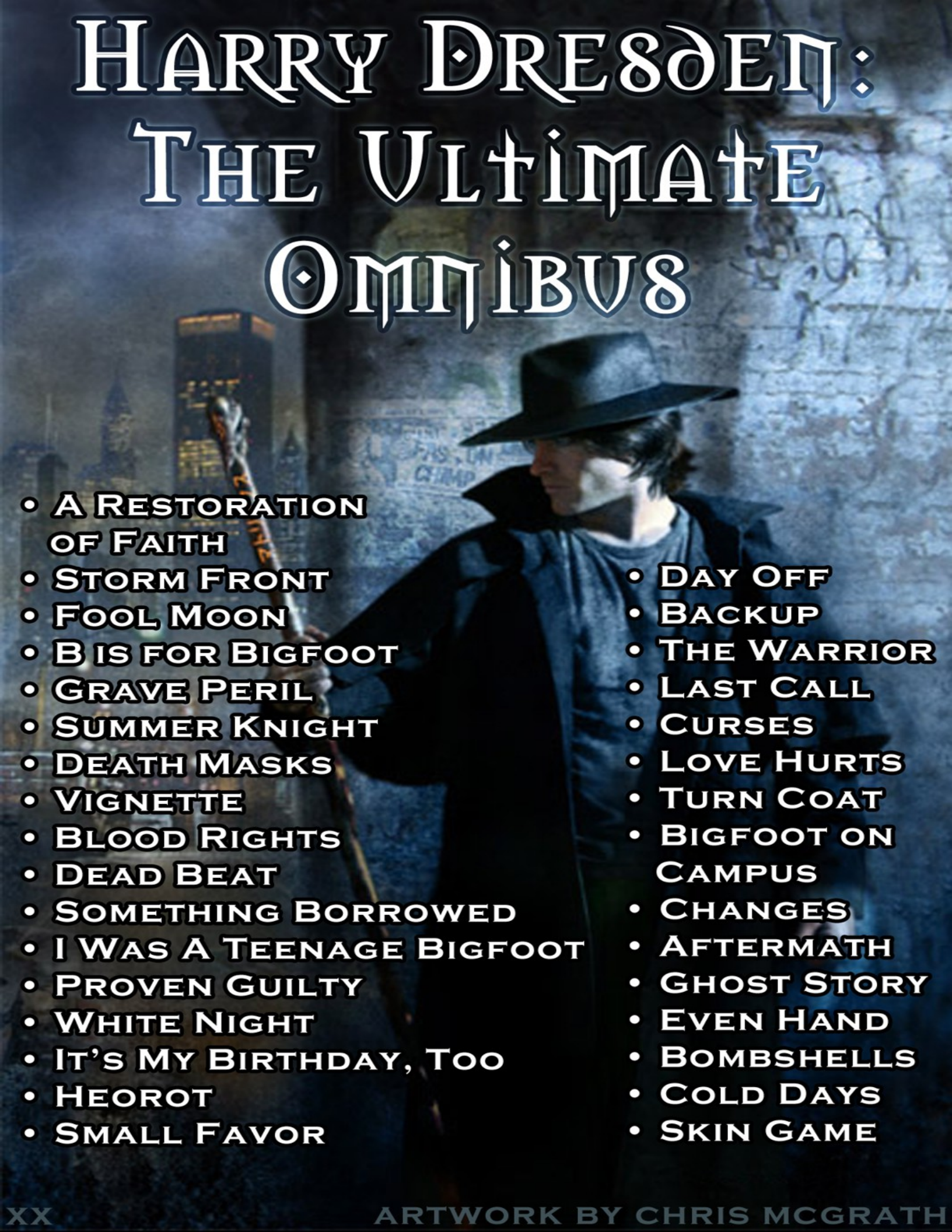


HARRY DRESDEN: THE ULTIMATE OMNIBUS

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- A RESTORATION OF FAITH
 - STORM FRONT
 - FOOL MOON
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 - GRAVE PERIL
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The Ultimate Dresden Omnibus

by Jim Butcher



"Yes, this counts as one book." - Xx

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KEEP CALM AND ASK BOB

HARRY DRESDEN, WIZARD
NO LOVE POTIONS, ENDLESS PURSES,
PARTIES OR OTHER ENTERTAINMENT.



This design is available as a t-shirt via [TeePublic](#) or [Zazzle](#)!

A RESTORATION OF FAITH

Takes place before *Storm Front*

This is the first of the Dresden Files stories, chronologically, and it was the first time I tried to write short fiction for the professional market. I originally put it together as a class assignment at the University of Oklahoma's Professional Writing program, more than two years before *Storm Front* found a home at Roc.

This one won't win any awards, because it is, quite frankly, a novice effort. It was perhaps the third or fourth short story I'd ever written, if you include projects in grade school. I had barely learned to keep my feet under me as a writer, and to some degree that shows in this piece. Certainly, the editors to whom I submitted this story seemed to think it wasn't up to par for professional publication, and I think that was a perfectly fair assessment.

Read this story for what it is—an anxious beginner's first effort, meant to be simple, straightforward fun.

I struggled to hold on to the yowling child while fumbling a quarter into the pay phone and jamming down the buttons to dial Nick's mobile.

"Ragged Angel Investigations," Nick answered. His voice was tense, I thought, anxious.

"It's Harry," I said. "You can relax, man. I found her."

"You did?" Nick asked. He let out a long exhalation. "Oh, Jesus, Harry."

The kid lifted up one of her oxford shoes and mule-kicked her leg back at my shin. She connected, hard enough to make me jump. She looked like a parent's dream at eight or nine years old, with her dimples and dark pigtails—even in her street-stained schoolgirl's uniform. And she had strong legs.

I got a better hold on the girl and lifted her up off the ground again while she twisted and wriggled. "Ow. Hold still."

"Let me go, beanpole," she responded, turning to glower back at me before starting to kick again.

"Listen to me, Harry," Nick said. "You've got to let the kid go right this minute and walk away."

"What?" I said. "Nick, the Astors are going to give us twenty-five grand to return her before nine p.m."

"I got some bad news, Harry. They aren't going to pay us the money."

I winced. "Ouch. Maybe I should just drop her off at the nearest precinct house, then."

"The news gets worse. The parents reported the girl kidnapped. The police band is sending two descriptions around town to Chicago PD, and they match guess who."

"Mickey and Donald?"

"Heh," Nick said. I heard him flick his Bic and take a drag. "We should be so lucky."

"I guess it's more embarrassing for Mr. and Mrs. High-and-Mighty to have their kid run away than it is to have her kidnapped."

"Hell. Kidnapped girl gives them something to talk about at their parties for months. Makes them look richer and more famous than their friends, too. Of course, we'll be in jail, but what the hell?"

"They came to us," I protested.

"That won't be the way they tell it."

"Dammit," I said.

"If you get caught with her, it could be trouble for both of us. The Astors got connections. Ditch the girl and get back home. You were there all

night.”

“No, Nick,” I said. “I can’t do that.”

“Let the boys in blue bring her in. That’ll clear you and me both.”

“I’m up on North Avenue, and it’s after dark. I’m not leaving a nine-year-old girl out here by herself.”

“Ten,” shouted the girl, furious. “I’m ten, you insensitive jerk!” She started kicking again, and I kept myself more or less out of the way of her feet.

“She sounds so cute. Just let her run, Harry, and let the criminal types beware.”

“Nick.”

“Aw, hell, Harry. You’re getting moral on me again.”

I smiled, but it felt tight on my mouth, and my stomach churned with anger. “Look, we’ll think of something. Just get down here and pick us up.”

“What happened to your car?”

“Broke down this afternoon.”

“Again? What about the El?”

“I’m broke. Nick, I need a ride. I can’t walk back to the office with her, and I don’t want to stand here in a public booth fighting her, either. So get down here and get us.”

“I don’t want to spend time in jail because you can’t salve your conscience, Harry.”

“What about your conscience?” I shot back. Nick was all bluster. When it came down to the wire, he couldn’t have left the girl alone in that part of town, either.

Nick growled out something that sounded vaguely obscene, then said, “Fine, whatever. But I can’t get across the river very easy, so I’ll be on the far side of the bridge. All you have to do is cross the bridge with her and stay out of sight. Police patrols in the area will be looking for you. Half an hour. If you’re not there, I’m not waiting. Bad neighborhood.”

“Have faith, man. I’ll be there.”

We hung up without saying good-bye.

“All right, kid,” I said. “Stop kicking me and let’s talk.”

“To hell with you, mister,” she shouted. “Let me go before I break your leg.”

I winced at the shrill note her voice hit and stepped away from the phone, half dragging and half carrying her with me while I looked around

nervously. The last thing I needed was a bunch of good citizens running to the kid's aid.

The streets were empty, the gathering dark rushing in quickly to fill the spaces left by the broken streetlights. There were lights in the windows, but no one came out in response to the girl's shouting. It was the sort of neighborhood where people looked the other way and let live.

Ah, Chicago. You just gotta love big, sprawling American cities. Ain't modern living grand? I could have been a real sicko, rather than just looking like one, and no one would have done anything.

It made me feel a little nauseated. "Look. I know you're angry right now, but believe me, I'm doing what's best for you."

She stopped kicking and glared up at me. "How should you know what's best for me?"

"I'm older than you. Wiser."

"Then why are you wearing that coat?"

I looked down at my big black duster, with its heavy mantle and long canvas folds flapping around my rather spare frame. "What's wrong with it?"

"It belongs on the set of *El Dorado*," she snapped. "Who are you supposed to be, Ichabod Crane or the Marlboro Man?"

I snorted. "I'm a wizard."

She gave me a look of skepticism you can really only get from children who have recently gone through the sobering trauma of discovering there is no Santa Claus. (Ironically, there is, but he can't operate on the sort of scale that used to make everyone believe in him.)

"You've got to be kidding me," she said.

"I found you, didn't I?"

She frowned at me. "How did you find me? I thought that spot was perfect."

I continued walking toward the bridge. "It would have been, for another ten minutes or so. Then that Dumpster would have been full of rats looking for something to eat."

The girl's expression turned faintly green. "Rats?"

I nodded. With luck, maybe I could win the kid over. "Good thing your mother had your brush in her purse. I was able to get a couple of hairs from it."

"So?"

I sighed. “So, I used a little thaumaturgy, and it led me straight to you. I had to walk most of the way, but straight to you.”

“Thauma-what?”

Questions were better than kicks any day. I kept answering them. Heck, I like to answer questions about magic. Professional pride, maybe. “Thaumaturgy. It’s ritual magic. You draw symbolic links between actual persons, places, or events, and representative models. Then you invest a little energy to make something happen on the small scale, and something happens on the large scale as well—”

The second I was distracted with answering her question, the kid bent her head and bit my hand.

I yelled something I probably shouldn’t have around a kid and jerked my hand away. The kid dropped to the ground, agile as a monkey, and took off toward the bridge. I shook my hand, growled at myself, and took off after her. She was fast, her pigtails flying out behind her, her shoes and stained kneesocks flashing.

She got to the bridge first. It was an ancient, two-lane affair that arched over the Chicago River. She hurled herself out onto it.

“Wait!” I shouted after her. “Don’t!” She didn’t know this town like I did.

“Sucker,” she called back, her voice merry. She kept on running.

That is, until a great rubbery, hairy arm slithered out from beneath a manhole cover at the apex of the bridge and wrapped its greasy fingers around one of her ankles. The kid screamed in sudden terror, pitching forward onto the asphalt and raking the skin from both knees. She turned and twisted, kicking at her attacker. Blood was a dark stain on her socks in the glow of the few functioning streetlights.

I cursed beneath my breath and raced toward her along the bridge, my lungs laboring. The hand tightened its grip and started dragging her toward the manhole. I could hear deep, growling laughter coming from the darkness in the hole that led down to the understructure of the bridge.

She screamed, “What is it? What is it? Make it let go!”

“Kid!” I shouted. I ran toward the manhole, jumped, and came down as hard as I could on the hairy arm, right at the wrist, the heels of both hiking boots thumping down onto the grimy flesh.

A bellow erupted from the manhole, and the fingers loosened. The girl twisted her leg, and though it cost her one of her expensive oxfords and one

kneesock, she dragged herself free of its grasp, sobbing. I gathered her up and backpedaled away, turning so that I wasn't leaving my back to the manhole.

The troll shouldn't have been able to squeeze his way out of a hole that small, but he did. First came that grimy arm, followed by a lumpy shoulder, and then his malformed head and hideous face. He looked at me and growled, jerking his way out of the hole with rubbery ease, until he stood in the middle of the bridge between me and the far side of the river, like some professional wrestler who had fallen victim to a correspondence course for plastic surgeons. In one hand, he held a meat cleaver approximately two feet long, with a bone handle and suspicious-looking stains of dark brown on it.

"Harry Dresden," the troll rumbled. "Wizard deprive Gogoth of his lawful prey." He whipped the cleaver left and right. It made a little whistling sound.

I lifted my chin and set my jaw. It's never smart to let a troll see that you're afraid of him. "What are you talking about, Gogoth? You know as well as I do that mortals aren't all fair game anymore. The Unseelie Accords settled that."

The troll's face split into a truly disgusting leer. "Naughty children," he rumbled. "Naughty children still mine." He narrowed his eyes, and they started burning with malicious hunger. "Give! Now!" The troll rolled toward me a few paces, gathering momentum.

I lifted my right hand, forced out a little will, and the silver ring upon my third finger abruptly shone with a clear, cool light, brighter than the illumination around us.

"Law of the jungle, Gogoth," I said, keeping my voice calm. "Survival of the fittest. You take another step and you're going to land smack in the 'too stupid to live' category."

The troll growled, not slowing, and raised one meaty fist.

"Think about it, darkspawn," I snarled. The light pouring from my ring took on a hellish, almost nuclear tone. "One more step and you're vapor."

The troll came to a lumbering halt, and his rubber-slime lips drew back from fetid fangs. "No," he snarled. Drool slithered down his fangs and splattered on the asphalt as he stared at the girl. "She is mine. Wizard cannot interfere in this."

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Watch me.” And with that, I lowered my hand (and with it the fierce silver light), gave the troll my best sneer, and turned in a flare of my dark duster to walk back to North Avenue with long, confident strides. The girl stared over my shoulder, her eyes wide.

“Is he coming after us?” I asked quietly.

She blinked back at the troll, and then at me. “Uh, no. He’s just staring at you.”

“Okay. If he starts this way, let me know.”

“So you can vapor him?” she asked, her voice unsteady.

“Hell, no. So we can run.”

“But what about ... ?” She touched the ring on my hand.

“I lied, kid.”

“What!?”

“I lied,” I repeated. “I’m not a good liar, but trolls aren’t too bright. It was just a light show, but he fell for it, and that’s all that counts.”

“I thought you said you were a wizard,” she accused me.

“I am,” I replied, annoyed. “A wizard who was at a séance-slash-exorcism before breakfast. Then I had to find two wedding rings and a set of car keys, and then I spent the rest of my day running after you. I’m pooped.”

“You couldn’t blow that ... that thing up?”

“It’s a troll. Sure I could,” I said cheerfully. “If I weren’t so worn-out, and if I were able to focus enough to keep from blowing myself up along with him. My aim’s bad when I’m this tired.”

We reached the edge of the bridge, and, I hoped, Gogoth’s territory. I started to swing the girl down. She was too big to be carrying. Then I saw her one bare foot dangling and the blood forming into dark scabs on her knees. I sighed and started walking along North Avenue. If I could go down the long city block to the next bridge, cross it, and make my way back down the other block within half an hour, I could still meet Nick on the other side.

“How’s your leg?” I asked.

She shrugged, though her face was pained. “Okay, I guess. Was that thing for real?”

“You bet,” I said.

“But it was ... It wasn’t ...”

“Human,” I said. “No. But hell, kid. A lot of people I know aren’t really human. Look around us. Bundy, Manson, those other animals. Right here in Chicago, you’ve got the Vargassis working out of Little Italy, the Jamaican posses, others. Animals. World’s full of them.”

The girl sniffed. I glanced at her face. She looked sad, and too wise for her years. My heart softened.

“I know,” she said. “My parents are like that, a little. They don’t think about anyone else, really. Just themselves. Not even each other—except what they can do for each other. And I’m just some toy that should get stuck in the closet and dragged out when people come over, so I can be prettier and more perfect than their toys. The rest of the time, I’m in their way.”

“Hey, come on,” I said. “It’s not that bad, is it?”

She glanced at me, and then away. “I’m not going back to them,” she said. “I don’t care who you are or what you can do. You can’t make me go back to them.”

“There’s where you’re wrong,” I said. “I’m not going to leave you down here.”

“I heard you talking to your friend,” she said. “My parents are trying to screw you over. Why are you still doing this?”

“I have another six months to work for a licensed investigator before I can get a license of my own. And I got this stupid thing about leaving kids in the middle of big, mean cities after dark.”

“At least down here, no one tries to lie and tell me that they care, mister. I see all these Disney shows about how much parents love their kids. How there’s some sort of magical bond of love. But it’s a lie. Like you and that troll.” She laid her head against my shoulder, and I could feel the exhaustion in her body as she sagged against me. “There’s no magic.”

I fell silent for several paces as I carried her. It was hard to hear that from a kid. A ten-year-old girl’s world should be full of music and giggling and notes and dolls and dreams—not harsh, barren, jaded reality. If there was no light in the heart of a child, a little girl like this, then what hope did any of us have?

A few paces later, I realized something I hadn’t been admitting to myself. A quiet, cool little voice had been trying to tell me something I hadn’t been willing to listen to. I was in the business of wizardry to try to help people; to try to make things better. But no matter how many evil

spirits I confronted, no matter how many would-be black magicians I tracked down, there was always something else—something worse—waiting for me in the dark. No matter how many lost children I found, there would always be ten times as many who disappeared for good.

No matter how much I did, how much trash I cleaned up, it was only a drop in the ocean.

Pretty heavy thoughts for a tired and beaten guy like me, my arms burdened with the girl's weight.

Flashing lights made me look up. The mouth to one of the alleys between the buildings had been sealed off with police tape, and four cars, blue bulbs awhirl, were parked on the street around the alley. A couple of EMTs were toting a covered shape out of the alley on a stretcher. The flashing strobes of cameras lit the alleyway in bursts of white.

I came to a stop, hesitant.

"What?" the girl murmured.

"Police. Maybe I should hand you over."

I felt her weary shrug. "They're only going to take me home. I don't care." She sagged against me again.

I swallowed. The Astors were Chicago's elite crowd. They carried enough clout around the old town to get a bum would-be private investigator put away for a good long time. And they could afford the best of lawyers.

It's a lousy world, Dresden, the cool little voice told me. And the good guys don't win unless they have an expensive attorney, too. You'd be in jail before you could blink.

My mouth twisted into a bitter smile as one of the uniform cops, a woman, noticed me and cast a long frown in my direction. I turned around and started walking the other way.

"Hey," the cop said. I kept walking. "Hey!" she said again, and I heard brisk footsteps on the sidewalk.

I hurried along into the dark and stepped into the first alley. The shadows behind a pile of crates created an ideal refuge, and I carried the girl into it with me. I crouched there in the darkness and waited while the cop's footsteps came near and then passed on by.

I waited in the dark, feeling all the heaviness and darkness settle into my skin, into my flesh. The girl just shivered and lay against me, unmoving.

“Just leave me,” she said, finally. “Go over the bridge. The troll will let you cross the bridge if I’m not with you.”

“Yes,” I said.

“So go on. I’ll walk up to the police after you’re gone. Or something.”

She was lying. I’m not sure how I could tell, but I could.

She would go to the bridge.

I’m told that bravery is doing what you need to do, even when you’re afraid. But sometimes I wonder if courage isn’t a lot more complicated than that. Sometimes, I think, courage is pulling yourself up off the ground one more time. Doing one more set of paperwork, even when you don’t want to. Maybe that’s just plain stubbornness; I don’t know.

It didn’t matter. Not to me. I’m a wizard. I don’t really belong here. Our world sucks. It might suit the trolls and the vampires and all those nasty, leering things that haunt our nightmares (while we clutch our physics books to our chests and reassure ourselves that they cannot exist), but I’m not a part of it. I won’t be a part of it.

I took a breath, in the dark, and asked, “What’s your name?”

She was silent for a moment and then said, in a very uncertain voice, “Faith.”

“Faith,” I said. I smiled, so that she could hear it. “My name’s Harry Dresden.”

“Hi,” she said, her voice a whisper.

“Hi. Have you ever seen something like this?” I cupped my hand, summoned some of the last dregs of my power, and cast a warm, glowing light into the ring on my right hand. It lit Faith’s face, and I could see on her smooth cheeks the streaks of the tears I had not heard.

She shook her head.

“Here,” I said, and took the ring from my finger. I slipped it onto hers, over her right thumb, where it hung a bit loose. The light died away as I did it, leaving us in the dark again. “Let me show you something.”

“Battery went out,” she mumbled. “I don’t have money for another one.”

“Faith? Do you remember the very best day of your life?”

She was quiet for a minute. Then she said, her voice a bare whisper, “Yes. A Christmas. When Gremma was still alive. Gremma was nice to me.”

“Tell me about it,” I urged quietly, covering her hand with my own.

I felt her shrug. “Gremma came over Christmas Eve. We played games. She would play with me. And we stayed up, on the floor by the Christmas tree, waiting for Santa Claus. She let me open just one present, for Christmas Eve. It was one she’d gotten me.”

Faith took a shuddering breath. “It was a dolly. A real baby dolly. Mother and Father had gotten me Barbie stuff, the whole line for that year. They said that if I left them all in the original boxes, they would be worth a lot of money later. But Gremma listened to what I really wanted.” Then I heard it, the tiny smile in her voice. “Gremma cared about me.”

I moved my hand, and a soft, pinkish light flowed up out of the ring around her thumb, a loving, gentle warmth. I heard Faith draw in a little gasp of surprise, and then a delighted smile spread over her mouth.

“But how?” she whispered.

I gave her a smile. “Magic,” I said. “The best kind. A little light in the dark.”

She looked up at me, studying my face, my eyes. I shied away from the perception of that gaze. “I need to go back, don’t I?” she asked.

I brushed a stray bit of hair from her forehead. “There are people who love you, Faith. Or who one day will. Even if you can’t see them beside you, right here, right now, they’re out there. But if you let the dark get into your eyes, you might never find them. So it’s best to keep a little light with you, along the way. Do you think you can remember that?”

She nodded up at me, her face lit by the light from the ring.

“Whenever it gets too dark, think of the good things you have, the good times you’ve had. It will help. I promise.”

She leaned against me and gave me a simple, trusting hug. I felt my cheeks warm up as she did. Aw, shucks.

“We need to go,” I told her. “We’ve got to get across the bridge and meet my friend Nick.”

She chewed on her lip, her expression immediately worried. “But the troll.”

I winked. “Leave him to me.”

The girl didn’t feel anywhere near so heavy as when I carried her back. I studied the bridge as we approached. Maybe, if I was lucky, I’d be able to sprint across without the troll being able to stop me.

Yeah. And maybe one day I’d go to an art museum and become well-rounded.

Bridges are a troll's specialty; either because of some magic or just because of aptitude, you never get across the bridge without facing the troll. That's life, I guess.

I set the girl down on the ground next to me and stepped out onto the bridge. "All right, Faith," I said. "Whatever happens, you run across that bridge. My friend Nick is going to pull up on the far side any minute now."

"What about you?"

I gave her a casual roll of my neck. "I'm a wizard," I said. "I can handle him."

Faith gave me another look of supreme skepticism and fumbled to hold my hand. Her fingers felt very small and very warm inside of mine, and a fierce surge of determination coursed through me. No matter what happened, I would let no harm come to this child.

We walked out onto the bridge. The few lights that had been burning brightly earlier were gone—Gogoth's work, doubtless. Night reigned over the bridge, and the Chicago River gurgled by, smooth and cold and black below us.

"I'm scared," Faith whispered.

"He's just a big bully," I told her. "Face him down and he'll back off." I hoped very much that was true. We kept walking and skirted wide around the manhole at the apex of the bridge; I kept my body between Faith and the entrance to the troll's lair.

Gogoth must have been counting on that.

I heard Faith scream again and whirled my head to see the troll's thick, hairy arm stretched up over the edge of the bridge, while the troll clung to the side of the bridge like some huge, overweight spider. I snarled and stomped his fingers once more, and the troll bellowed in rage. Faith slipped free, and I half hurled her toward the far side of the bridge. "Run, Faith!"

The troll's arm swept my legs out from beneath me and he came surging up over the railing at the side of the bridge, too supple and swift for his bulk. His burning eyes focused on the fleeing Faith, and more of his slimy drool spattered out of his mouth. He scythed his cleaver through the air and crouched to leap after the child.

I got my feet under me, screamed, and threw myself at the troll's leg, swinging my long legs around to tangle with the creature's. He roared in fury and went down in a tumble with me. I heard myself cackling and decided, without a doubt, that I had at least one screw loose.

The troll caught me by the corner of my jacket and threw me against the railing hard enough to make me see stars.

“Wizard,” Gogoth snarled, spitting drool and foam. The cleaver swept the air again, and the troll stalked toward me. “Now you die, and Gogoth chew your bones.”

I gathered myself to my feet, but it was too late. There was no way I could run or throw myself over the railing in time.

Faith screamed, “Harry!” and a brilliant flash of pink light flooded the bridge, making the troll whip his ugly head toward the far side of the river. I ducked to my left and ran, toward Faith and away from the troll. Looking up, I saw Nick’s car roaring toward the bridge with enough speed to tell me my partner had seen that something was going on.

The troll followed me, and though I had gained a few paces on him, I had the sinking realization that the beast was lighter on his feet than I was. There was a whistling sound of the cleaver cutting the air, and I felt something skim past my scalp. I bobbed to my right, ducking, and the second swipe missed by an even narrower margin. I stumbled, and fell, and the troll was on top of me in a heartbeat. I rolled in time to see him lift his bloodstained cleaver high above him, and I felt his drool splatter onto my chest.

“Wizard!” the troll bellowed.

There was a yell, and then the cop, the one who had followed us before, hurled herself onto the troll’s back and locked her nightstick across his throat. She gave the stick a practiced twist, and the troll’s eyes bulged. The huge cleaver clanged as it tumbled from Gogoth’s grip and hit the pavement.

The cop leaned back, making the troll’s spine arch into a bow—but this wasn’t a man she was dealing with. The thing twisted his head, squirmed, and popped out of her grip, then opened his jaws in a frenzied roar that literally blew the patrolwoman’s cap off her head and sent her stumbling back with a wide-eyed stare. The troll, maddened, slammed one fist into the pavement, cracking it, and drew the other back to drive toward her skull.

“Hey, ugly,” I shouted.

The troll turned in time to see me grunt and swing the massive cleaver at his side.

The rotten, grimy flesh just beneath his ribs split open with a howl of sound and a burst of motion. Gogoth leaned his head back and let out a

high-pitched, wailing yowl. I backed off, knowing what came next.

The poor cop stared in white-faced horror as the troll's wound split and dozens, hundreds, thousands of tiny, wriggling figures, squalling and squealing, poured out of the split in his flesh. The massive thews of the beast deflated like old basketballs, slowly sinking in upon themselves as the bridge became littered with a myriad of tiny trolls, their ugly little heads no bigger than the head of a president on a coin. They poured out of Gogoth in a flood, spilling onto the bridge in a writhing, wriggling horde.

The troll's cheeks hollowed, and his eyes vanished. His mouth opened in a slack-jawed yawn, and, as the leathery, grimy sack of tiny trolls emptied, he sank to the ground until he lay there like a discarded, disgusting raincoat.

The cop stared, mouth wide, attempting to form words of a prayer or a curse. Nick's headlights whirled and spilled across the bridge, and with twice ten thousand screams of protest, the tiny trolls dispersed before the light in all directions.

A few seconds later, there were only myself, Faith, the cop, and Nick, who was approaching us across the bridge. Faith threw herself at me and gave me a quick hug around the waist. Her eyes were bright with excitement. "That was the most disgusting thing I have ever seen. I want to be a wizard when I grow up."

"That was ... was ..." the cop said, stunned. She was short, stocky, and the loss of her cap revealed tightly braided, pale hair.

I winked down at Faith and nodded to the cop. "A troll. I know." I walked over to the cap and dusted it off. A few trolls, squealing in protest, fell to the street and scampered away. The cop watched with stunned eyes. "Hey, thanks a lot for the help, Officer"—I squinted down at her badge—"Murphy." I smiled and offered her the hat.

She took it with numb fingers. "Oh, Jesus. I really have lost it." She blinked a few times and then scowled up at my face. "You. You're the perp on the Astor kidnapping."

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but I needn't have bothered.

"Are you kidding?" Faith Astor sneered. "This ... buffoon? Kidnap me? He couldn't bum a cigarette off the Marlboro Man." She turned toward me and gave me a wink. Then she offered both her wrists to Murphy. "I admit it, Officer. I ran away. Take me to the pokey and throw away the key."

Murphy, to her credit, seemed to be handling things fairly well for someone who had just confronted the monster under the bed. She recovered her nightstick and went to Faith, examining her for injuries before directing a suspicious gaze at Nick and me.

“Hoo boy,” Nick said, planting his stocky bulk squarely beside mine. “Here it comes. You get the top bunk, stilts, but I’m not going to pick up your soap in the shower.”

The cop looked at me and Nick. Then she looked at the girl. Then, more thoughtfully, she looked at the leathery lump that had been Gogoth the troll. Her eyes flashed back to Nick and me, and she said, “Aren’t you two the ones who run Ragged Angel, the agency that looks for lost kids?”

“I run it,” Nick said, his voice resigned. “He works for me.”

“Yeah, what he said,” I threw in, just to let Nick know he wasn’t going to the big house alone.

Murphy nodded and eyed the girl. “Are you all right, honey?”

Faith sniffed and smiled up at Murphy. “A little hungry, and I could use something to clean up these scrapes. But other than that, I’m quite well.”

“And these two didn’t kidnap you?”

Faith snorted. “Please.”

Murphy nodded and then jabbed her nightstick at Nick and me. “I’ve got to call this in. You two vanish before my partner gets here.” She glanced down at Faith and winked. Faith grinned up at her in return.

Murphy took the girl back toward the far side of the bridge and the other police units. Nick and I ambled back toward his car. Nick’s broad, honest face was set in an expression of nervous glee. “I can’t believe it,” he said. “I can’t believe that happened. Was that the troll, what’s-his-name?”

“That was Gogoth,” I said cheerfully. “Nothing bigger than a breadcrumb is going to be bothered by trolls on this bridge for a long, long time.”

“I can’t believe it,” Nick said again. “I thought we were so dead. I can’t believe it.”

I glanced back over the bridge. On the far side, the girl was standing up on her tiptoes, waving. Soft pink light flowed from the ring on her right thumb. I could see the smile on her face. The cop was watching me, too, her expression thoughtful. It turned into a smile.

Modern living might suck. And the world we’ve made can be a dark place. But at least I don’t have to be there alone.

I put an arm around Nick's shoulders and grinned at him. "It's like I keep telling you, man. You've got to have faith."

HARRY DRESDEN: THE ULTIMATE OMNIBUS

- 
- A RESTORATION OF FAITH
 - STORM FRONT
 - FOOL MOON
 - B IS FOR BIGFOOT
 - GRAVE PERIL
 - SUMMER KNIGHT
 - DEATH MASKS
 - VIGNETTE
 - BLOOD RIGHTS
 - DEAD BEAT
 - SOMETHING BORROWED
 - I WAS A TEENAGE BIGFOOT
 - PROVEN GUILTY
 - WHITE NIGHT
 - IT'S MY BIRTHDAY, TOO
 - HEOROT
 - SMALL FAVOR
 - DAY OFF
 - BACKUP
 - THE WARRIOR
 - LAST CALL
 - CURSES
 - LOVE HURTS
 - TURN COAT
 - BIGFOOT ON CAMPUS
 - CHANGES
 - AFTERMATH
 - GHOST STORY
 - EVEN HAND
 - BOMBSHELLS
 - COLD DAYS
 - SKIN GAME

XX

ARTWORK BY CHRIS MCGRATH

STORM FRONT

ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER

T_{HE} **D**_{RES}**DEN** **F**_{ILES}

FOOL MOON
GRAVE PERIL
SUMMER KNIGHT
DEATH MASKS
BLOOD RITES
DEAD BEAT
PROVEN GUILTY
WHITE NIGHT

T_{HE} **C**_{ODEX} **A**_{LER}**A**

FURIES OF CALDERON
ACADEM'S FURY
CURSOR'S FURY
CAPTAIN'S FURY

JIM BUTCHER

STORM FRONT

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES



A ROC BOOK

ROC

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For Debbie Chester, who taught me everything I really needed to know about writing. And for my father, who taught me everything I really needed to know about living. I miss you, Dad.

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And thank you, Shannon, for too many things to list. You're my angel. One day, I will learn to turn my socks right side out before throwing them on the bedroom floor.

Chapter One

I heard the mailman approach my office door, half an hour earlier than usual. He didn't sound right. His footsteps fell more heavily, jauntily, and he whistled. A new guy. He whistled his way to my office door, then fell silent for a moment. Then he laughed.

Then he knocked.

I winced. My mail comes through the mail slot unless it's registered. I get a really limited selection of registered mail, and it's never good news. I got up out of my office chair and opened the door.

The new mailman, who looked like a basketball with arms and legs and a sunburned, balding head, was chuckling at the sign on the door glass. He glanced at me and hooked a thumb toward the sign. "You're kidding, right?"

I read the sign (people change it occasionally), and shook my head. "No, I'm serious. Can I have my mail, please?"

"So, uh. Like parties, shows, stuff like that?" He looked past me, as though he expected to see a white tiger, or possibly some skimpily clad assistants prancing around my one-room office.

I sighed, not in the mood to get mocked again, and reached for the mail he held in his hand. "No, not like that. I don't do parties."

He held on to it, his head tilted curiously. "So what? Some kinda fortune-teller? Cards and crystal balls and things?"

"No," I told him. "I'm not a psychic." I tugged at the mail.

He held on to it. "What are you, then?"

"What's the sign on the door say?"

"It says 'Harry Dresden. Wizard.'"

"That's me," I confirmed.

"An actual wizard?" he asked, grinning, as though I should let him in on the joke. "Spells and potions? Demons and incantations? Subtle and quick to anger?"

"Not so subtle." I jerked the mail out of his hand and looked pointedly at his clipboard. "Can I sign for my mail please?"

The new mailman's grin vanished, replaced with a scowl. He passed over the clipboard to let me sign for the mail (another late notice from my landlord), and said, "You're a nut. That's what you are." He took his clipboard back, and said, "You have a nice day, sir."

I watched him go.

"Typical," I muttered, and shut the door.

My name is Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. Conjure by it at your own risk. I'm a wizard. I work out of an office in midtown Chicago. As far as I know, I'm the only openly practicing professional wizard in the country. You can find me in the yellow pages, under "Wizards." Believe it or not, I'm the only one there. My ad looks like this:

HARRY DRESDEN—WIZARD

LOST ITEMS FOUND. PARANORMAL INVESTIGATIONS.

CONSULTING. ADVICE. REASONABLE RATES.

NO LOVE POTIONS, ENDLESS PURSES, PARTIES,

OR OTHER ENTERTAINMENT.

You'd be surprised how many people call just to ask me if I'm serious. But then, if you'd seen the things I'd seen, if you knew half of what I knew, you'd wonder how anyone could *not* think I was serious.

The end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the new millennium had seen something of a renaissance in the public awareness of the paranormal. Psychics, haunts, vampires—you name it. People still didn't take them seriously, but all the things Science had promised us hadn't come to pass. Disease was still a problem. Starvation was still a problem. Violence and crime and war were still problems. In spite of the advance of technology, things just hadn't changed the way everyone had hoped and thought they would.

Science, the largest religion of the twentieth century, had become somewhat tarnished by images of exploding space shuttles, crack babies, and a generation of complacent Americans who had allowed the television to raise their children. People were looking for something—I think they just didn't know what. And even though they were once again starting to open their eyes to the world of magic and the arcane that had been with them all the while, they still thought I must be some kind of joke.

Anyway, it had been a slow month. A slow pair of months, actually. My rent from February didn't get paid until the tenth of March, and it was looking like it might be even longer until I got caught up for this month.

My only job had been the previous week, when I'd gone down to Branson, Missouri, to investigate a country singer's possibly haunted house. It hadn't been. My client hadn't been happy with that answer, and had been even less happy when I suggested he lay off of any intoxicating substances and try to get some exercise and sleep, and see if that didn't help things more than an exorcism. I'd gotten travel expenses plus an hour's pay, and gone away feeling I had done the honest, righteous, and impractical thing. I heard later that he'd hired a shyster psychic to come in and perform a ceremony with a lot of incense and black lights. Some people.

I finished up my paperback and tossed it into the DONE box. There was a pile of read and discarded paperbacks in a cardboard box on one side of my desk, the spines bent and the pages mangled. I'm terribly hard on books. I was eyeing the pile of unread books, considering which to start next, given that I had no real work to do, when my phone rang.

I stared at it in a somewhat surly fashion. We wizards are terrific at brooding. After the third ring, when I thought I wouldn't sound a little too eager, I picked up the receiver and said, "Dresden."

"Oh. Is this, um, Harry Dresden? The, ah, wizard?" Her tone was apologetic, as though she were terribly afraid she would be insulting me.

No, I thought. It's Harry Dresden the, ah, lizard. Harry the wizard is one door down.

It is the prerogative of wizards to be grumpy. It is not, however, the prerogative of freelance consultants who are late on their rent, so instead of saying something smart, I told the woman on the phone, "Yes, ma'am. How can I help you today?"

"I, um," she said. "I'm not sure. I've lost something, and I think maybe you could help me."

"Finding lost articles is a specialty," I said. "What would I be looking for?"

There was a nervous pause. "My husband," she said. She had a voice that was a little hoarse, like that of a cheerleader who'd been working a long tournament, but had enough weight of years in it to place her as an adult.

My eyebrows went up. “Ma’am, I’m not really a missing-persons specialist. Have you contacted the police or a private investigator?”

“No,” she said, quickly. “No, they can’t. That is, I haven’t. Oh dear, this is all so complicated. Not something someone can talk about on the phone. I’m sorry to have taken up your time, Mr. Dresden.”

“Hold on now,” I said quickly. “I’m sorry, you didn’t tell me your name.”

There was that nervous pause again, as though she were checking a sheet of written notes before answering. “Call me Monica.”

People who know diddly about wizards don’t like to give us their names. They’re convinced that if they give a wizard their name from their own lips it could be used against them. To be fair, they’re right.

I had to be as polite and harmless as I could. She was about to hang up out of pure indecision, and I needed the job. I could probably turn hubby up, if I worked at it.

“Okay, Monica,” I told her, trying to sound as melodious and friendly as I could. “If you feel your situation is of a sensitive nature, maybe you could come by my office and talk about it. If it turns out that I can help you best, I will, and if not, then I can direct you to someone I think can help you better.” I gritted my teeth and pretended I was smiling. “No charge.”

It must have been the no charge that did it. She agreed to come right out to the office, and told me that she would be there in an hour. That put her estimated arrival at about two-thirty. Plenty of time to go out and get some lunch, then get back to the office to meet her.

The phone rang again almost the instant I put it down, making me jump. I peered at it. I don’t trust electronics. Anything manufactured after the forties is suspect—and doesn’t seem to have much liking for me. You name it: cars, radios, telephones, TVs, VCRs—none of them seem to behave well for me. I don’t even like to use automatic pencils.

I answered the phone with the same false cheer I had summoned up for Monica Husband-Missing. “This is Dresden, may I help you?”

“Harry, I need you at the Madison in the next ten minutes. Can you be there?” The voice on the other end of the line was also a woman’s, cool, brisk, businesslike.

“Why, Lieutenant Murphy,” I gushed, overflowing with saccharine, “it’s good to hear from you, too. It’s been so long. Oh, they’re fine, fine. And your family?”

“Save it, Harry. I’ve got a couple of bodies here, and I need you to take a look around.”

I sobered immediately. Karrin Murphy was the director of Special Investigations out of downtown Chicago, a de facto appointee of the Police Commissioner to investigate any crimes dubbed *unusual*. Vampire attacks, troll maraudings, and faery abductions of children didn’t fit in very neatly on a police report—but at the same time, people got attacked, infants got stolen, property was damaged or destroyed. And someone had to look into it.

In Chicago, or pretty much anywhere in Chicagoland, that person was Karrin Murphy. I was her library of the supernatural on legs, and a paid consultant for the police department. But two bodies? Two deaths by means unknown? I hadn’t handled anything like that for her before.

“Where are you?” I asked her.

“Madison Hotel on Tenth, seventh floor.”

“That’s only a fifteen-minute walk from my office,” I said.

“So you can be here in fifteen minutes. Good.”

“Um,” I said. I looked at the clock. Monica No-Last-Name would be here in a little more than forty-five minutes. “I’ve sort of got an appointment.”

“Dresden, I’ve sort of got a pair of corpses with no leads and no suspects, and a killer walking around loose. Your appointment can wait.”

My temper flared. It does that occasionally. “It can’t, actually,” I said. “But I’ll tell you what. I’ll stroll on over and take a look around, and be back here in time for it.”

“Have you had lunch yet?” she asked.

“What?”

She repeated the question.

“No,” I said.

“Don’t.” There was a pause, and when she spoke again, there was a sort of greenish tone to her words. “It’s bad.”

“How bad are we talking here, Murph?”

Her voice softened, and that scared me more than any images of gore or violent death could have. Murphy was the original tough girl, and she prided herself on never showing weakness. “It’s bad, Harry. Please don’t take too long. Special Crimes is itching to get their fingers on this one, and I know you don’t like people to touch the scene before you can look around.”

"I'm on the way," I told her, already standing and pulling on my jacket.

"Seventh floor," she reminded me. "See you there."

"Okay."

I turned off the lights to my office, went out the door, and locked up behind me, frowning. I wasn't sure how long it was going to take to investigate Murphy's scene, and I didn't want to miss out on speaking with Monica Ask-Me-No-Questions. So I opened the door again, got out a piece of paper and a thumbtack, and wrote:

Out briefly. Back for appointment at 2:30. Dresden

That done, I started down the stairs. I rarely use the elevator, even though I'm on the fifth floor. Like I said, I don't trust machines. They're always breaking down on me just when I need them.

Besides which. If I were someone in this town using magic to kill people two at a time, and I didn't want to get caught, I'd make sure that I removed the only practicing wizard the police department kept on retainer. I liked my odds on the stairwell a lot better than I did in the cramped confines of the elevator.

Paranoid? Probably. But just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that there isn't an invisible demon about to eat your face.

Chapter Two

Karrin Murphy was waiting for me outside the Madison. Karrin and I are a study in contrasts. Where I am tall and lean, she's short and stocky. Where I have dark hair and dark eyes, she's got Shirley Temple blond locks and baby blues. Where my features are all lean and angular, with a hawkish nose and a sharp chin, hers are round and smooth, with the kind of cute nose you'd expect on a cheerleader.

It was cool and windy, like it usually is in March, and she wore a long coat that covered her pantsuit. Murphy never wore dresses, though I suspected she'd have muscular, well-shaped legs, like a gymnast. She was built for function, and had a pair of trophies in her office from aikido tournaments to prove it. Her hair was cut at shoulder length and whipped out wildly in the spring wind. She wasn't wearing earrings, and her makeup was of sufficient quality and quantity that it was tough to tell she had on any at all. She looked more like a favorite aunt or a cheerful mother than a hard-bitten homicide detective.

"Don't you have any other jackets, Dresden?" she asked, as I came within hailing distance. There were several police cars parked illegally in front of the building. She glanced at my eyes for a half second and then away, quickly. I had to give her credit. It was more than most people did. It wasn't really dangerous unless you did it for several seconds, but I was used to anyone who knew I was a wizard making it a point not to glance at my face.

I looked down at my black canvas duster, with its heavy mantling and waterproof lining and sleeves actually long enough for my arms. "What's wrong with this one?"

"It belongs on the set of *El Dorado*."

"And?"

She snorted, an indelicate sound from so small a woman, and spun on her heel to walk toward the hotel's front doors.

I caught up and walked a little ahead of her.

She sped her pace. So did I. We raced one another toward the front door, with increasing speed, through the puddles left over from last night's rain.

My legs were longer; I got there first. I opened the door for her and gallantly gestured for her to go in. It was an old contest of ours. Maybe my values are outdated, but I come from an old school of thought. I think that men ought to treat women like something other than just shorter, weaker men with breasts. Try and convict me if I'm a bad person for thinking so. I enjoy treating a woman like a lady, opening doors for her, paying for shared meals, giving flowers—all that sort of thing.

It irritates the hell out of Murphy, who had to fight and claw and play dirty with the hairiest men in Chicago to get as far as she has. She glared up at me while I stood there holding open the door, but there was a reassurance about the glare, a relaxation. She took an odd sort of comfort in our ritual, annoying as she usually found it.

How bad was it up on the seventh floor, anyway?

We rode the elevator in a sudden silence. We knew one another well enough, by this time, that the silences were not uncomfortable. I had a good sense of Murphy, an instinctual grasp for her moods and patterns of thought—something I develop whenever I'm around someone for any length of time. Whether it's a natural talent or a supernatural one I don't know.

My instincts told me that Murphy was tense, stretched as tight as piano wire. She kept it off her face, but there was something about the set of her shoulders and neck, the stiffness of her back, that made me aware of it.

Or maybe I was just projecting it onto her. The confines of the elevator made me a bit nervous. I licked my lips and looked around the interior of the car. My shadow and Murphy's fell on the floor, and almost looked as though they were sprawled there. There was something about it that bothered me, a nagging little instinct that I blew off as a case of nerves. Steady, Harry.

She let out a harsh breath just as the elevator slowed, then sucked in another one before the doors could open, as though she were planning on holding it for as long as we were on the floor and breathing only when she got back in the elevator again.

Blood smells a certain way, a kind of sticky, almost metallic odor, and the air was full of it when the elevator doors opened. My stomach quailed a little bit, but I swallowed manfully and followed Murphy out of the elevator and down the hall past a couple of uniform cops, who recognized me and waved me past without asking to see the little laminated card the city had given me. Granted, even in a big-city department like Chicago

P.D., they didn't exactly call in a horde of consultants (I went down in the paperwork as a psychic consultant, I think), but still. Unprofessional of the boys in blue.

Murphy preceded me into the room. The smell of blood grew thicker, but there wasn't anything gruesome behind door number one. The outer room of the suite looked like some kind of a sitting room done in rich tones of red and gold, like a set from an old movie in the thirties—expensive-looking, but somehow faux, nonetheless. Dark, rich leather covered the chairs, and my feet sank into the thick, rust-colored shag of the carpet. The velvet velour curtains had been drawn, and though the lights were all on, the place still seemed a little too dark, a little too sensual in its textures and colors. It wasn't the kind of room where you sit and read a book. Voices came from a doorway to my right.

"Wait here a minute," Murphy told me. Then she went through the door to the right of the entryway and into what I supposed was the bedroom of the suite.

I wandered around the sitting room with my eyes mostly closed, noting things. Leather couch. Two leather chairs. Stereo and television in a black glossy entertainment center. Champagne bottle warming in a stand holding a brimming tub of what had been ice the night before, with two empty glasses set beside it. There was a red rose petal on the floor, clashing with the carpeting (but then, in that room, what didn't?).

A bit to one side, under the skirt of one of the leather recliners, was a little piece of satiny cloth. I bent at the waist and lifted the skirt with one hand, careful not to touch anything. A pair of black satin panties, a tiny triangle with lace coming off the points, lay there, one strap snapped as though the thong had simply been torn off. Kinky.

The stereo system was state of the art, though not an expensive brand. I took a pencil from my pocket and pushed the PLAY button with the eraser. Gentle, sensual music filled the room, a low bass, a driving drumbeat, wordless vocals, the heavy breathing of a woman as background.

The music continued for a few seconds more, and then it began to skip over a section about two seconds long, repeating it over and over again.

I grimaced. Like I said, I have this effect on machinery. It has something to do with being a wizard, with working with magical forces. The more delicate and modern the machine is, the more likely it is that something will go wrong if I get close enough to it. I can kill a copier at fifty paces.

“The love suite,” came a man’s voice, drawing the word *love* out into *luuuuuuuv*. “What do you think, Mister Man?”

“Hello, Detective Carmichael,” I said, without turning around. Carmichael’s rather light, nasal voice had a distinctive quality. He was Murphy’s partner and the resident skeptic, convinced that I was nothing more than a charlatan, scamming the city out of its hard-earned money. “Were you saving the panties to take home yourself, or did you just overlook them?” I turned and looked at him. He was short and overweight and balding, with beady, bloodshot eyes and a weak chin. His jacket was rumpled, and there were food stains on his tie, all of which served to conceal a razor intellect. He was a sharp cop, and absolutely ruthless at tracking down killers.

He walked over to the chair and looked down. “Not bad, Sherlock,” he said. “But that’s just foreplay. Wait’ll you see the main attraction. I’ll have a bucket waiting for you.” He turned and killed the malfunctioning CD player with a jab from the eraser end of his own pencil.

I widened my eyes at him, to let him know how terrified I was, then walked past him and into the bedroom. And regretted it. I looked, noted details mechanically, and quietly shut the door on the part of my head that had started screaming the second I entered the room.

They must have died sometime the night before, as rigor mortis had already set in. They were on the bed; she was astride him, body leaned back, back bowed like a dancer’s, the curves of her breasts making a lovely outline. He stretched beneath her, a lean and powerfully built man, arms reaching out and grasping at the satin sheets, gathering them in his fists. Had it been an erotic photograph, it would have made a striking tableau.

Except that the lovers’ rib cages on the upper left side of their torsos had expanded outward, through their skin, the ribs jabbing out like ragged, snapped knives. Arterial blood had sprayed out of their bodies, all the way to the mirror on the ceiling, along with pulped, gelatinous masses of flesh that had to be what remained of their hearts. Standing over them, I could see into the upper cavity of the bodies. I noted the now greyish lining around the motionless left lungs and the edges of the ribs, which apparently were forced outward and snapped by some force within.

It definitely cut down on the erotic potential.

The bed was in the middle of the room, giving it a subtle emphasis. The bedroom followed the decor of the sitting room—a lot of red, a lot of plush

fabrics, a little over the top unless viewed in candlelight. There were indeed candles in holders on the wall, now burned down to the nubs and extinguished.

I stepped closer to the bed and walked around it. The carpet squelched as I did. The little screaming part of my brain, safely locked up behind doors of self-control and strict training, continued gibbering. I tried to ignore it. Really I did. But if I didn't get out of that room in a hurry, I was going to start crying like a little girl.

So I took in the details fast. The woman was in her twenties, in fabulous condition. At least I thought she had been. It was hard to tell. She had hair the color of chestnuts, cut in a pageboy style, and it seemed dyed to me. Her eyes were only partly open, and I couldn't quite guess at their color beyond not-dark. Vaguely green?

The man was probably in his forties, and had the kind of fitness that comes from a lifetime of conditioning. There was a tattoo on his right biceps, a winged dagger, that the pull of the satin sheets half concealed. There were scars on his knuckles, layers deep, and across his lower abdomen was a vicious, narrow, puckered scar that I guessed must have come from a knife wound.

There were discarded clothes around—a tux for him, a little sheath of a black dress and a pair of pumps for her. There were a pair of overnight bags, unopened and set neatly aside, probably by a porter.

I looked up. Carmichael and Murphy were watching me in silence.

I shrugged at them.

“Well?” Murphy demanded. “Are we dealing with magic here, or aren't we?”

“Either that or it was really incredible sex,” I told her.

Carmichael snorted.

I laughed a little, too—and that was all the screaming part of my brain needed to slam open the doors I'd shut on it. My stomach revolted and heaved, and I lurched out of the room. Carmichael, true to his word, had set a stainless-steel bucket outside the room, and I fell to my knees throwing up.

It only took me a few seconds to control myself again—but I didn't want to go back in that room. I didn't need to see what was there anymore. I didn't want to see the two dead people, whose hearts had literally exploded out of their chests.

And someone had used magic to do it. They had used magic to wreak harm on another, violating the First Law. The White Council was going to go into collective apoplexy. This hadn't been the act of a malign spirit or a malicious entity, or the attack of one of the many creatures of the Nevernever, like vampires or trolls. This had been the premeditated, deliberate act of a sorcerer, a wizard, a human being able to tap into the fundamental energies of creation and life itself.

It was worse than murder. It was twisted, wretched perversion, as though someone had bludgeoned another person to death with a Botticelli, turned something of beauty to an act of utter destruction.

If you've never touched it, it's hard to explain. Magic is created by life, and most of all by the awareness, intelligence, emotions of a human being. To end such a life with the same magic that was born from it was hideous, almost incestuous somehow.

I sat up again and was breathing hard, shaking and tasting the bile in my mouth, when Murphy came back out of the room with Carmichael.

"All right, Harry," Murphy said. "Let's have it. What do you see happening here?"

I took a moment to collect my thoughts before answering. "They came in. They had some champagne. They danced for a while, made out, over there by the stereo. Then went into the bedroom. They were in there for less than an hour. It hit them when they were getting to the high point."

"Less than an hour," Carmichael said. "How do you figure?"

"CD was only an hour and ten long. Figure a few minutes for dancing and drinking, and then they're in the room. Was the CD playing when they found them?"

"No," Murphy said.

"Then it hadn't been set on a loop. I figure they wanted music, just to make things perfect, given the room and all."

Carmichael grunted, sourly. "Nothing we hadn't already figured out for ourselves," he said to Murphy. "He'd better come up with more than this."

Murphy shot Carmichael a look that said "shut up," then said, softly, "I need more, Harry."

I ran one of my hands back over my hair. "There's only two ways anyone could have managed this. The first is by evocation. Evocation is the most direct, spectacular, and noisy form of expressed magic, or sorcery.

Explosions, fire, that sort of thing. But I doubt it was an evocator who did this.”

“Why?” Murphy demanded. I heard her pencil scritch on the notepad she always kept with her.

“Because you have to be able to see or touch where you want your effect to go,” I told her. “Line of sight only. The man or woman would have had to be there in the room with them. Tough to hide forensic evidence with something like that, and anyone who was skilled enough to pull off a spell like that would have had the sense to use a gun instead. It’s easier.”

“What’s the other option?” Murphy asked.

“Thaumaturgy,” I said. “As above, so below. Make something happen on a small scale, and give it the energy to happen on a large scale.”

Carmichael snorted. “What bullshit.”

Murphy’s voice sounded skeptical. “How would that work, Harry? Could it be done from somewhere else?”

I nodded. “The killer would need to have something to connect him or her to the victims. Hair, fingernails, blood samples. That sort of thing.”

“Like a voodoo doll?”

“Exactly the same thing, yes.”

“There’s fresh dye in the woman’s hair,” Murphy said.

I nodded. “Maybe if you can find out where she got her hair styled, you could find something out. I don’t know.”

“Is there anything else you could tell me that would be of use?”

“Yes. The killer knew the victims. And I’m thinking it was a woman.”

Carmichael snorted. “I don’t believe we got to sit here and listen to this. Nine times out of ten the killer knows the victim.”

“Shut up, Carmichael,” Murphy said. “What makes you say that, Harry?”

I stood up, and rubbed at my face with my hands. “The way magic works. Whenever you do something with it, it comes from inside of you. Wizards have to focus on what they’re trying to do, visualize it, believe in it, to make it work. You can’t make something happen that isn’t a part of you, inside. The killer could have murdered them both and made it look like an accident, but she did it this way. To get it done this way, she would have had to want them dead for very personal reasons, to be willing to reach inside them like that. Revenge, maybe. Maybe you’re looking for a lover or a spouse.

“Also because of when they died—in the middle of sex. It wasn’t a coincidence. Emotions are a kind of channel for magic, a path that can be used to get to you. She picked a time when they’d be together and be charged up with lust. She got samples to use as a focus, and she planned it out in advance. You don’t do that to strangers.”

“Crap,” Carmichael said, but this time it was more of an absentminded curse than anything directed at me.

Murphy glared at me. “You keep saying ‘she,’” she challenged me. “Why the hell do you think that?”

I gestured toward the room. “Because you can’t do something that bad without a whole lot of hate,” I said. “Women are better at hating than men. They can focus it better, let it go better. Hell, witches are just plain *meaner* than wizards. This feels like feminine vengeance of some kind to me.”

“But a man could have done it,” Murphy said.

“Well,” I hedged.

“Christ, you are a chauvinist pig, Dresden. Is it something that *only* a woman could have done?”

“Well. No. I don’t think so.”

“You don’t *think* so?” Carmichael drawled. “Some expert.”

I scowled at them both, angry. “I haven’t really worked through the specifics of what I’d need to do to make somebody’s heart explode, Murph. As soon as I have occasion to I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“When will you be able to tell me something?” Murphy asked.

“I don’t know.” I held up a hand, forestalling her next comment. “I can’t put a timer on this stuff, Murph. It just can’t be done. I don’t even know if I can do it at all, much less how long it will take.”

“At fifty bucks an hour, it better not be too long,” Carmichael growled. Murphy glanced at him. She didn’t exactly agree with him, but she didn’t exactly slap him down, either.

I took the opportunity to take a few long breaths, calming myself down. I finally looked back at them. “Okay,” I asked. “Who are they? The victims.”

“You don’t need to know that,” Carmichael snapped.

“Ron,” Murphy said. “I could really use some coffee.”

Carmichael turned to her. He wasn’t tall, but he all but loomed over Murphy. “Aw, come on, Murph. This guy’s jerking your chain. You don’t really think he’s going to be able to tell you anything worth hearing, do you?”

Murphy regarded her partner's sweaty, beady-eyed face with a sort of frosty hauteur, tough to pull off on someone six inches taller than she. "No cream, two sugars."

"Dammit," Carmichael said. He shot me a cold glance (but didn't quite look at my eyes), then jammed his hands into his pants pockets and stalked out of the room.

Murphy followed him to the door, her feet silent, and shut it behind him. The sitting room immediately became darker, closer, with the grinning ghoul of its former chintzy intimacy dancing in the smell of the blood and the memory of the two bodies in the next room.

"The woman's name was Jennifer Stanton. She worked for the Velvet Room."

I whistled. The Velvet Room was a high-priced escort service run by a woman named Bianca. Bianca kept a flock of beautiful, charming, and witty women, pandering them to the richest men in the area for hundreds of dollars an hour. Bianca sold the kind of female company that most men only see on television and the movies. I also knew that she was a vampiress of considerable influence in the Nevernever. She had Power with a capital P.

I'd tried to explain the Nevernever to Murphy before. She didn't really comprehend it, but she understood that Bianca was a badass vampiress who sometimes squabbled for territory. We both knew that if one of Bianca's girls was involved, the vampiress must have been involved somehow, too.

Murphy cut right to the point. "Was this part of one of Bianca's territorial disputes?"

"No," I said. "Unless she's having it with a human sorcerer. A vampire, even a vamp sorcerer, couldn't have pulled off something like this outside of the Nevernever."

"Could she be at odds with a human sorcerer?" Murphy asked me.

"Possible. But it doesn't sound like her. She isn't that stupid." What I didn't tell Murphy was that the White Council made sure that vampires who trifled with mortal practitioners never lived to brag about it. I don't talk to regular people about the White Council. It just isn't done. "Besides," I said, "if a human wanted to take a shot at Bianca by hitting her girls, he'd be better off to kill the girl and leave the customer healthy, to let him spread the tale and scare off business."

“Mmph,” Murphy said. She wasn’t convinced, but she made notes of what I had said.

“Who was the man?” I asked her.

Murphy looked up at me for a moment, and then said, evenly, “Tommy Tomm.”

I blinked at her to let her know she hadn’t revealed the mystery of the ages. “Who?”

“Tommy Tomm,” she said. “Johnny Marcone’s bodyguard.”

Now it made sense. “Gentleman” Johnny Marcone had been the thug to emerge on top of the pile after the Vargassi family had dissolved into internal strife. The police department saw Marcone as a mixed blessing, after years of merciless struggle and bloody exchanges with the Vargassis. Gentleman Johnny tolerated no excesses in his organization, and he didn’t like freelancers operating in his city. Muggers, bank robbers, and drug dealers who were not a part of his organization somehow always seemed to get ratted out and turned in, or else simply went missing and weren’t heard from again.

Marcone was a civilizing influence on crime—and where he operated, it was more of a problem in terms of scale than ever before. An extremely shrewd businessman, he had a battery of lawyers working for him that kept him fenced in from the law behind a barricade of depositions and papers and tape recordings. The cops never said it, but sometimes it seemed like they were almost reluctant to chase him. Marcone was better than the alternative—anarchy in the underworld.

“I remember hearing he had an enforcer,” I said. “I guess he doesn’t anymore.”

Murphy shrugged. “So it would seem.”

“So what will you do next?”

“Run down this hairstylist angle, I guess. I’ll talk to Bianca and to Marcone, but I can already tell you what they’ll tell me.” She flicked her notebook closed and shook her head, irritated.

I watched her for a minute. She looked tired. I told her so.

“I am tired,” she replied. “Tired of being looked at like I’m some sort of nutcase. Even Carmichael, my own partner, thinks I’ve gone over the edge in all of this.”

“The rest of the station think so too?” I asked her.

“Most of them just scowl and spin their index fingers around their temples when they think I’m not looking, and file my reports without ever reading them. The rest are the ones who have run into something spooky out there, and they’re scared shitless. They don’t want to believe in anything they didn’t see on *Mister Science* when they were kids.”

“How about you?”

“Me?” Murphy smiled, a curving of her lips that was a vibrantly feminine expression, making her look entirely too pretty to be such a hardass. “The world’s falling apart at the seams, Harry. I guess I just think people are pretty arrogant to believe we’ve learned everything there is to know in the past century or so. What the hell. I can buy that we’re just now starting to see the things around us in the dark again. It appeals to the cynic in me.”

“I wish everyone thought like you do,” I said. “It would cut down on my crank calls.”

She continued to smile at me, impish. “But could you imagine a world where all the radio stations played ABBA?”

We shared a laugh. God, that room needed a laugh.

“Hey, Harry,” Murphy said, grinning. I could see the wheels spinning in her head.

“Yeah?”

“What you said about being able to figure out how the killer did this. About how you’re not sure you can do it.”

“Yeah?”

“I know it’s bullshit. Why did you lie to me about it?”

I stiffened. Christ, she was good. Or maybe I’m just not much of a liar. “Look, Murph,” I said. “There’s some things you just don’t do.”

“Sometimes I don’t want to get into the head of the slime I go after, either. But you do what needs to be done to finish the job. I know what you mean, Harry.”

“No,” I said, shortly. “You don’t know.” And she didn’t. She didn’t know about my past, or the White Council, or the Doom of Damocles hanging over my head. Most days, I could pretend I didn’t know about it, either.

All the Council needed now was an excuse, just an excuse, to find me guilty of violating one of the Seven Laws of Magic, and the Doom would drop. If I started putting together a recipe for a murder spell, and they found out about it, that might be all the excuse they needed.

“Murph,” I told her. “I *can’t* try figuring this spell out. I *can’t* go putting together the things I’d need to do it. You just don’t understand.”

She glared at me, without looking at my eyes. I hadn’t ever met anyone else who could pull that one off. “Oh, I understand. I understand that I’ve got a killer loose that I can’t catch in the act. I understand that you know something that can help, or you can at least find out something. And I understand that if you dry up on me now, I’m tearing your card out of the department Rolodex and tossing it in the trash.”

Son of a bitch. My consulting for the department paid a lot of my bills. Okay, most of my bills. I could sympathize with her, I supposed. If I was operating in the dark like she was, I’d be nervous as hell, too. Murphy didn’t know anything about spells or rituals or talismans, but she knew human hatred and violence all too well.

It wasn’t as though I was actually going to be doing any black magic, I told myself. I was just going to be figuring out how it was done. There was a difference. I was helping the police in an investigation, nothing more. Maybe the White Council would understand that.

Yeah, right. And maybe one of these days I’d go to an art museum and become well rounded.

Murphy set the hook a second later. She looked up at my eyes for a daring second before she turned away, her face tired and honest and proud. “I need to know everything you can tell me, Harry. Please.”

Classic lady in distress. For one of those liberated, professional women, she knew exactly how to jerk my old-fashioned chains around.

I gritted my teeth. “Fine,” I said. “Fine. I’ll start on it tonight.” Hooboy. The White Council was going to love this one. I’d just have to make sure they didn’t find out about it.

Murphy nodded and let out a breath without looking at me. Then she said, “Let’s get out of here,” and walked toward the door. I didn’t try to beat her to it.

When we walked out, the uniform cops were still lazing around in the hall outside. Carmichael was nowhere to be seen. The guys from forensics were there, standing around impatiently, waiting for us to come out. Then they gathered up their plastic bags and tweezers and lights and things and filed past us into the room.

Murphy was brushing at her windblown hair with her hand while we waited for the ancient elevator to take its sweet time getting up to the

seventh floor. She was wearing a gold watch, which reminded me. “Oh, hey,” I asked her. “What time is it?”

She checked. “Two twenty-five. Why?”

I breathed out a curse, and turned for the stairs. “I’m late for my appointment.”

I fairly flew down the stairs. I’ve had a lot of practice at them, after all, and I hit the lobby at a jog. I managed to dodge a porter coming through the front doors with an armload of luggage, and swung out onto the sidewalk at a lope. I have long legs that eat a lot of ground. I was running into the wind, my black duster billowing out behind me.

It was several blocks to my building, and after covering half of them I slowed to a walk. I didn’t want to arrive at my appointment with Monica Missing-Man puffing like a bellows, with my hair windblown and my face streaming with sweat.

Blame it on being out of shape from an inactive winter season, but I was breathing hard. It occupied enough of my attention that I didn’t see the dark blue Cadillac until it had pulled up beside me, and a rather large man had stepped out of it onto the sidewalk in front of me. He had bright red hair and a thick neck. His face looked like someone had smashed it flat with a board, repeatedly, when he was a baby—except for his jutting eyebrows. He had narrow little blue eyes that got narrower as I sized him up.

I stopped, and backed away, then turned around. Two more men, both of them as tall as me and a good deal heavier, were slowing down from their own jog. They had apparently been following me, and they looked annoyed. One was limping slightly, and the other wore a buzz cut that had been spiked up straight with some kind of styling gel. I felt like I was in high school again, surrounded by bullying members of the football team.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” I asked. I looked around for a cop, but they were all over at the Madison, I supposed. Everyone likes to gawk.

“Get in the car,” the one in front of me said. One of the others opened the rear door.

“I like to walk. It’s good for my heart.”

“You don’t get in the car, it isn’t going to be good for your legs,” the man growled.

A voice came from inside the car. “Mister Hendricks, please. Be more polite. Mister Dresden, would you join me for a moment? I’d hoped to give

you a lift back to your office, but your abrupt exit made it somewhat problematic. Perhaps you will allow me to convey you the rest of the way.”

I leaned down to look into the backseat. A man of handsome and unassuming features, dressed in a casual sports jacket and Levi’s, regarded me with a smile. “And you would be?” I asked him.

His smile widened, and I swear it made his eyes twinkle.

“My name is John Marcone. I would like to discuss business with you.”

I stared at him for a moment. And then my eyes slid aside to the very large and very overdeveloped Mister Hendricks. The man growled under his breath, and it sounded like Cujo just before he jumped at the woman in the car. I didn’t feel like duking it out with Cujo and his two buddies.

So I got into the back of the Caddy with Gentleman Johnny Marcone.

It was turning out to be a very busy day. And I was still late for my appointment.

Chapter Three

Gentleman Johnny Marcone didn't look like the sort of man who would have my legs broken or my jaw wired shut. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut short, and there were lines from sun and smiling etched into the corners of his eyes. His eyes were the green of well-worn dollar bills. He seemed more like a college football coach: good-looking, tanned, athletic, and enthusiastic. The impression was reinforced by the men he kept with him. Cujo Hendricks hulked like an all-pro player who had been ousted for extreme unnecessary roughness.

Cujo got in the car again, glowered at me in the rearview mirror, then pulled out into the street, driving slowly toward my office. The steering wheel looked tiny and delicate in his huge hands. I made a mental note: Do not let Cujo put his hands around your throat. Or hand. It looked almost like one of them could manage it.

The radio was playing, but as I got in the car it fouled up, squealing feedback out over the speakers. Hendricks scowled and thought about it for a second. Maybe he had to relay the message through his second brain or something. Then he reached out and fiddled with the knobs before finally turning the radio off. At this rate I hoped the car would make it all the way to my office.

"Mister Dresden," Marcone said, smiling, "I understand that you work for the police department, from time to time."

"They throw the occasional tidbit my way," I agreed. "Hey, Hendricks. You should really wear your seat belt. Statistics say you're fifty or sixty percent safer."

Cujo growled at me in the rearview mirror again, and I beamed at him. Smiling always seems to annoy people more than actually insulting them. Or maybe I just have an annoying smile.

Marcone seemed somewhat put off by my attitude. Maybe I was supposed to be holding my hat in my hand, but I had never really liked Francis Ford Coppola, and I didn't have a Godfather. (I *do* have a Godmother, and she is, inevitably perhaps, a faery. But that's another story.)

“Mister Dresden,” he said. “How much would it cost to retain your services?”

That made me wary. What would someone like Marcone want me for? “My standard fee is fifty dollars an hour plus travel expenses,” I told him. “But it can vary, depending on what you need done.”

Marcone nodded along with my sentences, as if encouraging me to speak. He wrinkled up his face as if carefully considering what he would say, and taking my well-being into account with grandfatherly concern. “How much would it set me back to have you not investigate something?”

“You want to pay me to not do something?”

“Let’s say I pay you your standard fee. That comes out to fourteen hundred a day, right?”

“Twelve hundred, actually,” I corrected him.

He beamed at me. “An honest man is a rare treasure. Twelve hundred a day. Let’s say I pay you for two weeks’ worth of work, Mister Dresden, and you take some time off. Go catch a few movies, get some extra sleep, that sort of thing.”

I eyed him. “And for more than a thousand dollars a day, you want me to...?”

“Do nothing, Mister Dresden.” Marcone smiled. “Nothing at all. Just relax, and put your feet up. And stay out of Detective Murphy’s way.”

Ah-hah. Marcone didn’t want me looking into Tommy Tamm’s murder. Interesting. I looked out the window and squinted my eyes, as though thinking about it.

“I’ve got the money with me,” Marcone said. “Cash on the spot. I’ll trust you to fulfill your end of the deal, Mister Dresden. You come highly recommended for your honesty.”

“Mmmm. I don’t know, John. I’m kind of busy to be accepting any more accounts right now.” The car was almost to my office building. The car door was still unlocked. I hadn’t worn my seat belt, either—just in case I needed to throw the door open and jump out. See how I think ahead? It’s that wizardly intellect—and paranoia.

Marcone’s smile faltered. His expression became earnest. “Mister Dresden, I am quite eager to establish a positive working relationship, here. If it’s the money, I can offer you more. Let’s say double your usual fee.” He steepled his hands in front of him as he talked, half-turning toward me. My

God, I kept expecting him to tell me to go out there and win one for the Gipper. He smiled. “How does that sound?”

“It isn’t the money, John,” I told him. I lazily locked my eyes onto his. “I just don’t think it’s going to work out.”

To my surprise, he didn’t look away.

Those who deal in magic learn to see the world in a slightly different light than everyone else. You gain a perspective you had never considered before, a way of thinking that would just never have occurred to you without exposure to the things a wizard sees and hears.

When you look into someone’s eyes, you see them in that other light. And, for just a second, they see you in the same way. Marcone and I looked at one another.

He was a soldier, a warrior, behind that relaxed smile and fatherly manner. He was going to get what he wanted and he was going to get it in the most efficient way possible. He was a dedicated man—dedicated to his goals, dedicated to his people. He never let fear affect him. He made a living on human misery and suffering, peddling in drugs and flesh and stolen goods, but he took steps to minimize that suffering because it was simply the most efficient means of running his business. He was furious over Tommy Tomm’s death—a cold and practical kind of fury that his rightful dominion had been invaded and challenged. He intended to find those responsible and deal with them in his own way—and he didn’t want the police interfering. He had killed before, and would again, and it would all mean nothing more to him than a business transaction, than paying for groceries in the checkout line. It was a dry and cool place, inside Gentleman Johnny Marcone. Except for one dim corner. There, hidden away from his everyday thoughts, there lurked a secret shame. I couldn’t quite see what it was. But I knew that somewhere in the past there was something that he would give anything to undo, would spill blood to erase. It was from that dark place that he drew his resolve, his strength.

That was the way I saw him when I looked inside, past all his pretenses and defenses. And I was, on some instinctual level, certain that he had been aware of what I would see if I looked—that he had deliberately met my gaze, knowing what he would give away. That was his purpose in getting me alone. He wanted to take a peek at my soul. He wanted to see what sort of man I was.

When I look into someone's eyes, into their soul, their innermost being, they can see mine in return—the things I had done, the things I was willing to do, the things I was capable of doing. Most people who did that got really pale, at least. One woman had passed out entirely. I didn't know what they saw when they looked in there—it wasn't a place I poked around much, myself.

John Marcone wasn't like the other people who had seen my soul. He didn't even blink an eye. He just looked and assessed, and after the moment had passed, he nodded at me as though he understood something. I got the uncomfortable impression that he had duped me. That he had found out more about me than I had about him. The first thing I felt was anger, anger at being manipulated, anger that he should presume to soulgaze upon me.

Just a second later, I felt scared to death of this man. I had looked on his soul and it had been as solid and barren as a stainless-steel refrigerator. It was more than unsettling. He was strong, inside, savage and merciless without being cruel. He had a tiger's soul.

"All right, then," he said, smoothly, and as though nothing had happened. "I won't try to force my offer on you, Mister Dresden." The car was slowing down as it approached my building, and Hendricks pulled over in front of it. "But let me offer you some advice." He had dropped the father-talking-to-son act, and spoke in a calm and patient voice.

"If you don't charge for it." Thank God for wisecracks. I was too rattled to have said anything intelligent.

Marcone almost smiled. "I think you'll be happier if you come down with the flu for a few days. This business that Detective Murphy has asked you to look into doesn't need to be dragged out into the light. You won't like what you see. It's on my side of the fence. Just let me deal with it, and it won't ever trouble you."

"Are you threatening me?" I asked him. I didn't think he was, but I didn't want him to know that. It would have helped if my voice hadn't been shaking.

"No," he said, frankly. "I have too much respect for you to resort to something like that. They say that you're the real thing, Mister Dresden. A real magus."

"They also say I'm nutty as a fruitcake."

"I choose which 'they' I listen to very carefully," Marcone said. "Think about what I've said, Mister Dresden. I do not think our respective lines of

work need overlap often. I would as soon not make an enemy of you over this matter.”

I clenched my jaw over my fear, and spat words out at him quick and hard. “You don’t want to make an enemy of me, Marccone. That wouldn’t be smart. That wouldn’t be smart at all.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, lazy and relaxed. He could meet my eyes by then without fear. We had taken a measure of one another. It would not happen in such a way again. “You really should try to be more polite, Mister Dresden,” he said. “It’s good for business.”

I didn’t give him an answer to that: I didn’t have one that wouldn’t sound frightened or stupidly macho. Instead, I told him, “If you ever lose your car keys, give me a call. Don’t try offering me money or threats again. Thanks for the ride.”

He watched me, his expression never changing, as I got out of the car and shut the door. Hendricks pulled out and drove away, after giving me one last dirty look. I had soulgazed on several people before. It wasn’t the sort of thing you forgot. I had never run into someone like that, someone so cool and controlled—even the other practitioners I had met gazes with had not been that way. None of them had simply assessed me like a column of numbers and filed it away for reference in future equations.

I stuck my hands in the pockets of my duster, and shivered as the wind hit me. I was a wizard, throwing around real magic, I reminded myself. I was not afraid of big men in big cars. I do not get rattled by corpses blasted from life by magic more intense than anything I could manage. Really. Honest.

But those dollar-bill-colored eyes, backed by that cool and nearly passionless soul, had me shaking as I took the stairs back up to my office. I had been stupid. He had surprised me, and the sudden intimacy of the soulgaze had startled and frightened me. All added together, it had caused me to fall apart, throwing threats at him like a frightened schoolkid. Marccone was a predator. He practically smelled my fear. If he got to thinking I was weak, I had a feeling that polite smile and fatherly facade would vanish as thoroughly and as quickly as it had appeared.

What a rotten first impression.

Oh, well. At least I was going to be on time for my appointment.

Chapter Four

Monica No-Last-Name was standing outside of my office when I got there, writing on the back of the note I had left taped to my office door.

I walked toward her, but she was too intent upon her writing to look up. She was a good-looking woman, in her mid-thirtysomethings. Ash blond hair that I thought must be natural, after a morbid and involuntary memory of the dead woman's dye job. Her makeup was tasteful and well applied, and her face was fair, friendly, with enough roundness of cheek to look fresh-faced and young, enough fullness of mouth to look very feminine. She was wearing a long, full skirt of palest yellow with brown riding boots, a crisp white blouse, and an expensive-looking green cardigan over it, to ward off the chill of early spring. She had to be in good shape to pull off a color combination like that, and she did it. Overall, it was a naggingly familiar look, something like Annette Funicello or Barbara Billingsley, maybe—wholesome and all-American.

"Monica?" I asked. I put on my most innocent and friendly smile.

She blinked at me as I approached. "Oh. Are you, um, Harry..."

I smiled and offered her my hand. "Harry Dresden, ma'am. That's me."

She took my hand after a tiny pause and kept her eyes firmly focused on my chest. At this point, I was just as glad to be dealing with someone who was too nervous to risk looking at my eyes. I gave her a firm but gentle handshake, and let go of her, brushing past her to unlock the office door and open it up. "I apologize for being late. I got a call from the police that I had to look in on."

"You did?" she asked. "You mean, the police, um..." She waved her fingers instead of finishing the sentence and entered when I held the door open for her.

"Sometimes." I nodded. "They run into something and want my take on it."

"What sorts of things?"

I shrugged and swallowed. I thought of the corpses at the Madison, and felt green. When I looked up at Monica, she was studying my face, chewing on her lip nervously. She hurriedly averted her gaze.

“Can I get you some coffee?” I asked her. I shut the door behind us, flicked on the lights.

“Oh. No, thank you. I’m fine.” She stood there, looking at my box of discarded paperbacks and holding her purse over her tummy with both hands. I thought she might scream if I said *boo* so I made sure to move carefully and slowly, making myself a cup of instant coffee. I breathed in and out, going through the familiar motions, until I had calmed down from my encounter with Marccone. By the time I was done, so was my coffee. I went to my desk, and invited her to have a seat in one of the two chairs across from me.

“Okay, Monica,” I said. “What can I do for you today?”

“Well, um. I told you that my husband was...was...” She nodded at me, gesturing.

“Missing?” I supplied.

“Yes,” she said with an exhalation of almost relief. “But he’s not mysteriously missing or anything. Just gone.” She flushed and stammered. “Like he just packed up a few things and left. But he didn’t say anything to anyone. And he hasn’t showed up again. I’m concerned about him.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “How long has he been gone?”

“This is the third day,” she said.

I nodded. “There must be some reason why you’re coming to me, rather than a private investigator or the police.”

She blushed again. She had a good face for blushing, fair skin that colored girlishly. It was quite fetching, really. “Yes, um. He had been interested in...in...”

“Magic?”

“Yes. He had been buying books on it in the religion section at the bookstore. Not like those Dungeons and Dragons games. The real thing. He bought some of those tarot cards.” She pronounced it like *carrot*. Amateurs.

“And you think his disappearance might have had something to do with this interest?”

“I’m not sure,” she confessed. “But maybe. He was very upset. He had just lost his job and was under a lot of pressure. I’m worried about him. I thought whoever found him might need to be able to talk to him about all of this stuff.” She took a deep breath, as if the effort of completing so many sentences without a single *um* had tired her.

“I’m still not clear on this. Why me? Why not the police?”

Her knuckles whitened on her purse. “He packed a bag, Mr. Dresden. I think the police will just assume he left his wife and his children. They won’t really look. But he didn’t. He’s not like that. He only wants to make a good life for us. Really, that’s all he wants.”

I frowned at her. Nervous that maybe hubby has run out on you after all, dear? “Even so,” I said, “why come to me? Why not a private investigator? I know a reliable man if you need one.”

“Because you know about...” She gestured, fitfully.

“About magic,” I said.

Monica nodded. “I think it might be important. I mean, I don’t know. But I think it might.”

“Where did he work?” I asked her. While I spoke, I got a pad of paper out of my pocket and jotted down a few notes.

“SilverCo,” she told me. “They’re a trading company. They locate good markets for products and then advise companies where they can best spend their money.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “What is his name, Monica?”

She swallowed, and I saw her twitching, trying to think of something to tell me other than his real name. “George,” she supplied at last.

I looked up at her. She was staring furiously down at her hands.

“Monica,” I said. “I know this must be really hard for you. Believe me, ma’am, there are plenty of people who are nervous when they come into my office. But please, hear me out. I am not out to hurt you or anyone else. What I do, I do to help people. It’s true that someone with the right skills could use your names against you, but I’m not like that.” I borrowed a line from Johnny Marcone. “It isn’t good business.”

She gave a nervous little laugh. “I feel so silly,” she confessed. “But there’s so many things that I’ve heard about...”

“Wizards. I see.” I put my pencil down and steepled my fingers in wizardly fashion. The woman was nervous and had certain expectations. I might ease her fears a little if I fulfilled some of them. I tried not to look over her shoulder at the calendar I had hanging on the wall, and the red circle around the fifteenth of last month. Late rent. Need money. Even with the fee from today and what I would make in the future, it would take the city forever to pay up.

Besides, I could never resist going to the aid of a lady in distress. Even if she wasn’t completely, one hundred percent sure that she wanted to be

rescued by me.

“Monica,” I told her. “There are powers in the universe that most people don’t even know about. Powers that we still don’t fully understand. The men and women who work with these powers see things in a different light than regular people. They come to understand things in a slightly different way. This sets them apart. Sometimes it breeds unwarranted suspicion and fear. I know you’ve read books and seen movies about how horrible people like me are, and that whole ‘suffer not a witch to live’ part of the Old Testament hasn’t made things all roses. But we really aren’t any different from anyone else.” I gave her my best smile. “I want to help you. But if I’m going to do that, you’re going to have to give me a little trust. I promise. I give you my word that I won’t disappoint you.”

I saw her take this in and chew on it for a while, while staring down at her hands.

“Victor,” she said at last. “Victor Sells.”

“All right,” I said, picking up my pencil and duly noting it. “Is there anyplace he might have gone that you can think of, offhand?”

She nodded. “The lake house. We have a house down by...” She waved her hand.

“The lake?”

She beamed at me, and I reminded myself to be patient. “In Lake Providence, over the state line, around Lake Michigan. It’s beautiful up there in the autumn.”

“Okay, then. Are you aware of any friends he might have run off to see, family he might have visited, anything like that?”

“Oh, Victor wasn’t on speaking terms with his family. I never knew why. He didn’t talk about them, really. We’ve been married for ten years, and he never once spoke to them.”

“Okay,” I said, noting that down, too. “Friends, then?”

She fretted her lip, a gesture that seemed familiar to her. “Not really. He was friends with his boss, and some people at work, but after he was fired...”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “I understand.” I continued writing things down, drawing bold lines between thoughts to separate them. I spilled over onto the next page before I was finished writing down the facts and my observations about Monica. I like to be thorough about this kind of thing.

“Well, Mr. Dresden?” she asked. “Can you help me?”

I looked over the page and nodded. “I think so, Monica. If possible, I’d like to see these things your husband collected. Which books and so on. It would help if I had a picture of him, too. I might like to take a look around your house at Lake Providence. Would that be all right?”

“Of course,” she said. She seemed relieved, but at the same time even more nervous than before. I noted down the address of the lake house and brief directions.

“You’re aware of my fees?” I asked her. “I’m not cheap. It might be less costly for you to hire someone else.”

“We’ve got quite a bit of savings, Mr. Dresden,” she told me. “I’m not worried about the money.” That seemed an odd statement from her, at the time—out of tune with her generally nervous manner.

“Well, then,” I told her. “I charge fifty dollars an hour, plus expenses. I’ll send you an itemized list of what I do, so you’ll have a good idea what I’m working on. A retainer is customary. I’m not going to guarantee that I work exclusively on your case. I try to handle each of my customers with respect and courtesy, so I can’t put any one of them before another.”

She nodded to me, emphatically, and reached into her purse. She drew out a white envelope and passed it over to me. “There’s five hundred inside,” she told me. “Is that enough for now?”

Cha-ching. Five hundred dollars would take care of last month’s rent and a good bit of this month’s, too. I could get into this bit with nervous clients wanting to preserve the anonymity of their checking accounts from my supposed sorcerous might. Cash always spends.

“That will be fine, yes,” I told her. I tried not to fondle the envelope. At least I wasn’t crass enough to dump the money on my desk and count it out.

She drew out another envelope. “He took most of his things with him,” she said. “At least, I couldn’t find them where he usually keeps them. But I did find this.” There was something in the envelope, making it bulge, an amulet, ring, or charm of some kind, I was betting. A third envelope came out of her purse—the woman must be compulsively well organized. “There’s a picture of him in here, and my phone number inside. Thank you, Mr. Dresden. When will you call?”

“As soon as I know something,” I told her. “Probably by tomorrow afternoon or Saturday morning. Sound good?”

She almost looked at my eyes, caught herself, and smiled directly at my nose instead. “Yes. Yes, thank you so much for your help.” She glanced up

at the wall. "Oh, look at the time. I need to go. School's almost out." She closed her teeth over her words and flushed again, as though embarrassed that she had let such an important fact about her slip out.

"I'll do whatever I can, ma'am," I assured her, rising, and walking her to the door. "Thank you for your business. I'll be in touch soon."

She said her good-byes, never looking me in the face, and fled out the door. I shut it behind her and went back to the envelopes.

First, the money. It was all in fifties, which always look new even when they're years old because they get so little circulation. There were ten of them. I put them in my wallet, and trashed the envelope.

The envelope with the photo in it was next. I took it out and regarded a picture of Monica and a man of lean and handsome features, with a wide forehead and shaggy eyebrows that skewed his handsomeness off onto a rather eccentric angle. His smile was whiter-than-white, and his skin had the smooth, dark tan of someone who spends a lot of time in the sun, boating maybe. It was a sharp contrast against Monica's paleness. Victor Sells, I presume.

The phone number was written on a plain white index card that had been neatly trimmed down to fit inside the envelope. There was no name or area code, just a seven-digit number. I got out my cross-listing directory and looked it up.

I noted that down as well. I wondered what the woman had expected to accomplish by only giving out first names, when she had been going to hand me a dozen other ways of finding out in any case. It only goes to show that people are funny when they're nervous about something. They say screwy things, make odd choices which, in retrospect, they feel amazingly foolish for making. I would have to be careful not to say anything to rub that in when I spoke to her again.

I trashed the second envelope and opened the last one, turning it upside down over my desk.

The brown husk of a dead, dried scorpion, glistening with some sort of preservative glaze, clicked down onto my desk. A supple, braided leather cord led off from a ring set through the base of its tail, so that if it was worn, it would hang head down, tail up and curled over the dried body to point at the ground.

I shuddered. Scorpions were symbolically powerful in certain circles of belief. They weren't usually symbols of anything good or wholesome,

either. A lot of petty, mean spells could be focused around a little talisman like that. If you wore it next to your skin, as such things are supposed to be worn, the prickly legs of the thing would be a constant poking and agitation at your chest, a continual reminder that it was there. The dried stinger at the tail's tip might actually pierce the skin of anyone who tried to give the wearer a hug. Its crablike pincers would catch in a man's chest hair, or scratch at the curves of a woman's breasts. Nasty, unpleasant thing. Not evil, as such—but you sure as hell weren't likely to do happy shiny things with magic with such an item around your neck.

Maybe Victor Sells had gotten involved in something real, something that had absorbed his attention. The Art could do that to a person—particularly the darker aspects of it. If he had turned to it in despair after losing his job, maybe that would explain his sudden absence from his home. A lot of sorcerers or wanna-be sorcerers secluded themselves in the belief that isolation would increase their ability to focus on their magic. It didn't—but it did make it easier for a weak or untrained mind to avoid distractions.

Or maybe it wasn't even a true talisman. Maybe it was just a curiosity, or a souvenir from some visit to the Southwest. There wasn't any way for me to tell if it was indeed a device used to improve the focus and direction of magical energies, short of actually using it to attempt a spell—and I really didn't want to be using such a dubious article, for a variety of good reasons.

I would have to keep this little un-beauty in mind as I tried to run this man down. It might well mean nothing. On the other hand, it might not. I looked up at the clock. A quarter after three. There was time to check with the local morgues to see if they had turned up any likely John Does—who knew, my search might be over before the day's end—and then to get to the bank to deposit my money and fire off a check to my landlord.

I got out my phone book and started calling up hospitals—not really my routine line of work, but not difficult, either, except for the standard problems I had using the telephone: static, line noise, other people's conversations being louder than mine. If something can go wrong, it will.

Once I thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye, a twitch of motion from the dried scorpion that sat on my desk. I blinked and stared at it. It didn't move. Cautiously, I extended my senses toward it like an invisible hand, feeling about for any traces of enchantment or magical energy.

Nothing. It was as dry of enchantment as it was of life.

Never let it be said that Harry Dresden is afraid of a dried, dead bug. Creepy or not, I wasn't going to let it ruin my concentration.

So I scooped it up with the corner of the phone book and popped it into the middle drawer of my desk. Out of sight, out of mind.

So I have a problem with creepy, dead, poisonous things. So sue me.

Chapter Five

McAnally's is a pub a few blocks from my office. I go there when I'm feeling stressed, or when I have a few extra bucks to spend on a nice dinner. A lot of us fringe types do. Mac, the pub's owner, is used to wizards and all the problems that come along with us. There aren't any video games at McAnally's. There are no televisions or expensive computer trivia games. There isn't even a jukebox. Mac keeps a player piano instead. It's less likely to go haywire around us.

I say *pub* in all the best senses of the word. When you walk in, you take several steps down into a room with a deadly combination of a low clearance and ceiling fans. If you're tall, like me, you walk carefully in McAnally's. There are thirteen stools at the bar and thirteen tables in the room. Thirteen windows, set up high in the wall in order to be above ground level, let some light from the street into the place. Thirteen mirrors on the walls cast back reflections of the patrons in dim detail, and give the illusion of more space. Thirteen wooden columns, carved with likenesses from folktales and legends of the Old World, make it difficult to walk around the place without weaving a circuitous route—they also quite intentionally break up the flow of random energies, dispelling to one degree or another the auras that gather around broody, grumpy wizards and keeping them from manifesting in unintentional and colorful ways. The colors are all muted, earth browns and sea greens. The first time I entered McAnally's, I felt like a wolf returning to an old, favorite den. Mac makes his own beer, ale really, and it's the best stuff in the city. His food is cooked on a wood-burning stove. And you can damn well walk your own self over to the bar to pick up your order when it's ready, according to Mac. It's my sort of place.

Since the calls to the morgues had turned up nothing, I kept a few bills out of Monica Sells's retainer and took myself to McAnally's. After the kind of day I'd had, I deserved some of Mac's ale and someone else's cooking. It was going to be a long night, too, once I went home and started trying to figure out how whoever it was had pulled off the death spell used

on Johnny Marcone's hatchet man, Tommy Tomm, and his girlfriend, Jennifer Stanton.

"Dresden," Mac greeted me, when I sat down at the bar. The dim, comfortable room was empty, but for a pair of men I recognized by sight at a back table, playing chess. Mac is a tall, almost gangly man of indeterminate age, though there's a sense to him that speaks of enough wisdom and strength that I wouldn't venture that he was less than fifty. He has squinty eyes and a smile that is rare and mischievous when it manifests. Mac never says much, but when he does it's almost always worth listening to.

"Hey there, Mac," I hailed him. "Been one hell of a day. Give me a steak sandwich, fries, ale."

"Ungh," Mac said. He opened a bottle of his ale and began to pour it warm, staring past me, into the middle distance. He does that with everyone. Considering his clientele, I don't blame him. I wouldn't chance looking them in the face, either.

"You hear about what happened at the Madison?"

"Ungh," he confirmed.

"Nasty business."

Such an inane comment apparently didn't merit even a grunted reply. Mac set my drink out and turned to the stove behind the bar, checking the wood and raking it back and forth to provide even heating for it.

I picked up a prethumbed newspaper nearby and scanned the headlines. "Hey, look at this. Another ThreeEye rampage. Jesus, this stuff is worse than crack." The article detailed the virtual demolition of a neighborhood grocery store by a pair of ThreeEye junkies who were convinced that the place was destined to explode and wanted to beat destiny to the punch.

"Ungh."

"You ever seen anything like this?"

Mac shook his head.

"They say the stuff gives you the third sight," I said, reading the article. Both junkies had been admitted to the hospital and were in critical condition, after collapsing at the scene. "But you know what?"

Mac looked back at me from the stove, while he cooked.

"I don't think that's possible. What a bunch of crap. Trying to sell these poor kids on the idea that they can do magic."

Mac nodded at me.

“If it was serious stuff, the department would have already called me by now.”

Mac shrugged, turning back to the stove. Then he squinted up and peered into the dim reflection of the mirror behind the bar.

“Harry,” he said, “you were followed.”

I had been too tense for too much of the day to avoid feeling my shoulders constrict in a sudden twinge. I put both hands around my mug and brought a few phrases of quasi-Latin to mind. It never hurt to be ready to defend myself, in case someone was intending to hurt me. I watched someone approach, a dim shape in the reflection cast by the ancient, worn mirror. Mac went on with cooking, unperturbed. Nothing much perturbed Mac.

I smelled her perfume before I turned around. “Why, Miss Rodriguez,” I said. “It’s always pleasant to see you.”

She came to an abrupt stop a couple of paces from me, apparently disconcerted. One of the advantages of being a wizard is that people always attribute anything you do to magic, if no other immediate explanation leaps to mind. She probably wouldn’t think about her perfume giving her identity away when she could assign my mysterious, blind identification of her to my mystical powers.

“Come on,” I told her. “Sit down. I’ll get you a drink while I refuse to tell you anything.”

“Harry,” she admonished me, “you don’t know I’m here on business.” She sat down on the barstool next to me. She was a woman of average height and striking, dark beauty, wearing a crisp business jacket and skirt, hose, pumps. Her dark, straight hair was trimmed in a neat cut that ended at the nape of her neck and was parted off of the dark skin of her forehead, emphasizing the lazy appeal of her dark eyes.

“Susan,” I chided her, “you wouldn’t be in this place if you weren’t. Did you have a good time in Branson?”

Susan Rodriguez was a reporter for the *Chicago Arcane*, a yellow magazine that covered all sorts of supernatural and paranormal events throughout the Midwest. Usually, the events they covered weren’t much better than “Monkey Man Seen With Elvis’s Love Child,” or “JFK’s Mutant Ghost Abducts Shapeshifting Girl Scout.” But once in a great, great while, the *Arcane* covered something that was real. Like the Unseelie Incursion of 1994, when the entire city of Milwaukee had simply vanished for two

hours. Gone. Government satellite photos showed the river valley covered with trees and empty of life or human habitation. All communications ceased. Then, a few hours later, there it was, back again, and no one in the city itself the wiser.

She had also been hanging around my investigation in Branson the previous week. She had been tracking me ever since interviewing me for a feature story, right after I'd opened up my business. I had to hand it to her—she had instincts. And enough curiosity to get her into ten kinds of trouble. She had tricked me into meeting her eyes at the conclusion of our first interview, an eager young reporter investigating an angle on her interviewee. She was the one who had fainted after we'd soulgazed.

She smirked at me. I liked her smirk. It did interesting things to her lips, and hers were already attractive. "You should have stayed around for the show," she said. "It was pretty impressive." She put her purse on the bar and slid up onto the stool beside me.

"No thanks," I told her. "I'm pretty sure it wasn't for me."

"My editor loved the coverage. She's convinced it's going to win an award of some kind."

"I can see it now," I told her. "'Mysterious Visions Haunt Drug-Using Country Star.' Real hard-hitting paranormal journalism, that." I glanced at her, and she met my eyes without fear. She didn't let me see if my gibe had ruffled her.

"I heard you got called in by the S.I. director today," she told me. She leaned toward me, enough that a glance down would have afforded an interesting angle to the V of her white shirt. "I'd love to hear you tell me about this one, Harry." She quirked a smile at me that promised things.

I almost smiled back at her. "Sorry," I told her. "I have a standard nondisclosure agreement with the city."

"Something off the record, then?" she asked. "Rumor has it that these killings were pretty sensational."

"Can't help you, Susan," I told her. "Wild horses couldn't drag it out of me, et cetera."

"Just a hint," she pressed. "A word of comment. Something shared between two people who are very attracted to one another."

"Which two people would that be?"

She put an elbow on the counter and propped her chin in her hand, studying me through narrowed eyes and thick, long lashes. One of the

things that appealed to me about her was that even though she used her charm and femininity relentlessly in pursuit of her stories, she had no concept of just how attractive she really was—I had seen that when I looked within her last year. “Harry Dresden,” she said, “you are a thoroughly maddening man.” Her eyes narrowed a bit further. “You didn’t look down my blouse even once, did you?” she accused.

I took a sip of my ale and beckoned Mac to pour her one as well. He did. “Guilty.”

“Most men are off-balance by now,” she complained. “What does it take with you, anyway, Dresden?”

“I am pure of heart and mind,” I told her. “I cannot be corrupted.”

She stared at me in frustration for a moment. Then she tilted back her head to laugh. She had a good laugh, too, throaty and rich. I *did* look down at her chest when she did that, just for a second. A pure heart and mind only takes you so far—sooner or later the hormones have their say, too. I mean, I’m not a teenager or anything, anymore, but I’m not exactly an expert in things like this, either. Call it an overwhelming interest in my professional career, but I’ve never had much time for dating or the fair sex in general. And when I have, it hasn’t turned out too well.

Susan was a known quantity—she was attractive, bright, appealing, her motivations were clear and simple, and she was honest in pursuing them. She flirted with me because she wanted information as much as because she thought I was attractive. Sometimes she got it. Sometimes she didn’t. This one was way too hot for Susan or the *Arcane* to touch, and if Murphy heard I’d tipped someone off about what had happened, she’d have my heart between two pieces of bread for lunch.

“I’ll tell you what, Harry,” she said. “How about if I ask some questions, and you just answer them with a yes or a no?”

“No,” I said promptly. Dammit. I am a poor liar, and it didn’t take a reporter with Susan’s brains to tell it.

Her eyes glittered with cheerfully malicious ambition. “Was Tommy Tomm murdered by a paranormal being or means?”

“No,” I said again, stubbornly.

“No, he wasn’t?” Susan asked. “Or no, it wasn’t a paranormal being?”

I glanced at Mac as though to appeal for help. Mac ignored me. Mac doesn’t take sides. Mac is wise.

“No, I’m not going to answer questions,” I said.

“Do the police have any leads? Any suspects?”

“No.”

“Are you a suspect yourself, Harry?”

Disturbing thought. “No,” I said, exasperated. “Susan—”

“Would you mind having dinner with me Saturday night?”

“No! I—” I blinked at her. “What?”

She smiled at me, leaned over, and kissed me on the cheek. Her lips, which I’d admired so much, felt very, very nice. “Super,” she said. “I’ll pick you up at your place. Say around nine?”

“Did I just miss something?” I asked her.

She nodded, dark eyes sparkling with humor. “I’m going to take you to a fantastic dinner. Have you ever eaten at the Pump Room? At the Ambassador East?”

I shook my head.

“Steaks you wouldn’t believe,” she assured me. “And the most romantic atmosphere. Jackets and ties required. Can you manage?”

“Um. Yes?” I said, carefully. “This is the answer to the question of whether or not I’ll go out with you, right?”

“No,” Susan said, with a smile. “That was the answer I tricked out of you, so you’re stuck, there. I just want to make sure you own something besides jeans and button-down Western shirts.”

“Oh. Yes,” I said.

“Super,” she repeated, and kissed me on the cheek once more as she stood up and gathered her purse. “Saturday, then.” She drew back and quirked her smirky little smile at me. It was a killer look, sultry and appealing. “I’ll be there. With bells on.”

She turned and walked out. I sort of turned to stare after her. My jaw slid off the bar as I did and landed on the floor.

Had I just agreed to a date? Or an interrogation session?

“Probably both,” I muttered.

Mac slapped my steak sandwich and fries down in front of me. I put down some money, morosely, and he made change.

“She’s going to do nothing but try to trick information out of me that I shouldn’t be giving her, Mac,” I said.

“Ungh,” Mac agreed.

“Why did I say yes?”

Mac shrugged.

“She’s pretty,” I said. “Smart. Sexy.”

“Ungh.”

“Any red-blooded man would have done the same thing.”

“Hngh,” Mac snorted.

“Well. Maybe not you.”

Mac smiled a bit, mollified.

“Still. It’s going to make trouble for me. I must be crazy to go for someone like that.” I picked up my sandwich, and sighed.

“Dumb,” Mac said.

“I just said she was smart, Mac.”

Mac’s face flickered into that smile, and it made him look years younger, almost boyish. “Not her,” he said. “You.”

I ate my dinner. And had to admit that he was right.

This threw a wrench into my plans. My best idea for poking around the Sells lake house and getting information had to be carried out at night. And I already had tomorrow night slated for a talk with Bianca, since I had a feeling Murphy and Carmichael would fail to turn up any cooperation from the vampiress. That meant I would have to drive out to Lake Providence tonight, since Saturday night was now occupied by the date with Susan—or at least the premidnight portion was.

My mouth went dry when I considered that maybe the rest of the night might be occupied, too. One never knew. She had dizzied me and made me look like an idiot, and she was probably going to try every trick she knew to drag more information out of me for the Monday morning release of the *Arcane*. On the other hand, she was sexy, intelligent, and at least a little attracted to me. That indicated that more might happen than just talk and dinner. Didn’t it?

The question was, did I really want that to happen?

I had been a miserable failure in relationships, ever since my first love went sour. I mean, a lot of teenage guys fail in their first relationships.

Not many of them murder the girl involved.

I shied away from that line of thought, lest it bring up too many old memories.

I left McAnally’s, after Mac had handed me a doggy bag with a grunt of “Mister,” by way of explanation. The chess game in the corner was still in progress, both players puffing up a sweet-smelling smog cloud from their pipes. I tried to figure out how to deal with Susan, while I walked out to my

car. Did I need to clean up my apartment? Did I have all the ingredients for the spell I would cast at the lake house later tonight? Would Murphy go through the roof when I talked to Bianca?

I could still feel Susan's kiss lingering on my cheek as I got in the car.

I shook my head, bewildered. They say we wizards are subtle. But believe you me, we've got nothing, nothing at all, on *women*.

Chapter Six

Mister was nowhere to be seen when I got home, but I left the food in his dish anyway. He would eventually forgive me for getting home late. I collected the things I would need from my kitchen—fresh-baked bread with no preservatives, honey, milk, a fresh apple, a sharp silver penknife, and a tiny dinner set of a plate, bowl, and cup that I had carved myself from a block of teakwood.

I went back out to my car. The Beetle isn't really blue anymore, since both doors have been replaced, one with a green clone, one with a white one, and the hood of the storage trunk in front had to be replaced with a red duplicate, but the name stuck anyway. Mike is a super mechanic. He never asked questions about the burns that slagged a hole in the front hatch or the claw marks that ruined both the doors. You can't pay for service like that.

I revved up the Beetle and drove down I-94, around the shore of Lake Michigan, crossing through Indiana, briefly, and then crossing over the state line into Michigan itself. Lake Providence is an expensive, high-class community with big houses and sprawling estates. It isn't cheap to own land there. Victor Sells must have been doing well in his former position at SilverCo to afford a place out that way.

The lakeshore drive wound in and out among thick, tall trees and rolling hills down to the shore. The properties were well spread out, several hundred yards between them. Most of them were fenced in and had gates on the right side of the road, away from the lake as I drove north. The Sells house was the only one I saw on the lake side of the drive.

A smooth gravel lane, lined by trees, led back from the lakeshore drive to the Sells house. A peninsula jutted out into the lake, leaving enough room for the house and a small dock, at which no boats were moored. The house was not a large one, by the standards of the rest of the Lake Providence community. Built on two levels, it was a very modern dwelling—a lot of glass and wood that was made to look like something more synthetic than wood by the way it had been smoothed and cut and polished. The drive curved around to the back of the house, where a driveway big enough to host a five-on-five game of basketball around a backboard

erected to one side was overlooked by a wooden deck leading off the second level of the house.

I drove the Blue Beetle around to the back of the house and parked there. My ingredients were in a black nylon backpack, and I picked that up and brought it with me as I got out of the car and stretched my legs. The breeze coming up from the lake was cool enough to make me shiver a little, and I drew my mantled duster closed across my belly.

First impressions are important, and I wanted to listen to what my instincts said about the house. I stopped for a long moment and just stared up at it.

My instincts must have been holding out for another bottle of Mac's ale. They had little to say, other than that the place looked like a pricey little dwelling that had hosted a family through many a vacation weekend. Well, where instinct fails, intellect must venture. Almost everything was fairly new. The grass around the house had not grown long enough, this winter, to require a cutting. The basketball net was stretched out and loose enough to show that it had been used fairly often. The curtains were all drawn.

On the grass beneath the deck something red gleamed, and I went beneath the deck to retrieve it. It was a plastic film canister, red with a grey cap, the kind you keep a roll of film in when you send it in to the processors. Film canisters were good for holding various ingredients I used, sometimes. I tucked it in my duster's pocket and continued my inspection.

The place didn't look much like a family dwelling, really. It looked like a rich man's love nest, a secluded little getaway nestled back in the trees of the peninsula and safe from spying eyes. Or an ideal location for a novice sorcerer to come to try out his fledgling abilities, safe from interruptions. A good place for Victor Sells to set up shop and practice.

I made a quick circuit of the house, tried the front and rear doors, and even the door up on the deck that led, presumably, to a kitchen. All were locked. Locks really weren't an obstacle, but Monica Sells hadn't invited me actually to take a look inside the house, just around it. It's bad juju to go tromping into people's houses uninvited. One of the reasons vampires, as a rule, don't do it—they have enough trouble just holding themselves together, outside of the Nevernever. It isn't harmful to a human wizard, like me, but it can really impair anything you try to do with magic. Also, it just isn't polite. Like I said, I'm an old-fashioned sort of guy.

Of course, the TekTronic Securities control panel that I could see through the front window had some say in my decision—not that I couldn't hex it down to a useless bundle of plastic and wires, but a lot of security systems will cause an alarm with their contact company if they abruptly stop working without notice. It would be a useless exercise, in any case—the real information was to be had elsewhere.

Still, something nagged at me, a sense of not-quite-emptiness to the house. On a hunch, I knocked on the front door, several times. I even rang the bell. No one came to answer the door, and no lights were on, inside. I shrugged and walked back to the rear of the house, passing a number of empty trash cans as I did.

Now that was a bit odd. I mean, I would expect a little something in the trash, even if someone hadn't been there in a while. Did the garbage truck come all the way down the drive to pick up the trash cans? That didn't seem likely. If the Sellses came out to the house for the weekend and wanted the trash emptied, it would stand to reason that they'd have to leave it out by the drive near the road as they left. Which would seem to imply that the garbagemen would leave the empty trash cans out by the road. Someone must have brought them back to the house.

Of course, it needn't have been Victor Sells. It could have been a neighbor, or something. Or maybe he tipped the garbagemen to carry the cans back away from the road. But it was something to go on, a little hint that maybe the house hadn't been empty all week.

I left the house behind me and walked out toward the lake. The night was breezy but clear, and a bit cool. The tall old trees creaked and groaned beneath the wind. It was still early for the mosquitoes to be too bad. The moon was waxing toward full overhead, with the occasional cloud slipping past her like a gauzy veil.

It was a perfect night for catching faeries.

I swept an area of dirt not far from the lakeshore clear of leaves and sticks, and took the silver knife from the backpack. Using the handle, I drew a circle in the earth, then covered it up with leaves and sticks again, marking the location of the circle's perimeter in my head. I was careful to focus in concentration on the circle, without actually letting any power slip into it and spoil the trap. Then, working carefully, I prepared the bait by setting out the little cup and bowl. I poured a thimbleful of milk into the

cup and daubed the bowl full of honey from the little plastic bear in my backpack.

Then I tore a piece of bread from the loaf I had brought with me and pricked my thumb with the knife. In the silver light of the moon, a bit of dark blood welled up against the skin, and I touched it daintily to the underside of the coarse bread, letting it absorb the blood. Then I set the bread, bloody side down, on the tiny plate.

My trap was set. I gathered up my equipment and retreated to the cover of the trees.

There are two parts of magic you have to understand to catch a faery. One of them is the concept of true names. Everything in the whole world has its own name. Names are unique sounds and cadences of words that are attached to one specific individual—sort of like a kind of theme music. If you know something's name, you can associate yourself with it in a magical sense, almost in the same way a wizard can reach out and touch someone if he possesses a lock of their hair, or fingernail clippings, or blood. If you know something's name, you can create a magical link to it, just as you can call someone up and talk to them if you know their phone number. Just knowing the name isn't good enough, though: You have to know exactly how to say it. Ask two John Franklin Smiths to say their names for you, and you'll get subtle differences in tone and pronunciation, each one unique to its owner. Wizards tend to collect names of creatures, spirits, and people like some kind of huge Rolodex. You never know when it will come in handy.

The other part of magic you need to know is magic-circle theory. Most magic involves a circle of one kind or another. Drawing a circle sets a local limit on what a wizard is trying to do. It helps him refine his magic, focus and direct it more clearly. It does this by creating a sort of screen, defined by the perimeter of the circle, that keeps random magical energy from going past it, containing it within the circle so that it can be used. To make a circle, you draw it out on the ground, or close hands with a bunch of people, or walk about spreading incense, or any of a number of other methods, while focusing on your purpose in drawing it. Then, you invest it with a little spark of energy to close the circuit, and it's ready.

One other thing such a circle does: It keeps magical creatures, like faeries, or even demons, from getting past it. Neat, huh? Usually, this is used to keep them out. It's a bit trickier to set up a circle to keep them *in*.

That's where the blood comes into play. With blood comes power. If you take in some of someone else's blood, there is a metaphysical significance to it, a sort of energy. It's minuscule if you aren't really trying to get energy that way (the way vampires do), but it's enough to close a circle.

Now you know how it's done. But I don't recommend that you try it at home. You don't know what to do when something goes wrong.

I retreated to the trees and called the name of the particular faery I wanted. It was a rolling series of syllables, quite beautiful, really—especially since the faery went by the name of Toot-toot every time I'd encountered him before. I pushed my will out along with the name, just made it a call, something that would be subtle enough to make him wander this way of his own accord. Or at least, that was the theory.

What was his name? Please, do you think wizards just *give* information like that away? You don't know what I went through to get it.

About ten minutes later, Toot came flickering in over the water of Lake Michigan. At first I mistook him for a reflection of the moon on the side of the softly rolling waves of the lake. Toot was maybe six inches tall. He had silver dragonfly's wings sprouting from his back and the pale, beautiful, tiny humanoid form that echoed the splendor of the fae lords. A silver nimbus of ambient light surrounded him. His hair was a shaggy, silken little mane, like a bird of paradise's plumes, and was a pale magenta.

Toot loved bread and milk and honey—a common vice of the lesser fae. They aren't usually willing to take on a nest of bees to get to the honey, and there's been a real dearth of milk in the Nevernever since hi-tech dairy farms took over most of the industry. Needless to say, they don't grow their own wheat, harvest it, thresh it, and then mill it into flour to make bread, either.

Toot alighted on the ground with caution, scanning around the trees. He didn't see me. I saw him wipe at his mouth and walk in a slow circle around the miniature dining set, one hand rubbing greedily at his stomach. Once he took the bread and closed the circle, I'd be able to bargain information for his release. Toot was a lesser spirit in the area, sort of a dockworker of the Nevernever. If anyone had seen anything of Victor Sells, Toot would have, or would know someone who had.

Toot dithered for a while, fluttering back and forth around the meal, but slowly getting closer. Faeries and honey. Moths and flame. Toot had fallen for this several times before, and it wasn't in the nature of the fae to keep

memories for very long, or to change their essential natures. All the same, I held my breath.

The faery finally hunkered down, picked up the bread, dipped it in the honey, then greedily gobbled it down. The circle closed with a little *snap* that occurred just at the edge of my hearing.

Its effect on Toot was immediate. He screamed a shrill little scream, like a trapped rabbit, and took off toward the lake in a buzzing flurry of wings. At the perimeter of the circle, he smacked into something as solid as a brick wall, and a little puff of silver motes exploded out from him in a cloud. Toot grunted and fell onto his little faery ass on the earth.

“I should have known!” he exclaimed, as I approached from the trees. His voice was high-pitched, but more like a little kid’s than the exaggerated kind of faery voices I’d heard in cartoons. “Now I remember where I’ve seen those plates before! You ugly, sneaky, hamhanded, big-nosed, flat-footed mortal worm!”

“Hiya, Toot,” I told him. “Do you remember our deal from last time, or do we need to go over it again?”

Toot glared defiantly up at me and stomped his foot on the ground. More silver faery dust puffed out from the impact. “Release me!” he demanded. “Or I will tell the Queen!”

“If I don’t release you,” I pointed out, “you *can’t* tell the Queen. And you know just as well as I do what she would say about any dewdrop faery who was silly enough to get himself caught with a lure of bread and milk and honey.”

Toot crossed his arms defiantly over his chest. “I warn you, mortal. Release me now, or you will feel the awful, terrible, irresistible might of the faery magic! I will rot your teeth from your head! Take your eyes from their sockets! Fill your mouth with dung and your ears with worms!”

“Hit me with your best shot,” I told him. “After that, we can talk about what you need to do to get out of the circle.”

I had called his bluff. I always did, but he probably wouldn’t remember the details very well. If you live a few hundred years, you tend to forget the little things. Toot sulked and kicked up a little spray of dirt with one tiny foot. “You could at least *pretend* to be afraid, Harry.”

“Sorry, Toot. I don’t have the time.”

“Time, time,” Toot complained. “Is that all you mortals can ever think about? Everyone’s complaining about *time*! The whole city rushes left and

right screaming about being late and honking horns! You people *used* to have it right, you know.”

I bore the lecture with good nature. Toot could never keep his mind on the same subject long enough to be really trying, in any case.

“Why, I remember the folk who lived here before you pale, wheezy guys came in. And they *never* complained about ulcers or—” Toot’s eyes wandered to the bread and milk and honey again, and glinted. He sauntered that way, then snatched the remaining bread, sopping up all the honey with it and eating it with greedy, birdlike motions.

“This is good stuff, Harry. None of that funny stuff in it that we get sometimes.”

“Preservatives,” I said.

“Whatever.” Toot drank down the milk, too, in a long pull, then promptly fell down on his back, patting at his rounded tummy. “All right,” he said. “Now, let me out.”

“Not yet, Toot. I need something first.”

Toot scowled up at me. “You wizards. Always needing something. I really could do the thing with the dung, you know.” He stood up and folded his arms haughtily over his chest, looking up at me as though I weren’t a dozen times taller than he. “Very well,” he said, his tone lofty. “I have deigned to grant you a single request of some small nature, for the generous gift of your cuisine.”

I worked to keep a straight face. “That’s very kind of you.”

Toot sniffed and somehow managed to look down his little pug nose at me. “It is my nature to be both benevolent and wise.”

I nodded, as though this were a very great wisdom. “Uh-huh. Look, Toot. I need to know if you were around this place for the past few nights, or know someone who was. I’m looking for someone, and maybe he came here.”

“And if I tell you,” Toot said, “I take it you will disassemble this circle which has, by some odd coincidence no doubt, made its way around me?”

“It would be only reasonable,” I said, all seriousness.

Toot seemed to consider it, as though he might be inclined not to cooperate, then nodded. “Very well. You will have the information you wish. Release me.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you sure? Do you promise?”

Toot stamped his foot again, scattering more silver dust motes. “Harry! You’re ruining the drama!”

I folded my arms. “I want to hear you promise.”

Toot threw up his hands. “Fine, fine, *fine*! I promise, I promise, I promise! I’ll dig up what you want to know!” He started to buzz about the circle in great agitation, wings lifting him easily into the air. “Let me out! Let me out!”

A promise thrice made is as close to absolute truth as you can get from a faery. I went quickly to the circle and scuffed over the line drawn in the dirt with my foot, willing the circle to part. It did, with a little hiss of released energy.

Toot streaked out over Lake Michigan’s waters again, a miniature silver comet, and vanished in a twinkling, just like Santa Claus. Though I should say that Santa is a *much* bigger and more powerful faery than Toot, and I don’t know his true name anyway. You’d never see me trying to nab Saint Nick in a magic circle, even if I did. I don’t think anyone has stones that big.

I waited around, walking about to keep from falling asleep. If I did that, Toot would be perfectly within his rights as a faery to fulfill his promise by telling me the information while I was sleeping. And, given that I had just now captured and humiliated him, he’d probably do something to even the scales—two weeks from now he wouldn’t even remember it, but if I let him have a free shot at me tonight, I might wake up with an ass’s head, and I didn’t think that would be good for business.

So I paced, and I waited. Toot usually took about half an hour to round up whatever it was I wanted to know.

Sure enough, half an hour later he came sparkling back in and buzzed around my head, drizzling faery dust from his blurring wings at my eyes. “Hah, Harry!” he said. “I did it!”

“What did you find out, Toot?”

“Guess!”

I snorted. “No.”

“Aw, come on. Just a little guess?”

I scowled, tired and irritated, but tried not to let it show. Toot couldn’t help being what he was. “Toot, it’s late. You promised to tell me.”

“No fun at *all*,” he complained. “No wonder you can’t get a date unless someone wants to know something from you.”

I blinked at him, and he chortled in glee. “Hah! I love it! We’re watching you, Harry Dresden!”

Now that was disconcerting. I had a sudden image of a dozen faery voyeurs lingering around my apartment’s windows and peering inside. I’d have to take precautions to make sure they couldn’t do that. Not that I was afraid of them, or anything. Just in case.

“Just tell me, Toot,” I sighed.

“Incoming!” he shrilled, and I held out my hand, fingers flat and palm up. He alighted in the center of my palm. I could barely feel his weight, but the sense, the aura of him ran through my skin like a tiny electric current. He stared fearlessly at my eyes—the fae have no souls to gaze upon, and they could not fathom a mortal’s soul, even if they could see it.

“Okay!” Toot said. “I talked to Blueblossom, who talked to Rednose, who talked to Meg O’ Aspens, who said that Goldeneyes said that he was riding the pizza car when it came here last night!” Toot thrust out his chest proudly.

“Pizza car?” I asked, bewildered.

“Pizza!” Toot cried, jubilant. “Pizza! Pizza! Pizza!” His wings fluttered again, and I tried to blink the damned faery dust out of my eyes before I started sneezing.

“Faeries like pizza?” I asked.

“Oh, Harry,” Toot said breathlessly. “Haven’t you ever had pizza before?”

“Of course I have,” I said.

Toot looked wounded. “And you didn’t share?”

I sighed. “Look. Maybe I can bring you guys some pizza sometime soon, to thank you for your help.”

Toot leapt about in glee, hopping from one fingertip to the other. “Yes! Yes! Wait until I tell them! We’ll see who laughs at Toot-toot next time!”

“Toot,” I said, trying to calm him, “did he see anything else?”

Toot tittered, his expression sly and suggestive. “He said that there were mortals sporting and that they needed pizza to regain their strength!”

“Which delivery place, Toot?”

The faery blinked and stared at me as though I were hopelessly stupid. “Harry. *The* pizza truck.” And then he darted off skyward, vanishing into the trees above.

I sighed and nodded. Toot wouldn't know the difference between Domino's and Pizza Hut. He had no frame of reference, and couldn't read—most faeries were studiously averse to print.

So, I had two pieces of information. One, someone had ordered a pizza to be delivered here. That meant two things. First, that someone was here last night. Second, that someone had seen them and talked to them. Maybe I could track down the pizza driver, and ask if he had seen Victor Sells.

The second piece of information had been Toot's reference to sporting. Faeries didn't think too much of mortals' idea of "sporting" unless there was a lot of nudity and lust involved. They had a penchant for shadowing necking teenagers and playing tricks on them. So Victor had been here with a lover of some kind, for there to be any "sport" going on.

I was beginning to think that Monica Sells was in denial. Her husband wasn't wandering around learning to be a sorcerer, spooky scorpion talismans notwithstanding. He was lurking about his love nest with a girlfriend, like any other husband bored with a timid and domestic wife might do under pressure. It wasn't admirable, but I guess I could understand the motivations that could cause it.

The only problem was going to be telling Monica. I had a feeling that she wasn't going to want to listen to what I had found out.

I picked up the little plate and bowl and cup and put them back into my black nylon backpack, along with the silver knife. My legs ached from too much walking and standing about. I was looking forward to getting home and getting some sleep.

The man with the naked sword in his hands appeared out of the darkness without a warning rustle of sound or whiff of magic to announce his presence. He was tall, like me, but broad and heavy-chested, and he carried his weight with a ponderous sort of dignity. Perhaps fifty years old, his listless brown hair going grey in uneven patches, he wore a long, black coat, a lot like mine but without the mantle, and his jacket and pants, too, were done in dark colors—charcoal and a deep blue. His shirt was crisp, pure white, the color that you usually only see with tuxedos. His eyes were grey, touched with crow's-feet at the corners, and dangerous. Moonlight glinted off those eyes in the same shade it did from the brighter silver of the sword's blade. He began to walk deliberately toward me, speaking in a quiet voice as he did.

“Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. Irresponsible use of true names for summoning and binding others to your will violates the Fourth Law of Magic,” the man intoned. “I remind you that you are under the Doom of Damocles. No further violations of the Laws will be tolerated. The sentence for further violation is death, by the sword, to be carried out at once.”

Chapter Seven

Have you ever been approached by a grim-looking man, carrying a naked sword with a blade about ten miles long in his hand, in the middle of the night, beneath the stars on the shores of Lake Michigan? If you have, seek professional help. If you have not, then believe you me, it can scare the bejeezus out of you.

I took in a quick breath, and had to work not to put it into a quasi-Latin phrase on the exhale, one that would set the man's body on fire and reduce him to a mound of ashes. I react badly to fear. I don't usually have the good sense to run, or hide—I just try to smash whatever it is that is making me afraid. It's a primitive sort of thing, and one I don't question too much.

But reflex-based murder seemed a tad extreme, so rather than setting him on fire, I nodded instead. "Evening, Morgan. You know as well as I do that those laws apply to mortals. Not faeries. Especially for something as trivial as I just did. And I didn't break the Fourth Law. He had the choice whether to take my deal or not."

Morgan's sour, leathery face turned a bit more sour, the lines at the corners of his mouth stretching and becoming deeper. "That's a technicality, Dresden. A pair of them." His hands, broad and strong, resettled their grip upon the sword he held. His unevenly greying hair was tied into a ponytail in the back, like Sean Connery's in some of his movies, except that Morgan's face was too pinched and thin to pull off the look.

"Your point being?" I did my best to keep from looking nervous or impressed. Truth be told, I was both. Morgan was my Warden, assigned to me by the White Council to make sure I didn't bend or break any of the Laws of Magic. He hung about and spied on me, mostly, and usually came sniffing around after I'd cast a spell of some kind. I would be damned if I was going to let the White Council's guard dog see any fear out of me. Besides, he would take it as a sign of guilt, in the true spirit of paranoid fanatics everywhere. So, all I had to do was keep a straight face and get out before my weariness made me slip up and do or say something he could use against me.

Morgan was one of the deadliest evocators in the world. He wasn't bright enough to question his loyalties to the Council, and he could do quick-and-dirty magic like few others could.

Quick and dirty enough to rip the hearts out of Tommy Tomm and Jennifer Stanton's chests, in fact, if he wanted to.

"My point," he said, scowling, "is that it is my assigned duty to monitor your use of your power, and to see to it that you do not abuse it."

"I'm on a missing-persons case," I said. "All I did was call up a dewdrop faery to get some information. Come on, Morgan. Everybody calls up faeries now and then. There's no harm in it. It's not as though I'm mind-controlling the things. Just leaning on them a little."

"Technicality," Morgan growled.

I stuck out my chin at him belligerently. We were of a height, though he outweighed me by about a hundred pounds. I could pick better people to antagonize, but he'd really gotten under my skin. "A technicality I'm prepared to hide wildly behind. So, unless you want to convene a meeting of the Council to call me on it, we can just drop the discussion right here. I'm pretty sure it will only take them about two days to cancel all their plans, make travel arrangements, and then get here. I can put you up until then. I mean, you'd be dragging a bunch of really crotchety old men away from their experiments and things for nothing, but if you really think it's necessary..."

Morgan scowled at me. "No. It isn't worth it." He opened his dark trench coat and slid the sword away into its scabbard. I relaxed a little. The sword wasn't the most dangerous thing about him, not by a long shot, but it was his symbol of the authority given to him by the White Council, and if rumors were true, it was enchanted to cut through the magical spells of anyone resisting him. I didn't want things ever to go far enough for me to find out if the rumors were true.

"I'm glad we agree about something," I said. "Nice seeing you again." I started to walk past him.

Morgan put one of those big hands on my arm as I went by, and his fingers closed around it. "I'm not finished with you, Dresden."

I didn't dare mess around with Morgan when he was acting in his role as a Warden of the White Council. But he wasn't wearing that hat, now. Once he'd put the sword away, he was acting on his own, without any more official authority than any other man—or at least, that was the technical

truth. Morgan was big on technicalities. He had scared the heck out of me and annoyed the heck out of me, in rapid succession. Now he was trying to bully me. I hate bullies.

So I took a calculated risk, used my free hand, and hit him as hard as I could in the mouth.

I think the blow startled him more than anything. He took a step back, letting go of my arm in surprise, and just blinked at me. He put one hand to his mouth, and when he drew his fingers away, there was blood on them.

I planted my feet and faced him, without meeting his eyes. “Don’t touch me.”

Morgan continued to stare at me. And then I saw anger creep over his face, set his jaw, make the veins at his temple stand out.

“How dare you?” he said. “How dare you strike me?”

“It wasn’t so hard,” I said. “If you’ve got Council business with me, I’m willing to give you whatever respect is your due. When you come on strong to me on personal business, I don’t have to put up with it.”

I saw the steam coming out of his ears as he mulled it over. He looked for a reason to come after me, and realized that he didn’t have one, according to the Laws. He wasn’t too bright—did I mention that already?—and he was a big one for following the Laws. “You’re a fool, Dresden,” he sputtered finally. “An arrogant little fool.”

“Probably,” I told him. I tensed myself to move quickly if necessary. I may not like to run away from what scares me, but I try not to fight hopeless battles, either, and Morgan had me by years of experience and a hundred pounds, at least. There was no Law of Magic that protected *me* from *him* and his fists, either, and if that occurred to him, he might decide to do something about it. That punch I’d landed had been lucky, coming out of the blue. I wouldn’t get away with it again.

“Someone killed two people with sorcery last night, Dresden. I think it was you. And when I find how you did it and can trace it back to you, don’t think you’re going to live long enough to cast the same spell at me.” Morgan swiped at the blood with one big fist.

It was my turn to blink. I tried to shift mental gears, to keep up with the change in subject. Morgan thought I was the killer. And since Morgan didn’t do too much of his own thinking, that meant that the White Council thought I was the killer. Holy shit.

Of course, it made sense, from Morgan's narrow and single-minded point of view. A wizard had killed someone. I was a wizard who had already been convicted of killing another with magic, even if the self-defense clause had kept me from being executed. Cops looked for people who had already committed crimes before they started looking for other culprits. Morgan was just another kind of cop, as far as I was concerned.

And, as far as he was concerned, I was just one more dangerous con.

"You're not serious," I told him. "You think I did it?"

He sneered at me. His voice was contemptuous, confident, and seething with absolute conviction. "Don't try to hide it, Dresden. I'm sure you think you're clever enough to come up with something innovative that we hidebound old men won't be able to trace. But you're wrong. We'll determine how you did it, and we'll follow it back to you. And when we do, I'll be there to make sure you never hurt anyone again."

"Knock yourself out," I told him. It was hard, really hard, to keep my voice as blithe as I wanted it to sound. "I didn't do it. But I'm helping the police find the man who did."

"The police?" Morgan asked. He narrowed his eyes, as though gauging my expression. "As if they could have any authority on this matter. They won't do you any good. Even if you do set someone up to take the fall for you under mortal law, the White Council will still see that justice is done." His eyes glittered, fanatic-bright underneath the stars.

"Whatever. Look, if you find something out about the killer, anything that could help the cops out, would you give me a call?"

Morgan looked at me with profound distaste. "You ask me to warn you when we are closing in on you, Dresden? You are young, but I never thought you stupid."

I bit back the obvious comment that leapt to mind. Morgan was on the edge of outrage already. If I'd realized how rabid he was to catch me slipping, I wouldn't have added more fuel to his fire by hitting him in the mouth.

Okay. I probably still would have hit him in the mouth. But I wouldn't have done it quite so hard.

"Good night, Morgan," I told him. I started to walk away again, before I could let my mouth get me into more trouble.

He moved faster than I would have given a man his age credit for. His fist went across my jaw at approximately a million miles an hour, and I

spun down to the dirt like a string-cut puppet. For several long moments, I was unable to do anything at all, even breathe. Morgan loomed over me.

“We’ll be watching you, Dresden.” He turned and started walking away, the shadows of the evening quickly swallowing up his black coat. His voice drifted back to me. “We’ll find out what really happened.”

I didn’t dare spout out a snappy comeback. I felt my jaw with my fingers, and made sure it wasn’t broken, before I stood up and walked back to the Beetle, my legs feeling loose and watery. I fervently hoped that Morgan would find out what had really happened. It would keep the White Council from executing me for breaking the First Law, for one thing.

I could feel his eyes on my back, all the way to the Beetle. Damn that Morgan. He didn’t have to take quite so much pleasure in being assigned to spy on me. I had a sinking feeling that anywhere I went over the next few days, he would be likely to turn up, watching. He was like this big, cartoon tomcat waiting outside the mousehole for the little mouse to stick its nose out so he could smash it flat with one big paw. I was feeling a lot like that little mouse.

I let that analogy cheer me up a bit. The cartoon cats always seemed to get the short end of the stick, in the final analysis. Maybe Morgan would, too.

Part of the problem was that seeing Morgan always brought up too many memories of my angsty teenage days. That was when I’d started to learn magic, when my mentor had tried to seduce me into Black wizardry, and when he had attempted to kill me when he failed. I killed him instead, mostly by luck—but he was just as dead, and I’d done it with sorcery. I broke the First Law of Magic: *Thou Shalt Not Kill*. There is only one sentence, if someone is found guilty, and one sword that they use to carry it out.

The White Council commuted the death sentence, because tradition demands that a wizard can resort to the use of deadly force if he is defending his own life, or the lives of the defenseless, and my claim that I had been attacked first could not be contested by my master’s corpse. So instead, they’d stuck me on a kind of accelerated probation: One strike and I was out. There were some wizards who thought that the judgment against me was a ludicrous injustice (I happened to be one of them, but my vote didn’t really count), and others who thought that I should have been

executed regardless of extenuating circumstances. Morgan belonged to that latter group. Just my luck.

I was feeling more than a bit surly at the entire White Council, benevolent intentions aside. I guess it only made sense that they'd suspect me, and God knows I'd been a thorn in their side, flying in the face of tradition by practicing my art openly. There were plenty of people on the Council who might well want me dead. I would have to start being more careful.

I rolled down the Beetle's windows on the way back to Chicago to help me stay awake. I was exhausted, but my mind was racing around like a hamster on an exercise wheel, working furiously, getting nowhere.

The irony was thick enough to make my tongue curl. The White Council suspected me of the killings, and if no other suspect came forward, I was going to take the rap. Murphy's investigation had just become very, very important to me. But to pursue the investigation, I would have to try to figure out how the killer had pulled off that spell, and to do *that*, I would have to indulge in highly questionable research that would probably be enough to get me a death sentence all by itself. Catch-22. If I had any respect at all for Morgan's intelligence, I would have suspected him of pulling off the killings himself and setting me up to take the blame.

But that just didn't track. Morgan might twist and bend the rules, to get what he saw as justice, but he'd never blatantly violate them. But if not Morgan, then who could have done it? There just weren't all that many people who could get enough power into that kind of spell to make it work—unless there was some flaw in the quasiphysics that governed magic that let hearts explode more easily than other things; and I wouldn't know that until I had pursued the forbidden research.

Bianca would have more information on who might have done it—she had to. I had already planned on talking to the vampiress, but Morgan's visit had made it a necessity, rather than merely a priority. Murphy was not going to be thrilled that I was thrusting myself into her side of this investigation. And, better and better, because White Council business was all hush-hush to nonwizards, I wouldn't be able to explain to her why I was doing it. Further joy.

You know, sometimes I think Someone up there really hates me.

Chapter Eight

By the time I got home, it was after two o'clock in the morning. The clock in the Beetle didn't work (of course), but I made a pretty good guess from the position of the stars and the moon. I was strung out, weary, and my nerves were stretched as tight as guitar strings.

I didn't think sleep was likely, so I decided to do a little alchemy to help me unwind.

I've often wished that I had some suave and socially acceptable hobby that I could fall back on in times like this. You know, play the violin (or was it the viola?) like Sherlock Holmes, or maybe twiddle away on the pipe organ like the Disney version of Captain Nemo. But I don't. I'm sort of the arcane equivalent of a classic computer geek. I do magic, in one form or another, and that's pretty much it. I really need to get a life, one of these days.

I live in a basement apartment beneath a big, roomy old house that has been divided up into lots of different apartments. The basement and the subbasement below it are both mine, which is sort of neat. I'm the only tenant living on two floors, and my rent is cheaper than that of all the people who have whole windows.

The house is full of creaks and sighs and settling boards, and time and lives have worn their impressions into the wood and the brick. I can hear all the sounds, all the character of the place, above and around me all through the night. It's an old place, but it sings in the darkness and is, in its own quirky little way, alive. It's home.

Mister was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs that led down to the apartment's front door. Mister is an enormous grey cat. I mean, enormous. There are dogs smaller than Mister. He weighs in at just over thirty pounds, and there isn't an undue amount of fat on his frame. I think maybe his father was a wildcat or a lynx or something. I had found Mister in a garbage can about three years before, a mewling kitten, with his tail torn off by a dog or a car—I was never sure which, but Mister hated both, and would either attack or flee from them on sight.

Mister had recovered his dignity over the next few months, and shortly came to believe that he was the apartment's tenant, and I was someone he barely tolerated to share the space with him. Right now he looked up and mrowed at me in an annoyed tone.

"I thought you had a hot date," I told him.

He sauntered over to me and rammed one shoulder playfully against my knee. I wavered, recovered my balance, and unlocked the door. Mister, as was his just due, entered before I did.

My apartment is a studio, one not-too-large room with a kitchenette in the corner and a fireplace to one side. There's a door that leads to the other room, my bedroom and bathroom, and then there's the hinged door in the floor that goes down to the subbasement, where I keep my lab. I've got things pretty heavily textured—there are multiple carpets on the floor, tapestries on the walls, a collection of knickknacks and oddities on every available surface, my staff and my sword cane in the corner, and several bulging bookshelves which I really will organize one day.

Mister went to his spot before the fireplace and demanded that it be made warm. I obliged him with a fire and lit a lamp as well. Oh, I have lights and so on, but they foul up so often it almost isn't worth turning them on. And I'm not even about to take chances with the gas heater. I stick with the simple things, the fireplace and my candles and lamps. I have a special charcoal stove and a vent to take most of the smoke out, though the whole place smells a little of woodsmoke and charcoal, no matter what I do.

I took off my duster and got out my heavy flannel robe before I went down into the lab. That's why wizards wear robes, I swear to you. It's just too damned cold in the lab to go without one. I clambered down the ladder to the lab, carrying my candle with me, and lit a few lamps, a pair of burners, and a kerosene heater in the corner.

The lights came up and revealed a long table in the center of the room, other tables against three of the walls around it, and a clear space at one end of the room where a brass circle had been laid out on the floor and fastened into the cement with U-shaped bolts. Shelves over the tables were crowded with empty cages, boxes, Tupperware, jars, cans, containers of all descriptions, a pair of unusual antlers, a couple of fur pelts, several musty old books, a long row of notebooks filled with my own cramped writing, and a bleached white human skull.

“Bob,” I said. I started clearing space off of the center table, dumping boxes and grocery sacks and plastic tubs over the brass circle on the floor. I needed room to work. “Bob, wake up.”

There was a moment of silence, while I started getting some things down from the shelves. “Bob!” I said, louder. “Come on, lazybones.”

A pair of lights came up in the empty sockets of the skull, orangish, flickering like candle flames. “It isn’t enough,” the skull said, “that I have to wake up. I have to wake up to bad puns. What is it about you that you have to make the bad puns?”

“Quit whining,” I told him, cheerfully. “We’ve got work to do.”

Bob the Skull grumbled something in Old French, I think, though I got lost when he got to the anatomical improbabilities of bullfrogs. He yawned, and his bony teeth rattled when his mouth clicked closed again. Bob wasn’t really a human skull. He was a spirit of air—sort of like a faery, but different. He made his residence inside the skull that had been prepared for him several hundred years ago, and it was his job to remember things. For obvious reasons, I can’t use a computer to store information and keep track of the slowly changing laws of quasiphysics. That’s why I had Bob. He had worked with dozens of wizards over the years, and it had given him a vast repertoire of knowledge—that, and a really cocky attitude. “Blasted wizards,” he mumbled.

“I can’t sleep, so we’re going to make a couple of potions. Sound good?”

“Like I have a choice,” Bob said. “What’s the occasion?”

I brought Bob up to speed on what had happened that day. He whistled (no easy trick without lips), and said, “Sounds sticky.”

“Pretty sticky,” I agreed.

“Tell you what,” he said. “Let me out for a ride, and I’ll tell you how to get out of it.”

That made me wary. “Bob, I let you out once. Remember?”

He nodded dreamily, scraping bone on wood. “The sorority house. I remember.”

I snorted, and started some water to boiling over one of the burners. “You’re supposed to be a spirit of intellect. I don’t understand why you’re obsessed with sex.”

Bob’s voice got defensive. “It’s an academic interest, Harry.”

“Oh yeah? Well, maybe I don’t think it’s fair to let your academia go peeping in other people’s houses.”

“Wait a minute. My academia doesn’t *just* peep—”

I held up a hand. “Save it. I don’t want to hear it.”

He grunted. “You’re trivializing what getting out for a bit means to me, Harry. You’re insulting my masculinity.”

“Bob,” I said, “you’re a *skull*. You don’t *have* any masculinity to insult.”

“Oh yeah?” Bob challenged me. “Pot kettle black, Harry! Have you gotten a date yet? Huh? Most men have something better to do in the middle of the night than play with their chemistry sets.”

“As a matter of fact,” I told him, “I’m set up for Saturday night.”

Bob’s eyes fluttered from orange to red. “Oooooo.” He leered. “Is she pretty?”

“Dark skin,” I said. “Dark hair, dark eyes. Legs to die for. Smart, sexy as hell.”

Bob chortled. “Think she’d like to see the lab?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“No, seriously,” Bob said. “If she’s so great, what’s she doing with you? You aren’t exactly Sir Gawain, you know.”

It was my turn to get defensive. “She likes me,” I said. “Is that such a shock?”

“Harry,” Bob drawled, his eye lights flickering smugly, “what you know about women, I could juggle.”

I stared at Bob for a moment, and realized with a somewhat sinking feeling that the skull was probably right. Not that I would admit that to him, not in a million years, but he was.

“We’re going to make an escape potion,” I told him. “I don’t want to be all night, so can we get to work? Huh? I can only remember about half the recipe.”

“There’s always room to make two if you’re making one, Harry. You know that.”

That much was true. The process of mixing up an alchemical potion is largely stirring, simmering, and waiting. You can always get another one going and alternate between them. Sometimes you can even do three, though that’s pushing it. “Okay, so, we’ll make a copy.”

“Oh, come on,” Bob chided me. “That’s dull. You should stretch yourself. Try something new.”

“Like what?”

Bob's eye sockets twinkled cheerfully. "A love potion, Harry! If you won't let me out, at least let me do that! Spirits know you could use it, and —"

"No," I said, firmly. "No way. No love potion."

"Fine," he said. "No love potion, no escape potion either."

"Bob," I said, warningly.

Bob's eye lights winked out.

I growled. I was tired and cranky, and under the best of circumstances I am not exactly a type A personality. I stalked over, picked up Bob by the jaws and shook him. "Hey!" I shouted. "Bob! You come out of there! Or I'm going to take this skull and throw it down the deepest well I can find! I swear to you, I'll put you somewhere where no one can ever let you out ever again!"

Bob's eyes winked on for a moment. "No you won't. I'm far too valuable." Then they winked out again.

I gritted my teeth and tried not to smash the skull to little pieces on the floor. I took deep breaths, summoning years of wizardly training and control to not throw a tantrum and break the nice spirit to little pieces. Instead, I put the skull back on the shelf and counted slowly to thirty.

Could I make the potion by myself? I probably could. But I had the sinking feeling that it might not have precisely the effect I wanted. Potions were a tricky business, and a lot more relied upon precise details than upon intent, like in spells. And just because I made a love potion didn't mean I had to use it. Right? It would only be good for a couple of days, in any case—surely not through the weekend. How much trouble could it cause?

I struggled to rationalize the action. It would appease Bob, and give him some kind of vicarious thrill. Love potions were about the cheapest things in the world to make, so it wouldn't cost me too much. And, I thought, if Susan should ask me for some kind of demonstration of magic (as she always did), I could always—

No. That would be too much. That would be like admitting I couldn't get a woman to like me on my own, and it would be unfair, taking advantage of the woman. What I wanted was the escape potion. I might need it at Bianca's place, and I could always use it, if worse came to worst, to make a getaway from Morgan and the White Council. I would feel a lot better if I had the escape potion.

"Okay, Bob. Fine. You win. We'll do them both. All right?"

Bob's eye lights came up warily. "You're sure? You'll do the love potion, just like I say?"

"Don't I always make the potions like you say, Bob?"

"What about that diet potion you tried?"

"Okay. That one was a mistake."

"And the antigravity potion, remember that?"

"We *fixed* the floor! It was no big deal!"

"And the—"

"Fine, fine," I growled. "You don't have to rub it in. Now cough up the recipes."

Bob did so, in fine humor, and for the next two hours we made potions. Potions are all made pretty much the same way. First you need a base to form the essential liquid content, then something to engage each of the senses, and then something for the mind and something else for the spirit. Eight ingredients, all in all, and they're different for each and every potion, and for each person who makes them. Bob had centuries of experience, and he could extrapolate the most successful components for a given person to make into a potion. He was right about being an invaluable resource—I had never even heard of a spirit with Bob's experience, and I was lucky to have him.

That didn't mean I didn't want to crack that skull of his from time to time, though.

The escape potion was made in a base of eight ounces of Jolt cola. We added a drop of motor oil, for the smell of it, and cut a bird's feather into tiny shavings for the tactile value. Three ounces of chocolate-covered espresso beans, ground into powder, went in next. Then a shredded bus ticket I'd never used, for the mind, and a small chain which I broke and then dropped in, for the heart. I unfolded a clean white cloth where I'd had a flickering shadow stored for just such an occasion, and tossed it into the brew, then opened up a glass jar where I kept my mouse scampers and tapped the sound out into the beaker where the potion was brewing.

"You're sure this is going to work, Bob?" I said.

"Always. That's a super recipe, there."

"Smells terrible."

Bob's lights twinkled. "They usually do."

"What's it doing? Is this the superspeed one, or the teleportation version?"

Bob coughed. "A little of both, actually. Drink it, and you'll be the wind for a few minutes."

"The wind?" I eyed him. "I haven't heard of that one before, Bob."

"I am an air spirit, after all," Bob told me. "This'll work fine. Trust me."

I grumbled, and set the first potion to simmering, then started on the next one. I hesitated, after Bob told me the first ingredient.

"Tequila?" I asked him, skeptically. "Are you sure on that one? I thought the base for a love potion was supposed to be champagne."

"Champagne, tequila, what's the difference, so long as it'll lower her inhibitions?" Bob said.

"Uh. I'm thinking it's going to get us a, um, sleazier result."

"Hey!" Bob protested. "Who's the memory spirit here! Me or you?"

"Well—"

"Who's got all the experience with women here? Me or you?"

"Bob—"

"Harry," Bob lectured me, "I was seducing shepherdesses when you weren't a twinkle in your great-grandcestor's eyes. I think I know what I'm doing."

I sighed, too tired to argue with him. "Okay, okay. Sheesh. Tequila." I got down the bottle, measured eight ounces into the beaker, and glanced up at the skull.

"Right. Now, three ounces of dark chocolate."

"Chocolate?" I demanded.

"Chicks are into chocolate, Harry."

I muttered, more interested in finishing than anything else, and measured out the ingredients. I did the same with a drop of perfume (some name-brand imitation that I liked), an ounce of shredded lace, and the last sigh at the bottom of the glass jar. I added some candlelight to the mix, and it took on a rosy golden glow.

"Great," Bob said. "That's just right. Okay, now we add the ashes of a passionate love letter."

I blinked at the skull. "Uh, Bob. I'm fresh out of those."

Bob snorted. "How did I guess. Look on the shelf behind me."

I did, and found a pair of romance novels, their covers filled with impossibly delightful flesh. "Hey! Where did you get these?"

"My last trip out," Bob answered blithely. "Page one seventy-four, the paragraph that starts with, 'Her milky-white breasts.' Tear that page out and

burn it and add those ashes in.”

I choked. “That will work?”

“Hey, women eat these things up. Trust me.”

“Fine,” I sighed. “This is the spirit ingredient?”

“Uh-huh,” Bob said. He was rocking back and forth on his jawbones in excitement. “Now, just a teaspoon of powdered diamond, and we’re done.”

I rubbed at my eyes. “Diamond. I don’t have any diamonds, Bob.”

“I figured. You’re cheap, that’s why women don’t like you. Look, just tear up a fifty into real little pieces and put that in there.”

“A fifty-dollar bill?” I demanded.

“Money,” Bob opined. “Very sexy.”

I muttered and got the remaining fifty out of my pocket, shredding it and tossing it in to complete the potion.

The next step was where the effort came in. Once all the ingredients are mixed together, you have to force enough energy through them to activate them. It isn’t the actual physical ingredients that are important—it’s the meaning that they carry, too, the significance that they have for the person making the potion, and for those who will be using it.

The energy for magic comes from a lot of places. It can come from a special place (usually some spectacular natural site, like Mount St. Helens, or Old Faithful), from a focus of some kind (like Stonehenge is, on a large scale), or from inside of people. The best magic comes from the inside. Sometimes it’s just pure mental effort, raw willpower. Sometimes it’s emotions and feelings. All of them are viable tinder to be used for the proverbial fire.

I had a lot of worry to use to fuel the magic, and a lot of annoyance and one hell of a lot of stubbornness. I murmured the requisite quasi-Latin litany over the potions, over and over, feeling a kind of resistance building, just out of the range of the physical senses, but there, nonetheless. I gathered up all my worry and anger and stubbornness and threw them all at the resistance in one big ball, shaping them with the strength and tone of my words. The magic left me in a sudden wave, like a pitcher abruptly emptied out.

“I love this part,” Bob said, just as both potions exploded into puffs of greenish smoke and began to froth up over the lips of the beakers.

I sagged onto a stool, and waited for the potions to fizz down, all the strength gone out of me, the weariness building up like a load of bricks on

my shoulders. Once the frothing had settled, I leaned over and poured each potion into its own individual sports bottle with a squeeze-top, then labeled the containers with a permanent Magic Marker—very clearly. I don't take chances in getting potions mixed up anymore, ever since the invisibility/hair tonic incident, when I was trying to grow out a decent beard.

"You won't regret this, Harry," Bob assured me. "That's the best potion I've ever made."

"I made it, not you," I growled. I really was exhausted, now—way too tired to let petty concerns like possible execution keep me from bed.

"Sure, sure," Bob agreed. "Whatever, Harry."

I went around the room putting out all the fires and the kerosene heater, then climbed the ladder back to the basement without saying good night. Bob was chortling happily to himself as I did.

I stumbled to my bed and fell into it. Mister always climbs in and goes to sleep draped over my legs. I waited for him, and a few seconds later he showed up, settling down and purring like a miniature outboard motor.

I struggled to put together an itinerary for the next couple of days through the haze of exhaustion. Talk to the vampire. Locate missing husband. Avoid the wrath of the White Council. Find the killer.

Before he found me.

An unpleasant thought—but I decided that I wasn't going to let that bother me, either, and curled up to go to sleep.

Chapter Nine

Friday night, I went to see Bianca, the vampiress.

I didn't just leap out of bed and go see her, of course. You don't go walking into the proverbial lion's den lightly. You start with a good breakfast.

My breakfast took place around three in the afternoon, when I woke up to hear my phone ringing. I had to get out of bed and pad into the main room to answer it.

"Mmmrrmmph," I grumbled.

"Dresden," Murphy said, "what can you tell me?"

Murphy sounded stressed. Her voice had that distinct edge that she got whenever she was nervous, and it rankled me, like fingernails scraping on bones. The investigation into Tommy Tomm's murder must not be going well. "Nothing yet," I said. Then I lied to her, a little. "I was up most of the night working, but nothing to show yet."

She answered me with a swearword. "That's not good enough, Harry. I need answers, and I need them yesterday."

"I'll get to it as quick as I can."

"Get to it faster," she snarled. She was angry. Not that this was unusual for Murphy, but it told me that something else was going on. Some people panic when things get rough, harried. Some people fall apart. Murphy got pissed.

"Commissioner riding your back again?" City Police Commissioner Howard Fairweather used Murphy and her team as scapegoats for all sorts of unsolvable crimes that he had dumped in her lap. Fairweather was always lurking around, trying for an opportunity to make Murphy look bad, as though by doing so he could avoid being crucified himself.

"Like a winged monkey from *The Wizard of Oz*. Kind of makes you wonder who's leaning on *him* to get things done." Her voice was sour as ripe lemons. I heard her drop an Alka-Seltzer into a glass of liquid. "I'm serious, Harry. You get me those answers I need, and you get them to me fast. I need to know if this was sorcery, and, if so, how it was done and who could have done it. Names, places—I need to know everything."

“It isn’t that simple, Mur—”

“Then *make* it simple. How long before you can tell me? I need an estimate for the Commissioner’s investigative committee in fifteen minutes or I might as well turn in my badge today.”

I grimaced. If I was able to get something out of Bianca, I might be able to help Murph on the investigation—but if it proved fruitless, I was going to have spent the entire evening doing nothing productive, and Murphy needed her answers now. Maybe I should have made a stay-awake potion. “Does the committee work weekends?”

Murphy snorted. “Are you kidding?”

“We’ll have something by Monday, then.”

“You can have it figured out by then?” she asked.

“I don’t know how much good it will do you, even if I can puzzle it out. I hope you’ve got more to go on than this.”

I heard her sigh into the phone and drink the fizzy drink. “Don’t let me down, Harry.”

Time to change the subject, before she pinned me down and smelled me lying. I had no intention of doing the forbidden research if I could find a way out of doing it. “No luck with Bianca?”

Another swearword. “That bitch won’t talk to us. Just smiles and nods and blows smoke, makes small talk, and crosses her legs. You should have seen Carmichael drooling.”

“Well. Tough to blame him, maybe. I hear she’s cute. Listen, Murph. What if I just—”

“No, Harry. Absolutely not. You will not go over to the Velvet Room, you will *not* talk to that woman, and you will not get involved in this.”

“Lieutenant Murphy,” I drawled. “A little jealous, are we?”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You’re a civilian, Dresden, even if you do have your investigator’s license. If you get your ass laid out in the hospital or the morgue, it’ll be me that suffers for it.”

“Murph, I’m touched.”

“I’ll touch your head to a brick wall a few times if you cross me on this, Harry.” Her voice was sharp, vehement.

“Hey, wind down, Murph. If you don’t want me to go, no problem.” Whoops. A lie. She’d be all over that like a troll on a billy goat.

“You’re a lousy liar, Harry. Godammit, I ought to take you down to lockup just to keep you from—”

“What?” I said, loudly, into the receiver. “Murph, you’re breaking up. I can’t hear you. Damn phone again. Call me back.” Then I hung up on her.

Mister padded over to me and batted at my leg. He watched me with serious green eyes as I leaned down and unplugged the phone as it started to ring again.

“Okay, Mister. You hungry?”

I got us breakfast. Leftover steak sandwich for him, SpaghettiOs heated up on the woodstove for me. I rationed out my last can of Coke, which Mister craves at least as badly as I do, and by the time I was done eating and drinking and petting, I was awake and thinking again—and getting ready for sundown.

Daylight savings time hadn’t cut in yet, and dark would fall around six. I had about two hours to get set to go.

You might think you know a thing or two about vampires. Maybe some of the stuff you’ve heard is accurate. Likely, it’s not. Either way, I wasn’t looking forward to the prospect of going into Bianca’s lair to demand information from her. I was going to assume that things were going to get ugly before all was said and done, just to make sure I didn’t get caught with my staff down.

Wizardry is all about thinking ahead, about being prepared. Wizards aren’t really superhuman. We just have a leg up on seeing things more clearly than other people, and being able to use the extra information we have for our benefit. Hell, the word *wizard* comes from the same root as *wise*. We know things. We aren’t any stronger or faster than anyone else. We don’t even have all that much more going in the mental department. But we’re god-awful sneaky, and if we get the chance to get set for something, we can do some impressive things.

As a wizard, if you’re ready to address a problem, then it’s likely that you’ll be able to come up with something that will let you deal with it. So, I got together all the things I thought I might need: I made sure my cane was polished and ready. I put my silver knife in a sheath that hung just under my left arm. I put the escape potion in its plastic squeeze-bottle into my duster’s pocket. I put on my favorite talisman, a silver pentacle on a silver chain—it had been my mother’s. My father had passed it down to me. And I put a small, folded piece of white cloth into my pocket.

I had several enchanted items around—or half-enchanted items, anyway. Carrying out a full enchantment is expensive and time-consuming, and I

just couldn't afford to do it very much. We blue-collar wizards just have to sling a few spells out where we can and hope they don't go stale at the wrong time. I would have been a lot more comfortable if I had been carrying my blasting rod or my staff, but that would be like showing up at Bianca's door in a tank, walking in carrying a machine gun and a flamethrower, while announcing my intention to fight.

I had to maintain a fine balance between going in ready for trouble and going in asking for trouble.

Not that I was afraid, mind you. I didn't think Bianca would be willing to cause problems for a mortal wizard. Bianca wouldn't want to piss off the White Council by messing with me.

On the other hand, I wasn't exactly the White Council's favorite guy. They might even look the other way if Bianca decided to take me quietly out of the picture.

Careful, Harry, I warned myself. Don't get entirely paranoid. If you get like that, you'll be building your little apartment into a Basement of Solitude.

"What do you think?" I asked Mister, once I was decked out in what paraphernalia I was willing to carry.

Mister went to the door and batted at it insistently.

"Everyone's a critic. Fine, fine." I sighed. I let him out, then I went out, got into my car and drove down to the Velvet Room in its expensive lakeside location.

Bianca runs her business out of a huge old mansion from the early days of the Roaring Twenties. Rumor has it that the infamous Al Capone had it built for one of his mistresses.

There was a gate with an iron fence and a security guard. I pulled the Beetle up into the little swath of driveway that began at the street and ended at the fence. There was a hiccupping rattle from back in the engine as I brought the machine to a halt. I rolled down the window and stuck my head out, peering back. Something went *whoomph*, and then black smoke poured out from the bottom of the car and scuttled down the slope of the drive and into the street.

I winced. The engine gave an almost apologetic rattle and shuddered to its death. Great. Now I had no ride home. I got out of the Beetle, and stood mourning it for a moment.

The security guard on the other side of the gate was a blocky man, not overly tall but overly muscled and hiding it under an expensive suit. He studied me with attack-dog eyes, and then said, through the gate, "Do you have an appointment?"

"No," I told him. "But I think Bianca will want to see me."

He looked unimpressed. "I'm sorry," he said. "Bianca is out for the evening."

Things are never simple anymore. I shrugged at him, folded my arms, and leaned on the hood of the Beetle. "Suit yourself. I'll just stay until a tow truck comes by, then, until I can get this thing out of the drive for you."

He stared at me, his eyes narrowed down to tiny slits with the effort of thinking. Eventually, the thoughts got to his brain, got processed, and were sent back out with a message to "pass the buck." "I'll call your name in," he said.

"Good man," I approved. "You won't be sorry."

"Name," he growled.

"Harry Dresden."

If he recognized my name, it didn't show on his face. He glared at me and the Beetle, then walked a few paces off, lifting a cellular phone from his pocket and to his ear.

I listened. Listening isn't hard to do. No one has practice at it, nowadays, but you can train yourself to pay attention to your senses if you work at it long enough.

"I've got a guy down here says that Bianca will want to talk to him," the guard said. "Says his name is Harry Dresden." He was silent for a moment. I couldn't quite make out the buzz of the other voice, other than that it was female. "Uh-huh," he said. He glanced back at me. "Uh-huh," he said again. "Sure. Sure, I will. Of course, ma'am."

I reached in through the window of the Beetle and got out my cane. I rested it on the concrete beside my boots and tapped it a few times, as though impatient.

The guard turned back to me, leaned over to one side, and pushed a button somewhere. The gate buzzed and clicked open.

"Come on in, Mr. Dresden," he said. "I can have someone come tow your car, if you like."

"Super," I told him. I gave him the name of the wrecker Mike has a deal with and told him to tell the guy that it was Harry's car again. Fido the

Guard dutifully noted this down, writing on a small notebook he drew from a pocket. While he did, I walked past him toward the house, clicking my cane on the concrete with every pace.

“Stop,” he told me, his voice calm and confident. People don’t speak with that kind of absolute authority unless they have a gun in their hands. I stopped.

“Put the cane down,” he told me, “and put your arms up. You are to be searched before you are allowed inside.”

I sighed, did what he said, and let him pat me down. I didn’t turn around to face him, but I could smell the metal of his gun. He found the knife and took it. His fingers brushed the nape of my neck, felt the chain there.

“What’s this?” he said.

“Pentacle,” I told him.

“Let me see it. Use one hand.”

I used my left to draw it out of my shirt and show it to him, a silver five-pointed star within a circle, all smooth geometry. He grunted, and said, “Fine.” The search went on, and he found the plastic squeeze-bottle. He took it out of my pocket, opened it, and sniffed at it.

“What’s this?”

“A health cola,” I told him.

“Smells like shit,” he said, capped it, and put it back in my pocket.

“What about my cane?”

“Returned when you leave,” he said.

Damn. My knife and my cane had been my only physical lines of defense. Anything else I did would have to rely wholly upon magic and that could be dicey on the best of days. It was enough to rattle me.

Of course, Fido the Guard had missed a couple of things. First, he’d overlooked the clean white handkerchief in my pocket. Second, he’d passed me on with my pentacle still upon my neck. He probably figured that since it wasn’t a crucifix or a cross, I couldn’t use it to keep Bianca away from me.

Which wasn’t true. Vampires (and other such creatures) don’t respond to symbols as such. They respond to the power that accompanies an act of faith. I couldn’t ward off a vampire mosquito with my faith in the Almighty—He and I have just never seemed to connect. But the pentacle was a symbol of magic itself, and I had plenty of faith in that.

And, of course, Fido had overlooked my getaway potion. Bianca really ought to trust her guards with more awareness of the supernatural and what sort of things to look for.

The house itself was elegant, very roomy, with the high ceilings and the broad floors that they just don't make anymore. A well-groomed young woman with a short, straight haircut greeted me in the enormous entry hall. I was passing polite to her, and she showed me to a library, its walls lined with old books in leather bindings, similar to the leather-cushioned chairs around the enormous old dogfoot table in the room's center.

I took a seat and waited. And waited. And waited. More than half an hour went by before Bianca finally arrived.

She came into the room like a candle burning with a cold, clear flame. Her hair was a burnished shade of auburn that was too dark to cast back any ruddy highlights, but did anyway. Her eyes were dark, clear, her complexion flawlessly smooth and elegantly graced with cosmetics. She was not a tall woman, but shapely, wearing a black dress with a plunging neckline and a slash in one side that showed off a generous portion of pale thigh. Black gloves covered her arms to above the elbows, and her three-hundred-dollar shoes were a study in high-heeled torture devices. She looked too good to be true.

"Mister Dresden," she greeted me. "This is an unexpected pleasure."

I rose when she entered the room. "Madame Bianca," I replied, nodding to her. "We meet at last. Hearsay neglected to mention how lovely you are."

She laughed, lips shaping the sounds, head falling back just enough to show a flash of pale throat. "A gentleman, they said. I see that they were correct. It is a charmingly passé thing to be a gentleman in this country."

"You and I are of another world," I said.

She approached me and extended her hand, a motion oozing feminine grace. I bowed over her hand briefly, taking it and brushing my lips against the back of her glove. "Do you really think I'm beautiful, Mister Dresden?" she asked me.

"As lovely as a star, Madame."

"Polite and a pretty one, too," she murmured. Her eyes flickered over me, from head to toe, but even she avoided meeting gazes with me, whether from a desire to avoid inadvertently directing her power at me, or being on the receiving end of mine, I couldn't tell. She continued into the room, and stopped beside one of the comfortable chairs. As a matter of course, I

stepped around the table, and drew out the chair for her, seating her. She crossed her legs, in that dress, in those shoes, and made it look good. I blinked for just a moment, then returned to my own seat.

“So, Mister Dresden. What brings you to my humble house? Care for an evening of entertainment? I quite assure you that you will never have another experience like it.” She placed her hands in her lap, smiling at me.

I smiled at her, and put one hand into my pocket, onto the white handkerchief. “No, thank you. I came to talk.”

Her lips parted in a silent *ah*. “I see. About what, if I might ask?”

“About Jennifer Stanton. And her murder.”

I had all of a second’s warning. Bianca’s eyes narrowed, then widened, like those of a cat about to spring. Then she was coming at me over the table, faster than a breath, her arms extended toward my throat.

I toppled over backward in my chair. Even though I’d started to move first, it almost wasn’t enough to get away from her reaching nails in time. One grazed my throat with a hot sensation of pain, and she kept coming, following me down to the floor, those rich lips drawn back from sharp fangs.

I jerked my hand out of my pocket, and flapped open my white hanky at her, releasing the image of sunlight I’d been storing for use in potions. It lit up the room for a moment, brilliant.

The light smashed into Bianca, hurled her back across the old table into one of the shelves, and tore pieces of flesh away from her like bits of rotten meat being peeled off a carcass by a sandblaster. She screamed, and the flesh around her mouth sloughed and peeled away like a snake’s scales.

I had never seen a real vampire before. I would have time to be terrified later. I took in the details as I tugged my talisman off over my neck. It had a batlike face, horrid and ugly, the head too big for its body. Gaping, hungry jaws. Its shoulders were hunched and powerful. Membranous wings stretched between the joints of its almost skeletal arms. Flabby black breasts hung before it, spilling out of the black dress that no longer looked feminine. Its eyes were wide, black, and staring, and a kind of leathery, slimy hide covered its flesh, like an inner tube lathered with Vaseline, though there were tiny holes corroded in it by the sunlight I had brought with me.

It recovered quickly, crouching and spreading long arms that ended in claw-tipped fingers to either side with a hiss of rage.

I drew my pentacle into my fist, raised it like every vampire slayer you ever saw does it, and said, “Jesus Christ, lady. I just came here to talk.”

The vampire hissed and started toward me with a gangling, weirdly graceful step. Its clawed feet were still wearing the three-hundred-dollar black pumps.

“Back,” I said, taking a step toward it myself. The pentacle began to burn with the cold, clear light of applied will and belief—my faith, if you will, that it could turn such a monster aside.

It hissed, and turned its face aside, lifting its membranous arms to shield its eyes from the light. It took one step back, and then another, until its hunched back was pressed against a wall of books.

Now what did I do? I wasn’t going to go try to put a stake through her heart. But if I lowered my will, she might come at me again—and I didn’t think I had anything, even the quickest evocations, that I could get out of my mouth before she tore it off of my head. And even if I got past her, she probably had mortal lackeys, like the security guard at the gate, who would be happy to kill me if they saw me trashing their mistress.

“You killed her,” the vampire snarled, and its voice was exactly the same, sultry and feminine, even though twisted by rage and coming from that horrid mouth. It was unsettling. “You killed Jennifer. She was *mine*, mageling.”

“Look,” I told her. “I didn’t come here for any of this. And the police know I’m here. Save yourself a lot of trouble. Sit down, talk with me, and then we’ll both go away happy. Christ, Bianca, do you think that if I’d killed Jennifer and Tommy Tamm I’d just be waltzing in here like this?”

“You expect me to believe that you didn’t? You will never leave this house alive.”

I was feeling angry myself, and frightened. Christ, even the *vampire* thought I was the bad guy. “What’ll it take to convince you that I didn’t do it?”

Black, bottomless eyes stared at me through the burning fire of my faith. I could feel some sort of power there, trying to get at me, and held off by the force of my will, just as the creature itself was. The vampire snarled, “Lower the amulet, wizard.”

“If I do, are you going to come at my throat again?”

“If you do not, I most certainly will.”

Shaky logic, that. I tried to work through the situation from her point of view. She had been scared when I showed up. She'd had me searched and divested of weapons as best she could. If she thought that I was Jennifer Stanton's murderer, would the mere mention of that name have brought that sudden violence out of her? I began to get that sinking feeling you get when you realize that not everything is as it appears.

"If I put this down," I told her, "I want your word that you'll sit down and talk to me. I swear to you, by fire and wind, that I had nothing to do with her death."

The vampire hissed at me, shielding its eyes from the light with one taloned hand. "Why should I believe you?"

"Why should I believe *you*?" I countered.

Yellowed fangs showed in its mouth. "If you do not trust my word, wizard, then how can I trust yours?"

"Then you give it?"

The vampire stiffened, and though its voice was still harsh with rage and pain, still sexy as a silk shirt without any buttons, I thought I heard the ring of truth in its words. "You have my promise. Lower your talisman, and we will talk."

Time for another calculated risk. I tossed the pentacle onto the table. The cold light drained away, leaving the room lit by mere electricity once more.

The vampire slowly lowered its arms, blinking its too-big eyes at me and then at the pentacle upon the table. A long, pink tongue flickered out nervously over its jaws and lower face, then slipped back into its mouth. It was surprised, I realized. Surprised that I had done it.

My heart was racing, but I forced my fear back down out of my forebrain and into the background. Vampires are like demons, like wolves, like sharks. You don't let them think that you are potential food and get their respect at the same time. The vampire's true appearance was grotesque—but it wasn't as bad as some of the things I had seen in my day. Some demons were a lot worse, and some of the Elder Things could rip your mind apart just by letting you look at them. I regarded the creature with a level gaze.

"How about it?" I said. "Let's talk. The longer we sit around staring at one another, the longer Jennifer's killer stays free."

The vampire stared at me for a moment more. Then it shuddered, drawing its wing membranes about itself. Black slime turned into patches

of pale, perfect flesh that spread over the vampire's dark skin like a growth of fungus. The flabby black breasts swelled into softly rounded, rosy-tipped perfection once more.

Bianca stood before me a moment later, settling her dress back into modesty again, her arms crossed over her as though she was cold, her back stiff and her eyes angry. She was no less beautiful than she had been a few moments before, not a line or a curve any different. But for me, the glamour had been ruined. She still had the same eyes, dark and fathomless and alien. I would always remember what she truly looked like, beneath her flesh mask.

I stooped and picked up my chair, righting it. Then I went around the table, turned my back on her, and stood hers up as well. Then I held it out for her, just as I had when I had entered the room.

She stared at me for a long minute. Some expression flickered across her face. She was disconcerted by my apparent lack of concern about the way she looked, and it told. Then she lifted her chin, proud, and settled gracefully into the chair again, regal as any queen, every line stiff with anger. The Old World rules of courtesy and hospitality were holding—but for how long?

I returned to my seat and leaned over to pick up my white handkerchief, toying with it. Bianca's angry eyes flickered down to it, and once again she repeated the nervous gesture of licking her teeth and lips, though this time her tongue looked human.

"So. Tell me about Jennifer and Tommy Tomm," I said.

She shook her head, almost sneering. "I can tell you what I told the police. I don't know who could have killed them."

"Come on, Bianca. We don't have to hide things from one another. We're not a part of the mortal world."

Her eyebrows slanted down, revealing more anger. "No. You're the only one in the city with the kind of skill required to cast that sort of spell. If you didn't do it, I have no idea who else could have."

"You don't have any enemies? Anyone who might have been wanting to make an impression on you?"

A bitter little line appeared at the corner of her lips, something that was not quite a smile. "Of course. But none of them could have managed what happened to Tommy and Jenny." She drummed her fingernails over the

tabletop, leaving little score marks in the wood. “I don’t let any enemies that dangerous run around alive. At least, not for long.”

I settled back in my chair, frowning, and did my damndest not to let her see how scared I was. “How did you know Tommy Tomm?”

She shrugged, her shoulders gleaming like porcelain, and just as brittle. “You may have thought he was just a bruiser for Johnny Marcone, Mister Dresden. But Tommy was a very gentle and considerate man, underneath. He was always good to his women. He treated them like real people.” Her gaze shifted from side to side, not lifting. “Like human beings. I wouldn’t take on a client if I thought he wouldn’t be a gentleman, but Tommy was better than most. I met him years ago, elsewhere. I always made sure he had someone to take care of him when he wanted an evening of company.”

“You sent Jennifer out to him that night?”

She nodded, her expression bleak. Her nails drummed the tabletop again, gouging out more wood.

“Was there anyone else he saw on a regular basis? Maybe someone who would have talked to him, known what was going on in his life?”

Bianca shook her head. “No,” she said. But then she frowned.

I just watched her, and absently tossed the handkerchief on the tabletop. Her eyes flicked to it, then up to mine.

I didn’t flinch. I met her bottomless gaze and quirked my mouth up in a little smile, as though I had something more, and worse, to pull out of my hat if she wanted to come after me again. I saw her anger, her rage, and for just a moment I got a peek inside, saw the source of it. She was furious that I had seen her true form, horrified and embarrassed that I had stripped her disguise away and seen the creature beneath. And she was afraid that I could take away even her mask, forever, with my power.

More than anything else, Bianca wanted to be beautiful. And tonight, I had destroyed her illusion. I had rattled her gilded little world. She sure as hell wasn’t going to let me forget that.

She shuddered and jerked her eyes away, furious and frightened at the same time, before I could see any deeper into her—or she into me. “If I had not given you my word, Dresden,” she whispered, “I would kill you this instant.”

“That would be unfortunate,” I said. I kept my voice hard. “You should know the risks in a wizard’s death curse. You’ve got something to lose,

Bianca. And even if you could take me out, you can bet your pretty ass I'd be dragging you into hell with me."

She stiffened, then turned her head to one side, and let her fingers go limp. It was a silent, bitter surrender. She didn't move quickly enough for me to miss seeing a tear streak down one cheek.

I'd made the vampire cry. Great. I felt like a real superhero. Harry Dresden, breaker of monsters' hearts.

"There may be one person who might know something," she said, her lovely voice dull, flat, lifeless. "I had a woman who worked for me. Linda Randall. She and Jennifer went out on calls together, when customers wanted that sort of thing. They were close."

"Where is she now?" I asked.

"She's working as a driver for someone. Some rich couple who wanted a servant that would do more than windows. She wasn't the type I usually keep around in any case. I think Jennifer had her phone number. I can have someone fetch it for you, Mister Dresden." She said my name as though it were something bitter and poisonous that she wanted to spit out.

"Thank you. That would be very kind." I kept my tone carefully formal, neutral. Formality and a good bluff were all that was keeping her from my throat.

She remained quiet, controlling her evident emotions, before she started to look up again, at last. Her eyes froze, then widened when they came to my throat. Her expression went perfectly, inhumanly still.

I grew tense. Not just tense, but steel-tight, wirebound, spring-coiled. I was out of tricks and weapons. If she came after me now, I wasn't going to get the chance to defend myself. There was no way I would be able to drink the potion before she tore me apart. I gripped the arms of my chair hard, to keep myself from bolting. Do not show fear. Do not run away. It would only make her chase me, snap her instincts into the reaction of pursuing the prey.

"You're bleeding, Mister Dresden," she whispered.

I lifted my hand, slowly, to my throat, where her nails had scored me, earlier. My fingertips came away slick with my own blood.

Bianca kept on staring. Her tongue flickered around her mouth again. "Cover it," she whispered. A strange, mewling sound came out of her mouth. "*Cover it, Dresden.*"

I picked up my handkerchief, and pressed it over my throat. Bianca blinked her eyes closed, slowly, and then turned away, half-hunched over

her stomach. She didn't stand up.

"Go," she told me. "Go now. Rachel's coming. I'll send her down to the gate with the phone number in a little while."

I walked toward the door, but then stopped, glancing back at her. There was a sort of horrid fascination to it, to knowing what was beneath the alluring exterior, the flesh mask, but seeing it twist and writhe with need.

"Go," Bianca whimpered. Fury, hunger, and some emotion I couldn't even begin to fathom made her voice stretch out, thinner. "Go. And do not think that I will not remember this night. Do not think that I will not make you regret it."

The door to the library opened, and the straight-haired young woman who had greeted me earlier entered the room. She gave me a passing glance, then walked past me, kneeling at Bianca's side. Rachel, I presumed.

Rachel murmured something too soft to hear, gently brushing Bianca's hair back from her face with one hand. Then she unbuttoned the sleeve of her blouse, rolled it up past her elbow, and pressed her wrist to Bianca's mouth.

I had a good view of what happened. Bianca's tongue flashed out, long and pink and sticky, smearing Rachel's wrist with shining saliva. Rachel shuddered at the touch, her breath coming quicker. Her nipples stiffened beneath the thin fabric of the blouse, and she let her head fall slowly backwards. Her eyes were glazed over with a narcotic languor, like those of a junkie who had just shot up.

Bianca's fangs extended and slashed open Rachel's pale, pretty skin. Blood welled. Bianca's tongue began to flash in and out, faster than could really be seen, lapping the blood up as quickly as it appeared. Her dark eyes were narrowed, distant. Rachel was gasping and moaning in pleasure, her entire body shivering.

I felt a little sick and withdrew step by step, not turning my back on the scene. Rachel toppled slowly to the floor, writhing her way toward unconsciousness with an evident glee. Bianca followed her down, unladylike now, a creature of bestial hunger. She crouched over the supine woman, and in the hunch of her pale shoulders I could see the batlike thing beneath the flesh mask, lapping up Rachel's blood.

I got out of there, fast, shutting the door behind me. My heart was hammering, too quickly. The scene with Rachel might have aroused me, if I hadn't seen what was underneath Bianca's mask. Instead, it only made me

sick to my stomach, afraid. The woman had given herself to that thing, as quickly and as willingly as any woman to her lover.

The saliva, some part of me rationalized, desperate to latch on to something cold and logical and detached. The saliva was probably narcotic, perhaps even addictive. It would explain Rachel's behavior, the need to have more of her drug. But I wondered if Rachel would have been so eager, had she known Bianca's true face.

Now I understood why the White Council was so hardnosed with vampires. If they could get that kind of control over a mortal, what would happen if they could get their hooks into a wizard? If they could addict a wizard to them as thoroughly as Bianca had the girl I'd just seen? Surely, it wasn't possible.

But if it wasn't, why would the Council be so nervous about them?

Do not think I will not make you regret it, she had said.

I felt cold as I hurried down the dark driveway toward the gate.

Fido the security guard was waiting for me at the front gate, and passed back my knife and my cane without a word. A tow truck was out front, latching itself to the Beetle. I put one hand on the cold metal of the gate and kept the other, with its handkerchief, pressed to my throat, as I watched George the tow-truck guy work. He recognized me and waved, flashing a grin that showed the white teeth in his dark face. I nodded back. I wasn't up to answering the smile.

A few minutes later, the guard's cellular phone beeped at him. He withdrew several paces, repeated several affirmatives, then took a notebook from his pocket, writing something down. He put the phone away and walked back over to me, offering me the piece of paper.

"What's this?" I said.

"The phone number you were looking for. And a message."

I glanced at the paper, but avoided reading it just then. "I thought Bianca was going to send Rachel down with it."

He didn't say anything. But his jaw tightened, and I saw his eyes flick toward the house, where his mistress was. He swallowed. Rachel wasn't coming out of the house, and Fido was afraid.

I took the paper. I kept my hand from shaking as I looked at it.

On it was a phone number. And a single word: *Regret*.

I folded the piece of paper in half and put it away into the pocket of my duster. Another enemy. Super. At least with my hands in my pockets, Fido

couldn't see them shaking. Maybe I should have listened to Murphy. Maybe I should have stayed home and played with some nice, safe, forbidden black magic instead.

Chapter Ten

I departed Bianca's place in George's loaner, a wood-panel Studebaker that grumbled and growled and squealed everywhere it went. I stopped at a pay phone, a short distance from the house, and called Linda Randall's number.

The phone rang several times before a quiet, dusky contralto answered, "Beckitts', this is Linda."

"Linda Randall?" I asked.

"Mmmm," she answered. She had a furry, velvety voice, something tactile. "Who's this?"

"My name is Harry Dresden. I was wondering if I could talk to you."

"Harry who?" she asked.

"Dresden. I'm a private investigator."

She laughed, the sound rich enough to roll around naked in. "Investigating my privates, Mr. Dresden? I like you already."

I coughed. "Ah, yes. Ms. Randall—"

"Miss," she said, cutting in. "Miss Randall. I'm not occupied. At the moment."

"Miss Randall," I amended. "I'd like to ask you some questions about Jennifer Stanton, if I could."

Silence on the other end of the line. I could hear some sounds in the background, a radio playing, perhaps, and a recorded voice talking about white zones and red zones and loading and unloading of vehicles.

"Miss Randall?"

"No," she said.

"It won't take long. And I assure you that you aren't the subject of anything I'm doing. If you could just give me a few moments of your time."

"No," she told me. "I'm on duty, and will be the rest of the night. I don't have time for this."

"Jennifer Stanton was a friend of yours. She's been murdered. If there's anything you could tell me that might help—"

She cut me off again. "There isn't," she said. "Good-bye, Mr. Dresden."

The line went dead.

I scowled at the phone, frustrated. That was it, then. I had gone through all the preparation, the face-off with Bianca, and possible future trouble for nothing.

No way, I thought. No way in hell.

Bianca had said that Linda Randall was working as a driver for someone, the Beckitts, I presumed, whoever they were. I'd recognized the voice in the background as a recorded message that played outside the concourses at O'Hare airport. So she was in a car at the airport, maybe waiting to pick up the Beckitts, and definitely not there for long.

With no time to lose, I kicked the wheezing old Studebaker into gear and drove to O'Hare. It was far easier to blow off someone over the phone than it was to do it in person. There were several concourses, but I had to trust to luck—luck to guide me to the right one, and luck to get me there before *Miss I-am-not-occupied* Randall had the opportunity to pick up her employers and leave. And a little more luck to keep the Studebaker running all the way to O'Hare.

The Studebaker did make it all the way there, and on the second concourse I came across a silver baby limo, idling in a parking zone. The interior was darkened, so I couldn't see inside very well. It was a Friday evening, and the place was busy, business folk in their sober suits returning home from long trips about the country. Cars continually purred in and out of the semicircular drive. A uniformed cop was directing traffic, keeping people from doing brainless things like parking in the middle of one of the traffic lanes in order to load up the car.

I swerved the old Studebaker into a parking place, racing a Volvo for it and winning by dint of driving the older and heavier vehicle and having the more suicidal attitude. I kept an eye on the silver limo as I got out of the car and strode over to a bank of pay phones. I plopped my quarter in, and once more dialed the number provided by Bianca.

The phone rang. In the silver limo, someone stirred.

"Beckitts', this is Linda," she purred.

"Hello, Linda," I said. "This is Harry Dresden again."

I could almost hear her smirk. There was a flicker of light from inside the car, the silhouette of a woman's face, then the orange glow of a cigarette being lit. "I thought I told you I didn't want to talk to you, Mr. Dresden."

"I like women who play hard to get."

She laughed that delicious laugh. I could see her head move in the darkened car when she did. "I'm getting harder to get by the second. Good-bye again." She hung up on me.

I smiled, hung up the phone, walked over to the limo, and rapped on the window.

It buzzed down, and a woman in her mid-twenties arched an eyebrow at me. She had beautiful eyes the color of rain clouds, a little too much eye shadow, and brilliant scarlet lipstick on her cupid's-bow lips. Her hair was a medium brown, drawn back into a tight braid that made her cheeks look almost sharp, severe, except for her forelocks, which hung down close to her eyes in insolent disarray. She had a predatory look to her, harsh, sharp. She wore a crisp white shirt, grey slacks, and held a lit cigarette in one hand. The smoke curled up around my nose, and I exhaled, trying to push it away.

She looked me up and down, frankly assessing. "Don't tell me. Harry Dresden."

"I really need to talk to you, Miss Randall. It won't take long."

She glanced at her watch and then at the terminal doors. Then back up at me. "Well. You've got me cornered, don't you? I'm at your mercy." Her lips quirked. She took a drag of her cigarette. "And I like a man who just won't stop."

I cleared my throat again. The woman was attractive, but not unduly so. Yet there was something about her that revved my engines, something about the way she held her head or shaped her words that bypassed my brain and went straight to my hormones. Best to head directly to the point and minimize my chances of looking moronic. "How did you know Jennifer Stanton?"

She looked up at me through long lashes. "Intimately."

Ahem. "You, uh. Worked for Bianca with her."

Linda blew more smoke. "That prissy little bitch. Yes, I worked with Jen. We were even roommates for a while. Shared a bed." She wrapped her lips around the last word, drawing it out with a little tremor that dripped wicked, secret laughter.

"Did you know Tommy Tomm?" I asked.

"Oh, sure. Fantastic in bed." She lowered her eyes and shifted on the car's seat, lowering one of her hands out of sight, and making me wonder where it had gone. "He was a regular customer. Maybe twice a month Jen

and I would go over to his place, have a little party.” She leaned toward me. “He could do things to a woman that would turn her into a real animal, Harry Dresden. You know what I mean? Growling and snarling. In heat.”

She was driving me crazy. That voice of hers inspired the kinds of dreams you wish you could remember more clearly in the morning. Her expression promised to show me things that you don’t talk about with other people, if I would give her half a chance. Your job, Harry. Think about your job.

Some days I really hate my job.

“When was the last time you talked to her?”

She took another drag, and this time I saw a small shake to her fingers, one she quickly hid. Just not quickly enough. She was nervous. Nervous enough to be shaking, and now I could see what she was up to. She was wearing the alley-cat mask, appealing to my glands instead of my brain, and trying to distract me with it, trying to keep me from finding something out.

I’m not inhuman. I can be distracted by a pretty face, or body, like any other youngish man. Linda Randall was damned good at playing the part. But I do not like to be made the fool.

So, Miss Sex Goddess. What are you hiding?

I cleared my throat, and asked, mildly, “When was the last time you spoke to Jennifer Stanton, Miss Randall?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. She wasn’t dumb, whatever else she was. She’d seen me reading her, seeing through her pretense. The flirting manner vanished. “Are you a cop?” she demanded.

I shook my head. “Scout’s honor. I’m just trying to find out what happened to her.”

“Dammit,” she said, softly. She flicked the butt of the cigarette out onto the concrete and blew out a mouthful of smoke. “Look. I tell you anything and see a cop coming around, I never saw you before. Got it?”

I nodded.

“I talked to Jen on Wednesday evening. She called me. It was Tommy’s birthday. She wanted to get together again.” Her mouth twisted. “Sort of a reunion.”

I glanced about and leaned down closer to her. “Did you?”

Her eyes were roving about now, nervous, like a cat who has found herself shut into a small room. “No,” she said. “I had to work. I wanted to,

but—”

“Did she say anything unusual? Anything that might have made you suspect she was in danger?”

She shook her head again. “No, nothing. We hadn’t talked much for a while. I didn’t see her as much after I split from the Velvet Room.”

I frowned at her. “Do you know what else she was doing? Anything she might have been involved with that could have gotten her hurt?”

She shook her head. “No, no. Nothing like that. That wasn’t her style. She was sweet. A lot of girls get like—They get pretty jaded, Mr. Dresden. But it never really touched her. She made people feel better about themselves somehow.” She looked away. “I could never do that. All I did was get them off.”

“There’s nothing you can tell me? Nothing you can think of?”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. She shook her head again, and she lied to me as she did it. I was just sure of it. She was closing in, tightening up, and if there was nothing to tell me, she wouldn’t be trying to hide it. She must know something—unless she was just shutting down because I’d stomped all over her feelings, as I had Bianca’s. Either way, she wasn’t telling me anything else.

I tightened my fist, frustrated. If Linda Randall had no information for me, I was at a dead end. And I’d romped all over another woman’s feelings—two in one night. You are on a roll, Dresden. Even if one of them had been something not-human.

“Why,” I asked her, the words slipping out before I thought about them. “Why the slut act?”

She looked up at me again, and smirked. I saw the subtle shifting in her, magnifying that sort of animal appeal she had, once more, as she had been doing when I first approached her—but it didn’t hide the self-loathing in her eyes. I looked away, quickly, before I had to see any more of it. I got the feeling that I didn’t want to see Linda Randall’s soul. “Because it’s what I do, Mr. Dresden. For some people it’s drugs. Booze. For me, orgasms. Sex. Passion. Just another addict. City’s full of them.” She glanced aside. “Next best thing to love. And it keeps me in work. Excuse me.”

She swung open the door. I took a quick step back and out of her way as she moved to the back of the limo, long legs taking long steps, and opened the trunk.

A tall couple, both wearing glasses and dressed in stylish grey business clothes, emerged from the terminal and approached the limo. They had the look of lifestyle professionals, the kind that have a career and no kids, with enough money and time to spend on making themselves look good—a NordicTrack couple. He was carrying an overnight bag over his shoulder and a small suitcase in one hand, while she bore only a briefcase. They wore no jewelry, not even watches or wedding rings. Odd.

The man slung the luggage items into the limo's trunk and looked from Linda to me. Linda avoided his eyes. He tried to speak quietly enough not to be heard, but I have good ears.

"Who's this?" he asked. His voice had a strained note to it.

"Just a friend, Mr. Beckitt. A guy I used to see," she answered him.

More lies. More interesting.

I looked across the limo to the woman, presumably Mrs. Beckitt. She regarded me with a calm face, entirely devoid of emotion. It was a little spooky. She had the look I'd seen in films, on the faces of prisoners released from the German stalags at the end of World War II. Empty. Numb. Dead, and just didn't know it yet.

Linda opened the back door and let Mr. and Mrs. Beckitt into the car. Mrs. Beckitt briefly put a hand on Linda's waist in passing, a gesture that was too intimate and possessive for the hired help. I saw Linda shiver, then close the door. She walked back around the car to me.

"Get out of here," she said, quietly. "I don't want to get in any trouble with my boss."

I reached for her hand, grabbed it, and held it between both of mine, as an old lover might, I supposed. My business card was pressed between our palms. "My card. If you think of anything else, give me a call. Okay?"

She turned away from me without answering, but the card vanished into a pocket before she got back into the limo.

Mrs. Beckitt's dead eyes watched me through the side window as the limo went by me. It was my turn to shiver. Like I said, spooky.

I went on into the airport. The monitors displaying flight times flickered to fuzz when I walked by. I went to one of the cafés inside, sat down, and ordered myself a cup of coffee. I had to pay for it with change. Most of my money had gone into paying off last month's rent and into the love potion I'd let Bob talk me into making. Money. I needed to get to work on Monica Sells's case, finding her husband. I didn't want to get out of hot water with

the White Council only to lose my office and apartment because I couldn't pay the bills.

I sipped coffee and tried to organize my thoughts. I had two areas of concern. The most important was finding who had killed Tommy Tamm and Jennifer Stanton. Not only to catch the killer before any more corpses turned up, but because if I didn't, the White Council would probably use the opportunity to have me put to death.

And, while tracking down killers and avoiding execution squads, I had to do some work for someone who would pay me. Tonight's excursion wasn't something I could charge Murphy for—she'd have my ass in a sling if she knew I was running around asking questions, poking my nose in where it shouldn't be. So, if I wanted money from Chicago P.D., I would have to spend time doing the research Murphy wanted—the black-magic research that could get me killed all by itself.

Or, I could work on Monica Sells's missing-husband case. I thought I had that one pretty well pegged down, but it wouldn't hurt to get it fleshed out fully. I could spend time working on it, fill out the hours on the retainer, maybe even get a few more added on. That appealed to me a lot more than trying to work out some black magic.

So, I could follow up on the lead Toot-toot had given me. There'd been pizza delivered out to the Lake Providence home that night. Time to talk to the deliveryman, if possible.

I left the café, went out to the pay phones, and dialed directory assistance. There was only one place near the Lake Providence address that delivered pizza. I got the number and dialed through.

"Pizza 'Spress," someone with his mouth full said. "What'll it be tonight?"

"Hey there," I said. "I wonder if you can help me out. I'm looking for the driver who took an order out to an address on Wednesday night." I told him the address, and asked if I could speak to the driver.

"Another one," he snorted. "Sure, hang on. Jack just got in from a run." The voice on the other end of the line called out to someone, and a minute later the high baritone of a young man spoke tentatively into my ear.

"H-hello?"

"Hello," I answered. "Are you the driver who took pizza to—"

"*Look*," he said, his voice exasperated and nervous. "I *said* I was sorry already. It won't happen again."

I blinked for a minute, off balance. “Sorry for what?”

“Jeezus,” he said. I heard him move across a room, with a lot of music and loud talk in the background, and then the background noise cut off, as though he had stepped into another room and shut the door behind him. “Look,” he said in a half whine. “I told you I’m not gonna say anything to anyone. I was only looking. You can’t blame me, right? No one answered the door, what was I supposed to do?” His voice cracked in the middle of his sentences. “Hell of a party, but hey. That’s your business. Right?”

I struggled to keep up with the kid. “What, exactly, did you see, Jack?” I asked him.

“No one’s face,” he assured me, his voice growing more nervous. He gave a jittery little laugh and tried to joke. “Better things to look at than faces, right? I mean, I don’t give a damn what you do in your own house. Or your friends, or whoever. Don’t worry about me. Never going to say a thing. Next time I’ll just leave the pizza and run a tab, right?”

Friends, plural. Interesting. The kid was awfully nervous. He must have gotten an eyeful. But I had a gut instinct that he was hiding something else, keeping it back.

“What else?” I asked him. I kept my voice calm and neutral. “You saw something else. What was it?”

“None of my business,” he said, instantly. “None of my business. Look, I gotta get off this line. We have to keep it open for orders. It’s Friday night, we’re busy as hell.”

“What,” I said, separating my words, keeping them clipped, “else?”

“Oh, shit,” he breathed, his voice shaking. “Look, I wasn’t with that guy. Didn’t know anything about him. I didn’t tell him you were having an orgy out there. Honest. Jeezus, mister, I don’t want any trouble.”

Victor Sells seemed to have a real good idea of how to party—and of how to frighten teenagers. “One more question, and I’ll let this go,” I told him. “Who was it you saw? Tell me about him.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know him, didn’t recognize him. Some guy, with a camera, that’s all. I went around the back of the house to try the back door, got up on your deck, and just saw inside. I didn’t keep on looking. But he was up there, all in black, with this camera, taking pictures.” He paused as someone pounded on the door he had closed earlier. “Oh, God, I have to go, mister. I don’t know you. I don’t know nothing.” And then there was a scrambling of feet, and he hung up the phone.

I hung up the phone myself and ambled back to George's loaner. I worked out the details I had just learned on the way back to my apartment.

Someone else had called Pizza 'Spress, evidently just before I had. Someone else had gone asking after the pizza boy. Who?

Why, Victor Sells, of course. Tracing down people who might have information about him, his possible presence in the lake house. Victor Sells, who had been having some sort of get-together out there that night. Maybe he'd been drunk, or one of his guests had been, and ordered the pizza—and now Victor was trying to cover his tracks.

Which implied that Victor knew someone was looking for him. Hell, as far as I knew, he'd been *in* the house when I'd gone out there last night. This made things a lot more interesting. A missing man who doesn't want to be found could get dangerous if someone came snooping after him.

And a photographer? Someone lurking around outside of windows and taking pictures? I rummaged in my duster pocket and felt the round plastic film canister. That explained where the canister had come from, at any rate. But why would someone be out there at the house, taking pictures of Victor and his friends? Maybe because Monica had hired someone else, a PI, without telling me. Maybe just a neighbor with the hots for taking dirty pictures. No way to tell, really. More mysteries.

I pulled the Studebaker into my drive and killed the engine. I tallied the score for the evening. Enigmas: lots. Harry: zero.

My investigation for Monica Sells had netted me one husband throwing wild parties in his beach house after losing his job, and working hard not to be found. Probably an advanced case of male menopause. Monica didn't seem to be the kind of woman who would take such a thing with good grace—more like the kind who would close her eyes and call me a liar if I told her the truth. But at least it merited a little more looking into—I could log a few more hours in on the case, maybe earn some more money out of it before I gave her the bill. But I still didn't really *know* anything.

The angle with Bianca had come to a dead end at Linda Randall. All I had were more questions for Miss Randall, and she was as closed as a bank on Sunday. I didn't have anything solid enough to hand to Murphy to let her pursue the matter. Dammit. I was going to have to do that research after all. Maybe it *would* turn up something helpful, some kind of clue to help lead me and the police to the murderer.

And maybe dragons would fly out my butt. But I had to try.

So I got out of the car to go inside and get to work.

He was waiting for me behind the trash cans that stood next to the stairs leading down to my front door. The baseball bat he swung at me took me behind the ear and pitched me to the bottom of the stairs in a near-senseless heap. I could hear his footsteps, but couldn't quite move, as he came down the stairs toward me.

It figured. It was just the kind of day I was having.

I felt his foot on the back of my neck. Felt him lift the baseball bat. And then it came whistling down toward my skull with a mighty crack of impact.

Except that it missed my motionless head, and whacked into the concrete next to my face, right by my eyes, instead.

"Listen up, Dresden," my attacker said. His voice was rough, low, purposefully hoarse. "You got a big nose. Stop sticking it where it doesn't belong. You got a big mouth. Stop talking to people you don't need to talk to. Or we're going to shut that mouth of yours." He waited a melodramatically appropriate moment, and then added, "Permanently."

His footsteps retreated up the stairs and vanished.

I just lay there watching the stars in front of my eyes for a while. Mister appeared from somewhere, probably drawn by the groaning noises, and started licking at my nose.

I eventually regained my mobility and sat up. My head was spinning, and I felt sick to my stomach. Mister rubbed up against me, as though he sensed something was wrong, purring in a low rumble. I managed to stand up long enough to unlock my apartment door, let Mister and myself in, and lock it behind me. I staggered over to my easy chair in the darkness and sat down with a *whuff* of expelled breath.

I sat motionless until the spinning slowed down enough to allow me to open my eyes again, and until the pounding of my head calmed down. Pounding head. Someone could have been pounding on my head with a baseball bat just then, pounding my head into new and interesting shapes that were inconducive to carrying on businesslike pursuits. Someone could have been pounding Harry Dresden right into the hereafter.

I cut off that line of thought. "You are not some poor rabbit, Dresden!" I reminded myself, sternly. "You are a wizard of the old school, a spellslinger of the highest caliber. You're not going to roll over for some schmuck with a baseball bat because he tells you to!"

Galvanized by the sound of my own voice, or maybe only by the somewhat unsettling realization that I had begun talking to myself, I stood up and built up the fire in the fireplace, then walked unsteadily back and forth in front of it, trying to think, to work out the details.

Had this evening's visits triggered the warning? Who had reason to threaten me? What were they trying to keep me from finding? And, most importantly, what was I going to do about it?

Someone had seen me talking to Linda Randall, maybe. Or, more likely, someone had seen me showing up at Bianca's place, asking questions. The Blue Beetle may not be glitzy, but it is sort of difficult to mistake for anyone else's car. Who would have reason to have me watched?

Why, hadn't Gentleman Johnny Marcone followed me so that he could have a word with me? So he could ask me to keep out of this business with Tommy Tamm's murder? Yes he had. Maybe this had been another reminder from the mob boss. It had that kind of mafioso feel to it.

I staggered to my kitchenette and fixed myself a tisane tea for the headache, then added in some aspirin. Herbal remedies are well and good, but I don't like to take chances.

Working on that same principle, I got my Smith & Wesson .38 Chief's Special out of its drawer, took the cloth covering off of it, and made sure it was loaded. Then I stuck the revolver in my jacket pocket.

Wizardry aside, it's tough to beat a gun for discouraging men with baseball bats. And I sure as hell wasn't going to roll over for the tiger-souled Johnny Marcone, let him push me around, let him know that it was all right to walk all over me whenever he felt like it. No way in hell or on earth, either.

My head was throbbing, and my hands were shaking, but I went down the ladder to my workroom—and started figuring out how to rip someone's heart out of his chest from fifty miles away.

Who says I never do anything fun on a Friday night?

Chapter Eleven

It took me the rest of the night and part of the morning, but I worked out how I could murder someone in the same manner that Tommy Tomm and Jennifer Stanton had been killed. After the fifth or sixth time I'd checked the figures, I stared at my calculations.

It didn't make any *sense*. It was *impossible*.

Or maybe we were all underestimating just how dangerous this killer was.

I grabbed my duster, and headed out without bothering to check my looks. I don't keep any mirrors in my home. Too many things can use mirrors as windows—or doors—but I was pretty sure I looked like a wreck. The Studebaker's rearview mirror confirmed this. My face was haggard, with a shadow of a beard, deep circles under bloodshot eyes, and hair that looked as though it had been riding a speeding motorcycle through a cloud of greasy smoke. Smoothing your hair back with sweaty palms as a study habit will do that to you. Especially if you do it for twelve or fourteen hours straight.

It didn't matter. Murphy wanted this information, and she needed to have it. Things were bad. They were very, very bad.

I made quick time down to the station, knowing Murphy would want to hear this from me face-to-face. The police station Murphy worked in was one in an aged complex of buildings that housed the metro police department. It was run-down, sagging in places like an old soldier who nonetheless stood at attention and struggled to hold in his gut. There was graffiti along one wall that the janitor wouldn't come to scrub off until Monday morning.

I parked in the visitors' parking—easy to do on a Saturday morning—and headed up the steps and into the building. The desk sergeant wasn't the usual mustached old warhorse whom I had run into before, but a greying matron with steely eyes who disapproved of me and my lifestyle in a single glance, then made me wait while she called up Murphy.

While I waited, a pair of officers came in, dragging a handcuffed man between them. He wasn't resisting them—just the opposite, in fact. His

head was down, and he was moaning in an almost musical way. He was on the thin side, and I got the impression that he was young. His denim jeans and jacket were battered, unkempt, as was his hair. The officers dragged him past the desk, and one of them said, "That DUI we called in. We're going to take him up to holding until he can see straight."

The desk sergeant passed a clipboard over, and one of the officers took it under his arm, before the two of them dragged the young man up the stairs. I waited, rubbing at my tired eyes, until the sergeant managed to get through to someone upstairs. She gave a rather surprised "Hmph," and then said, "All right, Lieutenant. I'll send him on up." She waved a hand at me to go on past. I could feel her eyes on me as I went by, and I smoothed my palm self-consciously over my head and jaw.

Special Investigations kept a little waiting area just within the door at the top of the staircase. It consisted of four wooden chairs and a sagging old couch that would probably kill your back if you tried to sleep on it. Murphy's office was at the end of a double row of cubicles.

Murphy stood just inside her office with a phone pressed to her ear, wearing a martyred expression. She looked like a teenager having a fight with an out-of-town boyfriend, though she'd tear my head off if she heard me saying any such thing. I waved my hand, and she nodded back at me. She pointed at the waiting area, then shut her office door.

I took a seat in one of the chairs and leaned my head back against a wall. I had just closed my eyes when I heard a scream from behind me in the hallway. There was a struggling sound, and a few startled exclamations, before the scream repeated itself, closer this time.

I acted without thinking—I was too tired to think. I rose and went into the hall, toward the source of the sound. To my left was the staircase, and to my right the hallway stretched ahead of me.

A figure appeared, the silhouette of a running man, moving toward me with long strides. It was the man who had hung so limply between the two officers, humming, a few minutes before. He was the one screaming. I heard a scrabbling sound, and then the pair of officers I had seen downstairs a few moments before came around the corner. Neither of them was a young man anymore, and they both ran with their bellies out, puffing for breath, holding their gun belts against their hips with one hand.

"Stop!" one of the officers shouted, panting. "Stop that man!"

The hair on the back of my neck prickled. The man running toward me kept on screaming, high and terrified, his voice a long and uninterrupted peal of...something. Terror, panic, lust, rage, all rolled up into a ball and sent spewing out into the air through his vocal cords.

I had a quick impression of wide, staring eyes, a dirty face, a denim jacket, and old jeans as he came down the shadowy hallway. His hands were behind his back, presumably held there by cuffs. He wasn't seeing the hall he was running through. I don't know what he was looking at, but I got the impression that I didn't want to know. He came hurtling toward me and the stairs, blind and dangerous to himself.

It wasn't any of my business, but I couldn't let him break himself apart in a tumble down the stairs. I threw myself toward him as hard as I could, attempting to put my shoulder into his stomach and drive him backward in a football-style tackle.

There is a reason I got cut every year during high school. I rammed into him, but he just *whuffed* out a breath and spun to one side, into a wall. It was as though he hadn't seen me coming and had no realization that I was there. He just kept staring blindly and screaming, careening off the wall and continuing on his way, toward the stairs. I went down to the floor, my head abruptly throbbing again where the unknown tough had rapped me with a baseball bat last night.

One good thing about being as tall as I am—I have long arms. I rolled back toward him and lashed out with one hand, fingers clutching. I caught his jeans at the cuff and gave his leg a solid sideways tug.

That did it. He spun, off-balance, and went down to the tile floor. The scream stopped as the fall took the wind from him. He slid to the top of the stairs and stopped, feebly struggling. The officers pounded past me toward him, one going to either side.

And then something strange happened.

The young man looked up at me, and his eyes rounded and dilated, until I thought they had turned into huge black coins dotted onto his bloodshot eyeballs. His eyes rolled back into his head until he could hardly have been able to see, and he started to shout in a clarion voice.

"Wizard!" he trumpeted. "Wizard! I see you! I see you, wizard! I see the things that follow, those who walk before and He Who Walks Behind! They come, they come for you!"

“Jesus Christ on a crutch,” the shorter, rounder officer said, as they took the man by his arms and started dragging him back down the hall. “Junkies. Thanks for the assist, buddy.”

I stared at the man, stunned. I caught the sleeve of the taller officer. “What’s going on, sir?” I asked him.

He stopped, letting the prisoner hang between him and his partner. The prisoner’s head was bowed forward, and his eyes were still rolled back, but he had his head turned toward me and was grinning a horrible, toothy grin. His forehead was wrinkled oddly, almost as though he were somehow focusing on me through the bones of his browridges and the frontal lobes of his brain.

“Junkie,” the taller officer said. “One of those new ThreeEye punks. Caught him down by the lake in his car with nearly four grams of the stuff. Probably more in him.” He shook his head. “You okay?”

“Fine, fine,” I assured him. “ThreeEye? That new drug?”

The shorter officer snorted. “One that’s supposed to make them see the spirit world, that kind of crap.”

The taller one nodded. “Stuff hooks harder than crack. Thanks for the help. Didn’t know you were a civilian, though. Didn’t expect anyone but police down here this time of day.”

“No problem,” I assured him. “I’m fine.”

“Hey,” the stouter one said. He squinted at me and shook his finger. “Aren’t you the guy? That psychic consultant Carmichael told me about?”

“I’ll take the fifth,” I said to him with a grin that I didn’t feel. The two officers chuckled and turned back to their business, quickly shouldering me aside as they dragged their prisoner away.

He whispered in a mad little voice, all the way down the hall. “See you, see you, wizard. See He Who Walks Behind.”

I returned to my chair in the waiting area at the end of the row of cubicles and sat down, my head throbbing, my stomach rolling uncomfortably. He Who Walks Behind. I had never seen the junkie before. Never been close to him. I hadn’t sensed the subtle tension of power in the air around him that signified the presence of a magical practitioner.

So how the hell had he seen the shadow of He Who Walks Behind flowing in my wake?

For reasons I don’t have time to go into now, I am marked, indelibly, with the remnants of the presence of a hunter-spirit, a sort of spectral hit

man known as He Who Walks Behind. I had beaten long odds in surviving the enemy of mine who had called up He Who Walks Behind and sent him after me—but even though the hunter-spirit had never gotten to me, the mark could still be seen upon me by those who knew how, by using the Third Sight, stretching out behind me like a long and horribly shaped shadow. Sort of a spiritual scar to remind me of the encounter.

But only a wizard had that kind of vision, the ability to sense the auras and manifestations of magical phenomena. And that junkie had been no wizard.

Was it possible that I had been wrong in my initial assessment of ThreeEye? Could the drug genuinely grant to its users the visions of the Third Sight?

I shuddered at the thought. The kind of things you see when you learn how to open your Third Eye could be blindingly beautiful, bring tears to your eyes—or they could be horrible, things that made your worst nightmares seem ordinary and comforting. Visions of the past, the future, of the true natures of things. Psychic stains, troubled shades, spirit-folk of all description, the shivering power of the Nevernever in all its brilliant and subtle hues—and all going straight into your brain: unforgettable, permanent. Wizards quickly learn how to control the Third Eye, to keep it closed except in times of great need, or else they go mad within a few weeks.

I shivered. If the drug was real, if it really did open the Third Eye in mortals instead of just inflicting ordinary hallucinations upon its users, then it was far more dangerous than it seemed, even with the deleterious effects demonstrated by the junkie I had tackled. Even if a user didn't go mad from seeing too many horrible or otherworldly things, he might see through the illusions and disguises of any of a number of beings that passed among mankind regularly, unseen—which could compel such creatures to act in defense, for fear of being revealed. Double jeopardy.

“Dresden,” Murphy snapped, “wake up.”

I blinked. “Not asleep,” I slurred. “Just resting my eyes.”

She snorted. “Save it, Harry,” she said, and pushed a cup into my hands. She'd made me coffee with a ton of sugar in it, just the way I like, and even though it was a little stale, it smelled like heaven.

“You're an angel,” I muttered. I took a sip, then nodded down the row of cubicles. “You want to hear this one in your office.”

I could feel her eyes on me as I drank. “All right,” she said. “Let’s go. And the coffee’s fifty cents, Harry.”

I followed her to her office, a hastily assembled thing with cheap plywood walls and a door that wasn’t hung quite straight. The door had a paper sign taped to it, neatly lettered in black Magic Marker with LT. KARRIN MURPHY. There was a rectangle of lighter wood where a plaque had once held some other hapless policeman’s name. That the office never bothered to put up a fresh plaque was a not-so-subtle reminder of the precarious position of the Special Investigations director.

Her office furniture, the entire interior of the office, in fact, was a contrast with the outside. Her desk and chair were sleek, dark, and new. Her PC was always on and running on its own desk set immediately to her left. A bulletin board covered most of one little wall, and current cases were neatly organized on it. Her college diploma, the aikido trophies, and her marksman’s awards were on the wall to one’s immediate right as you entered the office, and sitting there right next to your face if you were standing before her desk or sitting in the chair in front of it. That was Murphy—organized, direct, determined, and just a little bit belligerent.

“Hold it,” Murphy told me. I stopped outside of her office, as I always did, while she went inside and turned off, then unplugged her computer and the small radio on her desk. Murphy is used to the kind of mayhem that happens whenever I get around machinery. After she was done, I went on in.

I sat down and slurped more coffee. She slid up onto the edge of her desk, looking down at me, her blue eyes narrowed. She was dressed no less casually on a Saturday than she was on a workday—dark slacks, a dark blouse, set off by her golden hair, and bright silver necklace and earrings. Very stylish. I, in my rumpled sweats and T-shirt, black duster, and mussed hair, felt very slouchy.

“All right, Harry,” she said. “What have you got for me?”

I took one last drink of coffee, stifled a yawn, and put the cup down on her desk. She slipped a coaster under it as I started speaking. “I was up all night working on it,” I said, keeping my voice soft. “I had a hell of a time figuring out the spell. And as near as I can figure it, it’s almost impossible to do it to one person, let alone two at once.”

She glared at me. “Don’t tell me almost impossible. I’ve got two corpses that say otherwise.”

“Keep your shirt on,” I growled at her. “I’m just getting started. You’ve got to understand the whole thing if you’re going to understand any of it.”

Her glare intensified. She put her hands on the edge of her desk, and said in a deadly, reasonable tone, “All right. Why don’t you explain it to me?”

I rubbed at my eyes again. “Look. Whoever did this did it with a thaumaturgic spell. That much I’m sure of. He or she used some of Tommy Tamm and Jennifer Stanton’s hair or fingernails or something to create a link to them. Then they ripped out a symbolic heart from some kind of ritual doll or sacrificial animal and used a whale of an amount of energy to make the same thing happen to the victims.”

“This doesn’t tell me anything new, Harry.”

“I’m getting there, I’m getting there,” I said. “The amount of energy you need to do this is staggering. It would be a lot easier to manage a small earthquake than to affect a living being like that. Best-case scenario, I might be able to do it without killing myself. To one person who had really, really pissed me off.”

“You’re naming yourself as a suspect?” Murphy’s mouth quirked at the corner.

I snorted. “I said I was strong enough to do it to one person. I think it would kill me to try two.”

“You’re saying that some sort of wizard version of Arnold Schwarzenegger pulled this off?”

I shrugged. “It’s possible, I suppose. More likely, someone who’s just really good pulled it off. Raw power doesn’t determine all that you can do with magic. Focus matters, too. The better your focus is, the better you are at putting your power in one place at the same time, the more you can get done. Sort of like when you see some ancient little Chinese martial-arts master shatter a tree trunk with his hands. He couldn’t lift a puppy over his head, but he can focus what power he does have with incredible effect.”

Murphy glanced at her aikido trophies and nodded. “Okay,” she said, “I can understand that, I think. So we’re looking for the wizard version of Mister Miyagi.”

“Or,” I said, lifting a finger, “more than one wizard worked on this at the same time. Pooled their power together and used it all at once.” My pounding head, combined with the queasy stomach and the caffeine, was making me a little woozy. “Teamwork, teamwork, that’s what counts.”

“Multiple killers,” Murphy drawled. “I don’t have one, and you’re telling me there might be fifty.”

“Thirteen,” I corrected her. “You can never use more than thirteen. But I don’t think that’s very likely. It’s a bitch to do. Everyone in the circle has to be committed to the spell, have no doubts, no reservations. And they have to trust one another implicitly. You don’t see that kind of thing from your average gang of killers. It just isn’t something that’s going to happen, outside of some kind of fanaticism. A cult or political organization.”

“A *cult*,” Murphy said. She rubbed at her eyes. “The *Arcane* is going to have a field day with this one, if it gets out. So Bianca is involved in this, after all. Surely she’s got enough enemies out there who could do this. She could inspire that kind of effort to get rid of her.”

I shook my head. The pain was getting worse, heavier, but pieces were falling into place. “No. You’re thinking the wrong angle here. The killer wasn’t taking out the hooker and Tommy Tonn to get at Bianca.”

“How do you know?”

“I went to see her,” I responded.

“Dammit, Harry!”

I didn’t react to her anger. “You know she wasn’t going to talk to you, Murph. She’s an old-fashioned monster girl. No cooperation with the authorities.”

“But she *did* talk to you?” Murphy demanded.

“I said pretty please.”

“I would beat you to crap if you didn’t already look like it,” Murphy said. “What did you find out?”

“Bianca wasn’t in on it. She didn’t have a clue who it could have been. She was nervous, scared.” I didn’t mention that she’d been scared enough to try to take me to pieces.

“So someone was sending a message—but not to Bianca?”

“To Johnny Marccone,” I confirmed.

“Gang war in the streets,” Murphy said. “And now the out-fit is bringing sorcery into it as well. Mafioso magic spells. Jesus Christ.” She drummed her heels on the edge of the desk.

“Gang war. ThreeEye suppliers versus conventional narcotics. Right?”

She stared at me for a minute. “Yeah,” Murphy said. “Yeah, it is. How did you know? We’ve been holding out details from the papers.”

“I just ran into this guy who was stoned out of his mind on ThreeEye. Something he said makes me think that stuff isn’t a bunch of crap. It’s for real. And you would have to be one very, very badass wizard to manufacture a large quantity of this kind of drug.”

Murphy’s blue eyes glittered. “So, whoever is the one supplying the streets with ThreeEye—”

“—is the one who murdered Jennifer Stanton and Tommy Tomm. I’m pretty sure of it. It feels right.”

“I’d tend to agree,” Murphy said, nodding. “All right, then. How many people do you know of who could manage the killing spell?”

“Christ, Murphy,” I said, “you can’t ask me to just hand you a list of names of people to drag downtown for questioning.”

She leaned down closer to me, blue eyes fierce. “Wrong, Harry. I can ask you. I can *tell* you to give them to me. And if you don’t, I can haul you in for obstruction and complicity so quick it will make your head spin.”

“My head’s already spinning,” I told her. A little giggle slipped out. Throbbing head, pound, pound, pound. “You wouldn’t do that, Murph. I know you. You know damned well that if I had anything you could use, I would give it to you. If you’d just let me in on the investigation, give me the chance to—”

“No, Harry,” she said, her voice flat. “Not a chance. I am ass deep in alligators already without you getting difficult on me. You’re already hurt, and don’t ask me to buy some line about falling down the stairs. I don’t want to have to scrape you off the concrete. Whoever did Tommy Tomm is going to get nasty when someone comes poking around, and it isn’t your job to do it. It’s mine.”

“Suit yourself,” I told her. “You’re the one with the deadline.”

Her face went pale, and her eyes blazed. “You’re such an incredible shit, Harry.”

I started to answer her, I really did—but my skull got loose and shaky on my neck, and things spun around, and my chair sort of wobbled up onto its back legs and whirled about precariously. I thought it was probably safest to slide my way along to the floor, rubbery as a snake. The tiles were nice and cool underneath my cheek and felt sort of comforting. My head went boom, boom, boom, the whole time I was down there, spoiling what would have otherwise been a pleasant little nap.

Chapter Twelve

I woke up on the floor of Murphy's office. The clock on the wall said that it was about twenty minutes later. Something soft was underneath my head, and my feet were propped up with several phone books. Murphy was pressing a cool cloth against my forehead and throat.

I felt terrible. Exhausted, achy, nauseous, my head throbbing. I wanted to do nothing so much as curl up and whimper myself to sleep. Given that I would never live *that* down, I made a wisecrack instead. "Do you have a little white dress? I've had this deep-seated nurse fantasy about you, Murphy."

"A pervert like you would. Who hit your head?" she demanded.

"No one," I mumbled. "Fell down the stairs to my apartment."

"Bullshit, Harry," she said, her voice hard. Her hands were no less gentle with the cool cloth, though. "You've been running around on this case. That's where you got the bump on the head. Isn't it?"

I started to protest.

"Oh, save it," she said, letting out a breath. "If you didn't already have a concussion, I'd tie your heels to my car and drive through traffic." She held up two fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Fifty," I said, and held up two of my own. "It's not a concussion. Just a little bump on the head. I'll be fine." I started to sit up. I needed to get home, get some sleep.

Murphy put her hand on my neck and pressed me back down on the pillow beneath my head, which was, apparently, her jacket, because she wasn't wearing it. "Stay down," she growled. "How did you get here? Not in that heap of a car, I hope."

"The Beetle is doing its phoenix impression," I told her. "I've got a loaner. Look, I'll be fine. Just let me out of here, and I'll go home and get some sleep."

"You aren't in any shape to drive," Murphy said. "You're a menace. I'd have to arrest myself if I let you behind a wheel in your condition."

"Murph," I said, annoyed, "unless you can pay up what you owe me already, right now, I can't exactly afford a cab."

“Dream on, Harry,” Murphy said. “And save your breath. I’ll give you a ride home.”

“I don’t need a—” I began, but she got up from her knees and stalked out of her office.

Foolishness, I thought. Stupidity. I was perfectly capable of moving myself around. So I sat up and heaved myself to my feet.

Or tried to. I actually managed to half sit up. And then I just heaved.

Murphy came back in to find me curled on my side, her office stinking from where I’d thrown up. She didn’t, for a change, say anything. She just knelt by me again, cleaned off my mouth, and put another cool cloth over the back of my neck.

I remember her helping me out to her car. I remember little pieces of the drive back to my apartment. I remember giving her the keys to the loaner, and mumbling something about Mike and the tow-truck driver.

But mostly I remember the way her hand felt on mine—cold with a little bit of nervousness to the soft fingers, small beneath my great gawking digits, and strong. She scolded and threatened me the entire way back to the apartment, I think. But I remember the way she made sure she held my hand, as though to assure herself that I was still there. Or to assure me that she was, that she wasn’t going anywhere.

There’s a reason I’ll go out on a limb to help Murphy. She’s good people. One of the best.

We got back to my apartment sometime before noon. Murphy helped me down the stairs and unlocked the door for me. Mister came running up and hurled himself against her legs in greeting. Maybe being short gives her better leverage or something, since she didn’t really wobble when Mister rammed her, like I do. Or maybe it’s the aikido.

“Christ, Harry,” she muttered. “This place is dark.” She tried the light switch, but the bulbs had burnt out last week, and I hadn’t had the cash to replace them. So she sat me down on the couch and lit some candles off of the glowing coals in the fireplace. “All right,” she said. “I’m putting you in bed.”

“Well. If you insist.”

The phone rang. It was in arm’s reach so I picked it up. “Dresden,” I mumbled.

“Mister Dresden, this is Linda. Linda Randall. Do you remember me?”

Heh. Do men remember the scene in the movie with Marilyn standing over the subway grating? I found myself remembering Linda Randall's eyes and wondering things a gentleman shouldn't.

"Are you naked?" I said. It took me a minute to register what I'd said. Whoops.

Murphy gave me an arch look. She stood up and walked into my bedroom, and busied herself straightening the covers and giving me a modicum of privacy. I felt cheered. My slip had thrown Murphy off better than any lie I could have managed. Maybe a woozy Harry was not necessarily a bad Harry.

Linda purred laughter into the phone. "I'm in the car right now, honey. Maybe later. Look, I've come up with a few things that might help you. Can you meet me tonight?"

I rubbed at my eyes. It was Saturday. Tonight was Saturday night. Wasn't there something I was supposed to do tonight?

To hell with it, I thought. It couldn't have been all that important if I couldn't even remember it. "Sure," I told her. "Fine."

She *mmmed* into the phone. "You're such a gentleman. I like that, once in a while. I get off at seven. All right? Do you want to meet me? Say at eight?"

"My car exploded," I said. My tongue felt fuzzy. "I can meet you at the Seven-Eleven down the street from my apartment."

She poured that rich, creamy laughter into my ear again. "Tell you what. Give me an extra hour or so to go home, get a nice hot bath, make myself all pretty, and then I'll be there in your arms. Sound good to you?"

"Well. Okay."

She laughed again, and didn't say good-bye before disconnecting.

Murphy appeared again as soon as I hung up the phone. "Tell me you didn't just make a date, Dresden."

"You're just jealous."

Murphy snorted. "Please. I need more of a man than you to keep me happy." She started to get an arm beneath me to help me up. "You'd break like a dry stick, Dresden. You'd better get to bed before you get any more delusions."

I put a hand against her shoulder to push her back. I didn't have that kind of strength, but she backed off, frowning. "What?"

“Something,” I said. I rubbed at my eyes. Something was bothering me. I was forgetting something, I was sure of it. Something I said I would do on Saturday. I struggled to push thoughts of drug wars and people driven mad by the Third Sight visions given them by the ThreeEye drug, and tried to concentrate.

It didn’t take long to click. Monica. I had told her I would get in contact with her. I patted at my duster pockets until I found my notepad, and took it out. Fumbled it open, and waved at Murphy.

“Candle. Need to read something.”

“Christ, Dresden. I swear you’re at least as bad as my first husband. He was stubborn enough to kill himself, too.” She sighed, and brought a candle over. The light hurt my eyes for a moment. I made out Monica’s number and I dialed her up.

“Hello?” a male child’s voice asked.

“Hi,” I said. “I need to speak to Monica, please.”

“Who’s this?”

I remembered I was working for her on the sly and answered, “Her fourth cousin, Harry, from Vermont.”

“Kay,” the kid said. “Hold on.” Then he screamed, without lowering the mouthpiece of the phone from his lips, “MOM! YOUR COUSIN HARRY FROM VERMONT IS ON THE PHONE LONG-DISTANCE!”

Kids. You gotta love them. I adore children. A little salt, a squeeze of lemon—perfect.

I waited for the pounding in my head to resolve into mere agony as the kid dropped the phone and ran off, feet thumping on a hardwood floor.

A moment later, there was the rattle of the phone being picked up, and Monica’s quiet, somewhat nervous voice said, “Um. Hello?”

“It’s Harry Dresden,” I told her. “I just wanted to call to let you know what I’d been able to find out for y—”

“I’m sorry,” she interrupted me. “I don’t, um...need any of those.”

I blinked. “Uh, Monica Sells?” I read her the phone number.

“Yes, yes,” she said, her voice hurried, impatient. “We don’t need any help, thank you.”

“Is this a bad time?”

“No. No, it’s not that. I just wanted to cancel my order. Discontinue the service. Don’t worry about me.” There was an odd quality to her voice, as though she were forcing a housewife’s good cheer into it.

“Cancel? You don’t want me looking for your husband anymore? But ma’am, the money—” The phone began to buzz and static made the line fuzzy. I thought I heard a voice in the background, somewhere, and then the sound went dead except for the static. For a moment, I thought I’d lost the connection entirely. Blasted unreliable phones. Usually, they messed up on my end, not on the receiving end. You can’t even trust them to foul up dependably.

“Hello? Hello?” I said, cross and grumpy.

Monica’s voice returned. “Don’t worry about that. Thank you so much for all of your help. Good day, bye-bye, thank you.” Then she hung up on me.

I took the phone away from my ear and stared at it. “Bizarre,” I said.

“Come on, Harry,” Murphy said. She took the phone from my hand and planted it firmly in its cradle.

“Aww, Mom. It’s not even dark yet.” I made the lame joke to try to think about something besides how terribly my head was going to hurt when Murphy helped me up. She did. It did. We hobbled into the bedroom and when I stretched out on the cool sheets I was reasonably certain I was going to set down roots.

Murphy took my temperature and felt my scalp with her fingers, careful around the goose egg on the back of my skull. She shined a penlight into my eyes, which I did not like. She also got me a drink of water, which I did like, and had me swallow a couple of aspirin or Tylenol or something.

I only remember two more things about that morning. One was Murphy stripping me out of my shirt, boots, and socks, and leaning down to kiss my forehead and ruffle my hair. Then she covered me up with blankets and put out the lights. Mister crawled up and lay down across my legs, purring like a small diesel engine, comforting.

The second thing I remember was the phone ringing again. Murphy was just about to leave, her car keys rattling in her hand. I heard her turn back to pick up the phone, and say, “Harry Dresden’s residence.”

There was a silence.

“Hello?” Murphy said.

After another pause Murphy appeared in the doorway, a small shadow, looking down at me. “Wrong number. Get some rest, Harry.”

“Thanks, Karrin.” I smiled at her, or tried to. It must have looked ghastly. She smiled back, and I’m sure hers was nicer than mine.

She left then. The apartment got dark and quiet. Mister continued to rumble soothingly in the dark.

It kept nagging at me, even as I fell asleep. What had I forgotten? And another, less sensible question—who had been on the line who hadn't wanted to speak to Murphy? Had Monica Sells tried to call me back? Why would she call me off the case and tell me to keep the money?

I pondered that, and baseball bats and other matters, until Mister's purring put me to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

I woke up when thunder rattled the old house above me.

True dark had fallen. I had no idea of what time it was. I lay in bed for a moment, confused and a little dizzy. There was a warm spot on my legs, where Mister must have been until a few moments before, but the big grey cat was nowhere to be seen. He was a chicken about thunderstorms.

Rain was coming down in sheets. I could hear it on the concrete outside and on the old building above me. It creaked and swayed in the spring thunderstorm and the wind, timbers gently flexing, wise enough with age to give a little, rather than put up stubborn resistance until they broke. I could probably stand to learn something from that.

My stomach was growling. I got out of bed, wobbled a little, and rooted about for my robe. I couldn't find it in the dark, but came across my duster where Murphy had left it on a chair, neatly folded. Lying on top of it was a scattering of cash, along with a napkin bearing the words "You will pay me back.—Murphy." I scowled at the money and tried to ignore the flash of gratitude I felt. I picked up my duster and tugged it on over my bare chest. Then I padded on naked feet out into the living room.

Thunder rumbled again, growling outside. I could feel the storm, in a way that a lot of people can't, and that most of those who can put down to nerves. It was raw energy up there, naked and pulsing through the clouds. I could feel the water in the rain and clouds, the moving air blowing the droplets in gusts against the walls of the house above. I could sense, waiting, the fire of the deadly lightning, leaping from cloud to cloud above and seeking a path of least resistance to the patient, timeless earth that bore the brunt of the storm's attack. All four elements, interacting, moving, energy flashing from place to place in each of its forms. There was a lot of potential in storms, that a sorcerer could tap into if he was desperate or stupid enough. A lot of energy to be used, up there, where the forces of ancient nature brawled and tumbled.

I frowned, thinking about that. It hadn't occurred to me before. Had there been a storm on Wednesday night? Yes, there had. I remember thunder waking me for a few moments in the hours before dawn. Could our killer

have tapped into it to fuel his spells? Possibly. It bore looking into. Such tapped magic was often too unstable or volatile to use in such a carefully directed fashion.

Lightning flashed again, and I counted three or four seconds before the rumble reached me. If the killer *was* using the storms, it would make sense that if he or she were to strike again, it would happen tonight. I shivered.

My stomach growled, and more mundane matters took my attention. My head was feeling somewhat better. I wasn't dizzy anymore. My stomach was furious with me—like a lot of tall, skinny men, I eat endlessly, but it never stays on. I have no idea why. I shambled into the kitchen and started building up the grill.

"Mister?" I called. "You hungry, bud? I'm gonna fry up some burgers, mmm, mmm, mmm."

Lightning flashed again, closer this time, the thunder following right on its heels. The flash was bright enough to sear through my half-sunken windows and make me wince against it. But, in the flash of light, I caught sight of Mister.

The cat was up on the top of my bookshelf, in the far corner of the apartment—as far as it was possible to get away from my front door. He was watching it, his eyes luminous in the half dark, and though he had the cat-lazy look of any lounging feline, his ears were tilted forward, and his gaze focused unwaveringly upon the door. If he'd had a tail, it would have been twitching.

There came a knocking, a rapping, at my chamber door.

Maybe it was the storm making me nervous, but I quested out with my senses, feeling for any threat that might have been there. The storm made a mess of things, and all of that noise, both physical and spiritual, kept me from being able to tell anything more than that there was someone outside my door.

I felt in the pocket of my duster for the gun—but I remembered that I had set it aside in the lab last night and not taken it with me down to the police station. Police don't take kindly to anyone but police toting firearms inside the station, don't ask me why. In any case, it was out of easy reach now.

And then I remembered that Linda Randall was supposed to be showing up. I berated myself for getting spooked so easily, and then again for sleeping so long, and then again for looking and smelling like I hadn't

showered in a couple of days or combed my hair or shaved or anything else that might have made me marginally less unappealing. Ah, well. I got the impression that with Linda, that sort of thing didn't seem to matter too much. Maybe she was into *eau des hommes*.

I walked over to the door and opened it, smoothing back my hair with one hand and trying to keep a sheepish grin off of my face.

Susan Rodriguez waited outside in the rain, her black umbrella held above her. She wore a khaki trench coat and an expensive black dress beneath it, with heels. Pearls shone at her throat and ears. She blinked at me when I appeared in the door. "Harry?"

I stared at her. Oh my gosh. I had forgotten my date with Susan. How in the world could I have forgotten that? I mean, the White Council, the police, vampires, concussions, junkies, mob bosses, and baseball-bat-swinging thugs notwithstanding—

Well, no. There probably weren't any women incredible enough to make me keep my mind on them through all of that. But all the same, it seemed a little rude of me.

"Hi, Susan," I said, lamely. I peered past her. When had Susan said she was going to show up? Nine? And when had Linda said? Eight—no, wait. She'd said eight o'clock at first, and then said she'd be by in another hour after that. At nine. Hooboy. This was not going to be pretty.

Susan read me like a book and glanced back behind her in the rain, before looking back up at me. "Expecting someone, Harry?"

"Not exactly," I told her. "Uh, well. Maybe. Look, come on in. You're getting drenched." Which wasn't exactly true. *I* was getting drenched, my bare feet soaked, standing there in the open door, the wind blowing rain down the stairway at me.

Susan's mouth quirked in a malicious, predatory little smile, and she came in, folding down her umbrella and brushing past me. "This is your apartment?"

"Nah," I told her. "This is my summer home in Zurich." She eyed me as I closed the door, took her coat, and hung it up on a tall old wooden hat stand near the doorway.

Susan turned away from me as I hung up her coat. Her dress showed her back, the long curve of her spine, all the way down to her waist. It had a fairly tame hemline, and long, tight sleeves. I liked it. A lot. She let me see her back for a while as she walked away from me, toward the fireplace,

then slowly turned to face me, smirking, leaning one smooth hip on the couch. Her midnight hair was bound up on top of her head, displaying a long and slender neck, her skin an advertisement for something smooth and wonderful. Her lips quirked up at the corners, and she narrowed her dark, flashing eyes at me. "The police having you put in overtime, Harry?" she drawled. "The killings must be sensational. Major crime figure, murdered with magic. Care to make a statement?"

I winced. She was still hunting for an angle for the *Arcane*. "Sure," I told her. Her eyes widened in surprise. "I need a shower," I said. "I'll be right back. Mister, keep an eye on the lady, eh?"

Susan gave me a little roll of her eyes, then glanced up and studied Mister on his perch on the bookcase. Mister, for his part, flicked an ear and continued staring at the door.

More thunder rumbled overhead.

I lit a few candles for her, then took one with me into the bathroom. Think, Harry. Get awake, and get your head clear. What to do?

Get clean, I told myself. You smell like a horse. Get some cool water over your head and work this out. Linda Randall is going to be here in a minute, and you need to figure out how to keep Susan from prying her nose into the murders.

So advised, I agreed with myself and hurriedly got undressed and into the shower. I don't use a water heater, and consequently I am more than used to cold showers. Actually, given how often I, and wizards in general, get to date actual real women, maybe that's just as well.

I was just lathering up with shampoo when the lightning got a lot worse, the thunder a lot louder, the rain a lot harder. The height of the storm had hit the old house and hit it hard. It was almost possible to see clearly in the violent electrical discharge. Almost impossible to hear over the thunder. But I caught a flicker of motion out of the corner of my eye, a shadow that moved across the sunken window (covered by modest curtains) in the bathroom. Someone was moving toward the stairs down to my apartment.

Did I mention how I haven't had a ton of success with women? Nights like this are one reason why. I panicked, hard. I leapt out of the shower, my head all a-sudsy, wrapped a towel around my waist, and headed out into the front room.

I couldn't let Linda just come to the door and have Susan answer it. *That* would be the cattiest thing you've ever seen, and I would be the one to get

all the scratches and bites, too.

I rounded the corner from my bedroom into the main room and saw Susan reaching for the doorknob. Lightning flashed again, and thunder kept me from hearing the knob's *click-clack*. I heard something else, though, a snarling, spitting sound, and saw Mister, on his feet now, his back arched up and all his fur fluffed out, teeth bared, his no-longer-sleepy eyes fastened on the door.

The thunder passed as Susan swung the door open. I could see her face in profile. One hand was on her hip, and there was an amused, dangerous little smile on her pretty mouth.

As the door opened, I felt it, the cloud of energies that accompanies a spirit-being when it comes into the mortal world, disguised until now by the background clutter of the storm. A figure stood in the doorway, rather squat, less than five feet tall, dressed in a plain brown trench coat, illuminated by blue lightning overhead. There was something *wrong* to the shape, something that just wasn't a part of good old Mother Earth. Its "head" turned to look at me, and sudden twin points of fire, as blue as the lightning dancing above, flared up, illuminating the leathery, inhuman curves of a face that most closely resembled that of a large and warty toad.

Susan got a good look at the demon's eyes and face from two feet away and screamed.

"Susan!" I shouted, already moving toward the couch. "Get out of the way!" I threw myself to the floor behind the couch, landed with a *whumph* of hard floor hitting my ribs.

The demon's jaws parted in a silent hiss, and its throat constricted weirdly as I vanished behind the couch. There was a hissing sound, and a heart-sized section of the couch just *dissolved* in a cloud of mist and foul stench. Droplets of liquid spattered through, onto the floor near me, and where they touched little holes corroded outward in the space of two seconds. I rolled away from the couch and the demon's acid.

"Susan!" I shouted. "Get back toward the kitchen! Don't get between it and me!"

"What is it?" she screamed back at me.

"A bad guy." I poked my head up and peered through the smoking hole in the couch, ready to duck back down at a moment's notice. The demon, squat and bulkier than a human, was standing in the doorway, both long-

fingered, pad-tipped hands leaning forward toward the inside of the house. It paused as though resting against a light screen.

“Why isn’t it coming in?” Susan asked from the far corner, near the door. Her back was pressed to the wall, and her eyes were wide and terrified. My God, I thought, just don’t pass out on me, Susan.

“Homestead laws,” I said. “It isn’t a mortal creature. It has to gather its energy to push through the barrier around a home.”

“Can it get in?” she said. Her voice was thin, reedy. She was asking questions, gathering information, data, falling back on her ingrained career instincts—because, I suspected, her rational brain had short-circuited. That happens to people who get a good hard look at a demon for the first time.

I hurried over to her and grabbed her arm, dragging her back toward the door leading down to my lab. “Get down there,” I shouted, jerking the door up and revealing the folding ladder-staircase.

“It’s *dark*,” Susan protested. “Oh, God.” She blinked down at my waist. “Harry? Why are you naked?”

I looked down. And blushed. The towel must have fallen off while I was dancing around. Looking down made the shampoo suds still in my hair runnel down into my eyes, making them sting and burn. Could this evening get any worse?

There was a tearing sound from the doorway, and the toad-demon sort of surged forward a stumbling step. It was now in my house. Lightning still danced in the sky behind it, and I could only see it in ugly, hunchbacked outline, except for the electric light of its wide, round, googly eyes as it came toward me. Its throat was working in little, undulating motions.

“Crap,” I said. I’m quite eloquent in times of crisis. I shoved Susan toward the stairs, and turned toward the demon, tips of my thumbs touching, fingers spread, palms out toward it.

The demon’s mouth opened again, and it made a slick, spittooning sound.

“*Vento Riflittum*,” I shouted, willing my fear and anxiety into a tangible shape, throwing it down from my pounding heart through my shoulders and arms, directed at the foe. The globule of demonacid sped toward my face.

My terror and adrenaline roared out of my fingertips in the form of wind, gathering up speed enough to tear the hair from a man’s head. It caught the blob of acid and flung it back at the demon in a fine spray, stopped the thing dead in its tracks, and even drove it back several feet, its claw-tipped feet sliding on my smooth floor, catching on the rugs.

The acid sizzled and spat little electric blue sparks on its skin, but it didn't seem to harm the demon. It did, however, dissolve the trench coat to shreds in less time than it takes to draw a breath and wreaked havoc on my rugs and furniture.

The demon shook its head, gathering its wits. I turned to the far corner, near the door, and extended my hand, trumpeting, "*Vento servitas!*" The pale, smooth wood of my wizard's staff all but glowed in the darkness as it flew toward me, driven by a gentler, finer blast of the same wind. I caught it in my hand and spun it toward the demon, calling on the lines of power and force deep within the long, unbroken grains of wood in the staff. I extended the staff toward it, horizontally like a bar, and shouted, "Out! Out! Out! You are not welcome here!" A touch dramatic in any other circumstance, maybe—but when you've got a demon in your living room, nothing seems too extreme.

The toad-demon hunched its shoulders, planted its broad feet, and grunted as a wave of unseen force swept out from my staff like a broom whisking along the floor. I could feel the demon resist me, pressing against the strength of the staff, as though I were leaning the wood against a vertical steel bar and attempting to snap it across that length.

We strained silently for several seconds until I realized that this thing was just too strong for me. I wasn't going to be able to brush it off like a minor imp or a niggling poltergeist. It wouldn't take me long to exhaust myself, and once the demon could move again it was either going to dissolve me with its acid or else just waddle up to me and rip me into pieces. It would be stronger than a mortal, a hell of a lot faster, and it was not going to stop until I was dead or the sun had come up or one of any of a number of other unlikely conditions was met.

"Susan!" I shouted, my chest heaving. "Are you down there?"

"Yes," she said. "Is it gone?"

"Not exactly, no." I felt my palms get sweaty, the smooth wood of the staff begin to slip. The burning of the soapsuds in my eyes increased, and the lights of the demon's eyes brightened.

"Why don't you set it on fire? Shoot it! Blow it up!" Her voice had a searching quality to it, as though she were looking around, down there in the lab.

"I *can't*," I said to her. "I can't pump enough juice into it to *hurt* the thing without blowing us up along with it. You've got to get out of there."

My mind was racing along, calculating possibilities, numbers, my reserves of energy, cold and rational. The thing was here for me. If I drew it off to one side, into my bedroom and bathroom, Susan might be able to escape. On the other hand, it might be under orders to kill me and any witnesses, in which case after it had finished me it would simply go after her as well. There had to be another way to get her out of here. And then I remembered it.

“Susan!” I shouted. “There’s a sports bottle on my table down there. Drink what’s in it, and think about being away from here. Okay? Think about being far away.”

“I found it,” she called up a second later. “It smells bad.”

“Dammit, it’s a potion. It’ll get you out of here. Drink it!”

There was a gagging noise, and then a moment later she said, “Now what?”

I blinked and looked at the stairs going down. “It should have work—” I broke off as the toad thing leaned forward, reached out a clawed foot, and in that stride gained three feet of ground toward me. I was able to stop it again, barely, but I knew that it was going to be coming for my throat in a few more seconds.

“Nothing happened,” she said. “Dammit, Harry, we have to do something.” And then she came pounding up the ladder, dark eyes flashing, my .38 revolver in her hand.

“No!” I told her. “Don’t!” I felt the staff slip more. The demon was getting ready to come through all my defenses.

Susan raised the gun, face pale, her hands shaking, and started shooting. A .38 Chief’s Special carries six rounds, and I use a medium-speed load, rather than armor-piercing or explosive bullets or anything fancy like that. Fewer chances that something will go wrong in the presence of a lot of magic.

A gun is a pretty simple machine. A revolver approaches *very* simple. Wheels, gears, and a simple lever impact to ignite the powder. It’s tough for magic to argue with physics, most of the time.

The revolver roared six times.

The first two shots must have gone wide and hit somewhere else. The next two struck the demon’s hide and made deep dents in it before springing off and rebounding wildly around the room, as I had feared they would, more of a threat to us than to it. Fortunately, neither of us was

injured or killed by the ricochets. The fifth shot went between its long, oddly shaped legs and past it.

The sixth hit the thing square between its lightning-lantern eyes, knocked it off-balance, and sent it tumbling over with a toady hiss of frustration.

I gasped and grabbed at Susan's wrist. "Basement," I wheezed, as she dropped the gun. We both scrambled down the ladder. I didn't bother to shut it behind me. The thing could just tear its way through the floor, if it needed to. This way, I would at least know where it would come down, rather than have it tunnel through the floor and come out on top of my head.

At my will, the tip of the staff I still held burst into light, illuminating the room.

"Harry?" Bob's voice came from the shelf. The skull's eye lights came on, and he swiveled around to face me. "What the hell is going on? Woo woo, who is the babe?"

Susan jumped. "What is *that*?"

"Ignore him," I said, and followed my own advice. I went to the far end of my lab table and started kicking boxes, bags, notebooks, and old paperbacks off the floor. "Help me clear this floor space. Hurry!"

She did, and I cursed the lack of cleaning skills that had left this end of the lab such a mess. I was struggling to get to the circle I had laid in the floor, a perfect ring of copper, an unbroken loop in the concrete that could be empowered to hold a demon in—or out.

"Harry!" Bob gulped as we worked. "There's, a, um. A seriously badass toad-demon coming down the ladder."

"I *know* that, Bob." I heaved a bunch of empty cardboard boxes aside as Susan frantically tossed some papers away, exposing the entirety of the copper ring, about three feet across. I took her hand and stepped into the circle, drawing her close to me.

"What's happening?" Susan asked, her expression bewildered and terrified.

"Just stay close," I told her. She clung tightly to me.

"It sees you, Harry," Bob reported. "It's going to spit something at you, I think."

I didn't have time to see if Bob was right. I leaned down, touched the circle with the tip of my staff, and willed power into it, to shut the creature out. The circle sprang up around us, a silent and invisible tension in the air.

Something splattered and hissed against the air a few inches from my face. I looked up to see dark, sputtering acid slithering off the invisible shield the circle's power provided us. Half a second earlier and it would have eaten my face off. Cheery thought.

I tried to catch my breath, stand straight, and not let any part of me extend outside the circle, which would break its circuit and negate its power. My arms were shaking and my legs felt weak. Susan, too, was visibly trembling.

The demon stalked over to us. I could see it clearly in the light of my staff, and I wished that I couldn't. It was horribly ugly, misshapen, foul, heavily muscled, and I compared it to a toad only because I knew of nothing else that even remotely approached a description of it. It glared at us and drove a fist at the circle's shield. It rebounded in a shower of blue sparks, and the thing hissed, a horrible and windy sound.

Outside, the storm continued to rumble and growl, muffled by the thick walls of the subbasement.

Susan was holding close to me, and almost crying. "Why isn't it killing us? Why isn't it getting us?"

"It can't," I said, gently. "It can't get through, and it can't do anything to break the circle. So long as neither of us crosses that line, we'll be safe."

"Oh, God," Susan said. "How long do we have to stand here?"

"Dawn," I said. "Until dawn. When the sun rises, it has to go."

"There's no sun down here," she said.

"Doesn't work that way. It's got a sort of power cord stretching back to whoever summoned it. A fuel line. As soon as the sun comes up, that line gets cut, and he goes away, like a balloon with no air."

"When does the sun come up?" she asked.

"Oh, well. About ten more hours."

"Oh," she said. She laid her head against my bare chest and closed her eyes.

The toad-demon paced in a slow circuit around the circle, searching for a weakness in the shield. It would find none. I closed my eyes and tried to think.

"Uh, Harry," Bob began.

"Not now, Bob."

"But Harry—" Bob tried again.

“Dammit, Bob. I’m trying to think. If you want to be really useful, you could try to figure out why that escape potion you were so confident of didn’t work for Susan.”

“*Harry*,” Bob protested, “that’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

Susan murmured, against my chest, “Is it getting warm in here? Or is it just me?”

A terrible suspicion struck me. I looked down at Susan and got a sinking feeling. Surely not. No. It couldn’t be.

She looked up at me, her dark eyes smoky. “We’re going to die, aren’t we, Harry? Have you ever thought you’d want to die making love?”

She kissed my chest, almost absently.

It felt nice. Really, really nice. I tried not to notice all the bare, lovely back that was naked underneath my hand.

“I’ve thought that, many times,” she said, against my skin.

“Bob,” I began, my voice getting furious.

“I *tried* to tell you,” Bob wailed. “I did! She grabbed the wrong potion and just chugged it down.” Bob’s skull turned toward me a bit, and the lights brightened. “You’ve got to admit, though. The love potion works *great*.”

Susan was kissing my chest and rubbing her body up against me in a fashion that was unladylike and extremely pleasant and distracting. “Bob, I swear, I am going to lock you in a wall safe for the next two hundred years.”

“It’s not my *fault*!” Bob protested.

The demon watched what was happening in the circle with froggy eyes and kicked a section of floor clear enough of debris for it to squat down on its haunches and stare, restless and ready as a cat waiting for a mouse to stick its head out of its hole. Susan stared up at me with sultry eyes and tried to wrench me to the floor, and consequently out of the circle’s protective power. Bob continued to wail his innocence.

Who says I don’t know how to show a lady a good time?

Chapter Fourteen

Susan tugged at my neck and jerked my head down to hers for a kiss. As kisses went, well. It was, um, extremely interesting. Perfectly passionate, abandoned, not a trace of self-consciousness or hesitation to it. Or at any rate not from her. I came up for air a minute later, my lips itching with the intensity of it, and she stared up at me with burning eyes. “Take me, Harry. I need you.”

“Uh, Susan. That’s not really a good idea right now,” I said. The potion had taken hold of her hard. No wonder she had recovered from her terror enough to come back up the stairs and fire my gun at the demon. It had lowered her inhibitions to a sufficient degree that it must also have dulled her fears.

Susan’s fingers wandered, and her eyes sparkled. “Your mouth says no,” she purred, “but *this* says yes.”

I went up on my toes, and swallowed, trying to keep my balance and get her hand off me at the same time. “That thing is *always* saying something stupid,” I told her. She was beyond reason. The potion had kicked her libido into suicidal overdrive. “Bob, help me out here!”

“I’m stuck in the skull,” Bob said. “If you don’t let me out, I can’t do much of anything, Harry.”

Susan stood up on tiptoe to gnaw at my ear, wrapped her shapely thigh around one of mine, and started whimpering and pulling me toward the floor. My balance wavered. A three-foot circle was not enough to perform wrestling or gymnastics or...anything else in, without leaving something sticking out for the waiting demon to chew on.

“Is the other potion still there?” I asked.

“Sure,” Bob said. “I can see it where it fell on the floor. Could throw it to you, too.”

“Okay,” I said, growing excited—well. More excited. I might yet get out of this basement alive. “I’m going to let you out for five minutes. I want you to help me by throwing me the potion.”

“No, boss,” Bob said, his voice maddeningly cheerful.

“No? No?!”

“I get a twenty-four-hour leave, or nothing.”

“Dammit, Bob! I’m responsible for what you do if I let you out! You know that!”

Susan whispered, into my ear, “I’m not wearing any underwear,” and tried something approximating a pro-wrestling takedown to drop me to the floor. I wavered in balance and barely managed to stave her off. The demon’s frog-eyes narrowed, and it came to its feet, ready to leap on us.

“Bob!” I yelled. “You slimy jerk!”

“You try living in a bony old skull for a few hundred years, Harry! You’d want to get a night off once in a while, too!”

“Fine!” I shouted, my heart leaping into my throat as my balance wavered again. “Fine! Just make sure you get me the potion! You have twenty-four hours.”

“Just make sure you catch it,” Bob replied. And then a flood of orangish lights flowed out of both of the skull’s eye sockets and into the room. The lights swooped down in an elongated cloud over the potion bottle that lay on the floor at the far side of the lab, gathered it up, and hurled it through the air toward me. I reached up with my spare hand and caught it, bobbled it for a minute, and then secured it again.

The orange lights that were Bob’s spirit-form danced a little jig, then whizzed up the ladder and out of the lab, vanishing.

“What’s that?” Susan murmured, eyes dazed.

“Another drink,” I said. “Drink this with me. I think I can cover us both in the focus department, get us out of here.”

“Harry,” she said. “I’m not *thirsty*.” Her eyes smoldered. “I’m *hungry*.”

I hit upon an idea. “Once we drink this, I’ll be ready, and we can go to bed.”

She looked up at me hazily and smiled, wicked and delighted. “Oh, Harry. Bottoms up.” Her hands made a sort of silent commentary on her words, and I jumped, almost dropping the bottle. More shampoo from my hair trailed down my already burning eyes, and I squeezed them closed.

I slugged away about half the potion, trying to ignore the flat-cola taste, and quickly passed the rest to Susan. She smiled lazily and drank it down, licking her lips.

It started in my guts—a sort of fluttery, wobbly feeling that moved out, up through my lungs and out along my shoulders, down my arms. It also

went down, over my hips and into my legs. I began to shake and quiver uncontrollably.

And then I just flew apart into a cloud of a million billion tiny pieces of Harry, each one with its own perspective and view. The room wasn't just a square, cluttered basement to me, but a pattern of energies, grouped into specific shapes and uses. Even the demon was only a cloud of particles, slow and dense. I flowed around that cloud, up through the opening in the ceiling pattern, and outside of the apartment and into the raging nonpattern of the storm.

It took maybe five seconds, and then the power of the potion faded. I felt all the little pieces of me abruptly rush back together and slam into one another at unthinkable speed. It hurt, and made me nauseous, a sort of heavy-duty thump of impact that didn't come from any one direction, but from every direction at once. I staggered, planted my staff on the ground, and felt the rain wash down over me.

Susan appeared next to me a heartbeat later, and promptly sat down on her butt on the ground, in the rain. "Oh, God. I feel terrible."

Inside the apartment, the demon screamed, a raging, voiceless hiss. I could hear it madly rampaging around inside. "Come on," I told her. "We've got to get out of here before it gets smart and starts looking outside for us."

"I'm sick," she said. "I'm not sure I can walk."

"The mixed potions," I said. "They can do that to you. But we have to go now. Come on, Susan. Up and at 'em." I bent down and got her up on her feet and moving away from my apartment.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Do you have your car keys?"

She patted the dress, as if looking for pockets, and then shook her head dazedly. "They were in my coat pocket."

"We walk, then."

"Walk where?"

"Over to Reading Road. It always floods when there's this much rain. It'll be enough water to ground that thing if it tries to follow us." It was only a couple of blocks away. The cold rain came down in buckets. I was shaking, shivering, and naked, and more soap was getting into my eyes. But hey. At least I was clean.

"Wha?" she mumbled. "What will the rain do to it?"

“Not rain. Running water. It kills him if he tries to go over it after us,” I explained to her, patiently. I hoped the potions mixing together in her stomach hadn’t done anything irreversible. There had been accidents before. We were moving at good speed, all things considered, and had covered maybe forty yards in the pouring rain. Not much farther to go.

“Oh. Oh, that’s good,” she said. And then she convulsed and pitched to the ground. I tried to hold her, but I was just too tired, my arms too weak. I nearly went down with her. She rolled to her side and lay that way, retching horribly, vomiting herself empty.

Thunder and lightning raged around us again, and I heard the sharp crack of the storm’s power touching a tree nearby. I saw a bright flash of contact and then the subdued glow of burning branches. I looked in the direction we had been heading. The flooding Reading Road, safety from the demon, was still thirty yards away.

“I didn’t think you’d last this long,” someone said.

I almost jumped out of my skin. I picked my staff up in both hands and turned in a slow circle, searching for the source of the voice. “Who’s there?” There, to one side, a spot of cold—not physical cold, but something deeper and darker that my other senses detected. A pooling of shadows, an illusion in the darkness between lights, gone when lightning flashed and back again when it had passed.

“Do you expect me to give you my name?” the shadows scorned. “Suffice to say that I am the one who has killed you.”

“You’re an underachiever,” I shot back, still turning, eyes searching. “The job’s not done.”

In the darkness underneath a broken streetlight, then, maybe twenty feet away, I could make out the shape of a person. Man or woman, I couldn’t tell, nor could I distinguish from the voice. “Soon,” the shape said. “You can’t last much longer. My demon will finish you before another ten minutes have passed.” The voice was supremely confident.

“You called that demon here?”

“Indeed,” the shadowy shape confirmed.

“Are you *crazy*?” I demanded, stunned. “Don’t you know what could happen to you if that thing gets loose?”

“It won’t,” the shape assured me. “It is mine to control.”

I extended my senses toward the shape, and found that what I had suspected was true. It wasn’t a real person, or an illusion masking a real

person. It was only the seeming of one, a phantasm of shape and sound, a hologram that could see and hear and speak for its creator, wherever he or she was.

“What are you doing?” it demanded. It must have sensed me feeling it out.

“Checking your credentials,” I said, and sent some of my remaining will toward it, the sorcerous equivalent of a slap in the face.

The image cried out in surprise and reeled back. “How did you *do* that?” it snarled.

“I went to school.”

The hologram growled, then raised up its voice, calling out in rolling syllables. I tried to hear what had been said, but another peal of thunder blocked out the middle half of what was undoubtedly the demon’s name.

From within my apartment, the distant, faint sound of the demon’s smashing ruckus came to an abrupt halt.

“Now,” the image said, a sneer to its voice. “Now you will pay.”

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded.

“You’re in my way.”

“Let the woman go.”

“Sorry,” the image said. “She’s seen too much. She’s in the way, too, now. My demon will kill you both.”

“You bastard,” I snarled.

It laughed at me.

I looked over my shoulder, back toward the apartment. Through the rain I heard a dry and raspy hiss, underlaid with a sort of clicking growl. Blue frog-eyes, reflecting the storm’s lightning, came up the stairs from my basement apartment. It focused on me immediately and started forward. The back fender of Susan’s car, which she had parked outside my apartment, got in its way, and with the pad-tipped fingers of one skinny, soft-looking hand, it picked up the back end of the car and tossed it to one side, where it landed with a heavy crunch.

I tried not to think about those fingers around my throat.

“You see?” the image said. “Mine to call. Time for you to die, Mr. Dresden.”

Another flash of lightning showed the demon falling to all fours and scrambling toward me like an overweight lizard scuttling across hot sand to

shade, in an exaggerated wagging motion that looked ridiculous but brought it closer and closer at deceptive speed.

“Deposit another quarter to continue your call, asshole,” I said. I thrust my staff toward the shadowy image, this time, focusing my will into a full-fledged attack. “*Stregallum finitas.*”

Scarlet light abruptly flooded over it, devouring its edges and moving inward.

The image snarled, then gasped in pain. “Dresden! My demon will roll in your bones!” And then it broke off into a scream of anguish as my counterspell began to tear the image-sending apart. I was better than whoever had made the image, and they couldn’t hold the spell in the face of my counter. The image and the scream alike faded slowly into the distance until both were gone. I allowed myself the smallest touch of satisfaction, and then turned to the woman on the ground.

“Susan,” I said, crouching by her, keeping my eyes on the onrushing demon. “Susan, get up. We have to go.”

“I can’t,” she sobbed. “Oh, God,” she said, and she threw up some more. She tried to rise but collapsed back to the ground, moaning piteously.

I looked back at the water, gauging the thing’s speed. It was coming, fast, but not quite as fast as a man could run. I could still escape it, if I ran, full out. I could get across the water. I could be safe.

But I couldn’t carry Susan there. I’d never make it, with her slowing me down. But if I didn’t go, both of us would die. Wouldn’t it be better for one of us, at least, to live?

I looked back at the demon. I was exhausted, and it had caught me unprepared. The heavy rain would keep fire, man’s ancient weapon against the darkness and the things it hid, from being effective in holding it back. And I didn’t have enough left in me to do anything else. It would be as good as suicide to stand against it.

Susan sobbed on the ground, helpless in the rain, sick from my potions, unable to rise.

I leaned my head back and let the rain wash the last traces of shampoo from my eyes, my hair. Then I turned, took a step toward the oncoming demon. I couldn’t leave Susan to that thing. Not even if it meant dying. I’d never be able to live with myself afterward.

The demon squalled something at me in its hissing, toady voice, and raised both its hands toward me, coming up onto its hind legs. Lightning

flashed overhead, blinding bright. Thunder came hard on its heels, deep enough to shake the street beneath my bare feet.

Thunder.

Lightning.

The storm.

I looked up at the boiling clouds overhead, lit by the dancing lightning moving among them, deadly beautiful and luminous. Power seethed and danced in the storm, mystic energies as old as time, enough power to shatter stones, superheat air, boil water to steam, burn anything it touched to ashes.

At this point, I think it is safe to say, I was desperate enough to try anything.

The demon howled and waddled forward, clumsy and quick. I raised my staff to the sky with one hand, and with the other pointed a finger at the demon. This was dangerous work, tapping the storm. There was no ritual to give it shape, no circle to protect me, not even words to shield my mind from the way the energies of magic would course through it. I sent my senses coursing upward, toward the storm, taking hold of the formless powers and drawing them into patterns of raw energy that began to surge toward me, toward the tip of my staff.

“Harry?” Susan said. “What are you doing?” She huddled on the ground in her evening dress, shuddering. Her voice was weak, thready.

“You ever form a line of people holding hands when you were a kid, and scuff your feet across the carpeting together, and then have the last person in the line touch someone on the ear to zap them?”

“Yeah,” she said, confused.

“I’m doing that. Only bigger.”

The demon squalled again and drove itself into the air with its powerful toad-legs, hurtling toward me, sailing through the air with a frightening and unnatural grace.

I focused what little I had left of my will on the staff, and the clouds and raging power above. “*Ventas!*” I shouted. “*Ventas fulmino!*”

At my will, a spark leapt up from the tip of my staff toward the clouds above. It touched the rolling, restless belly of the storm.

Hell roared down in response.

Lightning, white-hot fury, with a torrent of wind and rain, all fell upon me, centered around the staff. I felt the power hit the end of the soaking wet

wood with a jolt like a sledgehammer. It coursed down the staff and into my hand, making my muscles convulse, bowing my naked body with the strain. It took everything I had to hold the image of what I wanted in my mind, to keep my hand pointed at the demon as it came for me, to keep the energy surging through me to wreak its havoc on flesh less tender than mine.

The demon was maybe six inches away when the storm's fury boiled down my body and out through my arm, out of my pointing finger, and took it in the heart. The force of it threw the thing back, back and up, into the air, and held it there, wreathed in a corona of blinding energy.

The demon struggled, screamed, toad-hands flailing, toad-legs kicking.

And then it exploded in a wash of blue flame. The night was lit once more, bright as day. I had to shield my eyes against it. Susan cried out in fear, and I think I must have been screaming along with her.

Then the night grew quiet again. Flaming bits of something that I didn't want to think about were raining down around us, landing with little, wet, plopping sounds upon the road, the sidewalk, the yards of the houses around me, burning quickly to little briquettes of charcoal and then hissing into sputtering coolness. The wind abruptly died down. The rain slowed to a gentle patter, the storm's fury spent.

My legs gave out, and I sat down shakily on the street, stunned. My hair was dry, and standing on end. There was smoke curling up from the blackened ends of my toenails. I just sat there, happy to be alive, to be breathing in and out again. I felt like I could crawl back in bed and go to sleep for a few days, even though I'd gotten up not half an hour ago.

Susan sat up, blinking, her face blank. She stared at me.

"What are you doing next Saturday?" I asked her.

She just kept on staring for a minute. And then quietly lay down again on her side.

I heard the footsteps approach from the darkness off to one side. "Summoning demons," the sour voice said, disgusted. "In addition to the atrocities you have already committed. I knew I smelled black magic on the winds tonight. You are a blight, Dresden."

I sort of rolled my head over to one side to regard Morgan, my warden, tall and massive in his black trench coat. The rain had plastered his greying hair down to his head, and coursed down the lines of his face like channels in a slab of stone.

“I didn’t call that thing,” I said. My voice was slurred with fatigue. “But I damn well sent it back to where it belongs. Didn’t you see?”

“I saw you defend yourself against it,” Morgan said. “But I didn’t see anyone else summon it. You probably called it up yourself and lost control of it. It couldn’t have taken me anyway, Dresden. It wouldn’t have done you any good.”

I laughed, weakly. “You’re flattering yourself,” I said. “I sure as hell wouldn’t risk calling up a demon just to get to *you*, Morgan.”

He narrowed his already-narrow eyes. “I have convened the Council,” he said. “They will be here two dawns hence. They will hear my testimony, Dresden, and the evidence I have to present to them against you.” There was another, more subdued flash of lightning, and it gave his eyes a wild, madman’s gleam. “And then they will order you put to death.”

I just stared at him for a moment, dully. “The Council,” I said. “They’re coming here. To Chicago.”

Morgan smiled at me, the kind of smile sharks reserve for baby seals. “Dawn, on Monday, you will be brought before them. I don’t usually enjoy my position as executioner, Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. But in your case, I am proud to fulfill that role.”

I shuddered when he pronounced my full name. He did it almost exactly right—maybe by accident, and maybe not, too. There were those on the White Council who knew my name, knew how to say it. To run from the Council convened, to avoid them, would be to admit guilt and invite disaster. And because they knew my name, they could find me. They could get to me. Anywhere.

Susan moaned and stirred. “H-H-Harry?” she mumbled. “What happened?”

I turned to her, to make sure she was all right. When I glanced back over my shoulder, Morgan was gone. Susan sneezed and huddled against me. I put an arm around her, to share what little warmth I had.

Monday morning.

Monday morning, Morgan would bring his suspicions and level his accusations, and it would likely be enough to get me voted dead. Whoever Mister or Miss Shadows was, I had to find him, her, it, or them before Monday morning, or I was as good as dead.

I was reflecting on what a miserable date I was, when the squad car pulled up, turned its spotlights on us, and the officer said, over the

loudspeaker, “Set the stick down and put your hands up. Don’t make any sudden moves.”

Perfectly natural, I thought, embracing a sort of exhausted stoicism, for the officer to arrest a naked man and a woman dressed in an evening gown, sitting on a sidewalk in the pouring rain like a couple of drunks fresh off a bender.

Susan shielded her eyes and then looked at the spotlight. All the throwing up she’d done must have gotten rid of the potion in her, ended its amorous effects. “This,” she said, in a calm and dispassionate voice, “is the worst night of my life.” The officers got out of the car and started toward us.

I grunted. “That’s what you get for trying to go out with a wizard.”

She glanced aside at me, and her eyes glittered darkly for a moment. She almost smiled, and there was a sort of vindictive satisfaction to her tone when she spoke.

“But it’s going to make a *fantastic* story.”

Chapter Fifteen

As it turned out, Linda Randall had a darn good reason for skipping out on our appointment Saturday night.

Linda Randall was dead.

I sneezed as I ducked under the yellow police tape in the sweatpants and T-shirt I had been allowed to pluck from the mess of my place before the police car had brought me across town to Linda Randall's apartment. And cowboy boots. Mister had dragged one of my sneakers off, and I hadn't had time to find it, so I wore what I had. Freaking cat.

Linda had died a bit earlier that evening. After getting to the scene, Murphy had tried to phone me, failed to get through, and then sent a squad car down to pick me up and bring me in to do my consultant bit. The dutiful patrolmen sent to collect me had stopped to check out the crazy naked guy a block away from my apartment, and had been surprised and more than a little suspicious when I turned out to be the very same man they were supposed to pick up and bring to the crime scene.

Dear Susan had come to my rescue, explaining away what had happened as "Just one of those things, tee-hee," and assuring the officers that she was all right and would be fine to drive home. She got a little pale around the edges when she saw once more the ruins of my apartment and the enormous dent the demon had put in the side of her car, but she made a bold face of it and eventually left the scene with that "I have a story to write" gleam in her eye. She stopped and gave me a kiss on the cheek on her way out, and whispered, "Not bad, Harry," in my ear. Then she patted my bare ass and got in her car.

I blushed. I don't think the cops noticed it, in the rain and the dark. The patrolmen had looked at me askance, but were more than happy to let me go put on some fresh clothes. The only things I had clean were more sweats and another T-shirt, this one proclaiming in bold letters over a little cartoon graveyard, "EASTER HAS BEEN CANCELED—THEY FOUND THE BODY."

I put those on, and my duster, which had somehow survived the demon attack, and my utterly inappropriate cowboy boots, and then I had gotten in

the patrol car and been driven across town. I clipped my little ID card to my coat's lapel and followed the uniforms in. One of them led me to Murphy.

On the way, I took in little details. There were a lot of people standing around gawking. It was still fairly early, after all. The rain came down in a fine mist and softened the contours of the scene. There were several police cars parked in the apartment building's parking lots, and one on the lawn by the door leading out to the little concrete patio from the apartment in question. Someone had left his bulbs on, and blue lights flashed over the scene in alternating swaths of shadow and cold light. There was a lot of yellow police tape around.

And right in the middle of it all was Murphy.

She looked terrible, like she hadn't eaten anything that didn't come out of a vending machine or drunk anything but stale coffee since I had seen her last. Her blue eyes were tired, and bloodshot, but still sharp. "Dresden," she said. She peered up at me. "You planning on having King Kong climb your hair?"

I tried to smile at her. "We still need to cast our screaming damsel. Interested?"

Murphy snorted. She snorts really well for someone with such a cute nose. "Come on." She spun on one heel and walked up to the apartment, as though she wasn't exhausted and at the end of her rope.

The forensics team was already there, so we got some nifty plastic booties to put over our shoes and loose plastic gloves for our hands from an officer standing beside the door. "I tried to call earlier," Murphy said, "but your phone was out of service. Again, Harry."

"Bad night for it," I responded, wobbling as I slipped the booties on. "What's the story?"

"Another victim," she said. "Same M.O. as Tommy Tomm and the Stanton woman."

"Jesus," I said. "They're using the storms."

"What?" Murphy turned and fixed her eyes on me.

"The storm," I repeated. "You can tap storms and other natural phenomena to get things done. All natural fuel for the mojo."

"You didn't say anything about that before," Murphy accused.

"I hadn't thought of it until tonight." I rubbed at my face. It made sense. Hell's bells, that was how the Shadowman had been able to do all of that in

one night. He'd called the demon and been able to send it after me, as well as appearing in the shadow he'd projected. And he'd been able to kill again.

"Have you got an ID on the victim?" I asked.

Murphy turned to go inside as she answered. "Linda Randall. Chauffeur. Age twenty-nine."

It was a good thing Murphy had turned away, or the way my jaw dropped would have told her that I knew the deceased, and she would have had all sorts of uncomfortable questions. I stared after Murphy for a second, then hurriedly veiled my expression and followed her inside the apartment.

Linda Randall's one-room apartment looked like the trailer of a rock band that did little besides play concerts, host parties, and fall into a stupor afterward. Dirty clothes were strewn on one side of a king-size bed. There was a disproportionate amount of clothing that looked as though it had been purchased from a Frederick's of Hollywood catalog—lacy and silky and satiny colors, all bright, designed to attract the eye. There were many candles around the bed, on shelves and dressers and a night table, most burned halfway down. The drawer of the night table was partly open, revealing a number of personal amusements—Linda Randall had, apparently, liked her toys.

The kitchenette, off to one side, looked largely unused, except for the coffeepot, the microwave, and the trash can, in which several pizza boxes were crammed. Maybe it was the pizza boxes that did it, that gave me a sudden pang of understanding and empathy for Linda. My own kitchen looked the same, a lot of the time, minus the microwave. Here had lived someone else who knew that the only thing waiting at home was a sense of loneliness. Sometimes it is comforting. Most often, it isn't. I'll bet Linda would have understood that.

But I'd never have the chance to know. The forensics team was gathered around the bed, concealing whatever was there, like a cluster of buzzards around the exposed head of the outlaws they used to bury up to their necks in the Old West. They spoke among themselves in low, calm voices, dispassionate as skilled dinner chatter, calling little details to the attention of their companions, complimenting one another on their observations.

"Harry?" Murphy said, quietly. Her tone of voice suggested that it wasn't the first time she'd said it. "Are you sure you're all right for this?"

My mouth twitched. Of course I wasn't all right for this. No one should ever be all right for this sort of thing. But instead of saying that, I told her,

“My head’s just aching. Sorry. Let’s just get it over with.”

She nodded and led me over toward the bed. Murphy was a lot shorter than most of the men and women working around the bed, but I had almost a head of height on all of them. So I didn’t have to ask anyone to move, just stepped up close to the bed and looked.

Linda had been on the phone when she died. She was naked. Even this early in the year, she had tan lines around her hips. She must have gone to a tanning booth during the winter. Her hair was still damp. She lay on her back, her eyes half-closed, her expression tranquil as it hadn’t been any time I’d seen her.

Her heart had been torn out. It was lying on the king-size bed about a foot and a half from her, pulped and squashed and slippery, sort of a scarlet and grey color. There was a hole in her chest, too, showing where bone had been splintered outward by the force that had removed her heart.

I just stared for a few moments, noting details in a sort of detached way. Again. Again someone had used magic to end a life.

I had to think of her as she sounded on the phone. Joking, a quick wit. A sort of sly sensuality, in the way she said her words and phrased her sentences. A little hint of insecurity around the edges, vulnerability that magnified the other parts of her personality. Her hair was damp because she’d been taking a bath before she came to see me. Whatever anyone said of her, she had been passionately, vitally alive. Had been.

Eventually, I realized how quiet the room was.

The men and women of the forensics team, all five of them, were looking up at me. Waiting. As I looked around, they all averted their gazes, but you didn’t have to be a wizard to see what was in their faces. Fear, pure and simple. They had been faced with something that science couldn’t explain. It rattled them, shook them to their cores, this sudden, violent, and bloody evidence that three hundred years of science and research was no match for the things that were still, even after all this time, lurking in the dark.

And I was the one who was supposed to have the answers.

I didn’t have any for them, and I felt like shit for remaining silent as I stepped back and turned away from Linda’s body, then walked across the room to the small bathroom. The tub was still full of water. A bracelet and earrings were laid out on the counter in front of a mirror, plus a little makeup, a bottle of perfume.

Murphy appeared beside me and stood with me, looking at the bathroom. She seemed a lot smaller than she usually does.

“She called us,” Murphy said. “Nine one one has the call recorded. That’s how we knew to come out here. She called and said that she knew who had killed Jennifer Stanton and Tommy Tomm and that now they were coming for her. Then she started screaming.”

“That’s when the spell hit her. The phone probably went out right after.”

Murphy frowned up at me and nodded. “Yeah. It did. But it was working fine when we got here.”

“Magic disrupts technology sometimes. You know that.” I rubbed at one eye. “Have you talked to any relatives, anything like that?”

Murphy shook her head. “There aren’t any relatives in town. We’re looking, now, but it might take some time. We tried to reach her boss, but he wasn’t available. A Mr. Beckitt?” She studied my face, waiting for me to say something. “You ever heard of him?” she asked, after a moment.

I didn’t look back at Murphy. I shrugged.

Murphy’s jaw tensed, little motions at the corners of her face. Then she said, “Greg and Helen Beckitt. Three years ago, their daughter, Amanda, was killed in a cross fire. Johnny Marcone’s thugs were shooting it out with some of the Jamaican gang that was trying to muscle in on the territory back then. One of them shot the little girl. She lived for three weeks in intensive care and died when they took her off life support.”

I didn’t say anything. But I thought of Mrs. Beckitt’s numb face and dead eyes.

“The Beckitts attempted to lodge a wrongful-death suit against Johnny Marcone, but Marcone’s lawyers were too good. They got it thrown out before it even went to court. And they never found the man who shot the little girl. Word has it that Marcone offered to pay them blood money. Make reparation. But they turned him down.”

I didn’t say anything. Behind us, they were putting Linda in a body bag, sealing her in. I heard men count to three and lift her, put her onto a gurney of some kind, and wheel her out. One of the forensics guys told Murphy they were going to take a break and would be back in ten minutes. She nodded and sent them out. The room got even more quiet.

“Well, Harry,” she said. Her voice was hushed, like she didn’t want to disturb the apartment’s new stillness. “What can you tell me?” There was a subtle weight to the question. She might as well have asked me what I

wasn't telling her. That's what she meant. She took her hand out of her jacket pocket and handed me a plastic bag.

I took it. Inside was my business card, the one I'd given to Linda. It was still curled a little, where I'd had to palm it. It was also speckled with what I presumed was Linda's blood. I looked at the part of the bag where you write the case number and the identification of the piece of evidence. It was blank. It wasn't on the records. It wasn't official. Yet.

Murphy was waiting for my answer. She wanted me to tell her something. I just wasn't sure if she was waiting for me to tell her that a lot of people have my card, and that I didn't know how it had gotten here, or if she wanted me to say how I had known the victim, how I had been involved with her. Then she would have to ask me questions. The kinds of questions you ask suspects.

"If I tell you," I said, "that I was having a psychic premonition, would you take me seriously?"

"What kind of premonition?" she said. She didn't look up at me.

"I sense..." I paused, thinking of my words. I wanted them to be very clear. "I sense that this woman will have a police record, probably for possession of narcotics and solicitation. I sense that she used to work at the Velvet Room for Madame Bianca. I sense that she used to be close friends and lovers with Jennifer Stanton. I sense that if she had been approached, yesterday, and asked about those deaths, that she would have claimed to know nothing."

Murphy mulled over my words for a moment. "You know, Dresden," she said, and her voice was tight, cool, furious, "if you'd *sensed* these things yesterday, or maybe even this morning, it's possible that we could have talked to her. It's possible that we could have found out something from her. It's even *possible*"—and she turned to me and slammed me against the doorway with one forearm and the weight of her body, suddenly and shockingly hard—"it's even possible," she snarled, "that she'd still be *alive*." She stared up at my face, and she didn't look at all like a cutesy cheerleader, now. She looked like a mother wolf standing over the body of one of her cubs and getting ready to make someone pay for it.

This time I was the one to look away. "A lot of people have my card," I said. "I put them up all over the place. I don't know how she got it."

"Goddammit, Dresden," she said. She stepped back from me and walked away, toward the bloodstained sheets. "You're holding out on me. I know

you are. I can get a warrant for your arrest. I can have you brought in for questioning.” She turned back to me. “Someone’s killed three people already. It’s my *job* to stop them. It’s what I do.”

I didn’t say anything. I could smell the soap and shampoo from Linda Randall’s bath.

“Don’t make me choose, Harry.” Her voice softened, if not her eyes or her face. “Please.”

I thought about it. I could bring everything to her. That’s what she was asking—not half the story, not part of the information. She wanted it all. She wanted all the pieces in front of her so she could puzzle them together and bring the bad guys in. She didn’t want to work the puzzle knowing that I was keeping some of the pieces in my pocket.

What could it hurt? Linda Randall had called me earlier that evening. She had planned on coming to me, to talk to me. She was going to give me some information and someone had shut her up before she could.

I saw two problems with telling Murphy that. One, she would start thinking like a cop. It would not be hard to find out that Linda wasn’t exactly a high-fidelity piece of equipment. That she had numerous lovers on both sides of the fence. What if she and I were closer than I was admitting? What if I’d used magic to kill her lovers in a fit of jealous rage and then waited for another storm to kill her, too? It sounded plausible, workable, a crime of passion—Murphy had to know that the DA would have a hell of a time proving magic as a murder weapon, but if it had been a gun instead, it would have flown.

The second problem, and the one that worried me a lot more, was that there were already three people dead. And if I hadn’t gotten lucky and creative, there would have been two more dead people, back at my apartment. I still didn’t know who the bad guy was. Telling Murphy what little more I knew wouldn’t give her any helpful information. It would only make her ask more questions, and she wanted answers.

If the voice in the shadows knew that Murphy was heading the investigation to find him, and was on the right track, he would have no qualms about killing her, too. And there was nothing she could do to protect herself against it. She might have been formidable to your average criminal, but all the aikido in the world wouldn’t do her any good against a demon.

Then, too, there was the White Council. Men like Morgan and his superiors, secure in their own power, arrogant and considering themselves above the authority of any laws but their own, wouldn't hesitate to remove one police lieutenant who had discovered the secret world of the White Council.

I looked at the bloodstained sheets and thought of Linda's corpse. I thought of Murphy's office, and what it would look like with her sprawled on the floor, her heart torn from her chest, or her throat torn out by some creeping thing from beyond.

"Sorry, Murph," I said. My voice came out in a rasping whisper. "I wish I could help you. I don't know anything useful." I didn't try to look up at her, and I didn't try to hide that I was lying.

I sensed, more than saw, the hardening around her eyes, the little lines of hurt and anger. I'm not sure if a tear fell, or if she really just raised a hand to brush back some of her hair. Then she turned to the front door, and shouted, "Carmichael! Get your ass in here!"

Carmichael looked equally as slobbish as he had a few days ago, as though the passage of time hadn't changed him—it certainly hadn't changed his jacket, only the food stains on his tie and the particular pattern of rumplement to his hair. There had to be something comforting, I reflected, in that kind of stability. No matter how bad things got, no matter how horrible or sickening the scene, you could count on Carmichael to look like the same quality of crap. He glared at me as he came in. "Yeah?"

She tossed the plastic bag to him, and he caught it. "Mark that and log it," she said. "Hang around for a minute. I want a witness."

Carmichael looked down at the bag and saw my card. His beady eyes widened. He looked back up at me, and I saw the shift in gears in his head, reclassifying me from *annoying ally* to *suspect*.

"Mr. Dresden," Murphy said. She kept her tone frosty, polite. "There are some questions we'd like to ask you. Do you think you could come down to the station and make a statement?"

Questions to be asked. The White Council would convene and execute me in a little more than thirty hours. I didn't have time for questions. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I've got to comb my hair tonight."

"Tomorrow morning, then," she said.

"We'll see," I said.

“If you aren’t there in the morning,” Murphy said, “I’m going to ask for a warrant. We’ll come and find you and by God, Harry, I’ll get some answers to this.”

“Suit yourself,” I told her, and I started for the door. Carmichael took a step forward and stood in my way. I stopped and looked at him, and he kept his eyes focused on the center of my chest. “If I’m not under arrest,” I told her, “then I presume I’m free to go.”

“Let him go, Ron,” Murphy said. Her tone of voice was disgusted, but I could hear the hurt underneath it. “I’ll talk to you again soon, Mr. Dresden.” She stepped closer and said, in a perfectly even tone, “And if it turns out that you’re the one behind all this, rest assured. Whatever you can do and whatever you can pull, I will find you and I will bring you down. Do you understand me?”

I did understand, really. I understood the pressure she was under, her frustration, her anger, and her determination to stop the killing from happening again. If I was some kind of hero from a romance novel, I’d have said something brief and eloquent and heartrending. But I’m just me, so I said, “I do understand, Karrin.”

Carmichael stepped out of my way.

And I walked away from Murphy, whom I couldn’t talk to, and from Linda, whom I couldn’t protect, my head aching, weary to my bones, and feeling like a total piece of shit.

Chapter Sixteen

I walked down the block from Linda Randall's apartment building, my thoughts and emotions a far more furious thunderstorm than the one now rolling away from the city, out over the vastness of the lake. I called a cab from the pay phone outside a gas station and stood about with my back resting against the wall of the building in the misting rain, scowling and waiting.

I had lost Murphy's trust. It didn't matter that I had done what I had to protect both her and myself. Noble intentions meant nothing. It was the results that counted. And the results of my actions had been telling a bald-faced lie to one of the only people I could come close to calling a friend. And I wasn't sure that, even if I found the person or persons responsible, even if I worked out how to bring them down, even if I did Murphy's job for her, that what had happened between us could ever be smoothed over.

My thoughts were on that topic and similar issues of doom and gloom when a man with a hat pulled low over his face began to walk past me, stopped halfway, then turned and drove his fist into my belly.

I had time to think, *Not again*, and then he struck me a second, and third time. Each blow drove into my guts, thrust me back against the unyielding wall, made me sick. My breath flew out of my mouth in a little, strangling gasp, and even if I'd had a spell already in mind, I wouldn't have had the breath to speak it.

I sort of sagged when he stopped hitting me, and he threw me to the ground. We were at a well-lit gas station, just before midnight on a Saturday night, and anything he did was in full view of any cars going by. Surely, God, he didn't plan on killing me. Though at the moment, I was too tired and achy to care.

I lay there for a moment, dazed. I could smell my attacker's sweat and cologne. I could tell it was the same person who had jumped me the night before. He grabbed my hair, jerked my head up, and, with an audible snip of steel scissors, cut off a big lock of my hair. Then let me go.

My blood went cold.

My hair. The man had cut off my hair. It could be used in almost any kind of magic, any kind of deadly spell, and there wouldn't be a damned thing I could do to stop it.

The man turned away, walking quickly, but not running. In a flood of panic and desperation, I leapt at his leg, got him around the knee, and yanked hard. I heard a distinctive little *pop*, and then the man screamed, "Son of a bitch!" and fell heavily to earth. One fist, one very large and knob-knuckled fist, was clutched around my hair. I tried to suck in a breath, and leapt for that hand.

My attacker's hat had fallen off, and I recognized him—one of Johnny Marcone's men who had followed me from the hotel on Thursday afternoon, the one who had begun limping after jogging after me for several blocks. Apparently, Gimpy had a trick knee, and I had just made it jump through its hoop.

I grabbed his wrist and held on with both hands. I'm not a particularly strong man, but I'm made out of wire, and stubborn as hell. I curled up around his wrist and hung on, trying to pry at his thick fingers. Gimpy tried to jerk his arm away. He was carrying a lot of muscle on that arm, but it wasn't enough to move the weight of my whole body. He shoved at me with his other arm, trying to push me off of him, then started pounding at me with one fist.

"Let go of me, dammit," Gimpy shouted. "Get off of me!"

I hunched my head down, my shoulders up, and hung on. If I could dig my thumbs into his tendons for long enough, his hand would have to open, no matter how strong he was. I tried to imagine his wrist as Play-Doh and my thumbs as solid steel, pushing into him, and held on for everything I was worth. I felt his fingers start to loosen. I could see the dark, thin strands of my hair.

"Jesus Christ," someone shouted. "Hey, Mike, come on!"

There were running footsteps.

And then a couple of young guys dressed in jogging suits and sneakers came over and dragged me off Gimpy. I screamed, incoherently, as my hands slipped from Gimpy's wrist. Some of my hair spilled out, onto the wet concrete, but more stayed in his grip as his fingers closed over it again.

"Easy, easy, man," one of the guys was saying as they dragged me off. "Take it easy."

There wasn't any use struggling against the pair of them. Instead, I dragged in a breath and managed to gasp, "Wallet. He's got my wallet."

Considering the way I was dressed, compared to Gimpy's suit and coat, that was one lie that was never going to get off the ground. Or at least, it wouldn't have, if Gimpy hadn't turned and started hurrying away. The two men let me go, confused. Then, taking the cautious route, they started away, walking hurriedly back to their car.

I struggled to my feet and after Gimpy, wheezing like a leaky accordion. Gimpy headed across the street to a car, and was already in it and leaving by the time I got there. I shambled to a halt in a cloud of his exhaust, and stared dully after his taillights as he drove off into the misting rain.

My heart pounded in my chest and didn't slow down even after I recovered my breath. My hair. Johnny Marcone now had a lock of my hair. He could give it to someone who used magic, and use it to do whatever they damn well pleased to me.

They could use my hair to tear my heart from my chest, rip it right out, like they had done to Jennifer Stanton, Tommy Tomm, and poor Linda Randall. Marcone had warned me to stop, twice, and now he was going to take me out once and for all.

My weariness, fear, and fatigue were abruptly burned away by anger. "Like hell," I snarled. "Like hell you will!"

All I had to do was to find them, find Johnny Marcone, find Gimpy, and find Marcone's wizard, whoever he or she was. Find them, get my hair back, lay them out like ninepins, and send in Murphy to round them up.

By God, I wasn't going to take this lying down. These assholes were serious. They'd already tried to kill me once, and they were coming after me again. Marcone and his boys—

No, I thought. Not Marcone. That didn't make any sense, unless it had been Marcone's gang dealing the ThreeEye from the very beginning. If Marcone had a wizard in residence, why would he have tried to bribe me away? Why not just swipe a lock of hair from me when he'd sent the thug with the bat, and then kill me when I didn't pay attention?

Could it be Marcone? Or could his thug be playing two sides of the street?

I decided that ultimately it didn't matter. One thing was clear: Someone had a lock of my hair. Some wizard, somewhere, meant to kill me.

Whoever this wizard was, he wasn't much good—I'd seen that when I'd wiped out his shadow-sending spell. He couldn't stand up to me if I could force him into a direct confrontation—he might have a lot of moxie, and a lot of raw power, to harness the storms as he had and to slap a demon into servitude. But he was like a big, gawky teenager, new to his strength. I had more than just strength, more than just moxie. I had training, experience, and savvy on my side.

Besides. At the moment I was mad enough to chew up nails and spit out paper clips.

The Shadowman couldn't take a shot at me yet. He didn't have that kind of strength. He needed to wait for the storms that came each spring, and to use them to kill me. I had time. I had time to work. If I could just find out where they were, where Gimpy had taken my hair, I could go after him.

The answer came to me in a flash, and it seemed simple. If the hair could be used as a link to the rest of me, I should be able to reverse it—to create a link from me back to the hair. Hell, maybe I could just set it on fire, burn it all up from my apartment. The formula for a spell like that would be screwy as hell, though. I needed Bob. Bob could help me work out a spell, figure out a formula like that in minutes instead of hours or days.

I grimaced. Bob was gone, and would be for almost another twenty-four hours. There was no way I could work out that formula in less than ten or twelve hours by myself, and I didn't think my brain was coherent enough to come up with solid calculations at the moment, anyway.

I could have called Murphy. Murphy would have known where Marcone was lurking, and Gimpy would probably be nearby. She could have given me an idea, at least, of how to find Gentleman Johnny, Gimpy, and the Shadowman. But she never would, now. And even if she did, she'd demand to know the whole story, and after I'd told it to her, she'd try to take me into protective custody or something ridiculous like that.

I clenched my fists, hard, and my nails dug into my palms. I should trim them sometime—

I looked down at my nails. Then hurriedly crossed the street to stand under the gas station's lights, and stared at my hands.

There was blood under my fingernails, where they'd bitten into Gimpy's wrists. I threw back my head and laughed. I had everything I needed.

I moved back out of the misting rain and squatted down on the concrete sidewalk. I used a bit of chalk I keep in my duster pocket to sketch out a

circle on the concrete, surrounding me. Then I scraped the blood out from under my nails and put it onto the concrete between my feet. It glistened in the fine, misty fall of rain.

The next part took me a moment to figure out, but I settled for using the tracking spell I already knew rather than trying to modify it to something a little more dignified. I plucked out a couple of nose hairs and put them in the circle, too, on top of the bits of Gimpy's skin and blood. Then I touched a finger to the chalk circle and willed energy into it, closing it off.

I gathered up my energy, from my anger, my renewed fear, my aching head and queasy stomach, and hurled it into the spell. "*Segui vostro testatum.*"

There was a rush of energy that focused on my nostrils and made me sneeze several times in a row. And then it came to me, quite strongly, the scent of Gimpy's cologne. I stood up, opened the circle again with a swipe of my foot, and walked out of it. I turned in a slow circle, all the way around. Gimpy's scent came to me strongly from the southwest, out toward some of the richer suburbs of Chicago.

I started laughing again. I had the son of a bitch. I could follow him back to Marcone, or whoever he was working for, but I had to do it now. I hadn't had enough blood to make it last long.

"Hey, buddy!" The cabby leaned out the window and glared at me, the engine running at an idle, the end of his cheroot glowing orange.

I stared at him for a second. "What?"

He scowled. "What, are you deaf? Did someone call for a cab?"

I grinned at him, still angry, still a little light-headed, still eager to go kick Gimpy and the Shadowman's teeth in. "I did."

"Why do I get all the nuts?" he said. "Get in."

I did, closing the door behind me. He eyed me suspiciously in the mirror and said, "Where to?"

"Two stops," I told him. I gave him my apartment's address, and sat back in the seat, my head automatically drawn toward the southwest, toward where the men who wanted to kill me were.

"That's one," he said. "Where's number two?"

I narrowed my eyes. I needed a few things from my apartment. My talismans, my blasting rod, my staff, a fetish that should still be vital. And after that, I was going to have a serious talk with one of Chicago's biggest gangsters.

“I’ll tell you when we get there.”

Chapter Seventeen

We ended up at the Varsity, a club Marcone owned in a Chicago suburb. It was a busy place, catering to much of the college-age crowd to be found on this side of the city, and even at one-thirty in the morning it was still fairly crowded for someplace so isolated, alone in a strip mall, the only business open at this time of the evening, the only lit windows in sight.

“Loony,” the cabby muttered as he drove away, and I had to pause for a moment and agree with him. I had directed him about in a meandering line, the spell I’d cast letting me literally follow my nose along Gimpy’s trail. The spell had begun fading almost the moment I’d cast it—I didn’t have enough blood to make a more lasting enchantment—but it had held long enough for me to zero in on the Varsity, and to identify Gimpy’s car in the parking lot. I walked past the windows and, sure enough, in a large, circular booth in the back I saw Johnny Marcone, the bull-necked Mr. Hendricks, Gimpy, and Spike, sitting together and talking. I ducked out of sight in a hurry, before one of them noticed me. Then walked back into the parking lot to consider exactly what I had at my disposal.

A bracelet on each wrist. A ring. My blasting rod. My staff.

I thought of all the subtle and devious means by which I might tilt the situation in my favor—clever illusions, convenient faltering of electricity or water, a sudden invasion of rats or cockroaches. I could have managed any of them. Not many people who use magic are that versatile, but very few have the kind of experience and training it takes to put such spells together on the fly.

I shook my head, irritated. I didn’t have time to bother with subtlety.

Power into the talismans, then. Power into the ring. I reached for the power in both the staff and rod, cool strength of wood and seething anger of fire, and stepped up to the front door of the Varsity.

Then I blew it off its hinges.

I blew it out, rather than in. Pieces flew toward me and bounced off the shield of air I held in front of me, while others rained back behind me, into the parking lot. It wouldn’t do to injure a bunch of innocent diners on the other side. You only get one chance to make a first impression.

Once the door was off, I pointed my blasting rod inside and spoke a command. The jukebox slammed back against the wall as though a cannonball had impacted it, and then melted into a puddle of liquid-plastic goo. The music squealed out the speakers and stopped. I stepped into the doorway and released a pent-up wave of energy from my ring. Starting at the door and then circling throughout the room, the lightbulbs began to explode with sharp little detonations and showers of powdered glass and glowing bits of filament. People at the bar and at all the wooden tables scattered around the room reacted as people tend to do in this sort of situation. They started screaming and shouting, rising to their feet or ducking beneath their tables in confusion. A few ducked out the fire door at the back of one side of the room. Then there was an abrupt and profound silence. Everyone stood stock-still and stared at the doorway—they stared at me.

At the back table, Johnny Marcone regarded the doorway with his passionless, money-colored eyes. He was not smiling. Mr. Hendricks, beside him, was glaring at me, his single eyebrow lowered far enough to threaten him with blinding. Spike was tight-lipped and pale. Gimpy stared at me in pure horror. None of them made any moves or any sound. I guess seeing a wizard cut loose can do that to you.

“Little pig, little pig, let me in,” I said, into the silence. I planted my staff on the ground and narrowed my eyes at Marcone. “I’d really like to talk to you for a minute, John.”

Marcone stared at me for a moment; then his lips twitched up at the corners. “You have a singular manner of persuasion, Mr. Dresden.” He stood up and spoke aloud to the room without ever taking his eyes off me. He must have been angry, but the icy exterior concealed it. “Ladies and gentlemen, the Varsity is closing early, it would seem. Please make an orderly exit through the door nearest you. Don’t worry about your bills. Mr. Dresden, if you would step out of the doorway and allow my customers to leave?”

I stepped out of the doorway. The place cleared out fast, customers and staff alike, leaving me alone in the room with Marcone, Hendricks, Spike, and Gimpy. None of them moved as they waited for the customers, the witnesses, to leave. Gimpy started sweating. Hendricks’s expression never changed. The big man was as patient as a mountain lion, ready to leap out on the unsuspecting deer.

"I want my hair back," I said, as soon as the last college-age couple had hustled out the door.

"Beg pardon?" Marcone said. His head tilted to one side, and he seemed genuinely puzzled.

"You heard me," I said. "This piece of trash of yours"—I swung my blasting rod up and pointed it at Gimpy—"just jumped me outside a gas station across town and cut off some of my hair. I want it back. I'm not going to go out like Tommy Tomm did."

Marcone's eyes abruptly shone with a terrible, cold, money-colored anger. He turned his head, deliberately, to Gimpy.

Gimpy's broad face went a bit more pasty. He blinked a trickle of sweat out of his eyes. "I don't know what he's talking about, boss."

Marcone's gaze never wavered. "I presume, Mr. Dresden," he said, "that you have some kind of proof?"

"Look at his left wrist," I said. "He's got several fingernail marks on his skin where I grabbed him."

Marcone nodded, those cold, tiger's eyes on Gimpy's, and said, almost gently, "Well?"

"He's lying, boss," Gimpy protested. He licked at his lips. "Hell, I got some fingernail marks from my girl. He knew that. You know what you said, he's for real, he knows things."

The pieces of the puzzle fell into place. "Whoever killed Tommy Tomm knows that I'm on his trail," I said. "Your rival, whoever it is selling the ThreeEye. Gimpy here must have gotten a sweet deal from him to turn on you. He's been providing your rival with information all along, running errands for him."

Gimpy couldn't have played a game of poker to save his life. He stared at me in horror, shook his head in protest.

"There's an easy way to settle this," Marcone said, his voice smooth and even. "Lawrence. Show me your wrist."

"He's lying, boss," Gimpy Lawrence said again, but his voice was shaking. "He's just trying to mess with your head."

"Lawrence," Marcone said, his tone the gentle reproof of parent to child.

Gimpy Lawrence knew it was over. I saw the desperate decision in his face before he actually moved. "Liar!" he howled at me. He got up, lifting his hand from underneath the table. I had time to realize he held a revolver, virtually a twin to my own .38, in his fist, before he started shooting.

Several things happened at the same time. I lifted my hand, focusing my will on the bracelet of tiny medieval-style shields around my left wrist, and hardened the protective energies around me. Bullets hammered against it with whining noises, striking sparks in the near dark of the restaurant.

Spike leapt clear of the table, staying low, a small Uzi-style automatic now in his hand. Hendricks was more ruthless and direct, reacting with the mindlessly violent instincts of a savage. With one hand, the big bodyguard hauled Marcone back, putting his own bulk between the mob boss and Gimpy Lawrence. With the other hand, he produced a compact semiautomatic.

Gimpy Lawrence turned his head and saw Hendricks and his gun. He panicked, turning his own weapon toward the larger man.

Hendricks shot him with a ruthless efficiency, three sharp claps of sound, three flashes of muzzle light. The first two shots hit Gimpy in the middle of his chest, driving him back a pair of steps. The third hit him over the right eyebrow, jerked his head back, and toppled him to the ground.

Gimpy Lawrence had dark eyes, like mine. I could see them. His head turned toward me as he lay there on the floor. I saw him blink, once. Then the lights went out of them, and he was gone.

I stood there for a moment, stunned. Grand entrance or not, this wasn't what I had wanted to happen. I didn't want to kill anyone. Hell, I didn't want anyone to die, not me and not them. I felt sick. It had been a sort of game, a macho contest of showmanship I had been determined to win. All of a sudden, it wasn't a game anymore, and I just wanted to walk away from it alive.

We all stood there, no one moving. Then Marcone said, from beneath Hendricks, "I wanted him alive. He could have answered several questions, first."

Hendricks frowned and got up off of Marcone. "Sorry, boss."

"That's all right, Mr. Hendricks. Better to err on the side of caution, I suppose." Marcone stood up, straightened his tie, then went and knelt by the body. He felt the man's throat, then wrist, and shook his head. "Lawrence, Lawrence. I would have paid you twice what they offered you, if you'd come to me with it. You never were very smart, were you?" Then, his face showing no more emotion than it had the entire evening, Marcone peeled back Gimpy Lawrence's left sleeve, and studied the man's wrist. He frowned, and lowered the arm again, his expression pensive.

“It would seem, Mr. Dresden,” he said, “that we have a common enemy.” He turned to focus his gaze on me. “Who is it?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. If I did, I wouldn’t be here. I thought maybe it was you.”

Marcone lifted his eyebrows. “You should have known me better than that, Mr. Dresden.”

It was my turn to frown. “You’re right. I should have.” The killings had been more vicious, savage than Marcone would have cared to use. Competitors might have to be removed, but there would be no sense in making a production of it. Certainly, there was no reason to murder bystanders, like Linda, like Jennifer Stanton. It was inefficient, bad for business.

“If he has something of yours, you are welcome to take it, Mr. Dresden,” Marcone said. He looked around the room and sighed. “Better hurry. I think the Varsity has seen its last crowd. A shame.”

It was hard, but I walked over to Gimpy Lawrence’s body. I had to set aside my staff, my rod, to rifle the corpse’s pockets. I felt like a ghoul, crouched over the body of a dead man, picking what was valuable to me off of it, out of his pockets.

I didn’t find my hair anywhere. I looked up at Marcone, and he regarded me, my eyes, without any readable emotion.

“Nothing,” I told him.

“Interesting. He must have passed the material in question to someone else before he came here,” Marcone said.

“Someone after he got here, maybe?”

Marcone shook his head. “I am quite sure he did not do that. I would have noticed.”

“I believe you,” I told him, and I did. “But who?”

“Our enemy,” Marcone said. “Obviously.”

I closed my eyes, suddenly sagging with weariness. “Dammit.”

Marcone said nothing. He stood up, and issued a few quiet orders to Hendricks and Spike. Hendricks wiped down his gun with a napkin, then left it lying on the floor. Spike went over behind the bar and started to do something involving a power cord and a bottle of whiskey.

I gathered up my staff and rod, stood up, and turned to Marcone. “Tell me what else you know. I need everything you have if I’m going to catch this guy.”

Marcone considered that, and nodded. “Yes, you do. Unfortunately, you chose a public forum for this discussion. You have set yourself up in the eyes of anyone who cared to watch as my enemy. As understandable as your reasons might have been, the fact that you have publicly defied me remains. I cannot let that go without response, regardless of my personal feelings, without inviting more of the same. I must maintain control. It isn’t personal, Mr. Dresden. It’s business.”

I tightened my jaw, and my grip on my blasting rod, and made sure my shield was still there, ready to go. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I need do nothing. Either our enemy will kill you, in which case I need not risk myself or my people in removing you, or you will find him in time and bring him down. If you do defeat him, I will let it be understood to any who ask that you did so at my behest, after which I will be inclined to forget this evening. Either way, it profits me best to wait and see.”

“If he kills me,” I pointed out, “if I’m the next one to have my heart ripped out, you still won’t know where he is. You won’t be any closer to removing him and protecting your business.”

“True,” Marcone said. Then he smiled, an expression that lasted for only a fraction of a second. “But I think you will not be such easy prey. I think that even if he kills you, he will reveal himself in some way. And since our encounter the other day, I think I have a better feel for what sorts of things to look for.”

I scowled at him and turned to go, moving briskly toward the door.

“Harry,” he said. I stopped and turned back around.

“On a personal note—I know nothing that would profit you in any case. All of his people we managed to take revealed nothing. They were that afraid of him. No one seems to know just where the drug comes from, from what it is made, or where this person does business. Shadows, they say. That he is always in the shadows. That is all that I have learned.”

I regarded Johnny Marcone for a moment, and then nodded, once. “Thank you.”

He shrugged. “Good luck. I think it would be best if you and I did not encounter one another in the future. I cannot tolerate any more interference in my affairs.”

“I think that’s a good idea, too,” I said.

“Excellent. It is good to have someone who understands.” And then he turned back toward his remaining two men, leaving the corpse of Gimpy Lawrence on the floor behind him.

I turned and trudged out of the place, into the night and the cold and the misty rain. I still felt sick, could still see Gimpy Lawrence’s eyes as he died. I could still hear Linda Randall’s husky laughter in my head. I still regretted lying to Murphy, and I still had no intentions of telling her any more than I already had. I still didn’t know who was trying to kill me. I still had no defense to present to the White Council.

“Let’s face it, Harry,” I told myself. “You’re still screwed.”

Chapter Eighteen

Have you ever felt despair? Absolute hopelessness? Have you ever stood in the darkness and known, deep in your heart, in your spirit, that it was never, ever going to get better? That something had been lost, forever, and that it wasn't coming back?

That's what it felt like, walking out of the Varsity, walking out into the rain. When I'm in turmoil, when I can't think, when I'm exhausted and afraid and feeling very, very alone, I go for walks. It's just one of those things I do. I walk and I walk and sooner or later something comes to me, something to make me feel less like jumping off a building.

So I walked. It was pretty stupid, in retrospect, walking around Chicago late on a Saturday night. I didn't look up very often. I walked and let things roll around in my head, my hands in the pockets of my duster, which flapped around my long legs while the light rain gradually plastered my hair to my head.

I thought about my father. I usually do, when I get that low. He was a good man, a generous man, a hopeless loser. A stage magician at a time when technology was producing more magic than magic, he had never had much to give his family. He was on the road most of the time, playing run-down houses, trying to scratch out a living for my mother. He wasn't there when I was born.

He wasn't there when she died.

He showed up more than a day after I'd been born. He gave me the names of three magicians, then took me with him, on the road, entertaining children and retirees, performing in school gymnasiums and grocery stores. He was always generous, kind—more kind and more generous than we could afford, really. And he was always a little bit sad. He would show me pictures of my mother, and talk about her, every night. It got to where I almost felt that I knew her, myself.

As I got older, the feeling increased. I saw my father, I think, as she must have—as a dear, sweet, gentle man. A little naive, but honest and kind. Someone who cared for others, and who didn't value material gain over all else. I can see why she would have loved him.

I never got to be old enough to be his assistant, as he had promised me. He died in his sleep one night. An aneurysm, the doctors said. I found him, cold, smiling. Maybe he'd been dreaming of Mother when he went. And as I looked at him, I suddenly felt, for the very first time in my life, utterly, entirely alone. That something was gone that would never return, that a little hole had been hollowed out inside of me that wasn't ever going to be filled again.

And that was how I felt, that rainy spring night in Chicago, walking along the streets, my breath pluming into steam, my right boot creaking with every step, dead people occupying all of my thoughts.

I shouldn't have been surprised, I suppose, when after hours of walking, my steps carried me back to Linda Randall's apartment. The police were all gone, now, the lights all off, all the gawking neighbors cozy in their beds. It was quiet in the apartment complex. Dawn wasn't yet brushing the sky, but somewhere, on a window ledge or in a rooftop nest, a bird was twittering.

I was at the end of my strength, my resources. I hadn't thought of anything, hadn't come up with any brilliant ideas. The killer was going to get a spell together to kill me the next time he had a storm to draw on, and from the way the air felt that could be anytime. If he didn't kill me, Morgan would certainly have the White Council set to execute me at dawn on Monday. The bastard was probably out lobbying votes, already. If the matter came before the Council, I wouldn't stand a chance.

I leaned against the door to Linda's apartment. It was striped with POLICE LINE—DO NOT CROSS yellow-and-black tape. I didn't really realize what I was doing until I had already worked a spell that opened the door, unfastened the lowest strip of yellow tape, and walked into her apartment.

"This is stupid, Harry," I told myself. I guess I wasn't in the mood to listen. I walked around Linda's apartment, smelling her perfume and her blood. They hadn't come to clean up the blood, yet. The apartment manager would probably have to handle that, later. They never really show you details like that at the movies.

I eventually found myself lying on the floor, on the carpeting next to Linda Randall's large bed. I was curled on my side, my back to her bed, my face toward the sliding glass doors that led out to her little concrete patio. I didn't feel like moving, like going anywhere, like doing anything. Useless. It had all been useless. I was going to die in the next two days.

The worst part was that I wasn't sure that I cared. I was just so tired, exhausted from all the magic I'd had to use, from the walking, from the bruises and punches and lack of sleep. It was dark. Everything was dark.

I think I must have fallen asleep. I needed it, after everything that had happened. I don't remember anything else, until the sun was too bright in my eyes.

I blinked and lifted a hand against the light, keeping my eyes closed. Mornings had never been my best time, and the sun had risen above the tops of the buildings across the street, cheerful springtime sunshine that dashed down through Linda Randall's curtains, through my eyelids and into my brain. I grumbled something, and rolled over, face to the cool darkness under Linda's bed, back to the warm sunlight.

But I didn't go back to sleep. Instead, I started to get disgusted with myself.

"What the hell are you doing, Harry?" I demanded, out loud.

"Lying down to die," I told myself, petulantly.

"Like hell," my wiser part said. "Get off the floor and get to work."

"Don't wanna. Tired. Go away."

"You're not too tired to talk to yourself. So you're not too tired to bail your ass out of the alligators, either. Open your eyes," I told myself, firmly.

I hunched my shoulders, not wanting to obey, but against my better judgment, I did open my eyes. The sunlight had turned Linda Randall's apartment into an almost cheerful place, overlaid with a patina of gold—empty still, to be sure, but warm with a few good memories. I saw a high-school year-book lying nearby, underneath the bed, several photographs serving as bookmarks. There was also a framed picture of a much-younger Linda Randall, smiling brightly, none of the jaded weariness I had seen in her in evidence, standing in her graduation robes between a kind-looking couple in their late fifties. Her parents, I presumed. She looked happy.

And, lying just in the edge of a stray little beam of sunlight, one that was already retreating as the sun rose above the edge of the buildings, was a small, red plastic cylinder with a grey cap.

My salvation.

I snatched it out from under the bed. I was shaking. I shook the canister, and it rattled. A roll of film was inside. I opened up the canister and dumped the film into my hand. The plastic leader had been retracted into the case—there were pictures on the film, but they hadn't been developed

yet. I closed the film up again and reached into the pocket of my duster and drew out another canister, the one I'd found at Victor Sells's lake house. The two were a match.

My mind spun around, taking off down a whole new track. An entirely new realm of possibility had opened up to me, and somewhere in it might be my opportunity, my chance to get out of this alive, to catch the killer, to salvage everything that had started going to hell.

But it still wasn't clear. I couldn't be sure what was going on, but I had a possible link now, a link between the murder investigation and Monica Sells's aborted inquiry into the disappearance of her husband, Victor. I had another lead to follow, but there wasn't much time to follow it. I had to get up, to get on my feet, and get going, fast. You can't keep a good wizard down.

I stood up, grabbed my staff and rod, and started toward the door. The last thing I needed was to get caught trespassing on a crime scene. It could get me arrested and stuck in holding, and I'd be dead before I could get bail. My mind was already rolling ahead, working out the next step, trying to find this photographer who had been at Victor's beach house, and getting these pictures developed and seeing if there was anything in them that was worth Linda Randall's death.

It was then that I heard a sound, and stopped. It came again, a quiet scraping.

Someone turned the key in the dead bolt of the apartment's front door and swung it open.

Chapter Nineteen

There was no time to flee beneath the bed, or into the bathroom, and I didn't want to be limited in mobility in any case. I leapt forward and stood behind the door as it opened, keeping very still.

A man entered—slim, short, harried-looking. His hair, a listless shade of brown, was drawn back into a ponytail. He wore dark cotton pants and a dark jacket, and carried a pouch on a strap at his side. He shut the door, most of the way, and looked around with great agitation. But, like most people who are too nervous to be thinking clearly, he was seeing less than he should have been, and though his head swept over where I would have been in his peripheral vision, he didn't notice me. He was a good-looking man, or so it seemed, with strong lines to his jaw and cheekbones.

He crossed the room and stopped short when he saw the bloodstained bed. I saw him clench his hands into fists. He made a strange, cawing little sound, then hurried forward, to throw himself down on the floor by the bed and start pawing underneath it. After a few seconds, his pawing grew more frantic, and I heard him curse out loud.

I slid my fingers over the smooth surface of the film canister in my pocket. So. The mysterious photographer lurking outside of Victor Sells's lake house was here looking for the film. I had a feeling in my stomach like I get when I finish a particularly difficult jigsaw puzzle—a peculiar satisfaction mingled with a touch of smugness.

I settled my staff and rod silently into the corner by the door and flipped my official police consultant's badge, complete with my photograph on it, out of my duster, so that it showed against the black canvas. I covered my ratty old T-shirt with the coat and hoped that the man would be too rattled and nervous to notice that I was wearing sweatpants and cowboy boots beneath the duster.

I kept my hands in my pockets, pushed the door shut with a little nudge of my boot, and just as it closed, said, "So. Returning to the scene of the crime. I knew we'd catch you if I just waited."

The man's reaction would have had me rolling in laughter on any other day. He jerked, slammed his head against the bottom of the bed, yelped,

drew himself back from the bed, turned to look at me, and all but leapt back over the bed in surprise when he saw me. I revised my opinion of his looks—his mouth was too pinched, his eyes too small and too close together, giving him the intent, predatory look of a ferret.

I narrowed my eyes and stalked toward him one slow pace at a time. “Just couldn’t stay away, could you?”

“No!” he said. “Oh, God! You don’t understand. I’m a photographer. See? See?” He fumbled with the case at his side and produced a camera from it. “Taking pictures. For the papers. That’s what I’m doing here, just trying to get a good look around.”

“Save it,” I told him. “We both know you aren’t here to take pictures. You were looking for this.” And I pulled the film canister out of my pocket, held it up, and showed it to him.

His babbling stopped, and he stood stock-still, staring at me. Then at the canister. He licked his lips and started trying to say something.

“Who are you?” I asked. I kept my voice gruff, demanding. I tried to think of what Murphy would sound like, if I was downtown with her right now, waiting for her to ask me questions.

“Uh, Wise. Donny Wise.” He swallowed, staring at me. “Am I in some kind of trouble?”

I narrowed my eyes at him and sneered, “We’ll see about that. Do you have identification?”

“Sure, yeah.”

“Let me see it.” I speared him with a glance, and added, “Slowly.”

He goggled at me and reached for his hip pocket with exaggerated slowness. With one hand, he drew out his wallet and flipped it open to his driver’s license. I stalked toward him, snatched it, and studied it. His license and picture agreed with the name he’d given me.

“Well, Mr. Wise,” I began, “this is an ongoing investigation. So long as you give me your cooperation, I don’t think that we—”

I looked up to see him peering at my name badge, and my voice trailed off. He jerked his wallet back, and accused, “You’re not a cop!”

I tilted my head back at an arrogant angle. “Okay. Maybe not. But I work with the cops. And I’ve got your film.”

He cursed again and started stuffing his camera back into his bag, clearly meaning to leave. “No. You got nothing. Nothing that connects any of this to me. I’m out of here.”

I watched him start past me, toward the door. “Don’t be so hasty, Mr. Wise. I really think you and I have things to discuss. Like a dropped film canister underneath the deck of a house in Lake Providence, last Wednesday night.”

He flicked a quick glance up at me. “I have nothing to say to you,” he mumbled, “whoever the hell you are.” He reached for the door and started to open it.

I gestured curtly to my staff in the corner, and hissed, in my best dramatic voice, “*Vento servitas*,” jerking my hand at the doorway. My staff, driven by tightly controlled channels of air moving in response to my evocation, leapt across the room and slammed the door shut in front of Donny Wise’s nose. He went stiff as a board. He turned to face me, his eyes wide.

“My God. You’re one of them. Don’t kill me,” he said. “Oh, God. You’ve got the pictures. I don’t know anything. Nothing. I’m no danger to you.” He tried to keep his voice calm, but it was shaking. I saw him tilt his eyes at the glass sliding doors to the little patio, as though calculating his chances of making it there before I could stop him.

“Relax, Mr. Wise,” I told him. “I’m not here to hurt you. I’m after the man who killed Linda. Help me. Tell me what you know. I’ll take care of the rest.”

He let out a harsh little laugh, and eased a half step toward the glass windows. “And get myself killed? Like Linda, like those other people? No way.”

“No, Mr. Wise. Tell me what you know. I’ll put a stop to the killings. I’ll bring Linda’s murderer to justice.” I tried to keep my voice soothing, even, fighting against the frustration I felt. Hell, I’d wanted to rattle him, but I hadn’t meant to scare him so badly that he wanted to jump through a plate-glass sliding door. “I want these people stopped just as badly as you do.”

“Why?” he demanded. I saw a little contempt in his eyes, now. “What was she to you? Were you sleeping with her, too?”

I shook my head. “No. No, she’s just one more dead person who shouldn’t be.”

“You’re not a cop. Why risk your ass to do this? Why go up against these people? Haven’t you seen what they can do?”

I shrugged. “Who else is going to?” He didn’t answer me, so I held up the film canister. “What are these pictures, Mr. Wise? What is on this film

that was worth killing Linda Randall for?”

Donny Wise rubbed his palms over his thighs. His ponytail twitched as he looked about the room. “I’ll make you a deal. Give me the film, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

I shook my head. “I might need what’s on here.”

“What’s there isn’t any good to you if you don’t know what you’re looking at,” he pointed out. “I don’t know you from Adam. I don’t want any trouble. All I want is to get my ass out of this alive and in one piece.”

I stared at him for a moment. If I traded him, I’d lose the film, and whatever was on it. If I didn’t, and if he was telling me the truth, the film wouldn’t do me any good. The trail had led me here, to him. If I didn’t dig up a lead to somewhere else, I was dead.

So I snapped my fingers, letting my staff rattle to the floor. Then I tossed him the film, underhand. He dropped it, and stooped to recover it, studying me warily.

“After I get out of here,” he said, “we’re quits. I’ve never seen you before.”

I nodded. “Fine. Let’s have it.”

Donny swallowed and ran a hand back over his hair, giving his ponytail a nervous little tug at the end of the motion. “I knew Linda from around. I’d taken some pictures of her, for a portfolio. I do shoots for some of the girls around town. They want to make it into magazines, most of them.”

“Adult magazines?” I asked.

“No,” he snapped, nervous still, “Uncle Abner’s magazine for children. Of course adult mags. Nothing really classy, but you can make some good money even if you’re not Hugh Hefner’s type.

“So on Wednesday, Linda comes to me. She says she’s got a deal for me. I shoot some pictures for her and give her the film, and I get—and she’s real nice to me. All I have to do is show up where she says, shoot a roll through the windows, and go. Deliver to her the next day. So I did it. And now she’s dead.”

“Out in Lake Providence,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“What did you see there?” I asked.

Donny Wise shook his head, his eyes drawn past me to the bed again. “Linda. Some other people. No one I knew. They were having some kind of party. All candles and stuff. It was storming like hell, a lot of thunder and

lightning, so I couldn't really hear them. I worried for a while about someone looking up and seeing me in the lightning, but I guess they were too busy."

"They were having sex," I said.

"No," he snapped. "They was playing canasta. Yeah, sex. The real thing, not fake stuff on a set. The real thing don't look as good. Linda, some other woman, three men. I shot my roll and got out."

I grinned, but he didn't seem to have noticed the double entendre. You just don't get quality lowlife often enough anymore. "Can you describe any of these other people?"

He shook his head. "I wasn't looking. But they wasn't being too particular, if you take my meaning. Turned my stomach."

"Did you know what Linda wanted with the pictures?"

He looked at me and then snickered, as though I were extremely simple. "Jesus, buddy. What do you think someone wants with pictures like that? She wanted to get leverage on somebody. Hell, it wouldn't hurt her reputation any if pictures of her in the middle of an orgy got out. But it might have, some of the people with her. What kind of simp, wanna-be cop are you?"

I ignored the question. "What are you going to do with the film, Donny?"

He shrugged. "Trash it, probably." I saw his eyes flick from side to side, and I knew that he was lying to me. He'd keep the film, find out who was in the pictures, and if he thought he could get away with it, he'd try to weasel whatever profit he could out of it. He seemed the type, and I trusted my instincts.

"Allow me," I said, and snapped my fingers. "*Fuego.*"

The canister's grey lid flew off in a little whoosh of flame, and Donny Wise yelped, drawing his hand back sharply. The red canister burst into flame on its way to the ground and landed there in a crumpled, smoking lump.

He stared at the film, then up at me, his mouth gaping.

"I hope I don't find out you've lied to me, Donny," I told him. He went white as a sheet, assured me that he hadn't, then turned and fled out of the apartment, knocking loose two bits of police tape on the way out. He didn't close the door behind him.

I let him go. I believed him. He didn't seem bright enough to make up a story on the fly, as rattled as he'd been. I felt a ferocious surge of triumph,

of anger, and of the desire to find this person, whoever it was, who was taking the raw forces of life and creation and turning them to the ends of destruction, and to put him in the trash with the rest of the garbage. Whoever he was, murdering with magic and killing people by degrees with the ThreeEye drug, he was someone I wanted to put down. My brain lurched into gear, now that there was something to work with, some other possibility for tomorrow morning than me dying in a variety of gruesome ways.

Linda Randall had been planning on blackmailing someone. I took a staggering mental leap and figured it was Victor, or someone out at his house during the party. But why? I didn't have any pictures now, only the information I'd gotten from Donny Wise. I couldn't afford to wait around. I *had* to pursue the lead he'd given me if I was to get to the bottom of this, and find out who had killed Linda.

How had I managed to get into all of this trouble in only a few days? And how in the world had I managed to stumble across what appeared to be a complex and treacherous little plot by chance, out at the house in Lake Providence, on a separate investigation entirely?

Simple answer—it hadn't been an accident. It had all been by design. I had been directed there. Someone had wanted me out at the lake house, had wanted me to get involved and to find out what was going on out there. Someone who was nervous as hell around wizards, who refused to give out her name, who had carefully dropped phrases that would make me believe her ignorance, who had to rush out quickly from her appointment and who was willing to let five hundred dollars go, just to get me off the phone a few seconds faster. Someone had drawn me out and forced me into the open, where I had attracted all sorts of hostile attention.

That was the key.

I gathered up my staff and rod and stalked out the door.

It was time to talk to Monica Sells.

Chapter Twenty

The cabby dropped me off a block away from Monica Sells's house in the suburbs. I was running out of time, out of Murphy's loan, and out of patience, so I didn't waste any daylight in walking down the street toward her place.

It was a cute little house, two stories, a couple of young trees in the front yard, just now starting to rival the house for height. There was a minivan in the driveway, and a basketball goal, well used. The lawn was grown rather long, but all the recent rains left a good excuse for that. The street was a quiet one, and it took me a moment to realize that most of the houses on it were not occupied. FOR SALE signs stood in many of the yards. Sparse curtains draped over empty, gaping windows, like cobwebs. There wasn't a lot of birdsong, for a street with so many trees, and I couldn't hear any dogs barking as I walked along the sidewalk. Overhead, clouds were thickening, building up for another thunderstorm.

Taken all together, it had the feel of someplace blighted, a place where a black wizard had set up shop. I swung up through the Sells yard and to the front door.

I rang the bell, and waited.

There was no answer.

I knocked. I leaned on the doorbell.

Still no answer.

I tightened my jaw and looked around. I didn't see anyone, so I turned back to the door, preparing to use a spell to open it.

Instead, the door swung open, maybe six inches. Monica Sells stood inside, peering out at me with her green eyes. She was dressed in jeans, a plain flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and her hair was covered by a bandanna. She wore no makeup. She looked both older and more appealing that way—I think maybe because it was a more natural look for her, something that was closer to the sort of person she really was, rather than the nicer clothes and jewelry she'd worn when she visited my office. Her face went pale, her lips bloodless.

"I don't have anything to say to you, Mr. Dresden," she said. "Go away."

“I can’t do that,” I said. She started to swing the door shut, but I jammed the end of my staff into the doorway, keeping it from closing.

“I’ll call the police,” she said, voice strained. She leaned against the door, trying to keep me from coming in.

“Do it,” I growled, and then I played a hunch, “and I’ll tell them about you and your husband.” I was taking a shot in the dark, but what the hell. She didn’t know that I didn’t know what the hell was going on.

My instincts paid off. I heard her suck in a breath and felt her resistance on the door sag a little. I put my shoulder to the door, leaned into it hard, and she stepped back from me in surprise. I don’t think she’d expected me to physically force my way into her house. Hell, I hadn’t expected me to do that. I hadn’t realized how angry I was until I saw the look of panic on her face when she looked up at me. I don’t know what I looked like, but it must not have been friendly.

I stopped. I closed my eyes. I took a deep breath, and tried to get a handle on my anger. It wouldn’t profit me anything to lose control.

That was when she went for the stunner.

I heard her move, opened my eyes in time to see her snatch a black plastic case the size of a cellular phone from the piano and lunge toward me. Her face was pale, frightened. Blue lightning danced between the two tines of the stunner as she shoved it at my stomach.

I swept my staff, upright, from right to left, and the buzzing device went past me, along with her lunge, striking the doorframe behind me. I slipped past her, into the living room, turning to face her as she recovered and turned around.

“I won’t let you hurt them,” she snarled. “Not you, not anyone. I’ll *kill* you before I let you touch them, wizard.” And then she was coming at me again, fury replacing the terror in her eyes, a grim determination to succeed that made me think of Murphy for a second. For the first time, she was looking me in the face. For the first time she forgot to keep her eyes averted from mine, and in that second, I saw inside of her.

Things seemed to slow down for a moment. I had time to see the color of her eyes, the structure of her face. To recognize where I had seen them before, why she had looked familiar to me. I had time to see, behind her eyes, the fear and the love that motivated every move she made, every step she took. I saw what had moved her to come to me, why she was afraid. I saw her grief, and I saw her pain.

And the pieces all fell into place. Knowing the emotions that drove her, the terrible love that she was showing even now, it all seemed perfectly obvious, and I felt stupid for not figuring it out days ago.

“Stop,” I said, or tried to say, before she thrust the stunner at my chest. I dropped staff and rod alike in a clatter of falling wood, and caught her wrist in both of my hands. She pushed the stunner up at my face, and I let her do it.

It got to within about three inches of me, the light bright in my eyes. Then I drew in a breath and puffed it out onto the stunner, along with an effort of will. There was a spark, a little puff of smoke, and then it went dead in her hands, like every other electronic gizmo seemed to do whenever I came around. Hell, I was surprised it had taken as long as it did to stop working. And even if it hadn’t, it wasn’t any trouble for me to hex it into uselessness.

I continued holding her wrist, but the driving tension behind her arm had eased away to nothing. She was staring at my face, her eyes wide with shock from the meeting of our gazes. She started shaking and dropped the useless stunner from limp fingers. It clattered to the floor. I let go of her, and she just stared at me.

I was shaking, too. A soulgaze is never something pleasant or simple. God, sometimes I hated that I had to live with that. I hadn’t wanted to know that she had been abused as a child. That she’d married a man who provided her with more of the same, as an adult. That the only hope or light that she saw in her life was in her two children. There hadn’t been time to see all of her reasons, all of her logic. I still didn’t know why she had drawn me into this entire business—but I knew that it was, ultimately, because she loved her two kids.

And that was all I really needed, that and one other connection, the nagging resemblance to someone that I had noticed in her at my office. The rest fell into place from there.

It took Monica Sells a moment to recover herself. She did it with remarkable speed, as though she were a woman used to drawing on a mask again after having it knocked off. “I...I’m sorry, Mr. Dresden.” She lifted her chin, and regarded me with a fragile, wounded pride. “What do you want here?”

“A couple of things,” I told her. I stooped down to recover my staff, my rod. “I want my lock of hair back. I want to know why you came to me last

Thursday, why you dragged me into this mess. And I want to know who killed Tommy Tomm and Jennifer Stanton and Linda Randall.”

Monica’s eyes grew even duller, and her face paled. “Linda’s dead?”

“Last night,” I told her. “And someone’s planning on taking me out the same way, the next chance they get.”

Outside, in the far distance, thunder rumbled. Another storm was in the works, slowly building. When it got to town, I was a dead man. It was as simple as that.

I looked back to Monica Sells, and it was all over her face—she knew about the storm just as well as I did. She knew about it, and there was a sort of sad and weary frustration in her eyes.

“You have to go, Mr. Dresden,” she said. “You can’t be here when... You’ve got to go, before it’s too late.”

I stepped toward her. “You’re the only chance I have, Monica. I asked you once before to trust me. You’ve got to do it again. You’ve got to know that I’m not here to hurt you or your—”

A door opened in the hallway behind Monica. A girl, on the gawky end of preadolescence, with hair the color of her mother’s, leaned out into the hallway. “Mom?” she said in a quavering voice. “Mom, are you okay? Do you want me to call the police?” A boy, perhaps a year or two younger than his sister, poked his head out, too. He was carrying a well-used basketball in his hands, turning it in nervous little gestures.

I looked back to Monica. Her eyes were closed. There were tears coming, trailing down her cheeks. It took her a moment, but she drew in a breath and spoke to the girl in a clear, calm voice, without turning around. “I’m fine,” she told them. “Jenny, Billy, get back into the room and lock the door. I mean it.”

“But, Mom—” the boy began.

“Now,” Monica said. Her voice was strained.

Jenny put a hand on her brother’s shoulder. “C’mon, Billy.” She looked at me for just a moment. Her eyes were too old and too knowing for a child her age. “C’mon.” The two vanished back into the room, closed the door, and locked it behind them.

Monica waited until they were gone, and then broke down into more tears. “Please. Please, Mr. Dresden. You have to go. If you’re here when the storm comes, if he knows...” She buried her face in her hands and made a quiet, croaking sound.

I stepped closer to her. I had to have her help. No matter how much pain she was in, no matter what kind of agony she was going through, I had to have her help. And I thought I knew the names to invoke to get it.

I can be such a bastard sometimes.

“Monica. Please. I’m up against a wall. I’m out of options. Everything I have leads here. To you. And I don’t have time to wait. I need your help, before I wind up just like Jennifer and Tommy and Linda.” I sought her eyes, and she looked up at me without turning her gaze away. “Please. Help me.” I watched her eyes, saw the fear and the grief and the weariness there. I saw her look at me as I leaned on her, and demanded more out of her than she could afford to give.

“All right,” she whispered. She turned away and walked toward the kitchen. “All right. I’ll tell you what I know, wizard. But there’s nothing I can do to help you.” She paused at the doorway and looked back at me. Her words fell with the weight of conviction, simple truth. “There’s nothing anyone can do, now.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Monica Sells had a cheerful, brightly colored kitchen. She collected painted cartoon cows, and they ranged over the walls and cabinet doors of the room in a cheerful, bovine sort of indolence. The refrigerator was covered with crayon drawings and report cards. There was a row of colored glass bottles on the windowsill. I could hear wind chimes outside, restlessly stirred by a cool, rising wind. A big, friendly cow clock on the wall swung its tail back and forth, *tick, tick, tick*.

Monica sat down at the kitchen table. She drew up her legs beneath her, and seemed to relax by a few degrees. Her kitchen, I sensed, was her sanctuary, the place where she retreated when she was upset. It was lovingly maintained, sparkling clean.

I let her relax for as long as I could, which wasn't long. I could almost feel the air building up to greater tension, the storm brewing in the distance. I couldn't afford to play with kid gloves. I was just about to open my mouth, to start pushing, when she said, "Ask questions, wizard. I'll answer them. I wouldn't even know where to start, myself." She didn't look at me. She didn't look at anything.

"All right," I said. I leaned against the kitchen counter. "You know Jennifer Stanton, don't you? You're related to her."

Her expression didn't change. "We have our mother's eyes," she confirmed. "My little sister was always the rebel. She ran away to become an actress, but became a whore instead. It suited her, in her own way. I always wanted her to stop, but I don't think she wanted to. I'm not sure she knew how."

"Have the police contacted you yet, about her death?"

"No. They called my parents, down in St. Louis. They haven't realized, yet, that I live in town. Someone will notice soon, I'm sure."

I frowned. "Why didn't you go to them? Why did you come to me?"

She looked over at me. "The police can't help me, Mr. Dresden. Do you think they would believe me? They'd look at me like I was some kind of lunatic, if I went to them babbling about magic spells and rituals." She

grimaced. “Maybe they’d be right. Sometimes I wonder if I’m going crazy.”

“So you came to me,” I said. “Why didn’t you just tell me the truth?”

“How could I?” she asked. “How could I walk into the office of someone I didn’t even know, and tell him—” She swallowed, and squeezed her eyes shut over more tears.

“And tell me what, Monica?” I asked. I kept my voice soft. “Who killed your sister?”

Wind chimes tinkled outside. The friendly cow clock went *tick, tick, tick*. Monica Sells drew in a long, shuddering breath and closed her eyes. I saw her gathering up the frayed threads of her courage, knotting them up as tightly as she could. I knew the answer, already, but I needed to hear it from her. I needed to be sure. I tried to tell myself that it would be good for her to face such a thing, just to say it out loud. I wasn’t sure I bought that—like I said, I’m not a very good liar.

Monica squeezed her hands into tight fists, and said, “God help me. God help me. It was my husband, Mr. Dresden. It was Victor.” I thought she would dissolve into tears, but instead she just hunched tighter into her little defensive ball, as though she expected someone to start hitting her.

“That’s why you wanted me to find him,” I heard myself say. “That’s why you sent me out to the lake house, to look for him. You knew he was there. You knew that if you sent me out there, he would see me.” My voice was quiet, not quite angry, but the words pounded around Monica Sells like sledgehammers throwing up chips of concrete. She flinched from each of them.

“I had to,” she moaned. “God, Mr. Dresden. You don’t know what it was like. And he was getting worse. He didn’t start as a bad man, really, but he kept getting worse and worse, and I was afraid.”

“For your kids,” I said.

She nodded, and rested her forehead on her knees. And then the words started spilling out of her, slowly at first, and then in a greater and greater rush, as if she couldn’t hold back the immense weight of them any longer. I listened. I owed it to her, for walking all over her feelings, for forcing her to talk to me.

“He was never a bad man, Mr. Dresden. You have to understand. He worked hard. He worked so hard for us, to give us something better. I think it was because he knew that my parents had been so wealthy. He wanted to

give me just as much as they could have, and he couldn't. It would make him so frustrated, so angry. Sometimes he would lose his temper. But it wasn't always so bad. And he could be so kind, sometimes, too. I thought that maybe the children would help him to stabilize.

"It was when Billy was about four that Victor found the magic. I don't know where. But he started getting obsessed with it. He brought home books and books. Strange things. He put a lock on the door to the attic, and after dinner he'd vanish up there. Some nights, he wouldn't come to bed. Some nights, I thought I could hear things, up there. Voices. Or things that weren't voices." She shuddered.

"He started to get worse. He'd get angry, and things would happen. Little things. The drapes would catch on fire at one edge. Or things would fly off the walls and break." She turned her haunted gaze toward her cute, tacky cows for a moment, as though assuring herself that they were still there.

"He'd scream at us for no reason. Or burst out laughing for no reason. He...he saw things. Things I couldn't see. I thought he was going crazy."

"But you never confronted him," I said, quietly.

She shook her head. "No. God forgive me. I couldn't. I had gotten used to being quiet, Mr. Dresden. To not making a fuss." She took a deep breath and continued. "Then, one night, he came to me and woke me up. He made me drink something. He told me that it would make me see, make me understand him. That if I drank, I would see the things he saw. That he wanted me to understand him, that I was his wife." This time, she did start crying, tears that coursed silently down her cheeks, the corners of her mouth.

Something else clicked solidly into place, where I'd already thought it would go. "The ThreeEye," I said.

She nodded. "And...I saw things, Mr. Dresden. I saw *him*." Her face screwed up, and I thought she was going to vomit. I could sympathize. To have the Third Sight suddenly opened to you like that, not knowing what it was, what was happening to you; to look on the man you had wed, who had given you children, and to see him for what he truly was, obsessed with power, consumed by greed—it had to have been hell. And it would remain with her. Always. She would never find the memory fading, never find the comfort and solace of years putting a comfortable padding between her and the image of her husband as a monster.

She continued, speaking in a low, hurried rush. “I wanted more. Even when it was over, even though it was horrible, I wanted more. I tried not to let it show, but he could tell. He looked into my eyes and he *knew*, Mr. Dresden. Like you did just now. And he started to laugh. Like he’d just won the lottery. He kissed me, he was so happy. And it made me sick.

“He started making more of the drug. But he could never make enough. It drove him berserk, furious. And then he started to realize that when he was angry, he could do more. He’d look for excuses to be angry. He’d drive himself into rages. But it still wasn’t enough.” She swallowed. “That’s when...when.”

I thought of frightened pizza drivers and faery commentary on human “sporting.” “That’s when he realized that he could touch other people’s emotions, too,” I said. “Use them to help power his magic.”

She nodded, and curled tighter in on herself. “It was only me, at first. He’d frighten me. And afterward I would be so exhausted. Then he found out that for what he was doing, lust worked better. So he started looking around. For backers. Investors, he called them.” She looked up at me, her eyes pleading. “Please, Mr. Dresden. You have to understand. It wasn’t always so bad. There were moments that I could almost see him again. That I thought he was going to come back to us.”

I tried to look on her with compassion. But I wasn’t sure I felt anything but fury, that someone, *anyone* should treat his family that way—or anyone else, for that matter. My feelings must have showed on my face, because Monica quickly averted her eyes, and huddled down in fear. She spoke in a hurried voice, as though to put off my rage, in the voice of a woman who has put off rage with desperate words more than once.

“He found the Beckitts. They had money. And he told them that if they would help him, he would help them get their vengeance on Johnny Marcone. For their daughter. They put their trust in him. They gave him all the money he needed.”

I thought of the Beckitts, and their lean, hungry faces. I thought of Mrs. Beckitt’s dead eyes.

“And he started the rituals. The ceremony. He said he needed our lust.” Her eyes shifted left and right, and the sickened look on her face grew deeper. “It wasn’t so bad. He would close the circle, and all of a sudden, nothing mattered. Nothing but flesh. I could lose myself for a while. It was almost like an escape.” She rubbed her hand on the leg of her jeans, as if

trying to wipe something foul off of it. “But it wasn’t enough. That’s when he started talking to Jennifer. He knew what she did. That she would know the right kind of people. Like her, like Linda. Linda introduced him to Marcone’s man. I don’t know his name, but Victor promised him something that was enough to bring him into the circle.

“I didn’t have to go all the time, then. Either Jenny or I would stay with the children. Victor made the drug. We started to make money. Things got better for a little while. As long as I didn’t think too much.” Monica took a deep breath. “That’s when Victor started getting darker. He called demons. I saw them. And he said he needed more power. He was hungry for it. It was horrible, like watching a starving animal, forever pacing. And I saw him start...start *looking* at the children, Mr. Dresden. It made me afraid. The way he looked at them, sometimes, I knew—” This time she buckled and doubled toward the floor with a groan. She shuddered and wept, out of control. “Oh, God. My babies. My babies.”

I wanted to go over to her. To offer her my hand to hold, to put an arm over her shoulders and to tell her that it would be all right. But I knew her, now. I had looked inside. It would make her scream. God, Harry, I thought. Haven’t you tortured this poor woman enough?

I rummaged in cabinets until I found a glass. I ran cold water from the sink, poured it into the glass, then went over and put it down by her. She straightened in her chair and took the glass between shaking hands. She took a sip, and spilled a little onto her chin.

“I’m sorry,” I said. It was all I could think of to say.

If she heard me, it didn’t show. She sipped water, then continued, as if desperate to finish, to get the taste of the words out of her mouth. “I wanted to leave him. I knew he’d be furious, but I couldn’t let the children stay close to him. I tried to talk to Jenny about it. And she took matters into her own hands. My little sister, trying to protect me. She went to Victor and told him that if he didn’t let me leave, she’d go to the police and to Johnny Marcone. She’d tell them all about him. And he...he...”

“He killed her,” I said. Hell. Victor hadn’t needed any of Jennifer Stanton’s hair to kill her. Any kind of sample of bodily fluids would have worked. With the ceremonies of lust that he’d been holding, he’d have had ample opportunity to collect from poor Jennifer Stanton. Maybe he’d even had her bring him a sample from Tommy Tomm. Or maybe Jennifer and

Tommy Tomm had just been too close, as they were making love, for the spell to affect just one of them when he killed them.

“He killed her,” Monica confirmed. Her shoulders slumped with a sudden weariness. “That’s when I came to you. Because I thought you might be able to see. Be able to do something, before he hurt my babies. Before he killed someone else. And now Linda’s dead, too. And soon you, Mr. Dresden. You can’t stop him. No one can.”

“Monica,” I said.

She shook her head and curled up in a miserable little ball. “Go,” she said. “Oh, God. Please go, Mr. Dresden. I don’t want to see it when he kills you, too.”

My heart felt like a lump of cold wax in my chest. I wanted so badly to tell her that everything would be all right. I wanted to dry her tears and tell her that there was still joy in the world, that there was still light and happiness. But I didn’t think she would hear me. Where she was, there was nothing but an endless, hopeless darkness full of fear, pain, and defeat.

So I did the only thing I could. I withdrew in silence and left her to her weeping. Perhaps it would help her start to heal.

To me, it only sounded like pieces of glass falling from a shattered window.

As I walked toward the front door, a little motion to the left caught my eye. Jenny Sells stood in the hallway, a silent wraith. She regarded me with luminous green eyes, like her mother’s, like the dead aunt whose namesake she was. I stopped and faced her. I’m not sure why.

“You’re the wizard,” she said, quietly. “You’re Harry Dresden. I saw your picture in the newspaper, once. The *Arcane*.”

I nodded.

She studied my face for a long minute. “Are you going to help my mom?”

It was a simple question. But how do you tell a child that things just aren’t that simple, that some questions don’t have simple answers—or any answer at all?

I looked back into her too-knowing eyes, and then quickly away. I didn’t want her to see what sort of person I was, the things I had done. She didn’t need that. “I’m going to do everything I can to help your mom.”

She nodded. “Do you promise?”

I promised her.

She thought that over for a moment, studying me. Then she nodded. "My daddy used to be one of the good guys, Mr. Dresden. But I don't think that he is anymore." Her face looked sad. It was a sweet, unaffected expression. "Are you going to kill him?"

Another simple question.

"I don't want to," I told her. "But he's trying to kill me. I might not have any choice."

She swallowed and lifted her chin. "I loved my aunt Jenny," she said. Her eyes brightened with tears. "Momma won't say, and Billy's too little to figure it out, but I know what happened." She turned, with more grace and dignity than I could have managed, and started to leave. Then she said, quietly, "I hope you're one of the good guys, Mr. Dresden. We really need a good guy. I hope you'll be all right." Then she vanished down the hall on bare, silent feet.

I left the house in the suburbs as quickly as I could. My legs drove me down the oddly silent sidewalk, and back to the corner where the cabby was waiting, meter ticking away.

I got in the cab and told the cabby to drive me to the nearest pay phone. Then I closed my eyes and struggled to think. It was hard, through all the pain I felt. Maybe I'm stupid or something, but I hate to see people like Monica, like little Jenny, hurting like that. There shouldn't be pain like that in the world, and every time I run into it, it makes me furious. Furious and sad. I didn't know if I wanted to scream or to cry. I wanted to pound Victor Sells's face in, and I wanted to crawl into bed and hide under the covers. I wanted to give Jenny Sells a hug, and to tell her that everything would be all right. And I was still afraid, all tight and burning in my gut. Victor Sells, of the shadows and demons, was going to kill me as soon as the storm rolled in.

"Think, Harry," I told myself. "*Think*, dammit." The cabby gave me an odd look in the rearview mirror.

I stuffed down all the feelings, all the fear, all the anger into a tight little ball. I didn't have time to let those feelings blind me now. I needed clarity, focus, purpose. I needed a plan.

Murphy. Murphy might be able to help me. I could tip her off about the lake house and send in the cavalry. They might find a stockpile of ThreeEye there. They could then arrest Victor like any other dealer.

But there were too many holes in that plan. What if Victor wasn't keeping his stores at the lake house? What if he eluded the police? Monica and her children would be in danger, if he did. Not only that, what if Murphy didn't listen to me? Hell, the judge might not issue a warrant to search private property on the word of a man who probably had a warrant out for his own arrest, now. Not only that, but the bureaucracy involved in working with the authorities in Lake Providence, on a Sunday, no less, would slow things down. It might not happen in time to save me from having my heart torn out. No, I couldn't rely on the police.

If this was any other time, if I was held in less suspicion by the White Council, I would report Victor Sells to them and let them handle the whole thing. They're not exactly soft on people using magic like Victor used it, to call up demons, to kill, to produce drugs. He had probably broken every Law of Magic. The White Council would waste no time in sending someone like Morgan to wipe Victor out.

But I couldn't do that, either. I was already under suspicion, thanks to Morgan's narrow-minded blindness. The Council was already meeting at sunrise on Monday. Some of the other members of the Council might listen to me, but they would be traveling, now. I had no way of reaching any of those who were sympathetic to me, no way of asking for help. There wasn't time, in fact, to try to round up any of my usual allies.

So, I concluded. It was up to me. Alone.

It was a sobering thought.

I had to confront Victor Sells, as strong a practitioner as I had ever gone up against, in his own place of power—the lake house. Not only that, but I had to do it without breaking any of the Laws of Magic. I couldn't kill him with sorcery—but somehow, I had to stop him.

Odds seemed really good that I was going to get killed, whether I tried to face him or not. To hell with it, then. If I was going to go out, it wasn't going to be while I was lying around moaning and bitching about how useless it all was. If Victor Sells wanted to take out Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden, he was going to have to shove his magic right down my throat.

This decision cheered me somewhat. At least I knew what I was doing now, where I was going. What I needed was an edge, I decided. Something to pull on Victor, something he wouldn't expect.

Now that I knew who he was, I understood the magic I had run into outside of my apartment a little bit better. It had been potent, deadly, but not sophisticated, not well controlled. Victor was powerful, strong, a natural mage—but he wasn't practiced. He didn't have any training. If only I had something of his, something like his own hair, that I could use against him. Maybe I should have checked the bathroom at Monica's, but I had the feeling that he wouldn't have been that careless. Anyone who spends time thinking about how to use that sort of thing against people is going to be doubly paranoid that no one have the opportunity to use it against him.

And then it struck me—I did have something of Victor's. I had his scorpion talisman, back in the drawer of my desk at the office. It was one of his own devices, something close and familiar. I could use it to create a bond to him, to sort of judo his own power back against him and beat him with it, hands down, no questions asked.

I might have a chance, yet. I wasn't finished, not by a long shot.

The cabby pulled into a gas station and parked next to the pay phone. I told him to wait for me a minute and got out, fumbling a quarter from my pocket to make the call. If it did turn out that I wouldn't live to see tomorrow, I wanted to make damn sure that the hounds of hell would be growling at Victor Sells's heels.

I dialed Murphy's number, down at the station.

It rang several times, and finally someone answered. The line was scratchy, noisy, and I could barely make out who it was. "Murphy's desk, this is Carmichael."

"Carmichael," I said loudly into the phone. "It's Harry Dresden. I need to talk to Murphy."

"What?" Carmichael said. There was a squeal of static. Dammit, the phones go to hell on me at the worst times. "I can't hear you. Murphy? You want Murphy? Who is this? Anderson, is that you?"

"It's Harry Dresden," I shouted. "I need to talk to Murphy."

"Eh," Carmichael grunted. "I can't hear you, Andy. Look, Murphy's out. She took that warrant down to Harry Dresden's office to take a look around."

"She *what*?" I said.

"Harry Dresden's office," Carmichael said. "She said she'd be back soon. Look, this connection is awful, try to call back." He hung up on me.

I fumbled for another quarter, my hands shaking, and dialed my own office number. The last thing I needed was for Murphy to go poking around in my office, maybe impounding things. If she stuck the scorpion in evidence, I was done for. I'd never be able to explain it to her in time. And if she saw me face-to-face, she might be furious enough with me to just have me slapped into holding and left there overnight. If that happened, I'd be dead by morning.

My phone rang a couple of times, then Murphy answered. The line was blissfully clear. "Harry Dresden's office."

"Murph," I said. "Thank God. Look, I need to talk to you."

I could practically feel her anger. "Too late for that now, Harry. You should have come to talk to me this morning." I heard her moving around. She started opening drawers.

"Dammit, Murph," I said, frustrated. "I know who the killer is. Look, you've got to keep out of that desk. It could be dangerous." I thought I had been going to tell her a lie, but I realized as I said it that I was telling the truth. I remembered seeing, or thinking I had seen, movement from the talisman when I had examined it before. Maybe I hadn't been imagining things.

"Dangerous," Murphy growled. I heard her scattering pens out of the top drawer of my desk, moving things around. The talisman was in the drawer beneath. "I'll tell you what's dangerous. Fucking with me is dangerous, Dresden. I'm not playing some kind of game here. And I can't trust what you say anymore."

"Murphy," I said, trying to keep my voice even, "you've got to trust me, one more time. Stay out of my desk. Please."

There was silence for a moment. I heard her draw in a breath, and let it out through her mouth. Then Murphy said, her voice hard, professional, "Why, Dresden? What are you hiding?"

I heard her open the middle drawer.

There was a clicking sound, and a startled oath from Murphy. The receiver clattered to the floor. I heard gunshots, shockingly loud, whining ricochets, and then a scream.

"Dammit!" I shouted at the phone. "Murphy!" I slammed the phone down and sprinted back to the cab.

The cabby blinked at me. "Hey, buddy. Where's the fire?"

I slammed the door shut, and gave him the address to my office. Then I thrust all of my remaining cash at him, and said, "Get me there five minutes ago."

The cabby blinked at the money, shrugged, and said, "Crazies. Cabbies get all the crazies." Then he tore out into the street, leaving a cloud of smoke behind us.

Chapter Twenty-two

The building was locked on Sunday. I jammed my key in the lock, twisted it hard to open it, and jerked the keys out again. I didn't bother with the elevator, just hurtled up the stairs as quickly as I could.

Five stories' worth of stairs. It took me less than a minute, but I begrudged every second of it. My lungs were burning and my mouth was dry as sand as I reached the fifth floor and sprinted down the hallway to my office. The halls were quiet, empty, dim. The only light came from the exit signs and from the overcast day outside. Shadows stretched and settled in the closed doorways.

The door to my office was ajar. I could hear my ceiling fan squeaking on its mounting, underneath the labored wheezing of my own breath. The overhead light wasn't on, but the reading light on my desk must have been, because yellow light outlined the doorway and laid a swath of gold across the floor of the hall. I stopped at the threshold. My hands were shaking so much I could hardly hold my staff and rod.

"Murphy?" I called out. "Murphy, can you hear me?" My voice was hoarse, breathless.

I closed my eyes, and listened. I thought I heard two things.

The first was a labored breath, with a faint moan on the exhale. Murphy.

The second was a dry, scuttling sound.

I could smell gunpowder on the air.

I clenched my jaw in sudden anger. Victor Sells's little beastie, whatever it was, had hurt my friend. Like hell I was going to stand out here and give it the run of my office.

I shoved the door open with my staff and stalked into the office, my blasting rod extended before me and words of power upon my lips.

Directly in front of my office door is a table arranged with a series of pamphlets with titles like *Real Witches Don't Float So Good*, and *Magic in the Twenty-first Century*. I had written some of them myself. They were meant for the curious, for people who just wanted to know about witches and magic. I squatted for a moment, blasting rod aimed beneath the table, but saw nothing. I rose again, looking back and forth, rod still ready.

To the right of the door is a wall lined with filing cabinets and a couple of easy chairs. The cabinets were shut, but something could have been hiding beneath one of the chairs. I slid to my left, checked behind the door to the office, and pressed my shoulders to the wall, keeping my eyes on the room.

My desk is in the back corner, to the right as you come in the door, diagonal from it. It's a corner office. There are windows on either of the outside walls. My shades were, as usual, drawn. The overhead fan, in the center of the room, spun around with a tired little groan on every rotation.

I kept my eyes moving, my senses alert. I choked down my anger, ferociously, and made myself remain cautious. Whatever had happened to Murphy, I wouldn't do her any good by letting it happen to me, too. I moved slowly, carefully, my blasting rod held ready.

I could see Murphy's tennis shoes behind my desk. She looked like she was curled on her side, from the way her feet were angled, but I couldn't see the rest of her. I pushed forward, striding to the center of the back wall, keeping my blasting rod leveled like a gun at the floor behind the desk as it became visible.

Murphy lay there, curled on her side, her golden hair in an artless sprawl about her head, her eyes open and staring blindly. She was dressed in jeans, a button-down shirt, and a Cubs satin jacket. Her left shoulder was stained with a blot of blood. Her gun lay next to her, a couple of feet away. My heart stepped up into my throat. I heard her take a little breath and groan when she let it out.

"Murphy," I said. Then, louder, "Murphy."

I saw her stir, a fitful little motion that was in response to my voice. "Easy, easy," I told her. "Relax. Don't try to move. I'm going to try to help you."

I knelt next to her, very slowly, watching the room all around. I didn't see anything. I set my staff aside, and felt her throat. Her pulse was racing, thready. There was not enough blood for it to be a serious injury, but I touched her shoulder. Even through the jacket, I could feel the swelling.

"Harry?" Murphy rasped. "Is that you?"

"It's me, Murph," I told her, setting my blasting rod aside and slowly reaching for the phone. The middle drawer of my desk, where the scorpion talisman had been, was open and empty. "Just hang on. I'm going to call an ambulance to help you."

“Can’t believe it. You bastard,” Murphy wheezed. I felt her stir around a little. “You set me up.”

I drew the phone down and dialed 911. “Hush, Murph. You’ve been poisoned. You need help, fast.”

The 911 operator came on and took my name and address. I told her to send an ambulance prepared to treat someone for poisoning, and she told me to stay on the line. I didn’t have time to stay on the line. Whatever had done this to Murphy, it was still around, somewhere. I had to get her out of there, and then I had to recover Victor’s talisman, to be able to use it against him when I went out to the lake house.

Murphy stirred again, and then I felt something hard and cool flick around my wrist and *clicker-clack* shut. I blinked and looked down at her. Murphy’s jaw was set in a stubborn line as she clicked the other end of the handcuffs shut around her own wrist.

“You’re under arrest,” she wheezed. “You son of a bitch. Wait till I get you in an interrogation room. You aren’t going anywhere.”

I stared at her, stunned. “Murph,” I stammered. “My God. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Like hell,” she said, her lip lifting in a ghost of its usual snarl. She twisted her head around, grimacing in pain, and squinted at me. “You should have talked to me this morning. Got you now, Dresden.” She broke off in a panting gasp, and added, “You jerk.”

“You stubborn bitch from hell.” I felt at a loss for a second, then shook my head. “I’ve got to get you out of here before it comes back,” I said, and I stooped forward to try to gather her up.

That was when the scorpion exploded toward me from the shadows beneath my desk, a harsh burst of dry, scuttling motion. It wasn’t a bug I could squash with my fingers, anymore. It was the size of a large terrier, all brown and glinting, and it was almost too fast to see coming.

I convulsed away from it, and saw the flash of its tail, saw its stinger whip forward and miss my eye by a hairbreadth. Something cool and wet speckled my cheek, and my skin started to burn. Venom.

My startled motion made my leg jerk, and I kicked my staff and rod away from me. I rolled after the latter desperately. Murphy’s handcuffs brought me up short, and both of us made sounds of discomfort as the steel bands cut at the base of our hands. I stretched for the rod, felt the smooth roundness of it on my fingertips, and then there was another scuttling sound

and the scorpion came at my back. The rod squirted out from beneath my grasping fingers and rolled away, out of reach.

I didn't have time for a spell, but I grabbed at the middle drawer of my desk, jerked it all the way out of its frame and barely managed to shove it between the scorpion and myself. There was a hiss of air and a smacking sound of breaking wood. The scorpion's stinger plunged through the bottom of the desk drawer and stuck fast. A crab-claw pincer gouged a hole through my sweatpants and into my leg.

I screamed and hurled the drawer away. The scorpion, its tail still stuck, went with it, and they both landed in a heap a few feet away.

"Won't do you any good, Dresden," Murphy moaned incoherently. She must have been too far gone from the poison to understand what was going on. "I've got you. Stop fighting it. Get some answers from you, now."

"Sometimes, Murph," I panted, "you make things just a little harder than they need to be. Anyone ever tell you that?" I bent down to her, and slipped my cuffed wrist beneath her arm and around her back, drawing her own arm back with me, my right arm and her left bound by the handcuff.

"My ex-husbands," she moaned. I strained and lifted us both up off the ground, then started hobbling toward the door. I could feel the blood on my leg, the pain where the scorpion had ripped it, hot and hateful. "What's happening?" Confusion and fear trembled in Murphy's voice. "Harry, I can't see."

Shit. The poison was getting to her. The poison of the common brown scorpion found all over most of the United States isn't much more venomous than the sting of a bumblebee. Of course, most bumblebees aren't the size of the family dog, either. And Murphy wasn't a big person. If a lot of poison had been introduced into her system, the odds were against her. She needed medical attention, and she needed it immediately.

If my hands had been free, I would have taken up my staff and rod and done battle, but I didn't like my odds tied to Murphy—even if I could keep the thing off of me, it might land on her, sting her again, and put an end to her. I was at a bad angle to search for her keys, and I didn't have time to go down the ring trying them on the handcuffs one by one. Any magic that I could work fast enough to shatter the cuffs in time would probably kill me with flying shrapnel, and there wasn't time to work out a gentler escape spell. *Dammit, Dad, I thought, I wish you'd lived long enough to show me how to slip out of a pair of handcuffs.*

“Harry,” Murphy repeated, her voice thready, “what’s happening? I can’t see.”

I saved my breath and lugged Murphy toward the door without answering her. Behind me, there was a furious scraping and clicking. I looked back over my shoulder. The scorpion’s stinger was stuck fast in the drawer, but the thing was rapidly ripping the wood to shreds with its pincers and legs.

I gulped, turned, and hobbled out of my office and down the hall with Murphy. I managed to swing the door to my office shut with one foot. Murphy’s legs did little to support her, and the difference in our heights made the trip awkward as hell. I was straining to keep her upright and moving.

I reached the end of the hall, the door to the stairway on my right, the elevator on my left.

I stopped for a moment, panting, trying not to let the sounds of splintering wood down the hall rattle my judgment. Murphy sagged against me, speechless now, and if she was breathing, I couldn’t tell. There was no way I was going to be able to carry her down the stairs. Neither one of us had enough left to manage that. The ambulance would be arriving in minutes, and if I didn’t have Murphy down there when it arrived, I might as well just leave her on the floor to die.

I grimaced. I hated elevators. But I pushed the button and waited. Round lights over the elevator doors began counting up to five.

Down the hall from me, the splintering sounds stopped, and something crashed into my office door, rattling it on its frame.

“Hell’s bells, Harry,” I said aloud. I looked up at the lights. Two. A pause approximately ten centuries long. Three. “Hurry *up*,” I snarled, and jabbed the button a hundred more times.

Then I remembered the bracelet of shields around my left wrist. I tried to focus on it but couldn’t, with it twisted awkwardly beneath Murphy, supporting her. So I laid her down as gently and quickly as I could, then lifted my left hand and focused on the bracelet.

The lower third of my office door exploded outward, and the brown, gleaming form of the scorpion bounded across the hallway and into the wall. It was bigger, now. The damn thing was growing. It bounced off of the wall with a scrabbling, horrible agility, oriented on me, and hurtled down the hall toward me as fast as a man can run, its legs clicking and scuttling furiously over the floor. It leapt at me, claws extended, stinger flashing. I

focused my will on the defensive shield the bracelet helped me form and maintain, struggling to get it together before the scorpion hit me.

I did it, barely. The invisible shield of air met the scorpion a handbreadth from my body and sent it rebounding back onto its back. There it struggled for a second, awkward and flailing.

Behind me, the elevator dinged, and the doors swooped gracefully open.

Without time to be delicate, I grabbed Murphy's wrist and hauled her into the elevator with me, jabbing at the button for the lobby. In the hall, the scorpion thrashed its tail and righted itself, oriented on me again with an uncanny intelligence, and flew toward me. There wasn't time to get my shield together again. I screamed.

The elevator doors swooped shut. There was a sharp thud, and the car rattled, as the scorpion smashed into them.

The car started down, and I tried to regain my breath. What the hell was that thing?

It wasn't just an insect. It was too fast, too damn smart for that. It had ambushed me, waiting until I had set my weapons aside to come after me. It had to be something else, some kind of power construct, built small, but designed to draw in energy, to get bigger and stronger, an arthropod version of Frankenstein's monster. It wasn't really alive, just a golem, a robot, a programmed thing with a mission. Victor must have figured out where his talisman had gotten to, and set a spell on it to attack anyone it came in contact with, the crazy bastard. Murphy had stumbled right into it.

It was still growing, getting faster and stronger and more vicious. Getting Murphy out of danger wasn't enough. I had to find a way to deal with the scorpion. I didn't want to, but I was the only one on the block who could. There was too much potential danger involved. What if it didn't stop growing? I had to kill it before it got out of control.

The lights on the elevator panel kept counting down, four to three to two. And then the elevator shuddered and ground to a stop. The lights flickered and went out.

"Oh, crap," I said. "Not now. Not *now*." Elevators hate me. I jabbed at the buttons, but nothing happened, and a second later there was a cough of smoke, and the lights behind the buttons went out, too, leaving me in darkness. The emergency lighting came on for just a second, but then there was the pop of a burning filament, and it went away too. Murphy and I were left huddling in the darkness on the floor.

Overhead, outside in the elevator shaft, there was the sound of shrieking metal. I looked up at the invisible roof of the elevator car in the darkness. “You have got to be kidding me,” I muttered.

Then there was a rattling bang, and something the weight of a small gorilla landed on the roof of the elevator. There was a second’s silence, and then something started a deafening tearing at the roof.

“You have got to be kidding me!” I shouted. But the scorpion wasn’t. It was wrenching back the roof of the elevator, rattling the bolts and supports, making it groan. Dust rattled down in the darkness, unseen grit for my unseeing eyes. We were sardines in a can, waiting to be torn up and eaten. I got the feeling that if the thing stung me now, the poison would be redundant—I would bleed to death before it became an issue.

“Think, Harry,” I shouted at myself. “Think, think, think!” I was stuck in a frozen elevator, handcuffed to my unconscious friend who was dying of poison while a magical scorpion the size of some French cars tried to tear its way into me and rip me apart. I didn’t have my blasting rod or my staff, the other gizmos I’d brought with me to the Varsity were drained and useless, and my shield bracelet would only prolong the inevitable.

A long strip of metal ripped away in the roof, letting in a strip of dim light, and I looked up at the scorpion’s underbelly, saw it wedge a claw into the breach and start to tear it open wider.

I should have smashed it when it was just a bug. I should have taken off my shoe and smashed it right there on my desk. My heart leapt into my throat as the thing tilted up, drove an exploratory pincer down into the upper third of the elevator, then started tearing the hole even larger.

I gritted my teeth and started drawing in every ounce of power that I had. I knew it was useless. I could direct a firestorm up at the thing, but it would slag the metal it was on and that would come raining back down on us and kill us, make the elevator shaft too hot for us to survive. But I wasn’t just going to let the thing have me, either, by God. Maybe, if I did it just right, I could catch it as it leapt, minimize the damage that I did to the surrounding scenery. That was the problem with not being too great at evocation. Plenty of speed, plenty of power, not much refinement. That’s what the staff did, and the blasting rod—they were designed to help me focus my power, give me pinpoint control. Without them I might as well have been a suicide soldier carrying a dozen grenades strapped to his belt and ready to jerk out the pin.

And then it occurred to me. I was thinking in the wrong direction.

I swung my eyes down from the ceiling, to the elevator's floor, pressed my palms against it. Bits of something rained down on my head and shoulders, and the clicking and scuttling of the scorpion got louder. I took all the power I'd drawn in and focused it beneath my palms. There was airspace beneath the elevator, in the elevator shaft, and that was what I reached for—air, instead of fire.

This was a simple spell, one I'd done hundreds of times, I told myself. It wasn't any different from calling my staff to my hand. Just...a little bigger.

"*Vento servitas!*" I shouted, pouring every bit of strength, every ounce of anger, every shred of fear I had into the spell.

And, beneath the elevator, the winds rose up at my call, a solid column of air that caught the bottom of the elevator like a giant's palm and hurled it upward, through the darkness of the elevator shaft. The brakes squealed, threw off sparks, and fell to pieces that dropped through the hole the scorpion had torn, to land next to me. The force of it pressed me down to the floor with a groan. There was a long and rising whine as the car accelerated up the elevator shaft.

I hadn't meant for there to be quite *that* much wind, I thought, and prayed that I hadn't just killed me and Murphy both.

The elevator hurtled up and up and up, and I could feel my face sagging down with the speed of it. My office building is twelve stories high. We'd started at the second floor, so assuming an average of nine feet per story, it was almost a hundred feet to the building's roof.

The car shot up it in less than a half dozen of my frantic heartbeats, slammed past the blocks at the top of the line, and hammered into the roof of the shaft like the bell on the strongman's sledgehammer game at the amusement park. The impact crushed the scorpion into the concrete with a series of sharp popping sounds as chitinous plates cracked and splintered, flattening it into a shapeless brown splotch. Colorless goo, the ectoplasm of magically created mass, splattered out between the crushed plates and hide and down into the car.

At the same time, Murphy and I were hurled *up*, meeting the goo halfway. I kept Murphy in the shelter of my body, trying to stay between her and the roof, and my back hit it hard enough to make me see stars. We tumbled loosely back down to the elevator's floor in a sprawl of limbs, and Murphy groaned beneath me when I landed on her.

I lay still for a moment, stunned. The scorpion was dead. I'd killed it, crushed it between the elevator and the roof of the shaft, and drenched myself and Murphy in ichor doing it. I'd saved our lives from the murderous device, against the odds.

But I just couldn't shake the nagging impression that I was forgetting something.

There was a little groan from the elevator, and then it shuddered, and started sliding back down the shaft, no longer supported by the powerful but short-lived pillar of wind that had driven it up there. We were falling back down the way we had come, and I had the feeling that we weren't going to have a much better time of it at the bottom than the scorpion had at the top.

Now was the time for the bracelet, and I didn't waste a heartbeat grabbing Murphy close to me, and bringing the shield into being around us. I only had a couple of seconds to focus, to think—I couldn't make the globe around us too brittle, too strong, or we'd just smash ourselves against the inside of it in the same way we would if we just rode the elevator down. There had to be some give to it, some flexibility, to distribute the tremendous force of the abrupt stop at the first floor.

It was dark, and there wasn't much time. Murphy and I rose up to the center of the space of the elevator while I pushed the shield out all around us, filled up the space with layer after layer of flexible shielding, semicohesive molecules of air, patterns of force meant to spread the impact around. There was a sense of pressure all around me, as though I had been abruptly stuffed in Styrofoam packing peanuts.

We fell, faster and faster. I sensed the bottom of the shaft coming. There was an enormous sound, and I held on to the shield with all of my might.

When I opened my eyes again, I was sitting on the floor of the shattered, devastated elevator, holding a sagging, unconscious Murphy. The elevator doors gave a warped, gasping little ding, then shuddered open.

A pair of EMTs with emergency kits in hand stood staring at the elevator, at Murphy and me, their jaws hanging open to their knees. Dust billowed everywhere.

I was alive.

I blinked at that, somewhat stunned. I was alive. I looked down at myself, at my arms and legs, and they were all there. Then I let my head

fall back and howled out a defiant laugh, a great, gawping whoop of primal joy.

“Take *that*, Victor Shadowman!” I shouted. “Hah! *Hah!* Give me your best shot, you murderous bastard! I’m going to take my staff and shove it down your *throat!*”

I was still laughing when the EMTs gathered me up and helped me and Murphy toward the ambulance, too stunned to ask any questions. I saw them both give me wary looks, though, and then trade a glance with one another that said they were going to sedate me with something as soon as they got the chance.

“The champion!” I howled, still on an adrenaline rush the size of the Colorado River, as they helped me out toward the ambulance. I thrust my fist into the air, scarcely noting or caring that my bracelet of silver shields had turned into a blackened ring of curled and wilted links, burned to uselessness by the energies I had forced through it. “I am the *man!* Shadowman, you’d better put your head between your legs and kiss your —”

The EMTs helped me outside. Into the rain. The wet slaps of raindrops on my face shut me up, made me cold sober faster than anything else in the world could have done. I was suddenly acutely aware of the handcuffs around my wrist, still, of the fact that I did not have Victor’s talisman to use to turn his own power against him. Victor was still out there, out at his lake house, he still had a hank of my hair, and he was still planning on ripping my heart out as soon as he possibly could, when the storm gave him the strength he needed.

I was alive, and Murphy was alive, but my elation was premature. I didn’t have anything to be celebrating, yet. I lifted my face to the sky.

Thunder growled, near at hand. Lightning danced overhead, somewhere in the clouds, casting odd light and spectral shadows through the roiling overcast.

The storm had arrived.

Chapter Twenty-three

Raindrops pelted down around me, the big, splashy kind you only really see in the spring. The air grew thicker, hotter, even with the rain falling. I had to think fast, use my head, be calm, hurry up. Murphy's handcuffs still held me fastened to her wrist. Both of us were coated in dust that was stuck to the stinking, colorless goo, the ectoplasm that magic called from somewhere else whenever generic mass was called for in a spell. The goo wouldn't last long—within a few more minutes, it would simply dissipate, vanish into thin air, return to wherever it had come from in the first place. For the moment, it was just a rather disgusting, slimy annoyance.

But maybe one that I could put to use.

My own hands were too broad, but Murphy had delicate little lady's hands, except where practice with her gun and her martial arts staff routines had left calluses. If she had heard me thinking that, and had been conscious, she would have punched me in the mouth for being a chauvinist pig.

One of the EMTs was babbling into a handset, while the other was on Murphy's other side, supporting her along with me. It was the only chance I was going to get. I hunched over beside Murphy's diminutive form and tried to shroud what I was doing with the dark folds of my black duster. I worked at her hand, squeezing her limp, slimy fingers together and trying to slip the steel loop of the handcuffs over her hand.

I took some skin off of her, and she groaned a lot, but I managed to get the cuffs off of her wrist just as the EMT and I sat her down on the curb next to the ambulance. The other EMT ran to the back of the ambulance and swung it open, rummaging around inside of it. I could hear sirens, both police cars and fire engines, approaching from all directions.

Nothing's ever simple when I'm around.

"She's been poisoned," I told the EMT. "The wound site is on her right upper arm or shoulder. Check for a massive dose of brown scorpion venom. There should be some antivenin available somewhere. She'll need a tourniquet and—"

"Buddy," the EMT said, annoyed, "I know my job. What the hell happened in there?"

“Don’t ask,” I said, glancing back at the building. The rain came down more heavily by slow degrees. Was I too late? Would I be dead before I could get to the lake house?

“You’re bleeding,” the EMT told me, without looking up from Murphy. I looked down at my leg, but it didn’t start hurting until I actually saw the injury and remembered I had it. The scorpion’s claw had ripped me pretty good, opening a six-inch tear in the leg of my sweats and a comparable gash in the leg beneath, ragged and painful. “Sit down,” the EMT said. “I’ll take care of it in a second.” He wrinkled up his face. “What the hell *is* this stinking shit all over you?”

I wiped rain from my hair, slicking it back. The other EMT came running with a bottle of oxygen and a stretcher, and they both bent over their work with Murphy. Her face had discolored, pale in parts, too brightly red in others. She was as limp as a wet dollar, except for the occasional shudder or flinch, quivers of her muscles that came from nowhere, pained her for a moment, and then apparently vanished.

It was my fault Murphy was there. It had been my decision to hold information away from her that had compelled her to take direct action, to search my office. If I’d just been more open, more honest, maybe she wouldn’t be lying there right now, dying. I didn’t want to walk away from her. I didn’t want to turn my back on her again and leave her behind me, alone.

But I did. Before the support units arrived, before police started asking questions, before the EMTs began looking around for me and giving my description to police officers, I turned on my heel and walked away.

I hated myself every step. I hated leaving before I knew if Murphy would survive the scorpion’s venomous sting. I hated that my apartment and my office building had been trashed, torn to pieces by demons and giant insects and my own clumsy power. I hated to close my eyes and see the twisted, mangled bodies of Jennifer Stanton and Tommy Tomm, and Linda Randall. I hated the sick twisting of fear in my guts when I imagined my own spare frame torn asunder by the same forces.

And, most of all, I hated the one responsible for all of it. Victor Sells. Victor, who was going to kill me as soon as this storm grew. I could be dead in another five minutes.

No. I couldn’t. I got a little more excited as I thought about the problem and looked up at the clouds. The storm had come in from the west, and was

only now going over the city. It wasn't moving fast; it was a ponderous roller of a thunderstorm that would hammer at the area for hours. The Sellses' lake house was to the east, around the shore of Lake Michigan, maybe thirty or forty miles away, as the crow flies. I could beat the storm to the lake house, if I was fast enough, if I could get a car. I could get out to the lake house and challenge Victor directly.

My rod and staff were gone, dropped when the scorpion attacked. I might have been able to call them down from my office with winds, but as worked up as I was, I might accidentally blow out the wall if I tried. I didn't care to be crushed by hundreds of pounds of flying brick, called to my outstretched hand by the strength of my magic and my fury. My shield bracelet was gone, too, burned out by countering the tremendous force of the impact of the falling elevator.

I still had my mother's pentacle talisman at my throat, the symbol of order, of the controlled patterns of power that were at the heart of white magic. I still had the advantage of years of formal training. I still had the edge in experience, in sorcerous confrontations. I still had my faith.

But that was about all. I was weary, battered, tired, hurt, and I had already pulled more magic out of the hat in one day than most wizards could in a week. I was pushing the edge already, in both mystic and physical terms. But that just didn't matter to me.

The pain in my leg didn't make me weaker, didn't discourage me, didn't distract me as I walked. It was like a fire in my thoughts, my concentration, burning ever more brightly, more pure, refining my anger, my hate, into something steel-hard, steel-sharp. I could feel it burning, and reached for it eagerly, shoving the pain inside to fuel my incandescent anger.

Victor Shadowman was going to pay for what he'd done to all those people, to me and to my friends. Dammit all, I was not going out before I'd caught up to that man and shown him what a real wizard could do.

It didn't take me long to walk to McAnally's. I came through the door in a storm of long legs, rain, wind, flapping duster, and angry eyes.

The place was packed, people sitting at every one of the thirteen stools at the bar, at every one of the thirteen tables, leaning against most of the thirteen columns. Pipe smoke drifted through the air in a haze, stirred by the languidly spinning blades of the ceiling fans. The light was dim, candles burning at the tables and in sconces on the walls, plus a little grey storm light sliding in through the windows. The light made the carvings on

the columns vague and mysterious, the shadows changing them in a subtle fashion. All of Mac's chessboards were out on the tables, but my sense of it was that those playing and watching the games were trying to keep their minds off of something that was disturbing them.

They all turned to stare at me as I came in the door and down the steps, dripping rainwater and a little blood onto the floor. The room got really quiet.

They were the have-nots of the magical community. Hedge magi without enough innate talent, motivation, or strength to be true wizards. Innately gifted people who knew what they were and tried to make as little of it as possible. Dabblers, herbalists, holistic healers, kitchen witches, troubled youngsters just touching their abilities and wondering what to do about it. Older men and women, younger people, faces impassive or concerned or fearful, they were all there. I knew them all by sight, if not by name.

I swept my gaze around the room. Every one of the people I looked at dropped their eyes, but I didn't need to look deep to see what was happening. Word has a way of getting around between practitioners of magic, and the arcane party line was working as it usually did. Word was out. There was a mark on my head, and they all knew it. Trouble was brewing between two wizards, white and black, and they had all come here, to the shelter offered by McAnally's winding spaces and disruptive configurations of tables and columns. They'd come here to shelter until it was over.

It didn't offer any shelter to me, though. McAnally's couldn't protect me against a sharply directed spell. It was an umbrella, not a bomb shelter. I couldn't get away from what Victor would do to me, unless I cared to flee to the Nevernever itself, and for me that was more dangerous, in some ways, than staying at Mac's.

I stood there in the silence for a moment, but said nothing. These people were associates, friends of a casual sort, but I couldn't ask them to stand beside me. Whatever Victor thought he was, he had the power of a real wizard, and he could crush any of these people like a boot could a cockroach. They weren't prepared to deal with this sort of thing.

"Mac," I said, finally. My voice fell on the silence like a hammer on glass. "I need to borrow your car."

Mac hadn't quit polishing the bar with a clean white cloth when I entered, his spare frame gaunt in a white shirt and dark breeches. He hadn't

stopped when the room had grown still. And he didn't stop when he pulled the keys out of his pocket and tossed them to me with one hand. I caught them, and said, "Thanks, Mac."

"Ungh," Mac said. He glanced up at me, and then behind me. I took the gesture for the warning it was, and turned.

Lightning flashed outside. Morgan stood silhouetted in the doorway at the top of the little flight of stairs, his broad frame black against the grey sky. He came down the stairs toward me, and the thunder came in on his heels. Rain had made little difference in the lay of his dull brown and grey hair, except for changing the texture of curl in his warrior's ponytail. I could see the hilt of the sword he wore, beneath his black overcoat. He had a muscular, scarred hand on it.

"Harry Dresden," he said. "I finally figured it out. Using the storms to kill those people is insanely dangerous, but you are just the sort of ambitious fool who would do it." He set his jaw in a hard line. "Have a seat," he said, gesturing at a table. The people sitting at it cleared away, fast. "We're going to stay here, both of us. And I'm going to make sure that you don't have the chance to use this storm to hurt anyone else. I'm going to make sure you don't get to try your cowardly tricks until the Council decides your fate." His grey eyes glittered with grim determination and certainty.

I stared at him. I swallowed my anger, the words I wanted to throw back at him, the spell I wanted to use to blast him out of my way, and spoke gently. "Morgan, I know who the killer is. And he's after me, next. If I don't get to him and stop him, I'm as good as dead."

His eyes hardened, a fanatic's gleam. He spoke in two sharp little explosions of single syllables. "Sit. Down." He drew the sword out from its scabbard by a couple of inches.

I let my shoulders sag. I turned toward the table. I leaned against the back of one of the chairs for a moment, taking a little weight off of my injured leg, and drew the chair out from the table.

Then I picked it up, spun in a half circle with it to gather momentum, and smashed it into the Warden's stomach. Morgan tried to recoil, but I'd caught him off guard, and the blow struck home, hard and heavy with the weight of Mac's hand-made wooden chair. In real life, the chair doesn't break when you slug somebody with it, the way it does in the movies. The person you hit is the one who breaks.

Morgan doubled forward, dropping to one hand and one knee. I didn't wait for him to recover. Instead, as the chair bounced off his ribs, I used the momentum of it to spin all the way around in a complete circle in the other direction, lifting the chair high, and brought it smiting down over the other man's back. The blow drove him hard into the floor, where he lay unmoving.

I sat the chair back at the table and looked around the room. Everyone was staring, pale. They knew who Morgan was, what his relationship to me was. They knew about the Council, and my precarious stance with it. They knew that I had just assaulted a duly appointed representative of the Council in pursuit of the execution of his duty. I'd rolled the stone over my own grave. There wasn't a prayer that I could convince the Council that I wasn't a rogue wizard fleeing justice, now.

"Hell with him," I said aloud, to no one in particular. "I haven't got time for this."

Mac came out from behind the bar, not moving in a hurry, but not with his usual laconic lack of concern, either. He knelt by Morgan and felt at his throat, then peeled back an eyelid and peered at the man. Mac squinted up at me and said, expressionless, "Alive."

I nodded, feeling some slight relief. However much of an ass Morgan was, he had good intentions. He and I wanted the same thing, really. He just didn't realize that. I didn't want to kill him.

But, I had to admit, in some gleeful little corner of my soul, that the look of shocked surprise on his arrogant face as I hit him with the chair was a sight worth remembering.

Mac stooped and picked up the keys, where I'd dropped them on the floor as I swung the chair. I hadn't noticed that I had. Mac handed them back to me and said, "Council will be pissed."

"Let me worry about that."

He nodded. "Luck, Harry." Mac offered me his hand, and I took it. The room was still silent. Fearful, worried eyes watched me.

I took the keys and walked up, out of the light and shelter of McAnally's and into the storm, my bridges burning behind me.

Chapter Twenty-four

I drove for my life.

Mac's car was an '89 TransAm, pure white, with a big eight-cylinder engine. The speedometer goes to 130 miles an hour. In places, I went past that. The falling rain made the roads dangerous at the speed I was driving, but I had plenty of incentive to keep the car moving as quickly as possible. I was still riding the steel-hard edge of anger that had carried me away from the ruins of my office and through Morgan.

The sky grew darker, a combination of building banks of storm clouds and the approaching dusk. The lighting was strange, greenish, the leaves of the trees as I left the city standing out too sharply, too harshly, the yellows of the lines in the road too dim. Most of the cars I saw had their headlights on, and streetlights were clicking alight as I barreled down the highway.

Fortunately, Sunday evening isn't a busy one, as far as traffic goes. I'd have been dead any other night. I must also have been driving during the watch rotation for the highway patrol, because not one of them tried to pull me over.

I tried to tune in the weather station, on the radio, but gave it up. The storm, plus my own agitation, was creating a cloud of squealing feedback on the radio's speakers, but nothing intelligible about the storm. I could only pray that I was going to get over to Lake Providence before it did.

I won. The curtains of rain parted for me as I whipped past the city-limits sign for Lake Providence. I hit the brakes to slow for the turn onto the lakefront road that led to the Sells house, started hydroplaning, turned into the slide with more composure and ability than I really should have had, and got the vehicle back under control in time to slide onto the correct road.

I pulled into the Sells gravel drive, on the swampy little peninsula that stretched out into Lake Michigan. The TransAm slid to a halt in a shower of gravel and a roar of mighty engine, then sputtered and gasped into silence. I felt, for a giddy second and a half, like Magnum, P.I. Blue Beetle aside, I could get into this sports-car thing. At least it had lasted long enough for

me to get to the Sells place. “Thanks, Mac,” I grunted, and got out of the car.

The gravel driveway leading back to the lake house was half-sunk in water from the recent storms. My leg hurt me too much to run very fast, but I set off down the drive at a long-legged lope, rapidly eating the distance to the house. The storm loomed before me, rolling across the lake toward the shore—I could see columns of rain, dimly lit by the fading light, falling into its waters.

I raced the storm to the house, and as I did I drew in every bit of power and alertness that I could, keyed myself to a tighter level, tuned my senses to their sharpest pitch. I came to a halt twenty yards shy of the house and closed my eyes, panting. There could be magical traps or alarms strewn about, or spiritual or shrouded guardians invisible to the naked eye. There could be spells waiting, illusions meant to hide Victor Sells from anyone who came looking. I needed to be able to see past all that. I needed to have every scrap of knowledge I could get.

So I opened my Third Eye.

How can I explain what a wizard sees? It isn’t something that lends itself readily to description. Describing something helps to define it, to give it limits, to set guardrails of understanding around it. Wizards have had the Sight since time began, and they still don’t understand how it works, why it does what it does.

The only thing I can say is that I felt as though a veil of thick cloth had been lifted away from me as I opened my eyes again—and not only from my eyes, but from all of my senses. I could abruptly smell the mud and fish odor of the lake, the trees around the house, the fresh scent of the coming rain preceding the storm on the smoke-stained wind. I looked at the trees. Saw them, not just in the first green coat of spring, but in the full bloom of summer, the splendor of the fall, and the barren desolation of winter, all at the same time. I Saw the house, and each separate part of it as its own component, the timbers as parts of spectral trees, the windows as pieces of distant sandy shores. I could feel the heat of summer and the cold of winter in the wind coming off the lake. I Saw the house wreathed in ghostly flames, and knew that those were part of its possible future, that fire lay down several of the many paths of possibility that lay ahead in the next hour.

The house itself was a place of power. Dark emotions—greed, lust, hatred—all hung over it as visible things, molds and slimes that were strewn over it like Spanish moss with malevolent eyes. Ghostly things, restless spirits, moved around the place, drawn to the sense of fear, despair, and anger that hung over it, mindless shades that were always to be found in such places, like rats in granaries.

The other thing that I saw over the house was a grinning, empty skull. Skulls were everywhere, wherever I looked, just at the edge of my vision, silent and still and bleach white, as solid and real as though a fetishist had scattered them around in anticipation of some bizarre holiday. Death. Death lay in the house's future, tangible, solid, unavoidable.

Maybe mine.

I shuddered and shoved the feeling away. No matter how strong the vision, how powerful the image gained with the Sight, the future was always mutable, always something that could be changed. No one had to die tonight. It didn't have to come to that, not for them and not for me.

But a sick feeling had settled into me, as I looked on this darkling house, with all of its stinking lust and fear, all of its horrid hate worn openly upon it to my Sight, like a mantle of flayed human skin on the shoulders of a pretty girl with gorgeous hair, luscious lips, sunken eyes, and rotting teeth. It repulsed me and it made me afraid.

And something about it, intangible, something I couldn't name, called to me. Beckoned. Here was power, power I had thrust aside once before, in the past. I had thrown away the only family I had ever known to turn away power exactly like this. This was the sort of strength that could reach out and change the world to my will, bend it and shape it to my desiring, could cut through all the petty trivialities of law and civilization and impose order where there was none, guarantee my security, my position, my future.

And what had been my reward for turning that power aside thus far? Suspicion and contempt from the very wizards I had acted to support and protect, condemnation from the White Council whose Law I had clung to when all the world had been laid at my feet.

I could kill the Shadowman, now, before he knew I was here. I could call down fury and flame on the house and kill everyone in it, not leave one stone upon another. I could reach out and embrace the dark energy he had gathered in this place, draw it in and use it for whatever I wanted, and the consequences be damned.

Why not kill him now? Violet light, visible to my Sight, throbbed and pulsed inside the windows, power being gathered and prepared and shaped. The Shadowman was inside, and he was gathering his might, preparing to unleash the spell that would kill me. What reason had I to let him go on breathing?

I clenched my fists in fury, and I could feel the air crackle with tension as I prepared to destroy the lake house, the Shadowman, and any of the pathetic underlings he had with him. With such power, I could cast my defiance at the Council itself, the gathering of white-bearded old fools without foresight, without imagination, without vision. The Council, and that pathetic watchdog, Morgan, had no idea of the true depths of my strength. The energy was all there, gleeful within my anger, ready to reach out and reduce to ashes all that I hated and feared.

The silver pentacle that had been my mother's burned cold on my chest, a sudden weight that made me gasp. I sagged forward a little, and lifted a hand. My fingers were so tightly crushed into fists that it hurt to try to open them. My hand shook, wavered, and began to fall again.

Then something strange happened. Another hand took mine. The hand was slim, the fingers long and delicate. Feminine. The hand gently covered mine, and lifted it, like a small child's, until I held my mother's pentacle in my grasp.

I held it in my hand, felt its cool strength, its ordered and rational geometry. The five-pointed star within the circle was the ancient sign of white wizardry, the only remembrance of my mother. The cold strength of the pentacle gave me a chance, a moment to think again, to clear my head.

I took deep breaths, struggling to see clear of the anger, the hate, the deep lust that burned within me for vengeance and retribution. That wasn't what magic was for. That wasn't what magic did. Magic came from life itself, from the interaction of nature and the elements, from the energy of all living beings, and especially of people. A man's magic demonstrates what sort of person he is, what is held most deeply inside of him. There is no truer gauge of a man's character than the way in which he employs his strength, his power.

I was not a murderer. I was not like Victor Sells. I was Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. I was a wizard. Wizards control their power. They don't let it control them. And wizards don't use magic to kill people. They use it to discover, to protect, to mend, to help. Not to destroy.

The anger abruptly evaporated. The burning hate subsided, leaving my head clear enough to think again. The pain in my leg settled into a dull ache, and I shivered in the wind and the first droplets of rain. I didn't have my staff, and I didn't have my rod. The trinkets I did have with me were either expended or burned to uselessness. All I had was what was inside me.

I looked up, suddenly feeling smaller and very alone. There was no one near me. No hand was touching mine. No one stood close by. For just a moment, I thought I smelled a whiff of perfume, familiar and haunting. Then it was gone. And the only one I had to help me was myself.

I blew out a breath. "Well, Harry," I told myself, "that's just going to have to be enough."

And so, I walked through a spectral landscape littered with skulls, into the teeth of the coming storm, to a house covered in malevolent power, throbbing with savage and feral mystic strength. I walked forward to face a murderous opponent who had all the advantages, and who stood prepared and willing to kill me from where he stood within the heart of his own destructive power, while I was armed with nothing more than my own skill and wit and experience.

Do I have a great job or what?

Chapter Twenty-five

The Sight of Victor's lake house will always be with me. It was an abomination. It looked innocuous enough, physically. But on a deeper level, it was foul, rotten. It seethed with negative energy, anger and pride and lust. Especially lust. Lust for wealth, lust for power, more than physical desire.

Shadowy spirit-beings that weren't wholly real, only manifestations of the negative energy of the place, clung to the walls, the rain gutters, the porch, the windowsills, glutting themselves on the negative energy left over from Victor's spellcasting. I was guessing that there was a lot of it. He didn't strike me as someone who would be able to make sure that his spells were energy-efficient.

I limped up the front steps. My Sight revealed no alarms, no sorcerous trip wires. I might be giving Victor Shadowman too much credit. He was as powerful as a full-blown wizard, but he didn't have the education. Muscle, not brains, that was Victor Shadowman. I had to keep that in mind.

I tried the front door, just for the hell of it.

It opened.

I blinked. But I didn't question the good fortune, or the overconfidence that had seen to it that Victor left his front door standing unlocked. Instead, I took a breath, gathered up what will I had, and pressed inside.

I forget how the house was furnished or decorated. All I remember is what the Sight showed me. More of the same as the outside, but more concentrated, more noxious. *Things* clung everywhere, things with silent, glittering eyes and hungry expressions. Some reptilian, some more like rats, some insectoid. All of them were unpleasant, hostile, and shied away from me as I came in, as the aura of energy I held in readiness around me touched them. They made quiet noises, things I would never have heard with my ears—but the Sight encompasses all of that.

There was a long, dark hallway coated with the things. I advanced slowly, quietly, and they oozed and crept and slithered from my path. The dark purple light of magic, that I had seen from the outside, was ahead of me, and growing brighter. I could hear music playing, and recognized it as the same piece that had been playing on the CD player at the Madison in

Tommy Tomm's suite when Murphy had asked me there on Thursday. Slow, sensuous music, steady rhythm.

I closed my eyes for a moment, listening. I heard sounds. A quiet whisper, being repeated over and over, a man's voice repeating an incantation, holding a spell in readiness for release. That would be Victor. I heard soft sighs of pleasure from a woman. The Beckitts? I could only assume so.

And, in a rumble that I could feel through the soles of my boots, I heard thunder over the lake. The low, chanting voice took on an edge of vicious, spiteful satisfaction, and continued the incantation.

I gathered up what energy I had and stepped around the corner, out of the hallway, into a spacious room that stretched up to the full height of the house without interruption, yards of open air. The room below was a living room. A spiral staircase wound its way up to what looked like a kitchen and dining room on a sort of platform or balcony above the rest of the room. The elevated deck on the back of the house must be accessible from the platform.

There was no one in the main room. The chanting, and the occasional sigh, came from the platform above. The CD player was down in the room beneath, music flowing from speakers that were covered with an image of fire and dozens of bloated, disgusting creature forms, feeding on the music as it came out. I could see the influence of the music as a faint, violet mist, in tune with the light coming from the platform above. This was a complex ritual spell, then, involving many base elements coordinated by the central wizard, Victor. Tricky. No wonder it was so effective. It must have taken Victor a lot of trial and error to figure it out.

I glanced up at the platform, then crossed the room, keeping as far away as I could from the CD player. I slipped under the platform without making any noise, and dozens upon dozens of slimy not-physical spirit things oozed from my path. Rain increased to a dull, steady rhythm outside, on the roof and on the wooden deck and against the windows.

There were boxes stacked all around me, plastic cases and cartons and cardboard boxes and wooden crates. I opened the nearest one, and saw, inside, at least a hundred slender vials like the ones I had seen before, full of the liquid ThreeEye. Beneath the vision of my Sight, it looked different, thick and cloudy with possibility, potential disaster lurking in every vial.

Faces, twisted in horror and torment, swam through the liquid, ghostly images of what might be.

I looked at the other boxes. In one, ancient liquor bottles full of an almost luminescent green liquid. Absinthe? I leaned closer, sniffing, and could almost taste the madness that swam latent in the liquid. I leaned back from the boxes, stomach churning. I checked the other boxes, quickly. Ammonia, reminiscent of hospitals and mental wards. Peyote mushrooms in plastic Tupperware—I was familiar with them. Alum, white and powdery. Antifreeze. Glitter in a hundred metallic shades in a huge plastic bag. Other things, deeper in the shadows, that I didn't take the time to look at. I had already figured out what all the articles were for.

Potions.

Ingredients for potions. This was how Victor was making the ThreeEye. He was doing the same thing I did when I made my little potions, but on a grander scale, using energy he stole from other places, other people. He used absinthe as the base, and moved out from there. Victor was mass-producing what amounted to a magical poison, one that probably remained inert until it was inside someone, interacting with their emotions and desires. That would explain why I hadn't noticed anything about it, before. It wouldn't have been obvious to a cursory examination, or to anything short of fully opening up my Sight, and that wasn't something I did very often.

I closed my eyes, shaking. The Sight was showing me too much. That was always the problem with it. I could look at these ingredients, the cases of the finished drug, and catch flash images of exactly how much suffering could be caused. There was too much. I was starting to get disoriented.

Thunder came again, more sharply, and above me, Victor's voice rose in pitch, to something audible. He was chanting in an ancient language. Egyptian? Babylonian? It didn't really matter. I could understand the sense of the words clearly enough. They were words of hate, malevolence. They were words that were meant to kill.

My shaking was becoming more pronounced. Was it only the effects of the Sight? The presence of so much negative energy, reacting with me?

No. I was simply afraid. Terrified to come out of my hiding place under the platform and to meet the master of the slithering horde that was draped over everything in sight. I could feel his strength from here, his confidence, the force of his will infusing the very air with a sort of hateful certainty. I

was afraid with the same fear that a child feels when confronted with a large, angry dog, or with the neighborhood bully, the kind of fear that paralyzes, makes you want to make excuses and hide.

But there was no time for hiding. No time for excuses. I had to act. So I forced my Sight closed and gathered my courage as best I could.

Thunder roared outside and there was a flash of lightning, the two happening close together. The lights flickered, and the music skipped a track. Victor screamed out the incantation in a kind of ecstasy above me. The woman's voice, presumably Mrs. Beckitt's, rose to a fevered pitch.

"You pays your money, you takes your chances," I muttered to myself.

I focused my will, extended my right arm and open palm to the stereo system, and shouted, "*Fuego!*" A rush of heat from my hand exploded into flame on the far side of the room and engulfed the stereo, which began to emit a sound more like a long, tortured scream than music. Murphy's handcuffs still dangled from my wrist, one loop swinging free.

Then I turned, extended my arms and roared, "*Veni che!*" Wind swept up beneath me, making my duster billow like Batman's cloak, lifting me directly up to the platform above and over its low railing into the suspended room.

Even expecting the sight, it rattled me. Victor was dressed in black slacks, a black shirt, black shoes—very stylish, especially compared to my sweatpants and cowboy boots. His shaggy eyebrows and lean features were highlighted eerily by the dark light flowing up from the circle around him, where the implements of his ritual spell were ready to complete the ceremony that would kill me. He had what looked like a spoon, its edges sharpened to razor keenness, a pair of candles, black and white, and a white rabbit, its feet bound with red cord. One of its legs was bleeding from a small tear, staining the white fur. And tied against its head with a cord was the lock of my own dark, straight hair. Over to one side was another circle, laid out in chalk upon the carpeting, maybe fifteen feet across. The Beckitts were inside, writhing together in mindless, sweating desire, generating energy for Victor's spell.

Victor stared at me in shock as I landed upon the balcony, wind whipping around me, roaring inside the small room like a miniature cyclone, knocking over potted plants and knickknacks.

"You!" he shouted.

“Me,” I confirmed. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about, Vic.”

His shock transformed into snarling anger in a heartbeat. He snatched up the sharpened spoon, raised it in his right hand, and screamed out words of the incantation. He dragged the rabbit in front of him, the ceremonial representation of me, and prepared to gouge out its, and therefore my, heart.

I didn’t give him the chance to finish. I reached into a pocket and hurled the empty plastic film canister at Victor Shadowman.

As a weapon, it wasn’t much. But it was real, and it had been hurled by a real person, a mortal. It could shatter the integrity of a magic circle.

The canister went through the air above Victor’s circle and broke it, just as he completed the incantation and drove the spoon’s blade down at the poor rabbit. The energy of the storm came whipping down the cylinder of focus created by Victor’s now-flawed circle.

Power shattered out into the room, wild, undirected, and unfocused, naked color and raw sound spewing everywhere with hurricane force. It sent objects flying, including Victor and me, and shattered the secondary circle the Beckitts were in, sending them rolling and bumping across the floor and into one wall.

I braced myself against the guardrail and held on as the power raged around me, charging the air with raw, dangerous magic, surging about like water under pressure, seeking an outlet.

“You bastard!” Victor screamed into the gale. “Why don’t you just die!” He lifted a hand and screamed something at me, and fire washed across the space between us, instant and hot.

I tapped some of the ample power now available in the room and formed a hard, high wall in front of me, squeezing my eyes shut in concentration. It was a dozen times harder to shield without my bracelet, but I blocked the flame, sent it swirling high and over me, huddling under a little quarter dome of hardened air that would not let Victor’s magic past it. I opened my eyes in time to see the flames touch the ceiling beams and set them alight.

The air still thrummed with energy as the wash of flame passed. Victor snarled when he saw me rise, lifted a hand to one side, and snarled out words of summoning. A crooked stick that looked like it might be some kind of bone soared through the air toward him, and he caught it in one hand, turning to me with the attitude of a man holding a gun.

The problem with most wizards is that they get too used to thinking in terms of one venue: Magic. I don't think Victor expected me to rise, lurch across the trembling floor toward him, and drive my shoulder into his chest, slamming him back into the wall with a satisfying thud. I leaned back a little and drove a knee toward his gut, missed, and got him square between the legs instead. The breath went out of him in a rush, and he doubled over to the ground. By this time, I was screaming at him, senseless and incoherent. I started kicking at his head.

I heard a metallic, ratcheting sound behind me and spun my head in time to see Beckitt, naked, point an automatic weapon at me. I threw myself to one side, and heard a brief explosion of gunfire. Something hot tore at my hip, spinning me into a roll, and I kept going, into the kitchen. I heard Beckitt snarl a curse. There were a number of sharp clicking sounds. The automatic had jammed. Hell, with this much magic flying around the room, we were all lucky the thing hadn't just exploded.

Victor, meanwhile, shook the end of the bone tube he held, and a half dozen dried, brown scorpion husks fell out onto the carpeting. His whiter-than-white teeth flashed in his boater brown face, and he snarled, "*Scorpiis, scorpiis, scorpiis!*" His eyes gleamed with lust and fury.

One of my legs wasn't answering my calls to action, so I crab-walked backward into the kitchen on the heels of my hands and one leg. Out on the dining section of the balcony, the scorpions shuddered to life and started to grow. First one, and then the others, oriented on the kitchen and started toward me in scuttling bursts of speed, getting larger as they came.

Victor howled his glee. The Beckitts rose, both naked, lean and savage-looking, both sporting guns, their eyes empty of everything but a wild sort of bloodlust.

I felt my shoulders press against a counter. There was a rattle, and then a broom fell down against me, its handle bouncing off of my head and landing on the tile floor beside me. I grabbed at it, my heart pounding somewhere around my throat.

A roomful of deadly drug. One evil sorcerer on his home turf. Two crazies with guns. One storm of wild magic looking for something to set it into explosive motion. And half a dozen scorpions like the one I had barely survived earlier, rapidly growing to movie-monster size. Less than a minute on the clock and no time-outs remaining for the quarterback.

All in all, it was looking like a bad evening for the home team.

Chapter Twenty-six

I was so dead. There was no way out of the kitchen, no time to use an explosive evocation in close quarters, and the deadly scorpions would rip me to pieces well before Victor could blow me up with explosive magic or one of the blood-maddened Beckitts could get their guns working long enough to put a few more bullets in me. My hip was beginning to scream with pain, which I supposed was better than the deadly dull numbness of more serious injuries and shock, but at the moment it was the least of my worries. I clutched the broom to me, my only pitiful weapon. I didn't even have the mobility to use it.

And then something occurred to me, something so childish that I almost laughed. I plucked a straw from the broomstick and began a low and steady chant, a bobbing about in the air with the fingers that held the straw. I reached out and took hold of the immense amounts of untapped energy running rampant in the air and drew them into the spell. "*Pulitas!*" I shouted, bringing the chant to a crescendo. "*Pulitas, pulitas!*"

The broom twitched. It quivered. It jerked upright in my hands. And then it took off across the kitchen floor, its brush waving menacingly, to meet the scorpions' advance. The last thing I had expected to use that cleaning spell for when I had laboriously been forced to learn it was a tide of poisonous scorpion monsters, but any port in a storm. The broom swept into them with ferocious energy and started flicking them across the kitchen toward the rest of the balcony with tidy, efficient motions. Each time one of the scorpions would try to dodge around it, the broom would tilt out and catch the beastie before it could, flick it neatly onto its back and continue about its job.

I'm pretty sure it got all the dirt on the way, too. When I do a spell, I do it right.

Victor screeched in anger when he saw his pets, still too small to carry much mass, being so neatly corralled and ushered off the balcony. The Beckitts lifted their guns and opened fire on the broom, while I hunkered down behind the counter. They must have been using revolvers, now, because they fired smoothly and in an ordered rhythm. Bullets smacked

into the walls and the counters at the back of the kitchen, but none of them came through the counter that sheltered me.

I caught my breath, pressing my hand against the blood on my hip. It hurt like bloody hell. I thought the bullet was stuck, somewhere by the bone. I couldn't move my leg. There was a lot of blood, but not so much that I was sitting in a puddle. Out on the balcony, the fire was beginning to catch, spreading over the roof. The entire place was going to come crashing down before much longer.

"Stop shooting, stop shooting, damn you!" Victor screamed, as the gunfire came to a halt. I risked a peek over the counter. My broom had swept the scorpions off the edge of the balcony and to the floor of the room below. As I watched, Victor caught the broom by its handle and broke it over the balcony railing with a snarl. The straw I still held in my fingers broke with a sharp little *twang*, and I felt the energy fade from the spell.

Victor Shadowman snarled. "A cute trick, Dresden," he said, "but pathetic. There's no way you can survive this. Give up. I'll be willing to let you walk away."

The Beckitts were reloading. I ducked my head back down before they got any funny ideas, and hoped that they didn't have heavier rounds that could penetrate the counters I hid behind and whatever contents they contained, to kill me.

"Sure, Vic," I replied, keeping my voice as calm as I could. "You're known for your mercy and sense of fair play, right?"

"All I have to do is keep you in there until the fire spreads enough to kill you," Victor said.

"Sure. Let's all die together, Vic. Too bad about all your inventory down there, though, eh?"

Victor snarled and pitched another burst of flame into the kitchen. This time, it was much easier to cover myself, half-shielded as I already was by the counters. "Oh, cute," I said, my voice dripping scorn. "Fire's the simplest thing you can do. All the real wizards learn that in the first couple of weeks and move on up from there." I looked around the kitchen. There had to be something I could use, some way I could escape, but nothing presented itself.

"Shut up!" Victor snarled. "Who's the real wizard here, huh? Who's the one with all the cards and who's the one bleeding on the kitchen floor? You're nothing, Dresden, *nothing*. You're a *loser*. And do you know why?"

“Gee,” I said. “Let me think.”

He laughed, harshly. “Because you’re an idiot. You’re an idealist. Open your eyes, man. You’re in the jungle, now. It’s survival of the fittest, and you’ve proved yourself unfit. The strong do as they wish, and the weak get trampled. When this is over, I’m going to wipe you off my shoe and keep going like you never existed.”

“Too late for that,” I told him. I was in the mood to tell a white lie. “The police know all about you, Vic. I told them myself. And I told the White Council, too. You’ve never even heard of them, have you, Vic? They’re like the Superfriends and the Inquisition all rolled up into one. You’ll love them. They’ll take you out like yesterday’s garbage. God, you really *are* an ignorant bastard.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then, “No,” he said. “You’re lying. You’re lying to me, Dresden.”

“If I’m lying I’m dying,” I told him. Hell, as far as I knew, I was. “Oh. And Johnny Marcone, too. I made sure that he knew who and where you were.”

“Son of a bitch,” Victor said. “You stupid son of a bitch. Who put you up to this, huh? Marcone? Is that why he pulled you off the street?”

I had to laugh, weakly. A bit of flaming cabinet fell off an upper shelf onto the tiles next to me. It was getting hot in there. The fire was spreading. “You never figured it out, did you, Vic?”

“Who?” Victor screamed at me. “Who was it, damn you? That whore, Linda? Her whore friend Jennifer?”

“Strike two, strike three, the other side gets a chance to steal,” I said back. Hell. At least if I could keep him talking, I might keep him in the house long enough to go down with me. And if I could make him mad enough, he might make a mistake.

“Stop talking to him,” Beckitt said. “He’s not armed. Let’s kill him and get out of here before we all die.”

“Go ahead,” I said in a cheerful tone. “Hell, I’ve got nothing to lose. I’ll send this whole house up in a fireball that’ll make Hiroshima look like a hibachi. Make my day.”

“Shut up,” Victor shouted. “Who was it, Dresden? Who, damn you?”

If I gave him Monica, he might still be able to get to her if he got away. There was no sense in risking that. So all I said was, “Go to hell, Vic.”

“Get the car started,” Victor snarled. “Go out through the deck doors. The scorpions will kill anything on the first floor.”

I heard motion in the room, someone moving out the doors onto the elevated deck at the back of the house. The fire continued to spread. Smoke rode the air in a thick haze.

“I’ve got to go, Dresden,” Victor told me. His voice was gentle, almost a purr, “but there’s someone I want you to meet, first.”

I got a sick, twisty little feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Kalshazzak,” Victor whispered.

Power thrummed. The air shimmered and shone, began to twist and spiral.

“Kalshazzak,” Victor whispered again, louder, more demanding. I heard something, a warbling hiss that seemed to come from a great distance, rushing closer. The black wizard called the name for the third and final time, his voice rising to a screech, “Kalshazzak!”

There was a thundercrack in the house, a dull and sulfurous stench, and I craned my neck to see over the counter, risking a glance.

Victor stood by the sliding glass doors that led out onto the wooden deck. Red-orange flames wreathed the ceiling on that side of the house, and smoke was filling the room below, casting the whole place in a hellish glow.

Crouched down on the floor in front of Victor was the toad-demon I had banished the night before. I had known that I hadn’t killed it. You can’t kill demons, as such, only destroy the physical vessels they create for themselves when they come to the mortal world. If called again, they can create a new vessel without difficulty.

I watched in fascination, stunned. I had seen only one person call a demon before—and I had killed my old master shortly after. The thing crouched in front of Victor, its lightning blue eyes whirling with shades of scarlet hate, staring up at the black-clad wizard, trembling with the need to tear into him, to rend and destroy the mortal being who had dared summon it forth.

Victor’s eyes grew wider and more mad, glittering with fevered intensity. Sweat ran down his face, and he tilted his head slowly to one side, as though his vision were skewing along the horizontal and by the motion he would compensate for it. I gave silent thanks that I had closed my Third

Eye when I did. I did not want to see what that thing really looked like—and I didn't want to get a good look at the real Victor Sells, either.

The demon finally gave a hiss of frustration and turned toward me with a croaking growl. Victor dropped his head back and laughed, his will triumphant over that of the being he had called from beyond. "There, Dresden. Do you see? The strong survive, and the weak are torn to little pieces." He flapped his hand at me and said, to the demon, "Kill him."

I struggled to my feet, supporting my weight on the counter, to face the demon as it rose and began its slow stalk toward me.

"My God, Victor," I said. "I can't get over how clumsy you are."

Victor's smile immediately became a snarling sneer once again. I saw fear touch the corners of his eyes, uncertainty even though he was on top, and I felt a little smile quirk my lips. I moved my gaze to the demon's.

"You really shouldn't just hand someone else a demon's name," I told him. Then I drew in a breath, and shouted out in a voice of command, "Kalshazzak!"

The demon stopped in its tracks and gave a whistling howl of agony and rage as I called its name and drew my will up to hurl against it.

"Kalshazzak," I snarled again. The demon's presence was suddenly *there*, in my head, raging slippery and slimy and wriggling like a venomous tadpole. It was a pressure, a horrible pressure on my temples that made me see stars and threatened to steal enough of my balance to send me falling to the floor.

I tried to speak again and the words stuck in my throat. The demon hissed in anticipation, and the pressure on my head redoubled, trying to force me down, to make me give up the struggle, at which point the demon would be free to act. The lightning blue of its eyes became glaringly bright, painful to look upon.

I thought of little Jenny Sells, oddly enough, and of Murphy, lying pale and unconscious on a stretcher in the rain, of Susan, crouched next to me, sick and unable to run.

I had beaten this frog once. I could do it again.

I cried out the demon's name for the third and final time, my throat burning and raw. The word came out garbled and imperfect, and for a sinking moment I feared the worst, but Kalshazzak howled again, and hurled itself furiously to the floor, thrashing its limbs about like a poisoned

bug, raging and tearing great swaths out of the carpet. I sagged, the weariness that came over me threatening to make me black out.

“What are you doing?” Victor said, his voice rising to a high-pitched shriek. “What are you doing?” He was staring at the demon in horror. “Kill him! I am your master! Kill him, kill him!” The demon howled in rage, turned its burning glare to me and then Victor, as though trying to decide whom to devour first. Its eyes settled on Victor, who went pale and ran for the doors.

“Oh no you don’t,” I muttered, and I uttered the last spell I could manage. One final time, on the last gasps of my power, the winds rose and lifted me from the earth. I hurtled into Victor like an ungainly cannonball, driving him away from the doors, past the demon as it made an awkward lunge at us, and toward the railing of the balcony.

We fell in a confused heap at the edge of the balcony that overlooked the room beneath, full of dark smoke and the red glow of flame. The air had grown almost too hot to breathe. Pain jolted through my hip, more bright and blinding than anything I had ever imagined, and I sucked in a breath. The smoky air burned, made me choke and gasp.

I looked up. Fire was spreading everywhere. The demon was crouched between us and the only way out. Over the edge of the balcony was only chaos and flame and smoke—strange, dark smoke that should have been rising, but instead was mostly settled along the floor like London fog. The pain was too great. I simply couldn’t move. I couldn’t even take in enough breath to scream.

“Damn you,” Victor screamed. He regained his feet and hauled me up toward his face with berserk strength. “Damn you,” he repeated. “What happened? What did you do?”

“The Fourth Law of Magic forbids the binding of any being against its will,” I grated out. Pain was tight around my throat, making me fight to speak the words. “So I stepped in and cut your control over it. And didn’t establish any of my own.”

Victor’s eyes widened. “You mean...”

“It’s free,” I confirmed. I glanced at the demon. “Looks hungry.”

“What do we do?” Victor said. His voice was shaking, and he started shaking me, too. “What do we do?”

“We die,” I said. “Hell, I was going to do that anyway. But at least this way, I take you out with me.”

I saw him glance at the demon, then back to me, eyes terrified and calculating. “Work with me,” he said. “You stopped it before. You can stop it again. We can beat it, together, and leave.”

I studied him for a moment. I couldn’t kill him with magic. I didn’t want to. And it would only have brought a death sentence on my head in any case. But I could stand by and do nothing. And that’s exactly what I did. I smiled at him, closed my eyes, and did nothing.

“Fuck you, then, Dresden,” Victor snarled. “It can only eat one of us at a time. And I’m not going to be the one to get eaten today.” And he picked me up to hurl me toward the demon.

I objected with fragile tenacity. We grappled. Fire raged. Smoke billowed. The demon came closer, lightning eyes gleaming through the hell-lit gloom. Victor was shorter than me, stockier, better at wrestling, and he hadn’t been shot in the hip. He levered me up and almost threw me, but I moved quicker, whipping my right arm at his head and catching him with the flailing free end of Murphy’s handcuffs, breaking his motion. He tried to break away, but I held on to him, dragged him in a circle to slam against the guardrail of the balcony, and we both toppled over.

Desperation gives a man extraordinary resources. I flailed at the balcony railing and caught it at the base, keeping myself from going over into the roiling smoke below. I shot a glance below, and saw the glistening brown hide of one of the scorpions, its stinging tail held up like the mast of a ship cutting through smoke at least four feet deep. The room was filled with angry clicking, scuttling sounds. Even in a single desperate glance, I saw a couch torn to pieces by a pair of scorpions in less time than it took to take a breath. They loomed over it, their tails waving in the air like flags from the back of golf carts. Hell’s bells.

Victor had grabbed on to the railing a little above me and to the left, and he stared at the oncoming demon with a face twisted with hatred. I saw him draw in a breath, and try to plant a foot firmly enough to free one hand to point at the oncoming demon in some sort of magical attack or defense.

I couldn’t allow Victor to get out of this. He was still whole. If he could knock the demon down, he might still slip out. So I had to tell him something that would make him mad enough to try to take my head off. “Hey, Vic,” I shouted. “It was your wife. It was Monica that ratted on you.”

The words hit him like a physical blow, and his head whipped around toward me, his face contorting in fury. He started to say something to me,

the words of a spell meant to blow me to bits, maybe, but the toad-demon interrupted him by rearing up with an angry hiss and snapping its jaws down over Victor's collarbone and throat. Bone broke with audible snaps, and Victor squealed in pain, his arms and legs shuddering. He tried to push his way *down*, away from the demon, and the creature's balance wobbled.

I gritted my teeth and tried to hold on. A scorpion leapt at me, brown and gleaming, and I drew my legs up out of reach of its pincers, just barely.

"Bastard," Victor cried, struggling uselessly in the demon's jaws. There was blood running down his body, fast and hot. The demon had hit an artery, and it was simply holding on, wavering at the edge of the balcony as Victor struggled and started kicking at my near hand. He hit me once, twice, and my balance wavered, my grip slipping. A quick glance below me showed me another scorpion, getting ready to jump at me, this one closer.

Murphy, I thought. *I should have listened to you*. If the scorpions didn't kill me, the demon would, and if the demon didn't, the fire was going to kill me. I was going to die.

There was a certain peace in thinking that, in knowing that it was all about to be over. I was going to die. It was as simple as that. I had fought as hard as I could, done everything I could think of, and it was over. I found myself, in my final seconds, idly wishing that I could have had time to apologize to Murphy, that I could apologize to Jenny Sells for killing her daddy, that I could apologize to Linda Randall for not figuring things out fast enough and saving her life. Murphy's handcuffs lay tight and cold against my forearm as monsters and demons and black wizards and smoke closed in all around me. I closed my eyes.

Murphy's handcuffs.

My eyes snapped open.

Murphy's handcuffs.

Victor swung his foot at my left hand again. I kicked with my legs and hauled with my shoulders to give me a second of lift, and grabbed Victor Sells's pant leg in my left hand. With my right, I flicked the free end of the handcuffs around one of the bars of the guardrail. The ring of metal cycled around on its hinge and locked into place.

Then, as I started to fall back down, I hauled hard on Victor's leg. He screamed, a horrible, high-pitched squeal, as he started to fall. *Kalshazzak*, finally overbalanced by the additional weight and leverage I had added to

Victor's struggles, pitched over the balcony guardrail and into the smoke below, crashing down to the floor, carrying Victor with him.

There was a rush of scuttling, clicking sounds, a piercing whistle-hiss from the demon. Victor's screams rose to something high-pitched and horrible, until he sounded more like an animal, a pig squealing at slaughter, than a man.

I swung from the balcony, my feet several feet above the fray, held suspended in an acutely painful fashion by Murphy's handcuffs, one loop around my wrist, the other locked around the balcony railing. I looked down as my vision started to fade. I saw a sea of brown, gleaming plates of segmented, chitinous armor. I saw the scorpions' stinging tails flashing down, over and over again. I saw the lightning eyes of Kalshazzak's physical vessel, and I saw one of them pierced and put out by the flashing sting of one of the scorpions.

And I saw Victor Sells, struck over and over again by stingers the size of ice picks, the wounds foaming with poison. The demon ignored the pincers and the stingers of the scorpions to begin tearing him apart. His face contorted in the final agony of rage and fear.

The strong survive, and the weak get eaten. I guess Victor had invested in the wrong kind of strength.

I didn't want to watch what was happening below me. The fires consuming the ceiling above were rather beautiful, actually, rolling waves of flame, cherry red, sunset orange. I was too weak to try to get out of this mess, and the entire thing had become far too annoying and painful to even consider anymore. I just watched the flames, and waited and noticed, oddly, that I was simply *starving*. And no wonder. I hadn't eaten a decent meal since...Friday? Friday. You notice odd things in those final moments, they say.

And then you start seeing things. For instance, I saw Morgan come through the sliding glass doors leading in from the outside deck, the silver sword of the White Council's justice in his hands. I saw one of the scorpions, now the size of a German shepherd, figure out the stairs, scuttle up them, and hurtle at Morgan. I saw Morgan's silver sword slash, *snickersnack*, and leave the scorpion in writhing pieces on the floor.

Then I saw Morgan, his expression grim, his weight making the fire-chewed balcony shudder, come for me. His eyes narrowed when he saw me,

and he lifted the sword, leaning far over the balcony railing. The blade flashed bright silver in the firelight as it started to come down.

Typical, was my last thought. How perfectly typical, to survive everything the bad guys could do, and get taken down by the people for whose cause I had been fighting.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I awoke somewhere cool and dark, in tremendous pain, coughing my lungs out. Rain was falling on my face, and it was the greatest feeling I'd ever known. Morgan's face was over mine, and I realized he'd been giving me CPR. Eww.

I coughed and spluttered and sat up, wheezing for breath. Morgan watched me for a moment, then scowled and stood up, eyes flickering around.

I managed to get enough wind to speak, and said, numbly, "You saved me."

He grimaced. "Yes."

"But why?"

He looked at me again, then stooped to pick up his sword and slip it into the scabbard at his side. "Because I saw what happened in there. I saw you risk your life to stop the Shadowman. Without breaking any of the Laws. You weren't the killer."

I coughed some more, and said, "That doesn't mean you had to save me."

He turned and blinked at me, as though puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"You could have let me die."

His hard expression never changed, but he said, "You weren't guilty. You're a part of the White Council." His mouth twisted as though the words were fresh lemons. "Technically. I had an obligation to preserve your life. It was my duty."

"I wasn't the killer," I said.

"No."

"So," I wheezed, "that would make me right. And then that would make *you*—"

Morgan scowled. "More than ready to carry out the Doom if you cross the line, Dresden. Don't think this has gotten you off the hook, as far as I'm concerned."

"So. If I remember correctly, as a Warden, it is your duty to report on my conduct to the Council, isn't it?"

His scowl darkened.

“So you’re going to have to go to them on Monday and tell them all about what really happened. The whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“Yes,” he snarled. “It is even possible they will lift the Doom.”

I started laughing, weakly.

“You haven’t won, Dresden. There are many on the Council who know full well that you have consorted with the powers of darkness. We, at least, will not relax our vigil on you. We will watch you day and night, we will *prove* that you are a danger who must be stopped.”

I kept laughing. I fell over on my side, I laughed so much.

Morgan arched an eyebrow and simply stared at me. “Are you all right?”

“Give me about a gallon of Listerine,” I choked, “and I’ll be just fine.”

Morgan just stared at me, and I laughed harder. He rolled his eyes and growled something about the police being here any moment to provide medical care. Then he turned and stomped off into the woods, muttering to himself the whole way.

The police arrived in time to catch the Beckitts trying to leave and arrested them for, of all things, being naked. Later, they were implicated in the ThreeEye drug ring, and prosecuted on distribution charges. Just as well for them that they’re in the Michigan justice system. They wouldn’t have come out of a cell alive if they’d been in Chicago. It wouldn’t have been good for Johnny Marcone’s business.

The Varsity suffered a mysterious fire the night of my visit. I hear Marcone didn’t have any trouble collecting the insurance money, in spite of all the odd rumors going around. Word hit the street that Marcone had hired Harry Dresden to take out the head of the ThreeEye gang, one of those rumors that you can’t trace back to any one person. I didn’t try to deny it. It was a cheap enough price to not have to worry about anyone bombing my car.

I was too hospitalized to show up at the meeting of the White Council, but it turned out that they decided to lift the Doom of Damocles (which I had always thought a rather pretentious name in any case) from me, due to “valorous action above and beyond the call of duty.” I don’t think Morgan ever forgave me for being a good guy. He had to eat crow in front of the whole Council, relentlessly driven by his anal-retentive sense of duty and honor. There’s no love lost between us. But the guy was honest. I’ll give him credit for that.

And hell. At least I don't have to look forward to him popping out from nowhere every time I cast a spell. I hope.

Murphy was in critical condition for nearly seventy-two hours, but she pulled through. They gave her a room right down the hall from me, in fact. I sent flowers to her hospital room, along with the surviving ring of her handcuffs. I told her, in a note, not to ask how the chain between the rings had been so neatly severed. I didn't think she'd buy that someone cut it with a magic sword. The flowers must have helped. The first time she got out of bed was to totter down the hall to my room, throw them in my face, and leave without saying a word.

She professed to have no memory of what had happened at my office, and maybe she didn't. But in any case, she got the warrant for my arrest rescinded, and a couple weeks later, when she went back to work, she called me in for advice the next day. And she sent a big check to cover my expenses in the murder investigations. I guess that means we're friends again, in a professional sense. But we don't joke anymore. Some wounds don't heal very quickly.

The police found the remains of the huge ThreeEye stash in what was left of the lake house, and Victor Sells eventually came up as the bad guy. Monica Sells and her children vanished into Witness Protection. I hope they've got a better life now than they had before. I suppose it couldn't be much worse.

Bob eventually came home again, more or less within the twenty-four-hour time limit, I suppose. I turned a deaf ear to rumors of a particularly wild party at the University of Chicago which lasted from Saturday night to Sunday night, and Bob wisely never mentioned it.

DATE WITH A DEMON was a headliner for the *Arcane* when it came out the following Monday, and Susan came by my hospital room to bring me a copy and to talk to me about it. She seemed greatly amused by the cast that held my hips immobilized until the docs could be sure that there wasn't too much fracturing (the X-ray machine kept fouling whenever they tried to use it on me, for some reason), and commented that it was a pity I wasn't more mobile. I used the sympathy factor to badger another date out of her, and she didn't seem to mind too much.

That time, we were *not* interrupted by a demon. And I didn't need any of Bob's love potions or advice, thank you very much.

Mac got his TransAm back. I got the Blue Beetle back. That didn't seem exactly equitable, but at least the Beetle still runs. Most of the time.

I made sure to send pizza out to Toot-toot and his faerie buddies every night for a week, and once a week ever since. I'm pretty sure the kid from Pizza 'Spress thought I was a loony, having him drop off pizza by the roadside. Heck with him. I make good on my promises.

Mister got a little shortchanged on the whole deal, but it is well beneath his dignity to notice such things.

And me? What did I get out of it? I'm not really sure. I escaped from something that had been following me for a long time. I'm just not sure what. I'm not sure who was more certain that I was a walking Antichrist waiting to happen—the conservative branch of the White Council, the men like Morgan, or me. For them, at least, the question has been partly laid to rest. For myself, though, I'm not so sure. The power is there. The temptation is there. That's just the way it's going to be.

I can live with that.

The world is getting weirder. Darker every single day. Things are spinning around faster and faster, and threatening to go completely awry. Falcons and falconers. The center cannot hold.

But in my corner of the country, I'm trying to nail things down. I don't want to live in Victor's jungle, even if it did eventually devour him. I don't want to live in a world where the strong rule and the weak cower. I'd rather make a place where things are a little quieter. Where trolls stay the hell under their bridges and where elves don't come swooping out to snatch children from their cradles. Where vampires respect the limits, and where the faeries mind their *p*'s and *q*'s.

My name is Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. Conjure by it at your own risk. When things get strange, when what goes bump in the night flicks on the lights, when no one else can help you, give me a call.

I'm in the book.

Author's Note

When I was seven years old, I got a bad case of strep throat and was out of school for a whole week. During that time, my sisters bought me my first fantasy and sci-fi novels: the boxed set of *Lord of the Rings* and the boxed set of the Han Solo adventure novels by Brian Daley. I devoured them all during that week.

From that point on, I was pretty much doomed to join SF&F fandom. From there, it was only one more step to decide I wanted to be a writer of my favorite fiction material, and here we are.

I blame my sisters.

My first love as a fan is swords-and-horses fantasy. After Tolkien I went after C. S. Lewis. After Lewis, it was Lloyd Alexander. After them came Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny, Robert Howard, John Norman, Poul Anderson, David Eddings, Weis and Hickman, Terry Brooks, Elizabeth Moon, Glen Cook, and before I knew it I was a dual citizen of the United States and Lankhmar, Narnia, Gor, Cimmeria, Krynn, Amber—you get the picture.

When I set out to become a writer, I spent years writing swords-and-horses fantasy novels—and seemed to have little innate talent for it. But I worked at my writing, branching out into other areas as experiments, including SF, mystery, and contemporary fantasy. That's how the Dresden Files initially came about—as a happy accident while trying to accomplish something else. Sort of like penicillin.

But I never forgot my first love, and to my immense delight and excitement, one day I got a call from my agent and found out that I was going to get to share my newest swords-and-horses fantasy novel with other fans.

The Codex Alera is a fantasy series set within the savage world of Carna, where spirits of the elements, known as furies, lurk in every facet of life, and where many intelligent races vie for security and survival. The realm of Alera is the monolithic civilization of humanity, and its unique ability to harness and command the furies is all that enables its survival in the face of

the enormous, sometimes hostile elemental powers of Carna, and against savage creatures who would lay Alera in waste and ruin.

Yet even a realm as powerful as Alera is not immune to destruction from within, and the death of the heir apparent to the Crown has triggered a frenzy of ambitious political maneuvering and in-fighting amongst the High Lords, those who wield the most powerful furies known to man. Plots are afoot, traitors and spies abound, and a civil war seems inevitable—all while the enemies of the realm watch, ready to strike at the first sign of weakness.

Tavi is a young man living on the frontier of Aleran civilization—because let's face it, swords-and-horses fantasies start there. Born a freak, unable to utilize any powers of furycrafting whatsoever, Tavi has grown up relying upon his own wits, speed, and courage to survive. When an ambitious plot to discredit the Crown lays Tavi's home, the Calderon Valley, naked and defenseless before a horde of the barbarian Marat, the boy and his family find themselves directly in harm's way.

There are no titanic High Lords to protect them, no Legions, no Knights with their mighty furies to take the field. Tavi and the free frontiersmen of the Calderon Valley must find some way to uncover the plot and to defend their homes against a merciless horde of Marat and their beasts.

It is a desperate hour, when the fate of all Alera hangs in the balance, when a handful of ordinary steadholders must find the courage and strength to defy an overwhelming foe, and when the courage and intelligence of one young man will save the Realm—or destroy it.

Thank you, readers and fellow fans, for all of your support and kindness. I hope that you enjoy reading the books of the Codex Alera as much as I enjoyed creating them for you.

—Jim

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A ROC BOOK

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Chapter One

I never used to keep close track of the phases of the moon. So I didn't know that it was one night shy of being full when a young woman sat down across from me in McAnally's pub and asked me to tell her all about something that could get her killed.

"No," I said. "Absolutely not." I folded the piece of paper, with its drawings of three concentric rings of spidery symbols, and slid it back over the polished oak-wood table.

Kim Delaney frowned at me, and brushed some of her dark, shining hair back from her forehead. She was a tall woman, buxom and lovely in an old-world way, with pale, pretty skin and round cheeks well used to smiling. She wasn't smiling now.

"Oh, come on, Harry," she told me. "You're Chicago's only practicing professional wizard, and you're the only one who can help me." She leaned across the table toward me, her eyes intent. "I can't find the references for all of these symbols. No one in local circles recognizes them either. You're the only real wizard I've ever even heard of, much less know. I just want to know what these others are."

"No," I told her. "You don't want to know. You're better off forgetting this circle and concentrating on something else."

"But—"

Mac caught my attention from behind the bar by waving a hand at me, and slid a couple of plates of steaming food onto the polished surface of the crooked oak bar. He added a couple of bottles of his homemade brown ale, and my mouth started watering.

My stomach made an unhappy noise. It was almost as empty as my wallet. I would never have been able to afford dinner tonight, except that Kim had offered to buy, if I'd talk to her about something during the meal. A steak dinner was less than my usual rate, but she was pleasant company, and a sometime apprentice of mine. I knew she didn't have much money, and I had even less.

Despite my rumbling stomach, I didn't rise immediately to pick up the food. (In McAnally's pub and grill, there aren't any service people. According to Mac, if you can't get up and walk over to pick up your own order, you don't need to be there at all.) I looked around the room for a moment, with its annoying combination of low ceilings and lazily spinning fans, its thirteen carved wooden columns and its thirteen windows, plus thirteen tables arranged haphazardly to defray and scatter the residual magical effects that sometimes surrounded hungry (in other words, angry) wizards. McAnally's was a haven in a town where no one believed in magic. A lot of the crowd ate there.

"Look, Harry," Kim said. "I'm not using this for anything serious, I promise. I'm not trying any summoning or binding. It's an academic interest only. Something that's been bothering me for a while." She leaned forward and put her hand over mine, looking me in the face without looking me in the eyes, a trick that few nonpractitioners of the Art could master. She grinned and showed me the deep dimples in her cheeks.

My stomach growled again, and I glanced over at the food on the bar, waiting for me. "You're sure?" I asked her. "This is just you trying to scratch an itch? You're not using it for anything?"

"Cross my heart," she said, doing so.

I frowned. "I don't know . . ."

She laughed at me. "Oh, come on, Harry. It's no big deal. Look, if you don't want to tell me, never mind. I'll buy you dinner anyway. I know you're tight for money lately. Since that thing last spring, I mean."

I glowered, but not at Kim. It wasn't her fault that my main employer, Karrin Murphy, the director of Special Investigations at the Chicago Police Department, hadn't called me in for consulting work in more than a month. Most of my living for the past few years had come from serving as a special consultant to SI, but after a fracas last spring involving a dark wizard fighting a gang war for control of Chicago's drug trade, work with SI had slowly tapered off—and with it, my income.

I didn't know why Murphy hadn't been calling me in as often. I had my suspicions, but I hadn't gotten the chance to confront her about them yet. Maybe it wasn't anything I'd done. Maybe the monsters had gone on strike. Yeah, right.

The bottom line was I was strapped for cash. I'd been eating ramen noodles and soup for too many weeks. The steaks Mac had prepared smelled like heaven, even from across the room. My belly protested again, growling its neolithic craving for charred meat.

But I couldn't just go and eat the dinner without giving Kim the information she wanted. It's not that I've never welshed on a deal, but I've never done it with anyone human—and definitely not with someone who looked up to me.

Sometimes I hate having a conscience, and a stupidly thorough sense of honor.

"All right, all right," I sighed. "Let me get the dinner and I'll tell you what I know."

Kim's round cheeks dimpled again. "Thanks, Harry. This means a lot to me."

"Yeah, yeah," I told her, and got up to weave my way toward the bar, through columns and tables and so on. McAnally's had more people than usual tonight, and though Mac rarely smiled, there was a contentment to his manner that indicated that he was happy with the crowd. I snatched up the plates and bottles with a somewhat petulant attitude. It's hard to take much joy in a friend's prosperity when your own business is about to go under.

I took the food, steaks and potatoes and green beans, back to the table and sat down again, placing Kim's plate in front of her. We ate for a while, myself in sullen silence and she in hearty hunger.

"So," Kim said, finally. "What can you tell me about that?" She gestured toward the piece of paper with her fork.

I swallowed my food, took a sip of the rich ale, and picked up the paper again. "All right. This is a figure of High magic. Three of them, really, one inside the other, like layered walls. Remember what I told you about magical circles?"

Kim nodded. "They either hold something out or keep it in. Most work on magic energies or creatures of the Nevernever, but mortal creatures can cross the circles and break them."

"Right," I said. "That's what this outermost circle of symbols is. It's a barrier against creatures of spirit and magical forces. These symbols here, here, here, are the key ones." I pointed out the squiggles in question.

Kim nodded eagerly. "I got the outer one. What's the next?"

"The second circle is more of a spell barrier to *mortal* flesh. It wouldn't work if all you used was a ring of symbols. You'd need something else, stones or gems or something, spaced between the drawings." I took another bite of steak.

Kim frowned at the paper, and then at me. "And then what would that do?"

"Invisible wall," I told her. "Like bricks. Spirits, magic, could go right through it, but mortal flesh couldn't. Neither could a thrown rock, bullets, anything purely physical."

"I see," she said, excited. "Sort of a force field."

I nodded. "Something like that."

Her cheeks glowed with excitement, and her eyes shone. "I *knew* it. And what's this last one?"

I squinted at the innermost ring of symbols, frowning. "A mistake."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's just gobbledygook. It doesn't mean anything useful. Are you sure you copied this correctly?"

Kim's mouth twisted into a frown. "I'm sure, I'm sure. I was careful."

I studied her face for a moment. "If I read the symbols correctly, it's a third wall. Built to withhold creatures of flesh *and* spirit. Neither mortal nor spirit but somewhere in between."

She frowned. "What kind of creatures are like that?"

I shrugged. “None.” I said, and officially, it was true. The White Council of wizards did not allow the discussion of demons that could be called to earth, beings of spirit that could gather flesh to themselves. Usually, a spirit-circle was enough to stop all but the most powerful demons or Elder Things of the outer reaches of the Nevernever. But this third circle was built to stop things that could transcend those kinds of boundaries. It was a cage for demonic demigods and archangels.

Kim wasn’t buying my answer. “I don’t see why anyone would make a circle like this to contain nothing, Harry.”

I shrugged. “People don’t always do reasonable, sensible things. They’re like that.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Come on, Harry. I’m not a baby. You don’t have to shelter me.”

“And you,” I told her, “don’t need to know what kind of thing that third circle was built to contain. You don’t want to know. Trust me.”

She glowered at me for a long moment, then sipped at her ale and shrugged. “All right. Circles have to be empowered, right? You have to know how to switch them on, like lights?”

“Something like that. Sure.”

“How would a person turn this one on?”

I stared at her for a long time.

“Harry?” she asked.

“You don’t need to know that, either. Not for an academic interest. I don’t know what you’ve got in mind, Kim, but leave it alone. Forget it. Walk away, before you get hurt.”

“Harry, I am not—”

“Save it,” I told her. “You’re sitting on a tiger cage, Kim.” I thumped a finger on the paper for emphasis. “And you wouldn’t need it if you weren’t planning on trying to stick a tiger in there.”

Her eyes glittered, and she lifted her chin. “You don’t think I’m strong enough.”

“Your strength’s got nothing to do with it,” I said. “You don’t have the training. You don’t have the knowledge. I wouldn’t expect a kid in grade school to be able to sit down and figure out college calculus. And I don’t expect it of you, either.” I leaned forward. “You don’t know enough yet to be toying with this sort of thing, Kim. And even if you did, even if you did manage to become a full-fledged wizard, I’d still tell you not to do it. You mess this up and you could get a lot of people hurt.”

“If I was planning to do that, it’s my business, Harry.” Her eyes were bright with anger. “You don’t have the right to choose for me.”

“No,” I told her. “I’ve got the responsibility to help you make the right choice.” I curled the paper in my fingers and crushed it, then tossed it aside, to the floor. She stabbed her fork into a cut of steak, a sharp, vicious gesture. “Look, Kim,” I said. “Give it some time. When you’re older, when you’ve had more experience . . .”

“You aren’t so much older than me,” Kim said.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “I’ve had a lot of training. And I started young.” My own ability with magic, far in excess of my years and education, wasn’t a subject I wanted to explore. So I tried to shift the direction of the conversation. “How is this fall’s fund-raiser going?”

“It’s not,” she said. She leaned back wearily in her seat. “I’m tired of trying to pry money out of people to save the planet they’re poisoning or the animals they’re killing. I’m tired of writing letters and doing marches for causes no one believes in anymore.” She rubbed at her eyes. “I’m just tired.”

“Look, Kim. Try to get some rest. And please, please don’t play with that circle. Promise me.”

She tossed her napkin down, left a few bills on the table, and stood up. “Enjoy your meal, Harry,” she said. “And thanks for nothing.”

I stood up as well. “Kim,” I said. “Wait a minute.”

But she ignored me. She stalked off toward the door, her skirt swaying along with her long hair. She cut an impressive, statuesque figure. I could feel the anger bubbling off her. One of the ceiling fans shuddered and let out a puff of smoke as she walked under it, then whirled down to a halt. She raced up the short flight of stairs and exited the bar, banging the door shut behind her. People watched her leave, then glanced back to me, speculation on their faces.

I sat back down, frustrated. Dammit. Kim was one of several people I had coached through the difficult period surrounding the discovery of their innate magical talents. It made me feel like crap to withhold information from her, but she had been playing with fire. I couldn’t let her do that. It was my responsibility to help protect her from such things, until she knew enough to realize how dangerous they were.

To say nothing of what the White Council would think of a nonwizard toying with major summoning circles. The White Council didn’t take chances with things like that. They just acted, decisively, and they weren’t always particular about people’s lives and safety when they did it.

I had done the right thing. Keeping that kind of information out of Kim’s hands had been the right decision. I had been protecting her from danger she didn’t, couldn’t, fully appreciate.

I had done the right thing—even if she had trusted me to provide answers for her, as I had in the past, when teaching her to contain and control her modest magical talents. Even if she had trusted me to show her the answers she needed, to be her guide through the darkness.

I’d done the right thing.

Dammit.

My stomach was soured. I didn’t want any more of Mac’s delicious meal, steak or no steak. I didn’t feel like I’d earned it.

I was sipping ale and thinking dark thoughts when the door opened again. I didn’t look up, occupied as I was with brooding, a famous pastime of wizards everywhere. And then a shadow fell over me.

“Sitting here pouting,” Murphy said. She bent over and absently picked up the wadded scrap of paper I had tossed aside earlier, tucking it tidily into her coat pocket rather than letting it lie about as clutter on the floor. “That’s not much like you, Harry.”

I glanced up at Murphy. I didn’t have far to look. Karrin Murphy wasn’t much more than five feet tall. She’d gotten her golden hair cut, from shoulder length to something far shorter, and a little longer in front than in back. It was a punky sort of look, and very appealing with her blue eyes and upturned nose. She was dressed for the weather in what must have been her at-home clothes: dark jeans, a flannel shirt, hiking boots, and a heavy woodsman’s jacket. She was wearing her badge on her belt.

Murphy was extremely cute, for a grown adult who also held a black belt in aikido, and had several marksmanship awards from Chicago PD. She was a real professional, one who had fought and clawed her way up the ranks to become full lieutenant. She’d made enemies along the way, and one of them had seen to it that she was put in charge of Special Investigations soon after.

“Hello there, Murphy,” I told her. I took a swig of ale and said, “Long time, no see.” I tried to keep my voice even, but I’m pretty sure she heard the anger in it.

“Look, Harry—”

“Did you read the editorial in the *Tribune*? The one criticizing you for wasting the city’s money hiring a ‘charlatan psychic named Harry Dresden’? I guess you must have, since I haven’t heard from you since it came out.”

She rubbed at the bridge of her nose. “I don’t have time for this.”

I ignored her. “Not that I blame you. I mean, not many of the good taxpayers of Chicago believe in magic, or wizards. Of course, not many of them have seen what you and I have. You know. When we worked together. Or when I was saving your life.”

Her eyes tightened at the edges. “I need you. We’ve got a situation.”

“You need me? We haven’t talked for more than a month, and you need me all of a sudden? I’ve got an office and a telephone and everything, Lieutenant. You don’t need to track me down here while I’m having dinner.”

“I’ll tell the killer to be sure to operate during business hours next time,” Murphy said. “But I need you to help me find him.”

I straightened in my chair, frowning. “There’s been a murder? Something in my field?”

Murphy flashed a hard smile at me. “I hope you didn’t have anything more important to do.”

I felt my jaw grow tense. “No. I’m ready.” I stood up.

“Well then,” she said, turning and walking away. “Shall we go?”

Chapter Two

Murphy declined to ride in the Blue Beetle, my old Volkswagen bug.

The Beetle wasn't really blue, not anymore. One of the doors had been replaced with a green duplicate, the other one with white, when something with claws had shredded the originals. The hood had been slagged by fire, and my mechanic, Mike, had replaced it with the hood from a red vehicle. The important thing is that the Beetle runs, even if it doesn't do it very fast, and I'm comfortable with the car. Mike has declared that the VW bug is the easiest car in the world to repair, and so that's what I drive. He keeps it running eight or nine days in ten. That's phenomenal.

Technology tends to foul up around wizards—flip on a light switch, and it'll be the time the bulb burns out. Drive past a streetlight, and it'll pick just then to flicker and die. Whatever can go wrong will, automobiles included.

I didn't think it made much sense for Murphy to risk her vehicle when she could have taken mine, but she said she'd take her chances.

She didn't speak as she drove her Saturn down the JFK, out toward Rosemont. I watched her, uncomfortable, as we went. She was in a hurry, taking a few too many chances cutting in and out of traffic, and I put on my seat belt. At least we weren't on her motorcycle.

"Murph," I asked her, "where's the fire?"

She glanced aside at me. "I want you out there before some other people show up."

"Press?" I couldn't quite keep a nasty slur out of the word.

She shrugged. "Whoever."

I frowned at her, but she didn't say anything else—which seemed typical. Murphy didn't speak much to me anymore. We rode the rest of the way in silence, exited the JFK, and pulled into the parking lot of a half-completed little strip mall. We got out of the car.

A jet came in, low, heading for O'Hare International Airport, only a few miles to the west. I squinted at it for a moment, and then frowned at Murphy as a uniformed officer led us toward a building surrounded by police tape. There was an abundance of light, the moon overhead bright silver and almost a completely round circle. I cast an enormous, gangly shadow as I walked, my duster flapping around my legs. It towered beside Murphy's far smaller shadow ahead of me.

"Murphy?" I said. "Aren't we outside Chicago city limits?"

"Yeah," Murphy said shortly.

"Uh. Then aren't we out of your jurisdiction, technically?"

"People need help wherever they can get it, Dresden. And the last several killings happened in Chicago, so we want to look at this firsthand. I already worked things out with the local force. It's not really an issue."

"Several killings?" I said. "Several? As in more than one? Murphy, slow down."

But she didn't. Instead, she led me into a roomy building that proved to be under construction, though all the exterior work was finished. Some of the windows were still covered with board. I didn't see the sign on the building's front doors until I got close.

"The Varsity?" I said, reading it. "I thought Marcone burned it down last spring."

"Mmm-hmm," Murphy said, glancing at me over her shoulder. "Relocated and rebuilding."

Chicago's resident crime lord, Gentleman Johnny Marcone, was the robber baron of the mean streets. He kept all the rough business inside the city proper, leaving his legitimate interests out in the suburbs, like here in Rosemont. Last spring, when I had confronted him in his club, a previous incarnation of the Varsity, about a deadly new drug on the streets, the place had wound up burning to the ground.

After the whole mess was over, word got out that the drug dealer I'd taken out had been Marcone's enemy, and that I had nuked him at the crime lord's request. I hadn't refuted the rumor. It was easier to let people talk than to force Marcone to make an issue of things.

Inside the building, the floors were rough, unfinished. Someone had turned on a couple of halogen work lights, and they cast the interior into brilliant, clear white light. There was drywall dust everywhere. There were a few card tables set up, with workmen's tools left out on them in places. Plastic buckets of paint, tarps, and a sack of new paintbrushes waited for use off to one side. I didn't notice the blood until Murphy put her arm out in front of me to keep me from walking into it.

"Wake up, Dresden," she said. Her voice was grim.

I stopped, and looked down. Blood. A lot of blood. It began near my feet, where a long splatter had reached out like an arm from a drowning man, staining the dusty floor with scarlet. My eyes followed the path of the long bloodstain back to a pool, maybe an eighth of an inch deep, surrounding a mound of ripped cloth and torn meat that must have been the corpse.

My stomach quailed, threatening to eject the bites of steak I'd taken earlier that evening, but I forced it down. I walked in a circle around the body, keeping my distance. The corpse was, I guessed, that of a male in his thirties. He had been a large man, with a short, spiky haircut. He had fallen onto his side, facing away from me, his arms curled up toward his head, his legs up toward his vitals. A weapon, a little automatic pistol, lay seven or eight feet away, uselessly out of the victim's reach.

I walked around the corpse until I could see the face.

Whatever had killed him, it hadn't been human. His face was gone, simply torn away. Something had ripped his lips off. I could see his bloodstained teeth. His nose had been torn all the way up one side, and part of it dangled toward the floor. His head was misshapen, as though some enormous pressure had been put upon his temples, warping his skull in.

His eyes were gone. Torn out of his head. Bitten out. There were the ragged slash marks of fangs all around the edges of the sockets.

I closed my eyes, tightly. I took a deep breath. Another. A third. That didn't help. The body stank, a sickly sewer-smell that rose up from the torn innards. My stomach wanted to roll up my throat, out my mouth, and onto the floor.

I could remember the other details, even with my eyes closed, and catalogued them neatly for later reference. The victim's jacket and shirt had been torn to bloody ribbons along his forearms, in defensive wounds. His hands and arms were a mass of pulped, ripped meat, the palms and fingers slashed to ragged lumps. The curl of his body hid his abdomen from me, but that was where the blood was pooling from, spreading out like ink from a spilled bottle. The stench only confirmed that he had been eviscerated.

I turned away from the corpse and opened my eyes, staring down at the floor.

"Harry?" Murphy said, from the far side of the body. The note of hardness that had been in her voice all evening was absent. She hadn't moved while I had done my cursory examination.

"I recognize him," I said. "At least, I think I do. You'll need to check dental records or something, to be sure."

I could hear her frown in her words. "Yeah? Who was he?"

"I don't know his name. I always called him Spike. For the haircut. He was one of Johnny Marcone's bodyguards."

Murphy was quiet for a moment, then said, succinctly, "Shit."

"What, Murph?" I looked back at her, without looking down at Spike's mangled remains.

Murphy's face was set in concern, for me, her blue eyes gentle. I saw her wipe the expression away, as quickly as a shadow crosses the floor, a smoothing of lines that left her features neutral. I guess she hadn't expected me to turn to her. "Take a look around a little more," she said. "Then we'll talk."

"What am I looking for?" I asked her.

"You'll know it," she said. Then added, in a whisper that I think she didn't intend me to hear, "I hope."

I turned back to my work, and looked around the room. Off to one side, one of the windows was broken. Near it was a table, lying askew on the floor, its legs warped and bent. I walked over to it.

Broken glass littered the ground around the collapsed table. Since the glass was on the inside of the building, something must have come in through the window. There was blood on several of the broken pieces of glass. I picked up one of the larger ones and frowned at it. The blood was dark red, and not yet wholly dried. I took a white handkerchief from my pocket, folded the shard of glass into it, and then slipped it into the pocket of my duster.

I rose and paced over the floor, my eyes downcast, studying the dust. In one spot, it was rubbed almost clean off the floor, as though a struggle had taken place there without blood being spilled. In another spot, where the halogen lamps didn't quite reach, there was a pool of silver moonlight below a window. I knelt down beside it.

In the center of the pool was a paw print, in the dust, a paw print almost as big as my spread hand. Canine. Dots at the tips of the paw spoke of heavy nails, almost claws.

I looked up through the window at the rounded silver shape of the almost-full moon.

"Oh, hell," I breathed. "Oh, hell."

Murphy came toward me and watched me silently for a moment, waiting. I licked my lips, stood up, and turned to her. "You've got problems."

"No kidding. Talk to me, Dresden."

I nodded, then pointed at the window. "The attacker probably came in there. He went after the victim, attacked him, got the gun away from him, and killed him. It's the attacker's blood on the window. They struggled a while, over there by that clean spot, maybe, and Spike made a break for the door. He didn't make it there. He got torn to pieces first."

I turned toward Murphy, looking down at her solemnly. "You've had other murders happen in the same way. Probably about four weeks ago, when the moon was last full. Those were the other killings you were talking about."

Murphy glanced at my face for a moment, keeping her eyes off mine, and nodded her head. "Yeah. Four weeks ago, almost exactly. But no one else picked up the full moon angle. Just me."

"Uh-huh. Then you should see this, too," I said. I led her over to the window and showed her the paw print in the dust beneath it. She regarded it in silence.

"Harry," she said after a minute. "Are there such things as werewolves?" She brushed a strand of hair back from her cheek, a small and oddly vulnerable gesture. She folded her arms over her stomach, as though she were cold.

I nodded. "Yeah. Not like you see in the movies, but yeah. I figure that's what you got going here."

She drew in a deep breath. "All right, then. All right. What can you tell me? What do I need to know?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but I didn't get a chance to say anything. There was a brief bout of shouting outside, and then the front doors of the building banged open. Murphy tensed, and I saw her mouth set in a hard little line. Her back straightened, and she stopped hugging herself, putting her fists on her hips.

"Goddammit," she said. "How do those assholes get everywhere so fast?"

I stepped forward, so that I could see. A quartet of people in suits came through the door, fanned out in an almost military diamond formation. The man in front was not quite as tall as me, but still very tall, six feet and three or four inches. His hair was jet black, as were his eyebrows, while his eyes were a shade of grey as pale as wood smoke. His dark blue suit fit him well, and I had the impression that it concealed an athletic build, in spite of the fact that he had obviously seen more than four decades. A blue identification badge reading "FBI" in huge, obnoxious letters dangled from one lapel.

"Secure the scene," he said, his voice deep, tense. "Lieutenant Murphy, what the hell are you doing on a crime scene out of your jurisdiction?"

"Nice to see you, too, Agent Denton," Murphy said in a flat tone. "You get around fast."

"I told you that you weren't welcome on this investigation," Denton said, his words crisp. His grey eyes flashed, and I saw a vein bulge rhythmically on his forehead. His gaze shifted to me. "Who is this?"

"Har—" I started to say, but Murphy's snort cut over my words.

"No one," she said. She flashed me a look that said, very clearly, to shut up. That annoyed the hell out of me.

"Harry Dresden," I said, making the words loud and clear. Murphy and I exchanged a glare.

"Ah," Denton said. "The charlatan. I've read about you in the *Tribune*." His clear, tense gaze returned to Murphy. "You and your psychic friend might want to step out of the way. There's police work being done here. The real kind, where we worry about fingerprints, fibers, genetic matches—silly things like that."

Murphy's eyes narrowed, along with mine, but if the twin glares affected Denton, it didn't show in his face. Murphy and Denton had a brief staring match, her fury against his steely intensity.

"Agent Benn!" Denton called.

A woman, not quite into her thirties, with a shoulder-length mane of hair gone prematurely grey, turned toward us from her intent contemplation of the corpse. She had olive skin, deep, green eyes, and a thin, severe mouth. She walked toward us with a sort of hard-muscled sensuality, moving like someone who is capable of being fast and dangerous when necessary. Of the four FBI agents who had entered the room, she was the only one obviously sporting a weapon. Her jacket was unbuttoned, and I could see the straps of her shoulder rig against the white of her shirt.

"Yes, sir," Benn said. Her voice was very quiet. Her eyes took up a position midway between Murphy and me, looking at neither of us while watching us both.

"Please escort these two *civilians*," Denton stressed the word, "from the crime scene."

Benn nodded once, but didn't say anything in reply. Just waited. I gathered myself to go, but paused. Murphy planted her feet and lowered her arms casually to her sides. I recognized the stubborn out-thrust angle of her jaw. She had that look she got when she was behind on points in one of her martial-arts tournaments. Murphy was ready to fight. Damn. I had to get her cooled off before we could accomplish anything.

"Murphy," I said, quietly. "Can we talk outside?"

"Like hell," Murphy said. "Whoever this killer is, he's knocked off half a dozen people in the last month. I'm here, and I'm after this man. The Rosemont department has given their consent for me to be here." Murphy glared up at Benn. The FBI agent had her by a considerable margin of reach and muscle. I saw Benn's eyes narrow, her shoulders grow tenser.

"Do you have that in writing?" Denton demanded. The vein in his head throbbed more angrily. "And do you really think you want me reporting this to your superiors, Lieutenant?"

"Don't push me, Denton," Murphy said, her voice hot. I winced.

"Look, Murphy," I said. I put a hand on her shoulder. "Let's just go outside for a minute." I squeezed, just a little.

Murphy turned back toward me. She chanced a brief glance up at my eyes, and then relaxed a little, a flicker of uncertainty crossing her features. She started to ease down, and I let my breath out. I definitely didn't want this dissolving into violence. It wouldn't accomplish anything.

"Get them out of here," Denton said, and there was a note to his voice that I didn't like.

Benn didn't give us any warning. She just moved, fast and hard, stepping toward Murphy and flicking some sort of martial-arts blow I wasn't familiar with toward her temple. There was a quick blur of motion. Murphy's hands got there before the blow landed, and she turned, somehow leveraging Benn's weight off from her legs and slamming the grey-maned woman hard into a wall.

Benn's expression went from shocked and surprised to furious in the space of half a second. Her hand dipped into her jacket, hesitated for half a second, and then resumed motion. She drew her gun with an expert's precision, smooth and quick without seeming hurried. Her green eyes blazed. I threw myself at Murphy, colliding with her and driving her over and down as the gun went off, louder than a close clap of thunder in the interior of the half-finished restaurant. We landed in a heap on the dusty floor.

"Benn!" Denton shouted. He lunged for her, heedless of the gun, and got between the armed woman and us. I could hear him talking to her in a low, urgent voice.

"You crazy bitch!" I shouted. "What is the matter with you?"

The two other FBI guys and several patrol officers from outside came running. Murphy grunted and elbowed me in the gut, urgently. I grunted back and moved off of her. Both of us climbed to our feet unhurt.

"What the hell happened?" demanded one of the officers, an older man with thinning grey hair.

Denton turned to the officer, calm and cool. "Misfire. There was a misunderstanding and Agent Benn's weapon accidentally discharged."

The officer rubbed at his scalp and eyed Murphy. "Is that true, Lieutenant?"

"Like hell!" I said. I pointed a finger at Benn. "This crazy bi—"

Murphy jammed an elbow into my stomach and glared at me. "That's true," Murphy said, while I rubbed at my gut. "It happened just like Agent Denton said. An accident."

I stared at her. "Murph, give me a break. This woman—"

"Had an accident with her weapon," Murphy said, voice hard. "Could have happened to anyone." Murphy turned her glare on the aging officer, and he blinked mildly at her, then shrugged.

Denton turned back to us and studied Murphy intently for a second. Then he nodded. "Roj, George. Why don't you two make sure the Lieutenant is all right and help her to her car?"

"Sure, sure, Phil," said a skinny kid with red hair, big ears, and freckles. "Uh, Mr. Dresden, Lieutenant Murphy. Why don't we go outside and get some air? I'm Roger Harris, and this is Agent Wilson."

The other FBI guy, a bulky, overweight man in his late forties, his hair receding and his gut overhanging his belt, just beckoned us to follow him and walked toward the door. Murphy glared at Denton for a moment, then spun on her heel and stalked after the bulky Wilson. I followed her.

"I can't believe that. You all right? Why the hell didn't you tell them what she did?" I asked Murphy, sotto voce.

"That bitch," Murphy said back, not nearly as quiet. "She tried to sucker punch me."

"She tried to *ventilate* you, Murph," I countered.

Murphy let out a breath between her teeth, but kept walking. I glanced back at the room behind us and saw Spike's torn and mangled body being surrounded by more police tape. Forensics had arrived, and the team was getting set to sweep the room. Denton was kneeling down beside Benn, who had her face in her hands, and looked as though she were weeping. Denton was watching me, his grey eyes calculating and expressionless, filing me away under "tall, slender, dark hair, dark eyes, hawkish features, no visible scars."

I stared at him for a minute and got a hunch, a solid intuition of which I was completely sure. Denton was hiding something. He knew something, and he wasn't talking. Don't ask me how I knew it, but something about him, about the way the veins bulged in his forehead, or the way he held his neck so stiffly, made me think so.

"Um," the kid, Harris, said. I blinked and turned to him. He opened the door for Murphy and me, and we walked outside. "Maybe give Deborah some slack. She's really stressed out about these Lobo killings. She hasn't slept much the past month. She knew one of the guys who got killed. She's been tense ever since."

"Shut up, Harris," the overweight Agent Wilson said, his tone disgusted. "Just shut up." He turned to the two of us and said in a calm voice, "Get the hell out of here. I don't want to see either of you around a scene that isn't on your turf, Lieutenant Murphy. Internal Affairs has enough to do, don't you think?"

He turned and went back into the building. The redheaded kid gave us an apologetic, awkward smile, and then hurried to catch up with the overweight agent. I saw him shoot a glance back at me, his expression thoughtful. Then he was gone. The door shut, leaving Murphy and me on the outside, away from the investigation and the evidence at the crime scene.

I looked up through the clear night at the almost-full moon. Werewolves jumping through windows at gangster's lackeys in unfinished restaurants. A mangled corpse in the middle of a blood-drenched floor. Berserk FBI field agents drawing guns and shooting to kill. A little kung fu, a little John Wayne, and a few casual threats.

So far, I thought, my nerves jangling, just one more night on the job.

Chapter Three

My stomach roiled around with disgust at the macabre sights inside the building, and with tension at what had nearly happened. One of my ears was still ringing from the sound of the gunshot. I was starting to shake all over now, the adrenaline rush fading and leaving me jumpy and wired. I stuck my hands in my duster's pockets, careful of the bloodstained shard of glass wrapped in my handkerchief, and turned my face into the wind, closing my eyes.

Relax, Harry, I told myself. Calm down. Breathe in and out, and just keep doing it. See? You aren't dead. Dead people don't breathe like that. You aren't Spike, all torn to pieces on the floor. You don't have any bullet holes in you, either. You're alive, and Murphy's all right, and you don't have to look at that eyeless face anymore.

But I could see the torn body, still, behind my eyelids. I could smell the ghastly stench of his opened innards. I could remember the blood, sticky on the dusty floor, congealing, thick with tiny flecks of drywall. I tasted bile in my throat, and fought to keep from throwing up.

I wanted to scream, to run, to wave my arms and kick something until I felt better. I could understand Agent Benn's reaction, almost, if she had been working a string of killings like the one I'd just seen. You can't stare at that much blood for very long without starting to see more of it everywhere else.

I just kept taking deep breaths, in and out. The wind was cool and fresh in my face, sharp with the smells of the coming autumn. October evenings in Chicago are chilly, breezy, but I love them anyway. It's my favorite time of year to be outside. I eventually calmed down. Murphy must have been doing the same thing beside me, making herself relax. We both started walking back toward the car at the same time, no words needing to be passed between us.

"I . . ." Murphy began, and fell silent again. I didn't look at her, didn't speak. "I'm sorry, Harry. I lost control. Agent Denton is an asshole, but he does his job, and he was right. Technically speaking, I didn't have any right to be on the scene. I didn't mean to drag you into all this."

She unlocked the doors and got in the car. I got in the passenger side, then reached out and plucked the keys from her hand as she began to start the engine. She quirked her head at me, narrowing her eyes.

I closed my hands around the keys. "Just sit down and relax for a while, Murph. We need to talk."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Harry," she said.

"This is the thanks I get for saving your life. Twice, now. You're going to hold out on me."

"You should know how it works," she said, scowling. But she settled back in her seat and looked out the windshield of the car. We could see the police, forensics, and the FBI suits moving back and forth inside the building. We were both quiet for a long time.

The funny thing was that the problems between Murphy and me came from the same source as the problems with Kim Delaney earlier tonight. Murphy had needed to know something to pursue an investigation. I could have given her the information—but it would have put her in danger to do so. I'd refused to say anything, and when I'd pursued the trail by myself all the way to its end, there had been some burning buildings and a corpse or two. There wasn't enough evidence to bring any charges against me, and the killer we'd been after had been dealt with. But Murphy hadn't ever really forgiven me for cutting her out of the loop.

In the intervening months, she'd called me in for work several times, and I'd given the best service I could. But it had been cool between us. Professional. Maybe it was time to try to bridge that gap again.

"Look, Murph," I said. "We've never really talked about what happened, last spring."

"We didn't talk about it while it was happening," she said, her tone crisp as autumn leaves. "Why should we start now? That was last spring. It's October."

"Give me a break, Murphy. I wanted to tell you more, but I couldn't."

"Let me guess. Cat had your tongue?" she said sweetly.

"You know I wasn't one of the bad guys. You have to know that by now. Hell's bells, I risked my neck to save you."

Murphy shook her head, staring straight forward. "That's not the point."

"No? Then what is?"

"The point, Dresden, is that you lied to me. You refused to give me information that I needed to do my job. When I bring you in on one of my investigations, I am *trusting* you. I don't just go around trusting people. Never have." She took a grip on the steering wheel, her knuckles whitening. "Less than ever, now."

I winced. That stung. What's worse, she was in the right. "Some of what I knew . . . It was dangerous, Murph. It could have gotten you killed."

Her blue eyes fixed on me with a glare that made me lean back against the car door. "I am *not* your daughter, Dresden," she said, in a very soft, calm voice. "I am not some porcelain doll on a shelf. I'm a police officer. I catch the bad guys and I put their asses away, and if it comes down to it, I take a bullet so that some poor housewife or CPA doesn't have to." She got her gun out of its shoulder holster, checked the ammo and the safety, and replaced it. "I don't need your protection."

"Murphy, wait," I said hastily. "I didn't do it to piss you off. I'm your friend. Always have been."

She looked away from me as an officer with a flashlight walked past the car, shining the light about on the ground as he looked for exterior evidence. "You were my friend, Dresden. Now . . ." Murphy shook her head once and set her jaw. "Now, I don't know."

There wasn't much I could say to that. But I couldn't just leave things there. In spite of all the time that had gone by, I hadn't tried to look at things from her point of view. Murphy wasn't a wizard. She had almost no knowledge of the world of the supernatural, the world that the great religion of Science had been failing to banish since the Renaissance. She had nothing to use against some of the things she encountered, no weapon but the knowledge that I was able to give her—and last spring I had taken that weapon away from her, left her defenseless and unprepared. It must have been hell for Murphy, to daily place herself at odds with things that didn't make any sense, things that made forensics teams just shake their heads.

That's what Special Investigations did. They were the team specially appointed by the mayor of Chicago to investigate all the "unusual crimes" that happened in the city. Public opinion, the Church, and official policy still frowned at any references to magic, the supernatural, vampires, or wizards; but the creatures of the spirit world still lurked about, trolls under bridges, cradle-robbing faeries, ghosts and spooks and boogers of every kind. They still terrorized and hurt people, and some of the statistics I'd put together indicated that things were only getting worse, not better. Someone had to try to stop it. In Chicago or any of its sprawling suburbs, that person was Karrin Murphy, and her SI team.

She had held the position longer than any of her many predecessors—because she had been open to the idea that there might be more than was dreamed of in Horatio's books. Because she used the services of the country's only wizard for hire.

I didn't know what to say, so my mouth just started acting on its own. "Karrin. I'm sorry."

Silence lay between us for a long, long time.

She gave a little shiver, finally, and shook her head. "All right," she said, "but if I bring you in on this, Harry, I want your word. No secrets, this time. Not to protect me. Not for anything." She stared out the window, her features softened in the light of the moon and distant streetlights, more gentle.

"Murphy," I said, "I can't promise that. How can you ask me to—"

Her face flashed with anger and she reached for my hand. She did something to one of my fingers that made a quick pain shoot up my arm, and I jerked my hand back by reflex, dropping the keys. She caught them, and jammed one of them in the ignition.

I winced, shaking my stinging fingers for a moment. Then I covered her hand with mine.

"Okay," I said. "All right. I promise. No secrets."

She glanced at me, at my eyes for a breath, and then looked away. She started the car and drove from the parking lot. "All right," she said. "I'll tell you. I'll tell you because I need every bit of help I can get. Because if we don't nail this thing, this werewolf, we're going to have another truckload of corpses on our hands this month. And," she sighed, "because if we don't, I'm going to be out of a job. And you'll probably end up in jail."

Chapter Four

"Jail?" I said. "Jail? Hell, Murphy. Were you planning on mentioning this to me anytime soon?"

She shot me an irritated scowl, headlights of cars going the opposite way on the highway flaring across her face. "Don't even start with me, Harry. I've had a long month."

A dozen questions tried to fight their way out of my mouth. The one that ended up winning was, "Why didn't you call me in on the other killings, last month?"

Murphy turned her eyes back to the road. "I wanted to. Believe me. But I couldn't. Internal Affairs started riding me about what happened with Marcone and Victor Sells last spring. Someone got the idea that I was in cahoots with Marcone. That I helped to murder one of his competitors and took out the ThreeEye drug ring. And so they were poking around pretty hard."

I felt an abrupt twinge of guilt. "Because I was on the scene. You had that warrant out for me and then had it rescinded. And then there were all those rumors about me and Marcone, after the whole thing was over . . ."

Murphy's lips compressed, and she nodded. "Yeah."

"And if you'd have tried to tell me about it, it would have been throwing gasoline on the fire." I rubbed at my forehead. And it would have gotten me looked at harder, too, by whoever was investigating Murphy. She had been protecting me. I hadn't even considered what those rumors Marcone had spread might do to anyone besides myself. Way to go, Harry.

"One thing you're not is stupid, Dresden," she confirmed.

"A little naive, sometimes, but never stupid. IA couldn't turn anything up, but there are enough people who are certain I'm dirty that, along with the people who already don't like me, they can screw me over pretty hard, given the chance."

"That's why you didn't make an issue out of what Agent Benn did," I guessed. "You're trying to keep everything quiet."

"Right," Murphy said. "I'd get ripped open from ass to ears if IA got word of me so much as bending the rules, much less tussling with one of the bureau's agents. Believe me, Denton might look like a jerk, but at least he isn't convinced that I'm dirty. He'll play fair."

"And this is where the killings come in. Right?"

Instead of answering, she cut into the slow lane and slowed to a leisurely pace. I half turned toward her in my seat, to watch her. It was while I did this that I noticed the headlights of another car drift across a couple lanes of traffic to drop into the slow lane behind us. I didn't say anything about it to Murphy, but kept a corner of my eye on the car.

"Right," Murphy said. "The Lobo killings. They started last month, one night before the full moon. We had a couple of gangbangers torn to pieces down at Rainbow Beach. At first, everyone figured it for an animal attack. Bizarre, but who knew, right? Anyway, it was weird, so they handed the investigation to me."

"All right," I said. "What happened then?"

"The next night, it was a little old lady walking past Washington Park. Killed the same way. And it just wasn't *right*, you know? Our forensics guys hadn't turned up anything useful, so I asked in the FBI. They've got access to resources I can't always get to. High-tech forensics labs, that kind of thing."

"And you let the djinni out of the bottle," I guessed.

"Something like that. FBI forensics, that redheaded kid with them, turned up some irregularities in the apparent dentition of the attackers. Said that the tooth marks didn't match genuine wolves or dogs. Said that the paw prints we found were off, too.

Didn't match real wolves." She gave a little shudder and said, "That's when I started thinking it might be something else. You know? They figured that someone was trying to make it *look* like a wolf attack. With this whole wolf motif, someone started calling the perpetrator the Lobo killer."

I nodded, frowning. The headlights were still behind us. "Just a crazy thought: Have you considered telling them the truth? That we might be dealing with a werewolf here?"

Murphy sneered. "Not a chance. They hire conservatives for jobs at the bureau. People who don't believe in ghosts and goblins and all that crap out there that I come to you about. They said that the murders must have been done by some sort of cult or pack of psychos. That they must have furnished themselves with weapons made out of wolf teeth and nails. Left symbolic paw prints around. That's why all the marks and tracks were off. I got Carmichael to check up on you, but your answering service said you were in Minnesota on a call."

"Yeah. Someone saw something in a lake," I confirmed. "What happened after that?"

"All hell broke loose. Three bums in Burnham Park, the next night, and they weren't just dead, they were *shredded*. Worse than that guy tonight. And on the last night of the full moon, an old man outside a liquor store. Then the night after that, we had a businessman and his driver torn up in a parking garage. IA was right there breathing down my neck the whole time, too. Observing everything." She shook her head with a grimace.

"That last victim. All the others were outside, and in a bad part of town. Businessman in a parking garage doesn't fit that pattern."

"Yeah," Murphy said. "James Harding III. One of the last of the red-hot industrialists. He and John Marcone are business partners in some development projects up in the Northwest."

"And tonight, we have another victim linked to Marcone."

"Yeah," Murphy nodded. "I'm not sure what's scarier. Thinking that these are just regular animal attacks, that they're being done by a bunch of psychos with knives edged with wolf teeth, or that they're organized werewolves." She let out a strained little laugh. "That still sounds crazy, even to me. Yes, Your Honor, the victim was killed by a werewolf."

"Let me guess. After the full moon it got quiet."

Murphy nodded. "IA wrapped up with inconclusive findings, and nothing much else happened. No one else died. Until tonight. And we've got four more nights of bright moonlight left, if whoever they are sticks to their pattern."

"You sure there's more than one?" I asked.

"Yeah," Murphy said. "There's bite marks, or bitelike marks, according to Agent Denton, from at least three different weapons. As far as all the lab guys are concerned, it could be multiple perpetrators, but there's no way for forensics to be sure."

"Unless it's real werewolves we're dealing with. In which case each set of marks goes with a different set of teeth, and we're looking at a pack."

Murphy nodded. "But there's no way I'm going to just come out and tell them that. That would put the nails in my career's coffin."

"Uh-huh," I said. "This is the part where you tell me about your job being in danger."

She grimaced. "They only need a good reason to get rid of me, now. If I don't catch these guys, whoever they are, politics will hang me out to dry. After that, it'll be simple for them to get some charges going on me for complicity or obstruction. And they'll probably try to get to you, too. Harry, we've got to catch the killer, or killers. Or I'm history."

"You ever get any blood or hair from the scenes?" I asked.

"Yeah, some," Murphy said.

"What about saliva?"

Murphy frowned at me.

"Saliva. It would be in the bite wounds."

She shook her head. "If they've found it, no one has said anything. Besides, all the samples won't do us a lot of good without a suspect to match them against."

"It won't do *you* a lot of good," I corrected her. "Something left blood on the window when it came through. Maybe that'll turn something up."

Murphy nodded. "That would be great. Okay, Harry. So you know what's going on now. What can you tell me about werewolves?"

I pursed my lips for a minute. "Not much. They weren't ever anything I studied too hard. I can tell you what they're not, mostly. Give me until morning, though, and I'll put together a full report on them." I glanced out the back window as Murphy pulled off the JFK Expressway. The car that I thought had been following us exited as we did.

Murphy frowned. “Morning? Can you do it any sooner?”

“I can have it on your desk by eight. Earlier, if you tell the night sergeant to let me in.”

Murphy sighed and rubbed at her eyes. “Okay. Fine.” We got back to McAnally’s, and she pulled in next to the Blue Beetle. Behind us, the car that had been following us also came into the parking lot. “Jesus, Harry. I can’t believe I’m sitting here talking to you about werewolves killing people in downtown Chicago.” She turned her face to me, her eyes anxious. “Tell me I’m not going nuts.”

I got out of the car, but leaned down to the window. “I don’t think you’re going nuts, Murph. I don’t know. Maybe the FBI is right. Maybe it’s not werewolves. Crazy things happen sometimes.” I gave her half of a smile, which she answered with a faint snort.

“I’ll probably be in my office, Dresden,” she said. “Have that report on my desk by morning.”

And then she pulled out of the parking lot, turning quickly out onto the street. I didn’t get into the Beetle. Instead, I watched the car that had followed us into the parking lot. It cruised around the far side of the lot, then started down the row, toward me, and kept on going.

The driver, a striking woman with shaggy, dark brown hair, peppered with grey, did not turn to look at me as she went past.

I watched the car go, frowning. It left the lot, turning the opposite way Murphy had, and vanished from sight. Had that been the same vehicle that had followed us down the JFK? Or had it only been my imagination? My gut told me that the woman in the car had been following me, but then again, my instincts had cried wolf before.

I got into the Blue Beetle and thought for a minute. I was feeling guilty and a little queasy still. It was my fault Murphy had gotten in trouble. I had put her in the middle of extremely questionable circumstances by not telling her what was going on last spring. The pressure she was under now was my responsibility.

I have what might be considered a very out-of-date and chauvinist attitude about women. I like to treat women like ladies. I like to open doors for them, pay for the meal when I’m on a date, bring flowers, draw out their seat for them—all that sort of thing. I guess I could call it an attitude of chivalry, if I thought more of myself. Whatever you called it, Murphy was a lady in distress. And since I had put her there, it only seemed right that I should get her out of trouble, too.

That wasn’t the only reason I wanted to stop the killings. Seeing Spike torn up like that had scared the hell out of me. I was still shaking a little, a pure and primitive reaction to a very primal fear. I did not want to get eaten by an animal, chewed up by something with a lot of sharp teeth. The very thought of that made me curl up on my car’s seat and hug my knees to my chest, an awkward position considering my height and the comparatively cramped confines of the Beetle.

What had happened to Spike was as brutal and violent a death as anyone could possibly have. Maybe the thug had deserved it. Maybe not. Either way, he was only one victim of many that had been torn apart by something that regular people shouldn’t have to face. I couldn’t just stand aside and do nothing.

I’m a wizard. That means I have power, and power and responsibility go hand in hand. I have a responsibility to use the power I’ve been given, when there is a need for it. The FBI was not in any sense prepared to deal with a pack of ravening werewolves stalking down victims in the midst of a Chicago autumn. That was more my department.

I let out a long breath and sat up again. I reached into my duster’s pocket for car keys, and found the shard of glass wrapped up in my white handkerchief.

I unwrapped it slowly and found the blood-smeared glass still there.

Blood has a kind of power. I could use the blood, cast a spell that would let me follow the blood back to the person who had spilled it. I could find the killer tonight, simply let my magic lead me to him, or them. But it would have to be now. The blood was almost dry, and once it was, I would have a hell of a lot more trouble using it.

Murphy would be royally pissed if I took off without her. She would probably assume that I had intended to follow the trail tonight, purposely leaving her out of the loop. But if I didn’t follow the trail, I’d lose the chance to stop the killer before another night fell.

It didn’t take me long to make up my mind. In the end, saving lives was more important than keeping Murphy from being pissed off at me.

So I got out of the Beetle and opened the storage trunk at the front of the VW. I took out a few wizardly implements: my blasting rod, the replacement for my shield bracelet, and one other thing that no wizard should be without. A Smith & Wesson .38 Chief’s Special.

I carried all of these back to the front of the car with me and got out the shard of glass with smeared blood.

Then I made with the magic.

Chapter Five

I got out the lump of chalk I always keep in my duster pocket, and the circular plastic dome compass that rides a strip of velcro on my dashboard, then squatted down, my voluminous coat spreading out over my legs and ankles. I drew a rough circle upon the asphalt around me with the chalk. The markings were bright against the dark surface and almost glowed beneath the light of the nearly full moon.

I added an effort of will, a tiny investment of energy, to close the circle, and immediately felt the ambient magic in the air around me crowd inward, trapped within the confines of the design. The hairs at the nape of my neck prickled and stood on end. I shivered, and took the shard of glass with its swiftly drying bloodstain and laid it down in the circle between the toes of my boots.

I began a low little chant of nonsense syllables, relaxing, focusing my mind on the effect I wanted. *“Interessari, interressarium,”* I murmured, and touched the plastic dome of the compass to the damp blood. Energy rushed out of me, swirled within the focusing confines of the circle I had drawn, and then rushed downward into the compass with a visible shimmer of silver, dustlike motes.

The compass needle shuddered, spun wildly, and then swung to the bloodstain on the dome like a hound picking up a scent. Then it whirled about and pointed to the southeast, whipping around the circle to hover steadily in that direction.

I grinned in anticipation and smudged the chalk with my boot, releasing the remaining stray energy back into the air, then took up the compass and returned to the Blue Beetle.

The problem with this particular spell was that the compass needle would point unerringly at whomever the blood had come from until the sun rose the next morning and disrupted the simple magical energies I had used to make the spell; but it didn’t point out the swiftest way to get to the target, only the direct direction in which he, she, or it lay.

Traffic in Chicago isn’t ever what any sane person would call friendly or simple, but I had lived there for a while and had learned to survive. I drove past Cook County Hospital, a virtual city of its own inside Chicago, and down past Douglas Park, then turned south on Kedzie. The compass needle slowly aligned to point hard to the east as I traveled south, and I wound up turning east on Fifty-fifth, toward the University of Chicago and Lake Michigan.

It wasn’t exactly a good part of town. In fact, as far as neighborhoods go in Chicago, it was pretty bad. There was a high crime rate, and a lot of the buildings were run-down, abandoned, or only infrequently used. Streetlights were out in a lot of places, so when night closed in, it was darker than most areas. It’s always been a favorite haunt for some of the darker things that come crawling out of the Nevernever for a night on the town. Trolls lurked about like muggers some nights, and any new vampire that came through the city always ended up in this neighborhood or one like it, searching for prey until he could make contact with Bianca or one of the lesser vampire figures of the city.

I pulled over as the compass swung to point at what looked like an abandoned department store, and I killed the engine. The faithful Beetle rattled to a grateful halt. I got the map of the city out of the glove box and squinted at it for a moment. Washington Park and Burnham Park, where four of last month’s deaths had taken place, were less than a mile away on either side of me.

I felt a little shiver run through me. This sure as hell looked like the place to find Murphy’s Lobo killer.

I got out of the car. I kept the blasting rod in my right hand, the dashboard compass in my left. My shield bracelet dangled on my left wrist. My gun was in the left pocket of my duster, within easy reach. I took a moment to take a deep breath, to clear my mind, and to clarify what I wanted to do.

I wasn’t here to bring the killer down, whoever he was. I was just locating him for Murphy. Murphy could put the guy under surveillance and nail him the next time he tried to move.

Even if I did capture him, Murphy couldn’t exactly bring him up on charges, based on the word of a professional *wizard*. Municipal judges would love having a cop appear before them and start spouting such crazy talk.

I spun my blasting rod around in my fingers, grinned, and started forward. That was all right. I didn’t need the justice system to recognize my power to be able to use it.

There were boards over the front windows of the once department store. I tested each one as I went past and found one that swung in easily. I stopped and examined it carefully, wary of any alarms that might be attached to it.

Such as the string tied across the bottom, lined with little jingle bells. If I had pushed the wooden sheet any farther inward, I would have set it to jangling. Instead, I slipped the string off the head of one of the nails it hung by, lowered the bells carefully, and slipped inside the dim confines of the abandoned store.

It was a skeletal place. There were still the bones of shelves, forming long aisles, but now barren of merchandise. Empty fluorescent light fixtures dangled in forlorn rows from the ceiling, and the powdered glass of shattered, tubular bulbs dusted the floor beneath them. Light seeped in from the street, mostly moonlight, but more light came from the back of the store. I checked my bloodstained compass. The needle was pointing firmly toward the light. I closed my eyes, and Listened, a skill that isn’t hard to pick up, but that most people don’t know how to do anymore. I heard voices, at least a pair of them, talking in hushed, urgent tones.

I crept toward the back of the store, using the barren shelves to keep myself from being seen. Then I held my breath and peeked up over the top of the last row of shelves.

Gathered around an old Coleman lantern were several people, all young, of various shapes and sizes and both genders. They were dressed in all shades of black, and most wore jackets and bracelets and collars of dark leather. Some had earrings and nose rings; one had a tattoo showing on his throat. If they had been tall, muscular folk, they would have looked intimidating, but they weren’t. They looked like college students, or younger, some still with acne, or too-oily hair, beards that wouldn’t quite grow all the way in, and the thinness of youth. They looked awkward and out of place.

Four or five of them were gathered behind and around a stout young man less than five and a half feet tall. He had thick glasses and pudgy fingers, and would have looked more at home with a pocket protector than with the spiked leather gloves on his fingers. He stood with his hands on his hips, glaring up at a rail-thin blond girl at least a head taller than he, the lines of her willowy body all awkward, her long, sad face set in an expression of anger. Her hair fell about her face and head in a ragged mane, but her eyes sparkled with contained wrath. Another five or six of the young people were gathered behind her, and everyone seemed tense.

“And I’m telling you,” the young man snarled in a muted voice, “that we should be out there right now. We can’t allow ourselves to rest until we’ve found them all and torn them apart.” There was a murmur of agreement from the people behind him.

“I swear, Billy,” the blonde said. “You’re such a testosterone-laden idiot. If we were out there right now, they might catch on to us.”

“Use your head, Georgia,” Billy snapped back. “You think they haven’t figured it out by now? They could take all of us out right this minute if they hit us.”

“They haven’t,” Georgia pointed out. “*She* told us not to move again tonight, and I’m not moving. And if you try it, so help me, I’m going to tie your ankles to your ears.”

Billy growled, actually growled, though it sounded posed and forced, and stepped forward. “You think you can handle me, bitch?” he said. “Bring it on.”

Georgia’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t sign on to this wolf thing to fight hapless losers like you, Billy. Don’t make me start now.” She glared at the young people standing behind Billy.

“You know what *she* told us. Are you going to start going up against her word?”

“Listen, Alphas,” Billy said, turning to look at those behind him, and then at those backing his opponent. “I’ve led you for all this time. I’ve done what I’ve promised to do. Are you going to stop trusting *me*?”

I peered at the discussion and then lowered my head again, back into the shadows. Holy I-Was-a-Teenage-Werewolf, Batman. I checked my compass, and it pointed firmly at the lit room, the group gathered around the lantern. Were these the killers? They looked more like a group of computer nerds geared up for Leather Night.

This was a start at least. I could clear out now, and let Murphy know what I had seen. I’d need to check around the building outside first, see if any of the group had any cars parked nearby, to be able to give Murphy the license plate numbers. Hell, we weren’t far from the university. Maybe some of them would have parking passes.

“What is the meaning of this?” came a clear, strident woman’s voice.

I craned my neck up to the edge of the shelf again. A dark-complected woman, as tall as the long-faced blonde, but older, solid with muscle and moving with an animal surety, had come into the room from a back door. Her brown hair was peppered with grey, and it took me only a second to recognize the woman from the car in the parking lot outside of McAnally’s. My heart started to pound a little more quickly with excitement. She had been following Murphy and me, after all. She glared at the two groups of young people, her eyes an almost eerie shade of amber that could barely be construed as brown. “Have I taught you no better?” the woman demanded.

Billy and Georgia were both looking down at the floor uncomfortably. The other young people had assumed similar postures, like a group of children caught planning to go out after curfew.

“This isn’t a game. Someone followed me here. They’re on to us. If you start making mistakes now, you’ll pay for them with your life,” the woman said, stalking back and forth around the group. I checked my compass.

The needle swung back and forth as she walked, pointing solidly at her. My heart leapt into my throat. I considered this woman, with her almost animal vitality, her commanding presence and force of will. This woman, I thought, might be a killer. And she knew she had been followed. How? How in the hell had she known I was after her?

I looked up at her again, excited, only to find her staring intently at the thick patch of shadows around the shelves I hid behind. One of the young people started to say something, and the woman raised her hand for silence. I saw her nostrils flare as she breathed in through her nose, and she took a step in my direction. I held my breath, not daring to duck back down behind the shelves, lest the motion give me away.

“Join hands,” snapped the woman. “Now.” And then she turned to the Coleman lantern on the floor and snuffed it out, plunging the room into blackness.

There was a moment of confused murmuring, a commanding hiss from the woman, and then there was nothing but silence and the sound of shoes and boots moving over the tiles, toward the back of the store. They were getting away. I rose, blind, and headed around the shelves toward them as quickly as I could, trying to follow.

In retrospect, it wasn’t the smartest decision, but I knew that I couldn’t afford to let them get away. The spell I’d wrought on my compass wouldn’t last long, not long enough to find the woman again, much less any of her pack of young people. I wanted to follow them out, to get the license plates on their cars, anything that would let me help Murphy locate them after they’d run.

I miscalculated the length of my stride and bounced into the wall at the end of the aisle. I sucked in a hiss of pain and reoriented myself, following them, using the darkness to conceal me as much as they did. I could have made some light for myself—but as long as no one could see, no one would start shooting, either, I reasoned. I moved out carefully, listening, and following the sounds.

I had only a second’s warning, the sound of claws sliding on the old tile, and then something large and furry slammed into my legs below the knee, taking them out from under me and sending me heavily to the floor. I let out a shout and swung my blasting rod like a baseball bat, feeling it crack down solidly on something hard and bony. There was a snarl, a deep, animal sound, and something tore the rod from my hand and sent it flying away. It clattered hollowly on the tile floor. I dropped my compass, scrambled for my gun, and got my feet underneath me, backpedaling, yelling my fear out into a wordless challenge.

I stood still for a moment, staring at nothing, breathing hard, my gun heavy in my hand. Fear made my heart pound, and as always, anger followed hard on the heels of fear. I was furious that I had been attacked. I’d half expected something to try to stop me, but in the dark whatever had been snarling had scared me a lot more than I’d thought it would.

Nothing happened after a minute, and I couldn’t hear anything. I reached into my shirt and drew out the silver pentacle that had been my mother’s, the five-pointed star upright within a circle, the symbol of order, symmetry, balance of power. I focused my will on it, concentrating, and the pentacle began to glow with a faint, gentle light—hardly the blinding luminescence that came as the result of focusing power against a being of the Nevernever, but adequate enough to navigate by, at least. I moved toward the back room, blue-white light like moonlight pooled around me.

It was definitely stupid to keep going forward, but I was angry, furious enough to bumble my way through the back room of the department store, until I saw the dark blue outline of an open doorway. I headed for it, tripping over a few more things along the way that I couldn’t quite make out in the werelight of my amulet, angrily kicking a few things from the path of my feet, until I emerged into an alley behind the old building, breathing open air, able to see again in dim shapes and colors.

Something hit me heavily from behind, driving me to the ground, gravel digging into my ribs through my shirt. My concentration vanished, and with it the light of my amulet. I felt something hard and metallic shoved against the back of my skull, a knee pressed into the small of my back, and a woman’s voice snarled, “Drop the gun, or I blow your head off.”

Chapter Six

Call me crazy, but I'm not big on defiance when I've got a gun rammed against my skull. I carefully set the .38 in my left hand down and moved my fingers away from it.

"Hands behind your back. Do it," snarled the woman. I did it. I felt the cold metal of the handcuffs around my wrists, heard the ratcheting sound of the cuffs closing around them. The knee lifted off of my back, and my attacker shoved me over with one leg, snapped on a flashlight, and shone it in my eyes.

"Harry?" she said.

I blinked and squinted against the light. I recognized the voice now. "Hi, Murphy. This is going to be one of those conversations, isn't it?"

"You jerk," Murphy said, her voice harsh. She was still only a shadow behind the flashlight, but I recognized the contours now. "You found a lead and followed it, and you didn't contact me."

"Those who live in glass houses, Lieutenant," I said, and sat up, my hands still held tightly behind my back. "There wasn't time. It was hot and I couldn't afford to wait or I might have lost it."

Murphy grunted. "How did you find this place?"

"I'm a wizard," I told her, and wagged my arms as best I could. "Magic. What else?" Murphy growled, but hunkered down behind me and unlocked the cuffs. I rubbed at my wrists after they were freed. "How about you?"

"I'm a cop," she said. "A car tailed us back to McAnally's from the murder scene. I waited until it was gone and followed it back here." She stood up again. "You were inside. Did anyone go out the front?"

"No. I don't think so. But I couldn't see."

"Dammit," Murphy said. She put her gun away in her coat. "They didn't come out the back. There must be some way up to the roof." She stood up and peered around at the closely packed buildings, shining her flashlight around the roof's edge. "They're long gone by now."

"Win some, lose some." I got to my feet.

"Like hell," she said and turned and started into the building.

I hurried to catch up with her. "Where are you going?"

"Inside. To look for stairs, a ladder, whatever."

"You can't follow them," I said, falling into step beside her as she went into the darkened building. "You can't take them on, not with just you and me."

"Them?" Murphy said. "I only saw one." She stopped and looked at me, and I explained to her in terse terms what had happened since we parted in the parking lot. Murphy listened, the lines at the corners of her blue eyes serious.

"What do you think happened?" she asked when I was finished.

"We found werewolves," I said. "The woman, the dark one with the grey in her hair, was their leader."

"Group killers?" Murphy said.

"Pack," I corrected her. "But I'm not so sure that they were the killers. They didn't seem . . . I don't know. Cold enough. Mean enough."

Murphy shook her head and turned to walk outside. "Can you give me a good description?"

I kept up with her. "Good enough, I guess. But what do you want it for?"

"I'm going to put out an APB for the woman we saw, and I want you to describe the kids you heard talking."

"What do you need that for? Don't you have the plates off the car she was driving?"

"I already called them in," Murphy said. "Rental. Probably taken out under a false ID."

"I think you've got the wrong people, Murph," I said. "Don't put out that APB."

"Why shouldn't I?" Murphy asked. "Someone follows me back to town from the scene of a murder. Not only that, but you can confirm to me that they were the killer from the scene. Not in a court of law, I know, but you can give it to me, and that's enough. Standard investigation will turn up the rest if we know where to look."

I held up my hand. "Hold on, hold on. My spell didn't tell me that the woman was the killer. Only that it was her blood at the scene."

Murphy folded her arms and glared up at me. "Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"You still don't get it, Murphy," I said, my own temper rising a little. "You don't start something with the kind of people who live in boogey-land unless you're willing to take it all the way, right there, right then. If you start harassing a pack of werewolves, setting the police after them, you've just declared war. You'd better be ready to fight it."

Murphy thrust her jaw out. "Don't worry about me. I can handle it."

"I'm not saying you can't," I said. "But whatever it was that tore apart Spike back at Marcone's club wasn't the same thing that was with me in the dark back there." I jerked my head at the main room of the department store.

"Oh yeah?" Murphy said. "Why not?"

"Because it could have killed me and it didn't."

"You don't think you could have taken care of yourself against a wolf, Harry?"

"In the dark?" I said. "Murphy, it's been nearly a hundred years since the wolf went extinct in most of the United States. You've got no idea, none at all, of how dangerous they can be. A wolf can run faster than you can drive a car through most of Chicago. His jaws can snap your thighbones with one jerk. A wolf can see the heat of your body in the complete dark, and can count the hairs on your head from a hundred yards off by starlight. He can hear your heart beating thirty or forty yards away. The wolf that was there in the dark with me could have killed me, easy. It didn't. It disarmed me, even after I'd hit it, and then it left."

"That doesn't mean anything," Murphy said—but she folded her arms over her stomach and glanced at the shadows around us with a little shiver. "Maybe the killer knows you. Maybe it didn't want to risk killing a wizard. Maybe, just maybe, the wolf did it to throw you off. Maybe it spared you just so you would react in this way, just to avoid suspicion."

"Maybe," I admitted. "But I don't think so. The kids I saw . . ." I shook my head. "Don't put out the APB, yet. Hold off on it, until I can get you some more information. Look, you pay me to give you my advice, to be your consultant on the supernatural. I'm your expert, right? Listen to me. Trust me."

She stared up at my face, her expression intent, looking away quickly when her eyes met mine. Murphy had known me for a while. You don't go looking into a wizard's eyes without a darned good reason. Wizards see too much.

"All right," she said finally. "I'll hold off on it—but only until tomorrow morning, when I have that report. If you can't show me anything by then, I'm going ahead after the people we saw tonight." Her mouth quirked in a fierce little grin. "I'd have a hell of a time explaining what I was doing out at the crime scene in Rosemont, anyway." The grin vanished, leaving only

ferocity. "But you *will* have that information for me, Dresden, bright and early. Make no mistake. I will catch the killer before anyone else dies."

I nodded to Murphy. "In the morning," I said. "You got it."

Murphy's flashlight flickered and then went out as the filament burst with an audible pop.

Murphy sighed in the darkness. "Nothing ever works right when you're here. Sometimes, Harry," she said, "I really hate hanging out with you."

Chapter Seven

I entered my apartment, tossed my blasting rod, which I had recovered from the abandoned department store, into the corner next to my wizard's staff and my sword cane, and locked the door behind me. It was one of those steel-frame doors, the antiburglar kind. I bought it after a demon had come stomping into my apartment six months ago and wrecked my place.

My apartment is in the basement of a huge old rooming house that somehow managed to survive all the Chicago fires. It's made almost entirely of wood, and it creaks and groans when the wind blows, which is all the time in this city, and makes gentle, soothing music. It's a place with a history, the neighbors are quiet, and my rent is cheap—though less so than it was before the demon trashed my place.

The apartment itself is devoid of electrical devices, for reasons that should be evident by now. There is a fireplace, and a kitchenette off the main room, a little bedroom adjacent to that, and a bathroom inside the bedroom. Sunken windows are high on each of the four walls, and one is on the wall of the bathroom.

I decorate in textures more than I do in colors; there were thick rugs all over the bare stone floors, layered on top of one another in most places. Demon acid had burned away most of my furniture, and I had been obliged to scavenge secondhand stores for replacements. I like furniture with a lot of old wood and soft cloth, and I had made my purchases accordingly. Tapestries hung from my walls, the oldest tapestries that I could find, covering the bare stone. In the ruddy firelight, the oranges and browns and reds that constituted the primary colors of the decor didn't look half bad.

I went over to the fireplace and built up the fire. October in Chicago is a cold, breezy month, and my dank little haven is usually chilly until I get a fire going. I dropped a few logs on the fire, and Mister made an appearance, rubbing up against my leg and purring fondly, staggering my balance off to one side.

"Been getting into the steaks again, eh, Mister?" I said, and rubbed the big, grey cat's ears. Mister is larger than a lot of dogs. Maybe one of his parents was part wildcat. I found him in a Dumpster one day when he was a kitten and he promptly adopted me. Despite my struggles, Mister had been an understanding soul, and I eventually came to realize that I was a part of his little family, and by his gracious consent was allowed to remain in his apartment. Cats. Go figure.

I fired up the wood-burning stove and prepared a quick meal of Spaghettios, grilled chicken, and toast. Mister shared in my meal, and split a can of Coke with me, as usual, and I tossed the dishes in the sink to soak before I went to my bedroom and put on my robe.

Let the wizardry commence.

I went to a spot in the far corner and moved the rug there, then lifted up the door in the floor beneath it, revealing the steep stepladder that led down to the subbasement, where I kept my lab.

I teetered down the stairs, holding a lit candle that cast a golden glow on the cheerful havoc that is my laboratory. Tables lined the walls, and the longest table filled most of the center of the room, leaving a cramped walk space around it, except for an area at the far side of the lab that I kept completely clear for my summoning circle, a ring of bright copper set into the floor. Books, notebooks, defunct ballpoint pens, broken pencils, boxes, plastic containers, old butter bowls, empty jelly jars, and plastic Baggies lay next to other containers of every size and shape that held the spices, rare stones, bones, fur, blood, oddments, jewelry, and other ingredients useful to wizardly pursuits and studies.

I reached the bottom of the ladder, stepped over a precariously balanced stack of comic books (don't ask), and started lighting the other candles that lay on dishes around the chilly room, finally bending to light up the kerosene heater that I keep down in the lab in an effort to at least blunt the cold. "Bob," I said then. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

Up on one of the shelves, huddled in the midst of a thick stack of hardbacks, was the bleached, smooth form of a human skull, its empty eye sockets gaping. Deep in those eye sockets, there was a flickering of orange light, which grew and solidified into twin points of lambent illumination. "Sleepyhead. Oh, that's rich, Harry. With a sense of humor like that, you could make a living as a garbage man anywhere in the country." The skull's mouth gaped open in the parody of a yawn, though I knew the spirit within, Bob, didn't feel fatigue in the same way that living beings did. I put up with his lip, so to speak—Bob had worked for several wizards over the course of a dozen mortal lifetimes, and he knew more about the nuts and bolts of magic than I ever would.

"What are we doing, now?" Bob sniggered. "More weight-loss potions?"

"Look, Bob," I said. "That was only to get me through a rough month. Someone's got to pay the rent around here."

"All right," Bob said smugly. "You going to get into breast enhancement, then? I'm telling you, that's where the money is."

"That isn't what magic is for, Bob. How petty can you get?"

"Ah," Bob said, his eye lights flickering. "The question is, how *pretty* can you get *them*? You aren't a half-bad wizard, Dresden. You should think about how grateful all those beautiful women will be."

I snorted and started cleaning off a space on the center table, stacking things up to one side. "You know, Bob, some of us aren't obsessed with sex."

Bob snorted, no easy feat for a guy with no nose or lips. "Some of us don't take a real, working body and all five senses for granted, either, Harry. When's the last time you saw Susan?"

"I don't know," I responded. "Couple weeks ago. We're both pretty busy with work."

Bob heaved a sigh. "A gorgeous woman like that, and here you are, down in your musty old lab, getting ready to do more ridiculous nonsense."

"Precisely," I said. "Now, shut up and let's get to work."

Bob grumbled something in Latin, but rattled a few times to shake the dust off of the skull. "Sure, what do I know? I'm just a pathetic little spirit, right?"

"With a photographic memory, three or four hundred years' worth of research experience, and more deduction capacity than a computer, Bob, yeah."

Bob almost seemed to smile. "Just for that, you get my best effort tonight, Harry. Maybe you're not such an idiot after all."

"Great," I said. "I want to work up a couple of potions, and I want to know everything you know about werewolves."

"What kind of potions, and what kind of werewolves?" Bob said promptly.

I blinked. "There's more than one?"

"Hell, Harry. We've made at least three dozen different kinds of potions down here ourselves, and I don't see why you wouldn't—"

"No, no, no," I growled at Bob. "Werewolves. There's more than one kind of werewolf?"

"Eh? More than one kind of what?" Bob tilted his skull over to one side, as though cocking an invisible hand to his ear bones.

"Werewolf, werewolf."

"*There* wolf," Bob replied solemnly, his voice seething with a hokey accent. "*There* castle."

I blinked at him. "Uh. What the heck are you talking about?"

"It's a *joke*, Harry. Stars almighty, you *never* get out, do you?"

I eyed the grinning skull and growled in frustration. "Don't make me come up there."

"Okay, okay. Sheesh. Aren't we grumpy tonight?" Bob's jaws stretched in a yawn again.

"I'm working another murder case, Bob, and I don't have time to goof around."

"Murder. Mortal business is so complicated. You never hear about murder charges in the Nevernever."

"That's because everything there is immortal. Bob, just shut up and tell me what you know about werewolves. If there's a bunch of different flavors, tell me what they are." I got out a notebook and a fresh pencil, then a couple of clean beakers with alcohol-flame burners to heat whatever liquid I put in them.

"All right," Bob said. "How much do you know?"

"Exactly nothing about werewolves. My teacher never covered that with me."

Bob barked out a harsh little laugh. "Old Justin had a lousy sense of just about everything. He got what was coming to him, Harry, and don't let anyone on the White Council tell you any different."

I stopped for a moment. A sudden rush of mixed feelings, anger and fear and mostly regret, washed through me. I closed my eyes. I could still see him, my teacher, dying in flames born of my will and anger. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Hell, the Council even suspended the sentence on you. You were vindicated. Say, I wonder what ever happened to Elaine. Now *there* was a sweet piece of—”

“Werewolves, Bob,” I said, in a very quiet, very angry voice. One hand started to hurt, and I saw that my fingers had clenched into a fist, the knuckles turning white. I turned my eyes to him, glaring.

I heard the skull make a gulping sound. And then he said, “Right. Okay. Werewolves. And, uh, which potions did you want?”

“I want a pick-me-up potion. A night’s rest in a bottle. And I want something that will make me imperceptible to a werewolf.” I reached for the notebook and my pencil.

“First one’s tough to do. There’s nothing quite like a decent night’s sleep. But we can make some super-coffee, no problem.” He spouted out the formula to me, and I noted it down as he went, my handwriting too dark and angular. I was still angry from the mere mention of my old master’s name. And the welter of emotions that rushed up with my memories of Elaine wouldn’t subside for an hour.

We all have our demons.

“What about the second one?” I asked the skull.

“Can’t really be done,” Bob said. “Wolves have just got way too much on the ball to hide from every one of their senses without doing some major work. I’m talking, like, a greater Ring of Invisibility, not just a Shadowcape or something.”

“Do I look like I’m made of money? I can’t afford that. What about a partial-hiding potion, then?”

“Oh, like a blending brew? Look like an unobtrusive part of the background, something like that? I would think that would be the most useful, really. Keep you from being noticed to begin with.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll take what I can get.”

“No problem,” Bob assured me, and rattled off another formula, which I jotted down. I checked the ingredients list, and thought that I had them all in stock among the countless containers on my shelves.

“Fine. I can get started on these. How much do you know about werewolves, Bob?”

“Plenty. I was in France during the Inquisition.” Bob’s voice was dry (but that is to be expected, considering).

I started on the first potion, the stimulant. Every potion has eight parts. One part is a base liquid to hold the others and provide a medium for mixing. Five parts are symbolically linked to each of the five senses. One is similarly linked to the mind, and another to the spirit. The basic ingredient to the stimulant potion was coffee, while the base for the scent-masking potion was water. I got them both to boiling. “Lot of werewolfery going on then?”

“Are you kidding?” Bob said. “It was werewolf central. We had every kind of werewolf you could think of. Hexenwolves, werewolves, lycanthropes, and loup-garou to boot. Every kind of lupine theriomorph you could think of.”

“Therro-what?” I said.

“Theriomorph,” Bob said. “Anything that shape-shifts from a human being into an animal form. Werewolves are theriomorphs. So are werebears, weretigers, werebuffalo . . .”

“Buffalo?” I asked.

“Sure. Some Native American shamans could do a buffalo. But almost everyone does predators, and until pretty recently, wolves were the scariest predator anyone around Europe could think of.”

“Uh, okay,” I said. “And there’s a difference between types of werewolves?”

“Right,” Bob confirmed. “Mostly it depends on how you go from human form to wolf form, and how much of your humanity you retain. Don’t burn the coffee.”

I turned down the flame beneath the beaker of coffee, annoyed. “I know, I know. Okay, then. How do you get to be a wolf?”

“The classic werewolf,” Bob said, “is simply a human being who uses magic to shift himself into a wolf.”

“Magic? Like a wizard?”

“No,” Bob said. “Well. Sort of. He’s like a wizard who only knows how to cast the one spell, the one to turn him into a wolf, and knows how to get back out of it again. Most people who learn to be werewolves aren’t very good at it for a while, because they keep all of their own humanity.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Bob said, “they can reshape themselves into the form of a wolf, but it’s pretty much just topology. They rearrange their physical body, but their mind remains the same. They can think and reason, and their personality doesn’t change—but they don’t have a wolf’s instincts or reflexes. They’re used to being sight-oriented bipeds, not smell-oriented quadrupeds. They would have to learn everything from scratch.”

“Why would someone do something like that?” I said. “Just learn to turn into a wolf, I mean.”

“You’ve never been a peasant in medieval France, Harry,” Bob said. “Life was hard for those people. Never enough food, shelter, medicine. If you could give yourself a fur coat and the ability to go out and hunt your own meat, you would have jumped at the chance, too.”

“Okay, I think I’ve got it,” I said. “Do you need silver bullets or anything? Do you turn into a werewolf if you get bitten?”

“Bah,” Bob said. “No. Hollywood stole that from vampires. And the silver-bullet thing is only in special cases. Werewolves are just like regular wolves. You can hurt them with weapons just like you can a real wolf.”

“That’s good news,” I said, stirring the potion. “What other kinds are there?”

“There’s another version of a werewolf—when someone *else* uses magic to change you into a wolf.”

I glanced up at him. “Transmogrification? That’s illegal, Bob. It’s one of the Laws of Magic. If you transform someone into an animal, it destroys their personality. You *can’t* transform someone else without wiping out their mind. It’s practically murder.”

“Yeah. Neat, huh? But actually, most personalities can survive the transformation. For a little while at least. Really strong wills might manage to keep their human memories and personality locked away for several years. But sooner or later, they’re irretrievably gone, and you’re left with nothing but a wolf.”

I turned from the potions to scribble in my notebook. “Okay. What else makes a werewolf?”

“The most common way, back in France, was to make a deal with a demon or a devil or a powerful sorcerer. You get a wolf-hide belt, put it on, say the magic words, and whammy, you’re a wolf. A *Hexenwolf*.”

“Isn’t that just like the first kind?”

“No, not at all. You don’t use your own magic to become a wolf. You use someone else’s.”

I frowned. “Isn’t that the second kind, then?”

“Stop being obtuse,” Bob chided me. “It’s different because you’re employing a talisman. Sometimes it’s a ring or amulet, but usually it’s a belt. The talisman provides an anchor for a spirit of bestial rage. Nasty thing from the bad side of the Nevernever. That spirit wraps around a human personality to keep it from being destroyed.”

“A kind of insulation,” I said.

“Exactly. It leaves you with your own intellect and reason, but the spirit handles everything else.”

I frowned. “Sounds a little easy.”

“Oh, sure,” Bob said. “It’s really easy. And when you use a talisman to turn into a wolf, you lose all of your human inhibitions and so on, and just run on your unconscious desires, with the talisman-spirit in charge of the way the body moves. It’s really efficient. A huge wolf with human-level intelligence and animal-level ferocity.”

I eyed Bob, and gathered up the other ingredients for the stimulant potion: a morning doughnut, for taste; a cock's crow, for hearing; fresh soap, for smell; bits of a washcloth, for touch; and a beam of dawn sunshine for sight; a to-do list, for the mind; and a bit of bright, cheerful music, for the spirit; and the potion was simmering along nicely.

Bob said nothing while I added the ingredients, and when I was finished I said, "Most people don't have the strength to control a spirit like that, I'd think. It would influence their actions. Maybe even control them. Suppress their conscience."

"Yeah. So?"

"So it sounds more like you'd be creating a monster."

"It's effective," Bob said. "I don't know about the good or the evil of the thing. That's something that only you mortals worry about."

"What did you call this flavor again?"

"Hexenwolf," Bob said, with a strong Germanic accent. "Spell wolf. The Church declared war on anyone who chose to become a Hexenwolf, and burned a huge number of people at the stake."

"Silver bullets?" I asked. "Bitten and turn into a werewolf?"

"Would you get off this 'bitten and turn into a werewolf' kick, Harry?" Bob said. "It doesn't work that way. Not ever. Or you'd have werewolves overrunning the entire planet in a couple of years."

"Fine, fine," I sighed. "What about the silver bullets?"

"Don't need them."

"All right," I said, and continued jotting down information to put together for Murphy in a report. "*Hexenwolf*. Got it. What else?"

"Lycanthropes," Bob said.

"Isn't that a psychological condition?"

"It might *also* be a psychological condition," Bob said. "But it was a reality first. A lycanthrope is a natural channel for a spirit of rage. A lycanthrope turns into a beast, but only inside his head. The spirit takes over. It affects the way he acts and thinks, makes him more aggressive, stronger. They also tend to be very resistant to pain or injury, sickness; they heal rapidly—all sorts of things."

"But they don't actually shape-shift into a wolf?"

"Give that boy a Kewpie," Bob said. "They're just people, too, but they're awfully fierce. Ever heard of the Norse berserkers? Those guys were lycanthropes, I think. And they're born, not made."

I stirred the stimulant potion, and made sure it was at an even simmer. "And what was the last one? Loop what?"

"Loup-garou," Bob said. "Or that was the name Etienne the Enchanter used for them, before he got burned at the stake. The loup-garou are the major monsters, Harry. Someone has cursed them to become a wolflike demon, and usually at the full moon. That someone's got to be really powerful, too, like a major heavyweight sorcerer or a demon lord or one of the Faerie Queens. When the full moon comes, they transform into a monster, go on a killing spree, and slaughter everything they come across until the moon sets or the sun rises."

A sudden little chill went over me, and I shivered. "What else?"

"Supernatural speed and power. Supernatural ferocity. They recover from injuries almost instantly, if they become hurt at all. They're immune to poison and to any kind of sorcery that goes for their brain. Killing machines."

"Sounds great. I guess this hasn't happened all that often? I'd have heard something by now."

"Right," Bob said. "Not often. Usually, the poor cursed bastard knows enough to shut himself away somewhere, or to head out into the wilderness. The last major loup-garou rampage happened around Gevaudan, France, back in the sixteenth century. More than two hundred people were killed in a little more than a year."

"Holy shit," I said. "How did they stop it?"

"They killed it," Bob said. "Here's where the silver bullets finally come in, Harry. Only a silver weapon can hurt a loup-garou, and not only that, the silver has to be inherited from a family member. Inherited silver bullets."

"Really? Why would that work and not regular silver?"

"I don't make the laws of magic, Harry. I just know what they are and have an idea of when they're changing. That one hasn't changed. I think maybe it has something to do with the element of sacrifice."

"Inherited silver," I mumbled. "Well. We'll just have to hope that this wasn't a loup-garou, I guess."

"If it was a louter, you'd know," Bob said wisely. "In the middle of this town, you'd have a dozen people dead every time the full moon came around. What's going on?"

"A dozen people are dying every time the full moon comes around." I filled Bob in on the Lobo killings, giving him all the information Murphy had given to me, and started on the next potion. Into the water went the ingredients: plastic wrap for sight; a bit of plain white cotton, for touch; a little deodorant for smell; a rustle of wind for hearing; a leaf of plain old lettuce, for taste; and finally I threw in a blank piece of paper, for the mind, and some elevator music for the spirit. The ingredients were boring. The potion looked and smelled boring. Perfect.

"Lot of dead people," Bob commented. "I'll let you know if I think of anything good. I wish I knew something else."

"I want you to learn more," I told him. "Go out and see what else you can round up on werewolves."

Bob snorted. "Fat chance, Harry. I'm a spirit of intellect, not an errand boy." But when I said the word "out," Bob's eyes glittered.

"I'll pick you up some new romance novels, Bob," I offered.

Bob's teeth clicked a couple of times. "Give me a twenty-four-hour pass," he said.

I shook my head. "Forget it. The last time I let you out, you invaded a party over at Loyola and set off an orgy."

Bob sniffed. "I didn't do anything to anyone that a keg wouldn't have done."

"But those people didn't *ask* for you to get into their systems, Bob. No way. You had your fun, and I'm not letting you out again for a while."

"Oh, come on, Harry."

"No," I said flatly.

"It would only be one little night o—"

"No," I said again.

Bob glowered at me and demanded, "New romances. None of those tatty used ones. I want something off the bestseller list."

"I want you back by sunrise," I countered.

"Fine," Bob snapped. "I can't believe how ungrateful you are, after everything I've done for you. I'll see if I can get someone's name. There might be a spirit or two who could get you some juicy information." The orange lights that were his eyes glittered and then flowed out of the skull in a misty cloud of lambent illumination. The cloud flowed up the ladder and out of my laboratory.

I sighed and set the second potion to simmering. It would take another hour or two to cook the potions, and then to shove the magic into them, so I sat down with my notebook and started writing up my report. I tried to ignore the headache that was creeping up the back of my neck toward the crown of my head, but it did little good.

I had to help Murphy nail the killer, whoever it was, while avoiding any trouble with the FBI. Otherwise, she was out of a job, and even if I didn't end up in jail, I would be out of a living myself. Johnny Marcone's man had been killed, and I would be a fool to think he would stand idly by and do nothing in response. I was sure the gangster would rear his head sooner or later.

Aside from all of that, there was a monster of one kind or another lurking in the dark, and the police and the FBI had been helpless to stop it. That left only me, Harry Dresden, your friendly neighborhood wizard, to step in and do something about it. And, if the killer figured out that I was getting involved, he would doubtless start gunning for me next. My troubles were multiplying.

Hexenwolves. Werewolves. Lycanthropes. Loup-garou.
What will they think of next?

Chapter Eight

The police headquarters downtown consists of a sprawling collection of buildings that have sprung up over the years as the need for law enforcement has increased. They don't match, and they come from a wildly varying selection of styles and designs, but they have somehow adapted themselves into a cohesive whole—much like the force itself. Special Investigations operates out of a big, run-down old building, a huge cube that has managed to hold up solidly in spite of the years, the grime, the smog, and the graffiti sprayed on its walls. It has bars over the windows and the doors and sits hunkered amidst buildings much taller than it, like a faithful old bulldog amidst a crowd of unruly children, struggling to maintain peace and order.

The inside of the building is plain, even dingy, but they keep it clean. The old warhorse of a desk sergeant eyed me as I entered the station, his grey mustache bristling over an impressive jaw. “Hiya, Bill,” I told him, and held up the manila envelope I had under one arm. “Bringing something up to Murphy in SI.”

“Dresden,” he said warily and jerked a thumb toward the stairs behind him, giving me permission to go.

I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, but I had showered and dressed nicely before I left the house, in neat business clothes, for once, instead of my usual western shirt and blue jeans. I kept the battered old duster, though, with my blasting rod dangling from a thong inside of it. I took the stairs two at a time and passed a few cops along the way. Several recognized me, and one or two even nodded, but I thought I could detect a sense of uneasiness from each of them. Apparently, I was carrying a distinct odor with the law at the moment.

I wrinkled up my nose. The police had always known me as something of a nut, the crazy guy who claimed to be a wizard, but a useful nut, who could provide good information and whose apparent “psychic abilities” had helped them on a number of occasions. I was used to being seen as one of the good guys, but now the cops were giving me the neutral, professional glances that they would give to a potential criminal, rather than the casual greetings one would give to a comrade in arms. It was to be expected, maybe, since rumor had associated my name with Johnny Marccone's, but it was still disturbing.

I was muttering to myself and deep in my own sleep-deprived thoughts when I bumped into a tall, lovely woman, dark of hair and eye, full of mouth, long of leg. She was wearing a tan skirt and jacket with a crisp white blouse. Her raven brows furrowed in consternation until she looked up at me, and then her eyes glowed with a sort of friendly avarice. “Harry,” she said, her lips curving into a smile. She stood up on her tiptoes and kissed my cheek. “Fancy seeing you here.”

I cleared my throat. “Hi, Susan,” I said. “Did that syndication deal go through?”

She shook her head. “Not yet, but I'm hoping. After those stories you gave me last spring, people started taking me a little more seriously.” She paused, drawing in a little breath. It made her chest rise and fall most attractively. “You know, Harry. If you're working with the police again, and if you should happen to be able to let me in on whatever is going on . . .”

I shook my head and tried to scowl at her. “I thought we agreed. I won't poke into your business deals and you won't poke into mine.”

She smiled up at me and touched a finger to my chest. “That was whenever we were out on a date, Harry.” She let her eyes wander down the length of my body, and then back up. “Or staying in on one.”

“Susan Rodriguez, I never knew you were a lawyer as well as a journalist.”

“Now you're getting nasty,” she said, grinning. “Seriously, Harry. Another exposé like last spring could make my career.”

“Yeah, well after last spring, the city made me sign about two tons of nondisclosure agreements. I can't tell you anything about the case.”

“So don't tell me about the case, Harry—but if you could mention, say, a nice spot in the street where I might stand and get some good pictures, I would be very,” she leaned up and kissed my neck. “Very”—the kiss traveled to my earlobe—“grateful.”

I swallowed and cleared my throat. Then took a step back down the stairs, away from her. I closed my eyes for a second and listened to the thunder of my suddenly pounding heart. “I'm sorry. I can't do that.”

“Oh, Harry. You're no fun.” She reached out and ran a hand over my hair, then smiled to let me know that there were no hard feelings. “But let's get together soon, all right? Dinner?”

“Sure,” I said. “Hey. What are you doing down here this early?”

She tilted her head, considering me. “Trade me? I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours. Off the record, even.”

I snorted. “Susan, give me a break.”

She let out a little sigh and shook her head. “I'll call you about dinner, all right?” She started down the stairs past me.

“All right,” I said. “All right. I'm bringing a report on werewolves to Murphy.”

“Werewolves,” she said, her eyes lighting. “Is that who's behind the Lobo murders?”

I frowned. “No comment. I thought the FBI was keeping that under wraps.”

“You can't kill a dozen people and expect no one to notice,” Susan said, her voice sly. “I keep track of the city morgues.”

“God, you're so romantic. All right, your turn. Give.”

“I was trying to talk to the investigator from the department's Internal Affairs. Word is that they're putting pressure on Murphy, trying to clear her out of Special Investigations.”

I grimaced. “Yeah. I heard that, too. Why does it concern you and the *Arcane*?”

“The most successful preternatural investigator the police department has gets hung out to dry? Even if people don't believe it, Murphy does a lot of good. If Murphy gets fired, and I can show how the numbers of mysterious crimes and unexplained deaths go up after she leaves, maybe I can get people to listen to papers like the *Arcane*. And to people like you.”

I shook my head. “People don't want to believe in magic anymore. Or things that go bump in the dark. For the most part, they're happier not knowing.”

“And when not knowing gets someone killed?”

I shrugged. “That's where people like me and Murphy come in.”

Susan eyed me doubtfully. “All I need is something solid, Harry. An eyewitness account, a photograph, something.”

“You can't photograph anything really supernatural,” I pointed out. “The energies around things like that will mess up cameras. Besides, the stuff I'm dealing with right now is too dangerous. You could get hurt.”

“What if I shot from a long way off?” she pressed. “Used a telephoto lens?”

I shook my head. “No, Susan. I'm not going to tell you anything. It's for your own good as much as for mine.”

She pressed her lips together. “Fine,” she said, her tone crisp, and went on down the stairs. I watched her go, dismayed. It seemed I was making a habit of excluding people from certain brands of information. Not only were my job and my freedom on the line, and Murphy's job, too—now it seemed that my love life, or what passed for it, was in danger as well.

I took a moment to try to sort through my thoughts and feelings on Susan, and gave it up as hopeless. Susan was a reporter for the Midwestern *Arcane*, a tabloid circulated widely from Chicago. It usually ran headlines about Elvis and JFK singing duets in Atlantic City, or on similar topics, but once in a while Susan managed to slip in something about the real world of the supernatural, the one that people had forgotten about in favor of science. She was damned good at her job, absolutely relentless.

She was also charming, gorgeous, funny, and sexy as hell. Our dates often ended in long, passionate evenings at my place or hers. It was an odd relationship, and neither one of us had tried to define it. I think maybe we were worried that if we did, we would change our minds and write it off as a bad idea.

I continued up the stairs, my mind a tired muddle of blood-spattered corpses, savage beasts, angry ex-apprentices, and sultry, dark eyes. There are times when my work is hard on my love life. But one thing I'm not is a boring date.

The doors to the SI office swung open just before I reached for them, and I drew up short. Agent Denton of the FBI was there, tall and immaculate in his gray suit. He stopped, too, and looked at me, holding open the door with one arm. There were bags under his grey eyes, but they were still calculating, assessing, and the veins in his forehead bulged with hypertension.

“Mr. Dresden,” he said, and nodded to me.

“Agent Denton,” I replied, keeping my tone polite, even friendly. “Excuse me. I need to get something to Lieutenant Murphy.”

Denton frowned a little, and then glanced at the room behind him, before coming all the way out into the hall and letting the door swing shut. "Maybe now isn't the best time for you to see her, Mr. Dresden."

I glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was five minutes before eight. "She wanted it early." I stepped to one side, to go around him.

Denton put a hand on my chest—just that. But he was strong. He might have been shorter than me, but he was carrying a lot more muscle. He didn't look at my eyes, and when he spoke, his voice was very quiet. "Look, Dresden. I know what happened last night didn't look good, but believe me when I say that I've got nothing against Lieutenant Murphy. She's a good cop, and she does her job. But she's got to follow the rules, just like everyone else."

"I'll keep that in mind," I told him and started to move again.

He kept up the pressure against my chest. "There's an agent from Internal Affairs in there with her right now. He's already in a bad mood from being hassled by some reporter. Do you really want to go in there and make him start asking all sorts of questions?"

I glanced at him, frowning. He lowered his hand from my chest. I didn't go around him, yet. "You know about the investigation she's under?"

Denton shrugged a shoulder. "It's to be expected, all things considered. Too much of what has happened in the past looks suspicious."

"You really don't believe, do you?" I asked him. "You don't believe that I'm a real wizard. You don't believe in the supernatural."

Denton straightened his tie. "What I believe doesn't matter, Mr. Dresden. What is important is that a lot of the scum out there believe in it. It affects the way they think and operate. If I could make use of your advice to solve this case, I would, the same as any other law officer." He glanced at me and added, "Personally, I think you are either slightly unstable or a very intelligent charlatan. No offense."

"None taken," I said, my voice wry. I nodded to the door. "How long will Murphy be busy?"

Denton shrugged. "If you like, I'll take the report in to her, drop it on her desk. You can go down the hall and call her. It doesn't matter to me, but I don't mind helping out a straight cop."

I thought it over for a second, and then passed the folder to him. "I appreciate it, Agent Denton."

"Phil," he said. For a second, he almost smiled, but then his face resumed its usual tense expression. "Do you mind if I take a look at it?"

I shook my head. "But I hope you like fiction, Phil."

He flicked the folder open and studied the first page for a moment, expressionless. He looked up at me. "You can't possibly be serious."

It was my turn to shrug. "Don't knock it. I've helped Murphy out before."

He glanced over the rest of the report, the look of skepticism on his face growing more secure. "I'll . . . give this to Murphy for you, Mr. Dresden," he said, then nodded to me and turned to walk toward the SI office.

"Oh, hey," I said casually. "Phil."

He turned to me and lifted his eyebrows.

"We're both on the same team here, right? Both of us looking for the killer?"

He nodded.

I nodded back. "What is it that you're not telling me?"

He stared for a long moment, and then blinked slowly. The lack of reaction gave him away. "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Dresden," he said.

"Sure you do," I told him. "You know something you can't or won't tell me, right? So why not just put it out on the table, now?"

Denton glanced up and down the hall and repeated, in precisely the same tone of voice, "I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Dresden. Do you understand?"

I didn't understand, but I didn't want him to know that. So I just nodded again. Denton nodded back, turned, and went into the SI office.

I frowned, puzzling over Denton's behavior. His expression and reaction had conveyed more than his words, but I wasn't sure exactly what. Except for that one flash of insight the night before, I was having trouble reading him. Some people were just like that, very good at keeping secrets with their bodies and motions as well as with their mouths.

I shook my head, went to the pay phone down the hall, dropped in my quarter, and dialed Murphy's number.

"Murphy," she said.

"Denton's dropping off my report. I didn't want to wander in on you with Internal Affairs hanging around."

There was a note of relief in Murphy's voice, subtle but there. "Thank you. I understand."

"The investigator is in your office now, isn't he?"

"Right," Murphy said, her tone neutral, polite, professional, and disinterested. Murphy keeps a great poker face when it's necessary, too.

"If you have any questions, I should be at my office," I said. "Hang in there, Murph. We'll nail this guy." There was the sound of a deeper voice, Denton's, and then the slap of a folder hitting the surface of Murphy's desk. Murphy thanked Denton, and then spoke to me again.

"Thank you very much. I'll be right on it." Then she hung up on me.

I hung up the phone myself, and realized that I was vaguely disappointed that I hadn't gotten to really speak to Murphy, that we hadn't had the chance to exchange our usual banter. It bothered me that I couldn't just walk into her office anymore, made me feel a little queasy and tense inside. I hate politics, but it was there, and as long as I was being held in any amount of suspicion, I could get Murphy in trouble just by being around.

Brooding all the while, I stomped down the stairs and out the front door of the station, toward the visitor parking, where the Blue Beetle waited for me.

I had gotten in and was preparing to coax it to life when I heard footsteps. I squinted up into the morning sunshine at the skinny form and big ears of the redheaded young FBI agent from the scene in Rosemont last night. I rolled down the window as he stepped up to my car. He glanced around, his face anxious, and then knelt down beside the window so that he could not be easily observed.

"Hi there, Agent . . ."

"Harris," he said. "Roger Harris."

"Right," I said. "Can I help you, Agent Harris?"

"I need to know, Mr. Dresden. I mean, I wanted to ask you last night, but I couldn't. But I need to ask you now." He glanced around again, restless as a rabbit when a fox goes by, and said, "Are you for real?"

"A lot of people ask me that, Agent Harris," I said. "I'll tell you what I tell them. Try me and see."

He chewed on his lip and looked at me for a minute. Then nodded a jerky little nod, his head bobbing. "All right," he said. "All right. Can I hire you?"

My eyebrows went up in surprise. "Hire me? What for?"

"I think . . . I think I know something. About the Lobo killings. I tried to get Denton to let us check it out, but he said that there wasn't enough evidence. We'd never be able to get a surveillance put on them."

"On who?" I asked, wary. The last thing I needed was to be getting involved in any more shady goings-on. On the other hand, as an independent operator, I could sometimes go poking my nose where the police couldn't. If there was a chance that I could turn up something for Murphy, or find the killer and stop him outside of legal channels entirely, I couldn't afford to pass it up.

"There's a gang in Chicago," Harris began.

"No kidding?" I asked, affecting puzzlement.

It was lost on the kid. "Yeah. They call themselves the Streetwolves. They've got a really rough reputation, even for this town. A spooky reputation. Even the criminals won't go near them. They say that the gang has strange powers. Streetwolf territory is down by the Forty-ninth Street Beach." He stared at me intently.

"Down by the university," I filled in. "And by the parks where last month's murders took place."

He nodded, eager as a puppy. "Yeah, right, down there. You see what I'm getting at?"

"I see, kid, I see," I told him and rubbed at my eye. "Denton couldn't go there and look around, so he sent you down here to get me to do it."

The kid flushed, his skin turning bright red, until his freckles vanished. "I . . . Uh . . ."

"Don't worry about it," I told him. "You didn't do a bad job with the act, but you've got to get up pretty early in the morning, et cetera."

Harris chewed on his lip and nodded. "Yeah, well. Will you do it?"

I sighed. "I guess you can't go on record as paying my fee, can you?" It wasn't really a question.

"Well. No. Officially, you are a suspect source, as a consultant."

I nodded. "I thought so."

"Can you do it, Mr. Dresden? Will you?"

I was regretting it even before I spoke. "All right," I said. "I'll check it out. But in exchange, tell Denton I want any of the information that the FBI or the Chicago police has on me."

Harris paled. "You want us to copy your files?"

"Yeah," I said. "I could get them through the Freedom of Information Act, anyway. I just don't want to spend the time and postage. Do we have a deal or not?"

"Oh, God. Denton would *kill* me if he found out. He doesn't like it when someone bends the rules." He chewed his lip until I thought it would fall off.

"You mean like he's doing by sending you here to me?" I shrugged. "Suit yourself, kid. That's my price. You can find my number if you change your mind." I coaxed the Beetle to life, and it rattled and coughed and started running.

"All right," he said. "All right. Deal." He offered me his hand.

I shook it, sealing the bargain, and got an uneasy feeling as I did. Harris walked away from the Beetle as quickly as he could, still looking around nervously.

"That was stupid, Harry," I told myself. "You shouldn't be getting yourself into anything more complicated than you already have."

I was right. But the potential gains made the risk worth it. I could possibly find the killers, stop them, and additionally find out why the cops had a bug up their collective ass about me. It might help me to work things out with Murphy. It might even help me get her out of the trouble she was having.

"Cheer up, Harry," I told myself. "You're just going to go poke around a biker gang's lair. Ask them if they happen to have killed some people lately. What could possibly go wrong?"

Chapter Nine

A block from the Forty-ninth Street Beach there was a rundown garage, the sort of place you only find in the worst sections of big cities. The building consisted of corrugated metal on a steel frame, oxidating in the rain and the mist rising off the lake so that gobbets of rust ran down the walls in streaks and pooled on the sidewalks in uneven puddles. On one side of the garage was a vacant lot; on the other, what looked like the sort of pawn shop where crooks traded in their spare guns and knives for a few extra dollars when things were tight. A faded sign hung askew over one of the garage doors, reading FULL MOON GARAGE. I pulled the Beetle into the gravel parking lot, and parked a few feet from the building.

“Thank God it’s not too obvious or anything,” I muttered, and killed the engine. It died with a new, moaning note to its usual rattle. I got out of the car, squinted at the building, and headed toward it. I didn’t have my gun with me, but I did have my blasting rod, my shield bracelet, and a ring on my right hand in which I had stored up about as much energy as someone twice my size could put into a solid punch. Gravel crunched under my shoes as I walked, and rare autumn sunshine glared in my eyes and cast a long shadow behind me.

I wasn’t sure who to expect inside, if anyone. The people I’d seen with the dark-haired woman the night before, the rather nerdy bunch of young people clad in imitation biker-leathers, didn’t seem to be the sort of folk to inspire fear in other criminal toughs as the Streetwolves apparently had. But maybe there was a connection. Maybe the dark-haired woman from last night was linked with the Streetwolves, somehow, as well as with the young people I had seen. What had the stout young man, Billy, called them? The Alphas.

What, then, had the Alphas been? Biker thugs in training? That sounded ridiculous, even to me. But what if those young people had been lycanthropes, like the ones Bob had told me about? What if they were being trained, somehow, as junior members of the Streetwolves until they could be brought in as full werewolves? Presuming the Streetwolves themselves were lycanthropes or werewolves, that is. Sometimes, a biker gang is just a biker gang. There might be no connection to the Alphas at all. My head spun a little, trying to sort out the possibilities.

All in all, it was far better to hope that the building was empty, and that I wouldn’t have to deal with anyone, werewolves or otherwise. I would much rather just poke around and find something incriminating inside, something that I could bring back to Murphy and Denton that would point them in the correct direction.

There was a regular door beside the pair of big, roll-up garage doors. Both of them were closed. I tried the regular door, and it opened easily enough, so I went on inside. There were no windows, and the only light in the garage fell into it from the open door behind me.

“Hello?” I called into the darkness. I tried to peer around, but saw nothing other than dim shapes and outlines, what might have been a car with the hood up, a couple of those rolling tool-cabinets. There was a dull reflection of glass windows off to one side, where there might have been an office. I stepped to one side of the doorway, squinting, and waited for my eyes to adjust.

There was a quiet sound, a dull rustle of clothing.

Dammit. I reached a hand into my duster, wrapping my fingers around my blasting rod, and Listened. I could hear the sound of breathing in the room, from multiple sources in a variety of directions. There was a scuffling sound, shoes on the concrete floor.

“I’m not a cop,” I said into the darkness. I had the feeling that might be important for them to know. “My name is Harry Dresden. I just want to speak to the Streetwolves.”

The room dropped into dead silence. No moving. No breathing. Nothing.

I waited, tense and ready to run.

“Take your hand out of your jacket,” a male voice said. “And keep your hands where I can see them. We’ve heard of your kind, wizard. We’ve heard of you. You’re with the cops.”

“You’re late on the gossip,” I said wryly. “I’m playing doubles with Johnny Marcone now. Didn’t you know?”

There was a snort from the dark. “Like hell. That’s just Marcone’s story. We know the real deal with you, wizard.”

Christ. I wished the police were as savvy as these ne’er-do-wells. “I’ve heard a few things about you all, too,” I said. “Not much of it is too friendly. Some of it might even be considered a little weird.”

There was a rough laugh. “What do you think they say about you, Dresden? Get your hands where I can see them. Now.” There was the click-clack of a pump shotgun’s action.

I swallowed and took my hand slowly off my blasting rod, then held both of my hands innocuously out in front of me, palms up. I willed strength through my shield bracelet as I did, drawing its protective energies about me. “All right,” I said. “Come up where I can see you.”

“You don’t give the orders here,” the male voice snarled. “I do.”

I pressed my lips together and drew in a breath through my nose. “I just want to talk to you.”

“About what?” said the voice.

I tried to come up with something, something believable—but I’m not much of a liar. So I told them the truth. “Some dead people last month. More dead last night.”

The voice didn’t answer me for a moment. I licked my lips and kept going.

“There were fake wolf tracks around the murder scenes. And the feds think someone used a weapon lined with wolf teeth to tear the victims up. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

There was a flurry of mutters around the room, low voices in hushed tones all around me. A dozen, maybe. More. I got a sudden, sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. If these people were the murderers, if they were responsible for last month’s deaths, I was in big trouble.

And if they were real werewolves, if they could shape-shift and come after me before I could clear out of there, I was as good as dead, shield bracelet or no. I choked down a surge of panic and forced myself not to turn and run for the door.

“Kill him,” someone said from the darkness, off to my left, a female voice with a deep, growling tone to it. There was an answering chorus of mewling sounds from the dark around me, repetitions of “Kill him, kill him, kill him.”

My eyes were starting to adjust to the lack of light. I could see them now, the shapes of people restlessly pacing. Their eyes glowed like dogs’ eyes in the glare of headlights. Both men and women moved around me, though I couldn’t tell their ages. There were blankets and pillows made into pallets on the floor, thrown aside while their occupants had risen. The female voice I had heard continued to chant, “Kill him, kill him, kill him,” while the others followed her lead. The air grew tight and heavy with a kind of energy I had never sensed before, a power that was gaining momentum as they chanted, a feral, raging current.

Directly in front of me, not fifteen feet away, stood the large shape of a man holding a shotgun. “Stop it,” he snarled, turning his head toward the others in the room. I could see his body responding as the energy grew, growing tenser, more ready. “Fight it. Hold it in, dammit. You can’t let it loose here. There will be cops all over us.”

When his head turned, I darted toward the doorway. I kept my left palm up and turned out toward the leader, the one with the shotgun, and held on to my shield as hard as I could.

My motion triggered a frenzied howl from the others in the room and they came surging toward me like a dozen creatures with one controlling mind. The shotgun roared and threw a flash of white light over the room, showing me a frieze of half-dressed or naked men and women hurtling toward me, their faces twisted with grimaces of berserk anger. The force of the blast slammed into my shield. It wasn’t quite enough to shatter the protective field, but it made my bracelet grow warm and shoved my opposite shoulder hard against the wall.

I stumbled, thrown off balance. One of the men, a heavyset fellow with his shoulders covered in tattoos, got between me and the door. I ran at him, and he spread his arms to grab me, assuming I would try to go past him.

Instead, I drove my fist at his nose as hard as I could. I don’t carry a lot of power on my own when I punch. But when I added in the kinetic energy stored in the ring, my fist became a battering ram of bone and flesh, flattening the man’s nose in a gout of blood, and sending him sprawling to the ground six feet away.

I was through the door in a flash and felt the sun’s welcome heat on my back. I pelted toward the Beetle, my long legs covering the ground quickly.

“Stop! Stop!” the leader shouted, and I cast a glance over my shoulder to see him, an older man with greasy hair beginning to go grey. He planted his feet in the doorway, facing inside, holding the shotgun across his body and shoving at the people trying to get past him.

I threw myself into the Beetle and jammed my key in the ignition.

The car wheezed and rattled, but didn’t start. Dammit.

My hands were trembling, but I kept trying to get the car going, using every trick I knew to coax the engine to life, while watching the door. The leader of the Streetwolves was still there, fighting to hold the frenzied group inside. They were screaming and howling, but he shoved them away, clubbed them down with the shotgun like wild dogs, the muscles in his shoulders and back straining. “Parker!” screamed one of them, the woman who had begun the killing chant, “Let me through!” He swatted her down with the butt of the shotgun without hesitation.

Then Parker turned his head toward me, and I met his eyes. There was a swimming moment, and then I was past his eyes, to what lay behind them.

Fury overwhelmed me, naked lust for meat, for the hunt. I needed to run, to kill. I was invincible, unstoppable. I could feel the power in my arms and hands, feel the raw energy of the wild coursing through me, sharpening my senses to animal keenness.

I felt his emotions like they were my own. Fury beneath rigid control, the ocean beating at a tide wall. The fury was directed at me, Dresden, at the man who had invaded his territory, challenged his authority, and driven his people out of control, endangering them. I saw that he was the leader of the lycanthropes called the Streetwolves, men and women with the minds and souls of beasts, and that he was aging, was not as strong as he once had been. Others, like the woman earlier, were beginning to challenge his authority. Today's events might tear him from leadership, and he would never live through it.

If Parker was to live, I had to die. He had to kill me, pure and simple, and he had to do it alone to prove his strength to the pack. That was the only thing that kept him from coming at my throat that very second.

Worse, he didn't know a damned thing about the last month's killings.

And then the moment was past, the soulgaze over. Parker's face was stunned. He had seen me in much the same way I had seen him. I don't know what he saw when he looked upon my soul. I didn't want to know what was down there.

I recovered from it before he did and fumbled at the keys again. The Beetle coughed to life, and I pulled out and onto the street, swerving wildly before gathering speed and heading back uptown as quickly as I could.

I shook the entire way, my shoulders so tight with fear and reaction that I could hear my collarbones creaking with strain. I could still hear the mewling chants of "Kill him, kill him," in my head. Those things in that garage had not been people. They had looked like people, but they weren't. And they scared the hell out of me.

While sitting at an intersection, I slammed my hand on the steering wheel, abruptly angry. "Stupid, Harry," I said. "How could you have been so stupid? Why in the hell did you go wandering in there like that? Do you realize how close those Neanderthal freaks came to tearing you apart?" I glared ferociously out my side window, at an old lady in a business suit who was staring at me as though I were a ranting madman. Which, I suppose, was what I looked like.

I stopped myself from glaring at her, took a deep breath, and tried to calm down. A couple of blocks later, I was able to start thinking straight again.

Parker and the Streetwolves were not responsible for the murders last month. That didn't make them any less dangerous. They were lycanthropes, the kind Bob had told me about, and I could see now why they had been feared. People with the souls of beasts, possessed of a ferocity so great that it could transform them into something inhuman without altering a single cell of their bodies.

They lived in a pack, and Parker was their leader. I had challenged his dominance in my clueless, bumbling way, and now he couldn't afford to let me live, or he would be killed himself. So now I had to worry about someone else coming after me, trying to kill me. Not only that, all of this trouble had come gratis, without giving me any lead on the true culprit of the Lobo killings.

Maybe it was a good time to leave town for a while.

I brooded over that for a block or so, and then shook my head. I wouldn't run. I had made this trouble for myself, and I would get out of it myself. I had to stay, to help Murphy find the killer, and to help save lives before the full moon rose again. And if Parker wanted to kill me, well—he'd find that doing in a full-fledged wizard is no easy task.

I gripped the steering wheel grimly. If it came to it, I would kill him. I knew I could do that. Technically, I suppose, Parker and his lycanthropes weren't human. The First Law of Magic, Thou Shalt Not Kill, wouldn't necessarily apply to them. Legally, I might be able to make a case for the use of lethal magic to the White Council.

I just wouldn't be safe from myself. I wouldn't be safe from the loathing I would feel, using a tool made of life's essence, its energy, to bring an end to life. Magic was more than just an energy source, like electricity or petroleum. It was power, true, but it was a lot of other things as well. It was all that was deepest and most powerful in nature, in the human heart and soul. The ways in which I applied it were crude and clumsy in comparison to magic in its pure form. There's more magic in a baby's first giggle than in any firestorm a wizard can conjure up, and don't let anyone tell you any different.

Magic comes from what is inside you. It is a part of you. You can't weave together a spell that you don't believe in.

I didn't want to believe that killing was deep inside of me. I didn't want to think about the part of me that took a dark joy in gathering all the power it could and using it as I saw fit, everything else be damned. There was power to be had in hatred, too, in anger and in lust, in selfishness and in pride. And I knew that there was some dark corner of me that would enjoy using magic for killing—and then long for more. That was black magic, and it was easy to use. Easy and fun. Like Legos.

I parked the Beetle in the lot of my office building and rubbed at my eyes. I didn't want to kill anybody, but Parker and his gang might not give me any choice. I might have to do a lot of killing, if I was going to live.

I tried not to think too much about what sort of person it might be who survived. I would burn that bridge when I came to it.

I would go up to my office and hold business hours for the rest of the day. I would wait for Murphy to call me, and give her any aid that I could. I would keep my eyes and ears open in case Parker or any of his gang came after me. There wasn't much more I could do, and it was frustrating as hell.

I went up to my office, unlocked it, and flipped on the lights. Gentleman Johnny Marcone was seated at my desk in a dark blue business suit, and his hulking bodyguard, Mr. Hendricks, was standing behind him.

Marcone smiled at me, but it didn't touch the corners of his eyes. "Ah, Mr. Dresden. Good. We need to talk."

Chapter Ten

Marcone had eyes the color of old, faded dollar bills. His skin was weatherworn, with an outdoorsman's deep tan. Creases showed at the corners of his eyes and mouth, as though from smiling, but those smiles were rarely sincere. His suit must have cost him at least a thousand dollars. He sat at ease in my chair, my chair, mind you, and regarded me with professional calm.

From behind him, Mr. Hendricks looked like an all-star collegiate lineman who hadn't been smart enough to go into the pros. Hendricks's neck was as big around as my waist, and his hands were big enough to cover my face—and strong enough to crush it. His red hair was buzz cut, and he wore his ill-fitting suit like something that he planned to rip his way out of when he turned into the Hulk. I couldn't see his gun, but I knew he was carrying one.

I stood in the doorway and stared at Marcone for a minute, but my gaze did nothing to stir him. Marcone had met it already, and taken my measure more than I had taken his. My eyes held no more fear for him.

"Get out of my office," I said. I stepped inside and closed the door.

"Now, now, Mr. Dresden," Marcone said, a father's reproof in his tone. "Is that any way to talk to a business partner?"

I scowled. "I'm not your partner. I think you're scum. The worst criminal this city has. One of these days the cops will nail you, but until then, I don't have to put up with you here in my own office. Get out."

"The police," Marcone said, a hint of correction in his voice, "would be best off run by private agencies, rather than public institutions. Better pay, better benefits—"

"Easier to bribe, corrupt, manipulate," I injected.

Marcone smiled.

I took off my duster and dropped it over the table in front of the door, the one covered in pamphlets with titles like "Witches and You," and "Want to Do Magic? Ask Me How!" I untied my blasting rod from its thong and set it calmly on the table in front of me. I had the satisfaction of seeing Hendricks tense up when he saw the rod. He remembered what I had done to the Varsity last spring.

I glanced up. "Are you still here?"

Marcone folded his hands in front of him. "I have an offer to make you, Mr. Dresden."

"No," I said.

Marcone chuckled. "I think you should hear me out."

I looked him in the eyes and smiled faintly. "No. Get out."

His fatherly manner vanished, and his eyes became cold. "I have neither the time nor the tolerance for your childishness, Mr. Dresden. People are dying. You are now working on the case. I have information for you, and I will give it to you. For a price."

I felt my back stiffen. I stared at him for a long minute, and then said, "All right. Let's hear your price."

Marcone held out his hand and Hendricks handed him a folder. Marcone put the folder down on the battered surface of my old wooden desk and flipped it open. "This is a contract, Mr. Dresden. It hires you as a consultant for my firm, in personal security. The terms are quite generous. You get to name your own hours, with a minimum of five per month. You can fill in your salary right now. I simply want to formalize our working relationship."

I walked over to my desk. I saw Hendricks's weight shift, as though he were about to jump over the desk at me, but I ignored him. I picked up the folder and looked over the contract. I'm not a legal expert, but I was familiar with the forms for this kind of deal. Marcone was on the up and up. He was offering me a dream job, with virtually no commitment, and as much money as I could want. There was even a clause that specified that I would not be asked or expected to perform any unlawful acts.

With that kind of money, I could live the life I wanted. I could stop scraping for every dollar, running my legs off working for every paranoid looney who wanted to hire me to investigate his great-aunt's possessed cow. I could catch up on reading, finally, do the magical research I'd been itching to do for the past few years. I wouldn't live forever, and every hour that I wasted looking for UFOs in Joliet was one more hour I couldn't spend doing something I wanted to do.

It was a pretty damned tempting deal.

It was a very comfortable collar.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" I said, and tossed the folder down on my desk.

Marcone's eyebrows went up, his mouth opening a little. "Is it the hours? Shall I lower the minimum to one hour per week? Per month?"

"It isn't the hours," I said.

He spread his hands. "What, then?"

"It's the company. It's the thought of a drug-dealing murderer having a claim on my loyalty. I don't like where your money comes from. It's got blood on it."

Marcone's cold eyes narrowed again. "Think carefully, Mr. Dresden. I won't make this offer twice."

"Let me make you an offer, John," I said. I saw the corner of his cheek twitch when I used his first name. "Tell me what you know, and I'll do my best to nail the killer before he comes for you."

"What makes you think I'm worried, Mr. Dresden?" Marcone said. He let a fine sneer color his words.

I shrugged. "Your business partner and his pet bodyguard get gutted last month. Spike gets torn to bits last night. And then you crawl out from under your rock to dangle information in my face to help me catch the killer and try to strong-arm me into becoming your bodyguard." I bent down and rested my elbows on the surface of the desk, then lowered my head until my eyes were a few inches from his. "Worried, John?"

His face twitched again, and I could smell him lying. "Of course not, Mr. Dresden. But you don't get where I have in life by being reckless."

"Just by being soulless, right?"

Marcone slammed his palms down on the desktop and stood. I rose with him, enough to stand over him, and to keep my eyes on his. "I am a man of business, Mr. Dresden. Would you prefer anarchy in the streets? Wars between rival crime lords? I bring order to that chaos."

"No. You just make the chaos more efficient and organized," I shot back. "Stick whatever pretty words you want onto it, but that doesn't change the fact that you're a thug, a fucking animal that should be in a cage. Nothing more."

Marcone's normally passionless face went white. His jaw clenched over words of rage. I pressed him, hard, my own anger spilling out with a passion gone out of control. I poured all of my recent frustration and fear into venomous words and hurled them at him like a handful of scrap metal.

"What's out there, John? What could it possibly be? Did you see Spike? Did you see how they'd torn his face off? Did you see the way they'd ripped his guts open? I did. I could smell what he had for dinner. Can you just imagine it happening to you next, John?"

"Don't call me that," Marcone said, his voice so quiet and cold that it set my momentum back on its heels. "If we were in public, Mr. Dresden, I'd have you killed for speaking that way to me."

"If we were in public," I told him, "you'd try." I drew myself up and glared down my nose at him, ignoring Hendricks's looming presence. "Now. Get the hell out of my office."

Marcone straightened his jacket and his tie. "I presume, Mr. Dresden, that you are going to continue your investigation with the police department."

"Of course."

Marcone walked around my desk, past me, and toward my door. Hendricks followed in his wake, huge and quiet. "Then in my own interests, I must accept your offer and aid the investigation however I might. Look up the name Harley MacFinn. Ask about the Northwest Passage Project. See where they lead you." He opened the door.

"Why should I believe you?" I asked him.

He looked back at me. "You have seen the deepest reaches of my soul, Mr. Dresden. You know me in a way so profound and intimate that I cannot yet fathom its significance. Just as I know you. You should know that I have every reason to help you, and that the information is good." He smiled again, wintry. "Just as you should know that it was unwise to make an enemy

of me. It need not have been this way.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If you know me so well, you should know that there’s no other way it could be.”

He pursed his lips for a moment, and did not try to refute me. “Pity,” he said. “A true pity.” And then he left. Hendricks gave me a pig-eyed little glare, and then he was gone, too. The door shut behind them.

I let out a long, shaking breath, and slumped against my desk. I covered my face with my hands, noticing as I did that they were shaking, too. I hadn’t realized the depth of the disgust in me for Marcone and what he stood for. I hadn’t realized how much it had sickened me to have my name associated with his. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted to launch myself at the man and smash him in the nose with my fists.

I stayed that way for a few minutes, letting my heart beat hard, catching my breath. Marcone could have killed me. He could have had Hendricks tear me apart, or put a bullet in me right there—but he hadn’t. That wasn’t Marcone’s way. He couldn’t eliminate me now, not after working so hard to spread the word throughout the underworld that he and I had some sort of alliance. He would have to be more indirect, more subtle. Having Hendricks scatter my brains out on the floor wasn’t the way to do it.

I thought over what he had said, and the implications of his acceptance of the deal I’d offered. He was in danger. Something had him scared, something that he didn’t understand and didn’t know how to fight. That was why he had wanted to hire me. As a wizard, I take the unknown and I turn it into something that can be measured. I take that cloak of terror off of things, make people able, somehow, to deal with them. Marcone wanted me to stand by him, to help him not be afraid of those things lurking in the dark.

Hell. It was only human.

I winced. I wanted to hate the man, but disgust, maybe anger, was as far as I could go. Too much of what he said was true. Marcone was a businessman. He had reduced violence in the streets—while sending the number of dollars made by criminals in this town soaring. He had protected the city’s flesh while si-phoning away its blood, poisoning its soul. It changed nothing, nothing at all.

But to know that the man I knew, the tiger-souled predator, the businessman killer—to know that he was frightened of what I was about to go up against: That scared the hell out of me, and added an element of intimidation to the work I was doing that hadn’t been present before.

That didn’t change anything, either. It’s all right to be afraid. You just don’t let it stop you from doing your job.

I sat down on the desk, forced thoughts of blood and fangs and agonizing death from my mind, and started looking for the name Harley MacFinn and the Northwest Passage Project.

Chapter Eleven

The demon trapped in the summoning circle screamed, slamming its crablike pincers against the unseen barrier, hurling its chitinous shoulders from side to side in an effort to escape the confinement. It couldn't. I kept my will on the circle, kept the demon from bursting free.

"Satisfied, Chauncy?" I asked it.

The demon straightened its hideous form and said, in a perfect Oxford accent, "Quite. You understand, I must observe the formalities." Then it took a pair of wholly incongruous wire-frame spectacles from beneath a scale and perched them upon the beaklike extremity of its nose. "You have questions?"

I let out a sigh of relief, and sat down on the edge of the worktable in my lab. I had cleared away all the clutter from around the summoning ring in the floor, and I'd have to move it before I could clamber up out of my lab, but I didn't like to take chances. No matter how comfortable Chaunzaggoroth and I were with our working relationship, there was always a chance that I could have messed up the summoning. There were rules of protocol that demonic beings were obliged to follow—one of them was offering resistance to any mortal wizard who called them. Another was doing their best to end the life of the same wizard, should they be able to escape the confines of the circle.

All in all, squeezing information from faeries and spirits of the elements was a lot easier and safer—but Bob had turned up nothing in his search among the local spirits. They weren't always up on information to be had in the city, and Bob now resided in his skull again, exhausted and unable to help any further.

So I'd gone to the underworld for assistance. They know when you've been bad or good, and they make Santa Claus look like an amateur.

"I need information about a man named Harley MacFinn, Chauncy. And about something he was working on called the Northwest Passage Project."

Chauncy clacked his pincers pensively. "I see. Presuming I have this information, what is it worth to you?"

"Not my soul," I snorted. "So don't even start with that. Look, I could dig this up myself in a few days."

Chauncy tilted his head, birdlike. "Ah. But time is of the essence, yes? Come now, Harry Dresden. You do not call upon me lightly. The possible dangers, both from myself and from your own White Council, are far too great."

I scowled at him. "Technically," I said, "I'm not breaking any of the Laws of Magic. I'm not robbing you of your will, so I'm clear of the Fourth Law. And you didn't get loose, so I'm clear of the Seventh Law. The Council can bite me."

The bone ridges above Chauncy's eyes twitched. "Surely, that is merely a colorful euphemism, rather than a statement of desire."

"It is."

Chauncy pushed the glasses a bit higher up on his nose. "The moral and ethical ramifications of your attitudes are quite fascinating, Harry Dresden. I am continually amazed that you remain in the Council's good graces. Knowing full well that most of the Council would look the other way while their enforcers killed you, should they learn that you have willfully brought a demon into this world, you still summon me not once, but a half-dozen times. Your attitudes are much more contiguous with those of many of my brethren in the World Below—"

"And I should throw in with your side, accept the dark powers, et cetera, et cetera," I finished for him, with a sigh. "Hell's bells, Chauncy. Why do you keep on trying to sucker me into signing on with Downbelow, eh?"

Chauncy shrugged his bulky shoulders. "I admit that it would give me no small amount of status to gather a soul of your caliber into our legions," he said. "Additionally, it would free me from the onerous duties which make even these excruciating visits to your world seem pleasant by comparison."

"Well, you aren't getting my soul today," I told him. "So make me a counteroffer, or we can call a close to the negotiations and I can send you back."

The demon shuddered. "Yes, very well. Let us not be hasty, Harry Dresden. I have the information you need. Additionally, I have more information of which you are not aware, and which would be of great interest to you, and which I judge, additionally, may help to preserve your life and the lives of others. Given the situation, I do not think the price I will ask inappropriate: I wish another of your names."

I frowned. The demon had two of my names already. If he gained my whole name, from my own lips, he could use it in any number of magical applications against me. That didn't particularly disturb me—demons and their ilk had great difficulty in reaching out from the Nevernever, the spirit world beyond the physical one we inhabited, with sorcery.

But Chaunzaggoroth was a popular source of information among wizards who went to the underworld in need of it. What bothered me was the possibility that one of them would get it. Chauncy was correct—there were a lot of people on the White Council who would be happy to see me dead. If one of them got my name, there was the chance that they would use it against me, either to kill me or to magically force me to do something that would openly violate one of the Seven Laws and have me brought to trial and killed.

On the other hand, Chauncy never lied to me. If he said he had information that could save people's lives, he had it, and that's all there was to it. Hell, he might even know who the killer was, though a demon's grasp of individual human identity was somewhat shaky.

I decided to gamble.

"Done," I said. "All pertinent information on the subject of my inquiry in exchange for another of my names."

Chauncy nodded once. "Agreed."

"All right," I said. "Let's have the information on MacFinn and the Northwest Passage Project."

"Very well," Chauncy said. "Harley MacFinn is an heir to a considerable fortune made in coal mining and railroads at the turn of the twentieth century. He is one of the ten richest men in the country known as the United States. He served during the police action in Vietnam, and when he returned to this country he began divesting himself of business interests, merely accruing capital. His favorite color is red, his shoe size is—"

"We can skip the little details unless you think they will be really relevant," I said. "I could hear about his favorite food and his problems in middle school all day and it wouldn't help anything." I got out my notebook and started taking notes.

"As you wish," Chauncy assented. "The object of his endeavors for the past several years has been the Northwest Passage Project. The project is an effort to buy enormous tracts of land, beginning in the central Rocky Mountains of the American Southwest, and moving northwest into Canada, to provide for an enormous, migratory-sized preserve for North American wildlife."

"He wants to make his own private playground out of the Rocky Mountains?" I blurted.

"No, Harry Dresden. He wishes to acquire the lands that are not already owned by the government, then donate them, provided the government guarantees that they will be used as a part of the Northwest Passage Project. He has considerable backing from environmentalist groups throughout the country, and support in your capital, as well, provided he can get the land."

"Wow," I said, impressed. "You said he has a lot of support. Who wants to stop him?"

"Industrial interests still looking to expand into the Northwest," Chauncy said.

"Let me guess. James Harding III was one of them," I said, already writing it down.

"How did you know?" Chauncy asked.

"He was killed by a werewolf last month, along with his bodyguard. Several other people died as well."

Chauncy beamed. "You are a clever man, Harry Dresden. Yes. James Douglas Harding III was exceptionally interested in blocking MacFinn's efforts to acquire property. He came to Chicago to have negotiations with MacFinn, but died before they were complete."

I closed my eyes for a minute, thinking. "Okay. Harding comes to town to talk to MacFinn. Harding's in cahoots with Marcone, so maybe Marcone is hosting the talks. Harding and his bodyguard get et-all-up by a werewolf. So . . . MacFinn is the werewolf in question?"

Chauncy smiled, a rather intimidating expression. "MacFinn is a member of an ancient family line from an island known as Ireland. His family has a notable history. Sometime in the murky past, legend would have it, the man known as Saint Pat-rick cursed his ancestor to become a ravening beast at every full moon. The curse came with two addenda. First, that it would be hereditary, passing down to someone new each and every generation. And second, that the cursed line of the family would never, ever die out, lasting until the end of days."

I wrote that down as well. "A Catholic saint did that?"

Chauncy made a sound of distaste. "I am not responsible for the sorts of people the Other Side employs, wizard. Or the tactics they use."

"Considering the source, I think I'll note it as a biased opinion. Your folk have done a thousand times worse," I said.

"Well. True," Chauncy admitted. "But we tend to be quite honest about the sort of beings we are and the sorts of things we stand for, at least."

I snorted. "All right. This is making a lot more sense now. MacFinn is a loup-garou, one of the legendary monsters. He's trying to do some good in his spare time, make the big park for all the furry critters, but Harding puts himself in the way. MacFinn goes on a killing spree and wipes him out." I frowned. "Except that Harding was the last person to be murdered last month. You would have thought that if MacFinn was going to lose it, Harding would be the first to go." I peered at Chauncy. "Is MacFinn the murderer?"

"MacFinn is a murderer," Chauncy said. "But among humankind, he is one of many, and not the most monstrous."

"Is he the one who killed Marcone's bodyguard? The other people last month?"

"My information on that point is inconclusive, Harry Dresden," Chauncy said. His black eyes gleamed. "Perhaps for the price of another name, I could inquire of my brethren and give you a more precise answer."

I scowled. "Not a chance. Do you know who murdered the other people, last month?"

"I do," Chauncy said. "Murder is one of the foremost sins, and we keep close track of sins."

I leaned forward intently. "Who was it?"

Chauncy laughed, a grating sound. "Really, Harry Dresden. In the first place, our bargain was for information regarding MacFinn and the Northwest Passage Project. In the second, I could not tell you the answer to such a direct question, and you know it. There is a limit to how much I may involve myself in mortal affairs."

I let out a breath of frustration and rubbed at my eyes. "Yeah, yeah. All right, Chauncy. What else can you tell me?"

"Only that Harley MacFinn was planning to meet with John Marcone tomorrow night, to continue the talks."

"Wait a minute. Is Marcone the major opponent to the project now?"

"Correct," Chauncy said. "He assumed control of a majority of the business interests shared with Harding upon Harding's death."

"So . . . Marcone had a fantastic motive to have Harding killed. It broadened his financial empire, and put him in a position to gouge MacFinn for as much money as he possibly could."

Chauncy adjusted his wire-frame spectacles. "Your reasoning would seem to be sound."

I thumped my pencil on my notebook, staring at what I had written. "Yeah. But it doesn't explain why everyone else got killed. Or who did it. Unless Marcone's got a pack of werewolves in his pocket, that is." I chewed on my lip, and thought about my encounter at the Full Moon Garage. "Or Streetwolves."

"Is there anything else?" Chauncy asked, his manner solicitous.

"Yes," I said. "Where can I find MacFinn?"

"Eight eighty-eight Ralston Place."

I wrote it down. "But that's right here in Chicago. In the Gold Coast."

"Where did you expect a billionaire to live when he was in Chicago, Harry Dresden? Now, I seem to have lived up to all of my obligations. I expect my payment now." Chauncy took a few restless steps back and forth within the circle. His time on earth was beginning to wear on him.

I nodded. "My name," I said, "is Harry Blackstone Dresden." I carefully omitted "Copperfield" from the words, while leaving the tones and pronunciation the same.

"Harry. Blackstone. Dresden," Chauncy repeated carefully. "Harry as in Harry Houdini? Blackstone, the stage illusionist?"

I nodded. "My dad was a stage musician. When I was born, he gave me those names. They were always his heroes. I think if my mother had survived the birth, she would have slapped him for it." I made a few more notes on my page, getting ideas down on paper before they fled from memory.

"Indeed," Chauncy agreed. "Your mother was a most direct and willful woman. Her loss was a great sadness to all of us."

I blinked, startled, and the pencil fell from my fingers. I stared at the demon for a moment. "You . . . you knew my mother? You knew Margaret Gwendolyn Dresden?"

Chauncy regarded me without expression or emotion. "Many in the underworld were . . . familiar with her, Harry Blackstone Dresden, though under a different name. Her coming was awaited with great anticipation, but the Dark Prince lost her, in the end."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

Chauncy's eyes gleamed with avarice. "Didn't you know about your mother's past, Mr. Dresden? A pity that we didn't have this conversation sooner. You might have added it into the bargain we made. Of course, if you would like to forfeit another name, to know all about your mother's past, her . . ." his voice twisted with distaste, "redemption, and the unnatural deaths of both mother and father, I am certain we can work something out."

I gritted my teeth in a sudden rush of childlike frustration. My heart pounded in my ears. My mother's dark past? I had expected that she was a wizardess, but I had never been able to prove anything, one way or another. Unnatural deaths? My father had perished in his sleep, of an aneurism, when I was young. My mother had died in childbirth.

Or had they?

A sudden, burning desire to know filled me, starting at my gut and rolling outward through my body—to know who my mother was, what she had known. She had left me her silver pentacle, but I knew nothing of the sort of person she was, other than what my gentle and too-generous father had told me before his death. What were my parents like? How had they perished and why? Had they been killed? Did they have enemies lurking out there, somewhere? If so, had I inherited them?

My mother's dark past. Did that explain my own fascination with the darker powers, my somewhat-less-than-sterling adherence to the rules of the White Council that I considered foolish or inconvenient?

I looked up at the demon, and felt like a sucker. I had been set up. He had intended, all along, to dangle this information in front of me as bait. He wanted to get my whole name, if he could, or more.

"I can show them to you, Harry Blackstone Dresden, as they really are," Chaunzaggroth assured me, his voice dulcet. "You've never seen your mother's face. I can give that to you. You've never heard her voice. I can let you hear that as well. You know nothing of what sort of people your parents were—or if you have any other family out there. Family, Harry Blackstone Dresden. Blood. Every bit as tormented and alone as you are . . ."

I stared at the demon's hideous form and listened to his soothing, relaxing voice. Family. Was it possible that I had a family? Aunts? Uncles? Cousins? Others, like me, perhaps, moving through the secret societies of the wizards, hidden from the view of the mortal world?

"The price is comparatively low. What need have you for your immortal soul when your body is finished with it? What harm to pass on to me only one more name? This is not information easily gained, even by my kind. You may not have the chance to garner it again." The demon pressed his pincers against the barrier of the conjuring circle. His beaklike maw fairly trembled with eagerness.

"Forget it," I said quietly. "No deal."

Chaunzaggroth's jaw dropped open. "But, Harry Blackstone Dresden—" he began.

I didn't realize that I was shouting until I saw him flinch. "I said forget it! You think I'm some kind of simp for you to sucker in, darkspawn? Take what you have gained and go, and feel lucky that I do not send you home with your bones torn from your body or your beak ground into dust."

Chaunzaggroth's eyes flashed with rage and he hurled himself against the barrier again, howling with blood lust and fury. I extended my hand and snarled, "Oh no you don't, you slimy little shit head." The demon's will strained against mine, and though sweat burst out on my forehead, I came out ahead once more.

Chaunzaggroth began to grow smaller and smaller, howling out his frustrated rage. "We are watching you, wizard!" he screamed. "You walk through shadows and one night you will slip and fall. And when you do, we will be there. We will be waiting to bring you down to us. You will be ours in the end."

He went on like that until he shrank to the size of a pinpoint and vanished with a little, imploding sound. I let my hand drop and lowered my head, breathing hard. I was shaking all over, and not only with the cold of my laboratory. I had badly misjudged Chaunzaggroth, thought him a somewhat reliable, if dangerous, source of information, willing to do reasonable business. But the rage, the fury, the frustrated malice that had been in his final offer, those last words, had shown his true colors. He had lied to me, deceived me about his true nature, played me along like a sucker and then tried to set the hook, hard. I felt like such an idiot.

The phone began to ring upstairs. I stirred into sudden motion, shoving stacks of things out of my way, pushing past them and over them, to reach the stepladder stairs that led up to my apartment. I hurried up them, my notebook in one hand, and caught the phone on its fifth ring. My apartment was dark. Night had fallen while I had interviewed the demon.

"Dresden," I said, puffing.

"Harry," Murphy said, her voice weak. "We've got another one."

"Son of a bitch," I said. "I'm coming. Give me the address." I set down the notebook and held my pencil ready to write.

Murphy's tone was numb. "Eight eighty-eight Ralston Place. Up in the Gold Coast."

I froze, staring at the address I had written down on the notebook. The address the demon had given me.

"Harry?" Murphy said. "Did you hear me?"

"I heard," I told her. "I'm coming, Murph." I hung up the phone and headed out into the light of the full moon overhead.

Chapter Twelve

Eight eighty-eight Ralston was a townhouse in the Gold Coast, the richest area of Chicago. It was set on its own little plot, surrounded by trees that hid the house from view almost entirely. High hedges, worked around the house in a small garden, added to the concealment as I drove up the white pebble drive, and parked the Beetle at the rear of a small fleet of police cars and emergency vehicles.

The strobing blue lights were almost comforting, by now. I'd seen them so many times that it felt, in an unsettling way, like a homecoming. Murphy had called me in early—I didn't see the forensics van yet, and only now were officers putting up yellow tape around the property.

I got out of my car, dressed in my jeans, button-down shirt, and boots again, my old black duster flapping around my calves. The wind was brisk, cold. The moon was riding high overhead, barely visible through the city's haze of pollution.

A chill ran down my neck, and I stopped, looking at the rows and rows of elegantly illuminated hedge sculptures, flower beds, and rows of shrubbery around me. I was abruptly certain that someone was out in the darkness; I could feel eyes on me.

I stared out at the night, sweeping my gaze slowly around. I could see nothing, but I would have bet money that there was someone out there. After a moment, the sense of being watched faded, and I shivered. I shoved my hands in my pockets and walked quickly toward the townhouse.

"Dresden," someone called, and I looked up to see Carmichael coming down the front stairs of the townhouse toward me. Carmichael was Murphy's right hand in Special Investigations. Shorter than average, rounder than average, slobbier than average, and with piggier eyes than average, Carmichael was a skeptic, a doubter, and a razor-sharp cop. He came down the stairs in his soup-stained old tie and shirtsleeves. "It's about fucking time. Jesus Christ, Dresden." He wiped a hand over his sweating brow.

I frowned down at Carmichael as we went up the stairs side by side. "That's the nicest greeting you've ever given me, I think," I said. "You change your mind about me being a fake?"

Carmichael shook his head. "No. I still think you're full of shit with this wizard-magic business. But Christ almighty, there are times when I wish you weren't."

"You never can tell," I said, my voice dry. "Where's Murphy?"

"Inside," Carmichael said, his mouth twisting with distaste. "You go on up the stairs. The whole place belongs to this guy. Murphy figures you might know something. I'm going to stay here and bog down the Feds when they show."

I glanced at him. "She still worried about looking bad for Internal Affairs?"

Carmichael grimaced. "Those assholes in IA would be all over her if she kicked the Feds out. Christ almighty, I get sick of city politics sometimes."

I nodded agreement and started up the stairs.

"Hey, Dresden," Carmichael said.

I looked over my shoulder at him, expecting the familiar jeers and insults. He was studying me with bright, narrow eyes. "I hear things about you and John Marcone. What's the deal?"

I shook my head. "No deal. He's lying scum."

Carmichael studied me intently, and then nodded. "You ain't much of a liar, Dresden. I don't think you could keep a straight face about something like this. I believe you."

"But you don't believe me when I say I'm a wizard?" I asked.

Carmichael grimaced and looked away. "Do I look like a fucking moron to you? Huh? You better get upstairs. I'll make some noise when Denton and the Stepford agents get here."

I turned to go and saw Murphy standing at the head of the stairs in a crisp grey business jacket and slacks, with sensible low heels and jewelry the color of steel. Her earrings seemed to be little more than bright beads of silver in her ears, which I had never really noticed when she had worn her golden hair long. Murphy's earlobes were cute. She'd kill me, just for thinking it.

"About time, Dresden. Get up here." Her voice was hard, angry. She vanished from the top of the stairway, and I took the rest of the stairs two at a time to catch up with her.

The apartment (though it was too big for the word to really apply) was brightly lit, and smelled, very faintly, of blood. Blood has a sweet sort of metallic odor. It makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up, and mine snapped to attention at once. There was another smell as well, maybe incense of some kind, and the fresh scent of the wind. I turned down a short hall at the top of the stairs, and followed Murphy into what was apparently a master bedroom, where I found the source of all the scents.

There was no furniture inside the master bedroom—and it was huge, large enough to make you wince at how far you'd have to go to get to the bathroom in the middle of the night. There was no carpeting. There were no decorations on the walls. There was no glass in the huge, single-pane window, letting in the October wind. The full moon shone down through it like a picture in a frame.

What the room did have was blood. There was blood all over, scattered in droplets and splashed in spurts against one wall. The scarlet footprints of something like a large wolf led in a straight line toward the shattered window. In the center of the room were the remains of a greater circle of summoning, its three rings of symbols carefully wrought in white chalk upon the wooden floor, burning sticks of incense interspersed among the symbols of the second ring.

What was left of Kim Delaney lay naked and supine on the bloodstained floor a few feet from the circle. The expression of shock and surprise on her face wouldn't change until rigor set in. Her dark, once-glittering eyes stared up at the ceiling, and her lips were parted, as though in the middle of an apology.

A large, wheel section of flesh beneath her chin was missing, and with it Kim's larynx and trachea. Bloody red meat was showing, the ragged ends of arteries and torn sections of muscle, and pale white bones gleamed at the bottom of the wound. Long rakes down her body had opened her like a Ziploc bag, leaving her covered in scarlet.

Something went "click" in my head. Someone threw some kind of switch that just turned off my emotions entirely and immersed me in a surreal haze. I couldn't be seeing this. It simply couldn't be real. It had to be some sort of game or hoax, in which the actors would start giggling in a few moments, unable to contain the mirth of their prank.

I waited. But no one started giggling. I wiped at my forehead with my hand and found cold sweat there. My fingers began to shake.

Murphy said, her voice still tight with anger, "Apparently, the incense set off the fire alarm in the hall. When the fire department got here, no one answered, so they came on in. They found her up here, around eight o'clock. She was still warm."

Eight o'clock. When I had been talking to the demon. Moonrise?

Behind me, Murphy closed the door to the bedroom. I turned to her, away from the grisly corpse. There was anger in every inch of her, in the way she glared at me.

"Murph," I said. "I don't know if I can do this."

"What's there to figure?" Murphy said. "There's a monster in the middle of the circle. I figure it's one of those loup-garou from your report. I figure it's Harley MacFinn, the owner of this house. Someone who knows he's going to go nuts when the moon rises. The girl tries to hold the monster inside the magic circle, right? Something goes wrong when MacFinn goes furry; he gets out of the circle, wastes her, then leaves."

"Uh-huh," I said, without turning around to look at Kim's body again. "It makes sense." And I told her what I had learned from the demon about Harley MacFinn, the Northwest Passage Project, and his antagonism with Marcone's business interests. Murphy listened to me in utter silence. When I was finished, she nodded, and turned to leave the room.

"Follow," she said shortly.

I followed, almost on her heels. I didn't turn around to see the room again before I left.

She led me down the hall, into another bedroom, this one furnished and neatly kept. "Come here," she said, moving to a dresser. I did, and she handed me a photograph of a middle-aged, starkly handsome man, his skin deeply tanned, the bones of his face gaunt and sharp. He was smiling.

Beside him in the picture was the amber-eyed woman from the department store where I'd run across the Alphas. She was also smiling. Her teeth were very white, very even, and her dark skin and silver-peppered hair went well with the man beside her. I chewed on my lip for a second, trying to think.

"That's Harley MacFinn," Murphy said. "Matches the picture on his driver's license. I didn't turn up any ID on the woman next to him, though." She studied my face critically. "She matches the description of the woman you said you saw in the department store, though. The one who followed us back from the scene in Rosemont. Is that her?"

I nodded. "Yeah. That's her."

Murphy nodded, took the picture from me, and set it back on the dresser. "Follow," she said again and walked out. I stared after her. What was wrong with Murphy? Had the scene unsettled her so much? I shook my head, still stunned from what I had seen, from too many facts coming together all at once, slam-bang in my brain.

"Murph, wait," I said. "Stop a minute. What's going on?"

She didn't answer me, just shot me a glare over her shoulder and continued walking. I hurried to catch up with her.

We went down what looked like a servant's narrow spiral staircase, down into the basement. She led me to the back of a storage room and pushed open a heavy, steel door there that opened onto a small, stark chamber, all of concrete, with no other exits. In the center of the chamber was another three-ring summoning circle, but this one's symbols had been made from silver and set into the concrete of the floor. Short bars of what looked like a mixture of silver and obsidian were interspersed around the second circle, creating what would, if the circle was functional, be a very formidable barrier.

But the symbols had been marred, torn, broken. Several from the critical inner ring had been pried up from the floor and were simply missing. Some of the bars had been broken. The circle, as it was, was nonfunctional and worthless—but whole, it would have served to contain Harley MacFinn when he shifted into his beast form. The room was a prison he had created for himself, something to contain the fury of the beast inside of him.

But someone had intentionally marred the circle, made the prison useless.

And I abruptly understood Kim Delaney's request. She had to have known Harley MacFinn, maybe through her environmental activism. She must have learned of his curse, and wanted to help him. When I had refused to help her, she had attempted to re-create the greater summoning circle upstairs in the bedroom, to hold in MacFinn once the moon rose. As I had warned her would happen, she had failed. She hadn't had the knowledge necessary to understand how such a construct would function, and consequently, she hadn't been able to make it work.

MacFinn had killed her. Kim was dead because I had refused to share my knowledge with her, because I hadn't given her my help. I had been so secure in my knowledge and wisdom; withholding such secrets from her had been the action of a concerned and reasoned adult speaking to an overeager child. I couldn't believe my own arrogance, the utter confidence with which I had condemned her to death.

I started to shake, harder, too many things pressing against my head, my heart. I could feel the pressure, somewhere inside of me, that switch on the inside of my head quivering, getting ready to flick back beneath a tide of raging anger, fury, regret, self-hatred. I took deep breaths and closed my eyes, trying not to let it happen.

I opened my eyes and looked up at Murphy. God, I needed to talk to her. I needed a friend. I needed someone to listen, to tell me it would be all right whether it was the truth or not. I needed someone to let me unload on them, to keep me from flying apart.

She regarded me with cold, angry eyes.

"Karrin," I whispered.

She drew from her pocket a crumpled piece of paper. She unfolded it, and held it up to me, so that I could see Kim Delaney's graceful handwriting, the sketch of the summoning circle that she had brought to me in McAnally's. The sketch I had refused to tell Kim about. The sketch I had crumpled into a little ball and tossed on the floor, and which Murphy had picked up, absently, just to get the trash out of people's way.

And I realized why there was so much anger in Murphy's eyes.

I stared at the sketch. "Karrin," I began again. "Stars above, you've got to listen to me." I took the sketch from her hands, my fingers trembling.

"Harry," she said, in a calm tone. "You lying *bastard*," and on the word she drove her fist into my stomach, hard, doubling me over. The motion put my head within easy reach, and her fist took me across the jaw in a right cross that sent me to the floor like a lump of wet pasta, stars dancing in my vision.

I was only dimly aware of her taking the sketch back from me. She twisted my arms painfully behind my back, and snapped her handcuffs around my wrists. "You promised me," she said, her voice furious. "You *promised*. No secrets. You lied to me all along. You played me like a sucker the entire while. Goddammit, Dresden, you're involved in this and people are dying."

"Murph," I mumbled. "Wait."

She grabbed my hair, jerked my head back, and slammed me across the jaw again, near-bersek anger lending her strength. My head swam, and blackness closed over my vision for several seconds.

"No more talking. No more *lies*," I heard her say, and she dragged me to my feet, shoved my face and chest against a wall, and began searching me for weapons. "No more people torn up like meat on a block. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

She took my blasting rod. My shield bracelet. The energy ring. Even my lump of chalk. Her voice went on, hard, cold, and professional, letting me know my rights.

I closed my eyes and leaned against the stone wall. Next to my head, it was the softest thing in the room. I didn't try to fight or to explain.

What was the point?

Chapter Thirteen

Walking down stairs with your hands fastened behind your back is more difficult than you would think. You depend upon your arms for balance, whether you realize it or not. With my hands cuffed at the small of my back, and Murphy walking me up the narrow servant's staircase, and then down the front stairs of MacFinn's building in front of a gaggle of staring police officers, my balance was gone.

As we came down, I could hear arguing voices. "You want to get in my face about this?" Carmichael demanded. "Look. I'm doing my job. My boss said no one was to go up, so no one goes up. Do I need to use shorter words or what?"

I looked up to see Denton towering over Carmichael, the veins in his forehead athrob, his three associates spread out in a fan behind him. "You are interfering with a duly appointed officer executing his duties," Denton snarled. "Get out of my way, Detective Carmichael. Or do you want to get added to Internal Affairs' to-do list along with your boss?"

"It's all right, Ron," Murphy said. "I'm done with my business up there, anyway."

Carmichael looked up at me and stared, his mouth opening. Denton and his crew looked, too. I saw Denton's face twist in surprise, and then close again, hedging out any emotion from his expression. Roger, the redheaded kid who worked for Denton, was staring at me openly, his jaw dropped. Benn, the woman who had attacked Murphy last night, regarded me with an almost bored expression, and Wilson, the overweight one, let out a satisfied snort.

"Lieutenant," Carmichael said. "You sure about this?"

"He was arguing with the most recently deceased last night. I can connect him to at least one resident of the house, as well as some of the . . . decorations there. I'm taking him in for obstructing and for conspiracy to commit murder. Put him in the car, Carmichael, and then get your ass upstairs." Murphy gave me a sharp push toward Carmichael, and I stumbled. Carmichael caught me.

"So let's go, Denton," Murphy said, and turned and stalked away. Denton gave me an expressionless glance, and stepped after Murphy, beckoning his companions to follow.

Carmichael shook his head and walked me to one of the police cars. "Fuck, Dresden. And here I was getting ready to throw in on your side. Guess I'm just a sucker for the underdog."

Carmichael unlocked the back of the car and put his hand on the back of my head as I bent down to get into it. "Watch your head. Christ, what happened to your jaw?"

I sat down in the back of the car and looked straight ahead. I didn't answer him. Carmichael stared at me for a while, and then shook his head. "We'll have someone drive you downtown as soon as the scene is secure. You can get in touch with your lawyer, then."

I kept my eyes forward and still didn't answer him.

Carmichael studied me some more, then stood and shut me into the car.

I closed my eyes.

I have felt low before in my life, have experienced events that left me broken and groveling and wishing I was dead. That was pretty much how I felt now, too. It wasn't that I hadn't found the killer—I've been beaten before, taken the blow on the chin, and come out fighting the next round. I can roll with the punches as well as anyone. But I hated feeling that I had betrayed a friend.

I had promised Murphy that I would keep no secrets from her—and I hadn't. Not really. But I had been stupid. I should have been putting pieces together more quickly, more instinctively. Perhaps I had some excuse in that I had been distracted by nearly having my head blown off at the Full Moon Garage, that I had been distracted by my soulgaze upon the Streetwolves' leader, and the knowledge that he wanted to kill me. But it wasn't a good enough excuse to clear things with Murphy. I wasn't sure anything would have been. I felt alone. I felt frustrated. I felt like shit.

And I felt worse, a moment later, when I looked out the car window at the full moon and realized something that I should have put together an hour before—the real killer or killers were still out there.

MacFinn couldn't have been responsible for all of the deaths the previous month. Two of the murders had occurred on the nights before and after the full moon. If MacFinn's curse was indeed to become a ravening beast during the full moon, he could not have murdered either of last month's victims, or Spike at the Varsity last night.

Which begged the question: Who *had* done the killings?

I didn't have any answers. If the dark-haired woman who had led the Alphas was indeed connected with MacFinn, could she have been responsible? Something wolflike had attacked me in the abandoned department store when all the lights had been out—had it been her? One of the Alphas? Perhaps that would explain how the other murders happened.

But if it had been true, why hadn't the killer finished me off while I was floundering in the dark, virtually helpless?

More and more questions, and no answers.

Not that it mattered to me now. A nice, quiet jail cell didn't sound too bad, once I thought about it. At least it would keep the criminal element off of my back. Provided they didn't shut me up with a four-hundred-pound con named "Hump" or anything.

And then an odd feeling crept over me, derailing my train of thought. Once more, the hairs on my neck were standing up. Someone was watching me.

I looked around. There was no one in sight. All of the police were inside the house. I was alone in the back of the patrol car, with my hands bound. I was helpless and alone, and I suddenly became very aware of the fact that Harley MacFinn had yet to be found or apprehended. He was still lurking in the night, unable to keep from tearing apart anyone he saw.

I thought of Spike's torn corpse. Of poor Kim Delaney, covered in her own blood upstairs in the townhouse. I added imaginary (and far more horrible) images of half a dozen other victims, stacking scene upon scene of blood and death in my mind within a few seconds.

I broke out in a cold sweat and looked out the other window.

Directly into a pair of brilliant, feral, amber eyes.

I yelled and flinched away, lifting my legs to kick should something come rushing through the vehicle's window. Instead, the door opened, and the dark-haired, amber-eyed woman from the department store said, "Be quiet, Mr. Dresden, or I will not be able to rescue you."

I blinked at her, over my upraised knees. "Huh?"

"Rescue you, Mr. Dresden. Get out of the car and come with me. And quickly, before the police return." She peered past me, toward the house. "There is not much time."

"Are you crazy?" I demanded. "I don't even know who the hell you are."

"I am Harley MacFinn's fiancée, Miss West," she said. "I am called Tera."

I shook my head. "I can't leave. I'd be buying more trouble than you could imagine."

Her amber eyes glinted. "You are the only one who can stop my fiancé, Mr. Dresden. You cannot do that from a jail cell."

"I'm not the Lone Ranger," I snapped in reply. "I'm a hired consultant. And I don't think the city is going to foot the bill for this sort of thing."

Tera West's teeth showed. "If money is your concern, I assure you that it is not a problem, Mr. Dresden. Time presses. Will you come, or not?"

I studied her face. She had clean, striking features, exceptional more than attractive. There were crow's-feet at the edges of her eyes, though they were the only sign of age on her that I could see. There was, along the edge of her forehead, at the hairline, a long, slender, purpling bruise.

"You," I said. "It was you who attacked me in the department store. I hit you, and you took my rod away from me."

She glared at me. "Yes," she said.

"You're a werewolf."

"And you," she said, "are a wizard. And we have no more time." She crouched a bit lower, staring past me. I looked in that direction, and saw Denton and his cronies exiting the townhouse, engaged in an animated discussion. "Your friend," she said, "the police detective, is close to finding my fiancé. Do you really want her to be the one to face him? Is she prepared to deal with what she will find? Or will she die, as the others did?"

Dammit. The bitch (no pun intended) was right. I was the one who was capable of actually doing something about MacFinn. If Murphy was the one to catch up to him first, people would get killed. She was a fantastic cop, and was becoming more adept at dealing with the supernatural, but she wasn't able to handle a major werewolf berserker. I turned back to Tera. "If I go with you, you'll take me to MacFinn."

She stopped in the midst of turning to leave. "When I can. At dawn. If you think you can create the circle, hold him in when the moon again rises. If you can help him."

I nodded once. My decision was made. “I can. I will.”

“She who was called Kim Delaney said the same thing,” Tera West said, and spun on her heels to head away from me, crouched low to the ground.

I rolled out of the backseat and followed Tera West out into the shrubberies and garden shadows around the building, away from the police cars and the lights.

Someone shouted in surprise, somewhere behind me. Then there was a cry of “Stop!” I just stood and ran, as fast as I could, to get out of the lights and the line of sight of any possible shooters.

Apparently, the one shout was all the warning I was going to get. Gunfire erupted behind me as I ran. Bullets tore up the dirt next to my feet. I think I started screaming without slowing down, hunching my shoulders and ducking my head as best I could.

I was maybe five feet away from the sheltering shadows behind the hedges when something slammed into my shoulder and threw me *through* the hedge and out the other side. I landed in a roll and stumbled halfway back to my feet. There was a second of screaming, confused input from my shoulder, as though my joints could suddenly hear a welter of sound, feel a broad variety of sensation and texture beneath my skin. And then my shoulder went numb entirely, and my vision started spinning. I reached out a hand to support myself as I started to fall—and remembered that my wrists were still cuffed behind me. I went into the turf, felt the grass against my cheek.

“He’s down, he’s down!” came a cold, female voice—Agent Benn’s, I thought. “Take him!”

There was no warning of presence, just the feeling of someone jerking me up to my feet by my duster. I felt Tera’s hand slide beneath my jacket, then vanish as she pressed it to the numbed area of my arm.

“You are not bleeding badly,” Tera said, her voice calm. “You were shot in the shoulder. Not the leg. Run or die.” Then she turned and started making her way through the hedges.

Some encouragement—but I had a hunch I would be feeling a lot worse a few minutes from now. So I swallowed the sickly taste of fear and loped after Tera West as best I could.

We started a game of shadow-haunted hide-and-seek in the little garden, Tera and me against the agents behind us. She moved like a wraith, in utter silence, smooth and steady in the black shadows and silver light of the moon overhead. She immediately cut into the hedges, taking lefts and rights every few paces. She did not slow down for me, and I was somehow very certain that MacFinn’s fiancée would not stop and wait for me should I fall. She wouldn’t hesitate to leave me behind if I could not keep the pace.

I did it for a while. It wasn’t even too hard. Oh, I felt a little out of breath, a little hampered by the handcuffs, but other than that, it was almost as though I hadn’t been shot, aside from the trickling warmth I could feel sliding down my ribs and over my belly. Endorphins—what a rush.

Our pursuers plunged into the maze of hedges, shrubs, and statuary, but my guide seemed to have an uncanny knack for avoiding them. She kept to the darkest parts of the garden as we went, checking behind her to make sure I was keeping the pace.

I wasn’t sure how much time passed that way, ghosting through the darkness while our pursuers struggled to coordinate their efforts and remain quiet at the same time, but it couldn’t have been long. I’ve read somewhere that the initial shock of gunshot injuries always wears off after a few moments—besides, I was out of shape. I couldn’t have kept up with Tera West for long. She was that fast, that good.

My shoulder began to pound double time to my laboring heart as we emerged from the last of the hedges to the street outside—and the eight-foot wrought iron fence that surrounded the property. I slid to a halt and stumbled against the fence, wheezing.

Tera looked over her shoulder, her amber eyes bright beneath the moon. She was breathing through her nose silently, the crouched run having not tired her in the least, it seemed.

“I can’t climb the fence,” I said. The pain from my shoulder was starting to become very real now—it felt like a runner’s cramp, only higher up. “There’s no way. Not with my hands cuffed.”

Tera nodded once. “I will lift you,” she said.

I stared at her, through a growing haze of pain. Then sighed. “You’d better hurry, then,” I said. “I’m about to pass out.”

She took the words in stride and said, “Lean against the fence. Keep your body stiff.” Then she seized my ankles. I did my best to follow her directions, and she heaved, straining with effort.

For a second, nothing happened. And then she started, very slowly, to move me up, my good shoulder against the fence. She kept pressing my ankles higher, until I bent forward at the waist, scrambled with my legs for a second—and then tumbled gracelessly to the ground on the far side of the fence. I hit the ground, and as I did a nuclear weapon went off in my shoulder, white fire, blinding heat.

I sucked in a breath and tried not to scream, but some sound must have escaped. There was a shout from somewhere behind me, and the sound of voices converging on our position.

Tera grimaced and turned to face the oncoming voices.

“Hurry up,” I gasped. “Climb it and let’s go.”

She shook her head, a stirring of dark hair. “No time. They are here.”

I gritted my teeth until they creaked and got my feet underneath me. She was right. The oncoming voices were close. Someone, Benn again, I thought, shouted out orders not to move. If Tera tried to clamber over the fence now, she’d be a perfect target at the top. The pursuers were too close. Tera didn’t stand much chance of escaping, and if she didn’t, I wouldn’t make it far. I’d be caught, and in more trouble than ever—and MacFinn would be on a rampage, with no one to oppose him.

I blinked sweat out of my eyes and knelt down as my blood pattered to the sidewalk. Little curls of steam came up where it hit the cold concrete.

I took a breath and drew in every bit of will I could summon, drew in the pain and my fear and sick frustration and shoved it all into a hard little ball of energy.

“*Ventas veloce,*” I murmured. “*Ubrum, ubrium.*” I repeated the words in a breathless chant, curling my fingers in toward my palm as I did.

The curls of steam from my blood began to thicken and gather into dense tendrils of mist and fog. Back along our trail, where more of my blood had spilled, more fog arose. For a few seconds, it was nothing, just a low and slithering movement along the ground—and then it erupted forth, billows of fog rising to cover the ground as the energy rushed out of me, covering Tera from my sight and causing shouts of confusion and consternation to come from the law officials pursuing us.

I dropped to my side, overwhelmed by pain and fatigue.

There was a whisper of sound, a creak of wrought metal, and then a light thump as Tera West landed beside me, invisible in the fog though she was only a few feet away. She moved toward me, and then I saw her expression, her eyes wide with wonder, the first emotion I had seen on her face.

“Wizard,” she whispered.

“Don’t wear it out,” I mumbled. And then everything went black.

Chapter Fourteen

I woke up someplace dark and warm. But then I opened my eyes, and it wasn't dark anymore. Just dim.

I was in a hotel room, a cheap one, lying on my back in a double bed. Heavy curtains were drawn, but cheap curtain rods sagged in the middle and let light in from outside. I felt that I had been lying there for a while. I took a deep breath and it made my shoulder begin a dull, pounding throb. I moaned, before I could think to keep quiet. I'm not a wimp; it just hurt that bad. My throat was parched, my lips chapped.

I turned my head, which made my jaw ache where Murphy had socked me. My left shoulder was covered in thick, white bandages and wrapped firmly in tape. It looked clean and neat, except for the bruises that I could see spreading out toward my chest and down my arm from beneath the bandages. As a side note, I noticed that I was naked, and the list of candidates for who could have undressed me was awfully short.

Beyond my shoulder, on the nightstand beside the bed, was a pile of miscellany. A book entitled *SAS Survival Manual* lay open to a page with several black and white illustrations of bandaging techniques. Beside it were some empty cardboard boxes whose labels declared them to have once contained cotton gauze wrapping, medical tape, that sort of thing. A brown bottle of hydrogen peroxide lay on its side atop a hacksaw with a nicked blade. A paper sack sat on the floor beside the bed, its top folded closed.

I moved my right hand up to rub at my aching head. One bracelet of Murphy's handcuffs hung around my wrist, the chain swinging from the base of the bracelet, where it had apparently been severed by the hacksaw. The other bracelet was down on my left wrist. I could feel it as a dull, throbbing band around the lower part of my arm.

I did my best not to move too much, but the pain didn't go away. After a few minutes, I decided that my wound wasn't going to start hurting any less, so I sat up. Slowly. Rising wasn't too much more trouble, though my legs shook a little. I made it to the bathroom and made use of the facilities, then splashed water on my face with my right hand.

This time, she didn't surprise me. I heard her move out of the darkness of the back corner of the room. I glanced up into Tera West's amber-colored eyes in the mirror and said, "Tell me I didn't get lucky last night."

Her expression never blinked, as though the insinuation had flown past her. She was still dressed in the same clothes and still held herself with the same relaxed composure she had always displayed. "You were very lucky," she said. "The bullet went through the muscle and missed the bone and the artery. You will live."

I scowled. "I don't feel so lucky."

Tera shrugged. "Pain is to be endured. It ends or it does not." I saw her consider my back, and then lower portions. "You are in reasonably good condition. You should be able to withstand it."

I felt a hot rush of blood to my face, and I fumbled for a towel and awkwardly slung it around my hips. "Are you the one who bandaged me? And, uh . . ." I made a vague gesture with the fingers of the hand that was holding the towel and preserving my modesty.

She nodded. "I am. And I have procured clothing for you that is not soaked in blood. You must dress, so that we may help my fiancé."

I turned to face her, and tried out my best glower. She didn't twitch an eyebrow. "What time is it?"

She shrugged. "Late afternoon. The sun will set soon, and the moon will rise soon after. We have no time to waste if we are to reach him before the change."

"Do you know where he is?"

She shrugged again. "I know him."

I let out a breath and slowly walked past her. I went to the paper bag on the floor next to the bed. Inside it, I found a pair of enormous purplish sweatpants and a white T-shirt with Old Glory flying on it in rippling, metallic colors, subtitled: INVEST IN AMERICA—BUY A CONGRESSMAN. I wrinkled up my nose at the sweatpants, liked the shirt, and fumbled myself into the clothing, ripping off price tags as I went.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"A hotel in East Chicago," she said.

I nodded. "How did you pay for it?"

"I used cash. MacFinn told me that the police can track the plastic cards."

I squinted at her. "Yeah. They can." I rubbed a hand over my head and went to the mirror again to study myself. I was walking more easily now—the pain wasn't any less, but I was beginning to get more used to it. "Do you have any ibuprofen, anything like that?"

"Drugs," she said. "No." She picked up a set of rental-car keys and turned toward the door.

"Stop," I told her. She turned to me, her eyes narrowed.

"We are going now," she said.

"We are not going," I replied, "until I have a few answers."

Her eyebrows furrowed, and she glared at me. Then she turned and walked out of the room, letting in a brief flood of orange-tinted sunlight before the door slammed behind her.

I considered the door for a moment. Then I sat down on the bed and waited.

Perhaps three minutes passed. Then she reappeared. "Now," she said, "we will leave."

I shook my head. "I told you *no*. Not until I get some answers."

"MacFinn will answer your questions," Tera told me. "Now, you must leave this place."

I snorted and folded my arms over my chest. My shoulder took fire and I wobbled on the bed before I lowered my left arm again. I left the right one folded across my chest, but it just didn't have the same effect. "Where is MacFinn? Why did he kill Marcone's business partner and his bodyguard? Or did he kill them at all?"

"You will leave this pl—" Tera began.

"Who are you? Why did the pair of you mess up the first circle, the one in your basement? How did you know Kim Delaney?"

Tera West snarled and seized me by the front of my shirt. "You will leave this place *now*," she said, glaring into my eyes.

"Why should I?" I snarled, and for once I didn't avert my eyes. I stared into her gleaming amber eyes and braced myself for the impact of looking into her soul, and for her to peer into mine.

Instead, nothing happened.

That, in itself, was enough to make my jaw drop incredulously. I continued the stare, and she didn't blink, didn't turn away—and didn't fall into soulgaze with me. I shuddered in reaction. What was going on? Why didn't the 'gaze begin? There were only two kinds of people whose eyes I could meet for more than a second or two: the people who had already met my eyes in a soulgaze were one kind; inhuman beings from the Nevernever were the other.

I had never looked upon Tera West's soul before. I remembered a soulgaze, every time it happened. The experience wasn't the sort of thing you could forget. That only left one conclusion.

Whoever she was—whatever she was, Tera West wasn't human.

"We will leave now," she growled.

I felt a surge of defiant grumpiness course through me. "Why *should* I?" I whispered back.

"Because I have called the police and told them that you are here, that you are acting irrational and dangerous, and that you possess a weapon. They will be here momentarily. I think that the police might be feeling threatened, given all the recent deaths. They will be likely to shoot you rather than take chances." She let go of my shirt with a little push, and stalked out of the room.

I sat on the bed for about five seconds. Then I rose and hobbled after her, taking time to snatch my duster from where it was draped over a chair. There were holes in the upper left arm, one in the front of the sleeve, one in the back, and it was crusty with dried blood that didn't much show against the black canvas. It was disgusting, but hey, it was mine. The boots and socks I had been wearing last night were next to it, and I snagged them, too.

Outside, it was late afternoon. The streets and highways would soon be crowded with commuters going home from work. Tera had rented a beat-up old car, probably from an independent rental business, rather than from one of the major chains—good move on her part. It would draw things out while the police methodically went through agency after agency, looking for someone of her description, and they always started with the big places first.

I studied her as she got in the car. She was tall and lean and pretty in a knife-edge sort of way. Her eyes moved around constantly—not nervously or randomly, but with the cool precision of someone making herself aware of everything surrounding her at all times. Her hands were scarred, long-fingered, and strong. The bruise on her head, where I had smacked her with my blasting rod the night before (no, two nights before; I had lost a day sleeping in the hotel room) was probably hurting like hell, but she didn't seem to notice it.

She drove us out onto the streets of East Chicago, one of the distant suburbs of the big city, down at the south end of Lake Michigan, finally turning off into a quiet drive beside a sign that read WOLF LAKE PARK.

Tera West made me nervous. She had appeared from nowhere to save me from the back of a police car, true, but what were her intentions? Was she really trying to help her fiancé keep from falling victim to his family curse again? Or were the two of them working together to remove anyone who could rebuild the magical circle that could contain MacFinn and render him harmless? That would make sense, given that once Kim Delaney was dead, they came after me.

On the other hand, that didn't fit with a lot of the other facts. MacFinn, if he was truly a loup-garou, changed into a beast only during the nights of the full moon. At least half a dozen people had been killed when the moon was waxing full, but not yet all the way there, or after it had been full for three nights already and was waning back toward half full again.

And Tera West wasn't a werewolf. A werewolf was a human being who used magic to turn into a wolf. She had looked upon my eyes and not been drawn in. Therefore, she wasn't a human being.

Could she be some kind of shape-shifter from the Nevernever? MacFinn's partner in crime, killing on the off nights to keep suspicion from falling on him? Some sort of being with which I was unfamiliar? Most of my background on the paranormal was Western European in origin. I should have been reading more books on Native American beliefs, South American speaks and haunts, African legend, East Asian folklore—but it was a little late for such regrets. If Tera West was a monster, and wanted me dead, she could have killed me already—and she surely would not have bothered to clean and dress my injury.

Of course, that begged the question: What *did* she really want?

And that question led the way to many more. Who were the young people I had seen her with that first evening? What was she doing with them? Did she have some kind of cult of followers, like vampires sometimes built up? Or was it something else entirely?

Tera pulled over onto a little gravel lane, drove a quarter mile up it, and pulled off into the weeds. "Get out," she said. "He will be here, somewhere."

The bouncing car ride had come to an end, mercifully, and the sun was still solidly above the horizon, with moonrise not for at least an hour after sunset. So I ignored the pain and pushed my way out of the car, to follow her into the woods.

It was darker underneath the ancient oaks and sycamores, and quiet. Birdsong came to us, but from far away, as though the birds were choosing the better part of valor in remaining where the sun could still touch the tree branches. The wind sighed through the woods, sending leaves spinning down in all shades of gold and orange and russet, adding to the thick, crunchy carpeting under our feet. Our steps sounded out distinctly as we moved ahead through the leaves, and the cool wind made me grateful that I had thought to drape my duster over my shoulders.

I studied the usually quiet Tera. She was walking with exaggerated motions, planting her feet down solidly with each step, as though intentionally trying to make noise. Once or twice, she stepped out of her way to tread on a branch, snapping it with a dry popping sound. I was too tired and sore to go to any such effort. I just walked, and it made more noise than she did. Who says I can't do anything right?

We hadn't gone more than a few hundred yards when Tera abruptly tensed, crouching, her eyes scanning all around. There was a whistling sound, and then a bent sapling jerked upright, dragging a noose around Tera's ankles and hauling her across the rock- and leaf-covered floor of the woods with a yelp of surprise.

I blinked at her, and then something came up out of the leaves, rose right up like Hamlet's dad from the stage floor. But instead of bemoaning his fate and charging me with avenging him, he slugged me across the jaw (on the same side of my face that already sported dark purple bruises) and sent me spinning to the ground, stunned.

I landed badly, but on my unwounded side, and rolled out of the way as a muddy, naked foot stomped down at my head. I grabbed on to it and jerked with more desperation than strength, and the foot's owner fell down beside me. Instead of being slowed, he slapped his arms at the ground as he hit it, in much the same way Murphy did when practicing falls. Then he rolled as I struggled to my hands and knees, and slid a hard, strong forearm beneath my throat, locking it there with the other hand and pressing back against my windpipe.

"Got you. I *got* you," snarled my attacker. I struggled against him, but he was bigger than me, stronger than me. He had me down, and he hadn't been shot or beaten up anywhere near as often as I had in the last fifteen hours or so.

I didn't stand a chance.

Chapter Fifteen

So there I was being strangled by a ranting, half-naked madman in the middle of the woods, with a she-werewolf dangling from a rope snare somewhere nearby. My gunshot wound hurt horribly, and my jaw throbbed from where my buddy the cop had brutalized it the night before. I’ve had worse days. That’s the great thing about being a wizard. I can always tell myself, honestly, that things could be worse.

I stopped trying to struggle against the man who was choking me. Instead, I grabbed his wrist and prepared to do something foolish.

Magic is a kind of energy. It is given shape by human thoughts and emotions, by imagination. Thoughts define that shape—and words help to define those thoughts. That’s why wizards usually use words to help them with their spells. Words provide a sort of insulation as the energy of magic burns through a spell caster’s mind. If you use words that you’re too familiar with, words that are so close to your thoughts that you have trouble separating thought from word, that insulation is very thin. So most wizards use words from ancient languages they don’t know very well, or else they make up nonsense words and mentally attach their meanings to a particular effect. That way, a wizard’s mind has an extra layer of protection against magical energies coursing through it.

But you can work magic without words, without insulation for your mind. If you’re not afraid of it hurting a little.

I drew in my will, my exhausted fear, and focused on what I wanted. My vision swam with dots of color. The man on my back snarled and growled incoherently, and spittle or foam dribbled onto the side of my face. Dried leaves and mud pressed against the other side of my face. Things started going black.

Then I ground my teeth together and released my will with a burst of sudden energy.

Two things happened. First, a rush of blinding thought, brilliant and wild and jangling, went through my head. My eyes swam with color, my ears with phantom sound. My senses were assaulted with a myriad of impressions: the sharp scent of the earth and dry leaves, the rippling scratch of a centipede’s legs fluttering up the skin of my forearms, the sensation of warm sunlight against my scalp, dozens of others I couldn’t identify—things with no basis in reality. They were a side effect of the energy rushing through my head.

The second thing that happened was a surge of electricity gathered from the air around me to my fingertips, gripped on my attacker’s wrist, and surged up through his arm and into his body. He convulsed against my back, out of control, and the strength of his own reaction threw him off of me and to his back on the leaves, jerking and flopping, his face stretched in a tight-lipped expression of shock and fear.

I wheezed in a breath, stunned and shaking, then scrambled back to my feet, only to stagger against a tree. I huddled there, watching my attacker’s convulsions fade into a numb paralysis. Finally, he just stared at the sky, his lips open, his chest heaving in and out.

I studied the man a little more closely. He was big. He was really big, at least as tall as me and twice as broad. He was dressed only in a pair of cutoff blue jeans, and those looked like they were ill fit. He was in a condition best described as “overwhelmingly masculine,” hairy-chested and muscled like a professional wrestler. There was grey in his hair and beard, and there were lines on his face, putting his age at well into maturity. It was his eyes that showed me the most about him. They burned green, wild and haunted, fastened on the distant sky now, but heavy with the weight of too much terrible knowledge. It couldn’t have been easy to live with a curse like his.

There was a scrambling sound, a muffled thump, and I looked up to see MacFinn’s noose trap hanging empty, the rope swinging back and forth. My eyes tracked down to earth to find an indistinct shape stir in the leaves, and then resolve itself into Tera West’s long limbs and practical clothes. She gathered her legs beneath her and crossed at once to MacFinn, her chest heaving, her eyes vague and distant.

“MacFinn,” she said. “MacFinn! You’ve killed him,” she snarled, and her eyes snapped up to mine, bright and burning with amber anger. I could have sworn I saw her face start to change, her bared teeth begin to grow into fangs. Maybe that was just the effect of the magic on my perceptions, though, or a primitive, lizard-brain sort of reaction to Tera rising to her feet and charging toward me with a howl. There was murder in her eyes.

I hadn’t gotten beaten up twice, shot, and nearly strangled to get taken out by a misguided werewolf bitch. I gathered in my dizzy, spinning will and extended my good hand toward the charging woman, flicking my wrist in a circle. “*Vento giostru!*” I trumpeted.

The winds howled down from the trees and whipped into a savage circle of moving air, lifting up dried leaves, sticks, and small stones. The miniature cyclone picked the charging Tera up off the ground and hurled her a good twenty feet through the air, into the branches of a pine tree. It also hurled out a cloud of rocks and small debris, forcing me to seek shelter behind a tree trunk.

How embarrassing. It was a little more wind than I had wanted. That’s the danger of evocation, of that instantaneous, ka-blowie sort of magic. Control can be somewhat tricky. All I had wanted was something to spin Tera around and then to plop her down on her ass.

Instead, rocks hammered against the tree trunk and zipped by, rattling against the trees all around in an almost deafening clatter. The wind shook the trees, tore branches from them, and cast half a ton of dirt and dust into the air in a choking cloud.

The wind died after about half a minute, leaving me choking and coughing on dust and dirt. I peered around the edge of my tree, to see what I could see.

The trees had been cleaned of their autumn colors in a fifty-foot-wide circle, leaving only stark branches behind. Where the bark had been brittle or dry, the cyclone had torn it from the trees, leaving pale, gleaming wood flesh visible. The leaves on the ground were gone as well, as were six or eight inches of topsoil—wind erosion gone berserk. A few stones, newly naked, could be seen in the torn earth, as could the roots of some of the trees and a number of startled worms.

MacFinn was sitting up, evidently recovered from the jolt I’d given him. His face was pasty and stunned as he looked around him. His chest rose and fell in uneven jerks.

There was a rustle, and then I caught sight of Tera West tumbling to the ground from the branches of the pine tree. She landed with a thump and sat there coughing and staring, her mouth hanging open in surprise. She blinked at me and nervously scooted a few inches backward over the ground.

“See there?” I wheezed, raising a hand and pointing at MacFinn. “He’s breathing. He’ll be all right.” My mind was still spinning from my unshielded magic attack on MacFinn. I caught the strong scent of wildflowers and stagnant water, and felt what I was sure were the scales of a snake slithering across the palms of my hands, while something with wings and glittering, multifaceted eyes hovered at the edge of my vision, vanishing whenever I tried to look at it. I tried to shove everything that didn’t make sense out of my way, to ignore it, but it was difficult to sort the false impressions from the ones that were in front of me.

Tera rose, and made her way toward the fallen man. She knelt down over MacFinn and wrapped her arms around him. I closed my eyes and wheezed until my head began to slow down a little. I focused on all the pain that was lurking in the midst of the confusion. Pain in my shoulder, my throat, my jaw, gave me a concrete foundation, a place that I knew was stable, if unpleasant. I fastened on it, concentrated, until I began to get less woozy. Once the pain returned in force, I wasn’t sure I wanted to be less woozy, but I opened my eyes anyway.

MacFinn had his arms around Tera’s shoulders, and she was kissing him as if she were trying to inhale him. I felt vaguely voyeuristic.

“Ahem,” I said. “Maybe we should get somewhere out of the open?”

They disengaged, slowly, and Tera helped MacFinn to rise to his full, impressive height. He made her look like a slip of a girl, but he leaned against her a little as he stood. He studied me, and I kept my eyes away from his. I didn’t want to see what was inside of him.

“Kim’s dead,” MacFinn said. “Isn’t she?”

It wasn’t a question, but I nodded. “Yeah. Last night.”

The big man shuddered and closed his eyes. “Dammit,” he whispered. “Dammit all.”

“There was nothing you could do,” Tera said, her voice low. “She knew the risks.”

“And you must be Harry Dresden,” MacFinn said. He glanced at the burns on his wrist, where my magic had taken him. “Sorry about that. I didn’t see Tera with you. I didn’t know who you were.”

I shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. But can we get out of the open? Last thing we need is a couple of runners or bikers to come back and report us to the police.”

MacFinn nodded at me. “All right. Let’s go.” Tera gave me a last, wary look, and then turned with MacFinn to help him farther back into the woods. I followed them.

MacFinn’s camp turned out to be hidden in the overhang of a bank of earth, heavily laced with the roots of the ancient trees above it that held it in place and kept it from simply spilling into a mound of mud. There was a small fire built at the back of the shelter the bank afforded, well shielded from sight. MacFinn made his way to the fire and settled down before it. Twilight would cast the sheltered camp into deep darkness, but for now it was only shady and out of the wind. The fire had made the place warm, comfortable. It didn’t feel like we were within fifteen miles of the third largest city in the country.

Tera settled down beside MacFinn, her manner restless. I remained standing, though the throbbing in my arm made me wish I was lying down in a bed somewhere, instead of huddling in the middle of a small but genuine forest.

“All right, MacFinn,” I said. “You want my help. And I want to keep more people from being hurt. But I need some things from you.”

He peered up at me, his green eyes calculating. “I am hardly in a position to bargain, Mr. Dresden. What you need, I will give you.”

I nodded. “Answers. I’ve got about a million questions.”

“Dark will come in less than two hours. Moonrise is only slightly more than an hour after that. We don’t have much time for questions.”

“Time enough,” I assured him. “Why did you come here?”

“I woke up about five miles from here this morning,” MacFinn said, looking away from me as he did, staring at the fire. “I’ve got several stashes hidden around the city. Just in case. This is one of the older ones. The damp had gotten to the clothes, and all I had was these.” He gestured at the jean shorts.

“Do you remember what you did?” The words had an edge to them, but at least I didn’t say, “Do you remember murdering Kim Delaney?” Who says I can’t be diplomatic?

MacFinn shuddered. “Pieces,” he said. “Just pieces.” He looked at me and said, “I didn’t mean to hurt her. I swear to you.”

“Then why is she dead?” The words came out flat, cool. Tera glared at me, but I watched MacFinn for his answer.

“The curse,” he said quietly. “When it happens, when I change—have you ever been angry, Mr. Dresden? So angry that you lost control? That nothing else mattered to you but acting on your anger?”

“Once,” I said.

“Maybe you can understand part of it then,” MacFinn said. “It comes on me, and there’s nothing left but the need to hurt something. To act on the rage. I tried to tell Kim that the circle wasn’t working, that she had to get out, but she wouldn’t *listen*.” I heard the frustration in his voice, and his hands clenched into fists. “She wouldn’t listen to me.”

“It frustrated you,” I said. “And when you changed . . .”

He nodded. “It’s how I came back from ‘Nam. Everyone else in my platoon died but me. I knew the full moon was coming. And I knew that I hated them, hated the soldiers who had killed my friends. When I changed, I started killing until there wasn’t anyone left alive within maybe two miles.”

I stared at MacFinn for a long moment. I believed that he was telling me the truth. That he didn’t have much control, if any, over his actions when he transformed. Though it occurred to me that if he *wanted* someone dead, he could probably point his monster-self in the right direction before he lost control.

Note to self: Do not cut MacFinn off in traffic.

“All right,” I said. “Why come here? Why to ‘Wolf Woods’? Why not to one of the other stashes?”

He smirked at the flames. “Where else would a werewolf run, Mr. Dresden?”

“Someplace a little less freaking obvious,” I shot back.

MacFinn shook his head. “The FBI doesn’t believe in werewolves. They aren’t going to make the connection.”

“Maybe,” I conceded. “But there are smarter people than the FBI looking for you now. I don’t think we should stay here for long.”

MacFinn glanced at me, and then around him, as though listening for pursuers. “You might be right,” he admitted. “But I’m not going anywhere until my head stops spinning. You don’t look so good, either.”

“I’ll make it,” I said. “All right, then. How did you know Kim Delaney? From her activist functions, I assume.”

MacFinn’s face went pale at the mention of her name, but he nodded. “Originally. We came to know of her talents about a year ago. She told us how you were helping her control her abilities. She was helping me, indirectly, with the Northwest Passage Project. Then, last month, I asked her for her help.”

“Why did you do that?”

MacFinn glanced warily at Tera, and then back at me. “Someone broke my circle.”

I hunkered down on my heels, resting my aching arm on my knees. “Someone broke your circle? The one in the basement?”

“Yes,” MacFinn said. “I don’t know who. I’m not at home a lot. We found it broken when we went downstairs before moonrise, last month.”

“And you asked Kim to fix it?”

MacFinn closed his eyes and nodded. “She said she could. She told us she would be able to make a new circle—one that would keep me from . . .”

I chewed on my lip as his voice trailed off. “Last month, you were meeting with Marcone’s business partner, right? Negotiations over the project?”

“I didn’t kill him,” MacFinn said quickly. “He died the night after the full moon. I couldn’t have made the change and done it then. And the other two nights, I made sure I was well away from human beings. I didn’t kill anyone the second two nights, either. I was alone.”

“Your fiancée could have done those killings,” I said, and flicked a glance at Tera West. She glared at my eyes for a moment, and then looked away.

“She didn’t,” MacFinn said, his tone cool.

“Let’s go back a bit,” I said. “Someone messed up your circle. To do that, they would have had to know about your curse, right? And they would have had to get into your house. So, the question is, who could do those things? And then the question is, who would have done it, and why?”

MacFinn shook his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “I just don’t. I don’t have much contact with the supernatural, Mr. Dresden. I keep my head down. I don’t know anyone else who can make the change, except for her.” He put his hand over that of the woman beside him.

A suspicion took root in my mind, someplace dark and sneaky. I studied Tera as I spoke to MacFinn. “You want to hear a theory?” I said. I didn’t wait for him to answer. “Presuming you’re telling the truth, I figure someone else did the killings the night before the full moon, last month. Some gangsters in town. Then they made sure that you would be the one going berserk the next three nights by fucking up your circle.”

“Why would they do that?” MacFinn asked.

“To set you up. They kill some people, maybe just for kicks, maybe for a good reason, and then they lay the blame at your feet. Someone like me, or the White Council, comes poking around, and they go straight to you. You’re notorious. Like a convicted felon. They find you over the body with a bloody knife, metaphorically speaking, and you’re the one to burn at the stake. Literally.”

MacFinn studied my face for a moment. “Or you think that there might be another reason.”

I shrugged. “Maybe you *are* the killer. You could be trying to make it look like someone is setting you up to me and the Council. The police can’t prove shit against you under the mundane justice system, and using this deception clears you with the supernatural community. So you moan and pose and say ‘Woe is me, I am only the poor cursed guy,’ and meanwhile a bunch of people end up dead. People who were standing in the way of your completing the Northwest Passage Project.”

MacFinn showed me his teeth. “You think the world wouldn’t be better off without people like Marcone and his lickspittles?”

“Good word, lickspittles,” I replied, keeping my voice bland. “That doesn’t really concern me right now, MacFinn. Men like Marcone know the risks and take their chances. What bothers me is that a bunch of other people are getting dead, and they don’t really deserve it.”

“Why would I be killing innocents?” MacFinn demanded, his voice growing tight, clipped.

“Innocents like Kim?” I said. I’m a wizard, not a saint. I’m allowed to be vindictive.

MacFinn went pale and looked down.

“Maybe you’re doing it as a smoke screen. Maybe you can’t help it. Or hell, maybe you really are just a poor cursed guy, and someone’s using you like a puppet. There’s no way for me to tell right now.”

“Assuming I’m not lying,” MacFinn grated, “who would have an interest in setting me up?”

I shook my head. “That’s the million-dollar question. I’d say that it was Johnny Marcone—he stands to benefit if you can’t oppose his business interests in the Northwest. As I understand it, the Northwest Passage would pretty much put nails in the coffin of a lot of industry up in that direction.”

MacFinn nodded grimly. “It would.”

“So that gives him a good motive. But how did he know about your curse? And how did he pull off ruining the circle? It doesn’t sound like him. He would just have your brakes fail, or maybe arrange for you to meet a couple of big men in a dark alley. It’s just his way.” I shrugged. “Who else would be doing it? Can you think of anyone?”

MacFinn shook his head. “I’ve always been lucky. Been able to hold myself in, lock myself up. Or been able to go far away, out into the wilds where no one would find me. So that when I changed, no one would be killed.”

“That’s why you were backing the Northwest Passage,” I guessed. “A place for you to go in safety when the full moon comes—a really big no-people zone.”

MacFinn glanced aside at Tera, who was staring stoically into the distance. “That and other reasons.” His jaw tightened, and he looked back to the fire. “You don’t know what it’s like, Mr. Dresden. To live with yourself.”

I rubbed at my mouth and chin with my good hand. I needed a shave. I studied MacFinn and Tera for a moment, trying to make up my mind.

Was MacFinn telling me the truth? Was he just a victim, someone being used by a faceless villain still at large? Or was he lying to me?

If he was lying, if all of this had been his design, what purpose would he have had in luring me out here? Killing me, of course, getting rid of the only wizard who could pen up his monstrous form. That was, after all, exactly what he would have done if I hadn’t have been able to shock him silly. But did that even make sense? What would he gain by removing me if I never stood in his way in the first place?

Careful, Harry. Don’t get *too* paranoid. Not everyone is planning and plotting and lying. But I had to wonder about Tera West. A nasty scenario was laying itself out in my mind. What if the dear, sweet fiancée was tired of hubby? What if she had done the before- and after-moon killings, then set up her sweetiekins to take the fall for her? She could get rid of MacFinn and Marcone’s partner all in one fell swoop.

Leaving her and Marcone alive. Marcone could have found out about MacFinn from Tera, and about the weakness of his circle from Tera as well. Tera wasn’t human, not even a little. She was something else, maybe a being of the Nevernever. Who knew how her mind worked?

And then there was the group of young people Tera seemed to be in charge of. How did they fit into this? What was she using them for?

I went fishing. “How are Georgia and Billy, Tera?” I asked, my tone conversational.

She blinked. Her mouth worked for a second, and then she answered, “Fine. They are well.” She pressed her lips together, clearly desiring the conversation to end.

I watched MacFinn. His face registered confusion, and then he looked between Tera and me uneasily. He didn’t know who the hell I was talking about, and she didn’t seem to want to let MacFinn in on what was apparently a secret.

Aha, little miss werewolf-shape-shifter-thing. What are you plotting?

I was going to press her harder, when MacFinn and Tera both looked up at exactly the same time, out toward the woods. I stared at them like a moron for a couple of seconds, my mind still running along trails of thought, tracing potential lies, possibilities. Then I shook that out of my brain and Listened.

“Both of you along that way,” Murphy said from somewhere in the distance downslope. “Ron, take your three and fan out until we’re even with the feds. Then we sweep west, up the hill.”

“Christ, Murphy,” Carmichael said. “We don’t owe the feds shit. If they’d have showed up on time, we’d have been out here hours ago. If we hadn’t got that report about the West woman in the hotel room, we still wouldn’t be here.”

“Can it, Carmichael,” Murphy snapped. “Pictures of MacFinn and the woman have been passed out. And you all know what Dresden looks like. Spread out and nab them.”

“You don’t even know if they’re here,” Carmichael protested.

“I’ll bet you sex to doughnuts that they are, Carmichael,” Murphy said, her voice dripping sweet venom. “And that should tell you how certain I am.”

Carmichael muttered something under his breath, and then growled orders to his men to fan out as Murphy had indicated.

“Dammit,” MacFinn snarled. “How did they know I was here?”

“Where else would a werewolf go to hide?” I sniped. “Shit. How do we get out?”

“Wind,” Tera said. She and MacFinn both came to their feet. “Or fog. Can you do one of those again?”

I grimaced and shook my head. “I don’t think so. I’m worn out. I’d probably make a mistake and that could kill someone.”

“If you don’t,” Tera said, “we will all be captured or killed.”

“You can’t solve all your problems by magic,” I snapped.

“He’s right,” MacFinn said quietly. “We split up. The first one discovered makes a lot of noise, puts up a fight, and gives the others a chance to get away.”

“No,” I said. “MacFinn, you’ve got to stay with me. I can make the circle with some sticks and dirt, if necessary, but if I’m not there, I can’t hold you in when the curse takes hold later tonight.”

MacFinn’s teeth showed again. “No time to argue, Mr. Dresden,” he said.

“Indeed there is not,” said Tera, and then she took off at a dead run. MacFinn hissed a curse and grabbed for her as she ran, but missed. Tera flew on into the woods, rushing silently down the slope on an angle that would take her past the edge of the pursuers’ line. She was noticed after only a few steps, shouts going up from three or four throats.

“Bitch,” MacFinn cursed, and he started after her. I seized his arm, my fingers clamping on his bicep hard enough to make him stop and stare at me, his green eyes fierce and wild.

“Split up,” I said, looking back down the hill. “If we’re lucky, they won’t even know that we were here.”

“But Tera—”

“Knows what she’s doing,” I said. “If the police nail us, there’s no way you’re going to be able to hold it in tonight. We go, now, and we meet at the nearest gas station to the park. All right?”

From down slope came the sounds of running men, a warning call, and then a gunshot. For Tera’s sake, I hoped that Agent Benn wasn’t down there. MacFinn clenched his jaw, and then ran up the slope, on an angle. Down below us, there were more shouts, more shots fired, and a short, sharp cry of pain.

Call me crazy, but those sounds, added to all the other things that had happened that day, were just too much for me to handle. I turned, cradling my wounded arm against me, and stumbled up the hill into a long, loping run. I kept my head down, watching my feet, only looking up often enough to make sure that I didn’t run into a tree, and fled.

Chapter Sixteen

I made it out of the park, exhausted and barely able to keep from screaming with pain. I stopped at the first gas station I could find, so I could take off my boots. Old and comfortable as they were, cowboy boots were not meant for running cross-country. I leaned against the side of the building by the pay phones, away from the street, and sat down on the sidewalk. My body throbbed with pain, slowing as my heart and breathing did.

I gave MacFinn an hour, but he didn't show up. No one did.

I got restless, fast. Could both MacFinn and Tera West have been captured? Murphy's cops may not have looked like much, but I knew they were tough and smart. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

I rummaged in my duster's pockets, came up with enough change to make a phone call, then made my painful way to the phone.

"Midwestern Arcane, this is Ms. Rodriguez," Susan said, when she picked up the phone. Her voice sounded tired, stressed.

"Hi, Susan," I said. My shoulder twinged, and I gritted my teeth, pulling my duster around me a little more tightly. The evening was bringing a cold wind and grey clouds, and the sweats and cotton T-shirt Tera West had given me weren't enough to keep out the chill.

"Harry?" she said disbelievingly. "My God. Where are you? The police are looking for you. They keep calling here. Something about a murder."

"Misunderstanding," I said and leaned against the wall. The pain was getting worse as chills soaked in and I started to shiver.

"You sound terrible," Susan said. "Are you all right?"

"Can you help me?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I don't know, Harry. I don't know what's going on. I don't want to get into any trouble."

"I could explain it," I offered, struggling to keep my words clear through the pain. "But it's sort of a long story." I dropped a subtle emphasis on that last word. Sometimes it scares me how easy it is to get people to do what you want them to do, if you know something about them.

"Story, eh?" Susan said. I could hear the sudden twinge of interest in her voice.

"Sure. Murder, violence, blood, monsters. Give you the whole scoop if you can give me a ride."

"You bastard," she breathed, but I thought she was smiling. "I would have come to get you anyway."

"Sure you would have," I said, but I felt a smile on my own lips. I told her the address of the gas station and hoped that the feds hadn't taken the time to get a wiretap for Susan's phone.

"Give me half an hour," Susan said. "Maybe more, depending on traffic."

I squinted up at the sky, which was rapidly darkening, both with oncoming dusk and heavy, brooding clouds. "Time's important. Hurry if you can."

"Just take care of yourself, Harry," she said, worry in her voice. Then she hung up the phone.

I did, too, and leaned back against the wall. I hated to draw Susan into this. It made me feel cheap, somehow. Weak. It was that whole problem with chivalry that I had. I didn't want a girl to be riding to my rescue, protecting me. It just didn't seem right. And I didn't want to endanger Susan, either. I was a murder suspect, and the police were looking for me. She could get in trouble, for aiding and abetting, or something like that.

On the other hand, I didn't have much choice. I didn't have any money for a cab, even if I could get one this far from the city. I didn't have a car. I was in no shape to walk anywhere. My contacts, in the persons of MacFinn and Tera West, were gone. I had to have help, and Susan was the only one I thought I could trust to do it. If there was a story involved, she'd go to hell itself to get it.

And I had used that against her, to lever her into helping me. I didn't like it that I had. I'd thought better of myself. I ducked my head against the cold, and shivered, and wondered if I'd done the right thing.

It was while I was leaning against the wall, waiting, that I heard a scrabbling sound around the corner of the gas station. I tensed and waited. The sound repeated itself, a definite pattern of three short movements. A signal.

Warily, I made my way to the back of the building, ready to turn and run as best I could. Tera West was there, behind the building, crouched down between several empty cardboard boxes that smelled of beer and the garbage bin. She was naked, her body a uniform shade of brown, without an ounce of excess fat on her. Her hair was mussed and had leaves and bits of twig caught in it. Her amber eyes looked even more alien and wild than usual.

She rose and came toward me, evidently unconscious of the cold. She moved with a feral sort of grace that made me all too aware of her legs, and her hips, even though I was battered, fatigued, and brooding.

"Wizard," she greeted me. "Give me your coat."

I snapped my eyes back up to hers, then slipped out of my duster, though my shoulder screamed with pain as I pulled the coat off of it, and my body sent up an entirely different round of complaints as the cold wind gleefully cut through the thin clothes I wore beneath the duster. Tera took the coat and slid into it, wrapping it around her and buttoning it closed. The sleeves were too long, and the coat dangled to her ankles, but it covered her lean, strong body well enough. I found myself faintly regretful that I'd had it with me.

"What happened?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "The police do not know how game runs, or how to chase it. One grabbed me. I made him let go." She glanced around us warily, and raked her fingers through her hair, trying to comb out leaves and sticks. "I led them away from you and MacFinn, changed, and made my way back to the camp. I followed MacFinn's trail."

"Where is he?"

She bared her teeth. "The federal people caught him. They took him away."

"Hell's bells," I breathed. "Do you know where?"

"Into a car," she responded.

"No," I said, growing frustrated. "Do you know where the car went?"

She shook her head. "But they had an argument with the one called Murphy. Murphy had more people with her, more guns. MacFinn went where Murphy wanted him to go."

"Downtown," I said. "Murphy would want him in holding down at the station. Hell, it's on the same floor as Special Investigations."

Tera shrugged, her expression hard. "As you say."

"We don't have much time," I said.

"For what? There is nothing more to be done. We cannot reach him now. MacFinn will change when the moon rises. Murphy and the police people will die."

"Like hell," I said. "I've got to get to the station before it happens."

Tera studied me with narrowed eyes. "The police are hunting for you as well, wizard. If you go there, you too will be locked in a cage. You will not be allowed to go to MacFinn."

"I wasn't planning on asking permission," I said. "But I think I can get inside. I just have to get to my apartment."

"The police will be watching it," Tera said. "They will be waiting for you there. And in any case, we have no car and no money. How will you reach Chicago before moonrise? There is nothing more to be done, wizard."

There came the crunch of tires around the side of the gas station, and I peeked around the corner. Susan's car was just coming to a halt. Raindrops were starting to come down and to make little impact circles on her Taurus's windshield. I felt a little surge of defiant energy.

"There's our ride," I said. "Follow." I relished throwing the terse command at Tera, and she stared at me. I turned my back on her and stalked over to the car.

Susan leaned across and threw open the passenger door, then blinked at me in surprise. She blinked again when Tera slipped in front of me, threw the passenger seat forward, and slid into the backseat with a flash of long, lean legs, then regarded Susan with unreadable, distant eyes.

I pushed the seat back and settled into place. It was a real effort to shut the door, and a small sound of discomfort escaped my mouth. When I looked at Susan, she was staring at me, and at my arm. I looked down and found that the bandage, and a part of the T-shirt's sleeve were soaked through with blood. The purple bruises had spread a few inches, it seemed, and showed beneath the shirt's sleeve.

"Good Lord," Susan gasped. "What happened?"

"I got shot," I said.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Susan stammered, still stunned.

"Is this female always so stupid?" Tera asked. I winced. Susan turned in the seat and glowered at Tera, and I looked back to see Tera narrow her eyes and bare her teeth in what one could hardly say was a smile.

"It hurts," I confirmed. "Susan, take us to my place, but don't stop when you get there. Just drive past slowly. I'll tell you everything on the way."

Susan gave Tera one last, skeptical glance, particularly taking in my bullet-torn duster and Tera's bare limbs. "This better be good, Dresden," she said. Then she slapped the car into gear and started driving with irritated haste back toward the city.

I wanted to collapse into sleep, but I made myself explain most of what had happened over the past couple of days to Susan, editing out mentions of the White Council, demons, that sort of thing. Susan listened, and drove, and asked intent questions, fastening gleefully on to the information concerning the Northwest Passage Project, and Johnny Marcone's links to the businesses opposing it. Rain started coming down in a steady, murky veil, and she flicked on the windshield wipers.

"So you've got to get to MacFinn," Susan said, when I was finished, "before the moon comes up and he transforms."

"You've got it," I said.

"Why don't you call Murphy? Tell her what's going on?"

I shook my head. "Murphy isn't going to be in the mood to listen. She busted me and I fled arrest. She'd have me in a cell before I could say *abracadabra*."

"But it's raining," Susan protested. "We won't be able to see the moon tonight. Won't that stop MacFinn from changing?"

I blinked at the question and glanced back at Tera. She was watching the buildings pass out the side window as the streetlights started flickering on. She didn't look at me, but shook her head.

"No such luck," I told Susan. "And with these clouds, I can't even tell if the sun has gone down yet, much less how much time we have before moonrise."

Susan breathed out slowly. "How are you going to get to MacFinn, then?"

"I've got a couple things at my apartment," I said. "Drive on by. Let's see if there's anyone watching the old place."

Susan turned the car down my street, and we rolled slowly through the rain. The old boardinghouse huddled stoically beneath the downpour, its gutters gurgling and spouting streams of water. The streetlights glowed with silver halos as the rain came down. A bit down from my building, a plain brown sedan was parked, and a couple of shadowy forms could be seen inside it when Susan drove past.

"That's them," I said. "I recognize one of them from Murphy's unit."

Susan let out another breath and drew the car around the corner, parking it along the street. "Is there any way to sneak into your place? A back door?"

I shook my head. "No. There's only the one door in, and you can see the windows from here. I just need the police to not be looking for a few minutes."

"You need a distraction," Tera said. "I will do it."

I looked over my shoulder. "I don't want any violence."

She tilted her head to one side, her expression never changing. "Very well," she said. "For MacFinn's sake, I will do as you say. Open the door."

I stared at her fathomless eyes for a second, searching for any signs of deception or betrayal. What if Tera was the killer? She had known about MacFinn, and was able to transform in one fashion or another. She could have committed the murders last month, as well as the one two nights past. But if so, why had she seemingly sacrificed herself so that MacFinn and I could escape? Why had she come to find me?

Then again, MacFinn had been captured. And her words at the gas station may have been calculated to make me give up trying to help him, if one looked at them from a certain point of view. What if she was trying to take care of both MacFinn and me by throwing us to the mundane legal system?

My head spun with pain and weariness. Paranoid, Harry, I told myself. You've got to trust someone, somewhere—or else MacFinn goes furry and Murphy and a lot of other good people die tonight. There wasn't much choice.

I opened the door, and we both got out of the car. "What are you going to do?" I asked Tera.

Instead of answering, the amber-eyed woman stripped off my duster and handed it back to me, leaving herself nude and lovely under the rain. "Do you like to look at my body?" she demanded of me.

"Careful how you answer this one, buster," Susan growled from the car.

I coughed, and glanced back at Susan, keeping my eyes off of the other woman. "Yeah, Tera. That will work fine, I guess."

"Wait for twenty slow breaths," she said. There was a note of amusement in her voice. "Pick me up at the far end of this block." Then she turned on a bare heel and glided into the darkness between streetlights in a graceful lope. I frowned after her for a moment, and then drew my duster back on.

"You don't have to look quite so hard," Susan said. "Is she the human-interest angle for this story?"

I winced, holding my wounded arm close to my side, and leaned down to meet Susan's eyes. "I don't think she's human," I said. Then I stood and started walking down the street, slowing my steps so that I didn't round the corner until Tera's prescribed time limit had elapsed. Even when I did, I walked quickly, like someone hurrying home out of the rain, my hands in my pockets, keeping my head down against the grey downpour.

I crossed the street toward my apartment building, glancing at the sedan as I did.

The cops weren't watching me. They were staring at the pool of light beneath the streetlight behind them, where Tera spun gracefully through the steps of some sort of gliding dance, moving to a rhythm and a music I could not hear. There was a primal sort of intensity to her motions, raw sexuality, feminine power coursing through her movements. Her back arched as she spun and whirled, offering out her breasts to the chill rain, and her skin was slick and gleaming with water.

I tripped over the curb on the far side of the street and felt my cheeks start to flame as I hurried down the steps to my apartment. I unlocked the door and went inside, shutting it behind me. I didn't light any candles, relying upon my knowledge of the house to move around.

The two potions were in their plastic sports bottles on the counter where I had left them. I grabbed up my black nylon backpack from the floor and threw the bottles into it. Then I

went into my bedroom and grabbed the blue coveralls with the little red patch over one breast pocket stenciled with **MIKE** in bold letters. My mechanic had accidentally left them in the trunk of the Blue Beetle the last time the Beetle was in the shop. I added a baseball cap, a first-aid kit, a roll of duct tape, a box of chalk, seven smooth stones from a collection of them I keep in my closet, a white T-shirt and a pair of blue jeans, and a huge bottle of Tylenol, zipped up the backpack, and headed back out again. At the last moment, I took up my wizard's staff from the corner by the door.

Something flashed past my legs, moving out into the night, and I almost jumped out of my skin. Mister paused at the top of the stairs to look back at me, his cat eyes enigmatic and irritated, and then vanished into the darkness. I muttered something under my breath and locked the door behind me, then headed out once more, my heart rattling along too quickly to be comfortable.

Tera was on her hands and knees in the middle of the pool of light behind the sedan, her damp hair fallen all around her face, her lips parted, facing the two plainclothes officers, who had gotten out of the car and were speaking to her from several feet away. Her chest was heaving in and out, but having seen her in action, I doubted that it was merely from the exertion of her dancing. Looked nice, though. The policemen were sure as hell staring.

I gripped my staff in hand, along with the backpack, and walked away down the street again. It didn't take long to make it back to Susan's car, and she immediately wheeled the vehicle around the block without comment. Susan hardly had begun to slow down when Tera appeared from between a couple of buildings and loped over to the car. I leaned forward, opened the door, and she got into the backseat. I threw her the extra clothes I had picked up, and she began to dress without comment.

"It worked," I said. "We did it."

"Of course it worked," Tera said. "Men are foolish. They will stare at anything female and naked."

"She's got that right," Susan said, under her breath, and jerked the car into motion again. "Oh, we are going to talk about this one, mister. Next stop, Special Investigations."

Outside the battered old police building downtown, I pulled the baseball cap a little lower over my eyes, and drank the blending potion. It didn't really have any taste to it at all, but it twitched and bubbled all the way down my gullet until it hit my stomach.

I gave the potion a few seconds to work and shifted my hands on the handle of my wizard's staff. Even though the end of it was shoved into a wheeled bucket, it still didn't look much like the handle of a mop. And even though I was dressed in the dark blue coveralls, they were ridiculously short on me. I did not look much like a janitor.

That's where the magic came in. If the potion worked, I would look like background to any casual observers, a part of the scenery that they wouldn't glance at twice. So long as they didn't give me an intense scrutiny, the potion's power should be able to keep me from being noticed, which would let me get close to MacFinn, which would let me put the containment circle around him and keep his transformed self from going on a rampage.

Of course, if it didn't work, I might just end up studying the inside of a jail cell for a few years—provided the transformed MacFinn didn't tear me apart first.

I tried to ignore the pain in my shoulder, the nervous tension in my stomach. I was rebandaged, Tylenoled, and as reasonably refreshed as I could possibly have been without drinking the potion I had brewed just for that purpose.

If I could have had both potions going in my system without them making me too ill to move, I would have downed the refresher potion the moment I got my hands on it, but without the blending potion, there was no way I could get inside to MacFinn. I could only hope that I'd find a use for it eventually. I'd hate the effort to go to waste.

I waited impatiently in the rain, sure for a moment that I had messed something up when making the potion, that it wasn't going to have any effect at all.

And then I felt it start to work.

A sort of grey feeling came over me, and I realized with a start that the colors were fading from my vision. A sort of listless feeling came over me, a lassitude that advised me to sit down somewhere and watch the world go by, but at the same time the hairs on the back of my neck prickled up as the potion's magic took effect.

I took a deep breath and walked up the stairs of the building with my bucket and my "mop," pulled open the doors, and went inside. Shadows shifted and changed oddly, all greys and blacks and whites, and for a second I felt like an extra on the set of *Casablanca* or *The Maltese Falcon*.

The solid old matron of a sergeant sat at the front desk, thumbing through a glossy magazine, a portrait done in colorless hues. She glanced up at me for a second, and tinges of color returned to her uniform, her cheeks, and her eyes. She looked me over casually, sniffed, and lowered her face to her magazine again. As her attention faded, so did the colors from her clothing and skin. My perceptions of her changed as she paid attention to me or did not.

I felt my face stretch in a victorious smile. The potion had worked. I was inside. I had to suppress an urge to break into a soft-shoe routine. Sometimes, being able to use magic was so cool. I almost stopped hurting for a few seconds, from sheer enjoyment of the special effects. I would have to remember to tell Bob how much I liked the way this potion worked.

I kept my head down and moved past the desk sergeant, just one more janitor coming in to clean up the police station after hours. I picked up the bucket and my "mop" and went up the stairs, toward the holding cells and the Special Investigations office on the fifth floor. One cop passed me on the stairs and didn't so much as look at me. His uniform and skin remained entirely devoid of color. I grew more confident and moved with more speed. I was effectively invisible.

Now all I had to do was find MacFinn, trick my way into seeing him, and save Murphy and all the other police from the monster MacFinn would become—before they arrested me for trying to do it.

And time was running out.

Chapter Seventeen

Ever wish you had an almanac?

I did, that night. I had no idea what time the moon was supposed to rise, and I hadn't exactly had time to run to the library or a bookstore. I knew that it was supposed to happen an hour or so after sundown, but the way the clouds rolled in had made it uncertain exactly when sundown had happened. Did I have twenty minutes? Ten? An hour?

Or was I already too late?

As I climbed the stairs, I thought about being alone in the building with MacFinn after he had changed. For all my vaunted wizard's knowledge, I had no real idea of his capabilities; although after seeing Kim's body, I had something of an idea of what he could do. Bob had said that loup-garou were fast, strong, virtually immune to magic. What could I do against something like that?

I just had to pray that I would be able to get the circle up around MacFinn before I had to find out. I checked the bucket, to make sure I still had the chalk and the stones I would need to construct the greater circle around MacFinn. You didn't necessarily have to make them out of silver and gold and whatnot. Mostly, you just had to understand how the construct channeled the forces that were being employed. If you knew that, you could figure out how to make it out of less pure materials. The very best wizards don't need much more than chalk, table salt, and a wooden spoon to pull off some remarkable stuff.

My thoughts were rambling now, panic making them scamper around like a frightened chipmunk. That was bad. I needed focus, direction, concentration. I drove my legs a little harder, went up the stairs as fast as I dared, until I came out on the fifth floor. The door to Special Investigations was ten feet away. The holding cells were down the hall and around the corner, and I started that way at once.

"What do you mean, you can't find him?" Murphy's voice demanded as I walked past the office door.

"Just that. The men on his apartment said that they kept a real good eye on the place, but that he got in and out again without them seeing anything." Carmichael's voice was tired, frustrated.

Murphy snorted. "Christ, Carmichael. Is Dresden going to have to walk right into the office before you can find him?"

I hurried on past the door and down the hall. Tempting as it was to listen to a conversation about myself without the participants knowing, I just didn't have time. I wheeled my wobbling, squeaking bucket down the hall, half jogging in my hurry.

Holding was set up, unsurprisingly, behind bars. There was a swinging barred door that the station guard had to buzz to open, if you didn't have the key. Beyond that was a sort of antechamber with a couple of wooden chairs and not much else besides a counter with a window made of bulletproof glass. The jailer sat behind the glass at his desk, his expression baggy eyed and bored. Past the jailer's window was another door, made of steel with a tiny little window, which led into the row of cells. The jailer had the controls to that door at his desk as well.

I went to the first barred door, kept my head down, and rapped on the metal slats. I waited for a while, but nothing happened, so I rapped on the bars again. It occurred to me that it would add a nice touch of irony if the same blending potion that got me into the building also kept me from being noticed by the jailer and let inside. I rapped on the bars again, harder this time, with the shaft of my wooden "mop."

It took some determined rapping to get him to look up from his magazine, but he finally did, and peered at me through thick glasses. His colors swirled and gained a bit of tint before settling back toward grey. He frowned at me, glanced back at a calendar on the wall, and then pushed the button.

The barred door buzzed and I shoved it open with my bucket, wheeling inside with my head down. "You're early this week," the jailer said, his eyes back on the magazine.

"Out of town on Friday. Trying to get done sooner," I replied. I kept my voice in a monotone, as grey and boring as I could manage. To my surprise, it came out as I intended it. I'm usually not much of a liar or an actor, so the potion must have been helping me on some subtle and devious level. One thing I'll say for Bob: He's annoying as hell, but he knows his stuff.

"Whatever. Sign here," the jailer said in a bored tone, and shoved a clipboard and a pen at me through a slot at the base of the Plexiglas window. He turned a page in his magazine, showing me a picture of an athletic-looking young woman doing something anatomically improbable with an equally improbable young man.

I hesitated. How in the hell was I supposed to sign in and out? I mean, Bob's potion may have been good, but it wasn't going to change a signature after I'd put it on the paper. I glanced at the inner door, and then at the clock on the wall. To hell with it. I didn't have time to hang around. I went over to the counter and scribbled something unreadable on the admissions sheet.

"Have any trouble tonight?" I asked.

The jailer snorted, turning his magazine to the right by ninety degrees. "Just that rich guy they brought in earlier. He was yelling for a while, but he's shut up now. Probably coming down off of whatever he was on." He collected the clipboard, gave it a perfunctory glance, and hung it back up on its peg beside a bank of black-and-white monitors.

I leaned closer to the monitors, sweeping my eyes over them. Each was apparently receiving a signal from a security camera, because each one of them displayed a scene that was exactly the same except for the actors in it—a small cell, maybe eight feet by eight, with bars serving as one wall, smooth concrete for the other three, a bunk, a toilet, and a single door. Maybe two thirds of the monitors had a strip of masking tape stuck to the lower right-hand corner of the screen, with a name, like HANSON or WASHINGTON, written in black marker. I frantically scanned the bank of monitors until, in the lower corner, I found the one that said MACFINN. I looked at his monitor. The video was blurred, flecked with snow and static, but I could see well enough what had happened.

The cell was empty.

Concrete dust drifted in the air. The wall of bars was missing, apparently torn from the concrete and allowed to fall away. I could see the scraps of MacFinn's denim shorts lying on the floor of the cell.

"Hell's bells," I swore softly. There was a flicker of motion on another monitor, the one next to MacFinn's. The tape at the bottom of the screen read MATSON, and a starved-looking, unshaven man in a sleeveless white undershirt and blue jeans could be seen curled up on the bunk, his back pressed to the rear corner of the cell. His mouth was open and his chest straining, as though he was screaming, but I could hear nothing through the thick security door and the concrete walls. There was a flicker of motion, a huge and furry shape on the camera, out of focus, and Matson threw up his skinny arms to protect himself as something huge and quick shoved its way between the bars, like a big dog going through a rotten picket fence, and engulfed him.

There was a burst of static and violent motion, and then a spattering of black on the grey walls and floor of the cell, as though someone had shaken up a cola and sprayed the walls with it. Then the huge form was gone, and left behind was a ragged, quivering doll of torn flesh and blood-soaked clothing. Matson stared up at the security camera, his dying eyes pleading with mine—and then he jerked once and was gone.

The entire thing had taken perhaps three or four seconds.

My eyes swept over the other security monitors as a sick sort of fascination settled over me. Prisoners were straining to the front of their cells, shouting things out, trying to get enough of a look to see what was going on. I realized that they couldn't see what was happening—they could only hear. They wouldn't be able to look out and see the transformed MacFinn until he was at the bars of their cell.

Fear, sick and horrible and debilitating, swam over me and tangled up my tongue. The creature had gone through the bars of the cell as though they'd been made of cheap plastic, and it had killed without mercy. I stared at Matson's dead eyes, at the ruined mess of what had been his guts, at the detached pieces of meat and bone that had once been his right arm and leg.

Stars above, Harry, I thought to myself. What the hell are you doing in the same building with that thing?

On another monitor, there was a replay of what had happened seconds before, and an aging black man named CLEMENT went down beneath the creature, screaming as he died. Seeing what was happening set off some primal, ancient fear, something programmed into my head, a fear of being found in my hiding place, of being trapped in a tiny space from which there was no escape while something with killing teeth and crushing jaws came in to eat me. That same primitive, naked part of me screamed and gibbered and shouted at my rational mind to turn around right now, to turn around and run, fast and far.

But I couldn't let it go on. I had to do something.

"Look," I said and pointed at the monitor. My finger trembled, and my voice came out as a ghost of a whisper. I tried again, jabbing my finger at the monitors and half shouting, "Look!" at the jailer.

He glanced up at me, tilted his head, and frowned. I saw some colors start to bleed into his face, but that didn't matter now. I continued to point at the monitors and tried to step closer to them. "Look, look at the screens, my God, man!" By now my voice was coming out in a high, panicky tone. I pressed as close to the monitors as I could, yelling, excited.

I should have known better, of course. Wizards and technology simply do not mix—especially when the wizard's heart is pounding like the floor of a basketball court and his guts are shaking. The monitors burst into frantic displays of static and snow, flickering images sometimes visible, sometimes not.

The guard gave me a disgusted look and turned around to glance at the monitors. He blinked at them for a second, while a man named MURDOCH died in flickering, poor reception.

“What the hell is wrong with those things now?” the jailer complained, and took off his glasses to clean them. “There’s always something going wrong with the damn cameras. I swear, it isn’t worth the money they cost to keep on fixing them.”

I frantically backed up from the monitors. “They’re dying,” I said. “God, you’ve got to let those men out of there before it kills them.”

The man nodded. “Uh-huh. Tell me about it. Just goes to show you how smart the city is, right?” I stared at him for a second, and he put his glasses back on to give me a polite, bored smile. His colors had gone back to black and white, and I must have looked like a dull, humdrum old janitor to him once again. The potion had blended my words into something that the guard’s brain would accept without comment, and let pass, just boring, everyday conversation like you have with people ninety percent of the time. The potion was fantastic. Way, way too good.

“Look at the monitors,” I screamed in frustration and fear. “He’s killing them!”

“The monitors won’t stop you doing your job,” the guard assured me. “I’ll just buzz you in.” And with that, he pressed a button somewhere behind the Plexiglas window, and the security door that led into the hallway of cells made a humming sound, clicked, and swung three or four inches open.

Screams poured out of the cells, high sounds that you wouldn’t think could come from a man’s throat, panicked and terrified. There was a horrible, wrenching sound, a screech of protesting metal, and one of the screams peaked at a shivering, violent point—then dissolved into a strangled mishmash of sounds, of tearing and snapping and popping, of gurgling and thudding. And when they were finished, something, something big, with a cavernous, resonating chest, snarled from not ten feet beyond the security door.

I shot a glance to the guard, who had stumbled to his feet and was grabbing for his gun. He headed out of his station, opening a door that led into the antechamber, presumably to investigate.

“No!” I shouted at him, and threw myself at the security door. I sensed, rather than saw, something else, on the other side of the wall, heading for the exit. I could hear its breath, feel its massive motion through the air, and I hurled my shoulder against the door, slamming it forward, just as something huge and strong thrust a paw through the doorway. The edge of the steel security door slammed forward onto the paw, a member that was neither wholly a paw nor a hand, but somewhere in between, tipped with huge black claws, and drenched in wet, dark, blood. I heard the creature on the far side of the door, only three inches of steel away, snarl in a fury and hatred so pure as to be painful to hear.

Then it started shoving at the door.

The first shove was tentative, but though I strained with all my strength, it still slapped me back a foot across the floor, my boots slipping on the tile. That paw-hand turned, and the talons sank into the steel door in a sudden, snapping motion as the thing took hold of it and started wrenching it back and forth in berserk anger.

“Help me!” I shouted at the guard, struggling to force the door closed. The jailer blinked at me for a second, then flooded with color.

“You!” he said. “My God. What is happening?”

“Help me close this door or we’re both dead,” I snarled, continuing to push forward with every ounce of strength I could summon. On the far side of the door, the loup-garou gathered its weight and hurled itself against the door again just as the guard rushed forward to help me.

The door exploded inward, throwing me back like a doll, past the guard, who stumbled back through the door that led behind the counter where he’d been sitting and fell to the ground. My upper back hit the barred door that led out into the hallway, eliciting an instant flash of hot agony from my wounded shoulder.

There was a snarl, and then the creature that had been Harley MacFinn came through the doorway. The loup-garou was a wolf, in the same way that a velociraptor is a bird—same basic design, vastly different outcome. It must have been five or five and a half feet tall at the tip of its hunched shoulders. It was wider than a wolf, as though a wolf had been squashed down with an extra five or six hundred pounds of muscle. Its pelt was shaggy, jet-black and matte, except where fresh blood was making it glisten. Its ears were ragged, upright, focused forward. It had a muzzle that was too wide to belong to anything natural, a mouthful of teeth, and MacFinn’s blazing eyes done in monochrome grey, the whole stained with blood that

looked black beneath the influence of the blending potion. Its limbs were disproportionate, though I couldn’t say whether they looked too long or too short—just *wrong*. Everything about it was wrong, screamed with malice and hate and anger, and it carried a cloak of supernatural power with it that made my teeth hurt and my hair stand on end.

The loup-garou came through the door, swept its monochrome gaze past me, then turned to its left with unholy grace and flung itself at the jailer.

The man got lucky. He looked up and saw the creature as he was regaining his feet, then convulsed in a spastic reaction to the sight of the fanged horror. The reaction threw him a few inches out of the loup-garou’s path. He scrambled back, behind the counter and out of my sight.

The loup-garou turned to pursue the jailer behind the counter, slowed because it had to shoulder its way between the counter and the wall, making the counter buckle outward into the room. The jailer got to his feet, gun in hand, took a creditable shooting stance, and emptied the pistol’s clip into the loup-garou’s skull in the space of maybe three seconds, filling the little antechamber with the sound of thunder and drowning out the cries of the prisoners in their cells in the hall beyond.

The monster kept coming. The bullets bothered it no more than a fly ramming the forehead of a professional wrestler. It rose up as the guard screamed, “No, no, no, nononononono!” And then it fell upon him, claws and fangs slashing. The jailer tried to turn, to run where there was no place left to go, and the thing turned its head and sank its jaws into the small of the man’s back, releasing a spray of blood. The jailer screamed and grabbed frantically at the console, but the loup-garou shook its head violently from left to right, tore him from the console, and hurled him to the floor behind the counter.

I didn’t see the guard die. But I saw the way the blood flew up over the hunched, gnarled shoulders of the loup-garou, to decorate the walls and the ceiling. I felt silently grateful when the bent and warping panes of Plexiglas became obscured with scarlet.

It was sometime right around then, as paralyzing agony seared through my shoulder and terrified prisoners screamed and cried out to God or Allah to save them that I noticed that a new noise had been added to the din. The guard had tipped off the alarm when he had scrambled at the console, and it was hooting enthusiastically. Cops were going to come running, and one of the first was going to be Murphy.

The loup-garou was still savaging the jailer’s body, and I hoped for his sake that the man wasn’t still alive. My best option would have been to slip into the cell block, close the security door behind me, and hope the creature went out into the building at large. Within the cell block, I would have time to put up a warding barrier, something that would keep the monster from coming through the door or the walls to get at me and the prisoners in there. I could fort up there, wait for morning, and live through the night, almost certainly. It was the smart thing to do. It was the survivable thing to do.

Instead, I turned to my staff, at the other side of the little room, and held forth my hand. “*Vento servitas*,” I hissed, forcing out tightly focused will, and a sudden current of air simultaneously threw my staff to me and slammed shut the door to the cells, giving the trapped prisoners what little protection it offered. I caught the staff in my outstretched hand and turned to the barred gate that held me shut in the antechamber with the loup-garou.

I thrust my staff in between the bars and leaned against it as though to pry the bars apart. Had it been only wood and muscle involved, I might have snapped the ancient ash. But a wizard’s staff is a tool that helps him to apply forces, to manipulate them and maneuver them to his will. So I leaned my will and my concentration on the staff at the same time I did my body, and worked on multiplying the force I was applying to the steel bars.

“*Forzare*,” I hissed. “*Forzare*.” The metal began to strain and buckle.

Behind me, the loup-garou started thrashing around. I heard the shattering of Plexiglas and shot it a look over my shoulder. The scant protection offered by the potion collapsed, colors flooding my vision. The black of its muzzle warmed to a scarlet-smeared wash of dark brown, stained with wet scarlet. Its fangs were ivory and crimson. Its eyes became a brilliant shade of green. It cut through the blending potion with the ferocity of its stare, and focused on me with an intensity that sent every instinct in my body screaming that death was here, that it was about to jump down my throat and rip me inside out.

“*Forzare!*” I shouted, shoving against the staff with every ounce of strength I had. The bars bowed out in the middle, parted to an opening perhaps a foot wide and twice as long. The counter exploded outward as the loup-garou came through it, showering me with debris and minor, painful cuts.

I dove through the opening, heedless of my shoulder, conscious only of the beast closing in behind me. My body sailed through with more grace than I could have managed under less panicked circumstances, almost as though the rush of air moving before the charging creature had helped lift me through. And then something closed on my left foot, and I simply lost all sensation in it.

I fell short, to the floor, bumping my chin hard enough to draw blood from the corner of my tongue. I looked over my shoulder to see the loup-garou with one of my boots held in its jaws, its broad head shoved through the opening in the bars and caught there. It was shaking its body back and forth, but its paws were smeared with scarlet blood, and its feet slipped left and right on the tile floor. Incredible strength or no, it couldn’t get the leverage it needed to tear the bars apart like tissues.

I heard myself making desperate animal sounds, struggling in a panic, writhing. The alarm was howling all around me now, and I could hear shouts and running footsteps. Dust was falling down around the edges of the bars, and I could see that the loup-garou was slowly tearing them from their mountings in the floor and ceiling, despite its bad footing.

I twisted my foot left and right, horrid images of simply losing it at the ankle flashing in my mind, and then abruptly shot forward several feet along the floor. I glanced down at my leg and saw a bloodstained sock before I scrambled up and started running for my staff.

Behind me, the loup-garou howled in frustration and began to throw itself about. It must have scraped enough of the blood off of its paws, because it then tore through the wall of bars in two seconds flat and rushed after me.

I took up my staff and spun to face the creature, planting my feet on the floor, holding the ash wood before me. "*Tornarius!*" I thundered, thrusting my staff upward, and the thing threw itself at me in a rush of power and mass.

My aim was to reflect the loup-garou's own power and momentum back against it, force equals mass times acceleration, et cetera, but I had underestimated just how much power the thing had. It overloaded my limits and we split the difference. The creature slammed against a solid force in the air that canceled its momentum and flung it to the floor.

Approximately equal force was also applied to me—but I was probably a fifth of the mass of the loup-garou. I was flung back through the air like a piece of popcorn in a sudden wind, all the way to where the hall turned the corner to lead down to Special Investigations. I hit the floor before I hit the wall, thankfully, bounced, rolled, and slapped into the wall at last, grateful to be at a stop and aching all over. I had lost my staff in the tumble. The tile floor was cool against my cheek.

I watched the loup-garou recover itself, focus its burning eyes on me, and hurtle down the hallway. I was in so much pain that I could appreciate the pure beauty of it, the savage, unearthly grace and speed with which it moved. It was a perfect hunter, a perfect killer, fast and strong, relentless and deadly. It was no wonder that I had lost to such a magnificently dangerous being. I hated to go, but at least I hadn't gotten beaten by some scabby troll or whining, angst-ridden vampire. And I wasn't going to turn away from it, either.

I drew in what was to be my last breath, my eyes wide on the onrushing loup-garou.

So I could clearly see as Murphy looked down at me with crystal-blue eyes that saw right through the potion's remaining effects. She gave me a hard glance and placed herself between me and the onrushing monster in a shooter's stance, raising up her gun in a futile gesture of protection.

"Murphy!" I screamed.

And then the thing was on us.

Chapter Eighteen

I tried to make my stunned body respond, to get to my feet, to unleash every ounce of magic at my command to protect Murphy, and to hell with the consequences.

I failed.

The loup-garou hurtled down the hallway, moving faster than I could have believed something so massive *could* move. Its claws gouged into the tile floor like it was soft clay. The walls shook around the beast, as though its very presence was enough to make reality shudder. Bloodstained drool spilled from its foaming jaws, and its green eyes blazed with hellish fury.

Murphy, standing at her full five-feet-and-change tall, was shorter than the loup-garou, its eyes on level with hers. She was wearing jeans again, hiking boots, a flannel shirt rolled up past the elbows, a bandanna around her throat. She was without makeup or jewelry, her earlobes curiously naked and vulnerable without earrings. Her punky little haircut fell down around her eyes, and as she raised her gun, she thrust out her lower lip and puffed out a breath, flipping her bangs up out of her vision. She started shooting when the loup-garou was about thirty feet away—useless. The thing had laughed off bullets fired into its skull at point-blank range.

I noticed three things at that point.

First, Murphy's gun was not the usual heavy-caliber Colt semiautomatic she carried. It was smaller, sleeker, with a telescopic sight mounted at its rear.

Second, the gun made a sharp little *bark, bark, bark*, rather than the more customary *wham, wham, wham*.

Third, when the first bullet hit the loup-garou's chest, blood flew, and the creature faltered and buckled, as though surprised. When the second and third shots slammed into its front leg, the limb slipped and went out from under it. The loup-garou snarled and rolled its momentum to the side, put its head down, and simply smashed its way through the wall and into the room beyond.

Murphy and I were left in the dust-clouded hallway, the escape alarm whooping plaintively in the background. Murphy dropped down next to me. "And I told Aunt Edna I'd never get any use out of those earrings," she muttered. "Christ, Dresden, you're covered in blood. How bad is it?" I felt her slip her hand inside an enormous tear in the blue jumpsuit that I hadn't seen before and run her palm over my chest and shoulders, checking the arteries there. "You're under arrest, by the way."

"I'm okay, I'm okay," I panted, when I could breathe. "What the hell happened? How did you do that?"

Murphy rose up, lifted the gun to half raised, and stalked toward the hole the loup-garou had left in the wall. We could hear crashing sounds, heavy thumps, and furious snarling somewhere on the other side. "You have the right to remain silent. What do you think happened, moron? I read your report. I make my own loads for competition shooting, so I ran off a few silver bullets last night. But they're only in twenty-two caliber, so I'm going to have to put one through his eye to take him out. If that will do it."

"Twenty-two?" I complained, still breathless. "Couldn't you have made some thirty-eights, some forty-fours?"

"Bitch and whine," Murphy snarled at me. "You have the right to an attorney. I don't make my loads for work, and I didn't have the materials for it. Be happy with what you have."

I scrambled to my feet and leaned against the wall by the ragged hole. There was the sound of running feet, moving toward us down the hall. "I can't believe you're *arresting* me. What's through that wall?"

"Records, archives," Murphy said, leveling the target pistol at the hole. "A bunch of big old file cabinets and computers. Everyone who works there went home hours ago. How's that thing react to tear gas?"

"Send some in there and I'll tell you," I muttered, and Murphy shot me a dire look.

"Just stay down, Dresden, until I can get you locked up somewhere safe and get a doctor to look at you."

"Murph. Listen to yourself. We're stuck in a building with one of the nastiest creatures around, and you're still trying to *arrest* me. Get some perspective."

"You made your bed, jerk. Now lie in it." Murphy then raised her voice, without turning her head from the hole in the wall. "Carmichael! Down here! I want four on the doors going out of Records, and the rest with me. Rudolph, get down here and get Dresden back to the office, out of the way." She glared at my wrists, where the handcuffs she'd put on me the night before still dangled. "Christ, Dresden," she added in a mutter. "What is it with you and my handcuffs?"

Police, most of them plainclothes guys from Special Investigations, came pouring into the hall. Some of them had pistols, some of them had pump-action riot guns. My vision blurred and swirled between grey tones and Technicolor, and adrenaline made my nerves jangle and jerk. The potion must have been wearing off; most potions only lasted for a couple of minutes, anyway.

I took inventory. The loup-garou's teeth had scored my foot, through the boot. It hurt, and my sock was soaked in blood. I would leave little red footprints on the floor when I started walking. I could taste the blood in my mouth, from where I had bitten into my tongue, and I either had to spit or swallow. I swallowed. No comments, please. My back was mostly numb, and what wasn't numb hurt like hell. My wounded shoulder, naturally, was pounding so hard that I could barely stand.

"Bastard chewed up my good boot," I muttered, and for some reason, the statement struck me as incredibly funny. Maybe I had just seen too much for the evening, but whatever had caused it, I sailed into panting, wheezing gales of laughter.

Carmichael dragged me back. His round face was red with exertion and tension, and his food-stained tie was loose around his throat. He passed me into the custody of a young, good-looking detective, who I didn't recognize. He must have been the rookie at SI. I leaned against the young man and laughed helplessly.

"Take him back to the office, Rudolph," Carmichael said. "Keep him there, out of the way. As soon as this is under control, we'll get him to a doctor."

"Jesus Christ," Rudolph said, his eyes wide, his short, dark hair coated with drifting dust. He had a tense, panicky voice, and in spite of his youth, he was panting twice as heavily as the veteran Carmichael. "You saw it on the security monitors, right? What that thing did to Sergeant Hampton?"

Carmichael grabbed Rudolph by the front of his shirt and shook him. "Listen up, rook," he said, his voice harsh. "It's still there, and it can do it to us just as quick as to Hampy. Shut your hole and do what I told you."

"R-right," Rudolph said. He straightened, and started jerking me back down the hall away from the records office. "Who is this guy, anyway?"

Carmichael glared at me. "He's the guy who knows. If he comes to and says something, listen to him." Then he picked up a riot gun and stomped over to where Murphy was getting set to lead a group through the hole in the wall after the loup-garou. She was going over instructions, that if she went down one of the men was to pick up her gun and try to put out the thing's eyes with it.

The rookie half dragged and half led me around the corner and down the hall to the Special Investigations office. I stared down at my feet as he did, at the trail of bloody footprints behind me, giggling. Something was nagging at me, somewhere behind the madness of the laughter, where a diffident, rational corner of my mind was waiting patiently for my consciousness to take notice of an important thought it had isolated. Something about blood.

"This isn't happening," Rudolph chanted to himself along the way. "This isn't happening. Sweet Jesus, this is a trick for the new guy. A prank. Got to be." He stank of sour sweat and fear, and he was shaking horribly. I could feel it in my biceps, where he held me.

I think it was his terror that let me see through my own hysteria, fight it down and shove it under control again. He hauled me through the door, into the Special Investigations office, and I stumbled to the battered, sunken old couch just inside the door. I gasped for air, while the rookie slammed the door and paced back and forth, his eyes bulging, wheezing for air. "This isn't happening," he said. "My God, this isn't happening."

"Hey," I managed, after a minute, struggling to sort out all the input raging through my body—tears, bruises, maybe a sprain or two, a little bit of chill where shock was lurking, and aching sides from the laughter, of all things. The rookie didn't hear me. "Hey, Rudy," I said louder, and the kid snapped his eyes over to me as though shocked that I'd spoken. "Water," I told him. "Need some water."

"Water, right," Rudolph said, and he turned and all but ran to the water fountain. His hands were shaking so hard that he crushed the first two paper cones he took from the dispenser, but he got the third one right. "You're that guy. The fake."

"Wizard," I rasped back to him. "Harry Dresden."

"Dresden, right," the kid said, and came back over to me with the paper cone. I took it and splashed the contents all over my face. It was a cool shock, something else to draw me back from the land of giggles and throbbing nerve endings, and I clawed for all the sane ground I could get. Then I handed the cone back to him. "One more for the inside."

He stared at me as though I was mad (and who's to say, right?) and went to get another cone cup of water. I drank the second one down and started sorting through my thoughts. "Blood, Rudy," I said. "Something about blood."

"God," the rookie panted, the whites of his eyes glaring. "It was all over Hampton. Blood all over the room, splashed on the Plexiglas and the security camera. Blood, goddamn blood everywhere. What the fuck is that thing?"

"Just one more tough bad guy. But it bleeds," I said. Then fastened on the idea, my brain churning to a ponderous conclusion. "It bleeds. Murphy shot it and put its blood all over the floor." I gulped down the rest of the water and stood. "It bleeds, and I can nail it." I lifted my fist to shake it defiantly over my head and strode past the stunned Rudolph.

"Hey," he said, feebly. "Maybe you should sit down. You don't look so good. And you're sort of under arrest, still."

"I can't be under arrest right now," I said back to him. "I don't have the time." I limped down the rows of desks and partitions to Murphy's office. It's a little tacked-on office, with cheap walls of wooden paneling and an old wooden door, but it was more than anyone else in the disfavored department had. There was a paper rectangle taped neatly to the door, where a name placard would be on any other office in the building, which read in neat, block letters of black ink: LT. KARRIN MURPHY, SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS. The powers that be refused to purchase a real name plaque for any director of SI—sort of their way of reminding the person they stuck in the position that they wouldn't be there long enough to matter. Underneath the neat paper square, at an angle, was a red and purple bumper sticker that said: TRESPASSERS WILL BE KILLED AND EATEN.

"I hope she didn't leave her computer on," I mumbled and went into Murphy's office. I took one look around the neatly organized little place and stepped in to pluck my blasting rod, bracelet, amulet, firearm, and other accoutrements I'd had in my possession when I'd been arrested from the table next to the computer. The computer was on. There was a cough from the monitor as my hand passed near it, and a little puff of smoke, then a bright spark from somewhere within the plastic console of the hard drive.

I winced and collected my things, putting on the shield bracelet with fumbling fingers, ducking my head into the loop of my pentacle amulet, stuffing my pistol into the jumpsuit's pocket, and taking my blasting rod firmly in my right hand, the side of the body that projects energy. "You didn't see that, Rudy. Okay?"

The rookie had a stunned look on his face as he stared at me and at the smoking computer and monitor. "What did you do?"

"Nothing, never came close, didn't do anything, that's my story and I'm sticking to it," I muttered. "You got that paper cup? Right, then. All we need is a stuffed animal."

He stared at me. "Wh-what did you say?"

"A stuffed animal, man!" I roared at him. "Don't mess with a wizard when he's wizarding!" I let out a cackle that threatened to bring the wild hysteria that still lurked inside of me back in full force, and banished it with a ferocious scowl. Poor Rudolph bore the brunt of both expressions, got a little more pale than he already was, and took a couple of steps back from me.

"Look. Carmichael still keeps a couple of toys in his desk, right? For when kids have to wait on their parents, that sort of thing?"

"Uh," said the rookie. "I, uh."

I brandished my blasting rod. "Go look!"

Maybe the kid would have taken any excuse at that point, but he seemed willing enough to follow my instructions. He spun and ran out into the main room and started frantically tearing open desks.

I limped out of Murphy's office and glanced back at the bloody footprints I left on the puke-grey carpet behind me with my soaking sock. The room was getting colder as I lost more blood. It wasn't serious, but it was all the way at the bottom of my considerably long body, and if I didn't get the bleeding stopped before too much longer it was bound to cause problems.

I was going to bend over and try to get a better look at my wounded foot, but when I started to, I swayed and wobbled dangerously, and thought it would be a better thing to wait until someone else could do it. I stood up and took a few deep breaths. Something nagged me about this entire deal, something that was missing, but I'd be damned if I could figure out what it was.

"Rudy," I called. "Get that animal yet?"

The rookie's hand thrust up from one of the partitioned cubicles with a battered stuffed Snoopy doll. "Will this work?"

"Perfect!" I cheered woozily.

And then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Nineteen

From out in the hallway, there came a scream that no human throat could have made, a sound of such fury and insane anger that it made my stomach roil and my guts shake. Gunfire erupted, not in a rattling series of individual detonations, but in a roar of furious thunder. Bullets shot through the wall, somewhere near me, and smashed out a couple of windows in the Special Investigations office.

I was on my last legs, exhausted, and terrified half crazy. I hurt, all over. There was no way I was going to have the focus, the strength I needed to go up against that monster. Easier to run, to plan something out, to come back when I was stronger. I could win a rematch. It's tough to beat a wizard who knows his enemy, who comes prepared to deal with it. It was the smart thing to do.

But I've never been known for my rational snap judgment. I gripped the blasting rod and started sucking in all the power I could reach, scooping up my recent terror, reaching down into the giggling madness, scraping up all the courage I had left, and pouring it into the kettle with everything else. The power came rushing into me, purity of emotion, complex energies of will, and raw hardheadedness, all combining into a field, an aura of tingling, invisible energy that I could feel enveloping my skin. Shivers ran over me, overriding the pain of my injuries, the ecstasy of power gathering my sensations into its heady embrace. I was pumped. I was charged. I was more than human, and God help anyone who got in my way, because he would need it. I drew in a deep, steadying breath.

And then I simply turned to the wall, pointed my rod at it, and snarled, *"Fuego."*

Chapter Twenty

I awoke in a dark place. It was like the inside of a warehouse, or a big, underground garage, all black, with a smooth, even floor, and a pool of bleak, sterile radiance in the middle of it that came from a source I could not see or identify. I felt like hell, and looked down to see myself covered in scratches, bruises, welts, blood, bandages, and ill-fitting clothing. I wore none of my implements or devices, and there was a curious sense of distance between me and the pain of my injuries—I was more than aware of them, but they seemed to be something that was merely noted in passing, and unimportant to my life as a whole.

I stood just outside the circle of light, and it seemed to me proper that I move forward into it. I did. And as I did, there appeared in the circle opposite me . . . me. Myself. Only better groomed, dressed in a mantled duster of black leather, not the sturdy, if styleless canvas that I wore. My double's pants and boots and shirt were all black as well, and they fit him as though tailor-made, rather than off-the-rack. His eyes were set deep, overshadowed by severe brows, and glittering with dark intelligence. His hair was neatly cut, and the short beard he wore emphasized the long lines of his face, the high cheekbones, the straight slash of his mouth, and the angular strength of his jaw. He stood as tall as I, as long limbed as I, but carried with him infinitely more confidence, raw knowledge, and strength. A faint whiff of cologne drifted over to me, cutting through my own sour sweat and blood smells.

My double tilted his head to one side, looked me up and down for a long minute, and then said, "Harry, you look like hell."

"And you look like *me*," I said, and limped toward him, peering.

My double rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Hell's bells, you make me sick with how thick skulled you are, sometimes." He took steps toward me, mirroring my own movements. "I don't look like you. I *am* you."

I blinked at him for a few seconds. "You are me. How does that work?"

"You're unconscious, moron," my double said to me. "We can finally talk to one another."

"Oh, I get it," I said. "You're Evil Harry, lurking inside Good Harry. Right? And you only come out at night?"

"Give me a break," my double said. "If you were that simple, you'd be so insufferably boring you'd probably blow your own head off. I'm not Evil Harry. I'm just Subconscious Harry. I'm your inner voice, bub. Your intuition, your instinct, your basic, animal reactions. I make your dreams, and I decide which nightmares to pop in the old psychic VCR at night. I come up with a lot of the good ideas, and pass them along to you when you wake up."

"So you're saying you're wiser than me? Smarter than me?"

"I probably am, in a lot of ways," my double said, "but that's not my job, and it's not why I'm here."

"I see. So what are you doing here, then? You're going to tell me how I'm going to meet three spirits of Harry Past, Present, and Future?" I asked.

My double snorted. "That's good. That really is, the banter thing. I can't do the banter very well. Maybe that's why you're in charge. Of course, if *I* was in charge more often, you'd get laid a lot more—but no, that's not it, either."

"Can we speed this along? I'm too tired to keep on guessing," I complained.

"No joke, jerk. That's why you're asleep. But we don't have long to talk, and there are some issues we need to work through." He said "issues" in the British manner, iss-ewwws.

"Issues to work through?" I said. "What, am I my own therapist, now?" I turned my back on my double and started stalking out of the lighted circle. "I've had some weird dreams, but this has got to be the stupidest one yet."

My double slipped around me and got in my way before I could leave the circle of light. "Hold it. You really don't want to do this."

"I'm tired. I feel like shit. I'm hurt. And what I really don't want is to waste any more time dreaming about you." I narrowed my eyes at my double. "Now get out of my way." I turned to my right and started walking toward the nearest edge of the circle.

My double slipped in front of me again, apparently without needing to cross the intervening space. "It isn't that simple, Harry. No matter where you go, there you are."

"Look, I've had a long night."

"I know," my double said. "Believe me, I know. That's why it's important to get some of this out now, before it settles in. Before you blow a gasket on your sanity, man."

"I've not worried about that," I lied. "I'm as solid as a brick wall."

My double snorted. "If you weren't getting pretty close to crazy, would you be talking to yourself right now?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it again. Shrugged. "Okay. You've got a point."

"I've got more than that," my double said. "Things have been happening to you so quickly that you haven't had time to think. You need to work through some of this, and then you need to do some hard thinking, fast."

I sighed and rubbed at my eyes. "All right, then," I said. "What do you want to hear?"

My double gestured, and there was Murphy as she had appeared in the hallway of the police station, the flesh of her bicep tented out by the broken bone, her face pale, spotted with blood, and streaked with tears and hopeless anguish.

"Murph," I said, quietly, and knelt down by the image. "Stars above. What have I done to you?" The image, the memory, didn't hear me. She just wept silent, bitter tears.

My double knelt on the other side of the apparition. "Nothing, Harry," he said. "What happened at the police station wasn't your fault."

"Like hell it wasn't," I snarled. "If I'd have been faster, gotten there sooner, or if I'd told her the truth from the beginning—"

"But you didn't," my double interjected. "And you had some pretty damned compelling reasons not to. Ease up on yourself, man. You can't change the past."

"Easy for you to say," I snarled.

"No, it isn't," my double said quietly. "Concentrate on what you will do, not what you should have done. You've been trying to protect Murphy all along, instead of making her able to protect herself. She's going to be fighting these kinds of things, Harry, and you won't always be there to babysit her. Instead of trying to play shepherd, you need to play coach, and get her into shape to do what she needs to do."

"But that means—"

"Telling her everything," my double said. "The White Council, the Nevernever, all of it."

"The Council won't like it. If I tell her and they hear about it, they might consider her a security risk."

"And if you don't make her able to understand what she's fighting, something's going to eat her face some dark night. Murphy's a big girl. The Council had better be careful if they decide to go messing with her." My double considered Murphy for a moment. "You should ask her out sometime, too."

"I should *what*?" I said.

"You heard me. You're repressing big time, man."

"This is all getting way too Freudian for me," I said, and stood up, intending to walk away again. I was confronted with an image of Susan, as she had appeared on the steps to the police station, tall in her heels and dress suit, elegant and beautiful, her face stretched with worry.

"Think she's going to get a good story out of this?" my double asked.

"Oh, that's below the belt. That's not why she's seeing me."

"Maybe, maybe not. But you're asking yourself that question, aren't you?" My double gestured to himself and to me, demonstratively. "Shouldn't that make you ask a few more questions?"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like how come you don't trust anyone," my double said. "Not even someone like Susan who has been going out on a limb for you tonight." He lifted a long-fingered hand and stroked at the short beard with his fingertips. "I'm thinking this has to do with Elaine. How about you?"

And then there she was, a girl of elegant height, perhaps eighteen or nineteen years of age—gawky and coltish, all long legs and arms, but with the promise of stunning beauty to add graceful curves to the lean lines of her body. She was dressed in a pair of my blue jeans, cut off at the tops of her muscled thighs, and my own T-shirt, tied off over her abdomen. A pentacle amulet, identical to my own, if less battered, lay over her heart, between the curves of her modest breasts. Her skin was pale, almost luminous, her hair a shade of brown-gold, like ripe wheat, her eyes a startling, storm-cloud grey in contrast. Her smile lit up her face, made her eyes dance with secret fires that still, even after all the years, made me draw in a sharp breath. Elaine. Beautiful, vital, and as poisonous as any snake.

I turned my back on the image, deliberately—before I could see it change into the Elaine that I had last seen—naked, festooned in swirling paints that lent a savage aura to her skin. Her lips had been stained brilliant, wet red, curving around twisting, rolling phrases as she chanted in the midst of her circle, its sigils meant to focus pain and fury into tangible power that had been used to hold a foolish young man helpless while his mentor offered him one last chance to sip from a chalice of fresh, hot blood.

"That's been over for a long time," I said, my voice shaking.

My double answered me quietly, "It isn't over. It isn't over yet, Harry. As long as you hold yourself responsible for Justin's death and Elaine's fall, it still colors everything you think and do."

I didn't answer myself.

"She's still alive," my double said. "You know she is."

"She died in the fire," I said. "She was unconscious. She couldn't have lived through it."

"You'd have known if she died. And they never found a second set of bones."

"She died in the fire!" I screamed. "She's dead."

"Until you stop pretending," my double said, appearing before me, "and try to face reality, you're not going to be able to heal. You're not going to be able to trust anyone. Which reminds me . . ."

My double gestured, and Tera West appeared as I had seen her crouched behind the garbage bin at the rear of the gas station, naked, her body lean, feral, leaves and bits of bracken in her hair, her amber eyes gleaming with cold, alien intelligence. "Why in the *hell* are you trusting *her*?"

"I haven't had much choice," I snapped. "In case you haven't noticed, things have been sort of desperate lately."

"You know she's not human," my double said. "You know she was at the scene of the crime, at Marcone's restaurant, where Spike was torn up. You know she has some kind of hold on a group of young people, the favorite targets of the creatures of the Nevernever. In fact, you can be pretty damn sure that she is a shape-shifter of one kind or another, who isn't telling you the whole truth, but still comes asking for your help."

"Like I can throw stones for not telling the whole truth," I said.

Hngh, my double said in answer. "But you haven't confronted her about what she isn't telling you. Those kids. Who the hell were they, and what were they doing? What is she getting them into? And why was she keeping it a secret from MacFinn? He didn't recognize the names when you dropped them."

"All right, all right," I said. "I was going to talk to her anyway. As soon as I wake up."

My double chuckled. "If things are that leisurely. These murders are still happening, and they're starting to pile up. Are you serious about doing something about them?"

"You know that I am."

My double nodded firmly. "I'm glad we agree on something. Let's look at some facts. MacFinn couldn't have committed all the murders. Most particularly, he couldn't have committed the most important murder—the industrialist, Marcone's partner. He and his bodyguard were killed the night after the full moon. And Spike was wiped out the night before the full moon. MacFinn doesn't have any control over his shape-shifting. He couldn't have been the one to pull off those murders."

"So who could have?" I asked.

"His fiancée. The men were ripped apart by an animal."

"But the FBI lab said that it wasn't a true wolf that did it."

"Werewolves are slightly different from real wolves," my double said.

"How do you know that?" I demanded.

"I'm the intuition, remember?" my double said. "Think about it. If you were going to change yourself into a wolf, do you think you could hold that image in your head, perfectly exact? Do you think you could make all the millions of subtle, tiny changes in skeletal and muscular structure? Magic doesn't just work—a mind has to direct it, shape it. Your emotions, your feelings toward wolves would color it, too—change the image and the shape. Ask Bob, next chance you get. I'm sure he'll tell you I'm right."

"Okay, okay," I said. "I'll buy that. But the FBI said that there was more than one set of tooth marks and prints, too."

"MacFinn explains some of them. During last month's full moon, he probably killed some people when his circle went ka-blooeey."

"And the group Tera had—they called themselves the Alphas—could explain the rest of them, if they were shape-shifters."

"Now you're catching on," my double said, approval in his tone. "You're smarter than you look."

"Do you think they were behind spoiling MacFinn's containment circle? The fancy one with all the silver and stuff?"

"They had the knowledge to do it, through Tera. Tera could have let them in, providing opportunity," my double said.

"But they didn't have a motive," I said. "Why would they have done it?"

"Because Tera told them to, maybe?"

I frowned and nodded. "She is a creature of the Nevernever. Who knows what's going through her—its head. It doesn't necessarily have to be understandable by human logic."

My double shook his head. "I don't buy that. I saw the way she looked at MacFinn—and how she sacrificed herself to divert the FBI and the police so that he could escape. Your instincts are telling you that she is in love with MacFinn, and that she wouldn't act against him."

"Yeah. You told me that about Elaine, too," I shot back, another pang of memory going through my chest.

"That was a long time ago," my double said defensively. "I've had time to get keener since then. And less easy to distract."

"All right," I sighed. "So where does that leave us?"

"I don't think we've run into the real killers yet. The ones who ruined MacFinn's circle and whacked the mob guys on the non-full-moon nights."

I squinted at my double. "You think so?"

He nodded and stroked his beard again. "Unless the Alphas are doing it without Tera knowing, and they look a little too bright eyed and bushy tailed to be doing that. I think it's someone else entirely. Someone trying to set up MacFinn and take him out of the picture."

"But why?"

"Maybe because they didn't want him putting the Northwest Passage Project through. Or, gee, maybe because he's a freaking werewolf, Harry, and someone caught on to it and wanted him dead. You know that there are organizations who would do that—some of the Venatori Umbrorum, members of the White Council, others who are in the know."

"But you don't think I've seen them, yet?"

"I don't think you've picked them out from the background," my double said. "Keep your eyes open, all right? Which brings us to the next topic of discussion."

"Does it?"

My double nodded. "Threat assessment. You've got all kinds of things staring you right in the face, and you're not noticing them. I don't want you to get killed because you're too distracted." He glanced to one side, frowned, and said, "We're almost out of time."

"We wouldn't be if you weren't such a wiseass."

"Bite me," my double said. "Don't forget Marcone. You pissed him off by not taking the deal he offered you. He thinks the killers are coming after him next, and he might be right. He's scared, and scared people do stupid things—like trying to off the only man in town who has a chance of stopping what's going on."

“Let me worry about Marcone,” I said.

“I *am* you, and I’m worried. Next is the cops. Some of Murphy’s people are dead. There is going to be hell to pay once she gets that arm fixed—and someone is going to remember that you were around, and with your luck, they won’t remember that you kept even more people from dying. You see Murphy and the police again, you’d better be careful or you’re going to get shot to death resisting arrest.”

“I’ll be careful,” I said.

“One more thing,” my double said. “You have forgotten about Parker and the Streetwolves entirely. Parker needs you dead if he’s going to remain in control of his people.”

“Yeah. You’d have thought he’d have been more on the ball than this.”

“Exactly,” my double said. “You’ve been hiding and away from your apartment for a while—but you show up in public again, and you can bet that Parker will be on your trail. And *think*. He knew the real deal between you and Marcone, and he’s a petty thug in Chicago. There’s probably a connection between them, and you’ve been too dumb to think of it.”

“Stars above,” I muttered. “It’s not as if the situation is very complicated. No pressure, right?”

“At least you’re willing to deal with it now, instead of just closing your eyes and pretending that they can’t see you. Be careful, Harry. It’s a real mess, and you’re the only one who can clean it up.”

“Who are you, my mother?” I asked.

My double snapped his fingers. “That reminds me, right. Your mother—” He broke off, glancing up and around him, an expression of frustration coming over his face. “Oh, hell.”

And then someone was shaking my unwounded shoulder, shaking me roughly awake. I blinked open my eyes in shock, and all the pains of my body came flooding back into me with renewed energy and agony. My brain reeled for a few minutes, trying to shift gears.

I was sitting in the passenger seat of Susan’s car. We were rolling down an expressway, somewhere, but rain was clouding the view of the skyline so that I couldn’t orient myself to where we were. The glowing numbers of the dashboard clock said that it was only a few minutes after nine. I’d had less than half an hour’s sleep. There was an old beach towel wrapped around my wounded foot, and my face felt cool, as though someone had wiped it clean.

“Is he awake?” Susan said, her voice high and panicky. “Is he awake?”

“I’m awake,” I said blearily, blinking open my eyes. “Sort of. What? This better be good.”

“It is not good,” Tera said from the backseat. “If you have any power left, wizard, you should prepare to use it. We are being followed.”

Chapter Twenty-one

I rubbed at my eyes and mumbled some vague curse at whoever was following us. "Okay, okay. Give me a minute."

"Harry," Susan said. "I'm almost on empty. I don't know if we *have* a minute."

"It never rains," I moaned.

Tera frowned at me. "It is raining now." She turned to Susan. "I do not think he is coherent."

I snorted and looked around blearily. "It's a figure of speech. Hell's bells, you really don't know *anything* about humans, do you?

"Are you sure there's someone following us?"

Tera glanced back at the traffic behind us. "Two cars back. And three cars behind that one. Two vehicles are following us."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

Tera turned those odd amber eyes back to me. "They move like predators. They move well. And I feel them."

I narrowed my eyes. "Feel them? On an instinctual level?"

Tera shrugged. "I feel them," she repeated. "They are dangerous."

The taste of blood was still in my mouth, annoying input, like static on a phone. Of all the people who might be chasing me in cars, I could only think of a few who would trigger the supernatural senses of an inhuman being. I thought that it might be a pretty good idea to listen to what my dapper double had to say. "Susan," I said, "I want you to get off the expressway."

Her dark eyes flashed beneath the streetlights as she looked at me, then down at her fuel gauge. "I have to in the next couple of miles anyway. What do you want me to do?"

"Pull off, and get to a gas station."

She flashed me another nervous look, and I had the time to note that she was gorgeous, like some sort of Latin goddess. Of course, I might have been a little less than entirely objective. "Then what?" she said.

I checked my foot and idly took off my remaining boot, so that my hips would be parallel with the floor while I was standing. "Call the police."

"What?" Susan exclaimed and guided her car off the freeway and down an exit ramp.

I felt around in the jumpsuit's tool pouch, until I came out with the little sports bottle with my second potion in it. "Just do it," I said. "Trust me on this one."

"Wizard," Tera said, her voice still utterly calm. "There is no one but you who can help my fiancé."

I shot Tera an annoyed glance. "I'll meet you where you hold your Cub Scout meetings."

"Harry?" Susan said. "What are you talking about?" She pulled the car down the exit ramp, onto a one-way access road.

"I understand what you're doing," Tera said. "I would do the same for my mate."

"*Mate?*" Susan said indignantly. "Mate? I am most certainly *not* his—"

I didn't get to hear the rest of what Susan said, because I grabbed my blasting rod in one hand, the potion in the other, opened the door to the car, unfastened my seat belt, and rolled out onto the shoulder of the road.

I know, I know. It sounds really stupid in retrospect, even to me. But it made a sort of chivalrous, cockamamie sense at the time. I was pretty sure that Parker and his cronies in the Streetwolves were shadowing us, and I had a precise idea of how dangerous they could be. I had to assume that they were even worse during the full moon. Susan had no idea of the level of danger she was in, and if I stayed near her I would only draw her more deeply into it. And Tera—I still didn't trust Tera. I wasn't sure that I wanted her fighting at my back.

I wanted to deal with my pursuers myself, to deal with my own mistake myself, and not to make an innocent bystander like Susan pay for it.

So I, uh, sort of threw myself out of the passenger seat of a moving car.

Don't look at me like that. I'm telling you, it made sense at the time.

I held out my arms and legs in a circle, as though I were trying to hug a barrel, and then scrape, scrape, rip, bumpity-bumpity-bumpity, whip, whip, whip, and thud. Everything whirled around the whole while. I managed, somehow, to keep my sense of direction, to maintain my momentum largely in a roll, and to angle myself toward the dubious comfort of the thick weeds at the side of the access road. By the time I came to a stop, I was among freshly crushed plants, all damp and cold from the rain, the smell of mud and gas and asphalt and exhaust clogging up my nose.

There was pain, pain everywhere, spreading out from my shoulder and my foot, whirling dizziness, blackness that rode on my eyelids and tried to force them down. I struggled to remember exactly what I had planned on doing when I had thrown open the door to Susan's car.

It came to me in a moment, and I jerked the squeeze top of the sports bottle open with my teeth and then crushed the plastic bottle, forcing the potion inside it out through the narrow nozzle and into my mouth. Eight ounces of cold coffee, I thought, dimly. Yum.

It tasted like stale cardboard and too-old pizza and burned coffee beans. But as it went down my gullet, I could feel the power in the brew spreading out into me, active and alive, as though I had swallowed a huge, hyperkinetic amoeba. My fatigue quite simply vanished, and energy came rushing into me, like it sometimes does at the end of a really good concerto or overture. The pain receded down to levels that I could manage. The soreness lifted out of my muscles, and my cloudy, cloggy thought processes cleared as though someone had flushed my synapses with jalapeño. My heart rate surged, and then held steady, and I came to the abrupt conclusion that things just weren't as bad as I had thought they were.

I pushed myself up using my bad arm, just to spite the injury that Agent Benn had dealt me, and brushed myself off. My jumpsuit was torn and there was fresh blood on it, scrapes from the asphalt and darkening bruises on my arms and legs that I could already see—annoying little bastards. I held them in contempt.

I shook my shield bracelet loose around my left wrist, took my blasting rod in my right hand, and turned toward the access road. I drew in a breath, smelling the odor of the rain on the asphalt, and more distantly the crisp, clean scent of autumn, almost buried by Chicago's stink. I considered how much I loved the autumn, and composed a brief poem about it as I watched traffic force Susan's car along and out of sight. I turned my head to view a pair of cars cut frantically across traffic and cruise down the access road. The lead car was a two-ton pickup, one of the really big ones, and Parker sat behind the wheel, looking around wildly until his eyes lit upon me, standing there in the tall weeds beside the road.

I smiled at him and contemplated his shocked expression to my own satisfaction.

Then I drew in a breath, and my renewed will with it, lifted the rod in my right hand, murmured a phrase in a language I didn't know, and blew the tires off his fucking truck.

They all went at once, in one satisfying THUMP, complete blowouts resulting from a sudden heating of the air inside the tires—a pretty slick spell to pull on the fly, heating up the air inside of the tires of a moving vehicle. The truck slewed left and right, and I could see Parker frantically rolling the steering wheel in an effort to maintain control. Two people sat in the cab with him, faces I didn't recognize from here, and they evidently didn't believe in seat belts. They were tossed about the inside of the truck like toys. The truck careened off the road in a spray of gravel, went past me into the weeds, hit some sort of ditch, and went into a ponderous roll.

There was an enormous crunching sound. Car wrecks, when they happen for real and not on television, are surprisingly noisy. They sound like someone pounding empty trash cans out of shape with a sledgehammer, only louder. Parker's truck tumbled over twice, crunched into the side of a hill, and lay on its passenger side.

"Well then," I said with a certain amount of professional pride. "That should take care of that."

I spoke too soon. There was a brittle, grinding sound, and the windshield of the truck exploded into a hectic spiderweb pattern. The sound repeated itself, and the safety glass shattered outward, followed by a foot wearing a heavy black combat boot. More glass flew outward, and then people started crawling out of the pickup, battered and bloodied. Besides Parker, there was the lantern-jawed lout whose nose I had flattened a few days ago, his nose now swollen and grotesque, and the bloodthirsty woman who had led the group into their berserk fit of lust. They were all dressed in the same variants of denim and leather, and cuts and bruises from the tossing they'd had were much in evidence.

Parker led them out of the truck, looked back at it, stunned—and then he looked at me. I saw fear flicker in his eyes, and it brought out a satisfied surge within my own pounding

heart. Served him right, the jerk. I spun my rod around once in my fingers, started whistling a bit from the overture to *Carmen*, and walked toward them through the grass, annoyed that I

was limping and that I was dressed in a ridiculous blue jumpsuit that left inches of my arms and legs bare.

Flatnose saw me and grunted out some sort of Neanderthal noise of surprise. He drew a handgun from inside his jacket, and it looked tiny in his hands. Without preamble he started squeezing off shots at me.

I lifted my left hand, forced more of my boundless energy through the shield bracelet, and sang a few phrases in what I supposed could have been taken for Italian to verbally encase the spell. I continued walking forward as bullets bounded off the shield before my hand in cascades of sparks, and I even had enough breath left over to keep on whistling *Carmen*.

Parker snarled and slashed at Flatnose's wrist with the edge of his hand in a martial-arts-style movement. I heard a bone break, very clearly, but Flatnose only jerked his hand back toward his body and flashed Parker a scowl.

"Remember why we're here," the shorter man said. "He's mine."

"Hello there, Mr. Parker," I called cheerfully. I suppose that the image I presented as I walked toward them would have been comic—except for all the blood, and the big smile I felt spreading over my face. It seemed to have a somewhat intimidating effect on the Streetwolves at any rate. The woman snarled at me, and for a second I could feel a wild, savage energy, the same that had surrounded the frenzied lycanthropes at the Full Moon Garage, starting to build in the air around me.

I gave the bitch an annoyed look and slashed my hand at the air, drawing, "*Disperdorus*." I forced out an effort of will I might have found daunting on another night, one when I was feeling a little less all-powerful, and the woman jerked back as though I had slapped her in the mouth. The energy she had been gathering fractured and flew apart as though it had never been. She stared at me, growing tense and nervous, and reached a hand toward a knife in a case at her hip.

"Let's have none of that nonsense. As I was saying," I continued, "hello there, Mr. Parker. I know why you're here. Heard about the ruckus on a police scanner and came down by the station looking for me, right? Hate to disappoint you, but I'm not going to allow you to kill me."

Flatnose scowled and said, "How did you know th—"

Parker shoved the heel of his hand across Flatnose's mouth in a sharp blow, and the big man shut up. "Mr. Dresden," Parker growled. He eyed me up and down. "What exactly makes you think you can stop me from killing you?"

I had to smile at the man. I mean, you have to smile at idiots and children. "Oh, I don't know," I chuckled. "Maybe because the second you step out of line, I'm going to wreck you a whole hell of a lot worse than that truck. And because in just a couple of minutes, the police are going to be arriving to sort you out." There was a momentary flash of dimness, where the streetlight seemed to fade, the rain to grow very cold, and then it was gone again. I blinked a little blood out of my eyes, and renewed my smile. Mustn't let the children see weakness.

Parker snarled his thin lips into a smile. He had bad teeth. "The cops are after your ass too, Dresden," he said. "I don't believe you."

"Once they're here, I'm going to mysteriously disappear," I said. "Just like, well, gosh, magic. But you guys are . . ." I forgot what I had been going to say for a moment. There was something nagging at the back of my mind, a detail I had forgotten.

"I can smell your blood, wizard," Parker said, very quietly. "God, you got no idea what it smells like." Parker didn't move, but the woman let out a little mewling sound and pressed against Flatnose's side. Her eyes were focused intently on me.

"Get a good whiff," I managed to say. "It's the last time you'll smell it." But my smile was gone. A creeping vine of uncertainty was beginning to crack the wall of confidence I had been enjoying. The rain was getting colder, the lights dimmer. My extended left arm began to ache, starting at the wounded shoulder, and my hand shook visibly. Pain started leaking in again, from every part of my battered body.

Sanity returned in a rush. The potion. The potion was giving out on me. I had pushed myself way too hard while the first euphoria was going over me. Dispelling the intimate aura of rage and lust that the woman had begun to gather over them had been a feat I would never have considered in a stable frame of mind. There were too many unknowns. My heart was laboring along now, and I started panting. I couldn't get enough breath to slow down my rocketing heartbeat.

Parker and his two companions grew tense together, all at once, with no visible signal passing between them. I could feel that wild energy again, coursing down to the lycanthropes from beyond the rain clouds overhead. I swear to you, I could see the cuts on their body, from the crash, closing up before my eyes. Flatnose rolled the wrist that had just been broken, flexed his fingers at me, and gave me a grim smile.

Okay, Harry, I told myself. Keep calm. Do not panic. All you have to do is to hold them until the cops get here, and then you can bleed to death in peace. Or get to a doctor. Whichever hurts less.

"You know, Parker," I said, and my voice had a fluttering quaver to it, a fast, desperate quality. "I didn't really mean to show up at your garage. Hell, I wouldn't have been there at all if Denton's goon hadn't turned me on to the idea."

"That doesn't matter now," Parker said. His voice had a quiet, certain tone to it, and he had visibly relaxed. He smiled at me, and showed me more of his teeth. "That's all in the past." Then Parker took a step forward, and I panicked.

I jammed the rod at him and snarled, "*Fuego*." I funneled my will through it, and to hell with what the Council thought of me killing someone with magic.

Nothing happened.

I stared in disbelief, first at Parker, and then at the blasting rod. My fingers went numb as I looked at them, and the rune-engraved ash rod fell to the ground, though I tried a clumsy grab to catch it. Instead, my weight came down on my torn foot, and the ripped muscles went into a sudden cramp that sent fresh agony up through my leg. It buckled and pitched me forward into the weeds and the mud. The last wisps of my shield vanished as I fell. My magic had failed me altogether.

Parker laughed, a low and nasty sound. "Nice trick. Got another?"

"One more," I rasped, and fumbled at the jumpsuit's tool pouch. Parker walked slowly toward me, confident, relaxed, and moving like a man thirty years younger than he. My fingers were aching with cold, torn from the asphalt, numb from all the pain and scrapes and bruises. But the handle of my Chief's Special was easy enough to find.

I drew it out, thumbed back the hammer, and pointed it up at Parker. His eyes widened and his weight settled back on his heels—not quite retreating, but not coming any closer, either. From three feet away, even down in the mud, it would be tough to miss him, and he knew it.

"I didn't pick you for the kind to carry a gun," he said. The rain plastered his greasy hair down over his eyes.

"Only on special occasions," I said back. I had to delay him. If I could hold him in place, just for a few minutes, the cops would show up. I had to believe that they would, because if they didn't I was dead meat. Maybe literally. "Stop where you are."

He didn't. He took a step toward me.

So I shot him.

The gun roared, and the bullet smacked into his right knee-cap. It exploded in a burst of blood and flying chips of bone, and the leg went out from under him, hurling him to the muddy ground. He blinked once, surprised, but the pain he must have been feeling didn't seem to register. He scooted back a couple of feet and stared at me for a second, reassessing me.

Parker then drew his legs beneath him, and ignoring his ruined knee, hunkered down on his heels and rested his elbows on his thighs as if we were old friends, keeping his hands in plain sight. "You're tougher than you look. We tried to catch you at your apartment, you know," he said, as though I hadn't just shot him. "But the cops were all over it. Police band said you'd gotten arrested, but I guess you got away. We paid the jailer to let us know when they rounded you up." He grinned his snaggle-toothed grin and looked almost friendly. "Hell, kid. We were hanging around in a bar two blocks from the station for almost two days, just hoping to be there when they brought you up the steps. Drive-by." He pointed his finger at me in a bang-bang motion, and let his thumb fall forward.

"Sorry to disappoint you," I mumbled. I was working hard not to give in to the shakes, the cold, or the darkness. I knew he was up to something, but there was too much to deal with—too much injury, too much exhaustion, too much blood on my hands. I squinted past him to see Flatnose and the woman still in the same spot, both of them watching me with the intent look of hungry animals.

Parker chuckled. "And instead, everything goes to hell at the station. Gunshots, explosions, sounds like a war inside. Which was fun to watch. And then we see you stumbling out of the middle of it, right there in front of the cop station, with a cute little piece on either side helping you down the stairs. We just rolled out right after your ass."

"I hope you're insured."

Parker shrugged. "Truck wasn't mine." He plucked up a long blade of grass and traced it over the ruin of his knee, painting it red with his blood before crushing it up in his fingers. "Most of my people are out by the lake tonight. They got to let off some steam during the full moon. Damn, but I want to take you out right there in front of all of them. You got a real badass reputation, kid."

"Can't have everything you want," I said. I blinked rain, or blood, from my eyes.

Parker's smile widened. "You know, kid. I think there's something you don't know."

In the distance, I could hear the sound of sirens speeding down the freeway toward me. Hot damn, I thought. I finally did something right. “Oh yeah?” I asked, daring to feel a satisfied thrill of victory.

Parker nodded and looked off to one side. “There were two cars behind you.”

And something smashed down on my right hand, making it go numb, and sending the gun to earth. I looked up and had time to see another of the lycanthropes from the garage lift a lead pipe wrapped in electrical tape, and bring it down hard at me. The woman screamed and rushed toward me. She had steel-toed boots. Flatnose lumbered after her, and was content to use the barrel of his pistol as a dumb club.

Parker just sat there, squatting on his heels, and watched them. I could see his eyes. My blood splattered onto his cheek.

I don’t like thinking about what they did. They didn’t want to kill me. They wanted to hurt me. And they were good at it. I couldn’t fight. I couldn’t even curl up into a ball. There wasn’t that much spirit left in me. I could hear myself making choking sounds, gagging on my own blood, sobbing and retching in pathetic agony. I would have screamed if I could have. You hear stories about men who keep silent through all the torture and agony that anyone inflicts on them, but I’m just not that strong. They broke me.

At some point, the mind says “no more” and it gets the hell away from all that pain. I started going there, to that away-place, and I wasn’t sorry to do it at all.

I could dimly hear Parker shoving people off of me, once I stopped moving. He broke a few more of their bones, and they backed off with snarls of rage. He was walking on the leg again already, though my shot must have torn the joint to pieces. At his orders, they picked me up and carried me to another car, just lugged me along like a sack of broken parts. Duct tape went around my wrists and ankles, knees and elbows and mouth. Then they threw me in the trunk.

Parker reached up to close the lid. I didn’t have enough energy to move my eyes. I just stared out, letting them focus wherever they would.

I saw a face behind the wheel of a car going past on the access road—just a sedan, something that would blend in with all the other cars in the city. The face was young, strained, sprinkled with freckles, the hair red, the ears big.

Roger Harris, FBI. Denton’s redheaded lackey.

The sedan rolled by without even slowing, and Harris didn’t look over at me, didn’t break his surveillance. I wasn’t the only one, it seemed, who was being followed that night.

Parker slammed shut the trunk, leaving me in darkness. The car started going just as the sirens began to arrive at the access road. My captors’ car bounced along and made a casual getaway, leaving me in an agony more thorough, sickening, and acute than any I had felt before.

And, behind the gag, I started laughing. I couldn’t help it. I laughed, and it sounded like I was choking on raw sewage.

The pieces had all fallen into place.

Chapter Twenty-two

There's a point after which one cannot possibly continue doing complicated things like thinking and keeping one's eyes open. Blackness ensues and everything stops until the body, or the mind, is ready to function again. The blackness came for me and I welcomed it.

When I started to wake up, I smelled motor oil.

That in itself boded ill. I was seated upright, and an upright metal beam pressed into my back. I felt something constricting my wrists and my ankles. Duct tape, still, perhaps. There was cold concrete floor beneath me. I was aching everywhere, and stiff. But there was something soft over me, a blanket, maybe. I wasn't as cold as I might have been.

My first emotion was a vague surprise that I was still alive.

The second was a cold, nasty little shiver. I was a prisoner. And as long as I was, survival was by no means certain. First things first, then. Make it certain. Find out where I was, devise a plan, and get my skinny wizard ass out of there.

After all, it would be a real pity to die when I'd finally put tabs on who had gotten me into this mess—as well as who was responsible for the recent killings that couldn't be attributed to MacFinn, and probably who had set him up as well.

To that end, I opened my eyes and tried to get a look at my surroundings.

I was in the enemy's stronghold, the Full Moon Garage. It was dim inside, and from what I could hear, it was still raining without. There was a dirty, but warm blanket over me, which came as something of a surprise. There was also a little stand with a mostly empty plastic bag of what I took to be blood, dripping down a plastic tube that vanished behind me, out of my sight, and presumably ended at my arm.

I wiggled my feet out from beneath the blanket. My legs had been duct-taped together above and below the knee, and at the ankle. My bitten foot had been wrapped in clean bandages, then covered in my bloodied sock. In fact, I found a number of clean bandages on various cuts and scrapes, and I could smell, faintly, as though my nose had been given a while to get used to it, the sharp, medicine smell of disinfectant. I couldn't feel Murphy's sawed-through handcuffs on my wrists, and found myself vaguely missing them. At least they'd been familiar, if not comfortable.

So, not only was I alive, but I was in considerably better shape, after presumably several hours of sleep and medical attention.

But that didn't explain who had done this to me. Or why.

I looked around the dimness of the garage. My eyes were now adjusted to it, but even so, there were pockets of shadows too deep to see into. An L-shaped ribbon of yellow light showed beneath the door to the manager's office, and the sound of rain on the corrugated roof was a low, soothing roar. I closed my eyes, trying to orient myself, to determine what time it was from the feel of the air and the sound of the rain. Late afternoon? Early evening? I couldn't tell for sure.

I coughed and found my throat dry, but functional. My hands were bound, and I didn't have any way of making a circle. Without a circle, I couldn't use any delicate magic to free myself—all I had access to was the kaboom sort of power, which, while great against nasty loup-garou and other monsters, isn't much good for getting rid of several layers of duct tape resting within half an inch of my own tender skin. Magic was out.

Did I ever tell you about my dad? He was a magician—not a wizard, mind you, but a magician, the kind you see at old-fashioned magic shows. He had a black top hat, a white rabbit, a basket of swords, and everything. He used to travel around the country, performing for the kids and the old folks, barely making enough to scrape by. After Mom died during childbirth, Dad had the job of raising me all by himself, and I guess he did the best he could. He meant well.

I was real young when he died (I refused to believe Chaunzaggoroth's insinuations until I had looked into them further) of a brain aneurism. But I learned a thing or three about what he did before then. He'd named me after three magicians, after all, the first of which was Houdini himself. And one of Houdini's first rules was that the means to escape was always within your grasp. Positive attitude. It's a fact that a human being can escape from just about everything, given enough time.

The only question was, how much time did I have left?

The duct tape was strong, and it was fastened tightly—but it was also cheap, easy to transport, and simple to apply. Even though it was wound about me in multiple layers, it wasn't the best thing for holding people, or else the cops would use duct tape and not handcuffs and manacles. It could be beaten.

So I started looking for ways to beat it.

A little writhing showed me that my hands weren't fastened as tightly as they could have been. I could feel a sharp pain in my forearm, and guessed that was from the IV. They had to loosen the tape on my arms to get the needle into my forearm. I wiggled my shoulders, which set the wounded one to aching fiercely. The tape put pressure on my wrists and tore the hair from my arms with an audible ripping sound, and I clenched my teeth over this particular torment.

It hurt, and it took me the best part of ten minutes, but I got my wrists and hands free. I ditched the IV needle while I was at it, imagining some deadly fluid flowing down the tube into my veins. Then I flexed my arms repeatedly and got them free.

My fingers were numb, stiff, not really responding, but I started fumbling at the tape on my legs as best I could, trying to get tears started so that I could just flex my legs and get the whole thing to go at once. It took more effort than I thought it would, but I finally flexed my legs, thankful that the jumpsuit kept me from losing stripes of hair from my thighs and calves (if not from my ankles). My legs were much stronger than my arms, so snapping the layers of duct tape on them was a lot simpler and quicker.

Just not simple or quick enough.

Before I'd gotten out of the last loop of duct tape, there was a click-clack, and the office door swung open, accompanied by a murmur of low voices and a tinny din of old-time rock-and-roll music.

I panicked. I couldn't run—my ankles were still bound. By the time I got free and struggled to my feet, they'd be on me. So I did the next best thing. I whipped the blanket up and over me, snaked my hands back behind the pole, grabbing up the IV needle as I went and concealing it in my hand, and bent my head far forward as though I were still asleep.

"I still don't get why we can't just put a bullet in him and dump him," said a harsh voice with no nasal tone at all—Flatnose.

"Stupid," Parker growled, his voice like sandpaper. "One, we don't do it without having the others here to see. And two, we don't do it until Marcone's had a chance to see him."

"Marcone," Flatnose said with a sneer in his voice. "What's he want with him?"

Good question, I thought. I kept my head down, my body relaxed, and tried to think sleepy thoughts. Marcone was coming here?

"Who cares?" Parker answered. "I made sure he'd live through the day. Either way, I wanted him here tonight. No skin off my teeth."

Flatnose grunted. "Chicago sees a lot of mobsters. Marcone's just one more. But one call from him, and this wizard character gets a reprieve. Who is this guy, huh? The freaking governor?"

"Always thinking with your balls," Parker said, his voice calm. "Marcone isn't just a mobster. Running Chicago is just his sideline, see. He's got business all over the country, and he owns people from here to the governor's mansion to Washington and back, and he's got more money than God. He can set us up, take us out, have the police on our ass anytime he wants. You don't screw with someone like that lightly."

There was a pause, and then Flatnose said, "Maybe. Or maybe Lana's right. Maybe you're getting soft. Marcone isn't one of us. He doesn't give us orders. The Parker I knew ten years ago wouldn't have thought twice of telling Marcone to fuck off."

Parker's voice became resigned. "Don't do this, man. You were never good enough, even when we were young. The Parker you knew ten years ago would have gotten all of us killed by now. I've kept you in cash, in dope, women, whatever you wanted. So settle down."

"I don't buy it," Flatnose said back. "I think Lana's right. And I say we off this skinny son of a bitch right now." I felt myself tense and prepared to make a run for it, hopeless or not. I'd rather get killed trying to get away than trying to pretend I was asleep.

"Back down," Parker said, and then there was a scuffling noise of boots on old concrete. I heard a couple of grunts and an abrupt yelp, and smelled sour sweat and stale beer as Flatnose was forced to his knees less than a foot away. He kept making small noises of pain, thick with tension, as though Parker was holding him in some kind of lock. I forced myself to relax, not to just stagger up and start running, but I felt a bead of sweat trickle down my face.

Parker snarled over Flatnose's whimpers, "I told you. You were never good enough. Challenge me again, in public or alone, it doesn't matter—and I will rip your heart out." The way he spoke the threat was eerie; not with the hissing, villainous emphasis one would expect, but in a calm, measured, almost bored tone, as though he were mentioning switching out a carburetor or changing a lightbulb. There was a rippling sort of sound, and Flatnose let out a howl of pain that dissolved into a string of doglike whimpers. I heard Parker's boots move a few steps away. "Now, get up," he said. "Call Tully's and get the others back here before the moon rises. We'll have blood tonight. And if Marcone isn't polite enough, we'll have a lot more."

I heard Flatnose make his way to his feet and shuffle off in a slow and haphazard fashion. He vanished into the office and closed the door behind him. I waited for a few moments, hoping that Parker would wander off and I could make my escape, but he didn't. Dammit.

I was running out of time. If I waited until the rest of the lycanthropes returned to the garage, I'd never be able to get away. The numbers would be stacked too high. If I was going to make a break for it, logically, the time was now.

Of course, I was still bound. By the time I got my legs free, Parker would be on me. And I had just listened to him disable a man twice his size and threaten to rip his heart out. He'd meant it, too, I could tell. When I had looked inside of him, I had seen a dark and angry place, the source of all that power and force of will. He could tear me to pieces with his bare hands, literally—and what was worse, he would. I had to have a head start if I was going to run.

I could make him mad, maybe. Antagonize him into going to get a baseball bat, or another roll of duct tape for my mouth. Then I could run, make a clean getaway. The one problem with that plan was that he might just rip my heart out on the spot—but nothing ventured, nothing gained. I didn't have time to be picky.

So I lifted up my head enough to squint at him in the semi-darkness and said, "You certainly have a way with people. You must have read a book or something."

My voice startled him, and he spun with the reflexes of a nervous cat. He stared at me for a long minute before starting to relax. "So. You're alive. It's just as well, I suppose."

"Mostly I was just tired. Thanks for the sack time."

He showed me his teeth. "No problem. Checkout is in a couple hours."

That scared me enough to make a rational man pee, but I only shrugged. "No problem. Good thing your people can't hit. They might have made me uncomfortable."

Parker laughed a rough laugh. "You got balls, kid. I'll give you that. At least, until Lana gets her teeth into them, later."

This wasn't going at all well. I had to find some way to piss him off, not make him laugh. "How's the knee?"

Parker narrowed his eyes. "A lot better. It didn't quite heal up before sunrise, but I figure it'll only take an hour or so after the moon comes up."

"I should have aimed higher," I said.

Parker's jaw clenched down a little. "Too late now, kid. Game over."

"Enjoy it while you can. I hear your people are getting a little sick of you. Do you think Lana will be the one to tear *your* balls off when they put you down?"

His boot came out of nowhere and hit me in the side of the head. It threw me hard to my right, and if I hadn't clenched my arms at the last minute, it would have thrown me to the floor and revealed my lack of bonds.

"You just don't know when to keep quiet, do you wizard?"

"What have I got to lose?" I shot back at him. "I mean, hell. It isn't as though all of the people that looked up to me have turned against me, right? It isn't as though I'm getting too old to manage wh—"

"Shut up," Parker snarled, his eyes taking on an eerie, greenish cast in the darkness, a trick of the light, and he kicked me again, this time in the stomach. My breath went out in a whoosh, and I fought to continue speaking.

"Waking up stiffer every morning. Eating less. Maybe not as strong as you used to be, right? Not as fast. Got to beat up on old dogs like Flatnose there, because if you try one of the younger ones, they'll take you down."

The plan was working beautifully. Now all that I needed was for him to stalk out of the room to calm down, or to fetch an instrument of mayhem or some more duct tape, anything. Instead, Parker just spun on his heel, picked up a tire iron, and turned back to me, lifting it high. "Fuck Marcone," he snarled. "And fuck you, wizard."

His muscles bunched beneath his old T-shirt as he raised the iron above his head. His eyes gleamed with the same sort of animalistic fury I had beheld in the other lycanthropes the night before. His mouth was stretched in a feral grin, and I could see the cords in his neck standing out as he wound up to give me the deathblow.

I hate it when a plan falls apart.

Chapter Twenty-three

I clenched my teeth and kicked my legs. The duct tape around my ankles gave way, but it was too late to do me any good. I didn't have time to get my weight beneath me, to run, but I made the gesture in any case. Just one of those things you do when you're about to die, I guess.

"Mr. Hendricks," came a very hard, very calm voice. "If Mr. Parker does not put down the tire iron in the next second or two, please shoot him dead."

"Yes sir, Mr. Marcone," Hendricks's rumbling basso answered. I looked over to my right, to see Gentleman Johnny Marcone standing at the door in a grey Italian business suit. Hendricks stood in front of him and a bit to one side, in a much cheaper suit, holding a pump-action shotgun with a short barrel, its stock worked into a pistol grip, in his meaty paws. The gaping black mouth of the barrel was leveled at Parker's head.

Parker's face snapped around to focus on Marcone at the same time as mine did. Parker's jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed to furious slits. His weight shifted from one foot to the other, as though he were preparing to throw the tire iron.

"That's a twelve-gauge riot gun, Mr. Parker," Marcone said. "I'm fully aware of your rather special endurance at this time of the month. Mr. Hendricks's weapon is loaded with solid-slug ammunition, and after several rounds have torn literal pounds of flesh from your body and ruptured the majority of your internal organs, I am reasonably certain that even you would perish." Marcone smiled, very politely, while Hendricks clicked the safety off of the weapon and settled his feet as though he expected firing the gun to knock him down. "Please," Marcone said. "Put down the tire iron."

Parker glanced back at me, and I could see the beast raging in his eyes, wanting to howl out and bathe in blood. It terrified me, made me go cold, right through my gut and down through my loins. There was more fury and rage there than any of the other members of the Streetwolves had demonstrated. Their own berserk losses of control had looked like a child's tantrum next to what I saw in Parker's eyes.

But he controlled it. He lowered his arm, slowly, and took two steps back from me, and I felt my breath whisper out in a sigh of relief. I wasn't dead. Yet. My kick hadn't quite dragged the blanket off of me, and I was still settled with my back against the steel post. They didn't know that I was loose underneath the rough wool. It wasn't much of an advantage, but it was all I had. I needed to find a way to use it, and fast.

"My people are coming," Parker growled. "If you try more of that heavy-handed shit, I'll have you torn apart."

"They are coming," Marcone agreed placidly. "But they are not yet here. Their motorcycles have all suffered flat tires, quite mysteriously. We have time to do business." I heard his shoes cross the concrete floor toward me, and I looked up at him. Marcone met my eyes without fear, a man in his mature prime, his hair immaculately greying at the temples, his custom-made suit displaying a body kept fit in spite of the advancing years. His eyes were the faded green of dollar bills and as opaque as mirrors.

"Hi, John," I said. "You've got good timing."

Marcone smiled. "And you have a way with people, Dresden," he said, glancing at the silent Parker with unveiled amusement. "You must have read a book. I'm already reasonably certain as to your reaction, but I thought I would give you another chance."

"Another chance to what?"

"I received a phone call today," Marcone said. "A Harley MacFinn somehow discovered my personal number. He was quite irate. He said that he knew that it was me who had destroyed his circle and set him up, and that he was going to deal with me tonight."

"I'd say you've had it, then, John. Harley can be fairly destructive."

"I know. I saw the news programs from the station last night. A loup-garou, is he?"

I blinked. "How did you—"

Marcone waved a hand. "The report you gave to Lieutenant Murphy. Such things have to be paid for, and thus copied and filed and copied and filed. It wasn't hard to obtain a copy for myself."

I shook my head. "Money isn't going to buy off Harley MacFinn."

"Quite," Marcone said. "And my parents, God rest their souls, were in no position to leave me anything, much less articles of silver, or I'd deal with him myself. I have no idea who told him that I had wronged him, or why, but it seems perfectly clear that he believes it. Which brings us to you, Mr. Dresden." He reached into that expensive Italian jacket and drew out a folded sheaf of papers—the contract I'd seen before. "I want to make a deal with you."

I stared at him in silence.

"The same stipulations as before," Marcone continued. "In addition, I will promise you, give you my personal oath, that I will see to it that the pressure is taken off of Lieutenant Murphy. I do have some friends in the mayor's office, and I'm certain something could be worked out."

I started to tell him to go to hell, but bit back the words. I was trapped, at the moment. If I ran, Parker would probably lose it and tear me apart. And if he didn't, Marcone would just point his finger and the hulking Mr. Hendricks would put me down with a twelve-gauge slug.

And Murphy, in spite of recent misunderstandings, was my friend. Or maybe it was more accurate to say that in spite of what had gone on lately, I was still Murphy's friend. Saving her job, getting the pressure from the politicians off of her—isn't that why I had gotten involved in this to begin with? Wouldn't Murphy thank me for helping her?

No, I thought. Not like that. She wouldn't want that kind of help. Magic, she could accept. Help from money generated by human suffering, graft, and deception was a different story. Marcone looked good in his grey suit and his perfect hair and his manicured hands, but he wasn't.

My own hands weren't clean—but they were free. Things were desperate, and getting worse the longer I waited. Maybe I could pull off enough magic to get myself out of this.

I drew in a breath, and focused on a pile of loose tools and metal parts on a workbench twenty feet away. I gathered together threads of will, feeling the pressure build with a sort of skewed intangibility to it, something I hadn't ever felt before. I focused on my goal, on the rush of air that would lift the tools and parts and hurl them at Marcone, Parker, and Hendricks like so many bullets, and I prayed that I wouldn't catch myself in the edges of it by accident and get myself killed. I'd be breaking the First Law of Magic if one of them died, and I might have to deal with the White Council later; but hell's bells, I did not want to die on that concrete floor.

My head pounded, but I pushed the pain aside, focused, and breathed out, "*Vento servitas.*"

Chapter Twenty-four

It couldn't possibly get any worse than this, I thought. I cowered in the corner, clutching my captured wrench like a child's teddy bear, with no way out, and full of the knowledge that my magic had failed me.

Oddly, that thought troubled me more than probable death. A lot more. Death was something that happened to everyone—only the timing is different, for each of us. I knew that I

would, eventually, die. Hell, I even knew that I might die horribly. But I had never thought that the magic would fail me. More accurately, I had never guessed that I might fail it. I had pushed too hard and my body wouldn't conduct the power I needed to utilize the forces I was accustomed to commanding. Granted, maybe I should have started with something smaller than a large and violent telekinesis, but the indication was there that I had burned out some internal circuitry. It might not ever come back.

It was a loss of identity. I was a wizard. It was more than just a job, more than just a title. Wizardry was at the core of my being. It was my relationship with my magic, the way I used it, the things it let me do that defined me, shaped me, gave me purpose.

I dwelled on these things while death danced over the concrete floor, clutching them like a sailor clinging to the wreckage of his ship, trying to ignore the storm that blasted it to pieces. I noted peripheral details from my pathetic hiding place. Marcone made a break for one of the garage doors, only to be pinned down behind a rusted truck by gunfire from some of the Streetwolves. Hendricks joined him, and a moment later, the truck roared to life and crashed out through the garage door and into the gravel parking lot. Hendricks, in the rear of the truck, fired several blasts from the big shotgun back into the building, while the Streetwolves sent rounds skewing off after the truck.

The real battle, though, took place between the Streetwolves and the FBI.

It was largely a gunfight. Denton was armed with his FBI-ISSUE automatic and what looked like an Uzi submachine gun. He cut down three of the lycanthropes with a swath of fire from the automatic weapon as he came in through the door, and the two great wolves with him hurtled into the darkness. Screams and savage snarling erupted from the shadows, and I could hear more of the lycanthropes dying, being torn apart by the enormous wolves that had once been Agents Benn and Wilson. Parker screamed orders somewhere in the dark, half incoherent with rage. Denton reached into his jacket for a fresh clip for the Uzi, and I saw something across his belly that I noted for future reference, should I have any future.

I watched the killing, and I hid, and I prayed that there would be an opportunity to flee toward the open doors of the garage before Denton or Parker noticed me. It went on forever. Oh, I knew, in some rational part of my brain, that only seconds were going by, but it felt like days. I was terrified, and my head and my body hurt, and I couldn't use magic to protect myself.

There was a sound near my ankle, and my heart leapt up out of my throat. I flinched violently away from it. The sound repeated itself in a continuous scrabble of noise. The floor, I noticed, was rough dirt and broken concrete in this corner, where the foundation platform was flawed. The scrabbling noise came from the very base of the wall, where the dirt was stirring and moving.

Something was trying to dig its way beneath the wall and into the garage, practically right underneath my butt. I felt a chill of fear, followed swiftly by anger at the thing that had added to an already overabundant flow of adrenaline. I clutched my make-shift weapon in hand and moved to crouch over the source of the disturbance, lifting it in preparation to strike at whatever came through.

I saw it in the dimness, and there was no mistaking the shape. A paw, a huge canine paw, scrabbled at the earth, digging out a shallow hole beneath the wall, frustrated by bits of concrete that got in the way. Between shots, I could hear animal sounds outside, panting whimpers of eagerness, it seemed. Whatever was out there wanted to dig its way inside, and wanted it bad.

"Dig this," I muttered, and swung the wrench down on the paw, hard.

There was an instant yelp of pain, and the paw jerked its way back out from beneath the corrugated-metal wall. It was followed by a snarl, and the paw appeared again, whereupon I slammed the wrench down on it once more, with similar results. I heard a furious snarling sound from the other side, and I released a small surge of vindictive satisfaction by leaning down close enough to the hole to say, "Hah. Bring another one in here and I'll give you the same."

I heard sounds outside for a moment, then a crunch of gravel, and Tera West's smooth, unmistakable voice. "Wizard," she hissed. "Stop that."

I blinked, startled, and leaned down close to the hole. "Tera? Is that you? How did you know it was me?"

"You are the only man I ever met," Tera growled, "who would smash the paws that are trying to free you from certain death." I flinched at another burst of gunfire from the far side of the garage. "I am going to tell them to dig again. Do not strike at their paws."

"Them?" I demanded. "Them who?"

But she didn't answer me. Instead, the scrabbling sounds began again. I looked over my shoulder at the rest of the room. I saw Streetwolves moving swiftly out through the door and the gaping hole Marcone had left in the garage door when he escaped. In a flash of automatic muzzle-flare, I saw Denton standing over the form of a lanky woman and firing down into it, apparently making absolutely certain that she would never rise again. I had enough time to recognize Lana's face, now screwed up with pain rather than bloodlust. Her body jerked and twitched as Denton emptied the remainder of the clip into her. And then everything went dark again.

By my feet, the scrabbling sounds continued—and then broke off in a yelp. I heard a series of vicious snarls and yelps from the half-dug hole beneath the wall, and I cursed.

"Tera," I whispered, as loudly as I dared. "What's going on?"

There was only more growling for answer, and a sharp yelp that carried to the far side of the garage.

I threw myself flat behind the toolbox and a pile of junk, just before a flashlight beam swept over the corner where I had been hiding. "It's that bitch," Denton snarled. "Roger's got her outside."

There was a whispering sound, and a tingling feeling along my spine. Then a throaty, sensual female voice purred, "Parker's still in here. So is that wizard. I can smell them."

"Dammit," Denton growled. "The wizard knows too much. Wilson, go help Roger."

"What about me, lover?" the female voice said, a husky laugh added to the end. Agent Benn sounded like she'd just had too much sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and was hungry for more.

"You and I stay in here. I'll cover the doors. Flush them toward me."

There was a mewling sound of pleasure from the woman. "Come with me," she urged. "Change. You know you love it so much. You know how good it feels."

I could visualize Denton's veins throbbing. "Smarter for one of us to cover the door with a gun." But there was a sort of heavy reluctance to his tone.

"Fuck smart," Benn purred. "Come with me. Change."

"It's not why we did this. Not why we made the bargain." Benn made another sound, utterly sexual in nature. "It doesn't matter now. Taste it," she urged him. "Taste the blood." The light wavered and dropped from the corner where I hid.

I chanced a look up. Agent Benn, spattered in gore, stood before Denton in the wash of his flashlight from the floor. She had three of her fingers pressed together, and was sliding them between his lips. Denton was shaking, and his eyes were squeezed tightly closed. He suckled at her fingers, something frighteningly erotic in the motion. One of the huge, gaunt beasts from earlier, Wilson I supposed, stood nearby, watching the pair of them with gleaming eyes.

Denton made a growling sound and grasped Benn by her mane of greying hair, jerking her chin up so that he could nuzzle and lick at the blood smeared over her throat. She laughed and arched into him, her hips undulating against him in urgent motions. "Change," she moaned. "Change. Do it."

There was a howl of rage, and flash of motion, and Parker staggered from the darkness, one arm dangling uselessly, a heavy knife in his other hand, and defiance and insane anger in his glazed eyes. Denton and Benn looked up, and then they reached to their waists, flickered, and changed into a pair of the nightmare-sized wolves, their eyes glowing in the ambient light, jaws dropping open to reveal lolling tongues and vicious fangs. Parker lurched forward, greasy hair flying, and the three wolves leapt on him.

I stared in a sort of sickened fascination. The wolves buried him under a mound of fangs and fur and blood and absolute fury. He screamed, the knife flailing, and then it was cast aside, out of his hands, to land spinning on the floor not far from me. Parker tried to fight, tried to struggle up and kick, but it was hopeless. There were flashes of blood, and he screamed again and went still.

And then the wolves started to eat him. They bit off chunks of muscle and gulped them down, ripping aside clothing to get to more meat. They snarled and snapped at one another, and one of the males mounted the female, even as she continued to tear at the body, burrowing her muzzle down through the layers of stomach muscle to get at the vitals. My gorge rose, and if I'd had anything in my stomach, I would have emptied it onto the concrete floor.

Instead, I turned back to the half-finished hole in the floor and started digging at it with my wrench, frantic. I didn't want to be the next thing on the menu.

There were more yelps from outside, more growls, and I opened the hole up enough that I thought I might be able to get out. I flattened myself down and wormed my way into the dirt, the corrugated metal scraping at my back, my wounded shoulder painning me again.

I jerked my way out into the open air, to find myself in an alley behind the garage, dimly lit by a distant streetlight.

There were wolves everywhere.

Three wolves, smaller than the ones I had seen before, were spread in a loose ring about a great russet-furred beast with bat-like ears. The great wolf's coat was spattered with blood, and two of the smaller wolves lay nearby, yelping in pain, stirring weakly, blood matting their coats. Tera was a part of the ring around the great beast as well, naked and lean, a length of pipe held in either hand. When the great wolf turned toward one of the others, the rest would begin to close in around him, and he would spin, jaws flashing, trying to pin down one of those who encircled him.

"You took your time, wizard," Tera snarled, without looking back at me.

I got to my feet, wrench in hand, and shook my head to clear it of cold sweat. "Tera," I said. "We've got to get out of here. Denton and the others will be coming."

"Go," she responded. "Help MacFinn. We will hold them." The great russet wolf lunged at her, and she skittered back, coolly staying a hair's breadth from his fangs. She fetched him a sharp blow across the nose with more speed than I could have believed and a contemptuous snort. The three smaller wolves rushed the great beast, and he spun to drive them back and away from him, drawing a yelp from one that wasn't swift enough to entirely evade his jaws.

"You can't stop them all," I said. "There's three more like this one."

"There are pack on the ground," she snarled, and jerked her head toward the wounded wolves. "We do not abandon our own."

I let out an acid curse. I needed Tera. She could confirm everything, help me sort out all my facts, make sure that I understood what was going on. She was offering to give her life for me, to stay and occupy Denton and the others for as long as she and her compatriots could, but I had seen enough people dying already tonight. I wasn't going to accept another loss on my behalf.

And I was abruptly more furious than afraid. I'd been run around and treated like a piece of baggage or a choice item on the menu for long enough. I'd flailed around in the dark and been helpless and ineffective for way too long. Too many people had been hurt, too much suffering caused by creatures of magic and the night, things that I should have been handling. It didn't matter to me, at that moment, that I couldn't work any of my spells against them. I might not have any magic available to me, but that didn't make me any less of a wizard, one of the magi, the wise. That's the true power of a wizard.

I know things.

Knowledge is power.

With power comes responsibility.

That made the entire thing pretty simple. I clutched the wrench in my hand, took a deep breath, and threw myself forward, at the great wolf's back. The huge wolf sensed me coming, spun with abrupt speed, and met me in the air. It slammed me down to the concrete and bent its jaws toward my throat. I heard Tera cry out, and she and the other wolves moved forward—but they would never have been able to get to the thing before it killed me. That wasn't the point.

I jammed the wrench into the wolf's jaws, feeling some teeth tear at one of my fingers as I did. The wolf snarled and jerked the wrench out of my hands. It spun end over end away from me, and the great beast turned back toward me, its eyes glowing.

I had time to watch it all in great detail. The wolf's power, its speed, simply shocked me. It was huge, quick, and I didn't have a prayer against it. The distant streetlight gleamed off of its reddened fangs as its muzzle sped toward my throat.

Chapter Twenty-five

The wolf's fur was speckled with drops of blood that had beaded on it like rain. The gravel in the alley shone in the half-light from the distant street lamps. The wolf's muzzle, a little shorter and broader than I had seen on *Wild Kingdom*, was drawn back, black lips from fangs striped white and red like peppermints. Its eyes were blue, rather than any proper lupine shade, and gleamed with a sort of demented awareness.

I had time to see all those details because I didn't need my eyes for what I wanted to do. I thrust my hands into the beast's pelt as he went for my throat, and wormed my way down between his forelegs with my buttocks, fingers digging, until I felt what I was looking for—the sharp metal edges of a belt buckle, down against the skin, almost flush to the surface. As the wolf's jaws came toward my throat, I furiously worked the buckle, feeling skin rip and tear from the wolf's hide as I jerked it open, and then threw my arm to one side, clutching hard at the trailing strap.

And abruptly, a wolf-pelt belt was sliding out from beneath the grey suit jacket of Roger Harris, the forensic specialist for the local FBI office, the kid with the red hair and the big ears. He crouched over me for a second, blinking in stunned amazement at me, blood on his mouth and lips.

"*Hexenwulf* jerk-off," I snarled and slammed my knee up into his groin. It hit home hard.

Harris gasped and rolled off me, reaching into his jacket, but I didn't let him get his gun. I stayed with him, keeping too close to him to let him move his arms freely, grabbed him by those big ears, and started slamming his head repeatedly against the gravel. He struggled against me for a few seconds, but I'd taken him by surprise. His skull banged against the rocks over and over, and after a half-dozen solid blows, he stopped struggling.

I released his ears with a little jerk and looked up at Tera and the wolves. They were closing in around him like a pack of sharks around a wounded dolphin, and I could read the blood in their eyes, in the bared fangs, and in the white-knuckled grip of Tera's hands on her lead pipes. I felt a sudden surge of frustration. Bad enough to have bloodthirsty animals roaming all over the city—I didn't need more of them on my team.

"Everyone back off," I snarled.

"He's ours," Tera answered me in kind. "He hurt those of the pack."

"Then why don't you get them some help instead of wasting your time on this guy?" I said.

"His blood is ours," Tera said, and the wolves confirmed this with a chorus of angry growls.

"He can't hurt you now. Killing him won't make your friends any better. And the last time might finish them."

"You do not understand, wizard," Tera snarled, and the wolves echoed her in a chorus, white fangs showing. "It is our way."

I stood up slowly, to my full height. "I understand," I said in a very low and even voice, "that you do not want to make me any more angry than I already am." I met Tera's eyes and stared, hard. My jaws ached from clenching. "There's been enough killing. Take him out now, and you're no different than he is."

"Wrong," Tera said. "I would be alive, and he dead."

"Not if you cross me, you won't be."

We held the tension for a moment, glaring at one another.

I saw uncertainty waver across her face. She didn't know that I was out of gas, magically speaking, and she had seen me do too many impressive things with my powers to want to defy me lightly. She blinked first and looked away from me with a sullen sound in the back of her throat. "As you wish, wizard," she said. "We don't have the time to waste fighting one another. The rest of his pack is coming. And we have wounded to tend to."

I nodded and swept my gaze around at the three wolves around me. "Anybody else?" I challenged. They all backed away from me, and didn't meet my eyes. "All right, then," I said, and stooped to recover Harris's gun and the wolf-pelt belt. "Do you have transportation out of here?"

"Yes," Tera said. "Georgia."

One of the wolves, a leggy, lanky, pale-brown beast shuddered and paced in a circle, making small, whimpering sounds. A moment later, there was a whisper of power. The she-wolf shivered, and went still, her head bowed. And then she shook herself, and all that pale-brown hair faded from paler skin, leaving me staring at the lanky, dark-blond girl I had seen in the department store a few days ago, sans all the black leather. Georgia rose to her feet and said, "I'll have her bring the van around on the next street. Can you get them to it?" Her expression was tense, her eyes a little wide.

"Yes," Tera said. "Everyone, come back to yourselves." The other two ambulant wolves began to pace in a slow circle, gathered their own power, and their own transformations commenced, until they stood before me as a pair of naked young men—one of them the short, stout boy who had been arguing against Georgia—Billy—and the other a face I recognized but couldn't name.

Tera took charge of the situation while I held Harris's gun and kept watch down the alley. She and the two young men made a litter for one of the wolves out of Harris's jacket, and the other Tera simply picked up with a flexion of wire-tight muscle and carried, though it must have weighed a hundred and fifty pounds. The wounded wolves yelped piteously, and Tera and the two young men cast dark glances at the downed Harris while they headed down the alley, and over toward the beach, leaving me alone with the kid.

I hunkered down beside him and slapped his face until his eyes rolled open. He blinked once and then jerked, as though he was about to sit up. I stuck the barrel of the semiautomatic in the hollow of his throat and said, in a calm voice, "Hold still."

He froze, staring up at me with wide eyes.

"I'm going to ask some questions, kid. I think I've got the answers already, but you're going to talk to me, quietly and honestly. Or I demonstrate point-blank bullet impact for you right here and now. Got it?"

Harris's mouth twitched a few times before he managed to speak. "If you kill me," he said, "Denton won't stop until you're dead."

"Give me a break, Roger," I said back in a reasonable tone. "Denton wants me dead anyway. I could kill you now and it wouldn't make any difference in what he has to do."

Roger licked his lips and rolled his eyes about without moving his head, as though hoping for rescue. "How did you know? About the belt?"

"I saw Denton's inside. And I saw that before you all changed, you had to reach inside your jackets for something. I figure that first night, Agent Benn was reaching into her jacket to touch the belt and tear Murphy's head off, when she got mad. But she managed to remember not to do it in time and drew her gun instead. Right?"

Harris's head twitched in a slight nod.

"The bargain," I said. "You're *Hexenwulfen*, so you've made a bargain with someone to get the power to change, to get the belts. Who is it?"

"I don't know," Harris said, and his eyes widened. "God, I don't know. Denton handled all of it."

I narrowed my eyes at him and drew back the hammer on the gun.

"Please," he squealed, breathless. "I don't know. I swear to God, Denton handled all of that. He just came to us, asked us if we wanted to back him, if we wanted to nail some of the scum that kept getting away from the law, and I told him I did. Jesus, I didn't know it was going to lead to this."

"Lead to what, Roger?" I asked, my tone frosty. "Start from the beginning, and make it quick."

"Marcone," he said, eyes on the gun. "It was all about Marcone. Denton wanted to take him down."

"You mean kill him."

His eyes flickered up to me. "He told us there was no other way to get to him. That he was doing more to poison this city than anyone alive. And he was right. Marcone's bought enough influence in this town to stay clear of city police forever, and he carries weight on the national level, too. The bureau has had more than one investigation on him called off. He's untouchable."

"So you planned to use the belts to kill him."

He nodded. "But there would be evidence. No one would believe he'd just been mauled by wild dogs. There would be a full investigation, forensics, the works."

I understood and nodded. "So you needed someone to make it a neat package. Let me guess: the Streetwolves."

Harris showed his teeth. “A gang of felons and troublemakers with a wolf motif. Murder of a criminal figure by persons with a wolf motif. No one would bother to check the figures on that one. It’s obvious. And we get one more dangerous group off the street.”

“Yeah, Roger, except that they’d be innocent of that particular crime. Did you think of that? Innocent like those other people who died the nights around the full moon last month. You killed them. You and the rest of Denton’s team.”

He closed his eyes, his face going pale, and he shuddered. “The change. When . . . when you’re changed, when you’re a beast, it’s so incredible. So much speed, power. Your body just sings with it. I tried coke once, in college, and it was nothing compared to this. The blood . . .” His tongue flicked out again over his bloodstained lips, a thirsty motion this time, rather than a nervous one.

“I think I’m starting to see. Denton didn’t tell you about that part. About how your thoughts are influenced. He probably didn’t know himself. And when you’ve done it once . . .”

Harris nodded emphatically. “You just can’t stop, man. It gets to where you’re pacing the room at night. And it’s better than sleep, when you get finished hunting, you feel so *alive*.” He opened his eyes again, staring up at me, pleading. “I didn’t mean to kill those people. We started off with criminals. Some gangsters dealing drugs. We were just going to scare them, but it was too much. They screamed and ran and we were after them, and . . . We killed them. And my God, Dresden, it was beautiful.”

“And it happened again,” I said. “A couple of times. Innocent people. Just poor schmucks in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Harris turned his head away from me and nodded. “Denton said that we could salvage it. He said that we could pin those killings on the Streetwolves as well. Make everyone think they had done it. And we just went along with him.”

I shook my head. “That doesn’t explain why you dragged MacFinn into this.”

“Denton,” the kid said. “It was all him. He said there was someone else we could also set up to take the blame, to be certain we’d be in the clear. That he had the man for it. We broke into MacFinn’s house, and there was all this occult stuff. We messed up some of it and left. And . . . the next night, more people were dead. And more, the next night. That’s when we went after that slime Marcone’s business partner, and wasted the bastard and his goon.”

“And then you laid low for a month.”

Harris swallowed and nodded. “Denton took the belts. He hid them from us. He’d held out better than anyone. And my God, poor Benn was so far gone, it was like she wasn’t even human anymore. Wilson wasn’t much better. But we lasted out the month.”

“And then you killed Marcone’s bodyguard at the Varsity.”

Harris’s eyes flared. “Yes. You should see his record. The things we know he did, but that we can’t get through a court. My God, Dresden, he had it coming.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Who are we to judge?”

“Who are we *not* to?” Harris demanded. “The power was in our hands. We had a responsibility to use it for the good. To do our jobs. Hell, Dresden. If you’re such a do-gooder, you should be helping us, not getting in the way. These men are untouchable and you know it.”

I shifted my weight uncomfortably. “I don’t agree with your methods. With setting people up to take the blame for your killings.”

Harris sneered. “Like MacFinn has never killed anyone. Hell, he’s a murderer now, isn’t he? After that scene at the police station, anyone would be convinced he was a killer.”

“Except me,” I said. “MacFinn would never have been there if you hadn’t messed up the circle that held him.”

“Yeah,” Harris said, a spiteful, frustrated edge to his tone. “Except you. You got to poking around in our business. Christ, that crazy report to Murphy even talked about the belts. That was when Denton started taking you seriously. If you had any brains at all, you’d pull that trigger and get the hell out now, before Denton and the others come out of the haze and come after you. Because you know way too much.”

“Why the Streetwolves?” I said, instead of shooting him. “Why send me off to check them out?”

“Denton figured they’d kill you,” Harris spat. “And get you out of our hair.”

I nodded. It figured, that someone else had been trying to kill me the whole while, and I hadn’t really noticed. “And he knew that they were after me, after I got away from them the first time.”

“Yeah. And had me tailing them, so we could find you and make sure you were dead. When I saw you in the back of that car,

I figured you were. So we planned the hit on the Streetwolves to go down tonight, before MacFinn went after Marcone.”

“How’d you know about that?” I asked.

Harris snorted. “Marcone told us. The snake called asking for police protection.”

I almost smiled. “Did he get it?”

“Hell, no,” Harris answered me. He lifted his chin, and balled his hands into fists, and I felt him tighten up beneath me. “I’m done talking,” he said. “If you aren’t going to sign on with us, then get the hell out of here. Or pull the trigger. But quit wasting my time.”

“I’m not done talking,” I said, and I jammed the gun crosswise over the kid’s throat, strangling him. “You’re going to give Denton a message for me. I’m sick of dancing around. Tell him that he’ll get his shot at me at moonrise, at Marcone’s place.”

Harris squirmed beneath me, making rasping, gagging sounds. His eyes widened at my words. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that he’ll try to be there when MacFinn shows up,” I said. “That he’ll want to make sure everyone there is dead so that he’s the only one who can report what happened. You tell him that I’ll be there. And tell him that he’s not going to get away with it. Do you understand me, kid?”

I let up on the pressure, and Harris croaked out a vague affirmative. I rose away from him, keeping the gun in one hand and the belt in the other. I saw his eyes flicker to the belt, tracking its movement with a tense, strained sort of hunger.

“Why tell me?” the kid asked. “Why warn us?”

I stared down at him for long seconds before I answered him in a quiet voice. “Because I don’t like what you’re doing. What you are. You aren’t using the power you’ve been given. It’s using you. You’re turning into animals. You’re using savagery and fear to try to uphold the peace. Now it’s your turn to see what it’s like to be afraid.”

Harris rose to his feet, his red hair askew, blood drying on his mouth, and backed several paces from me, his eyes darting around. “My belt,” he said. “I want my belt.”

“Forget it, kid,” I told him. “The smartest thing you can do is go lock yourself in your room, and stay there until all of this is over. Because one way or another, you aren’t using this belt again.”

His face whitened, and he took a step toward me. I pointed the gun at him, and he froze, his hands balling into fists. “You won’t get away with this,” he said, his voice thick with tension.

“Moonrise,” I told him, then turned on my heel and walked quickly from the alley, although my sock feet on the gravel, combined with my limp, probably spoiled the badass image.

Thirty feet down the alley, Tera appeared from the shadows and fell into step beside me, close enough to support me if I should fall. “You were wrong, wizard,” she said.

I looked down at her, and she met my gaze with her soulless amber eyes. “How so?”

“They have not become animals.” She looked over her shoulder, her eyes narrowed. “Animals do not do what they have done. Animals kill to eat, to defend themselves or their own, and to protect their territory. Not for the joy of it. Not for the lust of it.” She looked back up at me. “Only humans do that, wizard.”

I grimaced, but couldn’t really refute her. “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course,” Tera said. We walked in silence for a moment.

“You will try to help my fiancé?”

“I’ll try,” I said. “But I can’t let his curse claim any more lives.”

She nodded, her eyes dark. “He would want it that way. He thinks of others before himself.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

She shrugged, but there was a sudden, worried weight in her shoulders. “And these others. The FBI. They will try to stop you.”

“Yes.”

“And when they do?”

"I can't let them go on like they have. They're out of control. I don't think they can stop themselves from killing, now." I didn't look down at Tera, just focused on taking steps, one at a time. "When they do . . ." I said. "When they do . . . I guess I'm going to need to get very human."

Chapter Twenty-six

Tera and I walked toward the shores of Lake Michigan.

There, along Forty-ninth Street, idled a big old van, its engine rattling. Its headlights came on as we approached, and the driver got out to roll open the side door for us.

“Harry?” she said. “Oh, God. What did they do to you?” She hurried over to me, and then I felt Susan’s warmth against me as she slid one of my arms over her shoulder and pressed up against my side. She was wearing jeans that showed off her long legs, and a dark red jacket that complemented her dark skin. Her hair was tied back into a ponytail, and it made her neck look slender and vulnerable. Susan felt soft and warm beyond belief, and smelled clean and delightfully feminine, and I found myself leaning against her. All the aches and pains that had faded into the background came throbbing back to the forefront of my awareness, in comparison to her soft warmth and gentle support. I liked the way Susan felt better than the way I did.

“They beat him,” Tera explained. “But they kept him alive, as I told you they might.”

“Your face looks like a sack of purple potatoes,” Susan said, her dark eyes studying me, the lines in her face deepening.

“You say the sweetest things,” I mumbled.

They loaded me into the van, where Georgia, Billy, and the other Alphas were crouched. Two of the young people, a boy with blinking, watery blue eyes, and a girl with mousy brown hair, lay on their backs, gasping quietly. Clean white bandages had been wrapped around their wounds. Georgia had, evidently, been the attending medic. All of the Alphas were dressed in plain, dark bathrobes, rather than in their birthday suits, and I felt an oddly grateful feeling toward them for it. Things were weird enough without needing to ride around in a van with a bunch of naked, somewhat geeky college students.

I put my seat belt on and noted the bruises on my hands and forearms—ugly, dark purple-and-brown splotches, so thickly scattered over my skin that in places I couldn’t tell where one stopped and the next began. I sat down and leaned against the window, pillowing my head on my right hand.

“What are you doing here with these people?” I asked Susan when she got into the driver’s seat.

“Driving,” she said. “I was the only one old enough to rent the van.”

I winced. “Ouch.”

“Tell me about it,” she said and started the engine. “After you jumped out of the car, and I finished with my heart attack, we called the police, just like you said. Tera went to look for you and told me that the police had shown up too late, and that the Streetwolves had taken you. How did that truck crash like that?”

“Bad luck. Someone made all their tires explode at the same time.”

Susan gave me an arch look and started up the van. “Those bastards. Just lie still, Harry. You look like a train wreck. We’ll get you to someplace quiet.”

“Food,” I said. “I’m starving. Tera, can you keep track of moonrise?”

“I will,” she said. “The clouds are moving away. I can see the stars.”

“Fantastic,” I mumbled. And then I went to sleep, ignoring the jostling of the van. I didn’t wake up until the smell of fried grease and charred meat made me look up at the drive-thru window of a fast-food burger joint. Susan paid for everything in cash, passing paper sacks to everyone. I snagged a golden paper crown from one of the bags and idly joined it into a circle and put it on my head. Susan blinked at me, then let out a brief laugh.

“I am,” I intoned, with an imperious narrowing of my eyes, “the burger king.” Susan laughed again, shaking her head, and Tera gave me a serious, level gaze. I checked the status of the young people in the back of the van, and found them, even the wounded ones, hungrily wolfing (no pun intended) down the food.

Tera caught the direction of my glance and leaned toward me. “Puppies,” she said, as though the word should explain more than it did. “They were not hurt so badly as they thought. They will hardly have scars to show for it.”

“That’s good to know,” I said and sipped at my cola and chomped down steaming-hot french fries. “But what I’m really interested in,” I said, “is in knowing why your blood was in Marcone’s restaurant the night before the full moon.”

Tera took the hamburger patty off of the bun and started nibbling on it, holding it in her fingers. “Ask another time.”

“No offense,” I said, “but I’m not so sure there’s going to be another time. So tell me.”

Tera took another bite of meat, and then shrugged. “I knew that the pack that had harassed my fiancé was about. I deduced where they might strike, and went there to attempt to stop them.”

“All by yourself?”

Tera sniffed. “Most of those who turn themselves into wolves know little about *being* wolf, wizard. But these had taken too much of the beast inside. I ran through the window glass and fought, but they outnumbered me. I left before I could be killed.”

“And what about these kids?” I said, nodding toward the back of the van.

She glanced back at them, and for a moment, I saw warmth and pride gleaming in her eyes, subverting the remote, alien lines of her face. “Children. But with strong hearts. They wished to learn, and I taught. Let them tell you their tale.”

“Maybe later,” I said and finished off the french fries. “Where are we going?”

“To a safe place, to arm and prepare ourselves.”

“Myself,” I contradicted her. “To prepare myself. I’m not taking you with me.”

“You are incorrect,” Tera said. “I am going with you.”

“No.”

She fastened her amber eyes on mine. “You are strong, wizard. But you have not yet seen my beast. The men you will oppose would take my fiancé from me. I will not allow that. I will be with you, or you will kill me to stop me.”

This time, it was I who looked away first. I sipped at my drink, scowling, while Tera placidly ate more of the hamburger patty. “Who are you?” I asked her finally.

“One who has lost too many of her family already,” she said. And then she settled back on the seat and withdrew from the conversation, falling silent.

“One who has lost too many . . .” I grumbled, frustrated, mocking her beneath my breath. I turned back to the front of the van and hunched his shoulders over my burger. “Put some clothes on, you weird, yellow-eyed, table-dancing, werewolf-training, cryptic, stare-me-right-in-the-eyes-and-don’t-even-blink wench.”

There was a hissing sound from the backseat, and I flicked a scowl back over my shoulder. Tera was chewing on her meat. Her eyes were shining, her mouth was curved at the corners, and her breath was puffing out her nostrils in near-silent laughter.

The safe place we were going to turned out to be a big house up near the Gold Coast, not far from Marcone’s own minipalace. The house wasn’t large, by the neighborhood’s standards, but that was like saying that a bale of hay isn’t much to eat, by elephant standards. Susan drove the van up through a break in a high hedge, up a long driveway of white concrete, and into a six-car garage whose doors rolled majestically up before us.

I got out of the van, in the garage, and stared at the Mercedes and the Suburban also parked in it. “Where are we?” I said.

Tera opened the side door of the van, and Georgia, Billy, and the other young man emerged, assisting the two wounded werewolves. Georgia stretched, which did interesting things to the dark bathrobe, and drew her mane of tawny hair back from her lean face with one hand. “It’s my parents’ place. They’re in Italy for another week.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. “They aren’t going to mind you having a party, are they?”

She flashed me an annoyed look and said, “Not as long as we clean up all the blood. Come on, Billy. Let’s get these two inside and into bed.”

“You go on,” he said, fastening his eyes on me. “I’ll be along in a minute.”

Georgia looked like she wanted to give him an argument, but shook her head instead, and with the help of the other young man, took the two invalids inside. Tera, still naked and supremely unconcerned about it, followed them, glancing back over her shoulder at me before she disappeared. Susan promptly stepped in front of me, somewhat obstructing the view, and said, “Five minutes, Dresden. Come find me then.”

“Uh,” was my rapier reply, and then Susan went into the house, too.

I stood in the dark with Billy, the stout, short kid in thick glasses. He had his hands stuffed into his bathrobe pockets, and he was peering at me.

“Do all wizards,” he said, “get the kiddie crowns and wear them around? Or is that only for special occasions?”

“Do all werewolves,” I shot back, snatching the crown from my head, “wear glasses and too much Old Spice? Or is that only for full moons?”

He grinned at me, rather than taking umbrage. “You’re quick,” he said. “I always wanted to be that way.” He stuck out his hand toward me. “Billy Borden.”

I traded grips with him wearily, and he tried to crush my hand in his. “Harry Dresden,” I told him.

“You look pretty beat up, Mr. Dresden,” he said. “Are you sure you can handle going out again tonight?”

“No,” I answered, in a spurt of brutal honesty.

Billy nodded, and pushed his glasses up higher onto his nose. “Then you need our help.”

Oh, good grief. The Mickey Mouse Club of werewolves wanted to throw in on my side. Werewolfkateer role call: Billy. Georgia. Tommy. Cindy. Sheesh.

“No way,” I said. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not?” he said.

“Look, kid. You don’t know what these *Hexenwulfen* can be like. You don’t know what Marcone can be like, and you sure as hell have never seen anything like MacFinn outside of a movie theater. And even if you had the skills to deal with it, what makes you think you have a right to be going along?”

Billy considered the question seriously. “The same thing that makes you think that you do, Mr. Dresden,” he said.

I opened my mouth. And closed it again.

“I know I don’t know a lot, compared to you,” Billy said. “But I’m not stupid. I’ve got eyes. I see some things everyone else tries to pretend aren’t there. This vampire craze sweeping the nation. Why the hell shouldn’t there be some genuine vampires in it? Did you know that violent crimes have increased nearly forty percent in the last three years, Mr. Dresden? Murder alone has almost doubled, particularly in heavy urban areas and isolated rural areas. Abductions and disappearances have gone up nearly three hundred percent.”

I blinked at the kid. I hadn’t really read the numbers. I knew that Murphy and some of the other cops said that the streets were getting worse. And I knew myself, on some deep level, that the world was getting darker. Hell, it was one of the reasons I did idiotic things like I was doing tonight. My own effort to lift up a torch.

“I’m sort of a pessimist, Mr. Dresden. I think that people are almost too incompetent to hurt themselves so badly. I mean, if criminals were *trying*, they couldn’t increase their production by three hundred percent. And I hear stories, read the tabloids sometimes. So what if the supernatural world is making a come-back? What if that accounts for some of what is going on?”

“What if it does?” I asked him.

Billy regarded me steadily, without looking me in the eyes. “Someone has to do something. I can. So I should. That’s why we’re here, the Alphas. Tera offered us the chance to do something, when she met us through the Northwest Passage Project, and we took it.”

I stared at the kid. I could have argued with him, but there wouldn’t be much point to it. I knew his argument, backward and forward. I’d worked it out myself. If I was ten years younger, a foot shorter, and a couple of pounds heavier, that could have been me talking. And I had to admit, the kid did have power. I mean, turning yourself into a wolf is no cheap parlor trick. But I did have one angle to play, and I took it. I didn’t want this kid’s blood on my hands.

“I don’t think you’re ready for the big leagues yet, Billy.”

“Could be,” he said. “But there’s no one else in the bull pen.”

I had to give the kid credit. He had resolve. “Maybe you should sit this one out, and live to fight another day. It could all go bad, and if it does, those *Hexenwulfen* we took on down by the beach are going to be coming for you. Someone will need to stay with your wounded people, to protect them.”

“More likely, if they go through you, they’re going to go through us, too. It would be smarter to pile on everything we’ve got in one place. With you.”

I chuckled. “All your eggs in one basket?”

He shook his head. “All the money on the most likely winner.”

I studied him in silence for a long minute. I was confident of his sincerity. It just oozed out of him, in a way that only the really inexperienced and idealistic can manage. It was comforting, and at the same time it was the most frightening thing about him. His ignorance. No, not ignorance, really. Innocence. He didn’t know what he would be going out to face. If I let him go along, I’d be dragging him down with me. Despite what he’d seen tonight, I’d be exposing him to a whole new, violent, bloody, and dangerous world. One way or another, if I let Billy Borden and his buddies go with me, these innocent children wouldn’t live to see the sunrise.

But, God help me. He was right about one thing. I needed the help.

“Everyone who’s going takes orders from me,” I said, and he drew in a sharp breath, his eyes gleaming. “Not Tera. You do what I say, and you do it when I say it. And if I tell you to leave, you go. No questions. You got it?”

“I got it,” Billy said, and gave me a cocky grin that simply did not belong on the face of a geeky little college nerd in a black bathrobe. “You’re a smart man, Mr. Dresden.”

I snorted at him, and just then the automatic light on the garage door opener went out, leaving us in darkness. There was a disgusted sound from the doorway, and then the lights came on again. Georgia, in all her willowy, annoyed glory, was standing in the doorway to the garage.

“Billy Borden,” she said. “Don’t you have any better sense than to stay here in the dark?” She stalked out toward him, scowling.

He looked up at her calmly and said, “Tell everyone we’re going along. Dresden’s in charge. If they can handle that, they’re in, and if not, they’re staying here to guard Cindy and Alex.”

Georgia’s eyes widened and she gave a little whoop of excitement. She turned to me and threw her arms around me for a moment, making my shoulder scream in pain, and then whirled to Billy and bent down to do the same thing. He winced when she did, and she stood up and jerked back his black bathrobe, clearing it off of one side of his pale chest. To give the kid credit, his stoutness was the result of what looked like quite a bit of solid muscle, and along the line of his chest there was a thickly clotted wound, still trickling blood in a few places.

“What’s this?” Georgia said. “You idiot. You didn’t tell me you’d gotten hurt.”

Billy shrugged, and pulled his robe straight again. “It closed. And you can’t bandage it and keep it on me when I change, anyway.”

Georgia clucked her teeth, annoyed. “You shouldn’t have gone for the hamstring on that wolf. He was too fast.”

Billy flashed her a grin. “I almost got him, though.”

“You almost got yourself killed,” she said, but her voice had softened a few shades. I noticed that she hadn’t moved her hand from the other side of Billy’s chest, and he was looking up at her with an expectant expression. She fell silent, and they stared at one another for a minute. I saw her swallow.

Please, help me. Young werewolves in love. I turned to walk into the house, moving carefully.

I had never much believed in God. Well, that’s not quite true. I believed that there was a God, or something close enough to it to warrant the name—if there were demons, there had to be angels, right? If there was a Devil, somewhere, there had to be a God. But He and I had never really seen things in quite the same terms.

All the same. I flashed a look up at the ceiling. I didn’t say or think any words, but if God was listening, I hoped he got the message nonetheless. I didn’t want any of these children getting themselves killed.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Susan's perfume led me to her. She was waiting for me in a bedroom on the first floor. She stood in the simply furnished room, in her jeans and a white T-shirt blazoned with the words, EAT IT? I WOULDN'T SIT ON IT! It was one of mine. She lifted her chin up high when she saw me, as though trying to keep the tears in her eyes from falling.

Our gazes met, and held. We had looked into one another before, more than a year ago. She'd fainted when she saw what was inside of me through the soulgaze. I don't know what it was she saw. I don't look too hard into mirrors.

Inside of her, though, I'd seen passion, like I'd rarely known in people other than myself. The motivation to go, to do, to act. It was what drove her forward, digging up stories of the supernatural for a half-comic rag like the *Arcane*. She had a gift for it, for digging down into the muck that people tried to ignore, and coming up with facts that weren't always easily explained. She made people think. It was something personal for her—I knew that much, but not why. Susan was determined to make people see the truth.

I shut the door behind me and limped toward her.

"They'll kill you," she said. "Don't go." As I reached her, she put her hands against my chest, then her cheek.

"I've got to. Denton can't afford to let me live now. I need to finish this business, before it gets any more out of hand. Before more people die. If I don't go tonight, Denton will be able to kill Marcone and MacFinn and set MacFinn up for all the killings. He'll get away clean, and then he'll be able to focus on me. And maybe on you, too."

"We could go somewhere," she said quietly. "We could hide." I blinked my eyes closed. She'd said "we." She hadn't really done that much, before. I hadn't really thought in those terms, either. I hadn't much thought in those terms for a lot of years. Not since the last time.

I should have said something about it. Acknowledged the implication. I knew it was there, and she knew that I had noticed it. She held still, waiting.

Instead, I said, "I'm not much good at hiding. Neither are you."

Her breath went out in a little whisper, and I felt her tighten a little against me. There would be tears on my shirt, I knew, but I didn't look down at her.

"You're right," she said a moment later. Her voice was shaking. "And I know you are. But I'm afraid, Harry. I mean, I know we haven't been really close. Friends, and lovers, but . . ."

"Work," I said. I closed my eyes.

She nodded. "Work." Her fingers tightened on my shirt, and she looked up at me, dark eyes swimming with tears, still more on the smooth lines of her cheek. "I don't want to lose you now. I don't want the work to be all that's left."

I tried to think of something smart to say. Something that would reassure her, calm her, help her to feel better, to understand what I felt for her. But I wasn't even sure what it was that I felt.

I found myself kissing her, the rough growth on my mouth and chin brushing her soft skin. She tensed at first, and then melted against me with a deliciously feminine sort of willingness, a soft abandoning of distance that left her body, in all its dark beauty, pressed against mine. The kiss deepened, slowed, became something intense and erotic and self-contained. The motion of our lips, the warmth of our bodies pressed together. The touch of my fingertips on her face, featherlight. The scratch of her nails as her fingers kneaded at my shirt. My heart was pounding, and I could feel hers, too, racing.

She broke the kiss first, and I swayed on my feet, my breath gone. Without speaking, she guided me down to the edge of the bed, and sat me there. Then she vanished into the bathroom, reappearing with a basin of warm water, some soap, and a washcloth.

She undressed me. Slowly. Delicately. She changed the bandages, murmuring softly to me when it hurt, kissing my eyes and forehead to soothe me. She bathed me with the water, its warmth washing away the dried sweat, the blood, and some of the pain. Patiently, more gentle than rain, she made me clean, while I drifted, my eyes closed. I could hear myself make a soft sound, now and then, in response to her touches.

I felt her come to me. Felt her bare skin against mine, hot and smooth. I opened my eyes and saw the silver haze of the moon on the far horizon, across the lake. I saw Susan outlined in it, all sweetly feminine curves and lines, a beautiful shadow. She kissed me again, and I returned it in kind, and it was a liquid, smooth thing, as restrained and desperate as the near-still surface of a rushing river. Her lips passed from my mouth and roamed over the skin she had just cleaned, and when I tried to touch her, she gently pressed my hands back down, telling me without words to be still.

It went on like that, all skin and light touches, soft sighs, pounding hearts, until she settled atop me, keeping her weight off me with her legs, her hands, afraid to cause any pain. We moved together, feeling the power of our need, our hunger for one another, a pure blend of desire and warmth and affection and incredible intimacy that shook us to the core. It ended in silence, the sensation all the more piercing for that, our mouths together, our breath mingling.

She lay down beside me until our pounding hearts slowed down. Then she rose, and said, "I don't know if I want to fall in love with you, Harry. I don't know if I could stand it."

I opened my eyes, and answered softly, "I've never wanted to hurt you. I don't know what's right."

"I know what feels right," she said, and kissed me again, then started touching my forehead, lifting her head up to study me with gentle, compassionate eyes. "You see so much pain. I just wanted to remind you that there was something else in the world."

I'm a pretty tough guy. I mean, look at me. I can handle some rough stuff. But some things I'm not so tough about. I started crying, hard, and Susan held me, rocked me gently, until the tears had gone away.

I wanted to stay there, where it was warm, and where I was clean, and where there wasn't anyone dying. There wasn't any blood or snarling animals, and no one was trying to kill me. I liked the idea of being there, with Susan, in her arms, a whole lot more than I liked the idea of going out into the silver light of the full moon, which was growing greater underneath the horizon, coming up in a hazy nimbus.

Instead, I drew away from her a little and sat up.

It was a fool's moon.

She rose from the bed and returned with an overnight bag and drew out a pair of my black jeans, my black sneakers, socks, a heavy, dark grey shirt, dark undies to complete the color theme, and bless her heart, ibuprofen. I rose to dress, but she pressed a hand on my shoulder and made me sit down—then dressed me herself, slowly and carefully, her attention focused on the task. Neither of us spoke.

Ever had a beautiful, naked woman dress you? Talk about girding your loins for battle. There was something indescribably soothing and at the same time, exciting, about it. I could feel my body becoming more relaxed and aware, my senses more in tune with what was around me.

I heard footsteps in the hall, and a knock at the door. Tera's voice called, "Wizard. It is time."

I stood up, but Susan grabbed my wrist. "Harry," she said. "Wait a minute." She knelt down by the bag and drew out a heavy box, flat and broad. "I was going to give it to you for your birthday. But I thought you could use it."

I tilted my head and took the box in hand. It was heavy. "What is it?" I asked her.

"Just open it, dummy," she answered, smiling up at me. I did, and inside was the smell of soft, worked leather, sensuous and thick, wrapped up in translucent paper. I tossed the lid aside, took the paper off, and found dark leather, new and matte black, hardly casting back the light. I took it out of the box, and it unfolded into a heavy, long coat, like my own duster in design, even to the mantle around the shoulders and arms, but all made of the finer material.

I blinked at the coat. "It must have cost you a fortune."

She laughed wickedly. "Yeah. But I got to wear it around naked, just to feel it on my skin." Her face sobered. "I want you to have it, Harry. Something from me. For luck." She glided to my side and helped me into the coat.

The coat settled around me with a comforting heaviness and a peculiar sort of familiarity. It just felt right. I plucked my mother's pentacle on its chain from beneath my shirt and wore it openly. And then I got Harris's confiscated side arm from my coveralls' tool pouch, and put it in the coat's pocket. I didn't have any other magical tools. And maybe not even any more magic. The gun, all things considered, seemed an uncertain weapon at best.

But I was as ready as I was going to be.

I turned to say good-bye to Susan, to find her hurriedly stepping into her clothes. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"Getting dressed," she said.

"Why?"

“Someone’s got to drive the van, Dresden.” She tugged on her T-shirt, slung her jacket over her shoulder, and walked past me, pausing to give me a narrow glance. “Besides. This could be the biggest paranormal event I’ve ever had the chance to cover. Did you expect me to stay behind?” She pushed the door open and gave me an expectant look.

Damn, I thought. *And double damn*. One more person to worry about. One more person to protect. Susan wasn’t a werewolf. She wasn’t a wizard. She didn’t even have a gun. It was crazy to let her even think about going along. But I found myself wanting to make sure she was somewhere close.

“All right,” I said. “But the same rules I gave the kids. I’m in charge. You do what I say, when I say, or you stay here.”

Susan pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. “I kind of like the sound of that,” she said, teasing me. “I like that look on you, too. Have you ever thought about growing a beard?” Then she smiled, and vanished out into the hallway.

I scowled after her. She’d stay away from the worst of it. I’d make sure of that, if I had to tie her to the van myself. I muttered something grouchy, bent my head to one side, and inhaled, smelling the smell of new leather, of fresh clothes and soap, and of *eau de Susan* still lingering on my skin. I liked it. The jacket creaked as I started forward, and I caught sight of myself in the dresser mirror.

My double, the one from the dream, stared back out at me. Only the roughness of the three-day growth of dark whiskers, and the bruises, were at contrast with the subconscious-me’s neatly trimmed beard. Everything else was precisely the same.

I turned my face away rather quickly and paced from the room, out to the van, where the others were waiting.

Showtime.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The moon rose in silver splendor into an October sky strewn with pale clouds and brilliant stars. The clouds churned, a white-foam sea, and the moon was a vast, graceful clipper ship, its sails full of spectral light as it ran before the strength of the cold autumn winds. Pale light bleached each of the uncut stones on the nine-foot wall around Gentleman Johnny Marccone's estate, making edges sharper, shadows blacker, until it looked like a barrier made of gaping white skulls. Trees grew up thick on the other side of the wall, blocking the view of the interior, though no branches extended far enough to provide a way to climb over it.

"We've got to get over the wall," I said to the enormous, dark wolf beside me, keeping my voice low as we all crouched in the shadows of the bushes across the street from Marccone's estate. "There will be security on it. Maybe cameras, maybe infrared beams, maybe something else. I want you to find us a way past it." The wolf flickered her amber eyes toward me and made a soft, assenting growl. Then she simply turned and faded into the darkness, leaving five more furry, crouching shapes grouped around me.

The Alphas didn't exactly inspire confidence, but they had all managed to master enough rudimentary magic to transform themselves into very, very close approximations of wolves, at least. It was something.

Susan had parked the van on a hill leading up to Marccone's estate, and remained with it, in case we needed a quick getaway. When we'd arrived, a nude Tera West and five young people, three female and two male, had leapt out of the van, the Alphas hurriedly tumbling out of their robes.

"Hell's bells," I'd complained, "we're on a public street. Can you be something besides naked, here, people?"

Tera had smirked and, in a liquid shimmer, become a gaunt, dark wolf, a beast fully as large as Denton and his cronies had been, but with a narrower muzzle and cleaner proportions.

Like Denton and his crew of *Hexenwulfen*, she kept the exact same shade and color of her eyes, even in wolfish form.

"Well?" I'd demanded of the others. "Let's hurry it up."

Georgia had slipped her lean body from her dark robe and melted in a few seconds into her wolf shape, then had quickly slipped past me to go to Tera. Billy had growled something under his breath as he shrugged out of his robe, catching one sleeve on his arm as he'd begun to change.

Billy-wolf had stumbled over the robe still hanging on to his forepaw, tripped, and tumbled onto the street with a whuff of expelled breath and a little whimper.

I'd rolled my eyes. Billy-the-wolf had snarled and struggled out of his robe, picked it up carefully in his teeth, like a large and particularly grumpy-looking Benji, and put it back in the van.

"Um," one of the other girls had said, a redheaded lass who filled out her robe a little too generously. "We're still a little new at this." She'd covered herself with her arms awkwardly, letting her robe fall from her shoulders as she whispered a little chant, and had become a rather round, hefty-looking she-wolf with dark auburn fur. She'd moved daintily to the edge of the cargo van and had mimed, despite her weight, down to the street. The other two young people, a lanky, dark-haired boy and a scrawny girl with mouse-brown hair, had made the change and loped up the hill after Tera, and then we all had moved as quietly as we could to the rear of Marccone's estate.

Surrounded by a high stone wall, the property occupied an entire block, bounded on all four sides by individual streets. None of us had known the layout to Marccone's place, so we'd chosen to approach from the rear, on general principles of sneakiness. I hadn't thought it would be wise to walk in the front door, so I had dispatched Tera to find us a way in, while I'd remained behind with the Alphas.

I found myself tapping my fingers on my thighs as I crouched, restless. I soon realized that if I was tense, the would-be werewolves were twice as keyed up. The darkest-furred one, Billy, I thought, rose to his paws and started away, in the opposite direction from which Tera had gone. Georgia growled at him, Billy growled back, and the other male rose to follow him.

Great, I thought. I couldn't afford to let the Alphas wander off now, no matter how restless they were.

"Hey," I said quietly. "You can't go haring off now. If there's a way inside, Tera will find it."

The wolves all turned their heads, and their very human eyes, toward me.

Billy planted his paws stubbornly and growled.

"Oh, don't give me that," I snapped, glaring at him without meeting his eyes. "You promised you'd play this my way, Billy. This isn't a time to be messing around."

Billy's stance became less certain, and I beckoned all of them toward me. If I could keep them listening until Tera got back, I could at least be sure that they'd be around when I needed them. "Huddle up, everyone," I said. "I want to go over some things before we go in."

There was a brief silence, and then a crowding of furry, heavy bodies, and a snuffling of wet noses. Ten ears pricked up and rotated toward me, and ten bright, human eyes fastened upon me from lupine faces. I suppressed a sudden urge to say, "Good evening, class. I'm your teacher, Mr. Dresden," and instead put on my most serious expression.

"You all know what's at stake tonight," I said. "And that we could all get killed. We're going to be confronting a bunch of law-enforcement people who have gotten hold of some magic that's as black as anything I've ever seen, and are using it to turn themselves into wolves. They've lost control of the power they've grabbed. They're killing people, and if we don't stop them they're going to kill a lot more. Especially me, because I know too much. I'm a danger to them."

"But I don't want that. I don't want anyone to get killed. Not us, and not them. Maybe they deserve it. Maybe not. The power they grabbed has turned into a drug for them, and they're not really in control of themselves anymore. I just don't think we'd be much different than them if we went in there planning to wipe them out. It isn't enough to stand up and fight darkness. You've got to stand apart from it, too. You've got to be different from it."

I cleared my throat. "Hell. I'm not good at this. Go for their belts, if you can, just like I did in the alley. Once their belts are off, they're not going to be as crazy, and maybe we'll be able to talk to them." I glanced up at the wall and back down. "Just don't get killed, guys. Do what you have to do to stay alive. That's your first priority. And if you've got to kill them to do it, then don't hesitate."

There was a chorus of growls from around me, led by the wolf Billy, but that was the great thing about being the only human being there—I was the only one who could talk. There wouldn't have been any arguments, even had they disagreed. Their enthusiasm was a little intimidating.

"If you are any louder, wizard," Tera's soft voice came from behind me, "we might as well walk through the front gate." I jumped and looked up to see Tera, naked and human, crouched down a few feet away.

"I wish you wouldn't *do* that," I hissed at her. "Did you find a way in?"

"Yes," she said. "A place where the wall has crumbled. But it is far for you to walk, around along the eastern wall, toward the front of the property. We must run if we are to get inside in time."

I grimaced. "I'm not in any shape to run anywhere."

"It would seem you have little choice. I also saw many streaks of light across the front gate. And there are black boxes with glass eyes every seventy or eighty paces. They do not see the crumbled place. It is a fortunate position."

"Cameras," I muttered. "Hell."

"Come, wizard," Tera said, crouching down on all fours. "We have no time to waste if you are to join us. The pack can cover the distance in moments, but you must hurry."

"Tera. I've had a rough couple of days. I'd fall over in about two minutes if I tried to run somewhere."

The woman blinked passionless amber eyes up at me. "Your point?"

"I'm going over the wall right here," I said.

Tera looked at the wall and shook her head. "I cannot bring the pack over that wall. They are not strong enough to keep changing back and forth, and they have no hands in their wolf form."

"Just me then. I guess you all can find me?"

Tera snorted. "Of course. But it is foolish for you to go over the wall alone. And what if the cameras see you?"

"Let me worry about the cameras," I said. "Help me up to the top. Then you and the Alphas circle around and rendezvous with me."

Tera scowled, the expression dark. "I think this foolish, wizard. If you are too wounded to run, then you are too wounded to go in alone."

"We don't have time," I said with a glance up at the moon, "to argue about this. Do you want my help or don't you?"

Tera let out a sound somewhere between a snort and a snarl, and for a moment tension in her muscles made them stand out hard against her skin. One of the Alphas let out a little whimper, and stepped away from us.

“Very well, wizard,” Tera said. “I will show you the nearest camera and help you over the wall. Do not move from where you land. We do not know who is on the other side of the wall, or where.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “Worry about yourself. If there’s a good way through the wall, Denton might show up there, too, to go in. Or MacFinn might.”

“MacFinn,” Tera said, traces of pride in her voice and fear in her eyes, “will not even notice that the wall got in his way.”

I grimaced. “Just show me the camera.”

Tera led me forward through the dark, silent and naked and looking as though she didn’t mind the cold evening at all. The grass was damp, plush, and deep. Tera pointed out the small, silent square of the video camera settled onto the wall across the street, and almost entirely hidden by the shadows of the trees.

I licked my lips and leaned toward the camera, keeping my own form obscured by the bushes. I squinted my eyes and drew in my will, trying to focus. My head started to pound at once, and I felt sweat break out beneath my arms and across my forehead. Hexing up anything mechanical is usually fairly simple. The field of magic that surrounds practitioners of the Art plays havoc with the implements of technology. A passing thought, on the right kind of day, can blow out a cellular telephone or kill a photocopier.

This was the wrong kind of day. That field of energy around me was severely depleted from its usual levels, and the metaphysical “muscles” I would normally use to manipulate that energy were in screaming agony, reflected in pains throughout my body.

But I needed to get inside, and I really did think that I wouldn’t be able to make it all the way around the property. I was running on empty already, and too much more would leave me gasping like a fish out of water and wishing I was at home in bed.

I forced calm on my thoughts and focused all the energy I had, and it hurt me, starting in my head and spreading into weary aches in my knees and elbows. But the energy built, and built, and with it the pain, until I could hold it together no longer.

“*Malivaso*,” I whispered, and pushed my hand out at the square shape, like a grade-school girl throwing a baseball wrong handed. The power I’d gathered, though it felt like it was about to split me at the seams, rushed out in an almost impotent little hiccup of magic and swirled drunkenly toward the security camera.

For a long minute, nothing happened. And then there was a flash of light, and a tiny shower of sparks from the rear of the box. Smoke drizzled up from the camera in a quavering plume, and I felt a small surge of triumph. At least I had *something* left in me, even if it was aneurism-causing labor to perform the mildest of tasks.

“All right then,” I said a second later, my voice somewhat thready. “Let’s go.”

We looked around and made sure no cars were about, and then Tera, the Alphas, and I rushed across the road, through some decorative, leafy bushes, to the high stone wall. Tera laced her fingers together to form a stirrup. I put my good foot into it, and pushed up hard. She heaved me up, and half threw me over the wall. I caught myself at the top, saw a car’s headlights coming, and swiftly rolled down the other side, falling heavily to damp, muddy earth.

It was dark. It was really dark. I was crouched at the base of the wall, underneath a spreading canopy of bare tree branches and stubborn sycamore leaves. Moonlight filtered through in random places, but it only served to make the dark spots all the more gloomy. My own black leather duster was utterly invisible, and I remembered reading somewhere that the gleam of my eyes and teeth would be the most likely to give me away—but since I didn’t feel like sitting in the dark with my eyes closed, I didn’t. Instead, I crouched and got my confiscated gun ready in one pocket, and took my ace in the hole out of the other, getting that ready as well.

I shivered, and worked hard to remind myself not to be afraid. Then I waited in the darkness for my allies. And waited. And waited. Time passed, and I knew that a minute would feel like an hour, so I began counting, one number for every deliberate breath.

The wind blew through the trees, brisk and cool. Leaves rustled, and droplets of rainwater fell from the trees around me, making little pattering sounds as they struck my new coat. They clung to the leather in tight beads and caught pieces of moonlight in them, brilliant against the black. The smell of rich earth and damp stone rose up with the wind, and for a moment it did almost feel as though I was in a forest rather than on a crime lord’s private estate in the north end of Chicago. I took deep breaths, a little comforted by the illusion, and kept on counting.

And waited.

Nothing happened. No wolves, no sounds.

Nothing.

It wasn’t until I got to one hundred that I started to get really nervous, my stomach beginning a slow twist that made weak sensations lace out through my arms and legs like slivers of ice. Where was Tera? Where were the Alphas? It shouldn’t have taken them nearly so long to get inside the wall and then to cover the distance back to me. Though the estate was huge, the distance surely meant little to the flashing speed of a wolf.

The evening had obviously been moving along entirely too smoothly, I thought.

Something had gone wrong. I was alone.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Alone.

It's one of those small words that means entirely too much. Like fear. Or trust. I'm used to working alone. It goes with the territory. Wizards of my level of skill and strength (well, my usual levels) are few and far between—maybe no more than two dozen in the United States, with a slightly higher concentration of them in Europe, Africa, and Asia. But there is a difference between working alone and finding yourself facing a hatful of foes, on a cold night, while wounded, and in the dark, and practically helpless. It took me about ten seconds to become acutely aware of that difference.

Fear settled in comfortably. Fear was something I was used to. I was able to think past it, to focus on my predicament. Yay for me. My body reacted the same old way, keying up for fight or flight, while I forced my breathing to stay even.

The smart thing to do would be to run, to turn around and go back to the van and to have Susan drive me the hell away. Granted, I probably couldn't even climb the wall on my own, but I could have tried.

But I was already committed. I was here to do battle with the forces of evil, such as they were. I had dropped the challenge to them, not the other way around. Besides, if Tera and the kids were in trouble, I was the only one who could help them.

I climbed to my feet, getting out the gun, and moved forward through the woods, in a direction that seemed perpendicular to the line of the stone wall behind me. The woods were thick, sycamores and poplars giving way to evergreens with scratchy, low branches. I slipped through them as best I could, moving as quietly as I could manage. I didn't think I made more noise than the wind did, as it rattled the branches and the fallen leaves, and stirred more droplets of water to fall. In time, maybe three or four minutes, I came to the edge of the woods, and looked out on to Gentleman Johnny Marcone's estate.

It was magnificent, something out of a home-and-garden magazine. You could have put a small golf course in Marcone's backyard. A long ways off, at the front of the property, Marcone's huge white house stood serene and flawless, artistically illuminated by dozens of lights, with a veranda or patio larger than a dance floor plotted out at its rear. Behind it, three enormous square plots, side-by-side, contained lit and lovely gardens, terraced down a gently sloping hill toward me. At the hill's base was a pretty little vale, and there lay a small pond, which I realized after a moment was an enormous, concrete-lined swimming pool, lit from beneath the surface. The pool was irregularly shaped, and one corner of the pool stirred, near the surface. Steam lay thick over the water.

Standing stately sentinel toward the center of the vale was a ring of evergreens, thick and stocky trees that concealed whatever was at their center. Two rounded hillocks decorated the left side of the vale's landscape, one of them surmounted by what looked like a replica of a small, ruined shrine or temple, all cracked marble and fallen columns.

The whole place was well lit, both by silver moonlight and by lighting placed at strategic intervals. The lawn was immaculate, and trees dotted the grounds in the sort of careless perfection that only an army of expensive gardeners could have maintained.

And they say that crime doesn't pay.

I took a position behind a screen of trees and brush and looked around the grounds with careful, stealthy caution. I didn't have long to wait.

There was a rush of motion from beneath one of the trees on the far side of the estate, and a swift form, a dark-furred wolf, Billy, I thought, flew from beneath one tree and toward a patch of dark shadow on the grass, not twenty feet from me. I tensed, and started to rise from my hiding place in the brush, to call out to the wolf as he ran.

A bright red dot of light appeared against the wolf's fur. There was a hollow sound, something I could barely hear, like a politely covered cough. I saw the wolf jerk as a flash of blue feathered against its fur, and then the beast tumbled into a roll and fell to the ground. It struggled for a moment, back to its feet, and reached for the dart in its flanks with its jaws. Its balance wavered, and the wolf staggered to one side and fell. I could see its chest heaving, and one of its rear legs twitched spasmodically. I thought I saw the beast's eyes, Billy's eyes, focus on me for a moment, and then they glazed over and went vacant.

"Nice shot," called a deep, tense voice. In the ring of evergreens, there was motion, and then Denton appeared, walking out across the grass toward the fallen wolf. His dark, short hair was still immaculately rigid. I couldn't see the veins in his forehead, despite the bright light. It was a subtle change in him, one of several. His tie was loose. His jacket was unbuttoned. He moved with less steel in his backbone, more fire in his belly. There was an animal quality to him, a surety and savagery of purpose that had been uncertain before, and what it meant was a lot more significant than the changes that showed on his exterior.

His restraint was gone. Whatever last remnants of doubt or regret that had enabled him to maintain his own self-control, and some measure of control over the other *Hexenwulfen*, had vanished with the blood frenzy in the Full Moon Garage. It was in every line of him now, in each step and every flicker of his eyes.

The man had become a predator.

From the evergreens behind him appeared the rest of the *Hexenwulfen*: Benn, now dressed only in a white dress shirt and a grey business skirt, her legs dark and rippling with muscle in the moonlight; Harris, his ears still sticking out, his freckles dark spots against pale skin, his manner restless and hungry; and Wilson, still in his wrinkled suit, but with the shirt unbuttoned, his potbelly overlapping the belt of dark fur around his waist. He stroked and patted it with his fat fingers. His mouth was set in an odd, dangerous grin.

Denton moved across the grass to the fallen wolf, and nudged it with his toe. "Six," he said. "Did you count six?"

"Six," Benn confirmed, her voice throaty. "Can we have them now?" She reached Denton's side and pressed up against him, lifting one leg to rub against his, baring it to the top of her thigh as she did.

"Not yet," Denton said. He looked around him thoughtfully, and my gaze followed his. Scattered around a circle of perhaps fifty-yards diameter were several dark lumps I had taken to be indentations in the ground, shadows cast by the moon and the grounds lighting. I looked again and saw, with a surge of fearful understanding, that they weren't indentations. They were the wolves, my allies. The dark patch Billy had been running for gave a little whimper, and I thought I saw the moon glint off of Georgia's tawny coat. I looked around and counted the fallen.

Six. I couldn't tell them apart very well, couldn't tell which of them, if any, was Tera, but I counted six fallen wolves upon the ground. All of them, I thought, with a panicked rush of fear. All of them had been taken.

"Come on," Harris said, his voice tight, strained. "Fuck MacFinn, he isn't showing up. Let's take them out, all of them, and go find Dresden."

"We'll get to your belt soon enough, kid," Wilson snorted, his fingers stroking at the fur belt over his belly. "If you hadn't been so stupid as to lose it—"

Harris snarled, and Denton shook Benn from his side to get between the other two men. "Shut up. Now. We don't have time for this. Harris, we'll go after the wizard as soon as we can.

Wilson, keep your fat mouth shut, if you like your tongue where it is. And both of you back off." The men made low, growling noises, but they took steps away from one another.

I licked my lips. I was shaking. The gun felt heavy in my hand. There were only the four of them, I thought. They weren't more than thirty feet away. I could start shooting right now. If I got lucky, I could down them all. They were werewolves, but they weren't invincible.

I slipped the safety off of the pistol, and drew in a steady breath. It was a damn fool thing to do, and I knew it. Life is not the movies. It wasn't likely that I would be able to shoot them all before they could draw and shoot back. But I didn't have much choice.

Denton turned toward the first hillock, with its artfully ruined temple, and waved. "All right," he called. "That's all of them."

A pair of shapes appeared in the lights that shone on the temple, and then came down the hill toward Denton and the *Hexenwulfen*. Marcone was dressed in a flannel shirt, jeans, and a hunter's vest, and he bore a gleaming rifle, an enormous scope mounted on it, in one hand. Hendricks, hulking beside him in muscle-bound silence, was dressed in what looked like black military fatigues, bearing the gun I'd seen earlier, a knife, and various other gear. Hendricks's eyes flickered over Denton and his associates warily.

I stared at Marcone in shock. It took me a moment to pick my jaw up off the ground and to piece together what was going on. Marcone didn't know. He didn't know that Denton and company were out to get him. They must have blamed the other killings on MacFinn and the Alphas.

So now Denton had Marcone and the Alphas there. Once MacFinn arrived, he would be able to kill everyone he wanted dead, everyone who knew what was going on, and be able to make up any story he damned well pleased. Everyone but me, that is. He did not, as yet, have his hands on me.

"These are all we saw on the monitors," Marcone corrected. "There was a malfunction in camera six, at the rear line of the property. Mr. Dresden and such malfunctions tend to go hand in hand."

Dammit.

"Are you sure the wizard isn't one of them?" Denton demanded. "One of these wolves?"

"I think not," Marcone answered. "But I suppose anything is possible."

Denton scowled. "Then he's not here."

"If he truly offered you a challenge, he's here," Marcone said, his tone completely confident. "I'm certain of it."

"And he just watched his werewolf friends get shot down?" Denton asked.

"Wolves run faster than men," Marcone pointed out. "Possibly, he hasn't caught up to them yet. He could even be watching us now."

"You're giving him too much credit," Denton said. But I saw his eyes shift instinctively toward the blackness of the growth of woods. If I stood up, he would be looking right at me. I froze, holding my breath.

"Am I?" Marcone smiled, and leaned down to pluck the feathered dart from Billy's furry flank. "The tranquilizers likely won't hold these beasts for very long. Decisions need to be made, gentlemen. And if you are to hold to your end of the bargain, you had best get to work producing."

I don't know if Marcone noticed Benn's sudden tension, the way she slid her hands over her stomach, but I did. "Kill these dogs now," she said in a low, heated voice. "It prevents complications later in the evening."

Marcone tsked. "Shortsighted. Let MacFinn tear them to pieces when he arrives, and any medical examiner won't bother to look for the tranquilizers. If one of you does it, it will create awkward questions once forensics takes a look at things. And I thought that was the point of you coming to me with this offer. Reducing questions."

Benn lifted her lips away from her teeth, and I saw the tips of her breasts stiffen beneath her white shirt. "I hate slimy scum like you, Marcone," she purred, sliding her hand from her thigh up over her hip and beneath the buttons of her shirt. Marcone's eyes narrowed on her, and as though connected to the crime lord by a telepathic leash, Hendricks made one simple

motion, a shift of his forward arm, that chambered a round on the gun with a cold little *click-click*.

Denton gave Marcone a sharp look and took hold of Benn's wrist with his hand. The woman tensed for a second, resisting him, but then she allowed Denton to draw her hand away from the belt that was surely beneath her shirt. Denton released her, and Benn lowered her hands, visibly relaxing. Marcone and Hendricks never so much as blinked, or broke a sweat. Fragile situations like this one were evidently second nature to them.

I let out the breath I'd been holding for a long time. Six to one and ready for a fight. If I attacked them now, I didn't have a prayer. If I tried to move, to fade back into the trees, they would be likely to notice me. Damn.

Denton glanced at the trees once more, and I held my breath again. "Don't worry, Marcone," he said. "We'll turn the wizard over to you, once we find him. No questions asked."

"That being the case," Marcone said, "I suggest you start looking, while I make preparations for Mr. MacFinn. Please remember that I want Dresden alive, if possible."

My throat constricted, and if I hadn't been holding my breath, I think I would have let out a squeak. What in the world could John Marcone want with me, after the incident in the parking garage? Nothing good, certainly. Nothing I wanted to think about. Damn, damn. This night was getting spookier all the time.

"Of course, Mr. Marcone," Denton said, his tone a little too polite. "Do you have any suggestions of where we should start looking?"

Marcone ignored the sarcasm, flicked a switch on the sight on his rifle, and pointed it negligently at the tree line. "Over there ought to do."

The red dot of the laser sight settled onto a leaf six inches to the left of my head, and the thready pulse of fear in my chest turned into an icy white streak of terror.

Damn, damn, damn.

Chapter Thirty

If I ran, I would be seen and pursued, and likely torn apart. If I remained where I was hidden, I would be found and *then* torn apart, or shot, or tranquilized and given to Johnny Marccone. A poor set of choices, but I wasn't going to get any better ones by sitting on my ass. So I got my feet underneath me and started easing back into the woods, the confiscated semiautomatic still in my hand.

"Hold it," Denton said. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" Benn asked. I could hear the sudden, eager tension in her voice, and I struggled not to make any more noise as I hurried my pace back into the shelter of the deeper trees.

"Quiet," Denton snarled, and I froze in place. Wind and rain were the only sounds for a few moments, in the chilly autumn night. "Over there," Denton said after a moment. "I think I heard it over that way."

"Could be a raccoon. Squirrel. Or a cat," Wilson suggested.

"Don't be naive," came Marccone's voice, laced with scorn. "It's *him*."

There was the immediate sound of a slide being worked on a handgun, a round being chambered into place. "Move forward," said Denton. "That way. Fan out and we'll take him. Watch yourself. We don't know all of what he can do. Don't take any chances." His voice came closer as he spoke, and I nearly bolted. There was a chorus of assenting sounds, and another couple of weapons being readied. Footsteps came toward me through the grass.

After that, I did bolt, just stood up and ran bent over as low as I could. There was a shout from behind me and a bark of a gun being fired. I pointed the semiautomatic above me, afraid to fire back at them for fear of hitting Tera or one of the Alphas by mistake, and pulled the trigger twice. The gunshots must have surprised them, because Denton and the others scattered for cover behind the nearest trees.

I ran deeper into the woods, marshaling my thoughts. I had gained a little time, but time to do what? Running would only put me up against a stone wall. I doubted I'd be able to climb it, with a bum foot and a wounded shoulder. And I could only play the rabbit in the woods for so long before I was found.

Dammit, I thought. I'm no rabbit.

Chapter Thrity-one

The barrel of Denton's gun looked bigger and deeper than the national debt as it swung to bear on my face. His grey eyes glittered down the sights at me, and I saw the decision to pull the trigger flash across them. Before he could, I met his eyes hard, shoved myself out toward him with a sudden screaming pain in my temples, and locked him into a soulgaze.

There was a rushing sensation, as there usually was, a feeling of movement forward and then down, like being sucked into a whirlpool. I rode the sensation into Denton's head, a brief doubt crossing my mind. Maybe getting shot would have been better than wading heart deep into Denton's soul.

I can't describe what I found there very well. Try to imagine a place, a beautifully ordered structure, like the Parthenon or Monticello. Imagine that everything is balanced, everything is in proportion, everything is smooth and secure. Stick in blue skies overhead, green grass all around, puffy white clouds, flowers, and children running and playing.

Now, add a couple hundred years of wear and tear to it. Dull the edges. Round the corners a little. Imagine water stains, and worn spots where the wind has gotten to it. Turn the skies dirty brown with smog. Kill the grass, and replace it with tall, ugly ragweed. Ditch the flowers, and leave in their places only dried up, skeletal rose vines. Age the male children into adult winos, faces haggard with despair and self-loathing and flushed with drink, and the girls into tired, jaded strumpets, faces hard, eyes cold and calculating. Give the place of beauty an aura of rage and feral abandon, where the people who walk about watch the shadows like hungry cats, waiting to pounce.

And then, after all of that, after all the cares and trials and difficulties of the world a cop inhabits have been fairly represented, coat everything in a thick, sticky black sludge that smells like swamps and things that attract dun-colored flies. Paint it on, make it a coating that emphasizes the filth, the decay, the despair all around, that brings out that painful decline to the utmost degree. The sludge makes things stronger, and more bitter, more rotten, more putrid all at the same time.

That was Denton, inside. A good man, jaded by years and poisoned by the power that had taken control of him, until that good man had been buried and only the filth and decay remained. Until the existence of the man who had once been was only a bitter reminder that made the man who was now seem all the more downfallen by comparison.

I understood Denton's pain and his rage, and I understood how the dark power he'd taken had pushed him over the edge. There was an image of him kneeling at someone's feet as a wolf-fur belt was passed into his hands, and then it was gone. Knowing the man he had once been made clear to me the beast he had become, all violence and hunger and craving.

I felt tears on my cheeks, and violent shudders shaking down my spine. I could pity Denton, and the others with him, but now, more than ever, they scared the crap out of me. I had bought myself a few seconds, at least, with the soulgaze—but would it be enough to keep Denton from blowing my head off?

Denton stared at me as the soulgaze broke and we were released. He wasn't reacting well to whatever it was he had seen inside of me. His face had gone white, and his hand was trembling, the barrel of the gun wavering every which way. He lifted his other hand to mop beads of cold sweat away from his face.

"No," Denton said, white showing all around the grey irises of his eyes. "No, wizard." He raised his gun. "I don't believe in hell. I won't let you." He screamed then, at the top of his lungs. "I won't let you!" I tensed up, preparing for a futile attempt to throw myself out of the way of a speeding bullet.

"Yes," said a calm voice. "You will." A bright red dot appeared right on the middle of Denton's chest, cheerful as a Christmas light. I twisted my head around to see Marcone walking over the turf, his weapon pointed steadily at Denton, Hendricks looming to one side. Denton's lackeys were watching Marcone with bright, steady eyes. Murphy lay on the grass, her feet toward me, her head away. I couldn't see what condition she was in, and both fear and frustration leapt up into me, for her sake.

"Marcone," Denton said. His back straightened and his eyes narrowed. "You treacherous scum."

Marcone clucked with his teeth. "Our bargain was that you would bring him to me alive. Not execute him. Additionally, you may want to rethink the wisdom of using your own weapons. Let MacFinn kill him when he arrives."

"If he arrives," Denton snarled.

"My spotters," Marcone said, "tell me that the animals I sent out with them went mad with fear about two minutes ago, three miles west of here. I think it will not take him much longer to show up, Mr. Denton." His smile widened, but his money-colored eyes grew harder. "Now. Shall we cease antagonizing one another and finish our business?" Marcone lowered the rifle and flicked the laser sight off.

Denton looked from me to Marcone, and I saw the blackness rise up in his eyes, gather behind them, and get ready to come rolling out. "Marcone," I said. "Just shoot him now."

"I think we've both had enough of your attempts to divide and conquer, Mr. Dresden," Marcone said, his voice bored. "You're beaten. Acknowledge it with grace."

I watched a slow smile spread over Denton's face as he kept the gun pointed at my head. My voice rose by a couple notes of alarm. "I mean it, John. I really do, I shit you not. This entire thing is about them killing you."

"What a vulgar reassurance," Marcone said. "Agent Denton, we have a few details to attend to. Lower your gun and let us be about them."

"I don't think so," Denton said. And he pointed the gun at Hendricks and started pulling the trigger. The gun roared so many times, so quickly, that I couldn't tell how often Denton fired.

Hendricks snapped back onto his heels and was driven flat onto his back by the force of the bullets slamming into him. He didn't have time to twitch, much less scream, and he dropped like a felled tree. I felt it in the earth when his massive body hit the ground.

Marcone started to raise his gun, but Wilson and Harris hurtled at his back and dragged him to the ground, pounding on him with their fists. Marcone writhed like an eel and slipped away from them, but Denton stepped into his path and thrust the gun into Marcone's face.

"That's enough," he said, his voice gone hoarse. "Get them all and take them to the pit. MacFinn will be here any moment."

I took the moment to roll to my hands and knees and attempt to slip away unnoticed, but was brought up short by a pair of bare, muscular, feminine legs. My gaze followed the legs up, past the skirt, to a magnificently bare-breasted torso encircled by a wolf-pelt belt, and then to a face dominated by eyes made eerie by the lack of anything recognizably sentient in them. Benn smiled at me, set her foot against my wounded shoulder, and with a sadistic twist of her ankle and a shove of her muscled leg, sent searing pain screaming through my body, making me crumple to the ground in agony.

I remember them dragging me across the grounds. We passed into the ring of evergreens, and I remember thinking that any sounds originating in that circle of pines would be heavily muffled by their branches and needles, further muffled by the trees surrounding the property, as well as the high stone wall. Gunshots, for example, might not even be heard at all, off the property. It was the clearest thought I had while my shoulder exploded.

The next thing I remember was being shoved roughly forward. I fell, straight and hard in the dispassionate grip of gravity, and after long enough for me to start to suck in a breath, I hit water. It was only about six or eight inches deep, and beneath it was swirling, soft mud. I had a brief pang for my leather duster and then I sank down into the water, my hands slipping into the mud and getting stuck there. Cold water bubbled around my face, and felt nice, for a moment, on my aching shoulder.

Someone grabbed me by the collar and hauled me out of the water, to sit on my butt. Hands steadied me, and I sat with my shoulder aching and my head whirling until I could squint up at who was there.

Murphy dropped to one knee in the water beside me and smoothed back my damp hair. "Dresden," she said. "You okay?"

I took a look around me. I was at the bottom of an enormous pit, a square maybe twenty feet deep and twice that across. Muddy water, maybe from the rain, covered the bottom of the pit, and the moon tinted its surface silvery brown. Directly above the pit's center, maybe forty feet above me, was a square made of wooden planks, maybe five by five. It was a hunter's platform, suspended by ropes leading from the circle of evergreens that surrounded the pit. I could see the tops of the trees against the moon and the clouds.

"Dresden," Murphy said again. "Are you all right?"

"I'm alive," I said. I blinked at her for a second and then said, "I thought they killed you."

Her blue eyes sparkled briefly. Her hair was a mess, and her jeans and flannel shirt were rumpled and soaked with muddy water. She was shivering from the cold. "I thought they had, too. But they stopped as soon as Denton took you out, and tossed me down here. I can't figure why they didn't do the deed themselves, instead of leaving it to MacFinn."

I grimaced. "Trying to cover their tracks from the White Council," I said. "Denton wants MacFinn to take the fall for all the deaths. I think he's lost it."

"I always wind up in the nicest places when I hang with you, Dresden."

"You were tied up," I said. "How'd you get loose?"

"She had help," someone said in a slurred, heavy voice. "For all the good it will do her." I turned my head to see a naked and dirty Tera West, sitting with her back against another wall of mud. There were five soggy, motionless forms lying around her, the Alphas in their wolf-shapes. Tera held their heads upon her lap, up out of the water. She looked bedraggled and anguished, touching each of them in turn, very gently. Her amber eyes were dull.

"I don't get it," I said. "Why did they stick us down here? Marcone just keeps a pit trap dug in his yard?"

"He was planning on trapping MacFinn down here until morning," Tera said. "When he would be vulnerable."

"Whoa, whoa," Murphy said, face pensive. "You're saying Denton was responsible for the deaths? All of them?"

“One way or another. Yeah.” I gave Murphy the rundown on Denton. The way he’d gotten the belts for him and his people, lost control of the power they’d given him, and set up the Streetwolves and then MacFinn to take the blame.

Murphy broke out into acidic swearing. “That was the angle I was missing. Dammit. No wonder Denton was so hot to keep you off of the case and out of the way, and why he wanted to find you so bad after the scene at MacFinn’s place. That’s how he kept showing up everywhere so fast, too—he already knew that someone was dead.”

There were shouts from above, and we looked up to see Marcone swing out from the edge of the pit. He hung limply from a rope. His eyes were closed. I watched as he was drawn up in a series of short jerks until his bowed head bumped the bottom of the hunter’s platform above and then was left there.

“What the hell?” Murphy said, her voice soft.

“Bait,” I replied. I closed my eyes for a moment. “Denton’s stringing him up as bait for MacFinn. The loup-garou comes in, jumps up to get Marcone, then Denton cuts the rope and drops MacFinn down in here.”

“With us,” Murphy said quietly. I felt her shivers grow a little more severe. “They’re going to drop that thing into this pit with us. Oh, God, Harry.”

“Denton or one of his people must have gotten some silver bullets made,” I said. “They’ll just let MacFinn slaughter us, then shoot him from up there.” I squinted up at the edge of the pit. “Pretty good plan.”

“What can we do?” Murphy asked. She hugged herself, hard.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“Nothing,” Tera said quietly. Murphy and I turned to look at her. One of the Alphas was stirring, Billy maybe, and wobbled and fell when he tried to sit up. But at least he could hold his head up out of the water. “Nothing,” she repeated. “We are beaten.”

I closed my eyes and tried to order my thoughts, to push the pain and fatigue back down and put together some sort of plan. Murphy settled beside me, a shivering spot against my side. The cast on her arm pressed against my ribs. I opened my coat, more a polite gesture than anything else, given that it, too, was soaked, and slipped the edge of it around her shoulders with my arm. Her back stiffened and she flashed me a look of indignation, but after a second just pressed as far under the coat as she could.

After a moment, she spoke. Her voice came out quiet, uncertain—a far cry from her normal, brisk tones. “I’ve done some thinking, Dresden. I’ve decided that there’s a reasonable chance you aren’t involved with the killings.”

I smiled a little. “That’s real big of you, Murph. Doesn’t what Denton did to you sort of prove I’m not involved?”

She half smiled and shook her head. “No, Harry. It just means that he wants to kill you and me both. It doesn’t mean that I trust everything you’re saying.”

“He wants me dead, Murph. That should mean something in my favor, shouldn’t it?”

“Not really,” she said, and squinted up at the top of the pit. “From what I can tell, Denton wants pretty much everybody dead. And you could still be lying to me.”

“I’m not, Murph,” I said, my voice soft. “Cross my heart.”

“I can’t just take your word on it, Harry,” she whispered. “There are too many people dead. My men. My people. Civilians, the ones I’m supposed to protect. The only way to be sure is to take you all, everyone involved, and sort things out with you behind bars.”

“No,” I said. “There’s more to it than what you can prove, Murph, more than what’s going to stand up in court. Come on. You and me, we’ve known each other for years. You should be able to trust me by now, right?”

“I should be able to,” Murphy agreed. “But after what I’ve seen, all the blood and death . . .” She shook her head. “No, Harry. I can’t trust anyone anymore.” She half smiled and said, “I still like you, Dresden. But I can’t trust you.”

I tried to match her smile, but my feelings were in too much turmoil. Pain, mostly. Physical pain, and a deeper heart hurt, both for Murphy’s sake and for the sake of our friendship. She was so alone. I wanted to go to the rescue, somehow, to make her hurting go away.

She’d have spit in my face if I’d tried. Murphy wasn’t the sort of person who wanted to be rescued, from anything. That she accepted as much comfort as my wet coat offered her came as a surprise to me.

I looked around the pit again intently. The other Alphas were recovering, enough to sit up, but apparently not enough to move. Tera just sat with her back against the wall, defeated and exhausted. Marcone swung from the platform high above me, not moving, though I thought I might have heard a moan from him at one point. I felt a pang of sympathy for him. However much of a heartless bastard he might be, no one deserved to dangle like bait from a hook.

The Alphas, Tera, Marcone, Murphy. They were all where they were because of me. It was my fault we were there, my doing that we were all about to die. Carmichael, the poor jerk, was dead, also because of me. So were other good cops. So was Hendricks.

I had to do something about it.

“I need to get out of here,” I told Murphy. “Get me out of here, and maybe I can do something.”

Murphy turned her head toward me. “You mean . . . ?” She waved the fingers of her unbroken arm in a vaguely mystic gesture.

I nodded. I still had my ace in the hole. “Something like that.”

“Right. So how do we get you out of here?”

“You going to trust me, Murph?”

Her jaw clenched. “It doesn’t look as though I have much choice, does it?”

I smiled back at her, and rose to my feet, sloshing around in the water. “Maybe we could dig into the walls a bit. Make climbing holes.”

“You’ll probably get shot once you get to the top,” Murphy said.

“No,” I said, “I don’t think they’ll want to hang around the pit with MacFinn coming. They’re bloodthirsty, but not stupid.”

“So,” Murphy said. “All we need to do is get you up to the top of the pit, and then you’re going to go one-on-four with a bunch of armed FBI agents-cum-werewolves and beat them in time to go up against the loup-garou that we couldn’t stop before with all of your magical gizmos and a building full of police officers.”

“Essentially,” I answered.

Murphy looked up at me and then shrugged and let out a short, defiant laugh. She stood up too, flicked her hair back from her eyes with a toss of her head, and said, “I guess it could be worse.”

There was a soft sound from above and behind me. Murphy froze, staring upward, her eyes becoming almost impossibly wide.

I turned my head very slowly.

The loup-garou crouched up at the lip of the pit, huge and gnarled and muscled and deadly. Its foaming jaws were open, showing the rows of killing teeth. Its eyes gleamed with scarlet flames in the moonlight, and they were fastened on the dangling figure of Gentleman Johnny Marcone. I quivered, and the motion made a slight sound against the water. The beast turned its head down, and when it saw me its eyes narrowed to glowing slits, and it let out a harsh, low growl. Its claws dug into the earth at the edges of the pit, tearing through it like sand.

I remembered me.

My heart started ripping a staccato rhythm in my chest. That same raw, sharp, primitive fear I’d felt before, the fear of simply being jumped on and *eaten*, returned in full force and for a moment swept away all thoughts and plans.

“You had to say that,” I said to Murphy, my voice wan and pale. “Happy? It’s worse.”

Chapter Thirty-two

"Okay," I said, fear making my voice weak. "This is bad.

This is very, very bad."

"Wish I had my pistol," Murphy said, her tone resolute. "I wish we'd had some more time to talk things out, Harry."

I glanced over at Tera. One of the Alphas, the mouse-haired girl in her wolf-shape, was leaning against her and whimpering. "Close your eyes," Tera said softly and covered the little wolf's eyes with her hand. Her amber eyes met mine, without hope, without any sparkle of life.

They were going to die because of me. Dammit all, it wasn't fair. I hadn't done anything grossly stupid. It wasn't fair to have come so far, sacrificed so much, and to buy it down here in the mud, like some kind of burrowing bug. I searched the pit again desperately, but it was a fiendishly simple and complete trap. There were no options down here.

My eyes went up. Straight up.

"Marccone!" I shouted. "John Marccone! Can you hear me?"

The limp figure suspended above me stirred weakly. "What do you want, Mr. Dresden?"

"Can you move?" I asked. The loup-garou growled, low, and started pacing a circuit of the pit, glowing eyes flashing between us down at the bottom and Marccone, trying to decide who to rip apart first.

"An arm," Marccone confirmed a few seconds later.

"Do you still keep that knife on you? The one I saw at the garage?"

"Denton and his associates searched me and found it, I am afraid," came Marccone's voice.

"Dammit all. You're a miserable, stupid bastard for making a deal with Denton, Marccone. Now do you believe he wanted to kill you all along?"

The figure above me wiggled and writhed, swinging from the ropes that held him trussed up there. "Yes, do tell me that you told me so with your last breath, Mr. Dresden. I was already rather acutely aware of that," Marccone said, his voice dry. "But perhaps I'll yet have a chance to make amends."

"What are you doing?" I asked. I kept my eyes on the loup-garou, as it circled the pit, and kept myself opposite the creature, where I could see it.

"Reaching for the knife they *didn't* find," Marccone replied. He grunted, and then I saw a flicker of light on something shiny up above me.

"Forget it," Murphy said quietly, stepping close to my side as she watched Marccone. "He's just going to cut himself loose and leave us to rot here."

"We won't get the chance to rot," I pointed out. But I thought she was right.

Marccone started to spin slowly on his rope, wriggling around until his whole body was rotating on the end of it. He began to speak, his voice calm. "Irony, isn't it? I'd planned to wait for the creature on the platform and tempt it into the pit. There are some nets ready to drop on it, after that. I would have held it until morning."

"You do know that it's right beneath you now, don't you, John?" I asked.

"Mr. Dresden," Marccone said crossly. "I've asked you not to call me that."

"Whatever," I said, but I had to admire the raw courage of the man to banter while dangling up there like a ripe peach.

"I use this place to conduct noisy business," Marccone said. "The trees muffle the sound, you see. You can barely hear even shotgun blasts on the other side of the wall." He continued to spin on the rope, slow and lazy, a shadow against the moon and the stars.

"Well. That's nice," I said, "and despicable." The loup-garou looked down at me and snarled, and I took an involuntary step back from it. The mud wall of the pit stopped me.

"Oh, quite," Marccone agreed. "But necessary."

"Is there *anything* you're not shameless about, Marccone?" I asked.

"Of course. But you don't think I'm going to tell you, do you? Now, be quiet if you please. I don't need the distraction." And then I saw Marccone's arm curl in and straighten outward. There was a flutter of metallic motion in the air, and a snapping sound from the base of one of the ropes that held the platform suspended, at its far end where it was secured to one of the pine trees.

The rope abruptly sagged, and the platform—and Marccone with it—swayed drunkenly. Marccone grunted, and bounced against his ropes a few times, making the whole affair of ropes lurch about—and then the damaged line snapped and came entirely free. It whipped out toward Marccone, lost momentum, and then fell through the evening air.

Straight down into the pit in front of me. One end was still attached to the platform above, now off center from the pit and listing to one side.

I blinked at it for a moment, and Murphy said, "Holy shit. He did it."

"I don't recommend waiting about, Mr. Dresden," Marccone said. I saw him twist his head to look at the loup-garou, and tense up as the beast trotted around the edge of the pit to the side closest to him. If it had noticed the rope that had fallen down from above, it gave no sign.

Hope lurched in my chest like sudden thunder. I grabbed on to the rope with both hands and started shinnying up it like a monkey, pushing with my legs and using mostly my good arm to hang on with while I lifted my legs up higher for another grip.

I got up to even with the lip of the pit and started rocking the rope back and forth, getting a swinging momentum going so that I could leap off the rope and to the ground outside the pit. The ropes above creaked dangerously as I did, and Marccone swayed back and forth, still spinning about gently.

"Dresden," he shouted. "Look out!"

I had been intent on my escape, and given the loup-garou no thought. I turned my head around to see it flying through the air toward me. I could see its gleaming eyes and felt sure that I could have counted its teeth if I had waited around for it. I didn't. I let out a yelp and let go of the rope, dropping several feet straight down before clamping on to it again. The loup-garou sailed past me overhead like some huge, obscenely graceful bat, and landed on the far side of the pit with barely a sound.

My fingers felt weak, I was so shocked and terrified, but I started hauling my way up again, swinging desperately as I went. The loup-garou turned and focused its eyes on me again, but Marccone let out a sharp whistle, and the thing turned toward him, pricking its misshapen ears forward in a weirdly doggy mannerism, before it snarled and leapt upward. I bounced on the rope, and Marccone bobbed down and then back up again. The loup-garou missed him by bare inches, I think, but I didn't hang around to watch. I let out a yell and threw myself at the edge of the pit as the rope reached the apex of its swing.

I missed, my belly hitting the lip of the pit, but I started clawing at the earth and kept myself from falling. I strained and kicked, thrashing and whimpering in desperation, and managed to gain a few inches, slowly worming my way up onto the ground, until I got my feet underneath me. The loup-garou, on the far side of the pit, turned toward me and let out a sound that can best be described as a furious roar. Shouts erupted from elsewhere in the estate—Denton and his lackeys must have been watching the pit, I thought, but they were the second scariest bad guys on the field at the moment. I had bigger things on my mind.

Said thing threw itself at me, and I had a few seconds to start running, trying to arrange things so that the pit would be between me and it when it landed. I was only partly successful. The loup-garou tore up the earth where I had been standing when it came down, and turned toward me again, facing me across a scant ten feet of space, from one side of the square pit to the side adjacent to it.

The rope started bobbing again, and then with a motion full of grace and power, Tera swung up out of the pit and landed in a crouch on the ground beside me.

"Go, wizard," she snarled. "Denton and the others will kill us all if they are not stopped. I will handle MacFinn."

"No way," I said. "You can't possibly take him on."

"I know him," she responded. And then there was, in her place, the huge she-wolf, dark fur peppered with grey. She snarled and bounded at the loup-garou and it reared up like a cat about to take a mouse, plunging toward her with abrupt speed.

And that's when I saw the difference between Tera and the Alphas, Tera and Denton's *Hexenwulfen*, even Tera and the loup-garou. Where they were fast, Tera was fast *and* graceful. Where they were quick, Tera was quick *and* elegant. She made them look like amateurs. She was something more primal, more in tune with the wild than they would ever be.

As the loup-garou threw itself at her, she slipped to one side like wind, threw her shoulder beneath the beast's planted forepaw, and shouldered it off-balance, making it stumble. It recovered and spun toward her, but she was already gone, farther away from the pit, growling defiance at the supernatural creature. It followed, impervious and snarling with rage.

I heard a gunshot, and a bullet smacked into one of the trees behind me. Benn's voice repeated a low, frantic chant, and then I heard her words turn into an animal's snarls. Denton and the others were coming. It was time to play the last option I had, the one I hadn't wanted to be forced to use. I wasn't sure what would happen if I did, but there wasn't much choice.

I slipped my hand beneath my shirt and touched the wolf belt I'd taken from Agent Harris in the alley behind the Full Moon Garage.

It was vibrating beneath my fingers, warm to the touch, alive in its own fashion, and full of the power and strength that had been channeled into it. I closed my eyes and let that dark, wild power spill into me, mingle with all the fear and pain and weariness inside of me. It was easy. It was easier than any magic I'd ever done, leaping into me with a sort of hungry eagerness, seeping into me, making pain and fatigue and fear vanish and replacing it with nothing but strength, ferocity.

Power.

"Lupus," I whispered. *"Lupus, lupara, luperoso."*

Chapter Thirty-three

I circled into the trees and stepped over Harris's corpse. The kid's face had been smashed in by two bullets, though the semiautomatic was still in his dead hand. Murphy must have had Wilson's gun. Wilson lay not far from Harris, also dead. Wounds to the chest, massive bleeding. Benn lay next to him, naked but for a business skirt soaked in blood. There was a line of greenish goo around her waist, probably the remains of the wolf belt. Its magic must have died when she did. I tried not to look at the mangled meat on the back of her thighs, or the tears near her jugular. I tried not to smell her blood, or to notice the dark surge of contemptuous pride that went through me, leftovers from my experience with my own wolf belt.

I shuddered and went past the bodies. The night was silent, but for wind, and the creaking of the ropes that supported the platform in the middle of the encircling evergreens. I could still see Marcone hog-tied up there. The position must have been excruciating—it isn't every day that you get crucified and hung up as dinner for a monster, and you can't really train your muscles for it. I couldn't see Marcone's expression, but I could almost feel his agony.

I waved a hand as he spun gently toward me, and he nodded his head, silent. I pointed at my eyes, and then around at the shadowed trees, trying to ask him if he knew where the loup-garou was, but he shook his head. Either he didn't understand me or he couldn't see it, and either way it didn't do me any good.

I grimaced and moved forward through the trees, skirting the edge of the pit. I looked for the rope that had been used to haul Marcone up to his current position. It had to have been tied off somewhere low. I peered through the near dark, followed the strand of rope back down to the tree it was tied to, and headed over toward it.

Maybe I could get out of this. Maybe Murphy and I could escape with Marcone, join Susan and the others, and get out of here.

No. That was a happy fantasy. Even if I did get everyone out, I knew I couldn't live with myself if I let the loup-garou go loose tonight, on another killing spree. I had to try to stop it.

I was already going to have a hard enough time living with myself.

The rope supporting Marcone had been secured with a hasty knot, easily undone. I started working it, rubbernecking all around, listening, trying to locate the loup-garou. It wouldn't have just run off and left us here alive. Would it?

I took a turn around the tree with the rope to give me a little leverage, and then, very carefully because of my bum arm, started lowering Marcone. If I could get him low enough, I could have him swing over to me from the pit's center, catch him, balance him, and then go back and release the rope. It would have been easier if Murphy was there, but I hadn't seen her.

A nasty thought hit me. What if Murphy had run across the loup-garou and it had killed her silently? What if it was, even now, trying to get to me?

I secured the rope and moved back over to the pit. Marcone, no dummy, was already swinging back and forth as best he could, trying to get himself over to me. I went to the edge of the pit and crouched down, keeping my weight well away from the crumbling earth at the pit's lip.

Marcone let out a sudden startled hiss and said, "Dresden! The pit!"

I looked down and saw the loup-garou's eyes glowing, down in the darkness of the pit, only a heartbeat before they surged toward me with a howl of rage. It was coming *up* the wall of the pit, simply gouging its claws into the mud and hauling itself upward, toward me. I reeled back from the thing, threw out a hand and screamed, "*Fuego!*"

Chapter Thirty-four

I woke up.

That surprised me, in itself.

I woke up to see the moon still high overhead, and to feel Murphy's hand on my forehead. "Come on, Harry," she whispered. "Don't do this to me."

I blinked my eyes a few times and whispered, "You *shot* me, Murph. I can't believe you shot me."

She blinked her eyes at me, to hold back tears. "You stupid jerk," she said, her voice gentle. "You should have got down when I told you to."

"I was busy."

She glanced over her shoulder, at MacFinn's silent, still form. "Yeah. I saw, after." She turned back to me, looking a little past me, focused elsewhere.

"It's all right," I said. "I forgive you." I thought it very generous of me, appropriate to the last moments of a man's life.

Murphy blinked at me. And then stiffened. "You what?"

"Forgive you, Murph. For shooting me. Your job and all, I understand."

Murphy's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You think . . ." she said. Her face twisted with disgust and she sputtered for a moment, and then spat to one side. She began again. "You think that I thought you were one of the bad guys, still, and I shot you because you wouldn't surrender?"

I felt too weak and dizzy to argue. "Hey. It's understandable. Don't worry about it." I shivered. "I'm so cold."

"We're *all* cold, moron," Murphy snapped. "A front came through about the same time they threw us in that freaking pit. It must be below forty, already, and we're wet besides. Sit up, El Cid."

I blinked at her. "I . . . Uh. What?"

"Sit up, dummy," Murphy said. "Look behind you."

I did sit up, and it didn't hurt much worse than it had earlier this evening, surprising me again. I looked behind me.

Denton was there. He held a fallen branch in one hand, like a club. His eyes were wide and staring and savage, his face pale with loss of blood. There was a neat hole in his forehead, right in the middle. I blinked at the body for a moment.

"But . . . How did he . . . ?"

"I shot *him*, you jerk. He came running up behind you, just as I came back from giving first aid to that naked woman. Tera West. I was shaking too hard to have a safe shot with you standing, and I didn't know the loup-garou was coming up behind *me*." Murphy stood up. "I can't believe this," she said and turned to walk away. "You thought I shot you."

"Murph," I protested. "Murph, give me a break. I mean, I thought . . ."

She snorted at me over her shoulder. She snorts well for someone with a cute little button of a nose. "You *didn't* think, Dresden," she said, flipping her hair back from her eyes. "Dramatic death scene. Noble sacrifice, right? Tragically misunderstood? Hah! I understand you, buddy. You're such a pompous, arrogant, pretentious, chauvinistic, hopelessly old-fashioned, stupidly pigheaded . . ." Murphy went on in graphic detail and at great length about me as she walked away to call the police, and an ambulance, and it was music to my ears.

I lay back on the grass, tired but smiling. Things were all right between us.

The police had one hell of a time sorting out the mess at Marcone's place. I made sure to collect all the wolf belts. Murphy helped me. We burned them, right there, in a stinking fire made of tree branches. It was too hard for me to throw them in. Murph did it for me. She understands things, sometimes, that I couldn't ever explain to her. Later, I went with Murph to Carmichael's funeral. She went with me to Kim Delaney's. Those are the kind of things friends do for each other.

Mr. Hendricks, as it turns out, had worn his Kevlar under the black fatigues. They put me next to him in the ambulance that night when I finally left the scene. They'd bared his chest, and it was a solid mass of purple bruises, so that we were a matched set. He glowered at me in silence, but he breathed steadily through the oxygen mask on his face. I felt absurdly cheered when I saw him alive. All things considered, can you blame me?

Marcone got arrested on general principles, but nothing stuck. Though everything had happened on his property, injuries on the FBI agents indicated that they had all done one another in, or been killed by an animal—except for Denton, of course. None of the peace officers there had possessed a warrant, et cetera, et cetera. I hear his lawyers had him out in less than three hours.

Marcone called me a few days later and said, "You owe me your life, Mr. Dresden. Are you sure we can't talk business?"

"The way I see it, John," I told him, "you owe me *your* life. After all, even if you'd cut yourself free, you'd have just fallen down into the pit and got eaten up with the rest of us. I figure you thought your highest chances of survival were in freeing me, the wizard who deals with this kind of thing, to handle it."

"Of course," Marcone said, with a note of disappointment in his voice. "I'd just hoped you hadn't realized it. Nonetheless, Harry—"

"Don't call me Harry," I said, and hung up on him.

Susan filmed the death of the loup-garou from less than fifty yards away with a pretty good zoom lens and special light-sensitive film. The light from my amulet illuminated the scene rather dramatically without really showing many details. You can only see my back, and it looks like I'm swinging a glow stick around, and then throwing it at the monster, which can be seen only in shadowy detail as something large and furry. At the point where I released the spell, there's a burst of static about a second long, where the magic messed up Susan's camera, even from that far away.

In the film, the static clears and you can see Murphy shoot Denton off of my back, just before he brains me with his club. Then she spins around like Rambo, jumps out of the way of the leaping furry something-or-other, and empties the rest of her clip into the thing out of reflex.

Murph and I both know the bullets didn't hurt it at all, that it was just a reflexive gesture on her part, but I don't need the attention. She was quite the hero according to the camera, and that was fine with me.

Susan's film went on the morning news and was shown for about two days afterward, exclusively on WGN Channel Nine, and it impressed Chicago a lot. The film made Murphy popular enough, with voters, that a bunch of city councilmen went to bat for her, and the internal affairs investigation got called off. She carries a little bit more clout now than she did before. The politicians down at City Hall paid for a real name tag for her office door.

The weird thing was that the film just vanished after two days. No one knew what happened to it, but the film technician in the room with the exclusive WGN Channel Nine videotape disappeared, too, leaving only a few scattered and low-quality copies. A couple of days later, some experts spoke up claiming that the tape had to be fake, and decrying it as a simple hoax perpetrated by a tabloid.

Some people just can't deal with the thought of the supernatural being real. Federal government is like that, a lot. But I'm thinking that if anyone in the government *did* believe, they would just as soon not have had proof of the existence of werewolves and the instability of a local FBI agent showing at five, six, and ten.

The film's disappearance didn't stop Susan from getting a promotion at the *Arcane*, a big raise, and a guest slot on the Larry King show, plus a few other places. She looked good doing it, too, and made people think. She's getting her column syndicated. Maybe, in a few hundred years, people might actually be willing to consider what was real in the world with an open mind.

But I doubted it.

I didn't call Susan for a while, after she had seen me so far gone into being a monster that I might as well have been one. She didn't pressure me, but kept her presence known. She'd send me flowers, sometimes, or have a pizza delivered to my office when I was working late. Hell of a girl.

Tera was badly injured, but recovered thanks to her own reversion to human form, and Murphy's quick first aid. She asked me to meet her at Wolf Lake Park a few weeks later, and when I showed up, she was there, wearing just a long black cloak.

"I wished to tell you that what you did was necessary. And I wished to tell you good-bye," she said. And slipped the cloak off. She was naked, with a few new, wrinkled scars. "Good-bye."

"Where will you go?" I asked.

She tilted those odd amber eyes at me. "I have family," she said. "I have not seen them in a long time. I will return to them now."

"Maybe you'll call, sometime?"

Her eyes sparkled, and she smiled at me, a little sadly. "No, Harry Dresden. That is not the way of my kind. Come to the great mountains in the Northwest one winter. Perhaps I will be there." And then she shimmered into the shape of a great timber wolf, and vanished into the sunset.

All those people shape-shifting into wolves, and I had never once considered the possibility of a wolf shape-shifting into a person. I picked up Tera's cloak, musing, and took it home with me, as a reminder to keep my mind even more open to the realms of possibility.

The Alphas decided that I'm about the greatest thing since sliced bread. Which isn't exactly the most thrilling thing in the world for me. They asked me to a campout with them, which I reluctantly attended, where all dozen-odd young people swore friendship and loyalty to me, and where I spent a lot of time blinking and trying to say nothing. They're just itching for me to lead them in some meaningful crusade against evil. Hell, I have trouble just paying the bills.

When I took some time to think about all that had happened, I couldn't help but think that the last several months had been a little too crazy for coincidence. First, a power-drunk warlock had appeared out of nowhere, and I had to duke it out with him in his own stronghold before he murdered me outright. And then, Denton and his people showed up with enchanted wolf belts and raised hell.

I never had found out who exactly was behind the warlock who showed up the previous spring. Black wizards don't just grow up like toadstools, you know. Someone has to teach them complicated things like summoning demons, ritual magic, and clichéd villain dialogue. Who had been his teacher?

And Denton and company had shown up six months later. Someone had provided them with those belts. Someone had warned Denton that I was dangerous, that I or someone like me from the Council would go after him. And by telling him that, they had pointed him at me like a gun, determined to kill me.

I'm not much of a believer in coincidence. Could it have been one of my enemies on the White Council? One of the beings of the Nevernever who had come to hate me? I was on the list of a number of nasty things, for one reason or another.

"You know what?" I told Mister one night in front of the fire. "Maybe I've finally gone around the bend, but I think someone might be trying to kill me."

Mister looked up at me, his feline features filled with a supreme lack of concern, and rolled over so that I could rub his tummy. I did, pensive and comfortable before the fire, and thought about who it might be. And then thought that I might be getting a little stir-crazy. I hadn't gone anywhere but to work and back home for a couple of weeks. Too much work and no play makes Harry a paranoid boy.

I reached for the phone and started spinning the dial to Susan's number. Mister batted at my hand approvingly.

"Or maybe I'm just too stupid to get out of trouble's way, eh?"

Mister rumbled a deep, affirmative purr in his chest. I settled back to ask Susan over, and enjoyed the warmth of the fire.

ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER

B IS FOR BIGFOOT

by Jim Butcher

from *Under My Hat: Tales from the Cauldron*



B IS FOR BIGFOOT

JIM BUTCHER

WHEN PEOPLE COME to the only professional wizard in the Chicago phone book for help, they're one of two things: desperate or smart. Very rarely are they both.

The smart ones come to me because they know I can help—the desperate because they don't know anyone else who can. With a smart client, the meeting is brief and pleasant. Someone has lost the engagement ring that was a family heirloom, and has been told I'm a man who can find lost things. Such people engage my services (preferably in cash), I do the job, and everyone's happy.

Desperate clients, on the other hand, can pull all sorts of ridiculous nonsense. They lie to me about what kind of trouble they've gotten themselves into, or try to pass me a check I'm sure will bounce like a basketball. Occasionally they demand that I prove my powers by telling them what their problem is before they even shake my hand—in which case, the problem is that they're idiots.

My newest client wanted something different, though. He wanted me to meet him in the woods.

This did not make me feel optimistic that he would be one of the smart ones.

Woods being in short supply in Chicago, I had to drive all the way up to the northern half of Wisconsin to get to decent timber. That took me about six hours, given that my car, while valiant and bold, is also a Volkswagen Beetle made around the same time flower children were big. By the time I got there and had hiked a mile or two out into the woods, to the appointed location, dark was coming on.

I'm not a moron, usually. I've made enemies during my stint as a professional wizard. So when I settled down to wait for the client, I did so

with my staff in one hand, my blasting rod in the other, and a .38 revolver in the pocket of my black leather duster. I blew out a small crater in the earth with an effort of will, using my staff to direct the energy, and built a modest campfire in it.

Then I stepped out of the light of the campfire, found a comfortable, shadowy spot, and waited to see who was going to show up.

The whole PI gig is mostly about patience. You have to talk to a lot of people who don't know anything to find the one who does. You have to sit around waiting a lot, watching for someone to do something before you catch them doing it. You have to do a lot of searching through useless information to get to one piece of really good information. Impatient PIs rarely conclude an investigation successfully, and never remain in the business for long. So when an hour went by without anything happening, I wasn't too worried.

By two hours, though, my legs were cramping and I had a little bit of a headache, and apparently the mosquitoes had decided to hold a convention about ten feet away because I was covered with bites. Given that I hadn't been paid a dime yet, this client was getting annoying, fast.

The fire had died down to almost nothing, so I almost didn't see the creature emerge from the forest and crouch down beside the embers.

The thing was huge. I mean, just saying that it was nine feet tall wasn't enough. It was mostly human-shaped, but it was built more heavily than any human, covered in layers and layers of ropy muscle that were visible even through a layer of long, dark brown hair or fur that covered its whole body. It had a brow ridge like a mountain crag, with dark, glittering eyes that reflected the red-orange light of the fire.

I did not move. Not even a little. If that thing wanted to hurt me, I would have one hell of a time stopping it from doing so, even with magic, and unless I got lucky, something with that much mass would find my .38 about as deadly as a pricing gun.

Then it turned its head and part of its upper body toward me and said, in a rich, mellifluous Native American accent, "You done over there? Don't mean to be rude, and I didn't want to interrupt you, wizard, but there's business to be done."

My jaw dropped open. I mean it literally dropped open.

I stood up slowly, and my muscles twitched and ached. It's hard to stretch out a cramp while you remain in a stance, prepared to run away at

an instant's notice, but I tried.

"You're ...," I said. "You're a ..."

"Bigfoot," he said. "Sasquatch. Yowie. Yeti. Buncha names. Yep."

"And you ... you called me?" I felt a little stunned. "Um ... did you use a pay phone?"

I instantly imagined him trying to punch little phone buttons with those huge fingers. No, of course he hadn't done that.

"Nah," he said, and waved a huge, hairy arm to the north. "Fellas at the reservation help us make calls sometimes. They're a good bunch."

I shook myself and took a deep breath. For Pete's sake, I was a wizard. I dealt with the supernatural all the time. I shouldn't be this rattled by one little unexpected encounter. I shoved my nerves and my discomfort down and replaced them with iron professionalism—or at least the semblance of calm.

I emerged from my hidey-hole and went over to the fire. I settled down across from the Bigfoot, noting as I did that I was uncomfortably close to being within reach of his long arms. "Um ... welcome. I'm Harry Dresden."

The Bigfoot nodded and looked at me expectantly. After a moment of that, he said, as if prompting a child, "This is your fire."

I blinked. Honoring the obligations of hospitality is a huge factor in the supernatural communities around the world—and as it was my campfire, I was the de facto host, and the Bigfoot my guest. I said, "Yes. I'll be right back."

I hurried back to my car and came back to the campfire with two cans of warm Coke and half a tin of salt-and-vinegar Pringles chips. I opened both cans and offered the Bigfoot one of them.

Then I opened the Pringles and divided them into two stacks, offering him his choice of either.

The Bigfoot accepted them and sipped almost delicately at the Coke, handling the comparatively tiny can with far more grace than I would have believed. The chips didn't get the careful treatment. He popped them all into his mouth and chomped down on them enthusiastically. I emulated him. I got a lot of crumbs on the front of my coat.

The Bigfoot nodded at me. "Hey, got any smokes?"

"No," I said. "Sorry. It's not a habit."

“Maybe next time,” he said. “Now. You have given me your name, but I have not given you mine. I am called Strength of a River in His Shoulders, of the Three Stars Forest People. And there is a problem with my son.”

“What kind of problem?” I asked.

“His mother can tell you in greater detail than I can,” River Shoulders said.

“His mother?” I rubbernecked. “Is she around?”

“No,” he said. “She lives in Chicago.”

I blinked. “His mother ...”

“Human,” River Shoulders said. “The heart wants what the heart wants, yeah?”

Then I got it. “Oh. He’s a scion.”

That made more sense. A lot of supernatural folk can and do interbreed with humanity. The resulting children, half mortal, half supernatural, are called scions. Being a scion means different things to different children, depending on their parentage, but they rarely have an easy time of it in life.

River Shoulders nodded. “Forgive my ignorance of the issues. Your society is ... not one of my areas of expertise.”

I know, right? A Bigfoot saying “expertise.”

I shook my head a little. “If you can’t tell me anything, why did you call me here? You could have told me all of this on the phone.”

“Because I wanted you to know that I thought the problem supernatural in origin, and that I would have good reason to recognize it. And because I brought your retainer.” He rummaged in a buckskin pouch that he wore slung across the front of his body. It had been all but invisible amid his thick pelt. He reached a hand in and tossed something at me.

I caught it on reflex and nearly yelped as it hit my hand. It was the size of a golf ball and extraordinarily heavy. I held it closer to the fire and then whistled in surprise.

Gold. I was holding a nugget of pure gold. It must have been worth ... uh ... well, a *lot*.

“We knew all the good spots a long time before the Europeans came across the sea,” River Shoulders said calmly. “There’s another, just as large, when the work is done.”

“What if I don’t take your case?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “I try to find someone else. But word is that you can be trusted. I would prefer you.”

I regarded River Shoulders for a moment. He wasn't trying to intimidate me. It was a mark in his favor, because it wouldn't have been difficult. In fact, I realized, he was going out of his way to avoid that very thing.

"He's your son," I asked. "Why don't you help him?"

He gestured at himself and smiled slightly. "Maybe I would stand out a little in Chicago."

I snorted and nodded. "Maybe you would."

"So, wizard," River Shoulders asked. "Will you help my son?"

I pocketed the gold nugget and said, "One of these is enough. And yes. I will."

The next day I went to see the boy's mother at a coffee shop on the north side of town.

Dr. Helena Pounder was an impressive woman. She stood maybe six-four, and looked as though she might be able to bench-press more than I could. She wasn't really pretty, but her square, open face looked honest, and her eyes were a sparkling shade of springtime green.

When I came in, she rose to greet me and shook my hand. Her hands were an odd mix of soft skin and calluses—whatever she did for a living, she did it with tools in her hand.

"River told me he'd hired you," Dr. Pounder said. She gestured for me to sit, and we did.

"Yeah," I said. "He's a persuasive guy."

Pounder let out a rueful chuckle and her eyes gleamed. "I suppose he is."

"Look," I said. "I don't want to get too personal, but ..."

"But how did I hook up with a Bigfoot?" she asked.

I shrugged and tried to look pleasant.

"I was at a dig site in Ontario—I'm an archaeologist—and I stayed a little too long in the autumn. The snows caught me there, a series of storms that lasted for more than a month. No one could get in to rescue me, and I couldn't even call out on the radio to let them know I was still at the site." She shook her head. "I fell sick and had no food. I might have died if someone hadn't started leaving rabbits and fish in the night."

I smiled. "River Shoulders?"

She nodded. "I started watching, every night. One night the storm cleared up at just the right moment, and I saw him there." She shrugged. "We started talking. Things sort of went from there."

“So the two of you aren’t actually married, or ...?”

“Why does that matter?” she asked.

I spread my hands in an apologetic gesture. “He paid me. You didn’t. It might have an effect on my decision process.”

“Honest enough, aren’t you?” Pounder said. She eyed me for a moment and then nodded in something like approval. “We aren’t married. But suitors aren’t exactly knocking down my door—and I never saw much use for a husband anyway. River and I are comfortable with things as they are.”

“Good for you,” I said. “Tell me about your son.”

She reached into a messenger bag that hung on the back of her diner chair and passed me a five-by-seven photograph of a kid, maybe eight or nine years old. He wasn’t pretty, either, but his features had a kind of juvenile appeal, and his grin was as real and warm as sunlight.

“His name is Irwin,” Pounder said, smiling down at the picture. “My angel.”

Even tough, bouncer-looking supermoms have a soft spot for their kids, I guess. I nodded. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Earlier this year,” she said, “he started coming home with injuries. Nothing serious—abrasions and bruises and scratches. But I suspect that the injuries were likely worse before the boy came home. Irwin heals very rapidly, and he’s never been sick: literally never, not a day in his life.”

“You think someone is abusing him,” I said. “What did he say about it?”

“He made excuses,” Pounder said. “They were obviously fictions, but that boy is at least as stubborn as his father, and he wouldn’t tell me where or how he’d been hurt.”

“Ah,” I said.

She frowned. “Ah?”

“It’s another kid.”

Pounder blinked. “How ...”

“I have the advantage over you and your husband, inasmuch as I have actually been a grade-school boy before,” I said. “If he snitches about it to the teachers or to you, he’ll probably have to deal with retributive friction from his classmates. He won’t be cool. He’ll be a snitching, tattling pariah.”

Pounder sat back in her seat, frowning. “I’m ... hardly a master of social skills. I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

I shrugged. “On the other hand, you clearly aren’t the sort to sit around wringing her hands, either.”

Pounder snorted and gave me a brief, real smile.

“So,” I went on, “when he started coming home hurt, what did you do about it?”

“I started escorting him to school and picking him up the moment class let out. That’s been for the past two months—he hasn’t had any more injuries. But I have to go to a conference tomorrow morning and—”

“You want someone to keep an eye on him.”

“That, yes,” she said. “But I also want you to find out who has been trying to hurt him.”

I arched an eyebrow. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“I used River’s financial advisor to pull some strings. You’re expected to arrive at the school tomorrow morning to begin work as the school janitor.”

I blinked. “Wait. Bigfoot has a financial advisor? *Who?* Like, Nessie?”

“Don’t be a child,” she said. “The human tribes assist the Forest People by providing an interface. River’s folk give financial, medical, and educational aid in return. It works.”

My imagination provided me with an image of River Shoulders standing in front of a children’s music class, his huge fingers waving a baton that had been reduced to a matchstick by his enormity.

Sometimes my head is like an Etch A Sketch. I shook it a little, and the image went away.

“Right,” I said. “It might be difficult to get you something actionable.”

Pounder’s eyes almost seemed to turn a green-tinged shade of gold, and her voice became quiet and hard. “I am not interested in courts,” she said. “I only care about my son.”

Yikes.

Bigfoot Irwin had himself one formidable mama bear. If it turned out that I was right and he was having issues with another child, that could cause problems. People can overreact to things when their kids get involved. I might have to be careful with how much truth got doled out to Dr. Pounder.

Nothing’s ever simple, is it?

* * *

The school was called the Madison Academy, and it was a private elementary and middle school on the north side of town. Whatever strings River Shoulders had pulled, they were good ones. I ambled in the next morning, went into the administrative office, and was greeted with the enthusiasm of a cloister of diabetics meeting their insulin delivery truck. Their sanitation engineer had abruptly departed for a Hawaiian vacation, and they needed a temporary replacement.

So I wound up wearing a pair of coveralls that were too short in the arms, too short in the legs, and too short in the crotch, with the name “Norm” stenciled on the left breast. I was shown to my office, which was a closet with a tiny desk and several shelves stacked with cleaning supplies of the usual sort.

It could have been worse. The stencil could have read “Freddie.”

So I started engineering sanitation. One kid threw up, and another started a paint fight with his friend in the art room. The office paged me on an old intercom system that ran throughout the halls and had an outlet in the closet when they needed something in particular, but by ten I was clear of the child-created havoc and dealing with the standard human havoc, emptying trash cans, sweeping floors and halls, and generally cleaning up. As I did, going from classroom to classroom to take care of any full trash cans, I kept an eye out for Bigfoot Irwin.

I spotted him by lunchtime, and I took my meal at a table set aside for faculty and staff in one corner of the cafeteria as the kids ate.

Bigfoot Irwin was one of the tallest boys in sight, and he hadn’t even hit puberty yet. He was all skin and bones—and I recognized something else about him at once. He was a loner.

He didn’t look like an unpleasant kid or anything, but he carried himself in a fashion that suggested that he was apart from the other children; not aloof, simply separate. His expression was distracted, and his mind was clearly a million miles away. He had a double-sized lunch and a paperback book crowding his tray, and he headed for one end of a lunch table. He sat down, opened the book with one hand, and started eating with the other, reading as he went.

The trouble seemed obvious. A group of five or six boys occupied the other end of his lunch table, and they leaned their heads closer together and started muttering to one another and casting covert glances at Irwin.

I winced. I knew where this was going. I'd seen it before, when it had been me with the book and the lunch tray.

Two of the boys stood up, and they looked enough alike to make me think that they either had been born very close together or else were fraternal twins. They both had messy, sandy brown hair, long, narrow faces, and pointed chins. They looked like they might have been a year or two ahead of Irwin, though they were both shorter than the lanky boy.

They split, moving down either side of the table toward Irwin, their footsteps silent. I hunched my shoulders and watched them out of the corner of my eye. Whatever they were up to, it wouldn't be lethal, not right here in front of half the school, and it might be possible to learn something about the pair by watching them in action.

They moved together, though not perfectly in synch. It reminded me of a movie I'd seen in high school about juvenile lions learning to hunt together. One of the kids, wearing a black baseball cap, leaned over the table and casually swatted the book out of Irwin's hands. Irwin started and turned toward him, lifting his hands into a vague, confused-looking defensive posture.

As he did, the second kid, in a red sweatshirt, casually drove a finger down onto the edge of Irwin's dining tray. It flipped up, spilling food and drink all over Irwin.

A bowl broke, silverware rattled, and the whole tray clattered down. Irwin sat there looking stunned while the two bullies cruised right on by, as casual as can be. They were already fifteen feet away when the other children in the dining hall had zeroed in on the sound and reacted to the mess with a round of applause and catcalls.

"Pounder!" snarled a voice, and I looked up to see a man in a white visor, sweatpants, and a T-shirt come marching in from the hallway outside the cafeteria. "Pounder, what is this mess?"

Irwin blinked owlishly at the barrel-chested man and shook his head. "I ..." He glanced after the two retreating bullies and then around the cafeteria. "I guess ... I accidentally knocked my tray over, Coach Pete."

Coach Pete scowled and folded his arms. "If this was the first time this had happened, I wouldn't think anything of it. But how many times has your tray ended up on the floor, Pounder?"

Irwin looked down. "This would be five, sir."

“Yes it would,” said Coach Pete. He picked up the paperback Irwin had been reading. “If your head wasn’t in these trashy science fiction books all the time, maybe you’d be able to feed yourself without making a mess.”

“Yes, sir,” Irwin said.

“*Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*,” Coach Pete said, looking at the book. “That’s stupid. You can’t hitchhike onto a spaceship.”

“No, sir,” Irwin said.

“Detention,” Coach Pete said. “Report to me after school.”

“Yes, sir.”

Coach Pete slapped the paperback against his leg, scowled at Irwin—and then abruptly looked up at me. “What?” he demanded.

“I was just wondering. You don’t, by any chance, have a Vogon in your family tree?”

Coach Pete eyed me, his chest swelling in what an anthropologist might call a threat display. It might have been impressive if I hadn’t been talking to River Shoulders the night before. “That a joke?”

“That depends on how much poetry you write,” I said.

At this Coach Pete looked confused. He clearly didn’t like feeling that way, which seemed a shame, since I suspected he spent a lot of time doing it. Irwin’s eyes widened and he darted a quick look at me. His mouth twitched, but the kid kept himself from smiling or laughing—which was fairly impressive in a boy his age.

Coach Pete glowered at me, pointed a finger as if it might have been a gun, and said, “You tend to your own business.”

I held up both hands in a gesture of mild acceptance. I rolled my eyes as soon as Coach Pete turned his back, drawing another quiver of restraint from Irwin.

“Pick this up,” Coach Pete said to Irwin, and gestured at the spilled lunch on the floor. Then he turned and stomped away, taking Irwin’s paperback with him. The two kids who had been giving Irwin grief had made their way back to their original seats, meanwhile, and were at the far end of the table, looking smug.

I pushed my lunch away and got up from the table. I went over to Irwin’s side and knelt down to help him clean up his mess. I picked up the tray, slid it to a point between us, and said, “Just stack it up here.”

Irwin gave me a quick, shy glance from beneath his mussed hair, and started plucking up fallen bits of lunch. His hands were almost comically

large compared to the rest of him, but his fingers were quick and dexterous. After a few seconds he asked, "You've read the *Hitchhiker's Guide*?"

"Forty-two times," I said.

He smiled and then ducked his head again. "No one else here likes it."

"Well, it's not for everyone, is it?" I asked. "Personally, I've always wondered if Adams might not be a front man for a particularly talented dolphin. Which I think would make the book loads funnier."

Irwin let out a quick bark of laughter and then hunched his shoulders and kept cleaning up. His shoulders shook.

"Those two boys give you trouble a lot?" I asked.

Irwin's hands stopped moving for a second. Then he started up again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I've been you before," I said. "The kid who liked reading books about aliens and goblins and knights and explorers at lunch, and in class, and during recess. I didn't care much about sports. And I got picked on a lot."

"They don't pick on me," Irwin said quickly. "It's just ... just what guys do. They give me a hard time. It's in fun."

"And it doesn't make you angry," I said. "Not even a little."

His hands slowed down, and his face turned thoughtful. "Sometimes," he said quietly. "When they spoil my broccoli."

I blinked. "Broccoli?"

"I love broccoli," Irwin said, looking up at me, his expression serious.

"Kid," I said, smiling, "no one loves broccoli. No one even *likes* broccoli. All the grown-ups just agree to lie about it so that we can make kids eat it, in vengeance for what our parents did to us."

"Well, I love broccoli," Irwin said, his jaw set.

"Hunh," I said. "Guess I've seen something new today." We finished and I said, "Go get some more lunch. I'll take care of this."

"Thank you," he said soberly. "Um, Norm."

I grunted, nodded to him, tossed the dropped food, and returned the tray. Then I sat back down at the corner table with my lunch and watched Irwin and his tormentors from the corner of my eye. The two bullies never took their eyes off Irwin, even while talking and joking with their group.

I recognized that behavior, though I'd never seen it in a child before; only in hunting cats, vampires, and sundry monsters.

The two kids were predators.

Young and inexperienced, maybe. But predators.

For the first time, I thought that Bigfoot Irwin might be in real trouble.

I went back to my own tray and wolfed down the “food” on it. I wanted to keep a closer eye on Irwin.

Being a wizard is all about being prepared. Well, that and magic, obviously. While I could do a few things in a hurry, most magic takes long moments or hours to arrange, and that means you have to know what’s coming. I’d brought a few things with me, but I needed more information before I could act decisively on the kid’s behalf.

I kept track of Irwin after he left the cafeteria. It wasn’t hard. His face was down, his eyes on his book, and even though he was one of the younger kids in the school, he stood out, tall and gangly. I contrived to go past his classroom several times in the next hour. It was trig, which I knew, except I’d been doing it in high school.

Irwin was the youngest kid in the class. He was also evidently the smartest. He never looked up from his book. Several times the teacher tried to catch him out, asking him questions. Irwin put his finger on the place in his book, glanced up at the blackboard, and answered them with barely a pause. I found myself grinning.

Next I tracked down Irwin’s tormentors. They weren’t hard to find, either, since they both sat in the chairs closest to the exit, as though they couldn’t wait to go off and be delinquent the instant school was out. They sat in class with impatient, sullen expressions. They looked like they were in the grip of agonizing boredom, but they didn’t seem to be preparing to murder a teacher or anything.

I had a hunch that something about Irwin was drawing a predatory reaction from those two kids. And Coach Vagon had arrived on the scene pretty damned quickly—too much so for coincidence, maybe.

“Maybe Bigfoot Irwin isn’t the only scion at this school,” I muttered to myself.

And maybe I wasn’t the only one looking out for the interests of a child born with one foot in this world and one in another.

I was standing outside the gymnasium as the last class of the day let out, leaning against the wall on my elbows, my feet crossed at the heels, my

head hanging down, my wheeled bucket and mop standing unused a good seven feet away—pretty much the picture of an industrious janitor. The kids went hurrying by in a rowdy herd, with Irwin’s tormentors being the last to leave the gym. I felt their eyes on me as they went past, but I didn’t react to them.

Coach Vogon came out last, flicking out the banks of fluorescent lights as he went, his footsteps brisk and heavy. He came to a dead stop as he came out of the door and found me waiting for him.

There was a long moment of silence while he sized me up. I let him. I wasn’t looking for a fight, and I had taken the deliberately relaxed and nonconfrontational stance I was in to convey that concept to him. I figured he was connected to the supernatural world, but I didn’t know *how* connected he might be. Hell, I didn’t even know if he was human.

Yet.

“Don’t you have work to do?” he demanded.

“Doing it,” I said. “I mean, obviously.”

I couldn’t actually hear his eyes narrow, but I was pretty sure they did. “You got a lot of nerve, buddy, talking to an instructor like that.”

“If there weren’t all these kids around, I might have said another syllable or two,” I drawled. “Coach Vogon.”

“You’re about to lose your job, buddy. Get to work or I’ll report you for malingering.”

“Malingering,” I said. “Four whole syllables. You’re good.”

He rolled another step toward me and jabbed a finger into my chest. “Buddy, you’re about to buy a lot of trouble. Who do you think you are?”

“Harry Dresden,” I said. “Wizard.”

And I looked at him as I opened my Sight.

A wizard’s Sight is an extra sense, one that allows him to perceive the patterns of energy and magic that suffuse the universe—energy that includes every conceivable form of magic. It doesn’t actually open a third eye in your forehead or anything, but the brain translates the perceptions into the visual spectrum. In the circles I run in, the Sight shows you things as they truly are, cutting through every known form of veiling magic, illusion, and other mystic chicanery.

In this case, it showed me that the thing standing in front of me wasn’t human.

Beneath its illusion, the spindly humanoid creature stood a little more than five feet high, and it might have weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. It was naked, and anatomically it resembled a Ken doll. Its skin was a dark gray, its eyes absolutely huge, bulbous, and midnight black. It had a rounded, high-crowned head and long, delicately pointed ears. I could still see the illusion of Coach Pete around the creature, a vague and hazy outline.

It lowered the lids of its bulbous eyes, the gesture somehow exceptionally lazy, and then nodded slowly. It inclined its head the smallest measurable amount possible and murmured, in a melodious and surprisingly deep voice, "Wizard."

I blinked a few times and waved my Sight away, so that I was facing Coach Pete again. "We should talk," I said.

The apparent man stared at me unblinkingly, his expression as blank as a discarded puppet's. It was probably my imagination that made his eyes look suddenly darker. "Regarding?"

"Irwin Pounder," I said. "I would prefer to avoid a conflict with Svartalfheim."

He inhaled and exhaled slowly through his nose. "You recognized me."

In fact, I'd been making an educated guess, but the svartalf didn't need to know that. I knew precious little about the creatures. They were extremely gifted craftsmen, and were responsible for creating most of the really cool artifacts of Norse myth. They weren't wicked, exactly, but they were ruthless, proud, stubborn, and greedy, which often added up to similar results. They were known to be sticklers for keeping their word, and God help you if you broke yours to them. Most important, they were a small supernatural nation unto themselves: one that protected its citizens with maniacal zeal.

"I had a good teacher," I said. "I want your boys to lay off Irwin Pounder."

"Point of order," he said. "They are not mine. I am not their progenitor. I am a guardian only."

"Be that as it may," I said, "my concern is for Irwin, not the brothers."

"He is a whetstone," he said. "They sharpen their instincts upon him. He is good for them."

"They aren't good for him," I said. "Fix it."

“It is not my place to interfere with them,” Coach Pete said. “Only to offer indirect guidance and to protect them from anyone who would interfere with their growth.”

The last phrase was as emotionless as the first, but it somehow carried an ugly ring of a threat—a polite threat, but a threat nonetheless.

Sometimes I react badly to being threatened. I might have glared a little.

“Hypothetically,” I said, “let’s suppose that I saw those boys giving Irwin a hard time again, and I made it my business to stop them. What would you do?”

“Slay you,” Coach Pete said. His tone was utterly absent of any doubt.

“Awfully sure of yourself, aren’t you.”

He spoke as if reciting a single-digit arithmetic problem. “You are young. I am not.”

I felt my jaw clench, and forced myself to take a slow breath, to stay calm. “They’re hurting him.”

“Be that as it may,” he said calmly, “my concern is for the brothers, not for Irwin Pounder.”

I ground my teeth and wished I could pick my words out of them before continuing the conversation. “We’ve both stated our positions,” I said. “How do we resolve the conflict?”

“That also is not my concern,” he said. “I will not dissuade the brothers. I will slay you should you attempt to do so yourself. There is nothing else to discuss.”

He shivered a little, and suddenly the illusion of Coach Pete seemed to gain a measure of life, of definition, like an empty glove abruptly filled by the flesh of a hand.

“If you will excuse me,” he said, in Coach Pete’s annoying tone of voice, walking past me, “I have a detention over which to preside.”

“To preside over,” I said, and snorted at his back. “Over which to preside. No one actually talks like that.”

He turned his head and gave me a flat-eyed look. Then he rounded a corner and was gone.

I rubbed at the spot on my forehead between my eyebrows and tried to think.

I had a bad feeling that fighting this guy was going to be a losing proposition. In my experience, when someone gets their kids a supernatural supernanny, they don’t pick pushovers. Among wizards, I’m pretty buff—

but the world is full of bigger fish than me. More to the point, even if I fought the svartalf and won, it might drag the White Council of Wizards into a violent clash with Svartalfheim. I wouldn't want to have something like that on my conscience.

I wanted to protect the Pounder kid, and I wasn't going to back away from that. But how was I supposed to protect him from the Bully Brothers if they had a heavyweight on deck, ready to charge in swinging? That kind of brawl could spill over onto any nearby kids, and fast. I didn't want this to turn into a slugfest. That wouldn't help Irwin Pounder.

But what could I do? What options did I have? How could I act without dragging the svartalf into a confrontation?

I couldn't.

"Ah," I said to no one, lifting a finger in the air. "Aha!"

I grabbed my mop bucket and hurried toward the cafeteria.

The school emptied out fast, making the same transition every school does every day, changing from a place full of life and energy, of movement and noise, into a series of echoing chambers and empty halls. Teachers and staff seemed as eager to be gone as the students. Good. It was still possible that things would get ugly, and if they did, the fewer people around, the better.

By the time I went by the janitor's closet to pick up the few tools I'd brought with me and went to the cafeteria, my bucket's squeaking wheels were the loudest sound I could hear. I turned the corner at almost exactly the same time as the Bully Brothers appeared from the opposite end of the hall. They drew up short, and I could feel the weight of their eyes as they assessed me. I ignored them and went on inside.

Bigfoot Irwin was already inside the cafeteria, seated at a table, writing on a piece of paper. I recognized the kid's rigid, resigned posture, and it made my wrist ache just to see it: Coach Pete had him writing a sentence repetitively, probably something about being more careful with his lunch tray. The monster.

Coach Pete stood leaning against a wall, reading a sports magazine of some sort. Or at least, that was what he appeared to be doing. I had to wonder how much genuine interest a svartalf might have in the NBA. His eyes flicked up as I entered; I saw them go flat.

I set my mop and bucket aside and started sweeping the floors with a large dust broom. My janitorial form was perfect. I saw Coach Pete's jaw

clench a couple of times, and then he walked over to me.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Sweeping the floor,” I replied, guileless as a newborn.

“This is not a matter for levity,” he said. “No amount of it will save your life.”

“You grossly underestimate the power of laughter,” I said. “But if there’s some kind of violent altercation between students, any janitor in the world would find it his honor-bound duty to report it to the administration.”

Coach Pete made a growling sound.

“Go ahead,” I said. “Let your kids loose on him. I saw how they behaved in their classrooms. They’re problem cases. Irwin’s obviously a brilliant student and a good kid. When the administration finds out the three of them were involved in a fight, what do you think happens to the Troublemaker Twins? This is a private school. Out they go. Irwin is protected—and I won’t have to lift a finger to interfere.”

Coach Pete rolled up the magazine and tapped it against his leg a couple of times. Then he relaxed, and a small smile appeared upon his lips. “You are correct, of course, except for one thing.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“They will not be exiled. Their parents donate more funds to the school than any ten other families—and a great deal more than Irwin’s mother could ever afford.” He gave me a very small, very Gallic shrug. “This is a private school. The boys’ parents paid for the cafeteria within which we stand.”

I found myself gritting my teeth. “First of all, you have got to get over this fetish for grammatically correct prepositions. It makes you sound like a prissy twit. And second of all, money isn’t everything.”

“Money is power,” he replied.

“Power isn’t everything.”

“No,” he said, and his smile became smug. “It is the only thing.”

I looked back out into the hallway through the open glass wall separating it from the cafeteria. The Bully Brothers were standing in the hall, staring at Irwin the way hungry lions stare at gazelles.

Coach Pete nodded pleasantly to me and returned to his original place by the wall, unrolling his magazine and opening it again.

“Dammit,” I whispered. The svartalf might well be right. At an upper-class institution such as this, money and politics would have a ridiculous

amount of influence. Whether aristocracies were hereditary or economic, they'd been successfully buying their children out of trouble for centuries. The Bully Brothers might well come out of this squeaky clean, and they'd be able to continue to persecute Bigfoot Irwin.

Maybe this would turn out to be a slugfest after all.

I swept my way over to Irwin's table and came to a stop. Then I sat down across from him.

He looked up from his page of scrawled sentences, and his face was pale. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"How you doing, kid?" I asked him. When I spoke, he actually flinched a little.

"Fine," he mumbled.

Hell's bells. He was afraid of me. "Irwin," I said, keeping my voice gentle, "relax. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Okay," he said, without relaxing a bit.

"They've been doing this for a while now, haven't they?" I asked him.

"Um," he said.

"The Bully Brothers. The ones staring at you right now."

Irwin shivered and glanced aside without actually turning his head toward the window. "It's not a big deal."

"It kind of is," I said. "They've been giving you grief for a long time, haven't they? Only lately it's been getting worse. They've been scarier. More violent. Bothering you more and more often."

He said nothing, but something in his lack of reaction told me that I'd hit the nail on the head.

I sighed. "Irwin, my name is Harry Dresden. Your father sent me to help you."

That made his eyes snap up to me, and his mouth opened. "M-my ... my dad?"

"Yeah," I said. "He can't be here to help you. So he asked me to do it for him."

"My dad," Irwin said, and I heard the ache in his voice, so poignant that my own chest tightened in empathy. I'd never known my mother, and my father died before I started going to school. I knew what it was like to have holes in my life in the shape of people who should have been there.

His eyes flicked toward the Bully Brothers again, though he didn't turn his head. "Sometimes," he said quietly, "if I ignore them, they go away."

He stared down at his paper. "My dad ... I mean, I never ... you met him?"

"Yeah."

His voice was very small. "Is ... is he nice?"

"Seems to be," I said gently.

"And ... and he knows about me?"

"Yeah," I said. "He wants to be here for you. But he can't."

"Why not?" Irwin asked.

"It's complicated."

Irwin nodded and looked down. "Every Christmas there's a present from him. But I think maybe Mom is just writing his name on the tag."

"Maybe not," I said quietly. "He sent me. And I'm way more expensive than a present."

Irwin frowned at that and said, "What are you going to do?"

"That isn't the question you should be asking," I said.

"What is, then?"

I put my elbows on the table and leaned toward him. "The question, Irwin, is what are *you* going to do?"

"Get beat up, probably," he said.

"You can't keep hoping they'll just go away, kid," I said. "There are people out there who enjoy hurting and scaring others. They're going to keep doing it until you make them stop."

"I'm not going to fight anyone," Irwin all but whispered.

"I'm not going to hurt anyone. I ... I can't. And besides, if they're picking on me, they're not picking on anyone else."

I leaned back and took a deep breath, studying his hunched shoulders, his bowed head. The kid was frightened, the kind of fear that is planted and nurtured and which grows over the course of months and years. But there was also a kind of gentle, immovable resolve in the boy's skinny body. He wasn't afraid of facing the Bully Brothers. He just dreaded going through the pain that the encounter would bring.

Courage, like fear, comes in multiple varieties.

"Damn," I said quietly. "You got some heart, kiddo."

"Can you stay with me?" he asked. "If ... if you're here, maybe they'll leave me alone."

"Today," I said quietly. "What about tomorrow?"

"I don't know," he said. "Are you going away?"

“Can’t stay here forever,” I replied. “Sooner or later you’re going to be on your own.”

“I won’t fight,” he said. A droplet of water fell from his bowed head to smear part of a sentence on his paper. “I won’t be like them.”

“Irwin,” I said. “Look at me.”

He lifted his eyes. They were full. He was blinking to keep more tears from falling.

“Fighting isn’t always a bad thing.”

“That’s not what the school says.”

I smiled briefly. “The school has liability to worry about. I only have to worry about you.”

He frowned, his expression intent, pensive. “When isn’t it a bad thing?”

“When you’re protecting yourself, or someone else, from harm,” I said. “When someone wants to hurt you or someone who can’t defend themselves—and when the rightful authority can’t or won’t protect you.”

“But you have to hurt people to win a fight. And that isn’t right.”

“No,” I said. “It isn’t. But sometimes it is necessary.”

“It isn’t necessary right now,” he said. “I’ll be fine. It’ll hurt, but I’ll be fine.”

“Maybe you will,” I said. “But what about when they’re done with you? What happens when they decide that it was so much fun to hurt you, they go pick on someone else, too?”

“Do you think they’ll do that?”

“Yes,” I said. “That’s how bullies work. They keep hurting people until someone makes them stop.”

He fiddled with the pencil in his fingers. “I don’t like fighting. I don’t even like playing Street Fighter.”

“This isn’t really about fighting,” I said. “It’s about communication.”

He frowned. “Huh?”

“They’re doing something wrong,” I said. “You need to communicate with them. Tell them that what they’re doing isn’t acceptable, and that they need to stop doing it.”

“I’ve said that,” he said. “I tried that a long time ago. It didn’t work.”

“You talked to them,” I said. “It didn’t get through. You need to find another way to get your message through. You have to show them.”

“You mean hurt them.”

“Not necessarily,” I said quietly. “But guys like those two jokers only respect strength. If you show them that you have it, they’ll get the idea.”

Irwin frowned harder. “No one ever talked to me about it like that before.”

“I guess not,” I said.

“I’m ... I’m scared of doing that.”

“Who wouldn’t be?” I asked him. “But the only way to beat your fears is to face them. If you don’t, they’re going to keep on doing this to you, and then others, and someday someone is going to get hurt bad. It might even be those two jackasses who get hurt—if someone doesn’t make them realize that they can’t go through life acting like that.”

“They aren’t really bad guys,” Irwin said slowly. “I mean ... to anyone but me. They’re okay to other people.”

“Then I’d say that you’d be helping them as well as yourself, Irwin.”

He nodded slowly and took a deep breath. “I’ll ... I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” I said. “Thinking for yourself is the most valuable skill you’ll ever learn.”

“Thank you, Harry,” he said.

I rose and picked up my broom. “You bet.”

I went back to sweeping one end of the cafeteria. Coach Pete stood at the other end. Irwin returned to his writing—and the Bully Brothers came in.

They approached as before, moving between the tables, splitting up to come at Irwin from two sides. They ignored me and Coach Pete, closing in on Irwin with impatient eagerness.

Irwin’s pencil stopped scratching when they both were about five feet away from him, and without looking up he said in a sharp, firm voice, “Stop.”

They did. I could see the face of only one of them, but the bully was blinking in surprise.

“This is not cool,” Irwin said. “And I’m not going to let you do it anymore.”

The brothers eyed him, traded rather feral smiles, and then each of them lunged at Irwin and grabbed an arm. They hauled him back with surprising speed and power, slamming his back onto the floor. One of them started slapping at his eyes and face while the other produced a short length of heavy rubber tubing, jerked Irwin’s shirt up, and started hitting him on the stomach with the hose.

I gritted my teeth and reached for the handle of my mop—except it wasn't a mop that was poking up out of the bucket. It was my staff, a six-foot length of oak as thick as my circled thumb and forefinger. If this was how the Bully Brothers started the beating, I didn't even want to think about what they'd do for a finale. Svartalf or not, I couldn't allow things to go any further before I stepped in.

Coach Pete's dark eyes glittered at me from behind his sports magazine, and he crooked a couple of fingers on one hand in a way that no human being could have. I don't know what kind of magical energy the svartalf was using, but he was good with it. There was a sharp crackling sound, and the water in the mop bucket froze solid in an instant, trapping my staff in place.

My heart sped up. That kind of magical control was a bad, bad sign. It meant that the svartalf was better than me—probably a lot better. He hadn't used a focus of any kind to help him out, the way my staff would help me focus and control my own power. If we'd been fighting with swords, that move would have been the same as him clipping off the tips of my eyelashes without drawing blood. This guy would kill me if I fought him.

I set my jaw, grabbed the staff in both hands, and sent a surge of my will and power rushing down its rune-carved length into the entrapping ice. I muttered "*Forzare*" as I twisted the staff, and pure energy lashed out into the ice, pulverizing it into chunks the size of gravel.

Coach Pete leaned forward slightly, eager, and I saw his eyes gleam. Svartalves were old-school, and their culture had been born in the time of the Vikings. They thought mortal combat was at least as fun as it was scary, and their idea of mercy only embraced killing you quickly as opposed to killing you slowly. If I started up with this svartalf, it wouldn't be over until one of us was dead. Probably me. I was afraid.

The sound of the rubber hose hitting Irwin's stomach and the harsh breathing of the struggling children echoed in the large room.

I took a deep breath, grabbed my staff in two hands, and began drawing in my will once more.

And then Bigfoot Irwin roared, "*I said no!*"

The kid twisted his shoulders in an abrupt motion and tossed one of the brothers away as if he weighed no more than a soccer ball. The bully flew ten feet before his butt hit the ground. The second brother was still staring in shock when Bigfoot Irwin sat up, grabbed him by the front of his shirt,

and rose. He lifted the second brother's feet off the floor and simply held him there, scowling furiously up at him.

The Bully Brothers had inherited their predatory instinct from their supernatural parent.

Bigfoot Irwin had gotten something else.

The second brother stared down at the younger boy and struggled to wriggle free, his face pale and frantic. Irwin didn't let him go.

"Hey, look at me," Irwin snarled. "This is not okay. You were mean to me. You kept hurting me. For no reason. That's over. Now. I'm not going to let you do it anymore. Okay?"

The first brother sat up shakily from the floor and stared agog at his former victim, now holding his brother effortlessly off the floor.

"Did you hear me?" Irwin asked, giving the kid a little shake. I heard his teeth clack together.

"Y-yeah," stammered the dangling brother, nodding emphatically. "I hear you. I hear you. We hear you."

Irwin scowled for a moment. Then he gave the second brother a push before releasing him. The bully fell to the floor three feet away and scrambled quickly back from Irwin. The pair of them started a slow retreat.

"I mean it," Irwin said. "What you've been doing isn't cool. We'll figure out something else for you to do for fun. Okay?"

The Bully Brothers mumbled something vaguely affirmative and then hurried out of the cafeteria.

Bigfoot Irwin watched them go. Then he looked down at his hands, turning them over and back as if he'd never seen them before.

I kept my grip on my staff and looked down the length of the cafeteria at Coach Pete. I arched an eyebrow at him. "It seems like the boys sorted this out on their own."

Coach Pete lowered his magazine slowly. The air was thick with tension, and the silence was its hard surface.

Then the svartalf said, "Your sentences, Mr. Pounder."

"Yessir, Coach Pete," Irwin said. He turned back to the table and sat down, and his pencil started scratching at the paper again.

Coach Pete nodded at him, then came over to me. He stood facing me for a moment, his expression blank.

"I didn't intervene," I said. "I didn't try to dissuade your boys from following their natures. Irwin did that."

The svartalf pursed his lips thoughtfully and then nodded slowly. "Technically accurate. And yet you still had a hand in what just happened. Why should I not exact retribution for your interference?"

"Because I just helped your boys."

"In what way?"

"Irwin and I taught them caution—that some prey is too much for them to handle. And we didn't even hurt them to make it happen."

Coach Pete considered that for a moment and then gave me a faint smile. "A lesson best learned early rather than late." He turned and started to walk away.

"Hey," I said in a sharp, firm voice.

He paused.

"You took the kid's book today," I said. "Please return it."

Irwin's pencil scratched along the page, suddenly loud.

Coach Pete turned. Then he pulled the paperback in question out of his pocket and flicked it through the air. I caught it in one hand, which probably made me look a lot more cool and collected than I felt at the time.

Coach Pete inclined his head to me, a little more deeply than before. "Wizard."

I mirrored the gesture. "Svartalf."

He left the cafeteria, shaking his head. What sounded suspiciously like a chuckle bubbled in his wake.

I waited until Irwin was done with his sentences, and then I walked him to the front of the building, where his maternal grandmother was waiting to pick him up.

"Was that okay?" he asked me. "I mean, did I do right?"

"Asking me if I thought you did right isn't the question," I said.

Irwin suddenly smiled at me. "Do I think I did right?" He nodded slowly. "I think ... I think I do."

"How's it feel?" I asked him.

"It feels good. I feel ... not happy. Satisfied. Whole."

"That's how it's supposed to feel," I said. "Whenever you've got a choice, do good, kiddo. It isn't always fun or easy, but in the long run it makes your life better."

He nodded, frowning thoughtfully. "I'll remember."

"Cool," I said.

He offered me his hand very seriously, and I shook it. He had a strong grip for a kid. "Thank you, Harry. Could ... could I ask you a favor?"

"Sure."

"If you see my dad again ... could you tell him ... could you tell him I did good?"

"Of course," I said. "I think what you did will make him very proud."

That all but made the kid glow. "And ... and tell him that ... that I'd like to meet him. You know. Someday."

"Will do," I said quietly.

Bigfoot Irwin nodded at me. Then he turned and made his gangly way over to the waiting car and slid into it. I stood and watched until the car was out of sight. Then I rolled my bucket of ice back into the school so that I could go home.

JIM BUTCHER

**GRAVE
PERIL**

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES



A ROC BOOK

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Chapter One

There are reasons I hate to drive fast. For one, the *Blue Beetle*, the mismatched Volkswagen bug that I putter around in, rattles and groans dangerously at anything above sixty miles an hour. For another, I don't get along so well with technology. Anything manufactured after about World War II seems to be susceptible to abrupt malfunction when I get close to it. As a rule, when I drive, I drive malfunction when I get close to it. As a rule, when I drive, I drive very carefully and sensibly.

Tonight was an exception to the rule.

The *Beetle*'s tires screeched in protest as we rounded a corner, clearly against the NO LEFT TURN sign posted there. The old car growled gamely, as though it sensed what was at stake, and continued its valiant puttering, moaning, and rattling as we zoomed down the street.

"Can we go any faster?" Michael drawled. It wasn't a complaint. It was just a question, calmly voiced.

"Only if the wind gets behind us or we start going down a hill," I said. "How far to the hospital?"

The big man shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. He had that kind of salt-and-pepper hair, dark against silver, that some men seem lucky enough to inherit, though his beard was still a solid color of dark brown, almost black. There were worry and laugh lines at the corners of his leathery face. His broad, lined hands rested on his knees, which were scrunched up due to the dashboard. "I don't know for certain," he answered me. "Two miles?"

I squinted out the *Beetle*'s window at the fading light. "The sun is almost down. I hope we're not too late."

"We're doing all we can," Michael assured me. "If God wills it, we'll be there in time. Are you sure of your . . ." his mouth twisted with distaste, "source?"

"Bob is annoying, but rarely wrong," I answered, jamming on the brakes and dodging around a garbage truck. "If he said the ghost would be there, it will be there."

"Lord be with us," Michael said, and crossed himself. I felt a stirring of something; powerful, placid energy around him—the power of faith. "Harry, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"Don't ask me to Mass again," I told him, uncomfortable. "You know I'm just going to say no." Someone in a red Taurus cut me off, and I had to swerve around him, into the turn lane, and then ahead of him again. A couple of the *Beetle*'s wheels lifted off the ground. "Jerk!" I howled out the driver's window.

"That doesn't preclude asking," Michael said. "But no. I wanted to know when you were going to marry Miss Rodriguez."

"Hell's Bells, Michael," I scowled. "You and I have been chasing all over town for the past two weeks, going up against every ghost and spirit that has all of a sudden reared its ugly head. We still don't know what's causing the spirit world to go postal."

"I know that, Harry, but—"

"At the moment," I interrupted, "we're going after a nasty old biddy at Cook County, who could kill us if we aren't focused. And you're asking me about my love life."

Michael frowned at me. "You're sleeping with her, aren't you?" he said.

"Not often enough," I growled, and shifted lanes, swerving around a passenger bus.

The knight sighed. "Do you love her?" he asked.

"Michael," I said. "Give me a break. Where do you get off asking questions like that?"

"Do you love her?" he pressed.

"I'm trying to drive, here."

"Harry," he asked, smiling. "Do you love the girl or don't you? It isn't a difficult question."

"Speaks the expert," I grumbled. I went past a blue-and-white at about twenty miles an hour over the speed limit, and saw the police officer behind the wheel blink and spill his coffee as he saw me go past. I checked my rearview mirror, and saw the blue bulbs on the police car whirl to life. "Dammit, that tears it. The cops are going to be coming in right after us."

"Don't worry about them," Michael assured me. "Just answer the question."

I flashed Michael a glance. He watched me, his face broad and honest, his jaw strong, and his grey eyes flashing. His hair was cropped close, Marine-length, on top, but he sported a short, warrior's beard, which he kept clipped close to his face. "I suppose so," I said, after a second. "Yeah."

"Then you don't mind saying it?"

"Saying what?" I stalled.

"Harry," Michael scolded, holding on as we bounced through a dip in the street. "Don't be a child about this. If you love the woman, say so."

"Why?" I demanded.

"You haven't told her, have you? You've never said it."

I glared at him. "So what if I haven't? She knows. What's the big deal?"

"Harry Dresden," he said. "You, of all people, should know the power of words."

"Look, she knows," I said, tapping the brakes and then flattening the accelerator again. "I got her a card."

"A card?" Michael asked.

"A Hallmark."

He sighed. "Let me hear you say the words."

"What?"

"Say the words," he demanded. "If you love the woman, why can't you say so?"

"I don't just go around *saying* that to people, Michael. Stars and sky, that's . . . I just couldn't, all right?"

"You don't love her," Michael said. "I see."

"You know that's not—"

"Say it, Harry."

"If it will get you off my back," I said, and gave the *Beetle* every ounce of gas that I could. I could see the police in traffic somewhere behind me. "All right." I flashed Michael a ferocious, wizardly scowl and snarled, "I love her. There, how's that?"

Michael beamed. "You see? That's the only thing that stands between you two. You're not the kind of person who says what they feel. Or who is very introspective, Harry. Sometimes, you just need to look into the mirror and see what's there."

"I don't like mirrors," I grumbled.

“Regardless, you needed to realize that you *do* love the woman. After Elaine, I thought you might isolate yourself too much and never—”

I felt a sudden flash of anger and vehemence. “I don’t *talk* about Elaine, Michael. Ever. If you can’t live with that, get the hell out of my car and let me work on my own.”

Michael frowned at me, probably more for my choice of words than anything else. “I’m talking about Susan, Harry. If you love her, you should marry her.”

“I’m a wizard. I don’t have *time* to be married.”

“I’m a knight,” Michael responded. “And I have the time. It’s worth it. You’re alone too much. It’s starting to show.”

I scowled at him again. “What does that mean?”

“You’re tense. Grumpy. And you’re isolating yourself more all the time. You need to keep up human contact, Harry. It would be so easy for you to start down a darker path.”

“Michael,” I snapped, “I don’t need a lecture. I don’t need the conversion speech again. I don’t need the ‘cast aside your evil powers before they consume you’ speech. *Again*. What I need is for you to back me up while I go take care of this thing.”

Cook County Hospital loomed into sight and I made an illegal U-turn to get the *Blue Beetle* up into the Emergency entrance lane.

Michael unbuckled his seat belt, even before the car had come to a stop, and reached into the backseat to draw an enormous sword, fully five feet long in its black scabbard. He exited the car and buckled on the sword. Then he reached back in for a white cloak with a red cross upon the left breast, which he tossed over his shoulders in a practiced motion. He clasped it with another cross, this one of silver, at his throat. It clashed with his flannel workman’s shirt, blue jeans, and steel-toed work boots.

“Can’t you leave the cloak off, at least?” I complained. I opened the door and unfolded myself from the *Beetle*’s driver’s seat, stretching my long legs, and reached into the backseat to recover my own equipment—my new wizard’s staff and blasting rod, each of them freshly carved and still a little green around the edges.

Michael looked up at me, wounded. “The cloak is as much a part of what I do as the sword, Harry. Besides, it’s no more ridiculous than that coat you wear.”

I looked down at my black leather duster, the one with the large mantle that fell around my shoulders and spread out as it billowed in a most heavy and satisfactory fashion around my legs. My own black jeans and dark Western shirt were a ton and a half more stylish than Michael’s costume. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It belongs on the set of *El Dorado*,” Michael said. “Are you ready?”

I shot him a withering glance, to which he turned the other cheek with a smile, and we headed toward the door. I could hear police sirens closing in behind us, maybe a block or two away. “This is going to be close.”

“Then we best hurry.” He cast the white cloak back from his right arm, and put his hand on the hilt of the great broadsword. Then he bowed his head, crossed himself, and murmured, “Merciful Father, guide us and protect us as we go to do battle with the darkness.” Once more, there was that thrum of energy around him, like the vibrations of music heard through a thick wall.

I shook my head, and fetched a leather sack, about the size of my palm, from the pocket of my duster. I had to juggle staff, blasting rod, and sack for a moment, and wound up with the staff in my left hand, as was proper, the rod in my right, and the sack dangling from my teeth. “The sun is down,” I grated out. “Let’s move it.”

And we broke into a run, knight and wizard, through the emergency entrance of Cook County Hospital. We drew no small amount of stares as we entered, my duster billowing out in a black cloud behind me, Michael’s white cloak spreading like the wings of the avenging angel whose namesake he was. We pelted inside, and slid to a halt at the first intersection of cool, sterile, bustling hallways.

I grabbed the arm of the first orderly I saw. He blinked, and then gawked at me, from the tips of my Western boots to the dark hair atop my head. He glanced at my staff and rod rather nervously, and at the silver pentacle amulet dangling at my breast, and gulped. Then he looked at Michael, tall and broad, his expression utterly serene, at odds with the white cloak and the broadsword at his hip. He took a nervous step back. “M-m-may I help you?”

I speared him into place with my most ferocious, dark-eyed smile and said, between teeth clenched on the leather sack, “Hi. Could you tell us where the nursery is?”

Chapter Two

We took the fire stairs. Michael knows how technology reacts to me, and the last thing either of us wanted was to be trapped in a broken elevator while innocent lives were snuffed out. Michael led the way, one hand on the rail, one on the hilt of his sword, his legs churning steadily.

I followed him, huffing and puffing. Michael paused by the door and looked back at me, white cloak swirling around his calves. It took me a couple of seconds to come gasping up behind him. “Ready?” he asked me.

“Hrkghngh,” I answered, and nodded, still clenching my leather sack in my teeth, and fumbled a white candle from my duster pocket, along with a box of matches. I had to set my rod and staff aside to light the candle.

Michael wrinkled his nose at the smell of smoke, and pushed open the door. Candle in one hand, rod and staff in the other, I followed, my eyes flicking from my surroundings to the candle’s flame and back.

All I could see was more hospital. Clean walls, clean halls, lots of tile and fluorescent lights. The long, luminescent tubes flickered feebly, as though they had all gone stale at once, and the hall was only dimly lit. Long shadows stretched out from a wheelchair parked to the side of one door and gathered beneath a row of uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs at an intersection of hallways.

The fourth floor was a graveyard, bottom-of-the-well silent. There wasn’t a flicker of sound from a television or radio. No intercoms buzzed. No air-conditioning whirled. Nothing.

We walked down a long hall, our steps sounding out clearly despite an effort to remain quiet. A sign on the wall, decorated with a brightly colored plastic clown, read: NURSERY/MATERNITY, and pointed down another hall.

I stepped past Michael and looked down that hallway. It ended at a pair of swinging doors. This hallway, too, was quiet. The nurse’s station stood empty.

The lights weren’t just flickering here—they were altogether gone. It was entirely dark. Shadows and uncertain shapes loomed everywhere. I took a step forward, past Michael, and as I did the flame of my candle burned down to a cold, clear pinpoint of blue light.

I spat the sack out of my mouth and fumbled it into my pocket. “Michael,” I said, my voice strangled to hushed urgency. “It’s here.” I turned my body, so that he could see the light.

His eyes flicked down to the candle and then back up, to the darkness beyond. “Faith, Harry.” Then he reached to his side with his broad right hand, and slowly, silently, drew

Amoracchius from its sheath. I found it a tad more encouraging than his words. The great blade’s polished steel gave off a lambent glow as Michael stepped forward to stand beside me in the darkness, and the air fairly thrummed with its power—Michael’s own faith, amplified a thousandfold.

“Where are the nurses?” he asked me in a hoarse whisper.

“Spooked off, maybe,” I answered, as quietly. “Or maybe some sort of glamour. At least they’re out of the way.”

I glanced at the sword, and at the long, slender spike of metal set into its cross guard. Perhaps it was only my imagination, but I thought I could see flecks of red still upon it. Probably rust, I reasoned. Sure, rust.

I set the candle down upon the floor, where it continued to burn pinpoint-clear, indicating a spiritual presence. A big one. Bob hadn’t been lying when he’d said that the ghost of Agatha Hagglesworth was no two-bit shade.

“Stay back,” I told Michael. “Give me a minute.”

“If what the spirit told you is correct, this creature is dangerous,” Michael replied. “Let me go first. It will be safer.”

I nodded toward the glowing blade. “Trust me, a ghost would feel the sword coming before you even got to the door. Let me see what I can do first. If I can dust the spook, this whole contest is over before it begins.”

I didn’t wait for Michael to answer me. Instead, I took my blasting rod and staff in my left hand, and in my right I grasped the pouch. I untied the simple knot that held the sack closed, and slipped forward, into the dark.

When I reached the swinging doors, I pressed one of them and it slowly opened. I remained still for a long moment, listening.

I heard singing. A woman’s voice. Gentle. Lovely.

Hush little baby, don’t say a word. Mama’s gonna buy you a mockingbird.

Chapter Three

Even days that culminate in a grand battle against an insane ghost and a trip across the border between this world and the spirit realm usually start out pretty normally. This one, for example, started off with breakfast and then work at the office.

My office is in a building in midtown Chicago. It's an older building, and not in the best of shape, especially since there was that problem with the elevator last year. I don't care what anyone says, that wasn't my fault. When a giant scorpion the size of an Irish wolfhound is tearing its way through the roof of your elevator car, you get real willing to take desperate measures.

Anyway, my office is small—one room, but on the corner, with a couple of windows. The sign on the door reads, simply, HARRY DRESDEN, WIZARD. Just inside the door is a table, covered with pamphlets with titles like: *Magic and You*, and *Why Witches Don't Sink Any Faster Than Anyone Else—a Wizard's Perspective*. I wrote most of them. I think it's important for we practitioners of the Art to keep up a good public image. Anything to avoid another Inquisition.

Behind the table is a sink, counter, and an old coffee machine. My desk faces the door, and a couple of comfortable chairs sit across from it. The air-conditioning rattles, the ceiling fan squeaks on every revolution, and the scent of coffee is soaked into the carpet and the walls.

I shambled in, put coffee on, and sorted through the mail while the coffee percolated. A thank you letter from the Campbells, for chasing a spook out of their house. Junk mail. And, thank goodness, a check from the city for my last batch of work for the Chicago P.D. That had been a nasty case, all in all. Demon summoning, human sacrifice, black magic—the works.

I got my coffee and resolved to call Michael to offer to split my earnings with him—even though the legwork had been all mine, he and *Amoracchius* had come in on the finale. I'd handled the sorcerer, he'd dealt with the demon, and the good guys won the day. I'd turned in my logs and at fifty bucks an hour had netted myself a neat two grand. Michael would refuse the money (he always did) but it seemed polite to make the offer; especially given how much time we'd been spending together recently, in an attempt to track down the source of all the ghostly happenings in the city.

The phone rang before I could pick it up to call Michael. "Harry Dresden," I answered.

"Hello there, Mr. Dresden," said a warm, feminine voice. "I was wondering if I could have a moment of your time."

I kicked back in my chair, and felt a smile spreading over my face. "Why, Miss Rodriguez, isn't it? Aren't you that nosy reporter from the *Arcane*? That useless rag that publishes stories about witches and ghosts and Bigfoot?"

"Plus Elvis," she assured me. "Don't forget the King. And I'm syndicated now. Publications of questionable reputation all over the world carry my column."

I laughed. "How are you today?"

Susan's voice turned wry. "Well, my boyfriend stood me up last night, but other than that . . ."

I winced a little. "Yeah, I know. Sorry about that. Look, Bob found a tip for me that just couldn't wait."

"Ahem," she said, in her polite, professional voice. "I'm not calling you to talk about my *personal* life, Mr. Dresden. This is a business call."

I felt my smile returning. Susan was absolutely one in a million, to put up with me. "Oh, beg pardon, Miss Rodriguez. Pray continue."

"Well. I was thinking that there were rumors of some more ghostly activity in the old town last night. I thought you might be willing to share a few details with the *Arcane*."

"Mmmm. That might not be wholly professional of me. I keep my business confidential."

"Mr. Dresden," she said. "I would as soon not resort to desperate measures."

"Why, Miss Rodriguez." I grinned. "Are you a desperate woman?"

I could almost see the way she arched one eyebrow. "Mr. Dresden. I don't want to threaten you. But you must understand that I am well acquainted with a certain young lady of your company—and that I could see to it that things became *very* awkward between you."

"I see. But if I shared the story with you—"

"Gave me an exclusive, Mr. Dresden."

"An exclusive," I amended, "then you might see your way clear to avoiding causing problems for me?"

"I'd even put in a good word with her," Susan said, her voice cheerful, then dropping into a lower, smokier register. "Who knows. You might get lucky."

I thought about it for a minute. The ghost Michael and I had nailed last night had been a big, bestial thing lurking in the basement of the University of Chicago library. I didn't have to mention the names of any people involved, and while the university wouldn't like it, I doubted it would be seriously hurt by appearing in a magazine that most people bought along with every other tabloid in the supermarket checkout lines. Besides which, just the thought of Susan's caramel skin and soft, dark hair under my hands . . . Yum. "That's an offer I can hardly refuse," I told her. "Do you have a pen?"

She did, and I spent the next ten minutes telling her the details. She took them down with a number of sharp, concise questions, and had the whole story out of me in less time than I would have believed. She really was a good reporter, I thought. It was almost a shame that she was spending her time reporting the supernatural, which people had been refusing to believe in for centuries.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Dresden," she said, after she squeezed the last drops of information out of me. "I hope things go well between you and the young lady tonight. At your place. At nine."

"Maybe the young lady would like to discuss the possibilities with me," I drawled.

She let out a throaty laugh. "Maybe she would," Susan agreed. "But this is a business call."

I laughed. "You're terrible, Susan. You never give up, do you?"

"Never, ever," she said.

"Would you really have been mad at me if I hadn't told you?"

"Harry," she said. "You stood me up last night without a word. I don't usually stand for that kind of treatment from any man. If you hadn't had a good story for me, I was going to think that you were out horsing around with your friends."

"Yeah, that Michael." I chuckled. "He's a real party animal."

"You're going to have to give me the story on him sometime. Have you come any closer to working out what's going on with the ghosts? Did you look into the seasonal angle?"

I sighed, closing my eyes. "No, and yes. I still can't figure why the ghosts seem to be freaking out all at once—and we haven't been able to get any of them to hold still long enough for me to get a good look at them. I've got a new recipe to try out tonight—maybe that will do it. But Bob is sure it isn't a Halloweeny kind of problem. I mean, we didn't have any ghosts last year."

"No. We had werewolves."

"Different situation entirely," I said. "I've got Bob working overtime to keep an eye on the spirit world for any more activity. If anything else is about to jump, we'll know it."

"All right," she said. She hesitated for a moment and then said, "Harry. I—"

I waited, but when she stalled I asked, "What?"

"I, uh . . . I just want to be sure that you're all right."

I had the distinct impression that she had been going to say something else, but I didn't push. "Tired," I said. "A couple of bruises from slipping on some ectoplasm and falling into a card catalog. But I'm fine."

She laughed. "That creates a certain image. Tonight then?"

"I'm looking forward to it."

She made a pleased little sound with more than a hint of sexuality in it, and let that be her goodbye.

The day went fairly quickly, with a bunch of the usual business. I whipped up a spell to find a lost wedding ring, and turned down a customer who wanted me to put a love spell on his mistress. (My ad in the Yellow Pages specifically reads "No love potions," but for some reason people always think that their case is special.) I went to the bank, referred a caller to a private detective I knew, and met with a fledgling pyromancer in an attempt to teach him to stop igniting his cat accidentally.

I was just closing down the office when I heard someone come out of the elevator and start walking down the hallway toward me. The steps were heavy, as though from boots, and rushed.

"Mr. Dresden?" asked a young woman's voice. "Are you Harry Dresden?"

"Yes," I said, locking the office door. "But I'm just leaving. Maybe we can set up an appointment for tomorrow."

The footsteps stopped a few feet away from me. "Please, Mr. Dresden. I've got to talk to you. Only you can help me."

I sighed, without looking at her. She'd said the exact words she needed to in order to kick off my protective streak. But I could still walk away. Lots of people got to thinking that magic could dig them out of their troubles, once they realized they couldn't escape. "I'll be glad to, Ma'am. First thing in the morning." I locked the door and started to turn away.

"Wait," she said. I felt her step closer to me, and she grabbed my hand.

A tingling, writhing sensation shot up my wrist and over my elbow. My reaction was immediate and instinctive. I threw up a mental shield against the sensation, jerked my hand clear of her fingers, and took several steps back and away from the young woman.

My hand and arm still tingled from brushing against the energy of her aura. She was a slight girl in a black knit dress, black combat boots, and hair dyed to a flat, black matte. The lines of her face were soft and sweet, and her skin was pale as chalk around eyes that were sunken, shadowed, and glittering with alley-cat wariness.

I flexed my fingers and avoided meeting the girl's eyes for more than a fraction of a second. "You're a practitioner," I said, quietly.

She bit her lip and looked away, nodding. "And I need your help. They said that you would help me."

"I give lessons to people who want to avoid hurting themselves with uncontrolled talent," I said. "Is that what you're after?"

"No, Mr. Dresden," the girl said. "Not exactly."

"Why me, then? What do you want?"

"I want your protection." She lifted a shaking hand, fidgeting with her dark hair. "And if I don't have it . . . I'm not sure I'll live through the night."

Chapter Four

I let us both back into the office, and flicked on the lights. The bulb blew out. It does that a lot. I sighed, and shut the door behind us, leaving stripes of golden autumn light pouring through the blinds, interweaving with shadows on the floor and walls.

I drew out a seat in front of my desk for the young woman. She blinked at me in confusion for a second before she said, “Oh,” and sat. I walked around the desk, leaving my duster on, and sat down.

“All right,” I said. “If you want my protection, I want a few things from you first.”

She pushed back her asphalt-colored hair with one hand and gave me a look of pure calculation. Then she simply crossed her legs, so that the cut of her dress left one pale leg bare to mid thigh. A subtle motion of her back thrust out her young, firm breasts, so that their tips pressed visibly against the fabric. “Of course, Mr. Dresden. I’m sure we can do business.” The look she gave me was direct, sensual, and willing.

Nipple erection on command—now that’s method acting. Oh, she was pretty enough, I suppose. Any adolescent male would have been drooling and hurling himself at her, but I’d seen acts a lot better. I rolled my eyes. “That’s not what I meant.”

Her sex-kitten look faltered. “It . . . it isn’t?” She frowned at me, eyes scanning me again, reassessing me. “Is it . . . are you . . . ?”

“No,” I said. “I’m not gay. But I’m not buying what you’re selling. You haven’t even told me your name, but you’re willing to spread your legs for me? No, thanks. Hell’s bells, haven’t you ever heard of AIDS? Herpes?”

Her face went white, and she pressed her lips together until they were white, too. “All right, then,” she said. “What do you want from me?”

“Answers,” I told her, jabbing a finger at her. “And don’t try lying to me. It won’t do you any good.” Which was only a marginal lie, in itself. Being a wizard doesn’t make you a walking lie detector, and I wasn’t going to try a soulgaze on her to find out if she was sincere—it wasn’t worth it. But another great thing about being a wizard is that people attribute just about anything you do to your vast and unknowable powers. Granted, it only works with those who know enough to believe in wizards, but not enough to understand our limits—the rest of the world, the regular people who think magic is just a joke, just look at you like someone is going to stuff you into a little white coat any second now.

She licked her lips, a nervous gesture, not a sexy one. “All right,” she said. “What do you want to know?”

“Your name, for starters.”

She let out a harsh laugh. “You think I’m going to give you that, wizard?”

Point. Serious spell-slingers like me could do an awful lot with a person’s name, given by their own lips. “All right, then. What do I call you?”

She didn’t bother to cover her leg again. A rather pretty leg, actually, with a tattoo of some kind encircling her ankle. I tried not to notice. “Lydia,” she said. “Call me Lydia.”

“Okay, Lydia. You’re a practitioner of the Art. Tell me about that.”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with what I want from you, Mr. Dresden,” she said. She swallowed, her anger fading. “Please. I need your help.”

“All right, all right,” I said. “What kind of help do you need? If you’re into some kind of gang-related trouble, I’m going to recommend that you head for the police. I’m not a bodyguard.”

She shivered, and hugged herself with her arms. “No, nothing like that. It’s not my body I’m worried about.”

That made me frown.

She closed her eyes and drew in a breath. “I need a talisman,” she said. “Something to protect me from a hostile spirit.”

That made me sit up and take notice, metaphorically speaking. With the city flying into spiritual chaos as it was, I had no trouble believing that a girl gifted with magical talent might be experiencing some bad phenomena. Ghosts and spooks are drawn to the magically gifted. “What kind of spirit?”

Her eyes shifted left and right, never looking at me. “I can’t really say, Mr. Dresden. It’s powerful and it wants to hurt me. They . . . they told me you could make something that would keep me safe.”

True, in point of fact. Around my left wrist at that very moment was a talisman made from a dead man’s shroud, blessed silver, and a number of other, more difficult to come by ingredients. “Maybe,” I told her. “That depends on why you’re in danger, and why you feel you need protection.”

“I c-can’t tell you that,” she said. Her pale face pinched into an expression of worry—real worry, the kind that makes you look older, uglier. The way she hugged herself made her look smaller, more frail. “Please, I just need your help.”

I sighed, and rubbed at one eyebrow with my thumb. My first rampant instincts were to give her a cup of hot chocolate, put a blanket around her shoulders, tell her everything would be all right and strap my talisman onto her wrist. I tried to rein those in, though. Down, Quixote. I still knew nothing about her situation, or what she needed protection from—for all I knew, she was trying to stave off an avenging angel coming after her in retribution for some act so vile that it stirred the Powers that be to take immediate action. Even vanilla ghosts sometimes come back to haunt someone for a darned good reason.

“Look, Lydia. I don’t like to get involved in anything without knowing something about what’s going on.” *Which hadn’t slowed me down before*, I noted. “Unless you can tell me a little bit about your situation, convince me that you are in legitimate need of protection, I won’t be able to help you.”

She bowed her head, her asphalt hair falling across her face for a long minute. Then she drew in a breath and asked, “Do you know what Cassandra’s Tears is, Mr. Dresden?”

“Prophetic condition,” I said. “The person in question has random seizures—visions of the future, but they’re always couched in terms of conditions that make explanation of the dreams seem unbelievable. Doctors mistake it for epilepsy in children, sometimes, and prescribe a bunch of different drugs for it. Pretty accurate prophecy, as it goes, but no one ever buys into it. Some people call it a gift.”

“I’m not one of them,” she whispered. “You don’t know how horrible it is. To see something about to happen and to try to change it, only to have no one believe you.”

I studied her for a minute in silence, listening to the clock on my wall count down the seconds. “All right,” I said. “You say that you have this gift. I guess you want me to believe that one of your visions warned you about an evil spirit coming after you?”

“Not one,” she said. “Three. *Three*, Mr. Dresden. I only got one vision when they tried to kill the President. I got two for that disaster at NASA, and for the earthquake in Laos. I’ve never had three before. Never had something appear so clearly . . .”

I closed my eyes to think about this. Again, my instincts told me to help the girl, smash the bad ghost or whatever, and walk off into the sunset. If she was indeed afflicted with Cassandra’s Tears, my actions could do more than save her life. My faith could change it for the better.

On the other hand, I’d been played for a sucker before. The girl was obviously a competent actress. She had shifted smoothly to the role of willing seductress, when she thought I had been asking for sex in payment. That she would immediately make that conclusion based on my own fairly neutral statement said something about her, all by itself. This wasn’t a girl who was used to playing things fair and square. Unless I was grossly misreading her, she had bartered sex for goods and services before—and she was awfully young to be so jaded about the entire matter.

The entire Cassandra’s Tears angle was a perfect scam, and people had used it before, among the circles of the magically endowed. The story required no proof, no performance on the part of the person running the scam. All she would need would be a smidgen of talent to give her the right aura, maybe enough kinetomancy to tilt the dice a little on their way down. Then she could make up whatever story she wanted about her supposed prophetic gifts, put on a little-girl-lost act, and head straight for the local dummy, Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.

I opened my eyes to find her watching me. “Of course,” she said. “I could be lying. Cassandra’s Tears can’t be analyzed or observed. I could be using it as an excuse to provide a reasonable explanation why you should help a lady in distress.”

“That’s pretty much what’s going through my mind, Lydia, yeah. You could just be a small-time witch who stirred up the wrong demon and is looking for a way out.”

She spread her hands. “All I can tell you is that I’m not. I know that something’s coming. I don’t know what, and I don’t know why or how. I just know what I see.”

“Which is?”

"Fire," she whispered. "Wind. I see dark things and a dark war. I see my death coming for me, out of the spirit world. And I see you at the middle of it all. You're the beginning, the end of it. You're the one who can make the path go different ways."

"That's your vision? Iowa has less corn."

She turned her face away. "I see what I see."

Standard carny procedure. Flatter the ego of the mark, draw him in, get him good and hooked, and fleece him for everything he's got. Sheesh, I thought, someone else trying to get something out of me. My reputation must be growing.

Still, there was no sense in being rude. "Look, Lydia. I think maybe you're just overreacting, here. Why don't we meet again in a couple of days, and we'll see if you still think you need my help."

She didn't answer me. Her shoulders just slumped forward and her face went slack with defeat. She closed her eyes, and I felt a nagging sensation of doubt tug at me. I had the uncomfortable impression that she wasn't acting.

"All right," she said, softly. "I'm sorry to have kept you late." She got up and started walking toward the door of my office.

My better judgment propelled me up out of my chair and across the room. We reached the door at the same time.

"Wait a minute," I said. I unbound the talisman from my arm, feeling the silent *pop* of energy as the knot came undone. Then I took her left wrist and turned her hand over to tie the talisman onto her. There were pale scars on her arm—the vertical kind that run along the big veins. The ones you get when you're really serious about killing yourself. They were old and faded. She must have gotten them when she was . . . what? Ten years old? Younger?

I shuddered and secured the little braid of musty cloth and silver chain about her wrist, willing enough energy into it to close the circle once the knot was tied. When I finished, I touched her forearm lightly. I could just feel the talisman's power, a tingling sensation that hovered a half-inch off of her skin.

"Faith magic works best against spirits," I said quietly. "If you're worried, get to a church. Spirits are strongest just after the sun goes down, around the witching hour, and again just before the sun comes up. Go to Saint Mary of the Angels. It's a church at the corner of Bloomingdale and Wood, down by Wicker Park. It's huge, you can't miss it. Go around to the delivery door and ring the bell. Talk to Father Forthill. Tell him that Michael's friend said that you need a safe place to stay for a while."

She only stared at me, her mouth open. Tears formed in her eyes. "You believe me," she said. "You believe me."

I shrugged, uncomfortable. "Maybe. Maybe not. But things have been bad, the past few weeks, and I would rather not have you on my conscience. You'd better hurry. It's going to be sundown soon." I pressed some bills into her hand and said, "Take a cab. Saint Mary of the Angels. Father Forthill. Michael's friend sent you."

"Thank you," she said. "Oh, God. Thank you, Mr. Dresden." She seized my hand in both of hers and pressed a tearstained kiss to my knuckles. Her fingers were cold and her lips too hot. Then she vanished out the door.

I shut it behind her and shook my head. "Harry, you idiot. Your one decent talisman that would protect you against ghosts and you just gave it away. She's probably a plant. They probably sent her to you just to get the talisman off you, so that they can eat you up the next time you go spoil their fun." I glared down at my hand, where the warmth of Lydia's kiss and the dampness of her tears still lingered. Then I sighed, and walked to the cabinet where I kept fifty or sixty spare lightbulbs on hand, and replaced the one that had burned out.

The phone rang. I got down off my chair and answered it sourly. "Dresden."

There was silence and scratchy static on the other end of the line.

"Dresden," I repeated.

The silence stretched on, and something about it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. There was a quality to it that is difficult to describe. Like something waiting. Gloating. The static crackled louder, and I thought I could hear voices underneath it, voices speaking in low, cruel tones. I glanced at the door, after the departed Lydia. "Who is this?"

"Soon," whispered a voice. "Soon, Dresden. We will see one another again."

"Who is this?" I repeated, feeling a little silly.

The line went dead.

I stared at the phone before hanging it up, then ran my hand back through my hair. A chill crawled neatly down my spine and took up residence somewhere a little lower than my stomach. "All right, then," I said, my own voice a little too loud in the office. "Thank God that wasn't too creepy or anything."

The antique radio on the shelf beside the coffee machine hissed and squalled to life and I almost jumped out of my shoes. I whirled to face it in a fury, hands clenched.

"Harry?" said a voice on the radio. "Hey, Harry, is this thing working?"

I tried to calm my pounding heart, and focused enough will on the radio to let my voice carry through. "Yeah, Bob. It's me."

"Thank the stars," Bob said. "You said you wanted to know if I found out anything else ghostly going on."

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead."

The radio hissed and crackled with static—spiritual interference, not physical. The radio wasn't set up to receive AM/FM any more. Bob's voice was garbled, but I could understand it. "My contact came through. Cook County Hospital, tonight. Someone's stirred up Agatha Hagglesworth. This is a bad one, Harry. She is one mean old biddy."

Bob gave me the rundown on Agatha Hagglesworth's grisly and tragic death, and her most likely target at the hospital. I glanced down at my bare left wrist, and abruptly felt naked. "All right," I said. "I'm on it. Thanks, Bob."

The radio squalled and went silent, and I dashed out the door. Sundown would come in less than twenty minutes, rush hour had been going for a while now, and if I wasn't at Cook County by the time it got dark, all kinds of bad things could happen.

I flew out the front door, the sack of ghost dust heavy in my pocket, and all but slammed into Michael, tall and broad, toting a huge athletic bag over his shoulder, which I knew would contain nothing but *Amoracchius* and his white cloak.

"Michael!" I burst out. "How did you get here?"

His honest face split into a wide smile. "When there is a need, He sees to it that I am there."

"Wow," I said. "You're kidding."

"No," he said, his voice earnest. Then he paused. "Of course, you've gotten in touch with me every night for the past two weeks. Tonight, I just thought I'd save Him the trouble of arranging coincidence, so I came on over as soon as I got off work." He fell into step beside me and we both got into the *Blue Beetle*—he got in the red door, I got in the white one, and we peered out over the grey hood as I pulled the old VW into traffic.

And that was how we ended up doing battle in the nursery at Cook County.

Anyway, you see what I mean about a day being fairly normal before it falls all to pieces. Or, well. Maybe it hadn't been all that normal. As we took off into traffic and I gave the *Beetle* all the gas it could take, I got that sinking feeling that my life was about to get hectic again.

Chapter Five

Michael and I plunged through the hole I'd torn in reality and into the Nevernever. It felt like moving from a sauna into an air-conditioned office, except that I didn't feel the change on my skin. I felt it in my thoughts and my feelings, and in the primitive, skin-crawling part of me at the base of my brain. I stood in a different world than our own.

The little leather sack of ghost dust in my duster pocket abruptly increased its weight, dragging me off balance and to the ground. I let out a curse. The whole point of the ghost dust was that it was something extra-real, that it was heavy and inert and locked spiritual matter into place when it touched it. Even inside its bag, it had become a sudden stress on the Nevernever. If I opened the bag here, in the world of spirit, it might tear a hole in the floor. I'd have to be careful. I grunted with effort and pulled the little pouch out of my pocket. It felt like it weighed thirty or forty pounds.

Michael frowned down at my hands. "You know. I never really thought to ask before—but what is that dust made of?"

"Depleted uranium," I told him. "At least, that's the base ingredient. I had to add in a lot of other things. Cold iron, basil, dung from a—"

"Never mind," he said. "I don't want to know." He turned away from me, his arms steadily holding the massive sword before him. I recovered staff and rod, and stood beside him, studying the lay of the as-it-were land.

This part of the Nevernever looked like Chicago, at the end of the nineteenth century—no, strike that. This was the ghost's demesne. It looked like a mishmash of Agatha Hagglesworth's memories of Chicago at the end of her life. Edison's bulbs were mounted in some of the streetlights, while others burned with flickering gas flames. All of them cast hazy spheres of light, doing little to actually illuminate their surroundings. The buildings stood at slightly odd angles to one another, with parts of them seamlessly missing. Everything—streets, sidewalks, buildings—was made of wood.

"Hell's bells," I muttered. "No wonder the real Chicago kept burning down. This place is a tinderbox."

Rats moved in the shadows, but the street was otherwise empty and still. The rift that led back to our world wavered and shifted, fluorescent light and sterile hospital air pouring onto the old Chicago streets. Around us pulsed maybe a dozen shimmering disturbances in the air—the rich life forces of the infants back in the infirmary, showing through into the Nevernever.

"Where is she?" Michael asked, his voice quiet. "Where's the ghost?"

I turned in a slow circle, peering at the shadows, and shook my head. "I don't know. But we'd better find her, fast. And we need to get a look at this one if we can."

"To try to find out what's gotten it stirred up," Michael said.

"Exactly. I don't know about you, but I'm getting a little tired of chasing all over town every night."

"Didn't you already get a look at her?"

"Not the right kind of look," I said with a grimace. "There could be spells laid on her, some kind of magic around her to clue me in on what's going on. I need to be not in mortal peril for a couple of minutes to examine her."

"Provided she doesn't kill us first, all right," Michael assented. "But time is short, and I don't see her anywhere. What should we do?"

"I hate to say it," I said, "but I think we should—"

I was going to say "split up," but I didn't get the chance. The heavy wooden timbers of the roadway beneath us exploded up and out in a deadly cloud of splinters. I threw one leather-clad arm across my eyes and went tumbling one way. Michael went the other.

"My little angels! Mine, mine, MINE!" screamed a voice that roared against my face and chest and made my duster flap around as though made of gauze.

I looked up, to see the ghost, quite real and solid now, clawing its one-armed way up from the sub-street. Agatha's face was lean and bony, twisted in rage, and her hair hung about her in a shaggy mane, sharply at odds with her crisp white shirt. Her arm was missing from its shoulder, and dark fluid stained the cloth beneath it.

Michael rose to his feet with a shout, one of his cheeks cut and bleeding, and went after her with *Amoracchius*. The spirit backhanded him away with her remaining arm as though he weighed no more than a doll. Michael grunted and went flying, rolling along the wooden street.

And then, snarling and drooling, her eyes wide with frenzied madness, the ghost turned toward me.

I scrambled to my feet and held out my staff across my body, a slender barrier between me and the ghost on its home turf. "I guess it's too late to have a reasonable discussion, Agatha."

"My babies!" the spirit screamed. "Mine! Mine! Mine!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought," I breathed. I gathered my forces and started channeling them through the staff. The pale wood began glowing with a gold-and-orange light, spreading out before me in a quarter-dome shape.

The ghost screamed again and hurtled toward me. I stood fast and shouted, "*Refletum!*" at the top of my lungs. The spirit impacted against my shield with all the momentum of a bull rhinoceros on steroids. I've stopped bullets and worse with that shield before, but that was on my home turf, in the real world. Here, the Nevernever, Agatha's ghost overloaded my shield, which detonated with a thunderous roar and sent me sprawling to the ground. Again.

I jammed my scorched staff into the ground and groaned to my feet. Blood stained my tingling fingers, the skin swelling with dark bruises and burst blood vessels.

Agatha stood several paces away, shaking with rage, or if I was lucky, with confusion. Bits of my shield-fire played over her shape and slowly winked out. I fumbled for my blasting rod, but my fingers had gone numb and I dropped it. I bent over to pick it up, swayed, and stood up again, red mist and sparkling dots swimming through my vision.

Michael circled the stunned spirit and arrived at my side. His expression was concerned, rather than frightened. "Easy, Harry, easy. Good Lord, man, are you all right?"

"I'll make it," I croaked. "There's good news and bad news."

The knight brought his sword to guard again. "I've always been partial to the good news."

"I don't think she's interested in those babies anymore."

Michael flashed me a swift smile. "That is good news."

I wiped some sweat from my eyes. My hand came away scarlet. I must have gotten a cut, somewhere along the way. "The bad news is that she's going to come over here and tear us apart in a couple more seconds."

"Not to be negative, but I'm afraid the news gets worse," Michael said. "Listen."

I glanced at him, and cocked my head to one side. Distantly, but quickly growing nearer, I could hear haunting, musical baying, ghostly in the midnight air. "Holy shit," I breathed. "Hellhounds."

"Harry," Michael said sternly. "You know I hate it when you swear."

"You're right. Sorry. Holy shit," I breathed, "heckhounds. Godmother's out hunting. How the hell did she find us so damned fast?"

Michael grimaced at me. "She must have been close already. How long before she gets here?"

"Not long. My shield made a lot of noise when it buckled. She'll home in on it."

"If you want to go, Harry," Michael said, "go on and leave. I'll hold the ghost until you can get back through the rift."

I was tempted. There aren't a lot of things that scare me more than the Nevernever and my godmother in tandem. But I was also angry. I hate it when I get shown up. Besides, Michael was a friend, and I'm not in the habit of leaving friends to clean up my messes for me. "No," I said. "Let's just hurry."

Michael grinned at me, and started forward, just as Agatha's ghost extinguished the last residual bits of my magic that had been plaguing it. Michael sent *Amoracchius* whistling at the ghost, but she was unthinkably swift, and dodged each blow with a circling, swooping sort of grace. I lifted my blasting rod and narrowed my focus. I tuned out the baying of the hellhounds, now a lot nearer, and the sound of galloping hoofbeats that sent my pulse racing. I methodically blanked out everything but the ghost, Michael, and the power funneling into the blasting rod.

The ghost must have sensed the strike gathering, because she turned and flew at me like a bullet. Her mouth opened in a scream, and I could see jagged, pointed teeth lining her jaws, the empty white fire of her eyes.

"*Fuego!*" I shouted, and then the spirit hit me, full force. A beam of white fire spewed out from my blasting rod and across the wooden storefronts. They burst into flame as though soaked in gasoline. I went down, rolling, the spirit going after my throat with her teeth. I jammed the end of the blasting rod into her mouth and prepared to fire again, but she tore it from my hands with a ferocious doglike worrying motion and it tumbled away. I swiped the staff at her awkwardly, to no avail. She went for my throat again.

I shoved a leather-clad forearm into her mouth and shouted, "Michael!" The ghost ripped at me with her nails and clamped down on my forearm. I dropped the ghost dust and scabbled furiously at her with my free hand, trying to lever her off of me, but didn't do much more than muss up her clothing.

She got her hand on my throat and I felt my breath cut off. I writhed and struggled to escape, but the snarling ghost was a lot stronger and faster than me. Stars swam in front of my eyes.

Michael shouted, and swept *Amoracchius* at the spirit. The great blade bit into her back with a wooden-sounding thunk and made her arch up, screaming in pain. It was a deathblow. The white light of the blade touched her spirit-flesh and set it alight, sizzling away from the edges of the wound. She twisted, screaming in fury, and the motion jerked the blade from Michael's hands. Agatha Hagglesworth's blazing ghost prepared to fly at his throat.

I sat up, seized the sack of ghost dust, and with a grunt of effort swept it at the back of her head. There was a sharp sound when the improvised cosh struck her, the superheavy matter I'd enchanted hitting like a sledgehammer on china. The ghost froze in place for a moment, her feral mouth wide—and then toppled slowly to one side.

I looked up at Michael, who stood gasping for breath, staring at me. "Harry," he said. "Do you see?"

I lifted a hand to my aching throat and looked around me. The sounds of baying hounds and thundering hooves had gone. "See what?" I asked.

"Look." He pointed at the smoldering ghost-corpse.

I looked. In my struggles with Agatha's ghost, I had torn aside the prim white shirt, and she must have ripped up the dress when she'd been crashing through sidewalks and strangling wizards and so on. I crawled a bit closer to the corpse. It was burning—not blazing, but steadily being eaten away by *Amoracchius*'s white fire, like newsprint slowly curling into flame. The fire didn't hide what Michael was talking about, though.

Wire. Strands of barbed wire ran about the ghost's flesh, beneath her torn clothing. The barbs had dug cruelly into her flesh every two inches or so, and her body was covered with small, agonizing wounds. I grimaced, picking away at the burning cloth in tentative jerks. The wire was a single strand that began at her throat and wrapped about her torso, beneath the arms, winding all the way down one leg to her ankle. At either end, the wire simply vanished into her flesh.

"Sun and stars," I breathed. "No wonder she went mad."

"The wire," Michael asked, crouching down next to me. "It was hurting the ghost?"

I nodded. "Looks like. Torturing it."

"Why didn't we see this in the hospital?"

I shook my head. "Whatever this is . . . I'm not sure it would be visible in the real world. I don't think we would have seen it if we hadn't come here."

"God smiled on us," Michael said.

I eyed my own injuries, then glowered at the bruises already spreading over Michael's arm and throat. "Yeah, whatever. Look, Michael—this kind of thing doesn't just happen. Someone had to do it to this ghost."

"Which implies," Michael said, "that they had a reason to want this ghost to hurt those children." His face darkened into a scowl.

"Whether or not that was their goal, what it implies is that *someone* is behind all the recent activity—not some thing or condition. Someone is purposefully doing this to the ghosts in the area." I stood up and brushed myself off, as the corpse continued to burn, like the buildings around us. Fire raged up the sides of anything vertical, and began to chew its way across the streets and sidewalks as well. A haze of smoke filled the air, as the spirit's demesne in the Nevernever crumbled along with its remains.

"Ow," I complained. I keep my complaints succinct.

Michael took the handle of his sword and drew it out of the flames, shaking his head. "The city is burning."

"Thank you, Sir Obvious."

He smiled. "Can the flames hurt us?"

"Yes," I said, emphatic. "Time to go."

Together, we headed back to the rift at a quick trot. At one point, Michael shouldered me out of the way of a tumbling chimney, and we had to skirt around the pile of shattered bricks and blazing timbers.

"Wait," I said suddenly. "Wait. Do you hear that?"

Michael kept me hustling over the ground, toward the rift. "Hear what? I don't hear anything."

"Yeah." I coughed. "No more hounds howling."

A very tall, slender, inhumanly beautiful woman stepped out of the smoke. Reddish hair curled down past her hips in a riotous cascade, complementing her flawless skin, high cheekbones, and lush, full, bloodred lips. Her face was ageless, and her golden eyes had vertical slits instead of pupils, like a cat. Her gown was a flowing affair of deep green.

"Hello, my son," Lea purred, evidently unaffected by the smoke and unconcerned about the fire. Three great shapes, like mastiffs built from shadows and soot, crouched about her feet, watching us with flat, black eyes. They stood between us and the rift that led back home.

I swallowed and forced down a sudden feeling of childlike panic that started gibbering down in my belly and threatened to come dancing up out of my throat. I stepped forward, between the faerie and Michael and said, in a rough voice, "Hello, Godmother."

Chapter Six

My godmother looked around at the inferno and smiled. “It reminds me of times gone by. Doesn’t it remind you, my sweet?” She idly reached down and stroked the head of one of the hounds at her side.

“However did you find me so quickly, Godmother?” I asked.

She gave the hellhound a benign smile. “Mmmm. I have my little secrets, sweet. I only wanted to greet my long-estranged godson.”

“All right. Hi, good to see you, have to do it again sometime,” I said. Smoke curled up into my mouth and I started coughing. “We’re kind of in a hurry here, so—”

Lea laughed, a sound like bells just a shade out of tune. “Always in such a rush, you mortals. But we haven’t seen each other in ages, Harry.” She walked closer, her body moving with a lithe, sensuous grace that might have been mesmerizing in other circumstances. The hounds spread out silently behind her. “We should spend some time together.”

Michael lifted his sword again, and said, calmly, “Madame, step from our path, if you please.”

“It does *not* please me,” she spat, sudden and vicious. Those rich lips peeled back from dainty, sharp canines, and at the same time the three shadowy hounds let out bubbling growls. Her golden eyes swept past Michael and back to me. “He is mine, sir Knight, by blood right, by Law, and by his own broken word. He has made a compact with me. You have no power over that.”

“Harry?” Michael shot me a quick look. “Is what she says true?”

I licked my lips, and gripped my staff. “I was a lot younger, then. And a lot more stupid.”

“Harry, if you have made a covenant with her of your own free will, then she is right—there is little I can do to stop her.”

Another building fell with a roar. The fires gathered around us, and it got hot. Really, really hot. The rift wavered, growing smaller. We didn’t have much time left.

“Come, Harry,” Lea purred, her voice gone, pardon the pun, smoky again. “Let the good Knight of the White God pass on his way. And let me take you to waters that will soothe your hurts and balm your ills.”

It sounded like a good idea. It sounded *really* good. Her own magic saw to that. I felt my feet moving toward her in a slow, leaden shuffling.

“Dresden,” Michael said, sharply. “Good Lord, man! What are you doing?”

“Go home, Michael,” I said. My voice came out thick, dull, as though I’d been drinking. I saw Lea’s mouth, her soft, lovely mouth, curl upward in a triumphant smirk. I didn’t try to fight the pull of the magic. I wouldn’t have been able to stop my legs in any case. Lea’d had my number for years, and as far as I could tell she always would. I hadn’t a prayer of taking control back for more than a few seconds. The air grew cooler as I got closer to her, and I could smell her—her body, her hair, like wildflowers and musky earth, intoxicating. “There isn’t much time before the rift closes. Go home.”

“Harry!” Michael shouted.

Lea placed one long-fingered, slender hand upon my cheek. A wash of tingling pleasure went through me. My body reacted to her, helpless and demanding at the same time, and I had to fight to keep thoughts of her beauty from preoccupying me altogether.

“Yes, my sweet man,” Lea whispered, golden eyes bright with glee. “Sweet, sweet, sweet. Now, lay aside your rod and staff.”

I watched dully, as my fingers released both. They clattered to the ground. The flames grew closer, but I didn’t feel them. The rift glowed and shrank, almost closed. I narrowed my eyes, gathering my will.

“Will you complete your bargain now, sweet mortal child?” Lea murmured, sliding her hands over my chest and then over my shoulders.

“I will go with you,” I answered, letting my voice come out thick, slow. Her eyes lit with malicious glee, and she threw her head back and laughed, revealing creamy, delicious expanses of throat and bosom.

“When Hell freezes over,” I added, and drew out the little sack of ghost dust for the last time. I dumped it all over and down the previously mentioned bosom. There isn’t much lore about faeries and depleted uranium, yet, but there’s a ton about faeries and cold iron. They don’t like it, and the iron content of the dust’s formula was pretty high.

Lea’s flawless complexion immediately split into fiery scarlet welts, the skin drying and cracking before my eyes. Lea’s triumphant laugh turned into an agonized scream, and she released me, tearing her silken gown away from her chest in a panic, revealing more gorgeous flesh being riven by the cold iron.

“Michael,” I shouted, “now!” I gave my godmother a stiff shove, scooped up my staff and rod, and dove for the rift. I heard a snarl, and something fastened around one of my boots, dragging me to the ground. I thrust my staff down at one of the hellhounds, and the wood struck it in one of its eyes. It roared in rage, and its two pack mates came rushing toward me.

Michael stepped in the way and swept his sword at one of them. The true iron struck the faerie beast, and blood and white fire erupted from the wound. The second one leapt upon Michael and fastened its fangs onto his thigh, ripping and jerking.

I brought my staff down hard on the beast’s skull, driving it off Michael’s leg, and started dragging my friend back toward the swiftly vanishing line of the rift. More hellhounds appeared, rushing from the burning ruins around us. “Come on!” I shouted. “There’s no time!”

“Treachery!” spat my godmother. She rose up from the ground, blackened and burned, her fine dress in tatters about her waist, her body and limbs stretched, knobby, and inhuman. She clenched her hands into fists at her sides, and the fire from the building around us seemed to rush down, gathering in her grasp in a pair of blazing points of violet and emerald light. “Treasonous, poisonous child! You are mine as your mother swore unto me! As you swore!”

“You shouldn’t make contracts with a minor!” I shouted back, and shoved Michael forward, into the rift. He wavered for a moment on the narrow opening, and then fell through and vanished back into the real world.

“If you will not give me your life, serpent child, then I will have your *blood*!” Lea took two huge strides toward me and hurled both hands forward. A thunderbolt of braided emerald and violet power rushed at my face.

I hurled myself backwards, at the rift, and prayed that it was still open enough to let me fall through. I extended my staff toward my godmother and threw up whatever weak shield I could. The faerie fire hammered into the shield, hurling me back into the rift like a straw before a tornado. I felt my staff smolder and burst into flames in my hand as I went sailing through.

I landed on the floor of the nursery back in Cook County Hospital, my leather duster trailing with it a shroud of smoke that swiftly converted itself to a thin, disgusting coating of residual ectoplasm, while my staff burned with weird green and purple fire. Babies, in their little glass cribs, screamed lustily all around me. Confused voices babbled from the next room.

Then the rift closed, and we were left back in the real world, surrounded by crying babies. The fluorescent lights all came back up, and we could hear more worried words from the nurses back at the duty station. I beat out the fires on my staff, and then sat there, panting and hurting. None of the matter of the Nevernever may have come back to the real world—but the injuries gained there were very real.

Michael got up, and looked around at the babies, making sure that they were all in satisfactory condition. Then he sat down next to me, wiped the patina of ectoplasm from his brow, and started pressing the material of his cloak against the oozing gashes in his leg, where the hellhound’s fangs had sunk through his jeans. He gave me a pensive, frowning stare.

“What?” I asked him.

“Your godmother. You got away from her,” he said.

I laughed, weakly. “This time, yeah. So what’s bothering you?”

“You lied to her to do it.”

“I tricked her,” I countered. “Classic tactics with faeries.”

He blinked, and then used another section of his cloak to clean the ecto-gook off of *Amoracchius*. "I just thought you were an honest man, Harry," he said, his expression injured. "I can't believe you lied to her."

I started to laugh, weakly, too exhausted to move. "You can't believe I lied to her."

"Well, no," he said, his voice defensive. "That's not the way we're supposed to win. We're the good guys, Harry."

I laughed some more, and wiped a trickle of blood off of my face.

"Well, we are!"

Some kind of alarm started going off. One of the nurses stepped into the observation room, took one look at the pair of us, and ran out screaming.

"You know what bothers me?" I asked.

"What's that?"

I set my scorched staff and rod aside. "I'm wondering how in the world my godmother happened to be right at hand, when I stepped through into Nevernever. It isn't like the place is a small neighborhood. I wasn't there five minutes before she showed up."

Michael sheathed his sword and set it carefully aside, out of easy arm's reach. Then unfastened his cloak, wincing. "Yes. It seems an unlikely coincidence."

We both put our hands up on top of our heads, as a Chicago P.D. patrolman, his jacket and pants stained with spilled coffee, burst into the nursery, gun drawn. We both sat there with our hands on our head, and did our best to look friendly and nonthreatening.

"Don't worry," Michael said, quietly. "Just let me do the talking."

Chapter Seven

Michael rested his chin in his hands and sighed. “I can’t believe we’re in jail.”

“Disturbing the peace,” I snorted, pacing the confines of the holding cell. “Trespass. Hah. They’d have seen disturbed peace if we hadn’t shown up.” I jerked a fistful of citations out of my pants pocket. “Look at this. Speeding, failure to obey traffic signs, dangerous and reckless operation of a motor vehicle. And here’s the best one. Illegal *parking*. I’m going to lose my license!”

“You can’t blame them, Harry. It isn’t as though we could explain what happened in terms that they would understand.”

I kicked at the bars in frustration. Pain lanced up my leg and I immediately regretted it—they’d taken away my boots when I’d been put through processing. Added to my aching ribs, the wounds on my head, and my stiffening fingers, it was too much. I sat down on the bench next to Michael with a *whuff* of expelled breath. “I get so sick of that,” I said. “People like you and me stand up to things that these jokers”—I made an all-encompassing gesture—“would never even dream existed. We don’t get paid for it, we hardly even get thanked for it.”

Michael’s tone was unruffled, philosophical. “It’s the nature of the beast, Harry.”

“I don’t mind it so much. I just hate it when something like this happens.” I stood up, frustrated again, and started pacing the interior of the cell. “What really galls me is that we still don’t know why the spirit world’s been so jumpy. This is big, Michael. If we don’t pin down what’s causing it—”

“Who’s causing it.”

“Right, who’s causing it—who knows what could happen?”

Michael half-smiled. “The Lord will never give you a burden bigger than your shoulders can bear, Harry. All we can do is face what comes and have faith.”

I gave him a sour glance. “I need to get myself some bigger shoulders, then. Someone in accounting must have made a mistake.”

Michael let out a rough, warm laugh, and shook his head, then lay back on the bench, crossing his arms beneath his head. “We did what was right. Isn’t that enough?”

I thought of all those babies, snuffling and making cute, piteous little sounds as the nurses had rushed about, gathering them up and making sure that they were all right, carrying them off to their mommies. One, a fat little Gerber candidate, had simply let out an enormous burp and promptly fallen asleep on the nurse’s shoulder. About a dozen little lives, all told, with an open future laid out before them—a future that would have abruptly ended if I hadn’t acted.

I felt a stupid little smile playing at the corners of my mouth, and a very small, very concrete sense of satisfaction that my indignation hadn’t managed to erase. I turned away from Michael, so that he wouldn’t see the smile, and forced myself to sound resigned. “Is it enough? I guess it’s going to have to be.”

Michael laughed again. I flashed him a scowl, and it only drew more merry laughter, so I gave up trying, and just leaned against the bars. “How long before we get out of here, do you think?”

“I’ve never been bailed out of jail before,” Michael said. “You’d be a better judge.”

“Hey,” I protested, “what’s that supposed to mean?”

Michael’s smile faded. “Charity,” he predicted, “is not going to be very happy.”

I winced. Michael’s wife. “Yeah, well. All we can do is face what comes and have faith, right?”

Michael grunted, somehow making it wry. “I’ll say a prayer to Saint Jude.”

I leaned my head against the bars and closed my eyes. I ached in places I didn’t know could ache. I could have dozed off right there. “All I want,” I said, “is to get home, get clean, and go to sleep.”

An hour or so later, a uniformed officer appeared and opened the door, informing us that we’d made bail. I got a sickly little feeling in my stomach. Michael and I shuffled out of the holding area into the adjacent waiting room.

A woman in a roomy dress and a heavy cardigan stood waiting for us, her arms folded over her seventh or eighth month of pregnancy. She was tall, with gorgeous, silken blonde hair that fell to her waist in a shining curtain, timelessly lovely features, and dark eyes smoldering with contained anger. “Michael Joseph Patrick Carpenter,” she snapped, and stalked toward us. Well, actually she waddled, but the set of her shoulders and her determined expression made it seem like a stalk. “You’re a mess. This is what comes of taking up with bad company.”

“Hello, angel,” Michael rumbled, and leaned over to give the woman a kiss on the cheek.

She accepted it with all the loving tolerance of a Komodo dragon. “Don’t you hello angel me. Do you know what I had to go through to find a baby-sitter, get all the way out here, get the money together and then get the sword back for you?”

“Hi Charity,” I said brightly. “Gee, it’s good to see you, too. It’s been, what, three or four years since we’ve talked?”

“Five years, Mr. Dresden,” the woman said, shooting me a glare. “And the Good Lord willing it will be five more before I have to put up with your idiocy again.”

“But I—”

She thrust her swollen stomach at me like the ram on a Greek warship. “Every time you come nosing around, you get Michael into some sort of trouble. And now into jail! What will the children think?”

“Look, Charity, it was really imp—”

“Missus Carpenter,” she snarled. “It’s *always* really important, Mr. Dresden. Well, my husband has engaged in many important activities without what I dubiously term your ‘help.’ But it’s only when you’re around that he seems to come back to me covered in blood.”

“Hey,” I protested. “I got hurt too!”

“Good,” she said. “Maybe it will make you more cautious in the future.”

I scowled down at the woman. “I’ll have you know—”

She grabbed the front of my shirt and dragged my face down to hers. She was surprisingly strong, and she could glare right at me without looking me square in the eyes. “I’ll have you know,” she said, voice steely, “that if you *ever* get my Michael into trouble so deep that he can’t come home to his family I will make you sorry for it.” Tears that had nothing to do with weakness made her eyes bright for a moment, and she shook with emotion. I have to admit, at that particular moment, her threat scared me, waddling pregnancy and all.

She finally released me and turned back to her husband, gently touching a dark scab on his face. Michael put his arms around her, and with a little cry she hugged him back, burying her face against his chest and weeping without making any sound. Michael held her very carefully, as if he were afraid of breaking her, and stroked her hair.

I stood there for a second like a floundering goob. Michael looked up at me and met my gaze for a moment. He then turned, keeping his wife under one arm, and started walking away.

I watched the two of them for a moment, walking in step beside one another, while I stood there alone. Then I stuck my hands into my pockets, and turned away. I hadn’t ever noticed, before, how well the two of them matched one another—Michael with his quiet strength and unfailing reliability, and Charity with her blazing passion and unshakable loyalty to her husband.

The married thing. Sometimes I look at it and feel like someone from a Dickens novel, standing outside in the cold and staring in at Christmas dinner. Relationships hadn’t ever really worked for me. I think it’s had something to do with all the demons, ghosts, and human sacrifice.

As I stood there, brooding, I sensed her presence before I smelled her perfume, a warmth and energy about her that I’d grown to know over the time we’d been together. Susan paused at the door of the waiting room, looking back over her shoulder. I studied her. I never got tired of that. Susan had dark skin, tanned even darker from our previous weekend at the

beach, and raven-black hair cut off neatly at her shoulders. She was slender, but curved enough to draw an admiring look from the officer behind the counter as she stood there in a flirty little skirt and half-top which left her midriff bare. My phone call caught her just as she'd been leaving for our rendezvous.

She turned to me and smiled, her chocolate-colored eyes worried but warm. She tilted her head back toward the hallway behind her, where Michael and Charity had gone. "They're a beautiful couple, aren't they?"

I tried to smile back, but didn't do so well. "They got off to a good start."

Susan's eyes studied my face, the cuts there, and the worry in her eyes deepened. "Oh? How's that?"

"He rescued her from a fire-breathing dragon." I walked toward her.

"Sounds nice," she said, and met me halfway, giving me a long and gentle hug that made my bruised ribs ache. "You okay?"

"I'll be okay."

"More ghostbusting with Michael. What's his story?"

"Off the record. Publicity could hurt him. He's got kids."

Susan frowned, but nodded. "All right," she said, and added a flair of melodrama to her words. "So what is he? Some kind of eternal soldier? Maybe a sleeping Arthurian knight woken in this desperate age to battle the forces of evil?"

"As far as I know he's a carpenter."

Susan arched a brow at me. "Who fights ghosts. What, has he got a magic nailgun or something?"

I tried not to smile. The muscles at the corners of my mouth ached. "Not quite. He's a righteous man."

"He seemed nice enough to me."

"No, not self-righteous. Righteous. The real deal. He's honest, loyal, faithful. He lives his ideals. It gives him power."

Susan frowned. "He looked average enough. I'd have expected . . . I'm not sure. Something. A different attitude."

"That's because he's humble too," I said. "If you asked him if he was righteous, he'd laugh at the idea. I guess that's part of it. I've never met anyone like him. He's a good man."

She pursed her lips. "And the sword?"

"*Amoracchius*," I supplied.

"He named his sword. How very Freudian of him. But his wife just about reached down that clerk's throat to get it back."

"It's important to him," I said. "He believes that it is one of three weapons given by God to mankind. Three swords. Each of them has a nail that is supposed to be from the Cross worked into its design. Only one of the righteous can wield them. The ones who do call themselves the Knights of the Cross. Others call them the Knights of the Sword."

Susan frowned. "*The Cross*?" she said. "As in *the Crucifixion*, capital C?"

I shrugged, uncomfortably. "How should I know? Michael believes it. That kind of belief is a power of its own. Maybe that's enough." I took a breath and changed the subject. "Anyway, my car got impounded. I had to drive fast and C.P.D. didn't like it."

Her dark eyes sparkled. "Anything worth a story?"

I laughed tiredly. "Don't you ever give up?"

"A girl's got to earn a living," she said, and fell into step beside me on the way out, slipping her arm through mine.

"Maybe tomorrow? I just want to get back home and get some sleep."

"No date, I guess." She smiled up at me, but I could see the expression was strained around the edges.

"Sorry. I—"

"I know." She sighed. I shortened my steps a little and she lengthened hers, though neither of us moved quickly. "I know what you're doing is important, Harry. I just wish, sometimes, that—" She broke off, frowning.

"That what?"

"Nothing. Really. It's selfish."

"That what?" I repeated. I found her hand with my bruised fingers and squeezed gently.

She signed, and stopped in the hall, turning to face me. She took both of my hands, and didn't look up when she said, "I just wish that I could be that important to you, too."

An uncomfortable pang hit me in the middle of my sternum. Ow. It hurt to hear that, literally. "Susan," I stammered. "Hey. Don't ever think that you're not important to me."

"Oh," she said, still not looking up, "it's not that. Like I said, just selfish. I'll get over it."

"I just don't want you to feel like . . ." I frowned and took a breath. "I don't want you to think that I don't . . . What I mean to say is that I . . ." *Love you*. That should have been simple enough to say. But the words stuck hard in my throat. I'd never said them to anyone I didn't lose, and every time I told my mouth to make the sounds, something shut down somewhere along the way.

Susan looked up at me, her eyes flickering over my face. She reached up a hand and touched the bandage on my forehead, her fingers light, gentle, warm. Silence fell heavy on the hallway. I stood there staring stupidly at her.

Finally, I leaned down and kissed her, hard, like I was trying to push the words out of my useless mouth and into her. I don't know if she understood, but she melted to me, all warm, soft tension, smelling of cinnamon, the sweetness of her lips soft and pliant beneath mine. One of my hands drifted to the small of her back, to the smooth, rounded ridges of muscle on either side of her spine, and drew her against me a little harder.

Footsteps coming from the other direction made us both smile and break away from the kiss. A female officer walked by, her lips twisted into a knowing little smirk, and I felt my cheeks flush.

Susan took my hand from her back, bending her mouth to put a gentle kiss on my bruised fingers. "Don't think you're getting off that easy, Harry Dresden," she said. "I'm going to get you to start talking if it kills you." But she didn't press the issue, and together we reclaimed my stuff and left.

I fell asleep on the drive back to my apartment, but I woke up when the car crunched into the gravel parking lot beside the stone stairs leading down to my lair, in the basement of an old boardinghouse. We got out of the car, and I stretched, looking around the summer night with a scowl.

"What's wrong?" Susan asked.

"Mister," I said. "He's usually running right up to me when I come home. I let him out early this morning."

"He's a cat, Harry," Susan said, flashing me a smile. "Maybe he's got a date."

"What if he got hit by a car? What if a dog got him?"

Susan let out a laugh and walked over to me. My libido noted the sway of her hips in the little skirt with an interest that made my aching muscles cringe. "He's as big as a horse, Harry. I pity the dog that tries something."

I reached back into the car for my staff and rod, then slipped an arm around her. Susan's warmth beside me, the scent of cinnamon drifting up to me from her hair, felt incredibly nice at the end of a long day. But it just didn't feel right, to not have Mister run up to me and bowl into my shins in greeting.

That should have been enough to tip me off. I'll plead weariness, achiness, and sexual distraction. It came as a total shock to me to feel a wave of cold energy writhe into my face, in tandem with a shadowy form rising up from the steps leading down to my apartment. I froze and took a step back, only to see another silent shape step around the edge of the boardinghouse and start walking toward us. Gooseflesh erupted up and down my arms.

Susan caught on a second or two after my wizard's senses had given me warning. "Harry," she breathed. "What is it? Who are they?"

"Take it easy, and get out your car keys," I said, as the two shapes approached us, the waves of cool energy increasing as they did. Light from the distant street lamp reflected in the nearest figure's eyes, gleaming huge and black. "We're getting out of here. They're vampires."

Chapter Eight

One of the vampires let out a velvet laugh, and stepped out into the dim light. He wasn't particularly tall, and he moved with a casual and dangerous grace that belied his crystal-blue eyes, styled blond hair, and the tennis whites he wore. "Bianca told us you'd be nervous," he purred.

The second of the pair kept coming toward us from the corner of the boardinghouse. She, too, was of innocuous height and build, and possessed the same blue eyes and flawless golden hair as the man. She too was dressed in tennis whites. "But," she breathed, and licked her lips with a cat-quick tongue, "she didn't tell us you would smell so delicious."

Susan fumbled with her keys, and pressed up against me, tight with tension and fear. "Harry?"

"Don't look them in the eyes," I said. "And don't let them lick you."

Susan shot me a sharp look from beneath raven brows. "Lick?"

"Yeah. Their saliva's some kind of addictive narcotic." We reached her car. "Get in."

The male vampire opened his mouth, showing his fangs, and laughed. "Peace, wizard. We're not here for your blood."

"Speak for yourself," the girl said. She licked her lips again, and this time I could see the black spots on her long, pink tongue. Ewg.

The male smiled and put a hand on her shoulder, a gesture that was half affection, half physical restraint. "My sister hasn't eaten tonight," he explained. "She's on a diet."

"Vampires on a diet?" Susan murmured beneath her breath.

"Yeah," I said back, sotto voce. "Make hers a Blood Lite."

Susan made a choking sound.

I eyed the male and raised my voice. "Who are you, then? And why are you at my house?"

He inclined his head politely. "My name is Kyle Hamilton. This is my sister, Kelly. We are associates of Madame Bianca's, and we are here to give you a message. An invitation, actually."

"It only takes one of you to deliver a message."

Kyle glanced at his sister. "We were just on the way to our game of doubles."

I snorted. "Yeah, right," I told him. "Whatever it is you're selling, I don't want any. You can go now."

Kyle frowned. "I urge you to reconsider, Mr. Dresden. You, of all people, should know Madame Bianca is the most influential vampire in the city of Chicago. Denying her invitation could have grave consequences."

"I don't like threats," I shot back. I hefted my blasting rod and leveled it at Kyle's baby blues. "Keep it up and there's going to be a greasy spot right about where you're standing."

The pair of them smiled at me—innocent angels with pointed teeth. "Please, Mr. Dresden," Kyle said. "Understand that I am only pointing out the potential hazards of a diplomatic incident between the Vampire Court and the White Council."

Whoops. That changed things. I hesitated, and then lowered the blasting rod. "This is court business? Official business?"

"The Vampire Court," Kyle said, a measured cadence to his words, "extends a formal invitation to Harry Dresden, Wizard, as the local representative of the White Council of Wizards, to attend the reception celebrating the elevation of Bianca St. Claire to the rank of Margravine of the Vampire Court, three nights hence, reception to begin at midnight." Kyle paused to produce an expensive-looking white envelope and to refresh his smile. "The safety of all invited guests is assured, by word of the assembled court, of course."

"Harry," Susan breathed. "What's going on?"

"Tell you in a minute," I said. I stepped away from Susan. "You are acting as an ordained herald of the court, then?"

"I am," Kyle said.

I nodded. "Bring me the invitation."

The pair of them started toward me. I lifted my blasting rod and muttered a word. Power flooded through the rod, and the far tip began to glow with an incandescent light. "Not her," I said, nodding to the herald's sister. "Just you."

Kyle kept his smile, but his eyes had changed from blue to a shade of angry black that was rapidly expanding to cover the whites. "Well," he said, his voice tense, "aren't we the little lawyer, Mr. Dresden?"

I smiled back at him. "Look, Sparky, you're the herald. You should know the accords as well as I do. You've license to deliver and receive messages and to have safe passage granted you so long as you don't start any trouble." I waved the tip of the rod toward the girl beside him. "She doesn't. And she's not obliged to keep the peace, either. Let's just say I'd rather we all walked away from this."

They both made a hissing sound that no human could quite have duplicated. Kyle pushed Kelly roughly back behind him, where she remained, her soft-looking hands pressed to her stomach, her eyes flooded entirely black and empty of humanity. Kyle stalked toward me and thrust the envelope at me. I swallowed my fear, lowered my blasting rod, and took it.

"Your business here is complete," I told him. "Blow."

"You'd better be there, Dresden," Kyle snarled, pacing back to his sister's side. "My lady will be most upset if you are not."

"I told you to blow, Kyle." I lifted my hand, gathered my anger and my fear as handy sources of fuel, and said, quietly, "*Ventus servitas.*"

Chapter Nine

I dreamed.

Chapter Ten

Mortimer Lindquist had tried to give his house that gothic feel. Greyish gargoyles stood at the corners of his roof. Black iron gates glowered at the front of his house and statuary lined the walk to his front door. Long grass had overgrown his yard. If his house hadn't been a red-roofed, white-walled stucco transplant from somewhere in southern California, it might have worked.

The results looked more like the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland than an ominous abode of a speaker to the dead. The black iron gates stood surrounded by plain chain-link fence. The gargoyles, on closer inspection, proved to be plastic reproductions. The statuary, too, had the rough outlines of plaster, rather than the clean, sweeping profile of marble. You could have plopped a pink flamingo down right in the middle of the unmowed weeds, and it would have somehow matched the decor. But, I supposed, at night, with the right lighting and the right attitude, some people might have believed it.

I shook my head and lifted my hand to rap on the door.

It opened before my knuckles touched it, and a well-rounded set of shoulders below a shining, balding head backed through the doorway, grunting. I stepped to one side. The little man tugged an enormous suitcase out onto the porch, never taking notice of me, his florid face streaked with perspiration.

I sidled into the doorway as he turned to lug the bag out to the gate, muttering to himself under his breath. I shook my head and went on into the house. The door was a business entrance—there was no tingling sensation of crossing the threshold of a dwelling uninvited. The front room reminded me of the house's exterior. Lots of black curtains draped down over

the walls and doorways. Red and black candles squatted all over the place. A grinning human skull leered from a bookshelf straining to contain copies of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* with the lettering scraped off their spines. The skull was plastic, too.

Morty had a table set up in the room, several chairs around it with a high-backed chair at the rear, wood that had actually been carved with a number of monstrous beings. I took a seat in the chair, folded my hands on the table in front of me, and waited.

The little man came back in, wiping at his face with a bandanna handkerchief, sweating and panting.

"Shut the door," I said. "We need to talk, Morty."

He squealed and whirled around.

"Y-you," he stammered. "Dresden. What are you doing here?"

I stared at him. "Come in, Morty."

He came closer, but left the door open. In spite of his pudginess, he moved with the nervous energy of a spooked cat. His white business shirt showed stains beneath his arms reaching halfway to his belt. "Look, Dresden. I told you guys before—I get the rules, right? I haven't been doing *anything* you guys talked about."

Aha. The White Council *had* sent someone to see him. Morty was a professional con. I hadn't planned on getting any honest answers out of him without a lot of effort. Maybe I could play this angle and save myself a lot of work.

"Let me tell you something, Morty. When I come into a place and don't say a thing except, 'Let's talk,' and the first thing I hear is 'I didn't do it,' it makes me think that the person I'm talking to must have done something. You know what I'm saying?"

His florid face lost several shades of red. "No way, man. Look, I've got nothing to do with what's been going on. Not my fault, none of my business, man."

"With what's been going on," I said. I looked down at my folded hands for a moment, and then back up at him. "What's the suitcase for, Morty? You do something that means you need to leave town for a while?"

He swallowed, thick neck working. "Look, Dresden. Mister Dresden. My sister got sick, see. I'm just going to help her out."

"Sure you are," I said. "That's what you're doing. Going out of town to help your sick sister."

"I swear to God," Morty said, lifting a hand, his face earnest.

I pointed at the chair across from me. "Sit down, Morty."

"I'd like to, but I got a cab coming." He turned toward the door.

"*Ventus servitas*," I hissed, nice and dramatic, and threw some will at the door. Sudden wind slammed it shut right in front of his eyes. He squeaked, and backed up several paces, staring at the door, then whirling to face me.

I used the remnants of the same spell to push out a chair opposite me. "Sit down, Morty. I've got a few questions. Now, if you cut the crap, you'll make your cab. And, if not . . ." I left the words hanging. One thing about intimidation is that people can always think up something worse that you could do to them than you can, if you leave their imagination some room to play.

He stared at me, and swallowed again, his jowls jiggling. Then he moved to the chair as though he expected chains to fly out of it and tie him down the moment he sat. He balanced his weight on the very edge of the chair, licked his lips, and watched me, probably trying to figure out the best lies for the questions he expected.

"You know," I said. "I've read your books, Morty. *Ghosts of Chicago*. *The Spook Factor*. Two or three others. You did good work, there."

His expression changed, eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Thank you."

"I mean, twenty years ago, you were a pretty damn good investigator. Sensitivity to spiritual energies and apparitions—ghosts. What we call an ectomancer in the business."

"Yeah," he said. His eyes softened a little, if not his voice. He avoided looking directly in my face. Most people do. "That was a long time ago."

I kept my voice in the same tone, the same expression. "And now what? You run séances for people. How many times do you actually get to contact a spirit? One time in ten? One in twenty? Must be a real letdown from the actual stuff. Playacting, I mean."

He was good at covering his expressions—I'll give him that. But I'm used to watching people. I saw anger in the way he held his neck and shoulders. "I provide a legitimate service to people in need."

"No. You play on their grief to take them for all you can. You don't believe that you're doing right, Morty, deep down. You can justify it any way you want, but you don't *like* what you're doing. If you did, your powers wouldn't have faded like they have."

His jaw set in a hard line, and he didn't try to hide the anger anymore—the first honest reaction I'd seen out of him since he'd cried out in surprise. "If you've got a point, Dresden, get to it. I've got a plane to catch."

I spread my fingers over the tabletop. "In the past two weeks," I said, "the spooks have been going mad. You should see the trouble they've caused. That poltergeist in the Campbell house. The Basement Beast at U. of C. Agatha Hagglesworth, down at Cook County."

Morty grimaced and wiped at his face again. "Yeah. I hear things. You and the Knight of the Sword have been covering the worst of it."

"What else has been happening, Morty? I'm getting a little cranky losing sleep, so keep it short and simple."

"I don't know," he said, sullen. "I've lost my powers, remember."

I narrowed my eyes. "But you hear things, Morty. You've still got some sources in the Nevernever. Why are you leaving town?"

He laughed, and it had a shaky edge to it. "You said you read all of my books? Did you read *They Shall Rise*?"

"I glanced over it. End-of-the-world-type stuff. I figured you had been talking to the wrong kind of spirits too much. They love trying to sell people on Armageddon. A lot of them are cons like you."

He ignored me. "Then you read my theory on the barrier between our world and the Nevernever. That it's slowly being torn away."

"And you think it's falling to pieces, now? Morty, that wall has been there since the dawn of time. I don't think it's going to collapse right now."

"Wall." He said the word with a sneer. "More like Saran Wrap, wizard. Like Jell-O. It bends and wiggles and stirs." He rubbed his palms on his thighs, shivering.

"And it's falling now?"

"Look around you!" he shouted. "Good God, wizard. The past two weeks, the border's been waggling back and forth like a hooker at a dockworker's convention. Why the hell do you think all of these ghosts have been rising?"

I didn't let the sudden volume of his tone make me blink. "You're saying that this instability has been making it easier for ghosts to cross over from the Nevernever?"

"And easier to form bigger, stronger ghosts when people die," he said. "You think you've got some pissed-off ghosts now? Wait until some honor student on her way out of the south side with a college scholarship gets popped by accident in a gang shoot-out. Wait until some poor sap who got AIDS from a blood transfusion breathes his last."

"Bigger, badder ghosts," I said. "Superghosts. That's what you're talking about."

He laughed, a nasty little laugh. "New generation of viruses is coming, too. Things are going to hell all over. Eventually, that border's going to get thin enough to spit through, and you'll have more problems with demon attacks than gang violence."

I shook my head. "All right," I said. "Let's say that I buy that the barrier is fluid rather than concrete. There's turbulence in it, and it's making crossing over easier, both ways. Could something be causing the turbulence?"

"How the hell should I know?" he snarled. "You don't know what it's like, Dresden. To speak to things that exist in the past and in the future as well as in the now. To have them walk up to you at the salad bar and start telling you how they murdered their wife in her sleep."

"I mean, you think you've got a hold on things, that you understand, but in the end it all falls to pieces. A con is simpler, Dresden. You *make* order. People don't give a flying fuck if

Uncle Jeffrey really forgives them for missing his last birthday party. They want to know that the world is a place where Uncle Jeffrey *can* and *should* forgive them." He swallowed, and looked around the room, at the fake tomes and the fake skull. "That's what I sell them. Closure. Like on television. They want to know that it's all going to work out in the end, and they're happy to pay for it."

A car honked outside. Morty glared at me. "We're through."

I nodded.

He jerked to his feet, splotches of color in his cheeks. "God, I need a drink. Get out of town, Dresden. Something came across last night like nothing I've ever felt."

I thought of ruined cars and rosebushes planted in consecrated ground. "Do you know what it is?"

"It's big," Morty said. "And it's pissed off. It's going to start killing, Dresden. And I don't think you or anyone else is going to be able to stop it."

"But it's a ghost?"

He gave me a smile that showed me his canines. It was creepy on that florid, eyes-too-wide face. "It's a nightmare." He started to turn away. I wanted to let him go, but I couldn't. The man had become a liar, a sniveling con, but he hadn't always been.

I rose and beat him to the door, taking his arm in one hand. He spun to face me, jerking his arm away, glaring defiantly at my eyes. I avoided locking gazes. I didn't want to take a look at Mortimer Lindquist's soul.

"Morty," I said, quietly. "Get away from your séances for a while. Go somewhere quiet. Read. Relax. You're older now, stronger. If you give yourself a chance, the power will come back"

He laughed again, tired and jaded. "Sure, Dresden. Just like that."

"Morty—"

He turned away from me and stalked out the door. He didn't bother to lock the place up behind him. I watched him head out to the cab, which waited by the curb. He lugged his bag into the backseat, and then followed it.

Before the cab pulled out, he rolled down the window. "Dresden," he called. "Under my chair there's a drawer. My notes. If you want to kill yourself trying to stand up to this thing, you might as well know what you're getting into."

He rolled the window back up as the cab pulled away. I watched it go, then went back inside. I found the drawer hidden in the base of the carved wooden chair, and inside I found a trio of old leather-bound journals, vellum pages covered in script that started out neat in the oldest one and became a jerky scrawl in the most recent entries. I held the books up to my mouth and inhaled the smell of leather, ink, paper; musty and genuine and real.

Morty hadn't had to give me the notes. Maybe there was some root of the person he had been, deep down somewhere, that wasn't dead yet. Maybe I'd done him a little good with that advice. I'd like to think that.

I blew out a breath, found a phone and called a cab of my own. I needed to get the *Beetle* out of impound if I could. Maybe Murphy could fix it for me.

I gathered the journals and went to the porch to wait for the cab, shutting the door behind me. Something big was coming through town, Morty had said.

"A nightmare," I said, out loud.

Could Mort be right? Could the barrier between the spirit world and our own be falling apart? The thought made me shudder. Something had been formed, something big and mean. And my gut instinct told me that it had a purpose. All power, no matter how terrible or benign, whether its wielder is aware of it or not, has a purpose.

So this Nightmare was here for something. I wondered what it wanted. Wondered what it would do.

And worried that, all too soon, I would find out.

Chapter Eleven

An unmarked car sat in my driveway with two nondescript men inside.

I got out of the taxi, paid off the cabby, and nodded at the driver of the car, Detective Rudolph. Rudy’s clean-cut good looks hadn’t faded in the year since he’d started with Special Investigations, Chicago’s unspoken answer to the officially unacknowledged world of the supernatural. But the time had hardened him a bit, made him a little less white around the eyes.

Rudolph nodded back, not even trying to hide his glower. He didn’t like me. Maybe it had something to do with the bust several months back. Rudy had cut and run, rather than stick it out next to me. Before that, I’d escaped police custody while he was supposed to be watching me. I’d had a darn good reason to escape, and it wasn’t really fair of him to hold that against me, but hey. Whatever got him through the day.

“Heya, Detective,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Get in the car,” Rudolph said.

I planted my feet and shoved my hands in my pockets with a certain nonchalance. “Am I under arrest?”

Rudolph narrowed his eyes and started to speak again, but the man in the passenger seat cut him off. “Heya, Harry,” Detective Sergeant John Stallings said, nodding at me.

“How you doing, John? What brings you out today?”

“Murph wanted us to ask you down to a scene.” He reached up and scratched at several days’ worth of unshaven beard beneath a bad haircut and intelligent dark eyes. “Hope you got the time. We tried at your office, but you haven’t been in, so she sent us down here to wait for you.”

I shifted Mort Lindquist’s books in my arms. “I’m busy today. Can it wait?”

Rudolph spat, “The lieutenant says she wants you down there now, you get your ass down there. Now.”

Stallings gave Rudolph a look, and then rolled his eyes for my benefit. “Look, Harry. Murphy told me to tell you that this one was personal.”

I frowned. “Personal, eh?”

He spread his hands. “It’s what she said.” He frowned and then added, “It’s Micky Malone.”

I got a sickly little feeling in my stomach. “Dead?”

Stallings’s jaw twitched. “You’d better come see for yourself.”

I closed my eyes and tried not to get frustrated. I didn’t have time for detours. It would take me hours to grind through Mort’s notes, and sundown, when the spirits would be able to cross over from the Nevernever, would come swiftly.

But Murphy did plenty for me. I owed her. She’d saved my life a couple of times, and vice versa. She was my main source of income, too. Karrin Murphy headed up Special Investigations, a post that had traditionally resulted in a couple of months of bumbling and then a speedy exit from the police force. Murphy hadn’t bumbled—instead, she’d hired the services of Chicago’s only professional wizard as a consultant. She was getting to where she had a pretty good grasp on the local preternatural predators, at least the most common of them, but when things got hairy she still called me in. Technically, I show up on the paperwork as an investigative consultant. I guess the computer records system doesn’t have numerical codes for demon banishment, divination spells, or exorcisms.

S.I. had gone toe to toe with one of the worst things anyone but a wizard like me was ever likely to see, only the year before—a half-ton of indestructible loup-garou. They’d taken some serious casualties. Six dead, including Murphy’s partner. Micky Malone had gotten hamstrung. He’d gone through therapy, and had come along for one last job when Michael and I took down that demon-summoning sorcerer. After that, though, he’d decided that his limp was going to keep him from being a good cop, and retired on disability.

I felt guilty for that—maybe irrational, true, but if I’d been a little smarter or a little faster, maybe I could have saved those people’s lives. And maybe I could have saved Micky’s health. No one else saw it that way, but I did.

“All right,” I said. “Give me a second to put these away.”

The ride was quiet, except for a little meaningless chatter from Stallings. Rudolph ignored me. I closed my eyes and ached along the way. Rudolph’s radio squawked and then fell abruptly silent. I could smell burnt rubber or something, and knew that it was likely my fault.

I opened one eye and saw Rudolph scowling back at me in the mirror. I half-smiled, and closed my eyes again. Jerk.

The car stopped in a residential neighborhood near West Armitage, down in Bucktown. The district had gotten its name from the number of immigrant homes once there, and the goats kept in people’s front yards. The homes had been tiny affairs, stuffed with too-large families and children.

Bucktown had been lived in for a century and it was all grown up. Literally. The houses on their tiny lots hadn’t had much room to expand out, so they’d grown up instead, giving the neighborhood a stretched, elongated look. The trees were ancient oaks and sycamores, and decorated the tiny yards in stately majesty, except where they’d been roughly hacked back from power lines and rooftops. Shadows fell in sharp slants from all the tall trees and tall houses, turning the streets and sidewalks into candy canes of light and darkness.

One of the houses, a two-story white-on-white number, had its small driveway full and another half-dozen cars parked out on the street, plus Murphy’s motorcycle leaning on its kickstand in the front yard. Rudolph pulled the car up alongside the curb across the street from that house and killed the engine. It went on rattling and coughing for a moment before it died.

I got out of the car and felt something *wrong*. An uneasy feeling ran over me, prickles of sensation along the nape of my neck and against my spine.

I stood there for a minute, frowning, while Rudolph and Stallings got out of the car. I looked around the neighborhood, trying to pin down the source of the odd sensations. The leaves in the trees, all in their autumn motley, rustled and sighed in the wind, occasionally falling. Dried leaves rattled and scraped over the streets. Cars drove by in the distance. A jet rumbled overhead, a deep and distant sound.

“Dresden,” Rudolph snapped. “Let’s go.”

I lifted a hand, extending my senses out, pushing my perception out along with my will. “Hang on a second,” I said. “I need to . . .” I quit trying to speak, and searched for the source of the sensation. What the hell was it?

“Fucking showboat,” Rudolph growled. I heard him start toward me.

“Hang on, kid,” Stallings said. “Let the man work. We’ve both seen what he can do.”

“I haven’t seen shit that can’t be explained,” Rudolph growled. But he stayed put.

I drifted across the street, to the yard of the house in question, and found the first body in the fallen leaves, five feet to my left. A small, yellow-and-white-furred cat lay there, twisted so that its forelegs faced one way, its hindquarters the opposite. Something had broken its neck.

I felt a pang of nausea. Death isn’t ever pretty, really. It’s worst with people, but with the animals that are close to mankind, it seems to be a little nastier than it might be elsewhere in the wild kingdom. The cat couldn’t have reached its full growth, yet—maybe a kitten from early in the spring, roaming the neighborhood. There was no collar on its neck.

I could feel a little cloud of disturbance around it, a kind of psychic energy left by traumatic, agonizing, and torturous events. But this one little thing, one animal’s death, shouldn’t have been enough to make me aware of it all the way over from my seat in the police car.

Five feet farther on, I found a dead bird. I found its wings in two more places. Then two more birds, without heads. Then something that had been small and furry, and was now small and furry and squishy—maybe a vole or a ground squirrel. And there were more. A lot more—all in all, maybe a dozen dead animals in the front yard, a dozen little patches of violent energies still lingering. No single one of them would have been enough to disturb my wizard’s sense, but all of them together had.

So what the hell had been killing these animals?

I rubbed my palms over my arms, a sickly little feeling of dread rolling through me. I looked up to see Rudolph and Stallings following me around. Their faces looked kind of greenish.

“Jesus,” Stallings said. He prodded the body of the cat with one toe. “What did this?”

I shook my head and rolled my shoulders in a shrug. “It might take me a while to find out. Where’s Micky?”

“Inside.”

“Well then,” I said, and stood up, brushing off my hands. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Twelve

I stopped outside the doorway. Micky Malone owned a nice house. His wife taught elementary school. They wouldn't have been able to afford the place on his salary alone, but together they managed. The hardwood floors gleamed with polish. I saw an original painting, a seascape, hanging on one of the walls of the living room, adjacent to the entryway. There were a lot of plants, a lot of greenery that, along with the wood grain of the floors, gave the place a rich, organic glow. It was one of those places that wasn't just a house. It was a home.

"Come on, Dresden," Rudolph snapped. "The lieutenant is waiting."

"Is Mrs. Malone here?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Go get her. I need her to invite me in."

"What?" Rudolph said. "Give me a break. Who are you, Count Dracula?"

"Drakul is still in eastern Europe, last time we checked," I replied. "But I need her or Micky to ask me in, if you want me to do anything for you."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

I sighed. "Look. Homes, places that people live in and love and have built a life in have a kind of power of their own. If a bunch of strangers had been troupin' in and out all day, I wouldn't have any trouble with the threshold, but you're not. You guys are friends." Like Murphy had said—this one was personal.

Stallings frowned. "So you can't come in?"

"Oh, I could come in," I said. "But I'd be leaving most of what I can do at the door. The threshold would mess with me being able to work any forces in the house."

"What shit," Rudolph snorted. "Count Dracula."

"Harry," Stallings said. "Can't we invite you in?"

"No. Has to be someone who lives there. Besides, it's polite," I said. "I don't like to go places where I'm not welcome. I'd feel a lot better if I knew it was all right with Mrs. Malone for me to be here."

Rudolph opened his mouth to spit venom on me again, but Stallings cut him off. "Just do it, Rudy. Go get Sonia and bring her back here."

Rudolph glowered but did what he was told, going into the house.

Stallings tapped out a cigarette and lit up. He puffed for a second, thoughtfully. "So you can't do magic inside a house unless someone asks you in?"

"Not a house," I said. "A home. There's a difference."

"So what about Victor Sells's place? I hear you took him on, right?"

I shook my head. "He'd screwed up his threshold. He was running his business out of it, using the place for dark ceremonies. It wasn't a home anymore."

"So you can't mess with anything on its own turf?"

"Can't mess with mortals, no. Monsters don't get a threshold."

"Why not?"

"How the hell should I know," I said. "They just don't. I can't know everything, right?"

"Guess so," Stallings said, and after a minute he nodded. "Sure, I see what you mean. So it shuts you down?"

"Not completely, but it makes it a lot harder to do anything. Like wearing a lead suit. That's why vampires have to keep out. Other nasties like that. If you give them that much of a handicap, they have trouble just staying alive, much less using any freaky powers."

Stallings shook his head. "This magic crap. I never would have believed it before I came here. I still have trouble with it."

"Yeah? That's good. Means you aren't running into it too much."

He blew out twin columns of smoke from his nostrils. "Could be changing. Last couple of days, we've had some people go missing. Bums, street people, folks some of the cops and detectives know."

I frowned. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's all rumors so far. And people like that, they can just be gone the next day. But since I started working S.I., stuff like that makes me nervous."

I frowned, and debated telling Stallings what I knew about Bianca's party. Doubtless, there would be a whole flock of vampires in from out of town for the event. Maybe she and her

flunkies were rounding up hors d'oeuvres. But I had no proof of that—for all I knew, the disappearances, if they were disappearances, could be related to the turbulence in the Nevernever. If so, the cops couldn't do anything about it. And if it was something else, I could be starting a very nasty exchange with Bianca. I didn't want to sic the cops on her for no reason. I'm pretty sure Bianca had the resources to send them back at me—and she could probably make it look like I'd done something to deserve it, too.

Besides that, in the circles of the supernatural community, an Old World code of conduct still ruled. When you have a problem, you settle it face to face, within the circle. You don't bring in the cops and the other mortals as weapons. They're the nuclear missiles of the supernatural world. If you show people a supernatural brawl going on, it's going to scare the snot out of them and the next thing you know, they're burning everything and everyone in sight. Most people wouldn't care that one scary guy might have been right and the other was wrong. Both guys are scary, so you ace both of them and sleep better at night.

It had been that way since the dawn of the Age of Reason and the rising power of mortal kind. And more power to the people, I say. I hated all these bullies, vampires, demons, and bloodthirsty old deities rampaging around like they ruled the world. Never mind that, until a few centuries ago, they really had.

In any case, I decided to keep my mouth shut about Bianca's gathering until I knew enough to be certain, either way.

Stallings and I made small talk until Sonia Malone appeared at the door. She was a woman of medium height, comfortably overweight and solid-looking. Her face would have been gorgeous when she was a young woman, and it still carried that beauty, refined by years of self-confidence and steady reliability. Her eyes were reddened, and she wore no makeup, but her features seemed composed. She wore a simple dress in a floral print, her only jewelry the wedding band on her finger.

"Mr. Dresden," she said, politely. "Micky told me that you saved his life, last year."

I coughed and looked down. Though I guess that was true, technically, I still didn't see it that way. "We all did everything we could, ma'am. Your husband was very brave."

"Detective Rudolph said that I needed to invite you in."

"I don't want to go where I'm not welcome, ma'am," I replied.

Sonia wrinkled up her nose and eyed Stallings. "Put that out, Sergeant."

Stallings dropped the cigarette and mused it out with his foot.

"All right, Mr. Dresden," she said. For a moment, her composure faltered and her lips began to tremble. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, smoothing over her features, then opened her eyes again. "If you can help my Micky, please come in. I invite you."

"Thank you," I said. I stepped forward, through the door, and felt the silent tension of the threshold parting around me like a beaded curtain rimed with frost.

We went through a living room where several cops, people I knew from S.I., sat around talking quietly. It reminded me of a funeral. They looked up at me as I went by, and talk ceased. I nodded to them, and we went on past, to a staircase leading up to the second floor.

"He was up late last night," she told me, her voice quiet. "Sometimes he can't sleep, and he didn't come to bed until late. I got up early, but I didn't want to wake him, so I let him sleep in." Mrs. Malone stopped at the top of the stairs, and pointed down the hall at a closed door. "Th-there," she said. "I'm sorry. I c-can't . . ." She took another deep breath. "I need to see about lunch. Are you hungry?"

“Oh. Yes, sure.”

“All right,” she said, and retreated back down the stairs.

I swallowed and looked at the door at the end of the hall, then headed toward it. My steps sounded loud in my own ears. I knocked gently on the door.

Karrin Murphy opened it. She wasn't anyone's idea of a leader of a group of cops charged with solving every bizarre crime that fell between the lines of the law enforcement system. She didn't look like someone who would stand, with her feet planted, putting tiny silver bullets into an oncoming freight train of a loup-garou, either—but she was.

Karrin looked up at me from her five-foot-nothing in height. Her blue eyes, normally clear and bright, looked sunken. She'd shoved her golden hair under a baseball cap, and wore jeans and a white T-shirt. Her shoulder harness wrinkled the cotton around the shoulder where her sidearm hung. Lines stood out like cracks in a sunbaked field, around her mouth, her eyes. “Hi, Harry,” she said. Her voice too was quiet, gruff.

“Hiya, Murph. You don't look so good.”

She tried to smile. It looked ghastly. “I . . . I didn't know who else to call.”

I frowned, troubled. On any other day, Murphy would have returned my mildly insulting comment with compounded interest. She opened the door farther, and let me in.

I remembered Micky Malone as an energetic man of medium height, balding, with a broad smile and a nose that peeled in the sun if he walked outside to get his morning paper. The cane and limp were additions too recent for me to have firmly stuck in my memory. Micky wore old, quality suits, and was careful never to get the jackets messy or his wife would never let him hear the end of it.

I didn't remember Micky with a fixed, tooth-baring grin and eyes spread out in that helter-skelter gleam of madness. I didn't remember him covered in small scratches, or his fingernails crusted with his own blood, or his wrists and ankles cuffed to the iron-framed bed. He panted, grinning around the neatly decorated little room. I could smell sweat and urine. There were no lights on in the room, and the curtains had been drawn over the windows, leaving it in a brownish haze.

He turned his head toward me and his eyes widened. He sucked in a breath and threw back his head in a long, falsetto-pitched scream like a coyote's. Then he started laughing and rocking back and forth, jerking on the steel restraints, making the bed shake in a steady, squeaking rhythm.

“Sonia called us this morning,” Murphy said, toneless. “She'd locked herself into her closet and had a cellular. We got here right before Micky finished breaking down the closet door.”

“She called the cops?”

“No. She called me. Said she didn't want them to see Micky like this. That it would ruin him.”

I shook my head. “Damn. Brave lady. And he's been like this ever since?”

“Yeah. He was just . . . crazy mean. Screaming and spitting and biting.”

“Has he said anything?” I asked.

“Not a word,” Murphy said. “Animal noises.” She crossed her arms and looked up at me, at my eyes for a second, before looking away. “What happened to him, Harry?”

Micky giggled and started bouncing his hips up and down on the bed as he rocked, making it sound as though a couple of hyperkinetic teenagers were coupling there. My stomach turned. No wonder Mrs. Malone hadn't been willing to come back into this room.

“You better give me a minute to find out,” I said.

“Could he be . . . you know. Possessed? Like in the movies?”

“I don't know yet, Murph.”

“Could it be some kind of spell?”

“Murphy, I don't know.”

“Dammit, Harry,” she snapped. “You'd damned well better find out.” She clenched her fists and shook with suppressed fury.

I put my hand on her shoulder. “I will. Give me some time with him.”

“Harry, I swear, if you can't help him—” Her voice caught in her throat, and tears sparkled in her eyes. “He's one of *mine*, dammit.”

“Easy, Murph,” I told her, making my voice as gentle as I knew how. I opened the door for her. “Go get some coffee, all right? I'll see what I can do.”

She glanced up at me and then back at Malone. “It's okay, Micky,” she said. “We're all here for you. You won't be alone.”

Micky Malone gave her that fixed grin and then licked his lips before bursting out into another chorus of giggles. Murphy shivered and then walked out of the room, her head bowed. And left me alone with the madman.

Chapter Thirteen

I drew up a chair beside the bed and sat down. Micky stared at me with white-rimmed eyes. I rummaged around in the inside pocket of my duster. I had some chalk there, in case I needed to draw a circle. A candle and some matches. A couple of old receipts. Not much, magically speaking, to work with.

“Hi, there, Micky,” I said. “Can you hear me in there?”

Micky broke out in another fit of giggles. I made sure to keep my eyes away from his. Hell’s bells, I did *not* want to get drawn into a soulgaze with Micky Malone at the moment.

“All right, Micky,” I said, keeping my voice calm, low, like you do with animals. “I’m going to touch you—okay? I think I’ll be able to tell if there’s anything inside of you if I do. I’m not going to hurt you, so don’t freak out.” As I spoke, I reached out a hand toward his bare arm and laid it lightly upon Micky’s skin.

He was fever-hot to the touch. I could sense some kind of force at work on him—not the tingling energy of a practitioner’s aura, or the ocean-deep power of Michael’s faith, but it was there, nonetheless. Some kind of cold, crawling energy oozed over him.

What the hell?

It didn’t feel like any kind of spell I’d ever experienced. And it wasn’t a possession, I was sure of that. I would have been able to sense any kind of spirit-being in him, through a physical touch.

Micky stared at me for a second and then thrust his head at my hand, his teeth making snapping motions. I jerked back even though he couldn’t have reached me. Someone trying to bite you makes you react, more than if they take a punch at you. Biting is just more primal. Spooky.

Micky started giggling again, rocking the bed back and forth.

“All right,” I breathed. “I’m going to have to get a little desperate, here. If you weren’t a friend, Micky . . .” I closed my eyes for a moment, steeling myself, then focused my will into a spot right between my eyebrows, only a little higher. I felt the tension gather there, the pressure, and when I opened my eyes again, I’d opened my wizard’s Sight, too.

The Sight is a blessing and a curse. It lets you see things, things you couldn’t normally see. With my Sight, I can see even the most ethereal of spirits. I can see the energies of life stirring and moving, running like blood through the world, between the earth and the sky, between water and fire. Enchantments stand out like cords braided from fiber-optic cables, or maybe Las Vegas-quality neon, depending on how complicated or powerful they are. You can sometimes see the demons that walk among mankind in human form, this way. Or the angels. You see things the way they really are, in spirit and in soul, as well as in body.

The problem is that anything you see stays with you. No matter how horrible, no matter how revolting, no matter how madness-inducing or terrifying—it stays with you. Forever. Always right there in your mind in full technicolor, never fading or becoming easier to bear. Sometimes you see things that are so beautiful you want to keep them with you, always.

But more often, in my line of work, you see things like Micky Malone.

He was dressed in boxers and a white undershirt, stained with bits of blood and sweat and worse. But when I turned my Sight on him, I saw something different.

He had been ravaged. Torn apart. He was missing flesh, everywhere. Something had attacked him and taken out sections of him in huge bites. I’d seen pictures of people who’d been attacked by sharks, had hunks of meat just taken, gone. That’s what Micky looked like. It wasn’t visible to the flesh, but something had torn his mind, and maybe his soul, to bloody shreds. He bled and bled, endlessly, never staining the sheets.

And wound around him, starting at his throat and running down to one ankle was a strand of black wire, oversized barbs gouging into his flesh, the ends disappearing seamlessly into his skin.

Just like Agatha Hagglesworth.

I stared at him, horrified, my stomach writhing and heaving. I had to fight to keep from throwing up. Micky looked up at me and seemed to sense something was different, because he went abruptly still. His smile didn’t look mad to me anymore. It looked agonized, like a grimace of pain twisted and cranked until the muscles of his face were at the snapping point.

His lips moved. Shook, his whole face writhing with the expression. “Uh, uh, uh,” he moaned.

“It’s all right, Micky,” I said. I clasped my hands together to keep them from shaking. “I’m here.”

“Hurts,” he breathed at last, barely a whisper. “It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts . . .” He went on and on repeating it until he ran out of breath. Then he squeezed his eyes shut. Tears welled out and he broke into another helpless, maddened giggle.

What the hell could I do for *that*? The barbed wire had to be a spell of some kind, but it didn’t look like anything I had ever seen before. Most magic throbbed and pulsed with light, life, even if it was being used for malevolent purposes. Magic comes from life, from the energy of our world and from people, from their emotions and their will. That’s what I had always been taught.

But that barbed wire was dull, flat, matte-black. I reached out to touch it, and it almost seared my fingers with how cold it was. Micky, God. I couldn’t imagine what he must have been going through.

The smart thing to do would have been to fall back. I could get Bob and work on this, research it, figure out how to get the wire from around Micky without hurting him. But he had already been suffering through this for hours. He might not make it through many more—his sanity was going to be hard-pressed to survive the spiritual mauling he had taken. Adding another day of this torture onto it all might send him someplace from where he’d never come back.

I closed my eyes and took a breath. “I hope I’m right, Micky,” I told him. “I’m going to try to make it stop hurting.”

He let out a whimpering little giggle, staring up at me.

I decided to start at his ankle. I swallowed, steeling myself again, and reached down, getting my fingers between the burning cold barbed wire and his skin. I clenched my teeth, forcing will, power, into the touch, enough to be able to touch the material of the spell around him. Then I started pulling. Slowly, at first, and then harder.

The metal strands burned into me. My fingers never went numb—they just began to ache more and more violently. The barbed wire resisted, barbs clinging at Micky’s flesh. The poor man screamed aloud, agonized, though there was that horrible, tortured laughter added to it as well.

I felt tears burn into my eyes, from the pain, from Micky’s scream, but I kept pulling. The end of the wire tore free of his flesh. I kept pulling. Barb by barb, inch by inch, I tore the wire-spell free, drawing it up *through* his flesh at times, pulling that dead, cold energy away from Micky. He screamed until he ran out of breath and I heard whimpers coming from somewhere else in the room. I guess it was me. I started using both hands, struggling against the cold magic.

Finally, the other end slithered free from Micky’s neck. His eyes flew open wide and then he sagged down, letting out a low, exhausted moan. I gasped and stumbled back from the bed, keeping the wire in my hands.

It suddenly twisted and spun like a serpent, and one end plunged into my throat.

Ice. Cold. Endless, bitter, aching cold coursed through me, and I screamed. I heard footsteps running down the hall outside, a voice calling out. The wire whipped and thrashed around, the other end darting toward the floor, and I seized it in both hands, twisted it up and away from attaching itself at the other end. The loose strands near my neck started rippling,

cold barbs digging into me through my clothes, my skin, as the dark energy tried to attach itself to *me*.

The door burst open. Murphy came through it, her eyes living flames of azure blue, her hair a golden coronet around her. She held a blazing sword in her hand and she shone so bright and beautiful and terrifying in her anger that it was hard to see. The Sight, I realized, dimly. I was seeing her for who she was.

“Harry! What the hell?”

I struggled against the wire, knowing that she couldn’t see it or feel it, gasping. “The window. Murph, open the window!”

She didn’t hesitate for a second, but crossed the floor and threw open the window. I staggered after her, winding the frozen wire around one hand, my mind screaming with the agony of it. I fought it down, dragged it into a coil, my face twisted into a snarl as I did it. Anger surged up, hot and bright, and I reached for that power as I jerked the wire from my throat and

threw it out the window as hard as I could, sending it sailing into the air.

I snarled, jabbed a finger at it, took all that anger and fear and sent it coursing out of me, toward that dark spell. *"Fuego!"*

Chapter Fourteen

“No,” I said into the phone. I tossed my coat onto a chair and then sprawled out on the couch. My apartment lay covered in shadows, sunlight filtering in through the sunken windows high up on the walls. “I haven’t gotten the chance yet. I lost a couple of hours detouring to pull a spell off of Micky Malone, from S.I. Someone had wrapped barbed wire around his spirit.”

“Mother of God,” Michael said. “Is he all right?”

“Will be. But it’s four hours of daylight lost.” I filled him in on Mort Lindquist and his diaries, as well as the events at Detective Malone’s house.

“There isn’t much more time to find this Lydia, Harry,” Michael agreed. “Sundown’s in another six hours.”

“I’m working on it. And after I get Bob out the door looking, I’ll see if I can hit the streets myself. I got the *Beetle* back.”

He sounded surprised. “It’s not impounded?”

“Murphy fixed it for me.”

“Harry,” he said, disappointed. “She broke the law to get you your car back?”

“Darn tootin’ she did,” I said. “She owed me a favor. Hey man, the Almighty doesn’t arrange for *me* to be anywhere on time. I need wheels.”

Michael sighed. “There isn’t time to debate this right now. I’ll call you if I find her—but it doesn’t look good.”

“I just can’t figure it. What would this thing have to do with that girl? We need to find her and work out the connection.”

“Could Lydia be responsible for the recent disturbances?”

“I don’t think so. That spell I ran into today—I’ve never seen anything like it. It was . . .” I shivered, remembering. “It was wrong, Michael. Cold. It was—”

“Evil?” he suggested.

“Maybe. Yeah.”

“There is such a thing as evil, Harry, in spite of what many people say. Just remember that there’s good, too.”

I cleared my throat, uncomfortable. “Murphy put out the word to the folks in blue—so if one of her friends on patrol sees a girl matching Lydia’s description, we’ll hear about it.”

“Outstanding,” Michael said. “You see, Harry? This detour of yours to help Detective Malone is going to help us a great deal. Isn’t that a very positive coincidence?”

“Yeah, Michael. Divine fortune, yadda, yadda. Call me.”

“Don’t *yadda yadda* the Lord, Harry. It’s disrespectful. God go with you.” And he hung up.

I put my coat away, got out my nice, heavy flannel robe and slipped into it, then went over to the rug against the south wall. I dragged it away from the floor, and the hinged door there, then swung the door open. I fetched a kerosene lamp, lit it up and dialed the wick up to a bright flame, then got ready to descend the folding wooden ladder into the subbasement.

The telephone rang again.

I debated ignoring it. It rang again, insistent. I sighed, closed the door, put the rug back in place, and got to the phone on the fifth ring.

“What?” I said, uncharitably.

“I have to hand it to you, Dresden,” Susan said. “You certainly know how to charm a girl the morning after.”

I let out a long breath. “Sorry, Susan. I’ve been working and . . . it’s not going so well. Lots of questions and no answers.”

“Ouch,” she said back. Someone said something to her in the background, and she murmured a response. “I don’t want to add to your day, but do you remember the name of that guy you and Special Investigations took down a couple months ago? The ritual killer?”

“Oh, right. Him . . .” I closed my eyes, and grubbed about in my memory. “Leo something. Cravat, Camner, Conner. Kraven the Hunter. I didn’t really get his name. I tracked him down by the demon he was calling up and nailed him that way. Michael and I didn’t hang around for the paperwork afterwards, either.”

“Kravos?” Susan asked. “Leonid Kravos?”

“Yeah, that might have been it, I think.”

“Great,” she said. “Super. Thank you, Harry.” Her voice sounded a little tense, excited.

“Uh. Do you mind telling me what’s going on?” I asked her.

“It’s an angle I’m working on,” she said. “Look, all I’ve got right now are rumors. I’ll try to tell you more as soon as I’ve got something concrete.”

“Fair enough. I’m sort of focused on something else right now, anyway.”

“Anything you need help with?”

“God, I hope not,” I said. I shifted the phone a little closer to my ear. “Did you sleep all right, last night?”

“Maybe,” she teased. “It’s hard to get really relaxed, when I’m that unsatisfied, but your apartment’s so cold it’s kind of like going into hibernation.”

“Yeah, well. Next time I’ll make sure it’s a hell of a lot colder.”

“I’m shivering already,” she purred. “Call you tonight if I can?”

“Might not be here.”

She sighed. “I understand. Potluck, then. Thanks again, Harry.”

“Anytime.”

We said goodbye, hung up, and I went back to the stairs leading down into the subbasement. I uncovered the trapdoor, opened it, got my lantern, and clumped on down the steep, folding staircase.

My lab never got any less cluttered, no matter how much more organization I imposed on it. The contents only grew denser. Counters and shelves ran along three walls. A long table ran down the center of the room, with enough space for me to slip sideways down its length on either side. Next to the ladder, a kerosene heater blunted the worst of the subterranean chill. On the far side of the table, a brass ring had been set into the floor—a summoning circle. I’d had to learn the hard way to keep it clear of the other debris in the lab.

Debris. Technically, everything in the lab was useful, and served some kind of purpose. The ancient books with their faded, moldering leather covers and their all-pervasive musty smell, the plastic containers with resealable lids, the bottles, the jars, the boxes—they all had something in them I either needed or had needed at one time. Notebooks, dozens of pens and pencils, paper clips and staples, reams of paper covered in my restless, scrawling handwriting, the dried corpses of small animals, a human skull surrounded by paperback novels, candles, an ancient battle axe, they all had some significance. I just couldn’t remember what it was for most of them.

I took the cover off the lamp and used it to light up about a dozen candles around the room, and then the kerosene heater. “Bob,” I said. “Bob, wake up. Come on, we’ve got work to do.” Golden light and the smell of candle flames and hot wax filled the room. “I mean it, man. There’s not much time.”

Up on its shelf the skull quivered. Twin points of orangish flame flickered up in the empty eye sockets. The white jaws parted in a pantomime yawn, an appropriate sound coming out with it. “Stars and Stones, Harry,” the skull muttered. “You’re inhuman. It isn’t even sundown yet.”

“Stop whining, Bob. I’m not in the mood.”

“Mood. I’m exhausted. I don’t think I can help you out anymore.”

“Unacceptable,” I said.

“Even spirits get tired, Harry. I need rest.”

“Time enough for rest when I’m dead.”

“All right then,” Bob said. “You want work, we make a deal. I want to do a ridealong the next time Susan comes over.”

I snorted at him. “Hell’s bells, Bob, don’t you ever think about anything besides sex? No. I’m not letting you into my head while I’m with Susan.”

The skull spat out an oath. “There should be a union. We could renegotiate my contract.”

I snorted. “Any time you want to head back to the homeland, Bob, feel free.”

“No, no, no,” the skull muttered. “That’s all right.”

“I mean, there’s still that misunderstanding with the Winter Queen, but—”

“All right, I said.”

“You probably don’t need my protection anymore. I’m sure she’d be willing to sit down and work things out, rather than putting you in torment for the next few hundred—”

“All *right*, I said!” Bob’s eyelights flamed. “You can be such an asshole, Dresden, I swear.”

“Yep,” I agreed. “You awake yet?”

The skull tilted to one side in a thoughtful gesture. “You know,” it said. “I am.” The eye sockets focused on me again. “Anger really gets the old juices flowing. That was pretty sneaky.”

I got out a relatively fresh notepad and a pencil. It took me a moment to clear off a space on the central table. “I’ve run into some new stuff. Maybe you can help me out. And we’ve got a missing person I need to look for.”

“Okay, hit me.”

I took a seat on the worn wooden stool and drew my warm robe a little closer about me. Trust me, wizards don’t wear robes for the dramatic effect. They just can’t get *warm* enough in their labs. I knew some guys in Europe who still operated out of stone towers. I shudder to think.

“Right,” I said. “Just give me whatever you can.” And I outlined the events, starting with Agatha Hagglesworth, through Lydia and her disappearance, through my conversation with Mort Lindquist and his mention of the Nightmare, to the attack on poor Micky Malone.

Bob whistled, no mean trick for a guy with no lips. “Let me get this straight. This creature, this thing, has been torturing powerful spirits for a couple of weeks with this barbed-wire spell. It tore up a bunch of stuff on consecrated ground. Then it blew through somebody’s threshold and tore his spirit apart, and slapped a torture-spell on him?”

“You got it,” I said. “So. What kind of ghost are we dealing with, and who could have called it up? And what is this girl’s connection to it?”

“Harry,” Bob said, his tone serious. “Leave this one alone.”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“Maybe we could go on a vacation—Fort Lauderdale. They’re having this international swimsuit competition there, and we could—”

I sighed. “Bob, I don’t have time for—”

“I know a guy who’s possessed a travel agent for a few days, and he could get us tickets cut rate. What do you say?”

I peered at the skull. If I didn’t know any better, I would think that Bob sounded . . . nervous? Was that even possible? Bob wasn’t a human being. He was a spirit, a being of the Nevernever. The skull was his habitat, his home away from home. I let him stay in it, protected him, and bought him trashy romance novels on occasion in exchange for his help, his prodigious memory, and his affinity for the laws of magic. Bob was a records computer and personal assistant all rolled into one, provided you could keep his mind on the issue at hand. He knew thousands of beings in the Nevernever, hundreds of spell recipes, scores of formulae for potions and enchantments and magical constructions.

No spirit could have that kind of knowledge without it translating into considerable power. So why was he acting so scared?

“Bob. I don’t know why you’re so upset, but we need to stop wasting time. Sundown’s coming in a few hours, and this thing is going to be able to cross over from the Nevernever and hurt someone else. I need to know what it is, and where it might be going, and how to kick its ass.”

“You humans,” Bob said. “You’re never satisfied. You always want to find out what’s behind the next hill, open the next box. Harry, you’ve got to learn when you know too much.”

I stared up at him for a moment, then shook my head. “We’ll start with basics and work our way through this step by step.”

“Dammit, Harry.”

“Ghosts,” I said. “Ghosts are beings that live in the spirit world. They’re impressions left by a personality at the moment of death. They aren’t like people, or sentient spirits like you.

They don’t change, they don’t grow—they’re just *there*, experiencing whatever it is they were feeling when they died. Like poor Agatha Hagglesworth. She was loopy.”

The skull turned its eye sockets away from me and said nothing.

“So, they’re spirit-beings. Usually, they aren’t visible, but they can make a body out of ectoplasm and manifest in the real world when they want to, if they’re strong enough. And sometimes, they can just barely have any physical existence at all—just kind of exist as a cold spot, or a breath of wind, or maybe a sound. Right?”

“Give it up, Harry,” Bob said. “I’m not talking.”

“They can do all kinds of things. They can throw things around and stack furniture. There have been documented incidents of ghosts blotting out the sun for a while, causing minor earthquakes, all sorts of stuff—but it isn’t ever random. There’s always some purpose to it, something related to their deaths.”

Bob quivered, about to add something, but clacked his bony teeth shut again. I ginned at him. It was a puzzle. No spirit of intellect could resist a puzzle.

“So, if someone leaves a strong enough imprint when they go, you got yourself a strong ghost. I mean, badass. Maybe like this Nightmare.”

“Maybe,” Bob admitted, grudgingly, then spun his skull to face wholly away from me. “I’m still not talking to you, Harry.”

I drummed my pencil on the blank piece of paper. “Okay. We know that this thing is stirring up the boundary between here and the Nevernever. It’s making it easier for spirits to come across, and that’s why things have been so busy, lately.”

“Not necessarily,” Bob chirped up. “Maybe you’re looking at it from the wrong angle.”

“Eh?” I asked.

He spun to face me again, eyelights glowing, voice enthusiastic. “Someone *else* has been stirring these spirits, Harry. Maybe they started torturing them in order to make them jump around in the pool and start causing waves.”

There was a thought. “You mean, prodding the big spirits into moving so that they create the turbulence.”

“Exactly,” Bob said, nodding. Then he caught himself, mouth still open. He turned the skull toward the wall and started banging the bony forehead against it. “I am such an idiot.”

“Stirring up the Nevernever,” I said thoughtfully. “But who would do that? And why?”

“You got me. Big mystery. We’ll never know. Time for a beer.”

“Stirring up the Nevernever makes it easier for something to cross over,” I said. “So . . . whoever laid out those torture spells must have wanted to pave the way for something.” I thought of dead animals and smashed cars. “Something big.” I thought of Micky Malone, quivering and mad. “And it’s getting stronger.”

Bob looked at me again, and then sighed. “All right,” he said. “Gods, do you ever give up, Harry?”

“Never.”

“Then I might as well help you. You don’t know what you’re dealing with, here. And if you walk into this with your eyes closed, you’re going to be dead before the sun rises.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Dead before the sun rises,” I said. “Stars, Bob, why don’t you just go all the way over the melodramatic edge and tell me that I’m going to be sleeping with the fishes?”

“I’m not sure that much of you would be left,” Bob said, seriously. “Harry, look at this thing. Look at what it’s done. It crossed a threshold.”

“So what?” I asked. “Lots of things can. Remember that toad demon? It came over my threshold and trashed my whole place.”

“In the first place, Harry,” Bob said, “you’re a bachelor. You don’t have all that much of a threshold to begin with. This Malone, though—he was a family man.”

“So?”

“So it means his home has a lot more significance. Besides which—the toad demon came in and everything after that was pure physical interaction. It smashed things, it spat out acid

saliva, that kind of thing. It *didn’t* try to wrench your soul apart or enchant you into a magical sleep.”

“This is getting to be a pretty fine distinction, Bob.”

“It is. Did you ask for an invitation before you went into the Malone’s house?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess I did. It’s polite, and—”

“And it’s harder for you to work magic in a home you haven’t been invited into. You cross the threshold without an invitation, and you leave a big chunk of your power at the door. It doesn’t affect you as much because you’re a mortal, Harry, but it still gets you in smaller ways.”

“And if I was an all-spirit creature,” I said.

Bob nodded. “It hits you harder. If this Nightmare is a ghost, like you say, then the threshold should have stopped it cold—and even if it had gone past it, then it shouldn’t have had the kind of power it takes to hurt a mortal that badly.”

I frowned, drumming my pencil some more, and made some notes on the paper, trying to keep everything straight. “And certainly not enough to lay out a spell that powerful on Malone.”

“Definitely.”

“So what *could* do that, Bob? What are we dealing with, here?”

Bob’s eyes shifted restlessly around the room. “It could be a couple of things from the spirit world. Are you sure you want to know?” I glared at him. “All right, all right. It could be something big enough. Something so big that even a fraction of it was enough to attack Malone and lay that spell on him. Maybe a god someone’s dug up. Hecate, Kali, or one of the Old Ones.”

“No,” I said, flatly. “Bob, if this thing was so tough, it wouldn’t be tearing up people’s cars and ripping kitty cats apart. That’s not my idea of a godlike evil. That’s just pissed off.”

“Harry, it went through the threshold,” Bob said. “Ghosts don’t *do* that. They *can’t*.”

I stood up, and started pacing back and forth on the little open space of floor of my summoning circle. “It isn’t one of the Old Ones. Guardian spells all over the world would be freaking out, alerting the Gatekeeper and the Council of something like that. No, this is local.”

“Harry, if you’re wrong—”

I jabbed a finger at Bob. “If I’m *right*, then there’s a monster out there messing with my town, and I’m obliged to do something about it before someone else gets hurt.”

Bob sighed. “It blew through a threshold.”

“So . . .” I said, pacing and whirling. “Maybe it had some other way to get around the threshold. What if it had an invitation?”

“How could it have gotten that?” Bob said. “Ding-dong, Soul Eater Home Delivery, may I come in?”

“Bite me,” I said. “What if it took Lydia? Once she was out of the church, she could have been vulnerable to it.”

“Possession?” Bob said. “Possible, I guess—but she was wearing your talisman.”

“If it could get around a threshold, maybe it could get around that too. She goes to Malone’s, looks helpless, and gets an invite in.”

“Maybe.” Bob did a passable imitation of scrunching up his eyes. “But then why were all those little animals torn up outside? We are going way out on a branch here. There are a lot of maybes.”

I shook my head. “No, no. I’ve got a feeling about this.”

“You’ve said that before. You remember the time you wanted to make ‘smart dynamite’ for that mining company?”

I scowled. “I hadn’t had much sleep that week. And anyway, the sprinklers kicked in.”

Bob chortled. “Or the time you tried to enchant that broomstick so that you could fly? Remember *that*? I thought it would take a year to get the mud out of your eyebrows.”

“Would you focus, please,” I complained. I pushed my hands against either side of my head to keep it from exploding with theories, and whittled them down to the ones that fit the facts. “There are only a couple of possibilities. A, we’re dealing with some kind of godlike being in which case we’re screwed.”

“And the Absurd Understatement Award goes to Harry Dresden.”

I glared at him. “Or,” I said, lifting a finger, “B, this thing is a spirit, something we’ve seen before, and it’s using smoke and mirrors within the rules we already know. Either way, I think Lydia knows more than she’s admitting.”

“Gee, a woman taking advantage of Captain Chivalry. What are the odds.”

“Bah,” I said. “If I can find her and find out what she knows, I could nail it today.”

“You’re forgetting the third possibility,” Bob said amiably. “C, it’s something new that neither of us understand and you’re sailing off in ignorance to plunge into the mouth of Charybdis.”

“You’re so encouraging,” I said, fastening on the bracelet, and slipping on the ring, feeling the quiet, humming power in them both.

Bob somehow waggled his eyebrow ridges. “Hey, you never went out with Charybdis. What’s the plan?”

“I loaned Lydia my Dead Man’s Talisman,” I said.

“I still can’t believe after all the work we did, you gave it to the first girl to wiggle by.”

I scowled at Bob. “If she’s still got it, I should be able to work up a spell to home in on it, like when I find people’s wedding rings.”

“Great,” Bob said. “Give ‘em hell, Harry. Have fun storming the castle.”

“Not so fast,” I said. “She might not have it with her. If she’s in on this with the Nightmare, then she could have dumped it once she had it away from me. That’s where you come in.”

“Me?” Bob squeaked.

“Yes. You’re going to head out, hit the streets, and talk to all of your contacts, see if we can get to her before sundown. We’ve only got a couple of hours.”

“Harry,” Bob pointed out, “the sun’s up. I’m exhausted. I can’t just flit around like some kinda dewdrop fairy.”

“Take Mister,” I said. “He doesn’t mind you riding around. And he could use the exercise. Just don’t get him killed.”

“Hooboy,” Bob said. “Once more into the breach, dear friends, eh? Harry, don’t quit your job to become a motivational speaker. I have your permission to come out?”

“Yep,” I said, “for the purposes of this mission only. And don’t waste time prowling around in women’s locker rooms again.”

I put out the candles and the heater and started up the stepladder. Bob followed, drifting out of the eye sockets of the skull as a glowing, candleflame-colored cloud, and flowed up the steps past me. The cloud glided over to where Mister dozed in the warm spot near the mostly dead fire, and seeped in through the cat’s grey fur. Mister sat up and blinked his yellow-green eyes at me, stretched his back, and flicked his stump of a tail back and forth before letting out a reproachful meow.

I scowled at Mister and Bob, shrugging into my duster, gathering up my blasting rod and my exorcism bag, and old black doctor’s case full of stuff. “Come on, guys,” I said. “We’re on the trail. We have the advantage. What could possibly go wrong?”

Chapter Sixteen

Finding people is hard, especially when they don't want to be found. It's so difficult, in fact, that estimates run up near seven-digit figures on how many people disappear, without a trace, every year in the United States. Most of these people aren't ever found.

I didn't want Lydia to become one of these statistics. Either she was one of the bad guys and had been playing me for a sucker, or she was a victim who was in need of my help. If the former, then I wanted to confront her—I have this thing about people who lie to me and try to get me into trouble. If the latter, then I was probably the only one in Chicago who could help her. She could be possessed by one very big and very brawny spirit who needed to get some, pardon the pun, exorcise.

Lydia had been on foot when she left Father Forthill, and I don't think she'd had much cash. Assuming she hadn't come into any more resources, she'd likely still be in the Bucktown/Wicker Park area, so I headed the *Blue Beetle* that way. The *Beetle* isn't really blue any more. Both doors had to be replaced when they'd gotten clawed to shreds, and the hood had been slagged, with a big old hole melted in it. My mechanic, Mike, who can keep the *Beetle* running most days, hadn't asked any questions. He'd just replaced the parts with pieces of other Volkswagens, so that the *Blue Beetle* was technically blue, red, white, and green. But my appellation stuck.

I tried to keep my cool as I drove, at least as best as I could. My wizard's propensity for blowing out any kind of advanced technology seems to get worse when I'm upset, angry, or afraid. Don't ask me why. So I did my best to Zen out until I got to my destination—parking strips alongside Wicker Park.

A brisk breeze made my duster flap as I got out. On one side of the street, tall town houses and a pair of apartment buildings gleamed as the sun began to go down over the western plains. The shadows of the trees in Wicker Park, meanwhile, stretched out like black fingers creeping toward my throat. Thank God my subconscious isn't too symbolically aware or anything. The park had a bunch of people in it, young people, mothers with kids, while on the streets, business types began arriving in their business clothes, heading for one of the posh restaurants, pubs, or cafes that littered the area.

I got a lump of chalk and a tuning fork out of my exorcism bag. I glanced around, then squatted down on the sidewalk and drew a circle around myself, willing it closed as the chalk marks met themselves on the concrete. I felt a sensation, a crackling tension, as the circle closed, encasing the local magical energies, compressing them, stirring them.

Most magic isn't quick and dirty. The kind of stunts you can pull off when some nasty thing is about to jump up in your face are called evocations. They're fairly limited in what they can do, and difficult to master. I only had a couple of evocations that I could do very well, and most of the time I needed the help of artificial foci, such as my blasting rod or one of my other enchanted doodads, to make sure that I don't lose control of the spell and blow up myself along with the slobbering monster.

Most magic is a lot of concentration and hard work. That's where I was really good—thaumaturgy. Thaumaturgy is traditional magic, all about drawing symbolic links between items or people and then investing energy to get the effect that you want. You can do a lot with thaumaturgy, provided you have enough time to plan things out, and more time to prepare a ritual, the symbolic objects, and the magical circle.

I've yet to meet a slobbering monster polite enough to wait for me to finish.

I slipped my shield bracelet off of my wrist and laid it in the center of the circle—that was my channel. The talisman I'd passed off to Lydia had been constructed in a very similar manner, and the two bracelets would resonate on the same pitches. I took the tuning fork and laid it down beside the bracelet, with the two ends of the shield bracelet touching either tine, making a complete circle.

Then I closed my eyes, and drew upon the energy gathered in the circle. I brought it into me, molded it, shaped it into the effect I was looking for with my thoughts, fiercely picturing the talisman I'd given Lydia while I did. The energy built and built, a buzzing in my ears, a prickling along the back of my neck. When I was ready, I spread my hands over the two objects,

opened my eyes and said, firmly, “*Duo et unum.*” At the words, the energy poured out of me in a rush that left me a little light-headed. There were no sparks, no glowing luminescence or anything else that would cost a special effects budget some money—just a sense of completion, and a tiny, almost inaudible hum.

I picked up the bracelet and put it back on, then took up the tuning fork and smudged the circle with my foot, willing it broken. I felt the little *pop* of the residual energies being released, and I rose up and fetched my exorcism bag from the *Beetle*. Then I walked away, down the sidewalk, holding my tuning fork out in front of me. After I'd taken several paces away, I turned in a slow circle.

The fork remained silent until I'd turned almost all the way around—then it abruptly shivered in my hand, and emitted a crystalline tone when I had it facing vaguely northwest. I looked up and sighted along the tines of the fork, then walked a dozen paces farther and triangulated as best I could. The direction change on the way the fork faced when it toned the second time was appreciable, even without any kind of instruments—Lydia must have been fairly close.

“Yes,” I said, and started off at a brisk walk, sweeping the tuning fork back and forth, setting my feet in the direction that it chimed. I kept on like that to the far side of the park, where the tuning fork pointed directly at a building that had once been some kind of manufacturing facility, perhaps, but now stood abandoned.

The lower floor was dominated by a pair of garage doors and a boarded-up front door. On the lower two floors, most of the windows had been boarded up. On the third floor, truly bored or determined vandals had pitched stones through those windows, and their shattered edges stood sharp and dusty against the blackness behind them, like dirty ice.

I took two more readings, from fifty feet on either side of the first. All pointed directly to the building. It glowered down at me, silent and spooky.

I shivered.

I would be smart to call Michael. Maybe even Murphy. I could get to a phone, try to get in touch with them. It wouldn't take them long to get here.

Of course, it would be after sundown. The Nightmare, if it was inside Lydia, would be free to leave her then, to roam abroad. If I could get to her, exorcise this thing now, I could end the spree of destruction it was on.

If, if, if. I had a lot of ifs. But I didn't have much time. The sun was swiftly vanishing. I reached inside my duster and got out my blasting rod, transferring my exorcism bag to the same hand as the tuning fork. Then I headed across the street, to the garage doors of the building. I tested one, and to my surprise it rolled upwards. I glanced left and right, then slipped inside into the darkness, shutting the door behind me.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust. The room was lit only by the fading light that slipped its fingers beneath the plyboard over the windows, the edges of the garage doors. It was a loading dock that encompassed almost the entire first floor, I judged. Stone pillars held the place up. Water dripped somewhere, from a broken pipe, and there were pools of it everywhere on the floor.

A brand-new side-panel van, its engine still ticking, cooling off, stood parked at the far side of the loading dock, next to a five-foot-high stone abutment, where trucks would once have backed up to load and unload goods. A sign hanging by one hinge, over the van, read SUMNER'S TEXTILES MFG.

I approached the van slowly, my blasting rod held loosely at my side. I swept the tuning fork, and my eyes, around the shadowed chamber. The fork hummed every time it swept past the van.

The white van all but glowed in the half-light. Its windows had been tinted, and I couldn't see inside of them, even when I came within ten feet or so.

Something, some sound or other cue that I hadn't quite caught on the conscious level made the hair on the back of my neck prickle up. I spun to face the darkness behind me, the tip of my blasting rod rising up, my bruised fingers wrapped tight around its haft. I focused my senses on the darkness, and listened, honing my attention to the area around me.

Darkness.

Drip of water.

Creak of building, above me.

Nothing.

I put the tuning fork in my duster pocket. Then I turned back to the van, closed the distance quickly, and hauled open the side door, leveling my rod on the inside.

A blanket-wrapped bundle, approximately Lydia-sized, lay inside the van. One pale hand lay limp outside of it, my talisman, scorched-looking and bloodstained, wrapped around the slender wrist.

My heart leapt into my throat. "Lydia?" I asked. I reached out and touched her wrist. Felt the dull, slow throb of pulse. I let out a breath of relief, pulled the blankets from her pale face. Her eyes were open, staring, the pupils dilated until there was barely any color left in them at all. I waved my hand in front of her eyes and said again, "Lydia." She didn't respond. Drugged, I thought.

What the hell was she doing here? Lying in a van, covered up in blankets drugged and placed as neatly as could be. It didn't make sense, unless she was . . .

Unless she was a distraction. The bait for a trap.

I turned, but before I got halfway around that cold energy I'd felt the night before flooded over the side of my face, my throat. Something blonde and incredibly swift slammed into me with the force of a rushing bull, throwing me off my feet and into the van. I spun around onto my elbows to see the vampire Kyle Hamilton coming for me, his eyes black and empty, his face screwed up into a grimace of hunger. He still wore his tennis whites. I kicked at his chest, and superhuman strength or no, it lifted him up off the ground for a second, brought me a

half-breath of life. I lifted my right hand, the silver ring there gleaming, and cried, "*Assantius!*"

Chapter Seventeen

I don't remember how I managed to get home again. I have a vague image of all the cars around me going way too fast, and then of Mister's rumbling purr greeting me as I got into my apartment and locked the door behind me.

The vampire's narcotic saliva had soaked in through my skin in a matter of a second or three, spreading into my system in short order after that. I felt numb, light, all over. The room wasn't quite whirling, but when I moved my eyes, things almost seemed to blur a little, then to settle when I focused on something. I throbbed. Every time my heart beat, my entire body pulsed with a slow, gentle pang of pleasant sensation.

Something inside me couldn't help but love every second of it. Even counting the times I'd been juiced up in a hospital, it was the best drug I'd ever had.

I stumbled to my narrow bed and dropped onto it. Mister came and prowled around my face, waiting for me to get up and feed him. "Go away," I heard myself mumble. "Stupid furball. Go on." He put one paw on my throat, and touched the area of burned skin where the sunlight had struck the smear of Kelly Hamilton's saliva. Pain flared through me, and I groaned, forcing myself into the kitchen. I got some cold cuts out of the icebox and dropped them onto Mister's plate. Then I stumbled into the bathroom and flicked on the light.

It hurt.

I shielded my eyes and studied myself in the mirror. My pupils had dilated out nice and big. The skin on my throat, my cheek, was red and glowing, as though from falling asleep outside on a summer afternoon—painful, but not dangerous. I couldn't find any marks on my throat, so the vampire hadn't bitten me. I was pretty sure that was a good thing. Something about a bite being a link to a victim. If she'd bitten me, she could have gotten into my head. Usual mind-control enchantment. Breaking one of the Laws of Magic.

I stumbled back to my bed and sank down onto it, trying to sort out my thoughts. My lovely, throbbing body made this fairly difficult. Mister came nosing around again, but I shoved him away with one hand and forced myself to ignore him.

"Focus, Harry," I mumbled to myself. "Got to have focus."

I'd learned to block out pain, when necessary. Studying under Justin, it had been a practical necessity. My teacher hadn't believed in sparing the rod and spoiling the potential wizard. You learn very quickly not to make mistakes given the correct incentive to avoid them.

Blocking out pleasure was a more difficult exercise, but I somehow managed. The first thing I had to do was separate my sense of enjoyment. It took me a while, but I slowly marked out the boundaries of the parts of me that liked all the wonderful, warm sensations, and walled them away. Then the actual pounding happiness itself. I found my heart rate and slowed it a bit, though it was already going too slowly, then started shutting down perception of my limbs, pushing them behind the walls with the rest of me that wasn't doing any good. Giddy delight went next, leaving only a dull fuzz across my thinking, chemically unavoidable.

I closed my eyes and breathed, and tried to sort through things.

Lydia had fled the shelter of the church, and Father Forthill's protection. Why? I thought back, over the details of everything I knew about her. Her sunken eyes. The tingle of touching her aura. Had her hands been shaking, just a little? I think they had, in retrospect. I thought of what I had seen of her in the van, of the bracelet on her wrist. Her beating pulse. Had it been slow? I'd thought so, at the time—but then my own had been racing. I focused on the moment I'd been touching her.

Sixty, I thought. She'd been around sixty beats per minute. My own heart rate was about a sixth of that at the moment. Had been half that, before I'd slowed it down to quiet the song of the drug in my blood.

(Song, pretty song, why the hell did I have it shut away, when I could just lower the walls, listen to the music, lay here all happy and quiet and just *feel*, just *be* . . .)

I took a moment to prop the walls up again. Lydia's heart rate had been at human normal, nominally. But she'd been lying limp and still, much as I was, now. Kyle and Kelly had poisoned her, as they had me, I was sure of it. Then why had her heart been beating so quickly, in comparison?

She left the church and had been taken, perhaps, by the Nightmare. Then gone to Malone's house under its guidance, and gotten an invitation in. But why go to Malone's house? What did he have to do with anything?

Malone and Lydia. They'd both been attacked by the Nightmare. What was the connection? What linked them together?

More questions. What did the vampires want with her? If Kyle and his sister had been after Lydia, that meant that Bianca wanted her. Why? Was Bianca in league with the Nightmare? If she was, why the hell would she need to use her most powerful goons to kidnap the girl, if she was possessed by Bianca's ally?

And how the hell had the Nightmare gone through the threshold? An even better question, how had it gotten through the protection offered to Lydia by my Dead Man's talisman? No ghost should have been able to offer her any direct harm or contact through that thing. It didn't make any sense.

(Why should it? Why should anything need to mean anything at all? Just sit back, Harry. Lie back and feel good and relax and let your blood sing, let your heart beat, just ease down into the wonderful, warm, spinning dark and stop worrying, stop caring, drift and float and . . .)

The walls started to crumble.

I struggled, but sudden fear made my heartbeat quicken. I fought against the pull of the poison in my blood, but that struggle only made me more vulnerable, more susceptible. I

couldn't fail, now. I *couldn't*. People were depending upon me. I had to fight—

The walls fell, and my blood surged up with a roar.

I drifted.

And it was nice.

Drifting turned into sleep. Gentle, dark sleep. And sleep, in time, turned into dreams.

In my dream, I found myself back at the warehouse down by Burnham Harbor. It was night, beneath a full moon. I was wearing my duster, my black shirt and jeans, my black sneakers, which were better for . . . well. Sneaking. Michael stood beside me, his breath steaming in the winter air, dressed in his cloak, his full mail, his bloodred surcoat. *Amoracchius* rode his hip, a source of quiet, constant power. Murphy and the other members of Special Investigations all wore dark, loose clothing and their flack vests, and everyone had a gun in one hand and something else—like vials of holy water or silver crucifixes—in the other.

Micky Malone glanced up at the moon and shifted the shotgun in both hands—he was the only person relying upon raw, shredding firepower. Hey, the guy had a point. "All right," he said. "We go in and then what?"

"Here's the plan," Murphy said. "Harry thinks that the killer's followers will be drugged out and dozing. We round them up, cuff them up, and move on." Murphy grimaced, her blue eyes sparkling in the silver light. "Tell them what's next, Harry."

I kept my voice quiet. "The guy we're after is a sorcerer. It's sort of like being a wizard, only he spends all his energy doing things that are mostly destructive. He isn't good at doing anything that doesn't fuck someone up."

"Which makes him a badass as far as we're concerned," Malone growled.

"Pretty much," I confirmed. "The guy's got power, but no class. I'm going to go in and lock down his magic. We think he might have a demon on a string—that's what the murders have been for. They're part of his payment to get the demon to work for him."

"Demon," breathed Rudolph. "Jesus, can you believe this shit?"

"Jesus did believe in demons," Michael said, his voice quiet. "If the creature is there, do not get close to it. Don't shoot at it. Leave it to me. If it gets past me, throw your holy water at the thing and run while it screams."

"That's pretty much the plan," I confirmed. "Keep any human flunkies with knives from giving them to me or Michael. I'll take Kravos's powers out, and you guys grab him as soon as we're sure the demon won't eat us. I deal with any other supernatural stuff. Questions?"

Murphy shook her head. "Let's go." She leaned out and pumped her arm in the air, signaling the rest of the S.I. team, and we headed into the warehouse.

Everything went according to plan. In the front of the warehouse, a dozen young people, all with that lost, lonely look to them, lay dozing amidst fumes that made me dizzy. The remnants of a serious party lay all over the place—beer cans, clothes, roaches, empty needles, you name it. The cops fell on the kids in a dark-clad swarm and had them cuffed and hauled out into a waiting wagon in under ninety seconds.

Michael and I moved forward, toward the back of the warehouse, through stacks of boxes and shipping crates. Murphy, Rudy, and Malone followed hard on our heels. I cracked the door at the back wall and peered through it.

I saw a circle of black, smoking candles, a red-lit figure dressed in feathers and blood kneeling beside it, and something dark and horrible crouching within.

“Bingo,” I whispered. I turned to Michael. “He’s got the demon in there with him.”

The Knight simply nodded, and loosened his sword in its sheath.

I drew the doll out of my duster’s pocket. It was a Ken doll, naked, and not anatomically correct, but it would work. The single hair that forensics had recovered from the last victim’s crime scene had been carefully Scotch-taped to the doll’s head, and I had attired Ken in the general garb of someone delving into black magic—reversed pentagrams, some feathers, and some blood (from a hapless mouse Mister had nabbed).

“Murphy,” I hissed. “Are you absolutely sure about this hair? That it belongs to Kravos?” If it didn’t, the doll wouldn’t do diddly to the sorcerer, unless I managed to throw it into his eye.

“We’re reasonably sure,” she whispered, “yes.”

“Reasonably sure. Great.” But I knelt down, and marked out the circle around me, then another around the Ken doll, and wrought my spell.

The hair was Kravos’s. He became aware of the spell taking effect a few seconds before it could close off his power altogether—and with those few seconds he had, he reached out and broke the circle around the demon with his will and his hand, then in a screaming rage compelled it to attack.

The demon leapt toward us, all writhing darkness and shadows and glowing red eyes. Michael stepped into the doorway and drew *Amoracchius*, the sudden blaze of light and magical fury like a gale in that darkness.

In real life, I had completed the spell and shut Kravos away from his powers. Michael had carved the demon into chutney. Kravos had made a run for it, but Malone, at fairly long range, had fired his shotgun at the ground and at Kravos’s feet, and done it perfectly, sweeping the man’s legs out from beneath him and leaving him writhing, bleeding, but alive. Murphy had wrestled the knife out of the sorcerer’s hands, and the good guys had won the day.

In my dream, it didn’t happen that way.

I felt the fabric of the spell closing around Kravos start to slip. One minute, he was there, in the weaving I was spinning around him—the next, he was simply gone, the spell collapsing of its own unsupported weight.

Michael screamed. I looked up, to see him lifted high in the air, his sword sweeping through the shadows and darkness before him in impotent futility. Dark hands, fingers nightmarishly long, grabbed Michael’s head, covering his face. There was a twist, a wet, crackling sound, and the Knight’s neck broke cleanly. His body jerked, then went limp.

Amoracchius’s light died out. The demon screamed, a tinny, high-pitched sound, and let the body fall to the ground.

Murphy shouted and hurled her jar of holy water at the demon. The liquid flared into silver light as it struck something in that writhing darkness that was the demon. The shape turned toward us. Claws flashed out, and Murphy stumbled back, her eyes wide with shock where the talons had carved through her kevlar jacket, her shirt, her skin, leaving her belly torn open. Blood and worse rushed out, and she let out a weak gasp, pressing both hands against her own ruined side.

Malone started pumping rounds out of the shotgun. The demon-darkness turned toward him, a red-fanged leer spreading over it, and waited until the gun clicked empty. Then it simply laughed, grabbed the end of the shotgun, and slammed Malone against a wall, shoving the hardwood stock against the man’s belly until he screamed, until the flesh began to rip, until ribs started crackling, and then shoved harder, until I could clearly hear, even above the sound of Malone’s retching, the bones in his spine start to splinter and break. Malone, too, fell to the ground, dying.

Rudolph screamed, pasty-faced and white, and ran away.

Leaving me alone with the demon.

My heart rushed with terror and I shook like a leaf before the creature. I was still inside of the circle. I still had the circle protecting me. I struggled to reach out for my power, to summon a strike that would annihilate this thing.

And found something in my way. A wall. The same spell I’d meant to lay on Kravos.

The demon stalked over to me and, as though my circle wasn’t even there, reached out and backhanded me into the air. I landed with a thud upon the ground.

“No,” I stammered, and tried to struggle back from the thing. “No, this isn’t happening. This isn’t the way it happened!”

The demon’s red eyes glowed. I lifted my blasting rod toward it, pointed, and shouted, “*Fuego!*”

Chapter Eighteen

“Eat me,” I whispered. “I don’t . . . I don’t understand.”

“This thing you’ve been chasing, I think. The Nightmare. I think it was here.”

“Nightmare,” I said. I lowered my head and closed my eyes. “Bob, I can’t . . . I can’t think straight. What’s going on?”

“Well. You came in about five hours ago drugged to the gills on vampire spit, and muttering like a madman. I think you didn’t realize that I was inside Mister. Do you remember that part?”

“Yeah. Sort of.”

“What happened?”

I relayed my experience with Kyle and Kelly Hamilton to Bob. Speaking seemed to help things stop spinning, my guts to settle. My heartbeat slowly eased down to something less than that of a terrified rabbit.

“Sounds weird,” Bob said. “Got to be something important to make them risk going out in daylight like that. Even in a specially equipped van.”

“I realize that, Bob,” I said, and mopped at my face with one hand.

“You any steadier?”

“I . . . I guess.”

“I think you got torn up pretty good, spirit-wise. It’s lucky you started screaming. I came as quick as I could, but you didn’t want to wake up. The poison, I think.”

I sat up, cross-legged, staying inside the circle. “I remember that I had a dream. God, it was a terrible dream.” I felt my guts turn to water, and I started shaking again. “I tried to change it, but I wasn’t ready. I couldn’t.”

“A dream,” Bob said. “Yeah, that figures.”

“Figures?” I asked.

“Sure,” Bob said.

I shook my head, rested my elbows on my knees, and put my face in my hands. I did not want to be doing this. Someone else could do it. I should go, leave town. “It was a spirit that jumped me?”

“Yeah.”

I shook my head. “That doesn’t make any sense. How did it get past the threshold?”

“Your threshold isn’t so hot to begin with, Bachelor Man.”

I worked up enough courage to scowl at Bob. “The wards, then. I’ve got all the doors and windows warded. And I don’t have any mirrors it could have used.”

If Bob had any hands, he would have been rubbing them together. “Exactly,” he said. “Yes, exactly.”

My stomach quailed again, and a fresh burst of shuddering made me put my hands in my lap. I felt like sprawling somewhere, crying my eyes out, puking up whatever shreds of dignity remained in my stomach, and then crawling into a hole and pulling it in after me. I swallowed. “It . . . it never came in to me, then, is what you’re saying. It never had to cross those boundaries.”

Bob nodded, eyes burning brightly. “Exactly. You went out to it.”

“When I was dreaming?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Bob bubbled. “It makes sense now—don’t you see?”

“Not really.”

“Dreams,” the skull said. “When a mortal dreams, all kinds of strange things can happen. When a wizard dreams, it can be even weirder. Sometimes, dreams can be intense enough to create a little, temporary world of their own. Kind of a bubble in the Nevernever. Remember how you told me Agatha Hagglesworth was a strong enough ghost to have had her own demesne in the Nevernever?”

“Yeah. It looked kind of like old Chicago.”

“Well, people can do the same, at times.”

“But I’m not a ghost, Bob.”

“No,” he said. “You’re not. But you’ve got everything it takes to make a ghost inside you except for the right set of circumstances. Ghosts are only frozen images of people, Harry, last impressions made by a personality.” Bob paused, reflectively. “People are almost always more trouble than anything you run into on the Other Side.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I said. “All right. So you’re saying that any time I dream, it creates my own little rent-by-the-hour demesne in the Nevernever.”

“Not every time,” Bob said. “In fact, not even most times. Only really intense dreams, I suspect, bring the necessary energy out of people. But, with the border being so turbulent and easy to get through . . .”

“More people’s dreams are making bubbles on the other side. That must have been how it got to poor Micky Malone, then. While he was sleeping. His wife said he’d had insomnia that night. So the thing hangs around outside his house waiting for him to fall asleep and starts killing fuzzy animals to fill up the time.”

“Could be,” Bob said. “Do you remember your dream?”

I shuddered. “Yeah. I . . . I remember it.”

“The Nightmare must have got inside with you.”

“While my spirit was in the Nevernever?” I asked. “It should have ripped me to shreds.”

“Not so,” Bob beamed. “Your spirit’s demesne, remember? Even if only a temporary one. Means you have the home field advantage. It didn’t help, since it got the drop on you, but you had it.”

“Oh.”

“Do you remember anything in particular, any figure or character in the dream that wouldn’t have been acting the way you thought it should have?”

“Yeah,” I said. My shaking hands went to my belly, feeling for tooth marks. “Hell’s bells, yeah. I was dreaming of that bust a couple of months back. When we nailed Kravos.”

“That sorcerer,” Bob mused. “Okay. This could be important. What happened?”

I swallowed, trying not to throw up. “Um. Everything went wrong. That demon he’d called. It was stronger than it had been in life.”

“The demon was?”

I blinked. “Bob. Is it possible for something like a demon to leave a ghost?”

“Oh, uh,” Bob said, “I don’t think so—unless it had actually died there. Eternally perished, I mean, not just had its vessel dispersed.”

“Michael killed it with *Amoracchius*,” I said.

Bob's skull shuddered. "Ow," he said. "*Amoracchius*. I'm not sure, then. I don't know. That sword might be able to kill a demon, even through a physical shell. That whole faith-magic thing is awfully strong."

"Okay, so. We could be dealing with the ghost of a demon, here," I said. "A demon that died while it was all fired up for a fight. Maybe that's what makes it so . . . so vicious."

"Could be," Bob agreed, cheerily.

I shook my head. "But that doesn't explain the barbed-wire spells we've been finding on those ghosts and people." I grabbed onto the problem, the tangled facts, with a silent kind of desperation, like a man about to drown who has no breath to waste on screaming. It helped to keep me moving.

"Maybe the spells are someone else's work," Bob offered.

"Bianca," I said, suddenly. "She and her lackeys are all messed up in this somehow—remember that they put the snatch on Lydia? And they were waiting for me, that first night, when I came back from being arrested."

"I didn't think she was that big time a practitioner," Bob said.

I shrugged. "She's not, horribly. But she just got promoted, too. Maybe she's been studying up. She's always had a little more than her share of freaky vampire tricks—and if she was over in the Nevernever when she did it, it would have made her stronger."

Bob whistled through his teeth. "Yeah, that could work. Bianca stirs things up by torturing a bunch of spirits, gets all the turbulence going so that she can prod this Nightmare toward you. Then she lets it loose, sits back, and enjoys the fun. She got a motive?"

"Regret," I said, remembering a note I'd read more than a year ago. "She blames me for the death of one of her people. Rachel. She wants to make me regret it."

"Neat," Bob said. "And she could have been everywhere in question?"

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, she could have been."

"Means, opportunity, motive."

"Damn shaky logic, though. Nothing I could justify to the Council in order to get their backup, either. I don't have any proof."

"So?" Bob said. "Hat up, go kill her. Problem solved."

"Bob," I said. "You can't just go around killing people."

"I know. That's why you should do it."

"No, no. I can't go around killing people, either."

"Why not? You've done it before. And you've got a new gun and everything."

"I can't arbitrarily end someone's life because of something they may have done."

"Bianca's a vampire," Bob pointed out cheerfully. "She's not alive in the classic sense. I'll get Mister and go fetch the bullets and you—"

I sighed. "No, Bob. She's got lots of people around her, too. I'd probably have to kill some of them to get to her."

"Oh. Damn. This is one of those right and wrong issues again, isn't it."

"Yeah, one of those."

"I'm still confused about this whole morality thing, Harry."

"Join the club," I muttered. I took a shaking breath and leaned forward to put my hand over the circle, and will it broken. I almost cringed when its protective field faded from around me, but forced myself not to. I was as recovered as I was going to get. I needed to focus on work.

I stood up and walked to my worktable, my eyes by now adjusted to the dimness. I reached for the nearest candle, but there weren't any matches handy. So, I pointed my finger at it, frowned, and muttered the words, "*Flickum bicus*."

Chapter Nineteen

There's a kind of mathematics that goes along with saving people's lives. You find yourself running the figures without even realizing it, like a medic on a battlefield. This patient has no chance of surviving. That one does, but only if you let a third die.

For me, the equation broke down into fairly simple elements. The demon, hungry for its revenge, would come after those who had struck it down. The ghost would only remember those who had been there, whom it had focused on in those last moments. That meant that Murphy and Michael would be its remaining targets. Michael had a chance of protecting himself against the thing—hell, maybe a better chance than me. Murphy didn't.

I got on the phone to Murphy's place. No answer. I called the office, and she answered with a fatigue-blurred, "Murphy."

"Murph," I said. "Look, I need you to trust me on this one. I'm coming down there and I'll be there in about twenty minutes. You could be in danger. Stay where you are and stay awake until I get to you."

"Harry?" Murphy asked. I could hear her starting to scowl. "You telling me you're going to be late?"

"Late? No, dammit. Look, just do what I said, all right?"

"I do not appreciate this crap, Dresden," Murphy growled. "I haven't slept in two days. You told me you'd be here in ten minutes, and I told you I'd wait."

"Twenty. I said twenty minutes, Murph."

I could feel her glare over the phone. "Don't be an asshole, Harry. That's not what you said five minutes ago. If this is some kind of joke, I am not amused."

I blinked, and a cold feeling settled into my gut, into the hollow place the Nightmare had torn out of me. The phone line snapped, crackled, and popped, and I struggled to calm down before the connection went out. "Wait, Murphy. Are you saying you talked to me five minutes ago?"

"I am about two seconds short of killing the next thing that pisses me off, Harry. And everything keeping me out of bed is pissing me off. Don't get added to the list." She hung up on me.

"Dammit!" I yelled. I hung up the phone and dialed Murphy's number again, but only got a busy signal.

Something had talked to Murphy and convinced her she was talking to me. The list of things that could put on someone else's face was awfully long, but the probabilities were limited: either another supernatural beastie had wandered onto the stage or, I gulped, the Nightmare had taken a big enough bite of me that it could put on a convincing charade.

Ghosts could take material form, after all—if they had the power to form a new shape out of material from the Nevernever, and if they were familiar enough with the shape. The Nightmare had eaten a bunch of my magic. It had the power it needed. And it had the familiarity it needed.

Hell's bells, it was pretending to be me.

I hung up the phone and tore around the house frantically, collecting car keys and putting together an improvised exorcism kit from stuff in my kitchen: Salt, a wooden spoon, a table knife, a couple of storm candles and matches, and a coffee cup. I stuffed them all into an old Scooby-Doo lunch box, then, as an afterthought, reached into a bag of sand that I keep in the kitchen closet for Mister's litter box, and tossed a handful into a plastic bag. I added the scorched staff and blasting rod to the accumulating pile of junk in my arms. Then I ran for the door.

I hesitated, though. Then went to the phone and dialed Michael's number, fingers dancing over the rotary. It was also busy. I let out a shriek of purest frustration, slammed down the

phone, and ran out the door to the *Blue Beetle*.

Chapter Twenty

I wouldn't have thought you could find a peaceful, suburbanish neighborhood in the city of Chicago. Michael had managed, not too far west of Wrigley Field. Ancient old trees lined either side of the street in stately splendor. The homes were mostly old Victorian affairs, restored after a fluctuating economy and a century of wear and tear had reduced them to trembling firetraps. Michael's house looked like it was made of gingerbread. Fancy trim, elegant paint in ivory and burgundy—and, perhaps inevitably, a white picket fence around the house and its front yard. The porch light cast a circle of white radiance out onto the front lawn, almost to the edge of the property.

I slewed the *Beetle* up onto the curb in front of the house and pushed my way through the swinging gate, clomping up the stairs to rattle the knocker against the front door. I figured that it would take Michael a minute to stagger out of bed and come down the stairs, but instead I heard a thump, a pair of long steps, and then the curtains of the window beside the door stirred. A second later, the door opened, and Michael stood there, blinking sleep out of his eyes. He wore a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with JOHN 3:16 across his chest. He held one of his kids in his brawny arms, one I hadn't seen yet—maybe a year old, with a patch of curly, golden hair, her face pressed against her daddy's chest as she slept.

"Harry," Michael said. His eyes widened. "Merciful Father, what's happened to you?"

"It's been a long night," I said. "Have I been here yet?"

Michael peered at me. "I'm not sure what you mean, Harry."

"Good. Then I haven't. Michael, you've got to wake your family up, *now*. They could be in danger."

He blinked at me again. "Harry, it's late. What on earth—"

"Just listen." In terse terms, I outlined what I'd learned about the Nightmare, and how it was getting to its victims.

Michael stared at me for a minute. Then he said, "Let me get this straight. The ghost of a demon I killed two months ago is rampaging around Chicago, getting into people's dreams, and eating their minds from the inside."

"Yeah," I said.

"And now it's taken a part of you, manifested a body that looks like you, and you think it's coming here."

"Yes," I said. "Exactly."

Michael pursed his lips for a moment. "Then how do I know that you aren't this Nightmare, trying to get me to invite you in?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it again. Then said, "Either way, it's better if I stay out here. Charity would probably gouge out my eyes for showing up at this hour."

Michael nodded. "Come on in, Harry. Let me put the baby to bed."

I stepped inside, into a small entry hall with a polished hardwood floor. Michael nodded toward his living room, to the right, and said, "Sit down. I'll be back in a second."

"Michael," I said. "You should wake your family up."

"You said this thing is in a solid body, right?"

"It was a few minutes ago."

"Then it's not in the Nevernever. It's here, in Chicago. It can't get into people's dreams from here."

"I don't *think* so, but—"

"And it's going to be after the people who were near it when it died. It's going to come after me."

I chewed on my lip for a second. Then I said, "It's got a part of me in it, too."

Michael frowned at me.

"If I was going to come after you, Michael," I said. "I wouldn't start with you."

He looked down at the child he carried. His face hardened, and he said, in a very soft voice, "Harry. Sit. I'll be down in a moment."

"But it might—"

"I'll see to it," he said in that same soft, gentle voice. It scared me. I sat down. He took the child, walking softly, and vanished up a stairway.

I sat for a moment in a big, comfortable easy chair, the kind that rocks back and forth. There was a towel and a half-emptied bottle off to my left, on the lamp table. Michael must have been rocking the little girl to sleep.

Beside the bottle was a note. I leaned forward and picked it up, reading:

Michael. Didn't want to wake you and the baby. The little one is demanding pizza and ice cream. I'll be back in a few minutes—probably before you wake up and read this. Love, Charity.

Chapter Twenty-one

I’ve done smarter things in my life. Once, for example, I threw myself out of a moving car in order to take on a truckload of lycanthropes single-handedly. That had been nominally smarter. At least I had been fairly certain that I could kill them, if I had to, at the time.

Which put me one step ahead of where I was, now. I had already killed the Nightmare—or helped to kill it, at least. Something about that just didn’t seem fair. There should be some kind of rule against needing to kill anything more than once.

Rain fell in sheets rather than drops, sluicing down into my eyes. I had to keep on wiping my brow, sweeping water away, only to have it fill my vision again. I started to give serious thought to what it might be like to drown, right there on the sidewalk.

I cut across the street toward the cemetery fence. Seven feet of red brick, the fence rose in a jagged stair-step fashion every hundred feet or so, keeping up with the slow slope of the street along its southern perimeter as it moved west. At one point, a gaping slash of darkness marred the fence’s exterior, and I slowed as I approached it. The bricks had been torn like paper, and lay in rubble two feet deep around the hole in the wall. I tried to peer beyond it, and saw only more rain, green grass, the shadows of trees cast over the carefully tended grounds.

I paused, outside the graveyard. A dull, restless energy pressed against me, like when weariness and caffeine mix around three-thirty in the morning. It rolled against my skin, and I heard, actually *heard* whispering voices, through the rain, dozens, hundreds of whispers, ghostly sussurance. I put my hand on the wall, and felt the tension there. There are always fences around cemeteries. Always, whether stone or brick or chain-link. It’s one of those unwritten things that people don’t really notice, they just do it by reflex. Any kind of wall is a barrier in more than merely a physical sense. Lots of things are more than what they seem in a purely physical sense.

Walls keep things out. Walls around cemeteries keep things in.

I looked back, hoping that Michael had followed me, but I didn’t or couldn’t see him in the rain. I still felt weak, shaken. The voices whispered, clustering around the weak point in the wall, where the Nightmare had torn its way in. Even if only one death in a thousand had produced a ghost (and more than that did) there might be dozens of restless spirits wandering the grounds, some even strong enough for non-practitioners of the Art to experience.

Tonight, there weren’t dozens. Dozens would have been a happy number. I closed my eyes and could feel the power they stirred up, the way the air wavered and shook with the presence of hundreds of spirits, easily crossed over from the turbulent Nevernever. It made my knees shake, my belly quiver—both from the wounds that had been inflicted on me by the Nightmare and from simple, primitive fear of darkness, the rain, and a place of the dead.

The inmates of Graceland felt my fear. They pressed close to the break in the wall, and I began to hear actual, physical moans.

“I should wait here,” I muttered to myself, shaking in the rain. “I should wait for Michael. That would be the smart thing to do.”

Somewhere, in the darkness of the cemetery, a woman screamed. Charity.

What I wouldn’t have given to have my Dead Man’s talisman back, now. Son of a bitch.

I gripped my staff, knuckles white, and got out my blasting rod. Then I clambered through the break in the wall and headed into the darkness.

I felt them the moment I crossed into the cemetery, the second my shoes hit the ground. Ghosts. Shades. Haunts. Whatever you want to call them, they were dead as hell and they weren’t going to take it anymore. They were weak spirits, each of them, something that would barely have given me a passing shiver on a normal night—but tonight wasn’t.

A chill fell over me, abrupt as winter’s first wind. I took a step forward and felt a resistance, but not as though someone was trying to keep me out. It felt more like those movies I’ve seen with tourists struggling through crowds of beggars in dusty Middle Eastern cities. That’s what I experienced, in a chilling and spectral kind of way—people pushing against me, struggling to get something from me, something that I wasn’t sure I had and that I didn’t think would do any good even if I gave it to them.

I gathered in my will and slipped my mother’s amulet from around my neck. I held it aloft in the smothering, clammy darkness, and fed power into it.

The blue wizard light began to glow, to cast out a dim radiance, not so bright as usual. The silver pentagram within the circle was the symbol of my faith, if that’s what you wanted to call it, in magic. In the concept of power being controlled, ordered, used for constructive purpose. I wondered, for a minute, if the dimness was a reflection of my injuries or if it said something about my faith. I tried to think of how often I’d had to set something on fire, the past few years, how many times I’d had to blow something up. Or smash a building. Or otherwise wreak havoc.

I ran out of fingers and shivered. Maybe I’d better start being a little more careful.

The spirits fell back from that light, but for a few who still clustered close, whispering things into my ears. I didn’t pay them any attention, or stop to listen. That way lay madness. I shoved forward, more an effort of the heart than of the body, and started searching.

“Charity!” I shouted. “Charity, where are you?”

I heard a short sound, a call, off to my right, but it cut off swiftly. I turned toward it and began moving forward at a cautious lope, glowing pentacle held aloft like Diogenes’s lamp. Thunder rumbled again. The rain had already soaked the grass, made the dirt beneath my feet soft and yielding. A brief, disturbing image of the dead tearing their way up through the softened earth brought me a brief chill and a dozen spirits clustering close as though to feed from it. I shoved both fear and clutching, unseen fingers aside, and pressed forward.

I found Charity lying upon a bier within a marble edifice that looked like nothing so much as a Greek temple, the roof open to the sky. Michael’s wife lay upon her back, her hands clutched over her swollen belly, her teeth bared in a snarl.

The Nightmare stood over her, with my dark hair plastered to its head, my dark eyes reflecting the gleam of my pentacle. It held one hand in the air over Charity’s belly, its other over her throat. It tilted its head and watched me approach. In the edges of my wizard’s light, shapes moved, flitted, spirits swirling around like moths.

“Wizard,” the Nightmare said.

“Demon,” I responded. I wasn’t feeling much like any snapper patter.

It smiled, teeth showing. “Is that what I am,” it said. “Interesting. I wasn’t sure.” It lifted its hand from Charity’s throat, pointed a finger toward me, and murmured, “Goodbye, wizard. *Fuego.*”

I felt the surge of power before any fire rose up and swept toward me through the rain. I lifted my staff in my left hand in front of me, horizontally, and slammed power recklessly into a shield. *“Riflettum!”*

Chapter Twenty-two

All hospital emergency rooms have the same feel to them. They're all decorated in the same dull, muted tones and softened edges, which are meant to be comforting and aren't. They all have the same smell too: one part tangy antiseptics, one part cool dispassion, one part anxiety, and one part naked fear.

They wheeled Charity away first, Michael at her side. Triage being what it is, I got bumped to the front of the line. I felt like apologizing to the five-year-old girl holding a broken arm. Sorry, honey. Head trauma before fractured limbs.

The doctor who examined me wore a nameplate that read SIMMONS. She was broadly built and tough-looking, hair going grey in sharp contrast to her rich, dark skin. She sat down on a stool in front of me and leaned over, putting her hands on either side of my head. They were large, warm, strong. I closed my eyes.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, releasing me after a moment, and reaching for some supplies on a table next to her.

"Like a supervillain just threw me into a wall."

She let out a soft chuckle. "More specifically. Are you in pain? Dizzy? Nauseous?"

"Yes, no, and a little."

"You hit your head?"

"Yeah." I felt her start to daub at my forehead with a cold cloth, cleaning off grime and dried blood, though there wasn't much left, thanks to the rain.

"Mmmm. Well. There's some blood here. Are you sure it's yours?"

I opened my eyes and blinked at her. "Mine? Whose else would it be?"

The doctor lifted an eyebrow at me, dark eyes glittering from behind her glasses. "You tell me, Mister . . ." she checked her charts. "Dresden." She frowned and then peered up at me. "Harry Dresden? The wizard?"

I blinked. I'm not really famous, despite being the only wizard in the phone book. I'm more infamous. People don't tend to spontaneously recognize my name. "Yeah. That's me."

She frowned. "I see. I've heard of you."

"Anything good?"

"Not really." She let out a cross sigh. "There's no cut here. I don't appreciate jokes, Mister Dresden. There are people in need to attend to."

I felt my mouth drop open. "No cut?" But there had been a nice, flowing gash in my head at some point, pouring blood into my eyes and mouth. I could still taste some of it, almost. How could it have vanished?"

I thought of the answer and shivered. Godmother.

"No cut," she said. "Something that might have been cut a few months ago."

"That's impossible," I said, more to myself than to her. "That just can't be."

She shone a light at my eyes. I winced. She peered at each eye (mechanically, professionally—without the intimacy that triggers a soulgaze) and shook her head. "If you've got a concussion, I'm Winona Ryder. Get off that bed and get out of here. Make sure to talk to the cashier on the way out." She pressed a moist towelette into my hand. "I'll let you clean up this mess, Mister Dresden. I have enough work to do."

"But—"

"You shouldn't come into the emergency room unless it's absolutely necessary."

"But I didn't—"

Dr. Simmons didn't stop to listen to me. She turned around and strode off, over to the next patient—the little girl with the broken arm.

I got up and made my bruised way into the bathroom. My face was a mess of faint, dried blood. It had settled mostly into the lines and creases, making me look older, a mask of blood and age. I shivered and started cleaning myself off, trying to keep my hands from shaking.

I felt scared. Really, honestly scared. I would have been much happier to have needed stitches and painkillers. I wiped away blood and peered at my forehead. There was a faint, pink line beginning about an inch below my hair and slashing up into it at an angle. It felt very tender, and when I accidentally touched it with the rag, it hurt so much that I almost shouted. But the wound was closed, healed.

Magic. My godmother's magic. That kiss on the forehead had closed the wound.

If you think I should have been happy about getting a nasty cut closed up, then you probably don't realize the implications. Working magic directly on a human body is difficult. It's

very difficult. Conjuring up forces, like my shield, or elemental manifestations like the fire or wind is a snap compared to the complexity and power required to change someone's hair a different color—or to cause the cells on either side of an injury to fuse back together, closing it.

The healing cut was a message for me. My godmother had power over me on earth now, too, as well as in the Nevernever. I'd made a bargain with one of the Fae and broken it. That gave her power over me, which she demonstrated aptly by the way she'd wrought such a powerful and complex working on me—and I'd never even felt it happening.

That was the part that scared me. I'd always known that Lea had outclassed me—she was a creature with a thousand years or more of experience, knowledge, and she had been born to magic like I had been born to breathing. So long as I remained in the real world, though, she'd had no advantage over me. Our world was a foreign place to her, just as hers was to me. I'd had the home field advantage.

Had being the operative word. Had.

Hell's bells.

I gave up and let my hands shake while I wiped off my face. I had a good reason to be afraid. Besides, my clothes were soaked from the rain and I felt desperately cold. I finished washing the blood away, and went to stand in front of the electric hand dryer. I had to slam the button a dozen times before it started.

I had the nozzle of the thing turned up, directing the hot air up my shirt, when Stallings came in sans, for once, Rudolph. He looked as though he hadn't slept since I'd seen him last. His suit was rumpled, his grey hair a little greyer, and his moustache was almost the same color as the bags underneath his eyes. He went to the sink and splashed cold water on his face without looking at me.

"Dresden," he said. "We got word you were in the hospital."

"Heya, John. How's Murphy?"

"She slept. We just brought her in."

I blinked at him. "Christ. Is it dawn already?"

"About twenty minutes ago." He moved over to the dryer next to mine. His started on the first slap of the button. "She's sleeping, still. The docs are arguing about whether she's in a coma or on some kind of drug."

"You tell them what happened?" I asked.

He snorted. "Yeah. I'll just tell them that a wizard put her under a spell, and she's sleepy." He glanced over at me. "So when's she going to wake up?"

I shook my head. "My spell won't hold her for long. Maybe a couple more days, at the most. Each time the sun comes up, it's going to degrade it a little more."

"What happens then?"

"She starts screaming. Unless I find the thing that got her and figure out how to undo what it did."

"That's what you want Kravos's book for," Stallings said.

I nodded. "Yeah."

He reached into his pocket and produced the book—a little journal, thick but not broad, bound in dark leather. It was sealed in a plastic evidence bag. I reached for it, but Stallings pulled it away.

"Dresden. If you touch this, if you open it up, you're going to be leaving your prints on it. Skin cells. All sorts of things. Unless it disappears."

I frowned at him. "What's the big deal? Kravos is all but put away, right? Hell, we caught him with the murder weapon, with a body at the scene. There isn't anything in the journal to beat that, is there?"

He grimaced. "If it was just his trial, it wouldn't be a problem." "What do you mean?"

He shook his head. "Inside shit. I can't talk about it. But if you take this book, Dresden, it's got to vanish."

"Fine," I said, reaching for it. "It's gone."

He pulled it away again. "I mean it," he said. "Promise."

Something about the quiet intensity of his words touched me. "All right," I said. "I promise."

He stared at the book for a second, then slapped it into my palm. "Hell with it," he said. "If you can help Murph, do it."

"John," I said. "Hey, man. If I didn't think I needed it . . . What's going on here?"

"Internal Affairs," Stallings said.

"Looking at S.I.? Again? Don't they have anything better to do? What set them off this time?"

"Nothing," Stallings lied. He turned to go.

"John," I said. "What aren't you telling me here?"

He paused at the door and grimaced. "They're interested in the Kravos case. That's all I can say. You should hear word in the next day or so. You'll know it when you hear it."

"Wait," I said. "Something happened to Kravos?"

"I've got to go, Harry. Good luck."

"Wait, Stallings—"

He headed out the door. I cursed and started after him, but he lost me. I wound up standing in the hallway, shivering like a wet puppy.

Dammit. Cops were tight, a special kind of brotherhood. They'd work with you, but if you weren't a cop, you were on the outside in a billion subtle ways—one of which was that they didn't let you in on the department's secrets. What could have happened to Kravos? Something serious. Hell, maybe the Nightmare had taken out a little vengeance on him, as well, as long as it was out and about. Served him right, though, if it had happened.

I stood there for a minute, trying to work out what to do. I had no money on me, no car, no way to get either.

I needed Michael.

I asked someone for directions and headed for Maternity. I took a long route around, staying away from anything that looked technical or expensive. The last thing I wanted was to blow up Grandpa's iron lung.

I found Michael standing in a hallway. His hair had dried, all curled and mussed. There seemed to be more grey in it, this way, than usual. His beard had a rough, untrimmed look to it.

His eyes were sunken. Mud splattered his boots and his jeans to the knee. *Amoracchius's* black scabbard hung over his shoulder, empty.

Michael stood in front of a big picture window. Rows of little people in rolling cradles faced the window, heat lamps making sure that they didn't get chills. I stood there quietly with him, looking at the babies for a time. A nurse looked up, and then did a double take, staring at us, before hurrying out of the room.

"Aha," I said. "That nurse recognizes us. I didn't realize we were back down at Cook County. Didn't recognize the place without something being on fire."

"Charity's doctor is here."

"Uh-huh," I said. "So. Which one is the newest little Carpenter?"

Michael remained silent.

I got a sick little feeling, and glanced aside at him. "Michael?"

When he spoke, his voice was exhausted, numb. "The labor was complicated. She was cold, and might have been getting sick with something. Her water did break, back at the graveyard. I guess it makes it a lot harder on the baby."

I just listened to him, feeling sicker.

"They had to go ahead and do a C-section. But . . . they think there might be damage. She got hit in the stomach at one point, they think. They don't know if she'll be able to have children again."

"The baby?"

Silence.

"Michael?"

He stared at the infants and said, "The doctor says that if he lasts thirty-six hours, he might have a chance. But he's weakening. They're doing everything they can." Tears started at his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. "There were complications. Complications."

I tried to find something to say, and couldn't. Dammit. Tired frustration stirred my already unsteady belly. This shouldn't have happened. If I'd been faster, or smarter, or made a better decision, maybe I could have stopped Charity from getting hurt. Or the baby. I put my hand on Michael's shoulder and squeezed tight. Just trying to let him know that I was there. For all the good I'd done.

He took in a breath. "The doctor thinks I beat her. That's how she got the bruises. He never said anything, but . . ."

"That's ridiculous," I said, at once. "Stars and stones, Michael, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

His voice came out hard, bitter. He stared at his faint reflection in the glass. "It might as well have been me, Harry. If I hadn't gotten myself involved, this demon wouldn't have gone after her." I heard his knuckles pop as he clenched his fists. "It should have come after me."

"You're right," I said. "Holy hell, Michael, you're right."

He shot me a look. "What are you talking about?"

I rubbed my hands together, trying to sort through the ideas flashing across my brain in neon lights. "It's a demon, this thing we're after, right? It's a demon's ghost." An orderly, walking by pushing a tray, gave me an odd look. I smiled at him, feeling rather manic. He hurried along.

"Yes," Michael said.

"Demons are tough, Michael. They're dangerous and they're scary, but they're really kind of clueless in a lot of ways."

"How so?"

"They just don't get it, about people. They understand things like lust and greed and the desire for power, but they just don't get things like sacrifice and love. It's alien to most of them—doesn't make any sense at all."

"I don't understand what you're driving at."

"Remember what I said, about how I knew the worst way to get to you would be through your family?"

His frown darkened, but he nodded.

"I know that because I'm human. I know what it's like to care about someone other than myself. Demons don't—especially the thug-type demons who make pacts with two-bit sorcerers like Kravos. Even knowing that I thought the best way to get to you would be through someone close to you, I don't think a demon would have understood the context of that information."

“So what you’re saying is that this demon would have had no reason to go after my wife and child.”

“I’m saying it’s inconsistent. If it was just a question of a demon’s ghost going after the people who had killed it, then it should have just hammered on us all until we died and been done with it. I don’t think it ever would have occurred to it to take a shot at someone that we care about—even if it did have my knowledge about you. There’s got to be something else going on here.”

Michael’s eyes widened a bit. “The Nightmare is a cat’s-paw,” he said. “Someone else is using it to hit at us.”

“Someone who can cast those barbed-wire torment spells,” I said. “And we’ve been chasing around after the tool instead of going after the hand that’s wielding it.”

“Blood of God,” Michael swore. It was about the secondmost powerful oath he used. “Who could it be?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Someone who has us both in common, I guess. How many enemies do we share?”

He wiped his eyes on his sleeve, expression intent. “I’m not sure. I’ve made enemies with pretty much every creature in the country.”

“Ditto,” I said, morosely. “Even some of the other wizards wouldn’t mind seeing me fall down a few flights of stairs. Not knowing our attacker’s identity doesn’t bother me as much as something else, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Why he hasn’t taken us out already.”

“They want to hurt us, first. Vengeance.” His brow beetled. “Could your godmother be behind this?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. She’s a faerie. They aren’t usually this methodical or organized. And they aren’t impatient, either. This thing’s been active every night, like it couldn’t wait to get going.”

Michael looked at me for a moment. Then he said, “Harry, you know that I don’t think it’s my place to judge another person.”

“I hear a ‘but’ coming.”

He nodded. “But how did you get mixed up with the likes of that faerie? She’s bad, Harry. Some of them are merely alien, but that one is . . . malevolent. She enjoys causing pain.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I didn’t exactly pick her.”

“Who did?”

I shrugged. “My mother, I think. She was the one with power. My father wasn’t a wizard. Wasn’t into their world.”

“I don’t understand why she would do that to her child.”

Something inside me broke with a little snapping sensation, and I felt tears at my eyes. I scowled. They were a child’s tears, to go with a child’s old pain. “I don’t know,” I said. “I know that she was mixed up with some bad people. Bad beings. Whatever. Maybe Lea was one of her allies.”

“Lea. It’s short for Leannandsidhe, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I don’t know her real name. She takes blood from mortals and gives them inspiration in return. Artists and poets and things. That’s how she amassed most of her power.”

Michael nodded. “I’ve heard of her. This bargain you have with her. What is it?”

I shook my head. “It isn’t important.”

Something shifted in Michael, became harder, more resolute. “It is important to me, Harry. Tell me.”

I stared at the babies for a minute, before I said, “I was a kid. Things fell out with my old teacher, Justin. He sent a demon to kill me, and I went on the run. I made a bargain with Lea. Enough power to defeat Justin in exchange for my service to her. My loyalty.”

“And you broke faith with her.”

“More or less.” I shook my head. “She’s never pushed it before now, and I’ve been careful to stay out of her way. She doesn’t usually get this involved with mortal business.”

Michael moved his hand to *Amoracchius*’ empty scabbard. “She did take the sword though.”

I winced. “Yeah. I guess that was my fault. If I hadn’t have tried to use it to weasel out of the deal . . .”

“You couldn’t have known,” Michael said.

“I should have,” I said. “It isn’t as though it as a tough one to figure out.”

Michael shrugged, though his expression was less casual than the gesture. “What’s done is done. But I don’t know how much help to you I can be without the sword.”

“We’ll get it back,” I said. “Leah can’t help herself. She makes deals. We’ll figure out a way to get it back from her.”

“But will we do it in time,” Michael said. He shook his head, grim. “The sword won’t stay in her hands forever. The Lord won’t allow that. But it may be that my time to wield it has passed.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Perhaps it was a sign. Perhaps that I am no longer worthy to serve Him in this way. Or that the burden of it has passed on to someone else.” He grimaced, staring at the glass, the infants. “My family, Harry. Perhaps it’s time they had a full-time father.”

Oh, great. All I needed, now, was a crisis of faith and bad case of career doubt from the Fist of God. I needed Michael. I needed someone to watch my back, someone who was used to dealing with the supernatural. Sword or no sword, he had a steady head, and his faith had a subtle power of its own. He could be the difference between me getting killed and defeating whoever was out there.

Besides, he had wheels.

“Let’s get going. Time’s a-wasting.”

He frowned. “I can’t. I’m needed here.”

“Michael, look. Is someone with your kids at home?”

“Yes. I called Charity’s sister last night. She went over. Father Forthill was going to get some sleep, and then stay on.”

“Is there anything more you can do for Charity here?”

He shook his head. “Only pray. She’s resting, now. And her mother is on the way here.”

“Okay, then. We’ve got work to do.”

“You expect me to leave them again?”

“No, not leave them. But we need to find the person behind the Nightmare and take care of them.”

“Harry. What are we going to do? Kill someone?”

“If we have to. Hell’s bells, Michael, they might have murdered your son.”

His face hardened, and I knew then that I had him, that he’d followed me into Hell to get at whoever had hurt his wife and child. I had him all right—and I hated myself for it. Way to go, Harry. Jerk those heartstrings like a fucking puppeteer.

I held up the book. “I think I’ve got a line on the Nightmare’s name. I’ll bet you anything that Kravos recorded it in his book of shadows, here. If I’m right, I might be able to use it to make contact with the Nightmare and then trace his leash back to whoever’s holding it.”

Michael stared at the glass, at the kids beyond it.

“I need you to drive me home. From my lab, I might be able to sort out what’s going on before things get any more out of hand. Then we go handle it.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Michael.”

“All right,” he said, voice quiet. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Back in my lab, it felt a little creepy to be working by candle-light. Intellectually, I knew that it was still full daylight outside, but last night had brought out the instinctive fear of the dark that is a part of being human. I had been wounded. Everything, every shadow, every small sound made me twitch and jerk and look aside.

“Steady, Harry,” I told myself. “You have time before sundown. Just relax and get it over with.”

Good advice. Michael and I had driven around most of the morning, collecting what I would need for the spell. I’d read through Kravos’s journal while Michael drove. Sick stuff. He’d been careful about listing out every step of his rituals, complete with notes on the physical ecstasy he’d experienced during the killings—nine in all. Most of them had been women or children he’d killed with a cruelly curved knife. He’d roped a bunch of young people into his fold with drugs and blackmail, and then thrown orgies where he’d either participate or else channel the energy raised by all that lust into his magic. That seemed to be standard operating procedure for guys like Kravos. Win-win situation.

A thorough man. Thorough in his efforts to kill and corrupt lives to acquire more power, thorough in the documentation of his sick pleasures—and thorough in the listing of his efforts to secure a familiar demon by the name of Azorthragal.

The name had been carefully written, each syllable marked for specific emphasis.

Magic is a lot like language: it’s all about stringing things together, linking one thing with another, one idea with another. After you establish links, then you pour power into them and make something happen. That’s what we call thaumaturgy in the business—creating links between small things and big things. Then, you make something happen on the small scale and it happens on the large scale, too. Voodoo dolls are the typical example for that one.

But simulacra, like a voodoo doll, aren’t the only way to create links. A wizard can use fingernail clippings, or hair, or blood, if it’s fresh enough, or just about any other body part to create a link back to the original being.

Or you can use its name. Or maybe I should say, its Name.

Names have power. Everyone’s Name says something about them, whether they’re aware of it or not. A wizard can use that Name to forge a link to someone. It’s difficult with people. People’s self-concepts are always changing, evolving, so even if you get someone to tell you their full name, if you try to establish the link when they’re in a radically different mood, or after some life-changing event that alters the way they see themselves, it might not work. A wizard can get a person’s name only from their own lips, but if he doesn’t use it fairly quickly, it’s likely to get stale.

Demons, however, are a different matter. Demons aren’t people. They don’t have the problem of having a soul, and they don’t worry about silly things like good and evil, or right and wrong. Demons are. If a demon is going to be inclined to eat your face, it’s going to eat your face then, and now, and a thousand years from now.

It’s almost comforting, in a way—and it makes them vulnerable. Once you know a demon’s Name, you can get to it whenever you want to. I had Azorthragal’s Name. Even though it was a ghost now, instead of a demon, it ought to respond to the memory of its Name, if nothing else.

Time to get to it.

Five white candles surrounded my summoning circle, the points of an invisible pentacle. White for protection. And because they’re the cheapest color at Wal-Mart. Hey, being a wizard doesn’t make money grow on trees.

Between each candle was an object from someone the Nightmare had touched. My shield bracelet was there. Michael had given me his wedding ring, and Charity’s. I’d gone by the station, and grabbed the hand-lettered nameplate Murphy had kept stubbornly on her office door until the publicity last year had driven the municipal politicians into getting her a real one. It lay on the floor beside them. A visit to a grateful Malone household had turned up Micky’s retirement watch. It completed the circle, between the last pair of candles.

I drew in a breath, and checked my props. You don’t need all the candles and knives and whatnot to work magic. But they help. They make it easier to focus. In my weakened condition, I needed all the help I could get.

So I lit the incense and paced around the outside of the summoning circle, leaving myself enough room to work with inside the circle of incense and outside the circle of copper. I put out a little willpower as I did, just enough to close the circle, and felt the energy levels rise as random magic coalesced.

“Harry,” Michael called down from the room above. “Are you finished?”

I suppressed a flash of irritation. “Just getting started.”

“Forty-five minutes until sundown,” he said.

I couldn’t keep the annoyance out of my voice. “Gee, thanks. No pressure, Michael.”

“Can you do it or not, Harry? Father Forthill is staying at my house with the children. If you can’t stop this thing now, I’ve got to go back to Charity.”

“I sure as hell can’t do it with you breathing down my neck. Hell’s bells, Michael, get out of the way and let me work.”

He growled something to himself about patience or turning the other cheek or something. I heard his feet on the floor above as he retreated from the door leading down to my lab.

Michael didn’t come down into the lab with me because the whole concept of using magic without the Almighty behind it didn’t sit well with him, regardless of what we’d been through together. He could tolerate it, but not approve of it.

I got back to work, closing my eyes and forcing myself to clear my thoughts, to focus on the task at hand. I started to draw my concentration toward the copper circle. The incense smoke tickled at my senses, and swirled about inside the perimeter of the outer circle, not leaving it. The energy grew slowly, as I concentrated, and then I picked up the knife in my right hand, and a handful of water from a bowl on my left.

Now for the three steps. “Enemy, mine enemy,” I spoke, slipping power into the words, “I seek you.” I passed the knife over the copper circle, straight down. I couldn’t see it, without opening my Sight, but could feel the silent tension as I cut a slit between the mortal world and the Nevernever.

“Enemy, mine enemy,” I spoke again. “I search for you. Show me your face.” I cast the water up, over the circle, where the energy of the spell atomized it into a fine, drifting mist, filled with rainbows from the surrounding candles, shifting shapes and colors.

Now for the hard part. “Azorthragal!” I shouted, “Azorthragal, Azorthragal! *Appare!*” I used the knife to cut my finger, and smeared the blood onto the edge of the copper circle.

Power surged out of me, into the circle, through the rent in the fabric of reality, and as it did, the circle sprang up like a wall around the band of copper in the floor. I felt the cut as an acute, vicious pain, enough to make me blink tears out of my eyes as the power quested out, fueled by the energy of the circle, guided by the articles spread around it.

The spell quested about in the Nevernever, like the blind tentacle of the Kraken scouring the deck, looking for some hapless soul to grab. It shouldn’t have happened like that. It should have zipped to the Nightmare like a lariat and brought it reeling in. I reached out and put more power into the spell, picturing the thing that I had been fighting, the results of its work,

trying to give the spell more guidance. It wasn’t until I hit upon the *sense* of the Nightmare, for lack of a better word, the terror it had inspired that the spell latched onto something. There was a moment of startled stillness, and then a wild, bucking energy, a resistance, that made my heart pound in my chest, the cut in my finger burn as though someone had poured salt over it.

“*Appare!*” I shouted, forcing will into my voice, reeling back in on the spell. “I command thee to appear!” I slip into the archaic at dramatically appropriate moments. So sue me.

The swirling mist of rainbows swayed and wavered, as though some kind of half-solid thing were stirring the air within the summoning circle. It struggled like a maddened bull, trying to tear away from my spell. “*Appare!*”

Chapter Twenty-four

Michael parked his truck on the street outside Bianca's mansion. He put the keys in his leather belt pouch, and buttoned it with the silver cross button. Then he straightened the collar of his doublet, which showed through the neck of the mail, and reached behind the seat for the steel helmet that slipped on over his head. "Tell me again, Harry, why this is a good idea. Why are we going to a masquerade ball with a bunch of monsters?"

"Everything points us this way," I said.

"How?"

I took a breath, trying to be patient, and passed him the white cloak. "Look. We know that someone's been stirring up the spirit world. We know that they did it in order to create this Nightmare that's been after us. We know that the girl, Lydia, was connected to the Nightmare somehow."

"Yes," Michael said. "All right."

"Bianca," I said, "sent out her thugs to take Lydia. And Bianca's hosting a party for the nastiest bad guys in the region. Stallings told me that people have been going missing off the streets. They've probably been taken for food or something. Even if Bianca isn't behind it, and I'm not saying she isn't, chances are that anyone who could be is going to be at the party tonight."

"And you think you'll be able to spot them?" Michael asked.

"Pretty sure," I responded. "All I'll have to do is get close enough to touch them, to feel their aura. I felt whoever was backing the Nightmare when they helped it get away from me. I should be able to tell when I feel them again."

"I don't like it," Michael said. "Why didn't the Nightmare come after you the minute the sun went down?"

"Maybe I scared it. I cut it up a little."

Michael frowned. "I still don't like it. There are going to be dozens of things in there that have no right to exist in this world. It will be like walking into a roomful of wolves."

"All you have to do," I said, "is keep your mouth shut and watch my back. The bad guys have to play by the rules tonight. We've been given the protection of the old laws of hospitality. If Bianca doesn't respect that, it's going to kill her reputation in front of her guests and the Vampire Court."

"I will protect you, Harry," Michael said. "As I will protect anyone who these . . . things threaten."

"We don't need any fights, Michael. That's not why we're here."

He looked out the truck window and set his jaw.

"I mean it, Michael. It's their turf. There's probably going to be bad stuff inside, but we have to keep the big picture in focus here."

"The big picture," he said. "Harry, if there's someone in there that needs my help, they're getting it."

"Michael! If we break the truce first, we're open game. You could get us both killed."

He turned to look at me, and his eyes were granite. "I am what I am, Harry."

I threw my arms up in the air, and banged my hands on the roof of the truck. "There are people who could get killed if we mess this up. It isn't only our own lives we're talking about, here."

"I know," he said. "My family are some of them. But that doesn't change anything."

"Michael," I said. "I'm not asking you to smile and chat and get cozy. Just keep quiet and stay out of the way. Don't shove a crucifix down anyone's throat. That's all I'm asking."

"I won't stand by, Harry," he said. "I can't." He frowned and said, "I don't think you can, either."

I glared at him. "Hell's bells, Michael. I don't want to die, here."

"Nor do I. We must have faith."

"Great," I said. "That's just great."

"Harry, will you join me in prayer?"

I blinked at him. "What?"

"A prayer," Michael said. "I'd like to talk to Him for a moment." He half smiled at me. "You don't have to say anything. Just be quiet and stay out of the way." He bowed his head.

I squinted out the window of the truck, silent. I don't have anything against God. Far from it. But I don't understand Him. And I don't trust a lot of the people that go around claiming that they're working in His best interests. Faeries and vampires and whatnot—those I can fathom. Even demons. Sometimes, even the Fallen. I can understand why they do what they do.

But I don't understand God. I don't understand how He could see the way people treat one another, and not chalk up the whole human race as a bad idea.

I guess He's just bigger about it than I would be.

"Lord," Michael said. "We walk into darkness now. Our enemies will surround us. Please help to make us strong enough to do what needs to be done. Amen."

Just that. No fancy language, no flashy beseeching the Almighty for aid. Just quiet words about what he wanted to get done, and a request that God would be on his side—on our side. Simple words, and yet power surrounded him like a cloud of fine mist, prickling along my arms and my neck. Faith. I calmed down a little. We had a lot going for us. We could do this.

Michael looked up at me and nodded. "All right," he said. "I'm ready."

"How do I look?" I asked him.

He smiled, white teeth showing. "You're going to turn heads. That's for sure."

I had to smile back at him. "Okay," I said. "Let's party."

We got out of the truck, and started walking toward the gates around Bianca's estate. Michael buckled on the white cloak with its red cross as he went. He had a matching surcoat, boots, and armored guards on his shoulders. He had a pair of heavy gauntlets tucked through his boots, and wore a pair of knives on his belt, one on either side. He smelled like steel and he clanked a little bit when he walked. It sounded comforting, in a friendly, dreadnought kind of way.

It would have been more stylish to drive up through the gates and have a valet park the truck, but Michael didn't want to hand over his truck to vampires. I didn't blame him. I wouldn't trust a bloodsucking, night stalking, fiend of the shadows valet, either.

The gate had an honest-to-goodness guardhouse, with a pair of guards. Neither one of them looked like they were carrying guns, but they held themselves with an armed arrogance that neither myself nor Michael missed. I held up the invitation. They let us in.

We walked up the drive to the house. A black limo pulled up along the drive as we did, and we had to step off to the side to let it past. When we got to the front of the house, the occupants were just getting out of the car.

The driver came around to the rear door of the limo and opened it. Music washed out, something loud and hard. There was a moment's pause, and then a man glided out of the limo.

He was tall, pale as a statue. Sable hair fell in tousled curls to his shoulders. He was dressed in a pair of opalescent butterfly wings that rose from his shoulders, fastened to him by some mysterious mechanism. He wore white leather gloves, their gauntlet cuffs decorated in winding silver designs, and similar designs were set around his calves, down to his sandals. At his side hung a sword, delicately made, the handle wrought as though out of glass. The only other thing he had on was a loincloth of some soft, white cloth. He had the body for it. Muscle,

but not too much of it, good set of shoulders, and the pale skin wasn't darkened anywhere by hair. Hell's bells, I noticed how good he looked.

The man smiled, bright enough for a toothpaste commercial, and then reached a hand back down to the car. A pair of gorgeous legs in pink high heels slid out of the car, followed by a slender and scrumptious girl barely covered in flower petals. She had a short, tight skirt made out of them, and more petals cupped her breasts like delicate hands. Other than that, and the

baby's breath woven into the tumbled mass of her black hair, she wore nothing. And she wore it well. In heels, she might have been five-seven, and she had a face that made me think that she was both lovely and sweet. Her cheeks were flushed in a delicate pink blush, vibrant and alive, her lips parted, and she had a look to her eyes that told me she was on something.

"Harry," Michael said. "You're drooling."

"I'm not drooling," I said.

"That girl can't be nineteen years old."

"I'm not drooling!" I scowled, gripped my cane in hand, and stalked on up the driveway to the house. And wiped at my mouth with my sleeve. Just in case.

The man turned toward me, and both his eyebrows lifted. He looked me and my costume up and down, and burst out into a rich, rolling laugh. "Oh, my," he said. "You must be Harry Dresden."

That got my hackles up. It always bugs me when someone knows me and I don't know them. "Yeah," I said. "That's me. Who the hell are you?"

If the hostility bothered him, it didn't bother his smile. The girl with him slipped beneath his left arm and nestled against him, watching me with stoned eyes. "Oh, of course," he said. "I forget that you probably know very little of the intricacies of the Court. My name is Thomas, of House Raith, of the White Court."

"White Court," I said.

"Three Vampire Courts," Michael supplied. "Black, Red, and White."

"I knew that."

Michael shrugged one shoulder. "Sorry."

Thomas smiled. "Well. Only two, for all practical purposes. The Black Court has fallen on hard times of late, the poor darlings." His tone of voice suggested muted glee rather than pity. "Mister Dresden, allow me to introduce Justine."

Justine, the girl beneath his arm, gave me a sweet smile. I half-expected her to extend her hand to me to be kissed, but she didn't. She just molded her body to Thomas's in what looked like a most pleasant fashion.

"Charmed," I said. "This is Michael."

"Michael," Thomas mused, and studied the man up and down. "Dressed as a Knight Templar."

"Something like that," Michael said.

"How ironic," Thomas said. His eyes returned to me, and that smile widened. "And you, Mister Dresden. Your costume is . . . going to make quite a stir."

"Why, thank you."

"Shall we go inside?"

"Oh, let's." We all tramped up the front stairs, affording me an uncomfortably proximate view of Justine's legs along the way, lean and lovely and made for doing things that had nothing to do with locomotion. A pair of tuxedo-clad doormen who looked human swung open the mansion's doors for us.

The entry hall to Bianca's mansion had been redecorated since the last time I'd been there. The old-style decor had been lavishly restored. She'd had marble laid out instead of gleaming hardwood. All the doorways stood in graceful arches rather than stolid rectangles. Alcoves every ten feet or so sported small statuary and other pieces of art. It was lit only by the spots on each alcove, creating deep pools of shadow in between.

"Rather tacky," Thomas sniffed, his butterfly wings quivering. "Have you been to any Court functions before, Mister Dresden? Are you aware of the etiquette?"

"Not really," I said. "But it had better not involve anyone drinking anyone's bodily fluids. Particularly mine."

Thomas laughed, richly. "No, no. Well," he admitted, "not formally, in any case, though there will be ample opportunity to indulge, if you wish." His fingers caressed the girl's waist again, and she focused her eyes on me in a disconcertingly intent fashion.

"I don't think so. What do I need to know?"

"Well, we're all outsiders, not being members of the Red Court, and this is a Red function. First, we'll be presented to the company and they'll have the chance to come meet us."

"Mingle, eh?"

"Just so. Afterwards, we'll be presented to Bianca herself, and she, in turn, will give us a gift."

"A gift?" I asked.

"She's the hosting party. Of course she'll be giving gifts." He smiled at me. "It's only civilized."

I eyed him. I wasn't used to vampires being so chatty. "Why are you being so helpful?"

He laid his fingers upon his chest, lifting his eyebrows in a perfectly executed "who me?" expression. "Why, Mister Dresden. Why should I not help you?"

"You're a vampire."

"So I am," he said. "But, I'm afraid, I'm not a terribly good one." He gave me a sunny smile and said, "Of course, I could also be lying."

I snorted.

"So, Mister Dresden. Rumor had it you had refused Bianca's invitation."

"I had."

"What changed your mind?"

"Business."

"Business?" Thomas asked. "You're here on business?"

I shrugged. "Something like that." I stripped off my gloves, trying to look casual, and offered him my hand. "Thanks again."

His head tilted to one side and he narrowed his eyes. He looked down at my hand and then back up at me, his gaze calculating, before trading grips with me.

There was a faint, flickering aura about him. I felt it dance and glide over my skin like a soft, cool wind. It felt odd, different than the energy that surrounded a human practitioner—and nothing like the sense of whatever had been pumping up the Nightmare.

Thomas wasn't my man. I must have relaxed visibly, because he smiled and said, "I pass the test, eh?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Whatever you say. You're an odd duck, Harry Dresden. But I like you." And with that, he and his escort turned and glided together down the length of the entry hall, and through the curtained doors at the far end.

I glowered after them.

"Anything?" Michael asked.

"He's clean," I said. "Relatively speaking. Must be someone else here."

"You'll get the chance to do some handshaking, it sounds like," Michael said.

"Yeah. You ready?"

"Lord willing," Michael said.

We started together down the hall, and through the curtained doorway, and emerged into Vampire Party Central.

We stood on a concrete deck, elevated ten feet off the rest of a vast, outdoor courtyard. Music flowed up from below. People crowded the courtyard in a blur of color and motion, talk and costume, like some kind of Impressionist painting. Glowing globes rested on wire stands, here and there, giving the place a sort of torch-lit mystique. A dais, opposite the entryway we stood in, rose up several feet higher in the air, a suspiciously throne-like chair upon it.

I had just started to take in details when a brilliant white light flooded my eyes, and I had to lift a hand against it. The music died down a bit, and the chatter of people quieted some. Evidently, Michael and I had just become the center of attention.

A servant stepped forward and asked, calmly, "May I have your invitation, sir?" I passed it over, and a moment later heard the same voice, over a modest public address system.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Court. I am pleased to present Harry Dresden, Wizard of the White Council, and guest."

I lowered my hands, and the voices fell completely silent. From either side of the throne opposite, a pair of spotlights glared at me.

I shrugged my shoulders to get my cape to fall into place correctly, tattered red lining flashing against the black cotton exterior. The collar of the thing came up high on either side of my face. The spot glared off of the painted gold plastic medallion I wore at my throat. The worn powder-blue tux beneath it could have made an appearance at someone's prom, in the seventies. The servants at the party had better tuxes than I did.

I made sure to smile, so that they could see the cheap plastic fangs. I suppose the spotlight must have bleached my face out to ghostly whiteness, especially with the white clown makeup I had on. The fake blood drooling out the corners of my mouth would be standing out bright red against it.

I lifted a white-gloved hand and said, slurring a little through the fangs. "Hi! How are you all doing?"

My words rang out on deathly silence, from below.

"I still can't believe," Michael said, sotto voce, "that you came to the Vampires' Masquerade Ball dressed as a vampire."

"Not just a vampire," I said, "a *cheesy* vampire. Do you think they got the point?" I managed to peer past the spotlights enough to make out Thomas and Justine at the foot of the stairs. Thomas was staring around at the courtyard with undisguised glee, then flashed me a smile and a thumbs-up.

"I think," Michael said, "that you've just insulted everyone here."

"I'm here to find a monster, not make nice with them. Besides, I never wanted to come to this stupid party in the first place."

"All the same. I think you've peeved them off."

"Peeved? Come on. How bad could that be? Peeved."

From the courtyard below came several distinctive sounds: A few hisses. The rasp of steel as several someones drew knives. Or maybe swords. The nervous *click-clack* of someone with a semiautomatic working the slide.

Michael shrugged in his cloak, and I sensed, more than saw him put his hand on the hilt of one of his knives. "I think we're about to find out."

Chapter Twenty-five

Silence lay heavy over the courtyard. I gripped my cane and waited for the first gunshot, or whistle of a thrown knife, or bloodcurdling scream of fury. Michael was a steel-smelling presence beside me, silent and confident in the face of the hostility. Hell's bells. I'd meant to give the vamps a little thumb of the nose with the costume, but wow. I didn't think I'd net *this* much of a reaction.

"Steady, Harry," Michael murmured. "They're like mean dogs. Don't flinch or run. It will only set them off."

"Your average mean dog doesn't have a gun," I murmured back. "Or a knife. Or a sword." But I remained where I stood, my expression bland.

The first sound to ring out was neither gunshot nor battle cry, but rich, silvery laughter. It drifted up, masculine, somehow merry and mocking, bubbling and scornful all at once. I squinted down through the lights, to see Thomas, posed like some bizarre post-chrysalis incarnation of Errol Flynn, one foot up on the stairs, hand braced, his other hand on the crystalline hilt of his sword. His head was thrown back, every lean line of muscle on him displayed with the casual disregard of skilled effort. The butterfly wings caught the light at the edges of the spots and threw them back in dazzling colors.

"I've always heard," Thomas drawled, his voice loud enough to be heard by all, artfully projected, "that the Red Court gave its guests a warm welcome. I hadn't thought I'd get such a picturesque demonstration, though." He turned toward the dais and bowed. "Lady Bianca, I'll be sure to tell my father all about this dizzying display of hospitality."

I felt my smile harden, and I peered past the spotlights to the dais. "Bianca, dear, there you are. This *was* a costume party, was it not? A masquerade? And we were all supposed to come dressed as something we weren't? If I misread the invitation, I apologize."

I heard a woman's voice murmur something, and the spotlights flicked off. I was left in the dark for a minute, until my eyes could adjust, and I could regard the woman standing across from me, upon the dais.

Bianca wasn't tall, but she was statuesque in a way you only find in erotic magazines and embarrassing dreams. Pale of skin, dark of hair and eye, full of sensuous curves, from her mouth to her hips, everything possessed of luscious ripeness coupled with slender strength that would have caught the eye of any man. She wore a gown of flickering flame. I don't mean

that she wore a red dress—she *wore* flame, gathered about her in the shape of an evening gown, blue at its base fading through the colors of a candle to red as it cupped her full, gorgeous breasts. More flame danced and played through the elegant piles of her dark hair, flickering over her like a tiara. She had on a pair of real heels at least, adding several inches to her rather unimpressive height. The shoes did interesting things to the shape of her legs. The curve of her smile promised things that were probably illegal, and bad for you, and would carry warnings from the Surgeon General, but that you'd still want to do over and over again.

I wasn't interested. I had seen what was underneath her mask, once before. I couldn't forget what was there.

"Well," she purred, her voice carrying over the whole of the courtyard. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected any more taste from you, Mister Dresden. Though perhaps we will see about your taste, later in the evening." Her tongue played over her teeth, and she gave me a dazzling smile.

I watched her, watched behind her. A pair of figures in black cloaks, hardly more than vague shapes behind her stood quietly, as though ready to attack if she snapped a finger. I suppose every decent flame casts shadows. "I think you'd better not try it."

Bianca laughed again. Several in the courtyard joined in with her, though it was a nervous thing. "Mister Dresden," she said. "Many things can change a man's mind." She crossed her legs, slowly, flashing naked skin up to her taut, silky thigh as she did. "Perhaps we'll find something that changes yours." She waved her hand, lazy and arrogant. "Music. We are here to celebrate. Let us do so."

The music began again while I sorted out the meaning behind what Bianca had just said. She had given her tacit permission for her people to try to get to me. They couldn't just walk up and bite me, maybe, but yeesh. I'd have to be on my guard. I thought of Kelly Hamilton's narcotic kisses on my throat, the glowing warmth that had surrounded me, infused me, and shivered. Some part of me wondered what it might be like to let the vamps catch me, and if it would be all that bad. Another chewed furiously over everything I'd seen so far that evening—Bianca clearly had something in mind.

I shook my head and glanced back at Michael. He nodded to me, a slight motion beneath the great helm, and we both descended the stairs. My legs were shaking, making the trip down unsteady. I prayed that none of the vamps noticed it. Wouldn't do to let them see weakness. Even if I was as nervous as a bird in a coal mine.

"Do what you need to do, Harry," Michael said, low. "I'll be a couple steps behind you, to your right. I'll watch your back."

Michael's words steadied me, calmed me, and I felt profoundly grateful for them.

I expected the vamps to descend on me in a charming and dangerous cloud when I reached the courtyard, but they didn't. Instead, Thomas was waiting for me with one hand on the hilt of his sword, his pale body on shameless display. Justine stood a bit behind him. His face practically glowed with glee.

"Oh, *my*, that was marvelous, Harry. May I call you Harry?"

"No," I said. I caught myself, though, and tried to soften the answer. "But thanks. For what you said, when you did. Things might have gotten ugly."

Thomas's eyes danced. "They still might, Mister Dresden. But we couldn't have it descending into a general brawl, now could we?"

"We couldn't?"

"No, of course not. There would be far fewer opportunities to seduce and deceive and backstab."

I snorted. "I suppose you've got a point."

The tip of his tongue touched his teeth when he smiled. "I usually do."

"Um, thanks, Thomas."

He glanced aside, and frowned. I followed his gaze. Justine had drifted away from him, and now stood with a bright smile on her sweet face as she spoke to a lean, smiling man dressed in a scarlet tux and a domino mask. While I watched, the man reached out and stroked his fingers over her shoulder. He made some comment that made the lovely girl laugh.

"Excuse me," Thomas said with distaste. "I can't abide poachers. Do enjoy the party, Mister Dresden."

He drifted off toward them, and Michael stepped up to me. I half-turned my head toward him, to hear him murmur, "They're surrounding us."

I looked around. The courtyard was full of people. Many of them were young, pretty folk, dressed in all manner of black, poster children for the Goth subculture. Leather, plastic, and fishnet seemed to be the major themes in display, complete with black domino masks, heavy hoods upon cloaks, and a variety of different kinds of face paint. They talked and laughed, drank and danced to the music. Some of them wore a band of scarlet cloth about their arm, or a bloodred choker around their throats.

While I watched, I saw a too-lean young man bend over a table to inhale something through one nostril. A trio of giggling girls, two blondes and a brunette, all dressed up like Dracula's cheerleading squad, complete with black-and-red pom-poms, counted to three together and washed down a pair of pills with glasses of dark wine. Other young people pressed together in sensual motion, or simply sat or stood kissing, touching. A few, already partied out, lay upon the courtyard, smiling dreamily, their eyes closed.

I scanned the crowd with my eyes, and picked out the differences at once. Drifting among the young people clad in black were lean figures in scarlet—perhaps two or three dozen, in all. Male and female, of a variety of appearances and costumes, all shared the scarlet clothes, beauty, and a confident, stalking kind of motion that marked them as predators.

"The Red Court," I said. I licked my lips, and looked around some more. The vampires were being casual about it, but they had wandered into a ring around us. If we remained there any longer, we wouldn't be able to walk out of the courtyard without coming within a few feet of one of them. "The kids with the red bands are what? Junior vampires?"

"Marked cattle, I'd say," Michael rumbled. There was anger in it, steady and slow anger.

"Easy, Michael. We need to move around a little. Make it harder for them to hem us in."

"Agreed." Michael nodded toward the drink table, and we headed that way, our pace brisk. The vamps tried to adjust to follow us, but they couldn't make it look casual.

A couple in red moved to intercept us, meeting Michael and me just before we reached the table. Kyle Hamilton wore a harlequin's outfit, all in shades of scarlet. Kelly followed along with him, dressed in a scarlet body stocking that left nothing to the imagination, but with a long cloak covering her shoulders and collarbones, the hood up high around her face. A scarlet mask hid her features, except for her chin and luscious mouth. I thought I could see a puckering of the skin at one side of her mouth—perhaps the burns she'd suffered.

"Harry Dresden." Kyle greeted me in a too-loud voice, with a too-wide smile. "How pleasant to see you again."

I chuckled him boisterously on the shoulder, making his balance waver. "I wish it was mutual."

The smile became brittle. "And of course you remember my sister, Kelly."

"Sure, sure," I said. "Hit that tanning bed a little too long, did we?"

I expected her to snarl or hiss or go for my throat. But instead she turned to the table, collected a silver goblet and a crystal wine-glass from the attendant there, and offered them to us with a smile that mirrored her brother's. "It's so pleasant to see you, Harry. I'm sorry that we didn't get to see the lovely Miss Rodriguez tonight."

I accepted the goblet. "She had to wash her hair."

Kelly turned to Michael and offered him the glass. He accepted it with an inclination of his head, stiffly polite. "I see," she purred. "I had no idea you were into men, Mister Dresden."

"What can I say? They're just so big and strong."

"Of course," Kyle said. "If I was surrounded by people who wanted to kill me as badly as I want to kill you, I'd want a bodyguard about, too."

Kelly sidled up to Michael, her breasts thrust forward, straining the sheer fabric of the body stocking. She walked in a slow circle around him, while Michael remained standing just as he was. "He's gorgeous," she purred. "May I give him a kiss, Mister Dresden?"

"Harry," Michael said.

"He's married, Kelly. Sorry."

She laughed, pressing close to Michael, and tried to catch his eyes. Michael frowned, and stared at nothing, avoiding her. "No?" she asked. "Well. Don't worry, pretty man. You'll love it. Everyone wants to party like it's their last night on earth." She flashed a wicked smile up at him. "Now you get to."

"The young lady is too kind," Michael said.

"So stiff. I admire that in a man." She shot me a glance from behind her mask. "You really shouldn't drag poor defenseless mortals into these things, Mister Dresden." She looked Michael up and down again, admiring. "This one will be delicious, later."

"Don't bite off more than you can chew," I advised her.

She laughed, as though delighted. "Well, Mister Dresden. I see his crosses, but we all know the value of them to most of the world." She reached her hand toward Michael's arm, possessively. "For a moment, you almost had me thinking that he might be a true Knight Templar."

"No," I said judiciously. "Not a Knight Templar."

Kelly's hand touched Michael's steel-clad arm—and erupted into sudden, white flame, as brief and violent as a stroke of lightning. She screamed, a piercing wail, and fell back from him to the ground. She lay there, curled helplessly around her blackened hand, struggling to get enough breath back to scream. Kyle flew to her side.

I looked at Michael and blinked. "Wow," I said. "Color me impressed."

Michael looked vaguely embarrassed. "It happens like that sometimes," he said, apologetically.

I nodded and took that in stride. I turned my gaze back to the vampire twins. "Let that be a lesson to you. Hands off the Fist of God."

Kyle shot me a murderous look, his face rippling.

My heart sped up, but I couldn't let the fear show. "Go ahead, Kyle," I dared him. "Start something. Break the truce your own leader set up. Violate the laws of hospitality. The White Council will burn this place down so fast, people will call it Little Pompeii."

He snarled at me, and picked Kelly up. "This isn't over," he promised. "One way or another, Dresden. I'll kill you."

"Uh-huh." I flicked my wrist at him, my hand right in his face. "Shoo, shoo. I have to mingle."

Kyle snarled. But the pair withdrew, and I turned my gaze slowly around the courtyard. Everything in the immediate vicinity had stopped while people, black- and red-clad alike, stared at us. Some of the vampires in scarlet looked at Michael, swallowed, and took a couple of steps back.

I grinned, as cocky and as confident as I could appear, and lifted my glass. "A toast," I said. "To hospitality."

They were quiet for a moment, then hurriedly mumbled an echo to my toast and sipped from their drinks. I drained my goblet in a single gulp, hardly noticing the delightful flavor of it, and turned to Michael. He lifted his glass to the mouth of his helm in a token sip, but didn't take any.

"All right," I said. "I got to touch Kyle. He's out, too, though I didn't expect him to be our man. Or woman. Or monster."

Michael looked slowly around as the scarlet-clad vampires continued to withdraw. "It looks like we've cowed them for now."

I nodded, still uneasy. The crowd parted at one side, and Thomas and Justine came to us, blazes of pale skin and brilliant color amidst the scarlet and black. "There you are," Thomas said. He glanced down at my goblet and let out a sigh. "I'm glad I found you in time."

"In time for what?" I asked.

"To warn you," he said. He flicked a hand at the refreshments table. "The wine is poisoned."

Chapter Twenty-six

“Poisoned?” I said, witlessly.

Thomas peered at my face and then down at my goblet. He leaned over it enough to see that it was empty and said, “Ah. Oops.”

“Harry.” Michael stepped up beside me, and set his own glass aside. “I thought you said that they couldn’t try anything so overt.”

My stomach kept churning. My heart beat more quickly, though whether this was from the poison or the simple, cold fear that Thomas’s words had brought to me, I couldn’t say. “They can’t,” I said. “If I pitch over dead, the Council would know what happened. I sent word in today that I was coming here tonight.”

Michael shot Thomas a hard look. “What was in the wine?”

The pale man shrugged, slipping his arm around Justine once more. The girl leaned against him and closed her eyes. “I don’t know what they put in it,” he said. “But look at these people.” He nodded to those black-clad folk who were already stretched out blissfully upon the ground. “They all have wineglasses.”

I looked a bit closer and it was true. The servants moved about the courtyard, plucking up glasses from the fallen. As I watched, another young couple, dancing slowly together, sank down to the ground in a long, deep kiss that faded away into simple stillness.

“Hell’s bells,” I swore. “That’s what they’re doing.”

“What?” Michael asked.

“They don’t want me dead,” I said. “Not from this.” I didn’t have much time. I stalked past the refreshments table to a potted fern and bent over it. I heard Michael take up a position behind me, guarding my back. I shoved a finger down my throat. Simple, quick, nasty. The wine burned my throat coming back up, and the fern’s fronds tickled the back of my neck as I spat it back out into the base of the plant. My head spun as I sat back up again, and when I looked back toward Michael, everything blurred for a moment before it snapped back into focus. A slow, delicious numbness spread over my fingers.

“Everyone,” I mumbled.

“What?” Michael knelt down in front of me and gripped my shoulder with one arm. “Harry, are you all right?”

“I’m fuzzy,” I said. Vampire venom. Naturally. It felt good to have it in me again, and I wondered, for a moment, what I was so worried about. It was just that nice. “It’s for everyone. They’re drugging everyone’s wine. Vamp venom. That way they can say they weren’t just targeting me.” I wobbled, and then stood up. “Recreational poisoning. Put everyone in the party mood.”

Thomas mused. “Rather ham-handed, I suppose, but effective.” He looked around at the growing numbers of young people joining the first few upon the ground in ecstatic stupor. His fingers stroked Justine’s flank absently, and she shivered, pressing closer to him. “I suppose I’m prejudiced. I prefer my prey a little more lively.”

“We’ve got to get you out of here,” Michael said.

I gritted my teeth, and tried to push the pleasant sensations aside. The venom had to have an enormously quick absorption rate. Even if I’d brought the wine back up, I must have gotten a fairly good dose. “No,” I managed after a moment. “That’s what they want me to do.”

“Harry, you can barely stand up,” Michael objected.

“You are looking a bit peaked,” Thomas said.

“Bah. If they want me incapacitated, it means they’ve got something to hide.”

“Or just that they want you to get killed,” Michael said. “Or drugged enough to agree to let one of them feed on you.”

“No,” I disagreed. “If they wanted to seduce me, they’d have tried something else. They’re trying to scare me off. Or keep me from finding something out.”

“I hate to point out the obvious,” Thomas said, “but why on earth would Bianca invite you if she didn’t want you to be here?”

“She’s obligated to invite the Council to witness. That means me, in this town. And she didn’t expect me to actually show—pretty much everyone was surprised to see me at all.”

“They didn’t think you’d come,” Michael murmured.

“Yeah. Ain’t I a stinker.” I took a couple of deep breaths and said, “I think the one we’re after is here, Michael. We’ve got to stick this out for a little while. See if I can find out exactly who it is.”

“Exactly who is what?” Thomas asked.

“None of your beeswax, Thomas,” I said.

“Has anyone ever told you, Mister Dresden, that you are a thoroughly annoying man?” That made me grin, to which he rolled his eyes. “Well,” he said, “I’ll not intrude on your business any further. Let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.” He and Justine sauntered off into the crowd.

I watched Justine’s legs go, leaning on my cane a bit to help me balance. “Nice guy,” I commented.

“For a vampire,” Michael said. “Don’t trust him, Harry. There’s something about him I don’t like.”

“Oh, I like him,” I said. “But I sure as hell don’t trust him.”

“What do we do now?”

“Look around. So far we’ve got food in black, the vampires in red, and then there’s you and me, and a handful of other people in different costumes.”

“The Roman centurion,” Michael said.

“Yeah. And some Hamlet-looking guy. Let’s go see what they are.”

“Harry,” Michael asked. “Are you going to be okay?”

I swallowed. I felt dizzy, a little sickened. I had to fight to get clear thoughts through, bulldogging them against the pull of the venom. I was surrounded by things that looked at people like we look at cows, and felt fairly sure that I was going to get myself killed if I stayed.

Of course, if I didn’t stay, other people could get killed. If I didn’t stay, the people who had already been hurt remained in danger: Charity. Michael’s infant son. Murphy. If I didn’t stay, the Nightmare would have time to recuperate, and then it and its corporate sponsor, who I thought was here at this party, would feel free to keep taking potshots at me.

The thought of remaining in that place scared me. The thought of what could happen if I gave up now scared me a lot more.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get this over with.”

Michael nodded, looking around, his grey eyes dark, hard. “This is an abomination before the Lord, Harry. These people. They’re barely more than children . . . what they’re doing.

Consorting with these *things*.”

“Michael. Chill *out*. We’re here to get information, not bring the house down on a bunch of nasties.”

“Samson did,” Michael said.

“Yeah, and look how well things turned out for him. You ready?”

He muttered something, and fell in behind me again. I looked around and oriented on the man dressed as a Roman centurion, then headed toward him. A man of indefinite years, he stood alone and slightly detached from the rest of the crowd. His eyes were an odd color of green, deep and intense. He held a cigarette between his lips. His gear, right down to the Roman short sword and sandals, looked awfully authentic. I slowed a little as I approached him, staring.

“Michael,” I murmured, over my shoulder. “Look at his costume. It looks like the real thing.”

"It is the real thing," said the man in a bored tone of voice, not looking at me. He exhaled a plume of smoke, then put the cigarette back between his lips. Michael would have barely been able to hear my question. This guy had picked it right out. Gulp.

"Interesting," I said. "Must have cost you a fortune to put together."

He glanced at me. Smoke curled from the corners of his mouth as he gave me a very slight, very smug smirk. And said nothing.

"So," I said, and cleared my throat. "I'm Harry Dresden."

The man pursed his lips and said, thoughtfully and precisely, "Harry. Dresden."

When someone, anyone, says your name, it touches you. You almost feel it, that sound that stands out from a crowd of others and demands your attention. When a wizard says your Name, when he says it and *means* it, it has the same effect, amplified a thousandfold. The man in the centurion gear said my part of my Name and said it exactly right. It felt like someone had just rung a tuning fork and pressed it against my teeth.

I staggered, and Michael caught my shoulder, keeping me upright. Dear God. He had just used one *part* of my full name, my true Name, to reach out to me and casually backhand me off my feet.

"Hell's bells," I whispered. Michael propped me back up. I planted my cane, so that I would have an extra support, and just stared at the man. "How the hell did you *do* that?"

He rolled his eyes, took the cigarette in his fingers and blew more smoke. "You wouldn't understand."

"You're not White Council," I said.

He looked at me as though I had just stated that objects fall toward the ground; a withering, scathing glance. "How very fortunate for me."

"Harry," Michael said, his voice tense.

"Just a minute."

"Harry. Look at his cigarette."

I blinked at Michael. "What?"

"Look at his cigarette," Michael repeated. He was staring at the man with wide, intent eyes, and one hand had fallen to the hilt of a knife.

I looked. It took me a minute to realize what Michael was talking about.

The man blew more smoke out of the corner of his mouth, and smirked at me.

The cigarette wasn't lit.

"He's," I said. "He's, uh."

"He's a dragon," Michael said.

"A what?"

The man's eyes flickered with interest for the first time, and he narrowed his focus—not upon me, but upon Michael. "Just so," he said. "You may call me Mister Ferro."

"Why don't I just call you Ferrovox," Michael said.

Mister Ferro narrowed his eyes, and regarded Michael with a dispassionate gaze. "You know something of the lore, at least, mortal."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Dragons . . . dragons are supposed to be *big*. Scales, claws, wings. This guy isn't big."

Ferro rolled his eyes and said, impatiently, "We are what we wish to be, Master Drafton."

"Dresden," I snapped.

He waved a hand. "Don't tempt me to show you what I can do by speaking your name and making an effort, mortal. Suffice to say that you could not comprehend the kind of power I have at my command. That my true form here would shatter this pathetic gathering of monkey houses and crack the earth upon which I stand. If you gazed upon me with your wizard's sight, you would see something that would awe you, humble you, and quite probably destroy your reason. I am the eldest of my kind, and the strongest. Your life is a flickering candle to me, and your civilizations rise and fall like grass in the summer."

"Well," I said. "I don't know about your true form, but the weight of your ego sure is pushing the crust of the earth toward the breaking point."

His green eyes blazed. "What did you say?"

"I don't like bullies," I said. "You think I'm going to stand here and offer you my firstborn and sacrifice virgins to you or something? I'm not that impressed."

"Well," Ferro said. "Let's see if we can't make an impression."

I clutched my cane and gathered up my will, but I was way, way too slow. Ferro just waved a hand vaguely in my direction, and something crushed me down to the earth, as though I suddenly had gained about five thousand pounds. I felt my lungs strain to haul in a breath, and my vision clouded over with stars and went black. I tried to gather up my magic, to thrust the force away from me, but I couldn't focus, couldn't speak.

Michael looked down at me dispassionately, then said, to Ferro, "Siriothrax should have learned that trick. It might have kept me from killing him."

Ferro's cold regard swept back to Michael, bringing with it a tiny lessening in the pressure—not much, but enough that I could gasp out, "*Riflettum*," and focus my will against it. Ferro's spell cracked and began to flake apart. I saw him look at me, sensed that he could have renewed the effort without difficulty. He didn't. I climbed back to my feet, gasping quietly.

"So," Ferro said. "You are the one." He looked Michael up and down. "I thought you'd be taller."

Michael shrugged. "It wasn't anything personal. I'm not proud of what I did."

Ferro tapped a finger against the hilt of his sword. Then said, quietly, "Sir Knight. I would advise you to be more humble in the face of your betters." He cast a disdainful glance at me. "And you might consider a gag for this one, until he can learn better manners."

I tried for a comeback, but I still couldn't breathe. I just leaned against my cane and wheezed. Ferro and Michael exchanged a short nod, one where neither of them looked away from the other's eyes. Then Ferro turned and . . . well, just vanished. No flicker of light, no puff of flame. Just gone.

"Harry," Michael chided. "You're not the biggest kid on the block. You've got to learn to be a little more polite."

"Good advice," I wheezed. "Next time, you handle any dragons."

"I will." He looked around and said, "People are thinning out, Harry." He was right. As I watched, a vampire in a tight red dress tapped the arm of a young man in black. He glanced over to her and met her eyes. They stared at one another for a while, the woman smiling, the man's expression going slowly slack. Then she murmured something and took his hand, leading him out into the darkness beyond the globes of light. Other vamps were drawing more young people along with them. There were fewer scarlet costumes around, and more people blissed out on the ground.

"I don't like the direction this is going," I said.

"Nor do I." His voice was hard as stone. "Lord willing, we can put a stop to this."

"Later. First, we talk to the Hamlet guy. Then there's just Bianca herself to check."

"Not one of the other vampires?" Michael asked.

"No way. They're all subordinate to Bianca. If they were that strong, they'd have knocked her off by now, unless they were in her inner circle. That's Kyle and Kelly. She doesn't have the presence of mind for it, and he's already out. So if it's not a guest, it's probably Bianca."

"And if it's not her?"

“Let’s not go there. I’m floundering enough as it is.” I squinted around. “Do you see Hamlet anywhere?”

Michael squinted around, taking a few paces to peer around another set of ferns.

I saw the flash of red out of the corner of my eye, saw a form in a red cloak heading for Michael’s back, from around the ferns. I turned toward Michael and threw myself at his attacker.

“Look out!” I shouted. Michael spun, a knife appearing in his hand as though conjured. I grabbed the red cloaked-figure and whirled it around to face me.

The hood fell back from Susan’s face, revealing her startled dark eyes. She’d pulled her hair into a ponytail. She wore a low-cut white blouse and a little pleated skirt, complete with white knee socks and buckle-down shoes. White gloves covered her hands. A wicker basket dangled in the crook of her elbow, and round, mirror-toned spectacles perched upon the bridge of her slender nose.

“Susan?” I stammered. “What are you doing here?”

She let out a breath, and drew her arm out of my hand. “God, Harry. You scared me.”

“What are you *doing* here?” I demanded.

“You know why I’m here,” she said. “I came to get a story. I tried to call you and talk you into it, but *no*, you were way too busy doing whatever you were doing to even spare five minutes to talk to me.”

“I don’t believe this,” I muttered. “How did you get in here?”

She looked at me coolly and flicked open her basket. She reached inside and came out with a neat white invitation, like my own. “I got myself an invitation.”

“You *what*?”

“Well. I had it made, in any case. I didn’t think you’d mind me borrowing yours for a few minutes.”

Which explained why the invitation hadn’t been on the mantel, back at my apartment. “Hell’s bells, Susan, you don’t know what you’ve done. You’ve got to get out of here.”

She snorted. “Like hell.”

“I mean it,” I said. “You’re in danger.”

“Relax, Harry. I’m not letting anyone lick me, and I’m not looking anyone in the eyes. It’s kind of like visiting New York.” She tapped her specs with a gloved finger. “Things have gone all right so far.”

“You don’t get it,” I said. “You don’t understand.”

“Don’t understand what?” she demanded.

“You don’t understand,” purred a dulcet voice, behind me. My blood ran cold. “By coming uninvited, you have waived any right you had to the protection of the laws of hospitality.” There came a soft chuckle. “It means, Little Red Riding Hood, that the Big, Bad Wolf gets to eat you all up.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

I turned to find Lea facing me, her hands on her hips. She wore a slender, strapless dress of pale blue, which flowed over her curves like water, crashing into white foamy lace at its hem. She wore a cape of some material so light and sheer that it seemed almost unreal, and it drifted around her, catching the light in an opalescent sheen that trapped little rainbows and set them

to dancing against her pale skin. When people talk about models or movie stars being glamorous, they take it from the old word, from *glamour*, from the beauty of the high sidhe, faerie magic. Supermodels wish they had it so good as Lea.

“Why, Godmother,” I said, “what big eyes you have. Are we straining the metaphor or what?”

She drifted closer to me. “I don’t make metaphors, Harry. I’m too busy being one. Are you enjoying the party?”

I snorted. “Oh, sure. Watching them drug and poison children and getting roughed up by every weird and nasty thing in Chicagoland is a real treat.” I turned to Susan and said, “We have to get you out of here.”

Susan frowned at me and said, “I didn’t come here so that you could hustle me home, Harry.”

“This isn’t a game, Susan. These things are dangerous.” I glanced over at Lea. She kept drawing closer. “I don’t know if I can protect you.”

“Then I’ll protect myself,” Susan said. She laid her hand over the picnic basket. “I came prepared.”

“Michael,” I said. “Would you get her out of here?”

Michael stepped up beside us, and said, to Susan, “It’s dangerous. Maybe you should let me take you home.”

Susan narrowed her dark eyes at me. “If it’s so dangerous, then I don’t want to leave Harry here alone.”

“She has a point, Harry.”

“Dammit. We came here to find out who’s behind the Nightmare. If I leave before I do that, we might as well never have come. Just go, and I’ll catch up with you.”

“Yes,” Lea said. “Do go. I’ll be sure to take good care of my godson.”

“No,” Susan said, her tone flat. “Absolutely not. I’m not some kind of child for you to tote around and make decisions for, Harry.”

Lea’s smile sharpened, and she reached a hand toward Susan, touching her chin. “Let me see those pretty eyes, little one,” she purred.

I shot my hand toward my godmother’s wrist, jerking it away from Susan before the faerie could touch her. Her skin was silk-smooth, cool. Lea smiled at me, the expression stunning. Literally. My head swam, images of the faerie sorceress flooding my thoughts: those berry-sweet lips pressing to my naked chest, smeared with my blood, rose-tipped breasts bared by the light of fire and full moon, her hair a sheet of silken flame on my skin.

Another flash of image came then, accompanied by intense emotion: myself, looking up at her as I lay at her feet. She stretched out her hand and lightly touched my head, an absently fond gesture. An overwhelming sense of well-being filled me like shining, liquid light, poured into me and filled every empty place within me, calmed every fear, soothed every pain. I almost wept at the simple relief, at the abrupt release from worry, from hurt. My whole body trembled.

I was just so damned tired. So tired of hurting. Of being afraid.

“So it will be when you are with me, poor little one, poor lonely child.” Lea’s voice coursed over me, as sweet as the drug already within me. I knew she spoke the truth. I knew it on a level so deep and simple that a part of me screamed at myself for struggling to avoid her.

So easy. It would be so easy to lay down at my lady’s feet, now. So easy to let her make all the bad things go away. She would care for me. She would comfort me. My place would be there, in the warmth at her feet, staring up at her beauty—

Like a good dog.

It’s tough to say no to peace, to the comfort of it. All through history, people have traded wealth, children, land, and lives to buy it.

But peace can’t be bought, can it, chief, prime minister? The only ones offering to sell it always want something more. They lie.

I shoved the feelings away from me, the subtle glamour my godmother had cast. I could have taken a cheese grater to my own skin with less pain. But my pain, my weariness, my worries and fear—they were at least my own. They were honest. I gathered them back to me like a pack of mud-spattered children and stared at Lea, hardening my jaw, my heart. “No,” I said. “No, Lea.”

Surprise touched those delicate features. Dainty copper brows lifted. “Harry,” she said, her voice gentle, perplexed, “the bargain is already made. So mote it be. There is no reason for you to go on hurting.”

“There are people who need me,” I said. My balance wavered. “I still have a job to do.”

“Broken faiths weaken you. They bind you tighter, lessen you every time you go against your given oath.” She sounded concerned, genuinely compassionate. “Godson, I beg of you—do not do this to yourself.”

I said, struggling to be calm, “Because if I do that, there will be less for you to eat, yes? Less power for you to take.”

“It would be a terrible waste,” she assured me. “No one wants that.”

“We’re under *truce* here, Godmother. You’re not allowed to work magic on me without violating hospitality.”

“But I didn’t,” Lea said. “I’ve not worked any magic on you this night.”

“Bullshit.”

She laughed, silver and merry. “Such language, and in front of your lover too.”

I stumbled. Michael was there at once, supporting my weight with his shoulder, drawing my arm across it. “Harry,” he said. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

My head kept on spinning and my limbs started to shake. The drug already coursing through me, plus this new weakness, almost took me out. Blackness swam in front of my eyes and it was only with an effort of will that I kept myself from drowning in that darkness or giving in to the mad desire to throw myself down at Lea’s feet. “I’m okay,” I stammered. “I’m fine.”

Susan moved to my other side, her anger pouring off of her like heat from a desert highway. “What have you done to him?” she snapped at Lea.

“Nothing,” Lea replied in a cool voice. “He has done this to himself, the poor little one. One always risks dire consequences should one not keep a bargain with the sidhe.”

“What?” Susan said.

Michael grimaced, and said, “Aye. She’s telling the truth. Harry made a bargain last night, when we fought the Nightmare and drove it away from Charity.”

I struggled to speak, to warn them not to let Lea trick them, but I was too busy trying to sort out where my mouth was, and why my tongue wasn’t working.

“That doesn’t give her the right to put a spell on him,” Susan snapped.

Michael rumbled, “I don’t think she has. I can usually feel it, when someone’s done something harmful.”

“Of course I haven’t,” Lea said. “I have no need to do so. He’s already done it himself.”

What? I thought. What was she talking about?

Chapter Twenty-eight

I stared at Susan in mute disbelief.

She looked apologetic. “Oh, I’m sorry. I mean. I didn’t mean to upset you, Mister . . .”

“Dresden,” I supplied in a whisper.

“Mister Dresden, then.” She frowned down at herself, and smoothed a hand uncomfortably over the skirt, then looked around her. “Dresden. Aren’t you the guy who just opened a business as a wizard?”

Anger made me clench my teeth. “Son of a—”

“Harry,” Michael said. “I think we need to leave, rather than stand about cursing.”

My knuckles whitened as I tightened my fingers on my cane. No time for anger. Not now. Michael was right. We had to move, and quickly. “Agreed,” I said. “Susan, did you drive here?”

“Hey,” she said, squaring off against me. “I don’t know you, okay? My name is Miss Rodriguez.”

“Look, Su—Miss Rodriguez. My faerie godmother just stole a year’s worth of your memory.”

“Actually,” Michael put in, “you traded it away to her to keep some kind of spell from leaving Harry helpless.”

I shot him a glare and he subsided. “And now you don’t remember me, or I guess, Michael.”

“Or this faerie godmother, either,” Susan said, her face and stance still wary.

I shot Lea a look. She glanced over at me and her lips curved up into a smirk, before she turned back to her conversation with Thomas. “Oh, damn. She’s such a bitch.”

Susan rolled her eyes a little. “Look, guys. It’s been nice chatting with you, but this has got to be the lamest excuse for a pickup line I’ve ever heard.”

I reached a hand toward her again. Her own flashed down into the picnic basket and produced a knife, a G.I.-issue weapon from the last century, its edge gleaming. “I told you,” she said calmly, “I don’t know you. Don’t touch me.”

I drew my hand back. “Look. I just want to make sure you’re all right.”

Susan’s breathing was a little fast, but other than that she concealed her tension almost completely. “I’m perfectly fine,” she said. “Don’t worry about me.”

“At least get out of here. You’re not safe here. You came in on an invitation you had made up. Do you remember that?”

She screwed up her face into a frown. “How did you know that?” she asked.

“You told me so about five minutes ago,” I said, and sighed.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. You’ve had a bunch of your memories taken.”

“I remember coming here,” Susan said. “I remember having the counterfeit invitation made.”

“I know,” I said. “You got it off of my living room table. Do you remember that?”

She frowned. “I got it . . .” Her expression flickered, and she swallowed, glancing around. “I don’t remember where I got it.”

“There,” I said. “Do you see? Do you remember driving out to bail me out of jail a couple of nights ago?”

She’d lowered the knife by now. “I . . . I remember that I went down to the jail. And paid the bail money, but . . . I can’t think . . .”

“Okay, okay,” I said. My head hurt, and I pinched the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. “It looks like she took all of your memories that had me directly in them. Or her. What about Michael, do you remember him?”

She looked at Michael and shook her head.

I nodded. “Okay. Then I need to ask you to trust me, Miss Rodriguez. You’ve been affected by magic and I don’t know how we can get it fixed yet. But you’re in danger here and I think you should leave.”

“Not with you,” she said at once. “I have no idea who you are. Other than some kind of psychic consultant for Special Investigations.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Not with me. But at least let us walk you out of here, so that we can make sure you get out okay. You can’t swing a cat without hitting a vampire in here. So let us get you out to your car and then you can go wherever you like.”

“I didn’t get my interview,” she said. “But . . . I feel so strange.” She shook her head, and replaced her knife in her picnic basket. I heard the click of a tape recorder being switched off. “Okay,” she said. “I guess we can go.”

I nodded, relieved. “Wonderful. Michael, shall we?”

He chewed on his lip. “Maybe I should stay, Harry. If your godmother’s here, the Sword might be here too. I might get the chance to take it back.”

“Yeah. And you might get the chance to get taken from behind without someone here to cover for you. There’s too much messed up stuff here, man. Even for me. Let’s go.”

Michael fell in behind me, to my right. Susan walked beside him, on my left, keeping us both in careful view, and one hand still inside her picnic basket. I briefly wondered what kind of goodies she’d been bringing in case the big, bad wolf tried to head her off from grandma’s house.

We reached the foot of the stairs that led back up into the house. Something prickled the hairs at the back of my neck, and I stopped.

“Harry?” Michael asked. “What is it?”

“There’s someone . . .” I said, and closed my eyes. I brought up my Sight, just for a moment, and felt the pressure just a little above the spot between my eyebrows. I looked up again. The Sight cut through the enchantment in front of me like sunlight through a wispy cloud. Behind me, Michael and Susan both took in sharp breaths of surprise.

The Hamlet lookalike stood three stairs up, half smiling. I realized only then that the figure was a woman rather than a man, the slender shape of her slim hips and breasts obscured by the sable doublet she wore, giving her an odd, androgynous appearance. Her skin was pallid—not pale, not creamy. Pallid. Translucent. Almost greyish. Her lips were tinged very faintly blue, as though she’d been recently chilled. Or dead. I shivered, and lowered the Sight before it showed me something that I didn’t want to keep with me.

It didn’t change her appearance one bit. She wore a cap, which hid her hair completely, one of those puffy ones that fell over to one side, and stood with one hip cocked out, a rapier hanging from her belt. She held a skull in her other hand—it was a real one. And the bloodstains on it couldn’t have been more than a few hours old.

“Well done, wizard,” she said. Her voice sounded raspy, a quiet, hissing whisper, the kind that comes from throats and mouths which are perfectly dry. “Very few can see me when I do not wish to be seen.”

“Thank you. And excuse me,” I said. “We were just leaving.”

Bluish lips curved into a chill little smile. Other than that, she didn’t move. Not an inch. “Oh, but this is the hour for all to mingle and meet. I have a right to introduce myself to you and to hear your names and exchange pleasantries in return.” Her eyes fastened calmly on my face, evidently not fearing to meet my gaze. I figured that whatever she was, she probably had an advantage on me in the devastating gaze department. So I kept my own eyes firmly planted on the tip of her nose, and tried very hard not to notice that her eyes had no color at all, just a kind of flaccid blue-grey tinge to them, a filmy coating like cataracts.

“And what if I don’t have time for the pleasantries?” I said.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Then I might be insulted. I might even be tempted to call for satisfaction.”

“A duel?” I asked, incredulous. “Are you kidding me?”

Her eyes drifted to my right. “Of course, if you would rather a champion fought in your place, I would gladly accept.”

I glanced back at Michael, who had his eyes narrowed, focused on the woman’s doublet or upon her belt, perhaps. “You know this lady?”

"She's no lady," Michael said, his voice quiet. He had a hand on his knife. "Harry Dresden, Wizard of the White Council, this is Mavra, of the Black Court of Vampires."

"A real vampire," Susan said. I heard the click of her tape recorder coming on again.

"A pleasure," Mavra whispered. "To meet you, at last, wizard. We should talk. I suspect we have much in common."

"I'm failing to see anything we might possibly have in common, ma'am. Do you two know each other?"

"Yes," Michael said.

Mavra's whisper became chill. "The good Knight here murdered my children and grandchildren, some small time ago."

"Twenty years ago," Michael said. "Three dozen people killed in the space of a month. Yes, I put a stop to it."

Mavra's lips curved a little more, and showed yellowed teeth. "Yes. Just a little time ago. I haven't forgotten, Knight."

"Well," I said. "It's been nice chatting, Mavra, but we're on our way out."

"No you're not," Mavra said, calmly. But for her lips and her eyes, she still hadn't moved. It was an eerie stillness, not real. Real things move, stir, breathe. Mavra didn't.

"Yes, we are."

"No. Two of you are on your way out." Her smile turned chilly. "I know that the invitations said only one person could be brought with you. Therefore, one of your companions is not

under the protection of the old laws, wizard. If the Knight is unprotected, then he and I will have words. A pity you do not have *Amoracchius* with you, Sir Knight. It would have made things interesting, at least."

I got a sinking feeling in my gut. "And if it isn't Michael?"

"Then you keep offensive company, wizard, and I am displeased with you. I will demonstrate my displeasure decisively," Her gaze swept to Susan. "By all means. Choose which two are leaving. Then I will have a brief conversation with the third."

"You mean you'll kill them."

Mavra shrugged, finally breaking her stillness. I thought I heard a faint crackling of tendons, as though they'd protested moving again. "One must eat, after all. And these little, dazzled morsels the Reds brought tonight are too sweet and insubstantial for my taste."

I took a step back, and turned to Michael, speaking in a whisper. "If I get Susan out of here, can you take this bitch?"

"You might as well not whisper, Harry," Michael said. "It can hear you."

"Yes," Mavra said. "It can."

Way to go, Harry. Endear yourself to the monsters, why don't you? "Well," I asked Michael. "Can you?"

Michael looked at me for a moment, his lips pressed together. Then he said, "Take Susan and go. I'll manage here."

Mavra laughed, a dry and raspy sound. "So very noble. So pure. So self-sacrificing."

Susan stepped around me, to close a triangle with Michael and me. As she did, I noticed that Mavra leaned back from her, just slightly. "Now just a minute," Susan said. "I'm a big girl. I knew the risks when I came here."

"I'm sorry, Miss Rodriguez," Michael said, his tone apologetic. "But this is what I do."

"Save me from chauvinist pigs," Susan muttered. She turned her head around to me. "Excuse me. What do you think you're doing?"

"Looking in your pick-a-nick basket," I responded, as I flipped open one cover. I whistled. "You came armed for bear, Miss Rodriguez. Holy water. Garlic. Two crosses. Is that a thirty-eight?"

Susan sniffed. "A forty-five."

"Garlic," Michael mused.

Above us on the stairs, Mavra hissed.

I glanced up at her. "The Black Court was nearly wiped out, Thomas said. I wonder if that's because they got a little too much publicity. Do you mind, Miss Rodriguez?" I reached into the basket and produced a nice, smelly clove of garlic, then idly flicked it through the air, toward Mavra.

The vampire didn't retreat—she simply blurred, and then stood several steps higher than she had been a moment before. The garlic clove bounced against the stairs where she'd been, and tumbled back down toward us. I bent down and picked it up.

"I'd say that's a big yes," I looked up at Mavra. "Is that what happened, hmm? Stoker published the *Big Book of Black Court Vampire Slaying*?"

Those drowned-blue lips peeled back from her yellowed teeth. No fangs. "It matters little. You are beings of paper and cotton. I could tear apart a dozen score of your kind."

"Unless they'd had an extra spicy pizza, I guess. Let's get out of here, guys," I started up the stairs.

Mavra spread her hands out to either side, and gathered darkness into her palms. That's the only way I can explain it. She spread out her hands, and blackness rushed in to fill them, gathering there in a writhing mass that shrouded her hands to the wrists. "Try to force your way past me with that weapon, wizard, and I will take it as an attack upon my person. And defend myself appropriately."

Cold washed over me. I extended my senses toward that darkness, warily. And it felt familiar. It felt like frozen chains and cruel twists of thorny wire. It felt empty and black, and like everything that magic isn't.

Mavra was our girl.

"Michael," I said, my voice strangled. Steel rasped as he drew one of his knives.

"Um," Susan said. "Why are her hands doing that? Can vampires do that?"

"Wizards can," I said. "Get behind me."

They both did. I lifted my hand, my face creasing in concentration. I reached out and tried to call in my will, my power. It felt shaky, uncertain, like a pump that has lost its prime. It came to me in dribs and drabs, bit by bit, stuttering like a nervous yokel. But I gathered it around my upraised hand, in a crystalline azure glow, beautiful and fragile, casting harsh shadows over Mavra's face.

Her dead man's eyes looked down at me, and I had an abrupt understanding of why Michael had called her "it." Mavra wasn't a woman anymore. Whatever she was, she wasn't a person. Not like I understood people, in any case. Those eyes pulled at mine, pulled at me with a kind of horrid fascination, the same sickly attraction that makes you want to see what's under the blanket in the morgue, to turn over the dead animal and see the corruption beneath. I fought and kept my eyes away from hers.

"Come, wizard," Mavra whispered, her face utterly without expression. "Let us test one another, thou and I."

I hardened the energy I held. I wouldn't have enough juice to take two shots at her. I'd have to take her out the first time or not at all. Cold radiated off of her, little wisps of steam curling up as ice crystals formed on the steps at her feet.

"But you won't take the first shot, will you." I didn't realize I'd spoken my thoughts aloud until after I had. "Because then you'd be breaking the truce."

I saw an emotion in that face, finally. Anger. "Strike, wizard. Or do not strike. And I will take the mortal of your choice from you. You cannot claim the protection of hospitality to them both."

"Get out of the way, Mavra. Or don't get out of the way. If you try to stop us from leaving, if you try to hurt anyone under my protection, you'll be dealing with a Wizard of the Council, a Knight of the Sword and a girl with a basket full of garlic and holy water. I don't care how big, bad, and ugly you are, there won't be anything left of you but a greasy spot on the floor."

"You dare," she whispered. She blurred and came at me. I took a breath, but she'd caught me on the exhale, and I had no time to unleash the crystalline blast I'd prepared.

Michael and Susan moved at the same time, hands thrusting past me. She held a wooden cross, simple and dark, while he clutched his dagger by its blade, the crusader-style hilt turned up into a cross as well. Both wood and steel flared with a cold white light as Mavra closed, and she slammed into that light as if it were a solid wall, the shadows in her hand scattering and falling away like sand between her fingers. We stood facing her, my azure power and two blazing crosses, which burned with a kind of purity and quiet power I had never seen before.

"Blood of the Dragon, that old Serpent," Michael said, quietly. "You and yours have no power here. Your threats are hollow, your words are empty of truth, just as your heart is empty of love, your body of life. Cease this now, before you tempt the wrath of the Almighty." He glanced aside at me and added, probably for my benefit, "Or before my friend Harry turns you

into a greasy spot on the floor.”

Mavra walked slowly back up the steps, tendons creaking. She bent and gathered up the skull she’d dropped at some point during the discussion. Then turned back to us, looking down with a quiet smile. “No matter,” she said. “The hour is up.”

“Hour?” Susan asked me, in a tight whisper. “What hour is she talking about, Dresden?”

“The hour of socialization,” Mavra whispered back. She continued up to the top of the stairs, and gently shut the doors leading out. They closed with an ominous boom.

All the lights went out. All but the blue nimbus around my hand, and the faded glory of the two crosses.

“Great,” I muttered.

Susan looked frightened, her expression hard and tightly controlled. “What happens now?” she whispered, her eyes sweeping around in the dark.

Laughter, gentle and mocking, quiet, hissing, thick with something wet and bubbling, came from all around us. When it comes to spooky laughter, it’s tough to beat vampires. You’re going to have to trust me on this one. They know it well.

Something glimmered in the dark, and Thomas and Justine appeared in the glow of the power gathered in my hand. He lifted both hands at once, and said, “Would you mind terribly if I stood with you?”

I glanced at Michael, who frowned. Then at Susan, who was looking at Thomas in all his next-to-naked glory . . . somewhat intently. I nudged her with my hip and she blinked and looked at me. “Oh. No, not at all. I guess.”

Thomas took Justine’s hand, and the two of them stood off to my right, where Michael kept a wary eye on them. “Thank you, wizard. I’m afraid I’m not well loved here.”

I glanced over at him. There was a mark on his neck, black and angry red, like a brand, in the shape of lovely, feminine lips. I would have thought it lipstick, but I sensed a faint odor of burnt meat in the air.

“What happened to your neck?”

His face paled a few shades. “Your godmother gave me a kiss.”

“Damn,” I said.

“Well put. Are you ready?”

“Ready for what?”

“For Court to be held. To be given our gifts.”

The tenuous hold I had on the power faltered, and I lowered my trembling hand, let go of the tension gently, before I lost control of it. The last light flickered and went out, leaving us in a darkness I wouldn’t have believed possible.

And then the darkness was shattered by light—the spotlights again, shining up on the dais, upon the throne there, and Bianca in her flaming dress upon it. Her mouth and throat and the rounded slopes of her breasts were smeared in streaks of fresh blood, her lips stained scarlet as she smiled, down at the darkness, at the dozens of pairs of glowing eyes in it, gazing up at the dais in adoration, or terror, or lust, or all three.

“All rise,” I whispered, as soft whispers and moans, rustled up out of the darkness around us, not at all human. “Vampire Court is now in session.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

Fear has a lot of flavors and textures. There's a sharp, silver fear that runs like lightning through your arms and legs, galvanizes you into action, power, motion. There's heavy, leaden fear that comes in ingots, piling up in your belly during the empty hours between midnight and morning, when everything is dark, every problem grows larger, and every wound and illness grows worse.

And there is coppery fear, drawn tight as the strings of a violin, quavering on one single note that cannot possibly be sustained for a single second longer—but goes on and on and on, the tension before the crash of cymbals, the brassy challenge of the horns, the threatening rumble of the kettledrums.

That's the kind of fear I felt. Horrible, clutching tension that left the coppery flavor of blood on my tongue. Fear of the creatures in the darkness around me, of my own weakness, the stolen power the Nightmare had torn from me. And fear for those around me, for the folk who didn't have the power I had. For Susan. For Michael. For all the young people now lying in the darkness, drugged and dying, or dead already, too stupid or too reckless to have avoided this night.

I knew what these things could do to them. They were predators, vicious destroyers. And they scared the living hell out of me.

Fear and anger always come hand in hand. Anger is my hiding place from fear, my shield and my sword against it. I waited for the anger to harden my resolve, put steel into my spine. I waited for the rush of outrage and strength, to feel the power of it coalesce around me like a cloud.

It never came. Just a hollow, fluttering sensation, beneath my belt buckle. For a moment, I felt the fangs of the shadow demon from my dream once again. I started shaking.

I looked around me. All around, the large courtyard was surrounded by high hedges, cut with crenelated squares, in imitation of castle walls. Trees rose up at the corners, trimmed to form the shapes of the guard towers. Small openings in the hedge led out into the darkness of the house's grounds, but were closed with iron-barred doors. The only other way out that I saw was at the head of the stairs, where Mavra leaned against the doors leading back into the manor and out front. She looked at me with those corpse-milk eyes and her lips cracked as she gave me a small, chill smile.

I gripped my cane with both hands. A sword cane, of course—one made in merry old Jack the Ripper England, not a knockoff from one of those men's magazines that sells lava lamps and laser pointers. Real steel. Clutching it didn't do much to make me feel better. I still shook.

Reason. Reason was my next line of defense. Fear is bred from ignorance. So knowledge is a weapon against it, and reason is the tool of knowledge. I turned back to the front as Bianca started speaking to the crowd, some vainglorious bullshit I didn't pay any attention to. Reason. Facts.

Fact one: Someone had engineered the uprising of the dead, the torment of the restless souls. Most likely Mavra had been the one to actually work the magic. The spiritual turbulence had allowed the Nightmare, the ghost of a demon Michael and I had slain, to cross over and come after me.

Fact two: The Nightmare was out to get me and Michael, personally, by taking shots at us and all of our friends. Mavra might even have been directing it, controlling it, using it as a cat's-paw. Optionally, Bianca could have been learning from Mavra, and used it herself. Either way, the results had been the same.

Fact three: It hadn't come after us at sundown, the way we'd half expected.

Fact four: I was surrounded by monsters, with only the strength of a centuries-old tradition keeping them from tearing my throat out. Still, it seemed to be holding. For now.

Unless . . .

"Hell's bells," I swore. "I hate it when I don't figure out the mystery that it's too late."

Dozens of gleaming red eyes turned toward me. Susan jabbed her elbow into my ribs. "Shut *up*, Dresden," she hissed. "You're making them look at us."

"Harry?" Michael whispered.

"That's their game," I said, quietly. "We've been set up."

Michael grunted. "What?"

"This whole thing," I said. The facts started falling into place, about two hours too late. "It's been a setup from the very beginning. The ghosts. The Nightmare demon. The attacks on our family and friends. All of it."

"For what?" Michael whispered. "What's it a setup for?"

"She meant to force us to show here from the very beginning. She's getting set to take a lesson from history," I said. "We have to get out of here."

"A lesson from history?" Michael said.

"Yeah. Remember what Vlad Tepesh did at his inauguration?"

"Oh Lord," Michael breathed. "Lord preserve us."

"I don't get it," Susan said, voice quiet. "What did this guy do?"

"He invited all of his political and personal enemies to a feast. Then he locked them in and burned them all alive. He wanted to start off his administration on a high note."

"I see," Susan said "And you think this is what Bianca's doing?"

"Lord preserve us," Michael murmured again.

"I'm told that He helps those who help themselves," I said. "We've got to get out of here."

Michael's armor clinked as he looked around. "They've blocked the exits."

"I know. How many of them can you handle without the Sword?"

"If it was only a question of holding them off . . ."

"But it isn't. We may have to punch a hole through them."

Michael shook his head. "I'm not sure. Maybe two or three, Lord willing."

I grimaced. Only one vampire guarded each way out, but there were another two or three dozen in the courtyard—not to mention my godmother or any of the other guests, like Mavra.

"We'll head for that gate," Michael said, nodding toward one of the gates in the hedges.

I shook my head. "We'd never make it."

"You will," he said. "I think I can manage that much."

"Ixnay on that upidstay anplay," I said. "We need an idea that gets us all out alive."

"No, Harry. I'm supposed to stand between people and the harm things like these offer. Even if it kills me. It's my job."

"You're supposed to have the Sword to help. It's my fault that it's gone, so until I get it back for you, ease off on the martyr throttle. I don't need anyone else on my conscience." Or, I thought, a vengeful Charity coming after me for getting her children's father killed. "There's got to be a way out of this."

"Let me get this straight," Susan said, quietly, as Bianca's speech went on. "We can't leave now because it would be an insult to the vampires."

"And all the excuse they would need to call for instant satisfaction."

"Instant satisfaction," Susan said. "What's that?"

"A duel to the death. Which means that one of them would tear my arms off and watch me bleed to death," I said. "If I'm lucky."

Susan swallowed. "I see. And what happens if we just wait around?"

"Bianca or one of the others finds a way to make us cross the line and throw the first punch. Then they kill us."

“And if we don’t throw the first punch?” Susan asked.

“I figure she’ll have a backup plan to wipe us out with, just in case.”

“Us?” Susan asked.

“I’m afraid so,” I looked at Michael. “We need a distraction. Something that will get them all looking the other way.”

He nodded and said, “You might be better for that than me, Harry.”

I took a breath and looked around to see what I had to work with. We didn’t have much time. Bianca was bringing her speech to a close.

“And so,” Bianca said, her voice carrying ably, “we stand at the dawn of a new age for our kind, the first acknowledged Court this far into the United States. No longer need we fear the wrath of our enemies. No longer shall we meekly bow our heads and offer our throats to those who claim power over us.” At this point, her dark eyes fastened directly upon me. “Finally, with the strength of the entire Court behind us, with the Lords of the Outer Night to empower us, we will face our enemies. And bring them to their knees.” Her smile widened, curving fangs, bloodred.

She trailed a fingertip across her throat, then lifted the blood to her mouth to suckle it from her finger. She shivered. “My dear subjects. Tonight, we have guests among us. Guests brought here to witness our ascension to real power. Please, my friends. Help me welcome them.”

The spotlights swiveled around. One of them splashed onto my little group; me, Michael, Susan, with Thomas and Justine just a little apart. A second illuminated Mavra, at the head of the stairs, in all her stark and unearthly pallor. A third settled upon my godmother, who glowed with beauty in its light, casually tossing her hair back and casting a glittering smile around the courtyard. At my godmother’s side was Mister Ferro, unlit cigarette still between his lips, smoke dribbling out his nostrils, looking martial and bland in his centurion gear, and utterly unconcerned with everything that was going on.

Applause, listless and somehow sinister, came out of the dark around us. There should be some kind of law. Anything that is so bad that its *applause* is sinister should be universally banned or something. Or maybe I was just that nervous. I coughed, and waved my hand politely.

“The Red Court would like to take this opportunity to present our guests with gifts at this time,” Bianca said, “so that they may know how very, very deeply we regard their goodwill. So, without further ado, Mister Ferro, would you honor me by stepping forward and accepting this token of the goodwill of myself and my Court.”

The spotlight followed Ferro as he walked forward. He reached the foot of the dais, inclined his head in a shallow but deliberate nod, then ascended to stand before Bianca. The vampire bowed to him in return, and made a gesture with one hand. One of the hooded figures behind her stepped forward, holding a small cask, about as big as a breadbox. The figure opened it, and the lights gleamed on something that sparkled and shone.

Ferro’s eyes glittered, and he stretched his hand down into the cask, sinking it to the wrist. A small smile stretched his lips, and he withdrew his hand with slow reluctance. “A fine offering,” he murmured. “Especially in this age of paupers. I thank you.”

He and Bianca exchanged bows where she dipped her head just a fraction lower than his own. Ferro closed the cask and took it beneath one arm, withdrawing a polite step before turning and descending the stairs.

Bianca smiled and faced the courtyard again. “Thomas, of House Raith, of our brothers and sisters in the White Court. Please step forward, that I may give you a token of our regard.”

I glanced over at Thomas. He took a slow breath and then said, to me, “Would you stand with Justine for me, while I’m up there.”

I glanced at the girl. She stood looking up at Thomas, one hand on his arm, her eyes worried, one sweet little lip between her teeth. She looked small, and young, and frightened. “Sure,” I said.

I held out a rather stiff arm. The girl’s hands clutched at my forearm, as Thomas turned with a brilliant smile, and swaggered into the spotlight and up the steps. She smelled delicious, like flowers or strawberries, with a low, heady musky smell underneath, sensual and distracting.

“She hates him,” Justine whispered. Her fingers tightened on my arm, through my sleeve. “They all hate him.”

I frowned and glanced down at the girl. Even worried, she was terribly beautiful, though her proximity to me lessened the impact of her outfit. Or lack thereof. I focused on her face and said, “Why do they hate him?”

She swallowed, then whispered, “Lord Raith is the highest Lord of the White Court. Bianca extended her invitation to him. The Lord sent Thomas in his stead. Thomas is his bastard son. Of the White Court, he is the lowest, the least regarded. His presence here is an insult to Bianca.”

I got over my surprise that the girl had spoken that many words all together. “Is there some kind of grudge between them?”

Justine nodded, as on the dais, Thomas and Bianca exchanged bows. She presented him with an envelope, speaking too quietly for the crowd to hear. He responded in kind. Justine said, “It’s me. It’s my fault. Bianca wanted me to come be hers. But Thomas found me first. She hasn’t forgiven him for it. She calls him a poacher.”

Which made sense, in a way. Bianca had risen to where she was by being Chicago’s most infamous Madame. Her Velvet Room provided the services of girls most men only got to daydream about, for a hefty price. She had enough dirt and political connections that she could protect herself from legal persecution, even without counting any of her vampire tricks, and she’d always had more than her share of those. Bianca would want someone like Justine—sweet looking, gorgeous, unconsciously sexy. Probably dress her up in a plaid skirt and a starched white shirt with—

Down, Harry. Hell’s bells. “Is that why you stay with him?” I asked her. “Because you feel that it’s your fault he has enemies?”

She looked up at me, for a moment, and then away, her expression more sad than anything. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Look. He’s a vampire. I know that they can affect people, but you could be in danger—”

“I don’t need rescuing, Mr. Dresden,” she said. Her lovely eyes sparkled with something hard, determined. “But there is something you can do for me.”

I got an edgy feeling and watched the girl warily. “Yeah? Like what?”

“You can take Thomas and me with you when you leave.”

“You guys showed up in a limo, and you want a ride home with me?”

“Don’t be coy, Mister Dresden,” she said. “I know what you and your friends were talking about.”

I felt my shoulders creak with tension. “You heard us. You aren’t human, either.”

“I’m very human, Mister Dresden. But I read lips. Will you help him or not?”

“It isn’t my business to protect him.”

Her soft mouth compressed into a hard line. “I’m making it your business.”

“Are you threatening me?”

Her face flushed as pink as the dress she was almost wearing, but she stood her ground. “We need friends, Mister Dresden. If you won’t help us, then I’ll try to buy Bianca’s favor by exposing your plans to escape and claiming that I heard you talking about killing her.”

“That’s a lie,” I hissed.

“It’s an exaggeration,” she said, her voice gentle. She lowered her eyes. “But it will be enough for her to call a duel. Or to force you to shed blood. And if that happens, you will die.” She took a breath. “I don’t want it to be like that. But if we don’t do something to protect ourselves, she’ll kill him. And make me into one of her pet whores.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen to you,” I said. The words poured out of my mouth before I’d had time to run them past the thinking part of my brain, but they had that solid, certain ring of truth. Oh, hell.

She looked up at me, uncertain again, catching one of those soft lips between her teeth. “Really?” she whispered. “You really mean that, don’t you.”

I grimaced. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess I do.”

“Then you’ll help me? You’ll help us?”

Michael, Susan, Justine, Thomas. Before long, I was going to need a secretary just to keep track of everyone I was supposed to be looking out for. “You. But Thomas can look out for himself.”

Justine’s eyes filled with tears. “Mister Dresden, please. If there’s anything I can do or say to convince you, I—”

"Dammit," I swore, earning a glare from Michael. "Dammit, dammit, dammit, woman. All women, for that matter." That earned me a glare from Susan. "He's a *vampire*, Justine.

He's *eating* you. Why should you care if something happens to him?"

"He's also a person, Mister Dresden," Justine said. "A person who's never done you any harm. Why shouldn't you care what happens to him?"

I hate it when a woman asks me for help and I witlessly decide to go ahead and give it, regardless of dozens of perfectly good reasons not to. I hate it when I get threatened and strong-armed into doing something stupid and risky. And I hate it when someone takes the moral high ground on me and wins.

Justine had just done all three, but I couldn't hold it against her. She just looked too sweet and helpless.

"All right," I said, against my better judgment. "All right, just stay close. You want my protection, then you do what I say, when I say, and maybe we can all get out of this alive."

She let out a little shudder that ran through her most attractively, and then she pressed herself against me. "Thank you," she murmured, nuzzling her face into the hollow of my throat so that little lightning-streaks of sensation flickered down my spine. "Thank you, Mister Dresden."

I coughed, uncomfortably, and firmly shoved back any ideas of extracting a more thorough thanks from her later, despite the clamoring of my sex drive. Probably the vampire venom, I reasoned, making me notice things like that even more. Sure. I pushed Justine gently away, and looked up to see Thomas returning from his visit to the dais, holding an envelope in his hand.

"Well," I greeted him quietly, as he returned. "That looks like it went well enough."

He gave me a rather pallid smile. "It . . . she can be rather frightening, when she wishes, can't she."

"Don't let her get to you," I advised him. "What did she give you?"

Thomas accepted Justine into the circle of his arm, and she pressed her body to his as though she wanted to wallow in him and leave one of those angel shapes. He lifted the envelope and said, "A condo in Hawaii. And a ticket there, on a late flight tonight. She suggested that I might want to leave Chicago. Permanently."

"One ticket," I said, and glanced at Justine.

"Mmmm."

"Friendly of her," I commented. "Look, Thomas. We both want to get out of here tonight. Just stay close to me and follow my lead. All right?"

He frowned a bit, and then shot Justine a reproachful look. "Justine. I asked you not to—"

"I had to," she said, her face earnest, frightened. "I had to do something to help you."

He coughed. "I apologize, Mister Dresden. I didn't want to involve anyone else in my problems."

I rubbed at the back of my neck. "It's okay. We can help each other, I guess."

Thomas closed his eyes for a moment. Then he said, very simply and very openly, "Thank you."

"Sheesh," I said. I glanced up at Bianca, who was in converse with one of the robed and hooded shadows. The pair of them vanished to the back of the dais while Bianca watched, and then returned, lugging something that evidently weighed a good deal. They settled the fairly large object, hidden beneath a dark red cloth, on the dais beside Bianca.

"Harry Dresden," Bianca purred. "Old and esteemed acquaintance, and wizard of the White Council. Please come forward so that I can give you some of what I've been longing to for so long."

I gulped, and shot a glance back at Michael and Susan. "Look sharp," I said. "If she's going to do something, I guess it will be now, when we're separated."

He put his hand on her shoulder, and said, "God go with you, Harry." Energy thrummed along my skin, and the nearest vampires shifted about uneasily and took a few steps away. He saw me notice, and gave me a small, sheepish smile.

"Be careful, Mister Dresden," Susan said.

I bobbed my eyebrows at them, nodded to Thomas and Justine, and then walked forward, my cane in one hand, my cheesy cape flowing in the night air as I mounted the stairs to the dais. A bit of sweat stung in the corner of my eye, smearing my makeup, probably. I ignored it, meeting Bianca's gaze as I came level with her.

Vampires don't have souls. She didn't have to fear my gaze. And she wasn't good enough to sucker me into her eyes. Or at least, she hadn't been, a couple years ago. She met my gaze, steady, her eyes dark and lovely and so very, very deep.

I took the better course of valor, and focused upon the tip of her perfectly upturned nose. I saw her breasts rise and fall in pleasure beneath the flames that gowned her, and she let out a small, purring sound of satisfaction. "Oh, Harry Dresden. I had looked forward to seeing you tonight. You are a very handsome man, after all. But you look utterly ridiculous."

"Thanks," I said. No one, except maybe the pair of robed attendants at the back of the dais, could hear us. "How did you plan on killing me?"

She fell quiet for a moment, thoughtful. Then she asked me, as she formally inclined her head, for the benefit of the crowd below, "Do you remember Paula, Mister Dresden?"

I returned the gesture, only more shallowly, just to throw the little zing of insult into it. "I remember. She was pretty. Polite. I didn't really get to meet her much."

"No. She was dead within an hour of you setting foot in my house."

"I thought she might have gone that way," I said.

"That you might have killed her, you mean?"

"Isn't my fault if you lost control and ate her, Bianca."

She smiled, teeth blinding white. "Oh, but it *was* your fault, Mister Dresden. You'd come to my house. Provoked me to near madness. Forced me to go along with you under threat of my destruction." She leaned forward, giving me a glimpse down the flame-dress. She was naked beneath. "Now I get to return the favor. I'm not someone you can simply walk over, slap around, whenever you have a need. Not anymore." She paused and then said, "In a way, I'm grateful to you, Dresden. If I hadn't wanted so very badly to kill you, I would never have amassed the power and the contacts that I have. I never would have been elevated to the Court." She gestured to the crowd of vampires below, the courtyard, the darkness. "In a way, all of this is your doing."

"That's a lie," I said, quiet. "I didn't make you rope Mavra into working for you. I didn't make you order her to torture those poor ghosts, stir up the Nevernever and bring Kravos's pet demon back across to send after a bunch of innocents while you tried to get to me."

Her smile widened. "Is *that* what you think happened? Oh, my, Mister Dresden. You have an unpleasant surprise awaiting you."

Anger made me lift my eyes to meet her gaze, gave me the strength not to get pulled in by it—no mistaking. She had grown stronger in the past couple of years. "Can we just get this over with."

"Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly," she murmured, but she reached out a hand and tugged on the dark red cloth, uncovering the object there. "For you, Mister Dresden. With all of my most fervent sincerities."

The cloth slid away from a white marble tombstone, set with a pentacle of gold in its center. Block letters carved into it read **HERE LIES HARRY DRESDEN**, above the pentacle. Below it, they read **HE DIED DOING THE RIGHT THING**. An envelope had been taped to the side of the tombstone.

"Do you like it?" Bianca purred. "It comes complete with your own plot at Graceland, near to dear little Inez. I'm sure you'll have ever so much to talk about. When your time comes, of course."

I looked from the tombstone back up to her. "Go ahead," I said. "Make your move."

She laughed, a rich sound that spilled back down into the crowd below. "Oh, Mister Dresden," she said, lowering her voice. "You really don't understand, do you. I can't openly strike you down. Regardless of what you may have done to me. But I can defend myself. I can stand by while my guests defend themselves. I can watch you die. And if things are hectic and confusing enough, and a few others die along with you, well. That's hardly to be blamed upon me."

"Thomas," I said.

"And his little whore. And the Knight, and your reporter friend. I'm going to enjoy the rest of the evening, Harry."

"My friends call me Harry," I said. "Not you."

She smiled, and said, "Revenge is like sex, Mister Dresden. It's best when it comes on slow, quiet, until it all seems inexorable."

“You know what they say about revenge. I hope you got a second tombstone, Bianca. For the other grave.”

My words stung her, and she stiffened. Then she beckoned the attendants forward, to lift my tombstone in their gloved hands and carry it back. “I’ll have it delivered to Graceland, Mister Dresden. They’ll have your bed all ready for you, before the sun rises.” She flicked her wrist at me, curt dismissal.

I bowed my head, a bare, stark motion, cold. “We’ll see.” How’s that for a comeback? Then I turned and descended the stairs, my legs shaking a little, my back rigid and straight.

“Harry,” Michael said, as I drew close. “What happened?”

I held up my hand and shook my head, trying to think. The trap was already closing around me. I could feel that much. But if I could figure out Bianca’s plan, see it coming, maybe I could think my way out ahead of her.

I trusted Michael and the others to keep an eye out for trouble while I furiously pondered, tried to work through Bianca’s logic. My godmother glided forward at Bianca’s bidding, and I paused for a moment, to glance up to the dais.

Bianca presented her with a small black case. Lea opened it, and a slow tremble ran down her body, made her flame-red hair shift and glisten. My godmother closed it again and said, “A princely gift. Happily, as is the custom of my people, I have brought a matter of equal worth, to exchange with you.”

Lea beckoned the attendant forward, and was given a long, dark case. She opened it, displaying it for a moment to Bianca, and then turned, showing it to the gathered Court.

Amoracchius. Michael’s sword. It lay gleaming in the dark box, casting back the ruddy light with a pure, argent radiance. Michael went stiff beside me, stifling a shout.

A murmur went up from the assembled vampires and sundry creatures. They recognized the sword as well. Lea basked in it for a moment, until she folded the case closed and passed it over to Bianca. Bianca settled it across her lap, and smiled down at me and, I thought, at Michael.

“A worthy reply to my gift,” Bianca said. “I thank you, Lady Leanandsidhe. Let Mavra of the Black Court come forward.”

My godmother retreated. Mavra glided out of the night and onto the dais.

“Mavra, you have been a most gracious and honorable guest in my house,” Bianca said. “And I trust that you have found your treatment here fair and equitable.”

Mavra bowed to Bianca, silent, her rheumy eyes gleaming, glancing down towards Michael.

“Oh, Jesus,” I whispered. “Son of a *bitch*.”

“He didn’t mean it, Lord,” Michael said. “Harry? What did you mean?”

I clenched my teeth, eyes flickering around. Everyone was watching me, all the vampires, Mister Ferro, everyone. They all knew what was coming. “The tombstone. It was written on my damned tombstone.”

Bianca watched the realization come over me, still smiling. “Then please, Mavra, accept these minor tokens of my goodwill, and with them my hopes that vengeance and prosperity will belong to you and yours.” She offered forth the case, containing the sword, which Mavra accepted. Bianca then beckoned to the background, and the attendants brought out another covered bundle.

The attendants jerked the cover off of the bundle—Lydia. Her dark, tousled hair had been trimmed into an elegant cut, and she wore a halter and shorts of black Lycra that emphasized her hips, the beauty of her pale limbs. Her eyes stared into the lights, glazed, drugged, and she sagged helplessly between the attendants.

“My God,” Susan said. “What are they going to do with that girl?”

Mavra turned to Lydia, reaching into the case as she did. “Sweet,” her hissing voice rasped. Her eyes went to Michael again. “Now to open my gift. It may tarnish the steel a bit, but I’m sure I’ll get over it.”

Michael drew in a sudden breath.

“What’s going on?” Susan blurted.

“The blood of innocents,” he snarled. “The Sword is vulnerable. She means to unmake it. Harry, we cannot allow it.”

All around me, vampires dropped their wineglasses, slid out of their jackets, bared their scarlet-smeared fangs in slow smiles to me. Bianca started laughing, up above me, as Mavra opened the case and withdrew *Amoracchius*. The sword seemed to almost chime with an angry sound as the vampire touched it, but Mavra only sneered down at the blade as she lifted the sword.

Thomas moved closer to us, pushing Justine behind him as he drew his sword. “Dresden,” he hissed. “Dresden, don’t be a fool. It’s only one life—one girl’s life and a sword balanced against all of us. If you act now, you condemn us all.”

“Harry?” Susan asked, her voice shaking.

Michael too turned to look at me, his expression grim. “Faith, Dresden. Not all is lost.”

All looked pretty damned lost to me. But I didn’t have to do anything. I didn’t have to lift a finger. All I had to do, to get out of here alive, was to sit still. To do nothing. All I had to do was stand here and watch while they murdered a girl who had come to me a few days before, begging me for protection. All I had to do was ignore her screams as Mavra gutted her. All I had to do was let the monsters destroy one of the major bastions standing against them. All I had to do was let Michael go to his death, claim the protection of the laws of hospitality upon Susan, and I could walk away.

Michael nodded at me, then drew both knives and turned toward the dais.

I closed my eyes. *God forgive me for what I’m about to do.*

Chapter Thirty

In games and history books and military science lectures, teachers and old warhorses and other scholarly types lay out diagrams and stand-up models in neat lines and rows. They show you, in a methodical order, how this division forced a hole in that line, or how these troops held their ground when all others broke.

But that's an illusion. A real struggle between combatants, whether they number dozens or thousands, is something inherently messy, fluid, difficult to follow. The illusion can show you the outcome, but it doesn't impress upon you the surge and press of bodies, the screams, the fear, the faltering rushes forward or away. Within the battle, everything is wild motion and sound and a blur of impressions that flash by almost before they have time to register. Instinct and reflex rule everything—there isn't time to think, and if there's a spare second or two, the only thought in your head is “How do I stay alive?” You're intensely aware of what is happening around you. It's an obscure kind of torture, an acute and temporary hell—because one way or another, it doesn't last long.

A tide of vampires came toward us. They rushed in, animal-swift, a blur of twisted, bulging faces and staring black eyes. Their jaws hung too far open, fangs bared, hissing and howling. One of them held a long spear and shoved it toward Thomas's pale belly. Justine screamed. Thomas swept the crystalline sword he bore down in an arc, parrying the spear's tip aside and cutting through the haft.

Undeterred, the spear-wielding vampire came on, and sank its fangs into Thomas's forearm. Thomas shoved the vamp back, but it held firm. Thomas switched tactics, abruptly lifting the vampire up and clear of the ground, and then rolled the sword's blade around its belly, splitting it open in a welter of gore. The vampire fell to the ground, a sound bubbling up from his throat that was one part fury and one part agony.

“Their bellies!” Thomas shouted. “Without the blood they're too weak to fight!”

Michael caught a descending machete's blade on the metal guard around his forearm, and whipped one of his knives across the belly of the vamp who held it. Blood splattered out of the vamp, and it went down in convulsions. “I know,” Michael snapped back, flashing Thomas an irritated look.

And then he was buried in a swarm of red-clad bodies.

“Michael!” I shouted. I tried to push toward him, but found myself jostled aside. I saw him struggle and drop to one knee, saw the vampires shoving knives at him, and fangs, teeth tearing and worrying, and if any of them were burning, like before, I couldn't see it.

Kyle Hamilton appeared, across the dogpile over the fallen knight. He bared his fangs at me, and lifted a semiautomatic, one of the expensive models. Gold-plated. “Fare thee well, Dresden.”

I lifted the cane, its runes shimmering blue and white, and snapped. “*Venteferro!*”

Chapter Thirty-one

The darkness swallowed me and kept me for a long time. There was nothing but silence where I drifted, nothing but endless night. I wasn't cold. I wasn't warm. I wasn't anything. No thought, no dreams, no anything.

It was too good to last.

The pain of the burns came to me first. Burns are the worst injuries in the world. I'd been scorched on my right arm and shoulder, and it throbbed with a dull persistence that dragged me out of the peace. All the other assorted scrapes and bruises and cuts came back to me. I felt like a collection of complaints and malfunctions. I ached everywhere.

Memory came through the haze next. I started remembering what had happened. The Nightmare. The vampire ball. The kids who had been seduced into being there.

And the fire.

Oh, God. What had I done?

I thought of the fire, towering up in walls of solid flame, reaching out with hungry arms to drag the vampires screaming back into the pyre I had made of the hedges and the trees.

Stars and stones. Those children had been helpless in that. In the fire and the smoke that I'd needed a major sidhe sorceress's assistance to escape. I had never stopped to think about that. I had never even considered the consequences of unleashing my power that way.

I opened my eyes. I lay in my bed in my room. I stumbled out of the bed and into my bathroom. Someone must have fed me soup at some point, because when I started throwing up, there was something left to come out.

Killed them. I killed those kids. My magic, the magic that was the energy of creation and life itself had reached out and burned them to death.

I threw up until my belly ached with the violence of it, wild grief running rampant over me. I struggled, but I couldn't force the images out of my head. Children burning. Justin burning. Magic defines a man. It comes from down deep inside you. You can't accomplish anything with magic that isn't in you, somewhere, to do.

And I had burned those children alive.

My power. My choice. My fault.

I sobbed.

I didn't come to myself until Michael came into the bathroom. By the time he did, I lay on my side, curled up tight, the water of the shower pouring down over me, the cold making me shiver. Everything hurt, inside and out. My face ached, from being twisted up so tightly. My throat had closed almost completely as I wept.

Michael picked me up as though I weighed no more than one of his children. He dried me with a towel and shoved me into my heavy robe. He had on clean clothes, a bandage on his wrist and another on his forehead. His eyes looked a little more sunken, as though short on sleep. But his hands were steady, his expression calm, confident.

I gathered myself again, very slowly. By the time he was finished, I lifted my eyes to his.

"How many?" I asked. "How many of them died?"

He understood. I saw the pain in his eyes. "After I got the pair of you out, I called the fire department and let them know that people needed a rescue. They got there pretty quickly, but—"

"How many, Michael?"

He drew in a slow breath. "Eleven bodies."

"Susan?" My voice shook.

He hesitated. "We don't know. Eleven was all they found. They're checking dental records. They said the heat was so intense that the bones hardly look human."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Hardly human. There were more kids than that there—"

"I know. But that's all they found. And they rescued a dozen more, alive."

"It's something, at least. What about the ones unaccounted for?"

"They were gone. Missing. They're . . . they're presumed dead."

I closed my eyes. Fire had to burn hot to reduce bones to ash. Had my spell been that powerful? Had it hidden most of the dead?

"I can't believe it," I said. "I can't believe I was so stupid."

"Harry," Michael said. He put his hand on my shoulder. "We've no way to know. We just don't. They could have been dead before the fires came. The vampires were feeding from them indiscriminately, where we couldn't see."

"I know," I said. "I know. God, I was so arrogant. Such an *idiot* to go walking in there like that."

"Harry—"

"And those poor, stupid kids paid the price. Dammit, Michael."

"A lot of the vampires didn't make it out, either, Harry."

"It isn't worth it. Not if it wiped out all the vamps in Chicago."

Michael fell quiet. We sat that way for a long time.

Finally, I asked him, "How long have I been out?"

"More than a day. You slept through last night and yesterday and most of tonight. The sun will rise soon."

"God," I said. I rubbed at my face.

I could hear Michael's frown. "I thought we'd lost you for a while. You wouldn't wake up. I was afraid to take you to the hospital. Any place where there'd be a record of you. The vampires could trace it."

"We need to call Murphy and tell her—"

"Murphy's still sleeping, Harry. I called Sergeant Stallings, last night, when I called the fire department. S.I. tried to take over the investigation, but someone up the line called the police department off of it altogether. Bianca has contacts in City Hall, I guess."

"They can't stop the missing persons investigations that are going to start cropping up as soon as people start missing those kids. But they can stick a bunch of things in the way of it. Crap."

"I know," Michael said. "I tried to find Susan, the girl Justine, and the sword, after. Nothing."

"We almost pulled it off. Sword and captives and all."

"I know."

I shook my head. "How's Charity? The baby?"

He looked down. "The baby—they still don't know about him. They can't find out what's wrong. They don't have any idea why he is getting weaker."

"I'm sorry. Is Charity—?"

"She's stuck in bed for a while, but she'll be fine. I called her yesterday."

"Called. You didn't go see her?"

"I guarded you," Michael said. "Father Forthill was with my family. And there are others who can watch them, when I'm away."

I winced. "She didn't like that, did she. That you stayed with me."

"She's not speaking to me."

"I'm sorry."

He nodded. "So am I."

"Help me up. I'm thirsty."

He did, and I only swayed a little as I stood. I tottered out into the living area of my apartment. "What about Lydia?" I asked.

Michael remained silent, and my eyes answered my own question a few seconds later. Lydia lay on the couch in my living room, under a ton and a half of blankets, curled up, her eyes closed and her mouth a little open.

"I recognize her," Michael said.

I frowned. "From where?"

"Kravos's lair. She was one of the kids they hauled away, early on."

I whistled. "She must have known him. Known what he was going to do, somehow."

"Try not to wake her up," Michael said, his voice soft. "She wouldn't sleep. I think they'd drugged her. She was panicky, gabbling. I just got her quieted down half an hour ago."

I frowned a little and went into the tiny kitchen. Michael followed. I got a Coke out of the icebox, thought better of it with my stomach the way it was, and fetched a glass of water instead. I drank unsteadily. "I've got hell to pay now, Michael."

He frowned at me. "How do you mean?"

"What you do comes back to you, Michael. You know that much. Roll a stone and it rolls back upon you. Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind."

Michael lifted his eyebrows. "I didn't realize you'd read much of the Bible."

"Proverbs always made a lot of sense to me," I said. "But with magic, things like that come a lot sharper and cleaner than with other things. I killed people. I burned them. It's going to come back to haunt me."

Michael frowned, and looked out at Lydia. "The Law of Three, eh?"

I shrugged.

"I thought you told me once that you didn't believe in that."

I drank more water. "I didn't. I don't. It's too much like justice. To believe that what you do with magic comes back to you threefold."

"You've changed your mind?"

"I don't know. All I know is that there's going to be justice, Michael. For those kids, for Susan, for what's happened to Charity and your son. If no one else is going to arrange it, I'll damn well do it myself." I grimaced. "I just hope that if I'm wrong, I can dodge karmic paybacks long enough to finish this."

"Harry, the ball was the whole point. It was Bianca's chance to put you down while staying within the terms of the Accords. She laid her trap and missed. Do you think she's going to keep pushing it?"

I gave him a look. "Of course. And so do you. Or you wouldn't have played watchdog here for the past day."

"Good point."

I raked my fingers through my hair, and reached for the Coke, my stomach be damned. "We just have to decide what our next move is going to be."

Michael shook his head. "I don't know. I need to be with Charity. And my son. If he's . . . if he's sick. He needs me near him."

I opened my mouth to object, but I couldn't. Michael had already risked his neck for me more than once. He'd given me a lot of good advice that I hadn't listened to. Especially about Susan. If I'd only paid more attention, told her what I felt, maybe . . .

I cut off that line of thought before the hysterical sob that rose in my throat became more than a blur of tears in my eyes. "All right," I said. "I . . . thank you. For your help."

He nodded, and looked down, as though ashamed. "Harry. I'm sorry. I've done all that I could. But I'm not as young as I used to be. And . . . I lost the sword. Maybe I'm not the one to hold it anymore after all. Maybe this is how He is telling me that I need to be at home now. Be there for my wife, my children."

"I know," I said. "It's all right. Do what you think is best."

He touched the bandage on his forehead, lightly. "If I had the sword, maybe I'd feel differently." He fell quiet.

"Go on," I said. "Look, I'll be all right, here. The Council will probably give me some help." If they didn't hear about the people who'd died in the fire, that is. If they heard about that, that I'd broken the First Law of Magic, they'd take my head off my neck faster than you could say "capital offense." "Just go, Michael. I'll take care of Lydia."

"All right," he said. "I'll . . ."

A thought occurred to me, and I didn't hear what Michael said next.

"Harry?" he asked. "Harry, are you all right?"

"I'm having a thought," I said. "I . . . something feels *off* about this to me. Doesn't it to you?"

He just blinked at me.

I shook my head. "I'll think about it. Make some notes. Try to sort this mess out." I started toward the door. "Come on. I'll let you out."

Michael followed me to the door, and I had my hand on the knob when the door abruptly rattled under several rapid blows that could only loosely be construed as knocking. I shot him a glance over my shoulder, and without a word, he retreated to the fireplace and picked up the poker that had been lying against some of the logs. The tip glowed orange-red.

When a fresh barrage hammered against my door, I jerked it open, slipping to one side.

A slender figure of medium height stumbled into the room. He wore a leather jacket, jeans, tennis shoes, and a Cubs ball cap. He carried a rifle case made of black plastic, and he smelled of sweat and feminine perfume.

"You," I snarled. I grabbed the man's shoulder before he could get his balance and spun his shoulders hard, sending him back against the wall. I drove my fist hard at his mouth, felt the bright *smack-thud* of impact on my knuckles. I grabbed the front of his jacket in both hands, and with a snarl hurled him away from the wall, to the floor of my living room.

Michael stepped forward, put his work boot on the back of the intruder's neck, and pressed the glowing tip of the poker close to his eyes.

Thomas released the rifle case and jerked his hands up, pale fingers spread. "Jesus!" he gasped. His full lower lip had split, and was smeared with something pale and pinkish, not much like human blood. I glanced down at my knuckles, and they were smeared with the same substance. It caught the light of the fire and refracted in an opalescent sheen. "Dresden," Thomas stammered. "Don't do anything hasty."

I reached down and plucked the hat off of his head, letting his dark hair spill out and down in an unkempt mane. "Hasty? Like, maybe, turn traitor on you all of a sudden and let a bunch of monsters eat your girlfriend?"

His eyes rolled back to Michael and then over to me. "God, wait. It wasn't like that. You didn't see all that happened afterwards. At least shut the door and listen to me."

I glanced over at the open doorway, and after a hesitation shut it. No sense in leaving my back open just to be contrary. "I don't want to listen to him, Michael."

"He's a vampire," Michael said. "And he betrayed us. He's probably come here to try to trick us again."

"You think we should kill him?"

"Before he hurts someone," Michael said. His tone was flat, disinterested. Scary, actually. I shivered a little, and drew my robe closed around me a little more tightly.

"Look, Thomas," I said. "I've had a really bad day, and I only woke up half an hour ago. You're adding to it."

"We're all having a bad day, Dresden," Thomas said. "Bianca's people were after me all day and all night, too. I just barely got here without getting myself torn to pieces."

"The night is young," I said. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kill you like the lying, treacherous vampire sleaze you are?"

"Because you can trust me," he said. "I want to help you."

I snorted. "Why the hell should I believe you?"

"You shouldn't," he said. "Don't. I'm a good liar. One of the best. I'm not asking you to believe me. Believe the circumstances. We have a common interest."

I scowled. "You're kidding me."

He shook his head, and offered me a wry smile. "I wish I was. I thought I would get the chance to help you out once Bianca had taken her eyes off me, but she double-crossed me."

"Well, Thomas. I don't know how new you are to all of this, but Bianca is what we colloquially refer to as a 'bad guy.' They do that. That's one way you can tell they're bad guys."

"God save me from idealists," Thomas muttered. Michael growled, and Thomas shot him a hopeful, puppy-like smile. "Look, both of you. They have Dresden's woman."

I took a step forward, my heart fluttering. "She's alive?"

"For now," Thomas said. "They've got Justine, too. I want her back. You want Susan back. I think we can make a deal. Work together. What do you say?"

Michael shook his head. "He's a liar, Harry. I can tell just by being this close to him."

"Yes, yes, yes," Thomas said. "I confess to it. But at the moment, it isn't a part of my agenda to lie to anyone. I just want her back."

"Justine?"

Thomas nodded.

"So he can keep on draining the life out of her," Michael said. "Harry, if we aren't going to kill him, let's at least put him out."

"If you do," Thomas said. "You'll be making a huge mistake. And I swear to you, by my own stunning good looks and towering ego, that I'm not lying to you."

"Okay," I said to Michael. "Kill him."

"Wait!" Thomas shouted. "Dresden, please. What do you want me to pay you? What do you want me to do? I don't have anywhere else to go."

I studied Thomas's expression. He looked weary, desperate, beneath the cool facade he was barely holding onto. And beneath the fear, he looked resigned. Determined.

"Okay," I said. "It's all right, Michael. Let him up."

Michael frowned. "You sure?"

I nodded. Michael fell back from Thomas, but he kept the poker gripped loosely in one hand.

Thomas sat up, running his fingers lightly over his throat, where Michael's boot had left a dark mark, and then touched his split lip, and winced. "Thank you," he said, quietly. "Look in the case."

I glanced at the black rifle case. "What's in it?"

"A deposit," he said. "A down payment, for your help."

I quirked an eyebrow and leaned over the case. I ran my fingertips lightly over it. There was no spiny buzz of energy around it to herald a sorcerous booby trap, but a good one would be hard to notice. There was something inside, though. Something that hummed quietly, a silent vibration of power that ran through the plastic and into my hand. A vibration I recognized.

I flicked open the latches on the rifle case, fumbling in my hurry, and swung it open.

Amoracchius lay gleaming against the grey foam inside the case, unmarked from the inferno at Bianca's town house.

"Michael," I said, quietly. I reached out and touched the blade's hilt, again. Still, it buzzed with that quiet, deep power, at once reassuring and intimidating. I withdrew my fingers.

Michael paced over to the case and leaned down, staring at the sword. His expression wavered and became difficult to read. His eyes filled with tears, and he reached a broad, scarred hand down to the weapon's hilt. He took it in hand and closed his eyes.

"It's all right," he said. "They didn't hurt it." He blinked his eyes open, and looked upwards. "I hear you."

I glanced up toward my ceiling and said, "I hope you meant that in a figurative sense. Because I didn't hear anything."

Michael smiled and shook his head. "I was weak for a while. The swords are a burden. A power, yes, but at a price. I thought that perhaps the loss of the sword was His way of telling me it was time to retire." He ran his other hand over the twisted metal nail set into the blade at the weapon's cross guard. "But there's still work to be done."

I glanced up, at Thomas. "You say they've got Susan and Justine, huh? Where?"

He licked his lips. "The town house," he said. "The fire ruined the back of the house, but only the exterior. The inside was fine, and the basement was untouched."

"All right," I said. "Talk."

Thomas did, laying out facts in rapid order. After the havoc of the fire, Bianca and the Court had retreated into the mansion. Bianca had ordered the other vampires to each carry one of the helpless mortals out. One of them had brought Susan. When the police and fire crews had arrived, most of the action was over, and the fire marshal had been worked up into a lather over the deaths. He'd gone inside to speak to Bianca, and come out calm and collected, and ordered everyone to pack up and leave, that he was satisfied that it had been a terrible accident and that everything was over.

After that, the vampires had been able to relax and enjoy their "guests."

"I think they're turning some of them," Thomas said. "Bianca has the authority to allow it, now. And they lost too many in the fight and the fire. I know Mavra took a couple and took them with her when she left."

"Left?" I asked.

Thomas nodded. "She skipped town just after sunset, word is. Couple of hungry new mouths to feed, you know?"

"And how do you know all of this, Thomas? The last I heard, Bianca's people were trying to kill you."

He shrugged. "There's more to a good liar than meets the eye, Dresden. I was able to keep an eye on things for a while."

"Okay," I said. "So they've got our people at the manor house. We just need to get inside, get them, and get out again."

Thomas shook his head. "We need something else. She's brought in mortal security. Guards with machine guns. It would be a slaughter."

"That's the spirit," I said, with a grim smile. "Where in the house are they keeping the captives?"

Thomas looked at me rather blankly for a moment. Then he shook his head. "I don't know."

"You've known everything so far," Michael said. "Why are you drying up on us now?"

Thomas gave the Knight a wary look. "I'm serious. I haven't seen any more of that house than you two."

Michael frowned. "Even if we do get in, we can't go blundering around checking every broom closet. We need to know about the inside of the house."

Thomas shrugged. "I'm sorry. I'm tapped."

I waved a hand. "Don't worry. We just need to talk to someone who *has* seen the inside of the house."

"Capture a prisoner?" Michael asked. "I don't know how much luck we'd have with that."

I shook my head, and glanced over at the sleeping figure of Lydia, who hadn't stirred in all that time. "We just need to talk to her. She was inside. She might have some useful insights for us, in any case. She's got a gift for it."

"Gift?"

"Cassandra's Tears. She can see bits of the future."

I got dressed, and we gave Lydia another hour or so. Thomas went into the bathroom to shower, while I sat out in the living room with Michael. "What I can't figure," I said, "is how we managed to get out of there so easily."

"You call that easy?" Michael said.

I grimaced. "Maybe. I would have expected them to come after us by now. Or to have sent the Nightmare to get us."

Michael frowned, rolling the hilt of the sword between his two hands as though it were a golf club. "I see what you mean." He was quiet for a minute, and then said, "You really think the girl will be of help?"

"I hope so."

At that moment, Lydia started coughing. I moved to her side, and helped her drink some water. She seemed groggy, though she started to stir. "Poor kid," I commented to Michael.

"At least she got a little sleep. I don't think she'd had any for days."

Michael's words froze me solid.

I started to push myself away from Lydia, but her fingers reached out and dug into the sweater I was wearing. I jerked against them, but she held me, easily, not at all moved. The pale girl opened her sunken eyes, and they were flooded with blood, all through the whites, scarlet. She smiled, slow and malicious. She spoke, and her voice came out in a low, harsh sound totally unlike her natural tones, alien and malevolent. "You should have kept her from sleeping. Or killed her before she woke."

Michael started to his feet. Lydia rose, and with one arm she lifted me clear off the ground, bloody eyes glaring up at me with wicked exultation. "I've waited long enough for this," the alien voice, that of the Nightmare, purred. "Goodbye, wizard." And the slender girl flung me like a baseball at the stone of my fireplace.

Some days, it just doesn't pay to get out of bed.

Chapter Thirty-two

I flailed my arms and legs and watched the fireplace get closer to breaking open my head. At the last second, I saw a blur of white and pink, and then I slammed into Thomas, driving him into the stones of the fireplace. He let out a grunt, and I bounced off of him, and back to the floor, momentarily breathless. I shoved myself up to my hands and knees and looked at him. He'd wrapped a pink bath towel around his hips, but either the sheer speed of his movement or else the impact had knocked it mostly askew. His ribs jutted out on one side, oddly misshapen.

Thomas looked up at me, his face twisted into a grimace. "I'll be all right," he said. "Look out."

I looked up to find Lydia stalking toward me. "Idiot," she seethed at Thomas. "What did you think you could accomplish? So be it. You just got added to the list."

Michael slipped in between the possessed girl and me, the sword glittering in the low light of the room. "That's far enough," he said. "Get back."

I struggled back to my feet, and wheezed, "Michael, be careful."

Lydia let out another twisted laugh, and leaned forward, pressing her sternum against *Amoracchius's* tip. "Oh yes, Sir Knight. Get back or what? You'll murder this poor child? I don't think so. I seem to remember, there was something about this sword not being able to draw innocent blood, wasn't there?"

Michael blinked, and darted a glance back at me. "What?"

I got to my feet. "This is really Lydia. It isn't a magical construct, like we saw before. The Nightmare is possessing her. Anything we do to Lydia's body, she's going to have to live with, later."

The girl ran a hand over her breasts, beneath the taut Lycra, licking her lips and staring at Michael with bloody eyes. "Yes. Just a sweet little innocent lamb, wandered astray. You wouldn't want to hurt her, would you, Knight?"

"Harry," Michael said, "how do we handle this?"

"You die," Lydia purred. She rushed Michael, one hand reaching out to strike the sword's blade aside.

When she rushed me, I just got grabbed. But Michael had training, experience. He let the sword fall to the floor and rolled back with Lydia's rush. He grabbed her forearms as she reached for his throat, whirled, and sent her tumbling into the couch, knocking it over backwards and sending her into a sprawl on the far side.

"Keep her busy!" I shouted to him. "I can get it out of her!" And then I rushed back into my bedroom, searching for the ingredients for an exorcism. My room was a mess. I scrambled through it, while out in the living room, Lydia screamed again. There was another thump, this one rattling the wall beside the bedroom door, and then the sounds of panting, scuffling.

"Hurry up, Harry!" Michael gasped. "She's strong!"

"I know, I know!" I jerked open the door to my closet and started knocking things off the shelves, rather than hunt through them.

Behind the spare cans of shaving cream, I located five trick birthday candles, the kind that you can't blow out, and a five-pound bag of salt. "Okay!" I called. "I'm coming!"

Michael and Lydia lay on the floor, his legs wrapped around hers, while his arms pinned hers back behind her in some kind of modified full Nelson hold.

"Hold her there!" I shouted. I rushed in a circle around them, shoving back a chair and a footrest, kicking rugs and carpets aside, finally jerking the last one out from beneath Michael. Lydia fought him, twisting like an eel and screaming at the top of her lungs.

I tore open the salt and ran about the pair of them, dumping it out into a white mound in a circle. Then I ran about again, setting the candles down, piling up enough salt around them to keep them from being turned over. Lydia saw what I was doing and screamed again, redoubling her efforts.

"*Flickum bicus!*" I shouted, shoving a hurried effort of will into the little spell. The effort made me dizzy for a moment, but the candles burst to light, the circle of candles and salt gathering power.

I rose, reaching out my right hand and feeding more energy into the circle, setting it up in a spinning vortex winding about the three beings inside it—Lydia, Michael, and the Nightmare. Energy gathered in the circle, spinning around, whirling magic down into the earth, grounding and dispersing it. I could almost see the Nightmare clutching tighter to Lydia, holding on. All I needed was the right move to stun the Nightmare, to lock it up for a second, so that the exorcism could sweep it away.

"Azorthraga!" I shouted, bellowing out the demon's name. "Azorthraga! Azorthraga!" I stretched out my right hand again, concentrating fiercely. "Begone!"

Energy rushed out of my body as I completed the spell, swept toward the Nightmare within Lydia like a wave lifting a sleeping seal off a rock—

—and passed over, leaving it untouched.

Lydia began to laugh wildly, and managed to catch one of Michael's hands in hers. She gave a twist, and bones snapped with sharp pops and crackles. Michael let out an agonized scream, twisting and jerking. He knocked the circle of salt askew, and Lydia escaped him, rising to face me.

"Such a *fool*, wizard," she said. I didn't banter. I didn't even stand there, stunned that my spell had failed so miserably. I wound back a hand and threw a punch at her as hard as I could, hoping to stun the body the demon was riding in, to keep it from reacting.

The possessed Lydia glided from the path of my punch, caught my wrist, and dumped me onto my back. I started to push myself up, but she threw herself astride me, and slammed my head back against the floor, twice. I saw stars.

Lydia stretched above me, purring, and thrusting her hips down against mine. I tried to escape during the moment of gloating, but my arms and legs just didn't respond. She reached down, laying both of her hands almost delicately on my throat, and murmured, "Such a shame. All this time, and you didn't even know who it was after you. You didn't even know who else wanted revenge."

"I guess sometimes you find out the hard way," I slurred.

"Sometimes," Lydia agreed, smiling And then her hands closed over my throat, and I didn't have any more air.

Sometimes, when you're facing death, it feels like everything slows down. Everything stands out sharply in detail, almost freezes. You can see it all, feel it all, as though your brain has decided, in sheer defiance, to seize the last few moments of life and to squeeze them for every bit of living left.

My brain did that, but instead of showing me my trashed apartment and how I really needed a new coat of paint on the ceiling, it started frantically shoving puzzle pieces together. Lydia. The shadow demon. Mavra. The torment spells. Bianca.

One thing stood out in my mind, a piece that didn't fit anywhere. Susan had been gone for a day or two, where I had barely been able to talk to her. She'd said she was working on something. That something was happening. It fit, somehow, somewhere.

Chapter Thirty-three

It only takes a couple of these rough little episodes of life to teach a man a certain amount of cynicism. Once a rogue wizard or three has tried to end your life, or some berserk hexenwolves have worked really hard to have your throat torn out, you start to expect the worst. In fact, if the worst doesn't happen, you find yourself somewhat disappointed.

So really, it was just as well that Godmother had caught up to me, in spite of my best efforts to avoid her. I'd hate to find out that the universe really wasn't conspiring against me. It would jerk the rug out from under my persecution complex.

Therefore, working on the assumption that some sadistic higher power would make sure my evening got as complicated as it possibly could, I had formed a plan.

I jerked the lariat from about my throat and croaked, "Thomas, Michael. Now."

The pair of them produced small cardboard boxes from their pockets, palm-sized and almost square. With a shake, Michael cast the contents of the first box forward, slewing the box left and right, like a man scattering seeds. Thomas followed his lead, on the other side of my body, so that objects began to rain down atop and nearby me.

The faerie hounds let out startled yelps and leapt away. My godmother's horse let out a scream and pranced back several steps, putting distance between us.

I scrunched up my face and did my best to shield my eyes from the scattering nails. They fell over me in a sharp-toothed shower, prickling as they struck, and settled around me. Godmother had to let out on the rope that had looped about my throat as her horse backed away, giving me a bit of slack.

"Iron," hissed my godmother. Her lovely face turned livid, furious. "You *dare* defile the Awnsidhe soil with iron! The Queen will rip your eyes from your skull!"

"No," Thomas said. "They're aluminum. No iron content. That's a lovely horse you have. What's its name?"

Lea's eyes flashed to Thomas, and then at the nails all over the ground. While she did, I dipped a hand into my pocket, palmed my contingency plan, and popped it into my mouth. Two or three chews and a swallow and I was finished.

I tried not to let the abrupt surge of terror show.

"Not steel?" Lea said. She beckoned sharply at the ground, and one of the nails leapt up to her hand. She gripped it, frowning, her expression abruptly wary. "What is the meaning of this?"

"It's meant to be a distraction, Godmother," I said. I coughed, and patted my chest. "I just had to eat something."

Lea laid a hand on her horse's neck, and the savage beast calmed. One of the shadowy hounds nosed forward, nudging one of the nails with its snout. Lea gave the rope a little jerk, taking up the slack again, and said, "It will do you no good, wizard. You cannot escape this rope. It is bound to hold you. You cannot escape my power. Not here, not in Faerie. I am too strong for you."

"All true," I agreed, and got to my feet. "So let's get cracking. Turn me into a doggie and show me which trees I can pee on."

Lea stared at me as though I'd gone mad, her expression wary.

I took hold of the rope and shook it impatiently. "Come on, Godmother. Make with the magic already. Do I get to pick my color? I don't think I want to be that charcoal grey. Maybe you could do a nice sandy pelt for me. Or oh, I know, winter white. With blue eyes, I always wanted blue eyes, and—"

"Be silent!" Lea snarled, and shook the rope. There was a sharp, stinging sensation, and my tongue literally stuck to the roof of my mouth. I tried to keep talking, but it made my throat buzz as though bees were in it, angry, stinging. I kept silent.

"Well," Thomas said. "I'd like to see this. I've never seen an external transformation before. Do proceed, madame." He waved his hand impatiently. "Dog him, already!"

"This is a trick," Lea hissed. "It will avail you naught, wizard. No matter what hidden powers your friends are preparing to cast at me—"

"We're not," Michael put in. "I swear it on the Blood of Christ."

Lea sucked in a breath, as though the words had brought a sudden chill over her. She rode the horse up to me, close, so that the animal's shoulder pressed against mine. She reeled in on the braided leather of the lariat as she did, until she held it by a length of no more than six inches, jerking hard against my throat, hauling me almost off balance. She leaned down close to me and whispered, "Tell me, wizard. What are you hiding from me?"

My tongue loosened again, and I cleared my throat. "Oh. Nothing much. I just wanted a bite to eat before we left."

"A bite," Lea murmured. Then she jerked me over toward her and leaned down close, dainty nostrils flaring. She inhaled, slow, the silken mass of her hair brushing against my cheek, her mouth almost nuzzling mine.

I watched her face, her expression changing to slow surprise. I spoke to her in a quiet voice. "You recognize the smell, yes?"

The whites showed around her emerald eyes as they opened wider. "Destroying Angel," she whispered. "You have taken death, Harry Dresden."

"Yep," I agreed. "Toadstool. *Amanita virosa*. Whatever. The amantin toxin is going to show up in my blood in about two minutes. After that, it will start tearing apart my kidneys and liver. A few hours from now, I'll collapse, and if I don't die then, then I'll apparently recover for a few days while my innards fall apart, and then drop into arrest and die." I smiled. "There's no specific antidote for it. And I kind of doubt even you could use magic to put me back together again. Stitching closed a wound is a lot different from major internal transmutation. So, shall we?" I started walking in the direction Lea had come from. "You should be able to enjoy tormenting me for a few hours before I start vomiting blood and die."

She jerked the lariat tight, halting me. "This is a trick," she hissed. "You are lying to me."

I looked up at her with a lopsided grin. "Now, Godmother," I said. "You know I'm a terrible liar. Do you think I could really lie to you? Do you not smell it yourself?"

She stared at me, her face twisting slowly into an expression of horror. "Merciless winds," she breathed. "You have gone mad."

"Not mad," I assured her. "I know precisely what I'm doing." I turned to glance back at the bridge. "Goodbye, Michael. Goodbye, Thomas."

"Harry," Michael said. "Are you sure we shouldn't—"

"Shhh," I said, shooting him a look. "Ixnay."

Lea's eyes flickered back and forth between us. "What?" she demanded. "What is it?"

I rolled my eyes, and gestured at Michael.

"Well," Michael said. "As it happens, I have something here that might help."

"Something?" Lea demanded. "What?"

Michael reached into the pocket of his jacket and produced a small vial, capped at one end. "It's extract of St. Mary's Thistle," he said. "They use it in a lot of hospitals in Europe, for mushroom poisoning. Theoretically, it should do quite a bit to help a poisoning victim survive. Provided it's taken in time, of course."

Lea's eyes narrowed. "Give it to me. Now."

I *tsked*. "Godmother. As your faithful pet and companion, I feel I should warn you about how *dangerous* it is for one of the high sidhe to accept gifts. It could bind you to the giver if you don't return a gift in kind."

Lea's face slowly flushed scarlet, sweeping up from the creamy skin of her collarbones and throat over her chin and cheeks and up into her hair. "So," she said. "You would drive a bargain with me. You would take deadly toadstool to force me to release you."

I lifted my eyebrows and nodded, with a smile. "Essentially, yes. You see, I figure it's like this. You want me alive. I'm not of any use to you dead. And you won't be able to undo the poisoning with magic."

"I own you," she snarled. "You are mine now."

"Beg to differ," I said. "I'm yours for the next couple of days. After that, I'm dead, and I won't be doing you any more good."

"No," she said. "I will not set you free in exchange for this potion. I too can find the thistle."

"Maybe," I admitted. "Maybe you can even do it in time. Maybe not. Either way, without a trip to the hospital, there's not much chance of me living, even with the extract. And none at all, really, if I don't get it soon."

"I will not trade you away! You have given yourself to me!"

Michael shrugged one shoulder. "I believe that you wrought a bargain with a foolish young man caught in the heat of the moment. But we aren't asking you to undo it altogether."

Lea frowned. "No?"

"Naturally not," Thomas said. "The extract only offers Harry a chance at life. That's all we'd ask from you. You'd be obliged to let him go—and bound for a year and a day to do no harm to him or his freedom so long as he remains in the mortal world."

"That's the deal," I said. "As a faithful pet, I should point something out: If I die, you never get me, Godmother. If you let me go now, you can always give it a shot another night. It isn't as though you have a limited number of them, is it. You can afford to be patient."

Lea fell silent, staring at me. The night fell silent as well. We all waited, saying nothing. The quiet panic I already felt, after eating the toadstool, danced about my belly, making it twitch and jerk.

"Why?" she said, finally, her voice very quiet, pitched only for me. "Why would you do this to yourself, Harry? I don't understand."

"I didn't think you would," I said. "There are people who need me. People who are in danger because of me. I have to help them."

"You cannot help them if you are dead."

"Nor if I am taken by you."

"You would give your own life in place of theirs?" she asked, her tone incredulous.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because no one else can do this. They need me. I owe it to them."

"Owe them your life," Lea mused. "You are mad, Harry Dresden. Perhaps it comes of your mother."

I frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Lea shrugged. "She spoke as you do. Near the end." She lifted her eyes to Michael and straightened on the horse. "A dangerous play, you made tonight, wizard. A bold play. You cut the traditions of my people very close to the bone. I accept your bargain."

And then, with a casual flick, she removed the lariat from me. I stumbled back, away from her, gathered up my fallen staff and rod, and Bob in his net sack, and made my way to the bridge. Once there, Michael gave me the vial. I unstopped it and drank. The liquid within tasted gritty, a little bitter. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, after swallowing it down.

"Harry," Michael said, watching Lea. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"If I get to the hospital soon," I said. "I've got somewhere between six and eighteen hours. Maybe a little longer. I drank all that pink stuff before we left to line my stomach. It might slow down the rate of digestion on the mushroom, give the extract a chance to beat it to my guts."

"I don't like this," Michael muttered.

"Hey. I'm the one who ate the deadly poison, man. I don't much care for it myself."

Thomas blinked at me. "You mean, you were telling her the truth?"

I glanced at him, nodding. "Yeah. Look, I figure we'll be in there and out again in an hour, tops. Or else we'll be dead. Either way, it will happen in plenty of time before the first round of symptoms sets in."

Thomas just stared at me for a moment. "I thought you were lying," he said. "Bluffing."

"I don't bluff if I can help it. I'm not too good at it."

"So you really could die. Your godmother is right, you know. You are mad as a hatter. Nutty as a fruitcake."

"Crazy like a fox," I said. "All right. Bob, wake up." I shook the skull, and its empty eye sockets kindled with orange-red lights, somehow too far back inside them.

"Harry?" Bob said, surprised. "You're alive."

"For a while," I said. I explained to him how we'd gotten me away from my godmother.

"Wow," Bob said. "You're dying. What a great plan."

I grimaced. "The hospital should be able to take care of it."

"Sure, sure. In some places, the survival rate is as high as fifty percent, in the case of amantin poisoning."

"I took extract of milk thistle," I said, a little defensive.

Bob coughed, delicately. "I hope you got the dosage right, or it could do more harm than good. Now, if you'd come to me about this to begin with—"

"Harry," Michael said, sharply. "Look."

I turned to look at my godmother, who had ridden a little way off and sat still upon her dark steed. She raised in her hand something dark and gleaming, maybe a knife. She waved it to the four corners, north, west, south, east. She said something in a twisting, slippery tongue, and the trees began to moan as the wind rose, washing through them. Power washed out from the sidhe sorceress, from the dark knife in her hand, and raised the hairs on my arms, the nape of my neck.

"Wizard!" she called to me. "You have made bargain with me tonight. I will not seek you. But you have made no such bargain with others." She threw back her head in a long, loud cry, somehow terrifying and beautiful at once. It echoed over the rolling land, and then was answered. More sounds came drifting back, high-pitched howls, whistling shrieks, and deep, throaty coughing roars.

"Many there are who owe me," Lea sneered. "I will not be cheated of you. You have had the potion. You would not have placed your life in such jeopardy without a cure to hand. I will raise no hand against you—but they will bring you to me. One way or another, Harry Dresden, you will be mine this night."

The wind continued to rise, and overhead sudden clouds began to blot out the stars. The howls and calls came closer, carried on the rising wind.

"Shit," I said. "Bob, we have to get out of here. Now."

"It's still a pretty good walk to the spot you showed me on the map," Bob said. "A mile, maybe two, in subjective terms."

"Two miles," Michael noted, clinically. "I can't run that far. Not with my ribs like they are."

"And I can't carry you," Thomas said. "I'm amazing and studly, but I have limits. Let's go, Harry. It's just me and you."

My mind raced, and I struggled to put together a plan. Michael couldn't keep up. He had managed the sprint before, but his face looked a little greyish, now, and he carried himself stiffly, as though in pain. I trusted Michael. I trusted him at my side, and at my back. I trusted him to be able to take care of himself.

But alone, against a wrathful faerie posse, how would he do? I couldn't be sure—even with the sword, he was still a man. He could still lose his life. And I didn't want another life on my conscience.

I glanced over at Thomas. The handsome vampire managed to wear my castoff clothes and make them look like some kind of fashion statement. Slouch nouveau. He returned my glance with a perfect, shining smile, and I thought about what he had said, about what a good liar he was. Thomas had sided with me. Mostly. He'd been friendly enough. He even, apparently, had every reason to want to help me and work with me to get Justine back.

Unless he was lying to me. Unless she hadn't been taken at all.

I couldn't trust him.

"The two of you are staying here," I said. "Hold the bridge. You won't have to do it for long. Just slow them down. Make them go around."

"Oooo," Bob said. "Good plan. That should make it a real pain for them, Harry. I mean, until they kill Michael and Thomas and come after you. But that could take minutes! Hours, even!"

I glanced at the skull, and then at Michael. He shot Thomas a look, and then nodded to me.

"If there's trouble, you'll need me to protect you," Thomas objected.

"I can watch out for myself," I told him. "Look, this whole plan is based on surprise and speed and quiet. I can be quiet better alone. If it turns out that fighting has to be done, one or two people wouldn't make a difference. If we have to fight, this whole thing is over."

Thomas grimaced. "So you want us to stay here and die for you, is that it?"

I glared. "Hold the bridge until I can make it out of the Nevernever. After that, they shouldn't have any reason to come after you."

The wind rose to a howl, and shapes began to crest the top of the hill with the dolmens, dark things, moving swift and close to the ground.

"Harry, go," Michael said. He took *Amoracchius* into his hands. "Don't worry. We'll keep them off of your back."

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather I come with you?" Thomas asked, and took a step toward me. The shining steel of Michael's sword abruptly dropped in front of Thomas, the sharp edge of it pressing against his belly.

"I'm sure I'd rather not leave him alone with you, vampire," Michael said, his tone polite. "Do I make myself clear?"

"As water," Thomas said, sourly. He glanced at me and said, "You'd better not leave her there, Dresden. Or get killed."

"I won't," I said. "Especially that second part."

And then the first monstrous thing, like a mountain lion made all of shadows, bounded past Lea, and a set of dark talons flashed toward me. Thomas shoved me out of the way of the strike, crying out as the thing tore into his arm. Michael shouted in Latin, and his sword flared into argent light, cutting the vaguely catlike beast and dropping it into two squirming, struggling halves to the floor of the bridge.

"Go!" Michael roared. "God go with you!"

I ran.

The sounds of fighting died behind me, until I could only hear my own laboring breaths. The Nevernever changed, from sculpted, faerie-tale wilderness to dark, close forest, with cobwebs hanging down across a narrow trail through glowering trees. Eyes flashed in the shadows, things that never quite could be clearly seen, and I stumbled on.

"There!" Bob called. His orange eyelights swung to shine upon the split trunk of a dead, hollow tree. "Open a way there, and it will take us through!"

I grunted, and came to a halt, gasping. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes!" Bob said. "Hurry! Some of the Awnsidhe will be here at any moment!"

I cast a fearful glance behind me, and then started gathering in my will. It hurt to do. I felt so weak. The poison in my belly hadn't started tearing my body apart yet, but I almost thought that I could feel it stirring, moving, licking its chops and eyeing my organs with malevolent glee. I shoved all of that out of my thoughts, and forced myself to breathe steadily, to gather in my strength and reach out to part the curtain between worlds.

"Uh, Harry," Bob said suddenly. "Wait a minute."

Behind me, something broke a branch. There was a swift, rushing sound, of something moving toward me. I ignored it and reached out a hand, sinking my fingers into the friable border substance of the Nevernever.

"Harry!" Bob said. "I really think you should hear this!"

"Not now," I muttered.

The rushing noise grew closer, the rattle of undergrowth shunted aside by something large. Behind me, a warbling bellow shook the ground. Holy brillig and slithy toves, Batman.

"*Aparturum!*" I shouted, thrusting out with my will and opening a way. The rent in reality shone with dim light.

I threw myself forward into it, willing the way closed behind me. Something snagged at one corner of my leather duster, but with a jerk I was free of it and through.

I tumbled forward, onto the floor, the smell of autumn air and damp stone all around me. My heart thudded painfully with the effort of both the running and the spell. I lifted my head to look around me and get my bearings.

Bob had been good to his word. He had brought me out of the Nevernever right into Bianca's mansion. I found myself on the floor at the head of a staircase down, away from the front doors and the main hall.

I also found myself surrounded by a ring of vampires, all of them in their inhuman forms, the flesh masks gone. There had to be a dozen of them there, dark eyes glittering, their noses snuffling, drool spattering out and dripping from their bared fangs to the floor while their talons clawed at the air or ran lightly over their flabby black bodies. Some of them showed burns on their rubbery hide, patches of shrunken, wrinkled, scar-like tissue.

I didn't move. Anything, I sensed, would have set them off. Any motion, any move to flee or fight or escape would have ignited a frenzy, with myself on the receiving end.

While I watched, frozen, Bianca came up the stairs dressed in a white silk nightgown that whispered around her shapely calves. She carried a single candle that bathed her in soft radiance. She smiled at me, very slowly, very sweetly, and the bottom dropped out of my stomach.

"Well," she purred. "Harry Dresden. Such a pleasant surprise to have you visit."

"I tried to tell you," Bob said, his voice miserable. "The curtain felt weak there. Like someone had just gone through it. Like they had been watching this side."

"Of course," Bianca murmured. "A guard for every door. Did you think me a fool, Mister Dresden?"

I glowered at her, despairing. There wasn't anything I could say. I saved my breath, and began to draw in my will, to throw everything I had left into taking that smug smile off of her pretty, false face.

"Dears," Bianca purred, watching me. "Bring him down."

They hit me so fast that I never saw them move. There simply came a hideous, rushing force. I have memories of being passed from claw to claw, thrown, carried into the air, toyed with. Snuffling, squashed snouts, and staring black eyes, and hissing, terrible laughter.

I was driven down, carried, tossed about, everything torn from me, Bob disappearing without a sound. They pressed me down while I struggled and screamed, all useless, my mind too full of terror to focus, to defend myself.

And there, in the dark, they tore my clothes from me. I felt Bianca press her naked flesh to me, a heated, sinuous dream-body that unraveled into a nightmare. I felt the skin split and burst apart around her true form. The sweetness of her perfume gave way to a rotten-fruit reek. Her purring voice became a whining hiss.

And their tongues. Soft, intimate, warm, moist. Pleasure that struck me like hammers while I tried to scream against it. Chemical pleasure, animal sensation, heartless and cold, uncaring of my horror, revulsion, despair.

Darkness. Horrible, thick, sensual darkness.

Then pain.

Then nothing.

Chapter Thirty-four

I have very few memories of my father. I was about six years old when he died. What I do remember is a careworn, slightly stoop-shouldered man with kind eyes and strong hands. He was a magician—not a wizard, a stage magician. A good one. He never made it big, though. He spent too much time performing for children’s hospitals and orphanages to pull down much money. He and I and his little show roamed around the country. The memories of the first several years of my life are of my bed in the backseat of the station wagon, going to sleep to the whisper of asphalt beneath the tires, secure in the knowledge that my father was awake, driving the car, and there to take care of me.

The nightmares hadn’t started until just before his death. I don’t remember them, specifically—but I remember waking up, screaming in a child’s high-pitched shriek of terror. I’d scream in the darkness, scrambling to squeeze into the smallest space I could find. My father would come looking for me, and find me, and pull me into his lap. He would hold me, and make me warm, and soon I would fall asleep again, safe, secure.

“The monsters can’t get you here, Harry,” he used to say. “They can’t get you.”

He’d been right.

Until now. Until tonight.

The monsters got me.

I don’t know where real life left off and the nightmares began, but I thrashed myself awake, screaming a scratchy, hollow scream that made little more noise than a whimper. I screamed until I ran out of breath, and then all I could do was sob.

I lay there, naked, undone. No one came to hold me. No one came to make it all better. No one had, really, since my dad died.

Breathing first, then. I forced myself to control it, to stop the racking sobs and to draw in slow, steady breaths. Next came the terror. The pain. Humiliation. More than anything, I wanted to crawl into a hole and pull it in after me. I wanted to be not.

But I wasn’t not. I hurt too much. I was very painfully, very acutely, very much alive.

The burn still hurt the most, but the sweeping nausea running through me came in a photo finish second. My hands told me that I was lying upon a floor, but the rest of me thought I had been strapped into a giant gyroscope. I ached. My throat felt tight, and burned, as though seared by some hot liquid or chemical. I didn’t want to dwell too long on that.

I tested my limbs, and found them all present and functional. My belly twisted and roiled, and for a moment locked up tight, jerking me into a tight curl around it.

The sweat on my naked body went cold. The mushroom. The poison. Six to eighteen hours. Maybe a little more.

I felt thick, dry mouthed, fuzzy with the same aftereffects of the vampire venom that I’d felt before.

For a minute, I stopped fighting. I just lay there, weak and thirsty and hurting and sick, curled up into a ball. I would have started crying again if I’d had that much feeling left in me. I would have wept and waited to die.

Instead, some merciless, steady voice in my head drove me to open my eyes. I hesitated, afraid. I didn’t want to open my eyes and see nothing. I didn’t want to find myself in that same darkness. That darkness, with hissing things all around me. Maybe there, still, just waiting for me to awaken so that they—

Panic swept me for a moment, and gave me enough strength to shiver and push myself up into a sitting position. I took a deep breath, and opened my eyes.

I could see. Light seared at my eyes, a thin line of it surrounding a tall rectangle—a doorway. I had to squint for a moment, so used were my eyes to the darkness.

I looked around the room, wary. It wasn’t big. Maybe twelve by twelve, or a little more. I lay in a corner. The smell was violently rotten. My jailors, apparently, had no problems with letting me lie in my own filth. Some of it had crusted onto me, onto my legs and arms. Vomit, I guessed. There was blood in it. An early symptom of the mushroom poisoning.

There were other shapes in the dimness. A lump of cloth in one corner, like a pile of dirty laundry. Several laundry baskets, as well. A washer and dryer, on the far wall from the door.

And Justine, dressed in as little as I, curled up and sitting with her back to the wall, her arms wrapped loosely around her drawn-up knees, watching me with dark, feverish eyes.

“You’re awake,” Justine said. “I didn’t think you’d ever wake up.”

Gone was the glamorous girl I’d seen at the ball. Her hair hung lank and greasy. Her pale body looked lean, almost gaunt, and her limbs, what I could see of them, were stained and dirty, as was her face.

Her eyes disturbed me. There was something feral in them, something unsettling. I didn’t look at her for too long. Even as bad off as I was, I had enough presence of mind to not want to look into her eyes.

“I’m not crazy,” she said, her voice sharp, edged. “I know what you’re thinking.”

I had to cough before I could talk, and it made pains shoot through my belly again. “That wasn’t what I was thinking.”

“Of course it wasn’t,” the girl snarled. She rose, all lean grace and tension, and stalked toward me. “I *know* what you were thinking. That they’d shut you in here with that stupid little *whore*.”

“No,” I said. “I . . . that isn’t what—”

She hissed like a cat, and raked her nails across my face, scoring my cheek in three lines of fire. I cried out and fell back, the wall interrupting my retreat.

“I can always tell, when I’m like this,” Justine said. She gave me an abruptly careless look, turned on the balls of her feet and walked several feet away before stretching and dropping to all fours, watching me with an absent, disinterested gaze.

I stared at her for a moment, feeling the heat of the blood welling in the scratches. I touched a finger to them, and it came away sprinkled with scarlet. I lifted my gaze to the girl and shook my head. “I’m sorry,” I said. “God. What did they do to you?”

“This,” she said, carelessly, thrusting out one hand. Round, bruised punctures marked her wrist. “And this.” She held out the other wrist, showing another set of marks. “And this.” She stretched out her thigh to one side of her body, parallel to the floor, to show more marks, along it. “They all wanted a little taste. So they got it.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

She smiled with too many teeth, and it made me uneasy. “They didn’t do anything. I’m like this. This is the way I always am.”

“Um,” I said. “You weren’t that way last night.”

“Last night,” she snapped. “Two nights ago. At least. That was because *he* was there.”

“Thomas?”

Her lower lip abruptly trembled, and she looked as though she might cry. “Yes. Yes, Thomas. He makes it quieter. Inside me, there’s so much trying to get out, like at the hospital. Control, they said. I don’t have the kind of control other people have. It’s hormones, but the drugs only made me sick. He doesn’t, though. Only a little tired.”

“But—”

Her face darkened again. “Shut *up*,” she snapped. “But, but, but. Idiot, asking idiot questions. Fool who did not want me when I was willing to give. Nothing does that. None of them, because they all want to take, take, take.”

I nodded, and didn’t say anything, as she became more agitated. It might have been politically incorrect of me, but the word LOONY all but appeared in a giant neon sign over Justine’s head. “Okay,” I said. “Just . . . let’s just take it easy, all right?”

She glowered at me, falling silent. Then she slunk back to the space between the wall and the washing machine and sank into it. She started playing with her hair, and took no apparent notice of me.

I got up. It was hard. Everything spun around. On the floor, I found a dusty towel. I used it to sweep some of the grime off of my skin.

I went to the door and tried it. It stood firmly locked. I tested my weight against it, but the effort made a sudden fire of scarlet flash through my belly and I dropped to the floor, convulsing again. I threw up in the middle of it, and tasted blood on my mouth.

I lay exhausted for a while after that, and might have dropped off to sleep again. I looked up to find Justine holding the towel, and pushing it fitfully at my skin, the fresh mess.

"How long," I managed to ask her. "How long have I been here?"

She shrugged, without looking up. "They had you for a while. Just outside this door. I heard them taking you. Playing with you, for two hours, maybe. And then they put you in here. I slept. I woke. Maybe another ten hours. Or less. Or more. I don't know."

I kept an arm wrapped around my belly, grimacing, and nodded. "All right," I said. "We have to get out of here."

She brayed out a sharp laugh. "There is no out of here. This is the larder. The Christmas turkey doesn't get up and walk away."

I shook my head. "I . . . I was poisoned. If I don't get to a hospital, I'm going to die."

She smiled again, and played with her hair, dropping the towel. "Almost everyone dies in a hospital. You'd get to be someplace different. Isn't that better?"

"It's one of those things I could live without," I said.

Justine's expression went slack, her eyes distant, and she became still.

I stared at her, waved my hand in front of her eyes. Snapped my fingers. She didn't respond.

I sighed and stood up, then tested the door again. It was firmly bolted shut from the other side. I couldn't move it.

"Super," I sighed. "That's great. I'm never going to get out of here."

Behind me, something whispered. I spun, putting the door at my back, searching for the source of the sound.

A low mist crept out of the wall, a smoky, slithery mass that whirled itself down onto the floor like ethereal lace. The mist touched lightly at my blood on the floor where I'd thrown up, and then began to swirl and shape itself into something vaguely human.

"Great," I muttered. "More ghosts. If I get out of this alive, I've got to get a new job."

The ghost took shape before me, very slowly, very translucently. It resolved itself into the form of a young woman, attractive, dressed like an efficient secretary. Her hair was pulled up into a bun, but for a few appealing tendrils that fell down to frame her cheeks. Her ghostly wrist was crusted with congealed blood, spread around a pair of fang-punctures. Abruptly, I recognized her, the girl Bianca had fed upon until she died.

"Rachel," I whispered. "Rachel, is that you?"

As I spoke her name, she turned to me, her eyes slowly focusing on me, as though beholding me through a misty veil. Her expression turned, no pun intended, grave. She nodded to me in recognition.

"Hell's bells," I whispered. "No wonder Bianca got stuck on a vengeance kick. She literally was haunted by your death."

The spirit's face twisted in distress. She said something, but I could hear it only as a distant, muffled sound accompanying the movement of her lips.

"I can't understand you," I said. "Rachel, I can't hear you."

She almost wept, it seemed. She pressed her hand to her ghostly breast, and grimaced at me.

"You're hurt?" I guessed. "You hurt?"

She shook her head. Then touched her temple and drew her fingers slowly down over her eyes, closing them. "Ah," I said. "You're tired."

She nodded. She made a supplicating motion, holding out her hands as though asking for help.

"I don't know what I can do for you. I don't know if I can help you rest or not."

She shook her head again. Then she nodded, toward the door, and made a bottle-shaped curving gesture of her hands.

"Bianca?" I asked. When she nodded, I went on. "You think Bianca can lay you to rest." She shook her head. "She's keeping you here?"

Rachel nodded, her ghostly, pretty face agonized.

"Makes sense," I muttered. "Bianca fixates on you as you die tragically. Binds your ghost here. The ghost appears to her and drives her into a vengeance, and she blames it all on me."

Rachel's ghost nodded.

"I didn't kill you," I said. "You know that."

She nodded again.

"But I'm sorry. I'm sorry that me being in the wrong place at the wrong time set you up to die."

She gave me a gentle smile—which transformed into a sudden expression of horror. She looked past me, at Justine, and then her image began to fade, to withdraw into the wall.

"Hey!" I said. "Hey, wait a minute!"

The mist vanished, and Justine started to move. She rose, casually, and stretched. Then glanced down at herself and ran her hands appreciatively down over her breasts, her stomach. "Very nice," she said, voice subtly altered, different. "Rather like Lydia, in a lot of ways, isn't she, Mister Dresden."

I tensed up. "Kravos," I whispered.

Justine's eyes flooded with blood through the whites. "Oh yes," she said. "Yes indeed."

"Man, you need to get a life in the worst way. That was you, wasn't it. The telephone call the night Agatha Hagglesworth went nuts."

"My last call," Kravos said through Justine's lips, nodding. "I wanted to savor what was about to happen. Like now. Bianca has ordered that you should receive no visitors, but I just couldn't resist the chance to take a look at you."

"You want to look at me?" I asked. I tapped my head. "Come on in. There's a few things in here I'd like to show you."

Justine smiled, and shook her head. "It would be too much effort for too little return. Even without the shelter of a threshold, possessing even a mind so weak as this child's requires a considerable amount of effort. Effort," she added, "which was made possible by a grant from the Harry Dresden Soul Foundation."

I bared my teeth. "Leave the girl alone."

"Oh, but she's fine," Kravos said, through Justine's lips. "She's really happier like this. She can't hurt anyone, you see. Or herself. Her ranting emotions can't compel her to act. That's why the Whites love her so much. They feed on emotion, and this little darling is positively mad with it." Justine's body shivered, and arched sensuously. "It's rather exciting, actually. Madness."

"I wouldn't know," I said. "Look, if we're going to fight, let's fight. Otherwise, blow. I've got things to do."

"I know," Justine said. "You're busy dying of some kind of poisoning. The vampires tried to drink from you, but you made some of them very sick, and so they left you more or less untapped. Highly miffed, Bianca was. She wanted you to die as food for her and her new children."

"What a shame."

"Come now, Dresden. You and I are among the Wise. We both know you wouldn't want to die at the hands of a lesser being."

"I might rank among the wise," I said. "You, Kravos, are nothing but a two-bit troublemaker. You're the stupid thug of wizard land, and that you managed to live as long as you did without killing yourself is some kind of miracle in itself."

Justine snarled and lunged for me. She pinned me to the door with one hand and a casual, supernatural strength that told me she could have pushed her hand *through* me just as easily. "So self-righteous," she snarled. "Always sure that you're right. That you're in command. That you have all the power and all the answers."

I grimaced. Pain flared through my belly again, and it was suddenly all I could do not to scream.

"Well, Dresden. You're dead. You've been slated to die. You'll be gone in the next few hours. And even if you aren't, if you live through what they have planned, the poison will kill you slowly. And before you go you'll sleep. Bianca won't stop me, this time. You'll sleep and I'll be there. I'll come into your dreams and I will make your last moments on earth a nightmare that lasts for years." She leaned up close, standing on tiptoe, and spat into my face. Then the blood rushed from Justine's eyes and her head fell loosely forward, as though she'd been a horse struggling against the reins, to find their pressure gone. Justine let out a whimper, and sank against me.

I did my best to hold her. We sort of wound up on the floor together, neither one of us in much shape to move. Justine wept. She cried piteously, like a small child, mostly quiet.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry. I want to help. But there's too much in the way. I can't think—"

"Shhhhh," I said. I tried to stroke her hair, to soothe her before she could become agitated again. "It's going to be all right."

"We'll die," she whispered. "I'll never see him again."

She wept for some time, as the nausea and pain in my belly grew. The light outside the door never wavered. It didn't know if it was dark or light outside. Or if Thomas and Michael were still alive to come after me. If they were gone, and it was my fault, I'd never be able to live with myself in any case.

I decided that it must be night. It must be fullest, darkest night. No other time of day could possibly suit my predicament.

I rested my head on Justine's, after she fell quiet, and relaxed, as though she were falling asleep after her weeping. I closed my eyes and struggled to come up with a plan. But I didn't have anything. Nothing. It was all but over.

Something stirred, in the shadows where the laundry was piled.

Both of us looked up. I started to push Justine away, but she said, "Don't. Don't go over there."

"Why not?" I asked.

"You won't like it."

I glanced at the girl. And then got up, unsteadily, and made my way over to the piled laundry. I clutched the towel in my hand, for lack of any other weapon.

Someone lay in the piled clothing. Someone in a white shirt, a dark skirt, and a red cloak.

"Stars above," I swore. "Susan."

She groaned, faintly, as though very much asleep or drugged. I hunkered down and moved clothing off of her. "Hell's bells. Susan, don't try to sit up. Don't move. Let me see if you're hurt, okay?"

I ran my hands over her in the dimness. She seemed to be whole, not bleeding, but her skin was blazing with fever.

"I'm dizzy. Thirsty," she said.

"You've got a fever. Can you roll over here toward me?"

"The light. It hurts my eyes."

"It did mine too, when I woke up. It will pass."

"Don't," Justine whispered. She sat on her heels and rocked slowly back and forth. "You won't like it. You won't like it."

I glanced back at Justine as Susan turned toward me, and then looked down at my girlfriend. She looked back up to me, her features exhausted, confused. She blinked her eyes against the light, and lifted a slim, brown hand to shield her face.

I caught her hand halfway, and stared down at her.

Her eyes were black. All black. Black and staring, glittering, darker than pitch, with no white to them at all to distinguish them as human. My heart leapt up into my throat, and things began to spin faster around me.

"You won't like it," Justine intoned. "They changed her. The Red Court changed her. Bianca changed her."

"Dresden?" Susan whispered.

Dear God, I thought. This can't be happening.

Chapter Thirty-five

Susan let out a whimper and a groan, moving fitfully. By chance, her mouth brushed against my forearm, still stained with drying blood. She froze, completely, her whole body shuddering. She looked up at me with those dark, huge eyes, her face twisting with need. She moved toward my arm again, and I jerked it back from her mouth.

“Susan,” I said. “Wait.”

“What was that?” she whispered. “That was good.” She shivered again and rolled to all fours, eyes slowly focusing on me.

I shot a glance toward Justine, but only saw her feet as she pulled them back to her, slipping back into the tiny space between the washing machine and the wall. I turned back to Susan, who was coming toward me, staring as though blind, on all fours.

I backed away from her, and fumbled out to my side with one hand. I found the bloodstained towel I’d been using before, and threw it at her. She stopped for a moment, staring, and then lowered her face with a groan, beginning to lick at the towel.

I scooted back on all fours, getting away from her, still dizzy. “Justine,” I hissed. “What do we do?”

“There’s nothing to do,” Justine whispered. “We can’t get out. She isn’t herself. Once she kills, she’ll be gone.”

I flashed a glance at her over my shoulder. “Once she kills? What do you mean?”

Justine watched me with solemn eyes. “Once she kills. She’s different. But she isn’t quite like them until it’s complete. Until she’s killed someone feeding on them. That’s the way the Reds work.”

“So she’s still Susan?”

Justine shrugged again, her expression disinterested. “Sort of.”

“If I could talk to her, though. Get through to her. We could maybe snap her out of it?”

“I’ve never heard of it happening,” Justine said. She shivered. “They stay like that. It gets worse and worse. Then they lose control and kill. And it’s over.”

I bit my lip. “There’s got to be something.”

“Kill her. She’s still weak. Maybe we could, together. If we wait until she’s further gone, until the hunger gives her strength, she’ll take us both. That’s why we’re in here.”

“No,” I said. “I can’t hurt her.”

Something flickered in Justine’s face when I spoke, though I couldn’t decide whether it was something warm or something heated, angry. She closed her eyes and said, “Then maybe when she drinks you she’ll die of the poison in you.”

“Dammit. There’s got to be something. Something else you can tell me.”

Justine shrugged and shook her head, wearily. “We’re already dead, Mister Dresden.”

I clenched my teeth together and turned back to Susan. She kept licking at the towel, making frustrated, whimpering noises. She lifted her face to me and stared at me. I could have sworn I saw the bones of her cheeks and jaw stand out more harshly against her skin. Her eyes became drowning deep and pulled at me, beckoned to me to look deeper into that spinning, feverish darkness.

I jerked my eyes away before that gaze could trap me, my heart pounding, but it had already begun to fall away. Susan furrowed her brow in confusion for a moment, blinking her eyes, whatever dark power that had touched them fading, slipping unsteadily.

But even if that gaze hadn’t trapped me, hadn’t gone all the way over into hypnosis, it made something occur to me: Susan’s memories of the soulgaze hadn’t been removed. My godmother couldn’t have touched those. I was such an idiot. When a mortal looks on something with the Sight, really *looks*, as a wizard may, the memories of what he sees are indelibly imprinted on him. And when a wizard looks into a person’s eyes, it’s just another way of using the Sight. A two-way use of it, because the person you look at gets to peer back at you, too.

Susan and I had soulgazed more than two years before. She’d tricked me into it. It was just after that she began pursuing me for stories more closely.

Lea couldn’t have taken memories around a soulgaze. But she could have covered them up, somehow, misted them over. No practical difference, for the average person.

But, hell, I’m a wizard. I ain’t average.

Susan and I had always been close, since we’d started dating. Intimate time together. The sharing of words, ideas, time, bodies. And that kind of intimacy creates a bond. A bond that I could perhaps use, to uncover fogged memories. To help bring Susan back to herself.

“Susan,” I said, forcing my voice out sharp and clear. “Susan Rodriguez.”

She shivered as I Named her, at least in part.

I licked my lips and moved towards her. “Susan. I want to help you. All right? I want to help you if I can.”

She swallowed another whimper. “But. I’m so thirsty. I can’t.”

I reached out as I approached her, and plucked a hair from her head. She didn’t react to it, though she leaned closer to me, inhaling through her nose, letting out a slow moan on the exhale. She could smell my blood. I wasn’t clear on how much of the toxin would be in my bloodstream, but I didn’t want her to be hurt. No time to dawdle, Harry.

I took the hair and wound it about my right hand. It went around twice. I closed my fist over it, then grimaced, reaching out to grab Susan’s left hand. I spat on my fingers and smoothed them over her palm, then pressed her hand to my fist. The bond, already something tenuously felt in any case, thrummed to life like a bass cello string, amplified by my spit upon her, by the hair in my own hands, the joining of our bodies where our flesh pressed together.

I closed my eyes. It hurt to try to draw in the magic. My weakened body shook. I reached for it, tried to piece together my will. I thought of all the times I’d had with Susan, all the things I’d never had the guts to tell her. I thought of her laugh, her smile, the way her mouth felt on mine, the smell of her shampoo in the shower, the press of her warmth against my back as we slept. I summoned up every memory I had of us together, and started trying to push it through the link between us.

The memories flowed down my arm, to her hand—and stopped, pressing against some misty and elastic barrier. Godmother’s spell. I shoved harder at it, but its resistance only grew greater, more intense, the harder I pushed.

Susan whimpered, the sound lost, confused, hungry. She rose up onto her knees and pressed against me, leaning on me. She snuggled her mouth down against the hollow of my throat. I felt her tongue touch my skin, sending an electric jolt of lust flashing through me. Even close to death, hormones will out, I guess.

I kept struggling against Godmother’s spell, but it held in place, powerful, subtle. I felt like a child shoving fruitlessly at a heavy glass door.

Susan shivered, and kept licking at my throat.

My skin tingled pleasantly and then started to go numb. Some of my pain faded. Then I felt her teeth against my throat, sharp as she bit at me.

I let out a startled cry. It wasn’t a hard bite. She’d bitten me harder than that for fun. But she hadn’t had eyes like that then. Her kisses hadn’t made my skin go narcotic-numb then. She hadn’t been halfway to membership in Club Vampire then.

I pushed harder at the spell, but my best efforts grew weaker and weaker. Susan bit harder, and I felt her body tensing, growing stronger. No longer did she lean against me. I felt one of her hands settle on the back of my neck. It wasn’t an affectionate gesture. It was to keep me from moving. She took a deep, shuddering breath.

“In here,” she whispered. “It’s in here. It’s good.”

“Susan,” I said, keeping the feeble pressure on my godmother’s spell. “Susan. Please don’t. Don’t go. I need you here. You could hurt yourself. Please.” I felt her jaws begin to close. Her teeth didn’t feel like fangs, but human teeth can rip open skin just fine. She was vanishing. I could feel the link between us fading, growing weaker and weaker.

“I’m so sorry. I never meant to let you down,” I said. I sagged against her. There wasn’t much reason to keep fighting. But I did anyway. For her, if not for me. I held on to that link, to the pressure I had forced against the spell, to the memories of Susan and me, together.

“I love you.”

Why it worked right then, why the webbing of my godmother's spell frayed as though the words had been an open flame, I don't know. I haven't found any explanation for it. There aren't any magical words, really. The words just hold the magic. They give it a shape and a form, they make it useful, describe the images within.

I'll say this, though: Some words have a power that has nothing to do with supernatural forces. They resound in the heart and mind, they live long after the sounds of them have died away, they echo in the heart and the soul. They have power, and that power is very real.

Those three words are good ones.

I flooded into her, through the link, into the darkness and the confusion that bound her, and I saw, through her thoughts, that my coming was a flame in the endless cold, a beacon flashing out against that night. The light came, our memories, the warmth of us, she and I, and battered down the walls inside her, crushed away Lea's lingering spell, tore those memories away from my godmother, wherever she was, and brought them back home.

I heard her cry out at the sudden flush of memory, as awareness washed over her. She changed, right there against me—the hard, alien tension changed. It didn't vanish, but it changed. It became Susan's tension, Susan's confusion, Susan's pain, aware, alert, and very much herself again.

The power of the spell faded away, leaving only the blurred impression of it, like lightning that crackles through the night, leaving dazzling colors in the darkness behind.

I found myself kneeling against her, holding her hand. She still held my head. Her teeth still pressed against my throat, sharp and hard.

I reached up with my other shaking hand, and stroked at her hair. "Susan," I said, gentle. "Susan. Stay with me."

The pressure lessened. I felt hot tears fall against my shoulder.

"Harry," she whispered. "Oh, God. I'm so thirsty. I want it so much."

I closed my eyes. "I know," I said. "I'm sorry."

"I could take you. I could take it," she whispered.

"Yes."

"You couldn't stop me. You're weak, sick."

"I couldn't stop you," I agreed.

"Say it again."

I frowned. "What?"

"Say it again. It helps. Please. It's so hard not to . . ."

I swallowed. "I love you," I said.

She jerked, as though I'd punched her in the pit of the stomach. "I love you," I said again. "Susan."

She lifted her mouth from my skin, and looked up, into my eyes. They were her eyes again—dark, rich, warm brown, bloodshot, filled with tears. "The vampires," she said. "They—"

"I know."

She closed her eyes, more tears falling. "I tr-ied to stop them. I tried."

Pain hit me again, pain that didn't have anything to do with poison or injuries. It hit me sharp and low, just beneath my heart, as though someone had just shoved an icicle through me. "I know you did," I told her. "I know you did."

She fell against me, weeping. I held her.

After a long time, she whispered, "It's still there. It isn't going away."

"I know."

"What am I going to do?"

"We'll work on that," I said. "I promise. We have other problems right now." I filled her in on what had happened, holding her in the dimness.

"Is anyone coming for us?" she asked.

"I . . . I don't think so. Even if Thomas and Michael got away, they couldn't storm this place. If they ever even got out of the Nevernever. Michael could go to Murphy, but she couldn't just smash her way in here without a warrant. And Bianca's contacts could probably stall that for a while."

"We have to get you out of here," she said. "You've got to get to a hospital."

"Works in theory. Now we just have to work out the details."

She licked her lips. "I . . . can you even walk?"

"I don't know. That last spell. If there was much left in me, that spell took it out."

"What if you slept?" she asked.

"Kravos would have his chance to torture me." I paused, and stared at the far wall.

"God," Susan whispered. She hugged me, gently. "I love you, Harry. You should get to hear it t—" She stopped, and looked up at me. "What?"

"That's it," I said. "That's what needs to happen."

"What needs to happen? I don't understand."

The more I thought about it, the crazier it sounded. But it might work. If I could time it just right . . .

I looked down, taking Susan's shoulders in my hands, staring at her eyes. "Can you hold on? Can you keep it together for another few hours?"

She shivered. "I think so. I'll try."

"Good," I said. I took a deep breath. "Because I need to be asleep long enough to start dreaming."

"But Kravos," Susan said. "Kravos will get inside of you. He'll kill you."

"Yeah," I said. I took a slow breath. "I'm pretty much counting on it."

Chapter Thirty-six

My nightmares came quickly, dull cloud of poisonous confusion blurring my senses, distorting my perceptions. For a moment, I was hanging by one wrist over an inferno of fire, smoke, and horrible creatures, the steel of the handcuffs suspending me cutting into my flesh, drawing blood. Smoke smothered me, forced me to cough, and my vision blurred as I started to fade out.

Then I was in a new place. In the dark. Cold stone chilled me where I lay upon it. All around me were the whispers of things moving in the shadows. Scaly rasps. Soft, hungry hisses, together with the gleam of malevolent eyes. My heart pounded in my throat.

“There you are,” whispered one of the voices. “I watched them have you, you know.”

I sat up, shivering violently. “Yeah, well. That’s why they call them monsters. It’s what they do.”

“They enjoyed it,” came the whispering voice. “If only I could have videotaped it for you.”

“TV will rot your brain, Kravos,” I said.

Something blurred out of the darkness and struck me across the face. The blow drove me back and down. My vision blurred over with scarlet and my perceptions sharpened through a burst of pain, but I didn’t drop unconscious. You don’t, as a rule, in dreams.

“Jokes,” the voice hissed. “Jokes will not save you now.”

“Hell’s bells, Kravos,” I muttered, sitting up again. “Do they produce a *Cliched Lines Textbook for Villains* or something? Go for broke. Tell me that since you’re going to kill me anyway, you might as well reveal your secret plan.”

The dark blurred toward me again. I didn’t bother trying to defend myself. It drove me to the ground, and sat on my chest.

I stared up at Kravos. Forms and shapes hung about him like misty clothes. I could see the shape of the shadow demon, around him. I could see my own face, drifting among the layers. I saw Justine there, and Lydia. And there, at the center of that distorted, drifting mass, I saw Kravos.

He didn’t look much different. He had a thin, pinched face, and brown hair faded with grey. He wore a full, untrimmed beard, but it only made his head seem misshapen. He had wide, leathery shoulders, and symbols painted in blood, ritual things whose meanings I could vaguely piece together, covered his chest. He lifted his hands and delivered two more blows to my face, explosions of pain.

“Where are your gibes now, wizard?” Kravos snarled. “Where are your jokes? Weak, petty, self-righteous fool. We are going to have a very good time together, until Bianca comes to finish you.”

“You think so?” I asked. “I’m not sure. It’s our first date. Maybe we should take this one step at a time.”

Kravos hit me again, across the bridge of my nose, and my vision blurred with tears. “You aren’t funny!” he shouted. “You are going to *die*! You can’t treat this as a joke!”

“Why not?” I shot back. “Kravos, I took you out with a piece of chalk and a Ken doll. You’re the biggest joke of a spellslinger I’ve ever seen. Even I didn’t expect you to drop like that; maybe the link with that doll worked so well because it was anatomically corr—”

I didn’t get the chance to finish the sentence. Kravos screamed and took my dream self by the throat. It felt real. It felt completely as though he had me, his weight pinning my weakened body down, his fingers crushing into my windpipe. My head pounded. I struggled against him, futile and reflexive motions—but to no avail. He kept on choking me, the pressure increasing. Blackness covered my dream vision, and I knew that he would hold it until he was sure I was dead.

People who have near-death experiences often talk about moving toward the light at the end of the tunnel. Or ascending toward the light, or flying or floating, or falling. I didn’t get that. I’m not sure what that says about the state of my soul. There was no light, no kindly beckoning voice, no lake of fire to fall into. There was only silence, deep and timeless, where not even the beating of my heart thudded in my ears. I felt an odd pressure against my skin, my face, as though I had pressed into and through a wall of plastic wrap.

I felt a dull thud on top of my chest, and a sudden lessening of the burning in my lungs. Then another thud. More easing on my lungs. Then more blows to my chest.

My heart lurched back into motion with a hesitant thunder, and I felt myself take a wheezing breath. The plastic-wrap sensation tugged at me for a moment, then lifted away.

I shuddered, and struggled to open my eyes again. When I did, Kravos, still holding my throat, blinked his eyes in shock. “No!” he snarled. “You’re dead! You’re dead!”

“Susan’s giving his real body CPR,” someone said, behind him. Kravos whipped his head around to look, just in time to catch a stiff cross to the tip of his chin. He cried out in startled fear, and fell off of me.

I sucked in another labored breath and sat up. “Hell’s bells,” I gasped. “It worked.”

Kravos struggled to his feet and backed away, staring, his eyes flying open wide as they looked back and forth between me and my savior.

My savior was me, too. Or rather, something that looked a very great deal like me. It was my shape and coloring, and had bruises and scratches, mixed with a few burns, all over it. Its hair was a wild mess, its eyes sunken over circles of black in a pale, sickly face.

My double peered at me and said, “You know. We really look like hell.”

“What’s this?” hissed Kravos. “What trick is this?”

I offered myself a hand up, so I took it. It took me a moment to balance, but I said, “Hell, Kravos. As flexible as the boundaries between here and the spirit world have been, I would have expected you to figure it out by now.”

Kravos looked at the two of us, and bared his teeth. “Your ghost,” he hissed.

“Technically,” my ghost said. “Harry actually died for a minute. Don’t you remember how ghosts are made? Normally, there wouldn’t be enough latent energy to create an impression like me, but with him being a wizard—a real wizard, not a petty fake like you—and with the border to the Nevernever in such a state of flux, it was pretty much inevitable.”

“That was very well said,” I told my ghost.

“Just be glad your theory worked. I wouldn’t be very good at this, solo.”

“Well, thank Kravos here. It was him and Bianca and Mavra who stirred things up enough to make this possible.” We looked at Kravos. “You aren’t getting to sneak attack me while I’m doped unconscious, bub. It isn’t going to be like last time. Any questions?”

Kravos hurled himself at me in a fury. He overpowered me, and bore down on me, far too strong for me to overcome directly. I thrust a thumb into his eye. He screamed and bit at my hand.

And then my ghost came in. He wrapped his arms around Kravos’s neck and leaned back, hard, tugging the man’s body into a bow. Kravos strained and struggled, his arms flailing, strong as any maddened beast. My ghost was a little stronger than I, but he wouldn’t be able to hold Kravos for long.

“Harry!” my ghost shouted. “Now!”

I gripped Kravos by the throat, letting all the frustration and fury inside well up. I held up my left hand, and my dream self’s nails lengthened into glittering claws. Kravos stared at me in shock.

“You think you’re the only one who can play in dreams, Kravos? If I’d been ready for you the last time, you’d have never been able to do to me what you did.” My face twisted, mouth extending into a muzzle. “This time I’m ready. You’re in my dream, now. And I’m taking back what’s mine.”

I tore into his guts. I ripped him open with my claws and wolfed into his vitals, just as he had to me. Bits of him flew free, dream-blood splashing, dream-vitals steaming.

I tore and worried and gulped down bloody meat. He screamed and fought, but he couldn’t get away. I tore him to pieces and devoured him, the blood a hot, sweet rush on my tongue, his ghost-flesh hot and good, easing the ache of emptiness inside of me.

I ate him all up.

As I did, I felt power, surety, confidence, all rushing back into me. My stolen magic came raging back into me, filling me like silver lightning, a tingling, almost painful rush as I took back what was mine.

But I didn't stop there. My ghost fell away as I kept going. Kept tearing Kravos apart and gulping down the pieces. I got to his own power when I ate his heart—red, livid power, vital and primitive and dangerous. Kravos's magic had been for nothing but causing harm.

I took it. I had plenty of harm to start causing.

By the time I'd finished tearing him to shreds, the pieces were vanishing like the remnants of any foul dream. I crouched on the dream-floor as they did, shaking with the rushing energy inside of me. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looked up.

I must have looked feral. My ghost took a step back and lifted both hands. "Easy, easy," he said. "I think you got him."

"I got him," I said quietly.

"He was a ghost," my ghost said. "He wasn't really a person any more. And even as ghosts go, he was a bad egg. You don't have anything to regret."

"Easy for you to say," I said. "You don't have to live with me."

"True," my ghost answered. He glanced down at himself. His bruised limbs grew slowly translucent, and he began vanishing. "That's the only bad thing about this gig as a ghost. Once you accomplish whatever it was that caused you to get created, you're done. Kravos—the real Kravos—is already gone. Just his shell stayed behind. And this would have happened to him, too, if he'd killed you."

"Do unto others before they do unto you," I said. "Thanks."

"It was your plan," my ghost said. "I feel like hell anyway."

"I know."

"I guess you do. Try not to get killed again, okay?"

"Working on it."

He waved one hand, and faded away.

I blinked open my eyes. Susan knelt over me, striking my face with her hand. I felt wretched—but that wasn't all. My body almost buzzed with the energy I held, my skin tingling as though I hadn't used a whit of magic in weeks. She struck me twice more before I let out a strangled groan and lifted a hand to intercept hers.

"Harry?" she demanded. "Harry, are you awake?"

I blinked my eyes. "Yeah," I said. "Yeah. I'm up."

"Kravos?" she hissed.

"I pushed his buttons and he lost control. He got me," I said. "Then I got him. You did it just right."

Susan sat back on her heels, trembling. "God. When you stopped breathing, I almost screamed. If you hadn't told me to expect it, I don't know what I would have done."

"You did fine," I said. I rolled over and pushed myself to my feet, though my body groaned in protest. The pain felt like something happening very far away, to someone else. It

wasn't relevant to me. The energy coursing through me—*that*—was relevant. I had to release some of it soon or I'd explode.

Susan started to help me, and then sat back, staring at me. "Harry? What happened?"

"I got something back," I said. "It's a high. I still hurt, but that doesn't seem to be important." I stretched my arms out over my head. Then I stalked over to the dirty laundry and found a pair of boxers that fit me, more or less. I gave Susan a self-conscious glance, and slipped into them. "Get something on Justine, and we're out of here."

"I tried. She won't come out from behind the washing machine."

I clenched my jaw, irritated, and snapped my fingers while saying, "*Ventas servitas.*"

Chapter Thirty-seven

Fury surged through me, before fear or anxiety, a fury so scarlet and bright that I could scarcely believe it was mine. Maybe it wasn't. After all, you are what you eat—even if you're a wizard.

"Let go, Kyle," I grated. "You've got one chance to live through this. Walk away, right now."

Kyle laughed, letting his fangs extend. "No more bluffs, wizard," he purred. "No more illusions. Take him, sister."

Kelly came at me in a rush, but I had been waiting for that. I lifted my right hand and snarled, "*Ventas servitas!*" A furious column of wind slammed into her like a bag of sand, catching her in midair and driving her across the room, into the wall.

Kyle screamed in fury, drawing his hand back off of my throat and then driving it at me. I dodged the first blow by jerking my head to one side, and heard his hand crunch into the stone. The dodge cost me my balance, and as I teetered, he lashed out again, aiming for my neck. All I could do was watch it come.

And then Susan came between us. I didn't see her move toward us, but I saw her catch the blow in both of her hands. She spun, twisting her hips and body and shoulders, letting out a furious scream. She threw Kyle across the room, in the air the whole way, and with no noticeable trajectory. He slammed into his sister, driving them both into the wall once more. I heard Kelly scream, incoherent and bestial. The black, slime-covered bat-thing beneath the pleasant flesh mask tore its way out, shredding damply flapping skin with its talons as it started raking at Kyle. He struggled against her, shouting something that became lost in his creature-form's scream as he too tore his way free. The two of them started clawing at one another in a frenzy, fangs and tongues and talons flashing.

I snarled, and rolled my wrist, flipping my hand toward them in a gesture wholly unfamiliar to me. Words spilled from my lips in thundering syllables, "*Satharak, na-kadum!*" That scarlet, furious power I had stolen from Kravos flashed over me, following the gesture of my right hand, lashing out in a blaze of scarlet light that spun around the maddened vampires. The scarlet blaze whirled about them, winding too swiftly to be seen, a ribbon of flame that cocooned them both, burned brighter and hotter, the spell enfolding them in fire.

They screamed as they died, sounds like metal sheets tearing, and somehow also like terrified children. Heat thrummed back against us, almost singeing the exposed hairs on my legs, my chest. Greasy black smoke started to spread over the floor, and it stank.

I watched as they burned, though I could see nothing beneath the blazing flame-cocoon. Part of me wanted to dance in malicious glee, to throw my arms up in the air and crow my defiance and scorn to my enemies while they died, and to roll through their ashes when they'd cooled.

More of me grew sickened. I stared at the spell I had wrought and couldn't believe it had come from me—whether or not I'd taken the power, maybe even some primal knowledge of this spell, from Kravos's devoured spirit, the magic had come from *me*. I had killed them, as swiftly and as efficiently as with as little forethought as one gives to crushing an ant.

They were vampires, some part of me said. *They had it coming. They were monsters.*

Chapter Thirty-eight

I lifted my left hand before me, pouring energy into the shield bracelet, and shouted, “*Riflettum!*”

Chapter Thirty-nine

I regard it as one last sadistic gibe of whatever power had decided to make my life a living hell that the burn ward was full, and I was given a room to share with Charity Carpenter. She had recovered in spirit, if not in body, and she started in on me the moment I awoke. The woman's tongue was sharper than any sword. Even *Amoracchius*. I smiled through most of it. Michael would have been proud.

The baby, I learned, had taken an abrupt turn for the better in the hours before dawn the morning Bianca's house had burned. I thought that maybe Kravos had taken a bite of the little guy, and I had gotten it back for him. Michael thought God had simply decreed the morning to be a day of good things. Whatever. The results were what counted.

"We've decided," Michael said, stretching a strong arm around Charity, "to name him Harry."

Charity glowered at me, but remained silent.

"Harry?" I asked. "Harry Carpenter? Michael, what did that poor kid ever do to you?"

But it made me feel good. And they kept the name.

Charity got out of the hospital three days before me. Michael or Father Forthill remained with me for the rest of my stay. No one ever said anything, but Michael had the sword with him, and Forthill kept a crucifix handy. Just in case I had some nasty visitors.

One night when I couldn't sleep, I mentioned to Michael that I was worried about the repercussions of my workings, the harmful magic I had dished out. I worried that it was going to come back to haunt me.

"I'm not a philosopher, Harry," he said. "But here's something for you to think about, at least. What goes around comes around. And sometimes you get what's coming around." He

paused for a moment, frowning faintly, pursing his lips. "And sometimes you *are* what's coming around. You see what I mean?"

I did. I was able to get back to sleep.

Michael explained that he and Thomas had escaped the fight at the bridge only a few moments after it had begun. But time had stretched oddly, between the Nevernever and Chicago, and they hadn't emerged until two o'clock the following afternoon.

"Thomas brought us out into this flesh pit," Michael said.

"I'm not a wizard," Thomas pointed out. "I can only get in and out of the Nevernever at points close to my heart."

"A house of sin!" Michael said, his expression stern.

"A *gentlemen's* club," Thomas protested. "And one of the nicest ones in town."

I kept my mouth shut. Who says I never grow any wiser?

Murphy came out of the sleeping spell a couple days later. I had to go in a wheelchair, but I went to Kravos's funeral with her. She pushed me through a drizzling rain to the grave site. There was a city official there, who signed off on some papers and left. Then it was just us and the grave diggers, shovels whispering on earth.

Murphy watched the proceedings in complete silence, her eyes sunken, the blue faded out until they seemed almost grey. I didn't push, and she didn't talk until the hole was half filled in.

"I couldn't stop him," she said, then. "I tried."

"But we beat him. That's why we're here and he's there."

"*You* beat him," Murphy said. "A lot of good I did you."

"He sucker punched you. Even if you'd been a wizard, he'd have gotten to you—like he damn near did me." I shivered, remembered agony making the muscles of my belly tight. "Karrin, you can't blame yourself for that."

"I know," she said, but she didn't sound like she meant it. She was quiet for a long time, and I finally figured out that she wasn't talking because I'd hear the tears in her voice, the ones the rain hid from me. She didn't bow her head though, and she didn't look away from the grave.

I reached out and found her hand with mine. I squeezed. She squeezed back, silent and tight. We stayed there, in the rain, until the last bit of earth had been thrown over Kravos's coffin.

On the way out, Murphy stopped my wheelchair, frowning at a white headstone next to a waiting plot. "He died doing the right thing," she read. She looked down at me.

I shrugged, and felt my mouth curl up on one side. "Not yet. Not today."

Michael and Forthill took care of Lydia for me. Her real name was Barbara something. They got her packed up and moved out of town. Apparently, the Church has some kind of equivalent of the Witness Protection Program, for getting people out of the reach of supernatural baddies. Forthill told me how the girl had fled the church because she'd been terrified that she would fall asleep, and gone out to find some uppers. The vampires had grabbed her while she was out, which was when I'd found them in that old building. She sent me a note that read, simply, "I'm sorry. Thank you for everything."

When I got out of the hospital, Thomas sent me a thank-you letter, for saving Justine. He sent it on a little note card attached to a bow, which was all Justine was wearing. I'll let you guess where the bow was. I took the note, but not the girl. There was too much of an ick factor in sharing girls with a sex vampire. Justine was pretty enough, and sweet enough, when she wasn't walking the razor's edge of an organic emotional instability—but I couldn't really hold that against her. Plenty of people have to take some kind of medication to keep stable. Lithium, supermodel sex vampires—whatever works, I guess.

I had woman problems of my own.

Susan sent me flowers and called me every day, in the hospital. But she didn't ever talk to me for long. And she didn't come to visit. When I got out, I went to her apartment. She didn't live there anymore. I tried to call her at work, and never managed to catch her. Finally, I had to resort to magic. I used some hair of hers left on a brush at my apartment, and tracked her down on a beach along Lake Michigan, on one of the last warm days of the year.

I found her lying in the sun wearing a white bikini that left maximum surface area bared to it. I sat down next to her, and her manner changed, subtly, a quiet tension that I didn't miss, though I couldn't see her eyes behind the sunglasses she wore.

"The sun helps," she said. "Sometimes it almost goes away for a while."

"I've been trying to find you," I said. "I wanted to talk to you."

"I know," she said. "Harry. Things have changed for me. In the daylight, it's not too bad. But at night." She shivered. "I have to lock myself inside. I don't trust myself around people, Harry."

"I know," I said. "You know what's happening?"

"I talked to Thomas," she said. "And Justine. They were nice enough, I guess. They explained things to me."

I grimaced. "Look," I said. "I'm going to help you. I'll find some way to get you out of this. We can find a cure." I reached out and took her hand. "Oh, Hell's bells, Susan. I'm no good at this." I just fumbled the ring onto it, clumsy as you please. "I don't want you far away. Marry me."

She sat up, and stared at her hand, at the dinky ring I'd been able to afford. Then she leaned close to me and gave me a slow, heated kiss, her mouth melting-warm. Our tongues touched. Mine went numb. I got a little dizzy, as the slow throb of pleasure that I'd felt before coursed through me, a drug I'd craved without realizing it.

She drew away from me slowly, her face expressionless behind the sunglasses. She said, "I can't. You already made me ache for you, Harry. I couldn't control myself, with you. I couldn't sort out the hungers." She pressed the ring into my hand and stood up, gathering her towel and a purse with her. "Don't come to me again. I'll call you."

And she left.

I'd bragged to Kravos, at the end, that I'd been trained to demolish nightmares when I was younger. And to a certain extent it was true. If something came into my head for a fight, I could put up a good one. But now I had nightmares that were all my own. A part of me. And they were always the same: darkness, trapped, with the vampires all around me, laughing their hissing laughter.

I'd wake up, screaming and crying. Mister, curled against my legs, would raise his head and rumble at me. But he wouldn't pad away. He'd just settle down again, purring like a snowmobile's engine. I found it a comfort. And I slept with a light always close.

"Harry," Bob said one night. "You haven't been working. You've barely left your apartment. The rent was due last week. And this vampire research is going nowhere fast."

"Shut up, Bob," I told him. "This unguent isn't right. If we can find a way to convert it to a liquid, maybe we can work it into a supplement of some kind—"

"Harry," Bob said.

I looked up at the skull.

"Harry. The Council sent a notice to you today."

I stood up, slowly.

"The vampires. The Council's at war. I guess Paris and Berlin went into chaos almost a week ago. The Council is calling a meeting. Here."

"The White Council is coming to Chicago," I mused.

"Yeah. They're going to want to know what the hell happened."

I shrugged. "I sent them my report. I only did what was right," I said. "Or as close to it as I could manage. I couldn't let them have her, Bob. I couldn't."

The skull sighed. "I don't know if that will hold up with them, Harry."

"It has to," I said.

There was a knock at my door. I climbed up from the lab. Murphy and Michael had shown up at my door with a care package: soup and charcoal and kerosene for me, as the weather got colder. Groceries. Fruit. Michael had, rather pointedly, included a razor.

"How are you doing, Dresden?" Murphy asked me, her blue eyes serious.

I stared at her for a moment. Then at Michael.

"I could be worse," I said. "Come in."

Friends. They make it easier.

So, the vampires are out to get me, and every other wizard on the block. The little wizardlings of the city, the have-nots of magic, are making it a point not to go outside after dark. I don't order pizza for delivery anymore. Not after the first guy almost got me with a bomb.

The Council is going to be furious at me, but what else is new.

Susan doesn't call. Doesn't visit. But I got a card from her, on my birthday, Halloween. She only wrote three words.

I'll let you guess what three.

Author's Note

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Jim Butcher



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SUMMER KNIGHT: BOOK FOUR OF THE DRESDEN FILES

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This book is for big sisters everywhere who have enough patience not to strangle their little brothers—and particularly for my own sisters, who had more than most. I owe you both so much.

And for Mom, for reasons that are so obvious that they really don't need to be said—but I thought I would make special mention of candy cane cookies and that rocking chair that creaked me to sleep.

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

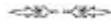
The author (that's me) wishes to thank all the people who should have been thanked in other books—Ricia and A.J., obviously, and the mighty Jen. Thank you to all the folks who have been so supportive of my work all along, including (but not limited to) Wil and Erin (who fed me great Chicago information and who I missed the first time around), Fred and Chris, Martina and Caroline and Debra and Cam and Jess and Monica and April.

Thank you also to you mighty librarians who have tricked people into reading these books, and to the bookstore personnel (and lurkers) who have gone out of their way to help me get noticed. I admit to being somewhat baffled, but I'm very grateful to you all.

I owe thanks to so many people that I probably am incapable of remembering everyone. If I missed someone, let Shannon know. She will club me on the head with a baseball bat and point out the mistake.

(P.S. Shannon and J.J., as always, thank you. I'd promise to be less of a weirdo, but we all know how long*that* one would last.)

Chapter One



It rained toads the day the White Council came to town.

I got out of the Blue Beetle, my beat-up old Volkswagen bug, and squinted against the midsummer sunlight. Lake Meadow Park lies a bit south of Chicago's Loop, a long sprint from Lake Michigan's shores. Even in heat like we'd had lately, the park would normally be crowded with people. Today it was deserted but for an old lady with a shopping cart and a long coat, tottering around the park. It wasn't yet noon, and my sweats and T-shirt were too hot for the weather.

I squinted around the park for a moment, took a couple of steps onto the grass, and got hit on the head by something damp and squishy.

I flinched and slapped at my hair. Something small fell past my face and onto the ground at my feet. A toad. Not a big one, as toads go—it could easily have sat in the palm of my hand. It wobbled for a few moments upon hitting the ground, then let out a bleary croak and started hopping drunkenly away.

I looked around me and saw other toads on the ground. A lot of them. The sound of their croaking grew louder as I walked further into the park. Even as I watched, several more amphibians plopped out of the sky, as though the Almighty had dropped them down a laundry chute. Toads hopped around everywhere. They didn't carpet the ground, but you couldn't possibly miss them. Every moment or so, you would hear the thump of another one landing. Their croaking sounded vaguely like the speech-chatter of a crowded room.

"Weird, huh?" said an eager voice. I looked up to see a short young man with broad shoulders and a confident walk coming toward me. Billy the Werewolf wore sweatpants and a plain dark T-shirt. A year or two ago the outfit would have concealed the forty or fifty extra pounds he'd been carrying. Now they concealed all the muscle he'd traded it in for. He stuck out his hand, smiling. "What did I tell you, Harry?"

"Billy," I responded. He crunched down hard as I shook his hand. Or maybe he was just that much stronger. "How's the werewolf biz?"

"Getting interesting," he said. "We've run into a lot of odd things lately when we've been out patrolling. Like this." He gestured at the park.

Another toad fell from the sky several feet away. “That’s why we called the wizard.”

Patrolling. Holy vigilantes, Batman. “Any of the normals been here?”

“No, except for some meteorological guys from the university. They said that they were having tornadoes in Louisiana or something, that the storms must have thrown the toads here.”

I snorted. “You’d think ‘it’s magic’ would be easier to swallow than that.”

Billy grinned. “Don’t worry. I’m sure someone will come along and declare it a hoax before long.”

“Uh-huh.” I turned back to the Beetle and popped the hood to rummage in the forward storage compartment. I came out with a nylon backpack and dragged a couple of small cloth sacks out of it. I threw one to Billy. “Grab a couple of toads and pitch them in there for me.”

He caught the bag and frowned. “Why?”

“So I can make sure they’re real.”

Billy lifted his eyebrows. “You think they’re not?”

I squinted at him. “Look, Billy, just do it. I haven’t slept, I can’t remember the last time I ate a hot meal, and I’ve got a lot to do before tonight.”

“But why wouldn’t they be real? They look real.”

I blew out a breath and tried to keep my temper. It had been short lately. “They could look real and feel real, but it’s possible that they’re just constructs. Made out of the material of the Nevernever and animated by magic. I hope they are.”

“Why?”

“Because all that would mean is that some faerie got bored and played a trick. They do that sometimes.”

“Okay. But if they’re real?”

“If they’re real, then it means something is out of whack.”

“What kind of out of whack?”

“The serious kind. Holes in the fabric of reality.”

“And that would be bad?”

I eyed him. “Yeah, Billy. That would be bad. It would mean something big was going down.”

“But what if—”

My temper flared. “I don’t have the time or inclination to teach a class today. Shut the hell up.”

He lifted a hand in a pacifying gesture. “Okay, man. Whatever.” He fell into step beside me and started picking up toads as we walked across the park. “So, uh, it’s good to see you, Harry. Me and the gang were wondering if you wanted to come by this weekend, do some socializing.”

I scooped up a toad of my own and eyed him dubiously. “Doing what?”

He grinned at me. “Playing Arcanos, man. The campaign is getting really fun.”

Role-playing games. I made a monosyllabic sound. The old lady with the shopping cart wandered past us, the wheels of the cart squeaking and wobbling.

“Seriously, it’s great,” he insisted. “We’re storming the fortress of Lord Malocchio, except we have to do it in disguise in the dead of night, so that the Council of Truth won’t know who the vigilantes who brought him down were. There’s spells and demons and dragons and everything. Interested?”

“Sounds too much like work.”

Billy let out a snort. “Harry, look, I know this whole vampire war thing has you jumpy. And grouchy. But you’ve been lurking in your basement way too much lately.”

“What vampire war?”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Word gets around, Harry. I know that the Red Court of the vampires declared war on the wizards after you burned down Bianca’s place last fall. I know that they’ve tried to kill you a couple of times since then. I even know that the wizards’ White Council is coming to town sometime soon to figure out what to do.”

I glowered at him. “What White Council?”

He sighed. “It’s not a good time for you to be turning into a hermit, Harry. I mean, look at you. When was the last time you shaved? Had a shower? A haircut? Got out to do your laundry?”

I lifted a hand and scratched at the wiry growth of beard on my face. “I’ve been out. I’ve been out plenty of times.”

Billy snagged another toad. “Like when?”

“I went to that football game with you and the Alphas.”

He snorted. “Yeah. In January, Dresden. It’s June.” Billy glanced up at my face and frowned. “People are worried about you. I mean, I know

you've been working on some project or something. But this whole unwashed wild man look just isn't you."

I stooped and grabbed a toad. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know better than you think," he said. "It's about Susan, right? Something happened to her last fall. Something you're trying to undo. Maybe something the vampires did. That's why she left town."

I closed my eyes and tried not to crush the toad in my hand. "Drop the subject."

Billy planted his feet and thrust his chin out at me. "No, Harry. Dammit, you vanish from the face of the earth, you're hardly showing up at your office, won't answer your phone, don't often answer your door. We're your friends, and we're worried about you."

"I'm fine," I said.

"You're a lousy liar. Word is that the Reds are bringing more muscle into town. That they're offering their groupies full vampirehood if one of them brings you down."

"Hell's bells," I muttered. My head started to ache.

"It isn't a good time for you to be outside by yourself. Even during daylight."

"I don't need a baby-sitter, Billy."

"Harry, I know you better than most. I know you can do stuff that other people can't—but that doesn't make you Superman. Everyone needs help sometimes."

"Not me. Not now." I stuffed the toad into my sack and picked up another. "I don't have time for it."

"Oh, that reminds me." Billy drew a folded piece of paper out of the pocket of his sweats and read it. "You've got an appointment with a client at three."

I blinked at him. "What?"

"I dropped by your office and checked your messages. A Ms. Sommerset was trying to reach you, so I called her and set up the appointment for you."

I felt my temper rising again. "You did what?"

His expression turned annoyed. "I checked your mail, too. The landlord for the office dropped off your eviction notice. If you don't have him paid off in a week, he's booting you out."

“What the hell gives you the right to go poking around in my office, Billy? Or calling my clients?”

He took a step in front of me, glaring. I had to focus on his nose to avoid the risk of looking at his eyes. “Get off the high horse, Harry. I’m your freaking friend. You’ve been spending all your time hiding in your apartment. You should be happy I’m helping you save your business.”

“You’re damned right it’s my business,” I spat. The shopping cart lady circled past in my peripheral vision, cart wheels squeaking as she walked behind me. “Mine. As in none of yours.”

He thrust out his jaw. “Fine. How about you just crawl back into your cave until they evict you from that, too?” He spread his hands. “Good God, man. I don’t need to be a wizard to see when someone’s in a downward spiral. You’re hurting. You need help.”

I jabbed a finger into his chest. “No, Billy. I don’t need more *help* . I don’t need to be baby-sitting a bunch of kids who think that because they’ve learned one trick they’re ready to be the Lone Ranger with fangs and a tail. I don’t need to be worrying about the vamps targeting the people around me when they can’t get to me. I don’t need to be second-guessing myself, wondering who *else* is going to get hurt because I dropped the ball.” I reached down and snatched up a toad, jerking the cloth bag from Billy’s hands on the way back up. “I don’t need *you* .”

Naturally, the hit went down right then.

It wasn’t subtle, as attempted assassinations go. An engine roared and a black compact pickup truck jumped the curb into the park fifty yards away. It jounced and slewed to one side, tires digging up furrows in the sunbaked grass. A pair of men clung to a roll bar in the back of the truck. They were dressed all in black, complete with black sunglasses over black ski masks, and their guns matched—automatic weapons in the mini-Uzi tradition.

“Get back!” I shouted. With my right hand, I grabbed at Billy and shoved him behind me. With my left, I shook out the bracelet on my wrist, hung with a row of tiny, medieval-style shields. I lifted my left hand toward the truck and drew in my will, focusing it with the bracelet into a sudden, transparent, shimmering half-globe that spread out between me and the oncoming truck.

The truck ground to a halt. The two gunmen didn’t wait for it to settle. With all the fire discipline of an action-movie extra, they pointed their guns more or less at me and emptied their clips in one roaring burst.

Sparks flew from the shield in front of me, and bullets whined and hissed in every direction as they ricocheted. My bracelet grew uncomfortably warm within a second or two, the energy of the shield taxing the focus to its limit. I tried to angle the shield to deflect the shots up into the air as much as possible. God only knew where all those bullets were going—I just hoped that they wouldn't bounce through a nearby car or some other passerby.

The guns clicked empty. With jerky, unprofessional motions, both gunmen began to reload.

“Harry!” Billy shouted.

“Not now!”

“But—”

I lowered the shield and lifted my right hand—the side that projects energy. The silver ring I wore on my index finger had been enchanted to save back a little kinetic energy whenever my arm moved. I hadn't used the ring in months, and it had a whale of a kick to it—one I hardly dared to use on the gunmen. That much force could kill one of them, and that would be basically the same as letting them fill me full of bullets. It would just take a little longer to set in. The White Council did not take kindly to anyone violating the First Law of Magic: Thou Shalt Not Kill. I'd slipped it once on a technicality, but it wouldn't happen again.

I gritted my teeth, focused my shot just to one side of the gunmen, and triggered the ring. Raw force, unseen but tangible, lashed through the air and caught the first gunman with a glancing blow across his upper body. His automatic slammed against his chest, and the impact tore the sunglasses off his head and shredded bits of his clothes even as it flung him back and out of the pickup, to land somewhere on the ground on the other side.

The second gunman got less of the blast. What did hit him struck against his shoulder and head. He held on to his gun but lost the sunglasses, and they took the ski mask with them, revealing him to be a plain-looking boy who couldn't have been old enough to vote. He blinked against the sudden light and then resumed his fumbling reload.

“Kids,” I snarled, lifting my shield again. “They're sending kids after me. Hell's bells.”

And then something made the hairs on the back of my neck try to lift me off the ground. As the kid with the gun started shooting again, I glanced

back over my shoulder.

The old lady with her shopping basket had stopped maybe fifteen feet behind me. I saw now that she wasn't as old as I had thought. I caught a flicker of cool, dark eyes beneath age makeup. Her hands were young and smooth. From the depths of the shopping basket she pulled out a sawed-off shotgun, and swung it toward me.

Bullets from the chattering automatic slammed against my shield, and it was all I could do to hold it in place. If I brought any magic to bear against the third attacker, I would lose my concentration and the shield with it—and inexpert or not, the gunman on the truck was spraying around enough lead that sooner or later he wouldn't miss.

On the other hand, if the disguised assassin got a chance to fire that shotgun from five yards away, no one would bother taking me to the hospital. I'd go straight to the morgue.

Bullets hammered into my shield, and I couldn't do anything but watch the third attacker bring the shotgun to bear. I was screwed, and probably Billy was along with me.

Billy moved. He had already gotten out of his T-shirt, and he had enough muscle to ripple—flat, hard muscle, athlete's muscle, not the carefully sculpted build of weight lifters. He dove forward, toward the woman with the shotgun, and stripped out of his sweatpants on the fly. He was naked beneath.

I felt the surge of magic that Billy used then—sharp, precise, focused. There was no sense of ritual in what he did, no slow gathering of power building to release. He blurred as he moved, and between one breath and the next, Billy-the-Naked was gone and Billy-the-Wolf slammed into the assailant, a dark-furred beast the size of a Great Dane, fangs slashing at the hand that gripped the forward stock of the shotgun.

The woman cried out, jerking her hand back, scarlet blood on her fingers, and swept the gun at Billy like a club. He twisted and caught the blow on his shoulders, a snarl exploding from him. He went after the woman's other hand, faster than I could easily see, and the shotgun tumbled to the ground.

The woman screamed again and drew back her hand.

She wasn't human.

Her hands distended, lengthening, as did her shoulders and her jaw. Her nails became ugly, ragged talons, and she raked them down at Billy, striking him across the jaw, this time eliciting a pained yelp mixed with a

snarl. He rolled to one side and came up on his feet, circling in order to force the woman-thing's back to me.

The gunman in the truck clicked on empty again. I dropped the shield and hurled myself forward, diving to grip the shotgun. I came up with it and shouted, "Billy, move!"

The wolf darted to one side, and the woman whipped around to face me, her distorted features furious, mouth drooling around tusklife fangs.

I pointed the gun at her belly and pulled the trigger.

The gun roared and bucked, slamming hard against my shoulder. Ten-gauge, maybe, or slug rounds. The woman doubled over, letting out a shriek, and stumbled backward and to the ground. She wasn't down long. She almost bounced back to her feet, scarlet splashed all over her rag of a dress, her face wholly inhuman now. She sprinted past me to the truck and leapt up into the back. The gunman hauled his partner back into the truck with him, and the driver gunned the engine. The truck threw out some turf before it dug in, jounced back onto the street, and whipped away into traffic.

I stared after it for a second, panting. I lowered the shotgun, realizing as I did that I had somehow managed to keep hold of the toad I had picked up in my left hand. It wriggled and struggled in a fashion that suggested I had been close to crushing it, and I tried to ease up on my grip without losing it.

I turned to look for Billy. The wolf paced back over to his discarded sweatpants, shimmered for a second, and became once more the naked young man. There were two long cuts on his face, parallel with his jaw. Blood ran down over his throat in a fine sheet. He carried himself tensely, but it was the only indication he gave of the pain.

"You all right?" I asked him.

He nodded and jerked on his pants, his shirt. "Yeah. What the hell was that?"

"Ghoul," I told him. "Probably one of the LaChaise clan. They're working with the Red Court, and they don't much like me."

"Why don't they like you?"

"I've given them headaches a few times."

Billy lifted a corner of his shirt to hold against the cuts on his face. "I didn't expect the claws."

"They're sneaky that way."

"Ghoul, huh. Is it dead?"

I shook my head. “They’re like cockroaches. They recover from just about anything. Can you walk?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Let’s get out of here.” We headed toward the Beetle. I picked up the cloth sack of toads on the way and started shaking them back out onto the ground. I put the toad I’d nearly squished down with them, then wiped my hand off on the grass.

Billy squinted at me. “Why are you letting them go?”

“Because they’re real.”

“How do you know?”

“The one I was holding crapped on my hand.”

I let Billy into the Blue Beetle and got in the other side. I fetched the first aid kit from under my seat and passed it over to him. Billy pressed a cloth against his face, looking out at the toads. “So that means things are in a bad way?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed, “things are in a bad way.” I was silent for a minute, then said, “You saved my life.”

He shrugged. He didn’t look at me.

“So you set up the appointment for three o’clock, right? What was the name? Somerset?”

He glanced at me and kept the smile from his mouth—but not from his eyes. “Yeah.”

I scratched at my beard and nodded. “I’ve been distracted lately. Maybe I should clean up first.”

“Might be good,” Billy agreed.

I sighed. “I’m an ass sometimes.”

Billy laughed. “Sometimes. You’re human like the rest of us.”

I started up the Beetle. It wheezed a little, but I coaxed it to life.

Just then something hit my hood with a hard, heavy thump. Then again. Another heavy blow, on the roof.

A feeling of dizziness swept over me, a nausea that came so suddenly and violently that I clutched the steering wheel in a simple effort not to collapse. Distantly, I could hear Billy asking me if I was all right. I wasn’t. Power moved and stirred in the air outside—hectic disruption, the forces of magic, usually moving in smooth and quiet patterns, suddenly cast into tumult, disruptive, maddening chaos.

I tried to push the sensations away from me, and labored to open my eyes. Toads were raining down. Not occasionally plopping, but raining down so thick and hard that they darkened the sky. No gentle laundry-chute drop for these poor things, either. They fell like hailstones, splattering on concrete, on the hood of the Beetle. One of them fell hard enough to send a spiderweb of cracks through my windshield, and I dropped into gear and scooted down the street. After a few hundred yards we got away from the otherworldly rain.

Both of us were breathing too fast. Billy had been right. The rain of toads meant something serious was going on, magically speaking. The White Council was coming to town tonight to discuss the war. I had a client to meet, and the vampires had evidently upped the stakes (no pun intended), striking at me more openly than they had dared to before.

I flipped on the windshield wipers. Amphibian blood left scarlet streaks on the cracked glass.

“Good Lord,” Billy breathed.

“Yeah.” I said. “It never rains, it pours.”

Chapter Two



I dropped Billy off at his apartment near campus. I didn't think the ghoul would be filing a police report, but I wiped down the shotgun anyway. Billy wrapped it in a towel I had in the backseat of the Beetle and took it with him, promising to dispose of the weapon. His girlfriend, Georgia, a willowy girl a foot taller than him, waited on the apartment's balcony in dark shorts and a scarlet bikini top, displaying a generous amount of impressively sun-bronzed skin in a manner far more confident and appealing than I would have guessed from her a year before. My, how the kids had grown.

The moment Billy got out of the car, Georgia looked up sharply from her book and her nostrils flared. She headed into the house and met him at the door with a first aid kit. She glanced at the car, her expression worried, and nodded to me. I waved back, trying to look friendly. From Georgia's expression, I hadn't managed better than surly. They went into the apartment, and I pulled away before anyone could come out to socialize with me.

After a minute I pulled over, killed the engine, and squinted up at myself in the rearview mirror of the Beetle.

It came as a shock to me. I know, that sounds stupid, but I don't keep mirrors in my home. Too many things can use mirrors as windows, even doors, and it was a risk I preferred to skip entirely. I hadn't glanced at a mirror in weeks.

I looked like a train wreck.

More so than usual, I mean.

My features are usually kind of long, lean, all sharp angles. I've got almost-black hair to go with the dark eyes. Now I had grey and purplish circles under them. Deep ones. The lines of my face, where they weren't covered by several months of untrimmed beard, looked as sharp as the edges of a business card.

My hair had grown out long and shaggy—not in that sexy-young-rock-star kind of way but in that time-to-take-Rover-to-the-groomer kind of way. It didn't even have the advantage of being symmetrical, since a big chunk had been burned short in one spot when a small incendiary had been smuggled to me in a pizza delivery box, back when I could still afford to

order pizza. My skin was pale. Pasty, even. I looked like Death warmed over, provided someone had made Death run the Boston Marathon. I looked tired. Burned out. Used up.

I sat back in my seat.

I hate it when I'm wrong. But it looked like maybe Billy and the werewolves (stars and stones, they sounded like a bad rock band) had a point. I tried to think of the last time I'd gotten a haircut, a shave. I'd had a shower last week. Hadn't I?

I mopped at my face with my shaking hands. The days and nights had been blurring lately. I spent my time in the lab under my apartment, researching twenty-four seven. The lab was in the subbasement, all damp stone and no windows. Circadian rhythms, bah. I'd pretty much dispensed with day and night. There was too much to think about to pay attention to such trivial details.

About nine months before, I'd gotten my girlfriend nearly killed. Maybe more than killed.

Susan Rodriguez had been a reporter for a yellow journal called the *Midwestern Arcane* when we met. She was one of the few people around who were willing to accept the idea of the supernatural as a factual reality. She'd clawed for every detail, every story, every ounce of proof she could dig up so that she could try to raise the public consciousness on the matter. To that end, she'd followed me to a vampire shindig.

And the monsters got her.

Billy had been right about that, too. The vampires, the Red Court, had changed her. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that they infected her. Though she was still human, technically, she'd been given their macabre thirst. If she ever sated it, she would turn all the way into one of them. Some part of her would die, and she would be one of the monsters, body and soul.

That's why the research. I'd been looking for some way to help her. To create a vaccine, or to purge her body. Something. Anything.

I'd asked her to marry me. She told me no. Then she left town. I read her syndicated column in the *Arcane*. She must have been mailing them in to her editor, so at least I knew she was alive. She'd asked me not to follow her and I hadn't. I wouldn't, until I could figure out a way to get her out of the mess I'd gotten her into. There *had* to be something I could do.

Had to be. There had to be.

I bowed my head, suddenly grimacing so hard that the muscles of my face cramped, ached, and smoldered. My chest felt tight, and my body seemed to burn with useless, impotent flame. I'm a wizard. I should have been able to protect Susan. Should have been able to save her. Should have been able to help her. Should have been smarter, should have been faster, should have been better.

Should have told her you loved her before it was too late. Right, Harry?

I tried not to cry. I willed myself not to with all of my years of training and experience and self-discipline. It would accomplish nothing. It wouldn't put me anywhere closer to finding a cure for Susan.

I was so damned tired.

I left my face in my hands. I didn't want someone walking by to see me bawling.

It took a long time to get myself back under control. I'm not sure how long it was, but the shadows had changed and I was baking in the car, even with the windows down.

It occurred to me that it was stupid to be sitting there on the street for more vampire thugs to come find, plain as day. I was tired and dirty and hungry, but I didn't have the cash to get anything to eat, and by the sun I didn't have the time to go back to the apartment for soup. Not if I was to keep my appointment with Ms. Sommerset.

And I needed that appointment. Billy had been right about that, too. If I didn't start earning my keep again, I would lose the office and the apartment. I wouldn't get much magical research done from a cardboard box in an alley.

Time to get moving, then. I raked my fingers uselessly through my mop of hair and headed for my office. A passing clock told me that I was already a couple of minutes late for the appointment. Between that and my appearance, boy, was I going to wow the client. This day just kept getting better.

My office is in a building in midtown. It isn't much of a building, but it still looked too good for me that day. I got a glare from the aging security guard downstairs and felt lucky that he recognized me from previous encounters. A new guy probably would have given me the bum's rush without blinking. I nodded at the guard and smiled and tried to look businesslike. Heh.

I walked past the elevator on my way to the stairs. There was a sign on it that said it was under repair. The elevator hadn't ever been quite the same since a giant scorpion had torn into one of the cars and someone had thrown the elevator up to the top of its chute with a torrent of wind in order to smash the big bug against the roof. The resulting fall sent the car plummeting all the way back to the ground floor and wreaked havoc with the building in general, raising everyone's rents.

Or that's what I heard, anyway. Don't look at me like that. It could have been someone else. Okay, maybe not the orthodontist on four, or the psychiatrist on six. Probably not the insurance office on seven, or the accountant on nine either. Maybe not the lawyers on the top floor. Maybe. But it isn't always me when something goes catastrophically wrong.

Anyway, no one can prove anything.

I opened the door to the stairwell and headed up the stairs to my office, on the fifth floor. I went down the hall, past the quiet buzz of the consulting firm that took up most of the space on the floor, to my office door.

The lettering on the frosted glass read HARRY DRESDEN—WIZARD. I reached out to open the door. A spark jumped to my finger when my hand got within an inch or three of the doorknob, popping against my skin with a sharp little snap of discomfort.

I paused. Even with the building's AC laboring and wheezing, it wasn't *that* cool and dry. Call me paranoid, but there's nothing like a murder attempt in broad daylight to make a man cautious. I focused on my bracelet again, drawing on my apprehension to ready a shield should I need it.

With the other hand I pushed open the door to my office.

My office is usually pretty tidy. Or in any case, I didn't remember it being quite as sloppy as it looked now. Given how little I'd been there lately, it seemed unfair that it should have gotten quite that bad. The table by the door, where I kept a bunch of flyers with titles like "Magic for Dummies" and "I'm a Wizard—Ask Me How" sat crookedly against the wall. The flyers were scattered carelessly over its surface and onto the floor. I could smell the faintest stink of long-burnt coffee. I must have left it on. Oops. My desk had a similar fungus coating of loose papers, and several drawers in my filing cabinets stood open, with files stacked on top of the cabinets or thrust sideways into their places, so that they stood up out of the drawers. My ceiling fan whirled woozily, clicking on every rotation.

Someone had evidently tried to straighten things up. My mail sat neatly stacked in three different piles. Both metal trash cans were suspiciously empty. Billy and company, then.

In the ruins of my office stood a woman with the kind of beauty that makes men murder friends and start wars.

She stood by my desk with her arms folded, facing the door, hips cocked to one side, her expression skeptical. She had white hair. Not white-blond, not platinum. White as snow, white as the finest marble, bound up like a captured cloud to bare the lines of her slender throat. I don't know how her skin managed to look pale beside that hair, but it did. Her lips were the color of frozen mulberries, almost shocking in a smooth and lovely face, and her oblique eyes were a deep green that tinted to blue when she tilted her head and looked me over. She wasn't old. Wasn't young. Wasn't anything but stunning.

I tried to keep my jaw from hitting the floor and forced my brain to start doing something by taking stock of her wardrobe. She wore a woman's suit of charcoal grey, the cut immaculate. The skirt showed exactly enough leg to make it hard not to look, and her dark pumps had heels just high enough to give you ideas. She wore a bone-white V-neck beneath her jacket, the neckline dipping just low enough to make me want to be watching if she took a deep breath. Opals set in silver flashed on her ears, at her throat, glittering through an array of colors I wouldn't have expected from opals—too many scarlets and violets and deep blues. Her nails had somehow been lacquered in the same opalescence.

I caught the scent of her perfume, something wild and rich, heavy and sweet, like orchids. My heart sped up, and the testosterone-oriented part of my brain wished that I'd been able to bathe. Or shave. Or at least that I hadn't worn sweatpants.

Her mouth quirked into a smile, and she arched one pale brow, saying nothing, letting me gawk.

One thing was certain—no woman like that would have anything less than money. Lots of money. Money I could use to pay the rent, buy groceries, maybe even splurge a little and get a wheelbarrow to help with cleaning my apartment. I only hesitated for a heartbeat, wondering if it was proper for a full-fledged wizard of the White Council to be that interested in cash. I made up my mind fast.

Phenomenal cosmic powers be damned. I have a lease.

“Uh, Ms. Sommerset, I presume,” I managed finally. No one can do suave like me. If I was careful, I should be able to trip over something and complete the image. “I’m Harry Dresden.”

“I believe you are late,” she replied. Sommerset had a voice like her outfit—rich, suggestive, cultured. Her English had an accent I couldn’t place. Maybe European. Definitely interesting. “Your assistant informed me when to arrive. I don’t like to be kept waiting, so I let myself in.” She glanced at my desk, then back at me. “I almost wish I hadn’t.”

“Yeah. I didn’t hear you were coming until, uh . . .” I looked around at my office, dismayed, and shut the door behind me. “I know this looks pretty unprofessional.”

“Quite correct.”

I moved to one of the chairs I keep for clients, facing my desk, and hurriedly cleared it off. “Please, sit down. Would you like a cup of coffee or anything?”

“Sounds less than sanitary. Why should I take the risk?” She sat, her back straight, on the edge of the chair, following me with her eyes as I walked around the desk. They were a cool, noticeable weight on me as I moved, and I sat down at my desk, frowning.

“Are you the kind who takes chances?”

“I like to hedge my bets,” she murmured. “You, for example, Mister Dresden. I have come here today to decide whether or not I shall gamble a great deal upon your abilities.” She paused and then added, “Thus far, you have made less than a sterling impression.”

I rested my elbows on my desk and steepled my fingers. “Yeah. I know that all this probably makes me look like—”

“A desperate man?” she suggested. “Someone who is clearly obsessed with other matters.” She nodded toward the stacks of envelopes on my desk. “One who is shortly to lose his place of business if he does not pay his debts. I think you need the work.” She began to rise. “And if you lack the ability to take care of such minor matters, I doubt you will be of any use to me.”

“Wait,” I said, rising. “Please. At least let me hear you out. If it turns out that I think I can help you—”

She lifted her chin and interrupted me effortlessly. “But that isn’t the question, is it?” she asked. “The question is whether or not *I* think you can

help me. You have shown me nothing to make me think that you could.” She paused, sitting back down again. “And yet . . .”

I sat back down across from her. “Yet?”

“I have heard things, Mister Dresden, about people with your abilities. About the ability to look into their eyes.”

I tilted my head. “I wouldn’t call it an ability. It just happens.”

“Yet you are able to see within them? You call it a soulgaze, do you not?”

I nodded warily and started adding together lots of small bits and pieces. “Yes.”

“Revealing their true nature? Seeing the truth about the person upon whom you look?”

“And they see me back. Yes.”

She smiled, cool and lovely. “Then let us look upon one another, Mister Dresden, you and I. Then I will know if you can be of any use to me. Surely it will cost me nothing.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. It’s the sort of thing that stays with you.” Like an appendectomy scar, or baldness. When you look on someone’s soul, you don’t forget it. Not ever. I didn’t like the direction this was going. “I don’t think it would be a good idea.”

“But why not?” she pressed. “It won’t take long, will it, Mister Dresden?”

“That’s really not the issue.”

Her mouth firmed into a line. “I see. Then, if you will excuse me—”

This time I interrupted her. “Ms. Sommerset, I think you may have made a mistake in your estimations.”

Her eyes glittered, anger showing for a moment, cool and far away. “Oh?”

I nodded. I opened the drawer to my desk and took out a pad of paper. “Yeah. I’ve had a rough time of things lately.”

“You can’t possibly know how little that matters to me.”

I drew out a pen, took off the lid, and set it down beside the pad. “Uh-huh. Then you come in here. Rich, gorgeous—kind of too good to be true.”

“And?” she inquired.

“Too good to be true,” I repeated. I drew the .44-caliber revolver from the desk drawer, leveled it at her, and thumbed back the hammer. “Call me crazy, but lately I’ve been thinking that if something’s too good to be true, then it probably isn’t. Put your hands on the desk, please.”

Her eyebrows arched. Those gorgeous eyes widened enough to show the whites all the way around them. She moved her hands, swallowing as she did, and laid her palms on the desk. “What do you think you are doing?” she demanded.

“I’m testing a theory,” I said. I kept the gun and my eyes on her and opened another drawer. “See, lately, I’ve been getting nasty visitors. So it’s made me do some thinking about what kind of trouble to expect. And I think I’ve got you pegged.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Mister Dresden, but I am certain—”

“Save it.” I rummaged in a drawer and found what I needed. A moment later I lifted a plain old nail of simple metal out of the drawer and put it on the desk.

“What’s that?” she all but whispered.

“Litmus test,” I said.

Then I flicked the nail gently with one finger, and sent it rolling across the surface of my desk and toward her perfectly manicured hands.

She didn’t move until a split second before the nail touched her—but then she did, a blur of motion that took her two long strides back from my desk and knocked over the chair she’d been sitting on. The nail rolled off the edge of the desk and fell to the floor with a clink.

“Iron,” I said. “Cold iron. Faeries don’t like it.”

The expression drained from her face. One moment, there had been arrogant conceit, haughty superiority, blithe confidence. But that simply vanished, leaving her features cold and lovely and remote and empty of all emotion, of anything recognizably human.

“The bargain with my godmother has months yet to go,” I said. “A year and a day, she had to leave me alone. That was the deal. If she’s trying to weasel out of it, I’m going to be upset.”

She regarded me in that empty silence for long moments more. It was unsettling to see a face so lovely look so wholly alien, as though something lurked behind those features that had little in common with me and did not care to make the effort to understand. That blank mask made my throat tighten, and I had to work not to let the gun in my hand shake. But then she did something that made her look even more alien, more frightening.

She smiled. A slow smile, cruel as a barbed knife. When she spoke, her voice sounded just as beautiful as it had before. But it was empty, quiet,

haunting. She spoke, and it made me want to lean closer to her to hear her more clearly. “Clever,” she murmured. “Yes. Not too distracted to think. Just what I need.”

A cold shiver danced down my spine. “I don’t want any trouble,” I said. “Just go, and we can both pretend nothing happened.”

“But it has,” she murmured. Just the sound of her voice made the room feel colder. “You have seen through this veil. Proven your worth. How did you do it?”

“Static on the doorknob,” I said. “It should have been locked. You shouldn’t have been able to get in here, so you must have gone through it. And you danced around my questions rather than simply answering them.”

Still smiling, she nodded. “Go on.”

“You don’t have a purse. Not many women go out in a three-thousand-dollar suit and no purse.”

“Mmmm,” she said. “Yes. You’ll do perfectly, Mister Dresden.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said. “I’m having nothing more to do with faeries.”

“I don’t like being called that, Mister Dresden.”

“You’ll get over it. Get out of my office.”

“You should know, Mister Dresden, that my kind, from great to small, are bound to speak the truth.”

“That hasn’t slowed your ability to deceive.”

Her eyes glittered, and I saw her pupils change, slipping from round mortal orbs to slow feline lengths. Cat-eyed, she regarded me, unblinking. “Yet have I spoken. I plan to gamble. And I will gamble upon you.”

“Uh. What?”

“I require your service. Something precious has been stolen. I wish you to recover it.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You want me to recover stolen goods for you?”

“Not for me,” she murmured. “For the rightful owners. I wish you to discover and catch the thief and to vindicate me.”

“Do it yourself,” I said.

“In this matter I cannot act wholly alone,” she murmured. “That is why I have chosen you to be my emissary. My agent.”

I laughed at her. That made something else come into those perfect, pale features—anger. Anger, cold and terrible, flashed in her eyes and all but

froze the laugh in my throat. “I don’t think so,” I said. “I’m not making any more bargains with your folk. I don’t even know who you are.”

“Dear child,” she murmured, a slow edge to her voice. “The bargain has already been made. You gave your life, your fortune, your future, in exchange for power.”

“Yeah. With my godmother. And that’s still being contested.”

“No longer,” she said. “Even in this world of mortals, the concept of debt passes from one hand to the next. Selling mortgages, yes?”

My belly went cold. “What are you saying?”

Her teeth showed, sharp and white. It wasn’t a smile. “Your mortgage, mortal child, has been sold. I have purchased it. You are mine. And you *will* assist me in this matter.”

I set the gun down on my desk and opened the top drawer. I took out my letter opener, one of the standard machined jobs with a heavy, flat blade and a screw-grip handle. “You’re wrong,” I said, and the denial in my voice sounded patently obvious, even to me. “My godmother would never do that. For all I know, you’re trying to trick me.”

She smiled, watching me, her eyes bright. “Then by all means, let me reassure you of the truth.”

My left palm slammed down onto the table. I watched, startled, as I gripped the letter opener in my right hand, slasher-movie style. In a panic, I tried to hold back my hand, to drop the opener, but my arms were running on automatic, like they were someone else’s.

“Wait!” I shouted.

She regarded me, cold and distant and interested.

I slammed the letter opener down onto the back of my own hand, hard. My desk is a cheap one. The steel bit cleanly through the meat between my thumb and forefinger and sank into the desk, pinning me there. Pain washed up my arm even as blood started oozing out of the wound. I tried to fight it down, but I was panicked, in no condition to exert a lot of control. A whimper slipped out of me. I tried to pull the steel away, to get it *out* of my hand, but my arm simply twisted, wrenching the letter opener counterclockwise.

The pain flattened me. I wasn’t even able to get enough breath to scream.

The woman, the faerie, reached down and took my fingers away from the letter opener. She withdrew it with a sharp, decisive gesture and laid it flat

on the desk, my blood gleaming all over it. “Wizard, you know as well as I. Were you not bound to me, I would have no such power over you.”

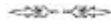
At that moment, most of what I knew was that my hand hurt, but some dim part of me realized she was telling the truth. Faeries don’t just get to ride in and play puppet master. You have to let them in. I’d let my godmother, Lea, in years before, when I was younger, dumber. I’d given her the slip last year, forced an abeyance of her claim that should have protected me for a year and a day.

But now she’d passed the reins to someone else. Someone who hadn’t been in on the second bargain.

I looked up at her, pain and sudden anger making my voice into a low, harsh growl. “Who are you?”

The woman ran an opalescent fingernail through the blood on my desk. She lifted it to her lips and idly touched it to her tongue. She smiled, slower, more sensual, and every bit as alien. “I have many names,” she murmured. “But you may call me Mab. Queen of Air and Darkness. Monarch of the Winter Court of the Sidhe.”

Chapter Three



The bottom fell out of my stomach.

A Faerie Queen. A Faerie Queen was standing in my office. I was looking at a Faerie Queen. Talking to a Faerie Queen.

And she had me by the short hairs.

Boy, and I'd thought my life was on the critical list already.

Fear can literally feel like ice water. It can be a cold feeling that you swallow, that rolls down your throat and spreads into your chest. It steals your breath and makes your heart labor when it shouldn't, before expanding into your belly and hips, leaving quivers behind. Then it heads for the thighs, the knees (occasionally with an embarrassing stop on the way), stealing the strength from the long muscles that think you should be using them to run the hell away.

I swallowed a mouthful of fear, my eyes on the poisonously lovely faerie standing on the other side of my desk.

It made Mab smile.

"Yes," she murmured. "Wise enough to be afraid. To understand, at least in part. How does it feel, to know what you know, child?"

My voice came out unsteady, and more quiet than I would have liked. "Sort of like Tokyo when Godzilla comes up on the beach."

Mab tilted her head, watching me with that same smile. Maybe she didn't get the reference. Or maybe she didn't like being compared to a thirty-story lizard. Or maybe she *did* like it. I mean, how should I know? I have enough trouble figuring out human women.

I didn't meet Mab's eyes. I wasn't worried about a soulgaze any longer. Both parties had to have a soul for that to happen. But plenty of things can get to you if you make eye contact too long. It carries all sorts of emotions and metaphors. I stared at Mab's chin, my hand burning with pain, and said nothing because I was afraid.

I hate being afraid. I hate it more than anything in the whole world. I hate being made to feel helpless. I hate being bullied, too, and Mab might as well have been ramming her fist down my throat and demanding my lunch money.

The Faerie Queens were bad news. Big bad news. Short of calling up some hoary old god or squaring off against the White Council itself, I wasn't likely to run into anything else with as much raw power as Mab. I could have thrown a magical sucker punch at her, could have tried to take her out, but even if we'd been on even footing I doubt I would have ruffled her hair. And she had a bond on me, a magical conduit. She could send just about anything right past my defenses, and there wouldn't be anything I could do about it.

Bullies make me mad—and I've been known to do some foolish things when I'm angry.

"Forget it," I said, my voice hot. "No deal. Get it over with and blast me. Lock the door on your way out."

My response didn't seem to ruffle her. She folded her arms and murmured, "Such anger. Such fire. Yes. I watched you stalemate your godmother the Leanansidhe autumn last. Few mortals ever have done as much. Bold. Impertinent. I admire that kind of strength, wizard. I need that kind of strength."

I fumbled around on my desk until I found the tissue dispenser and started packing the wound with the flimsy fabric. "I don't really care what you need," I told her. "I'm not going to be your emissary or anything else unless you want to force me, and I doubt I'd be much good to you then. So do whatever you're going to do or get out of my office."

"You should care, Mister Dresden," Mab told me. "It concerns you explicitly. I purchased your debt in order to make you an offer. To give you the chance to win free of your obligations."

"Yeah, right. Save it. I'm not interested."

"You may serve, wizard, or you may be served. As a meal. Do you not wish to be free?"

I looked up at her, warily, visions of barbecued me on a table with an apple in my mouth dancing in my head. "What do you mean by 'free'?"

"Free," she said, wrapping those frozen-berry lips around the word so that I couldn't help but notice. "Free of Sidhe influence, of the bonds of your obligation first to the Leanansidhe and now to me."

"The whole thing a wash? We go our separate ways?"

"Precisely."

I looked down at my hurting hand and scowled. "I didn't think you were much into freedom as a concept, Mab."

“You should not presume, wizard. I adore freedom. Anyone who doesn’t have it wants it.”

I took a deep breath and tried to get my heart rate under control. I couldn’t let either fear or anger do my thinking for me. My instincts screamed at me to go for the gun again and give it a shot, but I had to think. It was the only thing that could get you clear of the fae.

Mab was on the level about her offer. I could feel that, sense it in a way so primal, so visceral, that there was no room left for doubt. She would cut me loose if I agreed to her bargain. Of course, her price might be too high. She hadn’t gotten to that yet. And the fae have a way of making sure that further bargains only get you in deeper, instead of into the clear. Just like credit card companies, or those student loan people. Now there’s evil for you.

I could feel Mab watching me, Sylvester to my Tweetie Bird. That thought kind of cheered me up. Generally speaking, Tweetie kicks Sylvester’s ass in the end.

“Okay,” I told her. “I’m listening.”

“Three tasks,” Mab murmured, holding up three fingers by way of visual aid. “From time to time, I will make a request of you. When you have fulfilled three requests, your obligation to me ceases.”

Silence lay on the room for a moment, and I blinked. “What. That’s it?”

Mab nodded.

“Any three tasks? Any three requests?”

Mab nodded.

“Just as simple as that? I mean, you say it like that, and I could pass you the salt three times and that would be that.”

Her eyes, green-blue like glacial ice, remained on my face, unblinking. “Do you accept?”

I rubbed at my mouth slowly, mulling it over in my head. It was a simple bargain, as these things went. They could get really complicated, with contracts and everything. Mab had offered me a great package, sweet, neat, and tidy as a Halloween candy.

Which meant that I’d be an idiot not to check for razor blades and cyanide.

“I decide which requests I fulfill and which I don’t?”

“Even so.”

“And if I refuse a request, there will be no reprisals or punishments from you.”

She tilted her head and blinked her eyes, slowly. “Agreed. You, not I, will choose which requests you fulfill.”

There was one land mine I’d found, at least. “And no more selling my mortgage, either. Or whistling up the lackeys to chastise or harass me by proxy. This remains between the two of us.”

She laughed, and it sounded as merry, clear, and lovely as bells—if someone pressed them against my teeth while they were still ringing. “As your godmother did. Fool me twice, shame on me, wizard? Agreed.”

I licked my lips, thinking hard. Had I left her any openings? Could she get to me any other way?

“Well, wizard?” Mab asked. “Have we a bargain?”

I gave myself a second to wish I’d been less tired. Or less in pain. The events of the day and the impending Council meeting this evening hadn’t exactly left my head in world-class negotiating condition. But I knew one thing for certain. If I didn’t get out from under Mab’s bond, I would be dead, or worse than dead, in short order. Better to act and be mistaken than not to act and get casually crushed.

“All right,” I said. “We have a bargain.” When I said the words, a little frisson prickled over the nape of my neck, down the length of my spine. My wounded hand twitched in an aching, painful pang.

Mab closed her eyes, smiling a feline smile with those dark lips, and inclined her head. “Good. Yes.”

You know that look on Wile E. Coyote’s face, when he runs at full steam off the cliff and then realizes what he’s done? He doesn’t look down, but he feels around with one toe, and right then, right before he falls, his face becomes drawn with a primal dread.

That’s what I must have looked like. I know it was pretty much what I felt like. But there was no help for it. Maybe if I didn’t stop to check for the ground underneath my feet, I’d keep going indefinitely. I looked away from Mab and tried to tend to my hand as best I could. It still throbbed, and disinfecting the wound was going to hurt a lot more. I doubted it would need sutures. A small blessing, I guess.

A manila envelope hit my desk. I looked up to see Mab drawing a pair of gloves onto her hands.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“My request,” she replied. “Within are the details of a man’s death. I wish you to vindicate me of it by discovering the identity of his killer and returning what was stolen from him.”

I opened the envelope. Inside was an eight-by-ten glossy black-and-white of a body. An old man lay at the bottom of a flight of stairs, his neck at a sharp angle to his shoulders. He had frizzy white hair, a tweed jacket. Accompanying the picture was an article from the *Tribune*, headlined LOCAL ARTIST DIES IN MIDNIGHT ACCIDENT.

“Ronald Reuel,” I said, glancing over the article. “I’ve heard of him. Has a studio in Bucktown, I think.”

Mab nodded. “Hailed as a visionary of the American artistic culture. Though I assume they use the term lightly.”

“Creator of worlds of imagination, it says. I guess now that he’s dead, they’ll say all kinds of nice things.” I read over the rest of the article. “The police called it an accident.”

“It was not,” Mab responded.

I looked up at her. “How do you know?”

She smiled.

“And why should you care?” I asked. “It isn’t like the cops are after you.”

“There are powers of judgement other than mortal law. It is enough for you to know that I wish to see justice done,” she said. “Simply that.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, frowning. “You said something was stolen from him. What?”

“You’ll know it.”

I put the picture back in the envelope and left it on my desk. “I’ll think about it.”

Mab assured me, “You will accept this request, Wizard Dresden.”

I scowled at her and set my jaw. “I said I’ll *think* about it.”

Mab’s cat-eyes glittered, and I saw a few white, white teeth in her smile. She took a pair of dark sunglasses from the pocket of her jacket. “Is it not polite to show a client to the door?”

I glowered. But I got up out of the chair and walked to the door, the Faerie Queen’s heady perfume, the narcotics *scent* of her enough to make me a little dizzy. I fought it away and tried to keep my scowl in place, opening the door for her with a jerky motion.

“Your hand yet pains you?” she asked.

“What do you think?”

Mab placed her gloved hand on my wounded one, and a sudden spike of sheer, vicious cold shot up through the injury like a frozen scalpel before lancing up my arm, straight toward my heart. It took my breath, and I felt my heart skip a beat, two, before it labored into rhythm again. I gasped and swayed, and only leaning against the door kept me from falling down completely.

“Dammit,” I muttered, trying to keep my voice down. “We had a deal.”

“I agreed not to punish you for refusing me, wizard. I agreed not to punish or harass you by proxy.” Mab smiled. “I did that just for spite.”

I growled. “That isn’t going to make it more likely that I take this case.”

“You will take it, emissary,” Mab said, her voice confident. “Expect to meet your counterpart this evening.”

“What counterpart?”

“As you are Winter’s emissary in this matter, Summer, too, has sought out one to represent her interests.”

“I got plans tonight,” I growled. “And I haven’t taken the case.”

Mab tilted her dark glasses down, cat eyes on mine. “Wizard. Do you know the story of the Fox and Scorpion?”

I shook my head, looking away.

“Fox and Scorpion came to a brook,” Mab murmured, her voice low, sweet. “Wide was the water. Scorpion asked Fox for a ride on his back. Fox said, ‘Scorpion, will you not sting me?’ Scorpion said, ‘If I did, it would mean the death of us both.’ Fox agreed, and Scorpion climbed onto his back. Fox swam, but halfway over, Scorpion struck with his deadly sting. Fox gasped, ‘Fool, you have doomed us both. Why?’ ‘I am a scorpion,’ said Scorpion. ‘It is my nature.’”

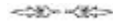
“That’s the story?” I said. “Don’t quit your day job.”

Mab laughed, velvet ice, and it sent another shiver through me. “You will accept this case, wizard. It is what you are. It is your nature.” Then she turned and walked down the hall, aloof, reserved, cold. I glowered after her for a minute before I shut the door.

Maybe I’d been shut away in my lab too long, but Spenser never mentions that the Faerie Queen has a great ass.

So I notice these things. So sue me.

Chapter Four



I leaned against my door with my eyes closed, trying to think. I was scared. Not in that half-pleasant adrenaline-charged way, but quietly scared. Wait-on-the-results-of-medical-tests scared. It's a rational sort of fear that puts a lawn chair down in the front of your thoughts and brings a cooler of drinks along with it.

I was working for the queen of wicked faeries—well, Queen of Winter, of the Unseelie faeries, at any rate. The Unseelie weren't universally vicious and evil, any more than the Seelie, the Summer fae, were all kind and wise. They were much like the season for which they had been named—cold, beautiful, pitiless, and entirely without remorse. Only a fool would willingly associate with them.

Not that Mab had given me much of a choice, but technically speaking there had been one. I could have turned her down flat and accepted whatever came.

I chewed on my lip. Given the kind of business I was in, I hadn't felt the need to spend too much time hunting for a good retirement plan. Wizards can live a long, long time, but most of the ones that do tend to be the kind that stick at home in their study. Not many tossed their gauntlets into as many faces as I had.

I'd been clever a couple of times, lucky a couple of times, and I'd come out ahead of the game so far—but sooner or later the dice were going to come up snake eyes. It was as simple as that, and I knew it.

Fear. Maybe that was why I'd agreed to Mab's bargain. Susan's life had been twisted horribly, and that was my fault. I wanted to help her before I went down swinging.

But some little voice in the back of my head told me that I was being awfully noble for someone who had flinched when push had come to shove. The little voice told me that I was making excuses. Some part of me that doesn't trust much and believes in even less whispered that I had simply been afraid to say no to a being who could probably make me long for death if I denied her.

Either way, it was too late for questions now. I'd made the bargain, for better or worse. If I didn't want it to end badly, I'd better start figuring out

how to get out of it without getting swallowed up in faerie politics. I wouldn't do that by taking the case of Ronald Reuel, I was pretty damn sure. Mab wouldn't have offered it if she hadn't thought it would get me further entangled than I already was. Maybe she had me in a metaphysical armlock, but that didn't mean I was going to jump every time she said "frog." I could figure out something else. And besides, I had other problems on my mind.

There wasn't much time to spare before the Council meeting that evening, so I got my things together and got ready to leave. I paused at the door, with that nagging feeling I get when I'm forgetting something. My eyes settled on my stack of unpaid bills and I remembered.

Money. I'd come here to get a case. To make some cash. To pay my bills. Now I was hip-deep in trouble and heading straight out to sea, and I hadn't gotten a retainer or made one red cent.

I swore at myself and pulled the door shut behind me.

You'd think as long as I was gambling with my soul, I would have thought to get Mab to throw in fifty bucks an hour plus expenses.

I headed out to start taking care of business. Traffic in Chicago can be the usual nightmare of traffic in any large American city, but that afternoon's was particularly bad. Stuck behind a wreck up ahead, the Beetle turned into an oven, and I spent a while sweating and wishing that I wasn't too much of a wizard for a decent modern air conditioner to survive. That was one of the hazards of magical talent. Technology doesn't get along so well when there is a lot of magic flying around. Anything manufactured after World War II or so seemed prone to failure whenever a wizard was nearby. Stuff with microcircuits and electrical components and that kind of paraphernalia seemed to have the most trouble, but even simpler things, like the Beetle's air conditioner, usually couldn't last long.

Running late, I dropped by my apartment and waded through the wreckage looking for my gear for the meeting. I couldn't find everything, and I didn't have time to get a shower. The refrigerator was empty, and all I could find to eat was a half-wrapped candy bar I'd started and never finished. I stuffed it into my pocket, then headed for the meeting of the White Council of Wizardry.

Where I was sure to cut a devastating swath with my couth, hygiene, and natural grace.

I pulled into the parking lot across the street from McCormick Place Complex, one of the largest convention centers in the world. The White Council had rented one of the smaller buildings for the meeting. The sun hung low in the sky, growing larger and redder as it dropped toward the horizon.

I parked the Beetle in the relative cool of the lowest level of the parking garage, got out of the car, and walked around to the front to open the trunk. I was shrugging into my robe when I heard a car coming in, engine rumbling and rattling. A black '37 Ford pickup, complete with rounded fenders and wooden-slat sides on the bed, pulled into the empty space next to mine. There wasn't any rust on the old machine, and it gleamed with fresh wax. A weathered shotgun rode on top of a wooden rack against the rear wall of the passenger compartment, and in the slot beneath it sat a worn old wizard's staff. The Ford crunched to a halt with a kind of dinosaur solidity, and a moment later the engine died.

The driver, a short, stocky man in a white T-shirt and blue denim overalls, opened the door and hopped down from the truck with the brisk motions of a busy man. His head was bald except for a fringe of downy white tufts, and a bristling white beard covered his mouth and jowls. He slammed the door shut with thoughtless strength, grinned, and boomed, "Hoss! Good to see you again."

"Ebenezar," I responded, if without the same earringing volume. I felt myself answer his grin with my own, and stepped over to him to shake his offered hand. I squeezed hard, purely out of self-defense. He had a grip that could crush a can of spinach. "You'd better take the shotgun down. Chicago PD is picky about people with guns."

Ebenezar snorted and said, "I'm too old to go worrying about every fool thing."

"What are you doing out of Missouri, sir? I didn't think you came to Council meetings."

He let out a barking laugh. "The last time I didn't, they saddled me with this useless teenage apprentice. Now I don't hardly dare miss one. They might make him move in again."

I laughed. "I wasn't that bad, was I?"

He snorted. "You burned down my barn, Hoss. And I never did see that cat again. He just lit out and didn't come back after what you did with the laundry."

I grinned. Way back when, I'd been a stupid sixteen-year-old orphan who had killed his former teacher in what amounted to a magical duel. I'd gotten lucky, or it would have been me that had been burned to a briquette instead of old Justin. The Council has Seven Laws of Magic, and the first one is Thou Shalt Not Kill. When you break it, they execute you, no questions asked.

But some of the other wizards had thought I deserved lenience, and there was a precedent for using lethal magic in self-defense against the black arts. I'd been put on a kind of horrible probation instead, with any further infraction against the Laws punishable by immediate summary judgement. But I'd also been sixteen, and legally a minor, which meant I had to go someplace—preferably where the Council could keep an eye on me and where I could learn better control of my powers.

Ebenazar McCoy had lived in Hog Hollow, Missouri, for as long as anyone could remember—a couple of centuries at least. After my trial, the Council packed me off to his farm and put him in charge of the remainder of my education. Education, to Ebenazar, meant a lot of hard work on the farm during the day, studying in the evening, and getting a good night's sleep.

I didn't learn much magic from him, but I'd gotten some more important stuff. I'd learned more about patience. About creating something, making something worthwhile out of my labor. And I'd found as much peace as a teenager could expect. It had been a good place for me then, and he'd given me the kind of respect and distance I'd needed. I would always be grateful.

Ebenazar frowned past me, squinting at the Beetle. I followed his gaze and realized that my car looked like it had been pounded with bloody hailstones. The toad blood had dried to dark caramel brown, except where my windshield wipers had swept it away. Ebenazar looked back at me, lifting his eyebrows.

"Rain of toads," I explained.

"Ah." He rubbed his jaw and squinted at me and then at the cloth wrapped around my hand. "And that?"

"Accident in the office. It's been a long day."

"Uh-huh. You know, you don't look so good, Hoss." He looked up at me, his eyes steady, frowning. I didn't meet the look. We'd traded a soulgaze, years ago, so I wasn't afraid of it happening again. I just didn't want to look

at the old man and see disappointment there. "I hear you been getting into some trouble up here."

"Some," I admitted.

"You all right?"

"I'll make it."

"Uh-huh. I'm told the senior Council is pretty upset," he said. "Could mean trouble for you, Hoss."

"Yeah. I figured."

He sighed and shook his head, looking me up and down, nose wrinkling. "You don't exactly look like a shining example of young wizardry. And you're not going to make much of an impression wearing that."

I scowled, defensive, and draped the stole of rich blue silk over my head. "Hey, I'm supposed to wear a robe. We all are."

Ebenezar gave me a wry look and turned to the pickup. He dragged a suit carrier out of the back and pulled out a robe of opulent dark fabric, folding it over one arm. "Somehow I don't think a plaid flannel bathrobe is what they had in mind."

I tied the belt of my old bathrobe and tried to make the stole look like it should go with it. "My cat used my good robe as a litter box. Like I said, it's been a long day, sir."

He grunted and took his stumpy old wizard's staff off the gun rack. Then he drew out his scarlet stole and draped it over the robe. "Too hot to wear this damn thing out here. I'll put it on inside." He looked up, pale blue eyes glittering as he swept his gaze around the parking garage.

I frowned at him and tilted my head. "We're late. Shouldn't we be getting to the meeting?"

"In a minute. Some people want to talk before we close the circle." He glanced aside at me and said more quietly, "Senior Council."

I drew in a sharp breath. "Why do they want to talk to us?"

"Not us. You. Because I asked them to, boy. People are scared. If the Senior Council allows things to come to an open vote of the entire Council, it could go badly for you. So I wanted some of them to get a chance to meet you for themselves before they started making choices that could get you hurt."

Ebenezar leaned back against his truck and folded his arms across his belly, bowing his head with his eyes squinted almost completely shut. He said nothing more. Nothing about him betrayed any tension, from the set of

his bull neck and solid shoulders to the stillness of his gnarled, work-hardened hands. But I felt it in him, somewhere.

I said quietly, "You're going out on a limb for me, aren't you?"

He shrugged. "Some, maybe."

I felt the anger run hot in my belly, and I tightened the muscles of my jaw. But I made an effort to keep my voice even. Ebenezar had been more than my teacher. He'd been my mentor at a time when I hadn't had anything else left to me. He'd helped me when a lot of other people wanted to kick me while I was down—or, more accurately, decapitate me while I was down. I owed him my life in more than one sense.

It would be wrong for me to lose my temper, no matter how tired or hurt I was. Besides, the old man could probably kick my ass. So I managed to tone my answer down to, "What the hell do you think you're doing, *sir* ? I am not your apprentice anymore. I can look out for myself."

He didn't miss the anger. Guess I'm not much of a poker player. He looked up at me and said, "I'm trying to help you, boy."

"I've got all the help I can stand already," I told him. "I've got vampires breathing down my neck, toads falling from the sky, I'm about to get evicted from everywhere, I'm late to the Council meeting, and I am *not* going to stand around out here and suck up to members of the Senior Council to lobby their vote."

Ebenezar thrust out his jaw, rapping his staff against the ground to emphasize his sentences. "Harry, this is not a game. The Wardens and the Merlin are dead set against you. They *will* move. Without support in the Senior Council you're in trouble, Hoss."

I shook my head and thought of Mab's glacial gaze. "It can't be much more than I'm in already."

"The hell it can't. They could make a sacrificial lamb of you."

"They will or they won't. Either way I'm not going to start brownnosing the Council now, Senior or otherwise."

"Harry, I'm not saying you need to get on your knees and beg, but if you would just—"

I rolled my eyes. "What? Offer a couple of favors? Sell my vote to one of the blocs? Fuck that. Pardon my French. I've got enough problems without—" I broke off abruptly, narrowing my eyes. "You're the last one I would expect to be telling me to get involved in Council politics."

Ebenezar scowled at me. "Oh?"

“Yeah. In fact, the last time I checked, you told me the whole swill-spouting pack of lollygagging skunkwallows could transform one another into clams, for all you cared.”

“I did not say that.”

“Did so.”

Ebenezar’s face turned red. “Boy. I ought to—”

“Save it,” I told him. “Go ahead and punch me or whatever, but threats just aren’t hitting me like they used to.”

Ebenezar snorted at me and slammed his staff on the concrete once more before turning and stalking several paces away. He stood there for a minute, muttering to himself. Or I thought he was muttering. After a minute, the sound resolved itself into swallowed laughter.

I scowled at his back. “What?” I demanded. “Why are you laughing at me?”

Ebenezar turned out to an open parking space across the row and said, “There. Are you satisfied?”

I never felt a whisper of power, not a breath of magic stirring against me. Whatever veil had been used, it was beyond anything I could have even attempted. I’m not exactly a neurosurgeon when it comes to magic. I’ve had my moments, but mostly I muddle through by shoving a lot of energy into my spells until it doesn’t matter if half of it is slopping out. Magically speaking, I’m a brawny thug, and noisy as hell.

This veil was good, almost perfect, completely silent. Way better than I would be able to do anytime in the next couple of decades. I stared in abrupt shock as it fell and two people I hadn’t sensed at all simply flickered into existence in front of me.

The first was a woman better than six feet tall. She wore her grey hair coiled in a net at the base of her neck. She had already put on her robes of office, black silk nearly the same color as her skin, and her purple stole echoed the gems at her throat. Her eyebrows were still dark, and she had one of them arched as she regarded Ebenezar, then me, with a completely unamused expression. When she spoke, her voice was a low, rich alto. “Lollygagging skunkwallows?”

“Matty—” Ebenezar began, laughter still flavoring his words. “You know how I get when I’m talking about Council politics.”

“Don’t you ‘Matty’ me, Ebenezar McCoy,” she snapped. She looked past my old mentor to focus on me. “Wizard Dresden, I am less than amused

with your lack of respect toward the White Council.”

I lifted my chin and glared down at the woman without meeting her eyes. It's a tough trick to learn, but if you're motivated enough you can do it. “That's a coincidence. I'm not terribly amused with you spying on me.”

The black woman's eyes flashed, but Ebenezar cut in before either of us could gather any more steam. “Harry Dresden,” he said dryly, “Meet Martha Liberty.”

She shot him a look and said pointedly, “He's arrogant, Ebenezar. Dangerous.”

I snorted. “That's every wizard ever.”

Martha continued as if I hadn't spoken. “Bitter. Angry. Obsessive.”

Ebenezar frowned. “Seems to me he has good reason to be. You and the rest of the Senior Council saw to that.”

Martha shook her head. “You know what he was meant to be. He's too great a risk.”

I snapped my fingers twice and hooked a thumb at my own chest. “Hey, lady. He's also right here.”

Her eyes flashed at me. “Look at him, Ebenezar. He's a wreck. Look at the destruction he has caused.”

Ebenezar took two quick, angry steps toward Martha. “By challenging the Red Court when they were going to kill that young woman? No, Matty. Hoss didn't cause what's happened since. They did. I've read his report. He stood up to them when they damn well needed standing up to.”

Martha folded her arms, strong and brown against the front of her robes. “The Merlin says—”

“I know what he says,” Ebenezar muttered. “By now I don't even need to hear him say it. And as usual, he's half right, half wrong, and all gutless.”

Martha frowned at him for a long and silent moment. Then she looked at me and asked, “Do you remember me, Mister Dresden?”

I shook my head. “They had a hood on me all through the trial, and I missed the meeting Warden Morgan called a couple years back. They were taking a bullet out of my hip.”

“I know. I never saw your face before today.” She moved then, lifting a slender staff of some dark reddish wood, and walked toward me, the staff clicking with each step. I faced her, bracing myself, but she didn't try to meet my gaze. She studied my features for a long moment and then said, very quietly, “You have your mother's eyes.”

An old pain rolled through me. I barely managed more than a whisper in response. "I never knew her."

"No. You didn't." She lifted one wide, heavy hand and passed it through the air on either side of my head, as though smoothing my hair without touching it. Then she raked her eyes over me, staring intently at my bandaged hand. "You hurt. You're in great pain."

"It isn't bad. It should heal in a few days."

"I'm not talking about your hand, boy." She closed her eyes and bowed her head. Her voice came heavily, slowly, as though her lips were reluctant to let the words pass them. "Very well, Ebenezar. I will support you."

She stepped back and away from me, back to the side of the second person who had appeared. I'd almost forgotten about him, and looking at him now I began to see why. He contained a quality of stillness I could all but feel around him—easy to sense but difficult to define. His features, his bearing, everything about him blended into his background, swallowed by that stillness, patient and quiet as a stone beneath moon and sun.

He was of innocuous height, five eight, maybe five nine. His dark hair was plaited in a long braid, despite age that seamed his features like bronzed leather under a scarlet sun, warm and worn. His eyes, beneath silver brows, were dark, inscrutable, intense. Eagle feathers adorned his braid, a necklace of bits of bone circled his throat, and he had a beaded bracelet wrapped around one forearm, which poked out from beneath his black robe. One weathered hand gripped a simple, uncarved staff.

"Hoss," Ebenezar said, "this here is Listens to Wind. But that's always been too much of a mouthful for me, even for a genuine Illinois medicine man. I just call him Injun Joe."

"How—" I began. Maybe some kind of irony could be found in the first part of asking how did he do, but something scratched at my foot and I left off the rest. I let out a yelp and jumped away from a flash of fur near my feet without stopping to see what it was. It had been that kind of day.

I tripped over my own staff and fell down. I scrambled over on my back to put my legs between my face and whatever snarling thing might be coming for me, drawing back one foot to kick.

I needn't have bothered. A raccoon, and a fairly young one at that, stood up on its hind legs and chattered at me in annoyance, soft grey fur bristling wildly as though it had been fit for an animal several sizes larger. The raccoon gave me what I swore was an irritated look, eyes glittering within

the dark mask of fur around them, then ran over to Injun Joe's feet and neatly scaled the old man's wooden staff. It swarmed up Injun Joe's arm to perch on his shoulder, still chittering and squeaking.

"Uh," I managed, "how do you do."

The raccoon chirruped again, and Injun Joe tilted his head to one side, then nodded. "Good. But Little Brother is irritated with you. He thinks anyone with that much food should share it."

I frowned, then I remembered the half-eaten stale candy bar in my pocket. "Oh, right." I pulled it out, broke it in half, and held it out to the raccoon. "Peace?"

Little Brother let out a pleased squeak and darted back down Injun Joe's arm and staff to my hand. He snatched the candy and then retired a few feet away to eat it.

When I looked up, Injun Joe stood over me, offering his hand. "Little Brother thanks you. He likes you, too. How do you do, Wizard Dresden."

I took his hand and got to my feet. "Thanks, uh, Listens to Wind."

Ebenezar interjected, "Injun Joe."

Injun Joe winked one grave eye at me. "The redneck hillbilly doesn't read. Otherwise he'd know that he can't call me that anymore. Now I'm Native American Joe."

I wasn't sure I was supposed to laugh, but I did. Injun Joe nodded, dark eyes sparkling. Then he murmured, "The one you knew as Tera West sends her respects."

I blinked at him.

Injun Joe turned to Ebenezar and nodded, then walked slowly back to Martha's side.

Ebenezar let out a satisfied grunt. "Fine. Now where is the Russian? We haven't got all day."

Martha's expression became remote. Injun Joe's face didn't change, but he moved his eyes to the tall wizard beside him. No one spoke, and the silence grew thick enough to choke on.

Ebenezar's face went very pale, and he suddenly leaned hard on his staff. "Simon," he whispered. "Oh, no."

I stepped up beside Ebenezar. "What happened?"

Martha shook her head. "Simon Pietrovich. Senior Council member. Our vampire expert. He was killed less than two days ago. The whole compound in Archangel, Ebenezar. All of them. I'm sorry."

Ebenezar shook his head slowly. His voice was a pale shadow of its usual self. "I've been to his tower. It was a fortress. How did they do it?"

"The Wardens said that they couldn't be sure, but it looked like someone let the killers in past the defenses. They didn't get away unscathed. There were the remains of half a dozen nobles of the Red Court. Many of their warriors. But they killed Simon and the rest."

"Let them in?" Ebenezar breathed. "Treachery? But even if it was true, it would have to be someone who knew his defenses inside and out."

Martha glanced at me, then back at Ebenezar. Something passed between them in that look, but I couldn't tell what.

"No," Ebenezar said. "That's insane."

"Master to student. You know what the Wardens will say."

"It's buffalo chips. It wouldn't ever get past the Senior Council."

"Eben," Martha said gently, "Joseph and I are only two votes now. Simon is gone."

Ebenezar took a blue bandanna from the pocket of his overalls and rubbed it over his pate. "Damnation," he muttered. "Guts and damnation."

I looked at Ebenezar and then at Martha. "What?" I asked. "What does this mean?"

She said, "It means, Wizard Dresden, that the Merlin and others on the Council are preparing to bring allegations against you accusing you of precipitating the war with the Red Court and placing the responsibility for a number of deaths on your head. And because Joseph and I no longer have the support of Simon on the Senior Council, it means that we cannot block the Merlin from laying it to general vote."

Injun Joe nodded, fingers absently resting on Little Brother's fur. "Many of the Council are frightened, Hoss Dresden. Your enemies will use this opportunity to strike through them. Fear will drive them to vote against you."

I shot Ebenezar a glance. My old mentor traded a long look with me, and I saw his eyes stir with uncertainty.

"Hell's bells," I whispered. "I'm in trouble."

Chapter Five



A heavy silence followed, until Ebenezar flexed the fingers of one hand and his knuckles popped. “Who is up for Simon’s place?”

Martha shook her head. “I suspect the Merlin will want one of the Germans.”

Ebenezar growled. “I’ve got fifty years’ seniority on every mother’s son of them.”

“It won’t matter,” Martha said. “There are too many Americans on the Senior Council already for the Merlin’s tastes.”

Injun Joe scratched Little Brother’s chest and said, “Typical. Only real American on the Senior Council is me. Not like the rest of you Johnny-come-latelies.”

Ebenezar gave Injun Joe a tired smile.

Martha said, “The Merlin won’t be happy if you decide to press a claim now.”

Ebenezar snorted. “Aye. And I can’t tell you how that breaks my heart.”

Martha frowned, pressing her lips together. “We’d best get inside, Ebenezar. I’ll tell them to wait for you.”

“Fine,” my old teacher said, his words clipped. “Go on in.”

Without a further word, Martha and Injun Joe departed, black robes whispering. Ebenezar slipped into his robe and put on his scarlet stole. Then he took up his staff again and strode determinedly toward the convention center. I kept pace silently, and worried.

Ebenezar surprised me by speaking. “How’s your Latin coming, Hoss? You need me to translate?”

I coughed. “No. I think I can manage.”

“All right. When we get inside, hang on to your temper. You’ve got a reputation as a hothead for some reason.”

I scowled at him. “I do not.”

“And for being stubborn and contrary.”

“I am not.”

Ebenezar’s worn smile appeared for a moment, but by then we had reached the building where the Council was to meet. I stopped walking, and Ebenezar paused, looking back at me.

“I don’t want to go in with you,” I said. “If this goes bad, maybe it’s better if you have some distance from me.”

Ebenazar frowned at me, and for a second I thought he was going to argue. Then he shook his head and went into the building. I gave him a couple of minutes, and then walked up the steps and went in.

The building had the look of an old-time theater—high, arched ceilings, floors of polished stone laid with strips of carpet, and several sets of double doors leading into the theater itself. The air conditioning had probably been running full blast earlier, but now there was no sound of fan or vent and the building inside felt warmer than it probably should have. None of the lights were on. You couldn’t really expect even basic things like lights and air conditioning to keep running in a building full of wizards.

All the doors leading into what was apparently an actual theater were closed except for one pair, and two men wearing dark Council robes, scarlet stoles, and the grey cloak of the Wardens stood before them.

I didn’t recognize one of the men, but the other was Morgan. Morgan stood nearly as tall as I did, only with maybe another hundred pounds of solid, working-man muscle. He had a short beard, patchy with brown and grey, and he wore his hair in a long ponytail. His face was still narrow, sour, and he had a voice to match it. “Finally,” he muttered upon seeing me. “I’ve been waiting for this, Dresden. Finally, you’re going to face justice.”

“I see someone had a nice big bowl of Fanatic-Os this morning,” I said. “I know you don’t like it, Morgan, but I was cleared of all those charges. Thanks to you, actually.”

His sour face screwed up even more. “I only reported your actions to the Council. I did not think they would be so”—he spat the word like a curse—“lenient.”

I stopped in front of the two Wardens and held out my staff. Morgan’s partner lifted a crystal pendant from around his neck and ran the crystal over the staff and then over my head, temples, and down the front of my body. The crystal pulsed with a gentle glow of light as it passed over each chakra point. The second Warden nodded to Morgan, and I started to step past him and into the theater.

He put out one broad hand to stop me. “No,” he said. “Not yet. Get the dogs.”

The other Warden frowned, but that was all the protest he made. He turned and slipped into the theater, and a moment later emerged, leading a

pair of Wardhounds behind him.

In spite of myself, I swallowed and took a half step back from them. “Give me a break, Morgan. I’m not enspelled and I’m not toting in a bomb. I’m not the suicidal type.”

“Then you won’t mind a quick check,” Morgan said. He gave me a humorless smile and stepped forward.

The Wardhounds came with him. They weren’t actual dogs. I like dogs. They were statues made of some kind of dark grey-green stone, their shoulders as high as my own belt. They had the gaping mouth and too-big eyes of Chinese temple dogs, complete with curling beards and manes. Though they weren’t flesh, they moved with a kind of ponderous liquid grace, stone “muscles” shifting beneath the surface of their skins as if they had been living beings. Morgan touched each on the head and muttered something too vague for me to make out. Upon hearing it, both Wardhounds focused upon me and began to prowl in a circle around me, heads down, the floor quivering beneath their weight.

I knew they’d been enchanted to detect any of countless threats that might attempt to approach a Council meeting. But they weren’t thinking beings—only devices programmed with a simple set of responses to predetermined stimuli. Though Wardhounds had saved lives often before, there had also been accidents—and I didn’t know if my run-in with Mab would leave a residual signature that might set the Wardhounds off.

The dogs stopped, and one of them let out a growl that sounded soothingly akin to bedrock being ripped apart by a backhoe. I tensed and looked down at the dog standing to my right. Its lips had peeled back from gleaming, dark fangs, and its empty eyes were focused on my left hand—the one Mab had wounded by way of demonstration.

I swallowed and held still and tried to think innocent thoughts.

“They don’t like something about you, Dresden,” Morgan said. I thought I heard an almost eager undertone to his voice. “Maybe I should turn you away, just to be careful.”

The other Warden stepped forward, one hand on a short, heavy rod worn on his belt. He murmured, “Could be the injury, if he’s hurt. Wizard blood can be pretty potent. Moody, too. Dog could be reacting to anger or fear, through the blood.”

“Maybe,” Morgan said testily. “Or it could be contraband he’s trying to sneak in. Take off the bandage, Dresden.”

“I don’t want to start bleeding again,” I said.

“Fine. I’m denying you entrance, then, in accordance with—”

“Dammit, Morgan,” I muttered. I all but tossed my staff at him. He caught it, and held it while I tore at the makeshift bandages I’d put on my hand. It hurt like hell, but I pulled them off and showed him the swollen and oozing wound.

The Wardhound growled again and then appeared to lose interest, pacing back over to sit down beside its mate, suddenly inanimate again.

I turned my eyes to Morgan and stared at him, hard. “Satisfied?” I asked him.

For a second I thought he would meet my gaze. Then he shoved my staff back at me as he turned away. “You’re a disgrace, Dresden. Look at yourself. Because of you, good men and women have died. Today you will be called to answer for it.”

I tied the bandage back on as best I could and gritted my teeth to keep from telling Morgan to take a long walk off a short cliff. Then I brushed past the Wardens and stalked into the theater.

Morgan watched me go, then said to his partner, “Close the circle.” He followed me into the theater, shutting the door behind him, even as I felt the sudden, silent tension of the Wardens closing the circle around the building, shutting it off from any supernatural access.

I hadn’t ever actually seen a meeting of the Council—not like this. The sheer variety of it all was staggering, and I stood staring for several moments, taking it in.

The space was a dinner theater of only moderate size, lit by nothing more than a few candles on each table. The room wouldn’t have been crowded for a matinee, but as a gathering place for wizards it was positively swamped. The tables on the floor of the theater were almost completely filled with black-robed wizards, variously sporting stoles of blue, gold, and scarlet. Apprentices in their muddy-brown robes lurked at the fringes of the crowd, standing along the walls or crouching on the floor beside their mentors’ chairs.

The variety of humanity represented in the theater was startling. Canted Oriental eyes, dark, rich skins of Africa, pale Europeans, men and women, ancient and young, long and short hair, beards long enough to tuck into belts, beards wispy enough to be stirred by a passing breeze. The theater buzzed in dozens of languages, of which I could identify only a fraction.

Wizards laughed and scowled, smiled and stared blankly, sipped from flasks and soda cans and cups or sat with eyes closed in meditation. The scents of spices and perfumes and chemicals all blended together into something pervasive, always changing, and the auras of so many practitioners of the Art seemed to be feeling just as social, reaching out around the room to touch upon other auras, to echo or strike dissonance with their energies, tangible enough to feel without even trying. It was like walking through drifting cobwebs that were constantly brushing against my cheeks and eyelashes—not dangerous but disconcerting, each one wildly unique, utterly different from the next.

The only thing the wizards had in common was that none of them looked as scruffy as me.

A roped-off section at the far right of the hall held the envoys of various organizations of allies and supernatural interests, most of whom I had only a vague idea about. Wardens stood here and there where they could overlook the crowd, grey cloaks conspicuous amid the black and scattered brown ones—but somehow I doubted they were as obtrusive as my own faded blue-and-white flannel. I garnered offended looks from nearly everyone I walked past—mostly white-haired old wizard folk. One or two apprentices nearer my own age covered their mouths as I went past, hiding grins. I looked around for an open chair, but I didn't spot one, until I saw Ebenezer wave at me from a table in the front row of the theater, nearest the stage. He nodded at the seat next to him. It was the only place available, and I joined him.

On the theater stage stood seven podiums, and at six of them stood members of the Senior Council, in dark robes with purple stoles. Injun Joe Listens to Wind and Martha Liberty stood at two.

At the center podium stood the Merlin of the White Council, a tall man, broad of shoulder and blue of eye, with hair falling past his shoulders in shining, pale waves and a flowing silver beard. The Merlin spoke in a rolling basso voice, Latin phrases gliding as smoothly from his mouth as from any Roman senator's.

“... et, quae cum ita sint, censeo iam nos dimittere rees cottidianas et de magna re gravi deliberare—id est, illud bellum contra comitatum rubrum.” *And given the circumstances, I move to dispense with the usual formalities in order to discuss the most pertinent issue before us—the war with the Red Court.* “Consensum habemus?” *All in favor?*

There was a general murmur of consent from the wizards in the room. I didn't feel any need to add to it. I tried to slip unnoticed into the seat beside Ebenezar, but the Merlin's bright blue eyes spotted me and grew shades colder.

The Merlin spoke, and though I knew he spoke perfectly intelligible English, he addressed me in Latin, quick and liquid—but his own perfect command of the speech worked against him. He was easy to understand. “Ahhh, Magus Dresdenus. Prudenter ades nobis dum de bello quod inceperis diceamus. Ex omni parte ratio tua pro hoc comitatu nobis placet.” *Ah, Wizard Dresden. How thoughtful of you to join us in discussions of the war you started. It is good to know that you have such respect for this Council.*

He delivered that last while giving my battered old bathrobe a pointed look, making sure that anyone in the room who hadn't noticed would now. Jerk. He let silence fall afterward and it was left to me to answer him. Also in Latin. Big fat jerk.

Still, it was my first Council meeting as a full wizard, and he was the Merlin, after all. And Idid look pretty bad. Plus, Ebenezar shot me a warning glance. I swallowed a hot answer and took a stab at diplomacy.

“Uh,” I said, “ego sum miser, Magus Merlinus. Dolor diei longi me tenet. Opus es mihi altera, uh, vestiplicia.” *Sorry, Merlin. It's been a very long day. I meant to have my other robe.*

Or that's what I *tried* to say. I must have conjugated something wrong, because when I finished, the Merlin blinked at me, expression mild. “Quod est?”

Ebenezar winced and asked me in a whisper, “Hoss? You sure you don't want me to translate for you?”

I waved a hand at him. “I can do it.” I scowled as I tried to put together the right words, and spoke again. “Excusationem vobis pro vestitu meo atque etiam tarditate facio.” *Please excuse my lateness and appearance.*

The Merlin regarded me with passionless, distant features, evidently well content to let my mouth run. Ebenezar put his hand over his eyes.

“What?” I demanded of him in a fierce whisper.

Ebenezar squinted up at me. “Well. First you said, ‘I am a sorry excuse, Merlin, a sad long day held me. I need me a different laundress.’ ”

I blinked. “What?”

“That’s what the Merlin said. Then you said ‘Excuses to you for my being dressed and I also make lately.’ ”

I felt my face heat up. Most of the room was still staring at me as though I was some sort of raving lunatic, and it dawned on me that many of the wizards in the room probably did not speak English. As far as they were concerned, I probably sounded like one.

“Goddamned correspondence course. Maybe you should translate for me,” I said.

Ebenezar’s eyes sparkled, but he nodded with a grave expression. “Happy to.”

I slipped into my seat while Ebenezar stood up and made an apology for me, his Latin terse and precise, his voice carrying easily throughout the hall. I saw the gathered wizards’ expressions grow more or less mollified as he spoke.

The Merlin nodded and continued in his textbook-perfect Latin. “Thank you, Wizard McCoy, for your assistance. The first order of business in addressing the crisis before us is to restore the Senior Council to its full membership. As some of you have doubtless learned by now, Senior Council member Pietrovich was killed in an attack by the Red Court two days past.”

A gasp and a low murmur ran through the theater.

The Merlin allowed a moment to pass. “Past conflicts with the Red Court have not moved with this kind of alacrity, and this may indicate a shift in their usual strategy. As a result, we need to be able to react quickly to further developments—which will require the leadership provided by a full membership on the Senior Council.”

The Merlin continued speaking, but I leaned over to Ebenezar. “Let me guess,” I whispered. “He wants to fill the opening on the Senior Council so that he’ll be able to control the vote?”

Ebenezar nodded. “He’ll have three votes for sure, then, and most times four.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“You aren’t going to do anything. Not yet.” He looked intently at me. “Keep your temper, Hoss. I mean it. The Merlin will have three plans to take you down.”

I shook my head. “What? How do you know that?”

“He always does things that way,” Ebenezar muttered. His eyes glittered with something ugly. “A plan, a backup plan, and an ace in the hole. I’ll shoot down the first one, and I’ll help you with the second. The third is all yours, though.”

“What do you mean? What plan?”

“Hush, Hoss. I’m paying attention.”

A balding wizard with bristling white eyebrows and a bushy blue beard, his scalp covered in flowing blue tattoos, leaned forward from the far side of the table and glared at me. “Shhhhh.”

Ebenezar nodded at the man, and we both turned back to face the stage.

“And it is for this reason,” the Merlin continued, “that I now ask Klaus Schneider, as a long-standing senior wizard of impeccable reputation, to take on the responsibility of membership in the Senior Council. All in favor?”

Martha glanced at Ebenezar and murmured, “A moment, honored Merlin. I believe protocol requires that we open the floor to debate.”

The Merlin sighed. “Under normal circumstances, Wizard Liberty, of course. But we have little time for the niceties of our usual procedures. Time is of the essence. So, all in—”

Injun Joe interrupted. “Wizard Schneider is a fine enchanter, and he has a reputation for skill and honesty. But he is young for such a responsibility. There are wizards present who are his senior in experience and the Art. They deserve the consideration of the Council.”

The Merlin shot Injun Joe a frown. “*Thankyou* for your perspective, Wizard Listens to Wind. But though your commentary is welcome, it was not asked for. There is no one present senior to Wizard Schneider who has not already declined a seat upon the Senior Council, and rather than run through meaningless nominations and repeated declinations, I had intended —”

Ebenezar cut in, sotto voce but loud enough for the Merlin to hear him, in English. “You had intended to shove your favorite down everyone’s throats while they were too worried to notice.”

The Merlin fell abruptly quiet, his eyes falling on Ebenezar in a sudden, pointed silence. He spoke in a low voice, his English carrying a rich British accent. “Go back to your mountain, Ebenezar. Back to your sheep. You are not welcome here, and never have been.”

Ebenezar looked up at the Merlin with a toothy smile, Scots creeping back into his vowels. “Aye, Alfred, laddie, I know.” He switched back to Latin and raised his voice again. “Every member of the Council has a right to speak his mind on these matters. You all know how important the appointment of one Senior Council member is. How many of you believe this matter too serious to leave to a consensus? Speak now.”

The theater rumbled with a general “Aye,” to which I added my own voice. Ebenezar looked around the room and then raised an eyebrow at the Merlin.

I could see frustration not quite hidden on the old man’s face. I could almost taste his desire to slam his fist down on the podium, but he controlled himself and nodded. “Very well. Then, in accordance with procedure, we will offer the position to the senior-most wizards present.” He looked to one side, where a slim-faced, prim-looking wizard sat with a quill, a bottle of ink, and pages and pages of parchment. “Wizard Peabody, will you consult the registry?”

Peabody reached under his table and came out with a bulging satchel. He muttered something to himself and rubbed some ink onto his nose with one finger, then he opened the satchel, which held what looked like a couple of reams of parchment. His eyes glazed over slightly, and he reached into the papers seemingly at random. He drew out a single page, put it on the desk before him, nodded in satisfaction, then read in a reedy voice, “Wizard Montjoy.”

“Research trip in the Yucatán,” Martha Liberty said.

Peabody nodded. “Wizard Gomez.”

“Still sleeping off that potion,” provided a grey-cloaked Warden standing by the wall.

Peabody nodded. “Wizard Luciozzi.”

“Sabbatical,” said the blue-bearded and tattooed wizard behind me. Ebenezar frowned, and one of his cheeks twitched in a nervous tic.

It went on like that for close to a quarter hour. Some of the more interesting reasons for absence included “He got real married,” “Living under the polar ice cap,” and “Pyramid sitting,” whatever that was.

Peabody finally read, with a glance up at the Merlin, “Wizard McCoy.” Ebenezar grunted and stood. Peabody read another half-dozen names before stating, “Wizard Schneider.”

A small, round-cheeked man with a fringe of gauzy white down over his scalp and a round belly stretching his robes stood up and gave Ebenezar a brief nod. Then he looked up at the Merlin and said, in Latin with a heavy Germanic accent, "While I am grateful for the offer, honored Merlin, I must respectfully decline your nomination, in favor of Wizard McCoy. He will serve the Council more ably than I."

The Merlin looked as though someone had grated slices of lemon against his gums. "Very well," he said. "Do any other senior wizards here wish to present themselves for consideration over Wizard McCoy?"

I was betting no one would, especially given the looks on the faces of the wizards nearby. Ebenezar himself never moved his eyes from the Merlin. He just stood with his feet spread wide apart and planted, his eyes steady, confident. Silence fell over the hall.

The Merlin looked around the hall, his lips pressed tightly together. Finally, he gave his head a very slight shake. "All in favor?"

The room rumbled with a second, more affirmative "Aye."

"Very well," the Merlin said, his upper lip twisting and giving the words an acid edge. "Wizard McCoy, take your place upon the Senior Council."

There was a murmur of what sounded a bit like relief from those in the hall. Ebenezar glanced back and winked at me. "One down. Two to go," he murmured. "Stay sharp." Then he hitched up his robes and stumped onto the stage, to the empty podium between Martha Liberty and Injun Joe. "Less talking, more doing," he said, loudly enough to be heard by the whole hall. "There's a war on."

"Precisely what I was thinking," the Merlin said, and nodded to one side. "Let us address the war. Warden Morgan, would you please stand forward and give the Council the Wardens' tactical assessment of the Red Court?"

An oppressive silence settled over the room, so that I heard every sound of Morgan's boots as he stepped up onto the stage. The Merlin moved aside, and Morgan placed a glittering gem or crystal of some kind upon the podium. Behind that, he set a candle, which he lit with a muttered incantation. Then he framed the candle with his hands and murmured again.

Light streaked from the candle into the crystal in a glowing stream and sprang up out of the crystal again in a large cone stretching up above the stage, several yards across at the top. Within the cone of light appeared a spinning globe of the Earth, its continents vaguely misshapen, like something drawn from a couple of centuries past.

A murmur ran through the room, and Bluebeard, at my table, muttered in Latin, “Impressive.”

“Bah,” I said in English. “He stole that from *Return of the Jedi*. ”

Bluebeard blinked at me, uncomprehending. I briefly debated trying to translate *Star Wars* into Latin and decided against it. See, I can have common sense, too.

Morgan’s low voice rumbled out in Latin phrases, rough but understandable. Which meant he spoke it better than me. Jerk. “The flashing red spots on the map are the locations of known attacks of the Red Court and their allies. Most of them resulted in casualties of one form or another.” As he spoke, widely scattered motes of red color began to form on the globe like the glowing lights of a Christmas tree. “As you can see, most of the activity has taken place in Western Europe.”

A mutter went through the room. The Old World was the domain of the Old School of wizardry—the “maintain secrecy and don’t attract attention” way of thinking. I guess they have a point, given the Inquisition and all. I don’t belong to the Old School. I have an ad in the Yellow Pages, under “Wizards.” Big shocker—I’m the only one there. I have to pay the bills somehow, don’t I?

Morgan droned on dispassionately. “We have known for a long time that the main power center of the Red Court is somewhere in South America. Our sources there are under pressure, and it has become difficult to get any information out of the area. We have had advance warning of several attacks, and the Wardens have managed to intercede with minimal losses of life, with the exception of the attack at Archangel.” The globe paused in its spinning, and my eyes fastened on the glowing point of light on the northwest coast of Russia. “Though it is presumed that Wizard Pietrovich’s death curse took a heavy toll on his attackers, no one in his household survived the attack. We don’t know how they got past his defenses. It would appear that the Red Court may have access to information or aspects of the Art that they have not before had.”

The Merlin stepped back to the podium, and Morgan collected his crystal. The globe vanished. “Thank you, Warden,” the Merlin said. “As we expected from Council records, our various retreats and Paths through the Nevernever are threatened. Frankly speaking, ladies and gentlemen, the Red Court holds us at a disadvantage within the mortal world. Modern technology so often disagrees with us that it makes travel difficult under

the best of circumstances and unreliable in a time of conflict. We vitally need to secure safe Paths through the Nevernever or else risk being engaged and overwhelmed in detail by an opponent who can move more rapidly than we. To that end, we have dispatched missives to both Queens of the Sidhe. Ancient Mai.”

My eyes flickered to the podium to the Merlin’s left, where stood another of the Senior Council members, apparently the Ancient Mai. She was a tiny woman of Oriental extraction, her skin fine and pale, her granite-colored hair worn in a long braid curled up at the back of her head and held with a pair of jade combs. She had delicate features only lightly touched by the passage of years, though her dark eyes were rheumy. She unfolded a letter written upon parchment and addressed the Council in a creaky but firm voice. “From Summer, we received this answer. ‘Queen Titania does not now, nor will she ever choose sides in the disputes of mortal and anthrophage. She bids both Council and Court alike to keep their war well away from the realms of Summer. She will remain neutral.’”

Ebenezar frowned and leaned forward to ask, “And from Winter?”

I twitched.

The Ancient tilted her head and regarded Ebenezar in perfect silence for a moment, somehow implying her annoyance at his interruption. “Our courier did not return. Upon consulting records of former conflicts, we may confidently assume that Queen Mab will involve herself, if at all, in a time and manner of her own choosing.”

I twitched more. There was a pitcher of water on the table, along with some glasses. I poured a drink. The pitcher only rattled against the cup a little. I glanced back at Bluebeard and saw him regarding me with a pensive gaze.

Ebenezar scowled. “Now what is that supposed to mean?”

The Merlin stepped in smoothly. “It means that we must continue whatever diplomacy we may with Winter. At all costs, we must secure the cooperation of one of the Sidhe Queens—or at least prevent the Red Court from accomplishing an alliance of its own until this conflict can be resolved.”

Martha Liberty lifted both eyebrows. “Resolved?” she said, her tone pointed. “I would have chosen a word like ‘finished’ myself.”

The Merlin shook his head. “Wizard Liberty, there is no need for this dispute to devolve into an even more destructive conflict. If there exists

even a small chance that an armistice can be attained—”

The black woman’s voice lashed out at the Merlin, harsh and cold. “Ask Simon Petrovich how interested the vampires are in reaching a peaceable settlement.”

“Contain your emotions, Wizard,” the Merlin replied, his voice calm. “The loss of Petrovich strikes each of us deeply, but we cannot allow that loss to blind us to potential solutions.”

“Simon knew them, Merlin,” Martha said, her tone flat. “He knew them better than any of us, and they killed him. Do you really think that they will be inclined to seek a reasonable peace with us, when they have already destroyed the wizard best able to protect himself against them? Why should they seek a peace, Merlin? They’re *winning* .”

The Merlin waved a hand. “Your anger clouds your judgement. They will seek a peace because even in victory they would pay too high a cost.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Martha said. “They will never sue for peace.”

“In point of fact,” said the Merlin, “they already have.” He gestured to the second podium on his left. “Wizard LaFortier.”

LaFortier was an emaciated man of medium height and build. His cheekbones stood out grotesquely from his sunken face, and his bulging eyes looked a couple of sizes too large. He had no hair at all, not even eyebrows, and on the whole it gave him a skeletal look. When he spoke, his voice came out in a resonant basso, deep and warm and smooth. “Thank you, Merlin.” He held up an envelope in one thin-fingered hand. “I have here a missive from Duke Ortega, the war leader of the Red Court, received this morning. In it he details the Red Court’s motivations in this matter and the terms they desire for peace. He also offers, by token of goodwill, a temporary cessation of hostilities in order to give the Council time to consider, effective this morning.”

“Bullshit!” The word burst out of my mouth before my brain realized I had said it. A round of snickers, mostly from brown-robed apprentices, echoed through the theater, and I heard fabric rustle as every wizard in the place turned to look at me. I felt my face heat again, and cleared my throat. “Well, it is,” I said to the room. Ebenezar translated for me. “I was attacked by a Red Court hit squad only a few hours ago.”

LaFortier smiled at me. It stretched his lips out to show his teeth, like the dried face of a thousand-year-old mummy. “Even if you are not lying,

Wizard Dresden, I would hardly expect perfect control of all Red Court forces given your role in precipitating this war.”

“*Precipitating it?*” I exclaimed. “Do you have any idea what they *did*?”

LaFortier shrugged. “They defended an assault upon their sovereignty, Wizard. You, acting in the role of representative of this Council, attacked a noble of their court, damaged her property, and killed members of said noble’s household and her as well. In addition, the records of local newspapers and authorities reveal that during the altercation, several young men and women were also killed—burned up in a fire, I think. Does that sound familiar to you, Wizard Dresden?”

I clenched my jaw, the sudden rush of rage spilling through me in such a torrent that I could scarcely see, much less trust myself to speak. I’d been brought before the Council for the first time when I had been put on trial for violating the First Law of Magic: Thou Shalt Not Kill. I’d burned my old mentor, Justin, to death. When I’d clashed with Bianca, lately of the Red Court, the previous year, I’d called up a firestorm when it looked as if my companions and I were going to buy it anyway. A lot of vampires burned. The bodies of some people had been found afterward, too. There was no way to tell which of them had been victims of the vampires and already dead when the fire got to them and which, if any, had been alive before I came along. I still have nightmares about it. I’m a lot of things, but I’m not a willing murderer.

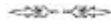
To my shock, I felt myself gathering in power, getting ready to unleash it at LaFortier, with his skeletal smirk. Ebnazar caught my eye, his own a little wide, and shook his head quickly. I clenched my hands into tight fists instead of blasting anybody with magic and forced myself to sit down again before I spoke. Self-disciplined, that’s me. “I have already detailed my recollection of the events in my report to the Council. I stand by them. Anyone who tells you differently than what you read there is lying.”

LaFortier rolled his eyes. “How comfortable it must be to live in such a clear-cut world, Wizard Dresden. But we are not counting the cost of your actions in coins or hours wasted—we are counting it in blood. Wizards are *dying* because of what *you* did while acting in this Council’s name.” LaFortier swept his gaze to the rest of the theater, his expression stern, controlled. “Frankly, I think it may be wise for the Council to consider that we may indeed stand in the wrong in this matter and that it might be prudent to give careful considerations to the Red Court’s terms for peace.”

“What do they want?” I snarled at the man, Ebenezar providing the Latin for the rest of the Council. “A pint of blood a month from each of us? Rights to hunt freely wherever they choose? Amulets to shield them from the light of the sun?”

LaFortier smiled at me and folded his hands atop his podium. “Nothing so dramatic, Dresden. They simply want what any of us would want in this situation. They want justice.” He leaned toward me, bulging eyes glittering. “They want you.”

Chapter Six



Gulp.

“Me?” I said. *Et la*, LaFortier. Feel the bite of my rapier wit.

“Yes. Duke Ortega writes that you, Wizard Dresden, are considered a criminal by the Red Court. In order to end this conflict they wish to extradite you to an area of their designation for trial. A resolution that is, perhaps, distasteful, but may also be only just.”

He didn’t get the last word out of his mouth before several dozen wizards around the auditorium rose to their feet with outraged shouts. Others stood up to cry out against them, and still more against them. The room descended into a cacophony of shouts, threats, and cussing (among wizards, cursing is a different matter altogether) in dozens of languages.

The Merlin let people shout for a moment before he called out in a ringing voice, “Order!” No one paid him any attention. He tried once more, then lifted his staff and slammed it down hard on the stage beside him.

There was a flash of light, a roar of sound, and a concussion that slopped the water in my glass up over the brim, spilling it on my flannel bathrobe. A couple of the wispiest wizards were knocked down by the force of it—but in any case, the shouting ceased.

“Order!” the Merlin demanded again, in exactly the same tone. “I am well aware of the implications of this situation. But lives are at stake. Your lives and my own. We must consider our options with the utmost gravity.”

“What options?” Ebenezar demanded. “We are wizards, not a herd of frightened sheep. Will we give one of our own to the vampires now and pretend that none of this has happened?”

LaFortier snapped, “You read Dresden’s report. By his own admission, what the Red Court accuses him of is true. They have a just grievance.”

“The situation was clearly a manipulation, a scheme to force Dresden to those actions in hopes of killing him.”

“Then he should have been smarter,” LaFortier said, his tone flat. “Politics is not a game for children. Dresden played and was beaten. It is time for him to pay the price so that the rest of us may live in peace.”

Injun Joe put a hand on Ebenezar’s arm and spoke quietly. “Peace cannot be bought, Aleron,” he murmured to LaFortier. “History teaches that

lesson. I learned it. You should have, too.”

LaFortier sneered at Injun Joe. “I don’t know what you are babbling about, but—”

I rolled my eyes and stood up again. “He’s talking about the American tribes losing their land to white settlers, dolt.” I figured Ebenezer would leave the insult out of the translation, but there were more stifled snorts from brown robes around the room. “And about Europe’s attempts to appease Hitler before the Second World War. Both attempted to purchase peace with compromise, and both got swallowed up bit by bit.”

The Merlin glared at me. “I did not recognize you, Wizard Dresden. Until you have the floor, you will refrain from such outbursts or I will have you removed from this meeting.”

I clenched my jaw and sat down. “Sorry. Here I was, figuring we had a responsibility to protect people. What was I thinking?”

“We will protect no one, Wizard Dresden, if we are dead,” the Merlin snapped. “Be silent or be removed.”

Martha Liberty shook her head. “Merlin, it seems clear that we cannot simply hand one of our own over to the Red Court because of their demands. Despite past differences with Council policy, Dresden is a fully ranked wizard—and given his performance in recent years, he seems well deserving of the title.”

“I do not question his ability with the Art,” LaFortier put in. “I question his judgement, his choices. He has played loose and reckless with his status as a wizard since Justin’s death.” The bald man turned his bulging eyes to the wizards in the theater. “Wizard Harry Dresden. Apprentice to the Wizard Justin DuMorne. Apprentice to the Wizard Simon Petrovich. I wonder how the Red Court learned enough of Petrovich’s defenses to bypass them so completely, Dresden.”

I stared at LaFortier for a second, shocked. Did the man actually believe that I had learned about this Petrovich’s defenses through Justin? Then sold a Senior Council member of the White Council to the vampires? Justin hadn’t exactly taken me around much. Before I’d been put on trial, I hadn’t even known that there was a White Council—or other wizards at all, for that matter. I gave him the only answer I could. I laughed at him. Wheezy, quiet laughter. I shook my head.

LaFortier’s expression grew outraged. “You see?” he demanded to the room. “You see in what contempt he holds this Council? His position as a

wizard? Dresden has constantly endangered us all with his obtuse indiscretion, his reckless disregard for secrecy and security. Even if it was someone else who betrayed Pietrovich and his students to the Red Court, Dresden is as guilty of their murder as if he himself had cut their throats. Let the consequences of his decisions fall upon him.”

I rose and faced LaFortier, but glanced at the Merlin for permission to speak. He gave the floor to me with a grudging nod. “Impossible,” I said. “Or at least impractical. I have violated none of the Laws of Magic in this matter, which rules out a summary trial. I am a full wizard. By Council law, I am therefore entitled to an in-depth investigation and trial—neither of which would provide any kind of workable solution anytime soon.”

The room rumbled with agreement when Ebenezar finished translating for me. That was hardly a surprise. If the Council jammed a trial down my throat and then threw me to the wolves, it would set a deadly precedent—one that could haunt any wizard in the room, and they knew it.

LaFortier jabbed a forefinger at me and said, “Quite true. Provided that you are, in fact, a full wizard. I move that the Council vote, immediately, to determine whether or not Dresden’s status as a wizard is valid. I remind the Council that his appointment to his stole was a de facto decision based upon circumstantial evidence. He has never stood Trial, never been judged worthy by his peers.”

“Like hell I haven’t,” I answered him. “I beat Justin DuMorne in a duel to the death. Is that not Trial enough for you?”

“Wizard DuMorne died, yes,” LaFortier said. “Whether he was defeated in an open duel or burned in his sleep is another matter entirely. Merlin, you have heard my motion. Let the Council vote upon the status of this madman. Let us end this foolishness and return to our lives.”

Ouch. An angle I hadn’t thought of. If I was stripped of my stole, it would be like a medieval noble having his title taken away. I would no longer be a wizard, politically speaking, and according to Council law and to the Accords between the various supernatural factions, the Council would be obligated to turn over a fugitive murderer to the Red Court. Which would mean, if I was fortunate, a horrible death. If I wasn’t fortunate, it could be considerably worse.

Given the kind of day I’d been having, my heart started skittering in my chest.

The Merlin frowned and nodded. "Very well, then. We vote upon the issue of the status of one Harry Dresden. Let those who would have him keep his stole vote for, and those who favor that his status be restored to that of apprentice vote against. All those in fav—"

"Wait," Ebenezar interjected. "I invoke my right as a member of the Senior Council to reduce the vote to the Senior Council alone."

The Merlin glared at Ebenezar. "On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that there exists a great deal of information about this matter of which the Council at large is unaware. It would be impractical to attempt to explain it all."

"Seconded," Injun Joe murmured.

"Accord," Martha Liberty added. "Three votes yea, honored Merlin. Let the Senior Council make this decision."

My heart started beating again. Ebenezar had made the right call. In a room full of frightened men and women, I wouldn't have had a prayer of keeping my stole. With the vote reduced to the Senior Council, maybe I had a fighting chance.

I could almost see the Merlin trying to figure a way out of it, but Council law is pretty clear on that point. The Senior Council members can always take a matter to a closed vote with three supporters.

"Very well," the Merlin said. The room rustled with whispers. "My interests lie in preserving the health and safety of those upon this Council, and of the communities of mankind in general. I vote against Dresden's validity as an initiate wizard of this Council."

LaFortier jumped in, bulging eyes narrowed. "As do I, and for the same reasons."

Ebenezar spoke next. "I've lived with this young man. I know him. He's a wizard. I vote to preserve his status."

Little Brother chittered from his perch on Injun Joe's shoulder, and the old wizard stroked the raccoon's tail with one hand. "My instincts about this man tell me that he comports himself as a wizard should." He gave a very mild glance to LaFortier. "I vote in favor of his status."

"As do I," Martha Liberty added. "This is not a solution. It is merely an action."

Harry three, bad guys two. I turned my eyes to Ancient Mai.

The tiny woman stood with her eyes closed for a moment, her head bowed. Then she murmured, "No wizard should so blatantly misuse his

status as a member of this Council. Nor should he be as irresponsible as Harry Dresden has been with his use of the Art. I vote against his retention of wizard status.”

Three to three. I licked my lips, and realized at just that moment that I had been too nervous and involved with events to take note of the seventh member of the Senior Council. He was standing at the far left of the stage. Like the other wizards, he wore a black robe, but his dark purple, almost black stole had a deep cowl upon it as well, which covered his face entirely. The candlelit dimness masked in shadow whatever the cowl didn’t cover. He was tall. Taller than me. Seven feet, and thin. His arms were folded, hands hidden inside the voluminous sleeves of his robe. Every eye in the place turned to the seventh member of the Council, and a silence deeper than that of the nearby Great Lake enveloped the room.

It lasted for long moments, then the Merlin prompted, quietly, “Gatekeeper. What say you?”

I leaned forward in my chair, my mouth dry. If he voted against me, I was betting a Warden would zap me unconscious before the sound of his voice died away.

After several of my frantic heartbeats, the Gatekeeper spoke in a resonant, gentle voice. “It rained toads this morning.”

A baffled silence followed. It became, a moment later, a baffled mutter.

“Gatekeeper,” the Merlin said, his voice more urgent, “how do you vote?”

“With deliberation,” the Gatekeeper said. “It rained toads this morning. That bears consideration. And for that, I must hear what word returns with the messenger.”

LaFortier eyed the Gatekeeper and said impatiently, “What messenger? What are you talking about?”

The back doors of the theater burst open, hard, and a pair of grey-cloaked Wardens entered the theater. They each had a shoulder under one of the arms of a brown-robed young man. His face was puffy and swollen, and his hands looked like rotten sausages about to burst. Frost clung to his hair in a thick coating, and his robe looked like it had been dipped in water and then dragged behind a sled team from Anchorage to Nome. His lips were blue, and his eyes fluttered and rolled semicoherently. The Wardens dragged him to the foot of the stage, and the Senior Council gathered at its edge, looking down.

“This is my courier to the Winter Queen,” Ancient Mai stated.

“He insisted,” one of the Wardens said. “We tried to take him for treatment, but he got so worked up about it I was afraid he would hurt himself, so we brought him to you, Ancient.”

“Where did you find him?” the Merlin asked.

“Outside. Someone drove up in a car and pushed him out of it. We didn’t see who it was.”

“You get the license number?” I asked. Both Wardens turned to eye me. Then they both turned back to the Merlin. Neither of them had gotten it. Maybe license plates were too new a concept. They weren’t yet a whole century old, after all. “Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “I would have gotten it.”

Ancient Mai carefully descended from the stage and moved to the young man. She touched his forehead and spoke to him gently in what I presumed to be Chinese. The boy opened his eyes and babbled something broken and halting back at her.

Ancient Mai frowned. She asked something else, which the boy struggled to answer, but it was apparently too much for him. He sagged, his eyes rolling back, and went completely limp.

The Ancient touched his hair and said in Latin, “Take him. Care for him.”

The Wardens laid the boy on a cloak, and then four of them carried him out, moving quickly.

“What did he say?” Ebenezar asked. He beat me to it.

“He said that Queen Mab bade him tell the Council she will permit them travel through her realm, provided one request is fulfilled.”

The Merlin arched a brow, fingers touching his beard thoughtfully. “What does she request?”

Ancient Mai murmured, “She did not tell him. She said only that she had already made her desires known to one of the Council.” The Senior Council withdrew together to one side, speaking in low voices.

I didn’t pay them any mind. The Ancient’s translation of the messenger’s words shocked me enough to keep me from so much as breathing, much less speaking. When I could move, I turned back to my table, leaned forward, and banged my head gently on the wooden surface. Several times.

“Dammit,” I muttered, in time with the thumps. “Dammit, dammit, dammit.”

A hand touched my shoulder, and I looked up to see the shadowed cowl of the Gatekeeper, standing apart from the rest of the Senior Council. His hand was covered by a black leather glove. I couldn't see any skin showing on him, anywhere.

"You know what the rain of toads means," he said, his voice very quiet. His English had a gentle accent, something part British and part something else. Indian? Middle Eastern?

I nodded. "Trouble."

"Trouble." Though I could not see his face, I suspected a very slight smile had colored the word. The cowl turned toward the other Senior Council members, and he whispered, "There isn't much time. Will you answer me one question honestly, Dresden?"

I checked Bluebeard to see if he was listening in. He had leaned way over toward a round-faced grandma-looking wizardess at another table and appeared to be listening intently to her. I nodded to the Gatekeeper.

He waved his hand. No words, no pause to prepare, nothing. He waved his hand, and the sounds of the room suddenly seemed to blur together, robbed of any coherence at all. "I understand you know how to Listen, too. I would rather no one else heard us." The sound of his voice came to me warped, parts pitched high and others low, oddly reverberating.

I gave him a wary nod. "What is the question?"

He reached up to his cowl, black leather against twilight purple, and drew back the hood a little, enough that I could see the gleam of one dark eye and a rough, thin grey beard against bronzed skin. I couldn't see his other eye. His face seemed to ripple and contort in the shadows, and I had an idea that he was disfigured, maybe burned. In the socket of the missing eye, I saw something silver and reflective.

He leaned down closer and whispered near my ear, "Has Mab chosen an Emissary?"

I struggled not to let the surprise show in my face, but I'm not always good at hiding my feelings. I saw comprehension flicker in the Gatekeeper's shadowed eye.

Dammit. Now I understood why Mab had been so confident. She'd known all along that she had set me up for a deal I couldn't refuse. She'd done it without breaking our bargain, either. Mab wanted me to take up her case, and she seemed perfectly happy to meddle in a supernatural war to get what she wanted.

She'd just been toying with me in my office, and I'd fallen for it. I wanted to kick myself. Somewhere out there was a village I'd deprived of its idiot.

In any case, there was no sense lying to the guy whose vote would decide my fate. I nodded to him. "Yes."

He shook his head. "Precarious balance. The Council can afford neither to keep you nor to cast you out."

"I don't understand."

"You will." He drew the cowl back down and murmured, "I cannot prevent your fate, wizard. I can only give you a chance to avoid it on your own."

"What do you mean?"

"Cannot you see what is happening?"

I frowned at him. "A dangerous imbalance of forces. The White Council in town. Mab meddling in our affairs."

"Or perhaps we are meddling in hers. Why has she appointed a mortal Emissary, young wizard?"

"Because someone up there takes a malevolent amusement in my suffering?"

"Balance," the Gatekeeper corrected me. "It is all about balance. Redress the imbalance, young wizard. Resolve the situation. Prove your worth beyond doubt."

"Are you telling me *I should* work for Mab?" My voice sounded hollow, tinny, as though it was trapped in a coffee can.

"What is the date?" the Gatekeeper asked.

"June eighteenth," I said.

"Ah. Of course." The Gatekeeper turned away, and sounds returned to normal. The Gatekeeper joined the rest of the Senior Council, and they trooped back up to their podiums. Podii. Podia. Whatever. Goddamned correspondence course.

"Order," called the Merlin again, and the room grew quiet after a reluctant moment.

"Gatekeeper," the Merlin said, "what is your vote?"

The silent figure of the Gatekeeper silently lifted one hand. "We have set our feet upon a darkling path," he murmured. "A road that will only grow more dangerous. Our first steps are critical. We must make them with caution."

The cowl turned toward Ebenezar, and the Gatekeeper said, “You love the boy, Wizard McCoy. You would fight to defend him. Your own dedication to our cause is not inconsiderable. I respect your choice.”

He turned toward LaFortier. “You question Dresden’s loyalty and his ability. You imply that only a bad seed can grow from bad soil. Your concerns are understandable—and if correct, then Dresden poses a major threat to the Council.”

He turned to Ancient Mai and inclined the cowl forward a few degrees. The Ancient responded with a slight bow of her own. “Ancient Mai,” the Gatekeeper said. “You question his ability to use his power wisely. To judge between right and wrong. You fear that DuMorne’s teaching may have twisted him in ways even he cannot yet see. Your fears, too, are justified.”

He turned to the Merlin. “Honored Merlin. You know that Dresden has drawn death and danger down upon the Council. You believe that if he is removed, so will be that danger. Your fears are understandable, but not reasonable. Regardless of what happens to Dresden, the Red Court has struck a blow against the Council too deep to be ignored. A cessation of current hostilities would only be the calm before the storm.”

“Enough, man,” Ebenezar demanded. “Vote, for or against.”

“I choose to base my vote upon a Trial. A test that will lay to rest the fears of one side of the issue, or prove falsely placed the faith of the other.”

“What Trial?” the Merlin asked.

“Mab,” the Gatekeeper said. “Let Dresden address Queen Mab’s request. Let him secure the assistance of Winter. If he does, that should lay to rest your concerns regarding his ability, LaFortier.”

LaFortier frowned, but then nodded at the Gatekeeper.

He turned next to Ancient Mai. “Should he accomplish this, it should show that he is willing to accept responsibility for his mistake and to work against his own best interests for the greater good of the Council. It should satisfy your concerns as to his judgement—to make the mistakes of youth is no crime, but not to learn from them is. Agreed?”

Ancient Mai narrowed her rheumy eyes, but gave the Gatekeeper a precise nod.

“And you, honored Merlin. Such a success may do much to alleviate the pressure of the coming war. If securing routes through the Nevernever places the Red Court at a severe enough disadvantage, it may even enable

us to avoid it entirely. Surely it would prove Dresden's dedication to the Council beyond a doubt."

"That's all well and good," Ebenezar said. "But what happens if he fails?"

The Gatekeeper shrugged. "Then perhaps their fears are more justified than your affection, Wizard McCoy. We may indeed conclude that his appointment to full Wizard Initiate may have been premature."

"All or nothing?" Ebenezar demanded. "Is that it? You expect the youngest wizard in the Council to get the best of Queen Mab somehow? *Mab*? That's not a Trial. It's a goddamned execution. How is he even supposed to know what her request was to begin with?"

I stood up, my legs shaking a little. "Ebenezar," I said.

"How the hell is the boy supposed to know what she wants?"

"Ebenezar—"

"I'm not going to stand by while you—" He abruptly blinked and looked at me. So did everyone else.

"I know what Mab wants," I said. "She approached me earlier today, sir. She asked me to investigate something for her. I turned her down."

"Hell's bells," Ebenezar breathed. He took the blue bandanna from his pocket and mopped at his gleaming forehead. "Hoss, this is out of your depth."

"Looks like it's sink or swim, then," I said.

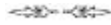
The Gatekeeper murmured to me in English, "Will you accept this, Wizard Dresden?"

I nodded my head. My throat had gone dry. I swallowed and tried to remind myself that there wasn't much choice. If I didn't play with the faeries and come out on top, the Council would serve me up to the vampires on a silver platter. The former might get me really, really killed. The latter would certainly kill me as well—and probably more than that.

As deals went, it blew. But some little part of me that hadn't let me forget all the destruction, maybe even the deaths I'd caused last year, danced gleefully at my apparent comeuppance. Besides, it was the only game in town. I tightened my grip on my staff and spoke as clearly as I could manage.

"Yeah. I accept."

Chapter Seven



The rest of the Council meeting was somewhat anticlimactic—for me, anyway.

The Merlin ordered the wizards to disperse immediately after the meeting via preplanned, secure routes. He also distributed a list to everyone, noting the Wardens near them to call upon if help was needed, and told them to check in with the Wardens every few days, as a safety precaution.

Next, a grizzled old dame Warden went over the theories to a couple of newly developed wards meant to work especially well against vampires. Representatives of the White Council's allies—secret occult brotherhoods, mostly—each gave a brief speech, declaring his or her group's support of the Council in the war.

Toward the end of the meeting, Wardens showed up in force to escort wizards to the beginnings of their routes home. The Senior Council, I presumed, would loiter around for a few days in order to see if I got killed trying to prove that I was one of the good guys. Sometimes I feel like no one appreciates me.

I stood up about three seconds before the Merlin said, "Meeting adjourned," and headed for the door. Ebenezar tried to catch my eye, but I didn't feel like talking to anyone. I slammed the doors open a little harder than I needed to, stalked out to the Blue Beetle, and drove away with all the raging power the ancient four-cylinder engine could muster. Behold the angry wizard puttputt-putting away.

My brain felt like something made out of stale cereal, coffee grounds, and cold pizza. Thoughts trudged around in aimless depression, mostly about how I was going to get myself killed playing private eye for Mab. If things got really bad, I might even drag down a few innocent bystanders with me.

I growled at myself. "Stop whining, Harry," I said in a firm, loud voice. "So what if you're tired? So what if you're hurt? So what if you smell like you're already dead? You're a wizard. You've got a job to do. This war is mostly your own fault, and if you don't stay on the ball, more people are

going to get hurt. So stiff upper lip, chin up, whatever. Get your ass in gear.”

I nodded at that advice, and glanced aside, to the envelope Mab had given me, which lay on the passenger seat. I had a name, an address, a crime. I needed to get on the trail of the killer. That meant I would need information—and the people who would have the most information, a couple of days after the fact, would be the Chicago PD.

I drove to Murphy’s place.

Lieutenant Karrin Murphy was the head of Chicago PD’s Special Investigations team. SI was the city’s answer to weirdness in general. They got all of the unusual crimes, the ones that didn’t fall neatly into the department’s other categories. SI has handled everything from sightings of sewer alligators to grave robbing in one of the city’s many cemeteries. What fun. They also got to take care of the genuine supernatural stuff, the things that no one talks about in official reports but that manage to happen anyway. Trolls, vampires, demon-summoning sorcerers—you name it. The city had appointed SI to make sure the paperwork stayed nice and neat, with no mention of preposterous fantasies that could not possibly exist. It was a thankless job, and the directors of SI typically blew it after about a month by refusing to believe that they were dealing with genuine weirdness. Then they got shuffled out of Chicago PD.

Murphy hadn’t. She’d lasted. She’d taken things seriously and employed the services of Chicago’s only professional wizard (guess who) as a consultant on the tougher jobs. Murphy and I have seen some very upsetting things together. We’re friends. She would help.

Murphy lives in a house in Bucktown, near a lot of other cops. It’s a tiny place, but she owns it. Grandma Murphy left it to her. The house is surrounded by a neat little lawn.

I pulled up in the Beetle sometime well after summertime dark but before midnight. I knew she’d be home, though I wasn’t certain she’d be awake. I made sure that I didn’t sound like I was trying to sneak up anywhere. I shut the door of the Beetle hard and walked with firm footsteps to her door, then knocked lightly.

A moment later the curtains on the barred windows beside the door twitched and then fell back into place. A lock disengaged, then another, then a door chain. I noted, as I waited, that Murphy had a steel-reinforced

door just like I did. Though I doubted she'd had as many demons or assassins showing up at it.

Murphy opened the door partway and peered out at me. The woman didn't look like the chief of Chicago PD's monster hunters. Her bright blue eyes were heavy, weary, and underscored with dark bags. She stood five feet nothing in her bare feet. Her golden hair was longer on top than in back, with bangs hanging down to her eyes. She wore a pale peach terry-cloth bathrobe that fell most of the way to her feet.

In her right hand she held her automatic, and a small crucifix dangled on a chain wrapped around her wrist. She looked at me.

"Heya, Murph," I said. I looked at the gun and the holy symbol and kept my voice calm. "Sorry to drop in on you this late. I need your help."

Murphy regarded me in silence for more than a minute. Then she said, "Wait here." She shut the door, returned a minute later, and opened it again, all the way. Then, gun still in hand, she stepped back from the doorway and faced me.

"Uh," I said, "Murph, are you all right?"

She nodded.

"Okay," I said. "Can I come in?"

"We'll know in a minute," Murphy said.

I got it then. Murphy wasn't going to ask me in. There are plenty of monsters running around in the dark that can't violate the threshold of a home if they aren't invited in. One of them had caught up to Murphy last year, nearly killing her, and it had been wearing my face when it did it. No wonder she didn't look exactly overjoyed to see me.

"Murph," I said, "relax. It's me. Hell's bells, there isn't anything that I can think of that would mimic me looking like this. Even demonic fiends from the nether regions of hell have *some* taste."

I stepped across her threshold. Something tugged at me as I did, an intangible, invisible energy. It slowed me down a little, and I had to make an effort to push through it. That's what a threshold is like. One like it surrounds every home, a field of energy that keeps out unwanted magical forces. Some places have more of a threshold than others. My apartment, for example, didn't have much of a threshold—it's a bachelor pad, and whatever domestic energy is responsible for such things doesn't seem to settle down as well in rental spaces and lone dwellings. Murphy's house

had a heavy field surrounding it. It had a life of its own; it had history. It was a home, not just a place to live.

I crossed her threshold uninvited, and I left a lot of my power at the door as I did. I would have to really push to make even the simplest of spells work within. I stepped inside and spread my hands. “Do I pass inspection?”

Murphy didn’t say anything. She crossed the room and put her gun back into its holster, setting it down on an end table.

Murphy’s place was . . . dare I say it, *cute* . The room was done in soft yellows and greens. And there were ruffles. The curtains had ruffles, and the couch had more, plus those little knitted things (aren’t they called doilies?) were draped over the arms of the two recliners, the couch, the coffee table, and just about every other surface that seemed capable of supporting lacy bits of froo-fra. They looked old and beautiful and well cared for. I was betting Murphy’s grandma had picked them out.

Murphy’s own decorating was limited to the gun-cleaning kit sitting on the end table beside the holster for her automatic and a wooden rack over the fireplace that bore a pair of Japanese swords, long and short, one over the other. That was the Murphy I knew and loved. Practical violence ready at hand. Next to the swords was a small row of photographs in holders—maybe her family. A thick picture album with what looked like a real leather cover sat open on the coffee table, next to a prescription bottle and a decanter of some kind of liquor—gin? The decanter was half empty. The glass next to it was completely empty.

I watched her settle down in the corner of the couch in her oversized bathrobe, her expression remote. She didn’t look at me. I got more worried by the moment. Murphy wasn’t acting like Murphy. She’d never passed up a chance to trade banter with me. I’d never seen her this silent and withdrawn.

Dammit, just when I needed some quick and decisive help. Something was wrong with Murphy, and I hardly had time to play dime-store psychologist, trying to help her. I needed whatever information she could get me. I also needed to help her with whatever it was that had hurt her so badly. I was fairly sure I wouldn’t be able to do either if I didn’t get her talking.

“Nice place, Murph,” I told her. “I haven’t seen it before.”

She twitched one shoulder in what might have been a shrug.

I frowned. "You know, if conversation is too much for you we could play charades. I'll go first." I held up my hand with my fingers spread. Murphy didn't say anything, so I provided her end of the dialogue. "Five words." I tugged on my ear. "Sounds like . . . What Is Wrong with You?"

She shook her head. I saw her eyes flicker toward the album.

I leaned forward and turned the album toward me. It had been opened on a cluster of wedding pictures. The girl in them must have been Murphy, back when. She had longer, sunnier hair and a kind of adolescent slenderness that showed around her neck and wrists. She wore a white wedding gown, and stood next to a tuxedo-clad man who had to have been ten years older than she was. In other pictures she was shoving cake into his mouth, drinking through linked arms, the usual wedding fare. He had carried her to the getaway car, and the photo-Murphy's face had been caught in a moment of laughter and joy.

"First husband?" I asked.

That got through to her. She glanced up at me for just a second. Then nodded.

"You were a kid in this. Maybe eighteen?"

She shook her head.

"Seventeen?"

She nodded. At least I was getting some kind of response out of her.

"How long were you married to him?"

Silence.

I frowned. "Murph, I'm not like a genius about this stuff or anything. But if you're feeling guilty about something, maybe you're being a little hard on yourself."

Without a word, she leaned forward and picked up the album, moving it aside to reveal a copy of the *Tribune*. It had been folded open to the obituaries page. She picked it up and handed it to me.

I read the first one out loud. "Gregory Taggart, age forty-three, died last night after a long bout with cancer . . ." I paused and looked at the photograph of the deceased and then at Murphy's album. It was the same man, give or take several years of wear and tear. I winced and lowered the paper. "Oh, God, Murph. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She blinked her eyes several times. Her voice came out thready, quiet. "He didn't even tell me that he was sick."

Talk about your nasty surprises. “Murph, look. I’m sure that . . . that things will work out. I know how you’re hurting, how you must feel, but—”

“Do you?” she said, still very quiet. “Do you know how I feel? Did you lose your first love?”

I sat quietly for a full minute before I said, “Yeah. I did.”

“What was her name?”

It hurt to think the name, much less to say it. But if it helped me get through to Murphy, I couldn’t afford to be touchy. “Elaine. We were . . . both of us were orphans. We got adopted by the same man when we were ten.”

Murphy blinked and looked up at me. “She was your sister?”

“I don’t have any relatives. We were both adopted by the same guy, that’s all. We lived together, drove one another nuts, hit puberty together. Do the math.”

She nodded. “How long were you together?”

“Oh. Until we were about sixteen.”

“What happened? How did she . . .”

I shrugged. “My adoptive father tried to get me into black magic. Human sacrifice.”

Murphy frowned. “He was a wizard?”

I nodded. “Strong one. So was she.”

“Didn’t he try to get Elaine, too?”

“Did get her,” I said. “She was helping him.”

“What happened?” she asked quietly.

I tried to keep my voice even and calm, but I wasn’t sure how well I managed it. “I ran away. He sent a demon after me. I beat it, then went back to save Elaine. She hit me with a binding spell when I wasn’t looking, and he tried a spell that would break into my head. Make me do what he wanted. I slipped out of the spell Elaine had on me and took on Justin. I got lucky. He lost. Everything burned.”

Murphy swallowed. “What happened to Elaine?”

“Burned,” I said quietly, my throat tightening. “She’s dead.”

“God, Harry.” Murphy was quiet for a moment. “Greg left me. We tried to talk a few times, but it always ended in a fight.” Her eyes welled up with tears. “Dammit, I should have at least gotten to tell him good-bye.”

I put the paper back on the table and closed the album, studiously not looking at Murphy. I knew she wouldn’t want me to see her crying. She

inhaled sharply. "I'm sorry, Harry," she said. "I'm flaking out on you here. I shouldn't. I don't know why this is getting to me so hard."

I glanced at the booze and the pills on the table. "It's okay. Everyone has an off day sometimes."

"I can't afford it." She drew the bathrobe a little closer around herself and said, "Sorry, Harry. About the gun." Her words sounded heavy, maybe a little slurred. "I had to be sure it was really you."

"I understand," I said.

She looked at me and something like gratitude touched her eyes. She got up from the couch abruptly and walked down a hallway, out of the living room, and said over her shoulder, "Let me put something else on."

"Sure, okay," I said after her, frowning. I leaned over to the table and picked up the prescription bottle behind the booze, next to the empty tumbler. A medium-sized dose of Valium. No wonder Murphy had been slurring her words. Valium and gin. Hell's bells.

I was still holding the pills when she came back in, wearing baggy shorts and a T-shirt. She'd raked a brush through her hair and splashed water on her face, so that I could barely tell that she'd been crying. She stopped short and looked at me. I didn't say anything. She chewed on her lip.

"Murph," I said, finally, "Are you okay? Is there . . . I mean, do you need —"

"Relax, Dresden," she said, folding her arms. "I'm not suicidal."

"Funny you say that. Mixing drinks with drugs is a great way to get it done."

She walked over to me, jerked the pill bottle out of my hands, and picked up the bottle of booze. "It isn't any of your business," she said. She walked into the kitchen, dropped things off, and came back out again. "I'm fine. I'll be fine."

"Murph, I've never seen you with a drink in your life. And Valium? It makes me worry about you."

"Dresden, if you came over here to lecture me, you can leave right now."

I shoved my fingers through my shaggy hair. "Karrin, I swear I'm not lecturing. I'm just trying to understand."

She looked away from me for a minute, one foot rubbing at the opposite calf. It hit me how small she looked. How frail. Her eyes were not only weary, I saw now. They were haunted. I walked over to her and put a hand

on her shoulder. Her skin was warm underneath the cotton of her T-shirt. "Talk to me, Murph. Please."

She pulled her shoulder out from under my hand. "It isn't a big deal. It's the only way I can get any sleep."

"What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath. "I mean, I can't sleep without help. The drinks didn't help. The drugs didn't, either. I have to use both or I won't get any rest."

"I still don't get it. Why can't you sleep? Is it because of Greg?"

Murphy shook her head, then moved over to the couch, away from me, and curled up in the corner of it, clasping her hands over her knees. "I've been having nightmares. Night terrors, the doctors say. They say it's different from just bad dreams."

I felt my cheek twitch with tension. "And you can't stay asleep?"

She shook her head. "I wake myself up screaming." I saw her clench her fists. "God dammit, Dresden. There's no reason for it. I shouldn't get rattled by a few bad dreams. I shouldn't fall to pieces hearing about a man I haven't spoken to in years. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me."

I closed my eyes. "You're dreaming about last year, aren't you? About what Kravos did to you."

She shivered at the mention of the name and nodded. "I couldn't stop thinking about it for a long time. Trying to figure out what I did wrong. Why he was able to get to me."

I ached inside. "Murph, there wasn't anything you could have done."

"Don't you think I know that?" she said, her voice quiet. "I couldn't have known that it wasn't you. I couldn't have stopped him even if I had. I couldn't have done anything to defend myself. To stop wh-what he did to me, once he was inside my head." Her eyes clouded with tears, but she blinked them away, her jaw setting. "There wasn't anything I could have done. That's what scares me, Harry. That's why I'm afraid."

"Murph, he's dead. He's dead and gone. We watched them put him in the ground."

Murphy snarled, "I know that. I know it, Harry. I know he's gone, I know he can't hurt me anymore, I know he's never going to hurt anyone again." She looked up at me for a moment, chancing a look at my eyes. Hers were clouded with tears. "But I still have the dreams. I know it, but it doesn't make any difference."

God. Poor Murphy. She'd taken a spiritual mauling before I'd shown up to save her. The thing that attacked her had been a spirit being, and it had torn her apart on the inside without leaving a mark on her skin. In a way, she'd been raped. All of her power had been taken away, and she'd been used for the amusement of another. No wonder it had left her with scars. Adding an unpleasant shock of bad news had been like tossing a spark onto a pile of tinder soaked in jet fuel.

"Harry," she continued, her voice quiet, soft, "you know me. God, I'm not a whiner. I hate that. But what that thing did to me. The things it made me see. Made me feel." She looked up at me, pain in the lines at the corners of her eyes, which threatened tears. "It won't go away. I try to leave it behind me, but it won't go. And it's eating up every part of my life."

She turned away, grabbing irritably at a box of tissues. I walked over to the fireplace and studied the swords on the mantel, so she wouldn't feel my eyes on her.

After a moment she spoke, her tone changing, growing more focused. "What are you doing here so late?"

I turned back to face her. "I need a favor. Information." I passed over the envelope Mab had given me. Murphy opened it, looked at the pair of pictures, and frowned.

"These are shots from the report of Ronald Reuel's death. How did you get them?"

"I didn't," I said. "A client gave them to me. I don't know where she got them."

She rubbed her eyes and asked, "What did she want from you?"

"She wants me to find the person who killed him."

Murphy shook her head. "I thought this was an accidental death."

"I hear it isn't."

"Where'd you hear that?"

I sighed. "A magic faerie told me."

That got me a suspicious glare, which dissolved into a frown. "God, you're being literal, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

Murphy shook her head, a tired smile at the corners of her mouth. "How can I help?"

"I'd like to look at the file on Ronald Reuel's death. I can't look at the scene, but maybe CPD caught something they didn't know was a clue. It

would give me a place to start, at least.”

Murphy nodded without looking at me. “All right. One condition.”

“Sure. What?”

“If this is a murder, you bring me in on it.”

“Murph,” I protested, “come on. I don’t want to pull you into anything that—”

“Dammit, Harry,” Murphy snapped, “if someone’s killing people in Chicago, I’m going to deal with them. It’s my job. What’s been happening to me doesn’t change that.”

“It’s your job to stop the bad guys,” I said. “But this might not be a guy. Maybe not even human. I just think you’d be safer if—”

“Fuck safe,” Murphy muttered. “My job, Harry. If you turn up a killing, you will bring me in.”

I hesitated, trying not to let my frustration show. I didn’t want Murphy involved with Mab and company. Murphy had earned too many scars already. The faeries had a way of insinuating themselves into your life. I didn’t want Murphy exposed to that, especially as vulnerable as she was.

But at the same time, I couldn’t lie to her. I owed her a lot more than that.

Bottom line, Murphy had been hurt. She was afraid, and if she didn’t force herself to face that fear, it might swallow her whole. She knew it. As terrified as she was, she knew that she had to keep going or she would never recover.

As much as I wanted to keep her safe, especially now, it wouldn’t help her. Not in the long run. In a sense, her life was at stake.

“Deal,” I said quietly.

She nodded and rose. “Stay out here. I need to get on the computer, see what I can pull up for you.”

“I can wait if it’s better.”

She shook her head. “I’ve already taken the Valium. If I wait any longer I’ll be too zonked to think straight. Just sit down. Have a drink. Try not to blow up anything.” She padded out of the room on silent feet.

I sat down in one of the armchairs, stretched out my legs, let my head fall forward, and dropped into a light doze. It had been a long day, and it looked like it was just going to get longer. I woke up when Murphy came back into the room, her eyes heavy. She had a manila folder with her.

“Okay,” she said, “this is everything I could print out. The pictures aren’t as clear as they could be, but they aren’t horrible.”

I sat up, took the folder from her and opened it. Murphy sat down in an armchair, facing me, her legs tucked beneath her. I started going over the details in the folder, though my brain felt like some kind of gelatin dessert topped with mush.

“What happened to your hand?” she asked.

“Magic faerie,” I said. “Magic faerie with a letter opener.”

“It doesn’t look good. The dressing isn’t right either. You have anyone look at it?”

I shook my head. “No time.”

“Harry, you idiot.” She got up, disappeared into the kitchen, and came back out with a first aid kit. I decided not to argue with her. She pulled up a chair from the kitchen next to mine, and rested my arm in her lap.

“I’m trying to read here, Murph.”

“You’re still bleeding. Puncture wounds will ooze forever if you don’t keep them covered.”

“Yeah, I tried to explain that, but they made me take the bandage off anyway.”

“Who did?”

“Long story. So the security guard on the building didn’t see anyone come in?”

She peeled off the bandage with brisk motions. It hurt. She fished out some disinfectant. “Cameras didn’t pick up anything, either, and there aren’t any bursts of static to indicate someone using magic. I checked.”

I whistled. “Not bad, Murph.”

“Yeah, sometimes I use my head instead of my gun. This will hurt.”

She sprayed disinfectant liberally on my hand. It stung.

“Ow!”

“Wimp.”

“Any other ways in and out of the building?”

“Not unless they could fly and walk through walls. The other doors are all fire exits, with alarms that would trip if someone opened them.”

I kept paging through the file. “ ‘Broken neck due to fall,’ it says. They found him at the bottom of the stairs.”

“Right.” Murphy used a wipe to clean both sides of my hand, and then she put more disinfectant on. It hurt a bit less. “He had contusions

consistent with a fall, and he was an old man. No one seen entering or leaving an apartment building with a high-security system, so naturally—”

“—no one looked for a killer,” I finished. “Or reported anything that might have indicated one. Or, wait, did they? Says here that the first officer on the scene found ‘slippery goo’ on the landing above where Reuel fell.”

“But none of the detectives on the scene later found any such thing,” Murphy said. She pressed a gauze pad against the wound from either side and began wrapping medical tape around to hold the pads on. “The first officer was a rookie. They figured he was seeing a killing where there wasn’t one so he could get in on a murder investigation.”

I frowned, turning the printouts of the photographs around. “See here? The sleeves of Reuel’s coat are wet. You can see the discoloration.”

She looked and admitted, “Maybe. There’s no mention of it, though.”

“Slippery goo. It could have been ectoplasm.”

“Is that too tight? Ecto-what?”

I flexed my fingers a little, testing the bandage. “It’s fine. Ectoplasm. Matter from the Nevernever.”

“That’s the spirit world, right? Faerieland?”

“Among other things.”

“And stuff from there is goo?”

“It turns into goo when there’s not any magic animating it. As long as the magic is there, it’s as good as real. Like when Kravos made a body that looked like mine and came gunning for you.”

Murphy shivered and started putting things back into her kit. “So when whatever it is that has made this ecto goo into matter has gone, it turns back into . . . ?”

“Slime,” I said. “It’s clear and slippery, and it evaporates in a few minutes.”

“So something from the Nevernever could have killed Reuel,” Murphy said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Or someone could have opened up a portal into the apartment building. There’s usually some gunk left when you open a portal. Dust drifting out from the Nevernever. So they could have opened a portal, then gotten out the same way.”

“Whoa! Hold it. I thought Faerieland was monsters only. People can go into the Nevernever?”

“If you know the right magic, yeah. It’s full of things that are fairly dangerous, though. You don’t just cruise through on a Sunday stroll.”

“Jesus Christ,” Murphy muttered. “So someone—”

“Or something,” I interjected.

“—or something could have gotten into the building and out again. Just like that. Past all the locks and guards and cameras. How scary is that?”

“Could have, yeah. Stepped in, pitched grampa down the stairs, stepped out again.”

“God. That poor old man.”

“I don’t think he was helpless, Murph. Reuel was mixed up with the faeries. I kind of doubt his hands were squeaky clean.”

She nodded. “Okay. Had he made any supernatural enemies?”

I held up the picture of the body. “Looks like it.”

Murphy shook her head. She swayed a little bit, and then sat down next to me, leaning her head against the corner of the couch. “So what’s the next step?”

“I go digging. Pound the proverbial pavement.”

“You don’t look so good. Get some rest first. A shower. Some food. Maybe a haircut.”

I rubbed my eyes with my good hand. “Yeah,” I said.

“And you tell me, when you know something.”

“Murph, if this was something from the Nevernever, it’s going to be out of your”—I almost said “league,”—“jurisdiction.”

She shrugged. “If it came into my town and hurt someone I’m responsible for protecting, I want to make it answer for that.” She closed her eyes. “Same as you. Besides. You promised.”

Well, she had me there. “Yeah. Okay, Murph. When I find something out, I’ll call.”

“All right,” she said. She curled up in the corner of the couch again, heavy eyes closing. She leaned her head back, baring the lines of her throat. After a moment, she asked, “Have you heard from Susan?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“But her articles are still coming into the *Arcane*. She’s all right.”

I nodded. “I guess so.”

“Have you found anything that will help her yet?”

I sighed and shook my head. “No, not yet. It’s like pounding my head against a wall.”

She halfway smiled. “With your head, the wall breaks first. You’re the most stubborn man I’ve ever met.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

Murphy nodded. “You’re a good man, Harry. If anyone can help her, it’s you.”

I looked down so she wouldn’t see the tears that made my eyes swim a little, and started putting the file back together. “Thanks, Murph. That means a lot to me.”

She didn’t answer. I looked up and saw that her mouth had fallen slightly open and her body was totally relaxed, a cheek resting on the arm of the couch.

“Murph?” I asked. She didn’t stir. I got up and left the file on the chair. I found a blanket and draped it lightly over her, tucking it in around her. She made a soft sound in the back of her throat and nuzzled her cheek closer to the couch.

“Sleep well, Murph,” I said. Then I headed for the door. I locked what I could behind me, made my way back to the Beetle, and drove toward home.

I ached everywhere. Not from sore muscles, but from simple exhaustion. My wounded hand felt like a big throbbing knot of cramping muscle, doused in gasoline and set on fire.

I hurt even more on the inside. Poor Murph had been torn up badly. She was terrified of the things she might have to face, but that made her no less determined to face them. That was courage, and more than I had. I at least was sure that I could hit back if one of the monsters came after me. Murphy didn’t have any such certainty.

Murphy was my friend. She’d saved my life before. We’d fought side by side. She needed my help again. She had to face her fear. I understood that. She needed me to help make it happen, but I didn’t have to like it. In her condition, she would be extra vulnerable to any kind of attack like the one by Kravos the year before. And if she got hit again before she had a chance to piece herself back together, it might not simply wound her—it might break her entirely.

I wasn’t sure I could live with myself if that happened.

“Dammit,” I muttered. “So help me, Murph, I’m going to make sure you come out of this okay.”

I shoved my worries about Murphy to the back of my mind. The best way to protect her would be to focus on this case, to get cracking. But my brain

felt like something had crawled into it and died. The only cracking it was going to be doing was the kind that would land me in a rubber room and a sleeveless coat.

I wanted food. Sleep. A shower. If I didn't take some time to put myself back together, I might walk right into something that would kill me and not notice it until it was too late.

I drove back to my apartment, which is the basement of a rooming house more than a century old. I parked the Beetle outside and got my rod and staff out of the car to take with me. It wasn't much of a walk between my apartment and the car, but I'd been accosted before. Vampires can be really inconsiderate that way.

I thumped down the stairs to my apartment, unlocked the door, and murmured the phrase that would disarm my wards long enough to let me get inside. I slipped in, and my instincts screamed at me that I was not alone.

I lifted the blasting rod, gathering my power and sending it humming through the focus so that the tip burst into brilliant crimson light that flooded my apartment.

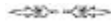
And then there she was, a slender woman standing by my cold fireplace, all graceful curves and poised reserve. She wore a pair of blue jeans over long, coltish legs, with a simple scarlet cotton T-shirt. A silver pentacle hung outside the shirt, resting on the curve of modest breasts, and it gleamed in the light from my readied blasting rod. Her skin was pale, like the inner bark of an oak, the living part of the tree, her hair the brown-gold of ripe wheat, her eyes the grey of storm clouds. Her fine mouth twitched, first into a smile and then into a frown, and she lifted elegant, long-fingered hands to show me empty palms.

"I let myself in," she murmured. "I hope you don't mind. You should change your wards more often."

I lowered the blasting rod, too stunned to speak, my heart lurching in my chest. She lowered her hands and closed the distance between us. She lifted herself onto her toes, but she was tall enough that it wasn't much of an effort for her to kiss my cheek. She smelled like wildflowers and sun-drenched summer afternoons. She drew back enough to focus on my face and my eyes, her own expression gentle and concerned. "Hello, Harry."

And I said, in a bare whisper, fighting through the shock, "Hello, Elaine."

Chapter Eight



Elaine walked past me, making a circuit around my apartment. It wasn't much of a tour. The place consists of a living room and a tiny bedroom. The kitchen is pretty much just an alcove with a sink and a fridge. The floor is smooth grey stone, but I'd covered a lot of it with a few dozen rugs. My furniture is all secondhand and comfortable. It doesn't even come close to matching. Bookshelves fill up most of the wall space, and where they don't, I have several tapestries, plus a *Star Wars* movie poster Billy gave me for Christmas. It's the old poster, the one with Princess Leia clinging to Luke's leg.

Anyway, that was my apartment on a normal day. Lately it had suffered from disrepair. It didn't smell so great, and pizza boxes and empty Coke cans had overflowed the trash can and spilled over a significant portion of the kitchen floor. You could barely walk without stepping on clothing that needed to be washed. My furniture was covered with scribbled-on papers and discarded pens and pencils.

Elaine walked through it all like a Red Cross worker through a war zone and shook her head. "I know you weren't expecting me, Harry, but I didn't think I'd be overdressed. You live in this?"

"Elaine," I choked out. "You're alive."

"A little less of a compliment than I would have hoped for, but I guess it could have been worse." She regarded me from near the kitchen. "I'm alive, Harry." Her face flickered with a trace of apprehension. "How are you feeling?"

I lowered myself onto the couch, papers crunching beneath me. I released the power held ready to strike, and the glowing tip of the blasting rod went out, leaving the apartment in darkness. I kept staring at her afterimage on my vision. "Shocked," I said finally. "This isn't happening. Hell's bells, this has got to be some sort of trick."

"No. It's me. If I was something out of the Nevernever, could I have crossed your threshold uninvited? Do you know anyone else who knows how you set up your wards?"

"Anyone could figure it out eventually," I said.

“All right. Does anyone else know that you failed your driver’s test five times in one week? Or that you sprained your shoulder trying to impress me going out for football our freshman year? That we soulgazed on our first night together? I think I can still remember our locker combination, if you like.”

“My God, Elaine.” I shook my head. Elaine, alive. My brain could not wrap itself around the idea. “Why didn’t you contact me?”

I saw her, dimly, lean against the wall. She was quiet for a while, as though she had to shape her words carefully. “At first because I didn’t even know if you had survived. And after that . . .” She shook her head. “I wasn’t sure I wanted to. Wasn’t sure you’d want me to. So much happened.”

My shock and disbelief faded before a sudden aching pain, and an old, old anger. “That’s putting it mildly,” I said. “You tried to destroy me.”

“No,” she said. “God, no, Harry. You don’t understand. I never wanted that.”

My voice gained a hard edge. “Which is why you hit me with that binding. Why you held me down while Justin tried to destroy me.”

“He never wanted you dead—”

“No, he just wanted to break into my head. Wanted to control me. Make me into some kind of . . . of . . .” Words failed me in the face of my frustration.

“Thrall,” Elaine said quietly. “He’d have wrapped you in enough spells to guarantee your loyalty. To make you his thrall.”

“And that’s worse than dead. And you *helped* him.”

Her voice crackled with anger of its own. “Yes, Harry. I helped him. That’s what thralls *do* .”

My rising ire abruptly quieted. “What . . . what are you saying?”

I saw her dim shape bow its head. “Justin caught me about two weeks before he sent that demon to capture you. That day I stayed home sick, remember? By the time you got home from school, he had me. I tried to fight him, but I was a child. I didn’t have enough experience to resist him. And after he had enthralled me, I didn’t see why I should fight anymore.”

I stared at her for a long minute. “So you’re telling me that you didn’t have any choice,” I breathed. “He forced you to do it. He made you help him.”

“Yes.”

“Why the hell should I believe you?”

“I don’t expect you to.”

I rose and paced back and forth restlessly. “I can’t believe you’re trying to tell me that the devil made you do it. Do you have any idea how lame that excuse sounds?”

Elaine watched me carefully, her grey eyes pensive and sad. “It wasn’t an excuse, Harry. Nothing can excuse the kind of pain I put you through.”

I stopped and frowned at her. “Then why are you telling me?”

“Because it needs to be said,” she murmured. “Because that’s what happened. You deserve to know that.”

It was quiet for a long time, then I asked, “He really had enthralled you?”

Elaine shivered and nodded.

“What was it like?”

She fretted at her lower lip. “I didn’t know it was happening. Not at the time. I didn’t have the ability to think clearly. Justin told me that you just needed to be shown what to do and that if I would hold you still long enough to let him explain things to you it would all work out. I believed him. Trusted him.” She shook her head. “I never wanted to hurt you, Harry. Never. I’m sorry.”

I sat down and rubbed my face with my hands, my emotions running high and out of control again. Without the anger to support me, all that was left inside was pain. I thought I had gotten over Elaine’s loss, her betrayal. I thought I had forgotten it and moved on. I was wrong. The wounds burst open again, as painful as they had ever been. Maybe more so. I had to fight to control my breathing, my tone.

I had loved her. I wanted very badly to believe her.

“I . . . I looked for you,” I said quietly. “In fire and water. I had spirits combing the Earth for any trace of you. Hoping that you’d survived.”

She pushed away from the wall and walked to the fireplace. I heard her putting in wood, and then she murmured something soft and low. Flame licked up over the logs easily, smoothly, low and blue, then settled into a dark golden light. I watched her profile as she stared down at the fire. “I got out of the house before you and Justin were finished,” she said finally. “His spells had begun to unravel, and I was struggling against them. Confused, terrified. I must have run. I don’t even remember doing it.”

“But where have you been?” I asked. “Elaine, I looked for you for years. Years.”

“Where you couldn’t have found me, Harry. You or anyone else. I found sanctuary. A place to hide. But there was a price, and that’s why I’m here.” She looked up at me, and though her features were calm and smooth, I could see the fear in her eyes, hear it coloring her voice. “I’m in trouble.”

My answer came out at once. For me, chivalry isn’t dead; it’s an involuntary reflex. It could have been any woman asking for help, and I’d have said the same thing. It might have taken me a second or two longer, but I would have. For Elaine, there was no need to think about it for even that long. “I’ll help.”

Her shoulders sagged and she nodded, pressing her lips together and bowing her head. “Thank you. Thank you, Harry. I hate doing this, I hate bringing this to you after all this time. But I don’t know where else to turn.”

“No,” I said, “it’s all right. Really. What’s going on? Why do you think you’re in trouble? What do you mean, you’re paying a price?”

“It’s complicated,” she said. “But the short version is that I was granted asylum by the Summer Court of the Sidhe.”

My stomach dropped about twenty feet.

“I built up a debt to Titania, the Summer Queen, in exchange for her protection. And now it’s time to pay it off.” She took a deep breath. “There’s been a murder within the realms of the Sidhe.”

I rubbed at my eyes. “And Titania wants you to be her Emissary. She wants you to find the killer and prove that the Winter Court is to blame. She told you that you would be contacted tonight by Mab’s Emissary, but she didn’t tell you who it was going to be.”

Elaine’s eyes widened in shock, and she fell silent. We stared at one another for a long moment before she whispered, “Stars and stones.” She pushed her hair back from her face with one hand, in what I knew to be a nervous gesture, even if it didn’t look it. “Harry, if I don’t succeed, if I don’t fulfill my debt to her, I’m . . . it’s going to be very bad for me.”

“Hooboy,” I muttered, “tell me about it. Mab’s more or less got me over the same barrel.”

Elaine swore quietly. “What are we going to do?”

“Uh,” I said.

She looked at me expectantly.

I scowled. “I’m thinking, I’m thinking. Uh.”

She rose and took a few long-legged strides across the living room and back, agitated. “There must be something . . . some way out of this. God,

sometimes their sense of humor makes me sick. Mab and Titania are laughing right now.”

If I’d had the energy, I’d have been pacing, too. I closed my eyes and tried to think. If I didn’t succeed on Mab’s behalf, she wouldn’t grant rights of passage to the Council. The Council would judge that I had failed my trial, and they’d wrap me up and deliver me to the vampires. I didn’t know the specifics of Elaine’s situation, but I doubted she had a deal that was any less fatal. My head hurt.

Elaine continued pacing, exasperated. “Come on, Harry. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that if this dilemma grows any more horns I’m going to shoot it and put it up on the wall.”

“I know this will never sink into your head, but this isn’t a time for jokes. We need to come up with something.”

“Okay. I’ve got it,” I said. “Get your stuff and come with me.”

Elaine reached back to the shadows beside the fireplace and withdrew a slender staff of pale wood, carved with swirling, abstract shapes. “Where are we going?”

I pushed myself up. “To talk to the Council and get their help.”

Elaine lifted her eyebrows. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Harry, but are you crazy?”

“Hear me out.”

She pressed her lips together, but gave me a quick nod.

“It’s simple. We’re in way over our heads. We need help. You’ve got to come out to the Council in any case.”

“Says who?”

“Oh, come on. You’re human, Elaine, and a wizard. That’s what is really important to them. They’ll side with us against the faeries, help us figure a way out of this mess.”

Elaine twitched at my use of the word, flicking a look around her as if by reflex. “That doesn’t sound like the Council I’ve heard of.”

“Could be that you’ve heard a skewed point of view,” I said.

Elaine nodded. “Could be. The Council I’ve heard of nearly executed you for defending yourself against Justin.”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“They put you on probation under threat of summary execution, and you all but had to kill yourself to get cleared.”

“Well, I was all but killing myself anyway. I mean, I didn’t do it so that the Council would—”

She shook her head. “God, Harry. You just can’t see it, can you? The Council doesn’t *care* about you. They don’t want to protect you. They will only put up with you as long as you toe the line and don’t become an inconvenience.”

“I’m already inconvenient.”

“A liability, then,” Elaine said.

“Look, some of the Council have their heads up their rear ends, sure. But there are good people there, too.”

Elaine folded her arms and shook her head. “And how many of those good people don’t want a thing to do with the Council?”

“Elaine—”

“No, Harry. I mean it. I don’t want anything to do with them. I’ve lived this long without the Council’s so-called protection. I think I can muddle through a little longer.”

“Elaine, when they find out about you, it needs to be from you. If you come forward, it’s going to cut down on any uneasiness or suspicion they might feel.”

“Suspicion?” Elaine exclaimed. “Harry, I am not a criminal.”

“You’re just asking for trouble, Elaine.”

“And how are they going to find out about me? Hmmm? Were you planning on running off to tattle?”

“Of course not,” I said. But I was thinking how much trouble I was going to be in if one of the Wardens heard I was associating with someone who might be a violator of the First Law, and one of Justin DuMorne’s apprentices at that. With the cloud of disfavor I was already under, adding that kind of suspicion to it might be enough to sink me, regardless of how the investigation turned out. Do I have a great life or what?

“I won’t say anything,” I said finally. “It has to be your choice, Elaine. But please believe me. Trust me. I have friends in the Council, too. They’ll help.”

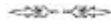
Elaine’s expression softened and became less certain. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Cross my heart.”

She leaned on her oddly carved staff and frowned. She was opening her mouth to speak when my reinforced door rattled under the rapping of a heavy fist.

“Dresden,” Morgan growled from the other side of the door. “Open up, traitor. There are questions I need you to answer.”

Chapter Nine



Elaine shot me a wide-eyed look and mouthed the word “Council?”

I nodded and pointed to my staff, in the corner along with my sword cane. Elaine picked it up without a word and tossed it to me. Then she moved silently through the door of my darkened bedroom and vanished inside.

The door rattled again. “Dresden,” Morgan growled, “I know you’re in there. Open the door.”

I swung it open before he could go on. “Or you’ll huff and you’ll puff and so on?”

Morgan glowered at me, tall, sour, and dour as ever. He’d traded his robes and cloak for dark slacks, a grey silk shirt, and a sport coat. He carried a golf bag on one shoulder, and most people wouldn’t have noticed the hilt of a sword nestled among the golf clubs. He leaned forward, cool eyes looking past me and into my apartment. “Dresden. Am I interrupting anything?”

“Well, I was going to settle down with a porn video and a bottle of baby oil, but I really don’t have enough for two.”

Morgan’s expression twisted in revulsion, and I felt an absurd little burst of vindictive satisfaction. “You disgust me, Dresden.”

“Yeah, I’m bad. I’m a bad, bad, bad man. I’m glad we got that settled. Good-bye, Morgan.”

I started to shut my door in his face. He slammed his palm against it. Morgan was a lot stronger than me. The door stayed open.

“I’m not finished, Dresden.”

“I am. It’s been one hell of a day. If you’ve got something to say, say it.”

Morgan’s mouth set in a hard smile. “Normally I appreciate that kind of directness. Not with you.”

“Gee, you don’t appreciate me. I’ll cry myself to sleep.”

Morgan stroked his thumb over the strap to the golf bag. “I want to know how it is, Dresden, that Mab just happened to come to you about this problem. The one thing that can preserve your status with the Council, and it just happened to fall to you.”

“Clean living,” I said. “Plus my mondo wheels and killer bachelor pad.”

Morgan looked at me with flat eyes. "You think you're funny."

"Oh, *I know* I'm funny. Unappreciated, but funny."

Morgan shook his head. "Do you know what I think, Dresden?"

"You think?" Morgan didn't smile. Like I said, unappreciated.

"I think that you've planned all of this. I think you are in with the vampires and the Winter Court. I think this is part of a deeper scheme."

I just stared at him. I tried not to laugh. I really did.

Well. Maybe I didn't try all that hard.

The laughter must have gotten to Morgan. He balled up his fist and slammed a stiff jab into my belly that took the wind out of my sails and half dropped me to my knees.

"No," he said. "You aren't going to laugh this off, traitor." He stepped into my apartment. The threshold didn't make him blink. The wards I had up caught him six inches later, but they weren't designed to be too much of an impediment to human beings. Morgan grunted, spoke a harsh word in a guttural tongue, maybe Old German, and slashed his hand in front of him. The air hissed and popped with static electricity, sparks flashing from his fingertips. He shook his fingers briefly, then walked in.

He looked around the place and shook his head again. "Dresden, you might not be a bad person, all in all. But I think that you're compromised. If you aren't working with the Red Court, then I am certain that they are using you. Either way, the threat to the Council is the same. And it's best removed by removing you."

I tried to suck in a breath and finally managed to say, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Susan Rodriguez," Morgan said. "Your lover, the vampire."

Anger made bright lights flash behind my eyes. "She's *not* a vampire," I snarled.

"They turned her, Dresden. No one goes back. That's all there is to it."

"They haven't. She's not."

Morgan shrugged. "That's what you would say if she'd addicted you to the venom. You'd say or do just about anything for them by now."

I looked up at him, teeth bared. "Get the fuck out of my house."

He walked over to the fireplace and picked up a dust-covered gift card I'd left sitting on the mantel. He read it and snorted. Then he picked up a picture I had of Susan. "Pretty," he said. "But that's easy to come by. Odds are she was their pawn from the first day she met you."

I clenched my hands into fists. “You shut your mouth,” I said. “You just shut your mouth about her. That’s not how it was.”

“You’re a fool, Dresden. A young fool. Do you really think that a normal mortal woman would want anything to do with you or your life? You can’t accept that she was just a tool. One of their whores.”

I spun to the corner, letting go of my staff, and picked up my sword cane. I drew the blade free with a steely rasp and turned toward Morgan. He saw it coming and had already drawn the bright silver blade of the Wardens from the golf bag.

Every tired, aching, angry bone in my body wanted to lunge at him. I’m not heavy with muscle, but I’m not slow, and I’ve got arms and legs miles long. My lunge is quick, and I can do it from a long way back. Morgan was a seasoned soldier, but in such close quarters it would be a question of reflexes. Advantage to the guy with the sword weighed in ounces instead of stones.

In that moment, I was sure that I could have killed him. He might have taken me with him, but I could have done it. And I wanted to, badly. Not in any sort of intellectual sense, but in the part of the brain that does all of its thinking after the fact. My temper had frayed to bloody tatters, and I wanted to vent it on Morgan.

But a thought snuck in past the testosterone and spoiled my rage. I stopped myself. Shaking, and with my knuckles white on my sword cane, I drew myself up straight. And I said, very quietly, “That’s number three.”

Morgan’s brow furrowed, and he stared at me, his own weapon steadily extended toward me. “What are you talking about, Dresden?”

“The third plan. The Merlin’s ace in the hole. He sent you here to pick a fight with me. With my door still standing open. There’s another Warden outside, listening, isn’t there? A witness, so that you have a clean kill. Hand the body over to the vampires. End of problem, right?”

Morgan’s eyes widened. He stammered over the first word. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I picked up the sheath half of the sword cane and slipped the blade back into it. “Sure, you don’t. Get out, Morgan. Unless you’d prefer to stab an unarmed man who isn’t offering you violence.”

Morgan stared at me for a moment more. Then he shoved the sword back into the golf bag, swung it onto his shoulder, and headed for the door.

He was almost out when there was a clunk from my bedroom. I shot a look at the doorway.

Morgan stopped. He looked at me and then at my bedroom. Something ugly sparkled in his gaze. "Who is in the bedroom, Dresden? The vampire girl, perhaps?"

"No one," I said. "Get out."

"We'll see," Morgan said. He turned and walked to my bedroom door, one hand still on the sword. "You and those who consort with your like will be brought to task very soon. I'm looking forward to it."

My heart started pounding again. If Morgan found Elaine, there were about a million things that might happen, and none of them were good. There seemed little I could do, though. I couldn't warn her, and I couldn't think of a way to get Morgan out of my apartment any faster.

Morgan peered through the doorway and looked around, then abruptly let out a hoarse cry and jumped back. At the same time, there was a harsh feline yowl, and Mister, my bobtailed grey cat, came zooming out of the bedroom. He darted between Morgan's legs and then streaked past him, out of the apartment and up the stairs into the summer evening.

"Gosh, Morgan," I said, "my cat might be a dangerous subversive. Maybe you'd better interrogate him."

Morgan straightened, his face slightly red. He coughed and then stalked to the door. "The Senior Council members wish me to tell you that they will be nearby but that they will not interfere in this Trial or aid you in any way." He took a business card out of his shirt pocket and let it fall to the floor. "That's the contact number for the Senior Council. Use it when you have failed the Trial."

"Don't let the door hit you on the brain on the way out," I responded.

Morgan glared at me as he left. He slammed the door behind him and stomped up the stairs.

I started trembling maybe half a minute after he left—reaction to the stress. At least I hadn't done it in front of him. I turned around, leaned back against the door with my eyes closed, and folded my arms over my chest. It was easier not to feel myself shaking that way.

Another minute or two passed before I heard Elaine move quietly out of my bedroom. The fire popped and crackled.

"Are they gone?" Elaine asked. Her voice was very carefully steady.

"Yeah. Though I wouldn't put it past them to watch my place."

I felt her fingers touch my shoulder. "You're shaking, Harry."

"I'll be all right."

"You could have killed him," Elaine said. "When you first drew."

"Yeah."

"Was he really setting you up like you said?"

I looked at her. Her expression was worried. "Yeah," I said.

"God, Harry." She shook her head. "That's way past paranoia. And you want me to give myself to those people?"

I covered her hand with mine. "Not to them," I said. "Not everyone on the Council is like that."

She looked at my eyes for a moment. Then, carefully, she drew her hand out from under mine. "No. I'm not going to make myself vulnerable to men like that. Not again."

"Elaine," I protested.

She shook her head. "I'm leaving, Harry." She brushed her hair back from her face. "Are you going to tell them?"

I took a deep breath. If the Wardens found out that Elaine was still alive and avoiding them, there would be a literal witch-hunt. The Wardens weren't exactly known for their tolerance and understanding. Morgan was walking, talking proof of that. Anyone who helped shield her from the Wardens would get the same treatment. Didn't I already have enough problems?

"No," I said. "Of course not."

Elaine gave me a strained smile. "Thank you, Harry." She lifted her staff closer to her, holding it with both hands. "Can you get the door for me?"

"They're going to be out there watching."

"I'll veil. They won't see me."

"They're good."

She shrugged and said without emphasis, "I'm better. I've had practice."

I shook my head. "What are we going to do about the faeries?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'll be in touch."

"How can I contact you?"

She nodded toward the door. I opened it. She stepped up beside me and kissed my cheek again, her lips warm. "You're the one with the office and the answering service. I'll contact you." Then she stepped to the door, murmuring quietly under her breath. There was a glitter of sudden silver

light around her that made me blink. When I opened my eyes again, she was gone.

I left the door open for a moment, and it was just as well that I did. Mister came padding back down the stairs a moment later and looked up at me with a plaintive meow. He prowled back into the apartment, curling around my legs and purring like a diesel engine. Mister is thirty pounds or so of tomcat. I figure one of his parents must have been a saber-toothed tiger. “Good timing, by the way,” I told him, and shut the door, locking it.

I stood in the dim, warm firelight of the room. My cheek still tingled where Elaine had kissed it. I could smell her lingering perfume, and it brought with it a pang of almost tangible memories, a flood of things I thought I had forgotten. It made me feel old, and tired, and very alone.

I walked to the mantel and straightened the card Susan had sent me the previous Christmas. I looked at her picture, next to the card. She’d been in a park that weekend, wearing a blue tank top and cutoff shorts. Her teeth were impossibly white against her darkly tanned skin and coal-black hair. I’d taken the picture while she was laughing, and her dark eyes shone.

I shook my head. “I am tired, Mister,” I said. “I am ridiculously tired.”

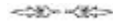
Mister meowed at me.

“Well, resting would be the sane thing to do, but who am I to throw stones, right? I mean, I’m talking to my cat.” I scratched at my beard and nodded to myself. “Just a minute on the couch. Then to work.”

I remember sitting down on the couch, and after that everything went blissfully black.

Which was just as well. The next day things got complicated.

Chapter Ten



I wasn't too tired to dream. Evidently, my subconscious—we've met, and he's kind of a jerk—had something on his mind, because the dream was a variation on the theme that had taken up most of my sleeping hours since I'd last seen Susan.

The dream began with a kiss.

Susan has a gorgeous mouth. Not too thin and not too full. Always soft, always warm. When she kissed me, it was like the world went away. Nothing mattered but the touch of her lips on mine. I kissed the dream-Susan, and she melted against me with a soft sound, the length of her body pliant, eager. Her fingers reached up and trailed over my chest, nails lightly raking.

I leaned back from the kiss after a long moment, and my eyes felt almost too heavy to open. My lips quivered and tingled with sensation, a feeling that begged for more kisses to make it cease. She looked up at me, dark eyes smoldering. Her hair had been pulled back into a long, silken tail that fell between her shoulder blades. It had grown longer, in the dreams. Her lovely aquiline face tilted up toward mine.

"Are you all right?" I asked her. I always did. And, as always, she gave me a small, sad smile and did not answer. I bit my lip. "I'm still looking. I haven't given up."

She shook her head and drew back from me. I had the presence of mind to look around. A dark alley this time, with the heavy, pounding music of a dance club making the nearest wall vibrate. Susan wore dark tights and a sleeveless blouse, and my black-leather duster had been draped over her shoulders and fell to brush her feet. She looked at me intently and then turned toward the entrance to the club.

"Wait," I said.

She walked to the door and turned back to me, extending her hand. The door opened, and dim, reddish light flooded out over her, doing odd things to the shadows over her face. Her dark eyes grew larger.

No, that wasn't right. The black of her pupils simply expanded, until the whites were gone, until there was nothing but darkness where her eyes should have been. They were vampire eyes, huge and inhuman.

“I can’t,” I said. “We can’t go in there, Susan.”

Her features grew frustrated, angry. She extended her hand to me again, more forcefully.

Hands came out of the darkness in the doorway, slim, pale, androgynous. They slipped over Susan, slowly, caressingly. Tugging at her clothing, her hair. Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment, her body growing stiff, before her weight shifted slowly toward the doorway.

Longing shot through me, sudden, mindless, and sharp as a scalpel’s blade. Hunger, a simple and nearly violent need to touch, to be touched, followed it into me, and I suddenly could not think. “Don’t,” I said, and stepped toward her.

I felt her hand take mine. I felt her press herself to me with another moan, and her lips, her mouth, devoured mine with ravenous kisses, kisses I answered with my own, harder and more demanding as my doubts faded. I felt it when her kiss turned poisonous, when the sudden narcotic numbness swept through my mouth and began to spread through my body. It didn’t make any difference. I kissed her, tore at her clothes, and she tore at mine. The hands helped, but I didn’t pay any attention to them anymore. They were an unimportant background sensation in comparison to Susan’s mouth, her hands, her skin velvet and warm beneath my fingers.

There was no romance, nothing but need, animal, carnal. I pushed her against a wall in the dim scarlet light, and she wrapped herself around me, frantic, her body urging me on. I pressed into her, sudden sensation of silk and honey, and had to fight for control, throwing my head back.

She quivered then, and as always, she struck. Her mouth closed on my throat, a flash of heat and agony that melted into a narcotic bliss like that of her kiss—but more complete. Languid delight spread through me, and I felt my body reacting, all traces of control gone, thrusting against her, into her. The motion slowly died as sheer, shivering ecstasy spread through me. I began to lose control of my limbs, muscles turning to gelatin. I sank slowly to the floor. Susan rode me down, her mouth hot and eager on my throat, her body, her hips moving now, taking over the rhythm.

The pleasure of the venom melted my thoughts, and they slid free of my flesh, floating over the ground. I looked down on my body, beneath Susan, pale and still on the floor, eyes empty. I saw the change take her. I saw her body twist and buck, saw her skin split and rip open. I saw something dark

and horrible tear its way out, all gaping dark eyes and slippery black hide. Blood, my blood, smeared its mouth.

The creature froze in shock, staring down at my corpse. And as I began to drift away, the creature threw back its head, its body rubbery and sinuous as a snake's, and let out an inhuman, screeching yowl full of rage, pain, and need.

I bolted up out of sleep with a short cry, my skin sheathed in a cold sweat, my muscles aching and stiff.

I panted for a moment, looking around my apartment. My lips tingled with remembered kisses, my skin with dreamed caresses.

I forced myself to my feet with a groan and staggered toward my shower. There were times when it was just as well that I had disconnected the water heater to head off magically inspired mishaps. It made bathing sheer torture in the winter, but sometimes there's no substitute for a cold shower.

I stripped and stood under chilly water for a while, shaking. Not necessarily from cold, either. I shook with a lot of things. First with raw and mindless lust. The shower took the edge off of that in a few moments. Don't get me wrong. I didn't have any particular death-sex fixation. But I had been used to a certain amount of friendly tension relieving with Susan. Her absence had killed that for me, completely—except for rare moments during the damned dreams when my hormones came raging back to the front of my thoughts again as though making up for lost time.

Second, I trembled with fear. My nightmares might be one part lusty dream, but they were also a warning. Susan's curse could kill me and destroy her. I couldn't forget that.

And finally, I shook with guilt. If I hadn't let her down, maybe she wouldn't be in this mess. She was gone, and I didn't have the vaguest idea where she was. I should have been doing more.

I stuck my head in the water, and shoved those thoughts away, washing myself off with a ton of soap and the last shampoo in the bottle. I scrubbed at my beard and finally reached out and got my straight razor, then spent a few minutes and a lot of care removing it. Dark, wiry black hair fell in clumps to the shower floor, and my face tingled as it breathed its first air for a couple of months. But it felt good, and as I went through the routine of grooming, my thoughts cleared.

I dug some clean clothes out of my closet, padded out into the living room, and pulled back the rug that covered the trapdoor leading to the

subbasement. I swung the door open, lit a candle, and descended the stepladder staircase into my lab.

My lab, in contrast to the havoc upstairs, looked like something run by a particularly anal-retentive military clerk. A long table ran down the middle of the room, between a pair of other tables, one on either wall, leaving only narrow walkways. White steel wire shelves on the walls held the host of magical components I used in research. They resided in a variety of jars, bottles, boxes, and plastic containers, most with labels listing the contents, how much was left, and when I had acquired the item. The tables were clean except for stacks of notes, a jar of pens and pencils, and myriad candles. I lit a few of them and walked down to the other end of the lab, checking the copper summoning circle set into the floor and making sure that nothing lay across it. You never knew when a magic circle would come in handy.

One area of the lab had retained the casual chaos that had been its major theme before I'd taken up nearly full-time residence last year. One shelf, still battered old wood, hadn't been changed or updated. Candleholders, covered in multiple shades of melted wax that had spilled down over them, sat at either end of the shelf. Between them was a scattering of various articles—a number of battered paperback romances, several Victoria's Secret catalogs, a scarlet scrap of a silk ribbon that had been tied into a bow on a naked young woman named Justine, one bracelet from a broken set of handcuffs, and a bleached old human skull.

"Bob, wake up," I said, lighting candles. "I need to pick your brain."

Lights, orange and nebulous, kindled deep in the shadows of the skull's eye sockets. The skull quivered a little bit on its shelf and then stretched its toothy mouth open in an approximation of a yawn. "So was the kid right? Was there some portent-type action going on?"

"Rain of toads," I said.

"Real ones?"

"Yeah."

"Ouch," said Bob the Skull. Bob wasn't really a skull. The skull was just a vessel for the spirit of intellect that resided inside and helped me keep track of the constantly evolving metaphysical laws that govern the use of magic. But "Bob the Skull" is a lot easier to say than "Bob the Spirit of Intellect and Lab Assistant."

I nodded, breaking out my Bunsen burners and beakers. “Tell me about it. Look, Bob, I’ve got kind of a difficult situation here and—”

“Harry, you aren’t going to be able to do this. There is no cure for vampirism. I like Susan too, but it can’t be done. You think people haven’t looked for a cure before now?”

“I haven’t looked for one before now,” I said. “And I’ve had a couple of ideas I want to look at.”

“Aye, Cap’n Ahab, arr har har har! We’ll get that white devil, sir!”

“Damn right we will. But we’ve got something else to do first.”

Bob’s eyelights brightened. “You mean something other than hopeless, pointless vampire research? I’m already interested. Does it have to do with the rain of toads?”

I frowned, got out a pad of paper and a pencil, and started scratching things down. Sometimes that helped me sort things out. “Maybe. It’s a murder investigation.”

“Gotcha. Who’s the corpse?”

“Artist. Ronald Reuel.”

Bob’s eyelights burned down to twin points. “Ah. Who is asking you to find the killer?”

“We don’t know he was killed. Cops say it was an accident.”

“But you think differently.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know a thing about it, but Mab says he was killed. She wants me to find the killer and prove that it wasn’t her.”

Bob fell into a shocked silence nearly a minute long. My pen scratched on the paper until Bob blurted, “Mab? *The* Mab, Harry?”

“Yeah.”

“Queen of Air and Darkness? *That* Mab?”

“Yeah,” I said, impatient.

“And she’s your *client*?”

“Yes, Bob.”

“Here’s where I ask why don’t you spend your time doing something safer and more boring. Like maybe administering suppositories to rabid gorillas.”

“I live for challenge,” I said.

“Or you *don’t*, as the case may be,” Bob said brightly. “Harry, if I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times. You don’t get tangled up with the Sidhe. It’s always more complicated than you thought it would be.”

“Thanks for the advice, skull boy. It wasn’t like I had a choice. Lea sold her my debt.”

“Then you should have traded her something for your freedom,” Bob said. “You know, stolen an extra baby or something and given it to her—”

“Stolen *ababy* ? I’m in enough trouble already.”

“Well, if you weren’t such a Goody Two-shoes all the time . . .”

I pushed at the bridge of my nose with my thumb. This was going to be one of those conversations that gave me a headache, I could tell already. “Look, Bob, can we stick to the subject, please? Time is important, so let’s get to work. I need to know why Reuel would have been knocked off.”

“Gee whiz, Harry,” Bob said. “Maybe because he was the Summer Knight?”

My pencil fell out of my fingers and rolled on the table. “Whoa,” I said. “Are you sure?”

“What do you think?” Bob replied, somehow putting a sneer into the words.

“Uh,” I said. “This means trouble. It means . . .”

“It means that things with the Sidhe are more complicated than you thought. Gee, if only someone had warned you at some point not to be an idiot and go making deals.”

I gave the skull a sour look and recovered my pencil. “How much trouble am I in?”

“A lot,” Bob said. “The Knights are entrusted with power by the Sidhe Courts. They’re tough.”

“I don’t know much about them,” I confessed. “They’re some kind of representative of the faeries, right?”

“Don’t call them that to their faces, Harry. They don’t like it any more than you’d like being called an ape.”

“Just tell me what I’m dealing with.”

Bob’s eyelights narrowed until they almost went out, then brightened again after a moment, as the skull began to speak. “A Sidhe Knight is mortal,” Bob said. “A champion of one of the Sidhe Courts. He gets powers in line with his Court, and he’s the only one who is allowed to act in affairs not directly related to the Sidhe.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that if one of the Queens wants an outsider dead, her Knight is the trigger man.”

I frowned. “Hang on a minute. You mean that the Queens can’t personally gun down anyone who isn’t in their Court?”

“Not unless the target does something stupid like make an open-ended bargain without even trying to trade a baby for—”

“Off topic, Bob. Do I or don’t I have to worry about getting killed this time around?”

“Of course you do,” Bob said in a cheerful tone. “It just means that the Queen isn’t allowed to actually, personally end your life. They could, however, trick you into walking into quicksand and watch you drown, turn you into a stag and set the hounds after you, bind you into an enchanted sleep for a few hundred years, that kind of thing.”

“I guess it was too good to be true. But my point is that if Reuel was the Summer Knight, Mab couldn’t have killed him. Right? So why should she be under suspicion?”

“Because she could have done it indirectly. And Harry, odds are the Sidhe don’t really care about Reuel’s murder. Knights come and go like paper cups. I’d guess that they were upset about something else. The only thing they really care about.”

“Power,” I guessed.

“See, you can use your brain when you want to.”

I shook my head. “Mab said something had been taken, and that I’d know what it was,” I muttered. “I guess that’s it. How much power are we talking about?”

“A Knight of the Sidhe is no pushover, Harry,” Bob said, his tone earnest.

“So we’re talking about a lot of magic going AWOL. Grand theft mojo.” I drummed my pen on the table. “Where does the power come from originally?”

“The Queens.”

I frowned. “Tell me if I’m off track here. If it comes from the Queens, it’s a part of them, right? If a Knight dies, the power should snap back to the Queen like it was on a rubber band.”

“Exactly.”

“But this time it didn’t. So the Summer Queen is missing a load of power. She’s been weakened.”

“If everything you’ve told me is true, yes,” Bob said.

“There’s no more balance between Summer and Winter. Hell, that could explain the toads. That’s a serious play of forces, isn’t it?”

Bob rolled his eyelights. “The turning of the seasons? Duh, Harry. The Sidhe are closer to the mortal world than any other beings of the Nevernever. Summer’s had a slight edge for a while now, but it looks like they’ve lost it.”

“And here I thought global warming was due to cow farts.” I shook my head. “So, Titania loses a bunch of juice, and naturally suspicion falls on her archenemy, Mab.”

“Yeah. It is kind of an archenemy-ish thing to do, you have to admit.”

“I guess.” I frowned down at my notes. “Bob, what happens if this imbalance between the Courts continues?”

“Bad things,” Bob said. “It will mess around with weather patterns, cause aberrant behavior in plants and animals, and sooner or later the Sidhe Courts will go to war with one another.”

“Why?”

“Because, Harry. When the balance is destroyed, the only thing the Queens can do is to blow everything to flinders and let it settle out into a natural distribution again.”

“What does that mean to me?” I asked.

“Depends on who has the edge when everything is settled,” Bob said. “A war could start the next ice age, or set off an era of rampant growth.”

“That last one doesn’t sound so bad.”

“No. Not if you’re an Ebola virus. You’ll have lots of friends.”

“Oh. Bad, then.”

“Yeah,” Bob said. “Keep in mind that this is theory, though. I’ve never seen it happen. I haven’t existed that long. But it’s something the Queens will want to avoid if they can.”

“Which explains Mab’s interest in this, if she didn’t do it.”

“Even if she did,” Bob corrected me. “Did she ever actually tell you she was innocent?”

I mulled it over for a moment. “No,” I said finally. “She twisted things around a lot.”

“So it’s possible that she *did* do it. Or had it done, at any rate.”

“Right,” I said. “So to find out if it was one of the Queens, we’d need to find her hitter. How tough would it be to kill one of these Knights?”

“A flight of stairs wouldn’t do it. A couple of flights of stairs wouldn’t do it. Maybe if he went on an elevator ride with you—”

“Very funny.” I frowned, drumming my pen on the table. “So it would have taken that little something extra to take out Reuel. Who could manage it?”

“Regular folks could do it. But they wouldn’t be able to do it without burning buildings and smoking craters and so on. To kill him so that it looked like an accident? Maybe another Knight could. Among the Sidhe, it was either the Winter Knight or one of the Queens.”

“Could a wizard do it?”

“That goes without saying. But you’d have to be a pretty brawny wizard, have plenty of preparation and a good channel to him. Even then, smoking craters would be easier than an accident.”

“The wizards have all been in duck-and-cover mode lately. And there are too many of them to make a practical suspect pool. Let’s assume that it was probably internal faerie stuff. That cuts it down to three suspects.”

“Three?”

“The three people who could have managed it. Summer Queen, Winter Queen, Winter Knight. One, two, three.”

“Harry, I said it could have been one of the Queens.”

I blinked up at the skull. “There are more than two?”

“Yeah, technically there are three.”

“*Three?*”

“In each Court.”

“Three Queens in each *Court* ? *Six* ? That’s just silly.”

“Not if you think about it. Each Court has three Queens: The Queen Who Was, the Queen Who Is, and the Queen Who Is to Come.”

“Great. Which one does the Knight work for?”

“All of them. It’s kind of a group thing. He has different duties to each Queen.”

I felt the headache start at the base of my neck and creep toward the crown of my head. “Okay, Bob. I need to know about these Queens.”

“Which ones? The ones Who Are, Who Were, or Who Are to Come?”

I stared at the skull for a second, while the headache settled comfortably in. “There’s got to be a simpler parlance than that.”

“That’s so typical You won’t steal a baby, but you’re too lazy to conjugate.”

“Hey,” I said, “my sex life has nothing to do with—”

“Conjugate, Harry. Conju—oh, why do I even bother? The Queen is just the Queen. Queen Titania, Queen Mab. The Queen Who Was is called the Mother. The Queen Who Is to Come is known as the Lady. Right now, the Winter Lady is Maeve. The Summer Lady is Aurora.”

“Lady, Queen, Mother, gotcha.” I got a pencil and wrote it down, just to help me keep it straight, including the names. “So six people who might have managed it?”

“Plus the Winter Knight,” Bob said. “In theory.”

“Right,” I said. “Seven.” I wrote down the titles and then tapped the notebook thoughtfully and said, “Eight.”

“Eight?” Bob asked.

I took a deep breath and said, “Elaine’s alive. She’s on the investigation for Summer.”

“Wow,” Bob said. “Wow. And I told you so.”

“I know, I know.”

“You think she might have gacked Reuel?”

“No,” I said. “But I never saw it coming when she and Justin came after me, either. I only need to think about if she had the means to do it. I mean, if you think it would have been tough for me, maybe she wasn’t capable of taking down Reuel. I was always a lot stronger than her.”

“Yeah,” Bob said, “but she was better than you. She had a lot going for her that you didn’t. Grace. Style. Elegance. Breasts.”

I rolled my eyes. “So she’s on the list, until I find some reason she shouldn’t be.”

“How jaded and logical of you, Harry. I’m almost proud.”

I turned to the folder Mab had given me and went through the newspaper clippings inside. “Any idea who the Winter Knight is?”

“Nope. Sorry,” Bob said. “My contacts on the Winter side are kinda sketchy.”

“Okay, then,” I sighed and picked up the notebook. “I know what I need to do.”

“This should be good,” Bob said dryly.

“Bite me. I have to find out more about Reuel. Who was close to him. Maybe someone saw something. If the police assumed an accident, I doubt there was an investigation.”

Bob nodded, somehow managing to look thoughtful. “So are you going to take out an ad in the paper or what?”

I went around the lab and started snuffing candles. “I thought I’d try a little breaking and entering. Then I’ll go to his funeral, see who shows.”

“Gosh. Can I do fun things like you when I grow up?”

I snorted and turned to the stepladder, taking my last lit candle with me.

“Harry?” Bob said, just before I left.

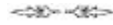
I stopped and looked back at him.

“For what it’s worth, be careful.” If I hadn’t known any better, I’d have said Bob the Skull was almost shaking. “You’re an idiot about women. And you have no idea what Mab is capable of.”

I looked at him for a moment, his orange eyes the only light in the dimness of my frenetically neat lab. It sent a little shiver through me.

Then I clomped back up the stepladder and went out to borrow trouble.

Chapter Eleven



I made a couple of phone calls, slapped a few things into a nylon backpack, and sallied forth to break into Ronald Reuel's apartment.

Reuel had lived at the south edge of the Loop, in a building that looked like it had once been a theater. The lobby yawned up to a high ceiling and was spacious and pretty enough, but it left me looking for the velvet ropes and listening for the disorganized squawking of an orchestra warming up its instruments.

I walked in wearing a hat with an FTD logo and carrying a long white flower box under one arm. I nodded to an aging security guard at a desk and went on past him to the stairs, my steps purposeful. You'd be surprised how far a hat, a box, and a confident stride can get you.

I took the stairs up to Reuel's apartment, on the third floor. I went up them slowly, my wizard's senses open, on the lookout for any energies that might yet be lingering around the site of the old man's death. I paused for a moment, over the spot where Reuel's body had been found, to be sure, but there was nothing. If a lot of magic had been put to use in Reuel's murder, someone had covered its tracks impressively.

I went the rest of the way up to the third floor, but it wasn't until I opened the door to the third-floor hallway that my instincts warned me I was not alone. I froze with the door from the stairway only half open, and Listened.

Listening isn't particularly hard. I'm not even sure it's all that magical. I can't explain it well, other than to say that I'm able to block out everything but what I hear and to pick up things I would normally miss. It's a skill that not many people have these days, and one that has been useful to me more than once.

This time, I was able to Listen to a half-whispered basso curse and the rustle of papers from somewhere down the hall.

I opened the flower box and drew out my blasting rod, then checked my shield bracelet. All in all, in close quarters like this, I would have preferred a gun to my blasting rod, but I'd have a hell of a time explaining it to security or the police if they caught me snooping around a dead man's apartment. I tightened my grip on the rod and slid quietly down the hall,

hoping I wouldn't need to use it. Believe it or not, my first instinct isn't always to set things on fire.

The door to Reuel's apartment stood half open, and its pale wood glared where it had been freshly splintered. My heart sped up. It looked like someone had beaten me to Reuel's place. It meant that I must have been on the right track.

It also meant that whoever it was would probably not be thrilled to see me.

I crept to the door and peered inside.

What I could see of the apartment could have been imported from 429-B Baker Street. Dark woods, fancy scrollwork, and patterns of cloth busier than the makeup girl at a Kiss concert filled every available inch of space with Victorian splendor. Or rather, it once had. Now the place looked wrecked. A sideboard stood denuded of its drawers, which lay upturned on the floor. An old steamer chest lay on its side, its lid torn off, its contents scattered onto the carpet. An open door showed me that the bedroom hadn't been spared the rough stuff either. Clothes and broken bits of finery lay strewn about everywhere.

The man inside Reuel's apartment looked like a catalog model for Thugs-R-Us. He stood a hand taller than me, and I couldn't tell where his shoulders left off and his neck began. He wore old frayed breeches, a sweater with worn elbows, and a hat that looked like an import from the Depression-era Bowery, a round bowler decorated with a dark grey band. He carried a worn leather satchel in one meat-slab hand, and with the other he scooped up pieces of paper, maybe index cards, from a shoe box on an old writing desk, depositing them in the bag. The satchel bulged, but he kept adding more to it with rapid, sharp motions. He muttered something else, emitted a low rumble, and snatched up a Rolodex from the desk, cramming it into the satchel.

I drew back from the door and put my back against the wall. There wasn't any time to waste, but I had to figure out what to do. If someone had shown up at Reuel's place to start swiping papers, it meant that Reuel had been hiding evidence of one kind or another. Therefore, I needed to see whatever it was Kong had in that satchel.

Somehow, I doubted he would show me if I asked him pretty please, but I didn't like my other option, either. In such tight quarters, and with other residents nearby, I didn't dare resort to any of my kaboom magic. Kaboom

magic, or evocation, is difficult to master, and I'm not very good at it. Even with my blasting rod as a focus, I had accidentally dealt out structural damage to a number of buildings. So far, I'd been lucky enough not to kill myself. I didn't want to push it if I didn't have to.

Of course, I could always just jump the thug and try to take his bag away. I had a feeling I'd be introduced to whole new realms of physical discomfort, but I could try it.

I took another peek at the thug. With one hand, he casually lifted a sofa that had to weigh a couple of hundred pounds and peered under it. I drew back from the door again. Fisticuffs, bad idea. Definitely a bad idea.

I chewed on my lip a moment more. Then I slipped the blasting rod back into the flower box, squared up my FTD hat, stepped around the corner, and knocked on the half-open door.

The thug's head snapped around toward me, along with most of his shoulders. He bared his teeth, anger in his eyes.

"FTD," I said, trying to keep my voice bland. "I got a delivery here for a Mr. Reuel. You want to sign for it?"

The thug glowered at me from beneath the shelter of his overhanging brow. "Flowers?" he rumbled a minute later.

"Yeah, buddy," I said. "Flowers." I came into the apartment and thrust the clipboard at him, idly wishing I had some gum to chomp. "Sign there at the bottom."

He glowered at me for a moment longer before accepting the clipboard. "Reuel ain't here."

"Like I care." I pushed a pen at him with the other hand. "Just sign it and I'll get going."

This time he glared at the pen, then at me. Then he set the satchel on the coffee table. "Whatever."

"Great." I stepped past him and put the flower box down on the table. He clutched the pen in his fist and scrawled on the bottom of the paper. I reached down with one hand as he did, plucked a piece of paper a little bigger than a playing card from the satchel, and palmed it. I got my hand back to my side just before he finished, growled, and shoved the clipboard at me.

"Now," he said, "leave."

"You bet," I told him. "Thanks."

I turned to go, but his hand shot out and his fingers clamped on to my arm like a steel band. I looked back. He narrowed his eyes, nostrils flared, and then growled, “I don’t smell flowers.”

The bottom fell out of my stomach, but I tried to keep the bluff going. “What are you talking about, Mr., uh”—I glanced down at the clipboard—“Grum.”

Mr. Grum?

He leaned down closer to me, and his nostrils flared again, this time with a low snuffling sound. “I smell magic. Smell wizard.”

My smile must have turned green to go with my face. “Uh.”

Grum took my throat in one hand and lifted me straight up off the ground with a strength no human could duplicate. My vision reduced itself to a hazy tunnel, and the clipboard fell from my fingers. I struggled against him uselessly. His eyes narrowed, and he bared more teeth in a slow smile. “Should have minded your own business. Whoever you are.” His fingers started tightening, and I thought I heard something crackle and pop. I had to hope it was his knuckles instead of my trachea. “Whoever you were.”

It was too late by far to use my shield bracelet, and my blasting rod lay out of reach on the coffee table. I fumbled in my pocket, as my vision started to go black, for the only weapon I had left. I had to pray that I was right in my guess.

I found the old iron nail, gripped it as best I could, and shoved it hard at Grum’s beefy forearm. The nail bit into his flesh.

He screamed, a throaty, basso bellow that shook the walls. He flinched and spun, hurling me away from him. I hit the door to Reuel’s bedroom, slamming it all the way open, and got lucky. I landed on the bed rather than on one of the wooden pillars at its corners. If I’d hit one of those, I’d have broken my back. Instead, I hit the bed, bounced, fetched up hard against the wall, then tumbled back to the bed again.

I glanced up to see that Grum looked very different than he had a moment before.

Rather than the film noir tough-guy getup, he wore a loincloth of some kind of pale leather—and nothing more. His skin was a dark russet, layered with muscle and curling dark hair. His ears stood out from the sides of his head like satellite dishes, and his features had flattened, becoming more bestial, nearly like those of a gorilla. He was also better than twelve feet

tall. He had to hunch over to stand, and even so his shoulders pressed against the ten-foot ceiling.

With another roar, Grum tore the nail from his arm and flung it to one side. It went completely through the wall, leaving a hole the size of my thumb. Then he spun back to me, baring teeth now huge and jagged, and took a stalking step toward me, the floor creaking beneath his feet.

“Ogre,” I wheezed. “Crap!” I extended my hand toward the blasting rod and focused my will. “*Ventas servitas!*”

A sharp and sudden torrent of air caught up the flower box and hurled it straight toward me. It hit me in the chest hard enough to hurt, but I snatched it, brought out my blasting rod, and trained it on Grum as he closed on me. I slammed more will through the rod, its tip bursting into scarlet incandescence.

“*Fuego!*” I barked as I released the energy. Fire in a column the size of my clenched fist flashed out at Grum and splashed against his chest.

It didn’t slow him down, not by a second. His skin didn’t burn—his hair didn’t even singe. The fire of my magic spilled over him and did absolutely nothing.

Grum shouldered his way through the bedroom door, cracking the frame as he did, and raised his fist. He slammed it down at the bed, but I didn’t wait around to meet it. I flopped over to the far side of the bed and tumbled down to the space between the bed and the wall. He reached for me, but I rolled underneath the bed, bumped against his feet, and scrambled toward the door.

I almost made it. But something heavy and hard slammed against my legs, taking them out from under me and knocking me down. I only had time to realize, dimly, that Grum had picked up an antique Victorian chair that resembled, more than anything else, a throne, and hurled it at me.

The pain kicked in a second later, but I crawled toward the door. The ogre’s feet pounded in rapid succession, and the floor shook as he grew closer and closer to me.

From the hall, a querulous female voice demanded, “What’s all that racket? I have already called the police, I have! You fruits get out of our hall, or they’ll lock you away!”

Grum stopped. I saw frustration and rage flicker over his apelike features. Then he snarled, stepped over me, and picked up the satchel. When he headed for the door, I rolled out of his way. He was big enough to

simply crush my chest if he stepped on me, and I didn't want to make it easy for him.

"You got lucky," the ogre growled. "But this is not over." Then his form blurred and shifted, growing smaller, until he wore the same appearance he had a few moments before. He settled his bowler with one hand, then stalked out the door, aiming a kick at me in passing. I cringed away from it, and he was gone.

"Well?" demanded that same voice. "What's it going to be, you fruit? Get out!"

Police sirens wailed somewhere outside. I got up, wobbled for a moment, and put my hand against the wall to help myself stay up. I turned the other hand over to look at the piece of paper I'd stolen from Grum's satchel.

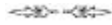
It wasn't paper. It was a photograph. Nothing fancy—just an instant-camera shot. It showed old white-haired Reuel, standing in front of the Magic Castle at one of the Disney parks.

Several young people stood beside him and around him, smiling, sunburned, and apparently happy. One was a tall, bull-necked young woman in faded jeans, with her hair dyed a shade of muddy green. She had a wide smile and a blunt, ugly face. Standing beside her was a girl who should have been in a lingerie catalog, all curves and long limbs in her brief shorts and bikini top, her hair also green, but the color of summer grass rather than that of pond scum. On the other side of Reuel was a pair of young men. One of them, a short, stocky fellow with a goatee and sunglasses, had his fingers lifted into a V behind the head of his companion, a small, slender man with his skin sunburned to the color of copper and his blond hair bleached out to nearly white.

Who were they? Why had Reuel been with them? And why had Grum seemed so intent on removing their picture from Reuel's apartment?

The sirens grew closer, and if I didn't want to get locked up by some well-meaning member of Chicago's finest, I needed to leave. I rubbed at my aching throat, winced at the wrenching, cramping pain in my back, wondered about the photograph, and stumbled out of the building.

Chapter Twelve



I got out of the old apartment building and back to the Blue Beetle without being mugged by any attackers, inhuman or otherwise. As I pulled out, a patrol car rolled up, blue bubbles flashing. I drove away at a sedate pace and tried to keep my shaking hands from making the car bob or swerve. No one pulled me over, so I must have done all right. Score one for the good guys.

I had time to think, though I wasn't sure I wanted to. I'd gone to Reuel's apartment on a simple snoop, not really expecting to find much, if anything. But I'd gotten lucky. Not only had I shown up at the right place, I'd done it at the right time. Someone obviously wanted to hide something there—either more pictures like the one I'd found or other papers from somewhere in the place. What I needed to determine now was what Grum had been trying to collect or—nearly as good—why he was trying to make some kind of evidence vanish. Failing that, knowing who he was working for would do almost as well—ogres aren't exactly known for their independent initiative. And given what was going on, it would be ludicrous to assume that one of the heavyweight thugs of the lands of Faerie just happened to be doing an independent contract in the home of the recently deceased.

Ogres were wyldfae—they could work for either Winter or Summer, and they could have a range of personalities and temperaments running the gamut from jovially violent to maliciously violent. Grum hadn't seemed to be on the cheerful end of that particular scale, but he *had* been both decisive and restrained. The average walking mountain of muscle from Faerie wouldn't have held back from beating me to a pulp, regardless of what the neighbors shouted. That meant that Grum had more savvy than the average bear, that he was dangerous—even if I didn't take into account how easily he had ignored the spells I'd hurled at him.

All ogres have an innate capacity for neutralizing magical forces to one degree or another. Grum had grounded out my spells like I'd been scuffing my feet on the carpet to give him a little static electricity zap. That meant that he was an old faerie, and a strong one. The quick and thorough shapeshifting supported that assessment as well. Your average club-

swinging thewmonger couldn't have taken human form, complete with clothing, so ably.

Smart plus strong plus quick equals badass. Most likely he was a trusted personal guard or a highly placed enforcer.

But for whom?

At a stop light I stared at the photograph I'd taken from Grum.

"Damn," I muttered, "who are these people?"

I added it to the list of questions still growing like fungus in a locker room.

Ronald Reuel's funeral had already begun by the time I arrived. Flannery's Funeral Home in the River North area had been a family-run business until a few years before. It was an old place, but had always been well kept. Now the carefully landscaped shrubbery had been replaced with big rocks, which were no doubt easier to maintain. The parking lot had a lot of cracks in it, and only about half of the outdoor lights were burning. The sign, an illuminated glass-and-plastic number that read QUIET ACRES FUNERAL HOME, glared in garish green and blue above the front door.

I parked the Beetle, tucked the photo into my pocket, and got out of the car. I couldn't casually take my staff or my blasting rod into the funeral home. People who don't believe in magic look at you oddly when you walk in toting a big stick covered with carvings of runes and sigils. The people who know what I am would react in much the same way as if I had walked in draped in belts of ammo and carrying a heavy-caliber machine gun in each hand, John Wayne-style. There could be plenty of each sort inside, so I carried only the low-profile stuff: my ring, mostly depleted, my shield bracelet, and my mother's silver pentacle amulet. My reflection in the glass door reminded me that I had underdressed for the evening, but I wasn't there to make the social column. I slipped into the building and headed for the room where they'd laid out Ronald Reuel.

The old man had been dressed up in a grey silk suit with a metallic sheen to it. It was a younger man's suit, and it looked too big for him. He would have looked more comfortable in tweed. The mortician had done only a so-so job of fixing Reuel up. His cheeks were too red and his lips too blue. You could see the dimples on his lips where thin lines of thread had been stitched through them to hold his mouth closed. No one would have mistaken this for an old man in the midst of his nap—it was a corpse, plain

and simple. The room was about half full, people standing in little knots talking and passing back and forth in front of the casket.

No one was standing in the shadows smoking a cigarette or looking about with a shifty-eyed gaze. I couldn't see anyone quickly hiding a bloody knife behind his back or twirling a moustache, either. That ruled out the Dudley Do-Right approach to finding the killer. Maybe he, she, or they weren't here.

Of course, I supposed it would be possible for faeries to throw a veil or a glamour over themselves before they came in, but even experienced faeries have trouble passing for mortal. Mab had looked good, sure, but she hadn't really looked *normal*. Grum had been much the same. I mean, he'd looked human, sure, but also like an extra on the set of *The Untouchables*. Faeries can do a lot of things really well, but blending in with a crowd generally isn't one of them.

In any case, the crowd struck me as mostly relatives and business associates. No one matched the pictures, no one seemed to be a faerie in a bad mortal costume, and either my instincts had the night off or no one was using any kind of veil or glamour. Bad guys one, Harry zero.

I slipped out of the viewing room and back into the hallway in time to hear a low whisper somewhere down the hall. That grabbed my attention. I made the effort to move quietly and crept a bit closer, Listening as I went.

"I don't *know*," hissed a male voice. "I looked for her all day. She's never been gone this long."

"Just my point," growled a female voice. "She doesn't stay gone this long. You know how she gets by herself."

"God," said a third voice, the light tenor of a young man. "He did it. He really did it this time."

"We don't know that," the first man said. "Maybe she finally used her head and got out of town."

The woman's voice sounded tired. "No, Ace. She wouldn't just leave. Not on her own. We have to do something."

"What can we do?" the second male said.

"Something," the woman said. "Anything."

"Wow, that's specific," the first male, apparently Ace, said with his voice dry and edgy. "Whatever you're going to do, you'd better do it fast. The wizard is here."

I felt the muscles in my neck grow tense. There was a short, perhaps shocked silence in the room down the hall.

“Here?” the second male echoed in a panicky tone. “Now? Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I just did, dimwit,” Ace said.

“What do we do?” the second male asked. “What do we do, what do we do?”

“Shut up,” snapped the female voice. “*Shutup*, Fix.”

“He’s in Mab’s pocket,” said Ace. “You know he is. She crossed over from Faerie today.”

“No way,” said the second voice, presumably Fix. “He’s supposed to be a decent sort, right?”

“Depends on who you hear it from,” said Ace. “People who get in his way have had a habit of getting real dead.”

“God,” said Fix, panting. “Oh God, oh God.”

“Look,” said the woman, “if he’s here, we shouldn’t be. Not until we know what it means.” Furniture, maybe a wooden chair, creaked. “Come on.”

I slipped back down the hall and around the corner into the lobby as I heard footsteps leaving the small side room. They didn’t come toward me. Instead, they moved further down the hall, away from the lobby. They had to be heading for a back door. I chewed on my lip and weighed my options. Three very apprehensive folks, maybe human, maybe not, heading down a darkened hall toward a back door that doubtless led into an equally dark alley. It sounded like a recipe for more trouble.

But I didn’t think I had any options. I counted to five and then followed the footsteps.

I saw only a retreating shadow at the far end of the hall. I looked into the room the three had been in as I went past it and found a small lounge with several upholstered chairs. I hesitated for a moment at the corner and heard the soft click of a metal door opening, then closing again. As I rounded the corner, I saw a door with a faded sticker spelling_{EXIT}.

I went to the door and opened it as quietly as I could, then poked my head out into the alley it opened into and rubbernecked around.

They were standing not five feet away—three of the young people from Reuel’s photo. The small, skinny man with the blond-white hair and dark tan was facing me. He was dressed in what looked like a secondhand brown

suit and a yellow polyester clip-on tie. His eyes widened almost comically, and his mouth dropped open in shock. He squeaked, and it was enough to let me identify him as Fix.

Beside him was the other young man, Ace. He was the one with the dark curly hair and goatee, wearing a grey sport coat with a white shirt and dark slacks. He still had his sunglasses on when he turned to look at me, and he clawed at the pocket of his jacket upon seeing me.

The third was the brawny, homely young woman with the muddy green hair and heavy brow. She had on a pair of jeans tight enough to show the muscles in her thighs and a khaki blouse. She didn't hesitate. She didn't even look. She just turned, her arm sweeping out as she did, and fetched me a blow to my cheek with the back of one shovel-size hand. I managed to move with it a bit at the last second, but even so the impact threw me out of the doorway and into the alley. Stars and cartoon birdies danced in my vision, and I rolled, trying to get clear before she could hit me again.

Ace pulled a small-caliber semiautomatic from his jacket pocket, but the woman growled at him, "Don't be stupid! They'd kill us all."

"Hebbity bedda," I said, by way of attempting a greeting. My mouth had gone rather numb, and my tongue felt like a lead weight. "Jussa hangonna sayke hee."

Fix jumped up and down, pointing at me, his voice shrill. "He's casting on us!"

The woman kicked me in the ribs hard enough to knock the wind out of me. Then she picked me up by the back of my pants, grunting with the effort, and threw me into the air. I came down ten feet away in an open Dumpster and crunched down amid cardboard boxes and stinking refuse.

"Go," the woman barked. "Go, go, go!"

I lay in the garbage for a minute, trying to catch my breath. The sound of three sets of running feet receded down the alley.

I had just sat up when a head popped into view over me, vague in the shadows. I flinched and threw up my left arm, willing power through the shield bracelet. I accidentally made the shield too big, and sparks kicked up where the shield intersected the metal of the Dumpster, but by their light I saw whose head it was.

"Harry?" Billy the Werewolf asked. "What are you doing in there?"

I let the shield drop and extended a hand to him. "Looking for suspects."

He frowned and hauled me out of the trash. I wobbled for a second or two, until my head stopped spinning quite so quickly. Billy steadied me with one hand. "You find any?"

"I'd say so, yeah."

Billy nodded and peered up at me. "Did you decide that before or after they hit you in the face and threw you in the garbage?"

I brushed coffee grounds off my jeans. "Do I tell you how to do your job?"

"Actually, yeah. All the time."

"Okay, okay," I muttered. "Did you bring the pizza?"

"Yeah," Billy said. "Got it back in the car. Why?"

I brushed at my shaggy hair. What I hoped were more coffee grounds fell out. I started walking down the alley toward the front of the building. "Because I need to make a few bribes," I said, looking back over my shoulder at Billy. "Do you believe in faeries?"

Chapter Thirteen



Billy held the pizza while I drew the chalk circle on the ground, back in the alley. “Harry,” he said, “how is this supposed to work exactly?”

“Hang on,” I said. I didn’t quite complete the circle, but took the pizza box from him. I opened it, took out one piece, and put it down in the middle of the circle on a napkin. Then I dabbed a bit of blood from the corner of my mouth where the girl had slugged me onto the bottom of the piece of pizza, stepped back, and completed the circle without willing it closed.

“Pretty simple,” I said. “I’ll call the faerie in close to the pizza there. He’ll smell it, jump on it, eat it. When he does, he’ll get the bit of my blood, and it will be enough energy to close the circle around him.”

“Uh-huh,” Billy said, his expression skeptical. He took out a second piece and started to take a bite. “And then you beat the information out of him?”

I took the piece out of his hand, put it back in the box, and closed it. “And then I bribe the information out of him. Save the pizza.”

Billy scowled at me, but he left the pizza alone. “So what do I do?”

“Sit tight and make sure no one else tries to pop me while I’m talking to Toot-toot.”

“Toot-toot?” Billy asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Hell’s bells, Billy, I didn’t pick the name. Just be quiet. If he thinks there are mortals around he’ll get nervous and leave before I can snare him.”

“If you say so,” Billy said. “I was just hoping to do more good than to deliver pizza.”

I raked my fingers through my hair. “I don’t know what you could do yet.”

“I could track those three in the picture you showed me.”

I shook my head. “Odds are they just got into a car and left.”

“Yeah,” he said, some forced patience in his voice. “But if I get their scent now, it might help me find them later on.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling a bit stupid. Okay, so I hadn’t considered the whole shapeshifting angle. “Fine, if you want to. Just be careful, all right? I don’t know what all might be prowling around.”

“Okay, Mom,” Billy said. He set the pizza box on top of a closed trash can, fell back down the alley, and vanished.

I waited until Billy had gone to find a nice patch of shadows to step into. Then I closed my eyes for a moment, drawing up my concentration, and began to whisper the faerie’s Name.

Every intelligent being has a Name, a specific series of spoken sounds linked to its very being. If a practitioner knows the Name of something, knows it in every nuance and detail of pronunciation, then he can use that Name to open a magical conduit to that being. That’s how demons get summoned to the mortal world. Call something’s Name and you make contact with it—and if you’re a wizard, that means that you can then exercise power over it, no matter where in the world it is.

Controlling an inhuman being via its Name is a shady area of magic, only one step removed from taking over the will of another mortal. According to the White Council’s Seven Laws of Magic, that’s a capital crime—and they make zero-tolerance policies look positively lenient.

Given how much the Council loves me, I’m a tad paranoid about breaking any of the Laws of Magic, so while I was calling the faerie’s Name, I put only the tiniest trickle of compulsion into it, just enough to attract his unconscious attention, to make him curious about what might be down this particular alley. I whispered the faerie’s Name and stood in the shadows, waiting.

Maybe ten minutes later, something made from a hummingbird and a falling star spiraled down from overhead, a flickering ball of blue-white light. It alighted on the ground, the light dimming to a luminous sheen over the form of a tiny faerie, Toot-toot.

Toot stood about six inches tall. He had a mane of dandelion-fluff hair the color of lilacs and a pair of translucent dragonfly wings rising from his shoulders. Otherwise he looked almost human, his beauty a distant echo of the lords of Faerie, the Sidhe. On his head he wore what looked like a plastic Coke bottle cap. It was tied into place with a piece of string that ran under his chin, and his lilac hair squeezed out from beneath it all the way around, all but hiding his eyes. In one hand he carried a spear fashioned from a battered old yellow Number 2 pencil, some twine, and what must have been a straight pin, and he wore a little blue plastic cocktail sword through another piece of twine on his belt.

Toot landed in a cautious crouch near the pizza, as though streaking in like an errant shot from a Roman candle might not have alerted anyone watching to his presence. He tiptoed in a big circle around the piece of pizza, and made a show of looking all around, one hand lifted to shade his eyes. Then he raised his arm into the air, balled up a tiny fist, and pumped it up and down a few times.

Immediately, half a dozen similar streaks of glowing color darted down out of the air, each one a different color, each one containing a tiny faerie at its center. They alighted more or less together, and every one of them was armed with a weapon that might have been cobbled together from the contents of a child's school box.

"Caption!" Toot-toot piped in a shrill, voice. "Report!"

A green-lit faerie beside Toot snapped to attention and slapped herself on the forehead with one hand, then turned sharply to her left and barked, "Loo Tender, report!"

A purple-hued faerie came to attention as well and smacked himself in the head with one hand, then turned to the next faerie beside him and snapped, "Star Jump, report!"

And so it went down the line, through the "Corpse Oral," the "First Class Privy," and finally to the "Second Class Privy," who marched up to Toot-toot and said, "Everyone's here, Generous, and we're hungry!"

"All right," Toot-toot barked. "Everyone fall apart for messy!"

And with that, the faeries let out shrill hoots of glee, tossed aside their weapons and armaments, and threw themselves upon the piece of pizza.

As soon as the little faeries started eating, the magic circle snapped closed around them with a hardly audible *pop* as it sprang into place. The effect was immediate. The faeries let out half a dozen piercing shrieks of alarm and buzzed into the air, smacking into the invisible wall of the circle here and there, sending out puffs of glowing dust motes when they did. They fell into a panicked spiral, around the inside of the circle, until Toot-toot landed on the ground, looked up at the other faeries, and started shouting, "Ten Huts! Ten Huts!"

The other faeries abruptly came to a complete stop in the air, standing rigidly straight. Evidently, they couldn't do that and keep their little wings going at the same time, because they promptly fell to the alley floor, landing with a half-dozen separate "ouches" and as many puffs of glowing faerie dust.

Toot-toot recovered his pencil spear and stood at the very edge of the closed circle, peering out at the alley. “Harry Dresden? Is that you?”

I stepped out from my hiding spot and nodded. “It’s me. How you doing, Toot?”

I expected a torrent of outraged but empty threats. That was Toot-toot’s usual procedure. Instead, he let out a hiss and crouched down in the circle, spear at the ready. The other tiny faeries took up their own weapons and rushed to Toot-toot’s side. “You can’t make us,” Toot said. “We haven’t been Called and until we are, we belong to ourselves.”

I blinked down at them. “Called? Toot, what are you talking about?”

“We’re not stupid, Emissary,” Toot-toot said. “I know what you are. I can smell the Cold Queen all over you.”

I wondered if they made a deodorant for that. I lifted my hand in a placating gesture. “Toot, I’m working for Mab right now, but it’s just another client, okay? I’m not here to take you anywhere or make you do anything.”

Toot planted the eraser end of his spear on the ground, scowling suspiciously up at me. “Really?” he demanded.

“Really,” I said.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Super duper double dog promise spit swear?”

I nodded. “Super duper double dog promise spit swear,” I repeated gravely.

“Spit!” Toot demanded.

I spat on the ground.

“Oh. Well, then,” Toot said. He dropped his spear and darted over to the pizza, much to the consternation of the other little faeries, who let out piping shrills of protest and then followed him. The piece of pizza didn’t last long. It was like watching one of those nature shows, where the piranha devour some luckless thing that falls in the water—except here there were glittering wings and motes and puffs of glowing, colorful dust everywhere.

I watched, frowning, until Toot-toot flopped onto his back, his tummy slightly distended. He let out a contented sigh, and the other faeries followed suit.

“So, Harry,” Toot said, “who do you think is going to win the war?”

“The White Council,” I said. “The Red Court’s got no depth on the bench and nothing in the bullpen.”

Toot snorted and flipped his plastic bottle-cap helm off his head. His hair waved around in the breeze. “Just because they don’t have any cows doesn’t mean that they won’t win. But I don’t mean *that* war.”

I frowned. “You mean between the Courts.”

Toot nodded. “Yeah.”

“Okay. What’s with the armor and weapons, Toot?”

The faerie beamed. “Neat, huh?”

“Highly scary,” I said gravely. “But why do you have them?”

Toot folded his arms and said, with all the gravity that six inches of fluff and pixie dust can muster, “Trouble’s coming.”

“Uh-huh. I hear the Courts are upset.”

“More than just upset, Harry Dresden. The drawing of the wyldfae is beginning. I saw some dryads walking with a Sidhe Knight from Summer, and a canal nereid climbed up out of the water a couple of blocks over and went into a Winter building.”

“Drawing of the wyldfae. Like you guys?”

Toot nodded and propped his feet up on the legs of the Star Jump, who let out a surprisingly basso belch. “Not everyone plays with the Courts. We mostly just do our jobs and don’t pay much attention. But when there’s a war on, the wyldfae get Called to one side or another.”

“Who picks which way you go?”

Toot shrugged. “Mostly the nice wyldfae go to the Warm Queen and the mean ones go to Cold. I think it’s got something to do with what you’ve been doing.”

“Uh-huh. So have you been doing Warm or Cold things?”

Toot let out a sparkling laugh. “How should I remember all those things?” He patted his stomach and then rose to his feet again, eyes calculating. “Is that a pizza box you have there, Harry?”

I held the box out and opened it, showing the rest of the pizza. There was a collective “Ooooo” from the faeries, and they all pressed to the very edge of the circle, until it flattened their little noses, staring at the pizza in fascinated lust.

“You’ve sure given us a lot of pizza the past couple of years, Harry,” Toot said, with a swallow. He didn’t look away from the box in my hands.

“Hey, you gave me a hand when I needed it,” I said. “It’s only fair, right?”

“Only fair?” Toot spat, outraged. “It’s . . . it’s . . . it’s *pizza* , Harry.”

“I’m wanting some more work done,” I said. “I need information.”

“And you’re paying in pizza?” Toot asked, his tone hopeful.

“Yes,” I said.

“Wah-hoo!” Toot shouted and buzzed into the air in an excited spiral. The other faeries followed him with similar carols of happiness, and the blur of colors was dizzying.

“Give us the pizza!” Toot shouted.

“Pizza, pizza, pizza!” the other faeries shrilled.

“First,” I said, “I want some questions answered.”

“Right, right, right!” Toot screamed. “Ask already!”

“I need to talk to the Winter Lady,” I said. “Where can I find her, Toot?”

Toot tore at his lavender hair. “Is *that* all you need to know? Down in the city! Down where the shops are underground, and the sidewalks.”

I frowned. “In the commuter tunnels?”

“Yes, yes, yes. Back in the part the mortals can’t see, you can find your way into Undertown. The Cold Lady came to Undertown. Her court is in Undertown.”

“What?” I sputtered. “Since when?”

Toot whirled around in impatient loops in the air. “Since the last autumn!”

I scratched at my hair. It made sense, I supposed. Last autumn, a vengeful vampire and her allies had stirred up all sorts of supernatural mischief, creating turbulence in the border between the real world and the Nevernever, the world of spirit. Shortly after, the war between the wizards and the vampires had begun.

Those events had probably attracted the attention of all sorts of things.

I shook my head. “And what about the Summer Lady? Is she in town?”

Toot put his fists on his hips. “Well, *obviously* , Harry. If Winter came here, Summer had to come too, didn’t it?”

“Obviously,” I said, feeling a little slow on the uptake. Man, was I off my game. “Where can I find her?”

“She’s on top of one of those big buildings.”

I sighed. “Toot, this is Chicago. There are a lot of big buildings.”

Toot blinked at me, then frowned for a minute before brightening. “It’s the one with the pizza shop right by it.”

My head hurt some more. “Tell you what. How about you guide me to it?”

Toot thrust out his little chin and scowled. “And miss pizza? No way.”

I gritted my teeth. “Then get me someone else to guide me. You’ve got to know someone.”

Toot scrunched up his face. He tugged at one earlobe, but it evidently didn’t help him remember, because he had to rub one foot against the opposite calf and spin around in vacant circles for ten whole seconds before he whirled back to face me, the nimbus of light around him brightening. “Aha!” he sang. “Yes! I can give you a guide!” He jabbed a finger at me. “But only if that’s all the questions, Harry. Pizza, pizza, pizza!”

“Guide first,” I insisted. “Then pizza.”

Toot shook his arms and legs as though he would fly apart. “Yes, yes, yes!”

“Done,” I said. I opened the pizza box and set it on top of a discarded crate nearby. Then I stepped over to the circle, leaned down, and with a smudge of my hand and an effort of will broke it, freeing the energies inside.

The faeries chorused several pitches and variants of “Yahoo!” and streaked past me so quickly that they left a cone of wild air behind them, tossing my unruly hair and scattering lighter pieces of garbage around the alley. They tore into the pizza with much the same gusto they’d used on the one piece earlier, but there was enough of it now to keep them from mangling it in mere seconds.

Toot zipped over to hover in front of my face and held out his little palm. A moment later, something that looked like an errant spark from a campfire whirled down and lighted on his palm. Toot said something in a language I couldn’t understand, and the tiny light pulsed and flickered as though in response.

“Right,” Toot said, nodding to the light. I peered more closely at it, and could just barely make out a tiny, tiny form inside, no larger than an ant. Another faerie. The light pulsed and flickered, and Toot nodded to it before turning to me.

“Harry Dresden,” Toot-toot said, holding out his palm, “this is Elidee. She’s going to pay me back a favor and guide you to the Winter Lady and

then to the Summer Lady. Good enough?”

I frowned at the tiny faerie. “Does she understand me?”

I barely saw Elidee stamp a tiny foot. The scarlet light around her flickered sharply, twice.

“Yes,” Toot-toot translated. “Two lights for yes, and one light for no.”

“Two for yes, one for no,” I muttered.

Toot frowned. “Or is that one for yes and two for no? I can never keep it straight.” And with that, the little faerie blurred and zipped past me and away to join the swarm of softly flashing lights demolishing the pizza.

Elidee, for her part, recovered from the miniature cyclone that Toot-toot left in his wake, whirled around dizzily for a few moments, then spiraled down to me and settled on the bridge of my nose. My eyes crossed trying to look at her. “Hey,” I said, “do I look like a couch to you?”

Two flashes.

I sighed. “Okay, Elidee. Do you want any pizza before we go?”

Two flashes again, brighter. The tiny faerie leapt up into the air again and zoomed over to the cloud around the pizza.

Footsteps came down the alley, then Billy stepped out of the shadows, pulling his sweatshirt down over his muscular stomach. I felt a brief and irrational surge of jealousy. I don’t have a muscular stomach. I’m not overlapping my belt or anything, but I don’t have abs of steel. I don’t even have abs of bronze. Maybe abs of plastic.

Billy blinked at the pizza for a moment and said, “Wow. That’s sort of pretty. In a *Jaws* kind of way.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Don’t look at it for too long. Faerie lights can be disorienting to mortals.”

“Gotcha,” Billy said. He glanced back at me. “How’d it go? You get what you needed?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You?”

He shrugged. “Alley isn’t the best place to pick up scents, but I should be able to recognize them again if I’m in my other suit. They didn’t smell quite normal.”

“Gee, what are the odds.”

Billy’s teeth showed in the dark. “Heh. So what are we waiting for?”

Elidee picked just then to glide back over to me and settle once more on the bridge of my nose. Billy blinked at her and said, “What the hell?”

“This is our guide,” I said. “Elidee, this is Billy.”

Elidee flashed twice.

Billy blinked again. “Uh, charmed.” He shook his head. “So? What’s the plan?”

“We go confront the Winter Lady in her underground lair. I do the talking. You stay alert and watch my back.”

He nodded. “Okay. You got it.”

I looked over to see the last piece of pizza lifted up into the air by greedy faerie hands. They clustered around it, tearing and ripping, and it was gone in seconds. With that, the faeries swarmed away like a squadron of potbellied comets and vanished from view.

Elidee fluttered off my nose and started drifting down the alley in the other direction. I followed her.

“Harry?” Billy asked, his voice a touch hopeful. “Are you expecting trouble?”

I sighed and rubbed at the space between my eyebrows.

Definitely getting a headache. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Fourteen



Elidee led Billy and me through alleys, up a fire escape to the roof of a building and then down on the other side, and through a junk-cluttered abandoned lot on the way to the Pedway. It took us better than half an hour of scrambling after the tiny faerie through the muggy heat, and by the end of it I wished I'd told Toot-toot that we wanted someone who could read a street map and guide us there in a car.

Chicago's commuter tunnels are fairly recent construction, compared to much of the rest of the city. The tunnels are a maze if you don't know them—long stretches of identical overhead lights, drab, clean walls dotted with advertising posters, and intersections bearing plain and not always helpful directional signs. The tunnels closed after the workday and wouldn't open up again until around six the next morning, but Elidee led us to an unfinished building at Randolph and Wabash. She flitted around in front of a service access door that proved to be unlocked and that led down to a similar door that opened onto a darkened section of the Pedway that looked as though it had been under construction but was abandoned when the building had shut down.

It was completely dark, so I slipped the silver pentacle off my neck, lifting it in my hand and focusing a quiet effort of will upon it. The five-pointed star has been a symbol of magic for centuries, representing the four elements and the power of spirit bound within the circle of will—primal power under the control of human thought. I held the pentacle before me, and as I concentrated it began to glow with a gentle blue light, illuminating enough of our surroundings that we could navigate through the dark, silent tunnels. The little faerie drifted in front of us down the tunnel, and we followed her without speaking. She took us to the intersection with the main tunnels of the Pedway and on a brief walk down another tunnel, to a section shut behind a rusting metal gate with a sign that read, DANGER KEEP OUT. The gate proved to be unlocked, and we went down the tunnel, into a damper section of tunnels, rife with the smell of mold, that was clearly not a part of the Pedway proper.

After another fifty or sixty feet we reached a place where the walls became rough and uneven and shadows lay thick and heavy, despite the

glow of my wizard's light.

Elidee drifted over to an especially dark section of wall and flew in a little circle in front of it.

"Okay," I said. "I guess this is where we get in."

"What is where we get in?" Billy asked, his voice skeptical. "Get into where?"

"Undertown," I said. I ran my hands over the wall. To the casual touch it appeared to be bare, unfinished concrete, but I felt a slight unsteadiness when I pressed against it. It couldn't have been solid stone. "Must be a panel here somewhere. Trigger of some kind."

"What do you mean, 'Undertown'? I've never heard of it before."

"I was probably working here for five or six years before I did," I said. "You have to understand the history of Chicago. How they did things here."

Billy folded his arms. "I'm listening."

"The city is a swamp," I said, still searching for a means of opening the door with my fingertips. "We're darn near level with Lake Michigan. When they first built the place, the town kept sinking into the muck. I mean, every year it sank lower. They used to build streets, then build a latticework of wood over them, and then *another* street on top of that, planning on them slowly sinking. They planned houses the same way. Built the front door on the second floor and called it a 'Chicago entry,' so when the house sank, the front door would be at ground level."

"What about when the street sank?"

"Built another one on top of it. So you wound up with a whole city existing under the street level. They used to have a huge problem with rats and criminals holing up under the streets."

"But not anymore?" Billy asked.

"The rats and thugs mostly got crowded out by other things. Became a whole miniature civilization down here. And it was out of sight of the sun, which made it friendly space for all the night-crawling critters around."

"Hence, Undertown," Billy said.

I nodded. "Undertown. There are a lot of tunnels around Chicago. The Manhattan Project was housed in them for a while during World War Two. Did all that atomic bomb research."

"That's cheerful. You come down here a lot?"

I shook my head. "Hell, no. All kinds of nastiness lives down here."

Billy frowned at me. "Like what?"

“Lots of things. Stuff you don’t often see on the surface. Things even wizards know almost nothing about. Goblins, spirits of the earth, wyrms, things that have no name. Plus the usual riffraff. Vampires sometimes find lairs down here during the day. Trolls can hide here too. Molds and fungi you don’t get in most of the natural world. You name it.”

Billy pursed his lips thoughtfully. “So you’re taking us into a maze of lightless, rotting, precarious tunnels full of evil faeries and monsters.”

I nodded. “Maybe leftover radiation, too.”

“God, you’re a fun guy, Harry.”

“You’re the one who wanted in on the action.” My fingers found a tiny groove in the wall, and when I pressed against it a small, flat section of stone clicked and retracted. The switch had to have triggered some kind of release, because the section of wall pivoted in the center, turning outward, and forming a door that led into still more dank darkness. “Hah,” I said with some satisfaction. “There we go.”

Billy pressed forward and tried to step through the door, but I put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him. “Hang on. There are some things you need to know.”

Billy frowned, but he stopped, listening.

“These are faeries. We’ll probably run into a lot of the Sidhe, their nobles, hanging out with the Winter Lady. That means that they’re going to be dangerous and will probably try to entrap you.”

“What do you mean, entrap me?” Billy said.

“Bargains,” I said. “Deals. They’ll try to offer you things, get you to trade one thing for another.”

“Why?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. It’s in their nature. The concept of debt and obligation is a huge factor in how they behave.”

Billy lifted his eyebrows. “That’s why that little guy worked for you, right? Because he owed you for the pizza and he had a debt to you.”

“Right,” I said. “But it can work both ways. If you owe *them* something, they have a conduit to you and can use magic against you. The basic rule is not to accept any gifts from them—and for God’s sake, don’t *offer* them any gifts. They find anything other than an equal exchange to be either enticing or insulting. It isn’t a big deal with little guys like Toot, but if you get into it with a Sidhe Lord you might not live through it.”

Billy shrugged. “Okay. No gifts. Dangerous faeries. Got it.”

“I’m not finished. They aren’t going to be offering you wrapped packages, man. These are the Sidhe. They’re some of the most beautiful creatures there are. And they’ll try to put you off balance and tempt you.”

“Tempt me? Like with sex, is that what you’re saying?”

“Like any kind of sensual indulgence. Sex, food, beauty, music, perfume. When they offer, don’t accept it, or you’ll be opening yourself up to a world of hurt.”

Billy nodded. “Okay, got it. Let’s go already.”

I eyed the younger man, and he gave me an impatient look. I shook my head. I don’t think I could have adequately conveyed the kind of danger we might be walking into with mere words in any case. I took a deep breath and then nodded to Elidee. “All right, Tinkerbelle. Let’s go.”

The tiny scarlet light gave an irritated bob and then darted through the concealed doorway and into the darkness beyond. Billy narrowed his eyes and followed it, and I went after him. We found ourselves in a tunnel where one wall seemed to be made of ancient, moldering brick and the other of a mixture of rotting wooden beams, loose earth, and winding roots. The tunnel ran on out of the circle of light from my amulet. Our guide drifted forward, and we set out to follow her, walking close together.

The tunnel gave way to a sort of low-roofed cavern, supported here and there by pillars, mounds of collapsed earth, and beams that looked like they’d been added in afterward by the dwellers in Undertown. Elidee circled in place a bit uncertainly, then started floating to the right.

I hadn’t been following the little faerie for five seconds before the skin on the back of my neck tried to crawl up over my head and hide in my mouth. I drew up short, and I must have made some kind of noise, because Billy shot a look back at me and asked, “Harry? What is it?”

I lifted a hand to silence him and peered at the darkness around me. “Keep your eyes open,” I said. “I don’t think we are alone.”

From the shadows outside the light came a low hissing sound. The rest of my skin erupted in gooseflesh, and I shook my shield bracelet clear. I lifted my voice and said clearly, “I am the Wizard Dresden, Emissary of the Winter Court, bound to pay a call upon the Winter Lady. I’ve no time or desire for a fight. Stand clear and let me pass.”

A voice—a voice that sounded like a tortured cat might, if some demented being gave it the gift of speech—mewled out of the shadows, grating on my ears. “We know who you are, wizard,” the voice said. Its

inflections were all wrong, and the tone seemed to come from not far above the ground, somewhere off to my right. Elidee let out a high-pitched shriek of terror and zipped back to me, diving into my hair. I felt the warmth of the light around the tiny faerie like a patch of sunlight on my scalp.

I traded a look with Billy and turned toward the source of the voice. “Who are you?”

“A servant of the Winter Lady,” the voice replied from directly behind me. “Sent here to guide you safely through this realm and to her court.”

I turned in the other direction and peered more closely toward the sound of the voice. The werelight from my amulet suddenly gleamed off a pair of animal eyes, twenty feet away and a few inches from the floor. I looked back at Billy. He’d already noted the eyes and turned to put his back to mine, watching the darkness behind us.

I turned back to the speaker and said, “I ask again. Who are you?”

The eyes shifted in place, the voice letting out an angry, growling sound. “Many names am I called, and many paths have I trod. Hunter I have been, and watcher, and guide. My Lady sent me to bring you thither, safe and whole and well.”

“Don’t get mad at me, Charlie,” I snapped. “You know the drill as well as I do. Thrice I ask and done. Who are you?”

The voice came out harsh and sullen, barely intelligible. “Grimalkin am I called by the Cold Lady, who bids me guide her mother’s Emissary with safe conduct to her court and her throne.”

I let out a breath. “All right,” I said. “So lead us.”

The eyes bobbed in place, as though in a small bow, and Grimalkin mewled again. There was a faint motion in the shadows outside my light, and then a dull greenish glow appeared upon the ground. I stepped toward it and found a faint, luminous footprint upon the ground, a vague paw, feline but too spread out and too thin to be an actual cat’s. Just as I reached it, another light appeared on the floor several feet away.

“Make haste, wizard,” mewled Grimalkin’s voice. “Make haste. The Lady waits. The season passes. Time is short.”

I moved toward the second footprint, and as I reached it a third appeared before us, in the dark, and so on.

“What was that all about?” Billy murmured. “Asking it the same thing three times, I mean.”

“It’s a binding,” I murmured in reply. “Faeries aren’t allowed to speak a lie, and if a faerie says something three times, it has to make sure that it is true. It’s bound to fulfill a promise spoken thrice.”

“Ah,” Billy said. “So even if this thing hadn’t actually been sent to guide us safely, you made him say so three times would mean that he’d be obligated to do it. Got it.”

I shook my head. “I wanted to make sure Grimalkin was on the level. But they hate being bound like that.”

From ahead of us, the faintly glowing eyes appeared briefly, accompanied by another mewling growl that sent a chill down my spine.

“Oh,” Billy said. He didn’t look any too calm himself. His face had gone a little pale, and he walked with his hands clenched into fists. “So if Grimalkin had good intentions to begin with, wouldn’t that make him angry that you needlessly bound him?”

I shrugged. “I’m not here to make friends, Billy. I’m here to find a killer.”

“You’ve never even heard of diplomacy, have you?”

We followed the trail of footprints on the ground for another twenty minutes or so, through damp tunnels, sometimes only a few feet high. More sections of the tunnel showed evidence of recent construction—if you could call swirling layers of stone that seemed to have been smoothed into place like soft-serve ice cream “construction.” We passed several tunnels that seemed entirely new. Whatever beings lived down here, they didn’t seem too shy about expanding. “How much further?” I asked.

Grimalkin let out *amrowl* ing sound from somewhere nearby—not in the direction of the next footprint, either. “Very near, noble Emissary. Very near now.”

The unseen faerie guide was good to its word. At the next glowing footprint, no other appeared. Instead, we came to a large, elaborately carved double doorway. Made of some black wood I could not identify, the doors were eight or nine feet high, and carved in rich bas-relief. At first I thought the carvings were of a garden theme—leaves, vines, flowers, fruit, that kind of thing. But as I walked closer to the door, I could see more detail in the light of my glowing amulet. The forms of people lay among the vines. Some sprawled amorously together, while others were nothing more than skeletons wrapped in creeping roses or corpses staring with sightless eyes from within a bed of poppies. Here and there in the garden one could see

evidence of the Sidhe—a pair of eyes, a veiled figure, and their hangers-on, little faeries like Toot-toot, leaf-clad dryads, pipe-wielding satyrs, and many, many others hiding from the mortals' views, dancing.

"Nice digs," Billy commented. "Is this the place?"

I glanced around for our guide, but I didn't see any more footprints or any feline eyes. "I guess it must be."

"They aren't exactly subtle, are they?"

"Summer's better at it than Winter. But they all can be when it suits them."

"Uh-huh. You know what bothers me, Harry?"

"What?"

"Grimalkin never said he'd guide us out again."

I glanced back at Billy. Quiet, hissing laughter came out of the darkness, directionless. I took a deep breath. Steady, Harry. Don't let the kid see you get nervous. Then I turned to the door and struck it solidly with my fist, three times.

The blows rang out, hollow and booming. Silence fell on the tunnels for a long moment, until the doors split down the middle, and let out from behind them a flood of light and sound and color.

I don't know what I'd expected from the Winter Court, but it wasn't big-band music. A large brass section blared from somewhere behind the doors, and drums rattled and pounded with the rough, genuine sound of actual skins. The lights were colored and muted, as if the whole place was lit by Christmas strands, and I could see shadows whirling and moving inside—dancers.

"Careful," I muttered. "Don't let the music get to you." I stepped up to the great doors and passed through them.

The room could have come from a Roaring Twenties hotel. Hell, it might have been, if the hotel had sunk into the earth, turned slightly upon its side, and been decorated by things with no concept of human values. Whatever it had once been, it had always been meant for dancing. The dance floor was made of blocks of rose-colored marble, and even though the floor was tilted, the blocks had been slipped to the level, here and there, creating something that looked almost like a flight of low, shallow stairs. Over the treacherous blocks danced the Winter Sidhe.

Beautiful didn't come close. It didn't start to come close. Men and women danced together, dressed in regalia of the 1940s. Stockings, knee-

length skirts, dress uniforms of both the army and the navy that looked authentic to the month and year. The hairstyles in evidence corresponded as well, though the color didn't always match the setting. One Sidhe girl I saw wore hers dyed sapphire-blue, and others wore braids of silver and gold, or of other colors. Here and there, light gleamed from metal or gems set into ears, brows, or lips, and the riot of subtle colors gathered around each and every dancer in its own distinct, fascinating nimbus, a corona of energy, of power manifesting itself as the Sidhe danced.

Even without the whirling auras, the way they moved was something hypnotic in itself, and I had to force my eyes away from it after only a few seconds of lovely legs being displayed as a woman spun, body arched back underneath a strong man's hands, throats bared and breasts offered out, as hair caught the gleam of the colored lights and threw it back in waves of color. I couldn't look anywhere on the dance floor without seeing someone who should have been making fun of people on the covers of magazines for being too ugly.

Billy hadn't been as paranoid as me, and he stood staring at the dance floor, his eyes wide. I nudged him with my hip, hard enough to make his teeth clack together, and he jerked and gave me a guilty look.

I forced my eyes away from the dancers, maybe twenty couples all told, to check out the rest of the ballroom.

To one side of the room stood a bandstand, and the musicians on it all wore tuxes. They were mortals, human. They looked normal, which was to say almost deformed in comparison to the dancers they performed for. Both men and women played, and none of them looked well rested or well fed. Their tuxes were stained with sweat, their hair hung lank and unwashed, and a closer look showed a silver manacle bound around the ankle of each of them, attached to a chain that ran through the bandstand, winding back and forth among them. They didn't look upset, though—far from it. Every one of them was bent to the music, faces locked in intensity and concentration. And they were *good*, playing with the unity of tone and timing that you only see from bands who have really honed their art.

That didn't change the fact that they were prisoners of the fae. But they evidently had no particular problems with the notion. The music rattled the great stone room, shaking dust from the ceiling hidden in the darkness overhead while the Sidhe danced.

Opposite the bandstand, the dance floor descended directly into a pool of water—or what I presumed was water, at any rate. It looked black and unnaturally still. Even as I watched, the waters stirred, moved by something out of sight beneath the surface. Color rolled and rippled over the dark surface, and I got the distinct impression that the pool wasn't water. Or not just water. I fought down another shiver.

Beyond the dance floor, on the side of the room opposite me, stood raised tiers of platforms, each one set with a separate little table, one that could sit three or four at the most, each one with its own dim, green-shaded lamp. The tables all stood at different relative heights to one another, staggered back and forth—until the tiers reached a pinnacle, a single chair made out of what looked like silver, its flaring back carved into a sigil, a snowflake the size of a dinner table. The great chair stood empty.

The drummer on the bandstand went into a brief solo, and then the instruments cut off altogether—but for one. The other band members sagged into their seats, a couple of them simply collapsing onto the floor, but the lead trumpet stayed standing, belting out a solo while the Winter Lords danced. He was a middle-aged man, a little overweight, and his face flushed scarlet, then purple as his trumpet rang out through the solo.

Then, all at once, the Sidhe stopped dancing. Dozens of beautiful faces turned to watch the soloist, eyes glittering in the muted light.

The man continued to play, but I could see that something was wrong. The flush of his face deepened even more, and veins began to throb in his forehead and throat. His eyes widened and began to bulge, and he started shaking. A moment later the music began to falter. The man tore his face away from the trumpet, and I could see him gasping for breath. He couldn't get it. A second later he jerked, then stiffened, and his eyes rolled up in his head. The trumpet slipped from his fingers, and he fell, first to his knees and then limply over onto his side, to the floor of the bandstand. He hit with finality, his eyes open but not focused. He twitched once more, and then his throat rattled and he was still.

A murmur went through the Sidhe, and I looked back to see them parting, stepping aside with deep bows and curtsies for someone emerging from their midst. A tall girl walked slowly toward the fallen musician. Her features were pale, radiant, perfect—and looked like an adolescent copy of Mab's. That was where the resemblance ended.

She looked young. Young enough to make a man feel guilty for thinking the wrong thoughts, but old enough to make it difficult not to. Her hair had been bound into long dreadlocks, each of them dyed a different shade, ranging from a deep lavender to pale blues and greens to pure white, so that it almost seemed that her hair had been formed from glacial ice. She wore leather pants of dark, dark blue, laced and open up the outside seams from calf to hip. Her boots matched the pants. She wore a white T-shirt tight enough to show the tips of her breasts straining against the fabric, framing the words OFF WITH HIS HEAD. She had hacked the shirt off at the top of her rib cage, leaving pale flesh exposed, along with a glitter of silver flashing at her navel.

She moved to the downed musician with a liquid grace, a thoughtless, casual sensuality that made a quiver of arousal slip down my spine. She settled down over him, throwing a leg over his hips, straddling him, and idly raked long, opalescent fingernails over his chest. He didn't move. Didn't breathe.

The girl licked her lips, her mouth spreading into a lazy smile, before she leaned down and kissed the corpse's dead lips. I saw her shiver with what was unmistakably pleasure. "There," she murmured. "There, you see? Never let it be said the Lady Maeve does not fulfill her promises. You said you'd die to play that well, poor creature. And now you have."

A collective sigh went up from the assembled Sidhe, and then they began applauding enthusiastically. Maeve looked back over her shoulder at them all with a lifted chin and a lazy smile before she stood up and bowed, left and right, to the sound of applause. The applause died off when Maeve stalked away from the corpse and to the rising tiers of dinner seats, stepping lithely up them until she reached the great silver throne at the top. She dropped into it, turned sideways, and idly threw her legs over one arm, arching her back and stretching with that same lazy smile. "My lords and ladies, let us give our poor musical brutes a little time to recover their strength. We have a visitor."

The Sidhe began drifting toward the tables on the tiers, stepping into place one by one. I stood where I was and said nothing, though as they settled down I became increasingly conscious of their attention, of the glittering intensity of immortal eyes upon me.

Once they were all settled in, I stepped forward and walked across the dance floor until I stood at the foot of the tier. I looked up at Maeve and

inclined my head to her. “Lady Winter, I presume.”

Maeve smiled at me, showing a dimple, and gave one foot a girlish bounce. “Indeed.”

“You know in what capacity I am here, Lady?”

“Naturally.”

I nodded. Nothing like a frontal assault, then. “Did you arrange the murder of the Summer Knight?”

Silence fell on the room. The regard of the Winter Sidhe grew more intent, more uncomfortable.

Maeve’s mouth spread into a slow smile, which in turn became a quiet, rolling laugh. She let her head fall back with it, and the Sidhe joined in with her. They sat there laughing at me for a good thirty seconds, and I felt my face begin to heat up with irrational embarrassment before Maeve waved one hand in a negligent gesture and the laughter obediently died away.

“Stars,” she murmured, “I adore mortals.”

I clenched my jaw. “That’s swell,” I said. “Did you arrange the murder of the Summer Knight?”

“If I had, do you really think I would tell you?”

“You’re evading,” I growled. “Answer the question.”

Maeve lifted a fingertip to her lips as though she needed it to hold in more laughter. Then she smiled and said, “I can’t just give you that kind of information, Wizard Dresden. It’s too powerful.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

She sat up, crossing her legs with a squeak of leather, and settled back on the throne. “It means that if you want me to answer that question, you’re going to have to pay for it. What is the answer worth to you?”

I folded my arms. “I assume you have something in mind. That’s why you sent someone to give us safe passage here.”

“Quick,” she murmured. “I like that. Yes, I do, wizard.” She extended a hand to me and gestured to an open seat at the table to the right and a little beneath the level of her throne. “Please sit down,” she said. Her teeth shone white. “Let’s make a deal.”

Chapter Fifteen



“You want me to cut another deal with the Sidhe,” I said. I didn’t bother to hide my disbelief. “When I burst out laughing at you, do you think you’ll be offended?”

“And why should you find the notion amusing?”

I rolled my eyes. “Christ, lady, that’s what got me into this crap to begin with.”

Maeve’s lips slithered into a quiet smile, and she left her hand extended, toward the seat beside her. “Remember, wizard, that you came to seek something from me. Surely it would not harm you to listen to my offer.”

“I’ve heard that before. Usually right before I get screwed.”

Maeve touched the tip of her tongue to her lips. “One thing at a time, Mister Dresden.”

I snorted. “Suppose I don’t want to listen.”

Something in her eyes suddenly made her face cold and unpleasant. “I think it might be wise for you to indulge me. I simply go mad when someone ruins a good party mood.”

“Harry,” Billy muttered, “these people are giving me the creeps. If she’s playing games with you, maybe we should go.”

I grimaced. “Yeah, that would be the smart thing. But it wouldn’t get me any answers. Come on.”

I stepped forward and started climbing up to the table Maeve had indicated. Billy followed closely. Maeve watched me the whole time, her eyes sparkling.

“There,” she said, once I’d been seated. “Not so untamable as he claimed.”

I felt my jaw get a little tighter as Billy took a seat beside me. A trio of brightly colored lights zipped in, bearing a silver tray holding a crystalline ewer of water and two glasses. “As who said?”

Maeve waved a hand airily. “No matter.”

I glared at her, but she didn’t seem bothered. “All right, Lady,” I said. “Talk.”

Maeve idly stretched out a hand. A goblet of some golden liquid appeared in her fingers and rimed over with frost as I watched. She took a

sip of the drink, whatever it was, and then said, "First, I will name my price."

"There'd better be a blue light special. I don't have much to trade, all things considered."

"True. I cannot ask for a claim over you, because Queen Mab has that already. But let me see." She tapped a fingernail to her lips again and then said, "Your issue."

"Eh?" I said, glibly.

"Your issue, wizard," she said, toying with a violet dreadlock. "Your offspring. Your firstborn. And in exchange I will give you the knowledge you seek."

"News flash, Coldilocks. I don't have any children."

Maeve laughed. "Naturally not. But the details could be arranged."

Evidently that was a cue. The dark pool of maybe-water stirred, drawing my eye. Ripples whispered as they lapped at the edges of the pool.

"What's that?" Billy whispered to me.

The waters parted, and a Sidhe girl rose out of the pool. She was tall, slender, water sliding down over pale, naked, supple curves. Her hair was a deep shade of emerald green, and as she kept on coming up out of the water, walking up what were apparently submerged stairs, I could tell that it wasn't dyed. Her face was sweetly angelic, sort of girl-next-door pretty. Her hair clung to her head, her throat, her shoulders, as did beads of water that glistened and threw back the fae-lights in dozens of colors. She extended her arms, and immediately half a dozen little lights, pixies, zipped out of nowhere, bearing a swath of emerald silk. They draped it over her extended arms, but the cloth served to emphasize, rather than conceal, her nakedness. She looked up at the tables with her feline fae-eyes and inclined her head to Maeve. Then she focused upon me.

There was an abrupt pulling sensation, something as simple and as difficult to resist as gravity. I felt a sudden urge to get up and go down to her, to remove the silk cloth and to carry her into the water. I wanted to see her hair fan out beneath the surface, feel her naked limbs sliding around me. I wanted to feel that slender waist beneath my hands, twist and writhe with her in the warm, weightless darkness of the pool.

Beside me, Billy gulped. "Is it just me, or is it getting a little warm in here?"

“She’s pushing it on you,” I said quietly. My lips felt a little numb. “It’s glamour. It isn’t real.”

“Okay,” Billy said without conviction. “It isn’t real.”

He reached for a glass and the ewer of water, but I grabbed his hand. “No. No food. No drink. It’s dangerous.”

Billy cleared his throat and settled back in his seat. “Oh. Right. Sorry.”

The girl glided up the tiers of tables, glittering pixies in darting attendance around her, gathering her hair back with ornate combs, fastening gleaming jewels to her ears, lacing more about her throat, wrist, ankle. I couldn’t help but follow the motion of the lights, which took my eyes on a thorough tour of her body. The urge to go to her became even stronger as she neared, as I smelled her perfume, a scent like that of the mist hovering over a still lake beneath a harvest moon.

The green-haired woman smiled, lips closed, then drew up in a deep curtsy to Maeve, and murmured, “My Lady.”

Maeve reached out and took her hand, warmly. “Jen,” she murmured. “Are you acquainted with the infamous Harry Dresden?”

Jen smiled, and her teeth gleamed between her lips. They were as green as seaweed, spinach, and fresh-steamed broccoli. “Only by reputation.” She turned to me and extended her hand, arching one verdant brow.

I gave Billy a self-conscious glance and rose to take the Sidhe-lady’s hand. I nudged Billy’s foot with mine, and he stood up too.

I bowed politely over Jen’s hand. Her fingers were cool, damp. I got the impression that her flawless skin should have been prune-wrinkled, but it wasn’t. I had to fight an urge to kiss the back of her hand, to taste her cool flesh. I managed to keep a neutral tone to my voice and said, “Good evening.”

The Sidhe-lady smiled at me, showing her green teeth again, and said, “Something of a gentleman. I wouldn’t have expected it.” She withdrew her hand and said, “And tall.” Her eyes roamed over me in idle speculation. “I like tall men.”

I felt my cheeks flush and grow warmer. Other parts suffered from similar inflammation.

Maeve asked, “Is she lovely enough to suit you, wizard? You’ve no idea how many mortal men have longed for her. And how few have known her embrace.”

Jen let out a quiet laugh. “For more than about three minutes, at any rate.”

Maeve drew Jen down until the nearly nude Sidhe lady knelt beside the throne. Maeve toyed with a strand of her curling, leaf-green hair with one hand. “Why not agree to my offer, wizard? Spend a night in the company of my maiden. Is it not a pleasant price?”

My voice came out more quietly than I’d intended. “You want me to get a child on her. A child you would keep.”

Maeve’s eyes glittered. She leaned toward me and said, very quietly, “Do not let that concern you. I can feel your hunger, mortal man. The needs in you. Hot as a fever. Let go for a time. No mortal could sate you as she will.”

I felt my eyes drawn to the Sidhe woman, trailing down the length of pale flesh left bared between the idle drapes of emerald silk, following the length of her legs. That hunger rose again in me, a raw and unthinking need. Scent flooded over me—a perfume of wind and mist, of heated flesh. Scent evoked more phantom sensations of the silken caress of delicate fae-hands, sweetly hot rake of nails, winding strength of limbs tangled with mine.

Maeve’s eyes brightened. “Perhaps she is not enough for you? Perhaps you would wish another. Even myself.” As I watched, Jen leaned her cheek against Maeve’s thigh and placed a soft kiss upon the tight leather. Maeve shifted, a slow, sensual motion of her hips and back, and murmured, “Mmmm. Or more, if your thirst runs deep enough. Drive a hard bargain, wizard. All of us would enjoy that.”

The longing, an aching force of naked need, redoubled. The two faeries were lovely. More than lovely. Sensuous. Willing. Perfectly unrestrained, perfectly passionate. I could feel that in them, radiating from them. If I made the bargain, they *would* make the evening one of nothing but indulgence, sensation, satiation, delight. Maeve and her handmaiden would do things to me that you only read about in magazines.

“Dear *Penthouse*,” I muttered, “I never thought something like this would happen to me . . .”

“Wizard,” Maeve murmured, “I see you weighing the consequences in your eyes. You think too much. It weakens you. Stop thinking. Come down into the earth with us.”

Some mathematical and uncaring part of my brain way the hell in the back of my head reminded me that *Idid* need that information. A simple statement from Maeve would tell me if she was the killer or not. *Go ahead* , it told me. *It isn't as though it's going to be painful for you to pay her price. Don't you deserve to have something pleasant happen to you for a change? Make the bargain. Get the information. Get wasted on kisses and pleasure and soft skin. Live a little—before that borrowed time you're on runs out.*

I reached out with a shaking hand to the crystal ewer on the table. I clenched it. It clinked and rattled against the glass as I poured cool, sparkling water into it.

Maeve's smile grew sharper.

"Harry," Billy said, his voice uncertain. "Didn't you just say something bad about—you know, taking food or drink from fa—uh, from these people?"

I put the pitcher down and picked up the glass of water.

Jen rubbed her cheek against Maeve's thigh and murmured, "They never really change, do they?"

"No," Maeve said. "The males all fall to the same thing. Isn't it delicious?"

I unbuttoned the fly in my jeans, undid the zipper a little, and dumped the cold water directly down my pants.

Some shocks of sensation are pleasant. This one wasn't. The water was so cold that tiny chips of ice had formed in it, as though it was trying to freeze itself from the inside out. That cold went right down where I had intended it to go, and everything in my jeans tried to contract into my abdomen in sheer, hypothermic horror. I let out a little yelp, and my skin promptly crawled with gooseflesh.

The gesture had its intended effect. That overwhelming, almost feral hunger withered and vanished. I was able to take my eyes off the Winter Lady and her handmaiden, to clear my thoughts into something resembling a sane line of reason. I shook my head a bit to be sure and then looked up at Maeve. Anger surged through me, and my jaw clenched tight, but I made an effort to keep my words at least marginally polite. "Sorry, sweetie, but I have a couple problems with that offer."

Maeve's lips tightened. "And those would be?"

"One. I'm not handing over a child to you. Not mine, not anyone's, not now, and not ever. If you had a brain in your head, you'd have known that."

Maeve's already pale face blanched even more, and she sat bolt upright on her throne. "*You dare* —"

"Shut up," I snarled, and it came out loud enough to ring off the walls of the ballroom. "I'm not finished."

Maeve jerked as though I'd slapped her. Her mouth dropped open, and she blinked at me.

"I came here under your invitation and protection. I am your *guest*. But in spite of that you've thrown glamour at me anyway." I stood up, my hands spread on the table, leaning toward her for emphasis. "I don't have time for this crap. You don't scare me, lady," I said. "I only came here for answers—but if you keep pushing me, I'm going to push back. Hard."

Maeve's evident anger evaporated. She leaned back on her throne, lips pursed, her expression placid and enigmatic. "Well, well, well. Not so easily captured, it would seem."

A new voice, a relaxed, masculine drawl, slid into the silence. "I told you, Maeve. You should have been polite. Anyone who declares war on the Red Court isn't going to be the sort to take kindly to pressure." The speaker stepped into the ballroom through the double doors and walked casually to the banquet tables and toward Maeve's throne.

It was a man, maybe in his early thirties, medium build, maybe half an inch shy of six feet tall. He wore dark jeans, a white tee, and a leather jacket. Droplets of dark reddish brown stained the shirt and one side of his face. His scalp was bald but for a stubble of dark hair.

As he approached, I picked out more details. He had a brand on his throat. A snowflake made of white scar tissue stood out sharply against his skin. The skin on one side of his face was red and a little swollen, and he was missing half of the eyebrow and a crescent of the stubble on his scalp on that side—he'd been burned, and recently. He reached the throne and dropped to one knee before it, somehow conveying a certain relaxed insolence with the gesture, and extended the box to Maeve.

"It is done?" Maeve asked, an almost childlike eagerness in her voice. "What took you so long?"

"It wasn't as easy as you said it would be. But I did it."

The Winter Lady all but snatched the carved box from his hands, avarice lighting her eyes. "Wizard, this is my Knight, Lloyd of the family Slate."

Slate nodded to me. "How are you?"

“Impatient,” I responded, but I nodded back to him warily. “You’re the Winter Knight?”

“So far, yeah. I guess you’re the Winter Emissary. Asking questions and investigating and so on.”

“Yep. Did you kill Ronald Reuel?”

Slate burst out laughing. “Christ, Dresden. You don’t waste time, do you?”

“I’ve filled my insincere courtesy quota for the day,” I said. “Did you kill him?”

Slate shrugged and said, “No. To be honest with you, I’m not sure *I could* have killed him. He’s been at this a lot longer than me.”

“He was an old man,” I said.

“So are a lot of wizards,” Slate pointed out. “I could have bench-pressed him, sure. Killing him is something else altogether.”

Maeve let out a sudden hiss of anger, the sound eerily loud. She lifted her foot and kicked Slate in the shoulder. Something popped when she did, and the force of the kick drove the Winter Knight down a tier, into the table and the Sidhe seated there. The table toppled, and Sidhe, chairs, and Knight went sprawling.

Maeve rose to her feet, sending the green-toothed Jen scooting away from her. She drew what looked like a military-issue combat knife from the carved box. It was crusted with some kind of black gelatinous substance, like burned barbecue sauce. “You stupid animal,” she snarled. “Useless. This is useless to me.”

She hurled the knife at Slate. The handle hit him in the biceps of his left arm just as he sat up again. His face twisted in sudden fury. He took up the knife, rose to his feet, and stalked toward Maeve with murder in his eye.

Maeve drew herself up, her face shining with a sudden terrible beauty. She lifted her right hand, ring finger and thumb both bent, and murmured something in a liquid, alien tongue. Sudden blue light gathered around her fingers, and the temperature in the room dropped by about forty degrees. She spoke again, and flicked her wrist, sending glowing motes of azure flickering toward Slate.

The snowflake brand flared into sudden light, and Slate’s advance halted, his body going rigid. The skin around the brand turned blue, then purple, then black, spreading like a stop-motion enhanced film of gangrene. A quiet snarl slipped from Slate’s lips, and I could see his body trembling

with the effort to continue toward Maeve. He shuddered and took another step forward.

Maeve lifted her other hand, her index finger extended while the others curled, and a sudden wind whipped past me, cold enough that it stole the breath from my lungs. The wind whipped madly around Slate, making his leather coat flap. Bits of white frost started forming on his eyelashes and eyebrows. His expression, now anguished as well as full of rage, faltered, and his advance halted again.

“Calm him,” Maeve murmured.

Jen slipped behind Slate, wrapping her arms around his neck, leaning her mouth down close to his ear. Slate’s eyes flickered with hot, violent hate for a moment, and then began to grow heavier. Jen ran her hand slowly down the sleeve of his jacket, fingers caressing his wrist. His arm lowered as I watched. A moment later, Jen slid the jacket from his shoulders. The tee was sleeveless, and Slate’s arms were hard with muscle—and tracked with needle marks. Jen held out a hand, and another darting pixie handed her a hypodermic needle. Jen slipped it into the bend of his arm, still whispering to him, sliding the plunger slowly down.

Slate’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he sank to his knees. Jen went down with him, wrapped around him like kelp on a swimmer, her mouth next to his ear.

Maeve lowered her hands, and the wind and the cold died away. She lifted a shaking hand to her face and stepped back to the throne, settling stiffly onto it, narrowed eyes locked on Slate’s increasingly malleable form. Her cheekbones stood out more sharply than before, her eyes looked more sunken. She gripped the arms of the throne, her fingers twitching.

“What the hell was that?” Billy whispered.

“Probably what passes for a polite disagreement,” I muttered. “Get up. We’re leaving.”

I stood up. Maeve’s eyes darted to me. Her voice came out dry, harsh. “Our bargain is not complete, wizard.”

“This talk is.”

“But I have not answered your question.”

“Keep your answer. I don’t need it anymore.”

“You don’t?” Maeve asked.

“We don’t?” Billy said.

I nodded toward Slate and Jen. "You had to push yourself to make him stand still. Look at you. You're just about out of gas right now from going up against your own Knight." I started down the tiers, Billy coming with me. "Besides that, you're sloppy, sweetheart. Reckless. A clean killing like Reuel's takes a plan, and that isn't you."

I could feel her eyes pressing against my back like frozen thorns. I ignored her.

"I did not give you leave to go, wizard," she said, her voice chilly.

"I didn't ask."

"I won't forget this insolence."

"I probably will," I said. "It's nothing special. Come on, Billy."

I walked to the double doors and out. As soon as we were both outside, the doors swung shut with a huge, hollow boom that made me jump. Darkness fell, sudden and complete, and I fumbled for my amulet as my heart lurched in panic.

The spectral light from my amulet showed me Billy's strained face first, and then the area immediately around us. The double doors were gone. Only a blank stone wall remained where they had been.

"Gulp," Billy said. He shook his head for a moment, dazed. "Where did they go?"

I rested my fingers against the stone wall, reaching out for it with my wizard's senses. Nothing. It was rock, not illusion. "Beats the hell out of me. The doors here must have been a way to some other location."

"Like some kind of teleport?"

"More like a temporary entrance into the Nevernever," I said. "Or a shortcut through the Nevernever to another place on Earth."

"Kind of intense in there. When she made it get all cold. I've never seen anything like that before."

"Sloppy," I said. "She was laying a binding on Slate. Her power was sloshing over into changing the temperature. A child could do better."

Billy let out a short, quiet laugh. "After what we just saw, anyone else would still be shaking. You're giving her the rating from the Russian judge."

"So sue me." I shrugged. "She's strong. Strong isn't everything."

Billy glanced up at me. "Could you do what she did?"

"I'd probably use fire."

His eyebrows went up, his expression impressed. “Do you really think Maeve’s not the killer?”

“I do,” I said. “This murder was clean enough to look like an accident. Maeve’s obviously got impulse-control issues. Doesn’t make for much of a methodical murderer.”

“What about Slate?”

I shook my head, my brow tightening. “Not sure about him. He’s mortal. There’s nothing that says he couldn’t lie to us. But I got what I was looking for, and I found out a couple of things on top of that.”

“So why are you frowning?”

“Because all I got was more questions. Everyone’s been telling me to hurry. Faeries don’t do that. They’re practically immortal and they’re not in a rush. But Mab and Grimalkin both have tried to rush me now. Maeve went for the high-pressure sales tactic too, like she didn’t have time for anything more subtle.”

“Why would they do that?”

I sighed. “Something’s in motion. If I don’t run down the killer, the Courts could go to war with one another.”

“That would explain the whole World War Two dress motif back there.”

“Yeah, but not why time would be so pressing.” I shook my head. “If we could have stayed longer, I might have been able to work out more, but it was getting too nervous in there.”

“Discretion, valor,” Billy said by way of agreement. “We leave now, right?”

“Elidee?” I asked. I felt a stirring in my hair, and then the tiny pixie popped out to hover in the air in front of me. “Can you lead us back to my car?”

The pixie flashed in the affirmative and zipped away. I lifted my amulet and followed.

Billy and I didn’t speak until our guide had led us out of the underground complex not far from where I’d parked the Blue Beetle. We cut through an alley.

About halfway down it, Billy grabbed my arm and jerked me bodily behind him, snapping, “Harry, get back!”

In the same motion he swung out one foot and kicked a metal trash can. It went flying, crashing into something I hadn’t seen behind it. Someone let out a short, harsh gasp of pain. Billy stepped forward and picked up the

metal lid that had fallen to the ground. He swung it down at the shape. It struck with a noisy crash.

I took a couple of steps back to make sure I was clear of the action, and reached for my amulet again. “Billy,” I said, “what the hell?”

I felt the sudden presence at my back half a second too late to get out of the way. A hand the size of a dinner plate closed on the back of my neck like a vice and lifted. I felt my heels rise until my toes were just barely touching the ground.

A voice, a feminine contralto, growled, “Let go of the amulet and call him off, wizard. Call him off before I break your neck.”

Chapter Sixteen



Being held up by your neck hurts. Trust me on this one. I lifted my hands by way of attempting to convey compliance and said, “Billy, get off him.”

Billy took a step back from the pale-haired young man he’d knocked down. Fix whimpered and scuttled away on his hands and butt. His borrowed brown suit was soiled and torn, and his yellow polyester tie hung from his collar by only one of its clips. He put his back against the alley wall, eyes wide beneath his shock of white dandelion hair.

Billy’s eyes flicked from my assailant to Fix and back. He squinted at her for a moment, then set his jaw in an expression of casual determination. “Harry? You want me to take her?”

“Wait a minute,” I managed to say. “Okay, he’s off. Put me down.”

The grip on the back of my neck relaxed, and as I touched ground again I took a step toward Billy, turning to face the woman who had held me.

As I expected, it was the tall, muscular young woman from the funeral home, her muddy green hair hanging lankly over her eyes and one cheek. She folded her arms and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Fix? Are you okay?”

The smaller man panted, “My lip is cut. It isn’t bad.”

The woman nodded and faced me again.

“All right,” I said. “Who the hell are you?”

“My name’s Meryl,” she said. Her voice was surprisingly quiet, contrasting with her size. “I wanted to apologize to you, Mr. Dresden. For hitting you and throwing you into the Dumpster.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Are you sure you got the right guy, Meryl? No one ever apologizes to me for anything.”

She pushed at her hair with one hand. It fell right back over her face. “I’m sorry. I was scared earlier, and I acted without thinking.”

I traded a glance with Billy. “Uh, okay. I’m pretty sure lurking in a dark alley to mug me with your apology isn’t the usual way to go about saying you’re sorry. But I didn’t read that Mars-Venus book, so who knows.”

Her mouth twitched, and she relaxed her stance by a tiny degree. “I didn’t know how else to find you, so I was just waiting near your car.”

“Okay,” I said. My neck still throbbed where her fingers had clamped on. Five to one I would have wonderful stripy bruises the next day. I nodded and turned away. “Apology accepted. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have things I need to do.”

A note of panic crept into her voice. “Wait. Please.”

I stopped and looked back at her.

“I need to talk to you. Just for a minute.” She took a deep breath. “I need your help.”

Of course she did.

“It’s very important.”

Of course it was.

The headache started coming back. “Look, Meryl, I’ve got a lot on my plate already.”

“I know,” she said. “Investigating Ron’s death. I think I can help you.”

I pursed my lips. “You were close to Reuel?”

She nodded. “Me. Fix. Ace. And Lily.”

I flashed back on the photo of Reuel and the four young people. “Green-haired girl? Very cute?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s Ace?”

“He had to go to work right after the funeral. But Lily’s why I need to talk to you. She’s missing. I think she’s in trouble.”

I started filling in context on the conversation I’d overheard between them. “Who are you?”

“I told you. My name is Meryl.”

“Okay, fine. *What* are you, Meryl?”

She flinched at the question. “Oh. I’m sorry, I didn’t know what you meant.” She raked at her hair again. “I’m a changeling. We all are.”

“A what?” Billy asked.

I nodded, getting it. “Changeling,” I said to Billy. “She’s half mortal and half fae.”

“Aha,” Billy said. “Which means what?”

I shrugged. “It means that she has to choose whether to remain a mortal or become wholly fae.”

“Yes,” she said. “And until then I’m under the rule of the Court of my fae father. Winter. The others too. That’s why the four of us stuck together. It was safer.”

Billy nodded. "Oh."

"Meryl," I said, "what makes you think your friend is in trouble?"

"She's not very independent, Mister Dresden. We share an apartment. She doesn't have a very good idea of how to take care of herself, and she gets nervous if she's out of the apartment for too long."

"And what do you think happened to her?"

"The Winter Knight."

Billy frowned. "Why would he hurt people in his own Court?"

Meryl let out a brief, hard laugh. "Because he can. He had a thing for Lily. He would hurt her, frighten her. He got off on it. He was furious when Maeve told him to back off. And once Ron was gone . . ." Her voice trailed off and she turned her head to one side.

"How does Reuel fit into this?" I asked.

"He was protecting us. Maeve had been torturing us for fun, and we didn't know where to turn. Ron took us in. He put us under his protection, and no one in Winter was willing to cross him."

"What about your fae dad?" Billy asked. "Didn't he do anything to look out for you?"

Meryl gave Billy a flat look. "My mother was raped by a troll. Even if he'd been strong enough to do anything about Maeve hurting us, he wouldn't have. He thinks he's already done enough by not devouring my mom on the spot."

"Oh," Billy said. "Sorry."

I frowned. "And with the Summer Knight gone, you think Slate grabbed the girl."

Meryl said, "Someone broke into the apartment. It looked like there had been a struggle."

I let out a sigh. "Have you contacted the police?"

She eyed me. "Oh, yeah, of course. I called them and told them that a mortal champion of the fae came and spirited away a half-mortal, half-nixie professional nude model to Faerieland. They were all over it."

I had to admire the well-placed sarcasm. "It doesn't take a supernatural studmuffin to cause something very bad to happen to a cute girl in this town. Your plain old mortal kidnappers and murderers can manage just fine."

She shook her head. "Either way, she's still in trouble."

I lifted a hand. "What do you want from me?"

“Help me find her. Please, Mister Dresden.”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t have time, energy, or brainpower to spare for this. The smart thing would be to blow her off entirely, or to promise her I’d do it and promptly forget about it. “This just isn’t a good time.” I felt like crap the second I said it. I didn’t look at the changeling’s face. I couldn’t. “There’s too much trouble already, and I don’t even know if I can help myself, much less your friend. I’m sorry.”

I turned to go, but Meryl stepped in front of me. “Wait.”

“I told you,” I said. “There’s nothing I can—”

“I’ll pay you,” Meryl said.

Oh, right. Money.

I was about to lose the office and the apartment, and this faerie work only paid in misery. I needed to pay some bills. Go to the grocery store. My mouth didn’t actually water, but it was close.

I shook my head again. “Look, Meryl, I wish I could—”

“Double your fee,” she said, her voice urgent.

Double. My. Fee. I hesitated some more.

“Triple,” she said. She reached for her back pocket and produced an envelope. “Plus one thousand cash, up front, right now.”

I looked back at Fix, still trembling and leaning against the alley wall, a handkerchief pressed to his mouth. Meryl continued to rock from one foot to the other, her eyes on the ground, waiting.

I tried to look at things objectively. A thousand bucks wouldn’t spend if I got myself killed while distracted by the additional workload. On the other hand, if I lived through this thing the money would be necessary. My stomach growled, and a sharp pang of hunger made me clench the muscles of my belly.

I needed the work—but more to the point, I needed to be able to live with myself. I wasn’t sure I was comfortable with the idea of looking back on this particular patch of memory and seeing myself leave some helpless girl, changeling or not, to the metaphoric wolves. People don’t ask me for help if they’re anything less than desperate. The changelings had been terrified of me only a few hours before. If they had turned to me for help now, it was because they were out of options.

And they also had money.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit,” I muttered. I snatched the envelope. “All right. I’ll look into it and do what I can—but I can’t make you any

promises.”

Meryl let out a shuddering breath. “Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Dresden.”

“Yeah,” I sighed. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a slightly crumpled business card. “Here’s my office number. Call and leave a message to let me know how I can reach you.”

She took the card and nodded. “I don’t know if I can pay your fees all at once. But I’ll be good for it, even if it takes a while.”

“We can worry about that later, when we’re all safe and sound,” I said. I nodded to her, then to Fix, and started walking down the alley again. Billy kept an eye on the pair of them and followed me.

We reached the parking lot of the funeral home a few minutes later. The lights were all out, and the Blue Beetle was the only car left in the lot. No one had bothered to steal it. What a shock.

“So what’s next?” Billy asked.

“I’ll call Murphy. See what she can tell me about Lloyd Slate.”

Billy nodded. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Actually, yeah,” I said. “Get out the phone book and call the hospitals. See if the morgues have a green-haired Jane Doe.”

“You think she’s dead, then?”

“I think it would be a lot simpler if she was.”

He grimaced. “Calling morgues? There must be about a million of them in Chicagoland. Isn’t there anything else I could do?”

“Welcome to the glamorous world of private investigation. You want to help or not?”

“Okay, okay,” Billy said. “My car’s a block over. I’ll get back to you as soon as I’m done making calls.”

“All right. I’ll probably be at my place, but if not you know the drill.”

Billy nodded. “Be careful.” Then he walked quickly down the street without looking back.

I fumbled my keys out and walked to the Beetle.

I didn’t smell the blood until I was close enough to touch the car. Through the window I saw a form, more or less human-shaped, curled up on my passenger seat. I circled cautiously to the other side of the car, then abruptly opened the door.

Elaine fell out of the car onto the pavement of the parking lot. She was drenched in blood that had soaked through her T-shirt, matted her golden-

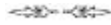
brown hair on one side, and run down her flanks to saturate her jeans to mid thigh. Her silver pentacle shone with liquid scarlet. The bare skin of her forearms was covered with long slashes and blood, and her face looked white. Dead.

My heart hammered in my chest, and I leaned down to her, fumbling at her throat. She still had a very slow pulse, but her skin felt cool and waxy. She started shuddering and whispered, “Harry?”

“I’m here. I’m here, Elaine.”

“Please,” she whispered. “Oh, God, please help me.”

Chapter Seventeen



I laid Elaine out, first thing, and tried to determine the extent of her injuries. Her forearms had been laced open in several places, but the worst injury was on her back, just inside of her left clavicle—a nasty puncture wound. The edges of it had puckered closed, but it hadn’t stopped the bleeding completely, and if she was bleeding internally she could be done for.

I would need both hands to put pressure on the wound. No help was on the way. There was little I could do for her, so I picked her up and put her back into the Beetle, then jumped in myself and started the ignition.

“Hang in there, Elaine,” I said. “I’m getting you to a hospital. You’re going to be all right.”

She shook her head. “No. No, too dangerous.”

“You’re hurt too badly for me to take care of it,” I said. “Relax. I’ll be with you.”

She opened her eyes and said with sudden, surprising insistence, “No hospitals. They’ll find me there.”

I started up the car. “Dammit, Elaine. What else am I supposed to do?”

She closed her eyes again. Her voice grew fainter by the word. “Aurora. Summer. Rothchild Hotel. There’s an elevator in back. She’ll help.”

“The Summer Lady?” I demanded. “You’re joking, right?”

She didn’t answer me. I looked over at her, and my heart all but stopped as I saw her head lolling, her body slumped. I jammed the Beetle into gear and jounced out onto the road.

“Rothchild Hotel,” I muttered. “More faeries. Keen.”

I got us to the hotel, one of the nice places along the shores of Lake Michigan. I skipped the huge valet-littered front drive and zipped the Beetle into the back parking lot, looking for some kind of service drive, or freight elevator, or maybe just a door with a sign on it that said,SUMMER COURT OF THE FAERIES THIS WAY.

I felt a slight warmth on my ear, and then Elidee zoomed out in front of my face and bumped up against the window. I rolled the window down a bit, and the tiny faerie streaked out ahead of my car, guiding me to the back

of the lot. She stopped, circling an unobtrusive, unlit breezeway. Then she sped away, her task evidently completed.

I quickly parked the car and set the brake. Elaine may have been slender, but she had too much muscle to be light. She'd always had the build of a long-distance runner, long and lean and strong. She was only just conscious enough to make it a little easier for me to carry her, wrapping her arms around my neck and leaning her head on my shoulder. She trembled and felt cold. Doubt gnawed at me as I took her down the breezeway. Maybe I should have ignored her and gone to the hospital.

I kept going until it became too dark to see, and I started to put Elaine down so that I could take out my amulet to make some light. Just as I did, a pair of elevator doors swept open, spilling light and canned music onto the breezeway.

A girl stood in the doors. She was five nothing, a hundred and nothing, her sunny hair pulled back into a braid. She wore a blue T-shirt with white painter's overalls, and she was liberally splattered with flecks of what looked like clay. Her rosy mouth opened in dismay as she saw me standing there with Elaine.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. She beckoned me urgently. "Come on, get her inside. The Lady can see to her."

My arms and shoulders had begun to burn with the effort of supporting Elaine, so I didn't waste time talking. I shuffled forward into the elevator and leaned against the back wall with a wheeze. The girl closed the elevator doors, took a key from her overalls pocket, and inserted it into a solitary keyhole where you would expect a bunch of buttons to be. The elevator gave a little lurch and started up.

"What happened to Ela?" the girl asked me. She looked from me to Elaine and chewed on one lip.

Ela? "Beats me. I found her like this in my car. She told me to bring her here."

"Oh. Oh, God," the girl said. She looked at me again. "You're with Winter, aren't you?"

I frowned. "How did you know?"

She shrugged. "It shows."

"I'm with Winter for now. But it's a one-shot deal. Think of me as a free agent."

“Perhaps. But an agent of Winter all the same. Are you sure you want to be here?”

“No,” I said. “But I’m sure I’m not leaving Elaine until I’m convinced she’s in good hands.”

The girl frowned. “Oh.”

“Can’t this thing go any faster?” My shoulders burned, my back ached, my bruises were complaining, and I could feel Elaine’s breathing growing weaker. I had to fight not to scream in sheer frustration. I wished there had been a bank of buttons to push, just so that I could have slammed the right button a bunch of times in a senseless effort to speed up the elevator.

The doors opened a geological epoch later, onto a scene as incongruous as a gorilla in a garter belt.

The elevator had taken us to what could only have been the roof of the hotel, assuming the roof opened up onto a section of rain forest in Borneo. Trees and greenery grew so thick that I couldn’t see the edge of the roof, and though I could hear the nighttime noises of Chicago, the sounds were vague in the distance and could almost not be heard over the buzz of locusts and the chittering of some kind of animal I did not recognize. Wind rustled the forest around me, and silver moonlight, brighter than I would have thought possible, gave everything an eerie, surreal beauty.

“I’m so glad I was going out for more clay just then. This way,” the girl said, and started off on a trail through the forest. I followed as quickly as I could, puffing hard to keep holding Elaine. It wasn’t a long walk. The trail wound back and forth and then opened onto a grassy glade.

I stopped and looked around. No, not a glade. More like a garden. A pool rested at its center, still water reflecting the moon overhead. Benches and stones of a good size for sitting on were strewn around the landscape. Statuary, most of it marble and of human subjects, stood here and there, often framed by flowers or placed between young trees. On the far side of the pool stood what at first glance I took to be a gnarled tree. It wasn’t. It was a throne, a throne of living wood, its trunk grown into the correct shape, branches and leaves spreading above it in stately elegance, roots spreading and anchoring it in the earth.

People stood here and there. A paint-spattered young man worked furiously on some sort of portrait, his face set in concentration. A tall man, his ageless beauty and pale hair marking him as one of the Sidhe, stood in the posture of a teacher beside a slender girl, who was drawing back a bow,

aiming at a target of bundled branches. On the far side of the glade, smoke rose from stones piled into the shape of an oven or a forge, and a broad-chested man, shirtless, bearded, heavy-browed and fierce-looking, stood on the other side of it, wielding a smith's hammer in regular rhythm. He stepped away from the forge, a glowing-hot blade gripped in a set of tongs, and dunked it into a trough of silvery water.

When I got a better look at him, I understood what he was. Steam rose in a cloud over his heavy, equine forelegs, then over his human belly and broad chest, and the centaur stamped a rear hoof impatiently, muttering under his breath, while colored lights played back and forth in the water of the trough. Haunting pipe music, sad and lovely, drifted through the glade from a young woman, mortal, sitting with a set of reed pipes, playing with her eyes closed.

"Where is she?" I demanded. "Where is the Lady?"

The centaur's head snapped around, and he snarled in a sudden, harsh basso. He took up his hammer again, whipped it in a quick circle, and started toward me at a slow canter, Clydesdale-sized hooves striking the ground with dull thumps. "Winterbound? Here? It cannot be borne."

I tensed, holding Elaine a little closer, and my heart lurched into a higher gear. The centaur was huge and looked ready to kill. "Whoa, there, big fella. I'm not looking for trouble."

The centaur bared his teeth at me and spoke, his deep voice filled with outrage. "There you stand with our Emissary's blood on your hands and expect us to believe you?"

The tall Sidhe man barked, "Korrick, hold."

The centaur drew up short, rearing onto his hind legs and kicking at the air with heavy hooves. "My lord Talos," he growled in frustration. "This arrogance cannot be tolerated."

"Peace," the Sidhe lord said.

"But mylord —"

The Sidhe lord stepped between me and the centaur, his back to me. He wore close-fit trousers of dark green and a loose shirt of white linen. The Sidhe lord said nothing, and I couldn't see his expression, but the centaur's face reddened, then blanched. He bowed his head, a stiff gesture, and then walked back over to his forge, hooves striking the ground in sharp, angry motions.

The Sidhe—Tallos, I presumed—turned back to me and regarded me with calm, feline eyes the color of a summer sky. He had the pale hair of the Sidhe, hanging in a straight, fine sheet to brush his shoulders. There was a quality of quiet confidence in his features, of relaxed strength, and the sense of him was somehow less alien than that of most of the Sidhe I had encountered. “I hope you will not judge Korrick too harshly, sir. You are, I take it, Harry Dresden?”

“If I’m not, he’s going to be upset with me when he catches me running around in his underpants.”

Tallos smiled. The expression came easily to his features. “Then I grant you passport and license in agreement with the Accords. I am Tallos, Lord Marshal of the Summer Court.”

“Yeah, that’s great, nice to meet you,” I said. “Hey, do you think you could help me save this woman’s *life* now?”

The Sidhe’s smile faded. “I will do what I can.” He glanced to the side and gestured with a roll of his wrist.

The garden flew into activity. A cloud of pixies darted through the air, bearing stalks of green plants and broad, soft leaves. They piled them into a soft-looking mound near the side of the pool. Tallos looked at me for permission and then gently took Elaine’s weight into his arms. My shoulders and biceps all but screamed in relief. The Sidhe lord carried Elaine to the bed of leaves and laid her down upon it. He touched her throat and then her brow with one hand, his eyes closing.

“Weak,” he said quietly. “And cold. But she has strength left in her. She will be all right for a little while.”

“No offense, but your people have some odd notions about time. Go get your Lady. She needs to see to Elaine now.”

Tallos regarded me with that same quiet, opaque expression. “She will be here when she will be here. I cannot hurry the sunrise, nor the Lady.”

I started to tell him where he could stick his sunrise, but I bit back the words and tried to take out some frustration by clenching my fists. My knuckles popped.

A hand touched my arm, and the girl, the sculptor from the elevator, said, “Please, sir. Let me get you something to drink, or some food. Mortal food, I mean. I wouldn’t offer the other kind.”

“Like hell,” I said. “Not until Elaine is taken care of.”

From where he knelt beside Elaine, Talos lifted both eyebrows, but he shrugged his shoulders. "As you wish." He rested his fingertips lightly on either side of her face and bowed his head. "My skills are rather limited. I can at least assure that she loses no ground."

There was a quiet surge of energy, something as gentle and strong as the weight of a wave lifting you off your feet. Elaine suddenly took a deep breath, and color came back into her cheeks. She blinked her eyes open for a moment, then sighed and closed them again.

"Talos can sustain her for a time," the girl said. "Until the Lady decides. He has been Ela's guardian and friend for several years." She tugged at my arm. "Please, take something to eat. You'll make us poor hosts if you do not."

My stomach growled again, and my throat started to complain after all the hard breathing I'd been doing. I exhaled through my nose and nodded to the girl, who led me to one of the benches not far away and pulled a plastic Coleman cooler from underneath it. She rummaged inside, then tossed me a cold can of Coke, a small bag of potato chips, and a long hoagie. None of them held any of the subtle, quivering lure of faerie fare.

"Best I can do for now," she said. "Turkey sub sound all right?"

"Marry me," I responded, tore into the food with fervor, and spent a couple of minutes indulging in one of the purest primal pleasures. Eating. Food never tastes so good as when you are starving, and Talos had granted me safe passport under the Accords, so I wasn't worried about any drugs in it.

While I ate, the girl drew a short stand over to her, on which was a clay bust of a young woman, parts of it still rough, still marked with the tracks of her fingers. She dipped them into a bowl of water attached to the stand and started working on the bust.

"What happened to her?" she asked.

"Hell if I know," I said between bites. "She was in my car like that. Wanted me to bring her here."

"Why did you?" She flushed. "I mean, you're working for Summer's enemies. Right?"

"Yeah. But it doesn't mean I'm friendly with them." I shook my head, washed down a half-chewed bite with a long drink of Coke. Heaven. I ate for a moment more and then frowned at the bust she was working on. The face seemed familiar. I studied it a bit, then asked, "Is that Lily?"

The girl blinked at me. "You know her?"

"Of her," I said. "She's a changeling, isn't she?"

The girl nodded. "Winter, but she hasn't chosen to go over to them. She was under Ronald's protection, and she models for us sometimes." She gestured vaguely toward the young man who was painting intently. "See, there are a few other pieces she modeled for around here."

I looked around the garden and picked out a pair of statues among all the rest. Both were nudes of white marble. One of them depicted the girl in a tiptoe stretch, arms over her head, body arched prettily. The other showed her kneeling, looking at something cupped in her hands, her expression one of quiet sadness. "Seems like she's well liked."

The girl nodded. "She's very gentle, very sweet."

"Very missing," I said.

She frowned. "Missing?"

"Yeah. Her roommate asked me to see if I could find her. Have you seen her in the past couple of days?"

"She hasn't been here to model, and I've never seen her anywhere but here. I'm sorry."

"Worth a shot," I said.

"Why are you looking for her?"

"I told you. Her roommate asked for my help. I gave it." Which was mostly true. Technically, I suppose, I'd sold it. I got the uneasy feeling that I might start feeling too guilty over the cash Meryl had given me to spend it. "I'm a tad busy this week, but I'll do what I can."

The girl's brow furrowed as she worked at the bust. "You're not like anyone else I've ever met who was working for Winter. Mab usually likes her agents . . . colder, I think. Hungrier. More cruel."

I shrugged. "She wanted someone to find a killer. I've had some experience."

She nodded. "Still, you seem like a decent enough person. It makes me sad to think that you've gotten entangled in Winter's snares."

I stopped chewing and looked up at her, hard. "Oh, Hell's bells."

She looked at me and lifted an eyebrow. "Hmm?"

I put the sandwich down and said, "You're her. You're the Summer Lady."

The shadow of a smile touched the girl's lips, and she bowed her head toward me. Her blond hair cleared out to Sidhe white, her fingers and limbs

suddenly seemed slightly longer, and her features became almost identical to Maeve's, eyes vertically slitted and almost violently green. She still wore the coveralls and blue T-shirt, and was still liberally covered in flecks of clay, though. They stood out in sharp contrast to her fair skin and pale hair.

"Call me Aurora," she said. "It's a little easier for everyone."

"Uh, right," I said. I finished the bite I was on and said, "So are you going to stop playing games with me and help Elaine, Aurora?"

She glanced over at Elaine, lying on the ground, and her expression grew troubled. "That depends."

My teeth clenched, and I said in a falsely pleasant voice, "On what?"

She turned her calm, inhuman eyes to me. "On you."

"Don't go getting specific on me, now," I said. "I wouldn't know how to handle it."

"Do you think this is a joke, Mr. Dresden? A game?"

"I know damn well it isn't a game."

She shook her head. "And that is where you are wrong. It is a game, but unlike the ones you know. You aren't allowed to know the rules to this game, and it was never intended to be fair. Do you know why Mab chose you, wizard?"

I glared at her. "No."

"Neither do I," she said. "And that is my part of the game. Why choose you? It must be because she expects something of you that she would get from no one else. Perhaps bringing Ela here is what she expected."

"What's the difference?" I demanded. "Elaine is hurt. Your Emissary has been wounded in the line of duty. Don't you think you should get her moving again?"

"But if that is what Winter expects, it could be used against me. I am the least Queen of Summer, but even so I must be cautious in the use of my power."

I snorted. "Maeve sure as hell doesn't think that way."

"Of course not," she said. "She's Winter. She's violent, vicious, merciless."

"And your centaur is just the soul of gentleness and understanding."

Aurora sighed and lowered her clay-crusted fingers. "I hope you will forgive Korrick's temper. He is usually a merrier sort. Everyone's been edgy because of matters here."

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Just so we’re clear, that was really mortal food, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said. “I have no desire to threaten your freedom, Mister Dresden, or to bind you in any way.”

“Good.” I knew she couldn’t lie to me, so I took another bite of the sandwich and some more chips. “Look, I’m not here to try to undermine your power or sabotage Summer, Aurora. I just want you to help Elaine.”

“I know,” she said. “I believe you. But I don’t trust you.”

“What reason do you have not to trust me?”

“I’ve watched you,” she responded. “You’re a mercenary. You work for hire.”

“Yeah. To pay the bills and—”

She lifted a hand. “You’ve made bargains with demons.”

“Nickel-and-dime stuff, nothing huge or—”

“You traded yourself to the Leanansidhe for power.”

“When I was younger, and a hell of a lot stupider, and in trouble—”

Her inhuman eyes met mine, penetrating. “You’ve *killed*.”

I looked away from her. There wasn’t much to say to that. My stomach turned, and I pushed the food a bit away from me.

Aurora nodded, slowly. “From the beginning, you have been meant to be a destroyer. A killer. Do you know the original purpose of a godparent, Mr. Dresden?”

“Yeah,” I said. I felt tired. “A godparent was chosen to ensure that a child had religious and moral guidance and teaching.”

“Indeed,” she said. “And your godmother, your teacher and guide, is the most vicious creature of Mab’s Court, more than Maeve’s equal, second in strength only to Mab herself.”

I let out a harsh laugh. “Teacher? Guide? Is that what you think Lea is to me?”

“Isn’t she?”

“Lea barely noticed me except when she thought she could get something from me,” I spat. “The rest of the time she couldn’t care less. The only thing she taught me was that if I didn’t want to get walked on I had to be smarter than her, stronger than her, and willing to do something about it.”

Aurora turned her lovely face fully toward me and regarded me with deep, quiet eyes. “Yes.” Unease gnawed at my belly as she continued. “The strong conquer and the weak are conquered. That is Winter. That is what

you have learned.” She leaned closer and said, quietly emphatic, “That is what makes you dangerous. Do you see?”

I stood up and walked a few paces away. Aurora didn’t say anything. I heard drips of water as she washed her hands in the little bowl.

“If you aren’t going to help Elaine, tell me. I’ll take her to the hospital.”

“Do you think I should help her?”

“I don’t give a damn if you do or not,” I said. “But one way or another I’m going to make sure she’s taken care of. Make up your mind.”

“I already have. What remains is for you to make up yours.”

I took a wary breath before asking, “Meaning?”

“Of the two people who entered this garden, Mister Dresden, Elaine is not the most grievously wounded. You are.”

“Like hell. I’ve just got some cuts and bruises.”

She rose and walked toward me. “Those aren’t the wounds I mean.” She reached out and laid a slender hand over my heart. Her skin was warm, even through my shirt, and the simple fact of her touch brought me a small but noticeable sense of comfort. Susan had been gone for months, and with the exception of the occasional assault, no one had actually touched me.

She looked up at me and nodded. “You see. You’ve been badly wounded, Mister Dresden, and you have found neither rest nor respite from your pains.”

“I’ll live.”

“True,” she said. “But this is where it always begins. Monsters are born of pain and grief and loss and anger. Your heart is full of them.”

I shrugged. “And?”

“And it makes you vulnerable. Vulnerable to Mab’s influence, to temptations that would normally be unthinkable.”

“I’m handling temptation pretty damned well, thank you.”

“But for how long? You need to *heal*, wizard. Let me help you.”

I frowned at her, and at her hand. “How?”

Aurora gave me a small, sad smile. “I’ll show you. Here.”

Her palm pressed a bit closer to me, and somewhere inside me a dam broke open. Emotions welled up like a riotous rainbow. Scarlet rage, indigo fear, pale blue sadness, aching yellow loneliness, putrid green guilt. The tide flooded through me, coursed over me like a bolt of lightning, searing and painful and beautiful all at once.

And after the tide receded, a deep, quiet stillness followed. A sensation of warmth suffused me, gently easing away my aches and bruises. It spread over my skin, like sunlight on a lazy afternoon outside, and with the warmth my cares began to evaporate. My fear vanished, and I began to relax muscles I hadn't realized were stretched tight as the warmth spread. I floated in warmth for a time, the release from pain an ecstasy in itself.

When I came back to my senses, I was lying on my back on the grass, staring up at leaves and silver-starred sky. My head lay in Aurora's lap. She knelt behind me, and her hands rested lightly, warm and soft, along the sides of my face. The pain began to return to my body, thoughts, and heart, like some quiet and odious tide washing in garbage from a polluted sea. I heard myself make a small sound of protest.

Aurora looked down at me, her eyes concerned. "Worse even than I suspected. You didn't even realize how much pain you were in, did you?"

My chest heaved and I let out a quiet sob. The warmth faded entirely, and the sheer weight of the difficulties I had to face pressed down on me, suffocating me.

Aurora said, "Please, let me help you. We'll make it a bargain, Mr. Dresden. Desist. Relax your efforts to help Winter. Stay here for a time and let me grant you a measure of peace."

Real tears formed, making my vision blur. I mopped at my face with my hands, struggling to think clearly. If I took the deal, it would probably mean my ass. Backing off from Mab's offer would mean that I didn't get a good outcome for the White Council, which meant that they would buy peace with the Red Court of Vampires for the low, low price of one Harry Dresden, slightly damaged.

"Forget it," I said, my voice weak. "I've got a job to do."

Aurora closed her eyes for a moment and nodded. "At least you are true to your word, Mister Dresden. Your honor is admirable. Even if it is misguided."

I forced myself to sit up, away from Aurora. "Go on," I said. "Help Elaine."

"I will," she assured me. "But she is in no danger for the moment, and it will take me some time. There is something I wish to say to you first."

"Okay. Talk."

"How much did Mab tell you about Ronald's death?"

I shook my head. "That he was dead. That the mantle of power he wore went missing. That the killer had to be found."

"Did she tell you why?"

I frowned. "Not exactly."

Aurora nodded and folded her hands in her lap. "Summer readies to go to war against Winter."

I frowned. "You mean it's not just a theoretical possibility anymore. It's real."

"I know no other kind of war. The loss of the Summer Knight has forced Summer's hand."

"I'm not sure I follow."

Her pale brow knit into a soft frown. "The power of our Knights is considerable. It carries a sort of weight that only a free mortal will can possess. That power, that influence, is a critical element of the balance between our Courts."

"Except now yours is gone."

"Exactly."

"Which makes Summer weaker."

"Yes."

I nodded. "Then why the hell are you planning an attack?"

"The seasons are changing," Aurora said. "In two days' time, Midsummer will be upon us. The height of Summer's strength."

She said nothing more, letting me do the math. "You think Winter has taken away your Knight," I said. "And if you wait, you're only going to grow more and more weak, while Winter gets stronger. Right?"

"Correct. If we are to have any chance of victory, we must strike while at the peak of our strength. It will be the only time when our Court might be near equal to Winter's strength. Otherwise, the seasons will change, and at Midwinter Mab and her creatures will come for us. And they *will* destroy us, and with us the balances of the mortal world." She lifted her green eyes from her hands to my face. "Winter, Mister Dresden. Endless Winter. Unending and vicious cycles of predator and prey. Such a world would not be kind to mortals."

I shook my head. "Why would Winter pull this now? I mean, if they had waited another couple of days, they could have held all the cards. Why leave you enough space to wriggle out?"

“I cannot even pretend to know the mind of Winter,” Aurora said. “But I know that they must not be allowed to destroy us. For your sake as well as ours.”

“Boy, everybody’s looking out for my best interests.”

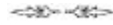
“Wizard, please. Promise me that you will do what you can to stop them.”

“I’m finished making promises.” I stood up and started for the path that led back to the elevator and out, but part of me wanted to do nothing but return to the comfort Aurora had offered. I paused and squeezed my eyes shut, focusing my resolve. “But I will say this. I’m going to find the killer and straighten this out, and I’m going to do it before Midsummer.”

I didn’t bother to add, “Because I’m as good as dead if I don’t.”

No need to belabor the obvious.

Chapter Eighteen



I got the hell away from the Rothchild and found a pay phone. Murphy picked up on the first ring. “Dresden?”

“Yeah.”

“Finally. You all right?”

“I need to talk to you.”

There was a short pause, then her voice softened. “Where?”

I rubbed at my head with the heel of one hand, trying to nudge my brain into gear. My thoughts stumbled around sluggishly and in no particular order. “Dunno. Someplace public, bunch of people, quiet enough to talk.”

“In Chicago. At this time of night.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” Murph said. “I guess I know a place.” She told me, we agreed to meet in twenty minutes, and hung up.

As I pulled into the parking lot, I reflected that odds were that not a lot of clandestine meetings involving mystical assassination, theft of arcane power, and the balance of power in the realms of the supernatural had taken place in a Wal-Mart Super Center. But then again, maybe they had. Hell, for all I knew, the Mole Men used the changing rooms as a place to discuss plans for world domination with the Psychic Jellyfish from Planet X and the Disembodied Brains-in-a-Jar from the Klaatu Nebula. I know I wouldn’t have looked for them there.

After midnight the Wal-Mart wasn’t crowded, but it wasn’t the usual deserted parking lot you’d expect after hours around Wrigleyville, either. The store was open all night, and there were plenty of people in a town like Chicago who would do their shopping late. I had to park about halfway down a row and walk through the cool of the evening before stepping into the refrigerator-cold of the enormous store, whose massive air conditioners had too much momentum to slow down for a few paltry hours of darkness.

A greeter nodded sleepily to me as I came in, and I passed up his offer of a shopping cart. Before I’d gotten all the way into the store, Murphy fell into step beside me. She was wearing a Cubs jacket, jeans, and sneakers, and she had her blond hair tucked up underneath an undecorated black ball cap. She walked with her hands in her pockets, and her expression, one of

belligerent annoyance, didn't seem to fit on someone that short. Wordlessly, we walked past all the little hole-in-the-wall franchise businesses, closed and locked up behind their grills, and settled down at the generic cafe near the deli section of the grocery store.

Murphy chose a booth where she could watch the door, and I sat across from her, where I could watch her back. She picked up a couple of cups of coffee, bless her noble heart. I dumped sugar and creamer into mine until bits floated on the surface, stirred it up, and took a slow sip that nearly scalded my tongue.

"You don't look so good," Murphy said.

I nodded.

"You want to talk about it?"

To my own surprise, I did. I set the coffee down and said without preamble, "I'm furious, Murph. I can't think straight, I'm so mad."

"Why?"

"Because I'm screwed. That's why. No matter what I do, I'm going to take it up the ass."

Lines appeared between her eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"It's this job," I said. "Investigating Reuel's death. There's a lot of resistance and I don't know if I can beat it. And if I don't beat it before tomorrow night, things are really going to go to hell."

"The client isn't being helpful?"

I let out a bitter laugh. "Hell, for all I know the client is doing this to me just so I can get myself horribly killed."

"You don't trust them, then."

"Not as far as I could kick her. And the people who are supposed to be working with me are driving me nuts." I shook my head. "I feel like some guy in a magician's box, just before he starts pushing all those swords through it. Only it's not a trick, and the swords are real, and they're going to start skewering me any second. The bad guys are doing their best to get me wiped out or screwed up. The good guys think I'm some kind of ticking psycho, just waiting to go off, and it's like pulling teeth to try to get a straight answer out of any of them."

"You think you're in danger."

"I know it," I said. "And it's just too damned big." I fell quiet for a moment, and sipped my coffee.

"So," Murph said. "Why did you want to see me?"

“Because the people who should be backing me up are about to throw me to the wolves. And because the only person actually helping me is green enough to get himself killed without a baby-sitter.” I set the empty cup down. “And because when I asked myself who I could trust, I came up with a damned short list. You’re it.”

She settled back in her seat with a slow, long exhalation. “You’re going to tell me what’s going on?”

“If you’re willing,” I said. “I know I’ve kept things from you. But I’ve done it because I thought it was how I could protect you best. Because I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I know. It’s annoying as hell.”

I tried to smile. “In this case, ignorance is bliss. If I tell you this stuff, it’s going to be serious. Just knowing it could be dangerous for you. And you aren’t going to be able to get away from it, Murph. Not ever.”

She regarded me soberly. “Then why tell me now?”

“Because you deserve to know, long since. Because you’ve risked your life for me, and to protect people from all the supernatural crud that’s out there. Because being around me has bought you trouble, and knowing more about it might help you if it comes your way again.” My cheeks flushed, and I admitted, “And because I need your help. This is a bad one. I’m afraid.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Harry.”

I gave her a tired smile. “One last thing. If you come in on this, you have to understand something. You have to promise me that you won’t haul SI and the rest of the police in on everything. You can dig up information, use them discretely, but you can’t round up a posse and go gunning for demons.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why the hell not?”

“Because bringing mortal authorities into a conflict is the nuclear assault of the supernatural world. No one wants to see it happen, and if they thought you might do it, they’d kill you. Or they’d pull strings higher up and get you fired, or framed for something. They would never allow it to pass. You’d get yourself ruined or hurt or killed and it’s likely a lot of people would go down with you.” I paused to let the words sink in, then asked, “Still want me to tell you?”

She closed her eyes for a moment and then nodded, once. “Hit me.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

“All right,” I said. And I told Murphy all of it. It took a while. I told her about Justin and about Elaine. I told her about the supernatural forces and politics at play in and around the city. I told her about the war I’d started because of what the Red Court had done to Susan. I told her about the faeries and Reuel’s murder.

And most of all, I told her about the White Council.

“Those spineless, arrogant, egomaniacal sons of bitches,” Murphy growled. “Who the hell do they think they are, selling out their own people like that?”

Some silent, delighted part of me let out a mental cheer at her reaction.

She made a disgusted noise and shook her head. “So let me get this straight,” she said. “You started a war between the Council and the Red Court. The Council needs the support of the faeries in order to have a chance at victory. But they can’t get that support unless you find this killer and restore the stolen magical power thingie—”

“Mantle,” I interjected.

“Whatever,” Murphy said. “And if you don’t get the magic whatsit, the Council fixes you up in a carryout box for the vampires.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“And if you don’t find the killer before Midsummer, the faeries slug it out with each other.”

“Which could be bad no matter who won. It would make El Niño look as mild as an early spring thaw.”

“And you want my help.”

“You’ve worked homicide before. You’re better at it than me.”

“That goes without saying,” she said, a trace of a smile on her mouth. “Look, Harry. If you want to find out who did the killing, the best way to start is to figure out why.”

“Why what?”

“Why the murder. Why Reuel got bumped off.”

“Oh, right,” I said.

“And why would someone try to take you out in the park yesterday?”

“It could have been almost anyone,” I said. “It wasn’t like it was a brilliant attempt, as far as they go.”

“Wrong,” Murphy said. “Not neat, but not stupid either. After you called earlier tonight, I snooped around.”

I frowned at her. "You found something?"

"Yeah. Turns out that there have been two armed robberies in the past three days, first outside of Cleveland and then at a gas station just this side of Indianapolis, coming toward Chicago."

"That doesn't sound out of the ordinary."

"No," Murphy said. "Not unless you throw in that in both cases, someone was grabbed at the scene and abducted, and both times the video security broke down just as the robbery started. Eyewitnesses in Indiana identified the perpetrator as a woman."

I whistled. "Sounds like our ghoul, then."

Murphy nodded, her lips pressed together. "Any chance those people she grabbed are alive?"

I shook my head. "Not likely. She probably ate them. A ghoul can go through forty or fifty pounds of meat a day. She'll put whatever's left someplace where animals can get to it, cover her tracks."

She nodded. "I figured. The pattern matches several incidents over the past twenty years. It took me a while to piece it together, but something similar has happened three times in connection with the operations of a contract killer who calls herself the Tigress. A friend at the FBI told me that they suspect her of a number of killings in the New Orleans area and that Interpol thinks she's pulled jobs in Europe and Africa, too."

"Hired gun," I said. "So who did the hiring?"

"From what you've said, my money's on the vampires. They're the ones who benefit most from you being dead. If they punch your ticket, the Council will probably sue for peace, right?"

"Maybe," I said, but I doubted it. "If that's what they had in mind, it's stupid timing. They Pearl-Harbored a bunch of wizards somewhere in Russia two nights ago, and the Council was pretty angry about it."

"Okay. So maybe they figure that if your investigation finds Reuel's killer and gets the Council brownie points with the faeries, they're in for a real fight. Killing you before that happens makes sense."

"Except that when it went down, I wasn't involved in the investigation yet."

Murphy shook her head. "I wish we could get you together with a sketch artist, describe her."

"Doubt it would help much. She was in makeup at first, and I didn't give her a second look. By the time I was paying attention, she mostly looked

like something out of a Japanese horror cartoon.”

She glanced down at her now cold coffee. “Not much we can do but wait, then. I’ve got a couple of sources trying to turn up more, but I wouldn’t bet anything on them. I’ll let you know.”

I nodded. “Even if we find her, it might not help with the faerie stuff.”

“Right,” she said. “Mind if I ask you a few questions? Maybe I’ll see something you don’t.”

“Okay.”

“This dreadlock chick. Maeve, you said her name was?”

“Yeah.”

“How sure are you in your instinct about her? That she couldn’t have done the murder, I mean.”

“Pretty close to certain.”

“But not completely.”

I frowned thoughtfully. “No. Faeries are tricky that way. Not completely.”

Murphy nodded. “What about Mab?”

I rubbed at my chin, feeling the beginnings of stubble. “She never out and out denied responsibility for Reuel’s death, but I don’t think she’s the killer.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do. She could have picked anyone she wanted to represent her interests, and she chose you. If she wanted to cover her tracks, it would make more sense for her to choose someone less capable and with less experience. She wouldn’t have picked someone as stupidly stubborn as you.”

I scowled. “Not stupidly,” I said. “I just don’t like to leave things undone.”

Murphy snorted. “You don’t know the meaning of ‘give up,’ dolt. You see my point.”

“Yeah. I guess it’s reasonable.”

“So what about this Summer girl?”

I blew out a breath. “It doesn’t seem to hang on her very well. She was kinder than any faerie I ever met. She could have been pretty darned unpleasant to me, but she wasn’t.”

“How about the other mortal, then? The Winter Knight.”

“He’s a violent, vicious heroin addict. I could see him tossing Reuel down those stairs, sure. But I’m not sure he’s savvy enough to have worked enough magic to steal the mantle. He was more of a plunder-now-and-think-later sort of guy.” I shook my head. “I’ve got three more faeries to talk to, though.”

“Summer Queen and both Mothers,” Murphy nodded. “When will you see them?”

“As soon as I can work out how. The Ladies are the closest to the mortal world. They aren’t hard to find. The Queens and the Mothers, though, will live in Faerie proper. I’ll have to go there to find a guide.”

Murphy lifted her eyebrows. “A guide?”

I grimaced. “Yeah. I don’t want to, but it’s looking like I’m going to have to pay my godmother a visit.”

Murphy quirked an eyebrow. “Seriously? You have a faerie godmother?”

“Long story,” I said. “Okay, I want to get moving. If you could—”

The store lights went out, all at once.

My heart all but stopped. A second later, battery-powered emergency lights came up and revealed a roiling cloud of silver-grey mist spreading into the store from the doors. The mist rolled over a startled cashier, and the woman slumped, her mouth slightly open and her eyes unfocused, staring.

“Good Lord,” Murphy said softly. “Harry, what’s happening?”

I had already gotten out of the booth and grabbed the salt shaker from our table, and the one next to it. “Trouble. Come with me.”

Chapter Nineteen



At first I tried to circle around to the exit doors, but the mist proved to be flowing in through them as well. “Curse it! We can’t get out that way.”

Murphy’s face went more pale as a young man flung himself at the exit doors. The moment he hit the mist, his running steps faltered. He came to a halt, a puzzled expression on his face, and stared around him blankly, as his shoulders slumped.

“Dear God,” she whispered. “Harry, what is that?”

“Come on, to the back of the store,” I said, and started running that way. “I think it’s a mind fog.”

“You think?”

I scowled over my shoulder at Murphy. “I’ve never seen one before, just heard about them. They shut down your head, flatline your ability to remember things, scramble your thoughts. They’re illegal.”

“Illegal?” Murphy yelled. “Says who?”

“Says the Laws of Magic,” I muttered.

“You didn’t say anything about any Laws of Magic,” Murphy said.

“If we get out of here alive, I’ll explain it to you sometime.” We ran down a long aisle toward the back of the store, passing housewares, then seasonal goods on our left, while grocery aisles stretched out on our right. Murphy stopped abruptly, broke open the covering over a fire alarm, and jerked it down.

I looked around hopefully, but nothing happened.

“Damn,” Murphy muttered.

“Worth a try. Look, the people in the fog should be all right once it’s gone, and whoever this is, they won’t have any reason to hurt them once we’re not around. We’ll get out the back door and get away from here.”

“Where are we going to go?”

“I don’t know,” I confessed, as I started moving again. “But anywhere is better than where the bad guys chose to attack and have their pick of a hundred hostages, right?”

“Okay,” Murphy said. “Getting out of here is good.”

“I bet the bad guys are counting on that, trying to flush us out into a dark alley. You carrying?”

Murphy was already drawing her gun from under her jacket, a well-used military-issue Colt 1911. “Are you kidding?”

I noticed that her hands were shaking. “New gun?”

“Old reliable,” she said. “You told me magic can jam a flaky gun.”

“Revolver would be even better.”

“Why don’t I just throw rocks and sharp sticks while I’m at it, Tex?”

“Auto bigot.” I spotted an EMPLOYEES ONLY sign. “There,” I said, and went that way. “Out the back.”

We headed for the swinging doors under the sign. I hit them first, shoving them open. A grey wall of mist lay in front of me and I leaned back, trying to stumble to a halt. If I let myself touch the mist, I might not have enough of my wits left to regret it. I stumbled a foot short of it and almost fell forward, but Murphy grabbed my shirt and jerked me sharply back.

We both backed out into the store. “Can’t get out that way,” Murphy said. “Maybe they don’t want to herd you anywhere. Maybe they just want to gas you and kill you while you’re down.”

I swept my gaze around the store. Cold grey mist rolled forward, slow and steady, in every direction. “Looks like,” I said. I nodded down a tall, narrow aisle containing auto parts. “Down there, quick.”

“What’s down here?” Murphy asked.

“Cover. I have to get us a defense against that mist.” We reached the open space at the end of the aisle, and I nodded to Murphy. “Here, stop here and stand close to me.”

She did it, but I could still see her shaking as she asked, “Why?”

I looked up. The mist had reached the far end of the aisle and was gliding slowly down it. “I’m going to put up a circle that should keep it off us. Don’t step out of it or let any part of you cross outside.”

Murphy’s voice took on a higher, more tense pitch. “Harry, it’s coming.”

I twisted open both salt shakers and started pouring them out in a circle around us, maybe three feet across. As I finished the circle, I invested it with the slightest effort of will, of intent, and it closed with a sudden snap of silent, invisible energies. I stood up again, holding my breath, until the mist touched it a moment later.

It roiled up against the circle and stopped, as though a cylinder of Plexiglas stood between it and us. Murphy and I both let out our breath in

slow exhalations. “Wow,” she said quietly. “Is that like a force field or something?”

“Only against magical energies,” I said, squinting around us. “If someone comes along with a gun, we’re in trouble.”

“What do we do?”

“I think I can protect myself if I’m ready to do it,” I said. “But I need to set up a charm on you.”

“A what?”

“Charm, short-term magic.” I fumbled at my shirt until I found a frayed thread and started pulling it out. “I need a hair.”

Murphy gave me a suspicious frown, but she reached under her hat and unceremoniously jerked out several dark gold hairs. I plucked them up and twisted them together with the strand of thread. “Give me your left hand.”

She did. Her fingers shook so hard that I could feel it when I put my own around them. “Murph,” I said. She kept looking up and down the aisle, her eyes a little wild. “Karrin.”

She looked up at me. She looked very young, somehow.

“Remember what I said yesterday,” I said. “You’re hurt. But you’ll get through it. You’ll be okay.”

She closed her eyes tightly. “I’m scared. So scared I’m sick.”

“You’ll get through it.”

“What if I don’t?”

I squeezed her fingers. “Then I will personally make fun of you every day for the rest of your life,” I said. “I will call you a sissy girl in front of everyone you know, tie frilly aprons on your car, and lurk in the parking lot at CPD and whistle and tell you to shake it, baby. Every. Single. Day.”

Murphy’s breath escaped in something like a hiccup. She opened her eyes, a mix of anger and wary amusement easing into them in place of the fear. “You do realize I’m holding a gun, right?”

“You’re fine. Hold your hand still.” Though her fingers still trembled a little, the wild, panicked spasms had ceased. I wrapped the twist of hair and thread around her finger.

Murphy kept on peering through the mist, her gun steady. “What are you doing?”

“Enchantment like that mist is invasive,” I said. “It touches you, gets inside you. So I’m setting you up with a defense. Left side is the side that

takes in energy. I'm going to block that mist's spell from going into you. Tie a string around your finger so you won't forget."

I tied the string in an almost complete knot, so that it would need only a single tug to finish. Then I fumbled my penknife out of my pocket and pricked the pad of my right thumb. I looked up at Murphy, trying to clear my thoughts for the spell.

She regarded me, her face pale and uncertain. "I've never really seen you, you know. Do it. Before."

"It's okay," I told her. I met her eyes for a dangerous second. "I won't hurt you. I know what I'm doing."

She lifted the corner of her mouth in a quick smile that made her eyes sparkle. She nodded and returned to peering out through the mist.

I closed my eyes for a moment and then began gathering my focus for the spell. We were already within a circle, so it happened fast. The air tightened on my skin, and I felt the hairs along my arms rise as the power grew. "*Memoratum*," I murmured. I tied off the improvised string and touched the bead of blood on my thumb to the knot. "*Defendre memorarius*."

The energy rushed out of me and into the spell, wrapping tight around the string and pressing against Murphy. A wave of goose bumps rippled up her arm, and she drew in a sudden sharp breath. "Whoa."

I looked at her sharply. "Murph? You okay?"

She blinked down at her hand, and then up at me. "Wow. Yeah."

I nodded, and took my pentacle out of my shirt. I wrapped it around my left hand, leaving the five-pointed star lying against my knuckles. "Okay, we're pushing our luck enough. Let's hope this works and get the hell out of here."

"Wait, you don't know if it will work?"

"It should work. It ought to. In theory."

"Great. Would it be better to stay here?"

"Heh, that's a joke, right?"

Murphy nodded. "Okay. How will we know if it works?"

"We step outside the circle and if we don't drift into Lala Land," I said, "we'll know it worked."

She braced her charmed hand on the butt of her gun. "That's what I love about working with you, Dresden. The certainty."

I broke the circle with a shuffle of my foot and an effort of will. It scattered with a pressured sigh, and the grey mist slid forward and over us.

It glided over my skin like a cold and greasy oil, something foul and cloying and vaguely familiar that made me want to start brushing it off. It writhed up over my arms, prickles of distraction and disorientation crawling over my limbs. I focused on the pentacle on my left hand, the solid, cool weight of it, the years of discipline and practice that it represented. I pushed the clinging mist away from my sensations, deliberately excluded it from my perception by sheer determination. A ripple of azure static flickered along the chain of my amulet, flashed around the pentacle, then faded, taking with it the distraction of the mind fog.

Murphy glanced back at me and said, voice low, “You okay? You looked shaky for a second.”

I nodded. “I got it now. You okay?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t feel like anything.”

Damn, I’m good—sometimes. “Go. Out through the garden center.”

Murphy had the gun—she walked in front. I kept my eyes open on our flanks as she headed down an aisle. We passed a customer and an employee, down a side aisle, pressed against a wall where they’d apparently tried to avoid the mist. Now they stood with faintly puzzled expressions on their faces, eyes not focused. Another shopper, an old man, stood in an aisle, swaying precariously on his feet. I stopped beside him and said quietly, “Sir, here, sit down for a minute,” and helped him sit down before he fell.

We went past another slackly staring employee, her blue smock marked with dirt stains and smelling of fertilizer, and headed for the doors leading out to the garden center.

My memory screamed a sudden alarm at me, and I lurched forward, diving past Murphy and out into the mist-shrouded evening within the chain-link boundaries of the garden center. A hard, sudden weight hit me, driving my thighs and hips down to the floor. My head whiplashed against it a moment later, complete with a burst of phantom light and very real pain.

I rolled, as the employee we’d just passed reversed her grip on a wickedly sharp set of pruners and stabbed them down at me. I oozed to one side in a sluggish dodge. The steel tips of the tool tore through my shirt and

some of my skin before biting into the concrete. I kept rolling and kicked at the woman's ankles. She avoided me with a kind of liquid agility, and I looked up into the human face of the ghoulish assassin from the rain of toads. The Tigress.

She didn't look particularly pretty, or particularly exotic, or particularly anything. She looked like no one in particular—medium height, medium build, no flattering curves, no outrageous flaws, no nothing. Medium-brown hair, of unremarkable cut and length. She wore jeans, a polo top, the Wal-Mart smock, all very normal.

The gun she started drawing from under the smock commanded attention, though—a revolver, snub-nosed, but it moved with the kind of weight that made me think high-caliber. I started trying to pull a shield together, but the defense I'd been holding against the mist and the blow to my head tangled up the process, slowed me down—not much, but enough to get me really dead.

Murphy saved me. As the Tigress brought the gun to bear on me, Murphy closed with her, trapping the ghoulish gun arm with her own and doing something with her left hand as she twisted her body at the hips, her strong legs spread wide.

Murphy was a faithful practitioner of Aikido, and she knew about grappling. The Tigress let out a shriek. Not a girly wow-does-that-hurt shriek, but the kind of furious, almost whistling sound you expect from a bird of prey. There was a snapping, popping sound, then a clap of thunder, the roar of a discharged gun at close quarters, the sudden sharp smell of burnt powder, and the revolver went skittering free.

The ghoulish stabbed the pruners at Murphy, but she was already on the way out, grunting with effort, her entire attack one circle that sent the Tigress stumbling away into a stand of large potted ferns.

Murphy spun to face the ghoulish. She took a shooting stance and snarled, "Get on your face on the floor. You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent."

The ghoulish changed. Skin tore at the corners of her mouth as it dropped open and gaped nightmarishly wide, canines lengthening as her lips peeled away from her teeth. Her shoulders jerked and twisted, hunching up and growing wider at the same time, her clothes stretching out while her body grew more hunched. Her fingers lengthened, talons extending from the tips

until her hands were spread as wide as the lawn rakes on a display behind her, and a fetid smell of decay and worse flooded out.

Murphy's face went bloodless as she stared at the transformation. If she'd been dealing with an armed thug, I think she would have been fine. But the ghoul wasn't and she wasn't. I saw the fear come surging up through her, winding its way into her through the scars a maddened ghost had left on her spirit the year before. Panic hit her, and her breath came in strangled gasps as a demon from a madman's nightmare clawed its way free of the bushes, spread its talons, and let out a rasping, quivering hiss. Murphy's gun started quivering, the barrel jerking erratically left and right. I struggled to get on my feet and back into the game, but my ears still rang and the constant pressure of the mist slowed me down.

The Tigress must have seen the terror that held Murphy. "A cop, eh?" the ghoul rasped, drool foaming between its teeth, dribbling down its chin. It started slowly toward Murphy, claw tips dragging along the floor. "Aren't you going to tell me that I have the right to an attorney?"

Murphy let out a small, terrified sound, frozen in place, her eyes wide.

It laughed at her. "Such a big gun for a sweet girl. You smell sweet. It makes me hungry." It continued forward, laughter still kissing every word, its distorted, inhuman voice continuing in a steady murmur, "Maybe I should let you arrest me. Wait until we're in the car. If you smell that good, I wonder how good you taste."

I guess the ghoul shouldn't have laughed. Murphy's eyes cleared and hardened. The gun steadied, and she said, "Taste this, bitch."

Murphy started shooting.

The ghoul let out another shriek, this one full of surprise and pain. The bullets didn't drive her back. That's for comic books and TV. Real bullets just rip through you like lead weights through cheesecloth. No gaping, bloody holes appeared in the ghoul's chest, but sudden flowers of scarlet sprayed out from her back, covering the potted ferns with bloody dewdrops.

The ghoul threw her arms up and recoiled, turning, screaming, and threw herself at the ferns.

Murphy kept shooting.

The ghoul stumbled and dropped down amid the ferns, still kicking and struggling wildly, knocking pots over, breaking others, scattering vegetable matter and dirt all over the floor.

Murphy kept shooting.

The gun clicked empty, and the ghoul half-rolled onto her ruined back, the stolen blue smock now ripped with huge holes and soaked through with blood. The ghoul choked and gagged, scarlet trickling out of her mouth. She let out another hiss, this one bubbling, and held up her hands in supplication. “Wait,” she rasped. “Wait, please. You win, I give up.”

Murphy ejected the clip, put in a fresh one, and worked the slide on the gun. Then she took a shooting stance again and sighted down the barrel, her blue eyes calculating, passionless, merciless.

She didn’t see the sudden shadow against the mist to her right, huge and hulking, backlit by emergency lights at the other end of the garden center. I did, and finally shoved my dazed self back to my feet. “Murph!” I shouted. “To your right!”

Murphy’s head snapped around, and she darted to her left, even as a garden hoe swept down and shattered against the concrete where she’d been standing. The ghoul scrambled back through the ferns and vanished into the mist, leaving blood smeared everywhere. Murphy backpedaled and shot at the form in the mist, then ducked as another arm swept a shovel in a scything arc that just missed her head.

Grum the Ogre rolled forward out of the mist, in his scarlet-skinned, twelve-foot-tall hulking form, a shovel clenched in one fist. Without slowing a step, he scooped up a twenty-gallon ceramic pot and threw it at Murphy like a snowball. She scooted behind a stack of empty loading palettes, and the pot exploded against them.

Magic would be useless against the ogre. I looked wildly around me, then seized a jumbo-sized plastic bag of round, tinted-glass potting marbles. “Hey!” I shouted. “Tall, red, and ugly!”

Grum’s head spun around further than I would have thought possible with a neck that thick, and his already beady eyes narrowed even more. He let out a bellowing roar and turned toward me, his huge feet slamming down on the concrete.

I tore open the bag and dumped it out toward him. Blue-green marbles spread over the floor in a wave. Grum’s foot slammed down on several as he advanced, and I hoped for the best. Grum continued toward me unslowed, and when his great foot lifted, I saw small circles of powdered glass on the ground.

I snarled a curse and ran deeper into the garden center, Grum’s footsteps heavy behind me. I heard Murphy shoot again, a pair of shots, and tried to

keep a mental count of her rounds. Four, in the new clip? Did she have another reload? And how many rounds did that Colt hold anyway?

A sharper, more piercing report cracked through the area—rifle fire. Murphy's Colt barked twice more, and she called, "Harry, someone's covering the exit with gunfire!"

"Kinda busy here, Murph!" I shouted.

"What the hell is that thing?"

"Faerie!" I shouted. Grum was already trying to kill me, so there was no point in being diplomatic. "It's a big, ugly faerie!" I started swiping things off of shelves to crash in the aisle behind me. I'd gained some distance on Grum, but it could be that he just needed time to gather momentum. I heard him snarl again, and he took a swing with the shovel in his hand. He was short of me, but it whooshed loudly enough to make me flinch.

I looked wildly for something made of steel to throw at the ogre or to defend myself with. The mist kept me from seeing more than a couple of yards ahead of me, and from what I could see, I was just heading deeper and deeper into the plant-vending area. The smell of summer-heated greenery, of fertilizer and mild rot, filled my nose and mouth. I rounded the end of the aisle and ducked through a narrow gate and out from under the canopy top that gave shade to this part of the garden center, into a roofless area bounded by a high chain-link fence and filled with young trees and greenery standing in silent rows.

I looked around wildly for a way out into the parking lot at large, and checked how close the ogre was, flicking a glance back over my shoulder.

Grum stopped at the gate to the fenced area and, with a small smile on his lips, swung the gate shut. As I watched, he covered his hand with a plastic trash bag, and bent the latch like soft clay. Metal squealed and the gate fastened shut with no more effort than I would need to close a twist-tie.

My heart fell down through my stomach, and I looked around me.

The chain-link fence was at least nine feet high, with a strand of barbed wire at the top, meant to stop incursions of baby-tree nappers, I guessed. A second gate, much bigger, stood closed—and the latch had been twisted exactly like the other, warped closed. It was a neat little trap, and I'd been chased right into it.

"Dammit," I said.

Grum let out a grating laugh, though I could barely see anything but his outline, several yards away in the mist. “You lose, wizard.”

“Why are you doing this?” I demanded. “Who the hell are you working for?”

“You got no guess?” Grum said. There was a note of casual arrogance to his voice. “Gee. That’s too bad. Guess you go to your grave not knowing.”

“If I had a nickel for every time I’d heard that,” I muttered, looking around me. I had a few options. None of them were good. I could open a way into the Nevernever and try to find my way through the spirit realm and back into the real world somewhere else—but if I did that, not only might I run into something even worse than I already had in front of me, but if I got unlucky I might hit a patch of slower time and not emerge back into my Chicago for hours, even days. I might also be able to melt myself a hole in the fence with conjured flame, providing I didn’t burn myself to a cinder doing it. I didn’t have my blasting rod with me, and without it my control could be shaky enough to manage just that.

I could probably pile a bunch of baby trees, loading palettes, sacks of potting soil, and so on against the outer wall of chain-link fence and climb out. I might get cut up on the barbed wire, but hell, that would be better than staying here. Either way, there was no time to waste standing around deciding. I turned toward the nearest set of young trees, picked up a couple, and tossed them against the fence. “Murphy! I’m stuck, but I think I can get clear! Get out of here now!”

Murphy’s voice floated to me, directionless in the fog. “Where are you?”

“Hell’s bells, Murph! Get out!”

Her gun barked twice more. “Not without you!”

I threw more stuff on the pile. “I’m a big boy! I can take care of myself!” I took a long step up onto the pile, and tested my grip. It was enough to let me reach the top. I figured I could pull myself up and worry about the barbed wire when I got there. I started climbing out.

I was looking at a faceful of barbed wire and pushing at the fence with my toes when I felt something wrap around my ankles. I looked down and saw a branch wrapped around my legs. I kicked at it irritably.

And then as I watched, another branch lifted from the pile and joined the first. Then a third. And a fourth. The branches beneath my feet heaved and I suddenly found myself hauled up into the air, swinging upside down from my heels.

It was an awkward vantage point, but I watched as the trees and plants and soil I'd thrown into a pile surged and writhed together. The young trees tangled their limbs together, growing before my eyes as they did, lengthening and growing thicker to become part of a larger whole. Other bits of greenery, clumps of dirt, and writhing vines and leaves joined the trees, whipping through the air apparently of their own volition and adding to the mass of the thing that held me.

It took shape and stood up, an enormous creature of vaguely human shape made all of earth and root and bough, twin points of brilliant emerald-green light burning in its vine-writhing, leaf-strewn head. It had to have been nine or ten feet tall, and nearly that far across. Its legs were thicker than me, and branches spread out above its head like vast horns against the background of luminous mind fog. The creature lifted its head and screamed, a sound of tortured wood and creaking limb and howling wind.

"Stars and stones, Harry," I muttered, my heart pounding, "when will you learn to keep your mouth shut?"

Chapter Twenty



“Murphy!” I screamed. “Get clear!”

The plant monster— No, wait. I couldn’t possibly refer to that thing as a “plant monster.” I’d be a laughingstock. It’s hard to give a monster a cool name on the spur of the moment, but I used a name I’d heard Bob throw out before.

The chlorofiend lifted me up and shook me like a set of maracas. I focused on my shield bracelet, running my will, bolstered by sudden fear, through the focus. My skin tingled as the shield formed around me, and I shaped it into a full sphere. I was barely in time. The chlorofiend threw me at a post in the chain-link fence. Without the shield, it would have broken my back. I slammed into it, feeling the energy of the shield tighten around me, spreading the impact over the whole of my body instead of solely at the point of impact. The shield transferred a portion of the kinetic energy of impact into heat and light, while the rest came through as an abrupt pressure. The result was like a sudden suit of oven-warmed elastic closing on me, and it felt about three sizes too small. It knocked the wind out of my lungs. Azure and argent light flashed in a vague sphere around me.

I didn’t bounce much, just fell to the concrete. The shield gave out a more feeble flash when I hit. I got up off the ground and dodged away from the chlorofiend, but it followed me, slapping aside a stand of wooden tomato stakes with one leafy arm. Its glowing green eyes blazed as it came. I ran up against the fence at the back end of the lot, and the chlorofiend’s huge fist smashed down at me again.

I lifted my shield bracelet against it, but the blow tossed me a dozen feet, down the length of fence and into a set of huge steel partitioned shelves holding hundreds of fifty-pound bags of mulch, potting soil, and fertilizer. I lay there dazed for a second, staring at an empty aisle display proclaiming in huge scarlet letters WEED-B-GONE ONLY 2.99!!! I clutched at the display and got to my feet again in time to duck under the chlorofiend’s fist as it punched at my head.

It hit one of the metal shelves instead of me, and there was a shriek of warping metal, a creaking yowl of pain from the fiend, and a burst of

sizzling smoke. The creature drew its smoking fist back and screeched again, eyes blazing even brighter, angrier.

“Steel,” I muttered. “So you’re a faerie somethingorother too.” I looked up at the enormous shelves as I ran down the length of them, and a second later I heard the chlorofiend turn and begin pacing after me. I started gathering in my will as I ran, and I allowed the physical shield to fall, leaving me only enough defense to keep the mist from blitzing my head. I would need every bit of strength I could muster to pull off my sudden and desperate plan—and if it didn’t work, my shield wouldn’t protect me for long in any case. Sooner or later, the chlorofiend would batter its way through my defenses and pound me into plant food.

I pulled ahead of it, but it started gaining momentum, catching up to me. As I reached the end of the row, the end of the steel shelves, I turned to face it.

Hell’s bells, that thing was big. Bigger than Grum. I could see through it in places, where twists of branches and leaves were not too closely clumped with earth, but that didn’t make it seem any less massive or dangerous.

If this didn’t work, I wasn’t going to last long enough to regret it.

Most magic is pretty time-consuming, what with drawing circles and gathering energies and aligning forces. Quick and dirty magic, evocation, is drawn directly from a wizard’s will and turned loose without benefit of guide or limit. It’s difficult and it’s dangerous. I suck at evocation. I only knew a couple that I could do reliably, and even they required a focus, such as my shield bracelet or blasting rod, to be properly controlled.

But for doing big dumb things that require a lot of energy and not much finesse, I’m usually fine.

I lifted my arms, and the mist was stirred by a sudden rush of moving air. The chlorofiend pounded closer, and I closed my eyes, pouring more energy out, reaching for the wind. “*Vento*,” I muttered, feeling more power stir. The chlorofiend bellowed again, sending a jolt of fear through me, and the winds rose even more. “*Vento! Vento, ventas servitas!*”

Power, magic, coursed through my outstretched arms and lashed out at the night. The wind rose in a sudden roar, a screaming cyclone that whirled into being just in front of me and then whirled out toward the heavy metal shelving.

The chlorofiend screamed again, nearly drowned out by the windstorm I’d called, only a few yards away.

The enormous, heavy shelves, loaded with tons of materials, let out a groan of protest and then fell, toppled over onto the chlorofiend with a deafening din that ripped at my ears and shook the concrete floor.

The chlorofiend was strong, but it wasn't that strong. It went down like a bush under a bulldozer, shrieking again as the steel shelves crushed it and burned into its substance. A foul greyish smoke rose from the wreckage, and the chlorofiend continued to scream and thrash, the shelves jerking and moving.

Exhaustion swept over me with the effort of the spell, and I glowered down at the fallen shelves. "Down," I panted, "but not out. Dammit." I watched the shelves for a moment and decided that the chlorofiend probably wouldn't shrug it off for a few minutes. I shook my head and headed for the gate into the enclosure. Hopefully, Grum hadn't twisted things up so badly that I couldn't get out.

He had. The metal latch on the gate had been pinched into a mess by his talons. They had scored the metal in sharp notches, like an industrial cutter. Note to self: Don't think steel can stop Grum's fingernails. I checked above and decided to risk climbing the fence and getting through the barbed wire.

I had gotten maybe halfway up the chain-link fence when Murphy limped out of the mist on the other side, her gun pointed right at me.

"Whoa, whoa, Murph," I said. I showed her my hands and promptly fell off the fence. "It's me."

She lowered the gun and let out her breath. "Christ, Harry. What are you doing?"

"Texas cage match. I won." From behind me, the chlorofiend let out another shriek and the shelving groaned as it shifted. I gulped and looked back. "Rematch doesn't look promising, though. Where have you been?"

She rolled her eyes. "Shopping."

"Where's Grum and the ghoul?"

"Don't know. The ghoul's blood trail went out, but someone shot at me when I followed it. Haven't seen the ogre." She blinked at the gate's latch.

"Damn. Guess he shut you in here, huh?"

"Pretty much. You get shot?"

"No, why?"

"You're limping."

Murphy grimaced. "Yeah. One of those bastards must have thrown a bunch of marbles on the floor. I slipped on one. It's my knee."

“Oh,” I said. “Uh.”

Murphy blinked at me. “*You* did that?”

“Well, it was a plan at the time.”

“Harry, that’s not a plan, it’s a Looney Tune.”

“Kill me later. Help me out of here now.” I squinted up at the barbed wire. “Maybe if you get a rake, you can push it up for me so that I can slide between it and the fence.”

“We’re twenty feet from the hardware department, genius,” Murphy said. She limped back into the mist, and returned half a minute later carrying a pair of bolt cutters. She cut a slit in the chain link fence and I squeezed through it while the chlorofiend thrashed, still pinned.

“I could kiss you,” I said.

Murphy grinned. “You smell like manure, Harry.” The smile faded. “What now?”

The trapped monster’s thrashing sent several smaller shelves toppling over, and I rubbernecked nervously. “Getting out is still first priority. That thing is down, but it’ll be coming before long.”

“What is it?”

“Chlorofiend,” I said.

“A what?”

“Plant monster.”

“Oh, right.”

“We need to get out.”

Murphy shook her head. “Whoever was covering the exit out front can probably see the other doors too. A silhouette in a doorway is a great target. It’s just like a shooting range.”

“How the blazes did they see you through the mist?”

“Is that really important right now? They can, and it means we can’t go out the front.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re right. The main exits are covered, that thing is in the garden center, and ten to one Ogre Grum is watching the back.”

“Ogre, check. What’s his deal?”

“Bullets bounce off him, and he shakes off magic like a duck does water. He’s strong and pretty quick and smarter than he looks.”

Murphy let out a soft curse. “You can’t blast him like you did the loup-garou?”

I shook my head. "I gave him a hard shot once already. I may as well have been spitting on him."

"Doesn't look like we have much choice for getting out."

"And even if we do, Grum or that plant thing could run us down, so we'll need wheels."

"We have to go through one of them."

"I know," I said, and headed back into the store.

"Where are you going?" Murphy demanded.

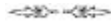
"I have a plan."

She limped after me. "Better than the Looney Tune one, I hope."

I grunted in reply. No need to agree with her.

We both realized that if this plan wasn't better than the last one, then, as Porky Pig would say, That's all, folks.

Chapter Twenty-one



Three minutes later Murphy and I went out the back door, and Grum was waiting for us.

He rose up out of the shadows by the large trash bins with a bull elephant's bellow and stomped toward us. Murphy, dragging a leg and wrapped somewhat desperately in a plaid auto blanket, let out a shrill cry and turned to run, but tripped and fell to the ground before the ogre.

I kept my left hand behind my back and lifted my right. Flame danced up from my cupped fingers, and I thundered, "Grum!"

The ogre's beady eyes turned to me, glittering. He let out another rumbling snarl.

"Stand thee from my path!" I called in that same overdramatic voice, "lest I grow weary of thee and bereft thee of thy life!"

The ogre focused wholly on me now, striding forward, past the whimpering form of Murphy. "I do not fear thy power, mortal," he snarled.

I lifted my chin and waved my fire-holding hand around a bit. "This is thy last warning, faerie dog!"

Grum's beady eyes grew angrier. He let out a harsh laugh and did not slow down. "Feeble mortal trickster. Thy spellfire means nothing to me. Do thy worst."

Behind Grum, Murphy threw the auto blanket off of her shoulders, and with one rip of the starting cord fired up her shiny new Coleman chain saw. She engaged the blade with a hissing whirr of air and without preamble swung it in an arc that ended precisely at the back of Grum's thick, hairy knee. The steel blade chewed through the ogre's hide as if it was made of Styrofoam. Blood and bits of meat flew up in a gruesome cloud.

The ogre screamed, his body contorting in agony. The scarlet skin around the injury immediately swelled, darkening to black, and tendrils of infectious-looking darkness spread from the wound up over the ogre's leg and hip within the space of a breath. He swept one huge fist at Murphy, but she was already getting out of his reach. The ogre's weight came down on the injured leg, and Grum fell to earth with a heavy thud.

I started forward to help, but everything was happening fast, and my movements felt nightmarishly slow. The ogre rolled to his belly at once,

maddened at the touch of the iron in the chain saw's blade, and started dragging himself toward Murphy faster than I would have believed with just his arms, talons gouging into the concrete. She hurried away from him, limping, but Grum slammed one fist down on the concrete so hard that half a dozen feet away, she was jarred off balance and fell.

Grum got hold of Murphy's foot and started dragging her back toward him. She let out a hollow gasp, then twisted and wriggled. She slipped out of her sneaker and hauled herself away from the ogre, her face gone white and drawn.

I ran up behind Grum, pulling my left hand out from behind my back, the fingers of my right hand still curled around the flickering flame I'd shown the ogre. A large yellow-and-green pump-pressure water gun sloshed a little in my left fist. I lowered it and squeezed the trigger. A stream of gasoline sprayed out all over Grum's back, soaking the ogre's skin. Grum whirled toward me halfway through, and I shot the gasoline into his eyes and nose, eliciting another scream. He bared his fangs and glared at me through eyes swollen almost shut.

"Wizard," he said, hardly understandable through the fangs and the drool, "your spellflame will not stop me."

I turned my right hand slowly, and showed Grum the burning can of Sterno I'd been palming. "Good thing I've got this plain old vanilla fire, then, huh?"

And I tossed the lit can of Sterno onto the gasoline-soaked ogre.

Hamstrung and blazing like a birthday candle, Grum screamed and thrashed. I skipped back and around him, helping Murphy up to her feet as the ogre slammed himself against the ground and then against the back wall of the Wal-Mart. He did that in a frenzy for maybe twenty seconds, before uttering an odd, ululating cry and hurling himself at a deep shadow behind a trash bin—and vanished, the light from the flames simply disappearing.

Murphy got up only with my help, her face pale with pain. She could put no weight at all on her wounded leg. "What happened?"

"We whipped him," I said. "He packed up and headed back to Faerie."

"For good?"

I shook my head. "For now. How's your leg?"

"Hurts. Think I broke something. I can hop on the other one."

"Lean on me," I said. We went a few paces, and she swayed dangerously. I caught her before she toppled. "Murph?"

“Sorry, sorry,” she gasped. “Hopping, bad idea.”

I helped her back down to the ground. “Look, stay here, against the wall. I’ll get the Beetle and pull it around here to you.”

Murphy was in enough pain to keep her from arguing. She did draw her gun, switch the safety on, and offer it to me. I shook my head. “Keep it. You might need it.”

“Dresden,” Murphy said, “my gun has been about as useful as fabric softener in a steel mill tonight. But someone out there has a rifle. If they’re using one, it’s because they’re a human, and you don’t have most of your magic stuff with you. Take the gun.”

She was right, but I argued anyway. “I can’t leave you defenseless, Murph.”

Murphy hauled up the leg of her jeans and pulled a tiny automatic from an ankle holster. She worked the slide, checked the safety, and said, “I’m covered.”

I took the Colt, checked the chamber and the safety, more or less by reflex. “That’s *acute* little gun there, Murph.”

She scowled at me. “I have small ankles. It’s the only one I can hide there.”

I chanted, teasing, “Murphy’s got a girl gun, Murphy’s got a girl gun.”

Murphy glowered at me and hauled the chain saw to within easy reach. “Come a little closer and say that.”

I snorted at her. “Give me a couple minutes,” I said. “I’ll tell you it’s me. Some of these bad guys can play dress up—so if you aren’t sure who it is . . .”

Murphy nodded, pale and resolved, and rested her hand on the gun.

I drew a deep breath and walked through the mist around the side of the building and toward the front parking lot. I kept close to the wall and moved as quietly as I could, Listening as I went. I gathered up energy for the shield bracelet and held my left hand ready. I held the gun in my right. Holding a pair of defenses focused around my left hand, I would have to do all my shooting with my right. I’m not a very good shot even when I can use both hands, so I just had to hope that no sharpshooting would be required.

I got to the front of the building before I heard something click in the fenced area of the garden center. I swallowed and pointed the Colt at it, noting that I wasn’t sure how many rounds the gun had left.

As I came closer, through the mist, I saw the chain fence around the ruined area where I'd been trapped with the chlorofiend. It had been torn down in a swath ten feet wide, and from what I could see of the inside, the tree-thing wasn't there anymore. Great. I took a few steps closer to the break in the fence to stare at the ruined chain link. I'd expected bent and stretched wire, still hot enough to burn where it had torn. Instead, I found edges cut off as neatly as with a set of clippers and coated with frost.

I checked around on the ground and found sections of wire, none of them longer than two or three inches. Steam curled up from them, and the cold in the air near the fence made me shiver. The fence had been frozen, chilled until the steel had become brittle and then shattered.

"Winter," I muttered. "I guess that wasn't much of a stretch."

I swept my eyes around through the mist, left my ears open, and paced as quietly as I could toward the dim, flickering lights that lay somewhere ahead in the parking lot. I'd parked the Beetle in an aisle almost even with the front doors, but I didn't have a reference point through the mist. I just headed out, picked the first row of cars, and started prowling silently along them, looking for the Beetle.

My car wasn't in the first row, but a thin stream of some kind of yellowish fluid was. I traced it to the next row, and found the Beetle sitting there in its motley colors. Another leak. They weren't exactly unheard of in a wizard's car, but this would be a hell of a time for the Beetle to get hospitalized.

I got in and set the gun down long enough to shove my keys in the ignition. My trusty steed wheezed and groaned a few times, but the engine turned over with an apologetic cough and the car rattled to life. I put it in gear, pulled through the empty space in front of me, and headed for the back of the building to get Murphy.

I had just passed the garden center with its ruined fence when my windows abruptly frosted over. It happened in the space of a breath, ice crystals forming and growing like plants on a stop-motion film until my view was completely cut off. The temperature dropped maybe fifty degrees, and the car sputtered. If I hadn't given it a bunch of gas, it would have stalled. The Beetle lurched forward, and I rolled down the window, sticking my head out the side in an effort to see what was going on.

The chlorofiend loomed up out of the mist and brought one huge, knobby fist down on the Beetle like an organic wrecking ball. The force of it

crumpled the hood like tin foil and drove the shocks down so that the frame smushed up against the tires. The impact threw me forward against the steering wheel and drove the breath out of me with a shock of pain.

The impact would have rolled any car with an engine under the hood. Most of the mass of the car would have been driven down, the lighter rear end would have flipped up, and me without my seat belt would have been bounced around like a piece of popcorn.

The old Volkswagens, though, have their engine in the back. Most of the weight of the car got bounced up a little in the air, then came back down to the ground with a jolt.

I slammed my foot on the gas harder, and the Beetle's engine sputtered gamely in response. As big and strong as the chlorofiend might be, it wasn't solid and it wasn't as heavy as a living mass of the same size. The Beetle bounced up from the blow that had crumpled the empty storage compartment under the hood and slammed into the chlorofiend without losing much of its momentum.

The beast let out a shriek of what might have been surprise, and was definitely pain. My car hammered into it with a flickering of scarlet static and a cloud of smoke from the substance of the faerie creature, swept under its legs, and drove the chlorofiend atop its hood.

I kept my foot on the gas, held the wheel as steadily as I could with one hand, and stuck my head out the window so I could see. The chlorofiend screamed again, the magic around it gathering in a cloud that made the hairs on my neck stand up, but the Beetle rattled through the attempt to hex it down, carrying the chlorofiend the length of the Wal-Mart garden center and to the back of the building.

"Think of it as payback for all those telephone poles," I muttered to the Beetle, and slammed on the brakes.

The chlorofiend rolled off of my car, skidded on the asphalt, and slammed into the side of a metal trash bin with a yowl of pain and an exploding cloud of dirt clods. Only one of my headlights appeared to have survived the attack, and even it flickered woozily through the mist and the cloud of dust and dirt rising from the chlorofiend.

I slammed the car into reverse, backed up a few more feet, then put it back into neutral. I raced the engine, then popped the clutch and sent the Beetle hurtling at the monster. I braced myself for the impact this time, and pulled my head in before I hit. The impact felt violent, shockingly loud,

and viscerally satisfying. The chlorofiend let out a broken-sounding creak, but until I backed the car up and whipped the wheel around so that I could see out the side window, I couldn't tell what had happened.

I'd torn the thing in half at about the middle, pinching it between the battered, frost-coated Beetle and the metal trash bin. Thank the stars it hadn't been a Fiberglas job. The legs lay against the trash bin, now only a pile of twisted saplings and earth, while the arms flailed toward me, a dozen long paces away, uselessly pounding the asphalt.

I spat out my window, put the car into gear again, and went to get Murphy.

I jumped out of the car and had to wrench the passenger door hard to get it to open. Murphy pushed herself up, using the wall for support, and stared at the frost-covered Beetle with wide eyes. "What the hell happened?"

"The plant monster."

"A plant monster and Frosty the Snowman?"

I got on her wounded side to support her. "I took care of it. Let's go."

Murphy let out another small sound of pain, but she didn't let it stop her from hobbling along toward the car. I was just about to help her in when she shouted, "Harry!" and threw her weight against me.

The chlorofiend, the upper half, had somehow clawed its way out of the mist, and one long, viny limb was reaching for me. I fell back, away from it, and tried to shield Murphy with my body.

It got me. I felt fingers the size of young tree trunks wrap around my throat and jerk me away from Murphy like I was a puppy. More branch-fingers got one of my thighs, and I felt myself suspended in the air and pulled slowly apart.

"Meddler," hissed an alien voice from somewhere near the chlorofiend's glowing green eyes. "You should never have involved yourself in these affairs. You have no concept of what is at stake. Die for your arrogance."

I tried for a witty riposte, but my vision blacked out and my head felt like it was trapped in a slowly tightening vise. I tried gathering forces, attempting to push them through my shield bracelet, but the moment I did there was a rustle of wood and leaves, and the bracelet snapped off of my wrist, broken. I tried to gather another spell—and realized as I did that my concentration had wavered too much and that my defense against the insidious enchantment of the mist had begun to fail. My thoughts broke apart into irregular pieces, and I struggled to reach for them and put them

together again as the pressure on my body increased, became a red-hot agony.

I only dimly heard the chain saw start up again, and Murphy's scream of challenge. The charm she wore wasn't relying on my concentration. It wouldn't last long, but it would keep the mist away from her for a few more minutes. The chlorofiend let out a shriek, and I heard the saw biting into wood, felt wood chips hitting my face.

I tumbled free, sapling branches tangled all around my head and shoulders, leaves and dirt scratching my face. My leg was still in the chlorofiend's grip, but I could breathe again.

The mist pressed close to me, giving me a sense of detachment and disinterest. It was hard to make any sense of what happened next. Murphy hopped closer, her weight on the one leg, and swept the chain saw through the chlorofiend's other arm. I fell to the ground, more inert tree parts around me.

The chlorofiend waved its arms at Murphy, but they didn't have the crippling force I'd seen it use before. They merely jostled her and knocked her down. Murphy snarled, crawling on her hands and knees, dragging the chain saw with her. She lifted it again and drove it at the creature's head, engine racing, blade singing through the air. The chlorofiend screamed in protest and frustration, lifting the stumps (hah hah, get it, stumps?) of its arms in feeble defense. Murphy tore through them with the chain saw, snicker-snack, and then drove the blade directly between the chlorofiend's glowing green eyes.

The monster shrieked again, writhing, but its arms never managed to do more than shove Murphy around a bit. Then it let out a final groan, and the eyes winked out. Murphy suddenly sat atop a mound of dirt and leaves and gnarled branches.

I lay there, staring stupidly at her, then heard a gunshot, the sharp, cracking report of a rifle. Murphy threw herself down and rolled toward me. A second shot rang out, and a puff of leaves a foot to Murphy's right leapt into the air.

Another sound cut through the night—police sirens, getting closer. Murphy dragged me and herself over the ground toward the car. I heard a harsh curse somewhere in the mist, and then a pair of footsteps retreating. A moment later, I thought the mist was starting to thin out.

“Harry,” Murphy said, shaking me. I blinked at her, and the relief showed in her worried expression. “Harry, can you hear me?”

I nodded. My mouth felt dry and my body ached. I fought to clear my head.

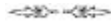
“Get us in the car,” she said, enunciating the words. “Get us in the car and get us out of here.”

The car. Right. I hauled Murphy into the Beetle, got in myself, and stared at the frosted windshield. The heat of the summer night was already melting the frost away, and I could see through it in spots.

“Harry,” Murphy said, exasperated, her voice thin and shaky. “Drive!”

Oh, right. Drive. Get out. I put the Beetle in gear, more or less, and we lurched out of the parking lot and out of the mist.

Chapter Twenty-two



“You’re *rekidding*,” Billy said, his voice touched with disbelief. “A chain saw? Where did you get the gasoline?”

Murphy looked up from her wounded leg and the willowy Georgia, who had cut her jeans away and was cleaning out the long gashes she’d acquired from ankle to mid calf. “Gas generator, backup power supply for all the food freezers. They had a ten-gallon plastic jug of it.”

Billy’s apartment was not a large one, and with a dozen people in it, even with the air-conditioning running full blast, it was too hot and too crowded. The Alphas, Billy’s werewolf accomplices, were out in force. We’d been challenged by a tall, thin young man in the parking lot and shadowed to the door by a pair of wolves who kept just far enough away to make it difficult to see them in the shadows.

When I’d first seen them, the Alphas had been a collection of misfits with bad hair, acne, and wanna-be tough guy leather outfits. In the year and a half since, they’d changed. None of them had that pale look anymore, none of them looked wheezy, and like Billy, the kids who’d been carrying baby fat had swapped it for lean, fit muscle. They hadn’t become a gang of Hollywood soap opera stars or anything, but they looked more relaxed, more confident, more happy—and I saw some scars, some of them quite vicious, showing on bare limbs. Most of the kids wore sweats, or those pullover knit dresses, garments that could be gotten out of in a hurry.

Pizza boxes were stacked three deep on the table, and a cooler of soft drinks sat on the floor nearby. I piled a plate with half-warm pizza, picked up a Coke, and found a comparatively empty stretch of wall to lean against.

Billy shook his head and said, “Look, Harry, some of this doesn’t make sense. I mean, if they could really run around doing this mind fog thing, shouldn’t we have heard about it by now?”

I snorted and said around a mouthful of pizza, “It’s pretty rare, even in my circles. No one who got hit with it will remember it. Check the paper tomorrow. Ten to one, emergency services showed up after we left, put out the fires, pulled a bunch of confused people out of the building, and the official explanation is a leaky gas line.”

Billy snorted. "That doesn't make any sense. There's not going to be evidence of an exploding line, no leak is going to show up at the gas company, no continuing fire of leaking gas—"

I kept eating. "Get real, Billy," I said. "You think people are going to be taken seriously by City Hall if they tell them, 'We really don't know what messed up all these people, we don't know what caused all the damage, we don't know why no one heard or saw anything, and we don't know what the reports of gunshots at the scene were about?' Hell, no. People would be accused of incompetence, publicly embarrassed, fired. No one wants that. So, gas leak."

"But it's stupid!"

"It's life. The last thing the twenty-first century wants to admit is that it might not know everything." I popped open the Coke and guzzled some. "How's the leg, Murph?"

"It hurts," Murphy reported, considerately leaving out the implied "you idiot."

Georgia stood up from attending Murphy's leg and shook her head. She was nearly a foot taller than Billy, and had bound her blond hair back into a tight braid. It emphasized the gauntness of her features. "The cuts and bruises are nothing major, but your knee could be seriously damaged. You should have it checked out by a real doctor, Lieutenant Murphy."

"Karrin," Murphy said. "Anyone who mops up my blood can call me Karrin." I tossed Murphy a Coke. She caught it and said, "Except you, Dresden. Any diet?"

I put several slices of pizza on a paper plate and passed them over. "Live a little."

"All right, Karrin," Georgia said, folding her arms. "If you don't want a twenty-five-thousand-dollar surgery along with seven or eight months of rehab, we need to get you to the hospital."

Murphy frowned, then nodded and said, "Let me eat something first. I'm starving."

"I'll get the car," Georgia said. She turned to Billy. "Make sure she doesn't put any weight on her leg when you bring her down. Keep it straight if you can."

"Got it," Billy said. "Phil, Greg. Get that blanket. We'll make a litter out of it."

"I'm not an infant," Murphy said.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "Easy," I said in a quiet voice. "They can handle themselves."

"So can I."

"You're hurt, Murph," I said. "If you were one of your people, you'd be telling you to shut up and stop being part of the problem."

Murphy shot me a glower, but its edge was blunted by the big mouthful of pizza she took. "Yeah. I know. I just hate being sidelined."

I grunted.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Finish this Coke. I haven't planned much past that."

She sighed. "All right, Harry. Look, I'll be home in a few hours. I'll keep digging, see if I can turn up anything about Lloyd Slate. If you need information on anything else, get in touch."

"You should rest," I told her.

She grimaced at her leg. Her knee was swollen to a couple of times its normal size. "Looks like I'm going to have plenty of time for that."

I grunted again and looked away.

"Hey, Harry," Murphy said. When I didn't look at her, she continued, "What happened to me wasn't your fault. I knew the risks and I took them."

"You shouldn't have had to."

"No one should. We live in an imperfect world, Dresden. In case that hasn't yet become obvious enough for you." She nudged my leg with her elbow. "Besides. You were lucky I was there. The way I count it, I'm the one who put on the boots."

A smile threatened my expression. "You did what?"

"Put on the boots," Murphy said. "I put on the boots and kicked some monster ass. I dropped the ghoul, and I'm the one who rammed a chain saw through the head of that plant monster thing. Crippled the ogre, too. What did you do? You threw a can of Sterno at him. That's barely an assist."

"Yeah, but I soaked him in gasoline first."

She snorted at me, around more pizza. "Shutout."

"Whatever."

"Murphy three, Dresden zero."

"You didn't do all of it."

"I put on the boots."

I raised my hands. "Okay, okay. You've . . . got boots, Murph."

She sniffed and took an almost dainty sip of Coke. "Lucky I was there."

I squeezed her shoulder and said, with no particular inflection, “Yes. Thank you.”

Murphy smiled up at me. From the window, one of the Alphas reported, “Car’s ready.”

Billy and a couple more laid out a blanket and then carefully lifted Murphy onto it. She tolerated them with a roll of her eyes, but hissed with discomfort even at the gentle motion.

“Call,” she said.

“Will.”

“Watch your back, Harry.” Then they carried her out.

I picked up some more pizza, exchanged some more or less polite chitchat with some of the Alphas, and made my escape from the crowded living room of the apartment to the balcony. I shut the sliding glass door behind me. Only one light in the parking lot provided any illumination, so the balcony was mostly covered in sheltering shadows. The night was a close one, humidity cooking along at a lazy summer broil, but even so it felt less claustrophobic than the crowded apartment.

I watched Billy and the Alphas load Murphy into a minivan and drive off. Then there was as much silence as you ever get in Chicago. The hiss of tires on asphalt was a constant, liquid background, punctuated with occasional sirens, horns, mechanical squeaks and squeals, and the buzzing of one lost locust that must have been perched on a building nearby.

I put my paper plate on the wooden balcony railing, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath, trying to clear my head.

“Penny for your thoughts,” said a quiet female voice.

I nearly jumped off the balcony in sheer reaction. My hand brushed the paper plate, and the pizza fell to the parking lot below. I whirled around and found Meryl sitting in a chair at the other side of the balcony, deep in shadows, her large form nothing more than a more solid piece of darkness—but her eyes gleamed in the half-light, reflecting traces of red. She watched the plate fall and then said, “Sorry.”

“S’okay,” I said. “Just a little nervous tonight.”

She nodded. “I was listening.”

I nodded back to her and returned to looking at nothing, listening to night sounds. After a while, she asked me, “Does it hurt?”

I waved my bandaged hand idly. “Sort of.”

“Not that,” she said. “I meant watching your friend get hurt.”

Some of my racing thoughts coalesced into irritated anger. “What kind of question is that?”

“A simple one.”

I took an angry hit from my can of Coke. “Of course it hurts.”

“You’re different than I thought you’d be.”

I squinted over my shoulder at her.

“They tell stories about you, Mister Dresden.”

“It’s all a lie.”

Her teeth gleamed. “Not all of them are bad.”

“Mostly good or mostly bad?”

“Depends on who’s talking. The Sidhe crowd thinks you’re an interesting mortal pet of Mab’s. The vampire wanna-be crowd thinks you’re some kind of psychotic vigilante with a penchant for vengeance and mayhem. Sort of a one-man Spanish Inquisition. Most of the magical crowd thinks you’re distant, dangerous, but smart and honorable. Crooks think you’re a hit man for the outfit, or maybe one of the families back East. Straights think you’re a fraud trying to bilk people out of their hard-won cash, except for Larry Fowler, who probably wants you on the show again.”

I regarded her, frowning. “And what do you think?”

“I think you need a haircut.” She lifted a can to her mouth and I caught a whiff of beer. “Bill called all the morgues and hospitals. No Jane Doe with green hair.”

“Didn’t figure there would be. I talked to Aurora. She seemed concerned.”

“She would. She’s everyone’s big sister. Thinks she needs to take care of the whole world.”

“She didn’t know anything.”

Meryl shook her head and was quiet for a while before she asked, “What’s it like being a wizard?”

I shrugged. “Mostly it’s like being a watch fob repairman. It’s both difficult and not in demand. The rest of the time . . .”

More emotion rose in me, threatening my self-control. Meryl waited.

“The rest of the time,” I picked up, “it’s scary as hell. You start learning the kinds of things that go bump in the night and you figure out that ‘ignorance is bliss’ is more than just a quotable quote. And it’s—” I clenched my hands. “It’s so damned *frustrating* . You see people getting hurt. Innocents. Friends. I try to make a difference, but I usually don’t

know what the hell is going on until someone is already dead. Doesn't matter what kind of job I do—I can't help those folks."

"Sounds hard," Meryl said.

I shrugged. "I guess it isn't any different than what anyone else goes through. The names just get changed." I finished off the Coke and stomped the dead soldier flat. "What about you? What's it like being a changeling?"

Meryl rolled the beer can between her broad hands. "About like anyone, until you hit puberty. Then you start feeling things."

"What kinds of things?"

"Different, depending on your Sidhe half. For me it was anger, hunger. I gained a lot of weight. I kept losing my temper over the most idiotic things." She took a drink. "And strength. I grew up on a farm. My older brother rolled a tractor and it pinned him, broke his hip, and caught on fire. I picked it up and threw it off him, then dragged him back to the house. More than a mile. I was twelve. My hair had turned this color by the next morning."

"Troll," I said quietly.

She nodded. "Yeah. I don't know the details about what happened, but yeah. And every time I let those feelings get loose, the more I lost my temper and used my strength, the bigger and stronger I got. And the worse I felt about what I did." She shook her head. "Sometimes I think it would be easier to just choose the Sidhe half. To stop being human, stop hurting. If it wasn't for the others needing me . . ."

"It would turn you into a monster."

"But a happy monster." She finished her beer. "I should go check on Fix—he's sleeping now—and try to call Ace. What are you going to do?"

"Try to add up some facts. Meet some contacts. Interview more Queens. Maybe get a haircut."

Her teeth showed again in a smile, and she rose. "Good luck." She went back into the noisy apartment and shut the door.

I closed my eyes and tried to think. Whoever had sent the Tigress, Grum, the chlorofiend, and the lone gunman after me had been trying to kill me. It was a reasonable assumption, then, that I was on the right track. Generally speaking, the bad guys don't try to bump off an investigator unless they're worried he's actually about to find something.

But if that was true, then why had the Tigress taken a shot at me the day before I'd gotten the case? She could have been working for the Red Court

and taken a new contract that just happened to be me, but it didn't sound likely. If the ghoul had been on the same contract, it meant that I'd been judged a threat to the killer's plans from day one, if not sooner.

The frost on my car's windows had probably been the doing of someone from Winter. I mean, a wizard could do the same thing, but as devastating spells go, that one seemed to be kinda limited. The ghoul, presumably, would work for anyone who paid. The chlorofiend, though . . . I hadn't expected it to talk, or to be intelligent.

The more I thought about the plant monster, the more things didn't add up. It had picked a spot and had its allies herd me to it. That wasn't the behavior of your average thug, even of the magical variety. It had a sense of personal conflict about it, as if the chlorofiend had a particular bone to pick with me.

And how the hell had Murphy killed it? It was stronger than your average bulldozer, for crying out loud. It had socked me once when I had my full shield going, and it still hurt. It had clipped me a couple of times and nearly broken bones.

The chlorofiend should have flattened Murphy into a puddle of slurry. It had hit her at least a dozen times, yet it seemed like it had only tapped her, as though unable to risk doing more damage. Then a lightbulb flashed on somewhere in my musty brain. The chlorofiend hadn't been a being, as such. It had been a construct—a magical vessel for an outside awareness. An awareness both intelligent and commanding, but one who could not, for some reason, kill Murphy when she attacked it. Why?

"Because, Harry, you idiot, Murphy isn't attached to either of the Faerie Courts," I told myself. Out loud.

"What's that got to do with it?" I asked myself. Again out loud. And people think I'm crazy.

"Remember. The Queens can't kill anyone who isn't attached to the Courts through birthright or bargain. She couldn't kill Murphy. Neither could the construct she was guiding."

"Damn," I muttered. "You're right."

A Queen seemed reasonable, then—probably from Winter. Or, more realistically, the frosted windshield could have been a decoy. Either way, I couldn't figure who would have had a reason to come after me with something as elaborate as a mind fog and a veritable army of assassins.

Which reminded me. The mind fog had to have come from somewhere. I wasn't sure if the Queens could have managed something like that outside of Faerie. If they couldn't, it meant that the killer had a hired gun, someone who could pull off a delicate and dangerous spell like that.

I started running down that line of thought, but only a moment later the wind picked up into a stiff, whistling breeze that roared through the air and swept down through the city. I frowned at the sudden shift in the weather and looked around.

I didn't find anything obvious, but when I glanced up, I saw the lights going out. A vast cloud bank was racing north, fast enough that I could see it eating the stars. A second wall of clouds was sailing south, toward the first bank. They met in only moments, and as they did, light flashed from cloud to cloud, brighter than daylight, and thunder shook the balcony beneath my feet. Not long after that, a drop of freezing-cold water landed on my head, quickly followed by a mounting torrent of chilly rain. The still-rising wind whipped it into a miserable downpour.

I turned and pulled open the door into the apartment with a frown. The Alphas were peering out windows, speaking quietly with one another. Across the room, Billy finished messing around with a television, and a rather rumpled-looking weatherman appeared, the image flickering with interference lines and bursts of snow.

"Guys, guys," Billy said. "Hush, let me listen." He turned up the volume.

". . . a truly unprecedented event, an enormous Arctic blast that came charging like a freight train through Canada and across Lake Michigan to Chicagoland. And if that wasn't enough, a tropical front, settled quietly in the Gulf of Mexico, has responded in kind, rushing up the Mississippi River in a sudden heat wave. They've met right over Lake Michigan, and we have received several reports of rain and bursts of hail. Thunderstorm warnings have been issued all through the Lake Michigan area, and a tornado watch is in progress for the next hour in Cook Country. National Weather Service has also issued a flash flood warning and a travel advisory for the eastern half of Illinois. This is some beautiful but very violent weather, ladies and gentlemen, and we urge you to remain in shelter until this storm has time to . . ."

Billy turned the volume down. I looked around the room and found nearly a dozen sets of eyes focused on me, patient and trusting. Bah.

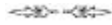
"Harry," Billy said at last, "that isn't a natural storm, is it?"

I shook my head, got another Coke out of the cooler, and headed tiredly for the door. “Side effect. Like the toads.”

“What does it mean?”

I opened the door and said, without looking back, “It means we’re running out of time.”

Chapter Twenty-three



I took the Beetle a ways north of town, keeping to the lake shore. Rain sheeted down, and lightning made the clouds dance with shadow and flame. Maybe ten miles from the center of town, the downpour eased up, and the air became noticeably colder—enough so that in jeans and a tee, I was shivering. I pulled the car off Sheridan Road a couple miles north of Northwestern University, out toward Winnetka, set the parking brake and locked it up, and trudged toward the shore of the lake.

It was a dark night, but I called no lights to guide me, and I didn't carry a flashlight. It took my eyes a while, but I finally managed to start making out shapes in the darkness and found my way through the light woods around this part of the lake shore to a long, naked promontory of rock thrusting itself a dozen yards into the water. I walked to the end of the stone and stood there for a moment, listening to the thunder rolling over the lake, the wind stirring the water into waves nearly like those of the sea. The air itself felt restless, charged with violence, and the light rain that still fell was uncomfortably cold.

I closed my eyes, pulling together energy from the elements around me, where water met stone, air met water, stone met air, and drawing as well from my own determination. The power coursed into me, dancing and seething with a quivering life of its own. I focused it with my thoughts, shaped it, and then opened my eyes and lifted my arms, wrists out so that the old pale round scars on either side of the big blue veins there felt the rain falling on them.

I pushed out the power I'd gathered and called into the thunder and rain, "Godmother! *Vente* , *Leanansidhe*!"

A sudden presence appeared beside me, and a woman's voice said, "Honestly, child, it isn't as though I'm far away. There's no reason to shout."

I jerked in surprise and nearly fell into the lake. I turned to my left to face my faerie godmother, who stood calmly upon the surface of the water, bobbing up and down a bit as waves passed under her feet.

Lea stood nearly my own height, but instead of dark contrasts and harsh angles, she was a creature of gliding curves and gentle shades. Hair the

color of flame coursed in curls and ringlets to below her hips, and tonight she wore with it a gown of flowing emerald silk, laced through with veins of ochre and aquamarine. A belt made from a twisted braid of silken threads of gold wound around her waist, and a dark-handled knife rested on a slant at her hip through a loop in the belt.

She was one of the high Sidhe, and her beauty went without saying. The perfection of her form was complemented by features of feminine loveliness, a full mouth, skin like cream, and oblong, feline eyes of gold, cat-slitted like those of most fae. She took in my surprise with a certain reserved mirth, her mouth set with a tiny smile.

“Good evening, Godmother,” I said, trying for a proper degree of politeness. “You look lovely as the stars tonight.”

She let out a pleased sigh. “Such a flatterer. I’m already enjoying this conversation so much more than the last.”

“I’m not dying this time,” I said.

The smile faded. “That is a matter of opinion,” she responded. “You are in great danger, child.”

“Thinking about it, I realize I generally have been whenever you were around.”

She clucked reprovingly. “Nonsense. I’ve never had anything but your best interests at heart.”

I barked out a harsh laugh. “My best interests. That’s rich.”

Lea arched a brow. “What reason have you to think otherwise?”

“For starters, because you tricked me out of a big evil slaying magic sword and sold me to Mab.”

“Tut,” Lea said. “The sword was just business, child. And as for selling your debt to Mab . . . I had no choice in the matter.”

“Yeah, right.”

She arched her brows. “You should know better, dear godchild. You know I cannot speak what is untrue. During our last encounter I returned to Faerie with great power and upset vital balances. Those balances had to be redressed, and your debt was the mechanism that the Queen chose to employ.”

I frowned at her for a minute. “Returned with great power.” My eyes fell to the knife at her waist. “That thing the vampires gave you?”

She rested her fingers lightly on the knife’s hilt. “Don’t cheapen it. This athame was no creation of theirs. And it was less a gift than a trade.”

“*Amoracchius* and that thing are in the same league? Is that what you’re saying?” Gulp. My faerie godmother was dangerous enough without a big-time artifact of magic. “What is it?”

“Not what, but whose,” Lea corrected me. “And in any case, you may be assured that surrendering my claim on you to Mab was in no way an attempt to do you harm. I have never meant you lasting ill.”

I scowled at her. “You tried to turn me into one of your hounds and keep me in a kennel, Godmother.”

“You’d have been perfectly safe there,” she pointed out. “And very happy. I only wanted what was best for you because I care for you, child.”

My stomach did a neat little rollover, and I swallowed. “Yeah. Uh. It’s very . . . you. I guess. In a demented, insane way, I can understand that.”

Lea smiled. “I knew you would. To business, then. Why have you called to me this night?”

I took a deep breath and braced myself a little. “Look, I know we haven’t gotten along really well lately. Or ever. And I don’t have a lot to trade with, but I had hoped you’d be willing to work out a bargain with me.”

She arched a red-gold brow. “To what ends?”

“I need to speak to them,” I said. “To Mab and Titania.”

Her expression grew distant, pensive. “You must understand that I cannot protect you from them, should they strike at you. My power has grown, poppet, but not to those heights.”

“I understand. But if I don’t get to the bottom of this and find the killer, I’m as good as dead.”

“So I have heard,” my godmother said. She lifted her right hand and extended it to me. “Then give me your hand.”

“*I need* my hand, Godmother. Both of them.”

She let out a peal of laughter. “No, silly child. Simply put your hand in mine. I will convey you.”

I gave her a sidelong look and asked warily, “At what price?”

“None.”

“*None*? You never do anything without a price.”

She rolled her eyes and clarified, “None to you, child.”

“Who, then?”

“No one you know, or knew,” Lea said.

An intuition hit me. “My mother. That’s who you’re talking about.”

Lea left her hand extended. She smiled, but only said, “Perhaps.”

I regarded her hand quietly for a moment, then said, "I'm not sure I can believe that you're really going to protect me."

"But I already have."

I folded my arms. "When?"

"If you will remember that night in the boneyard, I healed a wound to your head that may well have killed you."

"You only did it to sucker me into getting you the sword!"

Lea's tone became wounded. "Not *only* for that. And if you consider further, I also freed you of a crippling binding and rescued you from a blazing inferno not twenty-four hours later."

"You charged my girlfriend all her memories of me to do it! And you only saved me from the fire so that you could put me in a doghouse."

"That does not change the fact that I was, after all, protecting you."

I stared at her in frustration for a minute and then scowled. "What have you done for me lately?"

Lea closed her eyes for a moment, then opened her mouth and spoke. Her voice came out aged and querulous. "What's all that racket! I have already called the police, I have! You fruits get out of our hall or they'll lock you away!"

I blinked. "Reuel's apartment. That was you?"

"Obviously, child. And at the market, earlier this eve." She lifted her hand in the air, made an intricate motion with long, pale fingers, and opened her mouth again, as if singing a note of music. Instead, the sound of police sirens emerged, somewhat muted and indistinguishable from the real thing.

I shook my head. "I don't get it."

She moved her fingers again, and the sirens blended into another silver-sweet laugh, her expression amused, almost fond. "I am sure you do not, poppet." She offered her hand again. "Come. Time is pressing."

She had that part right at least. And I knew she was telling me the truth. Her words had left her little room for evasion. I'd never gotten anything but burned when making deals with the faeries, and if Lea was offering to help me for free, there had to be a catch somewhere.

Lea's expression told me that she either knew what I'd been thinking or knew me well enough to guess, and she laughed again. "Harry, Harry," she said. "If it is of any consequence to you, remember that our bargain is still in effect. I am bound to do you no harm for several weeks more."

I'd forgotten about that. Of course, I couldn't fully trust to that, either. Even if she had sworn to do me no harm, if I asked her to take me somewhere she could drop me off in a forest full of Unseelie nasties without breaking her word. She'd done something very similar to me last year.

Thunder rumbled again, and the light flared even more brightly in the clouds. Tick, tick, tick, the clock was running, and I wasn't going to get anything done standing here waffling. Either I trusted myself to my godmother or I went back home and waited for something to come along and squash me.

Going with Lea wasn't the best way to get what I wanted—it was just the only way. I took a breath and took her hand. Her skin felt like cool silk, untouched by the rain. “All right. And after them, I need to see the Mothers.”

Lea gave me an oblique glance and said, “Survive the flood before hurling yourself into the fire, child. Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

Annoyance flickered over her eyebrows. “Child, stop wasting time with questions. You have given me your hand. Close your eyes.”

I muttered a curse to myself and did it. My godmother spoke something, a string of liquid syllables in a tongue I could not understand—but it made my knees turn rubbery and my fingers suddenly feel weak. A wave of disorientation, dizzying but not unpleasantly so, scrambled my sense of direction. I felt a breeze on my face, a sense of movement, but I couldn't have said whether I was falling or rising or moving forward.

The movement stopped, and the whirling sensations passed. Thunder rumbled again, very loudly, and the surface I stood on shook with it. Light played against my closed eyelids.

“We are here,” Lea said, her voice hushed.

I opened my eyes.

I stood on a solid surface among grey and drifting mist. The mist covered whatever ground I was on, and though I poked at it with my foot, I couldn't tell if it was earth, wood, or concrete. The landscape around me rolled in hills and shallow valleys, all of it covered in ground fog. I frowned up at the skies. They were clear. Stars glittered impossibly bright against the velvet curtain of night, sparkling in dozens of colors, instead of in the usual pale silver, jewels against the blackness of the void. Thunder

rumbled again, and the ground shook beneath the mist. Lightning flashed along with it, and the ground all around us lit with a sudden angry blue fire that slowly faded away.

The truth dawned on me slowly. I pushed my foot at the ground again, and then in a circle around me. “We’re . . .” I choked. “We’re on . . . we’re on . . .”

“The clouds,” my godmother said, nodding. “Or so it would seem to you. We are no longer in the mortal world.”

“The Nevernever, then. Faerie?”

She shook her head and spoke, her voice still hushed, almost reverent. “No. This is the world between, the sometimes place. Where Chicago and Faerie meet, overlap. Chicago-Over-Chicago, if you will. This is the place the Queens call forth when the Sidhe desire to spill blood.”

“They call it forth?” I asked in a quiet voice. “They create it?”

“Even so,” Lea said, her voice similarly low. “They prepare for war.”

I turned slowly, taking it in. We stood on a rise of ground in a broad, shallow valley. I could make out what looked like a mist-shrouded lake shore not far away. A river cut through the cloudscape.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “This is . . . familiar.” Chicago-Over-Chicago, she had said. I started adding in mental images of buildings, streets, lights, cars, people. “This is Chicago. The land.”

“A model of it,” Lea agreed. “Crafted from clouds and mist.”

I kept turning and found behind me a stone, grey and ominous and enormous, startlingly solid amid all the drifting white. I took a step back from it and saw the shape of it—a table, made of a massive slab of rock, the legs made of more stones as thick as the pillars at Stonehenge. Writing writhed across the surface of the stone, runes that looked a little familiar. Norse, maybe? Some of them looked more like Egyptian. They seemed to take something from several different sources, leaving them unreadable. Lightning flashed again through the ground, and a wave of blue-white light flooded over the table, through the runes, lighting them like Las Vegas neon for a moment.

“I’ve heard of this,” I said after a moment. “A long time ago. Ebenezer called it the Stone Table.”

“Yes,” my godmother whispered. “Blood is power, child. Blood spilled upon that stone forever becomes a part of who holds it.”

“Who holds it?”

She nodded, her green eyes luminous. “For half of the year, the Table lies within Winter. For half, within Summer.”

“It changes hands,” I said, understanding. “Midsummer and Midwinter.”

“Yes. Summer holds the Table now. But not for much longer.”

I stepped toward the Table and extended a hand. The air around it literally shook, pressing against my fingers, making my skin ripple visibly as though against a strong wind—but I felt nothing. I touched the surface of the Table itself, and could feel the power in it, buzzing through the flowing runes like electricity through high-voltage cables. The sensation engulfed my hand with sudden heat and violence, and I jerked my fingers back. They were numb, and the nails of the two that had touched the table were blackened at the edges. Wisps of smoke rose from them.

I shook my fingers and looked at my godmother. “Let me get this straight. Blood spilled onto the Table turns into power for whoever holds it. Summer now. But Winter, after tomorrow night.”

Lea inclined her head, silent.

“I don’t understand what makes that so important.”

She frowned at the Table, then began pacing around it, slowly, clockwise, her eyes never leaving me. “The Table is not merely a repository for energy, child. It is a conduit. Blood spilled upon its surface takes more than merely life with it.”

“Power,” I said. I frowned and folded my arms, watching her. “So if, for instance, a wizard’s blood spilled there . . .”

She smiled. “Great power would come of it. Mortal life, mortal magic, drawn into the hands of whichever Queen ruled the Table.”

I swallowed and took a step back. “Oh.”

Lea completed her circuit of the table and stopped beside me. She glanced furtively around her, then looked me in the eyes and said, her voice barely audible, “Child. Should you survive this conflict, do not let Mab bring you here. Never.”

A chill crawled down my spine. “Yeah. Okay.” I shook my head. “Godmother, I still don’t get what you’re trying to tell me. Why is the Table so important?”

She gestured, left and right, toward a pair of hilltops facing one another across the broad valley. I looked at one, squinting at a sudden blur in my vision. I tried looking at the other, and the same thing happened. “I can’t see,” I said. “It’s a veil or something.”

“You must see if you are to understand.”

I drew in a slow breath. Wizards can see things most people can't. It's called the Sight, the Third Eye, a lot of other names. If a wizard uses his Sight, he can see the forces of magic themselves at work, spells like braids of neon lights, veils pierced like projections on a screen. A wizard's Sight shows things as they truly are, and it's always an unsettling experience, one way or the other. What you see with the Sight stays with you. Good or bad, it's always just as fresh in your mind as if you'd just seen it. I'd looked on a little tree-spirit being with my Sight when I'd been about fourteen, the first time it had happened to me, and I still had a perfect picture of it in my head, as though I was *still* looking at it, a little cartoonish being that was part lawn gnome and part squirrel.

I'd seen worse since. Much worse. Demons. Mangled souls. Tormented spirits. All of that was still there too. But I'd also seen better. One or two glimpses of beings of such beauty and purity and light that it could make me weep. But each time it got a little harder to live with, a little harder to bear, a cumulative weight.

I gritted my teeth, closed my eyes, and with careful deliberation unlocked my Sight.

Opening my eyes again made me stagger as I was hit with a sudden rush of impressions. The cloudy landscape absolutely seethed with magical energies. From the southern hilltop, wild green and golden light spilled, falling over the landscape like a translucent garden, vines of green, golden flowers, flashes of other colors spread through them, clawing at the gentle ground, anchored here and there at points of light so vibrant and bright that I couldn't look directly at them.

From the other side, cold blue and purple and greenish power spread like crystals of ice, with the slow and relentless power of a glacier, pressing ahead in some places, melted back in others, especially strong around the valley's winding rivers.

The conflict of energies both wound back to the hilltops themselves, to points of light as bright as small suns. I could, just barely, see the shadow of solid beings within those lights, and even the shadow of each was an overwhelming presence upon my senses. One was a sense of warmth, choking heat, so much that I couldn't breathe, that it pressed into me and set me aflame. The other was of cold, horrible and absolute, winding cold limbs around me, stealing away my strength. Those presences flooded

through me, sudden beauty, power so terrifying and exhilarating and awesome that I fell to my knees and sobbed.

Those powers played against one another—I could sense that, though not the exact nature of their conflict. Energies wound about one another, subtle pressures of darkness and light, leaving the landscape vaguely lit in squares of cold and warm color. Fields of red and gold and bright green stood against empty, dead blocks of blue, purple, pale white. A pattern had formed in them, a structure to the conflict that was not wholly complete. Most of a chessboard. Only at the center, at the Table, was the pattern broken, a solid area of Summer’s power in green and gold around the Stone Table, while Winter’s dark, crystalline ice slowly pressed closer, somehow in time with the almost undetectable motion of the stars overhead.

So I saw it. I got a look at what I was up against, at the naked strength of the two Queens of Faerie, and it was bigger than me. Every ounce of strength I could have summoned would have been no more than a flickering spark beside either of those blazing fountains of light and magic. It was power that had existed since the dawn of life, and would until its end. It was power that had cowed mortals into abject worship and terror before—and I finally understood why. I wasn’t a pawn of that kind of strength. I was an insect beside giants, a blade of grass before towering trees.

And there was a dreadful attraction in seeing that power, something in it that called to the magic in me, like to like, made me want to hurl myself into those flames, into that endless, icy cold. Moths look at bug zappers like I looked at the Queens of Faerie.

I tore my eyes away by hiding my face in my arms. I fell to my side on the ground and curled up, trying to shut the Sight, to force those images to stop flooding over me. I shook and tried to say something. I’m not sure what. It came out as stuttering, gibbering sounds. After that, I don’t remember much until cold rain started slapping me on the cheek.

I opened my eyes and found myself lying on the cold, wet ground on the shores of Lake Michigan, where I’d first called out to my godmother. My head was on something soft that turned out to be her lap. I sat up and away from her quickly. My head hurt, and the images the Sight had showed me made me feel particularly small and vulnerable. I sat shivering in the rain for a minute before I glanced back at my godmother.

“You should have warned me.”

Her face showed no remorse, and little concern. "It would have changed nothing. You needed to see." She paused and then added, "I regret that it was the only way. Do you yet understand?"

"The war," I said. "They'll fight for control of the area around the Table. If Summer holds the space, it won't matter if it's Winter's time or not. Mab won't be able to reach the table, spill blood on it, and add the power of the Summer Knight to Winter." I took a breath. "There was a sense to what they were doing. As though it was a ritual. Something they'd done before."

"Of course," Lea said. "They exist in opposition. Each wields vast power, wizard—power to rival the archangels and lesser gods. But they cancel one another flawlessly. And in the end, the board will be evenly divided. The lesser pieces will emerge and do battle to decide the balance."

"The Ladies," I said. "The Knights."

"And," Lea added, lifting a finger, "the Emissaries."

"Like hell. I'm not fighting in some kind of fucked-up faerie battle in the clouds."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

I snorted. "But you didn't help me. I needed to speak to them. Find out if one of them was responsible."

"And so you did. More truly than if you'd exchanged words."

I frowned at her and thought through what I knew, and what I'd learned on my trip to the Stone Table. "Mab shouldn't be in any hurry. If Summer is missing her Knight, Winter has the edge if they wait. There's no need to take the Table."

"Yes."

"But Summer is moving to protect the Table. That means Titania thinks someone in Winter did it. But if Mab is responding instead of waiting, it means . . ." I frowned. "It means she isn't sure why Summer is moving. She's just checking Titania's advance. And *that* means that she isn't sure whodunit, either."

"Simplistic," Lea said. "But accurate enough reasoning, poppet. Such are the thoughts of the Queens of the Sidhe." She looked out across the lake. "Your sun will rise in some little time. When once again it sets, the war will begin. In a balanced Court, it would mean, perhaps, little of great consequence to the mortal world. But that balance is gone. If it is not restored, child, imagine what might happen."

I did. I mean, I'd had an idea what might go wrong before, but now I *knew* the scale of the forces involved. The powers of Winter and Summer weren't simply a bunch of electricity in a battery. They were like vast coiled springs, pressing against one another. As long as that pressure was equal, the energies were held in control. But an imbalance in one side or the other could cause them to slip, and the release of energies from either side would be vast and violent, and sure to inflict horrible consequences on anything nearby—in this case, Chicago, North America, and probably a good chunk of the rest of the world with it.

"I need to see the Mothers. Get me to them."

Lea rose, all grace and opaque expression, impossible to read. "That, too, is beyond me, child."

"I *need* to speak to the Mothers."

"I agree," Lea said. "But I cannot take you to them. The power is not mine. Perhaps Mab or Titania could, but they are otherwise occupied now. Committed."

"Great," I muttered. "How do I get to them?"

"One does not get to the Mothers, child. One can only answer an invitation." She frowned faintly. "I can do no more to help you. The lesser powers must take their places with the Queens, and I am needed shortly."

"You're going?"

She nodded, stepped forward, and kissed my brow. It was just a kiss, a press of soft lips against my skin. Then she stepped back, one hand on the hilt of the knife at her belt. "Be careful, child. And be swift. Remember—sundown." She paused and looked at me askance. "And consider a haircut. You look like a dandelion."

And with that, she stepped out onto the lake, and her form melted into water that fell back into the storm-tossed waters with a splash.

"Great," I muttered. I kicked a rock into the water. "Just great. Sundown. I know nothing. And the people I need to talk to screen all of their calls." I picked up another rock and threw it as hard as I could over the lake. The sound of rain swallowed up the splash.

I turned and trudged back toward the Beetle through the thunder and the rain. I could see the shapes of the trees a bit better now. Dawn must be coming on, somewhere behind the clouds.

I sat down behind the wheel of the trusty Beetle, put the key in, and started the car.

The battered old Volkswagen wheezed once, lurched without being put into gear, and then started to fill with smoke. I choked and scrambled out of the car. I hit the release on the engine cover and opened it. Black smoke billowed out, and I could dimly see fire behind it, chewing up some part of the engine. I went back to the front storage compartment, got out the fire extinguisher, and put out the fire. Then I stood there in the rain, tired and aching and staring at my burnt engine.

Dawn. At Midsummer, that meant I had maybe fifteen hours to figure out how to get to the Mothers. Somehow, I doubted that their number was listed. Even if it had been, my visit to the battleground around the Stone Table had shown me that the Queens possessed far more power than I could have believed. Their sheer presence had nearly blown the top off my head from a mile away—and the Mothers were an order of magnitude above even Mab and Titania.

I had fifteen hours to find the killer and restore the Summer Knight's mantle to the Summer Court. *And then* to stop a war happening in some wild nether-place between here and the spirit world that I had no idea how to reach.

And my car had died. Again.

"Over your head," I muttered. "Harry, this is too big for you to handle alone."

The Council. I should contact Ebenezar, tell him what was happening. The situation was too big, too volatile, to risk screwing it up over a matter of Council protocol. Maybe I'd get lucky and the Council would A, believe me, and B, decide to help.

Yeah. And maybe if I glued enough feathers to my arms, I'd be able to fly.

Chapter Twenty-four



I examined my car for a few minutes more, took a couple of things off it, and walked to the nearest gas station. I called a wrecker, then got a cab back to my apartment, paying for everything with Meryl's advance.

Once there, I got a Coke out of the icebox, put out fresh food and water for Mister, and changed his kitty litter. It wasn't until I had dug around under the kitchen sink, gotten out the bottle of dishwashing soap, and blown the dust off of it that I realized I was stalling.

I glowered at the phone and told myself, "Pride goeth before a fall, Harry. Pride can be bad. It can make you do stupid things."

I took a deep breath and shotgunned the Coke. Then I picked up the phone and dialed the number Morgan had left me.

It barely rang once before someone picked up and a male voice said, "Who is calling, please?"

"Dresden. I need to speak to Ebenezer McCoy."

"One moment." Sound cut off, and I figured whoever answered must have put their hand over the mouthpiece. Then there was a rustle as the phone changed hands.

"You've failed, then, Dresden," Morgan stated. His tone gave me a good mental picture of the smile on his smug face. "Stay where you are until the Wardens arrive to escort you to the Senior Council for judgement."

I bit down on a creative expletive. "I haven't failed, Morgan. But I've turned up some information that the Senior Council should have." Pride goeth, Harry. "And I need help. This is getting too hot for one person to handle. I need some information and some backup if I'm going to sort this out."

"It's always all about you, isn't it?" Morgan said, his voice bitter. "You're the exception to every rule. You can break the Laws and mock the Council, you can ignore the trial set for you because you are too important to abide by their authority."

"It's got nothing to do with that," I said. "Hell's bells, Morgan, pull your head out of your ass. The faeries' power structure has become unstable, and it looks like it might hit critical mass if something isn't done. That's bigger than me, and a hell of a lot more important than Council protocol."

Morgan screamed at me, his voice so vicious that it made me flinch. “Who are you to judge that? You are no one, Dresden! You are nothing!” He took a seething breath. “For too long you have flouted the Council’s rule. No more. No more exceptions, no more delays, no more second chances.”

“Morgan,” I began, “I just need to speak to Ebenezar. Let him decide if —”

“No,” Morgan said.

“What?”

“No. You won’t evade justice this time, snake. This is your Trial. You will see it through without attempting to influence the Senior Council’s judgement.”

“Morgan, this is insane—”

“No. The insanity was in letting you live when you were a boy. DuMorne’s murderous apprentice. Insanity was pulling you from that burning house two years ago.” His voice dropped to an even more quiet register, the contrast to his previous tone unsettling. “Someone I dearly cared for was at Archangel, Dresden. And this time your lies aren’t going to get you out of what’s coming to you.”

Then he hung up the phone.

I stared at the receiver for a second before snarling with rage and slamming it down on the end table, over and over, until the plastic broke in my hands. It hurt. I picked up the phone and threw it against the stone of the fireplace. It shattered, its bell chiming drunkenly. I kicked at the heaped mess of my living room, scattering old boxes, empty cans of Coke, books, papers, and startled cockroaches. After a few minutes of that, I was panting, and some of the blind, frustrated anger had begun to recede.

“Bastard,” I growled. “That pigheaded, bigoted, self-righteous bastard.”

I needed to cool off, and the shower seemed as good a place as any. I got under the cold water and tried to wash off the sweat and fear of the past day. I half expected the water to burst into steam on contact with my skin, but instead I was able to let the anger slip away while focusing on the old shower routine—water, soap, rinse, shampoo, rinse. By the time I finished and stepped out shivering, I felt almost completely nonpsychotic.

I had no idea how to contact Ebenezar. If he was under Warden security, and I’m sure he and the rest of the Senior Council were, there would be no easy way. The best magical countermeasures in the world would create a

maze of misleading results for any spell or supernatural being that tried to find him.

For a moment, I debated asking Murphy for help. The Council tended to overlook any method that didn't involve the use of one kind of spell or another. Murphy's contacts in the force might be able to find them by purely old-fashioned methods. I decided against it. Even if Murphy traced the phone number down, Ebenezer might not be at it, and if I showed up there trying to get past the Wardens to get to him, it would be just the excuse Morgan needed to chop my head off.

I mussed up my hair with the towel and threw it on my narrow bed. Fine. I would do it without the Council's help.

I dressed again, putting on a pair of jeans and a white dress shirt still hanging in my closet. I rolled the sleeves up over my elbows. My sneakers were covered in muck, so I dragged my cowboy boots out of the closet and put them on. What the hell. Putting on the boots. Maybe it would do some good.

I got out my big sports bag, the kind you haul hockey gear around in. Into it went my blasting rod, my staff, and my sword cane, along with a backpack stocked with some candles, matches, a cup, a knife, a cardboard cylinder of salt, a canteen of blessed water, and various other bits of magical equipment I could use as needed. I threw in a box of old iron nails and a solid-steel Craftsman claw hammer with a black rubber grip, and put a couple of pieces of chalk in my pocket.

Then I slid the bag over my shoulder, went into the living room, and wrought the spell that would lead me to one of the very few only people who might help.

Half an hour later, I paid the cabbie and walked into one of the hotels surrounding O'Hare International Airport. The subtle tug of the spell led me to the hotel's restaurant, open for breakfast and half full of mostly business types. I found Elaine at a corner table, a couple of buffet plates scattered with the remains of her breakfast. Her rich brown hair had been pulled back into a tight braid and coiled at the base of her neck. Her face looked pale, tired, with deep circles under her eyes. She was sipping coffee and reading a paperback novel. She wore a different pair of jeans, these a lot looser, and a billowy white shirt open over a dark tank top. She stiffened a beat after my eyes landed on her, and looked up warily.

I walked to her table, pulled out the chair next to her, and sat down. “Morning.”

She watched me, her expression opaque. “Harry. How did you find me?”

“I got to thinking that same thing last night,” I said. “How did you find me, that is. And I realized that you hadn’t found me—you’d found my car. You were inside it and nearly unconscious when I got back to it. So I looked around the car.” I pulled the cap to a tire’s air valve out of my pocket and showed it to her. “And I found that one of these was missing. I figured you were probably the one who took it, and used it to home in on the Blue Beetle. So I took one of its mates from the other tires and used it to home in on the missing one.”

“You named your car after a superhero on the *Electric Company*?” Elaine reached into a brown leather purse on the chair beside her and drew out an identical valve cap. “Clever.”

I looked at the purse. What looked like airline tickets was sticking out of it. “You’re running.”

“You are a veritable wizard of the obvious, Harry.” She started to shrug, and her face became ashen, her expression twisting with pain. She took a slow breath and then resumed the motion with her unwounded shoulder. “I feel well motivated to run.”

“Do you really think a plane ticket will get you away from the Queens?”

“It will get me away from ground zero. That’s enough. There’s no way to find out who did it in time—and I don’t feel like running up against another assassin. I barely got away from the first one.”

I shook my head. “We’re close,” I said. “We have to be. They took a shot at me last night too. And I think I know who did both.”

She looked up at me, sharply. “You do?”

I picked up a crust of toast she’d discarded, mopped it through some leftover eggs, and ate it. “Yeah. But you probably have to catch a flight.”

Elaine rolled her eyes. “Tell you what. You stay here and feel smug. I’ll get another plate and be back when you’re done.” She got up, rather stiffly, and walked over to the buffet. She loaded her plate up with eggs and bacon and sausage mixed in with some French toast, and came back to the table. My mouth watered.

She pushed the plate at me. “Eat.”

I did, but between bites I asked, “Can you tell me what happened to you?”

She shook her head. “Not much to tell. I spoke with Mab and then with Maeve. I was on my way back to my hotel and someone jumped me in the parking lot. I was able to slip most of his first strike and called up enough fire to drive him away. Then I found your car.”

“Why did you come to me?” I asked.

“Because I didn’t know who did it, Harry. And I don’t trust anyone else in this town.”

My throat got a little tight. I borrowed her coffee to wash down the bacon. “It was Lloyd Slate.”

Elaine’s eyes widened. “The Winter Knight. How do you know?”

“While I was with Maeve, he came in carrying a knife in a box, and he’d been burned. It was coated in dried blood. Maeve was pretty furious that it wasn’t any good to her.”

Lines appeared between her eyebrows. “Slate . . . he was fetching my blood for her so that she could work a spell on me.” She tried to cover it, but I saw her shiver. “He probably tailed me out of that party. Thank the stars I used fire.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Dried out the blood, made it useless for whatever she wanted.” I shoveled down some more food. “Then last night I got jumped by a hired gun and a couple of faerie beasties.” I gave her the summary of the attack at Wal-Mart, leaving Murphy out of it.

“Maeve,” Elaine said.

“It’s about all I’ve got,” I said. “It doesn’t fit her very well, but—”

“Of course it fits her,” Elaine said absently. “Don’t tell me you fell for that psychotic dilettante nymphomaniac act she put on.”

I blinked and then said through a mouthful of French toast, “No. ’Course not.”

“She’s smart, Harry. She’s playing on your expectations.”

I chewed the next bite more slowly. “It’s a good theory. But that’s all it is. We need to know more.”

Elaine frowned at me. “You mean you want to talk to the Mothers.”

I nodded. “I figure they might let a few things slip about how things work. But I don’t know how to get there. I thought you might be able to ask someone in Summer.”

She closed her paperback. “No.”

“No, they won’t help?”

“No, I’m not going to see the Mothers. Harry, it’s insane. They’re too strong. They could kill you—worse than kill you—with a stray thought.”

“At this point I’m already in over my head. It doesn’t matter how deep the water gets from here.” I grimaced. “Besides, I don’t really have a choice.”

“You’re wrong,” she said with quiet emphasis. “You don’t have to stay here. You don’t have to play their game. Leave.”

“Like you are?”

“Like I am,” Elaine said. “You can’t stop what’s been set in motion, Harry, but you can kill yourself trying. It’s probably what Mab wanted to begin with.”

“No. I can stop it.”

She gave me a small smile. “Because you’re in the right? Harry, it doesn’t work like that.”

“Don’t I know it. But that’s not why I think so.”

“Then why?”

“You don’t try to kill someone who isn’t a threat to you. They took shots at both of us. They must think we can stop them.”

“They, them,” Elaine said. “Even if we are close, we don’t know who ‘they’ is.”

“That’s why we talk to the Mothers,” I told her. “They’re the strongest of the Queens. They know the most. If we’re smart, and lucky, we can get information from them.”

Elaine reached up to tug at her braid, her expression uncertain. “Harry, look. I’m not . . . I don’t want to . . .” She closed her eyes for a moment and then said in a voice, pained, “Please, don’t ask me to do this.”

“You don’t have to go,” I said. “Just find me the way to them. Just try.”

“You don’t understand the kind of trouble you’re asking for,” she said.

I looked down at my empty plate and said quietly, “Yeah. I do. I hate it, Elaine, and I’m afraid, and I must be half insane not to just dig myself a hole and pull it in after me. But I understand.” I reached across the table and put my hand over hers. Her skin was soft, warm, and she shivered at the touch. “Please.”

Her hand turned up, fingers curling briefly against mine. My turn to shiver. Elaine sighed. “You’re an imbecile, Harry. You’re such a fool.”

“I guess some things don’t change.”

She let out a subdued laugh before withdrawing her hand and standing. “I’ve got a favor left to me. I’ll call it in. Wait here.”

Five minutes later, she was back. “All right. Outside.”

I stood. “Thank you, Elaine. You going to make your plane?”

She opened her purse and tossed the airline tickets onto the table along with a pair of twenties. “I guess not.” Then she took a couple of other items out of the purse: a slave-ring of ivory carved in the shape of a ring of oak leaves and attached to a similar bracelet by a silver chain. An earring fashioned of what might have been copper and a teardrop-shaped black stone. Then an anklet dangling with bangles shaped like bird wings. She put them all on, then looked at my gym bag. “Still going with the phallic foci, eh? Staff and rod?”

“They make me feel all manly.”

Her mouth twitched, and she started for the exit. I followed her and found myself opening doors for her out of habit. She didn’t seem to be too horribly upset by it.

Outside, cars pulled up into a circle drive at the front of the hotel, airport shuttles disgorging and swallowing travelers, taxis picking up men and women in business suits. Elaine slipped the strap of her purse over her good shoulder and stood there quietly.

Maybe thirty seconds later, I heard the clopping of hooves on blacktop. A carriage rolled into sight, drawn by a pair of horses. One of them was the blue-white color of a drowned corpse, and its breath steamed in the air. The other was grass-green, its mane sown with wildflowers. The carriage itself looked like something from Victorian London, all dark wood and brass filigree—and no one was driving it. The horses came to a halt directly before us and stood there, stamping their feet and tossing their manes. The door to the carriage swung open in silence. No one was inside.

I took a surreptitious look around me. None of the straights seemed to have noticed the carriage or the unworldly horses pulling it. A taxi heading for the space the carriage occupied abruptly veered to one side and found another spot. I made an effort and could sense the whisper of enchantment around the carriage, subtle and strong, probably encouraging the straights not to notice it.

“I guess this is our ride,” I said.

“You think?” Elaine flipped her braid back over one shoulder and climbed in. “This will take us there, but we won’t have any protection on

the other side. Just remember, Harry, I told you this was a bad idea.”
“Preemptive I-told-you-sos,” I said. “Now I’ve seen everything.”

Chapter Twenty-five



The carriage took off so smoothly that I almost didn't feel it. I leaned over the window and twitched the shade aside. We pulled away from the hotel and into traffic with no one the wiser, cars giving us a wide berth even while not noting us. That was one hell of a veil. The carriage didn't jounce at all, and after about a minute wisps of mist began to brush up against the windows. Not long after, the mists blocked out the view of the city entirely. The street sounds faded, and all that was left was silver-grey mist and the clop of horse hooves.

The carriage stopped perhaps five minutes later, and the door swung open. I opened my gym bag and took out my rod and staff. I slipped the sword cane through my belt and drew out my amulet to lie openly on my chest. Elaine did the same with hers. Then we got out of the carriage.

I took a slow look at my surroundings. We stood on some kind of spongy grass, on a low, rolling hill surrounded by other low, rolling hills. The mist lay over the land like a crippled storm cloud, sluggish and thick in some places, thinner in others. The landscape was dotted with the occasional tree, boles thick and twisted, branches scrawny and long. A tattered-looking raven crouched on a nearby branch, its bead-black eyes gleaming.

"Cheery," Elaine said.

"Yeah. Very Baskerville." The carriage started up again, and I looked back to see it vanishing into the mist. "Okay. Where to now?"

At my words the raven let out a croaking caw. It shook itself, bits of moldy feather drifting down, and then beat its wings a few times and settled on another branch, almost out of sight.

"Harry," Elaine said.

"Yeah?"

"If you make any corny joke using the word 'nevermore,' I'm going to punch you. Do you understand me?"

"Never more," I confirmed. Elaine rolled her eyes. Then we both started off after the raven.

It led us through the cloudy landscape, flitting silently from tree to tree. We trudged behind it until more trees began to rise in the mist ahead of us,

thickening. The ground grew softer, the air more wet, cloying. The raven let out another caw, then vanished into the trees and out of sight.

I peered after it and said, “Do you see a light back there in the trees?”

“Yes. This must be the place.”

“Fine.” I started forward. Elaine caught my wrist and said in a sharp and warning tone, “Harry.”

She nodded toward a thick patch of shadows where two trees had fallen against one another. I had just begun to pick out a shape when it moved and came forward, close enough that I could make it out clearly.

The unicorn looked like a Budweiser horse, one of the huge draft beasts used for heavy labor. It had to have been eighteen hands high, maybe more. It had a broad chest, four heavy hooves, forward-pricked ears, and a long equine face.

That was where its resemblance to a Clydesdale ended.

It didn’t have a coat. It just had a smooth and slick-looking carapace, all chitinous scales and plates, mixing colors of dark green and midnight black. Its hooves were cloven and stained with old blood. One spiraling horn rose from its forehead, at least three feet long and wickedly pointed. The spirals were serrated on the edges, some of them covered with rust-brown stains. A pair of curling horns, like those of a bighorn sheep, curved around the sides of its head from the base of the horn. It didn’t have any eyes—just smooth, leathery chitin where they should have been. It tossed its head, and a mane of rotted cobwebs danced around its neck and forelegs, long and tattered as a burial shroud.

A large moth fluttered through the mist near the unicorn. The beast whirled, impossibly nimble, and lunged. Its spiral skewered the moth, and with a savage shake of its head, the unicorn threw the moth to the earth and pulverized the ground it landed on with sledgehammer blows of the blades of its hooves. It snorted after that, and then turned to pace silently back into the mist-covered trees.

Elaine’s eyes widened and she looked at me.

I glanced at her. “Unicorns,” I said. “Very dangerous. You go first.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“Maybe not,” I relented. “A guardian?”

“Obviously,” Elaine said. “How do we get past it?”

“Blow it up?”

“Tempting,” Elaine said. “But I don’t think it will make much of an impression on the Mothers if we kill their watchdog. A veil?”

I shook my head. “I don’t think unicorns rely on the normal senses. If I remember right, they sense thoughts.”

“In that case it shouldn’t notice you.”

“Hah,” I said in a monotone. “Hah-hah, ho-ho, oh my ribs. I have a better plan. I go through while you distract it.”

“With what? I’m fresh out of virginity. And that thing doesn’t look much like the unicorns I saw in Summer. It’s a lot less . . . prancy.”

“With thoughts,” I said. “They sense thoughts, and they’re attracted to purity. Your concentration was always better than mine. Theoretically, if you can keep an image in your head, it should focus on it and not you.”

“Think of a wonderful thought. Great plan, Peter Pan.”

“You have a better one?”

Elaine shook her head. “Okay. I’ll try to lead him down there.” She gestured down the line of trees. “Once I do, get moving.”

I nodded, and Elaine closed her eyes for a moment before her features smoothed over into relaxation. She started forward and into the trees, walking at a slow and measured pace.

The unicorn appeared again, ten feet in front of Elaine. The beast snorted and pawed at the earth and reared up on its hind legs, tossing its mane. Then it started forward at a slow and cautious walk.

Elaine held out her hand to it. It let out a gurgling whicker and nuzzled her palm. Still moving with dreamlike slowness, Elaine turned and began walking down the length of the lines of trees. The unicorn followed a pace or two behind her, the tip of its horn bobbing several inches above Elaine’s right shoulder.

They’d gone several paces before I saw that the plan wasn’t working. The unicorn’s body language changed. Its ears flattened back to its skull, and its feet shifted restlessly before it finally rose up on its hind hooves, preparing to lunge, with the deadly horn centered on Elaine’s back.

There wasn’t time to shout a warning. I lifted my blasting rod in my right hand, summoned the force of my will, and pushed it through the focus with a shout of “*Fuego!*”

Fire erupted from the tip of the rod, a scarlet ribbon of heat and flame and force that lanced out toward the unicorn. After having seen how spectacularly useful my magic wasn’t on the Ogre Grum, I didn’t want to

chance another faerie beast shrugging it off. So I wasn't shooting for the unicorn itself—but for the ground at its feet.

The blast ripped a three-foot trench in the earth, and the unicorn screamed and thrashed its head, trying to keep its balance. A normal horse would have toppled, but the unicorn somehow managed to get a couple of feet onto solid ground and hurled itself away in a forty-foot standing leap. It landed on its feet, already running, body sweeping in a circle to bring it charging toward me.

I ran for the nearest tree. The unicorn was faster, but I didn't have far to go, and I put the trunk between us.

It didn't slow down. Its horn slammed into the trunk of the dead tree and came through it as though it hadn't been there. I flinched away, but not fast enough to avoid catching several flying splinters in the chest and belly, and not fast enough to avoid a nasty cut on my left arm where one of those serrated edges of the horn ripped through my shirt. The pain of the injuries registered, but only as background data. I stepped around the bole of the tree, taking my staff in both hands, and swung it as hard as I could at the delicate bones of the unicorn's rear ankle.

Well, on a horse they're delicate. Evidently on unicorns, they're just a bit tender. The faerie beast let out a furious scream and twisted its body, tearing through the tree, shredding it as it whipped its horn free and whirled to orient on me. It lunged, the horn spearing toward me. I swept my staff up, a simple parry*quatre*, and shoved the tip out past my body while darting a pair of steps to my right, avoiding the beast's oncoming weight. I kept going, ducking a beat before the unicorn planted its forequarters, lifted its hind, and twisted, lashing out toward my head with both rear hooves. I rolled, came up running, and ducked behind the next tree. The unicorn turned and began stalking toward me, circling the tree, foam pattering from its open mouth.

Elaine cried out, and I whipped my head around to see her lifting her right hand, the ring on it releasing a cloud of glowing motes that burst around her in a swarm. The little lights streaked toward the unicorn and gathered around it, swirling and flashing in a dazzling cloud. One of them brushed against me, and my senses abruptly went into whiteout, overwhelmed with a simple image of walking down a sidewalk in worn shoes, the sun bright overhead, a purse bumping on my hip, stomach twinging with pleasant hunger pangs, the scent of hot asphalt in my nose,

children laughing and splashing somewhere nearby. A memory, something from Elaine. I staggered and pushed it away from me, regaining my senses.

The motes crowded around the unicorn, darting in to brush against it one at a time, and at each touch the faerie beast went wild. It spun and kicked and screamed and lashed out with its horn, lunging at insubstantial adversaries in wild frenzy, but all to no avail.

I looked past them to see Elaine standing in place, her hand extended, her face set in an expression of concentration and strain. "Harry," she shouted. "Go. I'll hold it."

I rose, heart pounding. "You got it?"

"For a little while. Just get to the Mothers," Elaine responded. "*Hurry!*"

"I don't want to leave you alone."

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of her face. "You won't be. When it gets loose, I'm not waiting around for it to skewer me."

I gritted my teeth. I didn't want to leave Elaine, but to be fair, she'd done better than I had. She stood against the unicorn still, only a dozen long strides away, her hand extended, the creature as contained as if she'd wrapped it in a net. My slender and straight and beautiful Elaine.

Memories, images washed through me, dozens of little things I'd forgotten coming back to me all at once; her laugh, quiet and wicked in the darkness; the feeling of her slender fingers slipping through mine; her face, asleep on the pillow beside me, gentle and peaceful in the morning sun.

There were many more, but I pushed them away. That had been a long time ago, and they wouldn't mean a thing if neither of us survived the next few minutes and hours.

I turned my back on her, left her struggling against the strength of that nightmarish unicorn, and ran toward the lights in the mist.

Chapter Twenty-six



The Nevernever is a big place. In fact, it's the biggest place. The Nevernever is what the wizards call the entirety of the realm of spirit. It isn't a physical place, with geography and weather patterns and so on. It's a shadow world, a magical realm, and its substance is as mutable as thought. It has a lot of names, like the Other Side and the Next World, and it contains within it just about any kind of spirit realm you can imagine, somewhere. Heaven, Hell, Olympus, Elysium, Tartarus, Gehenna—you name it, and it's in the Nevernever somewhere. In theory, at any rate.

The parts of the Nevernever closest to the mortal world are almost completely controlled by the Sidhe. This part of the spirit realm is called Faerie, and has close ties with our own natural world. As a result, Faerie resembles the real world in a lot of ways. It is fairly permanent and unchanging, for example, and has several versions of weather. But make no mistake—it isn't Earth. The rules of reality don't apply as tightly as they do in our world, so Faerie can be viciously treacherous. Most who go into it never come back.

And I had a gut feeling that I was running through the heart of Faerie.

The ground sloped down and grew wetter, softer. The mist swallowed sound quickly behind me, until all I could hear was my own labored breathing. The run made my heart pound, and my wounded hand throbbed painfully. There was a certain amount of exhilaration to the movement, my limbs and muscles stretching and feeling alive after several months of disuse. I couldn't have kept up the pace for long, but luckily I didn't have far to go.

The lights turned out to be a pair of lit windows in a cottage that stood by itself on a slight rise of ground. Stone obelisks the size of coffins, some fallen and cracked and others still upright, stood scattered in loose rings around the mound. The raven rested on one of them, its beady eyes gleaming. It let out another croaking sound and flew through an open window of the cottage.

I stood there panting for a minute, trying to get my breath, before I walked up to the door. My flesh began to crawl with a shivering sensation. I took a step back and looked at the house. Stone walls. A thatch roof. I could

smell mildew beneath an odor of fresh-baked bread. The door was made of some kind of heavy, weathered wood, and the snowflake symbol I'd seen before had been carved into it. Mother Winter, then. If she was anything like Mab, she would have the kind of power that would give any wizard the creeps. It would just hang in the air around her, like body warmth. Except that it would take a lot of body to feel its warmth through stone walls and a heavy door. Gulp.

I lifted my hand to knock, and the door swung open of its own accord, complete with a melodramatic Hammer Films whimper of rusting hinges.

A voice, little more than a creaking whisper, said, "Come in, boy. We have been expecting you."

Double gulp. I wiped my palms on my jeans and made sure I had a good grip on both staff and rod before I stepped across the threshold and into the dim cottage.

The place was all one room. The floor was wooden, though the boards looked weathered and dry. Shelves stood against the stone walls. A loom rested in the far corner, near the fireplace, a spinning wheel beside it. Before the fireplace sat a rocking chair, occupied, squeaking as it moved. A figure sat in it, shrouded in a shawl, a hood, as though someone had animated a bundle of blankets and cloth. On the hearth above the fireplace sat several sets of teeth, more or less human-sized. One looked simple enough, all white and even. The next was rotted-looking, with chipped incisors and a broken molar. The next set had all pointed teeth, stained with bits of rusty brown and what looked like rotten bits of flesh stuck between them. The last was made out of some kind of silvery metal, shining like a sword.

"Interesting," came the creaking voice from the creaking chair. "Most interesting. Can you feel it?"

"Uh," I said.

From the other side of the cottage, a brisk voice tsked, and I spun to face the newcomer. Another woman, stooped with age, blew dust from a shelf and ran a cloth over it before replacing the bottles and jars. She turned and eyed me with glittering green eyes from within a weathered but rosy face. "Of course I do. The poor child. He's walked a thorny path." The elderly lady came to me and put her hands firmly on either side of my head, peering at either eye. "Scars here, some. Stick out your tongue, boy."

I blinked. "Uh?"

“Stick out your tongue,” she repeated in a crisp tone. I did. She peered at my tongue and my throat and said, “Strength, though. And he can be clever, at times. It would seem your daughter chose ably.”

I closed my mouth and she released my head. “Mother Summer, I presume?”

She beamed up at me. “Yes, dear. And this is Mother Winter.” She gestured vaguely at the chair by the fire. “Don’t be offended if she doesn’t get up. It’s the wrong season, you know. Hand me that broom.”

I blinked, then reached over to pick up the ramshackle old broom with a gnarled handle and passed it to Mother Summer. The old lady took it and immediately began sweeping the dusty floor of the old cottage.

“Bah,” whispered Mother Winter. “The dust is just going to come back.”

“It’s the principle of the thing,” Summer said. “Isn’t that right, boy?”

I sneezed and mumbled something noncommittal. “Uh, pardon me, ladies. But I wondered if you could answer a few questions for me.”

Winter’s head seemed to turn slightly toward me from within her hood. Mother Summer stopped and eyed me, her grass-green eyes sparkling. “You wish answers?”

“Yes,” I said.

“How can you expect to get them,” Winter wheezed, “when you do not yet know the proper questions?”

“Uh,” I said again. Brilliance incarnate, that’s me.

Summer shook her head and said, “An exchange, then,” she said. “We will ask you a question. And for your answer, we will each give you an answer to what you seek.”

“No offense, but I didn’t come here so that you could ask me questions.”

“Are you sure?” Mother Summer asked. She swept a pile of dust past me and out the door. “How do you know you didn’t?”

Mother Winter’s rasping whisper came to me, disgusted. “She’ll prattle on all day. Answer us the questions, boy. Or get out.”

I took a deep breath. “All right,” I said. “Ask.”

Mother Winter turned back to face the fire. “Simply tell us, boy. Which is more important. The body—”

“—or the soul,” Mother Summer picked up. They both fell silent, and I felt their focus on me like the tip of a knife resting against my skin.

“I suppose that would depend on who was asking whom,” I said, finally.

“We ask,” Winter whispered.

Summer nodded. "And we ask you."

I thought about my words for a moment before I spoke.

I know, it shocked me too.

"Then I would say that were I old, sick, and dying, I would believe that the soul is more important. And if I was a man about to be burned at the stake in order to preserve his soul, I would believe that the body is more important."

The words fell on a long moment of silence. I found myself shifting my feet restlessly.

"Fairly said," Mother Winter rasped at last.

"Wise enough," Summer agreed. "Why did you give that answer, boy?"

"Because it's a stupid question. The answer isn't as simple as one or the other."

"Precisely," Summer said. She walked to the fire and withdrew a baking sheet on a long handle. A roundish loaf of bread was on it. She set it on a rack to cool. "This child sees what she does not."

"It is not in her nature," Winter murmured. "She is what she is."

Mother Summer sighed and nodded. "These are strange times."

"Hold on," I said. "What she are you talking about, here? It's Maeve, isn't it?"

Mother Winter made a quiet wheezing sound that might have been a laugh.

"I answered your questions," I said. "So pay up."

"Patience, boy," Mother Summer said. She took a kettle from a hook by the fireplace and poured tea into a pair of cups. She dipped what looked like honey into each, then cream, and gave one to Mother Winter.

I waited until each of them had sipped before I said, "Right, patience expired. I can't afford to wait. Tonight is Midsummer. Tonight the balance begins to tilt back to Winter, and Maeve is going to try to use the Stone Table to steal the Summer Knight's mantle for keeps."

"Indeed. Something to be prevented at all costs." Mother Summer arched an eyebrow. "Then what is your question?"

"Who killed the Summer Knight? Who stole his mantle?"

Mother Summer gave me a disappointed glance and sipped her tea.

Mother Winter lifted her tea to her hood. I still couldn't see her face—but her hand looked withered, the fingers tinged with blue. She lowered her

cup and said, "You ask a foolish question, boy. You are more clever than this."

I folded my arms. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Mother Summer frowned at Winter, but said, "It means that who is not as important as *why*."

"And *how*," Mother Winter added.

"Think, boy," Summer said. "What has the theft of the mantle accomplished?"

I frowned. War between the Courts, for one. Odd activity in the magical and natural world alike. But mostly the coming war, Winter and Summer gathering to battle at the Stone Table.

"Exactly," Winter whispered. The skin on the back of my neck rippled with a cold and unpleasant sensation. Hell's bells, she'd heard *me thinking*. "But think, wizard. How was it done? Theft is theft, whether the prize is food, or riches, or beauty or power."

Since it didn't seem to matter either way, I did my thinking out loud. "When something is stolen a couple of things can happen to it. It can be carried away where it cannot be reached."

"Hoarded," Summer put in. "Such as the dragons do."

"Yeah, okay. Uh, it can be destroyed."

"No, it can't," Mother Winter said. "Your own sage tells you that. The German fellow with the wild hair."

"Einstein," I muttered. "Okay, then, but it can be rendered valueless. Or it can be sold to someone else."

Mother Summer nodded. "Both of which are *change*."

I held up a hand. "Hold it, hold it. Look, as I understand it, this power of the Summer Knight, his mantle, it can't just exist on its own. It has to be inside a vessel."

"Yes," Winter murmured. "Within one of the Queens, or within the Knight."

"And it isn't with one of the Queens."

"True," Summer said. "We would sense it, were it so."

"So it's already in another Knight," I said. "But if that was true, there'd be no imbalance." I scratched at my head, and as I did it slowly dawned on me. "Unless it had been changed. Unless the new Knight had been changed. Transformed into something else. Something that left the power trapped, inert, useless."

Both of them regarded me steadily, silently.

"All right," I said. "I have my question."

"Ask it," they said together.

"How does the mantle pass on from one Knight to the next?"

Mother Summer smiled, but the expression was a grim one. "It returns to the nearest reflection of itself. To the nearest vessel of Summer. She, in turn, chooses the next Knight."

That meant that only one of the Queens of Summer could be behind it. Titania was out already—she had begun the war against Mab because she didn't know where the mantle was. Mother Summer would not have been telling me this information if she'd been the one to do it. That left only one person.

"Stars and stones," I muttered. "Aurora."

The two Mothers set down their teacups together. "Time presses," Summer said.

"That which must not be may be," Winter continued.

"You, we judge, are the one who may set things aright once more—"

"—if you are strong enough."

"Brave enough."

"Whoa, hold your horses," I said. "Can't I just bring this out to Mab and Titania?"

"Beyond talk now," Mother Winter said. "They go to war."

"Stop them," I said. "You two have to be stronger than Mab and Titania. Make them shut up and listen to you."

"Not that simple," Winter said.

Summer nodded. "We have power, but bound within certain limits. We cannot interfere with the Queens or Ladies. Not even on a matter so dire as this."

"What *can* you do?"

"I?" Summer said. "Nothing."

I frowned and looked from her to Mother Winter.

One aged, cracked hand lifted and beckoned me. "Come closer, boy."

I started to say no. But my feet moved without asking the rest of me, and I knelt in front of Mother Winter's rocking chair. I couldn't see her, even from here. Even her feet were covered by layers of dark cloth. But on her lap rested a pair of knitting needles, and a simple square of cloth, trailing thick threads of grey, undyed wool. Mother Winter reached down with her

withered hands, and took up a pair of rusted shears. She cut the trailing threads and passed me the cloth.

I took it, again without thinking. It felt soft, cold as if it had been in a refrigerator, and it tingled with a subtle, dangerous energy.

“It isn’t tied off,” I said quietly.

“Nor should it be,” Winter said. “It is an Unraveling.”

“A what?”

“An unmaking, boy. I am the unmaker, the destroyer. It is what I am. Bound within those threads is the power to undo any enchantment done. Touch the cloth to that which must be undone. Unravel the threads. It will be so.”

I stared at the square cloth for a moment, Then asked quietly, “Anyenchantment? Any transformation?”

“Any.”

My hands started shaking. “You mean . . . I could use this to undo what the vampires did to Susan. Just wipe it away. Make her mortal again.”

“You could, Emissary.” Mother Winter’s tone held a bone-dry amusement.

I swallowed and rose, folding up the cloth. I slipped it into my pocket, careful not to let any threads trail out. “Is this a gift?”

“No,” Winter rasped. “But a necessity.”

“What am I supposed to do with it?”

Mother Summer shook her head. “It is yours now, and yours to employ. We have reached the limits of how we may act. The rest is yours.”

“Make haste,” Winter whispered.

Mother Summer nodded. “No time remains. Be swift and wise, mortal child. Go with our blessings.”

Winter withdrew her frail hands into the sleeves of her robe. “Do not fail, boy.”

“Hell’s bells, no pressure,” I muttered. I gave each of them a short bow and turned for the door. I stepped over the threshold of the cottage and said, “Oh, by the way. I apologize if we did any harm to your unicorn on the way in.”

I looked back to see Mother Summer arch a brow. Winter’s head shifted, and I could see the gleam of light on yellow teeth. Her voice rasped, “What unicorn?”

The door shut, again of its own accord. I glowered at the wood for a moment and then muttered, “Freaking weirdo faerie biddies.” I turned and started back the way I had come. The Unraveling was a cool weight in my pocket, and promised to get uncomfortably chilly if I left it there too long.

The thought of the Unraveling made me walk faster, excitement skipping through me. If what the Mothers said was true, I’d be able to use the cloth to help Susan, which was something just this side of divine intervention. All I had to do was to finish up this case, and then I could go find her.

Of course, I thought sourly, finishing up this case was likely to kill me. The Mothers may have given me some insight, and a magic doily, but they sure as hell hadn’t given me a freaking clue as to how to resolve this—and, I realized, they hadn’t really *said*, “Aurora did it.” I knew they had to speak the truth to me, and their statements had led me to that conclusion—but how much of it was this mysterious prohibition from direct involvement and how much of it had been another fistful of faerie trickery?

“Make haste,” I rasped, trying to impersonate Winter’s voice. “We have reached the limits,” I said, mimicking Summer. I quickened my pace, and frowned over that last little comment Winter had made. She had taken an almost palpable glee in making it, as though it had given her an opening she wouldn’t otherwise have had.

What unicorn?

I gnawed over the question. If it was indeed a statement of importance, not just a passing mutter, then it had to mean something.

I frowned. It meant that there hadn’t *been* a guardian around the little cottage. Or at least not one Mother Winter had put there.

So who had?

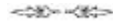
The answer hit me low in the gut, a sensation of physical sickness coming along with the realization. I stopped and clawed for my Sight.

I didn’t get to it before Grum came out from under a veil, Elaine standing close behind him. He caught me flat-footed. The ogre drove a sledgehammer fist toward my face. There was a flash of impact, a sensation of falling, and cool earth beneath my cheek.

Then the scent of Elaine’s subtle perfume.

Then blackness.

Chapter Twenty-seven



I came to on the ground of that dark Nevernever wood. Spirit realm or not, I felt cold and started shivering uncontrollably. That made playing possum pretty much impossible, so I sat up and tried to take stock.

I didn't feel any new bruises or breaks, so I hadn't been pounded while I was out. It probably hadn't been long. Mother Winter's Unraveling was no longer in my pocket. My bag was gone, as was my ring and my bracelet. My staff and rod, needless to say, had been taken as well. I could still feel my mother's pentacle amulet against my chest, though, which came as something of a surprise. My hand throbbed, where Mab had driven the freaking letter opener through it.

Other than that, I felt more or less whole. Huzzah.

I squinted at my surroundings next and found a ring of toadstools grown up around me. They weren't huge, tentacular, horribly fanged toadstools or anything, but it put a little chill in me all the same. I lifted my hand and reached out for them tentatively, extending my wizard's senses along with the gesture. I hit a wall. I couldn't think of another way to describe it. Where the ring began, my ability to reach, move, and perceive with my supernatural senses simply ended.

Trapped. Double huzzah.

Only after I'd gotten an idea of my predicament did I stand up and face my captors.

There were five of them, which seemed less than fair. I recognized the nearest right away—Aurora, the Summer Lady, now dressed in what I could only describe as a battle gown, made out of some kind of silver mail as fine and light as cloth. It clung closely to her, from the top of her throat down to her wrists and ankles, and shone with its own dim radiance in the forest's gloom. She wore a sword at her hip, and upon her pale hair rested a garland of living leaves. She turned green eyes to me, heartbreakingly lovely, and regarded me with an expression both sad and resolved.

"Wizard," Aurora said, "I regret that it has come to this. But you have come too close to interfering. Once you had served your purpose, I could not allow you to continue your involvement."

I grimaced and looked past her, at the ogre Grum, huge and scarlet-skinned and silent, and the horrific unicorn that had apparently been guarding the way to Mother Winter's cottage.

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"Kill you," Aurora said, her voice gentle. "I regret the necessity. But you're too dangerous to be allowed to live."

I squinted at her. "Then why haven't you?"

"Good question," said the fourth person present—Lloyd Slate, the Winter Knight. He still wore his biker leathers, but he'd added bits of mail and a few metal plates to the ensemble. He wore a sword at his hip, another on his back, and bore a heavy pistol on his belt. The gaunt, tense hunger of his expression hadn't changed. He looked nervous and angry. "If it had been up to me, I'd have cut your throat when Grum first dropped you."

"Why call him Grum?" I said, scowling at the ogre. "You might as well drop the glamour, Lord Marshal. There's not much point to it now."

The ogre's face twisted with surprise.

I glared spitefully at the dark unicorn and spat, "You too, Korrick."

Both ogre and unicorn glanced at Aurora. The Faerie Queen never took her eyes off me, but nodded. The ogre's form blurred and twisted, and resolved itself into the form of Talos, the Sidhe lord from Aurora's penthouse at the Rothchild. His pale hair had been drawn back into a fighting braid, and he wore close-fit mail of some glittering black metal that made him look rail-thin and deadly.

At the same time the unicorn shook itself and rose up into the hulking form of Korrick, the centaur, also dressed in mail and bearing weapons of faerie make. He stamped one huge hoof and said nothing.

Aurora walked in a circle around me, frowning. "How long have you known, wizard?"

I shrugged. "Not long. I started getting it on the way out of Mother Winter's cottage. Once I knew where to start, it wasn't hard to start adding up the numbers."

"We don't have time for this," Slate said and spat on the ground to one side.

"If he puzzled it out, others may have as well," Aurora said, her voice patient. "We should know if any other opposition is coming. Tell me, wizard. How did you piece it together?"

"Go to hell," I snapped.

Aurora turned to the last person there and asked, “Can he be reasoned with?”

Elaine stood a little apart from the others, her back to them. My bag rested on the ground near her feet, and my rod and staff lay there too. She’d added a cloak of emerald green to her outfit, somehow making it look natural. She glanced at Aurora and then at me. She averted her eyes quickly, “You’ve already told him you’re going to kill him. He won’t cooperate.”

Aurora shook her head. “More sacrifices. I am sorry you pushed me to this, wizard.”

Her hand moved. Some unseen force jerked my chin up, my eyes to hers. They flashed, a ripple of colors, and I felt the force of her mind, her will, glide past my defenses and into me. I lost my balance and staggered, leaning helplessly against the invisible solidity of the circle she’d imprisoned me in. I tried to fight it, but it was like trying to push water up a hill—nothing for me to strain against, nothing for me to focus upon. I was on her turf, trapped in a circle of her power. She flowed into me, down through my eyes, and all I could do was watch the pretty colors.

“Now,” she said, and her voice was the gentlest, sweetest thing I’d ever heard. “What did you learn of the Summer Knight’s death?”

“You were behind it,” I heard myself saying, my voice slow and heavy. “You had him killed.”

“How?”

“Lloyd Slate. He hates Maeve. You recruited him to help you. Elaine took him inside Reuel’s building, through the Nevernever. He fought Reuel. That’s why there was ooze on the stairs. The water on Reuel’s arms and legs was where Summer fire met Winter ice. Slate threw him down the stairs and broke his neck.”

“And his mantle of power?”

“Redirected,” I mumbled. “You gathered it in and placed it into another person.”

“Who?”

“The changeling girl,” I said. “Lily. You gave her the mantle and then you turned her to stone. That statue in your garden. It was right in front of me.”

“Very good,” Aurora said, and the gentle praise rippled through me. I fought to regain my senses, to escape the glittering green prison of her eyes. “What else?”

“You hired the ghoul. The Tigress. You sent her after me before Mab even spoke to me.”

“I do not know this ghoul. You are incorrect, wizard. I do not hire killers. Continue.”

“You set me up before I came to interview you.”

“In what way?” Aurora pressed.

“Maeve must have ordered Slate to take Elaine out. He made it look like he tried and missed, but Elaine played it for more. You helped her fake the injury.”

“Why did I do that?”

“To keep me upset, worried, so that when I spoke to you I wouldn’t have the presence of mind to corner you with a question. That’s why you attacked me, too. Telling me what a monster I’d become. To keep me off balance, keep me from asking the right questions.”

“Yes,” Aurora said. “And after that?”

“You decided to take me out. You sent Talos, Elaine, and Slate to kill me. And you created that construct in the garden center.”

Slate stepped closer. “Spooky,” he said. “He doesn’t *look* all that smart.”

“Yet he used only reason. Plus knowledge doubtless gained from the Queens and Mothers. He put it together for himself, rather than being told.” At that, her gaze slanted past me, to Elaine. I tried to pull away and couldn’t.

“Great,” Slate said. “No one squealed. Can we kill the great Kreskin now?”

Aurora held up a hand to Slate, and asked me, “Do you know my next objective?”

“You knew that if you bound up the Summer Knight’s mantle, Mother Winter would provide an Unraveling to free it and restore the balance. You waited for her to give it to me. Now you’re going to take it and the statue of Lily. You’re going to take her to the Stone Table during the battle. You’ll use the Unraveling, free Lily from being stone, and kill her on the table after midnight. The Summer Knight’s power will go to Winter permanently. You want to destroy the balance of power in Faerie. I don’t know why.”

Aurora’s eyes flashed dangerously. She removed her gaze from mine, and it was like suddenly falling *back up* a flight of stairs. I staggered back, tearing my eyes from her and focusing on the ground.

“Why? It should be obvious to you why, wizard. You of all people.” She spun in a glitter of silvery mail, pacing restlessly back and forth. “The cycle must be broken. Summer and Winter, constantly chasing each other, wounding what the other heals and healing what the other wounds. Our war, our senseless contest, waged for no reason other than that it has always been so—and mortals trapped between us, crushed by the struggle, made pawns and toys.” She took a shuddering, angry breath. “It must end. And I will end it.”

I ground my teeth, shivering. “You’ll end it by sending the natural world into chaos?”

“I did not set the price,” Aurora hissed. I caught sight of her eyes out of the corner of my vision and started tracking up to her face. I forced my gaze down again, barely in time. She continued speaking, in a low, impassioned voice. “I hate it. I hate every moment of the things I’ve had to do to accomplish this—but it should have been done long since, wizard. Delay is just as deadly. How many have died or been tormented to madness by Maeve, and those like her? You yourself have been tortured, abused, nearly enslaved by them. I do what *must* be done.”

I swallowed and said, “Harming and endangering mortal kind in order to help them. That’s insane.”

“Perhaps,” Aurora said. “But it is the only way.” She faced me again and asked, her voice cold, “Does the White Council know what you have discovered?”

“Bite me, faerie fruitcake.”

Slate stifled a laugh, hiding it under a cough. I felt more than saw Aurora’s sudden surge of rage, sparked by the Winter Knight but directed at me. A flare of light erupted from her, and I felt a sudden heat against the side of my body nearest her. The hairs on my arm rose straight up. Her voice rang out, hot and violent and strong. “What did you say, ape?”

“They don’t,” Elaine said, her voice tense. She put herself between me and Aurora, her back to me. “He told me before we left for the Mothers’. The Council doesn’t realize the depth of what’s happening. By the time they do, it will be too late for them to act.”

“Fine,” Slate said. “He’s the last loose end, then. Kill him and let’s get on with it.”

“Dammit, Slate,” I said. “Use your head, man. What do you think you’re going to get out of helping her like this?”

Slate gave me a cold smile. “That old bastard Reuel’s power, for one thing. I’ll be twice the Knight I was before—and then I’m going to settle some accounts with that little bitch Maeve.” He licked his lips. “After that, Aurora and I will decide what to do next.”

I let out a harsh bray of laughter. “I hope you got that in writing, dimwit. Do you really think she would let a man, and a mortal at that, have that much power over her?” Slate’s eyes became wary, and I pressed him. “Think about it. Has she ever given it to you straight, a statement, not a question or a dodge, or something she’s led you to assume?”

Suspicion grew in his gaze, but Aurora laid a hand on his shoulder. Slate’s eyes grew a little cloudy at her touch, and he closed them. “Peace, my Knight,” the Summer Lady murmured. “The wizard is a trickster, and desperate. He would say anything he thought might save him. Nothing has changed between us.”

I ground my teeth at the meaningless words, but Aurora had Slate’s number, whatever it was. Maybe all that time in Maeve’s company had softened him, the drugs and pleasures she fed him making him more open to suggestion. Maybe Aurora had just found a hole in his psychology. Either way, he wasn’t going to listen to me.

I looked around, but Korrick and Talos ignored me. Aurora kept on whispering to Slate. That left only one person to talk to, and the thought of it felt like someone driving nails into my chest. “Elaine,” I said. “This is crazy. Why are you doing this?”

She didn’t look up at me. “Survival, Harry. I promised to help Aurora or to give up my own life as forfeit in payment for all the years she protected me. I didn’t know when I made the promise that you were going to be involved.” She fell quiet for a moment, then swallowed before she said, her voice forced a little louder, “I didn’t know.”

“If Aurora isn’t stopped, someone is going to get hurt.”

“Someone gets hurt every day,” Elaine answered. “When you get right down to it, does it matter who? How? Or why?”

“People are going *todie* , Elaine.”

That stung her, and she looked up at me, sharp anger warring with a sheen of tears in her grey eyes. “Better them than me.”

I faced her, without looking away. “Better me than you, too, huh?”

She broke first, turning to regard Aurora and Slate. “Looks that way.”

I folded my arms and leaned against the back of my toadstool cell. I went over my options, but they were awfully limited. If Aurora wanted me dead, she would be able to see to it quite handily, and unless the cavalry came riding over the hill, there wasn't diddly I could do about it.

Call me a pessimist, but my life has been marked with a notable lack of cavalry. Checkmate.

Which left me with one last spell to throw. I closed my eyes for a moment, reaching inside, gathering up the magic, the life force within me. Any wizard has a reservoir of power inherent in him, power drawn from the core of his self rather than from his surroundings. Aurora's circle could cut me off from drawing upon ambient magic to fuel a spell—but it couldn't stop me from using the energy within me.

Granted, once used, there wouldn't be anything left to keep me breathing, my heart pumping, and electricity going through my brain. But then, that's why they call it a death curse, isn't it?

It was only a moment later that I opened my eyes, to see Aurora draw back from Lloyd Slate. The Winter Knight focused his eyes on me, scary eyes empty of anything like reason, and drew the sword from his belt.

"A grim business," Aurora said. "Good-bye, Mister Dresden."

Chapter Twenty-eight



I faced Slate head-on. I figured as long as I was going to take one of those swords, it might as well have a shot of killing me pretty quick. No sense in dragging it out. But I left my eyes on Aurora and held whatever power I had gathered up and ready.

"I am sorry, wizard," Aurora said.

"You're about to be," I muttered.

Slate drew back his blade, an Oriental job without enough class to be an actual katana, and tensed, preparing to strike. The blade glittered and looked really, really sharp.

Elaine caught Slate's wrist and said, "Wait."

Aurora gave Elaine a sharp and angry look. "What are you doing?"

"Protecting you," Elaine said. "If you let Slate kill him, he'll break the circle around Dresden."

Aurora looked from Elaine to me and back. "And?"

"Elaine!" I snarled.

She regarded me with flat eyes. "And you'll leave yourself open to his death curse. He'll take you with him. Or make you wish he had."

Aurora lifted her chin. "He isn't that strong."

"Don't be so sure," Elaine said. "He's the strongest wizard I've ever met. Strong enough to make the White Council nervous. Why take a pointless risk so close to the end?"

"You treacherous bitch," I said. "God damn you, Elaine."

Aurora frowned at me and then gestured to Slate. He lowered the sword and put it away. "Yet he is too dangerous to leave alive."

"Yes," Elaine agreed.

"What would you suggest?"

"We're in the Nevernever," Elaine said. "Arrange his death and leave. Once you are back in mortal lands, he won't be able to reach you. Let him spend his curse on Mab if he wishes, or on his godmother. But it won't be on you."

"But when I leave, my power will go with me. He won't be held by the circle. What do you suggest?"

Elaine regarded me passionlessly. “Drown him,” she said finally. “Call water and let the earth drink him. I’ll lock him into place with a binding of my own. Mortal magic will last, even after I’ve left.”

Aurora nodded. “Are you capable of holding him?”

“I know his defenses,” Elaine responded. “I’ll hold him as long as necessary.”

Aurora regarded me in silence for a moment. “So much rage,” she said. “Very well, Elaine. Hold him.”

It didn’t take her long. Elaine had always been smoother at magic than me, more graceful. She murmured something in the language she’d chosen for her magic, some variant on Old Egyptian, adding a roll of her wrist, a graceful ripple of her fingers, and I felt her spell lock around me like a full-body straitjacket, paralyzing me from chin to toes, wrapping me in silent, unseen force. It pressed against my clothes, flattening them, and made it hard to take a deep breath.

At the same time, Aurora closed her eyes, her hands spread at her side. Then she leveled her palms and slowly raised them. From within the circle, I couldn’t sense what she was doing, but there wasn’t anything wrong with my eyes and ears. The ground gurgled, and there was a sudden scent of rotten eggs. I felt the earth beneath me shift and sag, and then a slow “bloop bloop” of earth settling as water began rising up beneath me. It took maybe five seconds for the ground to become so soft that my feet sank into the warm mud, up to my ankles. Hell’s bells.

“Mortal time is racing,” Aurora said, and opened her eyes. “The day grows short. Come.”

Without so much as glancing at me, she swept away into the mist. Slate fell into place at her heels, and Talos followed several paces behind, slim and dangerous in his dark armor. Korrick the centaur spared me a sneer and a satisfied snort before he gripped a short, heavy spear in his broad fist and turned to follow the Summer Lady, hooves striking down in decisive clops.

That left Elaine. She came forward until she stood almost close enough to touch me. Slender and pretty, she regarded me steadily while she took a band from her jeans pocket, and bound her hair back into a tail.

“Why, Elaine?” I asked. I struggled furiously against the spell, but it was stronger than me. “Why the hell did you stop her?”

“You’re an idiot, Harry,” she said. “A melodramatic fool. You always were.”

I kept sinking into the earth and came level with her eyes. “I could have stopped her.”

“I couldn’t be sure you wouldn’t have thrown the curse at me, too.” She looked over her shoulder. Aurora had paused, a dim shape in the mist, and was waiting.

The watery earth kept drawing me down, and I looked up at her now, at the soft skin on the underside of her chin. She looked down at me and said, “Good-bye, Harry.” She turned and walked after Aurora. Then she paused, one leg bent, and turned enough so that I could see her profile. She said in that same casually neutral tone, “It’s just like old times.”

After that, they left me there to die.

It’s hard not to panic in that kind of situation. I mean, I’ve been in trouble before, but not in that kind of tick-tock-here-it-comes way. The problem in front of me was simple, steady, and inescapable. The ground kept getting softer and I kept on sliding down into it. The sensation of it was warm and not entirely unpleasant. I mean, people pay money for hot mud baths. But mine would be lethal if I didn’t find a way out of it, and the mud was already creeping up over my thighs.

I closed my eyes and tried to focus. I reached out to feel the fabric of Elaine’s spell around me, and pushed, trying to break through it. I didn’t have enough strength. Once Aurora’s circle dropped, I would be able to reach out for more power, but I’d be running short on time—and even so, brute strength wasn’t the answer. If I just randomly hammered at the spell around me, it would be like trying to escape from a set of shackles using dynamite. I would tear myself apart along with the binding.

Still, that dangerous option seemed to be my only hope. I tried to hang on, to stay calm and focused, and to wait for Aurora’s circle to give out. I got the giggles. Don’t ask me why, but under the pressure of the moment, it seemed damned funny. I tried not to, but I cackled and chortled as the warm mud slid up over my hips, my belly, my chest.

“Just like old times,” I wheezed. “Yeah, just like old times, Elaine. You backbiting, poisonous, treacherous . . .”

And then a thought hit me. Just like old times.

“. . . deceitful, wicked, *clever* girl. If this works I’ll buy you a pony.”

I put the studied indifference of her words together with her whole bloodless attitude. That wasn’t the Elaine I remembered. I could buy that she would murder me in a fit of rage, poison me out of flaming jealousy, or

bomb my car out of sheer, stubborn pique. But she would never do it and feel *nothing* .

The mud covered my chest, and still Aurora's circle hadn't faded. My heart pounded wildly, but I struggled to remain calm. I started hyperventilating. I might need every spare second I could get. The mud covered my throat and slid up over my chin. I wasn't fighting it any more. I got a good, deep breath just before my nose went under.

Then darkness pressed over my eyes, and I was left floating in thick, gooey warmth, the only sound the beating of my own heart thudding in my ears. I waited, and my lungs began to burn. I waited, not moving, fire spreading over my chest. I kept everything as relaxed as I could and counted the heartbeats.

Somewhere between seventy-four and seventy-five, Aurora's circle vanished. I reached out for power, gathering it in, shaping it in my mind. I didn't want to rush it, but it was hard not to. I took all the time I could without panicking, before I reached out again for the fabric of Elaine's spell.

I'd been right. It was the same binding she'd used when we were kids, when she'd been holding me down while my old master, Justin DuMorne, prepared to enthrall me. I'd found the way out as a kid, because Elaine and I had shared a certain impatience for our magical studies. Besides schoolwork, we'd been forced to pursue an entirely different regimen of spells and mental disciplines as well. Some nights, we would have homework until dinner, then head right for the magical stuff until well after midnight, working out spells and formulae until our eyes ached.

Toward the end, that got to be rough when all we really wanted was to be in bed, doing things much less scholarly and much more hormonal, until other parts ached. Ahem. To that end, we'd split the work. One of us would work out the spell while the other did the homework, then a quick round of copying and straight to . . . bed.

I'd been the one who worked out that binding. And it sucked.

It sucked because it had no flexibility to it, no subtlety, no class. It dropped a cocoon of hardened air around the target and locked it there, period. End of story. As teenagers, we had thought it impressively effective and simple. As a desperate man about to die, I realized that it was a brittle spell, like a diamond that was simultaneously the hardest substance on earth and easily fractured if struck at the correct angle.

Now that I knew what I was doing, I found the clumsy center of the spell, where I'd located it all those years ago, tying all the strands of energy together at the small of the back like a Christmas bow. There in the mud and darkness, I focused on the weak spot of the spell, gathered my will, and muttered, with my mouth clenched closed, "Tappitytaptap." It came out, "Mmphitymmphmph," but that didn't make any difference on the practical side. The spell was clear in my head. A spike of energy lashed into the binding, and I felt it loosen.

My heart pounded with excitement and I reached out with the spell again. The third time I tried it, the binding slipped, and I flexed my arms and legs, pulling them slowly free.

I'd done it. I'd escaped the binding.

Now I was merely drowning in what amounted to quicksand.

The clock was running against me as I started to feel dizzy, as my lungs struggled against my will, trying to force out what little air remained and suck in a deep breath of nice, cleansing muck. I reached for more power, gathered it in, and hoped I hadn't spun around without noticing. I pushed my palms toward my feet, just as my lungs forced me to exhale, and shouted with it, "*Forzare!*"

Naked force lashed out toward my feet, bruising one leg as it swept past. Even in magic, you can't totally ignore physics, and my action of exerting force down against the earth had the predictable equal and opposite reaction. The earth exerted force up toward me, and I flew out of the mud, muck and water flying up with me in a cloud of spray. I had a wild impression of mist and dreary ground and then a tree, and then it was replaced with a teeth-rattling impact.

By the time I'd coughed out a mouthful of mud and choked air back into my lungs, I had the presence of mind to wipe mud out of my eyes. I found myself twenty feet off the ground, dangling from the branches of one of the skeletal trees. My arms and legs hung loosely beneath me, and my jeans felt tight at the waist. I tried to see how I'd gotten hung up that way, but I couldn't. I could possibly get a hand and a foot on different branches, but I could barely wiggle, and I couldn't get loose.

"You foil a Faerie Queen," I panted to myself. "Survive your own execution. Get away from certain death. And get stuck up a freaking tree." I struggled some more, just as uselessly. One mud-covered boot fell off and hit the ground with a soggy plop. "God, I hope no one sees you like this."

The sound of footsteps drifted out of the mist, coming closer.

I pushed the heel of my hand against my right eyebrow. Some days you just can't win.

I folded my arms and had them sternly crossed over my chest when a tall, shrouded form emerged from the mist below. Dark robes swirled, a deep hood concealed, and a gloved hand gripped a wooden staff.

The Gatekeeper turned his head toward me and became still for a moment. Then he reached his other gloved hand into his hood. He made a strangled, muffled sound.

"Hi," I said. King of wit, that's me.

The Gatekeeper sounded as though he had to swallow half a gallon of laughter as he responded, "Greetings, Wizard Dresden. Am I interrupting anything?"

My other boot fell off and plopped to the ground. I regarded my dangling, muddy sock-feet with pursed lips. "Nothing all that important."

"That is good," he said. He paced around a bit, peering up at me, and then said, "There's a broken branch through your belt. Get your right foot on the branch below you, your left hand on the one above you, and loosen your belt. You should be able to climb down."

I did as he said and got my muddy self down from the tree and to earth. "Thank you," I said. I privately thought to myself that I'd have been a hell of a lot more grateful about five minutes earlier. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," he said.

"You've been watching?"

He shook his head. "Call it listening. But I have had glimpses of you. And matters are worsening in Chicago."

"Stars and stones," I muttered and picked up my boots. "I don't have time to chat."

The Gatekeeper put a gloved hand on my arm. "But you do," he said. "My vision is limited, but I know that you have accomplished your mission for the Winter Queen. She will keep her end of the bargain, grant us safe passage through her realm. So far as the Council is concerned, that will be enough. You would be safe."

I hesitated.

"Wizard Dresden, you could end your involvement in the matter. You could choose to step clear of it, right now. It would end the trial."

My aching, weary, half-smothered, and dirty self liked that idea. End it. Go home. Get a hot shower. A bunch of hot food. Sleep.

It was impossible, anyway. I was only one tired, beat-up, strung-out guy, wizard or not. The faeries had way too many powers and tricks to deal with on a good day, let alone on this one. I knew what Aurora was up to now, but, hell, she was getting set to charge into the middle of a battlefield. A battlefield, furthermore, that I had no idea how to even *find*, much less survive. The Stone Table had been in some weird pocket of the Nevernever like nothing I'd ever felt before. I had no idea how to reach it.

Impossible. Painful. Way too dangerous. I could call it a day, get some sleep, and hope I did better the next time I came up to the plate.

Meryl's face came to mind, ugly and tired and resolute. I also saw the statue of Lily. And Elaine, trapped by her situation but fighting things in her own way despite the odds against her. I thought of taking the Unraveling from Mother Winter, able to think of nothing but using it for my own goals, for helping Susan. Now it would be used for something else entirely, and as much as I wanted to forget about it and go home, I would bear a measure of the responsibility for the consequences of its use if I did.

I shook my head and looked around until I spotted my bag, jewelry, staff, and rod on the ground several yards away from the muddy bog Aurora had created. I recovered all of them. "No," I said. "It isn't over."

"No?" the Gatekeeper said, surprise in the tone. "Why not?"

"Because I'm an idiot." I sighed. "And there are people in trouble."

"Wizard, no one expects you to stop a war between the Sidhe Courts. The Council would assign no such responsibility to any one person."

"To hell with the Sidhe Courts," I said. "And to hell with the Council too. There are people I know in trouble. And I'm the one who turned some of this loose. I'll clean it up."

"You're sure?" the Gatekeeper said. "You won't step out of the Trial now?"

My mud-crusted fingers fumbled with the clasp of my bracelet. "I won't."

The Gatekeeper regarded me in silence for a moment and said, "Then I will not vote against you."

A little chill went through me. "Oh. You would have?"

"Had you walked away, I would kill you myself."

I stared at him for a second and then asked, "Why?"

His voice came out soft and resolute, but not unkind. "Because voting against you would have been the same thing in any case. It seems meet to me that I should take full responsibility for that choice rather than hiding behind Council protocol."

I got the bracelet on, then shoved my feet back into my boots. "Well, thanks for not killing me, then. If you'll excuse me, I've got somewhere to be."

"Yes," the Gatekeeper said. He held out his hand, a small velvet bag in it. "Take these. You may find a use for them."

I frowned at him and took the bag. Inside, I found a little glass jar of some kind of brownish gel and a chip of greyish stone on a piece of fine, silvery thread. "What's this?"

"An ointment for the eyes," he said. His tone became somewhat dry. "Easier on the nerves than using the Sight to see through the veils and glamours of the Sidhe."

I lifted my eyebrows. Bits of drying mud fell into my eyes and made me blink. "Okay. And this rock?"

"A piece from the Stone Table," he said. "It will show you the way to get there."

I blinked some more, this time in surprise. "You're helping me?"

"That would constitute interfering in the Trial," he corrected me. "So far as anyone else is concerned, I am merely seeing to it that the Trial can reach its full conclusion."

I frowned at him. "If you'd just given me the rock, maybe," I said. "The ointment is something else. You're interfering. The Council would have a fit."

The Gatekeeper sighed. "Wizard Dresden, this is something I have never said before and do not anticipate saying again." He leaned closer to me, and I could see the shadows of his features, gaunt and vague, inside his hood. One dark eye sparkled with something like humor as he offered his hand and whispered, "Sometimes what the Council does not know does not hurt it."

I found myself grinning. I shook his hand.

He nodded. "Hurry. The Council dare not interfere with internal affairs of the Sidhe, but we will do what we can." He stretched out his staff and drew it in a circle in the air. With barely a whisper of disturbance, he opened the fabric between the Nevernever and the mortal world, as though his staff had

simply drawn a circle of Chicago to step into—the street outside my basement apartment, specifically. “Allah and good fortune go with you.”

I nodded to him, encouraged. Then I turned to the portal and stepped through it, from that dark moor in Faerie to my usual parking space at home. Hot summer air hit my face, steamy and crackling with tension. Rain sleeted down, and thunder shook the ground. The light was already fading and dark was coming on.

I ignored them all and headed for my apartment. The mud, substance of the Nevernever, melted into a viscous goo that began evaporating at once, assisted by the driving, cleansing rain.

I had calls to make, and I wanted to change into non-slimy clothes. My fashion sense is somewhat stunted, but I still had to wonder.

What do you wear to a war?

Chapter Twenty-nine



I went with basic black.

I made my calls, set an old doctor's valise outside the front door, got a quick shower, and dressed in black. A pair of old black military-style boots, black jeans (mostly clean), a black tee, black ball cap with a scarlet Coca-Cola emblem on it, and on top of everything my leather duster. Susan had given me the coat a while back, complete with a mantle that falls to my elbows and an extra large portion of billow. The weather was stormy enough, both figuratively and literally, to make me want the reassurance of the heavy coat.

I loaded up on the gear, too—everything I'd brought with me that morning plus the Gatekeeper's gifts and my home-defense cannon, a heavy-caliber, long-barreled, Dirty Harry Magnum. I debated carrying the gun on me and decided against it. I'd have to go through Chicago to get to whatever point would lead me to the Stone Table, and I didn't need to get arrested for a concealed carry. I popped the gun, case and all, into my bag, and hoped I wouldn't have to get to it in a hurry.

Billy and the werewolves arrived maybe ten minutes later, the minivan pulling up outside and beeping the horn. I checked the doctor bag, closed it, and went out to the van, my gym bag bumping against my side. The side door rolled open, and I stepped up to toss my gear in.

I hesitated upon seeing the van, packed shoulder to shoulder with young people. There were ten or eleven of them in there.

Billy leaned over from the driver's seat and asked, "Problem?"

"I said only volunteers," I said. "I don't know how much trouble we're going into."

"Right," Billy said. "I told them that."

The kids in the van murmured their agreement.

I blew out my breath. "Okay, people. Same rules as last time. I'm calling the shots, and if I give you an order, you take it, no arguments. Deal?"

There was a round of solemn nods. I nodded in reply and peered to the back of the dim van, at a head of dull green hair. "Meryl? Is that you?"

The changeling girl gave me a solemn nod. "I want to help. So does Fix."

I caught a flash of white hair and dark, nervous eyes from beside Meryl. The little man lifted a hand and gave me a twitching wave.

"If you go along," I said, "same rules as everyone else. Otherwise you stay here."

"All right," Meryl said with a laconic nod.

"Yeah," Fix said. "Okay."

I looked around at all of them and grimaced. They looked so damned *young*. Or maybe it was just me feeling old. I reminded myself that Billy and the Alphas had already had their baptism by fire, and they'd had almost two years to hone their skills against some of the low-intensity riffraff of the Chicago underground scene. But I knew that they were getting in way over their heads on this one.

I needed them, and they'd volunteered. The trick was to make sure that I didn't lead them to a horrible death.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go."

Billy pushed open the passenger door, and Georgia moved back to the crowded rear seats. I got in beside Billy and asked, "Did you get them?"

Billy passed me a plastic bag from Wal-Mart. "Yeah, that's why it took so long to get here. There was police tape all over and cops standing around."

"Thanks," I said. I tore open a package of orange plastic box knives and put them into the doctor's valise, then snapped it closed again. Then I took the grey stone from my pocket, wrapped the thread it hung by around my hand, and held my hand out in front of me, palm down and level with my eyes. "Let's go."

"Okay," Billy said, giving me a skeptical look. "Go where?"

The grey stone quivered and twitched. Then it swung very definitely to the east, drawing the string with it, so that it hung at a slight angle rather than straight down.

I pointed the way the stone leaned and said, "Thata-way. Toward the lake."

"Got it," Billy said. He pulled the van onto the street. "So where are we heading?"

I grunted and stuck an index finger up.

"Up," Billy said, his voice skeptical. "We're going up."

I watched the stone. It wobbled, and I focused on it as I might on my own amulet. It stabilized and leaned toward the lake without wavering or

swaying on its string. "Up there," I clarified.

"Where up there?"

Lightning flashed and I pointed toward it. "There up there."

Billy glanced at someone in the back and pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I hope you know a couple of streets I don't, then." He drove for a while more, with me telling him to bear right or left. At a stoplight, the rain still pounding on the windshield, wipers flicking steadily, he asked, "So what's the score?"

"Well-Intentioned But Dangerously Insane Bad Guys are ahead coming down the stretch," I said. "The Faerie Courts are duking it out up there, and it's probably going to be very hairy. The Summer Lady is our baddie, and the Winter Knight is her bitch. She has a magic hankie. She's going to use it to change a statue into a girl and kill her on a big Flintstones table at midnight."

There were a couple of grunts as Meryl pushed her way toward the front of the van. "A girl? Lily?"

I glanced from the stone back to her and nodded. "We have to find Aurora and stop her. Save the girl."

"Or what happens?" Billy asked.

"Badness."

"Kaboom badness?"

I shook my head. "Mostly longer term than that."

"Like what?"

"How do you feel about ice ages?"

Billy whistled. "Uh. Do you mind if I ask a few questions?"

I kept my eyes on the chip of stone. "Go ahead."

"Right," Billy said. "As I understand it, Aurora is trying to tear apart *both* of the Faerie Courts, right?"

"Yeah."

"Why? I mean, why not shoot for just Winter so her side wins?"

"Because she can't," I said. "She's limited in her power. She knows she doesn't have the strength it would take to force things on her own. The Queens and the Mothers could stop her easily. So she's using the only method she has open to her."

"Screwing up the balance of power," Billy said. "But she's doing it by giving a bunch of mojo to Winter?"

“Limits,” I said. “She can’t move Winter’s power around at all, the way she can Summer’s. That’s why she had to kill her own Knight. She knew she could pour his power out into a vessel of her choosing.”

“Lily,” growled Meryl.

I glanced over my shoulder at her and nodded. “Someone who would trust her. Who wouldn’t be able to protect herself against Aurora’s enchantment.”

“So why’d she turn the girl to stone?” Billy asked.

“It was her cover,” I said. “The Queens could have found an active Knight. But once Lily was turned to stone, the Knight’s mantle was stuck in limbo. Aurora knew that everyone would suspect Mab of doing something clever and that Titania would be forced to prepare to fight. Mab would have to move in response, and the pair of them would create the battleground around the Stone Table.”

“What’s the Table for?”

“Pouring power into one of the Courts,” I said. “It belongs to Summer until midnight tonight. After that, any power that gets poured in goes to Winter.”

“Which is where we’re going now,” Billy said.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Turn left at that light.”

Billy nodded. “So Aurora steals the power and hides it, which forces the Queens to bring out the battleground with the big table.”

“Right. Now Aurora plans to take Lily there and use the Unraveling to free her of the stone curse she’s under. Then she kills her and touches off Faerie-geddon. She’s got to get to the table after midnight, but before Mab’s forces actually take the ground around it. That means she’s only got a small window of opportunity, and we need to stop her from using it.”

“I still don’t get it,” Billy said. “What the hell is she hoping to accomplish?”

“Probably she thinks she can ride out the big war. Then she’ll put it all together again from the ashes just the way she wants it.”

“Thank God she’s not too arrogant or anything,” Billy muttered. “It seems to me that Mab is going to be handed a huge advantage in this. Why didn’t Aurora just work together with Mab?”

“It probably never occurred to her to try it that way. She’s Summer. Mab is Winter. The two don’t work together.”

“Small favors,” Billy said. “So what do we do to help?”

“I’m going to have to move around through a battleground. I need muscle to do it. I don’t want to stop to fight. We just keep moving until I can get to the Stone Table and stop Aurora. And I want all of you changed before we go up there. Faeries are vindictive as hell and you’re going to piss some of them off. Better if they never get to see your faces.”

“Right,” Billy said. “How many faeries are we talking about?”

I squinted up at a particularly violent burst of lightning. “All of them.”

The stone the Gatekeeper had given me led us to the waterfront along Burnham Harbor. Billy parked the van on the street outside the wharves that had once been the lifeblood of the city and that still received an enormous amount of shipping every year. Halogen floodlights every couple of hundred feet made the docks into a silent still life behind a grid of chain-link fence.

I turned to the Alphas and said, “All right, folks. Before we go up, I’ve got to put some ointment on your eyes. It stinks, but it will keep you from being taken in by most faerie glammers.”

“Me first,” Billy said at once. I opened the little jar and smeared the dark ointment on under his eyes, little half-moons of dark, greasy brown. He checked his eyes in the mirror and said, “And I used to sneer at the football team.”

“Get your game face on,” I said. Billy slipped out of the car and pitched his sweats and T-shirt back in. I got out of the van and opened the side door. Billy, in his wolf-shape, came trotting around the side of the van and sat nearby as I smeared the greasy ointment on the eyes of all the Alphas.

It was a little unnerving, to me anyway. They were all naked as I did it, shimmering into wolf-form as soon as I had finished, and joining Billy outside. One of the girls, a redhead who had been daintily plump, now looked like something from a men’s magazine. She gave me a somewhat satisfied smile as I noticed, and the next, a petite girl with mousy brown hair and a long scar on her shoulder, held her dress against her front and confided, “She’s been impossible this year,” as I smeared ointment on her.

Half a dozen young men and another half a dozen young women, all told, made for a lot of wolf. They waited patiently as I slapped the ointment on Fix, then Meryl, and finally myself. I used the very last of it, and blew out a deep breath. I put on my gun, on a hip rig instead of a shoulder holster, and hoped that the rain and my duster would conceal it from any passing observation. Then I drew my pentacle out to lie on my shirt, gathered up

my staff and rod, slipping the latter through the straps on the doctor's bag, and picked it up. I juggled things around for a moment, until I could get the grey stone on its thread out and into my hand, and thought that maybe Elaine had the right idea when it came to going with smaller magical foci.

I had just gotten out into the rain when the wolves all looked out into the night at once. One of them, I think Billy, let out a bark and they scattered, leaving me and Meryl and Fix standing there alone in the rain.

"W-what?" Fix stammered. "What happened? Where did they go?"

Meryl said, "They must have heard something." She reached back into the minivan and came out with a machete and a wood axe. Then she pulled out a heavy denim jacket that had been festooned in layers of what looked like silverware. It rattled as she put it on.

"No chain mail?" I asked.

Fix fussed with a fork that was sticking out too far and said in an apologetic tone, "Best I could do on short notice. It's steel, though. So, you know, it will be harder for anything to bite her." He hopped back into the minivan and came out with a bulky toolbox that looked heavy as hell. The little guy lifted it to his shoulder as though he did it all the time and licked his lips. "What do we do?"

I checked the stone, which still pointed at the lake. "We move forward. If there's something out there, Billy will let us know."

Fix gulped, his frizzy white hair slowly being plastered to his head by the rain. "Are you sure?"

"Stay close to me, Fix," Meryl said. "How are we going to go that way, Dresden? There's a fence. Harbor security, too."

I had no idea, but I didn't want to say that. I headed for the nearest gate instead. "Come on."

We got to the gate and found it open. A broken chain dangled from one edge. Part of the shattered link lay on the ground nearby. The ends had been twisted, not cut, and steam curled up from them in a little hissing cloud where raindrops touched.

"Broken," I said. "And not long ago. This rain would cool the metal down fast."

"Not by a faerie, either," Meryl said quietly. "They don't like to come close to a fence like this."

"Silly," Fix sniffed. "A cheap set of bolt cutters would have been better than just breaking a perfectly good chain."

“Yeah, nasties can be irrational that way,” I said. The stone continued to lean out toward the end of one of the long wharves thrusting into the lake. “Out that way.”

We went through the gate and had gone maybe twenty feet before the halogen floodlights went out, leaving us in storm-drenched blackness.

I fumbled for my amulet with cold fingers, but Fix and Meryl both beat me to it. Fix’s toolbox thunked down, and a moment later he stood up with a heavy-duty flashlight. At almost the same time, there was a crackle of plastic, and Meryl shook the tube of a chemical light into eerie green luminescence.

A gunshot barked, sharp and loud, and Meryl jerked and staggered to one side. She looked down at blood spreading over her jeans, her expression one of startled shock.

“Down!” I said, and hit her at the waist, bearing her to the ground as the gun barked again. I grabbed at the glow stick and shoved it into my coat. “Put out those lights!”

Fix fumbled with the flashlight as another shot rang out, sending a sputter of sparks from his toolbox. Fix yelped and dropped the light. It rolled over to one side, slewing a cone of illumination out behind us.

The light spilled over the form of the Tigress, the ghoul assassin, not even bothering to try a human shape now. In her natural form, she was a hunch-shouldered, grey-skinned fiend, something blending the worst features of mankind, hyena, and baboon. Short, wiry red hairs prickled over her whole body. Her legs were stunted and strong, her arms too long, and her hands tipped in spurs of bone that replaced nails. Her hair hung about her head in a soggy, matted lump, and her eyes, furious as she came running forward, glared with malice. Pink and grey scars stood out against her skin, swollen areas where she’d healed all the damage Murphy had inflicted on her the night before. She flew toward us over the ground, running with all four limbs, mouth gaping wide.

She didn’t see the Alphas closing in behind her.

The first wolf, black grease still in half-circles under its eyes, hit her right leg, a quick snapping, jerking motion of its jaws. The ghoul shrieked in surprise and fell, tumbling. She regained her feet quickly and struck out at the wolf who had bloodied her, but the big grey beast rolled aside as a taller, tawnier wolf leapt over him. The second wolf took the ghoul’s other

leg, bounding away when the ghoul turned on it, while a third wolf darted in at the Tigress's back.

The ghoul screamed and tried to run again. The wolves didn't let her. I watched as another wolf slammed into her, knocking her down. She rolled to her front, but she'd been hamstrung, and her legs were now useless weight. Claws flashed out and drew flecks of blood, but the wolf she'd hit scrambled onto her back, jaws closing in on the back of the ghoul's neck. She let out a last frantic, gurgling scream.

Then the werewolves buried her in a tide of fur and flashing fangs. When they drew away half a minute later, I couldn't have recognized the remains for what they were. My stomach curled up on itself, and I forced myself to look away before I started throwing up.

I grabbed Meryl underneath her arms and started tugging her toward the nearest warehouse. I snarled, "Help me," at Fix, and he pitched in, surprisingly strong.

"Oh, God," Fix whimpered. "Oh, God, Meryl, oh, God."

"It's not bad," Meryl panted, as we dragged her around a corner of the building. "It isn't too bad, Fix."

I got out the glow stick and checked. Her jeans were stained with blood, black in the green light, but not as badly as they should have been. I found a long tear along the fabric of one leg, and whistled. "Lucky," I said. "Grazed you. Doesn't look like it's bleeding too bad." I poked at her leg. "Can you feel that?"

She winced.

"Good," I said. "Stay here. Fix, stay with her."

I left my bag there and unlimbered my gun. I kept it pointed at the ground and made sure my shield bracelet was ready to go, gathering energy into it in order to shield myself from any more rifle shots. I didn't raise the gun to level. I didn't want it to go off accidentally and bounce a bullet off my own shield and into my head.

As I stepped around the corner, I heard a short scream and then a series of sharp barks. One of the wolves appeared in the cone of Fix's fallen light, picked it up in his mouth, and trotted toward me.

"All clear?" I asked.

The wolf ducked his head in a couple of quick nods and dropped the flashlight on my foot. I picked it up. The wolf barked again and started off toward the wharf. I frowned at him and said, "You want me to follow you?"

He rolled his eyes and nodded again.

I started off after him. "If it turns out that Timmy's stuck down the well, I'm going home."

The wolf led me to the wharf the stone had pointed to, and there I found a young man in dark slacks and a white jacket on the ground in a circle of wolves. He held one bleeding hand against his belly and was panting. A rifle lay on the ground nearby, next to a broken pair of sunglasses. He looked up at me and grimaced, his face pale behind his goatee.

"Ace," I said. I shook my head. "You were the one who hired the ghoul."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he lied. "Get these things away from me, Dresden. Let me go."

"I'm running late, Ace, or I'd have the patience for more chitchat." I nodded at the nearest wolf and said, "Tear his nose off."

Ace screamed and fell back, covering his face with both arms. I winked at the wolf and stepped forward to stand over the changeling. "Or maybe his ears. Or toes. What do you think, Ace? What's going to make you talk fastest? Or should I just try them all one at a time?"

"Go to hell," Ace gasped. "You can do whatever you want, but I'm not talking. Go to hell, Dresden."

Footsteps came up behind us. Meryl limped close enough to see Ace, and then just stood there for a minute, staring at him. Fix followed her, staring.

"Ace," Fix said. "You? You shot Meryl?"

The bearded changeling swallowed and lowered his arms, looking at Meryl and Fix. "I'm sorry. Meryl, it was an accident. I wasn't aiming at you."

The green-haired changeling stared at Ace and said, "You were trying to kill Dresden. The only one besides Ron who has ever taken a step out of his way to help us. The only one who can help Lily."

"I didn't *want* to. But that was their price."

"Whose price?" Meryl asked in a monotone.

Ace licked his lips, eyes flicking around nervously. "I can't tell you. They'll kill me."

Meryl stepped forward and kicked him in the belly. Hard. Ace doubled over and threw up, gasping and twitching and sobbing. He couldn't get enough breath to cry out.

"Whose price?" Meryl asked again. When Ace didn't speak, she shifted her weight as though to repeat the kick and he cried out.

“Wait,” he whimpered. “Wait.”

“I’m done waiting,” Meryl said.

“God, I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you, Meryl. It was the vampires. The Reds. I was trying to get protection from Slate, from that bitch Maeve. They said if I got rid of the wizard, they’d fix it.”

“Bastards,” I muttered. “So you hired the Tigress.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Ace whined. “If I hadn’t done it, they’d have taken me themselves.”

“You had a choice, Ace,” Fix said quietly.

I shook my head. “How did you know we’d be coming here?”

“The Reds,” Ace said. “They told me where you’d show up. They didn’t say you wouldn’t be alone. Meryl, please. I’m sorry.”

She faced him without expression. “Shut up, Ace.”

“Look,” he said. “Look, let’s get out of here. All right? The three of us, we can get clear of this. We need to before we can’t help it anymore.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Meryl said.

“You do,” Ace said, leaning up toward Meryl, his eyes intent. “You feel it. You hear her Calling us. You feel it just like I do. The Queen Calls us. All of Winter’s blood.”

“She Calls,” Meryl said. “But I’m not answering.”

“If you don’t want to run, then we should think about what we’re going to do. After this battle is over, Maeve and Slate are just going to come for us again. But if we declare a loyalty, if we Choose—”

Meryl kicked Ace in the stomach again. “You worthless trash. All you ever think of is yourself. Get out of my sight before I kill you.”

Ace gagged and tried to protest. “But—”

Meryl snarled, “Now!”

The force of the word made Ace flinch away, and he turned it into a scramble before rising to run. The wolves all looked at me, but I shook my head. “Let him go.”

Meryl shrugged her shoulders and lifted her face to the rain.

“You okay?” Fix asked her.

“Have to be,” she said. Maybe it was just me, but her voice sounded a little lower, rougher. Trollier. Gulp. “Let’s move, wizard.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Uh, yeah.” I lifted the Gatekeeper’s stone and followed it down the wharf to the last pier, then down to the end of the last pier, empty of any ships or boats. A dozen wolves and two changelings followed me.

Nothing but the cold waters of Lake Michigan and a rolling thunderstorm surrounded me at the end of the pier, and the stone twitched, swinging almost to the horizontal on its pale thread.

“No kidding,” I muttered. “I know it’s up.” I reached out a hand and felt something, a tingle of energy, dancing and swirling in front of me. I reached a bit further, and it became more tangible, solid. I drew up a little of my will and sent it out, toward that force, a gentle surge of energy.

Brilliant light flickering through opalescent shades rose up in front of me, as bright as the full moon and as solid as ice. The light resolved itself into the starry outline of stairs, stairs that began at the end of the pier and climbed into the storm above. I stepped forward and put one foot on the lowest step. It bore my weight, leaving me standing on a block of translucent moonlight over the wind-tossed waters of Lake Michigan.

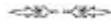
“Wow,” Fix breathed.

“We go up that?” Meryl asked.

“Woof,” said Billy the Werewolf.

“While we’re young,” I said, and took the next step. “Come on.”

Chapter Thirty



Sometimes the most remarkable things seem commonplace. I mean, when you think about it, jet travel is pretty freaking remarkable. You get in a plane, it defies the gravity of an entire planet by exploiting a loophole with air pressure, and it flies across distances that would take months or years to cross by any means of travel that has been significant for more than a century or three. You hurtle above the earth at enough speed to kill you instantly should you bump into something, and you can only breathe because someone built you a really good tin can that has seams tight enough to hold in a decent amount of air. Hundreds of millions of man-hours of work and struggle and research, blood, sweat, tears, and lives have gone into the history of air travel, and it has totally revolutionized the face of our planet and societies.

But get on any flight in the country, and I absolutely promise you that you will find someone who, in the face of all that incredible achievement, will be willing to complain about the drinks.

The *drinks*, people.

That was me on the staircase to Chicago-Over-Chicago. Yes, I was standing on nothing but congealed starlight. Yes, I was walking up through a savage storm, the wind threatening to tear me off and throw me into the freezing waters of Lake Michigan far below. Yes, I was using a legendary and enchanted means of travel to transcend the border between one dimension and the next, and on my way to an epic struggle between ancient and elemental forces.

But all I could think to say, between panting breaths, was, “Yeah. Sure. They couldn’t possibly have made this *anescalator* .”

Long story short: we climbed about a mile of stairs and came out in the land my godmother had shown me before, standing on the storm clouds over Chicago.

But it didn’t look like it had before the opening curtain.

What had once been rolling and silent terrain sculpted of cloud, smooth and naked as a dressing dummy, had now been filled with sound, color, and violence. The storm below that battlefield was a pale reflection of the one raging upon it.

We emerged on one of the hills looking down into the valley of the Stone Table, and the hillside around us, lit with flashes of lightning in the clouds beneath, was covered in faeries of all sizes and descriptions. Sounds rang through the air—the crackling snap of lightning and the roar of thunder following. Trumpets, high and sweet, deep and brassy. Drums beat to a dozen different cadences that both clashed and rumbled in time with one another. Shouts and cries rang out in time with those drums, shrieks that might have come from human throats, together with bellows and roars that couldn't have. Taken as a whole, it was its own wild storm of music, huge, teeth-rattling, overwhelming, and charged with adrenaline. Wagner wished he could have had it so good.

Not twenty feet away stood a crowd of short, brown-skinned, white-haired little guys, their hands and feet twice as large as they should have been, bulbous noses the size of lightbulbs behind helmets made out of what looked like some kind of bone. They wore bone armor, and bore shields and weaponry, and stood in rank and file. Their eyes widened as I came up out of the clouds in my billowing black duster, leather slick with rain. Billy and the werewolves surrounded me in a loose ring as they emerged, and Fix and Meryl pressed up close behind me.

On the other side of us stood a troll a good eight feet tall, its skin upholstered in knobby, hairy warts, lank hair hanging greasily past its massive shoulders, tiny red eyes glaring from beneath its single craggy brow. Its nostrils flared out and it turned toward me, drool dribbling from its lips, but the wolves crouched down around me, snarling. The troll blinked at them for a long moment while it processed a thought, and then turned away as though disinterested. More creatures stood within a long stone's throw, including a group of Sidhe knights, completely encased in faerie armor and mounted on long-legged warhorses of deep blue, violet, and black. A wounded sylph crouched nearby and would have looked like a lovely, winged girl from fifty yards away—but from there I could see her bloodied claws and the glittering razor edge of her wings.

I couldn't see the whole of the valley below. Some kind of mist or haze lay over it, and only gave me the occasional glimpse of whirling masses of troops and beings, ranks of somewhat human things massed together against one another, while other beings, some of which could only be called "monsters," rose up above the rest, slamming together in titanic conflicts that crushed those around them as mere circumstantial casualties.

More important, I couldn't see the Stone Table, and I couldn't even make a decent guess as to where I was standing in relation to where it should have been. The stone the Gatekeeper had given me leaned steadily in one direction, but that led straight down into the madness below us.

"What next?" Meryl yelled at me. She had to shout, though she was only a few feet away—and we were standing above the real fury of the battle below.

I shook my head and started to answer, but Fix tugged on my sleeve and piped something that got swallowed by the sounds of battle. I looked to where he was pointing, and saw one of the mounted Sidhe knights leave the others and come riding toward us.

He raised the visor of his helmet, an oddly decorated piece that somehow seemed insectoid. Pale faerie skin and golden cat-eyes regarded us from atop the steed for a moment, before he inclined his head to me and lifted a hand. The sounds of battle immediately cut off, boom, like someone had turned off a radio, and the silence threatened to put me off balance.

"Emissary," the Sidhe knight said. "I greet thee and thy companions."

"Greetings, warrior," I said in response. "I needs must speak with Queen Mab posthaste."

He nodded and said, "I will guide thee. Follow. And bid thy companions put away their weapons ere we approach her Majesty."

I nodded and said to those with me, "Put the teeth and cutlery away, folks. We need to play nice a while longer."

We followed the knight up the slope of the hill to its top, where the air grew cold enough to sting. I gathered my coat a little closer around me and could almost see the crystals of ice forming on my eyelashes. I just had to hope that my hair wouldn't freeze and break off.

Mab sat upon a white horse at the top of the hill, her hair down, rolling in silken waves to blend in with the mane and tail of her horse. She was clothed in a gown of white silk, the sleeves and trains falling in gentle sweeps to brush the cloudy ground at her steed's feet. Her lips and eyelashes were blue, her eyes as white as moonlight clouds. The sheer, cold, cruel beauty of her made my heart falter and my stomach flutter nervously. The air around her vibrated with power and shone with cold white and blue light.

"Oh, my God," Fix whispered.

I glanced back. The werewolves were simply staring at Mab, much as Fix was. Meryl regarded her from behind a forced mask of neutrality, but her eyes were alight with something wild and eager. “Steady, folks,” I said, and stepped forward.

The Faerie Queen turned her regard to me and murmured, “My Emissary. You have found the thief?”

I inclined my head to her. “Yes, Queen Mab. The Summer Lady, Aurora.”

Mab’s eyes widened, enough that I got the impression that she understood the whole of the matter from that one fact. “Indeed. And can you bring proof of this to us?”

“If I move swiftly,” I said. “I must reach the Stone Table before midnight.”

Mab’s empty eyes flickered to the stars above, and I thought I saw a hint of worry in them. “They move swiftly this night, wizard.” She paused and then breathed out, almost to herself, “Time himself runs against thee.”

“What can be done to get me there?”

Mab shook her head and regarded the field below us again. One entire swath of the battlefield flooded with a sudden golden radiance. Mab lifted her hand, and the aura around her flashed with a cerulean fire, the air thickening. That flame lashed out against the gold, and the two clashed in a shower of emerald energy, canceling one another out. Mab lowered her hand and turned to look at me again. Her eyes fell on the chip of stone on its pale thread and widened again. “Rashid. What is his interest in this matter?”

“Uh,” I said. “Certainly he isn’t, uh, you know, it isn’t like he’s representing the Council and they’re interfering.”

Mab took her eyes from the battle long enough to give me a look that said, quite clearly, that I was an idiot. “I know that. And your ointment. It’s his recipe. I recognize the smell.”

“He helped me find this place, yes.”

Mab’s lips twitched at the corners. “So. What does the old desert fox have in mind this time?” She shook her head and said, “No matter. The stone cannot lead you to the table. The direct route would place you in the path of battle enough to destroy any mortal. You must go another way.”

“I’m listening.”

She looked up and said, “Queen of the Air I may be, but these skies are still contested. Titania is at the height of her powers and I at the ebb of

mine. Not that way.” She pointed to the field, all weirdly lighted mist in gold and blue, green mist swirling with violence where they met. “And Summer gains ground despite all. Our Knight has not taken the field with us. He has been seduced, I presume.”

“Yes,” I said. “He’s with Aurora.”

Mab murmured, “That’s the last time I let Maeve hire the help. I indulge her too much.” She lifted her hand, evidently a signal, and scores of bats the size of hang gliders swarmed up from somewhere behind her, launching themselves in a web-winged cloud into the skies above. “We yet hold the river, wizard, though we lose ground on both sides now. Thy godmother and my daughter have concentrated upon it. But reach the river, and it will take thee through the battle to the hill of the Stone Table.”

“Get to the river,” I said. “Right. I can do that.”

“Those who are mine know of thee, wizard,” Mab said. “Give them no cause and they will not hamper thee.” She turned away from me, her attention back upon the battle, and the sound of it came crashing back in like a pent-up tide.

I turned from her and went back to the werewolves and the changelings. “We get to the river,” I shouted to them. “Try to stay in the blue mist, and don’t start a fight with anything.”

I started downhill, which as far as I know is the easiest way to find water. We passed through hundreds more troops, most of them units evidently recovering from the first shock of battle: scarlet- and blue-skinned ogres in faerie mail towered over me, their blood almost dull compared to their skin and armor. Another unit of brown-skinned gnomes tended to their wounded with bandages of some kind of moss. A group of sylphs crouched over a mound of bloody, stinking carrion, squabbling like vultures, blood all over their faces, breasts, and dragonfly wings. Another troop of battered, lantern-jawed, burly humanoids with wide, batlike ears, goblins, dragged their dead and some of their wounded over to the sylphs, tossing them onto the carrion pile with businesslike efficiency despite their fellows’ feeble screeches and yowls.

My stomach heaved. I fought down both fear and revulsion, and struggled to block out the images of nightmarish carnage around me.

I kept moving ahead, driving my steps with a sense of purpose I didn’t wholly feel, and kept the werewolves moving. I could only imagine that it all was worse for Billy and Georgia and the rest—whatever I saw and heard

and smelled, they were getting it a lot worse, through their enhanced senses. I called encouragement to them, though I had no idea if they could hear me through the din, and no idea if it did them any good, but it seemed like something I should do, since I'd dragged them here with me. I tried to walk on one side of Fix, screen out some of the worst sights around me. Meryl gave me a grateful nod.

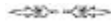
Ahead of us, the bluish mists began to give way to murky shades of green, faerie steel chimed and rasped on faerie steel, and the shrieks and cries of battle grew even louder. More important, amid the screams and shouts I could hear water splashing. We were near the river.

"Okay, folks!" I shouted. "We run forward and get to the river! Don't stop to slug it out with anyone! Don't stop until you're standing in the water!"

Or, I thought, until some faerie soldier rips your legs off.

And I ran forward into the proverbial fray.

Chapter Thirty-one



An angry buzzing sound arose from the musical din of battle ahead of us, and grew louder as we moved forward. I saw another group of goblin soldiers crouched in a ragged square formation. The goblins on the outside of the square tried to hold up shields against whistling arrows that came flickering through the mist over the water, while those within wielded spears against the source of the buzzing sound—about fifty bumblebees as big as park benches, hovering and darting. I could see a dozen goblins on the ground, wracked with the spasms of poison or simply dead, white- and green-feathered arrows protruding from throats and eyes.

A dozen of the jumbo bees peeled off from the goblins and came toward us, wings singing like a shop class of band saws.

“Holy moly!” Fix shouted.

Billy the Werewolf let out a shocked “Woof?”

“Get behind me!” I shouted and dropped everything but my staff and rod. The bees oriented on me and came zipping toward me, the wind stirred up by their wings tearing at the misty ground like the downblast of a helicopter.

I held my staff out in front of me, gathering my will and pushing it into the focus. I hardened my will into a shield, sending it through the staff, focusing on building a wall of naked force to repel the oncoming bees. I held the strike until they were close enough to see the facets of their eyes, swept my staff from right to left, and cried, “*Forzare!*”

A curtain of blazing scarlet energy whirled into place in front of me, and it slammed into the oncoming bees like a giant windshield. They went bouncing off of it with heavy thuds of impact. Several of the bees crash-landed and lay on the ground stunned, but two or three veered off at the last second, circling for another attack.

I lifted my blasting rod, tracking the nearest. I gathered up more of my will and snarled, “*Fuego!*” A lance of crimson energy, white at the core, leapt out from the tip of the blasting rod and scythed across the giant bee’s path. My fire caught it across the wings and burned them to vapor. The bee dropped, part of one wing making it spin in a fluttering spiral that slammed into the ground on the bank of the river. The other two retreated, and their

fellows attacking the goblins followed suit. The green tones faded from the mist at the edge of the river, which deepened to blue. The goblins let out a rasping, snarling cheer.

I looked around me and found Fix and Meryl staring at me with wide eyes. Fix swallowed, and I saw his mouth form the word “Wow.”

I all but tore my hair out in frustration. “Go!” I shouted and started running for the water, pushing and tugging at them to get them moving. “Go, go, go!”

We were ten feet from shore when I heard hoofbeats sweeping toward the river from the far side. I looked up to see horses sailing through the mist—not flying horses but long-legged faerie steeds, coats and manes shining golden and green, that had simply leapt from the far side of the river, bearing their riders with them.

On the lead horse, the first whose hooves touched the ground on our side of the river, was the Winter Knight. Lloyd Slate was splattered in liquids of various colors that could only be blood. He bore a sword in one hand, the reins to his mount in the other, and he was laughing. Even as he landed, the nearby goblins mounted a charge.

Slate turned toward them, sword whirling and gathering with it a howl of freezing winds, its blade riming with ice. He met the first goblin’s sword with his own, and the squat faerie soldier’s blade shattered. Slate shifted his shoulders and sent his horse leaping a few feet to one side. Behind him, the goblin’s head toppled from its shoulders, which spouted greenish blood for a few seconds before the body fell beside the head on the misty ground. The remaining goblins retreated, and Slate whirled his steed around to face me.

“Wizard!” he shouted, laughing. “Still alive!”

More faerie steeds leapt the river, Summer Sidhe warriors touching down behind Slate in helmets and mail in a riot of wildflower colors. One of them was Talos, in his dark mail, also stained with blood and bearing a slender sword splattered in so many colors of liquid that it looked as if it had cut the throat of a baby rainbow. Aurora landed as well, her battlegown shining, and a moment later there was a thunder of bigger hooves and a grunt of effort, and Korrick landed on our side of the river, his hooves driving deep into the ground.

Strapped onto the centaur’s shoulders, both human and equine, was the stone statue of the kneeling girl—Lily, now the Summer Knight.

Aurora drew up short and her eyes widened. Her horse must have sensed her disturbance, because it half-reared and danced nervously left and right. The Summer Lady lifted her hand, and once more the roar of battle abruptly ceased.

“You,” she half whispered.

“Give me the Unraveling and let the girl go, Aurora. It’s over.”

The Summer Lady’s eyes glittered, green and too bright. She looked up at the stars and then back to me, with that same, too-intense pressure to her gaze, and I began to understand. Bad enough that she was one of the Sidhe, already alien to mortal kind. Bad enough that she was a Faerie Queen, driven by goals I didn’t fully understand, following rules I could only just begin to grasp.

She was also mad. Loopy as a crochet convention.

“The hour is here, wizard,” she hissed. “Winter’s rebirth—and the end of this pointless cycle. Over, indeed!”

“Mab knows, Aurora,” I said. “Titania will soon know. There’s no point to this anymore. They won’t let you do it.”

Aurora let her head fall back as she laughed, the sound piercingly sweet. It set my nerves to jangling, and I had to push it back from my thoughts with an effort of will. The werewolves and the changelings didn’t do so well. The wolves flinched back with high-pitched whimpers and frightened growls, and Fix and Meryl actually fell to their knees, clutching at their ears.

“They cannot stop me, wizard,” Aurora said, that mad laughter still bubbling through her words. “And neither can you.” Her eyes blazed, and she pointed her finger at me. “Korricks, with me. The rest of you. Kill Harry Dresden. Kill them all.”

She turned and started down the river, golden light burning through the blue mist in a twenty-foot circle around her, and the centaur followed, leaving the battle roar, the horns and the drums, the screams and the shrieks, the music and the terror to come thundering back over us. The Sidhe warriors, a score of them, focused on me and drew swords or lifted long spears in their hands. Talos, in his spell-repelling mail that had enabled him to impersonate an ogre, shook colors from his blade and focused on me with deadly feline intensity. Slate let out another laugh, spinning his sword arrogantly in his hand.

Around me, I heard the werewolves crouch down, growls bubbling up in their throats. Meryl gathered herself to her feet, blood running from her ears, and took her axe in one big hand, drawing her machete into the other. Fix, his ears bleeding, his face pale and resolved, opened his toolbox with shaking hands and drew out a great big old grease-stained monkey wrench.

I gripped my staff and blasting rod and planted my feet. I called my power to me, lifted my staff, and smote it against the ground. Power crackled along its length and rumbled like thunder through the ground, frightening the faerie mounts into restlessness.

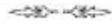
Slate leveled his sword at me and let out a cry, taking the panicked animal from a frightened rear to a full frontal charge. Around him, the warriors of the Summer Court followed, the light of stars and moon glittering on their swords and armor, horses screaming, surging toward us like a deadly, bejeweled tide.

The werewolves let out a full-throated howl, eerie and savage. Meryl screamed, wild and loud, and even Fix let out a tinny battle shriek.

The noise was deafening, and no one could have heard me anyway as I let out my own battle cry, which I figured was worth a shot. What the hell.

“I don’t believe in faeries!”

Chapter Thirty-two



Cavalry charges are all about momentum. You get a ton of furious horse and warrior going in one direction and flatten everything in your way. As the Sidhe cavalry came thundering toward us along the banks of the river, and as my heart pounded in my chest and my legs started shaking in naked fear, I knew that if I wanted to survive the next few seconds, I had to find a way to steal that momentum and use it for myself.

I dropped my blasting rod to grip my staff in both hand, and extend it before me. The moment I did, Sidhe riders began making swift warding gestures, accompanied by staccato bursts of magical pressure, separate protective charms rising up before each of them to block whatever magic I was about to throw.

The horses, however, didn't do any such thing.

I raised a shield, but not in a wall in front of me. Such a warding would have brought the faerie nobles into contact with it, and no one wizard could hold a spell against the wills of a score of faerie lords. I brought up a shield only a couple of feet high, and stretched it in a ribbon across the ground at the feet of Slate's mount.

The Winter Knight's steed, a giant grey-green beast, never knew what hit it. The low wall I'd called up clipped it at the knees, and it came crashing down to the misty earth with a scream, dragging Slate down with it. Talos, on Slate's right, could not react in time to stop his mount or to avoid the wall, but he threw himself clear as his horse went down, dropped into a roll as nimble and precise as any martial arts movie aficionado could desire, and came up on his feet. He spun, a dance-like step somehow in time with the vast song of the battlefield, and his sword came whipping at my head.

Dimly, I heard other horses screaming, tripping not only on my wall but on one another now, but I had no idea how well the spell had worked on the rest of the Sidhe warriors. I was too busy ducking Talos's first swing and backing out of range of the next.

Meryl stepped between us and caught Talos's sword in the X formed by her axe and machete. She strained against Summer's Lord Marshal, leaning her whole body into the effort, muscles quivering. I'd felt exactly how

strong the changeling girl was, but Talos simply pressed against that strength, his face composed, slowly overcoming her.

“Why do you do this, changeling child?” Talos called. “You who have struggled against Winter so long. It is useless. Stand aside. I wish no harm to thee.”

“Like you wish no harm to Lily?” Meryl shouted. “How can you do that to her?”

“It does not please me, child, but it is not for me to decide,” Talos answered. “She is my Queen.”

“She’s not mine,” Meryl snarled, and drove her forehead forward, into Talos’s nose. She struck him hard enough that I heard the impact, and it drove the faerie lord back several staggered paces.

She didn’t see Slate come up from the ground a few feet away and make a quick, squatting lunge at her flank.

“Meryl!” I shouted into the tumult. “Look out!”

She didn’t hear me. The Winter Knight’s sword bit into her just below her lowest rib, and she took more than a foot of frost-covered steel, thrusting up and back. Slate’s sword tore through her and came out through her jacket and the flatware coating it, emerging like some bloody blade of grass. She faltered, her mouth opening in a gasp. Both axe and machete fell from her hands.

“Meryl!” Fix screamed nearby.

Slate laughed and said something I couldn’t hear. Then he twisted the blade with a wrenching pop and whipped it back out. Meryl stared at him and reached out a hand. Slate slapped it contemptuously aside and turned his back on her. She fell limply down.

I felt the rage rising and climbed back to my feet, gripping my staff in both hands. Slate reached down and dragged Talos up from the ground with one hand.

“Slate!” I shouted. “Slate, you murdering bastard!”

The Winter Knight’s head whipped around toward me. His sword came up to guard. Talos’s eyes widened, and his fingers made a series of swift warding gestures.

I gathered my rage together and reached down into the ground beneath me, found the fury of the storm within it that matched my own. I thrust the end of my staff down into the misty cloud-ground as if I’d been driving a

hole through a frozen lake, then extended my right hand toward the Winter Knight. “*Ventas!*” I shouted. “*Ventas fulmino!*”

The fury of the storm beneath us reared up through the wood of my staff, electricity rising in a buzzing roar of light and energy coming up from the ground and spiraling around the staff and across my body. It whirled down my extended right arm, a serpent of blue-white lightning, hesitated for a second, and then lashed across the space between me and the tip of Lloyd Slate’s sword, fastening onto the blade, and bathing Slate in a writhing coruscation of azure sparks.

Slate’s body jerked, his back arching violently. Thunder tore the air apart as the bolt of lightning struck home, throwing Slate into the air and hurling him violently to the ground. The shock wave of the thunder knocked me down, together with everyone else in the immediate area.

Everyone except Talos.

The Lord Marshal of Summer braced himself against the concussion, lifting one hand before his eyes as if it had been a stiff breeze. Then, in the deafening silence that came after, he lifted his sword and came straight toward me.

I reached for my blasting rod, on the ground not far away, lifted it, and threw a quick lash of fire at Talos. The Sidhe lord didn’t even bother to gesture it aside. It splashed against him and away, and with a sweep of his sword he sent my blasting rod spinning from my grasp. I lifted my staff as a feeble shield with my left hand, and he struck that away as well.

Some of my hearing returned, enough for me to hear him say, “And so it ends.”

“You’re damned right,” I muttered. “Look down.”

He did.

I’d drawn my .357 in my right hand while he’d knocked the staff out of my left. I braced my right elbow against the ground and pulled the trigger.

A second roar of thunder, sharper than the first, blossomed out from the end of the gun. I don’t think the bullet penetrated the dark faerie mail, because it didn’t tear through Talos like it should have. It hit him like a sledgehammer instead, driving him back and toppling him to the ground. He lay there for a moment, stunned.

It was cheap, but I was in a freaking war and I was more than a little angry. I kicked him in the face with the heel of my boot, and then I leaned down and clubbed him with the heavy barrel of the .357 until his stunned

attempts to defend himself ceased and he lay still, the skin of his face burned and blistered where the steel of the gun's barrel stuck him.

I looked up in time to see Lloyd Slate, his right arm dangling uselessly, swing the broken haft of a spear at my head. There was a flash of light and pain, and I fell back on the ground, too stunned to know how badly I'd been hit. I tried to bring the gun to bear again, but Slate took it from my hand, spun it around a finger, and lowered the barrel toward my head, already thumbing the hammer back. I saw the gun coming down and saw as well that Slate wasn't going to pause for dramatic dialogue. The second I saw the dark circle of the barrel, I threw myself to one side, lifting my arms. The gun roared, and I waited for a light at the end of what I was pretty sure would be a downward sloping tunnel.

Slate missed. A ferocious, high-pitched shriek of fury made him whip his head to one side as a new attacker entered the fray.

Fix brought his monkey wrench down in a two-handed swing that ended at Lloyd Slate's wrist. There was a crunch of impact, of the delicate bones there snapping, and my gun went flying into the water. Slate let out a snarl and swung his broken arm at Fix, but the little guy was quick. He met the blow with the monkey wrench held in both hands, and it was Slate who screamed and reeled from the blow.

"You hurt her!" Fix screamed. His next swing hit Slate in the side of his left kneecap, and dropped the Winter Knight to the ground. "You hurt Meryl!"

Slate tried to roll away, but Fix rained two-handed blows of the monkey wrench down on his back. Evidently, whatever power it was that let Slate shrug off a bolt of lightning had been expended, or else it couldn't stand up to the cold steel of Fix's weapon. The little changeling pounded on Slate's back, screaming at him, until one of the blows landed on the back of his neck. The Winter Knight went limp and lay utterly still.

Fix came over to me and helped me up. As he did, wolves surrounded us, several of them bloodied, all of them with teeth bared. I looked blearily over them, to see the Sidhe warriors regrouping, dragging a couple of wounded. One horse lay on the ground screaming, the others had scattered, and only one warrior was still mounted, another slender Sidhe in green armor and a masked helm. Weapons still in hand, the Sidhe prepared to charge us again.

“Help me,” Fix pleaded, hauling desperately at Meryl’s shoulder. I stepped up on wobbly legs, but someone brushed past me. Billy, naked and stained with bright faerie blood, took Meryl under the shoulders, and dragged her back behind what protection the pack of werewolves offered.

“This is going to be bad,” he said. “We had an edge—their horses were terrified of us. On foot, I don’t know how well we’ll do. Almost everyone’s hurt. How’s Harry?”

“Dammit,” Meryl growled thickly. “Let me go. It isn’t all that bad. See to the wizard. If he goes down none of us are going home.”

“Meryl!” Fix said. “I thought you were hurt bad.”

The changeling girl sat up, her face pale, her clothing drenched in blood. “Most of it isn’t mine,” she said, and I knew she was lying. “How is he?”

Billy had sat me down on the ground at some point, and I felt him poking at my head. I flinched when it got painful. Sitting down helped, and I started to put things together again.

“His skull isn’t broken,” Billy said. “Maybe a concussion, I don’t know.”

“Give me a minute,” I said. “I’ll make it.”

Billy gripped my shoulder, relief in the gesture. “Right. We’re going to have to run for it, Harry. There’s more fight coming toward us.”

Billy was right. I could hear the sounds of more horses, somewhere nearby in the mist, and the hammering of hundreds of goblin boots striking the ground in step.

“We can’t run,” Meryl said. “Aurora still has Lily.”

Billy said, “Talk later. Here they come!” He blurred and dropped to all fours, taking his wolf-form again as we looked up and saw the Sidhe warriors coming toward us.

The waters behind them abruptly erupted, the still surface of the river boiling up, and cavalry, all dark blue, sea green, deep purple, rose up from under the waves. The riders were more Sidhe warriors, clad in warped-looking armor decorated in stylized snowflakes. There were only a dozen of them to the Summer warriors’ score, but they were mounted and attacking from behind. They cut into the ranks of the Summer warriors, blades flickering, led by a warrior in mail of purest white, bearing a pale and cold-looking blade. The Summer warriors turned to fight, but they’d been taken off guard and they knew it.

The leader of the Winter attack cut down one warrior, then turned to another, hand spinning through a series of gestures. Cold power surged

around that gesture, and one of the Summer warriors simply stopped moving, the crackling in the air around him growing louder as crystals of ice seemed simply to erupt from the surface of his body and armor, frozen from the inside out. In seconds, he was nothing but a slowly growing block of ice around a gold-and-green figure inside, and the pale rider almost negligently nudged the horse into a solid kick.

The ice shattered into pieces and fell to the ground in a jumbled pile.

The pale rider took off her helmet and flashed me a brilliant, girlish smile. It was Maeve, the Winter Lady, her green eyes bright with bloodlust, dreadlocks bound close to her head. She almost idly licked blood from her sword, as another Summer warrior fell to one knee, his back to the water, sword raised desperately against the riders confronting him.

The waters surged again, and pale, lovely arms reached out, wrapping around his throat from behind. I caught a glimpse of golden eyes and a green-toothed smile, and then the warrior's scream was cut off as he was dragged under the surface. The Summer warriors retreated, swift and in concert. The rest of the mounted Winter warriors set out in pursuit.

"Your godmother sends her greetings," Maeve called to me. "I'd have acted sooner, but it would have been a fair fight, and I avoid them."

"I need to get to the Table," I called to her.

"So I have been told," Maeve said. She rode her horse over to Lloyd Slate's unmoving form, and her lovely young face opened into another brilliant smile. "My riders are attacking further down the river, drawing Summer forces that way. You should be able to run upstream." She leaned down and purred, "Hello, Lloyd. We should have a talk."

"Come on, then," grunted Meryl. "Can you walk, wizard?"

In answer, I pushed myself to my feet. Meryl stood too, though I saw her face twist with pain as she did. Fix hefted his bloodied monkey wrench. I recovered my staff, but my blasting rod was nowhere to be seen. The black doctor bag lay nearby, and I recovered it, taking time to check its contents before closing it again. "All right, people, let's go."

We started along the stream at a jog. I didn't know how far we had to go. Everything around us was chaos and confusion. Once a cloud of pixies flew past us, and I found another stretch over the river where spiders as big as footballs had spun webs, trapping dozens of pixies in their strands. A group of faerie hounds, green and grey and savage, went past hot on the heels of a

long panther like being headed for the water. Arrows whistled past, and everywhere lay the faerie dead and dying.

Finally, I felt the ground begin to rise, and looked up to see the hill of the Stone Table before us. I could even see Korrick's hulking form at the top, as the centaur backed away from the stone figure of Lily, evidently just set upon the table. Aurora, dismounted, was a slender, gleaming form, looking down upon us with anger.

"Lily!" Meryl called, though her voice had gone thready. Fix whirled to look at her, his eyes alarmed, and Meryl dropped to one knee, her ugly, honest face twisting in pain. "Get her, Fix. Save her and get her home." She looked around, focusing on me. "You'll help him?"

"You paid for it," I said. "Stay here. Stay down. You've done enough."

She shook her head and said, "One thing more." But she settled down on the ground, hand pressed to her wounded side, panting.

Aurora said something sharp to Korrick. The centaur bowed his head to her and, spear gripped in his hand, came down the hill toward us.

"Crap," I said. "Billy, this guy is a heavy hitter. Don't close with him. See if you can keep him distracted."

Billy barked in acknowledgment, and the werewolves shot forward as the centaur descended, fanning out around him and harrying his flanks and rear while their companions dodged his hooves and spear.

"Stay with Meryl," I told Fix, and scooted around the werewolves' flanks, heading up the hill toward the Stone Table.

I got close enough to the top to see Aurora standing over the statue of Lily. She held Mother Winter's Unraveling in her fingers, pressed against the statue, and she was tugging sharply at the strands, beginning to pull it to pieces. I felt something as she did, a kind of dark gravity that jerked at my wizard's senses with sharp, raking fingers. The Unraveling began to come apart, strand by strand and line by line, under Aurora's slender hands.

I stretched out my hand, adrenaline and pain giving me plenty of fuel for the magic, and called, "*Ventas servitas!*" Wind leapt out in a sudden spurt, seizing the Unraveling and tearing it from Aurora's fingers, sending it spinning through the air toward me. I caught it, stuck my tongue out at Aurora, yelled, "Meep, meep!" and ran like hell.

"Damn thee, wizard!" screamed Aurora, and the sound raked at me with jagged talons. She lifted her hands and shouted something else, and the ground itself shook, throwing me off my feet. I landed and rolled as best I

could down the hill until I reached the bottom. It took me a second to drag in a breath, then I rolled to my back to sit up.

Sudden wind slashed at me, slamming me back down to the earth, and tore the Unraveling from my hands. I looked up to see Aurora take the bit of cloth from the air with casual contempt, and start back up the hill. I struggled to sit up and follow, but the wind kept me pinned there, unable to rise from the ground.

“No more interruptions,” Aurora spat, and gestured with one hand.

The ground screamed. From it, writhing up with whipping, ferocious motion, came a thick hedge of thorns as long as my hand. It rose into place in a ring around the waist of the hill, so dense that I couldn’t see Aurora behind it.

I fought against Aurora’s spell, but couldn’t overcome it physically, and I didn’t even bother to try to rip it to shreds with sheer main magical strength. I stopped struggling and closed my eyes to begin to feel my way through it, to take it apart from the inside. But even as I did, Fix started screaming, “Harry? Harry! Help!”

One of the werewolves let loose a high-pitched scream of agony, and then another. My concentration wavered, and I struggled to regain it. Those people were here because of me, and I would be damned if I would let anything more happen to them. I tried to hang on to the focus, the detachment I would need to concentrate, to unravel Aurora’s spell, but my fear and my anger and my worry made it all but impossible. They would have lent strength to a spell, but this was delicate work, and now my emotions, so often a source of strength, only got in the way.

Then hooves galloped up, striking the ground near me. I looked up to see the warrior in green armor, the only rider of those original Sidhe cavalry to stay mounted, standing over me, horse stamping, spear leveled at my head.

“Don’t!” I said. “Wait!”

But the rider ignored me, lifted the spear, its tip gleaming in the silver light, and drove it down at my unprotected throat.

Chapter Thirty-three



The spear drove into the earth beside my neck, and the rider hissed in an impatient female voice, “Hold still.”

She swung down from the faerie steed, reached up, and took off the masked helm. Elaine’s wheat-brown hair spilled down, escaping from the bun it had been tied in, and she jerked it all the way down irritably. “Hold still. I’ll get that off you.”

“Elaine,” I said. I went through a bunch of heated emotions, and I didn’t have time for any of them. “I’d say I was glad to see you, but I’m not sure.”

“That’s because you always were a little dense, Harry,” she said, her voice tart. Then she smoothed her features over, her eyes falling half closed, and spread her gloved hands over my chest. She muttered something to herself and then said, “Here. *Samanyana* .”

There was a surge of gentle power, and the wind pinning me to the ground abruptly vanished. I pushed myself back to my feet.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not done.” I recovered my valise and my staff. “I need to get through those thorns.”

“You can’t,” Elaine said. “Harry, I know this spell. Those thorns aren’t just pointy, they’re poisonous. If one of them scratches you, you’ll be paralyzed in a couple of minutes. Two or three will kill you.”

I scowled at the barrier and settled my grip on my staff.

“And they won’t burn, either,” Elaine added.

“Oh.” I ground my teeth. “I’ll just force them aside, then.”

“That’ll be like holding open a screen door, Harry. They’ll just fall back into place when your concentration wavers.”

“Then it won’t waver.”

“You can’t do it, Harry,” Elaine said. “If you start pushing through, Aurora will sense it and she’ll tear you apart. If you’re holding the thorns off you, you won’t be able to defend yourself.”

I lowered my staff and looked from the thorns back to Elaine. “All right,” I said. “Then you’ll have to hold them off me.”

Elaine’s eyes widened. “What?”

“You hold the thorns back. I’ll go through.”

“You’re going to go up against Aurora?*Alone?* ”

“And you’re going to help me,” I said.

Elaine bit her lip, looking away from me.

“Come on, Elaine,” I said. “You’ve already betrayed her. And I am going through those thorns, with your help or without it.”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, you do,” I said. “If you were going to kill me, you’ve already had your chance. And if Aurora finishes what she’s doing, I’m dead anyway.”

“You don’t understand—”

“I know I don’t,” I snapped. “I don’t understand why you’re helping her. I don’t understand how you can stand by and let her do the things she’s done. I don’t understand how you can stand here and let that girl die.” I let that sink in for a second before I added, quietly, “And I don’t understand how you could betray me like that. Again.”

“For all you know,” Elaine said, “it will happen a third time. I’ll let those thorns close on you halfway through and kill you for her.”

“Maybe so,” I said. “But I don’t want to believe that, Elaine. We loved each other once upon a time. I know you aren’t a coward and you aren’t a killer. I want to believe that what we had really meant something, even now. That I can trust you with my life the way you can trust me with yours.”

She let out a bitter little laugh and said, “You don’t know what I am anymore, Harry.” She looked at me. “But I believe you. I know I can trust you.”

“Then help me.”

She nodded and said, “You’ll have to run. I’m not as strong as you, and this is brute work. I won’t be able to lift it for long.”

I nodded at her. Doubt nagged at me as I did. What if she did it again? Elaine hadn’t exactly been sterling in the up-front-honesty department. I watched as she focused, her lovely face going blank, and felt her draw in her power, folding her arms over her chest, palms over either shoulder like an Egyptian sarcophagus.

Hell, I had ten million ways to die all around me. What was one over another? At least this way, if I went out, I’d go out doing something worthwhile. I turned and crouched, bag and staff in hand.

Elaine murmured something, and a wind stirred around her, lifting her hair around her head. She opened her eyes, though they remained distant,

unfocused, and spread both hands to her sides.

Wind lashed out in a column five feet around and drove into the wall of thorns. The thorns shuddered and then began to give, bending away from Elaine's spell.

"Go!" she gasped. "Go, hurry!"

I ran.

The wind almost blinded me, and I had to run crouched down, hoping that none of my exposed skin would brush against any thorns. I felt one sharp tug along my jacket, but it didn't pierce the leather. Elaine didn't let me down. After a few seconds, I burst through the wall and came out in the clear on top of the hill of the Stone Table.

The Table stood where it had been before, but the runes and sigils scrawled over its surface now blazed with golden light. Aurora stood at the Table, fingers flying over the Unraveling, its threads pressed against the head of the statue of the kneeling girl, still upon the table. I circled a bit to one side to stay out of her peripheral vision and ran toward her.

When I was only a few feet away, the Unraveling suddenly exploded in a wash of cold white light. The light washed over the statue in a wave, and as it passed, cold white marble warmed into flesh, her stone waves of hair becoming emerald-green tresses. Lily opened her eyes and let out a gasp, looking around dazedly.

Aurora took Lily by the throat, drove the changeling down to the surface of the Stone Table with her hand, and drew the knife from her belt.

It wasn't all that gentlemanly, but I slugged the Summer Lady in the back with a two-handed swing of my staff.

As I did, the stars evidently reached the right position, and we reached midnight, the end of the height of summer, and the glowing runes on the Table flared from golden light to cold, cold blue.

The blow jarred the knife from Aurora's hand, and it fell to the surface of the table. Lily let out a scream and got out from under Aurora's hand, rolling across the table's surface and away from her.

Aurora turned to me, as fast as any of the other Sidhe, leaning back on the table and planting both feet against my chest. She kicked hard and drove me back, and before I was done rolling she had called a gout of fire and sent it roaring toward me. I got to my knees and lifted my staff, calling together my will in time to parry the strike, deflecting the flame into the misty sky.

The red light of it fell on a green faerie steed leaping in the air above the thorns. It didn't make it over the wall but fall twenty feet short, screaming horribly as it landed on the poisoned thorns. Its rider didn't go down with it, though. Talos, his face bloodied, leapt off the horse's back, did a neat flip in the air, and came down inside the circle of thorns unscathed.

Aurora let out a wild laugh and said, "Kill him, Lord Marshal!"

Talos drew his sword and came for me. I thought the first blow was a thrust for my belly, but he'd suckered me, and the sword darted to one side to send my staff spinning off into the thorns. As he stalked me, I gripped my valise and backed away, looking around me for a weapon, for something to buy me a few seconds, for options.

Then a basso bellow shook the hilltop and froze even Aurora for a second. The wall of thorns shook and quivered, and something massive bellowed again and tore through it, into the open. The troll was huge, and green, and hideous, and strong. It wielded an axe in one hand like a plastic picnic knife and was covered in swelling welts, poisoned wounds, and its own dark-green blood. It had a horrible wound in its side, ichor flowing openly from it. It was dragging itself along despite the wounds, but it was dying.

And it was Meryl. She'd Chosen.

I could only stare as I recognized her features, inside the insane fury of the troll's face. It reached for Talos, and the Lord Marshal of Summer whirled, his bright sword taking off one of the troll's hands. She got the other on his leg, though, and dragged him beneath her even as she fell, the weight of her pinning him down, crushing him to the ground with a choked, gurgling cry of rage and triumph.

I looked back, to see Aurora catch Lily by her green hair, and drag her back toward the Table. I ran to it, and beat her to the knife, a curved number of chipped stone, dragging it across the Table and to me.

"Fool," Aurora hissed. "I will tear out her throat with my bare hands."

I threw the knife away and said, "No, you won't."

Aurora laughed and asked, eyes mad and enticing, "And why not?"

I undid the clasp of the valise. "Because I know something you don't."

"What?" she laughed. "What could you possibly know that matters now?"

I gave her a cold smile and said, "The phone number to Pizza Spress." I opened the bag and snarled, "Get her, Toot!"

There was a shrill, piping blast from inside the valise and Toot-toot sailed up out of it, leaving a trail of crimson sparkles in his wake. The little faerie still wore his makeshift armor, but his weapons had been replaced with what I'd had Billy pick up from Wal-Mart—an orange plastic box knife, its slender blade extended from its handle.

Aurora let out another laugh, uglier, and said, “And what can this little thing do?”

Toot blew another little blast on his trumpet and shouted, voice shrill, “In the name of the Pizza Lord! Charge!”

And the valise exploded in a cloud of crimson sparkles as a swarm of pixies, all armed with cold steel blades sheathed in orange plastic, rose up and streaked toward Aurora in a cloud of red sparkles and glinting knives.

She met my eyes as the pixies came for her, and I saw the sudden fear, the recognition of what was coming for her. She lifted a hand, golden power gathering there, but one of the pixies reached her, box knife flashing, and ripped across her hand with its blade. She screamed, blood flowing, and the golden light dimmed.

“No!” she howled. “No! Not now!”

The pixies swarmed her, and it wasn't pretty. The bright faerie mail of her gown gave her no protection against the steel blades, and they sheared through it like cardboard. From all directions, in a whirling cloud around her, Toot-toot and his companions struck dozens of times in only a few seconds, the bright steel splashing scarlet blood into the air.

I saw her eyes open, burning brightly, even as zipping, darting death opened up more cuts, flaying her pale skin. She hauled herself toward the Table.

If she died there, bled to death on the table, she would accomplish her goal. She would hurl vast power to the Winter Courts and destroy the balance between the faerie Courts. I threw myself up onto the Table and into her, bearing her back down and to the ground.

She screamed in frustration and struggled against me—but she didn't have any strength. We rolled down the hill a few times, and then wound up on the ground, me pinning her down, holding her there.

Aurora looked up at me, green eyes faded of color, unfocused. “Wait,” she said, her voice weak and somehow very young. She didn't look like a mad faerie sorceress now. She looked like a frightened girl. “Wait. You don't understand. I just wanted it to stop. Wanted the hurting to stop.”

I smoothed a bloodied lock of hair from her eyes and felt very tired as I said, "The only people who never hurt are dead."

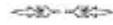
The light died out of her eyes, her breath slowing. She whispered, barely audible, "I don't understand."

I answered, "I don't either."

A tear slid from her eye and mixed with the blood.

Then she died.

Chapter Thirty-four



I'd done it. I'd saved the girl, stopped the thief, proved Mab's innocence, and won her support for the White Council, thereby saving my own ass.

Huzzah.

I lay there with Aurora's empty body, too tired to move. The Queens found me maybe a quarter of an hour later. I was only dimly aware of them, of radiant light of gold and blue meeting over me. Gold light gathered over the body for a moment and then flowed away, taking the dead flesh with it. I was left cold and tired on the ground.

The gold light's departure left only cold blue. A moment later, I felt Mab's fingers touch my head, and she murmured, "Wizard. I am well pleased with thee."

"Go away, Mab," I said, my voice tired.

She laughed and said, "Nay, mortal. It is you who must now depart. You and your companions."

"What about Toot-toot?" I asked.

"It is unusual for a mortal to be able to Call any of Faerie, even the lowest, into service, but it has been done before. Fear not for your little warriors. They were your weapon, and the only one accountable for their actions will be you. Take their steel with you, and it will be enough."

I looked up at her and said, "You're going to live up to your side of the bargain?"

"Of course. The wizards will have safe passport."

"Not that bargain. Ours."

Mab's lovely, dangerous mouth curled up in a smile. "First, let me make you an offer."

She gestured, and the thorns parted. Maeve stood there in her white armor, and Mother Winter stood behind her, all shrouded in black cloth. Before them on the ground knelt Lloyd Slate, broken, obviously in pain, his hands manacled to a collar around his throat, the whole made of something that looked like cloudy ice.

"We have a traitor among us," Mab purred. "And he will be dealt with accordingly. After which there will be an opening for a new Knight." She

watched me and said, “I would have someone worthy of more trust as his successor. Accept that power and all debts between us are canceled.”

“Not just no,” I muttered. “Hell, no.”

Mab’s smile widened. “Very well, then. I’m sure we can find some way to amuse ourselves with this one until time enough has passed to offer again.”

Slate looked up, blearily, his voice slurred and panicky. “No. No, Dresden. Dresden, don’t let them. Don’t let them take me. Take it, please, don’t let them keep me waiting.”

Mab touched my head again and said, “Only twice more, then, and you will be free of me.”

And they left.

Lloyd Slate’s screams lingered behind them.

I sat there, too tired to move, until the lights began to dim. I vaguely remember feeling Ebenezar heft me off the ground and get my arm across his shoulders. The Gatekeeper murmured something, and Billy answered him.

I woke up back at my place, in bed.

Billy, who had been dozing in a chair next to the bed, woke up with a snort and said, “Hey, there you are. You thirsty?”

I nodded, throat too dry to speak, and he handed me a glass of cool water.

“What happened?” I asked, when I could speak.

He shook his head. “Meryl died. She told me to tell you that she’d made her Choice and didn’t regret it. Then she just changed. We found her on the ground near you.”

I closed my eyes and nodded.

“Ebenezar said to tell you that you’d made a lot of people see red, but that you shouldn’t worry about them for a while.”

“Heh,” I said. “The Alphas?”

“Banged up,” Billy said, a hint of pride in his voice. “One hundred and fifty-five stitches all together, but we all came out of it more or less in one piece. Pizza party and gaming at my place tonight.”

My stomach growled at the word “pizza.”

I took a shower, dried off, and dressed in clean clothes. That made me blink. I looked around the bathroom, then peeked out at my bedroom, and said to Billy, “You cleaned up? Did laundry?”

He shook his head. “Not me.” There was a knock at the door and he said, “Just a minute.” I heard him go out and say something through the door before he came back in. “Visitors.”

I put some socks on, then my sneakers. “Who is it?”

“The new Summer Lady and Knight,” Billy said.

“They looking for trouble?”

Billy grinned and said, “Just come talk to them.”

I glowered at him and followed him out to the main room. It was spotless. My furniture is mostly secondhand, sturdy old stuff with a lot of wood and a lot of textured fabrics. It all looked clean too, and there were no stains in it. My rugs, everything from something that could have flown in the skies of mythic Araby to tourist-trap faux Navajo, had also been cleaned and aired out. I checked the floor underneath the rugs. Mopped and scoured clean. The hod had fresh wood in it, and the fireplace had been not only emptied out but swept clean to boot.

My staff and blasting rod were in the corner, gleaming as if they’d been polished, and my gun hung in its holster, freshly oiled. The gun had been polished too.

I went over to the alcove with the stove, sink, and icebox. The icebox was an old-fashioned one that stocked actual ice, given my problems with electricity. It had been cleaned, and new ice put in it. It was packed with neat rows of food—fresh fruits and veggies, juice, Cokes—and there was ice cream in the freezer. My pantry was full of dry foods, canned foods, pasta, sauces. And Mister had a new litterbox, made of wood, lined with plastic, and full of fresh litter. He had a carved wooden bowl as well, and a mate for water, and he had emptied it of food. Mister himself sprawled on the floor, batting idly at a cloth sack of catnip hanging from a string on the pantry door.

“I died,” I said. “I died and someone made a clerical error and this is heaven.”

I looked around to find Billy grinning at me like a fool. He hooked a thumb at the door. “Visiting dignitaries?”

I went to the door and opened it warily, peeking around it.

Fix stood there in a set of mechanic’s coveralls. His frizzy white hair floated around his head and complemented his smile. He had grease on his hands and face, and his old toolbox sat on the ground next to him. Beside

him stood Lily, shapely figure showing off simple dark slacks and a green blouse. Her hair had been pulled back into a ponytail.

And it had turned snow white.

“Harry,” Fix said. “How you doing?”

I blinked at them and said, “You? The new Summer Lady?”

Lily flushed prettily and nodded. “I know. I didn’t want it, but when—when Aurora died, her power flowed into the nearest Summer vessel. Usually it would be one of the other Queens, but I had the Knight’s power and it just sort of . . . plopped in there.”

I lifted my eyebrows and said, “Are you okay?”

She frowned. “I’m not sure. It’s a lot to think about. And it’s the first time this kind of power has fallen to a mortal.”

“You mean you’re not, uh. You haven’t?”

“Chosen?” Lily asked. She shook her head. “It’s just me. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but Titania said she’d teach me.”

I glanced aside. “And you chose Fix as your Knight, huh.”

She smiled at Fix. “I trust him.”

“Suits me,” I said. “Fix kicked the Winter Knight’s ass once already.”

Lily blinked and looked at Fix. The little guy flushed, and I swear to God, he dragged one foot over the ground.

Lily smiled and offered me her hand. “I wanted to meet you. And to thank you, Mister Dresden. I owe you my life.”

I shook her hand but said, “You don’t owe me anything. I’m apparently saving damsels on reflex now.” My smile faded and I said, “Besides. I was just the hired help. Thank Meryl.”

Lily frowned and said, “Don’t blame yourself for what happened. You did what you did because you have a good heart, Mister Dresden. Just like Meryl. I can’t repay a kindness like that, and it’s going to be years before I can make much use of my . . . my . . .” she fumbled for a word.

“Power?”

“Okay, power. But if you need help, or a safe place, you can come to me. Whatever I can do, I will.”

“She had some brownies come clean up your place for you, Harry,” Fix said. “And I just finished up with your car, so it should run for you now. I hope you don’t mind.”

I had to blink my eyes a few times, before I said, “I don’t mind. Come on in, I’ll get you a drink.”

We had a nice visit. They seemed like decent kids.

After everyone left, it was dark, and there was another knock at the door. I answered it, and Elaine stood there, in a T-shirt and jeans shorts that showed off her pretty legs. She had her hair up under a Cubs baseball hat, and she said without preamble, “I wanted to see you before I left.”

I leaned against the doorway close to her. “You got out okay, I guess.”

“So did you. Did Mab pay up?”

I nodded. “Yeah. What about you? Are you still beholden to Summer?”

Elaine shrugged. “I owed everything to Aurora. Even if she’d wanted to quibble about whether or not I’d paid her back in full, it’s a moot point now.”

“Where are you going?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Somewhere with a lot of people. Maybe go to school for a while.” She took a deep breath and then said, “Harry, I’m sorry things went like that. I was afraid to tell you about Aurora. I guess I should have known better. I’m glad you came through it all right. Really glad.”

I had a lot of answers to that, but the one I picked was, “She thought she was doing something good. I guess I can see how you’d . . . Look, it’s done.”

She nodded. Then she said, “I saw the pictures on your mantel. Of Susan. Those letters. And that engagement ring.”

I glanced back at the mantel and felt bad in all kinds of ways. “Yeah.”

“You love her,” Elaine said.

I nodded.

She let out a breath and looked down, so that the bill of her hat hid her eyes. “Then can I give you some advice?”

“Why not.”

She looked up and said, “Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Harry.”

I blinked and said, “What?”

She gestured at my apartment. “You were living in a sewer, Harry. I understand that there’s something you’re blaming yourself for. I’m just guessing at the details, but it’s pretty clear you were driving yourself into the ground because of it. Get over it. You aren’t going to do her any good as a living mildew collection. Stop thinking about how bad you feel—because if she cares about you at all, it would tear her up to see you like I saw you a few days ago.”

I stared at her for a moment and then said, "Romantic advice. From you."

She flashed me half of a smile and said, "Yeah. The irony. I'll see you around."

I nodded and said, "Good-bye, Elaine."

She leaned up and kissed my cheek again, then turned and left. I watched her go. And illegal mind fog or not, I never mentioned her to the Council.

Later that night I showed up at Billy's apartment. Laughter drifted out under the door, along with music and the smell of delivered pizza. I knocked and Billy answered the door. Conversation ceased inside.

I came into the apartment. A dozen wounded, bruised, cut, and happy werewolves watched me from around a long table scattered with drinks, Pizza Spress boxes, dice, pencils, pads of paper, and little inch-tall models on a big sheet of graph paper.

"Billy," I said. "And the rest of you guys. I just wanted to say that you really handled yourselves up there. A lot better than I expected or hoped. I should have given you more credit. Thank you."

Billy nodded and said, "It was worth it. Right?"

There was a murmur of agreement from the room.

I nodded. "Okay, then. Someone get me a pizza and a Coke and some dice, but I want it understood that I'm going to need thews."

Billy blinked at me. "What?"

"Thews," I said. "I want big, bulging thews, and I don't want to have to think too much."

His face split in a grin. "Georgia, do we have a barbarian character sheet left?"

"Sure," Georgia said, and went to a file cabinet.

I took a seat at the table and got handed pizza and Coke, and listened to the voices and chatter start up again, and thought to myself that it was a whole hell of a lot better than spending another night crucifying myself in the lab.

"You know what disappoints me?" Billy asked me after a while.

"No, what?"

"All of those faeries and duels and mad queens and so on, and no one quoted old Billy Shakespeare. Not even once."

I stared at Billy for a minute and started to laugh. My own aches and bruises and cuts and wounds pained me, but it was an honest, stretchy pain,

something that was healing. I got myself some dice and some paper and some pencils and settled down with friends to pretend to be Thorg the Barbarian, to eat, drink, and be merry.

Lord, what fools these mortals be.

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Jim Butcher



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*In memory of
Plumicon and Ersha,
fallen heroes*

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Chapter One

Some things just aren't meant to go together. Things like oil and water. Orange juice and toothpaste.

Wizards and television.

Spotlights glared into my eyes. The heat of them threatened to make me sweat streaks through the pancake makeup some harried stagehand had slapped on me a few minutes before. Lights on top of cameras started winking on, the talk-show theme song began to play, and the studio audience began to chant, "Lah-REE, Lah-REE, Lah-REE!"

Larry Fowler, a short man in an immaculate suit, appeared from the doors at the rear of the studio and began walking to the stage, flashing his porcelain smile and shaking the hands of a dozen people seated at the ends of their rows as he passed them. The audience whistled and cheered as he did. The noise made me flinch in my seat up on the stage, and I felt a trickle of sweat slide down over my ribs, beneath my white dress shirt and my jacket. I briefly considered running away screaming.

It isn't like I have stage fright or anything, see. Because I don't. It was just really hot up there. I licked my lips and checked all the fire exits, just to be safe. No telling when you might need to make a speedy exit. The lights and noise made it a little difficult to keep up my concentration, and I felt the spell I'd woven around me wobble. I closed my eyes for a second, until I had stabilized it again.

In the chair beside me sat a dumpy, balding man in his late forties, dressed in a suit that looked a lot better than mine. Mortimer Lindquist waited calmly, a polite smile on his face, but muttered out of the corner of his mouth, "You okay?"

"I've been in house fires I liked better than this."

"You asked for this meeting, not me," Mortimer said. He frowned as Fowler lingered over shaking a young woman's hand. "Showboat."

"Think this will take long?" I asked Morty.

He glanced beside him at an empty chair, and at another beside me. “Two mystery guests. I guess this one could go for a while. They shoot extra material and edit it down to the best parts.”

I sighed. I’d been on *The Larry Fowler Show* just after I’d gone into business as an investigator, and it had been a mistake. I’d had to fight my way uphill against the tide of infamy I’d received from association with the show. “What did you find out?” I asked.

Mort flicked a nervous glance at me and said, “Not much.”

“Come on, Mort.”

He opened his mouth to answer, then glanced up as Larry Fowler trotted up the stairs and onto the stage. “Not now. Wait for a commercial break.”

Larry Fowler pranced up to us and pumped my hand, then Mort’s with equally exaggerated enthusiasm. “Welcome to the show,” he said into a handheld microphone, then turned to face the nearest camera. “Our topic for today is ‘Witchcraft and Wizardry—Phony or Fabulous?’ With us in order to share their views are local medium and psychic counselor Mortimer Lindquist.”

The crowd applauded politely.

“And beside him, Harry Dresden, Chicago’s only professional wizard.”

There was a round of snickering laughter to go with the applause this time. I couldn’t say I was shocked. People don’t believe in the supernatural these days. Supernatural things are scary. It’s much more comfortable to rest secure in the knowledge that no one can reach out with magic and quietly kill you, that vampires exist only in movies, and that demons are mere psychological dysfunctions.

Completely inaccurate but much more comfortable.

Despite the relative levels of denial, my face heated up. I hate it when people laugh at me. An old, quiet hurt mixed in with my nervousness and I struggled to maintain the suppression spell.

Yeah, I said spell. See, I really am a wizard. I do magic. I’ve run into vampires and demons and a lot of things in between, and I’ve got the scars to show for it. The problem was that technology doesn’t seem to enjoy coexisting with magic. When I’m around, computers crash, lightbulbs burn out, and car alarms start screaming in warbling, drunken voices for no good reason. I’d worked out a spell to suppress the magic I carried with me, at least temporarily, so that I might at least have a chance to keep from blowing out the studio lights and cameras, or setting off the fire alarms.

It was delicate stuff by its very nature, and extremely difficult for me to hold in place. So far so good, but I saw the nearest cameraman wince and jerk his headset away from his ear. Whining feedback sounded tinnily from the headset.

I closed my eyes and reined in my discomfort and embarrassment, focusing on the spell. The feedback died away.

“Well, then,” Larry said, after half a minute of happy talk. “Morty, you’ve been a guest on the show several times now. Would you care to tell us a little bit about what you do?”

Mortimer widened his eyes and whispered, “I see dead people.”

The audience laughed.

“But seriously. Mostly I conduct séances, Larry,” Mortimer said. “I do what I can to help those who have lost a loved one or who need to contact them in the beyond in order to resolve issues left undone back here on earth. I also offer a predictions service in order to help clients make decisions on upcoming issues, and to try to warn them against possible danger.”

“Really,” Larry said. “Could you give us a demonstration?”

Mortimer closed his eyes and rested the fingertips of his right hand on the spot between his eyes. Then in a hollow voice he said, “The spirits tell me...that two more guests will soon arrive.”

The audience laughed, and Mortimer nodded at them with an easy grin. He knew how to play a crowd.

Larry gave Mortimer a tolerant smile. “And why are you here today?”

“Larry, I just want to try to raise public awareness about the realm of the psychic and paranormal. Nearly eighty percent of a recent survey of American adults stated that they believed in the existence of the spirits of the dead, in ghosts. I just want to help people understand that they do exist, and that there are other people out there who have had strange and inexplicable encounters with them.”

“Thank you, Morty. And Harry—may I call you Harry?”

“Sure. It’s your nickel,” I responded.

Larry’s smile got a shade brittle. “Can you tell us a little bit about what you do?”

“I’m a wizard,” I said. “I find lost articles, investigate paranormal occurrences, and train people who find themselves struggling with a sudden development of their own abilities.”

“Isn’t it true that you also consult for the Special Investigations department at Chicago PD?”

“Occasionally,” I said. I wanted to avoid talking about SI if I could. The last thing CPD would want was to be advertised on *The Larry Fowler Show*. “Many police departments across the country employ such consultants when all other leads have failed.”

“And why are you here today?”

“Because I’m broke and your producer is paying double my standard fee.”

The crowd laughed again, more warmly. Larry Fowler’s eyes flashed with an impatient look behind his glasses, and his smile turned into a gnashing of teeth. “No, really, Harry. Why?”

“For the same reasons as Mort—uh, as Morty here,” I answered. Which was true. I’d come here to meet Mort and get some information from him. He’d come here to meet me, because he refused to be seen near me on the street. I guess you could say I don’t have the safest reputation in the world.

“And you claim to be able to do magic,” Larry said.

“Yeah.”

“Could you show us?” Larry prompted.

“I could, Larry, but I don’t think it’s practical.”

Larry nodded, and gave the audience a wise look. “And why is that?”

“Because it would probably wreck your studio equipment.”

“Of course,” Larry said. He winked at the audience. “Well, we wouldn’t want that, would we?”

There was more laughter and a few catcalls from the crowd. Passages from *Carrie* and *Firestarter* sprang to mind, but I restrained myself and maintained the suppression spell. Master of self-discipline, that’s me. But I gave the fire door beside the stage another longing look.

Larry carried on the talk part of the talk show, discussing crystals and ESP and tarot cards. Mort did most of the talking. I chimed in with monosyllables from time to time.

After several minutes of this, Larry said, “We’ll be right back after these announcements.” Stagehands help up signs that read APPLAUSE, and cameras panned and zoomed over the audience as they whistled and hooted.

Larry gave me an annoyed look and strode offstage. In the wings, he started tearing into a makeup girl about his hair.

I leaned over to Mort and said, “Okay. What did you find out?”

The dumpy ectomancer shook his head. “Nothing concrete. I’m still getting back into the swing of things in contacting the dead.”

“Even so, you’ve got more contacts in this area than I do,” I said. “My sources don’t keep close track of who has or hasn’t died lately, so I’ll take whatever I can get. Is she at least alive?”

He nodded. “She’s alive. That much I know. She’s in Peru.”

“Peru?” It came as a vast relief to hear that she wasn’t dead, but what the hell was Susan doing in Peru? “That’s Red Court territory.”

“Some,” Mort agreed. “Though most of them are in Brazil and the Yucatán. I tried to find out exactly where she was, but I was blocked.”

“By who?”

Mort shrugged. “No way for me to tell. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. Thanks, Mort.”

I settled back in my seat, mulling over the news.

Susan Rodriguez was a reporter for a regional yellow paper called the *Midwestern Arcane*. She’d grown interested in me just after I opened up my practice, hounding me relentlessly to find out more about all the things that go bump in the night. We’d gotten involved, and on our first date she wound up lying naked on the ground in a thunderstorm while lightning cooked a toadlike demon to gooey bits. After that, she parlayed a couple of encounters with things from my cases into a widespread syndicated column.

A couple of years later, she wound up following me into a nest of vampires holding a big to-do, despite all my warnings to the contrary. A noble of the Red Court of Vampires had grabbed her and begun the transformation from mortal to vampire on her. It was payback for something I’d done. The vampire noble in question thought that her standing in the Red Court made her untouchable, that I wouldn’t want to start trouble with the entire Court. She told me that if I fought to take Susan back, I would be starting a worldwide war between the White Council of wizards and the vampires’ Red Court.

Which I did.

The vampires hadn’t forgiven me for taking Susan back from them, probably because a bunch of them, including one of their nobility, had been incinerated in the process. That’s why Mort didn’t want to be seen with me. He wasn’t involved in the war, and he intended to keep it that way.

In any case, Susan hadn't gone all the way through her transformation, but the vamps had given her their blood thirst, and if she ever gave in to it, she'd become one of the Red Court. I asked her to marry me, promising her that I'd find a way to restore her humanity. She turned me down and left town, trying to sort things out on her own, I guess. I still kept trying to find a way to remove her affliction, but I'd received only a card and a postcard or three from her since she'd left.

Two weeks ago, her editor had called to say that the columns she usually sent in for the *Arcane* were late, and asked if I knew how to get in touch with her. I hadn't, but I started looking. I got zip, and went to Mort Lindquist to see if his contacts in the spirit world would pay off better than mine.

I hadn't gotten much, but at least she was alive. Muscles in my back unclenched a little.

I looked up to see Larry come back onstage to his theme music. Speakers squealed and squelched when he started to talk, and I realized I'd let my control slip again. The suppression spell was a hell of a lot harder than I thought it would be, and getting harder by the minute. I tried to focus, and the speakers quieted to the occasional fitful pop.

"Welcome back to the show," Larry told a camera. "Today we are speaking with practitioners of the paranormal, who are here to share their views with the studio audience and our viewers at home. In order to explore these issues further, I have asked a couple of experts with opposing viewpoints to join us today, and here they are."

The audience applauded as a pair of men emerged from either side of the stage.

The first man sat down in the chair by Morty. He was a little over average height and thin, his skin burned into tanned leather by the sun. He might have been anywhere between forty and sixty. His hair was greying and neatly cut, and he wore a black suit with a white clerical collar sharing space with a rosary and crucifix at his throat. He smiled and nodded to Mort and me and shook hands with Larry.

Larry said, "Allow me to introduce Father Vincent, who has come all the way from the Vatican to be with us today. He is a leading scholar and researcher within the Catholic Church on the subject of witchcraft and magic, both historically and from a psychological perspective. Father, welcome to the show."

Vincent's voice was a little rough, but he spoke English with the kind of cultured accent that seemed to indicate an expensive education. "Thank you, Larry. I'm very pleased to be here."

I looked from Father Vincent to the second man, who had settled in the chair beside me, just as Larry said, "And from the University of Brazil at Rio de Janeiro, please welcome Dr. Paolo Ortega, world-renowned researcher and debunker of the supernatural."

Larry started saying something else, but I didn't hear him. I just stared at the man beside me as recognition dawned. He was of average height and slightly heavy build, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. He was dark-complected, his black hair neatly brushed, his grey-and-silver suit stylish and tasteful.

And he was a duke of the Red Court—an ancient and deadly vampire, smiling at me from less than an arm's length away. My heart rate went from sixty to a hundred and fifty million, fear sending silver lightning racing down my limbs.

Emotions have power. They fuel a lot of my magic. The fear hit me, and the pressure on the suppression spell redoubled. There was a flash of light and a puff of smoke from the nearest camera, and the operator staggered back from it, tearing off his headphones with one of the curses they have to edit out of daytime TV. Smoke began to rise steadily from the camera, along with the smell of burning rubber, and the studio monitors shrieked with feedback.

"Well," Ortega said, under his breath. "Nice to see you again, Mister Dresden."

I swallowed and fumbled at my pocket, where I had a couple of wizard gadgets I used for self-defense. Ortega put his hand on my arm. It didn't look as if he was exerting himself, but his fingers closed on my wrist like manacles, hard enough to send flashes of pain up through my elbow and shoulder. I looked around, but everyone was staring at the malfunctioning camera.

"Relax," Ortega said, his accent thick and vaguely Latinate. "I'm not going to kill you on television, wizard. I'm here to talk to you."

"Get off me," I said. My voice was thin, shaky. Goddamned stage fright.

He released me, and I jerked my arm away. The crew rolled the smoking camera back, and a director type with a set of headphones made a rolling

motion with the fingers of one hand. Larry nodded to him, and turned to Ortega.

“Sorry about that. We’ll edit that part out later.”

“It’s no trouble,” Ortega assured him.

Jerry paused for a moment, and then said, “Dr. Ortega, welcome to the show. You have a reputation as one of the premier analysts of paranormal phenomena in the world. You have proven that a wide variety of so-called supernatural occurrences were actually clever hoaxes. Can you tell us a little about that?”

“Certainly. I have investigated these events for a number of years, and I have yet to find one that cannot be adequately explained. Alleged alien crop circles proved to be nothing more than a favorite pastime of a small group of British farmers, for example. Other odd events are certainly unusual, but by no means supernatural. Even here in Chicago, you had a rain of toads in one of your local parks witnessed by dozens if not hundreds of people. And it turned out, later, that a freak windstorm had scooped them up from elsewhere and deposited them here.”

Larry nodded, his expression serious. “Then you don’t believe in these events.”

Ortega gave Larry a patronizing smile. “I would love to believe that such things are true, Larry. There is little enough magic in the world. But I am afraid that even though we each have a part of us that wishes to believe in wondrous beings and fantastic powers, the fact of the matter is that it is simple, primitive superstition.”

“Then in your opinion, practitioners of the supernatural—”

“Frauds,” Ortega said with certainty. “With no offense meant to your guests, of course. All of these so-called mediums, presuming they aren’t self-deluded, are simply skilled actors who have acquired a fundamental grasp of human psychology and know how to exploit it. They are easily able to deceive the gullible into believing that they can contact the dead or read thoughts or that they are in fact supernatural beings. Why, with a few minutes’ effort and the right setting, I am certain that I could convince anyone in this room that I was a vampire myself.”

People laughed again. I scowled at Ortega, frustration growing once more, putting more pressure on the suppression spell. The air around me started to feel warmer.

A second cameraman yelped and jerked off his squealing earphones, while his camera started spinning about slowly on its stand, winding power cables around the steel frame it rested on.

The on-air lights went out. Larry stepped to the edge of the stage, yelling at the poor cameraman. The apologetic-looking director appeared from the wings, and Larry turned his attention to him. The man bore the scolding with a kind of oxenlike patience, and then examined the camera. He muttered something into his headset, and he and the shaken cameraman began to wheel the dead camera away.

Larry folded his arms impatiently, then turned to the guests and said, "I'm sorry. Give us a couple of minutes to get a spare camera in. It won't take long."

"No problem, Larry," Ortega assured him. "We can just chat for a moment."

Larry peered at me. "Are you all right, Mister Dresden?" he asked. "You look a little pale. Could you use a drink or something?"

"I know I could," Ortega said, his eyes on me.

"I'll have someone bring them out," Larry said, and strode offstage toward his hairstylist.

Mort had engaged Father Vincent in quiet conversation, his back very firmly turned toward me. I turned back to Ortega, warily, my back stiff, and fought down the anger and fear. Usually being scared out of my mind is kind of useful. Magic comes from emotions, and terror is handy fuel. But this wasn't the place to start calling up gales of wind or flashes of fire. There were too many people around, and it would be too easy to get someone hurt, even killed.

Besides which, Ortega was right. This wasn't the place to fight. If he was here, he wanted to talk. Otherwise, he would have simply jumped me in the parking garage.

"Okay," I said, finally. "What do you want to say?"

He leaned a little closer so that he wouldn't have to raise his voice. I cringed inwardly, but I didn't flinch away. "I've come to Chicago to kill you, Mister Dresden. But I have a proposal for you that I want you to hear, first."

"You really need to work on your opening technique," I said. "I read a book about negotiations. I could loan it to you."

He gave me a humorless smile. “The war, Dresden. The war between your people and mine is too costly, for both of us.”

“War’s a pretty stupid option to take, generally speaking,” I said. “I never wanted it.”

“But you began it,” Ortega said. “You began it over a point of principle.”

“I began it over a human life.”

“And how many more would you save by ending it now?” Ortega asked. “Not merely wizards suffer from this. Our attention to the war leaves us less able to control the wilder elements of our own Court. We frown upon reckless killings, but wounded or leaderless members of our Courts often kill when they do not truly need to. Ending the war now would save hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives.”

“So would killing every vampire on the planet. What’s your point?”

Ortega smiled, showing teeth. Just regular teeth, no long canines or anything. The vampires of the Red Court look human—right up until they turn into something out of a nightmare. “The point, Dresden, is that the war is unprofitable, undesirable. You are the symbolic cause of it to my people, and the point of contention between us and your own White Council. Once you are slain, the Council will accept peace overtures, as will the Court.”

“So you’re asking me to lay down and die? That’s not much of an offer. You really need to read that book.”

“I’m making you an offer. Face me in single combat, Dresden.”

I didn’t quite laugh at him. “Why the hell should I do that?”

His eyes were expressionless. “Because if you do it would mean that the warriors I have brought to town with me will not be forced to target your friends and allies. That the mortal assassins we have retained will not need to receive their final confirmations to kill a number of clients who have hired you in the past five years. I’m sure I need not mention names.”

Fear and anger had been about to settle down, but they came surging back again. “There’s no reason for that,” I said. “If your war is with me, keep it with me.”

“Gladly,” Ortega said. “I do not approve of such tactics. Face me under the dueling laws in the Accords.”

“And after I kill you, what?” I said. I didn’t know if I could kill him, but there was no reason to let him think I wasn’t confident about it. “The next hotshot Red Duke does the same thing?”

“Defeat me, and the Court has agreed that this city will become neutral territory. That those living in it, including yourself and your friends and associates, will be free of the threat of attack so long as they are in it.”

I stared hard at him for a moment. “Chicago-blanca, eh?”

He quirked a puzzled eyebrow at me.

“Never mind. After your time.” I looked away from him, and licked sweat from my upper lip. A stagehand came by with a couple of bottled waters, and passed them to Ortega and to me. I took a drink. The pressure of the spell made flickering colored dots float across my vision.

“You’re stupid to fight me,” I said. “Even if you kill me, my death curse would fall on you.”

He shrugged. “I am not as important as the whole of the Court. I will take that risk.”

Hell’s bells. Dedicated, honorable, courageous, self-sacrificial loonies are absolutely the worst people in the world to go up against. I tried one last dodge, hoping it might pay off. “I’d have to have it in writing. The Council gets a copy too. I want this all recognized, official under the Accords.”

“That done, you will agree to the duel?”

I took a deep breath. The last thing I wanted to do was square off against another supernatural nasty. Vampires scared me. They were strong and way too fast, and had an enormous yuck factor. Their saliva was an addictive narcotic, and I’d been exposed to it enough to make me twitch once in a while, wondering what it would be like to get another hit.

I barely went outside after dark these days, specifically because I didn’t want to encounter any more vampires. A duel would mean a fair fight, and I hate fair fights. In the words of a murderous Faerie Queen, they’re too easy to lose.

Of course, if I didn’t agree to Ortega’s offer, I’d be fighting him anyway, probably at a time and place of his choosing—and I had the feeling that Ortega wasn’t going to show the arrogance and overconfidence I’d seen in other vampires. Something about him said that so long as I wasn’t breathing, he wouldn’t care much how it happened. Not only that, but I believed that he would start in on the people I cared about if he couldn’t have me.

I mean, come on. It was clichéd villainy at its worst.

And an undeniably effective lever.

I'd like to say that I carefully weighed all the factors, reasoned my way to a levelheaded conclusion, and made a rational decision to take a calculated risk, but I didn't. The truth is, I thought of Ortega and company doing harm to some of the people I cared about, and suddenly felt angry enough to start in on him right there. I faced him, eyes narrowed, and didn't bother to hold the anger in check. The suppression spell began to crack, and I didn't bother to keep it going. The spell shattered, and the buildup of wild energy rushed silently and invisibly over the studio.

There was a cough of static from the speakers on the stage before they died with loud pops. The flood-lights overhead suddenly burst with flashes of brilliance and clouds of sparks that fell down over everyone on the stage. One of the two surviving cameras exploded into fire, bluish flames rising up from out of the casing, and heavy power outlets along the walls started spitting orange and green sparks. Larry Fowler yelped and leapt up into the air, batting at his belt before pitching a smoldering cell phone to the floor. The lights died, and people started screaming in startled panic.

Ortega, lit only by the falling sparks, looked grim and somehow eager, shadows dancing over his features, his eyes huge and dark.

"Fine," I said. "Get it to me in writing and you've got a deal."

The emergency lights came up, fire alarms started whooping, and people started stumbling toward exits. Ortega smiled, all teeth, and glided off the stage, vanishing into the wings.

I stood up, shaking a little. A piece of something had apparently fallen and hit Mort's head. There was a small gash on his scalp, already brimming with blood, and he wobbled precariously when he tried to stand. I helped him up, and so did Father Vincent on the other side of him. We lugged the little ectomancer toward the fire doors.

We got Mort down some stairs and outside the building. Chicago PD was on the scene already, blue and white lights flashing. Fire crews and an ambulance or three were just then rolling up on the street. We settled Mort down among a row of people with minor injuries, and stood back. We were both panting a little as the emergency medtechs started triage on the wounded.

"Actually, Mister Dresden," Father Vincent said, "I must confess something to you."

"Heh," I said. "Don't think I missed the irony on that one, padre."

Vincent's leathery mouth creased into a strained smile. "I did not really come to Chicago merely to appear on the show."

"No?" I said.

"No. I really came here to—"

"To talk to me," I interjected.

He lifted his eyebrows. "How did you know?"

I sighed, and got my car keys out of my pocket. "It's just been that kind of day."

Chapter Two

I started walking for my car, and beckoned Father Vincent to follow. He did, and I walked fast enough to make him work to keep up with me. “You must understand,” he said, “that I must insist upon strict confidentiality if I am to divulge details of my problem to you.”

I frowned at him and said, “You think I’m a crackpot at best, or a charlatan at worst. So why would you want me to take your case?”

Not that I would turn him down. I wanted to take his case. Well, more accurately, I wanted to take his money. I wasn’t in the bad fiscal shape of the year before, but that meant only that I had to fend the creditors off with a baseball bat rather than a cattle prod.

“I am told you are the best investigator in the city for it,” Father Vincent said.

I arched an eyebrow at him. “You’ve got something supernatural going on?”

He rolled his eyes. “No, naturally not. I am not naive, Mister Dresden. But I am told that you know more about the occult community than any private investigator in the city.”

“Oh,” I said. “That.”

I thought about it for a minute, and figured it was probably true. The occult community he had in mind was the usual New Age, crystal-gazing, tarot-turning, palm-reading crowd you see in any large city. Most of them were harmless, and many had at least a little ability at magic. Add in a dash of feng-shui artists, season liberally with Wiccans of a variety of flavors and sincerities, blend in a few modestly gifted practitioners who liked mixing religion with their magic, some followers of voodoo, a few Santerians and a sprinkling of Satanists, all garnished with a crowd of young people who liked to wear a lot of black, and you get what most folks think of as the “occult community.”

Of course, hiding in there you found the occasional sorcerer, necromancer, monster, or demon. The real players, the nasty ones, regarded

that crowd the same way a ten-year-old would a gingerbread amusement park. My mental early-warning system set off an imaginary klaxon.

“Who referred you to me, padre?”

“Oh, a local priest,” Vincent said. He took a small notebook from his pocket, opened it, and read, “Father Forthill, of Saint Mary of the Angels.”

I blinked. Father Forthill didn’t see eye-to-eye with me on the whole religion thing, but he was a decent guy. A little stuffy, maybe, but I liked him—and I owed him for favors past. “You should have said that in the first place.”

“You’ll take the case?” Father Vincent asked, as we headed into the parking garage.

“I want to hear the details first, but if Forthill thinks I can help, I will.” I added, hastily, “My standard fees apply.”

“Naturally,” Father Vincent said. He toyed with the crucifix at his throat. “May I assume that you will spare me the magician rigmarole?”

“Wizard,” I said.

“There’s a difference?”

“Magicians do stage magic. Wizards do real magic.”

He sighed. “I don’t need an entertainer, Mister Dresden. Just an investigator.”

“And I don’t need you to believe me, padre. Just to pay me. We’ll get along fine.”

He gave me an uncertain look and said, “Ah.”

We reached my car, a battered old Volkswagen Bug named the Blue Beetle. It has what some people would call “character” and what I would call lots of mismatched replacement parts. The original car may have been blue, but now it had pieces of green, white, and red VWs grafted onto it in place of the originals as they got damaged in one way or another. The hood had to be held down with a piece of hanger wire to keep it from flipping up when the car jounced, and the front bumper was still smashed out of shape from last summer’s attempt at vehicular monsterslaughter. Maybe if Vincent’s job paid well, I’d be able to get it fixed.

Father Vincent blinked at the Beetle and asked, “What happened?”

“I hit trees.”

“You drove your car into a tree?”

“No. Trees, plural. And then a Dumpster.” I glanced at him self-consciously and added, “They were little trees.”

His uncertain look deepened to actual worry. “Ah.”

I unlocked my door. Not that I was worried about anyone stealing my car. I once had a car thief offer to get me something better for a sweetheart rate. “I guess you want to give me the details somewhere a little more private?”

Father Vincent nodded. “Yes, of course. If you could take me to my hotel, I have some photographs and—”

I heard the scuff of shoes on concrete in time for me to catch the gunman in my peripheral vision as he rose from between a pair of parked cars one row over. Dim lights gleamed on the gun, and I threw myself across the hood of the Beetle, away from him. I crashed into Father Vincent, who let out a squeak of startled surprise, and the pair of us tumbled to the ground as the man started shooting.

The gun didn’t split the air with thunder when it fired. Typically, guns do that. They’re a hell of a lot louder than anything most folks run into on a day-to-day basis. This gun didn’t roar, or bark, or even bang. It made a kind of loud noise. Maybe as loud as someone slamming an unabridged dictionary down on a table. The gunman was using a silencer.

One shot hit my car and caromed off the curve of the hood. Another went by my head as I struggled with Father Vincent, and a third shattered the safety glass of a ritzy sports car parked beside me.

“What’s happening?” Father Vincent stammered.

“Shut up,” I snarled. The gunman was moving, his feet scuffing on the concrete as he skirted around my car. I reached around the Beetle’s headlight and fumbled at the wire holding the hood down while the man came closer. It gave way and the hood wobbled up as I reached into the storage compartment.

I looked up in time to see a man, medium height and build, mid thirties, dark pants and jacket, lift a small-caliber pistol, its end heavy with a manufactured silencer. He fired, but he hadn’t taken time to aim at me. He wasn’t twenty feet away, but he missed.

I drew the shotgun out of the car’s trunk and flicked off the safety as I chambered a round. The gunman’s eyes widened and he turned to run. He shot at me again on the way, shattering one of the Beetle’s headlights, and he kept shooting toward me as he skittered back the way he came.

I jerked back behind the car and kept my head down, trying to count his shots. He got to eleven or twelve and the gun went silent. I stood up, the

shotgun already at my shoulder, and sighted down the barrel. The gunman ducked behind a concrete column and kept running.

“Dammit,” I hissed. “Get in the car.”

“But—” Father Vincent stammered.

“Get in the car!” I shouted. I got up, twisted the hanger wire on the hood back into place, and got in. Vincent got in the passenger side and I shoved the shotgun at him. “Hold this.”

He fumbled with it, his eyes wide, as I brought the Beetle to life with a roar. Well. Not really a roar. A Volkswagen Bug doesn’t roar. But it sort of growled, and I mashed it into gear before the priest had managed to completely shut the door.

I headed for the parking garage’s exit, whipping around the ramps and turns.

“What are you doing?” Father Vincent demanded.

“He’s an outfit hitter,” I spat. “They’ll have the exit covered.”

We screeched around the final corner and toward the parking garage’s exit. I heard someone yelling in a breathless voice, and a couple of large and unfriendly-looking men in a car parked across the street were just getting out. One of them held a shotgun, and the other had a heavy-duty semiautomatic, maybe a Desert Eagle.

I didn’t recognize the thug with the shotgun, but Thug Number Three was an enormous man with reddish hair, no neck, and a cheap suit—Cujo Hendricks, right hand enforcer to the crime lord of Chicago, Gentleman Johnny Marcone.

I had to bounce the Beetle up onto the sidewalk at the parking-garage exit to get around the security bar, and I mowed down some landscaped bushes on the way. I jounced over the curb and into the street, hauling the wheel to the right, and mashed the accelerator to the floor.

I glanced back and saw the original gunman standing at a fire-exit door, pointing the silenced pistol at us. He snapped off several more shots, though I only heard the last few, as the silencer started to give out. He didn’t have a prayer of a clean shot, but he got lucky and my back window shattered inward. I gulped and took the first corner against the light, nearly colliding with a U-Haul moving truck, and kept accelerating away.

A couple of blocks later, my heart slowed down enough that I could think. I slowed the car down to something approaching the speed limit, thanked my lucky stars the suppression spell had fallen apart in the studio

and not in the car, and rolled down my window. I stuck my head out for a second to see if Hendricks and his goons were following us, but I didn't see anyone coming along behind us, and took it on faith.

I pulled my head in and found the barrel of the shotgun pointed at my chin, while Father Vincent, his face pale, muttered to himself under his breath in Italian.

"Hey!" I said, and pushed the gun's barrel away. "Careful with that thing. You wanna kill me?" I reached down and flicked the safety on. "Put it down. A patrolman sees that and we're in trouble."

Father Vincent gulped, and tried to lower the gun below the level of the dash. "This weapon is illegal?"

"Illegal is such a strong word," I muttered.

"Oh, my," Father Vincent said with a gulp. "Those men," he said. "They tried to kill you."

"That's what hitters for the outfit do," I agreed.

"How do you know who they are?"

"First guy had a silenced weapon. A good silencer, metal and glass, not a cheapo plastic bottle." I checked out the window again. "He was using a small-caliber weapon, too, and he was trying to get real close before he started shooting."

"Why does that matter?"

It looked clear. My hands trembled and felt a little weak. "Because it means he was using light ammunition. Subsonic. If the bullet breaks the sound barrier, it sort of defeats the point of a silenced weapon. When he saw I was armed, he ran. Covered himself doing it, and went for help. He's a pro."

"Oh, my," Father Vincent said again. He looked a little pale.

"Plus I recognized one of the men waiting at the exit."

"Someone was at the exit?" Father Vincent said.

"Yeah. Some of Marcone's rent-a-thugs." I glanced back at the shattered window and sighed. "Dammit. So where are we going?"

Father Vincent gave me directions in a numb voice, and I concentrated on driving, trying to ignore the quivering in my stomach and the continued trembling of my hands. Getting shot at is not something I handle very well.

Hendricks. Why the hell was Marcone sending goons after me? Marcone was the lord of the mean streets of Second City, but generally he didn't like to use that kind of violence. He thought it was bad for business. I had

believed Marcone and I had an understanding—or at least an agreement to stay out of each other's way. So why would he make a move like this?

Maybe I had already stepped over a line somewhere, that I didn't know existed.

I glanced at the shaken Father Vincent.

He hadn't told me yet what he wanted, but whatever it was, it was important enough to covertly drag one of the Vatican's staff all the way to Chicago. Maybe it was important enough to kill a nosy wizard over, too.

Hoo-boy.

It was turning into one hell of a day.

Chapter Three

Father Vincent directed me to a motel a little ways north of O'Hare. It was a national chain, cheap but clean, with rows of doors facing the parking lot. I drove around to the back of the motel, away from the street, frowning. It didn't look like the kind of place someone like Vincent would stay in. The priest left my car almost before I'd set the parking break, hurried to the nearest door, and ducked inside as quickly as he could open the lock.

I followed him. Vincent shut the door behind us, locked it, and then fiddled with the blinds until they closed. He nodded at the room's little table and said, "Please, sit down."

I did, and stretched out my legs. Father Vincent pulled open a drawer on the plain dresser, and drew out a file folder, held closed with a wide rubber band. He sat down across from me, took off the rubber band, and said, "The Church is interested in recovering some stolen property."

I shrugged and said, "Sounds like a job for the police."

"An investigation is under way and I am giving your police department my full cooperation. But...How to phrase this politely." He frowned. "History is an able teacher."

"You don't trust the police," I said. "Gotcha."

He grimaced. "It is only that there have been a number of associations between Chicago police and various underworld figures in the past."

"That's mostly movies now, padre. You may not have heard, but the whole Al Capone thing has been over for a while."

"Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps not. I simply seek to do everything within my power to recover the stolen article. That includes involving an independent and discreet investigator."

Aha. So he didn't trust the police and wanted me to work for him on the sly. That's why we were meeting at a cheap motel rather than wherever he was really staying. "What do you want me to find for you?"

"A relic," he said.

"A what?"

“An artifact, Mister Dresden. An antique possessed by the Church for several centuries.”

“Oh, that,” I said.

“Yes. The article is fragile and of great age, and we believe that it is not being adequately preserved. It is imperative that we recover it as quickly as possible.”

“What happened to it?”

“It was stolen three days ago.”

“From?”

“The Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in northern Italy.”

“Long ways off.”

“We believe that the artifact was brought here, to Chicago, to be sold.”

“Why?”

He took an eight-by-ten glossy black and white from the folder and passed it to me. It featured a fairly messy corpse lying on cobblestones. Blood had run into the spaces between the stones, as well as pooling a little on the ground around the body. I think it had been a man, but it was hard to tell for certain. Whoever it was had been slashed to almost literal ribbons across the face and neck—sharp, neat, straight cuts. Professional knife work. Yuck.

“This man is Gaston LaRouche. He is the ringleader of a group of organized thieves who call themselves the Churchmice. They specialize in robbing sanctuaries and cathedrals. He was found dead the morning after the robbery near a small airfield. His briefcase contained several falsified pieces of American identification and plane tickets that would carry him here.”

“But no whatsit.”

“Ah. Exactly.” Father Vincent removed another pair of photos. These were also black-and-white, but they looked rougher, as if they had been magnified several times. Both were of women of average height and build, dark hair, dark sunglasses.

“Surveillance photos?” I asked.

He nodded. “Interpol. Anna Valmont and Francisca Garcia. We believe they helped LaRouche with the theft, then murdered him and left the country. Interpol received a tip that Valmont had been seen at the airport here.”

“Do you know who the buyer is?”

Vincent shook his head. “No. But this is the case. I want you to find the remaining Churchmice and recover the artifact.”

I frowned, looking at the photos. “Yeah. That’s what they want you to do too.”

Vincent blinked at me. “What do you mean?”

I shook my head impatiently. “Someone. Look at this photo. LaRouche wasn’t murdered there.”

Vincent frowned. “Why would you say that?”

“Not enough blood. I’ve seen men who were torn up and bled out. There’s a hell of a lot more blood.” I paused and then said, “Pardon my French.”

Father Vincent crossed himself. “Why would his body be found there?”

I shrugged. “A professional did him. Look at the cuts. They’re methodical. He was probably unconscious or drugged, because you can’t hold a man still very easily when you’re taking a knife to his face.”

Father Vincent pressed one hand to his stomach. “Oh.”

“So you’ve got a corpse found out in the middle of a street somewhere, basically wearing a sign around his neck that says, ‘The goods are in Chicago.’ Either someone was incredibly stupid, or someone was trying to lead you here. It’s a professional killing. Someone meant his corpse to be a clue.”

“But who would do such a thing?”

I shrugged. “Probably a good thing to find out. Do you have any better pictures of these two women?”

He shook his head. “No. And they’ve never been arrested. No criminal record.”

“They’re good at what they do then.” I took the photos. There were little dossiers paper-clipped to the back of the pictures, listing known aliases, locations, but nothing terribly useful. “This one isn’t going to be quick.”

“Worthwhile goals rarely are. What do you need from me, Mister Dresden?”

“A retainer,” I said. “A thousand will do. And I need a description of this artifact, the more detailed the better.”

Father Vincent gave me a matter-of-fact nod, and drew a plain steel money clip from his pocket. He counted off ten portraits of Ben Franklin, and passed them to me. “The artifact is an oblong length of linen cloth, fourteen feet, three inches long by three feet, seven inches wide made of a

handwoven three-to-one herringbone twill. There are a number of patches and stains on the cloth, and—”

I held up my hand, frowning. “Wait a minute. Where did you say this thing was stolen from?”

“The Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist,” Father Vincent said.

“In northern Italy,” I said.

He nodded.

“In Turin, to be exact,” I said.

He nodded again, his expression reserved.

“Someone stole the freaking *Shroud of Turin*?” I demanded.

“Yes.”

I settled back into the chair, looking down at the photos again. This changed things. This changed things a lot.

The Shroud. Supposedly the burial cloth used by Joseph of Aramitheia to wrap the body of Christ after the Crucifixion. Capital Cs. The cloth supposedly wrapped around Christ when he was resurrected, with his image, his blood, imprinted upon it.

“Wow,” I said.

“What do you know about the Shroud, Mister Dresden?”

“Not much. Christ’s burial cloth. They did a bunch of tests in the seventies, and no one was able to conclusively disprove it. It almost got burned a few years back when the cathedral caught fire. There are stories that it has healing powers, or that a couple of angels still attend it. A bunch of others I can’t remember right now.”

Father Vincent rested his hands on the table and leaned toward me. “Mister Dresden. The Shroud is perhaps the single most vital artifact of the Church. It is a powerful symbol of the faith, and one in which many people believe. It is also politically significant. It is absolutely vital to Rome that it be restored to the Church’s custody as expediently as possible.”

I stared at him for a second, and tried to pick out my words carefully. “Are you going to be insulted if I suggest that it’s very possible that the Shroud is, uh...*significant*, magically speaking?”

Vincent pressed his lips together. “I have no illusions about it, Mister Dresden. It is a piece of cloth, not a magic carpet. Its value derives solely from its historical and symbolic significance.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. Hell’s bells, that’s where plenty of magical power came from. The Shroud was old, and regarded as special, and people believed in

it. That could be enough to give it a kind of power, all by itself.

“Some people might believe otherwise,” I said.

“Of course,” he agreed. “That is why your knowledge of the local occult may prove invaluable.”

I nodded, thinking. This could be something completely mundane. Someone could have stolen a moldy old piece of cloth to sell it to a crackpot who believed it was a magic bedsheet. It could be that the Shroud was nothing more than a symbol, an antique, a historical Pop-Tart—nifty, but ultimately not very significant.

Of course, there was also the possibility that the Shroud was genuine. That it actually *had* been in contact with the Son of God when he had been brought back from the dead. I pushed that thought aside.

Regardless of why or how, if the Shroud *was* something special, magically speaking, then it could mean a whole new—and nastier—ball game. Of all the various weird, dark, or wicked powers who might abscond with the Shroud, I couldn’t think of any who would do anything cheerful with it. All sorts of supernatural interests might be at play.

Even discounting that possibility, mortal pursuit of the Shroud seemed to be deadly enough. John Marcone might already be involved, as well as the Chicago police—probably Interpol and the FBI, too. Even sans supernatural powers, when it came to finding people the cops were damned good at what they did. Odds were good that they’d locate the thieves and haul in the Shroud within a few days.

I looked from the photos to the cash, and thought about how many of my bills I could pay off with a nice, fat fee courtesy of Father Vincent. If I got lucky, maybe I wouldn’t have to put myself in harm’s way to do it.

Sure.

I believed that.

I put the money in my pocket. Then I picked up the photos too. “How can I get in touch with you?”

Father Vincent wrote a phone number on the motel’s stationary and passed it to me. “Here. It’s my answering service while I’m in town.”

“All right. I can’t promise you anything concrete, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Father Vincent stood up and said, “Thank you, Mister Dresden. Father Forthill spoke most highly of you, you know.”

“He’s a sport,” I agreed, rising.

“If you will excuse me, I have appointments to keep.”

“I’ll bet. Here’s my card, if you need to get in touch.”

I gave him a business card, shook hands, and left. At the Beetle, I stopped to open the trunk and put the shotgun back in it, after taking the shell from the chamber and making sure the safety was on. Then I pulled out a length of wood a little longer than my forearm, carved over with runes and sigils that helped me focus my magic a lot more precisely. I tossed my suit jacket in over the gun, and dug out a silver bracelet dangling a dozen tiny, medieval-style shields from my pocket. I fastened that to my left arm, slipped a silver ring onto my right hand, then took my blasting rod and set it beside me on the car seat as I got in.

Between the new case, the outfit hitter, and Duke Ortega’s challenge, I wanted to make damn sure that I wasn’t going to get caught with my eldritch britches down again.

I took the Beetle home, to my apartment. I rent the basement apartment of a huge, creaking old boardinghouse. By the time I got back, it was after midnight and the late-February air was speckled with occasional flakes of wet snow that wouldn’t last once they hit the ground. The adrenaline rush of *The Larry Fowler Show* and then the hired-goon attack had faded, and left me aching, tired, and worried. I got out of the car, determined to head for bed, then get up early and start to work on Vincent’s case.

A sudden sensation of cold, rippling energy and a pair of muffled thumps from the stairs leading down to my apartment changed my mind.

I drew out my blasting rod and readied the shield bracelet on my left wrist, but before I could step over to the stairs, a pair of figures flew up them and landed heavily on the half-frozen ground beside the gravel parking lot. They struggled, rolling, until one of the shadowy figures got a leg underneath the form on top of it, and pushed.

The second figure flew twenty feet through the air, landed on the gravel with a thump and a cough of expelled air, then got up and sprinted away.

Shield readied, I stepped forward before the remaining intruder could rise. I forced an effort of will through the blasting rod, setting the runes along its length alight with scarlet. Fire coalesced at the tip of the rod, bright as a road flare, but I held the strike as I stepped forward, shoving the tip of the blasting rod down at the intruder. “Make a move and I’ll fry you.”

Red light fell over a woman.

She was dressed in jeans, a black leather jacket, a white T-shirt, and gloves. She had her long, midnight hair tied back in a tail. Dark, oblique eyes smoldered up at me from beneath long lashes. Her beautiful face held an expression of wary amusement.

My heart thudded in sudden pain and excitement.

“Well,” Susan said, looking from the sizzling blasting rod up to my face. “I’ve heard of running into an old flame, but this is ridiculous.”

Chapter Four

Susan.

My brain locked up for a good ten seconds as I stared down at my former lover. I could smell the scent of her hair, the subtle perfume she wore, mixing with the new-leather scent of her jacket and another, new smell—new soap, maybe. Her dark eyes regarded me, uncertain and nervous. She had a small cut on the side of her mouth, beading with drops of blood that looked black in the red light of the blasting rod's fire.

"Harry," Susan said, her voice quiet and steady. "Harry. You're scaring me."

I shook myself out of my surprise and lowered the blasting rod, stepping over to her. "Stars and stones, Susan. Are you all right?"

I offered her my hand and she took it, rising easily to her feet. Her fingers were feverishly warm, and wisps of winter steam curled from her skin. "Bruises," she said. "I'll be fine."

"Who was that?"

Susan glanced the way her attacker had run and shook her head. "Red Court. I couldn't see his face."

I blinked at her. "You ran off a vampire? By yourself?"

She flashed me a smile that mixed weariness with a sense of pleasure. She still hadn't taken her hand from mine. "I've been working out."

I looked around a bit more, and tried to reach out with my senses, to detect any trace of the unsettling energy that hovered around the Reds. Nothing. "Gone now," I reported. "But we shouldn't hang around out here."

"Inside then?"

I started to agree, and then paused. A horrible suspicion hit me. I let go of her hand and took a step back.

A line appeared between her eyebrows. "Harry?"

"It's been a rough year," I said. "I want to talk, but I'm not inviting you in."

Susan's expression flickered with comprehension and pain. She folded her arms over her stomach and nodded. "No. I understand. And you're right to be careful."

I took another step back and started walking toward my reinforced-steel door. She walked a few feet away, and at my side, where I could see her. I went down the stairs and unlocked the door. Then I pushed out an effort of will to temporarily disable the protective spells laid over my house that amounted to the magical equivalent of a land mine and burglar alarm all in one.

I went in, glanced at the candleholder on the wall by the door, and muttered, "*Flickum bicus*." I felt a tiny surge of energy flowing out of me, and the candle danced to life, lighting my apartment in dim, soft orange.

My place is basically a cave with two chambers. The larger one was my living area. Bookshelves lined most of the walls, and where they didn't I had hung a couple of tapestries and an original *Star Wars* movie poster. I'd scattered rugs all over my floor. I had laid down everything from handmade Navajo rugs to a black area rug with Elvis's face, fully two feet across, dominating the piece. Like the Beetle, I figured some people would call my ragtag assembly of floor coverings eclectic. I just thought of them as something to walk on besides freezing-cold stone floor.

My furniture is much the same. I got most of it secondhand. None of it matches, but it's all comfortable to sprawl on, and my lights are dim enough to let me ignore it. A small alcove held a sink, an icebox, and a pantry for food. A fireplace rested against one wall, the wood all burned down to black and grey, but I knew it would still be glowing under the ash. A door led to my tiny bedroom and the apartment's three-quarters bath. The whole place may have been ragged, but it was very tidy and clean.

I turned to face Susan, and didn't put down my blasting rod. Supernatural creatures cannot lightly step across the threshold of a home unless one of the rightful residents invites them in. Plenty of nasties can put on a false face, and it wasn't inconceivable that one of them had decided to try to get close to me by pretending to be Susan.

A supernatural being would have a hell of a time getting over a threshold without being invited in. If that was some kind of shapeshifter rather than Susan or, God help me, if Susan had gone all the way over to the vampires, she wouldn't be able to enter. If it was the real Susan, she'd be fine. Or at

least, the threshold wouldn't hurt her. Getting paranoid suspicion from her ex-boyfriend might do its own kind of damage.

On the other hand, there was a war on, and Susan probably wouldn't be happy to hear I'd gotten myself killed. Better safe than exsanguinated.

Susan didn't pause at the door. She stepped inside, turned around to close and lock it, and asked, "Good enough?"

It was. Relief, coupled with a sudden explosion of naked emotion, roared through me. It was like waking up after days of anguish to find that the pain was gone. Where there had been only hurt, there was suddenly nothing, and other feelings rushed in to fill the sudden void. Excitement, for one, that quivering teenage nervousness that accompanies expectation. A surge of warm emotion, joy and happiness rolled together with a chattering glee.

And in the shadows of those, a few things darker but no less vibrant. Sheer, sensual pleasure in the scent of her, in looking at her face, her dark hair again. I needed to feel her skin under my hands, to feel her pressed to me.

It was more than mere need—it was hunger. Now that she was standing there in front of me, I needed her, all of her, as much as I needed food or water or air, and possibly more. I wanted to tell her, to let her know what it meant to me that she was there. But I'd never been very good at expressing myself verbally.

By the time Susan turned around again, I was already pressed up against her. She let out a quiet gasp of surprise, but I leaned gently into her, pressing her shoulders to the door.

I lowered my mouth to hers, and her lips were soft, sweet, fever-hot. She went rigid for a second, then let out a low sound and wound her arms around my neck and shoulders, kissing me back. I could feel her, the slender, too-warm strength and softness of her body. My hunger deepened, and so did the kiss, my tongue touching hers, lightly teasing. She responded as ardently as I did, her lips almost desperate, low whimpers vibrating through her mouth and into mine. I started to feel a little dizzy and disoriented, and though some part of me warned against it, I only pressed harder against her.

I slid one hand over her hip, beneath the jacket, and slipped up under the T-shirt she wore to curl around the naked sweetness of her waist. I pulled her hard against me, and she responded, her breath hot and quick, lifting one leg to press against mine, winding around my calf a little, pulling me

nearer. I lowered my mouth to her throat, tongue tasting her skin, and she arched against me, baring more of her skin. I drew a line of kisses up to her ear, gently biting, sending quivering shock waves through her as she shook against me, her throat letting out quiet sounds of deepening need. I found her eager lips again, and her fingers tightened in my hair, drawing me hard against her.

My dizziness grew. Some kind of coherent thought did a quick flyby of my forebrain. I struggled to take notice of it, but the kiss made it impossible. Lust and need murdered my reason.

A sudden, shrieking hiss startled me, and I jerked back from Susan, looking wildly around.

Mister, my bobtailed, battle-scarred tomcat, had leapt up onto the stones before the fireplace, his luminous green eyes wide and fixed on Susan. Mister weighs about thirty pounds, and thirty pounds of cat can make an absolutely impossible amount of noise.

Susan shuddered and pressed her palm against my chest, turning her face away from me. She pushed, something gentle rather than insistent. My lips burned to touch hers again, but I closed my eyes and took slow, shuddering breaths. Then I backed away from her. I had meant to go stir up the fire—not *that* fire, the literal one—but the room tilted wildly and it was all I could do to stumble into an easy chair.

Mister leapt up into my lap, more daintily than he had any right to be able to do, and rubbed his face against my chest, rumbling out a purr. I fumbled up one hand to pet him, and after a couple of minutes the room stopped spinning.

“What the hell just happened?” I muttered.

Susan emerged from the shadows and crossed the candlelit room to take up the fireplace poker. She stirred through the ashes until she found some glowing orange-red, and then began adding wood to the fire from the old iron hod beside the fireplace. “I could feel you,” she said, after a minute. “I could feel you going under. It...” She shivered. “It felt nice.”

Boy, did it. And I bet it would feel even nicer if all those clothes hadn’t been in the way. Aloud, all I said was, “Under?”

She looked over her shoulder at me, her expression hard to read. “The venom,” she said quietly. “They call it their Kiss.”

“I guess I can’t blame them. It sounds a lot more romantic than ‘narcotic drool.’” Some parts of me lobbied for a cessation of meaningless chat and

an immediate resumption of any line of thought that would lead to discarded clothing upon the floor. I ignored them. "I remember. When... when we kissed before you left. I thought I'd imagined it."

Susan shook her head, and sat down on the stones before the fireplace, her back straight, her hands folded sedately in her lap. The fire began to grow, catching onto the new wood, and though the light of it curled around her with golden fingers, it left her face veiled in shadow. "No. What Bianca did to me has changed me already, in some ways. Physically. I'm stronger now. My senses are sharper. And there's..." She faltered.

"The Kiss," I mumbled. My lips didn't find the word to their liking. They liked the real thing a lot better. I ignored them, too.

"Yes," she said. "Not like one of them can do. Less. But still there."

I mopped at my face with my hand. "You know what I need?" Either a naked, writhing, eager Susan or else a liquid-nitrogen shower. "A beer. You want one?"

"Pass," she said. "I don't think lowering my inhibitions would be healthy right now."

I nodded, got up, and went to my icebox. It's an actual icebox, the kind that runs on honest-to-goodness ice rather than Freon. I got out a dark brown bottle of Mac's home-brewed ale and opened it, taking a long drink. Mac would be horrified that I drank his beer cold, since he prided himself on an old-world brew, but I always kept a couple in there, for when I wanted it cold. What can I say. I'm an unlettered, barbaric American wizard. I drank off maybe half of it and put the cold bottle against my forehead afterward.

"Well," I said. "I guess you didn't come over to, uh...."

"Tear your clothes off and use you shamelessly?" Susan suggested. Her voice sounded calm again, but I could sense the underlying tone of her own hunger. I wasn't sure whether I should be unsettled by it or encouraged. "No, Harry. It isn't...that isn't something I can afford to do with you. No matter how much either of us wants it."

"Why not?" I asked. I knew why not already, but the words jumped from my brain to my mouth before I could stop them. I peered suspiciously at the beer.

"I don't want to lose control," Susan said. "Not ever. Not with anyone. But especially not with you." There was a silence in which only the fire made any noise. "Harry, it would kill me to hurt you."

More to the point, I thought, it would probably kill me too. Think about her instead of yourself, Harry. Get a grip. It's just a kiss. Let it go.

I drank the rest of my beer, which wasn't anywhere near as nice as other things I'd done with my mouth that night. I checked the fridge and asked Susan, "Coke?"

She nodded, looking around. Her gaze hesitated on the fireplace mantel, where I kept the card and three postcards I'd received from her, along with the little grey jewelry box that held the dinky little ring she'd turned down. "Is someone else living here now?"

"No." I got out a couple of cans, and took one over to her. She took it from me without touching my fingers. "Why do you ask?"

"The place looks so nice," she said. "And your clothes smell like fabric softener. You've never used fabric softener in your life."

"Oh. That." You can't tell people about it when faeries are doing your housework, or they get ticked off and leave. "I sort of have a cleaning service."

"I hear you've been too busy to clean up," Susan said.

"Just making a living."

Susan smiled. "I heard you saved the world from some kind of doom. Is it true?"

I fiddled with my drink. "Sort of."

Susan laughed. "How do you sort of save the world?"

"I only saved it in a Greenpeace kind of way. If I'd blown it, there might have been a historically bad storm, but I don't think anyone would have noticed the real damage for thirty or forty years—climate change takes time."

"Sounds scary," Susan said.

I shrugged. "Mostly I was just trying to save my own ass. The world was a twofer. Maybe I'm getting cynical. I suspect the only thing I accomplished was to keep the faeries from screwing up the place so that we could screw it up ourselves."

I sat down on the chair again, and we opened the Cokes and drank in silence for a bit. My heart eventually stopped pounding quite so loudly.

"I miss you," I said finally. "So does your editor. She called me a couple of weeks ago. Said your articles had quit coming in."

Susan nodded. "That's one reason I'm here. I owe her more than a letter or a phone call."

“You’re quitting?” I asked.

She nodded.

“You find something else?”

“Sort of,” she said. She brushed her hair back from her face with one hand. “I can’t tell you everything right now.”

I frowned. For as long as I’d known her, Susan had been driven by a passion for discovering the truth and sharing it with other people. Her work at the *Arcane* had arisen from her stubborn refusal to deny things she saw as the truth, even if they had seemed insane. She was one of the rare people who stopped and thought about things, even weird and supernatural things, instead of dismissing them out of hand. That’s how she’d begun work at the *Arcane*. That was how she had originally met me.

“Are you all right?” I asked. “Are you in trouble?”

“Relatively speaking, no,” she said. “But you are. That’s why I’m here, Harry.”

“What do you mean?”

“I came to warn you. The Red Court—”

“Sent Paolo Ortega to call me out. I know.”

She sighed. “But you don’t know what you’re getting into. Harry, Ortega is one of the most dangerous nobles of their Court. He’s a warlord. He’s killed half a dozen of the White Council’s Wardens in South America since the war started, and he’s the one who planned and executed the attack on Archangel last year.”

I sat straight up at that, the blood draining from my face. “How do you know about that?”

“I’m an investigative reporter, Harry. I investigated.”

I toyed with the Coke can, frowning down at it. “All the same. He came here asking for a duel. A fair fight. If he’s serious, I’ll take him on.”

“There’s more that you need to know,” Susan said.

“Like what?”

“Ortega’s opinion on the war is not the popular one within the Red Court. A few of the upper crust of the vampires support his way of thinking. But most of them like the idea of a lot of constant bloodshed. They also like the idea of a war to wipe out the White Council. They figure that if they get rid of the wizards once and for all, they won’t have to worry about keeping a low profile in the future.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Think about it,” Susan said. “Harry, the White Council is fighting this war reluctantly. If they had a decent excuse, they’d end it. That’s Ortega’s whole plan. He fights you, kills you, and then the White Council sues for peace. They’ll pay some kind of concession that doesn’t involve the death of one of their members, and that will be that. War over.”

I blinked. “How did you find out—”

“Hello, Earth to Harry. I told you, I investigated.”

I frowned until the lines between my eyebrows ached. “Right, right. Well, as plans go, I guess it sounds good,” I said. “Except for that middle part where I die.”

She gave me a small smile. “Much of the rest of the Red Court would rather you kept on breathing. As long as you’re alive, they have a reason to keep the war going.”

“Swell,” I said.

“They’ll try to interfere with any duel. I just thought you should know.”

I nodded. “Thanks,” I said. “I’ll—”

Just then, someone knocked firmly at my door. Susan stiffened and rose, poker in hand. I got up a lot more slowly, opened a drawer in the night table beside the chair, and drew out the gun I kept at home, a great big old Dirty Harry Callahan number that weighed about seventy-five thousand pounds. I also took out a length of silk rope about a yard long, and draped it over my neck so that I could get it off in a hurry if need be.

I took the gun in both hands, pointed it at the floor, drew back the hammer, and asked the door, “Who is it?”

There was a moment’s silence and then a calm, male voice asked, “Is Susan Rodriguez there?”

I glanced at Susan. She straightened more, her eyes flashing with anger, but she put the poker back in its stand beside the fireplace. Then she motioned to me and said, “Put it away. I know him.”

I uncocked the revolver, but I didn’t put it away as Susan crossed to the door and opened it.

The most bland-looking human being I had ever seen stood on the other side. He was maybe five nine, maybe one seventy-five. He had hair of medium brown, and eyes of the same ambiguous shade. He wore jeans, a medium-weight brown jacket, and worn tennis shoes. His face was unmemorable, neither appealing nor ugly. He didn’t look particularly strong, or craven, or smart, or particularly anything else.

“What are you doing here?” he asked Susan without preamble. His voice was like the rest of him—about as exciting as a W-2.

Susan said, “I told you I was going to talk to him.”

“You could have used the phone,” the man pointed out. “There’s no point to this.”

“Hi,” I said in a loud voice, and stepped up to my door. I towered over Blandman. And I had a great big gun in my hand, even if I did keep it pointed down at the floor. “I’m Harry Dresden.”

He looked me up and down and then looked at Susan.

Susan sighed. “Harry, this is Martin.”

“Hi, Martin,” I said. I switched my sidearm to my other hand and thrust mine at him. “Nice to meet you.”

Martin regarded my hand and then said, “I don’t shake hands.” That was evidently all the verbal interaction I merited, because he looked back at Susan and said, “We have to be up early.”

We? We?

I looked at Susan, who flushed with embarrassment. She glared at Martin and then said to me, “I need to go, Harry. I wish I could have stayed longer.”

“Wait,” I said.

“I wish I could,” she said. “I’ll try to call you before we go.”

There was that *we* again. “Go? Susan—”

“I’m sorry.” She stood up on tiptoe and kissed my cheek, her too-warm lips soft. Then she left, brushing past Martin just hard enough to jostle him into taking a little step to keep his balance.

Martin nodded to me and walked out too. After a minute I followed them, long enough to see them getting into a cab on the street outside.

We.

“Hell’s bells,” I muttered, and stalked back inside my house. I slammed the door behind me, lit a candle, stomped into my little bathroom, and turned on the shower. The water was only a couple degrees short of becoming sleet, but I stripped and got in anyway, simmering with several varieties of frustration.

We.

We, we, we. Which implied she and someone else together. Someone who was not me. Was she? Susan, with the Pedantic Avenger there? That didn’t track. I mean, hell’s bells, the guy was just so dull. Boring. Blasé.

And maybe stable.

Face it, Harry. Interesting you might be. Exciting you might be. Stable you ain't.

I pushed my head under the freezing water and left it there. Susan hadn't said they were together. Neither had he. I mean, that wouldn't be why she had broken off the kiss. She had a really good reason to do that, after all.

But then again, it wasn't like we were together. She'd been gone for better than a year.

A lot can change in a year.

Her mouth hadn't. Or her hands. Or the curve of her body. Or the smoldering sensuality of her eyes. Or the soft sounds she made as she arched against me, her body begging me to—

I looked down at myself, sighed, and turned the water to its coldest setting.

I came out of the shower shriveled and turning blue, dried off, and got into bed.

I had just managed to get the covers warm so that I could stop shivering when my phone rang.

I swore sulfurously, got out of bed into the freezing air, snatched up the phone, and growled, "What." Then, on the off chance it was Susan, I forced some calm into my voice and said, "I mean, hello?"

"Sorry to wake you, Harry," said Karrin Murphy, the head of Chicago PD's Special Investigations division. SI routinely handled any crime that fell between the cracks of the other departments, as well as being handed the really smelly cases no one else wanted. As a result, they wound up looking into all kinds of things that weren't easily explained. Their job was to make sure that things were taken care of, and that everything typed up neatly into the final report.

Murphy called me in as a consultant from time to time, when she had something weird that she didn't know how to handle. We'd been working together for a while, and Murphy had gotten to where she and SI could handle your average, everyday supernatural riffraff. But from time to time, she ran into something that stumped her. My phone number is on her quick dial.

"Murph," I said. "What's up?"

"Unofficial business," she said. "I'd like your take on something."

"Unofficial means not paid, I guess," I said.

“You up for any pro bono work?” She paused and then said, “This could be important to me.”

What the hell. My night had pretty much been shot anyway. “Where do you want me?”

“Cook County Morgue,” Murphy said. “I want to show you a corpse.”

Chapter Five

They don't make morgues with windows. In fact, if the geography allows for it, they hardly ever make morgues above the ground. I guess it's partly because it must be easier to refrigerate a bunch of coffin-sized chambers in a room insulated by the earth. But that can't be all there is to it. Under the earth means a lot more than relative altitude. It's where dead things fit. Graves are under the earth. So are Hell, Gehenna, Hades, and a dozen other reported afterlives.

Maybe it says something about people. Maybe for us, under the earth is a subtle and profound statement. Maybe ground level provides us with a kind of symbolic boundary marker, an artificial construct that helps us remember that we are alive. Maybe it helps us push death's shadow back from our lives.

I live in a basement apartment and like it. What does that say about me?

Probably that I overanalyze things.

"You look pensive," Murphy said. We walked down an empty hospital corridor toward the Cook County Morgue. We'd had to go the long way around so that I could avoid any areas with important medical equipment. My leather duster whispered around my legs as I walked. My blasting rod thumped against my leg rhythmically, where I'd tied it to the inside of the duster. I'd traded in my slacks for blue jeans and my dress shoes for hiking boots.

Murphy didn't look like a monster-hunting Val-kyrie. Murphy looked like someone's kid sister. She was five nothing, a hundred and nothing, and was built like an athlete, all springy muscle. Her blond hair hung down over her blue eyes, and was cut close in back. She wore nicer clothes than usual—a maroon blouse with a grey pantsuit—and she had on more makeup than was her habit. She looked every inch the professional businesswoman.

That said, Murphy was a monster-hunting Valkyrie. She was the only person I'd ever heard of who had killed one with a chainsaw.

"I said you look pensive, Harry," she repeated, a little louder.

I shook my head and told Murphy, "I don't like hospitals."

She nodded. "Morgues spook me. Morgues and dogs."

"Dogs?" I asked.

"Not like beagles or cocker spaniels or anything. Just big dogs."

I nodded. "I like dogs. They give Mister something to snack on."

Murphy gave me a smile. "I've seen you spooked. It doesn't make you look like that."

"What do I look like?" I asked.

Murphy pursed her lips, as though considering her words. "You look worried. And frustrated. And guilty. You know, romance things."

I gave her a wry glance, and then nodded. "Susan's in town."

Murphy whistled. "Wow. She's...okay?"

"Yeah. As much as she can be."

"Then why do you look like you just swallowed something that was still wriggling?"

I shrugged. "She's in town to quit her job. And she was with someone."

"A *guy*?" Murphy asked.

"Yeah."

She frowned. "With him, or *with* him?"

I shook my head. "Just with him, I think. I don't know."

"She's quitting her job?"

"Guess so. We're going to talk, I think."

"She said so?"

"Said she'd get in touch and we'd talk."

Murphy's eyes narrowed, and she said, "Ah. One of those."

"Eh?" I said, and eyed her.

She lifted her hands, palms out. "None of my business."

"Hell's bells, Murph."

She sighed and didn't look up at me, and didn't speak for a few steps. Finally she said, "You don't set up a guy for a good talk, Harry."

I stared at her profile, and then scowled down at my feet for a while. No one said anything.

We got to the morgue. Murphy pushed a button on the wall and said, "It's Murphy," at a speaker next to the door. A second later, the door buzzed and clicked. I swung open the door and held it for Murphy. She gave me an even look before she went through. Murphy does not respond well to chivalry.

The morgue was like others I'd seen, cold, clean, and brightly lit with fluorescent lights. Metal refrigerator doors lined one wall. An occupied autopsy table sat in the middle of the room, and a white sheet covered its subject. A rolling medical cart sat next to the autopsy table, another by a cheap office-furniture desk.

Polka music, heavy on accordion and clarinet, *oompahed* cheerfully through the room from a little stereo on the desk. At the desk sat a small man with a wild shock of black hair. He was dressed in medical scrubs and green bunny slippers, complete with floppy ears. He had a pen clenched in one hand, and scribbled furiously at a stack of forms.

When we came in, he held up a hand toward us, and finished his scribbling with a flourish, before hopping up with a broad smile. "Karrin!" he said. "Wow, you're looking nice tonight. What's the occasion?"

"Municipal brass are tromping around," Murphy said. "So we're all supposed to wear our Sunday clothes and smile a lot."

"Bastards," the little guy said cheerfully. He shot me a glance. "You aren't supposed to be spending money on psychic consultants, either, I bet. You must be Harry Dresden."

"That's what it says on my underwear," I agreed.

He grinned. "Great coat, love it."

"Harry," Murphy said, "this is Waldo Butters. Assistant medical examiner."

Butters shook my hand, then turned to walk to the autopsy table. He snapped on some rubber gloves and a surgical mask. "Pleased to meet you, Mister Dresden," he said over his shoulder. "Seems like every time you're working with SI my job gets really interesting."

Murphy chucked me on the arm with one fist, and followed Butters. I followed her.

"Masks on that tray to your left. Stay a couple of feet back from the table, and for God's sake, don't throw up on my floor." We put on masks and Butters threw back the sheet.

I'd seen corpses before. Hell's bells, I'd created some. I'd seen what was left of people who had been burned alive, savaged to death by animals, and who had died when their hearts exploded out of their chests, courtesy of black magic.

But I hadn't ever seen anything quite like this. I shoved the thought to the back of my head, and tried to focus purely upon taking in details. It

wouldn't do to think too much, looking at this. Thinking too much would lead me to messing up Butters's floor.

The victim had been a man, maybe a little over six feet tall, thin build. His chest looked like twenty pounds of raw hamburger. Fine grid marks stretched vertically from his collarbones to his belly, and horizontally across the width of his body. The cuts were spaced maybe a sixteenth of an inch apart, and the grid pattern slashed into the flesh looked nearly flawless. The cuts were deep ones, and I had the unsettling impression that I could have brushed my hand across the surface of that ruined body and sent chunks of flesh pattering to the floor. The Y-incision of the autopsy had been closed, at least. Its lines marred the precision of the grid of incisions.

The next thing I noticed were the corpse's arms. Or rather, the missing bits of them. His left arm had been hacked off two or three inches above the wrist. The flesh around it gaped, and a shard of black-crusting bone poked out from it. His right arm had been severed just beneath the elbow, with similar hideous results.

My belly twitched and I felt myself taking one of those prevomit breaths. I closed my eyes for a second and forced the impending reaction down. *Don't think, Harry. Look. See what there is to see. That isn't a man anymore. It's just a shell. Throwing up won't bring him back.*

I opened my eyes again, tore my gaze from his mutilated chest and hands, and forced myself to study the corpse's features.

I couldn't.

His head had been hacked off, too.

I stared at the ragged stump of his neck. The head just wasn't there. Even though that's where heads *go*. Ditto his hands. A man should have a head. Should have hands. They shouldn't simply be *gone*.

The impression it left on me was unsettling—simply and profoundly wrong. Inside me, some little voice started screaming and running away. I stared down at the corpse, my stomach threatening insurrection again. I stared at his missing head, but aloud all I said was, "Gee. Wonder what killed him."

"What *didn't* kill him," Butters said. "I can tell you this much. It wasn't blood loss."

I frowned at Butters. "What do you mean?"

Butters lifted one of the corpse's arms and pointed down at dark mottling in the dead grey flesh, just where the corpse's back met the table. "See that?" he asked. "Lividity. If this guy had bled out, from his wrists or his neck either one, I don't think there'd be enough blood left in the body to show this much. His heart would have just kept on pumping it out of his body until he died."

I grunted. "If not one of the wounds, then what was it?"

"My guess?" Butters said. "Plague."

I blinked and looked at him.

"Plague," he said again. "Or more accurately plagues. His insides looked like models for a textbook on infection. Not all the tests have come back yet, but so far every one I've done has returned positive. Everything from bubonic plague to strep throat. And there are symptoms I've found in him that don't match any disease I've ever heard of."

"You're telling me he died of disease?" I asked.

"Diseases. Plural. And get this. I think one of them was smallpox."

"I thought smallpox was extinct," Murphy said.

"Pretty much. They have some in vaults, probably some in some bioweapon research facilities, but that's it."

I stared at Butters for a second. "And we're standing here next to his plague-ridden body why?"

"Relax," Butters said. "The really nasty stuff wasn't airborne. I disinfected the corpse pretty well. Wear your mask and don't touch it, you should be fine."

"What about the smallpox?" I said.

Butters's voice turned wry. "You're vaccinated."

"This is dangerous, though, isn't it? Having the body out like this?"

"Yeah," Butters said, his voice frank. "But County is full, and the only thing that's going to happen if I report an occurrence of free-range smallpox is another evaluation."

Murphy shot me a warning look and stepped a very little bit between me and Butters. "You got a time of death?"

Butters shrugged. "Maybe forty-eight hours ago, tops. All of those diseases seemed to sprout up at exactly the same time. I make cause of death as either shock or a massive failure and necrosis of several major organs, plus tissue damage from an outrageously high fever. It's anyone's

guess as to which one gets the blue ribbon. Lungs, kidneys, heart, liver, spleen—”

“We get the point,” Murphy said.

“Let me finish. It’s like every disease the guy had ever had contact with all got together and planned when to hit him. It just isn’t possible. He probably had more germs in him than blood cells.”

I frowned. “And then someone Ginsued him after he died?”

Butters nodded. “Partly. Though the cuts on his chest weren’t postmortem. They had filled with blood. Tortured before he died, maybe.”

“Ugh,” I said. “Why?”

Murphy regarded the corpse without any emotion showing in her cool blue eyes. “Whoever cut him up must have taken the arms and hands to make it hard to identify him after he died. That’s the only logical reason I can think of.”

“Same here,” said Butters.

I frowned down at the table. “Why prevent identification of the corpse if it had died of disease?” Butters began to lower the arm slowly and I saw something as he did. “Wait, hold it.”

He looked up at me. I pressed closer to the table and had Butters lift the arm again. I had almost missed it against the rotted tone of the dead man’s flesh—a tattoo, maybe an inch square, located on the inside of the corpse’s biceps. It wasn’t fancy. Faded green ink in the shape of a symbolic open eye, not too different from the CBS network logo.

“See there?” I asked. Murphy and Butters peered at the tattoo.

“Do you recognize it, Harry?” Murphy asked.

I shook my head. “Almost looks old Egyptian, but with fewer lines. Hey, Butters, do you have a piece of paper?”

“Better,” Butters said. He got an old instant camera off the bottom tray of one of the medical carts, and snapped several shots of the tattoo. He passed one of them over to Murphy, who waved it around a little while the image developed. I got another.

“Okay,” I said, thinking out loud. “Guy dies of a zillion diseases he somehow contracted all at once. How long do you think it took?”

Butters shrugged. “No idea. I mean, the odds against him getting all of those at once like that are beyond astronomical.”

“Days?” I asked.

“If I had to guess,” Butters said, “I’d say more like hours. Maybe less.”

“Okay,” I said. “And during those hours, someone uses a knife on him and turns his chest into tuna cubes. Then when they’re done, they take his hands and his head and dump the body. Where was it found?”

“Under an overpass on the expressway,” Murphy said. “Like this, naked.”

I shook my head. “SI got handed this one?”

Murphy’s face flickered with annoyance. “Yeah. Homicide dumped it on us to take some high-profile case all the municipal folk are hot about.”

I took a step back from the corpse, frowning, putting things together. I figured odds were pretty good that there weren’t all that many people running around the world torturing victims by carving their skin into graph paper before murdering them. At least I hoped there weren’t all that many.

Murphy peered at me, her expression serious. “What. Harry, do you know something?”

I glanced from Murphy to Butters and then back again.

Butters raised both his hands and headed for the doors, stripping his gloves and dumping them in a container splattered with red biohazard signs. “You guys stay here and Mulder it out. I have to go down the hall anyway. Back in five minutes.”

I watched him go and said, after the door swung shut, “Bunny slippers and polka music.”

“Don’t knock it,” Murphy said. “He’s good at his job. Maybe too good.”

“What’s that mean?”

She walked away from the autopsy table, and I followed her. Murphy said, “Butters was the one who handled the bodies after the fire at the Velvet Room.”

The one I’d started. “Oh?”

“Mmm-hmm. His original report stated that some of the remains recovered from the scene were humanoid, but definitely not human.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Red vampires.”

Murphy nodded. “But you can’t just stick that in a report without people getting their panties in a bunch. Butters wound up doing a three-month stint at a mental hospital for observation. When he came out, they tried to fire him, but his lawyer convinced them that they couldn’t. So instead he lost all his seniority and got stuck on the night shift. But he knows there’s weirdness out there. He calls me when he gets some of it.”

“Seems nice enough. Except for the polka.”

Murphy smiled again and said, “What do you know?”

“Nothing I can tell you,” I said. “I agreed to keep the information confidential.”

Murphy peered up at me for a moment. Once upon a time, that comment might have sent her into a fit of stubborn confrontation. But I guess times had changed. “All right,” she said. “Are you holding back anything that might get someone hurt?”

I shook my head. “It’s too early to tell.”

Murphy nodded, her lips pressed together. She appeared to weigh things for a moment before saying, “You know what you’re doing.”

“Thanks.”

She shrugged. “I expect you to tell me if it turns into something I should know.”

“Okay,” I said, staring at her profile. Murphy had done something I knew she didn’t do very often. She’d extended her trust. I’d expected her to threaten and demand. I could have handled that. This was almost worse. Guilt gnawed on my insides. I’d agreed not to divulge anything, but I hated doing that to Murphy. She’d gone out on a limb for me too many times.

But what if I didn’t tell her anything? What if I just pointed her toward information she’d find sooner or later in any case?

“Look, Murph. I specifically agreed to confidentiality for this client. But...if I were going to talk to you, I’d tell you to check out the murder of a Frenchman named LaRouche with Interpol.”

Murphy blinked and then looked up at me. “Interpol?”

I nodded. “If I were going to talk.”

“Right,” she said. “If you’d said anything. You tight-lipped bastard.”

One corner of my mouth tugged up into a grin. “Meanwhile, I’ll see if I can’t find out anything about that tattoo.”

She nodded. “You figure we’re dealing with another sorcerer type?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. But if you give someone a disease with magic, it’s usually so that you make it look like they *haven’t* been murdered. Natural causes. This kind of mishmash...I don’t know. Maybe it’s something a demon would do.”

“A real demon? Like *Exorcist* demon?”

I shook my head. “Those are the Fallen. The former angels. Not the same thing.”

“Why not?”

“Demons are just intelligent beings from somewhere in the Nevernever. Mostly they don’t care about the mortal world, if they notice it at all. The ones who do are usually the hungry types, or the mean types that someone calls up to do thug work. Like that thing Leonid Kravos had called up.”

Murphy shivered. “I remember. And the Fallen?”

“They’re very interested in our world. But they aren’t free to act, like demons are.”

“Why not?”

I shrugged. “Depends on who you talk to. I’ve heard everything from advanced magical resonance theory to ‘because God said so.’ One of the Fallen couldn’t do this unless it had permission to.”

“Right. And how many people would give permission to be infected and then tortured to death,” Murphy said.

“Yeah, exactly.”

She shook her head. “Going to be a busy week. Half a dozen professional hitters for the outfit are in town. The county morgue is doing double business. City Hall is telling us to bend over backward for some bigwig from Europe or somewhere. And now some kind of plague monster is leaving unidentifiable, mutilated corpses on the side of the road.”

“That’s why they pay you the big bucks, Murph.”

Murphy snorted. Butters came back in, and I made my good-byes. My eyes were getting heavy and I had aches in places where I hadn’t known I had places. Sleep sounded like a great idea, and with so many things going on, the smart option was to get lots of rest in order to be as capably paranoid as possible.

I walked the long route back out of the hospital, but found a hall blocked by a patient on some kind of life-support machinery being moved on a gurney from one room to another. I wound up heading out through the empty cafeteria, into an alley not far from the emergency room exit.

A cold chill started at the base of my spine and slithered up over my neck. I stopped and looked around me, reaching for my blasting rod. I extended my magical senses as best I could, tasting the air to see what had given me the shivers.

I found nothing, and the eerie sensation eased away. I started down the alley, toward a parking garage half a block from the hospital, and tried to look in every direction at once as I went. I passed a little old homeless man, hobbling along heavily on a thick wooden cane. A while farther on, I passed

a tall young black man, dressed in an old overcoat and tattered and too-small suit, clutching an open bottle of vodka in one heavy-knuckled hand. He glowered at me, and I moved on past him. Chicago nightlife.

I kept on moving toward my car, and heard footsteps growing closer, behind me. I told myself not to be too jumpy. Maybe it was just some other frightened, endangered, paranoid, sleep-deprived consultant who had been called to the morgue in the middle of the night.

Okay. Maybe not.

The steady tread of the footsteps behind me shifted, becoming louder and unsteady. I spun to face the person following me, raising the blasting rod in my right hand as I did.

I turned around in time to see a bear, a freaking grizzly bear, fall to all four feet and charge. I had already begun preparing a magical strike with the rod, and the tip burst into incandescent light. Shadows fell harshly back from the scarlet fire of the rod, and I saw the details of the thing coming at me.

It wasn't a bear. Not unless a bear can have six legs and a pair of curling ram's horns wrapping around the sides of its head. Not unless bears can somehow get an extra pair of eyes, right over the first set, one pair glowing with faint orange light and one with green. Not unless bears have started getting luminous tattoos of swirling runes on their foreheads and started sprouting twin rows of serrated, slime-coated teeth.

It came charging toward me, several hundred pounds of angry-looking monster, and I did the only thing any reasonable wizard could have done.

I turned around and ran like hell.

Chapter Six

I'd learned something in several years of professional wizarding. Never walk into a fight when the bad guys are the ones who set it up. Wizards can call down lightning from the heavens, rip apart the earth beneath their enemy's feet, blow them into a neighboring time zone with gale winds, and a million other things even less pleasant—but not if we don't plan things out in advance.

And we're not all that much tougher than regular folks. I mean, if some nasty creature tears my head off my shoulders, I'll die. I might be able to lay out some serious magical pounding when I need to, but I'd made the mistake of tangling with a few things that had prepared to go up against me, and it hadn't been pretty.

This bear-thing, whatever the hell it was, had followed me. Hence, it had probably picked its time and place. I could have stood and blasted away at it, but in the close quarters of the alley, if it was able to shrug off my blasts, it would tear me apart before I could try Plan B. So I ran.

One other thing I'd learned. Wheezy wizards aren't all that good at running. That's why I'd been practicing. I took off at a dead sprint and fairly flew down the alley, my duster flapping behind me.

The bear-thing snarled as it came after me, and I could hear it slowly gaining ground. The mouth of the alley loomed into sight and I ran as hard as I could for it. Once I was in the open with room to dodge and put obstacles between me and the creature, I might be able to take a shot at it.

The creature evidently realized that, because it let out a vicious, spitting growl and then leapt. I heard it gather itself for the leap, and turned my head enough to see it out of the corner of my eye. It flew at my back. I threw myself down, sliding and rolling over the asphalt. The creature soared over me, to land at the mouth of the alley, a good twenty feet ahead. I skidded to a stop and went running back down the alley, a growing sense of fear and desperation giving my feet a set of chicken-yellow wings.

I ran for maybe ten seconds, gritting my teeth as the creature took up the pursuit again. I couldn't keep up a full sprint forever. Unless I thought of something else, I was going to have to turn and take my chances.

I all but flattened the tall young black man I'd seen earlier when I leapt over a moldering pile of cardboard boxes. He let out a startled noise, and I answered it with a low curse. "Come on!" I said, grabbing his arm. "Move, move, move!"

He looked past me and his eyes widened. I looked back and saw the four glowing eyes of the bear-creature coming at us. I hauled him into motion, and he picked up speed and started running with me.

We ran for a few seconds more before the little old derelict I'd seen earlier came limping along on his cane. He looked up, and the dim light from the distant street glinted on a pair of spectacles.

"Augh," I shouted. I shoved my running partner past me, toward the old man, and snarled, "Get him out of here. Both of you run!"

I whirled to face the bear-creature, and swept my blasting rod to point right at it. I ran some force of will down into the energy channels in the rod and with a snarled, "*Fuego!*" sent a lance of raw fire whipping through the air.

The blast slammed into the bear-creature's chest, and it hunched its shoulders, turning its head to one side. Its forward charge faltered, and it slid to a stop, crashing against a weathered old metal trash can.

"What do you know," I muttered. "It worked." I stepped forward and unleashed another blast at the creature, hoping to either melt it to bits or drive it away. The bear-thing snarled and turned a hateful, murderous gaze at me with its four eyes.

The soulgaze began almost instantly.

When a wizard looks into someone's eyes, he sees more than just what color they are. Eyes are windows to the soul. When I make eye contact for too long, or too intently, I get to peek in through the windows. You can't hide what you are from a wizard's soulgaze. And he can't hide from you. You both see each other for what you are, within, and it's with a clarity so intense that it burns itself into your head.

Looking on someone's soul is something you never forget.

No matter how badly you might want to.

I felt a whirling, gyrating sensation and fell forward, into the bear-thing's eyes. The glowing sigil on its forehead became a blaze of silver light the

size of a stadium scoreboard set against a roundish cliffside of dark green and black marble. I expected to see something hideous, but I guess you can't judge a monster by the slime on its scales. What I saw instead was a man of lean middle years dressed in rags. His hair was long and straight, wispy grey that fell down to his chest. He stood in a posture of agony, his wiry body stretched out in an arch, with his hands held up and apart, his legs stretched out. I followed the lines of his arms back and up and saw why he stood that way.

He'd been crucified.

The man's back rested against the cliff, the great glowing sigil stretching out above him. His arms were pulled back at an agonizing angle, and were sunk to the elbow in the green-black marble of the cliff. His knees were bent, his feet sunk into the stone as well. He hung there, the pressure of all his weight on his shoulders and legs. It must have been agonizing.

The crucified man laughed at me, his eyes glowing a shade of sickly green, and screamed, "As if it will help you! Nothing! You're nothing!"

Pain laced his voice, making it shrill. Agony contorted the lines of his body, veins standing out sharply against straining muscle.

"Stars and stones," I whispered. Creatures like this bear-thing did not have souls to gaze upon. That meant that regardless of appearances to the contrary, this thing was a mortal. It—no, *he*—was a human being. "What the hell is this?"

The man screamed again, this time all rage and anguish, void of words. I lifted a hand and stepped forward, my first instinct to help him.

Before I got close, the ground began to shake. The cliff face rumbled and slits of seething orange light appeared, and then widened, until I faced the second set of eyes, eyes the size of subway tunnels, opening on the great marble cliff. I stumbled several steps back, and that cliff face proved to be exactly that—a face, cold and beautiful and harsh around that fiery gaze.

The quaking in the earth increased, and a voice louder than a Metallica concert spoke, the raw sense of the words, the vicious anger and hate behind them hitting me far more heavily than mere volume.

GET OUT.

The sheer force of presence behind that voice seized me and threw me violently back, away from the tortured man at the cliffside and out of the soulgaze. The mental connection snapped like dry spaghetti, and the same force that had thrown my mind away from the soulgaze sent my physical

body flying back through the air. I hit an old cardboard box filled with empty bottles and heard glass shattering beneath me. The heavy leather duster held, and no broken shards buried themselves in my back.

For a second or two, I just lay on my back, stunned. My thoughts were a hectic whirlpool I couldn't calm or control. I stared up at the city's light pollution against the low clouds, until some tiny voice in me started screaming that I was in danger. I shoved myself to my knees, just as the bear-creature smacked a trash can aside with one of its paws and started toward me.

My head was still ringing with the aftereffects of the soulgaze and the psychic assault that had broken the connection. I lifted my blasting rod, summoned up every bit of will I could scrape together out of the confusion, and spat a word that sent another lance of flame toward the bear-creature.

This time the blast didn't even slow it down. The set of orange eyes flared with a sudden luminance, and my fire splashed against an unseen barrier, dispersing around the creature in sheets of scarlet. It let out a screaming roar and lumbered toward me.

I tried to get up, stumbled, and fell at the feet of the little old homeless guy, who leaned on his cane and stared at the creature. I had a dim impression of his features—Asian, a short white beard around his chin, heavy white eyebrows, and corrective glasses that made his eyes look the size of an owl's.

"Run, dammit!" I shouted at him. I tried to lead by example, but my balance was still whirling and I couldn't get off the ground.

The old man did not turn to run. He took off his glasses and pushed them at me. "Hold, please."

Then he took a deliberate step forward with his cane, placing himself between me and the bear-creature.

The creature hurled itself at him with a bellow, rearing up on its hindmost legs. It plunged down at the white-haired man, jaws gaping, and I couldn't do anything but watch it happen.

The little man took two steps to one side, pirouetting like a dancer. The end of his wooden cane lashed out and struck the creature's jaws with a crunching impact. Bits of broken yellow teeth flew from the creature's mouth. The little man continued his turn and evaded its claws by maybe an inch. He wound up behind the creature, and it turned to follow him, huge jaws snapping in rage.

The man darted back, staying just ahead of the thing's jaws, and in a blur of sudden light on metal he drew from his cane a long blade, the classic single-edged, chisel-pointed katana. The steel flashed at the creature's eyes, but it ducked low enough that the scything blade only whipped the top couple of inches from one of its ears.

The creature screamed, entirely out of proportion with the injury, a yowl that almost sounded human. It lurched back, shaking its head, a fine spray of blood sprinkling from its wounded ear.

At this point, I noticed three things.

One. The creature was paying me no attention whatsoever. Yippee ki yay. My head still spun wildly, and if it had come for me, I didn't think I could have done anything about it.

Two. The old man's sword was not reflecting light. It was emitting it. The water-patterned steel of the blade glowed with a steady silver flame that slowly grew brighter.

Three. I could feel the humming power of the sword, even from several yards away. It throbbed with a steady, deep strength, as quiet and unshakable as the earth itself.

In my entire life, I'd seen only one sword imbued with that much power.

But I knew that there were a couple more.

"Oi!" shouted the little old man, his English heavily accented. "Ursiel! Let him go! You have no power here!"

The bear-creature—Ursiel, I presumed—focused its four-eyed gaze on the little man and did something unsettling. It spoke. Its voice came out quiet, smooth, melodious, words somehow slithering out through the bear's jaws and throat. "Shiro. Look at yourself, little fool. You are an old man. You were at the peak of your strength when last we met. You cannot defeat me now."

Shiro narrowed his eyes, his sword gripped in one hand, the length of wooden sheath held in the other. "Did you come here to talk?"

Ursiel's head tilted to one side, and then the smooth voice murmured, "No. Indeed I did not."

It whirled, whipping its head toward me, and lunged. As it did, there was a rustle of cloth and then an old overcoat spun through the air, spreading like a fisherman's net. It fell over Ursiel's face, and the demon drew up short with a frustrated howl. It reached up and tore the coat from its head.

While it did, the tall young black man stepped between Ursiel and me. As I watched, he drew a long, heavy saber from the scabbard at his hip. The sword hummed with the same power as Shiro's, though in a slight variation, a different note within the same chord. Silver light flared from the blade's steel, and behind the demon, Shiro's blade answered it with more of its own radiance. The young man looked back at me, and I caught a glimpse of dark, intense eyes before he faced the demon, and said in a rumbling basso, words flavored with a thick Russian accent, "Ursiel. Let him go. You have no power here."

Ursiel hissed, the orange eyes blazing brighter by the moment. "Sanya. Traitor. Do you really think any of us fears even one of the Three, in your pathetic hands? So be it. I will take you all."

Sanya spread his empty hand to one side of his body in mocking invitation, and said nothing.

Ursiel roared and flew at Sanya. The big man extended the saber, and the weapon took Ursiel high on one shoulder, plunging through muscle and sinew. Sanya braced himself as the demon's body hit him, and though the impact drove his feet back across six inches of concrete, he held it up and away from me.

Shiro let out a ringing cry I wouldn't have believed a little old man could make, and Ursiel screamed, thrashing and flailing. Sanya shouted something in what sounded like Russian, and drove forward with both hands on the hilt of the impaling saber, overbearing Ursiel and sending the demon sprawling onto his back. Sanya followed, staying close, and I saw him throw his weight onto the demon as he twisted the hilt of the saber thrust through it.

He'd been too aggressive. Ursiel's paw hit him squarely upon one shoulder, and I heard the snap of breaking bone. The blow threw the young man away from the demon, and he rolled across the ground and into a wall, an explosive breath of pain forced from him as he hit.

Ursiel recovered its feet, tore the saber from its shoulder with a jerk of its jaws, and went after Sanya, but the white-haired old man menaced its flank, forcing it away from the wounded man and, incidentally, from me. For a few seconds, the old man and the demon circled each other. Then the demon lashed out at Shiro, a flurry of slashes with its claws.

The old man ducked them, retreating, his sword flickering and cutting. Twice, he left cuts on the demon's paws, but though it screamed in rage, it

only seemed to grow less intimidated, more angry. The old man's breathing grew visibly labored.

"Age," Ursiel's voice purred amidst its attack. "Death comes, old man. Its hand is on your heart now. And your life has been spent in vain."

"Let him go!" spat the old man between breaths.

Ursiel laughed again and the green pair of eyes glowed brighter. Another voice, this one not at all beautiful, the words twisted and snarling, said, "Stupid preacher. Time to die like the Egyptian did."

Shiro's expression changed, from stolid, controlled ferocity to something much sadder, much more resolved. He faced the demon for a moment, panting, and then nodded. "So be it."

The demon drove forward, and the old man gave ground, slowly forced into a corner of the alley. He seemed to be doing pretty well, until one close swipe of the demon's claws caught the glowing silver blade near its hilt, and sent it spinning away. The old man gasped and pressed back against the corner, panting, holding his right hand against the left side of his chest.

"So it ends, Knight," purred the smooth, demon-voice of Ursiel.

"*Hai*," the old man agreed quietly. He looked up above him, at a fire escape platform ten feet off the ground.

A shadowed figure dropped over the rail of the platform, steel rasping as it did. There was a low thrum of power, a flash of silver, and the hiss of a blade cutting the air. The shadowy figure landed in a crouch beside the creature.

The demon Ursiel jerked once, body stiffening. There was a thump.

Then its body toppled slowly over to one side, leaving its monstrous head lying on the alley floor. The light died from its four eyes.

The third Knight rose away from the demon's corpse. Tall and broad-shouldered, his close-cut hair dark and feathered with silver, Michael Carpenter snapped the blade of his broad sword, *amoracchius*, to one side, clearing droplets of blood from it. He put it back into its sheath, staring down at the fallen demon, and shook his head.

Shiro straightened, his breathing quick but controlled, and went to Michael's side. He gripped the larger man's shoulder and said, "It had to be done."

Michael nodded. The smaller Knight recovered the second sword, cleared the blade, and returned it to its wooden sheath.

Not far from me, the third Knight, the young Russian, pushed himself up from the ground. One of his arms dangled uselessly, but he offered the other to me. I took his hand and rose on wobbly legs.

“You are well?” he asked, his voice quiet.

“Peachy,” I responded, wobbling. He arched an eyebrow at me, then shrugged and went to recover his blade from the alley floor.

The aftereffects of the soulgaze had finally begun to fade, and the simple shock and confusion began to give way to a redundant terror. I hadn’t been careful enough. One of the bad guys had caught me off guard, and without intervention I would have been killed to death. It wouldn’t have been anything quick and painless, either. Without Michael and his two companions, the demon Ursiel would have torn me limb from literal limb, and I wouldn’t have been able to do a damned thing about it.

I had never encountered a psychic presence of such raw magnitude as upon the great stone cliff face. Not up close and personal like that, anyway. The first shot I’d taken at him had surprised and annoyed him, but he had been ready for the second blast and swatted aside my magical fire like an insect. Whatever Ursiel had been, he had been operating on a completely different order of magnitude than a mere punk of a mortal wizard like me. My psychic defenses aren’t bad, but they had been crushed like a beer can under a bulldozer. That, more than anything, scared the snot out of me. I had tried my psychic strength against more than a few bad guys, and I had never felt so badly outclassed. Oh, I knew there were things out there stronger than me, sure.

But none of them had ever jumped me in a dark alley.

I shook, and found a wall to lean on until my head cleared a little, and then walked stiffly over to Michael. Bits of broken glass fell from folds in my duster.

Michael glanced up as I came over to him. “Harry,” he said.

“It isn’t that I’m not glad to see you,” I said. “But you couldn’t have jumped down and beheaded the monster about two minutes sooner?”

Michael was usually pretty good about taking a joke. This time he didn’t even smile. “No. I’m sorry.”

I frowned at him. “How did you find me? How did you know?”

“Good advice.”

Which could have been anything from spotting my car nearby to being told by an angelic chorus. The Knights of the Cross always seemed to turn

up in bad places when they were badly needed. Sometimes coincidence seemed to go to incredible lengths to see to it that they were in the right place at the right time. I didn't think I wanted to know. I nodded at the demon's fallen body and said, "What the hell was that thing?"

"He wasn't a thing, Harry," Michael said. He continued staring down at the remains of the demon, and just about then they started shimmering. It only took a few seconds for the demon to dissolve into the form of the man I'd seen in the soulgaze—thin, grey-haired, dressed in rags. Except that in the soulgaze, his head hadn't been lying three feet away like that. I didn't think a severed head should have held an expression, but it did, one of absolute terror, his mouth locked open in a silent scream. The sigil I'd seen on the cliff face stood out on his forehead like a fresh scab, dark and ugly.

There was a glitter of orange-red light, the sigil vanished, and something clinked on the asphalt. A silver coin a little smaller than a quarter rolled away from the man's head, bounced against my foot, and then settled onto the ground. A second later, the body let out a hissing, sighing sound, and began to run with streaks of green-black goo. The body just deflated in on itself, noxious fumes and a spreading puddle of disgusting slime the only things remaining.

"That's it," I said, staring down and trying to keep myself from visibly trembling. "The weirdness has just gone off the end of my meter. I'm going home and going to bed." I bent to recover the coin before the slime engulfed it.

The old man snapped his cane at my wrist, growling, "No."

It stung. I jerked my hand back, shaking my fingers, and scowled at him. "Stars and stones, Michael, who is this guy?"

Michael drew a square of white cloth from his pocket and unfolded it. "Shiro Yoshimo. He was my teacher when I became a Knight of the Cross."

The old man grunted at me. I nodded at the wounded man and asked, "How about him?"

The tall black man glanced up at me as the old Knight began examining his arm. He looked me up and down without any sign of approval, glowered, and said, "Sanya."

"The newest of our Order," Michael added. He shook out the cloth, revealing two pairs of crosses embroidered in silver thread upon it. Michael knelt down and picked up the coin through the cloth, turned it over, then folded the cloth completely around the silver.

I frowned down at the coin as he did. One side bore some ancient portrait, maybe of a man's profile. The opposite side had some other design that was hidden under a stain in the shape of a rune—the one I'd seen on the demon Ursiel's forehead.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Shiro was protecting you," Michael said, rather than answering the question. Michael looked over at Shiro, who stood with the towering Sanya, and asked, "How is he?"

"Broken arm," the old man reported. "We should get off the street."

"Agreed," rumbled Sanya. The older Knight fashioned a makeshift sling from the shredded overcoat, and the tall young man slipped his arm into it without a sound of complaint.

"You'd better come with us, Harry," Michael said. "Father Forthill can get you a cot."

"Whoa, whoa," I said. "You never answered my question. *What was that?*"

Michael frowned at me and said, "It's a long story, and there's little time."

I folded my arms. "Make time. I'm not going anywhere until I know what the hell is going on here."

The little old Knight snorted and said, "Hell. That is what is going on." He opened his hand to me and said, "Please give them back."

I stared at him for a second, until I remembered his spectacles. I handed them to him, and he put them on, making his eyes goggle out hugely again.

"Wait a minute," I said to Michael. "This thing was one of the Fallen?"

Michael nodded, and a chill went through me.

"That's impossible," I said. "The Fallen can't do...things like *that*." I gestured at the puddle of slime. "They aren't allowed."

"Some are," Michael said, his voice quiet. "Please believe me. You are in great danger. I know what you've been hired to find, and so do they."

Shiro stalked down to the end of the alley and swept his gaze around. "Oi. Michael, we must go."

"If he will not come, he will not come," Sanya said. He glared at me, then followed Shiro.

"Michael," I began.

"Listen to me," Michael said. He held up the folded white cloth. "There are more where this one came from, Harry. Twenty-nine of them. And we

think they're after you."

Chapter Seven

I followed Michael's white pickup truck in the Blue Beetle to Saint Mary of the Angels Cathedral. It's a big, big church, a city landmark. If there's anything you like in the way of gothic architecture, you can find it somewhere on Saint Mary's. We parked near the back of the cathedral, and went to the delivery entrance, a plain oak door framed by lovingly tended rose vines.

Michael knocked at the door, and I heard the sound of multiple bolts being undone before the door opened.

Father Anthony Forthill opened the door. He was in his late fifties, balding, and carried a comfortable weight of years. He wore black slacks and a black shirt, the stark white square of his clerical collar sharply delineated. He was taller than Shiro, but a lot shorter than everyone else there, and beneath his glasses his eyes looked strained.

"Success?" he asked Michael.

"In part," Michael responded. He held up the folded cloth and said, "Put this in the cask, please. And we'll need to splint an arm."

Forthill winced, and accepted the folded cloth with the kind of ginger reverence paid only to explosives and samples of lethal viruses. "Right away. Good evening, Mister Dresden. Come in, all of you."

"Father," I answered. "You look like my day so far."

Forthill tried to smile at me, then padded away down a long hallway. Michael led us deeper into the church, up a flight of stairs to a storage room whose boxes had been stacked to the ceiling to make room for a number of folding cots, blocking the view of any windows. A mismatched pair of old lamps lit the room in soft gold.

"I'll get food, something to drink," Michael said quietly. He headed back out of the room. "And I need to call Charity. Sanya, you'd better sit down until we can see to your arm."

"I'll be fine," Sanya said. "I will help with food."

Shiro snorted and said, "Sit, boy." He headed for the door, catching up to Michael, and said, "Call your wife. I will do the rest." The two left together, their voices lowering to bare murmurs as they entered the hall.

Sanya glowered at the door for a moment and then settled down on one of the bunks. He looked around at the room for a moment, and then said, "You use the forces of magic, I take it."

I folded my arms and leaned against the wall. "What gave it away?"

He bared his teeth, white against his dark skin. "How long have you been a Wiccan?"

"A what?"

"A pagan. A witch."

"I'm not a witch," I said, glancing out the door. "I'm a wizard."

Sanya frowned. "What is the difference?"

"Wizard has a Z."

He looked at me blankly.

"No one appreciates me," I muttered. "Wicca is a religion. It's a little more fluid than most, but it's still a religion."

"And?"

"And I'm not really big on religion. I do magic, sure, but it's like...being a mechanic. Or an engineer. There are forces that behave a certain way. If you know what you're doing, you can get them to work for you, and you don't really need a god or a goddess or a whatever to get involved."

Sanya's expression became surprised. "You are not a religious man, then."

"I wouldn't burden any decent system of faith by participating in it."

The tall Russian regarded me for a moment and then nodded slowly. "I feel the same way."

I felt my eyebrow arch, Spock-like. "That's a joke, right?"

He shook his head. "It is not. I have been an atheist since childhood."

"You've got to be kidding me. You're a Knight of the Cross."

"Da," he said.

"So if you're not religious, you risk your life to help other people because...?"

"Because it must be done," he answered without hesitation. "For the good of the people, some must place themselves in harm's way. Some must pledge their courage and their lives to protect the community."

“Just a minute,” I said. “You became a Knight of the Cross because you were a *communist*?”

Sanya’s face twisted with revulsion. “Certainly not. Trotsky. Very different.”

I stopped myself from bursting out in laughter. But it was a near thing. “How did you get your sword?”

He moved his good hand to rest on the hilt of the blade, where it lay beside him on the cot. “*Esperacchius*. Michael gave it to me.”

“Since when has Michael gone running off to Russia?”

“Not that Michael,” Sanya said. He pointed a finger up. “That Michael.”

I stared at him for a minute and then said, “So. You get handed a holy sword by an archangel, told to go fight the forces of evil, and you somehow remain an atheist. Is that what you’re saying?”

Sanya’s scowl returned.

“Doesn’t that strike you as monumentally stupid?”

His glare darkened for maybe a minute before he took a deep breath and nodded. “Perhaps some could argue that I am agnostic.”

“*Agnostic*?”

“One who does not commit himself to the certain belief in a divine power,” he said.

“I know what it means,” I said. “What shocks me is that you think it applies to you. You’ve *met* more than one divine power. Hell, one of them broke your arm not half an hour ago.”

“Many things can break an arm. You yourself said that you do not need a god or goddess to define your beliefs about the supernatural.”

“Yeah, but I’m not agnostic. Just nonpartisan. Theological Switzerland, that’s me.”

Sanya said, “Semantics. I do not understand your point.”

I took a deep breath, still holding back the threat of giggles, and said, “Sanya. My point is that you have got to be more than a little thick to stand where you are, having seen what you’ve seen, and claim that you aren’t sure whether or not there’s a God.”

He lifted his chin and said, “Not necessarily. It is possible that I am mad, and all of this is a hallucination.”

That’s when I started laughing. I just couldn’t help it. I was too tired and too stressed to do anything else. I laughed and enjoyed it thoroughly while

Sanya sat on his cot and scowled at me, careful not to move his wounded arm.

Shiro appeared at the door, bearing a platter of sandwiches and deli vegetables. He blinked through his owlish glasses at Sanya and then at me. He said something to Sanya in what I took to be Russian. The younger Knight transferred his scowl to Shiro, but nodded his head in a gesture deep enough to be part bow, before he rose, claimed two sandwiches in one large hand, and walked out.

Shiro waited until Sanya was gone before he set the platter down on a card table. My stomach went berserk at the sight of the sandwiches. Heavy exertion coupled with insane fear does that to me. Shiro gestured at the plate and pulled up a couple of folding chairs. I sat down, nabbed a sandwich of my own, and started eating. Turkey and cheese. Heaven.

The old Knight took a sandwich of his own, and ate with what appeared to be a similar appetite. We munched for a while in contented silence before he said, “Sanya told you about his beliefs.”

I felt the corners of my mouth start to twinge as another smile threatened. “Yeah.”

Shiro let out a pleased snort. “Sanya is a good man.”

“I just don’t get why he’d be recruited as a Knight of the Cross.”

Shiro looked at me over the glasses, chewing. After a while, he said, “Man sees faces. Sees skin. Flags. Membership lists. Files.” He took another large bite, ate it, and said, “God sees hearts.”

“If you say so,” I said.

He didn’t answer. Right about the time I finished my sandwich, Shiro said, “You are looking for the Shroud.”

“That’s confidential,” I said.

“If you say so,” he said, using my own inflection on the words. The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are you looking for it?” he asked, chewing.

“If I am—and I’m not saying that I am—I’m doing it because I’ve been hired to look for it.”

“Your job,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“You do it for money,” he said.

“Yeah.”

“Hmph,” he said, and pushed his glasses up with his pinky. “Do you love money then, Mister Dresden?”

I picked up a napkin from one side of the platter, and wiped my mouth. “I used to think I loved it. But now I realize that it’s just dependency.”

Shiro let out an explosive bark of laughter, and rose, chortling. “Sandwich okay?”

“Super.”

Michael came in a few minutes later, his face troubled. There wasn’t a clock in the room, but it had to have been well after midnight. I supposed if I had called Charity Carpenter that late, I’d be troubled after the conversation, too. She was ferocious where her husband’s safety was concerned—especially when she heard that I was around. Okay, admittedly Michael had gotten pretty thoroughly battered whenever he came along on a case with me, but all the same I didn’t think it was fair of her. It wasn’t like I did it on purpose.

“Charity wasn’t happy?” I asked.

Michael shook his head. “She’s worried. Is there a sandwich left?”

There were a couple. Michael took one and I took a second one, just to keep him company. While we ate, Shiro got out his sword and a cleaning kit, and started wiping down the blade with a soft cloth and some kind of oil.

“Harry,” Michael said finally. “I have to ask you for something. It’s very difficult. And it’s something that under normal circumstances I wouldn’t even consider doing.”

“Name it,” I said between chews. At the time, I meant it literally. Michael had risked his life for me more than once. His family had been endangered the last time around, and I knew him well enough to know that he wouldn’t ask something unreasonable. “Just name it. I owe you.”

Michael nodded. Then looked at me steadily and said, “Get out of this business, Harry. Get out of town for a few days. Or stay home. But get out of it, please.”

I blinked at him. “You mean, you don’t want my help?”

“I want your safety,” Michael said. “You are in great danger.”

“You’re kidding me,” I said. “Michael, I know how to handle myself. You should know that by now.”

“Handle yourself,” Michael said. “Like you did tonight? Harry, if we hadn’t been there—”

“What?” I snapped. “I’d have been dead. It isn’t like it isn’t going to happen sooner or later. There are enough bad guys after me that one of them is eventually going to get lucky. So what else is new.”

“You don’t understand,” Michael said.

“I understand all right,” I said. “One more wacky B-horror-movie reject tried to kill me. It’s happened before. It’ll probably happen again.”

Shiro said, without looking up from his sword, “Ursiel did not come to kill you, Mister Dresden.”

I considered that in another pregnant silence. The lamps buzzed a little. Shiro’s cleaning cloth whispered over the steel of his sword.

I watched Michael’s face and asked, “Why was he there then? I’d have put down money that it was a demon, but it was just a shapechange. There was a mortal inside it. Who was he?”

Michael’s gaze never wavered. “His name was Rasmussen. Ursiel took him in eighteen forty-nine, on his way to California.”

“I saw him, Michael. I looked in his eyes.”

Michael winced. “I didn’t know that.”

“He was a prisoner in his own soul, Michael. Something was holding him. Something big. Ursiel, I guess. He’s one of the Fallen, isn’t he?”

Michael nodded.

“How the hell does that happen? I thought the Fallen aren’t allowed to take away free will.”

“They aren’t,” Michael said. “But they are allowed to tempt. And the Denarians have more to offer than most.”

“Denarians?” I asked.

“The Order of the Blackened Denarius,” Michael said. “They see an opportunity in this matter. A chance to do great harm.”

“Silver coins.” I took a deep breath. “Like the one you wrapped up in blessed cloth. Thirty pieces of silver, eh?”

He nodded. “Whoever touches the coins is tainted by the Fallen within. Tempted. Given power. The Fallen leads the mortal deeper and deeper into its influence. Never forcing them. Just offering. Until eventually they have surrendered enough of themselves and—”

“The thing gets control of them,” I finished.

Michael nodded. “Like Rasmussen. We try to help them. Sometimes the person realizes what is happening. Wants to escape their influence. When

we face them, we try to wear the demon down. Give the person taken the chance to escape.”

“That’s why you kept talking to it. Until its voice changed. But Rasmussen didn’t want to be free, did he?”

Michael shook his head.

“Believe it or not, Michael, I’ve been tempted once or twice. I can handle it.”

“No,” Michael said. “You can’t. Against the Denarians, few mortals can. The Fallen know our weaknesses. Our flaws. How to undermine. Even warned and aware of them, they have destroyed men and women for thousands of years.”

“I said I’ll be fine,” I growled.

Shiro grunted. “Pride before fall.”

I gave him a sour glance.

Michael leaned forward and said, “Harry, please. I know that your life has not been an easy one. You’re a good man. But you are as vulnerable as anyone. These enemies don’t want you dead.” He looked down at his hands. “They want *you*.”

Which scared me. Really scared me. Maybe because it seemed to disturb Michael so much, and very little disturbs him. Maybe because I had seen Rasmussen, and would always be able to see him there, trapped, wildly laughing.

Or maybe it was because part of me wondered if it would be so impossible to find a way to use the power the coin obviously offered. If it had made some random schmuck on the way to pan for gold into a killing machine that it took all three Knights of the Cross to handle, what could someone like me do with it?

Beat the living snot out of Duke Paolo Ortega. That’s for sure.

I blinked, refocusing my eyes. Michael watched me, his expression pained, and I knew that he’d guessed at my thoughts. I closed my eyes, shame making my stomach uneasy.

“You’re in danger, Harry,” Michael said. “Leave the case alone.”

“If I was in so much danger,” I responded, “why did Father Vincent come and hire me?”

“Forthill asked him not to,” Michael said. “Father Vincent...disagrees with Forthill on how supernatural matters are to be handled.”

I stood up and said, “Michael, I’m tired. I’m really damned tired.”

“Harry,” Michael chided me.

“Darned,” I mumbled. “Darned tired. Darn me unto heck.” I headed for the door and said, “I’m heading home to get some sleep. I’ll think about it.”

Michael stood up, and Shiro with him, both of them facing me. “Harry,” Michael said. “You are my friend. You’ve saved my life. I’ve named a child for you. But stay out of this business. For my sake, if not for your own.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked.

“Then I’ll have protect you from yourself. In the name of God, Harry, please don’t push this.”

I turned and left without saying good-bye.

In this corner, one missing Shroud, one impossibly and thoroughly dead corpse, one dedicated and deadly vampire warlord, three holy knights, twenty-nine fallen angels, and a partridge in a pear tree.

And in the opposite corner, one tired, bruised, underpaid professional wizard, threatened by his allies and about to get dumped by his would-be girlfriend for John Q. Humdrum.

Oh, yeah.

Definitely bedtime.

Chapter Eight

I fumed and brooded all the way back to my apartment, the Beetle's engine sputtering nervously the whole time. Mister was sitting at the top of the steps, and let out a plaintive meow as I shut and locked up my car. Though I kept my blasting rod and shield bracelet ready in case any vanilla goons were waiting around with more silenced guns, I was fairly confident no preternasties were hanging around in ambush. Mister tended to make lots of noise and then leave whenever supernatural danger was around.

Which just goes to show that my cat has considerably more sense than me.

Mister slammed his shoulder against my legs, and didn't quite manage to trip me into falling down the stairs. I didn't waste any time getting inside and locked up behind me.

I lit a candle, got out some cat food and fresh water for Mister's bowls, and spent a couple minutes pacing back and forth. I glanced at my bed and wrote it off as a useless idea. I was too worked up to sleep, even tired as I was. I was already chin deep in alligators and sinking fast.

"Right, then, Harry," I mumbled. "Might as well do some work."

I grabbed a heavy, warm robe off its hook, shoved aside one of my rugs, and opened the trapdoor leading down to the subbasement. A folding ladder-staircase led down to the damp stone chamber beneath, where I kept my lab, and I padded down it, my robe's hem dragging against the wooden steps.

I started lighting candles. My lab, barring a brief bout of insanity, generally reflects the state of my own mind—cluttered, messy, unorganized, but basically functional. The room isn't large. Three worktables line three of the walls in a U shape, and a fourth table runs down the center of the U, leaving a narrow walk-way around it. Wire utility shelves line the walls above the tables. Piled on the shelves and tables are a vast array of magical ingredients, plus that sort of miscellaneous domestic clutter that in households of more substance always winds up in a big

drawer in the kitchen. Books, notebooks, journals, and papers line the shelves, together with containers and boxes and pouches full of all sorts of herbs, roots, and magical ingredients, from a bottle of snake hisses to a vial of milk-thistle extract.

At the far end of the room there was a patch of floor kept completely clear of all clutter. A copper ring set into the stone of the floor, my summoning circle, resided there. Experience had shown me that you never can tell when you might need a ritual circle to defend yourself from magical attack, or for its other most obvious use—keeping a denizen of the Nevernever a temporary prisoner.

One of the shelves had less on it than the others. At either end rested a candleholder, long since overrun with many colors of melted wax until they were nothing but mounds, like a honeybee Vesuvius. Books, mostly paperback romances, and various small and feminine articles took up the rest of the shelf, but for where a bleached human skull sat in the middle. I picked up a pencil and rapped it against the shelf. “Bob. Bob, wake up. Work to be done.”

Twin points of orange and gold light kindled in the shadows of the skull’s eye sockets, and grew brighter as I went about the room lighting half a dozen candles and a kerosene lamp. The skull rattled a little, and then said, “It’s only a few hours from dawn, and you’re just starting up? What gives?”

I started getting out beakers and vials and a small alcohol burner. “More trouble,” I said. “It’s been one hell of a day.” I told Bob the Skull about the television studio, the vampire’s challenge, the hit man, the missing Shroud, and the plague-filled corpse.

“Wow. You don’t do things halfway, do you, Harry?”

“Advise now; critique later. I’m going to look into things and whip up a potion or two, and you’re going to help.”

“Right,” Bob said. “Where do you want to start?”

“With Ortega. Where is my copy of the Accords?”

“Cardboard box.” Bob said. “Third shelf, on the bottom row, behind the pickling jars.”

I found the box and pawed through it until I had found a vellum scroll tied shut with a white ribbon. I opened it and peered down at the handwritten calligraphy. It started off with the word *Insomuch*, and the syntax got more opaque from there.

"I can't make heads or tails of this," I said. "Where's the section about duels?"

"Fifth paragraph from the end. You want the Cliff's Notes version?"

I rolled the scroll shut again. "Hit me."

"It's based on Code Duello," Bob said. "Well, technically it's based on much older rules that eventually inspired the Code Duello, but that's just chickens and eggs. Ortega is the challenger, and you're the challenged."

"I know that. I get to pick the weapons and the ground, right?"

"Wrong," Bob said. "You pick the weapons, but he gets to choose the time and location."

"Damn," I muttered. "I was going to take high noon out in a park somewhere. But I guess I can just say that we'll duel with magic."

"If it's one of the available choices. It almost always is."

"Who decides?"

"The vampires and the Council will pick from a list of neutral emissaries. The emissary decides."

I nodded. "So if I don't have it as an option I'm screwed, right? I mean, magic, wizard, kind of my bag."

Bob said. "Yeah, but be careful. It's got to be a weapon that he can use. If you pick one he can't, he can refuse it, and force you to take your second choice."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that regardless of what happens, if he doesn't want to fight you in magic, he won't have to. Ortega didn't get to be a warlord without thinking things through, Harry. Odds are that he has a good idea what you can do and has planned accordingly. What do you know about him?"

"Not much. Presumably he's tough."

Bob's eyelights stared at me for a minute. "Well, Napoléon, I'm sure he'll never overcome that kind of tactical genius."

I flicked my pencil at the skull in annoyance. It bounced off a nose hole. "Get to the point."

"The point is that you'd be better off taking something you can predict."

"I'm better off not fighting to begin with," I said. "Do I need to get a second?"

"You both do," Bob said. "The seconds will work out the terms of the duel. His should be getting in touch with yours at some point."

"Uh. I don't have one."

Bob's skull turned a bit on its shelf and banged its forehead gently into the brick wall a few times. "Then get one, dolt. Obviously."

I got another pencil and a pad of yellow lined paper and wrote *To do* across the top, and *Ask Michael about duel* underneath it. "Okay. And I want you to find out whatever you can about Ortega before dawn."

"Check," Bob said. "I have your permission to come out?"

"Not yet. There's more."

Bob's eyelights rolled. "Of course there's more. My job sucks."

I got out a jug of distilled water and a can of Coke. I opened the can, took a sip, and said, "That corpse Murphy showed me. Plague curse?"

"Probably," Bob agreed. "But if it was really that many diseases, it was a big one."

"How big?"

"Bigger than that spell the Shadowman was using to tear hearts out a few years ago."

I whistled. "And he was running it off of thunderstorms and ceremonial rites, too. What would it take to power a curse that strong?"

"Curses aren't really my thing," Bob hedged. "But a lot. Like maybe tapping into a sorcerous ley line, or a human sacrifice."

I sipped more Coke, and shook my head. "Someone is playing some serious hardball then."

Bob mused, "Maybe the Wardens used it to get nasty on a Red Court agent."

"They wouldn't," I said. "They wouldn't use magic like that. Even if technically it was the diseases that killed the guy, it's too damn close to breaking the First Law."

"Who else would have that kind of power?" Bob asked me.

I turned to a fresh page and sketched out a rough version of the tattoo on the corpse. I held it up to show it to Bob. "Someone who didn't like this, maybe."

"Eye of Thoth," Bob supplied. "That the tattoo on the corpse?"

"Yeah. Was this guy in someone's secret club?"

"Maybe. The eye is a pretty popular occult symbol though, so you can't rule out the possibility that he was an independent."

"Okay," I said. "So who uses it?"

"Plenty of groups. Brotherhoods connected to the White Council, historic societies, a couple of fringe groups of occult scholars, personality cults,

television psychics, comic book heroes—”

“I get the point,” I said. I turned to a fresh page and from razor-sharp memory sketched out the symbol I’d seen on the demon Ursiel’s forehead. “Do you recognize this?”

Bob’s eyelights widened. “Are you insane? Harry, tear that paper up. Burn it.”

I frowned. “Bob, wait a minute—”

“Do it now!”

The skull’s voice was frightened, and I get nervous when Bob gets frightened. Not much can scare Bob out of his usual wiseass-commentator state of mind. I tore up the paper. “I guess you recognize it.”

“Yeah. And I’m not having anything to do with that bunch.”

“I didn’t hear that, Bob. I need information on them. They’re in town, they’ve taken a shot at me, and I’m betting they’re after the Shroud.”

“Let them have it,” Bob said. “Seriously. You’ve got no idea the kind of power this group has.”

“Fallen, I know,” I said. “Order of the Blackened Denarius. But they have to play by the rules, right?”

“Harry, it isn’t just the Fallen. The people they’ve taken are nearly as bad. They’re assassins, poisoners, warriors, sorcerers—”

“Sorcerers?”

“The coins make them effectively immortal. Some of the Order have had a thousand years to practice, and maybe more. That much time, even modest talents can grow teeth. Never mind everything experience would have taught them, everything they could have found to make themselves stronger over the years. Even without infernal superpowers, they’d be badass.”

I frowned, and tore the bits of paper into smaller bits. “Badass enough to manage that curse?”

“There’s no question that they’d have the skill. Maybe enough that they wouldn’t need as big a power source.”

“Great,” I said, and rubbed at my eyes. “All right, then. Big-leaguers all around. I want you to track down the Shroud.”

“No can do,” Bob said.

“Give me a break. How many pieces of two-thousand-year-old linen are in town?”

“That’s not the point, Harry. The Shroud is...” Bob seemed to struggle to find words. “It doesn’t exist on the same wavelength as me. It’s out of my jurisdiction.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m a spirit of intellect, Harry. Of reason, logic. The Shroud isn’t about logic. It’s an artifact of faith.”

“What?” I demanded. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“You don’t know everything, Harry,” Bob said. “You don’t even know a lot. I can’t touch this. I can’t come anywhere near it. And if I even try, I’ll be crossing boundaries I shouldn’t. I’m not going up against angels, Dresden, Fallen, or otherwise.”

I sighed, and lifted my hands. “Fine, fine. Is there someone I can talk to?”

Bob was quiet for a moment before he said, “Maybe. Ulsharavas.”

“Ulsha-who?”

“Ulsharavas. She’s an ally of the *loa*, an oracle spirit. There’s details about halfway through your copy of *Dumont’s Guide to Divinationators*.”

“How are her prices?”

“Reasonable,” Bob said. “You’ve got everything you need for the calling. She isn’t usually malicious.”

“Isn’t usually?”

“The *loa* are basically good guys, but they all have their darker aspects, too. Ulsharavas is a pretty gentle guide, but she’s been harsh before. Don’t let your guard down.”

“I won’t,” I said, and frowned. “One more thing. Swing by Marcone’s place and see if there’s anything interesting there. You don’t have to go all David Niven; just take a look around.”

“You think Marcone’s involved in this one?”

“His thugs already took a poke at me. I might as well find out whatever I can. I give you permission to leave in pursuit of that information, Bob. Get back before dawn. Oh, do we still have that recipe for the antivenom to vampire spit?”

A cloud of orange lights flowed out of the skull, across the table, and then up the stairs. Bob’s voice, oddly modulated, floated back to me. “Red notebook. Don’t forget to light the wardflame while I’m gone.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. I gave Bob a minute to clear my wards, then got down a three-candle holder with green, yellow, and red candles on it. I

lit the green one and set the candleholder aside. I got out *Dumont's Guide* and read over the entry for Ulsharavas. It looked pretty simple, though you couldn't be too careful whenever you called something in from the Nevernever.

I took a couple of minutes to gather what I'd need. The oracle spirit couldn't put together a body for herself, not even a nebulous cloud of light, like Bob could. She required a homunculus to manifest in the mortal world. Dumont recommended a newly dead corpse, but as the only one I was likely to find was my own, I needed a substitute. I found it in another box and plopped it down in the center of my summoning circle.

I added a cup of whiskey and a freshly opened tin of Prince Albert's chewing tobacco to the circle, the required down payment to convince Ulsharavas to show up. It was the last of my whiskey and the last of the tins of tobacco, so I added *Get more scotch and Prince Albert in a can* to my to-do list, and stuck it in my pocket.

I spent a couple of minutes sweeping the floor around the circle, so that I wouldn't kick a stray hair or bit of paper across the circle and flub it up. After a brief deliberation I chalked down another circle outside the copper one. Then I took a moment to go over the guide a last time, and to clear my head of distractions.

I took a deep breath and gathered in my strength. Then I focused, reached down, and touched the copper circle, willing a tiny jolt of power into it. The summoning circle closed. I felt it as a tingling prickle on the back of my neck and a faint warmth on the skin of my face. I repeated the process with the chalk circle, adding a second layer, and then knelt down by the circle, lifting both hands palms-up.

"Ulsharavas," I murmured, willing energy into the words. My voice shook oddly, skittering around tones in what seemed a random fashion. "Ulsharavas. Ulsharavas. One lost in ignorance seeks you. One darkened by the lack of knowledge seeks your light. Come, guardian of memory, sentinel of the yet to come. Accept this offering and join me here."

At the conclusion of the ritual words, I released the power I'd been holding, sending it coursing from me into the circle, and through it to seek out the oracle spirit in the Nevernever.

The response came immediately. A sudden swirl of light appeared within the copper circle, and briefly made the barrier around it visible as a curved

plane of blue sparkles. The light drizzled down over the homunculus, and a moment later it twitched, then sat up.

“Welcome, oracle,” I said. “Bob the Skull thought you might be of some help.”

The homunculus sat up and stretched out pudgy arms. Then it blinked, looked at its arms, and rose to stare down at itself. It looked up at me with one eyebrow raised, and asked, in a tiny voice, “A Cabbage Patch doll? You expect me to help you while wearing *this*?”

It was a cute doll. Blond ringlets fell to her plush shoulders, and she wore a pink-and-blue calico dress, complete with matching ribbons and little black shoes. “Uh, yeah. Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t have anything else with two arms and two legs, and I’m pressed for time.”

Ulsharavas the Cabbage Patch doll sighed and sat down in the circle, legs straight out like a teddy bear’s. She struggled to pick up the comparatively large cup of whiskey, and drank it down. It looked like she was taking a pull from a rain barrel, but she downed the whiskey in one shot. I don’t know where it went, given that the doll didn’t actually have a mouth or a stomach, but none of it spilled onto the floor. That done, she thrust a tiny fist into the tobacco and stuffed a wad of it into her mouth.

“So,” she said, between chews. “You want to know about the Shroud, and the people who stole it.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Uh. Yeah, actually. You’re pretty good.”

“There are two problems.”

I frowned. “Okay. What are they?”

Ulsharavas peered at me and said, “First. I don’t work for *bokkor*.”

“I’m not a *bokkor*,” I protested.

“You aren’t a *houngun*. You aren’t a *mambo*. That makes you a sorcerer.”

“Wizard,” I said. “I’m with the White Council.”

The doll tilted her head. “You’re stained,” she said. “I can feel black magic on you.”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “But mostly it isn’t mine.”

“Some of it is.”

I frowned at the doll and then nodded. “Yeah. I’ve made a bad call or two.”

“But honest,” Ulsharavas noted. “Well enough. Second is my price.”

“What did you have in mind?”

The doll spat to one side, flecks of tobacco landing on the floor. “An honest answer to one question. Answer me and I will tell you what you seek.”

“Yeah, right,” I said. “You could just ask me for my Name. I’ve heard that one before.”

“I didn’t say you’d have to answer in full,” the doll said. “I certainly do not wish to threaten you. But what you would answer, you must answer honestly.”

I thought about it for a minute before I said, “All right. Done.”

Ulsharavas scooped up more tobacco and started chomping. “Answer only this. Why do you do what you do?”

I blinked at her. “You mean tonight?”

“I mean always,” she answered. “Why are you a wizard? Why do you present yourself openly? Why do you help other mortals as you do?”

“Uh,” I said. I stood up and paced over to my table. “What else would I do?”

“Precisely,” the doll said, and spat. “You could be doing many other things. You could be seeking a purpose in life in other careers. You could be sequestered and studying. You could be using your skills for material gain and living in wealth. Even in your profession as an investigator, you could do more to avoid confrontation than you do. But instead you consign yourself to a poor home, a dingy office, and the danger of facing all manner of mortal and supernatural foe. Why?”

I leaned back against my table, folded my arms, and frowned at the doll. “What the hell kind of question is that?”

“An important one,” she said. “And one that you agreed to answer honestly.”

“Well,” I said. “I guess I wanted to do something to help people. Something I was good at.”

“Is that why?” she asked.

I chewed over the thought for a moment. Why *had* I started doing this stuff? I mean, it seemed like every few months I was running up against situations that had the potential to horribly kill me. Most wizards never had the kind of problems I did. They stayed at home, minded their own business, and generally speaking went on about their lives. They did not challenge other supernatural forces. They didn’t declare themselves to the public at large. They didn’t get into trouble for sticking their noses in other

people's business, whether or not they'd been paid to do so. They didn't start wars, get challenged to duels with vampire patriots, or get the windows shot out of their cars.

So why did I do it? Was it some kind of masochistic death wish? Maybe a psychological dysfunction of some sort?

Why?

"I don't know," I said, finally. "I guess I never thought about it all that much."

The doll watched me with unnerving intensity for a full minute before nodding. "Don't you think you should?"

I scowled down at my shoes, and didn't answer.

Ulsharavas took one last fistful of tobacco, and sat back down in her original position, settling her calico dress primly about her. "The Shroud and the thieves you seek have rented a small vessel docked in the harbor. It is a pleasure craft called the *Etranger*."

I nodded and exhaled through my nose. "All right then. Thank you for your help."

She lifted a tiny hand. "One thing more, wizard. You must know why the Knights of the White God wish you to stay away from the Shroud."

I arched an eyebrow. "Why?"

"They received part of a prophecy. A prophecy that told them that should you seek the Shroud, you will most assuredly perish."

"Only part of a prophecy?" I asked.

"Yes. Their Adversary concealed some of it from them."

I shook my head. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because," Ulsharavas said. "You must hear the second half of the prophecy in order to restore the balance."

"Uh. Okay."

The doll nodded and fixed me with that unsettling, unblinking stare. "Should you seek the Shroud, Harry Dresden, you will most assuredly perish."

"All right," I said. "So what happens if I don't?"

The doll lay down on her back, and wisps of light began flowing back out of her, back from whence Ulsharavas had come. Her voice came to me quietly, as if from a great distance. "If you do not, they all die. And this city with them."

Chapter Nine

I hate cryptic warnings. I know, the whole cryptic-remark concept is part and parcel of the wizard gig, but it doesn't suit my style. I mean, what *good* is a warning like that? All three Knights and the population of Chicago would die if I didn't get involved—and my number would be up if I did. That sounded like the worst kind of self-fulfilling crap.

There's a case to be made for prophecy; don't get me wrong. Mortals, even wizards, all exist at a finite point in the flow of time. Or, to make it simple, if time is a river, then you and I are like pebbles in it. We exist in one spot at a time, occasionally jostled back and forth by the currents. Spirits don't always have the same kind of existence. Some of them are more like a long thread than a stone—their presence tenuous, but rippling upstream and down as a part of their existence, experiencing more of the stream than the pebble.

That's how oracle spirits know about the future and the past. They're living in them both at the same time they're delivering mysterious messages to you. That's why they only give brief warnings, or mysterious dreams or prophetic knock-knock jokes, or however they drop their clues. If they tell you too much, it will change the future that they're experiencing, so they have to give out the advice with a light touch.

I know. It makes my head hurt too.

I don't put much stock in prophecy. As extensive and aware as these spirits might be, they aren't all-knowing. And as nutty as people are, I don't buy that any spirit is going to be able to keep an absolute lock on every possible temporal outcome.

Maybe-genuine prophecies aside, I could hardly drop the case now. In the first place, I'd been paid up front, and I didn't have the kind of financial breathing space I would need to be able to turn down the money and pay my bills at the same time.

In the second place, the risk of imminent death just didn't hit me the same way it used to. It wasn't that it didn't scare me. It did, in that kind of

horrible, uncertain way that left me with nothing to focus my fears upon. But I've beaten risks before. I could do it again.

You want to know another reason I didn't back off? I don't like getting pushed around. I don't like threats. As well-intentioned and polite and caring as Michael's threat had been, it still made me want to punch someone in the nose. The oracle's prophecy had been another threat, of sorts, and I don't let spirits from the Nevernever determine what I'm going to do, either.

Finally, if the prophecy was right, Michael and his brother Knights could be in danger, and they had saved my skinny wizard's ass not long ago. I could help them. They might be heaven-on-wheels when it came to taking on bad guys in a fight, but they weren't investigators. They couldn't run these thieves down the way I could. It was just a question of making them see reason. Once I'd convinced them that the prophecy they'd received wasn't wholly correct, everything would be fine.

Yeah, right.

I shoved those thoughts aside, and checked the clock. I wanted to move on Ulsharavas's tip as soon as possible, but I was beat and likely to make mistakes. With all the bad guys running around town, there was no sense in going out there into the dark, exhausted and unprepared. I'd wait for the potions to be ready and Bob to come back from his mission, at least. Sunlight would cut down on the risk as well, since Red Court vampires got incinerated by it—and I doubted these Denarian fruitcakes would get along with it either.

Thus prioritized, I checked my notes, and started putting together a couple of potions that would offer me a few hours of protection from the narcotic venom of the Red Court. The potions were simple ones. Brewing any kind of potion required a base liquid, and then several other ingredients meant to bind the magic put into the potion to the desired effect. One ingredient was linked to each of the five senses, then one to the mind and one to the spirit.

In this case, I wanted something that would offset the venomous saliva of the Red Court vampires, a narcotic that rendered those exposed to it passively euphoric. I needed a potion that would ruin the pleasurable sensations of the poison.

I used stale coffee as my base ingredient. To that I added hairs from a skunk, for scent. A small square of sandpaper for touch. I tossed in a small

photo of Meat Loaf, cut from a magazine, for sight. A rooster's crow I'd stored in a small quartz crystal went in for hearing, and a powdered aspirin for taste. I cut the surgeon general's warning label from a pack of cigarettes and chopped it fine to add in for the mind, and then lit a stick of the incense I sometimes used while meditating and wafted some of the smoke into the two bottles for the spirit. Once the potions were bubbling over a burner, I drew in my wearied will and released power into the mixes, suffusing them with energy. They fizzed and frothed with gratifying enthusiasm.

I let them simmer for a while, then took them from the fire and emptied them into a pair of small sports-drink bottles. After that, I slumped on a stool and waited for Bob to come home.

I must have nodded off, because when my phone rang, I jerked myself up straight and nearly fell off my stool. I clambered up the ladder and picked up the phone.

"Dresden."

"Hoss," said a weather-beaten voice on the other end. Ebenezar McCoy, a sometime teacher of mine, sounded businesslike. "Did I wake you up?"

"No, sir," I said. "I was up anyway. Working on a case."

"You sound tired as a coal-mine mule."

"Been up all night."

"Uh-huh," Ebenezar said. "Hoss, I just called to let you know not to worry about this duel nonsense. We're going to slap it down."

By "we," Ebenezar meant the Senior Council members. Seven of the most experienced wizards on the White Council held positions of particular authority, especially during times of crisis, when quick decisions were needed. Ebenezar had turned down his chance at a seat on the Senior Council for nearly fifty years. He took it only recently to block a potentially fatal political attack directed against yours truly by some of the more conservative (read, fanatic) members of the White Council.

"Slap it down? No, don't do that."

"What?" Ebenezar said. "You *want* to fight this duel? Did you fall and hit your head, boy?"

I rubbed at my eyes. "Tell me about it. I'll work out something to give me a shot at winning."

"Sounds like your wagon's already pretty full to be letting this vampire push you."

“He knew where to push,” I said. “Ortega brought a bunch of goons into town. Vampires and straight hit men, too. He says that if I don’t face him he’s going to have a bunch of people I know killed.”

Ebenazar spat something in what I presumed was Gaelic. “You’d better tell me what happened, then.”

I told Ebenazar all about my encounter with Ortega. “Oh, and a contact of mine says that the Red Court is divided over the issue. There are lots of them who don’t want the war to end.”

“Of course they don’t,” Ebenazar said. “That fool of a Merlin won’t let us take the offensive. He thinks his fancy wards will make them give up.”

“How are they working out?” I asked.

“Well enough for now,” Ebenazar admitted. “One major attack has been pushed back by the wards. No more Council members have been killed in attacks on their homes, though the Red Court’s allies are putting pressure on ours, and a few Wardens have died on intelligence-gathering missions. But it isn’t going to last. You can’t win a war sitting behind a wall and hoping the enemy decides to leave.”

“What do you think we should do?”

“Officially,” Ebenazar said, “we follow the Merlin’s lead. More than anything, now, we need to stay together.”

“What about unofficially?”

“Think about it,” Ebenazar snorted. “If we just sit here, the vampires are going to take apart or drive away our allies and then we’ll have to take them all on alone. Look, Hoss. Are you sure about this duel?”

“Hell no,” I said. “I just didn’t see much choice. I’ll figure out something. If I win, it might be worth it to the Council. Neutral territory for meeting and negotiating could come in handy.”

Ebenazar sighed. “Aye. The Merlin will think the same thing.” He was quiet for a moment before he said, “Not much like the days on the farm, is it, Hoss?”

“Not much,” I agreed.

“Do you remember that telescope we set up in the loft?”

Ebenazar had taught me what I knew of astronomy, on long, dark summer evenings in the Ozark hills, hay doors to the barn’s loft open, stars overhead shining in the country darkness by the millions. “I remember. That asteroid we discovered that turned out to be an old Russian satellite.”

“Asteroid Dresden was a better name than Kosmos Five.” He chuckled and added, as an afterthought, “Do you remember whatever happened to that telescope and such? I kept meaning to ask you but I never got around to it.”

“We packed it in that steamer trunk in the horse stall.”

“With the observation logs?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Oh, that’s right,” Ebenezar said. “Obliged.”

“Sure.”

“Hoss, we’ll agree to the duel if that’s what you want. But be careful.”

“I don’t plan to roll over and die,” I said. “But if something should happen to me…” I coughed. “Well, if it does, there are some papers in my lab. You’ll know how to find them. Some people I’d like to make sure are protected.”

“Of course,” Ebenezar said. “But I’m likely to carry on cranky if I have to drive all the way up to Chicago twice in as many years.”

“Hate for that to happen.”

“Luck, Hoss.”

“Thanks.”

I hung up the phone, rubbed tiredly at my eyes, and stomped back down to the lab. Ebenezar hadn’t come out and said it, but the offer had been there, behind the old man’s talk of days gone by. He’d been offering me sanctuary at his farm. It wasn’t that I didn’t like Chicago, but the offer was a tempting one. After a couple of rough years slugging it out with various bad guys, a quiet year or two on the farm near Hog Hollow, Missouri, sounded tempting.

Of course, the safety offered in that image was an illusion. Ebenezar’s place was going to be as well protected as any wizard’s on earth, and the old man himself could be a terrible foe. But the Red Court of vampires had a big network supporting it and they didn’t generally bother to play fair. They’d destroyed a wizard stronghold the previous summer, and if they’d cracked that place they could do it to Ebenezar’s Ozark hideaway too. If I went there and they found out about it, it would make the old man’s farm too tempting a target to pass by.

Ebenezar knew that as well as I did, but he and I shared a common trait—he doesn’t like bullies either. He’d be glad to have me and he’d fight to the death against the Reds if they came. But I didn’t want to draw that kind

of thing down on him. I was grateful for the old man's support, but I owed him more than that.

Besides, I was almost as well protected here in Chicago. My own wards, defensive screens of magic to protect my apartment, had kept me safe and alive for a couple of years, and the presence of a large mortal population kept the vampires from trying anything completely overt. Wizards and vampires notwithstanding, everyone in the supernatural community knew damned well that plain old vanilla mortals were one of the most dangerous forces on the planet, and went out of their way not to become too noticeable to the population at large.

The population at large, meanwhile, did everything it possibly could to keep from noticing the supernatural, so that worked out. The vampires had taken a poke or two at me since the war began, but it hadn't been anything I couldn't handle, and they didn't want to risk being any more obvious.

Thus, Ortega and his challenge.

So how the hell was I supposed to fight a duel with him without using magic?

My bed called to me, but that thought was enough to keep me from answering. I paced around my living room for a while, trying to think of some kind of weapon that would give me the most advantage. Ortega was stronger, faster, more experienced, and more resistant to injury than me. How the hell was I supposed to pick a weapon to go up against that? I supposed if the duel could be worked into some kind of pizza-eating contest I might have a shot, but somehow I didn't think that the Pizza Spress Hungry Man Special was on the list of approved weaponry.

I checked the clock and frowned. Dawn was only minutes away, and Bob wasn't back yet. Bob was a spirit being, a spirit of intellect from one of the more surreal corners of the Nevernever. He wasn't evil as much as he was magnificently innocent of any kind of morality, but as a spirit, daylight was a threat to him as surely as it was to the vampires of the Red Court. If he got caught out in it, it could kill him.

Dawn was about two minutes off before Bob returned, flowing down the ladder and toward the skull.

Something was wrong.

Bob's manifestation of a candle flame-colored cloud of swirling lights bobbed drunkenly left and right on its way back to the shelf with the skull. Purple globs of glowing plasm dribbled from the cloud in a steady trail,

striking the floor, where they winked out into blobs of transparent goo. The cloud flowed into the skull, and after a moment, faint violet flames appeared in the skull's empty eye sockets.

"Ow," Bob said, his voice tired.

"Hell's bells," I muttered. "Bob, you all right?"

"No."

Bob? Monosyllabic? Crap. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No," Bob said, faintly. "Rest."

"But—"

"Report," Bob said. "Have to."

Right. He'd been sent out on a mission and he was feeling pressured to finish it. "What happened?"

"Wards," Bob said. "Marccone's."

I felt my mouth fall open. "What?"

"Wards," Bob repeated.

I sat down on my stool. "How the hell did Marccone get wards?"

Bob's tone became a shade contemptuous. "Magic?"

The insult relieved me a little. If he was able to be a wiseass he'd probably be okay. "Could you tell who did the wards?"

"No. Too good."

Damn. A spell had to get up pretty early in the morning to get around Bob. Maybe he'd been hurt worse than I thought. "What about Ortega?"

"Rothchild," Bob said. "Half a dozen vamps with him. Maybe a dozen mortals."

Bob's eyelights flickered and guttered. I couldn't risk losing Bob by pushing him too hard—and spirit or not, he wasn't immortal. He wasn't afraid of bullets or knives, but there were things that could kill him. "Good enough for now," I said. "Tell me the rest later. Get some sleep."

Bob's eyelights flickered out without another word.

I frowned at the skull for a while and then shook my head. I collected my potion bottles, cleaned up the work area, and turned to leave and let Bob get some rest.

I was leaning over the wardflames to blow them out when the green candle hissed and shrank to a pinpoint of light. The yellow candle beside it flared up without warning, brighter than an incandescent lightbulb.

My heart started pounding and nervous fear danced over the back of my neck.

Something was approaching my apartment. That's what it meant when the flame spread from the green to the yellow candle. Warning spells I had threaded out to a couple of blocks from my house had sensed the approach of supernatural hostility.

The yellow candle dimmed, and the red candle exploded into a flame the size of my head.

Stars and stones. The intruder that had triggered the warning system the wardflames were linked to was getting closer; and it was something big. Or else a lot of somethings. They were heading in fast to set off the red candle so quickly, only a few dozen yards from my house.

I dashed up the ladder from the lab and got ready to fight.

Chapter Ten

I got up the ladder in time to hear a car door shut outside my apartment. I'd lost my .357 during a battle between the Faerie Courts hosted on clouds over Lake Michigan the previous midsummer, so I'd moved my .44 from the office to home. It hung on a gun belt on a peg beside the door, just over a wire basket I'd attached to the wall. Holy water, a couple cloves of garlic, vials of salt, and iron filings filled the basket, intended to be door prizes for anything that showed up in an attempt to suck my blood, carry me off to faerieland, or sell me stale cookies.

The door itself was reinforced steel, and could stand up to punishment better than the wall around it. I'd had a demon come a-knocking before, and I didn't want an encore performance. I couldn't afford new furniture, even secondhand.

I belted on the gun, shook out my shield bracelet, and took up my staff and blasting rod. Anything that came through my door would have to contend with my threshold, the aura of protective energy around any home. Most supernatural things didn't do so well with thresholds. After that, they'd have to force their way past my wards—barriers of geometrically aligned energy that would block out physical or magical intrusion, turning that energy back upon its source. A small, gentle push at my wards would result in a similar push against whatever was trying to get in. A swift or heavy push would result in more energy feeding back onto the attacker. Within the wards were sigils of fire and ice, which were designed to deliver bursts of destructive energy about as powerful as your average land mine.

It was a solid and layered defense. With luck, it should be enough to stop a considerable amount of threat from even reaching my door.

And since I'm such a lucky guy, I took a deep breath, pointed my blasting rod at the door, and waited.

It didn't take long. I expected flashes of magical discharge, demon howls, maybe some kind of pyrotechnics as evil magic clashed against my own defensive spells. Instead I got seven polite knocks.

I peered at the door suspiciously and then asked, "Who's there?"

A low, rough man's voice growled, "The Archive."

What the hell. "The Archive who?"

Evidently the speaker didn't have a sense of humor. "The Archive," the voice repeated firmly. "The Archive has been appointed emissary in this dispute, and is here to speak to Wizard Dresden about the duel."

I frowned at the door. I vaguely remembered mention of an Archive of some sort during the last White Council meeting I'd attended, as a neutral party. At the time, I'd assumed it had been some sort of arcane library. I'd had other things on my mind at the time, and I hadn't been listening too closely. "How do I know who you are?"

There was a rasp of paper on stone, and an envelope slid under my door, one corner poking out. "Documentation, Wizard Dresden," the voice replied. "And a pledge to abide by the laws of hospitality during this visit."

Some of the tension left my shoulders, and I lowered the gun. That was one good thing about dealing with the supernatural community. If something gave you its word, you could trust it. Within reason.

Then again, maybe that was just me. Of all the things I'd encountered, I'd been more of a weasel about keeping my word than any of them. Maybe that's why I was leery about trusting someone else.

I picked up the envelope and unfolded a sheet of plain paper certifying that its bearer had been approved by the White Council to act as emissary in the matter of the duel. I passed my hand over it and muttered a quick charm with the last password I'd gotten from the Wardens, and in response a brief glowing pentacle appeared centered on the paper like a bioluminescent watermark. It was legit.

I folded the paper closed again, but I didn't set my rod and staff aside just yet. I undid the dead bolt, muttered my wards back, and opened the door enough to see outside.

A man stood on my doorstep. He was nearly as tall as me but looked a lot more solid, with shoulders wide enough to make the loose black jacket he wore fit tightly on his upper arms. He wore a navy blue shirt and stood so that I could see the wrinkles caused by the straps of a shoulder rig. A black ball cap reined in dark golden hair that might have fallen to his shoulders. He hadn't shaved in a few days, and had a short, white scar below his mouth that highlighted the cleft in his chin. His eyes were grey-blue and

empty of any expression in a way I had seldom seen. Not like he was hiding what he felt. More like there was simply nothing there.

“Dresden?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I eyed him up and down. “You don’t look very Archive-esque.”

He lifted his eyebrows, a mildly interested expression. “I’m Kincaid. You’re wearing a gun.”

“Only when company comes over.”

“I haven’t seen any of the Council’s people carrying a gun. Good for you.” He turned and waved his hand. “This shouldn’t take long.”

I glanced past him. “What do you mean?”

A second later, a little girl started down my stairs, one hand carefully on the guide rail. She was adorable, maybe seven years old, her blond hair still baby-fine and straight, clipped neatly at her shoulders and held back with a hairband. She wore a plain little corduroy dress with a white blouse and shiny black shoes, and her coat was a puffy down-filled jacket that seemed like a bit of overkill for the weather.

I looked from the kid to Kincaid and said, “You can’t be bringing a child into this.”

“Sure I can,” Kincaid said.

“What, couldn’t you find a baby-sitter?”

The child stopped a couple of steps up so that her face was even with my own and said, her voice serious and marked with a faint British accent, “He *is* my baby-sitter.”

I felt my eyebrows shoot up.

“Or more accurately my driver,” she said. “Are you going to let us in? I prefer not to remain outdoors.”

I stared at the kid for a second. “Aren’t you a little short for a librarian?”

“I am not a librarian,” the child said. “I am the Archive.”

“Hang on a minute,” I said. “What do you—”

“I am the Archive,” the child said, her voice steady and assured. “I assume that your wards detected my presence. They seemed functional.”

“*You?*” I said. “You’ve got to be kidding.” I extended my senses gingerly toward her. The air around her fairly hummed with power, different from what I would expect around another wizard, but strong all the same, a quiet and dangerous buzz like that around high-tension power lines.

I had to suppress a sudden rush of apprehension from showing on my face. The girl had power. She had a hell of a lot of power. Enough to make

me wonder if my wards would be enough to stop her if she decided to come through them. Enough to make me think of little Billy Mumy as the omnipotent brat on that old episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

She regarded me with implacable blue eyes I suddenly did not want to take the chance of looking into. "I can explain it to you, wizard," she said. "But not out here. I have neither an interest nor an inclination to do you any harm. Perhaps the opposite."

I frowned at her. "Promise?"

"Promise," the child said solemnly.

"Cross your heart and hope to die?"

She drew an X over her puffy jacket with one index finger. "You don't know how much."

Kincaid took a couple of steps up and glanced warily around the street. "Make up your mind, Dresden. I'm not keeping her out here for long."

"What about him?" I asked the Archive, and nodded toward Kincaid. "Can he be trusted?"

"Kincaid?" the girl asked, her voice whimsical. "Can you be trusted?"

"You're paid up through April," the man replied, his eyes still scanning the street. "After that I might get a better offer."

"There," the girl said to me. "Kincaid can be trusted until April. He's an ethical man, in his way." She shivered and put her hands into the pockets of her puffy coat. She hunched up her shoulders and watched my face.

Generally speaking, my instincts about people (who weren't women who might potentially end up doing adult things with me) were pretty good. I trusted the Archive's promise. Besides, she was darling and looked like she was starting to get cold. "Fine," I said. "Come inside."

I stepped back and opened the door. The Archive came in and told Kincaid, "Wait with the car. Come fetch me in ten minutes."

Kincaid frowned at her, and then me. "You sure?"

"Quite." The Archive stepped in past me, and started taking off her coat. "Ten minutes. I want to head back before rush hour begins."

Kincaid fixed his empty eyes on me and said, "Be nice to the little girl, wizard. I've handled your kind before."

"I get more threats before nine a.m. than most people get all day," I responded, and shut the door on him. Purely for effect, I locked it too.

Me, petty? Surely not.

I lit a couple of candles in order to get a little more light into the living room and stirred up the fire, adding more wood to it as soon as the embers were glowing. While I did, the Archive took off her coat, folded it neatly over the arm of one of my lumpy comfy chairs, and sat down, back straight, hands folded in her lap. Her little black shoes waved back and forth above the floor.

I frowned at her. It's not like I don't like kids or anything, but I hadn't had much experience with them. Now I had one sitting there wanting to talk to me about a duel. How the hell did a child, no matter how large her vocabulary, manage to get appointed an emissary?

"So, uh. What's your name?"

She said, "The Archive."

"Yeah, I got that part. But I meant your name. What people call you."

"The Archive," she repeated. "I do not have a familiar name. I am the Archive, and have always been the Archive."

"You're not human," I said.

"Incorrect. I am a seven-year-old human child."

"With no name? Everybody has a name," I said. "I'm can't go around calling you the Archive."

The girl tilted her head to one side, arching a pale gold eyebrow. "Then what would you call me?"

"Ivy," I said at once.

"Why Ivy?" she asked.

"You're the Archive, right? Arch-ive. Arch-ivy. Ivy."

The girl pursed her lips. "Ivy," she said, and then nodded slowly. "Ivy. Very well." She regarded me for a moment and then said, "Go ahead and ask the question, wizard. We might as well get it out of the way."

"Who are you?" I asked. "Why are you called the Archive?"

Ivy nodded. "The thorough explanation is too complex to convey to you here. But in short, I am the living memory of mankind."

"What do you mean, the living memory?"

"I am the sum of human knowledge, passed down from generation to generation, mother to daughter. Culture, science, philosophy, lore, tradition. I hold the accumulated memories of a thousand generations of mankind. I take in all that is written and spoken. I study. I learn. That is my purpose, to procure and preserve knowledge."

"So you're saying that if it's been written down, you know it?"

“I know it. I understand it.”

I sat down slowly on the couch, and stared at her. Hell’s bells. It was almost too much to comprehend. Knowledge is power, and if Ivy was telling me the truth, she knew more than anyone alive. “How did you get this gig?”

“My mother passed it on to me,” she replied. “As I was born, just as she received it when she was born.”

“And your mother lets a mercenary drive you around?”

“Certainly not. My mother is dead, wizard.” She frowned. “Not dead, technically. But all that she knew and was came into me. She became an empty cup. A persistent vegetative state.” Her eyes grew a little wistful, distant. “She’s free of it. But she certainly isn’t alive in the most vital sense.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I wouldn’t know why. I know my mother. And all before her.” She put a finger to her temple. “It’s all in here.”

“You know how to use magic?” I asked.

“I prefer calculus.”

“But you can do it.”

“Yes.”

Yikes. If the reaction of my wards was any indication, it meant that she was at least as strong as any Wizard of the White Council. Probably stronger. But if that was true...

“If you know that much,” I said, “if you are that powerful, why did you hire a bodyguard to bring you here?”

“My feet don’t reach the pedals.”

I felt like smacking myself on the forehead. “Oh, right.”

Ivy nodded. “In preparation for the duel, I will need some information. Namely, where I might contact your second and what weapon you prefer for the duel.”

“I don’t have a second yet.”

Ivy arched an eyebrow. “Then you have until sundown this evening to gain one. Otherwise the match, and your life, will be forfeit.”

“Forfeit? Uh, how would the forfeit be collected?”

The little girl stared at me for a silent moment. Then she said, “I’ll do it.”

I swallowed, a cold chill rippling over me. I believed her. I believed that she could, and I believed that she would. “Um. Okay. Look, I haven’t exactly chosen a weapon yet, either. If I—”

“Simply choose one, Mister Dresden. Will, skill, energy, or flesh.”

“Wait,” I said. “I thought I got to pick swords or guns or something.”

Ivy shook her head. “Read your copy of the Accords. I choose what is available, and I choose the ancient ways. You may match wills with your opponent to gauge which of you is the most determined. You may match your skill at arms against his, each of you with weaponry of your individual choosing. You may wield energy forces against each other. Or you may challenge him to unarmed combat.” She considered. “I would advise against the last.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. “I’ll take magic. Energy.”

“You realize, of course, that he will decline in that venue and you will be forced to choose another.”

I sighed. “Yeah. But until he does, I don’t have to pick another one, right?”

“Indeed,” Ivy acknowledged.

There was a knock on the door, and I got up to open it. Kincaid nodded to me, then leaned in and said, “Ten minutes.”

“Thank you, Kincaid,” Ivy said. She rose, drew a business card from her pocket, and passed it to me. “Have your second call this number.”

I took the card and nodded. “I will.”

Just then, Mister emerged from my bedroom and lazily arched his back. Then he padded over to me and rubbed his shoulder against my shin by way of greeting.

Ivy blinked and looked down at Mister, and her child’s face was suddenly suffused with a pure and uncomplicated joy. She said, “Kitty!” and immediately knelt down to pet Mister. Mister apparently liked her. He started purring louder, and walked around Ivy, rubbing up against her while she petted him and spoke to him quietly.

Hell’s bells. It was adorable. She was just a kid.

A kid who knew more than any mortal alive. A kid with a scary amount of magical power. A kid who would kill me if I didn’t show up to the duel. But still a kid.

I glanced up at Kincaid, who stood frowning down at Ivy fawning all over Mister. He shook his head and muttered, “Now, that’s just creepy.”

Chapter Eleven

Ivy seemed reluctant to leave off petting Mister, but she and Kincaid left without further conversation. I shut the door after them and leaned on it, listening with my eyes closed until they'd gone. I didn't feel as tired as I should have. Probably because I had a wealth of experience that suggested I would get a lot more worn out before I got a real chance to rest.

Mister rubbed up against my legs until I'd leaned down to pet him, after which he promptly walked over to his food bowl, ignoring me altogether. I grabbed a Coke from the icebox while he ate, absently pouring a bit onto a saucer and leaving it on the floor by Mister. By the time I'd finished it, I'd made up my mind about what I had to do next.

Make phone calls.

I called the number Vincent had left for me first. I expected to reach an answering service, but to my surprise Vincent's voice, tense and anxious, said, "Yes?"

"It's Harry Dresden," I said. "I wanted to check in with you."

"Ah, yes, just a moment," Vincent said. I heard him say something, caught a bit of conversation in the background, and then heard him walking and a door shut behind him. "The police," he said. "I've been working with them throughout the evening."

"Any luck?" I asked.

"God only knows," Vincent said. "But from my perspective, it seems the only thing accomplished is deciding which department is going to handle the investigation."

"Homicide?" I guessed.

Vincent's tired voice became dry. "Yes. Though the mind boggles at the chain of logic that led to it."

"Election year. City management is politicking," I said. "But once you start dealing with the actual police personnel, you should be all right. There are good people in every department."

"One hopes. Have you found anything?"

“I’ve got a lead. I don’t know how good. The thieves might be on a small craft in the harbor. I’m heading down there presently.”

“Very well,” Vincent said.

“If the lead is good, do you want me to call CPD?”

“I’d rather you contacted me first,” Vincent said. “I am still uncertain of how much trust to place in the local police. I cannot help but think it must have been the reason the thieves fled here—that they possessed some contact or advantage with the local authorities. I’d like as much time as possible to decide whom to trust.”

I frowned and thought about Marcone’s flunkies taking a shot at me. Chicago PD had an unfair reputation for corruption, thanks in part to the widespread mob activity during Prohibition. It was inaccurate, but people were people, and people aren’t immune to being bought. Marcone had attained police-only information with disturbing speed before. “Might be smart. I’ll check it out and let you know. Shouldn’t be more than an hour or two.”

“Very good. Thank you, Mister Dresden. Is there anything else?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I should have thought of this last night. Do you have any pieces of the Shroud?”

“Pieces?” Vincent asked.

“Scraps or threads. I know that many samples were analyzed back in the seventies. Do you have access to any of those pieces?”

“Very possibly. Why?”

I had to remind myself that Vincent seemed to be largely a nonbeliever in the supernatural, so I couldn’t come out and say that I wanted to use thaumaturgy to track down the Shroud. “To confirm identification when I find it. I don’t want to get foxed with a decoy.”

“Of course. I’ll make a call,” Vincent said. “Get a sample FedExed here. Thank you, Mister Dresden.”

I said good-bye, hung up, and stared at the phone for a minute. Then I took a deep breath and dialed Michael’s number.

Even though the sky was barely light with morning, the phone rang only once before a woman’s voice said, “Hello?”

This was my nightmare. “Oh. Uh, hello, Charity. It’s Harry Dresden.”

“Hi!” the voice said brightly. “This isn’t Charity though.”

So maybe it wasn’t my nightmare. It was my nightmare’s oldest daughter. “Molly?” I asked. “Wow, you sound all grown-up now.”

She laughed. “Yeah, the breast fairy came to visit and everything. Did you want to talk to my mom?”

Some might find it significant that it took me a second to realize she wasn’t being literal about the faerie. Sometimes I hate my life. “Well, um. Is your dad around?”

“So you *don’t* want to talk to Mom, check,” she said. “He’s working on the addition. Let me get him.”

She set the phone down and I heard footsteps walking away. In the background, I could hear recorded children’s voices singing, the rattle of plates and forks, and people talking. Then there was a rustling sound, and a thump as the handset on the other end must have fallen to the floor. Then I heard the sound of heavy, squishy breathing.

“Harry,” sighed another voice from what must have been the same room. She sounded much like Molly but less cheerful. “No, no, honey, don’t play with the phone. Give that to me, please.” The phone rattled some more, the woman said, “Thank you, sweetie,” and then she picked up the phone and said, “Hello? Anyone there?”

For a second I was tempted to remain silent, or possibly try to imitate a recording of the operator, but I steeled myself against that. I didn’t want to let myself get rattled. I was pretty sure that Charity could smell fear, even over the phone. It could trigger an attack. “Hello, Charity. It’s Harry Dresden. I was calling to speak to Michael.”

There was a second of silence during which I couldn’t help but imagine the way Michael’s wife’s eyes must have narrowed. “I suppose it was inevitable,” she said. “Naturally if there is a situation so dangerous as to require all three of the Knights, you come crawling out of whatever hole you live in.”

“Actually, this is sort of unrelated.”

“I assumed it was. Your idiocy tends to strike at the worst possible place and time.”

“Oh, come on, Charity, that’s not fair.”

Growing anger made her voice clearer and sharper, if no louder. “No? At the one time in the last year that Michael most needs to be focused on his duty, to be alert and careful, you arrive to distract him.”

Anger warred with guilt for dominance of my reaction. “I’m trying to help.”

“He has scars from the last time you helped, Mister Dresden.”

I felt like slamming the receiver against the wall until it broke, but I restrained myself again. I couldn't stop the anger from making my words bite, though. "You're never going to give me an inch, are you?"

"You don't deserve an inch."

I said, "Is that why you named your son after me?"

"That was Michael," Charity said. "I was still on drugs, and the paperwork was done when I woke up."

I kept my voice calm. Mostly. "Look, Charity. I'm real sorry you feel the way you do, but I need to talk to Michael. Is he there or not?"

The line clicked as someone else picked up another extension and Molly said, "Sorry, Harry, but my dad isn't here. Sanya says he went out to pick up some doughnuts."

"Molly," Charity said, her voice hard. "It's a school day. Don't dawdle."

"Uh-oh," Molly said. "I swear, it's like she's telepathic or something."

I could almost hear Charity grinding her teeth. "That isn't funny, Molly. Get off the line."

Molly sighed and said, "Surrender, Dorothy," before she hung up. I choked on a sudden laugh, and tried to turn it into a series of coughs for Charity's benefit.

From the tone of her voice, she hadn't been fooled. "I'll give him a message."

I hesitated. Maybe I should ask to wait for him to return. There wasn't any love lost between Charity and myself, and if she didn't pass word along to Michael, or if she delayed before telling him, it could mean my death. Michael and the other Knights were busy with their pursuit of the Shroud, and God only knew if I'd be able to get in touch with him again today. On the other hand, I had neither the time nor the attention to spare to sit there butting heads with Charity until Michael returned.

Charity had been unreservedly hostile to me for as long as I had known her. She loved her husband ferociously, and feared for his safety—especially when he worked with me. In my head, I knew that her antagonism wasn't wholly without basis. Michael had been busted up several times when teamed up with me. During the last such outing, a bad guy gunning for me had nearly killed Charity and her unborn child, little Harry. Now she worried about the consequences that might be visited on her other children as well.

I knew that. But it still hurt.

I had to make a decision—to trust her or not. I decided to do it. Charity might not like me, but she was no coward and no liar. She knew Michael would want her to tell him.

“Well, Mister Dresden?” Charity asked.

“Just let him know that I need to talk to him.”

“Regarding?”

For a second, I debated passing Michael my tip on the Shroud. But Michael believed that I was going to get killed if I got involved. He took protecting his friends seriously, and if he knew that I was poking around he might be inclined to knock me unconscious and lock me in a closet now and apologize later. I decided against it.

“Tell him that I need a second by sundown tonight or bad things will happen.”

“To who?” Charity asked.

“Me.”

She paused, then said, “I’ll give him your message.”

And then she hung up on me.

I hung up the phone, frowning. “That pause wasn’t significant,” I told Mister. “It doesn’t mean that she was chewing over the thought of intentionally getting me killed in order to protect her husband and children.”

Mister regarded me with that mystic-distance focus in his feline eyes. Or maybe that was the look he got when his brain waves flatlined. Either way, it was neither helpful nor reassuring.

“I’m not worried,” I said. “Not one bit.”

Mister’s tail twitched.

I shook my head, got my stuff together, and headed out to investigate the lead at the harbor.

Chapter Twelve

When I first came to Chicago I thought of a harbor as a giant bowl of ocean with ships and boats in the foreground and the faded outline of the buildings on the far side in the background. I had always imagined political subversives dressed up as tribal natives and a huge hit in the profit margin of the East India Company.

Burnham Harbor looked like the parking lot of an oceangoing Wal-Mart. It might have been able to hold a football field or three. White wharves stretched out over the water with pleasure boats and small fishing vessels in rows within a placid oval of water. The scent of the lake was one part dead fish, one part algae-coated rock, and one part motor oil. I parked in the lot up the hill from the harbor, got out, and made sure I had my equipment with me. I wore my force ring on my right hand and my shield bracelet on my left wrist, and my blasting rod thumped against my leg where I had tied it to the inside of my leather duster. I'd added a can of self-defense spray to my arsenal, and I slipped it into my pants pocket. I would rather have had my gun, but toting it around in my pocket was a felony. The pepper spray wasn't.

I locked up the car and felt a sudden, slithering pressure on my back—my instincts' way of screaming that someone was watching me. I kept my head down, my hands in my pockets, and walked toward the harbor. I didn't rubberneck around, but I tried to get a look at everything while moving only my eyes.

I didn't see anyone, but I couldn't shake the impression that I was being observed. I doubted it was anyone from the Red Court. The morning hadn't reached full brightness yet, but it was still light enough to parboil a vampire. That didn't rule out any number of other flavors of assassin, though. And it was possible that if the thieves were here, they were keeping an eye on everyone coming and going.

All I could do was walk steadily and hope that whoever was watching me wasn't one of Marcone's thugs, a vampire groupie or a rent-a-gun aiming a

rifle at my back from several hundred yards away.

I found the *Etranger* in a few minutes, moored at a slip not far from the entrance. It was a pretty little ship, a white pleasure boat roomy enough to house a comfortable cabin. The *Etranger* wasn't new, but she looked neat and well cared for. A Canadian flag hung from a little stand on the ship's afterdeck. I moved on past the ship at a steady pace and Listened as I did.

Listening is a trick I'd picked up when I was a kid. Not many people have worked out the trick of it, blocking out all other sound in order to better hear one sound in particular—such as distant voices. It isn't as much about magic, I think, as it is focus and discipline. But the magic helps.

"Unacceptable," said a quiet, female voice in the *Etranger's* cabin. It was marked with a gentle accent, both Spanish and British. "The job entailed a great deal more expense than was originally estimated. I'm raising the price to reflect this, nothing more." There was a short pause, and then the woman said, "Would you like an invoice for your tax return then? I told you the quote was only an estimate. It happens." Another pause, and then the woman said, "Excellent. As scheduled, then."

I stared out at the lake, just taking in the view, and strained to hear anything else. Evidently the conversation was over. I checked around, but there weren't any people in sight moving around the harbor on a February weekday morning. I took a breath to steady myself, and moved closer to the ship.

I caught a glimpse of motion through a window in the cabin, and heard a chirping sound. A cell phone rested on a counter beside a pad of hotel stationery. A woman appeared in the window dressed in a long gown of dark silk, and picked up the cell phone. She answered it without speaking and a moment later said, "I'm sorry. You've the wrong number."

I watched as she put the phone down and casually let the nightgown slide to the floor. I watched a little more. I wasn't being a peeping Tom. This was professional. I noted that she had some intriguing curves. See? Professionalism in action.

She opened a door, and a bit of steam wafted out, the sound of the water growing louder. She stepped in and closed the door again, leaving the cabin empty.

I had an opportunity. I'd seen only one woman, and not well enough to positively identify her as either Anna Valmont or Francisca Garcia, the two remaining Churchmice. I hadn't seen the Shroud hanging from a laundry

line or anything. Even so, I had the feeling I'd come to the right place. My gut told me to trust my spiritual informer.

I made my decision and stepped up a short gangplank onto the *Etranger*.

I had to move fast. The woman on the ship might not be a fan of long showers. All I needed to do was get inside, see if I could find anything that might verify the presence of the Shroud, and get out again. If I moved quickly enough, I could get in and out without anyone the wiser.

I went down the stairs to the cabin with as much stealth as I could manage. The stairs didn't creak. I had to duck my head a bit when I stepped into the cabin. I stayed close to the door and checked around, listening to the patter of the water from the shower. The room wasn't large and didn't offer a bonanza of places to hide. A double bed took up nearly a quarter of the space in the room. A tiny washing machine and dryer were stacked one on another in a corner, a basket of laundry stowed atop them. A counter and kitchenette with a couple of small refrigerators used up most of the rest.

I frowned. Two fridges? I checked them out. The first was stocked with perishables and beer. The second was a fake, and opened onto a cabinet containing a heavy metal strongbox. Bingo.

The shower kept running. I reached out to pick up the strongbox, but a thought struck me. The Churchmice may have gotten themselves into a lot of trouble, but they'd evidently been good enough to avoid Interpol for a number of years. The hiding place for the strongbox was too clumsy, too obvious. I shut the fake fridge and looked around the room. I was starting to get nervous. I couldn't have much time left to find the Shroud and get out.

Of course. I took a couple of long steps to the washer and dryer and grabbed the laundry basket. I found it under several clean, fluffy towels, an opaque plastic package a little larger than a folded shirt. I touched it with my left hand. A tingling sensation pulsed against my palm, and the hairs along my arm rose up straight.

"Damn, I'm good," I muttered. I picked up the Shroud and turned to go.

A woman stood behind me, dressed in black fatigue pants, a heavy jacket, and battered combat boots. Her peroxide-blond hair was cut very short, but it did nothing to detract from the appeal of her features. She was elegantly pretty and pleasant to look at.

The gun she had pointed at my nose wasn't pretty, though. It was an ugly old .38 revolver, a cheap Saturday-night special.

I was careful not to move. Even a cheap gun can kill you, and I doubted I could raise a shield in time to do me any good. She'd taken me off guard. I'd never heard her coming, never sensed her presence.

"Damn, I'm good," the woman echoed, her accent high British, a touch of amusement in her voice. "Put the package down."

I held it out to her. "Here."

I wouldn't have tried for the gun, but if she stepped closer to me it might show that she was an amateur. She wasn't, and remained standing out of grab range. "On the counter, if you please."

"What if I don't?" I said.

She smiled without humor. "In that case, I'll have a dreary day of chores dismembering the body and cleaning up the blood. I'll leave it up to you."

I put the package on the counter. "Far be it from me to inconvenience a lady."

"What a dear boy you are," she said. "That's a very nice coat. Take it off. Slowly, if you please."

I slipped out of the coat and let it fall to the floor. "You tricked me onto the boat," I said. "That second phone call was you, telling your partner to draw me in."

"The shocking thing is that you fell for it," the woman said. She kept giving directions and she knew what she was doing. I leaned forward and put my hands against the wall while she patted me down. She found the pepper spray and took it, along with my wallet. She made me sit down on the floor on my hands while she took my coat and stepped back.

"A stick," she said, looking at my blasting rod. "How very preneolithic of you."

Aha. A professional she might be, but she was a straight. She didn't believe in the supernatural. I wasn't sure if that was going to help or hurt. It might mean that she would be a little less eager to shoot me. People who know what a wizard can do get really nervous if they think the wizard is about to try a spell. On the other hand, it meant that I didn't have either the support of the rest of the Council or the threat of my own retribution to use as leverage. I decided it was best to act like a normal for the time being.

The blonde laid my coat on the counter and said, "Clear."

The door to the bathroom opened, and the woman I'd heard before came out. She now wore a knit fabric dress the color of dark wine, and a couple of combs held her hair back from her face. She wouldn't stand out in a

crowd but she wasn't unattractive. "He's not Gaston," she said, frowning at me.

"No," said the blonde. "He was here for the merchandise. He was just about to leave with it."

The dark-haired woman nodded and asked me, "Who are you?"

"Dresden," I said. "I'm a private investigator, Ms. Garcia."

Francisca Garcia's features froze, and she traded a look with the gun-wielding blond. "How did you know my name?"

"My client told me. You and Ms. Valmont could be in a lot of trouble."

Anna Valmont kicked the wall and spat, "Bollocks." She glared at me, gun steady on me despite her outburst. "Are you working with Interpol?"

"Rome."

Anna looked at Francisca and said, "We should scrub this sale. It's falling apart."

"Not yet," Francisca said.

"There's no point in waiting."

"I'm not leaving yet," the dark-haired woman said, her eyes hard. "Not until he gets here."

"He isn't coming," Anna said. "You know he isn't."

"Who?" I asked.

Francisca said, "Gaston."

I didn't say anything. Evidently Francisca could read faces well enough that I didn't have to. She stared at me for a moment and then closed her eyes, the blood draining from her face. "Oh. Oh, *Dio*."

"How?" Anna said. The gun never wavered. "How did it happen?"

"Murder," I said quietly. "And someone set it up to point the police at Chicago."

"Who would have done that?"

"Some bad people after the Shroud. Killers."

"Terrorists?"

"Not that playful," I said. "As long as you have the Shroud, your lives are in danger. If you come with me, I can get you to some people who will protect you."

Francisca shook her head and blinked her eyes a couple of times. "You mean the police."

I meant the Knights, but I knew darn well what their stance would be on what to do with the thieves once any supernatural peril was past. "Yeah."

Anna swallowed and looked at her partner. Something around her eyes softened with concern, with sympathy. The two of them weren't solely partners in crime. They were friends. Anna's voice softened as she said, "Cisca, we have to move. If this one found us, others may not be far behind."

The dark-haired woman nodded, her eyes not focused on anything. "Yes. I'll get ready." She rose and stepped across the cabin to the washing machine. She drew out a pair of gym bags and put them on the counter, over the package. Then she slipped into some shoes.

Anna watched for a moment and then said to me, "Now. We can't have you running to the police to tell them everything. I wonder what to do with you, Mister Dresden. It really does make a great deal of sense to kill you."

"Messy, remember? You'd have that dreary day," I pointed out.

That got a bit of a smile from her. "Ah, yes. I'd forgotten." She reached into her pocket and drew out a pair of steel handcuffs. They were police quality, not the naughty fun kind. She tossed them to me underhand. I caught them. "Put one on your wrist," she said. I did. "There's a ring on that bulkhead. Put the other through it and lock the cuffs."

I hesitated, watching Francisca slip into a coat, her expression still blank. I licked my lips and said, "You don't know how much danger you two are in, Ms. Valmont. You really don't. Please let me help you."

"I think not. We're professionals, Mister Dresden. Thieves we might be, but we do have a work ethic."

"You didn't see what they did to Gaston LaRouche," I said. "How bad it was."

"When isn't death bad? The bulkhead, Mister Dresden."

"But—"

Anna lifted the gun.

I grimaced and lifted the cuffs to a steel ring protruding from the wall beside the stairs.

As a result, I was looking up them to the ship's deck when the second Denarian in twelve hours came hurtling down the stairway straight toward me.

Chapter Thirteen

I only saw it coming out of the corner of my eye, and I barely had time to register the movement and lunge as far as I could to one side. The demon went by me in a blur of rustling, metallic whispers, carrying the scent of lake water and dried blood. Neither of the Churchmice screamed, though whether this was intention or a by-product of surprise I couldn't tell.

The demon was more or less human, generally speaking, and disturbingly female. The lines of curvy hips swept down to legs that were oddly hinged, back-jointed like a lion's. She had skin of metallic green scales, and her arms ended in four-fingered, metallic-clawed hands. Like the demon form of Ursiel, she had two sets of eyes, one luminescent green, one glowing cherry red, and a luminous sigil burned at the center of her forehead.

Her hair was long. I mean like fifteen feet long, and looked like the demented love child of Medusa and Doctor Octopus. It had seemingly been cut in one-inch strips from half a mile of sheet metal. It writhed around her like a cloud of living serpents, metallic strands thrusting into the walls and the floor of the ship, supporting her weight like a dozen additional limbs.

Anna recovered from the surprise first. She already had a gun out and ready, but she hadn't been trained in how to use it in real combat. She pointed the gun more or less at the Denarian and emptied it at her in the space of a panicked breath. Since I was a couple of feet behind the demon, I flopped to one side as best I could, stayed low, and prayed to avoid becoming collateral damage.

The demon flinched once, maybe taking a hit, before it shrieked and twisted its shoulders and neck. A dozen metallic ribbons of writhing hair lashed across the room. One of them hit the gun itself, and metal shrieked as the demon tendril slashed clean through the gun's barrel. Half a dozen more whipped toward Anna's face, but the blond thief had reflexes fast enough to get her mostly out of the way. A tendril wrapped around Anna's ankle, jerked, and sent the woman sprawling to the floor, while another

lashed across her belly like a scalpel, cutting through her jacket and sprinkling the cabin with fine drops of blood.

Francisca stared at the thing for a second, her eyes huge and surrounded by white. Then she jerked open a drawer in the tiny galley, pulled out a heavy cutting knife, and lunged at the Denarian, blade flickering. It bit into the demon's arm and drew a furious shriek that did not sound at all human from her throat. The Denarian spun, silvery blood glistening on her scaly skin, and ripped one claw in a sweeping arch. The demon's claws sliced into Francisca's forearm, drawing blood. The knife tumbled to the ground. Francisca cried out and reeled back, into one of the walls.

The Denarian, eyes burning, whipped her head in a circle, the motion boneless, unnerving. Too many tendrils for me to count lanced across the room and slammed into Francisca Garcia's belly, thrusting like knives. She let out a choking gasp, and stared down at her wounds as several more tendrils thrust through her. They made a thunking sound as they hit the wooden wall of the cabin.

The demon laughed. It was a quick, breathless, excited laugh, the kind you expect from a nervous teenage girl. Her face twisted into a feral smile, showing a mouthful of metallic-seeming teeth, and both sets of eyes glowed brightly.

Francisca whispered, "Oh, my Gaston." Then her head bowed, dark hair falling about her face in a veil, and her body relaxed. The demon shivered and the tendril-blades whipped out of her, the last foot or so of each soaked in scarlet. The tendrils lashed about in a sort of mad excitement, and more droplets of blood appeared everywhere. Francisca slumped down to the floor, blood beginning to soak her dress, and fell limply onto her side.

Then the Denarian's two sets of eyes turned to me, and a swarm of razor-edged tendrils of her hair came whipping toward me.

I had already begun to ready my shield, but when I saw Francisca fall a surge of fury went coursing through me, filling me from toes to teeth with scarlet rage. The shield came together before me in a quarter-dome of blazing crimson energy, and the writhing tendrils slammed against it in a dozen flashes of white light. The Denarian shrieked, jerking back, and the attacking tendrils went sailing back across the cabin with their ends scorched and blackened.

I looked around wildly for my blasting rod, but it wasn't where Anna had left it when she took it from me. The pepper spray was, though. I grabbed it

and faced the Denarian in time to see her raise her clawed hand. A shimmer in the air around her fingers threw off a prismatic flash of color, and with a flash of light from the upper set of eyes, the demoness drove her fist at my shield.

She hit the shield hard, and she was incredibly strong. The blow drove me back against a wall, and when the heat-shimmer of power touched my scarlet shield, it fractured into shards of light that went flying around the cabin like the sparks from a campfire. I tried to get to one side, away from the demon's vicious strength, but she snarled and strands of hair punched into the hull on either side of me, caging me. The Denarian reached for me with her claws.

I shouted a panicked battle cry and gave her the pepper spray full in the face, right into both sets of eyes.

The demoness screamed again, twisting her face away, ruining the tendril-cage, the human eyes squeezing shut over a sudden flood of tears. The glowing demon-eyes did not even blink, and a sweep of the Denarian's arm fetched me a backhanded blow that sent me sprawling and made me see stars.

I got back to my feet, terrified at the notion of being caught helpless on the ground. The Denarian seemed able to blow off my magic with a bit of effort, and she was deadly in these confined quarters. I didn't think I could get up the stairs without her tearing me apart. Which meant I had to find another way to get the demon away.

The Denarian swiped a clawed hand at her eyes and snarled in mangled, throaty English, "You will pay for that."

I looked up to see that Anna had dragged herself across the floor to the fallen Francisca, and knelt over her, shielding the other woman from the Denarian with her body. Her face was white with pain, or shock, or both—but she shot me a glance and then jerked her head toward the far side of the cabin.

I followed her gaze and got her drift. As the Denarian recovered and blinked watery, murderous eyes at me, I lunged toward the far side of the room and shouted, "Get it out of the fridge! They must not have it!"

The Denarian spat out what I took to be an oath, and I felt that lionlike foot land in the middle of my back, flattening me to the floor, claws digging into my skin. She stepped over me, past me, and her tendrils tore open the real fridge, taking the door from its hinges before slithering inside

and knocking everything within to the floor. She hadn't quite finished with the first fridge before her hair had gone on to tear open the dummy fridge, and dragged out the steel strongbox.

While the Denarian did that, I looked wildly around the cabin, and spotted my blasting rod on the floor. I rolled, my back burning with pain, and grabbed the blasting rod. Calling up fire within the tiny cabin was a bad idea—but waiting around for the Denarian to murder me with her hairdo was even worse.

She stood up with the strongbox just as I began channeling energy into the blasting rod. Its carved runes began to burn with golden radiance and the tip of the rod suddenly gleamed with red light and wavered with hot-air shimmer.

The Denarian crouched, demonic limbs too long, feminine shape disturbingly attractive, red light gleaming on her metallic-green scales. Her hair writhed in a hissing mass, striking sparks as one edge rasped against another. Violent lust burned in both sets of eyes for a second, and then she turned away. Her hair tore the cabin's ceiling apart like papier-mâché, and using her hair, an arm, and one long leg, she swarmed out of the ship's cabin. I heard a splash as she hit the water, taking the strongbox with her.

"What was that?" stammered Anna Valmont, clutching Francisca's limp form to her. "What the bloody hell was that?"

I didn't drop the blasting rod or look away from the hole in the roof, because I didn't think the Denarian was the sort to leave a lot of people alive behind her. The end of the blasting rod was wavering drunkenly. "How is she?"

I watched the hole in the ceiling for several shaking breaths until Anna said, her voice barely audible, "She's gone."

A stabbing feeling went through my belly, sharp and hot. Maybe I'm some kind of Neanderthal for thinking so, but it hurt me. A minute ago, Francisca Garcia had been talking, planning, grieving, breathing. Living. She'd been killed by violence, and I couldn't stand the thought of things like that happening to a woman. It wouldn't have been any less wrong had it happened to a man, but in my gut it wasn't the same. "Dammit," I whispered. "How are you? Can you walk?"

Before she could answer, the ship lurched and leaned to one side. There was a wrenching, snapping roar and the rushing sound of water. Icy cold ran over my ankles and began to rise.

“The hull’s breached,” Anna said. “We’re taking on water.”

I headed for the stairway, blasting rod up, to make sure it was clear. “Can you get out?”

Light exploded behind my eyes and I dropped to my hands and knees at the bottom of the stairway. Anna had slugged me with something. A second burst of light and pain drove my head far enough down to splash some cold water against my forehead. I dimly saw Anna’s foot kick my blasting rod away from me. Then she picked up the Shroud in its package from the counter, and tore off the top sheet of the hotel memo pad. I saw that she had blood on her jacket, soaked through, and staining her fatigue pants down to the top of her left leg. She grabbed my coat, wincing, and one of the duffel bags. She put my leather duster on, covering the blood. The water had filled the cabin almost to the tops of her combat boots.

I tried to get my wits together, but something was keeping me from doing much besides focusing my eyes. I knew that I needed to leave, but I couldn’t get the message from my head to my arms and legs.

Anna Valmont stepped past me and went up the stairs. She stopped about halfway up, spat out another curse, and came back down them enough to reach down and splash cold water into my face. The shock jump-started something in my body, and I coughed, my head spinning, and started to move again. I’d been too drunk to stand up a time or two, but even then I’d been more capable than I was at that moment.

The blond thief grabbed my arm and half hauled me up a couple of stairs, her face twisted in pain. I desperately held on to that momentum, struggling up another stair even after she stopped pulling.

She kept going up the stairs and didn’t look back as she said, “I’m only doing this because I like your coat, Dresden. Don’t come near me again.”

Then she padded up out of the cabin and disappeared with the Shroud.

My head had started to throb and swell, but it was clearing rapidly also. But evidently I wasn’t all that bright even when fully conscious, because I staggered back down into the ship’s cabin. Francisca Garcia’s corpse had fallen onto its side, glassy eyes staring, mouth slightly open. One of her cheeks had been half-covered by water. There were still the tracks of tears on the other one. The water around her was a cloudy, brownish pink.

My stomach heaved and the anger that came with it nearly sent me to the floor again. Instead, I sloshed through the freezing water to the counter. I picked up the cell phone there, and the blank memo pad. I hesitated over

Francisca. She didn't deserve to have her body swallowed by the lake like a discarded beer bottle.

My balance wobbled again. The water had begun to rise more quickly. It covered my shins already, and I couldn't feel my feet for the cold. I tried to lift her body, but the effort brought a surge of pain to my head and I almost threw up.

I settled the body back down, unable to even curse coherently, and made do with gently closing her eyes with one hand. It was all I could do for her. The police would find her, of course, probably within a few hours.

And if I didn't get moving, they'd find me too. I couldn't afford to spend a night in the pokey while I was interrogated, charged and awaiting bail, but what else was new. I'd get in touch with Murphy as soon as I could.

I folded my arms against the growing cold, hugging the memo pad and cell phone to my chest, and slogged out of the bloody water of the *Etranger's* cabin and onto the deck. I had to make a short jump up to the dock. A couple of people were on the sidewalk above the little harbor, staring down, and I saw a couple of folks out on the decks of their ships, also staring.

I ducked my head, thought inconspicuous thoughts, and hurried away before my morning could get any worse.

Chapter Fourteen

I've been clouted in the head a few times in my day. The bump Anna Valmont had given me was smaller than some, but my head pounded all the way home. At least my stomach settled down before I started throwing up all over myself. I shambled in, washed down a couple of Tylenol with a can of Coke, and folded some ice into a towel. I sat down by the phone, put the ice pack against the back of my head, and called Father Vincent.

The phone rang once. "Yes?"

"It's in town," I said. "The two Churchmice had it on a boat in Burnham Harbor."

Vincent's voice gained an edge of tension. "You have it?"

"Uh," I said. "Not strictly speaking, no. Something went wrong."

"What happened?" he demanded, his voice growing more frustrated, angrier. "Why didn't you call me?"

"A third party made a grab for it, and what do you think I'm doing right now? I had a shot to recover the thing. I took it. I missed."

"And the Shroud was taken from the thieves?"

"Thief, singular. Chicago PD is probably recovering the body of her partner right now."

"They turned on each other?"

"Not even. A new player killed Garcia. Valmont duped the third party into taking a decoy. Then she grabbed the real McCoy and ran."

"And you didn't see fit to follow her?"

My head pounded steadily. "She ran really fast."

Vincent was silent for a moment before he said, "So the Shroud is lost to us once more."

"For now," I said. "I might have another lead."

"You know where it has gone?"

I took in a deep breath and tried to sound patient. "Not yet. That's why it's called a lead and not a solution. I need that sample of the Shroud."

“To be frank, Mister Dresden, I did bring a few threads with me from the Vatican, but...”

“Great. Get one of them to my office and drop it off with security downstairs. They’ll hold it for me until I can pick it up. I’ll call you as soon as I have anything more definite.”

“But—”

I hung up on Vincent, and felt a twinge of vindictive satisfaction. ““You didn’t see fit to follow her,”” I muttered to Mister, doing my best to imitate Vincent’s accent. “I gotcher didn’t see fit to follow her. White-collar jerk. How about I ring your bell a few times, and then you can go say Mass or something.”

Mister gave me a look as if to say that I shouldn’t say such things about paying clients. I glared at him to let him know that I was well aware of it, got up, went into my bedroom, and rummaged in my closet until I found a stick of charcoal and a clipboard. Then I lit several candles on the end table next to my big comfy chair and settled down with the memo pad I’d taken from the *Etranger*. I brushed the stick of charcoal over it as carefully as I could, and hoped that Francisca Garcia hadn’t been using a felt tip.

She hadn’t. Faint white letters began to appear amidst the charcoal on the paper. It read *Marriott* on the first line and 2345 on the second.

I frowned down at the pad. Marriott. One of the hotels? It could have been someone’s last name, too. Or maybe some kind of French word. *No, don’t make it more complicated than it has to be, Harry*. It probably meant the hotel. The number appeared to be military time for a quarter to midnight. Maybe even a room number.

I glared at the note. It didn’t tell me enough. Even though I may have had the time and place, I didn’t know where and when.

I looked at the cell phone I’d taken. I knew as much about cell phones as I did about gastrointestinal surgery. There were no markings on the case, not even a brand name. The phone was off, but I didn’t dare turn it on. It would probably stop working. Hell, it would probably explode. I would need to ask Murphy to see what she could find out when I talked to her.

My head kept pounding and my eyes itched with weariness. I needed rest. The lack of sleep was making me sloppy. I shouldn’t have chanced going onto the ship in the first place, and I should have been more careful about watching my back. I’d had a gut instinct someone was watching me,

but I had been too tired, too impatient, and I'd nearly gotten myself shot, impaled, concussed, and drowned as a result.

I headed into the bedroom, set my alarm clock for a couple hours after noon, and flopped down on my bed. It felt obscenely good.

Naturally it didn't last.

The phone rang and I gave serious thought to blasting it into orbit, where it could hang around with Asteroid Dresden. I stomped back into the living room, picked up the phone, and snarled, "What."

"Oh, uh," said a somewhat nervous voice on the other end. "This is Waldo Butters. I was calling to speak to Harry Dresden."

I moderated my voice to a mere snarl. "Oh. Hey."

"I woke you up, huh?"

"Some."

"Yeah, late nights suck. Look, there's something odd going on and I thought maybe I could ask you something."

"Sure."

"Sullen monosyllabism, a sure sign of sleep deprivation."

"Eh."

"Now descending into formless vocalization. My time is short." Butters cleared his throat and said, "The germs are gone."

"Germs?" I asked.

"In the samples I took from that body. I ran all the checks again just to be sure, and better than half of them turned up negative. Nothing. Zip, zero."

"Ungh," I said.

"Okay, then, Caveman Og. Where germs go?"

"Sunrise," I said. "Poof."

Butter's voice sounded bewildered. "Vampire germs?"

"The tiny capes are a dead giveaway," I said. I started pulling my train of thought into motion at last. "Not vampire germs. Constructs. See, at sunrise it's like the whole magical world gets reset to zero. New beginnings. Most spells don't hold together through even one sunrise. And it takes a lot to make them last through two or three."

"Magic germs?" Butters asked. "Are you telling me I've got magic germs?"

"Magic germs," I confirmed. "Someone called them up with magic."

"Like an actual magic spell?"

“Usually you call nasty hurtful spells a curse. But by tomorrow or the next day, those other samples will probably have zeroed out too.”

“Are they still infectious?”

“Assume they are. They’re good as real until the energy that holds them together falls apart.”

“Christ. You’re serious. It’s for real.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Is there a book or a Cliff’s Notes or something on this stuff?”

I actually smiled that time. “Just me. Anything else?”

“Not much. I swept the body for genetic remains but got nothing. The cuts on the corpse were made with either a surgical scalpel or some other kind of small, fine blade. Maybe a utility knife.”

“I’ve seen cuts like that before, yeah.”

“Here’s the best part. The same blade evidently took off the hands and head. The cuts are cleaner than a surgeon could manage on an operating table. Three single cuts. The heat from it half cauterized parts of the wounds. So what kind of tool can cut fine, precise lines and cleave through bones too?”

“Sword?”

“Have to be one hell of a sharp sword.”

“There’s a few around like that. Any luck identifying the victim?”

“None. Sorry.”

“’S okay.”

“You want to know if anything changes?”

“Yeah. Or if you see anyone else come in like that guy.”

“God forbid, will do. You find anything on that tattoo?”

“Called the Eye of Thoth,” I said. “Trying to narrow down exactly who uses it around here. Oh, give Murphy a call. Let her know about those samples.”

“Already did. She’s the one who told me to keep you in the loop. I think she was heading toward sleep too. Would she want me to wake her up to talk to you?”

I talked through a yawn. “Nah, it can wait. Thanks for the call, Butters.”

“No trouble,” he said. “Sleep is god. Go worship.”

I grunted, hung up the phone, and didn’t get to take the second step toward my bed when someone knocked at the door.

“I need one of those trapdoors,” I muttered to Mister. “I could push a button and people would fall screaming down a wacky slide thing and land in mud somewhere.”

Mister was far too mature to dignify that with a response, so I kept a hand near my gift rack as I opened the door a crack and peeked out.

Susan tilted her head sideways and gave me a small smile. She was wearing jeans, an old tee, a heavy grey fleece jacket, and sunglasses. “Hi,” she said.

“Hi.”

“You know, it’s hard to tell through the door, but your eyes look sunken and bloodshot. Did you sleep last night?”

“What is this thing you speak of, ‘sleep’?”

Susan sighed and shook her head. “Mind if I come in?”

I stepped back and opened the door wider. “No scolding.”

Susan came in and folded her arms. “Always so cold in here in the winter.”

I had a couple suggestions on how to warm up, but I didn’t say them out loud. Maybe I didn’t want to see her response to them. I thought about what Murphy had said about setting up a talk. I got some more wood and stirred up the fireplace. “Want me to make some tea or something?”

She shook her head. “No.”

Susan never turned down a cup of hot tea. I tried, but I couldn’t keep a hard edge out of my voice. “Just going to dump me and run, then. Drive-by dumping.”

“Harry, that isn’t fair,” Susan said. I could hear the hurt in her voice, but only barely. I raked harder at the fire, making sparks fly up, though flames were already licking the new wood. “This isn’t easy for anyone.”

My mouth kept running without checking in with my brain. My heart maybe, but not my brain. I shot her a look over my shoulder and said, “Except for Captain Mediocrity, I guess.”

She raised both eyebrows. “Do you mean Martin?”

“Isn’t that what this is about?” A spark flipped out of the fire and landed on my hand, stinging. I yelped and pulled my hand away. I closed the heavy mesh curtain over the fire and put the poker away. “And before you say anything, I know damn well I’m being insane. And possessive. I know that we were quits before you left town. It’s been more than a year, and it’s been

hard on you. It's only natural for you to find someone. It's irrational and childish for me to be upset, and I don't care."

"Harry—" she began.

"And it's not as if you haven't been thinking about it," I continued. Somewhere I knew that I'd start choking on my foot if I kept shoving it in my mouth. "You kissed me. You *kissed* me, Susan. I know you. You meant it."

"This isn't—"

"I'll bet you don't kiss Snoozy Martin like that."

Susan rolled her eyes and walked to me. She sat down on the lintel of my little fireplace while I knelt before it. She cupped my cheek in one hand. She was warm. It felt good. I was too tired to control my reaction to the simple, gentle touch, and I looked back at the fire.

"Harry," she said. "You're right. I don't kiss Martin like that."

I pulled my cheek away, but she put her fingers on my chin and tugged my face back toward her. "I don't kiss him at all. I'm not involved with Martin."

I blinked. "You're not?"

She drew an invisible X over her heart with her index finger.

"Oh," I said. I felt my shoulders ease up a little.

Susan laughed. "Was that really worrying you, Harry? That I was leaving you for another man?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"God, you are a dolt sometimes." She smiled at me, but I could see the sadness in it. "It always shocked me how you could understand so many things and be such a complete idiot about so many others."

"Practice," I said. She looked down at me for a while, with that same sad smile, and I understood. "It doesn't change anything, does it?"

"Martin?"

"Yeah."

She nodded. "It doesn't change anything."

I swallowed a sudden frog in my throat. "You want it to be over."

"I don't *want* it," she said quickly. "But I think it's necessary. For both of us."

"You came back here to tell me that?"

Susan shook her head. "I don't have my mind set. I think it wouldn't be fair to do that without talking to you about it. We both have to make this

decision.”

I growled and looked back at the fire. “Would be a lot simpler if you just gave me the Dear John speech and left.”

“Simpler,” she said. “Easier. But not fair and not right.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I’ve changed,” Susan said. “Not just the vampire thing. There’s a lot that’s been happening in my life. A lot of things that I didn’t know.”

“Like what?”

“How dangerous the world is, for one,” she said. “I wound up in Peru, but I went all over South America, Central America. I couldn’t have imagined what things are like there. Harry, the Red Court is *everywhere*. There are whole villages out in the country supporting groups of them. Like cattle bred for the lord of the manor. The vampires feed on everyone. Addict them all.” Her voice hardened. “Even the children.”

My stomach twitched unpleasantly. “I hadn’t ever heard that.”

“Not many know.”

I mopped a hand over my face. “God. Kids.”

“I want to help. To do something. I’ve found where I can help down there, Harry. A job. I’m going to take it.”

Something in my chest hurt, a literal pain. “I thought this was our decision.”

“I’m coming to that,” she said.

I nodded. “Okay.”

She slipped to the floor next to me and said, “You could come with me.”

Go with her. Leave Chicago. Leave Murphy, the Alphas, Michael. Leave a horde of problems—many of them ones I’d created for myself. I thought of packing up and heading out. Maybe fighting the good fight. Being loved again, held again. God, I wanted that.

But people would get hurt. Friends. Others who might be in my kind of danger and have no one to turn to.

I looked into Susan’s eyes and saw hope there for just a moment. Then understanding. She smiled, but it was somehow sadder than ever. “Susan —” I said.

She pressed a finger to my lips and blinked back tears. “I know.”

And then I understood. She knew because she was feeling the same way.

There are things you can’t walk away from. Not if you want to live with yourself afterward.

“Now do you understand?” she asked.

I nodded, but my voice came out rough. “Wouldn’t be fair. Not to either of us,” I said. “Not being together. Both of us hurting.”

Susan leaned her shoulder against mine and nodded. I put my arm around her.

“Maybe someday things will change,” I said.

“Maybe someday,” she agreed. “I love you. I never stopped loving you, Harry.”

“Yeah,” I said. I choked on the end of the word, and the fire went blurry. “I love you too. Dammit.” We sat there and warmed up in front of the fire for a couple of minutes before I said, “When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow,” she said.

“With Martin?”

She nodded. “He’s a coworker. He’s helping me move, watching my back. I have to put everything in order here. Pack some things from the apartment.”

“What kind of work?”

“Pretty much the same kind. Investigate and report. Only I report to a boss instead of to readers.” She sighed and said, “I’m not supposed to tell you anything else about it.”

“Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “Will I be able to reach you?”

She nodded. “I’ll set up a drop. You can write. I’d like that.”

“Yeah. Stay in touch.”

Long minutes after that, Susan said, “You’re on a case again, aren’t you?”

“Does it show?”

She leaned a little away from me, and I drew my arm back. “I smelled it,” she said, and stood up to add wood to the fire. “There’s blood on you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “A woman was killed about five feet away from me.”

“Vampires?” Susan asked.

I shook my head. “Some kind of demon.”

“Are you okay?”

“Peachy.”

“That’s funny, because you look like hell,” Susan said.

“I said no scolding.”

She almost smiled. “You’d be smart to get some sleep.”

“True, but I’m not all that bright,” I said. Besides, I didn’t have a prayer of falling asleep now, after talking to her.

“Ah,” she said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Don’t think so.”

“You need rest.”

I waved a hand at the stationery pad. “I will. I just have to run down a lead first.”

Susan folded her arms, facing me directly. “So do it after you get some rest.”

“There probably isn’t time.”

Susan frowned and picked up the pad. “Marriott. The hotel?”

“Dunno. Likely.”

“What are you looking for?”

I sighed, too tired to stick to my confidentiality guns very closely. “Stolen artifact. I think the note is probably about a site for the sale.”

“Who is the buyer?”

I shrugged.

“Lots of legwork, then.”

“Yeah.”

Susan nodded. “Let me look into this. You get some sleep.”

“It’s probably better if you don’t—”

She waved a hand, cutting me off. “I want to help. Let me do this for you.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I guess I could relate. I knew how much I’d wanted to help her. I couldn’t. It had been tough to handle. It would have been a relief to me to have done her some good, no matter how small it was.

“All right,” I said. “But just the phone work. Okay?”

“Okay.” She copied down the word and the number on a sheet she tore from the bottom of the memo pad and turned toward the door.

“Susan?” I said.

She paused without turning to look back at me.

“Do you want to get dinner or something? Before you go, I mean. I want to, uh, you know.”

“Say good-bye,” she said quietly.

“Yeah.”

“All right.”

She left. I sat in my apartment, in front of the fire, and breathed in the scent of her perfume. I felt cold, lonely, and tired. I felt like a hollowed-out husk. I felt as if I had failed her. Failed to protect her to begin with, failed to cure her after the vampires had changed her.

Change. Maybe that's what this was really about. Susan had changed. She'd grown. She was more relaxed than I remembered, more confident. There had always been a sense of purpose to her, but now it seemed deeper, somehow. She'd found a place for herself, somewhere where she felt she could do some good.

Maybe I should have gone with her after all.

But no. Part of the change was that she felt hungrier now, too. More quietly sensual, as if every sight and sound and touch in the room was occupying most of her attention. She'd smelled drops of blood on my clothing and it had excited her enough to make her move away from me.

Another change. She had an instinctive hunger for my blood. And she could throw vampires twenty feet through the air. She sure as hell wouldn't have any trouble tearing my throat out in an intimate moment if her control slipped.

I washed my face mechanically, showered in my unheated shower, and went shivering to my bed. The routine hadn't helped me. It only delayed me from facing the harshest truth of my relationship with Susan.

She had left Chicago.

Probably for good.

That was going to hurt like hell in the morning.

Chapter Fifteen

I had bad dreams.

They were the usual fare. Flames devoured someone who screamed my name. A pretty girl spread her arms, eyes closed, and fell slowly backward as dozens of fine cuts opened all over her skin. The air became a fine pink spray. I turned from it, into a kiss with Susan, who drew me down and tore out my throat with her teeth.

A woman who seemed familiar but whom I did not recognize shook her head and drew her hand from left to right. The dream-scenery faded to black in the wake of her motion. She turned to me, dark eyes intent and said, “You need to rest.”

Mickey Mouse woke me up, my alarm jangling noisily, his little hand on two and the big hand on twelve. I wanted to smack the clock for waking me up, but I reined in the impulse. I’m not against a little creative violence now and then, but you have to draw the line somewhere. I wouldn’t sleep in the same room with a person who would smack Mickey Mouse.

I got up, got dressed, left a message for Murphy, another for Michael, fed Mister, and hit the road.

Michael’s house did not blend in with most of the other homes in his neighborhood west of Wrigley Field. It had a white picket fence. It had elegant window dressings. It had a tidy front lawn that was always green, even in the midst of a blazing Chicago summer. It had a few shady trees, a lot of well-kept shrubberies, and if I had found a couple of deer grazing on the lawn or drinking from the birdbath, it wouldn’t have surprised me.

I got out of the Beetle, holding my blasting rod loosely in my right hand. I opened the gate, and a few jingle bells hanging on a string tinkled happily. The gate swung shut on a lazy spring behind me. I knocked on the front door and waited, but no one answered. I frowned. Michael’s house had never been empty before. Charity had at least a couple kids who weren’t old enough to be in school yet, including the poor little guy they’d named after me. Harry Carpenter. How cruel is that?

I frowned at the cloud-hazed sun. Weren't the older kids getting out of school shortly? Charity had some kind of maternal obsession with never allowing her kids to come home to an empty house.

Someone should have been there.

I got a sick, twisty feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I knocked again, put my ear against the door, and Listened. I could hear the slow tick of the old grandfather clock in the front room. The heater cycled on for a moment, and the vents inside whispered. There were a few sounds when a bit of breeze touched the house, the creaks of old and comfortable wood.

Nothing else.

I tried the front door. It was locked. I stepped back off the porch, and followed the narrow driveway to the back of the property.

If the front of the Carpenter home would have qualified for *Better Homes and Gardens*, the back would have been fit for a Craftsman commercial. The large tree centered on the back lawn cast lots of shade in the summer, but with the leaves gone I could see the fortresslike tree house Michael had built for his kids in it. It had finished walls, an actual window, and guardrails anywhere anyone could possibly have thought about falling. The tree house had a porch that overlooked the yard. Hell, I didn't have a porch. It's an unfair world.

A big section of the yard had been bitten off by an addition connected to the back of the house. The foundation had been laid, and there were wooden beams framing what would eventually be walls. Heavy contractor's plastic had been stapled to the wooden studs to keep the wind off the addition. The separate garage was closed, and a peek in the window showed me that it was pretty well filled with lumber and other construction materials.

"No cars," I muttered. "Maybe they went to Mc-Donald's. Or church. Do they have church at three in the afternoon?"

I turned around to go back to the Beetle. I'd leave a Michael a note. My stomach fluttered. If I didn't get a second for the duel, it was likely to be a bad evening. Maybe I should ask Bob to be my second. Or maybe Mister. No one dares to mess with Mister.

Something rattled against the metal gutters running the length of the back of the house.

I jumped like a spooked horse and scrambled away from the house, toward the garage at the back of the yard so that I could get a look at the

roof. Given that in the past day or so no less than three different parties had taken a poke at me, I felt totally justified in being on edge.

I got to the back of the yard, but couldn't see the whole roof from there, so I clambered up into the branches, then took a six-foot ladder up to the main platform of the tree house. From there, I could see that the roof was empty.

I heard brisk, somewhat heavy footsteps below me, and beyond the fence at the back of the little yard. I froze in place in the tree house, Listening.

The heavy footsteps padded up to the fence at the back of the yard, and I heard the scrape of chain link dragging against dry leaves and other late-winter detritus. I heard a muted grunt of effort and a long exhalation. Then the footsteps came to the base of the tree.

Leather scraped against a wooden step, and the tree shivered almost imperceptibly. Someone was climbing up.

I looked around me but the ladder was the only way down, unless I felt like jumping. It couldn't have been more than nine or ten feet down. Odds were I could land more or less in one piece. But if I misjudged the jump I could sprain an ankle or break a leg, which would make running away both impractical and embarrassing. Jumping would have to be a last resort.

I gathered in my will and settled my grip on my blasting rod, pointing it directly at where the ladder met the platform. The tip of the blasting rod glowed with a pinpoint of bright red energy.

Blond hair and the top half of a girl's angelic young face appeared at the top of the ladder. There was a quiet gasp and her blue eyes widened. "Holy crap."

I jerked the tip of the blasting rod up and away from the girl, releasing the gathered energy. "Molly?"

The rest of the girl's face appeared as she climbed on up the ladder. "Wow, is that an acetylene torch or something?"

I blinked and peered more closely at Molly. "Is that an earring in your eyebrow?"

The girl clapped her fingers over her right eyebrow.

"And your *nose*?"

Molly shot a furtive look over her shoulder at the house, and scrambled the rest of the way up to the tree house. As tall as her mother, Molly was all coltish legs and long arms. She wore a typical private-school uniform of

skirt, blouse, and sweater—but it looked like she'd been attacked by a lech with razor blades where fingers should have been.

The skirt was essentially slashed to ribbons, and underneath it she wore black tights, also torn to nigh indecency. Her shirt and sweater had apparently endured the Blitz, but the bright red satin bra that peeked out from beneath looked new. She had on too much makeup. Not as bad as most kids too old to play tag but too young to drive, but it was there. She wore a ring of fine gold wire through one pale gold eyebrow, and a golden stud protruded from one side of her nose.

I worked hard not to smile. Smiling would have implied that I found her outfit amusing. She was young enough to be hurt by that kind of opinion, and I had a vague memory of being that ridiculous at one time. Let he who hath never worn parachute pants cast the first stone.

Molly clambered in and tossed a bulging backpack down on the wooden floor. "You lurk in tree houses a lot, Mister Dresden?"

"I'm looking for your dad."

Molly wrinkled up her nose, then started removing the stud from it. I didn't want to watch. "I don't want to tell you how to investigate stuff, but generally speaking you won't find him in tree houses."

"I came over, but no one answered the door when I knocked. Is that normal?"

Molly took out the eyebrow ring, dumped the backpack out onto the floorboards, and started sorting out a long skirt with a floral print, a T-shirt, and a sweater. "It is on errands day. Mom loads up the sandcrawler with all the little snot-nosed Jawas and goes all over town."

"Oh. Do you know when she's due back?"

"Anytime," Molly said. She hopped into the skirt, and wriggled out of the tattered skirt and tights in that mystifyingly modest way that girls always seem to manage to acquire sometime in their teens. The shirt and pink sweater went on next, and the ripped up sweater and, to my discomfort, the bright red bra came out from under the conservative clothes and got tucked back into the backpack.

I turned my back on the girl as well as I could in the limited space. The link of handcuff Anna Valmont had slapped onto my wrist chafed and pinched. I scratched at it irritably. You'd think I'd been cuffed enough times that I should have gotten myself a key by now.

Molly took a wet-wipe from somewhere and started peeling the makeup from her face. “Hey,” she asked a minute later. “What’s wrong?”

I grunted and waved my wrist vaguely, swinging the cuff around.

“Hey, neat,” Molly said. “Are you on the lam? Is that why you’re hiding in a tree house, so the cops won’t find you?”

“No,” I said. “It’s kind of a long story.”

“Ohhhh,” Molly said wisely. “Those are fun-time handcuffs, not bad-time handcuffs. I gotcha.”

“No!” I protested. “And how the hell would you know about fun-time handcuffs anyway? You’re like ten.”

She snorted. “Fourteen.”

“Whatever, too young.”

“Internet,” she said sagely. “Expanding the frontiers of adolescent knowledge.”

“God, I’m old.”

Molly clucked and dipped into the backpack again. She grabbed my wrist firmly, shook out a ring of small keys, and started trying them in the lock of the cuffs. “So give me the juicy details,” she said. “You can say ‘bleep’ instead of the fun words if you want.”

I blinked. “Where the bleep did you get a bunch of cuff keys?”

She looked up at me and narrowed her eyes. “Think about this one. Do you *really* want to know?”

I sighed. “No. Probably not.”

“Cool,” she said, and turned her attention back to the handcuffs. “So stop dodging the issue. What’s up with you and Susan?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I like romance. Plus I heard Mom say that you two were a pretty hot item.”

“Your mom said that?”

Molly shrugged. “Sorta. As much as she ever would. She used words like ‘fornication’ and ‘sin’ and ‘infantile depravity’ and ‘moral bankruptcy.’ So are you?”

“Morally bankrupt?”

“A hot item with Susan.”

I shrugged and said, “Not anymore.”

“Don’t move your wrist.” Molly fiddled with one key for a moment before discarding it. “What happened?”

“A lot,” I said. “It’s complicated.”

“Oh,” Molly said. The cuffs clicked and loosened and she beamed up at me. “There.”

“Thanks.” I rubbed my sore wrist and put the cuffs in my coat pocket.

Molly bent over and picked up a piece of paper. She read it and said, “Ask Michael about duel? Whiskey and tobacco?”

“It’s a shopping list.”

Molly frowned. “Oh.” She was quiet for a moment and then asked, “So was it the vampire thing?”

I blinked at the girl again. “Was there a PBS special or something? Is there some kind of unauthorized biography of my life?”

“I snuck downstairs so I could listen to Dad tell Mom what had happened.”

“Do you eavesdrop on every private conversation you can?”

She rolled her eyes and sat down on the edge of the platform, her shoes waving in the air. “No one says anything interesting in a public conversation, do they? Why did you guys split up?”

I sat down next to her. “Like I said. It was complicated.”

“Complicated how?”

I shrugged. “Her condition gives her...an impulse-control problem,” I said. “She told me that strong emotions and uh, other feelings, are dangerous for her. She could lose control and hurt someone.”

“Oh,” Molly said, and scrunched up her nose again. “So you can’t make a play for her or—”

“Bad things could happen. And then she’d be a full vampire.”

“But you both want to be together?” Molly asked.

“Yeah.”

She frowned. “God, that’s sad. You want to be with her but the sex part —”

I shuddered. “Ewg. You are far too young to say that word.”

The girl’s eyes shone. “What word? Sex?”

I put my hands over my ears. “Gah.”

Molly grinned and enunciated. “But the *bleep* part would make her lose control.”

I coughed uncomfortably, lowering my hands. “Basically. Yeah.”

“Why don’t you tie her up?”

I stared at the kid for a second.

She lifted her eyebrows expectantly.

“What?” I stammered.

“It’s only practical,” Molly stated firmly. “And hey, you’ve already got the handcuffs. If she can’t move while the two of you are bleeping, she can’t drink your blood, right?”

I stood up and started climbing down the ladder. “This conversation has become way too bleeping disturbing.”

Molly laughed at me and followed me back to the ground. She unlocked the back door with another key, presumably from the same ring, and that was when Charity’s light blue minivan turned into the driveway. Molly opened the door, darted into the house, and returned without her backpack. The minivan ground to a halt and the engine died.

Charity got out of the van, frowning at me and at Molly in more or less equal proportions. She wore jeans, hiking boots, and a heavy jacket. She was a tall woman, only an inch or so under six feet, and carried herself with an assurance that conveyed a sense of ready strength. Her face had the remote beauty of a marble statue, and her long blond hair was knotted behind her head.

Without being told, Molly went to the rolling side panel door, opened it, and reached inside, unloading children from safety seats, while Charity went to the rear of the van and opened the rear doors. “Mister Dresden,” she said. “Lend a hand.”

I frowned. “Uh. I’m sort of in a hurry. I was hoping to find Michael here.”

Charity took a twenty-four-pack of Coke from the van in one arm and a couple of bulging paper grocery sacks in the other. She marched over to me and shoved them at my chest. I had to fumble to catch them, and my blasting rod clattered to the ground.

Charity waited until I had the sacks before heading for the van again. “Put them on the table in the kitchen.”

“But—” I said.

She walked past me toward the house. “I have ice cream melting, meat thawing, and a baby about to wake up hungry. Put them on the table, and we’ll talk.”

I sighed and looked glumly at the groceries. They were heavy enough to make my arms burn a little. Which probably isn’t saying much. I don’t spend much time working out.

Molly appeared from the van, lowering a tiny, tow-headed girl to the driveway. She was wearing a pink dress with a clashing orange sweater and bright purple shoes and a red coat. She walked up to me and said, words edged with babyish syllables, "My name is Amanda. I'm five and a half and my daddy says I'm a princess."

"I'm Harry, Your Highness," I said.

She frowned and said, "There's already a Harry. You can be Bill." With that, she broke into a flouncing skip and followed her mother into the house.

"Well, I'm glad that's settled," I muttered. Molly lowered an even smaller blond girl to the driveway. This one was dressed in blue overalls with a pink shirt and a pink coat. She held a plush dolly in one arm and a battered-looking pink blanket in the other. Upon seeing me, she retreated a couple of steps and hid around the corner of the van. She leaned out to look at me once, and then hid again.

"I've got him," said an accented male voice.

Molly hopped out of the van, grabbed a grocery bag from the back, and said, "Come on, Hope." The little girl followed her big sister like a duckling while Molly went into the house, but Hope glanced back at me shyly three or four times on the way.

Shiro emerged from the van carrying a baby seat. The little old knight carried the walking stick that concealed his sword on a strap over one wide shoulder, and his scarred hands held the chair carefully. A boy, probably not yet two years old, slept in it.

"Little Harry?" I asked.

"Yes, Bill," Shiro said. His eyes sparkled behind his glasses

I frowned and said, "Good-looking kid."

"Dresden!" snapped Charity's voice from the house. "You're holding the ice cream."

I scowled and told Shiro, "Guess we'd better get in."

Shiro nodded wisely. I took the groceries into the Carpenters' big kitchen and put them on the table. For the next five minutes, Shiro and Molly helped me carry in enough groceries to feed a Mongol horde.

After all the perishables got put away, Charity fixed a bottle of formula and passed it off to Molly, who took it, the diaper bag, and the sleeping boy into another room. Charity waited until she had left, then shut the door. "Very well," she said, still putting groceries away. "I haven't spoken to

Michael since you called this morning. I left a message with his cell phone voice mail.”

“Where is he?” I asked.

Shiro laid his cane on the table and sat down. “Mister Dresden, we have asked you not to get involved in this business.”

“That isn’t why I’m here,” I said. “I just need to talk to him.”

“Why are you looking for him?” Shiro asked.

“I’m dueling a vampire under the Accords. I need a second before sundown or I get disqualified. Permanently.”

Shiro frowned. “Red Court?”

“Yeah. Some guy named Ortega.”

“Heard of him,” Shiro said. “Some kind of war leader.”

I nodded. “That’s the rumor. That’s why I’m here. I had hoped Michael would be willing to help.”

Shiro stroked a thumb over the smooth old wood of his cane. “We received word of Denarian activity near St. Louis. He and Sanya went to investigate.”

“When will they get back?”

Shiro shook his head. “I do not know.”

I looked at the clock and bit my lip. “Christ.”

Charity walked by with an armload of groceries and glared at me.

I lifted my hands. “Sorry. I’m a little tense.”

Shiro studied me for a moment, and then asked, “Would Michael help him?”

Charity’s voice drifted out of the cavernous walk-in pantry. “My husband is sometimes an idiot.”

Shiro nodded and said, “Then I will assist you in his stead, Mister Dresden.”

“You’ll what?” I asked.

“I will be your second in the duel.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. “I mean, I’ll figure out something.”

Shiro lifted an eyebrow. “Have the weapons been set for the duel?”

“Uh, not yet,” I said.

“Then where is the meeting with the emissary and your opponent’s second?”

I fished out the card I’d gotten from the Archive. “I don’t know. I was told to have my second call this number.”

Shiro took the card and rose without another word, heading for the phone in the next room.

I put my hand on his arm and said, “You don’t need to take any chances. You don’t really know me.”

“Michael does. That is enough for me.”

The old Knight’s support was a relief, but I felt guilty, somehow, for accepting it. Too many people had been hurt on my behalf in the past. Michael and I had faced trouble together before, looked out for each other before. Somehow, it made it easier for me to go to him and ask for help. Accepting the same thing from a stranger, Knight of the Cross or not, grated on my conscience. Or maybe on my pride.

But what choice did I have?

I sighed and nodded. “I just don’t want to drag someone else into more trouble with me.”

Charity muttered, “Let me think. Where have I heard that before?”

Shiro smiled at her, the expression both paternal and amused, and said, “I’ll make the call.”

I waited while Shiro made a call from the room that served as the family study and the office for Michael’s contracting business. Charity stayed in the kitchen and wrestled a huge Crock-Pot onto the counter. She got out a ton of vegetables, stew meat, and a spice rack and set to chopping things up without a word to me.

I watched her quietly. She moved with the kind of precision you see only in someone who is so versed at what they are doing that they are already thinking of the steps coming twenty minutes in the future. I thought she took her knife to the carrots a little more violently than she needed to. She started preparing another meal somewhere in the middle of making the stew, this one chicken and rice and other healthy things I rarely saw in three dimensions.

I fidgeted for a bit, until I stood up, washed my hands in the sink, and started cutting vegetables.

Charity frowned at me for a moment. She didn’t say anything. But she got a few more veggies out and put them down next to me, then collected what had been cut so far and pitched them into the Crock-Pot. A couple of minutes later she sighed, opened a can of Coke, and put it on the counter next to me.

“I worry about him,” she said.

I nodded, and focused on cucumbers.

"I don't even know when he'll be home tonight."

"Good thing you have a Crock-Pot," I said.

"I don't know what I would do without him. What the children would do. I'd feel so lost."

What the hell. An ounce of well-intentioned but irrational reassurance didn't cost anything. I took a sip of the Coke. "He'll be all right. He can handle himself. And he has Shiro and Sanya with him."

"He's been hurt three times, you know."

"Three?" I asked.

"Three. With you. Every time."

"So it's my fault." My turn to chop vegetables like teenagers in a slasher movie. "I see."

I couldn't see her face but her voice was, more than anything else, tired. "It isn't about blame. Or whose fault it is. All that matters is that when you're around, my husband, my children's father, gets hurt."

The knife slipped and I cut off a neat little slice of skin on my index finger. "Ow," I snarled. I slapped the cold water on in the sink and put my finger under it. You can't tell, with cuts like that, how bad they're going to be until you see how much you're leaking. Charity passed me a paper towel, and I examined the cut for a minute before wrapping the towel around it. It wasn't bad, though it hurt like hell. I watched my blood stain the paper towel for a minute and then I asked, "Why didn't you get rid of me, then?"

I looked up to see Charity frowning at me. There were dark circles under her eyes that I hadn't noticed before. "What do you mean?"

"Just now," I said. "When Shiro asked you if Michael would help me. You could have said no."

"But he would have helped you in an instant. You know that."

"Shiro didn't."

Her expression became confused. "I don't understand."

"You could have lied."

Her face registered comprehension, and some fire came back into her eyes. "I don't like you, Mister Dresden. I certainly don't care enough for you to abandon beliefs I hold dear, to use you as an excuse to cheapen myself, or to betray what my husband stands for." She stepped to a cabinet

and got out a small, neat medical kit. Without another word, she took my hand and the paper towel and opened the kit.

“So you’re taking care of me?” I asked.

“I don’t expect you to understand. Whether or not I can personally stand you, it has no bearing on what choices I make. Michael is your friend. He would risk his life for you. It would break his heart if you came to grief, and I will not allow that to happen.”

She fell silent and doctored the cut with the same brisk, confident motions she’d used for cooking. I hear that they make disinfectants that don’t hurt these days.

But Charity used iodine.

Chapter Sixteen

Shiro came out of the office and showed me an address written on a piece of paper. “We meet them tonight at eight.”

“After sundown,” I noted. “I know the place. I’ll pick you up here?”

“Yes. I will need a little time to prepare.”

“Me too. Around seven.” I told them good-bye and headed for the door. Charity didn’t answer me but Shiro did. I got into my car. More kids came pelting into the house as I did, two boys and a girl. The smaller of the two boys stopped to peer at my car, but Charity appeared in the door and chivied him inside. She frowned at me until I coaxed the Blue Beetle to life and pulled out.

Driving home left me with too much time to think. This duel with Ortega was something I had no way to prepare for. Ortega was a warlord of the Red Court. He’d probably fought duels before. Which meant that he’d killed people before. Hell, maybe even wizards. I’d squared off against various toughs but that had been free-for-all fighting. I had been able to find ways to cheat, by and large. In a one-on-one duel, I wasn’t going to be able to fall back on cleverness, to take advantage of whatever I could find in my environment.

This was going to be a straight fight, and if Ortega was better than me, he’d kill me. Simple as that. The fear was simple, too. Simple and undeniable.

I swallowed, and my knuckles turned white. I tried to relax my fingers but they wouldn’t. They were too afraid to let go of the wheel. Stupid fingers.

I got back to my apartment, pried my fingers off the steering wheel, and found my door halfway open. I ducked to one side, in case someone had a gun pointed up the narrow stairway down to my apartment door, and drew out my blasting rod.

“Harry?” called a quiet, female voice from my apartment. “Harry, is that you?”

I lowered the blasting rod. "Murph?"

"Get inside," Murphy said. I looked down the stairway and saw her appear in the doorway, her face pale. "Hurry."

I came down the stairs warily, feeling out my wards as I did. They were intact, and I relaxed a little. I had given Murphy a personalized talisman that would let her through my defenses, and it would only have worked for her.

I slipped into my apartment. Murphy shut the door behind me and locked it. She'd started a fire in the fireplace and had one of my old kerosene lamps lit. I went to the fireplace and warmed up my hands, watching Murphy in silence. She stood with her back and shoulders rigid for a moment, before she came over to stand beside me, facing the fire. Her lips were held into a tense, neutral line. "We should talk."

"People keep saying that to me," I muttered.

"You promised me you'd call me in when you had something."

"Whoa, there, hang on. Who said I had anything?"

"There is a corpse on a pleasure ship in Burnham Harbor and several eyewitnesses who describe a tall, dark-haired man leaving the scene and getting into a multicolored Volkswagen Beetle."

"Wait a second—"

"There's been a *murder*, Dresden. I don't care how sacred client confidentiality is to you. People are dying."

Frustration made me clench my teeth. "I was going to tell you about it. It's been a really busy day."

"Too busy to talk to the police about a murder you may have witnessed?" Murphy said. "That is considered aiding and abetting a first-degree murder in some places. Like courts of law."

"This again," I muttered. My fingers clenched into fists. "I remember how this one goes. You slug me in the jaw and arrest me."

"I damn well should."

"Hell's bells, Murph!"

"Relax." She sighed. "If that was what I had in mind you'd be in the car already."

My anger evaporated. "Oh." After a moment, I asked, "Then why are you here?"

Murphy scowled. "I'm on vacation."

"You're what?"

Murphy's jaw twitched. Her words sounded a little odd, since she kept her teeth ground together while she talked. "I've been taken off the case. And when I protested I was told that I could either be on vacation or collecting unemployment."

Holy crap. The muckety-mucks at CPD had ordered Murphy off a case? But why?

Murphy answered the question I hadn't asked yet. "Because when Butters looked at the victim from the harbor, he determined that the weapon used to kill her and the one used on that victim you saw last night were the same."

I blinked. "What?"

"Same weapon," Murphy said. "Butters seemed pretty confident about it."

I turned that over in my head a few times, trying to shake out the kinks in the chains of logic. "I need a beer. You?"

"Yeah."

I went over to the pantry and grabbed a couple of brown bottles. I used an old bottle opener to take off the lids and took the drinks back to Murphy. She took her bottle in hand and eyed it suspiciously. "It's warm."

"It's the new recipe. Mac would kill me if he heard I served his brown cold." I took a pull from my bottle. The ale had a rich, full flavor, a little nutty, and it left a pleasant aftertaste lingering in the mouth. Make what jokes you will about trendy microbrews. Mac knew his stuff.

Murphy made a face. "Ugh. Too much taste."

"Wimpy American," I said.

Murphy almost smiled. "Homicide got wind that there was a link between the killing in Italy, the one here by the airport, and the one this morning. So they pulled strings and hogged the whole thing."

"How did they find out?"

"Rudolph," Murphy spat. "There's no way to prove anything but I'll bet you the little weasel heard me on the phone with Butters and ran straight over there to tell them."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Officially, yes. But in real life people are going to start accidentally losing reports and forms and requests if I try to file them. And when I tried to apply some pressure of my own, I got put down hard." She took another angry drink. "I could lose my job."

"That both sucks and blows, Murph."

“Tell me about it.” She frowned and looked up at my eyes briefly. “Harry. I want you to back off on this case. For your own sake. That’s why I came over here.”

I frowned. “Wait a minute. You mean people are threatening *you* with *me*? That’s a switch.”

“Don’t joke about it,” Murphy said. “Harry, you’ve got a history with the department, and not everyone thinks well of you.”

“You mean Rudolph.”

“Not just Rudolph. There are plenty of people who don’t want to believe you’re for real. Besides that, you were near the scene of and may have witnessed a felony. They could put you away.”

Obviously my life was too easy already. I swigged more beer. “Murph, cop, crook, or creature, it doesn’t matter. I don’t back off because some bully doesn’t like what I do.”

“I’m not a bully, Harry. I’m your friend.”

I winced. “And you’re asking me.”

She nodded. “Pretty please. With sugar.”

“With sugar. Hell, Murph.” I took a drink and squinted at her. “How much do you know about what’s going on?”

“I had some of the files taken away before I could read them.” She glanced up at me. “But I can read between the lines.”

“Okay,” I said. “This might take a little explaining.”

“You aren’t backing off, are you?”

“It isn’t an option.”

“Stop there then,” Murphy said. “The less you tell me, the less I can testify to.”

Testify? Hell. There should be some kind of rule about being forced to dodge several kinds of legal land mines at the same time. “This isn’t a friendly situation,” I said. “If straight cops go into it like it’s normal business, they’re going to get killed. I’d be really worried even if it were SI.”

“Okay,” Murphy said. She didn’t look happy. She drank her beer in a long pull and set the bottle on my mantel.

I put my hand on her shoulder. She didn’t snap it off at the wrist. “Murph. This looks bad already. I have a hunch it could get worse, fast. I have to.”

“I know,” she said. “I wish I could help.”

“Did you get the information on that cell phone?”

“No,” she said. But as she said it, she passed me a folded piece of paper. I unfolded it with my fingers and read Murphy’s printing: *Quebec Nationale, Inc, owner. No phone number. Address a P.O. box. Dead end.*

A dummy company, probably, I thought. The Churchmice could have it set up to do a lot of the buying and selling for them. Maybe dead Gaston had been from Quebec instead of France.

“Got it. Thanks, Murph.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Murphy said. She picked up her jacket from where she’d tossed it on my couch and shrugged into it. “There’s no APB out for you yet, Harry, but I’d be discreet if I were you.”

“Discreet. That’s me.”

“I’m serious.”

“Serious, yep.”

“Dammit, Harry.” But she smiled when she said it.

“You probably don’t want me to call you if I need help.”

She nodded. “Hell, no. That would be illegal. Keep your nose clean, walk the straight and narrow.”

“Okay.”

Murphy paused and asked, “I don’t think I’ve seen you without that coat outside of summer. Where’s your duster?”

I grimaced. “Missing in action.”

“Oh. You talk to Susan?”

I said, “Yeah.”

I felt Murphy’s eyes on my face. She got it without being told. “Oh,” she said again. “Sorry, Harry.”

“Thanks.”

“See you.” She opened my door, kept her hand near her gun, and then warily padded on out.

I shut my door after her and leaned against it. Murphy was worried. She wouldn’t have come to me in person if she weren’t. And she’d been extra careful with the legal stuff. Were things that dicey in the CPD?

Murphy was the first head of Special Investigations not to get her rear bounced onto the street after a token week or three of unsolvable cases. Generally speaking, when the administration wanted someone off the force, they’d get promoted to running SI. Or at least working in it. Every cop there had some kind of failing that had landed them what everyone else

considered to be a cruddy assignment. It had, by and large, created a strong sense of camaraderie among the SI officers, a bond only made tighter by the way they occasionally faced off with one kind of nightmarish creature or another.

SI cops had taken down several half-assed dark spellslingers, half a dozen vampires, seven or eight ravening trolls, and a demon that had manifested itself out of a mound of compost-heated garbage behind a pawnshop in Chinatown. SI could handle itself pretty well because they played careful, they worked together, and they understood that there were unnatural beings that sometimes had to be dealt with in ways not strictly in accordance with police procedure. Oh, and because they had a hired wizard to advise them about bad guys, of course. I liked to think that I had contributed too.

But I guess every bucket of fruit has something go rotten sooner or later. In SI the stinker was Detective Rudolph. Rudy was young, good-looking, clean-cut, and had slept with the wrong councilman's daughter. He had applied some industrial-strength denial to his experiences with SI despite freak encounters with monsters, magic, and human kindness. He had clung to a steadfast belief that everything was normal, and the realm of the paranormal was all make-believe.

Rudy didn't like me. Rudy didn't like Murphy. If the kid had sabotaged Murphy's investigation in order to curry favor with the folks in Homicide, maybe he was angling to get out of SI.

And maybe he'd lose a bunch of teeth the next time he walked through a quiet parking garage. I doubted Murphy would take that kind of backstabbing with good grace. I spent a moment indulging myself in a pleasant fantasy in which Murphy pounded Rudy's head against the door of her office at SI's home building until the cheap wood had a Rudolph-shaped dent in it. I enjoyed the thought way too much.

I gathered up a few things from around my apartment, including the antivenom potions Bob had helped me with. I checked on Bob while I was in the lab, and got a sleepy and incoherent response that I understood to mean that he needed more rest. I let him, went back upstairs, and called my answering service.

I had a message from Susan, a phone number. I called it, and a second later she answered. "Harry?"

“You’ve become clairvoyant. If you can do a foreign accent you could get a hot line.”

“Like, sure, as if,” Susan drawled ditzily.

“California isn’t foreign,” I said.

“You’d be surprised. How did things go?”

“Okay, I guess,” I said. “I got a second.”

“Michael?” she asked.

“Shiro.”

“Who?”

“He’s like Michael but shorter and older.”

“Oh, uh. Good. I did the legwork.”

I thought of some work I’d seen Susan’s legs do before. But I only said, “And?”

“And the downtown Marriott is hosting an art gala this very night, including a gallery sale and a fund-raiser auction for charity.”

I whistled. “Wow. So lots of art and money moving around, changing hands, being shipped hither and yon.”

“Hither maybe, but I don’t think UPS does yon,” Susan said. “Seems like a good place to sell a hot article or three. And it’s all sponsored by the Chicago Historical and Art Society.”

“Who?”

“A very small and very elite club for the upper crust. Gentleman Johnny Marcone is chairman of its board of directors.”

“Sounds like smuggling country all right,” I said. “How do I get in?”

“You put up a five-thousand-dollar-per-plate donation to charity.”

“Five *thousand*,” I said. “I don’t think I’ve ever had that much all in one place at one time.”

“Then you might try option two.”

“Which is?”

Susan’s voice took on a note of satisfaction. “You go with a reporter from the *Midwest Arcane* on her last assignment for her editor. I talked to Trish and got two tickets that had originally been given to a reporter on the *Tribune*.”

“I’m impressed,” I said.

“It gets better. I got us formal wear. The gala begins at nine.”

“Us? Uh, Susan. I don’t want to sound like an ass, but do you remember the last time you wanted to come on an investigation with me?”

“This time I’m the one with the tickets,” she said. “Are you coming with me or not?”

I thought about it for a minute but didn’t see any way around it. There wasn’t time for a long argument, either. “I’m in. I have to meet the Reds at McAnnally’s at eight.”

“Meet you there with your tux. Eight-thirty?”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“Sure,” she said quietly. “Glad I could help.”

Silence stretched long enough to become painful for both of us. I finally broke it at the same time as Susan. “Well, I’d better—”

“Well, I’d better let you go,” Susan said. “I have to hurry to get all of this done.”

“All right,” I said. “Be careful.”

“Stones and glass houses, Harry. See you this evening.”

We hung up, and I made sure I was ready to go.

Then I went to pick up my second, and work out the terms to a duel I was increasingly certain I had little chance of surviving.

Chapter Seventeen

I put on an old fleece-lined denim jacket and went by my office. The night security guy gave me a little trouble, but I eventually browbeat him into opening the safe in the office to retrieve my envelope from Father Vincent. I opened it and found a plastic case the size of a playing card, like the kind coin collectors use to frame paper money. In the exact center of the case was a single, dirty white thread about two inches long. The sample from the Shroud.

It wasn't much to work with. I could use the thread to create a channel to the rest of the Shroud, but nothing was certain. The thread had presumably been absent from the rest of the Shroud for going on thirty years. Not only that, but it had presumably been handled by various scientists or clergy, and it was possible that they had left enough of a psychic residue on the thread to cloud a seeking spell.

On top of all that, the thread was tiny. I would have to be extremely careful if I used a spell to go hunting the Shroud, or the forces in it would overload the thread in the same way that enough electrical current will overload the filament in a lightbulb. I'm not so great with delicate spell work. I've got plenty of power, but fine control of it could be a problem. By necessity, I would have to use a very gentle spell, and that would put severe limits on the range of it.

The spell would be a metal detector, rather than a radar dish, but it was a whole lot better than nothing. I hit the door.

Rather than inflicting another Charity encounter upon myself, I pulled the Beetle up to the curb in front of Michael's house and honked the horn. A moment later, Shiro appeared. The little old man had shaved the white down from his head, and where he didn't have liver spots, the skin shone. He wore some kind of loose-fitting black pants that looked a lot like the ones I'd seen Murphy wear at one of her aikido tournaments. He also wore a black shirt and a white gi jacket with a scarlet cross on either side of his chest. A belt of red silk held the jacket closed, and he wore his sword

through it, still in its wooden cane-sheath. He opened the door, slipped into the Beetle, and held his sword across his lap.

I got going, and neither of us said anything for a while. My knuckles were getting white again, so I started talking. "So you've done one of these duels before?"

"*Hai*," he said, nodding. "Many times."

"Why?"

Shiro shrugged. "Many reasons. Protect someone. Force something to leave an area in peace. Fight without involving others."

"To the death?"

Shiro nodded. "Many times."

"Guess you're pretty good at it then," I said.

Shiro smiled a little, eyes wrinkling even more. "Always someone better."

"You ever dueled a vampire?"

"*Hai*. Jade Court. Black Court."

"Jade Court?" I said. "I've never heard that there was such a thing."

"Southeast Asia, China, Japan. Very secretive. But they respect the Accords."

"Have you dueled any of the Denarians?"

He frowned out the window. "Twice. But they do not honor agreements. Treachery both times."

I thought that over for a while before I said, "I'm going for energy. If he won't take it, we'll do will."

Shiro glanced aside at me and nodded. "But there is a better choice."

"What?"

"Don't fight. Can't lose a fight you don't have."

I felt a snort coming on but I held it back. "I'm sort of locked into it now."

"Both parties want to quit, duel over," Shiro said. "I will be talking to Ortega's second. Ortega will be there. Smart for you try to talk him out of it."

"I don't think he'll do it."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Not fighting always smarter."

"Says the militant Knight of the Cross and his holy blade?"

"I hate fighting."

I glanced at him for a second, then said, “You don’t usually hear that from someone good at it.”

Shiro smiled. “Fighting is never good. But sometimes necessary.”

I blew out a deep breath. “Yeah. I guess I know what you mean.”

The rest of the ride to McAnnally’s was quiet. In the streetlights, my knuckles looked the same color as the rest of my hands.

McAnnally’s is a tavern. Not a bar, not a pub, but an actual, Old World–style tavern. When I went in, I stepped down three steps to the hardwood floor and looked around the place. The bar has thirteen stools at it. There were thirteen columns of dark wood, each one hand-carved with swirling leaves and images of beings of tale and fantasy. Thirteen tables had been spaced out around the room in an irregular pattern, and like the columns and bar stools, they had been intentionally placed that way in order to deflect and scatter random magical energies. It cut down on the accidents from grumpy wizards and clueless kids just discovering their power. Several ceiling fans whirled lazily, and were low enough that I always felt a bit nervous about one of them whirling into my eyebrows. The place smells of wood smoke, old whiskey barrels, fresh bread, and roasting meat. I like it.

Mac stood behind the bar. I didn’t know much about Mac. He was tall, medium build, bald, and somewhere between thirty and sixty. He had large and facile hands and thick wrists. All I’ve ever seen him wear is dark pants with a loose white shirt and an apron that somehow remained free of splatters of grease, spilled drinks, and the various other things he prepared for customers.

Mac caught my eye when I came in and nodded to my left. I looked. A sign on the wall said, ACCORDED NEUTRAL GROUND. I looked back at Mac. He drew a shotgun out from behind the bar so that I could see it and said, “Got it?”

“No problem,” I answered.

“Good.”

The room was otherwise empty, though normally there would be a couple of dozen members of the local magical scene. Not full-fledged wizards or anything, but there were plenty of people with a dab of magical talent. Then there were a couple of different Wiccan groups, the occasional changeling, scholars of the arcane, a gang of do-gooder werewolves, members of secret societies, and who knew what else. Mac must have put out the word that a

meeting was happening here. No one sane wants to be anywhere close to what could be a fight between a White Council member and a Red Court warlord. I knew I was sane because I didn't want to be there, either.

I walked over to the bar and said, "Beer." Mac grunted and plopped down a bottle of brown. I pushed some bills at him but he shook his head.

Shiro stood at the bar next to me, facing the opposite way. Mac put a bottle down beside him. Shiro twisted off the cap with one hand, took a modest sip, and set the bottle back down. Then he glanced at it thoughtfully, picked it up, and took a slower sip. "Yosh."

Mac grunted, "Thanks."

Shiro said something in what I guessed was Japanese. Mac answered monosyllabically. A man of many talents and few syllables is Mac.

I killed time with a couple more sips and the door opened.

Kincaid walked in, in the same outfit I'd seen that morning, but without the baseball cap. His dark blond hair was instead pulled back into an unruly tail. He nodded at Mac and asked, "All set?"

"Ungh," said Mac.

Kincaid prowled the room, looking under tables and behind columns, and checked the rest rooms and behind the counter as well. Mac said nothing, but I had the impression that he felt the precaution to be useless. Kincaid went to a corner table, nudging other tables back from it a bit, and put three chairs around it. He drew a gun out of a shoulder rig and set it on the table, then took a seat.

"Hi," I said toward him. "Nice to see you, too. Where's Ivy?"

"Past her bedtime," Kincaid said without smiling. "I'm her proxy."

"Oh," I said. "She has a bedtime?"

Kincaid checked his watch. "She believes very strongly in an early bedtime for children."

"Heh, heh, eh-heh." I don't fake amused chuckles well. "So where's Ortega?"

"Saw him parking outside," Kincaid said.

The door opened and Ortega entered. He wore a casual black blazer with matching slacks and a shirt of scarlet silk. He hadn't worn a coat despite the cold. His skin was darker than I remembered it. Maybe he'd fed recently. He carried himself with a relaxed, patient quality as he entered and surveyed the room.

He bowed slightly at the waist toward Mac, who nodded back. The vampire's eyes landed on Shiro and narrowed. Shiro said nothing and did not move. Ortega then regarded me with an unreadable expression and gave me a very slight nod. It seemed polite to nod back to him, so I did. Ortega did the same to Kincaid, who returned it with a lazy wave of one hand.

"Where is your second?" Kincaid asked.

Ortega grimaced. "Primping."

He hadn't finished the word before a young man slapped the door open and stepped jauntily into the tavern. He was wearing tight, white leather pants, a black fishnet shirt, and a white leather jacket. His hair was dark and hung to his shoulders in an unruly mane. He had a male model's face, smoky grey eyes, and thick, dark eyelashes. I knew him. Thomas Raith, a White Court vampire.

"Thomas," I said by way of greeting.

"Evening, Harry," he answered. "What happened to your duster?"

"There was a woman."

"I see," Thomas said. "Pity. It was the only thing you owned that gave me hope that there might be a feeble flicker of style in you."

"You should talk. That outfit you're wearing is treading dangerously close to the Elvis zone."

"Young, sleek Elvis ain't bad," Thomas said.

"I meant old, fat Elvis. Possibly Michael Jackson."

The pale man put a hand to his heart. "That hurts, Harry."

"Yeah, I've had a rough day too."

"Gentlemen," Kincaid said, a note of impatience in his voice. "Shall we begin?"

I nodded. So did Ortega. Kincaid introduced everyone and produced a document that stated he was working for the Archive. It was written in crayon. I drank some more beer. After that, Kincaid invited Shiro and Thomas to join him at the corner table. I went back to the bar, and a moment later, Ortega followed me. He sat down with a couple of empty stools between us, while Kincaid, Thomas, and Shiro spoke quietly in the background.

I finished my bottle and set it down with a thump. Mac turned around to get me another. I shook my head. "Don't bother. I've got enough on my tab already."

Ortega put a twenty down on the bar and said, "I'll cover it. Another for me as well."

I started to make a wiseass remark about how buying me a beer would surely make up for threatening my life and the lives of those I cared about, but I bit it back. Shiro had been right about fighting. You can't lose a fight you don't show up to. So I took the beer Mac brought me and said, "Thanks, Ortega."

He nodded, and took a sip. His eyes lit up a bit, and he took a second, slower one. "It's good."

Mac grunted.

"I thought you guys drank blood," I said.

"It's all we really need," Ortega said.

"Then why do you have anything else?"

Ortega held up the bottle. "Life is more than mere survival. All you need is the water, after all. Why drink beer?"

"You ever tasted the water in this town?"

He almost smiled. "Touché."

I turned the plain brown bottle around in my fingers. "I don't want this," I said.

"The duel?"

I nodded.

Ortega leaned an elbow on the bar and considered me. "Neither do I. This isn't personal. It isn't something I want."

"So don't do it," I said. "We could both walk."

"And the war would go on."

"It's been going on for nearly two years," I said. "It's mostly been cat and mouse, a couple of raids, fights in back alleys. It's like the Cold War, only with fewer Republicans."

Ortega frowned, and watched Mac cleaning the grill behind the bar. "It can get worse, Mister Dresden. It can get a great deal worse. And if the conflict escalates, it will threaten the balance of power throughout the worlds of flesh and spirit alike. Imagine the destruction, the loss of life that could ensue."

"So why not contribute to the peace effort? Starting with this duel. Maybe we could get some beads and some fringe and make signs that say 'Make blood not war' or something."

This time, Ortega did smile. It was a weary expression on him. "It's too late for that," he said. "Your blood is all that will satisfy many of my peers."

"I can donate," I said. "Let's say once every two months. You provide cookies and orange juice."

Ortega leaned toward me, the smile fading. "Wizard. You murdered a noble of our Court."

I got angry. My voice gained heat. "The only reason—"

Ortega cut me off, lifting his hand. "I do not say that your reasons were not valid. But the fact of the matter is that you appeared in her home as a guest and representative of the Council. And you attacked and eventually killed both Bianca and those under her protection."

"Killing me won't bring her back," I said.

"But it will slake the thirst for vengeance that plagues many of my kinsmen. When you are no more, they will be willing to at least attempt a peaceful resolution."

"Dammit," I muttered, and fiddled with the bottle.

"Though..." Ortega murmured. His eyes became distant for a moment. "There might be another way."

"What other way?"

"Yield," Ortega said. "Yield to the duel and let me take you into custody. If you are willing to work with me, I could place you under my protection."

"Work with you," I said. My stomach flip-flopped. "You mean become like you."

"It is an alternative to death," Ortega said, his expression earnest. "My kinsmen may not like it, but they could not argue against it. For taking Bianca's life, you could replace it with your own."

"As one of you."

Ortega nodded. "As one of us." He was quiet for a moment, then said, "You could bring Miss Rodriguez with you. Be together. She would not be a threat to you, were you both my vassals." He put his beer down. "I think you will find that we are much alike, Dresden. We're just playing for different teams."

I rubbed at my mouth. My instinctive reaction to Ortega's offer was one of revulsion. The Red Court vampires don't look like most would think. They looked like giant, hairless bats with slick, rubbery skin. They could

cover themselves with a flesh mask in order to look human, but I'd seen what was underneath the mask.

I'd been exposed to it. Thoroughly. I still had nightmares.

I opened my eyes. "Let me ask you a question."

"Very well."

"Do you live in a manor?"

"Casaverde," Ortega responded. "It's in Honduras. There is a village nearby."

"Uh-huh," I said. "So you feed on the villagers."

"Carefully. I provide them with supplies, medical attention, other necessities."

"Sounds reasonable," I said.

"It's beneficial to both of us. The villagers know that."

"Yeah, they probably do." I finished off the bottle. "Do you feed on children?"

Ortega frowned at me. "What do you mean?"

I didn't bother to hide the anger in my voice. "Do. You. Feed. On. Children."

"It's the safest way. The more the feeding is spread among many, the less dangerous it is for all of them."

"You're wrong. We're different." I stood up. "You hurt kids. We're done."

Ortega's voice sharpened. "Dresden. Do not lightly discard my offer."

"The offer to make me into a blood-drinking monster in eternal slavery to you? Why would I want to do that?"

"It is the only way to keep your life," Ortega said.

I felt the anger coalescing into rage. My upper lip curled away from my teeth, baring them in a snarl. "I thought life is more than mere survival."

Ortega's expression changed. It was only for a second, but in that moment I saw furious rage, arrogant pride, and violent bloodlust on his face. He regained his calm quickly, but traces of the hidden emotions thickened his accent.

"So be it. I will kill you, wizard."

He sounded convincing. It scared me. I turned and walked to the door. "I'll be outside," I said to no one in particular, and stepped out into the late-February cold.

That way, I'd have an excuse to be trembling.

Chapter Eighteen

I didn't have long to wait. The door opened behind me, and Kincaid emerged. He didn't say a word to me, just got into a rented sedan and left. Ortega came next. A car swung in off the street, and he opened the passenger door. He paused and looked back at me.

"I have a measure of respect for your principles and skills, Dresden. But this situation is of your own making, and I cannot allow it to continue. I'm sorry."

I watched him get in the car, and I didn't offer him any reply. Hell, he hadn't said a word that was untrue. Ortega had a genuine ax to grind and people—well, fellow monsters—to protect. And thus far, the Dresden-versus-vampires scoreboard read a whole bunch to zero.

If a vampire had done that to the White Council, I wonder if we would have reacted with as much reason and calm.

The taillights of Ortega's car hadn't yet gotten out of sight when Thomas emerged from the tavern and swaggered casually over to me. Thomas was a shade under six feet tall, which put him at half a head shorter than me. He was better-looking though, and despite my earlier comments about his outfit, he was one of those men who made anything look good. The fishnet shirt he wore cast patterns of shadow over the pale skin beneath it, adding to the lines of muscle on his stomach.

My stomach had muscles, but not so many that you could see them rippling. I'd have looked pathetic in a shirt like that.

"That was simple enough," Thomas said. He drew a pair of black leather driving gloves from his jacket pocket and started tugging them on. "Though I take it this duel isn't the only game in town at the moment."

"Why would you say that?" I asked.

"I've had a pro hitter following me ever since I landed yesterday. The itch between my shoulder blades got annoying."

I glanced around. "Is he here now?"

Thomas's eyes glittered. "No. I introduced him to my sisters."

The White Court were the most human of the vampires and in some ways the weakest. They fed on psychic energies, on pure life force rather than on blood. Most often, they would seduce those they fed upon, drawing life from them through physical contact during the act. If a couple of Thomas's sisters had met the hired gun tailing Thomas, the assassin probably wasn't going to be a problem to anyone. Ever. My eye twitched.

"The gunman was probably Ortega's," I said. "He hired some goons to take out people I knew if I didn't agree to this duel."

"That explains it, then," Thomas said. "Ortega really doesn't like me much. Must be the unsavory company I've kept in the past."

"Gee, thanks. How the hell did you end up his second?"

"It's my father's idea of a joke," Thomas said. "Ortega asked him to be his second. Show of solidarity between the Red and White Courts. Instead, Daddy dearest found the most annoying and insulting member of the family he possibly could to stand in."

"You," I said.

"*C'est moi*," Thomas confirmed with a little bow. "One would almost think Father was trying to get me killed."

I felt one side of my mouth tug up into a smile. "Nice father figure. Him and Bill Cosby. How's Justine?"

Thomas grimaced. "She's in Aruba is how she is. Which is where I was until one of pappa Raith's goons dragged me back up here."

"What did you two decide on for the duel?"

Thomas shook his head. "Can't tell you. Shiro is supposed to do that. I mean, technically I'm at war with you."

I grimaced and stared after Ortega's vanished car. "Yeah."

Thomas was quiet for a second, then said, "He means to kill you."

"I know."

"He's dangerous, Harry. Smart. My father is afraid of him."

"I could like him," I said. "It's sort of refreshing to have someone trying to kill me right to my face, instead of throwing me a bunch of curveballs and shooting me in the back. It's almost nice to have a fair fight."

"Sure. Theoretically."

"Theoretically?"

Thomas shrugged. "Ortega's been alive for about six hundred years. It isn't something you do by playing nice."

"From what I've heard, the Archive will object to any monkey business."

“It’s only cheating if he gets caught.”

I frowned at him and said, “Are you saying someone is planning to avoid getting caught?”

Thomas put his hands in his jacket pockets. “I’m not saying anything. I wouldn’t mind seeing you kick his ass, but I’m sure as hell not going to do something that would attract attention to me.”

“You intend to participate without being involved. That’s clever.”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “I won’t throw a banana peel under you. But don’t expect any help from me, either. I’m just making sure it’s a fair fight and then I’m back at my beach house.” He drew car keys from his pocket and headed for the parking lot. “Good luck.”

“Thomas,” I said to his back. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

He paused.

I asked, “Why do it?”

The vampire glanced over his shoulder at me and smiled. “Life would be unbearably dull if we had answers to all our questions.” He walked out to a white sports car and slipped into it. A second later, loud, screaming metal music started from the car’s stereo, the engine roared, and Thomas drove off.

I checked my watch. Ten more minutes until Susan arrived. Shiro emerged from McAnnally’s and put on his glasses. Once he spotted me, he walked over and took the glasses off again. “Ortega refused to cancel the duel?”

“He made me an offer I couldn’t excuse,” I said.

Shiro grunted. “Duel is wills. Tomorrow, just after sundown. Wrigley Field.”

“A stadium? Why don’t we put it on pay-per-view while we’re at it.” I glowered at the street and checked my watch again. “I’m meeting someone in a minute. I’ll give you the keys to my car. I can pick it up from Michael’s tomorrow.”

“No need,” Shiro said. “Mac called me a cab.”

“Okay.” I pocketed my keys.

Shiro stood quietly for a moment, lips pursed thoughtfully, before he said, “Ortega means to kill you.”

“Yes. Yes, he does,” I said. I managed not to grind my teeth as I said it. “Everyone is saying that like I didn’t know it already.”

“But you do not know *how*.” I frowned and looked down at Shiro. His shaved head gleamed under a nearby streetlight. “The war is not your fault.”

“I know that,” I said, but my voice lacked conviction.

“No,” Shiro said. “It *truly* is not your fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Red Court has been quietly building its resources for years,” he said. “How else were they ready to start their attacks in Europe only days after you defeated Bianca?”

I frowned at him.

Shiro drew a cigar from inside his jacket and bit off the end. He spat it to one side. “You were not the cause of the war. You were merely the excuse. The Reds would have attacked when they were ready.”

“No,” I said. “That’s not how it is. I mean, damn near everyone I’ve spoken to on the Council—”

Shiro snorted. He struck a match and puffed on the cigar a few times while he lit it. “The Council. Arrogant. As if nothing significant could happen unless a wizard did it.”

For someone who wasn’t on the White Council, Shiro seemed to have its general attitude pretty well surrounded. “If the Red Court wanted a war, why is Ortega trying to stop it?”

“Premature,” Shiro said. “Needed more time to be completely prepared. The advantage of surprise is gone. He wishes to strike once and be certain it is a lethal stroke.”

I watched the little old man for a minute. “Everyone’s got advice tonight. Why are you giving it?”

“Because in some ways you are every bit as arrogant as the Council, though you do not realize it. You blame yourself for what happened to Susan. You want to blame yourself for more.”

“So what if I do?”

Shiro turned me and faced me squarely. I avoided meeting his eyes. “Duels are a test of fire. They are fought in the will. The heart. If you do not find your balance, Ortega will not need to kill you. You will do so for him.”

“I guess you were a psychoanalyst before you were a sword-swinging vigilante against evil.”

Shiro puffed on the cheroot. "Either way, been alive longer than you. See more than you."

"Like what?"

"Like this vampire warlord. How he manipulates you. He is not what he seems to be."

"Really? I've never seen that one before," I said. "Someone not what they appear to be. How ever will I adjust."

Shiro shrugged. "He is centuries old. He is not from the same world. The world Ortega lived in was savage. Brutal. Men like him destroyed entire civilizations for gold and glory. And for hundreds of years since then, he has fought rival vampires, demons, and enemies of his kind. If he approaches you through formal, civilized channels, it is because he thinks it is the best way to kill you. Regardless of what happens in the duel, he intends to see you dead by any means necessary. Maybe before. Maybe after. But dead."

Shiro didn't put any particular emphasis on the words. He didn't need to. They were enough to scare me without any added dramatics. I glowered at his cigar and said, "Those things will kill you."

The old man smiled again. "Not tonight."

"I'd think a good Christian boy wouldn't be puffing down the cigars."

"Technicality," Shiro said.

"The cigars?"

"My Christianity," Shiro said. "When I was a boy, I liked Elvis. Had a chance to see him in concert when we moved to California. It was a big revival meeting. There was Elvis and then a speaker and my English was not so good. He invited people backstage to meet the king. Thought he meant Elvis, so I go backstage." He sighed. "Found out later I had become a Baptist."

I barked out a laugh. "You're kidding."

"No. But it was done, so I tried not to be too bad at being Baptist." He rested a hand on the handle of his sword. "Then came into this. Made the whole thing more simple. I serve."

"Serve who?"

"Heaven. Or the divine in nature. The memory of my fathers past. My fellow man. Myself. All pieces of the same thing. Do you know the story of the blind men and the elephant?"

“Have you heard the one about the bear that walks into a bar?” I responded.

“I think that is a no,” Shiro said. “Three blind men were shown an elephant. They touched it with their hands to determine what the creature was. The first man felt the trunk, and claimed that an elephant was like a snake. The second man touched its leg and claimed that an elephant was like a tree. The third man touched its tail, and claimed that the elephant was like a slender rope.”

I nodded. “Oh. I get it. All of them were right. All of them were wrong. They couldn’t get the whole picture.”

Shiro nodded. “Precisely. I am just another blind man. I do not get the whole picture of what transpires in all places. I am blind and limited. I would be a fool to think myself wise. And so, not knowing what the universe means, I can only try to be responsible with the knowledge, the strength, and the time given to me. I must be true to my heart.”

“Sometimes that isn’t good enough,” I said.

He tilted his head and looked up at me. “How do you know?”

A cab swerved in from the street and rattled to a stop. Shiro stepped over to it and nodded to me. “Will be at Michael’s if you need me. Be watchful.”

I nodded at him. “Thank you.”

Shiro said, “Thank me after.” Then he got into the cab and left.

Mac closed up shop a minute later, and put on a dark fedora on his way out. He nodded at me on the way to his Trans Am, and said nothing. I found a shadowy spot to linger in as Mac left, and kept an eye on the street. I’d hate for someone to drive by and shoot me with a plain old gun. Embarrassing.

A long, dark limo pulled into the parking lot. A uniformed driver got out and opened the door nearest to me. A pair of long, honey-brown legs slid out of the limo on top of black stiletto heels. Susan glided out of the car, managing grace despite the shoes, which probably qualified her for superhuman status all by itself. A sleeveless sheath of shimmering black cloth clung to her, an evening gown slit high on one side. Dark gloves covered her arms to the elbow, and her hair had been done up in a pile on top of her head, held in place with a couple of gleaming black chopsticks.

My tongue dropped out of my mouth and flopped onto my shoes. Well, not literally, but if I’d been a cartoon my eyeballs would have been about six feet long.

Susan had read my face and apparently enjoyed my reaction. “How much, good-looking?”

I looked down at my rumpled clothing. “I think I’m a tad underdressed.”

“One tuxedo, coming up,” Susan said.

The driver opened the trunk and drew out a hanger covered with a dry-cleaning bag. When he turned around with it, I realized that the driver was Martin. All he’d done to disguise himself was don an archetypical uniform and I hadn’t even recognized him until second glance. I guess sometimes it’s handy to be bland.

“Is it my size?” I asked, taking the tux when Martin passed it to me.

“I had to guess,” Susan said, lowering her eyelids in a sultry expression. “But it wasn’t like I didn’t know my way around.”

Martin’s face might have flickered with disapproval. My heart sped up a bit. “All right then,” I said. “Let’s get moving. I’ll dress on the way.”

“Do I get to look?” Susan asked.

“It’ll cost you extra,” I said. Martin opened the door for Susan and I slid in after her. I filled her in on what I’d found out about the Shroud and those after it. “I should be able to find the thing if we get close.”

“You think there will be any more of these Denarians there?”

“Probably,” I said. “If anything gets ugly, we’ll take the best part of valor, pronto. These guys play hardball.”

Susan nodded agreement. “Sounds like the thieves aren’t exactly shy about waving guns, either.”

“And we’ll have Marcone around too. Whither he goeth, there too goeth armed thugs and homicide investigations.”

Susan smiled. It was a new expression to me—a small, quiet, fierce little smile that showed her teeth. It looked natural on her. “You’re all about fun, aren’t you, Harry?”

“I am the Bruce Lee of fun,” I concurred. “Give me some space here.”

Susan slid over as far as she could to give me room to climb into the tux. I tried not to mar it too badly in the limited space. Susan glanced at me with a faint frown.

“What?” I asked her.

“You’re wrinkling it.”

“This isn’t as easy as I’m making it look,” I responded.

“If you weren’t staring at my legs, maybe it wouldn’t be such a challenge.”

“I wasn’t staring,” I lied.

Susan smiled at me as the car cruised through downtown and I did my best to dress like Roger Moore. Her expression became thoughtful after a moment, and she said, “Hey.”

“What?”

“What happened to your leather coat?”

Chapter Nineteen

The downtown Marriott was huge, brilliantly lit, and busy as an anthill. Several blue-and-whites were parked nearby, and a couple of officers were helping to direct traffic in front of the hotel. I could see maybe twenty limos on the street and pulling through the archway in front of the hotel doors, and every one of them looked bigger and nicer than ours. Valets rushed around to park the cars of guests who had driven themselves. There were a dozen men in red jackets standing around with bored expressions that some might mistake for inattention. Hotel security.

Martin pulled up to the entryway and said, "I'll wait for you out here." He passed a palm-sized cell phone to Susan. She slipped it into a black clutch. "If you get into trouble, speed-dial one."

At that point, a valet opened the door on my side, and I slipped out of the car. My rental tux felt a little awkward. The shoes were long enough for me but they were an inch and a half too wide. I shrugged my jacket into place, straightened the cummerbund, and offered a hand to Susan. She slid out of the car with a brilliant smile, and straightened my tie.

"Smile," she said quietly. "Everyone here is worried about image. If you walk in scowling like that we won't blend in."

I smiled in what I thought was a camouflaging manner. Susan regarded the expression critically, nodded, and slipped her arm through mine. We walked in under the cover our smiles provided. One of the security guards stopped us inside the door, and Susan presented the tickets to him. He waved us through.

"First thing to do is find some stairs," I said from behind my smile. "The loading docks will be near the kitchens, and they're below us. That's where they'll be bringing in the art stuff."

Susan held her course toward the stairs. "Not yet," she said. "If we snoop around the second we get in the door someone is likely to notice. We should mingle until the auction is running. People will be distracted then."

"If we wait, the whole thing could go down while we hobnob."

“Maybe,” Susan said. “But odds are that Anna Valmont and the buyer are both thinking the same thing.”

“When does the auction start?”

“Eleven.”

“Assuming the note means that the sale is at eleven forty-five, that doesn’t give us much time to look around. This place is huge.”

We got onto an escalator and Susan arched an eyebrow at me. “Do you have any better ideas?”

“Not yet,” I said. I caught a glimpse of myself in a polished brass column. I didn’t look half-bad. There’s a reason the tux has weathered a century virtually unchanged. You don’t fix what isn’t broken. Tuxedos make anyone look good, and I was a living testament to it. “Think they will have anything to eat? I’m starving.”

“Just keep the shirt clean,” Susan muttered.

“No problem. I can wipe my fingers on the cummerbund.”

“I can’t take you anywhere,” Susan said. She leaned a little against me, and it felt nice. I felt nice, generally speaking. I cleaned up pretty well, it would seem, and I had a lovely woman—no, I had *Susan* on my arm, looking lovely. It was a small silver lining compared to the troubled clouds I’d been floundering through, but it was something, and it lasted all the way up the escalator. I take the good moments wherever I can get them.

We followed the flow of formally dressed men and women up another escalator or three to a cavernous ballroom. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling and tables laden with expensive-looking snacks and ice sculptures all but overflowed onto the floor. A group of musicians played on the far side of the ballroom. They didn’t seem to be stretching themselves with some relaxed and classy jazz. Couples who also weren’t stretching themselves danced together on a floor the size of a basketball court.

The room wasn’t crammed with people, but there were a couple of hundred there already, and more coming in behind us. Polite but insincere chatter filled the space, accompanied by equally insincere smiles and laughter. There were a number of city officials whom I recognized in the immediate area, plus a couple of professional musicians and at least one motion-picture actor.

A waiter in a white jacket offered us a tray of champagne glasses, and I promptly appropriated a pair of them, passing the first to Susan. She lifted the glass to her mouth but didn’t drink. The champagne smelled good. I

took a sip, and it tasted good. I'm not a terribly impressive drinker, so I stopped after the first sip. Chugging down champagne on an empty stomach would probably prove inconvenient if it turned out I needed to do any quick thinking. Or quick leaving. Or quick anything.

Susan said hello to an older couple, and stopped for introductions. I kept my duck blind of a smile in place, and mouthed appropriately polite phrases in the right spots. My cheeks had already started hurting. We repeated that for half an hour or so, while the band played a bunch of low-key dance music. Susan knew a lot of people. She'd been a reporter in Chicago for five or six years before she'd had to leave town, but she had evidently managed to ingratiate herself to more people than I would have guessed. You go, Susan.

"Food," I said, after a stooped older man kissed Susan's cheek and walked away. "Feed me, Seymour."

"It's always the brain stem with you," she murmured. But she guided us over to the refreshment tables so that I could pick up a tiny sandwich. I didn't wolf the thing down in one bite, which was just as well, since it had a toothpick through it to hold it together. But the sandwich didn't last long.

"At least chew with your mouth closed," Susan said.

I took a second sandwich. "Can't help it. I got all kinds of *joie de vivre*, baby."

"And smile."

"Chew *and* smile? At the same time? Do I look like Jackie Chan?"

She had a retort but it died after a syllable. I felt her hand tighten on my arm. I briefly debated wolfing the second sandwich, just to get it out of the way, but I took the more sophisticated option instead. I put it in my jacket pocket for later, and turned to follow Susan's gaze.

I looked just in time to meet the gaze of Gentleman Johnny Marcone. He was a man of slightly above average height and unassuming build. He had handsome but unremarkable features. Central casting would have placed him as the genial next-door neighbor. He didn't have the usual boater's tan, it being February and all, but the crow's-feet at the corners of his pale green eyes remained. He looked a lot like the fictional public image he projected—that of a normal, respectable businessman, an American tale of middle class made good.

That said, Marcone scared me more than any single human being I'd ever met. I'd seen him produce a knife from his sleeve faster than a

hyperstrong psychotic could swing a tire iron at him. He'd thrown another knife through a rope while spinning in circles as he hung upside down in the dark, later the same night. Marcone may have been human, but he wasn't normal. He'd taken control of Chicago's organized crime during a free-for-all gang war, and he'd run it ever since despite the efforts of both everyday and supernatural threats. He'd done it by being deadlier than anything that came after him. Of all the people in the room, Marcone was the only one I could see who wasn't wearing a fake smile. It didn't look like he was particularly troubled by the fact, either.

"Mister Dresden," he said. "And Miss Rodriguez, I believe. I didn't realize you were an art collector."

"I am the foremost collector of velvet Elvii in the city of Chicago," I said at once.

"Elvii?" Marcone inquired.

"The plural could be Elvises, I guess," I said. "But if I say that too often, I start muttering to myself and calling things 'my precious,' so I usually go with the Latin plural."

Marcone did smile that time. It was a cool expression. Tigers with full stomachs wear smiles like Marcone's when they're watching baby deer play. "Ah. I hope you can find something to suit your tastes tonight."

"I'm easy," I said. "Any old rag will do."

Marcone narrowed his eyes. There was a short, pointed silence while he met my gaze. He could do that. I'd gotten into a soulgaze with him in the past. It was one of the reasons he scared me. "In that case, I would advise you to exercise caution in your acquisitions."

"Cautious, that's me," I said. "You sure you wouldn't rather make this simple?"

"In deference to your limitations, I almost would," Marcone said. "But I'm afraid I'm not quite sure what you're talking about."

I felt my eyes narrow and I took a step forward. Susan's hand pressed against my arm, silently urging restraint. I lowered my voice to something between Marcone and myself. "Tell you what. Let's start with one of your monkeys trying to punch my ticket in a parking garage. From there, we can move along to the part where I come up with a suitable reply."

I didn't expect what happened next.

Marcone blinked.

It wasn't a huge giveaway. At a card table, only a couple of the players would have seen it. But I was right in his face, and I knew him and I saw it. My words startled Marccone, and for half a second it showed. He covered it, bringing out a businessman's smile that was a lot better than my fake smile, and clapped a hand gently to my arm. "Don't try me in public, Dresden. You can't afford to do it. I can't afford to let you."

A shadow fell over Marccone, and I looked up to see Hendricks hulk into view behind him. Hendricks was still huge, still redheaded, still looked vaguely like a defensive lineman a little too awkward to make it from college to pro ball. His tux was nicer than mine. I wondered if he was wearing body armor under it again.

Cujo Hendricks had a date. He had a blond date. He had a gorgeous, leggy, blue-eyed, elegant, tall, Nordic angel of a date. She was wearing a white gown, and silver flashed at her throat, on each wrist, and on one ankle. I'd seen bikinis in issues of *Sports Illustrated* that might have felt too plain to be worn by Hendricks's date.

She spoke, and her voice was a throaty purr. "Mister Marccone. Is there a problem?"

Marccone arched an eyebrow. "Is there, Mister Dresden?"

I probably would have said something stupid, but Susan's nails dug into my forearm through my jacket. "No trouble," Susan said. "I don't believe we've met."

"No," said the blonde, with a faint roll of her eyes. "We haven't."

"Mister Dresden, Miss Rodriguez, I believe you both know Mister Hendricks. And this is Miss Gard."

"Ah," I said. "She's an employee, I take it?"

Miss Gard smiled. Professional smiles all around tonight, it would seem. "I'm from the Monoc Foundation," she said. "I'm a consultant."

"Regarding what, one wonders," said Susan. She definitely had the sharpest smile of those present.

"Security," Gard said, unruffled. She focused on me. "I help make sure that thieves, spies, and poor wandering spirits don't wind up all over the lawn."

And I got it. Whoever Miss Gard was, it seemed fairly likely that she was responsible for the wards that had torn Bob up so badly. My head of righteous fury died out, replaced by caution. Marccone had been concerned about my talents. He'd started taking steps to balance things, and Marccone

wasn't one to show his hand early, which meant that he was already prepared for trouble of one kind or another with me. He was ready to fight me.

Marcone read my features and said, "Neither one of us wants any unpleasantness, Dresden." His eyes became flat and hard. "If you want to talk, call my office tomorrow. In the meantime, I suggest you search for your classic renditions of Elvis elsewhere."

"I'll take it under advisement," I answered. Marcone shook his head and walked away to do his own mingling, which seemed to consist mainly of shaking hands, and nodding in the appropriate spots. Hendricks and the Amazonian Gard shadowed Marcone, never far away.

"What a charmer you are," Susan murmured.

I grunted.

"Such diplomacy."

"Me and Kissinger." I scowled after Marcone and said, "I don't like this."

"Why not?"

"Because he's up to something. He set up magical defenses around his house."

"Like he was expecting trouble," Susan said.

"Yeah."

"You think he's the buyer for the Shroud?"

"Would make a lot of sense," I said. "He's got enough contacts and money to do it. The buy is apparently going down here at his gala." I scanned the room as I spoke. "He doesn't do anything without planning it out to his advantage. He's probably got friends in hotel security. It would give him all kinds of freedom to meet Valmont where no one was watching."

I spotted Marcone as he found a spot near a wall and lifted a tiny cell phone to his ear. He spoke into it, his eyes hard, and he had the look of a man who wasn't listening, only giving orders. I tried to Listen in on what he was saying, but between the band, the ballroom, and the chatter of voices I wasn't able to make anything out.

"But why?" Susan asked. "He's got the means and the resources but what reason would he have to buy the Shroud?"

"Hell if I know."

Susan nodded. "He certainly isn't happy to see you here."

“Yeah. Something unsettled him, gave him a nasty surprise. Did you see his face?”

Susan shook her head. “What do you mean?”

“A reaction, during the conversation. I’m sure I saw it. He got caught flat-footed when I was talking to him, and he didn’t like it.”

“You rattled him?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“Enough to push him into moving early?” Susan’s dark eyes had also picked out Marcone, who snapped the cell phone closed and headed for one of the service doors with Gard and Hendricks behind him. Marcone paused to speak to a red-jacketed security guard and glanced in our direction.

“Looks like we’d better get moving,” I said. “I need a minute to use the spell on this thread sample and lead us to the Shroud.”

“Why haven’t you done that already?”

“Limited range,” I said. “And the spell won’t last long. We need to be close.”

“How close?” Susan asked.

“Maybe a hundred feet.”

Marcone left the room, and the security guard lifted his radio to his mouth.

“Crap,” I said.

“Relax,” Susan said, though her own voice sounded tight. “These are the upper crust of Chicago. The security guards won’t want to make a scene.”

“Right,” I said, and started for the door.

“Slowly,” Susan said, her smile in place again. “Don’t rush.”

I tried not to rush, despite the security guard closing in behind us. I saw red jackets moving in my peripheral vision as well. We kept up the slow, graceful walk of people wandering around a party, and Susan smiled enough for both of us. We got as far as the doors before another red jacket appeared in the doors in front of us, cutting us off.

I recognized the man—the gunman outside the television studio, the one who had nearly ventilated Father Vincent and me in the parking garage. His eyes widened in recognition and his hand moved toward his jacket, where a gun would be inside a shoulder holster. The body language was clear: *Come along quietly or get shot.*

I looked around us, but other than the partygoers, the dance floor, and the other security guards, nothing really seemed to present itself as an option.

Then the band struck up something a little faster with a syncopated Latin beat, and several of the younger couples who hadn't been dancing previously moved out onto the floor.

"Come on," I said, and guided Susan with me.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Buying some time to get across the room to those other doors," I said. I turned to her, put one hand on her waist and took her other hand in mine, and led off onto the dance floor with an uncomplicated two-step. "Just follow."

I looked back to her to see her mouth open in shock. "You told me you couldn't dance."

"Not like in clubs and stuff," I said. She followed me well enough to let me do a little dip and step into a restrained hustle. "I don't do so well with rock and roll. Ballroom is something else."

Susan laughed, her dark eyes shining, even as she watched the crowd around us for more red jackets. "Between this and the tux, you're threatening to become classy. Where did you learn?"

I kept us moving down the dance floor, rolling Susan out to the length of our arms and then drawing her in again. "When I first came to Chicago, I had a bunch of jobs until I hooked up with Nick Christian at Ragged Angel Investigations. One of them was as a dance partner with a senior-citizen organization."

"You learned from little old ladies?"

"Tough to tango with someone with lumbago," I said. "It requires great skill." I spun Susan again, this time bringing her back to me with her back to my chest, one hand still on her hip with the other holding her arm out. There was a subtle electricity in touching her, her waist slender and supple under my hand. Her hair smelled of cinnamon, and her dress left quite a bit of her back naked to view. It was distracting as hell, and when she glanced over her shoulder at me, her eyes were growing heated. She felt it too.

I swallowed. *Focus, Harry*. "See those doors behind the food tables?"

Susan nodded.

I checked over my shoulder. The security guards had been slowed down by the press of the crowd, and we had beaten them to the other side of the room. "That's where we're going. We need to ditch these guys and find Valmont before Marcone gets to her."

"Won't security just follow us through the kitchen?"

“Not if Vanilla Martin diverts their attention before we leave the floor.”

Susan’s eyes glittered and she kept dancing with me, drawing the tiny cell phone from her clutch. “You have a devious mind.”

“Call me crazy but I’d rather not have Marcone’s goons walk us out.” A little luck came our way, and the band moved to a somewhat slower number. Susan was able to stay closer to me, half concealing her cell phone. I heard the phone dialing numbers, and I tried to still my thoughts and feelings. It hadn’t worked for long at the Larry Fowler studio, but if I could rein in my emotions, Susan should at least be able to make a call.

It worked. She spoke quietly into the phone for all of three or four seconds, then clicked it closed and put it away. “Two minutes,” she said.

Damn. Martin was good. I could pick out a couple of security guards at the main doors. Marcone’s dark-haired hitter was closer. He had trouble making his way politely through the crowd, and we had managed to gain a small lead on him as we danced.

“Do we have a signal or anything?”

“I think we wait for something distracting to happen,” Susan said.

“Like what?”

The sudden shriek of braking tires cut through the band music. There was a loud crunch, and the sound of plate glass breaking, along with shrieks from the hotel lobby below. The band stopped in confusion, and people crowded toward the exit to see what was happening.

“Like that,” Susan said. We had to swim upstream, so to speak, but it didn’t look like anyone was bothering to look at us. I caught a glimpse of Marcone’s hitter, heading out toward the ruckus. The ass had his gun in his hand, despite any possible field of fire he might have picked being filled with rich and influential socialites. At least he was holding the weapon low and against his leg.

The staff were just as interested in the disturbance as anyone else, and we were able to duck back into the service hallway without comment from anyone. Susan took a quick look around and said, “Elevator?”

“Stairs if they have them. If someone shoots at us on stairs, we can scream and flail around a lot more.” I spotted a fire alarm diagram on the wall and traced my finger over it. “Here, down the hall and left.”

Susan stepped out of her shoes while I did that. It left her a lot shorter, but her feet were silent on the utilitarian carpet. We went down the hall, found the stairs, and started down them. We went down three flights, which

put us at ground level again, I guessed. I opened the door from the stairwell and took a look around. A dingy little elevator opened, and a couple of guys in the food-stained white of kitchen hands went walking down the hallway, peering ahead and chattering. I heard a siren or two wailing outside.

"I'll say this for Martin," I muttered. "When he distracts, he distracts."

"He has a strong work ethic," Susan agreed.

"Keep an eye out," I said, and stepped back from the door. Susan's gaze flicked around the stairwell and over the hallway while I stepped back to kneel on the ground, drawing out what I would need for my seeking spell.

I pulled out a black Magic Marker and drew a smooth circle on the tiled landing, all the way around me. The marker squealed as I did, and as I closed the circle I willed it shut. A gentle barrier, something I couldn't see but could easily feel closed around me, screening out disruptive forces so that I could work my spell.

"Is that a permanent marker?" Susan asked.

"Thus do I strike a blow for anarchy whenever the mood takes me," I muttered. "Just a minute." I took out the sample from Father Vincent and a windup plastic duck.

Which isn't as goofy as it sounds. Stay with me.

I touched the thread to the duck's bill, then wound the duck up. I muttered a low chant, mostly nonsense syllables, and focused on what I wanted. I set the duck down on the floor, but instead of beginning to waddle, it instead waited, completely still. I had to use a rubber band to attach the tiny thread to the duck's bill. It was too short to tie on. I focused, brushing aside any thoughts besides those I needed for the spell, and let the gathered magic go with a whispered, "Seek, seek, seek."

The power poured out of me, leaving me a bit short of breath. The little yellow duck quivered and then lurched into motion, spinning about in an aimless circle. I nodded once, reached out a hand, and with an effort of will to support the gesture, I broke the circle. The screen vanished as quickly as it had arrived, and the little yellow duck quacked and marched toward the door.

I glanced up at Susan. Her dark and lovely eyes watched the duck with what could charitably be termed extreme skepticism.

I scowled at her. "Don't say it."

"I didn't say anything."

"Well, don't."

She fought down a smile. "I won't."

I opened the door. The duck waddled out into the hallway, quacked, and turned to the left. I stepped out, picked the duck up, and said, "It's close. Let's move. We just check the duck at intersections."

"Does the duck know about stairs?"

"More or less. Come on; I don't know how long the spell will last."

I led the way. I'm not the world's mightiest athlete, but I exercise a bit, I have really long legs, and I can walk faster than some run. The duck led us down a pair of long hallways to a door with an EMPLOYEES ONLY sign on it.

I opened the door, peeked in, and reported in a whisper, "Big laundry room."

Footsteps sounded behind us, coming down another hallway. Susan looked at me with wide eyes. I pushed into the room, Susan close behind me. I closed the door almost all the way, holding it from closing completely so that the lock wouldn't click and give us away.

The footsteps came closer, a couple sets of them, and two shapes went quickly by, passing close to the cracked doorway.

"Hendricks and Gard," I murmured to Susan.

"How do you know?" she whispered back.

"Smelled the blonde's perfume." I counted silently to ten and opened the door, looking out. The hallway was clear. I closed the door and turned on the lights. The room was fairly large, with several commercial washing machines ranked against one wall. A bank of dryers faced them on the opposite side of the room, and in between were several long counters that held stacks and stacks of folded white sheets and towels. I put the duck on the floor, and it waddled off down the row of counters. "This is how they had it hidden on the yacht. Concealed among laundry."

"And those professional-thief types tend to be so predictable?" Susan asked.

I frowned and put the duck on the floor. "Watch the door."

The duck waddled at once over to the far side of the room, and bumped into some hanging laundry. I pulled the hanging sheets to one side, and found a large ventilation grate behind them. I knelt down, running my fingers and eyes over the edges of the grate, and found a pair of holes where screws had been. A quick tug on the grate had it off the wall, revealing a vent maybe three feet square. I stuck my head in and found a

ventilation shaft running between the walls. The duck waddled in and took a determined right.

“Air duct,” I said. I twisted out of the tuxedo jacket and absently ripped off the tie from around my neck. I stepped out of the clumsy shoes and rolled up my shirtsleeves, baring my shield bracelet to view. “Be right back.”

“Harry,” Susan began, her voice worried.

“I saw *Alien*. I’m not Tom Skerritt.” I winked at Susan, picked up the duck, and entered the air duct, moving as quietly as I could.

Evidently, it was very quiet. The duct ran straight, grates opening into utility rooms every fifteen or twenty feet. I had gone past three of the grates when I heard voices.

“This isn’t according to the deal,” came Marcone’s voice. It had the scratchy edges of a radio transmission to it.

Anna Valmont’s smooth British accent answered it from the other side of the next grate. “Neither was an early rendezvous. I don’t like it when a buyer changes the plan.”

A radio clicked. Marcone’s voice came through it, smooth and calm. “I assure you that I have no interest in breaking faith with your organization. It isn’t good business.”

“When I have confirmation of the transfer of funds, you’ll get the article. Not a second before.”

“My factor in Zurich—”

“Do you think I’m an idiot? This job has already cost us more than any of us bargained for. Clear off the bloody radio and contact me when you have something worth saying or I’ll destroy the bloody thing and leave.”

“Wait,” Marcone said. There was tension in his voice. “You can’t—”

“Can’t I?” Valmont answered. “Don’t fuck with me, Yank. And add another million to the bill for telling me my job. I’m calling off the deal if the money isn’t there in ten minutes. Out.”

I came up to the grate and found it sitting not quite squarely in its frame. Valmont must have entered the hotel and moved around through the air shafts. I peered out through the grate. Valmont had set up in a storage room of some kind. The only light in the room was a dim green shimmer that rose up from what must have been a palmtop computer. Valmont muttered something to herself beneath her breath, her eyes on the screen. She was wearing a lot of tight-fitting black clothing and a black baseball cap. She

wasn't wearing my coat, dammit, but I guess I couldn't have expected to find everything wrapped up in a nice package.

I checked the duck, setting it down facing toward me. It immediately walked in a little circle and pointed toward Anna Valmont.

The thief paced the room like a restless cat, eyes on the palmtop. My eyes adjusted to the dimness over the course of a few minutes of waiting, and I saw that Valmont was pacing back and forth around a tube with a carrying strap. The tube wasn't more than five or six feet from me.

I watched Valmont pace until her expression and steps froze, eyes locking hard on the palmtop. "Great Jupiter's balls," she said quietly. "He paid it."

Now or never. I put my hands on the grate and pushed it as gently as I could. It slid soundlessly from the wall and I set it to one side. Valmont was focused entirely on her little computer. If the prospect of payment distracted Valmont for a moment more, I'd be able to slip away with the Shroud, which would be very James Bond of me. Hopefully the tuxedo would help out with that. I needed only a few seconds to creep out, nip the Shroud, and get back into the vents.

I almost died when Valmont's radio crackled again and Marcone's voice said, "There. As agreed, plus your additional fee. Will that be sufficient?"

"Quite. You will find your merchandise in a storage closet in the basement."

Marcone's voice gained an edge. "Please be more specific."

I slipped out of the vents, thinking silent thoughts. A long stretch put my fingertips on the tube's carrying strap.

"If you wish," Valmont replied. "The article is in a locked room, in a courier's tube. The tube itself is outfitted with an incendiary. A radio transmitter in my possession has the capacity to disarm or to trigger the device. Once I am safely on my way from the city, I will disarm the device and notify you via telephone. Until that time, I suggest you do not try to open it."

I jerked my fingers away from the tube.

"Again you have altered our agreement," Marcone said. He said it in a voice as smooth and cold as the inside wall of a refrigerator.

"It does seem to be a seller's market."

"There are very few people able to speak about taking advantage of me."

Valmont let out a quiet, bitter little laugh. “Come, now. This is nothing more than an entirely reasonable piece of insurance,” Valmont said. “Be a good boy and your precious cloth is in no danger. Attempt to betray me, and you’ll have nothing.”

“And if the authorities find you on their own?” Marcone asked.

“You’ll need a broom and a dustpan when you come for the article. I should think you would be wise to do whatever you can to clear the path for me.” She turned the radio off.

I bit my lip, thinking furiously. Even if I took the Shroud now, Marcone would be upset when he didn’t get his hands on it. If he didn’t have Valmont killed, he’d at least tip off the police to her. Valmont, in turn, would destroy the Shroud. If I took it, I would have to move fast to get the Shroud away from the device. I couldn’t count on simply blowing the device out with magic. It was as likely to malfunction and explode as it was to just go dead.

I would need the transmitter too, and there was only one way to get it.

I stepped up behind Valmont and pressed the bill of the plastic duck against her spine. “Don’t move,” I said. “I’ll shoot.”

She stiffened. “Dresden?”

“Let me see your hands,” I said. She held them up, the green light of the palmtop showing columns of numbers. “Where’s the transmitter?”

“What transmitter?”

I pushed the duck against her a little harder. “I’ve had a long day too, Miss Valmont. The one you just told Marcone about.”

She let out a small sound of discomfort. “If you take it, Marcone will kill me.”

“Yeah, he takes his image seriously. You’d be smart to come with me and get protection from the authorities. Now where is the transmitter?”

Her shoulders slumped and she bowed her head forward for a moment. I felt a twinge of guilt. She had planned on being here with friends. They’d been killed. She was a young woman, alone in a strange land, and regardless of what happened, she wasn’t likely to come out of this situation ahead of the game. And here I was holding a duck to her back. I felt like a bully.

“My left jacket pocket,” Valmont said, her tone quiet. I reminded myself that I was a professional and reached into her pocket to get the transmitter.

She clobbered me.

One second, I was holding the duck to her back and reaching into her pocket. The next, I was falling to the ground with a bruise shaped like one of her elbows forming on my jaw. The light from the palmtop clicked out. A small red-tinted flashlight came on, and Valmont kicked the duck out of my hand. The beam of the flashlight followed the duck for a silent second, and then she laughed.

“A duck,” she said. She dipped a hand into her pocket and came out with a small silver semiautomatic. “I was fairly certain you wouldn’t shoot, but that goes a step beyond ridiculous.”

I’ve got to get a concealed-carry permit. “You won’t shoot either,” I said, and started to get up. “So you might as well put the gun d—”

She pointed the gun at my leg and pulled the trigger. Pain flashed through my leg and I let out an involuntary shout. I grabbed at my thigh as the red flashlight settled on me.

I pawed at my leg. I had a couple of smallish cuts, but I hadn’t been shot. The bullet had hit the concrete floor next to me and gouged a bite out of the concrete. A flying chip or two must have cut my leg.

“Terribly sorry,” Valmont said. “Were you saying something?”

“Nothing important,” I responded.

“Ah,” Valmont said. “Well, it would be bad etiquette to leave a corpse here for my buyer to clean up, so it seems as though I’ll be hand-delivering to Marcone after all. We can’t have you running off with what everyone is so excited over.”

“Marcone is the least of your worries,” I said.

“No, actually, he’s quite prominent among them.”

“Marcone isn’t going to sprout horns and claws and start tearing you apart,” I said. “Or at least, I don’t think he is. There’s another group after that Shroud. Like the thing from the ship this morning.”

I couldn’t see her face from the other end of the red flashlight, but her voice sounded a little shaky. “What was it?”

“A demon.”

“A real demon?” There was a strained tone in her voice, as though she couldn’t decide whether to laugh or sob. I’d heard it before. “You expect me to believe it was a literal demon?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re some sort of angel, I suppose.”

“Hell, no,” I said. “I’m just working for them. Sort of. Look, I know people who can protect you from those things. People who won’t hurt you. They’ll help.”

“I don’t need help,” Valmont said. “They’re dead, they’re both dead. Gaston, Francisca. My friends. Whoever these people, these *things* are, they can’t hurt me any more.”

The locked door of the storeroom screamed as something tore it off its hinges and out into the hall. The hallway lights poured in through the gap in a blinding flood, and I had to shield my eyes against them for a second.

I could see dim shapes, shadows in front of the light. One was lean and crouched, with shadowy tendrils of razor-edged hair slithering around it in a writhing cloud. One was sinuous and strong-looking, like a man who had traded its legs in on the scaled body of an enormous snake. Between them stood a shape that looked human, like a man in an overcoat, his hands in his pockets—but the shadows the shape cast writhed and boiled madly, making the lights flicker and swim in a nauseating fashion.

“Cannot hurt you any more,” said the central shape in a quietly amused, male voice. “No matter how many times I hear that one, it’s always a fresh challenge.”

Chapter Twenty

My eyes adjusted enough to make out some details. The demonic female with the Joan Jett hair, two sets of eyes, a glowing sigil, and vicious claws was the same Denarian who had attacked at the harbor that morning. The second demonic being was covered in dark grey scales flecked with bits of rust red. From shoulders to waist, he looked more or less human. From the neck up and the waist down, he looked like some kind of flattened serpent. No legs. Coils slithered out behind him, scales rasping over the floor. He too had the double pair of eyes, one set golden and serpentine, the other, inside the first, glowing faintly blue-green, matching the pulsing symbol of the same light that seemed to dance in the gleam of the scales of the snake's head.

One little, two little, three little Denarians, or so I judged the last of them. Of the three, he was the only one that looked human. He wore a tan trench coat, casually open. His clothes were tailor-fit to him and looked expensive. A slender grey tie hung loosely around his throat. He was a man of medium height and build, with short, dark hair streaked through with an off-center blaze of silver. His expression was mild, amused, and his dark eyes were half-closed and sleepy-looking. He spoke English with a faint British accent. "Well, well. What have we here? Our bold thief and her—"

I got the impression that he would have been glad to begin one of those trademark bantering conversations all the urbane bad guys seem to be such big fans of, but before he could finish the sentence Anna Valmont turned with her little pistol and shot him three times in the chest. I saw him jerk and twist. Blood abruptly stained his shirt and coat. She'd hit the heart or an artery.

The man blinked and stared at Valmont in shock, as more red spread over his shirt. He opened his coat a bit, and looked down at the spreading scarlet. I noted that the tie he wore wasn't a tie, as such. It looked like a piece of old grey rope, and though he wore it as apparent ornamentation, it was tied in a hangman's noose.

“I do not appreciate being interrupted,” the man said in a sharp and ugly tone. “I hadn’t even gotten around to the introductions. There are proprieties to observe, young woman.”

A girl after my own heart, Anna Valmont had a quick reply. She shot him some more.

He wasn’t five feet away. The blond thief aimed for the center of mass and didn’t miss him once. The man folded his arms as bullets hit him, tearing new wounds that bled freely. He rolled his eyes after the fourth shot, and made a rolling “move this along” gesture with his left hand until Valmont’s gun clicked empty, the slide open.

“Where was I,” he said.

“Proprieties,” purred the feminine demon with the wild hair. The word came out a little mangled, due to the heavy canines that dimpled her lips as she spoke. “Proprieties, Father.”

“There seems little point,” the man said. “Thief, you have stolen something I have an interest in. Give it to me at once and you are free to go your own way. Refuse me, and I will become annoyed with you.”

Anna Valmont’s upper lip had beaded with sweat, and she looked from her empty gun to the man in the trench coat with wide, wild eyes, frozen in confusion and obvious terror.

The gunshots would bring people running. I needed to buy a little time. I leaned up, fished a hand into Valmont’s jacket pocket, and drew out a small box of black plastic that looked vaguely like a remote control to a VCR. I held up the transmitter, put my thumb on it as if I knew what I was doing, and said to the man in the trench coat, “Hey, Bogart. You and the wonder twins back off or the bedsheet gets it.”

The man lifted his eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

I wagged the remote. “Click. Boom. No more Shroud.”

The snakeman hissed, body twisting in restless, lithe motion, and the demon-girl parted her lips in a snarl. The man between them stared at me for a moment, his eyes flat and empty, before he said, “You’re bluffing.”

“Like the bedsheet matters to me,” I said.

The man stared at me without moving. But his shadow did. It writhed and undulated, and the motion made me feel vaguely carsick. His eyes went from me to Valmont to the courier’s message tube on the floor. “A remote detonator, I take it. You do realize you are standing next to the device?”

I realized it. I had no idea how big the incendiary was. But that was all right, since I had no idea which button to push to set it off, either. “Yup.”

“You would kill yourself rather than surrender the Shroud?”

“Rather than letting *you* kill me.”

“Who said I would kill anyone?”

I glared at him and at the demon-girl and said, “Francisca Garcia mentioned it.”

The man’s shadow boiled but he watched me with flat, calculating eyes. “Perhaps we can reach an arrangement.”

“Which would be?”

He drew a heavy-caliber handgun from his pocket and pointed it at Anna Valmont. “Give me the remote and I won’t kill this young woman.”

“The demon groupie headman uses a gun? You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said.

“Call me Nicodemus.” He glanced at the revolver. “Trendy, I know, but one can only watch so many dismemberments before they become predictable.” He pointed the gun at the terror-stricken Valmont and said, “Shall I count to three?”

I threw on a puppet’s Transylvanian accent. “Count as high as you vant, but you von’t get one, one detonator, ah, ah, ah.”

“One,” Nicodemus said.

“Do you expect me to hand it over on reflex or something?”

“You’ve done such things repeatedly when there was a woman in danger, Harry Dresden. Two.”

This Nicodemus knew me. And he’d picked a pressure tactic that wasn’t going to take long, however it turned out, so he knew I was stalling for time. Crap. I wasn’t going to be able to bluff him. “Hold on,” I said.

He thumbed back the hammer of the revolver and aimed at Valmont’s head. “Thr—”

So much for cleverness. “All right,” I snapped, and I tossed the remote to him underhand. “Here you go.”

Nicodemus lowered the gun, turning to catch the remote in his left hand. I waited until his eyes flicked from Valmont to the remote.

And then I pulled up every bit of power I could muster in that instant, hurled my right hand forward, and snarled, “*Fuego!*”

Fire rose up from the floor in a wave as wide as the doorway and rolled forward in a surge of super-heated air. It expanded as it lashed out, and

slammed into Nicodemus's bloodied chest. The force of it threw him back across the hallway and into the wall on the opposite side. He didn't quite go through the wall, but only because there must have been a stud lined up with his spine. The drywall crumpled in from his shoulders to his hips, and his head snapped back in a whiplash of impact. It almost seemed that his shadow was thrown back with him, slapping wetly against the wall around him like blobs of tar.

The snakeman moved with blinding speed, slithering to one side of the blast. The demon-girl shrieked, and her bladed tresses gathered together in an effort to shield her as the fire and concussion threw her back and away from the door.

The heat was unbearable, an oven-hot flash that sucked the air from my lungs. Backwash from the explosion drove me back across the floor, rolling until I hit the wall myself. I cowered and shielded my face as the scarlet flames went out, replaced with a sudden cloud of ugly black smoke. My ears rang, and I couldn't hear anything but the hammering of my own heart.

The fire spell had been something I wouldn't have done if I'd had an option. That's why I had made a blasting rod. Down-and-dirty fast magic was difficult, dangerous, and likely to run out of control. The blasting rod helped me focus that kind of magic, contain it. It helped me avoid explosions that left heat burns on my lungs.

I fumbled around in the blinding smoke, unable to breathe and unable to see. I found a feminine wrist with one hand, followed it up to a shoulder, and found Anna Valmont. I hauled on her with one hand, found the courier's tube with the other, and crawled for the ventilation duct, hauling them both behind me.

There was air in the ventilation shaft, and Valmont coughed and stirred as I dragged her into it. Enough of the storage room had caught on fire that I had light enough to see. One of Valmont's eyebrows was gone, and one side of her face was red and blistered. I screamed, "Move!" at her as loudly as I could. Her eyes blinked with dull comprehension as I pushed her past me and toward the opening in the laundry room, and she started moving stiffly in front of me.

Valmont didn't crawl as quickly as I wanted her to, but then she wasn't the one closest to the fire and the monsters. My heart hammered in my ears and the shaft felt oppressively small. I knew that the demonic forms of the Denarians were tougher than either me or Anna Valmont. Unless I'd gotten

lethally lucky, they'd recover from the blast, and it wouldn't be long before they came after us. If we couldn't shake them or get into a car, and fast, they'd catch us, plain and simple. I shoved at Valmont, growing more frantic as my imagination turned up images of whipping tendrils cutting my legs to shreds, or venomous serpent fangs sinking into my calves as scaled hands dragged me backward by my ankles.

Valmont tumbled out of the air shaft and into the laundry room. I followed her closely enough to make me think of a program I'd seen about howler monkey mating habits. My ears were starting to get their act together, and I heard the high, buzzing ring of a fire alarm in the hallway outside.

"Harry?" Susan said. She looked between Valmont and me and helped the woman to her feet. "What's happening?"

I got to my feet and choked out, "We need to be gone. Right now."

Susan nodded at me, and then shoved me. Hard. I went stumbling sideways and into the wall of drying machines, slamming my shoulder and head. I looked back to see the demon-girl's hair pureeing its way out of the vents, and then the rest of the Denarian came out, scales, claws and all, rolling to all fours with dizzying grace.

Fast as the Denarian was, Susan was faster. The demon-girl came up with those rich lips split into a snarl, and Susan drove her heel right into them. She kicked hard enough that something crunched, and the demon-girl screamed in surprise and pain.

"Susan!" I shouted. "Look—"

I was going to say "out" but there wasn't time. Half a dozen bunches of tendrils drove at Susan like spears.

Susan dodged them. All of them. She had to fling herself across the room to the washing machines to do it, and the Denarian regained her balance and pursued. More blades drove toward Susan, but she ducked to one side, one hand ripping open the door to one of the washing machines. Susan slammed the door down on the demon-girl's hair, and without missing a beat kicked the Denarian's reverse-jointed knee in sideways.

The demon-girl shrieked in pain, struggling. I knew she was strong enough to pull free of the washing machine before long, but for the moment she was trapped. Susan reached up and tore a fold-down ironing board from where it was mounted on a nearby wall. Then she spun around and slammed it edge-on into the Denarian. Susan hit her three times, in the wounded leg,

the small of the back, and the back of the neck. The Denarian shrieked at the first two blows and then collapsed into a limp heap at the third.

Susan stared down at the demon-girl for a moment, dark eyes hard and hot. The ironing board's metal frame was now bent and twisted from the force of the blows Susan had dealt with it. Susan took a deep breath and then tossed the ironing board to one side, straightened her hair with one hand, and commented, "Bitch."

"Wow," I said.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Susan asked. She wasn't looking at me.

"Yeah," I said. "Wow."

Susan walked over to the counter, where she'd left her clutch. She opened it, got the phone, and said, "I'll have Martin pick us up at the exit."

I shook myself into motion and helped draw Anna Valmont to her feet. "What exit?"

Susan pointed wordlessly at a fire-escape diagram on the wall, still not looking at me. She spoke maybe a dozen quiet words into the phone and then folded it shut. "He's coming. They're evacuating the hotel. We'll need to—"

I felt a surge of magical energies. The air around Susan grew darker and then coalesced into a cloud of shadows. Within a heartbeat, the cloud deepened, then solidified into a writhing tangle of snakes of all sizes and colors wrapped all around Susan. The air suddenly filled with the sound of hissing and buzzing rattles. I saw the snakes begin to strike, fangs flashing. Susan let out a scream.

I turned to the doorway and saw the snakeman Denarian standing in it. One not-quite-human hand was held out toward Susan. His serpent mouth was rolling out hissing sounds, and I could feel the thrumming tension in the air between the Denarian's outstretched hand and Susan.

Rage flooded over me, and I barely stopped myself from throwing out another blast of raw spellfire at the snakeman. With that much rage behind it, I'd probably have killed everyone in the room. Instead, I reached out to the air in the hallway beyond the Denarian and pulled it all toward him, the words, "*Ventas servitas!*" thundering off my lips.

A column of wind hit the snakeman from behind, lifted him from the floor, and flung him across the room. He slammed into the wall of washing machines, driving a foot-and-a-half-deep dent in one of them, and let out a wailing, hissing whistle of what I hoped was surprise and pain.

Susan flung herself onto the ground, rolling, tearing at snakes, flinging them away. I could see flashes of her honey-brown skin and saw the black dress tearing. Droplets of red blood appeared on the floor near her, on her skin, and on the discarded snakes, but they were hanging on. She was tearing herself apart in her panic to remove the snakes.

I closed my eyes for a second that felt a year long, and gathered together enough will to attempt to disrupt the Denarian's spell. I formed the counterspell in my head, and hoped to God that I didn't misjudge how much power I'd need to undo it. Too little and the spell might actually get stronger, like steel forged in a flame. Too much, and the counterspell could unleash the power of both spells in a random, destructive flash of energies. I focused my will on the cloak of serpents over Susan and lashed out at them with my power, letting loose the counterspell with a snarled, "*Entropus!*"

The counterspell worked. The serpents writhed and thrashed around for a second, and then imploded, vanishing, leaving behind nothing but a coating of clear, glistening slime in their place.

Susan scrambled away, still gasping, still bleeding. Her skin shone, wet and slick with the residue of the conjured serpents. Rivulets of blood laced her arms and one leg, and thick black bruises banded the skin of one arm, one leg, her throat, and one side of her face.

I stared for a second. The darkness on her skin wasn't bruising. It gained shape, as I watched, resolving itself from vague discoloration to the dark, sharp lines of a tattoo. I watched the tattoo come into being over her skin, all curves and points, Maori-style. It began on her cheek under one eye and wound down around her face, around the back of her neck, and on down over one collarbone and into the neckline of her evening gown. It emerged again winding down along her left arm and left leg, finishing at the back of her hand and over the bridge of her left foot. She hauled herself to her feet, panting and shaking, the swirling designs lending a savage aspect to her appearance. She stared at me for a moment, her eyes dark and enlarged, the irises too big to be human. They filled with tears that didn't fall, and she looked away.

The snakeman recovered enough to slither his way vertical again, looking around. He focused yellow snake eyes on Susan and let out a surprised wheeze. "Fellowship," he rasped, the word a hiss. "Fellowship here." The Denarian looked around and spotted the courier's tube still

hanging by its strap from my shoulder. Its tail lashed about and the Denarian darted toward me.

I slipped to one side, keeping a table between us, and shouted, “Susan!”

The snakeman struck the table with one arm and broke it in half. Then he came at me over the pieces—until Susan ripped a dryer out of the wall and threw it at his head.

The Denarian saw it coming and dodged at the last second, but the dryer clipped him and sent him sprawling. He hissed again, and slithered away from both of us, shooting into the air shaft and out of sight.

I panted and watched the vent for a second, but he didn’t reappear. Then I hauled the still-stunned Valmont toward the door and asked Susan, “Fellowship?”

Her lips pressed together, and she averted her too-large eyes. “Not now.”

I ground my teeth in frustration and worry, but she was right. The smoke was getting thicker, and we had no way of knowing if tall, green, and scaly would be reappearing. I pulled Valmont along with me, made sure I still had the Shroud, and followed Susan out the door. She ran along barefoot without breaking stride, and between the pain in my lungs and the blond thief’s torpor, I could barely keep up with her.

We went up a flight of stairs and Susan opened a door on a pair of gorillas in red security blazers. They tried to stop us. Susan threw a right and a left cross, and we walked over them on our way out. I kind of felt bad for them. Getting punched out by a dame was not going to pad their goon résumés.

We left the building through a side door, and the dark limo was waiting, Martin standing beside it. I could hear sirens, people shouting, the blaring horns of fire vehicles trying to get to the hotel.

Martin took one look at Susan and stiffened. Then he hurried over to us.

“Take her,” I rasped. Martin picked up Valmont and carried her to the limo like a sleepy child. I followed him. Martin put the blond thief in and got behind the wheel. Susan slipped in after her, and I slung the tube off my shoulder to get in behind her.

Something grabbed me from behind, wrapping around my waist like a soft, squishy rope. I slapped at the car door, but I managed only to slam it shut as I was hauled back off my feet. I landed on the ground near the fire door.

“Harry!” Susan shouted.

“Go!” I gasped. I looked at Martin, behind the wheel of the limo. I grabbed the Shroud and tried to throw it at the car, but something pinned my arm down before I could. “Get out! Get help!”

“No!” Susan screamed, and tried for the door.

Martin was faster. I heard locks click shut on the limo. Then the engine roared, and the car screamed into the street and away.

I tried to run. Something tangled my feet and I couldn’t even get off the ground. I turned to find Nicodemus standing over me, the hangman’s noose the only thing he wore that wasn’t soaked with blood. His shadow, his freaking *shadow* was wrapped around my waist, my legs, my hands, and it moved and wriggled like something alive. I reached for my magic, but the grasping shadow-coils grew suddenly cold, colder than ice or frosted steel, and my power crumbled to frozen powder beneath it.

One of the shadow-coils took the courier’s tube from my numbed hands, curling through the air to hand it to Nicodemus. “Excellent,” he said. “I have the Shroud. And I have you, Harry Dresden.”

“What do you want?” I rasped.

“Just to talk,” Nicodemus assured me. “I want to have a polite conversation with you.”

“Blow me.”

His eyes darkened with cold anger, and he drew out the heavy revolver.

Great, Harry, I thought. That’s what you get for trying to be a hero. You get to eat a six-pack of nine-millimeter bon-bons.

But Nicodemus didn’t shoot me.

He clubbed me over the head with the butt of the gun.

Light flashed in my eyes, and I started to fall. I was out before my cheek hit the ground.

Chapter Twenty-one

The cold woke me.

I came to my senses in complete darkness, under a stream of freezing water. My head hurt enough to make the wound on my leg feel pleasant by comparison. My wrists and shoulders hurt even more. My neck felt stiff, and it took me a second to realize that I was vertical, my hands bound together over my head. My feet were tied too. My muscles started jumping and twitching under the cold water and I tried to get out from under it. The ropes prevented me. The cold started cutting into me. It hurt a lot.

I tried to get loose, working my limbs methodically, testing the ropes, trying to free my hands. I couldn't tell if I was making any progress. Thanks to the cold, I couldn't even feel my wrists, and it was too dark to see.

I got more scared by the moment. If I couldn't work my hands free, I might have to risk using magic to scorch the ropes. Hell, I was cold enough that the thought of burning myself had a certain appeal. But when I started trying to reach out for the power to manage it, it slithered away from me. Then I understood. Running water. Running water grounds magical energies, and every time I tried to get something together the water washed it away.

The cold grew more intense, more painful. I couldn't escape it. I panicked, thrashing wildly, dull pain flaring in my bound limbs, and fading away into numbness under the cold. I screamed a few times, I think. I remember choking on water while I tried.

I didn't have much energy. After a few minutes, I hung panting and hurting and too tired to struggle any more, the water only getting colder, bound limbs screaming.

I hurt, but I figured the pain couldn't possibly get any worse.

A few hours went by and showed me how wrong I was.

A door opened and firelight stabbed at my eyes. I would have flinched if I had been able to move that much. A couple of large, blocky men came

through the door carrying actual flaming torches. The light let me see the room. The wall beside the door was finished stone, but the walls all around me were a mishmash of fallen rubble and ancient brick, and one was made of curved concrete—some kind of piping for the city’s water system, I supposed. The ceiling was all rough earth, some stone, some roots. Water poured down from somewhere, over me, and vanished down a groove worn in the floor.

They had taken me to Undertown, a network of caves, ruined buildings, tunnels, and ancient construction that underlay the city of Chicago. Undertown was dark, damp, cold, full of various creatures that shunned sunlight and human company, and might have been radioactive. The tunnels where the Manhattan Project had been housed were just the start of Undertown. The people who knew of its existence didn’t come down here—not even wizards like me—unless matters were desperate.

No one knew their way around down here. And no one would be coming to find me.

“Been working out pretty hard,” I muttered to the two men, my voice a croak. “One of you guys got a cold beer? Maybe a freeze pop?”

They didn’t so much as look at me. One man took up a position on the wall to my left. The other took the wall to my right.

“I should have cleaned up, I know,” I told them. “If I’d realized I was having company I’d have taken a shower. Mopped the floor.”

No answer. No expression on their faces. No nothing.

“Tough room,” I said.

“You’ll have to forgive them,” said Nicodemus. He came through the door and into the torchlight, freshly dressed, shaved, and showered. He wore pajama pants, slippers, and a smoking jacket of Hugh Hefner vintage. The grey noose still circled his throat. “I like to encourage discretion in my employees, and I have very high standards. Sometimes it makes them seem standoffish.”

“You don’t let your goons talk?” I asked.

He removed a pipe from his pocket, along with a small tin of Prince Albert tobacco. “I remove their tongues.”

“I guess your human resources department isn’t exactly under siege, is it,” I said.

He tamped tobacco into his pipe and smiled. “You’d be surprised. I offer an excellent dental plan.”

“You’re going to need it when the formal-wear police knock your teeth out. This is a rented tux.”

His dark eyes glittered with something ugly. “Little Maggie’s youngest. You’ve grown up to be a man of considerable strengths.”

I stared at him for a long second, shivering and startled into silence. My mother’s name was Margaret.

And I was her youngest? As far as I knew, I had been an only child. But I knew precious little of my parents. My mother died giving birth to me. My father had suffered an aneurism when I had been about six years old. I had a picture of my father on a piece of yellowed newspaper I kept in a photo album. It showed him performing at a children’s benefit dinner in a small town in Ohio. I had a Polaroid instant picture showing my father and my mother, her stomach round with pregnancy, standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial. I wore my mother’s pentacle amulet around my neck. It was scarred and dented, but that’s to be expected when you run around using it to kill werewolves.

They were the only concrete things I had left of my parents. I’d heard stories before, that my mother hadn’t run with a very pleasant crowd. Nothing of substance, just inferences made from passing comments. I’d had a demon tell me that my parents had been murdered, and the same creature had hinted that I might have relatives. I’d shied away from the whole concept, deciding that the demon had been a dirty liar.

And given that Nicodemus and Chauncy worked for the same organization, I probably couldn’t trust the Denarian either. He was probably lying. Probably.

But what if he wasn’t?

Keep him talking, I decided. *Fish for information*. It wasn’t like I had a lot to lose, and knowledge was power. I might find out something that would give me some kind of edge.

Nicodemus lit the pipe with a match and puffed on it a few times, watching my face with a little smile on his lips. He read me, easily. I avoided looking at his eyes.

“Harry—may I call you Harry?”

“Would it matter if I told you no?”

“It would tell me something about you,” he said. “I’d like to get to know you, and I would rather not make this a trip to the dentist if I can avoid it.”

I glared at him, shivering under the freezing water, the bump on my head pounding, and my limbs aching beneath the ropes. “I’ve got to ask—just what kind of freaking dentist do you *go* to? Ortho de Sade? Smokin’ Joe Mengele, DDS?”

Nicodemus puffed on the pipe and regarded my bonds. Another expressionless man came in, this one older, thin, with thick grey hair. He pushed a room-service cart. He unfolded a small table and set it up over to one side, where the water wouldn’t splash on it. Nicodemus toyed with the bowl of his pipe. “Dresden, may I be frank with you?”

I figured the cart would open up to show an array of hardware intended to frighten me with its potential torture applications. “If it’s okay with Frank, I guess I don’t mind.”

Nicodemus watched the valet set out three folding chairs and cover the table with a white cloth. “You have faced a great many dangerous beings. But by and large, they have been idiots. I try to avoid that whenever I am able, and that is why you are bound and held under running water.”

“You’re afraid of me,” I said.

“Boy, you’ve destroyed three rival practitioners of the Arts, a noble of the vampire Courts, and even one of the Faerie Queens. They underestimated you as well as your allies. I don’t. I suppose you could think of your current position as a compliment.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, shaking freezing water out of my eyes. “You’re way too kind.”

Nicodemus smiled. The valet opened the cart and something far more diabolical than torture hardware was there. It was breakfast. The old valet started setting out food on the table. Hash browns. Some cheese. Some biscuits, bacon, sausages, pancakes, toast, fruit. And coffee, dear God. Hot coffee. The smell hit my stomach, and even frozen as it was it started crawling around on the inside of my abdomen, trying to figure out how to get away and get some food.

Nicodemus sat down, and the valet poured him some coffee. I guess pouring his own was beneath him. “I did try to keep you out of this affair.”

“Yeah. You seem like such a sweet guy. You’re the one who edited the prophecy Ulsharavas told me about?”

“You’ve no idea how difficult it is to waylay an angelic messenger.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “So why’d you do it?”

Nicodemus was not too important to add his own cream, no sugar. His spoon clinked on the cup. "I have a fond memory or two of your mother. It cost me little to attempt it. So why not?"

"That's the second time you've mentioned her," I said.

"Yes. I respected her. Which is quite unusual for me."

"You respected her so much you snatched me and brought me here. I see."

Nicodemus waved his hand. "It worked out that way. I needed someone of a certain metaphysical mass. You interfered in my business, you were convenient, and you fit the recipe."

Recipe? "What recipe?"

He sipped at his coffee and closed his eyes in enjoyment. The bastard. "I take it that this is the portion of the conversation where I reveal my plans to you?"

"What have you got to lose?"

"And apparently you expect me to tell you of any vulnerabilities I might have as well. I am wounded by the lack of professional respect this implies."

I ground my teeth. "Chicken."

He picked up a piece of bacon and nibbled at it. "It is enough for you to know that one of two things will happen."

"Oh, yeah?" Master of repartee, that's me.

"Indeed. Either you will be freed and sit down to enjoy a nice breakfast..." He picked up a slightly curved and sharp-looking knife from the table. "Or I will cut your throat as soon as I finish eating."

He said it scary—without any melodrama to it at all. Matter-of-fact. The way most people say that they need to take out the trash. "Ye olde 'join up or die' ultimatum," I said. "Gee, no matter how many times I get it, that one never goes out of style."

"Your history indicates that you are too dangerous to leave alive, I'm afraid—and I am on a schedule," Nicodemus said.

A schedule? He was working against a time limit, then. "I'm really inconvenient that way. Don't take it personal."

"I don't," he assured me. "This isn't easy for either of us. I'd use some sort of psychological technique on you, but I haven't gotten caught up on some of the more recent developments." He took a piece of toast and

battered it. "Then again, I suppose not many psychologists can drive chariots, so perhaps it balances out."

The door opened again, and a young woman came into the room. She had long, sleep-tousled dark hair, dark eyes, and a face a little too lean to be conventionally pretty. She wore a kimono of red silk belted loosely, so that gaps appeared as she moved. She evidently didn't have anything on underneath it. Like I said, Undertown is cold.

The girl yawned and stretched lazily, watching me as she did. She too spoke with an odd, vaguely British accent. "Good morning."

"And you, little one. Harry Dresden, I don't believe you've been introduced to my daughter, Deirdre."

I eyed the girl, who seemed vaguely familiar. "We haven't met."

"Yes, we have," Deirdre said, reaching out to pluck a strawberry from the breakfast table. She took a slow bite from it, lips sealed around the fruit. "At the harbor."

"Ah. Madame Medusa, I presume."

Deirdre sighed. "I've never heard that one before. It's so amusing. May I kill him, Father?"

"Not just yet," Nicodemus said. "But if it comes to that, he's mine."

Deirdre nodded sleepily. "Have I missed breakfast?"

Nicodemus smiled at her. "Not at all. Give us a kiss."

She slid onto his lap and did. With tongue. Yuck. After a moment she rose, and Nicodemus held one of the chairs out for her as she sat down. He reseated himself and said, "There are three chairs here, Dresden. Are you sure you wouldn't like to take breakfast with us?"

I started to tell him what he could do with his third chair, but the smell of food stopped me. I suddenly felt desperately, painfully hungry. The water got colder. "What did you have in mind?"

Nicodemus nodded to one of the goons. The man walked over to me, drawing a jewelry box out of his pocket. He opened it, offering it out to me.

I mimed a gasp. "But this is so sudden."

The goon glared. Nicodemus smiled. Inside the jewelry box was an ancient silver coin, like the one I'd seen in the alley behind the hospital. The tarnish on the coin was in the shape of another sigil.

"You like me. You really like me," I said without enthusiasm. "You want me to join up?"

“You needn’t if you do not wish to,” Nicodemus said. “I just want you to hear our side of things before you make up your mind to die needlessly. Accept the coin. Have some breakfast with us. We can talk. After that, if you don’t want to have anything to do with me, you may leave.”

“You’d just let me go. Sure.”

“If you accept the coin, I doubt I’d be able to stop you.”

“So what says I wouldn’t turn around and use it against you?”

“Nothing,” Nicodemus said. “But I am a great believer in the benevolence of human nature.”

Like hell he was. “Do you actually think you could convince me to join up with you?”

“Yes,” he said. “I know you.”

“Do not.”

“Do too,” he replied. “I know more about you than you do yourself.”

“Such as?”

“Such as why you chose this kind of life for yourself. To appoint yourself protector of mortal kind, and to make yourself the enemy of any who would do them harm. To live outcast from your own kind, laughed at and mocked by most mortals. Living in a hovel, barely scraping by. Spurning wealth and fame. Why do you do it?”

“I’m a disciple of the Tao of Peter Parker, obviously,” I said.

I guess Nicodemus was a DC Comics fan, because he didn’t get it. “It is all you will allow yourself, and I know why.”

“All right. Why?”

“Because you are ruled by fear. You are afraid, Dresden.”

I said, “Of what?”

“Of what you could be if you ever let yourself stray from the right-hand path,” Nicodemus said. “Of the power you could use. You’ve thought about what it might be like to bend the world to your will. The things you could have. The people. Some part of you has considered and found joy in the idea of using your abilities to take what you wish. And you are afraid of that joy. So you drive yourself toward martyrdom instead.”

I started to deny his words. But I couldn’t. He was right, or at least not wholly wrong. My voice came out subdued. “Everyone has thoughts like that sometimes.”

“No,” Nicodemus said, “they don’t. Most people never consider such actions. It never crosses their minds. The average mortal would have no

sure way of taking that kind of power. But for you, it's different. You may pretend you are like them. But you are not."

"That's not true," I replied.

"Of course it is," Nicodemus said. "You might not like to admit it, but that makes it no less true. It's denial. There are a number of ways you express it in your life. You don't want to see what you are, so you have very few pictures of yourself. No mirrors, either."

I ground my teeth. "I'm not different in any way that matters. I'm not any better than anyone else. We all put our pants on one leg at a time."

"Granted," Nicodemus said. "But a century from now, your mortal associates will be rotting in the earth, whereas, barring amputation or radical shifts in fashion, you will still be putting your pants on one leg at a time. All these allies and friends you have made will be withered and gone, while you are just beginning to come into your full strength. You look like a mortal, Dresden. But make no mistake. You aren't one."

"Oh, shut up."

"You are different. You are a freak. In a city of millions, you are all but alone."

"Which explains my dating life," I said, but I couldn't put much zing in the words. Something in my throat felt heavy.

Nicodemus had the valet pour coffee for Deirdre, but he spooned sugar into it himself. "You're afraid, but you don't have to be. You're above them, Dresden. There's an entire world waiting for you. Uncounted paths you could take. Allies who would stand with you over the years. Who would accept you instead of scorning you. You could discover what happened to your parents. Avenge them. Find your family. Find a place where you truly belonged."

He'd chosen to use words that struck hard on the oldest wound in me, a child's pain that had never fully healed. It hurt to hear those words. It stirred up a senseless old hope, a yearning. It made me feel lost. Empty.

Alone.

"Harry," Nicodemus said, his voice almost compassionate. "I used to be much as you are now. You are trapped. You are lying to yourself. You pretend to be like any other mortal because you are too terrified to admit that you aren't."

I didn't have an answer for that. The silver coin gleamed, still offered out to me.

Nicodemus laid one hand on the knife again. "I'm afraid I must ask you for an immediate decision."

Deirdre looked at the knife and then at me, eyes hot. She licked some spilled sugar off the rim of her coffee cup, and remained silent.

What if I did take the coin? If Nicodemus was on the level, I could at least live to fight another day. I had no doubts that Nicodemus would kill me, as he had Gaston LaRouche, Francisca Garcia, and that poor bastard Butters had cut into. There was nothing stopping him, and with the water still running over me, I doubted that even my death curse would be at one hundred percent.

I couldn't stop myself from imagining what it would feel like to bleed to death, there under the cold water. A hot, burning line on my throat. Dizziness and cold. Weakness fading into warmth that became perfect, endless darkness. Death.

God help me, I didn't want to die.

But I'd seen the poor bastard Ursiel had enslaved and driven mad. What he'd suffered was worse than death. And chances were that if I took the coin, the demon that came with it might coerce or corrupt me into the same thing. I'm not a saint. I'm not even particularly sterling, morally speaking. I've had dark urges before. I've been fascinated by them. Attracted to them. And more than once, I've given in to them.

It was a weakness that the demon in the ancient coin could exploit. I wasn't immune to temptation. The demon, the Fallen, would drown me in it. It's what the Fallen do.

I made my decision.

Nicodemus watched me, eyes steady, his knife hand perfectly still.

"Lead us not into temptation," I said. "But deliver us from evil. Isn't that how it goes?"

Deirdre licked her lips. The goon shut the box and stepped back.

"Are you certain, Dresden?" Nicodemus said in a quiet voice. "This is your very last chance."

I slumped weakly. There didn't seem to be much of a point to bravado anymore. I'd made the call, and that was that. "I'm certain. Fuck off, Nick."

Nicodemus stared at me impassively for a moment. Then he stood up with the knife and said, "I suppose I've had enough breakfast."

Chapter Twenty-two

Nicodemus walked over to me, his expression somewhat distracted. I realized with a chill that he looked like a man planning his activities for the day. To Nicodemus, I wasn't a person anymore. I was an item on his checklist, a note in his appointment book. He would feel no differently about cutting my throat than he would about putting down a check mark.

When he got within arm's reach, I couldn't stop myself from trying to get away from him. I thrashed at the ropes, hanging on to the desperate hope that one of them might break and give me a chance to fight, to run, to live. The ropes didn't break. I didn't get loose. Nicodemus watched me until I'd exhausted myself again.

Then he took a handful of my hair and pulled my chin up and back, twisting my head to my right. I tried to stop him, but I was immobilized and exhausted.

"Be still," he said. "I'll make it clean."

"Do you want the bowl, Father?" Deirdre asked.

Nicodemus's expression flickered with annoyance. His voice came out tight and impatient. "Where is my mind today? Porter, bring it to me."

The grey-haired valet opened the door and left the room.

A heartbeat later there was a wheezing grunt, and Porter flew back through the doorway and landed on his back. He let out a pained croak and curled into a fetal position.

Nicodemus sighed, turning. "Bother. What now?"

Nicodemus had looked bored when Anna Valmont emptied her gun into him. When I'd blasted a Nicodemus-shaped dent in the drywall of the hotel, he'd come through it without a ruffled hair. But when he saw the valet laying on the ground before the open door, Nicodemus's face went pale, his eyes widened, and he took a pair of quick steps to stand behind me, his knife at my throat. Even his shadow recoiled, rolling back away from the open door.

"The Jap," Nicodemus snarled. "Kill him."

There was a second of startled silence, and then the goons went for their guns. The one nearest the door didn't get his weapon out of its holster. Shiro, still in the outfit he'd worn at McAnnally's, came through the opening in a flash of black and white and red, his cane in his hand. He drove the end of the cane into Goon A's neck, and the thug dropped to the ground.

Goon B got his gun out and pointed it at Shiro. The old man bobbed to his left and then smoothly rolled right. The gun went off, and sparks flew up from two of the walls as the bullet ricocheted. Shiro drew *Fidelacchius* clear of its wooden sheath as he spun closer to the goon, the movement so fast that the sword looked like a blurred sheet of shining steel. Goon B's gun went flying through the air, his shooting hand still gripping it. The man stared at the stump at the end of his arm as blood gouted from it, and Shiro spun again, one heel rising to chin level. The kick broke something in the wounded goon's jaw, and the man collapsed to the damp floor.

Shiro had taken out three men in half as many seconds, and he hadn't stopped moving. *Fidelacchius* flashed again, and the chair beneath Deirdre collapsed, spilling her onto the floor. The old man promptly stepped on her wealth of dark hair, whirled the sword, and brought its tip down to rest against the back of Deirdre's neck.

The room became almost completely silent. Shiro kept his blade to Deirdre's neck, and Nicodemus did the same to mine. The little old man didn't look like the same person I'd talked to. Not that he had physically changed, so much as that the sheer presence of him was different—his features hard as stone, weathering the years only to grow stronger. When he had moved, it had been with a dancer's grace, speed, and skill. His eyes flashed with a silent strength that had been concealed before, and his hands and forearms were corded with muscle. The sword's blade gleamed red with blood and torchlight.

Nicodemus's shadow edged a bit farther back from the old man.

I think the freezing water was blending in with my sudden surge of hope and making me a little loopy. I found myself drunkenly singing, "Speed of lightning! Roar of thunder! Fighting all who rob or plunder! Underdog!"

"Be quiet," Nicodemus said.

"You sure?" I asked. "'Cause I could do Mighty Mouse if you'd rather. Underdog had this whole substance-use issue anyway." Nicodemus pressed the knife a bit harder, but my mouth was on autopilot. "That looked fast. I

mean, I'm not much of a fencer, but that old man looked amazingly quick to me. Did he look that quick to you? Bet that sword could go right through you and you wouldn't even realize it until your face fell on your feet."

I heard Nicodemus's teeth grind.

"Harry," Shiro said quietly. "Please."

I shut up, and stood there with a knife at my throat, shivering, aching, and hoping.

"The wizard is mine," Nicodemus said. "He's through. You know that. He chose to be a part of this."

"Yes," Shiro said.

"You cannot take him from me."

Shiro glanced pointedly at the goons lying on the floor, and then at the captive he held pinned down. "Maybe yes. Maybe no."

"Take your chances with it and the wizard dies. You've no claim of redemption here."

Shiro was quiet for a moment. "Then we trade."

Nicodemus laughed. "My daughter for the wizard? No. I've plans for him, and his death will serve me as well now as later. Harm her, and I kill him now."

Shiro regarded the Denarian steadily. "I did not mean your daughter."

I suddenly got a sick feeling in my stomach.

I almost heard Nicodemus's smile. "Very clever, old man. You knew I'd not pass the opportunity by."

"I know you," Shiro said.

"Then you should know that your offer isn't enough," Nicodemus said. "Not by half."

Shiro's face did not show any surprise. "Name it."

Nicodemus's voice dropped lower. "Swear to me that you will make no effort to escape. That you will summon no aid. That you will not release yourself quietly."

"And let you keep me for years? No. But I will give you this day. Twenty-four hours. It is enough."

I shook my head at Shiro. "Don't do this. I knew what I was doing. Michael will need your—"

Nicodemus delivered a swift jab to my right kidney and I lost my breath. "Be silent," he said. He focused his attention on Shiro and inclined his head slowly. "Twenty-four hours. Agreed."

Shiro mirrored the gesture. "Now. Let him go."

"Very well," Nicodemus said. "As soon as you release my daughter and lay down your sword, the wizard will go free. I swear it."

The old knight only smiled. "I know the value of your promises. And you know the value of mine."

I felt an eager tension in my captor. He leaned forward and said, "Swear it."

"I do," Shiro said. And as he did, he placed his palm lightly along the base of his sword's blade. He lifted it to show a straight cut on his hand, already dribbling blood. "Set him free. I will take his place as you demand."

Nicodemus's shadow writhed and boiled on the ground at my feet, bits of it lashing hungrily toward Shiro. The Denarian let out a harsh laugh, and the knife left my neck. He made a couple of quick movements, cutting the rope holding my wrists.

Without the support of my bonds, I fell. My body screamed in pain. It hurt so much that I didn't notice him cutting my feet free until it was done. I didn't make any noise. Partly because I was too proud to let Nicodemus know how bad I felt. Partly because I didn't have enough breath to whimper anyway.

"Harry," Shiro said. "Get up."

I tried. My legs and feet were numb.

Shiro's voice changed, carrying a quiet note of authority and command. "Get up."

I did it, barely. The wound on my leg felt hot and painful, and the muscle around it twitched and clenched involuntarily.

"Foolishness," Nicodemus commented.

"Courage," Shiro said. "Harry, come over here. Get behind me."

I managed to lurch to Shiro's side. The old man never looked away from Nicodemus. My head spun a bit and I almost lost my balance. My legs felt like dead wood from the knees down, and my back had started cramping. I ground my teeth and said, "I don't know how far I can walk."

"You must," Shiro said. He knelt down by Deirdre, rested his knee on her spine, and wrapped one arm around her throat. She began to move, but the old man applied pressure, and Deirdre went still again with a whimper of discomfort. That done, Shiro gave *Fidelacchius* a flick, and the beads of blood upon it sprinkled against one wall. He sheathed the blade in a liquid

movement, drew the cane-sheath from his belt, and then passed the hilt of the sword back toward me. "Take it."

"Uh," I said. "I don't have a real good record with handling these things."

"Take it."

"Michael and Sanya might not be too happy with me if I do."

Shiro was quiet for a moment before he said, "They will understand. Take it now."

I swallowed and did. The wooden hilt of the sword felt too warm for the room, and I could sense a buzz of energy emanating from it in rippling waves. I made sure I had a good grip on it.

Shiro said quietly, "They will come for you. Go. Second right. Ladder up."

Nicodemus watched me as I fell back through the doorway into the dimness of the hall beyond it. I stared at Shiro for a moment. He knelt on the floor, still holding Deirdre's neck at the breaking point, his eyes on Nicodemus. From the back, I could see the wrinkled skin on the back of his neck, the age spots on his freshly shaved scalp. Nicodemus's shadow had grown to the size of a movie screen, and it covered the back wall and part of the floor, twitching and writhing slowly closer to Shiro.

I turned and headed down the tunnel as quickly as I could. Behind me, I heard Nicodemus say, "Keep your word, Japan. Release my daughter."

I looked back. Shiro released the girl and stood up. She flung herself away from him, and as she did Nicodemus's shadow rolled forward like an ocean wave and crashed over the old Knight. One moment, he was there. The next, the room where he stood went totally black, filled with the rasping, seething mass of Nicodemus's demon shadow.

"Kill the wizard," Nicodemus snarled. "Get the sword."

Deirdre let out wild, primal scream from somewhere inside the darkness. I heard ripping, tearing sounds. I heard popping noises that might have been bones breaking or joints being dislocated. Then I heard the steely, slithery rasp of Deirdre's hairdo, and half a dozen metallic strands whipped toward me from the darkness.

I shuffled back, and the blades fell short of me. I turned around and started hobbling away. I didn't want to leave Shiro there, but if I'd stayed, I only would have died with him. My shame dug at me like a knife.

More blades emerged from the dark, presumably while Deirdre was still transforming into her demonic aspect. It couldn't be long before she finished and came flashing down the hallway after me. If I couldn't get myself clear, I'd be done for.

So once again I ran like hell. And hated myself for doing it.

Chapter Twenty-three

The shrieks died off more quickly than I would have thought, and I did my best to keep moving in a straight line. It was mostly dark. I was aware of a couple of doorways passing on my left, and I stumbled along until I found the second one on my right. I took it, and found a ladder that led up some kind of pipe or shaft, with a light shining down from about seven hundred miles above.

I got a couple of rungs off the floor when something hit me at knee level, grabbed my legs, and twisted. I fell off the ladder, the cane clattering onto the floor. I had a brief impression of a man's face, and then my attacker let out a wordless snarl and hit me hard on my left eye.

I ducked and rolled with the punch. The good news was that it didn't tear my face off or anything, which meant that the person throwing the punch was probably another mortal. The bad news was that he was built more heavily than me and probably had a lot more muscle. He piled atop me, trying to grasp my throat.

I hunched my shoulders and ducked my head as much as I could, and kept him from squeezing my head off. He threw another punch at me, but it's tough to throw a good punch when you're rolling around on the floor in the dark. He missed, and I started fighting dirty. I reached up and raked my nails across his eyes. I got one of them and he yelled, flinching away.

I managed to wriggle out from under him, giving him a hard shove that added to the momentum of the flinch. He fell, rolled, and started to rise.

I kicked him in the head with my rented formal shoes. My shoe went flying off, which I was pretty sure never happened to James Bond. The goon faltered, wobbling, so I kicked him with the other foot. He was tough. He started coming back from that one too. I bent over and slammed my fist down sledgehammer style at the back of his neck, several times. I was shouting as I did it, and the edges of my vision burned with a film of red.

The rabbit punches dropped him, and he fell limp to the ground.

“Son of a bitch.” I panted, feeling around until I found Shiro’s cane. “I didn’t get my ass kicked.”

“Good day to get that lottery ticket,” Susan said. She came down the last several feet of ladder, dressed again in the black leather pants, the dark coat. She checked to make sure the goon wasn’t faking it. Where’s Shiro?”

I shook my head. “He isn’t coming.”

Susan took a breath and then nodded. “Can you climb?”

“Think so,” I said, eyeing the ladder. I held out the cane. “Take this for me?”

Susan reached out to take the blade. There was a flicker of silver static and she hissed, jerking her fingers back. “What the hell is that?”

“Magic sword.”

“Well, it sucks,” Susan said. “Go ahead; I’ll come up behind you.”

I fumbled around with the cane, slipping it as best I could through the tux’s cummerbund. I started up the ladder and once again Deirdre shrieked, this time her voice wholly demonic, echoing weirdly through the stone corridors.

“Wasn’t that—” Susan asked, shaking her fingers.

“Yeah. Climb,” I said. “Climb fast.”

The action and adrenaline had done something to thaw me out, or at least it felt that way. My fingers tingled, but they were functional, and I gained speed as I climbed. “How’d you find me?”

“Shiro,” Susan responded. “We went to Michael’s house for help. He seemed to know where to go. Like instinct.”

“I saw Michael do that once,” I said, panting. “He told me he knew how to find where he was needed. How long is this freaking ladder?”

“Another twenty or thirty feet,” Susan said. “Comes out in the basement of an empty building south of the Loop. Martin’s waiting with the car.”

“Why did that guy talk about a Fellowship when he saw you back at the auction?” I asked. “What Fellowship?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Condense it.”

“Later.”

“But—”

I didn’t get to protest any further, because I slipped and nearly fell when I reached the top of the ladder. I recovered my balance and scrambled up

into a completely dark room. I looked back over my shoulder and saw Susan outlined, a dim shadow against a faint green-gold light.

“What’s that light?” I asked.

“Eyes,” Susan said. Her voice was a little thready. “Coming up. Move over.”

I did. Susan slid onto the floor as the green-gold light grew brighter, and I heard the steely rasping sound of Deirdre’s hair moving below. Susan turned and drew something from her jacket pocket. There was a clinking, clicking sound. Then she whispered, “One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, four, one thousand,” and dropped something down the ladder.

She turned to me, and I felt her fingers cover my eyes, pushing me away from the ladder. I got it then, and leaned away from the shaft the ladder had come up just before there was a hellishly loud noise and a flash of light, scarlet through Susan’s fingertips.

My ears rang and my balance wavered. Susan helped me to my feet and started moving out through the darkness, her steps swift and certain. From the shaft, I could dimly hear the demon-girl shrieking in fury. I asked, “Was that a grenade?”

“Just a stunner,” Susan said. “Lots of light and noise.”

“And you had it in your pocket,” I said.

“No. Martin did. I borrowed it.”

I tripped over something faintly yielding in the darkness, a limp form. “Whoa, what is that?”

“I don’t know. Some kind of guard animal. Shiro killed it.”

My next step squished in something damp and faintly warm that soaked through my sock. “Perfect.”

Susan slammed a door open onto nighttime Chicago, and I could see again. We left the building behind us and went down a flight of concrete steps to the sidewalk. I didn’t recognize the neighborhood offhand, but it wasn’t a good one. It had that wary, hard-core feel that made *The Jungle* seem like *Mary Poppins* by comparison. There was dim light in the sky—evidently dawn was not far away.

Susan looked up and down the street and cursed quietly. “Where is he?”

I turned and looked at Susan. The dark swirls and spikes of her tattoo still stood out dark against her skin. Her face looked leaner than I remembered.

Another shrieking scream came from inside the building. "This is a really bad time for him to be late," I said.

"I know," she said, flexing her fingers. "Harry, I don't know if I can handle that demon bitch if she comes at us again." She looked down at her own hand, where the dark tattoos swirled and curved. "I'm almost out."

"Out?" I asked. "Of what?"

Her lip lifted into a quiet snarl and she swept dark eyes up and down the street. "Control."

"Ooooookay," I said. "We can't just stand here. We need to move."

Just then, an engine growled, and a dark green rental sedan came screeching around the corner of the block. It swerved across to the wrong side of the street and came up on the curb before sliding to a stop.

Martin threw open the back door. There was a cut on his left temple and a streak of blood had dried dark on his jaw. Tattoos like Susan's, but thicker, framed one eye and the left side of his face. "They're behind me," he said. "Hurry."

He didn't have to tell either of us twice. Susan shoved me into the back of the car and piled in after me. Martin had the car moving again before she'd shut the door, and I looked back to see another sedan after us. Before we'd gone a block, a second car slid in behind the first, and the two accelerated, coming after us.

"Dammit," Martin said, glaring at his rearview mirror. "What did you do to these people, Dresden?"

"I turned down their recruiting officer," I said.

Martin nodded, and snapped the car around a corner. "I'd say they don't handle rejection well. Where's the old man?"

"Gone."

He exhaled through his nose. "These idiots are going to land us all in jail if this keeps up. How bad do they want you?"

"More than most."

Martin nodded. "Do you have a safe house?"

"My place. I've got some emergency wards I can set off. They could keep out a mail-order record club." I bobbed my eyebrows at Susan. "For a while, anyway."

Martin jukeed the car around another corner. "It isn't far. You can jump out. We'll draw them off."

“He can’t,” Susan objected. “He can barely move. He’s been hurt, and he could go into shock. He isn’t like us, Martin.”

Martin frowned. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’ll go with him.”

He stared up at the rearview mirror for a moment, at Susan. “It’s a bad idea.”

“I know.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“I *know*,” she said, voice tight. “There’s no choice, and no time to argue.”

Martin turned his eyes back to the road and said, “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

“God be with you both, then. Sixty seconds.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What are you both—”

Martin screeched around another corner and roared ahead at top speed. I bounced off the door on my side and flattened my cheek against the window. I recognized my neighborhood as I did. I glanced at the speedometer of the car and wished I hadn’t.

Susan reached across me to open the door and said, “We get out here.”

I stared at her and then motioned vaguely at the door.

She met my eyes and that same hard, delighted smile spread over her lips. “Trust me. This is kid stuff.”

“Cartoons are kid stuff. Petting zoos are kid stuff. Jumping out of a car is *insane*.”

“You did it before,” she accused me. “The lycanthropes.”

“That was different.”

“Yes. You left me in the car.” Susan crawled across my lap, which appreciated her. Especially in the tight leather pants. My eyes agreed with my lap wholeheartedly. Especially about the tight leather pants. Susan then crouched, one foot on the floorboards, one hand on the door, and offered her other hand to me. “Come on.”

Susan had changed in the last year. Or maybe she hadn’t. She had always been good at what she did. She’d just altered her focus to something other than reporting. She could take on demonic murderers in hand-to-hand combat now, rip home appliances from the wall and throw them with one hand, and use grenades in the dark. If she said she could jump out of a speeding car and keep us both from dying, I believed her. *What the hell*, I thought. It wasn’t like I hadn’t done this before—albeit at a fifth the speed.

But there was something deeper than that, something darker that Susan's vulpine smile had stirred inside of me. Some wild, reckless, primal piece of me had always loved the danger, the adrenaline, had always loved testing myself against the various and sundry would-be lethalties that crossed my paths. There was an ecstasy in the knife edge of the struggle, a vital energy that couldn't be found anywhere else, and part of me (a stupid, insane, but undeniably powerful part) missed it when it was gone.

That wildness rose up in me, and gave me a smile that matched Susan's.

I took her hand, and a second later we leapt from the car. I heard myself laughing like a madman as we did.

Chapter Twenty-four

As we went out the door, Susan pulled me hard against her. On general policy, I approved. She got one arm around the back of my head, shielding the base of my skull and the top of my neck. We hit the ground with Susan on the bottom, bounced up a bit, rolling, and hit the ground again. The impacts were jolting, but I was on the bottom only once. The rest of the time, the impact was something I felt only through my contact with Susan.

We wound up on the tiny patch of grass two doors down from my boardinghouse, in front of some cheap converted apartments. Several seconds later, the two pursuing cars went roaring by after Martin and his rented sedan. I kept my head down until they had passed, and then looked at Susan.

I was on top. Susan panted quietly beneath me. One of her legs was bent at the knee, half holding my thigh between hers. Her dark eyes glittered, and I felt her hips twitch in the kind of motion that brought a number of evenings (and mornings, and afternoons, and late nights) to mind.

I wanted to kiss her. A lot. I held off. "You all right?" I asked.

"You never complained," she answered. Her voice was a little breathless. "Nothing too bad. You? Anything hurt?"

"My ego," I said. "You're embarrassing me with the superstrength and whatnot." I rose, took her hand, and drew her to her feet. "How's a guy supposed to assert his masculinity?"

"You're a big boy. You'll think of something."

I looked around and nodded. "I think we'd better get off the street, pronto."

"Is running and hiding assertively masculine?" We started for my apartment. "The part where we don't die is."

She nodded. "That's practical, but I'm not sure it's masculine."

"Shut up."

"There you go," Susan said.

We went only a couple of steps before I felt the spell coming. It started as a low shiver on the back of my neck, and my eyes twitched almost of their own accord up to the roof of the apartment house we were walking by. I saw a couple of bricks from one of the chimneys fall free of their mortar. I grabbed Susan's collar and sidestepped, pulling her with me. The bricks shattered into shards and red powder on the sidewalk a step from Susan's feet.

Susan tensed and looked up. "What was that?"

"An entropy curse," I muttered.

"A what?"

I looked around, struggling to sense where the next surge of magic might come from. "Sort of a bad-luck spell. A really, *really* bad-luck spell. Preferred magic for getting rid of someone who annoys you."

"Who is doing it?"

"My guess? Snakeboy. He seems to have some talent, and he could have gotten some of my blood to target me with." I felt another gathering surge of energy to my right, and my eyes went to the power lines running overhead. "Oh, hell. Run."

Susan and I broke into a sprint. As we did, I heard one of the power lines snap, cables squealing. The longer end of loose cable flew toward us, trailing a cloud of blue and white sparks. It hit the ground somewhere behind us.

My clothes hadn't yet dried out from Nicodemus's guest accommodations. If it had been raining, the downed power line might have killed me. As it was, I felt a vibrating, clenching tingle wash over my legs. I almost fell, but managed to get a few more paces away from the sputtering line and regained control of my legs.

I felt another magical strike building, bringing a gust of wind with it, but before I could zero in on it Susan shouldered me to one side. I fell to the ground just as I heard a loud cracking sound. A branch as thick as my thigh slammed to the ground. I looked up to see a strip of bare white bark showing along the trunk of the old tree behind my boardinghouse.

Susan helped drag me to my feet and we ran the rest of the way to my apartment door. Even as we did, I felt another strike building, stronger than the last. I fumbled open the lock while thunder rumbled through the predawn grey, and we got inside.

I could still feel the curse growing and reaching for me. It was a strong one, and I wasn't sure that either my apartment's threshold or my standard wards would be able to keep it out. I slammed the door closed behind me, locked it. The room fell into darkness as I reached for the basket beside the door. There was a waxy lump the size of my fist in it, and I lifted it and slammed it hard against the door, across the crack between the door and the jamb. I found the wick standing out from the wax, focused on it, and drew in my will. I murmured, "*Flickum bicus*," and released the magic, and the wick suddenly glowed with a pure white flame.

Around the room at precisely the same moment, two dozen other candles of white and butter-colored wax also lit with a gentle flicker of white fire. As they did, I felt a sudden thrum of my own magic, prepared months before, raise into a rampart around my home. The curse pulsed again, somewhere outside, and hammered against the barrier, but my protection held. The malevolent energy shattered against it.

"Boo-ya, snakeboy," I muttered, letting out a tense breath. "Stick that in your scaly ass and smoke it."

"The action-hero one-liner doesn't count if you mix metaphors," Susan said, panting.

"Looks like no Harry Dresden action figures for me," I answered.

"Did you get him?"

"Slammed the door on his curse," I answered. "We should be safe for a while."

Susan looked around her at all the lit candles, getting her breath back. I saw her expression soften, and turn a little sad. We'd eaten a lot of dinners here, by candlelight. We'd done a lot of things that way. I studied her features while she stood lost in thought. The tattoos changed her, I decided. They changed the proportions and lines of her face. They lent her features a sort of exotic remoteness, an alien beauty.

"Thirsty?" I asked. She shot me a look with a hint of frustration in it. I lifted my hands. "Sorry. I didn't think."

She nodded, turning a little away from me. "I know. Sorry."

"Coke?"

"Yeah."

I limped to the icebox, which was going to need more ice before long. I didn't have the leftover energy to freeze the water again by magic. I

grabbed two cans of Coca-Cola, opened them both, and took one to Susan. She took a long guzzle and I joined her.

“You’re limping,” she said when she was done.

I looked down at my feet. “Only one shoe. It makes me lopsided.”

“You’re hurt,” she said. Her eyes were fastened on my leg. “Bleeding.”

“It isn’t too bad. I’ll clean it up in a minute.”

Susan’s eyes never wavered, but they got darker. Her voice grew quieter. “Do you need help?”

I turned a bit warily so that she couldn’t see the injured leg. She shivered and made an evident effort to look away. The tattoos on her face were lighter now—not fainter, but changing in colors. “I’m sorry. Harry, I’m sorry, but I’d better go.”

“You can’t,” I said.

Her voice remained very quiet, very toneless. “You don’t get it. I’ll explain everything to you in a little while. I promise. But I have to leave.”

I cleared my throat. “Um. No, you don’t get it. You can’t. Cannot. Literally.”

“What?”

“The defenses I put up have two sides and they don’t have an off switch. We literally, physically can’t leave until they go down.”

Susan looked up at me and then folded her arms, staring at her Coke can. “Crud,” she said. “How long?”

I shook my head. “I built them to run for about eight hours. Sunrise is going to degrade it a little though. Maybe four hours, five at the most.”

“Five hours,” she said under her breath. “Oh, God.”

“What’s wrong?”

She waved a hand vaguely. “I’ve been...been using some of the power. To be faster. Stronger. If I’m calm, it doesn’t get stirred up. But I haven’t been calm. It’s built up inside of me. Water on a dam. It wants to break free, to get loose.”

I licked my lips. If Susan lost control of herself, there was no place to run. “What can I do to help?”

She shook her head, refusing to look up at me. “I don’t know. Let me have some quiet. Try to relax.” Something cold and hungry flickered in her eyes. “Get your leg cleaned up. I can smell it. It’s...distracting.”

“See if you can build the fire,” I said, and slipped into my room, closing the door behind me. I went into the bathroom and closed that door too. My

first-aid kit had its own spot on one of the shelves. I downed a couple of Tylenol, slipped out of the remains of my rented tux, and cleaned up the cut on my leg. It was a shallow cut, but a good four inches long, and it had bled messily. I used disinfectant soap with cold water to wash it out, then slathered it in an antibacterial gel before laying several plastic bandages over the injury, to hold it closed. It didn't hurt. Or at least I didn't pick it out from the background of aches and pains my body was telling me about.

Shivering again, I climbed into some sweats, a T-shirt, and a flannel bathrobe. I looked around in my closet, at a couple of the other things I'd made for a rainy day. I took one of the potions I'd brewed, the ones to counter the venom of the Red Court, and put it in my pocket. I missed my shield bracelet.

I opened the door to the living room and Susan was standing six inches away, her eyes black with no white to them, the designs on her skin flushed a dark maroon.

"I can still smell your blood," she whispered. "I think you need to find a way to hold me back, Harry. And you need to do it now."

Chapter Twenty-five

I didn't have much left in me in the way of magic. I wouldn't until I got a chance to rest and recuperate from what Nicodemus had done to me. I might have been able to manage a spell that would hold a normal person, but not a hungry vampire. And that was what Susan was. She'd gained strength in more senses than the merely physical, and that never happened without granting a certain amount of magical defense, even if in nothing but the naked will to fight. Snakeboy's serpent-cloud had been one of the nastier spells I'd seen, and it had only slowed Susan down.

If she came at me, and it looked like she might, I wouldn't be able to stop her.

My motto, after the past couple of years, was to be prepared. I had something that I knew could restrain her—assuming I could get past her and to the drawer where I kept it.

"Susan," I said quietly. "Susan, I need you to stay with me. Talk to me."

"Don't want to talk," she said. Her eyelids lowered and she inhaled slowly. "I don't want it to smell so good. Your blood. Your fear. But it does."

"The Fellowship," I said. I struggled to rein in my emotions. For her sake, I couldn't afford to feel afraid. I edged a little toward her. "Let's sit down. You can tell me about the Fellowship."

For a second, I thought she wouldn't give way, but she did. "Fellowship," she said. "The Fellowship of Saint Giles."

"Saint Giles," I said. "The patron of lepers."

"And other outcasts. Like me. They're all like me."

"You mean infected?"

"Infected. Half-turned. Half-human. Half-dead. There are a lot of ways to say it."

"Uh-huh," I said. "So what's their deal?"

"The Fellowship tries to help people the Red Court has harmed. Work against the Red Court. Expose them whenever they can."

“Find a cure?”

“There is no cure.”

I put my hand on her arm and guided her toward my couch. She moved with a dreamy deliberation. “So the tattoos are what? Your membership card?”

“A binding,” she said. “A spell cut into my skin. To help me hold the darkness inside. To warn me when it is rising.”

“What do you mean, warn you?”

She looked down at her design-covered hand, then showed it to me. The tattoos there and on her face were slowly growing brighter, and had turned a shade of medium scarlet. “To warn me when I’m about to lose control. Red, red, red. Danger, danger, danger.”

The first night she’d arrived, when she’d been tussling with something outside, she’d stayed in the shadows for the first several moments inside, her face turned away. She’d been hiding the tattoos. “Here,” I said quietly. “Sit down.”

She sat on the couch and met my eyes. “Harry,” she whispered. “It hurts. It hurts to fight it. I’m tired of holding on. I don’t know how long I can.”

I knelt down to be on eye level with her. “Do you trust me?”

“With my heart. With my life.”

“Close your eyes,” I said.

She did.

I got up and walked slowly to the kitchen drawer. I didn’t move quickly. You don’t move quickly away from something that is thinking about making you food. It sets them off. Whatever had been placed inside her was growing—I could feel that, see it, hear it in her voice.

I was in danger. But it didn’t matter, because so was she.

I usually keep a gun in the kitchen drawer. At the time, I had a gun and a short length of silver-and-white rope in there. I picked up the rope and walked back over to her.

“Susan,” I said quietly. “Give me your hands.”

She opened her eyes and looked at the soft, fine rope. “That won’t hold me.”

“I made it in case an ogre I pissed off came visiting. Give me your hands.”

She was silent for a moment. Then she shrugged out of her jacket, and held her hands out, wrists up.

I tossed the rope at her and whispered, "*Manacus*."

I'd enchanted the rope six months before, but I'd done it right. It took barely a whisper of power to set the rope into motion. It whipped into the air, silver threads flashing, and bound itself around her wrists in neat loops.

Susan reacted instantly, going completely tense. I saw her set herself and strain against the ropes. I waited, watching for a full half a minute before she started shaking and stopped trying to break them. She let out a shaking breath, her head bowed, hair fallen around her face. I started to move toward her, when she stood up, legs spread enough to brace herself firmly, and tried again, lifting her arms.

I licked my lips, watching. I didn't think she'd break the ropes, but I'd underestimated people before. Her face, her too-black eyes scared me. She strained against the ropes again, the movement drawing her shirt up, showing me her smooth brown stomach, the winding swirls and barbs of her tattoo red and stark against her skin. There were dark bruises over her ribs, and patches of skin that had been scraped raw. She hadn't come away from our tumble from Martin's car without being hurt, after all.

After a minute more, she hissed out a breath and sat down, hair a tumbled mess around her face. I could feel her eyes on me more than I could actually see them. They didn't feel like Susan's eyes anymore. The tattoos stood out against her skin, red as blood. I backed off, again deliberately, calmly, and got the first aid kit out of the bathroom.

When I came back out, she flung herself at me in blinding speed and utter silence. I'd been expecting as much, and snapped, "*Forzare!*"

The silver rope flashed with a glitter of blue light and darted toward the ceiling. Her wrists went with it and she was pulled completely from the floor. Her feet swung up, and she twisted, again in silence, fighting the bonds on her. She didn't get free, and I let her swing there until her legs had settled again, her toes barely touching the floor.

She let out a quiet sob and whispered, "I'm sorry. Harry, I can't stop it."

"It's okay. I've got you." I stepped closer to examine the injuries on her midsection and winced. "God. You got torn up."

"I hate this. I'm so sorry."

It hurt me to hear her voice. There was enough pain in it for both of us. "Shhhh," I said. "Let me take care of you."

She fell quiet then, though I could sense flashes of that feral hunger in her. I got a bowl of water, a cloth, and set to cleaning up the scrapes as best

I could. She quivered once in a while. Once she let out a pained groan. The bruises went all the way up her back, and she had another patch of abraded skin on her neck. I put my hand on her head and pushed forward. She bowed her head and let it hang forward while I tended to the wound.

While I did, the quality of the tension changed. I could smell her hair, her skin, their scent like candle smoke and cinnamon. I became suddenly, intensely aware of the curve of her back, her hips. She leaned back a little toward me, bringing her body into contact with mine, the heat of her something that could have singed me. Her breathing changed, growing faster, heavier. She turned her head, enough to look at me over her shoulder. Her eyes burned, and her tongue flickered over her lips.

“Need you,” she whispered.

I swallowed. “Susan. I think maybe that—”

“Don’t think,” she said. Her hips brushed against the front of my sweats, and I was abruptly so hard that it hurt. “Don’t think. Touch me.”

Somewhere, I knew it wasn’t the best of ideas. But I laid the fingers of one hand on the curve of her waist, wrapping them slowly to her heated skin. Soft smoothness caressed my hand. There was a pleasure in it, a primal, possessive pleasure in touching her. I ran my palm and spread fingers over her flank, her belly, in slow and light circles. She arched at the caress, her eyes closing, and whispered, “Yes,” over and over again. “Yes.”

I let the washcloth fall from my other hand and reached up to touch her hair. More softness, rich texture, dark hairs gliding between my fingers. I felt a second of gathering tension in her and then she whipped her head around, teeth bared, reaching for my hand. I should have drawn my hand away. Instead, I tightened my fingers in her hair and pulled back, forcing her chin up and keeping her from reaching me.

I expected anger from her, but instead her body became pliant again, moving against me with a more willing abandon. A languid smile spread over her lips, and faded away to an openmouthed gasp as I slid my other hand up, beneath the cotton shirt, and ran my fingertips lightly over her breasts. She gasped, and at the sound all of my recent worry, fear, anger, pain—it all faded away, burned to ash by a sudden fire of raw need. To feel her under my hand again, to have the scent of her filling my head—I’d dreamed of it on too many cold and lonely nights.

It wasn’t the smart thing to do. It was the only thing.

I slid both hands around her body, teasing her breasts, loving the way their tips hardened to rounded points beneath my fingers. She tried to turn on me again, but I jerked her back hard against me, my mouth pressing against the side of her throat, keeping her from turning her head. It only excited her more.

“Need,” she whispered, panting. “Need you. Don’t stop.”

I wasn’t sure I could have. I couldn’t get enough of the taste of her onto my lips. Impatient, I shoved her shirt up, over her breasts, to the top of her back, and spent a slow and delicious moment following the line of her spine with my lips and tongue, tasting her skin, testing its texture with my teeth. Some part of me struggled to remember to be gentle. Another part didn’t give a damn. *Feel. Taste. Indulge.*

My teeth left small marks here and there on her skin, and I remember thinking that they looked intriguing beside the curling scarlet designs that swept in a spiral around her body. The dark leather of her pants blocked my mouth, a sudden ugliness beneath my lips, and I straightened with a snarl to get it out of my way.

For the record, tight leather pants don’t come off easily. Berserk lust is likely not the best frame of mind for removing them. I didn’t let that stop me. She gasped when I started taking them off, started squirming and wriggling, trying to help me. Mostly, it just drove me insane as she brushed against me, as I watched her move in sinuous, delicious need. Her panting gasps all had a quiet vocalization to them now, a sound that both spoke of her need and urged me on.

I got the pants down over her hips. There wasn’t anything else beneath them. I shivered and paused to spend another moment savoring her with my hands, my mouth, placing delicate kisses around the scrapes, biting at unmarred skin to elicit more desperate movements, louder moans. The scent of her was driving me insane.

“Now,” she whispered, a frenzied edge to her voice. “Now.”

But I didn’t hurry. I don’t know how long I stood there, kissing, touching, driving her cries into higher and more desperate pitches. All I knew was that something I’d wanted, needed, longed for had come to me again. At that moment there was nothing on earth, in heaven or hell, that meant more to me.

She looked over her shoulder at me, eyes black and burning with hunger. She tried for my hand again, driven beyond words now. I had to control her

head again, fingers knotted into her hair while my free hand got the interfering clothes out of the way. She let out mewling sounds of raw need, until I pulled her hips back against me, feeling my way, and in a rush of fire and silk felt my hardness press into her.

Her eyes flew open wide, out of focus, and she cried out, moving against me, meeting my motion with her own. I had a fleeting thought of slowing down. I didn't. Neither of us wanted that. I took her that way, my mouth on her ear, her throat, one hand in her hair, her hands stretched out over her, body straining back to meet mine.

God, she was beautiful.

She screamed and started shuddering, and it was all I could do not to explode. I fought away the inevitable for a little time more. Susan sagged down after a moment, until with my hands, with my mouth, with the thrusts of my body, I kindled the quiet moans once again to cries of need. She screamed again, the motions of her body swift, liquid, desperate, and there wasn't any way I could keep her from driving me over the brink with her.

Our cries mingled together as we intertwined. The strain of muscles and bodies and hungers overwhelmed me.

Pleasure like fire consumed us both and burned my thoughts to ash.

Time drifted by and did not touch us.

When I recovered my senses, I found myself on the floor. Susan lay on her stomach beneath me, her still-bound arms laid out above her head. Not much time had passed. Both of us were still short of breath. I shivered, and felt myself still inside her. I didn't remember releasing the spell that held the bonds up to the ceiling, but I must have done it. I moved my head to kiss her shoulder, her cheek, very softly.

Her eyes blinked slowly open, human again, though her pupils were dilated until they all but hid the dark brown of her irises. She didn't focus them. She smiled and made a soft sound, somewhere between a moan and a cat's purr. I stared at her for a moment, until I realized that the designs on her face had gone dark again, and had begun to fade away. As I watched over the next few moments, they vanished completely.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you."

"Wanted that."

"Me too," I said.

"Dangerous. Harry, you could have been hurt. I might have—"

I leaned down and kissed the corner of her mouth, silencing her. “You didn’t. It’s okay.”

She shivered, but nodded. “So tired.”

I felt like nothing more than dropping off to sleep, but instead I got to my feet. Susan let out a soft sound, half pleasure and half protest. I gathered her up and put her on the couch. I touched the rope, willing it to release her, and it slid away from her skin, coiling itself into neat loops in my hand. I pulled a blanket from the back of the couch and folded it over her. “Sleep,” I said. “Get some rest.”

“You should—”

“I will. Promise. But...I don’t think it would be a good idea to go to sleep near you.”

Susan nodded wearily. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“Should call Martin.”

“The phone won’t call out,” I said. “Not until the defenses go down.”

I didn’t think her voice sounded particularly disappointed as she snuggled down a bit more onto my couch. “Oh,” she said. “We’ll have to wait it out then.”

“Yeah,” I said. I stroked her hair. “Susan—”

She touched my hand with hers, and closed her eyes. “It’s all right. I told you, I’d never be able to separate the hungers with you. It...it was a release. Took some of the pressure off me. I wanted it. Needed it.”

“Did I hurt you?”

She made a purring sound without opening her eyes. “Maybe a little. I didn’t mind.”

I shivered and said, “You’re okay?”

She nodded slowly. “As I can be. Get some rest, Harry.”

“Yeah,” I said. I touched her hair again, and then shuffled into my bedroom. I didn’t shut the door. I put my pillows at the foot of my bed, so that I could see the couch when I lay down. I watched her face, graced by pale candlelight, until my eyes closed.

She was so lovely.

I wished that she were with me.

Chapter Twenty-six

I opened my eyes a while later, and saw Susan standing in the living room, her eyes closed. She was crouched, her hands held before her as if grasping an invisible basketball. As I watched, she moved, arms and legs gliding through gentle, circular motions. Tai chi. It was a meditative form of exercise that had originally come from martial arts. Lots of people who practiced tai chi didn't realize that the movements they followed were beautiful, slow-motion renditions of bone-breaking throws and joint locks.

I had a feeling Susan knew. She wore her T-shirt and a pair of my running shorts. She moved with the graceful simplicity of a natural talent honed by training.

A turn showed me her face, her expression set in peaceful concentration. I spent a minute watching her in silence, cataloging my own aches and pains.

She suddenly smiled, without opening her eyes, and said, "Don't start drooling, Harry."

"My house. I can drool as much as I want."

"What was that rope you used?" she asked, still going through her routine. "I've broken handcuffs before. Magic?"

Shoptalk. I had hoped for some other kind of discussion. Or maybe I'd been nervous about it. Work talk held a certain appeal for me, too. It was safe. "Faerie make," I said. "Has hair from a unicorn's mane woven through it."

"Really?"

I shrugged. "That's what Fix said. I imagine he knows."

"Would be handy to have around if the Denarians showed up again, don't you think?"

"Not unless they came here," I told her. "It's set to this place. Take it out of here and it wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

“Because I’m not that good yet,” I said. “It’s easy to make something that works at home. Takes a lot more know-how than I have to take an enchantment on the road.” I got out of bed and got moving. The clock said that it wasn’t yet ten in the morning. I hopped in and out of the shower, dressed, slapped a comb through my hair, and decided that the rakish, unshaven look was in.

By the time I got back out into the living room, Susan was dressed in the leather pants again and only four or five candles were still lit. The defensive barriers were winding down. “What happened after Martin took off from the hotel?” I asked.

Susan slouched into a chair. “I tried to get him to stop. He wouldn’t. We fought about it and he put a gun in my face.”

I choked. “He *what*?”

“To be fair, I wasn’t being very rational.”

“Hell’s bells.”

“Martin didn’t want to, but I convinced him to go to Michael’s place. I figured if anyone could get you out of a mess with the Denarians it would be him.”

“Seems reasonable to me,” I said. I debated between coffee and cola. The Coke won by virtue of convenience. Susan nodded at me before I could get the question out of my mouth, and I got her one too. “What about Anna Valmont?”

“She was in shock. Charity put her to bed.”

“Did you call the police?”

Susan shook her head. “I thought she might have known something that would help. We wouldn’t be able to find out what it was if she was angry and locked away.”

“What did Michael have to say about it?”

“He wasn’t there,” Susan said. “Shiro was. Charity said that Michael and someone named Sanya hadn’t come back from St. Louis and hadn’t called.”

I frowned and passed over the second can to her. “That doesn’t sound like him.”

“I know. They were worried.” She frowned. “Or Charity was. I don’t think Shiro was worried at all. It was almost as though he’d been expecting all of it. He was still dressed in the samurai clothes and he opened the front door before I could knock.”

“Michael’s done that kind of thing before. Fringe benefit of his job, maybe.”

Susan shook her head. “God works in mysterious ways?”

I shrugged. “Maybe so. Did Shiro say anything?”

“He just told Martin where to turn left or right and where to park. Then he told me to give him two minutes’ lead and to get ready to get you back to the car. He just...smiled a little, the whole time. It would have been a little spooky on anyone else. He seemed content. Maybe he just had a good poker face.”

I toyed with my can. “Has. He has a good poker face.”

Susan arched an eyebrow. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t think he’s dead. Not yet. He...he agreed to give himself over to the Denarians in exchange for them letting me go. The head Denarian guy, said his name was Nicodemus, made Shiro promise to not to fight back or escape for twenty-four hours.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

I shivered. “Yeah. I figure they’re archenemies. When Shiro offered himself, Nicodemus looked like a kid on Christmas morning.”

Susan sipped at her drink. “How bad are these people?”

I thought of Nicodemus and his knife. Of the sheer helplessness I’d felt as he drew my head back, baring my throat. I thought of sliced and diced corpses. “Bad.”

Susan regarded me quietly for a moment, while I stared at my drink.

“Harry,” she said finally. “You going to open that or just look at it?”

I shook my head and popped the tab on the can. My wrists felt sore, and the skin around them had been pretty thoroughly abraded. Evidently Nicodemus preferred regular old ropes to special unicorn-maned custom jobs. “Sorry. Got a lot to think about.”

“Yeah,” she said, her own voice softening. “What’s our next move?”

I checked the candles. Three to go. “Barrier will go down in maybe twenty minutes. We’ll call a cab, pick up the Beetle at McAnnally’s, and head to Michael’s place.”

“What if the Denarians are waiting outside for us?”

I picked up my blasting rod from the stand in the corner by the door and twirled it around in my fingers. “They’ll have to find their own cab.”

“And then?”

I picked up my staff and leaned it against the wall by the door. “We tell Michael and Sanya what happened.”

“Assuming they’re back.”

“Uh-huh.” I opened the kitchen drawer and got out my gun and its holster. “After that, I ask the nice Denarians to let Shiro go.”

Susan nodded. “We ask?”

I flipped open the cylinder on the gun and loaded it. “I’ll say pretty please,” I said, and snapped the cylinder shut again.

Susan’s eyes flashed. “Count me in.” She watched me while I put on a shoulder rig and slipped the gun into it. “Harry,” she said. “I don’t want to break up the righteous-vengeance vibe, but there are a couple of questions that are really bothering me.”

“Why do the Denarians want the Shroud, and what are they going to do with it,” I said.

“Yeah.”

I got an old squall jacket out of my room and slid it on. It felt wrong. I hadn’t worn anything but my old canvas duster or the newer leather one Susan had given me for the past several years. I checked the candles, and they had all gone out. I laid my hand on the wall, feeling for the defenses. There was a faint echo of them left, but nothing of substance, so I went back out into the living room and called for a cab. “We’re good to go. I think I’ve got an idea of what they’re doing, but I can’t be sure.”

She straightened my jacket collar absently. “Very sloppy of you. Didn’t you get the meglomaniacal bragfest from this Nicodemus?”

“He must have read that Evil Overlord list.”

“Sounds like someone who intends to get things done.”

He sure as hell had. “He let a couple things slip. I think we can get ahead of him.”

She shook her head. “Harry, when I went down there with Shiro, I didn’t see much. But I heard their voices through the tunnels. There was...” She closed her eyes for a moment, her expression one of faint nausea. “It’s hard for me to explain. Their voices gave me a strong impression. Shiro sounded like...I don’t know. A trumpet. Clear and strong. The other one...his voice stank. It was rotted. Corrupt.”

I didn’t understand what would have made Susan say that. Maybe it was something that the vampires had done to her. Maybe it was something she’d learned between tai chi classes. Maybe it was just pure intuition. But

I knew what she was talking about. There was a sense to Nicodemus, of something quiet and still and dangerous—of something patient and vile and malicious beyond the scope of mortal understanding. He scared the hell out of me.

“I know what you mean. Nicodemus isn’t another misguided idealist, or some greedy bastard out to make money,” I said. “He’s different.”

Susan nodded. “Evil.”

“And he plays hardball.” I wasn’t sure if I was asking Susan or myself, but I said, “You ready?”

She got her jacket on. I went to the door and she followed.

“The one bad thing about the duster,” she mused. “I could never see your butt.”

“I never noticed.”

“If you went around noticing your own ass I’d worry about you, Harry.”

I looked over my shoulder at her, smiling. She smiled back.

It didn’t last long. Both of our smiles turned a little sad.

“Susan,” I said.

She put two fingertips to my lips. “Don’t.”

“Dammit, Susan. Last night—”

“Shouldn’t have happened,” she said. Her voice sounded tired, but her eyes stayed steady on mine. “It doesn’t—”

“—change anything,” I finished. I sounded bitter, even to me.

She took her hand away and buttoned up the dark leather jacket.

“Right,” I said. I should have stuck to shoptalk. I opened the door and looked outside. “Cab’s here. Let’s get to work.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

I grabbed my staff, blasting rod, and Shiro's cane, and made a note to get myself a freaking golf bag. We took the cab to McAnnally's. The Blue Beetle was still in the nearby lot, and it hadn't been stolen, vaporized, or otherwise mishandled.

"What happened to your back window?" Susan asked.

"One of Marcone's goons winged a few shots at me outside the *Larry Fowler* studio."

Susan's mouth twitched. "You went on *Larry Fowler* again?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Uh-huh. And what about the hood?"

"Little holes are from Marcone's thug. Big dent was a chlorofiend," I said.

"A what?"

"Plant monster."

"Oh. Why don't you just say 'plant monster'?"

"I have my pride."

"Your poor car."

I got out my keys, but Susan put her hand on mine, and walked a circle around the car. She crouched down and looked beneath it a couple of times, then said, "Okay."

I got in. "Thank you, double oh seven, but no one bombs a Volkswagen. They're too cute."

Susan got in the passenger door and said, "Cute confetti if you aren't careful, Harry."

I grunted, revved up the car, and puttered to Michael's place.

The morning was cold and clear. Winter hadn't yet given up its grip on the Great Lakes, and where Lake Michigan went, Chicago went too. Susan got out and looked around the front lawn, frowning from behind black sunglasses. "How does he manage to make this place so nice, run his own business, and fight demons on the side?"

“He probably watches a lot of those home-and-garden shows,” I said.

She frowned. “The grass is green. It’s February and his grass is green. Doesn’t that strike you as strange?”

“Sod works in mysterious ways.”

She made a disgusted sound, and then followed me up the walk to the door.

I knocked. A moment later Father Forthill said, “Who’s there?”

“Donny and Marie,” I responded. “Salt-N-Pepa asked us to fill in for them.”

He opened the door, smiling from behind his gold-rimmed glasses. He was the same short, stocky, balding old Forthill, but he looked strained and tired. The lines of his face had grown deeper than I remembered. “Hello, Harry.”

“Father,” I said. “You know Susan?”

He looked at her thoughtfully. “By reputation,” he said. “Come in, come in.”

We did, and as I came in, Forthill set a Louisville Slugger baseball bat down in the corner. I raised my eyebrows, traded a look with Susan, and then put my staff and Shiro’s cane beside the bat. We followed Forthill into the kitchen.

“Where’s Charity?” I asked.

“Taking the children to her mother’s house,” Forthill said. “She should be back soon.”

I let out a breath of relief. “Anna Valmont?”

“Guest room. Sleeping.”

“I need to call Martin,” Susan said. “Excuse me.” She stepped aside into the small study.

“Coffee, doughnut?” Father Forthill asked.

I sat down at the table. “Father, you’ve never been closer to converting me.”

He laughed. “The Fantastic Forthill, saving souls one Danish at a time.” He produced the nectar of the gods themselves in Dunkin Donuts paper sacks and Styrofoam cups, taking some for himself as well. “I’ve always admired your ability to make jokes when faced with adversity. Matters are grave.”

“I sort of noticed,” I said through a mouthful of glazed doughnut. “Where’s Michael?”

“He and Sanya went to St. Louis to investigate possible Denarian activity. They were both arrested by the local police.”

“They what? What for?”

“No charges were filed,” Forthill said. “They were arrested, held for twenty-four hours, and released.”

“Sand trap,” I said. “Someone wanted them out of the way.”

Forthill nodded. “So it would seem. I spoke to them about two hours ago. They’re on their way back now and should be here soon.”

“Then as soon as they get here, we have to go get Shiro back.”

Forthill frowned and nodded. “What happened to you last night?”

I told him the short version—all about the art auction and the Denarians, but I elided over the details afterward, which were none of his chaste business. And which would have embarrassed me to tell. I’m not particularly religious, but come on, the man was a priest.

When I finished, Forthill took off his glasses and stared hard at me. He had eyes the color of robin’s eggs, and they could be disturbingly intense. “Nicodemus,” he said quietly. “Are you *sure* that is what he called himself?”

“Yeah.”

“Without a doubt?”

“Yeah. We had a nice chat.”

Forthill folded his hands and exhaled slowly. “Mother of God. Harry, could you describe him for me?”

I did, while the old priest listened. “Oh, and he was always wearing a rope around his neck. Not like a ship’s hawser, a thin rope, like clothesline. I thought it was a string tie at first.”

Forthill’s fingers reached up to touch the crucifix at his throat. “Tied in a noose?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you think of him?” he asked.

I looked down at my half-eaten doughnut. “He scared the hell out of me. He’s...bad, I guess. Wrong.”

“The word you are looking for is ‘evil,’ Harry.”

I shrugged, ate the rest of the doughnut, and didn’t argue.

“Nicodemus is an ancient foe of the Knights of the Cross,” Forthill said quietly. “Our information about him is limited. He has made it a point to find and destroy our archives every other century or so, so we cannot be

sure who he is or how long he has been alive. He may even have walked the earth when the Savior was crucified.”

“Didn’t look a day over five hundred,” I mumbled. “How come some Knight hasn’t gone and parted his hair for him?”

“They’ve tried,” Forthill said.

“He’s gotten away?”

Forthill’s eyes and voice stayed steady. “He’s killed them. He’s killed all of them. More than a hundred Knights. More than a thousand priests, nuns, monks. Three thousand men, women, children. And those are only the ones listed in the pages recovered from the destroyed archives. Only two Knights have ever faced him and survived.”

I had a flash of insight. “Shiro is one of them. That’s why Nicodemus was willing to trade me for him.”

Forthill nodded and closed his eyes for a moment. “Likely. Though the Denarians grow in power by inflicting pain and suffering on others. They become better able to use the strength the Fallen give them. And they gain the most from hurting those meant to counter them.”

“He’s torturing Shiro,” I said.

Forthill put his hand on mine for a moment, his voice quiet, calming. “We must have faith. We may be in time to help him.”

“I thought the whole point of the Knights was to deal out justice,” I said. “The Fists of God and all that. So why is it that Nicodemus can slaughter them wholesale?”

“For much the same reason any man can kill another,” Forthill said. “He is intelligent. Cautious. Skilled. Ruthless. Like his patron fallen angel.”

I guessed at the name. “Badassiel?”

Forthill almost smiled. “Anduriel. He was a captain of Lucifer’s, after the Fall. Anduriel leads the thirty Fallen who inhabit the coins. Nicodemus wasn’t seduced into Anduriel’s domination. It’s a partnership. Nicodemus works with Fallen as a near-equal and of his free will. No one of the priesthood, of any of the Knightly Orders, of the Knights of the Cross, has so much as scratched him.”

“The noose,” I guessed. “The rope. It’s like the Shroud, isn’t it? It has power.”

Forthill nodded. “We think so, yes. The same rope the betrayer used in Jerusalem.”

“How many Denarians are working with him? I take it that they probably don’t get along with each other.”

“You are correct, thank God. Nicodemus rarely has more than five or six other Denarians working with him, according to our information. Usually, he keeps three others nearby.”

“Snakeboy, demon-girl, and Ursiel.”

“Yes.”

“How many coins are running around the world?”

“Only nine are accounted for at this time. Ten, with Ursiel’s coin.”

“So Nicodemus could theoretically have nineteen other Fallen working with him. Plus a side order of goons.”

“Goons?”

“Goons. Normal hired hands, they looked like.”

“Ah. They aren’t normal,” Forthill said. “From what we have been able to tell, they are almost a small nation unto themselves. Fanatics. Their service is hereditary, passed on from father to son, mother to daughter.”

“This gets better and better,” I said.

“Harry,” Forthill said. “I know of no tactful way to ask this, so I will simply ask. Did he give you one of the coins?”

“He tried,” I said. “I turned him down.”

Forthill’s eyes stayed on my face for a moment before he let out a breath. “I see. Do you remember the sigil upon it?”

I grunted in affirmation, picked up a chocolate-covered jelly, and drew the symbol in the chocolate with a forefinger.

Forthill tilted his head, frowning. “Lasciel,” he murmured.

“Lasciel?” I said. It came out muffled, since I was licking chocolate off my finger.

“The Seducer,” Forthill murmured. He smeared his finger over the chocolate, erasing the sigil. “Lasciel is also called the Webweaver and the Temptress,” he said, between licks. “Though it seems odd that Nicodemus would want to free her. Typically, she does not follow Anduriel’s lead.”

“A rebel angel among rebel angels?”

“Perhaps,” Forthill said. “It is something better not discussed, for now.”

Susan stepped out of the little office, a wireless phone to her ear. “All right,” she said to the phone, and walked past us, jerking one hand at us to tell us to follow her. Father Forthill lifted his eyebrows, and we went out to the Carpenter family’s living room.

It was a fairly huge room divided into several clumps of furniture. The television was in the smallest clump, and still looked about three sizes too small. Susan marched over to it, flicked it on, and flipped through stations.

She stopped on a local station, a news report, that showed a helicopter angle of a building being consumed by a raging fire. About a dozen yellow-and-red fire trucks circled around it, but it was obvious that they were only containing the fire. The building was lost.

“What’s this?” Forthill asked.

“Dammit,” I snarled, and turned away from the television, pacing.

“It’s the building Shiro took us to last night,” Susan said. “The Denarians were in some tunnels beneath it.”

“Not anymore,” I snapped. “They’ve left and covered their tracks. Hell, they’ve had what? Six hours? They could be a couple of states away by now.”

“Nicodemus,” Forthill said. “It’s his style.”

“We’ll find them,” Susan said quietly.

“How?” I asked.

She pressed her lips together and turned away from me. She spoke quietly into the phone. I couldn’t hear what she said, but it had that end-of-conversation tone to it. She turned the handset off a moment later. “What can we do?”

“I can go to the underworld,” I said. “Call up some answers from there. But I can’t do it until the sun sets.”

Forthill said quietly, “You mustn’t do that. It’s far too dangerous. None of the Knights would want—”

I slashed my hand through the air, cutting him off. “We need information or Shiro is going to die. Not only that, but if we don’t run down Nicodemus, he gets to do whatever badness he’s getting ready to do with the Shroud. If I have to go to Downbelow for answers, then that’s where I go.”

“What about Michael?” Susan asked. “Couldn’t he find Shiro the way Shiro found Harry?”

Forthill shook his head. “Not necessarily. It isn’t something he can control. At times, the Knights are given that kind of discernment, but they can’t call it up at will.”

I checked my watch, figuring up distances. “Michael and Sanya should be back here in what? An hour or so?”

“Barring further difficulties,” Forthill said.

“Fine. We’ll see if the side of the angels wants to pitch in. If they don’t, I’m calling Chauncy up as soon as the sun goes down.” I took the phone from Susan and walked out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Susan asked.

“To talk to Anna Valmont. And after that, I’m going to call my client. On the off chance I survive, I want to look like I at least tried to be professional.”

Charity kept a guest room that had slowly been engulfed in a jungle of fabric. Clear boxes full of the stuff in every imaginable color stood stacked against one wall, and a small sewing machine sat on a table, barely visible among neatly folded stacks of more. More boxes of fabric had been stacked into a rampart around a single bed, which was occupied by a lump buried underneath several quilts.

I turned on a small lamp on the sewing table and hoped that the room wouldn’t burst into flame. “Anna. Wake up.”

The lump made a mumbling sound and stirred before settling again.

I turned the phone on and let the dial tone sound in the room’s silence. “I know you’re awake, Miss Valmont. And you know that I saved your ass back at the Marriott. So if you don’t sit up and talk to me right now, I’m calling the cops to come pick you up.”

She didn’t move. I punched in a number and let the phone start to ring.

“Bastard,” she muttered. With the British accent, it came out *bah-stuhd*. She sat up, her expression wary, holding the covers to her front. Her shoulders were bare. “Very well. What do you want?”

“My coat, for starters,” I said. “But since I doubt you’re palming it, I’ll settle for the name of your buyer.”

She stared at me for a moment before she said, “If I tell you that, it could kill me.”

“If you don’t, I’m turning you over to the police.”

She shrugged. “Which, while unpleasant, won’t kill me. Besides, you intend to turn me over in any case.”

I scowled at her. “I saved your life. Twice.”

“I am aware of that,” she said. She stared through me for a moment before she said, “It’s so hard to believe. Even though it happened to me. It seems...mad. Like a dream.”

“You aren’t crazy,” I said. “Or at least, you aren’t hallucinating or anything.”

She half laughed. "I know. Cisca is dead. Gaston is dead. It happened to them. My friends." Her voice broke, and she started blinking very quickly. "I just wanted to finish it. So that they didn't die for nothing at all. I owed it to them."

I sighed. "Look, I'll make this easy for you. Was it Marcone?"

She shrugged without focusing her eyes. "We went through an intermediary, so I can't be sure."

"But was it Marcone?"

Valmont nodded. "If I had to guess, I would say it was. The buyer was someone with a great deal of money and local influence."

"Does he know that you know?"

"One doesn't mention to the buyer that you know who he is when he is taking precautions to prevent it. It's impolite."

"If you know anything about Marcone, you know that he isn't going to pay you off and let you walk away without delivering," I said.

She rubbed at her eyes. "I'll offer to return it."

"Good idea. Assuming he doesn't kill you before you finish offering."

She glared at me for a second, angry and crying. "What do you want from me?"

I picked up a box of tissues from behind a bunch of yellow cotton on the table and offered it to her. "Information. I want to know everything. It's possible you've heard or seen something that might help me recover the Shroud. Help me out, and I might be able to buy you some time to leave town."

She took the box and blotted her eyes on a tissue. "How do I know you will deliver on that promise?"

"Earth to Larceny Spice, come in Larceny Spice. I've saved your life twice. I think you can safely assume goodwill."

She looked down, biting her lip. "I...I don't know."

"This is a limited-time offer."

She drew in a shaking breath. "All right. All right, let me clean up a little. Get dressed. I'll tell you what I know."

"Fine," I said. "Come on. There's a shower in the bathroom at the end of the hall. I'll get you towels and stuff."

"Is this your house?"

"Friends'. But I've stayed here before."

She nodded and fished around until she came up with the black shirt she'd been wearing the night before. She slipped into it and rose. She had long, pretty, and bruised legs, and as she stepped onto her right leg she let out a pained cry and fell forward. I caught her before she could hit the ground, and she leaned into me, lifting her right foot from the floor.

"Bloody hell," she wheezed. "I must have twisted my ankle last night." She shot me a hard-eyed glance. "Hands."

I jerked my hand off something pleasantly smooth and firm. "Sorry. Accident. Can you manage?"

She shook her head, balanced on one leg. "I don't think so. Lend me your arm a moment."

I helped her hobble down the hall and into the bathroom. I dug some more towels out of the linen closet, then passed them into her through a mostly closed door. She locked it behind her and started the shower.

I shook my head and went back down the hall, dialing Father Vincent's phone number. On the fifth ring, he answered, his voice sounding tired and strained. "Vincent."

"It's Harry Dresden," I said. "I know where the Shroud came into Chicago and who was buying. It got intercepted by a third party and they have it now."

"You're certain?" Vincent demanded.

"Yeah."

"Do you know where it is?"

"Not exactly, but I'm going to find out. I should know by this evening, maybe sooner."

"Why will it take until this evening?" Vincent asked.

"Well, uh. It's a little hard to explain," I said.

"Perhaps the police should handle the rest of the investigation."

"I'd advise against it."

"Why?"

"I have some information that indicates your mistrust may not have been misplaced."

"Oh," Vincent said. His voice sounded worried. "I think we should meet and talk, Mister Dresden. I'd rather not discuss this over the phone. Two o'clock, at the room we spoke in last?"

"I can probably do that," I said.

"Until then," said Vincent, and hung up.

I paced back into the living room and found Susan sitting and reading the morning paper with coffee and a doughnut. One of the sliding glass doors that had previously led to the back patio was open, and on the other side was a lot of bare wood and plastic—the addition Michael was building. The rasping of a saw came through the open door.

I stepped out and found Father Forthill at work. He'd taken off his coat and collar. He had a short-sleeved black shirt underneath. He wore leather work gloves and safety glasses. He finished sawing a beam, and blew dust off the cut before rising. "How is Father Vincent?"

"Sounds tired," I said. "I'm going to talk to him later, assuming we don't have something going on first."

"I worry for him," Forthill said. He held up the beam to the top of what would eventually be a window. "Here, hold this for me."

I did. Forthill started driving in a few nails, clenching several in his teeth. "And Miss Valmont?"

"Taking a shower. She's going to cooperate with us."

Forthill frowned, taking a nail from his lips. "I really wouldn't have expected that from her, from the sense I had of her."

"It's my charming personality," I said. "The ladies can't resist."

"Mmmm," Forthill said, around the nails.

"It's the only decent thing to do. And her back is against a wall, right?"

Forthill drove the nail in and frowned. He looked at me.

I looked back at him for a moment and then said, "I'll just go check on her."

I got about halfway across the living room before I heard a car door shut, immediately followed by a car engine. I ran to the front door and threw it open just in time to see the shattered rear window of the Blue Beetle zipping down the street and out of sight.

I fumbled at my pockets and groaned. My keys were missing. "Son of a *bitch*," I snarled. I punched the door frame in sheer frustration. I didn't punch it very hard. I was angry, not looking to break my own knuckles. "The old stumble and bump and I *fell* for it."

Susan stepped up beside me and sighed. "Harry, you idiot. You're a good man. But an idiot where women are concerned."

"First my coat and now my car. That's freaking gratitude for you."

Susan nodded. "No good deed goes unpunished."

I stared at her. "Are you laughing at me?"

She faced me from behind a perfectly straight face. But her voice sounded a little choked. “No.”

“You *are*.”

Her face turned pink and she shook her head.

“Laughing at my pain.”

She turned and walked back to the living room and picked up her paper. She sat down and held it up so that I couldn’t see her face. Choked sounds came out from behind the paper.

I stalked back out to the addition, growling. Forthill looked back at me, his eyebrows raised.

“Give me something to break. Or hit really hard,” I told him.

His eyes sparkled. “You’ll hurt yourself. Here, hold this for me.”

I lifted another cut board into place, while Forthill reached up to hammer it in. As he did, the sleeve of his shirt tugged up, and showed me a pair of green lines.

“Wait,” I said, and snapped my hand over to his arm. The board slipped out of my other hand and bonked me on the head on the way down. I scowled at it, wincing, but tugged the sleeve up.

Forthill had a tattoo on the inside of his right arm.

An Eye of Thoth.

“What is this?” I demanded.

Forthill looked around and tugged his sleeve back down. “A tattoo.”

“Duh, a tattoo. I know that. What does it mean?”

“It’s something I had done when I was younger,” he answered. “An organization I belonged to.”

I tried to calm down but my voice still sounded harsh. “What organization?”

Forthill blinked mildly at me. “I don’t understand why you are so upset, Harry—”

“*What* organization?”

He continued to look confused. “Just several of us who took our orders together. We were barely more than boys, really. And we’d...well. We’d happened on to some of the stranger events of our day. And records of others. A vampire had killed two people in town, and we stopped it together. No one believed us, of course.”

“Of course,” I said. “What about the tattoo?”

Forthill pursed his lips, thoughtful. “I haven’t thought about it in so long. Well, the next morning we went out and got the tattoos. We swore an oath to be always watchful against the forces of darkness, to help one another whenever we could.”

“Then what?”

“After the hangovers faded, we went a very good distance out of our way to make sure none of the senior clergy saw them,” Forthill responded, smiling faintly. “We were young.”

“And then?”

“And then no other supernatural events presented themselves over the next few years and the five of us drifted apart. Until I heard from Vittorio—from Father Vincent last week, I hadn’t spoken to any of them in years.”

“Wait. Vincent has a tattoo like this?”

“I suppose he could have had it removed. He might be the sort to do that.”

“What about the others in the group?”

“Passed away over the last several years,” Forthill said. He stripped off one of the work gloves and regarded his weathered hand. “Back then, I don’t think any of us thought we would ever live to be so old.”

The wheels spun in my head, and I got it. I understood what was happening, and why. On pure intuition I stalked to the front of the house, gathering up my things on the way. Father Forthill followed me. “Harry?”

I walked past Susan, who set her paper aside and stood up to follow me. “Harry?”

I got to the front door and jerked it open.

The engine of Michael’s white pickup rattled to a halt as I did, and he and Sanya got out of the truck. They looked a little rumpled and unshaven, but fine. Michael blinked at me and asked, “Harry? I think I just saw a woman driving your car toward the highway. What’s going on?”

“Get anything you need for a fight,” I said. “We’re going.”

Chapter Twenty-eight

When Father Vincent answered my knock, I kicked the door into his face as hard as I could. He fell back with a grunt of surprise. I came into the room with Father Forthill's Louisville Slugger in my hands, and jabbed the broad end of the bat into Vincent's throat.

The old priest made a sick croaking sound and clutched at his neck on the way to the floor.

I didn't let it stop there. I kicked him in the ribs twice, and when he rolled over, trying to get away from me, I stomped down on the back of his neck, drew my gun, and shoved it against his skull.

"*Dio*," Vincent whimpered, panting. "*Dio*, wait! Please, don't hurt me!"

"I don't have time to play pretend," I said. "Drop the act."

"Please, Mister Dresden, I don't know what you mean." He coughed, panting, and I saw droplets of scarlet dripping onto the carpet. I'd bloodied his nose, or maybe his lip. He turned his head a tiny bit, eyes wide with panic. "Please, don't do anything to me. I don't know what you want, but I'm sure that we can talk about it."

I drew back the hammer on the revolver and said, "I'm sure that we can't."

His face went white. "No, wait!"

"I'm getting tired of playing pretend. Three."

"But I don't know—" He choked, and I heard him trying not to retch. "You have to tell me—"

"Two," I said. "I'm not going to elaborate about the other number."

"You can't! You can't!"

"One," I said, and pulled the trigger.

In the instant between the word and the deed, Vincent changed. A sheath of green scales appeared over his skin, and his legs twined together into a serpent's long and sinuous body. The eyes went last, changing to vertically slit yellow orbs while a second set of glowing green eyes opened above the first.

The trigger came down on an empty chamber. Click.

The snake twisted to bite me, but I was already getting out of the way. Michael came through the door, his unshaven face set in grim determination, *Amoracchius* blazing with its own white light. The snakeman whirled to face Michael with a hiss. Michael tried for a clean horizontal cut, but the snakeman ducked under it and went for the door in a streak of gleaming green scales.

When the snakeman went out the door, Sanya brought a four-foot length of two-by-six down on its head. The blow drove the snakeman's chin flat to the ground. It twitched a couple of times and then lay still.

"You were right," Michael noted. He slipped the sword away into its sheath.

"Better get him back inside before some maid sees him," I said.

Michael nodded, grabbed the snakeman's tail, and hauled him back into the hotel room.

Sanya looked in, nodded, and set the end of the length of heavy board down with a certain amount of satisfaction. I realized he'd used the thing with one arm. Good grief. I needed to get to the gym. "Good," the big Russian said. "Let me put this back in the truck, and I will join you."

A few minutes later, the snakeman woke up in the corner of the hotel room with me, Michael, and Sanya standing over him. His tongue flickered out and in a few times, and his two sets of eyes darted around the room.

"What did I miss?" it hissed. The last word came out with an extra large helping of S sounds.

"A tattoo," I said. "Father Vincent had a tattoo on the inside of his right arm."

"There was no tattoo," the snakeman insisted.

"Maybe it was covered with all the blood. You made a stupid mistake. It's understandable. Most criminals aren't all that bright, so you were working uphill from the get-go."

The snakeman hissed, shifting its scales restlessly, a cobralike hood flaring around its neck and shoulders.

Michael drew *Amoracchius*. Sanya did the same with *Esperacchius*. The two blades threw pure white light over the snakeman, and he subsided, flinching back from them. "What do you want?"

"To talk," I said. "See, the way it works is that I ask you questions. You answer them. And as long as you do we'll all be happy."

“And if I don’t?” the snakeman hissed.

“I get a new pair of boots.”

The snake’s scales and coils twined around on one another, rasping. Its eyes remained on the two Knights. “Ask.”

“Here’s what I figure happened. Somehow, your glee club heard that the Churchmice were being hired to find and take the Shroud. You thought you’d just nip it from them on their way out of town, but you missed. You caught Gaston LaRouche, but he didn’t have the Shroud. So you tortured him until he told you everything.”

“And after he told us everything,” the snakeman said. “Nicodemus was indulging his little bitch.”

“I think it’s sweet to see a father and daughter doing things together. So you found out what LaRouche knew, killed him, and left his body where it would be found, pointed at where the Shroud was going. You figured you’d let the mortal authorities do the work of finding them for you, and take the Shroud when they did.”

“Drudge work. Unworthy of us.”

“You’re gonna hurt my feelings, snakeboy. You found out who the Church was sending over. Then you grabbed poor Father Vincent at the airport. You took his place.”

“Any infant could reason as much,” the Denarian hissed.

I pulled up a chair and sat. “Here’s where it gets interesting. Because you decided to hire me on. Why?”

“Why do you think?”

“To keep tabs on the Knights,” I said. “Or to distract them by making them try to keep me out of the search. Or maybe you thought I could really turn up the Shroud for you. Probably all three. No sense doing things for one reason when you can fit in a few ulterior motives for free. You even gave me a sample of the Shroud to make it more likely I’d find it.” I leaned back in the chair. “That’s where I started seeing something wrong. I talked to Marcone about his new thug gunning for me, and he blinked.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” the snakeman said.

“Marcone was the buyer.”

A cold laugh slithered out of the snakeman’s mouth. “A mortal. Nothing more.”

“Yeah, well, the mortal figured out that Father Vincent had been replaced, and he sent an assassin to kill you. The new guy wasn’t shooting

at me outside of Fowler's studio. He was after you."

"Impossible," the snakeman said.

"Pride goeth, legs. Marcone wasn't born yesterday."

"I am sure you have pleased yourself with your cleverness, wizard."

"It gets better," I said brightly. "See, Nicodemus didn't let much drop, other than that he was on a deadline and he needed someone savvy to the supernatural. His daughter did, though. She asked if he didn't want a silver bowl. That's a ceremonial bowl, and if I was guessing, I'd say it was meant to be used to catch lifeblood. Fuel a ritual."

The snakeman's tail lashed around restlessly.

"I think Father Vincent was a warm-up. A test for the ritual. I think he came over here with two samples from the Shroud, and you used one of them as the focus for the plague curse that killed him. Once you knew it would work, you went after the Shroud itself."

"You know nothing, wizard," said the snakeman. The glowing sigil on his forehead throbbed in time with the extra set of eyes. "You are pathetic."

"You're hurting my feelings. Don't make me get the baseball bat," I said. "Nicodemus covered his tracks this morning by burning down the building you'd been in. I suppose he sent you to cover everything up nice and neat with the cops and with me. I think he's got something in mind, and I think it's tonight. So why not make this a comparatively pleasant discussion and tell me all about it."

"Do you think that you frighten me, wizard?" said the Denarian. "I was destroying men more powerful than you before this pathetic nation was born."

"Where is Nicodemus and what is he doing with the Shroud? I'll give you a hint. It's got something to do with a plague curse."

"I have served Nicodemus since—"

"Since my last dental appointment, I get it," I said. "But let me point something out to you. Nicodemus isn't here." I held my palms out to either side of me, Vanna White-style. "These two gentlemen are very much here. And very much angry."

Sanya stared at the Denarian, the saber in his hand swishing back and forth a little. He growled. It was enough to make me want to edge away from him.

"Look," I told him. "We're going to find Nicodemus and push his face in. We're going to shut down whatever he's got in mind, and we're going to get

Shiro back. And you're going to tell us what we need to know."

"Or?"

Michael said, in a very quiet voice, "I end you."

The snakeman stared at me for a very long time. Then he started to rasp and shake. It took me a minute to realize that he was laughing at me. Snakes weren't really meant for laughter. It didn't sit well on a serpentine body.

"You cannot threaten me," he said. "There is nothing you can do to me."

"I see a couple of holy swords here that make me think otherwise."

"No," the Denarian said. He reached up to his forehead and clawed at the sigil there, as if trying to peel off his own skin. The symbol flashed, and then faded, along with the second set of eyes. The whole of him rippled, scales abruptly melting away. For a second, the features of Father Vincent emerged from beneath the scales. Then they too faded away, replaced by a man's pinched and hardened features. He was dark of skin, maybe Moorish, and he wasn't big. Five feet and a little change, and not more than one-fifty. Average height, several centuries ago.

The man lowered his hand and let a slightly tarnished silver coin roll across the floor to Michael's feet. "My name is Quintus Cassius, and I have long been slave to the will of the demon Saluriel." His dark eyes glittered with malice, and his tone dripped with sarcasm. "I beg you for mercy and the chance to mend my ways. How ever can I thank you, Sir Knight, for saving me from that torment."

Shit. He was playing the morality card. I shot a glance at Michael.

The big man frowned at snakeboy Cassius, but didn't miss a beat in drawing out a white handkerchief embroidered with a silver cross, and folding the coin up in it. Michael and Sanya exchanged a long look, and then both of them put away their swords.

"Uh, guys. What the hell are you doing? Dangerous demon murderer here, remember?"

"Harry," Michael said. "We can't. Not if he's surrendered the coin and asked mercy."

"What?" I demanded. "That's *stupid*."

"Of course it is," Cassius said. Glee danced in his voice. "They know that I am not sincere. They know I will turn on them at the first opportunity. That I will obtain one of the other coins and return to what I have done for centuries."

I stood up, angry enough that the chair fell over. “Michael, if you turn the other cheek on this bastard he’ll tear it off your face. You’re supposed to be the freaking Fist of God.”

“No, I’m not, Harry,” Michael said. “The purpose of the Knights is not to destroy those who serve evil.”

“Indeed not,” Cassius said. Somehow, there was more of a hiss in his voice now than when he’d been a snake. “They’re here to save us.”

“To *save* them?” I stared at Michael. “Is he kidding?”

Michael shook his head. “No one else can face the Denarians, Harry. No one else can challenge the Fallen. This moment might be the only chance Cassius has to turn aside from what he has chosen. To change his path.”

“Great. I’m all for changing his path. Let’s change it to a direct line to the bottom of Lake Michigan.”

Michael’s expression was pained. “The Knights are here to protect freedom. To give those who are under the oppression of dark forces the chance to win free of them. I cannot sit in judgment on this man’s soul, Harry Dresden. Not for you. Not for anyone. All I can do is remain faithful to my calling. Give him the chance to see hope for his future. To show him the love and compassion any human being should show another. The rest is out of my hands.”

I watched Cassius’s face while Michael spoke. His expression changed. It became harder. More brittle. And bitter. What Michael said had touched him. I didn’t believe for a second that it had touched Cassius enough to change his mind. But it touched him enough to drive him toward fury.

I turned to Michael and said, “Do you really think that thing is going to start sipping of the milk of human kindness?”

“No,” Michael said. “But that doesn’t change my purpose. He has surrendered his coin, and the influence of it. The rest is not for Sanya or me to decide. It is Cassius’s choice.”

“You’ve seen these things,” I snarled, stalking over to face Michael. “I’ve seen the corpses they’ve left. They would have killed me, Susan, you—hell, all of us—without blinking an eye. God only knows what they have in mind with that curse they’re putting together.”

“All power has its limits, Harry.” He shook his head. “This is the limit of mine.”

Without really thinking about it, I shoved his shoulder. “They might already have *killed* Shiro. And you’re going to let this bastard walk?”

Michael caught my arm in one hand and twisted. Michael is strong. I had to rise up onto my toes to relieve the pressure he put on my elbow, and he shoved me back from him, his eyes hard and cold and angry as hell.

"I know that," he said in that same deadly quiet voice. "I know they've hurt him. That they're going to kill him. Just as Shiro knew that Nicodemus would betray his promise to set you free. It's one of the things that makes us different than they are, Harry. The blood on their hands does not make it right to bloody my own. My choices are measured against my own soul. Not against the stains on theirs." He looked at Cassius, and the Denarian flinched away from the silent flame in Michael's expression. "It is not for me to judge his soul. No matter how much I might want to."

"Hell's bells," I muttered. "No wonder Nicodemus has killed so many Knights, if you're all as idiotic as this."

"Harry—" Michael began.

I interrupted him. "Look at him, Michael. He isn't a victim. He's a freaking collaborator. That poor bastard Rasmussen might have been dragooned into working with the Denarians, but Cassius does it because he wants to do it."

"There's no way for you to be sure of that, Harry," Sanya said.

"Why are you giving him a fair chance? Which of them has *ever* turned away from their coins?"

Sanya put his dark hand on my shoulder and said, "I did."

I looked back at him, frowning.

"I was of their number," Sanya said. "I was less experienced. Foolish. Proud. I did not set out to be a monster, but that much power corrupts. Shiro faced the Fallen I had allowed in. He exposed its lies. And I made a better choice."

"Traitor," said Cassius, his voice cold. "We handed you the world. Power. Glory. Everything you could have wanted."

Sanya faced the man and said, "What I wanted you could never give me. I had to find it for myself." He extended a hand. "Cassius, you can leave them just as I did. Help us, please. And let us help you."

Cassius leaned back, as though Sanya's hand might burn him, and hissed, "I will eat your eyes."

"We can't leave him here," I said. "He'll shoot us in the back. He'll try to kill us."

"Maybe," Michael said quietly, and didn't move.

I wanted to be angry with Sanya and Michael. But I couldn't. I'm only human. I'd flirted with dark powers before. Made stupid deals. Bad choices. I'd been given a chance to work free of them, or I'd have been dead long ago.

I understood what Michael and Sanya were saying and doing. I understood why. I didn't like it, but I couldn't really gainsay it without making a hypocrite of myself. There but for the lack of a demon-infested coin went I.

Cassius started wheezing and laughing his dry, contemptuous laugh. "Run along," he said. "Run along. I'll think over your words. Reexamine my life. Walk the straight and narrow."

"Let's go," Michael said quietly.

"We can't leave him," I insisted.

"The police aren't going to have anything on him, Harry. We're not going to kill him. We're finished here. Have faith. We'll find an answer somehow."

Cassius laughed at Michael's back as he walked out. Sanya followed him, lingering to look back over his shoulder at me.

"Fools," Cassius murmured, rising. "Weak fools."

I picked up the bat again and turned to the door. "You're wrong," I said to Cassius.

"Weak," Cassius repeated. "The old man was screaming after only an hour, you know. Nicodemus started with his back. Lashed him with chains. Then Deirdre played with him."

I gave Cassius a hard look over my shoulder.

He was sneering, lip lifted from his teeth. "Deirdre likes to break fingers and toes. I wish I'd been able to stay longer. I only got to pull out his toenails." His smile widened, eyes gleaming. "The woman, the Fellowship woman. She is yours?"

I felt my lip lift away from my teeth.

Cassius's eyes gleamed. "She bled prettily, didn't she? The next time I catch her, you won't be there to disrupt my conjuration. I'll let the snakes eat her. Bite by bite."

I stared at him.

Cassius smiled again. "But there is mercy for me, is there not? Forgiveness. Indeed, God is great."

I turned away from him again and said, very quietly, “People like you always mistake compassion for weakness. Michael and Sanya aren’t weak. Fortunately for you, they’re good men.”

Cassius laughed at me.

“Unfortunately for you, I’m not.”

I spun around, swinging the bat as hard as I could, and broke Cassius’s right kneecap.

He screamed in shock and sudden surprise, and went down. Odd crackling sounds came from the joint.

I swung again and broke his right ankle.

Cassius screamed.

I broke his left knee for him too. And his left ankle. He was thrashing around and screaming a lot, so it took me maybe a dozen swings.

“Stop!” he managed to gasp. “Stop, stop, stop!”

I kicked him in the mouth to shut him up, stomped his right forearm to the floor, and crushed his hand with another half dozen swings.

I pinned his left arm down the same way, and put the bat on my shoulder. “Listen to me, you worthless piece of shit. You aren’t a victim. You chose to be one of them. You’ve been serving dark forces your whole life. Freddie Mercury would say Beelzebub has a devil put aside for you.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” He gasped. “You can’t...you won’t...”

I leaned down and twisted his false priest’s collar, half choking him. “The Knights are good men. I’m not. And I won’t lose a second’s sleep over killing you.” I shook him with each word, hard enough to rattle his bloodied teeth. “Where. Is. Nicodemus.”

Cassius broke, sobbing. His bladder had let go at some point, and the room smelled like urine. He choked and spat out blood and a broken tooth. “I’ll tell.” He gasped. “Please, don’t.”

I let his collar go and straightened. “Where?”

“I don’t know,” he said, cowering away from my eyes. “He didn’t tell me. Meeting him tonight. Was going to meet him tonight. Eight.”

“Meet him where?”

“Airport,” Cassius said. He started throwing up. I kept his arm pinned, so it mostly went all over himself. “I don’t know exactly where.”

“What is he doing?”

“The curse. He’s going to unleash the curse. Use the Shroud. The old man’s blood. He has to be moving when he completes the ritual.”

“Why?”

“Curse is a contagion. He has to spread it as far as he can. More exposure to it. Make himself stronger. A-apocalypse.”

I took my foot off of his arm and smashed the motel’s phone to pieces with the bat. I found his cell phone and crushed it, too. Then I reached into my pocket and dropped a quarter on the floor near him. “There’s a pay phone on the other side of the parking lot, past a patch of broken glass. You’d better get yourself an ambulance.” I turned and walked to the door without looking back. “If I see you again—ever—I’ll kill you.”

Michael and Sanya waited for me outside the door. Sanya’s face held a certain amount of satisfaction. Michael’s expression was grave, worried, his eyes on mine.

“It had to be done,” I said to Michael. My voice sounded cold. “He’s alive. It’s more than he deserves.”

“Perhaps,” Michael said. “But what you did, Harry. It was wrong.”

A part of me felt sick. Another part felt satisfied. I wasn’t sure which of them was bigger. “You heard what he said about Shiro. About Susan.”

Michael’s eyes darkened, and he nodded. “It doesn’t make it right.”

“No. It doesn’t.” I met his eyes. “Think God’ll forgive me?”

Michael was quiet for a moment, and then his expression softened. He clasped my shoulder and said, “God is always merciful.”

“What you did for him was actually quite generous,” Sanya said philosophically. “Relatively speaking. He might be hurt, but he is, after all, alive. He’ll have a nice, long while to reconsider his choices.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “I’m a giver. Did it for his own good.”

Sanya nodded gravely. “Good intentions.”

Michael nodded. “Who are we to judge you?” His eyes flashed, and he asked Sanya, “Did you see the snake’s face, right when Harry turned with the bat?”

Sanya smiled and started whistling as we walked through the parking lot.

We piled into the truck. “Drop me off at my place,” I said. “I need to pick up a couple things. Make some phone calls.”

“The duel?” Michael asked. “Harry, are you sure you don’t want me to —”

“Leave it to me,” I said. “You’ve already got something on your plate. I can handle things. I’ll meet you at the airport afterward and help you find Shiro.”

“If you live,” Sanya said.

“Yes. Thank you, Comrade Obvious.”

The Russian grinned. “Was that a quarter you gave Cassius?”

“Yeah.”

“For the phone?”

“Yeah.”

Michael noted, “Phone calls cost more than that now.”

I slouched back and allowed myself a small smile. “Yeah. I know.”

Sanya and Michael burst out laughing. Michael pounded on the steering wheel.

I didn’t join them, but I enjoyed their laughter while I could. The February sun was already sinking fast toward the horizon.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Back at my apartment, I called Murphy on her personal cell phone. I used simple sentences and told her everything.

“Dear God,” Murphy said. Can I summarize or what? “They can infect the city with this curse thing?”

“Looks like,” I said.

“How can I help?”

“We’ve got to keep them from getting it into the air. They won’t be on public transportation. Find out if any chartered planes are taking off between seven and eight-thirty. Helicopters too.”

“Hang on,” Murphy said. I heard computer keys clicking, Murphy saying something to someone, a police radio. A moment later she said, voice tense, “There’s trouble.”

“Yeah?”

“There are a pair of detectives heading out to arrest you. Looks like Homicide wants you for questioning. There’s no warrant listed.”

“Crap.” I took a deep breath. “Rudolph?”

“Brownnosing rat,” Murphy muttered. “Harry, they’re almost to your place. You’ve only got a few minutes.”

“Can you decoy them? Get some manpower to the airport?”

“I don’t know,” Murphy said. “I’m supposed to be a mile from this case. And it isn’t as though I can announce that terrorists are about to use a biological weapon on the city.”

“Use Rudolph,” I said. “Tell him off the record that I said the Shroud is leaving town on a chartered flight from the airport. Let him take the heat for it if they don’t find anything.”

Murphy let out a harsh little laugh. “There are times when you can be a clever man, Harry. It takes me by surprise.”

“Why, thank you.”

“What else can I do?”

I told her.

“You’re kidding.”

“No. We may need the manpower, and SI is out of this one.”

“Just when I had hope for your intelligence, too.”

“You’ll do it?”

“Yeah. Can’t promise anything, but I’ll do it. Get moving. They’re less than five minutes away.”

“Gone. Thank you, Murph.”

I hung up the phone, opened my closet, and dug into a couple of old cardboard boxes I kept at the back until I found my old canvas duster. It was battered and torn in a couple of places, but it was clean. It didn’t have the same reassuring weight as the leather duster, but it did more to hide my gun than my jacket. And it made me look cool. Well, maybe cooler, anyway.

I grabbed my things, locked up my place behind me, and got into Martin’s rental car. Martin wasn’t in it. Susan sat behind the wheel. “Hurry,” I said. She nodded and pulled out.

A few minutes later, no one had pulled us over. “I take it Martin isn’t helping.”

Susan shook her head. “No. He said he had other duties that took precedence. He said that I did, too.”

“What did you say?”

“That he was a narrow-minded, hidebound, anachronistic, egotistical bastard.”

“No wonder he likes you.”

Susan smiled a little and said, “The Fellowship is his life. He serves a cause.”

“What is it to you?” I asked.

Susan remained silent for a long time as we drove across town. “How did it go?”

“We caught the impostor. He told us where the bad guys would be later tonight.”

“What did you do with him?”

I told her.

She looked at me for a while and then said, “Are you all right?”

“Fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“It’s done.”

“But are you all right?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m glad you didn’t see it.”

Susan asked, “Oh? Why?”

“You’re a girl. Beating up bad guys is a boy thing.”

“Chauvinist pig,” Susan said.

“Yeah. I get it from Murphy. She’s a bad influence.”

We hit the first traffic sign directing us toward the stadium, and Susan asked, “Do you really think you can win?”

“Yeah. Hell, Ortega is only the third or fourth most disturbing thing I’ve tangled with today.”

“But even if you do win, what does it change?”

“Me getting killed now. That way, I get to be killed later tonight instead.”

Susan laughed. There was nothing happy in it. “You don’t deserve a life like this.”

I squinted my eyes and made my voice gravelly. “Deserve’s got nothin’—”

“So help me God, if you quote Clint Eastwood at me, I’m wrapping this car around a telephone pole.”

“Do you feel lucky, punk?” I smiled and turned my left hand palm up.

I felt her hand settle lightly on mine a moment later, and she said, “A girl’s got to draw the line somewhere.”

We rode the rest of the way to the stadium in silence, holding hands.

I hadn’t ever been to Wrigley when it was empty. That wasn’t really the point of a stadium. You went there to be among about a bajillion people and see something happen. This time, with acres and acres of unoccupied asphalt, the stadium at its center looked huge and somehow more skeletal than when it was filled with vehicles and cheering thousands. The wind sighed through the stadium, gusting, whistling, and moaning. Twilight had fallen, and the unlit street lamps cast spidery shadows over the lots. Darkness gaped in the arches and doorways of the stadium, empty as the eyes of a skull.

“Thank God that isn’t too creepy or anything,” I muttered.

“What now?” Susan asked.

Another car pulled in behind us. I recognized it from McAnnally’s the night before. The car pulled up maybe fifty feet away and rolled to a stop. Ortega got out, and leaned down to say something to the driver, a man with a dark complexion and amber-tone glasses. There were two more men in

the backseat, though I couldn't see much of them. I was betting they were all Red Court.

"Let's not look scared," I said, and got out of the car.

I didn't look at Ortega, but drew out my staff with me, planted it on the ground, and stared at the stadium. The wind caught my coat, and blew it back enough to show the gun on my hip now and again. I'd traded in my sweats for dark jeans and a black silk shirt. The Mongols or somebody wore silk shirts because they would catch arrows as they entered wounds, and enable them to pull barbed arrowheads out without ripping their innards apart. I wasn't planning on getting shot with barbed arrows, but weirder things have happened.

Susan got out and walked up to stand beside me. She stared at the stadium too, and the wind blew her hair back the same way it did my coat. "Very nice," she murmured, hardly moving her mouth. "That's a good look on you. Ortega's driver is about to wet his pants."

"You say the nicest things to me."

We just stood there for a couple of minutes, until I heard a deep, rhythmic rumbling—one of those annoyingly loud bass stereos in some moron's car. The rumbling got louder; then there was a squealing of tires taking a tight turn, and Thomas pulled into the lot in a different white sports car than I'd seen him in the night before. The music got louder as he sped across the lot and parked his car diagonally across the lines I'd unconsciously respected when I'd parked. He killed the stereo and got out, a small cloud of smoke emerging with him. It wasn't cigarette smoke.

"Paolo!" Thomas caroled. He wore tight blue jeans and a black T-shirt with a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* logo. The laces to one of his combat boots were untied, and he carried a bottle of scotch in his hand. He pulled from it cheerfully and wove a drunken line to Ortega. Thomas offered out the bottle, his balance wobbling. "Have a swig?"

Ortega slapped the bottle from Thomas's hand. It shattered on the ground.

"Shpoilshport," Thomas slurred, wavering. "Hola, Harry! Hola, Susan!" He waved at us, and all but fell down. "I was going to offer you some too, but that plan's been blown all to hell now."

"Maybe another time," Susan said.

A blue light appeared in one of the tunnels from the stadium. A moment later, a vehicle somewhere between a compact car and a golf cart rolled

into the parking lot, a whirling blue bubble light flashing on its roof. With the quiet hum of electric motors, it zipped over to us and stopped. Kincaid sat behind the steering wheel and nodded to the rear of the vehicle. "In. We're set up inside."

We walked over to the security cart. Ortega started to get on, but I held up my hand to him. "Ladies first," I said quietly, and gave Susan my hand as she got on. I followed her. Ortega and Thomas followed. Thomas had put on a pair of headphones and was bobbing his chin in a vague fashion that was probably supposed to be in rhythm.

Kincaid started up the cart and called over his shoulder, "Where is the old man?"

"Gone," I said. I jerked a thumb at Susan. "Had to go to the bench."

Kincaid looked from me to Susan and shrugged. "Nice bench."

He drove us through several passages in the stadium, somehow finding his way despite the fact that no lights were on, and I could barely see. Eventually we rolled out onto the field from one of the bullpens. The stadium was dark but for where three spotlights basted the pitcher's mound and first and third base in pools of light. Kincaid drove to the pitcher's mound, stopped, and said, "Everyone out."

We did. Kincaid parked the cart over home plate, then padded through the shadows to the visiting team's dugout. "They're here," he said quietly.

The Archive emerged from the dugout, carrying a small, carved wooden box before her. She wore a dark dress with no frills or ruffles, and a grey cape held closed with a silver brooch. She was still little, still adorable, but something in her bearing left no illusions about the difference in her apparent age and her knowledge and capability.

She walked to the pitcher's mound, not looking at anyone, her focus on the box she carried. She set it down, very carefully, and then lifted the lid from the top of the box and stepped back.

A wave of nauseating cold flooded out when she opened the box. It went past me, through me. I was the only one there to react to it. Susan put her hand on my arm, kept her eyes on Ortega and Thomas, and asked, "Harry?"

My last meal had been a drive-through taco on the way back from the meeting with Cassius, but it was trying to leave. I kept it down and forced the sickening cold away from me with an effort of will. The sensation lessened. "Fine," I said. "I'm fine."

The Archive looked up at me, child features solemn. “You know what is inside the box?”

“I think so. I’ve never actually seen it.”

“Seen what?” Thomas asked.

Instead of answering, the Archive drew a small box out of her pocket. She opened the box and delicately plucked out an insect as long as her own fingers—a brown scorpion—by its tail. She looked around to make sure she had everyone’s attention. She did. Then she dropped the scorpion into the box.

There was an instant, immediate sound, somewhere between a wildcat’s scream and the sizzle of bacon hitting a hot skillet. Something that looked vaguely like a cloud of ink in clear water floated up out of the box. It was about the size of a baby’s head. Dozens of shadowy tendrils held the scorpion, drawing it up into the air along with the inky cloud. Dark violet flickers of flame played over the insect’s shell for all of two or three seconds—and then it simply crumbled, carapace falling away in flakes and dust.

The cloudy mass rose up to a height of about five feet, before the Archive murmured a word. It stopped in place, bobbing gently, holding there.

“Damn,” Thomas said, he took the earphones out. Music with many electric guitars sounded tinnily from them. “And this is what?”

“Mordite,” I said quietly. “Deathstone.”

“Yes,” the Archive said.

Ortega drew in a slow breath, and nodded in understanding.

“Deathstone, huh?” Thomas said. “It sort of looks like someone spray-painted a soap bubble. And gave it tentacles.”

“It isn’t a soap bubble,” I said. “There’s a solid piece inside. The energies it carries in it are what create that shroud effect around it.”

Thomas poked a finger at it. “What does it do?”

I caught his wrist before he could touch it, and pushed his hand away. “It kills. Hence the name *deathstone*, you half-wit.”

“Oh,” Thomas said, nodding with drunken sagacity. “It looked cool when it gacked that little thing, but so what? It’s a bug zapper.”

“If you disrespect this thing it’s going to get you killed,” I said. “It would kill anything living exactly the same way. Anything. It’s not from our world.”

“It’s extraterrestrial?” asked Susan.

“You do not understand, Miss Rodriguez,” Ortega said quietly. “Mordite is not from this galaxy or this universe. It is not of our reality.”

I had reservations about Ortega’s presence on the home-team roster, but I nodded. “It’s from Outside. It’s...congealed antilife. A chip of this stuff makes nuclear waste look like secondhand smoke. Being near it draws the life off you bit by bit. If you touch it, it kills you. Period.”

“Precisely,” said the Archive. She stepped forward to look at both Ortega and me. “An enchantment binds the particle in place. It is also sensitive to applied will. The duelists will face each other, the mordite between them. Will it toward your opponent. He with the greatest force of will controls the mordite. The duel will end when it has devoured one of you.”

Gulp.

The Archive continued. “Seconds will observe from first and third bases, facing their duelist’s opponent. Mister Kincaid will ensure that no undue interference is perpetrated by either second. I have instructed him to do so with extreme prejudice.”

Thomas wobbled a little and eyed the Archive. “Eh?”

The girl faced him and said, “He’ll kill you if you interfere.”

“Oh,” Thomas said cheerfully. “Gotcha, punkin.”

Ortega glared at Thomas and made a disgusted sound. Thomas found something else to look at and backed a prudent step away.

“I will monitor both duelists to ensure that no energies are employed on their behalf. I, too, will resolve any infractions with extreme prejudice. Do you understand?”

Ortega nodded. I said, “Yeah.”

“Are there any questions, gentlemen?” the Archive asked.

I shook my head. Ortega did too.

“Each of you may make a brief statement,” said the Archive.

Ortega drew a band of black and silver beads from his pocket. Without making an effort, I could feel the defensive energies bound up within them. He regarded me with casual mistrust as he bound the bracelet to his left side and said, “This can end in only one way.”

In answer, I fished one of the antivenom potions from my pocket, popped the top, and slugged it down. I burped and said, “Excuse me.”

“You’ve really got class, Dresden,” Susan said.

“Class oozes out my every orifice,” I agreed. I passed her my staff and rod. “Hold these for me.”

“Seconds, please retire to your positions,” said the Archive.

Susan put her hand on my arm, fingers clenching tight for a second. I reached up and touched her hand. She let go and backed away to third base.

Thomas offered to high-five Ortega. Ortega glared. Thomas smiled a Colgate smile and swaggered over to first base. He drew a silver flask of something from his hip pocket on the way, and took a sip.

The Archive looked back and forth between me and Ortega. She was standing on the pitcher’s mound, next to the floating glob of chilling energy, so she was a shade taller than Ortega and a shade shorter than me. Her face was solemn, even grim. It didn’t sit well on a child who should have been getting up for school in the morning.

“Are you both resolved to this duel?”

“I am,” Ortega said.

“Uh-huh.” I nodded.

The Archive nodded. “Gentlemen. Present your right hands, please.”

Ortega lifted his right arm, palm faced toward me. I mirrored him. The Archive gestured, and the mordite sphere floated up until it hovered precisely halfway between Ortega and me. Tension gathered against my palm, an invisible and silent pressure. It felt vaguely like holding my hand against a recirculating outlet in a swimming pool—it was a tenuous thing, that felt like it might easily slide to one side.

If it did, I’d get to see the mordite up close and personal. My heart skittered over a couple of beats, and I took a deep breath, trying to focus and ready myself. If I was Ortega, I’d want to open up with everything I had in the first heartbeat of the contest and end it almost before it began. I took a couple of deep breaths and narrowed my focus, my thoughts, until the pressure against my hand and the deadly darkness a few feet away from it were all that existed.

“Begin,” said the Archive. She backed quickly toward home plate.

Ortega let out a shout, a battle cry, his body dipping slightly, hips twisting, shoving his hand forward like a man trying to close a vault door with one arm. His will flooded toward me, wild and strong, and the pressure of it drove me back onto my heels. The mordite sphere zipped across three of the four feet between it and me.

Ortega's will was strong. Really, really strong. I tried to divert it, to overcome it and stop the sphere. For a panicked second I had nothing. The sphere kept drifting closer to me. A foot. Ten inches. Six inches. Small tendrils of inky darkness drifted out from the cloud around the mordite, reaching out blindly toward my fingers.

I gritted my teeth, hardened my will, and stopped the thing five inches from my hand. I tried to mount up some momentum of my own, but Ortega held strong against me.

"Don't draw this out, boy," Ortega said through clenched teeth. "Your death will save lives. Even if you kill me, my vassals at Casaverde are sworn to hunt you down. You and everyone you know and love."

The sphere came a bit closer. "You said you wouldn't harm them if I agreed to the duel," I growled.

"I lied," Ortega said. "I came here to kill you and end this war. Anything else is immaterial."

"You bastard."

"Stop fighting it, Dresden. Make it painless for yourself. If you kill me, they will be executed. By surrendering, you preserve them. Your Miss Rodriguez. The policewoman. The investigator you apprenticed under. The owner of that bar. The Knight and his family. The old man in the Ozarks. The wolf-children at the university. All of them."

I snarled, "Buddy, you just said the wrong thing."

I let the anger Ortega's words had ignited flood down through my arm. A cloud of scarlet sparks erupted against the mordite sphere, and it started creeping the other way.

Ortega's face became strained, his breathing heavier. He didn't waste any effort on words now. His eyes darkened until they were entirely black and inhuman. There were ripples, here and there, under the surface of his skin—the flesh mask that contained the vaguely batlike monster those of the Red Court really were. The monstrous Ortega, the true Ortega, stirred underneath the false human shell. And he was afraid.

The sphere crept closer. Ortega renewed his efforts with another war cry. But the sphere made it to the midway point, and got closer to him.

"Fool," Ortega said in a gasp.

"Murderer," I said, and shoved the sphere another foot closer to him.

His jaw clenched harder, the muscles in his face bulging. "You'll destroy us all."

“Starting with you.” The sphere darted a little nearer.

“You are a selfish, self-righteous madman.”

“You murder and enslave children,” I said. I shoved the mordite sphere to within a foot of him. “You threaten the people I love.” I shoved it closer still. “How does it feel, Ortega. Being too weak to protect yourself. How does it feel to know you are about to die?”

In answer, a slow smile crept over his face. His shoulders moved a little, and I saw that one of his arms hung limply at his side, like an empty sleeve. A small bulge appeared just to one side of his stomach, like a gun being held in an overcoat pocket.

I stared at it in shock. He’d pulled his real arm out of the flesh mask. He was holding a gun on me.

“How does it feel?” Ortega asked, voice very quiet. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Chapter Thirty

“You can’t,” I said. I shot a glance toward home plate, but the Archive apparently hadn’t noticed anything amiss. My will wavered, and the mordite sphere bobbed back and forth. “They’ll hear the shot. They’ll kill you.”

“Quite possibly,” he agreed. “As I said, I am prepared to accept that.”

His words chilled me, and the mordite sphere darted at my head. I caught it a couple of feet from me and held it, but just barely.

“I told you, Dresden. There’s only one way this can end. I would have preferred an honorable demise for you, but any death will do.”

I stared at the hidden gun.

A dot of bright scarlet light appeared on Ortega’s chest, and tracked slowly up.

My expression must have changed, because Ortega glanced down too. The bright pinpoint of the laser sight settled over his heart and became still.

Ortega’s eyes widened and his expression twisted into fury.

A lot of things happened at once.

There was a hissing sound, a thump, and a big section of Ortega’s chest dented in. Scarlet sprayed out behind him. An instant later, a booming sound much deeper than the crack of a rifle echoed around the stadium.

Ortega let out a screech that went off the high end of the scale. Fire erupted from the hidden gun, burning through Ortega’s flesh mask and shirt to reveal the muzzle of a small-caliber revolver clenched in an inhuman black hand. The bullet Ortega had taken had half twisted him, and he missed. I thought hanging around to let him try again was a bad idea, so I threw myself to one side and gave the mordite sphere another shove.

Ortega dodged the mordite, and even wounded, he was fast. A bright red dot appeared on his thigh for half a second, and with another *hiss-thump-boom*, the unseen gunman hit him again. I heard the bones of Ortega’s leg break.

Susan threw my staff and rod to me and leapt for Ortega, grabbing his free arm and twisting as if to throw him. Instead, the vampire writhed weirdly, and she wound up tearing the flesh mask from him, peeling it away like a banana skin to reveal the slime-slick, flabby-bodied creature beneath it—the true Ortega. He still held the gun though, and he turned to shoot at me again.

I screamed, “*Ventas servitas!*” at the top of my lungs, throwing my will at dirt of the pitcher’s mound. It whirled up into a miniature cyclone of fine brown soil, forcing the vampire to turn its head and shield its eyes. The second shot went wild as well, and I scrambled to get my blasting rod.

The flying dirt slowed her down, but Susan still went for Ortega’s gun hand. It was a mistake. Even with only one leg to support him, Ortega screeched again, twisted, and flung Susan from the pitcher’s mound into the third row of seats behind first base. She hit with bone-breaking force and dropped out of sight.

Sudden screeches filled the air, and I looked up to see as many as a dozen of the Red Court, revealed in their true forms, coming into the stadium. Some climbed over the walls, some jumped in from the upper levels, and some came bursting out of private boxes in showers of exploding glass.

I spun toward Ortega, lifting my blasting rod, rammed my will through it, and shouted, “*Fuego!*” A jet of flame as thick as my arm roared at him, but one of the incoming vampires hit him at the shoulder, dragging him out of the line of fire. The newcomer was set alight though, greasy skin going up like a bonfire, and it screamed hideously as it burned.

I sensed movement behind me, and turned to find Kincaid dashing across the ground. He scooped up the Archive and raced for one of the dugouts. One of the Red Court vamps got in his way. Kincaid’s arm blurred, a semiautomatic appearing in it, and without missing a step he put two shots neatly between the vampire’s eyes. The vampire started to fall, and as he went by it, Kincaid pumped another half dozen shots into its belly, which erupted in a messy shower of scarlet, and left the vampire screaming and thrashing weakly on the ground.

“Harry, look out!” Thomas screamed.

I didn’t look out. I figured on the worst and leapt forward. I heard a vampire hiss as it missed me, and it came rushing up behind me. I turned and unleashed another gout of fire from my blasting rod, but missed. The vampire closed on me, spraying venomous saliva into my face.

I'd been hit with vampire venom before, and the stuff worked fast, particularly in large amounts. But I'd taken the potion to block it, and all this did was make me itch. I used the time while the vampire sprayed me to prepare another blast, and unleashed the strike with the rod pressed against the vamp's flabby body. It scorched a wound in the vampire's belly the size of my fist and blew a two-foot hole in the creature's back. The vampire went into weak spasms, and I kicked it off me, rising.

Seven or eight vampires were within fifty feet of me, and coming fast. Thomas sprinted toward me, a knife gleaming in his hand, and hit one of the vamps from behind. He cut open the vampire's belly with a single slice, and the creature collapsed to the ground. "Harry, get out!"

"No!" I shouted. "Get Susan out of here!"

Thomas gritted his teeth, but changed course. He leapt up onto the first-base dugout and hopped neatly over the rail into the stands.

No help there, and there wasn't time to look for options. I crouched and concentrated, chanting, "Defendre, defendre," in a steady litany. It was difficult to do without my shield bracelet to focus it, but I brought up all the defensive energy I could manage in a dome around me.

The vampires hit it, slamming against it in mindless, shrieking rage. Any one of them could have flipped my car over lengthwise with only a little effort. Their blows against the shield could have crushed concrete. Within seconds, and I knew I was not going to be able to hold the defense in place for long. Once it went down, they were going to literally tear me limb from limb. I gave the shield my all, and felt them slowly breaking it down.

Then there was a roar, and a flash of brilliant light. A jet of fire streaked over me and took one of the vampires full-on in the head. It burst into flame, screaming and waving its too-thin arms, and went down onto the field, thrashing like a half-crushed bug. My shield collapsed, overloaded, and the bracelet began burning my wrist. I crouched lower.

Another jet of fire went by, incinerating the head of another vampire. All of them stopped, crouching, shrieking in confusion.

Kincaid stood outside the dugout and dropped a smoking shotgun to the ground. He reached into a golf bag next to him, smooth and professional, and drew out another double-barreled shotgun. One of the vampires leapt at him, but Kincaid was too fast. He pulled the trigger, and the shotgun roared. A jet of flame streaked out and went through the vampire, taking this one in the neck, and continuing to the right-field fence, where it blew a hole the

size of my face in the wall. There was a sound behind him, and Kincaid spun to shoot the other barrel at a vampire bounding down through the stands above the third-base dugout. He put the shot right down the vampire's throat, literally, and the creature went up in flames. Kincaid discarded that shotgun as well, and reached for the stock of another in his golf bag.

The other vampires leapt at Kincaid when he turned his back.

They got to deal with the Archive instead.

The child stepped out from behind the golf bag, the tenebrous mordite sphere floating between her hands. She released the sphere and made a single gesture.

The little cloud of darkness blurred toward the vampires and streaked into each in turn at the pace of a busy workman's hammer, *bang-bang-bang*. When the mordite sphere struck them, there was a flash of cold purple light, a swell of darkness, and then the sphere passed on through. It left ash and black bones raining down behind it. I could barely follow the mordite sphere's path, it moved so fast. One second the vampires were all there, and then they were simply gone. Black bones and grey ash littered the ground around me.

Silence fell, and the only thing I could hear was my own ragged breathing and the roaring of my own pulse in my ears. I looked around wildly, but I didn't see Ortega anywhere. The two vampires who had been gutted writhed feebly on the ground. Kincaid drew the last shotgun from the golf bag, and with two more flaming blasts executed them both.

The mordite sphere glided gently back to rest between the Archive's tiny hands, and she stood regarding me for a long and silent moment. There was nothing in her expression. Nothing in her eyes. Nothing. I felt the beginnings of a soulgaze and pulled my face away, fast.

"Who broke the sanctity of the duel first, Kincaid?" asked the Archive.

"Couldn't tell," Kincaid answered. He wasn't so much as breathing hard. "But Dresden was winning."

The Archive stood there a moment more, and then said, "Thank you for letting me pet your kitty, Mister Dresden. And thank you for my name."

That sounded frighteningly like a good-bye, but it was only polite to answer, "You're welcome, Ivy."

The Archive nodded and said, "Kincaid. The box, please."

I looked up to watch Kincaid set the wooden box down on the ground. The Archive sent the mordite sphere gliding slowly down into it, and then closed the lid on the box. "These proceedings are concluded."

I looked around at the bones, dust, and smoldering vampire corpses. "You think?"

The Archive regarded me with neutral eyes and said, "Let's go. It's after my bedtime."

"I'm hungry," Kincaid said, shouldering his golf bag. "We'll hit a drive-through. You can have the cookies."

"Cookies aren't good for me," the Archive said, but she smiled.

Kincaid said, "Dresden, hand me that, will you?"

I looked numbly at the ground where he pointed. One of the shotguns was there. Its barrels were still smoking hot. I picked it up gingerly by the stock and passed it to Kincaid, who wrapped it with the other gun he'd used in some kind of silver-lined blanket. "What the hell are those things?" I asked.

"Incendiary rounds," he said. He passed my dropped staff over to me. "Work real well on the Reds, but they're so hot they warp gun barrels. If you get unlucky, the second shot can blow back into your face, so you have to use throwaway guns."

I nodded thanks and took my staff. "Where can I get some?"

Kincaid grinned. "I know a guy. I'll have him call you. See you, Dresden."

Kincaid and the Archive started out of the stadium. A thought finally made its way through the combat adrenaline and I broke into a sprint toward the first-base dugout. Thomas had simply hopped up onto it. I managed to flop and clamber my way up, then into the stands.

Thomas was already there, on the ground with Susan. He'd taken off her jacket and used it to elevate her feet slightly. It looked as if he'd tilted her head back a little to clear the airway. He looked up and said, "She's unconscious, but she's alive."

I crouched down too, and touched her throat, just to be certain. "How bad is she hurt?"

He shook his head. "No real way to tell."

"We have to get her to a hospital, then," I said, rising.

Thomas caught my arm. "You don't want her waking up, injured and dazed, in a place packed to the roof with weakened prey."

“Then what the hell do we do?”

“Look, if she’s not dead, odds are she’ll recover.” Thomas held up his hand and fished out a ballpoint pen from his pocket. He twisted it and said, “Clear.” Then he twisted it again and put it back.

A moment later, Martin came rapidly down the aisle. He somehow made even that look boring, as if he were simply a man wanting to take his seat again before the opening pitch. It was especially impressive since he carried a huge rifle, a military sniper weapon with a telescopic sight and a laser attachment. He set the rifle aside and went over Susan for a moment, feeling here and there, before he said, “She’ll be sore.”

“You?” I asked. “You were the gunman?”

“Obviously,” Martin said. “Why do you think we were in Chicago to begin with?”

“Susan said she was getting her things.”

He looked up at me skeptically. “You believed that? I would have thought you knew Susan well enough to know that material things don’t hold a lot of interest for her.”

“I knew that,” I said. “But she said...” I trailed off and shook my head.

Martin looked up and said, “We knew Ortega was coming to kill you. We knew that if he succeeded, he might be able to bring the war to a peaceful conclusion, only to begin it again twenty years from now, from a much stronger position. I was sent to make sure Ortega did not kill you, and to eliminate him if I could.”

“Did you?”

Martin shook his head. “He had planned for the contingency. Two of his vassals got to him during the fight. They pulled him out. I don’t know how badly he was hurt, but it’s likely he’ll make it back to Casaverde.”

“You want the war to keep going. You’re hoping the White Council will destroy the Red Court for you.”

Martin nodded.

“How did you find out about the duel?”

Martin didn’t answer.

I narrowed my eyes and looked at Thomas.

Thomas put on an innocent expression. “Don’t look at me. I’m a drunken, chemical-besotted playboy who does nothing but cavort, sleep, and feed. And even if I had the mind to take a bit of vengeance on the Red

Court, I wouldn't have the backbone to actually stand up to anyone." He flashed me a radiant smile. "I'm totally harmless."

"I see," I said. I took a deep breath, and regarded Susan's face quietly for a moment. Then I bent down, got into her pockets, and got the keys to the rental car. "Are you leaving now, Martin?"

"Yes. I don't think our presence will be noticed here, but there's no sense in taking chances."

"Take care of her for me," I said.

Martin looked up at me for a second and then said, in a quiet voice, "Everything in my power. You have my word."

I nodded. "Thank you." I stood up and started for the exits, drawing the coat to cover my gun.

"Where are you going?" Thomas called.

"The airport," I answered. "I've got to meet some people about an old man and a bedsheet."

Chapter Thirty-one

I parked at a rental lot outside O'Hare about five minutes after seven. I got out of the car with my staff and rod in hand. There was only one old light burning on the lot, but the moon had risen huge and bright, and I had no trouble seeing Michael coming. His white truck came crunching to a halt on the gravel in front of me. I walked around to the passenger door. Sanya swung it open for me, then slid over. He was wearing blue denim and a big black cowboy hat.

"Harry," Michael said as I got in. "I was getting worried. You won?"

"Not exactly."

"You lost?"

"Not exactly. I had Ortega on the ropes and he cheated. Both of us cleared the benches. I came out of it in one piece. He came out in a couple of pieces but he got away."

"Is Susan all right?"

"She got thrown about twenty-five yards through the air and hit steel and concrete. She'll be fine." Something tickled my nose, and I sniffed. The sharp odor of metal filled the cab of the truck. "Michael, are you wearing the armor?"

"I am wearing the armor," Michael said. "And the cloak."

"Hello, Michael. We're going to an airport. The kind with metal detectors."

"It's all right, Harry. Things will work out."

"Will it sound like alarms going off when they do?" I glanced at the younger Knight and said, "Sanya isn't wearing armor."

Sanya half turned toward me and pulled his denim jacket open, revealing a Kevlar vest beneath it. "I am," he said soberly. "Fifteen layers with ceramic plating over critical areas."

"Well, at least you don't look like a Renaissance festival," I said. "This thing might actually protect you, besides making a slightly less medieval fashion statement. Is this the new stuff or the old stuff?"

“New,” Sanya said. “Will stop civilian munitions, even some military rounds.”

“But not knives or claws,” Michael murmured. “Or arrows.”

Sanya buttoned his coat back up, frowning. “Yours will not stop bullets.”

Michael said, “My faith protects me.”

I exchanged a skeptical look with Sanya and said, “Okeydokey, Michael. Do we have any idea where the bad guys are?”

“The airport,” Michael said.

I sat there silently for a second before I said, “Needle, haystack. Where, at the airport?”

Michael shrugged, smiling, and opened his mouth to speak.

I held up my hand. “We must have faith,” I said, doing my best to imitate Michael’s voice. “How did I guess. Did you bring *Fidelacchius*?”

“In the tool locker,” Michael said.

I nodded. “Shiro’s going to need it back.”

Michael was quiet for a moment before he said, “Yes, of course.”

“We’re going to save him.”

“I pray it is so, Harry.”

“We will,” I said. I stared out the window as Michael pulled into the airport proper. “It’s not too late.”

O’Hare is huge. We drove around in crowded parking lots and auto loading zones for nearly half an hour before Michael abruptly slowed the truck down outside the international concourse, his spine and neck straightening as if he’d heard a warning klaxon.

Sanya glanced aside at Michael and said, “What is it?”

“Do you feel that?” Michael asked him.

“Feel what?”

“Close your eyes,” Michael said. “Try to still your thoughts.”

I muttered, “I sense a great disturbance in the Force.”

“You do?” Michael asked, blinking at me.

I sighed and rubbed at the bridge of my nose. Sanya closed his eyes, and a second later his expression twisted in distaste. “Rot,” the Russian reported. “Sour milk. Mildew. The air smells greasy.”

“There’s a Pizza Hut kiosk about fifty feet away,” I pointed out, looking through the windows of the concourse. “But maybe it’s just a coincidence.”

“No,” Michael said. “It’s Nicodemus. He leaves a kind of stain everywhere he goes. Arrogance. Ambition. Disregard.”

“I only smell rotten things,” Sanya said.

“You’re sensing him too,” Michael said. “Your mind is interpreting it differently. He’s here.” He started pulling forward, but a cab zipped in front of him and stopped. The cabby got out and began unloading an elderly couple’s bags.

I muttered to myself and sniffed. I even reached out with my magical senses, trying to detect what Michael had. I felt nothing but the usual—patternless white noise of thousands of lives moving around us.

I opened my eyes, and found myself staring at the back of Detective Rudolph’s head. He had on the usual expensive suit, and stood with a spare, well-coiffed man I recognized from the district attorney’s office.

I froze for a second. Then I snatched Sanya’s black Stetson and pulled it down over my head. I tugged the brim down over my eyes and slouched down as low as I could.

“What is it?” Michael asked.

“Police,” I said. I took a more careful look around. I spotted seven uniformed officers and maybe ten other men who wore suits and casual clothes but walked and stood like cops. “I passed word to them that the Shroud might be on the way out of Chicago through here.”

“Then why are you hiding?”

“A witness reported me leaving the scene of a murder. If someone identifies me, I’m going to spend the next day or so getting questioned, and that won’t help Shiro.”

Michael’s brow knitted in concern. “True. Do the police know of the Denarians?”

“Probably not. SI isn’t on the case. Probably they’ve been told they’re some kind of terrorists and to be considered dangerous.”

The cabby in front of us finally finished up, and Michael pulled away from the loading zone and toward the parking lot. “That isn’t good enough. We can’t have them there.”

“As long as the police are around, it will restrict the Denarians’ movements. Make them keep their heads down and play nice.”

Michael shook his head. “Most supernatural creatures will hesitate before killing a mortal police officer. But Nicodemus won’t. He has nothing but contempt for mortal authorities. If we confront him, he *will* kill anyone who attempts to stop him, as well as taking hostages to use against us.”

Sanya nodded. “Not to mention that if this plague curse is as formidable as you say, it would be dangerous to those nearby.”

“It’s worse than that,” I said.

Michael rolled the steering wheel toward a parking space. “How so?”

“Forthill told me that the Denarians get a power boost from hurting people, right? Causing mayhem and destruction?”

“Yes,” Michael said.

“The curse is only going to last a few days, but while it does it’s going to make the Black Death look like chicken pox. That’s why he’s here. It’s one of the busiest international terminals on the planet.”

“Mother of God,” Michael swore.

Sanya whistled. “Flights from here go directly to every major nation in the world. If the Denarians’ plague is easily communicable...”

“I think I pretty well summed that up with the Black Death comment, Sanya.”

The Russian shrugged. “Sorry. What do we do?”

“We call in a bomb threat. Clear out the people and shut down the planes.”

“We need to be inside immediately,” Sanya said. “How long would it take the authorities to react?”

“It would only work if I knew who to call to get an immediate reaction.”

“Do you?” Sanya asked.

I held out my hand out to Michael. He slapped his cell phone into it. “No,” I said. “But I know someone who does.”

I called Murphy, trying to remain calm and hoping that the phone didn’t explode against my head. When I got the connection, it was cloudy with bursts of static, but I managed to tell her what was going on.

“You’re insane, Dresden,” Murphy said. “Do you know how incredibly irresponsible—and illegal—it is to falsify a bomb threat?”

“Yeah. Less irresponsible than letting cops and civilians get in these people’s way.”

Murphy was quiet for a second, and then asked, “How dangerous are they?”

“Worse than the loup-garou,” I said.

“I’ll make the call.”

“Did you get in touch with him?” I asked.

“I think so, yes. Do you need any more muscle?”

“Got plenty,” I said. “What I’m short on is time. Please hurry.”

“Be careful, Harry.”

I hung up the phone and got out of the truck. Michael and Sanya came with me. “Murphy’s going to report a bomb threat. The cops will clear everyone out of the building. That will clear out the area for us.”

“Leaving the Denarians without anyone to infect, or take hostage,” Sanya said.

“That’s the idea. After that, they’ll call in the bomb squad and backup. We’ll have twenty minutes, tops, to take advantage of the confusion.”

Michael unlocked the tool locker in the back of the pickup, and drew out Shiro’s cane. He tied a strap to it and slung it over his shoulder. While he did, Sanya buckled *Esperacchius* to his hip, then drew a freaking assault rifle out of the tool locker.

“Kalashnikov, isn’t it?” I asked. “That’s an extremely Chuck Heston look for the Knights of the Cross.”

Sanya slapped a magazine into the weapon, chambered a round, and made sure the gun’s safety was on. “I consider myself a progressive.”

“Too random for my taste,” Michael said. “Too easy to hurt the wrong person.”

“Maybe,” Sanya said. “But the only people inside should be the Denarians, yes?”

“And Shiro,” I said.

“I will not shoot Shiro,” Sanya assured me.

Michael buckled *Amoracchius* onto his hip. “How much longer will it take?”

The buzzing ring of a fire alarm blared from the concourse, and the police got together. A grizzled detective in a bad suit took charge and started directing suits and uniforms around. People started hurrying out of the concourse.

“Ask and ye shall receive,” I said. “Let’s circle around. Get in through one of the service entrances.”

Sanya slipped the assault rifle into an over-the-shoulder sports bag, but kept one hand on the stock. Michael nodded to me, and I took the lead. We circled around the building until we could see some of the planes. Ground crews were rushing around in confusion, and several guys with orange flashlights were waving them at flight crews, directing the wallowing jets away from the ramps to the concourse.

We had to climb a fence and drop down a ten-foot retaining wall to get behind the concourse, but in the dark and the confusion no one noticed us. I led us through a ground-crew door and through a room that was part garage and part baggage storage. Emergency lights were on and fire alarms still jangled. I passed a section of wall covered with calendar pinup girls, pictures of trucks, and a map of the concourse.

“Whoa, stop,” I said. Sanya bumped into my back. I glowered at him, and then peered at the map.

“Here,” I said, pointing at a marked door. “We’ll come out on this stairway.”

“Midway through,” Michael noted. “Which way do we go?”

“Split up,” Sanya suggested.

Michael and I said, “Bad idea,” at precisely the same time.

“Think,” I muttered, mostly to myself. “If I were an arrogant psychotic demon—collaborating terrorist out to trigger an apocalypse, where would I be?”

Sanya leaned over to look at the map and said, “The chapel.”

“The chapel,” said Michael.

“The chapel,” I echoed. “Down this hall, up the stairs, and to the left.”

We ran down the hall and up the stairs. I pushed open the door and heard a recorded voice telling me to be calm and proceed to the nearest exit. I checked my right before I did my left, and it saved my life.

A man in nondescript business wear stood watching the door and holding a submachine gun. When he saw me, he lifted the weapon, hesitated for a fraction of a second, and started shooting.

The slight pause was enough to let me reverse my direction. A couple of bullets went right through the steel fire door, but I stumbled back into Sanya. The big man caught me and spun, putting his back between me and the incoming bullets. I felt him jerk and heard him grunt once, and then we hit a wall and sank down.

I knew the gunman would be coming. Right then, he was probably circling out to the far wall across from the door. Once he had a clear line of fire down the stairs, he’d move up and gun us down.

I saw his shadow in the crack under the door, and I struggled to regain my feet. Sanya was doing the same thing, and the two of us managed to do little but keep each other down. The gunman came closer, his shadow moving in the little space beneath the door’s edge.

Michael stepped over me and Sanya, *Amoracchius* in hand, and shouted as he lunged forward, both hands driving the weight of the sword at the closed steel door. The sword went through the door, sinking almost to the hilt.

An erratic burst of gunfire sounded. Michael drew the sword back out of the door. Blood gleamed wet and scarlet along the length of the weapon's blade. Michael put his back against the wall of the stairwell. The gun barked a couple of times more and fell silent. After a minute, blood seeped under the door in a spreading red puddle.

Sanya and I got untangled and got up. "You're hit."

Michael had already moved and stood behind Sanya. He ran his hands over Sanya's back, grunted, and then held up a small, bright piece of metal, presumably the round. "It hit a strike plate. The vest caught it."

"Progressive." Sanya panted, wincing.

"You're lucky the bullet had to go through a steel door before it got to you," I muttered. I readied a shield and pressed the door slowly open.

The gunman lay on the floor. Michael's thrust had taken him just under the floating ribs, and had to have hit an artery to kill him so quickly. His gun lay in his hand, and his finger was limp on the trigger.

Sanya and Michael slipped out of the stairwell. Sanya had his rifle in hand. They stood lookout while I bent down and pried open the dead gunman's mouth. He didn't have a tongue. "One of Nicodemus's boys," I said quietly.

"Something is wrong," Michael said. Blood dripped from the tip of the sword to the floor. "I don't feel him anymore."

"If you can feel him, can he feel you? Could he know if you were getting close to him?"

Michael shrugged. "It seems likely."

"He's cautious," I said, remembering how Nicodemus had reacted when Shiro came through the door. "He doesn't take chances. He wouldn't wait around to start a fight he wasn't sure he could win. He's running." I stood up and headed for the chapel. "Come on."

Just as I got to the chapel's door, it swung open and two more men came out, both of them slapping clips into submachine guns. One of them didn't look up in time to see me, so I checked him in the forehead with a double-handed thrust of my staff, getting my whole weight behind the blow. His head snapped back and he dropped. The other gunman started to bring his

weapon up, but I batted the barrel aside with a sweep of my staff, then snapped the end of it hard into his nose. Before he could recover, Sanya stepped into him and slammed the butt of the Kalashnikov against his head. He fell on top of the first guy, tongueless mouth lolled open.

I stepped over them and into the chapel.

It had been a small, modest room. There were two rows of three pews each, a pulpit, a table, and subdued lighting. There were no specific religious trappings to the place. It was simply a room set aside to accommodate the spiritual needs of worldwide travelers of every belief, creed, and faith.

Any one of them would have felt profaned by what had been done to the room.

The walls had been covered in sigils, somewhat similar to those I had seen on the Denarians so far. They were painted in blood, and still wet. The pulpit had been leaned against the back wall, and the heavy table laid along it, so that it lay at an angle to the floor. On either side of the table was a chair covered in bits of bone, a few candles. On one of the chairs was a carved silver bowl, almost entirely covered in fresh blood. The room smelled sickly sweet, and whatever was in those candles made the air thick, languid, and hazy. Maybe opium. It had probably accounted for the slowed reaction of the second two gunmen. The candles shed muted light over the table's surface.

What was left of Shiro lay on it.

He was on his back, and shirtless. Torn flesh and dark, savage bruises, some of them in the clear outline of chains, lapped around from his back. His hands and feet were grotesquely swollen. They'd been broken so badly and in so many places that they looked more like sausages than human limbs. His belly and chest had been sliced up as I'd seen before, on the real Father Vincent and on Gaston LaRouche's corpse as well.

"There's so much blood," I whispered.

I felt Michael enter the room behind me. He made a soft, choking sound.

I stepped closer to Shiro's remains, noting clinical details. His face had been left more or less untouched. There were several items scattered around him on the floor—ritual implements. Whatever they had intended him for, they'd already done it. There were sores on his skin, fever blisters, I thought, and his throat was swollen. The damage to his skin probably hid many other such marks of pestilence.

“We’re too late,” Michael said quietly. “Have they already worked the spell?”

“Yeah,” I said. I sat down on the first pew.

“Harry?” Michael said.

“There’s so much blood,” I said. “He wasn’t a very big person. You wouldn’t think there could be so much blood.”

“Harry, there’s nothing else we can do here.”

“I knew him, and he wasn’t very big. You wouldn’t think there would be enough for all the painting. The ritual.”

“We should go,” Michael said.

“And do what? The plague has already started. Odds are we have it. If we carry it out, we only spread it. Nicodemus has the Shroud and he’s probably out looking for a full school bus or something. He’s gone. We missed.”

“Harry,” Michael said quietly. “We must—”

Anger and frustration suddenly burned hot and bright behind my eyes. “If you talk to me about faith I’ll kill you.”

“You don’t mean that,” Michael said. “I know you too well.”

“Shut up, Michael.”

He stepped up next to me and leaned Shiro’s cane against my knee. Then, without a word, he drew back to the wall and waited.

I picked up the cane and drew the wooden handle of the old man’s sword out enough to see five or six inches of clean, gleaming metal. I slapped it shut again, stepped up to Shiro, and composed him as best I could. Then I rested the sword beside him.

When he coughed and wheezed, I almost screamed.

I wouldn’t have thought that anyone could survive that much abuse. But Shiro drew in a ragged breath, and blinked open one eye. The other had been put out, and his eyelid looked sunken and strange.

“Hell’s bells,” I stammered. “Michael!”

Michael and I both rushed down beside him. It took him a moment to focus his eye on us. “Ah, good,” he rasped. “Was getting tired waiting for you.”

“We’ve got to get him to a hospital,” I said.

The old man twitched his head in a negative gesture. “Too late. Would do no good. The noose. The Barabbus curse.”

“What is he talking about?” I asked Michael.

“The noose Nicodemus wears. So long as he bears it, he apparently cannot die. We believe the noose is the one used by Judas,” Michael said quietly.

“So what’s this Barabbus curse?”

“Just as the Romans put it within the power of the Jews to choose one condemned prisoner each year to be pardoned and given life, the noose allows Nicodemus to mandate a death that cannot be avoided. Barabbus was the prisoner the Jews chose, though Pilate wanted to free the Savior. The curse is named for him.”

“And Nicodemus used it on Shiro?”

Shiro twitched his head again, and a faint smile touched his mouth. “No, boy. On you. He was angry that you escaped him despite his treachery.”

Hell’s bells. The entropy curse that had nearly killed both me, and Susan with me. I stared at Shiro for a second, and then at Michael.

Michael nodded. “We cannot stop the curse,” he said. “But we can take the place of its subject, if we choose to do it. That’s why we wanted you to stay away, Harry. We were afraid Nicodemus would target you.”

I stared at him and then at Shiro. My vision blurred. “It should be me lying there,” I said. “Dammit.”

“No,” Shiro said. “There is much you do not yet understand.” He coughed, and pain flashed over his face. “You will. You will.” He twitched the arm nearest the sword. “Take it. Take it, boy.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not like you. Like any of you. I never will be.”

“Remember. God sees hearts, boy. And now I see yours. Take it. Hold it in trust until you find the one it belongs to.”

I reached out and picked up the cane. “How do I know who to give it to?”

“You will know,” Shiro said, his voice becoming thinner. “Trust your heart.”

Sanya entered the room and padded over to us. “The police heard the gunfire. There’s an assault team getting ready to—” He froze, staring at Shiro.

“Sanya,” Shiro said. “This is our parting, friend. I am proud of you.”

Sanya swallowed and knelt down by the old man. He kissed Shiro’s forehead. Blood stained his lips when he straightened.

“Michael,” Shiro said. “The fight is yours now. Be wise.”

Michael laid his hand on Shiro’s bald head and nodded. The big man was crying, though his face was set in a quiet smile.

“Harry,” Shiro whispered. “Nicodemus is afraid of you. Afraid that you saw something. I don’t know what.”

“He should be afraid,” I said.

“No,” the old man said. “Don’t let him unmake you. You must find him. Take the Shroud from him. So long as he touches it, the plague grows. If he loses it, it ends.”

“We don’t know where he is,” I said.

“Train,” Shiro whispered. “His backup plan. A train to St. Louis.”

“How do you know?” Michael asked.

“Told his daughter. They thought I was gone.” Shiro focused on me and said, “Stop them.”

My throat clenched. I nodded. I managed to half growl, “Thank you.”

“You will understand,” Shiro said. “Soon.”

Then he sighed, like a man who has just laid down a heavy burden. His eye closed.

Shiro died. There was nothing pretty about it. There was no dignity to it. He’d been brutalized and savagely murdered—and he’d allowed it to happen to him in my place.

But when he died, there was a small, contented smile on his face. Maybe the smile of someone who had run his course without wavering from it. Someone who had served something greater than himself. Who had given up his life willingly, if not gladly.

Sanya said, his voice strained, “We cannot remain here.”

I stood up and slung the cane on its strap over my shoulder. I felt cold, and shivered. I put a hand to my forehead, and found it clammy and damp. The plague.

“Yeah,” I said, and strode out of the room and back toward the blood-spattered stairs. “Clock’s running.”

Michael and Sanya kept pace. “Where are we going?”

“The airfield,” I said. “He’s smart. He’ll figure it out. He’ll be there.”

“Who?” Michael asked.

I didn’t answer. I led them back down through the garage area and out onto the airfield tarmac. We hurried down along the concourse, and then out onto the open acres of asphalt that led from the concourses to the landing fields. Once we’d gotten out there, I took off my pentacle amulet and held it aloft, focusing on it in order to cause it to begin to shed a distinctive blue light.

“What are you doing?” Sanya asked.

“Signaling,” I said.

“Who?”

“Our ride.”

It took maybe forty-five seconds before the sound of a helicopter’s blades whirled closer to us. The aircraft, a blue-and-white-painted commercial job, zipped down to hover over us before dropping down for a precise if hurried landing.

“Come on,” I said, and headed for the craft. The side door opened, and I climbed in with Michael and Sanya close behind me.

Gentleman Johnny Marcone, dressed in dark fatigues, nodded to me and to the two Knights. “Good evening, gentlemen,” he said. “Just tell me where to take you.”

“Southwest,” I said, yelling over the noise of the chopper. “They’re going to be on a commercial train heading for St. Louis.”

Michael stared at Marcone in shock. “This is the man who ordered the Shroud stolen to begin with,” he said. “You don’t think he’s going to work with us?”

“Sure he will,” I said. “If Nicodemus gets away with the Shroud and pulls off this big curse, Marcone’s spent all that money for nothing.”

“Not to mention that the plague would be bad for business,” Marcone added. “I think we can agree to help one another against this Nicodemus. We can discuss the disposition of the Shroud afterward.” He turned and thumped the pilot’s shoulder a couple of times, and yelled directions. The pilot glanced back at us, and I saw Gard’s profile against the flight instruments. Hendricks leaned in from the passenger seat, listening to Marcone, and nodded himself.

“Very well then,” Marcone called, leaning back into the cabin. He took a large-caliber hunting rifle down from a rack and settled into a seat, buckling up. “Best strap in, gentlemen. Let’s go recover the holy Shroud.”

I settled in and told Michael, “Now, if only we had a bit of Wagner to send us on our way.”

I saw Gard’s reflection in the chopper’s front windows look up at my words. Then she flicked a couple of switches, and “Ride of the Valkyries” started thrumming through the helicopter’s cabin.

“Yee-haw,” I said as my elbows and knees started a nagging ache. “As long as we’re going, we might as well go out in style.”

Chapter Thirty-two

After a few minutes, the ride got bumpy. The chopper started jouncing at random, lurching several feet in any given direction. If I hadn't been strapped in, I probably would have slammed my head against the walls or ceiling.

Marcone put on a headset and spoke into a microphone. He listened to the answer and then shouted to the rest of us, "The ride may be a bit bumpier. The stabilizers are run by the onboard computer, which has failed." He gave me a direct look. "I can only speculate as to why."

I looked around, picked up another headset, put it on, and said, "Blow me."

"Excuse me?" came Gard's somewhat outraged voice over the intercom.

"Not you, blondie. I was talking to Marcone."

Marcone folded his arms in his seat, half smiling. "It's all right, Miss Gard. Compassion dictates that we must make allowances. Mister Dresden is a diplomatically challenged individual. He should be in a shelter for the tactless."

"I'll tell you what you can do with your shelter," I said. "Marcone, I need to speak to you."

Marcone frowned at me, and then nodded. "How much time before we reach the southbound tracks?"

"We're over the first one now," Gard replied. "Three minutes to catch the train."

"Inform me when we reach it. Mister Hendricks, please switch the cabin headphones to channel two."

Hendricks didn't say anything, and it made me wonder why he had bothered with a headset.

"There," came Marcone's voice after a moment. "We're speaking privately."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said.

"Tell you that I hadn't sent Mister Franklin for you?"

“Yeah.”

“Would you have believed me?”

“No.”

“Would you have thought I was playing some kind of game with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then why waste the time and make you more suspicious? Generally speaking, you are quite perceptive—given enough time. And I know you well enough to know that I do not wish to have you as my enemy.”

I glowered at him.

He arched an eyebrow, meeting my gaze without fear or hostility.

“Why do you want the Shroud?”

“That’s none of your business.”

I scowled. “Actually it is. Literally. Why do you want it?”

“Why do you?”

“Because the Denarians are going to kill a lot of people with it.”

Marcone shrugged. “That’s reason enough for me as well.”

“Sure it is.”

“It’s simple business, Mister Dresden. I can’t conduct business with a mound of corpses.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

Marcone’s teeth flashed. “Because given enough time, you are a perceptive individual.”

There was a beep in the headphones, and Gard said, “Fifteen seconds, sir.”

“Thank you,” Marcone replied. “Dresden, why should these people take the Shroud and this plague of theirs to St. Louis?”

“It’s another international airport,” I said. “It’s the central hub for TWA. And hell, as long as they’re there, they could probably go for a swim in the Mississippi.”

“Why not simply stay in Chicago?”

I nodded toward Michael and Sanya. “Them. Plus I figure they know that Murphy and SI would give them a hard time. Even the regular cops were out in force looking for them.”

He looked speculatively at Michael and Sanya. “I assume you have a means to locate the Shroud if that is the correct train?”

“Yeah,” I said. “And here’s the deal. You drop us off, and we get the Shroud.”

"I'm going with you," Marcone said.

"No, you aren't."

"I can always order Miss Gard to return to O'Hare."

"Where we'll all die of the plague, since we didn't stop the Denarians."

"That may be. Either way, I'm going with you."

I scowled at him, then shook my head and leaned back against the seat, shivering. "You suck. You suck diseased moose wang, Marcone."

Marcone smiled with just his mouth. "How colorful." He looked out the window and said, "My people tell me there are only three trains leaving Chicago for St. Louis this evening. Two freight trains and a passenger train."

"They won't be on the passenger train," I said. "They'd have to ditch weapons and goons, and they won't."

"Even odds that this is the one, then," Marcone said.

The chopper descended until the trees near the tracks were swaying in the downblast. That's the nice part about the Midwest. Go twenty miles from a town hall and there's nothing but lightly settled farm country. I looked out the window and saw a long train rumbling along the tracks.

Michael sat bolt upright and nodded to me.

"This is it," I said to Marcone. "Now what?"

"I bought this helicopter as Coast Guard surplus. It's fitted with a rescue winch. We climb down it onto the train."

"You're joking, right?"

"Nothing worth doing is ever easy, Dresden." Marcone took off the headphones and shouted to Sanya and Michael. Sanya's reaction was about like mine, but Michael only nodded and got unstrapped. Marcone opened a locker and drew out several nylon harnesses. He strapped one on himself and passed out another to each of us. Then he hauled the side door of the helicopter open. Wind filled the cabin. Marcone opened a cabinet, and started drawing a length of cable from it. I looked and saw the winch inside. Marcone looped the cable through a ring outside the door then said, "Who first?"

Michael stepped forward. "Me."

Marcone nodded and clipped the cable onto the harness. A minute later, Michael hopped out of the helicopter. Marcone flicked a switch near the electric winch, and cable began playing out. Marcone watched intently and then nodded. "He's down."

The winch reeled back in, and Sanya stepped up to the door. It took a couple of minutes, and it felt like the chopper was doing too much lurching around, but Marcone eventually nodded. "Dresden."

My mouth felt dry as Marcone checked my harness and clipped the cable to it. Then he shouted, "Go!"

I didn't want to go but I sure as hell wasn't going to chicken out in front of Marcone. I clutched my staff and rod to me, made sure Shiro's cane was strapped to my back, took a deep breath, and jumped. I swung around a little on the cable, and then felt myself going down.

The downdraft from the chopper all but blinded me, but when I did look around I could see the train beneath me. We were being lowered onto a car just forward of the end of the train, a large metal container with a flat lid. The helicopter had a searchlight pointed at the train, and I could see Michael and Sanya crouching and looking up at me.

I swayed and dangled like a kid's first yo-yo. My legs got clipped by an outgrown tree branch that hit me hard enough to leave bruises. When I got close, Michael and Sanya grabbed me and brought me down in one piece.

Marcone came down, his rifle hanging on his shoulder. I figured Hendricks was operating the winch. The Knights pulled Marcone safely in, and he detached the cable. It swung away and the chopper arched up and away, turning its searchlight out. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the brilliant moon, and I stayed crouched so that I could keep my balance.

"Harry," Michael called. "Where now?"

"Head for the engine and look for a boxcar," I told him. "Something it would be easy for them to hop into."

Michael nodded. "Sanya, rear guard."

The big Russian held his rifle like trained military and fell back to the rear of our group, watching behind us. Michael took the lead, one hand on his sword, and moved forward with a predatory grace and purpose.

I glowered at Marcone and said, "I'm not going anywhere with you behind me."

Marcone smiled again, and took his gun off his shoulder. He looked like trained military, too. He fell into line behind Michael.

I pulled my old duster back until it fell behind the handle of my pistol, leaving it clear for a draw. It probably didn't look military. It probably looked more like a spaghetti Western. I moved in behind Marcone, staff in my left hand, rod in my right.

We all moved forward over the rumbling freight cars, just like every Western movie you've ever seen. If I hadn't been feverish and nauseous, it might have been fun.

Michael abruptly crouched and held a closed fist beside his ear. Marcone stopped immediately, crouching, the rifle at his shoulder. Closed fist means stop, check. I crouched too.

Michael turned around to face us, poked a couple of fingers at his eyes, held three fingers up, and pointed at the car ahead of us. I took it to mean that he could see three bad guys up there. Michael beckoned Sanya, and the Russian slipped silently forward. Michael pointed at me and then at the back of the train. I nodded to him, and kept an eye out behind us.

I checked over my shoulder, and saw Michael and Sanya both swing down between the cars and out of sight.

When I faced the rear of the train again, I saw a nightmare running toward me over the cars.

Whatever creation process this thing had undergone, it hadn't been a kind one. Four-legged and lanky, it looked vaguely like a cat. But it didn't have fur. Its skin was leathery, wrinkled and mottled. Its head was somewhere between that of a jaguar and a wild boar. It had both tusks and fangs in its gaping, drooling mouth, and it moved with graceless speed.

I let out a strangled cry, lifting my blasting rod. I pushed power through it, yelled the word, and loosed a flashing bolt of fire at it. The bolt hit the thing in the face just as it gathered itself to leap at me. It let out an unnerving, wailing cry, then convulsed in pain as it jumped and sailed off the side of the car.

The fire blinded me for a moment, leaving a bright green dot over my vision. I heard the next one coming, but I couldn't see it. I dropped down to my stomach and yelled, "Marcone!"

The rifle cracked three times in deliberately spaced reports. I heard the thing squeal, and then saw it as my eyes started to adjust. It lay on top of the car maybe ten feet from me, hindquarters dragging, struggling to haul itself forward with one claw.

Marcone stepped closer, lifted the hunting rifle, and coolly put another shot right between its eyes. The creature twitched, fell, and slid bonelessly over the side of the train.

Marcone peered after it. "What was that?"

"Some kind of guard dog," I said.

“Interesting. Demon?”

I pushed myself to my feet. “Doubt it. Demons are usually a lot tougher.”

“Then what was it?”

“How the hell should I know? Never seen anything like it before. Where are Michael and Sanya?”

We went to look. The next car was an empty one with spaced wooden slats and an open top. It looked like something used to haul cattle. There were three men in it, unconscious or dead. Michael climbed the far wall of the cattle car and onto the next car in line.

We climbed down into the car. “Dead?” Marccone asked.

“Napping,” Sanya said.

Marccone nodded. “We should finish them. These men are fanatics. If they wake up, they’ll attack us without hesitation, armed or not.”

I eyed him. “We’re not going to murder them in cold blood.”

“Is there a particular reason why not?”

“Shut up, Marccone.”

“They would show us no such mercy. And if they are allowed to live they will surely be used by the Denarians to cause pain and death. It’s their purpose.”

“We’re not killing them.”

Marccone’s mouth curled into a bitter smile. “How did I guess.” He snapped open a case on his belt and tossed two sets of handcuffs at Sanya. The Russian caught them and cuffed the downed men together, looping one of the sets around a metal strut of the car.

“There,” Marccone said. “I suppose we’ll just have to take the chance that none of them will chew off his own hand at the wrist and slip free.”

“Sanya!” Michael’s voice thundered over the noise of the train, and a sudden, brilliant glare of white light leapt up from the top of the next car. Steel chimed on steel.

Sanya shoved his assault rifle at me. I caught it, and he pushed past me to start climbing out of the car. He hauled himself up with his right arm, his injured arm dangling, and heaved himself to the lip of the cattle car. He stood, drew *Esperacchius* in a blaze of more white light, and threw himself to the next car with a rumbling shout.

I let my staff drop and fumbled with the assault rifle, trying to find the safety. Marccone set his hunting rifle aside and said, “You’re going to hurt yourself.” He took the assault rifle out of my hands, checked a couple of

things without needing to look at the weapon, and then slung it over his shoulder as he climbed out of the car. I muttered to myself and went up the wooden slats beside him.

The next car was another metal box. Michael's and Sanya's swords shone like the sun, and I had to shield my eyes against them. They stood side by side with their backs to me, facing the front of the train.

Nicodemus stood against them.

The lord of the Denarians wore a grey silk shirt and black pants. The Shroud had been draped over his body, like a contestant in a beauty pageant. The noose around his neck blew out toward the rear of the train in the wind. He held a sword in his hands, a Japanese katana with a worn hilt. Droplets of blood stained the very tip of the sword. He held the sword at his side, a small smile on his lips, to all appearances relaxed.

Michael checked over his shoulder, and I saw a line of blood on his cheek. "Stay back, Harry."

Nicodemus attacked in the moment Michael's attention was elsewhere. The Denarian's weapon blurred, and Michael barely managed to get *Amoracchius* into a parry. He was thrown off balance and to one knee for a fatal second, but Sanya roared and attacked, whipping his saber through whistling arcs, and driving Nicodemus back. The Russian drove the Denarian toward the far side of the car.

I saw the trap coming and shouted, "Sanya, back off!"

The Russian couldn't stop his forward momentum entirely, but he pivoted and lunged to one side. As he did, steely blades erupted from within the car. The metal of the roof screamed as the blades pierced it, rising to a height of four or five feet in a line, a half breath behind Sanya. Nicodemus turned to pursue the Russian.

Michael got his feet, whipped the heavy blade of *Amoracchius* around, and slashed three times at the roof of the railcar. A triangular section three feet across fell down into the car, and the edges of the metal glowed dull orange with the heat of the parted steel. Michael dropped down through the hole and out of sight.

I lifted up my blasting rod and focused on Nicodemus. He shot a glance at me and flicked his wrist in my direction.

His shadow flashed across the top of the railcar and smashed into me. The shadow wrenched the blasting rod from my grip, dragged it through the air, and then crushed it to splinters.

Sanya let out a cry as a blade tore through the car's roof and one of his legs collapsed. He fell to one knee.

Then brilliant light flared up within the car beneath the combatants, spears of white lancing out through the holes the blades had cut into the metal. I heard Deirdre's demon form shriek in the car beneath us, and the blades harassing Sanya vanished.

Nicodemus snarled. He flung a hand toward me, and his shadow sent the splinters of my blasting rod shrieking toward my face. As they did, Nicodemus attacked Sanya, his sword flickering in the moonlight.

I got my arms up in time to deflect the splinters, but I was helpless to assist Sanya. Nicodemus knocked Sanya's saber out to one side. Sanya rolled, avoiding the stroke that would have taken his head. Doing it left Sanya's wounded arm on the ground, and Nicodemus crushed the heel of his boot down upon it.

Sanya screamed in pain.

Nicodemus raised his sword for the death blow.

Gentleman Johnny Marcone opened up with the Kalashnikov.

Marcone shot in three chattering bursts of fire. The first one tore through Nicodemus's chest and neck, just above the Shroud. The next hit on his arm and shoulder opposite the Shroud, all but tearing it off his torso. The last burst ripped apart his hip and thigh, on the hip opposite the Shroud's drape. Nicodemus's expression blackened with fury, but the bullets had torn half his body to shreds, and he toppled from the car and out of sight.

Below, there was another demonic shriek, and the sound of wrenching metal. The shrieks faded toward the front of the train, and a moment later Michael climbed up the ladder rungs on the side of the boxcar, his sword in its sheath.

I leapt forward and ran to Sanya. He was bleeding a lot from his leg. He had already taken off his belt, and I helped him wrap it around the leg in a makeshift tourniquet.

Marcone stepped up to where Nicodemus had fallen, frowned, and said, "Dammit. He should have dropped in place. Now we'll have to go back for the Shroud."

"No, we won't," I said. "You didn't kill him. You probably just pissed him off."

Michael stepped past Marcone to help Sanya, tearing off a section off his white cloak.

“Do you think so?” Marccone asked. “The damage seemed fairly thorough.”

“I don’t think he can be killed,” I said.

“Interesting. Can he run faster than a train?”

“Probably,” I said.

Marccone said to Sanya, “Do you have another clip?”

“Where is Deirdre?” I asked Michael.

He shook his head. “Wounded. She tore her way through the front wall of the car into the next one. Too risky to pursue her alone in close quarters.”

I stood up and crawled back over to the cattle car. I clambered down in it to fetch my staff. After a moment of hesitation, I got Marccone’s rifle, too, and started back up.

As it turned out, I was mistaken. Nicodemus could not run faster than a train.

He *flew* faster than a train.

He came sailing down out of the sky, his shadow spread like immense bat wings. His sword flashed toward Marccone. Marccone’s reflexes could make a striking snake look sluggish, and he dodged and rolled out of the way of the Denarian’s sword.

Nicodemus sailed to the next car on the train and landed in a crouch, facing us. A glowing sigil had appeared on his forehead, the sign itself something twisting, nauseating to look upon. His skin was marred and ugly where Marccone’s shots had hit him, but it was whole, and getting better by the second. His face twisted in fury and a kind of ecstatic agony, and his shadow flooded forward, over the length of the railcar in front of him and dipping down between his car and ours.

There was a wrenching sound and our car shook. Then the sound of tearing metal, and our car started shuddering.

“He’s uncoupled the cars!” I shouted. As I did, Nicodemus’s car began drawing away from us, as our own slowed down, the gap between them growing.

“Go!” Sanya shouted. “I’ll be all right!”

Michael stood and threw himself over the gap without hesitation. Marccone ditched the assault rifle and sprinted toward the gap. He threw himself over it, arms windmilling, and landed, barely, on the other car’s roof.

I got to the top of the car and did the same thing. I imagined missing the other car and landing on the tracks in front of the uncoupled end of the train. Even without an engine, pure momentum would be more than enough to kill me. I dropped Marccone's rifle and gathered my will in my staff. As I leapt, I thrust the staff back behind me and screamed, "*Forzare!*"

The raw force I sent out behind me shoved me forward. Actually, it shoved me too far forward. I landed closer to Nicodemus than either Michael or Marccone, but at least I didn't wind up sprawled at his feet.

Michael stepped up to stand beside me, and a second later Marccone did as well. He had an automatic pistol in either hand.

"The boy isn't very fast, is he, Michael?" said Nicodemus. "You're an adequate opponent, I suppose. Not as experienced as you could be, but it's hard to find someone with more than thirty or forty years of practice, much less twenty centuries. Not as talented as the Japanese, but then not many are."

"Give up the Shroud, Nicodemus," Michael shouted. "It is not yours to take."

"Oh, yes, it is," Nicodemus answered. "You certainly will not be able to stop me. And when I've finished you and the wizard, I'll go back for the boy. Three Knights in a day, as it were."

"He can't make bad puns," I muttered. "That's my shtick."

"At least he didn't overlook you entirely," Marccone answered. "I feel somewhat insulted."

"Hey!" I shouted. "Old Nick, can I ask you a question?"

"Please do, wizard. Once we get to the fighting, there really isn't going to be much opportunity for it."

"Why?" I said.

"Beg pardon?"

"Why?" I asked again. "Why the hell are you doing this? I mean, I get why you stole the Shroud. You needed a big battery. But why a plague?"

"Have you read Revelations?"

"Not in a while," I admitted. "But I just can't buy that you really think you're touching off the Apocalypse."

Nicodemus shook his head. "Dresden, Dresden. The Apocalypse, as you refer to it, isn't an event. At least, it isn't any specific event. One day, I'm sure, there will be an apocalypse that really does bring on the end, but I doubt it will be this event that begins it."

“Then why *do* this?”

Nicodemus studied me for a moment before smiling. “Apocalypse is a frame of mind,” he said then. “A belief. A surrender to inevitability. It is despair for the future. It is the death of hope.”

Michael said quietly, “And in that kind of environment, there is more suffering. More pain. More desperation. More power to the underworld and their servants.”

“Exactly,” Nicodemus said. “We have a terrorist group prepared to take credit for this plague. It will likely stir up reprisals, protests, hostilities. All sorts of things.”

“One step closer,” said Michael. “That’s how he sees it. Progress.”

“I like to think of it as simple entropy,” Nicodemus said. “The real question, to my mind, is why do you stand against me? It is the way of the universe, Knight. Things fall apart. Your resistance to it is pointless.”

In answer, Michael drew his sword.

“Ah,” said Nicodemus. “Eloquence.”

“Stay back,” Michael said to me. “Don’t distract me.”

“Michael—”

“I mean it.” He stepped forward to meet Nicodemus.

Nicodemus took his time, sauntering up to meet Michael. He crossed swords with him lightly, then lifted his blade in a salute. Michael did the same.

Nicodemus attacked, and *Amoracchius* flared into brilliant light. The two men met each other and traded a quick exchange of cuts and thrusts. They parted, and then clashed together again, steps carrying each past the other. Both of them emerged from it unscathed.

“Shooting him hardly seems to inconvenience him,” Marcone said quietly to me. “I take it that the Knight’s sword can harm him?”

“Michael doesn’t think so,” I said.

Marcone blinked and looked at me. “Then why is he fighting him?”

“Because it needs to be done,” I said.

“Do you know what I think?” Marcone said.

“You think we should shoot Nicodemus in the back at the first opportunity and let Michael dismember him.”

“Yes.”

I drew my gun. “Okay.”

Just then Demon-girl Deirdre's glowing eyes appeared several cars ahead of us and came forward at a sprint. I caught a glimpse of her before she jumped onto our car—still all supple scales and hairstyle by the Tasmanian Devil. But in addition she had a sword gripped in one hand.

"Michael!" I shouted. "Behind you!"

Michael turned and dodged to one side, avoiding Deirdre's first attack. Her hair followed him, lashing at him, tangling around the hilt of his sword.

I acted without thinking. I stripped Shiro's cane from my back, shouted, "Michael!" and threw the cane at him.

Michael didn't so much as turn his head. He reached out, caught the cane, and with a sweep of his arm threw the cane-sheath free of the sword so that *Fidelacchius's* blade shone with its own light. Without pausing, he swung the second sword and struck Deirdre's tangling hair from his arm, sending her stumbling back.

Nicodemus attacked him, and Michael met him squarely, shouting, "*O Dei! Lava quod est sordium!*" *Cleanse what is unclean, O God.* Michael managed to hold his ground against Nicodemus, their blades ringing. Michael drove Nicodemus to one side and I had a shot at his back. I took it. Beside me, Marcone did the same.

The shots took Nicodemus by surprise and stole his balance. Michael shouted and pressed forward on the offensive, seizing the advantage for the first time. Both shining blades dipped and circled through attack after attack, and Michael drove Nicodemus back step by step.

"Hell's bells, he's going to win," I muttered.

But Nicodemus drew a gun from the back of his belt.

He shoved it against Michael's breastplate and pulled the trigger. Repeatedly. Light and thunder made even the rushing train sound quiet.

Michael fell and did not move.

The light of the two swords went out.

I shouted, "No!" I raised my gun and started shooting again. Marcone joined me.

We didn't do too badly considering we were standing on a moving train and all. But Nicodemus didn't seem to care. He walked toward us through the bullets, jerking and twitching occasionally. He casually kicked the two swords over the side of the train.

I ran dry on bullets, and Nicodemus took the gun from my hand with a stroke of his sword. It hit the top of the boxcar once, then bounced off and into the night. The train thundered down a long, shallow grade toward a bridge. Demon-girl Deirdre leapt over to her father's side on all fours, her face distorted in glee. Tendrils of her hair ran lovingly over Michael's unmoving form.

I drew up my unfocused shield into a regular barrier before me, and said, "Don't even bother offering me a coin."

"I hadn't planned on it," Nicodemus said. "You don't seem like a team player to me." He looked past me and said. "But I've heard about you, Marcone. Are you interested in a job?"

"I was just going to ask you the same thing," Marcone said.

Nicodemus smiled and said, "Bravo, sir. I understand. I'm obliged to kill you, but I understand."

I traded a look with Marcone. I flicked my eyes at the upcoming bridge. He took a deep breath and nodded.

Nicodemus lifted the gun and aimed for my head. His shadow suddenly swept forward, under and around my shield, seizing my left hand. It ripped at my arm hard, pulling me off balance.

Marcone was ready. He let one of his empty guns fall and produced a knife from somewhere on his person. He flicked it at Nicodemus's face.

I went for his gun hand when he flinched. The gun went off. My senses exploded with a flash of light, and I lost the feeling in my left arm. But I trapped his gun arm between my body and my right arm and pried at his fingers.

Marcone went for him with another knife. It swept past my face, missing me. But it hit the Shroud. Marcone cut through it cleanly, seized it, and pulled it off Nicodemus entirely.

I felt the release of energy as the Shroud was removed, a wave of fever-hot magic that swept over me in a sudden, potent surge. When it was gone, my chills and my aching joints were gone with it. The curse had been broken.

"No!" Nicodemus shouted. "Kill him!"

Deirdre leapt at Marcone. Marcone turned and jumped off the train just as it rolled out over the river. He hit the water feet first, still clutching the Shroud, and was lost in the darkness.

I pried the gun from Nicodemus's fingers. He caught me by the hair, jerked my head back, and got his arm around my throat. He started choking me, hissing, "It's going to take days to kill you, Dresden."

He's afraid of you, said Shiro's voice in my mind.

In my memories, I watched Nicodemus edge away from Shiro as the old man entered the room.

The noose made him invulnerable to any lasting harm.

But in a flash of insight, I was willing to bet that the one thing the noose wouldn't protect him against was itself.

I reached back, fumbling until I felt the noose. I pulled on it as hard as I could, and then twisted it, pressing my knuckles hard into Nicodemus's throat.

Nicodemus reacted in sudden and obvious panic, releasing my throat and struggling to get away. I held on for dear life and dragged him off balance. I tried to throw him off the train, letting go of the noose at the last moment. He went over the edge but Deirdre let out a shriek and leapt forward, her tendrils writhing around one of his arms and holding him.

"Kill him," Nicodemus choked. "Kill him now!"

Coughing and wheezing, I picked up Michael's still form as best I could and leapt off the train.

We hit the water together. Michael sank. I wouldn't let go of him. I sank too. I tried to get us out, but I couldn't, and things started to become confusing and black.

I had almost given up trying when I felt something near me in the water. I thought it was a rope and I grabbed it. I was still holding on to Michael as whoever had thrown the rope started pulling me out.

I gasped for breath when my head broke water, and someone helped me drag Michael's body over to the shallows at the side of the river.

It was Marcone. And he hadn't thrown me a rope.

He'd hauled me out with the Shroud.

Chapter Thirty-three

I woke up in the back of Michael's pickup staring up at the stars and the moon and in considerable pain. Sanya sat at the back of the truck, facing me. Michael lay still and unmoving beside me.

"He's awake," Sanya said when he saw me moving.

Murphy's voice came from the front of the truck. "Harry, be still, okay? We don't know how badly you've been shot."

"Okay," I said. "Hi, Murph. It should have torn."

"What?" Murphy asked.

"Shroud. It should have torn like wet tissue. That just makes sense, right?"

"Shhhhhh, Harry. Be still and don't talk."

That sounded fine to me. The next time I opened my eyes, I was in the morgue.

This, all by itself, is enough to really ruin your day.

I was lying on the examining table, and Butters, complete with his surgical gown and his tray of autopsy instruments, stood over me.

"I'm not dead!" I sputtered. "I'm not dead!"

Murphy appeared in my field of vision, her hand on my chest. "We know that, Harry. Easy. We've got to get the bullet out of you. We can't take you to the emergency room. They have to report any gunshot wounds."

"I don't know," Butters said. "This X ray is all screwed up. I'm not sure it's showing me where the bullet is. If I don't do this right, I could make things worse."

"You can do it," Murphy said. "The technical stuff always messes up around him."

Things spun around.

Michael stood over me at one point, his hand on my head. "Easy, Harry. It's almost done."

And I thought, *Great. I'm going to require an armed escort to make sure I get to hell.*

When I woke up again, I was in a small bedroom. Stacks and boxes and shelves of fabric filled the place nearly to the ceiling, and I smiled, recognizing it. The Carpenters' guest room.

On the floor next to the bed was Michael's breastplate. There were four neat holes in it where the bullets had gone through. I sat up. My shoulder screamed at me, and I found it covered in bandaging.

There was a sound by the door. A small pair of eyes peeked around the corner, and little Harry Carpenter stared at me with big blue-grey eyes.

"Hi," I said to him.

He dutifully lifted his pudgy fingers and waved them at me.

"I'm Harry," I said.

He frowned thoughtfully and then said, "Hawwy."

"Good enough, kid."

He ran off. A minute later he came back, reaching way up over his head to hold on to his daddy's fingers. Michael came in the room and smiled at me. He was wearing jeans, a clean white T-shirt, and bandages over one arm. The cut on his face was healing, and he looked rested and relaxed. "Good afternoon," he said.

I smiled tiredly at him. "Your faith protects you, eh?"

Michael reached down and turned the breastplate around. There was a cream-colored material lining in the inside of the breastplate, with several deep dents in it. He peeled it back to show me layers and layers of bulletproof fabric backing ceramic strike plates set against the front of the breastplate. "My faith protects me. My Kevlar helps."

I laughed a little. "Charity made you put it in?"

Michael picked up little Harry and put him on his shoulders. "She did it herself. Said she wasn't going to spend all that trouble making the breastplate and then have me get killed with a gun."

"She made the breastplate?" I asked.

Michael nodded. "All of my armor. She used to work on motorcycles."

My shoulder throbbed hard enough to make me miss the next sentence. "Sorry. What did you say?"

"I said you'll need to take your medicine. Can you handle some food first?"

"I'll try."

I had soup. It was exhausting. I took a Vicodin and slept without dreaming.

Over the next couple of days, I managed to piece together what had happened from talking to Michael and, on the second day, to Sanya.

The big Russian had come out of things all right. Marcone, after getting me and Michael out of the water, had called Murphy and told her where to find us. She had already been on the way, and got there in only a couple of minutes.

The crew of the train, it turned out, had been killed. The three goons that had been trussed up on the train had bitten down on suicide pills and were dead when the cops found them. Murphy had taken us all to Butters instead of to the emergency room, since once my gunshot wound was reported, Rudolph and company could have made my life hell.

"I must be out of my mind," Murphy told me when she visited. "I swear, Dresden, if this comes back to bite me in the ass, I'm taking it out on your hide."

"We're fighting the good fight, Murph," I said.

She rolled her eyes at me, but said, "I saw the body at the airport concourse, Harry. Did you know him?"

I looked out the window, at Michael's three youngest playing in the yard, watched over by a tolerant Molly. "He was a friend. It could have been me instead."

Murphy shivered. "I'm sorry, Harry. The people who did it. Did they get away from you?"

I looked at her and said, "I got away from them. I don't think I did much more than annoy them."

"What happens when they come back?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Wrong," Murphy said. "The answer to that question is that you don't know exactly but that you will certainly call Murphy from the get-go. You get less busted up when I'm around."

"That's true." I covered her hand with mine and said, "Thanks, Murph."

"You're gonna make me puke, Dresden," she said. "Oh, so you know. Rudolph is out of SI. The assistant DA he was working for liked his toadying style."

"Rudolph the Brown-nosed Reindeer," I said.

Murphy grinned. "At least he's not my problem anymore. Internal Affairs has to worry now."

"Rudolph in Internal Affairs. That can't be good."

“One monster at a time.”

On the fourth day, Charity inspected my wound and told Michael that I could leave. She never actually spoke to me, which I considered an improvement over most visits. That afternoon, Michael and Sanya came in. Michael was carrying Shiro’s battered old cane.

“We got the swords back,” Michael said. “This is for you.”

“You’ll have a better idea what to do with that than me,” I told him.

“Shiro wanted you to have it,” Michael said. “Oh, and you got some mail.”

“I what?”

Michael offered me an envelope and the cane as a unit. I took them both, and frowned at the envelope. The lettering was in black calligraphy, and flowed beautifully across the envelope.

“To Harry Dresden. And it’s your address, Michael. Postmarked two weeks ago.”

Michael shrugged.

I opened the envelope and found two pages inside. One was a copy of a medical report. The other was ornately handwritten, like the envelope. It read:

Dear Mr. Dresden,

By the time you read this letter, I will be dead. I have not been given the details, but I know a few things that will happen over the next few days. I write you now to say what I might not have the chance to in the flesh.

Your path is often a dark one. You do not always have the luxury that we do as Knights of the Cross. We struggle against powers of darkness. We live in black and white, while you must face a world of greys. It is never easy to know the path in such a place.

Trust your heart. You are a decent man. God lives in such hearts.

Enclosed is a medical report. My family is aware of it, though I have not shared it with Michael or Sanya. It is my hope that it

will give you a measure of comfort in the face of my choice. Do not waste tears on me. I love my work. We all must die. There is no better way to do so than in the pursuit of something you love.

Walk in mercy and truth,

Shiro

I read over the medical report, blinking at several tears.

“What is it?” Sanya asked.

“It’s from Shiro,” I said. “He was dying.”

Michael frowned at me.

I held up the medical report. “Cancer. Terminal. He knew it when he came here.”

Michael took it and let out a long breath. “Now I understand.”

“I don’t.”

Michael passed the report to Sanya and smiled. “Shiro must have known that we would need you to stop the Denarians. It’s why he traded himself for your freedom. And why he accepted the curse in your place.”

“Why?”

Michael shrugged. “You were the one we needed. You had all of the information. You were the one who realized Cassius was masquerading as Father Vincent. You had contacts within the local authorities to give you access to more information, to help us when we needed the concourse emptied. You were the one who could call in Marcone for his help.”

“I’m not sure that says anything good about me,” I said, glowering.

“It says that you were the right man in the right place and at the right time,” Michael said. “What of the Shroud? Does Marcone have it?”

“I think so.”

“How should we handle it?”

“We don’t. I do.”

Michael regarded me for a moment, then said, “All right.” He stood up and then said, “Oh. The dry cleaners called. They said they’re going to charge you a late fee if you don’t swing by and pick up your laundry today. I’m running out for groceries. I can take you.”

“I don’t have anything that goes to a dry cleaners,” I muttered. But I went with Michael.

The dry cleaners had my leather duster. It had been cleaned up and covered with a protective treatment. In the pockets were the keys to the Blue Beetle, along with a bill to a parking garage. On the back of the bill, written in flowing letters, were the words *thank you*.

So I guess Anna Valmont wasn't all that horrible a person after all.

But then, I've always been a sucker for a pretty face.

When I got back to my house, I found a postcard with a picture of Rio and no return address with my mail. There was a number on the back. I called the number, and after a few rings, Susan asked, "Harry?"

"Harry," I said.

"Are you all right?"

"Shot," I said. "It'll heal."

"Did you beat Nicodemus?"

"I got away from him," I said. "We stopped the plague. But he killed Shiro."

"Oh," she said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"I got my coat back. And my car. Not a total loss." I started opening mail as I spoke.

Susan asked, "What about the Shroud?"

"Jury's not out yet. Marcone got involved."

"What happened?" she said.

"He saved my life," I said. "Michael's too. He didn't have to do it."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Sometimes it feels like the older I get, the more confused everything is."

Susan coughed. "Harry. I'm sorry I wasn't around. By the time I was conscious, we were already over Central America."

"It's okay," I said.

"I didn't know what Martin had in mind," she said. "Honestly. I wanted to talk to you and to Trish and pick up a few of my things. I thought Martin was only coming along to help. I didn't know that he had come here to kill Ortega. He used me to cover his movements."

"It's okay."

"It isn't okay. And I'm sorry."

I opened an envelope, read it, and blurted, "Oh, you're *kidding* me."

"What?"

"I just opened a letter. It's from Larry Fowler's lawyer. The jerk is *suing* me for trashing his car and his studio."

"He can't prove that," Susan said. "Can he?"

"Whether or not he can, this is going to cost me a fortune in legal fees. Smarmy, mealymouthed jerk."

"Then I hate to add more bad news. Ortega is back in Casaverde, recovering. He's called in all his strongest knights and let it be widely known that he's coming to kill you personally."

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Did you see the subtle humor there? Vampires, cross? God, I'm funny."

Susan said something in Spanish, not into the phone, and sighed. "Damn. I have to go."

"Saving nuns and orphans?" I asked.

"Leaping tall buildings in a single bound. I should probably put on some underwear."

That brought a smile to my face. "You joke around a lot more than you used to," I said. "I like it."

I could picture the sad smile on her face as she spoke. "I'm dealing with a lot of scary things," she said. "I think you have to react to them. And you either laugh at them or you go insane. Or you become like Martin. Shut off from everything and everyone. Trying not to feel."

"So you joke," I said.

"I learned it from you."

"I should open a school."

"Maybe so," she said. "I love you, Harry. I wish things were different."

My throat got tight. "Me too."

"I'll get you a drop address. If you ever need my help, get in touch."

"Only if I need your help?" I asked.

She exhaled slowly and said, "Yeah."

I tried to say, "Okay," but my throat was too tight to speak.

"Good-bye, Harry," Susan said.

I whispered, "Good-bye."

And that was the end of that.

I woke up to a ringing telephone the next day. "Hoss," Ebenezer said. "You should watch the news today." He hung up on me.

I went down to a nearby diner for breakfast, and asked the waitress to turn on the news. She did.

“...extraordinary event reminiscent of the science-fiction horror stories around the turn of the millennium, what appeared to be an asteroid fell from space and impacted just outside the village of Casaverde in Honduras.” The screen flickered to an aerial shot of an enormous, smoking hole in the ground, and a half-mile-wide circle of trees that had been blasted flat. Just past the circle of destruction stood a poor-looking village. “However, information coming in from agencies around the world indicates that the so-called meteor was in actuality a deactivated Soviet communications satellite which decayed in orbit and fell to earth. No estimates of the number of deaths or injuries in this tragic freak accident have yet reached authorities, but it seems unlikely that anyone in the manor house could possibly have survived the impact.”

I sat slowly back, pursing my lips. I decided that maybe I wasn't sorry Asteroid Dresden turned out to be an old Soviet satellite after all. And I made a mental note to myself never to get on Ebenezar's bad side.

The next day I tracked down Marcone. It wasn't easy. I had to call in a couple of favors in the spirit world to get a beacon-spell going on him, and he knew all the tricks for losing a tail. I had to borrow Michael's truck so that I could have a prayer of following him inconspicuously. The Beetle may be way sexy, but subtle it ain't.

He changed cars twice and somehow called into effect the magical equivalent of a destructive electromagnetic pulse that scrambled my beacon-spell. Only quick thinking and some inspired thaumaturgy combined with my investigative skills let me stay with him.

He drove right on into the evening, to a private hospital in Wisconsin. It was a long-term-care and therapeutic facility. He pulled in, dressed in casual clothes and wearing a baseball cap, which alone generated enough cognitive dissonance to make me start drooling. He pulled a backpack out of the car and went inside. I gave him a little bit of a lead and then followed him with my beacon. I stayed outside, peering in windows at lit hallways, keeping pace and watching.

Marcone stopped at a room and went inside. I stood at the window, keeping track of him. The paper tag on the door from the hall read DOE, JANE in big, permanent marker letters that were faded with age. There was a single bed in the room, and there was a girl on it.

She wasn't old. I'd place her in her late teens or early twenties. She was so thin it was hard to tell. She wasn't on life support, but her bedcovers

were flawlessly unwrinkled. Combined with her emaciated appearance, I was guessing she was in a coma, whoever she was.

Marcone drew up a chair beside the bed. He pulled out a teddy bear and slipped it into the crook of the girl's arm. He got out a book. Then he started reading to her, out loud. He sat there reading to her for an hour, before he slipped a bookmark into place and put the book back into the backpack.

Then he reached into the pack and pulled out the Shroud. He peeled down the outermost blanket on her bed, and carefully laid the Shroud over the girl, folding its ends in a bit to keep it from spilling out. Then he covered it up with the blanket and sat down in the chair again, his head bowed. I hadn't ever pictured John Marcone praying. But I saw him forming the word *please*, over and over.

He waited for another hour. Then, his face sunken and tired, he rose and kissed the girl on the head. He put the teddy bear back into the backpack, got up, and left the room.

I went to his car and sat down on the hood.

Marcone stopped in his tracks and stared at me when he saw me. I just sat there. He padded warily over to his car and said, voice quiet, "How did you find me?"

"Wasn't easy," I said.

"Is anyone else with you?"

"No."

I saw the wheels spinning in his head. I saw him panic a little. I saw him consider killing me. I saw him force himself to slow down and decide against any rash action. He nodded once, and said, "What do you want?"

"The Shroud."

"No," he said. There was a hint of frustration to his voice. "I just got it here."

"I saw," I said. "Who is the girl?"

His eyes went flat, and he said nothing.

"Okay, Marcone," I said. "You can give me the Shroud or you can explain it to the police when they come out here to search this place."

"You can't," he said, his voice quiet. "You can't do that to her. She'd be in danger."

My eyes widened. "She's yours?"

“I’ll kill you,” he said in that same soft voice. “If you so much as breathe in her direction, I’ll kill you, Dresden. Myself.”

I believed him.

“What’s wrong with her?” I asked.

“Persistent vegetative state,” he said. “Coma.”

“You wanted it to heal her,” I said quietly. “That’s why you had it stolen.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think it works like that,” I said. “It isn’t as simple as plugging in a light.”

“But it might work,” he said.

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I’ll take it,” he said. “It’s all I have.”

I looked back toward the window and was quiet for a minute. I made up my mind and said, “Three days.”

He frowned. “What?”

“Three days,” I said. “Three’s a magic number. And supposedly that’s how long Christ was wrapped in it. In three days, three sunrises, you should know whether it’s going to help or not.”

“And then?”

“Then the Shroud is returned in a plain brown wrapper to Father Forthill at Saint Mary of the Angels,” I said. “No note. No nothing. Just returned.”

“And if I don’t, you’ll expose her.”

I shook my head and stood up. “No. I won’t do that. I’ll take it up with you.”

He stared at me for a long moment before his expression softened. “All right.”

I left him there.

When I’d first met Marcone, he’d tricked me into a soulgaze. Though I hadn’t known the specifics, I knew then that he had a secret—one that gave him the incredible amount of will and inner strength needed to run one of the nation’s largest criminal empires. He had something that drove him to be remorseless, practical, deadly.

Now I knew what that secret was.

Marcone was still a black hat. The pain and suffering of the criminal state he ruled accounted for an untold amount of human misery. Maybe he’d been doing it for a noble reason. I could understand that. But it didn’t

change anything. Marcone's good intentions could have paved a new lane on the road to hell.

But dammit, I couldn't hate him anymore. I couldn't hate him because I wasn't sure that I wouldn't have made the same choice in his place.

Hate was simpler, but the world ain't a simple place. It would have been easier to hate Marcone.

I just couldn't do it.

A few days later, Michael threw a cookout as a farewell celebration for Sanya, who was heading back to Europe now that the Shroud had been returned to Father Forthill. I was invited, so I showed up and ate about a hundred and fifty grilled hamburgers. When I was done with them, I went into the house, but stopped to glance into the sitting room by the front door.

Sanya sat in a recliner, his expression puzzled, blinking at the phone. "Again," he said.

Molly sat cross-legged on the couch near him with a phone book in her lap and my shopping list she'd picked up in the tree house laid flat over one half of it. Her expression was serious, but her eyes were sparkling as she drew a red line through another entry in the phone book. "How strange," she said, and read off another number.

Sanya started dialing. "Hello?" he said a moment later. "Hello, sir. Could you please tell me if you have Prince Albert in a can—" He blinked again, mystified, and reported to Molly, "They hung up *again*."

"Weird," Molly said, and winked at me.

I left before I started choking on the laugh I had to hold back, and went out into the front yard. Little Harry was there by himself, playing in the grass in sight of his sister, inside.

"Heya, kid," I said. "You shouldn't be out here all by yourself. People will accuse you of being a reclusive madman. Next thing you know, you'll be wandering around saying, 'Woahse-bud.'"

I heard a clinking sound. Something shining landed in the grass by little Harry, and he immediately pushed himself to his feet, wobbled, then headed for it.

I panicked abruptly and lunged out ahead of him, slapping my hand down over a polished silver coin before the child could squat down to pick it up. I felt a prickling jolt shoot up my arm, and had the sudden, intangible impression that someone nearby was waking up from a nap and stretching.

I looked up to see a car on the street, driver-side window rolled down.

Nicodemus sat at the wheel, relaxed and smiling. “Be seeing you, Dresden.”

He drove away. I took my shaking hand from the coin.

Lasciel’s blackened sigil lay before my eyes. I heard a door open, and on pure instinct palmed the coin and slipped it in my pocket. I looked back to find Sanya frowning and looking up and down the street. His nostrils flared a few times, and he paced over to stand near me. He sniffed a few more times and then peered down at the baby. “Aha,” he rumbled. “Someone is stinky.” He swooped the kid up in his arms, making him squeal and laugh. “You mind if I steal your playmate for a minute, Harry?”

“Go ahead,” I said. “I need to get going anyway.”

Sanya nodded and grinned at me, offering his hand. I shook it. “It has been a pleasure to work with you,” Sanya said. “Perhaps we will see each other again.”

The coin felt cool and heavy in my pocket. “Yeah. Maybe so.”

I left the cookout without saying good-bye, and headed home. I heard something the whole time, something whispering almost inaudibly. I drowned it out with loud and off-key singing, and got to work.

Ten hours later, I put down the excavating pick and glowered at the two-foot hole I had chipped in my lab’s concrete floor. The whispering in my head had segued into “Sympathy for the Devil” by the Stones.

“*Harry*,” whispered a gentle voice.

I dropped the coin into the hole. I slipped a steel ring about three inches across around it. I muttered to myself and willed energy into the ring. The whispering abruptly cut off.

I dumped two buckets of cement into the hole and smoothed it until it was level with the rest of my floor. After that, I hurried out of the lab and shut the door behind me.

Mister came over to demand attention. I settled on the couch, and he jumped up to sprawl on his back over my legs. I petted him and stared at Shiro’s cane, resting in the corner.

“He said that I must live in a world of greys. To trust my heart.” I rubbed Mister’s favorite spot, behind his right ear, and he purred in approval. Mister, at least for the moment, agreed that my heart was in the right place. But it’s possible he wasn’t being objective.

After a while, I picked up Shiro's cane and stared down at the smooth old wood. *Fidelacchius's* power whispered against my fingertips. There was a single Japanese character carved into the sheath. When I asked Bob, he told me that it read, simply, *Faith*.

It isn't good to hold on too hard to the past. You can't spend your whole life looking back. Not even when you can't see what lies ahead. All you can do is keep on keeping on, and try to believe that tomorrow will be what it should be—even if it isn't what you expected.

I took Susan's picture down. I put the postcards in a brown envelope. I picked up the jewel box that held the dinky engagement ring I'd offered her, and that she'd turned down. Then I put them all away in my closet.

I laid the old man's cane on my fireplace mantel.

Maybe some things just aren't meant to go together. Things like oil and water. Orange juice and toothpaste.

Me and Susan.

But tomorrow was another day.

VIGNETTE

Takes place between *Death Masks* and *Blood Rites*

This was a very short piece I wrote at the request of my editor, Jennifer Heddle, who needed it for some kind of promotional thing—one of those free sampler booklets they sometimes hand out at conventions, I believe. I lost track of it in the clutter of life, then realized the deadline was the following morning.

It probably would have been helpful to have remembered at seven or eight, instead of at two a.m.

I'm not even sure I can claim to be the author of this piece, since it was almost entirely written by a coalition of caffeine molecules and exhausted twitches.

I sat on a stool in the cluttered laboratory beneath my basement apartment. It was chilly enough to make me wear a robe, but the dozen or so candles burning around the room made it look warm. The phone book lay on the table in front of me.

I stared at my ad in the Yellow Pages:

HARRY DRESDEN—WIZARD

**Lost Items Found. Paranormal Investigations.
Consulting. Advice. Reasonable Rates.
No Love Potions, Endless Purses, Parties, or
Other Entertainment**

I looked up at the skull on the shelf above my lab table and said, “I don’t get it.”

“Flat, Harry,” said Bob the Skull. Flickering orange lights danced in the skull’s eye sockets. “It’s flat.”

I flipped through several pages. “Yeah, well. Most of them are. I don’t think they offer raised lettering.”

Bob rolled his eyelights. “Not literally flat, dimwit. Flat in the aesthetic sense. It has no panache. No moxy. No chutzpah.”

“No what?”

Bob’s skull turned to one side and banged what would have been its forehead against a heavy bronze candleholder. After several thumps, it turned back toward me and said, “It’s boring.”

“Oh,” I said. I rubbed at my jaw. “You think I should have gone four-color?”

Bob stared at me for a second and said, “I have nightmares about Hell, where all I do is add up numbers and try to have conversations with people like you.”

I glowered up at the skull and nodded. “Okay, fine. You think it needs more drama.”

“More anything. Drama would do. Or breasts.”

I sighed and saw where that line of thought was going. "I am not going to hire a leggy secretary, Bob. Get over it."

"I didn't say anything about legs. But as long as we're on the subject ..."

I set the Yellow Pages aside and picked up my pencil again. "I'm doing formulas here, Bob."

"It's formulae, O Maestro of Latin, and if you don't drum up some business, you aren't going to need those new spells for much of anything. Unless you're working on a spell to help you shoplift groceries."

I set the pencil down hard enough that the tip broke, and I stared at Bob in annoyance. "So what do you think it should say?"

Bob's eyelights brightened. "Talk about monsters. Monsters are good."

"Give me a break."

"I'm serious, Harry! Instead of that line about consulting and finding things, put, 'Fiends foiled, monsters mangled, vampires vanquished, demons demolished.'"

"Oh yeah," I said. "That kind of alliteration will bring in the business."

"It will!"

"It will bring in the nutso business," I said. "Bob, I don't know if anyone's told you this, but most people don't believe that monsters and fiends and whatnot even exist."

"Most people don't believe in love potions, either, but you've got that in there."

I held on to a flash of bad temper. "The point," I told Bob, "is to have an advertisement that looks solid, professional, and reliable."

"Yeah. Advertising is all about lying," Bob said.

"Hey!"

"You suck at lying, Harry. You really do. You should trust me on this one."

"No monsters," I insisted.

"Fine, fine," Bob said. "How about we do a positive-side spin, then? Something like, 'Maidens rescued, enchantments broken, villains unmasked, unicorns protected.'"

"Unicorns?"

"Chicks are into unicorns."

I rolled my eyes. "It's an ad for my investigative business, not a dating service. Besides, the only unicorn I ever saw tried to skewer me."

"You're sort of missing the entire 'Advertising is lying' concept, Harry."

“No unicorns,” I said firmly. “It’s fine the way it is.”

“No style at all,” Bob complained.

I put on a mentally challenged accent. “Style is as style does.”

“Okay, fine. Suppose we throw intelligence to the winds and print only the truth. ‘Vampire slayer, ghost remover, faerie fighter, werewolf exterminator, police consultant, foe of the foot soldiers of Hell.’”

I thought about it for a minute, then got a fresh piece of paper and wrote it down. I stared at the words.

“See?” Bob said. “That would look really hot, attract notice, and it would be the truth. What have you got to lose?”

“This week’s gas money,” I said, finally. “Too many letters. Besides, Lieutenant Murphy would kill me if I went around blowing trumpets about how I help the cops.”

“You’re hopeless,” Bob said.

I shook my head. “No. I’m not in this for the money.”

“Then what are you in it for, Harry? Hell, in the past few years you’ve been all but killed about a million times. Why do you do it?”

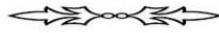
I squinted up at the skull. “Because someone has to.”

“Hopeless,” Bob repeated.

I smiled, picked up a fresh pencil, and went back to my formulas—formulae. “Pretty much.”

Bob sighed and fell quiet. My pencil scratched over clean white paper while the candles burned warm and steady.

BLOOD RITES



BOOK SIX OF THE DRESDEN FILES



Jim Butcher



A ROC BOOK

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Blood Rites

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For my nieces and nephews: Craig, Emily, Danny, Ellie, Gabriel, Lori, Anna, Mikey, Kaitlyn, Greta, Foster, and Baby-to-Be-Named-Later. I hope you all grow up to find as much joy in reading as has your uncle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chapter One



The building was on fire, and it wasn't my fault.

My boots slipped and slid on the tile floor as I sprinted around a corner and toward the exit doors to the abandoned school building on the southwest edge of Chicagoland. Distant streetlights provided the only light in the dusty hall, and left huge swaths of blackness crouching in the old classroom doors.

I carried an elaborately carved wooden box about the size of a laundry basket in my arms, and its weight made my shoulders burn with effort. I'd been shot in both of them at one time or another, and the muscle burn quickly started changing into deep, aching stabs. The damned box was heavy, not even considering its contents.

Inside the box, a bunch of flop-eared grey-and-black puppies whimpered and whined, jostled back and forth as I ran. One of the puppies, his ear already notched where some kind of doggie misadventure had marked him, was either braver or more stupid than his littermates. He scrambled around until he got his paws onto the lip of the box, and set up a painfully high-pitched barking full of squeaky snarls, big dark eyes focused behind me.

I ran faster, my knee-length black leather duster swishing against my legs. I heard a rustling, hissing sound and juked left as best I could. A ball of some kind of noxious-smelling substance that looked like tar went zipping past me, engulfed in yellow-white flame. It hit the floor several yards beyond me, and promptly exploded into a little puddle of hungry fire.

I tried to avoid it, but my boots had evidently been made for walking, not sprinting on dusty tile. They slid out from under me and I fell. I controlled it as much as I could, and wound up sliding on my rear, my back to the fire. It got hot for a second, but the wards I'd woven over my duster kept it from burning me.

Another flaming glob crackled toward me, and I barely turned in time. The substance, whatever the hell it was, clung like napalm to what it hit and

burned with a supernatural ferocity that had already burned a dozen metal lockers to slag in the dim halls behind me.

The goop hit my left shoulder blade and slid off the protective spells on my mantled coat, splattering the wall beside me. I flinched nonetheless, lost my balance, and fumbled the box. Fat little puppies tumbled onto the floor with a chorus of whimpers and cries for help.

I checked behind me.

The guardian demons looked like demented purple chimpanzees, except for the raven-black wings sprouting from their shoulders. There were three of them that had escaped my carefully crafted paralysis spell, and they were hot on my tail, bounding down the halls in long leaps assisted by their black feathered wings.

As I watched, one of them reached down between its crooked legs and . . . Well, not to put too fine a point on it, but it gathered up the kind of ammunition primates in zoos traditionally rely upon. The monkey-demon hurled it with a chittering scream, and it combusted in midair. I had to duck before the noxious ball of incendiary goop smacked into my nose.

I grabbed puppies and scooped them into the box, then started running. The demon-monkeys burst into fresh howls.

Squeaky barks behind me made me look back. The little notch-eared puppy had planted his clumsy paws solidly on the floor, and was barking defiantly at the oncoming demon-chimps.

“Dammit,” I cursed, and reversed course. The lead monkey swooped down at the puppy. I made like a ballplayer, slid in feetfirst, and planted the heel of my boot squarely on the end of the demon’s nose. I’m not heavily built, but I’m most of a head taller than six feet, and no one ever thought I was a lightweight. I kicked the demon hard enough to make it screech and veer off. It slammed into a metal locker, and left an inches-deep dent.

“Stupid little fuzzbucket,” I muttered, and recovered the puppy. “This is why I have a cat.” The puppy kept up its tirade of ferocious, squeaking snarls. I pitched him into the box without ceremony, ducked two more flaming blobs, and started coughing on the smoke already filling the building as I resumed my retreat. Light was growing back where I’d come from, as the demons’ flaming missiles chewed into the old walls and floor, spreading with a malicious glee.

I ran for the front doors of the old building, slamming the opening bar with my hip and barely slowing down.

A sudden weight hit my back and something pulled viciously at my hair. The chimp-demon started biting at my neck and ear. It hurt. I tried to spin and throw it off me, but it had a good hold. The effort, though, showed me a second demon heading for my face, and I had to duck to avoid a collision.

I let go of the box and reached for the demon on my back. It howled and bit my hand. Snarling and angry, I turned around and threw my back at the nearest wall. The monkey-demon evidently knew that tactic. It flipped off of my shoulders at the last second, and I slammed the base of my skull hard against a row of metal lockers.

A burst of stars blinded me for a second, and by the time my vision cleared, I saw two of the demons diving toward the box of puppies. They both hurled searing blobs at the wooden box, splattering it with flame.

There was an old fire extinguisher on the wall, and I grabbed it. My monkey attacker came swooping back at me. I rammed the end of the extinguisher into its nose, knocking it down, then reversed my grip on the extinguisher and sprayed a cloud of dusty white chemical at the carved box. I got the fire put out, but for good measure I unloaded the thing into the other two demons' faces, creating a thick cloud of dust.

I grabbed the box and hauled it out the door, and then slammed the school doors shut behind me.

There were a couple of thumps from the other side of the doors, and then silence.

Panting, I looked down at the box of whimpering puppies. A bunch of wet black noses and eyes looked back up at me from under a white dusting of extinguishing chemical.

"Hell's bells," I panted at them. "You guys are lucky Brother Wang wants you back so much. If he hadn't paid half up front, I'd be the one in the box and you'd be carrying me."

A bunch of little tails wagged hopefully.

"Stupid dogs," I growled. I hauled the box into my arms again and started schlepping it toward the old school's parking lot.

I was about halfway there when something ripped the steel doors of the school inward, against the swing of their hinges. A low, loud bellow erupted from inside the building, and then a Kong-size version of the chimp-demons came stomping out of the doorway.

It was purple. It had wings. And it looked really pissed off. At least eight feet tall, it had to weigh four or five times what I did. As I stared at it, two

little monkey-demons flew directly at demon Kong—and were simply absorbed by the bigger demon’s bulk upon impact. Kong gained another eighty pounds or so and got a bit bulkier. Not so much monkey Kong, then, as Monkey Voltron. The original crowd of guardian demons must have escaped my spell with that combining maneuver, pooling all of their energy into a single vessel and using the greater strength provided by density to power through my binding.

Kongtron spread wings as wide as a small airplane’s and leapt at me with a completely unfair amount of grace. Being a professional investigator, as well as a professional wizard, I’d seen slobbering beasties before. Over the course of many encounters and many years, I have successfully developed a standard operating procedure for dealing with big, nasty monsters.

Run away. Me and Monty Python.

The parking lot and the Blue Beetle, my beat-up old Volkswagen, were only thirty or forty yards off, and I can really move when I’m feeling motivated.

Kong bellowed. It motivated me.

There was the sound of a small explosion, then a blaze of red light brighter than the nearby street lamps. Another fireball hit the ground a few feet wide of me and detonated like a Civil War cannonball, gouging out a coffin-sized crater in the pavement. The enormous demon roared and shot past me on black vulture wings, banking to come around for another pass.

“Thomas!” I screamed. “Start the car!”

The passenger door opened, and an unwholesomely good-looking young man with dark hair, tight jeans, and a leather jacket worn over a bare chest poked his head out and peered at me over the rims of round green-glassed spectacles. Then he looked up and behind me. His jaw dropped open.

“Start the freaking car!” I screamed.

Thomas nodded and dove back into the Beetle. It coughed and wheezed and shuddered to life. The surviving headlight flicked on, and Thomas gunned the engine and headed for the street.

For a second I thought he was going to leave me, but he slowed down enough that I caught up with him. Thomas leaned across the car and pushed the passenger door open. I grunted with effort and threw myself into the car. I almost lost the box, but managed to get it just before the notch-eared puppy pulled himself up to the rim, evidently determined to go back and do battle.

“What the hell is that?” Thomas screamed. His black hair, shoulder length, curling and glossy, whipped around his face as the car gathered speed and drew the cool autumn wind through the open windows. His grey eyes were wide with apprehension. “What is that, Harry?”

“Just drive!” I shouted. I stuffed the box of whimpering puppies into the backseat, grabbed my blasting rod, and climbed out the open window so that I was sitting on the door, chest to the car’s roof. I twisted to bring the blasting rod in my right hand to bear on the demon. I drew in my will, my magic, and the end of the blasting rod began to glow with a cherry-red light.

I was about to loose a strike against the demon when it swooped down with another fireball in its hand and flung it at the car.

“Look out!” I screamed.

Thomas must have seen it coming in the mirror. The Beetle swerved wildly, and the fireball hit the asphalt, bursting into a roar of flame and concussion that broke windows on both sides of the street. Thomas dodged a car parked on the curb by roaring up onto the sidewalk, bounced gracelessly, and nearly went out of control. The bounce threw me from my perch on the closed door. I was wondering what the odds were against finding a soft place to land when I felt Thomas grab my ankle. He held on to me and drew me back into the car with a strength that would have been shocking to anyone who didn’t know that he wasn’t human.

He braced me with his hold on my leg, and as the huge demon dove down again, I pointed my blasting rod at it and snarled, “*Fuego!*”

A lance of white-hot fire streaked from the tip of my blasting rod into the late-night air, illuminating the street like a flash of lightning. Bouncing along on the car like that, I expected to miss. But I beat the odds and the burst of flame took Kongtron right in the belly. It screamed and faltered, plummeting to earth. Thomas swerved back out onto the street.

The demon started to get up. “Stop the car!” I screamed.

Thomas mashed down the brakes and I nearly got reduced to sidewalk pizza again. I hung on as hard as I could, but by the time I had my balance, the demon had hauled itself to its feet.

I growled in frustration, readied another blast, and aimed carefully.

“What are you doing?” Thomas shouted. “You lamed him; let’s run!”

“No,” I snapped back. “If we leave it here, it’s going to take things out on whoever it can find.”

“But it won’t be *us*!”

I tuned Thomas out and readied another strike, pouring my will into the blasting rod until wisps of smoke began emerging from the length of its surface.

Then I let Kong have it right between its black beady eyes.

The fire hit it like a wrecking ball, right on the chin. The demon’s head exploded into a cloud of luminous purple vapor and sparkles of scarlet light, which I have to admit looked really neat.

Demons who come into the mortal world don’t have bodies as such. They create them, like a suit of clothes, and as long as the demon’s awareness inhabits the construct-body, it’s as good as real. Having its head blown up was too much damage for even the demon’s life energy to support. The body flopped around on the ground for a few seconds, and then the Kong-demon’s earthly form stopped moving and dissolved into a lumpy looking mass of translucent gelatin—ectoplasm, matter from the Nevernever.

A surge of relief made me feel a little dizzy, and I slid bonelessly back into the Beetle.

“Allow me to reiterate,” Thomas panted a minute later. “What. The hell. Was *that*.”

I settled down onto the seat, breathing hard. I buckled up, and checked that the puppies and their box were both intact. They were, and I closed my eyes with a sigh. “Shen,” I said. “Chinese spirit creatures. Demons. Shapeshifters.”

“Christ, Dresden! You almost got me killed!”

“Don’t be a baby. You’re fine.”

Thomas frowned at me. “You at least could have told me!”

“I *did* tell you,” I said. “I told you at Mac’s that I’d give you a ride home, but that I had to run an errand first.”

Thomas scowled. “An *errand* is getting a tank of gas or picking up a carton of milk or something. It is *not* getting chased by flying purple pyromaniac gorillas hurling incendiary poo.”

“Next time take the El.”

He glared at me. “Where are we going?”

“O’Hare.”

“Why?”

I waved vaguely at the backseat. “Returning stolen property to my client. He wants to get it back to Tibet, pronto.”

“Anything else you’re neglecting to tell me? Ninja wombats or something?”

“I wanted you to see how it feels,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, Thomas. You never go to Mac’s place to hang out and chum around. You’re wealthy, you’ve got connections, and you’re a freaking vampire. You didn’t need me to give you a ride home. You could have taken a cab, called for a limo, or talked some woman into taking you.”

Thomas’s scowl faded away, replaced by a careful, expressionless mask. “Oh? Then why am I here?”

I shrugged. “Doesn’t look like you showed up to bushwhack me. I guess you’re here to talk.”

“Razor intellect. You should be a private investigator or something.”

“You going to sit there insulting me, or are you going to talk?”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. “I need a favor.”

I snorted. “What favor? You do remember that technically we’re at war, right? Wizards versus vampires? Ring any bells?”

“If you like, you can pretend that I’m employing subversive tactics as part of a fiendishly elaborate ruse meant to manipulate you,” Thomas said.

“Good,” I said. “ ’Cause if I went to all the trouble of starting a war and you didn’t want to participate it would hurt my feelings.”

He grinned. “I bet you’re wondering whose side I’m on.”

“No.” I snorted. “You’re on Thomas’s side.”

The grin widened. Thomas has the kind of whiter-than-white boyish grin that makes women’s panties spontaneously evaporate. “Granted. But I’ve done you some favors over the past couple of years.”

I frowned. He had, though I didn’t know why. “Yeah. So?”

“So now it’s my turn,” he said. “I’ve helped you. Now I need payback.”

“Ah. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to take a case for an acquaintance of mine. He needs your help.”

“I don’t really have time,” I said. “I have to make a living.”

Thomas flicked a piece of monkey flambé off the back of his hand and out the window. “You call this living?”

“Jobs are a part of life. Maybe you’ve heard of the concept. It’s called work? See, what happens is that you suffer through doing annoying and

humiliating things until you get paid not enough money. Like those Japanese game shows, only without all the glory.”

“Plebe. I’m not asking you to go pro bono. He’ll pay your fee.”

“Bah,” I muttered. “What’s he need help with?”

Thomas frowned. “He thinks someone is trying to kill him. I think he’s right.”

“Why?”

“There have been a couple of suspicious deaths around him.”

“Like?”

“Two days ago he sent his driver, girl named Stacy Willis, out to the car with his golf clubs so he could get in a few holes before lunch. Willis opened the trunk and got stung to death by about twenty thousand bees who had somehow swarmed into the limo in the time it took her to walk up to the door and back.”

I nodded. “Ugh. Can’t argue there. Gruesomely suspicious.”

“The next morning his personal assistant, a young woman named Sheila Barks, was hit by a runaway car. Killed instantly.”

I pursed my lips. “That doesn’t sound so odd.”

“She was waterskiing at the time.”

I blinked. “How the hell did *that* happen?”

“Bridge over the reservoir was the way I heard it. Car jumped the rail, landed right on her.”

“Ugh,” I said. “Any idea who is behind it?”

“None. Think it’s an entropy curse?” Thomas asked.

“If so, it’s a sloppy one. But strong as hell. Those are some pretty melodramatic deaths.” I checked on the puppies. They had fallen together into one dusty lump and were sleeping. The notch-eared pup lay on top of the pile. He opened his eyes and gave me a sleepy little growl of warning. Then he went back to sleep.

Thomas glanced back at the box. “Cute little furballs. What’s their story?”

“Guardian dogs for some monastery in the Himalayas. Someone snatched them and came here. A couple of monks hired me to get them back.”

“What, they don’t have dog pounds in Tibet?”

I shrugged. “They believe these dogs have a foo heritage.”

“Is that like epilepsy or something?”

I snorted and put my hand palm-down out the window, waggling it back and forth to make an airfoil in the wind of the Beetle's passage. "The monks think their great-grandcestor was a divine spirit-animal. Celestial guardian spirit. Foo dog. They believe it makes the bloodline special."

"Is it?"

"How the hell should I know, man? I'm just the repo guy."

"Some wizard you are."

"It's a big universe," I said. "No one can know it all."

Thomas fell quiet for a while, and the road whispered by. "Uh, do you mind if I ask what happened to your car?"

I looked around at the Beetle's interior. It wasn't Volkswagen-standard anymore. The seat covers were gone. So was the padding underneath. So was the interior carpet, and big chunks of the dashboard that had been made out of wood. There was a little vinyl left, and some of the plastic, and anything made out of metal, but everything else had been stripped completely away.

I'd done some makeshift repairs with several one-by-sixes, some hanger wire, some cheap padding from the camping section at Wal-Mart, and a lot of duct tape. It gave the car a real postmodern look: By which I meant that it looked like something fashioned from the wreckage after a major nuclear exchange.

On the other hand, the Beetle's interior was very, very clean. My glasses are half-full, dammit.

"Mold demons," I said.

"Mold demons ate your car?"

"Sort of. They were called out of the decay in the car's interior, and used anything organic they could find to make bodies for themselves."

"You called them?"

"Oh, hell, no. They were a present from the guest villain a few months ago."

"I hadn't heard there was any action this summer."

"I have a life, man. And my life isn't all about feuding demigods and nations at war and solving a mystery before it kills me."

Thomas lifted an eyebrow. "It's also about mold demons and flaming monkey poo?"

"What can I say? I put the 'ick' in 'magic.' "

"I see. Hey, Harry, can I ask you something?"

"I guess."

"Did you really save the world? I mean, like the last two years in a row?"

I shrugged. "Sort of."

"Word is you capped a faerie princess and headed off a war between Winter and Summer," Thomas said.

"Mostly I was saving my own ass. Just happened that the world was in the same spot."

"There's an image that will give me nightmares," Thomas said. "What about those demon Hell guys last year?"

I shook my head. "They'd have let loose a nasty plague, but it wouldn't have lasted very long. They were hoping it would escalate into a nice apocalypse. They knew there wasn't much chance of it, but they were doing it anyway."

"Like the Lotto," Thomas said.

"Yeah, I guess. The genocide Lotto."

"And you stopped them."

"I helped do it and lived to walk away. But there was an unhappy ending."

"What?"

"I didn't get paid. For either case. I make more money from flaming demon monkey crap. That's just wrong."

Thomas laughed a little and shook his head. "I don't get it."

"Don't get what?"

"Why you do it."

"Do what?"

He slouched down in the driver's seat. "The Lone Ranger impersonation. You get pounded to scrap every time you turn around and you barely get by on the gumshoe work. You live in that dank little cave of an apartment. Alone. You've got no woman, no friends, and you drive this piece of crap. Your life is kind of pathetic."

"Is that what you think?" I asked.

"Call them like I see them."

I laughed. "Why do you think I do it?"

He shrugged. "All I can figure is that either you're nursing a deep and sadistic self-hatred or else you're insane. I gave you the benefit of the doubt and left monumental stupidity off the list."

I kept on smiling. "Thomas, you don't really know me. Not at all."

“I think I do. I’ve seen you under pressure.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but you see me, what? Maybe a day or two each year? Usually when something’s been warming up to kill me by beating the tar out of me.”

“So?”

“So that doesn’t cover what my life is like the other three hundred and sixty-three days,” I said. “You don’t know everything about me. My life isn’t completely about magical mayhem and creative pyromania in Chicago.”

“Oh, that’s right. I heard you went to exotic Oklahoma a few months back. Something about a tornado and the National Severe Storms Lab.”

“I was doing the new Summer Lady a favor, running down a rogue storm sylph. Got to go all over the place in those tornado-chaser geekmobiles. You should have seen the look on the driver’s face when he realized that the tornado was chasing *us*.”

“It’s a nice story, Harry, but what’s the point?” Thomas asked.

“My point is that there’s a lot of my life you haven’t seen. I have friends.”

“Monster hunters, werewolves, and a talking skull.”

I shook my head. “More than that. I like my apartment. Hell, for that matter I like my car.”

“You *like* this piece of . . . junk?”

“She may not look like much, but she’s got it where it counts, kid.”

Thomas slouched down in his seat, his expression skeptical. “Now you’ve forced me to reconsider the monumentally stupid explanation.”

I shrugged. “Me and the Blue Beetle kick ass. In a four-cylinder kind of way, but it still gets kicked.”

Thomas’s face lost all expression. “What about Susan?”

When I get angry, I’d like to be able to pull off a great stone face like that, but I don’t do it so well. “What about her?”

“You cared about her. You got her involved in your life. She got torn up because of you. She got attention from all kinds of nasties and she nearly died.” He kept staring ahead. “How do you live with that?”

I started to get angry, but I had a rare flash of insight and my ire evaporated before it could fully condense. I studied Thomas’s profile at a stoplight and saw him working hard to look distant, like nothing was touching him. Which would mean that something *was* touching him. He

was thinking of someone important to him. I had a pretty good idea who it was.

“How’s Justine?” I asked.

His features grew colder. “It isn’t important.”

“Okay. But how is Justine?”

“I’m a vampire, Harry.” The words were cold and distant, but not steady. “She’s my girlfri—” His voice stumbled on the word, and he tried to cover it with a low cough. “She’s my lover. She’s food. That’s how she is.”

“Ah,” I said. “I like her, you know. Ever since she blackmailed me into helping you at Bianca’s masquerade. That took guts.”

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s got that.”

“How long have you been seeing her now?”

“Four years,” Thomas said. “Almost five.”

“Anyone else?”

“No.”

“Burger King,” I said.

Thomas blinked at me. “What?”

“Burger King,” I said. “I like to eat at Burger King. But even if I could afford to do it, I wouldn’t eat my meals there every day for almost five years.”

“What’s your point?” Thomas asked.

“My point is that it’s pretty clear that Justine isn’t just food to you, Thomas.”

He turned his head and stared at me for a moment, his expression empty and his eyes inhumanly blank. “She is. She has to be.”

“Why don’t I believe you?” I said.

Thomas stared at me, his eyes growing even colder. “Drop the subject. Right now.”

I decided not to push. He was working hard not to give anything away, so I knew he was full of crap. But if he didn’t want to discuss it, I couldn’t force him.

Hell, for that matter, I didn’t want to. Thomas was an annoying wiseass who tended to make everyone he met want to kill him, and when I have that much in common with someone, I can’t help but like him a little. It wouldn’t hurt to give him some space.

On the other hand, it was easy for me to forget what he was, and I couldn’t afford that. Thomas was a vampire of the White Court. They

didn't drink blood. They fed on emotions, on feelings, drawing the life energy from their prey through them. The way I understood it, it was usually during sex, and rumor had it that their kind could seduce a saint. I'd seen Thomas start to feed once, and whatever it was that made him not quite human had completely taken control of him. It left him a cold, beautiful, marble-white being of naked hunger. It was an acutely uncomfortable memory.

The Whites weren't as physically formidable or aggressively organized as the Red Court, and they didn't have the raw, terrifying power of the Black Court, but they didn't have all the usual vampire weaknesses, either. Sunlight wasn't a problem for Thomas, and from what I'd seen, crosses and other holy articles didn't bother him either. But just because they weren't as inhuman as the other Courts didn't make the Whites less dangerous. In fact, the way I saw it, it made them more of a threat in some ways. I know how to handle it when some slime-covered horror from the pits of Hell jumps up in my face. But it would be easy to let down my guard for someone nearly human.

Speaking of which, I told myself, I was agreeing to help him and taking a job, just as though Thomas were any other client. It probably wasn't the smartest thing I'd ever done. It had the potential to lead to lethally unhealthy decisions.

He fell silent again. Now that I wasn't running and screaming and such, the car started to get uncomfortably cold. I rolled up the window, shutting out the early-autumn air.

"So," he said. "Will you help me out?"

I sighed. "I shouldn't even be in the same car with you. I've got enough problems with the White Council."

"Gee, your own people don't like you. Cry me a river."

"Bite me," I said. "What's his name?"

"Arturo Genosa. He's a motion-picture producer, starting up his own company."

"Is he at all clued in?"

"Sort of. He's a normal, but he's real superstitious."

"Why did you want him to come to me?"

"He needs your help, Harry. If he doesn't get it, I don't think he's going to live through the week."

I frowned at Thomas. "Entropy curses are a nasty business even when they're precise, much less when they're that sloppy. I'd be risking my ass trying to deflect them."

"I've done as much for you."

I thought about it for a moment. Then I said, "Yeah. You have."

"And I didn't ask for any money for it, either."

"All right," I said. "I'll talk to him. No guarantees. But if I do take the case, you're going to pay me to do it, on top of what this Arturo guy shells out."

"This is how you return favors, is it."

I shrugged. "So get out of the car."

He shook his head. "Fine. You'll get double."

"No," I said. "Not money."

He arched an eyebrow and glanced at me over the rims of his green fashion spectacles.

"I want to know why," I said. "I want to know why you've been helping me. If I take the case, you come clean with me."

"You wouldn't believe me if I did."

"That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

Thomas frowned, and we drove for several minutes in silence. "Okay," he said then. "Deal."

"Done," I responded. "Shake on it."

We did. His fingers felt very cold.

Chapter Two



We went to O'Hare. I met Brother Wang in the chapel at the international concourse. He was a short, wiry Asian man in sweeping robes the color of sunset. His bald head gleamed, making his age tough to guess, though his features were wrinkled with the marks of someone who smiles often.

"Miss sir Dresden," he said, breaking into a wide smile as I came in with the box of sleeping puppies. "Our little one dogs you have given to us!"

Brother Wang's English was worse than my Latin, and that's saying something, but his body language was unmistakable. I returned his smile, and offered him the box with a bow of my head. "It was my pleasure."

Wang took the box and set it down carefully, then started gently sorting through its contents. I waited, looking around the little chapel, a plain room built to be a quiet space for meditation, so that those who believed in something would have a place to pay honor to their faith. The airport had redecorated the room with a blue carpet instead of a beige one. They'd repainted the walls. There was a new podium at the front of the room, and half a dozen replacement padded pews.

I guess that much blood leaves a permanent stain, no matter how much cleaner you dump on it.

I put my foot on the spot where a gentle old man had given up his life to save mine. It made me feel sad, but not bitter. If we had it to do again, he and I would make the same choices. I just wished I'd been able to know him longer than I had. It's not everyone who can teach you something about faith without saying a word to do it.

Brother Wang frowned at the white powder all over the puppies, and held up one dust-coated hand with an inquisitive expression.

"Oops," I said.

"Ah," Wang said, nodding. "Oops. Okay, oops." He frowned at the box.

"Something wrong?"

"Is it that all the little one dogs are boxed in?"

I shrugged. "I got all of them that were in the building. I don't know if anyone moved some of them before I did."

"Okay," Brother Wang said. "Less is more better than nothing." He straightened and offered me his hand. "Much thanks from my brothers."

I shook it. "Welcome."

"Plane leaving now for home." Wang reached into his robe and pulled out an envelope. He passed it to me, bowed once more, then took the box of puppies and swept out of the room.

I counted the priest's money, which probably says something about my level of cynicism. I'd racked up a fairly hefty fee on this one, first picking up the trail of the sorcerer who had stolen the pups, then tracking him down and snooping around long enough to know when he went out to get some dinner. It had taken me nearly a week of sixteen-hour days to find the concealed location of the room where the pups were held. They asked me to go get them, too, so I had to identify the demons guarding them, and work out a spell that would neutralize them without, for example, burning down the building. Oops.

All in all, my pay amounted to a couple of nice, solid stacks of Ben Franklins. I'd logged a ton of hours in tracking them down, and then added on a surcharge for playing repo. Of course, if I'd known about the flaming poo, I'd have added more. Some things demand overtime.

I went back to the car. Thomas was sitting on the hood of the Beetle. He hadn't bothered moving it to the actual parking lot, instead taking up a section of curb at the loading zone outside the concourse. A patrol cop had evidently come over to tell him to move it, but she was a fairly attractive woman, and Thomas was Thomas. He had taken off her hat and had it perched on his head at a rakish angle, and the cop looked relaxed and was laughing as I came walking up.

"Hey," I said. "Let's get moving. Things to do."

"Alas," he said, taking off the hat and offering it back to the officer with a little bow. "Unless you're about to arrest me, Elizabeth?"

"Not this time, I suppose," the cop said.

"Damn the luck," Thomas said.

She smiled at him, then frowned at me. "Aren't you Harry Dresden?"

"Yeah."

The cop nodded, putting on her hat. "Thought I recognized you. Lieutenant Murphy says you're good people."

“Thanks.”

“It wasn’t a compliment. A lot of people don’t like Murphy.”

“Aw, shucks,” I said. “I blush when I feel all flattered like that.”

The cop wrinkled her nose. “What’s that smell?”

I kept a straight face. “Burned monkey poo.”

She eyed me warily for a second to see if I was teasing her, then rolled her eyes. The cop stepped up onto the sidewalk and began moving on down it. Thomas swung his legs off the car and pitched my keys at me. I caught them and got in on the driver’s side.

“Okay,” I said when Thomas got in. “Where do I meet this guy?”

“He’s holding a little soiree for his filming crew tonight in a condo on the Gold Coast. Drinks, deejay, snacks, that kind of thing.”

“Snacks,” I said. “I’m in.”

“Just promise me you won’t fill up your pockets with peanuts and cookies.” Thomas gave me directions to a posh apartment building a few miles north of the Loop, and I got moving. Thomas was silent during the drive.

“Up here on the right,” he said finally, then handed me a white envelope. “Give this to the security guys.”

I pulled in where Thomas told me to and leaned out of my car to offer the envelope to the guard in the little kiosk at the entrance of the parking lot.

A squeaky, bubbling growl erupted from directly below my seat. I flinched.

“What the hell is that?” Thomas said.

I pulled up to the guard kiosk and stopped. I reached for my magical senses and extended them toward the source of the continuing growl. “Crap. I think it’s one of the—”

A sort of greasy, nauseating cold flooded over my perceptions, stealing my breath. A ghostly charnel-house scent came with it, the smell of old blood and rotting meat. I froze, looking up at the source of the sensation.

The person I’d taken to be a security guard was a vampire of the Black Court.

It had been a young man. Its features looked familiar, but dessication had left its face too gaunt for me to be sure. The vampire wasn’t tall. Death had withered it into an emaciated caricature of a human being. Its eyes were covered with a white, rheumy film, and flakes of dead flesh fell from its decay-drawn lips and clung to its yellowed teeth. Hair like brittle, dead

grass stood out from its head, and there was some kind of moss or mold growing in it.

It snatched at me with inhuman speed, but my wizard's senses had given me enough warning to keep its skeletal fingers from closing on my wrist—just barely. The vampire caught a bit of my duster's leather sleeve with the tips of its fingers. I jerked my arm back, but the vampire had as much strength in its fingertips as I did in my whole upper body. I had to pull hard, twisting with my shoulders to break free. I choked out a shout, and the sudden rush of fear made it high and thready.

The vampire rushed me, slithering out through the guardhouse window like a freeze-dried snake. I had a panicked instant to realize that if the vampire closed to wrestling range with me inside the car, they'd be harvesting my organs out of a mound of scrap metal and spare parts.

And I wasn't strong enough to stop it from happening.

Chapter Three



Thomas's senses evidently didn't compete with mine, because the Black Court vampire was up to its shoulders in the Beetle before he choked out a startled, "Holy crap!"

I threw my left elbow at the vampire's face. I couldn't hurt the creature, but it might buy me a second to act. I connected, snapping its head to one side, and with my other hand I reached into a box on the floor between the seats, right by the stick, and withdrew the weapon that might keep me from getting torn to shreds. The vampire tore at me with its near-skeletal hands, its nails digging like claws. If I hadn't laid those spells on my duster, it would have shoved its hand into my chest and torn out my heart, but the heavy, spell-reinforced leather held out for a second or two, buying me enough time to counterattack.

The vampires of the Black Court had been around since the dawn of human memory. They had acres of funky vampire powers, right out of Stoker's book. They had the weaknesses too—garlic, tokens of faith, sunlight, running water, fire, decapitation. Bram Stoker's book told everyone how to kill them, and the Blacks had been all but exterminated in the early twentieth century. The vampires who survived were the most intelligent, the swiftest, the most ruthless of their kind, with centuries of experience in matters of life and death. Mostly death.

But even with centuries of experience, I doubted any of them had ever been hit with a water balloon.

Or with a holy-water balloon, either.

I kept three of them in the box in my car, in easy reach. I snatched one up, palmed it, and slammed it hard against the vampire's face. The balloon broke, and the blessed water splattered over its head. Wherever it struck the vampire, there was a flash of silver light and the dead flesh burst into white, heatless flame as bright as a magnesium flare.

The vampire let out a dusty, rasping scream and convulsed in instant agony. It began thrashing around like a half-squashed bug. It slammed a flailing arm into my steering wheel and the metal bent with a groan.

“Thomas!” I snarled. “Help me!”

He was already moving. He tore his seat belt off, drew up his knees, and spun to his left. Thomas let out a shout and drove both feet hard into the vampire’s face. Thomas couldn’t have matched the Black Court vampire’s physical power, but he was still damned strong. The double kick threw the vampire out of the car and through the flimsy wooden wall of the guard kiosk outside.

The squeaky growling turned into ferocious little barks while the vampire struggled weakly. It tried to rise, its white-filmed eyes wide. I could see the damage the holy water had inflicted. Maybe a quarter of its head was simply gone, starting above its left ear and running down to the corner of its mouth. The edges of the holy-water burns glowed with faint golden fire. Viscous globs of gelatinous black fluid oozed forth from the wounds.

I picked up another water balloon and lifted my arm to throw it.

The vampire let out a hissing shriek of rage and terror. Then it turned and darted away, smashing through the back wall of the kiosk without slowing down. It fled down the street.

“He’s getting away,” Thomas said, and started getting out of the car.

“Don’t,” I snapped over all the barking. “It’s a setup.”

Thomas hesitated. “How do you know?”

“I recognize that guy,” I said. “He was at Bianca’s masquerade. Only he was alive back then.”

Thomas somehow grew even paler. “One of the people that creepy Black Court bitch turned? The one dressed like Hamlet’s shrink?”

“Her name is Mavra. And yeah.”

“Crap,” he muttered. “You’re right. It’s a lure. She’s probably hiding out there watching us right now, waiting for us to go running down a dark alley.”

I tried the steering wheel. It felt a little stiff, but it still functioned. Hail the mighty Blue Beetle. I found a parking space and pulled into it. The puppy’s barks became ferocious growls again. “Mavra wouldn’t need a dark alley. She’s got some serious talent for veils. She could be sitting on the hood and we might not see her.”

Thomas licked his lips, keeping his eyes on the parking lot. "You think she's come to town for you?"

"Sure, why not. I cheated her out of destroying the sword *Amoracchius*, and she was an ally of Bianca's up until I killed her. Plus we're at war. I'm surprised she hasn't shown up before now."

"Christ on a crutch. She spooks the hell out of me."

"Me too." I bent over and reached beneath the driver's seat. I felt a fuzzy tail, grabbed it, and drew the puppy out as gently as I could. It was the insane little notched-eared pup. He ignored me, still growling, and started shaking his head back and forth violently. "Good thing we had a stowaway. Vamp might have gotten us both."

"What's that he's got in his mouth?" Thomas asked.

The puppy lost hold of whatever he was savaging, and it landed on the floor of the Beetle.

"Ugh," I said. "It's that vamp's ear. Holy water must have burned it right off."

Thomas glanced down at the ear and turned a bit green. "It's moving."

The puppy snarled and batted at the wriggling bit of rotted ear. I picked it up as lightly as I could and tossed it out. The grey-and-black puppy was evidently satisfied with that course of action. He sat down and opened his mouth in a doggie grin.

"Nice reflexes, Harry," Thomas said. "When that vamp came at you. Real nice. Faster than mine. How the hell did you manage that?"

"I didn't. I was trying to feel out this little nuisance after he started growling. I felt the vamp coming a couple seconds before it jumped me."

"Wow," Thomas said. "Talk about strokes of luck."

"Yeah. It's sort of a first for me."

The pup abruptly spun, facing the direction the vampire had fled. He growled again.

Thomas went rigid. "Hey, Harry, you know what?"

"No, what?"

"I'm thinking we should get indoors."

I picked up the puppy and scanned the darkness, but saw nothing. "Discretion is the better part of not getting exsanguinated," I said. "Let's go."

Chapter Four



Thomas and I went into the apartment building, and found the guard who should have been in the booth outside drinking a cup of coffee with a second man behind a desk. We took the elevator to the top floor. There were only two doors in the hall, and Thomas knocked on the nearest. Music rolled and thumped inside while we waited, and the spotless carpet had been cleaned with something that smelled like snapdragons. Thomas had to knock twice more before the door finally opened.

A pretty woman somewhere around her mid-forties answered Thomas's knock, and a tide of loud music came with her. She was maybe five-foot-six and had her dark brown hair held up with a couple of chopsticks. She held a pile of discarded paper plates in one hand and a couple of empty plastic cups in the other and wore an emerald knee-length knit dress that showed off the curves of a WWII pinup girl.

Her face lit with an immediate smile. "Thomas, how wonderful to see you. Justine said you'd be coming by."

Thomas stepped forward with his own brilliant smile and kissed the woman on either cheek. "Madge," he said. "You look great. What are you doing here?"

"It's my apartment," Madge replied, her tone dry.

Thomas laughed. "You're kidding me. Why?"

"The old fool talked me into investing in his company. I need to make sure he doesn't throw the money away. I'm keeping an eye on him."

"I see," Thomas said.

"Did he finally talk you into acting?"

Thomas put a hand on his chest. "A modest schoolboy like me? I blush to think."

Madge laughed, a touch of wickedness to it, resting her hand lightly on Thomas's biceps as she did. Either she liked speaking with Thomas or the hallway was colder than I thought. "Who is your friend?"

“Madge Shelly, this is Harry Dresden. I brought him by to talk business with Arturo. Harry’s a friend of mine.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” I smiled a bit and offered my hand.

She fumbled with plates and cups for a moment, and then laughed. “I’ll have to give you a rain check. Are you an actor?” Madge asked, her expression speculative.

“To be or not to be,” I said. “How now brown cow.”

She smiled and nodded at the puppy, who was riding in the curl of my left arm. “And who is your friend?”

“He’s the dog with no name. Like Clint Eastwood, but fuzzier.”

She laughed again, and said to Thomas, “I see why you like him.”

“He’s mildly amusing,” Thomas agreed.

“He’s up past his bedtime,” I said. “Don’t mean to be rude, but I need to talk to Arturo before I fall asleep on my feet.”

“I understand,” Madge said. “The music’s a little loud in the living room. Thomas, why don’t I show you both to the study, and I’ll bring Arturo to you.”

“Is Justine here?” Thomas asked. His voice held a note of quiet tension to it that I doubted Madge noticed.

“Somewhere,” she said vaguely. “I’ll tell her you’ve arrived.”

“Thank you.”

We followed Madge inside the apartment suite. The living room was fairly dim, but I saw maybe twenty people there, men and women, some of them dancing, others standing and drinking or laughing or talking, like most parties. There was a haze of smoke, and only some of it was from cigarettes. Colored lights shifted and changed in time with the music.

I watched Thomas as we walked through the room. His manner changed subtly, something I could sense without being able to define. He didn’t move any more quickly, but his steps became more fluid somehow. He looked around the room as we went through, his eyelids a little heavy, and he started drawing the eyes of every woman we walked past.

I drew no such looks, even with the grey puppy sleeping in the crook of my arm. It’s not like I’m Quasimodo or anything, but with Thomas walking through the room like a predator angel, it was tough to compete.

Madge led us past the party room and into a small room with bookshelves and a desk with a computer. “Have a seat and I’ll go find him,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said, and settled down onto the chair at the desk. She left, her eyes lingering on Thomas for a moment before she did. He perched on a corner of the desk, his expression pensive. “You look thoughtful,” I said, “which seems wrong somehow. What is it?”

“I’m hungry,” Thomas said. “And thinking. Madge is Arturo’s first ex-wife.”

“And she’s hosting a party for him?” I asked.

“Yeah. I never thought she liked the guy much.”

“What did she mean about investing?”

Thomas shrugged. “Arturo broke off from a larger studio on the West Coast to found his own. Madge is real practical. She’s the kind of person who could despise someone while still being professional and working with him. Acknowledging his talents. If she thought it was a winning bet, she wouldn’t be worried that she didn’t like the person in charge. It wouldn’t be out of character for her to have invested money in Arturo’s new company.”

“What kind of money are we talking about?”

“Not sure,” Thomas said. “Seven figures, maybe more. I’d have to get someone to look.”

I whistled. “Lot of money.”

“I guess,” Thomas said. Thomas was rich enough that he probably didn’t have much perspective on the value of a buck.

I started to ask him more questions, but the door opened, and a tall and vigorous man in his fifties entered, wearing dark slacks and a grey silk shirt rolled up over his forearms. He had a head of magnificent silver locks framing a strong face with a dark, short beard. He had a boater’s tan, pale smile lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth, and large, intelligent dark eyes.

“Tommy!” the man boomed, and strode to Thomas. “Hey, I was hoping I would see you tonight.” His voice had a thick accent, definitely Greek. He clapped both hands on Thomas’s shoulders and kissed him on either cheek. “You’re looking good, Tommy boy, real good. You should come work with me, huh?”

“I don’t look good on camera,” Thomas said. “But it’s good to see you, too. Arturo Genosa, this is Harry Dresden, the man I told you about.”

Arturo looked me up and down. “Tall son of a bitch, huh?”

“I ate my Wheaties,” I said.

“Hey, pooch,” Arturo said. He scratched the grey puppy behind the ear. The little dog yawned, licked Arturo’s hand once, and promptly went back to sleep. “Your dog?”

“Temporarily,” I said. “Recovered him for a client.”

Arturo nodded, his expression calculating. “You know what a *strega* is, Mr. Dresden?”

“Practitioner of Italian folk magic,” I responded. “Divinations, love potions, fertility blessings, and protections. They also can manage a pretty vicious set of curses with a technique they call the *malocchio*. The Evil Eye.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Guess you know a thing or two, huh.”

“Just enough to get me into trouble,” I said.

“But do you believe in it?”

“In the Evil Eye?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve seen stranger things.”

Arturo nodded. “Tommy boy tell you what I need?”

“He said you were worried about a curse. Said some people close to you died.”

Arturo’s expression flickered for a second, and I saw grief undermine his confidence. “Yes. Two women. Good souls, both.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Assuming there is a curse involved, what makes you think it was meant for you?”

“They had no other contact with each other,” Arturo said. “Far as I know, I was the only thing they had in common.” He opened a drawer in his desk and drew out a couple of manila file folders. “Reports,” he said. “Information about their deaths. Tommy says maybe you can help.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. “Why would someone curse you?”

“The studio,” Arturo said. “Someone wants to stop the company from getting off the ground. Kill it before the first picture gets made.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Protection,” Arturo said. “I want you to protect the people on my crew during the shoot. Don’t want anything else to happen to anyone.”

I frowned. “Can be a tough job. Do you know who would want to stop production?”

Arturo scowled at me and stalked across the room to a cabinet. He opened it and withdrew an already opened bottle of wine. He pulled out the

cork with his teeth and took a swig. "If I knew that, I wouldn't need to hire an investigator."

I shrugged. "I'm a wizard, not a fortune-teller. Got any guesses? Anyone who might want to see you fail?"

"Lucille," Thomas said.

Arturo glanced at Thomas, scowling.

"Who is Lucille?" I asked.

"My second ex-wife," Arturo answered. "Lucille Delarossa. But she is not involved."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"She would not," he said. "I am certain."

"Why?"

He shook his head and stared down at his wine bottle. "Lucille . . . well. Let us say that I did not marry her for her mind."

"You don't have to be smart to be hostile," I said, though I couldn't really think of the last time someone stupid had pulled off powerful magic. "Anyone else? Is there another ex-wife around?"

Arturo waved a hand. "Tricia would not try to stop the picture."

"Why not?" I asked.

"She is the star."

Thomas made a choking sound. "Christ, Arturo."

The silver-maned man grimaced. "No choice. She had a standing contract. Could have killed me in court if I did not cast her."

"Is there an ex-wife number four?" I asked. "I can keep track of three. If there's four, I have to start writing things down."

"Not yet," Arturo muttered. "I am single. So far just the three."

"Well, that's something," I said. "Look, unless whoever is bringing this curse onto you does something right in front of me, there's not a lot I can do. We call a spell like the Evil Eye an entropy curse, and it's damned near impossible to trace any other way."

"My people must be protected from the *malocchio*," Arturo said. "Can you do that?"

"If I'm there when it goes down, yes."

"How much does that cost?" he asked.

"Seventy-five an hour, plus expenses. A thousand up-front."

Arturo didn't hesitate. "Done. We start shooting in the morning, nine o'clock."

“I’ll have to be close. Within sight, if possible,” I said. “And the less anyone knows about it, the better.”

“Yeah,” Thomas agreed. “He’ll need a cover story. If he stands around in the open, the bad guy will just wait until he leaves or goes to the bathroom or something.”

Arturo nodded. “He can boom for me.”

“Boom?” I asked.

“Boom microphone,” Thomas supplied.

“Oh. That isn’t such a hot idea,” I said. “My magic doesn’t get on so well with machines and such.”

Arturo’s face clouded with annoyance. “Fine. Production assistant.” Something in his pants made a chirping sound, and he drew a cell phone from his pocket. He held up a hand to me and stepped over to the other side of the room, speaking in low tones.

“Production assistant. What’s that?” I asked.

“Gofer,” Thomas said, “Errand boy.” He stood up, his movements restless.

There was a knock at the door, and it opened to admit a girl who may not have reached drinking age. She had dark hair, dark eyes, and was a little taller than average. She wore a white sweater with a short black skirt that showed off a lot of leg, and even compared to the pretty people outside, she was a knockout. Of course, the last time I’d seen her she’d been naked except for a red, Christmas-present-type bow, so it was possible that I was biased.

“Justine,” Thomas said, and there was the kind of relief in his voice that I would usually have associated with historical sailors shouting, “Land ho.” He took a step over to the girl and pulled her to him in a kiss.

Justine’s cheeks colored and she let out a breathless little laugh before her lips touched his, and then melted into the kiss like there wasn’t anything else in the whole world.

The puppy in the curl of my arm vibrated, and I glanced down to see him staring at Thomas, an inaudible, disapproving growl shaking his fuzzy chest.

They didn’t kiss for a long time, really, but when Thomas finally lifted his mouth from hers, she was flushed and I could see the pulse beating in her throat. Nothing remotely like thought or restraint touched her face. The heat in her eyes could have scorched me if I’d been a little closer, and for a

second I thought she was about to drag Thomas to the carpet right there in front of me.

Instead Thomas turned her so that she stood with her back to his chest, and drew her against him, pinning her there with his arms. He looked paler, and his eyes had become an even fainter shade of grey. He rested his cheek on her hair for a moment, and then said, "You've met Harry."

Justine regarded me with heavy, sultry eyes and nodded. "Hello, Mister Dresden." She inhaled through her nose, and made a visible effort to draw her thoughts together. "You're cold," she said to Thomas. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Thomas said, his tone light.

Justine tilted her head and then took a tiny step away from him. Thomas blinked at her, but didn't try to keep her there. "Not nothing," she said. She touched his cheek with her fingers. "You're freezing."

"I don't want you to worry about it," Thomas told her.

Justine looked over her shoulder at me.

I checked on Arturo, who was still in his conversation on the phone, then said in a low voice, "Black Court. I think it was one of Mavra's goons."

Justine's eyes widened. "Oh, God. Was anyone hurt?"

"Only the vampire," I said. I gave the puppy, now silent, a vague wave. "The pup saw him coming."

"Thomas," Justine said, looking back at him. "You told me you didn't have to worry about Mavra."

"In the first place, we don't know it's Mavra," Thomas said. He gave me a look over Justine's head that warned me to shut the hell up. "And in the second place, they were after Dresden. He's here under my invitation, so I helped him out a little."

"Boot to the head," I agreed. "Ran him off."

"My God. I'm glad you are all right, Mister Dresden, but this shouldn't have happened. Thomas, we shouldn't even be in town. If you don't—"

Thomas put a finger under Justine's chin and drew her eyes up to his.

Justine shuddered, her lips faltering to a halt, her mouth partly open. Her pupils dilated until there was practically no color showing around them. She swayed a little on her feet.

"Relax," Thomas said. "I'll take care of things."

Her brow furrowed with a tiny line, and she stammered, "But . . . I don't want you to . . . get hurt."

Thomas's eyes glittered. Deliberately he raised one pale hand and touched a fingertip to the pulse in Justine's throat. Then he drew it down in a slow, lazy spiral that stopped half an inch under her collarbone. She shuddered again, and her eyes slipped entirely out of focus. Whatever thought had been in her head, it died a silent little death, and left her swaying on her feet making soft, mindless sounds between quick breaths.

And she loved it. From the looks of things she didn't have a choice.

The puppy's silent growl buzzed against the skin of my arm. Anger flashed through me in a wave of silent outrage.

"Stop it," I said in a quiet voice. "Get out of her head."

"This doesn't concern you," Thomas replied.

"Like hell it doesn't. Back off on the mind-mojo. Right now. Or you and I are going to have words."

Thomas's gaze moved to me. Something vicious in his eyes flashed with a cold fury and one of his hands closed into a fist. Then he shook his head and closed his eyes for a moment. He spoke before they opened.

"The less she knows about the details," he said in a rough, strained voice, "the safer she's going to be."

"From who?" I demanded.

"From anyone who might not like me or my House," Thomas said. The words were laced with a hint of a feral snarl. "If she doesn't know any more than any other doe, there's no reason to target her. It's one of the only things I can do to protect her. Back off, wizard, or I'll be happy to start the conversation myself."

Just then Arturo finished his call and turned back to us. He blinked and stopped short of conversation distance. "I'm sorry. Did I miss something?"

Thomas arched an eyebrow at me.

I took a deep breath and said, "No. We just stumbled onto an uncomfortable topic. But we can put a lid on it until later."

"Good," Arturo said. "Now where were we?"

"I need to take Justine home," Thomas said. "She's had a little too much tonight. Best of luck, Arturo."

Arturo nodded to him and managed to smile. "Thank you, Tommy boy, for your help."

"It's nothing." He slipped an arm around Justine, drawing her with him, and nodded to me as he left the room. "Later, Harry."

I rose too, and asked Arturo, "Where do you want me tomorrow?"

He sat down his bottle of wine, grabbed a memo pad off the desk, and scribbled down an address. Then he withdrew a roll of money, peeled off ten bills and slapped a thousand dollars cash down on top of the address. I collected all of it.

“I do not know if I believe in your sincerity, Mr. Dresden,” Arturo said.

I waved the bills. “As long as you’re paying, I don’t really need you to believe in me. See you in the morning, Mr. Genosa.”

Chapter Five



I shambled back to my place around late o'clock. Mister, the bobtailed grey tomcat who shares my apartment, hurled himself at my legs in a shoulder-block of greeting. Mister weighs twenty-five or thirty pounds, and I had to brace myself against his ritual affection.

Mister tilted his head at me and sniffed at the air. Then he made a low, warning sound of his imperial displeasure. As I came in, he bounded up onto the nearest bit of furniture and peered at the puppy still sleeping in my arm.

"Temporary," I assured him. I sat down on the couch. "He isn't staying."

Mister narrowed his eyes, prowled over to me, and swatted at the puppy with an indignant paw.

"Take it easy. This little lunatic is a featherweight." I murmured a minor spell and lit a few candles around my apartment with my will. I dialed the number where I had been contacting Brother Wang while he was in town, but got only a recording telling me the number had been disconnected. The phones are occasionally wacky when it's me using them, so I tried again. No success. Bah. My bones ached and I wanted to rest, safe and cozy in my lair.

Said lair was in the basement of a creaky old boardinghouse built better than a hundred years ago. It had sunken windows high up on its walls, and largely consisted of a single living area around a fireplace. I had old, comfortable furniture—a sofa, a love seat, a couple of big recliner-type chairs. They didn't match, but they looked soft and inviting. The stone floor was covered with a variety of area rugs, and I'd softened the look of the concrete walls with a number of tapestries and framed pictures.

The whole place was sparkling clean, and the air smelled of pine boughs. Even the fireplace was scoured down to a clean stone surface. You can't beat the Fair Folk as housekeepers. You also can't tell people about them,

because they'll pack up and clear out. Why? I have no idea. They're faeries, and that's just how it works.

On one side of the living room there was a shallow alcove with a wood-burning stove, an old-fashioned icebox, and some cabinets that held my cooking ware and groceries. On the other, a narrow doorway led to my bedroom and bath. There was barely enough room for my twin bed and a secondhand dresser.

I pulled up the rug that covered the entrance to the subbasement, a trapdoor set into the floor. It was deep enough underground to keep a subterranean chill the year-round, so I juggled the puppy while putting on a heavy flannel robe. Then I got a candle, opened the trapdoor, and descended the folding stepladder into my laboratory.

I had forbidden the cleaning service to move around my lab, and as a result it had been slowly losing the war against entropy for a couple of years. The walls were lined with wire racks, and I'd filled them with Tupperware, boxes, bags, tubs, bottles, cups, bowls, and urns. Most of the containers had a label listing their contents, ingredients for any number of potions, spells, summonings, and magical devices I had occasion to make from time to time. A worktable ran down the middle of the room, and at its far end was a comparatively recent concrete patch that did not match the rest of the floor. The patch was surrounded by the summoning circle set into the stone. I'd splurged on replacing the old ring with a new one made of silver and I'd moved everything in the room as far from it as I could.

The thing I'd locked up under the circle had been quiet since the night I had sealed it into a spirit-prison, but when it came to entombing a fallen angel, I was pretty sure that there was no such thing as too much caution.

"Bob," I said as I lit some more candles. "Get up."

One shelf didn't match the rest of the room. Two simple metal struts held up a plain wooden plank. Mounds of old candle wax spread in multicolored lumps at either end of the board, and in the middle rested a human skull.

The skull shivered a little, teeth rattling, and then a dim glow of orange light appeared in its empty eye sockets. Bob the Skull wasn't really a skull. He was an air spirit, a being with a great deal of knowledge and centuries of magical experience. Since I'd stolen him from Justin DuMorne, my own personal childhood Darth Vader, Bob's knowledge and skills had let me save lives. Mostly my own, maybe, but a lot of other lives, too.

"How did it go?" Bob asked.

I started rummaging through the various and sundry. “Three of the little bastards slipped through that paralysis charm you were so sure of,” I said. “I barely got out in one piece.”

“You’re so cute when you whine,” Bob said. “I’d almost think that—Holy cats, Harry!”

“Eh?”

“You *stole* one of the temple dogs?”

I petted the puppy’s fur and felt a little offended. “It wasn’t anything I meant to happen. He was a stowaway.”

“Wow,” Bob said. “What are you going to do with him?”

“Not sure yet,” I said. “Brother Wang’s already gone. I tried to call his contact number just now, but it was out of service. I can’t call up a messenger and send it back to the temple, because that entire area of mountains is warded, and a letter might take months to get through. If it gets through at all.” I finally found a big enough box, scrounged around a bit more, and dropped a couple of old flannel bathrobes into it, followed by the exhausted puppy. “Besides, I’ve got better things to worry about.”

“Like what?”

“Like the Black Court. Mavra and her . . . her . . . Hey, what’s the term for a group of Black Court vampires? A gaggle? A passel?”

“A scourge,” Bob said.

“Right. Looks like Mavra and her scourge are in town. One of them came pretty close to punching my ticket tonight.”

Bob’s eyelights flickered with interest. “Neat. So the usual drill? Wait for them to try again so you can backtrack the attackers to Mavra?”

“Not this time. I’m going to find them first, kick down their door, and kill them all in their sleep.”

“Wow. That’s an atypically vicious plan, Harry.”

“Yeah. I liked it too.”

I put the puppy’s box on the table. “I want you to take Mister out on the town in the morning. Find wherever it is Mavra is holing up during the day, and for the love of Pete, don’t step on any more warding spells.”

Bob somehow gave the impression that he shivered. “Yeah. I’ve been a lot more careful. But the vampires aren’t stupid, Harry. They know they’re helpless during daylight. They’ll have taken some measures to protect their refuge. They always do.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I said.

“It might be more than you can handle alone.”

“That’s why I’m going Justice League on them,” I said, fighting a yawn. I put the cardboard box with the puppy on the worktable, picked up my candle, and went to the stepladder.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Bob asked.

“Bed. Early day tomorrow. New case.”

“And the temple dog is staying here why?”

“Because I don’t want to leave him all by his lonesome,” I said. “If I take him with me I think Mister would eat him after I went to sleep.”

“Dammit, Harry, I’m a voyeur, not a veterinarian.”

I scowled. “I need shut-eye.”

“And I get to babysit the dog?”

“Yeah.”

“My job sucks.”

“Form a union,” I said heartlessly.

“What’s the new case?” Bob asked.

I told him.

“Arturo Genosa?” Bob asked. “*The Arturo Genosa*? The movie producer?”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Yeah, I guess. You’ve heard of him?”

“Heard of him? Heck, yeah! He’s the best there is!”

My intuition piped up again, and I felt something in my insides drop. “Uh. What kind of movies?”

“Critically acclaimed erotic features!” Bob said, fairly bubbling with enthusiasm.

I blinked. “There are erotic film critics?”

“Sure!” Bob bubbled. “All kinds of periodicals.”

“Like what?”

“*Jiggs, Hooters, Funkybuns, Busting Out—*”

I rubbed at my eyes. “Bob, those are porno magazines, not trade journals.”

“Four stars, four boners, what’s the difference?” Bob asked.

I wasn’t going to touch that one.

The skull sighed. “Harry, I’m not trying to call you stupid or belabor the obvious, but you *did* get hired by a vampire of the White Court. An incubus. What kind of job did you *think* this was going to be?”

I glowered at Bob. He was right. I should have known it wasn't going to be simple.

"Speaking of," I said, "how much do you know about the White Court?"

"Oh, the usual," Bob said, which meant he knew plenty.

"I saw Thomas get real weird tonight," I said. "I don't know how to describe it, exactly. But Justine was there, and she said that he was freezing and that it worried her. Then he hit her with some kind of mind-magic hypnosis whammy, and zoned her out entirely."

"He was Hungry," Bob said. "I mean, capital H kind of Hungry. The Hunger is a kind of . . . I don't know. Symbiotic spirit, inside a White Court vamp. They're born with it."

"Ah," I said. "That's where they get the strength and powers and stuff."

"Among them nigh-immortality," Bob said. "But it don't happen for free. That's why they do the whole feeding thing. The Hunger needs it to survive."

"I got it, I got it," I said, through a yawn. "They use their powers and it makes the spirit hungry so they have to feed." I frowned. "What happens if they don't feed?"

"Short-term? Moodiness, anger, violent behavior, paranoia. In the long term, they'll use up whatever reservoir of life energy they have. Once that happens, the Hunger pretty much takes over and makes them hunt."

"If they can't hunt?"

"They go insane."

"What about the people they feed on?" I asked.

"What about them?" Bob said. "They get little pieces of their life nibbled away. It does a form of spiritual damage, like when the Nightmare mauled Mickey Malone. It leaves them vulnerable to the Whites' mental allure and control, so it's easy for the Whites to come by for another bite."

"What happens if they keep getting fed on?"

"It's fed *upon*, o Bard, and if it keeps up the mortal burns out early. Sort of fades away into a kind of mindless daze. Heart attack during an intense feeding usually kills them."

"Killer sex," I said. "Literally."

"To die for," Bob confirmed.

An eerie thought, and one that disturbed me a lot more than I thought it should. "What if the vamp doesn't want to feed on someone?"

“Want doesn’t matter,” Bob said. “They feed on pure reflex. It’s what they are.”

“So if they stay with someone,” I said, “eventually they kill them.”

“Sooner or later,” Bob said. “Always.”

I shook my head. “I’ll remember that,” I said. “Tough to keep up the paranoia around Thomas. He’s . . . well, hell, if he was human I might not mind buying him a beer once in a while.”

Bob’s tone turned serious. “He might be a great guy, Harry, but it doesn’t change the fact that he isn’t always in control of his power, or his Hunger. I doubt he can stop himself from entrancing that pretty girl of his. Or from feeding upon her.” Bob paused. “Not that he’d really want to. I mean, she’s hot. Who *wouldn’t* want a little nibble of Justine now and then? Am I right?”

“Focus,” I growled. “Just find Mavra’s hiding place. I’ll be back from the job before sundown if I can.”

Bob sighed dreamily. “Some guys get all the luck. Genosa always casts the prettiest girls. Lots and lots of pretty girls. I’m going to be prowling the mean streets, looking for hideous creatures of the night. And you’re going to be standing right there next to the most beautiful women in erotica, getting to watch everything going on. Big as life.”

I felt my face flood into a feverish blush. “Keep an eye on the dog. You have my permission to take Mister on the town after the sun rises. Be back by sundown.”

“Will do,” Bob said. “Harry, Harry, Harry. What I wouldn’t give to be in your shoes this week.”

Which in retrospect just goes to show that a pretty face can inspire even a bodiless spirit of intellect to dizzying heights of idiocy.

Chapter Six



My cat walked on my face just after dawn. My body thought I should have been getting a couple more hours of shut-eye at the least. Instead I shambled to the door to let Mister outside. Before the cat left, he bobbed his head at me, and his eyes glittered with nearly invisible flickers of orange light. Bob had taken temporary possession of Mister's body. (Actually, I suspected that Mister tolerated Bob's control only because he got to go see new things when I sent Bob out on a mission.)

Bob was a being of spirit, and was too fragile to go drifting around in sunlight. It could burn his usual form to vapor in a few seconds. The spirit needed some form of protection during full daylight, and Mister was it. I had my usual flash of concern and mumbled, "Be careful with my cat."

The cat rolled his eyes and gave me a contemptuous-sounding feline *mrowl*. Then Mister hurled himself against my legs in a gesture that had nothing to do with Bob, before bounding up the steps and out of sight.

I showered, got dressed, and got enough of a fire going in my kitchen stove to scramble some eggs and toast some bread. There was a scratching sound from the open trapdoor to my lab. Then I heard a series of thumps. A moment later the scratching came again, and I peered down the stepladder.

The little grey puppy had escaped the box, and was attempting to climb the stepladder. He made it up five or six steps, slipped, and thumped back down to the stone floor at the bottom of the ladder—evidently for at least the second time. He didn't whimper when he fell. He just sprawled, wiggled to get his paws back under him, then started up the stepladder again full of, well, dogged determination.

"Hell's bells, dog. You're insane. Did you know that? Certifiable."

The puppy climbed to the next step and paused to look at me, mouth dropping open in a doggie grin. He wagged his tail so hard he nearly fell off again. I went down and scooped him up, put him on the love seat, and sat down with him to eat breakfast. I shared, and made sure he got a bit of

water to drink. Just because I wasn't keeping him didn't excuse me from showing a guest some measure of hospitality. Even if the guest was fuzzy.

While I ate, I mapped out my plan for the day. I'd have to spend most of it at Genosa's studio, if I was going to be able to protect anyone from incoming curses. But ultimately that was a losing strategy. Sooner or later I would be in the wrong place, or else the curse might come in too hard or fast for me to stop. The smart plan was to find out where these curses were coming from. Someone had to be sending them. What I really had to do was find that person and push their face in a little. Problem solved.

What's more, I was pretty confident that whoever was behind these curses was close to Genosa's social circle. While not as invasive or vicious as magic that directly attacked a person's physical body, this curse was still plenty potent. For magic to work, you have to believe in it. Really believe, without any doubts or reservations. It isn't all that common for someone to have that much conviction directed toward murderous ends. It's even less common to have that kind of rancor for a complete stranger.

All of which meant that the killer was probably someone close to Genosa's crowd.

Or in it.

Which meant that there was at least a chance that I would come face-to-face with the killer at work today. Best pack for trouble.

Speaking of which, I wouldn't have to worry much about the Black Court making a move on me in daylight, but it didn't mean I could afford to let my guard down for long. Vampires had a general habit of recruiting surrogate thugs for wetwork in broad daylight, and a bullet between the eyes would kill me just as well as some vampire ripping my lower jaw off. In fact, it would be a lot better, because then the vamp could order the flunky to give himself up or suicide, and the mortal authorities who might otherwise cause trouble would become a nonissue.

I was better than most at maintaining a high alert, but even so I couldn't be sharp on my guard forever. I'd get tired, bored, make mistakes. To say nothing of how grumpy it would make me, generally speaking. The longer I waited to solve the vampire problem, the more likely I'd be to get dead. So I had to move fast. Which meant that I'd need to round up some help fast. It took me about ten seconds to figure out who I wanted to call. I even had time enough to go see one of them before work.

We finished breakfast, and I let the puppy handle the prewash. I got out my Rolodex, got on the phone, and left two messages with two answering machines. Then I pulled on my heavy black mantled duster, dropped the pup into one of its huge pockets, fetched my staff and rod along with a backpack full of various gadgets for on-the-fly spellwork, and went out to face the day.

My first destination, Dough Joe's Hurricane Gym, resided on the first floor of an old office building not far from the headquarters of Chicago PD. The place had once been a tragically if predictably short-lived country-and-western bar. When Joe moved in, he tore down every wall that wasn't a load-bearing section, ripped out the cheap ceiling tiles, peeled the floor down to smooth, naked concrete, and installed a lot of lights. To my right lay a couple of bathrooms large enough to do double duty as locker rooms. A large square of safety carpet boasted about thirty well-used pieces of weight-training equipment and several racks of weights and dumbbells that made my muscles ache just looking at them. In front of me was an honest-to-goodness boxing ring, though it wasn't raised. On the other side of the ring, a raised platform boasted a long row of boxing targets—heavy bags, speed bags, and a couple of flicker bags that I could rarely hit more than once in a row.

The last area was covered with a thick impact mat and was the largest in the gym. Several people in judo pajamas were already working through various grappling techniques. I recognized most of the pajama people on sight as members of Chicago's finest.

One of the men, a large and brawny rookie, let out a sharp shout, and then he and another man closed in to attack a single opponent. They were quick, and worked well together. If it had been anyone but Murphy up against them, they probably would have been successful.

Lt. Karrin Murphy, the woman in charge of the Special Investigations division of Chicago PD, stood an even five feet. Her blond hair had been tied back into a tail, and she wore white pajamas with a faded belt that was more grey than black. She was attractive in a pleasantly wholesome kind of way—crystal blue eyes, clear skin, an upturned nose.

And she'd been a student of aikido since she was eleven.

The brawny rookie underestimated her speed, and she had slipped aside from his kick before he realized his mistake. She caught him by an ankle, twisted with her whole frame, and sent him stumbling away for a second or

two—time enough for her to handle the second attacker. He struck more cautiously, and Murphy let out an abrupt shout of her own, faked a jab, and drove a front kick into his belt. It wasn't at full strength, and he'd taken the blow correctly, but he fell back a couple of steps, hands lifted in acknowledgment. If Murphy had been in earnest, she'd have put him down, hard.

The rookie came back in, but he hadn't really gotten up to speed. Murphy blocked a jab and a slow reverse punch, got the rookie by the wrist, and sent him smashing down on the impact mat, one hand twisted to the breaking point and held firm at the small of his back. The rookie grimaced and slapped the mat three times. Murphy released him.

"Hey, Stallings," she said, loudly enough to be heard by the whole gym. "What just happened here?"

The older opponent grinned and said, "O'Toole just got beat up by a girl, Lieutenant."

There was a general round of applause and good-natured jeers from the other cops in the gym, including several calls of "Pay up!" and "Told you so!"

O'Toole shook his head ruefully. "What did I do wrong?"

"Telegraphed the kick," Murphy said. "You're a moose, O'Toole. Even a light kick from you will do the job. Don't sacrifice speed to get more power. Keep it quick and simple."

O'Toole nodded, and walked over to an open corner of the mat with his partner.

"Hey, Murphy," I called. "When are you gonna stop picking on little kids and fight someone your own size?"

Murphy flicked her tail over her shoulder, her eyes shining. "Come say that to my face, Dresden."

"Give me a minute to amputate my legs and I will," I responded. I took my shoes off and set them against the wall, along with my duster. Murphy got a smooth wooden staff about five feet long from a rack on the wall. I took my staff into a square marked in tape on the mat, and we bowed to each other.

We warmed up with a simple sequence, alternating strikes in a steady, working rhythm, wooden staves clacking solidly. Murphy didn't start pushing for more speed. "Haven't seen you for almost two weeks. You flaking out on this self-defense notion?"

“No,” I said, keeping my voice down. “Been on a job. Finished it up last night.” I lost focus, slipped up in the sequence, and Murphy’s staff banged down hard on the fingers of my left hand. “Hell’s bells, ow!”

“Concentrate, wimp.” Murphy gave me a second to shake my fingers, and then she started again from the beginning. “You’ve got something on your mind.”

“Something off the record,” I said, lowering my voice.

She looked around. No one was close enough to listen in. “Okay.”

“I need a thug. You available?”

Murphy arched a brow. “You need manpower?”

“Thugpower,” I said.

Murphy frowned. “What do you have in mind?”

“Black Court,” I said. “At least two in town, probably more.”

“Hitters?”

I nodded. “One of them came pretty close to taking me last night.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. But we have to shut these guys down, and fast. They aren’t gentle and fun-loving like the Reds.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that when they feed, their victims don’t usually survive. They don’t feed as often, but the longer they stay, the more people are going to get killed.”

Murphy’s eyes glittered with a sudden, angry fire. “What’s the plan?”

“Find them. Kill them.”

Her brows shot up. “Just like that? No formal balls, no masquerades, no clandestine meetings as preliminaries?”

“Nah. I thought it might be nice to get the drop on the bad guys for a change.”

“I like that plan.”

“It’s simple,” I agreed.

“Like you,” Murphy said.

“Just like me.”

“When?”

I shook my head. “As soon as I find where they’re holed up during daylight. I can probably do it in a day or three.”

“How’s Saturday?”

“Uh. Why?”

She rolled her eyes. “Murphy annual family reunion is this weekend. I try to be working on reunion weekend.”

“Oh,” I said. “Why don’t you just, you know . . . not show up.”

“I need a good excuse not to show up, or my mother won’t let me hear the end of it.”

“So lie.”

Murphy shook her head. “She’d know. She’s psychic or something.”

I felt my eyebrows go up. “Well, gee, Murph. I guess I’ll just try to arrange things so that the deadly monster threat will be convenient to ducking your annual family fun-fest. Your sense of priorities once more astounds me.”

She grimaced. “Sorry. I spend time dreading this every year. Things are sort of hard between me and my mother. Family skews your sanity. I don’t expect you to under—”

She broke off abruptly, and a little pang of hurt went through me. She didn’t expect me to understand. I didn’t have a mother. I didn’t have a family. I never had. Even my dim memories of my father had all but vanished. I’d been only six years old when he died.

“God, Harry,” Murphy said. “I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry.”

I coughed and focused on the sequence. “It shouldn’t be a long job. I find the vamps. We go in, pound in some stakes, cut some heads, toss some holy water, and we’re gone.”

She began to speed the pace, evidently as glad as I to leave that comment unremarked. The strength of her swings made my hands buzz when her staff hit mine. “You mean we get to live the cliché?” she asked. “Stakes and crosses and garlic?”

“Yeah. Cakewalk.”

Murphy snorted. “Then why do you need thugs?”

“In case they have goons. I need thugpower with countergoon capability.”

Murphy nodded. “A few extra hands wouldn’t be a bad idea.” She sped up again, her staff a blur. I had to struggle to keep up. “Why don’t you ask the holy knight guy?”

“No,” I said.

“What if we need him?”

“Michael would come in a hot second if I asked him. But I’m tired of seeing him get hurt because of me.” I frowned, almost lost the rhythm, then

found it again. “God or someone like Him does Michael’s event scheduling, and I get the feeling that Michael’s a lot less invincible when he isn’t officially on the clock.”

“But he’s a big boy. I mean, he knows the risks. He has brains.”

“He also has kids.”

Murphy faltered this time, and I hit one of her thumbs. She winced and nodded toward the rookie cop she’d humbled. “O’Toole there is Mickey Malone’s nephew. He’d jump through fire for you, if I asked him along.”

“God, no. No newbies on this run. A stupid mistake could be fatal.”

“I could talk to Stallings.”

I shook my head. “Murph, the boys in SI are a lot better at handling supernatural weirdness than the average bear—but a lot of them still don’t really believe what they’re dealing with. I want someone smart and tough, and who won’t freeze or freak out, and that’s you.”

“They’re better than that.”

“What happens to them if something goes wrong? If I make a mistake. Or you do. Even if they got out in one piece, how do you think they would handle the backlash when they got back to the real world? Where people don’t believe in vampires, and there are bodies to explain?”

Murphy frowned. “The same thing that would happen to me, I guess.”

“Yeah. But you’re their leader. You want to be responsible for sending them into that kind of mess? Expose them to that?”

Murphy looked at several of the men around the gym and grimaced. “You know I don’t want that. But my point is that I’m as vulnerable as they are.”

“Maybe. But you know the score. They don’t. Not really. You know enough to be careful and smart.”

“What about the White Council?” Murphy asked. “Shouldn’t they be willing to help you? I mean, you’re one of their own.”

I shrugged. “By and large they don’t like me. I need their help like I need a sword in the neck.”

“Gee. Someone actually resisted your charm and finesse.”

“What can I say. They have no taste.”

Murphy nodded. “So who else are you going to get?”

“You and one more will do for coffin patrol,” I said. “I know a guy who is good with vampires. And I’m going to have a driver standing by when it goes down.”

“How many laws are you planning on breaking?”

“None,” I said. “If I can help it.”

“What if these vampires have human goons?”

“We disable them. I’m only gunning for Black Court. But if you want to pull double duty as conscience officer, that’s fine by me.”

We finished the sequence, backed a step away, and bowed to each other. Murphy walked with me to the edge of the mat, frowning and mulling things over. “I don’t want to sidestep any laws. Vampire hunting is one thing. Going vigilante is another.”

“Done,” I said.

She frowned. “And I’d really, really like it if we did it on Saturday.”

I snorted. “If we go early, maybe you can get laid up in the hospital or something, at least.”

“Ha-ha,” Murphy said.

“Do me a favor and keep an eye on missing persons for a few days. It might help tip us off to their location. I want every bit of information I can get.”

“Gotcha,” Murphy said. “You want to work on some hand-to-hand?”

I picked up my duster. “Can’t. Got to be on the new job in half an hour.”

“Harry, aikido is a demanding discipline. If you don’t practice every day, you’re going to lose what you’ve learned.”

“I know, I know. But it isn’t like I can depend on a routine from day to day.”

“A little knowledge is a dangerous thing,” Murphy said. She held my staff for me while I put on my coat and abruptly frowned as she handed it back.

“What?” I asked her.

Her mouth twisted into the shape it got when she tried to hold back laughter. “Is that a puppy in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?”

I looked down. The puppy had woken from his nap and poked its head out of my duster’s pocket, and was panting happily. “Oh. Right.”

Murphy plucked the puppy out of my pocket, turned him belly up, and started rubbing his tummy. “What’s his name?”

“No name. I’m not keeping him.”

“Ah,” Murphy said.

“Want a dog?”

She shook her head. "They take too much attention, and I'm gone at all hours."

"Tell me about it. Know anyone who does?"

"Not really."

"Do me a favor. Keep him for a day."

Murphy blinked. "Why me?"

"Because I have to go on a new job this morning and I haven't had time to get him settled with someone. Come on, Murph. He's friendly. He's quiet. You'll never know he's there. Just for the day."

Murphy glowered at me. "I'm not keeping him."

"I know, I know."

"I'm not keeping him."

"You just said that, Murph."

"Just so long as you understand that I'm not keeping him."

"I get it already."

She nodded. "Just this once, then. I'm doing paperwork at my desk today. But you'd better be there to pick him up by five."

"You're an angel, Murph. Thank you."

She rolled her eyes and settled the pup in the curl of her arm. "Yeah, yeah. What's the new job?"

I sighed and told her.

Murphy burst out laughing. "You're a pig, Dresden."

"I didn't know," I protested.

"Oink. Oink, oink."

I glowered at her. "Don't you have some paperwork to do?"

"Get there by five, pig."

"By five." I sighed. I grumbled to myself as I walked out to my car and left for my first day on the set.

Chapter Seven



Chicago is a business town. Entrepreneurs of every stripe duke it out ferociously in pursuit of the American dream, discarding the carcasses of fallen ventures along the way. The town is full of old business headquarters, most of them held by the long-term commercial giants. When a new business sets its sights on Second City, it's cheaper for them to settle in one of the newer industrial parks littered around the city's suburbs. They all look more or less alike—a grid of plain, blocky, readily adaptable buildings two or three stories high with no windows, no landscaping, and gravel parking lots. They look like enormous, ugly concrete bricks, but they're cheap.

Arturo had acquired a short-term lease on such a building in such an industrial complex twenty minutes west of town. There were three other cars parked in its lot by the time I got there. I had a nylon backpack full of various magical tools I might need to ward off malevolent energies: salt, a bunch of white candles, holy water, a ring of keys, a small silver bell, and chocolate.

Yeah, chocolate. Chocolate fends off all kinds of nasty stuff. And if you get hungry while warding off evil, you have a snack. It's multipurpose equipment.

One end of my carved wooden blasting rod protruded from the backpack in case I needed to make a fast draw. I was also wearing my shield bracelet, my mother's pentacle amulet, my force ring, and a new gizmo I'd been working with—a silver belt buckle carved into the shape of a standing bear. Better to have the magical arsenal and not need it, than to not have it and get killed to death.

I got out of the car. I had on a pair of slacks and a polo shirt, since I had no idea of what a production assistant on an adult film set was supposed to wear. The client would have to be happy with business casual. I slung the

backpack over one shoulder and locked up the car. A second car pulled up as I did, a shiny green rental number, and parked next to the Blue Beetle.

Two men got out. The driver was a fit-looking man, maybe in his late thirties. He was a little taller than average and had the build of someone who works out in a nonfanatic kind of way. His medium-brown hair was long enough to look a little disheveled. He wore round-rimmed spectacles, a Nike T-shirt, and Levi's, and his cross-trainers probably cost him upwards of a hundred bucks. He nodded at me and said, "Good morning," in a tone of genuine cheer.

"Hi," I responded.

"New guy?" he asked.

"New guy."

"Cameraman?"

"Stunt double."

"Cool." He grinned, pulled a designer-label gym bag out of the back of the rental car, and slung it over his shoulder. He approached, offering his hand. "I'm Jake."

I traded grips with him. His hands had the calluses of someone who worked with them, and he had a confidence that conveyed strength without attempting to crush my fingers. I liked him. "Harry," I responded.

The second man who got out of the rental car looked like a weight-lifting commercial. He was tall and built like a statue of Hercules beneath tight leather pants and a sleeveless workout shirt. He had a high-tech tan, coal-black hair, and wasn't old enough to qualify for decent rates on his auto insurance. His face didn't match the Olympian body. His features rated on the western slope of the bell curve of physical appeal. Though to be fair he was staring at me with a murderous scowl, which probably biased my opinion.

"Who the hell are you?" he growled.

"I the hell am Harry," I said.

He pulled out his own gym bag and slammed the car door closed. "You always a wiseass?"

"No. Sometimes I'm asleep."

He took a pair of hard steps toward me and thrust the heel of one hand at my shoulder in a belligerent push. Classic macho-jitsu. I could have done a bunch of fairly violent things in response, but I try not to get into fights in a

gravel parking lot if I can help it. I took the push without yielding and grunted.

“Wrist is a little limp,” I said. “If you like I can show you an exercise or something, help you out.”

His face twisted with abrupt heat. “Son of a bitch,” the man swore, and dropped his bag so he could ball his huge hands into huge fists.

“Whoa,” Jake said, and stepped between us, facing the big guy. “Hey, come on, Bobby. It’s too early for this crap.”

Bobby got a lot more aggressive once Jake was there to hold him back, snarling and cussing. I’d faced too many literal ogres to be too terribly impressed by a metaphorical one, but I was just as glad that it hadn’t gone any farther. The kid was a hell of a lot stronger than me, and if he knew more than nothing about how to handle himself, he could ruin my whole day.

The kid subsided after a minute, picked up his stuff again, and scowled at me. “I know what you’re thinking, and you can forget it.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “So you’re psychic too?”

“Wiseass stunt double,” he snarled. “It happened *once*. You aren’t going to make a name for yourself. You might as well just leave now.”

Jake sighed. “Bobby, he’s not a stunt double.”

“But he said—”

“He was *joking*,” Jake said. “Christ, he’s newer at this than you. Look, just go inside. Get some coffee or springwater or something. You don’t need this on a shooting day.”

The kid glared at me again and jabbed his index finger at me. “I’m warning you, asshole. Stay out of my way if you don’t want to get hurt.”

I tried to keep all the panic and terror he’d inspired off of my face. “Okeydoke.”

The kid snarled, spat on the ground in my direction, and then stormed inside.

“Someone woke up with his testosterone in a knot today,” I said.

Jake watched Bobby go and nodded. “He’s under pressure. Try not to take it personal, man.”

“That’s tough,” I said. “What with the insults and violent posturing and such.”

Jake grimaced. “Nothing to do with you personally, man. He’s worried.”

“About being replaced by a stunt double?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you serious? What the hell does a stunt double do in a porno flick?”

Jake waved a hand vaguely toward his belt. “Extreme close-ups.”

“Uh. What?”

“Historically speaking, it doesn’t happen often. Especially what with Viagra now. But it isn’t unknown for a director to bring in a double for the close of a scene, if the actor is having trouble finishing.”

I blinked. “He thought I was a *stunt penis*?”

Jake laughed at my reaction. “Man. You *are* new.”

“You been doing this work long?”

“Awhile,” he said.

“Guess it’s a dream job, eh? Gorgeous women and all.”

He shrugged. “Not as much as you’d think. After a while anyway.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“Habit?” he asked with an easy grin. “Plus lack of options. I thought about doing the family thing once, but it didn’t work out.” He fell silent for a second, his expression touched with faint grief. He shook his head to come out of it and said, “Look, don’t worry about Bobby. He’ll calm down once he figures out his stage name.”

“Stage name?”

“Yeah. I think that’s what has got him all nervous. This is only his second shoot. First one is in the can, but it’ll be a bit before they do final edits and such. He’s got until next week to figure out his performing name.”

“Performing name, huh.”

“Don’t make fun of it,” he said, expression serious. “Names have power, man.”

“Do they. Really.”

Jake nodded. “A good name inspires confidence. It’s important for a young guy.”

“Like Dumbo’s magic feather,” I said.

“Right, exactly.”

“So what name do you go by?” I asked.

“Jack Rockhardt,” Jake replied promptly. He eyed me for a moment, his expression assessing.

“What?” I asked.

“You mean you don’t recognize the name? Or me?”

I shrugged. "I don't have a TV. Don't go to those theaters, either."

His eyebrows shot up. "Really? Are you Amish or something?"

"Yeah, that's it. I'm Amish."

He grinned. "Maybe you'd better come inside with me. I'll introduce you around."

"Thanks."

"No problem," Jake said.

We went on into the building, a place with sterile beige walls and invincible medium-brown carpeting. Jake led me to a door with a computer-printed sign that read, GREEN ROOM, and went inside.

A long conference table ran down the center of a comfortably sized room. Doughnuts, drinks, fruits, bagels, and other foods of every description were laid out on trays down its length. The room smelled like fresh coffee, and I promptly homed in on the coffee machine for a cup.

A plain-faced woman in her mid-forties entered, wearing jeans, a black tee, and a red-and-white flannel shirt. Her hair was tied back under a red bandanna. She seized a paper plate and dumped food on it at random. "Good morning, Guffie."

"Joan," Jake responded easily. "Have you met Harry?"

"Not yet." She glanced over her shoulder at me and nodded. "Wow. You are very tall."

"I'm actually a midget. The haircut makes me look taller."

Joan laughed and popped a doughnut hole in her mouth. "You're the production assistant, eh?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "So let's produce."

"I thought that was Arturo's bag."

"He's the director and executive producer. I'm the actual producer. Makeup, cameras, lighting, sets, you name it. I handle the crew and the details." She turned to me and offered her hand, shaking off sugary doughnut goodness as she did. "Joan Dallas."

"Pleasure," I said. "Harry Dresden."

Joan nodded. "Come on then. There's still a lot to do before we can shoot. Guffie, get to the dressing room and clean yourself up."

Jake nodded. "Are they here yet?"

Her tone of voice became annoyed. "Giselle and Emma are."

There was a moment of silent, pregnant tension. Jake winced and headed for the door. “Harry, nice to meet you. Joan’s okay, but she’ll work you to death.”

Joan threw an apple at him. Jake caught it when it bounced off his chest, crunched into it with his teeth, and held it in his mouth so that he could wave as he left the room.

“Grab yourself some food, Stilts,” Joan said. “You can help me put cameras together.”

“I was hoping to talk to Arturo before we got going,” I said.

She turned around with two plates loaded with breakfast pastries. She hadn’t bothered getting any fruit. “You’re a funny guy. He’s probably not out of bed yet. Bring that box of cookies. If my blood sugar drops too low I might take your head off.”

She led me down a short hallway to a cavernous room—a shooting studio. A slightly raised stage held an unlit set, which looked like a lavishly appointed bedroom. Arrayed in a line in front of it were several black plastic crates and a freestanding shop light. Joan flicked it on and started opening crates, popping a bit of food into her mouth every third or fourth movement.

“Nice place,” I said.

“Been a bitch,” Joan said between bites. “Last company here was supposed to be some kind of computer production deal, but they had to be lying. They redid all the wiring in here, routed in way heavier than they were supposed to have. Took me a week to get things working, and then I had to turn their old gym into something like a dressing room, but this place still isn’t up to code.”

“Ye canna change the laws of physics,” I said.

She laughed. “Amen.”

“Engineer then?” I asked.

“By way of necessity,” she answered. “I’ve done sets, lighting, power. Even some plumbing. And,” she said, opening boxes, “cameras. Gather ’round, gofer boy; you can help.”

I settled down while she laid out parts from heavy plastic crates. She assembled them, several professional cameras and tripods, with the surety of long practice. She gave me instructions as she did, and I did my best to help her out.

There was a pleasant, quiet rhythm to the work, something that I hadn't really felt since the last time I'd been on a farm in Hog Hollow, Missouri. And it was interesting—technology was unfamiliar territory for me.

See, those who wield the primordial forces of creation have a long-running grudge with physics. Electronic equipment in particular tends to behave unpredictably—right up until it shuts down and stops working altogether. Old technologies seemed more stable, which was one reason I drove around town in a Volkswagen Beetle that had been built before the end of the Vietnam War. But newer products—videocameras, televisions, cell phones, computers—would die a horrible fizzling death after any extended time in my presence.

There was a sense of order to what we were doing that appealed to me on some level. Putting parts together, locking them into place, lining up plugs into their corresponding sockets, taping groups of wires together so that they wouldn't get tangled. I did well enough that Joan sat back and watched me work on the last camera on my own.

"So how is this supposed to work?" I said. "What happens next?"

"The lights." She sighed. "The damned lights are the most annoying part. We have to set them up so that no one looks too shiny or too wrinkly. Once that's done, I'll let the technical manager handle sound, and go ride herd on the actors."

"Metaphorically, I hope."

She snorted. "Yes. Some of them are decent enough—like that blockhead Guffie. But if you don't push them into getting things done, they'll never be ready for the set on time. Makeup, costume, that sort of thing."

"Aha. And some of them are late?" I asked.

"Scrump will be," she said. It almost came out a growl.

I pushed. "Who?"

"Tricia Scrump. Actress."

"You don't like her?" I asked.

"I despise that self-absorbed, egotistical little bitch," Joan said cheerfully. "She'll play the princess and everyone else in the cast will know that they don't have to show up on time, or be ready to go on time, or be entirely sober, since Her Lascivious Highness Trixie Vixen will be showing up late to everything anyway, high as a kite and doing exactly as she pleases. I long to slap her silly."

"You shouldn't repress your emotions like that," I said.

She let out a belly laugh. “Sorry. No reason to drag a newbie into old politics. Guess I’m just upset to be working with her again. I didn’t expect it.”

Aha. Hostility for the porn starlet. That’s what we in the business call “motive.” Joan did not strike a creepy, murderous *strega* vibe with me, but I’d learned the hard way that a skilled liar can look innocent right up until she stabs you in the back. I dug for more information like a good investigator. “Why not?”

She shook her head. “When Arturo left Silverlight Studios to start his own company, he made a lot of people angry.”

“What do you think about that? The move, I mean.”

She sighed. “Arturo is an idiot. He’s a kind man, and he means well. But he’s an idiot. Anyone who works with him now risks getting blacklisted by Silverlight.”

“Even Trixie? I mean, if she’s a big star, won’t the studio kind of kowtow to her?”

Joan leaned down to check a connection I’d made, shoving the plug in. “Are you on drugs or something? She’s a big star with a limited shelf life. They’d replace her without blinking.”

“She sounds gutsy.”

Joan shook her head. “Don’t confuse courage with stupidity. I think she’s vapid enough to actually believe she’s too important to lose.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you don’t like her much.”

“Doesn’t matter whether or not I like her,” Joan said. “It’s my job to work with her.”

I watched her set her mouth in a firm line as she started closing cases and stacking them up. I was willing to bet that Tricia Scrump, a/k/a Trixie Vixen, didn’t have the same kind of professional resolve.

I helped Joan pick up the crates and tools and stack them against the far wall of the dim studio. She moved briskly, tension and distaste simmering under the surface of her determined expression. I studied her as covertly as I could. She clearly wasn’t happy to be here. Could she be gunning for Arturo with some kind of heavy-duty entropy curse?

It didn’t track. There hadn’t been any hostility when she spoke about Arturo. And if she were a strong enough practitioner to throw out deadly spells, she wouldn’t be able to keep up a career amidst so much technology.

If she was harboring vengeful feelings toward Arturo, she was the best actress I'd ever seen.

I suppose that could have been possible. But my instincts were sending me mixed messages. On the one hand, they told me that Joan was on the level. On the other, they also told me there was more to the woman than met the eye. Something told me that things were more serious than they appeared—that this situation was even more dangerous than I had originally believed.

It bothered me. It bothered me a lot.

Joan shut the last case and interrupted my train of thought. "Okay then," she said. "Let's get the studio powered up."

"Um," I said. "Maybe I shouldn't be here when you do."

She lifted her eyebrows, evidently waiting for an explanation.

"Uh," I said. "I have a plate in my head. It's a little twitchy around electric fields. High-voltage equipment, that kind of thing. I'd rather come in when it was already up and running, so I can back off if there's a problem."

Joan stared at me with a lot of skepticism. "Is that so?"

"Yeah."

She frowned. "How did you *get* this job?"

Christ, I'm a terrible liar. I tried to think of an answer that didn't begin with, "Um."

But I was interrupted.

A surge of silent, invisible energy swept through the room, cold and foul. My stomach twisted with abrupt nausea, and my skin erupted in gooseflesh. Dark, dangerous magic swirled by, drawing my attention to the studio's exit. It was the kind of magic that destroys, warps, rots, and corrupts.

The kind of magic you'd need to feed a deadly entropy curse.

"What's wrong?" Joan shook me with one hand. "Harry? You're shaking. Are you all right?"

I managed to choke out, "Who else is in the building?"

"Jake, Bobby, Emma, and Giselle. No one else."

I stumbled to my pack and picked it up. If Joan hadn't helped me balance, I might have fallen down. "Show me where."

Joan blinked in confusion. "What?"

I shoved the sensation of the dark magic away as best I could and snarled, "They're in danger. Show me where! Now!"

My tone might have alarmed her, but her expression became more worried than frightened. Joan nodded and half ran out of the studio, leading me out a side door, up a flight of metal spiral stairs, and into another hallway. We sprinted down it to a room with a sign on it that said, DRESSING ROOM.

“Get back,” I said, and stepped in front of her.

I hadn’t yet touched the doorknob when a woman began to scream.

Chapter Eight



I tore the door open onto a room the size of my apartment, lined with freestanding mirrors, folding tables, and chairs. A cloud of foul energies slapped me in the face. Bobby stood off to my right, his expression registering surprise and confusion. To my left stood a woman in the corner of my vision, mostly naked. I didn't stop to goggle, but ran through the room to a second door. It was partly open and swinging closed again.

I slammed through it into a bathroom as big as my bedroom, which I suppose isn't all that unusual. The air was hot, humid, and smelled like fresh soap. The shower was running, its glass door broken into jagged teeth. The floor was covered in more broken glass, a little water, and a lot of blood. Two rigid, motionless bodies lay on the floor.

My instincts screamed a warning, and just before I stepped into the pool of bloodstained water, I threw myself into a jump. My shins hit heavily on the counter of the sink and I started to fall. I grabbed on to the faucet and hauled myself up. My shins hurt like hell, but I'd kept my feet off the floor. My brain caught up to my instincts, and I saw what was going on. The two people on the floor weren't motionless—they were locked into positions of rigid agony.

Sparks leapt up in the back corner of the room. A heavy, high-voltage light fixture had broken loose from the ceiling and fallen, hauling exposed wiring to lie in the thin sheet of scarlet liquid on the floor.

Like I said, I don't get along with technology when I'm trying to use it. But when I actually *want* to bust it up, I'm hell on wheels. I extended my right hand at the light fixture, snarled incoherently, and willed raw power over the electric menace like an invisible wrecking ball. The hex rippled through the air, and the live wires exploded into wild blue arcs of electricity for maybe two seconds.

And then the lights went out.

In the whole damn building.

Whoops.

I heard a pair of gasps from whoever was on the floor, presumably Jake and someone named Giselle. I got out my pentacle amulet.

“What’s happening?” Bobby’s voice sounded suspicious. Stars, what a dolt. “Hey, prick, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Where are the damned emergency lights?” said an annoyed female voice. A light flicked on in the dressing room, and Joan appeared at the bathroom door holding a pocket flashlight on her key chain. “What’s going on?”

“Call nine-one-one,” I snapped. “Hurry, there’s bleeding.”

“You need a light,” Joan said.

“Got one.” I willed energy through the silver pentacle. It flickered and began to brighten with a steady blue glow that made the blood on the floor look black. “Hurry, and bring all the ice you can find with you when you come back.”

Joan vanished from the door. She snarled, “Get out of the way, you blockhead,” and her footsteps retreated back down the hall. I got off the sink, splashed into the water, and knelt beside the downed people.

Jake, naked from the waist up, stirred as I did. “Ow,” he said in a rough voice. “Ow.”

“Are you all right?” I asked.

He sat up, wobbling a little. “Never mind. Giselle, she must have slipped in the shower. I came in to help her.”

I turned my attention to the girl. She was young and a little scrawny for my tastes, all long limbs and long hair. I rolled her onto her back. She had a cut running the length of her neck, curving from the base of her ear to above her collarbone. Blood shone on her skin, her mouth was partly open, and her dark eyes were glassy.

“Crap,” I said. I seized a towel from a large shelf of them and pressed it down hard on the girl’s wound. “Jake, I need you.”

He looked up a little blearily. “Is she dead?”

“She will be if you don’t help. Hold this down hard. Keep pressure on the wound.”

“Okay.” He didn’t look steady, but he clenched his jaw and did as I instructed. While I elevated her feet with a rolled towel, Jake said, “I can’t feel a pulse. She isn’t breathing.”

“Dammit.” I tilted the girl’s head back and made sure her mouth was clear. I sealed my mouth to hers and blew in hard. Then I drew back and put the heels of my hands near her sternum. I wasn’t sure how hard to push. The practice dummy in the CPR class didn’t have ribs to break. I guessed and hoped I got it right. Five pushes, then another breath. Five more, then another breath. The blue light from my amulet bobbed and waved about, making shadows lurch and shift.

For the record, CPR is hard to do for very long. I made it for maybe six or seven minutes, and was getting too dizzy to see when Jake told me to switch off with him. We swapped jobs. Joan returned with a big steel bowl of shaved ice, and I had her fold it into another towel, which I then pressed down over the wound.

“What are you doing?” Joan asked.

“She’s cut bad. If we get her heart started, she’ll bleed out,” I panted. “The cold will make the blood vessels constrict, slow down the bleeding. It might buy her some time.”

“Oh, God,” Joan muttered. “Poor thing.”

I leaned down to peer at her face. The skin on the left side of her features and on her throat was covered in blotches of dark, angry red. “Look. Burns.”

“From the electricity?” Joan asked.

“Her face wasn’t in the water,” I said. I squinted between the girl and the shower. “The water,” I said. “It turned hot on her. She got scalded and fell right through the damned glass.”

Joan flinched as if she’d been stabbed with a knife, and her face turned grey. “Oh, my God. This is my fault. I hooked up the water heater myself.”

“Jinxed,” said Bobby from the dressing room. “This whole shoot is jinxed. We’re screwed.”

Joan was holding herself steady, but tears fell from off her chin onto the naked girl. I kept pressure on the injury. “I don’t think this was your fault. I want you to get out front and show the paramedics in when they arrive.”

Her face still ashen, she rose and took off without looking back. Jake kept up the mouth-to-mouth like he knew what he was doing. I was panting and holding the towel and ice against the wound when the paramedics finally showed up, carrying heavy-duty flashlights and rolling a wheeled stretcher between them.

I told them what had happened to the girl and got out of their way, taking a seat on the corner of a counter that ran along a wall of makeup mirrors. Jake joined me a minute later. "Thought I felt her breathe," he panted, his tone subdued. We watched the paramedics work. "God, this is really terrible. What are the odds of all that happening? You know?"

I frowned and closed my eyes, extending my senses into the room around me. Somewhere in the furor and panic, the choking cloud of destructive magic had dissipated. Barely a trace remained. With the crisis over and no action to occupy my mind, my hands started shaking and I saw a few stars in the corners of my vision. A phantom surge of panic sent my heart and breathing racing. I bowed my head and rubbed at the back of my neck, waiting for it to pass. The paramedics had some big old flashlights, so I put my amulet away, letting the blue light die out.

"You all right?" Jake asked.

"Will be in a minute. I hope she'll be okay."

Jake nodded, frowning. "Maybe Bobby's right."

"About a jinx?"

"Maybe." He studied me for a second, expression guarded. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That we were in trouble. I mean, I thought you were in the studio. I ran in a couple of seconds after I heard her fall, and I was only a few feet away. You must have come through the door a couple of seconds after I did. How did you know?"

"Just lucky. We finished the cameras and Joan took me up there to introduce me or something."

"What was that light you had?"

I shrugged. "Present from a friend's kid. Some kind of fancy new thing the kids have. Light up jewelry for dance clubs and keggers."

"They call them raves now."

"Raves. Right."

Jake watched me for a moment and then slowly nodded his head. "Sorry. I'm being paranoid, I think."

"Been there. No problem."

He nodded and slumped down tiredly. "I thought I was a dead man in there. Thank you."

It seemed smart to keep the wizard thing as low-key as possible. Someone was flinging some nasty energy around. No sense in advertising my identity as a wizard of the White Council. “I didn’t do much but run in,” I said. “We’re just lucky the power went out.”

“Yeah.”

The paramedics stood up, loaded Giselle onto the stretcher, and picked it up. Jake and I both came to our feet as they did. “Is she going to be okay?” he asked.

The paramedics didn’t slow down, but one of them said, “She’s got a chance.” The man nodded to me. “Without the ice she wouldn’t have had that.”

Jake frowned and chewed on his lip, clearly upset. “Take care of her.”

The paramedics started moving out with quick, steady steps. “Sir, you’d better come along with us to the hospital so that the doctors can check you out.”

“I feel fine,” Jake said.

The paramedics went around the corner, but the second one called back, “Electricity can do some nasty damage you might not feel. Come on.”

But Jake stayed where he was. The paramedics took their lights with them, leaving the dressing room in darkness for a moment, until Joan returned with her little flashlight. “Guffie, get your Bowflexed ass into that ambulance.”

He looked up at his reflection in the mirrored wall. His hair was sticking up every which way. “Though I apparently see the same stylist as Einstein, the Bride of Frankenstein, and Don King, I feel fine. Don’t worry about me.”

“I thought you’d say that,” she said. “Fine, I’ll drive you there myself. Everyone else needs to leave until I can make sure the power lines aren’t going to kill anyone. Bobby and Emma are already outside. Harry, be back here by three, all right?”

“Why?” I asked.

“To start shooting.”

“Shooting,” Jake blurted. “After *that*?”

She grimaced. “The show must go on. Everyone out so I can lock up. Guffie, get in my car and don’t argue with me. Arturo is meeting us at the hospital.”

“Okay,” Jake said. He didn’t sound like he minded agreeing. “What about Bobby and Emma? They have a car?”

“Don’t think so.”

Jake picked up his sports bag, dug in it, and tossed me a set of keys. “Here. Give those to Emma for me?”

I caught them, and we all started out of the building. “Gotcha.”

Joan sighed. “Maybe we are jinxed. It’s like someone said *Macbeth*.”

“What are the odds,” Jake agreed.

Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble. I didn’t say anything to them, but I was pretty sure things would get worse before they got better.

A whole lot worse.

Chapter Nine



We went outside. Joan and Jake spoke briefly with Bobby and the woman I presumed to be Emma. Then Joan chivvied Jake into a car and drove out in a hurry, leaving the stage open for me to do some more snooping. There wasn't any time to waste with lethal magic like that on the loose, and the keys gave me a good excuse to do some more sniffing around.

I didn't hold out much hope that anything in Bobby the Bully's head would be important, so I focused on the woman and walked over to them. "Heya. I'm Harry. Production assistant."

"Emma," the woman said. She was actually very pretty. She had the kind of beauty that seemed to convey a sense of personal warmth, of kindness—a face best suited to smiling. Her eyes were shamrock green, her skin pale, her hair long and red, highlighted with streaks of sunny gold. She wore jeans with a black sweater, and made both of them look inviting—but she wasn't smiling. She offered me her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you. I'm glad you were there to help them."

"Anyone would have," I said.

"Come on, Emma," Bobby said, his expression sullen. "Let's call a cab and go."

She ignored him. "I don't think I've seen you around before."

"No, I'm local. A friend introduced me to Arturo, told him I needed a job."

Emma pursed her lips and nodded. "He's a softie," she said. "In case no one's told you, this isn't an average day on the set."

"I'd hope not. I'm sorry about your friend."

Emma nodded. "Poor Giselle. I hope she'll be all right. She's from France—doesn't have any family. I couldn't see her from where I was standing. Was it her throat that was hurt?"

"Yeah."

"Where? I mean, where was she hurt?"

I drew a line on my own face, starting at the back corner of my jaw and curving around to beside my Adam's apple. "There. Back to front."

Emma shuddered visibly. "God, the scars."

"If she lives, I doubt she'll mind them."

"Like hell she won't," Emma said. "They'll show. No one will cast her."

"Could have been worse."

She eyed me. "You don't approve of her profession?"

"I didn't say that."

"What, are you a religious type or something?"

"No. I just—"

"Because if you are, I'd like to tell you right now that I'm not, and I don't appreciate it when people pass judgment on my line of work."

"I'm not religious. I, uh—"

"I get so tired of hypocritical bastards who . . ." She started to say something else, then made a visible effort and shut her mouth. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually oversensitive. Sometimes I just get sick of people telling me how bad my work is for me. How it corrupts my soul. That I should abandon it and give my life to God."

"You're not going to believe me," I said. "But I know exactly what you mean."

"You're right," she said. "I don't believe you."

Her belt chirped, and she drew a cell phone from its clip. "Yes?" She paused for a moment. "No. No, sweetheart. Mommy already told you before I left. If Gracie says you get one cookie, then you only get one cookie. She's the boss until Mommy comes home." She listened for a moment, and then sighed. "I know, sweetie. I'm sorry. I'll be home soon. Okay? I love you too, sweetie. Kisses. Bye-bye."

"Kid?" I asked.

She gave me half of a smile as she put the phone back onto her belt. "Two. Their grandmother is with them."

I frowned. "Wow. I never really thought about, uh, actresses with children."

"Not many do," she said.

"Does, uh . . . does their father mind your career?"

Her eyes flashed hotly. "He isn't involved with them. Or me."

"Oh," I said. I offered her the keys. "From Jake, for the car. Sorry if I offended you. I didn't mean to."

She exhaled, and it seemed let out the pressure of her anger. She accepted them. “Not your fault. I’m tense.”

“Everyone around here seems to be,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s this film. If it doesn’t do well we’re all going to be looking for work.”

“Why?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “It’s complicated. But we’re all on contract with Silverlight. Arturo left them, but he had managed to slip something into his own contract with the studio that would let him continue hiring cast from Silverlight for three months after his departure.”

“Oh,” I said. “Jake said something about another movie.”

She nodded. “Arturo wanted to do three of them. This is the second. If the movies go over well, Arturo will have a name for himself, and we’ll have leverage to either quit contract with Silverlight or renegotiate better terms.”

“I see,” I said. “And if the movies crash, Silverlight will never pick up your contracts.”

“Exactly.” She frowned. “And we’ve had so many problems. Now this.”

“Come on, Emma,” Bobby called. “I’m starving. Let’s go find something.”

“You should start practicing some self-restraint for a change.” The woman’s green eyes flashed with irritated anger, but she smoothed it away from her face and said, “I’ll see you here this afternoon then, Harry. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

She turned and glowered at Bobby as she walked to the car. They got in without speaking, Emma driving, and left the lot. I walked over to my car, pensive. Thomas and Arturo had been right. Someone had whipped out one hell of a nasty entropy curse—assuming that this wasn’t a coincidental focus of destructive energy—the mystical equivalent of being struck with a bolt of lightning.

Sometimes energy can build up due to any number of causes—massive amounts of emotion, traumatic events, even simple geography. That energy influences the world around us. It’s what gives the Cubbies the home-field advantage (though that whole billy goat thing sort of cancels it out), leaves an intangible aura of dread around sights of tragic and violent events, and causes places to get a bad reputation for strange occurrences.

I hadn't sensed any particular confluence of energies until just before the curse happened to Giselle and Jake, but that didn't entirely rule out coincidence. There is a whole spectrum of magical energies that are difficult to define or understand. There are thousands of names for them, in every culture—mana, psychic energy, totem, juju, chi, bioethereal power, the Force, the soul. It's an incredibly complex system of interweaving energy that influences good old Mother Earth around us, but it all boils down to a fairly simple concept: Shit happens.

But then again, other people around Arturo had been hurt. I could buy that lightning could strike once—but if I hadn't interfered, it would have hit four times. Not much chance for coincidence there.

No matter how much I might have wished it, the energy that had caused Giselle to slip into the glass door, the glass to break and cut her, and the lights to fall down and electrify the floor was not one of those natural hot spots of power. It had swirled past me like some vast and purposeful serpent, and it hadn't gone after the first person to cross its path. It had ignored me, Joan, Jake, Bobby, and Emma and gone into the shower after the girl.

So Arturo was wrong about at least one thing. He wasn't the target of the *malocchio*.

The women around him were.

And that pissed me off. Call me a Neanderthal if you like, but I get real irrational about bad things happening to women. Human violence was at its most hideous when a woman was on the receiving end, and supernatural predators were even worse. That was why seeing Thomas entrance Justine had set me off. I knew the girl was willing, sure. I was pretty sure Thomas didn't want any harm to come to her. But the more primitive instincts in me only saw that she was a woman and Thomas had been preying upon her.

No matter what the rational part of my head thinks, when I see someone hurt a woman my inner gigantopithecus wants to reach for the nearest bone and go Kubrickian on someone's head.

I got into the car, frowning more deeply, and forced myself to calm down and think. I took deep breaths until I relaxed enough to start analyzing what I knew. The attacks had the feeling of vendetta to it. Someone had a grudge against Arturo and was deliberately striking women near him. Who would hold a grudge that vicious?

A jealous woman, maybe. Especially since he was a man with three ex-wives.

Madge was in business with Arturo, though. She didn't seem to me the sort who would jeopardize her fortunes with something so primitive and intangible as vengeful hatred. The most recent wife, Tricia, was in the same situation, though I hadn't yet met her. The other ex-wife, Lucille maybe, was not supposed to be in the picture. Could she be using magic to get a little payback?

I shook my head and started my car. I'd been briefly exposed to an entropy curse once. It had been a lot more powerful than the *malocchio* that had nearly killed Jake and Giselle. I barely survived it—even with a hefty arsenal of magic and the sacrifice of a good man's life to divert the curse from me.

I'd saved Jake and Giselle, but I'd been lucky. It could as easily have been me getting electrocuted in a pool of my own blood. I'd managed to mitigate the *malocchio*, barely, but there was nothing to say that it couldn't happen again. And it was more than possible that next time the lance of vicious magic would be aimed right at me.

I started up the Blue Beetle and headed for my office, pondering on the road.

I didn't have enough information to make a solid guess on a perpetrator. Maybe it would make more sense to examine the murder weapon, as it were, and determine how it was being used.

Curses had the same sorts of limitation as any other spell, after all. Which meant that whoever was sending the Evil Eye had to have some sort of means of directing the magic at a target. Body parts worked best—a lock of hair, nail clippings, and fresh blood were the most common items used, but they weren't the only ones. A poppet, a little dolly dressed up like the intended victim, could also be used to aim a malevolent spell. I've heard you can even employ a good photo.

But targeting the spell was only one part of the process. Before the killer could send it anywhere, he had to gather up the energy to make it happen. A curse that strong would require a whole lot of work, gathering and focusing raw magic in one place. And after *that*, the energy would have to be molded, shaped into its desired result. Even among the magically gifted, that kind of discipline was rare. Sure, any of the White Council could do that as a matter of routine, but the White Council didn't include everyone

with magical skill. Most weren't talented enough to apply for an apprenticeship. And there were plenty of people who washed out and never made it through their schooling.

Magic this powerful would be a dangerous business for someone new to the use of magic. Odds were good that this wasn't some petty, jealous whim of an arcane dabbler. Someone with a disturbing amount of ability was methodically committing murder.

But why? Why kill women working for Arturo? What effect would it have? The people involved in his films were clearly very nervous. Maybe someone was attempting to spread terror, to cause Arturo's business venture to implode.

Vengeance of some kind could be a motive, but after a moment's thought, I decided that greed opened up the field to more possibilities. Greed is a nice, sterile motivation. If the money's right, you don't need to know someone to take advantage of them. You don't have to hate them, or love them, or be related to them. You don't even have to know who they are. You just have to want money more than you want them to keep on breathing, and if history is any indicator, that isn't a terribly uncommon frame of mind.

I parked in my building's lot and stomped up the stairway to my office. Who would gain by Arturo's ruin? Silverlight Studios. I nodded. That line of thought fit a lot better than some sort of demented vengeance kick. It was a good place to get started, and I had a couple of hours to put to use. With luck, I could dig up the information I would need to support (or demolish) the idea of a bad guy with dollar signs where his conscience should be.

I opened my office door, but before I could go inside I felt something cold and hard press against the back of my neck: the barrel of a gun. My heart fluttered into sudden, startled panic.

"Go into the office," said a quiet, rough voice, relaxed and masculine. "Don't make this any louder than it has to be."

Chapter Ten



Apparently a gun held to the back of my head engenders a sense of fellowship and goodwill in the depths of my soul. I cooperated.

I unlocked the door to the office, and the gunman followed me in. My office isn't big, but it's on the corner, and has windows on two walls. There's a table, a counter with my old coffee machine on it, some metal filing cabinets, and a table holding a display of pamphlets meant to help public relations with the normals. My desk sat in the corner between the windows, two comfy chairs for clients facing it.

The gunman walked me to one of my comfy chairs and said, "Sit."

I sat. "Hey, man, look—"

The gun pressed harder. "Hush."

I hushed. A second later something slapped my shoulder.

"Take it," the gunman said. "Put it on."

I reached back and found a heavy cloth sleeping mask with an elastic head strap. "Why?"

The gunman must have thumbed back the hammer of his weapon, because it clicked. I put the stupid mask on. "You might not know this, but I don't function all that well as an investigator when blinded."

"That's the idea," the gunman drawled. The gun left my neck. "Try not to make me feel threatened," he said through a yawn. "I'm all spooked and jittery. If you make any noise or start to get up, I'll probably twitch, and this trigger is pretty sensitive. My gun is pointed at your nose. The ensuing cause-and-effect chain could be inconvenient for you."

"Maybe next time you could just say 'freeze,'" I said. "No need to walk me through it step by step."

His tone sounded like he'd colored it with a faint smile. "Just want to make sure you understand the situation. If I blew your head off over a stupid misunderstanding, gosh, would our faces be red." He paused, then added, "Well, mine, anyway."

He didn't sound jumpy to me. He sounded bored. I heard him moving around for a minute, and then there was a sudden vibration in the air. I felt as if the skin of my face had suddenly dried into leather and tightened over my cheekbones.

"Okay," he said. "That'll do. Take it off."

I took the mask off and found the gunman sitting on the edge of my desk, a compact semiautomatic in his hand. He had it pointed at me in a casual way. He was a big guy, almost my own height, with dark golden hair just long enough to look a little exotic. He had grey-blue eyes that stayed steady and missed nothing. He wore casual black pants and a black sports jacket over a grey T-shirt. He was built more like a swimmer than a weight lifter, all leonine power and lazy grace taken completely for granted.

I looked around and saw a circle of salt as wide as two of my fingers poured around the chair. A Morton's salt cylinder sat on the floor nearby. A bit of scarlet stained some of the salt circle; blood. He'd used it to power up the circle, and I could feel its energy trapping all the magic in it, including my own.

The circle had formed a barrier that would stop magical energy cold. I'd have to physically break the circle of salt and disrupt that barrier before I could send any magic at the gunman. Which was probably the point.

I eyed him and said, "Kincaid. I didn't expect to hear from you until tomorrow at least."

"Rolling stones and moss, baby," the mercenary responded. "I was going through Atlanta when I got your message. Wasn't hard to get a direct flight here."

"What's with the Gestapo treatment?"

He shrugged. "You're a pretty unpredictable guy, Dresden. I don't mind making a social call, but I needed assurance that you were really you."

"I assure you that I'm me."

"That's nice."

"Now what?"

He rolled one shoulder in a shrug. "Now we have a nice talk."

"While you point a gun at me?" I asked.

"I just want a friendly chat without either of us getting his brain redecorated with magic."

"I can't do that," I said.

He shook a finger at me in a negative gesture. "The Council will burn anyone who gets caught doing it. That's different." He nodded at the circle. "But from in there, you literally can't. I'm here to talk business, not to die of stupidity. If you like, think of the precautions as a compliment."

I folded my arms. "Because nothing says flattery like a gun to the head."

"Ain't that God's own truth," Kincaid said. He set the gun down on my desk, put left his hand on it. "Dresden, I'm just plain folks. I'm still alive because I don't take stupid chances or walk into things blindly."

I tried to ditch the stubborn anger and nodded. "Okay, then. No harm, no foul."

"Good." He checked a nylon-strap watch on his left wrist. "I haven't got all day. You wanted to talk to me. So talk."

I felt annoyed enough to start screaming, but forced myself to rein it in. "There's a scourge of vampires in town."

"Black Court?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Whose scourge?"

"Mavra."

Kincaid pursed his lips. "Cagey old hag. I hear she heads up a pretty big crew."

"Yeah. I'm going to downsize them."

Kincaid's index finger tapped on his gun. "Black Court are tough to take down."

"Unless you get them in their coffins," I said. "I can find them."

"You want me to bodyguard you until then?"

"No. I want you to go there with me and help me kill them all."

A smile parted his lips from white teeth. "Going on an offensive would be nice. I'm getting bored on defense. What's the play?"

"Find 'em. Kill 'em."

Kincaid nodded. "Simple enough."

"Yeah, that's the idea. What are you going to cost me?"

He told me.

I choked. "Do you offer coupons or anything?"

Kincaid rolled his eyes and stood up. "Christ. Why did you waste my time, Dresden?"

"Wait," I said. "Look, I'll figure out a way to pay you."

He arched an eyebrow.

"I'm good for it."

"Maybe," he said. "But it's funny how a spending a lifetime as a hired gun makes you a little cynical."

"Take a chance," I said. "I'll get the money to you. And I'll owe you one."

His eyes glittered, flickers of malice and amusement sharing space in them. "Owed a favor by the infamous Dresden. I guess it might be worth enough of my time to give you a chance."

"Great."

"Two conditions," he said.

"Like?"

"I want at least one more set of eyes along," he said. "Someone good in a fight."

"Why?"

"Because if someone gets hurt, it takes two people to get him out alive. One to carry him and one to lay down cover fire."

"I didn't think you cared."

"Of course I do," he said. "The wounded guy might be me."

"Fine," I said. "What's the second condition?"

"You need to understand that if you try to stiff me, I'll have to protect my interests." He lifted a hand. "Don't get me wrong. It's just business. Nothing personal."

"It won't be an issue," I said. "Besides, you wouldn't want to eat my death curse, would you?"

"No. So I'd use a rifle at a thousand yards. The bullet outruns its own sonic boom, and you'd never even hear the shot. You'd be dead before you realized what happened."

That scared me. I've faced more than a few gruesome or nightmarish creatures, but none of them had been that calm and practical. Kincaid believed that he could kill me, if it came to that.

And thinking about it, I believed him too.

He watched my face for a minute, and his smile turned a shade wolfish. "You sure you want me on board?"

There was a pregnant half second of silence. "Yeah."

"All right." Kincaid stepped forward and brushed the salt circle with his toe. The tension of the circle's barrier vanished. "But I'm on the clock. I've got to get back to Ivy's place before Sunday."

“Understood,” I said. “How do I get in touch?”

He slipped his gun into his jacket pocket and drew out a grey business card. He put the card on my desk and said, “Pager.”

He turned to leave. I stood up and said, “Hey, Kincaid.”

He glanced back at me. I tossed the sleep mask to him. He caught it.

“Just plain folk?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Not supernatural?”

“I wish,” he said. “Vanilla mortal.”

“You’re a liar.”

His features smoothed into a neutral mask. “Excuse me?”

“I said you’re a liar. I saw you during the fight at Wrigley, Kincaid. You fired a dozen shots, on the move and dodging bad guys the whole time.”

“What’s so supernatural about that?”

“In a fight, just plain folks miss sometimes. Maybe most times. You didn’t miss once.”

“What’s the point of shooting if you’re just going to miss?” He smiled, made a mime-gun of his thumb and index finger, and aimed at me. His thumb fell forward and he said, “I’m as human as you are, Dresden. I’ll see you later.”

Then he left.

I didn’t know whether to feel better or worse. On one hand, he was an experienced gunman, and absolutely deadly in a fight. Human or not, I might need someone like that with me when I confronted Mavra.

On the other hand, I had no idea how I would be able to pay him, and I believed him when he said he’d assassinate me. The entire concept was scary as hell. The threat of a death curse that could be levied against a wizard’s slayer was a major asset. It meant that anyone or anything that tried to attack a member of the White Council would hesitate, unwilling to risk the burst of destructive power a wizard could release in the last instants of his life.

But those instants would be too slow against a high-powered sniper round fired from ambush. I could imagine it, a flash and a thump on the back of my head, a split second of surprise, and then blackness before I could even realize the need to pronounce my curse.

Kincaid was right: It could work. The tactical doctrine of the powers-that-be in the magical communities of the world tended to run along a

couple of centuries behind the rest of the planet. It was entirely possible that the seniormost wizards of the White Council had never even considered the possibility. Ditto for the vampires. But it could work.

The future abruptly seemed like a fairly unpleasant place for professional wizards.

I set about cleaning up the salt and settled down at my little desk, putting my thoughts in order. I had to find out more about the circumstances around the victims of the *malocchio*. I had to go digging for more information on Arturo Genosa's venture into the world of erotic film.

And if that wasn't enough, while I did all of that, I *also* had to figure out how to get enough money to keep my own hired thug from putting holes in my skull.

For most people it would be a desperate situation. But most people hadn't been through them as many times as I had. My worry and tension slowly grew, and as they did I took a perverse comfort in the familiar emotions. It actually felt *good* to feel my survival instincts put me on guard against premature mortality.

Hell's bells. Is that insane or what?

Chapter Eleven



I ran up a long-distance bill while I did my digging on Genosa. I called a dozen different organizations and business entities around Los Angeles, but computers answered almost every phone, and everyone I talked to referred me to their home page on the Internet. Evidently conversation with an actual human being had become passé. Stupid Internet.

I hit some walls, slammed my head against some closed doors, got a little information, and ran out of time. I wrote down Internet addresses, picked up some food, and went to see Murphy.

Special Investigations has its office in one of the clump of mismatched buildings comprising Chicago Police Headquarters. I checked in with the desk sergeant and showed him the consultant's ID card Murphy had given me. The man made me sign in and waved me through. I marched up the stairs and came out on the level housing holding cells and Special Investigations.

I opened the door to SI and stepped inside. The main room was maybe fifty feet long and twenty wide, and desks were packed into it like sardines. The only cubicle walls in the room were around a small waiting area with a couple of worn old couches and a table with some magazines for bored adults and some toys for bored children. One of them, a plush Snoopy doll spotted with old, dark stains, lay on the floor.

The puppy stood over it, tiny teeth sunk into one of the doll's ears. He shook his head, his own torn ear flapping, and dragged Snoopy in a little circle while letting out small, squeaky growls. The puppy looked up at me. His tail wagged furiously, and he savaged the doll with even more enthusiasm.

"Hey," I told him. "Murphy's supposed to be watching you. What are you doing?"

The puppy growled and shook Snoopy harder.

"I can see that." I sighed. "Some babysitter she is."

A tall man, going bald by degrees and dressed in a rumpled brown suit, looked up from his desk. "Hey, there, Harry."

"Sergeant Stallings," I responded. "Nice moves on Murphy today. The way you slammed her foot with your stomach was inspiring."

He grinned. "I was expecting her to go for a lock. Woman is a nasty infighter. Everyone tried to tell O'Toole, but he's still young enough to think he's invincible."

"I think she made her point," I said. "She around?"

Stallings glanced down the long room at the closed door to Murphy's cheap, tiny office. "Yeah, but you know how she is with paperwork. She's ready to tear someone's head off."

"Don't blame her," I said, and scooped up the puppy.

"You get a dog?"

"Nah, charity case. Murphy was supposed to be keeping an eye on him. Buzz her for me?"

Stallings shook his head and turned his phone around to face me. "I plan to retire. You do it."

I grinned and went on down to Murphy's office, nodding to a couple other guys with SI along the way. I knocked on the door.

"God dammit!" Murphy swore from the other side. "I said not now!"

"It's Harry," I said. "Just stopping by to get the dog."

"Oh, God," she snarled. "Back away from the door."

I did.

A second later the door opened and Murphy glared up at me, blue eyes bright and cold. "Get more away. I've been fighting this computer all day long. I swear, if you blow out my hard drive again, I'm taking it out of your ass."

"Why would your hard drive be in my ass?" I said.

Murphy's eyes narrowed.

"Ah, hah, hah, heh. Yeah, okay. I'll be going, then."

"Whatever," she said, and shut her office door hard.

I frowned. Murphy wasn't really a "whatever" sort of person. I tried to remember the last time I had seen Murphy that short and abrupt. When she'd been in the midst of post-traumatic stress, she'd been remote but not angry. When she was keyed up for a fight or feeling threatened, she'd be furious but she didn't draw away from her friends.

The only thing that had come close to this was when she thought I was involved in a string of supernatural killings. From where she'd been standing, it looked like I had betrayed her trust, and she had expressed her anger with a right cross that had chipped one of my teeth.

Something was upsetting her. A lot.

"Murph?" I asked through the door. "Where did the aliens hide your pod?"

She opened the door enough to scowl at me. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"No pod, huh. Maybe you're an evil twin from another dimension or something."

The muscles along her jaw clenched, and her expression promised murder.

I sighed. "You don't seem to be your usual self. I'm not an analyst or anything, but you kinda look like something is bothering you. Just maybe."

She waved a hand. "It's this paperwork—"

"No, it isn't," I said. "Come on, Murphy. It's me."

"I don't want to talk about it."

I shrugged. "Maybe you need to. You're about two steps shy of psychotic right now."

She reached for her door again, but didn't close it. "Just a bad day."

I didn't believe her, but I said, "Sure, okay. I'm sorry if the dog added to it."

Her expression became tired. She leaned against the doorway. "No. No, he was great. Barely made a sound. Quiet as a mouse all day long. Even used the papers I put down."

I nodded. "You sure you don't want to talk?"

She grimaced and glanced around the office. "Maybe not here. Walk with me."

We left and headed down the hall to the vending machines. Murphy didn't say anything until she bought a Snickers bar. "My mom called," she said.

"Bad news?" I asked.

"Yeah." She closed her eyes and bit off a third of the candy bar. "Sort of. Not really."

"Oh," I said, as if her answer made some kind of sense. "What happened?"

She ate more chocolate and said, "My sister, Lisa, is engaged."

"Oh," I said. When in doubt, be noncommittal. "I didn't know you had a sister."

"She's my baby sister."

"Um. My condolences?" I guessed.

She glowered at me. "She did this on purpose. With the reunion this weekend. She knew exactly what she was doing."

"Well, it's a good thing someone knew, 'cause so far I have no freaking clue."

Murphy finished the candy bar. "My baby sister is engaged. She's going to be showing up this weekend with her fiancé, and I am going to be there without a fiancé or a husband. Or even a boyfriend. My mother will never let me hear the end of it."

"Well, uh, you had a husband, right? Two of them, even."

She glared. "The Murphys are Irish Catholic," she said. "My not one but *two*, count them, *two* divorces won't exactly wash clean the stigma."

"Oh. Well, I'm sure whoever you're dating would show up with you, right?"

She glanced back toward the SI offices. If looks could kill, hers would have blown that section of the building into Lake Michigan. "Are you kidding? I don't have time. I haven't been on a date in two years."

Maybe I should have gone for the ultimate inept remark, and started singing about how short people got nobody to love. I decided to sting her pride a little instead. She'd reacted well to it before. "The mighty Murphy. Slayer of various and sundry nasty monsters, vampires, and so on—"

"And trolls," Murphy said. "Two more when you were out of town last summer."

"Uh-huh. And you're letting a little family shindig get you down like this?"

She shook her head. "Look. It's a personal thing. Between me and my mom."

"And your mom is going to think less of you for being single? A career woman?" I regarded her skeptically. "Murphy, don't tell me you're a mama's girl under all the tough-chick persona."

She stared at me for a moment, exasperation and sadness sharing space on her features. "I'm the oldest daughter," she said. "And . . . well, the whole time I was growing up, I just assumed that I'd be . . . her successor, I

guess. That I'd follow her example. We both did. It's one of the things that made us close. The whole family knew it."

"And if your baby sister is all of a sudden more like your mom than you are, what? It threatens your relationship with her?"

"No," she said, annoyance in her tone. "Not like that. Not really. And sort of. It's complicated."

"I can see that," I said.

She slumped against the vending machine. "My mom is pretty cool," Murphy said. "But it's been hard to stay close to her the past few years. I mean, the job keeps me busy. She doesn't think I should have divorced my second husband, and that's been between us a little. And I've changed. The past couple of years have been scary. I learned more than I wanted to know."

I winced. "Yeah. Well. I tried to warn you about that."

"You did," she said. "I made my choice. I can handle living with it. But I can't exactly sit down and chat with her about it. So it's one more thing that I can't talk about with my mother. Little things, you know? A lot of them. Pushing us apart."

"So talk to her," I said. "Tell her there's stuff you can't talk about. Doesn't mean you don't want to be around her."

"I can't do that."

I blinked. "Why not?"

"Because I *can't*," she said. "It just doesn't work like that."

Murphy had genuine worry on her face and actual tears in her eyes, and I started feeling out of my depth. Maybe because it was a family thing. It seemed like something completely alien, and I didn't get it.

Murphy was worried about being close to her mom. Murphy should just go talk to her mom, right? Bite the bullet and clear the air. With anyone else she'd have handled the problem exactly that way.

But I've noticed that people got the most irrational whenever family was around—while simultaneously losing their ability to distinguish reason from insanity. I call it familial dementia.

I may not have understood the problem, but Murphy was my friend. She was obviously hurting, and that's all I really needed to know. "Look, Murph, maybe you're making more of it than you need to. I mean, seems to me that if your mom cares about you, she'd be as willing as you are to talk."

“She doesn’t approve of my career,” Murphy said tiredly. “Or my decision to live alone, once I was divorced. We’ve already done all the talking on those subjects and neither one of us is going to budge.”

Now *that* I could understand. I’d been on the receiving end of Murphy’s stubborn streak before, and I had a chipped tooth to show for it. “So you haven’t shown up at the reunion, where you’d see her and have to avoid all kinds of awkward topics, for the past two years.”

“Something like that,” Murphy said. “People are talking. And we’re all Murphys, so sooner or later someone is going to start giving unasked-for advice, and then it will be a mess. But I don’t know what to do. My sister getting engaged is going to get everyone talking about subjects I’d rather slash my wrists than discuss with my uncles and cousins.”

“So don’t go,” I said.

“And hurt my mom’s feelings a little more,” she said. “Hell, probably make people talk even more than if I was there.”

I shook my head. “Well. You’re right about one thing. I don’t understand it, Murph.”

“’S okay,” she said.

“But I wish I did,” I said. “I wish I worried about my uncle’s opinions, and had problems to work out with my mom. Hell, I’d settle for knowing what her voice sounded like.” I put a hand on her shoulder. “Trite but true—you don’t know what you have until it’s gone. People change. The world changes. And sooner or later you lose people you care about. If you don’t mind some advice from someone who doesn’t know much about families, I can tell you this: Don’t take yours for granted. It might feel like all of them will always be there. But they won’t.”

She looked down, so that I wouldn’t see a tear fall, I guess.

“Talk to her, Karrin.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, nodding. “So I’m not going to kill you for shoving your well-intentioned opinion down my throat in a vulnerable moment. Just this once.”

“That’s decent of you,” I said.

She took a deep breath, flicked a hand at her eyes, and looked up with a more businesslike face. “You’re a good friend, putting up with this crap. I’ll make it up to you sometime.”

“Funny you should say that,” I said.

“Why?”

“I’m scouting out a money trail, but the information I’m after is apparently on the Internet. Could you hit a few sites for me, help me get my hands on it?”

“Yes.”

“*Gracias.*” I passed her the addresses and gave her a brief rundown of what I was looking for. “I’m going to be out and about. I’ll call you in an hour or two?”

She sighed and nodded. “Did you find the vampires?”

“Not yet, but I got some backup.”

“Who?” she asked.

“Guy named Kincaid. He’s tough.”

“A wizard?”

“No. One of those soldier of fortune types. Pretty good vampire slayer.”

Murphy arched a brow. “Is he clean?”

“As far as I know,” I said. “I should hear from our wheelman tonight. With luck, I’ll find the lair and we’ll hit them.”

“Hey, if it just so happens that we have to go after them on—”

“Saturday,” I finished for her. “I know.”

I left, and told the pup my theory about familial dementia on the way down the stairs. “It’s just a theory, mind you. But it’s got the support of a ton of empirical evidence.” I felt a quiet pang of sadness as I spoke. Family troubles were something I hadn’t ever had. Wouldn’t ever have. Murphy’s problems with family might have been complicated and unpleasant, but at least they existed.

Every time I thought I had gotten through my orphan baggage, something like this came up. Maybe I didn’t want to admit how much it still hurt. Not even to myself.

I scratched the pup’s notched ear as I walked out to the Beetle. “My theory is just theoretical,” I told him. “Because how the hell should I know?”

Chapter Twelve



I swung past my apartment to grab lunch, a shower, and some clothes without so much blood on them. A beaten-up old Rabbit had lost a game of bumper tag with a Suburban, and traffic was backed up for a mile. As a result, I got back to the set a few minutes late.

A vaguely familiar girl with a clipboard met me at the door. She wasn't old enough to drink, but made up for a lack of maturity with what I could only describe as a gratuitous amount of perkiness. She was pretty, more awkwardly skinny than sleek, and had skin the color of cream. Her dark hair was done up in Princess Leia cinnamon rolls, and she wore jeans, a peasant-style blouse, and clunky-looking sandals. "Hi!" she said.

"Hi, yourself."

She checked her clipboard. "You must be Harry, then. You're the only one left, and you're late."

"I was on time this morning."

"That makes you half as good as a broken watch. You should be proud." She smiled again to let me know she was teasing. "Didn't I see you talking to Justine at Arturo's party?"

"Yeah, I was there. Had to leave before I turned into a pumpkin."

She laughed and stuck out her hand. "I'm Inari. I'm an associate production assistant."

I shook her hand. She wore some light, sweet scent that I liked, something that reminded me of buzzing locusts and lazy summer nights. "Nice to meet you—unless you're stealing my job. You're not a scab, are you?"

Inari grinned, and it transformed her face from moderately attractive to lovely. She had great dimples. "No. As an associate gofer, I'm down the ladder from you. I think your job is safe." She checked a plastic wristwatch. "Oh, God, we need to get moving. Arturo asked me to take you to his office as soon as you got here. This way."

“What’s he want?”

“Beats me,” Inari said. She started a brisk walk, and I had to lengthen my steps to keep up with her as she led me deeper into the building. She flipped to a second page and took a pen from behind one hair-bun. “Oh, what would you like on your vegetarian pizza?”

“Dead pigs and cows,” I said.

She glanced up at me and wrinkled her nose.

“They’re vegetarians,” I said defensively.

She looked skeptical. “With all the hormones and things they put in meats, you know that they’re having a number of very bad effects on you. Right? Do you know the kind of long-term damage fatty meats can do to your intestinal tract?”

“I choose to exercise my status as an apex predator. And I laugh in the face of cholesterol.”

“With an attitude like that, you’re going to wind up with bulletproof arteries.”

“Bring it.”

Inari shook her head, her expression pleasant and unyielding. “Everyone decided they wanted to stick with veggies when I order. If someone has meat, the grease will get all over the rest of the pizza, so they settled on veggies.”

“Then I guess I will too.”

“But what do you want on yours? I mean, I’m supposed to make everyone happy here.”

“Kill me some animals, then,” I said. “It’s a protein thing.”

“Oh, you should have said,” Inari replied, smiling at me. We stopped in front of a door and she scribbled on her clipboard. “Some extra cheese, maybe some beans and corn. Or wait. Tofu. Protein. I’ll fix you up.”

Bean-curd pizza, good grief. I should raise my rates. “You do that.” The puppy stirred in my pocket and I stopped. “Here, there’s something you could help me with.”

She tilted her head at me. “Oh?”

I reached into my pocket and drew the pup out. He was sleeping, every inch of him completely limp. “Could you keep my friend company while I talk to Arturo?”

The girl melted with adoration the way only girls can, and took the pup, cradling him in the crook of her arm and crooning to him. “Oh, he’s so

sweet. What's his name?"

"No name," I said. "Just watching him for a day or three. He might be hungry or thirsty when he wakes up."

"I love dogs," she replied. "I'll take good care of him."

"Appreciate it."

She started to walk away. "Oh, Harry, I almost forgot. What do you want to drink? Is Coke okay?"

I eyed her suspiciously. "It isn't noncaffeinated, is it?"

She arched a brow. "I'm health-conscious, not insane."

"Dear child," I said. She gave me another sunny smile and jounced off down the hall, holding the pup as if he were made of glass. I went into the office.

Arturo Genosa was inside, sitting on the corner of a desk. His silver hair looked rumpled, and a half-smoked cigar smoldered in a thick ashtray beside him. He summoned up a tired smile for me as I came in. "Hey, Harry." He came over and gave me one of those manly Mediterranean hugs, the kind that leave bruises. "God bless you, Mister Dresden. Without you there, I think we would have lost them both. Thank you."

He kissed me on either cheek. I'm not a kissy-huggy type, really, but I figured it was another manly European affection thing. Either that or he'd just marked me for death. I stepped back and said, "The girl going to be all right?"

Arturo nodded. "Going to live. All right? That I don't know." He waved a hand at his neck. "The scars. They will be very bad."

"Tough on an actress."

He nodded. "In the phone book, your ad says you give advice."

"Technically I sell it," I said. "But that's really more for—"

"I need to know," he said. "Need to know whether I should stop the project."

I arched an eyebrow. "You think that's why these people have been attacked?"

He picked up his cigar, fiddling around with it. "I don't know what to think. But I was nowhere nearby. This could not have been an attack on me."

"I agree," I said. "And it was the Evil Eye. I'm sure of it."

"Mister Dresden, if a man threatens me, then it is nothing to face it. But this person, whoever he is, is hurting the people near me. I no longer

choose only for myself.”

“Why would someone want to stop your film, Mr. Genosa?” I asked. “I mean, pardon me if this insults you, but it’s a skin flick. There are lots of them.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it is the business end,” he said. “Small entrepreneur, maybe could be a threat to more entrenched businessmen. So they lean. Apply pressure. Quietly, you understand.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you just told me that you think you’re being persecuted by a covert pornography syndicate.”

Genosa put the cigar in his mouth, rolling it around. He drummed his fingers on the desk and lowered his voice. “You joke, but in the past few years someone has been buying the studios a little at a time.”

“Who?”

He shook his head. “It is hard to say. I have investigated, but I am not a detective. Is there any way you could—”

“I’m already on it. I’ll tell you if I turn up anything.”

“Thank you,” he said. “But what should I do today? I can’t allow any of these people to be harmed.”

“You’re racing the clock, right? If you don’t finish the film, your business is kaput.”

“Yes.”

“How long do you have?”

“Today and tomorrow,” he said.

“Then you should ask yourself how willing you are to let ambition get someone killed. Then weigh it against how willing you are to let someone scare you out of living your life.” I frowned. “Or maybe lives, plural. You’re right when you say you aren’t choosing only for yourself.”

“How can I make that choice?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Look, Arturo. You need to decide if you are protecting these people or leading them. There’s a difference.”

He rolled the cigar back and forth between his fingers, and then nodded slowly. “They are adults. I am not their father. But I cannot ask them to risk themselves if they do not wish to. I will tell them they are free to leave should they choose, with no ill will.”

“But you will stay?”

He nodded firmly.

“Leader, then,” I said. “Next thing you know, Arturo, I’ll be buying you a big round table.”

It took him a second, but he laughed. “I see. Arthur and Merlin.”

“Yeah,” I said.

He regarded me thoughtfully “Your advice is good. For a young man, you have good judgment.”

“You haven’t seen my car.”

Arturo laughed. He offered me a cigar, but I turned him down with a smile. “No, thank you.”

“You look troubled.”

“Yeah. Something about your situation doesn’t sit right with me. This whole thing is hinky.”

Genosa blinked. “It is what?”

“Hinky,” I said. “Uh, it’s sort of a Chicago word. I mean that there’s something not right about what’s going on.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “People are getting hurt.”

“That’s not it,” I said. “The attacks have been brutal. That means that the intentions of whoever is behind them are equally brutal. You can’t sling around magic that you don’t really believe in. That isn’t something a simple business competitor would come up with—even assuming some hardball corporate types decided to start trying a supernatural angle instead of hiring fifty-dollar bruisers to lean on you.”

“You think it is personal?” he asked.

“I don’t think anything yet,” I said. “I need to do more digging.”

He nodded, expression sober. “If you stay here, you can keep protecting my people?”

“I think so.”

He pressed his lips together, expression resolved. “Then I will tell th—”

The door flew open and a living goddess of a woman stormed into the office. She was maybe five-foot-four and had brilliant, lush blond-highlighted red hair that fell to the small of her back. She wore only high-heeled pumps and a matching dark green two-piece set of expensive-looking designer lingerie, translucent enough to defeat the purpose of wearing clothing at all. It ably displayed all kinds of pleasant proportions of tanned, athletic female.

“Arturo, you Eurotrash pig,” she snarled. “What do you think you are doing, bringing that woman here?”

Genosa flinched at the tone, and did not look at the woman. “Hello, Trish.”

“Do *not* call me that, Arturo. I’ve told you over and over.”

Genosa sighed. “Harry, this my newest ex-wife, Tricia Scrump.”

And he let this gem slip out of his fingers? Shocking.

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “Trixie. Vixen. It’s been legally changed.”

“Okay,” Arturo said mildly. “Now what are you talking about?”

“You know full well what I’m talking about.” She spat the words. “If you think you are going to split this feature between two stars, you are sadly mistaken.”

“That isn’t going to happen at all,” he said. “But with Giselle hurt, I had to find someone else, and on such short notice . . .”

“Don’t patronize me.” Tricia ground her teeth. “Lara is retired. Re. Tie. Urd. This film is mine. I am *not* going to let you use my drawing power to fuel a comeback appearance for that . . . that *bitch*.”

I thought about pots and kettles.

“It won’t be an issue,” Genosa said. “She has agreed to a mask and a pseudonym. You are the star, Tricia. That has not changed.”

Trixie Vixen folded her arms, geometrically increasing her cleavage. “Fine, then,” she snapped. “As long as we understand each other.”

“We do,” Arturo said.

She threw her hair back over her shoulder, a gesture filled with arrogance, and glared at me. “And who is this?”

“Harry,” I provided. “Production assistant.”

“Well then, Larry. Where the hell is my latte? I sent you for it an hour ago.”

Evidently, reality did not often intrude on Tricia Scrump’s life. It was probably shackled up with courtesy somewhere. I prepared to return verbal fire, but a panicked look from Arturo stopped the first reply that sprang to mind. “Sorry. I’ll take care of it.”

“See that you do,” she said. She spun on one high heel, displaying her G-string and an ass that probably deserved its own billing in the credits, and stalked out.

At least she started to.

She abruptly stopped, frozen, her body tightening with tension.

A woman that made Trixie Vixen look like the ugly stepsister appeared in the door and blocked the starlet’s exit. I had to force myself not to stare.

Tricia “Trixie” Scrump née Genosa née Vixen’s beauty was up to code. You could run a checklist from it: lovely mouth, deep eyes, full breasts, slender waist, flared hips, long and shapely legs. Check, check, check. She looked like she’d been ordered from a catalog and assembled from a kit. She was a vision of a woman—but a prefabricated one, painted by numbers.

The newcomer was the real thing. She was grace. Beauty. Art. As such, she was not so easily quantified.

She would have been tall, even without the heeled faux-Victorian boots of Italian leather. Her hair was so dark that its highlights were nearly blue, a torrent of glossy curls held partially in check with a pair of milky ivory combs. She had eyes of dark grey with hints of violet twilight at their centers. Her clothes were all effortless style: natural fabrics, black skirt and jacket embroidered with abstract dark crimson roses with a white blouse.

Thinking back later, I couldn’t clearly remember her facial features or her body, beyond a notion that they were superb. Her looks were almost extraneous. They weren’t any more important to her appeal than a glass was to wine. It was at its best when invisible and showing the spirit contained within. Beyond mere physical presence, I could sense the nature of the woman—strength of will, intelligence, blended with a sardonic wit and edged with a lazy, sensuous hunger.

Or maybe the hunger was mine. In the space of five seconds, my attention to detail fractured, and I wanted her. I wanted her in the most primal sense, in every way I could conceive. Whatever gentle and chivalrous tendencies my soul harbored suddenly evaporated. Images swarmed over me—images of unleashing the fires burning in me upon willing flesh. Conscience withered a heartbeat later. Something hungry, confident, and unrepentant took its place.

I realized, on some distant level, that something was wrong, but there was no tangible, tactile sense of truth to the thought. Instincts ruled me, and only the most feral, vicious drives remained.

I liked it.

A lot.

While my inner Neanderthal was pounding his chest, Trixie Vixen took a step back from the dark-haired woman. I couldn’t see her face, but her voice crackled with too much anger. She was afraid. “Hello, Lara.”

“Trish,” the woman said, with faint contemptuous emphasis on the name. Her voice smoldered, so low and delicious that my toes started to curl up.

“You look lovely.”

“I’m surprised to see you here,” Tricia said. “There aren’t any whips or chains on the set.”

Lara shrugged, perfectly relaxed. “I’ve always felt that the best whips and chains are in the mind. With a little creativity, the physical ones are hardly necessary.” Lara stared down at Tricia for a moment and then asked, “Have you given any more thought to my offer?”

“I don’t do bondage films,” Tricia said. A sneer colored the words. “They’re for wrinkled old has-beens.” She started forward with a determined stride.

Lara didn’t move. Tricia stopped a bare inch from her and they met gazes again. The redheaded film star started trembling.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Lara said. She smiled and stepped clear of the doorway. “Keep in touch. Trish.”

Trixie Vixen fled—at least as much as someone wobbling away on six-inch heels can flee. The dark-haired woman watched her with a smug smile on her mouth and then said, “Exit scene. It must be difficult to be the center of the universe. Good afternoon, Arturo.”

“Lara,” Arturo said. His tone was that of an uncle chiding his favorite niece. He came around his desk and walked over to the woman, offering both hands. “You shouldn’t tease her like that.”

“Arturo,” she said warmly. She took his hands, and they did more social cheek kissing. I shook my head while they did, and managed to shove my libido out of the driver’s seat of my brain. Captain of my own soul (even if my pants were considering mutiny), I began focusing my thoughts, building up a barrier to shield them.

“You are an angel,” Arturo said to her. His voice was steady and kind and not at all that of a man having most of his blood channeled south of his belly button. How the hell could he not have reacted to her presence? “An angel to come here so quickly. To help me.”

She waved a hand in a lazy motion. Her fingernails weren’t terribly long, and didn’t have any polish. “I’m always glad to help a friend, Arturo. Are you all right?” she asked. “Joan said you’d forgotten to refill your prescription.”

He sighed. “I’m fine. Lowering my blood pressure would not have helped Giselle.”

Lara nodded. “It’s horrible, what happened. I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I am not sure I am comfortable to have Inari here. She’s a child.”

“That’s arguable,” Lara said. “After all, she’s old enough to perform now, if she wishes.”

Arturo looked startled and a little sick. “*Lara.*”

She laughed. “I’m not saying she *should*, dear fool. Only that my baby sister makes her own choices now.”

“They grow,” Arturo said. His voice was a little sad.

“They do.” Lara’s eyes moved over to me. “And who is this? Tall, dark, and silent. I like him already.”

“Harry,” Arturo replied. He beckoned me over. “Lara Romany, meet Harry, our new production assistant. He just started today, so be kind to him.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard,” she said, and slipped her arm through Genosa’s. “Joan wanted me to tell you that your prescription came in, and that she needs your help on the set.”

Arturo nodded with a strained but genuine smile. “And you are to escort me down to take my medicine, eh?”

“Via my feminine wiles,” Lara confirmed.

“Harry,” Arturo said.

“I need to make a quick call,” I answered. “I’ll be right behind you.”

The two of them left. Lara threw another look at me over her shoulder, her expression speculative. And hot. I mean, wow. If she’d crooked her finger, I think I would have been in danger of floating off the floor and drifting along behind her on a cloud of her perfume. Me and Pepé le Pew.

It took me maybe half a minute after they walked away before I was able to reboot my brain. After that, I ran a quick review of what had just happened through the old grey matter.

Pretty, pale, supernaturally sexy, and just a little scary. I could do the math. And I was willing to bet that Romany wasn’t Lara’s last name.

She looked a hell of a lot more like a Raith.

Son of a bitch. The White Court was here.

A succubus on the set. Strike that, the health-conscious kid sister made it two . . . succubuses. Succubusees? Succubi? Stupid Latin correspondence course. Or maybe she wasn’t one, because I hadn’t felt a thing like the attraction Lara Romany exuded when I was near little Inari.

It really hit me, then, that I'd wandered into a mess that might get me killed, regardless of how silly and embarrassing it sounded. Now I had to contend not only with pornography-syndicate conspiracies, but also a succubus of the White Court. Or maybe more than one, which for grammatical reasons I hoped was not the case.

So in addition to a feisty new Black Court partner in the war dance between the Council and the Vampire Courts, I also got angry lust bunny movie stars, deadly curses, and a thoroughly embarrassing job as my investigative cover.

Oh, and bean-curd pizza, which is just wrong.

What a mess.

I made a mental note: The next time I saw Thomas, I was going to punch him right in the nose.

Chapter Thirteen



After two or three tries, I got Genosa's phone to dial out to Murphy. "It's me, Murph. You get that information off the Internet?"

"Yeah. And then I talked to some people I know out there. I dug up some goodies for you."

"Peachy. Like what?"

"Nothing that will stand up in a court, but it might help you figure out what's going on."

"Wow, Murph. It's as if you're a detective."

"Bite me, Dresden. Here's the deal on Genosa. He's a dual citizen of the States and Greece. He's the last son of a big money family that fell on hard times. Rumor has it he left Greece to avoid his parents' debts."

"Uh-huh," I said. I continued searching through Genosa's desk and found a big old leather-bound photo album. "I'm listening."

"He wound up making and directing sex films. Did well investing the money, and he's worth a little more than four million, personally."

"Sex sells." I frowned, flipping through the photo album. It was neatly packed with excerpts from newspapers, transcripts, and photos of Genosa on the set of a number of national talk shows. There was another of him standing beside Hugh Hefner and surrounded by a number of lovely young women. "That's a lot of money. Is that all?"

"No," Murphy said. "He's paying alimony to three ex-wives out of some kind of fund set up to provide it. He's got almost all of what's left tied up in starting his own studio."

I grunted. "Genosa's under some serious pressure, then."

"How so?"

"He's only got about thirty-six hours to finish his movie," I said. "He's got one project done, but if he doesn't get a pair of profitable films, he'll lose the studio."

"You figure someone is trying to run him out of business?"

“Occam thinks so.” I turned another page and blinked at the article there. “Damn.”

“What?”

“He’s a revolutionary.”

“He’s what?” Murphy asked.

I repeated myself redundantly again. “Apparently Arturo Genosa is considered a revolutionary in his field.”

I could almost hear Murphy lift a skeptical eyebrow. “A revolutionary boink czar?”

“So it would seem.”

She snorted. “How exactly do you get to become a porn revolutionary?”

“Practice, practice, practice?” I guessed.

“Wiseass.”

I kept flipping pages, skimming the album. “He’s been interviewed in about thirty magazines.”

“Yeah,” Murphy said. “Probably with illustrious names like . . . like *Jugs-A-Poppin* and *Barely Legal Lolita Schoolgirls*.”

I thumbed through pages. “And *People*, *Time*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *USA Today*. He’s also been on *Larry King* and *Oprah*.”

“You’re kidding,” she said. “*Oprah*? Why?”

“Hang on; I’m reading. It looks like he’s got this crazy notion that everyone should be able to enjoy themselves in bed without going insane trying to meet an impossible standard. He thinks that sex is natural.”

“Sex is natural,” Murphy said. “Sex is good. Not everybody does it, but everybody should.”

“I’m the wiseass. You’re the cop. Respect my boundaries.” I kept reading. “Genosa also casts people of a lot of different ages instead of using only twenty-year-old dancers. According to a transcript of *Larry King*, he avoids gynecological close-ups and picks people based on the genuine sensuality of their performance rather than purely on appearance. And he doesn’t believe in using surgically altered . . . uh . . .”

My face heated up. Murphy was probably my best friend, but she was still a girl, and a gentleman just doesn’t say some words in front of a lady. I held the phone with my shoulder and made a cupping motion in front of my chest with both hands. “You know.”

“Boobs?” Murphy said brightly. “Jugs? Hooters? Ya-yas?”

“I guess.”

She continued as if I hadn't said anything. "Melons? Torpedoes? Tits? Gazongas? Knockers? Ta-tas?"

"Hell's bells, Murph!"

She laughed at me. "You're cute when you're embarrassed. I thought breast implants were required industry equipment. Like hard hats and steel-toed boots for construction workers."

"Not according to Genosa," I said. "He's quoted here saying that natural beauty and genuine desire make for better sex than all the silicone in California."

"I'm not sure whether I should be impressed or a little nauseous," Murphy said.

"Six of one and half dozen of another," I said. "Bottom line is that he's not your average pornographic artist."

"I'm not sure that's saying much, Harry."

"If you'd said that before I met him, I'd probably have agreed. But I'm not so sure now. I don't get any nasty vibe off him. He seems like a decent guy. Taking some measure of responsibility. Challenging the status quo, even if it hurts his profits."

"I'm pretty sure there's no Nobel prize for pornography."

"My point is that he's applying some measure of integrity to it. And people are responding well to him."

"Except for the ones trying to kill him," Murphy said. "Harry, this is cynical, but people who choose a life like that draw problems down onto themselves sooner or later."

"You're right. That is cynical."

"You can't help everyone. You'll go insane if you try."

"Look, the guy is in trouble and he's a fellow human being. I don't have to love his lifestyle to want to keep bad things from happening to him."

"Yeah." Murphy sighed. "I guess I know this tune."

"Do you think I could convince you to—"

The skin on the back of my neck went cold and clammy, tingling. I turned to the office doorway in time to see the lights in the hall flick out. My heart pounded in sudden apprehension. A shadowy figure appeared in the office door.

I picked up the first thing my hand found, Genosa's heavy glass ashtray, and flung it hard at the figure. The ashtray rebounded off the inner edge of the door and struck whoever it was. I heard a voiceless gasp of air. At the

same time something hissed past my ear. A sharp thumping sound came from the wall behind me.

I shouted at the top of my lungs and ran forward, but my foot tangled in the phone cord. It didn't tug me into a pratfall, but I stumbled, and it gave the shadowy figure time to run. By the time I'd recovered my balance and gotten to the hallway, I couldn't see or hear anyone.

The hall itself was dark, and I couldn't remember the locations of either light switches or doors, which made a headlong pursuit less than advisable. It occurred to me that I made a wonderful target, leaning out of the door of the dimly lit office, and I slipped back inside, shutting and locking the door behind me as I went.

I looked at whatever had thumped into the wall behind me, and found, of all the stupid things, a small dart fixed with exotic-looking yellow feathers fringed with a tinge of pink. I tugged the dart out of the wall. It was tipped with what appeared to be bone instead of metal, and the bone was stained with something dark red or dark brown. I had the feeling it wasn't Turtle Wax.

A poisoned blowgun dart. I'd been ambushed before, but that was pretty exotic, even for me. Almost silly, really. Who the hell got killed with poison blowgun darts these days?

A buzz of noise came from the dropped receiver of the phone. I picked up an empty plastic cigar tube from next to Genosa's humidor and slipped the dart into it, then capped it before I picked up the phone.

"Harry?" Murphy was demanding. "Harry, are you all right?"

"Fine," I said. "And it looks like I'm on the right track."

"What happened?"

I held up the cigar tube and peered at the dart. The poisoned tip gleamed with its semi-gelatinous stain. "It was pretty clumsy, but I think someone just tried to kill me."

Chapter Fourteen



“Get out of there, Harry.”

“No, Murph,” I said. “Look, I think it was just someone trying to scare me, or they’d have used a gun. Can you get to those records today?”

“If they’re matters of public record,” she said. “We’ve got the time difference on our side. What are you hoping to find?”

“More,” I said. “This whole thing stinks. Hard to put a puzzle together when you’re missing pieces.”

“Get in touch if you learn something,” Murphy said. “Magic or not, attempted murder is police business. It’s my business.”

“This time for sure,” I said.

“Watch your ass, Bullwinkle.”

“Always. Thanks again, Murph.”

I hung up and flipped through the next several pages of Genosa’s scrapbook, expecting nothing but more articles. I got lucky on the last few pages. He had big, glossy color photos there—three women, and I recognized two of them.

A subtitle beneath the first picture read, *Elizabeth Guns*. The photo was of Madge, Genosa’s first wife. She looked like she’d been in her mid-twenties in the picture and she was more or less nude. Her hair was enormous and stiff-looking, an artificial shade of deep scarlet. She probably had to take off her makeup with a Zamboni machine.

The next photo read, *Raven Velvet*, beneath a picture of a nearly Amazonian brunette I didn’t recognize. She had the kind of build that fairly serious female athletes can get, where the muscles are present, defined with obvious strength, but softened and rounded enough to look more pretty than formidable. Her hair was cut in a short pageboy, and at first I thought her features were really quite sweet, almost kind. But her expression was an unsmiling, haughty stare at the camera. Ex-Genosa two, I supposed. He’d called her Lucille.

The last picture was of the third former Mrs. Genosa. It was subtitled, *Trixie Vixen*, but someone had written across it in black permanent marker, *ROT IN HELL, YOU PIG*. There was no signature to tell who was responsible. Gee. I wonder.

I flipped through the album once more but didn't see anything new. At some point I realized that I was delaying going down to the set. I mean, yeah, there were probably going to be naked girls doing a variety of interesting things. And I hadn't gotten laid in a depressing number of months, which probably made it sound a little more interesting. But there's a time and a place to enjoy that kind of thing, and for me in front of a bunch of people and cameras was not it.

But I was a professional, dammit. And this was the job. I couldn't bodyguard anyone if I wasn't close enough to them to act. I couldn't figure out the source of the dark mojo without figuring out what was going on. And to do that, I needed to observe and ask questions—preferably without anyone knowing that's what I was doing. That was the smart thing, the professional thing. Conduct covert interviews while icons of sensual beauty got it on under stage lights.

Onward. I screwed up my courage, so to speak, and slipped warily out of the office and down the dimly lit hall to the studio.

There were a surprising number of people there. It was an enormous room, but it still looked busy. There were a couple of guys on each of four cameras, and there were a few more on hanging scaffolds that supported the stage lighting. A crew was working on the lighted set, which consisted of a bunch of panels made to look like an old brick wall, a couple of garbage cans, a trash bin, some loading pallets, and random bits of litter. Arturo and the beflanneled Joan were at the center of the activity, speaking to each other as they moved around placing cameras to their liking. Colt-legged Inari drifted along behind them marking positions on a chart. The notch-eared puppy followed her clumsily around, a piece of pink yarn tied around his neck and one of the loops of Inari's jeans. The puppy's tail wagged happily.

I was supposed to be doing the assistant thing after all, so I walked over to Genosa. The puppy saw me and galloped headlong into my shoe. I leaned down and scratched his ears. "What should I do to help, Arturo?"

He nodded at Joan. "Stick with her. She can show you the ropes as well as anyone. Watch, ask questions."

“Okeydoky,” I said.

“You’ve met Inari?” Arturo asked.

“Bumped into her already,” I said.

The girl smiled and nodded. “I like him. He’s funny.”

“Looks aren’t everything,” I said.

Inari’s laugh was interrupted when her pants beeped. She reached into them and drew out an expensive cell phone the size of a couple of postage stamps. I scooped up the puppy and held him in the crook of one arm, and Inari untied his makeshift lead and handed it to me before walking a few steps away, phone to her ear.

A harried-looking woman in sweeping skirts and a peasant blouse came half running across the studio floor, straight to Joan and Arturo. “Mr. Genosa, I think you’d better come to the dressing room. Right now.”

Genosa’s eyes widened and his face went pale. He shot me a questioning glance. I shook my head at him and gave him a thumbs-up. He let out a slow breath, and then said, “What is happening?”

Joan, behind him, checked her watch, rolled her eyes, and said, “It’s Trixie.”

The woman nodded with a sigh. “She says she’s leaving.”

Arturo sighed. “Of course she’d say that. Shall we, Marion?”

They left, and Joan scowled. “There’s no time for that prima donna.”

“Is there ever?”

Her frown faded, replaced by simple weariness. “I suppose not. I just don’t understand the woman. This project means as much to her future as to everyone else’s.”

“Being the center of the universe is a big job. Maybe it’s weighing on her nerves.”

Joan threw her head back and laughed. “That must be it. Let’s get moving.”

“What’s first?”

We went to one of the other sets, this one dressed up like a cheap bar, and started going through boxes of random bottles and mugs for a more detailed appearance. I set the puppy down on the bar, and he waddled up and down the length of it, nose down to the surface and sniffing. After a few moments I asked, “How long have you known Arturo?”

Joan hesitated for a second, then continued dressing up the set. “Eighteen or nineteen years, I think.”

“He seems like a nice man.”

She smiled again. “He isn’t,” she said. “He’s a nice boy.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “How so?”

She rolled one shoulder in a shrug. “He lives on the outside of his skin. He’s impulsive, more passionate than he can afford to be, and he’ll fall in love at the drop of a hat.”

“And that’s bad?”

“Sometimes,” she said. “But he makes up for it. He cares about people. Here, you get that top shelf. You don’t need a stepladder.”

I complied. “Soon I’ll move up to putting stars and angels on the tops of Christmas trees. Me and that yeti in *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.”

Joan laughed again and answered me. Her words became indistinct and toneless, like the teacher in the Peanuts cartoons. My heart began to race, and a stab of both food hunger and lust went through my stomach on its way to the base of my spine. My head turned of its own volition, and I saw Lara Romany enter the studio.

She’d done her hair up in a style belonging to ancient Greece or Rome. She wore a short black silk robe with matching heels and stockings. She slid over the floor with a kind of fascinating, serpentine grace. I wanted to watch without moving. But some stubborn part of me shoved my brain into an intellectual cold shower. She was a life-draining vampire. I’d be stupid to let myself keep on reacting that way.

I tore my eyes off of her, and realized that the puppy had come to the edge of the bar near me. He was crouched, his eyes on Lara, and was growling his squeaky little growl again.

I looked around, and kept my eyes from moving back to her only by an effort of will. Every man in the room had become still, eyes locked onto Lara as she walked.

“The woman is Viagra with legs,” Joan muttered. “Though I’ve got to admit, she knows how to make an entrance.”

“Um. Yeah.”

Lara took a seat in a folding chair, and Inari hurried over to kneel beside it in conversation. The electric sense of desire and compulsion faded a little, and people started moving about their tasks again. I helped Joan out, and kept the puppy near me, and in half an hour the first scene started shooting with Jake Guffie and a somewhat sullen-looking Trixie Vixen on the alley set.

Okay, let me tell you something. Porno sex is only loosely related to actual sex. The actors are constantly getting interrupted. They have to keep their faces turned in the right direction, and the body angling they have to do for the camera would make a contortionist beg for mercy. Every once in a while someone has to touch up their makeup, and it isn't only on their faces. You wouldn't believe where all it goes. There are lights shining in their eyes, people with cameras moving all around, and on top of all that, Arturo was giving them directions from behind the cameras.

Granted, my own sexual experience is somewhat limited, but I had never found any of that necessary. It was embarrassing for me to watch. Maybe in the editing room the scene would turn into something sensual and alluring, but on the set it mostly looked awkward and uncomfortable. I found excuses to look at other things, working hard to make sure one of them wasn't the lovely vampire. And I kept my eyes peeled for more deadly magic.

Maybe an hour into the shoot, I glanced aside and saw Inari pacing back and forth, a phone at her ear, speaking quietly. I closed my eyes, concentrated, and started Listening to her.

"Yes, Papa," she said. "Yes, I know. I will. I won't." She paused. "Yes, he's here." Her cheeks suddenly flushed pink. "What a terrible thing to say!" she protested. "I thought you were supposed to chase the boys off with a shotgun." She laughed, glanced across the studio and started walking away. "Bobby, Papa. His name is Bobby."

Aha. The plot thickens. I followed Inari's glance across the studio and saw Bobby the Sullen sitting in a folding chair near Lara, wearing a bathrobe. His impressive arms were folded over his chest, and he looked pensive and withdrawn. He paid no attention whatsoever to the shoot—or to Lara, for that matter. Inari, meanwhile, had moved a little beyond the range of my focused sense of hearing.

I frowned, pondered, and kept on the lookout for incoming black magic. Nothing untoward happened, beyond an audio monitor spitting sparks and dying when I walked too close to it. They shot three other scenes after that one, and I made sure not to notice much. They involved three, uh, performers I didn't recognize, two women and another man. They must have been the crew Joan said would follow Trixie's example by showing up late.

Of course, one of the people who *had* been on time was now in an ICU, and lucky to be there instead of the morgue. Punctuality was no protection against black magic.

Sometime a bit before midnight, the puppy was asleep in a bed I'd made him out of my duster. Most of the food (without meat, it seemed blasphemous to call it pizza) had been devoured. Trixie had flown into a tantrum an hour before, ranting at one of the cameramen and at Inari, and then stormed out of the studio wearing nothing but her shoes, and everyone was tired. The crew was setting up for a last scene—consisting of Emma, Bobby the Buff, and Lara Romany. I felt myself growing tense as Lara rose, and I withdrew to the back of the studio to get my thoughts together.

There was a movement from the darkness at the rear of the studio, only a few feet away, and I hopped back in a reflex born of surprise and fear. A shadowy figure darted out of a corner and headed for the nearest exit. My shock became a realization of a sudden opportunity, and I didn't stop to think before I went racing after the figure.

It hit the door and darted off into the Chicago night. I snatched my blasting rod from my backpack as I ran by and sprinted into pursuit, bolstered by anger and adrenaline, determined to catch the mysterious lurker before any more of the crew could be attacked.

Chases down dark Chicago alleys were getting to be old hat for me. Though technically, I suppose, we weren't in Chicago proper, and the broader, more generous spaces between the buildings of the industrial park could hardly qualify as alleys. Foot chases still happened often enough that I had taken up running for practice and exercise. Admittedly, I was usually on the other end of a foot chase, mostly due to my personal policies on hand-to-hand combat with anything that weighed more than a small car or could be described with the word *chitinous*.

Whoever I was after was not overly large. But he was fast, someone who had also practiced running. The industrial park was lit only sporadically, and my quarry was running west, away from the front of the park and into, of course, totally unlit areas.

With each step I got farther from possible help, and stood a higher chance of running into something I couldn't handle alone. I had to balance that against the possibility that I could stop whoever had been attacking Genosa's people before they could hurt anyone else. Maybe if it hadn't

been mostly women who were hurt, and maybe if I didn't harbor this buried streak of chivalry, and if I were a little smarter, it wouldn't have been such an easy choice.

The shadowy object of my pursuit reached the back of the industrial lot and sprinted across twenty feet of almost pitch-black blacktop toward a twelve-foot fence. I caught up to him about halfway across, just managing to kick at one heel. He was running all out, and the impact fouled his legs and threw him down. I dropped my weight onto his back and rode him down into the asphalt.

The impact nearly knocked the wind out of me, and I imagine it did worse to him. The grunt as he hit came out in a masculine baritone, much to my relief. I'd been thinking in terms of "him" because if I'd been thinking "her" I don't think I could have kept myself from holding back in the violence department, and that's the kind of thing that can get you hurt, fast.

The guy tried to get up, but I slammed my forearm into the back of his head a few times, bouncing his face against the asphalt. He was tough. The blows slowed him down, but he started moving again and suddenly twisted with the sinuous strength of a serpent. I went to one side; he got out from under me and immediately leapt for the fence.

He jumped four or five feet up and started climbing. I pointed my blasting rod at the top of the fence, drew in my will and snarled, "*Fuego.*"

Fire lashed across the top of the fence, bright and hot enough that the suddenly expanding air roared like a crack of thunder. Metal near the top of the fence glowed red, running into liquid a few feet above the man's head. Droplets pattered down like Hell's own rain.

The man cried out in shock or pain and let go of the fence. I beat him about the head and shoulders with my blasting rod when he did, the heavy wood serving admirably as a baton. The second or third blow stunned him, and I got the blasting rod across his neck in a choke, locked one of his arms behind him with a move Murphy had taught me, and pinned his face against the fence with my full weight.

"Hold still," I snarled. Bits of molten wire slithered down the chain link fence toward the ground. "Hold still or I'll hold your face there until it melts off."

He tried to struggle free. He was strong, but I had all the leverage, so that didn't mean much. Thank you, Murphy. I wrenched his trapped arm up until

he gasped with pain. I snarled, “Hold. Still.”

“Jesus Christ,” Thomas stammered, his voice pained. He ceased struggling and lifted his other hand in surrender. Recognizing the voice, I could place his profile too. “Harry, it’s me.”

I scowled at him and pulled harder on his arm.

“Ow,” he gasped. “Dresden, what are you doing? Let go. It’s *me*.”

I growled at him and did, shoving him hard against the fence and standing up.

Thomas rose slowly, turning to me with his hands lifted. “Thanks, man. I didn’t mean to surprise you like—”

I hit him solidly in the nose with my right fist.

I think it was the surprise as much as the blow that knocked him onto his ass. He sat there with his hands covering his face and stared up at me.

I drew up my blasting rod and readied another lash of flame. The tip of the rod glowed with a cinder-red glow of light barely a foot from Thomas’s face. His normally pale face was ashen, his expression was startled, and his mouth was stained with blood. “Harry—” he began.

“Shut up,” I said. I used a very quiet voice. Quiet voices are more frightening than screams. “You’re using me, Thomas.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

I leaned forward, the blazing end of the blasting rod making him squirm backward. “I told you to shut up,” I said in the same quiet voice. “There’s someone I think you know on the set, and you didn’t tell me about that. I think you’ve lied to me about other things too, and it’s put me in mortal peril at least one and a half times today already. Now give me one good reason I shouldn’t blast your lying mouth off your face right now.”

The hair on the back of my neck suddenly tried to crawl away from my skin. I heard two distinct clicks behind me, the hammers being drawn back on a pair of guns, and Lara’s maddeningly alluring voice murmured, “I’ll give you two.”

Chapter Fifteen



The first thought that went through my mind was something like, *Wow her voice is hot*. The second was, *How the hell did she catch up to us so quickly?*

Oh, and somewhere in there the practical side of me chimed in with, *It would be bad to get shot*.

What came out of my mouth was, “Is your last name really Romany?”

I didn’t hear any footsteps, but her voice came from closer when she answered. “It was my married name. Briefly. Now please step away from my little brother.”

Hell’s bells, she was his *sister*? Familial dementia. She might not react rationally to a threat. I took a deep breath and reminded myself that under the circumstances, I’d be an idiot to push Lara Raith. “I assume that when I do, you’ll lower the guns?”

“Assume instead that if you don’t, I’ll shoot you dead.”

“Oh, for the love of God.” Thomas sighed. “Lara, would you relax? We were just talking.”

She clucked her teeth, a sound of almost maternal disapproval. “Tommy, Tommy. When you say ridiculous things like that, I have to keep reminding myself that my baby brother isn’t as large an idiot as you would like us all to believe.”

“Oh, come on,” Thomas said. “This is a waste of time.”

“Shut up,” I said with an ungracious waggle of the blasting rod. I looked over my shoulder at Lara. She was wearing black lacy things with stockings and heels—

(How the hell had she caught up to us in the freaking heels? Even for a wizard, some things are simply beyond belief.)

—and she held a pair of pretty little guns in her hands. They probably weren’t packing the high-caliber ammunition of heavier weapons, but even baby bullets could kill me just fine. She held them like she knew what she

was doing, and sauntered closer through the heavy shadows, her skin luminous. And showing. And really gorgeous.

I gritted my teeth and beat back the sudden urge to taste-test the curvy dents in her stomach and thighs, and kept the blasting rod lit and pointing at Thomas. “Back off, toots. Put the guns down, stop with the come-hither whammy, and we can talk.”

She stopped between one step and the next, a faintly troubled expression on her face. She narrowed her eyes, and her voice slid through the air like honey and heroin. “What did you say?”

I fought off the pressure of that voice and growled, “Back. Off.” My inner Quixote was not to be entirely denied though, and I added, “Please.”

She stared at me for a moment, and then blinked her eyes slowly, as if seeing me for the first time. “Empty night,” she murmured, her tone one of someone speaking an oath. “You’re Harry Dresden.”

“Don’t feel bad. I cleverly concealed my identity as Harry the Production Assistant.”

She pursed her lips (which also looked delicious) and said, “Why are you threatening my brother?”

“It was a slow night and everyone else was busy.”

There wasn’t even the hint of a warning. One of the little guns barked, there was a flash of scarlet pain in my head, and I collapsed to one knee.

I kept the blasting rod trained on Thomas and lifted my hand to my ear. It came away wet with droplets of blood, but the pain had begun to recede. Lara arched a delicate eyebrow at me. Hell’s bells. She’d grazed my ear with a bullet. With that kind of skill, between the eyes would be no trick at all.

“Normally I would admire that kind of piquant retort,” she said in a silken, quiet voice. Probably because she thought it sounded scarier than if she’d said it loudly. “But where my little brother is concerned, I am in no mood to play games.”

“Point taken,” I said. My voice sounded shaky. I lowered the blasting rod until it wasn’t pointing at Thomas, and eased away the power held ready in it. The sullen fire at the tip of the rod went out.

“Lovely,” she said, but she didn’t lower the twin pistols. The autumn’s evening breeze blew her dark, glossy hair around her head, and her grey eyes shone silver in the half-light.

“Harry,” Thomas said. “This is my oldest sister, Lara. Lara, Harry Dresden.”

“A pleasure,” she said. “Thomas, step out from behind the wizard. I don’t want one of these rounds to take you if they go through.”

My guts turned to water. I still had my blasting rod in hand, but Lara could pull the trigger quicker than I could aim and loose a strike at her.

“Wait,” Thomas said. He pushed himself up to one knee and put himself between me and the other White vampire. “Don’t kill him.”

That earned Thomas an arched eyebrow, but a smile haunted her mouth. “And why not?”

“There’s the chance that he’d be able to level his death curse, for one.”

“True. And?”

Thomas shrugged. “And I have personal reasons. I’d take it as a favor if we could discuss the matter first.”

“So would I,” I added.

Lara let the ghostly smile remain. “I find myself liking you, wizard, but . . .” She sighed. “There is little room for negotiation, Thomas. Dresden’s presence here is unacceptable. Arturo’s independent streak is an internal matter of the White Court.”

“I didn’t come here to interfere with the White Court,” I said. “It wasn’t my intention at all.”

She regarded me. “We all know what intentions are worth. Why then, wizard?”

“That’s a good question,” I said, turning my head deliberately to Thomas. “I’d love to hear the answer.”

Thomas’s expression become apprehensive. His gaze flicked to Lara, and I had the sudden impression that he was preparing to move against her.

Lara frowned and said, “Thomas? What is he talking about?”

“This is a tempest in a teapot, Lara,” Thomas said. “It’s nothing. Really.”

Lara’s eyes widened. “You brought him into this?”

“Um,” Thomas began.

“You’re damn right he did,” I said. “You think I’d be here for the fun of it?”

Lara’s mouth dropped open. “Thomas. You’ve entered the game *now*?”

Thomas pressed his lips together for a few seconds, then rose slowly to his feet. He winced and put one hand to the small of his back. “Looks that way.”

“He’ll kill you,” Lara said. “He’ll kill you and worse. You haven’t got a fraction of the strength you’d need to threaten him.”

“That all depends,” Thomas said.

“On what?” she asked.

“On where the other members of the House decide to place their support.”

She let out a short laugh of disbelief. “You think any of us would take your side over his?”

“Why not,” Thomas said calmly. “Think about it. Father is strong, but he isn’t invincible. If he’s taken down by my influence, it leaves me in charge, and I’d be a hell of a lot easier to depose than he would. But if I lose, you can blame me for putting the psychic wristlock on you. Instant scapegoat. Life goes on and the only one to pay for it is me.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’ve been reading Machiavelli again.”

“To Justine at bedtime.”

Lara became quiet for a moment, her expression pensive. Then she said, “This is ill-advised, Thomas.”

“But—”

“Your timing is horrible. Raith’s position is already precarious among the Houses. Internal instability now could leave us vulnerable to Skavis or Malvora or those like them. If they sense weakness they won’t hesitate to destroy us.”

“Dad’s losing it,” Thomas countered. “He hasn’t been right for years, and we all know it. He’s getting old. It’s only a matter of time before the other Lords decide to take him—and when that happens, all of us will go down with him.”

She shook her head. “Do you know how many brothers and sisters have said such words to me over the years? He has destroyed them all.”

“They went up against him alone. I’m talking about all of us working together. We can do it.”

“Why now, of all times?”

“Why not now?”

She frowned at Thomas, and stared intently at him for better than sixty seconds. Then she shivered, took a deep breath, and pointed one gun at my head. And the other at Thomas.

“Lara,” he protested.

“Take your hand out from your back. Now.”

Thomas stiffened, but he moved his hand from his back slowly, fingers empty. I looked up and saw a bulge that brushed his shirt at the belt line.

Lara nodded. "I'm sorry, Tommy. I really am quite fond of you, but you do not know Father the way I do. You aren't the only Raith who takes advantage of being underestimated. He already suspects you have something afoot, and if he thinks for a moment I'm working with you, he'll kill me. Without hesitation."

Thomas's voice grew desperate. "Lara, if we act together—"

"We will die together. If not at his hands than at Malvora's and his like. I don't have a choice. It gives me no pleasure to kill you."

"Then don't do it!" he said.

"And leave you to Father's mercies? Even I have a few principles. I love you as much as anyone in the world, little brother, but I did not survive as long as I have by taking unnecessary risks."

Thomas swallowed. He didn't look at me, but his balance shifted a little, and his shirt rode up enough to show me the handle of a gun he had tucked into the back of his jeans. I didn't stare at it. I wouldn't have time to grab it and shoot before Lara could gun me down, but if Thomas could distract her for a beat or two, there might be a chance.

Thomas took a deep breath and said, "Lara."

Something in his voice had changed. The tone of it sounded the same, on the surface, but there was something beneath it that made the air sing with quiet, seductive power. It commanded attention. Hell, it commanded a lot of things, and it was creepy to hear it coming from him. I was glad that Thomas wasn't addressing me, because it would have been damned confusing.

"Lara," he said again. I saw her sway a little as he spoke. "Let me talk to you."

Evidently the sway was induced more by the evening breeze and those high heels than it was by Thomas's voice. "I'm afraid all you need say is good-bye, little brother." Lara thumbed back the hammer on both guns, her features calm and remote. "And you'd best say it for wizard as well."

Chapter Sixteen



I'd been in hairier situations than this one. Actually, it's sort of depressing, thinking how many times I'd been in them. But if experience had taught me anything, it was this:

No matter how screwed up things are, they can get a whole lot worse.

Case in point: our little standoff with Supertart.

Thomas shouted and darted to his left, across my view of Lara. As he went, I reached for the pistol tucked into the back of his jeans. Judging by the grip, it was a semiautomatic, maybe one of those fancy German models that are as tiny as they are deadly. I grabbed it, and felt pretty slick to be doing the teamwork thing—but Thomas's damned jeans were so tight that the gun didn't come loose. I leaned too far in the effort and wound up sprawling on my side. All I got for my oh-so-clever maneuver was scraped fingertips and a good view of Lara Raith in gunfighting mode.

I heard a shot go past, a kind of humming buzz in the air that provided an accent to the mild, barking report of the pistol. There were several shots in the space of a second or three. Two of them hit Thomas with ugly sounds of impact, one in the leg, and a second in the chest.

At the same time he hurled a small ring of keys at Lara, and it probably saved my life. She swatted them aside with the gun that had been trained on me. It gave me a precious second or two, and it was time enough to bring up my blasting rod and loose a panicked strike at her. It was sloppy as hell, even with the blasting rod to help me focus my will, and instead of a wrist-thick beam of semicoherent flame, it came out in a cone of fire maybe thirty feet across.

That made big noise—a thunderous thumping explosion as the heat displaced cool night air. Lara Raith had the reflexes that were depressingly common in all of those vampire types, and she darted out of the way of the flames. She leveled both guns at me as she did, blazing away like in those Hong Kong action movies. But evidently even Lara's superhuman skill

wasn't enough to overcome surprise, lateral movement, a firestorm, *and* the spike heels. God bless the fashion industry and the blind luck that protects fools and wizards; she missed.

I shook out my shield bracelet and hardened my will into a wall of unseen but solid force in front of me. The last few shots from Lara's guns actually struck the shield, illuminating it in a flash of blue-and-white energy. I held the shield firmly in place and readied the blasting rod again, and faced Lara squarely.

The vampire slipped into the shadows between the nearest building and a pair of huge industrial tanks and vanished from sight.

I padded forward to Thomas, keeping the shield up and in the general direction of where Lara had disappeared. "Thomas," I hissed. "Thomas, are you all right?"

It was a long beat before he replied, his voice weak and shaking. "I don't know. It hurts."

"You've been shot. It's supposed to hurt." I kept my eyes on the shadows, warily extending my senses as much as I could. "Can you walk?"

"Don't know," he panted. "Can't get my breath. Can't feel my leg."

I flicked my eyes down to him and back out again. Thomas's black T-shirt, was plastered to his chest on one side. He'd taken a hit in the lung, at least. If a major blood vessel had been struck, he was in trouble, vampire or not. The White Court were a resilient bunch, but in some ways they were just as fragile as the human beings they fed upon. He could heal up fast—I'd seen Thomas recover from broken ribs in a matter of hours—but if he bled out from a severed artery, he'd die like anyone else.

"Just hold still," I said. "Don't try to move until we know where she is."

"That'll get her," Thomas panted. "The old sitting-duck ploy."

"Give me your gun," I said.

"Why?"

"So that the next time you start talking I can shoot your wise ass."

He started to laugh, but it broke into agonized, wet coughing.

"Dammit," I muttered, and crouched down beside him. I set my blasting rod aside and slipped my right arm and one knee behind his back, trying to hold him vertical from the waist up.

"You'd better get moving. I'll manage."

"Would you shut up?" I demanded. I tried to ascertain the extent of his injuries with my free hand, but I'm no doctor. I found the hole in his chest,

felt the blood coming out. The edges of the wound puckered and gripped at my hand. “Well,” I told him. “Your wound sucks. Here.” I took his right hand and pressed it hard against the hole. “Keep your hand there, man. Keep the pressure on. I can’t hold it and carry you out too.”

“Forget carrying me,” he rasped. “Don’t be an idiot. She’ll kill us both.”

“I can hold the shield,” I said.

“If you can’t return fire, it won’t do you much good. Get clear, call the cops, then come back for me.”

“You’re delirious,” I said. If I left him there alone, Lara would finish him. I got my right shoulder under his left arm and hauled him to his feet. He wasn’t as heavy as I would have expected, but dragging him up like that had to have hurt him. The pain locked the breath in his throat. “Come on,” I growled. “You’ve got a good leg. Help me.”

His voice had become hollow, somehow ghostly, barely more than a whisper. “Just go. I can’t.”

“You *can*. Shut up and *help* me.”

I started walking as fast as I could back toward the street end of the industrial park. I kept my shield bracelet up, focusing my will into a barrier all around us. It wasn’t as strong as a more limited directional shield, but my eyes couldn’t be everywhere, and a smart opponent would shoot me in the back.

Thomas would have been screaming if he could have gotten his breath. Over the next minute or two, his face went white—I mean, even more so than usual. He’d always been pale, but his skin took on the grey tone of a corpse, sooty hollows forming under his eyes. Even so, he managed to help me. Not much, but enough that I could keep us both moving without stumbling.

I started to think that we were going to make it back safely, when I heard running footsteps and a woman rounded the corner ahead of us, her pale skin glowing in the dimness.

I cursed, pushing more will into the shield, and crouched down, letting Thomas collapse ungraciously onto the gravel parking lot. I fumbled for his gun, found it, and whipped the weapon up. I flicked off the safety with my thumb, took a half second to aim, and pulled the trigger.

“No,” Thomas gasped at the last possible instant. He leaned hard against me just as the gun went off, the barrel wavered, and the shot kicked up sparks on a concrete retaining wall fifty feet away. Panicked, I lined up the

weapon again, though I knew it would be a useless gesture. I might have taken her out with a surprise shot, but there was no chance at all that I could outshoot Lara Raith in a direct confrontation.

But it wasn't Lara. I couldn't see very far in the dimness, but Inari stumbled to a halt only a few feet shy of me, her eyes wide and her mouth open. "Oh, my God," she cried. "Thomas! What happened? What have you done to him?"

"Nothing!" I said. "He's been hurt. For the love of Pete, *help* me."

She hesitated for a second, her eyes wide, and then rushed forward to Thomas. "Oh, my God. There's blood! He's b-bleeding!"

I shoved my blasting rod at her. "Hold this," I snapped.

"What did you do to him?" she demanded. She had begun weeping. "Oh, Thomas."

I felt like screaming in frustration, and I tried to look at every possible place Lara might be, all at the same time. My instincts screamed that she was getting closer, and I wanted nothing more than to run away. "I told you, nothing! Just get moving and open the doors for me. We have to get back inside and call nine-one-one."

I bent down to pick up Thomas again.

Inari Raith screamed in grief and rage. Then she used my blasting rod with both hands to clout me on the back of the neck with so much force that it snapped in half. Stars exploded over my vision and I didn't even feel it when my face hit the gravel.

Everything got real confused for a minute or two, and when I finally started stirring I heard Inari crying. "Lara, I don't know what happened. He tried to shoot me, and Thomas isn't awake. He might be dead."

I heard footsteps on the gravel, and Lara said, "Give me the gun."

"What do we do?" Inari said. She was still crying.

Lara worked the slide on the gun with a couple of quiet clicks, checking the chamber. "Get inside," she said, her tone firm and confident. "Call emergency services and the police. *Now.*"

Inari got up and started to run off, leaving Thomas and me alone with the woman who had already half killed him. I tried to get up, but it was difficult. Everything kept spinning around.

I managed to get to one knee just as a cold, slithery feeling washed down my spine.

The three vampires of the Black Court did not announce their presence. They simply appeared as though formed from the shadows.

One of them was the one-eared vamp I had smacked with the holy-water balloon. On either side of him stood two more Black Court vamps, both male, both dressed in funeral finery, and both of teenage proportions. They hadn't been living corpses for very long—there were lividity marks on the arms and fingers of the first, and their faces hardly looked skeletal at all. Like the maimed vampire, they had long, dirty fingernails. Dried blood stained their faces and throats. And their eyes were filmy, stagnant pools.

Inari screamed a horror-movie scream and stumbled back to Lara. Lara sucked in a sharp breath, bringing the gun into point-down firing stance, spinning in a slow circle to watch each of the Black Court vamps in turn.

“Well, well,” rasped the maimed vampire. “What luck. The wizard and three Whites to boot. This will be entertaining.”

At which point I felt another, stronger slither of vile and deadly magical energy.

The *malocchio*. It was forming again, more powerfully than before—and I sensed that the deadly spell was already near and gathering more vicious power as it headed my way. Still dazed, I couldn't do a damned thing about it.

“Kill them,” the Black Court vampire whispered. “Kill them all.”

See what I mean? It's just like I said.

Things can *always* get worse.

Chapter Seventeen



I'm not hopeless at hand-to-hand, but I'm not particularly talented, either. I've been beaten senseless once or twice. Well. A lot. It isn't as unlikely as it sounds—a lot of the things that started pummeling me could bench-press a professional basketball team, whereas I was only human. In my neck of the woods, that meant that I was slightly tougher than a ceramic teacup.

I'd managed to survive the beatings thanks to good luck, determined friends, and an evil faerie godmother, but I figured that sooner or later my luck would run out, and I'd find myself alone, in danger, and at the limits of my endurance. Tonight had proved me right.

So it was a good thing I'd planned ahead.

I reached for my new belt buckle, with its carved design of a bear. The buckle was cast from silver, and the bear design was my own hand-carved work. It took me months to make it, though it wasn't particularly beautiful or inspirational, but I hadn't been trying for artistic accomplishment when I'd been creating it.

I'd been trying to prepare myself for, in the words of Foghorn Leghorn, just such an emergency.

I touched my left hand to my belt buckle and whispered, "*Fortius.*"

Power rushed into the pit of my stomach, a sudden tide of hot, living energy, nitrous for the body, mind, and soul. Raw life radiated out into my bones, running riot through my limbs. My confusion and weariness and pain vanished as swiftly as darkness before the sunrise.

This was no simple adrenaline boost, either, though that was a part of it. Call it *chi* or *mana* or one of thousand other names for it—it was pure magic, the very essence of life energy itself. It poured into me from the reservoir I'd created in the silver of the buckle. My heart suddenly overflowed with excitement, my thoughts with hope, confidence, and eager anticipation, and if I had a personal soundtrack to my life it would have been playing Ode to Joy while a stadium of Harry fans did the wave. It was

all I could do to stop myself from bursting into laughter or song. The pain was still there, but I shrugged off the recent blows and exertions and suddenly felt ready to fight.

Even when magic is involved, there ain't no free lunch. I knew that the pain would catch up to me. But I had to focus. Survive now; worry about the backlash later.

"Lara," I said. "I realize that you're kind of invested in killing me, but from where I'm standing the situation has changed."

The succubus shot a glance at the vampires and then at Inari. "I concur, Dresden."

"Rearrange teams and get the girl out?"

"Can you move?"

I pushed myself up, feeling pretty peppy, all things considered. Lara had her back more or less to me, and was trying to keep her eyes on all three Black Courters. The vampires, in turn, simply stood there with only the flicker of something hungry stirring in their dead, eyes to proclaim them something other than lifeless corpses. "Yeah, I'm good to go."

Lara shot a glance over her shoulder, her expression flickering with disbelief. "Impressive. *Pax*, then?"

I jerked my chin in a nod. "Twenty-four hours?"

"Done."

"Groovy."

"Their faces," Inari wailed. "Their *faces*! My God, what *are* they?"

I blinked at the terrified girl and shot a glance at Lara. "She doesn't know? You don't *tell* her these things?"

The succubus shrugged a shoulder, keeping most of her attention on the nearest vampire and said, "It's my father's policy."

"Your family is twisted, Lara. It really is." I picked up the shattered halves of my blasting rod. The carvings and spells laid on the wood were difficult, time-consuming, and expensive to make. I'd had to replace maybe half a dozen rods over the years, and it was the labor of better than a fortnight to create a new one. The girl had broken mine, which annoyed the hell out of me, but the drought of positive energy still zinging through me pointed out the upside: I now had two handy shafts of wood with jagged, pointy ends. I stepped between Inari and the nearest vampire and passed her one broken half of the rod. "Here," I said. "If you get the chance, make like Buffy."

Inari blinked at me. “What? Is this a joke?”

“Do it,” said Lara. Her voice was laced with iron. “No questions, Inari.”

The steel in the succubus’s voice galvanized the young woman. She took the shard of wood without further hesitation, though her expression grew no less terrified.

Overhead, the dark energy of the curse swirled around and around, a constant, intimidating pressure on my scalp. I tried to block out all the distractions, focusing on the curse and on where it was going. I needed to know who its target was—not only for the sake of my investigation, but for my immediate survival.

That curse was several kinds of nasty. And as it happened, I had a constructive, life-affirming purpose for a boatload of nasty juju. I drew my silver pentacle from my neck and spoke a troubling thought aloud. “Why are they just standing there?”

“They’re communing with their master,” Lara stated.

“I hate getting put on call waiting,” I said, wrapping the chain of my pentacle around my fist. “Shouldn’t we hit them now?”

“No,” Lara said sharply. “They’re aware of us. Don’t move. It will only set them off, and time is our ally.”

A sudden wash of almost physical cold set the hairs on the back of my neck on end. The curse was about to land, and I still wasn’t sure who it was coming for. I glanced upward, hoping for a physical cue. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that, Miss Raith.”

One of the vampires, the smallest of the pair who had showed up with One-ear, suddenly shuddered. Its dead eyes flickered around until they landed on me, and then it spoke. You wouldn’t think there would be a whole lot of difference between the rasp of one dry, leathery dead larynx and another, but there was. *This* voice flowed out and it wasn’t the voice of the vampire whose lips were moving. It was an older voice. Older and colder and vicious, but somehow tinged with something feminine. “Dresden,” that voice said. “And Raith’s right hand. Raith’s bastard son. And the darling of his eye. *This is a fortunate night.*”

“Evening, Mavra,” I said. “If it’s all the same to you, can you stop playing sock puppet with the omega Nosferatu and move this along? I’ve got a big day tomorrow and I want to get to bed for it.”

“Christ, Harry,” came a choking voice. I looked back and saw Thomas on the ground, his eyes open. He looked like death, and he had trouble

focusing on me, but at least he was lucid. “Are you drunk all of a sudden?”

I winked at him. “It’s the power of positive thinking.”

The puppet vampire hissed with Mavra’s anger, and its voice took on a quavering, modulated, half-echoing quality. “Tonight will balance many scales. Take them, my children. Kill them all.”

And a lot of things went down.

The vampires came for us. One-ear rushed at Lara. The sock puppet went for me, and the third one headed for Inari. It happened fast. My attacker may have been new to the game and clumsy, yet it moved at such a speed that it barely registered on my thoughts—but my body was still singing with the infusion of positive energy, and I reacted to the attack as if it had been the opening steps of a dance I already knew. I sidestepped the vampire’s rush and drove my half of the former blasting rod down at its back, Buffy-like.

Maybe it works better on television. The wood gouged the vampire, but I don’t think much of it got past its suit coat, much less pierced its heart. But the blow did manage to throw the thing off balance and send it stumbling past me. Maybe it actually hurt the vampire—the creature let out an earsplitting, creaking shriek of rage and surprise.

Inari screamed and swung her stake, but her Buffy impersonation wasn’t any better than mine. The vampire caught her arm, twisted its wrist, and broke bones with a snap, crackle, pop. She gasped and fell to her knees. The vampire shoved her over and leaned down, baring its teeth (not fangs, I noticed, just yellow corpse-teeth) and spreading its jaws to tear out her throat and bathe in the flood of blood.

And as if that weren’t enough, the curse suddenly coalesced and came shrieking out of the night to end Inari’s life.

I had scant seconds to act. I charged the vampire, leaned back, pictured an invisible beer can beginning an inch above the vampire’s teeth, and stomp-kicked the creature in the chin with my heel. It wasn’t a question of Harry-strength versus undead superstrength. I’d gotten the chump shot in, and while the vampire might have been able to rip through a brick wall, it only weighed as much as a dried corpse and it didn’t have enough experience to have anticipated the attack. I drove the kick home, hard. Physics took over from there, and the vampire fell back with a surprised hiss.

I seized Inari's right arm with my left. Energy flows out of the body from the right side. The left side absorbs energy. I stretched out my senses and felt the dark energy of the curse rushing down at Inari. It hit her a second later, but I was ready for it, and with an effort of will I caught the dark power coursing down into the girl before it could do her harm.

Pain erupted in my left palm. The power was cold—and not mountain-breeze cold, either. It was slimy and nauseating, like something that had come slinking out from the depths of some enormous subterranean sea. In that instant of contact, my head exploded with terror. This power, this black magic, was *wrong*. Fundamentally, nightmarishly, intensely *wrong*.

Since I'd begun my career as a wizard, I'd always believed that magic came from life, but that it was only potential energy, like electricity or natural gas or uranium. And while it may have come from positive origins, only its application would prove it good or evil. That there was no such thing as truly evil, malevolent, black magic.

I'd been wrong.

Maybe my own magic worked like that, but *this* power was something different. It had only one purpose—to destroy. To inflict horror, pain, and death. I felt that power writhe into me through my contact with the girl, and it hurt me on a level so deep that I could not find a specific word, even a specific *thought* to describe it. It ripped at me within, as though it had found a weakened place in my defenses, and started gouging out a larger opening, struggling to force itself inside me.

I fought it. The struggle happened all within an instant, and it hurt still more to tear that darkness loose, to force it to flow on through me and out of me again. I won the fight. But I felt a sudden terror that something had been torn away from me; that in simple contact with that dark energy, I had been scarred somehow, marked.

Or changed.

I heard myself scream, not in fear or challenge, but in agony. I extended my right hand and the black magic flowed out of it in an invisible torrent, fastening onto the vampire as it gained its feet again and reached out to grab me. The vampire's expression didn't even flicker, so I was sure it did not feel the curse coming.

Which made it a complete surprise when something slammed into the vampire from directly overhead, too quickly to be seen. There was a sound of impact, a raspy, dry scream, and the vampire went down hard.

It lay on the ground like a butterfly pinned to a card, arms and legs thrashing uselessly. Its chest and collarbone had been crushed.

By an entire frozen turkey. A twenty-pounder.

The plucked bird must have fallen from an airplane overhead, doubtlessly manipulated by the curse. By the time it got to the ground, the turkey had already reached its terminal velocity, and was still hard as a brick. The drumsticks poked up above the vampire's crushed chest, their ends wrapped in red tinfoil.

The vampire gasped and writhed a little more.

The timer popped out of the turkey.

Everyone stopped to blink at *that* for a second. I mean, come on. Impaled by a guided frozen turkey missile. Even by the standards of the quasi-immortal creatures of the night, that ain't something you see twice.

"For my next trick," I panted into the startled silence, "anvils."

And then the fight was on again.

Inari screamed in pain from her knees on the ground. Lara Raith lifted Thomas's little gun, and tongues of flame licked from it as she shot at One-ear. She was aiming for his legs. I started to help her, but I'd been playing long odds, mixing it up in hand-to-hand with the Black Court, and they caught up to me.

The vampire I'd dodged in the opening seconds of the fight slammed its arm into my shoulders. The blow was broad and clumsy but viciously strong. I managed to roll with it a little, but it still sent me straight down onto the gravel and knocked the wind from my chest. I felt the edges of rock cut me in a dozen places at once, but the pain didn't bother me. Yet. Nonetheless, it took me a second to get my body moving again.

The vampire stepped right over me and closed in on the fallen girl. With a simple, brutal motion, it seized her hair and shoved her facedown onto the parking lot, baring the back of her neck. It bent forward.

Thomas snarled, "Get away from her!" He hauled himself forward using his unwounded leg and one arm, and he got the other around the vampire's leg. Thomas heaved, and the creature fell, then twisted like an arthritic serpent to grapple with him.

Thomas went mano a mano, no tricks, no subtlety. The living corpse got a hand on Thomas's throat and tried to tear his head off. Thomas writhed sinuously away from the full power of the creature, and then rolled over a

couple of times. Thomas got hold of the thing's wrists and tried to force them away from his neck.

And then Thomas changed.

It wasn't anything so dramatic as the vampires of the Red Court, whose demonic forms lurked beneath a masquerade of seemingly normal human flesh. It was far subtler. A cold wind seemed to gather around him. His features stretched, changing, his cheekbones starker, his eyes more sunken, his face more gaunt. His skin took on a shining, almost luminescent luster, like a fine pearl under moonlight. And his eyes changed as well. His irises flickered to a shade of chrome-colored silver, then bleached out to white altogether.

He snarled a string of curses as he fought, and the sound of his voice changed as well—again, a subtle thing. It was more feral, more vicious, and its tone was not even remotely human. Thomas, despite his deathly injuries, went up against the Black Court killing machine in a contest of main strength and won. He forced the vampire's hands from his throat, rolled so that his good leg came up beneath the vampire, and, with the combined strength of his arms, Thomas threw the vampire into the brick wall of the nearest building.

Bricks shattered, and bits and pieces of them flew outward in a cloud of stinging shrapnel. The vampire collapsed to the ground for a moment, stunned. A heartbeat later, it stirred and began to rise again. Thomas's shoulders heaved, as though to push himself up and continue the fight, but whatever fuel had driven his transformation and sudden strength had been expended.

He fell limp and loose to the gravel, gaunt face empty of expression. His all-white eyes went out of focus, staring, and he did not move.

Lara Raith wasn't doing badly for herself. The wind was blowing the short little black silk robe back off of her, so it was all black lace and pale flesh that somehow did not present a contrast to the gun. One-ear had fallen on his side. Shards of brittle bone protruded from both thighs and both knees, where Lara Raith had exercised her marksmanship. One-ear pushed himself up, and Lara put a shot in the arm supporting the vampire's weight. One-ear's elbow exploded in a cloud of ruined cloth, moldy flesh, and bone splinters, and the creature fell back to the ground.

Lara put a bullet through One-ear's left eye. The smell was indescribably nauseating. Lara aimed at the vampire's other eye.

“This won’t kill me,” the creature snarled.

“I don’t need to,” Lara responded. “Just to slow you down.”

“I’ll be after you in hours,” One-ear-one-eye said.

“Look somewhere sunny,” she responded. “*Au revoir*, darling.”

The gun’s hammer clicked down and silence ensued.

Lara had time to blink in disbelief at the gun. Then the vampire Thomas had stunned rushed at Lara’s back. The creature wasn’t quite a blur, but it was fast as hell. I tried to shout a warning at her, but it came out more of a croak than anything.

Lara shot a glance over her shoulder and started to move, but my warning had come too late. The vampire seized her by her dark hair and spun her around. Then it hit her with a broad swing of its arm and literally knocked her out of her high-heeled shoes. She flew at the nearest wall, half spinning in the air, and hit hard. The gun tumbled from her fingers and she fell, her eyes wide and frightened, her expression stunned. Her face had been cut on the cheek, at the corner of her mouth, and on her forehead. She was bleeding odd, pale blood in thick, trickling lines.

The vampire shuddered and leapt after her, landing on all fours. It was graceful, but alien, far more arachnid than feline. The corpse prowled over to her, seized her throat, and shoved her shoulders against the wall. Then it thrust out a long, leathery tongue and started licking her blood, hissing in mounting pleasure.

One-ear slithered over to her as well, using his unwounded arm and a serpentine writhing of the rest of his body. “Raith’s second in command,” the vampire rasped. “As well as the White who betrayed us. Now you’re both mine.”

Lara tried to push the vampire licking her blood away, but she wasn’t strong enough, and she still looked dazed. “Get away from me.”

“Mine,” One-ear repeated. It drew Lara’s hair back away from her throat. The other vampire took her hands and pinned them against the wall above her head.

One-ear touched its tongue to Lara’s mouth and shivered. “I’ll show you what real vampires are like. You’ll see things differently soon. And you’ll be lovely, still. For a little while. I’ll enjoy that.”

Lara struggled, but the haze of confusion over her eyes did not clear, and her motions had a dreamlike lack of coordination. Her face took on an expression of horror as both vampires leaned into her, their withered teeth

settling onto her flesh. They bit her, and she bucked in terror and agony. There were ugly, slurping sounds beneath Lara Raith's screams.

Which was what I'd been waiting for. Once they had bitten down, I gathered up momentum as quietly as I could, closed the last few yards in the springing strides I would have used on a fencing strip, and drove the six-inch heel of one of Lara's black pumps as hard as I could into the space between the unwounded vampire's shoulder blades. I had the heel of my hand and the full weight of my body behind the blow, and I hit square and hard, so that the heel drove into its back, just left of its spine, directly at the vampire's withered heart.

I didn't get the response I would have liked best. The vampire didn't disintegrate or explode into dust. But it did convulse with a sudden scream, its body going into almost the same kind of spastic seizure the other one had displayed on having a turkey rammed through its chest. It staggered and fell to the ground, its dead face locked into a grimace of surprise and helpless pain.

One-ear was slow to react. By the time it tore its mouth from the gnawed and bleeding slope of Lara Raith's left breast, I had my mother's pentacle out and had focused all of my attention on it.

Now I've heard that the power of faith is simply another aspect of the magic I used all the time. I've also heard that it is a completely different kind of energy, totally unrelated to the living power I felt all around me. Certainly it garnered a very different reaction from various supernatural entities than my everyday wizardry did, so maybe they weren't related at all.

But that didn't matter. I wasn't holding a crucifix in the thing's face. I was holding the symbol of what *I* believed in. The five-pointed star of the pentacle represented the five forces of the universe, those of air, fire, water, earth, and of spiritual energy, laid into patterns of order and life and bound within a circle of human thought, human will. I believed that magic was fundamentally a force of life, of good, something meant to protect and preserve. I believed that those who wielded it therefore had a responsibility to use that power in the way it was meant to be used—and that was belief enough to tap into the vast power of faith, and to direct it against One-ear.

The pentacle burst into silver and blue light, a blaze as bright as an airborne flare. One-ear's stretched facial skin began to peel away, and the thick fluids oozing from its ruined eye socket burst into silver flame. The

vampire screamed and threw itself away from that silver fire. If he'd had a crony left, they could have come at me from opposite directions, so that the blazing light from the pentacle could sear only one. But he didn't, and I followed after One-ear, keeping the pentacle held before me, my concentration locked upon it.

One-ear scrambled over the writhing vampire with the turkey-crushed chest, and the creature, maybe younger or more vulnerable than its leader, simply burst into flame as the pentacle glared down upon it. I had to skip back a step from that sudden heat, and the fallen vampire was consumed by blinding fire until nothing was left of it.

By the time my eyes had adjusted to the comparative darkness of the parking lot again, One-ear was nowhere to be seen. I checked over my shoulder and saw the transformed Lara Raith straddle the staked vampire, her eyes blazing silver and bright, her skin shining as Thomas's had. She drove blows down at its face, crushing it with the first few, then driving *into* its skull with sickening squelching sounds during subsequent blows. She continued, screaming at the top of her lungs the whole while, until she'd crushed its face and moved onto its neck, beating it into shapeless pulp.

And then she tore the vampire's head off its shoulders, killing it.

She rose slowly, pale eyes distant and inhuman. Her white skin was streaked with ichor of black, brown, and dark green, mingling with the pale, pinkish blood around her cuts and the bite wounds. Her dark hair had fallen from its mostly up style, and hung around her in a wild tangle. She looked terrified and furious and sexy as hell.

The succubus turned hungry eyes on me, and began a slow stalk forward. I let the gathered light ease out of my pentacle. It wouldn't do me any good against Lara. "We have a truce," I said. My voice sounded harsh, cold, though I hadn't tried to make it that way. "Don't make me destroy you too."

She stopped in her stockinged tracks. Her expression flickered with uncertainty and fear, and she looked a hell of a lot shorter without the dome pumps. She shuddered and folded her arms over her stomach, closing her eyes for a moment. The luminous, compelling glow faded from her skin, her features becoming less unreal, if no less lovely. When she opened her eyes again, they were almost human. "My family," she said. "I have to get them out of here. Our truce stands. Will you help me?"

I looked at Inari, on the ground and paralyzed with pain. Thomas wasn't moving. He might have been dead.

Lara took a deep breath and said, "Mister Dresden, I can't protect them. I need your help to get them to safety. Please."

The last word had cost her something. Somehow, I held back from agreeing to help her on pure reflex. *That is a monumentally bad idea, Harry*, I cautioned myself. I shoved the knee-jerk chivalry aside and scowled at Lara.

She stood facing me, her chin lifted proudly. Her injuries looked vicious, and she had to be in pain, but she refused to let it show on her face—except for one moment, when she glanced at Thomas and Inari, and her eyes suddenly glistened. The tears fell, but she did not allow herself to blink.

"Dammit." I let out my breath in disgust at myself and said, "I'll get my car."

Chapter Eighteen



I debated talking to Arturo before I left but decided against it. Thomas and Inari were hurt, and the sooner they got medical care, the better. Additionally, One-ear the vampire had consciously gotten his own flunky immolated in order to escape. If he had some mystical method of communicating with Mama Mavra—or a cell phone—she might already be on the way with reinforcements.

One-ear was still pretty new to the vampire game, and his pair of followers had been virtual infants, and they had almost been more than all of us could handle. Mavra was in a different league entirely. She had been killing for centuries, and the near-extermination of the Black Court had meant that only the smartest, strongest, and most deadly of its members had survived. One-ear was dangerous enough, but if Mavra caught us in the open, she would take us apart.

So I ran to get the Blue Beetle from the row of parking spaces near the building Arturo was using. It was a quick run, a couple of plots up and one over from where Thomas and Inari lay. I slipped into the building. Only a couple of people saw me, and I ignored them as I ducked into the studio doors, seized my backpack, my coat, and the sleeping puppy, and fumbled in the coat until I found my car keys. I carried the whole kit and caboodle out to the car.

I coaxed the Beetle to life and tore down the gravel lanes with all the speed its little engine could manage. The Beetle's single headlight glared over Lara, who had Thomas in a fireman's carry. She'd taken off the short black robe and had tied it into an improvised sling for Inari, who stumbled along behind her older sister.

I opened the doors and helped her lower Thomas into the back of the Beetle. Lara stared for a second at my car's interior. It didn't look like she approved of the stripped and improvised quality of it. "There's no seat in back," she said.

“That’s why there’s a blanket,” I answered her. “Get in. How is he?”

“Alive, for now,” Lara said. “He’s breathing, but he’s emptied his reserves. He’ll need to refresh them.”

I paused and stared at her. “You mean he needs to feed on someone.”

Her eyes slid aside to Inari, but the girl had her hands full simply staying vertical through the pain, and probably wouldn’t have heard the space shuttle lifting off. Nonetheless, Lara lowered her voice. “Yes. Deeply.”

“Hell’s bells,” I said. I got the door for Inari and helped her into the passenger-side seat, buckled her in, and dropped the puppy in her lap. She clutched at him with her unwounded arm, whimpering.

I got the Beetle the hell away from the little industrial park. After several moments of hurried driving, I started to relax. I kept checking, but I saw no one following me. I played a few trail-shaking tricks, just in case, and finally felt able to speak. “I’ll get you to my place,” I told Lara.

“You can’t possibly think that the basement of a boardinghouse will be secure.”

“How do you know where I live?” I demanded.

“I’ve read the Court’s defensive assessment of your home,” she said with an absent wave of her hand.

Which was scary as hell, that someone had assessed my freaking apartment. But I wasn’t going to show her that. “It’s kept me alive pretty well. Once we get there we can fort up under my heavy defenses. We’ll be stuck inside, but safe until morning.”

“If you wish. But if he does not feed, Thomas will be dead within the hour.”

I spat an oath.

“Mavra knows where you live, in any case, Dresden. She will doubtless have some of her personnel waiting near your apartment.”

“True,” I said. “Where else could we go?”

“My family’s house.”

“You all live in Chicago?”

“Of course not,” Lara said, her voice tired. “But we keep houses in several cities around the world. Thomas has been in and out of Chicago for the past two or three years, between resort vacations. Justine is at the house, waiting for him.”

“Inari will need a doctor.”

“I have one,” she said. Then added, “On retainer.”

I stared at her in my rearview mirror for a moment (in which she appeared like anyone else) and then shrugged. “Which way?”

“North along the lake,” she said. “I’m sorry. I don’t know the street names. Turn right at the light ahead.”

She gave directions and I followed them, and I reminded myself that it would be a bad habit to form. It took us better than half an hour to get up to one of the wealthy lakeside developments that just about any large body of water makes inevitable. I’d seen several such developments during the course of my investigations, but the area Lara directed me to was as elaborate and expensive-looking as any I had ever seen.

The house we finally pulled up to had multiple wings, multiple stories, and a couple of faux-castle turrets. It had cost someone eight digits, and could have doubled as the headquarters of the villain in a James Bond movie. Old timber had grown up around it, and was manicured into an idyllic forest of rolling, grass-green hummocks and beautiful, shapely trees wreathed in ivy and autumn leaves. Small lit pools were dotted here and there, each shrouded with its own low cloud of evening mist.

The drive rolled through Little Sherwood for better than half a mile, and I started feeling nervous. If anything tried to kill me, I was too far away from the road to run for help. Or even to scream for it. I shook my wrist to hear the jangle of the little silver shields on my bracelet, and made sure it was ready to go at an instant’s notice.

Lara’s pale grey eyes regarded me in the rearview mirror for a moment, and then she said, “Dresden, you and my brother have nothing further to fear from me this night. I will respect our truce, and extend guest rights to you while you are in my family’s home. And I do so swear it.”

I frowned and didn’t chance a look at her eyes, even in the mirror. I didn’t have to. There was something in her voice that I recognized. Call it the ring of truth.

The one advantage to dealing with supernatural foes was that the code of honor of the Old World was accepted and expected when we negotiated with one another. A sworn oath and the obligations of hospitality were more binding in those circles than the threat of physical force. What Lara had offered me meant that not only would she not attempt to do me harm—she would be obligated to protect me should anyone else attempt to do so. If she failed in her duties as a host, it would represent a major loss of face, should word of it get around.

But from what I'd gathered, Lara wasn't the one making all the calls in the Raith household. If someone up the family food chain—for example, Daddy Raith—thought he could get away with it without word leaking out, he might decide to subtract me from the old equation of life. It was a real risk, and I didn't want to take it.

The last vampire who had offered me the hospitality of her home, Bianca, had drugged me, nearly killed me, manipulated me into starting a war (which incidentally forced me into a stupidly dangerous investigation with the Queens of Faerie), and tried to feed me to her most recent vampire “recruit,” my former lover, Susan. There was no reason to think that Lara wasn't capable of the same treachery.

Unfortunately, my back wasn't exactly breaking under the weight of all my options. I had no idea of how to help Thomas, and my apartment was the only place in town I would be safe. If I cut and ran Thomas wouldn't survive it. I didn't have anything but a strong intuition that Lara would hold to the letter of our truce. Two seconds after it was over she'd finish what she started, sure, but in the meantime we might be okay.

A paranoid little voice inside reminded me that Lara seemed like she was more or less on the level, and that it should make me nervous. Their near-humanity was what made the White Court so dangerous. I'd never come close to thinking that maybe Bianca was an okay person underneath the blood-craving monster. I'd known that she wasn't human, and I'd been wary every single time I'd interacted with her.

I didn't get any more of a creature-feature vibe from Lara than I did from Thomas. But I had to figure they were cut from a similar mold. There would be lies under lies. I had to be paranoid, which in this instance was another word for *smart*. I couldn't afford to extend Lara much trust if I wanted to avoid a rerun of the *Harry Nearly Dies Because of His Stupid Chivalry Show*.

I promised myself that the second anything got dicey I would blast my way out of that house through the nearest wall, incinerating first and asking questions later. It wouldn't be the subtlest escape in the whole world, but I was pretty sure the Raiths could afford to repair the damages. I wondered if vampires had any trouble getting homeowner's insurance.

I pulled the Blue Beetle around the circular drive in front of Château Raith. Its engine shuddered, coughed, and finally died before I could shut it

down. A sidewalk swept between a pair of vicious-looking stone gargoyles four feet high, and led through a rose garden bedded with pure white gravel.

The rose vines were old ones, some of them as thick as my thumb. Their spreading tendrils twined all around the entirety of the garden and over the feet of the crouching gargoyles. The lighting was all arranged in soft blues and greens, and it made the roses on the vines look black. Thick leaves grew all over the vines, but here and there I could see the wicked needle tips of larger-than-average thorns. The air was filled with their light, heady scent.

“Help Inari,” Lara said. “I will carry Thomas.”

“Considering that you’re the one who shot him in the first place, *I’ll* carry Thomas,” I said. “*You* help Inari.”

Her lips compressed slightly, but she nodded. “As you wish.”

Damn straight, as I wish.

Lara leaned over to pull Inari from the car, but before she could touch the girl the notch-eared puppy sprang up out of his sleep, barking and snarling at Lara in squeaky fury. Lara jerked her hand back, brows lowering in consternation. “What’s wrong with your animal?”

I sighed and slid into my leather duster, then came around to the passenger door. “I keep telling everyone he’s not mine.” I scooped up the little psychopath and deposited him in one of my coat pockets. He scrambled around in there for a minute, and then he managed to poke his head out. The puppy kept his eyes on Lara and kept growling. “There. Now the beast cannot harm you.”

Lara gave me a cool look and coaxed Inari to her feet. Then she helped me draw Thomas out of the car as gently as possible. He was flaccid and cold, his eyes entirely white, but I could hear his labored breathing. Without knowing the extent of the injuries to his upper body, I didn’t dare risk a fireman’s carry, so I got an arm under his shoulder blades and hamstrings, and lifted him like a child. He was heavy. My shoulders screamed, and my ears started ringing with a quiet, shrill tone.

I felt dizzy for a second, and shrugged it off with an effort of will. I couldn’t afford to show any weakness now.

I followed Lara and Inari up the sidewalk to the house. Lara pushed a button on a small plastic panel beside the door and said, “Lara Raith.” There was a heavy metallic *click-clack*, and one of the doors drifted slowly in.

Just then the lights of another car swept across us. A white limo pulled in beside the Blue Beetle on the circular drive and came to a halt. A moment later a white sedan pulled in behind the limo.

The limo's driver was woman over six feet tall wearing a grey uniform. Her hair was pulled back in a severe braid, and she wore dark red lipstick. A tall, strong-looking man in a grey silk suit got out on the passenger side of the limo. I caught sight of a shoulder rig while he was settling his jacket. His eyes swept around, taking in everything, including us at the door, the drive, the grounds, the trees, and the roof of the house. He was checking possible lines of fire. A bodyguard.

Simultaneously, another man and woman got out of the white sedan. At first I thought that they were the same two people. I blinked. The man looked the same, but the second woman was wearing a grey suit a lot like the one of the man with her. Then I got it—two sets of identical twins. They all looked wary, competent, and dangerous. They fanned out around the limo in silent coordination, like they'd done it a jillion times.

Then the driver opened the back door of the limo.

The air grew suddenly colder, as if the Almighty had flicked on the air-conditioning. A man slid out of the car. He was about six feet tall, dark of hair and pale of flesh. He was dressed in a white linen suit with a silver-grey silk shirt and Italian leather shoes. There was a scarlet gem of some kind fixed to his left earlobe, though his fine, straight hair hid it until a breeze briefly tossed the dark strands to one side. He had long, spatulate fingers, broad shoulders, the eyes of a drowsy jaguar, and he was better-looking than Thomas.

Beside me, Lara shuddered, and I heard her whisper, "Dammit, no."

The newcomer walked over to us, very slowly and deliberately. The doubles fell into position to his sides and behind him, and I couldn't help but think they looked like toys—two matched sets of Bodyguard Barbie and Bodyguard Ken. The pale man paused beside one of the gargoyles and plucked a stem and a rose from one of the plants there. Then he approached again, in no hurry whatsoever, plucking off leaves and thorns from the flower one by one.

When he was about four feet away he stopped, finally looking up from the rose. "Ah, dearest Lara," he murmured. His voice was deep, quiet, and as smooth as warm honey. "What a pleasant surprise to find you here."

Lara's expression slipped into a neutral mask, veiling the anxiety I could feel in the tension of her body. She inclined her head in a courtly nod, and left her eyes on the sidewalk.

The man smiled. His eyes swept over the rest of us meanwhile, distant and alien. "Have you been well?"

"Yes, my Lord."

His lips pursed into a pout. "This is hardly a formal occasion, little Lara. I've missed you."

Lara sighed. She met my eyes for a second, her expression one of warning. Then she turned to step closer to the man. She kissed his cheek without lifting her eyes and whispered, "And I you, Father."

Oh, crap.

Chapter Nineteen



Lord Raith looked Lara up and down. “That’s . . . quite a novel ensemble you’re wearing.”

“It’s been a busy night.”

Raith nodded and went to Inari, gently touching her shoulder, peering at her arm in the makeshift sling. “What happened to you, daughter mine?”

Inari lifted eyes dull with pain and fatigue and said, “We were mugged. Or something. I think it must have been a gang. That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Raith didn’t hesitate a beat. “Of course it does, dearest.” He fixed his eyes on Lara and said, “How could you let something like this happen to your baby sister?”

“Forgive me, Father,” Lara said.

Raith waved a generous hand. “She needs medical attention, Lara. I believe hospitals provide such a thing.”

“Bruce is here,” Lara said. “I’m sure he can take care of it.”

“Which is Bruce?”

I would have expected her tone to hold annoyance, but if so I didn’t hear it. “The doctor.”

“He came with you from California? How fortuitous.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Hey, people. Chat time is over. The girl’s about to pass out on her feet. Thomas is dying. So both of you shut your mouth and help them.”

Raith whipped his head around to stare daggers at me. His voice was cold enough to merit the use of a Kelvin scale. “I do not respond well to demands.”

I ground my teeth and said, “Both of you shut your mouth and help them. Please.”

And they say I can’t be diplomatic.

Raith flicked an irritated hand at the bookend brigade. Bodyguard Kens and Barbies drew their guns in precise unison and raised them to shoot.

“No!” Lara said. She stepped in front of me and Thomas. “You can’t.”

“Can’t?” Raith said. His voice was dangerously mild.

“They might hit Thomas.”

“I am confident in their marksmanship. They will not hit him,” Raith said, in a tone that suggested he wouldn’t lose any sleep if they did.

“I’ve invited him,” Lara said.

Raith stared at her for a moment, and then in that same soft voice asked, “Why?”

“Because we declared a twenty-four-hour truce while he assisted us,” Lara answered. “If not for his help, we might all be dead.”

Raith’s head tilted to one side. He regarded me for a long moment, and then smiled. He didn’t have Thomas beat when it came to smiles. Thomas’s grin had so much life to it that it was practically sentient. Lord Raith’s smile made me think of sharks and skulls. “I suppose it would be churlish to ignore my debt to you, young man. I will honor the truce and respect my daughter’s invitation and hospitality. Thank you for your assistance.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Would you both shut your mouths and help them now. Pretty please. With sugar on top.”

“I used to admire that kind of monolithic determination.” Raith waved his hand again, though his eyes looked no less cold. The thugs put their guns away. One man and one woman went to Inari, supporting her and helping her into the house. “Lara, bring your physician to her quarters, if you would. Assuming he has mind enough left to treat her.”

She bowed her head again, and something told me she resented doing it.

“I’ll expect you and Thomas in my chambers at dawn so that we can discuss what happened. Oh, and if you would, Wizard Dresden—”

The King of the White Court knew me on sight. This just kept getting better and better.

“—Lara can show you where Thomas’s chambers are. That girl of his is there, I think.” Lord Raith drifted into the house, paced by his retainers.

By my count, there were still two whole goons available for Thomas toting, but I grunted like a big tough guy and set out to do it myself. We started walking into the house. “Nice guy,” I commented to Lara. I was a little short of breath. “And I was all worried about meeting him.”

“I know,” Lara murmured. “He was really quite pleasant.”

“Except for the eyes,” I said.

She glanced at me again, something like approval in her features. “You saw that.”

“That’s what I do.”

She nodded. “Then please believe me when I say that deception is what we do, wizard. My father does not like you. I suspect he wishes to kill you.”

“I get that a lot.”

She smiled at me, and I got hit with another surge of lust—maybe one that wasn’t entirely inspired by her come-hither mojo. She was a smart, tough lady, and had plenty of courage. I had to respect that. And she was gliding along beside me dressed in skimpy black lingerie. Admittedly, the blood and ichor detracted from the overall look, but it gave me a good excuse to see the rest of her while making my assessment.

We went up a shallow, curving stairwell and down a long hall. I tried to stick mental landmarks into my memory so that I’d be able to leave in a hurry if I needed to. My vision blurred for a moment, and the high-pitched buzzing in my ears increased in volume. I took a breath and steadied myself against the wall.

“Here,” Lara said. She turned to me and took Thomas. Either she was stronger than me or she was good at acting like it was no big deal. Probably both.

I rolled my aching shoulders in relief. “Thanks. How is he?”

“The bullets aren’t going to kill him,” she said. “He’d have died already. The Hunger may finish him, though.”

I arched an eyebrow at her in question.

“The Hunger,” she repeated. “Our need to feed. The angel of our darker natures. We can draw upon it to give us a kind of strength, but it’s like fire. It can turn on you if you don’t keep it under control. Right now Thomas is so hungry that he can’t think. Can’t move. He’ll be all right once he feeds.”

I felt an itch on the back of my neck and checked over my shoulder. “Your father’s driver is tailing us.”

Lara nodded. “She’ll dispose of the body.”

I blinked. “I thought you said he was going to be all right.”

“He will be,” Lara said, her tone carefully neutral. “Justine won’t.”

“What?”

“He’s too hungry,” Lara said. “He won’t be able to control himself.”

“Fuck that,” I said. “That isn’t going to happen.”

“Then he’ll die,” Lara said tiredly. “This is the door to his suite.”

She stopped at a door, and with my reflexes on automatic pilot I opened it for her. We went into a rather large room dominated by a sunken pit in the floor. The carpet was lush, a dark crimson, pillows were all over, and a smoking brazier rested in the center of the pit. The air was heavy with sweet incense. Quiet jazz drifted through the room from speakers I couldn’t see.

On the opposite side of the room, a curtain twitched and then the girl appeared from what was evidently a room beyond. Justine’s shoulder-length dark hair had been striped with trendy strands of dark blue and deep purple. She wore a white bathrobe several sizes too large for her and looked rumpled from sleep. She blinked dark, sleepy eyes and then gasped and rushed toward us. “Thomas? My God!”

I looked back over my shoulder. The driver stood just outside the doorway, speaking quietly into a cellular phone.

Lara carried Thomas down into the pit and carefully laid him upon the pillows and cushions, Justine at her side. The girl’s face was twisted in anxiety. “Harry? What happened to him?”

Lara glanced up at me and said, “I need to make sure Inari is cared for. If you will excuse me.” I didn’t, but she left the room anyway.

Justine stared up at me, fear and confusion on her face. “I don’t understand.”

“Lara shot him,” I said quietly. “And then some Black Court gorillas jumped us.”

“Lara?”

“Didn’t seem like she liked the idea, but she sure as hell gave it a whirl. Lara said he’d spent his reserves fighting, and that he would die if he didn’t feed.”

Justine’s eyes flicked up to the doorway. She saw the driver standing outside. Justine’s face blanched.

“Oh,” she whispered.

Tears formed in her eyes.

“Oh, no. No, no,” she said. “My poor Thomas.”

I stepped forward. “You don’t have to do this.”

“But he’ll die.”

“Do you think he’d want it to be you instead?”

Her lips trembled and she closed her eyes for a moment. "I don't know. I've seen him. I know there's a part of him that wants to."

"And there's another part that doesn't," I said. "That would want you to be alive and happy."

She settled on her knees beside Thomas, staring down at him. She put her fingers on his cheek, and he moved for the first time since the fight with One-ear. He turned his head and placed a soft kiss on Justine's hand.

The girl shivered. "He might not take too much. He tries so hard not to take too much. Not to hurt me. He might stop himself."

"Do you really believe that?"

She was silent for a long moment, and then said, "It doesn't matter. I can't stand by and let him die when I can help him."

"Why not?"

She looked up at me, her eyes steady. "I love him."

"You're addicted to him," I said.

"That too," she agreed. "But it doesn't change anything. I love him."

"Even if it kills you?" I asked.

She bowed her head, gently stroking Thomas's cheek. "Of course."

I started to refute her, but just then the rush of energy from the silver belt buckle petered out. I started trembling violently. The pain of my injuries rushed back over me. Fatigue settled onto me like a backpack full of lead. My thoughts turned to exhausted sludge.

I vaguely remember Justine cajoling me to my feet and guiding me back through one of the curtains to a lavish bedroom. She helped me onto the bed and said, "You'll tell him for me, won't you?" She was crying through a small smile. "You'll tell him what I said? That I love him?"

The room was spinning, but I promised her that I would.

She kissed my forehead and gave me a sad smile. "Thank you, Harry. You've always helped us."

My vision narrowed to a grey tunnel. I tried to get back up again, but I could barely manage to turn my head.

So all I could do was watch Justine slide out of the bathrobe and leave the room to go to Thomas.

And to her death.

Chapter Twenty



Sometimes you wake up and there's a little voice inside your head that tells you that today is a special day. For a lot of kids, it sometimes happens on their birthdays and always on Christmas morning. I remember exactly one of those Christmases, when I was little and my dad was still alive. I felt it again eight or nine years later, the morning that Justin DuMorne came to pick me up from the orphanage. I felt it one more time, the morning Justin brought Elaine home from whatever orphanage she had been in.

And now the little voice was telling me to wake up. That it was a special day.

My little voice is some kind of psycho.

I opened my eyes and found myself on a bed the size of a small aircraft carrier. There was light coming into the room from beneath a curtain, but it wasn't enough to see more than vague outlines. I ached from almost a dozen minor cuts and abrasions. My throat burned with thirst, and my belly with hunger. My clothes were spattered in blood (and worse), my face was rough with the shadow of a beard, my hair was so mussed that it was approaching trendy, and I can't even imagine what I would have smelled like to anyone walking in. I needed a shower.

I slipped out into the entrance room, around the passion pit and its pillows. There wasn't a corpse lying in the pit or anything, but then that's what the driver had been for. The pale light of predawn colored the sky deep blue through a nearby window. I'd been down for only a few hours. Time to get into the car and get gone.

I opened the door to leave Thomas's chambers, but it was locked. I checked, but it was using at least a pair of key-only padlocks and maybe some kind of emergency bolt as well. There was no way I could open it.

"Fine. We do this Hulk style." I took a few steps back, focused on the wall I thought closest to the outside, and began to draw in my will. I took it slow, concentrating, so that I would have the best chance of keeping the

spell under control. “Mister McGee, don’t make me angry,” I muttered at the wall. “You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry.”

I was about to huff and puff and blow the wall down when the door rattled, clicked, and opened. Thomas entered, looking as he always did, though this time he wore khakis and a white cotton turtleneck. He had a long coat of brown leather draped over his shoulders, and a gym bag in his hand. He froze when he saw me. His expression showed something I didn’t think I’d ever seen in him before—shame. He looked down, avoiding my eyes.

“Harry,” he said quietly. “Sorry about the door. Had to make sure you got left alone until you woke up.”

I didn’t say anything. But I remembered my last sight of Justine. Fury, pure and simple, flooded through me.

“I brought you some clothes, some towels.” Thomas tossed the gym bag underhand. It landed on my foot. “There’s a guest room two doors down on your left. You can use the shower in there.”

“How’s Justine?” I asked. My voice was flat and hard.

He stood there without lifting his eyes.

I felt my hands clench into angry fists. I realized that I was barely a breath away from attacking Thomas with my bare hands. “That’s what I thought,” I said. I walked past him to the door. “I’ll clean up at home.”

“Harry.”

I stopped. His voice was raw with emotion, and sounded like he was trying to speak through a throat full of bitter mud. “I wanted you to know. Justine . . . I tried to stop in time. I didn’t want to hurt her. Never.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You had good intentions. That makes it all right.”

He folded his arms over his stomach, as if nauseous, and bowed his head. His long hair veiled his face. “I never pretended I wasn’t . . . a predator, Harry. I never claimed she was anything but what she was. Food. You knew it. She knew it. I didn’t lie to anyone.”

I had a bunch of vicious answers I could have used, but I went with, “Before she went to you last night, Justine asked me to tell you that she loved you.”

Short of shoving a running chain saw into Thomas’s guts, I don’t think I could have hurt him any more. He didn’t look up when I spoke, and he started trembling with rapid breaths. “Don’t go yet. I need to talk to you. Please. There are things happening that—”

I started walking out, and heard myself put every bit of caustic contempt I could into the words: “Make an appointment at my office.”

He took a step after me. “Dresden, Mavra knows about this house. For your own sake, at least wait for sunrise.”

He had a point. Dammit. Sunrise would send the Black Court back to their hidey holes, and if they had any mortal accomplices, it would at least mean that I would only be up against run of the mill weapons and tactics. Arturo probably wouldn’t be awake at the moment, and Murphy would just now be getting dressed and heading for the gym. Bob would stay out until the last minute he possibly could, so I’d have to wait for sunrise to talk to him anyway. I had a little time to kill.

“All right,” I said.

“Do you mind if tell you a few things?”

“Yes,” I said. “I mind.”

His voice broke. “Dammit, do you think I wanted this?”

“I think you hurt and used someone who loved you. A woman. As far as I’m concerned, you don’t exist. You look like a person, but you aren’t. I should have remembered that from the beginning.”

“Harry—”

Anger flared up in me like a wall of red flame behind my eyes. I shot a look at Thomas over my shoulder that made him flinch. “Be satisfied with nonexistence, Thomas,” I said. “You’re lucky you have it. It’s the only thing keeping you alive.”

I slammed the door behind me as I left his chambers. I slammed open the door to the guest room he’d mentioned. And then slammed it behind me, which was starting to seem a little childish, even through a haze of bitter anger. I tried to take deep breaths and got the shower going.

Hot water. Ye gods. There are no words to describe how good a hot shower feels after several years of living with no water heater of your own. I broiled myself for a while, and found soap, shampoo, shaving cream, and a razor waiting on a shelf inside the shower. I availed myself of them and began to calm down. I figured that once I got some coffee I might be almost stable again.

I guess if Lord Raith could afford a house that size, he could afford a water heater to match it, because I ran the shower as hot as I could stand for almost half an hour and it never got cold. When I got out, the bathroom mirror was steamed up and the air was thick and wet enough to suffocate

me. I slapped my towel over all the wet bits, tied it to my waist, and left the bathroom for the guest bedroom. The air was cooler and drier and it made it a pleasure to simply inhale.

I opened the sports bag Thomas had thrown me. It held a pair of blue jeans that looked more or less my size and a pair of plain grey athletic socks. Then I found what I thought at first was a circus tent, but it turned out to be an enormous Hawaiian shirt with lots of blue and orange in its flowered pattern.

I looked at the thing skeptically while I put on the jeans. They fit pretty well. Thomas hadn't included any clean underwear, which was likely just as well. I'd rather go commando than wear undies that may have outlived their previous owner. I zipped up the jeans with considerable caution. A nearby dresser had a mirror on it, and I went to it to comb my hair while working up the nerve to put on the shirt.

Inari's image stood in the mirror, staring at my back. My heart flew up into my throat, then past it into my brain and out the top of my skull. "Holy crap!" I sputtered.

I turned to face her. She was wearing a cute little pink sleep shirt with prints of Winnie the Pooh all over it. The shirt would have fallen to midthigh on a shorter or younger girl, but on Inari it barely managed to escape indecency. Her right arm was wrapped to the elbow in a black plaster cast. Her left was cradled against her body, and she held the notch-eared puppy in it. He looked restless and unhappy.

"Hello," Inari said. Her voice was very soft and her eyes were distant and unfocused. Alarm bells started going off in my head. "Your pet got out into the manor last night," she went on. "Father asked me to find him and bring him back to you."

"Oh," I said. "Uh. Thank you, I guess. Don't let me keep you waiting. Just put him on the bed."

Instead of doing so, she stared at me—specifically, at my chest. "You have more muscle than I would have thought. And scars." Her eyes flicked down to the puppy. When she looked back at me, they had turned a pale shade of grey, and over the next several seconds that color gained a metallic sheen. "I came to thank you. You saved my life last night."

"Welcome," I said. "Puppy on the bed, please?"

She slid forward and lowered the little dog to the bed. He looked tired, but he started a quiet little warning growl, his eyes on Inari. After she put

the dog down, she kept taking slow, sinuous steps toward me. “I don’t know what it is about you. You’re fascinating. I’ve been wanting the chance to speak with you all night.”

I did my best not to notice the almost serpentine grace of her movements. If I noticed them too hard, I’d start ignoring everything else.

“I’ve never felt this before,” Inari continued, almost to herself. Her eyes stayed locked on my bare chest. “About anyone.”

She got close enough that I could smell her perfume, a scent that made my knees wobble for a second. Her eyes had become a shade of brightest silver, inhumanly intense, and I shivered as a spasm of raw physical need shot through me—different from when Lara had hit me with the come-hither, but just as potent. I had a flash image of pressing Inari down onto the bed and tearing the sweet little nightshirt off of her, and I closed my eyes to shove it away.

It must have taken longer than it seemed, because the next thing I knew, Inari pressed herself to me. She shivered and ran her tongue over my collarbone. I nearly jumped out of my borrowed jeans. I blinked my eyes open, lifted a hand, and opened my mouth to protest, but Inari pressed her mouth to mine and guided my hand down to brush against something naked and smooth and delicious. There was a panicked second in which some part of me realized that my caution hadn’t been enough—that I’d been compromised and taken. But that part quickly shut up, because Inari’s mouth on mine was the sweetest thing I’d ever tasted. The puppy continued growling his little warning, but it didn’t matter, either.

We’d gotten to some seriously heavy breathing when Inari tore her lips from my mouth, panting, her mouth swollen with the heated kisses. Her eyes flashed pure and empty white, and her skin began to grow luminous and pearlescent. I tried to fumble some words out of my mouth, to tell her to stop. They didn’t get past my tingling lips. She hooked one long leg behind one of mine and pressed in with a sudden and inhuman strength to slather a line of licking, wet kisses across my throat. Cold started spreading through me—delicious, sweet cold that stole warmth and strength even as the pleasure began.

And then the damndest thing happened.

Inari let out a panicked shriek and staggered back from me. She fell to the floor on the other side of the guest room, gasping. She lifted her head a

moment later to look at me, her eyes hazed with confusion and their original color again.

Her mouth had been burned. I saw blisters rising around her lips. “What?” she stammered. “What happened? Harry? What are you doing here?”

“Leaving,” I said. I still felt short of breath, as if I’d been sprinting rather than doing energetic kissing. I turned from her, stuffed the dirty clothes in my pack, and pulled my duster on. I plopped the puppy down in his usual pocket and said, “I’ve got to get out of here.”

Just then Thomas slammed the door open, his eyes wild. He looked from Inari to me and back, and exhaled, evidently trying to relax. “Thank God. Are you both all right?”

“My mouth,” Inari said, her tone still sleepy and bewildered. “It hurts. Thomas? What happened to me?” She started hyperventilating. “What’s happening? Those *things* last night, and you were hurt, and your eyes were *white*, Thomas. I . . . what . . . ?”

Ow. It was painful to watch her. I’d seen people who had suddenly been shocked out of their innocence to the existence of the supernatural before, but it had rarely been something this sudden and terrifying. I mean, my God. The girl’s family wasn’t what she thought they were. They were also a part of this nightmarish new reality, and they had done nothing to prepare her for it.

“Inari,” Thomas said gently. “You need to rest. You’ve barely slept and your arm needs time to heal. You should get to bed.”

“How can I?” she said. Her voice started shaking and cracking, as if she were weeping, but no tears fell. “How can I? I don’t know who you are. I don’t know who I am. I’ve never *felt* anything like that. What’s happening to me?”

Thomas sighed and kissed her forehead. “We’ll talk, soon. All right? I’ll give you some answers. But first you have to rest.”

She leaned against him and closed her eyes. “I felt so empty, Thomas. And my mouth hurts.”

He picked her up like a child and said, “Shhhh. We’ll take care of it. You can sleep in my room for now. All right?”

“All right,” she said. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against his shoulder.

Still damp from the shower, I grew cold enough to bite the bullet, take off my duster, and put on the Hawaiian shirt. The duster went on over it, which went a long way toward neutralizing the shirt's presence. I packed up everything to go and headed for the door. Thomas was just leaving his room again, locking it up behind him.

I stared at his profile. He cared for Inari. That much was obvious. And whether he wanted to admit it or not, he had cared for Justine as well. I felt cold, bitter anger run through me when I thought of Justine, who had risked her life for him on at least one other occasion. Who had given up her life for him last night. The sheer, vicious passion of my anger surprised me. And then I had another intuition.

He hadn't meant it to happen. Thomas may have hurt or killed the woman he loved, but the anger I felt wasn't solely a reaction to what he'd done. I was standing on the outside this time, but I'd seen this situation before, when the Red Court had destroyed Susan's life. I would never have wished harm on Susan, not in a thousand years, but the fact remained that if she hadn't been going out with me, she probably would still be in Chicago, writing her column for the *Midwest Arcane*. And she would still be human.

That's why I felt such anger and shame when I looked at Thomas. I was staring into a mirror, and I didn't like what I saw there.

I'd all but destroyed myself in the wake of Susan's transformation. For all I knew, right now Thomas was worse off than I'd been. At least I'd saved Susan's life. I'd lost her as a lover, but she was still a vital, strong-willed woman determined to forge a life for herself—just not with me. Thomas would not have even that much consolation. He'd been the one to pull the trigger, so to speak, and his remorse was tearing him apart.

I shouldn't have tried to hurt him more. I shouldn't have started chucking stones from within my own glass domicile.

"She knew what she was doing," I said into the silence. "She knew the risk. She wanted to help you."

Thomas's mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "Yeah."

"It wasn't your decision at that point, Thomas."

"I was the only one there. If it wasn't my call then whose was it?"

"Your dad and Lara knew Justine was important to you?"

He nodded.

"They set her up," I said. "They could have handed you anyone. But they knew Justine was here. Your father gave Lara specific instructions to take

you to your room. And from what Lara said on the way here in the car, she knew what he was going to do.”

Thomas lifted his eyes. He stared at his door for a moment and then said, “I see.” He clenched a hand into a fist. “But it hardly matters now.”

I couldn’t refute that. “What I said was out of line.”

He shook his head. “No. You were right.”

“Right isn’t the same thing as cruel. I’m sorry.”

Thomas shrugged and we said nothing more on the matter.

“I’ve got places to go,” I said, heading down the hall. “If you want to talk, walk me out.”

“Not that way,” Thomas said quietly. He stared at me for a minute and then nodded, some of the tension leaving him. “Come on. I’ll take you around the guards and monitors. If my father sees you leaving, he might try to kill you again.”

I turned around and fell into step beside Thomas. The puppy whimpered and I scratched him behind the ears. “What do you mean, again?”

He spoke quietly, his eyes flat. “Inari. He sent her to you when he saw that you left my chambers.”

“If he wanted me dead, why didn’t he just come and do it?”

“It isn’t how the White Court fights, Harry. We use misdirection, seduction, manipulation. We use others as instruments.”

“So your dad used Inari.”

Thomas nodded. “He intended her to have you as her first.”

“Um. First what?”

“First lover,” Thomas said. “First kill.”

I swallowed. “I don’t think she knew what she was doing,” I said.

“She didn’t. In my family, we start off life like any other kid. Just . . . people. No Hunger. No feeding. No vampire stuff at all.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Not many do. But it comes on you eventually, and she’s about the right age. The panic and the trauma must have acted like a catalyst on her Hunger.” He stopped by a panel in the wall and nudged it with his hip. It slid open, revealing a dim corridor between interior walls. He went down it. “Between that, the painkillers, and the exhaustion, she didn’t know what was going on.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “The first feeding is lethal.”

“Always,” Thomas said.

“But she’s young and could be forgiven a loss of control under the circumstances. So I end up dead and it’s a believable accident. Raith is clear of any blame.”

“Yeah.”

“Why the hell hasn’t anyone told her, Thomas? What she is? What the world is really like?”

“We’re not allowed,” Thomas said quietly. “We have to keep it from her. It’s my father’s standard procedure. I didn’t know when I was her age, either.”

“That’s insane,” I said.

Thomas shrugged. “He’d kill us if we disobeyed.”

“What happened to her mouth? I mean, uh, I wasn’t exactly feeling observant when it happened. I’m not sure what I saw.”

Thomas frowned. We left the concealed passage for a dimly lit room halfway between a den and a library, thick with books and comfortable leather chairs and the scent of pipe smoke. “I don’t want to get too personal,” Thomas said. “But who was the last person you were with?”

“Uh, you. During this walk.”

He rolled his eyes. “Not like that. In the biblical sense.”

“Oh.” The question made me feel uncomfortable, but I said, “Susan.”

“Ah,” Thomas said. “No wonder.”

“No wonder what?”

Thomas stopped. His eyes were haunted, but he was clearly making an effort to focus on the answer. “Look. When we feed . . . we mingle our lives with the prey. Blend them together. Transform a portion of their life into ours and then pull it away with us. Got it?”

“Okay.”

“It isn’t all that different between human beings,” he said. “Sex is more than just sensation. It’s a union of the energy of two lives. And it’s explosive. It’s the process for creating *life*. For creating a new *soul*. *Think* about that. Power doesn’t *get* more dangerous and volatile than that.”

I nodded, frowning.

“Love is another kind of power, which shouldn’t surprise you. Magic comes from emotions, among other things. And when two people are together, in that intimacy, when they really, selflessly love each other it changes them both. It lingers on in the energy of their lives, even when they are apart.”

“And?”

“And it’s deadly to us. We can inspire lust, but it’s just a shadow. An illusion. Love is a dangerous force.” He shook his head. “Love killed the dinosaurs, man.”

“I’m pretty sure a meteor killed the dinosaurs, Thomas.”

He shrugged. “There’s a theory making the rounds now that when the meteor hit it only killed off the big stuff. That there were plenty of smaller reptiles running around, about the same size as all the mammals at the time. The reptiles should have regained their position eventually, but they didn’t, because the mammals could feel love. They could be utterly, even irrationally devoted to their mates and their offspring. It made them more likely to survive. The lizards couldn’t do that. The meteor hit gave the mammals their shot, but it was love that turned the tide.”

“What the hell does that have to do with Inari getting burned?”

“Aren’t you listening? Love is a primal energy, Harry. To actually touch that kind of power hurts us. It burns. We can’t take any energy that’s been touched by love. It dampens our ability to cause lust, as well. Even the trappings of love between two people can be dangerous. Lara’s got a circular scar on the palm of her left hand where she picked up the wrong wedding ring. My cousin Madeline picked up a rose that had been a gift between lovers, and the thorns poisoned her so badly she was in bed for a week.

“The last time you were with anyone, it was with Susan. You love each other. Her touch, her love is still upon you, and still protecting you.”

“If that’s true, then why I am still adjusting my pants every time Lara walks by?”

Thomas shrugged. “You’re human. She’s lovely and you haven’t gotten any in a while. But trust me, Harry. None of the White Court could wholly control or feed from you now.”

I frowned. “But it was a year ago.”

Thomas shrugged. “If there hasn’t been anyone else, then it’s still the strongest touch of another life on your own.”

“How are you defining love?”

“It isn’t a simple formula, Harry. I’m not sure. I recognize it when I see it.”

“So what’s love look like?”

“You can have everything in the world, but if you don’t have love, none of it means crap,” he said promptly. “Love is patient. Love is kind. Love always forgives, trusts, supports, and endures. Love never fails. When every star in the heavens grows cold, and when silence lies once more on the face of the deep, three things will endure: faith, hope, and love.”

“And the greatest of these is love,” I finished. “That’s from the Bible.”

“First Corinthians, chapter thirteen,” Thomas confirmed. “I paraphrased. Father makes all of us memorize that passage. Like when parents put those green yucky-face stickers on the poisonous cleaning products under the kitchen sink.”

It made sense, I guess. “What do you want to talk to me about?”

Thomas opened a door on the far side of the library and slipped into a long, quiet room. He flipped on the lights. There was thick grey carpeting on the ground. The walls were grey as well, and track lighting overhead splashed warm light over a row of portraits hung across three walls of the room. “You’re actually here. I mean, I never thought you would be in one of our homes—even this one, near Chicago. And I need you to see something,” he said quietly.

I followed him in. “What?”

“Portraits,” Thomas said. “Father always paints a portrait of the women who bear him children. Look at them.”

“What am I looking for?”

“Just look.”

I frowned at him but started on the left wall. Raith was no slouch as a painter. The first portrait was of a tall woman with Mediterranean coloring, dressed in clothes that suggested she had lived in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. A golden plate at the base of the portrait read, EMILIA ALEXANDRIA SALAZAR. I followed the paintings around the room. For someone who was supposedly feeding on people through sex, Raith had done comparatively little begetting. I was just guessing, but it didn’t look like any two portraits happened within twenty or thirty years of each other. The costumes progressed through the history of fashion, steadily growing closer to the present day.

The next-to-last portrait was of a woman with dark hair, dark eyes, and sharp features. She wasn’t precisely pretty, but she was definitely attractive in a striking, intriguing sense. She sat on a stone bench wearing a long, dark skirt and a deep crimson cotton blouse. Her head had an arrogant tilt to it,

her mouth held a self-amused smile, and her arms rested on the back of the bench on either side of her, casually claiming the entire space as her own.

My heart started pounding. Hard. Stars went over my vision. I struggled to focus on the golden nameplate beneath the portrait.

It read, MARGARET GWENDOLYN LEFAY.

I recognized her. I had only one picture to remember her by, but I recognized her.

“My mother,” I whispered.

Thomas shook his head. He slipped a few fingers under the turtleneck and drew out a silver chain. He passed it to me, and I saw that the chain held a silver pentacle much like my own.

In fact, *precisely* like my own.

“Not yours, Harry,” Thomas said, his voice quiet and serious.

I stared at him.

“*Our* mother,” he said.

Chapter Twenty-one



I stared at him hard, my heart lurching with shock, and my view narrowed down to a grey tunnel centered on Thomas. Silence filled the room.

“You’re lying,” I said.

“I’m not.”

“You must be.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because that’s what you do, Thomas. You lie. You use people and you lie.”

“I’m not lying this time.”

“Yeah, you are. And I don’t have time to put up with this crap.” I started for the door.

Thomas got in my way. “You can’t ignore this, Harry.”

“Move.”

“But we—”

My vision went red with rage and I hit him in the face for the second time in six hours. He fell to the floor, twisted his hips, and swept my legs out from under me. I hit the ground, and Thomas piled onto me, going for an armlock. I got a leg underneath me and sank my teeth into his arm as he tried to get it around my neck. I pushed up and slammed him against a wall with my body, and we both staggered apart. Thomas got to his feet, scowling at his arm where I bit him. I leaned against the wall, panting.

“It’s the truth,” he said. He wasn’t as winded as I was from the brief scuffle. “I swear it.”

A half-hysterical chuckle slipped out of my mouth. “Wait, I’ve seen this one before. This is where you say, ‘Search your feelings; you know it to be true.’”

Thomas shrugged. “You wanted to know why I’d been helping you. Why I risked myself for you. Now you know why.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Heh,” Thomas said. “I told you that, too.”

I shook my head. “You said it yourself: You use people. I think you’re playing me against your father somehow.”

“It might work out that way,” he said. “But that’s not why I asked you to help Arturo.”

“Why then?”

“Because he’s a decent man who doesn’t deserve to get killed, and there’s no way I could have done it on my own.”

I thought that over for a moment and then said, “But that’s not all of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Inari. You went nuts when that vamp was on her. Where does she fit in?”

Thomas leaned up against the wall beside my mother’s portrait. He pushed his hair back from his face with one hand. “She hasn’t been taken by her Hunger yet,” he said. “Once she starts feeding it there’s no going back. She’ll be like the rest of us. My father is pushing her toward that point. I want to stop him.”

“Why?”

“Because if . . . if she’s in love, that first time, it could kill her Hunger. She’d be free. I think she’s mature enough to be capable of that love now. There’s a young man she’s all twitterpated about.”

“Bobby?” I blurted. “The macho violent kid?”

“Give him a break. How insecure would you be if you were planning on spending the day having sex on camera in front of the girl you’d like to ask to dinner?”

“This might shock you, but I’ve never really considered that question before.”

Thomas pressed his lips together for a moment and then said, “If the kid loves her in return, then she could have a life. She could be free of the kinds of things that—” His voice broke. He had to cough before he continued. “Things like what happened to Justine. Like what my father has done to my other sisters.”

“What do you mean, done to them?”

“He establishes that he is their superior. He overpowers them. Pits his Hunger against theirs.”

My stomach twisted. “You mean he feeds on his own . . .” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Do you need me to paint you a picture? It’s the traditional way to settle family differences in all the Houses of the White Court.”

I shuddered and looked up at my mother’s portrait. “God. That’s hideous.”

Thomas nodded, his expression bleak and hard. “Lara is one of the most capable, intelligent people I’ve ever met. But around him, she turns into an obedient dog. He’s broken her to his will. Forced her to crave what he does to her. I won’t let that happen to Inari. Not when she could make her own life.”

I frowned. “Won’t that bring your dad down on you? Force him to try to make you like them?”

Thomas grimaced. “His tastes don’t run that way.”

“Small mercy, I guess.”

“Not really. He doesn’t want to keep me around. It’s just a matter of time before he comes after me. His sons, every last one of them, died under suspicious circumstances that can’t be traced back to him. I’m the first male to live as long as I have. Partly thanks to you.” He closed his eyes. “And partly thanks to Justine.”

“Hell’s bells,” I said quietly. The whole thing was almost ridiculous. “So let me get this straight. You want me to help save the girl, overthrow the dark lord, and defend the innocents terrorized by dark magic,” I said. “And you want me to do it because you’re my long-lost half brother, who needs someone noble to stand beside him in desperate battle for what’s right.”

He grimaced. “That phrasing has way more melodrama in it than I would have used.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. That’s a really lame con.”

“Give me *some* credit, Dresden.” He sighed. “I know how to con. If you were really just another mark, I’d have come up with a better story.”

“Forget it,” I said. “If you’d been straight with me to begin with maybe I’d help. But this bullshit about my mother is over the line.”

“She’s my mother too,” he said. “Harry, you knew she wasn’t exactly white as the driven snow. I know you’ve learned a little over the years. She was one hell of a dangerous witch, and she kept some bad company. Some of it was with my father.”

“You’re lying,” I growled. “What proof have you got?”

“Would anything satisfy you?” he demanded. “Proof is something you use with rational people, and right now you aren’t.”

The anger started fading a little. I hadn't gotten much rest, and was too tired to keep it up. I ached. I slid down the wall until I was sitting. I rubbed at my eyes. "It doesn't make any sense. What would she have been doing hanging around with your father?"

"God knows," Thomas said. "All I know is that there was some sort of business between them. It developed into something else. Father was trying to snare her permanently, but she wound up being too strong for him to completely enthrall. She escaped him when I was about five. From what I've been able to learn, she met your father the next year when she was on the run."

"Running from who?"

He shrugged. "Maybe my father. Maybe some people in the Courts or on the Council. I don't know. She'd gotten into some bad business and she wanted out. Whoever she was in it with didn't want her gone. They wanted her dead." He spread his hands, palm up. "That's almost everything I know, Harry. I tried to learn all I could about her. But no one would talk to me."

My eyelids felt gummy. My chest hurt. I looked up at the portrait of my mother. She was a woman of evident vitality, life flowing from her and around her, even in the painting. But I'd never gotten the chance to know her. She died in the delivery room.

Damn it all, what if Thomas was playing it straight with me? It would mean that I knew a little more about why the White Council all watched me like I was Lucifer, the Next Generation. It would mean being forced to accept that my mother was involved in bad business. Scary, big, bad business of one kind or another.

And it would mean that maybe I wasn't entirely alone in this world. There might be family for me. Blood of my blood.

The thought made my chest hurt worse. As a child, I'd fantasized for hours at a time about having a family. Brothers and sisters, parents who cared, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles—just like everyone else. A group of people who would stick together through everything, because that's what families do. Someone who would accept me, welcome me, maybe even be proud of me and desire my company.

I never celebrated Christmas as a kid, after my dad died. It hurt too much. Hell, it still hurt too much.

But if I had a real family, then maybe things could change.

I looked up. Thomas's face had always been difficult to read, but I saw another mirror of myself there. He was having some of the same thoughts as me. I wondered if he'd been lonely, like I had. Maybe he'd daydreamed about a family who wouldn't be trying to manipulate him, control him, or simply kill him.

But I stopped myself before I could follow that line of thought. Things were just too dangerous, and this issue too sensitive. I wanted, on some level, to believe Thomas. I wanted to believe him very much.

Which was why I couldn't afford to take any chances.

After a long moment, he said, "I'm not lying to you."

My voice came out soft, quiet, and calm. "Then prove it."

"How?" he asked. He sounded tired. "How the hell am I supposed to prove it to you?"

"Look at me."

He froze, his eyes still on the floor. "I don't . . . I don't think that would accomplish anything, Harry."

"Okay," I said. I started to rise. "Which way is my car?"

He lifted a hand. "Wait. All right," he said. He grimaced. "I was hoping to avoid this. I don't know what you're going to see if you look in there. I don't know if you'll still feel the same way about me."

"Ditto," I said. "We'd better sit down."

"How long will it take?" he asked.

"Seconds," I said. "Feels longer."

He nodded. We sat down about two feet from each other, cross-legged on the floor at the foot of my mother's portrait. Thomas took a deep breath and then lifted his grey eyes to mine.

The eyes are a window to the soul. Literally. Looking someone steadily in the eyes is an uncomfortable, intense experience for anyone. If you don't believe me, pick a stranger sometime, and just go up to them and stare them in the eye until that moment when there's a sudden acknowledgment of lowered barriers, that moment that inspires awkward silences and racing hearts. The eyes reveal a lot about a person. They express emotions and give clues to what thoughts are lurking behind them. One of the first things we all learn to recognize, as infants, are the eyes of whoever is taking care of us. We know from the cradle how important they are.

For wizards like me, that kind of eye contact is even more intense, and even more dangerous. Looking into someone's eyes shows me what they

are. I see it in a light of elemental truth so clear and bright that it burns it into my head forever. I see the core of who and what they are during a soulgaze, and they see me in the same way. There's nothing hidden, no possibility of deception. I don't see absolutely every thought or memory that passes through their head—but I do get to see the naked, emotional heart of who and what they are. It isn't a precise research technique, but it would tell me if Thomas was playing it straight.

I met Thomas's grey eyes with my own dark gaze and the barriers between us fell.

I found myself standing in a stark chamber that looked like an abstract of Mount Olympus after its gods died. Everything was made of cold, beautiful marble, alternating between utter darkness and snowy light. The floor was laid out like a chessboard. Statuary stood here and there, all human figures carved in stone that matched the decor. Particolored marble pillars rose up into dimness overhead. There wasn't a ceiling. There weren't any walls. The light was silver and cold. Wind sighed mournfully through the columns. Thunder rumbled somewhere far away, and my nose filled with the sharp scent of ozone.

At the center of the forlorn ruin stood a mirror the size of a garage door. It was set in a silver frame that seemed to grow from the floor. A young man stood in front of it, one hand reaching out.

I walked a little closer. My steps echoed among the pillars. I drew closer to the young man and peered at him. It was Thomas. Not Thomas as I had seen him with my own eyes, but Thomas nonetheless. This version of him was not deadly-beautiful. His face seemed a little more plain. He looked like he might have been a little nearsighted. His expression was strained with pain, and his shoulders and back were thick with tension.

I looked past the young man into the mirror. There I saw one of those things that I would want to forget. But thanks to the Sight, I wouldn't. Ever.

The reflection room in the mirror looked like the one I stood in at first glance. But looking closer revealed that rather than black and white marble, the place was made from dark, dried blood and sun-bleached bone. A creature stood there at the mirror, directly in front of Thomas. It was humanoid, more or less Thomas's size, and its hide shone with a luminous silver glow. It crouched, hunched and grotesque, though at the same time there was an eerie beauty about the thing. Its shining white eyes burned

with silent flame. Its bestial face stared eagerly at Thomas, burning with what seemed to be unsatiated appetite.

The creature's arm also extended to the mirror, and then with a shiver I realized that its limb was reaching a good foot past the mirror's surface. Its gleaming claws were sunk into Thomas's shaking forearm, and drops of dark blood had run from the punctures. Thomas's arm, meanwhile, had sunk into the mirror, and I saw his fingers digging in hard upon the flesh of the creature's forearm. Locked together, I sensed that the two were straining against each other. Thomas was trying to pull himself away from the thing. The creature was trying to drag him into the mirror, there among the dried blood and dead bones.

"He's tired," said a woman's voice.

My mother appeared in the mirror wearing a flowing dress of rich, royal blue. She watched the silent struggle while she drew closer. The portrait had not done her credit. She was a creature of life and vitality, and was more beautiful in motion than she could be in any frozen image. She was a tall woman, nearly six feet, and that was in flat sandals.

My throat tightened. I felt tears on my face. "Are you real?"

"Why should I not be?" she asked.

"You could just be a part of Thomas's mental landscape. No offense."

She smiled. "No, child. It's really me. In some measure, at least. I prepared you both for this day. I laid this working within each of you. A little portion of who and what I am. I wanted you to know who you were to each other."

I drew a shaking breath. "Is he really your son?"

My mother smiled, a sparkle in her dark eyes. "You have a perfectly serviceable sense of intuition, little one. What does it tell you?"

My vision blurred with tears. "That he is."

She nodded. "You must listen to me. I cannot be there to protect you, Harry. The two of you must take care of each other. Your brother will need your help, just as you will need his."

"I don't understand this," I said, gesturing at the mirror. "What do you mean, he's tired?"

My mother nodded at Thomas. "The girl he loved. She's gone. She was his strength. It knows that."

"It?" I asked.

She nodded at the mirror. "The Hunger. His demon."

I followed her nod with my gaze. The image-Thomas snarled something under his breath. The Hunger in the mirror answered in a slow, slithering tongue I did not understand. "Why didn't you help him?"

"I did what I could," my mother said. Her eyes flickered with something dark, an ancient spark of hatred. "I made sure that his father would endure a fitting punishment for what he did to us."

"You and Thomas?"

"And you, Harry. Raith yet lives. But he is weakened. Together you and your brother may have a chance against him. You will understand."

The Hunger hissed more words at Thomas. "What is it saying?" I asked.

"It's telling him to give up. That there's no point in fighting anymore. That it will never leave him in peace."

"Is it true?"

"Perhaps," she said.

"But he's fighting anyway," I said.

"Yes." Her eyes focused on mine, sad and proud. "It may destroy him, but he will not surrender himself to it. He is of my blood." She drifted to the very edge of the mirror and reached out a hand. It emerged from the mirror's surface as if from a motionless pool.

I stepped closer myself, reaching out to touch her hand. Her fingers were soft and warm. She wrapped them around mine, and squeezed. Then she lifted her hand and touched my cheek. "As are you, Harry. So tall, like your father. And I think you have his heart as well."

I couldn't answer her. I just stood there, silently crying.

"I have something for you," she said. "If you are willing."

I opened my eyes. My mother stood before me holding what I thought was a small gem or a jewel between long fingers. It pulsed with a low, gentle light.

"What is it?" I asked her.

"Insight," she said.

"It's knowledge?" I asked.

"And the power that goes with it," she said. She gave me a half smile, touched with irony. It looked familiar. "Think of it as a mother's advice, if you like. It doesn't make up for my absence, child. But it's all that I have to give."

"I accept it," I whispered. Because it was the only thing I could give her in return.

She passed me the gem. There was a flash, a tingling pain in my head, and then a lingering, dull ache. For some reason that didn't surprise me. You don't gain knowledge without a little pain.

She touched my face again and said, "I was so arrogant. I laid too great a burden upon you to bear alone. I hope that one day you will forgive me my mistake. But know that I am proud of what you have become. I love you, child."

"I love you," I whispered.

"Give my love to Thomas," she said. She touched my face again, her smile loving and sad. Tears slid from her eyes as well. "Be well, my son."

Then she drew her arm back into the mirror and the soulgaze was over. I sat on the floor facing Thomas. There were tears on his face. Both of us looked at each other, and then up at my mother's portrait.

After a moment I offered Thomas his pentacle on its chain. He took it and put it on.

"Did you see her?" he asked. His voice was shaking.

"Yeah," I said. The aching, lonely old hurt was overflowing me. But I suddenly found myself laughing. I had seen my mother with my Sight. I had seen her smile, heard her voice, and it was something I could never lose. Something no one could ever take away from me. It couldn't wholly make up for a lifetime of loneliness and silent grief, but it was more than I ever thought I would have.

Thomas met my eyes, and then he started laughing too. The puppy wriggled his way from my duster's pocket and started bounding back and forth and in circles in sheer, joyous excitement. The little nut had no clue at all what we were happy about, but evidently he didn't feel he needed one to join in.

I scooped up the puppy and rose. "I'd never really seen her face," I said. "I'd never heard her voice."

"Maybe she knew you wouldn't have," Thomas replied. "Maybe she did it like that so you could."

"She told me to tell you that she loved you."

He smiled, though it was sad and bitter. "She told me the same thing."

"Well," I said. "This changes things some."

"Does it?" he asked. He looked uncertain as he said it, frail.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm not saying that we're going to start from a fresh slate. But things are different now."

"They aren't for me, Harry," Thomas said. He grimaced. "I mean . . . I knew this already. It's why I tried to help you wherever I could."

"I guess you did," I said quietly. "I thought you were just saving up for a favor. But you weren't. Thank you."

He shrugged. "What are you going to do about Arturo?"

I frowned. "Protect him and his people, of course. If I can. What did Lara mean when she said that Arturo's independent streak was a matter for the White Court?"

"Damned if I know." Thomas sighed. "I thought he was just someone Lara knew from the industry."

"Does your dad have any connection to him?"

"Dad doesn't advertise what he's doing, Harry. And I haven't spoken more than twenty words to him in the last ten years. I don't know."

"Would Lara?"

"Probably. But ever since Lara worked out that I wasn't just a dim-witted ambulatory penis, she's been on her guard when we've talked. I haven't been able to get much out of her. So now I mostly sit there and nod and look wise and make vague remarks. She assumes that I know something she doesn't, and then she thinks the vague remark is actually a cryptic remark. She wouldn't want to move on me until she's figured out what it is I'm hiding from her."

"That's a good tactic if people are paranoid enough."

"In the Raith household? Paranoia comes bottled, on tap and in hot and cold running neuroses."

"What about your dad? He know any magic?"

"Like maybe entropy curses?" Thomas shrugged. "I hear stories about things he's done in the past. Some of them must be close to true. Plus he's got a huge library he keeps locked up most of the time. But even without magic, he can just rip the life out of anyone who pisses him off."

"How?"

"It's like when we feed. It's usually slow, gradual. But he doesn't need that kind of time or intimacy. Just a touch, a kiss, and wham, they're dead. That whole kiss-of-death thing in *The Godfather*? He was where that phrase originated, only for him it was literal."

"Really?"

"Supposedly. I've never seen him do it myself, but Lara has, plenty of times. Madeline once told me once that he liked to open conversations that

way, because it made sure he had the complete attention of everyone still breathing.”

“Stories. Supposedly. For someone on the inside, your information isn’t real helpful.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m not thinking clearly right now. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “Can’t throw stones.”

“What do we do?” he asked. “I’m . . . I feel lost. I don’t know what to do.”

“I think I do,” I said.

“What?”

Instead of answering him, I offered him my hand.

He took it, and I drew my brother to his feet.

Chapter Twenty-two



I waited until the predawn gloom had become full, dismal, rainy morning to leave Château Raith. Thomas helped me pull a few things together while I waited, and I borrowed a phone to make some calls.

After that, the puppy and I got back in the Beetle, hit the drive-through at McDonald's, and puttered back home to my apartment. I got out of the car and noticed a couple of blackened spots on the ground. I frowned and looked closer, discovering that they were in a methodical pattern. Someone had been trying to force their way past my wards, the magical protections I'd set up around the boardinghouse. They hadn't broken through them, but the fact that someone or something had tried made me more than a little uncomfortable. I got the shield bracelet ready to go as I went down the stairs, just in case, but nothing frustrated from fruitless attempts to break in was waiting for me. Mister appeared from under my landlady's car and followed me down the stairs.

I got into my apartment fast and shut the door behind me. I muttered a spell that lit half a dozen candles around the room, and braced myself for Mister's greeting. He made his usual attempt to bulldoze my legs out from under me with his shoulders. I put the puppy on the floor, where he panted happily at Mister, wagging his tail by way of friendly greeting. Mister did not look impressed.

I kept moving, trying to stay focused. I didn't think I had any time to waste. I shoved aside the rugs over the stepladder down to the lab, hauled the door open, and slid down into the lab. "Bob," I said. "What'd you find out?"

Mister padded over to the top of the stairs. A cloud of flickering orange lights arose from the cat and flowed down the stepladder to the lab. The lights streamed over to the skull on its shelf, and Bob's eye sockets flickered to life. "It was a long, cold night," he said. "Saw a place where a couple of ghouls set up shop, out by the airport."

“Did you find Mavra?”

“You know, Harry, the Black Court has become awfully cagey about picking a base of operations of late.”

“Did you find Mavra?”

“They’ve had centuries of experience,” Bob said. “And Chicago is huge. It’s like trying to find a needle in a cliché.”

I gave the skull a flat look and said in a flat voice, “Bob, you’re the only one in a thousand miles who could have found them. You are an invaluable asset and ally whose knowledge is matched only by your willingness to give of yourself to others. There, ego stroked. Did you find Mavra?”

Bob scowled. “You take all the fun out of getting complimented. Did you know that?” He muttered something under his breath, mainly in Chinese, I think. “Not yet.”

“What?” I demanded.

“I’ve narrowed it down,” Bob said.

“How narrow?”

“Uh,” the skull said. “It isn’t in any of the strip clubs.”

“Bob!” I demanded. “You were running around *strip* joints all day!?”

“I was only thinking of you, Harry,” Bob said.

“What?”

“Well, a lot of the people on the set of that movie do some erotic dancing as a sideline, and I wanted to make sure that, you know, your bad guy wasn’t going to take a night off to kill some locals as a warm-up.” Bob coughed. “See?”

I narrowed my eyes and took deep breaths. It didn’t really stop my anger from rising but it made it happen a little more smoothly.

“A-and you will be glad to know that every exotic dancer in Chicago is alive and well. Safeguarded by your friendly neighborhood air spirit,” Bob said. “Um. Say, Harry, that is quite the homicidal gleam in your eye.”

I took off my coat and looked around the lab until I located my clawhammer. I picked it up.

Bob’s voice gained a hurried, stammering edge. “And while I know that wasn’t exactly the mission you sent me out on, you have to admit that it was really quite a noble purpose that totally supported your quest to preserve life.”

I took a practice swing with the hammer. I took my duster off, folded it, laid it over the table, and tried again. Much better. I fixed a murderous gaze

on the skull on the shelf.

“Gee, uh, Harry,” Bob said. “I was just doing the breast job I co—best, best! The best job I could!”

“Bob,” I said, in a very reasonable tone of voice, “I don’t need to know about strippers. I need to know about Mavra.”

“Well. Yes, of course, boss. Um, so I noticed that you’re holding that hammer. And that your knuckles are turning kind of white there. And that you look sort of tense.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m going to feel a lot better in a minute.”

“Ha,” Bob said in a nervous false laugh. “Ha-ha. Ha. That’s funny, Harry.”

I raised the hammer. “Bob,” I said, “get your ethereal ass out of that skull. And back into Mister. And you get out on the *street* and find Mavra before high noon or I’m going to smash your skull into freaking *powder*!”

“But I’m tired and it’s raining and I don’t know if—”

I raised the hammer and took a step forward.

“Ack!” Bob choked. The cloud of orange lights spilled out of the skull in a hurried rush and zipped back up the stairs. I followed them, and saw the last few sparkles around Mister’s ears as Bob took possession of the cat again. I opened the door and the big tom bounded out into the morning.

I slammed the door, scowling. My thoughts were in a boiling turmoil beneath a fairly calm surface. I felt something I hadn’t before—a sort of bitter taste in my mouth that took occasional side trips down to my stomach.

Anger and fear were things I knew. They were emotions that had often saved my life. But this sensation was different—something like my concern for Mister when I sent him out with Bob, but quieter, more haunting, and it didn’t fade from one minute to the next.

I think maybe it was about Thomas. Before that morning there’d been no one in my life except a few truly hard-core friends, some familiar professional associates, my cat, and one or two dedicated enemies who visited at least as often as my friends. But now I had a brother. Kinfolk, as old Ebenezer would say. And it changed things.

I was used to watching out for myself—not that my friends never did anything for me, but with respect to the day-to-day problems of life, I operated solo, except for a herd of depressing thoughts for company. I thought about how I already had a grave, complete with a white marble

headstone, waiting for me at Graceland Cemetery, courtesy of an enemy now dead, but no less ready to receive me. I thought about how my utter ineptitude at romance was probably going to preserve my bachelor status for the next several decades. I thought about how many bad guys out there would be glad to take me out, and how it might take people weeks to realize I'd vanished.

And I thought about growing old. Alone. It was not unusual for a wizard to live more than three centuries, but that wouldn't stop time from taking its toll. Sooner or later I'd be old and frail, maybe even tired of living. And dying. I would have no one to share it with me, or hold my hand when I was afraid.

In some simple, unexplainable, and utterly irrational way, Thomas's presence had altered that. His blood was in common with my own, and knowing it had created a strong emotional bond like nothing I had felt before. My heart sped a little bit out of sheer happiness at the thought.

But no matter how happy discovering a brother made me, I would be a fool if I didn't realize another, darker side to the situation.

After a lifetime alone, I had a brother.

And I could lose him.

The bitter sensation intensified at the thought, and I knew what it felt like to worry for family.

I shut the door to the lab and covered it with its rug. I fumbled through my little pantry until I found my bottle of aspirin. The puppy followed me closely, and attacked my shoelaces when I stopped. I opened the bottle, chewed three aspirin up, and swallowed them, no drink. I hear that's a bad sign, when you can do medication like that.

I grimaced, rubbing at my head again, and tried to quiet the tide of emotion running around my nervous system. There were things I had to do, and I would need my mind to be ordered if I wanted to survive them. First things first. I checked my problem inventory:

Multiple injuries, including a vicious headache from where Inari had socked me.

On one side of me lurked a mysterious wielder of a sloppy but lethal curse.

On the other side, a homicidal vampire and her crew of killers.

And, lest I forget, somewhere behind me was a cold, distant mercenary who was going to kill me if I didn't pay his fee—and I had no idea where I

would come up with the cash.

What a mess. And it wasn't yet midmorning. And I was only growing more tired and beat up as the day went by. That meant that my smartest option was to attack the problem with a frontal assault with no delay, while my head was relatively clear.

I had to get moving before the bad guys got organized and came at me again.

Damn. If only I knew *where* I needed to move.

And if only I didn't have a sinking feeling that it might already be too late.

Chapter Twenty-three



I was waiting in the parking lot at Chicago PD headquarters when Murphy arrived from the gym. She was on her motorcycle, complete with heavy boots, a black helmet, and a dark leather jacket. She noted my car on the way in, and swung the bike into the parking space beside me. The bike's engine let out a relaxed, leonine growl, then died away.

Murphy swung off the bike and took off her helmet. She shook out her golden hair, which looked good when it was somewhat mussed. "Good morning, Harry."

At the sound of her voice, the puppy started thrashing around in my pocket until he managed to stick his head out, panting happily up at Murphy. "Morning," I said. "You sound pretty chipper."

"I am," she answered. She scratched the puppy's head. "Sometimes I forget how much I like riding the bike."

"Most chicks do," I said. "Roar of the engine and so on."

Murphy's blue eyes glittered with annoyance and anticipation. "Pig. You really enjoy dropping all women together in the same demographic, don't you?"

"It's not my fault all women like motorcycles, Murph. They're basically huge vibrators. With wheels."

She tried for an angry expression, but part of a laugh escaped her throat, and she let it turn into a wide smile. "You're bent, Dresden." She frowned then, and looked at me a little closer. "What's wrong?"

"Took a bit of a beating yesterday," I said.

"I've seen you beaten before. It doesn't look like this."

Murph had known me for too long. "It's personal stuff," I said. "I can't talk about it yet."

She nodded and was silent.

The silent stretched until I said, "I found out I might have family."

“Oh.” She frowned, but it was her concerned-friend frown instead of her impatient-cop frown. “I won’t push. But if you ever want to talk about it . . .”

“When I want to,” I told her. “Just not this morning. Have you got time to grab some breakfast with me?”

She checked her watch, and her eyes flicked toward a security camera and then to me, a warning. “Is this about that case we were discussing?”

Aha. The walls had ears, which meant that it was time for euphemisms. “Yeah. We’d be meeting with one other problem solver to discuss the situation.”

She nodded. “You got the data?”

“Sorta,” I said.

“Well. You know how much I’m looking forward to the family picnic today, but I might have a few minutes. Where did you want to eat?”

“IHOP.”

Murphy sighed. “My hips hate you, Dresden.”

“Just wait until they get to sit in my ritzy car.”

We got in the car and I dropped the pup into the box I’d put in the backseat and lined with some laundry I’d had in the Beetle’s trunk. He started wrestling with a sock. I think the sock was winning. Murphy watched him with a smile while I drove.

It was a Saturday morning, and I expected the International House of Pancakes to be packed. It wasn’t. In fact, an entire corner had been sectioned off with an accordion-folded screen as reserved seating, and there still weren’t enough customers to fill the remaining tables. The usual radio station wasn’t on. The people eating breakfast seemed to be doing so in almost total silence, and the only sound was the clink of silverware on plates.

Murphy glanced up at me and then around the room, frowning. She folded her arms over her stomach, which left her right hand near the gun she kept in a shoulder rig. “What’s wrong with this picture?” she asked.

Motion in the reserved area drew my eye, and Kincaid appeared and beckoned us. The lean mercenary was dressed in greys and dull blues, very nondescript, and had his hair pulled into a ponytail under a black baseball cap.

I nodded and went over to Kincaid, Murphy at my side. We stepped into the screened-off area. “Morning,” I said.

“Dresden,” Kincaid replied. His cool eyes slid over Murphy. “I hope you don’t mind me asking the manager for a quiet section to sit in.”

“It’s fine. Kincaid, this is Murphy. Murph, Kincaid.”

Kincaid didn’t so much as glance at her. He drew the accordion curtains closed. “You said this was business. Why did you bring a date?”

Murphy clenched her jaw.

“She’s not a date,” I said. “She’s going with us.”

Kincaid stared at me for a second, all ice and stone. Then he barked out a throaty laugh. “I always heard you were a funny guy, Dresden. Seriously, what is she doing here?”

Murphy’s eyes went flat with anger. “I don’t think I like your attitude.”

“Not now, kitten,” Kincaid said. “I’m talking business with your boyfriend.”

“He is *not* my boyfriend,” Murphy growled.

Kincaid looked from Murphy to me and back again. “You’re kidding me, Dresden. This isn’t amateur hour. If we’re playing with the Black Court, I don’t have time to babysit little Pollyanna here, and neither do you.”

I started to speak, and thought better of it. Murphy would have my head if I tried to protect her when she didn’t think she needed it. I took a small but prudent step back from them.

Murphy eyed Kincaid and said, “Now I’m sure of it. I don’t like your attitude.”

Kincaid’s lips lifted away from his teeth, and he moved his left arm, showing Murphy the gun rig under his jacket. “I’d love to chat with you over breakfast, cupcake. Why don’t you run and find a high chair so that we can.”

Murphy’s gaze didn’t waver. She looked from Kincaid’s eyes to his gun and back. “Why don’t we sit down. This doesn’t need to get ugly.”

Kincaid’s grin widened, and it wasn’t a pleasant expression. He put a broad hand on her shoulder and said, “This is where the big boys play, princess. Why don’t you be a good girl and go watch your *Xena* tapes or something.”

Murphy eyed Kincaid’s hand on her shoulder. Her voice became softer, but it sure as hell didn’t sound weak. “That’s assault. But I’ll tell you this once. I won’t repeat myself. Don’t touch me.”

Kincaid’s face contorted with rage, and he gave her shoulder a shove. “Get out of here, whore.”

Murphy didn't repeat herself. Her hands blurred as she caught Kincaid's wrist, broke his balance by half bending her knees, then twisted and threw him hard at a wall. Kincaid slammed over a table and into the wall, but rolled out of it almost instantly, his hand going for his gun.

Murphy trapped his gun arm between her arm and body as he drew, and her own gun appeared with nearly magical swiftness, pressed hard against the underside of Kincaid's chin. "Call me that again," she said in a quiet voice. "I dare you. I double-dog dare you."

Kincaid's angry expression vanished so swiftly that it could only have been artificial. Instead a faint grin made its way onto his mouth, even brushing at his eyes. "Oh, I like her," he said. "I'd heard about her but I wanted to see it myself. I like this one, Dresden."

I bet he always went for his gun when he liked a woman. "Maybe you should stop talking about her like she isn't standing there holding a gun under your chin."

"Maybe you're right," he said. Then he faced Murphy and lifted his empty hand, relaxing. She released his arm, lowered the gun, and stepped back, still scowling, but Kincaid put his gun down, then took a seat with his hands palm flat on the table beside the weapon. "Hope you won't remain offended, Lieutenant," he told her. "I needed to see if you measured up to your reputation before we went forward."

Murphy shot me her patented Harry-you-idiot glare and then focused an opaque expression on Kincaid. "Do you feel better now?"

"I feel satisfied," Kincaid replied. "It's a little easy to get you started, but at least you're competent. Is that a Beretta?"

"SIG," Murphy said. "Do you have a license and permit for your weapon?"

Kincaid smiled. "Naturally."

Murphy snorted. "Sure you do." She looked at Kincaid for a minute and then said, "Get this straight from the get-go. I'm still a cop. It means something to me."

He regarded her thoughtfully. "I heard that about you too."

"Murph," I said, sitting down at the table. "If you have something to say to him, say it to me. I'm his employer at the moment."

She arched an eyebrow. "And you can be sure that his actions are all going to be legal ones?"

"Kincaid," I said. "No felonies without checking with me first. Okay?"

“Yassuh,” said Kincaid.

I spread out an open hand at Murphy. “See? Yassuh.”

She regarded Kincaid without much in the way of approval but nodded and pulled out a chair. Kincaid rose as she started to sit down. Murphy glared at him. Kincaid sat down again. She pulled at the chair again and I rose. She put a hand on her hip and glared at me. “It doesn’t count as chivalrous courtesy if you’re only doing it to be a wiseass.”

“She’s right,” Kincaid admitted. “Go ahead, Lieutenant. We won’t be polite.”

Murphy growled, and started to sit. I began to stand up again anyway, but she kicked me in the shins and plopped down. “All right,” she said. “What do we know?”

“That I’m starving,” I said. “Wait a second.” I held off any business until after we’d ordered breakfast and the waitress brought it out to the reserved section. Once that was done and we were eating, we closed the screen again.

“All right,” I said after a moment. It came out muffled by a mouthful of gastronomic nirvana. Say what you will about nutrition; IHOP knows good pancakes. “This meeting is to share some information I’ve gained in the last day and to go over our basic plan.”

“Find them,” said Murphy.

“Kill them,” said Kincaid.

“Yeah, okay,” I said. “But I thought we might flesh out that second one a little more.”

“No need to,” said Kincaid. “In my experience it’s pretty much impossible to kill it if you don’t know where it is.” He lifted his brows, looking up from his food. “Do you know where it is?”

“Not yet,” I said.

Kincaid glanced at his watch, and then went back to his food. “I’m on a schedule.”

“I know that,” I said. “I’ll find them today.”

“Before sundown,” Kincaid said. “Suicide to go at them after dark.”

Murphy scowled at Kincaid. “What kind of attitude is that?”

“A professional one. I have a midnight flight to my next contract.”

“Let me get this straight,” Murphy said. “You’d just walk away because these murdering creatures didn’t fit into your schedule?”

“Yes.” Kincaid kept eating.

“It doesn’t bother you that innocent people might die because of them?”

“Not much,” Kincaid said, and took a sip of coffee.

“How can you just say that?”

“Because it’s the truth. Innocent people die all the time.” Kincaid’s fork and knife scraped on his plate as he sliced up some ham and eggs. “They’re better at it than your average murdering monster.”

“Jesus,” Murphy said, and stared at me. “Harry, I don’t want to work with this asshole.”

“Easy, Murph,” I said.

“I’m serious. You can’t condone his attitude.”

I rubbed at my eyebrow with a thumb. “Murph, the world is a cruel place. Kincaid didn’t make it that way.”

“He doesn’t care,” Murphy said. “Are you sure you want someone who doesn’t care about what we’re doing along when things go to hell?”

“He agreed to go and fight,” Harry said. “I agreed to pay him. He’s a professional. He’ll fight.”

Kincaid pointed a finger at me and nodded, chewing on another bite.

Murphy shook her head. “What about a driver?”

“He’ll be here today,” I said.

“Who is he?”

“You don’t know him,” I said. “I trust him.”

Murphy looked at me for a second and then nodded. “What are we up against?”

“Black Court vampires,” I said. “At least two, and maybe more.”

“Plus any help they might have,” Kincaid said.

“They can flip cars with one hand,” I said. “They’re fast. Like, Jackie Chan fast. We can’t go toe-to-toe with them, so the plan is to hit them in daylight.”

“They’ll all be asleep,” Murphy said.

“Maybe not,” Kincaid said. “The old ones don’t need to sometimes. Mavra could be functional.”

“And what’s more,” I said, “she’s a practitioner. A sorceress at least.”

Kincaid inhaled and exhaled slowly through his nose. He finished the bite he was on, and then he said, “Shit,” before taking another.

Murphy frowned. “What do you mean, a sorceress at least?”

“Kind of an industry term,” I said. “Plenty of people can do a little magic. Small-time stuff. But sometimes the small-timers practice up, or tap

into some kind of power source and get enough ability to be dangerous. A sorcerer is someone who can do some serious violence with magic.”

“Like the Shadowman,” Murphy said. “Or Kravos.”

“Yeah.”

“Good thing we got a wizard along then,” Kincaid said.

Murphy looked at me.

“Wizard means that you can do sorcery if you need to,” I said, “but it also means you can do a lot of other things too. A wizard’s power isn’t limited to blowing things up, or calling up demons. A good wizard can adapt his magic in almost any way he can imagine. Which is the problem.”

“What do you mean?” Murphy said.

“Mavra is good at veils,” I said, mostly to Kincaid. “Real good. She did some long range mental communications last night, too.”

Kincaid stopped eating.

“You’re saying that this vampire is a wizard?” Murphy asked.

Kincaid stared at me.

“It’s possible,” I said. “Maybe even likely. It would go a long way toward explaining how Mavra survived all this time.”

“This mission is heading for downtown FUBAR,” Kincaid said.

“You want out?” I asked.

He was silent for a minute and then shook his head. “But if Mavra is awake and active, and if she’s able to start tossing heavy magic around in closed quarters, we might as well drink some Bacardi-and-strychnine and save ourselves some walking.”

“You’re afraid of her,” Murphy said.

“Damn right,” Kincaid said.

She frowned. “Harry, can you shut down her magic? Like you did with Kravos?”

“Depends how strong she is,” I said. “But a wizard could handle her. Probably.”

Kincaid shook his head. “Magical lockdown. I’ve seen that work before,” he said. “One time I saw it fail. Everybody died.”

“Except you?” I asked.

“I was in back, covering our spellslinger when his head exploded. Barely made it out the door.” Kincaid pushed a piece of sausage around his plate. “Even if you can shut her down, Mavra’s still going to be real tough.”

“That’s why you get to charge so much,” I said.

“True.”

“We go in Stoker-standard,” I said. “Garlic, crosses, holy water, the works.”

“Hey,” Murphy said. “What about that pocketful-of-sunshine thing you told me about? With the white handkerchief you used on Bianca a few years back?”

I grimaced. “Can’t,” I said.

“Why not?”

“It’s impossible, Murph. It isn’t important why.” I hauled the conversation back on course. “We should be able to keep Mavra back until we deal with any goons. Then we can take her down. Any questions?”

Kincaid coughed significantly, and nodded at the table, where the waitress had, at some point, left us a bill. I frowned and fumbled through my pockets. I had enough to cover it, but only because I managed to find a couple of quarters in the various pockets of my duster. I left the money on the table. There wasn’t enough for a tip.

Kincaid regarded my lump of wrinkled small bills and change, then studied me with a distant, calculating gaze that would have made some people very nervous. Like people who had agreed to pay a lot of money but didn’t *have* any.

“That’s it for now then,” I said, rising. “Get anything you need ready, and we’ll go later today. I want to hit them as soon as I find them.”

Kincaid nodded and turned back to his plate. I left. My shoulder blades felt itchy when I turned my back to Kincaid. Murphy kept pace with me and we headed back to the Beetle.

Murphy and I didn’t talk while I drove her back to CPD HQ. Once we got there, and the car had stopped, she looked around the inside of my car, frowning. “What happened to the Beetle?”

“Mold demons.”

“Oh.”

“Murph?”

“Hmm?”

“You okay?”

She pressed her lips into a line. “I’m trying to adjust. In my head, I think what we’re doing is just about the only thing we responsibly can. But I’ve been a peace officer since before I could drink, and this kind of cowboy thing feels . . . wrong. It isn’t what a good cop does.”

“Depends on the cop, I think,” I said. “Mavra and her scourge are above the law, Murph, in every sense that matters. The only way they’re going to get stopped is if someone steps up and takes them down.”

“I know that here,” she said, and touched her own forehead with her finger. Then she clasped her hand into a fist and put it over her heart. “But I don’t *feel* it here.” She was quiet for a moment more and said, “The vampires aren’t the problem. I can fight that. Glad to. But there are going to be people around them, too. I don’t know if I can pull the trigger when there are going to be people around who could get hurt. I signed on to protect them, not to trap them in a cross fire.”

Not much I could say to that.

“Can I ask you something?” she said after a minute.

“Sure.”

She studied me with a faint, concerned frown. “Why can’t you do the sunshine thing? Seems like it would be really handy about now. It isn’t like you to call something impossible.”

I shrugged. “I tried it a couple years back,” I said. “After the war started. Turns out that you’ve got to be genuinely happy to be able to fold sunshine into a hankie. Otherwise it just doesn’t work.”

“Oh,” said Murphy.

I shrugged.

“I guess I’ll be in Wolf Lake Park, at the picnic, for a few hours at lunchtime. But I’ll have my pager with me,” she said.

“Okay. Sorry I didn’t drag you into some horrifying, morally questionable, bloodthirsty carnage in time.”

She smiled, more with her eyes than her mouth. “See you in a while, Harry.” Murphy got out of the car. She checked her watch and sighed. “T minus two hours and counting down.”

I blinked at her. “Whoa.”

Murphy gave me a skeptical glance. “What?”

“Whoa,” I said again. Thoughts were congealing in my brain, and I raked through my memory to see if the facts fit the idea. “Countdown. Son of a bitch.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you have the police reports on the two women who died in California?”

Murphy lifted an eyebrow, but said, "In my car. Hang on a second." She jogged a couple of spaces down to her car. I heard her pop open the trunk and slam it again. She reappeared with a thick manila folder and passed it to me.

I found the reports inside and scanned over them in rising excitement. "Here it is," I said, jabbing a finger at the report. "I know how they're doing it. Damn, I should have guessed this sooner."

"How they're doing what?" Murphy asked.

"The Evil Eye," I said, the words hurrying together as I grew more excited. "The *malocchio*. The curse that's hitting Genosa's people. It's on a timer."

She tilted her head. "It's automated?"

"No, no," I said, waving my hands. "It's on a schedule. Both women who died were killed in the morning, a little bit before ten o'clock." I closed my eyes, trying to picture the reports Genosa had given me. "Right . . . nine forty-seven and nine forty-eight. They died at the same time."

"That's not the same time, Harry."

I waved a hand, impatient. "They are. I'll bet you anything. The recorded time gets written down by officers on the scene in their report, and who would worry about a minute either way?"

"Why is it significant?" Murphy said.

"Because the two curses that have struck here in Chicago arrived at eleven forty-seven in the morning, and damned close to that last night. Add two hours to the deaths in California to account for the difference in time zones. The curse was sent at the same time. Thirteen minutes before noon or midnight." I followed the logic chain forward from that one fact. "Hell's bells," I breathed.

"I'm not going to ask you to explain every time you pause, Harry, because you know damned well I don't have a clue about what you're saying or what it means."

"It means that the killer isn't doing the curse on his own," I said. "I mean, there's no *reason* to do it that way, unless it's because you don't have a choice. The killer is using ritual magic. They've got a sponsor."

"You don't mean a corporation," Murphy said.

"No," I answered. "What time is it?"

"Ten-thirty," Murphy said.

“Yes,” I hissed, and slammed the clutch into gear. “If I haul ass there’s time.”

“Time?”

“To protect Genosa and his people,” I said. “That entropy curse is coming down on them in about an hour.” I stomped on the gas and shouted out the window over my shoulder, “This time I’ll be ready for it!”

Chapter Twenty-four



I expected Genosa to look awful the next morning, but evidently I had a temporary monopoly on rough nights in Chicago. He was waiting for me at the door when I got to the studio, dressed in slacks and a tennis shirt, perfectly coiffed and genial. I got another European-type hug before I'd gotten all the way out of the Beetle.

"The *malocchio*, it happened again," he said. "Didn't it. Last night when you ran out."

"Yeah," I said.

He licked his lips. "Who?"

"Inari. She's all right."

Arturo blinked several times. "Inari? That's insane. What possible threat could she be to anyone?"

Incipient succubus. No threat at all there. "There's got to be some reason she was targeted. We just don't know what it is yet."

"She's only a child," Genosa said, and for the first time I heard something like real anger in his voice. That was something to be noted. When kind men grow angry, things are about to change. "Have you any idea who is behind it?"

"Not yet," I said, and opened the storage compartment under the Beetle's hood. "But this is definitely more than business for somebody. For them it's personal. I think they're going to take another swing this morning, and I'm going to have a surprise for them when they do."

"How may I help?"

"Get the set moving like everything's normal. I need to get a spell of my own ready."

Arturo frowned at that, and it crinkled all the creases at the corners of his face into unfamiliar lines. "And that is all I can do?"

"For now."

He sighed. "All right. May fortune smile on your efforts, Mister Dresden."

"Don't know why she'd start now," I said, but gave him a quick smile by way of encouragement.

Genosa returned the smile and went back into the building. I followed him a couple of minutes later with my pack loaded with a fifty-foot retractable chalk line, a mirror, a box of tinfoil, and half a dozen candles. I hurried inside, and checked the greenroom and the dressing room before I found Jake Guffie loitering around the shooting studio in dark grey boxers and a loose silk robe. He had a paperback and a bottle of Gatorade, and was draped over his chair in a pose meant to convey calm and confidence. I'm not sure what made me think he was faking, but I knew it even before I spoke to him.

"Jake," I said. "Just the guy I need to see."

He jumped like a nervous cat and gave me a reproachful glance. "Oh. Good morning, Harry. What can I do for you?"

"I need your help with something for about ten minutes."

He tilted his head at me. "Yeah? What?"

I hesitated for a moment and then shrugged. "I'm setting up a spell to protect everyone from evil magic."

"Uh," Jake said, narrowing his eyes. "I don't want to disrespect your religion, man. But did someone spike your breakfast cereal with LSD or something?"

"What can I say, Jake. I'm insane but harmless. Come with me and help me draw some lines on the floor with chalk, and after that I'll leave you alone." I drew an X over my chest with a fingertip. "Cross my heart."

He looked around, maybe for an excuse to leave, but then shook his head and stood up. "What the hell," he said. "Maybe I'll learn something."

He followed me up the stairs to the top floor of the building. I found the northmost hall, put down my backpack, and started rummaging through it. Jake watched me for a minute before he said, "Is this some kind of feng shui thing?"

"Uh. Actually, it is, now that I think about it," I said. "Feng shui is all about manipulating positive and negative energy around, right? Here, hold this. What I'm doing here is setting up a kind of . . . well, a lightning rod, for lack of a better analogy. I'm setting things up so that if that negative

energy gathers again, it gets sent to the place I want it to go, rather than at a particular target. Like a person.”

“Feng shui,” he said. “Okay, I can buy that.”

“Let me snap this,” I said, and did, leaving a line of light blue chalk on the floor. “There. Come on.” I started down the hall, and after a moment Jake came after me.

I really did need someone’s help, and if I had to get someone to give me a hand on the set, I wanted either Jake or Joan, as the least disturbing—or at least the least threatening—folks I had met. And since Joan was a woman, and therefore more likely to become a target of the curse, I didn’t want her running back and forth through this gathering spell. The point was to move the bad mojo away, after all. It would have been silly to leave her standing right there in the middle of it.

Even if Jake wasn’t an overt believer in the supernatural scene, he was at least laid-back enough that he proved to be a capable helper. I had him follow me around the building with the end of the chalk line in hand. On each level of the building I tried to move around as much of the building’s perimeter as I could, leaving chalk lines on the floors and walls. I would lay down the line, snapping it against the surface to leave a light dusting of blue chalk—and as I did I poured out a whisper of my will with it, leaving each of the chalk lines quivering with a small amount of energy. My goal was to lay enough of these spikes of directional energy to make sure that when the curse came in again, it would have to cross at least one of them.

If everything worked to plan, the curse would come flying toward its target, cross one or more of my spikes, and be redirected to follow the lines. Then, at the approximate center of the building, which turned out to be a darkened corner of the soundstage, I laid down my mirror, shiny side up, and set up my candles at the cardinal points of another circle centered around the it. The spikes of force led directly toward the mirror, and I took the time to mark out another circle and light the candles, leaving a subtle quiver of energy in the new circle, too.

“Oh, right,” Jake said. “I read about this one. Mirror to pull the bad mojo away?”

“Sort of,” I said, standing up and dusting off my hands. “If I’ve done it right, the curse comes flying in, hits the mirror, and bounces back at whoever threw it.”

Jake lifted his eyebrows. “That’s kind of hostile, man.”

“No, it isn’t,” I said. “Someone tries to send good vibes at us, they’ll get that bounced back at them. They go trying to pull off another killing . . . well. What goes around comes around.”

“Hey, that’s a fundamental core of many religions,” Jake said. “Golden rule, man.”

“Yeah, it is,” I said. “Maybe a little more literal than usual, in this case.”

“You really think this place is cursed?” Jake said. His expression was thoughtful.

“I think someone doesn’t want Arturo’s new company to succeed,” I replied. “Among other things.”

Jake frowned. “You think Silverlight Studios is behind it?”

“Possible,” I said. “But things have been pretty nasty for someone with a money motivation.”

“Materialism is not good for the soul,” Jake said. “Those are the folks who can do the worst, when they’re after money.”

“Money’s new,” I answered. “Power’s old. Power is the real deal. Money, voters, oil, SUVs—they’re just stand-ins for power.”

“For a feng shui artist, you’re sort of intense, man.”

I shrugged. “That’s the first time anyone’s ever told me that.”

“You got a woman?”

I rolled up the chalk line. “Had one. Didn’t work out.”

“That could explain it,” Jake said. “Arturo gets like you between wives. Thank God that’s over.”

I blinked and looked Jake. “Over?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “I mean, he hasn’t sent out invitations or anything, but I know the guy. He’s had hearts floating around his head for a couple of months, and he’s in his days-before-wedding phase now.”

That was important. That was really freaking important. “Are you sure?” I asked.

Jake shrugged, his expression puzzled. “I’m not gonna testify to it in federal court or anything, man. I mean, city court, sure.”

Footsteps came around the corner, and Bully Bobby appeared, wearing shorts and a T-shirt and carrying a little notebook with a golf pencil. “Jake,” he said. “Finally, man. Arturo says I have to tell him today. What do you think of Rocko Stone? Or maybe Rack McGranite?”

“Rocko is way overdone already,” Jake said. “And racks are more of a girl thing.”

“Oh, right.”

“Go with something nonstandard, man. How about Gowan?”

“Gowan?” Bobby asked.

“Sure, he was a knight.”

“Like those Round Table guys?”

“Yeah, like that,” Jake said.

“Sounds kinda . . . soft, don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” Jake said. “Stiffen it up with a heavier last name. Like Commando.”

Bobby frowned. “Gowan Commando,” he said, and from his tone the kid just didn’t get it. “I guess that might work. Thanks, man.” He paused and noticed me for the first time. “Oh, hey. Uh, Harry, right?”

“Like yesterday,” I said. I didn’t use my happy voice. “Morning.”

“Yeah, morning.” Bobby coughed and glanced at Jake, who clenched a fist in an encouraging be-strong sort of gesture. “Harry,” Bobby said, “I was kind of an asshole to you yesterday, man. Sorry.”

It probably says something about me that I didn’t even consider the possibility that he might be sincere until he coughed and shuffled over to offer me his hand. “We okay?” he asked.

I blinked at him. People didn’t apologize to me much, as a rule, but I’d seen enough after-school specials to understand the theory. “What the hell.” I traded grips with the kid and said, “It’s nothing. Forget it.”

He smiled a little and said, “Cool. So what are you guys doing?”

“Feng shui,” Jake said.

“You know martial arts?” Bobby asked me.

Now that he wasn’t threatening violence, I could see that this kid was a jewel. He could potentially provide some lucky wiseass with straight lines for the rest of his natural life, and you can’t put a price on that. “A little.”

“Cool.”

Jake shook his head, and managed to keep from smiling. “Need anything else then, Harry?”

“Not right now.”

He nodded. “Come on, Gowan. Let’s go see if Joan needs help with anything.”

“Hey,” I said. “Jake.”

“Yeah?”

“Is Lara here today?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Yeah. Why?”

“No reason,” I said. “I’ll catch up to you later.”

They left, and I sat down in my dim, magically booby-trapped corner to think.

It was important that Arturo was in love. My gut told me it was important, but I couldn’t kick my tired brain into telling me *why*. I rubbed at my eyes. I needed more sleep to do any thinking, so I went looking for the next best thing—coffee and a backup brain.

Murphy answered the phone and I greeted her through the coffee and most of a doughnut.

“You’re mumbling, Harry,” Murphy said. “Speak up.”

I slurped coffee, scalded my mouth on the stuff, and set it aside to cool off a little. “Sorry, burned my tongue. Did you get any more information about Arturo Genosa?” I asked.

“Some,” Murphy said. “I got in touch with a guy I know in LA. He came up with municipal records and even some files from Genosa’s lawyer, but there’s not much in the way of admissible.”

“That’s okay. Just trying to get a picture.”

I heard her digging out a file and opening it. “Okay. He’s got a will on file, leaves everything to a couple of charities and his next of kin, looks like his mother in Greece—but she died a couple of years ago, so I guess the money all goes to charity.”

“What about his wives?” I asked.

“Control of their fund would have gone to his mother, but since she’s dead they get to keep drawing from it indefinitely. It’s in the prenuptial agreement for all three of them.”

“Three?” I asked. Hell’s bells, if the man was in love . . . “Does it mention a fourth wife?”

“Nope.”

“What about a fourth marriage license?”

I heard her rustling around the file, and tested the coffee while she did. Ah, perfection. “Stupid fax machine paper,” she growled. “It’s floppy and the pages all stick together.” Then she stopped for a second and said, “Son of a bitch, there is one.”

“When?”

“Dated for next Thursday.”

“To who?”

“I can’t tell. There’s a big blurry spot,” Murphy said. “Fax machine must have messed it up. But it’s definitely marriage license number four.”

“But with no prenuptial number four,” I said.

“No prenup number four.”

“Hello, new next of kin,” I said.

“Hello, motive,” Murphy agreed. “Hello, suspects.”

The greenroom door opened and I looked up in time to see a woman with a lingerie-model body under a flimsy robe enter the room, holding a big revolver. She pointed the gun at me, found the extension of the phone I was on and pulled it out of the wall, then said into a cell phone, “I’ve got him.”

I sat there holding the dead phone and the warm coffee and said, “Hello, Trixie.”

Chapter Twenty-five



Trixie Scrump-Genosa-Vixen-Expialidocius leaned against the door and said, “Don’t get up, Barry. And don’t move your hands.” Her voice shook with nervous energy, and the barrel of the gun waved drunkenly back and forth. The knuckles of the hand holding the cell phone to her ear were white. “I don’t want to shoot you.”

“You know, people don’t want to crash their cars either. But there is always some idiot who drives and talks on the cell phone at the same time, and crunch,” I said. “Maybe you should put your phone down until we’re done. Just to be safe.”

“Don’t give me orders,” she snapped, pushing the gun at me like it was some sort of sexual aid. She wobbled on her high heels when she did, but managed not to fall over. “Don’t you dare give me orders!”

I shut up. She was already wound pretty tight. I have a bad habit of turning into a real wiseass when someone makes me nervous. It’s just a reflex. But if I pushed Trixie too hard, her precarious self-control might snap, accidentally setting off the gun. I’d die of shame if she unintentionally shot me, so I resolved to keep my mouth shut. Mostly. “Okay.”

“Keep your hands right there, and don’t move.”

“Can I sip some of my coffee at least?” I asked. “It just got to the right temperature.”

She scowled. “No. You never got me my latte.”

“Right,” I said. “Good point.”

We sat there for a couple of minutes while my arms started getting tired, holding coffee and a useless phone in place like that. “So what happens now, Ms. Vixen?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s me and you here, and then there’s that gun. Usually there’s a specific purpose to using a gun as a negotiation tactic, but so far all

you're doing is pointing it at me. I'm no expert, but as I understand it, you get to make demands or something."

"I know you're afraid," she spat. "That's why you're talking. You're nervous and talking because you're afraid of me."

"I am paralyzed at the thought of losing my senior division shuffleboard career," I said. "That's just how much you scare me. But I'm also curious about our next step."

"There is no next step," she said.

"Um. So we sit here for the rest of eternity?"

She sneered. "No. In a minute I'm going to leave."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Just like that?"

"Yeah."

"You . . . brilliant fiend," I said. "I wouldn't ever have guessed that your plan was to do nothing."

She smirked. "It's all I need to do."

"I thought you might be worried that I would tell the police about it afterward."

Trixie laughed and looked genuinely amused. "Oh? You're going to tell them what? That I held a gun on you for no reason, did nothing, and then left?"

"Well. Yeah."

"Which are they going to believe? That crappy story or that you confronted me when I was alone, made unwanted sexual advances, and that I had to pull the gun out of my purse to discourage you?"

I narrowed my eyes. Actually, that wasn't a stupid plan, which made me doubt Trixie had come up with it all on her own. But why hold me in place for only a few moments? I checked the room's clock. Eleven forty. Crap. "Oh," I said. "You want me sidelined for the next time you call up the curse."

Her eyes widened. "How did you know th—" She broke off abruptly, her head twitching, evidently listening to someone on the phone. "Oh. I know. I'm not telling him anything. I don't see why you . . ." She winced. "Oh. Oh. Yes, all *right*. Do *you* want to come down here to do this? Fine, then. Fine." Her face darkened into a vicious scowl, but most of her attention came back to me.

"Who's on the phone?" I asked her.

"None of your business."

“Actually it is. Literally. Since I’m being paid to find the identities of whoever is swinging that curse.”

Trixie let out an ugly laugh. “What difference would it make if you did? It isn’t as though the police are going to believe the use of a magic curse as a murder weapon.”

“Maybe. But cops aren’t the only authority in the universe. Anyone ever tell you about the White Council?”

She licked her lips, and her eyes flickered around the room. “Of course they did,” she lied.

“So you know that employing magic to murder another human being carries the death penalty.”

She stared at me. “What are you talking about?”

“The trial wouldn’t be real long. Maybe ten or fifteen minutes, tops. And once they find you guilty, you’ll be executed on the spot. Beheaded. With a sword.”

Her mouth worked uselessly for a second. “You’re lying.”

“I’m an honest guy. Maybe you’re in denial and projecting.”

“I am not,” she snapped. “You’re just trying to scare me. It’s a lie.”

“I wish,” I said. “My life would have been simpler. Look, Trixie, you and whoever you’re working with might get away with it if you back off right now. Leave off the curses and get out of town.”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “And if we don’t?”

“Bad things happen. You’re already beaten, Ms. Vixen. You just don’t know it. If you roll out that curse again, you’re going to get a taste of it for yourself.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Not a threat,” I said. “Just a fact. You and your ritual are done.”

“Oh,” she said, regaining her composure. “You underestimate my powers.”

I snorted. “You haven’t *got* any powers.”

“Yes, I do. I’ve killed with them.”

“You’ve killed with a *ritual*,” I said.

“What’s the difference?”

“The difference,” I said, “is that if you have any skill of your own at magic, you don’t need a ritual.”

“Whatever. They’re the same thing anyway. Magic. Power.”

“No,” I said. “Look, a ritual spell like that doesn’t have anything to do with you. It’s like a cosmic vending machine. You put two quarters in, push the right button, and the curse comes flying out, courtesy of some psychotic otherworldly force that enjoys that kind of thing. It doesn’t take skill. It doesn’t take talent. You could be a freaking monkey and invoke that curse just as well.”

“There’s no practical difference,” she maintained.

“Yes, there is.”

“What?” she asked.

“You’re about to find out.”

Instead of looking uncertain, she smiled. “You’re talking about that sacred circle you had set up on the soundstage.”

She’d recognized the circle? Oh, crap.

“We knew that you’d try something,” she went on. “All I had to do was follow you when you came in. I don’t know what you thought you were going to accomplish, but I’m pretty sure all of your squiggles and candles aren’t going to do whatever you wanted them to, given that I broke your circle and smeared all your chalk lines.”

And she was right. Double crap.

“Trixie,” I said. “You can’t possibly think that this is all right. Why are you doing this?”

“I’m protecting what’s mine, Larry,” she said. “It’s business.”

“Business?” I demanded. “Two people are dead already. Giselle and Jake were at death’s door, and I don’t even want to think about what would have happened to Inari if I weren’t there. What the fuck do you think you’re *doing*?”

“I don’t feel any need to explain myself to you.”

I blinked at her slowly and then said, “You don’t know either. You don’t know who he’s marrying.”

She didn’t say anything, but her eyes blazed with scorn and fury.

I shook my head, continuing. “So you’ve just been eliminating all the women around Arturo Genosa. One at a time. You don’t even know if you’re killing the right person.”

“There’s only one little girl toy left pretty enough to suit his tastes,” she said.

“Emma,” I said.

“And once she’s gone, I won’t have to worry about her stealing what’s mine.”

I stared at her for a second. “Are you insane?” I said. “Do you think you’ll get away with this?”

“I’d love to see some prosecutor try me for witchcraft,” she responded.

Trixie was too stupid to believe me about the White Council and too self-absorbed to keep my name straight, but for crying out loud, she had to be human. “Hell’s bells, Trixie. Emma’s got kids.”

“So did Hitler,” Trixie snapped.

“No, he didn’t,” I said. “He had *dogs*.”

“Whatever,” Trixie said.

I checked the clock. Eleven-forty-three. In four minutes, give or take, Emma would die.

Trixie’s attention snapped to the phone and she listened for a moment, throwing out a terse, “Yes.” Then the phone abruptly squealed with feedback, and Trixie flinched hard enough to make me worry that she’d lost control of her weapon. “Dammit,” she said. “I hate these stupid cell phones.”

Cell phones are the caged canaries in the coal mines of the supernatural. When a little magic gets moving, cell phones are some of the first pieces of equipment to be disrupted. Odds were good that someone on the other end of that phone was starting to move energy around.

Which meant that the *malocchio* was coming to kill Emma.

And so long as Trixie kept me in the greenroom, there wasn’t a damned thing I could do to prevent it.

Chapter Twenty-six



If I didn't do something, another woman was going to die, and a couple of kids were going to become orphans. Of course, I also had a gun in my face. If I *did* do something, I would die. The smart thing would be to let Trixie finish delaying me and wait for her to leave. Emma would be dead, but I'd have at least twelve hours in which I could shut the Evil Eye franchise down. If I didn't cooperate, Emma and I would both die, and the bad guys would still be at large.

So the smart money was on staying put. Simple logic.

But there are things older than logic—like instinct. One of the most primal instincts in the human soul is the desire to protect children from harm. Even if the idea of Emma's death hadn't been motivation enough, the very *thought* of how savagely this stupid, venal, selfish harpy might scar Emma's children made me want to call down fire enough to roast Trixie Vixen and her sculpted ass to ash.

I found myself tensing to go after her, and damn the gun. It wasn't as brainless as you might think. Killing is not so easy as it seems. Most people are wired to be careful of their fellow human beings. Soldiers and cops both are specifically given training to overcome that instinct, and the criminals who fire at other people are usually driven to it by desperation.

And even trained soldiers and hardened criminals are often wildly inaccurate. Billy the Kid once emptied his Colt revolver at a bank teller from less than three feet away, and missed him six times. I'd seen a police reel of a cop who had been forced to draw and fire at a suspect, and he'd emptied a full clip at the man from less than twenty feet, missing him every time.

Trixie may have had the gun, but she didn't have experience, training, or much in the way of composure. If she hesitated, even for a fraction of a second, it would be possible for me to close on her. If she didn't hesitate,

the odds against me were not unthinkably high. It was possible that she might miss me enough times to let me take the gun.

Of course, it was possible she'd put a bullet through my eye, too. Or through my throat. Or maybe my guts.

I felt a sudden, ethereal wind, cold and ugly. The curse was almost there, and it was deadlier, more potent than ever before. A bare second of concentration told me that I would have no prayer of blocking that much magic, and even redirecting so much raw power would be nearly impossible. I don't know what had happened to make the curse that much stronger, that much deadlier, and it scared me half out of my mind.

I had to do something, and I had to do it now.

I needed a distraction, but the best I could do was to abruptly whip my head toward the door, and to shift my weight as if I might stand up.

"Don't move," Trixie snarled.

I licked my lips, staring at the door.

I saw her expression become uncertain. She rubbernecked toward the door—only for a second, but it would have to do.

I threw my still-steaming coffee at her. It sloshed across her shoulder and neck. She screamed in surprise and sudden pain. I lunged at her, lifting the handset of the telephone to swing at her head.

She cried out and stared at me, her lovely face stunned, terrified.

The Quixote reflexes kicked in.

I hesitated.

The gun went off from two feet away.

I recovered before I could lose much momentum and slammed into her, a full-body impact that drove her shoulder blades up against the wall beside the door. The gun roared again, and the sharp, acrid tang of cordite and the syrupy smell of blood flooded over me. I got my fingers around the wrist of her gun hand and slammed it against the wall. The gun barked some more, but finally tumbled from her fingers to the floor.

I kicked it across the room. Trixie clawed at my eyes with the nails of her free hand. Pain jolted through me. I got an arm around her waist and threw her bodily away from me, opposite the way I had kicked the weapon. She hit the table and folded over it, scattering a box of doughnuts and a plate of various fruits.

Then she sank to the floor, sobbing. One of her stockings had been soaked in blood, from ankle to calf, and she curled up, clutching at her

wounded leg. I recovered the gun without touching the handle, checked, and found it empty. I turned my eyes to Trixie Vixen.

She shrank away from me, weeping in pain and terror. She held up her other arm as a useless shield. “No. No, please. I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it.”

The adrenaline rushed through me, wild and mindless.

I wanted to kill her.

A lot.

I hadn’t ever felt that before—a sudden surge of fury, contempt, and disdain mixed in with a physical excitement only a few degrees short of actual arousal. It wasn’t an emotion. It was nothing that tame and limited. It was a force, a dark and vast tide that picked me up and swept me along like a Styrofoam packing peanut. And I liked it.

There was something in me that took a deep and gloating satisfaction in seeing my enemy on the floor and helpless. That part of me wanted to see her screaming. And then see her die screaming.

I’m not sure how I kept myself from acting on that flood of violence and lust. But instead of gut-shooting Trixie, I stared coldly at her for a second, studying her injuries. One of the shots must have either bounced into her calf or entered directly when the gun had gone off during the struggle. She bled, but not enough to kill her anytime soon, and the lines of her calf and foot seemed twisted, slightly misshapen. The bullet must have broken a bone.

“Please,” she babbled, staring at the gun I now held. “I’ll do whatever you want. Just say it. Oh, God, please don’t kill me.”

I stalked to the door. I noted a couple of bullet holes in it, and heard myself speak, my voice quiet and deadly cold. “Shut up.”

She did, shuddering with sobs, hiding her face. The scent of urine joined the other smells in the room. I kept her revolver in hand and jerked the door open hard, to rush through it and back to the soundstage to deal with the curse.

I didn’t have to bother.

Emma’s corpse lay on its back in the hall outside. She had been wearing spandex biking shorts with a matching sports halter. There was blood forming a pool beneath her. A small, neat hole directly into her sternum accompanied the hole in her forehead, just over her right eyebrow. She lay with her knees bent beneath her, her arms spread a little. A prescription

bottle lay on the ground, just barely touching one fingertip. She'd been dead before she fell, and her body had simply relaxed bonelessly to the ground.

The shots couldn't have been more perfect if they'd been delivered by a professional assassin. The odds against stray bullets randomly hitting where they had were inconceivably high. The *malocchio* had killed her. The stray bullets had simply been its instrument.

I heard Trixie gasp behind me, and turned to see her staring at the body. "No," she whispered, the timing of the words somehow disjointed and random. "That wasn't in the plan. This wasn't part of it. He *never* said that."

I heard running footsteps coming down the hall, and looked up in time to see a couple of the camera guys, Jake, and Arturo round the corner. They came to an abrupt stop, staring at the scene in shock. Someone—Jake, I thought—let out a high-pitched, squawking cry.

I suddenly realized that I was standing over a dead woman while another bled from a bullet wound ten feet away—and that I was holding the gun that did it to them both.

Trixie's eyes widened as if she recognized the opportunity. Her mouth twisted into a sudden, vindictive, mad-eyed rictus. She let out a scream, wailing, "Help me! Help me, oh, God, don't let him kill me too!"

I didn't have long to decide on a course of action, but I got the benefit of one of those crystallized moments, when nothing happens and it seems like you've got all the time in the world to think.

I'd been too slow and now Emma was dead. Worse yet, I looked guilty as hell, short-term. In the long term, forensics would show that Trixie had been holding the gun when it went off, but I had never been on good terms with the largest part of Chicago's legal system, either in the courts or law enforcement. At least one cop, now in Internal Affairs, would be glad to take this opportunity to crucify me, and if I took my chances with the law, the weapon plus the eyewitness testimony of a would-be victim could provide the state with a reasonable case. Even if they didn't win, I could still spend the duration in prison, months or possibly years, until the case was decided—but all it would really take was one or two days. By then Mavra and her scourge would find me and kill me. I knew from bloody experience that not even the strongest jail cell meant much to supernatural beings with murder in mind.

I still didn't know who was helping Trixie. If I didn't figure out who was behind this mess, they could keep going, keep on killing. If I was out of the picture, they'd get away with it, and the thought stirred up my rage once more. Emma's death had changed things. Before, there had been danger, but no one had died on my watch. Not for lack of trying, sure, but I'd been there in time to avert any deaths. But now Emma, whose worst crime probably had a lot to do with providing a decent living for her children, was lying there like so much meat, and her kids had no mommy.

I stared at Trixie for a hot, wild second, and the look choked her continued shrieks to whimpers. Trixie may have been female, but as of that moment she wasn't a woman anymore. She'd crossed a line. As far as I was concerned, she and her allies had forfeited their membership card to the humanity club when they killed Emma.

And I'd be damned if I was going to let them get away with it. But I couldn't do it from the inside of a cell.

I turned and hurried into an adjoining hall and toward the nearest door, but found it locked. I cursed and ran back, heading for the front door. Someone shouted but I ignored them. I sprinted the last twenty feet and was about to hit the door when it abruptly swung open.

Joan stepped in from the parking lot, panting. She wore old jeans and another flannel shirt over a tee. She had her keys in one hand, and a clawhammer in the other. She'd gone through the locked door and beaten me to the exit.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

I checked over my shoulder. I heard more shouts and running footsteps, heavy and fast. Bobby was running after me. If he tried to stop me here in the hall, I didn't think I could get away from him without hurting him, maybe badly. But when I took another step toward Joan she swallowed, her face pale with fright but her eyes determined, and lifted the clawhammer.

"Joan," I panted. "I have to go."

"No," she said. "I don't know what's going on, but I can't let you leave. I heard gunshots. Emma and Trish are hurt."

I didn't have time to discuss it. I took a handkerchief from my pocket, wrapped it around the handle of Trixie's gun to maybe preserve any prints, and lifted it, not quite pointing it at Joan. "There's not time to explain, but if you don't let me go it's going to keep happening. Someone else on the crew will get hurt tonight."

Her expression became angry. "Don't you dare threaten these people."

"It isn't a threat," I half screamed. I hated to do it, but I pointed the gun at her. "Move."

She started shaking but adjusted her grip on the hammer and shook her head.

"I mean it," I said, and took a step forward, radiating as much menace as I knew how.

Joan stared at the gun for a moment. Then an expression of resolution took the fear from her face. She lowered the hammer and took a step toward me, putting the barrel of the gun about six inches from her sternum. "I can't let you hurt anyone else. If you want to leave," she said quietly, "you'll have to kill me too."

I stared at her for a moment. Then I gripped the gun's barrel with my left hand, left the handkerchief around the handle, and offered it to her.

She stared at me. "What are you doing?"

"Take it," I said. "Trixie's fingerprints are on the handle, so don't touch it. She was the shooter. She's working with someone and they're responsible for all the deaths and injuries lately. But when the cops show, she'll lie to them, and it looks bad for me. If the police arrest and hold me, I won't be able to help you when they strike again tonight. I have to go."

She shivered and took the gun. She held it like it might bite her. "I don't understand."

"Joan. If I was the one who shot them, I'd have shot you too. Would I give you the gun if I'd done it? Just leave the murder weapon here for the cops?"

She hesitated, uncertain.

"Help me," I told her. There was a tense note of fear in my voice. "I need to get back to my place, get a few things, and go before the cops start watching it. Try to delay them. Just for five minutes, please. My God, it's going to happen *again* if I don't stop it."

She glanced over her shoulder at the door.

"Please, Joan," I said quietly. "God, please help me." Silence fell heavily, except for more footsteps, coming closer.

"I must be insane," she said. "I must be insane."

She stepped aside.

I did the only thing I could under the circumstances. It made me look guilty as hell, but if I wanted to keep breathing I didn't have much choice.

I ran.

Chapter Twenty-seven



I hit the parking lot at a run, piled into the Blue Beetle, and started it up. Behind me I heard the building's fire alarm go off, a deafening ringing of emergency bells. In addition to the police, and probably an ambulance, a bunch of fire trucks were about to show up as well. It was going to be one hell of a mess to sort through, at least for the CPD. By the time they made sure the building had been evacuated, seen to Trixie's wound, and taken statements from everyone in the building I could probably walk to Havana. She'd bought me at least ten minutes and probably more.

"Bless you, Joan," I muttered. I slapped the old car into reverse and cleared out, heading for my apartment. I was on the highway and gone before any sirens started converging. I drove carefully and under the limit, since getting pulled over for a citation could be fatal, and tried to think unobtrusive thoughts. But I found myself mulling over the details of the *malocchio*.

Trixie Vixen had been in the room with me when the last curse came down, and while she was clearly involved, it hadn't come from her. She'd known about it in great detail, though, and she'd known enough about magic to screw up the hurried wards I'd raised around the studio. Couple that with bragging about her power, and I figured she'd been involved in the actual magic at some point—she probably had handled part of the ritual that brought the curse down.

It made sense. Trixie was a jumbo-sized self-obsessed drama queen, complete with melodramatic dialogue, tantrums, and smug confidence that she was the center of the universe. The deaths and near-deaths from the *malocchio* had given new depths to the term *freak accident*. Swarms of bees, bridge-jumping cars, and electrocution in a puddle of one's own blood were some pretty ridiculous ways to kill someone. And that frozen turkey thing had come straight out of a cartoon.

They would have been funny if it hadn't been for the deaths.

But the curse had been different today. No winding, slow buildup, no murder weapons manufactured by the Acme Corporation, and no spillover onto other people nearby. Unlike the others, Emma's death had been the result of a surgical strike of focused, violent energy. The earlier editions of the curse had been more like a stone-headed hatchet than a scalpel. Today's curse had been far stronger than the ones I'd felt before, too.

And Trixie was the lowest common denominator.

Any kind of magic spell requires certain things to happen. You have to gather in the energy for whatever it is you're trying to do. Then you have to shape it with your thoughts and feelings into what you want it to do. And finally you have to release it in the direction you want it to go. To use a rough metaphor, you have to load the gun, aim it, and pull the trigger.

The problem was that with a curse that powerful, you were talking about a very big gun. Even with a ritual supplying the power for it, controlling that power was a task that not just anybody could do. Aiming and pulling the trigger were easier, but handling them all at once would be very difficult even for some wizards. That's why for the big projects you need three people working together, and it's the basis for the stereotype of three cackling witches casting spells in concert over a cauldron.

Trixie stormed off the set before the curse had come at Inari last night, and she hadn't been in the studio when it happened twelve hours prior to that. But she *had* been there with me today. Trixie the Drama Queen's personality was stamped all over the near-insane deaths, but I was damned sure that she wasn't a wizard.

Therefore, she'd had help. Someone would need to manage the energy, while Trixie shaped the curse into some kind of ludicrous death scenario. And someone else had to pull the trigger, channeling the spell to its intended recipient—also something that required a little more skill and focus than I was willing to believe Trixie had. So it would take three of them.

Three *stregas*.

Three former Mrs. Arturo Genosas.

The curse that killed Emma had been different. It had been a hell of a lot stronger, for one thing, and it had come at her a hell of a lot faster. And the death it had brought down on her had been efficient and quick. If Trixie wasn't with them, then it meant that either one of the others had some

serious skill, or they'd been able to find a replacement witch who had been content with making the murder swift, clean, and simple.

Four killers working together. I was the only one around who could get in their way, and they knew I was getting closer to them. Under the circumstances, they had only one logical target for the next iteration of the spell, twelve hours from now.

Me.

That was assuming, of course, that Mavra and the vampire scourge—or possibly the man I'd hired to help me kill them—didn't take me out first. Maybe they wouldn't get their chance. See? That's the power of positive thinking.

I got back to my apartment and got out of the car just in time to see Mister flying down the sidewalk as fast as he could run. He looked both ways before crossing the street, and we entered the apartment together. I started gathering things and shoving them into a nylon gym bag, then opened the door down to the lab. Bob flowed out of Mister, who promptly shuffled over to the fire and collapsed into sleep.

"Well?" I called down as I finished packing the bag. "Did you find her?"

"Yeah, I found her," Bob called.

"About time," I said. I went down the ladder in a hurry, and flicked several candles alight with a muttered word. I got out a roll of parchment about a foot and a half square. Then I spread it onto the worktable in the lab's center and set a fountain pen beside it. "Where?"

"Not far from Cabrini Green," Bob said. "I got a good look around the place."

"Good. You've got permission to come out long enough to show me what you found."

He made a sighing sound but didn't complain. The usual cloud of glowing orange motes of light slid out of the skull's eye sockets, though perhaps it was a little less bright and swirly than usual. The cloud of light surrounded the pen, and it rose up of its own accord, then began scratching a drawing of the lair on the parchment. Bob's voice, a little indistinct now, said, "You aren't going to like this."

"Why not?"

"It's a shelter."

"A homeless shelter?"

"Yeah," Bob said. "Does some rehab work with drug addicts, too."

“Stars and stones,” I murmured. “How could vampires take something that public?”

“There’s no real threshold on a public building, so they didn’t need an invitation. I think they probably came in from Undertown, right into the shelter’s basement.”

“How many people have they hurt?”

Bob’s pen flickered over the parchment. When I draw maps I usually end up with a series of lopsided squares and wavery lines and incomplete circles. Bob’s drawing looked like it could have been done by da Vinci. “There were three bodies stacked up in a corner of the basement,” Bob said. “A few of the shelter’s staff had been made into rough thralls and are covering for them, them, sort of. Maybe half a dozen people hadn’t been enthralled, but they were tied up and locked into a cedar closet.”

“Any goons?”

“Big-time. Half a dozen Renfields, and each of them has a darkhound to boot.”

“Renfields?” I asked.

“How in the world can you exist in this century and not know about Renfields?” Bob demanded. “You need a life, stat.”

“I read the book. I know who Renfield was. I’m not familiar with the parlance for Renfield in the plural.”

“Oh,” Bob said. “What do you need to know?”

“Well. First off, what did they call them before Stoker published the book?” I asked.

“They didn’t call them anything, Harry,” Bob said in a tone of gentle patience. “That’s *why* the White Court had Stoker publish the book. To tell people about them.”

“Oh. Right.” I rubbed at my eyes. “How do the vampires do their recruiting?”

“Mind-control magic,” Bob said. “The usual.”

“Always with the mental control,” I muttered. “Let me make sure my facts are straight. Rough thralls just stand around looking blank until they get orders, right?”

“Yeah,” Bob said, pen scratching. “Sort of like zombies, but they still have to go to the bathroom.”

“So a Renfield is the fine version of thralldom?”

“No,” Bob said. “A fine thrall is so controlled that they might not even *know* that they’re a thrall at all, and it lasts long-term.”

“Like what DuMorne did to Elaine.”

“Uh, I guess so, yeah. Like that. That kind of thing takes a subtle hand, though. Enthralling someone also requires a lot of time and a certain amount of empathy, neither of which has been readily available to Mavra.”

“So?” I said, getting impatient. “A Renfield is a . . . ?”

Bob put the pen down. “It’s the quick, dirty way for the Black Court to pick up some cheap muscle. Renfields have been crushed into total thralldom through brute psychic force.”

“You’re kidding,” I said. “The kind of mental damage that would do to someone . . .”

“It destroys their sanity when it happens,” Bob confirmed. “Makes them no good for anything but gibbering violence, but since that’s pretty much what the vampires wanted to begin with it works out.”

“How do you get them out of it?” I asked.

“You don’t,” Bob said. “The original Merlin couldn’t undo it, and neither could any of the saints on record to have tried. A thrall can be freed, or recover over time. Renfields can’t. From the moment their minds break they’ve got an expiration date.”

“Ugh,” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Renfields get more and more violent and deranged, and they self-destruct in a year or two. You can’t fix them. For all practical purposes, they’re already dead.”

I went over the facts in my head, and admired how much uglier the situation had just become. Over the years I’ve learned that ignorance is more than just bliss. It’s freaking orgasmic ecstasy. I glanced at Bob and said, “Are you sure about your facts?”

The cloud of orange light flowed tiredly back into the skull on its shelf. “Yes. DuMorne did quite a bit of research on the subject back in the day.”

“Murphy isn’t going to like this,” I said. “Dismembering monsters with a chain saw is one thing. People are another.”

“Yeah. People are easier.”

“Bob,” I growled. “They’re *people*.”

“Renfields aren’t, Harry,” Bob said. “They might still be moving around but they’re pretty much gone.”

“Boy, would it be fun to explain that to a courtroom,” I said. I shuddered. “Or to the White Council, for that matter. If I take out the wrong person, I could wind up in jail—or in a White Council star chamber trial. Mavra’s using the laws to protect herself against us. That’s so backward.”

“Screw the laws! Kill ’em all!” Bob said with weary cheer.

I sighed. “What about the dogs?”

“Your basic animal,” Bob said. “But they’ve been infused with a portion of the same kind of dark power that the Black Court runs on. They’re stronger, faster, and they don’t feel pain. I once saw a darkhound rip its way through a brick wall.”

“I bet they look like normal dogs afterward, huh?”

“And before-ward,” Bob said.

“I guess if the cops are on my case when this is over, the SPCA can come along for the ride.” I shook my head. “And on top of all that, Mavra is also keeping those hostages in the closet for food. She’ll use them as human shields once fighting starts.”

“Or as bait in a trap,” Bob said.

“Yeah. Either way it makes things more complicated, even if we go in when Mavra and her scourge are sleeping.” I looked at Bob’s diagram of the lair. “Any security system?”

“Old electronic one,” Bob said. “Nothing fancy. No problem for you to hex it down.”

“Mavra will know that. She’ll have sentries. We need to get past them.”

“Forget it. Rough thralls and Renfields don’t exactly make the most observant guardians in the world, but the darkhounds make up for them. If you want to sneak up, you’ll have to be invisible, inaudible, and unsmellable. Don’t count on a surprise attack.”

“Dammit. What kind of weapons are they toting?”

“Uh, teeth. Mostly teeth, Harry.”

I glared at him. “Not the dogs.”

“Oh. The thralls have got some baseball bats. The Renfields have assault rifles, grenades, and body armor.”

“Holy crap.”

Bob leered at me from his shelf. “Awww.Izzums scared of the mean old machine guns?”

I glowered and flipped a pencil at the skull. “Maybe Murphy can figure out a way to do this without starting World War Three. Meanwhile, change

of topic incoming. I need your opinion.”

“Sure,” Bob said. “Hit me.”

I told him about the entropy curse and who I thought was behind it.

“Ritual magic,” Bob confirmed. “More amateurs.”

“Who sponsors ritual curses these days?” I asked.

“Well. In theory, a lot of Powers. In practice, though, the writings on most of them have been gathered up by the Council or the Venatori or someone else with some supernatural clout. Or else destroyed. It might take me some time to recall all the details.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because I’ve got about six hundred years’ worth of memories to sort through, and I’m exhausted,” Bob said, his voice softer, as though coming from far away. “But you can be pretty sure that whoever is backing a death curse isn’t real friendly.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I said. “Hey, Bob.”

“Hmm?”

“Is it possible to work some kind of spell that would last, I dunno, maybe twenty or thirty years?”

“Sure, if you spend enough money,” Bob said. “Or if you’re some kind of sentimental family sap.”

“Sentimental? How’s that?”

“Well, you can anchor magic to certain materials, right? Most of them are very expensive. Or you do the cheap kind like you use on your blasting rod and such, refresh them once in a while.” The skull’s eyes were growing rapidly dimmer. “But there are times when you can anchor it to a person.”

“That isn’t doable,” I said.

“Not for you,” Bob said. “Gotta be a blood relation. Blood in common, that kind of thing. Maybe if you had a kid. But I guess you’d need a girlfriend for that, huh.”

I raked my hand through my hair, thinking. “And if you do it that way, the spell lasts? Even for that long?”

“Oh, sure,” Bob said. “As long as the person you anchor it to is alive. Takes a tiny bit of energy off them to keep the spell from slowing down. That’s why all the really nasty curses you hear about usually involve some family somewhere.”

“So for instance,” I said, “my mother could have laid out a curse on someone. And as long as I was alive, it would still be viable.”

“Exactly. Or like that loup-garou guy. His own bloodline keeps the curse fueled.” The skull’s mouth opened in a yawn. “Anything else?”

I picked up the map and tucked it into a pocket. Bob was at the end of his resources, and I had no time to lose. I’d have to finish out this one on my own. “Get some rest and see what you can remember,” I said. “I’ve got to clear out before the cops get here.” I started to get up off my stool, and every muscle in my body complained to be moving again. I winced and said, “Painkillers. Definitely need painkillers too.”

“Luck, Harry,” Bob mumbled, and the glittering orange lights in the skull’s eye sockets dimmed completely.

My body ached as I climbed back out of the lab. It was getting to be pretty good at aching, actually, by virtue of all the practice. I could ignore pain. I had a talent for ignoring it. That talent had been refined by the harsh lessons of life and the even harsher lessons of Justin DuMorne. But even so, the discomfort took its toll. My bed wasn’t particularly luxurious, but it looked that way when I passed it on my way to the door.

I had my keys in my hand and my bag over one shoulder when there was a rattling from the dim corner by the door. I paused, and a moment later my wizard’s staff twitched, rattling again. It shuddered and twitched, thumping against the wall and the floor in staccato fits, too much rhythm to the sounds for them to be meaningless.

“Well,” I muttered. “It’s about damn time.”

I picked up my staff, rapped one end hard on the floor, and focused my attention on the length of wood. I reached down through it, into the steady, heavy power of the earth beneath it, and then beat out my own short rhythm on the stone. My staff went still, then quivered sharply twice in my hand. I set out water and food for Mister, left, and locked my apartment behind me, then sealed the wards of protective energy around it.

By the time I was up the stairs, a heavy old Ford truck, a battered and tough-looking survivor of the Great Depression, pulled into the gravel parking lot at the side of the boardinghouse and crunched to a halt. It had Missouri plates. A gun rack at the back of the cab held an old double-barreled shotgun in its top slot, and a thick, stumpy old wizard’s staff in the one beneath it.

The driver set the brake and swung open the door without letting the engine die. He was old but hale, a short, stocky man in overalls, heavy working boots, and a flannel shirt. He had broad hands with scarred

knuckles, and wore a plain steel ring on each index finger. A few white hairs drifted around his sun-toughened scalp. He had dark eyes, a severely annoyed expression, and he snorted upon seeing me. “Hey, there, Hoss. You look like ten miles of bad—”

“Clichés,” I interjected, smiling. The old man puffed out a breath of quiet laughter and offered me his hand. I shook it, and found myself newly appreciative of the calloused strength that belied the man’s evident age. “Good to see you, sir. I was starting to feel a little swamped.”

Ebenazar McCoy, senior member of the White Council, a sometime mentor of mine, and by all accounts I’d heard one hell of a strong wizard, clapped me on my biceps with his free hand. “You, in over your head? It’s as if you’re too stubborn to know when to run.”

“We’d best get moving,” I told him. “The police will be along shortly.”

His frown knitted his shaggy white eyebrows together, but he nodded and said, “Hop in.”

I got in the truck and slid my staff into the gun rack with Ebenazar’s. The old man’s staff was shorter and thicker than mine, but the carved sigils and formulae on it were noticeably similar, and the texture and color of the wood was identical. They’d both come from the same lightning-wounded tree, back on Ebenazar’s land in the Ozarks. I shut the door and closed my eyes for a moment, while Ebenazar got the truck rolling.

“Your Morse is rusty,” he said a few minutes later. “On my staff it sounded like you spelled it ‘blampires.’”

“I did,” I said. “Black Court vampires. I just shortened it some.”

Ebenazar *tsked*. “Blampires. That’s the problem with you young people. Shortening all the words.”

“Too many acronyms?” I asked.

“Ayuh.”

“Well, then,” I said. “I’m glad you took the time to RSVP me. I have a problem that needs to stay on the QT, but is rapidly going FUBAR. I’m sorry to call you LD through AT&T instead of using UPS, but I needed your help ASAP. I hope that’s OK.”

Ebenazar grunted, shot me a sidelong look, and said, “Don’t make me kick your ass.”

“No, sir,” I said.

“Black Court,” he said. “Who?”

“Mavra. You know her?”

“I know it,” he said, the pronoun mildly emphasized. “Killed a friend of mine in the Venatori once. And she was in the Wardens’ files. They suspect she’s got a little skill at dark sorcery and consider her to be very dangerous.”

“It’s more than a little skill,” I said.

The old man frowned. “Oh?”

“Yeah. I’ve seen her throw raw power around, and put up the best veil I’ve ever seen through. I also saw her using some long-range mental communications with her flunkies.”

The old man frowned. “That’s more than a little.”

“Uh-huh. She’s gunning for me. Only, you know, without the guns.”

Ebenezar frowned, but nodded. “She holding that mess at the Velvet Room against you?”

“That’s how it looks from here,” I said. “She’s taken two swings at me. But I found where she’s laired, and I want to take her down before she gets to three.”

“Makes sense,” he said. “What’s your plan?”

“I’ve got help. Murphy—”

“The police girl?” he interrupted.

“God, don’t call her a girl,” I said. “At least not to her face. Yeah, her, and a mercenary named Kincaid.”

“Haven’t heard of him,” Ebenezar said.

“He works for the Archive,” I said. “And he’s good at killing vampires. I’m going in with those two, but we need someone standing by to get us out in a hurry.”

“I’m your driver, eh?” he mused. “And I suppose you want someone to lock down Mavra’s power, if she’s got access to that much magic.”

“It hadn’t occurred to me, really,” I lied. “But hey, if you are bored and want to do that to pass the time while you keep the car running, I don’t mind.”

The old man’s teeth flashed in a wolfish smile. “I’ll keep that in mind, Hoss.”

“I don’t have anything to use as a channel, though,” I said. “Are you going to be able to target her without hair or blood or something?”

“Yes,” Ebenezar said. He didn’t elaborate how he’d do it. “Though I doubt I can get her down to nothing. I can prevent her from working anything big, but she might have enough left in her to be annoying.”

“I’ll take what I can get,” I said. “But we need to move right now. She’s already taken several people.”

“Vampires are that way,” Ebenezar agreed in a casual tone, but I saw the way his eyes narrowed. He didn’t care for monsters like Mavra any more than I did. I could have kissed him.

“Thank you.”

He shook his head. “What about her death curse?”

I blinked.

“You’d thought of that, right?” he asked.

“What death curse?” I stammered.

“Use your head, boy,” Ebenezar said. “If she’s got a wizard’s power, she might well be able to level a death curse at you when she goes down.”

“Oh, come on,” I muttered. “That’s no fair. She’s *already* dead.”

“Hadn’t thought of that, eh?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Though I should have. Been a busy couple of days, what with dodging all the certain death coming at me from every direction. Not a second to spare for thinking. We have precious little time.”

He grunted. “So where we going?”

I checked the time at a passing bank billboard. “A picnic.”

Chapter Twenty-eight



What looked like a small army had invaded a portion of Wolf Lake Park and claimed it in the name of God and Clan Murphy. Cars filled the little parking lot nearby, and lined the nearest lane for a hundred yards in either direction. Summer had been generous with the rain for once, and all the trees in the park had put on glorious autumn colors so bright that if I scrunched up my eyes until my lashes blurred my vision they almost seemed to be afire.

In the park, a couple of gazebos had been stockpiled with tables and lots of food, and a pair of portable pavilions flanked them, giving shade to maybe a dozen people who had fired up their grills and were singeing meat. Music was playing from several different locations, the beats of the various songs stumbling into one another, and evidently someone had brought a generator, because there was an enormous TV set up out in the grass while a dozen men crowded around it, talking loudly, laughing, and arguing about what looked to be a college football game.

There were also a pair of volleyball nets and a badminton net, and enough Frisbees flying around to foul up radar at the local airports. A giant, inflatable castle wobbled dramatically as a dozen children bounced around on the inside of it, caroming off the walls and one another with equal amounts of enthusiasm. More kids ran in packs all over the place, and there must have been a dozen dogs gleefully racing one another and begging food from anyone who seemed to have some. The air smelled like charcoal, mesquite, and insect repellent, and buzzed with happy chatter.

I stood there for a minute, watching the festivities. Spotting Murphy in a crowd of a couple of hundred people wasn't easy. I tried to be methodical, sweeping the area with my gaze from left to right. I didn't spot Murphy, but as I stood there it occurred to me that a bruised and battered man better than six and a half feet tall in a black leather duster didn't exactly blend in with the crowd at the Murphy picnic. A couple of the men around the

television had spotted me with the kind of attention that made me think that they were with the law.

Another man walking by with a white Styrofoam cooler on one shoulder noticed the men at the television and followed their gaze to me. He was in his mid-thirties and about an inch or two over average height. His brown hair was cut short, as was a neatly cropped goatee. He had the kind of build that dangerous men seem to develop—not enormous, pretty muscle, but the kind of lean sinew that indicated speed and endurance as well as strength. And he was a cop. Don't ask me how I could tell—it was just something about the way he held himself, the way he kept track of his surroundings.

He promptly changed course, walked up to me, and said, “Hey, there.”

“Hey,” I said.

His tone was overtly friendly, but I could taste the suspicion in it. “Mind if I ask what you're doing here?”

I didn't have time for this crap. “Yes.”

He dropped the fake friendliness. “Listen, buddy. This is a family get-together. Maybe you could find another part of the park to stand around looking forboding.”

“Free country,” I said. “Public park.”

“Which has been reserved by the Murphy family for the day,” he said. “Look, buddy, you're scaring the kids. Walk.”

“Or you'll call the cops?” I asked.

He set the cooler down and squared off facing me, just barely far enough away to avoid a sucker punch. He looked relaxed, too. He knew what he was doing. “I'll do you a favor and call the ambulance first.”

By this time we were getting more attention from the football fans. I was frustrated enough to be tempted to push him a little bit more, but there was no sense in it. I assumed that the cops in the family were off today, but if I got beaten up someone might call in and find out about Emma's death. That was a good way to get bogged down in a holding cell and dead.

The guy faced me with confidence, even though I had a head and shoulders on him and outweighed him by forty or fifty pounds. He knew if anything happened, he'd have a ton of help.

Must be a nice feeling.

I lifted a hand by way of capitulation. “I'll go. I just need to speak to Karrin Murphy for a moment. Business.”

His expression flickered with surprise that was quickly hidden. “Oh.” He looked around. “Over there,” he said. “She’s reffing the soccer game.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure,” the man said. “You know, it wouldn’t kill you to be a little more polite.”

“Why take chances,” I muttered, turning my back on him and heading over to the makeshift soccer field. There were a bunch of rugrats too big for playground equipment and too young for pimples playing with what could kindly be construed as abundant enthusiasm while a few motherly types looked on. But I didn’t see Murphy.

I began to turn around and start another sweep. At this rate I would have to ask someone for directions.

“Harry?” Murphy’s voice called from behind me.

I turned around. My jaw dropped open. I was lucky none of the kids kicked their soccer ball into my exposed uvula. It took me a minute to stammer, “You’re wearing a dress.”

She glowered up at me. Murphy wasn’t going to qualify under anyone’s definition of *willowy* or *svelte*, but she had the build of a gymnast—tough, flexible, and strong. Generally speaking, being five-nothing, a hundred and nothing, and female had made her professional life less than pleasant, including getting her landed in charge of Special Investigations—a post that was the career equivalent to being exiled to the Bastille, or maybe left out for the ants.

Murphy had excelled at her new job, much to the distress of the folks who had gotten her put there. Partly, to be sure, because she had engaged the services of the only professional wizard in Chicago. But also because she was damned good at her job. She’d been able to inspire loyalty, to judge and employ her detectives’ skills effectively, and to keep everyone together through some fairly terrifying times—both in my company and outside of it. She was smart, tough, dedicated, and everything else an ideal leader of a police division should be.

Except male. In a profession that was still very much a boys’ club.

As a result, Murphy had made a number of accommodations to the male ego. She was an award-winning marksman, she had taken more than her share of martial-arts tournaments, and she continued to train ferociously, most of it with, among, and around cops. There was no one in the department who had any questions about whether or not Murphy could

introduce the baddest bad guys to new vistas of physical pain in hand-to-hand, and no one who had survived the battle with the loup-garou would ever doubt her skill with firearms or her courage again. But being Murphy, she went the extra mile. She wore her hair shorter than she liked it, and she went almost entirely without makeup or adornments. She dressed functionally—never scruffy, mind you, but almost always very subdued and practical—and never, ever wore a dress.

This one was long, full, and yellow. And it had flowers. It looked quite lovely and utterly . . . wrong. Just wrong. Murphy in a dress. My world felt askew.

“I hate these things,” she complained. She looked down, brushing at the skirt, and swished it back and forth a little. “I always did.”

“Wow. Uh, why are you wearing it, then?”

“My mom made it for me.” Murphy sighed. “So, I thought, you know, maybe it would make her happy to see me in it.” She took a whistle from around her neck, promoted one of the kids to referee, and started walking. I fell into pace beside her.

“You found them,” she said.

“Yeah. Our driver is here, and I called Kincaid about twenty minutes ago. He’ll have the hardware nearby and waiting for us.” I took a deep breath. “And we need to move in a hurry.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I’m pretty sure your brothers and sisters in law enforcement are going to want to sit me down for a long talk. I’d rather they didn’t until I’ve closed a couple of accounts.” I gave her a brief rundown of Emma’s murder.

“Christ,” she said. After a few steps she added, “At least this time around I heard it from you first. I’ve got a change of clothes in the car. What else do I need to know?”

“Tell you on the way,” I said.

“Right,” she said. “Look, I promised my mom I’d come see her before I left. My sister wanted to talk to me about something. Two minutes.”

“Sure,” I said, and we veered toward one of the pavilions. “You have a big family. How many?”

“Couple of hundred the last time I looked,” she said. “There, in the white blouse. That’s mother. The girl in the tight . . . everything is my baby sister, Lisa.”

“Baby sister has pretty legs,” I noted. “But those shorts must be a little binding.”

“The clothes keep the blood from reaching her brain,” Murphy said. “At least that’s my theory.” She stepped under the pavilion, smiling, and said, “Hi, Mom!”

Murphy’s mom was taller than her daughter, but she had that kind of matronly plumpness that comes with age, pasta, and a comfortable life. Her hair was dark blond, threaded through with grey that she had made no effort at all to conceal, and it was held back off her face with a jade comb. She was wearing a white blouse, a floral print skirt, and tinted sunglasses. She turned around to face Murphy as we walked up, and her face lit for a moment. “Karrin,” she said, her tone warm and wary.

Murphy held out her hands as she walked over to her mom, and the two clasped hands and hugged. There was a sort of stiffness to the gesture that suggested ritual, formality, and less-than-pleasant emotional undercurrents. They batted a few chatty words back and forth, and while they did I noted something odd. There had been at least a dozen people under the pavilion when we came in, but most of them had wandered away. In fact, there was a widening circle of open space clearing out around the pavilion.

Murphy didn’t miss it, either. She glanced back at me, and I quirked an eyebrow at her. She twitched one shoulder in a minimal shrug, and went back to talking with her mom.

A minute later only five people were within twenty or thirty feet: me, Murphy, her mom, little sister, Lisa, and the man whose lap she was draped across. The guy with the cooler. They were behind Murphy and me, and I turned my body halfway so that I could look at them without totally ignoring Murphy and her mom.

Lisa reminded me a lot of Murphy, had Murphy been an estrogen princess rather than a warrior princess. Blond hair, fair skin, a pert nose, and cornflower blue eyes. She wore a scarlet baby-doll T-shirt with the Chicago Bulls’ team logo stretched out over her chest. Her shorts had been blue jeans at some point, but they had come down with a bad case of spandex envy. She wore flip-flops and dangled them from her painted toes as she sat across the lap of the man I presumed to be the fiancé Murphy had mentioned.

He made quite a contrast with Lisa. He was a bit older than her, for one. Not double her age or anything, but definitely older. He was being careful

not to let any expression show on his face, and it made me think that he was worried about something.

“Mom,” Murphy was saying. “This is my friend Harry. Harry, this is my mother, Marion.”

I put on my best smile for Mother Murphy and stepped forward, offering her my hand. “Charmed, ma’am.”

She shook my hand and gave me a calculating look. Her grip reminded me of Murphy’s—her hands were small, strong, and had been hardened by work. “Thank you, Harry.”

“And this is my baby sister, Lisa,” Murphy said, turning to face her for the first time. “Lisa, this is—” Murphy froze, her words dying into a choking gasp. “Rich,” she said after a second, her voice shaking with a tide of emotion. “What are you doing here?”

He murmured something to Lisa. The girl slipped off his lap, and he stood slowly up. “Hello, Karrin. You’re looking well.”

“You miserable son of a bitch,” Murphy spat. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Karrin,” Murphy’s mom snapped. “There is no place for that kind of language here.”

“Oh, please!” Lisa cried.

“I don’t have to put up with that, Karrin,” Rich growled.

Murphy clenched her hands into fists.

“Whoa, whoa, people,” I said. I must have been feeling suicidal, because I took a step forward and placed myself in the middle of the circle of angry stares. “Come on, guys. At least let me get introduced to everyone before the fighting starts, so I’ll know who to duck.”

There was a second of heavy silence, and then Rich snorted out a quiet laugh and subsided back into his chair. Lisa folded her arms. Murphy tensed up a little, but with her it was a good sign. She always got that deadly relaxed look to her stance when she was about to kick someone’s ass.

“Thank you, Harry,” Mama Murphy said in a loud tone. She stepped forward with a paper plate laden with a hamburger and passed it to me. “It’s nice to know there is another adult present. Why don’t we get everyone introduced, Karrin.”

I checked the burger. It had everything on it but cheese. Just the way I liked it. I was favorably impressed with Mama Murphy. And I was starving,

too. More bonus points.

Murphy stepped up beside me. “Right. Introductions. Harry, this is my baby sister, Lisa.” She glared daggers at the man. “And this is Rich. My second husband.”

Oh, dear Lord.

Murphy stared from her mom to her sister to Rich. “I know we haven’t talked in a while, Mother. So let’s get caught up. Why don’t we start with why Lisa is engaged to my ex-husband and none of you even bothered to *tell* me?”

Lisa lifted her chin. “It isn’t my fault if you’re too much of a bitch to get a man to stay with you. Rich wanted an actual woman, which is why you aren’t involved with him anymore. And I didn’t tell you because it was none of your damned business.”

“Lisa,” scolded Mama Murphy. “That is not the kind of language a lady uses.”

“And those aren’t the kind of clothes a lady wears,” Murphy said, her voice tart. “She might as well talk like a whore, too.”

“Karrin!” Mama Murphy protested, her voice shocked.

There wasn’t time for this, either. I stepped up next to Murphy and gave Rich a half-desperate look.

“Ohhhhh-kay,” Rich said. He stood up from his chair, slipping an arm around Lisa’s shoulders. “This is no good. Come on, baby. Time for a walk until you cool off. Let’s go find a beer.”

“Murph,” I said. I leaned down enough to mutter at her ear, “Remember. No time.”

Murphy folded her arms, her expression unrepentant, but at least she turned away from her sister. Rich and Murphy Spice walked off toward the other pavilion.

Mother Murphy waited until they were gone before she faced us, her frown speaking volumes of disapproval. “For goodness’ sake, Karrin. You aren’t children anymore.”

Explosion averted, at least for the moment. I seized the opportunity to eat the hamburger.

Oh. My. God. For food this good, I’d marry Murphy just for her mom’s cooking on holidays.

“I can’t believe it,” Murphy said. “Rich. I thought he was working in New Orleans.”

“He is,” Mama Murphy said. “Lisa went down for Mardi Gras. Apparently he had to arrest her.”

“Mother,” Murphy protested. “You let her go to Mardi Gras? I had to sneak out of the house to go to the prom.”

Mother Murphy sighed. “Karrin, you’re the oldest child. She’s the youngest. All parents get a little more relaxed along the way.”

“Apparently,” Murphy said, her voice bitter, “that includes tolerating felonies like providing alcohol to a minor. She’s underage for beer until next month.”

“It’s always about work, isn’t it,” Mama Murphy said.

“This has nothing to do with work,” Murphy shot back. “Mother, he’s twice her age. How could you?”

I partook of near-divine hamburger and kept my head down, and felt wise for doing so.

“In the first place, dear, it isn’t up to me. It’s your sister’s life. And he isn’t twice her age. Worse things have happened.” She sighed. “We all felt Lisa should be the one to talk to you, but you know how she hates confronting you.”

“She’s a gutless little harlot, you mean.”

“That will be enough, young lady,” Mama Murphy said, her voice crackling with heat and steel. “Your sister found a man who genuinely loves her. I might not be entirely confident about the notion, but she’s old enough to make her own choices. And besides, you know how much I always liked Rich.”

“Yes, I know,” Murphy growled. “Can we talk about something else?”

“All right.”

“Where are the boys?”

Mama Murphy rolled her eyes and nodded at the group around the big television out on the grass. “Somewhere in there. You can hear them yelling if you listen.”

Murphy snorted. “I’m surprised Rich isn’t watching the game, too.”

“Karrin, I know you’re still angry with him. But it’s hardly the man’s fault that he wanted to start a family.”

“That was just a rationalization, Mother,” Murphy said. “What he wanted was for me to stay home so that I wouldn’t make him look bad at work.”

“I’m sorry you still think that,” Mama Murphy replied. “But you’re cheapening him. It isn’t as though he could start a family by himself. He

wanted a woman willing to do that with him. You made it clear that you didn't."

"Because I didn't want to give up what I do."

"There are other people in the family who have taken up your father's duties," Mother Murphy said, her voice bitter. "There's no need for you to do it."

"That isn't why I became a cop."

Mother Murphy shook her head and sighed. "Karrin. Your brothers are all serving. They're taking their time in settling down. I don't want to tell you what to do with your life—"

Murphy snorted.

"—but I do want to have the chance to hold my grandchildren while I'm still young enough and strong enough to do it. Rich wants to settle down, and your sister wants to be the woman he does it with. Is that such a bad thing?"

"I just can't see you flying to New Orleans every month to visit them."

"Of course not, dear," Mama Murphy replied. "I don't have that kind of money. That's why they'll be settling down here."

Murphy's mouth dropped open.

"Rich has already put in for his transfer and had it approved. He'll be working for the FBI office here in Illinois."

"I don't *believe* this," Murphy grated. "My own sister. Here. With Rich. And you're just going to keep throwing this in my face."

"Not everything is about you, Karrin," her mother said, her voice prim. "I'm sure we can all be adults about this."

"But he's my *ex-husband*."

"Whom you *divorced*," Murphy's mother replied. But the harsh words were delivered in a gentle tone. "For goodness' sake, Karrin, you've already made it clear that you didn't want him. Why should you care if someone else does?"

"I don't," Murphy protested. She waved a vague hand. "But Lisa isn't just 'someone.'"

"Ah," said Mama Murphy.

Just then Murphy's cell phone chirped. She checked it, frowned, and said, "Excuse me." Then she walked twenty or thirty feet away from me, out into the sunshine, head bent to the phone.

“That will be work, I assume,” Mama Murphy said to me. “You’re the private investigator, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I saw you on *Larry Fowler*.”

I sighed. “Yeah.”

“Is it true that he’s suing you for demolishing his studio?”

“Yeah. And his car. I had to get a lawyer and everything. The lawyer says that Fowler’s guy won’t have a case, even in civil court, but it’s expensive and it’s taking forever.”

“The legal system can be that way,” Mama Murphy agreed. “I’m sorry my daughter dragged you into our family squabble.”

“I volunteered,” I said.

“And now you regret it?”

I shook my head. “Hell—uh, heck, no. She’s been there for me too many times, Mrs. Murphy. I don’t know if you’re aware of how dangerous her job can be. The kinds of things she faces in Special Investigations can be especially difficult. And disturbing. Your daughter saves lives. There are people who would be dead right now if she hadn’t been there. I’m several of them.”

Mama Murphy was quiet for a moment before she said, “Before they established Special Investigations, the department routinely handed all those cases to senior detectives in the Thirteenth Precinct. The cases were referred to as black cat investigations. The detectives as black cats.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

She nodded. “My husband was a black cat for twelve years.”

I frowned. “Murphy never told me that.”

“I never told her. And Karrin never knew her father very well,” Mama Murphy said. “He was away so much of the time. And he died when she was only eleven.”

“Line of duty?”

Momma Murphy shook her head. “The work got to him. He . . . he grew distant and started to drink too much. And one night at his desk he took his own life.” She faced me and said, her voice tired and sad, “You see, Harry, my Collin never spoke of it, but I can read between lines as well as anyone. I know what my daughter is facing.”

That hung in the air between us for a moment.

“She’s good,” I said. “Not just skilled. She’s got a good heart, Mrs. Murphy. I’d sooner trust her with my life than anyone else in the world. It isn’t fair for you to give her a hard time about her job.”

Mama Murphy’s eyes sparkled, though they were also a little sad. “She thinks she’s protecting me from the awful truth, Harry, when I complain about her work and she keeps things secret in reply. It makes her happy to know that her mother is not even aware of such dangerous things. I could never take that away from her.”

I arched an eyebrow at Mama Murphy. Then smiled.

“What?” she asked.

“I see where she gets it,” I said.

Murphy turned back to me, her expression hard, and beckoned me. I went over to her.

“It’s Kincaid,” she said, her voice held tight and quiet. “He says to tell you he’s at the shelter and the Red Cross has shown up.”

“What? Hell’s bells.”

She nodded. “They do a blood drive every three months out of the shelter’s basement.”

Where the Black Court was. Where the coffins and Renfields and darkhounds were. Mavra and her brood would never allow themselves to be seen. The Red Cross volunteers were as good as dead if they went in the basement. “Oh, crap.”

“I’m calling it in,” she said.

“No,” I said, alarmed. “You can’t do that.”

“Like hell I can’t,” she said. “People are in danger.”

“And they’re going to be in *more* danger if this escalates,” I said. “Tell Kincaid to try to delay the Red Cross people. We’ll get down there and hit Mavra right now, before the volunteers can put themselves in the line of fire.”

Murphy scowled up at me, her voice rising a little. People started to give us surreptitious looks. “Don’t tell me how to do my job.”

“This *isn’t* your job, Murph,” I said. “Do you remember when I told you that I’d tell you everything? Do you remember that you agreed to trust my judgment? That you wouldn’t go calling in the cavalry on these things?”

Her expression became even more furious. “Do you think that I’m too stupid to know how to handle this?”

“I think that you’re way too worked up already. And that you can’t let this family thing get in the way of making the right decision. Getting the mortal authorities involved would be bad for everyone, Murph. Bad for you. Bad for SI. You might win the day, but when these things hit back, your people are going to suffer.”

For a second I thought she was going to strangle me. “What do you expect me to do?”

I got in her face, and I didn’t care if she avoided my eyes or not. “I *expect* you to listen to the person who knows what he’s talking about. I expect you to trust me, Murph, the way I trusted you. Get on the damn phone and tell Kincaid what I said and ask where to meet him. Then we take care of business.”

The eye contact got more intense, but Murphy shivered and broke it off before it could go any deeper. “Fine,” she said. “I’ll do it. But don’t think I won’t kick your ass over this later. Now back off before you blow up my phone.”

I did, returning to the pavilion.

Mama Murphy regarded me speculatively. “Work?”

I nodded.

“That was quite an argument,” she said.

I shrugged.

“It would seem that you won it.”

I sighed and said wryly, “And I’ll pay for it later.”

“You’ll both be leaving, then?”

“Yeah.”

Mama Murphy looked back and forth between me and Murphy for a moment and then said, “Let me get you another burger before you go.”

I blinked at her.

She assembled food, including a second burger for Murphy, and passed me the paper plates. She frowned at my hands, then up at my face, and asked, “Will you take care of my daughter?”

“Yes, ma’am. Of course I will.”

Her blue eyes flashed fiercely, and she said, “Let me get you a piece of cake.”

Chapter Twenty-nine



Murphy grabbed a gym bag out of her car and then followed me to Ebenezar's truck. She stopped about twenty feet short of it and said, "You're kidding me."

"Come on," I said. "You want to show up where there might be some trouble in your own car? That'd be nice for responding emergency units to see. So get in."

"What does it run on, coal?"

Ebenezar stuck his bald head out of the window, scowling. "No idea. Mostly I just turn it loose to hunt down dinner for itself."

"Murph," I said. "This is Ebenezar McCoy. Ebenezar, this is Karrin Murphy."

"You," Ebenezar said without approval. "I heard you've given the boy a hard time."

Murphy scowled. "Who the hell are you?"

"My teacher," I told her in a quieter voice. "A friend."

She glanced at me, then pursed her lips. She didn't miss the shotgun or the staff in the truck. "You're coming along to help?"

"As long as you don't think I'm too old, girlie," he drawled, heavy on the sarcasm.

"You got a driver's license? You driven Chicago streets lately?"

The old wizard scowled at her.

"Thought so," she said. "Move over."

He sputtered. "What?"

"I'm driving," she said. "So move."

I sighed. "Better move over, sir," I told Ebenezar. "We're in a hurry."

Murphy's gym bag thumped onto the ground and she stared at me with her mouth open.

"What?" I asked.

"Sir?" she said, her voice incredulous.

I scowled at her and ducked my head.

She picked up her bag, blinked a couple of times, and said, in her professionally politest tones, "If you don't mind, Mister McCoy, I know the streets better, and there are lives at stake."

Ebenezar's scowl had been half subverted by a small smile, but he said, "Bah. I'm too old to see the street signs anyway." He opened the door and started scooting. "Get in, get in. Come on, Hoss; we ain't got time to wait on you."

Murphy did not go so far as to slap her magnetic cop light on the top of the truck, but she got us to a parking garage near Mavra's lair in a big hurry. She knew the streets of the old town as well as anyone I'd ever seen, and she regarded niceties like red lights, one-way streets, and right-of-way with an almost magnificent lack of concern. Ebenezar's old truck kept up with her gamely enough, though I found my head bouncing off the roof a couple of times.

I told Murphy what I'd learned about the vampires' lair on the way.

Murphy shook her head. "Damn. This isn't what I expected. That they'd take something right in the middle of so many people."

"Me either," I said. "But that only means we need to move sooner instead of later. The longer the vamps are there, the more of those hostages they're going to bleed out, and the greater the risk of one of their Renfields snapping and opening up on pedestrians with an assault rifle."

"Assault rifles," Murphy said. "And hostages. Jesus, Harry, people could die."

"No *could* about it. They're already dying," I replied. "At least three bodies already. And the Renfields are just a matter of time."

"What if you're wrong?" Murphy said. "Do you really expect me to charge in guns blazing against people who might or might not already be dead? I have an obligation to protect citizens, not to sacrifice them."

My teeth clacked together as the truck went over a heavy bump. "These are the Black Court. They kill, and they do it frequently. Not only that, but they can propagate their kind more rapidly than any other vampire. If we let a nest of them go unmolested, we could potentially have dozens of them in a few days. In two weeks there could be hundreds. Something has to be done, and now."

Murphy shook her head. "But it doesn't mean it needs to be vigilante work. Harry, give me three hours to establish probable cause and I'll have

every cop and every SWAT team in two hundred miles ready to take on that nest.”

“And you’ll tell them what, exactly?” I said. “ ‘ Basement full of vampires’ is not going to cut it, and you know it. And if they go in with blinders on, cops will get killed.”

“And if it’s us?” Murphy asked. “What then? We kick down the door, shoot anything standing, and then make like we’re the Flying Van Helsing? A direct assault on a wary target is one of the best ways in the world to get killed.”

“So we figure something out,” I said. “We get a plan.”

Murphy shot me a look past Ebenezer, who evidently had decided to stay out of it. “This isn’t like the Wal-Mart plan with the marbles, is it?”

“I’ll tell you when I know. Let’s get there and see if we can find out first. Maybe Kincaid will have something.”

“Yeah,” Murphy said without much hope. “Maybe. Here, this is where Kincaid is meeting us.”

It wasn’t a pleasant neighborhood. The city had been working on urban renewal projects for decades, but the lion’s share of the money had gone to restore higher-profile, more infamous neighborhoods, such as Cabrini Green. In that time, many neighborhoods that had been borderline steadily eroded, and had usurped the infamous-neighborhood crown. The slum is dead. Long live the slum.

I’d seen worse, but not many. Tall buildings and narrow alleys choked out a lot of the sunshine. Most windows below the third or fourth floor had been boarded up. Ground level commercial properties were largely vacant. The storm drains were clogged with litter and other urban detritus, most of the streetlights were out, and graffiti and gang signs had been spray-painted everywhere. The air smelled like mildew, garbage, and exhaust. The residents of the neighborhood moved with brisk purpose, confidence, and flat eyes as they walked, doing everything they could to indicate by body language that they were not good targets for assault or robbery.

I spotted a drug house in the first ten seconds of looking around. The burned-out hulk of an abandoned car had been stripped for parts before it had been set on fire, and I had a notion that Murphy was the first cop to visit in the past several weeks.

But there was something missing.

Bums. Transients. Homeless folk. Winos. Bag ladies. Even in broad daylight there should have been someone collecting cans, panhandling change, or shambling along drinking from a bottle still covered with a paper bag.

But there wasn't. Everyone moving was getting from one place to another, not eking out a living from the environment.

"Look kind of quiet to you here?" Murphy asked, voice tight.

"Yeah," I said.

"They've been killing," she said, almost spitting the words.

"Maybe. Maybe not," Ebenezar said.

I nodded. "There's dark power at work here. People sense that, even if they don't know what it is. You're feeling it now."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged. "The presence of dark magic. It makes you feel nervous and angry. If you forced yourself to calm down and tried to sense it, you could feel it. It leaves a kind of stain around it."

"Stinks," rumbled Ebenezar.

"What does that have to do with missing street people?" Murphy asked.

"You've been here about three minutes, and the power bothers you already. Imagine living in it. Getting a little more afraid every day. Angrier. More demoralized. People get rattled enough to leave, even if they don't understand why. Over the long term this kind of power breeds its own wasteland."

"You mean that the vampires have been here for a while?" she asked.

"To have this much effect, it's been days at least," I said, nodding.

"More like two weeks." Ebenezar grunted with assurance. "Maybe three."

"God," Murphy said, shivering. "That's scary."

"Yeah. If they've been here that long, it means Mavra has something in mind."

She frowned. "You mean that this vampire came here and then chose when to make you aware of its presence? This could be a trap."

"It's possible. Paranoid, but possible."

Her mouth tightened into a line. "You didn't mention that at breakfast."

"We're doing battle with the living dead, Murph. Expect the occasional curveball."

"Are you patronizing me now?"

I shook my head. "No. Honest. Where's Kincaid?"

"Second level of this parking garage," Murphy said.

"Stop on the first level," I told her.

"Why?"

"He doesn't know about Ebenezar, and I don't want to spook him. We'll walk up and meet him."

Ebenezar nodded to us and said, "Good call, Hoss. Decent gunman can be twitchy. I'll give you a minute, then drive on up."

Murphy stopped the truck and we got out. I waited until we were several paces from the truck before I lowered my voice and said, "I know. You're afraid."

She glared at me, and started to deny it. But she knew better, and shrugged one shoulder instead. "Some."

"So am I. It's okay."

"I thought I was over this," she said. Her jaw tightened. "I mean, the night terrors are gone. I can sleep again. But it isn't like before, Harry. I used to get scared, but I'd be excited too. I would have wanted to do it. But I don't want this. I'm so afraid that I'm about to throw up. Which sucks."

"You're scared because you've learned things," I told her. "You know the kinds of things you're fighting," I said. "You know what could happen. You'd be an idiot if you *weren't* afraid. I wouldn't want someone with me who didn't have enough sense to be worried."

She nodded, but asked, "What if I freeze up on you again?"

"You won't."

"It could happen."

"It won't," I said.

"You sure?"

I winked at her and twirled my staff in one hand. "I wouldn't be betting my life on it otherwise. You've got my back, Murph. Shut up and dance."

She nodded, her expression remote. "There's nothing we can do to stop these things."

The *we* had changed. She meant the police. "No. Not without getting a lot of good cops killed."

"Those people with the vampires. These Renfields. We'll have to kill some of them. Won't we?"

"Probably," I said in a quiet voice.

"It isn't their fault they were taken."

“I know. We’ll do whatever we can to avoid killing them. But from what I know about them, they’re too far gone to leave us many options.”

“Do you remember Agent Wilson?” Murphy asked.

“The Fed you shot off my back.”

Murph’s expression flickered, though it wasn’t quite a flinch. “Yeah. He went outside the law to bring down the people he thought were beyond its reach, and now we’re making that same choice.”

“No, we aren’t,” I said.

“No? Why not?”

“Because they aren’t people.”

Murphy frowned.

I thought about it. “Even if they were, assuming they were still as dangerous and untouchable, would it change anything?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “That’s what scares me.”

For as long as I’d known her, Murphy had upheld the law. She had a good head on her shoulders when it came to the nature of good and evil and of right and wrong, but her first duty had been to the law. She’d believed in it, that it was the best way to help and protect her fellow man. She’d had faith that the power of the law, while imperfect, was absolute—almost holy. It was a rallying point in her soul, a foundation block of her strength.

But several years of staring out at the darkness had showed her that the law was both blind and deaf to some of the nastier parts of the world. She’d seen things that moved in the shadows, perverting the purpose of the law to use it as a weapon against the people she had sworn to defend. Her faith had taken a beating, or she wouldn’t even have considered stepping outside the boundaries of her authority. And she knew it.

That knowledge cost her dearly. There weren’t any tears in her eyes, but I knew that they were there, on the inside, while she mourned the death of her faith.

“I don’t know the right thing to do,” she said.

“Neither do I,” I said. “But someone has to do something. And we’re the only ones around. Either we choose to take a stand now or we choose to stand around at all the funerals regretting it later.”

“Yeah,” Murphy said. She took a deep, almost meditative breath. “I guess I needed to hear that said out loud.” A small but violent light flared to life behind her eyes. “Let’s go. I’m ready.”

“Murph,” I said.

She tilted her head and looked at me. My lips suddenly felt very dry.

"You look good in the dress."

Her eyes shone. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah."

The eye contact got dangerously intense and I shied off. Murphy let out a low, quiet laugh and touched the side of my face. Her fingers were warm, the touch light and delicate. "Thank you, Harry."

We came up to the second level of the garage together, walking with businesslike strides. The lights were out. In the depths of shadows I could see two vans parked side by side. The first one was a beat-up old fossil of a vehicle, born in an era when people would have thought it absurd to make a van "mini." A Red Cross decal on the driver's door proclaimed its identity.

The second was a white rental van. We approached, and Kincaid slid the side door open. I couldn't see him very well in the shadows. "Didn't take long," he commented. "You walk fast."

"Wheelman's here," I said. "He's coming up in an old Ford truck in a minute. Wanted to let you know first."

Kincaid glanced at the ramp and nodded. "Fine. What do we know?"

I told him. He took it all in without speaking, glanced once at the map Bob had drawn me, and said, "Suicide."

"Eh?" I said.

Kincaid shrugged. "We go in there guns blazing, we're going to get burned two feet from the door."

"I tried to tell him that," Murphy said.

"So we get a plan," I said. "Any suggestions?"

"Blow up the building," Kincaid said without looking up. "That works good for vampires. Then soak what's left in gasoline. Set it on fire. Then blow it all up again."

"For future reference, I was sort of hoping for a suggestion that didn't sound like it came from that Bolshevik Muppet with all the dynamite."

"Check," Kincaid said.

I peered at the van. "Hey. Where are the Red Cross people?"

"I killed and dismembered them," Kincaid said.

I blinked.

Kincaid stared at me for a second. "That was a joke."

"Right," I said. "Sorry. Now where are they?"

“On their lunch break. They somehow got the idea that I was a cop and that they would interfere with a sting if they went into the shelter. I gave them a C-note and told them to go grab lunch.”

“They believed you?” I asked.

“They somehow got the idea that I had a badge.”

Murphy eyed Kincaid. “That’s the kind of thing that’s illegal to own.”

Kincaid turned to dig in the white van. “Sorry if I came afoul of your sensibilities, Lieutenant. Next time I’ll let them walk in and get killed. I added the hundred to your bill, Dresden.” A dark jacket with the Red Cross logo on the shoulder flew out of the van and hit Murphy in the chest. She caught it, and a second later caught the matching baseball cap that followed. “Put them on,” Kincaid said. “Our ticket to get close enough to get the drop on them. Maybe even get some walking targets out of the way.”

“Where did you get those?” I asked.

Kincaid leaned out of the van enough to arch an eyebrow at me. “Found ‘em.”

“Kincaid,” Murphy said, “Give me the keys to the Red Cross van.”

“Why?”

“So I can change,” Murphy said, her voice tight.

Kincaid shook his head. “You got nothing everyone here hasn’t seen before, Lieutenant,” he said. After a moment he glanced at me and said, “Unless . . .”

“Yes,” I said through clenched teeth. “I’ve seen that sort of thing. It’s been a while, but I dimly remember.”

“Just checking,” Kincaid said.

“Now give her the damned keys.”

“Yassuh, Massah Dresden,” he said laconically, and tossed a ring with only two keys at Murphy. She caught it, let out a growling sound, and stalked over to the Red Cross van. She opened it and climbed in.

“Not bad,” Kincaid said, low enough that Murphy wouldn’t have heard him. He kept rooting around in the minivan, evidently without feeling any need for a light. “Her in a dress, I mean. Makes you notice she’s a woman.”

“Shut up, Kincaid.”

I could hear the wolfish smile, even if I couldn’t see it. “Yassuh. Now don’t look. I’m getting dressed and I blush easy.”

“Blow me, Kincaid,” I growled.

“Don’t you owe me enough already?” I heard him moving around. “You give any more thought to shutting down Mavra’s sorcery?”

“Yeah,” I said. Ebenezar’s truck growled as it changed gears. “Our wheelman is going to handle it.”

“You sure he can?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Here he comes.”

Kincaid stepped out of the van with guns strapped all over attachment points on a suit of black ballistic body armor that looked a generation or two ahead of the latest police-issue. He had one set of big-ass revolvers, a couple of those tiny, deadly machine guns that shoot so fast they sound like a band saw, and a bunch of automatics. They all came in matching pairs, presumably because he had an audition for the lead in a John Woo movie later that day.

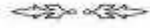
Kincaid donned a second Red Cross jacket to help hide all the weaponry, and added his own matching cap like Murphy’s. He watched Ebenezar’s truck coming, and said, “So who is this guy?”

Just then Ebenezar’s truck rolled up, its headlights in our eyes until it had all but passed. “So, Hoss,” Ebenezar was saying through the open window. “Who is this hired gun?”

The old man and the mercenary saw one another and stared at each other from maybe seven or eight feet apart. Time stopped for one of those frozen, crystallized instants.

And then both of them went for their guns.

Chapter Thirty



Kincaid was faster. One of the guns he'd had on him got to his hand so quick it might have been teleported there from under his coat. But even as he raised the gun toward the old wizard, there was a flash of emerald light from a plain steel ring on Ebenezar's right hand. I felt a low, harsh hum in the air and a surge of dizziness, and Kincaid's pistol ripped its way out of his fingers and shot away into the shadows of the parking garage.

I swayed on my feet. Kincaid recovered before I did and a second gun came out from under the Red Cross jacket. I looked up to see Ebenezar settle the old shotgun's stock against his shoulder, both barrels squarely on Kincaid's head.

"What the hell!" I blurted, and threw myself between them. It put Kincaid's pistol in line with my spine and Ebenezar's shotgun in line with my head, which seemed like a positive at the moment. As long as I was in front of the weapons, the two couldn't get a clean shot at each other. "What the hell do you think you're *doing*?" I demanded.

"Hoss," snarled Ebenezar, "you don't know what you're dealing with. Get down."

"Put the shotgun down," I said. "Kincaid, put the pistol away."

Kincaid's voice, behind me, sounded no different than it had at breakfast. "That sounds like a fairly low-percentage move for me, Dresden. No offense."

"I told you," Ebenezar said, his voice different—cold and terrible and hard. I'd never heard the old man speak that way before. "I told you if I ever saw you again, I'd kill you."

"Which is one reason you haven't seen me," Kincaid answered. "There's no point to this. If we start shooting, the kid's going to get hit. Neither of us has an interest in that."

"I'm supposed to believe you give a damn about him?" Ebenezar snarled.

“Half a damn, maybe,” Kincaid said. “I sort of like him. But what I meant was there’s no profit for either of us in killing him.”

“Put the damned guns down!” I choked. “And stop talking about me like I’m a kid who isn’t here.”

“Why are you here?” Ebenezar demanded, ignoring me.

“I’m a hired gun,” Kincaid said. “Dresden hired me. Do the math, Blackstaff. Of all people you should know how it goes.” The tone of Kincaid’s voice changed to something thoughtful. “But the kid doesn’t know what we do. Does he?”

“Harry, get *down*,” Ebenezar said, speaking to me again.

“You want me down?” I said. I met Ebenezar’s eyes and said, “Then I want your word you aren’t going to open up on Kincaid until we’ve talked.”

“Dammit, boy. I’m not giving my word to that—”

Anger made my voice lash out, hard and sharp. “Not him. Give me your word, sir. Now.”

The old man’s gaze wavered and he lifted his forward hand from the shotgun, fingers spread in a conciliatory gesture. He let the barrel ease down. “All right. My word to you, Hoss.”

Kincaid exhaled slowly through his teeth. I felt his weight shift behind me.

I glanced back. His gun was half lowered. “Yours too, Kincaid.”

“I’m working for you right now, Dresden,” he said. “You already have it.”

“Then put the gun away.”

To my surprise, he did, though his empty eyes remained fastened on Ebenezar.

“What the hell was that about?” I demanded.

“Defending myself,” Kincaid said.

“Don’t give me that crap,” I said.

Anger touched Kincaid’s voice. It was a cold thing that lined his words with frost. “Self-defense. If I’d known your fucking wheelman was Blackstaff McCoy, I’d have been in another state by now, Dresden. I want nothing to do with him.”

“It’s a little late for that now,” I told him. I glared at Ebenezar. “What are you doing?”

“Taking care of a problem,” the old man said. He kept his eyes on Kincaid while he drew the gun back into the truck. “Harry, you don’t know

this”—his mouth twisted with bitter revulsion—“this thing. You don’t know what it’s done.”

“You’re one to talk,” Kincaid replied. “Gorgeous work at Casaverde, by the way. Russian satellite for a measured response to Archangel. Very nice.”

I whirled on Kincaid. “Stop it.”

Kincaid met my eyes, calm and defiant. “Permission to engage in philosophical debate with the hypocrite, sir?”

Anger hit me in a red wave, and before I realized what I was doing I was up in Kincaid’s face, shoving my nose at his. “Shut your mouth. Now. This man took me in when no one else would, and it probably saved my life. He taught me that magic, that *life* was more than killing and power. You might be a badass, Kincaid, but you aren’t worth the mud that falls off his goddamned boots. If it came to it, I’d trade your life for his without a second thought. And if I see you trying to provoke him again I’ll kill you myself. Do you understand me?”

There was a second where I felt the beginnings of the almost violent psychic pressure that accompanies a soulgaze. Kincaid must have felt it coming on, too. He let his eyes slip out of focus, turned away from me, and started unpacking a box in the van. “I understand you,” he said.

I clenched my hands as hard as I could and closed my eyes. I tried not to move my lips while I counted to ten and got the blaze of my temper under control. After a few seconds I took a couple of steps back from Kincaid and shook my head. I leaned against the fender of Ebenezer’s old Ford and got myself under control.

Blazing anger had gotten me into way too many bad situations, historically speaking. I knew better than to indulge it like that—but at the same time it felt good to let off a little steam. And dammit, I’d had a good reason to slap Kincaid down. I couldn’t believe that he would have the temerity to compare himself to my old teacher. In any sense.

Hell, from what Ebenezer had said, Kincaid wasn’t even human.

“I’m sorry,” I said a minute later. “That he was trying to push your buttons, sir.”

There was a significant beat before Ebenezer answered.

“It’s nothing, Hoss,” he said. His voice was rough. “No need to apologize.”

I looked up and stared at the old man. He wouldn't meet my eyes. Not because he was afraid of a soulgaze beginning, either. He'd insisted on it within an hour of meeting me. I still remembered it as sharply as every other time I'd looked on someone's soul. I still remembered the old man's oak-tree strength, his calm, his dedication to doing what he felt was right. And more than simply looking like a decent person, Ebenezar had lived an example for an angry and confused young wizard.

Justin DuMorne had taught me *how* to do magic. But it was Ebenezar who had taught me *why*. That magic came from the heart, from the essence of what the wizard believed—from who and what he chose to be. That the power born into any wizard carried with it the responsibility to use it to help his fellow man. That there were things worth protecting, defending, and that the world could be more than a jungle where the strong thrived and the weak were devoured.

Ebenezar was the only man on the planet to whom I regularly applied an honorific. As far as I was concerned, he was the only one who truly deserved it.

But a soulgaze wasn't a lie-detector test. It shows you the core of another person, but it doesn't shine lights into every shadowy corner of the human soul. It doesn't mean that they can't lie to you.

Ebenezar avoided my eyes. And he looked ashamed.

"There's work to be done, Ebenezar," I said in a measured tone. "I don't know what you know about Kincaid, but he knows his business. I asked him here. I need his help."

"Yes," Ebenezar agreed.

"I need yours too," I said. "Are you in?"

"Yes," he said. I thought I heard something like pain in his voice. "Of course."

"Then we move now. We talk later."

"Fine."

I nodded. Murphy had appeared at some point, now dressed in jeans, a dark shirt, and the Red Cross hat and jacket Kincaid had given her. She had her gun belt on, and she held herself a little differently, so I figured she had strapped on her Kevlar vest.

"All right," I said, stepping over to the van. "Ebenezar is going to shut down Mavra, or at least throw a wet blanket over anything she can do. You got everything you need, sir?"

Ebenezar grunted in the affirmative and patted a pair of old leather saddlebags he had tossed over his shoulder.

“Right,” I said. “That means that our main problems should be the Renfields and their darkhounds. Guns and teeth. We’ll want to get inside and down to the basement if we can. Then if bullets start flying, it should keep them from killing people upstairs and next door.”

“What’s the rest of the plan?” Kincaid asked.

“Kill the vampires, save the hostages,” I said.

“For the record,” Kincaid said, “I was hoping for an answer that vaguely hinted at a specific tactical doctrine rather than spouting off general campaign objectives.”

I started to snap at him but reined in my temper. This wasn’t the time for it. “You’ve done this the most,” I said. “What do you suggest?”

Kincaid looked at me for a moment and then nodded. He glanced at Murphy and said, “Something in a Mossberg. Can you handle a shotgun?”

“Yeah,” Murphy said. “These are close quarters, though. We’d need something heavy like that to stop a charge, but the barrel would need to be cut short.”

Kincaid gave her a look, and said, “That would be an illegal weapon.” Then he reached into the van and handed her a shotgun with a barrel that had been cut down to end just above the forward grip. Murphy snorted and checked out the shotgun while Kincaid rattled around in the white minivan again.

Instead of a second shotgun, though, he drew a weapon made of plain, nonreflective steel from the van. It was modeled after a boar spear of the Middle Ages, a shaft about five feet long with a cross-brace thrusting out on two sides at the base of the spear tip—a foot and a half of deadly, matte-black blade as wide as my hand at the base, and tapering down to a fine point at the tip. There was enough mass to the spear to make me think that he could as easily chop and slash with the edges of the spearhead as thrust with the tip. The butt end of the spear ended at some kind of bulbous-looking cap of metal, maybe just a counterweight. A similar double protrusion bulged out from the spear shaft at the base of the blade.

“Spear and magic helmet,” I said in my best Elmer Fudd voice. “Be vewy, vewy quiet. We’re hunting vampires.”

Kincaid gave me the kind of smile that would make dogs break into nervous howls. “You got your stick ready there, Dresden?”

“You should go with a shotgun,” Murphy told Kincaid.

Kincaid shook his head. “Can’t shove the shotgun into a charging vampire or hellhound and hold them off with the cross-brace,” he said. He settled the spear into his grip and did something to the handle. The beam of a flashlight clicked on from one side of the bulge at the base of the spearhead. He tapped the other one with a finger. “Besides, got incendiary rounds loaded zip-gun style in either end. If I need them, bang.”

“In the butt end too?” I asked.

He reversed his grip on the spear and showed me the metal casing. “Pressure trigger on that one,” he said. Kincaid dropped the spear’s point down and held the haft close to his body, somehow managing to make the weapon look like a casual and appropriate accessory. “Shove it hard against the target and boom. Based it on the bang sticks those *National Geographic* guys made for diving with sharks.”

I looked from the gadget-readied spear and body armor to my slender staff of plain old wood and leather duster.

“My dick is bigger than your dick,” I said.

“Heh,” Kincaid said. He draped a rope of garlic around his neck, then tossed another one to me, and a third to Murphy.

Murphy eyed the garlic. “I thought the vampires were going to be asleep. I mean, they staked Dracula in his coffin, right?”

“You’re thinking of the movie,” Kincaid said. He passed me a web belt with a canteen and a pouch on it. The pouch contained a medical kit, a roll of duct tape, a road flare, and a flashlight. The canteen had masking tape on the lid, and block letters in permanent marker identified it as holy water. “Read the book. Older or stronger members of the Black Court might not be totally incapacitated by sunlight.”

“Might not even inconvenience Mavra,” I said. “Stoker’s Dracula ran around in broad daylight. But between daylight and Ebenezer, Mavra shouldn’t have much in the way of powers. If there are any Black Court on their feet who want to come for us, they’ll have to do it the dirty way.”

“Which is why I got you a surprise, Dresden.”

“Oh, good,” I said. “A surprise. That’s sure to be fun.”

Kincaid reached into the van and presented me with a futuristic-looking weapon, a gun. It had a round tank the size of a gumball machine attached to its frame, and for a second I thought I’d been handed a pistol-sized flame

thrower. Then I recognized it, cleared my throat, and said, "This is a paintball gun."

"It's a high-tech weapon," he said. "And it isn't loaded with paint. The ammunition is interspersed holy water and garlic loads. It'll hurt and frighten darkhounds and it will chew holes in any vamps that are moving around."

"While not putting any holes in us," Murphy chimed in. "Or in innocent bystanders."

"Okay," I said. "But this is a paintball gun."

"It's a weapon," Murphy said. "And a weapon that will do harm to the bad guys while not hurting your allies. That makes it a damned good one for you for such close quarters. You're good in a fight but you don't have close-quarters firearms or military training, Harry. Without ingrained fire discipline, you're as likely to kill one of us as the bad guys."

"She's right," Kincaid said. "Relax, Dresden. It's sound technology, and a good tool for teamwork. We do this simple. I'm on point. Then the shotgun. Then you, Dresden. I see a Renfield with a gun, and I'm going to drop flat. Murphy handles it from there. If we get a vampire or a darkhound, I'll crouch and hold it off with the spear. The two of you hit it with everything you can. Push it back until I can pin it on the spear. Then kill it."

"How?" Murphy asked. "Stakes?"

"Screw stakes," Kincaid said. He held out a heavy machete in an olive-drab sheath to Murphy. "Take off its head."

She clipped the machete onto her belt. "Gotcha."

"The three of us together should be able to take one vamp down the hard way if we're alert. But if one of them closes on us, we're probably going to die," Kincaid said. "The best way to stay alive is to hit them fast and stay on the offensive. Once we've put down any unfriendlies, you two can go save the hostages or take the Renfields to therapy or tap dance or whatever. If things go south, stay together and come straight back out. McCoy should have the truck out front and ready where he can see the door."

"I will," Ebenezer agreed.

"Okay," Kincaid said. "Anyone have any questions?"

"Why do they sell hot dogs in packages of ten but hot dog *buns* in packages of eight?" I said.

Everyone glared at me. I should probably leave off wizarding and chase my dream of becoming a stand-up comedian.

Instead, I put the toy gun in my right hand, my staff in my left, and said, “Let’s go.”

Chapter Thirty-one



I drove the Red Cross van up to the shelter. I pulled in right in front, put it in park, and said, “You two go in first. I’m sure whoever the vamps have working for them will recognize me, at least by description. Outside chance they’ll know Murph, too, but the uniform might make them play along until you can get any bystanders out of the building.”

“How should I do that?” Kincaid asked.

“Hell’s bells, you’re the big time mercenary. What am I paying you for?” I said, annoyed. “What’s unit response time down here, Murphy?”

“This is gang country. Officially about six minutes. Reality is more like ten or fifteen. Maybe more.”

“So we call it six or seven minutes to get clear after someone calls CPD screaming about rabid dogs and gunfire,” I said. “The longer before that happens the better. So get it done calmly and quietly, Kincaid. Talk them out if you can.”

“No problem,” Kincaid said, and leaned his spear against the dashboard. “Let’s go.”

Murphy held her weapon down and close to her side and followed Kincaid into the building. I waited, but I had already planned to go on in if I didn’t hear anything in the next minute or so. I started counting to sixty.

On forty-four, the door opened and a couple of bedraggled men and three or four raggedly dressed women, all of them more beaten down than actually aged, came shambling out.

“Like I said, it shouldn’t take long,” Kincaid was saying in a bluff, heavy, cheerful voice marked with the harder, shorter vowels of a Chicago accent. He came along behind the street folk, shepherding them out. “It’s probably just a faulty detector. As soon as the guys from the gas company check out the basement and make sure it’s safe, we’ll get set up and get everyone paid. An hour, tops.”

“Where is Bill?” demanded one of the women in a querulous voice. “Bill is the man from the Red Cross. You aren’t Bill.”

“Vacation,” Kincaid said. His good-natured smile did not touch his eyes. They remained cold and uncaring as he reached through the van’s window and picked up his spear. The woman took one look at his expression, another at the weapon, then ducked her head and scurried away from the shelter. The others followed suit, scattering like a covey of quail alerted to sudden danger.

I went inside, and Kincaid backed in after me, shutting the door. The reception area looked more like a security checkpoint—a small room, a couple of chairs, a heavy-duty security door, and a guard station behind a window of heavy bars. But the security door had been propped open with one of the chairs, and I could see Murphy standing in the room on the other side, her riot gun held level, her stance alert and ready.

I walked over to her. The room beyond the reception area was the size of a small cafeteria. Cubicle walls sprouted in one corner like some kind of crystalline growth. Half a dozen people dressed in business casual stood passively against the nearest cubicle wall, and Murphy had her gun leveled at them.

They should have been afraid. They weren’t. They just stood there, eyes dull, faces set in vacant, bovine expressions. “Harry,” she said. “Kincaid said we shouldn’t let them out until you made sure they weren’t dangerous.”

“Yeah,” I said. I hated to think of leaving simple thralls staring stupidly at nothing, given all the violence on the immediate agenda, but that would have been better than setting some bloodthirsty Renfield loose somewhere behind me. I closed my eyes for a moment, concentrating. There were a thousand other things I would rather do than examine victims of the Black Court with my Sight, but we didn’t have time for anything else.

I opened my eyes along with my Sight, and focused on the people standing in line.

I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a sheep slaughtered for mutton. The process isn’t fast, even if it isn’t really cruel. They make the sheep lie down on its side and cover its eyes. The sheep lies there without struggling, and the shepherd takes a sharp knife and draws a single, neat line across its throat. The sheep jerks in a sharp twitch of surprise, while the shepherd

holds it gently down. It smells blood and stirs more. Then the animal quiets again under the shepherd's hand. It bleeds.

It doesn't look real, the first time you see it, because the blood is too bright and thick, and the animal isn't struggling. There's a lot of blood. It spreads out on the ground, soaking into dirt or sand. It dyes the wool of the sheep's chest, throat, and legs a dark, rusty red. Sometimes the blood gets into a puddle around its nose, and the animal's breaths make scarlet ripples.

Before the end, the sheep might twitch and jerk another time or two, but it's silent, and it doesn't really make an effort to fight. It lies there, becoming more still, and after several minutes that stroll past in no great hurry, it dies.

That's what they looked like to my Sight, those people the vampires had enthralled. They stood calmly, relaxed, thinking of nothing. Like sheep, they had been blindfolded to the truth somehow. Like sheep, they did not struggle or flee. Like sheep, they were being kept for whatever benefit their lives would provide—and like sheep they would eventually be taken for food. I saw them, defenseless and beaten, blood soaking into their clothing while they lay still under the hand of a being more powerful than they.

They stood quietly, dying like sheep. Or rather, five of them did.

The sixth was a Renfield.

For the briefest second, I saw the sixth victim, a burly man of middle years and wearing a blue oxford shirt, as a sheep like the rest of them. Then that image vanished, replaced by something inhuman. His face looked twisted and deformed, and his muscles swelled hideously, bulging with blackened veins and quivering with unnatural power. There was a band of shimmering, vile energy wreathing his throat in an animal's collar—the reflection of the dark magic that had enslaved him.

But worst of all were his eyes.

The man's eyes looked as if they had been clawed out by something with tiny, scalpel-sharp talons. I met his blind gaze, and there was nothing there. Nothing. Just an empty darkness so vast and terrible that my lungs froze and my breath locked in my throat.

By the time I realized what I was seeing, the man had already let out a feral shriek and charged me. I shouted in surprise and tried to back up, but he was simply too fast. He backhanded me. The enchantments on my duster diverted much of the power in it, so it didn't crack any of my ribs, but it

was still strong enough to throw me from my feet and into a wall. I dropped to the floor, stunned.

An angel, blazing with fury and savage strength, spun toward the Renfield, her eyes shining with azure flame, a shaft of fire in her hands. The angel was dressed in soiled robes smudged with smoke and blood and filth, no longer white. She bled from half a dozen wounds, and moved as if in terrible pain.

Murphy.

There was a peal of thunder, and flame leapt from the shaft of light in her hands. The Renfield, now deformed with muscle like some kind of madman's gargoyle, accepted the blow, and batted the shaft of light from the angel's hands. She dove for the weapon. The Renfield followed, reaching for her neck.

Something hit it hard, a second shaft, though this one was made not of light but of what looked like solidified smog of black and deep purple. The blow drove the Renfield from its feet, and the angel recovered the fallen weapon. Another shaft of light thundered into the Renfield's head, and it collapsed abruptly to the ground.

I shook my head, trying to tear away from painful clarity of my Sight. I heard a footstep nearby. Still stunned, I looked behind me.

For just a second I saw something standing there. Something enormous, malformed, something silent and merciless and deadly. It had to crouch to keep from brushing the ceiling with the horns curling away from its head, and batlike wings spread from its shoulders to fall around it and behind it, to drag along the floor, and I thought I saw some kind of hideous double image lurking behind it like the corpse-specter of Death himself.

Then the second was past, I pushed my Sight away, and Kincaid stood frowning down at me. "I said, are you all right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, just clipped me."

Kincaid offered me his hand.

I didn't take it. I pushed myself to my feet instead.

His expression became opaque. It had an alien quality to it that made it more frightening than when it had been merely unreadable. He stepped over to the body of the middle-aged man in the blue oxford shirt, and jerked his spear out of the corpse. It was wet with blood all the way to the cross-brace.

I shuddered, but asked Murphy, "You okay?"

She still gripped the riot gun as she stood over the body, keeping her eyes on the five people remaining. There was a bloody, pulpy mess where the first shot had ripped open the man's leg, but it hadn't even slowed him down. It was messier where Murphy's second shot had torn into his head. Not that he would have been any better off if she'd hit him in the chest. People don't survive direct hits from shotguns delivered from a couple of steps away.

"Murph?" I asked.

"Fine," she said. Some of the Renfield's blood had sprayed onto her cheek, beading into red droplets below her distant eyes. "I'm fine. What now?"

Kincaid stepped up beside Murphy and put his hand on the end of the riot gun's barrel. He pushed gently, and she shot him a look before taking a steadying breath and lowering the weapon.

Kincaid nodded at the remaining thralls. "I'll get these five out and meet you at the stairs. Don't go down without me."

"Don't worry," I said. "We won't."

He prodded the five thralls into motion and herded them out of the building. I oriented myself on the room's doors, remembering Bob's handy-dandy map, and headed for the door that led down to the basement. Murphy walked beside me. She said nothing, but fed two more shells into the riot gun. She reached for the doorknob.

I put mine there first. "Hold it, Murph," I said. "Let me check it for surprises."

She looked at me for a second and then nodded.

I closed my eyes and laid my hand on the door, gently pushing my awareness through the door, feeling silently for patterns of energy that might indicate magical wards like the ones protecting my apartment. My magical awareness was akin to the Sight, just as my sense of touch was akin to my sense of sight. It cost me less than opening the Sight, and was infinitely more gentle to my psyche.

I felt nothing, no waiting wards or prereadied traps of Mavra's deadly black magic. Generally speaking, the bad guys weren't terribly interested in learning defensive magic when they could be out blowing things up instead, but I was determined not to get sucker punched on something that basic.

"He was already gone," I told Murphy.

She said nothing.

“I saw him, Murph. I Saw him. There wasn’t anything left inside him. He was . . . less than an animal. There was nothing else you could have done.”

She spoke very quietly. “Shut the fuck up, Harry.”

I did. I finished my check, felt around for the presence of any supernatural entities that might be right on the other side of the door, and Listened, to boot. Nothing. When I opened my eyes again, Kincaid was standing there with Murphy. I hadn’t heard his approach. “Clear?” he asked.

I nodded. “The door isn’t warded. I don’t think there’s anything waiting on the other side, but I can’t be sure.”

Kincaid grunted, glanced at Murphy, then leaned back and kicked the door open.

Murphy blinked at me. Kincaid was a big guy, sure, but it’s tough to kick doors down on the first try. I’d seen men batter one with those same vicious kicks for fifteen minutes before the door gave way. Maybe he’d just gotten lucky.

Yeah, I believed that. The image of that enormous, demonic thing that had crouched in the mercenary’s place loomed with a terrible clarity in my head.

Kincaid landed on balance, lifted the spear, and pointed the head and its attached flashlight down the closed, narrow stairway.

There was only silence.

And then the sound of a soft, mocking laugh from somewhere in the darkness below us.

Hell’s bells. The back of my neck crawled up my scalp and into one ear.

“Form up,” I murmured, because it sounded more military and tougher than saying, “You guys go first.” Kincaid nodded and took a step down. Murphy readied the riot gun again and pressed in behind him. I picked up my air-powered popgun and followed her.

“Where are they keeping the hostages again?” Murphy asked.

“In a closet at the bottom of the stairs, on the right.”

“That was hours ago,” Kincaid said quietly. “They could be anywhere now. Once we go down there, there’s no room for playing around.”

“The hostages are our first concern.”

“Screw that. That’s exactly *why* the vamps took hostages in the first place,” Kincaid said. “If you let them dictate your tactics, they’re going to use it to kill you.”

“That isn’t your concern,” I said.

Kincaid's voice became quieter and harder. "It is when I'm standing this close to you. They might get me instead."

"That's why you get the big bucks."

He shook his head. "We don't even know if they're alive. Look, this is a basement. All we have to do is roll down the grenades and then go mop up whatever is left afterward. We're underground. The collateral damage will be minimal."

"That's not good enough," I said. "We save the hostages first. Once they're clear, *then* we take care of business with Mavra."

Kincaid glanced over his shoulder at me, his eyes narrow and cold. Defiance and contempt rang in every word. "It might be a little harder to rescue them if we're dead."

Murphy put the mouth of the riot gun against Kincaid's spine and said, "How good is that armor?"

Sometimes Murphy has a way with words.

We were all quiet for a couple of seconds. Then I said, "We might get killed trying to save the hostages. We *will* get killed if we don't stick together. Do the math, Kincaid. Or break your agreement and get out."

He stared at Murphy for a second and then relented, turning back to face the stairway. "Fine," he said. "We do it your way. It's amateur night."

We started down the first flight of stairs together, while whatever waited in the darkness below us laughed again.

Chapter Thirty-two



The basement in the shelter was unusually deep, especially for Chicago. The stairs went down about ten feet, and were only about two and a half feet wide. My imagination treated me to a brief vision of some grinning Renfield with a machine gun popping around the corner already shooting, bullets tearing all three of us to shreds in the space of a heartbeat. My stomach writhed in pure nervous fear, and I forced myself to put it aside and focus on my surroundings.

The walls had been mortared and painted white, but cracks and mineral stains from damp spots all but concealed the original color. At the bottom of the stairs was a landing maybe three feet square, and then a second set of stairs led farther down, the air getting more cramped and colder as they went.

The stale air smelled like mildew and rot. Our breathing and our movements sounded incredibly loud in the otherwise oppressive silence that followed, and I found myself pointing the paintball gun forward, over Murphy's head and Kincaid's shoulder, so that I could start shooting as soon as something bounded into view. For all the good it was likely to do. Against any normal thug, the weapon would do little but make them damp. Or vaguely aromatic.

The stairway ended at a half-open old door.

Kincaid nudged it slowly open with his spear, already crouched.

Murphy aimed her gun at the black doorway.

Me too. The end of my stupid paintball gun quivered involuntarily.

Nothing happened.

Silence reigned.

"Dammit," I muttered. "I don't have the nerves for this crap."

"Want me to find you a Valium?" Kincaid asked.

"Kiss my ass," I said.

He reached into his belt pouch and pulled out a couple of plastic tubes. He bent them sharply, shook them up, and they began to shine with chemical light. He edged up to the doorway and flicked one to the left, the other to the right, bouncing them off the walls so that he wouldn't expose himself to anyone in the hall beyond. Then he waited a beat and leaned out, peeking around. "Nothing moving," he reported. "No lights. But it looks like that map was pretty good. Hall on my right goes about ten feet, then ends at the door to that closet. Open hall on my left, twenty feet long, and opens into a room."

"Closet first," I said.

"Cover me."

Kincaid flowed down the last couple of stairs and through the door. Murphy kept within a foot of his back. Kincaid peeled off to the right. Murphy dropped into a crouch, shotgun aimed down the green-lit hall to the left. I wasn't as smooth, but I went after Kincaid, paintballs and staff ready.

The closet door was only five feet high and opened out, toward the hall. Kincaid listened at the door, then leaned aside to let me touch it first. I couldn't feel any enchantments on it, and nodded to him. He shifted his grip on the spear so that he'd be ready to drive the tip of it into anything that came at him from the closet, and drew the door open.

The light from his spear flickered around a dank little chamber that was too big to be a proper closet and too small to be a room. Patches of moisture and mildew blotted the damp stone walls, and the smell of unwashed bodies and waste rolled out of the door.

Half a dozen children, none of them older than nine or ten, huddled against the back wall of the closet. They were dressed in castoff clothing, most of it far too big, and they wore steel cuffs on their hands. The cuffs, in turn, were locked to a larger chain attached to a heavy steel ring bolted into the floor. The children reacted in silent terror, flinching away from the doorway and from the light.

Children.

Someone was going to regret this. If I had to take this building, hell, this *block* apart with nothing but raw will and my bare hands, someone was going to pay. Even the monsters should draw a line somewhere.

Then again, I guess that's why they call them monsters.

"Son of a bitch," I snarled, and ducked my head to step into the room.

Kincaid abruptly threw his weight against me, shoving me aside from the door. “No,” he growled.

“Dammit, get out of my way,” I said.

“It’s a trap, Dresden,” Kincaid said. “There’s a trip wire. Go through that door and you’ll kill all of us.”

Murphy checked over her shoulder and returned to watching the darkness for trouble.

I frowned at Kincaid and picked up the plastic light stick, holding it out. “I don’t see a wire.”

“Not a literal wire,” Kincaid. “It’s a net of infrared beams.”

“Infrared? How did you—”

“Dammit, Dresden, if you want to know about me, wait for the autobiography like everyone else.”

He was right. It was a little late to be worrying about Kincaid’s background now. “Hey, kids,” I said. “Everybody stay really still and keep back, okay? We’re going to get you out of here.” I lowered my voice and said to Kincaid, “How do we get them out of there?”

“Not sure we can,” Kincaid said. “The beam is rigged up to an antipersonnel mine.”

“Well,” I said. “Can’t we just . . . can’t you put a weight on a land mine and leave it there? So long as the weight holds the trigger down, it doesn’t explode, right?”

“Right,” Kincaid said. “But that’s assuming we’ve gone back in time to World War Two.” He shook his head. “Modern mines are pretty good at killing people, Dresden. This one’s British, pretty recent.”

“How can you tell?”

He tapped his nose. “The Brits use a different chemical priming charge than most. It’s probably a bouncer, very nasty.”

“Bouncer?”

“Yeah. If something interrupts the beam, the charge activates. Several individual submunitions get blown up into the air, or sideways, or however they want to set it up, in a pattern. Then they explode maybe five or six feet in the air. Sends a couple of thousand steel balls out in a big cloud. Kills everything in thirty, maybe forty meters if you’re in the open, maybe a lot farther in a tight space like this. If it was me, I’d have set the charges up to get thrown straight down this hall. All these stone walls, the shrapnel would shred everything real good.”

"I could hex down whatever is sending the beam," I said.

"Thus interrupting it," Kincaid said. "Thus kablowlie. Thus death."

"Dammit." I swallowed and took a step back from the doorway, hoping the presence of my magic wouldn't screw up the device in a moment of monumentally bad timing. "I can shield us, if it's all coming in from one direction."

Kincaid arched an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Damn. But it won't help those kids much. They're over there."

I scowled ferociously. "How do we disarm the device?"

"You still don't want the Bolshevik Muppet solution, right?"

"Right."

"Then someone has to crawl in there without setting it off, find the explosive, disable it and unhook it from the sensors."

"Right," I said. "Do it."

Kincaid nodded. "Can't."

"What?"

"I can't."

"Why *not*?"

He nodded at the doorway. "There are three beams set up in an asymmetrical crisscross over the doorway. There isn't enough room for me to get through the open spaces."

"I'm thinner than you," I said.

"Yeah, but longer and a hell of a lot gawkier. And I know what happens to tech when nervous wizards get close."

"Someone has to do it," I said. "Someone small enough to . . ."

We both looked down the hall at Murphy.

Murphy didn't look away from her vigil, and said, "How do I disarm it?"

"I'll talk you through," Kincaid said. "Dresden, better take her gun and cover us."

"Hey," I said. "I'm in charge here. Kincaid, talk her through it. Murphy, give me your gun so I can cover you."

I tied the handle of the paintball gun into my coat where my blasting rod usually went. I winked at Murphy, who saw the gesture and did not respond to it. She just passed me the gun and turned her baseball cap around. Then she walked down the hall, slipping out of her coat and gun belt on the way.

“Better lose the Kevlar too,” Kincaid said. “I can pass it to you. Bottom left corner looks like the best bet. Stay as flat as you can and as much to the left as you can. I think you can get in.”

“You think?” I asked. “What if you’re wrong?”

He gave me an annoyed look. “You don’t see me telling you how to watch that goddamned doorway in case all the vampires show up at any second to kill us, do you?” Kincaid asked.

I was going to scowl at him, but he had a point. I scowled at the darkness instead, gripping Murphy’s gun. I fumbled for a second, because the riot gun must have been some kind of military-issue, and it took me a second to find the safety. I flicked it to reveal the red dot. Or at least I was thought it was red. The green chemical light made it look black.

“Stop,” Kincaid said in a calm voice. “Unclench.”

“Unclench what?” Murphy demanded.

“Unclench your ass.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“You’re going to trip the beam. You need another quarter inch. Relax.”

“I am relaxed,” Murphy growled.

“Oh,” Kincaid said. “Damn, great ass then. Take off your pants.”

I winced and checked over my shoulder. Murphy was stretched out on the floor on her belly, her cheek on the cold floor, arms stretched above her. The small of her back was in the doorway. She managed to move her head just enough to eye Kincaid. “Once again?”

“Take off your pants,” Kincaid said, smiling. “Think of the children.”

She muttered something to herself and moved her arms, shifting slightly.

“No good,” Kincaid said. “You’re moving too far.”

“Okay, genius,” Murphy said. “What do I do?”

“Hold still,” Kincaid said. “I’ll do it.”

There was silence for a second. Murphy hissed out a breath. Or maybe it was more of a gasp.

“I don’t bite,” he said. “Be still. I want to live through this.”

“Okay,” Murphy said in a small voice a moment later.

I scowled hard at the darkness and felt myself getting irrationally angry, and fast. I glanced back again. Murphy wriggled forward, all the way through the doorway. Her legs were pale, pretty, and strong. And I had to admit that Kincaid was completely correct about her posterior.

Kincaid was bracing her legs, hands on her calves and sliding down as she moved forward, helping her to keep them from accidentally moving too far. Or at least that damn well better have been what he was doing, because if it wasn't I would be forced to kill him.

I shook my head and returned to my vigil. *Get a grip, Harry*, I thought to myself. *It isn't like you and Murphy are an item. She isn't something you own. She's her own person. She does what she wants with who she wants. You're not even involved with her. You've got no say in it.*

I ran through those thoughts a couple of times, found them impeccably logical, morally unassailable, and still wanted to slug Kincaid. Which implied all kinds of things I didn't have time to think about.

I heard them speaking quietly to each other a moment later. Murphy was describing the explosive, and Kincaid was giving her instructions.

In the darkness beyond the last chemical light, I heard something move.

I shifted my weight, reaching into my belt pouch for my own chemical light sticks. I pressed them against the floor to break the layer separating the two chemicals and shook them until they started to emit their own soft green fire. I threw them down the hall, where they landed in the room beyond. The lights revealed little beyond more stone floor and some drywall. Bob had reported that the room was essentially a storage chamber, with several smaller chambers defined by recently installed drywall that could be used for storage, emergency shelters during the odd tornado warning, or additional rooms for those in need of a place to spend the night. But all I could see was half of a door, a couple of stacks of cardboard boxes, a dressmaker's dummy, and the glowing sticks of emerald light.

And then something large and four-legged moved in front of one of the lights for a second or two. The darkhound was a large and rangy animal, maybe a large Alsatian, and it deliberately stayed in place for a moment before vanishing into the shadows once more.

I kept the riot gun aimed down the hall and wished that Inari hadn't broken my damned blasting rod. I would far rather have had it than the gun. Without the blasting rod to help me focus and contain the destructive energies of flame I preferred, I didn't dare start blasting away at the bad guys with magic, especially in such tight quarters as the shelter. But then, maybe it was just as well. I had already met my quota for burning down public institutions this week.

I couldn't see anything else, but I knew there was something there. So I lowered my eyelids almost all the way and focused my attention, Listening. There was the faint sound of something breathing, but nothing more.

It wasn't enough. I lowered the gun a bit, relaxing my shoulders, and poured more of my focus into it, Listening more deeply than I ever had before. The sound of breathing became louder, and I picked out several other faint sources of it. A moment later I began to hear a dull throbbing, which I realized was a beating heart. More heartbeats joined it, a confused chorus of drumming beats, but I was able to identify individual rhythms into a pair of groups. One was a bit faster, lighter—smaller hearts, probably the darkhounds. There were four of them. The other group was human, and there were five hearts beating in an eager, savage cadence—pressed up against the walls on either side of the doorway, out of sight but less than twenty feet away.

And from the back of the room I heard footsteps, slow and deliberate. They slid quietly across the stone floor, and the wasted outline of an emaciated female form appeared in front of one of the glow sticks.

And no heartbeat accompanied it.

Mavra.

The darkhounds appeared, vague shapes, and paced restlessly through the shadows around the vampire. My heart lurched in sudden apprehension, and I released my attention from the Listening. I raised the gun, got to my feet, and backed away.

Again, that soft, mocking laugh drifted through the basement.

"Trouble," I said over my shoulder. "Five Renfields, four darkhounds at least, and Mavra's awake."

"Indeed," came Mavra's dry, dusty voice. "I've been waiting for you, Dresden. There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Oh?" I said. I looked over my shoulder at Kincaid and mouthed, *How long?*

Kincaid had crouched and taken up his spear again. He glanced back and said, "Thirty seconds."

"We take the kids and run," I whispered.

"I've been admiring you for some time now, Dresden," came Mavra's voice. "I've seen you stop bullets with your power. I've seen you stop knives and claws and fangs." She made a gesture with her hand. "And so I

simply must know how well you will fare against your own weapon of choice.”

And two Renfields stepped out into the doorway, blocking my view of Mavra. Each of them held a long metal device in their hands, and each of them wore something that bulged out above their shoulders, gleaming shapes of rounded metal. A blue starter flame flickered at the end of the devices they held, and it hit me all at once what was happening.

Both of the Renfields lifted their flamethrowers and filled the cramped little hallway with fire.

Chapter Thirty-three



The riot gun went off, though I'm not sure if it was because I'd instinctively decided to use the weapon or if I'd just convulsed in surprise. The bad guys were twenty feet away, which was plenty of distance for the shot from the riot gun to spread. If I'd had it aimed well, it would almost certainly have put one of them down. As it was, the largest force of the blast went between them, though from the way they jerked and twisted, either the sheer roaring volume of the weapon was enough to intimidate them or they'd caught a little shot as it went past. Fire coughed uncertainly from the mouths of the flamethrowers, spattering the hall along the floors, walls, and ceiling, where it clung in globs of what had to be a mix of gasoline or some other accelerant, and petroleum jelly—homemade napalm. The air went from cold to roasting-hot, even from the aborted discharge of fire, sucking the wind from my lungs.

Both men, unassuming-looking types in ragged clothing, their eyes wide and fanatical, hesitated for a second before planting their feet again and taking aim once more. It was only a second, but it was enough to save my life. I dropped the gun, tossed my staff into my right hand, and shook out my shield bracelet. I rammed panicked will into the focus and spread it in a wall of energy before me.

The Renfields cut loose this time, flame as thick as spray from a breached hydrant roaring down the hall. I caught it on the shield, but I had never intended it to stop heat. It was primarily a defense against kinetic energy, and while I had used it to handle everything from bullets to runaway elevator cars in my career as a wizard, it just wasn't all that good at stopping the transfer of intense heat. The napalm-jelly splattered against the invisible shield, gallons of it, and the fire clung to it in white-hot glee. Its mindless fury seeped through the shield and flowed onto me.

It hurt. Oh, God, it *hurt*. The fingers of my left hand were the first to feel it, and then my palm and wrist, all in the space of a second. If you've never

been burned, you can't imagine the pain. And my fingers, where millions of tactile nerves were able to send panicked damage-messages to my brain, felt as if they had simply exploded and been replaced with howling agony.

I jerked my hand back, and felt my focus waver, the shield start to fade. I gritted my teeth, and somehow managed to dig up the strength to extend my hand again, hardening the shield and my will. I backed away in shuffling half steps, my mind almost drowning in pain, desperately keeping the shield up.

"Ten seconds!" Kincaid shouted.

I saw blisters rising on my left hand. I felt my fingers curling into a claw. They looked thinner, as if made of melting wax, and I could see the shadows of my bones beneath the flesh. The shield grew weaker yet. The pain got worse. I stood now at the bottom of the stairs, and as the shield faltered, the empty space between me and the doorway behind me might as well have been a mile.

I didn't have ten seconds.

I reached into myself, into the horrible red pain, and drew forth more power yet. I focused it on my staff, and the sigils and runes carved along its surface became suddenly suffused with eye-searing scarlet light. My nose filled with the smell of charring wood, and as the shield wavered out of existence, I screamed, "*Ventas servitas!*"

The power I'd gathered in my staff shot out of it, an invisible serpent of energy. The shield fell just as a shrieking gale of wind shot down the stairs. The column of air howled against me, throwing my duster forward around me like a flag, and caught the blazing napalm like a tub of Jell-O, hurling the fire back the way it had come and providing it with air enough to treble its size.

The fire went mad. It seared mortar from rough stone, and chewed cracks into the rock floor, the damp stone coughing and popping as water within expanded.

For an instant I could see the two Renfields, still spraying fire toward me. They started screaming, but they obeyed Mavra's raspy howls to stand fast, and it killed them. The napalm molded itself to them and the flame embraced them.

What hit the ground as they fell could not have been easily identified as human remains.

I kept my will on the wind, the carved runes on my staff blazing ember-orange, and it spread the flames into the far room in a deadly river of searing light and charred black ash. For agonized seconds I held the winds and spread the flames, and then my will faltered, the runes on the staff dimming. Pain overcame me for a second, and it hurt so much that I literally could not see.

“Wizard!” howled Mavra’s voice, the words sounding like dusty scales and cold, reptilian fury. “Wizard! The wizard! Kill, kill, kill everything!”

“Get him!” Kincaid snarled. I felt Murphy get her arms under mine, and she started hauling me back with surprising power. I started seeing through the blinding agony in time to see a charred, inhuman-looking man wielding an ax leap at Kincaid. The mercenary rammed his spear full into the man’s chest, stopping him in his tracks. A second man appeared from the smoke behind the first, this one holding a shotgun. There was a roaring sound, and fire tore through the impaled Renfield, then struck the second one full in the face with hideous, searing results. Kincaid jerked the spear clean of the corpse of the first Renfield, even as the second flailed around wildly, then pointed the shotgun in more or less the right direction.

Kincaid whirled the spear into a reverse grip, slammed it into the second Renfield’s chest and the second incendiary round blasted out from the housing at the butt end of the spear, and drove the remaining life from the man. A burning corpse hit the floor a second later.

A gun roared from the smoke. Kincaid grunted and staggered. The spear fell from his hands, but he didn’t fall. He drew a gun in either hand and backed unsteadily away, the semiautomatic barking out shots as swiftly as he could send them into the choking smoke down the hall.

More Renfields, roasted but functional, came through the smoke, shooting. Darkhounds bounded around them, the naked and bloody shells of dogs, but filled with horrible rage. Behind them I saw Mavra’s slender, deadly form, lit for the first time. She was wearing the same clothing I’d seen her in the last time—a tattered number from the Renaissance, all of black. Hamlet would have been happy to wear it. I saw her filmy dead eyes focus on me, and she lifted an ax in one hand.

The first two darkhounds reached Kincaid, and he went down under them before I could even cry out. One of the Renfields brought a sledgehammer down on him, while the other simply emptied a handgun into the pile as two more darkhounds threw themselves into it.

“No!” I shouted.

Murphy hauled me into the closet and out of the line of fire, just as Mavra threw. Her ax came tumbling end over end down the hall, and struck the stone wall at the back of the closet with such force that the head buried itself to the eye in the rock and the wooden handle shattered into splinters. Two of the children, still chained underneath where the ax hit, let out wails of pain and terror as splinters tore at them.

“Oh, God,” Murphy said. “Your hand, oh, God.” But she never stopped moving. She shoved me by main force into the back corner of the closet, picked up her gun, leaned into the doorway, and sent eight or nine measured shots down the hall, her face set in grim concentration. Her pale legs were a startling contrast against the black of her Kevlar vest. “Harry?” she shouted. “There’s smoke, I can’t see anything, but they’re at the foot of the stairs. What do we do?”

I stared at a black box up on the wall, near the ceiling. Presumably Kincaid’s antipersonnel mine. He’d been right. It was set up to open and spew its deadly projectiles diagonally down, so that they would bounce and fill both closet and hall with death.

“Harry!” Murphy shouted.

I barely had breath enough to answer. “Can you hook up the mine again?”

She looked over her shoulder at me, eyes wide. “You mean we can’t get out?”

“Can you do it?” I barked.

She nodded, once.

“Wait for my signal, then arm it and get low.”

She spun and leapt up onto a wooden chair near the mine, either something she had dragged there or something the bad guys had used too. She hooked up two alligator clips and held up a third, looking over her shoulder at me, her face pale. The children wept and screamed below her.

I dragged myself over to kneel in front of the children, facing down the hallway. I lifted my left hand, and stared at it in shock for a second. I always thought I looked good in red and black, but as a rule I preferred that to be my clothes. Not my limbs. My hand was a blackened, twisted claw of badly cooked meat, burned dark wherever it wasn’t bloodred. My silver shield bracelet dangled beneath it, the charm-shields heat-warped, gleaming and bright.

I raised my other hand to signal Murphy, but then I heard a scream from down the hall, snarling and vicious and hardly human. The smoke swirled and cleared for a second, and I saw Kincaid, dragging one leg, his back against the wall. He had one hand clenched hard to his leg, and a gun in the other. He shot at a target I couldn't see until the gun started clicking.

"Now, Murphy!" I shouted. My voice thundered down the hall. "Kincaid! Bolshevik Muppet!"

The mercenary's head whipped around toward me. He moved like hamstrung lightning, swift and lurching and grotesque. He dropped the gun, released his leg, and threw himself straight at me with his three unwounded limbs.

Again I raised my shield, and prayed that the mine's infrared trip wire functioned.

Time slowed.

Kincaid flung himself through the doorway.

The mine beeped. There was a sharp, snapping click of metal.

Kincaid tumbled past me. I leaned aside to let him, and at the same instant brought every scrap of strength I had left to bear on the shield.

Lumpy metal spheres, maybe twenty or thirty of them, flew out into the air. I had angled my shield in a simple inclined plane, its base at the closet's doorway, its summit at the back wall of the closet, about four feet off the ground. Several of the spheres hit the shield, but the slope of it sent them rebounding out into the hall.

The submunitions exploded in a ripple of thunder and light. Steel balls flew in deadly sprays, rattling off stone walls and tearing into flesh with savage efficiency. The sloped shield flared into azure incandescence, energy from the shrapnel being absorbed and shed as flashbulb-bright bursts of light. The sound was indescribable, almost loud enough to kill all on its own.

And then it was over.

Silence fell, broken only by the crackling of flames. Nothing moved but drifting smoke.

Murphy, Kincaid, the captive children, and I were all huddled together in an unorganized pile of frightened humanity. We all sat there stunned for a moment. Then I said, "Come on. We have to get moving before the fire spreads." My voice sounded raw. "Let's get these kids out. I might be able to break these chains."

Kincaid reached up without speaking and took a key down from a high hook on the opposite wall. He settled back down to sit leaning against it, and tossed me the key.

“Or we could do that,” I said, and passed the key to Murphy. She started unlocking them. I was too tired to move. My hand didn’t hurt, which was a very bad sign, I knew. But I was too tired to care. I just sat there and stared at Kincaid.

He had his hand clamped down on his leg again. He was bleeding from it. There was more blood on his belly, on one hand, and his face was positively smothered with it, as if he’d been bobbing for apples in a slaughterhouse.

“You’re hurt,” I said.

“Yep,” he replied. “Dog.”

“I saw you go down.”

“It got nasty,” he confirmed.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I lived.”

“Your chest is bleeding,” I said. “And there’s blood on your hand.”

“I know that.”

“And your face is drenched in it.”

He lifted an eyebrow and touched his free hand to his chin, then looked at the blood. “Oh. That isn’t mine.” He started fumbling at his belt.

I got enough energy together to go to him and help. He pulled a roll of black duct tape from a pouch on his belt and with sharp, jerking motions we wound the tape tightly around his wounded leg several times, layering the wound in adhesive, literally taping it closed. He used about a third of the roll, then grunted and tore it off. Then he said, “You’re going to lose that hand.”

“I was sending it back to the kitchen anyway. I ordered it medium well.”

Kincaid stared at me for a second and then started letting out soft, wobbly-sounding laughter, as if it were something he didn’t have a lot of practice at. He stood up, wheezing soft laughter, drew another gun and his own machete from his belt, and said, “Get them out. I’m going to dismember whatever is left.”

“Groovy,” I said.

“All that trouble we went to, and you just blew the place up. We could have done this to begin with, Dresden.”

Murphy got the kids loose and they started getting away from the wall. One of them, a girl no more than five years old, just collapsed against me crying. I held on to her for a moment, letting her cry, and said, “No, we couldn’t have.”

Kincaid regarded me, his expression unreadable. I thought I saw something wild and bloodthirsty and satisfied in his eyes for just a second. Then he said, “Maybe you’re right.”

He vanished into the smoke.

Murphy helped me to my feet. She had all the kids join hands, took the hand of the lead child herself, and led us all to the stairs. She bent and scooped up her jeans on the way. There wasn’t enough denim left to avoid public indecency, and she dropped them with a sigh.

“Pink panties,” I said, looking down. “With little white bows. I wouldn’t have guessed that.”

Murphy looked too tired to glare, but she tried.

“They really go with the Kevlar and the gun belt, Murph. Shows you’re a woman with her priorities straight.”

She stepped on my foot, smiling.

“Clear,” said Kincaid’s voice from the smoke. He appeared again, coughing a little. “Found four coffins occupied. One of them was that One-ear guy you told me about. Beheaded them. Vampires are history.”

“Mavra?” I asked.

He shook his head. “That whole end of the hall looks like a chop shop for a black market organ bank. The vampire took that blast from the mine right in the kisser. You’d need her dental records and a jigsaw puzzle all-star to get a positive ID.”

Kincaid didn’t see Mavra flicker into sight. She rose out of the smoke behind him, horribly torn and mangled, badly burned, and angry as hell. She was missing her lower jaw, half of an arm, a basketball-sized section of lower abdomen, and one of her legs was attached by only a scrap of flesh and her black tights. For all of that, she moved no less swiftly, and her eyes burned with dead fire.

Kincaid saw the look on my face. He dropped flat.

I whipped the stupid little paintball gun out of my duster and emptied it at Mavra.

May lightning strike me dead if the damned thing didn’t work like a charm. Hell, better than most charms, and I’m the guy who should know.

The shots poured out almost as swiftly as from Kincaid's deadly little machine guns, and they splattered into Mavra, sizzling viciously. Silver fire immediately began chewing at her flesh wherever the paintballs struck and broke. It ripped into her and it happened *fast*, as if some hyperkinetic gourmet were taking a melon baller to her flesh.

Mavra let out a shocked and dusty shriek.

The holy water and garlic paintballs put a hole as wide as a three-liter bottle of Coke all the way through her. I could see the glow of fire in the pall of smoke behind her. She staggered and fell to her knees.

Murphy drew the machete from her belt and threw it underhand.

Kincaid caught it as he turned back to Mavra, and took her head off at the base of her neck. The head went one way. The body went straight down—there was no thrashing, no howling or spurting ichor, no gales of magical wind or sudden clouds of dust. Mavra's remains simply thumped to the ground, nothing but a withered cadaver once more.

I looked from Mavra's corpse to the paintball gun, impressed. "Kincaid. Can I keep this?"

"Sure," he said. "I'll add it to the bill." He stood up slowly, looking at the destruction. He shook his head. Then he joined us as we went up the stairs. "Even seeing it, it's tough to believe."

"What is?" I asked.

"Your shield. And that bit with all the wind and fire, especially with your hand like that." He glanced at me, something like caution in his expression. "I've never seen a wizard cut loose before."

What the hell. It wouldn't hurt to encourage the mercenary to be wary of me. I stopped and leaned on my staff. The runes still glowed with a sullen fire, though it was slowly fading. Tiny, white wisps of wood smoke curled up from it, sharp in my nose. It hadn't ever done *that* before, but there was no reason to mention that for the time being.

I looked straight at him until it was obvious that he was refusing to meet my eyes. Then I said in a quiet, gentle voice, "You still haven't."

I walked on out, leaving him to stare after me. I didn't think for a second that he would allow what he'd seen to scare him out of killing me if I didn't pay him. But it might scare him enough to make him more cautious about taking that option. Every little bit helps.

Before we got out of the shelter, I took off my duster and draped it onto Murphy's shoulders. It enveloped her entirely, its hem dragging the ground,

covering her legs. She gave me a grateful look just as Ebenezar appeared in the doorway. The old man looked at the kids, then at my hand, and drew in a sharp breath.

“You all right to walk yourself out?” he asked.

“So far. We need to get these kids and ourselves the hell away from here.”

“Fine,” he said. “Where?”

“We’ll take the kids to Father Forthill at Saint Mary of the Angels,” I said. “He’ll have a good idea of what can be done to help them.”

Ebenezar nodded. “I know him by reputation. Good man.”

We went outside and started loading kids into Ebenezar’s old Ford truck. The old man had a gun rack at the back of the cab, his thick old staff in the bottom rack, his old Greener shotgun in the top one. He lifted the kids into the back one by one, where he had them lie down on a thick old thermal blanket and covered them with a second one.

Kincaid came out of the shelter carrying a contractor’s heavy garbage bag, the smoke growing thicker behind him. The bag was half full. He threw it over one shoulder, then turned to me and said, “Taking care of details. As I see it, the contract is done. You satisfied with that?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Nice working with you. Thank you.”

Kincaid shook his head. “The *money* is how you thank me.”

“Yeah, uh,” I said, “about that. It’s Saturday, and I’m going to have to talk to someone at the bank. . . .”

He stepped closer to me and handed me a white business card. It had a number printed on it in gold lettering. There was another number written in ink that made the balance currently in my checking account look extremely small. Nothing else.

“My Swiss account,” he explained. “And I’m in no hurry. Have it there by Tuesday and we’ll be square.”

He got in the van and left.

Tuesday.

Crap.

Ebenezar watched the white van pull out, then helped Murphy get me into the truck. I sat in the middle, my legs over on Murphy’s side of the cab. She had a first-aid kit in her hands, and as we rode along she covered my burned hand lightly with gauze, entirely silent. Ebenezar drove off

cautiously. We heard sirens start up when we were a couple of blocks away. "The kids to the church," he said. "Then where?"

"My place," I said. "I'll get patched up for round two."

"Round two?" Ebenezer asked.

"Yeah," I said. "If I don't do something, a ritual entropy curse is gonna head my way before midnight."

"How can I help?" he asked.

I looked steadily at him. "We'll have to talk about it."

He squinted out ahead of us and kept his emotions off of his face. "Hoss. You're too involved. You do too much. You take on way too damned much."

"There's a bright side, though," I said.

"Oh?"

"Uh-huh. If I buy it tonight, at least I won't have to figure out how to pay Kincaid before he kills me."

Chapter Thirty-four



Ebenazar drove, and I felt myself float off into a pensive haze. Well, that wasn't exactly true. It was more of a pense-less haze, but I didn't complain about it. My mouth didn't want to work, and on some level I knew that numb, floating shock was better than searing agony. Somewhere in the background, Murphy and Ebenazar talked enough to work out details, and we must have dropped the kids off with Father Forthill, because when I finally got out of the truck, the back was empty of children.

"Murphy," I said, frowning. "I had a thought. If there's an APB out for me, maybe we shouldn't go back to my place."

"Harry," she said, "we've been here for two hours. You're sitting on your couch."

I looked around. She was right. The fireplace was going, with Mister in his favorite spot by the mantel, and the notch-eared puppy was lying on the couch next to me, using my leg as a pillow. I tasted Scotch in my mouth, one of Ebenazar's own brews, but I didn't remember drinking it. Man, I must have been in worse shape than I thought. "So I am," I said. "But that doesn't make my concerns any less valid."

Murphy had hung my coat up on its hook by the door and was wearing a pair of my knee-length knit shorts. They fell to halfway down her calf, and she'd had to tie a big knot in the front to keep them on, but at least she wasn't walking around in her panties. Dammit.

"I don't think so," she said. "I've talked to Stallings. He said there's an APB for someone matching your description, but your name isn't attached to it. Only that the suspect is wanted for questioning and may be using the alias Larry or Barry. There were no prints on the weapon, but it was registered to the witness." She shook her head. "I don't know how that happened. I'd say you got lucky, but I know better. And you'd make some wiseass remark about it."

I let out a broken little laugh. “Yeah,” I said. “Hell’s bells. Trixie Vixen has got to be the most vacuous, conceited, small-minded, petty, and self-absorbed baddie I’ve ever snooped out. That’s what happened.”

“What?” Murphy asked.

“My name,” I said, still wheezing laughter. “She never got it straight. The woman got my freaking name wrong. I don’t think she bothers to keep very close track of other people’s existence if it doesn’t profit her.”

Murphy arched an eyebrow. “But there were other people there, weren’t there? Someone must have known your name.”

I nodded. “Arturo for sure. Probably Joan. But everyone else only knew my first name.”

“And someone had to wipe any of your prints from the gun. They’re covering for you,” Murphy said.

I pursed my lips, surprised. Not so much that Arturo and his people had done it, but because of my reaction to the news—it made a warm spot somewhere inside me that felt almost completely unfamiliar. “They are,” I said. “God knows why, but they are.”

“Harry, you saved the lives of some of their people.” She shook her head. “In the business they’re in, I doubt Chicago’s finest are exactly making them feel like valued members of the community. That kind of isolation brings people together—and you helped them. Makes you one of them when trouble comes.”

“Makes me family,” I said.

She smiled a little and nodded. “So you know who dunnit?”

“Trixie,” I said. “Probably two others. My sense is that it’s the Ex-Mr.-Genosa club, but that’s just a hunch. And I think they had help.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Trixie was getting instructions from someone on the phone when she was holding a gun on me,” I said. “And they’ve been invoking that curse with a ritual. Unless someone’s actually got some talent, it takes two or three people to raise the energy that’s needed. And let’s face it, three witches cackling over a cauldron somewhere is pretty much stereotyped into the public awareness.”

“*Macbeth*,” Murphy said.

“Yeah. And that movie with Jack Nicholson as the devil.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“You told me about rituals once. The cosmic vending machine, right? An outside power offers to give you something if you fulfill a specific sequence of events.”

“Yeah.”

Murphy shook her head. “Scary. People can just do a dance and someone dies. Regular people, I mean. What happens if someone publishes a book?”

“Someone has,” I said. “Plenty of times. The White Council has pushed it to happen a couple of times—like with the Necronomicon. It’s a reasonably good way to make certain the ritual in question isn’t going to work.”

She frowned. “I don’t get it. Why?”

“Supply and demand,” I said. “There are limits to what outside forces can deliver to the mortal world. Think of the incoming power as water flowing through a pipeline. If a couple of people are using a rite once every couple of weeks, or every few years, there’s no problem pumping in enough magic to make it work. But if fifty thousand people are trying to use the rite all at once, there isn’t enough power in any one place to make it happen. It just comes out as a little dribble that tastes bad and smells funny.”

Murphy nodded, following me. “So people who have access to rituals don’t want to share them.”

“Exactly.”

“And a book of dark rituals is not something your average vacuous princess of porn picks up at the mall. So she had help.”

“Yeah,” I said, frowning. “And that last run on the curse had a professional behind it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It was a hell of a lot faster, for one thing, and deadlier. It hit so quick I didn’t have time to redirect it away from the victim, even though I knew it was coming. It was stronger, too. A *lot* stronger, like someone who knew the business had taken the trouble to focus or amplify it somehow.”

“What can do that?” Murphy asked.

“Coordination between talented wizards,” I said. “Uh, sometimes you can use certain articles and materials to amplify magic. They’re usually expensive as hell. Sometimes special locations can help, places like Stonehenge, or certain positions of stars on a given night of the year. Then there’s the old standby.”

“What’s that?” Murphy asked.

“Blood,” I said. “The destruction of life. The sacrifice of animals. Or people.”

Murphy shivered. “And you think they’re coming after you next?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m in the way. They have to if they want to get away clean.”

“Get away with their big old fund intact?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Seems pretty extreme for a greed killing,” Murphy said. “I’ve got nothing against greed as a motivator, but damn. It’s like some people just never grasp the idea that other people actually exist.”

“Yeah,” I said with a sigh. “I guess this time there just happened to be three of them standing in the same place.”

“Heh,” Murphy said. “God only knows what kind of unholy bad luck got three ex-wives together. I mean, what are the odds, you know?”

I sat up straight. Murphy had put her finger on it. “Stars and stones, you’re right. How could I have missed that?”

“You’ve been a little busy?” Murphy guessed.

I felt my heart speed up. It beat with a dull pressure on my hand. It wasn’t pain yet, but it was coming. “Okay, let’s think, here. Arturo didn’t announce that he was getting married again. I mean, I only found out because someone who knows him made a sharp guess. And I doubt the ex-wives knew about it firsthand. In fact, I’d be willing to bet they were informed of the fact by a third party.”

“Why?” Murphy asked.

“Because if you want to work magic on someone, you’ve got to believe in it. You’ve got to want it. Otherwise it just fizzles. That means that they *want* someone dead. Genuinely want it.”

“Because when they found out it was a nasty surprise,” Murphy said. “Maybe whoever told them tilted things even further before the ex-wives found out. Made it hit them really hard, make them really mad. I don’t know, Harry. You’d need a fourth party to want Arturo’s new squeeze nixed for that to hold water.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. Then I felt my eyes widen. “Unless that wasn’t what they wanted at all. Murph, I don’t think this is about money.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Genosa’s in *love*,” I said. I felt myself rise to my feet. “Son of a bitch, it was right there in front of me the whole time.”

Murphy frowned and rose with me, putting her hand on my good arm. “Harry, you need to sit back down. All right? You’re hurt. You need to sit down until Ebenezar gets back.”

“What?”

“Ebenezar. He thinks he can do something for your hand, but he had to pick up something first.”

“Oh,” I said. My head spun a little. She tugged at my arm and I sat back down. “But that’s *it*.”

“What’s it?”

“Trixie and the other *stregas* are just weapons for someone else. *Genosa* is in *love*. That’s why he didn’t react to Lara like everyone else. They can’t touch him. That’s what this is all about.”

Murphy frowned. “What do you mean? Who is using them as weapons?”

“The White Court,” I said. “Lord Raith and the White Court. It’s no coincidence that he *and* his second-in-command are in Chicago this weekend.”

“What does Genosa’s being in love have to do with anything?”

“The White Court can control people. I mean, they seduce them, get close, and before long they can sink in the psychic hooks. They can make slaves of the people they feed on, and make them *like* it to boot. That’s the source of their power.”

Murphy arched an eyebrow. “But not if someone is in love?”

I laughed weakly. “Yeah. They just said it out loud. It was an internal matter. Hell, it was practically the first thing she said about him. That Arturo was always falling in love.”

“What who said?”

“Joan,” I said. “Plain old practical, flannel-wearing, doughnut-scarfing Joan. And Lara the wonder slut. Not in that order. I’m sure of it.”

Murphy scowled. “Egad, Holmes. You’ve got to provide me with some context if you want me to understand.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Here’s the setup, all right? Raith is the leader of the White Court, but over the past several years he’s been losing face. His personal power base is slowly eroding.”

“Why?”

“Thomas, mainly,” I said. “Raith apparently murders his sons before they start getting ideas of knocking him off and taking over the family business. He sent Thomas to get killed at the vampire masquerade ball, but Thomas hooked up with Michael and me and came out of it alive. Then Raith set Thomas up again last year, at the duel with Ortega, but Thomas got through that one, too. And from what I’ve deduced, Papa Raith isn’t putting the fear of himself into his own children very well anymore.”

“What’s that got to do with Genosa?” she asked.

“Genosa publicly defied Raith’s authority,” I said. “Arturo told me that someone had been slowly buying up the adult-movie companies, manipulating things from behind the scenes. Trace the money trail back and I’d bet you dollars to doughnuts that you’ll find that it’s Raith and that he owns Silverlight. By leaving Silverlight Studios and going off to break stereotypes by doing his own movies, Genosa was defying Raith’s authority in a very public way.”

“So you’re saying that the White Court controls the erotica industry?”

“Or at least a bunch of it,” I confirmed. “Think about it. They can influence people’s opinions of all kinds of things—what physical beauty is, what sex is, how one should react to temptation, what is acceptable behavior in intimate relationships. My God, Murph, it’s like training deer to come to a particular feeding point to make stalking and killing them easier.”

Her mouth fell open for a moment. “God. That’s . . . that’s sort of terrifying. That’s huge.”

“And insidious,” I said. “I never even thought about something like that happening. Or maybe it’s fairer to say that it’s *been* happening. Maybe Raith was just taking over the business from some other player in the White Court.”

“So when Genosa thumbed his nose at Silverlight, it made Lord Raith look even weaker.”

“Yeah,” I said. “A mere human defying the White King. And Raith couldn’t send Lara to control him, either, because Genosa is in love.”

“Meaning?”

“The White Court can’t touch someone who is in love,” I said. “Real love. If they try to feed on them, it causes them physical agony. It’s . . . their holy water, I guess you could say. Their silver bullet. They’re terrified of it.”

Murphy's eyes brightened and she nodded. "Raith wasn't able to control Genosa, so he had to find a way to torpedo the guy instead, or lose face."

"And be torn from his position of power. Exactly."

"Why not just kill Genosa?"

I shook my head. "The White Court seems to pride itself on elegance when it comes to power games. Thomas told me that when the Whites go to war with one another, they do it through indirect means. Cat's-paws. The more untraceable the better. They believe that intelligence and manipulation are more important than mere strength. If Raith just popped a cap in Arturo, it would have been still another loss of face. So . . ."

"So he finds someone he *can* control," Murphy said. "He sets them up to find out that the new wife is a danger to their positions, and he does it in the worst possible way, to make them readier to take action. He even hands them the murder weapon—a big, nasty dark ritual. He's not sure who it is, so he tells them to get rid of whoever Genosa is secretly engaged to. They've got a means, a motive, and an opportunity. Even in magical circles, I'll bet no one's going to be able to easily prove it was Raith who was responsible for the death of the woman Arturo was engaged to."

"And in love with," I said. "For Lord Raith it's a win-win situation. If they kill the fiancée, it will destabilize Genosa and hamper his ability to produce films. Hell, maybe Raith planned to wait until he fell into a depression afterward, and then send one of the ex-wives after a while to offer comfort, seduce him, and leave him vulnerable to Lara's control. If they *don't* manage to kill the fiancée, they might still create enough havoc and confusion to derail Genosa's work."

"And even if someone on the spooky end of the block figures out whodunit, Raith has it set up so that they can't be traced back to him."

"Yeah," I said. "Meanwhile, Arturo is back in the fold and Raith has reconsolidated his power base. End of problem."

"But not if you interfere and stop him."

"Not if I interfere and stop him," I agreed. "So once Raith gets word that I'm sticking my nose into his business, he brings in Lara to keep an eye on me and take me out if she can."

"Or just take you," Murphy said. "If this guy is a schemer, maybe he thought it would be great to have this Lara get hooks into you."

The puppy stirred, disturbed. I shivered and petted him. "Ugh," I said. "But it didn't work, and I'm close to blowing the whole thing wide open."

Now he'll have to take a swing at me and get me out of the picture."

Murphy made a growling sound. "Gutless bastard. Going through other people like that."

"It's smart," I said. "If he really has been weakened, he wouldn't want to take on anyone from the White Council directly. Only a fool goes toe to toe with a stronger enemy. That's why Thomas did the same thing as his father—recruiting me to go up against him."

Murphy whistled. "You're right. How the hell did you get this bag of snakes?"

"Clean living," I said.

"You should tell Thomas to get lost," Murphy said.

"Can't."

"Why not?"

I looked at her in silence.

Her eyes widened. She understood. "It's him. He's family."

"Half brother," I said. "Our mother used to hang around with Lord Raith."

She nodded. "So what are you going to do?"

"Survive."

"I mean about Thomas."

"I'll burn that bridge when I come to it."

"Fair enough," Murphy said. "But what is your next move?"

"Go to Thomas," I said. "Make him help." I looked down at my bandaged hand. "I need a car. And a driver."

"Done," said Murphy.

I frowned, thinking. "And I might need something else from you tonight. Something tough."

"What?"

I told her.

She stared silently past me for a moment and then said, "God, Harry."

"I know. I hate to ask it. But it's our only shot. I don't think we can win this one with simple firepower."

She shivered. "Okay."

"You sure? You don't have to do it."

"I'm with you," she said.

"Thank you, Karrin."

She gave me a small smile. "At least this way I feel like I get to do *something* to help."

"Don't be silly," I said. "The image of you gunfighting in your panties is going to boost my morale for years."

She kicked my leg gently with hers, but her smile was somewhat wooden. She looked down to focus on the puppy, who promptly rolled over on his back, chewing at her fingers.

"You okay?" I asked. "You got kinda quiet."

"I'm fine," she said. "Mostly. It's just . . ."

"Just?"

She shook her head. "It's been sort of a stressful day for me, relationship-wise."

I know what you mean, I thought.

"I mean, first that asshole Rich and Lisa. And . . ." She glanced at me, her cheeks pink. "And this thing with Kincaid."

"You mean him taking your pants off?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. It's been . . . well, it's been a really, really long time since a good-looking man took my pants off. I sort of forgot how much I enjoyed it. I mean, I know this is just a reaction to the danger and adrenaline and so on, but still. I've never reacted that strongly to a simple touch."

"Oh," I said.

She sighed. "Well, you asked. It's got me a little distracted. That's all."

"Just so you know," I said, "I don't think he's human. I think he's pretty major bad news."

"Yeah," Murphy said, her voice annoyed. "It's never the nice guys who get a girl worked up."

Apparently not. "Oh," I said again.

"I'll call a cab," Murphy said. "Get some clothes and my bike. The car's still back at the park, and there might still be family there. Give me about an hour, and I'll be ready to take you where you need to go, if you're able."

"I have to be," I said.

Murphy called the cab, and just as it got there Ebenezar opened the door, carrying a brown paper grocery sack. I looked up at him, feeling a sudden blend of emotions—relief, affection, suspicion, disappointment, betrayal. It was a mess.

He saw the look. He stopped in the doorway and said, "Hoss. How's the hand?"

"Starting to feel things again," I said. "But I figure I'll pass out before it comes all the way back."

"I might be able to help a little, if you want me to."

"Let's talk about that."

Murphy had pretty obviously picked up on the tension between us back at the shelter. She kept her tone and expression neutral and said, "My cab's here, Harry. See you in an hour."

"Thanks, Murph," I said.

"Pleasure to meet you, Miss Murphy," Ebenezar said. He corrected himself almost instantly. "Lieutenant Murphy."

She almost smiled. Then she gave me a look, as if to ask me if it was all right to leave me with the old man. I nodded and she left.

"Close the door," I told Ebenezar.

He did, and turned to face me. "So. What do you want me to tell you?"

"The truth," I said. "I want the truth."

"No, you don't," Ebenezar said. "Or at least not now. Harry, you have to trust me on this one."

"No. I don't," I responded. My voice sounded rough and raw. "I've trusted you for years. Completely. I've built up some credit. You owe me."

Ebenezar looked away.

"I want answers. I want the truth."

"It will hurt," he said.

"The truth does that sometimes. I don't care."

"I *do*," he said. "Boy, there is no one, *no one*, I would hate to hurt as much as you. And this is too much to lay on your shoulders, especially right now. It could get you killed, Harry."

"That isn't your decision to make," I said quietly. It surprised me how calm I sounded. "I want the truth. Give it to me. Or get out of my home and never come back."

Frustration, even true anger flickered across the old man's face. He took a deep breath, then nodded. He put the grocery sack down on my coffee table and folded his arms, facing my fireplace. The lines on his face looked deeper. His eyes focused into the fire, or through it, and they were hard, somehow frightening.

“All right,” he said. “Ask. I’ll answer. But this could change things for you, Harry. It could change the way you think and feel.”

“About what?”

“About yourself. About me. About the White Council. About everything.”

“I can take it.”

Ebenezar nodded. “All right, Hoss. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

Chapter Thirty-five



“Let’s start simple,” I said. “How do you know Kincaid?”

He blew out a breath, cheeks puffing out. “He’s in the trade.”

“The trade?”

“Yes.” Ebenezar sat down on the other end of the couch. The puppy got up on wobbling legs and snuffled over to examine him. His tail started wagging. Ebenezar gave the little dog a brief smile and scratched his ears. “Most of the major supernatural powers have someone for that kind of work. Ortega was the Red Court’s, for example. Kincaid and I are contemporaries, of a sort.”

“You’re assassins,” I said.

He didn’t deny it.

“Didn’t look like you liked him much,” I said.

“There are proprieties between us,” Ebenezar said. “A measure of professional courtesy and respect. Boundaries. Kincaid crossed them about a century ago in Istanbul.”

“He’s not human?”

Ebenezar shook his head.

“Then what is he?”

“There are people walking around who carry the blood of the Nevernever in them,” Ebenezar said. “Changelings, for one, those who are half-Sidhe. The faeries aren’t the only ones who can breed with humanity, though, and the scions of such unions can have a lot of power. Their offspring are usually malformed. Freakish. Often insane. But sometimes the child looks human.”

“Like Kincaid.”

Ebenezar nodded. “He’s older than I am. When I met him, I still had hair and he had been serving the creature for centuries.”

“What creature?” I asked.

"*The creature,*" Ebenezar said. "Another half mortal like Kincaid. Vlad Drakul."

I blinked. "Vlad Tepesh? Dracula?"

Ebenezar shook his head. "Dracula was the son of Drakul, and pretty pale and skinny by comparison. Went to the Black Court as a kind of teenage rebellion. The original creature is . . . well. Formidable. Dangerous. Cruel. And Kincaid was his right arm for centuries. He was known as the Hound of Hell. Or just the Hellhound."

"And he's afraid of you," I said, my voice bitter. "Blackstaff McCoy. I guess that's your working name."

"Something like that. The name . . . is a long story."

"Get started, then," I said.

He nodded, absently rubbing the puppy behind the ears. "Ever since the founding of the White Council, ever since the first wizards gathered to lay down the Laws of Magic, there has been someone interested in tearing it apart," he said. "The vampires, for one. The faeries have all been at odds with us at one time or another. And there have always been wizards who thought the world would be a nicer place without the Council in it."

"Gee," I said. "I just can't figure why any wizard would think that."

Ebenezar's voice lashed out, harsh and cold. "You don't know what you're talking about, boy. You don't know what you're saying. Within my own lifetime, there have been times and places where even speaking those words could have been worth your life."

"Gosh, I'd hate to for my life to be in jeopardy. Why did he call you Blackstaff?" I asked, my voice hardening. An intuition hit me. "It's not a nickname," I said. "Is it. It's a title."

"A title," he said. "A solution. At times, the White Council found itself bound by its own laws while its enemies had no such constraints. So an office was created. A position within the Council. A mark of status. One wizard, and only one, was given the freedom to choose when the Laws had been perverted, and turned as weapons against us."

I stared at him for a moment and then said, "After all that you taught me about magic. That it came from life. That it was a force that came from the deepest desires of the heart. That we have a responsibility to use it wisely—hell, to *be* wise, and kind, and honorable, to make sure that the power gets used wisely. You taught me all of that. And now you're telling me that

it doesn't mean anything. That the whole time you were standing there with a license to kill."

The lines in the old man's face looked hard and bitter. He nodded. "To kill. To enthrall. To invade the thoughts of another mortal. To seek knowledge and power from beyond the Outer Gates. To transform others. To reach beyond the borders of life. To swim against the currents of time."

"You're the White Council's wetworks man," I said. "For all their prattle about the just and wise use of magic, when the wisdom and justice of the Laws of Magic get inconvenient, they have an assassin. You do that for them."

He said nothing.

"You kill people."

"Yes." Ebenezar's face looked like something carved in stone, and his voice was quietly harsh. "When there is no choice. When lives are at stake. When the lack of action would mean—" He cut himself off, jaw working. "I didn't want it. I still don't. But when I have to, I act."

"Like at Casaverde," I said. "You hit Ortega's stronghold when he escaped our duel."

"Yes," he said, still remote. "Ortega killed more of the White Council than any enemy in our history during the attack at Archangel." His voice faltered for a moment. "He killed Simon. My friend. Then he came here and tried to kill you, Hoss. And he was coming back here to finish the job as soon as he recovered. So I hit Casaverde. Killed him and almost two hundred of his personal retainers. And I killed nearly a hundred people there in the house with them. Servants. Followers. Food."

I felt sick. "You told me it would be on the news. I thought maybe it was the Council. Or that you'd done it without killing anyone but vampires. I had time to think about it later, but . . . I wanted to believe you'd done what was right."

"There's what's right," the old man said, "and then there's what's necessary. They ain't always the same."

"Casaverde wasn't the only necessary thing you did," I said. "Was it."

"Casaverde," Ebenezar said, his voice shaking. "Tunguska. New Madrid. Krakatoa. A dozen more. God help me, a dozen more at least."

I stared at him for a long moment. Then I said, "You told me the Council assigned me to live with you because they wanted to annoy you. But that

wasn't it. Because you don't send a potentially dangerous criminal element to live with your hatchet man if you want to rehabilitate him."

He nodded. "My orders were to observe you. And kill you if you showed the least bit of rebelliousness."

"Kill me." I rubbed at my eyes. The pounding in my hand grew worse. "As I remember, I got rebellious with you more than once."

"You did," he said.

"Then why didn't you kill me?"

"Jehoshaphat, boy. What's the point of having a license to ignore the will of the Council if you aren't going to use it?" He shook his head, a tired smile briefly appearing on his mouth. "It wasn't your fault you got raised by that son of a bitch DuMorne. You were a dumb kid, you were angry, and afraid, and your magic was strong as hell. But that didn't mean you needed killing. They gave the judgment to me. I used it. They aren't happy with how I used it, but I did."

I stared at him. "There's something else you aren't telling me."

He was silent for a minute. Then two. And a while later he said, "The Council knew that you were the son of Margaret LeFay. They knew that she was one of the wizards who had turned the Council's own laws against it. She was guilty of violating the First Law, among others, and she had . . . unsavory associations with various entities of dubious reputation. The Wardens were under orders to arrest her on sight. She'd have been tried and executed in moments when she was brought before the Council."

"I was told she died in childbirth," I said.

"She did," Ebenezar confirmed. "I don't know why, but for some reason she turned away from her previous associates—including Justin DuMorne. After that, nowhere was safe for her. She ran from her former allies and from the Wardens for perhaps two years. And she ran from me. I had my orders regarding her as well."

I stared at him in pained fascination. "What happened?"

"She met your father. A man. A mortal, without powers, without influence, without resources. But a man with a good soul, like few I have ever seen. I believe that she fell in love with him. But on the night you were born, one of her former allies found her and exacted his vengeance for her desertion." He looked up at me directly and said, "He used an entropy curse. A ritual entropy curse."

Shock paralyzed me for a moment. Then I said, "Lord Raith."

“Yes.”

“He killed my mother.”

“He did,” Ebenezar confirmed.

“God. You’re . . . you’re sure?”

“He’s a snake,” Ebenezar said. “But I’m as sure as I can be.”

The pounding spread up my arm, and the room pulsed brighter and dimmer in time with it. “My mother. He was standing three feet from me. He killed my mother.” A child’s pain—the emptiness in my life the shape of my unknown mother, my unfortunate father—swelled and screamed in rage. The source of that pain, or part of it, had finally been revealed to me. And in that moment, had I known where to strike, I would have eagerly embraced murder. Nothing mattered but exacting retribution. Nothing mattered but taking righteous vengeance for the death of a child’s mother. My mother. I started shaking, and I knew that my sanity was buckling under the pressure.

“Hoss,” Ebenezar said. “Easy, boy.”

“Kill him,” I whispered. “I’ll kill him.”

“No,” Ebenezar said. “You’ve got to breathe, boy. Think.”

I started gathering power. “Kill him. *Kill* him. Everything. All of it. Nothing left.”

“Harry,” Ebenezar snapped. “Harry, let go. You can’t handle that kind of power. You’ll kill yourself if you try.”

I didn’t care about that, either. The power felt too good—too strong. I wanted it. I wanted Raith to pay. I wanted him to suffer, screaming, and then die for what he had done to me. And I was strong enough to make it happen. I had the power and the resolve to bring such a tide of magic against him that he would be utterly destroyed. I would lay him low and make him howl for mercy before I tore him apart. He deserved nothing less.

And then fire blossomed in my hand again, so sudden and sharp that my back convulsed into an agonized arch, and I fell to the floor. I couldn’t scream. The pain washed my fury away like dandelions before a flash flood. I looked around wildly and saw the old man’s broad, calloused hand clamped down over my burned, lightly bandaged flesh with bruising strength. When he saw my eyes he released my hand, his expression sickened.

I curled up for a minute while my pounding heart telegraphed consecutive tidal waves of agony through me. It was several minutes before I could master the pain and sit slowly up again.

"I'm sorry," Ebenezar whispered. "Harry, I can't let you indulge your rage. You'll kill yourself."

"I'll take him with me," I got out between gritted teeth.

Ebenezar let out a bitter laugh. "No, you won't, Hoss."

"How do you know?"

"I've tried," he said. "Three times. And I didn't even get close. And you think your mother went without spending her death curse on her murderer? The creature who had enslaved her? Might as well ask if a fish remembered to swim."

I blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"He's protected," he said quietly. "Magic just slides off him."

"Even a death curse?"

"Useless," he said bitterly. "Raith is protected by something big. Maybe a big damned demon. Maybe even some old god. He can't be touched with magic."

"Is that even possible?" I asked.

"Aye," the old man said. "I don't know how. But it is. Does a lot to explain how he got to become the White King."

"I don't believe it," I said quietly. "She'd been close to him. She must have known he was protected. She was strong enough to make the White Council afraid of her. She wouldn't have spent her curse for nothing."

"She threw it. She wasted it."

"So now my mother is incompetent as well as evil," I said.

"I never said that—"

"What do you know about her?" I said. I had my right hand clamped around my left wrist, hoping to distract myself from the pain. "How would you know? Did she tell you? Were you there with her?"

He looked down at the floor, his face pale. "No."

"Then how the hell do you know?" I demanded.

His words came out in a harsh croak. "Because I knew her, Hoss. I knew her almost better than she knew herself."

The fire crackled.

"How?" I whispered.

He drew his hand back from the puppy. "She was my apprentice. I was her teacher. Her mentor. She was my responsibility."

"You taught her?"

"I failed her." He chewed on his lip. "Harry . . . when Maggie was coming into her power, I made her life a living hell. She was barely more than a child, but I rode herd on her night and day. I pushed her to learn. To excel. But I was too close. Too involved. And she resented it. She ran off as soon as she could get away with it. Started taking up with bad sorts out of sheer rebellion. She made a couple of bad decisions, and . . . and then it was too late for her to go back."

He sighed. "You're so much like her. I knew it when they sent you to me. I knew it the minute I saw you. I didn't want to repeat my mistakes with you. I wanted you to have breathing space. To make up your own mind about what kind of person you would be." He shook his head. "The hardest lesson a wizard has to learn is that even with so much power, there are some things you can't control. No matter how much you want to."

I just stared at him. "You're an assassin. A murderer. You knew about what happened to my mother. You knew her and you never *told* me. Good God, Ebenezar. How could you do that to me? Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"I'm only human, Hoss. I did what I thought was best for you at the time."

"I *trusted* you," I said. "Do you know how much that *means* to me?"

"Yes," he said. "I never did it with the intention of hurting you. But it's done. And I wouldn't choose to do it any differently if it happened again."

He moved, got the sack, and hunkered down by me so that he could rest my forearm over one knee and examine the burned hand. Then he reached into the bag and drew out a long strand of string hung with some kind of white stone. "Let's see to your hand. I think I can get the circulation restored, at least a little. Maybe enough to save the hand. And I can stop the pain for a day or two. You'll still have to get to a doctor, but this should tide you over if you're expecting trouble tonight."

It didn't take him long, and I tried to sort through my thoughts. They were buried under a storm of raw emotions, all of them ugly. I lost track of time again for a minute. When I looked up, my hand didn't hurt and it seemed a little less withered beneath the white bandages. A string of white stones had been tied around my wrist. Even as I watched, one of them yellowed and began to slowly darken.

“The stones will absorb the pain for a while. They’ll crumble one at a time, so you’ll know when they stop working.” He looked up to my face. “Do you want my help tonight?”

An hour ago it wouldn’t even have been a question. I’d have been more than glad to have Ebenezar next to me in a fight. But the old man had been right. The truth hurt. The truth *burned*. My thoughts and feelings boiled in a blistering, dangerous tumult in my chest. I didn’t want to admit what was at the core of that turmoil, but denying it wouldn’t make it any less true.

Ebenezar had lied to me. From day one.

And if he’d been lying to me, what else had he lied about?

I’d built my whole stupid life on a few simple beliefs. That I had a responsibility to use my power to help people. That it was worth risking my own life and safety to defend others. Beliefs I’d taken as my own primarily because of the old man’s influence.

But he hadn’t been what I thought he was. Ebenezar wasn’t a paragon of wizardly virtue. If anything he was a precautionary tale. He had seemed to talk a good game, but underneath that surface, he’d been as cold and as vicious as any of the cowardly bastards in the Council whom I despised.

Maybe he’d never claimed to be a shining example. Maybe I’d just needed someone to admire. To believe in. Maybe I’d been the stupid one, putting my faith in the wrong place.

But none of that changed the fact that Ebenezar had hidden things from me. That he’d lied.

That made it simple.

“No,” I whispered. “I don’t want you there. I don’t know you. I never did.”

“But you’d fight beside someone like the Hellhound.”

“Kincaid’s a killer for hire. He never pretended he was anything else.”

The old man exhaled slowly and said, “I reckon that ain’t unfair.”

“Thank you for your help. But I’ve got things to do. You should go.”

He rose, picked up the paper bag, and said, “I’m still there for you, Hoss, if you change your—”

I felt my teeth clench. “I said get out.”

He blinked his eyes a few times and whispered, “A hard lesson. The hardest.”

Then he left.

I refused to watch him go.

Chapter Thirty-six



I sat in the silence of the old man's departure and felt a lot of things. I felt tired. I felt afraid. And I felt alone. The puppy sat up and displayed some of the wisdom and compassion of his kind. He wobbled carefully over to me, scrambled up onto my lap, and started licking the bottom of my chin.

I petted his soft baby fur, and it gave me an unexpected sense of comfort. Sure, he was tiny, and sure, he was just a dog, but he was warm and loving and a brave little beast. And he liked me. He kept on giving me puppy kisses, tail wagging, until I finally smiled at him and roughed up his fur with one hand.

Mister wasn't about to let a mere dog outdo him. The hefty tom promptly descended from his perch on my bookshelf and started rubbing himself back and forth under my hand until I paid attention to him, too.

"I guess you aren't nothing but trouble," I told the dog. "But I already have a furry companion. Right, Mister?"

Mister blinked at me with an enigmatic cat expression, batted the puppy off the couch and onto the floor, and promptly lost interest in me. Mister flowed back down onto the floor, where the puppy rolled to his feet, tail wagging ferociously, and began to romp clumsily around the cat, thrilled with the game. Mister flicked his ears with disdain and went back up onto his bookshelf.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. The world might be vicious and treacherous and deadly, but it couldn't kill laughter. Laughter, like love, has power to survive the worst things life has to offer. And to do it with style.

It got me moving. I dressed for trouble—black fatigue pants, a heavy wool shirt of deep red, black combat boots. I put on my gun belt with one hand, clipped my sword cane to the belt, and covered it with my duster. I made sure I had my mother's amulet and my shield bracelet, sat down, and called Thomas's cell phone.

The phone got about half of a ring out before someone picked it up and a girl's frightened voice asked, "Tommy?"

"Inari?" I asked. "Is that you?"

"It's me," she confirmed. "This is Harry, isn't it."

"For another few hours anyway," I said. "May I speak to Thomas, please?"

"No," Inari said. It sounded like she had been crying. "I was hoping this was him. I think he's in trouble."

I frowned. "What kind of trouble?"

"I saw one of my father's men," she said. "I think he had a gun. He made Thomas drop his phone in the parking lot and get into the car. I didn't know what I should do."

"Easy, easy," I said. "Where was he taken from?"

"The studio," she said, her voice miserable. "He gave me a ride here when we heard about the shooting. I'm here now."

"Is Lara there?" I asked.

"Yes. She's right here."

"Put her on, please."

"Okay," Inari said.

The phone rustled. A moment later Lara's voice glided out of the phone and into my ear. "Hello, Harry."

"Lara. I know your father is behind the curse on Arturo, along with Arturo's wives. I know they've been gunning for his fiancée so that Raith can get Arturo back under his control. And I have a question for you."

"Oh?" she said.

"Yeah. Where is Thomas?"

"It excites me when a man is so subtle," she said. "So debonaire."

"Better brace yourself, then," I said. "I want him in one piece. I'm willing to kill anyone who gets in the way. And I'm willing to pay you to help me."

"Really?" Lara said. I heard her murmur something, presumably to Inari. She waited a moment, I heard a door close, and the tone of her voice changed subtly, becoming businesslike. "I am willing to hear you out."

"And I'm willing to give you House Raith. And the White Court with it."

Shocked silence followed. Then she said, "And how would you manage such a thing?"

"I remove your father from power. You take over."

“How vague. The situation isn’t a simple one,” she said, but I could hear a throbbing note of excitement in her voice. “The other Houses of the White Court follow House Raith because they fear and respect my father. It seems unlikely that they would transfer that respect to me.”

“Unlikely. Not impossible. I think it can be done.”

She made a slow, low purring sound. “Do you? And what would you expect from me in return? If my father has decided to remove Thomas, I am hardly capable of stopping him.”

“You won’t need to. Just take me to him. I’ll get Thomas myself.”

“After which, my father will be so impressed with your diplomatic skills that he cedes the House to me?”

“Something like that,” I said. “Get me there. Then all you have to do is watch from the sidelines while Cat’s-paw Dresden handles your father.”

“Mmm,” she said. “That would certainly raise my status among the Lords of the Court. To arrange for a usurpation isn’t so unusual, but very few manage to have good seats to it as well. A firsthand view of it would be a grace note few have attained.”

“Plus if you were standing right there and things went badly for me, you’d be in a good spot to backstab me and keep your father’s goodwill.”

“Of course,” she said, without a trace of shame. “You understand me rather well, wizard.”

“Oh, there’s one other thing I want.”

“Yes?” she asked.

“Leave the kid alone. Don’t push her. Don’t pressure her. You come clean with Inari. You tell her the deal with her bloodline and you let her make up her own mind when it comes to her future.”

She waited for a beat and then said, “That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

She purred again. “My. I am not yet sure if you are truly that formidable or simply a vast and mighty fool, but for the time being I am finding you an extremely exciting man.”

“All the girls tell me that.”

She laughed. “Let us assume for a moment that I find your proposal agreeable. I would need to know how you intend to overthrow my father. He’s somewhat invincible, you see.”

“No, he isn’t,” I said. “I’m going to show you how weak he really is.”

“And how do you know this?”

I closed my eyes and said, "Insight."

Lara lapsed into a thoughtful silence for a moment. Then she said, "There is something else I must know, wizard. Why? Why do this?"

"I owe Thomas for favors past," I said. "He's been an ally, and if I leave him hanging out to dry it's going to be bad for me in the long term, when I need other allies. If the plan comes off, I also get someone in charge of things at the White Court who is more reasonable to work with."

Lara made a soft sound that was probably mostly pensive but that would have been a lot more interesting in the dark. Uh. I mean, in person.

"No," she said then. "That's not all of it."

"Why not?"

"That would be sufficient reason if it were me," she said. "But you aren't like me, wizard. You aren't like most of your own kind. I have no doubt that you have reasonable skill at the calculus of power, but calculation is not at the heart of your nature. You prepare to take a terrible risk, and I would know why your heart is set to it."

I chewed on my lip for a second, weighing my options and the possible consequences. Then I said, "Do you know who Thomas's mother was?"

"Margaret LeFay," she said, puzzled. "But what does that—" She stopped abruptly. "Ah. Now I see. That explains a great deal about his involvement in political matters over the past few years." She let out a little laugh, but it was somehow sad. "You're much like him, you know. Thomas would sooner tear off his own arm than see one of his siblings hurt. He's quite irrational about it."

"Is that reason enough for you?" I asked.

"I am not yet entirely devoid of affection for my family, wizard. It satisfies me."

"Besides," I added, "I've just handed you a secret with the potential for some fairly good blackmail down the line."

She laughed. "Oh, you *do* understand me."

"Are you in?"

There was silence. When Lara finally spoke again, her voice was firmer, more eager. "I do not know precisely where my father would have had Thomas taken."

"Can you find out?"

Her voice took on a pensive tone. "In fact, I believe I can. Perhaps it was fate."

“What was fate?”

“You’ll see,” she said. “What sort of time frame did you have in mind?”

“An immediate one,” I said. “The immediater the better.”

“I’ll need half an hour or a little more. Meet me at my family’s home north of town.”

“Half an hourish,” I said. “Until then.”

I hung up the phone just as a loud, low rumble approached my house. A moment later Murphy came back in. She was decked out in biker-grade denim and leather again. “I guess we’re going somewhere.”

“Rev up the Hog,” I said. “You ready for another fight?”

Her teeth flashed. She tossed me a red motorcycle helmet and said, “Get on the bike, bitch.”

Chapter Thirty-seven



Motorcycles aren't safe transport, as far as it goes. I mean, insurance statistics show that everyone in the country is going to wind up in a traffic accident of some kind and most of us are going to be involved in more than one. If you're driving around in a beat-up old Lincoln battleship and someone clips you at twenty miles an hour, it probably is going to frighten and annoy you. If you're sitting on a motorcycle when it happens, you'll be lucky to wind up in traction. Even if you aren't in an accident with another vehicle, it's way too easy to get yourself hurt or killed on a bike. Bikers don't wear all that leather around simply for the fashion value or possible felony assaults. It's handy for keeping the highway from ripping the skin from your flesh should you wind up losing control of the bike and sliding along the asphalt for a while.

All that said, riding a motorcycle is *fun*.

I put on the bulky, clunky red helmet, fairly certain that I had never before disguised myself as a kitchen matchstick. Murphy's black helmet, by comparison, looked like something imported from the twenty-fifth century. I sighed as the battered corpse of my dignity took yet another kick in the face and got on the bike behind Murphy. I gave her directions, and her old Harley growled as she unleashed it on the unsuspecting road.

I thought the bike was going to jump out from underneath me for a second, and my balance wobbled.

"Dresden!" Murphy shouted back to me, annoyed. "Hang on to my waist!"

"With what?" I shouted back. I waved my bandaged hand to one side of her field of vision and the hand holding the staff to the other.

In answer, Murphy took my staff and shoved the end of it down into some kind of storage rack placed so conveniently close to the rider's right hand that it couldn't have been mistaken for anything but a holster for a rifle or baseball bat. My staff stuck up like the plastic flagpole on a golf

cart, but at least I had a free hand. I slipped my arm around Murphy's waist, and I could feel the muscles over her stomach tensing as she accelerated or leaned into turns, cuing me to match her. When we got onto some open road and zoomed out of the city, the wind took the ends of my leather duster, throwing them back up into the air of the bike's passage, and I had to hold tight to Murphy or risk having my coat turn into a short-term parasail.

We rolled through Little Sherwood and up to the entrance of Château Raith. Murphy brought the Harley to a halt. It might have taken me a few extra seconds to take my arm from around her waist, but she didn't seem to mind. She had her bored-cop face on as she took in the house, the roses, and the grotesque gargoyles, but I could sense that underneath it she was as intimidated as I had been, and for the same reasons. The enormous old house reeked of the kind of power and wealth that disdains laws and societies. It loomed in traditional scary fashion, and it was a long way from help.

I got off the bike and she passed me my staff. The place was silent, except for the sound of wind slithering through the trees. There was a small flickering light at the door, another at the end of the walk up to it, and a couple of splotches of landscape lighting, but other than that, nothing.

"What's the plan?" Murphy asked. She kept her voice low. "Fight?"

"Not yet," I said, and gave her the short version of events. "Watch my back. Don't start anything unless one of the Raiths tries to physically touch you. If they can do that, there's a chance they could influence you in one way or another."

Murphy shivered. "Not an issue. If I could help it they weren't going to be touching me anyway."

An engine roared and a white sports car shot through the last several hundred yards of Little Sherwood. It all but flew up the drive, narrowly missed Murphy's bike, spun, and screeched to a neat stop, parallel-parked in the opposite direction.

Murphy traded a glance with me. She looked impressed. I probably looked annoyed.

The door opened and Lara slid out, dressed in a long, loose red skirt and a white cotton blouse with embroidered scarlet roses. She walked purposefully toward us. Her feet were bare. Silver flashed on a toe and one

ankle, and as she drew closer I heard the jingle of miniature bells. “Good evening, wizard.”

“Lara,” I said. “I like the skirt. Nice statement. Very *Carmen*.”

She flashed me a pleased smile, then focused her pale grey gaze on Murphy and said, “And who is this?”

“Murphy,” she said. “I’m a friend.”

Lara smiled at Murphy. Very slowly. “I can never have too many friends.”

Murphy’s cop face held, and she added a note of casual disdain to her voice. “I didn’t say your friend,” she said. “I’m with Dresden.”

“What a shame,” Lara said.

“I’m also with the police.”

The succubus straightened her spine a little at the words, and studied Murphy again. Then she inclined her head with a little motion half suggesting a curtsy, a gesture of concession.

The other door of the white sports car opened and Reformed Bully Bobby got out, carsick and a little wobbly on his feet. Inari followed him a second later, slipping underneath one of his arms to help hold him steady despite her own broken arm and sling.

Lara raised her voice. “Inari? Be a darling and fetch her for me right away. Bobby, dear, if you could help her I would take it as a kindness.”

“Yeah, sure,” Bobby said. He looked a little green but was recovering as he hurried toward the house with Inari.

“We’ll bring her right down,” Inari said.

I waited until they had gone inside. “What the hell are they doing here?” I demanded of Lara.

She shrugged. “They insisted and there was little time for argument.”

I scowled. “Next time you’re practicing the sex appeal, maybe you should spend some time working up some ‘go-thither’ to go with all the ‘come-hither.’”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” she said.

“Who are they bringing out?” I asked.

Lara arched a brow. “Don’t you know?”

I gritted my teeth. “Obviously. Not.”

“Patience then, darling,” she said, and walked around to the back of the sports car, hips and dark hair swaying. She opened the trunk and drew out a sheathed rapier—a real one, not one of those skinny car-antenna swords

most people think of when they hear the word. The blade alone was better than three feet long, as wide as a couple of my fingers at the base, tapering to a blade as wide as my pinkie nail and ending in a needle tip. It had a winding guard of silver and white-lacquered steel that covered most of the hand, adorned with single red rose made of tiny rubies. Lara drew out a scarlet sash, tied it on, and slipped the sheathed weapon through it. "There," she said, and sauntered over to me again. "Still *Carmen*?"

"Less *Carmen*. More *Pirates of Penzance*," I said.

She put the spread fingers of one hand over her heart. "Gilbert and Sullivan. I may never forgive you that."

"How will I find the will to go on?" I asked, and rolled my eyes at Murphy. "And hey, while we're on the subject of going on . . ."

Inari slammed the door of the house open and held it that way. Bobby came out a minute later, carrying an old woman in a white nightgown in his arms. The kid was big and strong, but he didn't look like he needed to be to carry her. There was an ephemeral quality to the woman. Her silver hair drifted on any wisp of air, her arms and legs hung weakly, and she was almost painfully thin.

The kid came to us, and I got a better look. It wasn't an old woman. Her skin was unwrinkled, even if it had the pallor of those near death, and her arms and legs weren't wasted, but were simply slender with youth. Her hair, though, was indeed silver, white, and grey. The evening breeze blew her hair away from her face, and I knew it had gone grey literally overnight.

Because the girl was Justine.

"Hell's bells," I said quietly. "I thought she was dead."

Lara stepped up beside me, staring at the girl, her features hard. "She should be," she said.

Anger flickered in my chest. "That's a hell of a thing to say."

"It's a matter of perspective. I don't bear the girl any malice, but given the choice I would rather she died than Thomas. It's the way of things."

I shot her a look. "What?"

Lara moved a shoulder in a shrug. "Thomas pulled himself away from her at the last possible instant," she said. "Truth be told, it was *after* that instant. I don't know how he managed it."

"And that bothers you?" I demanded.

“It was an unwarranted risk,” she said. “It was foolish. It should have killed him to draw away.”

I gave her a look that managed to be both blank and impatient.

“It’s the intensity of it,” she said. “It’s . . . a unification. Thomas’s store of life energy was all but gone. Forcibly breaking away from a vessel—”

“From Justine,” I interrupted.

Lara looked impatient now. “Forcibly breaking away from Justine was an enormous psychic trauma, and he was at his weakest. Taking only lightly and breaking the contact isn’t difficult. In fact, it’s normally the way of things. But he’d been feeding regularly from the girl for several years. He could draw energy from her with a simple caress. To take her fully . . .” Lara’s eyes grew a shade paler, and the tips of her breasts tightened against her blouse. “There’s no thought involved in it. No judgment. No hesitation. Only need.”

“That’s horrible,” Murphy said, her voice a whisper. “To force that on her.”

Lara’s pale eyes drifted to Murphy. “Oh, no. It isn’t coerced, dear officer. She was more than willing to give. When prey has been taken so many times, they stop caring about death. There’s only the pleasure of being fed upon. They’re eager to give more, and they care nothing about the danger.”

Murphy sounded sickened. “Maybe she broke it off instead.”

Lara’s mouth curled into a smirk. “No. By the time my brother took enough to restore him to his senses, the girl was little more than an animal in season.”

Murphy’s eyes narrowed as she stared at Lara. “And talking about it excites you. That’s sick.”

“Have you never made yourself hungry by talking about food, Officer Murphy?” Lara asked.

Murphy scowled, but didn’t answer.

“In any case,” Lara said, “what Thomas did was cruel. Justine cared for him as much as any of our prey ever can. There was little left when he drew away, of her body or her mind. Strictly speaking, she is survived, Officer. But I’m not sure one could say that she is alive.”

“I get it,” I said. “She and Thomas had . . . made an impression on each other. A sort of psychic bond. And you think Justine might be able to tell us where he is.”

Lara nodded. "It happens when we keep someone too long. Though I'm surprised you know of it."

"I didn't," I said. "But when Bianca took Justine from him, Thomas knew that she was being held in Bianca's manor. He wouldn't say how."

Lara nodded. "If there is enough of her mind left, she might be able to lead us to my brother. I do not think he will be far from here. Father does not often travel far outside the property he controls."

Bobby reached us with the girl, and Inari ducked into the house and came out with a wheelchair. She rushed it over to Justine, and Bobby settled her into it.

I knelt down by the wheelchair. Justine lay almost bonelessly, barely holding her head up. Her dark eyes were heavy and unfocused. A small smile touched her mouth. Her eyes were sunken and her skin was almost translucent. She took slow, shallow breaths, and I heard her make a soft, pleased sound on each exhalation.

"Man," I breathed. "She looks out of it."

"Tick-tock," Murphy reminded me.

I nodded and waved my hand in front of Justine's eyes. No reaction. "Justine?" I said quietly. "Justine, it's Harry Dresden. Can you hear me?"

A faint line appeared on her forehead, though her expression did not quite become a frown. But it was something.

"Justine," I said. "Listen to me. Thomas is in trouble. Do you hear me? Thomas is in danger, and we need you to find him."

A slow shudder rolled through her. She blinked her eyes, and though they didn't quite focus, they stirred, looking around her.

"Thomas," I said again. "Come on, Justine. I need you to talk to me."

She took a deeper breath. The languid pleasure on her face faded, replaced with a portion of both sadness, and desire. "Thomas," she whispered.

"Yeah," I said. "Where is he? Can you tell me where he is?"

This time her eyes lost focus completely, then closed. Her lovely face smoothed into an almost meditative concentration. "Feel."

"Where?" Frustration threatened to overwhelm me. "What do you feel?"

She moved a hand and touched the opposite wrist. Then her knee. "Chains. Cold."

Lara leaned over her and asked, "Is he far away?"

Justine shivered. "Not far."

“Which direction?” I asked.

She made a feeble, vague motion with her hand, but frowned at the same time.

“I don’t think she’s strong enough to point,” I said to Lara.

Lara nodded and told Inari, “Turn the chair around slowly, please.”

“Justine,” I said, “can you tell us when he’s in front of you?”

The girl opened her eyes. They met mine for a heartbeat, and boy howdy did I chicken out and look away fast. No soulgaze, please. I’d had too many dying sheep tattooed into my memory for one day. But as Inari turned the chair, Justine suddenly lifted her head and her hand and pointed out into the darkness. The motion was weak, but in comparison to the others it was nearly forceful.

Lara stared out at the night for a moment and then said, “The Deeps. He’s in the Deeps.”

“What?” Murphy asked.

Lara frowned. “It’s an old cave on the northern edge of the property. There’s a shaft, a natural chasm, and no one is sure how far down it goes. We use it for . . .”

“Disposing of things,” I said quietly. “Like corpses.”

“Yes.”

“How long will it take us to get there?”

“There’s a service road to the groundskeeper’s cottage,” she said. “Go around the manor and head north. There’s a white fence on the far side of the lawn. Look for the gate.”

“I won’t have to. You’re coming with us,” I said.

Lara didn’t get to answer, because the night abruptly filled with deadly thunder, and a major-league pitcher planted a fastball directly between my shoulder blades. I went down hard, and concrete skinned my face. I heard Murphy grunt and hit the ground half of a heartbeat later.

I managed to move my head a second later, in time to see one of the Bodyguard Kens standing on the front porch of the manor. He worked the slide on a shotgun, the barrel tracking Lara. The succubus darted to her left, as swift and graceful as a deer, and the bodyguard followed her. The barrel of the gun found Inari before it caught up to Lara, and the girl stood frozen, her eyes as wide as teacups.

“Look out!” Bobby screamed. He hit Inari in a flying tackle that would have rattled the teeth of a professional fullback, and the gun went off.

Blood scattered into the air in a heavy red mist.

Bodyguard Ken started pumping another round into the weapon, and the nearest target was Justine. The girl sat staring toward where she'd said Thomas was. I didn't think she could even hear the shots, much less move to avoid them, and I knew that she was going to die.

That is, until Murphy popped up into a kneeling firing stance, gun in hand. The gunman spun to aim at her and fired. He'd rushed himself, and the blast went wide of Murphy. It tore into the white sports car and shredded its left front tire.

Murphy didn't shoot back right away. She aimed her pistol for an endless half second while Bodyguard Ken ejected the previous shell and began to squeeze the trigger again. The spent shell hit the ground. Murphy's gun barked.

Bodyguard Ken's head jerked to one side, as if someone had just asked him a particularly startling question.

Murphy shot him three more times. The second shot made a fingertip-sized hole in the gunman's cheekbone. The third shattered against the brick of the house, and the fourth smacked into his chest. He must have been wearing armor, but the impact of the hit was enough to send him toppling limply backward. The shotgun went off as he fell, discharging into the air, but he was dead before the echoes faded away.

Murphy watched the gunman with flat, icy eyes for a second and then spun to me, setting her gun aside to reach under my coat.

"I'm okay," I wheezed. "I'm okay. The coat stopped it."

Murphy looked startled. "Since when has the duster been lined with Kevlar?"

"It isn't," I said. "It's magic. Hurts like hell but I'll be all right."

Murphy gripped my shoulder hard. "Thank God. I thought you were dead."

"Check the kid. I think he took a hit."

She went to over to Bobby and Inari, and was joined by Lara. I followed a moment later. Inari was whimpering with pain. Bobby was in shock, lying there quietly while he bled from his shredded shoulder and arm. He'd been lucky as hell. Only part of the blast had taken him, and while the wound would leave him with some nasty scars, it hadn't torn open any arteries. He'd live. Murphy grabbed a first-aid kit off of her bike and got the wound

site covered up and taped down with a pressure bandage. Then she moved on to the girl.

“Is he all right?” Inari’s voice was panicky. “He was so brave. Is he all right?”

“He should be,” Murphy said. “Where’s it hurt?”

“It’s my shoulder,” Inari said. “Oh, God, it hurts.”

Murphy tore open the girl’s T-shirt with ruthless practicality and examined the injury. “Not shot,” she said. “Looks like she did it when the kid pulled her out of the line of fire.” Murphy moved her hand and Inari went breathless and pale with pain. “Crap, it’s her collarbone, Harry. Maybe a dislocated shoulder too. She can’t move herself. Both of them need an ambulance, and now.” She looked over at the bodyguard and shook her head. “And there’s a fatality on the scene. This is getting bad, Dresden. We have to put this fire out before it goes wild.”

“We don’t have time to wait around while the cops sort things out,” I said.

“And if we don’t report the shooting along with the gunshot wounds, we’re going to have police crawling through every inch of our lives.”

“It was an accident,” Lara said. “The boy and Inari were looking at my father’s collection of guns. She slipped and fell. The shotgun went off.”

“What about the body?” Murphy demanded.

Lara shrugged. “What body?”

Murphy glared at Lara and cast me a glance of appeal. “Harry?”

“Hey, telling the truth keeps getting me put in jail. And the last time I tried to engineer a cover-up, I wound up cleverly running off with the murder weapon and covering it with my prints before handing it over to someone who thought I was a murderer at the time. So don’t look at me.”

“There’s no time to argue about this,” Lara said. “If one of my father’s guards saw you, he’ll have reported you. The others will be on their way, and will be more heavily armed.” She focused on Murphy. “Officer, let me handle this quietly. It will only protect the mortal officers who might get involved. And, after all, only the man who died committed any crime.”

Murphy narrowed her eyes.

“I will owe you a favor,” Lara said. “If matters go well tonight, it could be a considerable asset to you in the future. Dealing with the Raiths is a dark business. Let it stay in the dark.”

Murphy hesitated. Then her mouth firmed into a line and she nodded once. She changed out the clip in her pistol to a fresh one. "Come on," she said. "Let's move before I start thinking about this."

"Moving before I think is my specialty," I said.

"The road," Lara said. "Through the gate behind the house I'll meet you at the groundskeeper's cottage."

"Why not squeeze onto the bike?" I said.

Murphy gave me an arch look.

"I'm just being practical," I said defensively.

"Someone has to call the ambulance and move the body," Lara said. "And I'd get there faster on my own in any case. I'll catch up to you when I can."

Which I figured was as much assurance as I'd get from her. It wasn't encouraging, but time was short, my options few, and standing around outdoors was likely to get everyone a bad case of deaditis.

So I strode to Murphy's bike. "Let's go."

Murphy came over to me, eyes on Lara. "She'll turn on us," she said quietly.

"She'll back the winning horse. So it had better be you and me. Can you handle the vigilante thing?"

She smiled at me, nervous but game. "Get on the bike, bitch."

She got on, I got on behind her, and, rebels that we were, neither of us put on a helmet.

What can I say? I like to live dangerously.

Chapter Thirty-eight



Murphy zipped around the house, tearing up the lawn with her Harley. We were doing better than sixty by the time she cleared the smooth turf surrounding the manor and zipped through an open gate onto a long, narrow gravel lane lined with high hedges.

Ahead of us, headlights on high-beam flashed into our eyes and an engine roared.

Lara had been right. Raith's bodyguards knew we were coming.

The car surged toward us.

Murphy's head whipped left and right, but the hedges were old growth, impassable and unbroken. "Crap! No time to turn!"

Ahead of us, I saw the silhouette of the remaining Bodyguard Ken climb out of the car window to sit on it, and lift a gun to his shoulder.

I leaned forward into Murphy, and took my staff from the holster. "Murphy!" I shouted. "We need more speed! Go faster!"

She looked over her shoulder, blue eyes wide, blond hair lashing around her cheeks.

"Go!" I screamed.

I felt her shoulders set as she turned back to the front and stomped on gears with one foot, and the old Harley roared as it dug into the road with ferocious power and shot ahead at terrifying speed. Flame spat from the shape ahead of us, and bullets hit the road, kicking up sparks and bits of gravel with a series of whistling whiplash sounds that beat the sound of exploding shots to us by almost a second.

I ignored the gunman, focusing on the staff. Of all my foci, the staff was the most versatile. Meant simply to assist with the redirection of forces I could use to call wind, to bend steel bars, and to channel lightning. I had used my staff to erect barriers of force, disrupt hostile magics, and in a pinch to beat bad guys about the head and shoulders.

I took the tool, the trademark and icon of a wizard, and couched it under my arm like a lance, the tip extending past Murphy's bike. I reached out for my will and gathered up power, feeding it into the rune-carved wood.

"What are you doing?" Murphy screamed.

"Faster!" I thundered. "Don't turn!"

Murphy had another gear, and that damned Harley had to have been built by demons, not engineers. No vehicle without a roll cage had any business going that fast.

But I needed it to have enough force to survive. Even wizards cannot escape the consequences of physics. You can call up a storm of fire, but it won't burn without fuel and air. Want to infuse yourself with superhuman strength? It's possible. But keep in mind that just because your muscles have gotten supercharged, it doesn't mean that your bones and joints can support the weight of a Volkswagen.

By the same line of reasoning, force still equals mass times acceleration no matter how big your magic wand might be. Me plus Murphy plus her Harley didn't mass anywhere near what the car and the people in it did. I could give us an advantage, but even with the staff I could stretch the rules only so far. Our mass wasn't going to change—and that meant that we needed all the acceleration we could get.

I started channeling our force into the staff, focusing it into a blunted wedge in front of us. All the extra power flooding ahead of us started heating the air, and flickers of blue and purple fire began streaking back around us in a corona, like one of the space shuttles on reentry.

"You have got to be kidding me!" Murphy screamed.

The oncoming car got closer. The bodyguard started shooting again, then dropped the gun and slid back into the car in a panic, strapping on his seat belt.

"This is insane!" Murphy yelled. But the Harley kept going faster.

The oncoming headlights loomed up in blinding brilliance. The other driver leaned on the horn.

Murphy screamed in terror and challenge in response.

I shouted, "*Forzare!*" and unleashed my will. It went rocketing down through the staff. Again its runes and sigils flared into hellish light, and the flickering corona of fire ahead of us blazed into an incandescent cloud.

Murphy's bike didn't waver.

Neither did the bodyguards' car.

There was a flash of light and thunder as the force lance struck the car, and between the reckless speed of Murphy's Hog and my will, physics landed firmly on our side. Our side of the equation was bigger than theirs.

The car's hood and front bumper crumpled as if they'd hit a telephone pole. The windows shattered inward as force I'd redirected lashed through the car. I screamed as glass and steel started flying, and with every scrap of strength that I had, I willed an angle into the lance, deflecting the car. Its front right wheel flew up off the ground, and the rest of the car followed, flipping up into the air and into a lateral roll.

I heard the bodyguards inside screaming.

There was an enormous crunch, totally drowning out Murphy's cry and my own howling, and then we were through it, continuing down the lane, shedding flames behind us like bits of wax melting from a candle, and we were suddenly screaming in triumph. We'd survived. The smoldering staff suddenly felt like it weighed a ton, and I almost dropped it. Exhaustion followed into the rest of my body a breath later, and I slumped against Murphy's back, looking behind us.

The car hadn't exploded, like they do on TV. But it had torn through ten or twelve feet of heavy hedge and slammed into a tree. The car lay on its side, steaming. Glass and broken bits of metal were spread on the ground around it in a field of debris at least fifty feet across. The air bags had deployed, and I could see a pair of crumpled forms inside. Neither of them was moving.

Murphy kept the Harley racing forward, and was casting laughter into the wind all the way down the road.

"What?" I called to her. "Why are you laughing?"

She half turned her head. Her face was flushed, her eyes sparkling. "I think you were right about the vibrator thing."

Half a mile later we rolled up to a house that could have handled a family of four without trouble. By the standards of the Raith estate, I guess that qualified it as a cottage. Murphy killed the bike's engine maybe two hundred yards out, and we coasted in the rest of the way, the only sound the crunching grind of gravel under the tires. She stopped the bike, and we both sat there in the silence for a minute.

"See a cave?" she asked me.

"Nope," I said. "But we can't wait for Lara to show up."

"Any ideas how to find it?" Murphy asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve never heard of a ritual spell that didn’t involve fire and some chanting and some smelly incense and stuff.”

“Christ, Dresden. We don’t have time to wander around the woods in the dark hoping to smell our way to the cave. Isn’t there some way you could find it?”

“With magic? Iffy. I’m not sure what I would do to look for a cave.”

Murphy frowned. “Then this is stupid,” she said. “We’d be smarter to back off and come back with help and light. You could defend yourself against this curse, couldn’t you?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But that last one came in awfully strong and fast, and it changes everything. I can swing at a slow-pitch softball and hit it every time. Not even the best hitter can hit five hundred against major-league pitching.”

“How did they do it?” she asked.

“Blood sacrifice,” I said. “Has to be. Raith is involved with the ritual now.” My voice twisted with bitter anger. “He’s got experience using it. He’s got Thomas now, which means he isn’t going to target him with the curse. Raith’s going to bleed him to help kill me. The only chance Thomas has is for me to stop the curse.”

Murphy sucked in a breath. She hopped off the bike and drew her gun, holding it down by her leg. “Oh. You circle left and I’ll circle right and we’ll sniff for the cave, then.”

“Argh, I’m an idiot,” I said. I leaned my still-glowing staff against the bike and jerked the silver amulet off my neck. “My mother left this to me. Thomas has one like it. She had forged a link between them so that when one of us was touching both of them we got a . . . sort of a psychic voice mail.”

“Meaning what?” Murphy asked.

I twisted the chain around the index finger of my burned hand, letting it dangle. “Meaning I can use that link to find the other amulet again.”

“If he has it,” Murphy said.

“He will,” I said. “After last night, he won’t take it off.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know it,” I said. I held my right hand palm up and tried to focus upon it. I found the link, the channel through which my mother’s latent enchantment had contacted Thomas and me, and I poured some of my will into it, trying to spread it out. “Because I believe it.”

The amulet quivered on its string and then leaned out toward the night to our left.

“Stay close,” I said, and turned in that direction. “Okay, Murph?”

There was no answer.

My instincts clamored in alarm. I dropped my concentration and looked around, but Murphy was nowhere in sight.

Directly behind me there was a muffled sound, and I turned to find Lord Raith standing there with an arm around Murphy’s neck, covering her mouth and with a knife pressed up hard against her ribs. He was wearing all black this time, and in the autumn moonlight he looked like little more than a shadow, a pale and grinning skull, and a very large knife.

“Good evening, Mister Dresden.”

“Raith,” I said.

“Put the staff down. Amulet too. And the bracelet.” He pressed the knife and Murphy sucked in a sharp breath through her nose. “Now.”

Dammit. I dropped the bracelet, the staff, and my amulet to the grass.

“Excellent,” Raith said. “You were right about Thomas keeping his amulet with him. I found it around his neck when I was cutting his shirt off to have him chained down. I was fairly certain that you would judge such an obviously linked item to be too hazardous to employ in any location magic, but on the off chance I was wrong, I kept my own location spell going. I’ve been watching you since you arrived.”

“You must feel smug and self-satisfied. Are you getting to a point?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he said. “Kneel and place your hands behind your back.”

The remaining Bodyguard Barbie appeared. She had a set of prisoner’s shackles.

“What if I don’t?” I asked.

Raith shrugged and shoved an inch of knife between Murphy’s ribs. She bucked in sudden, startled pain.

“Wait!” I said. “Wait, wait! I’m doing it.”

I knelt, put my hands behind my back, and Bodyguard Barbie hooked steel links to my wrists and ankles.

“That’s better,” Raith said. “To your feet, wizard. I’m going to show you the Deeps.”

“Kill me with that entropy curse from point-blank range, eh?” I said.

“Precisely,” Raith responded.

“Gaining you what?” I asked.

“Immense personal satisfaction,” he said.

“Funny,” I said. “For a guy warding against magic, you seemed to want to get rid of my gear pretty bad.”

“This is a new shirt,” he said with a smile. “And besides, can’t have you killing the help—or Thomas—to spite me.”

“Funny,” I said. “You seem to be a lot of talk and not much do. I’ve heard about all kinds of things you are capable of. Enslaving women you feed on. Killing with a kiss. Superhuman badassness. But you aren’t doing any of it.”

Raith’s mouth set into a snarl.

“The White Council has taken a few shots at you, but when they quit you didn’t go gunning for anyone,” I continued. “And hey, what with you being invincible and all, there’s got to be a reason for that. You must have been approached by others. I bet you got some pretty juicy offers. And I just can’t square that with someone who allows a tart like Trixie Vixen to snap at him over the phone like she did to you today.”

Raith’s white face went whiter with rage. “I would not say such things were I in your position, wizard.”

“You’re going to kill me anyway,” I said. “Hell, you’ve pretty much got to. I mean, we’re at war, after all, and there you are all immune to magic. Must be a lot of pressure from the Reds for the White Court to get off its ass and do something. Makes you wonder why you didn’t just wham, kiss-of-death me back there. Maybe get it on tape or something so you could show it off. Or hell, why you haven’t socked the kiss of death on Murphy there just to shut me up.”

“Is that what you want to see, wizard?” Raith said, his tone threatening.

I smiled at Raith’s threat, and said, my tone a schoolyard singsong, “Lord Raith and Murphy, sitting in a tree, *not* K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

Raith clutched harder at Murphy’s throat, and she arched her back, gasping, “*Dresden*.”

I subsided with the chant, but I didn’t let up. “See, immune to getting hurt is one thing,” I said. “But I’m thinking my mother’s death curse hit you where it hurt—a while later. There’s a parasite called a tick. Lives in the Ozarks. And it is nigh invulnerable,” I said. “But it isn’t unkillable. Hard to squash, sure. But it can still be pierced with the right weapon. Or it can be smothered.” I smiled at Raith. “And it can starve.”

He stood as still as a statue, staring at me. His grip on Murphy's throat slackened.

"That's why you've been old news," I said quietly. "Mom said she arranged it so that you would suffer. And since the night you killed her, you haven't been able to feed. Have you. Haven't been able to top off the tank of vampire superpower gas. So no kisses of death. No assaults on wizards. No direct assaults on Thomas when a couple of deathplots failed. You even had to have willing help for this operation, 'cause there was no more enslaving women to your will. Though I take it from Inari being alive that the plumbing works. And after that, I take it from the fact that you haven't raped her into psychic slavery that you can't do that part. Must have made things hard for you, huh, Raith. Did you get the double entendre there, man? Made things hard?"

"Insolent," Raith said at last. "Utterly insolent. You *are* like her."

I let out a breath. It had been only a strong theory until his reaction had confirmed it. "Yeah. Thought so. You've been nothing but talk since my mom got finished with you. Living for years, talking a good game and hoping that no one noticed what you weren't doing. Hoping no one figured out that one of your broodmares gelded you. Bet that was terrifying. Living like that."

"Perhaps," he said in a low murmur.

"They're going to figure it out," I said quietly. "This is a pointless exercise. It will cost you to kill us, and you aren't getting any more. Ever. You'd be smarter to cut your losses and start running."

Raith's cold face again lifted into a smile. "No, boy. You aren't the only one who worked out what your mother did to me. And how. So instead, you and your brother are going to die tonight. Your deaths will end your mother's paltry little binding, along with her bloodline, of course." His eyes flashed to Murphy and he said with a slow smile, "And then perhaps something to eat. I am, after all, very hungry."

"You son of a bitch," I snarled.

Raith smiled at me again. Then told the Barbie, "Bring him."

And with that, Murphy still pinned on his knife—don't miss the symbolism there, Doc Freud—he led us through thirty yards of trees and down a rough slope into cold and darkness.

Chapter Thirty-nine



Lord Raith led us into the cave he called the Deeps, and the Bodyguard Barbie kept her gun on me while simultaneously remaining well out of easy reach. She wasn't any Trixie Vixen anyway. If I jumped her, she'd shoot me, and that would be that. Not that I could have done much jumping, what with the leg irons and all. I had trouble just shuffling along while ducking my head low enough to keep from bumping into rocky protrusions from the cave's roof.

"Murph?" I said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm feeling a little repressed," she responded. There was tight pain in her voice. "I'm fulfilling this hostage stereotype, and it's pissing me off."

"That's good," Raith said. He still had her by the neck, with the knife he held actually pressed a tiny bit into the wound he'd already given. "Defiance adds a great deal of enjoyment to feeding, Ms. Murphy." He put a contemptuous emphasis on the honorific. "It is, after all, a great deal more pleasurable to conquer than to rule. And defiant women can be conquered again and again before they break."

I ignored Raith. "How's your side?"

Murphy shot a glare over her shoulder at her captor. "A little prick like this? It's nothing."

In answer, Raith threw Murphy against the wall. She caught herself and turned, her hand blurring in a short, vicious strike.

Raith wasn't human. He caught her hand without so much as looking at it. He drove her hand and wrist back against the wall, and brought the bloodied tip of his knife sharply up under her chin. Her lip twisted into a defiant snarl and her knee lashed up as she kicked. Raith blocked it with a sweep of his thigh and pressed in close to her, all sinuous, serpentine speed and strength, until he was pressed to her front, his face to hers, raven-black hair mingling with her dark gold.

“Warrior women are all the same,” Raith said, his eyes on Murphy’s. His voice was low, slow, lilting. “You all know your way around struggling with other bodies. But you know little about the needs of your own.”

Murphy stared at him, shoulders twitching, and her lips slowly parted.

“It’s bound into you,” Raith whispered. “Deeper than muscle and bone. The need. The only way to escape the blackness of death. You cannot deny it. Cannot escape it. In joy, in despair, in darkness, in pain, mortalkind still feels desire.” His hand slid down from her wrist, his fingertips lightly brushing the thick veins. A soft sound escaped from Murphy’s throat.

Raith smiled. “There. You already feel yourself weakening. I’ve taken thousands like you, lovely child. Taken them and broken them. There was nothing they could do. There is nothing you can do. You were made to feel desire. I was made to use it against you. It is the natural cycle. Life and death. Mating and death. Predator and prey.”

Raith leaned closer with each word, and brushed his lips against Murphy’s throat as he spoke. “Born mortal. Born weak. And easily taken.”

Murphy’s eyes went wide. Her body arched in shock. She let out a low, sobbing sound, as she tried and failed to hold back her voice.

Raith drew his head slowly back, smiling down at Murphy. “And that’s only a taste, child. When you know what it is to be truly taken later this night, you will understand that your life ended the moment I wanted you.” His hand moved, sudden and hard, digging his thumb against the wound in her ribs. Her face went white, and another, similar cry escaped her. She crumpled, and Raith let her fall to the ground. He stood over her for a moment, and then said, “We’ll have days, little one. Weeks. You can spend them in agony or in bliss. The important thing to realize is that I’ll be the one who decides which. You are no longer in command of your body. Nor your mind. You no longer have a choice in the matter.”

Murphy gathered herself together and managed to lift her eyes again. They were defiant, and blurred with tears, but I could see the terror in them as well—and a sort of sickened, hideous desire. “You’re a liar,” she whispered. “I am my own.”

Raith said, quietly, “I can always tell when a woman feels desire, Ms. Murphy. I can feel yours. Part of you is so tired of being disciplined. Tired of being afraid. Tired of denying yourself for the good of others.” He knelt down, and Murphy’s eyes shied away from his. “That part of you is what wanted to feel the pleasure I just gave. And it is that part of you that will

grow as it feels more. The defiant young woman is already dead. She is simply too afraid to admit it.”

He seized her hair and started dragging her, careless and hard. I saw her face for a second, confusion and fear and anger warring for control of her expression. But I knew she’d taken a wound far more grievous than any physical injury I’d seen her sustain. Raith had forced her to feel something, and there had been nothing she could do to stop him. She’d done her best to tear into him, and he had slapped her down like a child. It wasn’t Murphy’s fault that she’d lost that fight. It wasn’t her fault that he’d forced sensation upon her. I mean, hell, he was the lord of the freaking nation of sexual predators, and even weakened and hampered by my mother’s curse, he had been able to take apart Murphy’s psychic and emotional defenses.

If he got the full measure of his powers back, what he would do to Murphy in retaliation for what my mother had done to him would be worse than death.

The damndest thing was that there wasn’t much I could do about it. Not because I was chained up, held at gunpoint, and probably going to die—though I had to admit, that might make things somewhat difficult—but because this wasn’t a fight that someone else could win for Murphy. The real battle was inside of her—her strength of will against her own well-founded fears. Even if I did ride in on a white horse to save her, it would mean only that she would be forced to question her own strength and integrity thereafter, and that would be nothing more than a slow death of her self-reliance and strength of will.

It was something I could not save her from.

And I had asked her to face it.

Raith hauled on her hair as if it had been a dog’s lead.

Murphy didn’t fight back.

I clenched my hands into impotent fists. Murphy was in very real danger of dying that night, even if she kept on breathing and her heart kept on beating. But she would have to be the one to save herself.

The best thing I could do was nothing. The best thing I could say was nothing. I had some power, but it couldn’t help Murphy now.

Hell’s bells, irony blows.

Chapter Forty



I'd been in a few caves that were the headquarters for dark magic and those who trafficked in it. None of them had been warm. None of them had been pleasant. And none of them had been professionally decorated.

Until now.

After a long, precipitous slope into the earth, the Raith Deeps opened up into a cavern bigger than most Paris cathedrals. To a degree, it resembled one. Lights played in soft colors on the walls, mostly shifting rosy hues. The cave was of living rock, and the walls had all been shaped by water into nearly organic-looking curves and swirls. The floor sloped very slightly up, to where a shift in the rock gave rise to an enormous carved chair of pure, bone-white stone. The chair had been decorated with flares and flanges and every kind of carved frivolity you could imagine, so that it sat at the center of all the carving like a peacock poised in front of its tail. Water fell in a fine mist from overhead, and more lights played through it, broken by the droplets into myriad spectra. To the right hand of the throne was a smaller carved seat—almost a stool really, like the ones you'd imagine lions or seals perching on during circus performances. To the left was a jagged, broken gap in the rock, and behind the throne, where more of the mist fell, was simply darkness.

Though the stone was smooth, it undulated in regular, ripple-shaped rises toward the throne from where we entered the Deeps. Here and there along the rippled floor were groups of pillows and cushions, thick woven carpets, low, narrow tables set with wine and the kinds of finger foods that tended to get smeared about fairly easily.

"Well, it's subtle," I said to no one in particular. "But I like it. Sort of *The King and I* meets *Harem Honeys* and *Seraglio Sluts II*."

Raith strode past me and threw Murphy at a pile of pillows and cushions along one wall, the one farthest away from the entrance. She knew how to take a fall, and though the motion had been vicious and torn out some of

her hair, she landed well, coming up to a shaky crouch. Bodyguard Barbie dragged my manacles and me over to the wall nearby and padlocked me to a steel ring in the wall. There was a whole row of such rings there. I tried to wiggle a little, testing the strength of the steel ring, but whoever built it knew what he was doing. No wiggle, no flexion of the ring where it joined the wall.

“Time?” Raith asked.

“Eleven-thirty-nine, my lord,” the bodyguard reported.

“Ah, good. Still time.” He walked over to a group of pillows in the far corner of the room, and I realized that they had been strewn around a little raised platform of stone. The platform was a circle perhaps ten feet across, and inside of it was a thaumaturgic triangle, an equilateral shape within the ring of the circle used in most ritual magic because it was easier for amateurs to draw a freaking triangle than a pentacle or a Star of Solomon. Thick incense wafted up from braziers around the circle, giving the cold air the sharp scent of cinnamon and some other, more acrid spice. “Wizard, I believe you have met my assistants.”

Two women rose from the shadows within the circle and faced me. The first was Madge, Arturo’s first wife, the disciplined businesswoman. She wore a white robe trimmed with scarlet cloth, and her hair was down. It made her look both younger and simultaneously lent her an overripe look, like fruit a day swollen and spoiled. Her eyes were no less calculating, but there was an edge of something there that I recognized—cruelty. The love of power, to the exclusion of the well-being of one’s fellow beings.

The second woman, of course, was Trixie Vixen. She looked awful and she didn’t get up. I could see the thick bandages over her wounded leg as she sat quietly on one hip, the silk of her own crimson-trimmed white robe spread out in such a way that it normally would have revealed enticing curves of calf and thigh. Her eyes had the heavy, flickering look of someone on far too many drugs, and used to it.

Thomas was chained to the floor in the center of the thaumaturgic triangle. He was naked, gagged, and his pale skin was covered with bruises and the stripes of being beaten with a slender cane. There was a low ridge of rock under his spine that arched his back off the floor, pinning his shoulders back and exposing his chest in such a fashion that he would be unable to move, even if someone should be leaning over him in order to cut out his heart.

“You’re missing one,” I said. “Where’s wifey number two?”

“Dear Lucille.” Raith sighed. “She was far too eager to please, and melodramatic about it to boot. I did not authorize her little attempt to poison you via blow dart, wizard, though I suppose I would not have been upset with her had she succeeded. But she was guiding the spell last night and had the incredibly bad taste to attempt to murder my daughter.” Raith sighed. “I very nearly felt obligated to you for saving her, Dresden. Lucille assured me that she had only the best of intentions and wanted to do all that she could to continue helping me.”

“So you sacrificed her for the curse this morning,” I spat.

“No, he didn’t,” Madge said in a quiet, rather chillingly conversational tone. “I did. The little bitch. I’d been dreaming about something like that for years. They’re wrong about revenge, you know. All the movies. I found it quite fulfilling and rewarding, from an emotional standpoint.”

“I helped,” Trixie protested. “I helped kill her.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “You were right there holding a *gun* on me when Lucille died, you . . . you self-deluded, half-witted schlong-jockey.”

Trixie shrieked, lurched up, and started to throw herself at me. Madge and Raith caught her arms and let her thrash for a moment, until she was panting and drooping. They eased her back down. “Be still,” Raith said. “That’s quite enough from you.”

Trixie hit him with a sullen scowl. “You don’t tell me wh—”

Madge slapped her. Hard. One of her rings left a long line of fine red droplets on Trixie’s cheek. “Idiot,” she spat at Trixie. “If you’d told the police his *name* instead of forgetting it for your pills and needles, the wizard would be in a cell right now.”

“What the fuck does it matter?” Trixie snarled, not looking up. “He’s had it now. It didn’t make any difference.”

Madge tilted her head back and lifted her right hand, palm out and fingers spread, and said, “*Orbius*.”

There was a surge of power that grated against my wizard’s senses, and something wet and stinking that looked like a fusion of a fresh cow patty and a dew speckled cobweb came into being, slapping across Trixie’s face. She fell back, clawing at it with her painted fingernails and screaming. Whatever the stuff was, it stuck like superglue, and it rendered her screams all but inaudible.

I shot a hard glance at Madge. She had power. Not necessarily a lot of it, but she had it. No wonder she'd made sure her hands were full when she first met me. The touch of one practitioner's hand against another's was electric and unmistakable. She'd dodged me neatly, which meant . . .

"You knew I was getting involved," I said.

"Of course," Raith confirmed. He added a pinch of something to one of the braziers and picked up a carved box. He drew black candles from it and placed them at each tip of the triangle. "Drawing you into a position of vulnerability was one of the points of the entire exercise. It was time to have flights of angels sing my dear son to his rest, and you and he had become entirely too friendly. I had assumed he was feeding from you and had you under his influence, but after I listened to the security tape from the portrait gallery I was delighted. Both of Margaret's sons. I finally will escape her ridiculous little binding, remove a troublesome thorn in my side —"

He kicked Thomas viciously in the ribs. Thomas jerked but made no sound, his eyes burning with impotent fury. Trixie Vixen fell over onto her side, back going into desperate arches.

"—slay the wizard that has a full quarter of the Red Court quaking in their fleshmasks, restore a rebellious employee to acceptable controls, and now, in addition to all of that, I have acquired someone with influence among the local authorities." His eyes lingered on the subdued Murphy for a moment, growing shades more pale.

Murphy didn't look up at him.

"Take off your shoes, little one," Raith said.

"What?" Murphy whispered.

"Take them off. Now."

She flinched at the harshness of his tone. She took her shoes off.

"Throw them over the edge. Socks too."

Murphy obeyed Raith without lifting her eyes.

The incubus made a pleased sound. "Good, little one. You please me." He walked in a circle around her as if she were a car he'd just purchased. "All in all, Dresden, a marked gain for the year. It bodes well for the future of House Raith, don't you think?"

Trixie Vixen's heels thumped on the floor.

Raith looked down at her and then at Madge. "Can you manage the ritual alone, dear?"

“Of course, my lord,” Madge said calmly. She struck a match and lit one of the candles.

“Well, then,” Raith said. He regarded Trixie with clinical detachment until her heels had stopped drumming on the stone floor. Then he seized her hair and dragged her to the left side of the enormous throne. She still moved weakly. He lifted her by the back of the neck and pitched her out into the darkness like a bag of garbage.

Trixie Vixen couldn’t scream as she fell to her death. But she tried.

I couldn’t stop myself from feeling protest and pain as I saw another human being killed. Even though I tried.

Raith dusted his hands against each another. “Where was I?”

“Taunting the wizard with how he has been manipulated from the beginning,” Madge said. “But I would suggest that you let me begin the conjuring at this point. The timing should be just about right.”

“Do it,” Raith said. He walked around the circle, examining it carefully, and then walked over to me.

Madge picked up a curved ritual knife and a silver bowl and stepped into the circle. She pricked her finger with the knife and smeared blood upon the circle, closing it behind her. Then she knelt at Thomas’s head, lifted her face with her eyes closed, and began a slow chant in a tongue whose words twisted and writhed through her lips.

Raith watched her for a long moment, and then his head abruptly snapped up toward the exit of the cave.

Bodyguard Barbie came to attention like a dog who has noticed its master taking a package of bacon out of the fridge.

“Sirens,” Raith said, his voice harsh.

“Police?” asked Barbie.

“Ambulance. What happened? Who called them?”

Barbie shook her head. Maybe the questions were too complex for her to handle.

“Gee, Raith,” I said. “I wonder why the EMTs have shown up. I wonder if the police are coming along, too. Don’t you wonder that?”

The lord of the White Court glared at me, then turned to walk toward the ridiculously elaborate throne. “I suppose it doesn’t matter one way or the other.”

“Probably not,” I agreed. “Unless Inari is involved.”

He stopped, frozen in his tracks.

“But what are the chances?” I asked. “I mean, I’m sure the odds are way against her being hurt. Riding a long way in the back of the ambulance with some young med tech. I’m sure daddy’s little girl is not going to vamp out for the very first time on an EMT or a doctor or a nurse or a cop, kill them in front of God and everybody, and start off her adult life with a trip to prison, where I’m sure lots of other unfortunate deaths would put her away for good.”

Raith didn’t turn. “What have you done to my child?”

“Did something happen to your child?” I asked. I probably said that in as insulting a fashion as I possibly could. “I hope everything is all right. But how will we know? You should just get on with the cursing, I guess.”

Raith turned to Madge and said, “Continue. I’ll be back in a moment.” Then to the bodyguard he said, “Keep your gun aimed at Dresden. Shoot him if he tries to escape.” The bodyguard drew her weapon. Raith turned and darted from the room, faster than humanly possible.

Madge continued her twisty chant.

“Heya, Thomas,” I said.

“Mmmph,” he said through the gag.

“I’m gonna get you out of here.”

Thomas lifted his head from the ground and blinked at me.

“Don’t space out on me, man. Stay with us here.”

He stared at me for a second more and then groaned and dropped his head back onto the ground. I wasn’t sure if that was an affirmative or not.

“Murph?” I called.

She looked up at me, then down again.

“Murph, don’t fall apart on me. He’s the bad guy and he’s way sexy while he does it. That’s his bag. He’s supposed to be able to get to you.”

“I couldn’t stop him,” she said in a numb voice.

“That’s okay.”

“I couldn’t stop myself either.” She met my eyes for a second and then slumped to the floor. “Leave me alone, Mister Dresden.”

“Right,” I muttered. I focused on the bodyguard. “Hey there. Look, uh. I don’t know your name. . . .”

She just stared at me down the length of her gun.

“Yeah, okay, that’s hostile,” I said. “But look, you’re a person. You’re human. I’m human. We should be working together here against the vampires, right?”

Nothing. I get more conversation from Mister.

“Hey!” I shouted. “You! You demented U.S. Army surplus blow-up doll! I’m *talking* to you. So say something!”

She didn’t, but her eyes glittered with annoyance, the first emotion I’d seen there. What can I say, inspiring anger is my gift. I have a responsibility to use it wisely.

“Excuse me!” I shouted as loudly as I could. “Did you hear me, *bitch*? At this rate I’m gonna have to blow you up too, just like I did the Bodyguard Kens and your twin.”

Now real fury filled her eyes. She cocked her gun and opened her mouth as if she were going to actually speak to me, but I never got to hear what she was going to say.

Murphy made a soundless, barefooted run, leapt, and drove a flying side kick into the back of Bodyguard Barbie’s neck. *Whiplash* was far too mild a word to describe what happened to the woman’s head. Whiplash happens in friendly, healthy things like automobile accidents. Murphy meant the kick to be lethal, and that made it worse than just about any car wreck.

There was a crackling sound and Barbie dropped to the floor. The gun never went off.

Murphy knelt and searched the woman, taking her gun, a couple of extra clips, a knife, and a set of keys. She stood up and started trying keys on my manacles.

I looked up and watched Madge as she did. The sorceress remained on her knees in the circle, her chant flowing smoothly from her mouth in an unbroken stream. The ritual required it. Had she broken her chant, shouted a warning to the bodyguard, or moved outside the circle it would have disrupted the ritual—and that kind of thing can draw some awfully lethal feedback for showing disrespect to whatever power is behind the ritual. She was at least as trapped as I was.

“Took you long enough,” I said to Murphy. “I was going to run out of actual sentences and just start screaming incoherently.”

“That’s what happens when your vocabulary count is lower than your bowling average.”

“Me not like woman with smart mouth,” I said. “Woman shut smart mouth and get me free or no wild monkey love for you.” She found the right key and got the shackles off me. My wrists and ankles ached. “You

had me scared,” I said. “Until you called me Mister Dresden, I almost believed he’d gotten to you.”

Murphy bit her lip. “Between you and me, I’m not sure he didn’t.” She shivered. “I wasn’t doing much acting, Harry. You made a good call. He underestimated me. But it was too close. Let’s leave.”

“Steady. Just a little longer.”

Murphy frowned, but she didn’t run. “You want me to keep Madge covered? What if she does that magic-superglop thing on our faces too?”

I shook my head. “She can’t. Not until the ritual is complete.”

“Why not?”

“Because if she makes a mistake in the ritual there’s going to be some backlash. Maybe it wouldn’t touch us, or maybe it would—but it sure as hell would kill everyone in the circle.”

“Thomas,” Murphy breathed.

“Yeah.”

“Can we mess up the rite?”

“Could. But to quote Kincaid, thus kablowlie, thus death. If we interrupt the ritual or if she screws it up, things go south.”

“But if we don’t stop her, she kills Thomas.”

“Well. Yeah.”

“Then what do we do?” Murphy asked.

“We jump Raith,” I said, and nodded back to the wall where she had crouched. “Get back to where he threw you. When he comes in again, we take him down and trade him for Thomas.”

“Won’t breaking the circle screw up the ritual?” Murphy asked.

“Not the outer circle,” I said. “The circle is mostly there to help her have the juice for the ritual. Madge’s got some talent. And a survival instinct. She can hold it together if we break it.”

Murphy’s eyes widened. “But breaking the triangle. *That* will screw up the ritual.”

I regarded Madge steadily and said, loud enough to be sure she heard, “Yep. And kill her. But we aren’t going to break the triangle yet.”

“Why not?” Murphy demanded.

“Because we’re going to offer Madge a chance to survive the evening. By letting her kill Raith in Thomas’s place and let the curse go to waste. So long as someone dies on schedule, whatever is behind the ritual shouldn’t mind.” I walked over to stand directly outside the circle. “Otherwise, all I

have to do is kick one of these candles over or smudge the lines of the triangle then back up to watch her die. And I think Madge is a survivor. She walks, Thomas is fine, and Raith isn't giving anyone any more trouble."

"She'll run," Murphy said.

"Let her. She can run from the Wardens, but she can't hide. The White Council is going to have some things to say to her about killing people with magic. Pointed things. Cutting things."

"Taunting the spellslinger must be a really fun game, since people like you and Raith keep playing it," Murphy said, "But don't you think he's going to notice that you aren't being held with a gun on you anymore?"

I looked down at the bodyguard's body and grimaced. "Yeah. The corpse is gonna be a giveaway, isn't it."

We looked at each other and then both bent down and grabbed an arm. We dragged the remains of the final Bodyguard Barbie over to the edge of the yawning chasm and dropped her in. After that I reached for my sword cane, still clipped to my belt, and loosened the blade in its sheath.

"Can't believe Raith let you keep that," Murphy said.

"The guard didn't seem to be very good at employing her initiative, and he didn't specifically mention my losing the cane. Don't think he noticed it. He was pretty busy gloating, and I was chained up and all."

"He's like a movie villain," Murphy said.

"No. Hollywood wouldn't allow that much cliché." I shook my head. "And I don't think he's thinking very clearly right now. He's pretty worked up about beating my mom's death curse."

"How tough is this guy?" Murphy asked.

"Very tough. Ebenezar says my magic can't touch him."

"How's about I shoot him?"

"Can't hurt," I said. "You might get lucky and solve our problem. But only a really critical shot will drop him, and even then it's iffy whether or not you'll get him. White Court vamps don't soak up gunshots as well as Red Court vampires do, or ignore them like the Black Court, but they can get over them in a hurry."

"How?"

"They have a kind of reserve of stolen life-energy. They tap into it to be stronger or faster, to recover from injuries, forcibly manipulate the sensations of police lieutenants, that kind of thing. They don't run around being as tough as the Black Court all the time, but they can rev the engine

when they need to do it. It's probably safe to assume that Lord Raith has a great big honking tank of reserve energy."

"We'd have to run him out of gas in order to get to him long-term."

"Yep."

"Can we do that?"

"Don't think so," I said. "But we can force him to push himself pretty hard."

"So we almost beat him. *That's* the plan?"

"Yeah."

"That's not a very good plan, Harry," Murphy said.

"It's a wascally-wabbit plan," I said.

"Actually, it qualifies as a *crazy* plan."

"Crazy like a fox," I said. I put my hands on her shoulders. "There's no time to argue, Murph. Trust me?"

She flipped her hands up in a helpless little gesture (slightly mitigated by the fact that she had a gun in one and a knife in the other) and turned to stalk back to the cushions where Raith had initially thrown her. "We're going to die."

I grinned and stepped back to the ring where Raith had me chained up. I stood there in the same pose as when I'd been prisoner, and held the shackles behind my back as if they might still be attached.

I had barely settled into position when there was the sound of one, two, three gazelle-like bounds on the sloped tunnel floor, and Raith shot into the cavern, scowling. "What idiocy!" he snarled toward Madge. "That stupid buck from Arturo's studio nearly slaughtered my daughter by sheer incompetence. The medical teams are taking them now."

He stopped talking abruptly. "Guard?" he snapped. "Madge, where did she go?"

Madge widened her eyes, still continuing the twisting, slippery words of the chant, and gave Murphy a significant look.

Raith turned, back stiffening in apprehension, to face Murphy.

Madge should have warned Raith about me. If he'd blown off old Ebenezar's lethal magic, he had defenses out the wazoo. I didn't even try to blast away at him with power.

Instead I swung the shackles once over my head and brought the flying steel down on Raith's right ear with every ounce of strength in my body. The steel cuffs bit into his flesh with vicious strength and laid him out on

the floor. He let out a snarl of shock and surprise. He turned to glare at me, his eyes burning a bright, metallic silver, his torn ear already knitting itself whole again.

I dropped the chains, drew my sword cane, and drove the blade straight at Raith's left eye. The White lord moved his hand in a blur of motion, batting the scalpel-slender blade aside. I drew a sharp cut across his hand, but it didn't keep him from kicking my ankles out from underneath me with a sweep of his leg. He rose almost before I was through falling, and picked up the bloodied shackles, his features set in wrath. I went flat and covered my neck with my hands.

Murphy shot Raith in the back. The first bullet came out the left side of his chest, and must have left a hole in his lung. The second exploded out from between two ribs on the other side of his body.

It had taken less than a second for the two shots to hit, but Raith reversed direction, flashing to one side like a darting bat, and two more shots seemed to miss him. The motion was odd to watch, and vaguely disturbing. Raith almost flowed across the room, looking as if he were being lazy, but moving with unnerving speed. He vanished behind an elaborate Oriental-style screen.

And the cave's lights went out.

The only source of light left in the cavern came from the three black candles at the points of the ritual's triangle, way the hell at the back of the chamber. Madge's voice continued its rippling, liquid chant, an edge of smug contempt somehow conveyed in it, her attention focused on the ritual. Thomas's bruised body twitched as he looked around, eyes wide behind the gag in his mouth. I saw his shoulders tighten as he tested the chains. They didn't seem to give way for him any more than mine had for me.

Murphy's voice slid through the darkness a moment later, sounding sharp against the steady, liquid chant of the entropy curse. "Harry? Where is he?"

"I have no idea," I said, keeping the point of the sword low.

"Can he see in the dark?"

"Um. Tell you in a minute."

"Oh," she said. "Crap."

Chapter Forty-one



Raith's voice drifted out of the darkness. "I can indeed see you, wizard," he said. "I must admit, a brute attack was not what I expected of you."

I tried to orient to the sound of Raith's voice, but the Deeps had the acoustics of, well, a cave. "You really don't have a very good idea about what kind of man I am, do you?"

"I had assumed that White Council training would mold you a bit more predictably," he admitted. "I was certain you'd have some kind of complex magical means of dealing with me without bloodshed."

I thought I heard something really close to me and swept my slender sword left and right. It whistled as it cut the air. "Blood washes out with enough soda water," I said. "I've got no trouble with the thought of spilling more of yours. It's sort of pink anyway."

Murphy was not talking, which meant that she was acting. Either she was using the sound of my voice to get close to me so that we could team up or she had gotten a better idea than I of Raith's location, and she was stalking close enough to drill him in the dark. Either way, it was to our advantage for the conversation to continue.

"Maybe we can make a deal, Raith," I said.

He laughed, low and lazy and confident. "Oh?"

"You don't want to push this all the way," I said. "You've already eaten one death curse. There's no reason for you to take another if you don't have to."

He laughed gently. "What do you propose?"

"I want Thomas," I said. "And I want Madge. You stop these attacks and leave Arturo alone."

"Tempting," he said. "You want me to allow one of my most dangerous foes to live, you want me to surrender a competent ally, and then you would like me to permit the erosion of my power base to continue. And in exchange, what do I receive?"

“You get to live,” I said.

“My, such a generous offer,” Raith said. “I can only assume this is some sort of clumsy ploy, Dresden, unless you are entirely deluded. I’ll counter your offer. Run, wizard. Or I won’t kill the pretty officer. I’ll keep her. After I kill you, of course.”

“Heh,” I said. “You aren’t in good enough shape for that to be so easy,” I said. “Or you wouldn’t have let me stall you while we batted bullshit back and forth.”

In answer, Raith said absolutely nothing.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach.

And, better and better, the chant rolling from Madge’s lips rose to a ringing crescendo. A wild, whirling wind rose within the center of the circle, catching her hair and spreading it in a cloud of dark-and-silver strands. As that happened, the tempo of her words shifted, and they shifted from that other tongue into English. “While here we wait, O hunter of the shadows! We who yearn for your shadow to fall upon our enemy! We who cry out in need for thy strength, O Lord of Slowest Terror! May your right arm come to us! Send unto us your captain of destruction! Mastercraftsman of death! Let now our need become the traveler’s road, the vessel for He Who Walks Behind!”

The rest of my stomach promptly followed the bottom, and for a second I thought my sense of logic and reason had vanished with them.

He Who Walks Behind.

Hell’s holy stars and freaking stones shit bells.

He Who Walks Behind was a demon. Well. Not really a demon. The Walker was to a demon what one of those hockey-masked movie serial killers was to the grade-school bully who had tried to shake me down once for lunch money. Justin DuMorne had sent the Walker after me when we’d had our falling-out, and I’d barely managed to survive the encounter. I’d torn apart He Who Walks Behind, but even so he’d left me with some unnerving scars.

And the ritual Madge was using was calling that thing back.

Madge picked up the sacrificial knife and the silver bowl. The whirling wind gathered into a miniature thunderstorm hovering slowly over the triangle where Thomas was bound. “See here our offering to flow into your strength! Flesh and blood, taken unwilling from one who yearns to live! Bless this plea for help! Accept this offering of power! Make known to us

your hand that we might dispatch him against our mutual foe—Harry Dresden!”

“Murphy!” I screamed. “Get out of here! Right now! Run!”

But Murphy didn’t run. As Madge raised the knife, Murphy appeared in the light of the black candles, darting into the circle, the knife in her teeth, the gun in one hand—and in her other, the keys she’d taken from the last bodyguard. She knelt down as Madge screamed out the last of the ritual in an ecstasy of power. Murphy had crossed the circle around the ritual, breaking it. That meant that whatever magic Madge was calling up would be able to zip right out of it without delay, the second Madge fed a life to the gathering presence of He Who Walks Behind. Murphy set the gun down and tried one key on Thomas’s chains. Then another.

“Madge!” Raith’s voice snapped in warning. I heard a flutter of movement that began five feet to my right and vanished toward the circle.

Madge opened her eyes and looked down.

Murphy found the key, and the steel bracelet on Thomas’s right arm sprang open.

Madge kept screaming, reversed the knife, and drove it down at Thomas’s chest.

Thomas caught Madge’s knife hand by the wrist, and his skin suddenly shone pale and bright. She leaned on the knife, screaming, but Thomas held her there with one arm.

Murphy picked up the gun, but before she could aim it at Madge, there was a blur, her head snapped to one side, and she dropped to the ground in abrupt stillness. Raith stood over her unmoving form, and bent with businesslike haste to recover her knife, his eyes moving to Thomas.

Fumbling in haste, I seized the sheath of my cane-sword from my belt, grabbing hard at my will, struggling to pull together power through the cloud of raw terror that had descended over my thoughts. I managed it, and normally invisible runes along the length of the cane burst into blue and silver light. There was a deep hum, so low that it could be felt more than heard, as I reached into the power the cane was meant to focus—the enormous and dangerous forces of earth magic.

I reached out through the cane for Lord Raith—

And felt nothing. Not just empty air and drifting dust, but *nothing*. A cold and somehow hungry emptiness that filled the space where he should have been. I’d felt something like it before, when I’d been near a mote of

one of the deadliest substances that any world of flesh or spirit had ever known. My power, my magic, the flowing spirit of life, just vanished into it without getting near Raith.

I couldn't touch him. The void around him was so absolute, I knew without needing to doubt that there was nothing in my arsenal of arcane skills that could affect him.

But Madge didn't have any such protection.

I redirected my power, easily found the knife in Madge's hand, and without the circle to protect her, there was nothing she could do to keep me from seizing the knife in invisible bands of earth force, magnetism, and sending it tumbling out of her grip and into the abyss of the chasm near them.

"No!" Madge screamed, staring up at the whirling cloud of dark energy in horror.

"Hold him!" Raith snarled.

Madge threw herself down on Thomas's arm, and as strong as he was, he had three limbs chained down, and not even supernatural strength is a substitute for proper leverage. Not only that, but Madge was desperate. She managed to force Thomas's arm down, and while she obviously couldn't have held him for long, it was long enough. Lord Raith drove his knife down at Thomas's chest.

Thomas howled in frustration and sudden pain.

I rammed more power through the cane and stopped the knife a bare instant after the tip hit Thomas, and pinkish blood welled up from the shallow stab wound. Raith cast a snarl at me and shoved down on the knife, his own skin luminous, and he had the power of a pile driver behind his arms. I didn't have a prayer of stopping him, even if that void around him hadn't been sapping my power into nothingness—so I redirected my own push instead, switching to a right-angle force instead of going directly against Raith, and the knife swept hard to one side as Raith pushed down. It dug a furrow through Thomas's flesh on the way, wetting a good three inches of the blade in his blood, but then Raith's own power drove it down into the stone of the cavern floor, and the steel shattered.

Thomas got his hand free and hit Madge, a backhanded blow that knocked her out of the light of the black candles.

"Harry!" he yelled. "Break the chains!"

Which I couldn't do. My little displays of earth magic were a long way from being of chain-shattering quality. But I did the next best thing.

Raith had to step back for a second, because a shard from the shattering knife had gone through his hand. He ripped it out of his flesh with a snarl, then turned back to Thomas, and as he did I got the bodyguard's keys in a magnetic grip and threw them hard at Lord Raith's face.

Keys are a nasty missile weapon, and any street fighter will tell you so. For fun, get yourself a milk carton and throw a ring of keys at it. You don't even have to throw it very hard. Odds are better than merely good that the milk carton is going to have holes in it and that milk is going to be dribbling out everywhere.

And eyelids are way thinner than milk cartons.

Raith got a bunch of keys in the face and they hit him hard enough to make him scream. I caught them again on the rebound and sent them zipping back at him, as if they'd been fastened to rubber bands tied to his nose. I don't care how superhumanly sexy you are, if you're a vertically symmetrical biped, you don't have much choice but to react when something tries to put out your eyes.

I pummeled Raith with the keys until he ducked out of the light of the black candles, and then I sent them darting over to Thomas. I shouted his name as I did, and he reached up and caught them with his free hand. He shook one out without delay, and started freeing himself of his chains.

It was just then that the swirling clouds over the empty triangle coalesced into the vague outline of an inhuman face—one that I recognized from the darkest hour of my past and the nightmares it had inhabited since. That demonic mouth split into an eerily soundless scream, as if it had created a sudden void of sound rather than the opposite. That hideous face oriented on the very edge of the remaining candlelight—upon Madge. The cloud surged forward and down, sprouting sudden rows of almost toothlike spines as it did. Madge sat up, raising her hands in a useless gesture of defense. The demonic cloud shot itself forward and into her mouth. The spines tore at her, and Madge struggled to keep it out of her, but it was all useless, and not particularly speedy. She had plenty of time to feel it as the demonic killer, the guiding mind who had been behind the entropy curse, flowed in its semigaseous form into her mouth and throat and lungs, then extruded savage spines and tore her apart from within.

Madge didn't manage to get out a scream as she died.

But it wasn't for lack of trying.

Thomas got his arms and legs free and got up, staring in horror at Madge—or more accurately, at the spined cloud still mangling Madge's corpse from within.

Raith hit Thomas from behind, a blur of motion. There was only a second to see what was happening, but I saw it clearly when Raith seized Thomas by the shoulder and chin, and with a single savage twist, broke his neck.

Thomas fell without so much as a twitch.

"No!" I screamed.

Raith turned toward me.

I dropped my sword, slashed at the air with the cane and my will, and the gun Murphy had taken from the bodyguard flew to my hand.

Raith's face was bruised and torn. Thick globules of pink blood had splattered over his battered features and his dark shirt. He smiled as he started toward me, and the shadows between the candles and my cane covered him.

I aimed more or less at Raith and shot. The flash showed him to me for an instant. I used that single image to redirect my fire and shot again. And again. And again. The last shot showed me Raith, only eight or ten feet away, a look of shock upon his face. The next shot showed him on his knees, clutching at his stomach, where a welter of pink fluid had soaked him.

Then the gun locked open, and empty.

For a minute it was all dark.

Then Raith's flesh began to glow. His shirt was in shreds, and he tore it from him with a negligent gesture. His skin became suffused with a pale light once more, and I saw his body rippling weirdly around an ungainly hole left of his navel. He was healing.

I stared at him tiredly for a minute, then bent over and picked up my sword.

He laughed at me. "Dresden. Wait there for a moment. I'll deal with you as I did Thomas."

"He was my blood," I said quietly. "He was my only family."

"Family," Raith spat. "Nothing but an accident of birth. Random consequence of desire and response. Family is meaningless. It is nothing but the drive of blood to further its own. Random combination of genes. It is utterly insignificant."

“Your children don’t think that,” I said. “They think family is important.”

He laughed. “Of course they think that. I have trained them to do so. It is a simple and convenient way to control them.”

“And nothing more?”

Raith rose, regarding me with casual confidence. “Nothing more. Put the sword down, Dresden. There’s no reason this has to hurt you.”

“I’ll pass. You can’t have much left in you,” I said. “I’ve given you enough of a beating to kill three or four people. You’ll stay down sooner or later.”

“I have enough left in me to deal with you,” he said, smiling. “And after that, things will change.”

“Must have been hard,” I said. “All those years. Playing it careful. Never pushing yourself or using your reserves. Not able to risk getting your hands dirty, for fear everyone would see that you couldn’t do what your kind do. Couldn’t feed.”

“It was an annoyance,” Raith said after a wary pause. He took a step toward me, testing my response. “And perhaps taught me a measure of humility, and of patience. But I never told anyone what Margaret’s curse did to me, Dresden. How did you know?”

I kept the point of the sword pointed at his chest and said, “My mother told me about it.”

“Your mother is dead, boy.”

“You’re immune to magic, too. Guess she just doesn’t have a lot of respect for the rules.”

His face darkened into an ugly, murderous mask. “She’s dead.”

I smirked at him, waving the tip of my sword in little circles.

The glow on his skin began to fade, and the darkness closed in with deadly deliberation. “It has been a pleasure speaking with you, but I am healed, wizard,” Raith snarled. “I’m going to make you beg me for death. And my first meal in decades is going to be the little police girl.”

At which point all the lights in the cavern came up at the same time, restoring the place to its slightly melodramatic but perfectly adequate lighting.

Lara stepped from behind the screen, her scarlet skirt swaying, sword on her hip, and murmured, “I think I’d like to see that, Father.”

He stopped, staring at her, his face hardening. "Lara. What do you think you're doing?"

"Writhing in disillusionment," she said. "You don't love me, dearest Papa. Me, your little Lara, most dutiful daughter."

He let out a harsh laugh. "You know better. And have for a century."

Her beautiful face became remote. Then she said, "My head knew, Father. But my heart had hoped otherwise."

"Your heart," he said, scorn in his voice. "What is that? Take the wizard at once. Kill him."

"Yes, Papa," she said. "In a moment. What happened to Thomas?"

"The spell," he said. "Madge lost control of it when she unleashed it at Dresden. Your brother died trying to protect him. Subdue him, dearest. And kill him."

Lara smiled, and it was the coldest, most wintry expression I had ever seen. And I had seen some of the champs. She let out a mocking, scornful little laugh. "Did you stage that for my benefit, wizard?"

"It was a little rough," I said. "But I think I got my point across."

"How did you know I was watching?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Someone had to have told Raith that bullshit about the accident with the gun," I said. "You were the only one who could have done that. And since this confrontation was going to be pivotal to your future, regardless of how it turned out, you'd be an idiot not to watch."

"Clever," she said again. "Not only is my father drained of his reserves, he is unable to recover more." She lowered her eyelids, her eyes glittering like silver ice as she did. "Quite helpless, really."

"And now you know it," I said.

I gave Raith a very small smile.

Raith's expression twisted into something somewhere between rage and horror. He took a step back from Lara, looking from her to me and back.

Lara traced her fingers in light caresses over the sword at her hip. "You've made me the cat's-paw for you, Dresden. While making me think I had the advantage of you. You've played me at my own game, and ably. I thought you capable of nothing but overt action. Clearly I underestimated you."

"Don't feel bad," I said. "I mean, I look so stupid."

Lara smiled. "I have one question more," she said. "How did you know the curse left him unable to feed?"

“I didn’t,” I said. “Not for certain. I just thought of the worst thing I could possibly do to him. And it wasn’t killing. It was stealing. It was taking all of his power away. Leaving him to face all the enemies he’d made—with nothing. And I figured my mother might have had similar thoughts.”

Raith sneered at Lara. “You can’t kill me,” he said. “You know that the other Lords would never permit you to lead the Court. They follow *me*, little Lara. Not the office of the Lord of House Raith.”

“That’s true, Father,” Lara said. “But they don’t know that you have been weakened, do they? That you have been made impotent. Nor will they know, when you continue to lead them as if nothing had changed.”

He lifted his chin in an arrogant sneer. “And why should I do that?”

Silver light from Lara’s eyes spread over her. It flowed down the length of her hair. It poured over her skin, flickered over her clothing, and dazzled the very air around her. She let her sword belt fall to the ground, and silver, hungry eyes fell upon Lord Raith.

What she was doing was directed solely at him, but I was on the fringes of it. And I suddenly had pants five sizes too small. I felt the sudden, simple, delicious urge to go to her. Possibly on my knees. Possibly to stay that way.

I panicked and took a step back, making an effort to shield my thoughts from Lara’s seductive power, and it let me think almost clearly again.

“Wizard,” she said, “I suggest you take your friend from this place. And my brother, if he managed to survive the injury.” Her skirt joined the belt, and I made damned sure I wasn’t looking. “Father and I,” Lara purred, “are going to renegotiate the terms of our relationship. It promises to be interesting. And you might not be able to tear yourselves away, once I begin.”

Raith took a step back from Lara, his eyes racked with fear. And with need. He’d totally forgotten me.

I moved, and quickly. I was going to pick Murphy up, but I managed to get her moving again on her own, though she was still only half-conscious. The right side of her face was already purple with bruising. That gave me the chance to pick Thomas up. He wasn’t as tall as me, but he had more muscle and was no featherweight. I huffed and puffed and got him into a fireman’s carry, and heard him take a grating, rattling breath as I did.

My brother wasn’t dead.

At least, not yet.

I remember three more things from that night in the Deeps.

First was Madge's body. As I turned to leave, it suddenly sat up. Spines protruded from its skin, along with rivulets of slow, dead blood. Its face was ravaged shapeless, but it formed up into the features of the demon called He Who Walks Behind, and its mouth spoke in a honey-smooth, honey-sweet, inhuman voice. "I am returned, mortal man," the demon said through Madge's dead lips. "And I remember thee. Thou and I, we have unfinished business between us."

Then there was a bubbling hiss, and the corpse deflated like an empty balloon.

The second thing I remember happened as I staggered toward the exit with Thomas and Murphy. Lara slid the white shirt from her shoulders to the floor and faced Raith, lovely as the daughter of Death himself, a literal irresistible force. Timeless. Pale. Implacable. I caught the faintest scent of her hair, the smell of wild jasmine, and nearly fell to my knees on the spot. I had to force myself to keep moving, to get Thomas and Murph out of the cave. I don't think any of us would have come out of it with our own minds if I hadn't.

The last thing I remember was dropping to the ground on the grass outside the cave, holding Thomas. I could see his face in the starlight. There were tears in his eyes. He took a breath, but it was a broken one. His head and his neck hung at an impossible angle to his shoulders.

"God," I whispered. "He should be dead already."

His mouth moved in a little fluttering quiver. I don't know how I did it, but I understood that he'd tried to say, "Better this way."

"Like hell it is," I said back. I felt incredibly tired.

"Hurt you," he almost-whispered. "Maybe kill you. Like Justine. Brother. Don't want that."

I blinked down at him.

He didn't know.

"Thomas," I said. "Justine is alive. She told us where you were tonight. She's still alive, you suicidal dolt."

His eyes widened, and the pale radiance flooded through his skin in a startled wave. A moment later he drew in a ragged breath and coughed, thrashing weakly. He looked sunken-eyed and terrible. "Wh-what? She's what?"

“Easy, easy, you’re going to throw up or something,” I said, holding him steady. “She’s alive. Not . . . not good, really, but she’s not dead. Not gone. You didn’t kill her.”

Thomas blinked several times, and then seemed to lose consciousness. He lay there, breathing quietly, and his cheeks were tracked with the trails of luminous silver tears.

My brother would be okay.

But then a thought occurred to me, and I said, “Well, crap.”

“What?” asked Murphy, blearily. She blinked her eyes at me.

I peered owlishly up at the night sky and wondered, “When is it going to be Tuesday in Switzerland?”

Chapter Forty-two



I woke up the next morning. More specifically, I woke up the next morning when the last stone on Ebenezer's painkilling bracelet crumbled into black dust, and my hand began reporting that it was currently dipped in molten lead.

Which, as days go, was not one of my better starts. Then again, it wasn't the worst one, either.

Normally I'd give you some story about how manly I was to immediately attain a state of wizardly detachment and ignore the pain. But the truth was that the only reason I didn't wake up screaming was that I was too out of breath to do it. I clenched my hand, still in dirty wrappings, to my chest and tried to remember how to walk to the freezer. Or to the nearest chopping block, one of the two.

"Whoa, whoa," said a voice, and Thomas appeared, leaning over me. He looked rumpled and stylish, the bastard. "Sorry, Harry," he said. "It took me a while to get something for the pain. Thought I'd have gotten back hours ago." He pressed my shoulders to the bed and said, "Stay there. Think of . . . uh, pentangles or something, right? I'll get some water."

He reappeared a minute later with a glass of water and a couple of blue pills. "Here, take them and give them about ten minutes. You won't feel a thing."

He had to help me, but he was right. Ten minutes later I lay on my bed thinking that I should texture my ceiling with something. Something fuzzy and soft.

I got up, dressed in my dark fatigue pants, and shambled out into my living room, slash kitchen, slash study, slash den. Thomas was in the kitchen, humming something to himself. He hummed on-key. I guess we hadn't gotten the same genes for music.

I sat down on my couch and watched him bustle around—as much as you can bustle when you need to take only two steps to get clear from one side

of the kitchen to the other. He was cooking eggs and bacon on my wood-burning stove. He knew jack about cooking over an actual fire, so the bacon was scorched and the eggs were runny, but it looked like he was amusing himself doing it, and he dumped burned bits, underdone bits, or bits he simply elected to discard on the floor at the foot of the stove. The puppy and the cat were both there, with Mister eating anything he chose to and the puppy dutifully cleaning up whatever Mister judged unworthy of his advanced palate.

“Heya, man,” he said. “You aren’t gonna feel hungry, but you should try to eat something, okay? Good for you and all that.”

“Okay,” I said agreeably.

He slapped the eggs and bacon more or less randomly onto a couple of plates, brought me one, and kept one for himself. We ate. It was awful, but my hand didn’t hurt. You take what you can get in this life.

“Harry,” Thomas said after a moment.

I looked up at him.

He said, “You came to get me.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You saved my life.”

I mused on it. “Yeah,” I agreed a moment later. I kept eating.

“Thank you.”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“No, it isn’t,” he said. “You risked yourself. You risked your friend Murphy, too.”

“Yeah,” I said again. “Well. We’re family, right?”

“Too right we are,” he said, a lopsided smile on his mouth. “Which is why I want to ask you a favor.”

“You want me to go back with you,” I said. “Feel things out with Lara. Visit Justine. See which way the future lies.”

He blinked at me. “How did you know?”

“I’d do it too.”

He nodded quietly. Then said, “You’ll go?”

“As long as we do it before Tuesday.”

Murphy came by on Monday, to report that the investigation had determined that Emma’s shooting was a tragic accident. Since no prints had been found, and the eyewitness (and owner of the weapon) had vanished, I wasn’t in any danger of catching a murder rap. It still looked as fishy as a

tuna boat, and it wouldn't win me any new friends among the authorities, but at least I wouldn't be going to the pokey this time around.

It was hard for me to concentrate on Murphy's words. Raith had partially dislocated her lower jaw, and the bruises looked like hell. Despite the happy blue pain pills, when I saw Murphy I actually heard myself growling in rage at her injury. Murphy didn't talk much more than business, but her look dared me to make some kind of chivalrous commentary. I didn't, and she didn't break my nose, by way of fair exchange.

She took me to an expensive specialist her family doctor referred her to, who examined my hand, took a bunch of pictures, and wound up shaking his head. "I can't believe it hasn't started to mortify," he said. "Mister Dresden, it looks like you may get to keep your hand. There's even a small portion on your palm that didn't burn at all, which I have no explanation for whatsoever. Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"That's working just fine, Doc," I mumbled. "Not that it's had much use lately."

He gave me a brief smile. "More personal, I'm afraid. How good is your insurance?"

"Um," I said. "Not so hot."

"Then I'd like to give you a bit of advice, off the record. Your injury is almost miraculously fortunate, in terms of how unlikely it was that the limb would survive. But given the extent of the burns and the nerve damage, you might seriously consider amputation and the use of a prosthesis."

"What?" I said. "Why?"

The doctor shook his head. "We can prevent an infection from taking root and spreading until we can get you a graft to regenerate the epidermis—that's the main possible complication at this point. But in my professional judgment, you'll get more functionality out of an artificial hand than you ever again will from your own. Even with surgery and extensive therapy, which will cost you more than a pretty penny, and even if you continue to recover at the high end of the bell curve, it could be decades before you recover any use of the hand. In all probability, you will never recover any use of it at all."

I stared at him for a long minute.

"Mister Dresden?" he asked.

“My hand,” I responded, with all the composure of a three-year-old. I tried to smile at the doctor. “Look. Maybe my hand is all screwed up. But it’s *mine*. So no bone saws.”

The doctor shook his head, but said, “I understand, son. Good luck to you.” He gave me a prescription for an antibiotic ointment, a reference to a yet more expensive specialist just in case, and some pain medication. On the way back to my house, I asked Murphy to stop by the drugstore, where I got my prescriptions filled, and bought a bunch of clean bandages and a pair of leather gloves.

“Well?” Murphy said. “Are you going to tell me what the doctor said?”

I threw the right glove out the window, and Murphy arched an eyebrow at me.

“When I get done with my mummy impersonation,” I said, waving my freshly bandaged hand, “I want to have a choice between looks. Michael Jackson or Johnny Tremain.”

She tried not to show it, but I saw her wince. I empathized. If I hadn’t been on Thomas’s groovy pain drugs, I may have started feeling bitter about the whole thing with my hand.

Monday afternoon I got the Blue Beetle back from my mechanic, Mike, who is the automotive repair equivalent of Jesus Christ himself. Either that or Dr. Frankenstein. I drove the Beetle out to a hotel near the airport to meet with Arturo Genosa and the new Mrs. Genosa.

“How’s the married life, Joan?” I asked.

Joan, dumpy and plain and glowing with happiness, leaned against Arturo with a small smile.

Arturo grinned as well and confided, “I have never been married to a woman with such . . . creativity.”

Joan blushed scarlet.

We had a nice breakfast, and Arturo presented me with my fee, in cash. “I hope that isn’t inconvenient, Mr. Dresden,” he said. “We didn’t finish the film and the money is gone when I am forced to declare bankruptcy, but I wanted to be sure you received your pay.”

I shook my head and pushed the envelope back to him. “I didn’t save your film. I didn’t save Emma.”

“The film, bah. You risked your life to save Giselle’s. And Jake as well. Emma . . .” His voice trailed off. He almost seemed to visibly age. “I

understand that you may not be entirely free to speak, but I must know what happened to her.”

Joan’s expression froze, and she gave me a pleading look.

She didn’t have to explain it to me. She knew or suspected the truth—that Tricia Scrump had been behind the killing. It would break Arturo’s heart to hear it about a woman he had once, however ill-advisedly, loved.

“I’m not sure,” I lied. “I found Emma and Trixie like that. I thought I saw someone and ran off trying to catch the guy. But either he was faster than me or I’d been seeing things. We might never know.”

Arturo nodded at me. “You mustn’t blame yourself. Nor must you refuse what you rightfully earned, Mister Dresden. I’m in your debt.”

I wanted to turn the money down, but damn, it was Monday. And Kincaid was Tuesday. I took the envelope.

Jake Guffie appeared a moment later, dressed in a casual suit of pale cotton. He hadn’t shaved, and there was a lot of grey in the scruff of his beard. He looked like he hadn’t slept much, either, but he was trying to smile. “Arturo. Joan. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Joan said.

Jake joined us, and we had a nice breakfast. Then we walked with Joan and Arturo to their airport shuttle. Jake and I watched them go. He stared after them for a moment. He looked weary, but if it had bothered him to deceive Arturo about Trixie Vixen, he hadn’t let it show.

Jake turned to me and said, “I guess you weren’t the killer. The police said the shooting was accidental. They pulled up Trixie’s record and saw all her trips to rehab. Said that she had probably done something stupid while she was stoned.”

“Do you think that?” I asked.

“No way, man. She did *everything* stupid. Stoned was just a coincidence.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to protect Emma.”

He nodded. “So am I, man. She was going to take her medication. Allergy medication. She didn’t want to take it with tap water so she was going to the greenroom for a bottle of Evian. She was just standing in the wrong place. Hell of a thing.”

“I feel for her kids,” I said. “I’ve done the orphan thing. It sucks.”

Jake nodded. “I don’t know how they’ll get on without their mom,” he said. “Not like I have much experience, either. But I can’t be such a lousy

father that they qualify as orphans.”

I blinked for a second and then said, “You wanted to settle down once, you said.”

“Yeah. But Emma decided she wouldn’t have me.”

I nodded. “You going to keep acting?”

“Oh, hell, no,” he said. “Silverlight is gonna blacklist me like everyone else. And I can’t do that and go to PTA and stuff. I got another job lined up.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “What?”

“Dude, me and Bobby are gonna to start up a consulting business. Feng shui.”

I had no problem with that.

Next I went with Thomas up to the Raith family homestead north of town. This time we went in the front doors. There were a new pair of bodyguards at the door. They weren’t twins, and they didn’t have that numb, mindlessly obedient glaze in their eyes. They had evidently been chosen for skill and experience. I was betting on former marines.

“Welcome, Mister Raith,” one of the guards said. “Your sister requests that you join her for breakfast in the east garden.”

They both stood there waiting to fall in around us, so it didn’t exactly come off like an invitation, but from the attention, they might have been as concerned with protecting us as watching us. Thomas took the lead by half a step, and I fell in on his right. I was quite a bit taller than him, but his expression had taken on a confidence and sense of purpose I hadn’t seen in him before, and our feet hit the floor in time with one another.

The guards accompanied us out into a truly gorgeous terraced garden, a number drawn straight from the Italian Renaissance, with faux ruins, ancient statues of the gods, and a design overgrown enough to prevent seeing much at a time, the better to spend more time exploring. At the top of the highest terrace was a table made of fine metal wire twisted into looping designs, with matching chairs spread around it. A light breakfast was laid out on the table, heavier on the fruits and juices than was my habit. But then, my habit was usually to eat any leftovers from dinner for breakfast first.

Lara sat at the table, wearing white clothing accented with embroidered red roses. Her hair was drawn back into a loose tail, and she rose to greet us both with outstretched hands.

“Thomas,” she said. “And Harry.”

“Sis,” Thomas replied. “Should I assume from our greeting that there’s been a change of management?”

She took her seat again, and Thomas joined her. I took a seat opposite him, so that I could watch his back, and I didn’t spare any energy for false smiles. I didn’t want Lara to think that we were going to be buddies now, and I suck at faking them anyway.

Lara took in my gaze, her own eyes calculating behind the smile. “Oh, it’s just the usual little family spat,” she said. “I’m sure Father is going to be angry with me for a while and will forget all about it.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Thomas asked.

Lara’s smile grew a little sharper. “I’m sure he will.” She took a sip of orange juice. “Unfortunately, Thomas, I don’t know if he’s going to be as forgiving to you.”

Thomas inhaled sharply.

“I’m sorry,” Lara said. She looked like she meant it.

“You’re turning your back on him?” I asked. “On your brother.”

Lara lifted a hand. “I do not want to, but my father’s antagonism with Thomas is well known. If I am to maintain the fiction that my father is in control of his House, Thomas cannot remain. I’m not going to have you removed, of course, Thomas. But I do have to cut you off. You no longer enjoy the protection of House Raith—in any overt sense, in any case. And I am truly sorry for it.”

“The twins,” he said. “They put you up to this. They wanted me gone.”

“Madrigal did,” Lara confirmed. “Madeline didn’t particularly care, but she has always indulged his tantrums. And simply put, I needed their support more than I did yours.”

Thomas took another deep breath and nodded. “Things might change later.”

“I hope so,” Lara said. “But for now, there is nothing else I can do. Don’t approach me openly again, Thomas. Don’t visit. Don’t claim Raith as your home. Lose the credit cards, and don’t try to touch your accounts. You’ve got something tucked away?”

“A little,” he said. “The money doesn’t matter.”

Lara set her orange juice down and leaned back in her seat. “But Justine does,” she said.

“Yes. Madrigal would love to get his hands on her.”

“He won’t,” she responded. “I swear it to you, Thomas, that I will keep her safe with me. I can do that much for you, at least.”

Something eased out of Thomas’s shoulders. “How is she?”

“Distant,” Lara said. “Very vague and distracted. But happy, I think. She speaks of you at times.”

“You’ll . . .” His face twisted in distaste.

“Actually, no,” Lara said.

Thomas frowned at her.

“Why don’t you go see her,” Lara suggested, and nodded toward a lower portion of the garden, where I could see Justine, in her wheelchair, sketching something on a pad across her lap.

Thomas rose like a shot, then visibly forced himself to slow down, and went down the winding path to the girl, leaving me alone with Lara.

“He really doesn’t belong here, you know,” she said. “Like Inari.”

“How is she?”

“In traction,” Lara said. “In a room with her boyfriend at the hospital. He isn’t in much better shape. They’re always talking, laughing.” She sighed. “It’s got all the signs of love. I spoke to her, as we agreed I would do. I don’t think Inari will be one of us after all. She said something about doing feng shui in California.”

“I didn’t know she knew martial arts,” I said.

Lara smiled a little, watching Thomas. He was kneeling beside Justine, looking at her sketches and talking. She looked weak but delighted, like when they take terminal kids to Disneyland on those talk shows. It warmed the heart at the same time it wrenched it. I didn’t like the way it made me feel.

“Just to be up-front with you, Lara,” I said, “I don’t trust you.”

She nodded. “Good.”

“But we’ve got a hostage crisis on our hands.”

“Of what sort?”

“Family secrets. You know mine about Thomas.”

Her eyes were unreadable. “Yes. And you know about my father.”

“If you spout off about Thomas, I spout off about your dad. We both lose. So I think it would be best if we agreed to truce of mutual honesty. You don’t have to like me. Or agree with me. Or help me. But be honest and you’ll get the same from me. If I’m about to go hostile, I’ll tell you that our truce is over. You do the same. It’s good for both of us.”

She nodded slowly and then said, “Your word on it then?”

“My word. Yours?”

“Yes. You have my word.”

We both tucked into breakfast then, in silence.

Half an hour later Thomas rose, leaned down, and brushed his lips against Justine’s cheek. He stood up rather abruptly, then turned and hurried away with tense, pained motions. He didn’t look back. As he approached, I got a good look at his face.

His lips were burned and blistered. He walked past us as if we weren’t there, his eyes distant.

“He was always a romantic.” Lara sighed. “She’s protected. The little idiot should never have let himself feel so much for prey. It was that last time together that did it, I imagine.”

“Had to go both ways.”

“Greater love hath no man,” Lara agreed.

We left. Thomas and I got into the Beetle and I asked him, “You okay?”

His head was bowed. He didn’t say anything.

“I asked after Inari,” I said.

His eyes moved toward me, though he didn’t lift his head.

“She’s in traction. And she’s in love. Gonna be weeks before she and Bobby are going to get to do anything. No crimes of passion.”

“She’s free,” Thomas said.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” After a minute he added, “No one should have to be like the Raiths. Destroying the people you care about the most.”

“You didn’t destroy her. And I think Lara really will protect her.”

He shrugged, his expression dark.

“You slept much since Saturday?”

“No.”

“You need to rest and I need a dog-sitter. I’ll drop you at my place. I’ll run errands. You drink Mac’s beer until you crash on my couch. We’ll figure out what you do next when you’re rested. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said. “Thank you.”

I took him back to my apartment and spent the rest of the morning trying to collect on bills a few people still owed me. I didn’t have much luck. I spent the rest of the day applying for loans, and had even less luck. Bank guys get so hung up about things like bad credit histories and people who

fill in the “occupation” blank of the application with *wizard*. I guess it could have been worse. I could have been filling out the reason the loan was needed with *pay off mercenary for services rendered*.

By the end of the day, my hand hurt so badly that it had begun to cut through the painkillers, and I was exhausted. On the way out of the last bank, I forgot what my car looked like for a minute. I missed my street and had to drive around the block, but I missed it the second time, too. I managed to get home before I completely lost sentience, staggered past Thomas and Mister and the puppy asleep on the couch, and collapsed onto my bed.

When I woke up, it was Tuesday morning.

I found myself nervously looking around for the bright red dot of a laser sight to appear on my nose while I was in the shower with a plastic trash bag over my bandaged hand. I got dressed, got on the phone, and called Kincaid’s number, then waited for him to return the call.

It took less than three minutes. “It’s Dresden,” I told the phone.

“I know. How’s the hand?”

“I saw this great Swiss Army prosthesis with all these different attachments, but my hopes got crushed. I’m keeping the original.”

“Damn shame,” Kincaid said. “You need another contract?”

“Wanted to talk about the last one,” I said. “Uh, I mean, I know you said Tuesday, but I’m still getting some assets turned into cash.” I wasn’t lying to him. I hadn’t sold all my used paperbacks yet, or dipped into my comic collection. “I need a little more time.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Time. I need more time.”

“For what?”

“To get your money,” I said, leaving out the word *dolt*. See? I can be diplomatic.

“The money got here hours ago.”

I blinked.

“You can pay me twice if you like,” Kincaid said. “I won’t stop you. Anything else?”

“Uh. No. I don’t think so.”

“Don’t call me again if it isn’t business.” He paused. “Though I want to give you a piece of advice.”

“What’s that?” I asked, cleverly hiding my confusion.

"She went down pretty easy," Kincaid said. "Mavra, I mean."

"Yeah. 'Cause of your groovy cutting-edge vampire-hunting weapon, I guess. Thanks."

"It's paid for," he said. "But I mostly gave it to you to make you feel better. And to make sure you didn't shoot me by accident."

"What about what you said about how cool a weapon it was?"

"Dresden. Come on. It's a paintball gun. Mavra's world-class bad news. I expected it to chew apart newbie vamps, sure. You think Mavra would have tottered on out of the smoke to let you kill her? Nice and dramatic like that? If you buy that one, I got a bridge to sell you."

I got a sick, sinking little feeling in my stomach. "It was her," I said.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Well. Because . . . she was wearing the same outfit," I said. "Son of a bitch. That sounds really lame, even to me. One corpse looks a lot like another. It could have been a decoy."

"Could," he said. "So my advice to you, Dresden. Watch your back."

"Gee. Thanks."

"No charge." He paused for a second as someone spoke in the background, then said, "Ivy says to tell your kitty hello for her." He hung up.

I put the phone down, thoughtful. When I turned around Thomas was sitting up on the couch. Silently he offered me the business card with Kincaid's account number and the amount of the bill on it.

"Found it in the laundry," he said.

"You didn't have to do that," I said.

"I know," he replied.

"You really have that much money?"

He shook his head. "Not anymore. That was pretty much everything I'd set aside. I hadn't made a lot of plans for independence. I figured I'd either be dead or running things. I've got about fifty bucks to my name now."

I sat down on the couch. The puppy snuffled me with his nose and wagged his tail in greeting.

"Where are you going to go?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Guess I can do what my cousin Madrigal does: find some rich girl." He grimaced. "I don't know what to do."

"Look," I said. "You really saved my ass. Crash here for a while."

"I don't want charity."

“It isn’t,” I said. “Think of that money transfer as a rent payment. You can have the couch until you get your feet under you again. It’ll be crowded, maybe, but it isn’t forever.”

He nodded. “You sure?”

“Sure.”

Later Thomas went to the grocery store and I went down to the lab to talk to Bob. I filled him in on events.

“You’re sure?” Bob asked. “It was He Who Walks Behind?”

I shivered. “Yeah. Thought I’d killed him.”

“Walkers aren’t killable, Harry,” Bob said. “When you tore him up before, it banished him from the mortal realm. Might have hurt him, made him take time to heal up. But he’s still out there.”

“That’s comforting,” I said. I unwrapped my burned hand.

“Yuck,” said Bob.

“Can you see anything about the injury?” I asked.

“Burned meat and nerve damage, looks like,” Bob said. “Hmm, I think it still has reflexes, though. I bet you could use it a little if you did it without thinking about it.”

I frowned. “You’re right. I think I did during the fight with Raith. But look at this.” I opened my stiff fingers with my right hand.

There was unburned flesh there, just as the doctor had observed. What he didn’t know was that the unharmed flesh was in the shape of a sigil in angelic script—the name of one of the Fallen angels. Specifically, the same entity imprisoned in an ancient silver coin, at that very moment trapped under two feet of concrete and half a dozen warding spells on the far side of the lab.

“Lasciel,” Bob said. His voice was worried.

“I thought she was locked up. I thought she couldn’t touch me from there, Bob.”

“She can’t,” Bob said, bewildered. “I mean, that’s *impossible*. There’s no way she should be able to reach out from there.”

“Sounds kind of familiar,” I muttered. I wrapped up my hand again. “But that’s what I thought too. And my staff is acting weird. When I start to run power through it, I’m getting excess heat. The runes start glowing like embers and there smoke curling up out of them. Seemed like my workings with the staff were coming out a lot bigger than I wanted, too. Did I blow something on the preparation?”

“Maybe,” Bob said. “But, uh. Well, it sounds a lot like Hellfire. I hear that some of the Fallen really love it.”

“*What?*”

“Hellfire,” Bob said. “Uh, it’s sort of an alternate power source. Not a pleasant one, but man, you could really turbocharge violent spells with it.”

“I know what Hellfire is, Bob.”

“Oh. Right. Why are you using it then, Harry?”

I said through clenched teeth, “I don’t know. I didn’t mean to. I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

“Hell,” Bob said. “Heh. You made with the funny, boss.”

I had involuntary access to Hellfire. How had *that* happened?

Lasciel’s sigil on my left palm was the only cool spot on my burning hand.

Hell’s bells. I shook my head and headed for the ladder back up.

As I left Bob said, “Hey, Harry?”

“Yeah?”

The orange lights in the skull glowed eagerly. “Tell me again about Murphy’s ass.”

Thomas came back from the store later that day. “Got the puppy a bowl and a collar and food and so on. Nice little guy. Real quiet. Don’t think I’ve heard him whine at all.” He tousled the puppy’s ears. “You decide on a name?”

The puppy cocked his head to one side, ears tilted up with interest, dark little eyes on my face.

“I never said I was keeping him,” I said.

Thomas snorted. “Yeah. Right.”

I frowned down at the puppy. “He’s tiny. He’s grey. He doesn’t make much noise,” I said after a minute. I dropped to a knee and held my hand out to the little dog. “How about Mouse?”

Mouse bounced straight up in a fit of eager puppy joy and romped over to lick my hand and chew gently on one of my fingers.

Thomas smiled, though it was a little sad. “I like it,” he said.

We started putting groceries away, and it was the strangest feeling. I was used to being alone. Now there was someone else in my personal space. Someone I didn’t mind being there. Thomas was all but a stranger, but at the same time he wasn’t. The bond I sensed between us was not made weaker by being inexplicable, no less absolute for being illogical.

I had a family. Hell, I had a dog.

This was a huge change. I was happy about it, but at the same time I realized that it was going to be a big adjustment. My place was going to be pretty crowded, pretty fast, but once Thomas got into his own apartment, it would be more normal. I don't think either one of us wanted to be tripping all over each other every time we turned around.

I felt myself smiling. It looked like life was looking up.

I had started feeling a little crowded already, sure. But I took a deep breath and brushed it back. Thomas wouldn't be here too long, and the dog was certainly a lot smaller than Mister. I could handle a little claustrophobia.

I frowned at a giant green bag and asked Thomas, "Hey. Why did you get large breed Puppy Chow?"

The Dresden Files Collection 1-6

Storm Front
Fool Moon
Grave Peril
Summer Knight
Death Masks
Blood Rites

Jim Butcher



A ROC BOOK



DEAD BEAT

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

PROVEN GUILTY

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

WHITE NIGHT

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

SMALL FAVOR

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

TURN COAT

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

CHANGES

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

JIM BUTCHER

THE DRESDEN FILES 7-12

The Dresden Files Collection 7-12

Dead Beat
Proven Guilty
White Night
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Changes

Jim Butcher



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Dead Beat

JIM BUTCHER

ROC

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*For my son.
The best thing that ever happened to me.
I love you, Short-stuff.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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More thanks to my family for their continuing support and love. To Shannon for being who she is, and whose good opinion I would work ten... well, wait, no, maybe three times as hard to keep—okay, okay, five, tops. (Ten would be more hours than exist, babe, and besides, when could I play Halo?) Also thanks to my son JJ, whose boundless energy, enthusiasm, and love are wonderfully intimidating.

Oh, and also for my ferocious furry bodyguard, Frost, who supports my career by frightening away any bad guys long before they get near enough to actually bother me, and by helping me eat any potentially distracting snacks.

Chapter One

On the whole, we're a murderous race.

According to Genesis, it took as few as four people to make the planet too crowded to stand, and the first murder was a fratricide. Genesis says that in a fit of jealous rage, the very first child born to mortal parents, Cain, snapped and popped the first metaphorical cap in another human being. The attack was a bloody, brutal, violent, reprehensible killing. Cain's brother Abel probably never saw it coming.

As I opened the door to my apartment, I was filled with a sense of empathic sympathy and intuitive understanding.

For freaking Cain.

My apartment isn't much more than a big room in the basement of a century-old wooden boardinghouse in Chicago. There's a kitchen built into an alcove, a big fireplace almost always lit, a bedroom the size of the bed of a pickup truck, and a bathroom that barely fits a sink, toilet, and shower. I can't afford really good furniture, so it's all secondhand, but comfortable. I have a lot of books on shelves, a lot of rugs, a lot of candles. It isn't much, but at least it's clean.

Or used to be.

The rugs were in total disarray, exposing bare patches of stone floor. One of the easy chairs had fallen over onto its back, and no one had picked it up. Cushions were missing from the couch, and the curtains had been torn down from one of the sunken windows, letting in a swath of late-afternoon sunshine, all the better to illuminate the books that had been knocked down from one of my shelves and scattered everywhere, bending paperback covers, leaving hardbacks all the way open, and generally messing up my primary source of idle entertainment.

The fireplace was more or less the epicenter of the slobquake. There were discarded clothes there, a couple of empty wine bottles, and a plate

that looked suspiciously clean—doubtless the cleanup work of the other residents.

I took a stunned step into my home. As I did my big grey tom, Mister, bounded down from his place on top of one of the bookshelves, but rather than give me his usual shoulder-block of greeting, he flicked his tail disdainfully at me and ghosted out the front door.

I sighed, walked over to the kitchen alcove, and checked. The cat's bowls of food and water were both empty. No wonder he was grumpy.

A shaggy section of the kitchen floor hauled itself to its feet and came to meet me with a sheepish, sleepy shuffle. My dog, Mouse, had started off as a fuzzy little grey puppy that fit into my coat pocket. Now, almost a year later, I sometimes wished I'd sent my coat to the cleaners or something. Mouse had gone from fuzz ball to fuzz barge. You couldn't guess at a breed to look at him, but at least one of his parents must have been a wooly mammoth. The dog's shoulders came nearly to my waist, and the vet didn't think he was finished growing yet. That translated into an awful lot of beast for my tiny apartment.

Oh, and Mouse's bowls were empty, too. He nuzzled my hand, his muzzle stained with what looked suspiciously like spaghetti sauce, and then pawed at his bowls, scraping them over the patch of linoleum floor.

"Dammit, Mouse," I growled, Cain-like. "It's *still* like this? If he's here, I'm going to kill him."

Mouse let out a chuffing breath that was about as much commentary as he ever made, and followed placidly a couple of steps behind me as I walked over to the closed bedroom door.

Just as I got there, the door opened, and an angel-faced blonde wearing nothing but a cotton T-shirt appeared in it. Not a long shirt, either. It didn't cover all of her rib cage.

"Oh," she drawled, with a slow and sleepy smile. "Excuse me. I didn't know anyone else was here." Without a trace of modesty, she slunk into the living room, pawing through the mess near the fireplace, extracting pieces of clothing. From the languid, satisfied way she moved, I figured she expected me to be staring at her, and that she didn't mind it at all.

At one time I would have been embarrassed as hell by this kind of thing, and probably sneaking covert glances. But after living with my half brother the incubus for most of a year, I mostly found it annoying. I rolled my eyes and asked, "Thomas?"

“Tommy? Shower, I think,” the girl said. She slipped into jogging wear—sweatpants, a matching jacket, expensive shoes. “Do me a favor? Tell him that it—”

I interrupted her in an impatient voice. “That it was a lot of fun, you’ll always treasure it, but that it was a onetime thing and that you hope he grows up to find a nice girl or be president or something.”

She stared at me and then knitted her blond brows into a frown. “You don’t have to be such a bast—” Then her eyes widened. “Oh. *Oh!* I’m sorry—oh, my God.” She leaned toward me, blushing, and said in a between-us-girls whisper, “I would *never* have guessed that he was with a *man*. How do the two of you *manage* on that tiny bed?”

I blinked and said, “Now *wait* a minute.”

But she ignored me and walked out, murmuring, “He is *such* a naughty boy.”

I glared at her back. Then I glared at Mouse.

Mouse’s tongue lolled out in a doggy grin, his dark tail waving gently.

“Oh, shut up,” I told him, and closed the door. I heard the whisper of water running through the pipes in my shower. I put out food for Mister and Mouse, and the dog partook immediately. “He could have fed the damned dog, at least,” I muttered, and opened the fridge.

I rummaged through it, but couldn’t find what I was after anywhere, and it was the last straw. My frustration grew into a fire somewhere inside my eyeballs, and I straightened from the icebox with mayhem in mind.

“Hey,” came Thomas’s voice from behind me. “We’re out of beer.”

I turned around and glared at my half brother.

Thomas was a shade over six feet tall, and I guess now that I’d had time to get used to the idea, he looked something like me: stark cheekbones, a long face, a strong jaw. But whatever sculptor had done the finishing work on Thomas had foisted my features off on his apprentice or something. I’m not ugly or anything, but Thomas looked like someone’s painting of the forgotten Greek god of body cologne. He had long hair so dark that light itself could not escape it, and even fresh from the shower it was starting to curl. His eyes were the color of thunderclouds, and he never did a single moment of exercise to earn the gratuitous amount of ripple in his musculature. He was wearing jeans and no shirt—his standard household uniform. I once saw him in the same outfit answer the door to speak to a

female missionary, and she'd assaulted him in a cloud of forgotten copies of *The Watchtower*. The tooth marks she left had been interesting.

It hadn't been the girl's fault, entirely. Thomas had inherited his father's blood as a vampire of the White Court. He was a psychic predator, feeding on the raw life force of human beings—usually easiest to gain through the intimate contact of sex. That part of him surrounded him in the kind of aura that turned heads wherever he went. When Thomas made the effort to turn up the supernatural come-hither, women literally couldn't tell him no. By the time he started feeding, they couldn't even *want* to tell him no. He was killing them, just a little bit, but he had to do it to stay sane, and he never took it any further than a single feeding.

He could have. Those the White Court chose as their prey became ensnared in the ecstasy of being fed upon, and became increasingly enslaved by their vampire lover. But Thomas never pushed it that far. He'd made that mistake once, and the woman he had loved now drifted through life in a wheelchair, bound in a deathly euphoria because of his touch.

I clenched my teeth and reminded myself that it wasn't easy for Thomas. Then I told myself that I was repeating myself way too many times and to shut up. "I know there's no beer," I growled. "Or milk. Or Coke."

"Um," he said.

"And I see that you didn't have time to feed Mister and Mouse. Did you take Mouse outside, at least?"

"Well sure," he said. "I mean, uh...I took him out this morning when you were leaving for work, remember? That's where I met Angie."

"Another jogger," I said, once more Cain-like. "You told me you weren't going to keep bringing strangers back here, Thomas. And on my freaking *bed*? Hell's bells, man, *look* at this place."

He did, and I saw it dawn on him, as if he literally hadn't seen it before. He let out a groan. "Damn. Harry, I'm sorry. It was...Angie is a really... *really* intense and, uh, athletic person and I didn't realize that..." He paused and picked up a copy of Dean Koontz's *Watchers*. He tried to fold the crease out of the cover. "Wow," he added lamely. "The place is sort of trashed."

"Yeah," I told him. "You were here all day. You said you'd take Mouse to the vet. And clean up a little. *And* get groceries."

"Oh, come on," he said. "What's the big deal?"

“I don’t have a beer,” I growled. I looked around at the rubble. “And I got a call from Murphy at work today. She said she’d be dropping by.”

Thomas lifted his eyebrows. “Oh, yeah? No offense, Harry, but I’m doubting it was a booty call.”

I glared. “Would you stop it with that already?”

“I’m telling you, you should just ask her out and get it over with. She’d say yes.”

I slammed the door to the icebox. “It isn’t like that,” I said.

“Yeah, okay,” Thomas said mildly.

“It isn’t. We work together. We’re friends. That’s all.”

“Right,” he agreed.

“I am not interested in dating Murphy,” I said. “And she’s not interested in me.”

“Sure, sure. I hear you.” He rolled his eyes and started picking up fallen books. “Which is why you want the place looking nice. So your business friend won’t mind staying around for a little bit.”

I gritted my teeth and said, “Stars and stones, Thomas, I’m not asking you for the freaking moon. I’m not asking you for rent. It wouldn’t kill you to pitch in a little with errands before you go to work.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said, running his hand through his hair. “Um. About that.”

“What about it?” I demanded. He was supposed to be gone for the afternoon so that my housecleaning service could come in. The faeries wouldn’t show up to clean when someone could see them, and they wouldn’t show up ever again if I told someone about them. Don’t ask me why they’re like that. Maybe they’ve got a really strict union or something.

Thomas shrugged a shoulder and sat down on the arm of the couch, not looking at me. “I didn’t have the cash for the vet or the groceries,” he said. “I got fired again.”

I stared at him for a second, and tried to keep up a good head of steam on my anger, but it melted. I recognized the frustration and humiliation in his voice. He wasn’t faking it.

“Dammit,” I muttered, only partly to Thomas. “What happened?”

“The usual,” he said. “The drive-through manager. She followed me into the walk-in freezer and started ripping her clothes off. The owner walked through on an inspection about then and fired me on the spot. From the

look he was giving *her*, I think she was going to get a promotion. I hate gender discrimination.”

“At least it was a woman this time,” I said. “We’ve got to keep working on your control.”

His voice turned bitter. “Half of my soul is a demon,” he said. “It can’t be controlled. It’s impossible.”

“I don’t buy that,” I said.

“Just because you’re a wizard doesn’t mean you know a damned thing about it,” he said. “I can’t live a mortal life. I’m not made for it.”

“You’re doing fine.”

“Fine?” he demanded, voice rising. “I can disintegrate a virgin’s inhibitions at fifty paces, but I can’t last two weeks at a job where I’m wearing a stupid hairnet and a paper hat. In what way is that *fine*?”

He slammed open the small trunk where he kept his clothes, seized a pair of shoes and his leather jacket, put them on with angry precision, and stalked out into the gathering evening without looking back.

And without cleaning up his mess, I thought uncharitably. Then I shook my head and glanced at Mouse, who had lain down with his chin on his paws, doggy eyes sad.

Thomas was the only family I’d ever known. But that didn’t change the truth: Thomas wasn’t adjusting well to living life like normal folks. He was damned good at being a vampire. That came naturally. But no matter how hard he tried to be something a little more like normal, he kept running into one problem after another. He never said anything about it, but I could sense the pain and despair growing in him as the weeks went by.

Mouse let out a quiet breath that wasn’t quite a whine.

“I know,” I told the beast. “I worry about him too.”

I took Mouse on a long walk, and got back in as late-October dusk was settling over Chicago. I got my mail out of the box and started for the stairs down to my apartment, when a car pulled in to the boardinghouse’s small gravel lot and crunched to a stop a few steps away. A petite blonde in jeans, a blue button-down shirt, and a satin White Sox windbreaker slipped the car into park and left the engine running as she got out.

Karrin Murphy looked like anything but the head of a division of law enforcement in charge of dealing with everything that went bump in the night in the whole greater Chicago area. When trolls started mugging passersby, when vampires left their victims dead or dying in the streets, or

when someone with more magical fire-power than conscience went berserk, Chicago PD's Special Investigations department was tasked to investigate. Of course, no one seriously believed in trolls or vampires or evil sorcerers, but when something weird happened, SI was in charge of explaining to everyone how it had been only a man in a rubber mask, and that there was nothing to worry about.

SI had a sucky job, but the men and women who worked there weren't stupid. They were perfectly aware that there were things out there in the darkness that were beyond the scope of conventional understanding. Murphy, in particular, was determined to give the cops every edge they could get when dealing with a preternatural threat, and I was one of her best weapons. She would hire me on as a consultant when SI went up against something really dangerous or alien, and the fees I got working with SI paid the lion's share of my expenses.

When Mouse saw Murphy, he made a little huffing sound of greeting and trotted over to her, his tail wagging. If I had leaned back and kept my legs straight I could have gone skiing over the gravel, but other than that, the big dog left me with no option but to come along.

Murphy knelt down at once to dig her hands into the fur behind Mouse's floppy ears, scratching vigorously. "Hey, there, boy," she said, smiling. "How are you?"

Mouse slobbered several doggy kisses onto her hands.

Murphy said, "Yuck," but she was laughing while she did. She pushed Mouse's muzzle gently away, rising. "Evening, Harry. Glad I caught you."

"I was just getting back from my evening drag," I said. "You want to come in?"

Murphy had a cute face and very blue eyes. Her golden hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and it made her look a lot younger than usual. Her expression was a careful, maybe even uncomfortable one. "I'm sorry, but I can't," she said. "I've got a plane to catch. I don't really have time."

"Ah," I said. "What's up?"

"I'm going out of town for a few days," she said. "I should be back sometime Monday afternoon. I was hoping I could talk you into watering my plants for me."

"Oh," I said. She wanted me to water her plants. How coy. How sexy. "Yeah, sure. I can do that."

“Thanks,” she said, and offered me a key on a single steel ring. “It’s the back-door key.”

I accepted it. “Where you headed?”

The discomfort in her expression deepened. “Oh, out of town on a little vacation.”

I blinked.

“I haven’t had a vacation in years,” she said defensively. “I’ve got it coming.”

“Well. Sure,” I said. “Um. So, a vacation. By yourself?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “Well. That’s sort of the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. I’m not expecting any trouble, but I wanted you to know where I was and with who in case I don’t show up on time.”

“Right, right,” I said. “Doesn’t hurt to be careful.”

She nodded. “I’m going to Hawaii with Kincaid.”

I blinked some more.

“Um,” I said. “You mean on a job, right?”

She shifted her weight from one hip to the other. “No. We’ve gone out a few times. It’s nothing serious.”

“Murphy,” I protested. “Are you insane? That guy is major bad news.”

She glowered at me. “We’ve had this discussion before. I’m a grown-up, Dresden.”

“I know,” I said. “But this guy is a mercenary. A killer. He’s not even completely human. You can’t trust him.”

“You did,” she pointed out. “Last year against Mavra and her scourge.”

I scowled. “That was different.”

“Oh?” she asked.

“Yeah. I was paying him to kill things. I wasn’t taking him to b—uh, to the beach.”

Murphy arched an eyebrow at me.

“You won’t be safe around him,” I said.

“I’m not doing it to be *safe*,” she replied. Her cheeks colored a little. “That’s sort of the point.”

“You shouldn’t go,” I said.

She looked up at me for a moment, frowning.

Then she asked, “Why?”

“Because I don’t want to see you get hurt,” I said. “And because you deserve someone better than he is.”

She studied my face for a moment more and then exhaled through her nose. “I’m not running off to Vegas to get married, Dresden. I work all the time, and life is going right by me. I just want to take the time to live it a little before it’s too late.” She pulled a folded index card out of her pocket. “This is the hotel I’ll be at. If you need to get in touch or anything.”

I took the folded index card, still frowning, and full of the intuition that I had missed something. Her fingers brushed mine, but I couldn’t feel it through the glove and all the scars. “You sure you’ll be all right?”

She nodded. “I’m a big girl, Harry. I’m the one choosing where we’re going. He doesn’t know where. I figured he couldn’t set anything up ahead of time, if he had any funny business in mind.” She made a vague gesture toward the gun she carried in a shoulder holster under her jacket. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

“Yeah,” I said. I didn’t even try to smile at her. “For the record, this is stupid, Murph. I hope you don’t get killed.”

Her blue eyes flashed, and she frowned. “I was sort of hoping you’d say something like, ‘Have a good time.’”

“Yeah,” I said. “Whatever. Have fun. Leave me a message when you get there?”

“Yes,” she said. “Thanks for looking out for my plants.”

“No problem,” I said.

She nodded at me, and lingered there for a second more. Then she scratched Mouse behind the ears again, got in her car, and drove off.

I watched her go, feeling worried.

And jealous.

Really, really jealous.

Holy crap.

Was Thomas right after all?

Mouse made a whining sound and pawed at my leg. I sighed, stuck the hotel information in a pocket, and led the dog back to the apartment.

When I opened my door, my nose was assaulted with the scent of fresh pine—not pine cleaner, mind you. Real fresh pine, and nary a needle in sight. The faeries had come and gone, and the books were back on the shelves, the floor scrubbed, curtains repaired, dishes done, you name it. They may have weird bylaws, but faerie housecleaning runs a tight ship.

I lit candles with matches from a box I had sitting on my coffee table. As a wizard, I don’t get on so well with newfangled things like electricity and

computers, so I didn't bother to try to keep electric service up and running in my home. My icebox is a vintage model run on actual ice. There's no water heater, and I do all my cooking on a little wood-burning stove. I fired it up and heated some soup, which was about the only thing left in the house. I sat down to eat it and started going through my mail.

The usual. The marketing savants at Best Buy continued in their unabated efforts to sell me the latest laptop, cell phone, or plasma television despite my repeated verbal and written assurances that I didn't have electricity and that they shouldn't bother. My auto-insurance bill had arrived early. Two checks came, the first a token fee from Chicago PD for consulting with Murphy on a smuggling case for an hour the previous month. The second was a much meatier check from a coin collector who had lost a case of cash from dead nations over the side of his yacht in Lake Michigan and resorted to trying out the only wizard in the phone book to locate them.

The last envelope was a big yellow manila number, and I felt a nauseating little ripple flutter through my guts the second I saw the handwriting on it. It was written in soulless letters as neat as a kindergarten classroom poster and as uninflected as an English professor's lecture notes.

My name.

My address.

Nothing else.

There was no rational reason for it, but that handwriting scared me. I wasn't sure what had triggered my instincts, unless it was the singular lack of anything remarkable or imperfect about it. For a second I thought I had gotten upset for no reason, that it was a simple printed font, but there was a flourish on the last letter of "Dresden" that didn't match the other Ns. The flourish looked perfect, too, and deliberate. It was there to let me know that this was inhuman handwriting, not some laser printer from Wal-Mart.

I laid the envelope flat on my coffee table and stared at it. It was thin, undeformed by its contents, which meant that it was holding a few sheets of paper at the most. That meant that it wasn't a bomb. Well, more accurately, it wasn't a high-tech bomb, which was a fairly useless weapon to use against a wizard. A low-tech explosive setup could have worked just fine, but they wouldn't be that small.

Of course, that left mystical means of attack. I lifted my left hand toward the envelope, reaching out with my wizard's senses, but I couldn't get them

focused. With a grimace I peeled the leather driving glove off of my left hand, revealing my scarred and ruined fingers. I'd burned my hand so badly a year before that the doctors I'd seen had mostly recommended amputation. I hadn't let them take my hand, mostly for the same reason I still drove the same junky old VW Beetle—because it was mine, by thunder.

But my fingers were pretty horrible to look at, as was the rest of my left hand. I didn't have much movement in them anymore, but I spread them as best I could and reached out to feel the energies of magic moving around the envelope once more.

I might as well have kept the glove on. There was nothing odd about the envelope. No magical booby traps.

Right, then. No more delays. I picked up the envelope in my weak left hand and tore it open, then upended the contents onto the coffee table.

There were three things in the envelope.

The first was an eight-by-ten color photo, and it was a shot of Karrin Murphy, director of Chicago PD's Special Investigations division. She wasn't in uniform, though, or even in business attire. Instead she was wearing a Red Cross jacket and baseball hat, and she was holding a sawed-off shotgun, an illegal model, in her hands. It was belching flame. In the picture you could also see a man standing a few feet away, covered in blood from the waist down. A long, black steel shaft protruded from his chest, as if he'd been impaled on it. His upper body and head were a blur of dark lines and red blobs. The shotgun was pointing right at the blur.

The second was another picture. This one was of Murphy with her hat off, standing over the man's corpse, and I was in the frame with her, my face in profile. The man had been a Renfield, a psychotically violent creature that was human only in the most technical sense—but then the camera shot of his murder was a most technical witness.

Murphy and I and a mercenary named Kincaid had gone after a nest of vampires of the Black Court led by a deadly vampire named Mavra. Her minions had objected pretty strenuously. I'd gotten my hand badly burned when Mavra herself took the field against us, and I had been lucky to get away that lightly. In the end, we'd rescued hostages, dismembered some vampires, and killed Mavra. Or at least, we'd killed someone we were meant to think was Mavra. In retrospect, it seemed odd that a vampire known for being able to render herself all but undetectable had lurched out

at us from the smoke and ash of her ruined stronghold to be beheaded. But I'd had a full day and I had been ready to take it on faith.

We tried to be as careful as we could during the attack. As a result, we saved some lives we might not have if we'd gone in hell-for-leather, but that Renfield had come damn close to taking my head off. Murphy killed him for it. And she'd been photographed doing it.

I stared at the photos.

The pictures were from different angles. That meant that someone else had been in the room taking them.

Someone we hadn't even seen.

The third item that fell to the coffee table was a piece of typewriter paper, covered in the same handwriting as the address on the envelope. It read:

Dresden,

I desire a meeting with you, and offer a truce for the duration, bound by my word of honor to be upheld. Meet with me at seven p.m. tonight at your grave in Graceland Cemetery, in order to help me avoid taking actions that would be unfortunate to you and your ally in the police.

Mavra

The final third of the letter had a lock of golden hair taped to it. I held the picture up next to the letter.

The hair was Murphy's.

Mavra had her number. With pictures of her committing a felony (and with me aiding and abetting, no less), Mavra could have her out of the cops and behind bars in hours. But even worse was the lock of hair. Mavra was a skilled sorceress, and might have been as strong as a full-fledged wizard. With a lock of Murphy's hair, she could do virtually anything she pleased to Murph, and there wouldn't be squat anyone could do about it. Mavra could kill her. Mavra could worse than kill her.

It didn't take me long to make up my mind. In supernatural circles, a pledge of truce based upon a word of honor was an institution—especially among the old-world types like Mavra. If she was offering a truce so that we could talk, she meant it. She wanted to deal.

I stared down at the pictures.

She wanted to deal, and she was going to be negotiating from a position of strength. It meant blackmail.

And if I didn't play along, Murphy was as good as dead.

Chapter Two

The dog and I went to my grave.

Graceland Cemetery is famous. You can look it up in just about any Chicago tour book—or God knows, probably on the Internet. It's the largest cemetery in town, and one of the oldest. There are walls, substantial ones, all the way around, and it has far more than its share of ghost stories and attendant shades. The graves inside range from simple plots with simple headstones to life-sized replicas of Greek temples, Egyptian obelisks, mammoth statues—even a pyramid. It's the Las Vegas of boneyards, and my grave is in it.

The cemetery isn't open after dark. Most aren't, and there's a reason for it. Everybody knows the reason, and nobody talks about it. It isn't because there are dead people in there. It's because there are not-quite-dead people in there. Ghosts and shadows linger in graveyards more than anywhere else, especially in the older cities of the country, where the oldest, biggest cemeteries are right there in the middle of town. That's why people build walls around graveyards, even if they're only two feet high—not to keep people out, but to keep other things in. Walls can have a kind of power in the spirit world, and the walls around graveyards are almost always filled with the unspoken intent of keeping the living and the unliving seated at different sections of the community dinner table.

The gates were locked, and there was an attendant in a small building too solid to be called a shack, and too small to be called anything else. But I'd been there a few times, and I knew several ways to get in and out after dark if need be. There was a portion of the fence in the northeast corner where a road construction crew just outside had left a large mound of gravel, and it sloped far enough up the wall that even a man with one good hand and a large and ungainly dog could reach the top.

We went in, Mouse and I. Mouse might have been large, but he was barely more than a puppy, and he still had paws that looked too big for his

lean frame. The dog had been built on the scale of those statues outside Chinese restaurants, though—broad chested and powerful, with that same mountainous strength built into his muzzle. His coat was a dark and almost uniform grey, marked on the tips of his fuzzy ears, his tail, and his lower legs with solid black. He looked a little gangly and clumsy now, but after a few more months of adding on muscle, he was going to be a real monster. And damned if I minded the company of my own personal monster going to meet a vampire over my grave.

I found it not far from a rather famous grave of a little girl named Inez, who had died a century before. The little girl's grave had a statue mounted on it. I'd seen it often, and it looked mostly like Carroll's original Alice—a cherub in a prim and proper Victorian dress. Supposedly the child's ghost would occasionally animate the statue and run and play among the graves and the neighborhoods near the graveyard. I'd never seen her, myself.

But, hey. The statue was missing.

My grave is one of the more humble ones there. It's standing open, too—the vampire noble who bought it for me had set it up to be that way. She'd gotten me a coffin on permanent standby, too, sort of like the president gets Air Force One, only a little more morbid. Dead Force One.

My headstone is simple white marble, a vertical stone, but it's engraved in bold letters inlaid with gold: HARRY DRESDEN. Then a gold-inlaid pentacle, a five-pointed star surrounded by a circle—the symbol of the forces of magic contained within mortal will. Underneath it are more letters: HE DIED DOING THE RIGHT THING.

It's a sobering sort of place to visit.

I mean, we're all going to die. We know that on an intellectual level. We figure it out sometime when we're still fairly young, and it scares us so badly that we convince ourselves we're immortal for more than a decade afterward.

Death isn't something anyone likes to think about, but the fact is that you can't get out of it. No matter what you do, how much you exercise, how religiously you diet, or meditate, or pray, or how much money you donate to your church, there is a single hard, cold fact that faces everyone on earth: One day it's going to be over. One day the sun will rise, the world will turn, people will go about their daily routines—only you won't be in it. You'll be still. And cold.

And despite every religious faith, the testimony of near-death eyewitnesses, and the imaginations of storytellers throughout history, death remains the ultimate mystery. No one truly, definitively knows what happens after. And that's assuming there *is* an after. We all go there blind to whatever is out there in the darkness beyond.

Death.

You can't escape it.

You.

Will.

Die.

That's a bitter, hideously concrete fact to endure—but believe me, you get it in a whole new range of color and texture when you face it standing over your own open grave.

I stood there among silent headstones and memorials both sober and outrageous, and the late-October moon shone down on me. It was too cold for crickets, but the sound of traffic, sirens, car alarms, overhead jets, and distant loud music, the pulse of Chicago, kept me company. Mist had risen off of Lake Michigan like it did a lot of nights, but tonight it had come on exceptionally thick, and tendrils of it drifted through the graves and around the stones. There was a silent, crackling tension in the air, a kind of muted energy that was common in late autumn. Halloween was almost here, and the borders between Chicago and the spirit world, the Never-never, were at their weakest. I could sense the restless shades of the graveyard, most of them too feeble ever to manifest to mortal eyes, stirring in the roiling mist, tasting the energy-laden air.

Mouse sat beside me, ears forward and alert, his gaze shifting regularly, eyes focused, his attention obvious enough to make me think that he could literally see the things I could only vaguely feel. But whatever was out there, it didn't bother him. He sat beside me in silence, content to leave his head under my gloved hand.

I wore my long leather duster, its mantle falling almost to my elbows, along with black fatigue pants, a sweater, and old combat boots. I carried my wizard's staff with me in my right hand, a length of solid oak hand-carved with flowing runes and sigils all up and down its length. My mother's silver pentacle hung by a chain around my neck. My scarred flesh could barely feel the silver bracelet hung with tiny shields on my left wrist, but it was there. Several cloves of garlic tied together in a big lump lay in

my duster's pocket, and brushed against my leg when I shifted my weight. The group of odd items would have looked innocuous enough to the casual eye, but they amounted to a magical arsenal that had seen me through plenty of trouble.

Mavra had given me her word of honor, but I had plenty of other enemies who would love to take a shot at me. I wasn't going to make myself an easy target. But standing around in the haunted graveyard in the dark started to make me nervous, fast.

"Come on," I muttered after a few minutes. "What's taking her so long?"

Mouse let out a growl so low and quiet that I barely heard it—but I could feel the dog's sudden tension and wariness quivering up through my maimed hand, shaking my arm to the elbow.

I gripped my staff, checking all around me. Mouse was doing much the same, until his dark eyes started tracking something I couldn't see. Whatever it was, judging from Mouse's gaze, it was getting closer. Then there was a quiet, rushing sound and Mouse crouched, nose pointed at my open grave, his teeth bared.

I stepped closer to my grave. Patches of mist flowed down into it from the green grounds. I muttered under my breath, took off my amulet, and pushed some of my will into the five-pointed star, causing it to glow with a low blue light. I draped the amulet over the fingers of my left hand while I gripped the staff in my right, and peered down into the grave.

The mist inside it suddenly gathered, congealed, and flowed into the form of a withered corpse—that of a woman, emaciated and dried as though from years in the earth. The corpse wore a gown and kirtle, medieval style, the former green and the latter black. The fabric was simple cotton—modern manufacture, then, and not actual historic dress.

Mouse's snarl bubbled up into a more audible rumbling snarl.

The corpse sat up, opened milk-white eyes, and focused on me. It lifted a hand, in which it held a white lily, and held it toward me. Then the corpse spoke in a voice that was all rasp and whisper. "Wizard Dresden. A flower for your grave."

"Mavra," I said. "You're late."

"There was a headwind," the vampire answered. She flicked her wrist, and the lily arched up out of the grave and landed on my headstone. She followed it out with a similar, uncannily smooth motion that reminded me of a spider in its eerie grace. I noted that she wore a sword and a dagger on

a weapons belt at her waist. They looked old and worn, and I was betting that they were not of modern make. She came to a halt and faced me from across my grave, her face turned very slightly away from the blue light of my amulet, her cataract eyes steady on Mouse. “You kept your hand? After those burns, I would have thought you would have amputated it.”

“It’s mine,” I said. “And it’s none of your business. And you’re wasting my time.”

The vampire’s corpse lips stretched into a smile. Flakes of dead flesh fell down from the corners of her mouth. Brittle hair like dried straw had mostly been broken off to the length of a finger, but here and there longer strands the color of bread mold brushed the shoulders of her dress. “You’re allowing your mortality to make you impatient, Dresden. Surely you want to take this opportunity to discuss your assault on my scourge?”

“No.” I slipped my amulet on again and rested my hand on Mouse’s head. “I’m not here to socialize. You’ve got dirt on Murphy and you want something from me. Let’s have it.”

Her laugh was full of cobwebs and sandpaper. “I forget how young you are until I see you,” she said. “Life is fleeting, Dresden. If you insist on keeping yours, you ought to enjoy it.”

“Funny thing is, trading insults with an egotistical superzombie just isn’t my idea of a good time,” I said. Mouse punctuated the sentence with another rumbling growl. I turned my shoulders from her, starting to turn away. “If that’s all you had in mind, I’m leaving.”

She laughed harder, and the sound of it spooked the hell out of me. Maybe it was the atmosphere, but something about it, the way that it simply *lacked* anything to do with the things that should motivate laughter...There was no warmth in it, no humanity, no kindness, no joy. It was like Mavra herself—it had the withered human shell, but underneath it all was something from a nightmare.

“Very well,” Mavra said. “We shall embrace brevity.”

I faced her again, wary. Something in her manner had changed, and it was setting off all my alarm bells.

“Find The Word of Kemmler,” she said. Then she turned, dark skirts flaring, one hand resting negligently upon her sword, and started to leave.

“Hey!” I choked. “That’s it?”

“That’s it,” she said without turning.

“Wait a minute!” I said.

She paused.

“What the hell is The Word of Kemmler?”

“A trail.”

“Leading to what?” I asked.

“Power.”

“And you want it.”

“Yes.”

“And you want me to find it.”

“Yes. Alone. Tell no one of our agreement or what you are doing.”

I took in a slow breath. “What happens if I tell you to go to hell?”

Mavra silently lifted a single arm. There was a photo between two of her desiccated fingers, and even in the moonlight I could see that it was of Murphy.

“I’ll stop you,” I said. “And if I don’t, I’ll come after you. If you hurt her, I’ll kill you so hard your last ten victims will make miraculous recoveries.”

“I won’t have to touch her,” she said. “I’ll send the evidence to the police. The mortal authorities will prosecute her.”

“You can’t do that,” I said. “Wizards and vampires may be at war, but we leave the mortals out of it. Once you get mortal authorities involved, the Council will do it as well. And then the Reds. You could escalate matters into global chaos.”

“If I intended to employ the mortal authorities against you, perhaps,” Mavra said. “You are White Council.”

My stomach twisted with sudden, sickened understanding. I was a member of the White Council of Wizards, a solid citizen of the supernatural realms.

But Murphy wasn’t.

“The protector of the people,” Mavra all but purred. “The defender of the law will find herself a convicted murderer, and her only explanation would make her sound like a madwoman. She is prepared to die in battle, wizard. But I won’t merely kill her. I will unmake her. I will destroy the labor of her life and her heart.”

“You bitch,” I said.

“Of course.” She looked at me over her shoulder. “And unless you are prepared to unmake mortal civilization—or at least enough of it to impose your will upon it—there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

Fury exploded somewhere in my chest and rolled out through my body and thoughts in a red fire. Mouse rolled forward toward Mavra a step, shaking the mist around us with a rising growl, and I didn't realize at first that he was following my lead. "Like hell there isn't," I snarled. "If I hadn't agreed to a truce I would—"

Mavra's corpse-yellow teeth appeared in a ghastly smile. "Kill me in my tracks, wizard, but it will do you no good. Unless I put a halt to it, the pictures and other evidence will be sent to the police. And I will do so only once I am satisfied with your retrieval of The Word of Kemmler. Find it. Bring it to me before three midnights hence, and I will turn over the evidence to you. You have my word."

She dropped the photo of Murphy, and some kind of purple, nauseating light played over it for a second as it fell to the ground. There was the acrid smell of scorched chemicals.

When I looked back up at Mavra there was no one there.

I walked slowly over to the fallen photo, struggling to slap my anger aside quick enough to reach out with my supernatural senses. I didn't feel any of Mavra's presence anywhere near me, and over the next several seconds my dog's growls died down to low, wary sounds of uncertainty—and then to silence. While I wasn't quite certain of all the details, Mouse wasn't your average dog, and if Mouse didn't sense lurking bad guys, it was because there weren't any bad guys lurking.

The vampire was gone.

I picked up the photo. Murphy's picture had been marred. The dark energy had left scorch marks in the shape of numbers over Murphy's face. A phone number. Cute.

My righteous fury kept on fading, and I missed it. Once it was gone, there was going to be only sick worry and fear left in its place.

If I didn't work for one of the worst of the bad guys I've ever dealt with, Murphy would get hung out to dry.

Said bad guy was after power—and was on a deadline to boot. If Mavra needed something that soon, it meant that some kind of power struggle was about to go down. And three midnights hence meant Halloween night. Aside from ruining my birthday, it meant that black magic was going to be brought into play sometime soon, and at this time of year that could mean only one thing.

Necromancy.

I stood there in the boneyard, staring down at my grave, and started shivering. Partly from the cold.

I felt very alone.

Mouse exhaled a breath that was not quite a whimper of distress, and leaned against me.

“Come on, boy,” I told him. “Let’s get you home. No sense in more than one of us getting involved with this.”

Chapter Three

I needed some answers.

Time to hit the lab.

Mouse and I returned to my apartment in the Blue Beetle, the beat-up old Volkswagen Bug that is my faithful steed. “Blue” is kind of a metaphorical description. The car has had various doors and panels replaced with white, yellow, red, and green. My mechanic, Mike, had managed to pound the hood more or less back into its original condition, which I’d bent out of shape while ramming a bad guy, but I hadn’t had the money to repaint, so now the car had primer grey added to its ensemble.

Mouse had been growing too quickly to be very graceful about getting out of the car. He filled up most of the backseat, and when climbing from there to the front and then out the driver’s-side door he reminded me of some footage I’ve seen of an elephant seal flopping through a New Zealand parking lot. He emerged happily enough, though, panting and waving his tail contentedly. Mouse liked going places in the car. That the place had happened to be a clandestine meeting in a freaking graveyard didn’t seem to spoil anything for him. It was all about the journey, not the destination. A very Zen soul, was Mouse.

Mister hadn’t come back yet, and neither had Thomas. I tried not to think too hard about that. Mister had been on his own when I found him, and he frequently went rambling. He could take care of himself. Thomas had managed to survive for all but the last several months of his life without me. He could take care of himself too.

I didn’t have to worry about either of them, right?

Yeah, right.

I disarmed my wards, the spells that protected my home from various supernatural intrusions, and slipped inside with Mouse. I built up the fire a bit, and the dog settled down in front of it with a pleased sigh. Then I

ditched my coat, grabbed my thick old flannel robe and a Coke, and headed downstairs.

I live in a basement apartment, but a trapdoor underneath one of my rugs opens up on a folding wooden stair ladder that leads down to the subbasement and my lab. It's cold down there, year-round, which is why I wear the heavy robe. It's one more drop of romance sucked out of the wizarding mystique, but I stay comfortable.

"Bob," I said as I climbed down into the pitch-dark lab. "Warm up the memory banks. I've got work to do."

The first lights in the room to flicker on were the size and golden-orange color of candle flames. They shone out from the eye sockets of a skull, slowly growing brighter, until I could see the entire shelf the skull rested upon—a simple wooden board on the wall, covered in candles, romance novels, a number of small items, and the pale human skull.

"About time," the skull mumbled. "It's been weeks since you needed me."

"'Tis the season," I said. "Most of the Halloween jobs start looking the same after a few years. No need to consult you when I already know the answers I need."

"If you were so smart," Bob muttered, "you wouldn't need me now."

"That's right," I told him. I pulled a box of kitchen matches out of my robe's pockets and began lighting candles. I started with a bunch of them on a metal table running down the center of the small room. "You're a spirit of knowledge, whereas I am only human."

"Right," said Bob, drawing out the word. "Are you feeling all right, Harry?"

I continued on, lighting candles on the white wire shelves and workbenches on the three walls in a C shape around the long steel table. My shelves were still crowded with plastic dishes, lids, coffee cans, bags, boxes, tins, vials, flasks, and every other kind of small container you can imagine, filled with all kinds of substances as mundane as lint and as exotic as octopus ink. I had several hundred pounds' worth of books and notebooks on the shelves, some arranged neatly and some stacked hastily where they'd been when last I left them. I hadn't been down to the lab for a while, and I don't allow the faeries access, so there was a little bit of dust over everything.

"Why do you ask?" I said.

“Well,” Bob said, his tone careful, “you’re complimenting me, which is never good. Plus lighting all of your candles with matches.”

“So?” I said.

“So you can light all the candles with that stupid little spell you made up,” Bob said. “And you keep dropping the box because of your burned hand. So it’s taken you seven matches now to keep lighting those candles.”

I fumbled and dropped the matchbox again from my stiff, gloved fingers.

“Eight,” he said.

I suppressed a growl, struck a fresh match, and did it too forcefully, snapping it.

“Nine,” Bob said.

“Shut up,” I told him.

“You got it, boss. I’m the best at shutting up.” I lit the last few candles, and Bob said, “So did you come down here to get my help when you start working on your new blasting rod?”

“No,” I said. “Bob, I’ve only got the one hand. I can’t carve it with one hand.”

“You could use a vise grip,” the skull suggested.

“I’m not ready,” I said. My maimed fingers burned and throbbed. “I’m just...not.”

“You’d better get ready,” Bob said. “It’s only a matter of time before some nasty shows up and—”

I shot the skull a hard look.

“All right, all right,” Bob said. If he had hands, the skull would have raised them in a gesture of surrender. “So you’re telling me you still won’t use any fire magic.”

“Stars and stones,” I sighed. “So I’m using matches instead of my candle spell and I’m too busy to get the new blasting rod done. It’s not a big deal. There’s just not much call for blowing anything up or burning it to cinders on my average day.”

“Harry?” Bob asked. “Are your feet wet? And can you see the pyramids?”

I blinked. “What?”

“Earth to Dresden,” Bob said. “You are standing knee-deep in de Nile.”

I threw the matchbook at the skull. It bounced off halfheartedly, and the few matches left in tumbled out at random. “Keep your inner psychoanalyst to your damned self,” I growled. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Yeah,” Bob said. “You’re right, Harry. What do I know about anything?”

I glowered at Bob, and pulled up my stool to the worktable. I got out a notebook and a pencil. “The question of the hour is, what do you know about something called The Word of Kemmler?”

Bob made a sucking sound through his teeth, which is fairly impressive given that he’s got no saliva to work with. Or maybe I’m giving him too much credit. I mean, he can make a B sound with no lips, too. “Can you give me a reference point or anything?”

“Not for certain,” I said. “But I have a gut instinct that says it has something to do with necromancy.”

Bob made a whistling sound. “I hope not.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because *that* Kemmler was a certifiable nightmare,” Bob said. “I mean, wow. He was sick, Harry. Evil.”

That got my attention. Bob the skull was an air spirit, a being that existed in a world of knowledge without morality. He was fairly fuzzy on the whole good-evil conflict, and as a result he had only vague ideas of where lines got drawn. If *Bob* thought someone was evil, well...Kemmler must have really pushed the envelope.

“What’d he do?” I asked. “What made him so evil?”

“He was best known for World War One,” Bob said.

“The whole *thing*?” I demanded.

“Mostly, yeah,” Bob said. “There were about a hundred and fifty years of engineering built into it, and he had his fingers into all kinds of pies. He vanished at the end of hostilities and didn’t show up again until he started animating mass graves during World War Two. Went on rampages out in Eastern Europe, where things were pretty much a nightmare even without his help. Nobody is sure how many people he killed.”

“Stars and stones,” I said. “Why would he do something like that?”

“A wild guess? He was freaky insane. Plus evil.”

“You say ‘was,’” I said. “Past tense?”

“Very,” Bob said. “After what the guy did, the White Council hunted him down and wiped his dusty ass out in 1961.”

“You mean the Wardens?”

“I mean the White Council,” Bob said. “The Merlin, the whole Senior Council, the brute squad out of Archangel, the Wardens, and every wizard and ally the wizards could get their hands on.”

I blinked. "For one man?"

"See above, regarding nightmare," Bob said. "Kemmler was a *necromancer*, Harry. Power over the dead. He had truck with demons, too, was buddies with most of the vampire Courts, every nasty in Europe, and some of the uglier faeries, too. Plus he had his own little cadre of baby Kemmlers to help him out. Apprentices. And thugs of every description."

"Damn," I said.

"Doubtless he was," Bob said. "They killed him pretty good. A bunch of times. He'd shown up again after the Wardens had killed him early in the nineteenth century, so they were real careful the second time. And good riddance to the psychotic bastard."

I blinked. "You *knew* him?"

"Didn't I ever tell you?" Bob asked. "He was my owner for about forty years."

I stared. "You worked with this monster?"

"I do what I do," Bob said proudly.

"How did Justin get you, then?"

"Justin DuMorne was a Warden, Harry, back at Kemmler's last stand. He pulled me out of the smoldering ruins of Kemmler's lab. Sort of like when you pulled me out of the smoldering ruins of Justin's lab when you killed him. Circle of life, like that Elton John song."

I felt more than a little tiny bit cold. I chewed on my lip and laid my pencil down. I had the feeling the rest of this conversation was not going to be something I wanted to create a written record of. "So what is The Word of Kemmler, Bob?"

"Not a clue," Bob said.

I glowered. "What do you mean, not a clue? I thought you were his skull Friday."

"Well, yeah," Bob said. His eyelights flickered suddenly, a nervous little dance. "I don't remember very much of it."

I snorted out a laugh. "Bob. You never forget anything."

"No," Bob said. His voice shrank into something very small. "Unless I want to, Harry."

I frowned and took a deep breath. "You're saying that you chose to forget things about Kemmler."

"Or was compelled to," Bob said. "Um. Harry, can I come out? Just inside the lab? You know, while we talk."

I blinked a couple of times. Bob was full of mischief on the best of days. I didn't let him out except on specific intelligence-gathering missions anymore. And while he often pestered me to let him out on one of his perverted minirampages, he had never asked permission to leave his skull for the duration of a chat. "Sure," I told him. "Stay inside the lab and be back in the skull at the end of this conversation."

"Right," Bob said. A small cloud of glowing motes of light the size of campfire sparks came sailing out of the skull's eyes and darted to the far corner of the lab. "So anyway, when are we going to work on the new blasting rod?"

"Bob," I said. "We're talking about The Word of Kemmler."

The lights shot restlessly over to the other side of the lab, swirling through the steps on my stair ladder in a glowing helix. "*You're* talking about The Word of Kemmler," Bob said. The glowing cloud stretched, motes now spiraling up and down the stairs simultaneously. "*I'm* working on my Vegas act. Lookit, I'm DNA."

"Would you stop goofing around? Can you remember anything at all about Kemmler?"

Bob's voice quavered, the motes becoming a vague cloud again. "I can."

"Then tell me what you know."

"Is that a command?"

I blinked. "Do I have to make it one?"

"You don't want to command me to remember, Harry."

"Why not?" I demanded.

The cloud of lights drifted in vague loops around the lab. "Because knowledge is what I am. Losing my knowledge of what I knew of Kemmler took away a...a big piece of my existence. Like if someone had cut off your arm. What's left of what I know of Kemmler is close to the missing pieces."

I thought I started to understand him. "It hurts."

The lights swirled uncertainly. "It also hurts. It's more than that."

"If it hurts," I said, "I'll stop, and you can forget it again when we're done talking."

"But—" Bob said.

"It's a command, Bob. Tell me."

Bob shuddered.

It was a bizarre sight. The cloud of lights shivered for a second, as if in a trembling breath of wind, and then abruptly just *shifted*, flickering to one side as quickly as if I had been looking at it with one eye closed and suddenly switched to the other.

“Kemmler,” Bob said. “Right.” The lights came to rest on the other end of the table in the shape of a perfect sphere. “What do you want to know, wizard?”

I watched the lights warily, but nothing seemed all that wrong. Other than the fact that Bob was suddenly calm. And geometric. “Tell me what The Word of Kemmler is.”

The lights pulsed scarlet. “Knowledge. Truth. Power.”

“Uh,” I said, “a little more specific?”

“The master wrote down his teachings, wizard, so that those who came after him could learn from him. Could learn about the true power of magic.”

“You mean,” I said, “so that they could learn about necromancy.”

Bob’s voice took on the edge of a sneer. “What you call magic is nothing but a mound of parlor tricks, beside the power to master life and death itself.”

“That’s an opinion, I guess,” I said.

“More than that,” Bob said. “It is a truth. A truth that reveals itself to those who seek it out.”

“What do you mean?” I said slowly.

There was a flash, and a pair of white eyes formed in the glittering cloud of red points of light. They weren’t pleasant. “Shall I show you the start of the path?” Bob’s voice said. “Death, Dresden, is a part of you. It is woven into the fabric of your being. You are a collection of pieces, each of them dying and in turn being reborn and remade.”

The white lights were cold. Not mountain-spring cold, either. Graveyard-mist cold. But I’d never seen anything quite like them before. And there was no sense interrupting Bob when he was finally spilling some information.

Besides. Fascinating light.

“Dead flesh adorns you even now. Nails. Hair. You tend them and caress them like any other mortal. Your women decorate them. Entice with them. Death is not a thing to be feared, boy. She is a lover who waits to take you

into her arms. You can feel her, if you know what her touch is like. Cold, slow, sweet.”

He was right. A cold, tingling nonfeeling was glittering over my fingernails and my scalp. For a second I thought that it hurt, but then I realized that it was only a shivering sensation where that cold energy brushed close to the blood pulsing beneath my skin. It was where they met that it felt uncomfortable. Without the blood, the cold would be a pure, endless sweetness.

“Take a little of death inside, boy. And it will lead you to more. Open your mouth.”

I did. I was staring at the light in any case, and it was amazing enough to merit a bit of gaping. I barely noticed a frozen mote of dark blue light, like the corpse of a tiny star, that appeared from one of the spirit’s white eyes and began drifting toward my mouth. The cold sensation grew, and it hit my tongue like a thermonuclear peppermint, freezing hot, searingly bitter and sweet and—

—and *wrong*. I spat it out, recoiling, throwing my arms up in front of my face. I fell to the floor, numbness spreading.

“Too late!” crowed the spirit. It shot into the air, swirling around over me, gloating. “Whatever you have done to my thoughts, the master will not be pleased that you have meddled with his servant.”

The cold started spreading, and it wasn’t purely physical. There was an empty, heartless void to it, a starless, frozen quality that raked at me—not just my body, but *me*—with a mindless hunger. And I could feel it sending tendrils out through me, slowing my heartbeat, making it impossible to breathe.

“Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for that?” the spirit purred, drifting back and forth over me. “Sitting there locked behind my own thoughts? Waiting for the chance to fight free? Finally, you thick-witted ogre, I get to leave your stupidity behind.”

“Bob,” I choked out. “This conversation is over.”

The spirit’s scarlet lights flared to sudden, incandescent rage and it screamed, a wailing sound that rattled my shelves and felt like it was splitting my head. Then the cloud was ripped backward across the room, sucked into the eyeholes of the skull as though down a hellish drain.

Once the last of the motes went flickering back into the skull, the horrible cold faltered a little, and I curled up, focusing my will and trying

to push it away. It took me a while, and that hideous void-presence lingered against my fingernails, even after I could feel my fingers again, but after a little while I was able to sit up.

After that I just curled up my knees against my chest, shocked and scared half out of my mind. I had always known that Bob was an incredibly valuable asset, and that no spirit with as much knowledge as he had could be weak. But I had not been at all prepared for the sheer power he had wielded, or for the malice with which he did it. Bob wasn't supposed to be a sleeping nightmare waiting to wake up. Bob was supposed to be my wisecracking porta-geek.

Good Lord, I couldn't remember the last time I'd confronted a demon with that much raw psychic power. If I'd been a second slower, or—stars and stones—if I hadn't remembered the condition that would banish Bob back to the skull and once again remove the dark memories, I'd be dead now. Or maybe dead and then some.

And it would have been my own stupid fault, too.

"Harry?" Bob said.

I flinched and let out a small squeaking sound. Then I got hold of myself and blinked up at the skull. It rested on its shelf, and its orange-gold eye lights were back to their usual color. "Oh. Hey."

Bob's voice was very quiet. "Your lips are blue."

"Yeah."

"What happened?" Bob asked.

"It got kind of cold in here."

"Me."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Harry," Bob said. "I tried to tell you."

"I know," I said. "I had no idea."

"Kemmler was bad, Harry," Bob said. "He...he took what I was. And he twisted it. I destroyed most of my memories of my time with him, and I locked away everything I couldn't. Because I didn't want to be like that."

"You won't," I told him quietly. "Now hear this, Bob. I command you never to recover those memories again. Never to let them out again. Never to obey any command to unleash them again. From here on out they sleep with the fishes. Understand me?"

"If I do," Bob said carefully, "I won't be able to do much to help you, Harry. You'll be on your own."

“Let me worry about that,” I said. “It’s a command, Bob.”

The skull let out a slow sigh of relief. “Thank you, Harry.”

“Don’t mention it,” I said. “Literally.”

“Right,” he said.

“Okay. Let’s see,” I said. “Can you still remember general information about Kemmler?”

“Nothing you couldn’t find in other places. But general knowledge I learned when Justin was with the Wardens, yes.”

“All right, then. You—that is, that other you—said that Kemmler had written down his teachings, when I asked him what The Word of Kemmler was. So I figure it’s a book.”

“Maybe,” Bob said. “Council records stated that Kemmler had written three books: *The Blood of Kemmler*, *The Mind of Kemmler*, and *The Heart of Kemmler*.”

“He published them?”

“Self-published,” Bob said. “He started spreading them around Europe.”

“Resulting in what?”

“Way too many penny-ante sorcerers getting their hands on some real necromancy.”

I nodded. “What happened?”

“The Wardens put on their own epic production of *Fahrenheit 451*,” Bob said. “They spent about twenty years finding and destroying copies. They think they accounted for all of them.”

I whistled. “So if *The Word of Kemmler* is a fourth manuscript?”

“That could be bad,” Bob said.

“Why?”

“Because some of Kemmler’s disciples escaped the White Council’s dragnet,” Bob said. “They’re still running around. If they get a new round of necro-at-home lessons to expand their talents, they could use it to do fairly horrible things.”

“They’re wizards?”

“Black wizards, yes,” Bob said.

“How many?”

“Four or five at the most, but the Wardens’ information was very sketchy.”

“Doesn’t sound like anything the Wardens can’t handle,” I said.

“Unless what’s in the fourth book contains the rest of what Kemmler had to teach them,” Bob said. “In which case, we might end up with four or five Kemmlers running around.”

“Holy crap,” I said. I plunked my tired ass down on my stool and rubbed at my head. “And it’s no coincidence that it’s almost Halloween.”

“The season when the barriers between the mortal realm and the spirit world will be weakest,” Bob said.

“Like when that asshole the Nightmare was hunting down my friends,” I said. I peered at Bob. “But for him to do that, he had to weaken the barriers even more. He and Bianca had tormented all those ghosts to start making the barriers more unstable. Would it have to be ghosts to stir up the kind of turbulence you’d need for big magic?”

“No,” Bob said. “But that’s one way. Otherwise you’d have to use some rituals or sacrifices of one kind or another.”

“You mean deaths,” I said.

“Exactly.”

I frowned, nodding. “They’d have to invest some energy early to get things moving for a big necromantic working. Like bouncing on a diving board a couple of times before you jump.”

“An accurate, if crude aphorism,” Bob said. “You’d have to do a little prework if you wanted to start working Kemmler-level necromancy, even on Halloween.” He sighed. “Though that doesn’t really help you much.”

I got up and headed for the stepladder. “It helps more than you know, man. I’m getting you new romances.”

The skull’s eye lights brightened. “You are? I mean, of course you are. But why?”

“Because if someone’s setting up for big bad juju, they’ll have left bodies. If they’ve done that, then I have a place to start tracking them and finding out what’s going on.”

“Harry?” Bob called up as I left the lab. “Where are you going?”

I stuck my head back down the trapdoor and said, “The morgue.”

Chapter Four

Chicago has a bitchin' morgue. You can't call it a "morgue" anymore because it's the Forensic Institute now. It isn't run by a "coroner" either, because now it's a medical examiner. It's on West Harrison Street, which is located in a fairly swanky industrial park, mostly specializing in various biotech industries. It's pretty. There are wide green lawns, carefully kept and trimmed, complete with sculpted trees and bushes, a fantastic view of the city's skyline, and quick access to the freeway.

It's upscale, sure. But it's also very quiet. Despite the gorgeous landscaping and a more antiseptic naming scheme, it's where they bring the dead to be poked and prodded.

I parked the Blue Beetle in the visitor's parking lot—of the complex next door. The morgue had more than average security, and I didn't want to advertise my presence. I grabbed my bribe from the backseat and headed for the front door of the Office of the Medical Examiner. I knocked, flashing my little laminated card I got from the police that makes me look like an official policelike person. The door buzzed, and I went in, nodding to a comfortably heavysset security guard reading a magazine behind a nondescript desk to one side of the entry area.

"Phil," I said.

"Evening, Dresden," he said. "Official?"

I held up the wooden box packed with McAnally's microbrew. "Unofficial."

"Hosannah," drawled Phil. "I like unofficial better." He put his feet back up on the desk and opened up his magazine again. I left the beer on the floor next to the desk, where it would be out of sight from the door. "How come I never heard of this bar?"

"Just a little local tavern," I said. I didn't add, *that caters to the supernatural community and doesn't exactly try to attract the attention of locals.*

“I’ll have to get you to take me by sometime.”

“Sure,” I said. “Is he here?”

“Back in the slabs,” he said, reaching down for one of the ales. Phil opened the lid with a thumb and took a swig, eyes on his magazine again. “Ahhhhh,” he said, his tone philosophical. “You know, if anyone had come through that door, I’d tell him to get his ass going before someone drives up or something.”

“Gone,” I said, and hurried back into the hallways behind the entry area.

There were several slabs—I mean, examination rooms—in the morgue—that is, in the Forensic Institute. But I knew that the guy I was looking for would be in the smallest, crummiest room, the one farthest away from the entrance.

Waldo Butters, other than having the extreme misfortune of being born to parents with little to no ability to bestow a manly name upon their son, had also been cursed with a sense of honesty, a measure of integrity, and enough moral courage to make him act on them. When he’d examined the corpses of a bunch of things I’d burned mostly to briquettes, he’d pronounced them “humanlike, but definitely nonhuman,” in his report.

It was a fair enough description of the remains of a bunch of batlike Red Court vampires, but since everyone knew that there were no such things as “humanlike nonhumans,” and the remains were obviously human corpses that had been horribly twisted by intense heat, Butters wound up sitting in a psych ward for ninety days for observation. After that, he had been forced to wage a legal battle just to keep his job. His superiors didn’t want him around, and they handed him the worst parts of the job they could come up with, but Butters stuck it out. He mostly worked the overnight shift and weekends.

It had the happy side effect of producing an ME who regarded the establishment with the same sort of cheerful disrespect I my-self occasionally indulged in. Which was damned handy when, for example, one needed a bullet removed from one’s arm without intruding upon the law enforcement community’s busy schedule.

The doctor was in. I heard polka music oompahing cheerfully through the hall as I approached the room. But the music was off, somehow. Butters normally played his polka records and CDs loud, and I had gotten used to hearing the elite performers of the polka universe. Whoever he was playing now sounded admirably energetic, but lumpy and uneven. There were odd

jerks and breaks in the music, though the whole of it somehow managed to hang on the rhythm of a single bass drum. On the whole, it made the music happy, lively, and somehow misshapen.

I opened the door and regarded the source of the Quasimodo Polka.

Butters was a little guy, maybe five-foot-three in his shoes, maybe 120 pounds soaking wet. He was dressed in blue hospital scrubs and hiking boots. He had a shock of wiry black hair that gave him a perpetual look of surprise that stopped just short of being a perpetual look of recent electrocution. He was wearing Tom Cruise sunglasses and had transformed himself into Polkastein.

A bass drum was strapped to his back, and a couple of wires ran to his ankles from a pair of beaters mounted on the frame. The drum beat in time to stomps of his feet. A small but genuine tuba hung from his slender shoulders, and there were more strings attached to his elbows, which moved back and forth in time to “oom” and “pah” respectively. He held an accordion in his hands, strapped to the harness on his chest. A clarinet had been clamped to the accordion so that the end was near his mouth, and there was, I swear to God, a cymbal on a frame held to his head.

Butters marched in place, red-faced, sweating, and beaming as he thumped and oompahed and blared accordion music. I just stood there staring, because while I have seen a lot of weird things, I hadn’t ever seen that. Butters wrapped up the polka and energetically banged his head against the tuba, producing a deafening clash from the cymbal. The motion brought me into his peripheral vision and he jumped in surprise.

The motion overbalanced him and he fell amidst a clatter of cymbal, a honk of tuba, a fitful stutter of drum, and then lay on the floor while his accordion wheezed out.

“Butters,” I said.

“Harry,” he panted from the pile of polka. “Cool pants.”

“I can see you’re busy.”

He missed the sarcasm. “Heck, yeah. Gotta get set. Oktoberfest Battle of the Bands tomorrow night.”

“I thought you weren’t going to enter after last year.”

“Hah,” Butters said, sneering defiantly. “I’m not going to let the Jolly Rogers laugh at me like that. I mean, come on. Five guys named Roger. How much polka can be in their souls?”

“I have no freaking clue,” I answered truthfully.

Butters flashed me a grin. "I'll get them this year."

I couldn't help it: I started smiling. "Need any help getting out of there?"

"Nah, I got it," he said brightly, and started unstrapping himself. "Surprised to see you. Your checkup isn't until next week. Hand bothering you?"

"Not really," I said. "Wanted to talk to you about—"

"Oh!" he said. He hopped up from the stuff and left it on the floor so that he could scamper toward a desk in the corner. "Before you get started, I found something interesting."

"Butters," I said, "I'd like to chat, man, but I'm in a pretty big hurry."

He paused, crestfallen. "Really?"

"Yeah. It's a case, and I need to find out if you know anything that could help me."

"Oh," he said. "Well, you have cases all the time. *This* is important. I've been doing a lot of research since you started seeing me about your hand, and the conclusions I've been able to extrapolate from—"

"Butters." I sighed. "Look, I'm in a huge hurry. Five words or less, okay?"

He leaned his hands on his desk and regarded me, eyes sparkling. "I know how wizards live forever." He paused for a thoughtful second and then said, "Wait, that's six words. Never mind, then. What did you want to talk about?"

My mouth fell open. I shut it and glared at him. "No one likes a wiseass, Butters."

He grinned. "I told you it was important."

"Wizards don't live forever," I said. "Just a really long time."

Butters shrugged and kept pulling out file folders. He flicked on a backlight for reading X-ray films, and started pulling them from the folders and putting them on the light. "Hey, I'm still not sure I buy into this whole hidden-world-of-magic thing. But from what you've told me, wizards can live five or six times as long as the average human. That's closer to forever than anyone I know. And what I've seen makes me think there must be something to it. Come here."

I did, frowning at the X-rays. "Hey. Aren't these mine?"

"Yep," Butters confirmed. "After I switched to one of the older machines, I got about fifteen percent of them to come out," he said. "And

there are three or four from your records that managed to survive whatever it is about you that screws up X-rays.”

“Ugh. This is that gunshot wound I got in Michigan,” I said, pointing at the first. It showed a number of fracture lines in my hip bone, where a small-caliber bullet had hit me. I had barely avoided a shattered pelvis and probable death. “They got this one after they got the cast off.”

“Right,” Butters said. “And here, this is one from a couple of years ago.” He pointed at a second shot. “See the fracture lines? They’re brighter, where the bone re-fused. Leaves that signature.”

“Right,” I said. “So?”

“So,” Butters said. “Look at this one.” He flipped up a third X-ray. It was much like the others, but without any of the bright or dark lines. He flicked it with a finger and looked at me, eyes wide.

“What?” I asked.

He blinked, slowly. Then he said, “Harry. This is an X-ray I took two months ago. Notice the lack of anything wrong.”

“So?” I asked. “It healed, right?”

He made an exasperated sound. “Harry, you are dense. Bones don’t *do* that. You carry marks where they re-fused for the rest of your life. Or rather, I would. *You* don’t.”

I frowned. “What’s that got to do with wizard life span?”

Butters waved his hand impatiently. “Here, here are some more.” He slapped up more X-rays. “This is a partial stress fracture to the arm that didn’t get shot. You got it in that fall from the train a couple nights after we met,” he said. “It was just a crack. You didn’t even know you had it, and it was mild enough that it just needed a splint for a few days. It was off before you were ambulatory.”

“What’s so odd about that?”

“Nothing,” Butters said. “But look, here it is again. There’s a fuse marker, and in the third one, poof, it’s gone. Your arm is back to normal.”

“Maybe I just drink too much milk or something,” I said.

Butters snorted. “Harry, look. You’re a tough guy. You’ve been injured a lot.” He pulled out my medical file and thumped it down with a grunt of effort. Granted, there are phone books smaller than my hospital file. “And I’m willing to bet you’ve had plenty of boobos you never saw a doctor about.”

“Sure,” I said.

“You’re at least as battered as a professional athlete,” Butters said. “I mean, like a hockey player or football player. Maybe as much as some race-car drivers.”

“They get battered?” I asked.

“When you go around driving half a ton of steel at a third the speed of sound for a living, you get all kinds of injuries,” he said seriously. “Even the crashes that aren’t spectacular are pretty vicious on the human body at the speeds they’re going. Ever been in a low-speed accident?”

“Yeah. Sore for a week.”

“Exactly,” Butters said. “Multiply that. These guys and other athletes take a huge beating, right? They develop a mental and physical toughness that lets them ignore a lot of pain and overcome the damage, but the damage gets done to their bodies nonetheless. And it’s cumulative. That’s why you see football players, boxers, a lot of guys like that all beat to hell by the time they’re in their thirties. They regain most of the function after an injury, but the damage is still there, and it adds up bit by bit.”

“Again I ask, what’s that got to do with me?”

“You aren’t cumulative,” Butters said.

“Eh?”

“Your body doesn’t get you functional again and then leave off,” Butters said. “It continues repairing damage until it’s *gone*.” He stared at me. “Do you understand how *incredibly significant* that is?”

“I guess not,” I said.

“Harry, that’s probably *why* people age to begin with,” he said. “Your body is a big collection of cells, right? Most of them get damaged or wear out and die. Your body replaces them. It’s a continual process. But the thing is, every time the body makes a replacement, it’s a little less perfect than the one that came before it.”

“That copy-of-a-copy thing,” I said. “I’ve heard about that, yeah.”

“Right,” Butters said. “That’s how you’re able to heal these injuries. It’s why you have the potential to live so long. Your copies are perfect. Or at least a hell of a lot closer to it than most folks.”

I blinked. “You’re saying I can heal any injury?”

“Well,” he said, “not like mutant X-factor healing. If someone cuts an artery, you’re gonna bleed out. But if you survive it, given enough time your body seems to be able to replace things almost perfectly. It might take

you months, even several years, but you can get better when other people wouldn't."

I looked at him, and then at my gloved hand. I tried to talk, but my throat wouldn't work.

"Yeah," the little doctor said quietly. "I think you're going to get your hand back at some point. It didn't mortify or come off. There's still living muscle tissue there. Given enough time, I think you'll be able to replace scar tissue and regrow the nerves."

"That..." I said, and choked up. I swallowed. "That would be nice."

"We can help it along, I think," Butters said. "Physical therapy. I was going to talk to you about it next visit. We can go over it then."

"Butters," I said. "Uh. Wow, man. This is..."

"Really exciting," he said, eyes gleaming.

"I was going to say amazing," I said quietly. "And then I was going to say thank-you."

He grinned and twitched a shoulder in a shrug. "I calls them like I see them."

I stared down at my hand and tried to twiddle my fingers. They sort of twitched. "Why?" I asked.

"Why what?"

"Why am I able to make good copies?"

He blew out a breath and pushed his hand through his wiry hair, grinning. "I have no freaking clue. Neat, huh?"

I stared down at the X-ray film for a moment more, then put my hand in my duster's pocket. "I hoped you could help me get some information," I said.

"Sure, sure," Butters replied. He went to his polka suit and started taking it apart. "Is something going on?"

"I hope not," I said. "But let's just say I've got a real bad feeling. I need to know if there have been any odd deaths in the area in the past day or two."

Butters frowned. "Odd how?"

"Unusually violent," I said. "Or marks of some kind of murder method consistent with a ritual killing. Hell, I'll even take signs of torture prior to death."

"Doesn't sound like anyone I've met," Butters said. He took off his sunglasses and put on his normal black-rimmed glasses. "Though I'm not

done for tonight. Let me check the records and see who's in the hiz-ouse."

"Thank you," I said.

Butters knocked a few flyers off his chair and sat down. He dragged a keyboard out from under a medical magazine and gave me a significant look.

"Oh, right," I said. I backed away from his desk to the far side of the room. Proximity to me tended to make computers malfunction to one degree or another. Murphy still hadn't forgiven me for blowing out her hard drive, even though it had happened only the once.

Butters got on his computer. "No," he said, after a moment's reading and key thumping. "Wait. Here's a guy who got knifed, but it happened way up in the northwest corner of the state."

"No good," I said. "It would have to be local. Within a county or three of Chicago."

"Hmph," Butters said. "You investigative types are always so picky about this kind of thing." He scanned over the screen. "Drive-by shooting victim?"

"Definitely no," I said. "For a ritual killing it would be a lot more intimate."

"Think you're out of luck then, Harry," he said. "There were some high-profile stiffs that came in, and the day crew took them all."

"Hmm."

"Tell me about it. I got stuck with a wino and some poor bastard who got caught under a tractor and had to be tested for drugs and booze earlier tonight, but that's..." He paused. "Hello."

"Hello?"

"*That's* odd."

That perked up my ears, metaphorically speaking. "What's odd?"

"My boss, Dr. Brioche, passed over one of his subjects. It got moved to my docket, but I didn't get a memo about it. Not even an e-mail, the bastard."

I frowned. "That happen a lot?"

"Attempts to make it look like I'm neglecting my job so he can fire me?" Butters said. "That one's new, but it's in the spirit of my whole history here."

"Maybe he was just busy today."

“And maybe Liv Tyler is waiting in my bedroom to rub my feet,” Butters responded.

“Heh. Who’s the stiff?”

“A Mr. Eduardo Anthony Mendoza,” Butters read. “He was in a head-on collision with a Buick on the expressway. Only he was a pedestrian.” Butters scrunched up his nose. “Looks like it will be a nasty one. No wonder high-and-mighty Brioche didn’t want to handle it.”

I mused. It wasn’t what I was looking for, but there was something about the situation around that corpse that set off my internal alarm bells. “Mind if I ask you to indulge an intuition?”

“Sure. I’m as polka empowered as I’m going to get, anyway. Lemme break out my gear and we’ll take a look-see at the late Eddie Mendoza.”

“Cool,” I said. I leaned against the wall and folded my arms, preparing to settle in for a while.

The door to the examination room slammed open, and Phil the security guard walked in with a businesslike stride.

Except Phil’s throat had been slit open from ear to ear, and blood covered his upper body in a sheet of ugly splatters. His face was absolutely white. There was no chance whatsoever that poor Phil was alive.

That didn’t stop him from striding into the room, seizing Butters’s desk, and throwing it, computer, heavy file cabinet, and all, into the far wall of the room, where it shattered with a thunderous sound of impact. Butters stared at Phil with horror, then let out a somewhat rabbitlike shriek and scurried back from him.

“Don’t move!” thundered a deep, resonant voice from the hallway outside. Dead Phil froze in his tracks. A big man in a khaki trench coat and, I swear to God, a dark fedora strode into the room, intent on Butters, and he didn’t see me against the wall. I hesitated for a second, still shocked at the suddenness of it all. Three other men in coats, all grey of face and purposeful of motion, flanked him.

“Don’t hurt the little coroner, gentlemen,” the man said. “We’ll need him. For a little while.”

Chapter

Five

The man in the fedora took a step toward Butters, drumming a slender book against his thigh with one hand. “Stand aside,” he muttered, and dead Phil sidestepped.

Butters had scrambled back into a corner, his eyes the size of glazed doughnuts behind his glasses. “Wow,” he babbled. “Great entrance. Love the hat.”

The guy in the fedora took a step forward and reached out with his other hand, at which point I decided to act. A raised hand isn’t much in the regular world, but from a guy in a long coat with his own flock of zombies it had to be at least as menacing as pointing a gun.

“That will be enough,” I said, and I said it loud enough to hurt ears. I stepped away from the wall with my left hand extended. My silver bracelet of heat-warped shields hung on my wrist, and I readied my will, pushing enough power into the bracelet to prepare a shield to leap up immediately. The bracelet was still pretty banged-up from the beating it had taken the last time I’d used it, and I’d only barely gotten it working again. As a result, it channeled the energy pretty sloppily, and blue-white sparks leaped out and fell to the floor in a steady drizzle. “Put your hand down and step away from the coroner.”

The man turned to face me, book thumping steadily against his leg. For a second I thought he was another dead man himself, his face was so pale—but spots of color appeared high on his cheeks, faint but there. He had a long face, and though it was pale it was leathery, as if he’d spent years in the blowing desert wind and sand without seeing the sun. He had dark eyes, thick grey sideburns, no beard, and a scar twisted his upper lip into a perpetual sneer.

“Who,” said the man, his accent thick and British, “are you?”

“The Great Pumpkin,” I responded. “I’ve risen from the pumpkin patch a bit early because Butters is just that nifty. And you are?”

The man studied me in silence for a long second, eyes focused on my sparking wrist, then on my throat, where my mother's silver pentacle amulet was probably lying outside my shirt. "You may call me Grevane. Walk away, boy."

"Or what?" I said.

Grevane gave me a chilly little smile, thumping his book, and nodded at his unmoving companions. "There's room in my car for one more."

"I've got a job already," I said. "But there's no reason for this to get nasty. You're going to stand right there while Butters and me leave."

"And I," he said, his voice annoyed.

"What's that?"

"Butters and I, fool. Do you seriously think that a defensive shield barely held together by a clumsy, crude little focus will intimidate me into allowing you to leave?"

"No," I said, and drew my .44 revolver from my duster's pocket. I pointed it at him and thumbed back the trigger. "That's why I brought this."

He lifted his eyebrows. "You intend to murder me *in cruor gelidus*?"

"No, I'll do it right here," I said. "Butters, get up. Come over here to me."

The little guy hauled himself to his feet, shaking, and edged around the empty, staring gaze of the late Phil.

"Good," I said. "This is moving along nicely, Grevane. Keep it up and I won't need to make Forensics pick your teeth out of that wall behind you."

Butters scuttled over to me while Grevane thumped his book on his leg. The necromancer stared at me, barely sparing a glance for Butters. Then a slow and fairly creepy smile spread over his face. "You are not a Warden."

"I flunked the written."

His nostrils flared. "Not one of the Council's guard dogs. You are, in fact, more of my own persuasion."

"I really doubt that," I said.

Grevane had narrow, yellow teeth and a crocodile's smile. "Don't play games. I can smell the true magic on you."

The last person to talk about "true magic" had been necro-Bob. I had to fight off a shiver. "Uh. I guess that's the last time I buy generic deodorant."

"Perhaps we can make an arrangement," Grevane said. "This need not end in bloodshed—particularly not now, so close to the end of the race. Join

me against the others. A living lieutenant is far more useful to me than a dead fool.”

“Tempting,” I told him in the voice I usually reserved for backed-up toilets. Butters got to me, and I bumped him toward the door with my hip. He took the hint instantly, and I sidestepped to the door of the room with him. I kept my eyes and my gun on Grevane, my readied bracelet drizzling heatless sparks to the floor. “But I don’t think I like your management technique. Butters, check the hall.”

Butters bobbed his head out and looked nervously around. “I don’t see anyone.”

“Can you lock that door?”

Keys rattled. “Yes,” he said.

“Get ready to do it,” I said. I stepped out in the hall, slammed the door shut, and snapped, “Lock it. Hurry.”

Butters fumbled with a key. He jammed one in the door and turned it. Heavy security bolts slid to with a comfortably weighty snap an instant before something heavy and solid hit the door hard enough for me to feel the floor rattle through my boots. A second later the door jumped again, and a fist-sized dent mushroomed half an inch out of its center.

“Oh, God,” Butters babbled. “Oh, God, that was Phil. What is that? What is happening?”

“Right there with you, man,” I said. I grabbed him and started walking down the hall as quickly as I could drag the little guy. “Who else has keys to the door?”

“What?” Butters blinked for a second. “Uh. Uh. The other doctors. Day security. And Phil.”

The door rattled again, dented again, and then went silent.

“Grevane’s figured that out too,” I said. “Come on, before he finds the right key. Do you have your car keys with you?”

“Yes, yes, wait, oh, yes, right here,” Butters said. His teeth were chattering together so loudly that he could barely speak clearly, and he stumbled every couple of steps. “God. Oh, God, it’s *real*.”

In the halls behind us, metal clicked and scraped on metal. Someone was trying keys in a lock. “Butters,” I said. I grabbed his shoulders and had to resist the urge to slap him in the face, like in the movies. “Do what I tell you. Stop thinking. Think later. Move now or there won’t *be* a later.”

He stared at me, and for a second I thought he was going to throw up. Then he swallowed, nodded once, and said, "Okay."

"Good. We run to your car. Come on."

Butters nodded and took off for the front of the building at a dead sprint. He accelerated a lot faster than I did, but I have long legs and I caught up pretty quickly. Butters stopped to hit the buzzer at the guard station, and I held the door open wide enough to let him out first. He turned right and ran for the parking lot, and I was only a couple of feet behind him.

We rounded the corner of the building, and Butters dashed toward a pint-sized pickup truck parked in the nearest space. I followed him, and after the silence of the morgue, the night sounds of the city were a blaring music. Traffic hissed by in an automotive river on the highway. Sirens sounded in the distance, ambulance rather than patrol car. Somewhere within a two-hundred-mile radius, one of those enormous, thumping bass stereos pounded out a steady beat almost too low to hear.

The light in the parking lot was out, making everything dark and hazy, but the scent of gasoline came sharp to my nose, and I seized Butters's collar and pulled. The little guy choked and all but fell down, but stopped.

"Don't," I said, and slipped my fingers under the pygmy truck's hood. It flipped up, already open.

The engine had been torn apart. A snapped drive belt hung out like the tongue of a dead steer. Wires were strewn everywhere, and finger-sized holes had been driven into plastic fluid tanks. Coolant and windshield cleaner still dribbled to the parking lot's concrete, and from the smell of it they were mixing with whatever gasoline had been in the tank.

Butters stared at it with wide eyes, panting. "My truck. They killed my truck."

"Looks like," I said, sweeping my gaze around.

"Why did they kill my truck?"

That heavy bass stereo kept rumbling through the October night. I paused for a second, focusing on the sound. It was changing, getting a little bit higher pitched with each beat. I recognized what that meant, and panic slammed through my head for a second.

Doppler effect. The source of the rumbling bass was coming toward us.

In the darkness of the industrial park's lanes a pair of headlights flashed on, revealing a car accelerating toward the Forensic Institute. The lights

were spaced widely apart—an older car, and judging by the sound of the engine some kind of gas-guzzling dinosaur like a Caddy or a big Olds.

“Come on,” I snapped to Butters, and started running to the lot next door, back to the Blue Beetle. We’d already been spotted, obviously, so I fired up my shield bracelet again, so that my hand looked like it had been replaced with a small comet. Butters followed, and I had to give the little guy credit—he was a good runner.

“There!” I shouted. “Get to my car!”

“I see it!”

Behind us the rumbling Cadillac swerved into the Institute’s parking lot and lurched over a concrete-encased grassy median, sparks flying from its undercarriage. The car roared up onto the grass and skidded to a broadside stop. The door flew open and a man got out.

I got a half-decent glance at him in the backwash of the Caddy’s headlights. Medium height at most, long, thinning hair, and pale, loose skin with a lot of liver spots. He moved stiffly, like someone with arthritis, but he hauled a long shotgun out of the car with him and raised it to his shoulder with careful deliberation.

I juked to one side so that I was directly between the driver and Butters, twisted at the hips, extended my arm behind me, and raised my shield. It flickered to life in a ghostly half dome just a second before one barrel of the shotgun bloomed with light and thunder. The shield flashed and sent off a cloud of sparks the size of a small house. I felt it falter through the damaged bracelet on my wrist, but it solidified again in time to catch the second blast from the gun’s other barrel. The old man with the shotgun howled in wordless outrage, broke the barrel, and started loading in fresh shells.

Butters was screaming, and I was yelling right along with him. We got to the Beetle and piled in. I stomped the engine to life, and the Beetle sputtered once and then gamely took off at its best clip. I screeched out of the parking lot and onto the road, started to skid, turned into it, fishtailed once, and then shot off down the street.

“Look out!” Butters screamed, pointing.

I snapped a glance over my shoulder and saw Phil and the other three dead men from the examination room sprinting across the grounds at us. I don’t mean they were running. It was a full-out sprint, faster than Phil

could have done even in the prime of his life. I stomped on the gas and kept my eyes on the road.

The Beetle lurched, and Butters cried out, “Holy crap!”

I looked back again and saw Dead Phil clinging to the back of the car. He had to have been standing on the rear bumper. The other three dead men weren’t far behind him, keeping up with the car. Dead Phil drove his hand down at the back of the Beetle, and there was a wrenching sound of impact, then a series of snaps and squeals as he tore the back cover from the car, exposing the engine.

“Take the wheel!” I shouted to Butters. He reached over and seized the steering wheel. I twisted and thrust my right hand at Dead Phil. I focused my attention on the plain silver ring on my middle finger. It was another focus, like the shield bracelet, one designed to store back a little kinetic energy every time I moved my arm. I focused on the ring, clenched my hand into a fist, and shoved it directly at Dead Phil, releasing the energy within.

Dead Phil had raised his arm again, this time to tear apart the Beetle’s engine, but I beat him to the punch. The unseen force unleashed from the ring hit him at the top of his thighs, kicking his whole lower body out straight. The force tore his grip loose from the car, and he tumbled away, hitting the street with heavy, crunching sounds of impact, arms and legs splayed. The other dead men ran past him, one leaping clear over, and Dead Phil lay twitching on the ground like a broken toy.

I got back to the wheel and shifted the car into the next gear. In my rearview mirror I saw the leading dead man spring at us again, but he missed the car by a couple of feet, and I left the rest of them behind in the darkness, scooting out of the industrial park and onto public streets.

I drove for a while, taking a lot of unnecessary turns. I didn’t think anyone was pursuing us, but I didn’t want to take the chance that the old man might have gotten back into his Caddy and onto our tails. Maybe ten minutes went by before I started breathing easier, and I finally felt safe enough to pull over into a well-lit convenience-store parking lot.

I started shaking as soon as I set the parking brake. Adrenaline does that to me. I usually get along just fine when the actual crisis is in progress, but after it’s over, my body makes up for the lost terror. I closed my eyes and tried to keep my breathing slow and calm, but it was a fight to do it. There wasn’t anything I could do about the trembling.

It had been getting harder and harder to maintain my composure ever since the battle where I nearly lost my hand. The emotions I'd always felt seemed to be hitting me harder and harder lately, and sometimes I had to literally close my eyes and count to ten to keep from losing control. Right then I wanted to scream and howl—partly in joy at being alive, and partly in rage that someone had tried to kill me. I wanted to call up my power and start laying waste with it, to feel the raw energy of creation scorching through my thoughts and body, mastered by raw will. I wanted to cut loose.

But I couldn't do that. Even among the strongest wizards on the planet, I'm no lightweight. I don't have the finesse and class and experience that a lot of the older practitioners do, but when it comes to raw metaphysical muscle, I rank in the top thirty or forty wizards alive. I had a ton of strength, but I didn't always have the fine control to go with it—that's why I had to use specially prepared articles such as my bracelet and my ring to focus that power. Even with them, it wasn't always easy to be precise. The last time I had surrendered my self-control and really cut loose with my power, I burned as many as a dozen people to scorched skeletons.

I had a responsibility to keep that destructive strength in check; to use it to help people, to protect them. It didn't matter that I still felt terrified. It didn't matter that my hand was screaming with pain. It didn't matter that my car had been mutilated yet again, or that someone had tried to kill one of the few people in town I considered a real friend.

I had to hold back. Be careful. Think clearly.

"Harry?" Butters asked after a minute. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just give me a minute."

"I don't understand this," he said. His voice didn't sound any too steady either. "What just happened?"

"You don't want to know," I said.

"Yes, I do."

"Trust me," I said. "You don't want to be involved in this kind of business."

"Why not?"

"You'll get hurt. Or killed. Don't go looking for trouble."

He let out a frustrated neighing sound. "Those people came for me. I didn't go looking for them. *They* were looking for *me*."

He had a point, but even so, Butters was not someone I would want to see involved in a conflict between people like Grevane and his dead men and

his liver-skinned partner. Mortals usually didn't fare too well when it came to tangling with preternatural bad guys. In my day I'd seen dozens of men and women die from it, despite everything I did to help them.

"This is unreal," Butters said. "I know you and Murphy have talked about this black-magic supernatural stuff a lot. And I've seen some things that are tough to explain. But...I never imagined something like this could happen."

"You're happier that way," I said. "Hell, if I could do it, I might want to forget I ever found out about any of it."

"I'm happier being scared?" he asked almost timidly. "I'm happier wondering if maybe my bosses were right the whole time, and I really am insane? I'm happier being in danger, and having no idea what to do about it?"

I didn't have a quick answer for that one. I stared at my hands. The trembling had almost stopped.

"Help me understand this, Harry," he said. "Please."

Well, dammit.

I raked the fingers of my right hand through my hair. Grevane had been after Butters, specifically. He had backup waiting outside, and he trashed Butters's truck to make sure the little guy couldn't escape. He openly said that he needed Butters, and needed him in one piece to boot.

All of which meant that Butters was in very real—and very serious—danger. And by now I've learned that I can't always protect everyone. I screw up sometimes, like everyone else. I make stupid mistakes.

If I kept quiet, if I forced Butters to wear blinders, he wouldn't be able to do jack to protect himself. If I made a bad call and something happened to him, it would be my fault that he didn't have every chance to survive. His blood would be on my hands.

I couldn't take that choice away from him. I wasn't his father or his guardian angel or his sovereign king. I wasn't blessed with the wisdom of Solomon, or with the foresight of a prophet. If I chose Butters's path for him, in some ways it would make me no different from Grevane, or any number of other beings, human and nonhuman alike, who sought to control others.

"If I tell you this," I said quietly, "it could be bad for you."

"Bad how?"

“It could force you to keep secrets that people would kill you for knowing. It could change the way you think and feel. It could really screw up your life.”

“Screw up my life?” He stared at me for a second and then said, deadpan, “I’m a five-foot-three, thirty-seven-year-old, single, Jewish medical examiner who needs to pick up his lederhosen from the dry cleaners so that he can play in a one-man polka band at Oktoberfest tomorrow.” He pushed up his glasses with his forefinger, folded his arms, and said, “Do your worst.”

The words were light, but there was both fear and resolve just under the surface of them. Butters was smart enough to be scared. But he was also a fighter. I could respect him for both.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s talk.”

Chapter Six

Butters hadn't taken time to collect his coat when he left, and the last time the Beetle's heater had worked was before the demolition of the Berlin Wall. I ducked into the store, got us each a cup of coffee, then untwisted the wire that holds down the lid of the storage trunk. I dug out a worn but mostly clean blanket that I kept in the trunk to cover the short-barreled shotgun I stored in the event that I would ever need to give Napoleon's charging hordes a taste of the grape. Given the way the night was going, I got the shotgun, too, and slipped it into the backseat.

Butters accepted the blanket and the coffee gratefully, though he shivered hard enough to slop a little of the drink over the side of the cup. I sipped a little coffee, slipped the cup into the holder I'd rigged on the car's dashboard, and got moving again. I didn't want to wait around in the same place for too long.

"All right," I told Butters. "There are two things you have to accept if you want to understand what's going on."

"Hit me."

"First the tough one. Magic is real."

I could feel him looking at me for a moment. "What do you mean by that?"

"There's an entire world that exists alongside the everyday life of mankind. There are powers, nations, monsters, wars, feuds, alliances—everything. Wizards are a part of it. So are a lot of other things you've heard about in stories, and even more you've never heard of."

"What kind of things?"

"Vampires. Werewolves. Faeries. Demons. Monsters. It's all real."

"Heh," Butters said. "Heh, heh. You're joking. Right?"

"No joke. Come on, Butters. You know that there are weird things out there. You've seen the evidence of them."

He pushed a shaking hand through his hair. “Well, yes. Some. But, Harry, you’re talking about something else entirely here. I mean, if you want to tell me that people have the ability to sense and affect their environment in ways we don’t really understand yet, I can accept that. Maybe you call it magic, and someone else calls it ESP, and someone else calls it the Force, but it’s not a new idea. Maybe there are people whose genetic makeup makes them better able to employ these abilities. Maybe it even does things like make them reproduce their DNA more clearly than other people so that they can live for a very long time. But that is not the same thing as saying that there’s an army of weird monsters living right under our noses and we don’t even notice them.”

“What about those corpses you analyzed?” I said. “Humanoid but definitely not human.”

“Well,” Butters said defensively, “it’s a big universe. I think it’s sort of arrogant to assume that we’re the only thinking beings in it.”

“Those corpses were the bodies of vampires of the Red Court, and you don’t want to meet a living one. There were a lot of them in town at one point. There aren’t so many now, but there are plenty more where they came from. They’re only one flavor of vampire. And *vampires* are only one flavor of supernatural predator. It’s a jungle out there, Butters, and people aren’t anywhere near the top of the food chain.”

Butters shook his head. “And you’re telling me that nobody knows about it?”

“Oh, lots of people know about it,” I said. “But the ones who are in the know don’t go around talking about it all that much.”

“Why not?”

“Because they don’t want to get locked up in a loony bin for three months for observation, for starters.”

“Oh,” Butters said, flushing. “Yeah. I guess I can see that. What about regular people who see things? Like sightings and close encounters and stuff?”

I blew out a breath. “That’s the second thing you have to understand. People don’t want to accept a reality that frightening. Some of them open their eyes and get involved—like Murphy did. But most of them don’t want anything to do with the supernatural. So they leave it behind and don’t talk about it. Don’t think about it. They don’t want it to be real, and they work really hard to convince themselves that it isn’t.”

“No,” Butters said. “I’m sorry. I just don’t buy that.”

“You don’t need to buy it,” I said. “It’s true. As a race, we’re an enormous bunch of idiots. We’re more than capable of ignoring facts if the conclusions they lead to make us too uncomfortable. Or afraid.”

“Wait a minute. You’re saying that a whole world, multiple civilizations of scientific study and advancement and theory and application, all based around the notion of observing the universe and studying its laws is...what? In error about dismissing magic as superstition?”

“Not just in error,” I said. “Dead wrong. Because the truth is something that people are afraid to face. They’re terrified to admit that it’s a big universe and we’re not.”

He sipped coffee and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Come on, Butters,” I said. “Look at history. How long did the scholarly institutions of civilization consider Earth to be the center of the universe? And when people came out with facts to prove that it wasn’t, there were riots in the streets. No one wanted to believe that we all lived on an unremarkable little speck of rock in a quiet backwater of one unremarkable galaxy. The world was supposed to be flat, too, until people proved that it wasn’t by sailing all the way around it. No one believed in germs until years and years after someone actually saw one. Biologists scoffed at tales of wild beast-men living in the mountains of Africa, despite eyewitness testimony to the contrary, and pronounced them an utter fantasy—right up until someone plopped a dead mountain gorilla down on their dissecting table.”

He chewed on his lip and watched the streetlights.

“Time after time, history demonstrates that when people don’t want to believe something, they have enormous skills of ignoring it altogether.”

“You’re saying that the entire human race is in denial,” he said.

“Most of the time,” I replied. “It’s not a bad thing. It’s just who we are. But the weird stuff doesn’t care about that—it keeps on happening. Every family’s got a ghost story in it. Most people I’ve talked to have had something happen to them that was impossible to explain. But that doesn’t mean they go around talking about it afterward, because everyone knows that those kinds of things aren’t real. If you start saying that they are, you get the weird looks and jackets with extra-long sleeves.”

“For everyone,” he said, voice still skeptical. “Every time. They just keep quiet and try to forget it.”

“Tell you what, Butters. Let’s drive down to CPD and you can tell them how you were just attacked by a necromancer and four zombies. How they nearly outran a speeding car and murdered a security guard who then got up and threw your desk across the room.” I paused for a moment to let the silence stretch. “What do you think they’d do?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He bowed his head.

“Unnatural things happen all the time,” I said. “But no one talks about it. At least, not openly. The preternatural world is everywhere. It just doesn’t advertise.”

“You do,” Butters said.

“But not many people take me seriously. For the most part even the ones who accept my help just pay the bill, then walk out determined to ignore my existence and get back to their normal life.”

“How could someone do that?” Butters asked.

“Because it’s terrifying,” I said. “Think about it. You find out about monsters that make the creatures in the horror movies look like the Muppets, and that there’s not a damned thing you can do to protect yourself from them. You find out about horrible things that happen—things you would be happier not knowing. So rather than live with the fear, you get away from the situation. After a while you can convince yourself that you must have just imagined it. Or maybe exaggerated it in the remembering. You rationalize whatever you can, forget whatever you can’t, and get back to your life.”

I glanced down at my gloved hand and said, “It’s not their fault, man. I don’t blame them.”

“Maybe,” he said. “But I don’t see how things that hunt and kill human beings could be there among us without our knowing.”

“How big was your graduating class in high school?”

Butters blinked. “What?”

“Just answer me.”

“Uh, about eight hundred.”

“All right,” I said. “Last year in the U.S. alone more than nine hundred thousand people were reported missing and not found.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You can check with the FBI. That’s out of about three hundred million, total population. That breaks down to about one person in three hundred and twenty-five vanishing. Every year. It’s been almost

twenty years since you graduated? So that would mean that between forty and fifty people in your class are gone. Just gone. No one knows where they are.”

Butters shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “So?”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “So they’re missing. Where did they go?”

“Well. They’re missing. If they’re missing, then nobody knows.”

“Exactly,” I said.

He didn’t say anything back.

I let the silence stretch for a minute, just to make the point. Then I started up again. “Maybe it’s a coincidence, but it’s almost the same loss ratio experienced by herd animals on the African savannah to large predators.”

Butters drew his knees up to his chest, huddling farther under the blanket. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Nobody talks about this kind of thing. But all those people are still gone. Maybe a lot of them just cut their ties and left their old lives behind. Maybe some were in accidents of some kind, with the body never found. The point is, people don’t *know*. But because it’s an extremely scary thing to think about, and because it’s a lot easier to just get back to their lives they tend to dismiss it. Ignore it. It’s easier.”

Butters shook his head. “It just sounds so insane. I mean, they’d believe it if they saw it. If someone went on television and—”

“Did what?” I asked. “Bent spoons? Maybe made the Statue of Liberty disappear? Turned a lady into a white tiger? Hell, I’ve *done* magic on television, and everyone not screaming that it was a hoax was complaining that the special effects looked cheap.”

“You mean that clip that WGN news was showing a few years back? With you and Murphy and the big dog and that insane guy with a club?”

“It wasn’t a dog,” I said, and shivered a little myself at the memory. “It was a loup-garou. Kind of a superwerewolf. I killed him with a spell and a silver amulet, right on the screen.”

“Yeah. Everyone was talking about it for a couple of days, but I heard that they found out it was a fake or something.”

“No. Someone disappeared the tape.”

“Oh.”

I stopped at a light and stared at Butters for a second. “When you saw that tape, did you believe it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He took a breath. “Well, because the picture quality wasn’t very good. I mean, it was really dark—”

“Where most scary supernatural stuff tends to happen,” I said.

“And the picture was all jumpy—”

“The woman with the camera was terrified. Also pretty common.”

Butters made a frustrated sound. “And there was an awful lot of static on the tape, which made it look like someone had messed with it.”

“Sort of like someone messed with almost all of my X-rays?” I shook my head, smiling. “And there’s one more reason you didn’t believe it, man. It’s okay; you can say it.”

He sighed. “There’s no such things as monsters.”

“Bingo,” I said, and got the car moving again. “Look, Butters. You are your own ideal example. You’ve seen things you can’t explain away. You’ve suffered for trying to tell people that you *have* seen them. For God’s sake, twenty minutes ago you got attacked by the walking dead. And you’re *still* arguing with me about whether or not magic is real.”

Seconds ticked by.

“Because I don’t want to believe it,” he said in a quiet, numb voice.

I exhaled slowly. “Yeah.”

Dead silence.

“Drink some coffee,” I told him.

He did.

“Scared?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” I said. “That’s smart.”

“Well, then,” he murmured. “I’m-must be the smartest guy in the whole world.”

“I know how you feel,” I said. “You run into something you totally don’t get, and it’s scary as hell. But once you learn something about it, it gets easier to handle. Knowledge counters fear. It always has.”

“What do I do?” Butters asked me.

“I’m taking you somewhere you’ll be safe. Once I get you there, I’ll figure out my next move. For now, ask me questions. I’ll answer them.”

Butters took a slower sip of his coffee and nodded. His hands looked steadier. “Who was that man?”

“He goes by Grevane, but I doubt that’s his real name. He’s a necromancer.”

“What’s a necromancer?”

I rolled a shoulder in a shrug. “Necromancy is the practice of using magic to muck around with dead things. Necromancers can animate and control corpses, manipulate ghosts, access the knowledge stored in dead brains—”

Butters blurted out, “That’s impos—” Then he stopped himself and coughed. “Oh. Right. Sorry.”

“They can also do a lot of really freaky things involving the soul,” I said. “Even in the weird circles, it isn’t the kind of thing you talk about casually. But I’ve heard stories that they can inhabit corpses with their consciousness, possess others. I’ve even heard that they can bring people back from the dead.”

“Jesus,” Butters swore.

“I kinda doubt they had anything to do with that one.”

“No, no, I meant—”

“I know what you meant. It was a joke, Butters.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry.” He swigged more coffee, and started looking around at the streets again. “But bringing the dead to life? That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“You’re assuming that what the necromancer brings them back to is better than death. From what I’ve heard, they don’t generally do it for humanitarian reasons. But that might be a load of crap. Like I said, no one talks about it.”

“Why not?” Butters asked.

“Because it’s forbidden,” I told him. “The practice of necromancy violates one of the Laws of Magic laid down by the White Council. Capital punishment is the only sentence, and no one wants to even come close to being suspected by the Council.”

“Why? Who are they?”

“They’re me,” I said. “Sort of. The White Council is a...well, most people would call it a governing body for wizards all over the world, but it’s really more like a Masonic lodge. Or maybe a frat.”

“I’ve never heard of a fraternity handing out a death sentence.”

“Yeah. Well the Council has only seven laws, but if you break them...” I drew my thumb across my neck. “By the way, they aren’t fond of regular

folks knowing about them. So don't talk about them to anyone else."

Butters swallowed and touched the fingers of one hand to his throat. "Oh. So this guy, Grevane. He was like you?"

"He's not like me," I said, and it came out in a snarl that surprised even me. Butters twitched violently. I sighed and made an effort to lower my voice again. "But he's probably a wizard, yeah."

"Who is he? What does he want?"

I blew out a breath. "He's most likely a student of this badass black magic messiah named Kemmler. The Council burned Kemmler down a while back, but several of his disciples may have escaped. I think Grevane is looking for a book his teacher hid before he died."

"A magic book?"

I snorted. "Nah. Trinkets aren't too hard to come by. If my guess is correct, this book contains more of the knowledge and theory Kemmler used in his most powerful magics."

Butters nodded. "So...if Grevane gets hold of the book and learns, he gets to be the next Kemmler?"

"Yeah. And he mentioned that there were others involved in this business too. I think word of the presence of Kemmler's book came up, and his surviving students are showing up to grab it before their fellow necromancers do. For that matter, just about anyone involved in black magic might want to get their hands on it."

"So why doesn't the Council just grab them and...?" He drew his thumb across his throat.

"They've tried," I said. "They thought the disciples had all been accounted for."

Butters frowned. Then he said, "I guess wizards can go into denial about uncomfortable things too, huh?"

I barked out a laugh. "People are people, man."

"But now you can tell this Council about Grevane and this book, right?"

My stomach quivered a little. "No."

"Why not?"

Because if I did, Mavra would destroy my friend. The thought screamed across my brain in a blaze of frustration that I tried to keep concealed. "Long story. The short version is that I'm not real popular with the Council, and they're pretty busy right now."

"With what?" he asked.

“A war.”

He scrunched up his nose and tilted his head, studying me. “That’s not the only reason you aren’t calling them, is it?” Butters said.

“Egad, Holmes,” I told him. “No, it isn’t. Don’t push.”

“Sorry.” He finished the coffee, then made a visible effort to cast around for a new conversational thread. “So. Those were actual zombies?”

“Never seen one before,” I said. “But that seems like a pretty good guess.”

“Poor Phil,” Butters said. “Not a saint or anything, but not a bad guy.”

“He have a family?” I asked.

“No,” Butters said. “Single. That’s a mercy.” He was silent for a second, then said, “No. I guess it isn’t.”

“Yeah.”

“If those guys were zombies, how come they didn’t want brains?” Butters said. He held both arms stiff out in front of him, rolled his eyes back in his head, and moaned, “Braaaaaaaaaaaaaains.”

I snorted. He gave me a weak smile.

“Seriously,” Butters said. “These guys were more like the Terminator.”

“What’s the use of a foot soldier who can’t do anything but hobble along and moan about brains?”

“Good point,” Butters said. He scrunched up his nose in thought. “Don’t I remember something about sewing a zombie’s lips shut with thread to kill them? Does that work?”

“No clue,” I said. “But you saw those things. If you want to get close enough to find out, be my guest, but I’ll be observing it through a freaking telescope.”

“No, thank you,” Butters said. “But how do we stop them?”

I sighed. “They’re tough, but they’re still flesh and bone. Massive trauma will do it sooner or later.”

“How massive?”

I shrugged. “Run them over with a truck. Chop them to bits with an ax. Burn them to ashes. A gun or a baseball bat won’t do it.”

“This may come as a shock to you, Harry, but I don’t have an ax with me. Is there something else? Maybe something that isn’t so Bunyan-esque?”

“Plenty,” I said. “If you can cut off the flow of energy into them, they’ll drop.”

“How do you do that?”

“You’d have to ground them out. Running water is the best way, but there needs to be a lot of it. A small stream, at least. I could also probably trap one in a magic circle and cut off any energy from getting to it. Either way, they’d just fall over, plop.”

“Magic circles,” Butters shook his head. “And nothing else?”

“Keep in mind that they aren’t intelligent,” I said. “Zombies follow orders, but they don’t have much more intellect than your average animal. You have to outthink them—or the necromancer who is giving them orders. You could also cut off the necromancer’s control of them.”

“How?”

“Kill their drum.”

“Uh, what?”

I shook my head. “Sorry. A zombie...well, it isn’t really a person with thoughts and feelings and such, but the corpse is *used* to being a person. To eating, breathing—and to a beating heart. That’s how the necromancer controls them. He plays a beat or some kind of rhythmic music, and uses magic to substitute his beat for the zombie’s heartbeat. He links himself to the beat, the beat to the zombie’s heart, and when the necromancer gives a command, as far as the zombie is concerned it’s coming from inside him and he wants to do it. That’s how they can control them so completely.”

“That book,” Butters said. “Grevane kept drumming it against his leg. And then outside, that huge bass woofer in that Cadillac.”

“Exactly. Make the beat stop or get the zombies out of earshot, and he loses control of them. But that’s really dicey.”

“Why?”

“Because it won’t destroy the zombie. It just frees it from the necromancer’s control. Anything could happen. It could just shut down, or it could start killing everyone it sees. Totally unpredictable. If I’d stopped him from drumming in the exam room, they might have killed us all. Or run off in different directions to hurt other people. We couldn’t afford to take the chance.”

Butters nodded, absorbing this for a minute. Then he piped up with, “Grevane said you weren’t a Warden. What is a Warden?”

“Wardens are the White Council’s version of cops,” I said. “They enforce the Laws of Magic, bring criminals in for a trial, and then they chop off their heads. Sometimes they get enthusiastic and just skip to the chopping.”

“Well. That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“In theory,” I said. “But they’re so paranoid that next to them, Joe McCarthy looks like a friendly puppy. They don’t ask many questions, and they don’t hesitate to make up their minds. If they *think* you’ve broken a law, you might as well have.”

“That’s not fair,” Butters said.

“No. It isn’t. I’m not real popular with the Wardens. I’m not sure they’d come out to help me if I asked them.”

“What about other wizards on the Council?”

I sighed. “The White Council is already at the limits of its resources. Even if they weren’t, the Council really, really likes to not get involved.”

He frowned. “Could the cops stop Grevane?”

“No way,” I said, “Not a chance in hell are any of them prepared to handle him. And if they tried, a whole lot of good people would die.”

Butters sputtered. “They’ll just *sit* there and let people like Phil get killed?” he demanded, his voice outraged. “If regular people can’t do it, and the Council won’t get involved, who the hell is going to stop him?”

“I am,” I said.

Chapter Seven

We went back to my apartment, and I wasted no time getting Butters inside and behind the protection of my wards. Mouse loomed up from little kitchen alcove and padded over to me, tail wagging.

“Holy crap,” Butters said. “You have a pony.”

“Heh,” I said. Mouse sniffed at my hand and then walked over to snuffle around Butters’s legs with a certain solemn ceremony. Then he sneezed and looked up at Butters, wagging his tail.

“Can I pet him?” Butters said.

“If you do, he won’t leave you alone.” I went into my room to pick up a few things from my closet, and when I came back out Butters was sitting on the hearth, poking the fire to life and feeding it fresh wood. Mouse sat nearby, watching with patient interest.

“What breed is he?” Butters asked.

“Half chow and half wooly mammoth. A wooly chammoth.”

Mouse’s jaws opened in a doggy grin.

“Wow. Some serious teeth there,” Butters said. “He doesn’t bite, does he?”

“Only bad guys,” I told him. I grabbed Mouse’s lead and clipped it to his collar. “I’m going to take him outside for a bit. I’ll bring him back in; then I want you to lock up and stay put.”

He hesitated in midpoke. “You’re leaving?”

“It’s safe,” I said. “I’ve got measures in place here that will prevent Grevane from finding you by magical means.”

“You mean with a spell or something?”

“Yeah,” I said. “My spells should counter Grevane’s and keep him from locating you while I get some things done.”

“You won’t be here?” Butters said. He didn’t sound too steady.

“Grevane won’t find you,” I said.

“But what if he does it anyway?”

“He won’t.”

“Sure, sure, he won’t. I believe you.” Butters swallowed. “But what if he *does*?”

I tried to give him a reassuring smile. “There are more wards in place to stop someone from coming in. Mouse will keep an eye on you, and I’ll leave a note for Thomas and ask him to stay home tonight, just in case.”

“Who’s Thomas?”

“Roommate,” I said. I dragged a piece of paper and a pen out of a cabinet in the base of the coffee table and started writing the note.

Thomas,

Bad guys from my end of the block are trying to kill the little guy in the living room. His name is Butters. I brought him here to get him off the radar while I negotiate with them. Do me a favor and keep an eye on him until I get back.

Harry

I folded the note and stuck it up on the mantel. “He’s smart, and fairly tough. I’m not sure when he’ll get back. When he does, tell him I brought you here and give him the note. You should be okay.”

Butters exhaled slowly. “All right. Where are you going?”

“To the bookstore,” I said.

“Why there?”

“Grevane was reading a copy of a book called *Die Lied der Erlking*. I want to know why.”

Butters stared at me for a second and then said, “In all of that, with threats and guns and zombies and everything, you noticed the title of the book he was holding?”

“Yeah. Damn, I’m good.”

“What do I do?” he asked.

“Get some sleep.” I waved a hand at my bookshelves. “Read. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen. Oh, one more thing: Do not open the door for any reason.”

“Why not?”

“Because the spells on it might kill you.”

“Oh,” he said. “Of course. The spells.”

“No joking, Butters. They’re meant to keep things out, but if you open the door you could get caught in the backwash. Thomas has a talisman that will let him in safely. So do I. Anyone else will be in for a world of hurt, so stand clear.”

He swallowed. “Right. Okay. What if the dog has to go?”

I sighed. “He can’t mess the place up any worse than Thomas. Come on, Mouse. Let’s make sure you’ll be settled.”

Mouse seemed to have a sixth sense about when not to take his time making use of the boardinghouse’s yard, and we went to our little designated area and back with no delays. I got him back inside with Butters, revved up the Beetle, and headed for Bock Ordered Books.

Artemis Bock, proprietor of Chicago’s oldest occult shop, had been a fixture near Lincoln Park for years before I had ever moved to town. The neighborhood was a bizarre blend of the worst a large city had to offer marching side by side with the erudite academia of the University of Chicago. It wasn’t the kind of place I wanted to walk around after dark, wizard or no, but there wasn’t much choice.

I parked the Beetle a block down from the shop, across the street from cheap apartments that were flying gang colors on the windows nearest the doors. I wasn’t too worried that someone was going to steal the Blue Beetle while I was in the shop. The car just wasn’t sexy enough to warrant stealing. But to be on the safe side, I made no pretense whatsoever of hiding my gun as I left the car and slipped it into a shoulder holster under my duster. I had my staff with me, too, and I took it firmly into my right hand as I shut the car door and started down the street with a purpose, my expression set and cold. I didn’t have a concealed-carry permit for the gun, so I could wind up in jail for toting it along with me. On the other hand, this part of town was a favorite spot for some of the nastier denizens of the supernatural community. Between them and the very real prospect of your everyday urban criminal, I could wind up in my grave for *not* toting it. I’d err on the side of survival, thank you very much.

On the short walk to the store, I stepped over a pair of winos and tried to ignore a pale and too-thin woman with empty eyes who staggered by in leopard-print tights, a leather coat, and a bra. Her pupils had dilated until her blue eyes looked black, and she was nearly too stoned to walk. She probably wasn’t old, but life had used her hard. She saw me and for a second looked like she was going to display her wares. But she got a closer

look at my face and skittered to one side and tried to become invisible. I went by her without comment.

The night was very cold. In a few more weeks it would get cold enough that people like the two drunks and the stoned girl would start freezing to death. Someone would see a body, and eventually someone would call the police. The cops would show up and fill out on the police report that the body had been found and presumed accidentally frozen to death. Sometimes it wasn't an accident. The weather was a convenient way for a dealer or for the outfit to kill someone who had gotten on their nerves. Something to knock them out, a removal of a bit of clothing, and leave them for the night to devour. Most of those bodies were found within a few blocks of where I was walking.

Maybe thirty yards short of the shop, I crossed some kind of invisible line where the oppressive, dangerous atmosphere of the bad part of town lessened by several degrees. A few steps later I caught my first glance of a U of C campus building, far down the block. I felt myself relax a little in response, but that unspoken promise of safety and the rule of law was only an illusion. The closer you got to campus, the less crime occurred, but there was nothing other than convention and slightly more frequent police patrols to keep the darker elements of the city from pushing the boundaries.

Well, there was one more thing. But I couldn't afford to get involved with it. Mavra's prohibition against involving anyone else meant that even if I wanted extra help, I didn't dare ask for it. I was on my own. And if trouble came looking, I'd have to handle it alone.

Predators respond to body language. I walked like I was on my way to rip someone's face off, until I made it to the shop and entered the store.

Artemis Bock, proprietor, sat behind a counter facing the door. He was a bear of a man in his late fifties, broad-shouldered, unshaven, and heavyset with weathered muscle under a layer of comfortable living. He had knuckles the size and texture of golf balls, marked with old scars from whatever career he'd pursued before he'd become a storekeeper. He wasn't anything so strong as a wizard, but he knew his way around Chicago, around basic magical theory, and his shop was protected with half a dozen subtle wards that did a lot to encourage people looking for trouble to look elsewhere.

The door chimes tinkled as I came in, and there was a deeper chime from somewhere behind the counter. Bock had one arm on the counter and one

out of sight under it until he peered over his reading glasses at my face, and nodded. He folded his arms onto the counter again, hunched over what looked like an auto magazine, and said, “Mister Dresden.”

“Bock,” I replied with a nod.

His eyes flickered over my staff, and I got the impression that he noticed or sensed the gun under the jacket.

“I need to get into the cage,” I told him.

His shaggy eyebrows drew together. “The Wardens were here not a month ago. I run a clean shop. You know that.”

I lifted my gloved hand in a pacifying gesture. “This isn’t an inspection tour. Personal business.”

He made a rumbling sound in his throat, something halfway between a sound of acknowledgment and one of apology. He reached behind him without looking and snagged a key from where it hung on a peg on the wall behind him. He flicked it at me. I had to let my staff fall into the crook of my left arm so that I could use my right hand to catch the key. I doubt it looked graceful, but at least I didn’t drop the staff and the key both, which would have been more my speed.

“You want to come along?” I asked him. Bock didn’t let customers peruse the books in the cage without supervision.

“What am I going to tell you?” he said, and turned the page in his magazine.

I nodded and started for the back of the store.

“Mister Dresden,” Bock said.

“Hmm?”

“Word is on the street that there’s dark business afoot. Will was through here today. Said things were getting nervous.”

I paused. Billy Borden was the leader of a gang of genuine werewolves who called themselves the Alphas and lived in the neighborhood around campus. About four years before, the Alphas had learned how to shapeshift into wolves and had declared the campus area a monster-free zone. They backed it up by ripping monsters to shreds, and they did it well enough that the local underworld of vampires, ghouls, and various other nasties found it easier to hunt elsewhere.

The magical community of Chicago—of people, I mean—was centered around a number of different neighborhoods in town. The clump around campus was the smallest, but probably the most informed of them. Word

has a way of getting around the occult crowd when something vicious is on the warpath, and sends them hurrying to seek shelter or keep their heads down. It was a survival instinct on behalf of those who were blessed with one form or another of talent for magic, but who didn't have enough power to be a credible threat, and one that I heartily encouraged. Things were bad enough without some amateur one-trick Willy deciding he was going to hat up and take on the bad guys.

Of course, that was precisely what Billy Borden had done. Billy and company were not up to taking on people on Grevane's level. Don't get me wrong: They were a real threat to your average dark whatever, especially working together, but they weren't used to dealing with someone in Grevane's weight class. Billy needed to keep his head down, but I couldn't contact him to tell him that. Hell, even if I did, he'd just stick his jaw out at me and tell me he could handle it. So I had to play another angle to get him to lie low.

"If you see him again," I told Bock, "let him know that I'd appreciate it if he'd keep his head down, his eyes open, and to get in touch with me before he moves on anything."

"Something's happening," Bock said. His eyes flickered over to his calendar.

I suddenly became conscious of the eyes of three or four other customers in the store. It was late, true, but the occult community doesn't exactly keep standard hours, and Halloween was only two days off. Scratch that, it was almost one A.M. *Tomorrow* was Halloween. That meant trick-or-treating for some people, but it meant sacred Samhain for others, and there were a number of other beliefs attached to the day in the occult circles. There was shopping to be done.

"It might be," I told Bock. "You might want to be behind a threshold after dark for the next day or two. Just to be careful."

Bock's expression told me that he thought I wasn't telling him everything. I gave him a look that told him to mind his own damned business, and headed for the back of the store.

Bock's shop was bigger than you'd have expected from the outside. It had been a speakeasy back in the day, fronting as a neighborhood grocery. The front of the store offered a browsing area for customers interested in purchasing everything from crystals to incense to candles to oils to wands and other symbolic instruments of ritual magic—your typical New Agey

stuff. There were various statues and idols for personal shrines, meditation mats, bits of furniture and other decoration for any alternative religion you'd care to name, including some figures of Buddha and Ghanesh.

Behind the occult area were several rows of bookshelves holding one of the largest selections in town of books on the occult, the paranormal, and the mystical. Most of the books were chock-full of philosophy or religion—predominantly Wiccan of one flavor or another, but there were several texts slanted toward Hindu beliefs, drawn from the kabbalah, voodoo, and even a couple grounded in ancient beliefs in the Norse or Greek gods. I steered clear of the whole mess, myself. Magic wasn't something you needed God, a god, or gods to help you with, but a lot of people felt differently than I did. Even some wizards of the Council held deep religious convictions, and felt that they were bound intricately to their magic.

Of course, if they believed it, it was as good as true. Magic is closely interwoven with a wizard's confidence. Some would say that it is bound up with a wizard's faith, and it would mean practically the same thing. You have to believe in the magic for it to work—not just that it *will* happen, but that it *should* happen.

That's what makes people like Grevane so dangerous. Magic is essentially a force of creation, of life. Grevane's necromancy made a mockery of life, even as he used it to destroy. Besides being murderous and extremely icky, there was something utterly profane about using magic to create a rotting semblance of a human life. My stomach turned a little, just thinking about what it might be like to work a spell like that. And Grevane *believed* in it.

Which really seemed to make him look more and more like some kind of wacko. A deadly, powerful, calm, and intelligent lunatic. I shook my head. How do I get myself into this kind of crap?

I walked through the bookshelves to a door in the back wall. While it wasn't precisely hidden, the door had no frame and was set flush with the wall around it, and was covered with the same paneling as the wall. Once it had opened to allow customers to slip into a private area to drink illegal booze. Now it was locked. I used Bock's key to open it and let myself into the back of the store.

The rear area wasn't large—nothing more than a single room with an office built into one corner, and a pair of long bookshelves set behind a heavy iron grille on the wall opposite. The room was full of boxes, shelves,

tables, where Bock would keep his spare inventory, if any, and where he handled his mail-order business. There were a couple of safety lights glowing on outlets on the walls. The office door was partly open, and the light was on. I heard the office radio playing quietly on a classic-rock station.

I went to the door set in the iron grille and unlocked it, then rolled open the cage door. Bock kept all of his valuable texts in the cage. He had an original first printing of *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, autographed, on the highest shelf, carefully sealed in plastic, and several dozen other rare books, some of them even more valuable.

The remaining shelves were filled with serious texts on magic theory. A lot of them were almost as occluded with opinion and philosophy as their more modern counterparts on the shelves in the front of the store. The difference was that most of them were written by members of the Council at one time or another. There were very few volumes that addressed magic in its most elemental sense, as a pure source of energy, the way I'd been taught about it. One of the notable exceptions was *Elementary Magic* by Ebenezar McCoy. It was the first book most wizards ever handed an apprentice. It dealt with the nuts and bolts of moving energy around, and stressed the need for control and responsibility on behalf of the wizard.

Though now that I thought about it, Ebenezar hadn't handed me a copy of the book when he'd been teaching me. He hadn't even lectured me more than a couple of times. He told me what he expected, and then he lived it in front of me. Damned effective teaching method, to my way of thinking.

I drew out a copy of his book and stared at it for a moment. My stomach fluttered a little. Of course, he'd been lying to me, too. Or at least not telling me the whole truth. And the whole time he'd been teaching me, he'd been under orders from the Council to execute me if I wasn't perfectly behaved. I hadn't been perfect. The old man didn't kill me, but he didn't trust me enough to come clean, either. He didn't tell me that he was in charge of dirty jobs for the Council. That he was their wetworks man, the one who broke the Laws of Magic with their blessing, who betrayed the same responsibility he wrote about, talked about, and had apparently lived.

He was trying to protect you, Harry, I told myself.

That didn't make it right.

He never tried to be your hero, your role model. You did that.

That didn't change a damned thing.

He never wanted to hurt you. He had the best intentions.

And the road to hell is paved with them.

You need to get over it. You need to forgive him.

I slammed the book back onto the shelf. Hard.

“Hello?” called a woman’s voice from behind me.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. My staff clattered to the ground, and when I spun around my shield bracelet was up and spitting sparks, and my .44 was in my right hand, pointing at the office.

She was young, midtwenties at most. She was dressed in a long wool skirt, a turtleneck, and a cardigan sweater, all in colors of grey. She had hair of medium brown, held up into a bun with a pair of pencils, wore glasses, and had a heart-shaped face that was more attractive than beautiful, her features soft and appealing. She had a smudge of ink on her chin and on the fingers of her right hand, and she wore a name tag that had the store logo at the top and HI, MY NAME IS SHIELA below it.

“Oh,” she said, and stiffened, becoming very pale. “Oh. Um. Just take what you want. I won’t do anything.”

I let out my breath between my teeth, and slowly lowered the gun. For crying out loud, I had nearly started shooting. Tense much, Harry? I let go of the energy running through the shield bracelet, and it dimmed as well. “Excuse me, miss,” I said as politely as I could manage. “You startled me.”

She blinked at me for a second, confusion on her features. “Oh,” she said, then. “You aren’t robbing the store.”

“No,” I said.

“That’s good.” She put a hand to her chest, breathing a little quickly. It had to be a fairly generous chest, given that I could notice the curves of her breasts even through the cardigan. Ah, trusty libido. Even when I am up to my ears in trouble, you are there to distract me from such trivial matters as survival. “Oh. Then you’re a customer, I suppose? May I help you?”

“I was just looking for a book,” I said.

“Well,” she said with businesslike cheer, “flick on that lamp next to you, to begin with, and we’ll find what you’re looking for.” I did, and Shiela smoothed her skirts and walked over to me. She was average height, maybe five-six, which made her approximately a foot shorter than me. She paused as she got closer, and peered up at me. “You’re him,” she said. “You’re Harry Dresden.”

“That’s what the IRS keeps telling me,” I said.

“Wow,” she said, her eyes bright. She had very dark eyes that went well with skin like cream, and as she got closer I saw that her outfit did a lot to conceal some pleasant curves. She wasn’t going to be modeling bikinis anywhere, but she looked like she’d be very pleasant to curl up with on a cold night.

Man. I needed to date more or something. I rubbed at my eyes and got my mind back on business.

“I’ve wanted to meet you,” she said, “ever since I came to Chicago.”

“You new in town? I haven’t seen you here before.”

“Six months,” she said. “Five working here.”

“Bock works you pretty late,” I said.

She nodded and brushed a curl of hair away from her cheek, leaving a smudge of dark ink on it. “End of the month. I’m doing books and inventory.” Then she looked stricken and said, “Oh, I didn’t even introduce myself.”

“Shiela?” I guessed.

She stared at me for a second, and then flushed and said, “Oh, right. The name tag.”

I stuck out my hand. “I’m Harry.”

She shook my hand. Her grip was firm, soft, warm, and tingled with the energy of someone who had some kind of minor talent to practice.

I’d never really considered what it might be like for someone to sense my own aura. Shiela drew in a sharp breath, and her arm jumped. Her ink-stained fingers squeezed tight for a second and smudged my hand. “Oh. Sorry, sorry.”

I rubbed my hand on my fatigue pants. “I’ve seen worse stains tonight,” I said. “Which brings me to the books.”

“You stained a book?” she said, her face and voice distressed.

“No. That was just a bad segue.”

“Oh. Oh, right,” she said, nodding. She absently rubbed her hands together. “You’re here for a book. What are you looking for?”

“A book called *Die Lied der Erlking*.”

“Oh, I’ve read that one.” She scrunched up her nose, eyes distant for a second, then said, “Two copies, right-hand shelf, third row from the top, eighth and ninth books from the left.”

I blinked at her, then went to the shelf and found the book where she’d said. “Wow. Good call.”

“Eidetic memory,” she said with a pleased smile. “It’s...sort of my talent.” She gestured vaguely with the hand she’d touched me with.

“Must come in handy during inventory.” I checked the shelf. “There’s only one copy, though.”

She frowned, then shrugged. “Mister Bock must have sold one this week.”

“I bet he did,” I said, troubled. It bothered me to think about Grevane standing in a store, speaking to people like Bock or Shiela. I pulled the cage closed and started slowly for the front of the store.

I opened the book. I’d heard it referenced before, in other works. It was supposed to deal with the lore around the Erlkoenig, or Elfking. He was supposed to be a faerie figure of considerable power, maybe a counterpart to the Queens of the Faerie Courts. The book had been compiled by Wizard Peabody early last century from the collected notes of a dozen different crusty wizards, most of them dead at the time, and was considered to be a work of nearly pure speculation.

“How much?” I asked.

“Should be on an index card inside the cover,” Shiela said, walking politely beside me.

I looked. The book was worth half a month’s rent. No wonder I’d never bought a copy. Business hadn’t been bad lately, but between handling all of Mouse’s licensing and shots and the trucks of food he ate, and Thomas’s job troubles, I didn’t have anything to spare. Maybe Bock would let me lease it or something.

Shiela and I walked out of the back room and started toward the front of the store. As we came out of the book areas, she said, “Well, I think you know the way from here. It was a pleasure meeting you, Harry.”

“You too,” I said, smiling. Hey, she was a woman, and pretty enough. Her smile was simply adorable. “Maybe I’ll bump into you again sometime.”

“I’d like that. Only next time without the gun.”

“One of those old-fashioned girls, huh?” I said.

She laughed and walked back toward the rear of the store.

“Find what you needed?” Bock asked. There was an edge to his voice, something I couldn’t quite place. He was definitely uncomfortable.

“I hope so,” I said. “Uh. About the price...”

Bock looked at me hard from under his thick eyebrows.

“Uh. Would you take a check?”

He looked around the store and then nodded. "Sure, from you."

"Thanks," I said. I wrote out a check, hoping it wouldn't bounce before I got to the door, and sneaked my own glance around the shop. "Did I run out your customers?"

"Maybe," he said uncomfortably.

"Sorry," I said.

"It happens."

"Might be better for them to be home. You too, in fact."

He shook his head. "I have a business to run."

He was an adult, and he'd been in this town longer than I had. "All right," I said. I handed him the check. "Did you sell the other copy you had in inventory?"

He put the check in the register, and put the book into a plastic bag, zipped it shut, then put that in a paper sack. "Two days ago," he said after a moment's thought.

"Do you remember to whom?"

He puffed out a breath that flapped his jowls. "Old gentleman. Long hair, thinning. Liver spots."

"Real loose skin?" I asked. "Moved kind of stiff?"

Bock looked around again, nervous. "Yeah. That's him. Look, Mister Dresden, I just run the shop, okay? I don't want to get involved with any trouble. I had no idea who the guy was. He was just a customer."

"All right," I told him. "Thanks, Bock."

He nodded and passed over the book. I folded the sack, book and all, into a pocket on my duster, and fished my car keys out of my pocket.

"Harry," came Shiela's voice, low and urgent.

I blinked and looked up at her. "Yeah?"

She nodded toward the front of the store, her face anxious.

I looked out.

On the street outside the shop stood two figures. They were dressed more or less identically: long black robes, long black cape, big black mantles, big black hoods that showed nothing of the faces inside. One was taller than the other, but other than that they simply stood on the sidewalk outside, waiting.

"I told these guys last week I didn't want to buy a ring," I said. I glanced at Shiela. "See that? Witty under pressure. That was a Tolkien joke."

“Ha,” said Bock, more than a little uneasy. “I don’t want any trouble here, Mister Dresden.”

“Relax, Bock,” I said. “If they wanted trouble, they’d have kicked down the door.”

“They’re here to talk to you?” Shiela asked.

“Probably,” I said. Of course, if they were more of Kemmler’s knitting circle, they might just walk up and try to kill me. Grevane had. I drummed my fingers thoughtfully along the solid wood of my wizard’s staff.

Bock looked at me, his expression a little queasy. He wasn’t an easy man to frighten, but he was no fool, either. I had wrecked three...no wait, four. No...at *least* four buildings during my cases in the last several years, and he didn’t want Bock Ordered Books to be appended to the list. That hurt a little. Normals looked at me like I was insane when I told people I was a wizard. People who were in the know didn’t look at me like I was insane. They looked at me like I was insanely dangerous.

I guess at least four buildings later, they’ve got reason to think so.

“Maybe you’d better close up shop for the night,” I told Bock and Shiela. “I’ll go out and talk to them.”

Chapter Eight

I paused just before I opened the shop's door and walked outside.

It was one of those moments that would have had dramatic music if my life were a movie, but instead I got a radio jingle for some kind of submarine sandwich place blaring over the store's ambient stereo. The movie of my life must be really low-budget.

The trick was to figure out which movie I was in. If this was a variant on *High Noon*, then walking outside was probably a fairly dangerous idea. On the other hand, there was always the chance that I was still in the opening scenes of *The Maltese Falcon* and everyone trying to chase down the bird still wanted to talk to me. In which case, this was probably a good chance to dig for vital information about what might well be a growing storm around the search for *The Word of Kemmler*.

But just in case, I shook out my shield bracelet to the ready. I took my staff in hand and settled my fingers around it in a solid grip, curling them to the sigil-carved surface of the wood one by one.

Then I called up my power.

Like I said, magic comes from life, and especially from emotions. They're a source of the same intangible energy that everyone can feel when an autumn moon rises and fills you with a sudden sense of bone-deep excitement, or when the first warm breeze of spring rushes past your face, full of the scents of life, and drowns you in a sudden flood of unreasoning joy. The passion of mighty music that brings tears to your eyes, and the raw, bubbling, infectious laughter of small children at play, the bellowing power of a stadium full of football fans shouting "Hey!" in time to that damned song—they're all charged with magic.

My magic comes from the same places. And maybe from darker places than that. Fear is an emotion, too. So is rage. So is lust. And madness. I'm not a particularly good person. I'm no Charles Manson or anything, but I'm not going to be up for canonization either. Though in the past, I think

maybe I was a better person than I am today. In the past I hadn't seen so many people hurt and killed and terrorized by the same kind of power that damn well should have been making the world a nicer place, or at the least staying the hell away from it. I hadn't made so many mistakes back then, so many shortsighted decisions, some of which had cost people their lives. I had been sure of myself. I had been whole.

My stupid hand hurt like hell. I had half a dozen really gutwrenchingly good reasons to be afraid, and I was. Worst of all, if I made any mistakes, Murphy was going to be the one to pay for it. If that happened, I didn't know what I would do.

I drew it all in, the good, the bad, and the crazy, a low buzz that coursed through the air and rattled the idols and candles and incense holders on their shelves in the store around me. In the glass door of the shop I saw my left hand vanish, replaced with an irregular globe of angry blue light that trailed bits of heatless fire to the floor. I pulled in the energy from all around me, readying myself to defend, to attack, to protect, or to destroy. I didn't know what the two cloaked figures wanted, but I wanted them to know that if they'd come looking for a fight, I'd be willing to oblige them.

I held my power around me like a cloak and slipped out to face the pair waiting for me on the sidewalk. I took my time, every step unhurried and precise. I kept an eye on them, but only in my peripheral vision. Otherwise I left my eyes on the ground and walked slowly, until the blue glow of my shield light fell on their dark robes, making the black look blue, darkening the shadows in the folds to hues too dark to have names. Then I stopped and lifted my eyes slowly, daring them to meet my gaze.

It might have been my imagination, but I thought the pair of them rocked back a little, swaying like reeds before an oncoming storm. October wind blew about us, freezing-cold air that took its chill from the icy depths of Lake Michigan.

"What do you want?" I asked them. I borrowed frost from the wind and put it in my voice.

The larger of the pair spoke. "The book."

But which book? I wondered. "Uh-huh. You're a Schubert fan boy, aren't you? You've got the look."

"Goethe, actually," he said. "Give it to me."

He was definitely after a copy of *Der Erlking*, then. His voice was...odd. Male, certainly, but it didn't sound quite human. There was a kind of

quavering buzz in it that made it warble, somehow, made the words slither uncertainly. The words were slow and enunciated. They had to be, in order to be intelligible.

“Bite me,” I answered him. “Get your own book, Kemmlerite.”

“I have nothing but disdain for the madman Kemmler,” he spat. “Have a care what insults you offer. This need not involve you at all, Dresden.”

That gave me a moment’s pause, as they say. Taking on arrogant, powerful dark wizards is one thing. Taking on ones who have done their homework and who know who you are is something else entirely. It was my turn to be rattled.

The dark figure noted it. His not-human voice swayed into the night again in a low laugh.

“Touché, O dark master of evil bathrobes,” I said. “But I’m still not giving you my copy of the book.”

“I am called Cowl,” he said. Was there amusement in his voice? Maybe. “And I am feeling patient this evening. Again I will ask it. Give me your copy of the book.”

Die Lied der Erlking bumped against my leg through the pocket of my duster. “And again do I answer thee. Bite me.”

“Thrice will I ask and done,” said the figure, warning in its tone.

“Gee, let me think. How am I gonna answer this time,” I said, planting my feet on the ground.

Cowl made a hissing sound, and spread its arms slightly, hands still low, by its hips. The cold wind off the lake began to blow harder.

“Thrice I ask and done,” Cowl said, his voice low, hard, angry. “Give... me...the book.”

Suddenly the second figure took a step forward and said, in a female version of Cowl’s weird voice, “Please.”

There was a second of shocked silence, and then Cowl snarled, “Kumori. Mind your tongue.”

“There is no cost in being polite,” said the smaller of the two, Kumori. The robes were too thick and shapeless to give any hint at her form, but there was something decidedly feminine in the gesture she made with one hand, a roll of her wrist. She faced me again and said, “The knowledge in *Der Erlking* is about to become dangerous, Dresden,” she said. “You need not give us the book. Simply destroy it here. That will be sufficient. I ask it of you, please.”

I looked between the two of them for a moment. Then I said, “I’ve seen you both before.”

Neither of them moved.

“At Bianca’s masquerade. You were there on the dais with her.” As I spoke the words, I became increasingly convinced of them. The two figures I’d seen back then had never shown their faces, but there was something in the way that Cowl and Kumori moved that matched the two shadows back then precisely. “You were the ones who gave the Leanansidhe that *athame*.”

“Perhaps,” said Kumori, but there was an inclination to her head that ceded me the truth of my statement.

“That was such an amazingly screwed-up evening. It’s been coming back to haunt me for years,” I said.

“And will for years to come,” said Cowl. “A great many things of significance happened that night. Most of which you are not yet aware.”

“Hell’s bells,” I complained. “I’m a wizard myself, and I still get sick of that I-know-and-you-don’t shtick. In fact, it pisses me off even faster than it used to.”

Cowl and Kumori exchanged a long look, and then Kumori said, “Dresden, if you would spare yourself and others grief and pain, destroy the book.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” I asked. “Going around trashing copies?”

“There were fewer than a thousand printed,” Kumori confirmed. “Time has taken most of them. Over the past month we have accounted for the rest, but for two here, in Chicago, in this store.”

“Why?” I demanded.

Cowl moved his shoulders in the barest hint of a shrug. “Is it not enough that Kemmler’s disciples could use this knowledge for great evil?”

“Are you with the Council?” I responded.

“Obviously not,” Kumori replied from the depths of her hood.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Seems to me that if you were on the up-and-up you’d be working with the Council, rather than running around reinterpreting *Fahrenheit 451* from a Ringwraith perspective.”

“And it seems to me,” Kumori answered smoothly, “that if you believed that their motives were as pure as they claim, you would already have notified them yourself.”

Hello. Now *that* was a new tune, someone suggesting that the Council was bent and I was in the right. I wasn’t sure what Kumori was trying to do,

but it was smartest to play this out and see what she had to say. “Who says I haven’t?”

“This is pointless,” Cowl said.

Kumori said, “Let me tell him.”

“Pointless.”

“It costs nothing,” Kumori said.

“It’s going to if you keep dawdling,” I said. “I’m going to start billing you for wasting my time.”

She made a weird sound that I only just recognized as a sigh. “Can you believe, at least, that the contents of the book are dangerous?”

Grevane had seemed fond enough of his copy. But I wouldn’t know for sure what the big stink was about until I had time to read the book myself. “For the sake of expediency, let’s say that I do.”

“If the knowledge inside the book is dangerous,” Cowl said, “what makes you think that the Wardens or the Council would use it any more wisely than Kemmler’s disciples?”

“Because while they are a bunch of enormous assholes, they always try to do the right thing,” I said. “If one of the Wardens thought he might be about to practice black magic, he’d probably cut off his own head on pure reflex.”

“All of them?” Kumori asked in a quiet voice. “Are you sure?”

I looked back and forth between them. “Are you telling me that someone on the Council is after Kemmler’s power?”

“The Council is not what it was,” said Cowl. “It has rotted from the inside, and many wizards who have chafed at its restrictions have seen the war with the Red Court reveal its weakness. It will fall. Soon. Perhaps before tomorrow night.”

“Oh,” I drawled. “Well, gee, why didn’t you say so? I’ll just hand you my copy of the book right now.”

Kumori held up a hand. “This is no deception, Dresden. The world is changing. The Council’s end is near, and those who wish to survive it must act now. Before it is too late.”

I took a deep breath. “Normally I’m the first one to suggest we t.p. the Council’s house,” I said. “But you’re talking about necromancy. Black magic. You aren’t going to convince me that the Council and the Wardens have suddenly gotten a yen to trot down the left-hand path. They won’t touch the stuff.”

“Ideally,” Cowl said. “You are young, Dresden. And you have much to learn.”

“You know what young me has learned? Not to spend too much time listening to the advice of people who want to get something out of me,” I said. “Which includes car salesmen, political candidates, and weirdos in black capes who mug me on the street in the middle of the night.”

“Enough,” Cowl said, anger making his voice almost unintelligible. “Give us the book.”

“Bite my ass, Cowl.”

Kumori’s hood twitched back and forth between Cowl and me. She took three steps back.

“Just as well,” Cowl murmured. “I have wanted to see for myself what has the Wardens so nervous about you.”

The cold wind rose again, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose up stiffly. A flash of sensation flickered over me as Cowl drew in power. A *lot* of power.

“Don’t,” I said. I lifted my shield bracelet, weaving defensive energy before me with my thoughts. I solidified my hold on my own power, wrapping my fingers tight around my staff, and then slammed it down hard on the concrete. The cracking sound of it echoed back and forth from darkened buildings and the empty street. “Walk away. I’m not kidding.”

“*Dorosh*,” he snarled in reply, and extended his right hand.

He hit me with raw, invisible force—pure will, focused into a violent burst of kinetic energy. I knew it was coming, my shield was ready, and I braced myself against it in precisely the correct way. My defense was perfect.

It was all that saved my life.

I’ve traded practice blows with my old master Justin DuMorne, himself at one time a Warden. I fought him in earnest, too, and won. I’ve tested my strength in practice duels against the mentor who succeeded him, Ebenezer McCoy. My faerie godmother, the Leanansidhe, has a seriously nasty right hook, metaphysically speaking, and I’ve even gone up against the least of the Queens of Faerie. Throw in a couple of demons, various magical constructs, a thirteen-story fall in a runaway elevator, half a dozen spellslingers of one amount of nasty or another, and I’ve seen more sheer mystic violence than most wizards in the business. I’ve beaten them all, or at least survived them, and I’ve got the scars to show for it.

Cowl hit me harder than any of them.

My shield lit up like a floodlight, and despite all that I could do to divert the energy he threw at me, it hit me like a professional linebacker on an adrenaline frenzy. If I hadn't been able to smooth it out and take the blow evenly across the whole front of my body, it might have broken my nose or ribs or collarbone, depending on where the energy bled through. Instead it felt like the Jolly Green Giant had slugged me with a family-sized beanbag. If there had been any upward force on it, it would have thrown me far enough to make me worry about the fall. But the blow came head-on, driving me straight back.

I flew several yards in the air, hit on my back, scraped along the sidewalk, and managed to turn the momentum into a roll. I staggered to my feet, leaning hard against a parked car. I must have clipped my head at some point, because stars were swirling around in my vision.

By the time I got myself upright again, the panic had set in. No one had ever thrown power like that at me. Stars and stones, if I hadn't been absolutely prepared for that blow...

I swallowed. I'd be dead. Or at best broken, bleeding, and utterly at the mercy of an unknown wizard. One who was still nearby, and probably getting ready to hit me again. I forced thoughts and doubts from my mind and readied my shield, my bracelet already grown so warm that I could feel it through the ugly scars on the skin of my wrist. I couldn't even think about hitting back, because if my shield wasn't back up and ready for another blow, I wouldn't live long enough to get the chance.

Cowl walked slowly toward me down the sidewalk, all cloak and hood and shadows. "Disappointing," he said. "I hoped you were ready for the heavyweight division."

He flicked his wrist, and the next blow howled at me in the freezing wind blowing off the lake. This one came in at an angle, and I didn't even try to stop it cold. I sidestepped like a nervous horse, angling my shield to deflect the blow. Again energy leaked through, but this time it only shoved me across the sidewalk.

My shoulder hit the building, and it drove the breath out of me. I've had shoulder injuries before, and it probably made it feel worse than it was. I bounced off the building and kept my feet, but my legs wobbled—not from the effort of holding me up, but from the energy I'd had to expend to survive the attacks.

Cowl kept walking toward me. Hell's bells, it didn't even look like he was trying all that hard.

I got a cold feeling in my chest.

This man could kill me.

"The book, boy," Cowl said. "Now."

What rose up in me then wasn't outrage or terror. It wasn't righteous wrath. It wasn't confidence, or surety, or determination to protect a loved one. It was 100 percent pure, contrary stubbornness. Chicago was my town. I didn't care who this joker was; he wasn't going to come gliding down the streets of *my* town and push in my teeth for my milk money.

I don't get pushed around by anyone.

Cowl was strong, but his magic wasn't inhuman. It was huge, and it was different from what I worked with, but it didn't have that nauseating, greasy, somehow empty feel that I'd come to associate with the worst black magic. No, that wasn't entirely true. There was a lingering sense of black magic involved in his power. Then again, there's a little of it in mine, too.

The point being that Cowl wasn't some kind of demon. He was a wizard. Human.

And, behind the magic, just as fragile as me.

I poured power down my arm, whirled my staff, pointed it at the car on the street beside him, and snarled, "*Forzare!*"

The sigils on the staff burst into sudden, hellish scarlet light, as bright as the blaze of my shield, and shimmering waves of force flowed out from me. They flooded out over the sidewalk, under the Toyota parked on the street nearest Cowl. I snarled with effort, and the Hellfire force abruptly lashed up, underneath the street side of the car. The car flipped up as lightly and quickly as a man overturning a kitchen chair. Cowl was under it.

There was a crash, and Hell's bells, it was loud. Glass shattered everywhere, and sparks flew out in every direction. The car's alarm went off, warbling drunkenly, and alarms started going off all up and down the street. In apartment windows, lights started blinking on.

I fell to one knee, suddenly exhausted, the light from staff and shield both dwindling to nothing and vanishing. I had never moved that much mass before, that quickly, with nothing but raw kinetic energy, and I could hardly find enough energy to focus my eyes. If I hadn't had the staff to lean on, I'd have been hugging the sidewalk.

There was the sound of metal grating on concrete.

“Oh, come on,” I said panting.

The car shuddered, then slid a few inches to one side. Cowl straightened slowly. He’d gotten back to the very rear of the car’s impact area somehow, and he must have been able to shield himself from the partial impact. As he straightened he wavered, then braced himself against a streetlight with one black-gloved hand. I felt a surge of satisfaction. *Take that, jerk.*

A low growling sound came warbling out of the black hood. “The book.”

“Bite,” I panted, “me.”

But he hadn’t been talking to me. Kumori stepped out of the shadows of a doorway and gestured with a whispered word.

I felt a sudden, strong tug at my duster’s pocket. The flap covering it flew up, and the slender book in its paper bag started sliding out.

“Ack,” I managed, which was all the repartee I was up for at the moment. I rolled and trapped the book between my body and the ground.

Kumori extended her hand again, and more forcefully. I slid two feet over the concrete, until I braced a boot against an uneven joint in the sidewalk and saw movement behind the two figures. “Game over,” I said. “Stop it.”

“Or what?” Cowl demanded.

“Ever see *Wolfen*?” I spat.

Wolves appeared, just freaking *appeared* out of the Chicago night. Big wolves, refugees from a previous epoch, huge, strong-looking beasts with white fangs and savage eyes. One was crouched on the wrecked Buick, within an easy leap of Cowl, bright eyes fastened on him. Another had appeared behind Kumori, and a third leapt lightly down from a fire escape, landing in a soundless crouch in front of her. One appeared on either side of me, and snarls bubbled out of the night.

More lights were coming on. A siren wailed in the night.

“What big teeth they have,” I said. “You want to keep going until the cops show up? I’m game.”

There wasn’t even a pause for the two cloaked figures to look significantly at each other. Kumori glided to Cowl’s side. Cowl gave me a look that I felt, even if I couldn’t see his face, and he growled, “This isn’t —”

“Oh, shut up,” I said. “You lost. Go.”

Cowl’s fingers formed into a rigid claw and he snarled a word I couldn’t quite hear, slashing at the air.

There was a surge of power, darker this time, somehow more nebulous. The air around them blurred, there was the sudden scent of mildew and lightless waters, a sighing sound, and as quickly as that, they were simply gone.

“Billy,” I said a second later, angry. “What the *hell* are you doing? Those people could have killed you.”

The wolf crouching on the wrecked car looked at me, and dropped its mouth open into a lolling grin. It leapt over the broken glass to land beside me, shimmered, and a second later the wolf was gone, replaced by a naked man crouching beside me. Billy was a little shorter than average, and had more muscle than a Bowflex commercial. Medium brown hair, matching eyes, and he wore a short beard now that made him look a lot older than when I’d met him years ago.

Of course, he *was* older than when I’d met him years ago.

“This is my neighborhood,” he said quietly. “Can’t afford to let anyone make me look bad here.” He moved with quick efficiency, getting a shoulder under one of mine and hauling me to my feet by main strength. “How bad are you hurt?”

“Bruises,” I said. The world spun a little as he hauled me up, and I wasn’t sure I could have stood on my own. “Little wobbly. Out of breath.”

“Cops will be here in about seventy seconds,” he said, like someone who knew. “Come on. Georgia’s in the car at the other end of this alley.”

“No,” I said. “Look, just get me to my car. I can’t be...” I couldn’t be seen with him. If Mavra was watching me, or having me tailed, it might mean that she would release the dirt she had on Murphy. But I damn sure couldn’t just explain everything to him. Billy wasn’t the sort to stand by when he saw a friend in trouble.

And I was damned lucky he wasn’t. I hadn’t had much left in me but some hot air when Cowl had stood up again.

“No time,” Billy said. “Look, we’ll get you back here after things calm down later. Christ, Harry, you crushed that car like a beer can. I didn’t know you were that strong.”

“Me neither,” I said. I couldn’t get to my car on my own. I couldn’t afford to be seen with Billy and the Alphas. But I couldn’t allow myself to get detained or thrown into jail, either. Never mind that if Cowl and his sidekick had found me, there might be other interested parties after me,

too. If I kept showing my face on the streets, someone would tear it off for me.

I had to go with Billy. I would cut things as short as I could. I didn't want them involved in this business any more than they already were, anyway, as much to protect them as Murphy. Dammit, Mavra would just have to show some freaking understanding. Maybe if I said please.

Yeah, right.

I might already have blown it and doomed Murphy, but I didn't have much choice.

I leaned on Billy the werewolf, and did the best I could to hobble along with him down the alley and off the street.

Chapter Nine

Billy probably could have picked me up and carried me at a flat run if he needed to, but we had to cross only about fifty yards of alley and darkened street before an expensive SUV, its lights out, cut over to the curb and made a swift stop in front of us.

“Quick,” I said, still panting, “to the Woofmobile.”

Billy helped me into the backseat, followed me in, and before the door was even shut the SUV began accelerating smoothly and calmly from the scene. The interior smelled like new-car-scented air freshener and fast food.

“What happened?” asked the driver. She was a willowy young woman about Billy’s age, somewhere around six feet tall. Her brown hair was pulled into a severe braid, and she wore jeans and a denim jacket. “Hello, Harry.”

“Evening, Georgia,” I replied, slumping back against the headrest.

“Are you all right?”

“Nothing a nice long nap won’t fix.”

“He was attacked,” Billy supplied, answering the first question. He tugged sweats and a T-shirt out of an open gym bag and hopped into them with practiced motions.

“The vampires again?” Georgia asked. She turned on the headlights and joined other traffic. Reflected streetlights gleamed off the diamond engagement ring on her left hand. “I thought the Reds were staying out of town.”

“Not vampires,” I said. My eyelids started increasing their mass, and I decided not to argue with them. “New friends.”

“I think they must have been other wizards,” Billy said quietly. “Big black cloaks and hoods. I couldn’t see their faces.”

“What set the police off?” she asked.

“Harry flipped a car over on top of one of them.”

I heard Georgia suck in her breath through her teeth.

"Yeah, and I'm the one who *lost* the fight," I muttered. "Barely even rattled his cage."

"My God," Georgia said. "Is everyone all right?"

"Yeah," I replied. "The bad guys got away. If the Alphas hadn't come along when they did, I'm not sure I would have."

"Everyone else scattered, and they'll meet us back at the apartment," Billy said. "Who were those guys?"

"I can't tell you that," I said.

There was an empty second, and then Billy's voice turned cautious. "Why? Is it some kind of secret, need-to-know wizard thing?"

"No. I just have no freaking clue who it was."

"Oh. What did they want?" Billy asked. "I only showed up at the end."

"I picked up a rare book at Bock's. Apparently they wanted it."

I could have sworn I heard his brow furrow. "Is it valuable?"

"Something in it must be," I answered. I fumbled at my pocket and drew out the book to make sure it was still there. The slender volume looked innocent enough. And at least it wouldn't take too long to read through. "I appreciate the assist, but I can't stay."

"Sure, sure," Billy said. "What can we do to help?"

"Don't take me to your apartment, for one," I said. "Somewhere you don't go as much."

"Why not?" Billy asked.

"Please, man. Just do it. And let me think for a minute," I said, and closed my eyes again. I tried to work out how best to keep the Alphas from getting involved in this business, but my weary, aching body betrayed me. I dropped into a sudden darkness too black and silent to allow for any dreams.

When I jerked awake, my neck was aching from being bent forward, my chin on my chest. We weren't driving anymore, and I was alone in the SUV. The hollow weariness had abated significantly, and I didn't feel any trembling in my limbs. I couldn't have been out for very long, but even a little sleep can do wonders sometimes.

I got out and found myself in a garage big enough to house half a dozen cars, though the SUV and a shiny black Mercury were the only two vehicles in it. I recognized the place—Georgia's parents' house, an upper-end place on the north side of town. The Alphas had brought me here once before,

when they helped rescue me from the lair of a gang of psychotic lycanthropes. Susan had been with me.

I shook my head, took up my staff and the little book, and walked toward the door to the house. I paused just before I opened it, and heard voices speaking in quiet tones. I closed my eyes and focused on my sense of hearing, head tilted to one side, and the sound of the voices became clear and distinct enough for me to understand. It's a useful skill, Listening, though I couldn't tell you exactly how to do it.

There was the sound of a phone being returned to its cradle. "They're all fine," Billy said.

"Good," Georgia replied. "Something's going on. Did you see his face?"

"He looked tired," Billy said.

"He looked more than just tired. He's afraid."

"Maybe," Billy said, after a second of hesitation. "So what if he is?"

"So how bad must things be if *he* is afraid?" Georgia asked. "And there's more."

Billy exhaled. "His hand."

"You saw it then?"

"Yeah. After he nodded off."

"He's not supposed to have any movement in it," she said, her voice growing more worried. "You've seen him on gaming nights. He can barely cup his fingers to hold chips. I heard the wood of his staff creaking under them tonight. I thought he would crush it."

I blinked at that news and looked down at my gloved hand. I tried to wiggle my fingers. They sort of twitched.

"He's been a little different since he got burned," Billy said.

"It's been longer than that," Georgia said. "It's been since the year before. Remember when he showed up to gaming with all those bandages under his sweater? He never would talk about what happened. It was a week after that murder at the docks, and that big terrorist scare at the airport. It's been since then. He's been distant. More all the time."

"You think he had something to do with that murder?" Billy asked.

"Of course not," Georgia said. "But I think he might have been working on a case and gotten involved with the victim in some way. You know how he is. He probably blames himself for her death."

I swallowed and tried not to think of a pretty, dark-haired woman bleeding to death while the hold of her boat slowly filled with water. She'd

made enough bad choices to get herself into trouble. But I hadn't been able to protect her from the creature that had taken her life.

"If he's in trouble we're going to help him," Billy said.

"Yes," Georgia replied. "But think about this, Billy. Getting involved might not be the best way to do it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he didn't want us to take him to the apartment," Georgia said. "Do you know why?"

"No, I don't. Neither do you."

She made a disgusted sound. "Billy, he's afraid the apartment is being watched."

"By who?"

"By *what*," Georgia said. "We haven't seen or heard or scented anything. If there's magic at work here, it could be more than we know how to handle."

"So what are you saying?" Billy said. "That we should just abandon him if he's in trouble?"

"No." She sighed. "But, Billy, you saw what he was capable of doing. We saw him mow through an army at the faerie battleground. And you tell me tonight that he flipped a car onto one of these other wizards, and that the man blew it off. I don't think we're weak, but running off ghouls and trolls and the occasional vampire is one thing. Mixing it up with wizards is something else. You've seen what kind of power they have."

"I'm not afraid," Billy said.

"Then you're stupid," Georgia replied, her voice blunt but not cruel. "Harry isn't what he used to be. He's been hurt. And I don't care what he says, his injured hand bothers him more than he lets on. He doesn't need any more handicaps."

"You want to just leave him alone?" Billy asked.

"I don't want to weigh him down. You know him. He'll protect other people before he takes care of himself. If he's operating so far out of our league, we might not be anything but a distraction to him. We have to understand our limits."

There was a long silence.

"I don't care," Billy said then. "I'm not just going to stand by if he's in trouble."

“All I want,” Georgia said, “is for you to listen to him. If he doesn’t want our support, or if he thinks it is too dangerous for us to be involved, we have to trust that he knows what he’s doing. He knows things that we don’t. He’s trusted us before, and he’s never led us wrong. Just promise me that you’ll return the compliment.”

“I can’t just...turn away,” Billy said.

“I wouldn’t want you to,” Georgia said. “But...sometimes you think with your fangs and not with your head, Will.” There was the soft sound of a kiss. “I love you. We’ll help him however we can. I just wanted you to consider the idea that he might not need us for violence.”

Billy took a couple of heavy steps. One of the kitchen chairs creaked. “I don’t know what else we can do.”

“Well,” Georgia said. She opened the fridge. “What about these masked wizard types. Did you get close enough to scent them?”

“I tried,” Billy said. “And I was closest to them. But...”

“But?”

“I couldn’t get a scent. Harry did something. He flipped the car over. There was a flash of red light and after that all I could smell was...”

I heard Georgia take a couple of steps, maybe to touch him. “What did you smell?”

“Sulfur,” Billy said, his voice a little weak. “I smelled brimstone.”

There was silence.

“What does it mean?” Georgia asked.

“That I’m worried about him,” Billy said. “You should have seen the look on his face. The rage. I’ve never seen anyone look that angry.”

“You think he’s...what? Unstable?” Georgia asked.

“You’re the psych grad,” Billy said. “What do you think?”

I put my hand on the door. I hesitated for just a second and then pushed it open.

Billy and Georgia both sat in a rather roomy kitchen at a small table, with two bottles of beer set open but untouched on the table. They blinked and straightened, staring up at me in surprise.

“What do you think?” I asked Georgia quietly. “I’d like to know, too.”

“Harry,” Georgia said, “I’m just a grad student.”

I went to the fridge and got myself a cold beer. It was an American brand, but I’ve got no palate in any case. I like my beer cold. I twisted the cap off, then walked over to the table and sat down with them. “I’m not

looking for a therapist. You're a friend. Both of you are." I swigged beer. "Tell me what you think."

Georgia and Billy traded a look, and Billy nodded.

"Harry," Georgia said, "I think you need to talk to someone. I don't think it's important who it is. But you have a lot of pressures on you, and if you don't find some way to let them out, you're going to hurt yourself."

Billy said, "People talk to their friends, man. No one can do everything alone. You work through it together."

I sipped some more beer. Georgia and Billy did, too. We sat in silence for maybe four or five minutes.

Then I said, "About two years ago I exposed myself to a demonic influence. A creature called Lasciel. A fallen angel. The kind of being that turns people into...into real monsters."

Georgia watched me, her eyes focused intently on my face. "Why did you do that?"

"It was in a silver coin," I said. "Whoever touched it would have been exposed. There was a child who had no idea what it was. I didn't think. I just slapped my hand over it before the child could pick it up."

Georgia nodded. "What happened?"

"I took measures to contain it," I said. "I did everything I could think of, and for a while I thought I'd been successful." I sipped more beer. "Then last year, I realized that my magic was being augmented by a demonic energy called Hellfire. That's what you smelled tonight, Billy, when I flipped the car."

"Why do you use it?" Billy asked.

I shook my head. "It isn't my choice. It just happens."

Georgia frowned. "I'm not an expert on magic, Harry, but from what I've learned that kind of power doesn't come for free."

"No. It doesn't."

"Then what was the price?" she asked.

I drew in a deep breath. Then I started peeling the leather glove off my scarred hand. "I wondered that too," I said. I slid the glove off and turned my hand over.

The scarring was the worst on the insides of my fingers and over my palm. It looked more like melted wax than human flesh, all white with flares of blue where some of the veins still survived—all except for the

exact center of my palm. There, three lines of pink, healthy flesh formed a sigil vaguely suggestive of an hourglass.

"I found this there when I got burned," I said. "It's an ancient script. It's the symbol for the name of Lasciel."

Georgia drew in a slow breath and said, "Oh."

Billy looked back and forth between us. "Oh? What, oh?"

Georgia gave me a be-patient look and turned to Billy. "It's a demon mark. Like a brand, yes?" She looked at me for confirmation.

I nodded.

"He's worried that this demon, Lasciel, might be exerting some kind of control on him in ways that he cannot detect."

"Right," I said. "Everything I know tells me that I should be cut off from Lasciel. That I should be safe. But the power is still there somehow. And if the demon is influencing my thoughts, pulling my strings, I might not even be able to feel it happening."

Georgia frowned. "Do you believe that to be a probability?"

"It's too dangerous to assume anything else," I said. I held up a hand. "That's not hubris. It's just a fact. I have power. If I use it unwisely or recklessly, people could get hurt. They could die. And if Lasciel is somehow influencing me..."

"Who knows what could happen," Billy finished, his tone sober.

"Yeah."

"Damn," Billy said.

We all took a sip of beer.

"I'm worried," I said. "I haven't been able to find any answers. I've gone through spell after spell. Rites, ceremonies, I've tried everything. It won't go away."

"Jesus," Billy breathed.

"An influence like this is detectable, and against the Laws of Magic. If the Wardens found out and pushed a trial on me, it might be enough to get me executed. And if I get near the Knight of the Cross I told you about, he'll be able to feel it on me. I don't know how he'd react. What he would think." I swallowed. "I'm scared."

Georgia touched my arm briefly, then said, "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself, Harry. I know you well enough to know that you would never want that kind of power, much less abuse it."

“If some part of me didn’t want it,” I asked, “why didn’t I pick up the kid instead of Lasciel’s coin?”

A heavy silence settled over the kitchen.

“You’ve been friends to me. Stuck it out by me when times were rough,” I said a moment later. “You’ve made me welcome in your home. In your life. You’re good people. I’m sorry I haven’t been more open with you.”

“Is that what tonight was about?” Billy asked. “The demon?”

“No,” I said. “Tonight was different. And I can’t tell you about it.”

“If you’re trying to protect us...” Billy began.

“I’m not protecting you,” I said. “I’m protecting someone else. If I’m seen with you, it could get them badly hurt. Maybe even killed.”

“I don’t understand. I want to help...” Billy said.

Georgia put her hand over Billy’s. He glanced at her, flushed, and then closed his mouth.

I nodded and finished the beer. “I need you to trust me for a little while. I’m sorry. But the faster I’m out of here, the better.”

“How can we help?” Georgia asked.

“Just knowing that you want to is a help,” I told her. “But that’s almost the only thing you can do. For now, at least.”

“Almost the only thing?”

I nodded. “If I could get something to eat, and maybe a ride back to my car, I’d be obliged.”

“We can do that,” Billy said.

“Thank you,” I said.

Chapter Ten

I raided the refrigerator and divested it of a small plate of cold cuts while Billy made a call to his apartment. Moments later one of the other Alphas called back, confirming that the furor around Bock Ordered Books had begun to die down.

“Only one patrol car still there,” Billy reported. “Plus the guys with the wrecker.”

“We shouldn’t wait any longer,” I said. “With cops around, any neighborhood monsters will lie low for a while to be careful. I want to be back there and gone before they get moving again.”

“Eat in the car,” Georgia suggested, and we all piled back into her SUV.

Georgia parked on the curb behind the Beetle and let me out. I had my keys in my hand, ready to get in and get gone. But when I saw the car, I stopped.

Someone had smashed out the remaining windows in the car. Glass littered the street and the car’s interior. Parts of the windshield were missing, and the rest clung together in a mass of fracture lines that made the whole mess opaque. The back window had already been broken when I used my force ring on that zombie earlier in the evening. The doors and the hood were dented in dozens of places, and the door handles had been entirely smashed off. The tires sagged limply, and I could see long, neat slashes in them without difficulty.

I approached the car slowly.

The wooden handle of a Louisville Slugger baseball bat protruded from the gaping driver’s-side window, the cardboard tag from the store still dangling from its string.

Billy leaned out the SUV window and let out a low whistle. “Wow.”

“But on the upside,” I said, “now all the windows match.”

“What a mess,” Georgia said.

I went around to the front of the car and opened the trunk. It hadn't been tampered with. My sawed-off shotgun was still in the backseat. Billy and Georgia got out and walked over to me.

"Gang?" Georgia asked.

"Gang wouldn't have left the gun," I said.

"The guys in the hoods?" Billy guessed.

"Didn't strike me as the baseball-bat type." I reached in and picked up the bat with just my forefinger and thumb, near the middle, where it wouldn't mar any fingerprints left on it. I showed it to them. "Cowl would have used his magic to smash the car up, not a club." I walked around to the back of the car and frowned down at the engine. It looked intact. I leaned in the window and tried my key. The engine turned over without any trouble.

"Huh," Billy said. "Who completely ruins a car but doesn't touch the engine?"

"Someone sending me a message," I said.

Billy pursed his lips. "What does it say?"

"That I need to rent a car, apparently," I said. I shook my head. "I don't have time for this."

Billy and Georgia traded a look, and Georgia nodded. She came over to me, took my car keys where I held them in my cupped left hand, and replaced them with her own.

"Oh, hell, no," I said. "Don't do that."

"It's not a big deal," she told me. "Look, you still take your car to Mike's Garage, right?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"But nothing," Billy said. "We're only a couple of blocks from the apartment. We'll get your car towed to Mike's."

Georgia nodded firmly. "Just bring back the SUV whenever the Beetle is ready."

I thought it over. Seeing my car torn up was actually a hell of a lot more distressing than I had thought it would be. It was only a machine. But it was *my* machine. Some part of me felt furious that someone had done this to my ride.

My first instinct was to refuse their offer, get the Beetle to the shop, and use cabs until then—but that was the anger talking. I forced myself to apply my brain to it, and figured that, given how much running around I might need to do in the near future, I couldn't afford it. I couldn't afford the time

that public transportation would cost me, either, assuming I could use it at all. Damn, but I hate to swallow my pride.

“It’s a new car. Something will blow out.”

“It’s still under warranty,” Georgia said.

Billy gave me a thumbs-up. “Good hunting, Harry. Whatever you’re after.”

I nodded back to him and said, “Thanks.”

I got into the SUV and headed out to speak to the only person in Chicago who knew as much about magic and death as I did.

Mortimer Lindquist had done pretty well for himself over the past couple of years, and he’d moved out of the little California-import stucco ranch house he’d been in the last time I’d gone to visit him. Now he was working out of a converted duplex in Bucktown. Mort leased both halves of the duplex, and ran his business on one side, with his home on the other. There were no cars in the business driveway, though he mostly operated at night. He must have already wrapped up for the evening. He had abandoned the faux-Gothic decor that had previously graced his place of business, which was a hopeful sign. I needed the help of someone with real skill, not a charlatan with a batch of gimmicks.

I parked the SUV in the business driveway, mowing down a patch of yellow pansies as I did. I wasn’t used to driving something that big. The Beetle might be small and slow, but at least I knew exactly where its tires were going to go.

The lights were all out. I availed myself of the brass knocker hung on the residential door.

Fifteen minutes later, a bleary-looking little man answered. He was short, twenty or thirty pounds overweight, and had given up trying to conceal his receding hairline in favor of shaving his scalp completely bald. He was wrapped in a thick maroon bathrobe and wore grey slippers on his feet.

“It’s three o’clock in the morning,” Mort complained. “What the hell do you—” He saw my face and his eyes widened in panic. He hurried to shut the door.

I stabbed my oak staff into the doorway and stopped him from closing it. “Hi, Mort. Got a minute?”

“Go away, Dresden,” the little man said. “Whatever it is you want, I don’t have it.”

I leaned on my staff and put on an affable smile. “Mort, after all we’ve been through together, I can’t believe you’d speak to me like that.”

Mort gestured furiously at a pale scar on his scalp. “The last time I had a conversation with you, I wound up with a concussion and fifteen stitches in my head.”

“I need your help,” I said.

“Ha,” Mort said. “Thank you, but no. You might as well ask me to paint a target on my chest.” He kicked at my staff, but not very hard. Those slippers wouldn’t have protected his foot very well. “Get out, before something sees you here.”

“Can’t do that, Mort,” I said. “There’s black magic afoot. You know that, don’t you?”

The little man stared at me in silence for a moment. Then he said, “Why do you think I want you gone? I don’t want to be seen with you. I’m not involved.”

“You are now,” I said. I kept smiling, but all I really wanted to do was throw a jab at his nose. I guess my feelings must have leaked through into my expression, because Mort took one look at my face and blanched. “People are in trouble. I’m helping them. Now open this damned door and help me, or I swear to God I am going to come camp out on your lawn in my sleeping bag.”

Mort’s eyes widened, and he looked around outside the house, nervous energy making his eyes flick back and forth rapidly. “You son of a bitch,” he said.

“Believe it.”

He opened the door. I stepped inside and he shut it behind me, snapping several locks closed.

The interior of the house was clean, businesslike. The entry hall had been converted into a small waiting room, and beyond it lay the remainder of the first floor, a richly colored room lined with candles in sconces, now unlit, featuring a large table of dark polished wood surrounded by matching hand-carved chairs. Mort stalked into his séance room, picked up a box of kitchen matches, and started lighting a few candles.

“Well?” he asked. “Going to show me how all-powerful you are? Call up a gale in my study? Maybe slam a few doors for dramatic effect?”

“Would you like me to?”

He threw the matches down on the table and took a seat at its head. "Maybe I haven't been clear with you, Dresden," Mort said. "I'm not a wizard. I'm not with the Council. I have no interest in attracting their attention or that of their enemies. I am not a participant in your war with the vampires. I like my blood where it is."

"This isn't about the vampires," I said.

Mort frowned. "No? Are things dying down, then?"

I grimaced and took a seat a few chairs down. "There was a nasty fight in Mexico City three weeks ago, and the Wardens bloodied the Red Court's nose pretty well. Seems to have thrown a wrench in their plans for some reason."

"Getting ready to hit back," Mort said.

"Everyone figures that," I said. "We just don't know where or when."

Mort exhaled and leaned his forehead on the heel of one hand. "Did you know I found someone they'd killed a couple of years ago? Young boy, maybe ten years old."

"A ghost?" I asked.

Mort nodded. "Little guy had no idea what was going on. He didn't even know he was dead. They cut his throat with a razor blade. You could barely see the mark unless he turned to look over his right shoulder."

"That's what they do," I said. "How can you see things like that and not want to fight them?"

"Bad things *happen* to people, Dresden," Mort said. "I'm sorry as hell about it, but I'm not you. I don't have the power to change it."

"Like hell you don't," I said. "You're an ectomancer. One of the strongest I've met. You've got access to all kinds of information. You could do a lot of good."

"Information doesn't stop fangs, Dresden. If I start using what I know against them, I'd be a threat. Five minutes after I get involved I'll be the one with his throat cut."

"Better them than you, huh?"

He looked up and spread his hands. "I am what I am, Dresden. A coward. I don't apologize for it." He folded his fingers and regarded me soberly. "What's the fastest way for me to get you away from my home and out of my life?"

I leaned my staff against the table and slouched into my chair. "What do you know about what's been happening in town lately?"

“Black magic?” Mort asked. “Not much. I’ve had nightmares, which is unusual. The dead have been nervous for several days. It’s been difficult to get them to answer a summons, even with Halloween coming up.”

“Has that happened before?” I asked.

“Not on this scale,” Mort said. “I’ve asked, but they won’t explain to me why they’re afraid. In my experience, it’s one way that spiritual entities react to the presence of dark powers.”

I nodded, frowning. “It’s necromancy,” I said. “You ever heard about a guy named Kemmler?”

Mort’s eyes widened. “Oh, God. His disciples?”

“I think so,” I said. “A lot of them.”

Mort’s face turned a little green. “That explains why they’re so afraid.”

“Why?”

He waved a hand. “The dead are terrified of whatever is moving around out there. Necromancers can enslave them. Control them. Even destroy them.”

“So they can feel their power?” I asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Good,” I said. “I was counting on that.”

Mort frowned and arched an eyebrow.

“I’m not sure how many of them are in town,” I said. “I need to know where they are—or at least how many of them are here. I want you to ask the dead to help me locate them.”

He lifted both hands. “They won’t. I’ll tell you that for certain. You couldn’t get a ghost to willingly appear within screaming distance of a necromancer.”

“Come on, Mort. Don’t start holding out on me.”

“I’m not,” he said, and held up two fingers in a scout’s hand signal. “My pledge of honor upon it.”

I exhaled, frustrated. “What about residual magic?”

“What do you mean?”

“Whenever these necromancers work with dark magic it leaves a kind of stain or footprint. I can sense it if I get close enough.”

“So why don’t you do it?”

“It’s a big town,” I said. “And whatever these lunatics are up to, it’s got to happen by midnight Halloween. I don’t have time to walk a grid hoping to get close.”

“And you think the dead will?”

“I think the dead can move through walls and the floor, and that there are a whole lot more of them than there are of me,” I said. “If you ask them, they might do it.”

“They might attract attention to themselves, you mean,” Mort said. “No. They may be dead, but that doesn’t mean that they can’t get hurt. I won’t risk that for Council infighting.”

I blinked for a second. A few years ago Mort had barely been able to crawl out of his bottle long enough to cold-read credulous idiots into believing he could speak to their dead loved ones. Even after he had gotten his life together and begun to reclaim his atrophied talents, he had never displayed any particular indication that he wanted anything more than to turn a profit on his genuine skills rather than with fraud. Mort always looked out for number one.

But not tonight. I recognized the quiet, steady light in his eyes. He was not going to be pushed on this issue. Maybe Mort wasn’t willing to go to the wall for his fellow human beings, but apparently with the dead it was different. I hadn’t expected the little ectomancer to grow a backbone, even if it was only a partial one.

I weighed my options. I could always try to lean harder on Mort, but I was pretty sure that it wouldn’t do me much good. I could try contacting the ghosts of Chicagoland myself—but while I knew the basic theory of ectomancy, I had no practical experience with it. I had no time to waste floundering around like a clueless newbie in an area of magic totally outside my practical experience.

“Mort,” I said, “look. If you mean it, I’ll respect that. I’ll go right now.”

He frowned, his eyes wary.

“But this isn’t about wizard politics,” I said. “Kemmler’s disciples have already killed at least one person here in town, and they’re going to kill more.”

He slumped a little in his chair and closed his eyes. “Bad things happen to people, Dresden. That’s not my fault.”

“Please,” I said. “Mort, I have a friend involved in this. If I don’t deal with these assholes, she’s going to get hurt.”

He didn’t open his eyes or answer me.

Dammit. I couldn’t force him to help me. If he wasn’t going to be moved, he wasn’t going to be moved.

“Thanks for nothing then, Mort,” I told him. My voice sounded more tired than bitter. “Keep on looking out for number one.” I rose, picked up my staff, and walked toward the door.

I had it unlocked and half-open when Mort said, “What’s her name?”

I paused and inhaled slowly. “It’s Murphy,” I said without turning around. “Karrin Murphy.”

There was a long silence.

“Oh,” Mort said then. “You should have just said so. I’ll ask them.”

I looked over my shoulder. The ectomancer stood up and walked over to a low bureau. He withdrew several articles and started laying them out on the table.

I shut the door and locked it again, then went back to the ectomancer. Mort unfolded a paper street map of Chicago and laid it flat on the table. Then he set candles at each of its corners and lit them. Finally he poured red ink from a little vial into a perfume atomizer.

After watching him for a moment, I asked, “Why?”

“I knew her father,” Mort said. “I know her father.”

“She’s a good person,” I said.

“That’s what I hear.” He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. “Dresden, I need you to be quiet for a while. I can’t afford any distraction.”

“All right,” I said.

“I’m going to ask them,” Mort said. “You won’t hear me, but they will. I’ll spray the ink into the air over the map, and they’ll bring it down wherever they find one of your footprints.”

“You think it will work?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe. But I’ve never done this before.” He closed his eyes and added, “Shhh.”

I sat waiting and tried not to fidget. Mort was completely still for several minutes, and then his lips started moving. No sound came from them, except for the quiet sighs of breathing when he inhaled. He broke out into a sudden and heavy sweat, his bald head gleaming in the candlelight. The air suddenly vibrated against my face, and flashes of cold raced over my body at random. A second later I became acutely conscious of another presence in the room. Then another. And a third. Seconds after that, though I could see or hear no one, I became certain that the room was packed with people, and an accompanying sense of claustrophobia made me long to get outside

into fresh air. It was definitely magic, but different from any I had felt before. I fought the trapped, panicked sensation and remained seated, still and quiet.

Mort nodded sharply, picked up the atomizer, and sprayed a mist of red ink into the air over the map.

I held my breath and leaned closer.

The mist drifted down over the map, but instead of settling into an even spread, the fine droplets began to swirl into miniature vortexes like tiny, bloody tornadoes sweeping over the map. Scarlet circles formed at the base of the minitornadoes, until the whirling cones spiraled down into vertical lines, then vanished.

Mort let out a grunt and slumped forward in his chair, gasping for breath.

I stood up and examined the street map by candlelight.

“Did it work?” Mort rasped.

“I think it did,” I said. I put my finger beside one of the larger red circles. “This is the Forensic Institute. One of them created a zombie there earlier tonight.”

Mort sat up and leaned forward over the map, his eyes glazed with fatigue. He pointed at another bloody dot. “That one. It’s the Field Museum.”

I traced my finger to another one. “This one is in a pretty tough neighborhood. I think it’s an apartment building.” I moved on to the next. “A cemetery. And what the hell, at O’Hare?”

Mort shook his head. “The ink’s darker than the others. I think that means it’s beneath the airport, in Undertown.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “That makes sense. Two more. An alley down by Burnham Park, and a sidewalk on Wacker.”

“Six,” Mort said.

“Six,” I agreed.

Six necromancers like Grevane and Cowl.

And only one of me.

Hell’s bells.

Chapter Eleven

I clipped my old iron mailbox with the front fender of the stupid SUV as I pulled into the driveway at my apartment. The box dented one corner of the vehicle's hood and toppled over with a heavy clang. I parked the SUV and shoved the pole the mailbox was mounted on back into the ground, but the impact had bent the pole. My mailbox leaned drunkenly to one side, but it stayed upright. Good enough for me.

I gathered up my gear, including the sawed-off shotgun I'd removed from the Beetle, and got indoors in a hurry.

I set things down and locked up my wards and the heavy steel door I'd had installed after a big, bad demon had huffed and puffed and blown down the original. It wasn't until I had them all firmly secured that I let out a slow breath and started to relax. The living room was lit only by the embers of the fire and a few tiny flames. From the kitchen alcove, I heard the soft thumping sound of Mouse's tail wagging against the icebox.

Thomas sat in the big comfy recliner next to the fire, absently stroking Mister. My cat, curled up on Thomas's lap, watched me with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Thomas," I said.

"All quiet on the basement front," Thomas murmured. "Once Butters wound down he just about dropped unconscious. I told him he could sleep in the bed."

"Fine," I said. I took my copy of *Erlking*, lit a few candles on the end table, and flopped down onto the couch.

Thomas arched an eyebrow.

"Oh," I said, sitting up. "Sorry, didn't think. You probably want to sleep."

"Not especially," he said. "Someone should keep watch, anyway."

"You all right?" I asked him.

"I just don't feel like sleeping right now. You can have the couch."

I nodded and settled down again. "You want to talk?"

“If I did, I’d be talking.” He went back to staring at the fire and stroking the cat.

He was still upset, obviously, but I’d learned that it was pointless to start pushing Thomas, no matter how well-intentioned I might be. He’d dig in his heels from sheer obstinacy, and the conversation would get nowhere.

“Thanks,” I said, “for looking out for Butters for me.”

Thomas nodded.

We fell into a relaxed silence, and I started reading the book.

A while later I fell asleep.

I dreamed almost immediately. Threatening trees, mostly evergreens, rose up around a small glade. In its center a modest, neat campfire sparked and crackled. I could smell a lake somewhere nearby, moss and flowers and dead fish blending in with the scent of mildewed pine. The air was cold enough to make me shiver, and I hunched a little closer to the fire, but even so I felt like my back was to a glacier. From somewhere overhead came the wild, honking screams of migrating geese under a crescent moon. I didn’t recognize the place, but it somehow seemed perfectly familiar.

A camping rig straddled the fire, holding a tin coffee mug and a suspended pot of what smelled like some kind of rich stew, maybe venison.

My father sat across the fire from me.

Malcolm Dresden was a tall, spare man with dark hair and steady blue eyes. His jeans were as heavily worn as his leather hiking boots, and I could see that he was wearing his favorite red-and-white flannel shirt under his fleece-lined hunting jacket. He leaned forward and stirred the pot, then took a sip from the spoon.

“Not bad,” he said. He picked up a couple of tin mugs from one of the stones surrounding the fire and grabbed the coffeepot by its wooden handle. He poured coffee into both cups, hung the coffeepot back over the fire, and offered me one of them. “You warm enough?”

I accepted the mug and just stared at him for a moment. Maybe I had expected him to look exactly like I remembered, but he didn’t. He looked so thin. He looked young, maybe even younger than me. And...so very, very ordinary.

“You go deaf, son?” my father asked, grinning. “Or mute?”

I fumbled for words. “It’s cold out here.”

“It is that,” he agreed.

He pulled a couple of packs of powdered creamer from a knapsack, and passed them over to me along with a couple of packs of sugar. We prepared the coffee in silence and sipped at it for a few moments. It filled me with an earthy, satisfying warmth that made the terrible chill along my spine more bearable.

“This is a nice change of pace from my usual dream,” I said.

“How so?” my father asked.

“Fewer tentacles. Fewer screams. Less death.”

Just then, out in the blackness beneath the trees, something let out an eerie, wailing, alien cry. I shivered and my heart beat a little faster.

“The night is young,” my father said dryly.

There was a rushing sound out in the woods, and I saw the tops of several trees swaying in succession as something, something big, moved among them. From tree to tree, the unseen threat moved, circling the little glade. I looked down and saw ripples on the surface of my coffee. My hand was trembling.

“What is that?” I asked.

“Beware the Jabberwock, my son,” he said. He took a sip of his coffee and regarded the motion in the trees without fear. “You know what it is. You know what it wants.”

I swallowed. “The demon.”

He nodded, blue eyes on mine.

“I don’t suppose—”

“I’m fresh out of vorpal swords,” my father said. He reached into the pack and tossed me a miniature candy bar. “The closest I can get is a Snickers snack.”

“You call that a funny line?” I asked.

“Look who’s talking.”

“So,” I said. “Why haven’t I dreamed about you before?”

“Because I wasn’t allowed to contact you before,” my father said easily. “Not until others had crossed the line.”

“Allowed?” I asked. “What others? What line?”

He waved a hand. “It isn’t important. And we don’t have much time here before it returns.”

I sighed and rubbed at my eyes. “Okay, I’m done with the stupid nostalgia dream. Why don’t you go back to wherever you came from and I’ll have a nice soothing dream of going to work naked.”

He laughed. "That's better. I know you're afraid, son. Afraid for your friends. Afraid for yourself. But know this: You are not alone."

I blinked at him several times. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm not a part of your own subconscious, son. I'm me. I'm real."

"No offense, but of course the dream version of you would say that," I said.

He smiled. "Is that what your heart tells you I am? A dreamed shadow of memory?"

I stared at him for a minute and then shook my head. "It can't be you. You're dead."

He stood up, walked around the fire, then dropped to one knee beside me. He put his hand on my shoulder. "Yes. I'm dead. But that doesn't mean that I'm not here. It doesn't mean that I don't love you, boy."

The light of the fire blurred in front of my eyes, and a horrible pang went through my chest. "Dad?"

His hand squeezed tighter. "I'm here."

"I don't understand it," I said. "Why am I so afraid?"

"Because you've got more to lose than you ever have before," he said. "Your brother. Your friends. You've opened yourself up to them. Loved them. You can't bear the thought of someone taking them away from you."

"It's getting to be too much," I said. My voice shook. "I just keep getting more wounded and tired. They just keep coming at me. I'm not some kind of superhero. I'm just *me*. And I didn't want any of this. I don't want to die."

He put his other hand on my other shoulder and faced me intently. I met his eyes while he spoke. "That fear is natural. But it is also a weakness. A path of attack for what would prey upon your mind. You must learn to control it."

"How?" I whispered.

"No one can tell you that," he said. "Not me. Not an angel. And not a fallen angel. You are the product of your own choices, Harry, and nothing can change that. Don't let anyone or anything tell you otherwise."

"But...my choices haven't always been very good," I said.

"Whose have?" he asked. He smiled at me and rose. "I'm sorry, son, but I have to go."

"Wait," I said.

He put his hand on my head, and for that brief second I was a child again, tired and small and utterly certain of my father's strength.

"My boy. There's so much still ahead of you."

"So much?" I whispered.

"Pain. Joy. Love. Death. Heartache. Terrible waters. Despair. Hope. I wish I could have been with you longer. I wish I could have helped you prepare for it."

"For what?" I asked him.

"Shhhhh," he said. "Sleep. I'll keep the fire lit until morning."

And darkness and deep, silent, blissfully restful night swallowed me whole.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning my brain was throbbing with far too many thoughts and worries to allow for any productive thinking. I couldn't afford that. Until I knew exactly what was going on and how to stop it, the most important weapon in my arsenal was reason.

I needed to clear my head.

I got my running clothes on as quietly as I could, but as tired as Butters looked I could probably have decked myself in a full suit of Renaissance plate armor without waking him. I took Mouse on his morning walk, filled up a plastic sports bottle with cold water, and headed for the door.

Thomas stood waiting for me at the SUV, dressed as I was in shorts and a T-shirt. Only he made it look casually chic, whereas I looked like I bought my wardrobe at garage sales.

"Where's the Beetle?" he asked.

"Shop," I said. "Someone beat it up."

"Why?"

"Not sure yet," I said. "Feel like a run?"

"Why?" he asked.

"My head's full. Need to move."

Thomas nodded in understanding. "Where?"

"Beach."

"Sure," he said. He hooked a thumb at the SUV. "What's with the battleship?"

"Billy and Georgia loaned it to me."

"That was nice of them."

"Nice and stupid. It won't last long with me driving it." I sighed. "But I need the wheels. Come on. It's after dawn, but I still don't want to leave Butters alone for long."

He nodded, and we got into the SUV. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

“God, not until I can blow off some steam running.”

“I hear you,” he said, and we remained silent all the way to the beach.

North Avenue Beach is one of the most popular spots in town in the summer. On a cloudy morning at the end of October, though, not many folk were about. There were two other cars in the parking lot, probably belonging to the two other joggers moving steadily on the running trail.

I parked the SUV, and Thomas and I got out. I spent a couple of minutes stretching, though it probably wasn't as thorough as it should have been. Thomas just leaned against the SUV, watching me without comment. From what I've seen, vampires don't seem to have a real big problem with pulled muscles. I nodded to him, and we both hit the running trail, starting off at the slowest jog I could manage. I ran like that for maybe ten minutes before I felt warm enough to pick up the pace. Thomas matched me the whole time, his eyes half-closed and distant. My breathing hit a comfortable stride, hard but not labored. Thomas didn't breathe hard at first, either, but my legs are a lot longer than his, and I'd developed a taste for running as exercise over the past few years. I shifted into a higher gear, and finally made him start working to keep up with me.

We ran down the beach, past the beach house—a large structure built to resemble the top few decks of an old riverboat, giving the impression that the vessel had sunk into the sand of the beach. At the far end of the beach we would turn and come back. We went all the way down and back three times before I slowed the pace a little, and said, “So you wanna hear what's going on?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Okay.” There was no one nearby, and by now the sun had risen enough to touch the top of the Chicago skyline behind me. Mavra couldn't have been listening in herself, and it was unlikely any mortal accomplice could, either. It was as close to ideal privacy as I was likely to get. I started with the arrival of Mavra's package and told Thomas of the events of the entire evening.

“You know what we should do?” Thomas asked when I was finished. “We should kill Mavra. We could make it a family project.”

“No,” I said. “If we take her out, Murphy will be the one to suffer for it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Thomas said. “I'm pretty sure I know what Murphy would have to say about that.”

"I don't want it to come to that," I said. "Besides, whatever this *Word of Kemmler* is, there are some seriously nasty people after it. It's probably a good idea to make sure they don't get it."

"Right," Thomas said. "So you keep it away from the nasty people so you can give it to the nasty vampire."

"Not if I can help it," I said.

"So Murphy gets burned anyway?" he asked.

I narrowed my eyes. "Not if I can help it."

"How are you going to manage that?"

"I'm working on it," I said. "The first step is to find *The Word of Kemmler*, or the whole thing is a bust."

"How do you do that?"

"The map," I said. "I don't think these guys are running around working the major black magic for no reason. I need to check out where they've been and figure out what they were doing."

"What about Butters?" Thomas asked.

"For now we keep him behind my wards. I don't know why Grevane wanted him, and until I figure it out he's got to keep his head down."

"I doubt Grevane was looking for a polka aficionado," Thomas said.

"I know. It's got something to do with one of the bodies at the morgue."

"So why not go there?" Thomas asked.

"Because the guard was killed there. There's blood all over the place, maybe the guard's body, and God only knows what Grevane did to the place after we left. The cops will have it locked down hard by now, and they'll definitely want to have a nice long talk with anyone who might have been there. I can't afford to spin my wheels in an interrogation room right now. Neither can Butters."

"So ask Murphy to look around," Thomas said.

I ground my teeth together for a few steps. "I can't. Murphy's on vacation."

"Oh," he said.

"I'm watering her plants."

"Right."

"While she's in Hawaii."

"Uh-huh," he said.

"With Kincaid."

Thomas stopped running.

I didn't.

He caught up to me a hundred yards later. "Well, that's a bitch."

I grunted. "I think she wanted me to tell her not to go," I said. "I think that's why she came to see me."

"So why didn't you?" he asked.

"Didn't realize it until it was too late. Besides, she's not my girlfriend. Or anything. Not my place to tell her who she should see." I shook my head. "Besides...I mean, if it was going to be right with Murphy, it would have been right before now, right? If we got all involved and it didn't work out, it would really screw things up for me. I mean, most of my living comes from jobs for SI."

"That's real reasonable and mature, Harry," Thomas said.

"It's smarter not to try to complicate things."

Thomas frowned at me for a moment. Then he said, "You're serious, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "I guess so. Yeah."

"Little brother," he said, "I simply cannot get over how stupid you are at times."

"Stupid? You just told me it was reasonable."

"Your excuses are," Thomas said, "but love isn't."

"We're not in love!"

"Never gonna be," Thomas said, "if you keep being all logical about it."

"Like you're one to talk."

Thomas's shoes hit the trail a little more sharply. "I know what it's like to lose it. Don't be an idiot, Harry. Don't lose it like I did."

"I can't lose what I haven't ever had."

"You have a *chance*," he said, a snarl in his words, and I had the sudden sense that he had come precariously close to violent action. "And that's more than I've got."

I didn't push him. We got to the end of the trail and moved off it, slowing to walk down the beach, winding down. "Thomas," I said, "what's wrong with you today, man?"

"I'm hungry," he said, his voice a low growl.

"We can hit a McDonald's or something on the way home," I suggested. He bared his teeth. "Not that kind of hunger."

"Oh." We walked awhile more, and I said, "But you fed just yesterday."

He laughed, a short and bitter sound. “Fed? No. That woman...that wasn’t anything.”

“She looked like she’d just run a marathon. You took from her.”

“I took.” He spat the words. “But there’s no substance to it. I didn’t take deeply from her. Not from anyone anymore. Not since Justine.”

“But food is food, right?” I said.

“No,” he said. “It isn’t.”

“Why?”

“It isn’t like that.”

“Then what *is* it like?”

“There’s no point in telling you,” he said.

“Why not?”

“You couldn’t understand,” he said.

“Not if you don’t *tell* me, dolt,” I said. “Thomas, I’m your brother. I want to understand you.” I stopped and put my hand on his shoulder, shoving him just hard enough to make him turn to face me. “Look, I know it’s not working out the way we hoped. But dammit, if you just go storming off every time you get upset about something, if you don’t give me the chance to understand you, we’re never going to get anywhere.”

He closed his eyes, frustration evident on his face. He started walking down the beach, just at the edge of what passed for surf in Lake Michigan. I kept pace. He walked all the way down the beach, then stopped abruptly and said, “Race me back. Beat me there, and I’ll tell you.”

I blinked. “What kind of kindergarten crap is that?”

His grey eyes flashed with anger. “You want to know what it’s like? Beat me down the beach.”

“Of all the ridiculous, immature nonsense,” I said. Then I hooked a foot behind Thomas’s calf, shoved him down to the sand, and took off down the beach at a dead sprint.

There’s an almost primal joy in the sheer motion and power of running a race. Children run everywhere for a reason—it’s fun. Grown-ups can forget that sometimes. I stretched out my legs, still loose from the longer jog, and even though I was running across sand, the thrill of each stride filled my thoughts.

Behind me, Thomas spat out a curse and scrambled to his feet, setting out after me.

We ran through the grey light. The morning had dawned cold, and even at the lakeside the air was pretty dry. Thomas got ahead of me for a couple of steps, looked back, and kicked his heel, flinging sand into my face and eyes. I inhaled some of it, started gasping and choking, but managed to hook my fingers in the back of Thomas's T-shirt. I tugged hard as he stepped, and I outweighed Thomas considerably. He stumbled again, and, choking and gasping, I got ahead of him. I regained my lead and held it.

The last hundred yards were the worst. The cold, dry air and sand burned at my throat, that sharp, painful dryness that only a long run and hard breathing can really do to you. I swerved off the sand toward the parking lot, Thomas's footsteps close behind me.

I beat him back to the SUV by maybe four steps, slapped the back of the vehicle with my hand, then leaned against it, panting heavily. My throat felt like it had been baked in a kiln, and as soon as I could manage it I took the keys out of my black nylon sports pouch. There were several keys on the ring, and I fumbled at them one at a time. After the third wrong guess I had a brief, sharp urge to break the window and grab the bottle of water I'd left sitting in the driver's seat. I managed to force myself to try the keys methodically until I found the right one.

I opened the door, grabbed the bottle, twisted off the cap, and lifted it to ease the parched discomfort in my throat.

I took my first gulp, and the water felt and tasted like it had come from God's own water cooler. It took the harshest edge off the burning thirst, but I needed more to ease the discomfort completely.

Before I could swallow again, Thomas batted the water bottle out of my hand. It arched through the air and landed on the sand, spilling uselessly onto the beach.

I spun on Thomas, staring at him in surprised anger.

He met my gaze with weary grey eyes and said, "It's like that."

I stared at him.

"It's exactly like that." His expression didn't change as he went around and got into the SUV on the passenger side.

I stayed where I was for a moment, trying to ignore my thirst. It was all but impossible to do so. I thought about living with that discomfort and pain hour after hour, day after day, knowing that all I had to do was pick up a vessel filled with what I needed and empty it to make me feel whole.

Would I be able to content myself with a quick splash of relief now and then? Would I be able to take enough to keep me alive?

For a time, perhaps. But time itself would make the thirst no easier to bear. Time would inevitably weigh me down. It would become more difficult to concentrate and to sleep, which would in turn undermine my self-control, which would make it more difficult to concentrate and sleep—a vicious cycle. How long would I be able to last?

Thomas had done it for most of a year.

I wasn't sure I would have done as well in his place.

I got into the SUV, closed the door, and said, "Thank you."

My brother nodded. "What now?"

"We go to 7-Eleven," I said. "Drinks are on you."

He smiled a little and nodded. "Then what?"

I took a deep breath. The run had helped me clear some of the crap out of my head. Talking to my brother had helped a little more. Understanding him a little better made me both more concerned and a bit more confident. I had my head together enough to see the next step I needed to take.

"The apartment. You keep an eye on Butters," I said. "I'm hitting these spots on the map to see what I can find. If I can't turn up anything on my own, I might have to go to the Nevernever for some answers."

"That's dangerous, isn't it?" he said.

I started the car and shrugged my shoulder. "It's a living."

Chapter Thirteen

I took a shower, got dressed, and left Thomas behind with the still-sleeping Butters. Thomas settled down on the couch with a candle, a book, and an old U.S. cavalry saber he'd picked up in an estate sale and honed to a scalpel's edge. I left the sawed-off shotgun on the coffee table within arm's reach, and Thomas nodded his thanks to me.

"Keep an eye on him?" I asked.

Thomas turned a page. "Nothing will touch him."

Mouse settled down on the floor between Butters and the door, and huffed out a breath.

I got into the SUV and got out Mort's map. I headed for the nearest magical hot spot marked in bloody ink on the map—the spot of sidewalk on Wacker.

It was a bitch to find a parking place. It's never easy in Chicago, and I had a shot at a pretty good spot on the street, but while the Beetle would have managed just fine, the SS *Loaner* would have had to smash the cars on either side a few inches apart to fit. I wound up taking out a mortgage to pay for a parking space at a garage, walked a couple of city blocks, and proceeded down the street with my wizard's senses alert, feeling for the dark energy that the city's dead had found.

I found the spot on the sidewalk outside of a corner pharmacy.

It was so small I had walked almost completely through it before I felt it. It felt almost like walking into air-conditioning. The residual magic felt cold, like the other dark power I'd touched, terribly cold, and my skin erupted in goose bumps. I stopped on the spot, closed my eyes, and focused on the remaining energy.

It felt strange somehow. Dawn had dispersed most of the energy that had been there, but even as an aftertaste of the magic that had been worked there, the cold was dizzying. I'd felt dark power similar to this before today—similar, but not identical. There was something about this that was unlike

the horrible aura surrounding Grevane, or that I had sensed from wielders of black magic in my past. This was undeniably the same power, but it somehow lacked the greasy, nauseating sense of corruption I'd felt before.

That was all I could sense. I frowned and looked around. There was a spot on the sidewalk that might have been a half-cleaned bloodstain, or might have been spilled coffee. Around me, business-day commuters came and went, some of them pausing to give me annoyed glares. Cars purred by on the street.

I checked at the pharmacy, but the place had been closed the night before, and no one had been there or heard about anything out of the ordinary. I checked the neighboring places of business, but it was a part of town where not much was open after six or seven in the evening, and no one had seen or heard about anything out of the ordinary.

Most of the time the investigation business is like that. You do a lot of looking and not finding. The cure for it is to do more looking. I walked back to the SUV and went to the next spot on the map, at the Field Museum.

The Field Museum is on Lake Shore Drive, and occupies the whole block north of Soldier's Field. I felt a brief flash of gratitude that things usually went to hell during the workweek. If this had been a Sunday with the Bears at home, I'd have had to park and then backpack in from Outer Mongolia. As it was, I got a spot in the smaller parking lot in the same block as the museum, which cost me only a portion of the national gross income.

I walked to the entrance from the parking lot, and slowed my steps for a few strides. There were two patrol cars and an ambulance parked outside the Field Museum's main entrance. Aha. This stop looked like it might be a bit more interesting than the last one.

The doors had just opened for normal visiting hours, and it cost me yet more of my money to get a ticket. My wallet was getting even more anorexic than usual. At this rate I wouldn't be able to afford to protect mankind from the perils of black magic. Hell's bells, that would be really embarrassing.

I went in the front entrance. It's impressively big. The first thing my eyes landed on was the crown jewel of the Field Museum—Sue, the largest, most complete, and most beautifully preserved skeleton of a *Tyrannosaurus rex* ever discovered. They're the actual petrified bones, too—none of this cheap plastic modeling crap for the tourists. The museum prided itself on

the authenticity of the exhibit, and with reason. There's no way to stand in Sue's shadow, to see the bones of the enormous hunter, its size, its power, its enormous teeth, without feeling excruciatingly edible.

Late October is not the museum's high traffic season, and I saw only a couple of other visitors in the great entrance hall. Museum security was in evidence, a couple of men in brown quasi-uniforms, and an older fellow with greying hair and a comfortable-looking suit. The man in the suit stood next to an unobtrusive doorway, talking to a couple of uniformed police officers, neither of whom I recognized.

I moseyed over closer to the three of them, casually browsing over various exhibits until I could get close enough to Listen in.

"...damnedest thing," the old security chief was saying. "Never would have figured that this kind of business would happen here."

"People are people," said the older of the two cops, a black man in his forties. "We can all get pretty crazy."

The younger cop was a little overweight and had a short haircut the color of steamed carrots. "Sir, do you know of anyone who might have had some kind of argument with Mister Bartlesby?"

"Doctor," the security man said. "Dr. Bartlesby."

"Right," said the younger cop, writing on a notepad. "But do you know of anyone like that?"

The security man shook his head. "Dr. Bartlesby was a crotchety old bastard. No one liked him much, but I don't know of anyone who disliked him enough to kill him."

"Did he associate with anyone here?"

"He had a pair of assistants," the security chief replied. "Grad students, I think. Young woman and a young man."

"They a couple?" the younger cop asked.

"Not that I could tell," the security chief said.

"Names?" the older cop asked.

"Alicia Nelson was the girl. The guy was Chinese or something. Lee Shawn or something."

"Does the museum have records on them?" the cop asked.

"I don't think so. They came in with Dr. Bartlesby."

"How long have you known the doctor?" the older cop asked.

"About two months," the security chief said. "He was a visiting professor doing a detailed examination of one of the traveling exhibits. It's already

been taken down and packed up. He was due to leave in a few more days.”

“Which exhibit?” the young cop asked.

“One of the Native American displays,” the security man supplied. “Cahokian artifacts.”

“Ka-what?” the older cop asked.

“Cahokian,” the security chief said. “Amerind tribe that was all over the Mississippi River valley seven or eight hundred years ago, I guess.”

“Were these artifacts valuable?” asked the older cop.

“Arguably,” the security chief said. “But their value is primarily academic. Pottery shards, old tools, stone weapons, that kind of thing. They wouldn’t be easy to liquidate.”

“People do crazy things,” the young cop said, still writing.

“If you say so,” the security chief said. “Look, fellas, the museum would really like to get this cleared up as quickly as possible. It’s been hours already. Can’t we get the remains taken out now?”

“Sorry, sir,” the older cop said. “Not until the detectives are done documenting the scene.”

“How long will that take?” the security chief asked.

The older cop’s radio clicked, and he took it off his belt and had a brief conversation. “Sir,” he told the security chief, “they’re removing the body now. Forensics will be over in a couple of hours to sweep the room.”

“Why the delay?” the chief asked.

The cop answered with a shrug. “But until then, I’m afraid we’ll have to close down access to the crime scene.”

“There are a dozen different senior members of the staff with offices off of that hallway,” the security chief protested.

“I’m sure they’ll finish up as quickly as they can, sir,” the cop said, though his tone brooked no debate.

“Told my boss I’d give it a try.” The chief sighed. “You want to come explain it to him?”

“Glad to,” the cop said with a forced smile. “Lead the way.” The two cops and the security chief strode off together, presumably to talk to somebody with an office, a receptionist, and an irritatingly skewed perspective on the importance of isolating a crime scene.

I chewed on my lip. I was pretty sure that the apparent murder the cops were talking about and my hot spot of dark magic had to be related to each other. But if the hot spot was located on a murder site, it would be shut

away from any access. Forensics could spend hours, even days, going over a room for evidence.

That meant that if I wanted to get a look around, I had to move immediately. From what the cops had said, Forensics wasn't there yet. The men moving the body were part of the new civilian agency the city government was employing to transport corpses around town, judging from the ambulance outside. Both cops were with the security chief, which would mean that at most there was maybe a detective and a cop at the crime scene. There might be a chance that I could get close enough to see something.

It took me about two seconds to make up my mind. The minute the security chief was out of sight, I slipped through the nondescript doorway, down a flight of stairs, and into the plain and unassuming hallways meant for the Field Museum's staff instead of its visitors. I passed a small alcove with a fridge, a counter, and a coffee machine. I picked up a cup of coffee, a bagel, a newspaper, and a spiral notebook someone had left there. I piled up everything in my arms and tried to look like a bored academic on his way to his office. I had no clue where I was going yet, but I tried to walk like I knew what I was doing, reaching out with my arcane senses in an effort to feel where the remnants of the hot spot might be.

I chose intersections methodically, left each time. I hit a couple of dead ends, but tried to keep close track of where I was going. The complex of tunnels and hallways under the Field Museum could swallow a small army without needing a glass of water, and I couldn't afford to get lost down there.

It took me fifteen minutes to find it. One hallway had been marked with crime-scene tape, and I homed in on it. Even before I turned down the hall, my senses prickled with uneasy cold. I'd found my hot spot of necromantic energy, and there was a murder scene at its center. I heard footsteps and slipped to one side, remaining still as a pair of cops in suits came out, arguing quietly with each other about the shortest path outside so that they could smoke. They'd been cooped up with the body, taking pictures and documenting the scene since before anyplace had been open for breakfast, and neither one of them sounded like he was in a good mood.

"Rawlins," said one of them into his radio, "where the hell are you?"

"Talking to some administrator," came the reply, the voice of the older cop from upstairs.

“How soon can you get down here to watch the site?”

“Give me a few minutes.”

“Dammit,” cursed the other detective. “Bastard is doing this on purpose.”

The one with the radio nodded. “Screw this. I’ve been on duty since noon yesterday. We’ve got the scene documented. It’ll keep for two minutes while he walks his slow ass down here.”

The other detective nodded his agreement and they left.

I set my props aside and slipped under the tape and down the hallway. There were office doors every couple of steps, all closed. At the end of the hall a door stood open, the lights on. I might have only a few minutes, and if I was going to learn anything it had to be now. I hurried forward.

There might not have been a body there anymore, but even before I saw it, the room stank of death. It’s an elusive scent, something that you get as a bonus to other smells, rather than a distinctive smell of its own. The thick, sweet odor of blood was in the air, mixed in with the faint stench of offal. There was the musty, moldy smell of old things long underground, too, as well as a few traces of something spicier, maybe some kind of incense. The death scent was mixed all through it, something sharp and unnerving, halfway between burned meat and cheap ammonia-based cleaner. My stomach rolled uncomfortably, and the rising sense of dark energy didn’t help me keep it calm.

The office was a fairly large one. Shelves and filing cabinets lined the walls. Three desks sat clumped together in the middle of the room. A small refrigerator sat in the corner, near an old couch and a coffee table littered with mostly empty boxes of Chinese takeout and a laptop computer. Books and boxes filled the shelves. The desks were cluttered with books, notebooks, folders, and a few personal articles—a novelty coffee mug, a couple of picture frames, and some recent popular novels.

Everything had been splattered with blood and dark magic.

The blood had dried out, and most of it was either red-black or dark brown. There was a large pool on the floor between the door and the nearest desk, dried into a sticky sludge. A sharp, almost straight line marked where the corpse had been lifted, probably peeling up the hem of a jacket or coat from where it had been stuck to the floor. Droplets had splattered the walls, the desk, the photographs, the novels, and the novelty mugs.

I hated blood. As a decorating theme it left something to be desired. And it smelled horrible. My stomach twisted again, and I fought to keep down the doughnuts I'd grabbed at the convenience store. I closed my eyes and then forced myself to open them again. To look. The only way to avoid more scenes like this was to look at this one, figure out who had done it, and then to go stop them from doing it again.

I pushed my revulsion away and focused on the scene, searching for details.

There were a few smears of blood on the floor but none on the sides, surface, or edge of the nearest desk. That meant that the victim hadn't moved much after he'd gone down. Either he'd been held down or he'd bled out so quickly that he hadn't had time to crawl toward the nearest phone, on the desk, to call for help. I looked up. There wasn't much blood on the ceiling. That didn't prove anything, but if someone had opened his throat, there would almost certainly have been blood sprayed all over it. Any other kind of bleeding wound would probably have left the victim, evidently Dr. Bartlesby, able to function, at least for a couple of minutes. He'd probably been held down.

I looked down. There was part of a footprint in blood on the floor, leading away. It looked like part of the heel of an athletic shoe—and not a large one, either. Probably a woman's shoe, or a large child's. For the sake of my ability to sleep at night, I hoped it was an adult's shoe. Children shouldn't see such things.

Then again, who should?

On an entirely different level, the room was even more disturbing. The dark power here was not the pure, silent cold I'd felt on the sidewalk on Wacker. It felt corrupt, dark, somehow mutilated. There was a sense of malicious glee to the residue of whatever magic had been worked here. Someone had used their power to murder a man—and they had loved doing it. Worse, it was a distinctly different aura than I had felt near either Cowl or Grevane. Magical workings didn't leave behind an exact finger-print that could be traced to a given wizard, but intuition told me that this working had been sloppier and more frenetic than something Grevane would have done, and messier than Cowl would prefer.

But it was strong—stronger magic than almost anything I had ever done. Whoever was behind the spell that had been wrought here was at least as powerful as I was. Maybe stronger.

“Heh,” drawled a voice from behind me. “I thought that was you.”

I stiffened and turned around. The older of the two cops from upstairs stood ten feet down the hall from me, one hand resting casually on the butt of his sidearm. His dark face was wary, but not openly hostile, and his stance one of caution but not alarm. The name tag on his jacket read RAWLINS.

“Thought who was me?” I asked him.

“Harry Dresden,” he said. “The wizard. The guy Murphy hires for SI.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess that’s me.”

He nodded. “I saw you upstairs. You didn’t look like your typical museum patron.”

“It was the big leather coat, wasn’t it?” I said.

“That helped,” Rawlins acknowledged. “What are you doing down here?”

“Just looking,” I said. “I haven’t gone into the room.”

“Yeah. You can tell that from how I haven’t arrested you yet.” Rawlins looked past me, into the room, and his expression sobered. “Hell of a thing in there.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Something don’t feel right about it,” he said. “Just...I don’t know. Sets my teeth on edge. More than usual. I’ve seen knifings before. This is different.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It is.”

Dark eyes flicked back to me, and the old cop exhaled. “This is something from down SI’s way?”

“Yeah.”

He grunted. “Murphy send you?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

“Why you here then?”

“Because I don’t like things that put cops’ teeth on edge,” I said. “You guys have any suspects?”

“For someone who just happened to be walking by, you got a lot of questions,” he said.

“For a beat cop in charge of securing the scene, you were asking plenty of your own,” I said. “Upstairs, with museum security.”

He grinned, teeth very white. “Shoot. I been a detective before. Twice.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Busted back down?”

“Both times, on account of I have an attitude problem,” Rawlins said.

I gave him a lopsided smile. "You going to arrest me?"

"Depends," he said.

"On what?"

"On why you're here." He met my gaze directly, openly, his hand still on his gun.

I didn't meet his eyes for very long. I glanced over my shoulder, debating how to answer, and decided to go with a little sincerity. "There are some bad people in town. I don't think the police can get them. I'm trying to find them before they hurt anyone else."

He studied me for a long minute. Then he took his hand off the gun and reached into his coat. He tossed me a folded newspaper.

I caught it and unfolded it. It was some kind of academic newsletter, and on the cover page was a photograph of a portly old man with sideburns down to his jaw, together with a smiling young woman and a young man with Asian features. The caption under the picture read, *Visiting Professor Charles Bartlesby and his assistants, Alicia Nelson, Li Xian, prepare to examine Cahokian collection at the FMNH, Chicago.*

"That's the victim in the middle," Rawlins said. "His assistants shared the office with him. They have not been answering their cell phone numbers and are not in their apartments."

"Suspects?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Not many people murder strangers," he said. "They were the only ones in town who knew the victim. Came in with him from England somewhere."

I looked from the newsletter up to Rawlins, and frowned. "Why are you helping me?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "Helping you? You could have found that anywhere. And I never saw you."

"Understood," I said. "But why?"

He leaned against the wall and folded his arms. "Because when I was a young cop, I went running down an alley when I heard a woman scream. And I saw something. Something that..." His face became remote. "Something that has given me bad dreams for about thirty years. This *thing* strangling a girl. I push it away from her, empty my gun into it. It picks me up and slams my head into a wall a few times. I figured Mama Rawlins's baby boy was about to go the way of the dodo."

"What happened?" I asked.

“Lieutenant Murphy’s father showed up with a shotgun loaded with rock salt and killed it. And when the sun comes up, it burns this thing’s corpse like it had been soaked in gasoline.” Rawlins shook his head. “I owed her old man. And I seen enough of the streets to know that she’s been doing a lot of good. You been helping her with that.”

I nodded. “Thank you,” I told him.

He nodded. “Don’t really feel like losing my job for you, Dresden. Get out before someone sees you.”

Something occurred to me. “You heard about the Forensic Institute?”

He shrugged at me. “Sure. Every cop has.”

“I mean what happened there last night,” I said.

Rawlins shook his head. “I haven’t heard of anything.”

I frowned at him. A grisly murder at the morgue would have been all over the place, in police scuttlebutt if not in the newspapers. “You haven’t? Are you sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure.”

I nodded at him and walked down the hallway.

“Hey,” he said.

I looked over my shoulder.

“Can you stop them?” Rawlins asked.

“I hope so.”

He glanced at the bloodied room and then back at me. “All right. Good hunting, kid.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Wow,” Butters said, fiddling with the control panel on the SUV. “This thing has everything. Satellite radio stations. And I bet I could put my whole CD collection inside the changer on this player. And, oh, cool, check it out. It’s got an onboard GPS, too, so we can’t get lost.” Butters pushed a button on the control panel.

A calm voice emerged from the dashboard. “Now entering Helsinki.”

I arched an eyebrow at the dashboard and then at Butters. “Maybe the car is lost.”

“Maybe you’re interfering with its computer, too,” Butters said.

“You think?”

He smiled tightly, checking his seat belt for the tenth time. “Just so we’re clear, I have no problems with hiding, Harry. I mean, if you’re worried about my ego or something, don’t. I’m fine with the hiding. Happy, even.”

I pulled off the highway. The green lawns and tended trees of the industrial park hosting the Forensic Institute appeared as the SUV rolled up the ramp. “Try to relax, Butters.”

He jerked his head in a nervous, negative shake. “I don’t want to get killed. Or arrested. I’m really bad at being arrested. Or killed.”

“It’s a calculated risk,” I said. “We need to find out what Grevane wanted with you.”

“And we’re taking me to work...why?” “

“Think about it. What would have happened if they’d found you missing, blood all over the place, the building ransacked, and Phil’s corpse lying in the morgue or on the lawn outside?”

“Someone would have gotten fired,” Butters said.

“Yeah. And they would have locked down the building to search for evidence. And they would have grabbed you and locked you away somewhere, for questioning at least.”

“So?” Butters asked.

“If Grevane cleaned up what happened at the morgue, it means he didn’t want too much official attention focused there. Whatever he wants from you, I’m betting it’s still in the building.” I pulled into the industrial park. “We have to find it.”

“Eduardo Mendoza?” he asked me.

“Offhand, I can’t think of any other reason for someone to want to grab your friendly neighborhood assistant medical examiner,” I said. “Grevane’s got to be interested in a corpse at the morgue, and that one was the only one that seemed a little odd.”

“Harry,” Butters said, “if this guy really is a necromancer—a wizard of the dead—then why the hell would he need a plain old vanilla science nerd like me?”

“That’s the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question,” I said. “And we have another reason, too.”

“The museum doctor guy, right?” Butters asked.

I nodded at him and parked in the lot next to Butters’s ruined little truck. “Right. I need to know what killed him. Hell, any information could be useful.”

Butters exhaled. “Well. I don’t know what I’ll be able to manage.”

“Anything is more than I have now.”

He looked around warily. “Do you think...do you think Grevane or his buddy is out there right now? Watching for...you know...me?”

I pulled open my coat and showed Butters my shoulder holster and gun. Then I reached behind me and drew out my staff from the back of the SUV. “If they show up, I’m going to ruin their whole day.”

He chewed on his lip. “You can do that, right?”

I took a look around and said, “Butters, trust me. If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s ruining people’s day.”

He let out a nervous little laugh. “You can say that again.”

“If there’s one thing I’m good at—” I began. Butters punched me lightly on the arm, and I smiled at him. “We’ll get in and out as quick as we can, get you back under cover. I think we’ve got it under control.”

I killed the SUV’s ignition and pulled out the key. The truck shuddered, and a warbling, wailing sound came from the dashboard. For a second I expected someone to shout, “Red alert, all hands to battle stations!” Instead there was a hiccup of sound from the truck, and then a smooth, recorded voice reported, “Warning. The door is ajar. The door is ajar.”

I blinked at the dashboard. It repeated the warning several more times, getting a little slower and lower pitched each time, then droned into a basso rumble, followed by silence.

“That was not an omen,” I said firmly.

“Right,” Butters replied in a faint voice. “Because stuff is always messing up around you.”

“Exactly,” I said. I tried to think of a way to wring positive spin from that last statement, but I wasn’t up to the mental gymnastics. “Come on. The sooner we get moving, the sooner we get you out of here.”

“Okay,” he said, and the pair of us got out of the SUV and headed for the Forensic Institute. As we approached the door, I started limping and leaning on my staff a little, as if I needed the support. Butters opened the door for me, and I hobbled in with a pained expression on my face as we approached the security desk.

I didn’t know the guard on duty. He was in his mid-twenties and looked athletic. He watched us coming, squinting a little, and when we were well inside his eyebrows lifted. “Dr. Butters,” he said, evidently surprised. “I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Casey,” Butters said, giving him a jerky nod of the head. “Hey, I like the new haircut. Is Dr. Brioche in?”

“He’s working now,” Casey said. “Room one, I think. What are you doing here?”

“Hoping to avoid a lecture,” Butters replied dryly. He clipped his identification to his coat. “I forgot to file some forms, and if I don’t get them done before the mail goes out, Brioche will scold me until my eyes bleed.”

Casey nodded and looked me over. “Who’s this?”

“Harry Dresden,” Butters said. “He’s got to sign off on the forms. He’s a consultant for the police department. Harry, this is Casey O’Roarke.”

“Charmed,” I said, and handed him the laminated identification card Murphy had issued me to get me through police lines to crime scenes. As I did, I felt another cold pocket of dark energy. Grevane had murdered and then reanimated Phil while the poor guy was sitting at his desk.

Casey examined the card, checked my face against the picture on it, and passed it back to me with a polite smile. “You want me to tell Dr. Brioche you’re here, Dr. Butters?”

Butters shuddered. “Not particularly.”

“Right,” Casey said, and waved us past. We were almost out of the entry hall when he spoke again. “Doctor? Did you see Phil this morning?”

Butters hesitated for a second before he turned around. “He was there at the desk the last time I saw him, but I had to leave for an early dentist appointment. Why?”

“Oh, he wasn’t at the desk when I got here,” Casey said. “Everything was locked down, and the security system was armed.”

“May be he had somewhere to be, too,” Butters suggested.

“Maybe,” Casey agreed. There was a faint frown line between his eyes. “He didn’t tell me anything, though. I mean, I’d have come in early if he had an appointment or something.”

“Beats me,” Butters said.

Casey squinted at Butters and then nodded slowly. “Okay. I just wouldn’t want him to get in trouble over breaking protocol.”

“You know Phil,” Butters said.

Casey rolled his eyes and nodded, then went back to filling out some kind of paperwork. Butters and I slipped away from the entry hall and down to Butters’s usual examination room. The place had been put back together. His desk rested in its usual spot, piled with papers and his computer. Whoever had cleaned up the room had done a fairly good job of it.

“Casey knows something,” Butters said the minute the door was shut. “He suspects something.”

“That’s what they pay security to do,” I said. “Don’t let it rattle you.”

Butters nodded, looking around the examination room. He walked over to his polka suit, still piled in the corner. “At least they didn’t wreck this,” he said. Then he let out a short laugh. “Man. Are my priorities skewed or what?”

“Everyone has something they love,” I said.

He nodded. “Okay. So what do we do now?”

“First things first,” I said. “Can you get a look at Bartlesby’s corpse?”

Butters nodded and walked over to his computer. I backed up and stood against the wall.

Butters started the thing up and spent a minute or two waggling a mouse and stabbing at keys with his forefinger. Then he whistled. “Wow. Bartlesby’s body got here about an hour ago, and it’s been flagged for immediate examination. Brioche is doing it.”

“Is that unusual?” I asked.

He nodded. "It means someone really wants to know about the victim. Someone in government or law enforcement, maybe." He wrinkled up his nose. "Plus it was pretty horrific. Brioche will get some press out of it. Of course he took this one for himself."

"Can you get to it?" I asked.

Butters frowned and tapped a few more keys. Then he looked up at the clock. "Maybe. Brioche is working in room one right now, but he's got to be almost finished with whatever he's doing. Bartlesby's corpse is in room two. If I hurry..." He stood up and scurried for the door. "Wait here."

"You sure?" I asked him.

He nodded. "Someone really would get suspicious if they saw you roaming around. If I need you I'll give you a signal."

"What signal?"

"I'll imitate the scream of a terrified little girl," he said with a waggle of his eyebrows. He headed out the door. "Back in a minute."

Butters wasn't gone long, and he slipped back into the room before five minutes had passed. He looked a little shaky.

"You all right?" I asked.

He nodded. "Couldn't stay there for long. I heard Brioche come out of room one."

"You see the body?"

"Yeah," Butters said with a shudder. "It was already stripped and laid out. Bad stuff, Harry. He had thirty or forty stab wounds in his upper thorax. Someone carved his face up, too. His nose, ears, eyelids, and lips were in a sandwich Baggie next to his head." He took a deep breath. "Someone had sliced off the quadriceps on both legs. They were missing. And he'd been eviscerated."

I frowned. "How?"

"A big X-shaped cut across his abdomen. Then they peeled him open like a Chinese take-out box. He was missing his stomach and most of his intestines. There might have been other organs gone, too."

"Ick," I said.

"Extremely."

"Could you see anything else?"

"No. Even if I'd wanted to, there wasn't time for more than a quick look." He walked over to a rolling stand of medical instruments. "Why

would someone do that to him? What possible purpose could it have served?"

"Maybe some kind of ritual," I said. "You've seen that before."

Butters nodded. He went through the motions of pulling on an apron, mask, gloves, cap—the works. "I still don't get it. You know?"

I did know. Butters didn't have it in him to comprehend the kind of violence, hatred, and bloodlust that had fallen upon the late Bartlesby. That kind of utter disregard for the sanctity of life simply didn't exist in his personal world, and it left him at a total loss when confronted with it face-to-face.

"Or," I said, a thought occurring to me, "it might have been something else. Anthropomancy."

He walked over to one of the freezers and cracked it open. "What's that?"

"An attempt to divine the future or gain information by reading human entrails."

Butters turned to me slowly, his face sickened. "You're kidding."

I shook my head. "It's possible."

"Does it work?" he asked.

"It's extremely powerful and dangerous magic," I answered. "Anyone who does it has to kill someone and gets an immediate death sentence if the Council learns of it. If it didn't work, no one would bother."

Butters's mouth hardened into a firm line. "That's...really wrong." He frowned over the sentence and then nodded. "Wrong."

"I agree."

He turned back to the freezer, checked a toe tag, and then hauled a rolling exam table over to it. "This might take me a little while," he said. "An hour and a half, maybe more."

"You want a hand with that?" I asked. I hoped he didn't.

Butters, bless him, shook his head. He walked over to his desk and flicked on his CD player. Polka music filled the room. "I'd really rather do this alone."

"You sure?" I asked.

"Just listen for a girlie scream," he said. "Can you wait for me up front?"

I nodded, leaned my staff in the corner, and left him in the room. He locked the door behind me, and I wandered up to sit down in the waiting area near the front doors. I took a chair that put the wall to my back, and

where I could see Casey's video monitor, the front door, and the door leading back to the examination rooms.

I leaned my head back against the wall with my eyes mostly closed and waited. Over the next hour one doctor came in and another left. The mailman showed up with the day's deliveries, as did the UPS truck. An ambulance arrived with the cadaver of an old woman that Casey rolled away, presumably into storage.

Then a young couple came in. The girl was about five-six and pleasantly pretty, even without much in the way of makeup. She was dressed in sandals, a simple blue sundress, and a wool jacket. Her hair was cut into a bob full of unruly brown curls, and her eyes were bloodshot with fatigue. The young man wore a simple, well-cut business suit. He was a little under six feet tall, had Asian features, wire-rimmed glasses, wide shoulders, and wore his hair in a long ponytail.

I recognized them: Alicia Nelson and Li Xian, from the picture on the cover of the newsletter Rawlins had given me. Dr. Bartlesby's missing assistants had come to the morgue.

I remained very still, and tried to think thoughts that would make me blend in with the wall. They walked to the security desk and stood so close to me that I didn't need to bother with Listening to them.

"Good morning," Alicia said, producing a driver's license and showing it to Casey. "My name is Alicia Nelson. I'm the late Dr. Bartlesby's assistant. I understand that his remains have been brought here."

Casey regarded her without much in the way of expression. "Ma'am, we do not make that kind of information available to the public, in order to protect the relatives of the deceased."

She nodded, drew an envelope out of her purse, and passed that to Casey as well. "The doctor had no surviving family or next of kin," she said. "But he granted me power of attorney over his estate two years ago. The paperwork is all in order."

Casey scanned it, frowning. "Mmmmmph."

Alicia pushed brown curls wearily from her eyes. "Please, sir, the doctor had several personal effects which I need to take into custody as soon as possible. Passwords, credit cards, keys, that sort of thing. They were in his wallet."

"What's the rush?" Casey drawled.

“Some of his effects could potentially grant a thief access to his accounts and security boxes. As you can see in the documents, he wanted control of them to pass to me until I could arrange to have them passed on to the charities he patronized.”

Casey folded up the pages again and put them back in the envelope. “Ma’am, you’re going to have to speak with our director, Dr. Brioché. I’m sure he’ll be happy to help you out.”

“All right,” Alicia agreed. “Is he available?”

“I’ll go speak to him,” Casey said. “If you’ll wait here, please.”

“Of course,” the girl replied. She waited for Casey to go through the security door and then spun on her heel and stalked over to the entrance, staring out at the morning sunlight. Her posture was stiff with anger. She leaned her forearm on the glass door and pressed her forehead to it.

The tall young man, Li Xian, had remained silent the whole while. He followed her over to the door and spoke in a quiet voice I could scarcely hear. I narrowed my eyes and listened.

“...back at any moment,” Xian murmured. “We should sit down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Alicia shot back in a heated whisper. “I’m weary, not idiotic.”

“You should get some rest before you do anything more,” Xian said. “I don’t see why you’re playing games. You should have let me follow the guard back.”

“Stop thinking with your stomach,” the girl growled. “It’s bad enough that you lost control without adding a further lack of discipline to the situation.”

“We are not here because I stopped to eat,” Xian replied, anger of his own in his whisper. “If you hadn’t indulged yourself we wouldn’t face this problem.”

The girl spun from the glass, facing Xian squarely, her face contorted with pride and anger. “Your attitude, Li, is making you part of the problem. Not part of the solution.”

The long-haired man went white and cringed back from the girl. His face rippled, a sort of slithery motion just beneath the surface of his skin that stretched his features grotesquely, causing a slight sinking of the eyes, a slight elongation of the jaw. He let out a gasp, and when his mouth opened I could see the teeth of a carnivore.

It happened for only a second, but I averted my eyes before he might have noticed me watching him. If he had seen me, I would have been in immediate danger. I'd seen a flash of Li Xian's true face—he was a ghoul. Ghouls are preternatural predators who derive their primary sustenance from devouring human flesh. Fresh, cold, rotting, they don't care as long as it gets into their bellies.

My stomach turned. Butters said that someone had removed Bartlesby's quadriceps, the long, strong muscles on the front of the thigh. It had been Xian. He'd carved himself steaks from the old man's corpse. If he suspected that I knew what he was, he might decide to protect himself with extreme prejudice, and that would be bad. Ghouls are quick, strong, and harder to kill than a juicy rumor about the president. I'd fought ghouls before, and it wasn't something I wanted to repeat if I could avoid it. Especially given that I'd left my staff in Butters's office.

Xian recovered his normal appearance and lowered his eyes. He bowed his head to Alicia.

"Do I make myself clear?" the girl whispered.

"Yes, my lord," Xian replied.

Lord? I thought. My mind raced over the possibilities.

Alicia exhaled and pressed her thumb against the spot between her eyebrows. "Don't talk, Xian. Just don't talk. We'll all be happier. And safer." She breezed past him, back to the little waiting area, and sat down. She picked up a copy of *Newsweek* sitting out on an end table and began to flick through it, while Xian remained standing near the door. I pretended to be drowsing.

Casey returned a couple of minutes later and said, "Ms. Nelson, it's going to be a while before Dr. Brioche can see you."

"How long?" she asked, smiling.

"An hour or so at least," Casey said. "He says that if you'd like to make an appointment for this afternoon that he will be glad to—"

"No," she interrupted him, shaking her head firmly. "Some of his business is time-critical, and I need to recover his effects at the earliest possible opportunity. Please tell him that I will wait."

Casey lifted his eyebrows and then shrugged. "Yes, ma'am."

I blinked my eyes a few times and then sat up straight, stretching. "Oh, hey, Casey," I mumbled, standing. I feigned a limp and went to the desk. "I left my cane in Butters's office. Would it be okay to go back and grab it?"

Casey nodded. "One second." He picked up the phone, and a second later I heard polka music pumping through the little speaker. "Doctor, your consultant friend forgot something in your office. You want me to send him back?" He listened, nodding, and then waved me at the door, buzzing me through.

I hurried back to Butters's examination room and knocked. Butters unlocked the door to let me in.

"Hurry," I told him, glancing back down the hall. "We've got to go."

Butters gulped. "What's going on?"

"There are some bad guys here."

"Grevane?" he asked.

"No. New bad guys," I said.

"More of them?" Butters said. "That's not fair."

"I know. It's getting to be like Satan's reunion tour around here." I shook my head. "Is there a back door?"

"Yes."

"Good. Grab your stuff and let's go."

Butters gestured at the exam table. "But what about Eduardo?"

I chewed on my lip. "You find out anything?"

"Not a lot," he said. "A car hit him. He suffered some pretty massive blunt impact trauma. He died."

I frowned and took a few steps toward the corpse. "There's got to be more to it than that."

Butters shrugged. "If there is, I didn't see it."

I frowned down at the dead man. He was a painfully skinny specimen. His abdomen had been opened with a neat Y incision. There was a lot of blood and disgusting-looking greyish flesh. Broken, jagged bone protruded from the skin of one leg. One hand had been crushed into pulp. And his face...

Looked familiar. I recognized him.

"Butters," I said. "What was this guy's name?"

"Eduardo Mendoza."

"His full name," I said.

"Oh. Uh, Eduardo Antonio Mendoza."

"Antonio," I said. "It's him. It's Tony."

"Who?" Butters asked.

"Bony Tony Mendoza," I said, excited. "He's a smuggler."

Butters tilted his head at me. "A smuggler? Not like Han Solo, I guess."

"No. He's a balloonner."

"What's that?"

I gestured at his head. "He'd done time in a carnival as a sword swallower when he was a kid. He would fill up a balloon with jewels or drugs or whatever other small items he wanted to move around. Then he swallowed the balloon with a string tied to it. Check at the back of his mouth. He'd wedge the string between two of his back teeth and pull the balloon out when the coast was clear."

"That's silly," Butters said, but he went over to the corpse and pried its jaws open. He adjusted an overhead work lamp on a flexible stand and peered down past Bony Tony's teeth. "Holy crap. It's there."

He fished around for a few moments while I went back to the door and picked up my staff. I looked back to see Butters drag from the corpse's mouth a yellow-white condom with its end closed and a heavy piece of kite cord knotted around it.

"What's in it?" I asked.

"Hang on." Butters sliced the condom open with a scalpel and withdrew a small rectangle of dark plastic, about the size of a key chain ornament.

"What is that?" I asked him.

"It's a jump drive," he said, frowning.

"A what?"

"You plug it into your computer so you can store data on it when you want to move files around to other machines."

"Information," I said, frowning. "Bony Tony was smuggling information. Something Grevane needed to know. Maybe the two out front wanted it too. Maybe that's why he got killed."

"Ugh," Butters said.

"Can you read the information?" I asked him.

"Maybe," he said. "I can try another machine."

"Not now," I said. "No time. We need to get out of here."

"Why?"

"Because things have just become a lot more dangerous."

"They have?" Butters chewed on his lip. "Why?"

"Because," I said. "Bony Tony worked for John Marcone."

Chapter Fifteen

Gentleman Johnnie Marcone was the most powerful figure in Chicago's criminal underworld. If there was an illegal enterprise afoot, Marcone was either in charge of it or had been paid for the privilege of its operating in his territory. Bony Tony had done most of a dime in a federal penitentiary for trafficking in narcotics, and after that he'd moved into less politically incorrect areas of the business. He mostly dealt in moving stolen goods, everything from jewels to hot furniture.

I wasn't sure exactly where Bony Tony ranked in Marcone's criminal hierarchy, but Marcone wasn't the sort of person who would take the murder of one of his people lightly—not without his approval, at any rate. Marcone would know about Bony Tony's death soon, if he didn't already. He was sure to get involved in one fashion or another, and the best way for him to get to whoever had killed Bony Tony would be to get his hands on whatever it was they wanted.

I had to get Butters somewhere safe, the quicker the better. But until I knew what was on that storage device, I couldn't judge what would be safe for him and what wouldn't.

"Harry," Butters said, as if he was repeating himself.

I blinked a couple of times. "What?"

"Do you want to hang on to this?" he said in the same tone. He stepped over to me and offered me the little slip of plastic.

"No!" I snapped, and took two steps back. "Butters, get that the hell away from me."

He froze in place, staring at me, his expression somewhere between confused and wounded. "I'm sorry."

I took in a deep breath. Where the hell was my concentration? This was no time to start spacing out on trains of thought, no matter how relevant to the circumstances. "Don't be," I said. "Look, that thing doesn't have any moving parts, right? Electronic storage?"

“Yeah.”

“Then I don’t dare touch it,” I said. “Remember how messed up my X-rays were?”

He nodded. “You’re saying that the data on here could get messed up the same way.”

“I couldn’t ever have cassette tapes after I started working magic,” I said. “They’d just fade away into static after a while. The magnetic strips on my credit cards stopped working in a day or two.”

Butters chewed on his lip and nodded slowly. “The data on the jump drive would be even more fragile than a magnetic strip. It might make sense if it was some kind of erratic electromagnetic field around you. Every human body gives off a unique field of electromagnetic energy. It could be like with your cell replication, that your field is more—”

“Butters,” I said, “no time for that now. The important thing is that I don’t dare touch that toy.” I frowned, thinking out loud. “Or take it back to my place, either. The wards keep magic out, but they keep it in, too. It would probably fry it to hang around in there for too long. Even working any heavy energy around it could be dangerous.”

“Well, that’s stupid,” Butters said. “I mean, storing important wizard information on something that getting close to a wizard would destroy.”

“It’s not stupid if you want to sell it to a wizard and you’re worried the buyer might off you instead of dealing in good faith,” I said.

Butters looked at the corpse and then back at me. “You think Grevane killed Bony Tony?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But Grevane knew that he couldn’t get to the information on that jump drive on his own.”

Butters swallowed. “Which explains why he needed me.”

“Yeah.” I chewed on my lip for a second and then said, “Get Bony Tony back in the fridge. We’re leaving.”

Butters nodded and went back to the examining table. He threw the cloth over the corpse. “Where?”

“Can you read that thing here?”

“No,” Butters said. “This computer is too old. It has the wrong ports. We could go to one of the other offices, maybe—”

“No. We need to get out of here—now.”

“We could go to my place,” Butters suggested.

“No. Grevane will definitely have it under surveillance. Dammit.”

“Why dammit?”

“We’re short on options, and that means we have to go someplace I didn’t want to go.”

“Where?” he asked.

“A friend’s. Come on.”

“Right,” Butters said, and promptly walked over to his polka suit. He heaved up a couple of pieces. The cymbals clashed tinnily against one another.

“What are you doing?” I demanded. “We’ve got to go.”

“I’m not leaving it here for God-knows-what to mess with,” Butters said. He grunted and threw a strap awkwardly over his shoulder. The bass drum rumbled.

“Yes, you are,” I said. “We are not taking it with us. We don’t have time for this.”

Butters turned to face me, his expression stricken.

That stupid polka suit filled up most of the back of the SUV. It was a pain to move it without making a bunch of noise, but in the end we managed to slip out the back door of the Forensic Institute and make a clean getaway. I watched the road behind us carefully, until I was sure that I wasn’t being followed. Then I headed for the campus area, and Billy’s apartment.

I pulled into the apartment’s parking lot, leaned out, and yelled, “Hey!”

A young man with arms and legs a few sizes too large to match his body appeared from behind the corner of the building, frowning. He was dressed in sweats, a T-shirt, and boat shoes, standard easily discarded werewolf wardrobe for troubled times. He flipped an untidy mop of black hair out of his eyes and leaned against the SUV’s door. “Hey, Harry.”

“Kirby,” I greeted him. “This is my friend Butters.”

Kirby nodded to Butters and asked me, “Did you spot me?”

“No, but Billy always has someone on watch outside when times are tense.”

Kirby nodded, his expression serious. “What do you need?”

“Park this beast for me. I keep running into things.”

“Sure. Billy and Georgia are upstairs.”

I got out of the car, and Butters hopped out with me. “Thanks, man.”

“Yeah,” Kirby said. He got in the SUV and frowned. He looked around at all the doors.

“The door is ajar,” the dashboard said.

“It won’t shut up,” I explained to him.

“It gets sort of Zen after a while,” Butters said brightly. “Life is a journey. Time is a river. The door is a jar.”

Kirby gave him a skeptical look. I grabbed Butters by the shoulder and hauled him into the building and up to the apartment.

Billy opened the door before we even got to it, and looked out expectantly. He stepped a bit to one side, holding the door open for us, watching up and down the hallway. “Heya, Harry.”

The apartment was a typical college place—small, a couple of bedrooms, nothing permanent on the walls, furniture that wasn’t too expensive or hard to move, and equipped with an expensive entertainment center. Georgia sat on the couch reading from one of a small mountain of medical books. I walked in and introduced everyone.

“I need a computer,” I told Billy.

He arched an eyebrow at me.

I waved a hand in a vague motion. “Tell him, Butters.”

Butters pulled the jump drive from his pocket and showed it to Billy. “Anything with a USB port.”

Georgia frowned and asked, “What’s on it?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I need to know.”

She nodded. “Better let him use the one on the far wall of the computer room, Will. The farther from Harry the better.”

“Feel the love.” I sighed. I pointed at the little table next to the door and asked, “Can I make a few calls while I wait?”

“Sure.” Billy turned to Butters. “Right this way.”

They went into one of the bedrooms. Georgia went back to her book. I picked up the phone.

The phone at my place rang a dozen times before it rattled, and then Thomas slurred, “What?”

“It’s me,” I said. “You all right?”

“I was all right. I was asleep. Stupid Mouse woke me up to get the phone.”

“Any sign of visitors? Calls?”

“No and no,” he said.

“Get some more sleep,” I said.

He made a grunting noise and hung up.

I called my answering service next. They had recently phased over to stored voice mail. I was suspicious of it on general principles. From a purely logical standpoint, I knew my issues with technology wouldn't extend all the way across town over the phone lines, but all the same I didn't trust it. I would much rather have dealt with an actual person taking messages, but it cost too much now to keep someone manning the phones when voice mail could do all the work. I punched the buttons and had to go through all the menus only twice to get it to work.

Beeeeeeep. "Harry, it's Murphy. We got into Hawaii all right, and there was no problem with the hotel, so you can reach me at those contact numbers. I'll call in again in a couple of—" Her voice broke off into a sudden high-pitched noise. "Would you *stop* that?" she demanded, with a lot more laughter than anger in her voice. "I'm on the phone. In a couple of days, Harry. Thanks for taking care of my pants. Er, plants, *plants*." *Beeeeeeep.*

I wondered what had caused Murphy to make a high-pitched noise and a big old Freudian slip. And I wondered what to read into the fact that she had left me a message instead of calling me at home. Probably nothing. She probably didn't want to wake me up or something. Yeah. She was probably only thinking of me.

Beeeeeeep. "Harry. Mike. The Beetle will be ready at noon." *Beeeeeeep.*

God bless Mechanic Mike. If I heard a car complaining about its closed doors being open one more time, I would have to disintegrate something.

Beeeeeeep. "Oh," said a young woman's voice. "Mister Dresden? It's Shiela Starr. We met at Bock Ordered Books last night?" There was the sound of her taking an unsteady breath. "I wondered if I could ask for a few minutes of your time. There have been...I mean, I'm not completely certain but...I think something is *wrong*. Here at the store, I mean." She let out a snippet of laughter that was half anxiety and half weariness. "Oh, hell, I probably sound crazy, but I would really like to speak to you about it. I'll be at the shop until noon. Or you can call my apartment." She gave me the number. "I hope you can come by the store, though. I would really appreciate it." *Beeeeeeep.*

I found myself frowning. Shiela hadn't said it outright, but she had sounded pretty scared. That wasn't terribly surprising, given what she'd probably seen happening right outside Bock's shop the night before, but it

made me feel uncomfortable to hear fear in her voice. Or maybe it's more correct to say that I'm not comfortable with fear in any woman's voice.

It's not my fault. I know it's sexist and macho, and it's retrograde social evolution, but I hate it when bad things happen to women. Don't get me wrong; I hate bad things to happen to anyone—but when it's a woman that's in danger, I hate it with a reflexive, bone-deep, primal mindlessness that borders on insanity. Women are beautiful creatures, and dammit, I enjoy making sure that they're safe and treating them with old-fashioned manners and courtesy. It just seems right. I'd suffered for thinking that way more than once, but it still didn't change the way I felt.

Shiela was a girl, and she was scared. Therefore, if I wanted to have any peace of mind, I was going to have to go talk to her.

I checked the clock. Eleven. She was still at the store.

I dialed one more number, and got an answering machine with no message, only a tone. "This is Dresden," I told the machine. "And we need to talk."

Butters and Billy reappeared. I hung up the phone and asked them, "Well?"

"Numbers," said Billy.

"More specific?" I asked.

Butters shook his head. "It's hard to be any more specific than that. There was only one file on the jump drive, and it was empty. The only information on it was the file name, and it was just a number." He offered me a piece of white paper with a string of numerals printed on it in his spidery scrawl. I counted. There were sixteen of them. "That's it."

I took the paper and frowned at the numbers. "That is spectacularly useless."

"Yeah," Butters said quietly.

I rubbed at the bridge of my nose. "Okay. Let me think." I tried to prioritize. Grevane was out there looking for Butters. Maybe Marcone was looking for him too. Maybe the dead professor's two assistants to boot. "Butters, we have to get you behind my wards again."

He blinked at me. "But why? I mean, they wanted me so that they could get to the information. I'm useless to them now."

"You and I know that. They don't."

"Oh."

"Billy," I said, "could you please take Butters over to my place?"

“No problem,” he said. “What about you? Won’t you need wheels?”

“The Beetle is ready. I’ll take a cab.”

“I can drop you off,” Billy offered.

“No. It’s the opposite way from my apartment, and Butters needs to get there yesterday. Go around the block once or twice before you pull in. Make sure no one is watching the door.”

Billy smiled. “I know the drill.”

“Don’t try to open the door yourself, Butters. Knock and wait for Thomas to do it.”

“Right.” Butters fretted at his lip a little. “What are you going to be doing?”

“Detective stuff. I have places to go and people to see.”

And with a little luck, none of them would kill me.

Chapter Sixteen

Billy's apartment was only a couple of blocks from Bock Ordered Books, and while I could have taken a couple of alleys to make the trip even shorter, I kept on the open streets, where there were plenty of people. I didn't see anyone following me, but if there was a good enough team on me—or if they were using veils to hide their presence, of course—I might miss them. I kept my staff in my right hand and made sure my shield bracelet was ready, in case anyone tried some kind of variant on the old drive-up assassination. I'd survived them before, but the classics never go out of style.

I got to Bock's in one piece, and no one so much as glared at me. I felt sort of rejected, but comforted myself with the knowledge that there were at least half a dozen people in town who were sure to keep making my life dangerous. More if you counted Mavra, who technically wasn't a person.

Bock didn't open the doors of his store until eleven, so when I went in I was probably the first one to show up for the day. I paused outside the door. Two of the store windows and the glass panel of the door were all gone, replaced by rough sheets of plywood. Bock had gotten off better than the boutique next door—all the glass was gone, doubtless shattered by one kind of flying debris or another during my conversation with Cowl and his sidekick. I went inside.

Bock was at his place behind the counter, and looked tired. He glanced up at the sound of his door chimes. His expression became something closed and cautious when he saw me.

"Bock," I said. "You here all night?"

"End-of-the-month inventory," he said, his voice careful and quiet. "And repairing the windows. What do you need?"

I looked around the inside of the store. Shiela appeared from behind one of the shelves at the back of the store, looking anxious. She saw me and exhaled a little, then gave me a quiet smile.

“Just here to talk,” I told Bock, nodding toward Shiela.

He glanced at her, then back at me, frowning. “Dresden. There’s something I need to say to you.”

I arched an eyebrow at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Look. I don’t want to make you upset.”

I leaned on my staff. “Bock, come on. You’ve known me ever since I came to town. If something’s wrong, you aren’t going to upset me by telling me about it.”

He folded his thick forearms over his paunch and said, “I don’t want you coming into my store anymore.”

I leaned on my staff a little more. “Oh.”

“You’re a decent enough man. You’ve never jumped down my throat like the other folks from the Council. You’ve helped people around here.” He took a deep breath and made a vague gesture toward the plywood patches on his shop. “But you’re trouble. It follows you around.”

Which was true enough. I didn’t say anything.

“Not everyone can drop a car on someone who attacks them,” Bock went on. “I’ve got a family. My oldest is in college. I can’t afford to have the place wrecked.”

I nodded. I could understand Bock’s position. It’s terrifying to feel helpless in the face of a greater power—more so than it is painful to be told you aren’t wanted somewhere.

“Look. If you need anything, give me a call. I’ll order it or pull it off the shelves for you. Will or Georgia can come pick it up. But...”

“Okay,” I said. My throat felt a little tight.

Bock’s face got red. He looked away from me, at the ruined door. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I said. “I understand. I’m sorry about your shop.”

He nodded.

“I’m just here for a minute. After that I’ll go.”

“Right,” he said.

I walked down the aisles back to Shiela, and nodded to her. “I got your message.”

Shiela was wearing the same clothes as the night before, only more rumpled. She’d pulled her hair back and held it in place with a pair of ballpoint pens thrust through a knot at right angles. With her hair like that, it showed the pale, clean lines of her jaw and throat, and I was again struck

by the impulse to run my fingers over her skin and see if it was as soft as it looked.

She glanced at Bock, then smiled up at me and touched my arm with her hand. "I'm sorry he did that. It isn't fair of him."

"No. It's fair enough. He has the right to protect himself and his business," I said. "I don't blame him."

She tilted her head to one side, studying my face. "But it hurts anyway?"

I shrugged. "Some. I'll survive." The chimes rung at the front of the store as another customer came in. I glanced back at Bock, and sighed. "Look, I don't want to be here very long. What did you need?"

She brushed back a few strands of hair that had escaped the knot. "I... well, I had a strange experience last night."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Go on."

She picked up a small stack of books and started shelving them as she spoke. "After all the excitement, I went back to the inventory in the back room, and Mr. Bock had gone to get the plywood for the windows. I thought I heard the chimes ring, but when I looked no one was there."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"But..." She frowned. "You know how when you go into an empty house, you *know* it's empty? How it just *feels* empty?"

"Sure," I said. I watched her stretch up onto the tips of her toes to put a book away on the top shelf. It drew her sweater up a little, and I could see muscles move under a swath of the pale skin of her lower back.

"The store didn't feel empty," she said, and I saw her shiver. "I never saw anyone, never heard anyone. But I was sure someone was here." She glanced back at me and flushed. "I was so nervous I could hardly think straight until the sun came up."

"Then what?" I asked.

"It went away. I felt a little silly. Like I was a scared little kid. Or one of those dogs that's staring at something growling when nothing is there."

I shook my head. "Dogs don't just stare and growl for no reason. Sometimes they can perceive things people can't."

She frowned. "Do you think something was here?"

I didn't want to tell her that I thought a Black Court vampire had been lurking unseen in the shop. Hell, for that matter I didn't particularly want to *think* about it. If Mavra had been here, there wouldn't have been anything Shiela or Bock could do to defend themselves against her.

“I think you wouldn’t be foolish to trust your instincts,” I said. “You’ve got a little talent. It’s possible you were sensing something too vague for you to understand in any other way.”

She put the last book away and turned to face me. She looked tired. Fear made her expression one of sickness, an ugly contortion. “Something was here,” she whispered.

“Maybe,” I said, nodding.

“Oh, God.” She tightened her arms across her stomach. “I...I might be sick.”

I leaned my staff against the shelf and put a hand on her shoulder, steadying her. “Shiela. Take a few deep breaths. It’s not here now.”

She looked up at me, her expression miserable, her eyes wet and shining. “I’m sorry. I mean, you don’t need this.” She squeezed her eyes tightly shut, and more tears fell. “I’m sorry.”

Oh, hell. Tears. Way to go, Dresden—terrify the local maiden you showed up to comfort. I drew Shiela a little toward me, and she leaned against me gratefully. I put my arm around her shoulders and let her lean against me for a minute. She shivered with silent tears for a little bit and then pulled herself together.

“Does this happen to you a lot?” she asked in a quiet voice, sniffing.

“People get scared,” I murmured. “There’s nothing wrong with that. There are scary things out there.”

“I feel like a coward.”

“Don’t,” I told her. “All it means is that you aren’t an idiot.”

She straightened and took a step back. Her face looked a little blotchy. Some women can cry and look beautiful, but Shiela wasn’t one of them. She took off her glasses and wiped at her eyes. “What do I do if it happens again?”

“Tell Bock. Get somewhere public,” I said. “Call the cops. Or better yet, call Billy and Georgia. If what you felt really was some kind of predator, they won’t want to stick around if they know they’ve been spotted.”

“You sound as if you’ve dealt with them before,” she said.

I smiled a little. “May be a time or two.”

She smiled up at me, and it was a grateful expression. “It must be very lonely, doing what you do.”

“Sometimes,” I said.

“Always being so strong when others can’t. That’s...well, it’s sort of heroic.”

“It’s sort of idiotic,” I replied, my voice dry. “Heroism doesn’t pay very well. I try to be cold-blooded and money-oriented, but I keep screwing it up.”

She let out a little laugh. “You fail to live up to your ideals, eh?”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

She tilted her head again, eyes bright. “Are you with someone?”

“Just you.”

“Not with them. *With* them.”

“Oh,” I said. “No. Not really.”

“If I asked you to come have dinner out with me, would it seem too forward and aggressive?”

I blinked. “You mean...like a date?”

Her smile widened. “You do...you know...like women? Right?”

“What?” I said. “Oh, yes. Yes. I’m down with the women.”

“By coincidence I happen to be a woman,” she said. She touched my arm again. “And since it seems like I might not get a chance to flirt with you a little more while I’m at work, I thought I had better ask you now. So is that a yes?”

The prospect of a date seemed to me like a case of bad timing in several ways. But it also seemed like a good idea. I mean, it had been a while since a girl had been interested in me in a nonprofessional sense.

Well. A human girl, anyway. The only one who even came close was in Hawaii with someone else, giggling and thinking about pants. It might be really nice just to be out talking and interacting with an attractive girl. God knows it would beat hanging around my crowded apartment.

“It’s a yes,” I said. “I’m kind of busy right now, but...”

“Here,” she said. She took a black marker out of a pocket in her sweater and grabbed my right hand. She wrote numbers on it in heavy black strokes. “Call me here, maybe tonight, and we’ll figure out when.”

I let her do it, amused. “All right.”

She popped the cap back on the marker and smiled up at me. “All right, then.”

I picked up my staff. “Shiela, look. I might not be around this place. I’ll respect Bock’s wishes. But let him know that if there’s any trouble, all he has to do is call me.”

She shook her head, smiling. "You're a decent person, Harry Dresden."

"Don't spread that around too much," I said, and started for the door.

And froze in my tracks.

Standing in the little entry area of the bookstore, facing Bock at his counter, were Alicia and the ghoul, Li Xian.

I stepped back to Shiela and pulled her around the corner of a shelf.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Quiet," I said. I closed my eyes and Listened.

"...a simple question," Alicia was saying. "Who bought it?"

"I don't keep track of my customers," Bock replied. His voice was polite, but it had an undertone of granite. "I'm sorry, but I just don't have that information. A lot of people come through here."

"Really?" Alicia asked. "And how many of them purchase rare and expensive antique books from you?"

"You'd be surprised."

Alicia let out a nasty little laugh. "You really aren't going to volunteer the information, are you?"

"I don't *have* it to volunteer," Bock said. "Both copies of the book were bought yesterday. Both were men, one older and one younger. I don't remember anything more than that."

I heard a couple of footsteps, and Li Xian said, "Perhaps you need help remembering."

There was the distinct, heavy click of a pair of hammers on a shotgun being drawn back. "Son," Bock said in that same voice, "you'll want to step away from the counter and leave my shop now."

"It would appear that the good shopkeeper has taken sides on this matter," Alicia said.

"You're wrong, miss," Bock said. "I run this shop. I don't give information. I don't take sides. If I had a third copy, I'd sell it to you. I don't. Both of you leave, please."

"I don't think you understand," Alicia said. "I'm not leaving here until I have an answer to my question."

"I don't think you understand," Bock replied. "There's a tengauge shotgun wired under this counter. It's loaded, cocked, and pointing right at your bellies."

"Oh, my," Alicia said, her voice amused. "A shotgun. Xian, whatever shall we do?"

I ground my teeth. Bock had asked me to stay away, but even so he was standing there protecting my identity, even though he knew damned well that the two in front of him were dangerous.

I checked. The door to the back room of the shop was open. “The back door,” I said to Shiela in a whisper. “Is it locked?”

“Not from this side.”

“Go into the back room and get in the office,” I said. “Get on the floor and stay there. Now.”

She looked up at me with wide eyes and then hurried back through the open door.

I gripped my staff and closed my eyes, thinking. I patted my duster’s pocket. The book was still there, riding along with my .44. Ghouls were hard to kill. I had no idea what Alicia was, but I was willing to bet she wasn’t a mere academic assistant. For her to command the respect of a creature like Li Xian, she had to be major-league dangerous. It would be an extremely foolish idea to assault them.

But that didn’t matter. If I didn’t do something, they were going to get unpleasant at Bock. Bock might not have been a stalwart companion who stuck through thick and thin, but he was what he was: an honest shopkeeper who wanted neither to become involved in supernatural power struggles nor to compromise his principles. If I did nothing, he was going to get hurt while protecting me.

I stepped around the shelf and started walking toward the front of the store.

Bock sat in his spot behind the counter, one hand gripping its edge in a white-knuckled grasp, the other out of sight below it. Alicia and Li Xian stood in front of it. She looked relaxed. The ghoul was slouched into an eager stance, knees bent a little, arms hanging loosely.

“Shopkeeper, I will ask you one last time,” Alicia said. “Who purchased the last copy of *Die Lied der Erlking*?” She lifted her left hand and faint heat shimmers rose from her fingers along with a whisper of dark power. “Tell me his name.”

I drew in my will, lifted my staff, and snarled, “*Forzare!*”

The runes on the staff burst into smoldering scarlet light. There was a thunderstorm’s roar, and raw power, invisible and solid, lashed out of the end of my staff. It whipped across the shop, knocking books from the shelves on the way, and hit the ghoul in the chest. It lifted him off his feet

and sent him smashing into the plywood-covered door. He went through the wood without slowing down, out over the sidewalk, and into the wall of the building across the street, where he hit with a crunch.

Alicia spun toward me, her eyes wide and shocked.

I stood with my feet spread. My shield bracelet was on my left hand, thrumming with power and drizzling blue-white sparks. My staff smoldered with the scent of fresh-burned wood, and the scarlet runes shone in the darkness at the back of the store. I pointed it directly at Alicia.

“His name,” I snarled, “is Harry Dresden.”

Chapter Seventeen

“**Y**ou,” I snarled, gesturing at Bock with the end of my staff.

“You little weasel. You were gonna sell me out. I ought to kill you right here.”

From his vantage point above Alicia’s curly-haired head, Bock blinked at me in confusion. I stared at him, hard, not daring to leave anything in my expression that the girl would see. If I’d tried to protect Bock, it would only have made it more likely that she would do something to him. By appearing to threaten him, it would make him seem more unimportant to the necromancer and her henchman. It was the best thing I could do to protect him.

Bock got it. His expression flickered through several subtle shades of comprehension, fear, and guilt. He twitched his head at me in a nod of thanks.

“Well, well,” Alicia said. She hadn’t moved, other than to turn toward me. “I’ve never heard of you, but I must admit that you know how to make an entrance, Harry Dresden.”

“I took lessons,” I said.

“Give me the book,” she said.

“Ha,” I said. “Why?”

“Because I want it,” she said.

“Sorry. It’s the hot Christmas present this year,” I said. “Maybe you can find a scalper in a parking lot or something.”

She tilted her head, the fingers of her hand still flickering with little shimmers, like heat rising from asphalt. “You refuse?”

“Yes, moppet,” I told her. “I refuse. I deny thee. No, already.”

Her eyes narrowed in anger and...well, something happened that I hadn’t ever seen before. The store got darker. I don’t mean that the lights went out. I mean everything got darker. There was a low, trembling sensation that seemed to make my eyeballs jiggle a little, and the shadows simply

expanded up out of the corners and dim areas of the store like time-lapse photography of growing molds. As they slid over portions of the store, that nasty, greasy sensation of cold came with them. When the shadows washed over an outlet that housed the power cords to a pair of table lamps, the lamps themselves went dim and then died out. They covered the old radio, and Aretha Franklin's voice faded away to a whisper and vanished. The shadows got to the register and its lights went out, and when they brushed the old ceiling fan it began to whirl down to a stop. The shadows crept over Bock and he went pale and started shaking. He thrust one hand down onto the counter as if he had to do it to keep himself upright.

The only place the darkness didn't spread was over me. The shadows stopped in a circle all around me, maybe six inches away from me and the things I was carrying. The Hellfire smoldering in the runes of my staff glowed more brightly in the darkness, and the tiny sparks falling in a steady rain from my damaged shield bracelet seemed to burn away tiny pockets of the darkness where they fell, only to have it slide back in once they had burned away.

This was a kind of power I hadn't felt before. Normally when someone who can sling major mojo around draws their stuff up around them, it's something violent and active. I'd seen wizards who charged the air around them with so much electricity it made their hair stand on end, wizards whose power would gather light into nearly solid gem-shaped clouds that orbited around them, wizards whose mastery of earth magic literally made the ground shake, wizards who could shroud themselves in dark fire that burned anyone near them with the raw, emotional rage of their magic.

This was different. Alicia's power, whatever it was, didn't fill the store. It *emptied* it in a way that I didn't think I fully understood. Utter stillness spread out from her—not peace, for that would have been something tranquil, accepting. This stillness was a horrible, hungry emptiness, something that took its power from being *not*. It was made of the emptiness at the loss of a loved one, of the silence between the beats of a heart, and of the inevitability of the empty void that waited patiently for the stars to grow cold and burn out. It was power wholly different from the burning fires of life that formed the magic I knew—and it was strong. God, it was so *strong*.

I began to tremble as I realized that everything I had wasn't enough to go up against this.

"I don't like your answer," Alicia said. She smiled at me, a slow and evil expression. She had a dimple on one cheek. Hell's bells, an evil dimple.

My mouth felt dry, but my voice sounded steady when I spoke. "That's too bad. If you're so upset about not getting a copy, I suggest you take it up with Cowl."

She stared at me with no expression for a moment and then said, "You are with Cowl?"

"No," I told her. "I was, in fact, forced to drop a car on him last night when he tried to take the book from me."

"Liar," she said. "Had you truly fought Cowl, you'd be dead."

"Whatever," I replied, my tone bored. "I'll tell you what I told him. My book. You can't have it."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Wait a moment. You were at the mortuary. In the entryway."

"We call it the Forensic Institute now."

Her eyes glittered. "You found it. You succeeded where Gre-vane failed, didn't you?"

I turned up one corner of my mouth, and said nothing.

Alicia took in a deep breath. "Perhaps we can reach an understanding."

"Funny," I said. "Grevane said the very same thing."

Alicia took an eager step toward me. "You denied him?"

"I didn't like his hat."

"You have wisdom for one so young," she said. "In the end he is nothing but a dog mourning his fallen master. He would turn on you in a moment. The gratitude of the Capiorcorpus, by contrast, is an eternal asset."

Capiorcorpus. Roughly translated, the taker of corpses, or bodies. I suddenly had a better idea of why Li Xian had referred to Alicia as "my lord."

"Assuming I want that gratitude," I said, "what price would it carry?"

"Give me the book," she said. "Give me the *Word*. Stand with me at the Darkhallow. In exchange I will grant you autonomy and the principality of your choice when the new order arises."

I didn't want her to know that I had no freaking clue what she was talking about, so I said, "That's a tempting offer."

"It should be," she said. She lifted her chin, and her eyes glittered with something bright and utterly confident. "The new order will change many

things in this world. You have the opportunity to help shape it to your liking.”

“And if I turn you down?” I asked.

She met my eyes directly. “You are young, Harry Dresden. It is a great tragedy when a man with your potential dies before his time.”

I shied away from her gaze at once. When a wizard looks into another person’s eyes for an instant too long, he sees into them in a profound and unsettling kind of vision called a soulgaze. If I’d left my gaze on Alicia’s eyes, I would get an up-close and personal look at her soul—and she at mine. I didn’t want to see what was going on behind that dimpled smile. I recognized that perfect surety in her manner and expression as something more than rampant ego or fanatic conviction.

It was pure madness. Whatever else Alicia was, she was calmly and horribly insane.

My mouth felt a lot drier. My legs were shaking, and my feet were advising the rest of me to let them run away. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“By all means,” Alicia said. Her face took on an ugly expression and her voice hardened. “Consider it. But take a single step from where you stand and it will be your last.”

“Killing me might get you a copy of the book, but it won’t get you the *Word*,” I said. “Or did you think I was carrying both of them around with me?”

Her right hand clenched into a slow fist and the room got a couple of degrees colder. “Where is the *Word*?”

Wouldn’t I like to know? I thought.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” I said. “Kill me now and there’s no *Word*. No new order.”

She uncurled her hand. “I can make you tell me,” she said.

“If you could do that, you’d have done it by now, instead of standing there looking stupid.”

She started taking slow steps toward me, smiling. “I prefer to attempt reason before I destroy a mind. It is a somewhat taxing activity. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather work with me?”

Gulp. Mental magic is a dark, dark, dark grey area of the art. Every wizard who makes it to the White Council has received training in how to defend against mental assaults, but that was perfunctory at best. After all, the Council made it a special point to wipe out wizards who violated the

sanctuary of another's mind. It's one of the Laws of Magic, and if the Wardens caught someone doing it, they killed them, end of story. There was no such thing as an expert at that kind of magic on the White Council, and as a result the defense training was devised by relative amateurs.

Something told me that Alicia the Corpsetaker wasn't an amateur.

"That's close enough," I said in a cold voice.

She kept walking, very slowly, a sort of sinuous enjoyment in her stride. "Last chance."

"I mean it," I said. "Stay ba—"

Before I could finish the word, she made a rippling gesture with the shimmering fingers of her left hand.

There was a whirling sensation, and I was suddenly caught in a gale, a whirlwind that tried to carry me toward the girl. My feet started sliding across the floor. I leaned back with a cry, lifting my shield bracelet, and it blazed into a dome of solid blue light before me. It did nothing—nothing at all. The vicious vortex continued to draw me to her outstretched hand.

I started to panic, and then realized what was happening. There was no wind—not physically, anyway. The books on the shelves were not stirring, nor was my long leather duster. My shield offered me no protection from a wholly nonphysical threat, and I released it, saving my strength.

The hideous vacuum wasn't meant for my body. It was targeting my thoughts.

"That's right," Alicia said.

Holy crap. She'd heard me thinking.

"Of course, young man. Give me what I want now and I may leave you enough of your mind to feed yourself."

I gritted my teeth, marshaling my thoughts, my defenses.

"It's too late for that, boy."

Like hell it was. My thoughts coalesced into a unified whole, an absolute image of a wall of smooth, grey granite. I built the image of the wall in my mind and then filled it with the power I'd been holding at the ready. I felt a nauseating confusion for a second, and then the mental gale ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

Alicia's head jerked as if she'd been slapped across the cheek.

I glared at her, teeth gritted, and asked, "Is that all you got?"

Corpsetaker snarled out a spiteful curse, lifted her left arm, and twisted her fingers into a raking claw.

There was a hideous pressure against the image of the granite wall in my mind. It wasn't a single, resounding blow, as I had expected from my training, a kind of psychic battering ram. Instead it was an enormous, steady weight, as if a sudden tide had flooded in to wash the wall away completely.

I thought that pressure would ease in a moment, but it only became more and more difficult to bear. I struggled to hold the image of the wall in place, but despite everything I could do, dark and empty cracks began to appear and spread through it. My defenses were crumbling.

"Delicious," Corpsetaker said, and her voice didn't sound strained at all. "After a century, they're still teaching the young ones the same tripe."

I saw movement beyond Corpsetaker, and Li Xian appeared in the shattered plywood doorway. Half of his face was lumpy and purpled with bruising, and one shoulder had been smashed grossly out of shape. He was bleeding a thin, greenish-brown fluid, and moved as if in great pain, but he came in on his own power, and his eyes were alert.

"My lord," Xian said. "Are you well?"

"Perfectly," Corpsetaker purred. "Once I have his mind, the rest is yours."

His misshapen face twisted into a smile that spread too wide for human features. "Thank you, lord."

Holy crap. It was time to leave.

But my feet wouldn't move.

"You needn't bother, young wizard," Corpsetaker said. "If you take the attention you would need to free your feet, your wall will fail. Just open to me, boy. You will feel less pain."

I ignored the necromancer and tried to think of other options. My mental defenses were indeed crumbling, but any strength of will I spent to move my legs would collapse the defenses entirely. I had to get the pressure off of me for a moment—only time enough to distract Corpsetaker, to give me time to get the hell away. But given that I could barely move at all, my options were severely limited.

Part of the wall began to crumble. I felt Corpsetaker's will begin pouring in, the first trickle from a dark sea.

If I wanted to live, I had little choice.

I reached my thoughts down into the smoldering Hellfire burning in the runes of my staff, and sent it flooding into my mind, into the failing wall

that protected me. The cracks in the cold grey granite filled with crimson flame, and where the dark sea of Corpsetaker's will pressed against it there was a screaming hiss of freezing water boiling into a cloud of steam.

Corpsetaker let out a sudden, hollow gasp, and the pressure on my thoughts vanished.

I spun, wobbled, got my balance, and then ran for the back door.

"Take him!" Corpsetaker snarled behind me. "He has the book and the *Word!*"

There was a sickly ripping, crackling sound, and Li Xian let out a bestial and inhuman howl.

I dashed through the back room of the bookstore, and to the back door. I slammed its opening bar and sprinted through it, out into the alley behind the shop. I heard two sets of feet following me, and Corpsetaker began chanting in a low, growling voice. That hideous pressure began to surge against my thoughts again, but this time I was ready for it, and my defenses fell into place more quickly, more surely. I was able to keep running.

I ran down the alley, and made it maybe thirty yards before a sudden fire exploded through my right calf. I crashed down to the ground, barely holding on to my mental defenses. I dropped my staff and reached down to my calf, to feel something metal and sharp protruding from it. I cut my fingers on an edge and jerked them back. I couldn't get a good look, but I saw a flash of steel and a lot of blood—and Corpsetaker and the ghoul were still coming.

There was no way I could have whipped up any magic to stop them—not with all of my power focused on keeping Corpsetaker from invading my mind. I wouldn't be able to overcome the ghoul physically—even wounded, Xian was quick on his feet, and closing the distance fast.

I drew the .44 and sent three shots back down the alley. Corpsetaker darted to one side, but the ghoul never even slowed down. He flung one too-long arm through an arc, and there was a glitter of steel in the gloomy alley. Something hit me in the ribs nearly hard enough to knock me down, but the spell-covered leather of my duster stopped it from piercing through. A triangle of steel fell to the ground, each point sharpened and given a razor's edge.

"All I needed," I muttered. "Ninja ghouls." I emptied the revolver at Xian. He wasn't ten feet from me on the last shot, and I must have hit him.

He jerked, careened off a wall, and stumbled, but he was a long way from down.

Corpsetaker's will continued to erode my defenses. I had to get away from her, or she'd open up my brains like a tin of sardines—and then Xian would eat them.

The three-pointed shuriken still in my calf, I forced myself to my feet through the screaming pain. I seized my staff, hobbling in earnest this time, and struggled toward the end of the alley. My only chance was to make it to the street, to flag down a cab, somehow beg a ride from a passing car, or maybe get some help. I knew there wasn't much hope of any of those things happening, but it was all I had.

I almost got to the end of the alley, the pain in my leg growing steadily worse—and then I abruptly lost track of what was going on.

One moment I'd been busy, I knew. I was doing something important. The next I was just standing there, sort of floundering. Whatever I'd been doing, it was right on the tip of my tongue. I knew that if I could just focus for a second, I'd be able to remember it and get back on track. My leg hurt. I knew that. And my head felt jumbled, the thoughts there, but in disarray, as if I'd gone through a drawer of folded laundry, pulled out something from the bottom, and then slapped the drawer shut again without straightening anything up.

I heard a snarl behind me, and realized that whatever I'd been doing, it was too late to get back on track now. I tried to turn around, but for some reason I couldn't remember how.

"I have it," panted a woman's voice behind me. "Numbers. It's only...He only has *numbers*."

"My lord," snarled a thick, deformed voice. "What is your command?"

"He doesn't know where the *Word* is. He is useless to me. The book is in the right pocket of his coat. Take it, Xian. Then kill him."

Chapter Eighteen

I was pretty sure that Corpsetaker was talking about me, and I knew for sure that getting killed was a bad thing. I just couldn't figure out how to go about doing something to stop it. Something about my mind. That it wasn't working right.

A battered-looking man entered my field of view, and I was able to turn my head enough to watch him. Oh, crap, it was Li Xian, the ghoul. I had a bad feeling that he was going to do something unpleasant, but he just stuck his hand in my coat pocket and pulled out the slender copy of *Erlking*.

The ghoul turned away from me and offered the book to someone out of my field of view.

There was the sound of flipping pages. "Excellent," Corpsetaker said. "Take him back from the street and finish him. Hurry. He's stronger than most. I'd rather not hold him all day."

Oh, right. Corpsetaker was holding my mind captive. That meant that she was in my head. That meant she had beaten my defenses down. Just pulling those thoughts together made me feel stronger. My head started clearing, and as it did the pain in my wounded leg grew more intense.

"Hurry," she said, her voice now strained.

Rough hands seized the back of my coat. I wanted to run, but I still couldn't get everything to respond together. An inspiration seized me. If Corpsetaker was in my head, it meant that she could feel everything I was feeling—such as the burning pain in my leg.

When the ghoul started pulling me backward, I couldn't struggle, but I managed to twist my hips a little and bend my good knee. I fell over sideways, onto the wounded leg. The fall drove the shuriken a little harder into my calf, and the world went white with pain.

Corpsetaker shrieked. I heard a metallic clatter, as if she had stumbled into a trash can, and I felt my arms and legs come all the way back under my command. The ghoul stumbled on his mangled leg. He pushed off the

wall and came at me. I spun on the small of my back and kicked out hard and straight at his good knee.

That's a nasty defensive technique Murphy taught me, and one that doesn't rely upon raw physical power. The ghoul's weight was all on that leg, and the kick connected hard. There was a grinding pop, and he let out a spitting snarl of pain.

I scrambled away from him on one leg and the heels of my hands. I could see my blood on the floor of the alley, smeared in a trail from my wounded leg. There were little stars fluttering through my vision, and I felt as weak as a starved kitten. Everything was spinning around so much that I didn't even bother to get to my feet. I crawled out of the cold shadows of the alley, onto the sidewalk, and into broad daylight.

I heard someone shout something. There were police sirens a block or two away. They were doubtless heading for Bock's place, after someone had seen me throw the ghoul out through the plywood-covered door. Give them two minutes to sort out what was going on, and I'd have men with silver shields and a strong desire to speak to the dead professor's missing assistants all around me.

Of course, by then I'd probably have been dead for a minute and a half.

The wounded ghoul, his face twisted, jaws lolling open wide to show yellowed fangs, came shambling out of the alley after me.

I heard a woman shout, the sound high and furious and totally unafraid. There was a whooshing sound, a spinning shape, and then an ax—a freaking double-bladed *ax*—buried itself to the eye in the ghoul's flank. Just as it hit, there was a flash of light from a spot on the blade, so bright that it left a red mark in the shape of a single rune burned into my vision. There was a loud bark of sound as the ax hit the ghoul. The creature was thrown forcefully to the sidewalk, and thin, greenish-brown fluid sprayed everywhere in a disgusting shower.

A woman in a dark business suit stepped into my line of sight. She was better than six feet tall, blond, and coldly beautiful. Her blue eyes burned with battle-lust and excitement as she drew a sword with a straight, three-foot blade from the scabbard at her side. As I watched, she took several smooth steps to place herself between the ghoul and me. Then she pointed the tip of the sword at him and snarled, "Avaunt, carrion."

The ghoul tore the ax from his side and staggered into a crouch, holding the weapon in both hands with a panicked desperation. He took a pair of

awkward, shuffling steps back.

An engine roared and a grey sedan swerved up onto the sidewalk.

“Avaunt!” cried the woman; then she raised the sword and glided toward the ghoul.

Li Xian didn’t want any part of it. His inhuman face twisted in recognizable fear. He dropped the ax and fled back down the alley.

“Coward.” The woman sighed, clearly disappointed. She snatched up the ax, then said to me, “Get in.”

“I know you,” I said. “Miss Gard. You work for Marcone.”

“I work for Monoc Securities,” the woman corrected me. Her hand clamped down on my arm like a slender steel vise, and she hauled me to my feet without effort. My wounded calf clenched into a nasty cramp, and I could feel the steel blades continuing to cut at my muscles. I clenched my teeth, snarling my defiance at the pain. Gard gave me a quick glance of approval and tugged me toward the grey sedan. I still had to hobble on my staff, but with her help I made it to the car and fumbled my way into the backseat. More hands pulled me in.

The whole time Gard kept her sharp, cold blue gaze on the alley and the street around us. Once I was in, she shut the door, sheathed the sword, and unclipped the scabbard from her belt before getting into the passenger’s seat. The grey sedan pulled out into the street again, and started away from the scene.

The driver turned his head just enough to catch me in his peripheral vision. His neck was too thick for any more movement than that. He had red hair clipped into a close buzz, shoulders wide enough to build a deck on, and he’d had to get his business suit at the big-and-tall store.

“Hendricks,” I greeted him.

He looked up into the rearview mirror with his beady eyes and glowered.

“Nice to see you again, too,” I said. I settled back into the seat as much as I could, trying to ignore my leg, and refusing to look at the man sitting beside me.

I didn’t really need to look at him. He was a man a little over average height, somewhere in the late prime of his life, his dark hair flecked with grey. He had skin that had seen a lot of time out in the weather, leaving him with a perpetual boater’s tan, and eyes the color of wrinkled old dollars. He’d be wearing a suit that cost more than some cars, and making it look good. He looked handsome and wholesome, more like the coach of a

successful sports team than a gangster. But John Marcone was the most powerful figure in Chicago's criminal underworld.

"Isn't that a little childish?" he asked me, his voice amused. "Refusing to look at me like that?"

"Indulge me," I said. "It's been a long day."

"How serious is your injury?" he asked.

"Do I look like a doctor to you?" I asked.

"You look more like a corpse," he answered.

I squinted at him. He sat calmly in his seat, mirroring me. "Is that a threat?" I asked.

"If I wanted you dead," Marcone said, "I would hardly have come to your aid just now. You must admit, Dresden, that I have just saved your life. Again."

I closed my eye again and scowled. "Your timing is improbable."

He sounded amused. "In what way?"

"Coming to my rescue just as someone was about to punch my ticket. You must admit, Marcone, that it smells like a setup."

"Even I occasionally enjoy good fortune," he replied.

I shook my head. "I called you less than an hour ago. If it wasn't a setup then how did you find me?"

"He didn't," said Gard. "I did." She looked over her shoulder at Marcone and frowned. "This is a mistake. It was his fate to die in that alley."

"What is the point of having free will if one cannot occasionally spit in the eye of destiny?" Marcone asked.

"There will be consequences," she insisted.

Marcone shrugged. "When aren't there?"

Gard turned her face back to the front and shook her head. "Hubris. Mortals never understand."

"Tell me about it," I said. "Everyone makes that mistake but me."

Marcone glanced at me, and his eyes wrinkled at the corners. It was very nearly a smile. Gard turned her head slowly and gave me a cold glare that wasn't anywhere close to smiling.

"Let's get to the part of the conversation where you tell me what you want," I said. "I don't have time for any more banter."

"Ah," Marcone said. "I suspected you would somehow become involved in the events at hand."

"What events would those be?" I asked.

“The situation concerning the death of Tony Mendoza.”

I scowled at him. “What do you want?”

“Unless I miss my guess,” Marcone said, “I want to help you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Right.”

“I’m quite serious, Dresden,” he told me. “I allow no one to harm those in my employ. Whoever murdered Mendoza must be chastised immediately—whether or not they happen to be necromancers.”

I blinked. “How did you know what they were?”

“Miss Gard,” he replied serenely. “She and her colleagues have outstanding resources.”

I shrugged. “Good for you. But I’m not interested in helping you maintain your empire.”

“Naturally. But you *are* interested in stopping these men and women before they accomplish whatever goal it is that they are pursuing.”

I shrugged. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do,” he said, his tone growing distant and cool. He met my eyes and said, “Because I know you. I know that you would oppose them. Just as you know that I will not permit them to take one of mine from me without punishment.”

I glared back at him. I wasn’t worried about a soulgaze. Those happened only once between any two people, and Marcone had already gotten a look at me. When he said that he knew me, that’s what he was talking about. I’d seen his soul in return, and it had been a cold and barren place—but one of order, as well. If Marcone gave his word, he kept it. And if someone came for one of his people, he would go after them without hesitation, fear, or pity.

That didn’t make him noble. Marcone had the soul of a tiger, of a predator protecting his territory. It only made him more resolved and more dangerous.

“I’m not a hit man,” I told him. “And I don’t work for you.”

“Nor am I asking you to,” he said. “I simply want to give you information that might help you in your efforts.”

“You aren’t listening. I am not going to kill anyone for you.”

His teeth suddenly showed, very white against the tan. “But you will go up against them.”

“Yes.”

He settled back in his seat. "I've seen what you do to the people who get in your way. I'm willing to take my chances."

That thought, that attitude, was a little creepier than I was comfortable with. I wasn't a killer. I mean, sure, sometimes I fought. Sometimes people and not-people got killed. But it wasn't as though I was some kind of Jack the Ripper. From time to time matters got desperately dangerous between me and various denizens of the preternatural world, but I had only killed...

I thought about it for a minute.

I'd killed more of them than I hadn't.

Quite a few more.

I felt a little sick to my stomach.

Marcone watched me from behind hooded eyes and waited.

"What do you want to tell me?" I asked him.

"I don't want to waste your time," he said. "Ask me questions. I'll answer whichever I can."

"How much do you know about the deal that got Mendoza killed?"

He drummed the fingers of his right hand on his thigh for a moment. "Mendoza was getting ready to retire," Marcone said. "He had a final scheme to complete. I owed the man for loyalties past, and at his request I allowed him certain liberties."

"He was selling something independently?"

Marcone nodded. "The contents of an old storage locker. Mendoza had come across the key to it in an estate sale."

That was criminal-speak for purchasing hot merchandise from a mugger or burglar. "Go on."

"The key opened a storage locker that had been sealed since 1945. It contained a number of works of art, jewelry, and similar cultural artifacts."

I arched an eyebrow. "Loot from World War Two?"

"So Mendoza presumed," Marcone said. "He offered me my selection of the contents, and in return I allowed him to dispose of the rest in whatever manner he saw fit."

"What did you get out of it?" I asked.

"Two Monets and a Van Gogh."

"Holy crap." I shook my head. "What happened then?"

"Mendoza went about liquidating his cache. It had been in process for several weeks when he reported that one of the people he had approached

regarding an antique book seemed to have access to resources that were well beyond the ordinary.”

“Did he give you a name?” I asked.

“A man named Grevane,” Marcone said. “Mendoza asked for my advice on the matter.”

“And you told him about how wizards are technologically challenged.”

“Among other things,” he said, nodding.

“But the deal went south.”

“So it would seem,” Marcone said. “Since Mendoza’s death, I have asked Miss Gard to collect information on recent events in the local supernatural community.”

I glanced at the woman and nodded. “And she told you there were necromancers running around.”

“Once that had been established, we attempted to narrow down the location of these individuals, particularly Grevane, but met with very limited success.”

“I’m able to find where they’ve been,” Gard said without turning around. “Or at least where they’ve been weaving their spells.”

“And there are a number of hot spots of necromantic energy around town,” I said. “I know that already.”

Marcone placed his fingers in a steeple before him. “But what I suspect you do not know is that last night at the location on Wacker, a member of my organization had an altercation with representatives of a rival interest from out of town. There was a gun-fight. My man was mortally wounded and left for dead.”

“That doesn’t add up to necromancy,” I said, frowning. “What caused the hot spot?”

“That is the question,” Marcone said. He took a folded piece of paper from his breast pocket and passed it to me. “These are the names of the responding EMTs,” he said. “According to my man, they were the first on the scene.”

“Did he talk to you before he died?” I asked.

“He did,” Marcone replied. “In point of fact, he did not die.”

“Thought you said he was mortally wounded.”

“He was, Mister Dresden,” Marcone said, his features remote. “He was.”

“He survived.”

“The surgeons at Cook County thought it a bona fide miracle. Naturally I thought of you at once.”

I rubbed at my chin. “What else has he said?”

“Nothing,” Marcone said. “He has no memory of the events after he saw the ambulance arriving.”

“So you want me to talk to the EMTs. Why haven’t you done it yourself?” I asked.

He arched his brows. “Dresden. Try to keep in mind that I am a criminal. For some reason it’s quite difficult to get people in uniforms to open their hearts to me.”

I gritted my teeth at another agonizing twinge from my leg. “Right.”

“So,” he said, “we’re back to my original question. How serious is your injury?”

“I’ll make it,” I said.

“Do you think you’ll need to see a doctor? If it’s too mild a wound, I’ll be glad to have Miss Gard make it look more authentic.”

I looked at him for a moment. “I’m heading for an emergency room whether I need it or not, eh?”

“As luck would have it, we are near a hospital. Cook County, in fact.”

“Yeah. The cut’s pretty deep.” I looked at the piece of paper and then stuck it in my pocket. “There’s bound to be an EMT or two there. Maybe you should drop me off at the emergency room.”

Marcone smiled, and it didn’t touch his eyes. “Very well, Dresden. You have my deepest sympathies for your pain.”

Chapter Nineteen

Marcone and company dropped me off a hundred yards from the emergency entrance to the hospital, and I had to hobble in alone. It was hard, and I was tired, but I'd been hurt worse before. It wasn't like I wanted to do this every day or anything, but after a certain point of ridiculous discomfort, the pain all feels pretty much the same.

Once I made it to the emergency room, I was a big hit. When you drag yourself inside panting and leaving a trail of bloody footprints behind you, it makes a certain impression. I had an orderly and a nurse helping me onto my stomach on a gurney within a few seconds while the nurse examined the wound.

"It isn't life-threatening," she reported after she cut away my pant leg and took a look. She glanced at me almost in accusation. "From the way you came in here, you'd think this almost killed you."

"Well," I said, "I'm kind of a wimp."

"Nasty," commented the burly orderly. He produced a clipboard layered in forms and a ballpoint pen and handed them both to me. "They'll have to cut this out."

"We'll let the doctor decide that," the nurse said. "How did this happen, sir?"

"I have no clue," I said. "I was walking down the street and all of a sudden I thought my leg was on fire."

"You walked here?" she asked.

"A helpful Boy Scout brought me most of the way," I said.

She sighed. "Well, it's been a slow day. They should be able to see to you shortly."

"That's super," I said. "Because it hurts like hell."

"I can get you some Tylenol," the nurse said primly.

"I don't have a headache. I have a four-inch piece of steel in my leg."

She passed me a paper cup and two little white tablets. I sighed and took them.

“Heh,” the orderly said after she left. “Don’t worry too much. They’ll get you something when the doctor sees to you.”

“With this kind of loving care, I probably won’t need it.”

“Don’t be too hard on her,” the orderly said. “You should see what people try so that they can get to some painkillers. Vicodin, morphine, that kind of thing.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Hey, man, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He had brought a bowl of ice with him, and he started sealing it into plastic bags, which he started packing around my leg. “This should numb it a little, and maybe take down some of the swelling. It ain’t a local, but it’s what I’ve got.”

The ice didn’t actually burst into steam upon touching me, even though it felt like it should have. The pain didn’t exactly lessen, but it did suddenly feel a little more distant. “Thanks, man. Hey, I was hoping I could talk to a couple of guys I know while I was here,” I said. “They’re EMTs. Gary Simmons and Jason Lamar.”

The orderly lifted his eyebrows. “Simmons and Lamar, sure. They drive an ambulance.”

“I know. Are they around?”

“They were on shift last night,” he said. “But it’s the end of the month and they might be on their swing shift. I’ll ask.”

“Appreciate it,” I said. “If Simmons is there, tell him a school buddy is here.”

“Sure. If I do that, though, you gotta do something for me and fill out these forms.”

I eyed the clipboard and picked up the pen. “Tell the doc to sign me up for carpal tunnel surgery when he gets that thing out of me. Two birds with one stone.”

The orderly grinned. “I’ll do that.”

He left me to fill in forms, which didn’t used to take terribly long to fill out since I didn’t have any kind of insurance. One of these days, when I had the money, I was going to have to get some. They say that when you pay for insurance you’re really buying peace of mind. It might make me feel peaceful to think of how much money the company was probably going to lose on me in the long run. If I lived my whole life in the open, as I had

been since I'd come to Chicago, they might be dealing with me for two or three centuries. I wondered what the yearly markup would be for a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old.

A young doctor came in after I was finished with the forms, and true to the orderly's prediction, he had to cut the shuriken out of me. I got a local, and the sudden cessation of pain was like a drug all by itself. I fell asleep while he was cutting and woke up as he was wrapping my leg up.

"...the sutures dry," he was saying. "Though from the looks of your file I suppose you know that."

"Sure, Doc," I said. "I know the drill. Do you need to take them out or did I get the other kind?"

"They'll dissolve," he said. "But if you experience any swelling or fever, get in touch. I'm giving you a prescription for something for the pain and some antibiotics."

"Follow all the printed instructions and be sure to take them all," I said, in my best surgeon-general-slash-television-announcer voice.

"Looks like you've done this as often as I have," he said. He gestured to the steel tray where the bloodied shuriken lay. "Did you want to keep the weapon?"

"Might as well. I'll have to get a souvenir in the gift shop otherwise."

"You sure you don't want the police to look at it?" he said. "They might be able to find fingerprints or something."

"I already told you guys it must have been some kind of accident," I said.

He gave me a look of extreme skepticism. "All right. If that's the way you want it." He dropped the little weapon into a metal tray of alcohol or some other sterilizer. "Keep your leg elevated. That will ease the swelling. Stay off of it for a couple of days, at least."

"No problem," I said.

He shook his head. "The orderly will be by in a minute with your prescriptions and a form to sign." He departed.

A minute later there were footsteps outside the little alcove they'd put me in, and a large young man drew the curtain aside. He had skin almost as dark as my leather duster, and his hair had been cropped into a flat-top so precise that his barber must have used a level. He was on the heavy side—not out of shape or ripped out, but simply large and comfortable with it. He wore an EMT's jacket, and the name tag on it read LAMAR. He stood there

looking at me for a minute and then said, "You're the wrong color to have been in my high school. And I didn't do college."

"Army medic?" I asked.

"Navy. Marines." He folded his arms. "What do you want?"

"My name is Harry Dresden," I said.

He shrugged. "But what do you want?"

I sat up. My leg was still blissfully numb. "I wanted to talk to you about last night."

He eyed me warily. "What about it?"

"You were on the team who responded to a gunshot victim on Wacker."

His breath left him in a long exhale. He looked up and down the row, then stepped into the little alcove and closed the curtain behind him. He lowered his voice. "So?"

"So I want you to tell me about it," I said.

He shook his head. "Look, I want to keep my job."

I lowered my voice as well. "You think telling me is going to endanger that?"

"Maybe," he said. He pulled open his jacket and then unbuttoned two buttons on his shirt. He opened it enough to show me a Kevlar vest beneath it. "See that? EMTs have to wear them around here, because people shoot at us sometimes. Gangbangers, that kind of thing. We show up to try to save lives and people shoot at us."

"Must be tough," I said cautiously.

He shook his head. "I can handle it. But a lot of people don't. And if it looks like you're starting to crack under the pressure, they'll pull you out. Word gets around that I'm telling fairy tales about things I've seen, they'll have me on psychiatric disability by tomorrow." He turned to go.

"Wait," I said. I touched his arm lightly. I didn't grab him. You don't go unexpectedly grabbing former marines if you want your fingers to stay in the same shape. "Look, Mr. Lamar. I just want to hear about it. I'm not going to repeat it to anyone. I'm not a reporter or—"

He paused. "You're the wizard," he said. "Saw you on *Larry Fowler* once. People say you're crazy."

"Yeah," I said. "So it isn't as if they'd believe me, even if I did talk about you. Which I won't."

"You're the one they arrested in the nursery a few years back," he said. "You broke in during a blackout. They found you in the middle of a

wrecked room with all those babies.”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

Lamar was silent for a second. Then he said, “You know that the year before, the SIDS rate there was the highest in the nation? They averaged one case every ten days. No one could explain it.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Since they arrested you there, they haven’t lost one,” he said. He turned back to me. “You did something.”

“Yeah. Do you like ghost stories?”

He snorted out a breath through his nose. “I don’t like any of this crap, man. Why do you want me to tell you what I saw?”

“Because what you know might help me keep more people from getting hurt.”

He nodded, frowning. “All right,” he said after a moment. “But I’m not saying this right now. You understand me? I’m not going to say this again. To anyone. Only reason I’ll tell you is that you helped those babies.”

I nodded.

He sat down on the edge of the gurney. “We got the call around midnight. Headed over to Wacker. The cops were there already. Found this guy on the street, all busted up. Two hits in the chest and two in the abdomen. He was bleeding bad.”

I nodded, listening.

“We tried to stabilize him. But there wasn’t much point to it. Simmons and me both knew that. But we tried. It’s what you do, you know? He was awake for it. Scared as hell. Screaming some. Kept begging us not to let him die. Said he had a little girl to look after.”

“What happened?”

“He died,” Lamar said, his voice flat. “I’ve seen it before. Here in town. In action while I was in the corps. You get to where you can recognize death when he comes knocking.” He rubbed his large, rather slender hands together. “We tried to resuscitate, but he was gone. That’s when it happened.”

“Go on.”

“This woman shows up. I don’t know from where. We just looked up and she was standing over us looking down.”

I leaned forward. “What did she look like?”

"I don't know," Lamar answered. "She was...like, wearing this costume, right? Like those people at Renaissance fairs. Big old black robe with a hood over her head. I didn't see much of her face. Just her chin and her throat. She was white."

"What did you do?"

"I figured she was a nut. You get them a lot this time of year. Or maybe going to a costume party or something. Hell, it's almost Halloween. She looks at me and tells me to back up and let her help him."

How many women in a black hooded robe could have been running around town last night? Kumori. That would have been maybe forty-five minutes or an hour before I saw her at Bock's.

Lamar peered at my face. "You know her," he said.

"Not personally. But yeah. What did she do?"

His face grew more remote. "She knelt down over him. Like, straddling the stretcher. Then she leaned down. The robe and the hood fell over them both, right. Like, I couldn't see what she was doing." He licked his lips. "And it got cold. I mean, ice started forming on the sidewalk and the stretcher and on our truck. I swear to you, it happened."

"I believe it," I said.

"And the victim all of a sudden starts coughing. Trying to scream. I mean, it wasn't like the wounds were gone, but...I don't know how to describe it. He was holding on." His face twisted with a sickened expression. "He was in agony, and he was stable. It was like...like he wasn't being *allowed* to die.

"So the woman stands up. She tells us we've got less than an hour to save him. And then she's gone. Like, poof, gone. Like she was all in my imagination."

I shook my head. "Then?"

"We get him brought in. The docs patched him up and got fresh blood into him. He passed out about an hour later. But he made it."

Lamar was silent for a long moment.

"That couldn't have happened," he said then. "I mean, I've seen people pull through some bad stuff. But not like that. He should have been dead. Everything I know tells me so. But he kept going."

"Sometimes miracles happen," I said quietly.

He shuddered. "This wasn't a miracle. There wasn't any angel choir singing. My skin tried to crawl away and hide." He shook his head. "I don't

want to think about it.”

“What about your partner?” I asked.

“He drank himself under the table twenty minutes after our shift ended. Hell, only reason I wasn’t with him was that I was teaching a CPR class this morning.” He looked at me. “That help?”

“It might,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Sure.”

“What are you going to do now?” I asked.

“Gonna go find my own table.” Lamar stood up and said, “Good luck, man.”

“Thanks.”

The big man left, and while I got my prescriptions and filled out the last forms, I thought about what he’d had to say. I got the prescriptions filled at the hospital pharmacy, called a cab, and told him to take me to Mike’s to pick up the Blue Beetle.

I sat in the backseat with my eyes closed and thought about what I’d learned. Kumori had saved the gunshot victim’s life. If everything Lamar had said was accurate, it meant that she had gone out of her way to do it. And whatever she’d done, it had been an extremely difficult working to leave a mystic impression as intense as it did. That might explain why Kumori had done very little during the altercation with Cowl. I had expected her to be nearly as strong as her partner, but when she tried to take the book from me, her power hadn’t been stronger than my own muscles and limbs.

But the Kemmler Alumni Association was in town with some vicious competition in mind. Why would Kumori have expended her strength for a stranger, rather than saving it for battling rival necromancers? Could the shooting victim have been important to her plans in some way?

It didn’t track. The victim was just one more thug for the outfit, and he certainly wasn’t going to be doing anything useful from his bed in intensive care.

I had to consider the possibility that she’d been trying to do the right thing: using her power to help someone in dire need.

The thought made me uncomfortable as hell. I knew that the necromancers I’d met were deadly dangerous, and that if I wanted to survive a conflict with them, I would have to be ready to hit them fast and hard and without any doubts. That’s easy when the enemy is a frothing,

psychotic monster. But Kumori's apparently humanitarian act changed things. It made her a person, and people are a hell of a lot harder for me to think about killing.

Even worse, if she'd been acting altruistically, it would mean that the dark energy the necromancers seemed to favor might not be something wholly, inherently evil. It had been used to preserve life, just as the magic I knew could be used either to protect or to destroy.

I'd always considered the line between black magic and white to be sharp and clear. But if that dark power could be employed in whatever fashion its wielder chose, that made it no different from my own.

Dammit. Investigation was supposed to make me certain of what needed to be done. It was not supposed to confuse me even more.

When I opened my eyes, thick clouds had covered the sun and painted the whole world in shades of grey.

Chapter Twenty

It was past the middle of the afternoon by the time I got the Blue Beetle from Mike's and headed back to my apartment. I tried to be wary of possible tails, but by then the local was wearing off and my leg was hurting again. I don't know if you've ever had a serious physical injury, but there's more to it than simply increasing the amount of discomfort. It's tiring. The pain carries with it a tax of bone-deep weariness that makes you want to crawl into a dark hole and hibernate.

So when I say I tried to be wary, what I mean is that I flicked a glance at my rearview mirror a couple of times whenever I had the presence of mind to remember to do so. As long as the bad guys were restricting themselves to driving brightly painted side-panel vans or maybe nitro-burning funny cars, I was perfectly safe.

I got back to my place, disabled the wards, unlocked the door, and slipped inside. Mister came flying down the stairs at my back, and thumped companionably against my legs. I all but screamed. "Stupid cat," I snarled.

Mister wound around my legs in a pleased fashion, unconcerned with my opinion of him. I limped inside and locked up behind me. Mouse waited until Mister was bored with me, then shambled over to snuffle at my legs and collect a few scratches behind his ears.

"Hey, there," Thomas greeted me quietly. He sat in the chair by the fire, several candles lit on the end table beside it. He had a book open. Sword and shotgun rested near his hand. He glanced at my leg and rose, his face alarmed. "What happened?"

I grimaced, tottered over to the couch, and plopped down on it. "Sticks and stones may break your bones, but Chinese throwing stars get you a dozen stitches." I drew the ghoul's weapon from my pocket by way of illustration and tossed it down on the coffee table. "How's Butters?"

"Fine," Thomas said. "Funny little guy. Made an awful racket with that... polka thing of his for about half an hour, babbled for forty minutes straight,

and fell asleep eating dinner. I put him on the bed.”

“He’s had a stressful day,” I said.

“He’s a coward,” Thomas said.

I glared at him and started to snarl something harsh and defensive.

He held up a hand and hurried to speak. “Don’t take that wrong, Harry. He’s smart enough to understand what’s happening. And he’s smart enough to know that there’s not a damned thing he can do about it. He knows the only reason he’s alive is that someone else is protecting him. He isn’t kidding himself that he’s somehow done it because of his own cleverness or skill.” Thomas glanced at the door to the bedroom. “He doesn’t know how to deal with the fear. It’s strangling him.”

I propped my aching leg up on the coffee table. “Thank you for your professional opinion, Counselor.”

Thomas gave me a level look. “I’ve seen it before. I know what I’m talking about.”

“Whatever,” I said.

“When you were attacked in the morgue last night, he froze. Didn’t he.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “Not everyone is cut out for the battlefield.”

“But he froze,” Thomas said. “You had to scream orders into his ear and haul him around like luggage, right?”

“That doesn’t make him a coward.”

“He lets his fear control him. That’s what a coward is, Harry.”

“A lot of people would react the same way,” I said.

“A lot of people aren’t making themselves into excess baggage for my brother,” he shot back.

“No one does well their first time out,” I said.

“It isn’t an isolated incident,” Thomas said. “You told me that when he reported on the corpses taken from Bianca’s manor, and they locked him up in the nuthouse.”

“So?”

“So do you think he got his job back without backing down? Admitting to some shrink that he hadn’t really seen what he saw?” Thomas shook his head. “He was afraid to lose his career. He caved.”

I sat silently.

“Doesn’t make him a bad person,” Thomas said. “But he’s a coward. He’s either going to get you killed or else freeze at a bad moment and die—and you’ll torture yourself over how it’s all your fault. If we want to

survive, we need to get him somewhere safe. Then cut him loose. Better for everyone.”

I thought about it for a minute.

“You might be right,” I said. “But if we tell him to rabbit, he’s never going to be able to get over the fear. We’ll be making it worse for him. He has to face it down.”

“He doesn’t want to.”

“No,” I said, “but he needs to.”

Thomas looked from me to the fire and nodded. “It’s your show.”

I watched Mouse mosey over to his bucket-sized food bowl. He sat down by it and waited expectantly until Mister prowled over to him. Then he bent down to eat. My cat stalked up to Mouse and promptly swatted him on the muzzle with one paw. Mouse opened his jaws in a doggy grin and walked a couple of steps in the direction Mister had swatted him.

Mister regarded Mouse with lordly disdain, then ate part of a single piece of kibble. Then he slapped at the bowl of food, scattering bits over the kitchen floor, and walked away. Once he was done, Mouse padded back over, patiently ate the spilled food, and then resumed munching on the bowl.

“Remember when Mouse would slide all the way to the wall when Mister did that?” Thomas asked.

“Heh. Yeah.”

“Do you think Mister realizes that the dog is about twenty times bigger than he used to be?” Thomas asked.

“Oh, he realizes it, all right,” I said. “He just doesn’t see how it’s relevant.”

“One of these days Mouse is going to disabuse him of the notion.”

I shook my head. “He won’t. Mister made his point when Mouse was tiny. Mouse is the sort to respect tradition.”

“Or he’s scared to cross the cat.” Thomas’s eyes drifted to my bandages and he nodded at my leg. “How bad is it?”

“I can walk. I wouldn’t want to go dancing.”

“Is that your next move, dancing?”

I leaned my head back on the couch and closed my eyes. “I’m not sure what to do next. How are you as a sounding board?”

“I can look interested and nod at appropriate moments,” he said.

“Good enough,” I said.

I told Thomas everything.

He listened, taking it all in, and the first thing he said was, “You have a *date?*”

I opened my eyes and blinked at him. “What. Is that so hard to conceive?”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “Christ, Harry, I thought you were going to spend the rest of your life as a hermit.”

“What?”

He rolled his eyes. “It isn’t like you’ve gone looking for women,” Thomas said. “I mean, you never hit any clubs. Try to get any phone numbers. I figured you just didn’t want to.” He mulled it over for a minute and then said, “Good God. You’re *shy*.”

“I am not,” I said.

“The girl practically had to throw herself into your arms. My sister would laugh herself sick.”

I glowered at him. “You are not a spectacularly helpful sounding board.”

He stretched out a little and crossed his legs at the ankle. “I’m so pretty, it’s hard for me to think of myself as intelligent.” He pursed his lips. “There are two things you need to know.”

“The book,” I said, nodding.

“Yeah. Everyone is hot and bothered over this *Erlking* thing. You read it?”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

I raked my fingers through my hair. “And nothing. It’s a collection of essays about a particular figure of faerie lore called the Erlking.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s one of the high *sidhe*,” I said. “And he isn’t part of Winter or Summer. He’s a *wyldfae*.”

“Powerful?”

“Very,” I said. “But just how powerful he is varies depending on who was writing about him. Some of them ranked him among the top faerie nobles. A couple claimed he was on par with one of the Faerie Queens.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s some kind of hunter spirit,” I said. “Associated with all kinds of primal violence. He’s apparently one of the beings who can call up and lead the Wild Hunt.”

"The what?" Thomas said.

"It's a gathering of some of the more predatory beings of Faerie," I said. "They appear in the autumn and winter usually, usually along with storms and rough weather. A gathering of black hounds the size of horses with glowing red eyes, led by a hunter with the horns of a stag on a black horse."

"The Erlking?" Thomas asked.

"There are several figures who can lead the hunt, apparently," I said. "None of them are particularly friendly. The Hunt will kill anything and anyone it runs across. It's major-league dangerous."

"I think I've heard about it," Thomas said. "Is it true that you can avoid being hunted by joining them?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I've never heard of anyone who met the Hunt and survived. Could be that they won't hunt what they think of as another predator."

"Like sharks," Thomas said. "It's all about body language."

"I wouldn't count on nonverbal cues to protect you from the Hunt," I said. "Assuming you ever saw them. It appears maybe only once every five or six years, and can show up almost anywhere in the world."

"Is it the Hunt you think the Kemmlerites are interested in?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I can't think what else it would be. The Erlking has a reputation as a being that preys upon children, or at least one that heralds their deaths. A couple of wizards even peg him as a guardian who ensures that children's souls aren't harmed or diverted as they depart dying bodies."

"Sounds like there is a mixed opinion on this Erlking guy."

"Faeries are like that," I said. "They aren't ever quite what they seem to be. It's hard to pin them down."

"But why would a gang of necromancers be interested in him? Is there anything in the book that makes sense?"

"Not that I saw," I said. "There were stories, songs, lectures, accountings, bad sketches, and worse poetry about the Erlking, but nothing practical."

"Nothing you saw," Thomas said.

"Nothing I saw," I confirmed. "But these lunatics would hardly be this serious about the book if it wasn't there somewhere."

"Do you think it's connected to this Darkhallow that Corpsetaker was talking about?" Thomas asked.

"I don't know," I said. "What's a Darkhallow?"

We listened to the fire crackle for a minute before Thomas said, "I hate to say this, but maybe you should contact the Council."

I grimaced. "I *know* I should," I said. "I don't know what they're doing. And these necromancers are strong, Thomas. Stronger than me. I don't think I can take them in a straight fight."

"Sounds like a good reason to call for help."

"I can't do that," I said. "Mavra would torpedo Murphy."

"I don't think Murphy would want you to get killed over this, Harry," he pointed out. "And what's going to happen if the Council hears that you knew these folk were around and didn't report it to them? They aren't going to be happy."

"I know," I said. "I know. But at the moment it's my choice, and I'm not going to choose for my friend to get hurt. I can't."

He nodded, as if he'd expected the answer.

"Plus there's one more reason not to call in the Council," I said.

"Why?"

"Right now, Cowl, Grevane, and Corpsetaker aren't working together. If I call in the Council it gives them a common enemy and a reason to cooperate."

"They have a common enemy," he pointed out. "You."

I laughed, and it came out a little bitter. "They aren't worried about me. Hell, I can't even figure out what's going on." I rubbed at my eyes. "You said there were two things I need to know. What's the second thing?"

"Your car."

"Oh, I got it back," I said. "It's out front."

"No, dummy," Thomas said. "Whoever trashed your car did it deliberately. They were trying to tell you something."

"It might not even be related to this situation," I said.

He snorted. "Yeah. It just happened now, out of all the times it could have happened."

"Whoever was sending the message, it's a little obscure. You think it's one of the Kemmler crowd?"

"Why not?" he said.

I thought about it for a minute. "It doesn't seem like something Grevane would do. I bet he's more like the kind to send undead minions to deliver his messages. Corpsetaker would send a nightmare or a forced

hallucination or something. She's big on the mind magic. Ghouls don't really send messages. They just eat you."

"That leaves Cowl, his buddy, and Grevane's buddy with the liver spots."

"Yeah," I said. "I almost feel like there was something familiar about Liver Spots," I said. "I'm not sure what. I might be grasping at straws."

"What about Cowl and Kumori?"

"I don't know, man," I said. "They were just a couple of people in cloaks. I never saw their faces. If I had to guess from the way they talked, I'd bet that they were Council."

"That would be a very good reason to cover their faces," Thomas agreed.

"There's no point in chewing this over and over," I said. I rubbed at my eyes. "Bony Tony's numbers mean something. They'll lead to the book, somehow. I'm sure of it."

"Maybe a locker number?" Thomas asked.

"Too many digits," I said.

"Maybe it's some kind of cipher. Substituting letters for numbers."

I raised my eyebrows. "That's a thought." I dug the folded piece of paper out of my pocket and passed it over to him. "Stay here and work on it. See if you can make any sense out of it."

He accepted the paper. "Now I feel like James Bond. Suave and intelligent, breaking all the codes while looking fabulous. What are you going to do?"

"I think the Erlking is the key to this," I said. "And the Erlking is a faerie."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Meaning?"

"When you want to know about faeries," I said, "it's best to ask a faerie. I'm going to call up my godmother and see if she knows anything."

"From what you've told me, isn't that kind of dangerous?"

"Very," I said.

"You're hurt. You should have some backup."

I nodded. "Watch the fort," I said. "Mouse."

The big dog lifted his shaggy head from the floor, ears perked forward, serious eyes on me.

"Come on," I told him. "We're going for a ride."

"Oh, Harry," Thomas said.

"Yeah?"

“Before you go...would you mind if I, uh, helped Butters out by getting his polka contraption loaded up into your trunk?”

“What. You don’t like polka?”

Thomas’s expression looked strained. “Please, Harry. I like the little guy, but come *on*.”

I rubbed at my mouth with one hand to cover up the smile. “Sure. Probably safest for everyone that way.”

“Thank you,” he said, and collected the polka suit and brought it up the stairs behind me as I prepared to take a chance on a conversation with one of the more dangerous beings I knew.

Chapter

Twenty-one

Mouse and I took the Beetle out of Chicago proper, following the lake north out of town. For once I wished I had an automatic transmission. Driving stick with only one good hand and one good leg is not fun. In fact, it's the next best thing to impossible, at least for me. I wound up using my wounded leg more than I should have, and the discomfort intensified. I thought about the painkillers in my pocket, and then blew them off. I needed to be sharp. When all of this was over, there would be time to muddle my head with codeine. So I drove, and swore under my breath at anything that made me change gears, while Mouse rode along in the passenger seat with his head usually sticking out the window.

By the time I was far enough from town to start calling out to my godmother, the sun had set, though the cloud-veiled western sky still glowed the color of campfire embers. I pulled off onto a side road that was made of old gravel and stubborn weeds that kept trying to grow up in the road's smooth center. It led down to a little dead end where some kind of construction project never went through. It was a popular spot for local kids to hang out and imbibe illegal substances of one intensity or another, and there were empty beer cans and bottles scattered around in abundance.

Mouse and I left the car up on the road, and walked maybe fifty yards down through trees and heavy undergrowth to the shore of the lake. At one point on the shore, a little spit of land formed a promontory only ten or twelve inches higher than the surface of the water.

"Wait here," I told Mouse, and the dog sat down at the end of the spit of land, watching me with alert eyes, his ears flicking around at all the little sounds. Then I walked out onto the spit to its end, and a cold wind off the lake swept around me, blowing my coat and threatening my balance. I grimaced and leaned on my staff, out at that point of land where earth and water and sky met one another, and focused my thoughts, blocking out the pain of my leg, my fears, my questions. I gathered together my will, then

lifted my face to the wind and called out, quietly, “Leanansidhe. An it please thee, come hither and hold discourse with me.”

I sent my will, my magic coursing into the words, and they reverberated with power, echoing from the surface of the lake, repeating themselves in whispers in the swirling wind, vibrating the ground upon which I stood.

Then I waited. I could have repeated myself, but my godmother had certainly heard me. If she was going to come, she would. If she wasn’t, no amount of repetition was likely to change her mind. The wind blew colder and stronger, throwing cold droplets up from the lake and into my face. One gust of wind brought me the sound of an airliner overhead, and another the lonely whistle of a freight train. Distantly, somewhere on the lake, a bell rang out several times, a solemn sound that made me think of a funeral dirge. Beyond that, nothing stirred.

I waited. In time, the fire faded from the overcast sky, and only the darkest tones of purple were left on the western horizon behind me. Dammit. She wasn’t coming.

After I thought that but before I could actually turn around, there was a swirling in the waters near my feet, and a slow spiral of water spray spun up from the surface of the lake, a bizarre sight. The spray rolled up and away from a female form, beginning at the feet, bare and pale, and rolling up over a medieval-style gown of emerald green. The gown was belted with a woven silver rope, and a slightly curved, single-edged knife of some dark, glassy material hung at an angle through it.

When the spray rolled up over the woman’s face, I expected my godmother’s blazing wealth of copper and scarlet curls, her wide feline eyes of amber, her features that always made her seem smug and somewhat pleased with herself, in absence of the animation of any other emotion.

Instead I saw a long, pale throat, features of heart-stopping, cold beauty, canted eyes greener than any color to be found in the natural world, and long, silken hair of purest white, bound within a circlet of what looked like rose vines surrounded in gleaming ice, beautiful and brittle and cruel.

Behind me, a deep-throated snarl burst forth from Mouse, back on the shore.

“Greetings, mortal,” said the faerie woman. Her voice shook water and earth and sky with subtle power. I felt it resonating through the elements around me as much as heard it.

My mouth went dry and my throat got tight. I leaned on my staff to help me balance as I cast a courtly bow in her direction. "Greetings, Queen Mab. I do beg your pardon. It was not my intention to disturb thee."

My head shifted into panicked, quick thought. Queen Mab had come to me, and that absolutely could not be good. Mab, monarch of the Winter Court of the Sidhe, the Queen of Air and Darkness, was not a very nice person. In fact, she was one of the most feared beings of power you'd find short of archangels and ancient gods. I'd once used my wizard's Sight to look upon Mab as she unveiled her true self in a working of power, and it had come perilously close to driving me insane.

Mab was not some paltry mortal being like Grevane or Cowl or the Corpsetaker. She was far older, far crueler, far more deadly than they could ever be.

And I owed her a favor. Two, to be exact.

She stared at me for a long and silent moment, and I didn't look at her face. Then she let out a quiet laugh and said, "Disturb me? Hardly. I am here only to fulfill the duties I have been obliged to take upon myself. It is no fault of thine that this summons reached mine ears."

I straightened up slowly and avoided her eyes. "I had expected my godmother to come."

Mab smiled. Her teeth were small and white and perfect, her canines delicately sharp. "Alas. The Leanansidhe is tied up at the moment."

I drew in a breath. My godmother was a powerful member of the Winter Court, but she couldn't hold a candle to Mab. If Mab wanted to take Lea down, she certainly could do it—and for some reason the thought spurred on a protective instinct, something that made me irrationally angry. Yes, Lea was hardly a benevolent being in her own right. Yes, she'd tried to enslave me several times in the past several years. But for all of that, she was still *my* godmother, and the thought of something happening to her angered me. "For what reason have you detained her?"

"Because I do not tolerate challenges to my authority," she said. One pale hand drifted to the hilt of the knife at her belt. "Certain events had convinced your godmother that she was no longer bound by my word and will. She is now learning otherwise."

"What have you done to her?" I asked. Well. It didn't sound like a question so much as a demand.

Mab laughed, and the sound of it came out silvery and smoother than honey. The laugh bounded around the waves and the earth and the winds, clashing against itself in a manner that made the hairs on my neck stand up and my heart race with a sudden apprehension as I felt an odd kind of pressure settle over me, as if I were closed into a small room. I gritted my teeth and waited the laugh out, trying not to show how harshly it had affected me. “She is bound,” Mab said. “She is in some discomfort. But she is in no danger from my hand. Once she acknowledges who rules Winter, she will be restored to her station. I can ill afford the loss of so potent a vassal.”

“I need to speak to her now,” I said.

“Of course,” Mab said. “Yet she languishes in the process of enlightenment. Thus am I here to fulfill her obligation to teach and guide you.”

I frowned. “You locked her away somewhere, but you’re keeping her promises?”

Something cold and haughty flickered through Mab’s eyes. “Promises must be kept,” she murmured, and the words made wave, wind, and stone tremble. “My vassal’s oaths and bargains are binding upon me, so long as I restrain her from fulfilling them.”

“Does that mean that you will help me?” I asked.

“It means that I will give you what she might give you,” Mab said, “and speak what knowledge she might have spoken to you were she here in flesh, rather than in proxy.” She tilted her head slowly to one side. “You know, wizard, that I may speak no word that is untrue. Thus is my word given to you.”

I eyed her warily. It was true that the high Sidhe could not speak words that were untrue—but that wasn’t the same thing as *telling* the truth. Most of the Sidhe I had met were past masters of the art of deception, speaking in allusions and riddles and inferences that would undermine the necessary honesty of their words so thoroughly that they might be much stronger lies than if they had simply spoken a direct falsehood. Trusting the word of one of the Sidhe was an enterprise best undertaken with extraordinary caution and exacting care. If I had any choice in the matter, I would avoid it.

But there was nothing I could do but forge ahead. I still had to find out more about what Sergeant Kemmler’s Lonely Hearts Club Band was doing

in Chicago, and that meant taking the risk of speaking with my godmother. Mab was simply more of the same risk.

A *lot* more of it.

"I seek knowledge," I said, "about the one known as the Erlking."

Mab arched an eyebrow. "*Him*," she said. "Yes. Your godmother knows some little of him. What would you know of him?"

"I want to know why all of Kemmler's disciples are grabbing up all the copies of the White Council's book about him."

Nothing that I could imagine would truly rattle Mab's composure, but that sentence apparently came close. Her expression froze, and with it the wind came to a sudden, dead halt. The waves of the shore abruptly stilled to a sheet of glass beneath her feet, dimly reflecting the glow of the city skyline in the distance and the last shreds of purple light in the leaden sky.

"Kemmler's disciples," she said. Her eyes were deeper than the lake she stood upon. "Could it be?"

"Could what be?" I asked.

"The *Word*," she said. "*The Word of Kemmler*. Has it been found?"

"Um," I said. "Sort of."

Her delicate white brows rose. "Meaning what, pray tell?"

"Meaning that the book was found," I said. "By a local thief. He tried to sell it to a man named Grevane."

"Kemmler's first student," Mab said. "Did he acquire the book?"

"No," I said. "The thief used mortal technology to conceal the book, in order to prevent Grevane from taking it from him without paying."

"Grevane killed him," Mab guessed.

"And how."

"This mortal ferromancy—technology, you called it. Does it yet conceal the book?"

"Yeah."

"Grevane yet seeks it?"

"Yeah. Him and at least two more. Cowl and the Corpsetaker."

Mab lifted a pale hand and tapped a finger to rich, lovely lips the color of frozen mulberries. Her nails were colored with shining opalescence gorgeous to the eye and distracting as hell. I felt a little dizzy until I forced myself not to look at them. "Dangerous," she mused. "You have fallen among deadly company, mortal. Even the Council fears them."

"You don't say."

Mab narrowed her eyes, and a little smile graced her lips. "Impudent," she said. "It's sweet on you."

"Gosh, that's flattering," I said. "But you haven't told me a thing about why they might be interested in the Erlking."

Mab pursed her lips. "The being you ask me about is to goblins as I am to the Sidhe. A ruler. A master of their kind. Devious, cunning, strong, and swift. He wields dominion over the spirits of fallen hunters."

I frowned. "What kind of spirits?"

"The spirits of those who hunt," Mab said. "The energy of the hunt. Of excitement, hunger, bloodlust. Betimes, the Erlking will call those spirits into the form of the great black hounds, and ride the winds and forests as the Wild Hunt. He carries great power with him as he does. Power that calls to the remnants of hunters now passed on from mortal life."

"You're talking about ghosts," I said. "The spirit of hunters."

"Indeed," Mab said. "Shades that lay in quiet rest, beyond the beck of the mortal pale, will rise up to the night and the stars at the sound of his horn, and join the Hunt."

"Powerful shades," I said quietly.

"Specters most potent," Mab said, nodding, her eyes bright and almost merry as they watched me.

I leaned on my staff, trying to get as much weight as I could off of my injured leg, so that it would stop pounding enough to make me think. "So a gaggle of wizards whose stock in trade is enslaving the dead to their will is interested in a being whose presence calls up powerful spirits they couldn't otherwise reach." I followed the chain of logic from there. "There's something in the book that tells them how to get his attention."

"Darling child," Mab said. "So clever for one so young."

"So what is it?" I asked. "Which part of the book?"

"Your godmother," she said, her smile growing wider, "has no idea."

I ground my teeth together. "But you do?"

"I am the Queen of Air and Darkness, wizard. There is little I do not."

"Will you tell me?"

She touched the tip of her tongue to her lips, as if savoring the taste of the words. "You should know us better than that by now, wizard. Nothing given by one of the Sidhe comes without a price."

My foot hurt. I had to hop a little bit on my good leg when my balance wavered. "Great," I muttered. "What is it you want?"

“You,” Mab said, folding her hands primly in front of her. “My offer of Knighthood yet stands open to you.”

“What’s wrong with the new guy?” I asked, “that you’d dump him for me?”

Mab showed me her teeth again. “I have not yet replaced my current Knight, treacherous though he is,” she purred.

“He’s still alive?” I asked.

“I suppose,” Mab said. “Though he very much wishes that he were not. I have taken the time to explain to him at length the error of his ways.”

Torture. She’d been torturing him in vengeance for his treachery for more than three years.

I felt a little sick to my stomach.

“If you like, you might consider it an act of mercy,” she said. “Accept my offer, and I will forgive your debt to me and answer all your questions freely.”

I shuddered. Mab’s last Knight had been an abusive, psychotic, drug-addicted, murdering rapist. I was never clear on whether he got the job *because* of those qualities or whether they had been instilled in him on the job. Either way, the title of Winter Knight was a permanent gig. If I accepted Mab’s offer, I’d be doing it for life—though there would, of course, be no promises as to how long that life would be.

“I told you once before,” I said, “that I’m not interested.”

“Things have changed, wizard,” Mab said. “You know the kind of power you face in Kemmler’s heirs. As the Winter Knight, you would have strength far outweighing even your own considerable gifts. You would have the wherewithal to face your foes, rather than slinking through the night gathering up whispers to use against them.”

“No.” I paused and then said, “And no means no.”

Mab shrugged one shoulder, a liquid motion that drew my eyes toward the curves of her breasts within the silken gown. “You disappoint me, child. But I can wait. I can wait until the sun burns cold.”

Thunder rumbled over the lake. Off in the southwest, lightning leapt from cloud to cloud.

Mab turned her head to watch. “Interesting.”

“Uh. What’s interesting?”

“Powers at work, preparing the way.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“That you have little time,” Mab said. She turned to face me again. “I must do what I might to preserve your life. Know this, mortal: Should Kemmler’s heirs acquire the knowledge bound within the *Word*, they will be in a position to gather up such power as the world has not seen in many thousands of years.”

“What? How?”

“Kemmler was”—Mab’s eyes grew distant, as if in memory—“a madman. A monster. But brilliant. He learned how to bind to his will not only dead flesh, but shades—to rend them asunder and devour them to feed his own power. It was the secret of the strength that allowed him to defy all the White Council together.”

I added two and two and got four. “The heirs want to call up the ancient spirits,” I breathed. “And then devour them for power.”

Mab’s deep-green eyes almost seemed to glow with intensity. “Kemmler himself attempted it, but the Council struck him down before he could finish.”

I swallowed. “What happens if one of his heirs is able to do it?”

“The heir would gain power such as has not been wielded by mortal hands in the memory of your race,” Mab said.

“The Darkhallow,” I said. I rubbed at my eyes. “That’s what it is. A ritual, tomorrow night. Halloween. They all want to be the one to make themselves into a junior-league god.”

“Power is ever sweet, is it not?”

I thought about it some more. I had to worry about more than just Kemmler’s cronies. Mavra wanted the *Word*, too. Hell’s bells. If Mavra succeeded in making herself into some kind of dark goddess, there wasn’t a chance in hell that she wouldn’t obliterate me at the first opportunity. “Can they do it without the *Word*?”

Mab’s mouth curled up in a slow smile. “If they could, why would they seek it so desperately?” The wind began to stir again, and the lake began to resume its ebb and flow. “Beware, wizard. You are engaged in a most deadly game. I should be disappointed were I deprived of your service.”

“Then get used to it,” I said. “I’m never going to be your knight.”

Mab tilted back her head and let out that nerve-searing laughter again. “I have time,” she said. “And you mortals find life to be very sweet. Two favors you yet owe me, and make no mistake, I will collect. One day you will kneel at my feet.”

The lake suddenly surged, dark waters whirling up in a snake-quick spiral, forming a waterspout that stretched from the lake's surface up out of sight into the darkness above me. The wind howled, driving my balance to one side, so that my wounded leg buckled and I fell to one knee.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the gale was gone. The lake was calm again. The wind sighed mournfully through tree branches sparsely covered in dead leaves. There was no sign of Mab.

I grimaced and struggled to my feet. I glanced back at Mouse, who was sitting on the shore, watching me with worried doggy eyes.

"She always has to have the last word," I told him.

Mouse padded over to me, and I scratched his ears a couple of times while he snuffled at me. He looked warily out at the lake.

"One problem at a time," I told him. "We'll handle Mab later. Somehow."

I walked back to the Beetle more slowly than ever, and Mouse stayed within a step or two the entire time. The adrenaline faded and left me wearier than ever. I had to fight to stay awake all the way back to my place. A thin, cold, drizzling rain began to fall.

I had just gotten home and out of the car when Mouse let out a warning snarl. I spun and wavered, then planted my staff hard on the ground to keep from falling over.

Out of the darkness and rain, a dozen or more people suddenly loomed into view. All of them walked toward me, steady and unhurried.

And all of them marched in step with one another.

In the distance I heard the low, rumbling thunder of a drum played on a big bass stereo.

Behind the first group came another. And behind them another. By then I could see the eyes of the nearest—empty, staring eyes in sunken, deathly faces.

My heart lurched in sudden terror as the zombies closed in on me.

I shambled down my stairs and tripped, stumbling against my door. I fumbled at my keys, frantically taking down my wards so that my own security spells didn't kill me on my way in. Mouse stayed at my back, continuous snarls bubbling from between his bared teeth.

"Thomas!" I screamed. "Thomas, open the door!"

I heard a noise, close, and spun around.

Mindless faces appeared at the top of the stairs leading down to my apartment door, and Grevane's killing machines leapt down them, straight at me.

Chapter

Twenty-two

Mouse leapt into the air as the lead zombie flung itself at me, and met it with an ugly sound of impact. The dog and the animate corpse dropped onto the stairs. The zombie swung an arm at Mouse, but the dog rolled, taking the blow on one slab of a shoulder, his snarl sharpening at the impact. The dog surged against the zombie's legs and got his teeth into the corpse's face. He shook his head violently, while the zombie stumbled and reeled under the ferocity of the attack.

The second zombie bypassed the struggling pair, reaching out for me. I barely had time to brandish my staff at the creature and snarl, "*Forzare!*"

Unseen force struck the zombie like an ocean wave, flinging it back up the stairs and out of sight.

Mouse let out a shrieking sound of pain, ripped his fangs once more at the zombie's face, and pushed away from it. The zombie's face had been crushed and torn until it was unrecognizable. Both eyes had been torn out, and the undead thing flailed around wildly, striking blindly with heavy sweeps of its arms. Mouse leaned heavily against me, one paw held lifted from the ground, snarling.

Three more zombies were already most of the way down the stairs, and there was no time to do anything but try my staff again. I raised it, but the nearest zombie was faster than I had guessed, and he batted the wood out of my hand. It smacked against the concrete wall of the stairwell and rebounded onto the blinded zombie, out of my reach. The zombie snatched at my arm and I barely avoided it.

The door opened at my back and Thomas called, "Down!"

I dropped to the ground and did my best to haul Mouse down with me. There was a roar of thunder, and the leading zombie's head vanished into a spray of ugly, rotten gore. The remainder of the being thrashed for a second and then fell drunkenly to one side, collapsing into immobility.

Thomas stood in the doorway, dressed only in a pair of blue jeans. He held the sawed-off shotgun against his shoulder, and his eyes blazed with a cold silver fury. He worked the pump on the gun and fired it three times more, destroying or driving back my nearest attackers for a moment. Then he seized the collar of my duster and dragged me forcibly into the apartment. Mouse came with us, and Thomas slammed the door shut.

“Get the locks,” I told him. He started shoving the door’s two heavy security bolts shut, while I crawled to the door, laid my hands against it, and with a whisper of will rearmed the wards that protected the apartment. The air hummed with a low buzz as the wards snapped back up into place.

Silence fell over the apartment.

“Okay,” I said, panting. “That’s it. Safe at home.” I looked around the apartment and spotted Butters hovering near the fireplace, poker in hand. “You okay, man?”

“I guess so,” Butters said. He looked a little wild around the eyes. “Are they gone?”

“If they aren’t yet, they will be. We’re safe.”

“Are you sure?”

“Definitely,” I said. “There’s no way they’re going to get in here.”

The words were hardly off my lips when there was a thunder crack of sound and a heavy thump that knocked scores of books off my bookshelves and sent us all staggering around like the cast of the original *Star Trek*.

“What was that?” Butters screamed.

“The wards,” Thomas snapped.

“No,” I said. “I mean, come on. Walking right into those wards is suicide.”

There was another clap of thunder, and the apartment shook again. A flash of bright blue light bathed the outside of the boardinghouse, and even reflected through the sunken windows near my apartment’s ceiling, it was painfully bright.

“Can’t commit suicide if you’re already dead,” Thomas said. “How many of those things were out there?”

“Uh, I’m not sure,” I said. “A lot?”

Thomas swallowed, got the box of shells off the mantel, and started loading them into the shotgun. “What happens if he just keeps throwing zombies at the wards?”

“I didn’t build them to keep up a continuous discharge,” I said. There was another roaring sound and another flash of light, but this time there was barely a tremor on the floor. “They’re going to fade and collapse.”

“How long?” Thomas asked.

There was a crackling buzz from outside, too slow, this time, to be heard only as a roar of noise. Blue-white light flickered dimly. “Not long. Dammit.”

“Oh, God,” Butters said. “Oh, God, oh, God. What happens when the wards are gone?”

I grunted. “The door is made of steel. It will take them some time to get through it. And after that, there’s the threshold. That should stop them, or at least slow them down.” I raked my fingers over my hair. “We’ve got to come up with something, fast.”

“What about the extra defenses?” Thomas asked.

“They’re standing right outside,” I said.

“Hence the need for extra defenses,” Thomas snapped. He pumped a round into the shotgun’s chamber and slipped another into the extra slot in its clip.

“Those defenses are meant to stop a magical assault,” I said. “Not physical entry.”

“Will they keep the zombies out?” Butters asked.

“Yes. But they’ll also keep us *in*.”

“What’s so bad about that?” Butters asked.

“Nothing,” I said, “until Grevane sets the building on fire. Once they go up, I can’t take them down again. We’ll be trapped.” I ground my teeth. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“But the zombies are out there!” Butters said.

“I’m not the only one who lives here,” I said. “If he burns down the house to get to me, people will die. Thomas, get dressed and get your shoes on. Butters, there’s a ladder under that Navajo rug there. I want you to take a candle and go down it. There’s a black nylon backpack on a table, and a white skull on a wooden shelf. Put the skull in the backpack and bring it to me.”

“What?” Butters said.

“Do it!” I snapped.

Butters scurried over to the Navajo rug, found the trapdoor down to my lab, and grabbed a candle. He disappeared down the ladder.

Thomas put the shotgun down and opened his trunk. It didn't take him long to get dressed in socks, black combat boots, a white T-shirt, a black leather jacket. Maybe it was part of his supernatural sex-vampire powers—dressing quickly for a hasty getaway.

“You see?” he said while he dressed. “About Butters.”

“Shut up, Thomas,” I said.

“What is the plan?” he said.

I limped over to the phone and put it to my ear. Nothing.

“They cut the phone.”

“We can't call for help,” Thomas said.

“Right. Only thing we can do is smash our way out to the car.”

Thomas nodded his head with a jerk. “How you want to do it?”

“What do you think?”

“Big old wall of fire would do it. Cover our left flank and keep the bad guys off of us. I'll take the right flank and shoot anything that moves.”

Fire magic. A sudden memory of my burned hand flashed through my head so intensely that I felt actual, physical pain in the nerve endings that had been destroyed. I thought about what I would need to do to manage the wall Thomas had suggested, and at the mere *thought* my stomach twisted in revulsion—and worse, with doubt.

For magic to work, you have to believe in it. You have to believe that you can and should perform whatever action you had in mind, or you get zippo. As my hand burned with phantom agony, I realized something I had not admitted, not even to myself.

I wasn't sure I *could* use fire magic again.

Ever.

And if I tried it and failed, it would only make it more difficult to focus my will on it again in the future, each failure building a wall that would only grow more difficult to breach. My belief in my powers might never recover.

I looked down at my maimed hand, and for just a second I actually saw the blackened, cracked flesh, my fingers swollen, the whole of it seeping blood and fluid. The second passed, and there was only my hand in its leather glove again, and I knew that beneath the glove it was scarred in various shades of white and red and pink.

I wasn't ready. God, even to save lives that included my own, I wasn't sure that I would be able to call up fire again. I stood there feeling helpless

and angry and afraid and stupid—and most of all, ashamed.

I shook my head at Thomas and avoided meeting his eyes while I gave him an excuse. “I’m all but done,” I said quietly. “I’ve got to save whatever I have left to block Grevane if he throws power at us directly. I don’t know how much I’m going to be able to do.”

He searched my expression for a second, frowning. Then he shrugged into the jacket, his face grim. He seized the saber in its scabbard and buckled it on with a worn leather belt. He settled it at his hip and picked up the shotgun again. “Guess it’s up to me, then.”

I nodded.

“I’m not sure how hard I’ll be able to push,” he said quietly.

“You handled Black Court vampires pretty well last year,” I said.

“I’d been feeding on Justine every day,” he said. “I had a lot to draw on. Now...” He shook his head. “Now I’m not sure.”

“We aren’t exactly overstaffed here, Thomas.”

He closed his eyes for a second, and then nodded. “Right.”

“Here’s the plan. We get to the Beetle. We drive away.”

“And then what? Where do we go after that?” he asked.

“You don’t see me nitpicking your plans, do you?”

There was a sudden, heavy thump against the steel security door. It rattled in its frame. Bits of dust descended from my ceiling. Then another. And another. Grevane had thrown enough zombies at the wards to wear them out.

Thomas grimaced and looked at my leg. “Can you get up the stairs on your own?”

“I’ll make it,” I said.

Butters came panting up the stepladder from the lab, his face pale. He wore my nylon pack, and I could see Bob the skull making one side of it bulge a little.

“Gun,” I said to Thomas, and he handed me the shotgun. “Right. Here’s how it works. We open the door.” I gestured with the shotgun. “I sweep it clear enough to get Thomas clear of the doorway. Then Thomas goes in front. Butters, I’m going to hand you the shotgun.”

“I don’t like guns,” Butters said.

“You don’t have to like it,” I said. “You just have to carry it. With my leg hurt, I can’t get up the stairs without using my staff.”

The steel door rattled again, the pace of the blows against it increasing.

“Butters,” I snapped. “Butters, you’ve got to take the gun when I hand it to you and follow Thomas. All right?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Once we get up the stairs, Thomas runs interference while I start the car. Butters, you’ll get in the backseat. Thomas gets in and then we leave.”

“Um,” Butters said, “Grevane trashed my car so I couldn’t get away, remember? What if he’s done the same thing to yours?”

I stared at Butters for a second and tried not to show him how much that worried me.

“Butters,” Thomas said quietly, “if we stay here we’re going to die.”

“But if they’ve destroyed the car—” Butters began.

“We’ll die,” Thomas said. “But we don’t have a choice. Whether or not they’ve destroyed it, our only chance of getting out of this alive is to get to the Beetle and hope it runs.”

The little guy got even paler, and then abruptly doubled over and staggered over to the wall beneath one of my high windows. He threw up. He straightened after a minute and leaned back against the wall, shaking. “I hate this,” he whispered, and wiped his mouth. “I hate this. I want to go home. I want to wake up.”

“Get it together, Butters,” I said, my voice tight. “This isn’t helping.”

He let out a wild laugh. “Nothing I can do would *help*, Harry.”

“Butters, you’ve got to calm down.”

“Calm down?” He waved a shaking hand at the door. “They’re going to kill us. Just like Phil. They’re going to kill us and we’re going to die. You, me, Thomas. We’re all going to die!”

I forgot my bad leg for a second, crossed the room to Butters, and seized him by the front of his shirt. I hauled up until his heels lifted off of the floor. “Listen to me,” I snarled. “We are *not* going to die!”

Butters stared up at me, pale, his eyes terrified. “We’re not?”

“No. And do you know why?”

He shook his head.

“Because Thomas is too pretty to die. And because I’m too stubborn to die.” I hauled on the shirt even harder. “And most of all because tomorrow is Oktoberfest, Butters, and polka will never die.”

He blinked.

“Polka will never die!” I shouted at him. “Say it!”

He swallowed. “Polka will never die?”

“Again!”

“P-p-polka will never die,” he stammered.

I shook him a little. “Louder!”

“Polka will never die!” he shrieked.

“We’re going to make it!” I shouted.

“Polka will never die!” Butters screamed.

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this,” Thomas muttered.

I shot my half brother a warning look, released Butters, and said, “Get ready to open the door.”

Then the window just over Butters’s head exploded into shards of broken glass. I felt a hot, stinging sensation on my nose. I stumbled, my wounded leg gave out, and I fell.

Butters shrieked.

I looked up in time to see dead grey fingers clutching the little guy by the hair. They hauled him off of his feet, and two more zombie hands latched onto him and pulled him up through the broken window and out of the apartment. It happened so fast, before I could get my good leg under me, before Thomas could draw his saber.

There was a terrified scream from outside. It ended abruptly.

“Oh, God,” I whispered. “Butters.”

Chapter

Twenty-three

I stood staring up at the broken window in stunned silence for a second.

“Harry,” Thomas said, quiet urgency in his voice, “we need to go.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not leaving him.”

“He’s probably dead already.”

“If he is,” I said. “It won’t protect him from Grevane. I won’t leave him there.”

“Do we have a chance in a fight?”

I shook my head with a grimace. “Help me up.”

He did. I limped over to the window and shouted, “Grevane!”

“Good evening,” Grevane said, the rich, cultured tones of his voice a marked contrast to the dull, steady pounding at my front door. “My compliments to your contractor. That door is really quite sturdy.”

“I like my privacy,” I called back. “Is the mortician alive?”

“That’s a somewhat fluid term in my experience,” Grevane said. “But he is well enough for the time being.”

My knees wobbled a little in relief. Good. If Butters was still all right, I had to keep Grevane talking. Barely five minutes had passed since the attack began. Even if the bad guys had cut the phone lines to the whole boardinghouse, the neighbors would have heard the racket and watched the light show from my wards. Someone was sure to call the authorities. If I could keep Grevane busy long enough, they would arrive, and I was willing to bet money that Grevane would rabbit rather than take chances this close to his goal. “You’ve got him. I want him.”

“As do I,” Grevane said. “I presume he found the information in the smuggler’s corpse.”

“Yes,” I said.

“And I take it you also know.”

“Yes.”

He made a thoughtful sound. He was very near the broken window, though I couldn't see him. "That presents a problem for me," Grevane said. "I have no intention of sharing the *Word* with anyone. I'm afraid it will be necessary for me to silence you."

"I'm the least of your worries," I called back. "Corpsetaker and Li Xian took the information from me this afternoon."

There was a silence, broken only by the slow, steady pounding on my door.

"If that had happened," Grevane said, "you would not be alive to speak of it."

"I got lucky and got away," I said. "Corpsetaker sounded all hot and bothered about this Darkhallow thing you guys have planned."

I heard the angry sound of someone spitting. "If you are telling the truth," Grevane said, "then it profits me nothing to allow you and the mortician to live."

"That's one way to look at it," I said. "But you could just as easily say that it costs you nothing to do it, either. Last night you wanted to make me a deal. You still willing to talk?"

"To what purpose?" he said.

There was the shrieking sound of steel beginning to bend under stress. One corner of the door, up at the top, bent in, letting in cold evening air.

"Hurry," Thomas urged me. "We have to do something fast."

"Give me Butters," I said to Grevane. "I'll give you the information I found."

"You offer me nothing. I have him already," Grevane said. "I can extract the information from him myself."

"You could," I said, "if he knew it. He doesn't."

Grevane snarled something in a language I didn't understand. I heard scuffling shoes, then the sound of a slap and a dazed exclamation from Butters. "Is that true?" Grevane asked him. "Do you have the information about the *Word*?"

"Dunno what it is," Butters mumbled. "There was a jump drive. Numbers. It was a whole bunch of numbers."

"What numbers?" Grevane snarled.

"Don't know. Whole bunch. Can't remember them all. Harry has them."

"Liar," Grevane said. There was the sound of another blow, and Butters cried out.

“I don’t know!” Butters said. “There were too many and I only saw them for a sec—”

Another blow fell, this time with the dull, heavy sound of a closed fist hitting flesh.

I clenched my teeth, rage filling me.

“I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know...” Butters said. It sounded like he was crying.

“Look at me,” Grevane said. “*Look.*”

I closed my eyes and turned my face a little from the window. I could imagine what was happening. Butters, probably on his knees, being held by a pair of zombies, Grevane standing over him in his trench coat, pinching Butters’s chin between his thumb and forefinger. I could imagine him forcing Butters’s eyes up to meet his, to begin a soulgaze. Grevane wanted to see the inside of Butters’s head, in a swift and harsh attempt to assess the truth.

And Butters would be exposed to the corruption of a soul steeped in dark magic and a lifetime of murder.

I heard a high-pitched little sound that rose rapidly, growing louder and louder until it was a wail of terror and madness. There was no dignity in the sound. No self-control. I would never have recognized it as Butters’s voice if I hadn’t known he was out there. But it was him. Butters screamed, and he kept screaming without pausing to take a breath until it wound down to a frozen, gurgling sound and died away.

“Well?” asked another voice, one I did not recognize. It rasped harshly, as if the man speaking had spent a lifetime imbibing cheap Scotch and cheaper cigars.

“He doesn’t know,” Grevane reported quietly, disgust in his voice.

“You’re sure?” said the second voice. I moved a bit to one side and stood up on tiptoe to peer out the window. I could see the second speaker. It was Liver Spots.

“Yes,” Grevane said. “He doesn’t have any strength to him. If he knew, he’d answer.”

“If you kill the mortician, you’ll have to kill me,” I called. “Of course, I’m the only one with the information, other than Corpsetaker. I’m sure that you psychotic necro-wannabes with delusions of godhood are all about sharing with your fellow maniacs.”

There was silence from outside.

“So you should go ahead and take me out,” I said. “Of course, when I lay down my death curse on you, it’s going to make it that much harder for you to beat out Corpsetaker for the Darkhallow, but what’s life without a few challenges to liven things up?” I paused and then said, “Don’t be an idiot, Grevane. If you don’t deal with me, you’ll be cutting your own throat.”

“Is that what you think?” Grevane said. “Perhaps I will simply walk away.”

“No, you won’t,” I said. “Because when Corpsetaker gets her membership to the Mount Olympus Country Club, the first thing she’s going to do is find her nearest rival—you—and rip your pancreas out through your nose.”

The door suddenly bent on a diagonal on the top half, folding it in as if it had been wax paper. The door didn’t quite go down, but I could see dead fingers reaching up through it, trying to rip and tear the weakened section.

“Harry,” Thomas said, his voice tight with apprehension. He drew his saber and went to the door. He hacked at dead fingers that appeared in the breach. They spun through the air and landed on the floor, still bending and wriggling like bisected earthworms.

“Make up your mind, Grevane!” I called. “If this goes any further, I’m going to do everything in my power to kill you. I can’t beat you. We both know that. But you won’t get the information out of me against my will. I’m not a pansy. I can push you hard enough to make you kill me.”

“You would have me believe that you would simply commit suicide?” Grevane asked.

“To take you down with me?” I replied. “Oh, hell, yeah. Count on it.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Liver Spots hissed. “Kill him. He knows he’s finished. He’s desperate.”

Which was true, dammit, but the last thing I needed was for someone to point that out to Grevane. A zombie finger flew past my head, and another bounced off my duster and fell to the floor at my feet, still twitching, a long and yellowed fingernail making an unsettling scratching sound against my boot. The pounding on the door got louder, the whole thing rattling in its frame.

And then, just like that, it stopped. Silence fell over the apartment.

“What are your terms?” Grevane asked.

“You release Butters to me,” I said. “You let us drive off with your sidekick in the car. Once we’re away from here, I give him the numbers and

drop him off. Mutual truce until sunrise.”

“These numbers,” Grevane said. “What do they mean?”

“I don’t have a clue,” I said. “At least not yet. Neither did Corpsetaker.”

“Then what value do they have?” he asked.

“Someone is bound to figure it out. But if you don’t deal with me now, it sure as hell won’t be you.”

There was another long pause, and then Grevane said, “Give me your pledge that you will abide by the terms.”

“Only in return for yours,” I said.

“You have it,” Grevane said. “I swear it by my power.”

“No,” hissed Liver Spots. “Don’t do this.”

I lifted my eyebrows and traded a speculative look with Thomas. Oaths and promises have a certain kind of power all their own—that was one reason they were so highly regarded among the beings of the supernatural community. Whenever someone breaks a promise, some of the energy that went into making it feeds back on the promise breaker. For most people that isn’t a really big deal. Maybe it shows up as a little bad luck, or a cold or a headache or something.

But when a more powerful being or a wizard swears an oath by his own power, the effect is magnified significantly. Too many broken oaths and promises can cripple a wizard’s use of magic, or even destroy the ability entirely. I’ve never seen or heard of a wizard breaking an oath sworn by his own power. It was one of the constants of the preternatural world.

“And by my own power, I swear in return to abide by the terms of the agreement,” I said.

“Harry,” Thomas hissed. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Saving our collective ass, I hope,” I said.

“You don’t actually think he’ll abide by it, do you?” Thomas whispered.

“He will,” I said, and as I said it I realized how confident I was that I was right. “If he wants to survive, he doesn’t have much choice. Grevane’s entire purpose here is gaining power. He won’t jeopardize that now by breaking an oath sworn by his magic.”

“You hope.”

“Even if he decides to screw us, it’s good to keep him talking. The longer we delay, the more likely it is the cops are going to show up. He’ll back off before he faces that.”

“But if the cops don’t show, you’re giving him what he needs to make himself into a freaking nightmare,” Thomas said.

I shook my head. “Might not be a bad thing. I can’t beat him. Corpsetaker, either. Throwing Grevane into the mix is going to make it harder for either of them to concentrate on me.”

Thomas exhaled slowly. “It’s a hell of a risk.”

“Oh, no. A risk,” I said. “Well, we wouldn’t want that, now, would we?”

“No one likes a wiseass, Harry.”

“Butters is counting on me,” I said. “Right now, I’m all he’s got. Do you have any better ideas?”

Thomas grimaced and shook his head.

“Very well,” Grevane called. “How shall we proceed?”

“Pull your zombies back,” I said. As I did, I found a pen and a piece of paper, pulled out the folded piece of paper from my pocket, and made a copy of the numbers. “You go with them. Liver Spots and Butters wait by the car. We all get in and drive off. Once I’m a few blocks away, I’ll drop Liver Spots off with the numbers, unharmed.”

“Agreed,” Grevane said.

We waited for a minute, and then Thomas said, “You hear anything?”

I went to the door and Listened. I could hear someone breathing fast and heavy. Butters. Nothing else. I shook my head and glanced at Thomas.

He came over to the door, sword still in hand. He opened it slowly. The pounding it had taken had warped it, and he had to haul hard on the door to get it unstuck from its frame. Thomas looked out for a moment. There were a couple of still-twitching pieces of zombie on the stairs, but other than that it was empty. He paced slowly up the stairs, looking around him as he went. My staff still lay at a slant on the floor before the door. Thomas nudged it back into the apartment with his foot. “Looks clear.”

I grabbed the shotgun and picked up the staff, holding both awkwardly with my good hand. Mouse fell into place at my side, his hackles still stiff, a low, almost subsonic growl rumbling in his chest every few moments. I hobbled out and up the stairs.

Cold rain fell, light but steady. It was dark. Really dark. No lights were on anywhere in sight. Grevane must have hexed this entire portion of the city power grid when the attack began. I didn’t make use of electricity in my apartment, so it hadn’t been noticeable to me inside.

I got a sick, sinking little feeling. If the lights were all out and the phones were all down, then there might not *be* any cops on the way. By the time the wards had begun to make noise, the phones were already dead. Without lights, there was an excellent chance that no one had seen anything unusual in the dark, and the rain would have muffled sounds considerably. People tended to stay home in comfortable surroundings in such situations—and if someone had seen or heard a crime going on but had no way to notify the authorities about it, it was unlikely that they would do anything but stay at home and keep their heads down.

Zombie scrap parts littered the top of the stairs, the gravel parking lot, and the little lawn. Some of them looked burned, while others seemed to have melted like wax in the summer sun. There were a number of blank, black spots burned into the ground. I couldn't easily count how many zombies had been destroyed, but there had to have been almost as many down as I had seen in the opening moments of the attack.

Grevane had brought more. The rain almost hid them, but I could see the zombies at the limit of my sight, standing in silence, motionless. There were dozens of them. Hell's bells. If we'd made that run for the car, we wouldn't have had a prayer. That big, booming stereo bass rumbled steadily in the background.

Near the Beetle stood Liver Spots. He wore the same coat, the same broad-brimmed hat, the same sour expression on his wrinkled, spotted face. His fine white hair drifted around in every tiny bit of moving air wherever it wasn't wet from the rain. I studied him for a minute. He was a good two or three inches under average height. His features seemed familiar, I was certain, but I couldn't place them. It bothered me—a lot—but this was no time to start entertaining uncertainties.

Butters lay curled in a fetal position on the muddy, wet gravel at Liver Spots's feet. He was breathing hard and fast, and his eyes stared sightlessly forward.

Liver Spots gestured curtly at Butters. In reply I held up the copy of the numbers, then slipped it back in my pocket. "Put him in the car," I told Liver Spots.

"Do it yourself," the man responded, his voice rough, harsh.

Mouse focused on Liver Spots and let out a low, rumbling growl.

I narrowed my eyes at him, but said, "Thomas."

Thomas sheathed the sword and picked up Butters like a small child, his eyes on Liver Spots. He came back to the car, and Mouse and I watched Liver Spots closely the whole while.

“Put him in the back,” I said.

Thomas opened the door and set Butters in the backseat. The little guy leaned his head against the wall and sat all curled up. You could have fit him into a paper grocery sack.

“Mouse,” I said. “In.”

Mouse prowled into the backseat and sat leaning against Butters, serious dark eyes never leaving Liver Spots.

“All right,” I said, passing the shotgun to Thomas. “It works like this. Thomas, you get in the back. Spots, you’re riding shotgun. And when I say riding shotgun, I mean that Thomas is going to shove it up your ass and pull the trigger if you try anything funny.”

He stared at me, eyes flat.

“Do you understand me?” I said.

He nodded, eyes narrowed.

“Say it,” I told him.

Raw hatred dripped from his words. “I understand you.”

“Good,” I said. “Get in.”

Liver Spots walked toward the car. He had to step around me to get to the passenger’s-side door, and when he drew even with me he suddenly stopped and stared at me. There was a puzzled frown on his face. He stayed that way for a second, looking at me from soles to scalp.

“What?” I demanded.

“Where is it?” he said. He sounded as if he was speaking for his own benefit rather than for mine. “Why isn’t it here?”

“I’ve had a long day,” I told him. “Shut your mouth and get in the car.”

For a second I saw his eyes, and at my words they suddenly burned with a manic loathing and scorn. I could see, quite clearly, that Liver Spots wanted me dead. There wasn’t anything rational or calm about it. He wanted to hurt me, and he wanted me to die. It was written in his eyes so strongly that it might as well have been tattooed across his face. I needed no soulgaze, no magic, to recognize murderous hate when I saw it.

And he still looked familiar, though for the life of me—maybe literally—I couldn’t remember from where.

I avoided his eyes in time to avert a soulgaze of my own and said, "Get into the car."

He said, "I'm going to kill you. Perhaps not tonight. But soon. I'm going to see you die."

"You'll have to wait in line, Spots," I told him. "I hear the only tickets left are in general admission."

He narrowed his eyes and began to speak.

Mouse let out a sudden, warning snarl.

I tensed, watching Liver Spots, but he did the same thing I did. He flinched and then looked warily around. When his eyes got to a spot behind me, they widened.

Thomas had the shotgun on him, so I turned from Liver Spots and looked for myself.

From the rain and the dark came a rising cloud of light. It drew nearer with unsettling speed, and after only a few speeding heartbeats I could see what made the light.

They were ghosts.

Surrounded in a sickly greenish glow, a company of Civil War-era cavalry rushed toward us, dozens of them. There should have been a rumble of thundering hooves accompanying them, but there was only a distant and pale sound of a running herd. The riders wore broad-brimmed Union hats and jackets that looked black rather than blue in the sickly light, and bore pistols and sabers in their semitransparent hands. One of the lead riders lifted a trumpet to his lips as he rode, and ghostly strains of the cavalry charge drifted through the night air.

Behind them, mounted on phantom horses that looked as if they'd been drowned, were Li Xian and the Corpsetaker. The ghoul wore a tom-tom drum at his side, held in place by a heavy leather belt draped sideways from one shoulder. While he rode, he beat out a staccato military rhythm on it with one hand, and it sounded somehow primitive and wild. The Corpsetaker had changed into clothes made of heavy biker leather, complete with a chain gauntlet and spiked fighting bracers on her forearms. She wore a curved sword on her belt, a heavy tulwar that looked ugly and murderous. As she came closer, she sent her ghostly steed racing to the head of the troop and drew her blade. She spun it over her head, laughing in wild abandon, and bore straight down upon us.

"Treachery!" howled Liver Spots. "We are betrayed!"

Grevane appeared in the mist from among the motionless zombies. He stared at the oncoming Corpsetaker and let out a howl of rage. He raised his hands, and every zombie in sight abruptly stiffened and then broke into a charge.

“Kill them!” Grevane howled. Actual, literal foam formed at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes burned beneath the brim of the fedora. “Kill them all!”

Liver Spots whirled toward me, producing a tiny pistol from somewhere in his sleeve, a derringer. From the size of it, it couldn't have held a very heavy bullet, but he wouldn't need it to be heavy to kill me at this range. I dove back and to my right, trying to get the car between Liver Spots and me. There was a startling popping sound and a flash of light. I hit the muddy gravel hard. Liver Spots came around the car after me, evidently determined to use the second bullet in the pistol.

Thomas didn't have time to get out of the car. There was a sudden explosion and my windshield blew outward in a cloud of shot and shattered glass. Both tore into Liver Spots, and he stumbled and went down.

I lifted my staff in my good hand and brought it down hard on his wrist. There was a brittle, snapping sound, and the little gun flew from his grasp.

He went into an utter rage.

Before I knew what was happening, Liver Spots had thrown himself on top of me and had both of his hands fastened on my throat. I felt him shut off my airway, and struggled against him. It didn't do much good. The old man seemed filled with maddened strength.

“It's mine!” he screamed at me. He shook me on each word, slamming my head back against the gravel in precise, separate detonations of pain and bright stars in my vision. “Give it to me! Mine!”

A zombie landed on the gravel near us in a crouch and turned toward me. Its dead eyes regarded me without passion or thought as it formed a fist and drove it at my head.

Before it could land, a flickering saber from one of the spectral cavalry whispered through the night and the rain and struck the zombie on the neck. The corpse's head flew from its shoulders, dribbling a line of sludgy black ichor, and landed with its empty eyes staring into mine.

Thomas screamed, “Down!”

I stopped struggling to get up, and tried to press myself as flat to the ground as I could.

The driver's-side door to the Beetle flew open, swept just over the end of my nose, and struck Liver Spots in the face. He flew back from me.

Thomas leaned out of the driver's side to grab at me, but a second ghostly horseman swept by, sword hissing. Thomas ducked in time to save his neck, but took part of the slash across his temple and ear and scalp, and that side of his head and shoulder was almost immediately covered in a sheet of blood a few shades too pale to be human.

Thomas recovered his balance and pulled me grimly into the car. I fumbled with the keys and shoved them into place. I twisted the key in desperate haste, mashing on the gas as I did. The engine turned over once and then stalled.

"Dammit!" Thomas cried in frustration. A streak of faint green light appeared in the air over the car's hood. A second later another went by, this time ending at the hood. There was a startling sound of impact and the frame of the car rattled. A bullet hole appeared in the hood.

I tried the car again and this time coaxed the old VW to life.

"Hail the mighty Beetle!" I crowed, and slapped the car into reverse. The wheels spun up gravel and mud, and I shot back straight into a crowd of zombies, slamming into them and sending them flying.

I whipped the car's hood toward the street and shifted into drive. As I did, I got a look at the Corpsetaker bearing down on Grevane, tulwar raised. From somewhere in his coat, Grevane produced a length of chain, and as the sword swept toward him he held up the chain, his arms outstretched, and caught the blow on the links between them, sliding the deadly blade away from him.

Corpsetaker howled in fury and whirled the phantom mount around to charge him again, almost absently striking the head from a zombie as she passed it.

I flattened the gas pedal, and the Beetle lurched forward—straight toward a trio of ghostly cavalry troops. They bore down on us, not wavering.

"I hate playing chicken," I muttered, and shifted into second.

Just before I would have hit them, the cavalry leapt, translucent horses and riders rising effortlessly into the air, over the car, to land on the ground behind me. I didn't give them a chance to whirl and try it again. I bounced the Beetle out onto the street, turned left, and charged away at flank speed. I got a few blocks away, then slowed enough to roll down the window.

There were no screams or shrieks of battle. The rain muffled the sound, and in the heavy darkness I couldn't see anything going on behind me. I could dimly hear the whumping bass drum that kept Grevane's zombies going, still somewhere out there in the background. Beyond that, very quiet but getting nearer, I heard sirens.

"Everyone all right?" I asked.

"I'll make it," Thomas said. He had stripped out of his jacket and shirt, and had the latter pressed to the side of his bleeding head.

"Mouse?" I asked.

There was a wet, snuffling sound by my ear, and Mouse licked my cheek.

"Good," I said. "Butters?"

There was silence.

Thomas looked at the backseat, frowning.

"Butters?" I repeated. "Heya, man. Earth to Butters."

Silence.

"Butters?" I asked.

There was a long pause. Then a slow inhalation. Then he said, in a very weak voice, "Polka will never die."

I felt my mouth stretch into a fierce grin. "Damn right it won't," I said.

"True." Thomas sighed. "Where are we going?"

"We can't go back there," I said. "And with the wards torn down, it wouldn't do us too much good anyway."

"Where, then?" Thomas asked.

I stopped at a stop sign and patted at my pockets for a moment. I found one of the two things I was looking for.

Thomas frowned at me. "Harry? What's wrong?"

"The copy of the numbers I made for Grevane," I said. "It's gone. Liver Spots must have grabbed it from me when we were tussling."

"Damn," Thomas said.

I found the key to Murphy's house in another pocket. "Okay. I've got a place we can hole up for a while, until we can figure out our next move. How bad is the cut?"

"Bleeder," Thomas said. "Looks worse than it is."

"Keep pressure on it," I said.

"Thank you, yes," Thomas said, though he sounded more amused than annoyed.

I got the Beetle moving again, frowning out the windows. “Hey,” I said. “Do you guys notice something?”

Thomas peered around for a moment. “Not really. Too dark.”

Butters drew in a sharp breath. His voice still unsteady, he said, “That’s right. It’s too dark.” He pointed out one window. “That’s where the skyline should be.”

Thomas stared out. “It’s gone dark.”

“Lights are out,” I said quietly. “Do you see any anywhere?”

Thomas looked around for a moment, then reported, “Looks like a fire off that way. Some headlights. Some police lights. The rest are...” He shook his head.

“What happened?” Butters whispered.

“So that’s what Mab meant. They did this,” I said. “The heirs of Kemmler.”

“But why?” Thomas asked.

“They think that one of them is going to become a god tomorrow night. They’re creating fear. Chaos. Helplessness.”

“Why?”

“They’re preparing the way.”

Thomas didn’t say anything. None of us did.

I can’t speak for the others, but I was afraid.

The Beetle’s tires whispered over the streets as I drove through the cold, lightless murk that had fallen over Chicago like a funeral shroud.

Chapter

Twenty-four

Murphy's house had belonged to her grandmother. It was a dinky little place, and resided in a neighborhood built before Edison's lights went into vogue, and while some areas like that became ragged and run-down, this particular street looked more like some kind of historical real estate preserve, with well-kept lawns, trimmed trees, and tidy paint jobs on all the homes.

I pulled the Beetle into the driveway, hesitated for half a second, and then continued up onto the lawn and around to the rear of the house, parking beside a little outbuilding that looked like a tool-shed as envisioned by the Gingerbread Man. I killed the engine, and sat for a moment listening to the car make those just-stopped clicking sounds. Without the headlights, it was very dark. My leg hurt like hell. It seemed like a really great idea to close my eyes and get some rest.

Instead I fumbled around until I found the cardboard box I keep in the car. Next to a couple of holy-water balloons, an old pair of socks, and a heavy old potato, I found a crinkling plastic package. I tore it open, bent the plastic tube inside sharply, and shook it up. The two chemical liquids inside mixed, and the glow stick began to shine with gold-green light.

I got out of the car and hauled my tired ass toward the back door. Thomas and Mouse and Butters followed me. I unlocked the door with Murphy's key, and led everyone inside.

Murphy's place was...dare I say it, really cute. The furniture was old Victorian, worn but well cared for. There were a lot of doilies in its decorating scheme, and all in all it was a very girly sort of place. When Murphy's grandmother passed away and Murphy moved in, she hadn't changed it much. The sole concession to the presence of Chicago's toughest little detective was a simple wooden stand on the fireplace mantel, which held a pair of curved Japanese swords one over the other.

I went from the living room into the kitchen, and opened the drawer where Murphy kept her matches. I lit a couple of candles, then used them to find a pair of old glass kerosene lamps and get them going.

Thomas came in while I was doing that, grabbed the glow stick, and held it in one hand while he opened the refrigerator and rummaged inside.

“Hey,” I said. “That’s not your fridge.”

“Murphy would share, wouldn’t she?” Thomas asked.

“That isn’t the point,” I said. “It’s not yours.”

“The power’s out,” Thomas replied, shoulder deep in the fridge. “This stuff is going to spoil anyway. All right, pizza. And beer.”

I stared at him for a second. Then I said, “Check the freezer, too. Murphy likes ice cream.”

“Right,” he said. He glanced up at me and said, “Harry, go sit down. I’ll bring you something.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“No, you aren’t. Your leg is bleeding again.”

I blinked at him and looked down. The white bandages had soaked through with fresh, dark red. The bandage wasn’t saturated yet, but the stain had covered most of the white. “Damn. That’s inconvenient.”

Butters appeared in the kitchen doorway, ghostly somehow in his pale blue scrubs. His hair was a mess, all muddy and mussed. His glasses were gone, and he had his eyes squinted up as he looked at us. He had a cut on his lower lip that had closed into a black scab, and he had one hell of a shiner forming over his left cheekbone, presumably where Grevane had struck him.

“Let me wash up,” Butters said. “Then I’ll see to it. You’ll want to make sure that stays clean, Harry.”

“Go sit down,” Thomas said. “Butters, are you hungry?”

“Yes,” Butters said. “Is there a bathroom?”

“Hall, first one on the left,” I said. “I think Murphy keeps a firstaid kit under the sink.”

Butters moved silently over to one of the candles, took it, and left just as quietly.

“Well,” I said. “At least he’s clear now.”

“Maybe so,” Thomas said. He was moving things from the fridge to the kitchen counter. “They know he doesn’t know anything. But you risked your life to protect his. That might start them to thinking.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You were willing to die to protect him. You think Grevane understands enough about friendship to comprehend why you did it?”

I grimaced. “Probably not.”

“So they might start wondering what made him so valuable to you. Wondering what you know that they don’t.” He rummaged in a cupboard and found some bread, some crackers. “Maybe it won’t amount to anything. But it might. He should be careful.”

I nodded agreement. “You can keep an eye on him.”

Thomas glanced at me. “You think you’re going out now?”

“Soon as I eat something,” I said.

“Don’t be stupid,” Thomas said. “Your leg is hurt. You can barely walk straight. Eat. Get some sleep.”

“There’s no time,” I said.

He glared at me for a second, then pressed his mouth into a line and said, “Let’s talk about it after we eat something. Everyone’s angry when they’re hungry. Makes for bad decisions.”

“Probably smart,” I said.

“Take the coat off. Go sit down. Let Butters look at your leg.”

“It just needs a new bandage,” I said. “I can do that myself.”

“You’re missing my point, dummy,” Thomas said. “A friend would let Butters deal with a problem that he’s capable of handling. He’s had plenty of the other kind tonight.”

I glared at Thomas, shrugged out of the duster, and limped for the living room. “It’s easier to deal with you when you’re a simple, selfish asshole.”

“I forget how limited you are, brain-wise,” Thomas said. “I’ll be more careful.”

I settled cautiously down onto Murphy’s old couch. It creaked as I did. Murphy isn’t large, and I doubt that her grandma was, either. I’m not exactly layered in muscle, but as tall as I am, no one ever mistakes me for a lightweight. I shoved some doilies off the coffee table so that they wouldn’t get blood all over them, and propped my throbbing leg up on the table. It took a little bit of the pressure off of the injury, which didn’t mean it stopped hurting. It just hurt a little bit less aggressively. Whatever; anything was a relief.

I sat like that until Butters emerged from the hall that went back to the bathroom and the house’s two bedrooms. He had Murphy’s medical kit in

hand. I remembered one of those little standard firstaid kits that would fit into the glove box of a car. Murphy had evidently been planning ahead. She'd replaced the little medical kit with one the size of a contractor's toolbox.

"I don't think I'm quite that hurt," I told Butters.

"Better to have it and not need it," he replied quietly. He set down the kerosene lamp and the toolbox. He rummaged in the box, came out with a pair of safety scissors, and set about stripping the bandage away, his motions smooth and confident. Once he had the bandage clear, he peered at the injury, moved the lamp to get a better look, and winced. "This is a mess. You've popped the two center sutures." He glanced up at me apologetically. "I'll have to replace them, or the others are going to tear out one at a time."

I swallowed. I did not want to do sutures without anesthetics. Hadn't I already experienced enough pain for one day?

"Do it," I told him.

He nodded and set about cleaning the bloodied skin around the injury. He wiped his hands down with a couple of sterilizing wipes, and snapped on some rubber gloves. "There's a topical here. I'll use it, but it's not much stronger than that stuff you get for a toothache."

"Just get it over with," I said.

He nodded, produced a curved needle and surgical thread, adjusted the lamp again, and set to work. He was fairly quick about it. I did my best to hold still. When he was finished, my throat felt raw and rough. I hadn't actually done any yelling, but only by strangling any screams before they came out.

I lay there kind of limply while Butters re-covered the wound. "You started on the antibiotics, right?" he asked.

"Not yet," I said.

He shook his head. "You should take them right away. I don't want to think about what might have gotten into the wound back at your apartment." He swallowed and went a little pale. "I mean, my God."

"That's the worst part about the walking dead," I said. "The stains."

He smiled at me, or at least he tried to. "Harry," he said. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I..." He shook his head. "I was useless back there. Worse than useless. You could have been hurt."

Thomas appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, pale and silent. He arched his brow, somehow managing to say, "I told you so," without actually opening his mouth.

I glared back at him, in an effort to convey several uncharitable things. He smiled a little and faded back into the kitchen. Butters missed the whole thing.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "You ever had anything like this happen before?"

"Like zombies and ghosts and necromancers?" Butters asked.

"Like life-threatening and dangerous," I said.

"Oh." He was quiet for a minute. "No. I tried to go into the army, but I couldn't make it through boot. Wound up in the hospital. Same thing when I tried to be a policeman. The spirit was willing, but Butters was weak."

"Some people just aren't cut out for that kind of thing," I told him. "That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Sure, it isn't," he said, but he wasn't agreeing with me.

"You can do a lot that I can't," I told him. I nodded at my leg.

"But this stuff is...hell, it's *simple*," Butters said. "I mean, the words get a little bit long. But all in all, it isn't that complicated."

"Listen to yourself, Butters," I told him. "You're sitting there with a straight face saying that medicine and medical forensics is simple, except for the long words. Do you have any clue what it's like to *not* be as intelligent as you?"

He shook his head impatiently. "I'm not some kind of genius." He frowned. "Okay, well, technically I have a genius IQ, but that isn't the point. A lot of people do. The point is that I've spent most of my adult life doing this. That's why I can do it well."

"And the point is," I told him, "that I've spent most of my adult life doing zombies and ghosts and other things trying to kill me. That's why I can do it well. We've got different specialties. That's all. So don't beat yourself up for not being better at my job than I am."

He started cleaning up the medical detritus, throwing things away and stripping out of the gloves. "Thanks, Harry. But it's more than that. I just... I couldn't *think*. When those things grabbed me. When he was hitting me. I knew I should have been doing something, planning something, but my brain wouldn't work." He slammed something down into the trash can with more force than necessary. "I was too afraid."

I was too tired to move, and for the first time I started to notice how cold it was without my coat. I folded my arms and tried not to shiver. I watched Butters quietly for a moment and said, "It gets easier."

"What does?"

"Living with the fear."

"It goes away?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Never. Gets worse, in some ways. But once you face it down, you learn to accommodate it. Even work with it, sometimes."

"I don't understand," he whispered.

"Fear can't hurt you," I said. "It can't kill you."

"Well, technically—"

"Butters," I said. "Don't give me statistics on heart failure. Fear is a part of life. It's a warning mechanism. That's all. It tells you when there's danger around. Its job is to help you survive. Not cripple you into being unable to do it."

"I have empirical evidence to the contrary," he said, bitter humor in his voice.

"That's because you've never thought about it before," I said. "You've reacted to the fear, but you haven't ever faced it and put it into the right perspective. You have to make up your mind to overcome it."

He was quiet for a second. "Just like that?" he said. "Just make up my mind and poof, it's different?"

"No. But it's the first step," I said. "After that, you find other steps to take. Think about it for a while. Maybe you'll never need it again. But at least you'll be ready if it happens sometime down the line."

He closed up the medical toolbox. "You mean it's over?"

"For you," I said. "Grevane knows that you don't have anything he wants. He's got no reason to look for you. Hell, for that matter, I think you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time when he *did* come looking. Anyone with access to the corpse and the ability to find where Bony Tony had hidden the jump drive would have been good enough for Grevane. Your part in this is over."

Butters closed his eyes for a second. "Oh, thank God." He blinked up at me. "Sorry. I mean, it isn't that I don't like being around you, but..."

I smiled a little. "I understand. I'm glad you're all right." I glanced down at my leg. "Looks nice and neat again. Thanks, Butters. You're a good friend."

He frowned up at me. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

I thought I saw him straighten his shoulders a little. "Okay."

Thomas appeared in the door of the kitchen. "Gas stove. Hot food and tea. Sugar?"

"Tons," I said.

"Not for me," Butters said.

Thomas nodded, and slipped back into the kitchen.

"So how come if I'm your friend, you don't tell me important things?" Butters said.

"Like what?" I asked him.

Butters gestured at the kitchen. "Well. That, you know...you're gay."

I blinked at him.

"I mean, don't get me wrong. It's the twenty-first century. You can live your life how you want, and it doesn't make you any less cool."

"Butters—" I began.

"And hey, look at the guy. I mean, I'm not even gay, and I think he looks great. Who could blame you?"

Choking sounds came from the kitchen.

"Oh, shut up!" I snarled at Thomas.

He kept on making choking sounds that bubbled with laughter.

"You should have just said something," Butters said. "Don't feel like you have to hide anything, Harry. I won't judge. I owe you too much for that."

"I'm not gay," I stated.

Butters nodded at me, compassion and empathy all over his face. "Oh. Okay, sure."

"I'm not!"

Butters raised his hands. "It wasn't my place to intrude," he said. "Later, some other time, maybe. None of my business."

"Oh, for crying out loud," I muttered.

Thomas came out bearing plates of steaming, reheated pizza, some roast beef sandwiches, and crackers with slices of cheese partly melted on them. He put them down and came back with bottles of cold beer and cups of hot tea. He poured my tea for me, then leaned over and gave me a chaste kiss on the hair. "There you go."

Butters pretended not to notice.

I punched Thomas awkwardly in the ribs. "Give me the damned pizza before I kill you."

Thomas sighed and confided to Butters, "He gets like this sometimes."

I grabbed the pizza from Thomas, and leaned over enough to snag a beer. Mouse, who had been lying by the front windows staring out at the darkness, got up and came nosing over toward the food.

"Oh, here," Thomas said. "The antibiotics." He put a couple of pills down on my plate.

I growled wordlessly at him, washed them down with a swallow of beer, and fell to eating pizza and roast beef sandwiches and crackers with cheese. I shared a bit with Mouse, every third or fourth bite, until Thomas snagged the last roast beef sandwich and put it on the floor for Mouse to have to himself.

I finished the beer and settled back with the tea afterward. I hadn't realized how hungry I was until I'd started eating. The tea was sweet and just barely cool enough to drink. In the wake of the meal and the evening's excitement, I finally started to feel warm and human again. The pain in my leg faded until it was barely noticeable.

I blinked heavily down at my bandaged leg and said, "Hey."

"Hmmm?" Thomas asked.

"You bastard. Those weren't antibiotics."

"No, they weren't," Thomas said, and without a trace of shame. "They were the painkillers. You idiot. You need to rest before you kill yourself."

"Bastard," I said again. The couch really was very comfortable. I finished my tea over the next several moments. "Maybe you have a point."

"Of course I do," Thomas said. "Oh, here's the antibiotic, by the way." He passed me a single horse pill. I swallowed it with the last of my tea. Thomas set the teacup aside and then helped me to my feet. "Come on. Get a few hours of rest. Then you can figure out your next move."

I grunted. Thomas helped me into one of the darkened bedrooms, and I sank onto a soft bed, too tired to be angry. Too tired to be awake. I vaguely remember stripping out of my shirt and shoes before pulling soft and heavy covers over me. Then there was blessed darkness, warmth, and quiet.

The last thing I thought, before I dropped off to sleep, was that the covers smelled faintly of soap and sunlight and strawberries.

They smelled like Murphy.

Chapter

Twenty-five

In the odd dream, I had a hot tub.

I lay back in it, luxuriating, the water churning to a controlled froth by jets that hit it and me from dozens of angles. The water was at that perfect temperature, a little short of scalding my skin, and the heat of it sank into muscle and bone, warming me deliciously and washing away aches and pains.

It was an odd dream, because I have never in my life been in a hot tub.

I opened my eyes and looked slowly around me. The hot tub was set in the floor of what looked like a natural cave. Low, reddish light came from what looked like some kind of moss growing on the stalactites overhead.

That was odd, because I'd never been in a cave like this, either.

"Hello?" I called. My voice bounced around the empty cavern.

I heard the sound of movement, and a woman stepped into sight from behind a rock formation. She was a little taller than average and had hair that fell in a sheet of golden silk to her shoulders. She was dressed in a silken tunic belted with soft rope, both pure white. The outfit neither displayed any impropriety nor allowed anyone looking to ignore the beauty of the body it clothed. Her eyes were of a deep, deep blue, like a sunny October sky, and her skin glowed with wholesome appeal. She was, quite simply, a stunning creature.

"Hello. I thought it was time we had a talk," she said. "You've had a hard day. I thought pleasant surroundings might suit you."

I eyed her for a moment. I was naked, which was good. The surface of the pool had enough in the way of bubbles and froth to be opaque, which was also good. It saved me the embarrassment of my response to her. "Who are you?"

She lifted golden brows in a faint smile, and seated herself beside the hot tub, on the floor of the cave, her legs together and to one side, her hands folded on her lap. "Have you not reasoned it yourself by now?"

I stared at her for a long minute and then said, quietly, "Lasciel."

The woman bowed her head, smiling in acknowledgment. "Indeed."

"You can't be here," I said. "I sealed you into the floor under my lab. I imprisoned you."

"Indeed you did," the woman said. "What you see here is not my true self, as such. Think of me as a reflection of the true Lasciel who resides within your mind."

"As a what?"

"When you chose to touch the coin, you accepted this form of my awareness within you," Lasciel said. "I am an imprint. A copy."

I swallowed. "You live in my head. And you can talk to me?"

"I can now," Lasciel said. "Now that you have chosen to employ what I have offered you."

I took in a deep breath. "Hellfire. I used Hellfire today to empower my magic."

"You made the conscious choice to do so," she said. "And as a result, I can now appear to your conscious mind." She smiled. "Actually, I've been looking forward to meeting you. You are a great deal more interesting than most I have been given to."

"You, uh," I said, "you don't look much like a demon."

"Keep in mind, please, that I was not always a resident of Hell. I relocated there." She looked at herself. "Shall I add the wings? A harp? A golden halo?"

"Why are you asking me?" I asked.

"Because I am something of a guest," she said. "It costs me nothing to take on an appearance that pleases my host."

"Uh-huh," I said. "If you're my guest, then get out."

She laughed, and there was nothing alluring or musical about it. It was just laughter, warm and genuine. "That isn't possible, I'm afraid. By taking the coin, you invited me in. You cannot simply will me away."

"Fine," I said. "This is a dream. I'll wake up. See ya."

I made the simple effort of will required to wake myself from a dream.

And nothing happened.

"Maybe it's the painkillers," Lasciel suggested. "And you were, after all, very tired. It looks like we'll be spending a little time together."

I glared for a while. I don't usually take the time to glower at things in dreams, either. "What do you want?" I said.

“To make you an offer,” she said.

“The answer is no,” I said. “We now return me to my regularly scheduled dream.”

She pursed her lips, then smiled again. “I think you want to hear me out,” she said. “This is your dream, after all. If you truly wished me to begone, don’t you think you could make it so?”

“Maybe it’s the hot tub,” I suggested.

“I saw that you’d never experienced one,” Lasciel said. She dipped a toe into the pool and smiled. “I have, often. Do you like it?”

“It’s okay,” I said, and tried to look like I didn’t think it was just about the nicest thing ever for an aching and tired body. “You know what I know, eh?”

“I exist within your mind,” she said. “I see what you see. Feel what you feel. I learn what you learn—and quite a bit more besides.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I said.

“That I can do you a great deal of good,” she said. “I have the knowledge and memory of two thousand years of life upon this world, and infinite thousands outside it. I know many things that could be of use to you. I can advise you. Teach you secrets of your craft never known to mortalkind. Show you sights no human has ever seen. Share with you memory and image beyond anything you could imagine.”

“By any chance does all of this knowledge and power and good advice come for only three easy installments of nineteen ninety-five plus shipping and handling?”

The fallen angel arched a golden brow at me.

“Or maybe it comes with a bonus set of knives tough enough to saw through a nail, yet still cut tomatoes like *this*.”

She regarded me steadily and said, “You aren’t nearly as funny as you think you are.”

“I had to come up with some kind of response to your offer to corrupt and enslave me. Bad jokes seemed perfectly appropriate, because I can only assume that you’ve got to be kidding.”

Lasciel pursed her lips, a thoughtful expression. It made me start thinking about how soft her mouth looked, for example. “Is that what you think I want? A slave?”

“I got a look at how you guys work,” I said.

“You’re referring to Ursiel’s previous host, yes?”

“Yes. He was insane. Broken. I’m not eager to give it a whirl for myself.”

Lasciel rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. Ursiel is a mindless thug. He doesn’t care what happens to the holder of his coin, provided he gets to taste blood as often as possible. I don’t operate that way.”

“Sure you don’t.”

She shrugged. “Your derision will not unmake the truth. Some of my kindred prefer domination in their relationships with mortals. The wiser among us, though, find a mutual partnership to be much more practical, and beneficial for both parties. You saw something of how Nicodemus functions with Anduriel, did you not?”

“No offense, but I would shove a sharpened length of rebar into one ear and out the other if I thought I was going to turn into anything like Nicodemus.”

Her expression registered surprise. “Why?”

“Because he’s a monster,” I said.

Lasciel shook her head. “Perhaps from your perspective. But you know very little of him and his goals.”

“I know he did his damndest, literally, to kill me and two of my friends, and God knows how many innocent people with that plague. And he *did* kill another friend.”

“What is your point?” Lasciel asked. She seemed genuinely confused.

“The point is that he crossed the line, and I’m never going to play on his team. He doesn’t get understanding or sympathy anymore. Not from me. He’s got payback coming.”

“You wish to destroy him?”

“In a perfect world he would vanish off the face of the earth and I would never hear of him again,” I said. “But I’ll take whatever I can get.”

She absorbed that for a few moments, and then nodded slowly. “Very well,” she said. “I will depart. But let me leave you with a thought?”

“As long as you leave.”

She smiled, rising. “I understand your refusal to allow another to control your life. It’s a poisonous, repugnant notion to think of someone who would dictate your every move, impose upon you a code of behavior you could not accept, and refuse to allow you choice, expression, and the pursuit of your own heart’s purpose.”

“Pretty much,” I said.

The fallen angel smiled. “Then believe me when I say that I know *precisely* how you feel. All of the Fallen do.”

A little cold spot formed in the pit of my stomach, despite the hot tub. I shifted uncomfortably in the water.

“We have that in common, wizard,” Lasciel said. “You’ve no reason to believe me, but consider for a moment the possibility that I am sincere in my offer. I could do a great deal to help you—and you could continue to live your life on your own terms, and in accordance with your own values. I could help you be ten times the force for good that you already are.”

“With that power, I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly,” I said.

“Gandalf to Frodo,” the demon said, smiling. “But I am not sure the metaphor is applicable. You needn’t actually take up the coin, if it did not suit you to do so. The aid I can offer you in this shadow form is far more limited than if you took up the coin, but it is not inconsiderable.”

“Ring, coin, whatever. The physical object is only a symbol in any case—a symbol for power.”

“I merely offer you the benefit of my knowledge and experience,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “Power. I’ve already got more than I’m comfortable with.”

“Which is the foremost reason that you, of all people, are capable of wielding it responsibly.”

“Maybe I am,” I said. “Maybe not. I know how it works, Lasciel. The first taste is free. The price goes up down the line.”

She watched me with luminous blue eyes.

“See, if I start leaning on you now, how long is it going to be before I decide that I need more of your help? How long before I start digging up the concrete in my lab because I think I need your coin in order to survive?”

“And?” she asked quietly. “If you *do* need it to survive?”

I sat in the swirling hot waters and sighed. Then I closed my eyes, made an effort of will, and reshaped the dream we stood within, so that the hot tub was gone and I stood dressed and facing her on a solid cavern floor. “If it comes to that, I hope I die with a little bit of style. Because I’m not going to sign on with Downbelow. Not even in hell’s Foreign Legion.”

“Fascinating,” Lasciel said. She smiled at me.

My God, it was beautiful. It wasn't merely physical loveliness or the appearance of warmth. It was the whole sense of her, the vibrant, glowing *life* of the being before me, a life with energy enough to ignite a star. Seeing her smile was like watching the sun rise on the very first morning, like feeling the caress of the first breeze of the first spring. It made me want to laugh and run and spin around in it, like the sunny days of a childhood I could only dimly remember.

But I held myself back. Beauty can be dangerous, and fire, though lovely, can burn and kill when not treated with respect. I faced the fallen angel cautiously, my posture unthreatening but unbowed. I faced her beauty and felt the radiant warmth of her presence and held myself from reaching out for it.

"I'm not fascinating," I said. "I am what I am. It isn't perfect, but it's mine. I'm not making deals with you."

Lasciel nodded, her expression thoughtful. "You've been burned in bargains past, and you have no desire to repeat the experience. You are wary of dealing with me and those like me—and for good reason. I don't think I would have had any lasting respect for you, had you accepted my offer at face value—even though it is genuine."

"Gee. I would have felt crushed by your lack of respect."

She laughed with a lot of belly in it, genuinely pleased. "I admire your will. Your defiance. As something of a defiant being myself, I think we might forge a strong partnership, given time to develop it."

"That won't happen," I said. "I want you to leave."

"Get thee behind me?" she asked.

"Something like that."

She bowed her head. "As you wish, my host. I request that you merely consider my offer. Should you wish to converse with me again, you have only to call my name."

"I won't," I said.

"As it pleases you," she said.

Then she was gone, and the dream cavern was darker and lonelier for her absence. I relaxed and went back to my sleep and my solitary dreams.

I was too tired to remember if any of them had a hot tub.

Chapter

Twenty-six

I slept hard and didn't wake up until well after sunrise. I heard voices, and after a minute I identified the sharp, crackling edges of tone that told me they were coming out of a radio. I got up and gave myself a washcloth bath at the bathroom sink. It wasn't as nice as a hot tub, and not even as nice as a shower, but I didn't feel like sticking my aching leg into a trash bag and taping it shut so that I could get one without getting my bandages wet.

I couldn't find my clothes anywhere, so I wandered out into the house in my bare feet and mangled pants. The hospital staff had cut the pant leg mostly off of my wounded leg, and the edges were rough and uneven. I passed a mirror in the hallway of the house and stopped to examine myself.

I looked like a joke. A bad joke.

"...mysterious power outage continues," the radio announcer was saying. "In fact, it's difficult to estimate how long we'll be able to stay on the air, or even how many people are actually receiving this broadcast. Gasoline-powered generators have been encountering odd trouble throughout the city, batteries seem unreliable, and other gasoline-powered engines, including those of vehicles, are behaving unpredictably. The telephone lines have been having all kinds of problems, and cell phones seem to be all but useless. O'Hare is completely shut down, and as you can imagine, it's playing havoc with airline traffic throughout the nation."

Thomas was standing in the kitchen, at the gas stove. He was making pancakes and listening to an old battery-powered radio sitting on Murphy's counter. He nodded to me, put a finger against his lips, and flicked a glance at the radio. I nodded, folded my arms, and leaned against the doorway to listen to the announcer continue.

"National authorities have declined to comment on the matter, though the mayor's office has given a statement blaming the problems on unusual sunspot activity."

Thomas snorted.

The radio prattled on. “That answer doesn’t seem to hold much water, given that in cities as near as the south side of Joliet all systems are behaving normally. Other sources have suggested everything from an elaborate Halloween hoax to the detonation of some kind of electromagnetic pulse device, which has disrupted the city’s electrical utilities. A press conference has reportedly been scheduled for later this evening. We’ll be on the air all through the current crisis, giving you up-to-date information as quickly as we...”

The announcer’s voice broke up into wild static and sound. Thomas reached over and flicked the radio off. “Had it on for twenty minutes,” he said. “Got a clear signal for maybe five of them.”

I grunted.

“Do you know what’s happened?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Where’s Butters?”

Thomas tilted his head toward the back door. “Walking Mouse.”

I took a seat at the little kitchen table, getting my weight off of my injured leg. “Today’s going to be pretty intense,” I said.

Thomas flipped a pancake. “Because of the heirs of Kemmler?”

“Yeah,” I said. “If Mab is right about what they’re trying to do, someone has to stop them before tonight.”

“Why?”

“Because after that I’m not sure anyone will be *able* to stop them,” I said.

My brother nodded. “Think you can take them?”

“They’re fighting among themselves,” I said. “They’re all going to be more worried about their fellow necromancers than they are about me.”

“Uh-huh,” Thomas said. “But do you think you can take them?”

“No.”

“Then what you’re talking about isn’t heroism, man. It’s suicide.”

I shook my head. “I don’t need to kill them. I only need to stop them. If I play this right, I won’t need to fight anybody.”

Thomas flipped another pancake. The cooked side was a uniform shade of perfect light brown. “How are you going to manage that?”

“They need two things to make this godhood thing go,” I said. “The Erlking and the knowledge in *The Word of Kemmler*. If I can deny them either, the whole shebang is canceled.”

“You figure out those numbers yet?” Thomas asked.

“No.”

“So...what? You going to put a hit on the Erlking to keep him from showing up?”

I shook my head. “Mab gave me the impression that the Erlking was in the same weight class as her.”

“She tough?” Thomas asked.

“Beyond the pale,” I said.

“So you can’t kill the Erlking. What, then?”

“I summon him myself.”

He arched an eyebrow.

“Look, no matter how mighty he is, he can’t be in two places at once. If I call him up and keep him busy, then the heirs can’t summon him to their ceremony.”

He nodded. “How are you going to call him?”

“The book,” I said. “It’s almost got to be one of those poems or songs. One of them must be an incantation to attract the Erlking’s attention.”

“But you don’t have the book,” Thomas said.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s the kink I haven’t worked out yet.”

Thomas nodded, scraping the last of the batter out of a bowl and onto the griddle. “Even if you do figure out how to call the Erlking, it sounds like he might be kinda dangerous.”

“Probably. But impersonal. That means not as dangerous as one of the heirs going godly and showing up to give me some payback for annoying them.” I shrugged. “And the only one in danger will be me.”

“Wrong,” Thomas said. “I’ll be with you.”

I had been sure he would say something like that, but hearing it still felt pretty good. Thomas had a truckload of baggage, and he wasn’t always the most pleasant person in the world—but he was my brother. Family. He’d stand with me.

Which made what came next hard to say.

“You can’t,” I said.

His expression smoothed over into neutrality. “Because of Mavra?”

“No,” I said. “Because I’m going to bring in the White Council.”

Thomas dropped his spatula onto the kitchen floor.

“I have to,” I said. “It took all the Wardens together to take down Kemmler and his students last time. I might not be able to prevent the

Erlking's arrival. If that happens, someone has to stop the heirs directly. I can't do it. The Wardens can. It's as simple as that."

"Okay," he said. "But that doesn't explain why I can't stick with you."

"Because to them you're just a White Court vampire, Thomas. With whom I am supposed to be at war. If they learn that you're my brother, it might give the people in the Council who don't like me grounds to question my loyalty. And even if they believe that I'm not acting against the Council or being controlled by you, they'd still be suspicious of you. They'd want assurances that you were on their team."

"They'd use me," he said quietly. "And use me against you."

"They'd use us both against each other. Which is why you can't be around when they show."

Thomas turned and studied my face carefully. "What about Murphy? If you call in the Council, Mavra will screw up her life."

I chewed on my lip a little. "Murphy wouldn't want me to put innocents in danger to protect her. If one of the heirs turns into some kind of dark god, people are going to die. She wouldn't forgive me for protecting her if that was the cost," I said. "Besides. This isn't about recovering the *Word*. This is about stopping the heirs. I can still get the book to Mavra and fulfill our bargain."

Thomas took a deep breath. "Is that wise?"

"I don't know. She's not exactly alive. I doubt Kemmler's techniques would apply to her use of magic."

"If they didn't," Thomas said, "then why would she want the book?"

Which was a damned good question. I rubbed at my eyes. "All I know is that I've got to stop the heirs. And I've got to protect Murphy."

"If the Council finds out that you're planning on using them to defeat the heirs so that you can give Kemmler's book to a vampire of the Black Court, you'll be in trouble."

"Not for long," I said. "The Wardens will execute me on the spot."

"God. And you can accept that? From your own people?"

"I'm acclimated," I said.

We were quiet for a moment.

"You want me to sit this out," Thomas said. "You don't want me to help."

"I don't see that I have much choice," I told him. "Do you?"

"You could just leave this whole thing. We could head for Aruba or something."

I looked at him.

“Okay,” he said. “You won’t. But a guy can hope. I just don’t like the idea of sitting on the sidelines when you might need my help.” He frowned. “Hey. You’re doing this on purpose. You’re trying to keep me out of it to protect me, you...sneaky little bitch.”

“It works out that way,” I said. “Think of it as payback for those painkillers.”

He grimaced at me, then nodded.

“And thank you,” I said quietly. “You were right. I needed the rest.”

“Of course I was right,” Thomas said. “You looked like you were about to pass out. You still don’t look great.”

“I’m hungry. Did you make those pancakes for breakfast, or are they only decorative?”

“Go ahead and mock,” Thomas said. He slapped a bunch of pancakes onto a plate and brought it over to the table along with a plastic bottle of maple syrup. “Here. Happy birthday.”

I blinked at the pancakes and then up at him.

“I’d have gotten you a present, but...” He shrugged.

“No,” I said. “I mean, no, that’s okay. I’m surprised you remembered at all. No one has remembered my birthday since Susan left town.”

Thomas got himself a plate and left the rest on a third plate for Butters. He sat down at the table and started eating them without syrup. “Don’t make a big thing of it. I’m sort of surprised I remembered it myself.” He nodded at the world in general. “So you think Grevane and the Corpsetaker are the ones who turned the lights out?”

I shook my head. “They were both stretching themselves by keeping so many undead under their control. That’s why the Corpsetaker went after Grevane with a sword, and why he defended himself physically.”

“Then who did it?”

“Cowl,” I said. “He made himself scarce last night. My guess is that he was too busy setting it up to take a swing at Grevane or the Corpsetaker.”

“Why Cowl?”

“Because this is a major hex, man. If you’d have asked me yesterday, I wouldn’t have thought this was possible. I don’t know how he did it, but...” I shivered. “His magic is stronger than mine. And from what I saw of his technique, he’s a hell of a lot more skilled, too. If he’s as good at

thaumaturgy as he is at evocation, he's the most dangerous wizard I've ever seen."

"I'm not sure how he did it matters as much as why," Thomas said.

I nodded. "He gets a lot of advantages. Paralyzes human power structures. Keeps cops and so on too busy to interfere with whatever they're doing."

"But that's not the only reason. You said something about preparing the way?"

"Yeah." I finished a large bite of syrupy pancake goodness. "Black magic is tied in pretty closely with a lot of negative emotions—especially fear. So if you do something that scares a whole lot of people, you get an environment that is better for black magic. This stunt is going to cause havoc. Make a lot of people worry. It will help with the heirs' major mojo tonight."

"You're sure it's tonight?"

I nodded. "Pretty much. It's Halloween. The barriers between the mortal world and the spirit world are at their weakest. They'll be able to call up the most spirits to devour tonight. All the acts of black magic they've been working around town were also part of that preparation. Creating spiritual turbulence. Making it easier to use larger and larger amounts of black magic."

Thomas ate several bites while I listened. Then he said, "How are you going to contact the Council with the phones out?"

"Alternative channels," I said. "I'll call up a messenger."

"Meanwhile," Thomas said, his voice a little bitter, "I will stay here and do...nothing."

"No, you won't," I said. "Because you're going to be figuring out where they can call up the most old spirits. Not only that, but I'm leaving you a copy of Bony Tony's code numbers. Figure out what they mean."

He toyed with a bit of pancake. "Old spirits would come from a graveyard, right?"

"Probably," I said. "But sometimes they can get attached to possessions instead of a specific location. See what you can find out about Native American burial grounds or ruins. That's the right age bracket for what the heirs want."

"Okay," Thomas said without much confidence. "And you want me to figure out the numbers, too."

“With Butters,” I said. “He can help you on both counts. He’s damned smart.”

“Assuming he wants to help,” Thomas said. “He might want to cash in his chips and get out of this game while he’s still alive.”

“If he does, then you’ll be on your own,” I said. “But I don’t think he will.”

Just then the kitchen door opened and Butters came in with a panting Mouse. The big dog padded over to me and nudged my hand with his nose until I scratched him in his favorite spot, just behind one notched ear.

“Don’t think who will what?” Butters asked. “Oh, hey, pancakes. Are there any for me?”

“Counter,” Thomas said.

“Cool.”

“Butters,” I said. “Look, I think you’re going to be all right on your own now. If you want me to, I’ll take you home after breakfast.”

He peered owlishly at me and said, “Of course I want to go home. The Oktoberfest polka-off is tonight.”

Thomas arched an eyebrow at me.

Butters looked back and forth between us and said, “Do you need me to do something?”

“Maybe,” I said. “There’s some research to be done. I totally understand if you want to get while the getting’s good. But if you’re willing, we could use your help.”

“Research,” Butters said. “What kind of research?”

I told him.

Butters chewed on his lip. “Is it...is anything going to try to kill me for doing it?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “But I can’t lie to you. These are some dangerous people. I can’t predict everything they might do.”

Butters nodded. “But...if you don’t get this information, what happens?”

“It gets harder to stop them.”

“And if you don’t stop them, what happens?”

I put my fork down, suddenly not very hungry. “One of them gets phenomenal cosmic power, and all the living space he can take. I get killed. So will a lot of innocent people. And God only knows what someone could do with power like that over the long term.”

Butters looked down at his pancakes.

I waited. Thomas said nothing. His appetite hadn't been affected, and the sound of his knife and fork on the plate was the only one in the kitchen.

"This is bigger than me," he said finally. "It's bigger than polka, even. So I guess I'll help."

I smiled at him. "Appreciate it."

Thomas looked up, studying Butters speculatively. "Yeah?"

Butters nodded, and grimaced. "If I walk away when I know I could lend a hand...I'm not sure I could live with that. I mean, if you were asking me to shoot somebody or something, I'd head for the hills. But research is different. I can do research."

I rose and clapped Butters gently on the shoulder. "Thomas will fill you in."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I have to figure out how to call up the Erlking," I said.

"Is that why everyone wanted that book?"

"Apparently."

"But you had it. Heck, you *read* it."

I rubbed at my eyes. "Yeah. I know. But I didn't know exactly what I was looking for."

Butters nodded. "Frustrating, huh."

"Just a bit."

"It's too bad you don't have a photographic memory," Butters said. "I knew a guy in college with one of those, the bastard. He could just look at a page, and then read it back to himself in his head a week later."

A thought struck me hard, and I felt my limbs twitch with sudden excitement. "What did you say?"

"Uh. You don't have a photographic memory?" Butters asked.

"Yes," I said. "Butters, you are a genius."

"I am," he said. Then his brow furrowed in puzzlement. "I am?"

"Brilliant," I said. "Certifiably."

"Oh. Good."

I rose and started gathering my things. "Where is that backpack I had you wear?"

"Living room," Butters said. "Why?"

"You might need it." I limped out to the living room and got the backpack. I touched it lightly, and felt the solid curve of Bob the skull within. I got my coat and my car keys and headed for the back door.

“Where are you going?” Thomas asked.

“Gumshoeing,” I said.

“You shouldn’t go alone.”

“Probably not,” I agreed. “But I am.”

“At least take Mouse,” Thomas said.

The big dog tilted his head quizzically, looking back and forth between Thomas and me.

“And hold his leash in my teeth?” I said. “I’ve only got the one hand to work with.”

Thomas frowned and then rolled a shoulder in a shrug. “Okay.”

“The phones are apparently unreliable,” I said. I tossed the backpack at Thomas. He caught it. “Bob will know how to reach me if you find something. Got that, Bob?”

A muffled voice from the backpack said, “*Jawohl, herr kommandant.*”

Butters jumped halfway out of his chair and made a squeaking sound. “What was that?”

“Explain it to him,” I told Thomas. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.”

My brother nodded at me. “Good luck. Be careful.”

“You too. Keep your eyes open. Thanks again, Butters.”

“Sure, sure. See you soon.” Butters poked at the backpack with his fork.

“Hey!” Bob protested from inside the pack. “Stop that! You’ll scratch it all up!”

I swung out the door. The night’s rest had done me good, and realizing how it might be possible to stop the heirs of Kemmler had given me an electric sense of purpose. I strode to the car, barely feeling my aching leg.

I turned my hand over and regarded Shiela’s phone number, written on it in black marker.

I didn’t have a photographic memory.

But I knew someone who did.

Chapter

Twenty-seven

I went to my office. Traffic wasn't as bad as it could have been. It looked like the commuters hadn't poured into town in the usual volume. The traffic lights were out, but there were cops at most of the problem intersections, and everyone seemed to be driving slowly and reasonably during the crisis. That's what they were calling it on the radio—the crisis. There were a lot more people than usual out and about on the street, and with far less of the usual brisk, businesslike manner.

All in all, it was about the best reaction to the situation you could hope for. It seemed like people could go one of two ways: Either they freak out and start rioting, or they actually act like human beings in trouble ought to, and look out for one another. When LA blacked out, there had been big-time rioting. In New York, people had pulled together.

It was just as well that people hadn't reacted quite so blindly as they might have. Without even trying, I could feel the slow, sour tension of black magic pulsing and swirling through the city. With the subtle influence of all that dark energy behind it, even a mild panic could have turned ugly, and fast.

Of course, it wasn't dark yet. Nightfall could change things.

As advanced as mankind likes to think it is, we all have that age-old, primal, undeniable dread of darkness. Of being unable to see danger coming. We don't like to think that we're afraid of the dark anymore, but if that's true, then why do we work so hard to make sure our cities are constantly lit? We cloak ourselves in so much light that we can barely see the stars at night.

Fear is a funny thing. In the right light, even tiny and insignificant fears can suddenly grow, swelling up to monstrous proportions. With the black magic rolling around the way it was, that instinctive fear of the dark would feed upon itself, doubling and redoubling, and with no explanation to tell

them why the lights hadn't come on, people would start to forget their carefully rational reasons not to be afraid in favor of panic.

Even assuming I prevented a brand-spanking-new dark godling from arising, tonight could be bad. It could be very bad.

I got to my office and tried to call Shiela's number. The phones weren't cooperating with me, which hardly came as a surprise. They rarely worked perfectly on the best of days. I kept a copy of a reverse phone book at my office, though, and I found the address of her Cabrini-Green apartment. While it wasn't as bad as it had been in the past, it wasn't exactly the best part of town, either. I had a brief pang of longing for the gun I'd lost in the alley behind Bock's place. It wasn't that the gun was more effective than other things I could do to defend myself, but it was a hell of a lot more of a deterrent to the average Chicago thug than a carved stick.

Just for fun, I tried the phones again, dialing my contact number for the nearest outpost of the Wardens.

So help me God, the phone rang.

"Yes," answered a woman with a low, roughened voice.

I fumbled my little notebook of security phrases out of my duster's pocket. "One second," I said. "I didn't think the call would go through." I flipped the little notebook open to the last page and said, "Uh, chartreuse sirocco."

"Rabbit," answered the voice. I checked the notebook. It was the countersign.

"This is Wizard Dresden," I said. "I have a Code Wolf situation here. Repeat, Code Wolf."

The woman on the other end of the phone hissed. "This is Warden Luccio, wizard."

Holy crap, the boss herself. Anastasia Luccio was one of the next in line for a seat on the Senior Council, and was the commander of the Wardens. She was one tough old bird, and she was the field commander of the Council's forces in the war with the Red Court.

"Warden Luccio," I said respectfully—both because she probably deserved it and because I needed to get along with her as well as I possibly could.

"What is the situation?" she asked.

"At least three apprentices to the necromancer Kemmler are here in Chicago," I said. "They found the fourth book. They're going to use it

tonight.”

There was a stunned silence from the other end of the phone.

“Hello?” I said.

“Are you sure?” Luccio asked. Her voice had a faint Italian accent. “How do you know who they are?”

“All those zombies and ghosts were sort of a giveaway,” I said. “I confronted them. They identified themselves as Grevane, Cowl, and Capiorcorpus, and they each had a drummer with them.”

“*Dio*,” Luccio said. “Do you know where they are?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it,” I said. “Can you help?”

“Affirmative,” Luccio said. “We will dispatch Wardens to Chicago immediately. They will arrive at your apartment within six hours.”

“Might not be the best place,” I said. “I was attacked there last night, and my wards got torn apart. The apartment may be under surveillance.”

“Understood. Then we will rendezvous at the alternate location.”

I checked the notebook. I’d have to meet them at McAnally’s. “Gotcha,” I said.

“*Che cosa?*” she asked.

“Uh, understood, Warden,” I said. “Six hours, alternate location. Don’t skimp on the personnel, either. These folks are serious.”

“I am familiar with Kemmler’s disciples,” she said, though her tone was more one of agreement than reprimand. “I will lead the team myself. Six hours.”

“Right. Six hours.”

She hung up the phone.

I settled it back onto its cradle, lips pursed in thought. Hell’s bells, the war captain of the White Council herself was to take the field. That meant that this situation was being regarded as an emergency tantamount to a terrorist with an armed nuclear bomb. If the head Warden was coming out to battle, it meant that the Wardens were going to pull out all the stops.

I was going to have a lot of help for a change. Help that held me in deadly suspicion, and who might execute me if they learned some of my secrets, but help nonetheless. I felt an odd sense of comfort. The Wardens had been one of my biggest fears practically since I had learned about their existence. There was something deeply satisfying about seeing the object of that fear take a hostile interest in Grevane and company. Like when Darth Vader turns against the emperor and throws him down the shaft. There’s

nothing quite so cool as seeing someone who scares the hell out of you go at an enemy.

And then a disturbing thought occurred to me: Why in hell was the war captain of the White Council answering the freaking phones? Why wasn't a junior member of the Wardens doing the receptionist work?

I could think of only a couple or three reasons.

None of them were pleasant.

My brief flash of relief and confidence melted away. Good thing it did, too. I'm sure the world would come to an end if I were allowed to feel a sense of relief and well-being for any length of time.

I shoved my worry out of my head. It wasn't going to help anything. The only one I could count on to ride to my rescue was me. If the Wardens managed to do it anyway, it would be a nice surprise, but I had to get myself moving before the problem started looking too big. It was the same principle as cleaning a really messy room. You don't think about everything you have to do. You focus on one thing and get it done, then move on to the next.

I needed the summons that was hidden in *Der Erlking*. To get that, I had to talk to Shiela. *Right, Harry. Get a move on.* I tried the phone once more, but I guess I'd already won the functional tech lottery: All circuits were busy.

I hadn't been sitting down very long, but it was long enough for my leg to make it clear to the rest of my body that it didn't want to be walked on any more today.

"Get with the program," I told my leg severely. "You don't have to be happy about it, but I need you functional."

My leg sat there in sullen silence and throbbed, which I took as assent. I reached for my keys, and then heard a soft sound at my office door.

I whirled my staff into my hand, calling up my will, and the runes were already smoldering with sullen orange light when the door opened.

Billy stood in the doorway, his expression frozen in surprise, his mouth open. He was wearing jeans, cowboy boots, and an old leather jacket. He hadn't worn his glasses much over the past several years, but he had them on today. His hair had been mussed by the wind, which sighed against my office windows. I heard a few drops of rain begin to fall, striking with dull taps on the glass.

"Um," he said after a minute. "Hi, Harry."

I scowled at him and lowered the staff, letting the power ease out of it. The warmed wood felt good under my hand, and the faint scent of wood smoke lay on the air. “Bad time to be appearing suddenly in my office door,” I said.

“Next time I’ll whistle or something,” Billy replied.

“How’d you find me?”

“It’s your office.” He looked around the place. “You talking to someone?”

“Not really,” I said. “What do you need?”

He opened his coat. The handle of a gun protruded from his belt—my revolver. “Artemis Bock came by my place. He said there was some trouble at his store.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Bad guys were trying to rough him up. I argued with them about it.”

Billy nodded. “That’s what he said. He found this in the alley outside. He said there was blood.”

“One of them clipped my leg,” I said. “I got it taken care of.”

Billy nodded, worried. “Um. He was worried about you.”

“I’m fine.” I stood up, careful about my leg. “Bock okay?”

“Um,” Billy said. He looked at me, his expression clearly concerned. “Yeah. Not hurt, I mean. Some damage to the store, which he said he didn’t mind. He wanted me to thank you for him.” He pulled the gun out of his belt and said, “And I thought you might need this.”

“Shouldn’t carry it in your pants like that,” I said. “Good way to sing soprano.”

“It’s empty,” he said, and offered me the handle of the gun.

I took it, flipped the cylinder open, and checked it. The gun wasn’t loaded. I slid it into the pocket of my duster, then opened the drawer of my desk and took out a small box of ammunition I kept there. I put it in the pocket along with the gun. “Thanks for bringing that by,” I said. “Why’d you come looking here?”

“You didn’t answer the phone at your place. I went by there. It looked like someone tried to tear the door off.”

“Someone did,” I said.

“But you’re all right?” There was a little more weight on the question than I would have expected.

"I'm fine," I said, getting impatient. "Hell's bells, Billy. If you've got something to say, go ahead and say it."

He inhaled deeply. "Um. Well. I'm sort of afraid to."

I arched a brow at him, and scowled again.

"Look. You...aren't acting right, Harry."

"Meaning?" I asked.

"Meaning not like yourself," Billy said. "People have been noticing."

"People?" I asked. My leg pounded. I had no time for this kind of psychological patty-cake. "What people?"

"People who respect you," he said carefully. "Maybe who are even a little bit afraid of you."

I just stared at him.

"I don't know if you know this, Harry. But you can be a really scary guy. I mean, I've seen what you can do. And even the people who haven't seen themselves have heard stories. Believe me, we're all glad you're one of the good guys, but if you weren't..."

"What?" I said, suddenly feeling more tired. "If I wasn't, then what?"

"You'd be scary. Really scary."

"Get to your damned point," I said quietly.

He nodded. "You've been talking to things."

"Excuse me?"

He lifted his hands. "Talking to things. I mean, you were talking to things when I was outside your door."

"That was nothing," I said.

"Okay," Billy said, though his tone suggested that he was placating me rather than agreeing.

"What is this talking-to-things crap? Did Bock say I was doing that?"

"Harry—" Billy said.

"Because I wasn't," I said. "Good God, I do some crazy crap, but it's usually the 'this is never going to work but I have to try it' variety of crazy. I'm not insane."

Billy folded his arms, his eyes searching my face. "See, that's the thing. If you were truly insane, would you be able to realize it?"

I rubbed at the bridge of my nose. "So let me get this straight. Because Bock said something about me, and because you heard me talking to myself, suddenly I'm ready for the room with rubber walls."

"No," he said. "Sort of. Harry, look, it isn't like I'm trying to accuse—"

“That’s funny, because it sounds like an accusation from this end,” I said.
“I only—”

I slammed my staff down on the floor, and Billy flinched.

He tried to cover it, but I had seen the motion. Billy flinched like he was genuinely afraid that I was going to hurt him.

What the hell?

“Billy,” I said quietly. “There is some bad business going on. I don’t have time for this. I don’t know what Bock told you, but he’s had a bad couple of days. He’s rattled. I’m not going to hold anything against him.”

“All right,” he said quietly.

“I want you to go home,” I told him. “And I want you to start sending out word around to the in crowd. Everyone wants to be behind a threshold tonight.”

He frowned and took off his glasses, scrubbing at them with a corner of his shirt. “Why?”

“Because the White Council is sending a war party to town. You don’t want anyone you know to get caught in the backwash.”

Billy swallowed. “This is big, then?”

“And I have to get moving. I don’t have time for distractions.” I stepped forward and put my hand on his shoulder. “Hey, it’s me. Harry. I’m as sane as I ever am, and I need you to trust me for a little while. Tell people to keep their heads down. Okay?”

He took a deep breath and then nodded sharply. “I’ll do it, man.”

“Good. I don’t know why you’re so worried about me. But we’ll sit down and talk after the dust settles. Figure out what’s up. Make sure I haven’t stripped a gear when I wasn’t looking. I promise you.”

“Right,” he said, nodding. “Thank you. I’m sorry if this is...aw, hell, man.”

“Enough with sharing the emotions,” I said. “We’re gonna turn into women as we stand here. Get a move on.”

He chunked my arm with a mostly closed fist, and left.

I waited for him to go. I didn’t feel like riding down in the elevator with him, wondering if he was afraid of me suddenly turning on him with an ax or a butcher knife or something.

I leaned on my staff and thought about it for a second. Billy was really worried about me. Worried enough that he was afraid that I might do something to him. What the hell had I done to set that off?

And an even better question, which I had to ask myself, followed on the heels of that first one.

What if he was right?

I poked at my skull with a finger. It didn't *feel* soft or anything. I didn't feel insane. But if you'd really lost it, would you have enough left upstairs to know? Crazy people never *thought* they were crazy.

"I've always talked to things," I said. "And to myself."

"Good point," myself agreed with me. "Unless that means you've been nuts all along."

"I don't need wiseass remarks," I told myself severely. "There's work to do. So shut up."

All I could think was that it had been Georgia's idea. She was always buried to the ears in her psych textbooks. Maybe she had fallen victim to some kind of inverted psychological hypochondria or something.

Thunder rumbled outside, and the rain started coming down harder.

I didn't need any doubts distracting me right now. I shrugged off the whole conversation with Billy, tabling it for later. I loaded my gun, since not loading it would have been almost as good as not having it, then slipped it back into my pocket, locked up my office behind me, and headed for the car.

I had to get to Shiela and see if her remarkable memory could call up the poems and stanzas from that stupid book. And then I had to figure out how to call up a wild and deadly lord of the darker realms of Faerie and sidetrack him so that the heirs of Kemmler couldn't use him to promote themselves to demigod status. And along the way, I had to find *The Word of Kemmler* and get it to Mavra, somehow, without the White Council learning what I was up to.

Easy as breathing.

As I rode down in the elevator, I had to admit that Billy might have a point.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The Cabrini-Green tenement Shiela lived in had seen better days—but it had seen worse, too. The city had dumped a lot of money into urban renewal projects there, and it was an ongoing process. Shiela's building was still undergoing renovation, and the lobby and many of the floors were only half-finished. No workmen were in the building when I went into the lobby, but there were dozens of tarps, stacks of drywall and raw lumber, heavy tool lockers that had been bolted to the floor, and other evidence of the contractors who would doubtless have been working had the city's lights not been out.

I walked over to the elevators and to the security panel there, and found the button of Shiela's apartment on the ninth floor. I pressed it and held it down for a minute before I realized that, duh, the power was out and I wasn't going to be able to ring her apartment.

I grimaced and looked around for the stairs. Nine flights up on my leg wasn't going to feel nice, but it wasn't as though I had an infinite number of options.

The door to the stairs was locked, but it was a standard fire door with a push bar on the other side. I lifted my staff, looked around the lobby to make sure no one had wandered in to see me, and then gestured with the staff and murmured, "*Forzare.*"

I sent a bare whisper of my power through the door and then drew it back toward me with a sharp gesture. I caught the push bar on the other side with it, and the door trembled and then swung open by an inch or two. I thrust the end of my staff into it to hold it open, then grabbed on and heaved. I stared at the stairs for a second, but they didn't get any shorter or turn into an escalator or anything, so I sighed and started painfully hauling myself up them, one step at a time.

Nine floors and 162 steps later, I paused to catch my breath, and then opened the door to the ninth-floor hallway in the same manner I had the

one in the lobby. The ninth-floor hallway was still under construction, and several of the apartments in it were missing doors, and even walls. I limped along until I found Shiela's apartment and then knocked on the door.

I felt a tingling tension over the door as I touched it—a magical ward of some kind. It was nowhere near as strong as the ones on my apartment had been, but it was stable. That was fairly impressive. Shiela might not have a ton of inborn talent, but she evidently had enough discipline to offset the lack. I held my hand out lightly, just over the surface of the door, sending my senses running over the ward, getting more of a feel for its strength. It couldn't have stopped me if I used my power to force my way in, but it felt strong enough to give me a solid kick in the teeth if I tried it physically. It would certainly scare the hell out of a would-be burglar. Not bad.

After a minute I heard footsteps and the door opened a little. I could see a security chain and a slender stripe of her face that included one of Shiela's dark, sparkling eyes. She let out a surprised little sound and then said, "Harry. Just a minute."

I waited while she shut the door and took off the security chain. Then she opened the door again, smiling at me. She had an infectious smile, and I found myself answering it with one of my own.

She was dressed in a scarlet sequined bodice that made her chest into something very difficult not to stare at, nearly translucent baggy leggings, leather sandals that wrapped around her calves, and 6.5 million pounds of bangles on her arms and ankles. Her hair had been caught up in a high ponytail fixed into place to rise over some kind of mesh headdress, and her smooth, bare shoulders looked lovely and strong.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," I said back. "Is your roommate Shiela in, Genie?"

She laughed. "You caught me in the nick of time. I was just about to leave to get together with some people I know."

"Costume party?" I asked.

"No, I dress like this all the time." Her eyes sparkled. "It is Halloween."

"Even with the lights out?"

She bobbed her brows, her smile wicked for a second. "Who knows. That might make it more fun."

I had been right about the curves that had been hidden under her loose clothing back at Bock's. They were awfully pleasant ones. It was an effort of will to stay focused on her face—especially when she laughed. Her laugh

made all sorts of interesting little quivers run over her. “Do you have a minute?” I asked.

“Maybe even two,” she said. “What did you have in mind?”

“I need your help with something,” I said. I looked up and down the hallway. As far as I knew I hadn’t been followed, and I’d been watching my back—but that didn’t mean that no one was there. I was pretty good at noticing such things, but there were plenty of people (and nonpeople) who were better than me. “If you don’t mind, can we talk about it inside?”

Her expression became a little wary, and she looked up and down the hall herself. “Are you in trouble? Is this about the people at the store?”

“Pretty much,” I said. “May I come in?”

“Of course, of course,” she said, and stepped back inside, holding the door open for me. I limped in. “Oh, my God,” she said, staring at me as I came in. “What happened?”

“A ghoul threw a knife into my leg,” I told her.

She blinked at me. “You mean...a real ghoul? An actual ghoul?”

“Yeah.”

Her face twisted up with dismay. “Oh. Wow. I’ve heard stories, but I never thought...you know. It’s hard to believe they’re really out there. Does that make me an idiot?”

“No,” I said. “It makes you lucky. If I never see another ghoul, it will be too soon.”

Her apartment was pretty typical of the kind: small, worn, rundown, but clean. She had mostly secondhand furniture, an ancient old fridge, mismatched bookshelves that overflowed with paperbacks and textbooks, and a tiny, aged television that looked as if it didn’t get much use.

“Sit down,” she said, picking up a couple of blankets and a throw pillow from the couch, clearing off a space for me. I tottered over to the couch and sat, which felt entirely too good. I grunted and got my leg elevated onto the coffee table, and it felt even better.

“Thanks,” I said.

She shook her head, staring at me. “You look frightful.”

“Been a tough couple of days.”

She studied me with serious eyes. “I suppose it must have been. What are you doing here?”

“The book,” I said. “The one on the Erlking that I got from Bock.”

“I remember,” she said.

“Exactly.”

“Um. What?”

“That’s why I’m here,” I said. “You remember but I don’t, and the bad guys stole my copy. I need you to remember it for me.”

She frowned. “The whole thing?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “There were several poems and stanzas in there. I think what I need is in one of them.”

“What do you need?” she said.

I stared at her for a second. Then I said, “It might be better if you don’t know.”

She lifted her chin and regarded me for a moment, as if I’d just said something bad about her mother. “Excuse me?”

“This is some bad business,” I said. “It might be safer for you if I don’t tell you much about it.”

“Well,” she said. “That’s quite patronizing of you, Harry. Thank you.”

I held up a hand. “It isn’t like that.”

“Yes,” she said. “It is. You want me to give you information, but you won’t tell me why or what you are going to do with it.”

“It’s for your own protection,” I said.

“Perhaps,” she replied. “But if I give you this information, I’m going to bear some responsibility for what you do with it. We don’t know each other very well. What if you took the information I gave you and used it to hurt someone?”

“I won’t.”

“And maybe that’s true,” she said. “But maybe it isn’t. Don’t you see? I have an obligation in this matter,” she said, “to use my talent responsibly. That means not using it blindly or recklessly. Can you understand that?”

“Actually,” I said, “I can.”

She pursed her lips and then nodded. “Then if you want me to help you, tell me why you need it.”

“You could be put at risk if you become involved in this,” I said. “It could be very dangerous.” I left a clear silence between the last two words for emphasis.

“I understand,” she said. “I accept that. So tell me.”

I stared at her for a second, and then sighed, a little frustrated. She had a point, after all. But dammit, I didn’t want to see anyone else get hurt

because of Kemmler's disciples. Particularly not anyone with such lovely breasts.

I jerked my eyes away from them and said, "The people you've seen around the store are going to use the book to call up the Erlking."

She frowned. "But...he's an extremely powerful faerie, yes? Can they do that?"

"Do you mean is it possible?" I asked. "Sure. I whistled up Queen Mab a few hours ago, myself." Which was technically the truth.

"Oh," she said, her tone mild. "Why?"

"Because I needed information," I said.

"No, not that. Why are these people calling up the Erlking?"

"They're going to use his presence on Halloween night to call up an extra-large helping of ancient spirits. Then they're going to bind and devour those spirits in order to give themselves a Valhalla-sized portion of supernatural power."

She stared at me, her mouth opening a little. "It's...a rite of ascension?" she whispered. "A real one?"

"Yeah," I said.

"But that's...that's insane."

"So are these people," I said. "What you tell me could stop it from happening. It could save a lot of lives—not least of which is my own."

She folded her arms over her stomach as if chilled. Her face looked pale and worried. "I need the poems because I'm going to summon the Erlking before they can do it and to make sure that I sidetrack him long enough to ruin their plans."

"Isn't that dangerous?" she asked.

"Not as dangerous as doing nothing," I said. "So now you know why. Will you help me?"

She fretted her lower lip, as though mulling it over, but her eyes were sparkling. "Say please."

"Please," I said.

Her smile widened. "Pretty please?"

"Don't push me," I half growled, but I doubt it came out very intimidating.

She smiled at me. "It might take me few minutes. I haven't looked at that book in some time. I'll have to prepare. Meditate."

"Is it that complicated?" I asked.

She sighed, the smile fading. “There’s so much of it, sometimes my head feels like a library. I don’t have a problem remembering. It’s finding where I’ve put it that’s a challenge. And not all of it is very pleasant to remember.”

“I know what that’s like,” I said. “I’ve seen some things I would rather weren’t in my head.”

She nodded, and paced over to settle down on the couch next to me. She drew her feet up underneath her and wriggled a bit to get comfortable. The wriggling part was intriguing. I tried not to be too obviously interested, and fumbled my notebook and trusty pencil from my duster’s pocket.

“All right,” she said, and closed her eyes. “Give me a moment. I’ll speak it to you.”

“Okay,” I said.

“And don’t stare at me.”

I moved my eyes. “I wasn’t.”

She snorted delicately. “Haven’t you ever seen breasts before?”

“I wasn’t staring,” I protested.

“Of course.” She opened one eye and gave me a sly oblique glance. Then she closed her eyes with a little smile and inhaled deeply.

“That’s cheating,” I said.

She smiled again, and then her expression changed, her features growing remote. Her shoulders eased into relaxation, and then her eyes opened, dark, distant, and unfocused. She stared into the far distance for several moments, her breathing slowing, and her eyes started moving as if she were reading a book.

“Here it is,” she said, her voice slow, quiet, and dreamy. “Peabody. He was the one to compile the various essays.”

“I just need the poems,” I said. “No need for the cover plate.”

“Hush,” she said. “This isn’t as easy as it looks.” Her fingers and hands twitched now and then while her eyes swept over the unseen book. I realized after a moment that she was turning the pages of the book in her memory. “All right,” she said a minute later. “Ready?”

I poised my pencil over my notepad. “Ready.”

She started quoting poetry to me, and I started writing it down. It wasn’t in the first poem or the second, but in the third one I recognized the rhythms and patterns of a phrase of summoning, each line innocent on its own, but each building on the ones preceding it. With the proper focus,

intent, and strength of will, the simple poem could reach out beyond the borders of the mortal world and draw the notice of the deadly faerie hunter known as the Erlking, the lord of goblins.

“That’s the one,” I said quietly. “I need you to be completely sure of your accuracy of recollection.”

Shiela nodded, her eyes faraway. Her hand made a reverse of the page-turning motion she used and she spoke the poem to me again, more slowly. I double-checked that I’d written it all down correctly.

It doesn’t do to mangle a summoning. If you get the words wrong, it can have all kinds of bad effects. Best-case scenario, the summoning doesn’t work, and you pour all the effort into it for nothing. One step worse, a bungled summoning could call up the wrong being—maybe one that would be happy to rip off your face with its tentacle-laden, extendable maw. Finally, at the extreme end of negative consequences, the failed summons might call up the being you wanted—in this case the Erlking—only it would be insulted that you hadn’t bothered to get it right. Uber-powerful beings of the spirit world had the kind of power and tempers that horror movies are made of, and it was a bad idea to get one of them mad at you.

If you called up a being incorrectly, there was very little you could do to protect yourself from them. That was the job hazard of summoning. If I chanted the Erlking to Chicago, I had to be damned sure I did it correctly, or it would be worth as much as my life.

“Once more,” I told Shiela quietly when she was finished. I had to be sure.

She nodded and began again. I checked my written version. They all came out the same for the third time in a row, so I was as sure as I reasonably could be that it was accurate.

I stared at the notepad for a moment, trying to absorb the summoning, to remember its rhythm, the rolling sound of consonant and verb that were only incidentally related to language. This wasn’t a poem—it was simply a frequency, a signal of sound and timing, and I committed it with methodical precision to memory, the same way I stored the precise inflections required to call upon a spirit being using its true name. In a sense, the poem *was* a name for the Erlking. He would respond to it in the same way.

When I looked up again a few moments later, I felt the gentle pressure of Shiela’s gaze. She was watching me, her eyes worried. “You’re either

incredibly stupid or one of the most courageous men I've ever seen."

"Go with stupid," I said lightly. "In my experience, you can't go wrong assuming stupid."

"If you use the summoning," she said quietly, not smiling at my tone, "and something bad happens to you, I will be to blame."

I shook my head. "No," I said. "I know what I'm doing. It will be my own damned fault."

"I'm not sure that your acceptance can absolve me of responsibility," she said, frowning. "Is there anything else I can do to help you?"

"There's no need to offer," I said.

"Yes," she said earnestly. "There is. I need to know that I've done whatever I can. That if something happens to you, it won't be because of something I didn't do."

I studied her face for a moment, and found myself smiling. "You take this whole responsibility thing very seriously," I said.

"Is there some reason I shouldn't?" she asked.

"None at all," I said. "It's just unusual from someone...well, don't take this the wrong way, but it's unusual from someone so far down the ladder, when it comes to raw power."

She smiled a little. "It doesn't take much power to hurt someone," she said. "It's far easier than healing the damage. It's always like that, for everything. Not just magic."

"Yeah. But not many people seem to get that." I reached over and put my right hand on hers. She had very soft, very warm hands. "Thank you for helping me. If there's anything I can ever do to pay you back..."

She smiled at me and said, "There is one thing."

"Oh?" I asked.

She nodded. "A friend told me once that you can tell a lot about a person from how they do things the first time."

I blinked a couple of times and then said, "Uh. Like what?"

"Like this," she said, and came to me. She moved beautifully—fluid and graceful and elegantly feminine. She was all warm curves and soft flesh scented of wildflowers as she slid one leg over mine, straddling my thighs. Her gentle hands lightly framed my face as she leaned down to kiss me, her eyes rolling back and closing in anticipation as her mouth met mine.

The kiss began slowly, quietly—sensuous but not impassioned, patience without hesitance. Her lips were a warm and gentle contact on mine, and

there was a sense of exploration to her mouth, as she felt her way around the kiss. Maybe I was just too tired, or too injured, or too worried about my prospects for immediate survival, but it felt good. It felt really good. Shiela's mouth wasn't inflamed with need. She demanded nothing with the kiss. All she wanted was to taste my mouth, to feel my skin under her hands.

And then without warning, a desperate yearning for more of that simple contact, that human warmth, roared through me in a flash fire of need.

Nearly everyone underestimates how powerful the touch of another person's hand can be. The need to be touched is something so primal, so fundamentally a part of our existence as human beings that its true impact upon us can be difficult to put into words. That power doesn't necessarily have anything to do with sex, either. From the time we are infants, we learn to associate the touch of a human hand with safety, with comfort, with love.

I hadn't been touched much for...well, a long damned time. Thomas may have been my brother, but he avoided physical contact, even casual and incidental contact, like the plague. I hadn't exactly been overwhelmed with romantic interests, either. The closest thing to it I'd had of late had been the advances of a neophyte succubus—and that contact had been anything but loving.

When sex becomes part of the equation, the impact of another's touch can be even more urgent and profound—so much so that good sense, even basic logical deduction, can go right out the window, washed away in a flood of needs that simply *must* be met.

I hadn't been touched in a long time. I hadn't been kissed in even longer. Given how likely it was that I was going to die before my next sunrise, Shiela's presence, her warmth, the simple fact that she *wanted* to be touching me crowded out every worry and fear, and I was glad to see them go. Shiela's kiss freed me from pain and from fear—even if only for a moment. And I wanted to hold on to that moment for as long as I possibly could.

I tightened my grip on the kiss, and my good arm rose, sliding deliberately around the small of her back, pulling her toward me.

Shiela let out a hiss of sudden excitement, but her kiss grew no deeper, no swifter. Her mouth stayed in its gentle rhythm, and I leaned harder into it. Her breath quickened still more, but her kiss deepened only slowly,

maddeningly patient, torturously gentle. Her hips shifted in slow tension against mine, and I could feel the heat of her against me.

What I wanted to do was to reach up and haul down the sequined top. I wanted my mouth to explore every sinuous curve of her. I wanted to drive her mad with need, to fill my senses with her warmth, her cries, her scent. I wanted to forget everything arrayed against me, even if it was just for a little while, and bare her an inch at a time. The emptiness that her warmth had begun to fill howled at me to let go.

But what I did was open my mouth and brush my tongue over her lips, gently and slowly, and only once. She shivered at that touch, and her teeth tugged delicately at my lower lip. I drew the kiss to a slow, quiet close, and bowed my head, so that my forehead rested against hers. Both of us remained like that for a minute, breathing a little fast.

“Did you want to stop?” she whispered.

“No,” I answered. “But I needed to.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t know me,” I said. “Did you want me to stop?”

“No,” she said. “But I needed you to. You don’t know me, either.”

“Then why kiss me?” I asked.

“I...” I heard a touch of something like embarrassment in her voice. “It’s been a long time for me. Since I’ve kissed anyone. I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed it.”

“Same here.”

Her fingers stirred lightly, touching the sides of my face. “You seem so alone. I just...wanted to know what it was like. Just the kiss. Before anything else gets involved.”

“That’s reason enough,” I agreed. “What did you think of it?”

She made a low sound in her throat. “I think I want more.”

“Mmmm,” I said, agreeing. “That works for me.”

She let out a quiet, wicked little laugh. “Good.” She shivered again and then drew away from me, dark eyes bright, still breathing fast enough to make her chest absolutely mesmerizing. She stood up, smiling. “Is there anything else I can do to help you?”

“Grab my staff for me?”

She arched a brow.

I felt my cheeks flush. “Uh. The literal staff.”

“Oh,” she said, and passed it to me.

She watched me with quiet concern as I heaved myself to my feet, but she made no move to help me, for which my ego was entirely grateful. I hobbled over to her door, and she walked beside me.

I turned to her and touched her cheek with my right hand. She leaned her face against my palm, just a little, and smiled up at me.

“Thank you,” I told her. “You’re a lifesaver. Probably literally.”

She looked down and nodded. “All right. Be careful?”

“I’ll try,” I told her.

“Try hard,” she said. “I’d like to see you again soon.”

“Okay. I’ll survive. But only because you asked.”

She laughed, and I smiled, and then I left her in her apartment and started back down the stairs to the street.

Going down was a lot harder than going up had been. I made it to the third floor before I had to stop for a breather, and I sat down to rest my aching leg for a moment.

So I was panting and sitting flat on my ass when the air in front of me wavered, and a dark, hooded figure stepped forward from out of nowhere, one hand extended, some sort of fine mesh that covered her outstretched palm flickering with ugly purple light.

“Be very still, Dresden,” Kumori said, her voice soft. “If you try to move, I’ll kill you.”

Chapter

Twenty-nine

Kumori stood about four feet from me—easily within reach of my staff, if I wanted to strike at her. But since I was sitting down and had only one strong hand to swing the staff, I wouldn't be able to hit hard enough to disable her, even if I somehow managed to hit her before she unleashed the power she was holding in her hand.

And besides. She was a girl.

Unless she proved herself to be some kind of monstrous thing that just looked like a girl, I wasn't going to hit her. On some rational level, I knew my attitude was dangerously illogical, but that didn't change anything. I don't hit girls.

I had the feeling she was quick enough to beat me, as she stood over me with the magical equivalent of a cocked and readied gun sparkling through the metal mesh over her right palm. I could feel the air vibrating with a low, steady note of power, and her stance was both confident and wary.

One thing I was pretty sure of—she was here to talk. If she'd wanted to kill me, she could have done it already. So I stayed sitting, set my staff aside, very slowly, and mildly raised both hands. "Take it easy there, cowgirl," I said. "You got me dead to rights."

I couldn't see her face within the depths of the hood, but I heard a dry note of amusement in her voice. "Take off the bracelet, please. And the ring on your right hand."

I arched a brow. The ring was spent, and probably didn't have enough juice left in it to push her back a step, but I'd never run into anyone who had noticed it before. Whoever she was, Kumori knew how wizards operated, and it made me even more sure that she was hiding her face because she was someone I might recognize—someone on the White Council.

I slipped the bracelet off my left hand and lowered it slowly to the stair beside me, but getting that ring off was going to be problematic. "I can't

get the ring off,” I said.

“Why not?” Kumori asked.

“Fingers on my left hand don’t work anymore,” I said.

“What happened?”

I blinked at her for a second. The question had been polite. In fact, if I didn’t know any better, I’d have taken her tone for actual interest.

“What happened to your left hand?” she asked, her tone patient.

I answered her as politely as I could while staring at her, trying to figure her out. “I was fighting vampires. There was a fire. Burned my hand so bad the doctors wanted to take it off. There’s no way I can get the ring off unless you want to come over here and take it yourself.”

She was still for a moment. Then she said, “It might be easier if you would agree to a truce for the duration of this conversation. Are you willing to give your word on it?”

She wanted a truce, which meant that she had indeed come to talk, rather than to execute me. There sure as hell wouldn’t be any harm in agreeing to a truce, and it might prevent hostilities that could be triggered by raw nerves. “In exchange for yours,” I said. “This conversation and half an hour after its conclusion.”

“Done,” Kumori said. “You have my word.”

“And you have mine,” I said.

She lowered her hand at once, taking the odd mesh over it and its sparkling energies into the deep sleeves of her robe. I didn’t take my eyes off her as I reclaimed my shield bracelet and fixed it back onto my wrist. “All right,” I said. “What did you want to talk about?”

“The book,” she said. “We still want your copy.”

“You’ll have to talk to the Corpsetaker,” I said. “He and his ghoul took it from me last night. But if you go looking, he looks like a girl in her early twenties. Great dimples.”

The hood shifted, as though Kumori had tilted her head to one side. “You know of the source of the Corpsetaker’s name?”

“I figure he’s a body switcher,” I said. “I’ve heard necromancers can do that kind of thing. Move their consciousness from one body to another. Exchange with some poor sucker who can’t protect themselves. Corpsetaker was in that old professor’s body. I figure he swapped with his assistant, and then killed the old man’s body with the girl’s mind inside.”

The hood nodded, conceding me the point. "But I have difficulty believing your story. Had the Corpsetaker taken the book from you, he would have killed you as well."

"Wasn't for lack of trying," I said, and gestured at my leg. "He was overconfident, and I was a little bit lucky. He got the book, but I got away."

She was silent for a moment and then said, her voice thoughtful, "You're telling me the truth."

"I'm bad at lying. Lies get all confusing. Can't keep them straight."

Kumori nodded. "Then let me make you this offer."

"Join or die?" I guessed.

She exhaled softly through her nose. "Hardly. Cowl has a certain amount of respect for you, but he believes you too raw to make some sort of alliance feasible."

"Ah," I said. "Then you'll probably go to the second offer I always get. Go away and you won't kill me."

"Something like that," Kumori said. "You have no real idea of what is going on here. Your ignorance is more dangerous than you know, and your continued involvement in this matter could cause disastrous consequences."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Withdraw from the field," she said.

"Or what?"

"Or you will regret it," she said. "That isn't a threat. Simply a fact. As I said, Cowl has a certain respect for you, but he will not be able to protect you or treat you gently should you continue to involve yourself. If you stand in his way, he *will* kill you. He would prefer it if you stood clear."

"Gosh. That's so altruistic of him." I shook my head. "If he kills me, he'll have my death curse to contend with."

"He has already contended with such curses," Kumori said. "Many times. I advise you to retire from the field."

"I can't do that," I said. "I know what you people are doing. I know about the Darkhallow. I know why you're doing it."

"And?"

"And I can't let that happen," I said. "Insurance in Chicago is expensive enough without adding in a petulant new deity tearing up the real estate."

"Our goals are not so different," Kumori said. "Grevane and the Corpsetaker are madmen. They must be stopped."

“From what I’ve seen of old Cowl, he’s a couple of french fries short of a Happy Meal too.”

“And you would do what?” Kumori asked. “Prevent them from reaping the bounty of the Darkhallow? Take the power for yourself?”

“I want to make sure *nobody* takes it,” I said. “I don’t particularly care how I get it done.”

“Truly?” she asked.

I nodded. “Now here’s where I make you an offer.”

She hesitated, clearly taken off guard. “Very well.”

“Bail,” I told her. “Leave Cowl and the Sociopath Squad to their squabbling. Give me what information I need to stop them.”

“He’d kill me in a day,” she said.

“No,” I told her. “I’d take you to the White Council. I’d get you protection.”

She stared at me from within her hood, utterly silent.

“See, Kumori, you’re sort of a puzzle,” I said. “Because you’re working with these necromancers. In fact, I’m willing to bet you aren’t bad at necromancy yourself. But you went out of your way to save someone’s life the other night, and that just doesn’t jive with that crowd.”

“Doesn’t it?” she said.

“No. They’re killers. Good at it, but they’re just killers. They wouldn’t take a step out of their way to help someone else. But you went way the hell out of your way to help a stranger. It says that you aren’t like them.”

She was silent for a moment more. Then she said, “Do you know why Cowl has made a study of necromancy? And why I have joined him?”

“No.”

“Because necromancy embraces the power of death, just as magic embraces the power of life. And as magic can be twisted and perverted to cruel and destructive ends, necromancy can be turned upon its nature as well. Death can be warded off, as I did for the wounded man that night. Life can be served by that dark power, if one’s will and purpose are strong.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “You got involved with the darkest and most corruptive, insanity-causing forces in the universe so that you could jump-start wounded bodies to life.”

She moved her hand, a sudden, slashing motion. “No. No, you idiot. Don’t you see the potential here? The possibility to end *death*.”

“Uh. End death?”

“You will die,” she said. “I will die. Cowl will die. Everyone now walking this tired old world knows but one solid, immutable fact. Their life will end. Yours. Mine. Everyone’s.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s why they call us ‘mortals.’ Because of the mortality.”

“Why?” she asked.

“What?”

“Why?” she repeated. “Why must we die?”

“Because that’s the way it is,” I said.

“Why must that be the way it is?” she said. “Why must we all live with that pain of separation? With horrible grief? With rage and loss and sorrow and vengeance ruling the lives of every soul beneath the sky? What if we could change it?”

“Change it,” I said, my skepticism clear in my voice. “Change death.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Just...poof. Make it go away.”

“What if we could?” she said. “Can you imagine what it would mean? If mere age would not lay mankind low after his threescore and ten, how much better would the world be? Can you imagine if da Vinci had continued to live, to study, to paint, to invent? That the remarkable accomplishments of his lifetime could have continued through the centuries rather than dying in the dim past? Can you imagine going to see Beethoven in concert? Taking a theology class taught by Martin Luther? Attending a symposium hosted by Albert Einstein? *Think*, Dresden. It boggles the *mind*.”

I thought about it.

And she was right.

Supposing for half a second that what she said might be possible, it would mean...Hell. It would change *everything*. There would be so much more time, and for everyone. Wizards lived for three or even four centuries, and to them even their own lives seemed short. What Kumori was talking about, the end of death itself, would give everyone else the same chance to better themselves that wizards enjoyed. It would, in a single stroke, create more parity between wizards and the rest of mankind than any single event in history.

But that was insane. Setting out to conquer *death*? People died. That was a fact of life.

But what if they didn't have to?

What if my mother hadn't died? Or my father? How different would my life be today?

Impossible. You couldn't just drive death away.

Could you?

Maybe that wasn't the point. Maybe this was one of those things in which the effort meant more than the outcome. I mean, if there was a chance, even a tiny, teeny chance that Kumori was right, and that the world could be so radically changed, wouldn't I be obliged to try? Even if I never reached the goal, never finished the quest, wouldn't the attempt to vanquish death itself be a worthy pursuit?

Wow.

This question was a big one. Way bigger than me.

I shook my head and told Kumori, "I don't know about that. What I know is that I've seen the fruits of that kind of path. I saw Cowl try to murder me when I got in his way. I've seen what Grevane and the Corpsetaker have done. I've heard about the suffering and misery Kemmler caused—and is still causing today, thanks to his stupid book.

"I don't know about something as big as trying to murder death. But I know that you can tell a tree from what kind of fruit falls off it. And the necromancy tree doesn't drop anything that isn't rotten."

"Ours is a calling," Kumori said, her voice flat. "A noble road."

"I might be willing to believe you if so much of that road wasn't paved in the corpses of innocents."

I saw her head shake slowly beneath the hood. "You sound like them. The Council. You do not understand."

"Or maybe I'm just not quite arrogant enough to start rearranging the universe on the assumption that I know better than God how long life should last. And there's a downside to what you're saying, too. How about trying to topple the regime of an immortal Napoleon, or Attila, or Chairman Mao? You could as easily preserve the monsters as the intellectual all-stars. It can be horribly abused, and that makes it dangerous."

I faced her down for a long and silent second. Then she let out a sigh and said, "I think we have exhausted the possibilities of this conversation."

"You sure?" I asked her. "The offer is still open. If you want to get out, I'll get the Council to protect you."

“Our offer is open as well. Stand aside, and no rancor will follow you.”

“I can’t,” I said.

“Nor can I,” she said. “Understand that I do not wish you any particular harm. But I will not hesitate to strike you down should you place yourself in our path.”

I stared at her for a second. Then I said, “I’m going to stop you. I’m going to stop you and Cowl and Grevane and Corpsetaker, and your little drummers too. None of you are going to promote yourself to godhood. No one is.”

“I think you will die,” she said, her tone even, without inflection.

“Maybe,” I said. “But I’m going to stop you all before I go. Tell Cowl to get out of the way now, and I won’t hunt him down after all of this is over. He can walk. You too.”

She shook her head again and said, “I’m sorry we could not work something out.”

“Yeah,” I said.

She hesitated. Then she asked me, her voice soft and genuinely curious, “Why?”

“Because this is what I have to do,” I said. “I’m sorry you aren’t going to let me help you.”

“We all act as we think we must,” she said. “I will see you by and by, Dresden.”

“Count on it,” I said.

Kumori left without another word, gliding silently down the stairs and out of sight.

I sat there for a moment, aching and tired and more scared than I had sounded a minute before.

Then I got up, shoved my pain and my fear aside, and hobbled out to the Blue Beetle.

I had work to do.

Chapter Thirty

I went back to my car, got in, and headed out to find a few things I would need to make the summoning of the Erlking marginally less suicidal. Serious summoning spells have to be personalized both to the entity to be summoned and to the summoner, and it took me a little while to find enough open businesses to get it all. Traffic on the streets grew steadily worse as the afternoon wore on, slowing me down even further.

More ominous than that, the tenor of the city had begun to slowly, steadily change. What had been an atmosphere of bemused enjoyment of an unanticipated holiday from the daily grind had turned into annoyance. As the sun tracked across the sky and the power still hadn't come back on, annoyance started turning into anger. By high noon, there were police visible on every street in cars, on motorcycles, on bicycles, and on foot.

"That all for ya?" asked an enterprising vendor. He was a potbellied, balding gardener selling fresh fruit and vegetables from the back of a pickup on a corner, and he was the only one I'd seen who wasn't trying to gouge Chicagoans in their moment of trial. He put the pumpkin I'd chosen in a thin plastic bag as he did, and took the money I offered him.

"That's everything," I said. "Thanks."

Shouting broke out somewhere nearby, and I looked up to see a whip-thin young man sprinting down the sidewalk across the street. A pair of cops chased him, one of them shouting at his uselessly squealing radio.

"Christ, look at that," the vendor said. "Cops everywhere. Why do they need the cops everywhere if this is just a power outage?"

"They're probably just worried about someone starting a riot," I said.

"Maybe," the vendor said. "But I hear some crazy things."

"Like what?" I asked.

He shook his head. "That terrorists blew up the power plant. Or maybe set off some kind of nuke. They can disrupt electronics and stuff, you know."

"I think someone might have noticed a nuclear explosion," I said.

"Oh, sure," he said. "But hell, maybe somebody did. Practically no phones, radio is damned near useless. How would we know?"

"I dunno. The big boom? The vaporized city?"

The vendor snorted. "True, true. But something happened."

"Yeah," I said. "Something happened."

"And the whole damned city is getting scared." The vendor shook his head as more shouting broke out farther down the block. A police car, lights and sirens wailing, tried to bull through the traffic to move toward the disturbance, without much success.

"Getting worse," the vendor observed. "This morning it was all smiles. But people are getting afraid."

"Halloween," I said.

The vendor glanced at me and shivered. "Maybe that's part of it. Maybe just because it's getting darker. Clouding over. People get spooked sometimes. Just like cattle. If they don't get the lights on, tonight might be bad here."

"Maybe," I said. I juggled the bag with my staff, trying to work out how to carry them both back down the street to the Beetle.

"Here," said the vendor. "I'll help you, son."

"Thank you," I told him, though to be honest I felt embarrassed that I actually wanted his help, much less needed it. "That old Bug there."

He walked the fifty feet down the sidewalk with me. He dropped off the sack in the front-end trunk of the VW, nodded at me, and said, "About time I got my old self out of here anyway, I think. Getting tense around here. Thunderstorm's coming in."

"Newspaper weatherman said it was supposed to be clear," I said.

The vendor snorted and tapped his nose. "I lived around this old lake all my life. There's a storm coming."

Boy was there. In spades.

He nodded to me. "You should get home. Good night to stay in and read a book."

"That sounds nice," I agreed. "Thanks again."

I nudged the Beetle out into traffic by virtue of being more willing to accept a fender-bender than anyone else on the road. I had everything I needed to try to whistle up the Erlking, but it had eaten up a lot of my day. I'd tried to call Murphy's place every time I'd stopped the car, but I never

got a line through to Thomas and Butters, and now, with the afternoon sun burning its way down toward the horizon, I had run out of daylight.

It was time to rendezvous with the Wardens, so I headed for McAnally's.

Mac's tavern was tucked in neatly beneath one tall building and surrounded by others. You had to go down an alley to get to the tavern, but at least it had its own dinky parking lot. I managed to find a spot in the lot and then limped down the alley to the tavern, taking the short flight of steps down to the heavy wooden door.

I opened the door onto a quiet buzz of activity. In times of supernatural crisis, McAnally's became a sort of functional headquarters for gossip and congregation. I understood why. The tavern was old, lit by a dozen candles and kerosene lamps, and smelled of wood smoke and the steaks Mac cooked for his heavenly steak sandwiches. There was a sense of security and permanence to the place. Thirteen wooden pillars, each one hand-carved with all manner of supernatural scenes and creatures, held up the low ceiling. Ceiling fans that normally turned in lazy circles were not moving now, thanks to the power outage, but the actual temperature of the bar was unchanged. There were thirteen tables scattered out irregularly around the room, and thirteen stools at the long bar.

The whole layout of the place was meant to disperse and divert dangerous or destructive energies that might accompany any grouchy wizard types into the tavern—nothing major. It was just a kind of well-planned feng shui that cut down on the number of accidents bad-tempered practitioners of the arts might inadvertently inspire. But that dispersal of energies did a little something to ward off larger magical forces as well. It wasn't going to protect the place from a concentrated magical attack: McAnally's wasn't a bomb shelter. It was more like a big beach umbrella, and when I came through the door I felt a sudden relief of pressure I hadn't realized had built up. The minute I shut the door behind me, some of the fear and tension faded, the dark energies Cowl had stirred up sliding around the tavern like a stream pouring around a small, heavy stone.

A sign on the wall just inside the door proclaimed, ACCORDED NEUTRAL TERRITORY. That meant that the signatories of the Unseelie Accords, including the White Council and the Red Court, had agreed that this place would be treated with respect. No one was supposed to start any kind of conflict inside the tavern, and would be bound by honor to take outside any fight that did come up, as rapidly as possible. That kind of agreement was

only as good as the honor of anyone involved, but if I broke the Accords in the building, the White Council would hang me out to dry. From past experience, I assumed that the Red Court would come down on any of their folk who violated the tavern's neutrality in the same way.

The tavern was crowded with members of the supernatural community of Chicago. They weren't wizards. Most of them had only a pocketful of ability. One dark-bearded man had enough skill at kinetomancy to alter the spin on any dice he happened to throw. An elderly woman at another table had an unusually strong rapport with animals, and was active in municipal animal shelter charities. A pair of dark-haired sisters who shared an uncanny mental bond played chess at one of the tables, which seemed kind of masturbatory, somehow. In one of the corners, five or six wizened old practitioners—not strong enough to have joined the Council, but competent enough in their own right—huddled together over mugs of ale, speaking in low tones.

Mac himself glanced over his shoulder. He was a tall, spare man in a spotless white shirt and apron. Bald and good at it, Mac could have been any age between thirty-five and fifty. He pursed his lips upon seeing me, turned back to his wood-burning stove, and quickly finished up a pair of steaks he'd been cooking.

I started limping over to the bar, and as I went the room grew quiet. By the time I was there, the uneven thump of my staff on the floor and the sizzling of the steaks were the only sounds.

"Mac," I said. Someone vacated a stool, and I nodded my thanks and sat down with a wince.

"Harry," Mac drawled. He slipped his frying pan off the stove, slapped both steaks onto plates, and with a couple of gestures and brief movements made fried potatoes and fresh vegetables appear on the plates, too. It wasn't magic. Mac was just a damned good cook.

I glanced around the room and spoke in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear. "I need some space, Mac. Some people are meeting me here shortly. I'll need several tables."

A round of nervous whispers and quiet comments went through the crowd. The old practitioners in the corner rose from their table without further ado. Several of them nodded at me, and one grizzled old man growled, "Good luck."

The less experienced members of the supernatural crowd looked from me back to the departing seniors, uncertainty on every face.

“Folks,” I said, in general. “I can’t tell you what to do. But I would like to request that you all think about getting home before dark. Come nightfall, you want to be behind a threshold.”

“What’s happening?” blurted one of the youngest men in the room. He still had pimples.

Mac eyed him and snorted.

“Come on. I’m a wizard. We have union rules against telling anybody anything,” I said. There was a round of muted chuckles. “Seriously. I can’t say any more for now,” I said. And I couldn’t. Odds were better than good that one or more spies lurked among the patrons of the tavern, and the less information they had about White Council plans and activities, the better. “Take this seriously, guys. You don’t want to be outside come nightfall.”

Mac turned around to the bar and swept his eyes over it, his expression polite and pointed. He grunted and flicked his chin at the door, and the noise from the room rose again as people began speaking quietly to one another, getting up, and leaving money on the tables as they left.

Two minutes later, Mac and I were the only people left in the tavern. Mac walked around the edge of the bar and sat down next to me. He put one steak-laden dinner plate on the bar in front of me, kept the other for himself, and added a couple of bottles of his home-brewed dark ale. Mac flipped the tops off with a thumbnail.

“Bless your soul, Mac,” I said, and picked up one bottle. I held it up. Mac clinked his bottle of ale against mine, and then we both took a long drink and fell to on the steaks.

We ate in silence. After a while, Mac asked, “Bad?”

“Pretty bad,” I said. I debated how much I could tell him. Mac was a good guy and a long-term acquaintance and friend, but he wasn’t Council. Screw it. The man gave me steak and a beer. He deserved to know something more than that there was a threat he probably couldn’t do anything about. “Necromancers.”

Mac’s fork froze on the way to his mouth. He shook his head, put his last bite of steak into his mouth, and chewed slowly. Mac never used a sentence when one word would do. “Wardens?”

“Yeah. A lot of them.”

He pursed his lips with a frown. “Kemmler,” he said.

I arched an eyebrow, but I wasn't really surprised that he knew the infamous necromancer's name. Mac always seemed to have a pretty darned good idea about what was going on. "Not Kemmler. His leftovers. But that's bad enough."

"Ungh." Mac finished up his plate in rapid order, then rose and started collecting money and clearing the tables in the corner farthest from the door. At some point he collected my barren plate and empty bottle and put a fresh ale down in front of me.

I sipped at it, watching him. He didn't make a production of it, but he checked the short-barreled shotgun he kept on a clip behind the bar, and put a pair of 1911s in unobtrusive spots behind the bar, so that no matter where he stood, one of the weapons would be within easy reach. He handled them like he knew exactly what he was doing.

I sipped at the ale and mused. I knew little of Mac's background. He'd opened the tavern a few years before I'd moved to Chicago. No one I'd talked to knew where he'd been before that, or what he had done. I wasn't surprised that he knew something about weapons. He'd always moved like someone who could handle himself. But since he wasn't exactly a chatterbox, most of what I knew came from observation. I hadn't the faintest idea of why or where he'd learned the business of violence.

I could respect that. I had run through a few bad patches that were just as well left behind and forgotten.

Mac looked up abruptly, and started polishing the bar near the shotgun's clip. A second later the door opened, and a Warden of the White Council came in.

He was a tall man, six feet and then some, and built with the solidity of an aging soldier. His lank hair had more grey in it than I remembered, and was drawn back into a ponytail. His face was narrow, almost pinched, and in the absence of any other expression, he looked like he had just taken a big bite of alum-sprinkled lemon rind. The Warden wore the grey cloak of his office over black fatigues. He carried a carved staff in his right hand, and bore a long-bladed sword on his left hip.

That much I had expected.

What surprised me was how battered he looked.

The Warden's cloak was ripped in several spots, and stained with what could have been mud, blood, and greenish motor oil. There were burn marks along the hem, and several raw, ragged holes in it that might have

been the results of corrosive burns. His staff looked similarly nicked and stained—and the man himself looked like a boxer after a tough tenth round. He had bruises on one cheek. His nose had been broken sometime in the past several weeks. There was an ugly line of fresh, scarlet scar tissue running from his hairline to one eyebrow, and I could see white bandages through a hole in his jacket, over his left biceps.

For all of that, he came through the door like a man who knew he could clear out a bar full of marines if he needed to, and his eyes settled on me at once. His mouth twisted into an even more sour frown.

“Wizard Dresden,” he said quietly.

“Warden Morgan,” I responded. I figured Morgan would be along with any Wardens sent to Chicago. It was in his area of responsibility, and he didn’t like me. He’d spent a few years following me around, hoping to catch me performing black magic so that he could execute me. It hadn’t happened, and the Council had lifted my probation. I don’t think he had ever forgiven me for that. He blamed me for other things too, I think, but I had always figured they were just excuses. Some people don’t get along, ever. Morgan and I were two of them.

“McAnally,” Morgan said to the tavern keeper.

“Donald,” Mac replied.

Interesting. Hell, I’d been on the Council for years, and I hadn’t known Morgan’s first name.

“Dresden,” Morgan said. “Have you checked for veils?”

“If I told you I had, you’d check it yourself anyway, Morgan,” I said. “So I didn’t bother.”

“Of course you didn’t,” he said. I saw him frown a little in concentration, and then his eyes went a bit out of focus. He swept his gaze around the room, using his Sight, that odd, half-surreal sense that lets wizards observe the forces of magic moving around them. A wizard’s Sight cuts through all kinds of veils and spells meant to disguise and distract. It’s a potent ability, but it comes at a price. Anything you see through the Sight stays with you, never fading in your memory, always right there for recall, as if you’d just seen it. You can’t just forget something that you See. It’s there for life.

Morgan didn’t let his gaze linger too long near Mac or myself, and then he nodded to himself, and called out, “Clear.”

The door opened and Warden Luccio came in. She was a solid old matriarch of a woman, as tall as most men and built like someone who did

plenty of physical labor. Her hair was a solid shade of iron grey, cropped into a neat, military cut. She too wore a Warden's grey cloak, though she wore clothes suitable for hiking or camping beneath that: jeans, cotton, flannel, boots, all in muted tones of grey and brown. She too carried a staff and bore a sword at her side, though hers was a slender scimitar, light and elegant. Though not as worn as Morgan's, her gear also showed evidence of recent action.

"Warden Luccio," I said, and rose from the barstool to incline my head to her.

"Wizard," she said quietly. I would have needed a high-speed camera to take in the details of her smile, but at least it was there. She nodded to me and then a little more deeply to Mac.

Behind her came three more Wardens. The first was a young man I vaguely recognized from a Council meeting a few years back. He had naturally tanned skin, dark hair, dark eyes, and sharp-edged, classically Spanish features. I remembered him in an apprentice's brown robe back then, and covering his mouth with one hand to conceal a grin inspired by some of my dialogue with the Council's bigwigs.

The brown robe was gone, and he looked like he had filled in a little since I'd first seen him, but good Lord, he was younger than Billy the werewolf. He wore a grey cloak that looked reasonably clean and not at all damaged, and black fatigues beneath that. A simple, straight sword hung from one hip, and was balanced on the other side by a holstered Glock and, I kid you not, three round fragmentation grenades. His staff was fairly new-looking, but there were enough dents and nicks in it to make me think he had kept things from hitting him with it, and he walked with a kind of arrogant confidence you see only in people who have not yet realized their own mortality.

"This is Warden Ramirez," Luccio said. "Ramirez, Dresden."

"How's it going?" Ramirez said, flashing me a grin.

I shrugged. "You know. Pretty much the usual."

Two more Wardens came in behind him, and they looked even younger and greener. Their cloaks and staves were immaculate, and they wore clothes and equipment so similar to Ramirez's that they qualified as a uniform. Luccio introduced the blocky young man with distant, haunted eyes as Kowalski. The sweet-faced young Asian girl's name was Yoshimo.

I limped over to Luccio and nodded at the tables Mac had set up. “I hope there’s room enough. When are the other Wardens arriving?”

Luccio fixed me with a quiet, weary gaze. Then she drew her hands from beneath her cloak and held out a folded bundle wrapped in brown paper, offering it to me. “Take it.”

I took the bundle and unwrapped it.

It was a folded grey cloak.

“Put it on,” said Luccio in her quiet, steady voice. “And then every available Warden will be here.”

Chapter Thirty-one

I stared at Luccio for a second.

“That’s a joke,” I said. “Right?”

She gave me a brief, bitter smile. “Master McAnally,” she said to Mac. “I think we could use a round. Do you have anything decent to drink?”

Mac grunted and said, “Got a new dark.”

“Is it worth drinking?” Luccio asked. She sounded tired, but there was a teasing tone to her voice.

Mac glowered at her in answer, and she gave him a smile that was part challenge and part apology, and took a seat at one of the tables. She gestured at the table and said, “Wardens, please join me.”

Morgan took the seat to Luccio’s right, and the look he gave me could have burned holes in sheet metal. I did what I always did when Morgan did that: I eyed him right back, then dismissed him as if he weren’t even there. I pulled out the chair opposite Luccio and sat. The two youngest Wardens sat down, but Ramirez stayed standing until Mac had brought over bottles of his dark ale and left them on the table. He headed back over to the bar.

Ramirez glanced at Luccio, and she nodded. “Close the circle, please, Warden.”

The young man drew a piece of chalk from his pocket, and quickly drew a heavy line on the floor all the way around the table. He finished the circle, then touched it lightly with the forefinger of his right hand and spoke a quiet word. I felt a flicker of his will as he released a tiny bit of power into the circle. The circle closed around us in a sudden, silent tension, raising a thin barrier around us that was almost entirely impregnable to magical forces. If anyone had been trying to spy on the meeting with magic, the circle would prevent it. If anyone had left some kind of listening device nearby, the magic-saturated air within the circle would be certain to fry it within a minute.

Ramirez nodded to himself and then reversed the last open chair at the table and straddled it, resting one arm on the back. Morgan slid him the last bottle of ale, and he took it in one hand.

“Absent friends,” Luccio murmured, holding up her bottle.

I could get behind that toast. The rest of us muttered, “Absent friends,” and we had a drink, and Luccio stared at her bottle for a moment.

I waited in the pregnant silence and then said, “So. Making me a Warden. That’s a joke, right?”

Luccio took a second, slower taste of the ale and then arched an eyebrow at the bottle.

Behind the bar again, Mac smiled.

“It’s no joke, Warden Dresden,” Luccio said.

“As much as we all would like it to be,” Morgan added.

Luccio gave him a look of very gentle reproof, and Morgan subsided into silence. “How much have you heard about recent events in the war?”

“Nothing in the past several days,” I said. “Not since my last check-in.”

She nodded. “I thought as much. The Red Court has begun a heavy offensive. This is the first time that they’ve concentrated their efforts on disrupting our communications. We suspect that a great many wizards never received word through our usual messengers.”

“Then they found weaknesses in the communications lines,” I said. “But they waited to exploit them until it would hurt us the most.”

Luccio nodded. “Precisely. The first attack came in Cairo, at our operations center there. Several Wardens were taken, including the senior commander of the region.”

“Alive?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yes. Which was an unacceptable threat.”

When vampires take you alive, it isn’t so that they can treat you to ice cream. That was one of the really nightmarish facets of the war with the Red Court. If the enemy got you, they could do worse than kill you.

They could make you one of their own.

If they managed to turn a Warden, especially one of the senior commanders, it would give them access to a treasury of knowledge and secrets—to say nothing of the fact that they would effectively gain, in many ways, a wizard of their own. Vampires didn’t use magic in the same way that mortal wizards did. They tapped into the same nauseating well of power that Kemmler and those like him used. But from what I understood

of it, the skills carried over. A turned wizard would be a deadly threat to the Wardens, the Council, and mortals alike. We never talked about it, but there was a sort of silent understanding among wizards that we would never be taken alive. And an equally silent fear that we might be.

“You went after them,” I guessed.

Luccio nodded. “A major assault. Madrid, São Paolo, Acapulco, Athens. We struck at enemy strongholds there to acquire intelligence to the whereabouts of the prisoners. Our people were being held in Belize.” She waved a hand vaguely at Morgan.

“Our intelligence indicated the presence of the highest-ranking members of the Red Court, including the Red King himself. The Merlin and the rest of the Senior Council took the field with us,” Morgan said quietly.

That made me raise my brows. The Merlin, the leader of the Senior Council, was as defensive-minded as it was possible to be. He’d guided the White Council into the equivalent of a cold war with the Red Court, with everyone moving carefully and unwilling to commit, in the hopes that it would give the war time to settle away into negotiations and some kind of diplomatic resolution. An offensive action like a full assault from the Senior Council, the seven oldest and strongest wizards on the planet, had been long overdue.

“What changed the Merlin’s mind?” I asked quietly.

“Wizard McCoy,” Luccio said. “When our people were taken, he persuaded most of the Senior Council to take action, including Ancient Mai and the Gatekeeper.”

That made sense. My old mentor, Ebenezar McCoy, was a member of the Senior Council. He had a couple of longtime friends on the Council, but that didn’t give him a majority vote. If he wanted to get anything done, he had to talk someone from the Merlin’s bloc into casting their vote with him—either that, or convince the Gatekeeper, a wizard who habitually abstained from voting, to take a stand with him. If Ebenezar had convinced Ancient Mai *and* the Gatekeeper to vote with him in favor of action, the Merlin would have little choice but to move.

And just because the Merlin was a master of wards and defensive magic did not mean that he couldn’t kick some ass if he needed to. You don’t get to be the Merlin of the White Council by collecting bottle caps, and Arthur Langtry, the current Merlin, was generally considered to be the most powerful wizard on earth.

I had seen for myself what Ebenezar McCoy was capable of. A couple of years ago he had pulled an old Soviet satellite out of orbit and brought it down into the lap of Duke Ortega, the warlord of the Red Court. He'd killed a ton of vampires in doing it.

He'd also killed people. He'd taken the force of life and creation and used it to wipe out the lives of mortals—victims of the Red Court's power. And it wasn't the first time he'd done it. Ebenezar, I'd learned, held an office that did not officially exist—that of the White Council's assassin. Known as the Blackstaff, he had a license to kill, as well as to break the other Laws of Magic when he deemed it necessary. When I learned that he was violating and undermining the same laws he'd taught me to obey, to *believe* in, it had wounded me so deeply that in some ways I was still bleeding.

Ebenezar had betrayed what I believed in. But that didn't change the fact that the old man was the strongest wizard I'd ever seen in action. And he was the youngest and least powerful of the Senior Council.

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

"There was no evidence of the presence of the Red King or his entourage, but other than that the attack went as planned," Morgan said. "We assaulted the vampires' stronghold and took our people back with us."

Luccio's face twisted in sudden and bitter grief.

"It was a lure," I said quietly. "Wasn't it?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "We moved out and took our wounded to the hospice in Sicily."

"What happened?"

"We were betrayed," she said, and her words carried more sharp edges than a sack of broken glass. "Someone within our ranks must have reported our position to the Red Court. They attacked us that night."

"When was that?" I asked.

Luccio frowned, then glanced across the table at Ramirez.

"Three days ago, Zulu time," Ramirez provided quietly.

"I've not slept," Luccio said. "Between that and all the travel, I lose track." She took another drink of ale and said, "The attack was vicious. They were coming for the Senior Council, and their sorcerers managed to cut us off from escaping into the Nevernever for nearly a day. We lost thirty-eight Wardens that day, in fighting all over Sicily."

I sat there for a moment, stunned. Thirty-eight. Stars and stones, there were only about two hundred Wardens on the Council. Not every wizard had the kind of talent that made them dangerous in a face-to-face confrontation. Most of those who did were Wardens. In a single day, the Red Court had killed nearly 20 percent of our fighting force.

“They paid for it,” Morgan rumbled quietly. “But...they seemed almost mad to die in order to kill us. Driven. I saw four different death curses unleashed that day. I saw vampires climb over mounds of their own dead without so much as slowing down. We must have taken twenty of their warriors for every loss of our own.” He closed his eyes and his sour face was suddenly masked with very real and very human grief. “They kept coming.”

“We had many wounded,” Luccio said. “So many wounded. As soon as the Senior Council was able to open the ways into the Never-never, we retreated to the paths through Faerie. And we were pursued.”

I sat up straight. “What?”

Morgan nodded. “The Red Court followed us into the territory of the Sidhe,” he said.

“They had to know,” I said quietly. “They had to know that by pressing the attack in Faerie itself they would anger the Sidhe. They’ve just declared war on Summer and Winter alike.”

“Yes,” Morgan said in a flat voice. “But it didn’t stop them. They attacked us as we retreated. And...” He glanced at Luccio as if in appeal.

She gave him a firm look and said to me, “They had called demons to assist them.” She inhaled slowly. “Not simply beasts from the Nevernever. They had gone to the Netherworld. They had called Outsiders.”

I took a longer drink of Mac’s ale. Outsiders. Demons were bad enough, but they were at least something I was fairly familiar with. The reaches of the Nevernever, the world of spirit and magic that surrounds the mortal world, are filled with all kinds of beings. Most of them really don’t give a damn about mortal affairs, and we are nothing but a remote and unimportant curiosity to them. When beings of the spirit world are interested in mortal business, it’s for a good reason. The ones who like to eat us, hurt us, or generally terrify us are what wizards commonly refer to as demons, as a general term. They’re bad enough.

Outsiders, though, were so rarely spoken of that they were all but a rumor. I wasn’t really clear on all of the details, but the Outsiders had been

the servants and foot soldiers of the Old Ones, an ancient race of demons or gods who had once ruled the mortal world, but who had apparently been cast out and locked away from our reality.

There was a specific Law of Magic against contacting them—Thou Shalt Not Open the Outer Gates. No one wanted to be the one suddenly suspected of opening ways for the Outsiders to enter the mortal world. The Wardens absolutely did not play around with violations of the Laws of Magic. Their entire purpose in life was to protect the Council—first from violators of the seven Laws, and then from everyone else.

I eyed the folded grey cloak on the table in front of me.

“I thought only mortal magic could call up Outsiders,” I said quietly.

Luccio said quietly, “You are correct.”

My stomach lurched a little. Someone had told the Red Court where to find the Council. Someone had blocked off their escape route to the Nevernever so strongly that the most powerful wizards on the planet had required a full day to open them again. And someone had begun calling up Outsiders in numbers, sending them to attack the White Council.

The Council is not what it was, Cowl had said. It has rotted from the inside. It will fall. Soon.

“The Wardens fell back to fight a holding action against the Red Court so that our wounded could escape to safety,” Luccio reported, her crisp voice at odds with her weary eyes. “That was when they loosed the Outsiders upon us. We lost another twenty-three Wardens in the first moments of combat, and many more were wounded.” There was silence while she took a long pull from her bottle, emptying it, then setting it down sharply on the table, anger flickering in her eyes. “If Senior Council members McCoy and Liberty had not come to our aid, we might have all died there. Even with them, we managed to hold them only long enough for the Gatekeeper and the Merlin to raise a ward behind us, to give us time to escape.”

“A ward?” I blurted. “Are you telling me that they stonewalled an entire army of vampires and demons? With *one* ward?”

“You don’t get to be Merlin of the White Council by collecting bottle caps,” Ramirez said, his voice dry.

I glanced aside at Ramirez. He grinned at me and swigged beer.

“McCoy was injured,” Luccio continued.

Ramirez snorted. “Who *wasn’t*?”

Luccio snapped, “Carlos.”

He lifted a hand in surrender and settled back onto his chair again, but his grin never faded.

“There were many injuries,” Luccio continued. “But as the hospice in Sicily had been taken, we diverted the worst cases to a hospital we control in the Congo.” She stared at her bottle for a moment. Her mouth opened, and then she closed it again. She closed her eyes.

Morgan frowned at her. Then he put a hand on Luccio’s shoulder, looked at me, and said, “The vampires knew.”

I got a sick, twisting feeling in my stomach. “Oh, God.”

“It was daylight there,” Morgan said. “And the place was a fortress of the Merlin’s wards. There was no way for the vampires to breach it from the Nevernever, and nothing short of a demon lord could have broken through them.” His mouth twisted, and his eyes glittered with rage and hate. “They sent mortals against us. Against men and women lying injured, unconscious, helpless in their beds.” The anger in his voice seemed to strangle him for a moment.

“But...” I said. “Look, I know what it’s like going up against mortals you don’t want to kill. It’s difficult, but they can be stopped. Fought. Bullets and explosives can be defended against.”

“Which is why they used gas,” Ramirez said quietly, stepping in where Morgan’s and Luccio’s voices had failed. His own tone was serious. His grin had vanished. “A nerve agent, probably sarin. They deployed it against the entire hospital, the people we had protecting it, and six square blocks of city around it.” He put his own bottle down and said, “No one survived.”

“My God...” I whispered.

There was dead silence.

“Ebenezar?” I asked in a whisper. “You said he was wounded. Was he...”

Ramirez shook his head. “Stubborn old bastard wouldn’t go to the hospital,” the young Warden said. “He went with one of the teams staging a counteroffensive with the Fellowship of Saint Giles.”

“Thousands of innocent mortals died,” Luccio said, and there was a slow, low snarl in her voice. She kept it tightly leashed and under control, but I heard it. I recognized it, and I knew what it was like to feel it permeating my words. “Women. Children. Thousands. And today I buried one hundred and forty-three Wardens.”

I sat there, stunned.

In a single, vicious stroke, the Red Court had very nearly destroyed the White Council.

“They have crossed every line,” Luccio said, her voice quiet and precise. “Violated every principle of war of our world and the mortal world alike. Madness. They have gone mad.”

“They’ve committed suicide,” I said quietly. “They don’t have a prayer against the Council and the Faerie Courts alike.”

“The Sidhe were taken by surprise,” Morgan rumbled. “They aren’t prepared for a fight. And we’re holding on by our fingernails. We’ve got less than fifty Wardens capable of combat. Without our communications network in order, members of the Council have been attacked individually and by surprise. We don’t know how many more wizards have died.”

“And it gets even better,” Ramirez said. “Agents of the Red Court are haunting the ways through Faerie. We were attacked on the way here, twice.”

“Our priority,” Luccio said, voice crisp, “is to consolidate our forces and to draw upon every available resource to restore the Wardens as a fighting force. We must draw the members of the Council together and make sure that they are protected. We’re reorganizing our security.” She shook her head. “And frankly, we must protect the lives of the Senior Council. So long as they are concealed from the enemy and still able to take action, they are a dangerous force. Together they wield more power than any hundred members of the Council, and it can be concentrated with deadly effect, as the Merlin showed in the Nevernever. So long as they stand ready to strike, the enemy cannot openly unveil his full strength.”

“More important,” Morgan growled, “the mortal wizards who betrayed us, whoever they are, fear the Senior Council. That is why their first move was an attempt to destroy them.”

Luccio nodded. “If we can hold on until the Faerie Courts mobilize for action, we can recover from this attack. Which brings us to today,” Luccio said, and studied me, tired and frank. “Every other Warden able to fight is currently either engaged against the enemy or safeguarding the Senior Council. Our lines of support and communication are tenuous.” She gestured at those seated at the table. “This is every resource the White Council has to spare.”

I looked at the weary captain of the Wardens. At the battered Morgan. At Ramirez, who had reclaimed his cocky smile, and at Yoshimo and

Kowalski, untried, quiet, and frightened.

“Warden Luccio,” I said. “May I speak to you privately?”

Morgan scowled and said in a hot voice, “Anything you have to say to her you can say to all—”

Luccio put her hand on Morgan’s arm, a gentle gesture, but it cut him off. “Morgan. Perhaps you would be so kind as to get me another bottle. And I’m sure McAnally would be willing to provide us all with some dinner.”

Morgan stared at her for a second, then at me. Then he rose, smudged the chalk circle with a boot, and broke the circle around the table, releasing the buzzing tension from the air.

“Come on, kids,” Ramirez told the other two younger wardens, rising. “We have to go sit with Uncle Morgan while the other adults have a serious talk.” He put a hand on my shoulder on the way past and squeezed. “Hey, bartender! Are those onion rings I smell?”

I waited until they had all settled down at the far end of the bar and Mac began to bring them some food. Then I turned to Luccio and said, “I can’t be a Warden.”

She studied me for a second and then asked, in a very precise, very polite voice, “And why not?”

“Because you people have been threatening to kill me for doing something I didn’t do since I was sixteen years old,” I said. “You’re all convinced I’m some sort of hideous threat, and every time you get the chance you try to make my life miserable.”

Luccio listened attentively and then said, “Yes. And?”

“And?” I said. “I’ve spent my entire adult life with the Wardens looking over my shoulder waiting for a chance to accuse me of things I didn’t do, and trying to set me up and entrap me when you never found me doing anything.”

Luccio’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“Don’t give me that,” I said. “You know damned well that Morgan tried to provoke me into attacking him just before we got the treaty with Winter, so he and the Merlin would have an excuse to throw me to the vampires.”

Luccio’s eyes widened, and her voice came out harder. “*What?*” She shot a look at Morgan, and then back at me. “Are you telling me the truth?”

There was some kind of cadence to the question that her words didn’t usually have, and on pure instinct I reached out with my senses. I could feel

a light tension in the air, humming like the space between the tines of a tuning fork.

“Yes,” I told her. The humming chime continued unabated. “I’m telling you the truth.”

She stared at me for a long second and then settled back onto her chair. The humming tension faded. She folded her hands on the table, frowning down at them. “Then...There were rumors. Of how Morgan behaved around you. But I thought that they were only that.”

“They weren’t,” I said. “Morgan has threatened and persecuted me every time he got the chance.” I clenched my right hand into a fist. “And I have done *nothing*. I won’t become a part of that, Warden Luccio. So keep the cape. I wouldn’t polish my car with it.”

She regarded her folded hands, eyes narrow. “Dresden,” she said quietly. “The White Council is at war. Would you simply abandon your own people to the mercies of the Red Court? Would you stand aside and let Kemmler’s disciples have their way?”

“Of course not,” I said. “And I never said I wouldn’t fight. But I won’t be wearing *this*.” I shoved the cloak across the table. “Keep it.”

She shoved it back to the table before me. “Put it on.”

“Thank you, no.”

“Dresden,” Luccio said, and her voice was calm and agate-hard. “It is not a request.”

“I don’t respond well to threats,” I said.

“Then respond to reality,” she snapped. “Dresden, the Wardens are all but shattered. We need every battle-capable wizard we can recruit, train, or conscript.”

“A lot of wizards can fight,” I growled.

“And they *aren’t* Harry Dresden,” she said. “You idiot. Don’t you know what I am offering you?”

“Yeah. The chance to hunt down teenage kids who were never told the Laws of Magic and execute them for breaking them. The chance to badger and intimidate and interrogate anyone who doesn’t suit me. Neither of which I want anything to do with.”

“Ebenezar said you were stubborn, but not that you were a fool. The Council has been betrayed, Dresden. And *you* are the most infamous wizard in it. There are many who have spoken out against you. Many who say that

you began the war with the Red Court intentionally so that you could create an opportunity to bring about the fall of the Council.”

I burst out in bitter laughter. “*Me?* That’s *insane*. For crying out loud, I can’t even balance my stupid checkbook!”

Luccio’s eyes softened a little, and she sighed. “I believe you.” She shook her head. “But you have a reputation, and the members of the Council will be badly unsettled by this loss. Their fear could easily turn upon you. That is why you are going to join the Wardens.”

I scowled. “I don’t get it.”

“It is time to set our past differences aside. If you wear the cloak of a Warden and step in to fight when the Council is in its hour of need, it will make our people look at you differently.”

I took a deep breath. “Oh. Vader syndrome.”

“Excuse me?”

“Vader syndrome,” I said. “There’s no ally so impressive, encouraging, and well loved as an ally who was an enemy that made you shake in your boots a couple of minutes ago.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Luccio said. “I think that you do not realize your own reputation. You have overcome more enemies and battled more evils than most wizards a century your senior. And times are changing. There are more young wizards attaining membership to the Council than ever before—like Ramirez and his companions, there. To them, you are a symbol of defiance to the conservative elements of the Council, and a hero who will risk his life when his principles demand it.”

“I am?”

“You are,” Luccio said. “I can’t say that I approve of it. But right now the Council will need every scrap of courage and faith we can muster. Your presence and support in the face of a greater danger will appease your detractors, and the presence of a wizard who has experience in battle will encourage the younger members of the Council.” She grimaced. “Put simply, Dresden, we need you. And you need us.”

I rubbed at my eyes for a moment. Then I said, “Let’s say I do sign on. I’m willing to wear the cloak. I’m willing to fight for as long as the war is on. But I won’t move away from Chicago. There are people here who depend on me.” I glowered. “And I won’t bow my head to Morgan. I don’t want him within a hundred miles of my town.”

Luccio rubbed at her jaw, and then nodded slowly, her eyes thoughtful. “I have to reassign Morgan in any case.” She nodded again, more sharply. “Then I’m conscripting you into the Wardens as a regional commander.”

I blinked.

“You’ll be in charge of security and operations in this region, and coordinate with the other three American regional commanders.”

“Uh,” I said. “What does that mean?”

“That it will be your job to protect mortals in this area. To be vigilant against supernatural threats in your region, and represent the Council in matters of diplomacy. To aid and assist other wizards who come to you for aid and protection, and, when required, to strike out at the enemies of the Council, such as the Red Court and their allies.”

I frowned. “Uh, I pretty much do that anyway.”

Luccio’s face broke into the first genuinely warm smile I’d ever seen on her, the care lines vanishing, replaced with crow’s-feet at the corners of her eyes. “So now you’ll do it in a grey cloak.” Her expression sobered. “You’re a fighter, Dresden. If the White Council is to survive, we need more like you.”

She pushed away from the table and walked over to the bar, carrying our empty bottles with her.

When she came back, I had just finished getting the cloak pin settled and draping the heavy, soft grey fabric around my shoulders. She stopped in front of me and looked me up and down for a moment. Ramirez glanced at me, and his grin widened. Morgan looked, and from his expression you would think someone had just shoved a knife into his testicles. Mac’s brow furrowed, and he studied me in the cloak, his lips quietly pursed.

“Thank you,” Luccio said quietly, and offered me an ale.

I accepted it with a nod. We touched bottles and took a drink.

“Very well then, Commander,” Luccio said, her tone turning brisk and businesslike. “This is your territory, and you have the most recent intelligence on Kemmler’s disciples. What is our next step?”

I shoved my hair back from my eyes and said, “Okay, Warden Lucc—uh, Captain Luccio. Let’s sit down and get to work. It’s getting dark, and we don’t have much time.”

Chapter

Thirty-two

When I walked through the door of Murphy's house, it was raining and I was still wearing the grey cloak. I limped into the kitchen, where Thomas and Butters and Bob were sitting at a table with a bunch of candles, paper, pencils, and empty cans of Coors.

Thomas's jaw dropped open. "Holy crap," he said.

Butters blinked at Thomas and then at me. "Uh. What?"

"Harry!" Bob said, orange eye lights glowing brightly. "You *stole* a Warden's cloak?"

I scowled at them and took the cloak off. It dripped all over the kitchen floor. "I didn't steal it." Mouse came padding into the room, tail wagging, and I rubbed briefly at his ears.

"Oh," Bob said. "So you took it off a body?"

"No," I said, annoyed, and settled onto a chair at the table. "I got drafted."

"Holy crap," Thomas said again.

"I don't get it," Butters said.

"Harry's joined the wizard secret police!" Bob bumbled. "He gets to convict on suspicion and take justice into his own hands! How cool is that!"

Thomas looked at me steadily and then at the door behind me. Then back to me.

"I'm alone," I said quietly. "Relax."

He nodded. "What happened?"

"A lot," I said. "There isn't time to cover it all now. But the Wardens are in town, and I'm not so worried about them crawling all over and finding out everyone's secrets."

"Why not?" Thomas asked.

"Because at the moment all five of them are at a hotel downtown, getting showers and changing bandages while I try to come up with more information about the heirs of Kemmler."

Thomas blinked slowly. "All *five*...and they have wounded?"

I nodded, my lips pressed hard together.

"Wow," Thomas said quietly. "How bad is it?"

"They drafted *me*," I said.

"That's bad, all right," Bob said cheerfully.

I looked at the scattered papers and books on the table. "Tell me you guys came up with something."

Butters blinked a few times and then started fumbling at the papers on the table, peering at them in the candlelight. "Uh, well, there's good news and bad news."

"Bad first," I said. "I'm going to need the pick-me-up afterward."

"We've got nothing on those numbers," Butters said. "I mean, they aren't a code. They're too short. They could be an address or an account number, but none of the banks we could get on the phone use that number of digits." He coughed apologetically. "If I could have gotten on the Net I could have gotten you a lot more, but..." He gestured uselessly around the room. "We couldn't get one call in fifty to go through, and at most of the places we called, no one answered. And in the past hour the phones have gone out altogether."

I shook my head. "Yeah. City's going insane, too. There were two fires between here and McAnally's. Some kind of riot going in Bucktown, I heard on a police radio."

"The governor has asked for help from the National Guard," Thomas said quietly. "They're sending troops in to keep order on the streets."

I blinked. "How did you find that out?"

"I called my sister," he said.

I frowned. "I thought Lara wasn't speaking with you."

Thomas's voice went dry. "Just because she cut me off from the family's money, kicked me out of any of our holdings, made it clear that I no longer have their protection, and she's holding the woman I love as a virtual prisoner, don't think she doesn't still like me, personally."

"So she did you a little favor," I said.

"Technically," Thomas said, "she did *you* a little favor."

"Why did she do that?" I asked.

"Well, I hinted about how since her entire power base depended on a certain secret being kept, and since you were awfully irrational about

protecting the good citizens of Chicago, that you might develop loose lips to sink her ship if she didn't help you in your moment of need."

"Um," I said. "So you're telling me that I just engaged in blackmail against the ruler of the White Court. By proxy."

"Yeah," Thomas said. "You've got some great big brass balls on you to do something like that, Harry."

"I guess I do." I shook my head. "Why did I do that?"

"Because we needed help," Thomas said. "We were getting nowhere fast. Lara's got a ton of resources available to her, and a lot of manpower. She was able to come up with some of the other information we needed."

"Which is the good news," Butters said. "She wasn't blacked out and cut off from the Internet like we are, and she was able to get a bunch of information we couldn't." He passed me a piece of paper. "Not on the numbers—but one of her people was able to find out about Native American artifacts and weapons here in Chicago."

I looked up sharply at Butters. "Yeah?"

He nodded at the paper and I read over it. "Yep," he said. "The Native American Center is using their facility to host this big display on tribal hunting and warfare before all of us palefaces showed up with guns and smallpox. The History Channel is using it as a part of some history-of-warfare special, and they were filming there all last week."

"Yeah," I said. "That could have some old hunter spirits attached to it." I read over the list. "Dammit, I should have remembered this myself. The Field Museum has that big Cahokian artifacts exhibit that Professor Bartlesby was in charge of. Hell, it was a bunch of Indian artifacts that Corpsetaker helped assemble himself. Probably with tonight in mind."

Butters nodded. "And the Mitchell Museum up in Evanston has got more Native American artifacts than either one put together."

"Crap," I said. "That's it."

"How do you know that?" Butters asked.

"It only stands to reason," Bob supplied. "The whole point is to summon up as many old spirits as possible and then consume them. The most spirits are going to be attracted to wherever there is the most old junk."

I nodded. "I remember this place now. That museum's on a college campus, right?"

"Kendall College," Butters confirmed.

“College campus on Halloween night,” Thomas said. “Hell of a place for a gang of necromancers to slug it out. There’s going to be collateral damage.”

“No, there isn’t,” I said, and I was surprised how vicious my own voice sounded. “Because we’re going to stop this stupid summoning. And then we’re going to hunt those murderous bastards down and kill them.”

There was dead silence in the kitchen.

Thomas and Butters both stared at me, expressions apprehensive.

“Maybe it’s the cloak,” Bob suggested brightly. “Harry, do you feel any more judgmental and self-righteous than you did this morning?”

I took a slow and deep breath. “Sorry,” I said. “Sorry. That came out kinda harsh.”

“Maybe a little,” Butters said, his voice all but a whisper.

I rubbed at my face and glanced at the battery-powered clock on the wall of Murphy’s kitchen. “Okay. Sundown’s in just over an hour. I have to be ready to call up the Erlking by then.”

“Um,” Thomas said. “Harry, if it’s the Erlking’s presence that’s going to attract all of these old spirits to their old tools and stuff, then won’t it do the same thing no matter *who* calls him up?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Unless the one who calls him traps him in a circle to contain his power and leaves him there.”

Bob made a spluttering sound. “Harry, that’s a dangerous proposition. No, scratch that, it’s an *insane* proposition. Even assuming you have the will to trap something like the Erlking in a circle, and even if you keep him there all night, he is *not* going to let that kind of insult go. He’ll come back the next night and kill you. If you’re lucky.”

“I can worry about that after I’ve done it,” I said.

“Wait,” Butters said. “Wait, wait. I mean, will it really matter? These guys don’t have the bad magic book, right? Without that book, all they can do is call up the spirits. They can’t, you know, eat them. Right?”

“We can’t assume that they don’t have it,” I said. “Grevane might have found it.”

“But the other two couldn’t, right?” Butters said.

“Even if they haven’t, they’ll still be there,” I said. “They can’t afford to assume that their rivals haven’t gotten the book. So they’re going to show up with everything they have to try to prevent one of the others from going through with the ritual.”

“Why?” Butters asked.

“Because they hate each other,” I said. “And if one of them goes all godly, he’s going to enjoy crushing the others. It will probably be the first thing he does.”

“Oh,” Butters said.

“That’s why I need you to do something for me, Thomas.”

My brother nodded. “Name it.”

I grabbed a blank piece of paper and a pencil and started writing. “This is a note. I want you to take it down to the address I’m writing down and get it to the Wardens.”

“I’m not going anywhere close to the Wardens,” Thomas said.

“You don’t have to,” I said. “They’re at a hotel. You’ll leave it at the desk and ask the clerk to take it to them. Then clear out fast.”

“Are they going to trust a note?” Thomas asked, skeptical.

“I told them to expect a messenger if I couldn’t get there myself. They know about the Erlking. That I’m trying to sidetrack him. They need to know where the heirs of Kemmler are going to be so that they can take them down.”

“Five of them,” Thomas said quietly. “They’ll be outnumbered by one.”

I grimaced. It would be worse than that. Ramirez had looked like he could handle himself, but the two rookies couldn’t have stood up to any of the heirs or their companions, from what I’d seen. “Once I’ve secured the Erlking, I’ll be along as quick as I can. Besides that, they’re Wardens,” I said. “They’ll take down Kemmler’s flunkies.”

“Or die trying,” Thomas said. He grimaced. “How should I get down there?”

I went to another kitchen drawer and rummaged in it until I found Murphy’s spare keys. I tossed them to Thomas. “Here. Her motorcycle is in the shed.”

“Right,” he said, but his expression was wary. “She going to mind me stealing her bike?”

“It’s in a good cause,” I told him. “The streets are bad, and the Wardens need to get moving soonest. Go.”

Thomas nodded, pocketed the keys, and shrugged into his leather jacket. “I’ll get back here as soon as I’m done.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Thomas. To the Wardens you’re nothing but a White Court vampire. If they see you, they’ll be out for blood.”

“I understand,” he said. His voice was a little bitter. “If I’m not back in time, Harry...good luck.”

He offered his hand, and we traded grips, hard. My hand must have been cold with nerves, because his felt warm. Then he let go of my hand, nodded to Bob and Butters, and headed out into the rain. A minute later Murphy’s Harley grumbled in the backyard, and then purred off into the rain and gloom.

I sat there in silence for a minute, then got up and went to the stove. I got the teapot out, filled it up, and put it on the gas burner to boil. It took me a minute to find Murphy’s collection of teas, and it was gratuitously complex. I mean, come on, how many different types of tea do you really need? Maybe I’m prejudiced, because I take my tea with so much sugar that the actual flavor is sort of an aftertaste.

I found some in instant bags that smelled vaguely minty. “Tea?” I asked Butters.

“Sure,” he said.

I got out two cups.

“What’s next?” he asked.

“Hot tea,” I said. “Staying warm. Then I go out in the rain and call up the Erlking. You’re staying inside while I do.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because it’s going to be dangerous.”

“Well, yeah,” he said. “But why inside the house? I mean, this supergoblin can just rip the walls apart, right?”

“Strong enough to do it, probably,” I said. “But it can’t. The house is protected by its threshold.”

Butters looked at me blankly. “Which means what?”

I leaned a hip on the counter and explained. “A threshold is a kind of energy that surrounds a home. It’s...” I frowned, thinking how to explain it. “It’s sort of like the home has a positive charge to it. If outside magic wants to come in, it has to neutralize that charge first. Big, tough things from the Nevernever need a lot of power just to stay in our world. They don’t usually have enough to take out a threshold and still have enough juice to be dangerous.”

“It’s like that vampire thing?” he asked. “They can’t come in if you don’t invite them?”

“Pretty much, yeah. If you invite something in, your threshold won’t affect it. But other magical beings and energy have trouble with it. It’s a solid defense.”

“Didn’t help your place much,” Butters observed.

“My place is a rental apartment,” I said. “And except for the past several months, it’s been just me living there. Doesn’t give it the same kind of energy as you’d find in a long-established home.”

“Oh. Is that what they mean by ‘safe as houses,’ then?”

I smiled a little. “A house doesn’t make a home. When the place has got history, family, emotions, worries, joys worked into the wood, that’s when it gets a solid threshold. This house has been in the Murphy clan for better than a hundred years, and lived in for every one of them. It’s solid. You’ll be safe in here.”

“But it’s not going to get loose once you call it up,” Butters said. “Right?”

“That’s the plan. But even if it did, *you* aren’t the one who is going to piss it off. There won’t be any reason for it to come after you.”

“Oh, good,” he said. He blinked at me and said apologetically, “Not that I want it to come after *you*, Harry.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said.

Butters nodded. “Why zombies?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“Sorry. Changing topics. New question. Why do all these necromancer types use zombies?”

“Not all of them do,” I pointed out. “Corpsetaker had called up a bunch of semicorporeal ghosts. Specters.”

“But human,” Butters said. “Zombies look human. Specters look human. Why not whistle up a pack of decayed rats? Or maybe semicorporeal mosquitos? Why use people?”

“Oh,” I said. “It’s got to do with a kind of metaphysical impression that any given creature leaves upon its death. Sort of like a footprint. Human beings leave larger footprints than most animals, which means that you can pour more energy into reanimating them.”

“They make stronger goons,” Butters clarified.

“Yes.”

“How come Grevane had fresh corpses when he came to get me, but he attacked your house with old ones? I mean, I saw those things up close.” He

shivered. "Some of them must have dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century."

"Same reason they animate humans instead of animals," I said. "Older corpses leave a deeper metaphysical imprint. They're harder to call up, but once you get them here they're easier to control, stronger, more difficult to damage."

"Old corpses get you stronger undead flunkies," he said.

"Right," I said. I could see the wheels turning in Butters's head as he processed the information. He looked like he was busy lining up dozens more questions spawned by the answers to the first few, and I had a feeling he would pursue them with relentless curiosity.

"Okay. But what if—"

"Butters," I said as gently as I could. "Not now. All I want to do is have a quiet cup of tea." An inspiration hit me. "Ask Bob," I told him. "Bob knows a hell of a lot more than I do, anyway."

"Oh," Butters said. He looked from me to the skull. "Um. Yeah, I guess Thomas was talking to it."

"He!" Bob said indignantly. "I am very much a he! I'm not some kind of freaking animatronic Tinkertoy!"

"Right," Butters said. "Um. Sorry. Bob. Do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"It's a waste of my vast intellect and talent," Bob sneered.

"Do it, Bob," I told him.

"Oh, man." The orange lights in the skull's eye sockets rolled. "Fine. I haven't got anything better to do than to teach kindergarten."

"Great!" Butters bubbled, and sat down at the table. He grabbed some more paper and a pencil. "Well, how about we start with..."

I fixed myself a cup of tea and one for Butters. I put the cup down near him, but he took little notice of it. He was deeply involved in a conversation with Bob.

I slipped out into the living room and put my aching leg up on the table, then settled back onto the couch with my tea. I sat in the gloom, sipping hot, sweet mint something-or-other and tried to order my thoughts. I was tired enough that it didn't take too long.

I was about to call up a peer of Queen Mab and try to trap it for an entire night. A garden spider had about as much chance of trapping a Bengal tiger.

Except that the Bengal tiger probably wouldn't bother to squash the spider for daring to make the attempt. The Erlking would.

That made the whole notion more stupid than most of my plans, but I didn't have too much choice in the matter. The presence of the Erlking in the area would drastically increase the number and the potency of the undead that the Kemmlerites were planning to summon tonight. If I could block the Erlking's presence from Chicago, it would take a big chunk out of the powers the necromancers would summon. Grevane and company were formidable enough without calling up an army of superzombies and über-ghosts. If I could stop that from happening, it might give Luccio and her Wardens a real chance to defeat them.

If I wasn't fast enough to call the Erlking before one of the Kemmlerites, or if he escaped my hold and ran loose through Chicago, people would die. The Erlking would summon the Wild Hunt into a lightless Chicago Halloween night, and anyone they caught in the open would be torn to shreds.

Lightning flickered outside, somehow too dark and dull to be natural. A beat later, thunder ripped through the evening air, shaking the little house. The wind started to pick up, and the steady beat of rain on the windows surged and retreated with its restless gusting.

I didn't feel like a wizard. I didn't feel like a deadly and powerful Warden. I didn't feel like the supernatural champion of Chicago, or a fearless foe of evil, a daring summoner able to cast his defiance into the teeth of a supernatural titan, or an enlightened sage of the mystic arts. I felt like a scarred, battered, aching, one-handed man with few pleasant prospects for the future and a ridiculous pair of pants with one leg slashed off.

Mouse padded over to me through the dimness. He chuffed softly at me, and then laid his head down on my leg. My eyes were closed, but I could hear his tail thumping softly against the couch. I rested my bad hand on Mouse's head and petted him awkwardly. Mouse didn't mind. He just leaned against me, loaning me the warmth of his fur and the silent faithfulness of his presence.

It made me feel better. Mouse might not have been the smartest creature on earth, but he was steady, kind, loyal, and was possessed of the uncanny wisdom of beasts for knowing whom to trust. I might not have been a

superhero, but Mouse thought that I was pretty darned cool. That meant something. It would have to be enough.

I set my teacup down, took my foot off Murphy's coffee table, and rose. I picked up my staff without looking at it, took a deep breath, and clenched my jaw.

Then I marched into the kitchen in a lopsided stalk. "Butters," I said. "Stay here with Bob and Mouse. Watch my back. If you see anyone trying to sneak up on me, give a yell."

"Right," he said. "Will do."

I nodded to him and went out into the rain to test my will against the legendary lord of the Wild Hunt.

Chapter

Thirty-three

The rain had plastered my hair to my head by the time I got all the material for the summoning out of the Beetle's trunk. I stuffed it all into a gym bag and then walked out to the middle of the backyard. It wasn't quite too dark to see—not yet. But I didn't want to make any mistakes, so I used the last of the chemical light sticks Kincaid had given me before our raid on Mavra's scourge the year before. I snapped it and shook it up, and green-yellow light spread out in a little pool around me. The rain limited how much it could spread, and it created the illusion that the entire world had shrunk to a ten-foot circle rain and grass and green-golden light.

I started with the circle where I intended to trap the Erlking. The coil of barbed wire still gleamed with its factory finish. I uncoiled enough of it to give me several small holes in my fingers and to join into a circle about seven feet across. Though it wasn't cold iron in the technical sense, it was very much what the faeries meant when they said “cold iron”—the wire had plenty of iron in it, and cold iron was the bane of the faerie world.

I laid the barbed wire out, straightening it slightly as I went, and tacked it down into the damp earth with horseshoe-shaped metal staples as long as my little finger. I double-checked every staple, and then clipped the barbed wire from the larger roll and used a pair of pliers to twist the loose ends together. After that, I marked out the points of an invisible five-pointed star within the circle, and placed several articles with an affinity for the Erlking; a heavy collar one might place on a hunting hound, a whetstone, a small bowie knife, flint and steel, and several steel arrowheads.

Then I placed my own affinity items opposite those of the Erlking's, outside the circle; a used copy of *The Hobbit*, the splintered end of my last blasting rod, my .44, a parking ticket I hadn't paid yet, and finally my mother's silver pentacle amulet. I stepped back and went over the circle again, making sure that it was fixed solidly and that nothing had fallen across it.

In the back of my mind somewhere, I was aware of the approach of sunset. I don't know how I knew it, really. It was already darker than most nights, and I certainly couldn't judge when the sun would be down with all those rain clouds in the way—but that didn't seem to matter. I could feel the sunlight still gliding down to be trapped in the overcast, could feel its presence and warmth with some part of my mind that wasn't entirely beholden to mere physics. I could feel it fading, and felt the concurrent stirring of the magical forces of night as it did.

The energy of night was far different than that of the daylight—not inherently evil, but wilder, more dangerous, more unpredictable. Night was a time of endings, and this night, Samhain, All Hallow's Eve, was particularly so. On this night, the forces of the spirit world, the wild things that haunted the Nevernever, drawn to death and decay, would flit freely back and forth. Spirits would turn restless in their graves and wander the world, mostly unseen by mortal eyes. The wild beasts could feel the night coming, and their metropolitan cousins could sense the knife-edge of danger and energy in the air. Dogs began to howl in the neighborhood around me, first one, then two, then dozens, and their long, low, mournful howls rose up in a haunting tide.

Dark was only moments away, and I stripped the black leather glove from my bad hand and knelt by the barbed-wire circle. Then I leaned down and pressed my left palm, all scarred but for the shape of Lasciel's sigil like a living brand on my skin, against the nearest tine of barbed wire, pressing my flesh down with careful deliberation. I didn't feel the wire cut me, but there was a trickle of warmth over a portion of the sigil, and my blood—black in the greenish chemical light—slipped down over the barbed wire, mixing with my will to send energy coursing into the cold-iron prison I had built.

The prison was built and the trap was set. I wished that there had been more time to assemble the articles I'd needed. If there had been months to prepare, I could have worked with Bob to figure out the best way to do the job. The materials might have been rare and expensive and difficult to attain, but it was within the realm of possibility to build a circle from which even a being like the Erlking could not lightly escape.

But there hadn't been time, and if my quickie-mart Alcatraz was going to do the job, it would need all of my focus and determination.

So I shut my doubts into a closet in the back of my mind, along with my fears. I knelt in my coat in the rain, staff still in my right hand, and took slow, deep breaths. I envisioned myself drawing in power with each breath, and exhaling weakness and distraction. I felt the magic stirring around me and within me as I did, and I started building up my will, gathering my strength for use, until the wet grass seemed to sparkle with too many points of green-gold light and the hairs on my neck rose up on end.

I took in a final deep breath, and on the exhale night fell.

I opened my mouth and began to call out in the steady cadence of the summoning. My voice rang hollow in the wind and rain, muffled but strong, and I poured some of my will into the words, until the power in them began to make the air ripple around them as they flowed from my lips. There, in the darkness, I reached into the spirit world to call up one of the deadliest beings of Faerie.

And the Erlking answered.

One moment the circle was empty. Then there was a flash of lightning, a crash of thunder, and a disembodied black shadow appeared on the grass within the circle—the shadow of a tall, standing figure with no physical presence to cast it.

I barely stopped myself from flinching and breaking off the summoning chant—a mistake that would have freed the Erlking to leave at best, and freed it to kill me at worst. But I recovered myself and kept up the litany all the way through to the end. When I finished it, my voice had risen to a strident, silvery clarion, and on the last word lightning flashed down from the storm, green and white and eye-searing. It struck down upon the circle, slammed against it, and then scattered out around the circle in a hissing matrix of electricity and steam and magic, defining the cylinder of the magic circle in a sparkle of greenish light that rose up into the night for a moment, and then faded away.

When it was gone, the shadow within my circle was no longer alone.

The Erlking stood better than eight feet high. Other than that it looked more or less like a human dressed in close-fitting leathers and mail of some dark, matte black substance. It wore a bucket-shaped helmet that covered its face, and the horns of an enormous stag rose up and away from the helm. Within the slit of the helmet's visor, I could see twin gleams of amber fire, and as those terrible eyes settled upon me, I could feel the presence of the being behind them like a sudden raw and wild hunger that

pressed against the *outside* of my skin. I could feel the Erlking's lust for the wild night, for the hunt, and for the kill. Lightning flashed again and the rain came down harder, and he raised his arms slowly, dismissing me and stretching his body up to glory in the storm.

It is time, mortal. Release me.

The words suddenly appeared in my head without going through my ears, scarlet and glowing and scalding. This time I did flinch as the Erlking's will sent meaning into my thoughts like a well-thrown spear. I tore my attention away from that lance of thought and spoke aloud in reply.

"I will not release you."

The glowing eyes within the helm snapped back to me, flaring larger and brighter. *I am no beast to be lured and trapped, mortal. Set me free and join me in the hunt.*

Images came with the thoughts this time—the rush of rain and wind in my face, raw hunger in my belly that I was about to sate, the strength and power of my body and that of the mount beneath me, and the glorious thrill of the chase as the prey fled as it was created to do, testing my strength, speed, endurance, and will while the night called and the storm raged around me. To my surprise, there was no sense of hate in it, no twisting bitterness of despair. There was only a wild and ferocious joy, an adrenaline sense of excitement, of passion, of savage harmony red in tooth and claw.

I barely managed to pull my thoughts back into my own control, grinding my teeth and reminding myself that I was kneeling in Murphy's backyard, not pursuing game through the forest primeval. The Erlking might not be evil incarnate, but that didn't mean that he wasn't far too dangerous to be allowed to go free. "No," I growled. "I will not release you."

His amber-flame eyes narrowed, and he dropped slowly into a crouch, knees bent, his fingers resting lightly on the grass just inside the barbed wire. Those eyes were barely three feet from mine, and he considered me in silence that swiftly became a torment of suspense.

You are he, the Erlking cast at me. He who defied Queen Winter. He who slew Lady Summer.

In those thoughts, I saw Mab standing over me as I lay stunned beside the Summer Lady's corpse, offering me her hand. I felt Aurora's blood drying on my skin, tasted it, harsh and sweet, in my mouth. I had to force myself not to try to spit the phantom taste from my tongue.

"I am he," I said.

We are not foes, came his thoughts. And...he was curious about it. Even baffled. In sending me his thoughts, I also got flashes of emotion from him. *You are part of the hunt. A predator. Why do you call me if not to join me?*

“To prevent another from setting you free this night.”

The Erlking tilted its head. There was no sending of thought, but I read the gesture clearly enough to interpret it as if he had. *Why?*

“Because your presence would mean suffering and death for those people I would protect.”

Man suffers. Man dies. It is how things are.

“Not tonight it isn’t,” I growled.

Hunter, cast the Erlking. You are not strong enough to hold me. Release me, lest I turn the hunt upon you.

And suddenly I felt the other side of the hunt. I felt my legs singing with the strength of terror. I felt my lungs burning, felt my body moving with the power and grace that only the approach of death can summon from it. I fled over the rough ground, bounding like a deer, and knew the whole while that there was no escape.

“Thrice I say and done.” I gasped, forcing the words out in a defiant scream. “I will. Not. Release you.”

And the Erlking rose, an unearthly scream piercing the night. The chorus of howling dogs rose with it, louder and louder, and the storm lashed at the air with sabers of wind and lances of lightning. The sound was deafening, the light searing, and the freaking ground started to tremble as the Erlking lashed out against my circle with his will.

I stood my ground, facing the Erlking and casting my will into the circle, forcing it against his own power, struggling to contain him while he sought to burst free from my enchantment. It was an enormous struggle, and almost hopeless. I felt like a man straining to push a car up a hill. Not only was it a difficult weight to begin to move, but a greater force was working against me, and if I allowed it to move even an inch it would begin to gain momentum and crush me beneath it.

So I fought for that inch, refusing to give it to him. The Erlking wasn’t an evil being—but he was a force of nature, power, and violence without conscience or restraint.

He screamed again, and the howling wind and rain and the call of beasts grew even louder. Again he surged against the circle of my will, and again I held him in. Wild, the Erlking shook his head like a maddened beast, and

his antlers slammed against the confining wall of the circle that imprisoned him, sending ripples of greenish light out through the circle. Then he reached to his side and drew a black sword from its scabbard. He lifted the blade, and a lance of green lightning flashed down from the storm, touching upon its tip and wreathing it in blinding light. Then he took the sword in both hands and brought it down upon the barrier.

I have little memory of what the third blow was like. I remember it in much the same way I do the burning of my left hand. There was too much light, too much energy, a tide of agony, and I was terrified. My vision faded to a blind field of white, and I thrust my staff hard against the ground to keep from falling.

And then my vision began to clear. The tide began to recede. And within the circle, whirling in a frenzy of frustration and need, was the Erlking. His power was fading, and the circle I'd built had been good enough to give me enough leverage to hold him.

I thought I heard a muffled voice somewhere amid all the wind and rain and thunder and the swift pounding of my own heart. I started to look around for the source of the noise.

And then someone hit me on the back of the head.

I remember *that* part, because I'd been through it before. A flash of light, pain, a sickening whirling sensation as I fell, and a disjointed looseness to limbs that had suddenly gone useless. I fell to one side, shocked that the whole world had suddenly tilted on end. The grass suddenly felt cold and wet against my cheek.

With a shriek of triumph, the Erlking shattered my circle into a cloud of golden light that faded and vanished. There was a roar of wind, and then an enormous horse landed in Murphy's yard as if it had just vaulted over the whole of her house. The Erlking flung himself up onto the black steed's back and let loose an eerie cry. When he did, all the howling music of the dogs, primitive and fierce, seemed to congeal into flashes of lightning that leapt *up* from the ground and into the clouds. For a second there was silence, and then the screaming winds warbled and whistled into deeper, more terrifying howls than any dog had ever uttered. From the shadows rushed a great hound, a beast the size of a pony with dark fur, gleaming white teeth, and the flaming amber eyes of the Erlking himself. More hounds came leaping from the shadows, bounding in bloodthirsty joy around the Erlking's horse.

The Erlking whirled his steed, lifted his black sword in a mocking salute to me, and then cried out to his steed and his hounds. The black horse gathered itself and leapt into the air, then started churning its legs as if running up a hill—and kept going up. The hounds leapt and followed their master up into the teeth of the storm. Lightning flashed in my eyes, and when it died again, they were gone.

The Wild Hunt was loose in Chicago.

And I had been the one to call them here.

I struggled until I began to move. I wasn't able to get enough balance to rise, but I managed to roll over onto my back. Cold raindrops slapped against my face.

Cowl put the barrel of my own .44 to the end of my nose and said, "An impressive display, Dresden. It's always such a pity when someone with such talent dies so young."

Chapter Thirty-four

I looked at the cavernous barrel and thought to myself that a .44 really was a ridiculously big gun. Then I looked past it to Cowl and said, “But you aren’t planning on doing it yourself, are you? Otherwise you’d have just shot me in the back of the head and had done with it. With me groggy like that, you might not even have had a death curse to worry about.”

“Very good,” Cowl said approvingly. “Your reason, at least, seems sound. Provided you remain very still and give me no reason to think you a threat, I’ll be glad to let you live until the Erlking returns for you.”

I held still, partly because I didn’t want to get shot, and partly because I thought I might throw up if I moved my head too much. “How’d you find me?” I asked.

“Kumori and I have been taking turns tailing you most of the day,” he said.

“When do you people sleep?” I asked.

“No rest for the wicked,” Cowl said. His tone was amused from within his heavy hood, but the gun never wavered.

“Someone had to keep an eye on me,” I said. “You and Grevane and Corpsetaker all wanted the Erlking to be in town. It didn’t matter to you who called him as long as someone did.”

“And you were the only one with an interest in keeping him away,” Cowl said. “All I needed to do was watch you and ensure that you did not actually trap the Erlking.”

“And that’s why you followed me,” I said.

“It’s one reason,” he replied. “I think you might actually have done it, you know, had I not interrupted you. I was the only one of the three of us who thought you might succeed.”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “I thought that you guys hated one another’s guts.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then are you working together or trying to kill each other?” I asked.

“Why, yes,” Cowl said, and what sounded like a genuine laugh bubbled in his voice. “We smile at one another and play nicely all in the name of Kemmler’s greater glory, of course. But we are all planning on killing one another as soon as it’s convenient. I take it that Corpsetaker tried to remove Grevane last night?”

“Yeah. It was a real party.”

“Pity. I would have enjoyed watching them in action again. But I was busy with the actual work. That’s how it usually works out.”

“Taking out the city’s power grid.”

“And phone lines, radio communications, and quite a few other, subtler things,” Cowl said. “It was difficult, but someone had to do it. Naturally it fell to me. But we’ll see how things settle out before morning.”

“Heh,” I said. “They think they’re using you to get the serious technical magic done, while they save up their juice for the fight. And you think you’re lulling them off guard, so that when the Darkhallow goes down, you get the power.”

“There’s no real reason to practice my swordplay and summoning of the dead when I have no intention of entering a tactical contest with them.”

“You really intend to make yourself into a god?” I asked.

“I intend to take power,” Cowl said. “I regard myself as the least of the possible evils.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Someone is going to get the power. Might as well be you. Something like that?”

“Something like that,” Cowl said.

“What if no one got it?” I said.

“I don’t really see that happening,” he said. “Grevane and the Corpsetaker are determined. I intend to beat them to the prize and use it to destroy them. It’s the only way to be sure one of those madmen does not become something more terrible than the earth has ever seen.”

“Right,” I said. “You’re the correct madman for the job.”

Cowl was silent for a long moment in the rain. Drops fell off the end of my pistol in his gloved hand. Then he said, his voice pensive, “I do not perceive myself to be mad. But if I were truly mad, would I be able to tell?”

I shivered. Probably from the rain and the cold.

Cowl took a step back from me and said, voice firm and confident again, “Did you find him?”

I looked behind me and saw Kumori glide out the back door of Murphy’s house. “Yes.”

I stared hard at Kumori, and my heart lurched in my chest.

She left the door open behind her. There was no candlelight in the kitchen. There was no movement inside the house.

“Excellent,” Cowl said. He took a step back from me. “I have already warned you to stay clear of my path, Dresden. I now suspect that you are too proud to back down. I know of the Wardens now in the city. They pose no serious obstacle to my plans.”

“You think you can take them in a fight?” I said.

“I have no intention of *fighting* them, Dresden,” Cowl replied. “I’m simply going to kill them. Join them if it suits you to do so instead of waiting for the Erlking. It makes no difference to me how you die.”

His voice was steady and absolutely confident. It scared me. My heart lurched in my chest, fear for Butters and a dawning understanding of Cowl’s quiet madness competing to see which could make it race faster.

“There’s one problem, Cowl,” I said.

Cowl began to turn away, but then paused. “Oh?”

“You still don’t have the *Word*. How are you going to manage the Darkhallow without it?”

For an answer, Cowl carefully lowered the hammer on my revolver and turned away. And he laughed, quietly, under his breath. He started walking, and Kumori hurried to his side. Then Cowl tossed my gun into the grass, raised his hand, and flicked it at the air before him. I felt a surge of power as he parted the veil between the material world and the Nevernever and they both stepped through it, vanishing from Murphy’s backyard. The rift sealed behind Cowl, so quietly and smoothly that I would never have been able to tell it had opened at all.

I was left alone in the wind and the darkness and the cold rain. Somewhere in the distance there was an echoing howl that came from above me and very far away.

It should have frightened me, but I was so woozy that I mostly wanted to lie down and close my eyes for a minute. I knew that if I did I might not open them for a while. Maybe not ever.

I had to check on Butters and Mouse. I rolled over and picked up my staff, then crawled a couple of feet and got my mother's pentacle. Then I stood up. My head pounded with a dull, throbbing beat of pain, and I bowed my head forward for a moment, letting cold rain fall onto the lump forming on the back of my skull. The worst of it passed after a minute, and I got the pain under control. I'd taken harder shots to the head than that one had been, and I didn't have time to coddle myself. I blew out a harsh breath and shambled into the house.

I found it dark, all the candles that had been lit now extinguished. I lifted my mother's pentacle and ran my will through it, causing it to pulse and then glow with silver-blue light. I lifted the pentacle over my head and surveyed the kitchen.

It was empty. There was no sign of Mouse or Butters—and no evidence of a struggle, either. My fear subsided a little. If Kumori had found them, there would be signs of violence—blood, scattered furnishings. Butters's papers were still stacked up neatly on the kitchen table.

Murphy's house wasn't a large one, and there were only so many places Butters could be. I limped into the living room and then down the short hall to the bedrooms and the bathroom.

"Butters?" I called softly. "It's Harry. Mouse?"

There was a sudden rough scratching at the door of the linen closet beside me, and I almost jumped through the ceiling. I swallowed in an effort to force my heart back down into my chest, then opened the closet door.

Butters and Mouse crouched on the floor of the closet. Butters was at the rear, and though Mouse looked cramped, he crouched solidly between Butters and the door. His tail began to thump against the inside of the closet when he saw me, and he wriggled his way clear to come to me.

"Oh, thank God," Butters said. He squirmed out of the closet after Mouse. "Harry. Are you all right?"

"Been worse," I told him. "Are you okay? What happened?"

"Um," Butters said, "I saw you out there. And then...there was something inside that ring of barbed wire. And I was...I couldn't see it very well, but then the wind kicked up and I thought I saw something moving outside and...I yelled and sort of panicked." His face flushed. "Sorry. I was just...much shorter than that thing. I panicked."

He'd rabbited. All in all, probably not a stupid reaction to the presence of an angry lord of Faerie. "Don't worry about it," I said. "Mouse stayed with you?"

"Yeah," Butters said. "I guess so. He started to try to get outside when that thing in the circle screamed. I was holding him back. I didn't realize I still had his collar when I, uh..."

Butters's face turned greenish and he said, "Excuse me." Then he sprinted for the bathroom.

I heard him throwing up inside and frowned down at Mouse.

"You know what?" I told the dog. "I don't care if Butters had been chock-full of gamma radiation and had green skin and purple pants. There's no way he could haul you into a closet with him."

Mouse looked up at me and tilted his head to one side, doggy expression enigmatic.

"But that would mean that it was the other way around. That you were the one hauling Butters to a hiding place."

Mouse's jaw dropped open into a grin.

"But *that* would mean that you knew you couldn't handle Kumori, and that she was dangerous to Butters. And you knew that I wanted you to protect him. And that instead of fighting or running away, you formulated a plan to hide him." I frowned. "And dogs aren't supposed to be that smart."

Mouse snorted out a little sneeze, shook his fuzzy head, and then flopped over onto his back, eyes begging me to scratch his tummy.

"What the hell," I said, and started scratching. "Looks to me like you earned it."

Butters emerged from the bathroom a couple of minutes later. "Sorry," he said. "Nerves. I, uh...Harry, I'm sorry I ran away like that."

"Took cover," I provided. "In the action business, when you don't want to say you ran like a mouse, you call it 'taking cover.' It's more heroic."

"Right," Butters said, flushing. "I took cover."

"It's fun, taking cover," I said. "I take cover all the time."

"What happened?" Butters asked.

"I called the Erlking, but someone kept me from keeping him penned up. They came in the house for a minute, and..." I felt my voice trail off. My relief that Butters and Mouse were all right began to fade, as I realized that they had never been what Kumori had been searching for.

"What?" Butters said quietly. "Harry, what is it?"

“Son of a *bitch*,” I swore, and my voice was a sulfurous snarl. “How could I be so *stupid*?”

I whirled and stalked back down the hall, through the living room, and into the kitchen, lifting my light.

On the kitchen table there were only empty cups of tea, empty cans, unlit candles, paper, and pens.

In the spot where Bob the skull had sat, there was nothing.

“Oh, man,” Butters said quietly at my elbow. “Oh, man. They took him.”

“They took him,” I spat.

“Why?” Butters whispered. “Why would they do that?”

“Because Bob the skull hasn’t always been mine,” I growled. “He used to belong to my old teacher, Justin. And before that he belonged to the necromancer, Kemmler.” I whirled in a fury and slammed my fist into Murphy’s refrigerator so hard that it dented the side and split my middle knuckle open.

“I...I don’t get it,” Butters said, his voice very quiet.

“Bob did for Kemmler what he did for me. He was a consultant. A research assistant. A sounding board for magical theory,” I said. “That’s why Cowl took him.”

“Cowl’s doing research?” Butters asked.

“No,” I spat. “Cowl knew that Bob used to be Kemmler’s. Somewhere in there, Bob knows everything about the theory that Kemmler did.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that Cowl doesn’t need *The Word of Kemmler* now. He doesn’t need the stupid book to enact the Darkhallow because he’s got the spirit that helped Kemmler *write* it.” I shook my head, bitter regret a metallic taste in my mouth. “And I practically gave it to him.”

Chapter Thirty-five

I gave the blood on my torn knuckle a disdainful glance, then snapped, “Get your things and hold on to Mouse. We’re going.”

“Going?” Butters asked.

“It isn’t safe for you here now,” I said. “They know about this place. I can’t leave you behind.”

Butters swallowed. “Where are we going?”

“They tailed me all day. I’ve got to make sure the people I’ve seen today are all right.” I paused, thoughts tearing through my head. “And...I’ve got to find the book.”

“The necromancer’s book?” Butters asked. “Why?”

I got out my keys and headed for the Beetle. “Because I have no freaking clue what’s supposed to be happening at this Darkhallow. The only part that I understood enough to stop was the summoning of the Erlking, and that’s been blown to hell. I keep getting burned because I don’t know enough about what’s going on. I’ve got to figure out how to throw a wrench into Cowl’s gears during the Darkhallow.”

“Why?”

“Because the only other thing I can do is try to kick my way through a crowd of necromancers and undead and try to punch his ticket face-to-face.”

“Wouldn’t that work?”

“If I could pull it off,” I said, and went out into the rain. “But I’m a featherweight fighting in the heavyweight division. Nose-to-nose, I think Cowl would probably kick my eldritch ass. My only real chance is to fight smart, and that means I’ve got to know more about what’s going on. For that, I need the book.”

Butters hurried after me, a couple of fingers through Mouse’s collar. We got into the Beetle and I revved it up. “But we still haven’t figured out those numbers,” he said.

“That has to change,” I said. “Now.”

“Um,” said Butters as I got the Beetle moving, “you can say ‘now’ all you want, but I still don’t know.”

“Could it be a combination?” I said. “Like to a safe?”

“The older safe combinations need some kind of designation for left and right. The newer ones might use some kind of digital code, sure, but unless you find a safe with a password sixteen numerals long, that won’t help us much.”

“A credit card,” I said. “That’s sixteen digits, right?”

“Can be,” Butters said. “You think that’s what the number was? Maybe a credit card or debit card account that Bony Tony wanted his fee to get paid to?”

I grimaced. “Doesn’t make any sense,” I said. “Something like that would be in his pocket. Not hidden in a balloon hanging from a string down his throat.”

“Good point,” Butters said.

We rode in silence for a while. Except for the headlights of other cars, the streets were dark. Between the total lack of lighting, the dark, and the heavy rain, it was like driving through a cave. Traffic was tight and snarled anywhere near the highways, but it had thinned out considerably since the afternoon. The people of Chicago seemed to mostly be staying home for the night, which was a mercy in more ways than one.

Butters looked around nervously a few minutes later. “Harry. This isn’t exactly the best neighborhood.”

“I know,” I said, and pulled over in front of a hydrant, the only open space in sight.

He swallowed. “Why are you stopping the car?”

“I need to check on someone,” I said. “Stay here with Mouse. I’ll be right back.”

“But—”

“Butters,” I said impatiently. “There’s a girl here who helped me out earlier today. I have to make sure Cowl and his sidekick haven’t harmed her.”

“But...can’t you do this after you stop the bad guys?”

I shook my head. “I’m doing my best, here. I don’t know what might happen in the next few hours, but dammit, this girl helped me because I asked her to. *I* dragged her into this. Cowl and Kumori were going to

considerable lengths to destroy every copy of *Der Erlking* that they could find, and if they guessed that I got it from her memory she'll be in danger. I need to be sure she's all right."

"Ooooooh," Butters said. "This is the girl who asked you out, right?"

I blinked. "How did you know that?"

"Thomas told me."

I growled under my breath and said, "Remind me to punch his lights out sometime soon."

"Hey," Butters said. "At least he didn't let me keep thinking you were gay."

I gave Butters a flat look and got out of the car. "Stay in the driver's seat," I told him. "If there's trouble, run. Try to circle back for me."

"Right," Butters said. "Got it."

I hurried through the rain and the darkness into Shiela's building. I drew out my pentacle and willed light from it, and went up the stairs to her floor as I had that morning. The stairs and the hallway had that illusory unfamiliarity that darkness can give a place you've seen only once or twice, but I found my way to Shiela's door easily enough.

I paused for a moment and tried to sense the wards she'd woven, and found that they were still in place. That was good. If anyone had come in after her for some reason, they'd have either torn the ward down or set it off on the way through.

Unless, of course, someone had gone to the trouble to get invited in first. Shiela didn't seem to be the kind to turn folks away out of a sense of general paranoia. I knocked several times.

There wasn't an answer.

She had said she was going out, earlier. She was probably at some costume party somewhere. Talking with friends. Eating good food. Having fun.

Probably.

I knocked again and said, "Shiela? It's Harry."

I heard a couple of soft steps, the creak of a floorboard, and then the door opened to the length of its security chain. Shiela stood in the opening. There was soft candlelight coming from her apartment. "Harry," she said quietly, her mouth curling into a smile. "What are you doing here? Hang on." She closed the door, the security chain rattled, and then she opened it again. "Come in."

“I really can’t stick around,” I said, but I stepped through the door anyway. She had half a dozen candles lit on the end table beside her couch, and there was a mussed blanket on the couch next to a paperback novel.

Shiela’s long, dark hair was piled up into bun and held in place with a couple of chopsticks, leaving her ears and the smooth skin of her neck intriguingly bare. She was wearing a Bears football jersey made of soft cotton that hung to her knees, and she wore pink slippers on her feet. The jersey was loose on her, but she had the curves to make it look more appealing than it had any right to be. I could see her calves, and they did a wonderful job of blending softness and strength.

Shiela saw me looking, and her cheeks turned a little pink. “Hi,” she said, her voice quiet.

“Hi,” I said back, and smiled at her. “Hey, I thought you had a party tonight?”

She shook her head. “I was walking. I didn’t want to walk in the rain, and I couldn’t call anyone to get me a ride, so I’m home.” She tilted her head to one side and frowned at me. “You seem...I’m not sure. Tense. Angry.”

“Both,” I said. “There are some things happening.”

She nodded, her dark eyes serious. “I’ve heard that there’s something bad brewing. It’s what you’re working on, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

She fretted at her lower lip. “Then why are you here?”

She looked beautiful like that, in a sleepshirt in the candlelight. She wasn’t wearing any makeup, but she looked deliciously soft and feminine. I thought about kissing her again, just to make sure that the first one hadn’t been some sort of anomaly. Then I shook my head and reminded myself that tonight was about business. “I just needed to make sure that you were all right.”

Her eyes widened. “Am I in some kind of danger?”

I lifted my hand placatingly. “I don’t think you are now. But I was followed today. I had to be sure that you were safe. Have you seen anyone? Maybe felt nervous or anxious for no reason?”

“No more than any other day,” she said. Thunder rumbled, and the rain kept drumming on her windows. “Honestly.”

I let out my breath and felt myself relax a little. “Okay, good. I’m glad.”

Thunder rumbled again and we both just stood there, staring at each other. Both of us glanced, just for a second, at the other’s eyes, then pulled

away before anything could happen.

“Harry,” she said quietly. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“You already have,” I said.

She took a step closer, and her dark eyes looked huge. “Are you sure?”

My heart sped up again, but I took a little step back from her. “Yeah. Shiela, I knew I wouldn’t be able to focus on the rest of tonight if I didn’t look in on you first.”

She nodded then, and folded her arms. “All right. But when you’re finished with this, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head and put her hand on my arm. “It would take some time to explain it. If you think you need your focus for tonight, I don’t want to distract you with anything.”

I looked at her, and then deliberately down her, and said, “That’s probably best. I’m finding you very distracting right now.”

She flushed brighter. “No. That’s just you reacting to being in danger. You’re afraid that you’re going to die, and sex is very life affirming.”

“Is that what it is?” I drawled.

“Among other things,” she said.

For a few seconds my hormones did their best to lobby for overcoming distraction by means of indulgence, but I reined them in. Shiela was right: I was in pain and in fear and in danger, and those kinds of circumstances have a tendency to make you pay attention to different things—the soft shine of candlelight on Shiela’s hair, for example, or the soft scent of rose oil and flowered soap on her skin—and Shiela had been in danger for part of that time as well.

I didn’t want to take advantage of that. And I didn’t want to start anything with her that I wasn’t going to be able to finish. For all I knew I’d be dead before another day was out, and it wouldn’t be right to allow things to go any further just because I was afraid.

On the other hand, though, there was nothing wrong with savoring life while you still had it.

I leaned down to her, lifted her chin gently with my right hand, and kissed her mouth again. She quivered and returned it with a slow, hesitant shyness. I stayed like that for a moment, tasting her lips, my fingertips light on her chin, and then straightened, breaking it off very slowly.

She opened her eyes a moment later, her breathing a little fast.

I touched her cheek with my fingertips and smiled at her. "I'll call you soon."

She nodded, her eyes clouding with concern. "Be careful."

"Harry?" called a voice.

I blinked and looked around.

"Harry!" he called again, and I recognized Butters's voice. There was a curious quality to the acoustics of his voice—as if he were standing in an empty room, with no furniture or carpeting to absorb any sound.

Shiela froze, looking toward her door, and then said, "Dammit."

I blinked at her. "What?"

"I didn't want this to distract you," she said, and her tone was enigmatic.

I frowned at her for a moment and then opened the door to the apartment. Butters stood in the hall. He'd improvised a lead for Mouse out of what looked like the torn hem of his scrubs tunic, and my big shaggy dog headed for me, nose to the ground, pulling Butters along the way. Butters, for his part, stumbled along uncertainly, as if he'd had a little too much to drink and couldn't get his balance.

"Butters?" I said. "What's up?"

"The car died," he said. "And there were some guys who looked like they didn't like me on the street, so I came to find you."

Butters stopped, or tried to. Mouse chuffed out a breath in greeting and headed straight for me. I leaned down to scratch at Mouse's ears. "Hey, Mouse. Shiela, this is my dog, Mouse. And this is Waldo Butters. He's a friend of mine."

Shiela blinked her eyes closed slowly and looked away.

Butters peered and squinted, looking around him. "What?"

I frowned at him and touched his arm. "Are you okay?"

He flinched a little when I touched him, then clapped a hand down on my arm as if using it to orient on me. "Harry?" he asked. "Don't you have a light?"

I lifted my eyebrows at him and lifted my pentacle, willing it to light. "Here," I said. "Shiela, I hope you don't mind if they come in?"

Butters peered up at me and then around him.

"Harry?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

"Um, who are you talking to?"

I stared at him for a silent second.

And then a few details floated together in my mind, and the bottom dropped all the way out of my stomach.

I closed my eyes for a moment, and opened my inner vision, my wizard's Sight, and turned to face Shiela.

The little apartment simply dissolved, sliding away like paint being washed away by a stream of falling water. In its place I could see a dimly lit, gutted building. Studs stood naked where the drywall had been removed. There were piles of scrap wiring, half-rotted-looking ducts, and similar refuse, which had been removed from the building and thrown aside into refuse piles. The place had been prepared for renovation—but it was empty. The only window I could see was broken. Thunder rumbled, the sound slightly different than it had been a moment before. The driving rain gained a couple of notches of volume, beating hollowly on the old apartment building.

I stared at Shiela with my Sight, and she stood there unchanged—except that I could see a faint tint of light around her, subtle but definite. It meant that she was either a noncorporeal presence or an illusion of thought and energy rather than a reality. But if she'd been an illusion, she should have faded away entirely, as the apartment had done.

I released my Sight again. My stomach twisted on itself, a burning, bitter feeling. "Shiela," I said quietly. "Stars and stones, it's all but your real name, isn't it? Lasciel."

"It's close," Shiela agreed quietly.

"Harry?" Butters whispered. His eyes were very wide. "Who are you talking to?"

"Shut up a minute, Butters," I said, staring at her. She regarded me quietly, her eyes now steady on mine. "That's what Billy was talking about. Bock started looking awfully odd when I was speaking to you at the bookstore. And you never interacted with anyone else. Never opened any doors in the store. Didn't pick up the book when I was looking for it." I glanced down at my hand, where she'd written her number in permanent ink. It was now gone. "Illusions," I said.

"Yes," she said calmly. "Some of appearance only. Some of seeming."

"Why?"

"To *help* you," she said. "I told you that I could not make open contact with your conscious mind. That is why I created Shiela." She gestured

down at herself. “I wanted to help you, but I couldn’t do it directly. So I tried to do it this way.”

“So you lied to me,” I said.

She arched a brow. “I had little choice in the matter.”

“What about after you made contact with me?” I said, and my voice was bitter too. “I used the Hellfire and you came to me in a dream.”

“That was after you met Shiela, if you will recall,” she said.

“But you didn’t *need* Shiela anymore.”

“No,” she said. “I didn’t. But I found that I...” She rolled her shoulders in a shrug. “That I enjoyed being Shiela. That I enjoyed interacting with you as one person to another. Without being regarded with fear and suspicion. I know that you understand what it is like. You’ve felt it often enough in your own life.”

“But oddly enough,” I said, “I haven’t gone off and pretended to be someone else to gain another’s trust.”

“You’ve felt that isolation for less than two score years, my host. I’ve lived with it for millennia.”

“Yeah? How long were you planning on stringing me along?”

Her soft mouth turned into a firm line. “I was going to tell you once the night’s business was done—assuming you lived through it.”

“Sure you were,” I said.

“I told you,” she said. “I didn’t want it to become a distraction for you.”

I barked out a harsh little laugh. “And why should I believe that?”

“Because your death would mean the death of this part of me,” she said, gesturing down at herself again. “The thought shadow of Lasciel would not survive your death—and the true Lasciel, my true self, would remain trapped for who knows how long. You have no idea of what it is to be trapped without sound, sight, or senses, waiting for someone to bring you forth from oblivion.”

I stared hard at her. “I don’t believe you.”

“You need not, my host,” she said, and gave me a little bow. “But that makes it no less true.”

“You *kissed* me,” I said.

Shiela-Lasciel’s eyebrows lifted and she gave me an almost whimsical smile. “When I said that it has been a long time since I was close to anyone, I meant it. I enjoyed that contact, my host. As, I think, did you.”

“Oh, let me guess,” I said. “You did that for me, too. Because you wanted to help me.”

“I kissed you because I desired it and because it was pleasurable. If you will recall, my host, I *did* help you. I gave you the summons to call the Erlking, did I not?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again, struggling to find something to say.

“I have never wished you ill, my host,” she said. “In fact, I have done all that I can to assist you.”

I suddenly felt very tired and rubbed at my forehead. I reminded myself that Lasciel was a fallen angel. That she was one of the thirty demons of the Order of the Blackened Denarius. That she was known as the Temptress and the Webweaver, and that she was ancient, powerful, and deadly dangerous at the art of manipulation. She could not be trusted; nor could her little carbon copy that had taken up residence in my head.

But she had helped me. And she had kissed me. Sure, a kiss was just a kiss, but her desire for it, her hesitation, the sense of yearning to her had been genuine. She had wanted to do it. She had enjoyed it. She was one hell of a good kisser.

Hell *being the operative word*, I reminded myself.

“I can still help you, my host,” she said. “You are a powerful mortal, but your foes are more formidable still. They will kill you.” Her face took on an expression of frustrated protest. “Let me help you survive. Give me the chance to preserve myself. Please.”

I stared at her for a moment. She looked lovely and sincere and afraid.

She looked exactly like the kind of woman in trouble whom I could never turn away.

“I have no intention of dying,” I said quietly. “But you aren’t going to be part of the equation.”

“If you don’t—”

“Save it,” I told her quietly. “I know how this works. First I allow you to help with this problem. Then with the next one. Then with the one after that. And at some point I’ll need more power for what will probably look like a very good reason and dig up the coin. And then you’ll be able to do pretty much anything you want with me.” I shook my head. “That’s one big, long, slippery slope. No.”

She clenched her jaw, her expression frustrated. "But I do not wish you any harm."

"Maybe," I said. "But there's no way for me to know that."

She arched one dark eyebrow at me.

Then, as quickly as blinking, the building was on fire. It rose up in a sudden explosion of heat and flame that engulfed the bare studs on the walls and chewed at the floor. Vicious heat assaulted my back, a searing pain that left me with no choice but to move forward. Behind me the fire roared up higher, and I looked around frantically, suddenly panicked. The only portion of the building that wasn't being swallowed by rising, hungry flame led to the broken window. I sprinted to it, spotted the old iron of a fire escape lattice beneath it, and ducked down to go through onto the fire escape before I was burned to charcoal.

And then the flames vanished, the air became cool once more, and the beat of rain replaced the roar of flame. I stood at the window, one leg raised onto the sill, the rain soaking my chest and my jeans.

And there was no fire escape outside the window.

There was only a long, long drop to the sidewalk beneath.

I swallowed and drew back from the window, shaking. The whole thing had happened so *fast*. My reaction to the fire had been sheer and naked terror, and even now my hand throbbed with the pain of illusory burns. Ever since that fire I'd had nightmares of more. The illusion of fire had cut straight through to my pain and terror and utterly bypassed my brain.

Which was exactly what Lasciel meant it to do.

"Harry?" Butters called, his voice high and thready. I couldn't see him. He stood back in the darkness of the empty building, and in my mindless panic I had allowed the light of my mother's pentacle to go out.

"I'm okay," I told him. "Just stay where you are. I'm coming."

I lit the pentacle again, and found Lasciel standing next to me, one eyebrow still raised. "That is how you know," she said. "If I wished to kill you, my host, your blood would be seeping from your broken corpse and mixing with the rain on the sidewalk."

There wasn't much I could say to that.

"Let me help you," she urged me. "I can help you defend yourself against the disciples of Kemmler. I can teach you magics you have never considered. I can show you how to make yourself stronger, swifter. I can

show you how you might heal the damage to your hand, if you have enough discipline. There wouldn't even be a scar."

I turned my back on her. My heart pounded against my chest as I walked back to Butters.

She was lying to me. She had to be. That's what the Denarians did. They lied and manipulated their way into a mortal's good graces, gradually giving them more power while they fell more deeply under their demonic influence.

But she was telling the truth about one thing, for sure: She could make me stronger. Even the weakest Denarian I had seen, Quintus "Snakeboy" Cassius, had been a certifiable nightmare. With Hellfire to supplement my magic and an enormously powerful being to serve as a tutor and consultant, my abilities could grow to epic proportions.

If I had power like that, I could protect my friends—Murphy, Billy, and the others. I could turn my power against the Red Court and help save the lives of the Wardens and the Council. I could do a lot of things.

And her kiss...The illusion had all been in my head, but it had been so utterly *real*. Every detail. Shiela herself had been so thoroughly genuine that I would never have guessed she was an illusion. Indeed, there was little difference, from my own perspective, between that complex an illusion and reality. The feel of her, the scent, everything had been there.

And she had been just as convincingly real in her blond-goddess form beside the hot tub in my dream. Her appearance had to be malleable. She could appear to me as anything.

As anyone.

Some darker, baser part of my nature toyed with *that* notion for a moment. But only for a moment. I didn't dare let that thought flow through my head for long. Her touch had been too soft, too gentle, too warm. Too good. I'd been without female company for years, and more of that warmth, that pleasing contact, was a temptation too great to allow myself to dwell upon.

I turned slowly and faced Lasciel.

She lifted her eyebrows, leaning a little forward in anticipation of my answer.

I knew how to manipulate and control my dreams—and this manifestation of Lasciel's shadow was nothing more than a waking dream.

"This is my mind," I told her quietly. "Get thee behind me."

I focused my thoughts and my power and brought forth my own illusion of imagination and thought. Silver manacles appeared from nowhere, manifested from my focus and desire, and locked themselves around Lasciel's wrists and ankles. I gestured sharply and visualized her being lifted through the air. Then I opened my hand, my spread fingers out, palm to the floor, and she fell into an iron cage that appeared from my concentrated effort. The door slammed and locked behind her.

"Fool," she said in a quiet voice. "We will die."

I closed my eyes and with a last effort of imagination and will summoned a heavy tarp that fell over the cage, covering it and blocking Lasciel from sight and sound.

"Maybe we will," I muttered to myself. "But I'll do it on my own."

I turned around to find Butters staring at me, his expression almost sick with fear. Mouse sat beside him, also staring at me, somehow managing to look worried.

"Harry?" he asked.

"I'm okay," I told him quietly.

"Um. What happened?"

"A demon," I told him. "It got into my head a while back. It was causing me to experience...hallucinations, I guess you could call them. I thought I was talking to people. But it was the demon, pretending to be them."

He nodded slowly. "And...and it's gone now? You did, like, some kind of autoexorcism?"

"Not gone," I said quietly. "But it's under control. Once I knew what it was doing, I was able to lock it away."

He peered at me. "Are you crying?"

I turned my face away, trying to make it look like I was staring at the window while I wiped a hand over my eyes. "No."

"Harry. Are you sure you're all right? Not, you know...insane?"

I looked back up at Butters and suddenly laughed. "Look who's talking, polka boy."

He blinked for a moment and then smiled a little. "I just have better taste than most."

I walked to him and rested my hand on his shoulder. "I'm all right. Or at least no crazier than I usually am."

He looked at me for a moment and then nodded. "Okay."

“Good thing you came along when you did,” I said. “You tipped the demon’s hand when you came up here. There was no way it could fit you into the illusion.”

“I helped?” he said.

“Big-time,” I said. “I think I’m just too used to knowing more than most people about magic. The demon was using some of my expectations against me. It knew exactly how to hide things from a wizard.”

An idle thought flicked through my brain at the words. And suddenly I froze with my mouth open.

“Hell’s bells,” I swore. “That’s it.”

“It is?” Butters asked. “Er, *what* is?”

Mouse tilted his head to one side, ears perked inquisitively.

“How to hide things from a wizard,” I said, and I felt my mouth stretching into a wide, half-crazy grin. I dug in my memory until I found the string of mystery numbers and recited them. “Ha!” I said, and threw my hand up in the air in triumph. “Hah! Ha-ha! Eureka.”

Butters looked distressed.

“Let’s go,” I told him, rising excitement making tingles of nervous energy shoot through my limbs. I started walking to give some of it an outlet. “Come on, let’s hurry.”

“Why?” Butters asked, bewildered.

“Because I know what those numbers mean,” I said. “I know how to find *The Word of Kemmler*. And to do it, I need your help.”

Chapter Thirty-six

The lights of Chicago were still out and the night was growing even darker. The storm had driven most people from the streets, and now headlights appeared only intermittently. The National Guard had set up around Cook County Hospital, bringing in generators and laboring to keep them running while providing a shelter of some sort and a presence of authority on some of the streets—but they were as badly hampered by the lack of reliable telephone and radio communications as anyone else, and rain and darkness had cast them into the same morass of confusion as the rest of the city.

The net result of it was that some streets were bright with the headlights of military trucks and patrolled by National Guardsmen, and some of them were as black and empty as a crooked politician's heart. One section of State Street was sunken in blackness, and I pulled the Beetle up onto the sidewalk in front of a darkened Radio Shack.

"Stay, Mouse," I told the dog, and got out of the car. I walked to the glass door and considered it and the bars on it. Then I leaned my staff against it, drew in my will, and muttered, "*Forzare.*"

There was no flash of light with the release of energy—I'd kept the spell tidy enough to avoid that. Instead it all went into kinetic force, snapping the plate glass as cleanly as if I'd used a cutter, and bending the center bars out into a neat bow shape, large enough to slip through.

"Holy crap," Butters said, his voice a hushed shout. "You're breaking in?"

"No one's minding the store," I said. I nudged a few pieces of door that hadn't fallen out of the frame, then carefully slid into the building. "Come on."

"Now you're entering," Butters informed me. "You're breaking. *And* entering. We're going to jail."

I stuck my head out between the bars and said, "It's in a good cause, Butters. We're the secret champions of the city. Justice and truth are on our

side.”

He looked at the front of the store uncertainly. “They are?”

“They are if you *hurry* up before someone in a uniform spots us,” I said. “Move it.”

I went back into the store, lifting up my amulet and willing it to light. I stared around me at all the technological things, only a very few of which I could readily identify. I turned in a circle, looking for one particular gadget, but I had no idea where in the store it would be.

Butters came in and looked around. The blue light of my pentacle gleamed on his glasses. Then he nodded decisively at a section of counter and walked over to it.

“Is this it?” I asked him.

“Something wrong with your eyes?” he asked me.

I grimaced at him. “I don’t get in here a lot, Butters. Remember?”

“Oh. Oh, yeah, right. The Murphyonic technology thing.”

“Murphyonic?”

“Sure,” Butters said. “You exude a Murphyonic field. Anything that can go wrong does.”

“Don’t let Murph hear you say that.”

“Heh,” Butters said. “Bring the light.” I lifted it higher and stepped up behind him. “Yeah, yeah,” he said. “They’re right here under the glass.” He peered around behind the counter. “There must be a key here somewhere.”

I lifted up my staff and drove it bodily down through the glass, shattering it.

Butters looked a little wild around the eyes, but he said, “Oh, right, I forgot. Burglary.” One hand darted in and plucked up an orange box. Then he looked around and picked up a couple of packs of batteries from a rack on the wall. He hadn’t touched a thing but what he had taken with him, and neither had I. Without security systems, the only way we would get caught would be by fingerprints or direct apprehension, and I was glad we didn’t have to take the time to wipe anything for prints before commencing the getaway.

I led Butters back to the car, and away we got.

“I can’t see anything,” Butters said. “Can you make the light again?”

“Not this close to the gadget,” I told him. “A minute or two wouldn’t be a problem, but the longer I work forces near it, the more likely it is to give out.”

“I need some light,” he said.

“All right, hang on.” I found a spot near an alley and parked with the Beetle’s headlights pointing at the overhanging awning of a restaurant. I left the car running and got out with Butters. He opened the box and took out the batteries and did gadgety things with them while I kept an eye out for bad guys, or possibly the cops.

“Tell me why you think this is it again?” Butters said. He had drawn a little plastic device the size of a small walkie-talkie from the box and fumbled with it until he found the battery cover.

“The numbers in Bony Tony’s code are just longitude and latitude,” I said. “He hides the book, see. He records the coordinates with one of those global satellite thingies all those soldiers raved about during Desert Storm.”

“Global positioning system,” Butters corrected me.

“Whatever. The point is that you need a GPS to find those specific coordinates. They’re accurate to what? Ten or twelve yards?”

“More like ten feet,” Butters said.

“Wow. So Bony Tony figures that most wizards wouldn’t have a clue about what a GPS device is—and the ones who do can’t *use* one because they’re high-tech, and running one even close to a wizard will short it out. It’s his insurance, to make sure that Grevane can’t screw him.”

“But Grevane did,” Butters said.

“Grevane did,” I echoed. “The idiot. He never considered that Bony Tony might have been able to outfox him. So he knows that Bony Tony has got the key to finding *The Word of Kemmler* on him, but Grevane never even considers that it might be something he can’t access. He just blunders along doing as he pleases, which he’s used to.”

“Whereas you,” Butters said, “read books at the library.”

“And magazines, ’cause they’re free there,” I said. “Though I have to give most of the credit to Georgia’s SUV. I might not have thought of this if it hadn’t had the same system.”

“Note the past tense on that,” Butters said. “Had.” He glanced up at me pointedly. “I’m about to turn it on. Do you need to move off?”

I nodded at him and backed off all the way to the car and tried to think technologically friendly thoughts. Butters stood in the headlights for a minute, frowning down at the gadget and then peering up at the sky.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Signal isn’t coming through very well. Maybe it’s the storm.”

“Storm isn’t helping,” I said back. “There’s magic at work too.” I chewed on my lip for a second. “Turn it off.”

Butters did and then nodded at me. I hurried over to him and said, “Now hold still.” Then I drew a piece of chalk from my duster pocket and marked out a quick circle around him on the concrete.

Butters frowned down at the chalk and said, “Is this...some kind of mime training? Do you want me to press my fingers against an invisible wall?”

“No,” I said. “You’re going to throw up a circle around you—an outwardly directed barrier. It should put a screen between you and any outside magical influence.”

“I am, huh?” he said. “How do I do that?”

I completed the circle, reached for my penknife, and passed it to him. “You need to put a drop of your blood on the circle, and picture a wall going up in your head.”

“Harry. I don’t know magic.”

“Anyone can do this,” I said. “Butters, there isn’t any time. The circle should hold out Cowl’s working and give you a chance to get a signal normally.”

“An anti-Murphyonic field, huh?”

“You’ve watched too many *Trek* reruns, Butters. But basically, yeah.”

He pressed his lips together and then nodded at me. I backed away to the Beetle again. Butters grimaced and then touched the penknife to the base of his left thumbnail, where the skin is thin and fragile. Then he leaned over self-consciously and squeezed his thumb until a drop of blood fell on the chalk circle.

The circle barrier snapped up immediately, invisibly. Butters looked around for a second and then said, “It didn’t work.”

“It worked,” I told him. “It’s there. I can feel it. Try again.”

Butters nodded and went back to his gizmo. Five seconds later, his face brightened. “Hey, whaddya know. It worked. So this circle keeps out magic?”

“And only magic,” I said. “Anything physical can cross it and disrupt the barrier. Handy for hedging out demons and such, though.”

“I’ll remember that,” Butters said. He peered down at the gadget. “Harry!” he exclaimed. “You were right! The numbers match up to

coordinates right here in Chicago.”

“Where?” I demanded.

“Hang on.” The little guy punched buttons and frowned. “I have to get it to calculate distance and heading from here.”

“It can do that?” I asked.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Plus AM/FM radio, weather reports, fish and game reports, maps of major cities, locations of restaurants and hotels for travelers, all kinds of stuff.”

“That,” I said, “is really cool.”

“Yeah. You really get a lot for the five hundred bucks on this model.” The whole time his fingers flicked back and forth on the gadget. “Right,” he said. “Uh, northwest of us and maybe a mile off.”

I frowned at him. “Doesn’t it tell you the address or something?”

“Yeah,” Butters said, pushing more buttons. “Oh, wait. No, you have to buy the expansion card for that.” He looked up thoughtfully. “Maybe we could go back and get it?”

“One little burglary and you’ve gone habitual,” I said. “No, it’s a bad idea. If a patrol car spotted the broken window there will be police there. I doubt anyone saw us, but there’s no reason to take chances.”

“Well, how do we find it then?” he asked.

“Turn it off. Then break the circle with your foot and get in the car. We’ll head that way and stop in a bit and you can check again. Rinse and repeat.”

“Right, good idea.” He turned the gizmo off and smudged the chalk circle with his foot. “Like that?”

“Like that. Let’s go.”

Butters got in the Beetle and we started through the dark, dank streets. After several long blocks I stopped with my lights shining into the awning in front of an apartment building, and Butters got out to repeat the process. He took my chalk with him, dribbled a bit of his blood on the circle he drew, and tried the GPS gadget again. Then he hurried through the rain back into the car.

“More north,” he said.

I peered at the darkness as I got moving, going through my mental map of Chicago. “Soldier’s Field?”

“Maybe,” he said. “I can’t see anything.”

We drove north and cruised past the home of da Bears. I stopped just on the other side and Butters checked again, facing the stadium. Then he

blinked and turned around. His eyes widened and he came running back to the car. “We’re really close. I think it’s the Field Museum.”

I got the car moving. “Makes sense,” I said. “Bony Tony had plenty of contacts there. He did some trading in discretionary antiquities.”

“You mean stolen artifacts?”

“What did I just say? He probably has some kind of arrangement with security there. Maybe he stashed it in a staff locker or something.”

I parked in front of the Field Museum under a NO PARKING sign. There were a couple of actual spots I could have used, but the drive was even closer. Besides, I found it aesthetically satisfying to defy municipal code.

I put the Beetle’s parking brake on and got out into the rain. “Stay, Mouse,” I said. “Come on, Butters. Can that thing get us close to the book?”

“Within ten feet or so,” he said. “But Harry, the museum is closed. How are we going to—”

I blew out the glass of the front door with my staff, just as I had at Radio Shack.

“Oh,” he said. “Right.”

I strode into the main hall, Butters walking on my heels. Lightning flashed, abruptly illuminating Sue the Tyrannosaurus in all her bony Jurassic glory. Butters hadn’t been expecting it, and let out a strangled little cry.

Thunder rolled and I got out my amulet for light, lifting an eyebrow at Butters.

“Sorry,” he said. “I, uh...I’m a little nervous.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I told him, my own heart pounding wildly. The sudden reveal of that monstrous skeleton had shaken me, too.

Don’t look at me like that. It was a tense sort of evening.

I looked slowly around the place, and Listened for a moment. I couldn’t sense anyone’s presence. I opened my Sight again, just for a quick glance around, but I didn’t see anyone hiding behind a veil of magic. I backed off. “Check again.”

He did so, though the shining floor of the museum didn’t take the chalk as readily as concrete. A few minutes later he nodded toward Sue and said, “Over that way.”

He broke the circle and we hurried across the enormous floor. “Try to keep quiet,” I told him. “Security might still be around.”

We stopped at Sue's feet and checked again. Butters frowned, peering around. "This can't be right," he said. "According to the GPS, these coordinates are inside that wall. Could Bony Tony have hidden it in the wall?"

"It's stone," I said. "And I think someone might have noticed if he'd torn out a wall in the entry hall and replaced it."

He shook the GPS a little. "I don't get it, then."

I chewed on my lip and looked up at Sue.

"Elevation," I said.

"What?"

"Come on." I pointed up. "There's a gallery overlooking the main hall. It must be either up there or on a floor below us."

"How do we know which?"

"We look. Starting with the upstairs. The levels below us are like some kind of gerbil maze from hell." I started for the stairs, and Butters came after me. Going up them was a pain, but my instincts were screaming that I was right, and my excitement made the discomfort unremarkable.

Once on the gallery, we went past a display of articles from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show—saddles, wooden rifles that had been carried by the show's cowboys and Indians alike, cavalry bugles, feathered war bonnets, beaded vests, moccasins, ancient old boots, several worn old tom-toms, and about a million old photographs. Beyond that was some kind of interactive ecology display, and just past that there was a table bearing the weight of an enormous, malformed-looking dinosaur skull.

Butters checked again and nodded toward the skull. "I think it's there."

I went down to the skull. The display proclaimed that it was Sue's actual skull, but that geological shifts and pressures had warped it, so the museum had created an artificial skull for the display. Holding my light up, I walked slowly around the skull—an enormous block of rock now. I peered into darkened crevices in the rock, and when I didn't find a book I got down on the floor and started checking under the heavy platform that supported the skull.

I found a manila envelope duct-taped to the underside of the platform, and snatched it. I got out from under the platform and tore the envelope open, my fingers shaking.

An old, slender black volume not much larger than a calendar notebook fell from the envelope.

I held it in my bare right hand for a moment. There was no tingle of arcane energies to the book, no sense of lurking evil or imminent danger. It was simply a book—but nonetheless I was sure I had found *The Word of Kemmler*. My fingers shook harder, and I opened it.

The front bore a spidery scrawl of cursive writing: *The Word of Heinrich Kemmler*.

“Hey, that was kind of fun!” Butters said. “Is that it?”

“This is it,” I said. “We found it.” I glanced up at Butters and said, “Actually, *you* found it, Butters. I couldn’t have done it without your help. Thank you.”

Butters beamed. “Glad I could help.”

I thought I heard a noise.

I lifted a hand, forestalling whatever Butters was about to say.

The sound didn’t repeat itself. There was only thunder and rain.

I put a finger to my lips and Butters nodded. Then I closed my eyes and reached out with my senses, slow and careful. For the barest second I felt my thoughts brush against a stirring of cold energy.

Necromancy.

I drew back from it with panicked haste. “Butters, get out.”

The little ME blinked up at me. “What?”

“Get out,” I said, my voice harsher. “There’s a fire exit at the far side of the gallery. Go out it. Run. Get out of here and don’t stop until you’re someplace safe. Don’t look back. Don’t slow down.”

He stared at me, his eyes huge, his face deathly pale.

“Now!” I snarled.

Butters bolted. I could hear terrified little sounds escaping his throat as he sprinted toward the far end of the gallery.

I closed my eyes and concentrated again, drawing in my will and power as I did so, casting my senses about in an effort to find the source of the dark power. I touched the necromantic working again, and this time I didn’t even try to hide my presence by pulling away.

Whoever it was had come in through the door I’d broken open. I could feel a slithering sort of power there, mixed in with a cold kind of lust, a passion for despair.

I walked to the railing of the gallery and looked down into the entry hall.

Grevane stood below, trench coat wet and swaying, water dripping from the brim of his fedora. There was a half circle of dead men standing behind

him, and he beat a slow rhythm on his leg with one hand.

I wanted to cut and run, but I couldn't. I had to hold things up here until Butters had a chance to get away. And besides, if I ran away, toward the back exit and nowhere near my car, Grevane's zombies would catch me and tear me apart.

I licked my lips, struggling to weigh my options.

Then I had an idea. Holding my pentacle's chain in my teeth for light, I opened the book and started flipping through it, one page after another. I didn't read it. I didn't even try to read it. I just opened the pages, fixed my gaze at a couple of points on each, and moved on.

It wasn't a long book. I was finished less than two minutes later.

There was a sound from the stairway, and I rose, readying my shield bracelet.

Grevane came onto the gallery floor, zombies marching behind him. He stood and stared at me for a moment, his expression impossible to read.

"Stay back," I said quietly.

He blinked at me very slowly. "Why?"

I held up the book in one hand. "Because I've got the *Word* here, Grevane. And if you don't back off, I'll burn it to ash."

His eyes widened, and he lurched a half step closer to me, licking his lips. "No, you won't," he said. "You know that. You want the power as much as I do."

"God, you people are dysfunctional," I said. "But just to save time I'll give you a reason that you're capable of understanding. I've read the book. I don't need it anymore. So if you push me, I'll be glad to flash-fry it for you."

"You didn't read it," Grevane spat. "You haven't had it for ten minutes."

"Speed-reading," I lied. "I can do *War and Peace* in thirty minutes."

"Give me the book," Grevane said. "I will allow you to live."

"Get out of my way. Or I will allow it to burn."

Grevane smiled.

And suddenly a weight fell on me, like someone had dropped a lead-lined blanket on my shoulders. My ears filled with rushing, hissing whispers. I stumbled and felt a dozen flashes of burning, needle-fine pain, and between that and the extra weight I fell to my knees. It took me a second to realize what was happening.

Snakes.

I was covered in snakes.

There were too many of them to count or identify, and they were all furious. Some dark green reptile as long as my arm struck at my face, sinking fangs into my left cheek and holding on. More of them struck at my neck, my shoulders, my hands, and I screamed in panic and pain. My duster took several hits, but the en-spelled leather held out against them. I tore at my neck and shoulders and head, ripping snakes free of me by main strength, their fangs tearing at my flesh as I did.

I struggled to order my thoughts and rise, because I knew Grevane would be coming. I tried to gather my shield as I pushed myself to my hands and knees, but I saw a flash of a heavy boot driving toward me and light exploded in my eyes and I flopped back to the floor, briefly stunned.

I blinked slowly, waiting for my eyes to focus.

Liver Spots appeared in my vision, weathered and strange, white hair wiry and stiff beneath his hat, his loose skin somehow reptilian in the dim light.

"I know you," I slurred, the words tumbling out without checking in with my brain. "I know who you are now."

Liver Spots knelt down over me. He took my wrists and clamped something around them.

While he did, Grevane came up and took *The Word of Kemmler* from my limp fingers. He opened it and began scanning through pages until he found the passage he'd been looking for. He read it, stared at it for a long moment, and then opened his mouth in a slow, wheezing cackle.

"By the night," he said, his voice dusty and amused. "It's so simple. How could I not have seen it before?"

"You are satisfied?" Liver Spots asked Grevane.

"Entirely," Grevane said.

"And you will stand by our bargain."

"Of course," Grevane answered. He read another page of the book. "A pleasure working with you. He's all yours." Grevane turned, still beating a slow rhythm on his leg, and the shambling zombies followed him.

"Well, Dresden," Liver Spots said once they were gone. His voice was a rich, rough purr. "I believe you were saying you recognized me?"

I stared up at him blankly.

"Let me help your memory," he said. He took an olive-drab duffel bag from his shoulder and set it on the ground. Then, mostly with one hand, he

opened it.

And he drew out a Louisville Slugger.

Oh, my God. I tried to move, but I couldn't. The metal bindings burned cold on my wrists.

"You," I said. "You busted up my car."

"Mmmm. Much as *you* broke my ankles. My knees. My wrists and my hands. With a Louisville Slugger baseball bat. While I lay helpless on the floor."

Quintus Cassius, the Snakeboy, the serpent-summoning sorcerer and former Knight of the Order of the Blackened Denarius, smiled down at me. He leaned over, kneeling and far too close to me for comfort, and whispered to me as if to a lover.

"I have dreamed of this night, boy," he purred, and gently stroked the side of my face with the baseball bat. "In my day, we would say that revenge is sweet. But times have changed. How do you say? Payback is a bitch."

Chapter

Thirty-seven

I stared up at the withered old man I'd called Liver Spots, and behind the loose skin, the wrinkles, the white wiry hair, I could see the man who had been one of the Order of the Blackened Denarius.

"How?" I asked him. "How did you find me?"

"I didn't," he said. "The coroner's apartment was easy enough to find. I took hairs from his brush. Since you were so eager to keep him sheltered under your wing, it wasn't too terribly difficult to keep track of him—and you—once we had destroyed your wards."

"Oh," I said. My voice shook a little.

"Are you afraid, boy?" Cassius whispered.

"You're about the fifth-scariest person I've met today," I said.

His eyes became very cold.

"Don't knock it," I said. "That's really better than it sounds."

He rose slowly, looking down at me. The fingers of his right hand tightened and loosened on the handle of the bat. Hatred burned there as well, mindless and irrational and howling to be slaked. Cassius hadn't exactly been stable when I'd faced him two years before. From the look of him now, he was preparing a campaign for the presidency of the World Psychosis Association.

I knew that Cassius was a killer, like few I'd ever seen. He had spent what might have been fifteen or sixteen centuries bound to a different fallen angel within his own silver coin, working hand in hand with the head of the Order. He had, I was sure, personally done away with hundreds of foes who had done far less to him than I had.

He would kill me. If a flash of rage took him, he'd cave my head in with that bat, screaming the whole time.

I shuddered at the image and reached out for my magic, seeing if I could draw in enough to try to sucker punch him. But when I tried, the manacles on my wrists suddenly *writhed*, moving, and dozens of sharp points

suddenly pricked into my wrists, as if I had swept my hand through a rosebush. I winced in pain, my breath frozen in my chest for a second.

Cassius smiled at me. “Don’t bother. We’ve used those manacles on wizards and witches for centuries. Nicodemus himself designed them.”

“Yeah. Ouch.” I winced, but no amount of writhing would move my arms very much, and I couldn’t move to try to make the thorny manacles hurt less.

Cassius stared down at me, his eyes bright. He stood there, watching me try to writhe, enjoying my helplessness and pain.

An image flashed through my mind—an old man of faith and courage who had willingly given himself into the hands of the Order in exchange for my freedom. Shiro had died after sustaining the most hideous torments I had ever seen visited upon a human body—and some of them had come at the hands of Cassius. I closed my eyes. I knew what he wanted. He wanted to hurt me. He wanted to see how much pain he could deliver before I died. And there was nothing I could do to prevent it.

Unless...

I thought of what Shiro had told me about having faith. For him it was a theological and moral truth upon which he had based his life. I didn’t have the same kind of belief, but I had seen how forces of light and darkness came into conflict, how imbalances were redressed. Cassius was in the service of some of the darkest forces on the planet. Shiro would have said that nothing he did could have prevented a balancing force of light—such as Shiro and his brother Knights—from being placed in his way. In my own experience, I had noticed that when something truly, deeply evil arose, one of the Knights tended to show up.

Maybe one would show up to face Cassius.

Hell’s bells. That was mighty thin.

But it was technically possible. And it was all I had.

I almost laughed. What I needed to survive this lunatic was something I had never had much of: faith. I had to believe that some other factor would intervene. I had no other option.

But that didn’t mean I couldn’t try to help intervention along. The longer I kept breathing, the more likely it was that someone would happen across the scene—maybe even someone who could help. Maybe even someone like my friend Michael.

I had to keep Cassius talking.

“What happened to you?” I asked him a moment later, opening my eyes. I’d read somewhere that people love to talk about themselves. “The last time I saw you, you could have passed for forty.”

Cassius stared at me for a moment more, and then leaned his bat on the floor. “It was the result of losing my coin to you and your friends,” he said, voice creaking. “While I held my coin, Saluriel prevented age from ravaging my body. Now nature is collecting her due from me. Plus interest.” He waved his stiff-fingered right hand, wrinkled, spotted, swollen with what looked like bad arthritis. “If she has her way, I will be dead within the year.”

“Why?” I asked him. “Isn’t your new demon stopping the clock for you?”

His eyes narrowed, unsteady and cold. “I have no Denarius now,” he said, his voice low and very polite. “When I eventually left the hospital and rejoined Nicodemus, he had no coin being held as a spare.” Mad fire flickered through his gaze. “You see, he’d given it to you.”

I swallowed. “That’s what you were looking for, outside my apartment. You wanted the Denarius.”

“Lasciel wouldn’t be my first choice, but I must be content with what is available.”

“Uh-huh. So where’s Nicodemus? He’s helping you, I take it.”

Cassius’s eyes closed almost all the way. “Nicodemus cast me out. He said that if I was too much a fool to keep possession of my coin that I deserved whatever befell me.”

“What a guy.”

Cassius shrugged. “He is a man of power, with no tolerance for fools. Once you are dead and Lasciel’s coin is mine, he will take me back.”

“You sound pretty confident there,” I said.

“Is there some reason I should not be?” He moved stiffly over to his duffel bag. “You should make this simpler for both of us. I’m willing to make you an offer. Give it to me now, and I will make your death quick.”

“I don’t have it,” I told him.

He let out a rough cackle. “There are only so many places one can hide it,” he said. “If you are holding it as part of you, enough pain will make you drop it.” He drew out a slender little coping saw from the bag and set it on the floor. “I once knew a man who swallowed his Denarius, and would swallow it again when it came through.”

“Yuck,” I said.

Cassius put a standard-head screwdriver down next to the saw. “And one who cut himself open and placed the coin in his abdominal cavity.” He drew a vicious-looking hooked linoleum knife from the bag and held it thoughtfully. “If you tell me, I’ll take your throat.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked.

He pared a yellowed fingernail with the knife. “I go on a treasure hunt.”

I studied him for a minute, then said, “I don’t have it with me. That’s the truth. I bound Lasciel and buried the coin.”

He let out a snarl and snatched at my left hand. He tore my glove from it, and then twisted my hand to show me my own horribly scarred palm, and the name-sigil of the demon Lasciel upon it, the only skin that wasn’t layered in scar tissue. “You *have* it,” he spat. “And it is *mine*.”

I took a deep breath and tried to embrace an optimistic conviction in the moral rectitude of my cause; to think positive.

Hey, hideous torture would draw things out. It wasn’t the way I would have chosen to stall Cassius, but again, I wasn’t spoiled for choice.

“I’m telling you the truth,” I said. “Besides, you wouldn’t have made it quick, even if I did give it to you.”

He smiled. It looked grandfatherly. “Probably,” he agreed. He reached into the duffel bag again and pulled out a three-foot length of heavy chain, the kind they used to use for bicycle locks. He held it in one hand while he moved my wrists, lifting them so that I lay flat on my back, my arms outstretched over my head. “I’m a winner either way.”

I wasn’t strong enough to move them. The damned manacles made me weaker than a newborn kitten.

“Surrender your coin,” Cassius said pleasantly. Then he gave me a hard kick in the ribs.

It drove the breath from me and hurt like hell. I managed to choke out the words, “Don’t have it.”

“Surrender your coin,” he said again. And this time he swung the chain and lashed it down hard over my stomach. My duster was open and the chain tore through my shirt and ripped at the flesh of my belly. My vision went red with a sudden haze of agony. “I d-ddon’t...” I began.

“Surrender your coin,” he purred. And he hit me again with the chain.

Rinse and repeat. I don’t know how many times.

An eternity later, Cassius touched his tongue to some of the blood on the chain and regarded me thoughtfully. "I hope you aren't too impatient for me to get the bat," he said. "You see, my balance is quite unsteady these days. I'm told it's a result of all the damage to my knees and ankles."

I lay there hurting. My belly and chest were on fire. Blood from one of the snakebites had trickled into my left eye, and had crusted my eyelashes together so that I couldn't open it again.

"You see, I've only got this one good hand to swing the bat with. My other was badly broken by multiple blunt-impact traumas. One-handed, I'm afraid it's difficult to aim properly or judge the power of my swing."

I tried to look around me, but I couldn't get my right eye to move properly.

"As a result," Cassius continued, "once I start paying you back for what you did to me, I'm afraid it's quite likely that I might hit you too hard and too many times. And I want to savor this."

Where was Michael? Where was...anyone?

Cassius leaned down and said, "And when I start, Dresden, I want to be free to indulge myself. To really let go and live the moment. I'm sure you understand."

No one is coming to save you, Harry.

I rasped, "I told you."

He paused, eyebrows lifted, and rolled a hand. "Pray continue."

"Told you," I said, and it was marred with a groan. "Told you if I ever saw you again I would kill you."

He let out a low, amused little chuckle and put the chain down.

He picked up the linoleum knife. Then he knelt stiffly down beside me, and calmly cut my shirt open and spread it and my duster away from my abdomen. "I remember," he said. "One should never make promises one cannot keep."

"I didn't," I told him quietly.

"Best you hurry then," he told me. "I can't imagine you have more than a few moments to make good." He prodded my belly with his finger, drawing a gasp of pain from me. "Mmmm. Nice and tender now. The better to cut through."

I watched the knife move, slow and bright and beautiful. Time seemed to slow down as it did.

Dammit, I was *not* going to die. I was not going to let this murderous bastard kill me. I was going to survive. I didn't know how I would do it, but my will locked onto the notion and I found myself grinding my teeth. I had shown him mercy before. He'd had his chance to walk away. I was going to live. And I was going to kill him.

The knife bit into the muscle of my stomach. He moved it very slowly, staring at the inner edge of the hooked blade as he drew it toward my groin in a gradually deepening incision. It hurt almost as much as the chain, but it left me with enough breath to scream.

I did. I howled at him at the top of my lungs. I shrieked profanities at him. I even managed to twitch my body a little, and I began calling up my will again, bringing fresh agony from the manacles.

He finished his first long, shallow, almost delicate cut, lifted the knife from my flesh, and repositioned it beside the first. The whole while I never stopped ranting at the top of my lungs. I doubted it was coherent enough to understand—but it described my feelings perfectly. I screamed and I kept on screaming.

And because I did, Cassius never heard Mouse's claws on the marble floor.

The air suddenly shook with a bellowing, damned near leonine roar. Cassius's head whipped around in time to see my dog leap from twenty feet away and hurtle forward like a grey-furred wrecking ball.

Mouse's front paws hit Cassius squarely on the sternum, and a bloodcurdling snarl exploded from the huge dog's chest as they both went down. Mouse snapped his jaws at Cassius's throat, but he had too much momentum remaining from his charge. His paws slid on the smooth floor, carrying him past Cassius before his teeth could do more than lightly rip at one shoulder.

Cassius screamed in rage, crouching, and flicked his hand at Mouse. There was a surge of dark magic, a shimmering blur, and suddenly a serpent coalesced from the shadows lying upon the gallery. It reared up for a second, and I could see the deadly outline of a cobra's hood rising a good five feet from the floor. Then the serpent launched itself at Mouse.

My dog saw it coming, sprang back from the serpent's first strike, and then leapt forward, jaws trying to latch on behind the shadow serpent's head. Lashing loops of reptilian darkness whipped into coils that tried to

trap the big dog, and the pair of them rolled along the floor, each seeking to grasp and kill the other.

Cassius stared at Mouse for a second, eyes wide, and then turned to me. There was actual, literal foam at the corner of his mouth, and his face was stretched into a grotesque grimace of fury. He lurched over to my side, speaking a language I didn't recognize in a half-hysterical shriek. Then he seized my hair, jerked my head back to bare my throat, and swept the knife down toward my jugular.

Before his arm was halfway down, there was a thin, high-pitched, tinny-sounding wail. Butters threw himself onto Cassius's back, carrying them both over me and to the floor. The knife missed me entirely, and went skittering away on impact.

Cassius snarled another oath and tried to crawl for the knife. Butters tried to pull Cassius away, his face deathly pale. The little guy had all the fighting prowess of a leatherback turtle, but he got his arms and legs around Cassius's torso and clung like a wild-haired monkey.

Cassius's body may have been weakened, but he'd had more than a millennium to learn about infighting. He twisted his shoulders and then slammed the side of his head into Butters's nose with a crunching sound of impact. Butters reeled from the blow, and blood spattered his face and upper lip.

Cassius then twisted again and escaped Butters's grip. He heaved himself toward the knife.

"Butters!" I screamed, helpless to move and furious and terrified. "Don't let him get the weapon!"

The little medical examiner shook his head once, then let out that tinny wail of challenge again and threw himself at Cassius. Butters caught him around one leg. Cassius kicked at his face, but Butters ducked his head down and the blows rolled off his shoulders. Cassius pushed himself a little closer to the knife.

Butters lifted his head with a squeak of defiance and sank his teeth into Cassius's leg.

The former Denarian howled in sudden, startled pain.

Another bellowing roar shook the gallery, and I looked up to see Mouse gripping the shadow serpent's neck in his heavy jaws. Mouse shook his head violently. There was a burst of crunching sounds, and suddenly the

shadow serpent stiffened and then abruptly dissolved into gallons and gallons of translucent, gelatinous ectoplasm.

Butters yelped and I looked up to see Cassius holding the knife, sweeping it clumsily at his opponent. Butters skittered away from the knife, eyes wide with terror.

But he skittered directly between Cassius and me.

And held his ground.

Mouse didn't skip a beat after killing the serpent. This time he rushed forward low, his snarls in chorus with the growling of thunder outside. He hit Cassius at the knees with the full power of his body, and Cassius went down like a tenpin before a bowling ball.

Butters rushed forward and kicked at Cassius's knife hand. The weapon skittered away again, over the edge of the gallery and into the great hall below. Cassius kicked at Butters and got him in the shins, sending Butters to the floor.

Cassius got out from under Mouse and lurched for me, his eyes mad, his hands outstretched in strangling claws.

Mouse landed on his back, and the huge dog's jaws closed on the man's neck.

Cassius froze in place in sudden terror, his eyes very wide. He stared at me.

For a second there was total silence.

"I gave you a chance," I told him, my voice quiet.

Quintus Cassius's liver-spotted face went pale with horrified comprehension. "Wait."

"Mouse," I said. "Kill him."

I had only one open eye with which to watch Cassius meet his end. But in that final second, rage and terror and horrified realization flashed through his eyes. And just as Mouse's jaws crushed the delicate bones of his neck, there was a flare of ugly energies, a flash of unholy purplish light around him, and he spoke words that rang in echoes totally out of proportion to their volume.

"DIE ALONE," he spat.

A flood of power hit me and my vision went black.

The last thing I heard was the snapping of bone.

Chapter Thirty-eight

I didn't wake up.

It was more like I felt myself putting together some kind of awareness, the way a stagehand constructs a set. Evidently I was a minimalist, because the reality I awoke to was a bare black floor, a single hanging lamp overhead, and three chairs.

I walked forward into the light and stared at the chairs.

In one sat Lasciel, again in her angelic, blond, wholesome form. She wasn't wearing the white tunic, though. Instead, she was clothed in an Illinois Department of Corrections prison jumpsuit. The orange suited her hair and complexion quite well. She wore prison shackles, wrists and feet, and sat primly in her chair.

In the second chair was me. Well. It was a version of me, some kind of subconscious alter ego of mine. His hair was clipped shorter and neater than mine, and he wore a dark beard that was kept in similar fastidious order. He wore a black silk shirt, black trousers, and his hands (both of them) were unmarred, his finger-tips held together in a steeple that rested on his chin.

"Another dream," I said, and sighed. I slumped down into the third chair. I looked more or less as I had when I woke up that morning. My shirt was slashed open, though there wasn't any blood on my torso, and my skin hadn't been pounded and ripped with a chain. Wishful thinking.

"Not precisely a dream," the subconscious me said. "Call it a meeting of the minds."

Lasciel smiled, very slightly.

"No," I said, and pointed at Lasciel. "I've said everything I intend to say to her." I turned to my alter ego—though on thinking about it, maybe alter id was more accurate. "As for you, you're sort of a jerk. And the whole look you've got going there says 'evil wizard,' which I am now professionally opposed to."

Alterna-Harry sighed. "I've told you before. I'm not some sort of dark demon. I'm simply the more primal essence of yourself. The one most concerned with such matters as food. Survival." His dark eyes flickered idly over Lasciel. "Mating," he said, a lazy growl to the tone. He looked back to me. "The important things in life."

"That I am even having this dream probably means that I need a good therapist," I said. I stared at my other self and said, "It was you, wasn't it? You wanted to pick up the coin."

"Make sure you remember that I am a part of you before you point any fingers," he said. "And yes. The potential for power in an alliance with Lasciel"—he inclined his head to her, a courtly, gentlemanly gesture, damn his chivalrous eyes—"was too great to simply ignore. There are too many things out there determined to kill you. So long as you keep Lasciel's coin, you both have the option to seek more power if necessary to protect yourself or others, *and* you prevent the coin from being used by unscrupulous sorts like Cassius."

I grimaced. "So?"

"So," he said. "This is a time to consider employing a portion of that power."

I stared at him and said, "You've been talking to her behind my back."

"For months," he said calmly. "It was only polite. After all, you wanted nothing to do with her."

"You asshole," I said. "The whole reason I wasn't talking was that I didn't want the temptation."

"I did," my subconscious said. "Honestly, you should listen to me more often. If you'd taken my advice about Murphy, she wouldn't be in Hawaii. In bed with Kincaid."

Lasciel coughed gently and said, "Gentlemen. If I might offer a suggest —"

Both I and my alternative self said, at the same time and in exactly the same voice, "Shut up."

Lasciel blinked, but did.

My double and I eyed each other, and I nodded slowly. "We're in agreement, then, that her presence and her influence are dangerous."

"We are," my double said. "She must not be allowed to dictate actions or to direct our choices through suggestion or manipulation." My double looked at her and said, "But she can and should be used as a resource, under

careful control. She can offer us enormous amounts of information.” He eyed her again and said, “And amusement.”

Lasciel left her eyes down and smiled, very slightly.

“No,” I said. “I’ve got Bob when I want information. And if I want sex, I’ll...figure out something.”

“You don’t have Bob now,” my double said. “And you’ve wanted sex since about twenty minutes after the last time you had it.”

“That’s beside the point,” I told him sullenly. “I’m not quite insane enough to let a fallen angel give me virtual nooky, just for kicks.”

“Listen to me,” he said, and his voice became sharp, commanding. “Here’s the cold truth. You are determined to take us into battle against forces you cannot possibly overcome through main strength. Not only that, but your source of assistance, the Wardens, may also turn against you if they learn the truth about what you’re attempting. You are wounded. You are out of contact with your other allies.”

“It’s the right thing to do,” I said, setting my jaw.

My double rolled his eyes. “Tell me, is it morally necessary for you to die in the process?”

I glowered at him.

“This meeting is just a formality, you know,” he said. “You are already planning on asking Lasciel’s shadow for her help. That’s why you read through the book as you did before it was taken from you. You wanted it to go through your mind so that she could see it, and provide you with the text as she did for the summoning of the Erlking.”

I lifted a finger. “I only did that in case I wasn’t able to pry enough out of Grevane to figure out exactly what Kemmler’s disciples are doing.”

My double arched a brow. “How’d that work out for you?”

“Don’t be a wiseass,” I said.

“The point,” he said, “is that you have little or no chance to prevail if you blindly rush in. You must know how they intend to manipulate these energies. You *must* know if there is a weak time or place at which to assault them. You must know the details of the Darkhallow, or you might as well cut your own wrists.”

“Don’t have to,” I told him. “I could just sit and wait for the Erlking to come by.”

“Six of one, half a dozen of another,” my double agreed. “In addition, your body is in no condition to do *anything* at the moment.” He leaned

forward. “Free her to help us.”

I inhaled slowly and stared at Lasciel for a moment. Then I said, “After I killed Justin and got my head together at Ebenezer’s place, I promised myself something. I promised that I would live my life on my own terms. That I knew the difference between right and wrong and that I wouldn’t cross the line. I wouldn’t allow myself to become like Justin DuMorne.”

“Don’t you want to survive?” my double asked.

I rose from the chair and started walking into the darkness outside the light. “Of course I do. But some things are more important than survival.”

“Yeah,” my double said. “Like the people who are going to get killed when you die and don’t stop Kemmler’s disciples.”

I froze at the edge of the darkness.

“Take the high road if you want to,” my double said. “Choose to walk away from this strength in the name of principle. But after your noble death, everyone you no longer protect, everyone who might one day have come to you for help, everyone who is killed in the aftermath of the Darkhallow—every life you might have protected in the future will be on your head.”

I stared at the darkness and then closed my eyes.

“Regardless of where it came from, Lasciel offers you the power of knowledge. If you turn aside from that power—power only *you* can take up—then you abandon your commitment to protect and defend those who are not strong enough to do it themselves.”

“No,” I said. “That isn’t...that isn’t my responsibility.”

“Of course it is,” my subconscious said, voice clear and sharp. “You coward.”

I stopped and turned, staring at him.

“If you go to your death rather than do everything you might to prevent what is happening, you are merely committing suicide and trying to make yourself feel better about it. That is the act of a coward. It is beneath contempt.”

I went through the logic of his argument and didn’t make any headway against it—of course. While my double might look like another person, he wasn’t. He was me.

“If I open this door now,” I said slowly. “I might not be able to close it again.”

“Or you might,” my double said. “I have no intention of allowing her any control. So you will be the one who determines it.”

“What if I can’t contain her again once she is freed?”

“Why shouldn’t you be able to? It’s your mind. Your will. Your choice. You still believe in free will, do you not?”

“It’s dangerous,” I said.

“Of course it is. And now you must choose. Will you face that danger? Or will you run from it, and so condemn those who need your strength to their deaths?”

I stared at him for a minute. Then I looked at Lasciel. She waited, her eyes steady, her expression calm.

“Can you do it?” I asked her bluntly. “Can you show me what was on those pages?”

“Of course,” she answered, her manner one of subservience without a trace of resentment. “I would be pleased to offer you whatever assistance you permit.”

She looked humble. She looked cooperative. But I knew better. The mere shadow of the fallen angel Lasciel was a vital and powerful force. She might look humble and cooperative, but if that was her true nature she wouldn’t have fallen to begin with. I didn’t think she was harboring murderous impulses or anything—my instincts told me that she was genuinely pleased to help me.

After all, that was the first step. And she had patience. She could afford to wait.

Dangerous indeed. Lasciel represented nothing less than the intrinsic allure of power itself. I had never sought to become a wizard. Hell, a lot of the time I thought about how nice things might be if I hadn’t been one. The power had been a birthright, and if it had grown since then, it had done so by the necessity of survival. But I’d tasted a darker side to the possession of power—the searing satisfaction of seeing an enemy fall to my strength. The lust to test myself against another, to challenge them and see who was the strongest. The mindless hunger for more that, if once indulged, might never be slaked.

One of the coldest, most evil souls I have ever encountered once told me that the reason I fought so hard to do what seemed right was that I was terrified to look within me and see the desire to cease the fight and do as I would, free of conscience or remorse.

And now I could see that he had been right.

I looked at the fallen angel, patiently waiting, and was terrified.

But there were innocent lives at stake: men and women and children who needed protection.

If I didn't give it to them, who would?

I took a deep breath, reached into my pocket, and found a silver key there. I threw it to my double.

He caught it and rose. Then he unlocked Lasciel's shackles.

Lasciel inclined her head to him respectfully. Then she walked over to me, gorgeous and warm in the harsh light, her eyes lowered. Without a trace of self-consciousness, she sank down to her knees, bowed her head, and said, "How may I serve you, my host?"

I opened my eyes and found myself on my back. There was a candle burning nearby. Mouse had curled himself protectively around my head, and his tongue was flicking over my face, rough and wet and warm.

I hurt absolutely everywhere. I'd learned to block out pain under the harsh lessons of Justin DuMorne, but it went only so far.

Lasciel had shown me a different technique.

I couldn't have explained to anyone what I did. I wasn't sure that I understood it myself, at least on a conscious level. I simply knew. I gathered the pain together and fed it into a burning fire of determination in my thoughts, and it began to steadily recede.

I exhaled slowly and began to sit up. My brain registered the screaming torture of the muscles in my stomach—it just wasn't horribly important, and took up little of my attention.

"My God, Harry," Butters said. His voice was thick and slurred, as if he were holding his nose. His hand pushed on my shoulder. "Don't sit up."

I let him push me back down. I needed a couple of minutes to let the pain continue to fade. "How bad is it?"

He exhaled. "It's pretty hideous, but I don't think he actually perforated the abdominal wall. Skin and tissue damage, but you did some bleeding." He swallowed and looked a little green around the gills. "That's my best guess, anyway."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, fine. It's just...I work with corpses because I just couldn't handle...you know...actual living people."

“Heh. You can eat lunch while looking at a three-month-old corpse, but first aid on my stomach is too much to handle?”

“Yeah. I mean, you’re still alive. That’s just weird.”

I shook my head. “How long was I out?” I was surprised at how calm and steady my voice sounded.

“It’s been about fifteen minutes,” Butters said. “I found some bandages and alcohol in the old man’s duffel bag. I’ve got your belly cleaned and covered, but I don’t have much of an idea of how much trouble you’re in. You need a hospital.”

“Maybe later,” I said. I lay on my back, poring over what Lasciel had given me about the writings in the book. Hell, the thing had been written in German. I didn’t know German, but Lasciel had translated the text about the Darkhallow. It felt like we had talked about it for an hour or more, but dream time and real time aren’t always lockstepped.

Butters’s nose had swollen up. There was still some blood on his face, and he already had a matched set of gorgeously colorful black eyes. He leaned over and fussed with the bandages on my stomach.

“Hey,” I said quietly. “I told you to run. I was doing that heroic rear-guard thing. You screwed it all up.”

“Sorry,” he answered, his voice serious. “But...I got outside and I couldn’t run. I mean, I wanted to. I *really* wanted to. But after all you’ve done for me...” He shook his head. “I just couldn’t do that.”

“What did you do?”

“I ran around the outside of the museum. I tried to find help, but with all the rain and the dark there wasn’t anyone around. So I ran to the car and got Mouse. I thought that maybe he could help you.”

“He could,” I agreed. “He did.”

Mouse’s tail thumped on the floor, and he kept on licking at my head. I realized, dully, that he was cleaning the dozens of tiny snakebites.

“But he couldn’t have done it without you, Butters,” I said. “You saved my life. Another five minutes and I’d have been history.”

He blinked down at me for a moment and then said, “I did, didn’t I?”

“Damned brave of you,” I said.

His spine straightened a little. “You think?”

“Yeah.”

“And check it out,” he said, gesturing at his face, his mouth opening into a toothy smile. “I have a broken nose, don’t I?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“Like I’m a boxer. Or maybe a tough-as-nails gumshoe.”

“You earned it,” I said. “Hurt?”

“Like hell,” he said, but he was still smiling. He blinked a few times, the gears almost visibly spinning in his head, and said, “I didn’t run away. And I fought him. I jumped on him.”

I kept quiet and let him process it.

“My God,” he said. “That was...that was so *stupid*.”

“Actually, when you survive it gets reclassified as ‘courageous.’” I reached out my right hand. Butters shook it, gripping hard.

He looked at Cassius’s body, and his smile faded. “What about him?” he asked.

“He’s done,” I said.

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Oh,” I said. “We’ll leave the body here. No time to move it. He’ll be a John Doe on the public records, and there probably won’t be a heavy investigation. If we get out quick it shouldn’t be an issue.”

“No. I mean...I mean, my God, he’s dead. We killed him.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” I told him. “I’m the one who killed him. All you did was try to help me.”

His brow furrowed and he shook his head. “That’s not what I mean either. I feel sorry for him.”

“Don’t,” I said. “He was a monster.”

Butters frowned and nodded. “But he was also a man. Or was once. He was so bitter. So much hate. He had a horrible life.”

“Note the past tense,” I said. “Had.”

Butters looked away from the corpse. “What happened there at the very end? There was a light, and his voice sounded...weird. I thought he’d killed you.”

“He hit me with his death curse,” I said.

Butters swallowed. “I guess it didn’t work? I mean, because you’re breathing.”

“It worked,” I told him. I’d felt that vicious magic grab hold of me and sink in. “I don’t think he was strong enough to kill me outright. So he went for something else.”

“‘Die alone’?” Butters asked quietly. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Not sure I want to.” I took a deep breath and then exhaled. I didn’t have enough time to lie there waiting to recover. “Butters, I don’t have any right to ask this of you. I’m already in your debt. But I need your help.”

“You have it,” he said.

“I haven’t even told you what it is,” I said.

Butters smiled a little and nodded. “I know. But you have it.”

I felt my lips peel back from my teeth in a fierce grin. “One little assault and you’ve gone habitual. Next thing I know you’ll be forming a fight club. Help me up.”

“You shouldn’t,” he said seriously.

“No choice,” I said.

He nodded and then stood up and offered me his hand. I took it and rose, waiting to sway or pass out or throw up from the pain. I did none of those things. The pain was there, but it didn’t stop me from moving or thinking. Butters just stared at me and then shook his head.

I found my staff, picked it up, and walked to the Buffalo Bill exhibit. Butters got the candle, and then he and Mouse kept pace. I looked around for a second, then picked up a long, heavy-duty extension cord running from an outlet on the wall to power some lights on an exhibit in the center of the room. I jerked it clear at both ends and gathered it into a neat loop. Once I had it, I passed it to Butters.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Preparing,” I said. “I found out about the Darkhallow.”

Butters blinked. “You did? How?”

I grunted. “Magic.”

“Okay,” he said. “What did you learn?”

“That this isn’t a rite. It’s a big spell,” I said. “It all depends on drawing together a ton of dark spiritual energy.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Like a lot of things. The necromantic energy around animated corpses and manifested shades. The predatory spirits of ancient hunters. All the fear that’s been growing since last night. Plus, the past several years have seen some serious magical turbulence around Chicago. Kemmler’s disciples can put that turbulence to work for them, too.”

“Then what?”

“They gather it together and get it going in a big circle. It creates a kind of vortex, which then funnels down into whoever is trying to consume the energy. Poof. Insta-god.”

He frowned. “I’m not very clued in on this magic stuff, but that sounds kind of dangerous.”

“Hell, yeah,” I said, and crossed the room to a rack of riding equipment. “It’s like trying to inhale a tornado.”

“Holy crap,” Butters said. “But how does that help us?”

“First of all, I found out that the vortex itself is deadly. It’s going to draw off the life of every living thing around it.”

Butters gulped. “It will kill everything?”

“Not at first. But when the wizard at the vortex draws down the power, it’s going to create a kind of vacuum where all that power used to be. The vacuum will rip away the life energy of everything within a mile.”

“Dear God. That will kill thousands of people.”

“Only if they finish the spell,” I said. “Until then, the farther back you are from it, the less it will do,” I said. “But to get near the vortex, the only way to survive it is to surround yourself with necromantic energy of your own.”

“Only those with ghosts or zombies need apply?” he asked.

“Exactly.” I lifted a saddle from the rack. Then I got a second one. I hung both over opposite ends of my staff, and picked it up like a plowman’s yoke, the saddles hanging. I started walking down the stairs.

“But wait,” Butters said. “What are you going to do?”

“Get to the center of the vortex,” I said. “The effort it will take to work this spell is incredible. I don’t care how good Cowl is. If I hit him as he tries to draw down the vortex, it’s going to shake his concentration. The spell will be ruined. The backlash will kill him.”

“And everyone will be all right?” he asked.

“That’s the plan.”

He nodded and then stopped abruptly in his tracks. I felt his stare burning into my back.

“But, Harry. To get there you’ll have to call up the dead yourself.”

I stopped and looked over my shoulder at him.

Comprehension dawned in his eyes. “And you need a drummer.”

“Yeah.”

He swallowed. "Could...could you get in trouble with your people for doing this?"

"It's possible," I said. "But there's a technicality I can exploit."

"What do you mean?"

"The Laws of Magic specifically refer to the abuse of magic when used against our fellow human beings. Technically it only counts if you call up human corpses."

"But you told me that everyone only calls humans."

"Right. So while the Laws of Magic only address necromancy as used on human corpses, there usually isn't any need for a distinction. Nutty necromancers only call up humans. Sane wizards don't touch necromancy at all. I don't think anyone has tried something like this."

We reached the main level of the museum.

"It's going to be dangerous," I told him. "I think we can do it, but I can't make you any promises. I don't know if I can protect you."

Butters walked beside me for several steps, his expression serious. "You can't try it without someone's help. And if you don't stop it, the spell will kill thousands of people."

"Yes," I said. "But I can't order you to help me. I can only ask."

He licked his lips. "I can keep a beat," he said.

I nodded and reached my destination. I slipped my improvised yoke off my shoulders and dropped both saddles to the floor. My breathing was a little harsh from the effort, even though I barely noticed the pain and strain. "You'll need a drum."

Butters nodded. "There were some tom-toms upstairs. I'll go get one."

I shook my head. "Too high-pitched. Your polka suit is still in the Beetle's trunk, right?"

"Yes."

I nodded. Then I looked up. And up. And up. Another flash of lightning illuminated the pale, towering terror of Sue, the most complete Tyrannosaurus skeleton mankind has ever discovered.

"Okay, Butters," I told him. "Go get it."

Chapter

Thirty-nine

By the time we got outside, the storm had turned into something with its own vicious will. Rain lashed down in blinding, cold sheets. Wind howled like a starving beast, lightning burned almost continually across the sky, and the accompanying thunder was a constant, rumbling snarl. This was the kind of storm that came only once or twice in a century, and I had never seen its equal.

That said, the entire thing was nothing but a side effect of the magical forces now at work over the city. The apprehension, tension, fear, and anger of its people had coalesced into dark power that rode over Chicago in the storm. The Erlking's presence—I could still hear the occasional shrieking howl amidst the storm's angry roaring—stirred that energy even more.

I shielded my eyes from the rain as best I could with one hand, staring up at the lightning-threaded skies. There, a few miles to the north, I found what I had expected—a slow and massive rotation in the storm clouds, a spiral of fire and air and water that rolled with ponderous grace through its cycle.

"There!" I called back to Butters, and pointed. "You see it?"

"My God," he said. He clutched at my shoulders with both hands to hold himself steady, and his bass drum pulsed steadily behind me. "Is that it?"

"That's it," I growled. I shook the water from my eyes and clutched at the saddlehorn to keep my balance. "It's starting."

"What a mess," Butters said. He glanced behind us, at the broken brick and debris and wreckage of the museum's front doors. "Is she all right?"

"One way to find out," I growled. "Hah, mule!"

I laid my left hand on the rough, pebbled skin of my steed and willed it forward. The saddle lurched, and I clutched hard with my other hand to stay on.

The first few steps were the worst. The saddle sat at a sharp incline not too unlike that on a rearing horse. But as my mount gathered speed, the

length of her body tilted forward, until her spine was almost parallel with the ground.

I didn't know this before, but as it turns out, Tyrannosaurs can *really* haul ass.

She might have been as long as a city bus, but Sue, despite her weight, moved with power and grace. As I'd called forth energy-charged ectoplasm to clothe the ancient bones, they had become covered in sheets of muscle and a hide of heavy, surprisingly supple quasi-flesh. She was dark grey, and there was a ripple pattern of black along her head, back, and flanks, almost like that of a jaguar. And once I had shaped the vessel, I had reached out and found the ancient spirit of the predator that had animated it in life.

Animals might not have the potential power of human remains. But the older the remains, the more magic can be drawn to fill them—and Sue was sixty-five *million* years old.

She had power. She had power in spades.

I had rigged the saddles to straddle her spine, just at the bend where neck joined body. I'd had to improvise to get them around her, using the long extension cords to tie them into place, and it had been ticklish as hell to get Butters on board without his losing the beat and destroying my control of the dinozombie. But Butters had pulled through.

Sue bellowed out a basso shriek that rattled nearby buildings and broke a few windows as she hurtled forward down the streets of the city. The blinding rain and savage storm had left the streets all but deserted, but even so, there were earthquakes less noticeable than a freaking Tyrannosaur. The streets literally shook under her feet. In fact, we left acres of strained, cracked asphalt behind us.

Here's something else I bet you didn't know about Tyrannosaurs: they don't corner well. The first time I tried to take a left, Sue swung wide, the enormous momentum of her body simply too much for even her muscles to lightly command. She swung up onto the sidewalk, crushed three parked cars under her feet, knocked over two light poles, kicked a compact car end over end to land on its roof, and broke every window on the first two floors of the building beside us as her tail lashed back and forth in an effort to counterbalance her body.

"Oh, my God!" Butters screamed. He kept hanging on to me with his arms, stabbing his legs out alternately to either side in order to operate the bass drum strapped on his back.

“They’re probably insured!” I shouted. Thank God the streets weren’t crowded that night. I made a note to be sure to have Sue slow down a little before we turned again, and kept the focus of my will on her, her attention on the task at hand.

Just before we turned onto Lake Shore Drive we hit a National Guard checkpoint. There were a couple of army Hummers there, their headlights casting useless cones of light into the night and storm, wooden roadblocks, and two luckless GIs in rain ponchos. As Sue bore down on them, the two men stared, their faces white. One of them simply dropped his assault rifle from numb hands.

“Get out of the way, fools!” I screamed.

The two men dove for cover. Sue’s foot crashed down onto the hood of one Hummer, crushing it to the asphalt, and then we were past the checkpoint and pounding our way down the street toward Evanston.

“Heh,” I said, looking back over my shoulder. “I’d love to hear how they explain *that* to their CO.”

“You *crushed* that truck!” Butters shouted. “You’re like a human wrecking ball!” There was a thoughtful pause, and then he said, “Hey, are we going anywhere near my boss’s place? Because he just won’t shut up about his new Jaguar.”

“Maybe later. For now, look sharp,” I told him. “She’s a lot faster than I thought. We’ll be there in just a minute.” I ducked under the corner of a billboard as Sue went by it. “Whatever you do, keep that drumbeat going. Do you understand?”

“Right,” Butters said. “If I stop, no more dinosaur.”

“No,” I called back. “If you stop, the dinosaur does whatever the hell it wants to.”

Shouts rose up from a side street where a couple more guardsmen saw us go by. Sue turned her head toward them and let out another challenging bellow that broke more windows and startled the guardsmen so much that they fell down. I felt a surge of simple, enormous hunger run through the beast I’d called up, as though the ancient animus I’d summoned from the spirit world was beginning to remember the finer things in life. I touched Sue’s neck again, sending a surge of my will down into her, jerking her head back around with a rumbling cough of protest.

My ears rang in the wake of that vast sound, and I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Butters was okay. His face was pale.

“If this thing gets loose,” he said. “That would be bad.”

“Which is why you shouldn’t stop the drum,” I told him. If Sue went wild, I could scarcely imagine the potential carnage she could inflict. I mean, good grief. Look at all the senseless victims in *Jurassic Park II*.

We hit Evanston, the first suburb of Chicago proper, which is mainly separated from Chicago by the presence of trees on the streets and a few more homes than high-rises. But given that it’s only a block or two away from the heart of Second City, the addition of trees and homes made it feel more like a park nestled down at the feet of the city.

I guided Sue into a gentler left turn onto Sheridan, slowing down enough to be sure that we wouldn’t swerve off the street. As Sue headed in, I was suddenly struck with the realization of how fragile those homes seemed. Good Lord, another driving accident like the one back in town would result in a home being crushed, and not just some dents and broken windows. We would be moving among precisely the people I was trying to protect—families, homes with children and parents and pets and grandparents. Decent folks, for the most part, who just wanted to make their homes peaceful and secure and go about their lives.

Of course, if I didn’t hurry up and stop the Darkhallow, every house I was now passing would be filled with its dead.

I checked the sky during the next long flicker of lightning and didn’t like what I saw. The clouds were spinning faster, more broadly, and unnatural colors and striations had appeared in their formation. And we were almost under its center.

I guided Sue down another side street, and that’s when I felt the cloud of power gathering before me. It swirled and writhed against my wizard’s senses, sending tingling shafts of heat and cold and other, less recognizable sensations running through me. I shuddered at the disorienting strength of it.

There was magic being wrought ahead. A lot of it.

“There!” Butters shouted, pointing. “Down that way, that whole block is the campus!”

Lightning flashed again as I turned Sue down the street, and it was over the dinosaur’s broad head that I saw Wardens battling for their lives in the street ahead.

They were in trouble. Luccio had them moving in a tight group around a cluster of...Hell’s bells, around a group of children in colorful Halloween

costumes. Morgan was at the head of the group, Luccio brought up the rear, and Yoshimo, Kowalski, and Ramirez were on the flanks.

Even as I watched, I saw dozens of rotting forms lurch out of the shadows ahead of them and charge. More came running in behind them, letting out wails of mad anger.

Luccio whirled to deal with them. And dear God, I suddenly saw the difference between a strong but somewhat clumsy young wizard and a master of the magic of battle.

Fire lashed from her left hand—not a gout of flame like I could call up, but a slender *needle* of fire so bright that it hurt the eyes to see. She swept it in an arc at thigh level, and every one of the zombies coming behind went tumbling to the ground amidst crackling sounds of shattering muscle and singeing meat. Another wave surged up behind the first. Luccio caught one of them in a grip of invisible power and hurled the undead into the ones behind, sending more of them to the ground, but a pair of the zombies got through.

Luccio ducked the grasping arms of the first, caught the thing by a wrist, and sent it stumbling aside with a twist of her body that reminded me of one of Murphy's moves. The second zombie drove a hammer-heavy blow at her head, but that slender blade she wore at her side swept up out of its scabbard and took off its arm at the elbow. Another move brought a chiming surge of some power I could feel even from half a block away singing through the silver steel of her sword, and she flicked it lightly at the zombie's head. The blade touched, there was a flash of light, and the zombie abruptly fell limp to the ground, the magic that had animated it disrupted and gone.

In less than five seconds, Luccio had simply wiped out thirty undead, and it hadn't even been a contest.

I guess you don't get to be commander of the Wardens by collecting bottle caps, either.

My eyes flickered back to the front of the group, where Morgan met the shock of another wave. His style was rougher and more brutal than Luccio's, but he got similar results. A heavy stomp of his foot sent a ripple through the earth that knocked undead to the ground like bowling pins. A gesture of his hand and wrist and a cry of effort drew grasping waves of concrete and earth up to clamp down on the fallen zombies. He closed his fist, and the earth tightened, drawing back down into the ground, cutting

and tearing its way through undead flesh and ripping the zombies to shreds. One of the creatures was still mobile, and with a look of contemptuous impatience on his face, Morgan drew the broadsword at his hip—the one used for executions of wizards guilty of breaking one of the Laws of Magic—paused a beat to get the timing right, and then swung, once, twice, *snicker-snack*, and the zombie fell apart into a number of wriggling bits.

Several others got through here and there. Kowalski hammered one to the ground with unseen force, while beside him Yoshimo twisted a hand and the branches of a nearby tree reached down of their own accord, wrapped around the undead's throat, and hauled it up off the ground. Ramirez, a fighter's grin on his face, lashed out with some kind of bright green energy I had never seen before, and the zombie nearest him simply fell apart into what looked like grains of sand. As an afterthought, he drew his sidearm as a second creature charged him, and calmly put two rounds into its head from less than ten feet away. He must have been loaded up with hollow points or something, because the creature's head exploded like rotten fruit and the rest fell twitching to the ground.

None of the zombies got within ten feet of the terrified children.

More of them materialized out of the rain and the night, but Luccio and the Wardens kept moving steadily forward, burning and crushing and slicing and dicing their way across the street, furiously determined to get the children clear.

Which is probably why they didn't see the sucker punch coming.

Out of nowhere there was the roar of an engine, and an old Chrysler shot forward along the street. The driver pulled it into a sharp left turn as it got close to the Wardens and their charges, and the wet rain turned it into a broadside slide. The car swept forward like an enormous broom of iron and steel, and none of the Wardens were looking that way.

I cried out to Sue and hung on to the saddlehorn.

The car slid, sending out a bow wave of sheeting water from the wet street.

Ramirez's head snapped around toward the car and he shrieked a warning. But it was too late to get out of the way. The group was still under attack, and the mindless creations that assaulted them cared nothing for self-preservation. They would continue the fight, and even if the Wardens could have run from the car, they would never survive being mobbed by the undead in the chaos. In a flash of insight, I realized that these were the

same tactics Grevane had used at my apartment—ruthlessly sacrificing minions in order to defeat the enemy.

Everyone else's head turned toward the oncoming car.

The muscles of Sue's legs tensed, and the saddle lurched.

One of the little girls screamed.

And then the Tyrannosaur came down from the leap that had carried her over the besieged Wardens. Sue landed with one clawed foot on the street, and the other came down squarely on the Caddy's hood, like a falcon descending upon a rabbit. There was an enormous sound of shrieking metal and breaking glass, and the saddle lurched wildly again.

I leaned over to see what had happened. The car's hood and engine block had been compacted into a two-foot-thick section of twisted metal. Even as I looked, Sue leaned over the car in a curiously birdlike movement, opened her enormous jaws, and ripped the roof off.

Inside was Li Xian, dressed in a black shirt and trousers. The ghoul's forehead had a nasty gash in it, and green-black blood had sheeted over one side of his face. His eyes were blank and a little vague, and I figured he'd clipped his head on the steering wheel or window when Sue brought his sliding car to an abrupt halt.

Li Xian shook his head and then started to scramble out of the car. Sue roared again, and the sound must have terrified Li Xian, because all of his limbs jerked in spasm and he fell on his face to the street. Sue leaned down again, her jaws gaping, but the ghoul rolled under the car to get away from them. So Sue kicked the car, and sent it tumbling end over end three or four times down the street.

The ghoul let out a scream and stared up at Sue in naked terror, covering his head with his arms.

Sue ate him. Snap. Gulp. No more ghoul.

"What's with that?" Butters screamed, his voice high and frightened. "Just covering his head with his arms? Didn't he see the lawyer in the movie?"

"Those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them," I replied, turning Sue around. "Hang on!"

I rode the dinosaur into the stream of zombies following in the Wardens' wake and let her go to town. Sue chomped and stomped and smacked zombies fifty feet through the air with swinging blows of her snout. Her tail batted one particularly vile-looking zombie into the brick wall of the

nearest building, and the zombie hit so hard and so squishily that it just stuck to the wall like a refrigerator magnet, arms and legs spread in a sprawl.

In a couple of minutes there wasn't much in the way of zombies to keep on demolishing, so I swung Sue around to pace after the Wardens. They had gotten clear of the street while I covered their retreat, and I saw Warden Luccio at the door of the nearest building, waving the last two children and Ramirez through the door while she watched out behind.

I guided Sue up to the building, and had her settle down to the ground. "Come on. But keep the drum going," I told Butters.

We slid out of our saddles and ran a couple of steps through the heavy rain to where Luccio stood at the door.

"Hey, there," I said. "Sorry I'm late."

Luccio stared at me for a moment and then at the dinosaur. Her eyes held a mixture of wonder, anger, gratitude, and revulsion. "I...*Dio*, Dresden. What have you done?"

"It isn't a mortal," I said. "It's an animal. You know the laws are there to protect our fellow wizards and mortals."

"It's..." She looked like she might throw up. "It's *necromancy*," she said.

"It's necessary," I said, and my voice sounded harsh. I hooked a thumb up. "You've seen the vortex forming?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Dark power. Kemmler's people are going to call it down and devour it along with all the shades they could get to show up, and if they go through with it and turn one of themselves into a god..."

Luccio's eyes widened as she figured it out and caught on. "There will be a vacuum," she said. "It will draw in magic to replace it. It will draw in *life*."

"Right," I said. "And they're going to be over there, directly under the vortex," I said. "But if anyone tries to go in without a field of necromantic energy around them, the vortex will suck them dry before they get there. We need to get in there to stop them. That's why I borrowed Tiny, here. So don't give me any crap about the Laws of Magic, or at least wait for later, because there are too many lives at stake."

Anger flickered over her face and she opened her mouth. Then she frowned and closed it again. "Where did you get this information?"

"Kemmler's book," I said.

“You found it?”

I grimaced. “Briefly. Grevane jumped me and took it.”

Butters looked back and forth between us, marching in place to make the polka suit’s drumbeat.

Luccio blinked at him, took a deep breath, then said, “And who is this?”

“The drummer I needed to pull this off,” I told her. “And a good friend. He saved my life tonight. Butters, this is Ms. Luccio. Captain, this is Butters.”

Luccio gave Butters a courtly little bow, and he ducked his head sheepishly in reply.

“Where did you find those kids?” I asked.

She grimaced. “This building is an apartment complex. We got here just as the first of the undead arose. One of the parents was screaming about the children being at some sort of Halloween party in a building on campus. We were too late to save the women taking care of them, but at least we got the children out.”

I chewed on my lip, studying the Warden. “You had evil wizards to gun down. And you stopped to get some kids out of the line of fire? I figured Wardens would have melted the bad guys first, tried to get the civilians clear later.”

She lifted her chin and regarded me with an arched brow. “Is that how you think of us?”

“Yes,” I said.

She frowned, and looked down at the hilt of her sword. “Dresden...the Wardens are not, as a rule, concerned with compassion or empathy. But they were *children*. I am not proud of my every act as a Warden. But I would sooner hurl myself to the demons than leave a child to die.”

I frowned at her. “You would,” I said thoughtfully. “Wouldn’t you?”

She smiled a little, her iron-grey hair plastered to her head with the rain, and it made many wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. “Not all of us share Morgan’s attitudes. But even he would never have turned aside from children in danger. He is an enormous ass at times. But a brilliant soldier. And beneath all his flaws, a decent man.”

The door to the building slammed open and Morgan came through, sword gripped in both hands. “I told you,” he said viciously to Luccio. “I *told* you he would turn on us. This latest violation of the laws only proves what I’ve said all along....” His voice trailed off slowly as he caught me from the

corner of his eye and turned to see me standing there, and Sue crouched a couple of yards behind me.

“Yeah,” I told Luccio, and my voice was the only dry thing about me. “I see what you mean.”

“Morgan, he found the book.” She looked at me. “Tell him.”

I relayed everything I had learned to Morgan. He glowered at me with enormous suspicion, but by the time I got to the part where thousands of people would die if we failed to stop the spell, his face became drawn with anxiety and then hardened with determination. He listened without interrupting.

“We need to get to the center of the spell,” I finished. “Attack them just as they try to draw it down.”

“It’s impossible,” Morgan said. “I got close enough to see them when we went in for the children. They’re in a little patch of grass and picnic tables between the buildings. There are several hundred animated corpses in our way.”

“As it happens,” I said, jerking my head at Sue, “I brought an animated corpse countermeasure along with me tonight. I’ll get us through.”

Morgan stared at me for a second and then nodded, the idea clearly gathering momentum in his thoughts. “Yes, then. We try to hit them as they complete the spell. That gives them the most time to backstab one another, and if we disrupt a working that powerful, the backlash will probably kill them.”

“Agreed,” Luccio said. “How’s Yoshimo?”

“Ramirez says her thigh is broken,” Morgan growled. “She’s not in danger but she won’t be doing any more fighting tonight.”

“Dammit,” Luccio said. “I should have caught that one before it went through.”

“No, Captain,” Morgan said implacably. “She should never have tried her sword on it. She was an unremarkable fencer, at best.”

“Gosh you’re a sweetheart, Morgan,” I said.

He glared at me, and the sword quivered in his hands.

Luccio brought her hand down between us in a gesture of absolute authority. “Gentlemen,” she said quietly. “Later. We’ve no time.”

Morgan took a deep breath in and then nodded.

I folded my arms and kept up my glower, but I hadn’t been the one near violence. Point, Dresden.

“I’ve done for Grevane’s drummer, and Sue just ate Corpsetaker’s sidekick,” I said. “That leaves us with those two and Cowl, plus Cowl’s assistant.”

“Four of them and five of us,” Morgan said.

Luccio grimaced. “It could be worse,” she admitted. “But only you and I have any experience with this kind of fight.” She glanced at me. “No offense, Dresden, but you’re young, and you haven’t seen this kind of duel very often—but even you have more experience than Ramirez or Kowalski.”

“None taken,” I said, beginning to shiver in the rain. “I’d rather be home in bed.”

“Morgan, please get the other Wardens and fill them in. Then put Yoshimo where she can see the front door and defend the building. If things don’t go well, we may need somewhere to fall back.”

“If things don’t go well,” I said, “we really won’t have to worry about that.”

Morgan shook his head at me. “I’ll be right back.”

I stood there for a moment. A mangled zombie wandered up the sidewalk. I walked back to Sue and touched her flank and her thoughts, and she flicked her tail, batting the thing away into the darkness. Then I walked back over to Luccio.

“Incredible,” she said quietly, looking at Sue. “Dresden, this...this kind of magic is an abomination. Perhaps a necessary one this night, but hideous all the same. And yet look at it. It’s amazing.”

“Pretty good for zombie crushing too,” I said.

“Indeed.” She looked up at the sky again. “How will we know when they begin drawing down the power?”

I started to say, “Your guess is as good as mine,” but I didn’t get any of it out of my mouth before the clouds rolled and stirred and suddenly began to spin in a single enormous spiral. More lightning showed me the dim form of what looked like a thin, almost spidery tornado that dropped from the cloud and began to descend to the ground.

I stiffened and nodded at it. “There you go,” I said. “They’re starting now.”

“Very well,” Luccio said. “Then we must move at once. I want you to—”

Luccio didn’t get to tell me what she wanted me to do, because the earth suddenly boiled with writhing masses of pale green light that came surging

up out of the ground. They took on form as they came, first vaguely human, then over the next instants resolving into clearer images of what looked like Amerind tribesmen. As they came, their mouths opened in shrieks and wails of excitement and rage, and ghostly weapons appeared in their hands—spears and hatchets, clubs and bows.

One of them turned and threw a translucent, shimmering spear at my chest. I barely had time to think, but my left arm swept up, my charred shield bracelet exploded into a cloud of blue and white sparks, and the hurled spear shattered into angry green flames against my shield. I heard a short cry beside me and ducked, narrowly avoiding a swing from a spectral hatchet whose wielder floated over me. I threw myself forward and rolled, coming up with my shield ready and my will gathering in my staff, making the sigils carved along its length glow with sullen fire.

A specter swung a club at Luccio, and she rolled with the blow, but even so took a hit to her jaw and mouth that staggered her. She recovered her balance, ducked to avoid a second swing, and once more drew the silver sword of a Warden from her hip. Again the blade sang with that buzzing power I'd sensed before, and Luccio made a clean lunge at the specter that thrust the blade through its heart. The specter arched as if in agony and then simply exploded into flashes of sickly light and falling globs of ectoplasm. Luccio swept her sword back and spun on a heel to face two more of the quasi-solid spirits.

I blocked a second blow of the hatchet on my shield, looking wildly around for Butters. I spotted the little guy five yards away, on his hands and knees on the crosswalk, his legs still kicking wildly to keep the drum going. Three of the deadly specters were closing in on him with wails of madness and rage.

"Butters!" I shouted, and rose to go to him, but two more specters dove at me and forced me to crouch behind my shield. I could only watch what happened as the three undead swarmed Butters and attacked him.

Butters spun around wildly, his eyes down, evidently not even aware that they were coming. One of them swung a great two-handed club back, as Butters put one hand to his mouth and then slammed it back down on the ground again. The specter's weapon swept down with a clean and lethal grace, heading directly for the back of Butters's head.

And suddenly shattered against the curving curtain of an empowered circle.

Butters looked up at the specters as they flailed uselessly against the circle. He had the piece of chalk I'd given him in one hand, and he'd torn the little cut he'd used before open once more with his teeth. He stood up, the drum still thumping, and gave me a shaky thumbs-up.

"Good, Butters!" I shouted at him. "Stay in there!"

He nodded, his face pale, and marched in place to keep the drum going.

I swung my staff at a specter and hit it, and the ghostly warrior reacted as if struck by a heavy brick. It was a curious kind of impact—not the thudding *thump* of hitting something solid, but *some* kind of impact nonetheless. I knew from the way that the specters had come up through the earth that they were only partially material. A material impact would have little enough effect on them, and the strength of my arm behind the swing meant nothing to them. But the power of my will that I had called up and held ready in my staff—that was something else. That energy was what the specter reacted to, and I pressed my advantage, whipping my staff through the specter's head and belly on two separate swings, driving the apparition away with howls of pain.

In the time it took me to do that, Luccio had simply dispatched three more of the specters with the humming power of her Warden's blade. She looked at me, her eyes wide, and lifted a pointing finger. She snarled a word, and another searing thread of flame shot over my shoulder about eight inches from my right ear. There was a howl, and I turned my head to see another specter that had been charging my back fall, consumed in scarlet flame.

I felt a fierce grin on my face and I turned around to nod my thanks to Luccio—and saw the Corpsetaker come out from under a veil of magic and swing her drawn tulwar at Luccio's back.

"Captain!" I shouted.

Luccio's sword arm swept up and around, blade parallel to her spine as she drew it around her shoulders in a circle, and caught Corpsetaker's attack without even turning to face it. Luccio sprang forward like a cat and spun in place, only to have Corpsetaker press her attack and drive the captain of the Wardens back on her heels.

Corpsetaker's young face was set in a wide and manic smile, cheeks dimpled, her curly hair flying wildly around her head as she charged. She wore a small skin drum of some kind on a rig at her hip, and she beat a swift tattoo on it with one hand while fighting with the other. A fresh cloud

of specters swirled up in support of her, and a flying arrow drew a line of scarlet on Luccio's cheek.

I roared out a challenge, brandished my staff, and bellowed, "*Forzare!*" A lance of unseen force lashed out at Corpsetaker, but the necromancer leapt back and away from it. She cried out words in an unknown tongue, and half a dozen specters darted toward me.

I brought up my shield, but was soon hard-pressed to even hold it up against repeated attacks from the specters, and they kept trying to circle around me. If I'd stood my ground they would have killed me, and as much as I wanted to help Luccio, I had no choice but to take one step back after another, until I found my shoulders pressed against Sue's enormous flank.

But my attack on the Corpsetaker had bought Luccio what she needed to make a fight of things—time to recover from the surprise attack. She cut down two more specters with needles of flame, contemptuously slapped aside another cut from Corpsetaker's tulwar, and then took the battle to the necromancer, grey cloak flying in the storm's wind, pressing her hard with the silver rapier and driving Corpsetaker back one step after another.

I dropped the staff and slapped my bare hand on Sue's hide. Though the dinosaur looked like a living beast, that was only appearance. Her own flesh was made of the same ectoplasm that the specters were—I had just poured enough energy into it to make it seem more solid. She was of the same stuff as the specters—and that meant that she could hurt them.

The Tyrannosaur stirred and then snapped her jaws to one side, closing on a specter and tearing it into fading light and globs of goo. She heaved herself to her feet, eyes sweeping around the ground in front of her for the next specter. It lifted a bow and loosed a glowing green arrow that sank into the muscle of her neck, and she bellowed in pain, but the arrow was no more than a bee's sting. One clawed foot came up and down and destroyed a second specter. The others let out wails and shouts of fear and anger and spread out to attack Sue, while the dinosaur lashed her tail around and looked for the next victim.

I saw Luccio drive Corpsetaker forward and around the corner of the building out of sight. I'd given the specters a bigger problem to worry about, and I went after Luccio.

"Harry!" Butters shouted, pointing.

I looked up at the building. I heard children screaming inside. Someone—Ramirez, I thought—screamed, "Get down, get down!" There were

flashes of luminous green light swirling here and there in the windows. I heard Morgan shout a challenge, and I heard a raucous booming sound from within. The Wardens there were under attack as well.

“Stay put!” I told him, and ran after Luccio.

It was too thick with shadow to see easily around the side of the building, but in a flash of lightning I saw Luccio make another lunge—her technique gorgeous, back leg stretched forward, spine straight, the sword extended and taking the full weight of her body behind its vicious tip. Luccio knew what she was doing. She dipped the tip of her blade under Corpsetaker’s tulwar, and the point sank into the necromancer just under the floating ribs. Corpsetaker’s mad smile never faltered.

The lightning died away and I heard a short, gasping cry.

I took my mother’s pentacle in hand and lifted it, willing light from it. Silver-blue light filled the little space between buildings. I saw Luccio plant her feet, twist the blade viciously, and whip it back out again.

Corpsetaker fell to her knees. She stared down at her chest and then pressed her hands tightly to the wound. She looked up again, staring at Luccio and then at me. Her eyes clouded over with confusion, and she slowly toppled to her side on the grass.

“Excellent,” said Luccio, turning around. She flicked blood from the silver blade and regarded it for a moment, then strode with purposeful steps for the front of the building again. “Come, wizard. We have no time to waste.”

“You’re going to leave her there?”

“She’s finished,” Luccio said harshly. “Come.”

“Are you all right?” I said.

She shot a hard look at me. “Perfectly. Grevane and Cowl remain. We must find them and kill them.” Her eyes flicked to the spiraling clouds overhead. “And quickly. We have only moments. Hurry, fool.”

I stood there for a second, staring at Luccio’s back. I lifted the pentacle and looked at Corpsetaker’s body, lying on its side in the rain. She twitched a little, her dark eyes wide and staring blindly, her face pale.

And my stomach twisted in sudden fear.

I stepped around the corner of the building with my .44 in my hand, aimed it at the back of Luccio’s head, drew back the hammer, and shouted, my voice harsh and hard, “Corpsetaker!”

Luccio's steps faltered. Her head snapped around to look at me, and in her eyes I saw a brutal cruelty that could never have belonged to the captain of the Wardens.

I felt the first tug of a soulgaze, but I made my decision in the moment that my voice caused her steps to falter. She opened her mouth, and I saw the Corpsetaker's madness twist Luccio's eyes, felt the sudden, dark tension as she began to gather power.

She never got it. In that single second of uncertainty, Corpsetaker had been relying upon her disguise to defend her, and had her mind bent upon planning her next step—not preparing her death curse. The bullet from my .44 hit her just over her right cheekbone.

Her head snapped back and then forward. It might have been Luccio's body, but it was the Corpsetaker's expression of shock and surprise as the stolen body fell to the ground in a loose tangle of dead limbs.

I heard a low, strangled sound.

I looked up to see Morgan standing in the building's doorway, sword in hand. He stared at Luccio's corpse and rasped, "Captain."

I stared at him for a second, and then fumbled for words. "Morgan. This isn't what it looks like."

Morgan's dark eyes rose to focus on me, and his face twisted with rage. "You." His voice was deadly quiet. The sword rose to a guard and he stalked out into the rain, and his voice rose to a wrathful roar as the ground—the freaking *ground*—began to literally shake. "Murderer! Traitor!"

Oh, shit.

Chapter

Forty

Morgan lashed his fist out at me, shouting something that sounded vaguely Greek, and the very rocks of the earth rippled up in a wave that flew toward me with incredible speed.

I had never fought against earth magic in earnest before, but I knew enough about it to not want to be in the way when it got to me. The gun went back in my pocket, and I took my staff in hand and ran for the nearest tree. I thrust the staff back at the earth as I ran, gathered in my will, and shouted, “*Forzare!*”

Unseen force lashed out at the ground behind me and flung me up at an angle. I hit the branches of the tree maybe ten feet up and scrambled wildly to grab one. I did it, and though it shook the tree like a blow from a giant ax, the wave of power went by under me without, oh, sucking me under the ground or crushing me or anything like that. I can’t imagine that whatever Morgan had in mind was less than horribly violent.

Morgan bellowed in rage and charged toward me, sword in hand. I jerked my legs up and he missed my ankles, if not by much. He snarled in rage, whirled with the silver sword of the Wardens abruptly emitting a low howling sound, and struck at the trunk of the tree in a motion of focus and power that reminded me of way too many Kurosawa movies. There was a flash of light as the blade cut all the way through the tree’s trunk, the heat of all that force setting both sides of the cut on fire as the tree started to fall.

I dropped clear and rolled as the tree fell out toward the street, and Morgan darted to one side, trying to get around the fallen tree to kill me.

“Morgan!” I shouted. “For God’s sake, man! That wasn’t Luccio!”

“Lies!” Morgan snarled. He abandoned chasing me around the tree in favor of simply hacking his way through it, and the sword in his hands howled again and again as he struck, cutting trunk and branches like bits of straw.

“It was the Corpsetaker!” I shouted. “The body thief! She let Luccio gut her and then switched places with her!”

His answer was an almost incoherent snarl. He came the last several feet faster than I could have believed and lashed at me with the sword. I brought my shield up and deflected the blow, but the impact of it slammed painfully against the whole left side of my body. There was more than simply physics behind that blade. I backpedaled out into the street, where several more zombies saw me and headed my way. Specters darted or looped lazily about now, with no sense of purpose in them at all, now that their drum was silent and the Corpsetaker was dead.

“Morgan!” I screamed. “Luccio might still be alive! But not if she doesn’t get help, and soon! We can’t do this!”

“More lies!” He murmured something, the blade in his hands hummed as Luccio’s had, and he flicked it lightly out against my shield.

There was a shrieking scream—in my head, rather than in my ears. I don’t know how to describe it, except to say that bad audio feedback is musical and soothing by comparison. The power in the silver sword hit my defensive shield and simply undid it, unraveled it, so that all the energy in it went flying apart in all directions, while a hot, tingling pain flashed through my left arm where I wore the bracelet.

Morgan attacked in earnest after that little flick of the blade had destroyed my defense, but his first swing was an overhand one, aimed at my temple. I knocked the blade aside with a sweep of my staff, and saw a flash of surprise cross his face at the speed of the parry. He recovered his balance, but I simply ran from him, taking that vital second to get moving again. Morgan cursed and followed me, but I can move, especially for a man my size, and Morgan wasn’t exactly a spring chicken.

I gained ten or twelve feet on him before my legs suddenly became unsteady and I faltered and nearly fell. I wanted to scream in frustration. Though I didn’t feel how much pain my body was in, it was battered and weak. There was no way I could simply outrun him, but I made it back over to where my dinosaur stood, restlessly idle after driving away the specters. I got close enough to touch her and slapped at her flank, desperately willing my intentions to her tiny brain. Doubtless, savvy necromancers had ways of conveying their orders over a distance, but I was new at this, and I had no intentions of refining my technique anytime soon.

Sue spun around as Morgan charged, leaned down low, and opened her vast jaws in a bellow of challenge.

Say what you will about Morgan, the man was no coward. But the bellow of an angry Tyrannosaur is enough to give any mammal a moment or two of doubt. He slid to a halt on his heels, still grasping the sword in his left hand, and stared at Sue and then at me. He took a deep breath and then reached out his right hand, where there was a low, yawning, humming sound that shook the air around his fingers.

“No,” he said quietly. “Not even this creature will keep you from justice this time, Dresden. Even if I have to die doing it.”

I stared at Morgan, the same old frustration and fear suddenly yielding to a realization. I had always assumed that Morgan’s irrational hatred was something personal, reserved for me and me alone. I had assumed that for whatever reason, Morgan’s persecution was the result of the political and philosophical enmity of certain members of the White Council, that he was nothing but a pawn for someone higher up in the game.

But politicians don’t make good kamikazes. That kind of dedication is reserved for zealots of principle and lunatics. For the first time I considered the notion that perhaps Morgan’s hate was not directed at me personally, but at those that he truly believed to be violators of the Laws of Magic, murderers and traitors. I knew people who would face death, even embrace it, rather than surrender their principles. Karrin Murphy was one of them, and I was friends with most of the rest.

At the end of the day, Morgan was a cop. He worked for a different body of law, of course, and under a different set of guidelines, but his duties were the same: Pursue, combat, and apprehend those who violated the laws put in place to protect people from harm. He’d spent more than a century as a policeman dealing with some of the more nightmarish things on the planet. Thinking of him in that light suddenly gave me a different understanding of Morgan’s character.

I’d seen burned-out cops before. They’d labored long and hard in the face of danger and uncertainty to uphold the law and protect the victims of crimes, only to see both the law and the victims it should have protected broken, beaten, and abused again and again. It mostly happened to the cops who genuinely cared, who believed in what they were doing, who passionately wanted to make a difference in the world. Somewhere along the way, their passion had become bottled anger. The anger had fermented

into bitter hatred. Then the hatred had fed upon itself, gnawing away at them over years, even decades, until only a shell of cold iron and colder hate remained.

I didn't feel contempt for burned-out cops. I didn't feel anger toward them. All I ever felt was sadness and empathy for their pain. They'd seen too much in their daily battle against criminals. Ten or twenty or thirty years of witnessing the most monstrous aspects of humanity had slowly turned them into walking casualties of war.

And Morgan had been on his beat for more than a century.

Morgan didn't hate me. He hated the bad guys. He hated the wizards who abused the power he had dedicated his life to using to protect others. When he looked at me, he didn't see Harry Dresden. He could see only the atrocities and tragedies that had burned themselves into his mind and heart. I understood him. It didn't make me like him, but I could understand the pain that drove him to persecute me.

Of course, my sensitivity and empathy were completely irrelevant, because they wouldn't do a damned thing to stop him. If he charged me, I wouldn't have any options.

"Morgan," I rasped. "Please don't. We can't let Corpsetaker divide us like this. Can't you see that? That was her intention when she took Luccio."

"Traitor," he snarled. "Liar."

I ground my teeth in frustration. "My God, man, thousands of people are about to die!"

His mouth twisted, baring his teeth all the way to the gums. "And you will be the first."

If he charged me again, I wouldn't have any choice but to fight, and he was at least as strong as me, and far more experienced—not to mention the enchantment-breaking silver sword in his hand. If I didn't kill him fast, he would kill me. It was as simple as that. And even if I did kill him, he would spend his death curse on me—and it wouldn't be like the feeble thing Cassius had thrown. Morgan would obliterate me.

I couldn't run. I couldn't survive fighting him, regardless of whether or not I beat him. The best I could hope for would be to take him with me. If I died, Sue would go wild, reverting to the instincts of her ancient spirit. She would hunt. People would die.

But, if Morgan died, it would leave only Kowalski and Ramirez to stop Cowl and Grevane. Even if they could manage to pull off some kind of

necromancy to shield them from the vortex as they went in, they would never be able to beat the necromancers within. They would certainly die, and not long after that the Darkhallow would annihilate thousands of innocent lives.

With Morgan leading them, they might have a chance. Not a good one, but at least there was a chance.

Which meant that if I wanted to stop the Darkhallow and save all those lives, I had only one choice. I leaned my suddenly trembling hand against Sue's leg, and she sank back into a passive crouch.

Morgan let out a bellow of defiance and determination and rushed me.

I lowered my shield. My heart pounded with a fear so strong that I nearly threw up.

The lightning gleamed on the silver blade of his sword.

I dropped my staff to the ground and faced him, arms at my sides, my hands clenched into terrified fists. I readied my will, my own death curse, picturing Grevane in my thoughts. At least I could give the Wardens a better chance for victory if I could kill or cripple one of the bastards on my way out.

Time stretched out into an endless moment. I watched Morgan's sword sweep up to the vertical, the blade a gorgeous silver that reflected the lightning ripping apart the spinning vortex behind me.

"Harry!" Butters screamed, his voice horrified, the drum pounding frantically.

As Morgan struck, I took the coward's way out and closed my eyes.

I knew that it was inevitable that one day I would die.

But I didn't want to watch it coming.

Chapter Forty-one

A gunshot rang out.

Morgan jerked at the hips, suddenly thrown off balance. He spun gracelessly and fell to the ground.

I stared at him in shock.

Morgan let out a snarl, fixed his eyes on me, and lifted his right hand, deep and terrifying power gathering in it.

“Morgan!” snapped a woman’s voice. That voice rang with authority and confidence, with command. The speaker damned well *knew* that when she gave an order that it would be obeyed, and imbued the command with a power that had nothing to do with magic. “Stand down!”

Morgan froze for an instant and glanced over his shoulder.

Ramirez stood twenty feet away, his pistol smoking in his hand. The other arm was supporting the weight of the girl I had known as the Corpsetaker. The girl’s face was as pale as death, and she could not possibly have been standing on her own, but though her features were exactly the same as when Corpsetaker had been in the body, she did not look like the same person. Her eyes were narrowed and hard, and her expression was filled with a stern, almost regal confidence.

“You heard me,” the girl snapped. “Stand *down*!”

“Who are you?” Morgan asked.

“Morgan,” Ramirez said. “Dresden was telling the truth. This is Captain Luccio.”

“No,” Morgan said, shaking his head, but his voice lacked his usual absolute conviction. “No, it’s a lie.”

“It’s no lie,” Ramirez said. “I soulgazed her. It’s the captain.”

Morgan’s lips worked soundlessly, but he didn’t release the strike he held ready in his hand.

“Morgan,” the girl said, quietly this time. “It’s all right. Stand down.”

“You aren’t the captain,” Morgan mumbled. “You can’t be. It’s a trick.”

The girl, Luccio, abruptly put on a lopsided smile. “Donald,” she said. “Dear idiot. I’m the one who trained you. I am fairly certain that you do not know as much as I do about who I am.” Luccio lifted her arm and showed Morgan the silver rapier she’d carried before. She took it in her hand and whipped it in a circle, eliciting a steady, humming power, as I’d felt before. “There. Could another so employ my own blade?”

Morgan stared at her for a moment. Then his hand dropped, suddenly limp, the power he’d held draining away.

My heart started beating again, and I leaned heavily against Sue’s flank.

Ramirez holstered his gun and helped the new Luccio over to Morgan’s side, then lowered her gently to the ground beside him.

“You’re hurt,” Morgan said. His own face had gone white with pain. “How bad is it?”

Luccio tried a small smile. “I’m afraid I aimed too well. The wound has done for me. It may take some time, that’s all.”

“My God,” Morgan said. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I saw Dresden shoot you and...while you were bleeding. Needed help.”

Luccio raised a weak hand. “No time,” she said gently.

Ramirez had bent over Morgan, meanwhile, and was examining the gunshot wound. The bullet had caught Morgan in the back of one leg, and it looked messy. “Dammit,” Ramirez said. “It hit his knee. It’s shattered.” He placed his fingers lightly over Morgan’s knee, and the older Warden abruptly twisted in pain, his face gone bloodless. “He can’t walk.”

Luccio nodded. “Then it’s up to you.” She looked over at me. “And you, Warden Dresden.”

“What about Kowalski?” I said.

Ramirez paled. He glanced back at the apartment building and shook his head. “He was sitting on the floor when the specters rose out of it. He never had a chance.”

“No time,” Luccio said weakly. “You must go.”

Butters came marching over to us, drum still beating, his face pale. “Okay,” he said. “I’m ready. Let’s do it.”

“Not you, Butters,” I said. “Sue just needs to be able to hear the drum. She’ll hear it over there just as well as if you were on her back. I want you to stay here.”

“But—”

"I can't afford to spare effort to protect you," I told him. "And I don't want to leave the wounded here alone. Just keep the drum beating."

"But I want to go with you. I want to help. I'm not afraid to"—he swallowed, face pale—"die fighting beside you."

"Look at it this way," I said. "If we blow it, you get to die anyhow."

Butters stared at me for a second, and then said, "Gee. Now I feel better."

"I believe that there's a cloud for every silver lining," I said. "Come on, Ramirez."

Ramirez's grin returned. "Everyone else who lets me ride on their dinosaur calls me Carlos."

I climbed back up into the first saddle, and Ramirez settled into the second.

"God be with you, Harry," Butters said, marching in place on the ground, his face worried.

Given whom I had chosen as my ally, I sort of doubted that if God went with me it would be to assist me. "I'll take whatever help I can get," I said aloud, and laid my hand on Sue's hide. She lurched up from her crouch, and I turned her toward the site of the vortex.

"You're hurt," Ramirez said. He kept his voice pitched very low.

"I can't feel it," I said. "I'll worry about the rest if there's a later. You've got great timing, by the way. Thank you."

"*De nada*," he said. "I was right behind Morgan. I heard you trying to talk to him about Luccio."

"You believed me?" I started Sue forward. It would take her several steps to pick up speed.

Rodriguez sighed. "I've heard a lot about you. Watched you at that Council meeting. My gut says you're okay. It was worth checking out."

"And you soulgazed her. That was some fast thinking. And good shooting."

"I'm brilliant as well as skilled," he said modestly. "It's a great burden, all of that on top of my angelic good looks. But I try to soldier on as best I can."

I let out a short, rough laugh. "I see. I hope I won't embarrass you, then."

"Did I not mention my nearly godlike sense of tolerance and forgiveness?" Sue gathered speed and I turned her down the street. "Hey," he said. "The bad guys are back that way."

"I know," I said. "But they're expecting an attack from that direction. I'm going to circle the block, try to come in behind them."

"Is there time?"

"My baby can move," I told him. Sue broke into her run, and the ride smoothed out.

Ramirez let out a whoop of pure enjoyment. "Now this is cool," he said. "I can't even imagine how complicated this must have been."

"Wasn't complicated," I told him.

"Oh. So summoning up dinosaurs is actually very easy, is it?"

I snorted. "Any other night, any other place, I don't think I could have done it. But it wasn't complicated, either. Lifting up an engine block isn't complicated. It's just a lot of work."

Ramirez was silent for a moment. "I'm impressed," he said.

I didn't know Ramirez very well, but my sense of him told me that those were words he was not in the habit of uttering. "When you do something stupid and die, it's pathetic," I said. "When you do something stupid and survive it, then you get to call it impressive or heroic."

He let out a rueful chuckle. "What we're doing right now..." he said. His voice softened and lost its edge of brash arrogance. "It's pathetic. Isn't it?"

"Probably," I said.

"On the other hand," he said, recovering. "If we survive it, we're heroes. Medals. Girls. Endorsements. Cars. Maybe they put us on a cereal box."

"Seems the least they could do," I said.

"So we've got two of them left to take down. Who do we hit first?"

"Grevane," I said. "If he's holding a bunch of zombies as guard dogs, he isn't going to have a lot of attention to spare for defensive spells, or for throwing anything else at us. We hit him fast, hopefully put him down before he can try anything. He handled a chain like he knew how to use it when I saw him fight Corpsetaker."

"Ugh," Ramirez said. "Nasty. Anyone who knows their way around a kusari is a tough customer."

"Yeah. So we shoot him."

"Damn right, we shoot him," Ramirez said. "This is why so many of the younger members of the Council like the way you do things, Dresden."

I blinked. "They do?"

"Oh, hell, yes," Ramirez said. "A lot of them, like me, were apprentices when you were first tried after Justin DuMorne's death. A lot of them are

still apprentices. But there are people who think highly of what you've done."

"Like you?"

"I would have done a lot of those things," he said. "Only with a lot more style than you."

I snorted. "Second one we'll hit calls himself Cowl. He's good. I've never seen a wizard stronger than he is, and that includes Ebenezar McCoy."

"A lot of guys who hit hard have a glass jaw. Bet he's all offense."

I shook my head. "No. He's just as good at protecting himself. I flipped a car over on top of him and it barely slowed him down."

Ramirez frowned and nodded. "How do we take him down then?"

I shook my head. "Haven't thought of anything good. Hit him with everything and hope something gets through. And if that wasn't enough, he's got an apprentice with him, called Kumori, who seems personally loyal. She's probably strong enough to be on the Council herself."

"Damn," Ramirez said quietly. "She pretty?"

"She keeps her face covered," I said. "No idea."

"If she was pretty, I'd just turn on the Ramirez charm and have her eating out of my hand," he said. "But I can't take chances with that kind of power if I'm not sure she's pretty. Used recklessly, it could endanger innocent bystanders or land me in bed with an ugly girl."

"Can't have that," I said, turning Sue around another corner. I checked the vortex. The slender, spinning psuedo-tornado was more than halfway to the ground.

"All right then," Ramirez said. "Once we're past Grevane, I'll take on the apprentice. You go for Cowl."

I glanced back at him with an arched eyebrow.

"If we ignore Kumori she'll be free to take us both out. One of us has to counter her. You're stronger than me," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. "Don't get me wrong. I'm so damned good that I make it look easy, but I'm not stupid. You have the best shot at taking Cowl down. If I can drop the apprentice, I'll help. Sound like a plan?"

"Sounds like a plan," I said. "I just wish it sounded like a winning plan."

"You got a better idea?" Ramirez asked me cheerfully.

"No," I said, and I turned Sue down the street that would hopefully let us attack the necromancers from the rear.

“Well, then,” he said, his smile ferocious. “Shut up and dance.”

Chapter

Forty-two

The campus of the college consisted of only a few buildings—a couple of dorms, a couple of buildings with classrooms, the Mitchell Museum, and an administrative office. The area between them was a nicely kept lawn, too small to look like a park, but larger than you'd want to mow every week. At the center of the area, directly in front of the museum, picnic tables had been overturned onto their sides around a large circle open to the skies above. I slowed Sue's steps for a moment, to try to get some kind of idea of what we had to contend with.

Standing in silent ranks around that circle were Grevane's style of undead—very solid, very physical, though there were relatively few of them in the half-rotted or desiccated condition of the corpses that had attacked my place. These undead looked like they might still have been saved by a snappy EMT. They all looked like Native American tribesmen, just as Corpsetaker's specters had, though the styles of clothing and weaponry were slightly different.

One other thing was different, too: These undead radiated a kind of hideous, ephemeral cold, and their skin almost seemed to glow with its own pale, horrible light. I could sense the raw power that lay within them, even from a hundred yards away. These undead were different from those that had attacked the Wardens, as different as an old pickup truck was from a modern battle tank. These zombies would not be so easily destroyed as those others, and were likely to be far stronger, far faster.

They stood in ranks around the inner circle, facing outward, but they ranked thicker between the circle and the last location of the Wardens than on the side nearest us. I had managed to outflank the thinking of whoever had those undead in position, and the thought cheered me somewhat. Spirits and specters and formless masses of luminescent light darted and flowed around the circle like strands of kelp and bits of algae caught in a whirlpool. They were all the same unpleasant colors as the lightning in the

storm, and even as I watched their numbers visibly grew. Sue paced a restless step forward, and I felt a horrible sensation of cold on the skin of my face and forehead, as if the hovering vortex above was casting out some kind of perverted inversion of sunlight. I crouched a little lower on Sue's back and the feeling faded.

Lightning flashes from different directions cast a web of shadows over the whole place, trees and buildings collaborating with the storm to conceal much of the open circle continually clothed in shifting blocks and threads of darkness. I could see that there was *someone* within the circle of picnic tables, but not who, and I couldn't even be sure of how many.

"That," I said in a low voice, "is a lot of badass zombies."

"And ghosts," Ramirez said.

"And ghosts."

"Look at it this way," he said. "With that many of them, how can we miss?"

"Yeah," I said. "Cool."

I didn't want to do it. I wanted to go find myself a hole and crawl into it. But instead I put my hand on Sue's neck, drew her attention to the zombies, and willed her forward into battle.

Sue leapt forward and hit the nearest rank of zombies before any of them had the chance to notice her. She tore one apart with her vast jaws, smashed several others flat, crushed some with her flailing tail, and generally went to town. After her devastating initial charge, I heard a frantic man's voice shout from within the circle, and the zombies turned to attack.

The zombies whipped out bows and spears and clubs, or else tore at Sue with their bare hands. It wasn't pretty. Arrows streaked through the air with unnatural speed, and when they struck the Tyrannosaur's hide they sounded almost like gunshots. One zombie rammed a spear cleanly through the massive muscle of Sue's right thigh. A swinging club shattered several of her teeth, and even as I watched, an unarmed zombie leapt up onto her flank, got a hold of the heavy extension cord that held the saddles in place, then drove his fist into her flesh up to the elbow, and started raking out gobbets of tissue by the handful.

I brought up the sparkling blue cloud of my shield bracelet in time to intercept an arrow, and others smashed against it with the force of bullets even as I held it in place. Without being told, I felt Ramirez turn to our right, his own left hand extended, and a concave disk of green light

expanded weblike from his outstretched fingertips, covering that flank from still more of them.

But as vicious and as strong and as swift and deadly as the zombies were, they couldn't hold a candle to Sue.

The injuries that might have terrified a living beast only infuriated her, and as that rage swelled, her own grey-and-black hide gained a silvery sheen of power. She roared so loudly that my chest and belly shook and my ears screamed with pain. She caught one zombie in her jaws and flung it away. It sailed up over the nearest five-story building and out of sight in the darkness and rain. When she stomped down with her foot, she shattered the concrete of a walkway and drove a footprint more than a foot deep into the earth around it. The zombie assault turned into one enormous exercise in suicidal tactics, for whenever one of the undead warriors managed to get through to harm Sue, the Tyrannosaur not only crushed the unlife out of them, but grew that much more angry and powerful and unstoppable.

It was like riding a carnivorous earthquake.

"Look!" Ramirez screamed. "Look there!"

I followed his nod and spotted Grevane in the circle in his trench coat and fedora. The necromancer was keeping a steady beat on a drum hung from his belt, and he gripped a staff of gnarled, twisted black wood with the other. He stared at us, his face twisted in hatred, and his eyes glittered with insane malice.

I willed Sue to head for the circle, but the Tyrannosaur's will was suddenly no longer pliable or easily led. The blood rage and fury of battle had overloaded what little mind she actually possessed, and now she was nothing but several rampaging tons of killing machine.

"Hurry!" Ramirez shouted.

"She's not listening!" I told him. I applied my will even more forcefully, but it was like one man struggling to hold back a bulldozer. I gritted my teeth, desperately trying to figure a way to get Sue where I wanted her, and hit on one idea. Instead of trying to stop her battle rage, I encouraged it, and then I pointed her at the zombies nearer to the circle.

Sue responded with bloodlust and glee, swerving to charge toward the zombies nearest the circle, crushing and rekillng them as she went.

"We have to jump!" I shouted.

"Wahoo!" Ramirez cried, his smile blazing white.

Sue pursued a dodging zombie to within ten feet of one of the fallen picnic tables, and I let out a scream of fear and excitement as I jumped. It was like falling from a little bit higher than a second-story window, but I managed to land feet-first and well enough to absorb most of the shock of impact, though the flash of pain told me that my knees and ankles were going to be sore for days.

I rose and lifted my shield at once, in time to intercept the deadly flash of Grevane's whirling chain.

"Fool," he snarled. "You should have joined me when you had the chance." His eyes flicked up and glittered. I followed the line of his gaze. The vortex wasn't more than ten feet from the ground.

"You can't draw it in if I'm standing right here," I shouted back, retreating and circling to get into the circle of picnic tables. When I did, that horrible, sickly sense of cold faded. This near, the vortex wasn't drawing the life off of me. It was the eye of the metaphysical hurricane. "One distraction and the backlash will kill you. It's *over*."

"It is *not* over!" he howled, and the chain whipped out again, striking my shield. "It is *mine*! My birthright! I was his favored child!"

I barely heard a footstep behind me, and whirled in time to lift my shield against another zombie with a spear. The weapon shattered against my upraised shield, but even as it did, I felt a burning impact as Grevane's chain wrapped around my wounded leg and jerked hard. My balance went out from under me, and I fell to the ground.

Grevane's zombie piled onto my back and started *biting* me. I felt hot, horrible pain on my trapezius muscles left of my neck, even through my cloak and spellworked duster. The zombie let out a vicious cry and let go, then went for the unprotected nape of my neck. I struggled to throw it off of me, to get away, but my battered body was weakened and it was incredibly strong.

"Die!" Grevane screamed, wild laughter in his unsteady voice. "Die, die, die—"

His howls broke off into a single quiet, choking noise, and the zombie on my back abruptly froze.

I struggled out from under it in time to see Grevane standing a few feet away, the chain discarded upon the ground, his hand held to his neck. Blood, black in the night, sprayed from between his fingers. His expression

became enraged and he turned toward me, extending a hand to the zombie near me. The zombie turned, once more with purpose.

But then Grevane's expression became puzzled. His eyes rolled back in his head, and I saw the long, straight, smooth cut that had opened his neck from one side to the other, cutting all the way to his spine.

Ramirez stepped into my line of vision, his silver sword in hand and coated with blood. In his other hand he held his pistol. Without hesitation or hurry, he raised the gun and aimed at Grevane's head from five feet away.

Then he executed the stunned necromancer.

The body went loose, fell, and lay there in the grass and rain, one leg twitching.

Around us, the zombies had suddenly lost their vibrant animation, and most of them simply stood passively still, staring at nothing. Tyrannosaur Sue couldn't have cared less, and carried on with her killing spree.

Ramirez came to me and helped me to my feet. "Sorry it took me so long. I had to dodge some bad guys."

"You got here," I said, panting.

He nodded once, grimacing. "Couldn't shoot with you that close, in this light. Had to do it the old-fashioned way. You were one hell of a good distraction, though."

"You did fine," I said. I could feel hot wetness trickling down my back. "Thank God he was insane."

"How's that?" Ramirez asked.

"At the end there. You'd opened his throat but he still thought he could keep going. He tried to hang on to his control of the zombies. It was like he didn't think death counted when it came to him."

"And that's lucky why?"

"He refused to believe he was dying," I said. "No death curse."

Ramirez nodded. "Yeah, you're right. Lucky us."

Then a man's voice said, "I don't know if I'd say *that*, gentlemen."

I whirled as one of the passive zombies still standing nearby turned, lifting its spear—and then shimmered into the form of Cowl. He lifted one hand from the folds of his dark cloak, and there was no warning surge of gathering power when a wave of vicious force flickered out from his palm and took Ramirez full in the chest.

The young Warden hadn't been ready for it. The magical blow lifted him from his feet and threw him backward like a rag doll. He hit the ground twenty feet later, limbs already flopping limply, and lay there without moving.

"No!" I shouted, and I whirled on Cowl, Hellfire erupting from the runes of my staff. I lifted the staff, snarled, "*Forzare!*" and sent a lance of vicious energy at the dark figure.

Cowl swiftly crossed his hands at the wrists, forming an X shape with his arms, aligning defensive energy before him—but he hadn't been quite swift enough, or else he hadn't reckoned on how much energy he had to deal with. The lash of raw, scarlet force hammered him hard on the right side of his body, spinning him around and stealing his balance. He stumbled in a corkscrewing motion, and went to the ground.

I drew back the staff for another blow—but then someone pressed against my back, fingers tightened in my hair, and I felt the cold, deadly edge of a knife at my throat.

"Don't move," Kumori's quiet voice said. She was stretched out quite a bit to be pulling my hair and holding the knife, but she'd done it right. There was no way I could try to escape her without her opening an artery. I ground my teeth, my power still ready to lash out again, and debated doing exactly that. Kumori would probably kill me, but it might be worth it to finish Cowl.

I looked up at the writhing vortex. Its tip was now barely above the height of my own head.

Cowl recovered his feet by slow degrees, shaken more than hurt, and anger radiated from him in nearly palpable waves. "Idiot," he said, voice harsh. "You have lost. Can you not see? This game is over."

"Don't do this," I growled. "It isn't worth it. You're going to kill thousands of innocent people."

Cowl's hood tilted up toward the descending vortex, and he marched over the grass until he stood directly beneath it. "Keep him still," he snapped to Kumori.

"Yes, lord," Kumori replied. The steel at my throat never wavered.

Cowl's hand dipped into a pouch at his side, and came out holding Bob the skull. The lights in the skull's eye sockets burned a cold shade of blue and violet.

“There, spirit,” Cowl said, holding the skull up to see the vortex. “Do you see it?”

“Of course,” said the skull, his voice just as cold and empty. “It is precisely as the master described. Proceed.” The eye lights swiveled and came to rest on me. “Ah. The White Council’s black sheep. I recommend that you kill him immediately.”

“No,” Kumori said firmly. “His death curse could destroy the working.”

“I know that,” the skull replied, his voice contemptuous. “But if he lives when Cowl draws down the power he might disrupt it. Kill him now.”

“Silence, spirit,” Cowl said in a harsh voice. “You are not the master here. Challenge me again at your own peril.”

The skull’s eye sockets burned colder yet, but he said nothing.

I swallowed. Bob...wasn’t Bob anymore. I’d known that he was bound and beholden to whoever possessed the skull he resided within, and that their personality would strongly influence his own—but I’d never really imagined what that might be like. Bob wasn’t precisely a friend to me but...I was used to him. In a way he was family, the mouthy, annoying, irritable cousin who was always insulting you but who was definitely at Thanksgiving dinner. I had never considered the possibility that one day he might be something else.

Something murderous.

The worst part was that Bob had given Cowl good advice. My death curse might well mess up this spell, but on the other hand, Cowl did not seem one to be afraid of death curses. If he gave me the chance to wait until he was actually at the delicate moment of drawing down the power, I wouldn’t need anything as strong as a death curse to upset his balance.

Of course, it would kill me. Kumori’s blade would see to that. But I could stop him if I was alive when it went down.

Cowl set the skull aside on the grass, then raised his hands above his head and let the sleeves fall back from his long, weathered arms covered in old scars. He began a chant in a low voice, steady and strong.

The vortex quivered. And then, almost delicately, it began to descend to Cowl, drifting toward him as lightly and slowly as a drifting feather of down.

Power rolled through the heavens, the clouds, the whirling vortex. Spirits and swirling apparitions screamed and wailed their tormented replies.

Kumori's hands never weakened or wavered, but I could sense that almost every fiber of her attention was directed toward Cowl.

I might have one chance.

"Bob," I said. "*Bob.*"

The blue eye lights turned toward me.

"Think," I said quietly. "Think, Bob. You know me. You've worked with me for years."

The blue eye lights narrowed.

"Bob," I said quietly. "You've got to remember me. I gave you a name."

The skull quivered a little, as if a shudder had run through it, but the eyes continued to burn cold and blue.

And then one of them flickered into a shade of its usual orange, then immediately back to cold blue.

My heart thudded in sudden excitement. Bob the skull, *my* Bob, had just winked at me.

Cowl continued his chant, and the clouds spun more and more rapidly. The rain abruptly stopped, as swiftly as if someone had turned off a faucet, and the air filled with spirits, ghosts, apparitions and specters, caught in some vast and unseen whirlpool that dragged them in accelerating circles. The power in the air made it hard to breathe, and the roar of wailing spirits, vast wind, and an earth-deep rumble grew steadily louder.

"Bob," I shouted into the cacophony, "you have my permission!"

Orange light streaked from the eye sockets of the skull and blazed away from the circle of overturned picnic tables—but even so, I saw Bob's glowing body of energy pulled by the whirling currents of magic. He fought against that horrible vortex, and I suddenly realized that without the shelter of the skull or some other kind of physical body, Bob was no different from any of the other spirit beings trapped in that vast maelstrom. If the Darkhallow was completed, he too would be trapped and devoured.

I thought I saw Bob's form sucked up into the clouds of trapped spirits, but there was too much light and noise for me to be sure of anything.

Cowl kept on chanting, and I saw his body arch with tension. Over the next minute or so, he actually, physically rose above the ground, until his boots were three or four inches in the air. His voice had become part of the wild storm, part of the dark energy, and it rolled and boomed and echoed all around us. I began to understand the kind of power we were dealing with. It was power as deep as an ocean, and as broad as the sky. It was dark and

lethal and horrible and beautiful, and Cowl was about to take it all in. The strength it would give him would not make him a match for the entire White Council. It would put him in a league so far beyond them that their strength would mean virtually nothing.

It was power enough to change the world. To reshape it after one's own liking.

The tip of the vortex spun down, danced lightly upon Cowl's lips, and then slipped gently between them. Cowl howled out the last repetition of his chant, his mouth opening wide.

I ground my teeth. Bob hadn't been able to help me, and I couldn't let Cowl complete the spell. Even if it killed me.

I drew in my magic for the last spell I would ever throw, a blast to slam into Cowl, disrupt the spell, let that vast energy tear him to bits.

Kumori sensed it and I heard her let out a short cry. The knife burned hot on my throat.

And then the dinosaur I'd summoned plunged through the clouds of wild spirits and headed directly for Kumori, her eyes blazing with brilliant orange flames. Tyrannosaurus Bob let out a bellow and swiped one enormous talon at Kumori.

Cowl's apprentice was tough and competent, but no amount of training or forethought can prepare you for the sight of an angry dinosaur coming to eat your ass. She froze for the briefest second, and I turned, shoving away from her. The knife whipped against my throat, and I felt a hot sting. I wondered if that was what Grevane had felt.

There was no more time. I flung myself across the grass, gripped my staff in both hands, and swung it like a baseball bat at Cowl's head.

The blow connected, right on what felt like the tip of his upturned jaw, snapping his mouth shut and knocking him to the ground. The vortex abruptly screamed and filled with a furious red light. I choked out a cry and fell down on my right side to the ground, bringing up my shield bracelet and holding it over me in an effort to protect myself from the vast forces now flying free from the botched spell.

There was more sound, so loud that no word could accurately describe it, incandescent lightning, screaming faces, and forms of spirits and ghosts, and trembling earth beneath me.

And blackness fell.

Chapter

Forty-three

When I came to my senses there was darkness and steady, cold rain, and I had sunk up to my neck in a deep well of aching pain. Neither lightning nor thunder played through the skies. I lay there for a moment, gathering my wits, and as I did the lights of the city began to come on, bit by bit, as the power grids went back online.

A booted foot pressed into the ground beside my face, and I followed it up, up and up, until I saw the horned helmet of the Erlking outlined against the brightening Chicago skyline.

“Wizard. Called you forth a mighty hunter tonight. One that has not walked this earth since time gone and forgotten.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Pretty nifty, huh?”

There was a low, wild laugh from that helmet. “Daring. Arrogant. It pleases me.” He tilted his head. “And you are poor game at the moment. Because of that, and because you pleased me with your calling of the old hunter, this night you may go free. But beware, mortal. The next time our paths cross, it shall be my very great pleasure to run you down.”

There was a gust of cold autumn wind, and the Erlking was gone.

I looked around blearily. Every tree in the area was gone, torn off about a foot from the earth. The picnic tables had been torn to splinters. The buildings of the college, especially the museum, looked as if they had been ravaged by a tornado that had torn out great chunks and sections of them.

My ribs hurt. I looked down and saw that I had fallen around Bob the skull and curled my body around him as I had shielded myself. Orange flame flickered to life in the eye sockets.

“Some show, huh?” Bob said. He sounded exhausted.

“You had to go get the dinosaur, eh?” I said. “I figured you’d just grab a handy zombie.”

“Why settle for wieners when you can have steak?” the skull said brightly. “Pretty good idea, Harry, talking to me once Cowl sat me on the

ground. I didn't want to work for him anyway, but as long as he had the skull...well. You know how it is."

I grunted. "Yeah. What happened?"

"The spell backlashed when you slugged Cowl," Bob said. "Did just a bit of property damage."

I coughed out a little laugh, looking around me. "Yeah. Cowl?"

"Most likely there are little pieces of him still filtering down," Bob said brightly. "And his little dog, too."

"You see them die?" I asked.

"Well. No. Once that backlash came down, it tore apart every enchantment within a hundred miles. Your dinosaur sort of fell apart."

I grunted uneasily.

"Oh," Bob said. "I think that Warden over there is alive."

I blinked. "Ramirez?"

"Yeah," Bob said. "I figured that you were a Warden now and stuff, and that you would probably want me to help out some other Warden. So just before the big bang, I had the dinosaur stand over him, soak up the blast."

I grunted. "Okay," I said. "We've got to help him. But one thing first."

"What's that?" Bob asked.

I squinted around until I found Grevane's battered corpse. Then I crawled over to it. I fumbled in the trench coat's pockets until I found Kemmler's slender little book. I squinted around me, but there was no one to look as I put it in my pocket.

"Okay," I said. "Come on. Watch my back while I help Ramirez."

"You betcha, boss," Bob said, and his voice was very smug. "Hey, you know what? Size really *does* matter."

Ramirez made it out of that evening alive. He had four broken ribs and two dislocated shoulders, but he came through. With Butters's help, I was able to get him, Luccio, and Morgan back to my place. At some point in the evening, Butters had taken off his drum and let Morgan take over the drumming duties while he tried to help Luccio, and as a result her wound hadn't been quite as fatal as she had thought it would be. They were far too badly hurt to stay at my place, though, and Senior Council member "Injun Joe" Listens-to-Wind himself showed up with half a dozen more stay-at-home wizards who knew something about medicine and healing to move them to a more secure location.

“Just don’t get it,” Morgan was telling Listens-to-Wind. “All of these things happening at once. It can’t be a coincidence.”

“It wasn’t,” I heard myself say.

Morgan looked at me. The resentment in his eyes hadn’t changed, but there was something else there that hadn’t been before—dare I hope it, some modicum of respect.

“Think about it,” I said. “All those heavy vampire attacks just when Cowl and his buddies most needed the White Council not to be involved.”

“Are you saying that you think Cowl was using the vampires as a tool?” Morgan asked.

“I think they had a deal,” I said. “The vampires throw their first major offensive at the right time to let Cowl pull off this Darkhallow.”

“But what do they get out of it?” Morgan asked.

I glanced at Listens-to-Wind and said, “The Senior Council.”

“Impossible,” Morgan said. “By that time, they had to know that the Senior Council was back at Edinburgh. The defenses there have been built over thousands of years. It would take...” Morgan paused, frowning.

I finished the sentence for him. “It would take a god to break through them and kill the Senior Council.”

Morgan stared at me for a long time, but didn’t say anything. It wasn’t long before they left, pulling out the wounded Wardens and leaving.

It left me with only about half an hour to meet Mavra’s deadline, but since the phones were up again, I left a message at her number and headed for our rendezvous.

I turned up at my grave again, standing over the open hole in the ground as Mavra approached me, this time openly and without melodrama. She faced me over my grave, and said nothing. I took the book out of my pocket and tossed it to her. She picked it up, regarded it, and then drew an envelope from her jacket and tossed it at my feet. I picked it up and found the negatives of the incriminating pictures of Murphy inside.

Mavra turned to leave.

I said, “Wait.”

She paused.

“This never happens again,” I said quietly. “You try to get to me through other mortals again and I’ll kill you.”

Mavra’s rotted lips turned up at one corner. “No, you won’t,” she said in her dusty voice. “You don’t have that kind of power.”

"I can get it," I said.

"But you won't," she responded, mockery in her tone. "It wouldn't be right."

I stared at her for a full ten seconds before I said, in a very quiet voice, "I've got a fallen angel tripping all over herself to give me more power. Queen Mab has asked me to take the mantle of Winter Knight twice now. I've read Kemmler's book. I know how the Darkhallow works. And I know how to turn necromancy against the Black Court."

Mavra's filmed eyes flashed with anger.

I continued to speak quietly, never raising my voice. "So once again, let me be perfectly clear. If anything happens to Murphy and I even *think* you had a hand in it, fuck right and wrong. If you touch her, I'm declaring war on you. Personally. I'm picking up every weapon I can get. And I'm using them to kill you. Horribly."

There was utter silence for a moment.

"Do you understand me?" I whispered.

She nodded.

"Say it," I snarled, and my voice came out so harsh and cold that Mavra twitched and took half a step back from me.

"I understand," she rasped.

"Get out of my town," I told her.

And Mavra retreated into the shadows.

I stood there over my grave for a minute more, just feeling the pain of my battered body, and bitterly considering the inevitability of death. After a moment I felt another presence near me. I looked up and found the dream image of my father regarding my tomb-stone speculatively.

"He died doing the right thing," my father read.

"Maybe I can change it to, 'he died alone,'" I said back.

My father smiled a little. "Thinking about the death curse, eh?"

"Yeah. 'Die alone.'" I stared down at my open grave. "Maybe it means I'll never be with anybody. Have love. A wife. Children. No one who is really close. Really there."

"Maybe," my father said. "What do you think?"

"I think that's what he wanted to do to me. I think I'm so tired that I'm hallucinating. And that I hurt. And that I want someone to be holding my hand when it's my time. I don't want to do it alone."

“Harry,” my dad said, and his voice was very gentle, “can I tell you something?”

“Sure.”

He walked around the grave and put his hand on my shoulder. “Son. Everyone dies alone. That’s what it is. It’s a door. It’s one person wide. When you go through it, you do it alone.” His fingers squeezed me tight. “But it doesn’t mean you’ve got to be alone before you go through the door. And believe me, you aren’t alone on the other side.”

I frowned and looked up at my father’s image, searching his eyes. “Really?”

He smiled and drew his finger in an X on his chest. “Cross my heart.”

I looked away from him. “I did things. I made a deal I shouldn’t have made. I crossed a line.”

“I know,” he said. “It only means what you decide it means.”

I looked up at him. “What?”

“Harry, life isn’t simple. There is such a thing as black and white. Right and wrong. But when you’re in the thick of things, sometimes it’s hard for us to tell. You didn’t do what you did for your own benefit. You did it so that you could protect others. That doesn’t make it right—but it doesn’t make you a monster, either. You still have free will. You still get to choose what you will do and what you will be and what you will become.” He clapped my shoulder and turned to walk away. “As long as you believe you are responsible for your choices, you still are. You’ve got a good heart, son. Listen to it.”

He vanished into the night, and somewhere in the city, bells started tolling midnight.

I stared at my waiting grave, and I suddenly realized that death was really not my biggest worry.

He died doing the right thing.

God, I hope so.

Thomas was waiting back at my apartment when I returned, and Mouse came loping in not long after. Murphy’s bike had failed him completely, and by the time he’d reached the college campus, the fur had flown and the whole show was over. I crashed hard, and slept for more than a day. When I woke up, I found that my injuries had all been dressed again, and that an IV was hanging beside my bed. Butters showed up every day to check on me, and he had me on antibiotics and had imposed a ferociously healthy diet on

me that Thomas made me stick to. I grumbled a lot, and slept a lot, and after several days was feeling almost human again.

Murphy showed up to chew me out for the wreck she found where her house used to be. We'd left the place sort of trashed. But when she saw me in bed, covered in bandages, she stopped in her tracks.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Oh. Things," I said. "Chicago was interesting for a couple of days there." I peered at her. She had a cast on her left arm, as if for a broken wrist, and I thought I saw the edge of a bruise on her neck. "Hey," I said. "What happened?"

Her cheeks turned pink. "Oh. Things. Hawaii was interesting for a couple of days there."

"I'll trade you my story for yours," I said.

She got pinker. "Um. I'll...have to think about it."

Then we both looked at each other and laughed, and we left it at that.

Chicago reacted to the events of that Halloween predictably. It was all attributed to the worst storm in fifty years, rioting, a minor earth tremor, a large load of bread produced by a local bakery that had been contaminated with ergot, and similar Halloween-fueled hysteria. In the blackout, some reprehensible types had vandalized the museum and relocated Sue's skeleton to a local campus as some kind of bizarre practical joke. There had been dozens of break-ins, robberies, murders, and other crimes during the blackout, but any other reports and wild stories were automatically put down to hysteria and/or ergot poisoning. Life went on.

Captain Luccio survived her injuries, but not without serious long-term damage that would take a lot of rehabilitation. Between that and the uncertainty of what would happen in her shiny new body, she had been relieved of command as the captain of the Wardens until such time as her health and state of mind were judged to be sound and reliable.

Morgan took her place.

He came to visit me at my place, maybe two weeks later, and gave me the news.

"Dresden," he said. "I was against inducting you in the first place. But Captain Luccio had the right to ignore my recommendation. She made you a Warden and she made you a regional commander, and there's nothing I can do about that." He took a deep breath. "But I don't like you. I think you are dangerous."

His mouth twisted. “But I am no longer convinced you do these things out of malice. I think you lack discipline and judgment. You have repeatedly demonstrated your willingness to put yourself in harm’s way to protect others. As much as it galls me to admit it, I don’t think you have any evil intentions. I think your questionable actions are the result of arrogance and poor judgment. In the end, it matters little why you do it. But I cannot in good conscience condemn you for it without giving you some sort of chance to prove me wrong.”

From Morgan, this was the equivalent of Emperor Constantine converting to Christianity. He was almost admitting that he had been *wrong*. I reached into my pocket, pulled out a penny, and dropped it to the floor.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“I’m just making sure gravity is still online,” I said.

He frowned at me, then shrugged and said, “I don’t trust you. I’m not committing any Wardens to your command, and, truth be told, we don’t have them to spare in any case. But you may be required to participate in missions from time to time, and I will expect you to work with the other regional commander in America. He operates out of Los Angeles. He specifically requested the assignment, and given his role in recent events, he could hardly be gainsaid.”

“Ramirez,” I guessed.

Morgan nodded. Then he reached into his coat and produced an envelope. He handed it to me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Your first paycheck,” Morgan said, and he didn’t look happy to be saying it. “Monthly.”

I opened the envelope and blinked. It wasn’t a fortune, but it sure as hell would be a nice little addition to my earnings in the investigation business. “I never thought I would hear myself say this,” I said as he started to leave, “but thank you, Morgan.”

His face twisted up into something bitter, and he managed to spit out the words: “You’re welcome.” I think he fled before he started to puke.

Several weeks later Butters showed up at my door with a big box wrapped in Christmas paper. I let him in, and he carried it to the living room and presented me with it. “Go ahead. Open it.”

I did. Inside the box was a guitar case, and inside that an old wooden guitar. “Uh,” I said. “What’s this for?”

“Therapy,” Butters said. He’d been having me practice squeezing a squishy ball with my left hand, and, just as he’d predicted, I had slowly gained a little more control of it. “You’re going to learn to play.”

“Uh, my hand doesn’t work that well,” I said.

“Not yet,” Butters replied. “But we’ll start slow like everything else, and you can work up to it. Just do the lessons. Look, there’s a book in the bottom of the case.”

I opened the case and found a book entitled *Guitar for Total Idiots*, while Butters went on about tendons and metacarpal something-or-other and flexibility. I opened the book, but night had fallen and the fire was too low to let me read it. I absently waved a hand at the candles on the table beside the couch and muttered, “*Flickum bicus*.” They puffed to light with a little whoosh of magic.

I stopped and blinked—first at the candles and then at my burned hand.

“What?” Butters asked.

“Nothing,” I said, and opened the book to look over it. “You know, Butters, for a mortician you’re a pretty good healer.”

“You think so?”

I glanced at the warm, steady flame of the candles and smiled. “Yeah.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I was seven years old, I got a bad case of strep throat and was out of school for a whole week. During that time, my sisters bought me my first fantasy and sci-fi novels: the boxed set of *Lord of the Rings* and the boxed set of the Han Solo adventure novels by Brian Daley. I devoured them all during that week.

From that point on, I was pretty much doomed to join SF&F fandom. From there, it was only one more step to decide I wanted to be a writer of my favorite fiction material, and here we are.

I blame my sisters.

My first love as a fan is swords-and-horses fantasy. After Tolkien I went after C. S. Lewis. After Lewis, it was Lloyd Alexander. After them came Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny, Robert Howard, John Norman, Poul Anderson, David Eddings, Weis and Hickman, Terry Brooks, Elizabeth Moon, Glen Cook, and before I knew it I was a dual citizen of the United States and Lankhmar, Narnia, Gor, Cimmeria, Krynn, Amber—you get the picture.

When I set out to become a writer, I spent years writing swords-and-horses fantasy novels—and seemed to have little innate talent for it. But I worked at my writing, branching out into other areas, including SF, mystery, and contemporary fantasy, as experiments. That's how the Dresden Files initially came about—as a happy accident while trying to accomplish something else. Sort of like penicillin.

But I never forgot my first love, and to my immense delight and excitement, one day I got a call from my agent and found out that I was going to get to share my newest swords-and-horses fantasy novel with other fans.

The Codex Alera is a fantasy series set within the savage world of Carna, where spirits of the elements, known as furies, lurk in every facet of life, and where many intelligent races vie for security and survival. The realm of Alera is the monolithic civilization of humanity, and its unique ability to

harness and command the furies is all that enables its survival in the face of the enormous, sometimes hostile elemental powers of Carna, and against savage creatures who would lay Alera in waste and ruin.

Yet even a realm as powerful as Alera is not immune to destruction from within, and the death of the heir apparent to the Crown has triggered a frenzy of ambitious political maneuvering and infighting amongst the High Lords, those who wield the most powerful furies known to man. Plots are afoot, traitors and spies abound, and a civil war seems inevitable—all while the enemies of the realm watch, ready to strike at the first sign of weakness.

Tavi is a young man living on the frontier of Aleran civilization—because, let's face it, swords-and-horses fantasies start there. Born a freak, unable to utilize any powers of furycrafting whatsoever, Tavi has grown up relying upon his own wits, speed, and courage to survive. When an ambitious plot to discredit the Crown lays Tavi's home, the Calderon Valley, naked and defenseless before a horde of the barbarian Marat, the boy and his family find themselves directly in harm's way.

There are no titanic High Lords to protect them, no Legions, no Knights with their mighty furies to take the field. Tavi and the free frontiersmen of the Calderon Valley must find some way to uncover the plot and to defend their homes against a merciless horde of Marat and their beasts.

It is a desperate hour where the fate of all Alera hangs in the balance, where a handful of ordinary steadholders must find the courage and strength to defy an overwhelming foe, and where the courage and intelligence of one young man will save the Realm—or destroy it.

Thank you, readers and fellow fans, for all of your support and kindness. I hope that you enjoy reading the first book of the Codex Alera, *Furies of Calderon*, as much as I enjoyed creating it for you.

—Jim

***Furies of Calderon* is available now in paperback
from Ace Books.**

Read on for an exciting preview of
the next novel of the Dresden Files

PROVEN GUILTY

by Jim Butcher

Available now in hardcover from Roc Books

Blood leaves no stain on a Warden's grey cloak.

I didn't know that until the day I watched Morgan, second in command of the White Council's Wardens, lift his sword over the kneeling form of a young man guilty of the practice of black magic. The boy, sixteen years old at the most, screamed and ranted in Korean underneath his black hood, his mouth spilling hatred and rage, convinced by his youth and power of his own immortality. He never knew it when the blade came down.

Which I guess was a small mercy. Microscopic, really.

His blood flew in a scarlet arc. I wasn't ten feet away. I felt hot droplets strike one cheek, and more blood covered the left side of the cloak in blotches of angry red. The head fell to the ground, and I saw the cloth over it moving, as if the boy's mouth was still screaming imprecations.

The body fell onto its side. One calf muscle twitched spasmodically and then stopped. After maybe five seconds, the head did too.

Morgan stood over the still form for a moment, the bright silver sword of the White Council of Wizards' justice in his hands. Besides him and me, there were a dozen Wardens present, and two members of the Senior Council—the Merlin and my one-time mentor, Ebenezar McCoy.

The covered head stopped its feeble movements. Morgan glanced up at the Merlin and nodded once. The Merlin returned the nod. "May he find peace."

"Peace," the Wardens all replied together.

Except me. I turned my back on them and made it two steps away before I threw up on the warehouse floor.

I stood there shaking for a moment until I was sure I was finished, then straightened slowly. I felt a presence draw near me and looked up to see Ebenezar standing there.

He was an old man, bald but for wisps of white hair, short, stocky, his face half covered in a ferocious-looking grey beard. His nose and cheeks and bald scalp were all ruddy, except for a recent, purplish scar on his pate. Though he was centuries old, he carried himself with vibrant energy, and his eyes were alert and pensive behind gold-rimmed spectacles. He wore the formal black robes of a meeting of the Council, along with the deep purple stole of a member of the Senior Council.

“Harry,” he said quietly. “You all right?”

“After that?” I snarled, loudly enough to make sure everyone there heard me. “No one in this damned building should be all right.”

I felt a sudden tension in the air behind me.

“No, they shouldn’t,” Ebenezer said. I saw him look back at the other wizards there, his jaw setting stubbornly.

The Merlin, also in his formal robes and stole, came over to us. He looked like a wizard should look—tall, long white hair, long white beard, piercing blue eyes, his face seamed with age and wisdom.

Well. With age, anyway.

“Warden Dresden,” he said. He had the sonorous voice of a trained speaker and spoke English with a high-class British accent. “If you had some evidence that you felt would prove the boy’s innocence, you should have presented it during the trial.”

“I didn’t have anything like that, and you know it,” I replied.

“He was proven guilty,” the Merlin said. “I soulgazed him myself. I examined more than two dozen mortals whose minds he had altered. Three of them might eventually recover their sanity. He forced four others to commit suicide and had hidden nine corpses from the local authorities, as well. And every one of them was a blood relation.” The Merlin stepped toward me, and the air in the room suddenly felt hot. His eyes flashed with azure anger, and his voice rumbled with deep, unyielding power. “The powers he used had already broken his mind. We did what was necessary.”

I turned and faced the Merlin. I didn’t push out my jaw and try to stare him down. I didn’t put anything belligerent or challenging into my posture. I didn’t show any anger on my face or slur any disrespect into my tone when I spoke. The past several months had taught me that the Merlin hadn’t gotten his job through an ad on a matchbook. He was, quite simply, the strongest wizard on the planet. And he had talent, skill, and experience to go along with that strength. If I ever came to magical blows with him, there wouldn’t be enough left of me to fill a lunch sack. I did *not* want a fight.

But I didn’t back down, either.

“He was a kid,” I said. “We all have been. He made a mistake. We’ve all done that too.”

The Merlin regarded me with an expression somewhere between irritation and contempt. “You know what the use of black magic can do to a person,” he said. Marvelously subtle shading and emphasis over his words

added a perfectly clear, unspoken thought: *You know it because you've done it. Sooner or later, you'll slip up, and then it will be your turn.* "One use leads to another. And another."

"That's what I keep hearing, Merlin," I answered. "Just say no to black magic. But that boy had no one to tell him the rules, to teach him. If someone had known about his gift and *done* something in time—"

He lifted a hand, and the simple gesture had such absolute authority to it that I stopped to let him speak. "The point you are missing, Warden Dresden," he said, "is that the boy who made that foolish mistake died long before we discovered the damage he'd done. What was left of him was nothing more or less than a monster who would have spent his life inflicting horror and death on anyone near him."

"I *know* that," I said, and I couldn't keep the anger and frustration out of my voice. "And I *know* what had to be done. I *know* it was the only measure that could stop him." I thought I was going to throw up again, and I closed my eyes and leaned on the solid oak length of my carved staff. I got my stomach under control and opened my eyes to face the Merlin. "But it doesn't change the fact that we've just *murdered* a boy who probably never knew enough to understand what was happening to him."

"Accusing someone else of murder is hardly a stone you are in a position to cast, Warden Dresden." The Merlin arched a silver brow at me. "Did you not discharge a firearm into the back of the head of a woman you merely *believed* to be the Corpsetaker from a distance of a few feet away, fatally wounding her?"

I swallowed. I sure as hell had, last year. It had been one of the bigger coin tosses of my life. Had I incorrectly judged that a body-transferring wizard known as the Corpsetaker had jumped into the original body of Warden Luccio, I would have murdered an innocent woman and law-enforcing member of the White Council.

I hadn't been wrong—but I'd never...never just *killed* anyone before. I've killed things in the heat of battle, yes. I've killed people by less direct means. But Corpsetaker's death had been intimate and coldly calculated and not at all indirect. Just me, the gun, and the limp corpse. I could still vividly remember the decision to shoot, the feel of the cold metal in my hands, the stiff pull of my revolver's trigger, the thunder of the gun's report, and the way the body had settled into a limp bundle of limbs on the

ground, the motion somehow too simple for the horrible significance of the event.

I'd killed. Deliberately, rationally ended another's life.

And it still haunted my dreams at night.

I'd had little choice. Given the smallest amount of time, the Corpsetaker could have called up lethal magic, and the best I could have hoped for was a death curse that killed me as I struck down the necromancer. It had been a bad day or two, and I was pretty strung out. Even if I hadn't been, I had a feeling that Corpsetaker could have taken me in a fair fight. So I hadn't given Corpsetaker anything like a fair fight. I shot the necromancer in the back of the head because the Corpsetaker had to be stopped, and I'd had no other option.

I had executed her on suspicion.

No trial. No soulgaze. No judgment from a dispassionate arbiter. Hell, I hadn't even taken the chance to get in a good insult. Bang. Thump. One live wizard, one dead bad guy.

I'd done it to prevent future harm to myself and others. It hadn't been the best solution—but it had been the *only* solution. I hadn't hesitated for a heartbeat. I'd done it, no questions, and gone on to face the further perils of that night.

Just like a Warden is supposed to do. Sorta took the wind out of my holier-than-thou sails.

Bottomless blue eyes watched my face and he nodded slowly. "You executed her," the Merlin said quietly. "Because it was necessary."

"That was different," I said.

"Indeed. Your action required far deeper commitment. It was dark, cold, and you were alone. The suspect was a great deal stronger than you. Had you struck and missed, you would have died. Yet you did what had to be done."

"Necessary isn't the same as *right*," I said.

"Perhaps not," he said. "But the Laws of Magic are all that prevent wizards from abusing their power over mortals. There is no room for compromise. You are a Warden now, Dresden. You must focus on your duty to both mortals and the Council."

"Which sometimes means killing children?" This time I didn't hide the contempt, but there wasn't much life to it.

“Which means always enforcing the Laws,” the Merlin said, and his eyes bored into mine, flickering with sparks of rigid anger. “It is your duty. Now more than ever.”

I broke the stare first, looking away before anything bad could happen. Ebenezar stood a couple of steps from me, studying my expression.

“Granted, you’ve seen much for a man your age,” the Merlin said, and there was a slight softening in his tone. “But you haven’t seen how horrible such things can become. Not nearly. The Laws exist for a reason. They *must* stand as written.”

I turned my head and stared at the small pool of scarlet on the warehouse floor beside the kid’s corpse. I hadn’t been told his name before they’d ended his life.

“Right,” I said tiredly, and wiped a clean corner of the grey cloak over my blood-sprinkled face. “I can see what they’re written in.”

PROVEN GUILTY

A_{LSO} **BY** **J**_{IM} **B**_{UTCHER}

SOMETHING BORROWED

—*from My Big Fat Supernatural Wedding, edited by P. N. Elrod*

Steel pierced my leg and my body went rigid with pain, but I could not allow myself to move. “Billy,” I growled through my teeth, “kill him.”

Billy the Werewolf squinted up at me from his seat and said, “That might be a little extreme.”

“This is torture,” I said.

“Oh, for crying out loud, Dresden,” Billy said, his tone amused. “He’s just fitting the tux.”

Yanof the tailor, a squat, sturdy little guy who had recently immigrated to Chicago from Outer Sloboviakastan or somewhere, glared up at me, with another dozen pins clutched between his lips and resentment in his eyes. I’m better than six and a half feet tall. It can’t be fun to be told you’ve got to fit a tux to someone my height only a few hours before the wedding.

“It ought to be Kirby standing here,” I said.

“Yeah. But it would be harder to fit the tux around the body cast and all those traction cables.”

“I keep telling you guys,” I said. “Werewolves or not, you’ve got to be more careful.”

Ordinarily, I would not have mentioned Billy’s talent for shapeshifting into a wolf in front of a stranger, but Yanof didn’t speak a word of English. Evidently, his skills with needle and thread were such that he had no pressing need to learn. As Chicago’s resident wizard, I’d worked with Billy on several occasions, and we were friends.

His bachelor party the night before had gotten interesting on the walk back to Billy’s place, when we happened across a ghoul terrorizing an old woman in a parking lot.

It hadn’t been a pretty fight. Mostly because we’d all had too many stripper-induced Jell-O shots.

Billy’s injuries had all been bruises and all to the body. They wouldn’t spoil the wedding. Alex had a nasty set of gashes on his throat from the ghoul’s clawlike nails, but he could probably pass them off as particularly enthusiastic hickeys. Mitchell had broken two teeth when he’d charged the ghoul but hit a wall instead. He was going to be a dedicated disciple of Anbesol until he got to the dentist.

All I had to remember the evening by was a splitting headache, and not from the fight. Jell-O shots are far more dangerous, if you ask me.

Billy’s best man, Kirby, had gotten unlucky. The ghoul slammed him into a brick wall so hard that it broke both his legs and cracked a vertebra.

“We handled him, didn’t we?” Billy asked.

“Let’s ask Kirby,” I said. “Look, there isn’t always going to be a broken metal fence post sticking up out of the ground like that, Billy. We got lucky.”

Billy’s eyes went flat and he abruptly stood up. “All right,” he said, his voice hard. “I’ve had just about enough of you telling me what I should and should not do, Harry. You aren’t my father.”

“No,” I said, “but—”

“In fact,” he continued, “if I remember correctly, the other Alphas and I have saved your life twice now.”

“Yes,” I said. “But—”

His face turned red with anger. Billy wasn’t tall, but he was built like an armored truck. “But *what*? You don’t want to share the spotlight with any of us mere one-trick wonders? Don’t you *dare* belittle what Kirby did, what the others have done and sacrificed.”

I am a trained investigator. Instincts honed by years of observation warned me that Billy might be angry. “Great hostility I sense in you,” I said in a Muppet voice.

Billy’s steady glower continued for a few more seconds, and then it broke. He shook his head and looked away. “I’m sorry. For my tone.”

Yanof jabbed me again, but I ignored it. “You didn’t sleep last night.”

He shook his head again. “No excuse. But between the fight and Kirby and”—he waved a vague hand—“today. I mean, *today*.”

“Ah,” I said. “Cold feet?”

Billy took a deep breath. “Well, it’s a big step, isn’t it?” He shook his head. “And after next year, most of the Alphas are going to be done with school. Getting jobs.” He paused. “Splitting up.”

“And that’s where you met Georgia,” I said.

“Yeah.” He shook his head again. “What if we don’t have anything else in common? I mean, good grief. Have you seen her family’s place? And I’m going to be in debt for seven or eight years just paying off the student loans. How do you know if you’re ready to get married?”

Yanof stood up, gestured at my pants, and said something that sounded like, “Hahklha ah lafala krepata khem.”

“I’m not seeing people right now,” I told him as I took off the pants and passed them over. “Or else you’d have a shot, you charmer.”

Yanof sniffed, muttered something else, and toddled back into the shop.

“Billy,” I said, “you think Georgia would have fought that thing last night?”

“Yes,” he said without a second’s hesitation.

“She going to be upset that you did it?”

“No.”

“Even though some folks got hurt?”

He blinked at me. “No.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Because”—he shook his head—“because she won’t. I know her. Upset by the injuries, yes, but not by the fight.” He shifted to a tone he probably didn’t realize was an imitation of Georgia’s voice. “People get hurt in fights. That’s why they’re called fights.”

“You know her well enough to answer serious questions for her when she isn’t even in the room, man,” I said quietly. “You’re ready. Keep the big picture in mind. You and her.”

He looked at me for a second and then said, “I thought you’d say something about love.”

I sighed. “Billy. You knob. If you didn’t love her, you wouldn’t be stressed about losing what you have with her, would you.”

“Good point,” he said.

“Remember the important thing. You and her.”

He took a deep breath and let it out. “Yeah,” he said. “Georgia and me. The rest doesn’t matter.”

I was going to mumble something vaguely supportive, when the door to the fitting room opened and an absolutely ravishing raven-haired woman in an expensive lavender silk skirt-suit came in. She might have been my age, and she had a lot of gold and diamonds, a lot of perfect white teeth, and the kind of curves that come only from surgery. Her shoes and purse together probably cost more than my car.

“Well,” she snapped, and put a fist on her hip, glaring first at Billy and then at me. “I see you are already doing your best to disrupt the ceremony.”

“Eve,” Billy said in a kind of stilted, formally polite voice. “Um. What are you talking about?”

“For one thing, this,” she said, flicking a hand at me. Then she gave me a second, more evaluative look.

I tried to look casual and confident, there in my Spider-Man T-shirt and black briefs. I managed to keep myself from diving toward my jeans. I

turned aside to put them on, maintaining my dignity.

“Your underwear has a hole,” Eve said sweetly.

I jerked my jeans on, blushing. Stupid dignity.

“Bad enough that you insist on this ... petty criminal taking part in a ceremony before polite society. Yanof is beside himself,” Eve continued, speaking to Billy. “He threatened to quit.”

“Wow,” I said. “You speak Sloboviakstanese?”

She blinked at me. “What?”

“Because Yanof doesn’t speak any English. So how did you know he threatened to quit?” I smiled sweetly at her.

Eve gave me a glare of haughty anger and defended herself by pretending I hadn’t said anything. “And now we’re going to have to leave out one of the bridesmaids. To say nothing of the fact that with *him* standing up there on one side of you and Georgia on the other, you’re going to look like a midget. The photographer will have to be notified, and I have no idea how we’ll manage to rearrange everything at the last moment.”

I swore I could hear Billy’s teeth grind. “Harry,” he said in that same polite, strained voice, “this is Eve McAlister. My stepmother-in-law.”

“I do not care for that term, as I have told you often. I am your mother-in-law,” she said. “Or will be, whenever this ongoing disaster you’ve created from a respectable wedding breathes its last.”

“I’m sure we can work something out,” Billy assured her, his tone hopeless.

“Georgia is late and is letting the voice mail answer her phone—as though I needed something else to occupy my thoughts.” She shook her head. “I assume the lowlifes you introduced her to kept her out too late last night. Just like this one did to you.”

“Hey, come on,” I said, careful to keep my tone as reasonable and friendly as I could. “Billy’s had a rough night. I’m sure he can help you out if you just give him a chance to—”

She made a disgusted sound and interrupted me. “Did I say or do something to imply that I cared to hear your opinion, charlatan? Lowlifes. I warned her about folk like you.”

“You don’t even know me, lady,” I said.

“Yes, I do,” she informed me. “I know all about you. I saw you on *Larry Fowler*.”

I narrowed my eyes at Eve.

Billy's expression came close to panic, and he held up both hands, palms out, giving me a pleading look. But my hangover ached, and life is too short to waste it taking verbal abuse from petty tyrants who watch bad talk shows.

"Okay, Billy's stepmom," I began.

Her eyes flashed. "Do *not* call me that."

"You don't care to be called a stepmother?" I asked.

"Not at all."

"Though you obviously aren't Georgia's mother. Howsabout I call you trophy wife?" I suggested.

She blinked at me once, her eyes widening.

Billy put his face in his hands.

"Bed warmer?" I mused. "Mistress made good? Midlife crisis byproduct?" I shook my head. "When in doubt, go with the classics." I leaned a little closer and gave her a crocodilian smile. "*Gold digger*."

The blood drained out of Eve's face, leaving ugly pinkish blotches high on her cheeks. "Why, you ... you ..."

I waved my hand. "No, it's all right; I don't mind finding alternate terms. I understand that you're under pressure. Must be hard trying to look good in front of the old money when they all know that you were really just a receptionist or an actress or a model or something."

Her mouth dropped completely open.

"We're all having a tough day, dear." I flipped my hand at her. "Shoo."

She stared at me for a second, then let out a snarled curse you'd hardly expect from a lady of her station, spun on the heel of one Italian-leather pump, and stalked from the room. I heard a couple of beeps as she crossed to the shop's door, and then she started screeching into a cell phone. I could hear her for about ten seconds after she went outside.

Mission accomplished. Spleen vented. Dragon lady routed. I felt pleased with myself.

Billy heaved a sigh. "You had to talk to her like that?"

"Yeah." I glowered out after the departed Eve. "Once my mouth was open and my lips started moving, it was pretty much inevitable."

"Dammit, Harry." Billy sighed.

"Oh, come on, man. Sticks and stones may break her bones, but one wiseass will never hurt her. It's not a big deal."

"Not for you: You don't have to live with it. I do. So does Georgia."

I chewed on my lower lip for a second. I hadn't thought about it in those terms. I suddenly felt less than mature. "Ah," I said. "Oh. Um. Maybe I should apologize?"

He bent his head and pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers. "Oh, God, no. Things are bad enough already."

I frowned at him. "Is it really that important to you? The ceremony?"

"It's important to Georgia."

I winced. "Oh," I said. "Ah."

"Look, we've got a few hours. I'll stay here and try to sort things out with Eve," Billy said. "Do me a favor?"

"Hey, what's a best man for? Other than tackling a panicked groom if he tries to run."

He gave me a quick grin. "See if you can contact Georgia first? Maybe she's had car trouble or overslept or something. Or maybe she just left her phone on all night and it went dead."

"Sure," I said, "I'll take care of it."

I CALLED BILLY and Georgia's apartment and got no answer. Knowing Georgia, I expected her to be at the hospital, visiting Kirby. Billy might have been the combat leader of the merry band of college kids who had learned shapeshifting from an actual wolf, but Georgia was the manager, surrogate mom, and brains when there wasn't any violence on.

Kirby was on painkillers and groggy, but he told me Georgia hadn't been there. I talked to the duty nurse and confirmed that though his family was flying in from Texas to see him, he'd had no visitors since Billy and I had left.

Odd.

I thought about mentioning it to Billy, but I didn't really know anything yet, and it wasn't as though he needed *more* pressure.

"Don't get paranoid, Harry," I told myself. "Maybe she's got a hangover, too. Maybe she ran off with a male stripper." I waited to see if I was buying it, then shook my head. "And maybe Elvis and JFK are shackled up in a retirement home somewhere."

I went to Billy and Georgia's apartment.

They live in a place near the University of Chicago's campus, in a neighborhood that missed being an ugly one by maybe a hundred yards. It

still wasn't the kind of place you'd want to hang around outside after dark. I didn't have a key to get into the building, so I pressed buttons one at a time until someone buzzed me in, and I took the stairs up.

As I neared the apartment door, I knew something was wrong. It wasn't that I saw or heard anything, magical or otherwise, but when I stopped before the door, I had a nebulous but strong conviction that something bad had gone down.

I knocked. The door rattled and fell off the lower hinge. It swung open a few inches, drunkenly, upper hinges squealing. Splits and cracks, invisible until the door moved, appeared in the wood, and the dead bolt rattled dully against the inside of the door, loose in its setting.

I stopped there for a long second, waiting and listening. Other than the whirring of a window fan at the end of the hall and someone playing an easy-listening station on the floor above me, there was nothing. I closed my eyes for a moment and extended my wizard's senses, testing the air nearby for any touch of magic upon it.

I felt nothing but the subtle energy that surrounded any home, a form of naturally occurring protective magic called the threshold. Billy and Georgia's apartment was the nominal headquarters of the Werewolves, and members came and went at all hours. It was never intended to be a permanent home—but there had been a lot of living in the little apartment, and its threshold was stronger than most. I slowly pushed the door open with my right hand.

The apartment had been torn to pieces.

A futon lay on its side, its metal frame twisted like a pretzel. The entertainment center had been pulled down from the wall, shattering equipment, scattering CDs and DVDs and vintage *Star Wars* action figures everywhere. The wooden table had been broken in two precisely at its center. One of the half-dozen chairs survived. The others were kindling. The microwave protruded from the drywall of an interior wall. The door of the fridge had taken out the bookcase across the room. Everything in the kitchen had been pulled down and scattered.

I moved in as quietly as I could—which was pretty damn quiet. I had done a lot of sneaking around. The bathroom looked like someone had taken a chain saw to it and followed up with explosives. The bedroom used to house computers and electronic stuff looked like the site of an airplane crash.

Billy and Georgia's bedroom was the worst of all of them.

There was blood on the floor and one wall.

Whatever had happened, I had missed it. Dammit. I wanted to kill something, I wanted to scream in frustration, and I wanted to throw up in fear for Georgia.

But in my business, that kind of thing doesn't help much.

I went back into the living room. The phone near the door had survived. I dialed.

"Lieutenant Murphy, Special Investigations," answered a professional, bland voice.

"It's me, Murph," I told her.

Murphy knows me. Her tone changed at once. "My God, Harry, what's wrong?"

"I'm at Billy and Georgia's apartment," I said. "The place has been torn apart. There's blood."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Georgia's missing." I paused and said, "It's her wedding day, Murph."

"Five minutes," she said at once.

"I need you to pick something up for me on the way."

MURPHY CAME THROUGH the door eight minutes later. She was the head of Chicago PD's Special Investigations Department. They were the cops who got to handle all the crimes that didn't fall into anyone else's purview—stuff like vampire attacks and mystical assaults, as well as more mundane crimes like grave robbing, plus all the really messy cases the other cops didn't want to bother with. SI is supposed to make everything fit neatly into the official reports, explaining away anything weird with logical, rational investigation.

SI spends a lot of time struggling with that last one. Murphy writes more fiction than most novelists.

Murphy doesn't look like a cop, much less a monster cop. She's five nothing. She's got blond hair, blue eyes, and a cute nose. She's also got about a zillion gunnery awards and a shelfful of open-tournament martial arts trophies, and I once saw her kill a giant plant monster with a chain saw. She wore jeans, a white tee, sneakers, a baseball cap, and her hair was

pulled back into a tail. She wore her gun in a shoulder rig, her badge around her neck, and she had a backpack slung over one shoulder.

She came through the door and stopped in her tracks. She surveyed the room for a minute and then said, "What did this?"

I nodded at the twisted futon frame. "Something strong."

"I wish I were a big-time private investigator like you. Then I could figure these things out for myself."

"You bring it?" I asked.

She tossed me the backpack. "The rest is in the car. What's it for?"

I opened the pack, took out a bleached-white human skull, and put it down on the kitchen counter. "Bob, wake up."

Orange lights appeared in the skull's shadowed eye sockets, and then slowly grew brighter. The skull's jaws twitched and then opened into a pantomime of a wide yawn. A voice issued out, the sound odd, like when you talk while on a racquetball court. "What's up, boss?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Murphy swore. She took a step back and almost fell over the remains of the entertainment center.

Bob the Skull's eyelights brightened. "Hey, the cute blonde! Did you do her, Harry?" The skull spun in place on the counter and surveyed the damage. "Wow. You *did*! Way to go, stud!"

My face felt hot. "No, Bob," I growled.

"Oh," the skull said, crestfallen.

Murphy closed her mouth, blinking at the skull. "Uh. Harry?"

"This is Bob the Skull," I told her.

"It's a skull," she said. "That talks."

"Bob is actually the spirit inside. The skull is just the container it's in."

She looked blankly at me and then said, "It's a *skull*. That *talks*."

"Hey!" Bob protested. "I am not an it! I am definitely a he!"

"Bob is my lab assistant," I explained.

Murphy looked back at Bob and shook her head. "Just when I start thinking this magic stuff couldn't get weirder."

"Bob," I said, "take a look around. Tell me what did this."

The skull spun obediently and promptly said, "Something strong."

Murphy gave me an oblique look.

"Oh, bite me," I told her. "Bob, I need to know if you can sense any residual magic."

“Ungawa, bwana,” Bob said. He did another turnaround, this one slower, and the orange eyelights narrowed.

“Residual magic?” Murphy asked.

“Anytime you use magic, it can leave a kind of mark on the area around you. Mostly it’s so faint that sunrise wipes it away every morning. I can’t always sense it.”

“But *be* can?” Murphy asked.

“But he *can*!” Bob agreed. “Though not with all this chatter. I’m working over here.”

I shook my head and picked up the phone again.

“Yes,” said Billy. He sounded harried, and there was an enormous amount of background noise.

“I’m at your apartment,” I said. “I came here looking for Georgia.”

“What?” he said.

“Your apartment,” I said louder.

“Oh, Harry,” Billy said. “Sorry—this phone is giving me fits. Eve just talked to Georgia. She’s here at the resort.”

I frowned. “What? Is she all right?”

“Why wouldn’t she be?” Billy said. Someone started shrieking in the background. “Crap, this battery’s dying. Problem solved; come on up. I brought your tux.”

“Billy, wait.”

He hung up.

I called him back and got nothing but voice mail.

“Aha!” Bob said. “Someone used that wolf spell the naked chick taught to Billy and the Werewolves, back over there by the bedroom,” he reported. “And there were faeries here.”

I frowned. “Faeries. You sure?”

“One hundred percent, boss. They tried to cover their tracks, but the threshold must have taken the zing out of their illusion.”

I nodded and exhaled. “Dammit.” Then I strode into the bathroom and hunkered down, pawing through the rubble.

“What are you doing?” Murphy asked.

“Looking for Georgia,” I said. I found a plastic brush full of long strands the color of Georgia’s hair and took several of them in hand.

I’ve gotten a lot of mileage out of my tracking spell, refining it over the years. I stepped out into the hall and drew a circle on the floor around me

with a piece of chalk. Then I took Georgia's hairs and pressed them against my forehead, summoning up my focus and will. I shaped the magic I wanted to create, focused on the hairs, and released my will as I murmured, "*Interessari, interressarium.*"

Magic surged out of me, into the hairs and back. I broke the circle with my foot, and the spell flowed into action, creating a faint sense of pressure against the back of my head. I turned, and the sensation flowed over my skull in response, over my ear, then over my cheekbone, and finally came to rest directly between my eyes.

"She's this way," I said. "Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh?"

"I'm facing south," I said.

"Which is a problem?"

"Billy says she's at the wedding. Twenty miles north of here."

Murphy's eyes widened in comprehension. "A faerie has taken her place."

"Yeah."

"Why? Are they trying to place a spy?"

"No," I said quietly. "This is malicious. Probably because Billy and company backed me up during the battle when the last Summer Knight was murdered."

"That was years ago."

"Faeries are patient," I said, "and they don't forget. Billy's in danger."

"I'd say Georgia was the one in danger," Murphy said.

"I mean that Billy's in danger, too," I said.

"How so?"

"This isn't happening on their wedding day by chance. The faeries want to use it against them."

Murphy frowned. "What?"

"A wedding isn't just a ceremony," I said. "There's power in it. A pledging of one to another, a blending of energies. There's magic all through it."

"If you say so," she said, her tone wry. "What happens to him if he marries a faerie?"

"Conservatives get real upset," I said absently. "But I'm not sure, magically speaking. Bob?"

“Oh,” Bob said. “Um. Well, if we assume this is one of the Winter Sidhe, then he’s going to be lucky to survive the honeymoon. If he does, well, she’ll be able to influence him, long term. He’ll be bound to her, the way the Winter Knights are bound to the Winter Queens. She’ll be able to impose her will over his. Change the way he thinks and feels about things.”

I ground my teeth. “And if she changes him enough, it will drive him insane.”

“Usually, yup,” Bob said. His voice brightened. “But don’t worry, boss. Odds are he’ll be dead before sunrise tomorrow. He might even die happy.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” I said. I checked my watch. “The wedding is in three hours. Georgia might need help now.” I looked back at Murphy. “You carrying?”

“Two on me. More in the car.”

“Now, there’s a girl who knows how to party!” Bob said.

I popped the skull back into my backpack harder than I strictly had to and zipped it shut. “Feel like saving the day?”

Her eyes sparkled, but she kept her tone bored. “On the weekend? Sounds too much like work.”

We started from the apartment together. “I’ll pay you in doughnuts.”

“Dresden, you pig. That cop-doughnut thing is a vicious stereotype.”

“Doughnuts with little pink sprinkles,” I said.

“Professional profiling is just as bad as racial profiling.”

I nodded. “Yeah. But I know you want the little pink sprinkles.”

“That isn’t the point,” she said loftily, and we got into her car.

We buckled in, and I said more quietly, “You don’t have to come with me, Karrin.”

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

I nodded and focused on the tracking spell, turning my head south. “Thataway.”

THE WORST THING about being a wizard is all the presumption; people’s expectations. Pretty much everyone expects me to be some kind of con artist, since it is a well-known fact that there is no such thing as magic. Of those who know better, most of them think I can just snap my fingers, poof, and have whatever I want. Dirty dishes? Snap my fingers and they wash themselves, like in *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*. Need to talk to a friend?

Poof, teleport them in from wherever they are, because the magic knows where to find them, all by itself.

Magic ain't like that. Or I sure as hell wouldn't drive a beat-up old Volkswagen.

It's powerful, true, and useful, and enormously advantageous, but ultimately it is an art, a science, a craft, a tool. It doesn't go out and do things by itself. It doesn't create something from nothing. Using it takes talent and discipline and practice and a lot of work, and none of it comes free.

Which was why my spell led us to downtown Chicago and suddenly became less useful.

"We've circled this block three times," Murphy told me. "Can't you get a more precise fix on it?"

"Do I look like one of those GPS thingies?" I sighed.

"Define *thingie*," Murphy said.

"It's my spell," I said. "It's oriented to the points of the compass. I didn't really have the z-axis in mind when I designed it, and it only works for that when I'm right on top of the target. I keep meaning to go back and fix that, but there's never time."

"I had a marriage like that," Murphy said. She stopped at a light and stared up. The block held six buildings—three apartments, two office buildings, and an old church. "In there. Somewhere. It could take a lot of time to search that."

"So call in all the king's horses and all the king's men," I said.

She shook her head. "I might be able to get a couple, but since Rudolph moved to Internal Affairs, I've been flagged. If I start calling in people left and right without a damn good logical, rational, wholly normal reason ..."

I grunted. "I get it. We need to get closer. The closer I get to Georgia, the more precise the tracking spell will be."

Murphy nodded once and pulled over in front of a fire hydrant, parking the car. "Let's be smart about this. Six buildings. Where would a faerie take her?"

"Not the church. Holy ground is uncomfortable for them." I shook my head. "Not the apartments. Too many people there. Too easy for someone to hear or see something."

"Office buildings on a weekend," Murphy said. "Empty as you can find in Chicago. Which one?"

“Let’s take a look. Maybe the spell can give me an idea.”

It took ten minutes to walk around the outsides of both buildings. The spell remained wonderfully nonspecific, though I knew Georgia was within a hundred yards or so. I sat down at the curb in disgust. “Dammit,” I said, pushing at my hair. “There has to be something.”

“Would a faerie be able to magick herself in and out of there?”

“Yes and no,” I said. “She couldn’t just wander in through the wall, or poof herself inside. But she could walk in under a veil, so that no one saw her—or else saw an illusion of what she wanted them to see.”

“Can’t you look for residual whatsit again?”

It was a good idea. I got Bob and tried it, while Murphy found a phone and tried to reach Billy or anyone who could reach Billy. After an hour’s effort, we had accomplished enormous amounts of nothing.

“In case I haven’t mentioned it before,” I said, “dealing with faeries is a pain in the ass.” Someone in a passing car flicked a still-smoldering cigarette butt onto the concrete near me. I kicked it through a sewer grate in disgust.

“She covered her tracks again?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

I shrugged. “Lot of ways. Scatter little glamours around to misdirect us. Only used her magic very lightly, to keep from leaving a big footprint. If she did her thing in a crowded area, enough people’s life force passing by would cover it. Or she could have used running water to—”

I stopped talking, and my gaze snapped back to the sewer grate.

I could hear water running through it in a low, steady stream.

“Down there,” I said. “She’s taken Georgia to Undertown.”

MURPHY STARED AT the stairs leading down to a tunnel with brick walls and shook her head. “I wouldn’t have believed this was here.”

We stood at the end of an uncompleted wing of Chicago’s underground commuter tunnels, at a broken section of wall hidden behind a few old tarps that led down into the darkness of Undertown.

Murphy had thrown on an old Cubs jacket over her shirt. She switched guns, putting her favorite Sig away in exchange for the Glock she wore holstered on one hip. The gun had a little flashlight built onto the underside

of its barrel, and she flicked it on. “I mean, I knew there were some old tunnels,” Murphy said, “but not this.”

I grunted and took off the silver pentacle amulet I wore around my neck. I held it in my right hand, my fingers clutching the chain against the solid, round length of oak in my right hand, about two feet long and covered with carved runes and sigils—my blasting rod. I sent an effort of will into the amulet, and the silver pentacle began to glow with a gentle, blue-white light. “Yeah. The Manhattan Project was run out of the tunnels here until they moved it to the Southwest. Plus the town kept sinking into the swamp for a hundred and fifty years. There are whole buildings sunk right into the ground. The Mob dug places during Prohibition. People built bomb shelters during the fifties and sixties. And other things have added more, plus gateways back and forth to the spirit world.”

“Other things?” Murphy asked, gun steady on the darkness below. “Like what?”

“Things,” I said, staring down at the patient, lightless murk of Undertown. “Anything that doesn’t like sunlight or company. Vampires, ghouls, some of the nastier faeries, obviously. Once, I fought this wacko who kept summoning up fungus demons.”

“Are you stalling?” Murphy asked.

“Maybe I am.” I sighed. “I’ve been down there a few times. Never been good.”

“How you wanna do this?”

“Like we did the vampire lair. Let me go first with the shield. Something jumps out at us, I’ll drop and hold it off until you kill it.”

Murphy nodded soberly. I swallowed a lump of fear out of my throat. It settled into my stomach like a nugget of ice. I prepared my shield, and the same color light as emanated from my pentacle surrounded it, drizzling heatless blue-white sparks in an irregular stream. I prepared myself to use my blasting rod if I had to, and started down the stairs, following the tracking spell toward Georgia.

The old brick stairs ended at a rough stone slope into the earth. Water ran down the walls and in rivulets down the sides of the tunnel. We went forward, through an old building that might have been a schoolhouse, judging by the rotted piles of wood and a single old slate chalkboard fallen from one wall. The floor was tilted to one side. The next section of tunnel was full of freezing, dirty, knee-deep water until it sloped up out of the

water, went round a corner where the walls had been cut by rough tools, and then opened into a wider chamber.

It was a low-ceilinged cave—low for me, any way. Most folks wouldn't have been troubled. Three feet from the doorway, the floor dropped away into silent, black water that stretched out beyond the reach of my blue wizard light. Murphy stepped up next to me, and the light on her gun sent a silver spear of white light out over the water.

There, on a slab of stone that rose up no more than an inch or two from the water's surface, lay Georgia.

Murphy's light played over her. Georgia was a tall woman—in high-enough heels, she could have looked me in the eye. She'd been stork-skinny and frizzy haired when I met her. The years in between had softened her lines and brought out a natural confidence and intelligence that made her an extraordinarily attractive, if not precisely beautiful, woman. She was naked, laid on her back with her arms crossed over her chest in repose, funeral-style. She took slow breaths. Her skin was discolored from the cold, her lips tinged blue.

"Georgia?" I called, feeling like a dummy. But I didn't know of any other way to see if she was awake. She didn't stir.

"What now?" Murphy asked. "You go get her while I cover you?"

I shook my head. "Can't be as easy as it looks."

"Why not?"

"Because it never is." I bowed my head for a moment, pressed my fingertips lightly to my forehead, between my eyebrows, and concentrated on bringing up my Sight.

One of the things common to all wizards is the Sight. Call it a sixth sense, a third eye, whatever you please; around the world everyone with enough magic has the Sight. It lets you actually see the forces of energy at work in the world around you—life, death, magic, what have you. It isn't always easy to understand what I see, and sometimes it isn't pretty—and anything a wizard views with his Sight is there, in Technicolor, never fading—forever.

That's why you have to be careful what you choose to Look at. I don't like doing it, ever. You never know what it is you'll See.

But when it came to finding out what kinds of magic might be between Georgia and me, I didn't have many options. I opened my Sight and Looked out over the water to Georgia.

The water was shot through with slithery tendrils of greenish light—a spell of some kind, just under its placid surface. If the water moved, the spell would react. I couldn’t tell how. The stone Georgia lay upon held a dull, pulsing energy, a sullen violet radiance that wound in slow, hypnotic spirals through the rock. A binding was in effect, I was sure, something to keep her from moving. Another spell played over and through Georgia herself—a cloud of deep blue sparkles that lay against her skin, especially around her head. A sleeping spell? I couldn’t make out any details from here.

“Well?” Murphy said.

I closed my eyes and released my Sight, always a mildly disorienting experience. The remnants of my hangover made it worse than usual. I reported my findings to Murphy.

“Well,” she said, “I sure am glad we have a wizard on the case. Otherwise we might be standing here without any idea what to do next.”

I grimaced and stepped to the water’s edge. “This is water magic. It’s tricky stuff. I’ll try to take down the alarm spell on the surface of the pool, then swim out and get Geo—”

Without warning, the water erupted into a boiling froth at my feet, and a claw, a freaking pincer as big as a couple of basketballs, shot out of the water and clamped down on my ankle.

I let out a battle cry. Sure, a lot of people might have mistaken it for a sudden yelp of unmanly fear, but trust me: It was a battle cry.

The thing, whatever it was, pulled my leg out from under me, trying to drag me in. I could see slick, wet black shell. I whipped my blasting rod around to point at the thing and snarled, “*Fuego!*”

A lance of fire as thick as my thumb lashed from the tip of my blasting rod, which was pointed at the thing’s main body. It hit the water and boiled into steam. It smashed into the shell of the creature with such force that it simply ripped the thing’s body from its clawed limb. I brought my shield up, a pale, fragile-looking quarter dome of blue light that coalesced into place before the steam boiled back into my eyes.

I squirmed away from the water on my butt, shaking wildly at the severed limb that still clutched me.

The waters surged again, and another slick-shelled *thing* grabbed at me. And another. And another. Dozens of the creatures were rushing toward our

side of the pool, and the pressure wave rushing before them rose a foot off the pool's surface.

"Shellycobbs!" I shouted, and flicked another burst of flame at the nearest, driving it back. "They're shellycobbs!"

"Whatever," Murphy said, stepped up beside me, and started shooting. The third shellycobb took three hits in the same center area of its shell and cracked like a restaurant lobster.

It bought me a second to act, and I raised the blasting rod and tried something new on the fly, a blending of a blast of fire with my shield magic. I pointed the rod at one side of the shore, gathered my will, and thundered, "*Ignus defendarius!*"

A bar of flame, bright enough to hurt my eyes, shot out to one side of the room. I drew a line across the stone with the tip of the blasting rod, and as the flame touched the stone, it adhered, spooling out from my blasting rod until it had formed a solid line between us and the water, and an opaque curtain of flame three feet high separated us from the shellycobbs. Angry rattles and splashes came from the far side of the curtain.

If the fire dropped, the faerie water monsters would swarm us.

The fire took a lot of energy to keep up, and if I tried to hold it too long, I'd probably black out. Worse, it was still fire—it needed oxygen to keep burning, and in those cramped tunnels there wasn't going to be much of it around for breathing if the fire stayed lit too long. All of this meant we had only seconds and had to do something—fast.

"Murph!" I snapped. "Could you carry her?"

She turned wide blue eyes to me, her gun still held ready and pointing at the shellycobbs. "What?"

"Can you carry her?"

She gritted her teeth and nodded once.

I met her eyes for a dangerous second and asked, "Do you trust me?"

Fire crackled. Water boiled. Steam hissed.

"Yes, Harry," she whispered.

I flashed her a grin. "Jump the fire. Run to her."

"Run to her?"

"And hurry," I said, lifting my left arm, focusing as my shield bracelet began to glow, blue-white energy swiftly becoming incandescent. "Now!"

Murphy broke into a run and hurtled over the wall of fire.

"*Forzare!*" I shouted, and extended my left arm and my will.

I reshaped the shield, this time forming it in a straight, flat plane about three feet wide. It shot through the wall of flame, over the water, to the stone upon which Georgia lay. Murphy landed on the bridge of pure force, kept her balance, and poured on the speed, sprinting over the water to the unconscious young woman.

Murphy slapped her gun back into its holster, grabbed Georgia, and, with a shout and a grunt of effort, managed to get the tall girl into a fireman's carry. She started back, much more slowly than she'd gone forward.

The shellycobbs thrashed even more furiously, and the strain of holding both spells started to become a physical sensation, a spidery, trembling weakness in my arms and legs. I clenched my teeth and my will, focusing on holding the wall and the bridge until Murphy could return. My vision distorted, shrinking down to a tunnel.

And then Murphy shouted again and plunged through the fire, this time more slowly. She let out a gasp of pain as she got singed, then stumbled past me.

I released the bridge with a gasp of relief. "Go!" I said. "Come on, let's go!"

Together, we were barely able to get Georgia lifted. I was only able to hold the wall of flame against the shellycobbs for about fifty feet when I had to release the spell or risk passing out. I guess the shellycobbs weren't sprinters, because Murphy and I outran them, dragging the naked girl out of her Undertown prison and back to Murphy's car.

In all that time, Georgia never stirred.

Murphy had a blanket in her trunk. I wrapped Georgia in it and got in the backseat with her. Murphy gunned the car and headed for the Lincolnshire Marriott Resort Hotel, twenty miles north of town and one of the most ostentatious places in the area to hold a wedding. Traffic wasn't good, and according to the clock in Murphy's car, we had less than ten minutes before the wedding was supposed to begin.

I struggled in the backseat, fumbling to keep Georgia from bouncing off the ceiling, to get my backpack open, and to ignore the cuts the shellycobb's pincer left on my leg.

"Is that blood on her face?" Murphy asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Dried. But I figure it wasn't hers. Bob said she wolfed out in the apartment. I think Georgia got her fangs into Jenny Greenteeth before she got grabbed."

“Jenny who?”

“Jenny Greenteeth,” I said. “She’s one of the sidhe. Faerie nobility, sidekick to the Winter Lady.”

“Are her teeth green?”

“Like steamed spinach. I saw her leading a big old bunch of shellycobbs just like those guys, back at the faerie war. If Maeve wanted to lay out some payback for Billy and company, Jenny’s the one she’d send.”

“She’s dangerous?”

“You know the stories about things that tempt you down to the water’s edge and then drown you? Sirens that lure sailors to their deaths? Mermaids who carry men off to their homes under the sea?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s Jenny. Only she’s not so cuddly.”

I dug Bob out of my backpack. The skull took one look at the sleeping, naked Georgia and leered. “First you get demolition-level sex with the cop chick, and now a threesome, all in the same day!” he cried. “Harry, you have to write *Penthouse* about this!”

“Not now, Bob. I need you to identify the spell that’s been laid on Georgia.”

The skull made a disgusted sound but focused on the girl. “Oh,” he said after a second. “Wow. That’s a good one. Definitely sidhe work.”

“I figure it’s Jenny Greenteeth. Give me details.”

“Jenny got game. It’s a sleep spell,” he said. “A seriously good one, too. Malicious as hell.”

“How do I lift it?”

“You can’t,” Bob said.

“Fine. How do I break it?”

“You don’t understand. It’s been tied into the victim. It’s being fueled by the victim’s life force. If you shatter the spell ...”

I nodded, getting it. “I’ll do the same to her. Is it impossible to get rid of it?”

“No, not at all. I’m saying that *you* couldn’t lift it. Whoever threw it could do that, of course. But there’s another key.”

I grew wroth and scowled. “What key, Bob?”

“Uh,” he said, somehow giving the impression that he’d shrugged. “A kiss ought to do it. You know. True love, Prince Charming, that kind of thing.”

“That won’t be hard,” I said, relaxing a little. “We’ll definitely get to the wedding before he goes off alone with Jenny and gets drowned.”

“Oh, good,” Bob said. “Of course, the girl still kicks off, but you can’t save all the people, all the time.”

“What?” I demanded. “Why does Georgia die?”

“Oh, if the Werewolf kid goes through the ceremony with Jenny and plights his troth and so on, it’s going to contaminate him. I mean, if he’s married to another, it can’t really be pure love. Jenny’s claim on him would prevent the kiss from lifting the spell.”

“Which means Georgia won’t wake up,” I said, chewing on my lip. “At what point in the wedding does it happen, exactly?”

“You mean, when will it be too late?” Bob asked.

“Yeah, I mean, when they say, ‘I do,’ when they swap rings, or what?”

“Rings and vows,” Bob said, mild scorn in his voice. “Way overrated.”

Murphy glanced up at me in the rearview mirror and said, “It’s the kiss, Harry. It’s the kiss.”

“Buffy’s right!” Bob agreed cheerily.

I met Murphy’s eyes in the mirror for just a second and then said, “Yeah. I guess I should have figured.”

Murphy smiled a little.

“The kiss seals the deal,” Bob prattled. “If Billy kisses Jenny Greenteeth, the girl with the long legs ain’t waking up, and he ain’t long for the world, either.”

“Murph,” I said, tense.

She rolled down the car’s window, slapped a magnetic cop light on the roof, and started up the siren. Then she stomped on the gas and all but gave me whiplash.

UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, the trip to the resort would have taken half an hour. I’m not saying Murphy’s driving was suicidal. Not quite. But after the third near collision, I closed my eyes and fought off the urge to chant, “There’s no place like home.”

Murphy got us there in twenty minutes.

Tires screeched as she swung into the resort’s parking lot. “Drop me there,” I said, pointing. “Park behind the reception tent so folks won’t see Georgia. I’ll go get Billy.”

Clutching my blasting rod, I bailed out of the car, which never actually came to a full stop, and ran into the hotel. The concierge blinked at me from behind her desk.

“Wedding!” I barked at her. “Where?”

She blinked and pointed a finger down the hall. “Um. The ballroom.”

“Right!” I said, and sprinted that way. I could see the open double doors and heard a man’s voice over a loudspeaker saying, “Until death do you part?”

Eve McAlister stood at the doorway in her lavender silk outfit, and when she saw me, her eyes narrowed into sharp little chips of ice. “There, that’s him. That’s the man.”

Two big, beefy guys in matching badly fitted maroon dress coats appeared—hotel security goons. They stepped directly into my path, and the larger one said, “Sir, I’m sorry, but this is a private function. I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

I ground my teeth. “You have got to be kidding me! Private? I’m the best-fucking-man!”

The loudspeaker voice in the ballroom said, “Then by the power vested in me ...”

“I will not allow you to further disrupt this wedding, or tarnish my good name,” Eve said in a triumphant tone. “Gentlemen, please escort him from the premises before he causes a scene.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the bigger goon said. He stepped toward me, glancing down at the blasting rod. “Sir, let’s walk to the doors now.”

Instead, I darted forward, toward the doors, taking the goons by surprise with the abrupt action. “Billy!” I shouted.

The goons recovered in an eyeblink and tackled me. They were professional goons. I went down under them, and it drove the breath out of me.

The loudspeaker voice said, “Man and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

I lay there on my back under maybe five hundred pounds of security goon, struggling to breathe and staring at nothing but ceiling.

A ceiling lined with a whole bunch of automated fire extinguishers.

I slammed my head into the Boss Goon’s nose and bit Backup Goon on the arm until he screamed and jerked it away, freeing my right arm.

I pointed the blasting rod up, reached for my power, and wheezed, “*Fuego ...*”

Flame billowed up to the ceiling.

A fire alarm howled. The sprinklers flicked on and turned the inside of the hotel into a miniature monsoon.

Chaos erupted. The ballroom was filled with screams. The floor shook a little as hundreds of guests leapt to their feet and started looking for an exit. The security goons, smart enough to realize they suddenly had an enormous problem on their hands, scrambled away from the doorway before they could be trampled.

I got to my feet in time to see a minister fleeing a raised platform, where a figure in Georgia’s wedding dress had hunched over, while Billy, spiffy in his tux, stared at her in pure shock. That much running water grounded out whatever glamour the bride might have been using, and her features melted back into those I’d seen before—she lost an inch or two of height and her proportions changed. Georgia’s rather sharp features flowed into a visage of haunting, unearthly beauty. Georgia’s brown hair became the same green as emeralds and seaweed.

Jenny Greenteeth turned toward Billy, her trademark choppers bared in a viridian snarl, and her hand swept at his throat, inhuman nails gleaming.

Billy may have been shocked, but not so much that he didn’t recognize the threat. His arm intercepted Jenny’s and he drove into her, pushing both hands forward with the power of his arms, shoulders, and legs. Billy had a low center of gravity, and was no skinny weakling. The push sent Jenny back several steps and off the edge of the platform. She fell in a tangle of white fabric and lace.

“Billy!” I shouted again, almost managing to make it loud. My voice was lost in the sounds of panic and the wailing fire alarms, so I gritted my teeth, brought my shield bracelet up to its flashiest, sparkliest, shiniest charge, and thrust into the press of the crowd. To them, it must have looked like someone waving a road flare around, and there was a steady stream of interjections that averaged out to “Eek!” I forged ahead through them.

By the time I was past the crowd, Jenny Greenteeth had risen to her feet, tearing the bridal gown off as if it were made of tissue paper. She stretched one hand into a grasping claw and clenched at the air. Ripples of angry power fluttered between her fingers, and an ugly green sphere of light appeared in her hand.

She leapt nimbly back up to the platform, unencumbered by the dress, and flung the green sphere at Billy. He ducked. It flew over his head, leaving a hole with blackened, crumbling edges in the wall behind him.

Jenny howled and summoned another sphere, but by that time I was within reach. Standing on the floor by the platform gave me a perfect shot at her knees, and I swung my blasting rod with both hands. The blow elicited a shriek of pain from the sidhe woman, and she flung the second sphere at me. I caught it on my shield bracelet and it rebounded upon her, searing a black line across the outside of one thigh.

The sidhe screamed and threw herself back, her weight mostly on one leg, and snarled to me, "Thou wouldst have saved this one, Wizard. But I will yet exact my Lady's vengeance twofold."

And with a graceful leap, she flew over our heads, forty feet to the door, and vanished from sight as swiftly and nimbly as a deer.

"Harry!" Billy said, staring in shock at the soaking-wet room. "What the hell is happening here? What the hell was that thing?"

I grabbed his tux. "No time. Come with me."

He did but asked, "Why?"

"I need you to kiss Georgia."

"Uh," he said. "What?"

"I found Georgia. She's outside. The watery tart knows it. She's going to kill her. You gotta kiss her, *now*."

"Oh," he said.

We both ran, and suddenly the bottom fell out of my stomach.

Vengeance twofold.

Oh, God.

Jenny Greenteeth would kill Murphy, too.

THE AREA OUTSIDE the hotel was a mess. People were wandering around in herds. Emergency sirens were already on the way. A couple of cars had smashed into each other in the parking lot, probably as they both gunned it for the road. Everyone out there seemed to be determined to get in our way, slowing our pursuit.

We ran to where Murphy had parked her car.

It was lying on its side. Windows were broken. One of the doors had been torn off. I didn't see anyone around. But Billy suddenly cocked his head to

one side and then pointed at the reception tent. We ran for it as quietly as we could, and Billy threw himself inside. I heard him let out a short cry.

I followed.

Georgia lay on the ground, hardly covered by the blanket at all, limbs sprawled bonelessly. Billy rushed over to her.

Just past them I saw Murphy.

Jenny Greenteeth stood over her at the refreshments table, pushing her face down into a full punch bowl, hands locked in Murphy's hair. The wicked faerie's eyes were alight with rage and madness and an almost sexual arousal. Murphy's arms twitched a little, and Jenny gasped, lips parting, and pushed down harder.

Murphy's hand fluttered one more time and went still.

The next thing I knew, I was smashing my blasting rod down onto Jenny Greenteeth, screaming incoherently and pounding as hard as I possibly could. I drove the faerie back from Murphy, who slid limply to the ground. Then Jenny recovered her balance, struck out at me with one arm, and I found out a fact I hadn't known before.

Jenny Greenteeth was something strong.

I landed several feet away, not far from Billy and Georgia, watching birdies and little lights fly around. On another table, next to me, was another punch bowl.

Jenny Greenteeth flew at me, lust in her inhumanly lovely features, her feline eyes smoldering.

"Billy!" I slurred. "Dammit, kiss her! Now!"

Billy blinked at me.

Then he turned to Georgia, lifting the upper half of her body in his arms, and kissed her with a desperation and passion that no one could fake.

I didn't get to see what happened, because faster than you could say "oxygen deprivation," Jenny Greenteeth had seized my hair and smashed my face against the bottom of the punch bowl.

I fought her, but she was stronger than anything human, and she had all kinds of leverage. I could feel her pressed against me, body tensing and shifting, rubbing against me: She was getting off as she murdered me. The lights started to go out. This was what she did. She knew what she was doing.

Lucky for me, she wasn't the only one.

I suddenly fell, getting the whole huge punch bowl to turn over on me as I did, drenching me in bright red punch. I gasped and wiped stinging liquid from my eyes and looked up in time to see a pair of wolves, one tall and lean, one smaller and heavier, leap at Jenny Greenteeth and bring her to the ground. Screams and snarls blended, and none of them sounded human.

Jenny tried to run, but the lean wolf ripped across the back of her unwounded leg with its fangs, severing the hamstring. The faerie went down. The wolves were on her before she could scream again. The wheel turns, and Jenny Greenteeth never had a chance. The wolves knew what they were doing.

This was what *they* did.

I crawled over to Murphy. Her eyes were open and staring, her body and features slack. Some part of my brain remembered the steps for CPR. I started doing it. I adjusted her position, sealed my lips to Murphy's, and breathed for her. Then compressions. Breathe. Compressions.

"Come on, Murph," I whispered. "Come on."

I covered her mouth with mine and breathed again.

For one second, for one teeny, tiny instant, I felt her mouth move. I felt her head tilt, her lips soften, and my oh-so-professional CPR—just for a second, mind you—felt almost, *almost* like a kiss.

Then she started coughing and sputtering, and I sank back from her in relief. She turned on her side, breathing hard for a moment, and then looked up at me with dazed blue eyes. "Harry?"

I leaned down, causing runnels of punch to slide into one of my eyes, and asked quietly, "Yeah?"

"You have fruit-punch mouth," she whispered.

Her hand found mine, weak but warm. I held it. We sat together.

BILLY AND GEORGIA got married that night in Father Forthill's study, at St. Mary of the Angels, an enormous old church. No one was there but them, the padre, Murphy, and me. After all, as far as most anyone else knew, they'd been married at that disastrous travesty of a farce in Lincolnshire.

The ceremony was simple and heartfelt. I stood with Billy. Murphy stood with Georgia. They both looked radiantly happy. They held hands the whole time, except when exchanging rings.

Murphy and I stepped back when they got to the vows.

“Not exactly a fairy-tale wedding,” she whispered.

“Sure it was,” I said. “Had a kiss and an evil stepmother and everything.”

Murphy smiled at me.

“Then by the power vested in me,” the padre said, beaming at the pair from behind his spectacles, “I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss th—”

They beat him to it.

I WAS A TEENAGE BIGFOOT

by Jim Butcher



I Was a Teenage Bigfoot

JIM BUTCHER

There are times when, as a professional wizard, my vocation calls me to the great outdoors, and that night I was in the northwoods of Wisconsin with a mixed pack of researchers, enthusiasts and . . . well. Nerds.

“I don’t know, man,” said a skinny kid named Nash. “What’s his name again?”

I poked the small campfire I’d set up earlier with a stick and pretended that they weren’t standing less than ten feet away from me. The forest made forest sounds like it was supposed to. Full dark had fallen less than half an hour before.

“Harry Dresden,” said Gary, a plump kid with a cell phone, a GPS unit, and some kind of video game device on his belt. “Supposed to be a psychic or something.” He was twiddling deft fingers over the surface of what they call a “smart” phone, these days. Hell, the damned things are probably smarter than me. “Supposed to have helped Chicago PD a bunch of times. I’d pull up the Internet references, but I can’t get reception out here.”

“A psychic?” Nash said. “How is anyone ever supposed to take our research seriously if we keep showing up with fruitcakes like that?”

Gary shrugged. “Doctor Sinor knows him or something.”

Doctor Sinor had nearly been devoured by an ogre in a suburban park one fine summer evening, and I’d gotten her out in one piece. Like most people who have a brush with the supernatural, she’d rationalized the truth away as rapidly as possible—which had led her to participate in such fine activities as tonight’s Bigfoot expedition in her spare time.

“Gentlemen,” Sinor said, impatiently. She was a blocky, no-nonsense type, grey-haired and straight-backed. “If you could help me with these

speakers, we might actually manage to blast a call or two before dawn.”

Gary and Nash both hustled over to the edge of the firelight to start messing about with the equipment the troop of researchers had packed in. There were half a dozen of them, altogether, all of them busy with trail cameras and call blasting speakers and scent markers and audio recorders.

I pulled a sandwich out of my pocket and started eating it. I took my time about it. I was in no hurry.

For those of you who don't know it, a forest at night is *dark*. Sometimes pitch-black. There was no moon to speak of in the sky, and the light of the stars doesn't make it more than a few inches into a mixed canopy of deciduous trees and evergreens. The light from my little campfire and the hand-held flashlights of the researchers soon gave the woods all the light there was.

Their equipment wasn't working very well—my bad, probably. Modern technology doesn't get on well with the magically gifted. For about an hour, nothing much happened beyond the slapping of mosquitoes and a lot of electronic noises squawking from the loudspeakers.

Then the researchers got everything online and went through their routine. They played primate calls over the speakers and then dutifully recorded the forest afterward. Everything broke down again. The researchers soldiered on, repairing things, and eventually Gary tried wood-knocking, which meant banging on trees with fallen limbs and waiting to hear if there was a response.

I liked Doctor Sinor, but I had asked to come strictly as a ride-along and I didn't pitch in with her team's efforts.

The whole “let's find Bigfoot” thing seems a little ill-planned to me, personally. Granted, my perspective is different from that of non-wizards, but marching out into the woods looking for a very large and very powerful creature by blasting out what you're pretty sure are territorial challenges to fight (or else mating calls) seems . . . somewhat unwise.

I mean, if there's no Bigfoot, no problem. But what if you're standing there, screaming “Bring it on!” and *find* a Bigfoot?

Worse yet, what if *he* finds *you*?

Even worse, what if you were screaming, “Do me, baby!” and he finds you *then*?

Is it me? Am I crazy? Or does the whole thing just seem like a recipe for trouble?

So anyway, while I kept my little fire going, the Questionably Wise Research Variety Act continued until after midnight. That's when I looked up to see a massive form standing at the edge of the trees, in the very outskirts of the light of my dying fire.

I'm in the ninety-ninth percentile for height, myself, but this guy was *tall*. My head might have come up to his collarbone, barely, assuming I had correctly estimated where his collarbone was under the long, shaggy, dark brown hair covering him. It wasn't long enough to hide the massive weight of muscle he carried on that enormous frame or the simple, disturbing, very slightly inhuman proportions of his body. His face was broad, blunt, with a heavy brow ridge that turned his eyes into mere gleams of reflected light.

Most of all, there was a sense of awesome power granted to his presence by his size alone, chilling even to someone who had seen big things in action before. There's a reaction to something that much bigger than you, an automatic assumption of menace that is built into the human brain: Big equals dangerous.

It took about fifteen seconds before the first researcher, Gary I think, noticed and let out a short gasp. In my peripheral vision, I saw the entire group turn toward the massive form by the fire and freeze into place. The silence was brittle crystal.

I broke it by bolting up from my seat and letting out a high-pitched shriek.

Half a dozen other screams joined it, and I whirled as if to flee, only to see Doctor Sinor and crew hotfooting it down the path we'd followed into the woods, back toward the cars.

I held it in for as long as I could, and only after I was sure that they wouldn't hear it did I let loose the laughter bubbling in my chest. I sank back onto my log by the fire, laughing, and beckoning the large form forward.

"Harry," rumbled the figure in a very, very deep voice, the words marked with the almost indefinable clippings of a Native American accent. "You have an unsophisticated sense of humor."

"I can't help it," I said, wiping at tears of laughter. "It never gets old." I waved to the open ground across the fire from me. "Sit, sit, be welcome, big brother."

"Appreciate it," rumbled the giant and squatted down across the fire from me, touching fingers the size of cucumbers to his heart in greeting.

His broad, blunt face was amused. “So. Got any smokes?”

It wasn’t the first time I’d done business with the Forest People. They’re old school. There’s a certain way one goes about business with someone considered a peer, and Strength of a River in His Shoulders was an old school kind of guy. There were proprieties to be observed.

So we shared a thirty-dollar cigar, which I’d brought, had some S’mores, which I made, and sipped from identical plastic bottles of Coca-Cola, which I had purchased. By the time we were done, the fire had burned down to glowing embers, which suited me fine—and I knew that River Shoulders would be more comfortable in the near-dark, too. I didn’t mind being the one to provide everything. It would have been a hassle for River Shoulders to do it, and we’d probably be smoking, eating, and drinking raw and unpleasant things if he had.

Besides, it was worth it. The Forest People had been around long before the great gold rushes of the nineteenth century, and they were loaded. River Shoulders had paid my retainer with a gold nugget the size of a golf ball, the last time I’d done business with him.

“Your friends,” he said, nodding toward the disappeared researchers. “They going to come back?”

“Not before dawn,” I said. “For all they know, you *got* me.”

River Shoulders’ chest rumbled with a sound that was both amused and not entirely pleased. “Like my people don’t have enough stigmas already.”

“You want to clear things up, I can get you on the Larry Fowler show any time you want.”

River Shoulders shuddered—given his size, it was a lot of shuddering. “TV rots the brains of people who see it. Don’t even want to know what it does to the people who *make* it.”

I snorted. “I got your message,” I said. “I am here.”

“And so you are,” he said. He frowned, an expression that was really sort of terrifying on his features. I didn’t say anything. You just don’t rush the Forest People. They’re patient on an almost alien level, compared to human beings, and I knew that our meeting was already being conducted with unseemly haste, by River Shoulders’ standards. Finally, he swigged a bit more Coke, the bottle looking tiny in his vast hands, and sighed. “There is a problem with my son. Again.”

I sipped some Coke and nodded, letting a little time pass before I answered. "Irwin was a fine, strong boy when I last saw him."

The conversation continued with contemplative pauses between each bit of speech. "He is sick."

"Children sometimes grow sick."

"Not children of the Forest People."

"What, never?"

"No, never. And I will not quote Gilbert and Sullivan."

"Their music was silly and fine."

River Shoulders nodded agreement. "Indeed."

"What can you tell me of your son's sickness?"

"His mother tells me the school's doctor says he has something called mah-no."

"Mono," I said. "It is a common illness. It is not dangerous."

"An illness could not touch one born of the Forest People," River Shoulders rumbled.

"Not even one with only one parent of your folk?" I asked.

"Indeed," he said. "Something else must therefore be happening. I am concerned for Irwin's safety."

The fire let out a last crackle and a brief, gentle flare of light, showing me River Shoulders clearly. His rough features were touched with the same quiet worry I'd seen on dozens and dozens of my clients' faces.

"He still doesn't know who you are, does he?"

The giant shifted his weight slightly as if uncomfortable. "Your society is, to me, irrational and bewildering. Which is good. Can't have everyone the same, or the earth would get boring."

I thought about it for a moment and then said, "You feel he has problems enough to deal with already."

River Shoulders spread his hands, as if my own words had spotlighted the truth.

I nodded, thought about it, and said, "We aren't that different. Even among my people, a boy misses his father."

"A voice on a telephone is not a father," he said.

"But it is more than nothing," I said. "I have lived with a father and without a father. With one was better."

The silence stretched extra-long.

“In time,” the giant responded, very quietly. “For now, my concern is his physical safety. I cannot go to him. I spoke to his mother. We ask someone we trust to help us learn what is happening.”

I didn’t agree with River Shoulders about talking to his kid, but that didn’t matter. He wasn’t hiring me to get parenting advice, about which I had no experience to call upon anyway. He needed help looking out for the kid. So I’d do what I could to help him. “Where can I find Irwin?”

“Chicago,” he said. “St. Mark’s Academy for the Gifted and Talented.”

“Boarding school. I know the place.” I finished the Coke and rose. “It will be my pleasure to help the Forest People once again.”

The giant echoed my actions, standing. “Already had your retainer sent to your account. By morning, his mother will have granted you the power of a turnkey.”

It took me a second to translate River Shoulders’ imperfect understanding of mortal society. “Power of attorney,” I corrected him.

“That,” he agreed.

“Give her my best.”

“Will,” he said, and touched his thick fingertips to his massive chest.

I put my fingertips to my heart in reply and nodded up to my client. “I’ll start in the morning.”

It took me most of the rest of the night to get back down to Chicago, go to my apartment, and put on my suit. I’m not a suit guy. For one thing, when you’re NBA sized, you don’t exactly get to buy them off the rack. For another, I just don’t like them—but sometimes they’re a really handy disguise, when I want people to mistake me for someone grave and responsible. So I put on the grey suit with a crisp white shirt and a clip-on tie, and headed down to St. Mark’s.

The academy was an upper-end place in the suburbs north of Chicago, and was filled with the offspring of the city’s luminaries. They had their own small, private security force. They had wrought iron gates and brick walls and ancient trees and ivy. They had multiple buildings on the grounds, like a miniature university campus, and, inevitably, they had an administration building. I started there.

It took me a polite quarter of an hour to get the lady in the front office to pick up the fax granting me power of attorney from Irwin’s mom, the archeologist, who was in the field somewhere in Canada. It included a

description of me, and I produced both my ID and my investigator's license. It took me another half an hour of waiting to be admitted to the office of the dean, Doctor Fabio.

"Doctor Fabio," I said. I fought valiantly not to titter when I did.

Fabio did not offer me a seat. He was a good-looking man of sober middle age, and his eyes told me that he did not approve of me in the least, even though I was wearing the suit.

"Ms. Pounder's son is in our infirmary, receiving care from a highly experienced nurse practitioner and a physician who visits three days a week," Doctor Fabio told me, when I had explained my purpose. "I assure you he is well cared for."

"I'm not the one who needs to be assured of anything," I replied. "His mother is."

"Then your job here is finished," said Fabio.

I shook my head. "I kinda need to see him, Doctor."

"I see no need to disrupt either Irwin's recovery or our academic routine, Mister Dresden," Fabio replied. "Our students receive some of the most intensive instruction in the world. It demands a great deal of focus and drive."

"Kids are resilient," I said. "And I'll be quiet like a mouse. They'll never know I was there."

"I'm sorry," he replied, "but I am not amenable to random investigators wandering the grounds."

I nodded seriously. "Okay. In that case, I'll report to Doctor Pounder that you refused to allow her duly appointed representative to see her son, and that I cannot confirm his well-being. At which point I am confident that she will either radio for a plane to pick her up from her dig site, or else backpack her way out. I think the good doctor will view this with alarm and engage considerable maternal protective instinct." I squinted at Fabio. "Have you actually *met* Doctor Pounder?"

He scowled at me.

"She's about yay tall," I said, putting a hand at the level of my temples. "And she works outdoors for a living. She looks like she could wrestle a Sasquatch." Heh. Among other things.

"Are you threatening me?" Doctor Fabio asked.

I smiled. "I'm telling you that I'm way less of a disruption than Mama Bear will be. She'll be a headache for weeks. Give me half an hour, and

then I'm gone."

Fabio glowered at me.

St. Mark's infirmary was a spotless, well-ordered place, located immediately adjacent to its athletics building. I was walked there by a young man named Steve, who wore a spotless, well-ordered security uniform.

Steve rapped his knuckles on the frame of the open doorway and said, "Visitor to see Mister Pounder."

A young woman who looked entirely too nice for the likes of Doctor Fabio and Steve looked up from a crossword puzzle. She had chestnut-colored hair, rimless glasses, and had a body that could be readily appreciated even beneath her cheerfully patterned scrubs.

"Well," I said. "Hello, nurse."

"I can't think of a sexier first impression than a man quoting Yakko and Wakko Warner," she said, her tone dry.

I sauntered in and offered her my hand. "Me neither. Harry Dresden, PI."

"Jen Gerard. There are some letters that go after, but I used them all on the crossword." She shook my hand and eyed Steve. "Everyone calls me Nurse Jen. The flying monkeys let you in, eh?"

Steve looked professionally neutral. He folded his arms.

Nurse Jen flipped her wrists at him. "Shoo, shoo. If I'm suddenly attacked I'll scream like a girl."

"No visitors without a security presence," Steve said firmly.

"Unless they're richer than a guy in a cheap suit," Nurse Jen said archly. She smiled sweetly at Steve and shut the infirmary door. It all but bumped the end of his nose. She turned back to me and said, "Doctor Pounder sent you?"

"She's at a remote location," I said. "She wanted someone to get eyes on her son and make sure he was okay. And for the record, it wasn't cheap."

Nurse Jen snorted and said, "Yeah, I guess a guy your height doesn't get to shop off the rack, does he." She led me across the first room of the infirmary, which had a first aid station and an examination table, neither of which looked as though they got a lot of use. There were a couple of rooms attached. One was a bathroom. The other held what looked like the full gear of a hospital's intensive care ward, including an automated bed.

Bigfoot Irwin lay asleep on the bed. It had been a few years since I'd seen him, but I recognized him. He was fourteen years old and over six feet tall, filling the length of the bed, and he had the scrawny look of young things that aren't done growing.

Nurse Jen went to his side and shook his shoulder gently. The kid blinked his eyes open and muttered something. Then he looked at me.

"Harry," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"Sup, kid," I said. "I heard you were sick. Your mom asked me to stop by."

He smiled faintly. "Yeah. This is what I get for staying in Chicago instead of going up to British Columbia with her."

"And think of all the Spam you missed eating."

Irwin snorted, closed his eyes, and said, "Tell her I'm fine. Just need to rest." Then he apparently started doing exactly that.

Nurse Jen eased silently out of the room and herded me gently away. Then she spread her hands. "He's been like that. Sleeping maybe twenty hours a day."

"Is that normal for mono?" I asked.

"Not so much," Nurse Jen said. She shook her head. "Though it's not completely unheard of. That's just a preliminary diagnosis based on his symptoms. He needs some lab work to be sure."

"Fabio isn't allowing it," I said.

She wagged a hand. "He isn't paying for it. The state of the economy, the school's earnings last quarter, et cetera. And the doctor was sure it was mono."

"You didn't tell his mom about that?" I asked.

"I never spoke to her. Doctor Fabio handles all of the communication with the parents. Gives it that personal touch. Besides. I'm just the nurse practitioner. The official physician said mono, so behold, it is mono."

I grunted. "Is the boy in danger?"

She shook her head. "If I thought that, to hell with Fabio and the winged monkeys. I'd drive the kid to a hospital myself. But just because he isn't in danger now doesn't mean he won't be if nothing is done. It's probably mono. But."

"But you don't take chances with a kid's health," I said.

She folded her arms. "Exactly. Especially when his mother is so far away. There's an issue of trust, here."

I nodded. Then I said, “How invasive are the tests?”

“Blood samples. Fairly straightforward.”

I chewed that one over for a moment. Irwin’s blood was unlikely to be exactly the same as human blood, though who knew how intensively they would have to test it to realize that. Scions of mortal and supernatural pairings had created no enormous splash in the scientific community, and they’d been around for as long as humanity itself, which suggested that any differences weren’t easy to spot. It seemed like a reasonable risk to take, all things considered, especially if River Shoulders was maybe wrong about Irwin’s immunity to disease.

And besides. I needed some time alone to work.

“Do the tests, on my authority. Assuming the kid is willing, I mean.”

Nurse Jen frowned as I began to speak, then nodded at the second sentence. “Okay.”

Nurse Jen woke up Irwin long enough to explain the tests, make sure he was okay with them, and take a couple of little vials of blood from his arm. She left to take the vials to a nearby lab and left me sitting with Irwin.

“How’s life, kid?” I asked him. “Any more bully problems?”

Irwin snorted weakly. “No, not really. Though, they don’t use their fists for that, here. And there’s a lot more of them.”

“That’s what they call civilization,” I said. “It’s still better than the other way.”

“One thing’s the same. You show them you aren’t afraid, they leave you alone.”

“They do,” I said. “Coward’s a coward, whether he’s throwing punches or words.”

Irwin smiled and closed his eyes again.

I gave the kid a few minutes to be sound asleep before I got to work.

River Shoulders hadn’t asked for my help because I was the only decent person in Chicago. The last time Irwin had problems, they’d had their roots in the supernatural side of reality. Clearly, the giant thought that this problem was similar, and he was smarter than the vast majority of human beings, including me. I’d be a fool to discount his concerns. I didn’t think there was anything more troublesome than a childhood illness at hand, but I was going to cover my bases. That’s what being professional means.

I'd brought what I needed in the pockets of my suit. I took out a small baggie of powdered quartz crystal and a piece of paper inscribed with runes written in ink infused with the same powder and folded into a fan. I stood over Irwin and took a moment to focus my thoughts, both upon the spell I was about to work and upon the physical coordination it would require.

I took a deep breath, then flicked the packet of quartz dust into the air at the same time I swept the rune-inscribed fan through a strong arc, released my will, and murmured, "*Optio*."

Light kindled in the spreading cloud of fine dust, a flickering glow that spread with the cloud, sparkling through the full spectrum of visible colors in steady, pulsing waves. It was beautiful magic, which was rare for me. I mean, explosions and lightning bolts and so on were pretty standard fare. This kind of gentle, interrogative spell? It was a treat to have a reason to use it.

As the cloud of dust settled gently over the sleeping boy, the colors began to swirl as the spell interacted with his aura, the energy of life that surrounds all living things. Irwin's aura was bloody strong, standing out several inches farther from his body than on most humans. I was a full-blown wizard, and a strong one, and my aura wasn't any more powerful. That would be his father's blood, then. The Forest People were in possession of potent magic, which was one reason no one ever seemed to get a decent look at one of them. Irwin had begun to develop a reservoir of energy to rival that of anyone on the White Council of wizardry.

That was likely the explanation for Irwin's supposed immunity to disease—the aura of life around him was simply too strong to be overwhelmed by a mundane germ or virus. Supported by that kind of energy, his body's immune system would simply whale on any invaders. It probably also explained Irwin's size, his growing body drawing upon the raw power of his aura to optimize whatever growth potential was in his mixed genes. Thinking about it, it might even explain the length of River Shoulders' body hair, which just goes to show that no supernatural ability is perfect.

Oh, and as the dust settled against Irwin's body, it revealed threads of black sorcery laced throughout his aura, pulsing and throbbing with a disturbing, seething energy.

I nearly fell out of my chair in sheer surprise.

"Oh no," I muttered. "The kid couldn't just have gotten mono. That would be way too easy."

I called up a short, gentle wind to scatter the quartz dust from Bigfoot Irwin's covers and pajamas, and then sat back for a moment to think.

The kid had been hit with black magic. Not only that, but it had been done often enough that it had left track marks in his aura. Some of those threads of dark sorcery were fresh ones, probably inflicted at some point during the previous night.

Most actions of magic aren't any more terribly mysterious or complicated than physical actions. In fact, a lot of what happens in magic can be described by basic concepts of physics. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, for example—but it *can* be moved. The seething aura of life around the young scion represented a significant force of energy.

A very significant source.

Someone had been siphoning energy off of Bigfoot Irwin. The incredible vital aura around the kid now was, I realized, only a fraction of what it *should* have been. Someone had been draining the kid of that energy and using it for something else. A vampire of some kind? Maybe. The White Court of Vampires drained the life-energy from their victims, though they mostly did it through physical contact, mostly sexual congress, and there would be really limited opportunity for that sort of thing in a strictly monitored coed boarding school. Irwin had been attacked both frequently and regularly, to have his aura be so mangled.

I could sweep the place for a vampire. Maybe. They were not easy to spot. I couldn't discount a vamp completely, because they were definitely one of the usual suspects, but had it been one of the White Court after the kid, his aura would have been more damaged in certain areas than others. Instead, his aura had been equally diminished all around. That would indicate, if not conclusively prove, some kind of attack that was entirely nonphysical.

I settled back in my chair to wait, watching Bigfoot Irwin sleep. I'd stay alert for any further attack, at least until Nurse Jen got back.

River Shoulders was right. This wasn't illness. Someone was killing the kid very, very slowly.

I wasn't going to leave him alone.

Nurse Jen came back in a little less than two hours. She looked at me with her eyebrows raised and said, "You're still here."

“Looks like,” I said. “What was I supposed to do?”

“Leave me a number to call with the results,” she said.

I winked at her. “If it makes you feel any better, I can still do that.”

“I’m taking a break from dating cartoon characters and the children who love them.” She held up the envelope and said, “It’s mono.”

I blinked. “It is?”

She nodded and sighed. “Definitely. An acute case, apparently, but it’s mono.”

I nodded slowly, thinking. It might make sense, if Irwin’s immune system had come to rely upon the energy of his aura. The attacks had diminished his aura, which had in turn diminished his body’s capacity to resist disease. Instead of fighting off an illness when exposed, his weakened condition had resulted in an infection—and it was entirely possible that his body had never had any practice in fighting off something that had taken hold.

Nurse Jen tilted her head to one side and said, “What are you thinking?”

“How bad is it?” I asked her. “Does he need to go to a hospital?”

“He’s in one,” she said. “Small, but we have everything here that you’d find at a hospital, short of a ventilator. As long as his condition doesn’t get any worse, he’ll be fine.”

Except that he wouldn’t be fine. If the drain on his life-energy kept up, he might never have the strength he’d need to fight off this disease—and every other germ that happened to wander by.

I was thinking that the boy was defenseless—and I was the only one standing between Bigfoot Irwin and whatever was killing him.

I looked at Nurse Jen and said, “I need to use a phone.”

“How serious?” Doctor Pounder asked. Her voice was scratchy. She was speaking to me over a HAM radio from somewhere in the wilds of unsettled Canada, and was shouting to make herself heard over the static and the patch between the radio and the phone.

“Potentially very serious,” I half-shouted back. “I think you need to come here immediately!”

“He’s that ill?” she asked.

“Yeah, Doc,” I replied. “There could be complications, and I don’t think he should be alone.”

"I'm on the way. There's weather coming in. It might be tomorrow or the next day."

"Understood," I said. "I'll stay with him until then."

"You're a good man, Dresden," she said. "Thank you. I'll move as fast as I can. Pounder, out."

I hung up the phone and Nurse Jen stared at me with her mouth open. "What the hell are you doing?"

"My job," I replied calmly.

"The boy is going to be fine," Jen said. "He's not feeling great, but he'll be better soon enough. I told you, it's mono."

"There's more going on than that," I said.

"Oh?" Jen asked. "Like what?"

Explaining would just convince her I was a lunatic. "I'm not entirely at liberty to say. Doctor Pounder can explain when she arrives."

"If there's a health concern, I need to know about it now." She folded her arms. "Otherwise, maybe I should let the winged monkeys know that you're a problem."

"I told his mother I would stay with him."

"You told his mother a lot of things."

"What happened to not taking chances?"

"I'm thinking I'll start with you."

I felt tired. I needed sleep. I inhaled and exhaled slowly.

"Nurse," I said. "I care about the kid, too. I don't dispute your medical knowledge or authority over him. I just want to stay close to him until his mom gets here. That's why I was hired."

Nurse Jen eyed me askance. "What do you mean, it's more than mono?"

I folded my arms. "Um. Irwin is a nice guy. Would you agree with that?"

"Sure, he's a great kid. A real sweetheart, thoughtful."

I nodded. "And he has a tendency to attract the attention of . . . how do I put this?"

"Complete assholes?" Nurse Jen suggested.

"Exactly," I said. "People who mistake kindness for weakness."

She frowned. "Are you suggesting that his sickness is the result of a deliberate action?"

"I'm saying that I don't know that it isn't," I said. "And until I know, one way or another, I'm sticking close to the kid until the Doc gets here."

She continued looking skeptical. “You won’t if I don’t think you should. I don’t care how much paperwork you have supporting you. If I start yelling, the winged monkeys will carry you right out to the street.”

“They’d try,” I said calmly.

She blinked at me. “You’re a big guy. But you aren’t that big.”

“You might be surprised,” I said. I leaned forward and said, very quietly, “I’m not. Leaving. The kid.”

Nurse Jen’s expression changed slowly, from skepticism to something very thoughtful. “You mean that, don’t you.”

“Every word.”

She nodded. Then she called, “Steve.”

The security guard lumbered into the room from the hall outside.

“Mister Dresden will be staying with Mister Pounder for a little while. Could you please ask the cafeteria to send over two dinner plates instead of one?”

Steve frowned, maybe trying to remember how to count all the way to two. Then he glowered at me, muttered a surly affirmative, and left, speaking quietly into his radio as he went.

“Thank you,” I said. “For the food.”

“You’re lying to me,” she said levelly. “Aren’t you.”

“I’m not telling you the whole truth,” I said. “Subtle difference.”

“Semantic difference,” she said.

“But you’re letting me stay anyway,” I noted. “Why?”

She studied my face for a moment. Then she said, “I believe that you want to take care of Irwin.”

The food was very good—nothing like the school cafeterias I remembered. Of course, I went to public school. Irwin woke up long enough to devour a trayful of food, and some of mine. He went to the bathroom, walking unsteadily, and then dropped back into an exhausted slumber. Nurse Jen stayed near, checking him frequently, taking his temperature in his ear every hour so that she didn’t need to waken him.

I wanted to sleep, but I didn’t need it yet. I might not have had the greatest academic experience, in childhood, but the other things I’d been required to learn had made me more ready for the eat-or-be-eaten portions of life than just about anyone. My record for going without sleep was just under six days, but I was pretty sure I could go longer if I had to. I could

have napped in my chair, but I didn't want to take the chance that some kind of attack might happen while I was being lazy.

So I sat by Bigfoot Irwin and watched the shadows lengthen and swell into night.

The attack came just after nine o'clock.

Nurse Jen was taking Irwin's temperature again when I felt the sudden surge of cold, somehow oily energy flood the room.

Irwin took a sudden, shallow breath, and his face became very pale. Nurse Jen frowned at the digital thermometer she had in his ear. It suddenly emitted a series of beeping, wailing noises, and she jerked it free of Irwin just as a bunch of sparks drizzled from its battery casing. She dropped it to the floor, where it lay trailing a thin wisp of smoke.

"What the hell?" Nurse Jen demanded.

I rose to my feet, looking around the room. "Use a mercury thermometer next time," I said. I didn't have much in the way of magical gear on me, but I wasn't going to need any for this. I could feel the presence of the dark, dangerous magic, radiating through the room like the heat from a nearby fire.

Nurse Jen had pressed a stethoscope against Irwin's chest, listening for a moment, while I went to the opposite side of the bed and waved my hand through the air over the bed with my eyes closed, trying to orient upon the spell attacking Irwin's aura, so that I could backtrack it to its source.

"What are you doing?" Nurse Jen demanded.

"Inexplicable stuff," I said. "How is he?"

"Something isn't right," she said. "I don't think he's getting enough air. It's like an asthma attack." She put the stethoscope down and turned to a nearby closet, ripping out a small oxygen tank. She immediately began hooking up a line to it, attached to one of those nose-and-mouth-covering things, opened the valve, and pressed the cup down over Irwin's nose and mouth.

"Excuse me," I said, squeezing past her in order to wave my hand through the air over that side of the bed. I got a fix on the direction of the spell, and jabbed my forefinger in that direction. "What's that way?"

She blinked and stared at me incredulously. "What?"

"That way," I said, thrusting my finger in the indicated direction several times. "What is over that way?"

She frowned, shook her head a little, and said, “Uh, uh, the cafeteria and administration.”

“Administration, eh?” I said. “Not the dorms?”

“No. They’re the opposite way.”

“You got any lunch ladies that hate Irwin?”

Nurse Jen looked at me like I was a lunatic. “What the hell are you talking about? No, of course not!”

I grunted. This attack clearly wasn’t the work of a vampire, and the destruction of the electronic thermometer indicated the presence of mortal magic. The kids were required to be back in their dorms at this time, so it presumably wasn’t one of them. And if it wasn’t someone in the cafeteria, then it had to be someone in the administration building.

Doctor Fabio had been way too interested in making sure I wasn’t around. If it was Fabio behind the attacks on Irwin, then I could probably expect some interference to be arriving—

The door to the infirmary opened, and Steve and two of his fellow security guards clomped into the room.

—any time now.

“You,” Steve said, pointing a thick finger at me. “It’s after free hours. No visitors on the grounds after nine. You’re gonna have to go.”

I eased back around Nurse Jen and out of the room Irwin was in. “Um,” I said, “let me think about that.”

Steve scowled. He had a very thick neck. So did his two buddies. “Second warning, sir. You are now trespassing on private property. If you do not leave immediately, the police will be summoned and you will be detained until their arrival.”

“Shouldn’t you be out making sure the boys aren’t sneaking over to the girls’ dorms and vice versa? Cause I’m thinking that’s really more your speed, Steve.”

Steve’s face got red. “That’s it,” he said. “You are being detained until the police arrive, smartass.”

“Let’s don’t do this,” I said. “Seriously. You guys don’t want to ride this train.”

In answer, Steve snapped his hand out to one side, and one of those collapsible fighting batons extended to its full length and locked. His two friends followed suit.

“Wow,” I said. “Straight to the weapons? Really? Completely inappropriate escalation.” I held up my right hand, palm out. “I’m telling you, fellas. Don’t try it.”

Steve took two quick steps toward me, raising the baton.

I unleashed the will I had been gathering and murmured, “*Forzare.*”

Invisible force lashed out and slammed into Steve like a runaway car made of foam rubber. It lifted him off his feet and tossed him back, between his two buddies, and out the door of the infirmary. He hit the floor and lost a lot of his velocity before fetching up against the opposite wall with an explosion of expelled breath.

“Wah,” I said, Bruce Lee style, and looked at the other two goons. “You boys want a choo-choo ride, too?”

The pair of them looked at me and then at each other, gripping their batons until their knuckles turned white. They hadn’t had a clear view of exactly what had happened to Steve, since his body would have blocked them from it. For all they knew, I’d used some kind of judo on him. The pair of them came to a conclusion somewhere in there—that whatever I had pulled on Steve wouldn’t work on both of them—and they began to rush me.

They thought wrong. I repeated the spell, only with twice the energy.

One of them went out the door, crashing into Steve, who had just been about to regain his feet. My control wasn’t so good without any of my magical implements, though. The second man hit the side of the doorway squarely, and his head made the metal frame ring as it bounced off. The man’s legs went rubbery and he staggered, bleeding copiously from a wound that was up above his hairline.

The second spell was more than the lights could handle, and the fluorescents in the infirmary exploded in showers of sparks and went out. Red-tinged emergency lights clicked on a few seconds later.

I checked around me. Nurse Jen was staring at me with her eyes wide. The wounded guard was on his back, rocking back and forth in obvious pain. The two who had been knocked into the hallway were still on the ground, staring at me in much the same way as Jen, except that Steve was clearly trying to get his radio to work. It wouldn’t. It had folded when the lights did.

I spread my hands and said, to Nurse Jen, “I told them, didn’t I? You heard me. Better take care of that guy.”

Then I scowled, shook my head, and stalked off along the spell's back-trail, toward the administration building.

The doors to the building were locked, which was more the academy's problem than mine. I exercised restraint. I didn't take the doors off their hinges. I only ripped them off of their locks.

The door to Doctor Fabio's office was locked, and though I tried to exercise restraint, I've always had issues with controlling my power—especially when I'm angry. This time, I tore the door off its hinges, slamming it down flat to the floor inside the office as if smashed in by a medieval battering ram.

Doctor Fabio jerked and whirled to face the door with a look of utter astonishment on his face. A cabinet behind his desk which had been closed during my first visit was now open. It was a small, gaudy, but functional shrine, a platform for the working of spells. At the moment, it was illuminated by half a dozen candles spaced out around a Seal of Solomon containing two photos—one of Irwin, and one of Doctor Fabio, bound together with a loop of what looked like dark grey yarn.

I could feel the energy stolen from Irwin coursing into the room, into the shrine. From there, I had no doubt, it was being funneled into Doctor Fabio himself. I could sense the intensity of his presence much more sharply than I had that morning, as if he had somehow become more metaphysically massive, filling up more of the room with his presence.

"Hiya, Doc," I said. "You know, it's a pity this place isn't Saint Mark's Academy for the Resourceful and Talented."

He blinked at me. "Uh. What?"

"Because then the place would be S.M.A.R.T. Instead, you're just S.M.A.G.T."

"What?" he said, clearly confused, outraged, and terrified.

"Let me demonstrate," I said, extending my hand. I funneled my will into it and said, "*Smagt!*"

The exact words you use for a spell aren't important, except that they can't be from a language you're too familiar with. Nonsense words are best, generally speaking. Using "smagt" for a combination of naked force and air magic worked just as well as any other word would have. The energy rushed out of me, into the cabinet shrine, and exploded in a blast of kinetic

energy and wind. Candles and other decorative objects flew everywhere. Shelves cracked and collapsed.

The spell had been linked to the shrine. It unraveled as I disrupted all the precisely aligned objects that had helped direct and focus its energy. One of the objects had been a small glass bottle of black ink. Most of it wound up splattered on the side of Doctor Fabio's face.

He stood with his jaw slack, half of his face covered in black ink, the other half gone so pale that he resembled a Renaissance Venetian masque.

"Y-you . . . you . . ."

"Wizard," I said quietly. "White Council. Heck, Doctor, I'm even a Warden these days."

His face became absolutely bloodless.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "You know us. I'm going to suggest that you answer my questions with extreme cooperation, Doctor. Because we frown on the use of black magic."

"Please," he said, "anything."

"How do you know us?" I asked. The White Council was hardly a secret, but given that most of the world didn't believe in magic, much less wizards, and that the supernatural crowd in general is cautious with sharing information, it was a given that your average Joe would have no idea that the Council even existed—much less that they executed anyone guilty of breaking one of the Laws of Magic.

"V-v-venator," he said. "I was a Venator. One of the Venatori Umbrorum. Retired."

The Hunters in the Shadows. Or of the Shadows, depending on how you read it. They were a boys club made up of the guys who had the savvy to be clued in to the supernatural world, but without the talent it took to be a true wizard. Mostly academic types. They'd been invaluable assets in the White Council's war with the Red Court, gathering information and interfering with our enemy's lines of supply and support. They were old allies of the Council—and any Venator would know the price of violating the Laws.

"A Venator should know better than to dabble in this kind of thing," I said in a very quiet voice. "The answer to this next question could save your life—or end it."

Doctor Fabio licked his lips and nodded, a jerky little motion.

"Why?" I asked him quietly. "Why were you taking essence from the boy?"

“H-he . . . He had so *much*. I didn’t think it would hurt him and I . . .” He cringed back from me as he spoke the last words. “I . . . needed to grow some hair.”

I blinked my eyes slowly. Twice. “Did you say . . . hair?”

“Rogaine didn’t work!” he all but wailed. “And that transplant surgery wasn’t viable for my hair and skin type!” He bowed his head and ran fingertips through his thick head of hair. “Look, see? Look how well it’s come in. But if I don’t maintain it . . .”

“You . . . used black magic. To grow *hair*.”

“I . . .” He looked everywhere but at me. “I tried *everything* else first. I never meant to harm anyone. It never hurt anyone *before*.”

“Irwin’s a little more dependent on his essence than most,” I told him. “You might have killed him.”

Fabio’s eyes widened in terror. “You mean he’s . . . he’s a . . .”

“Let’s just say that his mother is his second scariest parent and leave it at that,” I said. I pointed at his chair and said, “Sit.”

Fabio sat.

“Do you wish to live?”

“Yes. Yes, I don’t want any trouble with the White Council.”

Heavy footsteps came pounding up behind us. Steve and his unbloodied buddy appeared in the doorway, carrying their batons. “Doctor Fabio!” Steve cried.

“Don’t make me trash your guys,” I told Fabio.

“Get out!” Fabio all but screamed at them.

They came to a confused stop. “But . . . sir?”

“Get out, get out!” Fabio screamed. “Tell the police there’s no problem here when they arrive!”

“Sir?”

“Tell them!” Fabio screamed, his voice going up several octaves. “For God’s sake, man! Go!”

Steve, and his buddy, went. They looked bewildered, but they went.

“Thank you,” I said, when they left. No need to play bad cop at this point. If Fabio got any more scared, he might collapse into jelly. “Do you want to live, Doctor?”

He swallowed. He nodded once.

“Then I suggest you alter your hairstyle to complete baldness,” I replied. “Or else learn to accept your receding hairline for what it is—the natural

progression of your life. You will discontinue *all* use of magic from this point forward. And I do mean all. If I catch you with so much as a Ouija board or a deck of Tarot cards, I'm going to make you disappear. Do you get me?"

It was a hollow threat. The guy hadn't broken any of the Laws, technically speaking, since Irwin hadn't died. And I had no intention of turning anyone over to the tender mercies of the Wardens if I could possibly avoid it. But this guy clearly had problems recognizing priorities. If he kept going the way he was, he might slide down into true practice of the black arts. Best to scare him away from that right now.

"I understand," he said in a very meek voice.

"Now," I said. "I'm going to go watch over Irwin. You aren't going to interfere. I'll be staying until his mother arrives."

"Are . . . are you going to tell her what I've done?"

"You bet your ass I am," I said. "And God have mercy on your soul."

Irwin was awake when I got back to the infirmary, and Nurse Jen had just finished stitching closed a cut on the wounded guard's scalp. She'd shaved a big, irregularly shaped section of his hair off to get it done, too, and he looked utterly ridiculous—even more so when she wrapped his entire cranium in bandages to keep the stitches covered.

I went into Irwin's room and said, "How you feeling?"

"Tired," he said. "But better than earlier today."

"Irwin," Nurse Jen said firmly.

"Yes ma'am," Irwin said, and meekly placed the breathing mask over his nose and mouth.

"Your mom's coming to see you," I said.

The kid brightened. "She is? Oh, uh. That's fantastic!" He frowned. "It's not . . . because of me being sick? Her work is very important."

"Maybe a little," I said. "But mostly, I figure it's because she loves you."

Irwin rolled his eyes but he smiled. "Yeah, well. I guess she's okay. Hey, is there anything else to eat?"

Later, after Irwin had eaten (again), he slept.

"His temperature's back down, and his breathing is clear," Nurse Jen said, shaking her head. "I could have sworn we were going to have to get

him to an ICU a few hours ago.”

“Kids,” I said. “They bounce back fast.”

She frowned at Irwin and then at me. Then she said, “It was Fabio, wasn’t it. He was doing something.”

“Something like what?” I asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I just know it . . . feels like something that’s true. He’s the one who didn’t want you here. He’s the one who sent security to run you out just as Irwin got worse.”

“You might be right,” I said. “And you don’t have to worry about it happening again.”

She studied me for a moment. Then she said, simply, “Good.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “That’s one hell of a good sense of intuition you have, nurse.”

She snorted. “I’m still not going out with you.”

“Story of my life,” I said, smiling.

Then I stretched out my legs, settled into my chair, and joined Bigfoot Irwin in dreamland.

JIM BUTCHER

PROVEN GUILTY

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES



A ROC BOOK

ROC

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PROVEN GUILTY

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Chapter One

Blood leaves no stain on a Warden's grey cloak.

I didn't know that until the day I watched Morgan, second in command of the White Council's Wardens, lift his sword over the kneeling form of a young man guilty of the practice of black magic. The boy, sixteen years old at the most, screamed and ranted in Korean underneath his black hood, his mouth spilling hatred and rage, convinced by his youth and power of his own immortality. He never knew it when the blade came down.

Which I guess was a small mercy. Microscopic, really.

His blood flew in a scarlet arc. I wasn't ten feet away. I felt hot droplets strike one cheek, and more blood covered the left side of the cloak in blotches of angry red. The head fell to the ground, and I saw the cloth over it moving, as if the boy's mouth were still screaming imprecations.

The body fell onto its side. One calf muscle twitched spasmodically and then stopped. After maybe five seconds, the head did too.

Morgan stood over the still form for a moment, the bright silver sword of the White Council of Wizards' justice in his hands. Besides him and me, there were a dozen Wardens present, and two members of the Senior Council—the Merlin and my one-time mentor, Ebenezar McCoy.

The covered head stopped its feeble movements. Morgan glanced up at the Merlin and nodded once. The Merlin returned the nod. "May he find peace."

"Peace," the Wardens all replied together.

Except me. I turned my back on them, and made it two steps away before I threw up on the warehouse floor.

I stood there shaking for a moment, until I was sure I was finished, then straightened slowly. I felt a presence draw near me and looked up to see Ebenezar standing there.

He was an old man, bald but for wisps of white hair, short, stocky, his face half covered in a ferocious-looking grey beard. His nose and cheeks and bald scalp were all ruddy, except for a recent, purplish scar on his pate. Though he was centuries old he carried himself with vibrant energy, and his eyes were alert and pensive behind gold-rimmed spectacles. He wore the

formal black robes of a meeting of the Council, along with the deep purple stole of a member of the Senior Council.

“Harry,” he said quietly. “You all right?”

“After that?” I snarled, loudly enough to make sure everyone there heard me. “No one in this damned building should be all right.”

I felt a sudden tension in the air behind me.

“No they shouldn’t,” Ebenezar said. I saw him look back at the other wizards there, his jaw setting stubbornly.

The Merlin came over to us, also in his formal robes and stole. He looked like a wizard should look—tall, long white hair, long white beard, piercing blue eyes, his face seamed with age and wisdom.

Well. With age, anyway.

“Warden Dresden,” he said. He had the sonorous voice of a trained speaker, and spoke English with a high-class British accent. “If you had some evidence that you felt would prove the boy’s innocence, you should have presented it during the trial.”

“I didn’t have anything like that, and you know it,” I replied.

“He was proven guilty,” the Merlin said. “I soulgazed him myself. I examined more than two dozen mortals whose minds he had altered. Three of them might eventually recover their sanity. He forced four others to commit suicide, and had hidden nine corpses from the local authorities, as well. And every one of them was a blood relation.” The Merlin stepped toward me, and the air in the room suddenly felt hot. His eyes flashed with azure anger and his voice rumbled with deep, unyielding power. “The powers he had used had already broken his mind. We did what was necessary.”

I turned and faced the Merlin. I didn’t push out my jaw and try to stare him down. I didn’t put anything belligerent or challenging into my posture. I didn’t show any anger on my face, or slur any disrespect into my tone when I spoke. The past several months had taught me that the Merlin hadn’t gotten his job through an ad on a matchbook. He was, quite simply, the strongest wizard on the planet. And he had talent, skill, and experience to go along with that strength. If I ever came to magical blows with him, there wouldn’t be enough left of me to fill a lunch sack. I did *not* want a fight.

But I didn’t back down, either.

“He was a kid,” I said. “We all have been. He made a mistake. We’ve all done that too.”

The Merlin regarded me with an expression somewhere between irritation and contempt. “You know what the use of black magic can do to a person,” he said. Marvelously subtle shading and emphasis over his words added in a perfectly clear, unspoken thought: *You know it because you’ve done it. Sooner or later, you’ll slip up, and then it will be your turn.* “One use leads to another. And another.”

“That’s what I keep hearing, Merlin,” I answered. “Just say no to black magic. But that boy had no one to tell him the rules, to teach him. If someone had known about his gift and *done* something in time—”

He lifted a hand, and the simple gesture had such absolute authority to it that I stopped to let him speak. “The point you are missing, Warden Dresden,” he said, “is that the boy who made that foolish mistake died long before we discovered the damage he’d done. What was left of him was nothing more nor less than a monster who would have spent his life inflicting horror and death on anyone near him.”

“I *know* that,” I said, and I couldn’t keep the anger and frustration out of my voice. “And I *know* what had to be done. I *know* it was the only measure that could stop him.” I thought I was going to throw up again, and I closed my eyes and leaned on the solid oak length of my carved staff. I got my stomach under control and opened my eyes to face the Merlin. “But it doesn’t change the fact that we’ve just *murdered* a boy who probably never knew enough to understand what was happening to him.”

“Accusing someone else of murder is hardly a stone you are in a position to cast, Warden Dresden.” The Merlin arched a silver brow at me. “Did you not discharge a firearm into the back of the head of a woman you merely *believed* to be the Corpsetaker from a distance of a few feet away, fatally wounding her?”

I swallowed. I sure as hell had, last year. It had been one of the bigger coin tosses of my life. Had I incorrectly judged that a body-transferring wizard known as the Corpsetaker had jumped into the original body of Warden Luccio, I would have murdered an innocent woman and a law-enforcing member of the White Council.

I hadn’t been wrong—but I’d never...never just *killed* anyone before. I’ve killed things in the heat of battle, yes. I’ve killed people by less direct means. But Corpsetaker’s death had been intimate and coldly calculated and not at all indirect. Just me, the gun, and the limp corpse. I could still vividly remember the decision to shoot, the feel of the cold metal in my

hands, the stiff pull of my revolver's trigger, the thunder of the gun's report, and the way the body had settled into a limp bundle of limbs on the ground, the motion somehow too simple for the horrible significance of the event.

I'd killed. Deliberately, rationally ended another's life.

And it still haunted my dreams at night.

I'd had little choice. Given the smallest amount of time, the Corpsetaker could have called up lethal magic, and the best I could have hoped for was a death curse that killed me as I struck down the necromancer. It had been a bad day or two, and I was pretty strung out. Even if I hadn't been, I had a feeling that Corpsetaker could have taken me in a fair fight. So I hadn't given Corpsetaker anything like a fair fight. I shot the necromancer in the back of the head because the Corpsetaker had to be stopped, and I'd had no other option.

I had executed her on suspicion.

No trial. No soulgaze. No judgment from a dispassionate arbiter. Hell, I hadn't even taken the chance to get in a good insult. *Bang. Thump.* One live wizard, one dead bad guy.

I'd done it to prevent future harm to myself and others. It hadn't been the best solution—but it had been the *only* solution. I hadn't hesitated for a heartbeat. I'd done it, no questions, and gone on to face the further perils of that night.

Just like a Warden is supposed to do. Sorta took the wind out of my holier-than-thou sails.

Bottomless blue eyes watched my face and he nodded slowly. "You executed her," the Merlin said quietly. "Because it was necessary."

"That was different," I said.

"Indeed. Your action required far deeper commitment. It was dark, cold, and you were alone. The suspect was a great deal stronger than you. Had you struck and missed, you would have died. Yet you did what had to be done."

"Necessary isn't the same as *right*," I said.

"Perhaps not," he said. "But the Laws of Magic are all that prevent wizards from abusing their power over mortals. There is no room for compromise. You are a Warden now, Dresden. You must focus on your duty to both mortals and the Council."

“Which sometimes means killing children?” This time I didn’t hide the contempt, but there wasn’t much life to it.

“Which means always enforcing the Laws,” the Merlin said, and his eyes bored into mine, flickering with sparks of rigid anger. “It is your duty. Now more than ever.”

I broke the stare first, looking away before anything bad could happen. Ebenezar stood a couple of steps from me, studying my expression.

“Granted that you’ve seen much for a man your age,” the Merlin said, and there was a slight softening in his tone. “But you haven’t seen how horrible such things can become. Not nearly. The Laws exist for a reason. They *must* stand as written.”

I turned my head and stared at the small pool of scarlet on the warehouse floor beside the kid’s corpse. I hadn’t been told his name before they’d ended his life.

“Right,” I said tiredly, and wiped a clean corner of the grey cloak over my blood-sprinkled face. “I can see what they’re written in.”

Chapter Two

I turned my back on them and walked out of the warehouse into Chicago's best impression of Miami. July in the Midwest is rarely less than sultry, but this year had been especially intense when it came to summer heat, and it had rained frequently. The warehouse was a part of the wharves down at the lakeside, and even the chill waters of Lake Michigan were warmer than usual. They filled the air with more than the average water-scent of mud and mildew and eau de dead fishy.

I passed the two grey-cloaked Wardens standing watch outside and exchanged nods with them. Both of them were younger than me, some of the most recent additions to the White Council's military-slash-police organization. As I passed them, I felt the tingling presence of a veil, a spell they were maintaining to conceal the warehouse from any prying eyes. It wasn't much of a veil, by Warden standards, but it was probably better than I could do, and there weren't a whole hell of a lot of Wardens to choose from since the Red Court's successful offensive the previous autumn. Beggars can't be choosers.

I tugged off my robe and my cloak. I was wearing sneakers, khaki shorts, and a red tank top underneath. It didn't make me any cooler to remove the heavy clothes—just marginally less miserable. I walked hurriedly back to my car, a battered old Volkswagen Beetle, its windows rolled down to keep the sun from turning the interior into an oven. It's a jumble of different colors, as my mechanic has replaced damaged portions of the body with parts from junked Bugs, but it started off as a shade of powder blue, and that had earned it the sobriquet of the Blue Beetle.

I heard quick, solid footsteps behind me. "Harry," Ebenezer called.

I threw the robe and cloak into the Beetle's backseat without a word. The car's interior had been stripped to its metal bones a couple of years back, and I had made hurried repairs with cheap lumber and a lot of duct tape. Since then, I'd had a friend redo the inside of the car. It wasn't standard, and it still didn't look pretty, but the comfortable bucket seats were a lot nicer than the wooden crates I'd been using. And I had decent seat belts again.

“Harry,” Ebenezar said again. “Damnation, boy, stop.”

I thought about getting into the car and leaving, but instead stopped until the old wizard approached and shucked off his own formal robes and stole. He wore a white T-shirt beneath denim Levi’s overalls, and heavy leather hiking boots. “There’s something I need to speak to you about.”

I paused and took a second to get some of my emotions under control. Those and my stomach. I didn’t want the embarrassment of a repeat performance. “What is it?”

He stopped a few feet behind me. “The war isn’t going well.”

By which he meant the war of the White Council against the Red Court of vampires. The war had been a whole lot of pussyfooting and fights in back alleys for several years, but last year the vampires had upped the ante. Their assault had been timed to coincide with vicious activity from a traitor within the Council and with the attack of a number of necromancers, outlaw wizards who raised the dead into angry specters and zombies—among a number of other, less savory things.

The vampires had hit the Council. Hard. Before the battle was over, they’d killed nearly two hundred wizards, most of them Wardens. That’s why the Wardens had given me a grey cloak. They needed the help.

Before they’d finished, the vampires killed nearly forty-five thousand men, women, and children who happened to be nearby.

That’s why I’d taken the cloak. That wasn’t the sort of thing I could ignore.

“I’ve read the reports,” I said. “They say that the Venatori Umbrorum and the Fellowship of St. Giles have really pitched in.”

“It’s more than that. If they hadn’t started up an offensive to slow the vamps down, the Red Court would have destroyed the Council months ago.”

I blinked. “They’re doing that much?”

The Venatori Umbrorum and the Fellowship of St. Giles were the White Council’s primary allies in the war with the Red Court. The Venatori were an ancient, secret brotherhood, joined together to fight supernatural darkness wherever they could. Sort of like the Masons, only with more flamethrowers. By and large, they were academic sorts, and though several of the Venatori had various forms of military experience, their true strength lay in utilizing human legal systems and analyzing information brought together from widely dispersed sources.

The Fellowship, though, was a somewhat different story. Not as many of them as there were of the Venatori, but not many of them were merely human. Most of them, so I took it, were those who had been half turned by the vampires. They'd been infested with the dark powers that made the Red Court such a threat, but until they willingly drank another's lifeblood, they never quite stopped being human. It could make them stronger and faster and better able to withstand injury than regular folks, and it granted them a drastically increased life span. Assuming they didn't fall prey to their constant, base desire for blood, or weren't slain in operations against their enemies in the Red Court.

A woman I'd once cared for very much had been taken by a Red Court vampire. In point of fact, I'd kicked off the war when I went and took her back by the most violent means at my disposal. I brought her back, but I didn't save her. She'd been touched by that darkness, and now her life was a battle—partly against the vampires who had done it to her, and partly against the blood-thirst they'd imposed upon her. Now she was a part of the Fellowship, whose members included those like her and, I'd heard, many other people and part-people with no home anywhere else. St. Giles, patron of lepers and outcasts. His Fellowship, while not a full-blown powerhouse like the Council or one of the Vampire Courts, was nonetheless proving to be a surprisingly formidable ally.

"Our allies can't challenge the vampires in face-to-face confrontations," Ebenezar said, nodding. "But they're wreaking havoc on the Red Court's supply chains, intelligence, and support, attacking from the mortal end of things. Red Court infiltrators within human society are unmasked. Humans controlled by the Red Court have been arrested, framed, or killed—or else abducted to be forcibly freed of their addiction. The Fellowship and the Venatori continue to do all in their power to provide information to the Council, which has enabled us to make a number of successful raids against the vampires. The Venatori and the Fellowship haven't appreciably weakened the vampires, but the Red Court has been slowed down. Perhaps enough to give us a fighting chance to recover."

"How's the boot camp coming?" I asked.

"Luccio is confident of her eventual success in replacing our losses," Ebenezar replied.

"Don't see what else I can do to help," I said. "Unless you're wanting someone to go start fathering new wizards."

He stepped closer to me and glanced around. His expression was casual, but he was checking to see if anyone was close enough to overhear. “There’s something you don’t know. The Merlin decided it was not for general knowledge.”

I turned to face him and tilted my head.

“You remember the Red Court’s attack last year,” he said. “That they called up Outsiders and assaulted us within the realm of Faerie itself.”

“Bad move, so I’ve heard. The Faeries are going to take it out of their hides.”

“So we all thought,” the old man said. “In fact, Summer declared war upon the Red Court and began preliminary assaults on them. But Winter hasn’t responded—and Summer hasn’t done much more than secure its borders.”

“Queen Mab didn’t declare war?”

“No.”

I frowned. “Never thought she’d pass up the chance. She’s all about carnage and bloodshed.”

“It surprised us as well,” he said. “So I want to ask a favor of you.”

I eyed him without speaking.

“Find out why,” he said. “You have contacts within the Courts. Find out what’s happening. Find out why the Sidhe haven’t gone to war.”

“What?” I asked. “The Senior Council doesn’t know? Don’t you have an embassy and high-level connections and official channels? Maybe a bright red telephone?”

Ebenezar smiled without much mirth. “The general turbulence of the war has stretched everyone’s intelligence-gathering abilities,” he replied. “Even those in the spiritual realms. There’s another level entirely to the war in the conflict between spiritual spies and emissaries of everyone involved. And our embassy to the Sidhe has been...” He rolled a weathered, strong shoulder in a shrug. “Well. You know them as well as anyone.”

“They’ve been polite, open, spoken with complete honesty, and left you with no idea what is going on,” I guessed.

“Precisely.”

“So the Senior Council is asking me to find out?”

He glanced around again. “Not the Senior Council. Myself. A few others.”

“What others?” I asked.

“People I trust,” he said, and looked at me directly over the rims of his spectacles.

I stared at him for a second and then said in a whisper, “The traitor.”

The vampires of the Red Court had been a little too on top of the game to be merely lucky. Somehow, they had been obtaining vital secrets about the dispositions of the White Council’s forces and their plans. Someone on the inside had been feeding the vampires information, and a lot of wizards had died because of it—particularly during their heaviest attack, last year, in which they’d violated Sidhe territory in pursuit of the fleeing Council. “You think the traitor is someone on the Senior Council.”

“I think we can’t take any chances,” he said quietly. “This isn’t official business. I can’t order you to do it, Harry. I’ll understand if you don’t want to. But there’s no one better for the job—and our allies cannot maintain the current pace of operations for long. Their best weapon has always been secrecy, and their actions have forced them to pay a terrible cost of lives to give us what aid they have.”

I folded my arms over my stomach and said, “We need to help them, sure. But every time I look sideways at Faerie, I get into deeper trouble with them. It’s the last thing I need. If I do this, how—”

Ebenazar’s weight shifted, gravel crunching loudly. I glanced up to see the Merlin and Morgan emerge from the building, speaking quietly and intently.

“I wanted to talk to you,” Ebenazar said, evidently for the benefit of anyone listening. “Make sure Morgan and the other Wardens are treating you square.”

I went along with him. “When they talk to me at all,” I said. “About the only other Warden I ever see is Ramirez. Decent guy. I like him.”

“That says a lot for him.”

“That the Council’s ticking time bomb has a good opinion of him?” I waited for Morgan and the Merlin to leave, but they paused a little way off, still talking. I stared at the gravel for a long time, and then said, much more quietly, “That could have been me in there today. I could have been that kid.”

“It was a long time ago,” Ebenazar said. “You were barely more than a child.”

“So was he.”

Ebenezar's expression became guarded. "I'm sorry you had to see that business."

"Is that why it happened here?" I asked him. "Why come to Chicago for an execution?"

He exhaled slowly. "It's one of the great crossroads of the world, Harry. More air traffic comes through here than anywhere else. It's an enormous port city for shipping of any kind—trucks, trains, ships. That means a lot of ways in and out, a lot of travelers passing through. It makes it difficult for any observers from the Red Court to spot us or report our movements." He gave me a bleak smile. "And then there's the way Chicago seems to be inimical to the health of any vampire who comes here."

"That's a pretty good cover story," I said. "What's the truth?"

Ebenezar sighed and held up his hand in a conciliatory gesture. "It wasn't my idea."

I looked at him for a minute and then said, "The Merlin called the meeting here."

Ebenezar nodded and arched a shaggy grey brow. "Which means...?"

I chewed on my lower lip and scrunched up my eyes. It never helped me think any better, but that was no reason not to keep trying it. "He wanted to send me a message. Kill two birds with one stone."

Ebenezar nodded. "He wanted you stripped of your position as a Warden, but Luccio is still the technical commander of the Wardens, though Morgan commands in the field. She supported you and the rest of the Senior Council overruled him."

"Bet he loved that," I said.

Ebenezar chuckled. "I thought he was having a stroke."

"Joy," I said. "I didn't want the job to begin with."

"I know," he said. "You got rocks and hard places, boy. Not much else."

"So the Merlin figures he'll show me an execution and scare me into toeing the line." I frowned, thinking. "I take it there's no word on the attack last year? No one found with mysterious sums of money dumped into their bank accounts that would incriminate a traitor?"

"Not yet," Ebenezar said.

"Then with the traitor running around loose, all the Merlin has to do is wait for me to screw something up. Then he can call it treason and squish me."

Ebenezar nodded, and I saw the warning in his eyes—another reason to take the job he was offering. “He genuinely believes that you are a threat to the Council. If your behavior confirms his belief, he’ll do whatever is necessary to stop you.”

I snorted. “There was another guy like that once. Name of McCarthy. If the Merlin wants to find a traitor, he’ll find one whether or not one actually exists.”

Ebenezar scowled, a hint of a Scots burr creeping into his voice, as it did anytime he was angry, and he glanced at the Merlin. “Aye. I thought you should know.”

I nodded, still without looking up at him. I hated being bullied into anything, but I didn’t get the vibe that Ebenezar was making an effort to maneuver me into a corner. He was asking a favor. I might well help myself by doing him the favor, but he wasn’t going to bring anything onto my head if I turned him down. It wasn’t his style.

I met his eyes and nodded. “Okay.”

He exhaled slowly and nodded back, silent thanks in his expression. “Oh. One other thing,” he said, and passed me an envelope.

“What’s this?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “The Gatekeeper asked me to give it to you.”

The Gatekeeper. He was the quietest of the wizards on the Senior Council, and even the Merlin showed him plenty of respect. He was taller than me, which is saying something, and he stayed out of most of the partisan politics of the Senior Council, which says even more. He knew things he shouldn’t be able to know—more so than most wizards, I mean—and as far as I could tell, he’d never been anything but straight with me.

I opened the envelope. A single piece of paper was inside. Letters in a precise, flowing hand read:

Dresden,

In the past ten days there have been repeated acts of black magic in Chicago. As the senior Warden in the region, it falls to you to investigate and find those responsible. In my opinion, it is vital that you do so immediately. To my knowledge, no one else is aware of the situation.

Rashid

I rubbed at my eyes. Great. More black magic in Chicago. If it wasn't some raving, psychotic, black-hatted bad guy, it was probably another kid like the one who'd died a few minutes ago. There wasn't a whole lot of in-between.

I was hoping for the murderous madman—sorry, political correctioners; *madperson*. I could deal with those. I'd had practice.

I didn't think I could handle the other.

I put the letter back in the envelope, thinking. This was between the Gatekeeper and me, presumably. He hadn't asked me publicly, or told Ebenezar what was going on, which meant that I was free to decide how to handle this one. If the Merlin knew about this and officially gave me the assignment, he'd make damned sure I didn't have much of a choice in how to handle it—and I'd have to do the whole thing under a microscope.

The Gatekeeper had trusted me to handle whatever was wrong. That was almost worse.

Man.

Sometimes I get tired of being the guy who is supposed to deal with un-deal-withable situations.

I looked up to find Ebenezar squinting at me. The expression made his face a mass of wrinkles.

"What?" I asked.

"You get a haircut or something, Hoss?"

"Uh, nothing new. Why?"

"You look..." The old wizard's voice trailed off thoughtfully. "Different."

My heartbeat sped up a little. As far as I knew, Ebenezar was unaware of the entity who was leasing out the unused portions of my brain, and I wanted to keep it that way. But though he had a reputation for being something of a magical brawler, his specialty the summoning up of primal, destructive forces, he had a lot more on the ball than most of the Council gave him credit for. It was entirely possible that he had sensed something of the fallen angel's presence within me.

"Yeah, well. I've been wearing the cloak of the people I spent most of my adult life resenting," I said. "Between that and being a cripple, I've been off my sleep for almost a year."

"That can do it," Ebenezar said, nodding. "How's the hand?"

I bit back my first harsh response, that it was still maimed and scarred, and that the burns made it look like a badly melted piece of wax sculpture. I'd gone up against a bad guy with a brain a couple of years back, and she'd worked out that my defensive magic was designed to stop kinetic energy—not heat. I found that out the hard way when a couple of her psychotic goons sprayed improvised napalm at me. My shield had stopped the flaming jelly, but the heat had gone right through and dry roasted the hand I'd held out to focus my shield.

I held up my gloved left hand and waggled my thumb and the first two fingers in jerky little motions. The other two fingers didn't move much unless their neighbors pulled them. "Not much feeling in them yet, but I can hold a beer. Or the steering wheel. Doctor's had me playing guitar, trying to move them and use them more."

"Good," Ebenezar said. "Exercise is good for the body, but music is good for the soul."

"Not the way I play it," I said.

Ebenezar grinned wryly, and drew a pocket watch from the front pocket of the overalls. He squinted at it. "Lunchtime," he said. "You hungry?"

There wasn't anything in his tone to indicate it, but I could read the subtext.

Ebenezar had been a mentor to me at a time I'd badly needed it. He'd taught me just about everything I thought was important enough to be worth knowing. He had been unfailingly generous, patient, loyal, and kind to me.

But he had been lying to me the whole time, ignoring the principles he had been teaching me. On the one hand, he taught me about what it meant to be a wizard, about how a wizard's magic comes from his deepest beliefs, about how doing evil with magic was more than simply a crime—it was a mockery of what magic meant, a kind of sacrilege. On the other hand, he'd been the White Council's Blackstaff the whole while—a wizard with a license to kill, to violate the Laws of Magic, to make a mockery of everything noble and good about the power he wielded in the name of political necessity. And he'd done it. Many times.

I had once held the kind of trust and faith in Ebenezar that I had given no one else. I'd built a foundation for my life on what he'd taught me about the use of magic, about right and wrong. But he'd let me down. He'd been

living a lie, and it had been brutally painful to learn about it. Two years later, it still twisted around in my belly, a vague and nauseating unease.

My old teacher was offering me an olive branch, trying to set aside the things that had come between us. I knew that I should go along with him. I knew that he was as human, as fallible, as anyone else. I knew that I should set it aside, mend our fences, and get on with life. It was the smart thing to do. It was the compassionate, responsible thing to do. It was the *right* thing to do.

But I couldn't.

It still hurt too much for me to think straight about it.

I looked up at him. "Death threats in the guise of formal decapitations sort of ruin my appetite."

He nodded at me, accepting the excuse with a patient and steady expression, though I thought I saw regret in his eyes. He lifted a hand in a silent wave and turned away to walk toward a beat-up old Ford truck that had been built during the Great Depression. Second thoughts pressed in. Maybe I should say something. Maybe I should go for a bite to eat with the old man.

My excuse hadn't been untrue, though. There was no way I could eat. I could still feel the droplets of hot blood hitting my face, still see the body lying unnaturally in a pool of blood. My hands started shaking and I closed my eyes, forcing the vivid, bloody memories out of the forefront of my thoughts. Then I got in the car and tried to leave the memories behind me.

The Blue Beetle is no muscle car, but it flung up a respectable amount of gravel as I left.

The streets weren't as bad as they usually were, but it was still hotter than hell, so I rolled down the windows at the first stoplight and tried to think clearly.

Investigate the faeries. Great. That was absolutely guaranteed to get complicated before I got any useful answers. If there was one thing faeries hated doing, it was giving you a straight answer, about anything. Getting plain speech out of one is like pulling out teeth. Your *own* teeth. Through your *nose*.

But Ebenezar was right. I was probably the only one on the Council with acquaintances in both the Summer and Winter Courts of the Sidhe. If anyone on the Council could find out, it was me. Yippee.

And just to keep things interesting, I needed to hunt down some kind of unspecified black magic and put a stop to it. That was what Wardens spent all their time doing, when they weren't fighting a war, and what I'd done two or three times myself, but it wasn't ever pretty. Black magic means a black practitioner of some kind, and they tended to be the sorts of people who were both happy to kill an interfering wizard and able to manage it.

Faeries.

Black magic.

It never rains but it pours.

Chapter Three

Between one heartbeat and the next, the passenger seat of the Blue Beetle was suddenly occupied. I let out a yelp and nearly bounced my car off of a delivery truck. The tires squealed in protest and I started to slide. I turned into it and recovered, but if I'd had another coat of paint on my car I'd have collided with the one next to me. My heart in my throat, I got the car moving smoothly again, and turned to glare at the sudden passenger.

Lasciel, aka the Temptress, aka the Webweaver, apparently some kind of photocopy of the personality of a fallen angel, sat in the passenger seat. She could look like anything she chose, but her most common form was that of a tall, athletic blonde wearing a white Greek-style tunic that fell almost to her knee. She sat with her hands in her lap, staring out the front of the car, smiling very slightly.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I snarled at her. "Are you trying to get me killed?"

"Don't be such a baby," she replied, her tone amused. "No one was harmed."

"No thanks to you," I growled. "Put the seat belt on."

She gave me a level look. "Mortal, I have no physical form. I exist nowhere except within your mind. I am a mental image. An illusion. A hologram only you can see. There is no reason for me to wear my seat belt."

"It's the principle of the thing," I said. "My car, my brain, my rules. Put on the damned seat belt or get lost."

She heaved a sigh. "Very well." She twisted around like anyone would, drawing the seat belt forward around her waist and clicking it. I knew she couldn't have picked up the physical seat belt and done that, so what I was seeing was only an illusion—but it was a convincing one. I would have had to make a serious effort to see that the actual seat belt hadn't moved.

Lasciel looked at me. "Acceptable?"

"Barely," I said, thinking furiously. Lasciel, as she appeared to me now, was a portion of a genuine fallen angel. The real deal was trapped inside an ancient silver denarius, a Roman coin, which was buried under a couple of

feet of concrete in my basement. But in touching the coin, I'd created a kind of outlet for the demon's personality—embodied as an entirely discrete mental entity living right in my own head, presumably in the ninety percent of the brain that humans never use. Or in my case, maybe ninety-five. Lasciel could appear to me, could see what I saw and sense what I sensed, could look through my memories to some degree and, most disturbing, could create illusions that I had to work hard to see through—just as she was now creating the illusion of her physical presence in my car. Her extremely attractive and wholesome-looking and entirely desirable presence. The bitch.

"I thought we had an understanding," I growled. "I don't want you coming to see me unless I call you."

"And I have respected our agreement," she said. "I simply came to remind you that my services and resources are at your disposal, should you need them, and that the whole of my self, currently residing beneath the floor of your laboratory, is likewise prepared to assist you."

"You act like I wanted you there in the first place. If I knew how to erase you from my head without getting killed, I'd do it in a heartbeat," I replied.

"The portion of me that shares your mind is nothing but the shadow of my true self," Lasciel said. "But have a care, mortal. I am. I exist. And I desire to continue to do so."

"Like I said. If I could do it without getting killed," I growled. "In the meanwhile, unless you want me to chain you into a little black closet in my head, get out of my sight."

Her mouth twitched, maybe in irritation, but nothing more than that showed on her face. "As you wish," she said, inclining her head. "But if black magic truly is once more rising within Chicago, you may well have need of every tool at hand. And as you must survive for *me* to survive, I have every reason to aid you."

"A tiny black box," I said. "Without holes in the lid. Smelling like my high school locker room."

Her mouth curled again, an expression of wary amusement. "As you wish, my host."

And she was gone, vanishing back into the undeveloped vaults of my mind or wherever she went. I shivered, making sure my thoughts were contained, shielded from her perceptions. There was nothing I could do to prevent Lasciel from seeing and hearing everything I did, or from

rummaging randomly in my memories, but I had learned that I could at least veil my active thoughts from her. I did so constantly, in order to prevent her from learning too much, too quickly.

That would only help her reach her goal—that of convincing me to unearth the ancient silver coin buried under my lab and sealed within spells and concrete. Within the coin, the old Roman denarius—one of a collection of thirty—dwelt the whole of the fallen angel, Lasciel.

If I chose to ally myself with her, it would get me all kinds of strength. The power and knowledge of a fallen angel could turn anyone into a deadly and virtually immortal threat—at the low, low cost of one's soul. Once you signed on with one of the literal Hell's Angels, you weren't the only one in the captain's chair anymore. The more you let them help you, the more you surrendered your will to them, and sooner or later it's the fallen angel that's calling the shots.

I'd grabbed the coin a heartbeat before a friend's toddler could reach down for it, and touching its surface had transferred a portion of the personality, the intellect of Lasciel into my head. She helped me survive several nasty days the previous autumn, and her assistance had been invaluable. Which was the problem. I couldn't allow myself to continue relying on her help, because sooner or later, I'd get used to it. And then I'd enjoy it. And at some point, digging up that coin in my basement wouldn't seem like such a bad idea.

All of which meant that I had to stay on my guard against the fallen angel's suggestions. The price may have been hidden, but it was still there. Lasciel wasn't wrong, though, about how dangerous situations involving true black magic could become. I might well find myself in need of help.

I thought about those who had fought beside me before. I thought about my friend Michael, whose kid had been the one about to pick up the coin.

I hadn't seen Michael since then. I hadn't called. He'd called me a couple of times, invited me to Thanksgiving dinner a couple of times, asked if I was all right a couple of times. I had turned down his invitations and cut every phone conversation short. Michael didn't know that I'd picked up one of the Blackened Denarii, taken possession of a token that could arguably make me a member of the Knights of the Blackened Denarius. I'd fought some of the Denarians. I'd killed one of them.

They were monsters of the worst sort, and Michael was a Knight of the Cross. He was one of three people on the face of the earth who had been

chosen to wield a holy sword, an honest-to-Goodness holy sword, each of them with what was supposed to be a nail from the Cross, capital C, worked into the blade. Michael fought dark and evil things. He beat them. He saved children and innocents in danger, and he would stand up to the darkest creatures imaginable without blinking, so strong was his faith that the Almighty would give him strength enough to defeat the darkness before him.

He had no love for his opposites, the Denarians, power-hungry psychopaths as determined to cause and spread pain and suffering as Michael was to contain them.

I never told him about the coin. I didn't want him to know that I was sharing brain space with a demon. I didn't want him to think less of me. Michael had integrity. Most of my adult life, the White Council at large had been sure that I was some kind of monster just waiting for the right time to morph into its true form and start laying waste to everything around me. But Michael had been firmly on my side since the first time we'd met. His unwavering support had made me feel a whole hell of a lot better about my life.

I didn't want him to look at me the way he'd looked at the Denarians we'd fought. So until I got rid of Lasciel's stupid mental sock puppet, I wasn't going to ask him for help.

I would handle this on my own.

I was fairly sure that my day couldn't get much worse.

No sooner had I thought it than there was a horrible crunching sound, and my head snapped back hard against the headrest on the back of the driver's seat. The Beetle shuddered and jounced wildly, and I fought to keep it under control.

You'd *think* I would know better by now.

Chapter Four

I managed to get one wild look around, and it showed me someone in a real battleship of an old Chrysler, dark grey, windows tinted, and then the car slammed into the Beetle again and nearly sent me into a deadly spin. My head snapped to one side and hit the window, and I could almost smell the smoldering of my tires as they all slid forward and sideways simultaneously. I felt the car hit the curb, and then bounce up. I wrenched at the steering wheel and the brakes, my body responding to things my stunned brain hadn't caught up to yet. I think I kept it from becoming a total disaster, because instead of spinning off into oncoming traffic or hitting the wall at a sharp angle, I managed to slam the Beetle's passenger-side broadside into the building beside the street. Brick grated on steel, until I came to a halt fifty feet later.

Stars swarmed over my vision and I tried to swat them away so that I could get a look at the Chrysler's plates—but it was gone in a heartbeat. Or at least I think it was. Truth be told, my head was spinning so much that the car could have been doing interpretive dance in a lilac tutu and I might not have noticed.

Sitting there seemed like a really good idea, so I sat. After a while I got the vague notion that I should make sure everyone was all right. I looked at me. No blood, which was positive. I looked blearily around the car. No screaming. No corpses in my rearview mirror. Nothing was on fire. There was broken safety glass everywhere from the passenger-side window, but the rear window had been replaced with a sheet of translucent plastic a while back.

The Beetle, stalwart crusader against the forces of evil and alternative fuels, was still running, though its engine had acquired an odd, moaning wheeze as opposed to the usual surly wheeze. I tried my door. It didn't open. I rolled down my window and hauled myself slowly out of the car. If I could get up the energy to slide across the hood before I got back in, I could audition for *The Dukes of Hazzard*.

"Here in Hazzard County," I drawled to myself, "we don't much cotton to hit-and-run automotive assaults."

It took an unknown number of minutes for the first cop to arrive, a patrolman I recognized named Grayson. Grayson was an older cop, a big man with a big red nose and a comfortable gut, who looked like he could bounce angry drunks or drink them under the table, take your pick. He got out of his car and started asking me questions in a concerned tone of voice. I answered him as best I could, but something between my brain and my mouth had shorted out, and I found him eyeing me and then looking around the inside of the Beetle for open containers before he sat me down on the ground and started routing traffic around. I got to sit down on the curb, which suited me fine. I watched the sidewalk spin around until someone touched my shoulder.

Karrin Murphy, head of Chicago PD's Special Investigations department, looked like someone's cute kid sister. She was maybe a rose petal over five feet tall, had blond hair, blue eyes, a pug nose, and nearly invisible freckles. She was made all of springy muscle; a gymnast's build that did not preclude feminine curves. She was in a white cotton shirt and blue jeans that day, a Cubs ball cap on her head, reflective sunglasses over her eyes.

"Harry?" she asked. "You okay?"

"Uncle Jesse is gonna be awful disappointed that one of Boss Hogg's flunkies banged up the General Lee," I told her, waving at my car.

She stared at me for a moment and then said, "Did you know you have a bruise on the side of your head?"

"Nah," I said. I poked a finger at it. "Do I?"

Murphy sighed and gently pushed my finger down. "Harry, seriously. If you're so loopy you can't talk to me, I need to get you to a hospital."

"Sorry, Murph," I told her. "Been a long day already. I got my bells rung pretty good. I'll be fine in a minute."

She exhaled, and then nodded and sat down on the curb with me. "Mind if I have one of the EMTs look at you? Just to be careful?"

"They'd want to take me to a hospital," I said. "Too dangerous. I could short out someone's life support. And the Reds are watching the hospitals, putting hits on our wounded. I could draw fire onto the patients."

"I know that," she said quietly. "I won't let them take you."

"Oh. Okay, then," I said. An EMT checked me out. He shined a light into my eyes, for which I kicked him lightly in the shins. He muttered at me for a minute, poked me here and there, examined and measured and counted

and so on. Then he shook his head and stood up. "Maybe a mild concussion. He should see a doctor to be safe, Lieutenant."

Murphy nodded, thanked the EMT, and looked pointedly at the ambulance. He sidled away, his expression disapproving.

Murphy sat down with me again. "All right, spill. What happened?"

"Someone in a dark grey Chrysler tried to park in my backseat." I waved a hand, annoyed, as she opened her mouth. "And no. I didn't get the plates. I was too busy considering a career as a crash test dummy."

"You've got the dummy part down," she said. "You into something lately?"

"Not yet," I complained. "I mean, Hell's bells, Murphy. I got told half a freaking hour ago that there's bad juju going down somewhere in Chicago. I haven't even had time to start checking into it, and someone is already trying to make me into a commercial for seat belts and air bags."

"You sure it was deliberate?"

"Yeah. But whoever it was, he wasn't a pro."

"Why do you say that?"

"If he had been, he'd have spun me easy. No idea he was there until he'd hit me. Could have bumped me into a spin before I could have straightened out. Flipped my car a few times. Killed me pretty good." I rubbed at the back of my neck. A nice, full-body ache was already spreading out into my muscles. "Isn't exactly the best place for it, either."

"Attack of opportunity," Murphy said.

"Whassat?"

She smiled a little. "When you weren't expecting the shot, but you see it and take it before the opportunity passes you by."

"Oh. Yeah, probably one of those."

Murphy shook her head. "Look, maybe I should get you to a doctor anyway."

"No," I said. "Really. I'm okay. But I want to get off the street soonest."

Murphy inhaled slowly and then nodded. "I'll take you home."

"Thanks."

Grayson came ambling over to us. "Wrecker's on the way," he said. "What do we got here?"

"Hit and run," Murphy said.

Grayson lifted his eyebrows and eyed me. "Yeah? Looked to me like you got hit a couple of times. On purpose-like."

“For all I know it was an honest accident,” I said.

Grayson nodded. “There’s some clothes in your backseat. Looks like they have blood on them.”

“Leftovers from last Halloween,” I said. “It’s costume stuff. A cloak and robes and such, had fake blood all over them. It looked cheesy as hell.”

Grayson snorted. “You’re worse than my kid. He’s still got some of his football jerseys in his backseat from last fall.”

“He probably has a nicer car.” I glanced up at the Beetle. It was a real mess, and I winced. It wasn’t like the Beetle was a priceless antique or anything, but it was *my* car. I drove it places. I liked it. “In fact, I’m sure it’s a nicer car.”

Grayson let out a wry chuckle. “I need to fill out some papers. You okay to help me fill in the blanks?”

“Sure,” I told him.

“Thanks for the call, Sergeant,” Murphy said.

“*De nada*,” Grayson replied, touching the brim of his cap with a finger. “I’ll get those forms, Dresden, soon as the wrecker gets here.”

“Cool,” I said.

Grayson moved off, and Murphy stared at me steadily for a moment.

“What?” I asked her quietly.

“You lied to him,” she said. “About the clothes and the blood.”

I twitched one shoulder.

“And you did it well. I mean, if I didn’t know you...” She shook her head. “It surprises me about you. That’s all. You’ve always been a terrible liar.”

“Um,” I said. I wasn’t sure how to take that one. “Thank you?”

She let out a wry chuckle. “So what’s the real story?”

“Not here,” I said. “Let’s talk in a bit.”

Murphy studied my face for a second, and her frown deepened. “Harry? What’s wrong?”

The limp, headless body of that nameless young man filled my thoughts. It brought up too many emotions with it, and I felt my throat tighten until I knew I wouldn’t be able to speak. So I shook my head a little and shrugged.

She nodded. “You going to be all right?”

There was a peculiar gentleness in her voice. Murphy had been playing in what amounted to a boys-only league in her work with CPD, and she put off a tough-as-nails aura that made her seem almost as formidable as she

actually was. That exterior almost never varied, at least out in the open, with other police officers nearby. But as she looked at me, there was a quiet, definite, and unashamed vulnerability in her voice.

We've had our differences in the past, but Murphy was one hell of a good friend. I gave her my best lopsided smile. "I'm always all right. More or less."

She reached out and twitched a stray bit of hair from my forehead. "You're a great big girl, Dresden. One little fender bender and you go all emotional and pathetic." Her eyes flickered to the Beetle again, and suddenly burned with a cold blue fire. "Do you know who did this to you?"

"Not yet," I growled as the wrecker arrived. "But you can bet your ass I'm going to find out."

Chapter Five

By the time we got back to my place, my head was starting to run at its normal speed, the better to inform me how much it hurt. I had a nice, deep-down body ache to go along with the bruised skull. The light of the afternoon sun stabbed at my eyes in a cheerfully vicious fashion, and I was glad when I shambled down the steps to my basement apartment, disarmed my magical wards, unlocked the door, and shoved hard at it.

It didn't open. The previous autumn, zombies had torn apart my steel security door and wrecked my apartment. Though I was getting a modest paycheck from the Wardens now, I still didn't have enough money to pay for all the repairs, and I had set out to fix the door on my own. I hadn't framed it very well, but I try to think positive: The new door was arguably even more secure than the old one—now you could barely get the damned thing open even when it wasn't locked.

While I was in home-renovation mode, I put down linoleum in the kitchen, carpet on the living room and bedroom floors, and tile in the bathroom, and let me tell you something.

It isn't as easy as those Time-Life homeowner books make it look.

I had to slam my shoulder against it three or four times, but the door finally groaned and squealed and came open.

"I thought you were going to have a contractor fix that," Murphy said.

"When I get the money."

"I thought you were getting another paycheck now."

I sighed. "Yeah. But the rate of pay was set in 1959, and the Council hasn't given it a cost-of-living increase since. I think it comes up for review in a few more years."

"Wow. That's even slower than City Hall."

"Always thinking positive." I went inside, stepping onto the large wrinkle that had somehow formed in the carpet before the door.

My apartment isn't huge. There's a fairly roomy living room, with a miniature kitchen set in an alcove opposite the door. The door to my tiny bedroom and bathroom is on the right as you come in, with a red-brick fireplace set in the wall beside it. Bookshelves, tapestries, and movie

posters line the cold stone walls. My original *Star Wars* poster had survived the attack, though my library of paperbacks had taken a real beating. Those darned zombies, they always dog-ear the pages and crack the spines the minute they're done oozing foul goop and smashing up furniture.

I have a couple of secondhand sofas, which aren't hard to get cheap, so replacing them wasn't too bad. A pair of comfortable old easy chairs by the fire, a coffee table, and a large mound of grey-and-black fur rounded out the furnishings. There's no electricity, and it's a dim little hole, but it's a dim, *cool* little hole, and it was a relief to get out of the broiling sun.

The small mountain of fur shook itself, and something thudded against the wall beside it as it rose up into the shape of a large, stocky dog covered in a thick shag of grey fur, complete with an almost leonine mane of darker fur around his neck, throat, chest, and upper shoulders. He went to Murphy straightaway, sitting and offering up his right front paw.

Murphy laughed, and grabbed his paw briefly—her fingers couldn't have stretched around the offered limb. “Hiya, Mouse.” She scratched him behind the ears. “When did you teach him that, Harry?”

“I didn't,” I said, stooping to ruffle Mouse's ears as I went past him to the fridge. “Where's Thomas?” I asked the dog.

Mouse made a chuffing sound and looked at the closed door to my bedroom. I stopped to listen for a moment, and heard the faint gurgle of water in the pipes. Thomas was in the shower. I got a Coke out of the fridge and glanced at Murphy. She nodded. I got her one too, and doddered over to the couch to sit down slowly and carefully, my aches and pains complaining at me the whole while. I opened the Coke, drank, and settled back with my eyes closed. Mouse lumbered over to sit down by the couch and lay his massive head on one knee. He pawed at my leg.

“I'm fine,” I told him.

He exhaled through his nose, doggie expression somehow skeptical, and I scratched his ears, to prove it. “Thanks for the ride, Murph.”

“Sure,” she said. She brought out a plastic sack she'd carried in and tossed it on the floor. It held my robe, stole, and cloak, all of them spattered with blood. She walked over to the kitchen sink and started filling it with cold water. “So let's talk.”

I nodded and told her about the Korean kid. While I did that, she put my stole in the sink, then started washing it briskly in the cold water.

“That kid is what wizards mean when they talk about warlocks,” I said. “Someone who has betrayed the purpose of magic. Gone bad, right from the start.”

She waited a moment and then said, in a quiet, dangerous voice, “They killed him here? In Chicago?”

“Yes,” I said. I felt even more tired. “This is one of our safer meeting places, apparently.”

“You saw it?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t stop it?”

“I couldn’t have,” I said. “There were heavyweights there, Murphy. And...” I took a deep breath. “I’m not sure they were completely in the wrong.”

“Like hell they weren’t,” she snarled. “I don’t give a good God damn what the White Council does over in England or South America or wherever they want to hang around flapping their beards. But they came here.”

“Had nothing to do with you,” I said. “Nothing to do with the law, that is. It was internal stuff. They would have done the same to that kid, no matter where they were.”

Her movements became jerky for a moment, and water splashed over the rim of the sink. Then she visibly forced herself to relax, put the stole aside, and went to work on the robe. “Why do you think that?” she asked.

“The kid had gone in for black magic in a big way,” I said. “Mind-control stuff. Robbing people of their free will.”

She regarded me with cool eyes. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“It’s the Fourth Law of Magic,” I said. “You aren’t allowed to control the mind of another human. But...hell, it’s one of the first things a lot of these stupid kids try—the old Jedi mind trick. Sometimes they start with maybe getting homework overlooked by a teacher or convincing their parents to buy them a car. They come into their magic when they’re maybe fifteen or so, and by the time they’re seventeen or eighteen they’ve got a full-grown talent.”

“And that’s bad?”

“A lot of times,” I said. “Think about how men that age are. Can’t go ten seconds without thinking about sex. Sooner or later, if someone doesn’t teach them otherwise, they’ll put the psychic armlock on the head

cheerleader to get a date. And more than a date. And then more girls, or I guess other guys if I'm going to be PC about it. Someone else gets upset about losing a girlfriend or a daughter getting pregnant and the kid tries to fix his mistakes with *more* magic."

"But why does that mandate execution?" Murphy asked.

"It..." I frowned. "Getting into someone's mind like that is difficult and dangerous. And sooner or later, while you're changing them, you start changing yourself, too. You remember Micky Malone?"

Murphy didn't exactly shudder, but her hands stopped moving for a minute. Micky Malone was a retired police officer. A few months after he'd gotten out of the game, an angry and vicious spiritual entity had unleashed a psychic assault on him, and bound him in spells of torment to boot. The attack had transformed a grandfatherly old retired cop into a screaming maniac, totally out of control. I'd done what I could for the poor guy, but it had been really bad.

"I remember," Murphy said quietly.

"When a person gets into someone's head, it inflicts all kinds of damage—sort of like what happened to Micky Malone. But it damages the one doing it, too. It gets easier to bend others as you get more bent. Vicious cycle. And it's dangerous for the victim. Not just because of what might happen as a direct result of suddenly being forced to believe that the warlock is the god-king of the universe. It strains their psyche, and the more uncharacteristically they're made to feel and act, the more it hurts them. Most of the time, it devolves into a total breakdown."

Murphy shivered. "Like those office workers Mavra did it to? And the Renfields?"

A flash of phantom pain went through my maimed hand at the memory. "Exactly like that," I said.

"What can that kind of magic do?" she asked, her voice more subdued.

"Too much. This kid had forced a bunch of people to commit suicide. A bunch more to commit murder. He'd turned a whole gang of people, most of them his family, into his personal slaves."

"My God," Murphy said quietly. "That's hideous."

I nodded. "That's black magic. You get enough of it in you and it changes you. Stains you."

"Isn't there anything else the Council can do?"

“Not when the kid is that far gone. They’ve tried it all,” I said. “Sometimes the warlock seemed to get better, but they all turned back in the end. And more people died. So unless someone on the Council takes personal responsibility for the warlock, they just kill them.”

She thought about that for a moment. Then she asked, “Could you have done that? Taken responsibility for him?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Theoretically, I guess. If I really believed he could be salvaged.”

She pressed her lips together and stared at the sink.

“Murph,” I said, as gently as I knew how. “The law couldn’t handle someone like that. You couldn’t arrest them, contain them, without some serious magic to neutralize their powers. If you tried to bring an angry warlock into holding down at SI, it would get ugly. Worse than the loup-garou.”

“There’s got to be another way,” Murphy said.

“Once a dog goes rabid, you can’t bring him back,” I said. “All you can do is keep him from hurting others. The best solution is prevention. Find the kids displaying serious talent and teach them better from the get-go. But the world population has grown so much in the past century that the White Council can’t possibly identify and reach them all. Especially with this war on. There just aren’t enough of us.”

She tilted her head, staring at me. “Us? That’s the first time I’ve heard you reference the White Council with yourself included in it.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I drank the rest of my Coke. Murphy went on washing for a minute, set the robe aside, and reached for the grey cloak. She dropped it into the sink, frowned, and then held it up. “Look at this,” she said. “The blood came out when it hit the water. All by itself.”

“It’s like that kid never died. Cool,” I said quietly.

Murphy watched me for a moment. “Maybe this is what it feels like for civilians when they see cops doing some of the dirty work. A lot of times they don’t understand what’s happening. They see something they don’t like and it upsets them—because they don’t have the full story, aren’t personally facing the problem, and don’t know how much worse the alternative could be.”

“Maybe,” I agreed.

“It sucks.”

“Sorry.”

She cast me a fleeting smile, but her expression grew serious again when she crossed the room to sit down near me. “Do you really think what they did was necessary?”

God help me, I nodded.

“Is this why the Council was so hard on you for so long? Because they thought you were a warlock about to relapse?”

“Yeah. Except for the part where you’re using the past tense.” I leaned forward, chewing on my lip for a second. “Murph, this is one of those things the cops can’t get involved in. I told you there would be things like this. I don’t like what happened anymore than you do. But please, don’t push this. It won’t help anyone.”

“I can’t ignore a dead body.”

“There won’t be one.”

She shook her head and stared at the Coke for a while more. “All right,” she said. “But if the body shows up or someone reports it, I won’t have any choice.”

“I understand.” I looked around for a change of subject. “So. There’s black magic afoot in Chicago, according to an annoyingly vague letter from the Gatekeeper.”

“Who is he?”

“Wizard. Way mysterious.”

“You believe him?”

“Yeah,” I said. “So we should be on the lookout for killings and strange incidents and so on. The usual.”

“Right,” Murphy said. “I’ll keep an eye out for corpses, weirdos, and monsters.”

The door to the bedroom opened and my half brother Thomas emerged, freshly showered and smelling faintly of cologne. He was right around six feet in height, and was built like the high priest of Bowflex—all lean muscle, sculpted and well formed, not too much of a good thing. He wore a pair of black trousers and black shoes, and was pulling a pale blue T-shirt down over his rippling abs as he came into the room.

Murphy watched him, blue eyes gleaming. Thomas is awfully pretty to look at. He’s also a vampire of the White Court. They didn’t go in for fangs and blood so much as pale skin and supernaturally hot sex, but just because they fed on raw life force rather than blood didn’t make them any less dangerous.

Thomas had worked hard to make sure that he kept his hunger under control, so that when he fed he wouldn't hurt anyone too badly—but I knew it had been a difficult struggle for him, and he carried that strain around with him. It was visible in his expression, and it made all of his movements those of a lean, hungry predator.

"Monsters?" he asked, pulling the shirt down over his head. He smiled pleasantly and said, "Karrin, good afternoon."

"That's Lieutenant Murphy to you, Prettyboy," she shot back, but her face was set in an appreciative smile.

He grinned back at her from under his hair, which even when wet and uncombed was carelessly curling and attractive. "Why, thank you for the compliment," he said. He reached down to scratch Mouse's ears, nodded to me, and seized up his big, black gym bag. "You have some more business come to town, Harry?"

"That's the scuttlebutt," I said. "I haven't had time to look into it yet."

He tilted his head to one side and frowned at me. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Car trouble."

"Uh-huh," he said. He slung the bag's strap over his shoulder. "Look, you need some help, just let me know." He glanced at the clock and said, "Gotta run."

"Sure," I said to his back. He shut the door behind him.

Murphy arched an eyebrow. "That was abrupt. Are you still getting along?"

I grimaced and nodded. "He's . . . I don't know, Murph. He's been very distant lately. And gone almost all of the time. Day and night. He sleeps and eats here, but mostly when I'm at work. And when I do see him, it's always like that—in passing. He's in a hurry to get somewhere."

"Where?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"You're worried about him," she said.

"Yeah. He's usually a lot more tense than this. You know, the whole incubus hunger thing. I'm worried that maybe he's decided appetite control was for the birds."

"Do you think he's hurting anyone?"

"No," I said at once, a little too quickly. I forced myself to calm down and then said, "No, not as such. I don't know. I wish he'd talk to me, but

ever since last fall, he's kept me at arm's length."

"Have you asked him?" Murphy said.

I eyed her. "No."

"Why not?"

"It isn't done that way," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because guys don't do it like that."

"Let me get this straight," Murphy said. "You want him to talk to you, but you won't actually tell him that or ask him any questions. You sit around with the silence and tension and no one says anything."

"That's right," I said.

She stared at me.

"You need a prostate to understand," I said.

She shook her head. "I understand enough." She rose and said, "You're idiots. You should talk to him."

"Maybe," I said.

"Meanwhile, I'll keep my eyes open. If I find anything odd, I'll get in touch."

"Thank you."

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait for sundown," I said.

"Then what?" she asked.

I rubbed at my aching head, feeling a sudden surge of defiance for whoever had run me off the road and whatever black-magicky jerk had decided to mess around with my hometown. "Then I put on my wizard hat and start finding out what's going on."

Chapter Six

Murphy stayed until she was sure I wasn't going to suddenly drop unconscious, but made me promise to call her in a couple of hours to be sure. Mouse escorted her to the door when she left, and Murphy swung it shut with two hands and a grunt of effort in order to make it close snugly into the frame. Her car started, departed.

I prodded my brain with a sharp stick until it figured out my next move. My brain pointed out that I knew the current Summer Knight of the Summer Court, and that the guy owed me some fairly big favors. I'd saved his life when he'd just been a terrified changeling trying not to get swallowed up by an incipient war between Winter and Summer. When everything settled, he was the new Summer Knight, the mortal champion of the Summer Court. It gave him a lot of influence with fully half of the Sidhe realm, and he'd probably know more about what was going on there than any other native of the real world. My brain thought it would be really wonderful if maybe I could make one little phone call to Fix and get all the information I needed about the Sidhe Courts handed to me on a silver platter.

My brain is sometimes overly optimistic, but I indulged it on the off chance that I came up a winner in the investigative lottery.

I reached for the phone. It rang eleven times before someone answered. "Yes?"

"Fix?" I asked.

"Mmmph," answered a rumped-sounding male voice. "Who is this?"

"Harry Dresden."

"Harry!" His voice brightened with immediate, if somewhat sleepy, cheer, which seemed far more appropriate to the Summer Knight of the Sidhe Courts. "Hey, how are you? What's up?"

"That's the question of the day," I said. "I need to talk to you about Summer business."

The sleepiness vanished from his voice. So did the friendliness. "Oh."

"Look, it's nothing big," I started. "I just need to—"

“Harry,” he said, his voice sharp. Fix had never cut me off before. In fact, if you’d asked my professional opinion a year before, I’d have told you he never interrupted anyone in his life. “We can’t talk about this. The line might not be secure.”

“Come on, man,” I said. “No one can monitor the phone line with a spell. It’d burn out in a second.”

“Someone isn’t playing by the old rules anymore, Harry,” he said. “And a phone tap is not a difficult thing to engineer.”

I frowned. “Good point,” I allowed. “Then we need to talk.”

“When?”

“Soonest.”

“Accorded neutral territory,” he responded.

He meant McAnally’s pub. Mac’s place has always been a hangout for the supernatural crowd in Chicago. When the war broke out, someone managed to get it placed on a list of neutral territories where, by the agreements known as the Unseelie Accords, everyone respected the neutrality of the property and was expected to behave in a civil fashion when present. It might not have been a private rendezvous, but it was probably the safest place in town to discuss this kind of thing. “Fine,” I said. “When?”

“I’ve got business tonight. The soonest I can do it is tomorrow. Lunch?”

“Noon,” I replied.

There was a sleepy murmur on the other end of the phone—a woman’s voice.

“Shhhhh,” Fix said. “Sure, Harry. I’ll see you there.”

We hung up, and I regarded the phone with pursed lips. Fix sleeping this late in the day? And with a girl in bed with him, no less. And interrupting wizards without a second thought. He’d come a ways.

Of course, he’d had a lot of exposure to the faeries since the last time I’d seen him. And if he had anything like the power that I’d seen the champions of the Sidhe display before, he’d have had time to get used to his new strength. You can never tell how someone is going to handle power—not until you hand it to them and see what they do with it. Fix had certainly changed.

I got a little twist in my gut that told me I should employ a great deal more than average caution when I spoke to him. I didn’t like the feeling. Before I could think about it for too long, I made myself pick up the phone

and move on with what my brain told me was a reasonable step two—checking around to see if anyone had heard anything about bad juju running around town.

I called several people. Billy the Werewolf, recently married. Mortimer Lindquist, ectomancer. Waldo Butters, medical examiner and composer of the “Quasimodo Polka,” a dozen magical small-timers I knew, plus my ex’s editor at the *Midwestern Arcane*. None of them had heard of anything, and I warned them all to keep an ear to the ground. I even put in a call to the Archive, but all I got was an answering service, and no one returned my call.

I sat and stared at the phone’s base for a moment, the receiver buzzing a dial tone in my gloved left hand.

I hadn’t called Michael, or Father Forthill. I probably should have, working on the basic notion that more help was better help. Then again, if the Home Office wanted Michael on the case, he’d be there regardless of whether or not anyone called him and how many immovable objects stood in the way. I’ve seen it happen often enough to trust that it was true.

It was a good rationalization, but it wasn’t fooling anyone. Not even me. The truth was that I didn’t want to talk to either one of them unless I really, really, really had to.

The dial tone turned into that annoying *buzz-buzz-buzz* of a no-connection signal.

I hung the phone back up, my hand unsteady. Then I got up, reached down to the clumsily trimmed area of carpet that covered the trapdoor set in the apartment’s floor, and pulled it open onto a wooden stepladder that folded out and led down into my laboratory.

The lab is in the subbasement, which is a much better name for it than the basement-basement. It’s little more than a big concrete box with a ladder leading up and out of it. The walls are lined with overflowing white wire shelves, the cheap kind you can get at Wal-Mart. In my lab, they store containers of every kind, from plastic bags to microwave-safe plastic dinnerware to heavy wooden boxes—and even one lead-lined, lead-sealed box where I store a tiny amount of depleted uranium dust. Other books, notebooks, envelopes, paper bags, pencils, and apparently random objects of many kinds crowd each other for space on the shelves—all except for one plain, homemade wooden shelf, which held only candles at either end,

four romance novels, a Victoria's Secret catalog, and a bleached human skull.

A long table ran down the middle of the room, leaving a blank section of floor at the far end kept perfectly clear of any clutter whatsoever. A ring of plain silver was set into the floor—my summoning circle. Underneath it lay a foot and a half or so of concrete, and then another heavy metal box, wrapped with its own little circle of wards and spells. Inside the box was a blackened silver coin.

My left palm, which had been so badly burned except for an outline of skin in the shape of Lasciel's angelic symbol, suddenly itched.

I rubbed it against my leg and ignored it.

My worktable had been crowded with material for most of the time it had been down in my lab. But that no longer was the case.

At that point I felt I owed someone an apology. When Murphy had asked me about the money from the Council, the answer I'd given her was true enough. They'd set the pay rate for Wardens in the fifties—but even the Council wasn't quite hidebound enough to ignore things like standard inflation, and the Warden's paychecks had kept pace through discretionary funding in—my God, I'm starting to sound like part of the establishment.

Long story short. The Wardens have sneaky ways of getting paid more, and the money I was getting from them, while not stellar, was nothing to sneeze at, either. But I hadn't been spending it on things like fixing up my apartment.

I'd been spending it on what was on my worktable.

"Bob," I said, "wake up."

Orangish flames kindled wearily to life inside the open eye sockets of the skull. "Oh for crying out loud," a voice from within complained. "Can't you take a night off? It'll be finished when it's finished, Harry."

"No rest for the wicked, Bob," I said cheerfully. "And that means we can't slack off either, or they'll outwork us."

The skull's voice took on a whiny tone. "But we've been tinkering with that stupid thing every night for six months. You're growing a cowlick and buck teeth, by the way. You keep this up and you'll have to retire to a home for magical geeks and nerds."

"Pish tosh," I said.

"You can't say pish tosh to that," Bob grumped. "You don't even know what it means."

“Sure I do. It means spirits of air should shut up and assist their wizard before he sends them out to patrol for fungus demons again.”

“I get no respect,” Bob sighed. “Okay, okay. What do you want to do now?”

I gestured at the table. “Is it ready?”

“Ready?” Bob said. “It isn’t ever going to be *ready*, Harry. Your subject is fluid, always changing. Your model must change too. If you want it to be as accurate as possible, it’s going to be a headache keeping it up to date.”

“I do, and I know,” I told him. “So talk. Where are we? Is it ready for a test run?”

“Put me in the lake,” Bob said.

I reached up to the shelf obligingly, picked up the skull, and set it down on the eastern edge of the table.

The skull settled down beside the model city of Chicago. I’d built it onto my table, in as much detail as I’d been able to afford with my new paycheck. The skyline rose up more than a foot from the tabletop, models of each building made from cast pewter—also expensive, given I’d had to get each one made individually. Streets made of real asphalt ran between the buildings, lined with streetlights and mailboxes in exacting detail—and all in all, I had the city mapped out to almost two miles from Burnham Harbor in every direction. Detail began to fail toward the outskirts of the model, but as far as I’d been able to, I modeled every building, every road, every waterway, every bridge, and every tree with as much accuracy as I knew how.

I’d also spent months out on the town, collecting bits and pieces from every feature on my map. Bark from trees, usually. Chips of asphalt from the streets. I’d taken a hammer and knocked a chip or two off every building modeled there, and those pieces of the originals had been worked into the structure of their modeled counterparts.

If I’d done it correctly, the model would be of enormous value to my work. I’d be able to use various techniques to do all kinds of things in town—track down lost objects, listen in on conversations happening within the area depicted by the model, follow people through town from the relative safety of my lab—lots of cool stuff. The model would let me send my magic throughout Chicago with a great deal more facility and with a far broader range of applications than I could currently manage.

Of course, if I *hadn’t* done it correctly...

“This map,” Bob said, “is pretty cool. I’d have thought you would have shown it off to someone by now.”

“Nah,” I said. “Tiny model of the city down here in my basement laboratory. Sort of projects more of that evil, psychotic, Lex Luthor vibe than I’d like.”

“Bah,” Bob said. “None of the evil geniuses I ever worked for could have handled something like this.” He paused. “Though some of the psychotics could have, I guess.”

“If that’s meant to be flattering, you need some practice.”

“What am I if not good for your ego, boss?” The skull turned slowly, left to right, candleflame eyes studying the model city—not its physical makeup, I knew, but the miniature ley lines that I’d built into the surface of the table, the courses of magical energy that flowed through the city like blood through the human body.

“It looks...” He made a sound like someone idly sucking a breath through his teeth. “Hey, it looks not bad, Harry. You’ve got a gift for this kind of work. That model of the museum really altered the flow around the stadium into something mostly accurate, speaking thaumaturgically.”

“Is that even a real word?” I asked.

“It should be,” he said with a superior sniff. “Little Chicago might be able to handle something if you want to give it a test run.” The skull spun around to face me. “Tell me that this doesn’t have something to do with the bruises on your face.”

“I’m not sure it does,” I said. “I got word today that the Gatekeeper—”

Bob shivered.

“—thinks that there’s black magic afoot in town, and that I need to do something about it.”

“And you want to try to use Little Chicago to find it?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Do you think it will work?”

“I think that the Wright Brothers tested their new stuff at Kitty Hawk instead of trying it over the Grand Canyon for a reason,” Bob said. “Specifically, because if the plane folded due to flawed design, they might *survive* it at Kitty Hawk.”

“Or maybe they couldn’t afford to travel,” I said. “Besides, how dangerous could it be?”

Bob stared at me for a second. Then he said, “You’ve been pouring energy into this thing every night for six months, Harry, and right now it’s

holding about three hundred times the amount of energy that kinetic ring you wear will contain.”

I blinked. At full power, that ring could almost knock a car onto its side. Three hundred times that kind of energy translated to...well, something I’d rather not experience within the cramped confines of the lab. “It’s got that much in it?”

“Yes, and you haven’t tested it yet. If you’ve screwed up some of the harmonics, it could blow up in your face, worst-case scenario. Best case, you only blow out the project and set yourself back to ground zero.”

“To square one,” I corrected him. “Square one is the beginning of a project. Ground zero is the area immediately under a bomb blast.”

“One may tend to resemble the other,” Bob said sourly.

“I’ll just have to live with the risk,” I said. “That’s the exciting life of a professional wizard and his daring assistant.”

“Oh, please. Assistants get paid.”

In answer, I reached down to a paper bag out of sight below the table and withdrew two paperback romances.

Bob let out a squeaking sound, and his skull jounced and jittered on the blue-painted surface of the table that represented Lake Michigan. “Is that it, is that it?” he squeaked.

“Yes,” I said. “They’re rated ‘Burning Hot’ by some kind of romance society.”

“Lots of sex *and* kink!” Bob caroled. “Gimme!”

I dropped them back into the bag and looked from Bob to Little Chicago.

The skull spun back around. “You know what kind of black magic?” he asked.

“No clue. Just black.”

“Vague, yet unhelpful,” Bob said.

“Annoyingly so.”

“Oh, the Gatekeeper didn’t do it to annoy you,” Bob said. “He did it to prevent any chance of paradox.”

“He...” I blinked. “He what?”

“He got this from hindsight, he had to,” Bob said.

“Hindsight,” I murmured. “You mean he went to the future for this?”

“Well,” Bob hedged. “That would break one of the Laws, so probably not. But he might have sent himself a message from there, or maybe gotten

it from some kind of prognosticating spirit. He might even have developed some ability for that himself. Some wizards do.”

“Meaning what?” I asked.

“Meaning that it’s possible nothing *has* happened, yet. But that he wanted to put you on your guard against something that’s coming in the immediate future.”

“Why not just tell me?” I asked.

Bob sighed. “You just don’t get this, do you?”

“I guess not.”

“Okay. Let’s say he finds out that someone is going to steal your car tomorrow.”

“Heh,” I said bitterly. “Okay, let’s say that.”

“Right. Well, he can’t just call you up and tell you to move your car.”

“Why not?”

“Because if he significantly altered what happened with his knowledge of the future it could cause all sorts of temporal instabilities. It could cause new parallel realities to split off from the point of the alteration, ripple out into multiple alterations he couldn’t predict, or kind of backlash into his consciousness and drive him insane.” Bob glanced at me again. “Which, you know, might not do much to deter you, but other wizards take that kind of thing seriously.”

“Thank you, Bob,” I said. “But I still don’t get why any of those things would happen.”

Bob sighed. “Okay. Temporal studies 101. Let’s say that he hears about your car being stolen. He comes back to warn you, and as a result, you keep your car.”

“Sounds good so far.”

“But if your car never got stolen,” Bob said, “then how did he know to come back and warn you?”

I frowned.

“That’s paradox, and it can have all kinds of nasty backlash. Theory holds that it could even destroy our reality if it happened in a weak enough spot. But that’s never been proven, and never happened. You can tell, on account of how everything keeps existing.”

“Okay,” I said. “So what’s the point in sending the message at all, if it can’t change anything?”

“Oh, it can,” Bob said. “If it’s done subtly enough, indirectly enough, you can get all kinds of things changed. Like, for example, he tells you that your car is going to be stolen. So you move it to a parking garage, where instead of getting stolen by the junkie who was going to shoot you and take the car on the street, you get jacked by a professional who takes the car without hurting you—because by slightly altering the fate of the car, he indirectly alters yours.”

I frowned. “That’s a pretty fine line.”

“Yes, which is why not mucking around with time is one of the Laws,” Bob said. “It’s possible to change the past—but you have to do it indirectly, and if you screw it up you run the risk of Paradox-egeddon.”

“So what you’re saying is that by sending me this warning, he’s indirectly working some other angle completely?”

“I’m saying that the Gatekeeper is usually a hell of a lot more specific about this kind of thing,” Bob said. “All of the Senior Council take black magic seriously. There’s got to be a reason he’s throwing it at you like this. My gut says he’s working from a temporal angle.”

“You don’t have any guts,” I said sourly.

“Your jealousy of my intellect is an ugly, ugly thing, Harry,” Bob said.

I scowled. “Get to the point.”

“Right, boss,” said the skull. “The point is that black magic is very hard to find when you look for it directly. If you try to bring up instances of black magic on your model, like Little Chicago is some kind of evil-juju radar array, it’s probably going to blow up in your face.”

“The Gatekeeper put me on guard against black magic,” I said. “But maybe he’s telling me that so that I can watch for something else. Something black-magic related.”

“Which might be a lot easier to find with your model,” Bob said cheerfully.

“Sure,” I said. “If I had the vaguest idea of what to look for.” I frowned, scowling. “So instead of looking for black magic, we look for the things that go along with black magic.”

“Bingo,” Bob said. “And the more normal the better.”

I pulled out my stool and sat down, frowning. “So, how about we look for corpses? Blood. Fear. Those are pretty standard black wizardry accessories.”

“Pain, too,” Bob said. “They’re into pain.”

“So’s the BDSM community,” I said. “In a city of eight million there are tens of thousands like that.”

“Oh. Good point,” Bob said.

“One would almost think you should have thought of that one,” I gloated. “But for the BDSM crowd, the pain isn’t something they fear. So you just look for the fear instead. Real fear, not movie-theater fear. Terror. And there can’t be a lot of spilled human blood in places with no violent activity, unless someone slips at the hospital or something. Ditto the corpses.” I drummed the fingers of my good hand thoughtfully on the table beside Bob. “Do you think Little Chicago could handle that?”

He considered for a long moment before he said, in a cautious tone, “Maybe one of them. But this will be a very difficult, very long, and very dangerous spell for you, Harry. You’re good for your years, but you still don’t have the kind of fine control you’ll get as you age. It’s going to take all of your focus. And it will take a lot out of you—assuming you can manage it at all.”

I took a deep breath and nodded slowly. “Fine. We treat it as a full-blown ritual, then. Cleansing, meditation, incense, the works.”

“Even if you do everything right,” Bob said, “it might not work. And if Little Chicago turns out to be flawed, it would be very bad for you.”

I nodded slowly, staring at the model city.

There were eight million people in my town. And out of all of them, there were maybe two or three who could stand up to black magic, who had the kind of knowledge and power it took to stop a black wizard. Not only that, but odds were good that I was the only one who could actively find and counter someone before he got the murder-ball rolling. I was also, presumably, the only one who was forewarned.

Maybe it would be better to slow this down. Wait for developments my friends would report to me. Then I could get a better read on the threat, and how to deal with it. I mean, was it worth as much as my life to try this spell, when patience would get me information that was almost as good?

It might not be worth my life, but it would probably cost someone else’s. Black magic isn’t the kind of thing that leaves people whole behind it—and sometimes the victims it kills are the lucky ones. If I didn’t employ the model, I’d have to wait for the bad guys to make the first move.

So I had to do it.

I was tired of looking at corpses and victims.

“Pull together everything you know about this kind of spell, Bob,” I told him quietly. “I’m going to get some food and then we’ll lay out the ritual. I’ll start looking for fear come sundown.”

“Will do,” Bob said, and for once he was serious and didn’t sass me.

Yikes.

I started back up my ladder before I thought about it too much and changed my mind.

Chapter Seven

Ritual magic is not my favorite thing in the whole world. It doesn't matter what I'm trying to accomplish; I still feel sort of silly when it comes time to bathe and then dress myself up in a white robe with a hood, lighting candles and incense, chanting, and mucking around with a small arsenal of candles, wands, rods, liquids, and other props used in ritual magic.

Self-conscious as I might be, though, the props and the process offered an overriding advantage when it came to working with heavy magic—they freed up my attention from the dozens of little details that I would normally be forced to imagine and keep firmly in mind. Most of the time I never gave the proper visualization a second thought. I'd been doing it for so long that it was practically second nature. That was fine for short-term work, where I had to hold my thoughts in perfect balance only for a few seconds, but for a longer spell I would need an exponentially greater amount of focus and concentration. It took someone with a lot more mental discipline than me to cast a spell through a half-hour ritual without help, and while there were probably experienced wizards who could manage it, few bothered to try it when the alternative was usually simpler, safer, and more likely to work.

I rounded up the props I would need for the ritual, with the elements first. A silver cup, which I would fill with wine, for water. A geode the size of my fist, its internal crystals vibrant shades of purple and green, for earth. Fire would be represented by a faerie-made candle, formed from unused beeswax, its wick braided from the hairs of a unicorn's mane. Air would be anchored by a pair of hawk-wing feathers wrought from gold with impossibly fine detail and precision by a band of svartalves whose mortal contact sold examples of their craftsmanship out of a shop in Norway. And for the fifth element, spirit, I would use my mother's silver pentacle amulet.

Other props followed, to engage the senses. Incense for scent and fresh grapes for taste. Tactile forces would depend upon a double-sided three-inch square I'd made from velvet on one side and sandpaper on the other. A rather large, deeply colored opal set within a silver frame reflected back

every color of the rainbow, and would hold down the sight portion of the spell. And when I got rolling I would strike my old tuning fork against the floor for sound.

Mind, body, and heart came last. For mind, I would use an old K-Bar military knife as my ritual *athame*, as I usually did. Fresh droplets of my blood upon a clean white cloth would symbolize my physical body. For heart, I placed several photos of those who were dear to me inside a sack of silver-white silk. My parents, Susan, Murphy, Thomas, Mouse and Mister (my thirty-pound grey tomcat, currently on walkabout), and after a brief hesitation, Michael and his family.

I prepared the ritual circle on my lab floor, carefully sweeping it, mopping it, sweeping it again, then cleansing it with captured rainwater poured from a small, silver ewer. I brought in all the props and laid them out, ready to go.

Then I prepared myself. I lit sandalwood incense and more faerie-candles in the bathroom, started up the shower, then went step by step through a routine of washing, while focusing my mind on the task at hand. The water sluicing over me would drain away any random magical energies, a crucial step in the spell—contaminating the spell's energy with other forces would cause it to fail.

I finished bathing, dried, and slipped into my white robe. Then I knelt on the floor at the head of the stairs down to the lab, closed my eyes, and began meditating. Just as no other energies could be allowed into the ritual, my concentration had to be of similar purity. Random thoughts, worries, fears, and emotions would sabotage the spell. I focused on my breathing, upon stilling my thoughts, and felt my limbs grow a little chill as my heartbeat slowed. Worries of the day, my aches and pains, my thoughts of the future—all had to go. It took a while to get myself in the proper frame of mind, and by the time I was finished it had been dark for two hours and my knees ached somewhere in the background.

I opened my eyes and everything came into a brilliantly sharp focus that discounted the existence of anything except myself, my magic, and the ritual awaiting me. It had been a long, wearying preparation, and I hadn't even started with the magic yet, but if the spell could help me nail the bad guys quicker, the hours of effort would be well worth it.

Silence and focus ruled.

I was ready.

And then the fucking phone rang about a foot from my ear.

It is possible that I made some kind of unmanly noise when I jumped. My posture-numbed legs didn't respond as quickly as I needed them to, and I lurched awkwardly to one side, half falling onto the nearest couch.

"Dammit!" I screamed in sudden frustration. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!"

Mouse looked up from his lazy drowse and tilted his head to one side, ears up and forward.

"What are you looking at?" I snarled.

Mouse's jaw dropped open into a grin, and his tail wagged.

I rubbed my hand at my face while the phone kept on ringing. It had been a while since I'd done any seriously focused magic like that, and granted, I really don't get very many calls, but all the same I should have remembered to unplug the phone. Four hours of preparation gone to waste.

The phone kept ringing, and my head pounded in time with it. I ached. Stupid phone. Stupid car crash. I tried to think positive, because I read somewhere that it's important to do that at times of stress and frustration. Whoever wrote that was probably selling something.

I picked up the phone and growled, "Screw thinking positive," into the handset.

"Um," said a woman's voice. "What did you say?"

"Screw thinking positive!" I half shouted. "What the hell do you want?"

"Well. Maybe I have the wrong number. I was calling to speak to Harry Dresden?"

I frowned, my mind taking in details despite my temper's bid to take over the show. The voice was familiar to me; rich, smooth, adult—but the speaker's speech patterns had an odd hesitancy to them. Her words had an odd, thick edge on them, too. An accent?

"Speaking," I said. "Annoyed as hell, but speaking."

"Oh. Is this a bad time?"

I rubbed at my eyes and choked down a vicious response. "Who is this?"

"Oh," she said, as if the question surprised her. "Harry, it's Molly. Molly Carpenter."

"Ah," I said. I clapped one palm to my face. My friend Michael's oldest daughter. Way to role-model, Harry. You sure do come off like a calm, responsible adult. "Molly, didn't recognize you at first."

"I'm sorry," she said.

The “s” sound was a little bit thick. Had she been drinking? “Not your fault,” I said. Which it hadn’t been. For that matter, the interruption might have been a stroke of luck. If my head was still too scrambled from that afternoon’s automobile hijinks to remember to unplug the phone, I didn’t have any business trying to cast that spell. Probably would have blown my own head off. “What do you need, Molly?”

“Um,” she said, and there was nervous tension in her voice. “I need...I need you to come bail me out.”

“Bail,” I said. “You’re being literal?”

“Yes.”

“You’re in *jail*?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Oh my God,” I said. “Molly, I don’t know if I can do that. You’re sixteen.”

“Seventeen,” she said, with sparks of indignation and another thick “s.”

“Whatever,” I said. “You’re a juvenile. You should call your parents.”

“No!” she said, something near panic in her voice. “Harry, please. I can’t call them.”

“Why not?”

“Because I only get the one call, and I used it to call you.”

“Actually, I don’t think that’s exactly how it works, Molly.” I sighed. “In fact, I’m surprised that...” I frowned, thinking. “You lied about your age.”

“If I hadn’t, Mom and Dad would be here already,” she said. “Harry, please. Look, there’s...there’s a lot of trouble at home right now. I can’t explain it here, but if you’ll come get me, I swear, I’ll tell you all about it.”

I sighed again. “I don’t know, Molly...”

“Please?” she said. “It’s just this once, and I’ll pay you back, and I’ll never ask something like this of you again, I promise.”

Molly had long since earned her PhD in wheedling. She managed to sound vulnerable and hopeful and sad and desperate and sweet all at the same time. I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t need half that much effort to wrap her father around a finger. Her mother, Charity, was probably a different story, though.

I sighed. “Why me?” I asked.

I hadn’t been talking to Molly, but she answered. “I couldn’t think who else to call,” she said. “I need your help.”

“I’ll call your dad. I’ll come down with him.”

“Please, no,” she said quietly, and I didn’t think she was feigning the quiet desperation in her voice. “Please.”

Why fight the inevitable? I’ve always been a sucker for ye olde damsel in distress. Maybe not as big a sucker now as I had been in the past, but the insanity did not seem much less potent than it had always been.

“All right,” I said. “Where?”

She gave me the location of one of the precincts not too far from my apartment.

“I’m coming,” I told her. “And this is the deal: I’ll listen to what you have to say. If I don’t like it, I’m going to your parents.”

“But you don’t—”

“Molly,” I said, and I felt my voice harden. “You’re already asking me for a lot more than I feel comfortable with. I’ll come down there to get you. You tell me what’s up. After that, I make the call, and you abide by it.”

“But—”

“This isn’t a negotiation,” I said. “Do you want my help or not?”

There was a long pause, and she made a frustrated little sound. “All right,” she said. After a beat she hurried to add, “And thank you.”

“Yeah,” I said, and eyed the candles and incense, and thought about all the time I’d thrown away. “I’ll be along within the hour.”

I would have to call a cab. It wasn’t the most heroic way to ride to the rescue, but walkers can’t be choosers. I got up to dress and told Mouse, “I’m a sucker for a pretty face.”

When I came out of the bedroom in clean clothes, Mouse was sitting hopefully by the door. He batted a paw at his leash, which hung over the doorknob.

I snorted and said, “You ain’t pretty, furface.” But I clipped the leash to his collar, and called for a cab.

Chapter Eight

The cabby drove me to the Eighteenth District of the CPD, on Larrabee. The neighborhood around it has seen a couple of better days and thousands of worse ones. The once-infamous Cabrini Green isn't far away, but urban renewal and the efforts of local neighborhood watches, community groups, church congregations from several faiths, and cooperation with the local police department had changed some of Chicago's nastier streets into something resembling actual civilization.

The nasty hadn't left the city, of course—but it had been driven away from what had once been a stronghold of decay and despair. What was left behind wasn't the prettiest section of town, but it bore the quiet, steady signs of a place that had a passing acquaintance with law and order.

Of course, the cynical would point out that Cabrini Green was only a short walk from the Gold Coast, one of the richest areas of the city, and that it was no coincidence that funds had been sent that way by the powers that be through various municipal programs. The cynical would be right, but it didn't change the fact that the people of the area had worked and fought to reclaim their homes from fear, crime, and chaos. On a good day, the neighborhood made you feel like there was hope for us, as a species; that we could drive back the darkness with enough will and faith and help.

That kind of thinking had taken on whole new dimensions for me in the past year or two.

The police station wasn't new, but it was free of graffiti, litter, and shady characters of any kind—at least until I showed up, in jeans and a red T-shirt, bruised and unshaven. I got a weird look from the cabby, who probably didn't get all that many sandalwood-scented fares to drop off there. Mouse presented his head to the cabby while I paid through the driver's window, and got a smile and a polite scratching of the ears in reply.

Mouse has better people skills than me.

I turned to walk up to the station, stubbornly putting my money back in my wallet with my stiff left hand as I walked, and Mouse walked beside me. The hair on the back of my neck suddenly crawled, and I looked up at the reflection in the glass doors as I approached them.

A car had pulled up on the far side of the street behind me, and was stopped directly under a No Parking sign. I saw a vague shadow inside the car, a white sedan I did not recognize and which certainly wasn't the dark grey car that had run me off the road earlier. But my instincts told me I was being tailed by someone. You don't park illegally like that, in front of a police station no less, just because you're bored.

Mouse let out a low rumble of a growl, which made me grow a shade more wary. Mouse rarely made noise at all. When he did, I had begun to think it was because there was some kind of dark presence around—evil magic, hungry vampires, and deadly necromancers had all earned snarls of warning. But he never made a peep when the mailman came by.

So adding it up, someone from the nasty end of my side of the supernatural street was following me around town. Good grief; at least I usually know who I'm pissing off, and why. By the time an investigation gets to the point where I'm being followed, there's usually been at least one crime scene and maybe even a corpse or two.

Mouse growled another warning.

"I see him," I told Mouse quietly. "Easy. Just keep walking."

He fell silent again, and we never broke stride up to the door.

Molly Carpenter appeared and opened the door for us.

The last time I'd seen Molly, she'd been an awkward adolescent, all skinny legs, bright-eyed interest, and hesitation of movement offset by an appealing personal confidence and frequent smiles and laughter. But that had been years ago.

Since then, Molly had gotten all grown up.

She strongly favored her mother, Charity. Both of them were tall for women, only an inch or two under six feet, both of them blond, fair, blue-eyed, and both of them built like the proverbial brick house, somehow managing to combine strength, grace, and beauty that showed as much in their bearing, expression, and movement as it did in their appearance. Charity was a rose wrought of stainless steel. Molly could have been her younger self.

Of course, I doubted Charity had ever worn an outfit like Molly's.

Molly stood facing me in a long, gauzy black skirt, shredded artistically in several places. She wore fishnet tights beneath it, showing more leg and hip than any mother would prefer. The tights, too, were artfully torn in patches to display pale, smooth skin of thigh and calf. She had army-

surplus combat boots on her feet, laced up with neon pink and blue laces. She wore a tight tank top, its fabric white, thin, and strained by the curves of her breasts, and a short black bolero jacket bearing a huge, gaudy button printed with the logo “SPLATTERCON!!!” in dripping red letters. Black leather gloves covered her hands.

But wait, that’s not all.

Her blond hair had been dyed, parti-colored, one half of her head bubblegum pink, the other sky blue, and it had been cut at a uniform length that ended just below her chin and left most of her face covered by a close veil of hair. She wore a lot of makeup; way too much eye liner and mascara, and black lipstick colored her mouth. Bright rings of gold gleamed in both nostrils, her lower lip, and her right eyebrow, and there was a bead of gold in that little dent just under her lower lip. There were miniature barbell-shaped bulges at the tips of her breasts, where the thin fabric emphasized rather than concealed them.

I didn’t want to know what else had been pierced. I know I didn’t, because I told myself that very sternly. I didn’t want to know, even if it was, hell, a little intriguing.

But wait, that’s *still* not all.

She had a tattoo on the left side of her neck in the shape of a slithering serpent, and I could see the barbs and curves of some kind of tribal design flickering out from the neckline of her tank top. Another design, whirling loops and spirals, covered the back of her right hand and vanished up under the sleeve of the jacket.

She watched me with one eyebrow arched, waiting for me to react. Her posture and expression both made the effort to say that she was way too cool to care what I thought, but I could practically taste the uncertainty she was working to hide, and her anxiety.

“Long time, no see,” I said, finally.

“Hello, Harry,” she replied. The words came out a little thick, and I saw more gold flash near the tip of her tongue.

Of course.

“It’s odd,” I said. “From here, it doesn’t look like you’re in jail at all.”

“I know,” she said. She managed to keep her voice mostly steady, but her face and throat colored pink in a guilty flush. She shifted her weight restlessly, and an odd clicking sound came from her mouth. Good grief.

She'd picked up a tic of rattling her tongue piercing against her teeth when she was nervous. "Um. I should apologize, I guess. Uh..."

She floundered. I let her. A long silence made her look more flustered, but I had no intention of politely helping her out of it.

Mouse sat down between me and Molly, watching her intently.

Molly smiled at the dog and reached down to pet him.

Mouse tensed up, and a low rumbling came from his chest. Molly moved her hand toward him again, and my dog's chest suddenly rumbled with a deep and warning growl.

The last time Mouse had growled at anything—for that matter, made much noise at all—it had been a crazed sorcerer who made fair headway toward eviscerating me, and summoned a twenty-foot-long demon cobra to kill my dog. Mouse killed it instead. Then, at my command, Mouse killed the sorcerer, too.

And now he was growling at Molly.

"Be polite," I told him firmly. "She's a friend."

Mouse gave me a look and then fell quiet again. He sat calmly as Molly let him sniff her hand and scratch at his ears, but his wary body language didn't change.

"When did you get a dog?" Molly asked.

Mouse was spooked, though not the way he was when serious bad guys were around. Interesting. I kept my tone neutral. "Couple years ago. His name is Mouse."

"What breed is he?"

"He's a West Highlands Dogasaurus," I said.

"He's huge."

I said nothing, and the girl floundered some more. "I'm sorry," she said, finally. "I lied to you to get you to come down here."

"Really?"

She grimaced. "I'm sorry. I just...I really need your help. I just thought that if I could talk to you in person about it, you might be...I mean..."

I sighed. Regardless of how intriguingly rounded her tight shirt was, she was still a kid. "Call a spade a spade, Molly," I said. "You figured if you could get me to come all the way down here, you'd have a chance to flutter your eyelashes and get me to do whatever it is you really want me to do."

She glanced aside. "It isn't like that."

"It's just like that."

“No,” she began. “I didn’t want this to be a bad thing...”

“You manipulated me. You took advantage of my friendship. How is that *not* a bad thing?” My headache started rising up again. “Give me one reason I shouldn’t turn and walk away right now.”

“Because my friend is in trouble,” she said. “I can’t help him, but you can.”

“What friend?”

“His name is Nelson.”

“In jail?”

“He didn’t do it,” she assured me.

They never did. “He’s your age?” I asked.

“Almost.”

I arched an eyebrow.

“Two years older,” she amended.

“Then tell legal-adult Nelson he should call a bail bondsman.”

“We tried that. They can’t get to him before tomorrow.”

“Then tell him to bite the bullet and spend a night in the lockup or else to call his parents.” I turned to go.

Molly caught my wrist. “He *can’t*,” she said, desperation in her voice. “There’s no one for him to call. He’s an orphan, Harry.”

I stopped walking.

Well, dammit.

I’d been an orphan, too. It hadn’t been fun. I could tell you some stories, but I make it a personal policy not to review them often. They amount to a nightmare that started with my father’s death, followed by years and years of feeling acutely, perpetually alone. Sure, there’s a system in place to care for orphans, but it’s far from perfect and it is, after all, a system. It isn’t a *person* looking out for you. It’s forms and carbon copies and people with names you quickly forget. The lucky kids more or less randomly get tapped by foster parents who genuinely care. But for all the puppies at the pound who don’t get chosen, life turns into one big lesson on how to look out for yourself—because there’s no one in this world who cares enough to do it for you.

It’s a horrible feeling. I don’t care to experience even the faded memory of it—but if I just hear the word “orphan” aloud, that empty fear and quiet pain come rushing back from the darker corners of my mind. For a long time I’d been stupid enough to assume that I could handle everything on

my own. That's vanity, though. Nobody can handle everything by themselves. Sometimes, you need someone's help—even if that help is only giving you a little of their time and attention.

Or bailing you out of jail.

"What's your friend Nelson in for?"

"Reckless endangerment and aggravated assault." She took a breath and said, "It's kind of a long story. But he's a sweet guy, Harry. There isn't a violent bone in his body."

Which emphasized to me just how young Molly really was. There are violent bones in everyone's body, if you look deep enough. About two hundred and six of them. "What about your dad? He saves people all the time."

Molly hesitated for a second, and her cheeks turned pink. "Um. My parents don't like Nelson very much. Especially my dad."

"Ah," I said. "Nelson's *that* kind of friend." Things started adding up. I asked the loaded question. "Why is it so important for him to get out tonight?"

Wait for it.

Molly let go of my wrist. "Because he might be in danger. The weird kind of danger. He needs your help."

And there it was.

Sometimes it's almost as though I'm psychic.

Chapter Nine

Boyfriend Nelson had been arraigned two hours before. His bail had been set at enough money to make me glad that over the past year I had made it a habit to keep a chunk of cash around, just in case I needed it in a hurry. I got the fisheye from a hard-faced office matron as I counted it out in twenties. She counted it, too.

“Thank you,” I said. “It’s a wonderful feeling to be trusted.”

She did not look amused. She pushed some papers at me. “Sign here, please. And here.”

I signed, while Molly hovered nervously in the background holding Mouse’s leash. Then we sat down and waited. Molly fidgeted until they brought her honey-bunny out to sign the last couple of papers before being released.

Boyfriend Nelson wasn’t what I’d expected. He was an inch or two taller than Molly. He had a long, narrow face, and I would have hesitated to touch his cheekbones for fear of slicing my fingers on them. He was thin, but it was that kind of lean, whipcord thinness rather than anything that would denote frailty. He moved well, and I pegged him as a fencer or a martial artist of some other kind. Dark hair fell around his head in an even mop. He wore square-shaped, silver-rimmed spectacles, chinos, and a black T-shirt with another SPLATTERCON!!! logo on it. He looked tired and needed a shave.

The second he was free, he hurried over to Molly and they hugged, speaking quietly to one another. I didn’t listen in. It didn’t seem right to invade their privacy. Besides, body language told me enough. The hug went on a second or two longer than Molly wanted it to. Then, when Nelson bent his head down to kiss her, she gave him a sweet smile, turning her cheek to meet his lips. After that, he got the point. He bit his lower lip a little and stepped back from her, rubbing his hands on his pants as if unsure what else to do with them.

“Save me from awkward relationship melodrama,” I muttered to Mouse under my breath, and got onto a pay phone to call a cab. Being a learned wizardly type I had, of course, discovered the cure for tangling up an

otherwise orderly life with relationship issues: Don't have a relationship. It was better that way.

If I repeated it to myself often enough, I almost believed it.

Molly and boyfriend Nelson walked over to me a minute later. Nelson didn't look up at me when he offered me his hand. "Uh. I guess, thank you."

I shook his hand and squeezed hard enough to hurt a little. Me annoyed alpha male, ungh. "How could I refuse such a polite and straightforward request for help?" I took Mouse's leash from Molly, who looked away, turning pink again.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful," Nelson said, "but I have to get moving now."

"No, you don't," I said.

His weight had already shifted to move into his first step, and he blinked at me. "Excuse me?"

"I just got you out of a cage. Now comes the part where you tell me what happened to you. Then you can go."

His eyes narrowed and his weight shifted again, centering his balance. Definitely a student of martial arts. "Are you threatening me?"

"I'm telling you how it's going to be, kid. So talk."

"And if I don't?" he demanded.

I shrugged. "If you don't, maybe I'll knock your block off."

"I'd like to see you try," he said, more anger in his voice.

"Suit yourself," I said. "But we're in sight of the cop at the entry desk. He probably won't see who threw the first punch. You just got out on bail. You'll go back, probably for assault, committed within two minutes of being freed. There isn't a judge in town who would grant you bail again."

I saw him think about it furiously, which impressed me. A lot of men his age, when angry, wouldn't bother with actual thought. Then he shook his head. "You're bluffing. You'd be arrested too."

"Hell's bells, kid," I said. "When did you fall off the turnip truck? They'll interview me. I'll tell them you threw the first punch. Who do you think they're going to believe? I'll be out in an hour."

Nelson's knuckles popped as he clenched his fists. He stared at me, and then at the building behind him.

"Nelson," Molly urged quietly. "He's trying to help you."

"He's got a hell of a way of showing it," Nelson spat.

“Just balancing the scales a bit,” I said, glancing at Molly. Then I sighed. Nelson was holding on to his pride. He didn’t want to back down in front of Molly.

Insecurity, thy name is teenager.

It wouldn’t kill me to help Nelson save face. “Come on, kid. Give me five minutes to talk to you and I’ll pay your fare back to wherever you’re heading. I’ll throw in some fast food.”

Nelson’s stomach made a gurgling sound and he licked his lips, glancing aside at Molly. The wary focus slid out of his posture and he nodded, brushing his hand back through his hair. He let out a long exhale and said, “Sorry. Just...been a bad day.”

“I had one of those once,” I said. “So talk. How’d you wind up in jail?”

He shook his head. “I’m not sure what actually happened. I was in the bathroom—”

I held up my hand, interrupting him with the gesture. Eat your heart out, Merlin. “What bathroom? Where?”

“At the convention,” he said.

“Convention?” I asked.

“SplatterCon,” Molly offered. She waved a hand at her button and at Nelson’s shirt. “It’s a horror movie convention.”

“There’s a convention for that?”

“There’s a convention for everything,” Nelson said. “This one screens horror movies, invites in directors, special-effects guys, actors. Authors, too. There are discussion panels. Costume contests. Vendors. Fans show up to the convention to get together and meet the industry guests, that kind of thing.”

“Uh-huh. You’re a fan, then?”

“Staff,” he said. “I’m supposed to be in charge of security.”

“Okay,” I said. “Get back to the bathroom.”

“Right,” he said. “Well. I’d had a lot of coffee and potato chips and pretzels and stuff, so I was just sitting in there with the stall door closed.”

“What happened?”

“I heard someone come in,” Nelson said. “The door was really squeaky.” He licked his lips nervously. “And then he started screaming.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Who?”

“Clark Pell,” he said. “He owns the old movie theater next to the hotel. We rented it out for the weekend so we could play our favorites on the big

screen. Nice old guy. Always supports the convention.”

“Why was he screaming?”

Nelson hesitated for a second, clearly uncomfortable. “He...you have to understand that I didn’t actually see anything.”

“Sure,” I said.

“It sounded like a fight. Scuffling sounds. I heard him let out a noise, right? Like someone had startled him.” He shook his head. “That’s when he started screaming.”

“What happened?”

“I jumped up to help him, but...” His cheeks turned red. “You know. I was kind of in the middle of something. It took me a second to get out of the stall.”

“And?”

“And Mr. Pell was there,” he said. “He was unconscious and bleeding. Not real bad. But he looked like he’d taken a real pounding. Broken nose. Maybe his jaw, too. They took him to the hospital.”

I frowned. “Could someone have slipped in or out?”

“No,” Nelson said, and his voice was confident on that point. “That damned door all but screams every time it swings.”

“Could someone have come in at the same time as Pell?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said. “On the same opening of the door. But—”

“I know,” I said. “But they would have had to open the door to leave.” I rubbed at my chin. “Could someone have held the door open?”

“The hall was crowded. You could hear the people when the door was open,” Nelson said. “And there was a cop standing right outside. He was the first one in, in fact.”

I grunted. “And with no other obvious suspects, they blamed you.”

Nelson nodded. “Yes.”

I mused for a moment and then said, “What do you think happened?”

He shook his head, several times, and very firmly. “I don’t know. Someone must have gotten in and out somehow. Maybe there’s an air vent or something.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Maybe that’s it.”

Nelson checked his watch, and swallowed. “Oh, God, I’ve got to get to the airport. I’m supposed to meet Darby in thirty minutes and take him to the hotel.”

“Darby?” I asked.

“Darby Crane,” Molly supplied. “Producer and director of horror films. Guest of honor at SplatterCon.”

“He do any work I might have seen?” I asked.

Molly nodded. “Maybe. Did you ever see *Harvest*? The one with the Scarecrow?”

“Uh,” I said, thinking. “Where it smashes through the wall of the convent and eats the nuns? And the librarian sets it on fire and it burns down the library and himself with it?”

“That’s the one.”

“Heh,” I said. “Not bad. But I’ll take a Corman flick any day.”

“Excuse me,” Nelson said, “but I *really* need to get moving.”

As he spoke, the cab I’d called pulled up to the curb. I checked, and found my shadowy tail still outside, patient and motionless.

Mouse let out another almost subaudible growl.

My shadow wasn’t exactly going out of his way not to be noticed, which meant that he almost certainly wasn’t a hit man. A hired gun would do everything he could to stay invisible, preferably until several hours after I was cold and dead. Of course, he could be trying reverse psychology, I supposed. But that kind of circular reasoning could trigger a paranoia-gasm and drive me loopy fast.

Odds were good he was just supposed to keep an eye on me, whoever he was. Better, then, to keep him in sight, rather than trying to shake him. I was happier knowing where he was than worrying about him being out of sight. I’d play it cool—give him a while to see if I could figure out what he was up to. I nodded to myself, and strode out to the curb, Mouse at my side.

“Okay, kids,” I called over my shoulder. “Get in the cab.”

Mouse and I took the backseat. Molly didn’t give Nelson a chance to choose. She got into the passenger seat in front, and boyfriend Nelson settled into the backseat beside me.

“Which?” I asked him.

“O’Hare.”

I told the driver, and we took off for the airport. I watched my shadow in vague reflections in the windows. The car’s lights came on and followed us all the way out to O’Hare. We got Nelson there in time to meet his B-movie mogul, and he all but leapt from the car. Molly opened her door to follow him.

“Wait,” I said. “Not you.”

She shot me a glance over her shoulder, frowning. "What?"

"Nelson's out of jail and he's talked to me about what happened, and he's in time to meet Darby Crane. I think I pretty much lived up to what I said I would do."

She frowned prettily. "Yes. So?"

"So now it's your turn. Close the door."

She shook her head. "Harry, don't you see that he's in some kind of trouble? And he doesn't believe in..." She glanced at the cabby and back to me. "You know."

"Maybe he is," I said. "Maybe not. I'm going to get over to the convention tonight and see if there's anything supernatural about the assault on Mr. Pell. Right after we get done talking to your parents."

Molly blanched. "What?"

"We had a deal," I said. "And in my judgment, Molly, we need to go see them."

"But..." she sputtered. "It isn't as though I need them to bail me out or anything."

"You should have thought about that before you made the deal," I said.

"I'm not going there," she said, and folded her arms. "I don't want to."

I felt cold stone flow into the features of my face, into the timbre of my voice. "Miss Carpenter. Is there any doubt in your mind—any at all—that I could take you there regardless of what you want to do?"

The change in tone hit her hard. She blinked at me in surprise for a second, lips parted but empty of sound.

"I'm taking you to see them," I said. "Because it's the smart thing to do. The legal thing to do. The right thing to do. You agreed to do it, and by the stars and stones, if you try to weasel out on me I will wrap you in duct tape, box you up, and send you UPS."

She stared at me in utter shock.

"I'm not your mom or your dad, Molly. And these days I'm not a very nice person. You've already abused my friendship tonight, and diverted my attention from work that could have saved lives. People who *really* need my help might get hurt or die because of this stupid stunt." I leaned closer, staring coldly, and she leaned away, declining to make eye contact. "Now buckle the fuck up."

She did.

I gave the cabby the address and closed my eyes. I hadn't seen Michael in...nearly two years. I regretted that. Of course, not seeing Michael meant not seeing Charity either, which I did *not* regret. And now I was going to drive up in a cab with their daughter. Charity was going to like that almost as much as I like cleaning up after Mouse on our walks. In her eyes, my mere presence near her daughter would make me guilty of uncounted (if imaginary) transgressions.

The angelic sigil on my left palm burned and itched furiously. I poked at it through the leather glove, but it didn't help. I'd have to keep the glove on. If Michael saw the sigil, or if he somehow sensed the shadow of Lasciel running around in my head, he might react in a manner similar to his wife's—and that didn't take into consideration a father's desire to protect his... physically matured daughter from any would-be, ah, invaders.

I predicted fireworks of one kind or another. Fun, fun, fun.

Should I survive the conversation, I would then be off to a horror convention, where a supernatural assault might or might not have happened, with a mysterious stranger following me while an unknown would-be assassin ran around loose somewhere, probably practicing his offensive driving skills so that he could polish me off the next time he saw me.

Let the good times roll.

Chapter Ten

I told the cabby to keep the meter running and headed for the Carpenters' front door. Molly remained cool, distant, and untouchably silent all the way over the small lawn. She walked calmly up the steps to the porch. She faced the door calmly—and then broke out into a sweat the moment I rang the bell.

Nice to know I wasn't the only one. I wasn't looking forward to speaking with Michael. As long as I kept the conversation brief and didn't get too close to him, he might not sense the presence of the demon inside me. Things might work out.

My already sore head twinged a little more.

Beside me, Molly rolled her shoulders in a few jerky motions and pushed at her hair in fitful little gestures. She tugged at her well-tattered skirts, and grimaced at her boots. "Can you see if there's any mud on them?"

I paused to consider her for a second. Then I said, "You have two tattoos showing right now, and you probably used a fake ID to get them. Your piercings would set off any metal detector worth the name, and you're featuring them in parts of your anatomy your parents wish you didn't yet realize you had. You're dressed like Frankenhooker, and your hair has been dyed colors I previously thought existed only in cotton candy." I turned to face the door again. "I wouldn't waste time worrying about a little mud on the boots."

In the corner of my eye, Molly swallowed nervously, staring at me until the door opened.

"Molly!" shrieked a little girl's voice. There was a blur of pink cotton pajamas, a happy squeal, and then Molly caught one of her little sisters in her arms in a mutual hug.

"Hiya, hobbit," Molly said, catching the girl by an ankle and dangling her in the air. This elicited screams of delight from the girl. Molly swung her upright again. "How have you been?"

"Daniel is the boss kid now, but he isn't as good as you," the girl said. "He yells lots more. Why is your hair blue?"

"Hey," I said. "It's pink, too."

The girl, a golden-haired moppet of six or seven, noticed me for the first time and promptly buried her face against Molly's neck.

"You remember Hope," Molly said. "Say hello to Mister Dresden."

"My name is Hobbit!" the little girl declared boldly—then lowered her face into the curve of Molly's neck and hid from me. Meanwhile, the house erupted with thudding feet and more shouts. Lights started flicking on upstairs, and the stairwell shuddered as brothers and sisters pounded down it and ran for the front door.

Another pair of girls made it there first, both of them older than Hope. They both assaulted Molly with shrieks and flying hugs. "Bill," the smaller of the pair greeted me, afterward. "You came back to visit."

"My name is Harry, actually," I said. "And I remember you. Amanda, right?"

"I'm Amanda," she allowed cautiously. "But we already have a Harry. That's why you're Bill."

"And this is Alicia," Molly said of the other, a child as gawky and skinny as Molly had been when I first met her. Her hair was darker than the others, trimmed short, and she wore black-rimmed glasses over a serious expression. "She's the next oldest girl. You remember Mister Dresden, don't you, Leech?"

"Don't call me Leech," she said in the patient tone of someone who has said something a million times and plans on saying it a million times more. "Hello, sir," she told me.

"Alicia," I said, nodding.

Evidently the use of her actual name constituted a gesture of partisanship. She gave me a somewhat relieved and conspiratorial smile.

A pair of boys showed up. The oldest might have been almost ready to take a driver's test. The next was balanced precariously between grade school and pimples. Both had Michael's dark hair and solid, sober expression. The younger boy almost threw himself at Molly upon seeing her, but restrained himself to a hello and a hug. The older boy only folded his arms and frowned.

"My brother Matthew," Molly said of the younger. I nodded at him.

"Where have you been?" the oldest boy said. He stood there frowning at Molly for a moment.

"Nice to see you too, Daniel," she replied. "You know Mister Dresden."

He gave me a nod, said to Molly, “I’m not kidding. You just took off. Do you have any idea of how much it messed things up here?”

Molly’s mouth firmed into a line. “You didn’t think I was going to just hang around forever did you?”

“Is it Halloween wherever it is you live?” Daniel demanded. “Look at you. Mom is going to freak out.”

Molly stepped forward and half tossed Hope into Daniel’s chest. “When does she do anything else? Shouldn’t these two be in bed?”

Daniel grimaced as he caught Hope and said, “That’s what I was trying to do before someone interrupted bedtime.” He took Amanda’s hand, and over half-hearted protests took the two youngest girls back into the house.

There was a creak from the upstairs of the house and Alicia thumped Matthew firmly with her elbow. The two vanished as heavy steps descended from the second floor.

Michael Carpenter was almost as tall as me and packed a lot more muscle. He had the kind of face that told anyone who looked that he was a man of honesty and kindness who nonetheless could probably kick the crap out of you if you offered him violence. I wasn’t sure how he managed that. Something about the strength of his jawline, maybe, bespoke the steady power of both body and mind. But as for the kindness, that went all the way down to his soul. You could see it in the warmth of his grey eyes.

He wore khaki pants and a light blue T-shirt. A hard-cased plastic cylinder, doubtless the one he used to transport his sword, hung from a strap over one shoulder. An overnight bag hung over the other, and his hair was damp from the shower. He came down the stairs at the pace of a man with places to be—until he looked up and saw Molly and me standing in the doorway.

He froze in place, a smile of surprised delight illuminating his face as he saw Molly. The overnight bag thumped to the floor as he strode forward and crushed his oldest daughter to his chest in a hug.

“Daddy,” she protested.

“Hush,” he told her. “Let me hug you.”

Her eyes flickered to the case still held against one shoulder, and her expression became tainted with a sudden worry. “When are you going?”

“You just caught me,” he said. “I’m glad.”

She hugged her father back, and closed her eyes. “It’s just a visit,” she said.

He rose from the hug a moment later, studying her face, worry in his eyes. Then he nodded, smiled, and said, "I'm glad anyway." He jerked his head back a moment later, as if the rest of her appearance had only then registered on him, and his eyes widened. "Margaret Katherine Amanda Carpenter," he said, his voice hushed. "God's blood, what have you done to your..." He looked her up and down, gentle dismay on his face. "...your..."

"Self," I suggested. "Yourself."

"Yourself," Michael sighed. He looked Molly up and down again. She was doing that thing where she tried to display how much she didn't care what her daddy thought of her look, and it was almost painfully obvious that she cared a great deal. "Tattoos. The hair wasn't so bad, but..." He shook his head and offered me his hand. "Tell me, Harry. Am I just too old?"

I didn't want to shake Michael's hand. Lasciel's presence in me, even if it wasn't the full-blown version, wasn't something he would miss—not if he made actual physical contact with me. For a couple of years I had been avoiding him with every excuse I had, hoping I could take care of my little demon issue without bothering him about it.

More accurately, I supposed, I had been too ashamed to let him see what had happened. Michael was probably the most honest, decent human being I had ever had the privilege to know. He had always thought well of me. It had been something that had given me comfort in a low spot or two, and I hated the thought of losing his trust and friendship. Lasciel's presence, the collaboration of a literal fallen angel, would destroy that.

But friendship isn't a one-way street. I had brought his daughter back because I had thought it was the right thing to do—and because I thought he'd do the same for someone else in a similar circumstance. I respected him enough to do that. And I respected him too much to lie to him. I had avoided the confrontation long enough.

I shook his hand.

And nothing in his manner or expression changed. Not an ounce.

He hadn't sensed Lasciel's presence or mark.

"Well?" he asked, smiling.

"If you think she looks silly, you're too old," I said after a moment. "I'm moderately ancient by the standards of the younger generation, and I think she only looks a little over the top."

Molly rolled her eyes at us both, her cheeks pink.

“I suppose a good Christian should be willing to turn the other cheek when it comes to matters of fashion,” Michael said.

“Let he who hath never stonewashed his jeans cast the first stone,” I said, nodding.

Michael laughed and gripped my shoulder briefly. “It’s good to see you, Harry.”

“And you,” I said, trying a smile. I glanced at the plastic case on his shoulder. “Business trip?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Where to?”

He smiled. “I’ll know when I get there.”

I shook my head. Michael was entrusted to wield one of the blades of the Knights of the Cross. He was one of only two men in the world who were entrusted with such potent weapons against dark powers. As such, he had a lot of planet to cover. I wasn’t clear exactly how his itinerary was established, but he was often called away from his home and family, apparently summoned to where his strength was most needed.

I don’t go in big for religion—but I believe in the Almighty. I had seen a vast power at work supporting Michael’s actions. Coincidence seemed to go to insane lengths, at times, to make sure he was where he needed to be to help someone in trouble. I had seen that power strike down seriously twisted foes without Michael so much as raising his voice. That power, that faith, had carried him through dangers and battles he had no business surviving, much less winning.

But I hadn’t ever thought too much about how hard it must be for him to leave his home when the Archangels or God or Whoever sent up a flare and called him off to a crisis.

I glanced aside at Molly. She was smiling, but I could see the strain and worry beneath the surface.

Hard on his family, too.

“Haven’t you left?” called a woman’s voice from upstairs. The house creaked again and Michael’s wife appeared at the top of the stairway, saying, “You’ll be—”

Her voice cut off suddenly. I hadn’t ever seen Charity in a red silk kimono before. Like Michael, her hair was damp from the shower. Even wet, it still looked blond. Charity had nice legs, clearly defined muscles in her calves shifting as she stepped to the head of the stairs, and what I could

see of the rest of her looked much the same—strong, fit, healthy. She bore a sleeping child on one hip—my namesake, Harry, the youngest of the bunch. His arms and legs splayed in perfect relaxation, and his head was pillowed on her shoulder. His cheeks were pink with that look very young children get while sleeping.

Blue eyes widened in utter surprise and for just a moment she froze, staring at Molly. She opened her mouth for a second, words hesitating on her tongue. Then her eyes shifted to me and surprise fell to recognition, which was followed by a *mélange* of anger, worry, and fear. She clutched her kimono a little more tightly to her, her mouth working for a second more, then said, “Excuse me for a moment.”

She vanished and reappeared a moment later, sans little Harry, this time covered in a long terrycloth bathrobe, her feet inside fuzzy slippers.

“Molly,” she said quietly, and came down the stairs.

The girl averted her eyes. “Mother.”

“And the wizard,” she said, her mouth hardening into a line. “Of course he’s here.” She tilted her head to one side, her expression hardening further. “Is this who you’ve been with, Molly?”

The air pressure in the room quadrupled, and Molly’s face darkened from pink to scarlet. “So what if it is?” she demanded, defiance making the words ring. “That’s no business of yours.”

I opened my mouth to assure Charity that I had nothing to do with anything (not that it would actually alter the nature of the conversation), but Michael glanced at me and shook his head. I zipped my lips and awaited developments.

“Wrong,” Charity said, her stance belligerent and unyielding. “You are a child and I am your mother. It is precisely my business.”

“But it’s my *life*,” Molly replied.

“Which you clearly lack the discipline and intelligence to manage.”

“Here we go again,” Molly said. “Go go gadget control freak.”

“Do *not* take that tone of voice with me, young lady.”

“Young lady,” Molly singsonged back in a nasal impersonation of her mother’s voice, her fists now on her hips. “What’s the point? Stupid of me to think that you might actually be willing to talk with me instead of telling me how to live every second of my life.”

“I fail to see the error in that when you clearly have no idea what you’re doing, young lady. *Look* at you. You look like...like a savage.”

My mouth went off on reflex. “Ah, yes, a savage. Of the famous Chromotonsorial Cahokian Goth tribe.”

Michael winced.

The look Charity turned on me could have withered the life from small animals and turned potted flowers black. “Excuse me, Mister Dresden,” she said, words clipped. “I do not recall speaking to you.”

“Beg pardon,” I said, and gave her my sweetest smile. “Don’t mind me. Just thinking out loud.”

Molly turned to glare at me, too, but hers was a pale imitation of her mother’s. “I do not need you to defend me.”

Charity’s attention shifted back to her daughter. “You will *not* speak to an adult in that tone of voice so long as you are in this house, young lady.”

“Not a problem,” Molly shot back, and then she whirled on her heel and opened the door.

Michael put his hand out, not with any particular effort, and the door slammed shut again with a sharp, booming impact.

Sudden silence fell over the Carpenter household. Both Molly and Charity stared at Michael with expressions of utter shock.

Michael took a deep breath and then said, “Ladies. I try not to involve myself in these discussions. But obviously your conversation this evening is unlikely to resolve the differences you’ve had.” He looked at them in turn, and his voice, while still gentle, became something more immovable than a mountain’s bones. “I don’t have any feeling that my trip will be an extended one,” he said, “but we never know what He has planned for us. Or how much time is left to any of us. This house has been upset long enough. The strife is hurting everyone. Find a way to resolve your troubles before I return.”

“But...” Molly began.

“Molly,” Michael said, his tone of voice inexorable. “She is your mother. She deserves your respect and courtesy. You will give them to her for the length of a conversation.”

Molly set her jaw, but looked away from her father. He stared at her for a moment, until she gave him a brief nod.

“Thank you,” he said. “I want you both to make an effort to set the anger aside, and talk. By God, ladies, I will not go forth to answer the call only to come home to more conflict and strife. I get enough of that while I’m gone.”

Charity stared at him for a second longer, and then said, "But Michael... surely you aren't going to leave now. Not when..." She gestured vaguely at me. "There will be trouble."

Michael stepped over to his wife and kissed her gently. Then he said, "Faith, my love."

She closed her eyes and looked away from him after the kiss. "Are you sure?"

"I'm needed," he said with quiet certainty. He touched her face with one hand and said, "Harry, would you walk me to the car?"

I did. "Thank you," I said, once we were outside. "I'm glad to get out of there. Tension, knife."

Michael nodded. "It's been a long year."

"What happened to them?" I asked.

Michael tossed his case and his bag into the back of his white pickup truck. "Molly was arrested. Possession."

I blinked at him. "She was possessed?"

He sighed and looked at me. "Possession. Marijuana and Ecstasy. She was at a party and the police raided it. She was caught holding them."

"Wow," I said, my voice subdued. "What happened?"

"Community service," he said. "We talked about it. She was clearly repentant. I thought that the humiliation and the sentence of the law were enough to settle matters, but Charity thought we were being too gentle. She tried to restrict which people Molly was allowed to spend time with."

I winced. "Ah. I think I can see how this played out."

Michael nodded, got into his truck, and leaned on the open window, looking up at me. "Yes. Both of them are proud and stubborn. Friction rose until it exploded this spring. Molly left home, dropped out of school. It's been...difficult."

"I can see that," I said, and sighed. "Maybe you should pitch in with Charity. Maybe the two of you could sit on her until she gets back on the straight and narrow."

Michael smiled a little. "She's Charity's daughter. A hundred parents sitting on her couldn't make her surrender." He shook his head. "A parent's authority can only go so far. Molly has to start thinking and choosing for herself. At this point, twisting her arm until she cries uncle isn't going to help her do that."

"Doesn't seem like Charity agrees with you," I said.

Michael nodded. "She loves Molly very much. She's terrified of the kinds of things that could happen to her little girl." He glanced at the house. "Which brings me to a question for you."

"Yeah?"

"Is there some kind of dangerous situation developing?"

I chewed on my lip and then nodded. "It seems probable, but I don't have anything specific yet."

"Is my daughter involved in it?"

"Not to my knowledge," I told him. "Her boyfriend got arrested tonight. She talked me into bailing him out."

Michael's eyes narrowed a little, but then he caught himself, and I saw him force the angry expression from his face. "I see. How in the world did you get her to come here?"

"It was what I charged for my help," I said. "She tried to back out, but I convinced her not to."

Michael grunted. "You threatened her?"

"Politely," I said. "I'd never hurt her."

"I know that," Michael said, his tone gently reproving. Behind us, the front door opened. Molly stepped out onto the porch, hugging herself with her arms. She stood that way for a moment, ignoring us. A few seconds later, a light on the second floor came on. Charity, presumably, had gone back upstairs.

Michael watched his daughter for a moment, pain in his eyes. Then he took a deep breath and said, "May I ask a favor of you?"

"Yes."

"Talk to her," Michael said. "She likes you. Respects you. A few words from you might do more than anything I could tell her right now."

"Whoa," I said. "I don't know."

"You don't have to negotiate a treaty," Michael said, smiling. "Just ask her to talk to her mother. To be willing to give a little."

"Compromise has to work both ways," I said. "What about Charity?"

"She'll come around."

"Am I the only one who has noticed that Charity really doesn't regard me with what most of the world thinks of as fairness? Or fondness? I am the last person in the world likely to get her to sit down for a reconciliation talk."

He smiled. "Have a little faith."

“Oh, please.” I sighed, but there wasn’t any real feeling behind it.

“Will you try to help?” Michael asked.

I scowled at him. “Yes.”

He smiled at me, mostly in his eyes. “Thank you. I’m sorry you walked into the cross fire tonight.”

“Molly told me there had been trouble at home. Bringing her here seemed like the right thing to do.”

“I appreciate it.” Michael frowned, his eyes distant for a moment, then said, “I’ve got to get moving.”

“Sure,” I said.

He met my eyes and said, “If something arises, will you keep an eye on them for me? It would make me feel a lot better to know you were watching over them until I return.”

I glanced back at his house. “What happened to having faith?”

He smiled. “Seems a bit lazy to expect the Lord to do all the work, doesn’t it?” His expression grew serious again. “Besides. I do have faith, Harry. In Him—and in you.”

Demon-infested me writhed in uncomfortable guilt on the inside. “I’ll keep an eye on them, of course.”

“Thank you,” Michael said, and put the truck in gear. “When I get back, I need to talk business with you, if you have the time.”

I nodded. “Sure. Good hunting.”

“God be with you,” he replied with a deep nod, and then he pulled out and left. Have sword, will travel. Hi-yo, Silver, away.

Get Molly and Charity to sit down and talk things out. Right. I had about as much chance to do that as I did of backpacking my car to the top of Mount Rushmore. I was gloomily certain that even if I did manage to get them together, it would only make things go more spectacularly wrong once they were there. The whole house would probably go up in an explosion when mother met antimother.

No good could come of this one. Why in the world had I agreed to it?

Because Michael was my friend, and because I was in general too stupid to turn down people in need. And maybe because of something more. Michael’s house had always been full of hectic life, but it had been a place, in general, of talk and warmth and laughter and good food. The ugly shouts and snarls of Molly and Charity’s quarrel had stained the place. They didn’t belong there.

I had never had a home like that, growing up. Even now that Thomas and I had found one another, when I thought of a family, I thought of the Carpenter household. I had never had that kind of intimacy, closeness. Those who have such a family seldom realize how rare and precious it is. It was something worth preserving. I wanted to help.

And Michael had a point. I might have a chance to get through to Molly. That was only half the battle, so to speak, but it was probably more than he could manage from his own position.

But whatever higher power arranged these things had a demented sense of timing, given how much I had on my plate already. Hell's bells.

Molly came over to me after Michael's truck had vanished. She stood beside me in the quiet summer evening, silent.

"I guess you need a ride back to your place," I said.

"I don't have any money," she replied quietly.

"Okay," I said. "Where do you need to go?"

"The convention," she replied. "I have friends there. A room for the weekend." She glanced over her shoulder at the house.

"The rug rats seemed glad to see you," I observed.

She smiled fleetingly and her voice warmed. "I didn't realize how much I missed them. Dumb little Jawas."

I thought about nudging her toward her mother for a second, and decided against it. She might decide to do it if she wasn't pressured, but the second she thought I was trying to force her into something, she'd dig in her heels. So all I said was, "They're cute kids."

"Yes," she replied quietly.

"I'm heading for the convention anyway," I told her. "Get in the cab."

"Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," I said.

Chapter Eleven

When people say the word “convention,” they are usually referring to large gatherings of the employees of companies and corporations who attend a mass assembly, usually in a big hotel somewhere, for the purpose of pretending to learn stuff when they are in fact enjoying a free trip somewhere, time off work, and the opportunity to flirt with strangers, drink, and otherwise indulge themselves.

The first major difference between a business convention and a fandom convention is that fandom doesn’t bother with the pretenses. They’re just there to have a good time. The second difference is the dress code—the ensembles at a fan convention tend to be considerably more novel.

SplatterCon!!! (apparently the name of the con was misspelled if the three exclamation points were left out) had populated the hotel with all kinds of costumed fans, unless maybe the costumes were actually clothing trends. Once in a while, it gets hard to tell make-believe and avant-garde fashion apart. The hotel had an entry atrium, which in turn branched off into a pair of long, wide hallways leading to combination ball-and dining rooms, the ones with those long, folding partitions that can be used to break the larger rooms up into smaller halls for seminars and talk panels and so on. There were a couple hundred people in sight, and I could see more entering and leaving various panel rooms.

“I kind of expected a few more people to be here,” I said to Molly. I had stopped at my apartment to grab my stuff and drop off Mouse.

“It’s Thursday night,” she said, as if that should be significant. “And it’s getting late, at least for a weeknight. We have more than three thousand people already registered.”

“Is that a lot?”

“For a first-year convention? It’s a Mongol horde.” There was pride in her voice as she spoke. “And we have a really young staff, to boot. But old hands at putting conventions together.” She went on like that for a few moments, naming names and citing their experience as though she expected me to whip out a licensing manual or something to make sure the convention was up to code.

Two girls, both too young for me to think adult thoughts about, sidled by in black-and-purple clothing and makeup that left a lot of skin bare, their faces painted pale, trickles of fake blood at the corners of their mouths. One of them smiled at me, and she had fangs.

I had my hand on my staff and the harsh, clear scent of wood smoke filled my nose before I stopped myself from unleashing an instant, violent, and noisily pyrotechnic assault upon the vampire five feet from me. A second's study showed irregular lumps and finger marks on the teeth—the girls had probably made them with their own fingers from craft plastic. I let out my breath in a steady exhalation and relaxed again, releasing the power I'd begun to channel through my staff.

Relax, Harry. Hell's bells, that would be a great story for the papers. Professional Wizard Incinerates Amateur Vampire. News at ten.

The two girls went on by, none the wiser, and even Molly only frowned at them and then back at me for a second, her face tilted into an expression of silent inquiry.

I shook my head. "Sorry, sorry. Been a long day already. Look, I need to get a look at the bathroom where this theater owner was attacked."

"All right," Molly said. "But first we'll get you a name tag at registration."

"We will?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because you're not supposed to have access to the convention if you haven't registered for it," she said. "Con security and hotel security might get confused. It would be inconvenient for you."

"Right," I said. "Good thinking. I'm not sure how I'd react to inconvenience."

I followed her over to a set of tables set up to receive dozens or hundreds of people at once, each designated with white paper signs marked with "A-D," "E-J," and so on down the alphabet. A tired-looking, brown-haired woman of early middle age sat behind the first table, doing some kind of paperwork.

"Molly," she said, and her voice warmed with tired but genuine pleasure. "Who is your friend?"

"Harry Dresden," Molly said. "This is Sandra Marling. She's the convention chair."

"You're a horror fan?" Sandra Marling asked me.

"My life is all about horror, these days."

“You should find plenty here to entertain you,” she assured me. “We’re showing movies in several rooms as well as in the theater, and there’s the vendors’ room, and some autograph signings tomorrow, and of course there are several parties active already, and the costume contests are always fun to watch.”

“Isn’t that something,” I said, and tried not to drown in my enthusiasm.

“Sandy,” Molly said, stepping in, “I want to use my freebie for Harry, here.”

Sandra nodded. “Oh, Rosanna was looking for you a few minutes ago. Have you spoken to her yet?”

“Not since this afternoon,” Molly said, and fretted at her lower lip. “Did she remember to take her vitamins?”

“Rest easy, girl. I reminded her for you.”

Molly looked visibly relieved. “Thank you.”

Sandra, meanwhile, had me filling out a registration form, which I scribbled through fairly quickly. At the end, she passed me a plastic badge folded around a card that said, SPLATTERCON !!! HI, I'M... She gave me a black ink marker to go with it and said, “Sorry, the printer’s been off-line all day. Just write your name in.”

I promptly wrote the words *An Innocent Bystander* onto the name tag before folding it up in the plastic badge and pinning it to my shirt.

“I hope you enjoy SplatterCon, Harry,” Sandra said.

I picked up a schedule and glanced at it. “Make Your Own Blood and Custom Fangs” at ten A.M., to be followed by “How to Scream Like a Pro.” “I don’t see how I can avoid being entertained.”

Molly gave me a level look as we walked away. “You don’t have to make fun of it.”

“Actually I do,” I said. “I make fun of almost everything.”

“It’s mean,” she said. “Sandra has poured her whole life into this convention for a year, and I don’t want to see her feelings hurt.”

“Where do you know her from?” I asked. “Not church, I guess.”

Molly looked at me obliquely for a second and then said, “She’s a part-time volunteer at one of the shelters where I’m doing community service. She helped Nelson out when he was younger. Rosie too, and her boyfriend.”

I lifted a hand in acquiescence. “Fine, fine. I’ll play nice.”

“Thank you,” she said, her voice still prim. “It’s very adult of you.”

I started to get annoyed, but was struck by the disturbing thought that if I did, I would be coming down on the same side of the situation as Charity, which might be one of the signs of the apocalypse.

Molly led me down to the end of one of the long conference room hallways, where there were the usual restroom doors. One of them had been marked over with three bars of police tape, shutting it, and a uniformed cop sat in a chair beside the door.

The cop was a large black man, grey in his hair at the temples, and he sat with the chair leaned on its rear two legs so that his head rested back against the wall. He had on his uniform, but had added on a SplatterCon!!! name tag. He had filled in the name on the card with a marker, too, though his blocky script under the HI, I'M read *An Authority Figure*. The uniform name stripe on his shirt read RAWLINS.

"Well now," the cop said as I walked over to him. He opened his mostly closed eyes and gave me a wary smile. He read my name tag and snorted. "It's the consultant guy. Thinks he's a wizard."

"Rawlins," I said, smiling, and offered him my hand. He took it, his grip lazily strong.

"So you're one of those horror movie fans, huh?" he rumbled.

"Um, yes," I said.

He snorted again.

"I was sort of hoping I could get into the bathroom there."

Rawlins pursed his lips. "There's two more on this floor. One's back near the front desk, and there's another at the end of the other conference hall."

"I like this one," I said.

Rawlins squinted at me and said, "Maybe you can't read so good. You see that tape there, says crime scene and such?"

"The bright yellow and black stuff?" I asked.

"That's it exactly."

"Yep."

"Well, that's what we police use when we have a crime scene and we don't want nosy private investigators stomping all over it in their big boots and contaminating everything," he drawled.

"What if I promise to walk on tippy toe?"

"Then I promise I will stop bouncing you off walls just as soon as I think you're not resisting arrest," he said in a cheerful tone. The smile faded a little and his eyes hardened. "It's a crime scene. No."

“Molly,” I said quietly. “Would you mind if I talked to the officer alone?”

“Sure,” she said. “There are things I need to handle anyway. Excuse me.” She walked away without looking back.

“Do you mind talking about it?” I asked Rawlins.

“Naw,” he said. “Look, you seem okay, Dresden. I’ll talk. But I’m not letting you in there.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because it might make things harder on the kid we took in for it.”

I frowned and tilted my head. “Yeah?”

Rawlins nodded. “Kid didn’t do it,” he said. “But hotel security cameras show him going in there, then the victim, and no one else. And I was sitting right here in this spot the whole time. I’m sure no one else went in or out.”

“So how do you know the kid didn’t attack the old man?” I asked.

Rawlins gave an easy shrug. “Didn’t fit him. He wasn’t breathing hard, and giving a beating runs you out of breath quick. No damage to his hands or knuckles. No blood on him.”

“So why’d you arrest him?” I asked.

“Because the record shows that there’s no one else who could have done it,” Rawlins said. “And because the old man was too out of it to talk and clear him. Kid didn’t beat on the old man, but that doesn’t mean that he wasn’t in with whoever did. I figured maybe he knows how the attacker got in and out unseen, so I took him down and booked him. I figured if he was an accomplice, he’d spill rather than take the whole fall himself.” Rawlins grimaced. “But he didn’t spill. Didn’t know a damn thing.”

“Then why’d he get put away?” I asked.

“Didn’t know he had a record until the paperwork was already going. Repeat offender got a real steep hill to climb as a suspect. Makes it look bad for him. He might take the fall on this even if he’s innocent.”

I shook my head. “You’re sure no one could have gone in or out?”

“I was right here,” he said. “Anyone went past me without me noticing, they were a Jedi Knight or something.”

“Or something,” I muttered, glancing at the door.

“The girlfriend,” Rawlins said, nodding after the departed Molly. “She get you involved in this?”

“Daughter of a friend,” I said, nodding. “Bailed him out.”

Rawlins grunted. "Damn shame for that kid. I played it by the book, but..." He shook his head. "Sometimes the book don't do enough."

"The girl thinks he's innocent," I said.

"The girl always thinks they're innocent, Dresden," Rawlins said, without malice. "Problem is that there's pretty good evidence that says he ain't. Good enough to send a repeat offender upstate, unless the lab guys find something in there or on the old man to clear him. Which brings us back to why you ain't going in."

I nodded, frowning. "What if I told you it might be something weird?"

He shrugged. "What if you did?"

"Might be something that I could recognize, if I could just get a look at the room. I might be able to help the kid."

He squinted at me. "You think there's spooky afoot?"

"I told the girl I'd look into it."

Rawlins frowned, but then shook his head. "Can't let you in there."

"Could I just look?" I asked. "You open the door, and I don't even go in. I just look. That couldn't hurt anything, could it? And you've already been in there, the EMTs, maybe a detective. Am I right? I couldn't contaminate it all *that* much just from looking in the door."

Rawlins gave me a long, level stare and then sighed. He grunted, and the front legs of his chair thunked down to the floor. He rose and said, "All right. Not one step inside."

"You're an officer and a gentleman," I told him. I used my elbow to nudge the restroom door open. It squealed ferociously. I leaned my head in, my chin just over the level of the top strip of tape, and looked around the bathroom.

Standard stuff. A bathroom. White tile. Stalls, urinals, sinks, a long mirror.

The blood wasn't standard, of course.

There was a large splotch of it on the floor, and it had been smeared around when it had been making the tile all slippery. There were a couple of different footmarks on the floor, outlined in blood, and more smears of it on one of the sinks, where the victim had apparently tried to pull himself up off the floor. It looked fairly gruesome, which wasn't really a surprise. There wasn't as much blood as there would have been at, say, a murder, but there was plenty all the same. Someone had laid into Clark Pell, the victim,

with a will. I picked out small blood splatter on the mirror, high on the wall, and in a spot on the ceiling.

“Jesus,” I muttered. “It was an unarmed assault? No knives or anything?”

Rawlins grunted. “Old man had broken ribs, bruises, gashes from being slammed around. No cuts or stabs, though.”

“No kid did this,” I said.

“Wasn’t a professional, either. Crowded spot like this. Witness in the bathroom. Cop twenty feet away. Dumbest thug in Chicago wouldn’t open up that big a can of whoopass where he’d be seen and caught.”

“Someone strong,” I muttered. “And really, really vicious. He had to have hit the old guy a few times after he went down.”

Rawlins grunted again. “Sound like anyone you know?”

I shook my head. I stared at the room for a second and then chewed on my lower lip for a second, coming to a decision. I closed my eyes, clearing my thoughts.

“That’s enough,” Rawlins said. “Shut the door before people start to stare.”

“One second,” I murmured. Then with an effort of focus and will, and a faint sense of illusory pressure on my forehead, I opened my wizard’s Sight.

The Sight is something anyone born with enough talent has. It’s an extra sense, though when using it almost everyone experiences it as a kind of augmented vision. It shows you the primal nature of things, the true and emotional core of what they are. It also shows you the presence of magical energies that course through pretty much everything on the planet, showing you how that energy flowed and pulsed and swirled through the world. The Sight was especially useful for looking for any active magical constructs—that’s spells, for the newbie—and for cutting through illusions and spells meant to obfuscate what was true.

I opened my Sight and it showed me what my physical eyes could not see about the room. It showed me something that, with as many bad things as I had seen in my life, still made me clench my fists and fight to keep from losing control of my stomach.

The site of the attack, the blood, the brutality and pain inflicted upon the victim, had not been a simple matter of desire, conflict, and violence.

It had been a deliberate, gleeful work of art.

I could see patterns in the bloodstain, patterns that showed me the terrified face of an old man, pounded into a lumpy, unrecognizable mass by sledgehammer fists, each one a miniature portrait painted in the medium of terror and pain. When I looked at the smears on the sink, I could hear a short series of grunts meant to be desperate cries for help. And then the old man was hurled back down for another round of splatter portraits of pain.

And just for a second, I saw a shadow on the wall—a brief glimpse, a form, a shape, something that left an outline of itself on the wall where it had absorbed the agonized energy of the old man’s suffering.

I fought to push the Sight away from my perceptions again, and staggered. That was the drawback to using the Sight. The Sight could show you a lot of things, but everything you saw with it was there to stay. It wrote everything you perceived with it upon your memory in indelible ink, and those memories were always there, fresh and harsh when you went back to them, never blurring with the passage of time, never growing easier to endure. The little demonic diorama of bad vibes painted over the white tiles of that bathroom was going to make some appearances in my darker dreams.

It looked like I’d found the black magic the Gatekeeper warned me about. Just as well that I hadn’t tried the dangerous spell with Little Chicago.

I took a couple of steps away, shaking away the flickers of color and sparkles of light on my vision that remained for a time when the Sight was gone once more. Rawlins had a hand under one of my elbows.

“You all right, man?” he rumbled a moment later, his voice very quiet.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah. Thanks.”

He looked from me to the closed door and back. “What did you see in there?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. My voice sounded shaky. “Something bad.”

Almost too quietly to be heard, he said, “This wasn’t just some thug, was it.”

My stomach twisted again. In my mind’s eye, I could see a malicious smile reflected in the eyes of the old man, the memory absolutely crystalline. “Maybe not,” I mumbled. “It could have been a person, I think. Someone really sick. Or...maybe not. I don’t know.” More words struggled to bubble out of my mouth and I clamped my lips resolutely shut until I’d gotten my thoughts back under control.

I looked around me and realized that the hairs on the back of my neck were not crawling around at the memory of the energy I'd just brushed.

They were reacting to more of it drifting through the air. Now. Nearby.

"Rawlins," I said. "How many other cops are here?"

"Just me now," he said quietly. He took a look at my face and then peered around, his heavy-lidded eyes deceptively alert, his hand on his gun. "We got trouble?"

"We got trouble," I said quietly, shifting my staff into my right hand.

The lights went out, all of them at once, plunging the hotel into pure blackness.

And the screaming started.

Chapter Twelve

No more than two or three seconds went by before Rawlins had his flashlight out and he flicked it on. The light flashed white and clean for maybe half a second, and then it dimmed down, as though some kind of greasy soot had coated it, until the light, though still bright, was so vague and veiled that it accomplished little more than to cast a faint glow to maybe an arm's length from Rawlins.

"What the hell," he said, and shook the light a few times. He had his hand on his gun, the restraining strap off, but he hadn't drawn it yet. Good man. He knew as well as I did that the hotel was going to have far more panicked attendees than potential threats.

"We'll try mine," I said, and got the silver pentacle on its chain from around my neck. A gentle whisper and an effort of will and the amulet began to emit a pure, silver-blue light that reached into the darkness around us, burning it away as swiftly as it pressed in, until we could see for maybe fifteen feet around us. Beyond that was just a murky vagueness—not so much a cloud or a mist as a simple lack of light.

I gripped my staff in my right hand, and more of my will thrummed through it, setting the winding spirals of runes and sigils along its length to burning with a gentle, ember orange light.

Rawlins stared at me for a second and then said, "What the hell is going on?"

There were running footsteps and shouts and cries in the gloom. All of them sounded choked, muffled somehow. One of the two teenaged "vampires" stumbled into the circle of my azure wizard's light, sobbing. Several young men blundered along a moment later, blindly, and all but trampled her. Rawlins grabbed the girl with a grunt of, "Excuse me, miss," and hauled her from their path. He lifted her more or less by main strength and pushed her gently against the wall. He forced her to look at him and said, "Follow the wall that way to the door. Stay close to the wall until you get out."

She nodded, tears making her makeup run in a mascara mudslide, and stumbled off, following Rawlins directions.

“Fire?” Rawlins blurted, turning back to me. “Is this smoke?”

“No,” I said. “Believe me. I know burning buildings.”

He gave me an odd look, grabbed an older woman who was passing blindly, and sent her off to follow the wall to the door out. He shivered then, and when he exhaled his breath came out in a long, frosty plume. The temperature had dropped maybe forty degrees in the space of a minute.

I struggled to ignore the sounds of frightened people in the dark and focused on my magical senses. I reached out to the cold and the gloom, and found it a vaguely familiar kind of spellworking, though I couldn’t remember precisely where I’d encountered it before.

I spun in a slow circle with my eyes closed, and felt the murk grow deeper, darker as I faced back down the hall to the hotel’s front desk. I took a step that way, and the murk thickened marginally. The spell’s source had to be that way. I gritted my teeth and started forward.

“Hey,” Rawlins said. “Where are you going?”

“Our bad guy is this way,” I said. “Or something is. Maybe you’d better stay here, help get these people outside safely.”

“Maybe you ought to shut your fool mouth,” Rawlins replied, his tone one of forced cheer. He looked scared, but he drew his gun and kept the barrel down, close to his side, and held his mostly useless flashlight in his other hand. “I’ll cover you.”

I nodded once at him, turned, and plunged into the darkness, Rawlins at my back. Screams erupted around us, sometimes accompanied by the sight of stumbling, terrified people. Rawlins nudged them toward the walls, barked at them in a tone of pure paternal authority to stay near them, to move carefully for the exits. The gloom began to press in closer to me, and it became an effort of will to hold up the light in my amulet against it. A few steps more and the air grew even colder. Walking forward became an effort, like wading through waist-deep water. I had to lean against it, and I heard a grunt of effort come out of my mouth.

“What’s wrong?” Rawlins asked, his voice tight.

We passed under one of the hotel’s emergency light fixtures, its floodlights only dim orange rings in the murk until my amulet’s light burned the shadows away. “Dark magic,” I growled through clenched teeth. “A kind of ward. Trying to keep me from moving ahead.”

He huffed out a breath and muttered, “Christ. Magic. That isn’t real.”

I stopped and gave him a steady look over my shoulder. “Are you with me or not?”

He swallowed, staring up at the dim circles of light that were all he could see of another set of emergency lights. “Crap,” he muttered, wiping a sudden beading of sweat from his brow despite the cold air. “You need me to push you or something?”

I let out a bark of tense laughter, and forced my power harder against the gloomy ward, hacking at it with the machete of my will until I began to chop a path through the dark working, picking up speed. As I did, the sense of the spell became more clear to me. “It’s coming from up ahead of us,” I said. “The first conference room in this hall.”

“They got it set up for movies,” Rawlins said. He seized a sobbing and terrified man in his middle years and deflected him bodily to the wall, snapping the same orders to him. “God, it was packed in there. If the crowd panicked—”

He didn’t finish the sentence, and he didn’t need to. Chicago has seen more than a few deaths due to a sudden panic in a movie theater. I redoubled my efforts and broke into a heavy, labored jog that led us to a pair of doors leading into the first conference room. One of the doors was shut, and the other had been slammed open so hard that it had wrenched its way clear of one of the hinges.

From inside the room came a sudden burst of terrified screams—not the canned screams you get in horror movies. Real screams. Screams of such base, feral intensity that you could hardly tell they had come from a human throat. Screams you only really hear when there are terrible things happening.

Rawlins knew what they meant. He spat out a low curse, lifting his gun to a ready position, and we rushed forward to the room side by side.

The murk began to do more than simply drag at me when I hit the doorway. The air almost seemed to congeal into a kind of gelatin, and it suddenly became a fight to keep my legs moving forward. I snarled in sudden frustration, and transformed it into more will that I sent coursing down through my silver pentacle amulet. The soft radiance emanating from the symbol became a white-and-cobalt floodlight, driving back the gloom, burning it from my path. It left the large room still coated in shadow, but it was no longer the total occlusion of the magical murk.

It was a long room, about sixty feet, maybe half that wide. At the far end of the room was a very large projection screen. Chairs faced it in two columns. At one point in the aisle between them, a projector sat, running at such a frantic speed that smoke was rising from the reels of celluloid. The projected movie still appeared clearly on the screen, in a frantic fast-motion blur of faces and images from a classic horror film from the early eighties. The soundtrack could only be heard as a single, long, piercing howl.

There were still about twenty people in the room. Immediately beside the door was an old woman, curled on her side on the ground, sobbing in pain. Nearby a wheelchair lay overturned, and a man with braces of some kind on his legs and hips had fallen into an awkward, painful-looking sprawl from which he could not arise. One of his arms was visibly broken, bone pushing at skin. Other people cringed against the walls and beneath chairs. When my wizard light flooded the place, they got up and started staggering away, still screaming in horror.

Straight ahead of me were bodies and blood.

I couldn't see much of them. Three people were down. There was a lot of blood around. A fourth person, a young woman, crawled toward the door making frantic mewling sounds.

A man stood over her. He was nearly seven feet tall and so thick with slabs of muscle that he almost seemed deformed—not pretty bodybuilder muscle, either, but the thick, dull slabs that come from endless physical labor. He wore overalls, a blue shirt, and a hockey mask, and there was a long, curved sickle in his right hand. As I watched, he took a pair of long steps forward, seized the whimpering girl by her hair, and jerked her body into a backward bow. He raised the sickle in his right hand.

Rawlins didn't bother to offer him a chance to surrender. He took a stance not ten feet away, aimed, and put three shots into the masked maniac's head.

The man jerked, twisting a bit, and released the girl's hair abruptly, tossing her aside with a terrible, casual strength. She hit a row of chairs and let out a cry of pain.

Then the maniac turned toward Rawlins and, even though the mask hid his features, the tilt of his head and the tension of his posture showed that he was furious. He went toward Rawlins. The cop shot him four more

times, flashes of bright white burning the image of the maniac and the room onto my eyes.

He brought the sickle down on Rawlins. The cop managed to catch the force of it upon his long flashlight. Sparks flew from the steel case, but the light held. The maniac twisted the sickle, so that the tip plowed a furrow across Rawlins's forearm. The cop snarled. The flashlight spun to the ground. The maniac raised the sickle again.

I braced myself, raised my staff and my will, and cried, "*Forzare!*"

Unseen power lashed from my staff, pure kinetic energy that ripped through the air and hit the maniac like a wrecking ball. The blow drove him back down the aisle, through the air. He hit the projector on its stand. It shattered. He went through it without slowing down. He kept going, the flight of his passage tearing through the large projection screen, and hit the back wall with a thunderous impact.

I sagged in sudden exhaustion, the effort of the spell an enormous drain on me, and had to plant my staff on the ground to keep from falling over. My headache flared up with a vengeance, and the light of my amulet and staff both faded.

There were a few more screams, the quick, light sound of frightened feet, and I whirled. I saw someone flee the room from the corner of my eye, but I didn't get much of a look at them. A second later, the room returned to normal, the lights back, the broken projector still spinning one reel at reduced speed, a loose tongue of film slap-slap-slapping the broken casing.

Rawlins advanced, gun still out, his eyes very wide, down to the far end of the room. He went past the screen and looked behind it, gun in firing position. He looked around for a second, then back at me, his expression baffled.

"He's not here," Rawlins said. "Did you see him go that way?"

I just didn't have enough left in me to speak right at that moment. I shook my head.

"There's a dent in the wall," he reported. "Covered in...I dunno what. Some kind of slime."

"He's gone," I grunted. Then I started forward, toward the downed people. Two of them were young men, the third a young woman. "Help me."

Rawlins holstered his weapon and did. One of the young men was dead. There was a crescent-shaped cut in his thigh that had opened an artery.

Another lay mercifully unconscious, a bruise on his head, several hideous inches of bloody innards protruding from a slash across his belly. I was afraid that if we moved him, his guts might come popping out. The girl was alive, but the sickle's tip had drawn a pair of long lines down her back along the spine, and the cuts had been vicious and deep. Bits of bone showed and she lay on her belly, her eyes open and blinking but utterly unfocused, either unwilling or unable to move.

We did what we could for them, which wasn't much more than jerking the tablecloths off the water tables in the corner and improvising soft pads out of them to apply to open wounds. The second girl lay on her side nearby, sobbing hysterically. I checked on the old woman, who had just had the wind knocked out of her. I hauled the guy who'd fallen from his wheelchair into a slightly more comfortable position and he nodded thanks at me.

"See to the other victim," Rawlins said. He held the pad against the boy's opened abdomen, putting gentle pressure on it as he jerked out his radio. It squealed with feedback and static when he used it, but he managed to get emergency help headed our way.

I went to the sobbing girl, a tiny little brunette wearing much the same clothes as Molly had been. She'd been bruised up pretty well, and from the way she lay on the floor she could evidently not move without feeling agony. I went to her and felt over her left shoulder gently. "Be still," I told her quietly. "It's your collarbone, I think. I know it hurts like hell, but you're going to be all right."

"It hurts, it hurts, hurts, hurts, hurts," she panted.

I found her hand with mine and squeezed tight. She returned it with a desperate pressure. "You'll be all right," I told her.

"Don't leave me," she whimpered. Her hand was all but crushing mine. "Don't leave."

"It's all right," I said. "I'm right here."

"What the hell is this?" Rawlins said, panting. He looked around him, at the corpse, at the movie screen, at the dent in the wall beyond. "That was the Reaper, the freaking Reaper. From the *Suburban Slasher* films. What kind of psycho dresses up as the Reaper and starts..." His face twisted in sudden nausea. "What the hell is this?"

"Rawlins," I said, in a sharp voice, to get his attention.

His frightened eyes darted to me.

“Call Murphy,” I told him.

He stared at me blankly for a second, then said, “My captain is the one who has to make the call on that one. He’ll decide.”

“Up to you,” I said. “But Murphy and her boys might actually be able to do something with this. Your captain can’t.” I nodded at the corpse. “And we aren’t playing for pennies here.”

Rawlins looked at me. Then at the dead boy. Then he nodded once and picked up his radio again.

“Hurts,” the girl whimpered, breathless with pain. “Hurts, hurts, hurts.”

I held her hand. I patted it awkwardly with my gloved left hand while we heard sirens approach.

“My God,” Rawlins said again. He shook his head. “My God, Dresden. What happened here?”

I stared at the enormous rip in the movie screen and at the Reaper-shaped dent in the wooden panels of the wall behind it. Clear gelatin, the physical form of ectoplasm, the matter of the spirit world, gleamed there against the broken wood. In minutes it would evaporate, and there would be nothing left behind.

“My God,” Rawlins whispered again, his voice still stunned. “What happened here?”

Yeah.

Good question.

Chapter Thirteen

The authorities arrived and replaced crisis with aftermath.

The EMTs rushed the more badly injured girl and the eviscerated young man to an emergency room, while police officers who arrived on the scene did what they could to take care of the other injured attendees until more medical teams could show up. I stayed with the injured girl, holding her hand. One of the EMTs had examined her briefly, saw that though in considerable pain she was not in immediate danger, and ordered me to stay with her and keep anyone from moving her until the next team could arrive.

That suited me fine. The thought of standing up again was daunting.

I sat with the girl as more police arrived. She had become quiet and listless as her fear faded and her body produced endorphins to dull the pain. I heard a gasp and the sudden sound of pounding feet. I looked up to see Molly slip by a patrolman and fling herself down beside the girl.

“Rosie!” she cried, her face very pale. “Oh my God!”

“Easy, easy,” I told her, putting a hand against Molly’s shoulder to prevent her from embracing the wounded girl. “Don’t jostle her.”

“She’s hurt,” Molly protested. “Why haven’t they put her in an ambulance?”

“She’s not in immediate danger,” I said. “Two other people were. The ambulance took them first. She goes on the next one.”

“What happened?” Molly asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not sure yet. I didn’t see much of it. They were attacked.”

The girl on the floor suddenly stirred and opened her eyes. “Molly?” she said.

“I’m here, Rosie,” Molly said. She touched the injured girl’s cheek. “I’m right here.”

“My God,” the girl said. Tears welled from her eyes. “He killed them. He killed them.” Her breathing began to come faster, building toward panic.

“Shhhhhhh,” Molly said, and stroked Rosie’s hair back from her forehead as one might a frightened child. “You’re safe now. It’s all right.”

“The baby,” Rosie said. She slid her hand from mine and laid it over her belly. “Is the baby all right?”

Molly bit her lip and looked at me.

“She’s pregnant?” I asked.

“Three months,” Molly confirmed. “She just found out.”

“The baby,” Rosie said. “Will the baby be all right?”

“They’re going to do everything possible to make sure that you’re both all right,” I said immediately. “Try not to worry about it too much.”

Rosie closed her eyes, tears still streaming. “All right.”

“Rosie,” Molly asked. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“I’m not sure,” she whispered. “I was sitting with Ken and Drea. We’d already seen our favorite scene in the movie and we decided to go. I was bending over to get my purse and Drea was checking her makeup and then the lights went out and she started screaming...And then when I could see again, he was there.” She shuddered. “He was there.”

“Who?” Molly pressed.

Rosie’s eyes opened too wide, showing white all around. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “The Reaper.”

Molly frowned. “Like in the movie? Someone in a costume.”

“It couldn’t be,” Rosie said, her trembling growing more pronounced. “It was him. It was really him.”

The next medical team arrived and headed right for us. Rosie seemed to be on the verge of another panic attack when she saw them, and started thrashing around. Molly leaned in close, whispering to her and continually touching her head, until the EMTs could get to work.

I stepped back. They got Rosie loaded onto a stretcher. When they laid her arm down by her side, I could see several small, round marks, irregular bruises, and damaged capillaries just under the surface of the skin at the bend of her arm.

Molly stared at me for a second, her eyes wide. Then she helped the EMTs throw a blanket over Rosie and her track marks. The EMTs counted to three and lifted the stretcher, flicked out the wheels underneath, and rolled her toward the doors. The girl stirred and thrashed weakly as they did this, letting out whimpering little cries.

“She’s frightened,” Molly told the EMTs. “Let me ride with her, help keep her calm.”

The men traded a look and then one of them nodded. Molly let out a breath of relief, nodded to them, and went to walk by the head of the stretcher, where Rosie could see her.

“Don’t worry,” said the other EMT. “We’ll be right back for you, sir.”

“What, this?” I asked, and waved vaguely at my head. “Nah, I didn’t get hurt here. This is from earlier. I’m good.”

The man’s expression was dubious. “You sure?”

“Yep.”

They took the girl out. I dragged myself to the wall and propped my back up against it. A minute later, a man in a tweed suit came in and walked directly to Rawlins. He spoke to the officer for a moment, glancing over at me once as they talked, then turned and walked over to me. Of only average height, the man was in his late forties, thirty pounds overweight, balding, and had watery blue eyes. He nodded at me, grabbed a chair, and settled down into it, looking down at me. “You’re Dresden?”

“Most days,” I said.

“My name is Detective Sergeant Greene. I’m with homicide.”

“Tough job,” I said.

“Most days,” he agreed. “Now, Rawlins back there tells me you were an eyewitness to what happened. Is that correct?”

“Mostly,” I said. “I only saw what happened at the very end in here.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. He blinked his watery eyes and absently removed a pen and a small notebook from his pocket. Behind him, cops were surrounding the area where the victims had lain with a circle of chairs and stringing crime scene tape between them. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“The lights went out,” I said. “People panicked. We heard screams. Rawlins went to help and I went with him.”

“Why?” he asked.

“What?”

“Why,” Greene said, his tone mild. “You’re a civilian, Mr. Dresden. It’s Rawlins’s job to help people in emergencies. Why didn’t you just head for the door?”

“It was an emergency,” I said. “I helped.”

“You’re a hero,” Greene said. “Is that it?”

I shrugged. “I was there. People needed help. I tried to.”

“Sure, sure,” Greene said, blinking his eyes. “So what were you doing to help?”

“Holding the light,” I said.

“Didn’t Rawlins have his own flashlight?”

“Can’t have too many flashlights,” I replied.

“Sure,” Greene said, writing things. “So you held the light for Rawlins. What then?”

“We heard screams in here. We came in. I saw the attacker over that girl they just took out.”

“Can you describe him?” Greene asked.

“Almost seven feet tall,” I said. “Built like a battleship, maybe three hundred, three twenty-five. Hockey mask. Sickle.”

Greene nodded. “What happened.”

“He attacked the girl. There were other people behind him, already down. He was about to cut her throat with the sickle. Rawlins shot him.”

“Shot at him?” Greene asked. “Since we don’t have a dead bad guy on the floor?”

“Shot at him,” I amended. “I don’t know if he hit him. The bad guy dropped the girl and swung that sickle at Rawlins. Rawlins blocked it with his flashlight.”

“Then what?”

“Then I hit the guy,” I said.

“Hit him how?” Greene asked.

“I used magic. Blew him thirty feet down the aisle and through the projector and the movie screen.”

Greene slapped his pen down onto the notebook and gave me a flat look.

“Hey,” I said. “You asked.”

“Or maybe he turned to run,” Greene said. “Knocked the projector over and jumped through the screen to get to the back of the room.”

“If that makes you feel better,” I said.

He gave me another hard look and said, “And then what?”

“And then he was gone,” I said.

“He ran out the door?”

“No,” I said. “We were pretty much right next to the door. He went through the screen, hit the wall behind it, and poof. Gone. I don’t know how.”

Greene wrote that down. “Do you know where Nelson Lenhardt is?”

I blinked. “No. Why would I?”

“He apparently attacked someone else at this convention today and beat him savagely. You bailed him out of jail. Maybe you’re friends with him.”

“Not really,” I said.

“Seems a little odd, then, that you dropped two thousand dollars to bail out this guy you’re not friends with.”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you do it?”

I got annoyed. “I had personal reasons.”

“Which are?”

“Personal,” I said.

Greene regarded me with his watery blue eyes, silent for a long minute. Then he said, patiently and politely, “I’m not sure I understand all of this. I’d appreciate it if you could help me out. Could you tell me again what happened? Starting with when the lights went out?”

I sighed.

We started over.

Four more times.

Greene was never so much as impolite to me, and his mild voice and watery eyes made him seem more like an apologetic clerk than a detective, but I had a gut instinct that there was a steely and dangerous man underneath the tweed camouflage, and that he had me pegged as an accomplice, or at least as someone who knew more than he was saying.

Which, I suppose, was true. But going on about black magic and ectoplasm and boogeymen that disappeared at will wasn’t going to make him like me any better. That was par for the course, when it came to cops. Some of them, guys like Rawlins, had run into something nasty at some point in their careers. They never talked much about it with anyone—other cops tend to worry about it when one of their partners starts talking about seeing monsters, and all kinds of well-intentioned counseling and psychological evaluations were sure to follow.

So if a cop found himself face-to-face with a vampire or a ghoul (and survived it), its only existence tended to be in the landscape of memory. Time has a way of wearing the sharpest edges away from that kind of thing, and it’s easy to avoid thinking about terrifying monsters, and even more terrifying implications, and get back to the daily routine. If enough time went by, a lot of cops could even convince themselves that what happened

had been exaggerated in their heads, bad memories amplified by darkness and fear, and that since everyone around them knew monsters didn't exist, they must therefore have seen something normal, something explainable.

But when the heat was on, those same cops changed. Somewhere deep down, they know that it's for real, and when something supernatural went down again, they were willing, at least for the duration, to forget about anything but doing whatever they could to survive it and protect lives, even if in retrospect it seemed insane. Rawlins would poke fun at me for "pretending" to be a wizard when there was a fan convention in progress. But when everything had hit the proverbial fan, he'd been willing to work with me.

Then there was the other kind of cop—guys like Greene, who hadn't ever seen anything remotely supernatural, who went home to their house and 2.3 kids and dog and mowed their lawn on Saturdays, who watch *Nova* and the Science Channel and subscribe to *National Geographic*, and keep every issue stored neatly and in order in the basement.

Guys like that were dead certain that everything was logical, everything was explainable, and that nothing existed outside the purview of reason and logic. Guys like that also tend to make pretty good detectives. Greene was a guy like that.

"All right, Mr. Dresden," Greene said. "I'm still kind of unclear on a few points. Now, when the lights went out, what did you do?"

I rubbed at my eyes. My head ached. I wanted to sleep. "I've already told you this. Five times."

"I know, I know," Greene said, and offered me a small smile. "But sometimes repeating things can jiggle forgotten little details loose. So, if you don't mind, can you tell me about when it went dark?"

I closed my eyes and fought a sudden and overwhelming temptation to levitate Greene to the ceiling and leave him there for a while.

Someone touched my shoulder, and I opened my eyes to find Murphy standing over me, offering me a white Styrofoam cup. "Evening Harry."

"Oh, thank God," I muttered, and took the cup. Coffee. I sipped some. Hot and sweet. I groaned in pleasure. "Angel of mercy, Murphy."

"That's me," she agreed. She was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a very light cotton blazer. She had circles under her eyes and her blond hair was messy. Someone must have gotten her out of bed for this one. "Detective Greene," she said.

“Lieutenant,” Greene replied, all courtesy on the surface. “I didn’t realize I’d called Special Investigations for help. Maybe someone bumped the speed dial on my phone.” He reached into a pocket and took out a cell. He regarded it gravely for a moment and then said, “Oh, wait. My mistake. You aren’t on my speed dial. I must have slipped into some kind of fugue state when I wasn’t looking.”

“Don’t worry, Sergeant,” Murphy said, smiling sweetly. “If I find out whodunit, I’ll tell you so you can get the collar.”

Greene shook his head. “This is messy enough already,” he said. “Some clown in a horror movie costume cuts a bunch of horror fans to ribbons. The press is going to make piranhas look like goldfish.”

“Yep,” Murphy said. “Seems to me you should take all the help you can get. Don’t want to screw it up in front of all those cameras.”

He gave her another flat look and then shook his head. “You aren’t exactly famous for your friendly spirit of cooperation with your fellow officers, Lieutenant.”

“I get the job done,” Murphy said easily. “I can help you. Or I can see to it that the press knows that you’re refusing assistance in finding a murderer because of departmental rivalry. Your call.”

Greene stared at her for another long minute, then said, “Does calling someone an overbearing, egotistical bitch constitute sexual harassment?”

Murphy’s smile grew sunnier. “Come to the gym sometime and we’ll discuss it.”

Greene grunted and rose, stuffing his pad and pen into his pocket. “Dresden, don’t leave town. I might need to speak to you again.”

“Won’t that be nice,” I mumbled, and sipped more coffee.

Greene handed Murphy a card. “My cell number is on it. In case you actually do want to cooperate.”

Murphy traded him for one of hers. “Ditto.”

Greene shook his head, gave her a barely polite nod, and walked off to speak to the officers near the taped-off section of floor.

“I think he likes you,” I told Murphy.

Murphy snorted. “He’s had you running in a circle, huh?”

“For an hour.” I tried not to sound too disgusted.

“It’s annoying,” she said. “But it really does work. Greene’s probably the best homicide detective in the state. If he had a personality he’d have made captain by now.”

“I don’t think he’s going to be much help on this one.”

Murphy nodded, and sat down in the chair Greene had vacated. “So. You want to give me the rundown here?”

“I haven’t even finished my coffee,” I complained. But I told her, starting with bailing Nelson out of jail and skipping over the details of the visit to Michael’s house. I told her about the attack, and how Rawlins and I had presumably cut it short.

She exhaled slowly. “So this thing must have been from the spirit world, right? If it got shot full of bullets, didn’t die, then dissolved into goo?”

“That’s a reasonable conclusion,” I said, “but I didn’t exactly have time to make a thorough analysis. It could have been anything.”

“Any chance you killed it?”

“I didn’t hit it all that hard. Must have had some kind of self-destruct.”

“Dammit,” Murphy said, missing the reference. No one loves the classics anymore. “Will it come back?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I said.

“That’s not good enough.”

I sighed and nodded. “I’ll see what I can figure out. How’s Rawlins?”

“Hospital,” she reported. “He’ll need a bunch of stitches for that cut he took.”

I grunted and rose. It was an effort, and I wobbled a little, but as soon as I got my balance I walked over to the remains of the projector on its stand. I bent down and picked up a large round tin, the one the movie reel had come in. I flipped it over and read the label.

“Hunh,” I said.

Murphy came over and frowned at the tin. “*Suburban Slasher II?*”

I nodded. “This means something.”

“Other than the death of classic cinema?”

“Movie fascist,” I said. “The guy that jumped them looked like the Reaper.”

Murphy gave me a blank look.

“The Reaper,” I told her. “Come on, don’t tell me you haven’t ever seen the Reaper. The killer from the *Suburban Slasher* films. He can’t be slain, brings death to the wicked—which includes anyone who is having sex or drinking, apparently. If that’s not classic cinema, I don’t know what is.”

“I guess I missed that one,” Murphy said.

“There have been eleven films featuring the Reaper so far,” I replied.

"I guess I missed those eleven," Murphy amended. "You think this was someone trying to look like the Reaper character?"

"Someone," I murmured with exaggerated menace. "Or some *thing*."

She gave me a level look. "How long have you been waiting to use that one?"

"Years," I said. "The opportunity doesn't come up as often as you'd think."

Murphy smiled, but it was forced, and we both knew it. The jokes didn't change the facts. Something had killed one young man only a few feet from where we sat, and the lives of at least two of the wounded hung on the skills of the doctors attending them.

"Murph," I said. "There's a theater right down the street. Run by a guy named Clark Pell. Could you find out what movie was showing there this afternoon?"

Murphy flipped to an earlier page of her notebook and said, "I already did. Something called *Hammerhands*."

"Oldie but a goodie," I said. "Ruffians push this farmer out onto train tracks and the train cuts his hands off at the wrist. They leave him for dead. But he survives, insane, straps sledgehammer heads to the stumps, and hunts them down one at a time."

"And Clark Pell was the victim beaten here earlier today," Murphy said. "Badly beaten with some kind of blunt instrument."

"Maybe it's a coincidence," I said.

She frowned. "Can someone do that? Bring movie monsters to life?"

"Sorta looks that way," I said.

"How do we stop them?" she asked.

I dragged the con schedule out of my pocket and paged through it. "The real question is, how do we stop them before tomorrow night?"

"What's tomorrow night?"

"Movie fest," I said, and held up the film schedule. "Half a dozen films showing here. Another half a dozen in Pell's theater. And most of their monsters aren't nearly as friendly as Hammerhand and the Reaper."

"God almighty," Murphy breathed. "Any chance this could be regular folks playing dress up?"

"I doubt it. But it's possible."

She nodded. "We'll let Greene cover that angle, then. Consider yourself to be on the clock for the department, Harry. What's our next move?"

“We talk to the surviving victims,” I said. “And I try to figure out how many ways there are for someone to do something this crazy.”

She nodded, and then frowned at me. “First, you get some sleep. You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Feel like I’m about to fall down.”

She nodded. “I’ll see if I can talk to Pell, if he’s even awake. I doubt we’ll get to the others before morning. Assuming they survive.”

“Right,” I said. “I’ll need to get back here and do some snooping tomorrow. With any luck, we can track down our bad guy before something else jumps off the movie screen.”

Murphy nodded and rose. She offered me a hand. I took it and she hauled me up. Murphy is a lot stronger than she looks.

“Give me a ride home?” I asked.

She already had her keys in her hand. “Do I look like your driver?”

“Thanks, Murph.”

We headed for the door. Usually I have to shorten my steps to match Murphy’s, but tonight I was so tired that she was waiting for me.

“Harry,” she said. “What if we can’t find out who is doing it in time?”

“We’ll find them,” I said.

“But if we don’t?”

“Then we fight monsters.”

Murphy took a deep breath and nodded as we stepped out into the summer night. “Damn right we do.”

Chapter Fourteen

Murphy drove me home and parked in the gravel lot next to the century-old converted boardinghouse. She killed the engine in the car, and it made those clicking noises they do. We sat there with the windows rolled down for a second. A cool breeze coming off the lake whispered through the car, soothing after the unrelenting heat of the day.

Murphy checked her rearview mirror and then scanned the street. "Who were you watching for?"

"What?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"You rubbernecked so much on the way here, I'm surprised your shoulders aren't bruising your ears."

I grimaced. "Oh, that. Someone was tailing me tonight."

"And you're just now telling me about it?"

I shrugged. "No sense worrying you over nothing. Whoever he is, he's not there now." I described the shadowy man and his car.

"Same one who ran you off the road, do you think?" she asked.

"Something tells me no," I said. "He wasn't making any effort to avoid being spotted. For all I know, he could just be a PI gathering information on me for the lawsuit."

"Christ," Murphy said. "Isn't that thing over with?"

I grimaced. "For a talk show host, Larry Fowler can really hold a grudge. He keeps doing one thing after another."

"Maybe you shouldn't have burned down his studio and shot up his car, then."

"That wasn't my fault!"

"That's for a court to decide," Murphy said in a pious tone. "You got an attorney?"

"I helped a guy find his daughter's lost dog five or six years ago. He's an attorney. He's giving me a hand with the legal process, enough so it hasn't actually bankrupted me. But it just keeps going and going."

Neither of us got out of the car.

I closed my eyes and listened to the summer night. Music played somewhere. I could hear the occasional racing engine.

“Harry?” Murph asked after a while. “Are you all right?”

“Hungry. Little tired.”

“You look like you’re hurting,” she said.

“Maybe a little achy,” I said.

“Not that kind of hurt.”

I opened my eyes and looked at her, and then away. “Oh. That.”

“That,” she agreed. “You look like you’re bleeding, somehow.”

“I’ll get over it,” I told her.

“Is this about last Halloween?”

I shrugged a shoulder.

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “There was a lot of confusion in the blackout and right after. But they found a corpse in the Field Museum that had been savaged by an animal. Lab guessed it was a large dog. They found three different blood types on the floor, too.”

“Did they?” I asked.

“And at Kent College. They found eight dead bodies there. Six of them had no discernable means of death. One had its head half severed by a surgically sharp blade. The other had taken a .44 round to the back of the head.”

I nodded.

She stared at me for a while, frowning and waiting for me to continue. Then she said, in a quiet, certain voice, “You killed them.”

My memory played some bad clips in my head. My stomach twisted. “I didn’t do the headless guy.”

Her cool, blue eyes stayed steady and she nodded. “You killed them. It’s eating at you.”

“It shouldn’t. I’ve killed a lot of things.”

“True,” Murphy said. “But they weren’t faeries or vampires or monsters this time. They were people. And you weren’t in the heat of battle when they died. You made the choice cold.”

I couldn’t lift my eyes for some reason. But I nodded and whispered, “More or less.”

She waited for me to say more, but I didn’t. “Harry,” she said. “You’re tearing yourself up over it. You’ve got to talk to someone. It doesn’t have to be me or here, but you’ve got to do it. There’s no shame in feeling bad about killing someone, not for any reason.”

I let out a short little laugh. It tasted bitter. “You’re the last person I’d expect to tell me not to feel bad about committing murder.”

She shifted uncomfortably. “Sort of surprised myself,” she said. “But dammit, Harry. You remember when I shot Agent Denton?”

“Yeah.”

“Took me some time to deal with it, too. I mean, I know he’d lost it. And he was going to kill you if I didn’t do it. But it made me feel...” She squinted out at the Chicago night. “Stained. To take a life.” She swallowed. “And those poor people the vampires had controlled at the shelter. That was even worse.”

“All of those people were trying to kill you, Murph. You had to do it. You didn’t have an option. You thought about it. You knew that when you pulled the trigger.”

“Do you think you had an option?” she asked.

I shrugged and said, “Maybe. Maybe not.” I swallowed. “The point is that I never bothered to consider it. Never hesitated. I just wanted them dead.”

She was quiet for a long time.

“What if the Council is right about me?” I asked Murphy quietly. “What if I grow into some kind of monster? One who takes life without consideration for anything but his own will. Who cares more about end than means. More about might than right. What if this is the first step?”

“Do you think it is?” Murphy asked.

“I don’t—”

“Because if you think so, Harry, then it probably is. And if you decide that it isn’t, it probably isn’t.”

“The power of positive thinking?” I asked.

“No. Free will,” she said. “You can’t change what has already happened. But you choose what to do next. Which means that you only cross over to the dark side if you choose to do it.”

“What makes you think that I won’t?” I asked.

Murphy snorted, and reached over to touch my chin lightly with the fingers of one hand. “Because I’m not an idiot. Unlike some other people in this car.”

I reached up and gripped her fingers with my right hand, squeezing gently. Her hand was steady and warm. “Careful. That was almost a compliment.”

“You’re a decent man,” Murphy said, lowering her hand without removing it from my fingers. “Painfully oblivious, sometimes. But you’ve got a good heart. It’s why you’re so hard on yourself. You’re tired, hungry, and hurting, and you saw the bad guys do something you couldn’t stop. Your morale is low. That’s all.”

Her words were simple, frank, and direct. There was no sense of false comfort to her tone, not a trace of indulgent pity. I’ve known Murphy for a while. I knew that she meant every single word. Knowing that I had her support, even in the face of violation of the laws she worked to preserve, was a sudden and vast comfort.

I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again.

Murphy is good people.

“Maybe you’re right,” I said. “Hell’s bells, I’ve got to stop feeling sorry for myself and get to work.”

“Start with food and rest,” she said. “If you don’t hear from me, assume I’ll pick you up in the morning.”

“Right,” I said.

We sat there holding hands for a minute. “Karrin?” I asked.

She looked up at me. Her eyes looked very large, very blue. I couldn’t stare at them too long. “Have you ever thought about...you know. Us?”

“Sometimes,” she said.

“Me too,” I said. “But...the timing always seems to be off, somehow.”

She smiled a little. “I noticed.”

“Do you think it’ll ever be right?”

She squeezed my hand gently, and then withdrew hers from mine. “I don’t know. Maybe sometime.” She frowned at her hand, and then said, “It would change a lot of things.”

“It would,” I said.

“You’re my friend, Harry,” Murphy said. “No matter what happens. Sometimes in the past...I haven’t really done right by you.”

“Like when you handcuffed me in my office,” I said.

“Right.”

“And when you chipped one of my teeth arresting me.”

Murphy blinked. “I chipped a tooth?”

“And when—”

“Yes, all right,” she said. She gave me a mild glare, her cheeks pink. “The point is that I should have seen that you were one of the good guys a

lot sooner than I did. And...”

I blinked at her ingenuously, and waited for her to say it.

“And I’m sorry,” she growled. “Jerk.”

That had cost her something. Murphy has more pride than is good for her. And yes, I am aware of the proverb about glass houses and stones. So I didn’t give her any more of a hard time than I already had. “Don’t go all romantic on me now, Murph.”

She smiled a little and rolled her eyes. “If we ever did get together, I’d kill you inside a week. Now, go get some rest. You’re useless to me like this.”

I nodded and swung out of the car. “In the morning, then.”

“Around eight,” she said, and pulled out and back onto the street. She called to me, “Be careful!”

I looked after the car and sighed. My feelings about Murphy were still in a hopelessly complicated tangle. Maybe I should have said something to her sooner. Shared my feelings with her sooner. Acted more swiftly, taken the initiative.

Be careful, she said.

Why did I feel like I’d been too careful already?

Chapter Fifteen

My Mickey Mouse alarm clock went off at seven, and buzzed stubbornly at me until I kicked off the covers, sat up, and shut it off. I ached all over, felt stiff all over, but that sense of overwhelming exhaustion had faded, and since I was already vertical, I got moving.

I got into the shower, and tried not to jump too much when the first shock of freezing water hit me. I've had some practice at it. I've never had a water heater last me more than a week without some kind of technical problem coming up—and that was the kind of thing you just did not want to take chances on when you have a gas heater. So my showers were always either cold or colder. Given my dating life, and the inhuman charms available to some of the beings who occasionally faced off with me, it was probably just as well.

But, especially when I had bumps and bruises and sore muscles, I wished I could have a skin-blistering hot shower like everyone else in the country.

And suddenly the water shifted from ice-cold to piping hot. It was a shock, and I actually let out a little yelp and danced around in the shower until I could redirect the shower head so that it wasn't scalding my bits and pieces. After the initial shock of the temperature change, I leaned my aching head and neck into the spray for a second, and let out a long groan. Then I said, "Dammit, I told you to stop that."

Lasciel's voice murmured in a quiet laugh under the sound of the water. The sensation of phantom fingertips dug into the wire-tight muscles at the base of my neck, easing soreness away. "You should use the technique I taught you last autumn to block out the discomfort."

"I don't need to," I said, and tried for grouchy. But the heated water and massaging fingers, illusory though they were, were simply delicious. "I'll be fine."

"Your discomfort is my discomfort, my host," she said, and sighed. "Literally, as all my perceptions can come only through your own."

"This isn't real," I said quietly. "The water isn't really hot. No one is actually massaging my neck. It's an illusion you're laying over my senses."

“Does it not feel soothing?” her disembodied voice asked. “Does it not ease the tension?”

“Yes,” I sighed.

“What matter, then? It is real enough.”

I waved a hand as though trying to brush off an annoying fly from my neck, and the sensation of those strong, steady fingers retreated. “Go on,” I said. “Hands off. I don’t want to start my day with a psychic cage match, but if you push me to it, I will.”

“As you wish,” her voice said, and the sense of presence retreated. Then paused. “My host, I note that you made no mention of the hot water.”

I grunted and mumbled something under my breath, ducked my head under the seemingly scalding water for a few seconds, and then said, “Did you pick up on what happened last night?”

“Indeed,” the fallen angel replied.

“What was your read, then?”

There was a moment of thoughtful silence, and then Lasciel responded, “That Karrin feels a certain distance between the pair of you is a professional necessity, but that she is considering that time and circumstance might someday render it irrelevant.”

I sighed. “No,” I said. “Not *that*. Stars and stones, I don’t want dating advice from a freaking helltart. I meant the things that attacked people at the convention.”

“Ah,” Lasciel said, with no trace of offense in her tone. “It was obviously the attack of a spiritual predator.”

Takes one to know one, I thought. I rolled a stiff shoulder under the hot water. “If that’s true, then the attacks weren’t about violence,” I said thoughtfully. “Which explains what I saw in that bathroom, where the old man had been attacked. Whatever did it was intent on causing fear. Causing pain. Then devouring the...what? The psychic energy it generated in the victims?”

“That is a somewhat simplistic description,” she said, “but one that is as close as I expect a mortal can come to understanding.”

“What, you’re a mortality bigot now?”

“Now and always,” she replied. “I mean no insult by it, but you should know that your ability to comprehend your environment is very strongly defined by your belief in a number of illusions. Time. Truth. Love. That

kind of thing. It isn't your fault, of course—but it does impose limits upon your ability to perceive and understand some matters."

"I'm only human," I said. "So enlighten me."

"To do so, you would have to release your hold on mortality."

I blinked and said, "I'd have to die?"

She sighed. "Again, you have only a partial understanding. But in the interest of expediency, yes. You would have to cease living."

"Then don't bother enlightening me," I said. "I have plenty of would-be teachers already." I rinsed and repeated my shampoo and made myself smell like Irish Spring. "The survivors of the attacks, then. They're going to have taken a spiritual mauling."

"If the theory is correct," Lasciel's voice responded. "If they are indeed wounded in spirit, it would seem conclusive."

I shuddered. That kind of damage showed itself in a number of ways, and none of them were pretty. I'd seen men driven to agonies of madness by spiritual attacks. Murphy had been subjected to such an assault and spent years learning to cope with the night terrors it had spawned, until the spiritual and psychological wounds had finally healed. I'd seen some who had been subjected to a psychic sandblasting by vampires of the Black Court who had become nearly mindless bodies, obeying orders, and others of the same ilk who had turned into psychotic killing machines in service to their masters.

The worst part of it all was that almost the only way for me to see something like that was to open my Sight. Which meant that every horribly mangled psyche I'd come across remained fresh and bright in my memory. Always.

The top shelf of my mental trophy case was getting crowded with hideous keepsakes.

The not-truly-hot water coursed over me, a small but suddenly significant comfort. "Go away," I told Lasciel. Then I added, "Leave me the hot water. Just this once."

"As you wish," the fallen angel's voice replied, polite satisfaction in her tone. The sense of her presence vanished entirely.

I stayed in the shower until my fingers shriveled up. Or, more accurately, I stayed there until the fingers of my right hand shriveled up. The skin of my burned left hand always looked withered and shriveled, these days. The

second I turned the water off, the full sensation of icy cold returned, and I shivered violently as I toweled off and got dressed.

I took care of Mouse and Mister's various needs, ate several leftover biscuits from the fridge for breakfast, and opened a can of Coke. After a moment's thought, I headed down to my lab and grabbed Bob's skull from the shelf.

Faint orange lights flickered in the sockets. "Hey," Bob mumbled in a sleep-slurred voice. "Where are we going?"

"Investigating," I said. I went back upstairs with the skull and dropped it into my nylon backpack. "I might need you today. But there are going to be straights around, so keep your mouth shut unless I open the pack."

"Kay," Bob said with a yawn, and the lights in the skull's eye sockets winked out again.

I strapped on the magical arsenal—my shield bracelet, the energy ring, and my silver pentacle amulet. I slipped my newly carved blasting rod into a side pocket of the pack, leaving the handle out where I could reach up behind my right ear and whip it out in a hurry. I picked up my staff and eyed my leather duster, hanging on its hook by the door. I had layered spells over the duster in an effort to provide myself with a measure of protection against various fangs and claws and bullets and such, and as a result the coat had effectively become a suit of armor.

But, like most suits of armor, it lacked its own air-conditioning system—and if I wore it around in the blazing summer heat, I'd probably die of heat prostration before anyone had the chance to bite, slice, or shoot me. Hell, even the blue jeans I was wearing would feel too heavy long before noon. The duster stayed on its hook.

That rattled me a little. I'm used to the duster, and the spells on its leather had saved my life before. It made me feel a little vulnerable to think of getting into some kind of supernatural conflict without it. So I grabbed Mouse's lead, much to the dog's tail-wagging approval, and clipped it onto his collar. "You're with me today," I told him. "I need someone to watch my back. Maybe to help me eat a hot dog later."

Mouse's tail wagged even more at the mention of hot dogs. He chuffed out a breath, nudged my hip with the side of his head in a fond gesture, and we went outside to wait for Murphy.

She pulled up and eyed Mouse warily as I opened the back door and he jumped up onto the backseat. The car rocked back and forth with his weight

and sank a little.

“He’s car-broken, right?”

Mouse wagged his tail and gave Murphy an enthusiastic, vacant doggie grin, tilting his head back and forth quizzically. It was easy for my imagination to subtitle the look: *Car-broken? What is that?*

“Wiseass,” I muttered at the dog, and got in the passenger side. “Don’t worry, Murph. We did an insane amount of work on the whole bodily function issue as soon as I realized how big he was going to get. He’ll be good.” I glared at the backseat. “Won’t you?”

Mouse gave me that same grin and puzzled tilting of his head. I frowned at him more deeply. He leaned forward to nuzzle my shoulder with his heavy muzzle, and settled down in the backseat.

Murphy sighed. “If it was any other dog, I’d make him ride in the trunk.”

“That’s right,” I said. “You have dog issues.”

“Big dog issues,” Murphy corrected me. “Just big dogs.”

“Mouse isn’t big. He’s compactly challenged.”

She gave me an arch look as she pulled out and said, “You’d fit in the trunk, too, Harry.” Then she frowned at me and said, “Your lips are blue.”

“Long shower,” I said.

She gave me a sudden, swift grin. “Wanted to keep your mind on business? I think I’ll interpret that as a compliment to my sexual appeal.”

I snorted and buckled in. “You heard anything from the hospital?”

Murphy’s smile faded and she kept her eyes on the road. She nodded without looking at me, her face impossible to read.

“Bad, huh?” I asked.

“The young man the paramedics carried off died. The girl who was already down when you came in is going to make it, but she’s in some kind of shock. Catatonic. Doesn’t focus her eyes or anything. Just lies there.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I was sort of expecting that. What about the other girl? Rosie?”

“Her injuries were painful but not life-threatening. They closed the cuts and set the bones, but when they heard she was pregnant they kept her at the hospital for observation. It looks like she’ll come through without losing the child. She’s awake and talking.”

“That’s something,” I said. “And Pell?”

“Still in ICU. He’s an old man, and his injuries were severe. They think he’ll be all right as long as there aren’t any complications. He’s groggy, but

he's conscious."

"ICU," I said. "Any chance we could talk to him somewhere else?"

"Those doctors can be real funny about not wanting people in critical condition to nip out for a walk to the vending machines," she said.

I grunted. "You might have to solo him, then. I don't dare go walking in there with all the medical equipment around."

"Even if it was just for a few minutes?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I don't have any control over when things break down." I paused and said, "Well, not exactly. I could blow out the whole floor in a few seconds, if I was trying to do it, but there's not much I can do to keep things from breaking down. Odds are good that if I was only in there for a few minutes, nothing bad would happen. But sometimes things go haywire the second I walk by them. I can't take any chances when there are people on life support."

Murphy arched a brow at me, and then nodded in understanding. "Maybe we can get you on a speaker phone or something."

"Or something." I rubbed at my eyes. "I think this is gonna be a long day."

Chapter Sixteen

When you get right down to it, all hospitals tend to look pretty much the same, but Mercy Hospital, where the victims in the attack had been taken, somehow managed to avoid the worst of the sterile, disinfected, quietly desperate quality of many others. The oldest hospital in Chicago, the Sisters of Mercy had founded the place, and it remained a Catholic institution. Thought ridiculously large when it was first built, the famous Chicago fires of the late nineteenth century filled Mercy to capacity. Doctors were able to handle six or seven times as many patients as any other hospital during the emergency, and everyone stopped complaining about how uselessly big the place was.

There was a cop on guard in the hallway outside the victims' rooms, in case the whacko costumed killer came after them again. He might also be there to discourage the press, whenever they inevitably smelled the blood in the water and showed up for the frenzy. It did not surprise me much at all to see that the cop on guard was Rawlins. He was unshaven and still had his SplatterCon!!! name tag on. One of his forearms was bound up in neatly taped white bandages, but other than that he looked surprisingly alert for someone who had been injured and then worked all through the night. Or maybe his weathered features just took such things in stride.

"Dresden," Rawlins said from his seat. He'd dragged a chair to the hall's intersection. He was dedicated, not insane. "You look better. 'Cept for those bruises."

"The best ones always show up the day after," I said.

"God's truth," he agreed.

Murphy looked back and forth between us. "I guess you'll work with anybody, Harry."

"Shoot," Rawlins drawled, smiling. "Is that little Karrie Murphy I hear down there? I didn't bring my opera glasses to work today."

She grinned back. "What are you doing down here? Couldn't they find a real cop to watch the hall?"

He snorted, stuck his legs out, and crossed his ankles. I noted that for all of his indolent posture, his holstered weapon was clear and near his right

hand. He regarded Mouse with pursed lips and said, "Don't think dogs are allowed in here."

"He's a police dog," I told him.

Rawlins casually offered Mouse the back of one hand. Mouse sniffed it politely and his tail thumped against my legs. "Hmmm," Rawlins drawled. "Don't think I've seen him around the station."

"The dog's with me," I said.

"The wizard's with me," Murphy said.

"Makes him a police dog, all right," Rawlins agreed. He jerked his head down the hall. "Miss Marcella is down that way. They got Pell and Miss Becton in ICU. The boy they brought in didn't make it."

Murphy grimaced. "Thanks, Rawlins."

"You're welcome, little girl," Rawlins said, his deep voice grandfatherly.

Murphy gave him a brief glare, and we went down the hall to visit the first of the victims.

It was a single-bed room. Molly was there, in a chair beside the bed, where she had evidently been asleep while mostly sitting up. By the time I got in the room and shut the door, she was looking around blearily and mopping at the corner of her mouth with her sleeve. In the bed beside her was Rosie, small and pale.

Molly touched the girl's arm and gently roused her. Rosie looked up at us and blinked a few times.

"Good morning," Murphy said. "I hope you were able to get some rest."

"A l-little," the girl said, her voice raspy. She looked around, but Molly was already passing her a glass of water with a straw in it. Rosie sipped and then laid her head tiredly back, then murmured a thank you to Molly. "A little," she said again, her voice stronger. "Who are you?"

"My name is Karrin Murphy. I'm a detective for the Chicago Police Department." She gestured at me, and took a pen and a small notebook from her hip pocket. "This is Harry Dresden. He's working with us on the case. Do you mind if he's here?"

Rosie licked her lips and shook her head. Her uninjured hand moved fitfully, stroking over the bandages on the opposite forearm in nervous motions. Murphy engaged the girl in quiet conversation.

"What are you doing here?" Molly asked me in a half whisper.

"Looking into things," I replied as quietly. "There's something spooky going on."

Molly chewed on her lip. "You're sure?"

"Definitely," I said. "Don't worry. I'll find whatever hurt your friend."

"Friends," Molly said, emphasizing the plural. "Have you heard anything about Ken? Rosie's boyfriend? No one will tell us anything."

"He the kid that they took from the scene?"

Molly nodded anxiously. "Yes."

I glanced at Murphy's back and didn't say anything.

Molly got it. Her face went white and she whispered, "Oh, God. She'll be so..." She folded her arms and shook her head several times. Then she said, "I've got to..." She looked around, and in a louder voice said, "I'm dying for coffee. Anyone else need some?"

Nobody did. Molly picked up her purse and turned around to walk for the door. In doing so, she brushed within a foot or two of Mouse. Instead of growling, though, Mouse leaned his head affectionately against her leg as she went by, and cadged a few ear scratches from the girl before she left.

I frowned at Mouse after Molly had gone. "Are you going bipolar on me?"

He settled down again immediately. Murphy went on asking Rosie fairly predictable questions about the attack.

The clock was running. I pushed the question about Mouse's odd behavior aside for the moment, and let Mouse watch the door while I reached for my Sight.

It was a slight effort of concentration to push away the concerns of the material world, like aches and pains and bruises and why my dog was growling at Molly, and then the mere light and shadow and color of the everyday world dissolved into the riot of flowing energy and currents of light and power that lay beneath the surface.

Murphy looked like Murphy had always looked beneath my Sight. She appeared almost as herself, but clearer, somehow, her eyes flashing, and she was garbed in a quasi angelic tunic of white, stained in places with the blood and mud of battle. A short, straight sword, its blade made of almost viciously bright white light, hung beneath her left arm, where I knew her light cotton blazer hid her gun in its shoulder rig. She looked at me and I could see her physical face as a vague shadow beneath the surface of the aspect I saw now. She smiled at me, a sunny light in it, though her body's face remained a neutral mask. I was seeing the life, the emotion behind her face, now.

I shied away from staring at her lest I make eye contact for too long—but that smile, at least, was something I wouldn't mind remembering.

Rosie was another story.

The physical Rosie was a small, slight, pale young woman with thin, frail features. The Rosie my Sight revealed to me was entirely different. Pale skin became a pallid, dirty, leathery coating. Large dark eyes looked even bigger, and flicked around with darting, avian jerks. They were furtive eyes, giving her the dangerous aspect of a stray dog or maybe some kind of rat—the eyes of a craven, desperate survivor.

Winding veins of some kind of green-black energy pulsed beneath her skin, particularly around the inside bend of her left arm. The writhing strings of energy ended at the surface of her skin, in dozens of tiny, mindlessly opening and closing little mouths—the needle tracks I'd seen the night before. Her right hand kept darting back and forth over the other arm as if trying to scratch a persistent itch. But her fingers couldn't touch. There was a kind of sheath of sparkling motes around her hands, almost like mittens, and she couldn't actually touch those mindlessly hungry mouths. Worse, there were what looked almost like burn marks on her temples—small, black, neat holes, as if someone had bored a hot needle through the skin and skull beneath. There was a kind of phantom blood around the injuries, but her eyes were wide and vague, as if she didn't even notice them.

What the hell? I had seen the victims of spiritual attacks before, and they'd never been pretty. Usually they looked like the victim of a shark attack, or someone who had been mauled by a bear. I hadn't ever seen someone with damage like Rosie's. It looked almost like some kind of demented surgeon had gone after her with a laser scalpel. That pushed the weirdometer a couple of clicks beyond the previous record.

My head started pounding and I pushed the Sight away. I leaned my hip against the wall for a second and rubbed at my temples until the throbbing subsided and I was sure that my normal vision had returned.

"Rosie," I said, cutting into the middle of one of Murphy's questions. "When was your last fix?"

Murphy glanced over her shoulder at me, frowning. Behind her, the girl gave me a guilty look, her eyes shifting to one side. "What do you mean?" Rosie asked.

"I figure it's heroin," I said. I kept my voice pitched to the barest level needed to be audible. "I saw the tracks on you last night."

"I'm diab—" she began.

"Oh please," I said, and let the annoyance show in my voice. "You think I'm that stupid?"

"Harry," Murphy began. There was a warning note in her voice, but my head hurt too much to let it stop me.

"Miss Marcella, I'm trying to help you. Just answer the question."

She was silent for a long moment. Then she said, "Two weeks."

Murphy arched a brow, and her gaze went back to the girl.

"I quit," she said. "Really. I mean, once I heard that I was pregnant...I can't do that anymore."

"Really?" I asked.

She looked up and her eyes were direct, though nothing like confident. "Yes. I'm done with it. I don't even miss it. The baby's more important than that."

I pursed my lips and then nodded. "All right."

"Miss Marcella," Murphy said, "thank you for your time."

"Wait," she said, as Murphy turned away. "Please. No one will tell us anything about Ken. Do you know how he's doing? What room he's in?"

"Ken's your boyfriend?" Murphy asked in a careful tone.

"Yes. I saw them load him in the ambulance last night. I know he's here..." Rosie stared at Murphy for a second, and then her face grew even more pale. "Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no."

I was glad I'd gotten a look at her before she found out about her boyfriend. My imagination provided me with a nice image of watching the emotional wounds open up as though an invisible sword had begun slicing into her, but at least I didn't have to see it with my Sight, too.

"I'm very sorry," Murphy said quietly. Her voice was steady, her eyes compassionate.

Molly picked that moment to return with a cup of coffee. She took one look at Rosie, put the coffee down, and then hurried to her. Rosie broke down in choking sobs. Molly immediately sat on the bed beside her, and hugged her while she wept.

"We'll be in touch," Murphy said quietly. "Come on, Harry."

Mouse stared at Rosie with a mournful expression, and I had to tug on his leash a couple of times to get him moving. We departed and headed for

the nearest stairwell. Murphy headed for ICU, which was in the neighboring building.

"I didn't see the track marks on her last night," she said after a minute. "You pushed her pretty hard."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it might mean something. I don't know what, yet. But we didn't have time to waste listening to her denial."

"She wasn't straight with you," Murphy said. "No one kicks heroin that fast. Two weeks. She should still be feeling some of the withdrawal."

"Yeah," I said. We went outside to go to the other building. Bright morning sunlight made my head hurt even more, and the sidewalk began revolving. I stopped to wait for my eyes to adjust to the light.

"You all right?" Murphy asked.

"It's hard. Seeing someone like that," I said quietly. "And she's probably the least mangled of the three."

She frowned. "What did you see?"

I tried to tell her what Rosie had looked like. It sounded surreal and garbled, even to me. I didn't think I had conveyed it very well.

"You look terrible," she said when I finished.

"It'll pass. Just got this damned headache." I shook my head and focused on taking steady breaths until I could force the pain to recede. "Okay. I'm good."

"Did you learn what you were hoping for?" Murphy asked.

"Not yet," I said. "I'll need to look at the others, too. See if the injuries on them give me some kind of pattern."

"They're in ICU."

"Yeah. I need to find a way to them without getting too close to someone on life support. I can't stay around to talk. I'll need maybe a minute, ninety seconds to look at them both. Then I'll get out. Let you talk."

Murphy took a deep breath and said, "You sure you should do this?"

"No," I told her. "But I can't help you if I don't get to look at them. I can't do that any other way. If I can stay calm and relaxed, it shouldn't hurt anything for me to be there for a minute or two."

"But you can't be sure."

"When can I?"

She frowned at me, but nodded. "Let me go ahead of you," she said. "Wait here."

I found a chair, and took it down the hall and sat down with Mouse and Rawlins. We shared a companionable silence. I leaned my head back against the wall and closed my eyes.

My headache finally began to fade away just as Murphy returned. "All right," she said quietly. "We need to go down a floor and then use the back stairs. A nurse is going to let us in. You won't have to walk past any of the other rooms before you get to our witnesses."

"Okay," I said, and stood up. "Let's get this over with."

Chapter Seventeen

I wasted no time. We went up the stairs, and I was already preparing my Sight. A nurse opened the door to the stairway, and I simply stepped into the first door on my left—the catatonic girl’s, Miss Becton’s. I stepped into the doorway and raised my Sight.

She was a young girl, still in her late teens, nervously thin, her hair a shocking color of red that for some reason did not strike me as a dye job. She lay on her front, her head turned to the side, muddy brown eyes open and blank. Her back had been covered in bandages.

As my Sight focused on her, I saw more. The girl’s psyche had been savagely mauled, and as I watched her, phantom bruises darkened a few patches of skin that remained, and blood and watery fluids oozed from the rest of her torn flesh. Her mouth was set in a continual, silent wail, and beneath the real-world glaze, her eyes were wide with terror. If there’d been enough left of her behind those eyes, Miss Becton would have been screaming.

My stomach rolled and I barely spotted a trash can in time to throw up into it.

Murphy crouched down at my side, her hand on my back. “Harry? Are you okay?”

Anger and empathy and grief warred for first place in my thoughts. Across the room, I was dimly conscious of a clock radio warbling to life and dying in a puff of smoke. The room’s fluorescent lights began to flicker as the violent emotions played hell with the aura of magic around me.

“No,” I said in a vicious, half-strangled growl. “I’m *not* okay.”

Murphy stared at me for a second, and then looked at the girl. “Is she...”

“She isn’t coming back,” I said.

I spat a few times into the trash can and stood up. My headache started to return. The girl’s terrified eyes stayed bright and clear in my imagination. She’d been out for a fun time. A favorite movie. Maybe coffee or dinner with friends afterward. She sure as hell hadn’t woken up yesterday morning and wondered if today would be the day some kind of nightmarish *thing* would rip away her sanity.

“Harry,” Murphy said again, her voice very gentle. “You didn’t do this to her.”

“Dammit,” I said. I sounded bitter. She found my right hand with hers and I closed my fingers around hers with a kind of quiet desperation. “Dammit, Murph. I’m going to find this thing and kill it.”

Her hand was steady and strong, like her voice. “I’ll help.”

I nodded and held tight to her hand for a minute. There wasn’t any tension in that contact, no quivering sensation of excitement. Murphy was human and alive. She held my hand to remind me that I was too. I somehow managed to push the sense of visceral horror I’d seen filling the girl from my immediate thoughts, until I felt steadier. I squeezed her hand once and released it.

“Come on,” I said, my voice rough. “Pell.”

“Are you sure you don’t need a minute?”

“It won’t help,” I said. I gestured at the radio and the lights. “I need to get this over with and leave.”

She chewed on her lip but nodded at me, and led me to the door across the hall. I didn’t want to do it, but I hauled up my Sight again and braced myself as I followed on Murphy’s heels and Looked at Clark Pell.

Pell was a sour-looking old cuss made out of shoe leather and gristle. One arm and both legs were in casts, and he was in traction. One side of his face was swollen with bruising. A plastic tube for oxygen ran beneath his nose. Bandages swathed his head, though bits of coarse grey hair stuck out. One eye was swollen mostly shut. The other was open, dark, and glittering.

Beyond the physical surface, his wounds were very nearly as dire as those the girl had suffered. He had been brutally beaten. Phantom bruises slid around his wrinkled skin, and the shapes of distorted bones poked disquietingly at the surface. And I saw something about the old man, too. Beneath the shoe leather and gristle, there were *more* shoe leather and gristle. And iron. The old man had been badly beaten, but it wasn’t the first such he had endured—physically or spiritually. He was a fighter, a survivor. He was afraid, but he was also angry and defiant.

Whatever had done this to him hadn’t gotten what it wanted—not like it had with the girl. It had to settle for a physical beating when its attack hadn’t elicited the terror and anguish it had expected. The old man had faced it, and he didn’t have any power of his own, beyond a lifetime of

stubborn will. If he'd done it, as painful and as frightening as it must have been, I could steel myself against Looking at the aftermath.

I released my Sight slowly and took a deep breath. Murphy, poised beside me as if she expected me to abruptly collapse, tilted her head and peered at me.

"I'm all right," I told her quietly.

Pell made a weak but rude sound. "Whiner. Not even a cast."

I faced the old man and said, "Who did this to you."

He shook his head, a feeble motion. "Crazy."

Murphy started to say something but I raised my hand and shook my head at her, and she fell silent, waiting.

"Sir," I said to Pell. "I swear to you. I'm not a cop. I'm not a doctor. I think you saw something strange."

He stared at me, his one eye narrowed.

"Didn't you?" I asked quietly.

"Ha...H-h—" he tried to say, but the word broke into a wracking, quiet cough.

I held up my hand and waited for him to recover. Then I said, "Hammerhands."

Pell's lip lifted, a faint little sneer. His good hand moved weakly, and I stepped over closer to him.

"You told Greene it was someone dressed like Hammerhands," I guessed.

Pell closed his eye tiredly. "Pretty much."

I nodded. "But it wasn't just a costume," I said quietly. "This was something more."

Pell gave a slow shudder, before opening his eye again, dull with fatigue. "It was *him*," the old man whispered. "Don't know how. Don't make no sense. But...you could feel it."

"I believe you," I told him.

He watched me for a second and then nodded, closing his eye. "Thing is. That was the only damn movie ever scared me. Wasn't even all that good." He gave a weak shake of his head and said, "Buzz off."

"Thank you," I told him quietly. Then I turned and walked toward the door.

Murphy followed at my side, and we headed back down the stairs. "Harry?" she asked. "What was that?"

"Pell," I said. "He gave us what we needed."

“He did?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think he did. This thing has got to be some kind of phobophage.”

“A what?”

“It’s a spiritual entity that feeds on fear. It attacks in order to scare people, and feeds on the emotion.”

“It didn’t give Pell those broken bones by shouting ‘boo!’” Murphy said.

“Yeah. It’s got to manifest a physical body in order to come to the real world. Pretty standard for all those demon types.”

“How do we beat it?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know yet. First I have to find out what kind of phobophage it is. But I’ve got a place to pick up a trail now. There are only going to be so many beings who could have crossed over to Chicago from the Nevernever to do what this thing did.”

We emerged into the sunshine and I stopped for a minute, lifting my face up to the light.

The horror and misery I’d seen on the victims remained in place, a clear and terrible image, but the sunlight and the equally sharp memory of old Pell’s defiance took the edge off.

“You going to be all right?” Murphy asked.

“I think so,” I said quietly.

“Can you tell me what you saw?”

I did, in as few words as I could.

She listened, and then nodded slowly. “It hardly seems like what happened to them happened to Rosie.”

“Maybe Rawlins and I got there in time,” I said. “Maybe it hadn’t had time to do more than a little foreplay.”

“Or maybe there’s another reason,” Murphy said.

“Remind me to lecture you about the interest rate on borrowed trouble,” I said. “Simplest explanation is the one to go with until we find out something to the contrary.”

Murphy nodded. “If this creature hit the convention twice, it will probably do it again. Seems to me that maybe we should advise them to close it down. No convention, no attacks, right?”

“Too late for that,” I said.

She tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

“The creature feeds on fear. It’s attracted to it,” I said. “If they shut down the convention, it will scare a lot of people.”

“News reports will do that, too.”

“Not the same way,” I said. “A news report might unsettle some folks. But the people at the convention here, the ones who knew the victims, who were in the same buildings—it will hit them harder. It will make what happened here something dangerous. Something real.”

“If the attacker is that dangerous, they *should* be afraid,” Murphy said.

“Except that intense fear will attract the attacker again,” I said. “In fact, enough of it would attract *more* predators of the same nature.”

“More?” Murphy said, her voice sharp.

“Like blood in the water draws in sharks,” I said. “Only instead of being at the convention, the targets will be scattered all over Chicago. Right now, the only advantage we have is that we know generally where the thing is going to strike again. If the convention closes, we lose that advantage.”

“And the next chance we get to pick up its trail will be when the next corpse turns up.” Murphy shook her head. “What do you need from me?”

“For now, a ride home,” I said. “I’ll have some consulting to do, and…” I suddenly ground my teeth. “Dammit, I almost forgot.”

“What?”

“I’ve got a lunch meeting I can’t miss.”

“More important than this?” she asked.

“I can’t let it slide,” I said. “Council stuff. Maybe important.”

She shook her head. “You take too much responsibility on yourself, Harry. You’re just one man. A good man, but you’re still only human.”

“This is what happens when I don’t wear the coat,” I opined. “People start thinking I’m not a superhero.”

She snorted and we started back toward her car. “I’m serious,” she said. “You can’t be everywhere at once. You can’t stop all the bad things that are going to happen.”

“Doesn’t mean someone shouldn’t try,” I said.

“Maybe. But you take it personal. You tear yourself up over it. Like with that girl just now.” She shook her head. “I hate to see you like that. You’ve got worries enough without beating yourself up for things you didn’t do.”

I shrugged and fell quiet until we got back to the car. Then I said, “I just can’t stand it. I can’t stand seeing people get hurt like that. I hate it.”

She regarded me steadily and nodded. “Me too.”

Mouse thumped his head against my leg and leaned on me so that I could feel his warmth.

That settled, we all got into Murphy's car, so that I could track down I knew not what, just as soon as I got done opening an entirely new can of worms with the Summer Knight.

Chapter Eighteen

At my request, Murphy dropped me off a couple of blocks from home so that I could give Mouse at least a little chance to stretch his legs. He seemed appreciative and walked along sniffing busily, his tail fanning the air. I kept a watch out behind me, meanwhile, but my unknown tail did not appear. I kept an eye out for any other people or vehicles that might have been following me, in case he was working with a team, but I didn't spot anyone suspicious. That didn't stop me from keeping a paranoid eye over my shoulder until we made it back to the old boardinghouse, and I went down the stairs to my apartment door.

I muttered my defensive wards down, temporarily neutralizing powerful constructions of magic that I had placed around my apartment shortly after the beginning of the war with the Red Court. I opened the dead bolt on the steel door, twisted the handle, and then slammed my shoulder into the door as hard as I could to open it.

The door flew open to a distance of five or six whole inches. I kicked it a few times to open it the rest of the way, then tromped in with Mouse and looked up to find the barrel of a chopped-down shotgun six inches from my face.

"Those things are illegal, you know," I said.

Thomas scowled at me from the other end of the shotgun and lowered the weapon. I heard a metallic click as he put the safety back on. "You've got to get that door fixed. Every time you come in it sounds like an assault team."

"Boy," I replied, letting Mouse off his lead. "One little siege and you get all paranoid."

"What can I say." He turned and slipped the shotgun into his bulging sports bag, which sat on the floor by the door. "I never counted on starring in my own personal zombie movie."

"Don't kid yourself," I said. Mister flew across the room and pitched all thirty pounds of himself into a friendly shoulder block against my legs. "It was my movie. You were a spear-carrier. A supporting role, tops."

"It's nice to be appreciated," he said. "Beer?"

“Sure.”

Thomas sauntered over to the icebox. He was wearing jeans, sneakers, and a white cotton T-shirt. I frowned at the sports bag. His trunk, an old military-surplus footlocker, sat on the ground beside the bag, padlocked shut. Between the trunk and the bag, I figured pretty much every material possession he owned now sat on the floor by my door. He came back over to me with a couple of cold brown bottles of Mac’s ale, and flicked the tops off of both of them at the same time with his thumbs. “Mac would kill you if he knew you were chilling it.”

I took my bottle, studying his face, but his expression gave away little. “Mac can come over here and install air-conditioning, then, if he wants me to drink it warm in the middle of summer.”

Thomas chuckled. We clinked bottles and drank.

“You’re leaving,” I said a minute later.

He took another sip, and said nothing.

“You weren’t going to tell me,” I said.

He rolled a shoulder in a shrug. Then he nodded at an envelope on the fireplace’s mantel. “My new address and phone number. There’s some money in there for you.”

“Thomas...” I said.

He swigged beer and shook his head. “No, take it. You offered to let me stay with you until I got on my feet. I’ve been here almost two years. I owe you.”

“No,” I said.

He frowned. “Harry, please.”

I stared at him for a minute, and struggled with a bunch of conflicting emotions. Part of me was childishly relieved that I would have my tiny apartment to myself again. A much larger part of me felt suddenly empty and worried. Still another part felt a sense of excitement and happiness for Thomas. Ever since he started crashing on my couch, Thomas had been recovering from wounds of his own. For a while there, I had feared that despair and self-loathing were going to cause him to implode, and I had somehow known that his desire to get out on his own again was a sign of recovery. Part of that recovery, I was sure, was Thomas regaining a measure of pride and self-confidence. That’s why he’d left the money on the mantel. Pride. I couldn’t turn down the money without taking that pride from him.

Except for scattered memories of my father, Thomas was the only blood family I'd ever had. Thomas had faced danger and death beside me without hesitation, had guarded me in my sleep, tended me when I'd been injured, and once in a while he'd even cooked. We got on each other's nerves sometimes, sure, but that hadn't ever altered the fundamental fact of who we were to one another.

We were brothers.

Everything else was temporary.

I met his eyes and asked, quietly, "Are you going to be all right?"

He smiled a little and shrugged. "I think so."

I tilted my head. "Where'd the money come from?"

"My job."

I lifted my eyebrows. "You found a job you could hold?"

He winced a little.

"Sorry," I said. "But...I know you'd had so much trouble." Specifically, he'd been subjected to the amorous attentions of various fellow employees who had been drawn to him to such a degree that it had practically been assault. Being an incubus was probably easier at night clubs and celebrity parties than at a drive-through or a cash register. "You found something?"

"Something without people," he said. He smiled easily as he spoke, but I sensed an undercurrent of deception in it. He wasn't telling me the whole truth. "I've been there a while."

"Yeah?" I asked. "Where?"

He evaded me effortlessly. "A place down off Lake View. I've finally earned a little extra. I just wanted to pay you back."

"You must be getting all kinds of overtime," I said. "As near as I can figure it, you've been putting in eighty-and ninety-hour weeks."

He shrugged, his smile a mask. "Working hard."

I took another sip of beer (which was excellent, even cold) and thought it over. If he didn't want to talk about it, he wasn't going to talk about it. Pushing him wouldn't make him any more likely to tell me. I didn't get the sense that he was in trouble, and while he had one hell of a poker face, I'd lived with him long enough to see through it most of the time. Thomas hadn't ever supported himself before. Now that he was sure he could do it, it had become something he valued.

Getting out on his own was something he needed to do. I wouldn't be doing him any favors by interfering.

“You sure you’ll be okay?” I asked him.

Something showed through the mask, then—embarrassment. “I’ll be all right. It’s past time for me to get out on my own.”

“Not if you aren’t ready,” I said.

“Harry, come on. So far we’ve been lucky. The Council hasn’t noticed me here. But with all of your Warden stuff, sooner or later somebody’s going to show up and find you rooming with a White Court vampire.”

I grimaced. “That would be a mess,” I agreed. “But I don’t mind chancing it if you need the time.”

“And I don’t mind getting out on my own to avoid making trouble for you with the Council,” he said. “Besides, I’m just covering my own ass. I don’t want to cross them, myself.”

“I wouldn’t let them—”

Thomas burst out in a brief, genuine laugh. “Christ, Harry. You’re my brother, not my mother. I’ll be fine. Now that I won’t be here to make you look bad, maybe you can finally start having girls over again.”

“Bite me, prettyboy,” I said. “You need any help moving or anything?”

“Nah.” He finished the beer. “I just have one box and one bag. Cab’s on the way.” He paused. “Unless you need my help with a case or something. I’ve got until Monday to move in.”

I shook my head. “I’m working with SI on this one, so I’ve got plenty of support. I think I can get things locked down by tonight.”

Thomas gave me a flat look. “Now you’ve done it.”

“What?” I asked.

“You predicted quick victory. Now it’s going to get hopelessly complicated. Jesus, don’t you know any better than that by now?”

I grinned at him. “You’d think that I would.”

I finished my beer and offered my brother my hand. He gripped it. “If you need anything, call me,” he said.

“Ditto.”

“Thank you, little brother,” he said quietly.

I blinked my eyes a couple of times. “Yeah. My couch is always open. Unless there’s a girl over.”

Outside, wheels crunched on gravel and a car horn sounded.

“There’s my ride,” he said. “Oh. Do you mind if I borrow the shotgun? Just until I can replace it.”

“Go ahead,” I told him. “I’ve still got my .44.”

“Thanks.” He bent over and swung the heavy footlocker onto one shoulder without effort. He picked up the sports bag, slung the strap over his other shoulder, and opened the door easily with one hand. He glanced back, winked at me, and shut the door behind him.

I stared at the closed door for a minute. Car doors opened and closed. Wheels crunched as the cab drove away, and my apartment suddenly seemed a couple of sizes too large. Mouse let out a long sigh and came over to me to nudge his head underneath my hand. I scratched his ears for a minute and said, “He’ll be all right. Don’t worry about him.”

Mouse sighed again.

“I’ll miss him too,” I told the dog. Then I shook myself and told Mouse, “Don’t get comfortable. We’re going to go visit Mac. You can meet the Summer Knight.”

I went around getting everything I needed for a formal meeting with the Summer Knight, called another cab, and sat in my too-quiet apartment wondering what it was my brother was hiding from me.

Chapter Nineteen

McAnally's pub is on the bottom floor of a building not too far from my office. Chicago being what it is—essentially a giant swamp with a city sinking into it—the building had settled over the years, and to enter the pub you had to come in the door and take a couple of steps down. It's a low-ceilinged room, or at least it's always felt that way to me, and it offers the added attraction of several whirling ceiling fans at my eye level, just as I come in the door, and after stepping down into the room they're still uncomfortably close to my head.

There's a sign Mac's got hanging up at the door that reads ACCORDED NEUTRAL GROUND. It means that the place was supposed to be a no-combat zone, under the terms laid out in the Unseelie Accords, the most recent and influential set of principles agreed upon by most of the various nations of the supernatural maybe ten or twelve years ago. By the terms of the Accords, there's no fighting allowed between members of opposing nations in the bar, and we're not supposed to attempt to provoke anybody, either. If things do get hostile, the Accords say you have to take it outside or risk censure by the signatory nations.

More importantly, at least to me, Mac was a friend. When I came to his place to eat, I considered myself a guest, and he my host. I'd abide by his declared neutrality out of simple respect, but it was good to know that the Accords were there in the background. Not every member of the supernatural community is as polite and neighborly as me.

Mac's place is one big room. There are a baker's dozen of thick wooden support pillars spread through the room, each of them carved with figures from Old World nursery tales. There's a bar with thirteen stools, thirteen tables spread irregularly throughout the room, and the whole place has an informal, comfortable, asymmetrical sort of feel to it.

I came through the door armed for bear and projecting an attitude to match. I bore my staff in my left hand, and I'd slipped my new blasting rod, a shaft of wood two feet long and as thick as my two thumbs together, through my belt. My shield bracelet hung on my left hand, my force ring

was on my right, and Mouse walked on my right side on his lead, looking huge and sober and alert.

A couple of people inside looked at my face and immediately tried to look like they had no interest in me. I wasn't in a bad mood, but I wanted to look that way. Since the war with the Red Court had gotten rolling, I had learned the hard way that predators, human and otherwise, sense fear and look for weakness. So I walked into the place like I was hoping to kick someone in the neck, because it was a hell of a lot easier to discourage potential predators ahead of time than it was to slug it out with them when they followed me out afterward.

I crossed the room to the bar, and Mac nodded at me. Mac was a lean man somewhere between thirty and fifty. He wore his usual dark clothes and spotless white apron while simultaneously managing all the bartending and a big wood-burning grill where he cooked various dishes for the customers. The summer heat was fairly well blunted by the shade and the fans and the partially subterranean nature of the room, but there were still dark spots of sweat on his clothes and beading along the bare skin of his scalp.

Mac knew what the tough-guy face was about, and it clearly didn't bother him. He nodded to me as I sat down on a stool.

"Mac. You got any cold beer back there somewhere?"

He gave me an unamused look.

I leaned my staff on the bar, lifted both hands in a placating gesture, and said, "Kidding. But tell me you've got cold lemonade. It's a zillion degrees out there."

He answered with a glass of lemonade cooled with his patented lemonade ice cubes, so that you could drink it cold and not have it get watered down, all at the same time. Mac is pretty much a genius when it comes to drinks. And his steak sandwiches should be considered some kind of national resource.

"Business?" he asked me.

I nodded. "Meeting with Fix."

Mac grunted and went out to a corner table, one with a clear view of the door. He nudged it out a bit from the wall, polished it with a cloth, and straightened the chairs around it. I nodded my thanks to him and settled down at the table with my lemonade.

I didn't have long to wait. A couple of minutes before noon, the Summer Knight opened the door and came in.

Fix had grown, and I mean that literally. He'd been about five foot three, maybe an inch or so higher. Now he had towered up to at least five nine. He'd been a wiry little guy with white-blond hair, and most of that remained true. The wire had thickened to lean cable, but the shock of spikes he'd worn as a hairdo had gotten traded in on a more typical cut for faerie nobles—a shoulder-length do. Fix hadn't been a good-looking guy, and the extra height and muscle and the hair did absolutely nothing to change that. What had changed was his previous manner, which had been approximately equal parts nervous and cheerful.

The Summer Knight projected confidence and strength. They shone from him like light from a star. When he opened the door, the dim shadows retreated somewhat, and a whispering breeze that smelled of pine and honeysuckle rolled through the room. The air around him did something to the light, throwing it back cleaner, more pure, more fierce than it had been before it touched him.

Fix wasn't putting on a face, like I had. This was what he had become: the Summer Knight, mortal champion of the Seelie Court, a thunderstorm in blue jeans and a green cotton shirt. His gaze went first to Mac, and he gave the barkeep a polite little bow of respect. Then he turned to me, grinned, and nodded. "Harry."

"Fix," I said. "Been a while. You've grown."

He looked down at himself and looked briefly like the flustered young man I had first met. "It sort of snuck up on me."

"Life has a way of doing that," I agreed.

"I hope you don't mind. Someone else wanted to speak to you, too."

He turned his head and said something, and a breath later the Summer Lady entered the tavern.

Lily had never been hard on the eyes. The daughter of one of the Sidhe and a mortal, she'd had the looks usually reserved for magazines and movie stars. But, like Fix, she had grown; not physically, though a somewhat juvenile eye might have made certain comparisons to the past and somehow found them even more appealing. What had changed most was the bashful uncertainty that had filled her every word and movement. The old Lily had hardly been able to take care of herself. This was the Summer Lady, youngest of the Seelie Queens, and when she came in the room, the

whole place suddenly seemed more alive. The lingering taste of lemonade on my tongue became more intensely sour and sweet. I could hear every whisper of wind around every lazily spinning fan blade in the room, and all of them murmured gentle music together. She wore a simple sundress of green, starkly contrasting the silken waterfall of purest white tresses that fell to her waist.

More than that, she carried around her a sense of purpose, a kind of quiet, gentle strength, something as steady and warming and powerful as summer sunlight. Her face, too, had gained character, the awkward shyness in her eyes replaced with a kind of gentle perception; a continual, quiet laughter leavened with just a touch of sadness. She stepped forward, between two of the carved wooden columns, and the flowers wrought into the wood upon them twitched and then burst into sudden blooms of living color.

Everyone there, myself included, stopped breathing for a second.

Mac recovered first. "Lily," he said, and bowed his head to her. "Good to see you."

She smiled warmly at his use of her name. "Mac," she replied. "Do you still make those lemonade ice cubes?"

"Two," Fix said, grinning more broadly. He offered his arm to Lily, and she laid her hand upon it, both gestures so familiar to them that they didn't need to think about them anymore. They came over to the table, and I rose politely until Fix had seated Lily. Then we mere menfolk sat down again. Mac came with drinks and departed.

"So," Fix said. "What's up, Harry?"

Lily sipped lemonade through a straw. I tried not to stare and drool. "Um. I've been asked to get in touch with you," I said. "After the Red Court's attack last year, when they encroached on Faerie territory, we were kind of expecting a response. We were wondering why there hadn't been one."

"We meaning the Council?" Lily asked quietly. Her voice was calm, but something just under its surface warned me that the answer might be important.

"We meaning me and some people I know. This isn't exactly, ah, official."

Fix and Lily exchanged a look. She nodded once, and Fix exhaled and said, "Good. Good, I was hoping that would be the case."

“I am not permitted to speak for the Summer Court to the White Council,” Lily explained. “But you have a prior claim of friendship to both myself and my Knight. And there is nothing to prevent me from speaking to an old friend regarding troubled times.”

I glanced back and forth between them for a moment before I said, “So why haven’t the Sidhe laid the smack down on the Red Court?”

Lily sighed. “A complicated matter.”

“Just start at the beginning and explain it from there,” I suggested.

“Which beginning?” she asked. “And whose?”

I felt my eyebrows arch up. “Hell’s bells, Lily. I wasn’t expecting the usual Sidhe word games from you.”

Calm, remote beauty covered her face like a mask. “I know.”

“Seems to me that you’re a couple of points in the red when it comes to favors given and received,” I said. “Between that mess in Oklahoma and your predecessor.”

“I know,” she said again, her expression showing me less than nothing.

I leaned back into my chair for a second, glaring at her, feeling that same old frustration rising. Damn, but I hated trying to deal with the Sidhe. Summer or Winter, they were both an enormous pain in the ass.

“Harry,” Fix said with gentle emphasis. “She isn’t always free to speak.”

“Like hell she isn’t,” I said. “She’s the Summer Lady.”

“But Titania is the Summer Queen,” Fix told me. “And if you’ll forgive me for pointing out something so obvious, it wasn’t so long ago that you murdered Titania’s daughter.”

“What does that have to do with anything,” I began, but snapped my lips closed over the last word. Of course. When Lily had become the Summer Lady, she got the whole package—and it went way beyond simply turning her hair white. She would have to follow the bizarre set of limits and rules to which all of the Faerie Queens seemed bound. And, more importantly, it meant she would have to obey the more powerful Queens of Summer, Titania and Mother Summer.

“Are you telling me that Titania has ordered you both not to help me?” I asked them.

They stared back at me with faerie poker faces that told me nothing.

I nodded, beginning to understand. “You aren’t permitted to speak officially for Summer. And Titania’s laid some kind of compulsion on you

both to prevent you from helping me on a personal level,” I said. “Hasn’t she?”

Had there been crickets, I would have heard them clearly. Had my table companions been statues, I’d have gotten more reaction from them.

“You’re not supposed to help me. You’re not supposed to tell me about the compulsion.” I followed the chain of logic a step further. “But you want to help, so here you are. Which means that the only way I could get information out of you is to approach it indirectly. Or else the compulsion would force you to shut up. Am I close?”

Cheep-cheep. If it went on much longer, they’d have to worry about inbound pigeons.

I frowned a little and thought about it for a minute. Then I asked, “Theoretically speaking,” I said, “what kinds of things might prevent Winter and Summer from reacting to an incursion by another nation?”

Lily’s eyes sparkled, and she nodded to Fix. The little guy turned to me and said, “In theory, only a few things could do it. The simplest would be a lack of respect for the strength of the incurring nation. If the Queens considered them no threat, there would be no need to act.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Go on.”

“A much more serious reason would be an issue of the balance of power between the Courts of Summer and Winter. Any reaction to the invasion would alter what resources one would have at hand. If one Court did not act in concert with the other, it would provide an ideal opportunity for a surprise assault while the other had its strategic back turned.”

I rubbed my hands along my thighs, squinting one eye shut. “Let me see if I’ve put this together right. Summer’s ready to throw down. But Winter isn’t gonna help, because apparently they’d rather take a poke at you guys when you were focused on another threat.”

I took Fix’s silence as an affirmative.

“That’s insane,” I said. “If that happens, both Courts are going to suffer. Both of you will be weakened. No matter who came out on top, they’d be easy pickings for the Reds. Theoretically speaking.”

“An imbalance between Winter and Summer is nothing new,” Lily said. “It has existed since the time when we first met you, Harry. It continues today because of the fate of the current Winter Knight.”

I grimaced. “Christ. He’s still alive? After...what, almost four years?”

Fix shuddered. “I saw him once. The man was a psycho, a drug addict and a murderer—”

“And a rapist,” Lily interjected in a quiet, sad voice.

“And that,” Fix agreed, his expression grim. “I could break his neck and not lose a minute’s sleep. But no one deserves...” He swallowed, his face going pale. “That.”

“The moron betrayed Mab,” I said quietly. “He knew the risks when he did it.”

“No,” Fix said, with another shudder. “Believe me, Harry. He didn’t know what would happen to him. He couldn’t have.”

Fix’s obvious discomfort made a certain impression on me, especially given that Mab had displayed an unnerving amount of interest in me, and that I still owed her a couple of favors. I shifted uneasily in my chair and tried to blow it off. “Whatever,” I said. “There’s a Summer Knight. There’s a Winter Knight. What’s unbalanced about that?”

“He isn’t exerting his power,” Fix replied. “He’s a prisoner, and everyone knows it. He has no freedom, no will. He can’t stand on the side of Winter as its champion. So far as the tension between the Courts goes, the Winter Knight might as well not exist.”

“All right,” I murmured. “Mab’s got a man in the penalty box. She wants to take the offensive before Summer pushes a power play, and she’s looking for ways to even the odds. If Summer goes running off to take on the Reds, it will give her a chance to strike.” I shook my head. “I don’t pretend to know Mab very well, but she isn’t suicidal. If the imbalance is so dangerous, why is she keeping the Winter Knight alive to begin with? And she must see what the consequences of another Winter-Summer war would be.” I looked back and forth between them. “Right?”

“Unfortunately,” Lily said quietly, “our intelligence about the internal politics of Winter is very limited—and Mab is not the sort to reveal her mind to another. I do not know if she realizes the potential danger. Her actions of late have been...” She closed her eyes for a moment and then said, with some obvious effort, “Erratic.”

I propped up my chin on the heel of my hand, thinking. “Mab’s a lot of things,” I said thoughtfully. “But she sure as hell isn’t erratic. She’s like some damned big glacier. Not a thing you can do to stop her, but at least you know just how she’s going to move. What’s the bard say? Constant as the northern star.”

Fix frowned, as if struggling with an internal decision for a minute, then let out an exasperated sigh and said, "I think many who know the Sidhe would agree with you."

Which was neither a confirmation nor a denial—technically, at any rate. But then, Sidhe magic and bindings tended to lean heavily toward the technical details.

I sat back slowly again, thoughts flickering over dozens of ideas and bits of information, putting them together into a larger picture. And it wasn't a pretty one. The last time one of the Faerie Queens had come a little bit unbalanced, the situation had become a potential global catastrophe on the same order of magnitude as a middling large meteor impact or a limited nuclear exchange. And *that* had been the youngest Queen of the gentler and more reasonable Summer, Lily's predecessor. Aurora. The late Aurora, I suppose.

If Mab had blown a gasket, matters wouldn't be just as bad.

They would be worse.

A lot worse.

"I've got to know more about this one," I told them quietly.

"I know," Lily said. She lifted her hand to a temple and closed her eyes in a faint frown of pain. "But..." She shook her head and fell silent again as Titania's binding sealed her tongue.

I glanced at Fix, who managed to whisper, "Sorry, Harry," before he too closed his eyes and looked vaguely ill.

"I need answers," I murmured, thinking aloud. "But you can't give them to me. And there can't be all that many people who know what's going on."

Silence and faint expressions of pain. After a few seconds, Fix said, "I think we've done all we can here."

I racked my brains for a few seconds more and then said, "No, you haven't."

Lily opened her eyes and looked at me, arching a perfect, silver-white brow.

"I need someone with the right information and who isn't under a compulsion not to help me. And I can only think of one person who fits the bill."

Lily's eyes widened a second after I got done speaking.

"Can you do it?" I asked her. "Right now?"

She chewed her lower lip for a second, then nodded.

“Call her,” I said.

Fix looked back and forth between us. “I don’t understand. What are you doing?”

“Something stupid, probably,” I said. “But this is too big. I need more information.”

Lily closed her eyes and folded her hands on her lap, her expression relaxing into one of deep concentration. I could feel the subtle stir of energy around her.

My stomach rumbled. I asked Mac to whip me up a steak sandwich and settled down to wait.

It didn’t take long. My sandwich wasn’t halfway done when Mouse let out a sudden, rumbling growl of warning, and the temperature in the bar dropped about ten degrees. The whirling ceiling fans let out mechanical moans of protest and spun faster. Then the door opened and let in sunlight made wan by a patch of dreary grey clouds. The light cast a slender black silhouette.

Fix’s eyes narrowed. His hands slid casually out of sight beneath the table, and he said, “Oh. *Her*.”

The young woman who entered the bar could have been Lily’s sister. She had the same exotic beauty, the same canted, feline eyes, the same pale, flawless skin. But this one’s hair was worn in long, ragged strands of varying lengths, like a Raggedy Ann doll, each one dyed a slightly different color from frozen seas—pale blues and greens, as though each had borrowed its color from a different glacier. Her eyes were a cold, brilliant shade of green, almost entirely darkened by pupils dilated as though with drugs or arousal. A slender silver hoop gleamed at one side of her nose, and a collar of black leather studded with silver snowflakes encircled the graceful line of her slender throat. She wore sandals and cut-off blue jean shorts—very cut-off, and very tight. A tight, white T-shirt strained across her chest, and read, in pale blue letters stretched into intriguing curves, “YOUR BOYFRIEND WANTS ME.”

She prowled across the room to us, all hips and lips and fascinating eyes, looking far too young to move with such wanton sensuality. I knew better. She could have been a century old. She chose to look the way she did because of what she was: the Winter Lady, youngest Queen of the Unseelie Court, Mab’s understudy in wickedness and power. When she walked by the

flowers that had bloomed in Lily's presence, they froze over, withered, and died. She gave them no more notice than Lily had.

"Harry Dresden," she said, her voice low, lulling, and sweet.

And I said, "Hello, Maeve."

Chapter Twenty

Maeve stared at me for a long minute and licked her lips. “Look at you,” she all but purred. “All pent up like that. You haven’t had a woman in ages, have you?”

I hadn’t. I really, really hadn’t. But that wasn’t the kind of thinking that a professional investigator allowed to clog up the gears in his brain. I could have said something back, but I decided that if I ignored the taunt, maybe she’d get bored and leave me alone. So instead of taking up the verbal épée, I rose and drew out a chair for her, politely. “Sit with us, Maeve?”

Her head tilted almost all the way to her shoulder. She stared at me with those intense green eyes. “Just boiling over. Maybe you and I should have a private talk. Just the two of us.”

My libido seconded the suggestion, and heartily.

My libido and I generally don’t see eye to eye. Dammit.

“I’d rather just sit and have a nice chat,” I said to her.

“Liar,” Maeve said, smiling.

I sighed. “All right. There are a lot of things I’d love to do. But the only thing that’s going to happen is a nice chat. So you might as well sit down and let me get you a drink.”

Her head tilted the other way. Her hips shifted in a kind of counterpoint that drew the eye. “How long has it been for you, wizard? How long since you sated yourself.”

The answer was depressing. “Last time I saw Susan, I guess.”

Maeve made a disgusted sound. “No, not *love*, wizard. Need. Flesh.”

“The two aren’t mutually exclusive,” I said.

She waved that off with an expression of contempt. “I want an answer.”

“Looks to me like there’s all kinds of things you want that you aren’t going to get,” I told her. I glanced at Fix and Lily, throwing a mute appeal into it.

Fix gave me an apologetic shrug and Lily sighed. “You might as well indulge her, Harry. She’s as stubborn as any of us, the only one who might give you the answers you need, and she knows it.”

I looked back at Maeve, who gave me that same eerie, intensely sensual smile. “Tell me, mortal. When was the last time flesh, new and strange to your hand, lay quivering beneath you, hmm?” She leaned down until her eyes were inches from mine. I could smell winter mint and something lush and corrupt, like rotted flowers, on her breath. “When was the last time you could taste and feel some little lovely’s cries?”

I regarded her without any expression and said, in a gentle voice, “Technically? When I killed Aurora.”

Maeve’s expression flickered with an instant of uncertainty.

“You remember Aurora,” I told her quietly. “The last Summer Lady. Your peer. Your equal. When she died, she’d been cut several dozen times with cold iron. She was bleeding out. But she was still trying to stick a knife in Lily. So I tackled her and held her down. She kept struggling until she lost too much blood. And then she died in the grass on the hill of the Stone Table.”

Dead silence filled the whole place.

“It sort of surprised me,” I said, never putting any particular emotion on the words. “How fast it happened. It surprised her, too. She was confused when she died.”

Maeve only stared at me.

“I never wanted to kill her. But she didn’t leave me any choice.” I let the silence fill the room for a moment and stared at Maeve’s eyes.

The Winter Lady swallowed and eased her weight a tiny bit away from me.

Then I gestured with one hand at the chair I still held out for her and said, “Let’s be polite to one another, Maeve. Please.”

She took a slow breath, soulless, inhuman eyes on mine, and then said, “I know now why Mab wants you.” She straightened and gave me an odd little bow, which might have looked more courtly had she been wearing a gown. Then she sat and said, “Does the barkeep still have those sweet-lemon chips of ice?”

“Of course,” I said. “Mac. Another lemonade for the Lady, please?”

Mac provided it in his usual silence. As he did, the few people who were in the place cleared out. Most of the magical community of Chicago knew the Ladies by reputation, if not on sight, and they wanted nothing to do with any kind of incident between Winter and Summer. They were safer if they were never noticed.

Hell, if I could have snuck out, I would have led the way. When I'd defeated Aurora, there had been a healthy chunk of luck involved. I caught her with a sucker punch. If she'd been focused on taking me out instead of finishing her scheme, I doubt I would have survived the evening. Sure, I might have stared Maeve down, but ultimately I was bluffing—trying to fool the oncoming shark into thinking I might be something that could eat it. If the shark decided to start taking bites anyhow, things would get unpleasant for me.

But this time, at least, the shark didn't know that.

Maeve waited for her lemonade, wrapped her lips idly around the straw, and sipped. Then she settled back into her seat, chewing. Crunching sounds came from her mouth. The lemonade had frozen solid when it passed her lips.

Which made me feel pretty damned smart for avoiding the whole sexual temptation issue.

Maeve looked at Lily steadily as she chewed, and then said, to me, "You know, my last Knight often dragged this one before the Court for performances. All kinds of performances. Some of them hurt. And some of them didn't. Though she still cried out prettily enough." She smiled, her tone polite and conversational. "Do you remember the night he made you dance for me in the red shoes, Lily?"

Lily's green eyes settled on Maeve, calm and placid as a forest pool.

Maeve's smile sharpened. "Do you remember what I did to you after?"

Lily smiled, a tired little expression, and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Maeve. I know how much pleasure you take in gloating, but you can't hurt me with that now. That Lily is no more."

Maeve narrowed her eyes, and then her gaze shifted to Fix. "And this one. I've seen this little man weeping like a child. Begging for mercy."

Fix sipped at his lemonade and said, "For the love of God, Maeve. Would you give the Evil Kinkstress act a rest? It gets tired pretty fast."

The Winter Lady let out an exasperated breath, put down her drink, and folded her arms sullenly across her chest. "Very well," Maeve said, her tone petulant. "What is it you wish to know, wizard?"

"I'd like to know why Mab hasn't been striking back at the Red Court after they trespassed on Sidhe territory during the battle last year."

Maeve arched a brow at me. "That is knowledge, and therefore power. What are you prepared to trade for it?"

“Forgetfulness,” I said.

Maeve tilted her head. “I can think of nothing in particular I would like to forget.”

“I can think of something you want me to forget, Maeve.”

“Can you?”

I smiled, with teeth. “I’d be willing to forget what you did at Billy and Georgia’s wedding.”

“Pardon?” Maeve said. “I don’t seem to recall being present.”

She knew the score. She knew that I knew it, too. Her legality pissed me off. “Of course,” I replied. “You weren’t there. But your handmaiden was. Jenny Greenteeth.”

Maeve’s lips parted in sudden surprise.

“I saw through her glamour. Didn’t you know who shut her down?” I asked her, lifting my own eyebrows in faux innocence. “That was petty cruelty, Maeve, even for you. Trying to ruin their marriage.”

“Your wolf children did me a petty wrong,” Maeve replied. “They killed a favorite hireling of the Winter Court.”

“They owed their loyalty to Dresden when they killed the Tigress,” Lily murmured. “Even as did the Little Folk he used against Aurora. They acted with his consent and upon his will, Maeve. You know our laws.”

Maeve gave Lily a dirty look that was almost human.

“For what happened that night, they were mine.” I put my hands flat on the table and leaned a little toward Maeve, speaking with as much quiet intensity as I could. “I protect what is mine. You should know that by now. I have lawful reason for a quarrel with you.”

Maeve’s attention moved back to me, and her expression became remote and alien. “What is it you propose?”

“I’m willing to let things go as they are, all accounts settled, in exchange for an honest answer to my question.” I settled back in my chair and asked, “Why hasn’t Winter moved against the Red Court?”

Maeve regarded me with an odd little twinkle in her eye, then nodded and said, “Mab has not allowed it.”

Fix and Lily traded a quick look of surprise.

“Sooth,” Maeve said, nodding, evidently enjoying their reaction. “The Queen has readied her forces to strike at Summer, and has furthermore given specific orders preventing her captains from conducting operations against the Red Court.”

“That’s madness,” Lily said quietly.

Maeve folded her hands on the table, frowning at something far away, and said, “It may well be. Dark things stir in Winter’s heart. Things even I have never before seen. Dangerous things. I believe they are a portent.”

I tilted my head a little, focused on her. “How so?”

“What Aurora attempted was insane. Even among the Sidhe,” Maeve replied. “Her actions could have thrown enormous forces out of balance, to the ruin of all.”

“Her heart was in the right place,” Fix said, his tone mildly defensive.

“Maybe,” I told him, as gently as I could. “But good intent doesn’t amount to much when the consequences are epically screwed up.”

Maeve shook her head. “Hearts. Good. Evil. Mortals are always concerned with such nonsense.” She abruptly rose, her mind clearly elsewhere.

Something in her expression or manner gave me a sudden sense that she was worried. Deeply, truly worried. Little Miss Overlord was frightened.

“These mortal notions,” Maeve said. “Good, evil, love. All those other things your kind natter on about. Are they perhaps contagious?”

I rose with her, politely. “Some would say so,” I told her.

She grimaced. “In the time since her death, I have often thought to myself that Aurora was stricken with some mortal madness. I believe the Queen of Air and Darkness has been taken by a similar contagion.” She suddenly shuddered and said, voice curt, “I have answered you with truth, and more than needed be said. Does that satisfy the accounting, mortal?”

“Aye,” I told her, nodding. “Good enough for me.”

“Then I take my leave.” She turned, took half a step, and there was a sudden gust of frozen air that knocked her mostly full glass of lemonade onto the floor. It froze in a lumpy puddle. Somewhere between tabletop and floor, Maeve vanished.

The three of us sat there quietly for a moment.

“She was lying,” Fix said.

“She can’t lie,” Lily and I said at exactly the same moment. Lily yielded the issue to me with a gesture of her hand, and I told Fix, “She can’t speak an outright lie, Fix. None of the Sidhe can. You know that.”

He frowned and made a frustrated, helpless little gesture with his hand. “But...Mab? Insane?”

“It does fit with our concerns,” Lily told him quietly.

Fix looked a little green around the edges. "I loved her like a sister, but Aurora's madness was bad enough. If *Mab* sets out to send the world on a downward spiral...I mean, I can't even imagine the kind of things she could do."

"I can," I said quietly. "I would suggest that you relay word of this to Titania, Lady. And take that as official concern from the Council. Please also convey the message that the Council is naturally interested in preserving the balance in Faerie. It would be of value to all of us to cooperate in order to learn more."

Lily nodded once at me. "Indeed. I will do so." She shivered and closed her eyes for a second, her expression distressed. "Harry, I'm very sorry, but the bindings on me...I stretch the bounds of my proper place."

Fix nodded decisively and rose. He took Lily's arm. "I wish we could have done more to help you."

"Don't worry about it," I said, rising politely to my feet again. "You did what you could. I appreciate it."

Lily gave me a strained smile. She and Fix departed, quick and quiet. The door never opened, but a breath later they were both gone. Mouse sat there next to the table, cocking his head left and right, his ears attentively forward, as though trying to figure that one out.

I sat at the table and sipped lemonade without much enthusiasm. More trouble in Faerie. Bigger trouble in Faerie. And I'd be willing to bet dollars to navel lint that I knew exactly which stupid son of a bitch the Council would expect to start poking his nose around in it.

I put the lemonade down. It suddenly tasted very sour.

Mac arrived. He took my lemonade. He replaced it with a beer. I flicked the top off with my thumb and put it away in a long pull. It was warm and it tasted too much, but the gentle bite of the alcohol in it was pleasant enough to make me want another.

Mac showed up with another.

Mac can sometimes be downright angelic.

"They've changed," I told him. "Fix and Lily. It's like they aren't even the same people anymore."

Mac grunted once. Then he said, "They grew up."

"Maybe that's it." I fell back into a brooding silence, and Mac left me to it. I finished the second beer more slowly, but I didn't have a lot of time to

lose. I nodded my thanks to Mac, left money on the table, and took up Mouse's leash. We headed for the door.

I had other business to take care of. Nebulous maybe-threats would have to wait for the monsters I was sure would show up in a few hours. At least I'd gotten out of the whole situation without someone trying to kill me or declaring war on the Council. I'd had a civil conversation with both Lady Winter and Lady Summer and come away from it unscathed.

As I walked toward the door, though, an idle thought gnawed at me.

It had hardly been like pulling out teeth at all.

Chapter Twenty-one

I headed back for SplatterCon!!! before the afternoon was half gone, this time with my backpack of wizard toys, my staff, my blasting rod, my dog, my gun, and a partridge in a pear tree. I didn't have a concealed-carry permit for the .44, but working on the theory that it was better to have the gun and not need it than to need it and not have it, I put it in the backpack.

When I got to SplatterCon!!!, I decided that it very well might have been better not to have the damned gun on me; there was something of a police presence in evidence.

Two patrol cars were parked in plain sight outside the hotel, and one cop in uniform stood, sweating and miserable-looking, outside the doors. As I paid off the cabby, I picked out at least two loiterers in street clothes who were paying too much attention to who and what approached the building to be casual strollers taking advantage of spots of shade outside the hotel. I clipped on my SplatterCon!!! name tag.

The cop's eyes flicked over me and I could all but see him take stock of me—tall guy, gaunt, mussed hair, dark eyes, big dog, sticks, backpack, one hand in a leather glove...and a horror convention name tag. Evidently, in this guy's head, a name tag gave you carte blanche to look weird without being threatening, because when his eyes got to that, he just traded a nod with me and waved me through.

Inside, not only was the convention in full swing, but they had added a press conference to it to boot. The conference wing outside the room where the killer struck was packed with a half circle of reporters and photographers, while industrious satellite personnel held up lights and even a couple of boom microphones. From the door I could see three more uniformed officers. Between the cops, the conference, and the passersby, that whole section of the hotel was packed with a lot of noisy people. The air-conditioning had been pushed well beyond its limits, and it was stuffy and smelled like most crowded buildings.

Mouse sneezed and looked mournful. I agreed with him.

Murphy appeared out of the crowd and made her way to me. She gave me a tight nod, and knelt down to speak to Mouse and scratch behind his ears.

“How’d your meeting go?” she asked.

“Survived it. Storm clouds on the horizon.” I looked around the place a minute more and said, “For crying out loud, it’s a zoo.”

“It gets better,” Murphy said. “I’ve been speaking with the convention staff, and they say that since the story hit the news and the radio stations at noon, they’ve almost doubled the number of attendees.”

“Crap,” I sighed.

“There’s more. Greene called in the Feds,” she said.

I frowned. “Last time the Feds showed up was less than fun.”

“Tell me about it.” She hesitated and then said, “Rick is with them.”

I blinked at her for a second, and then remembered. “Oh, right. The ex.”

“Ex-husband,” Murphy said, her tone sour. Her back was rigidly straight, and her eyes flickered with stormy emotions. “Current brother-in-law.”

“Which is icky,” I said.

“And I don’t like him being here,” Murphy said. “But it isn’t my call. And it’s possible that I have issues.”

I snorted.

She gave me a brief smile. “This has been splashy enough that they’ve got one of the major forensics units from the East Coast on the way.”

I scowled. “Maybe he should have blown a few trumpets, too. Or brought in a marching band. I think if he hurries, he can probably rent some of those big swiveling spotlights before dark.”

She rolled her eyes. “I get the point, Harry. You don’t like all the noise.”

“I don’t like all the potential victims,” I said. “Fifty bucks says the extra attendees are mostly minors.”

“No bet,” she replied. “Does it matter?”

“Maybe. In general, young people, especially adolescents, feel emotions much more intensely. The whole hormone thing. It can make them easier targets. Richer sources of energy.”

“Then why did it hit an old geezer like Pell first?”

I opened my mouth, and then closed it again. “Good point.”

“Besides,” she continued, “isn’t it a good thing if more people are paying attention? From what you’ve told me, things from the spooky side of the street don’t like crowds.”

“In general, no,” I said. “But the place wasn’t exactly a ghost town yesterday when the phobophage showed up.”

“You think it will appear right in front of all these people?” she asked.

“I think crowds aren’t going to deter it. I think that if something bad happens, the more people there are around, the more fear it’s going to generate and the more our killer gets to eat. And a panic with more people means even more people get hurt.”

Murphy’s pale golden brows knitted into a frown. “So, what options can you give me?”

“There’s no guarantee, but I think we’ll have until nightfall.”

“Why?”

“Because it will be stronger after dark.”

Murphy frowned. “You think that’s why Pell survived his attack,” she murmured. “It was still daylight.”

“Got it in one,” I said. “Assuming we have until sundown, it gives us a little time to work.”

“Doing what?”

“Setting up some wards,” I said.

“Like at your place?”

I shook my head. “Nothing that complex. There’s no time. I can’t build a moat around this place, but I think I can throw together a web that will let us know when and where something comes over from the Nevernever. I’ll need to walk around a lot of the building to cover it all.”

She nodded. “That doesn’t address the crowd issue.”

I grimaced. “You know anyone in the fire department?”

“A cousin,” she said.

“This place must be over maximum occupancy. Maybe if the fire marshal heard about how crowded it was, they’d clear at least some of these people out. We only need a crowd big enough to tempt the killer in.”

She nodded. “I’ll see to it.”

“And I know it’s a long shot, but has CPD turned up anything? Or the ME?”

“Nothing on the autopsy. They didn’t give this one to Butters. Brioche handled it, and he didn’t find anything out of the ordinary.”

“Naturally,” I sighed. “Greene?”

“Theories. He had some vague notion that the attack might have been some kind of publicity stunt to attract attention to the convention.”

“That’s a little cynical,” I said.

“Greene isn’t a believer,” Murphy said. “And he’s a trained investigator looking for a solid motive. If he accepts that the killer was just some kind

of lunatic, it means he's got almost nothing to work with. So he's grasping at straws and hoping he can find something familiar he can use to nail the killer fast."

I grunted. "Guess I can see that."

"I don't envy him," Murphy said. "I don't like him much, but he's a cop, and he's in a tight spot. Chances are, there's not a damned thing he could do about it. And he doesn't even know it."

There was a little extra weight on the last phrase, something that contained personal pain.

Murphy had faced the same situations as Greene, more or less. Something wild happened, and none of it made any sense. Murphy had her first face-off with the supernatural while she was still a beat cop on patrol. It gave her an advantage as a detective, because at least she knew how much she didn't know. Greene didn't even have that much going for him. I hated to see her like that, feeling helpless to do anything. Hurting. Even if only in memory.

"How about you?" I asked. "You see anything that you think is worth mentioning?"

"Not yet. Someone around here has got to know something useful—even if they don't know that they do." She tilted her head and frowned at me. "Wait. You're asking *me*?"

I shrugged a shoulder. "Murph, you've seen as much weird as most wizards. I think you're more capable than you know."

She studied my face for a long moment. "What do you mean?"

I shrugged again. "I mean that you've been there a time or two. You know what it's like when something is lurking around. There's commonality to it. You'll know it when you feel it."

"What? Am I supposed to be a wizard now?"

I grinned. "Just a savvy cop chick, Murph."

"Cop chick?" she asked, menace in her voice.

"Sorry," I said. "*Police* chick."

She grunted. "That's better."

"Just don't ignore your instincts," I said. "They're there for a reason."

Murphy wasn't listening to that last part, because she'd turned her head sharply to one side, blue eyes narrowing as she focused on a man who had emerged from a conference room doorway and was slipping down the hall.

And Mouse let out a low growl.

“Who’s that?” I asked Murphy.

“Darby Crane,” Murphy said.

“Ah,” I said. “The horror movie director.”

Mouse growled again. Murphy and he started after Crane.

Why fight the inevitable? I started walking before Mouse pulled my arms out of their sockets. “Hey, howsabout we go talk to him?”

“You think?” Murphy said.

“Take him. I’ll back you up.”

She nodded, without turning around. “Excuse me,” she told a gang of conventiongoers in front of her. “Coming through, please.”

We tried to hurry through the crowd, but it was like trying to run in chest-deep water. The faster you try to move, the more resistance there is. Crane moved through them like an eel, a spare man of medium height in slacks and a dark blazer. Murphy forged ahead, making room for me to follow, while I put my height to good use to keep an eye on Crane.

He beat us to a comparatively empty side hallway that led back to ground-floor guest rooms and elevators. By the time we got into the clear, the elevator doors had opened. Murphy hurried forward and shot a glance over her shoulder at me, then jerked her chin at the elevators.

I grinned. There are times when I hate it that technology has such problems operating around wizards. And then there are the times when it’s sort of fun.

I made a mild effort of will, focused my thoughts on the elevators, and murmured, “*Hexus*.” Nebulous and unseen energy fluttered down the hallway, and when the hex hit the elevators there was a sudden hiss of sparks at one edge of the panel with the call button, and an oozing smoke dribbled out a moment later. The doors started to close, then a bell went *bing*. The doors sprang open again. That happened a couple of more times before Murphy closed to the elevator and caught up to Darby Crane.

I slowed my pace, holding on to Mouse, and lurked several feet away, trying to blend in by reading a wall full of flyers announcing various parties at the convention.

Crane was a surprisingly good-looking man—slender, stark cheekbones, and his demeanor was more like an actor’s than that of someone on the production side. His dark hair was in a short, neat cut, dark eyes deep-set and opaque, and he carried himself in a posture that read nothing but relaxed nonaggression.

Before I'd finished looking him over, I was sure that the whole thing was a calculated lie. There was cruelty lurking below the calm of his features, contempt hiding within the modest posture of his body. As Murphy approached, he stepped out of the elevator, frowning at the smoke. His eyes snapped to her, and around the hallway at once. There were several other people standing not far away, outside of a guest room with an open door.

He judged them, then Murphy for a moment, and then turned to face her, his mouth settling into a polite, bland little perjury of a smile.

"So hard to rely upon technology these days," he said, his glance moving over me as part of the background scenery. I thought. He had a surprisingly deep, resonant voice. "May I help you, Officer?"

"Lieutenant, actually," she told him without rancor. "My name is Karrin Murphy. I'm with..."

"Chicago Police Department Special Investigations," Crane said. "I know."

Alarm bells went off in my head. I doubted Crane would recognize it, but Murphy's stance shifted subtly, becoming more wary. "Have we met, Mr. Crane?"

"In a way. I've seen secondhand copies of the film of you gunning down a madman and some sort of animal several years ago. Very impressive, Lieutenant. Have you ever considered work in film?"

She shook her head. "I've been told the camera adds ten pounds. I have problems enough. May I take a few moments of your time, Mister Crane?"

He grinned at her, then, a grin I'm sure he meant to be boyish and flirty. The weasel. "I suppose that depends on what you intend to do with them."

Murphy studied his face for just a moment, as though in wary amusement. "I had a few questions regarding the incident here, and I hope that you can help me out with them."

"I can't imagine what I know that would help you," Crane replied. He glanced at the unmoving elevator doors and sighed. "Bother." He drew a small black cell phone from his jacket pocket, hit a button without looking, and lifted it to his ear. Then he lowered it again and frowned down at it in silence.

Hah. Take that, weasel.

"It won't take much of your time," Murphy said. "I'm sure that you can see how important it is for us to be thorough in this investigation. We would all hate for anyone else to be harmed."

“I’m sure I don’t know anything of any importance, Lieutenant,” Crane said, his voice turning a little impatient. “I was present during the blackout last night, but I was already in my room. I didn’t even come downstairs until this morning.”

“I see. Did anyone see you at that time?”

Crane let out a little laugh. “Am I a suspect, that I need an alibi?”

“As a celebrity guest, it’s entirely possible that the person or persons responsible for this attack might have an unhealthy interest in you,” Murphy replied, matching his fake laugh with her politely professional smile. “I certainly don’t mean to imply any sort of accusation—only concern for your safety.”

Someone shoved open a door that showed a set of stairs behind it, and a small man in an expensive grey suit emerged from it. He was sort of frog-faced—he had the mouth of someone much larger than he, almost grotesquely thick and wide. He had fine black hair, all limp and stringy, and someone had cut it with the ancient but trusty salad-bowl method. He had bulgy, watery eyes that required extra-large, wide-rimmed glasses to properly encircle.

“Ah, Mr. Crane,” the newcomer said. He had a wheezy, nasal voice. “I received your call, but it was apparently cut off just as I answered.”

Crane took out his phone again and tossed it underhand to the newcomer. “It seems to have died quite abruptly, Lucius. Like this elevator.”

The man caught it and frowned at the phone, then at Murphy with equal amounts of disapproval. “I see.”

“Lieutenant Murphy, may I present Lucius Glau, my personal advisor and legal counsel.”

Mouse tensed as Glau turned to regard Murphy with his froggy eyes. The little lawyer made a swallowing sound in his throat, and then said, “Is my client under arrest?”

“No,” she said. “Naturally n—”

“Then I must insist that this conversation be cut short,” Glau said over her. For a pasty little guy, he had a lot of confidence. He squared off in front of Murphy, just to one side of Crane. Murphy’s arms relaxed to her sides and I saw her blue eyes flick down to the floor and back up, gauging distances. The tension level went higher.

“We were just talking,” Murphy told Glau. I’d seen her wearing that look, right before she went for her gun, more than once. “In an amiable and

cooperative fashion.”

“As I informed both the FBI and the investigator in charge of the scene with Chicago’s police department, my client was in his rooms all night and neither witnessed what happened nor even knew of what had transpired until he came down to breakfast this morning.” Glau’s voice was clipped, his bulgy eyes impossible to read. I got the feeling it was the expression he used whenever he did anything, be it eating ice cream or drowning puppies. “Continued contact could well be construed as harassment.”

“Lucius, Lucius,” Crane said, holding out his hand between them, his voice soothing. “Honestly, you react so strongly to the smallest things.” He turned that dazzling smile on Murphy and said, “I’m sorry. Lucius has worked for me for a very long time, and he’s seen a number of unreasonable people approach me. I certainly don’t think of the attentions of so striking a woman as harassment.”

Murphy’s eyes left Glau for a second as she cocked a golden brow at Crane. “Really?”

“Truly,” Crane said, the model of modern gallantry. “Lucius is doubtless concerned about my timetable for today, and I would hate to disappoint any of the fans here to meet me by falling behind my schedule.”

He glanced at Froggy as he spoke, and Froggy took a very small step back from Murphy.

Crane nodded at him, continuing to speak. “But if you would permit it, perhaps you would care to let me get you a drink of something later this evening, by way of apology?”

Murphy hesitated, which wasn’t much like her. “I don’t know...” she said.

Crane extended his hand to her to be shaken, still smiling. “If you still had questions, I’d be happy to answer them then. Please, as a token of my intentions, I insist. I would hate you to have the wrong impression of me.”

Murphy gave him a look of wary amusement and lifted her hand.

I’m not sure how I got across that much carpet that fast, but I put my hand on Murphy’s shoulder and gripped lightly just before she touched him. She froze, sensing the warning in the gesture, and drew her hand back.

Crane’s eyes narrowed, studying me, his hand still sticking out. “And who is this?”

“Harry Dresden,” I said.

Crane went still. Not still like people go still, where you can see them blinking and swaying slightly and adjusting their balance. He went still like corpses and plastic dressing dummies, and said nothing.

As I am a highly experienced investigator, I drew the conclusion that he recognized the name.

Froggy made a gulping sound in his throat, bulging eyes switching to me. I thought he shrunk in on himself a little, as if suddenly losing an inch or two of height—or tensing to crouch.

He recognized it, too. I felt famous.

Mouse let out a relaxed ripsaw of a growl, so low that it could hardly be heard.

Froggy's eyes went to the dog and widened. He shot a look at Crane.

Everyone froze like that for a moment. Crane and Murphy still smiled their professional smiles. Froggy looked froglike. I went for bored. But I felt my heart speed up as my instincts told me that violence was a hell of a lot closer to the surface than it looked.

"There are witnesses here, Dresden," Crane said. "You can't move on me. It would be seen."

I tilted my head and pursed my lips thoughtfully. "You're right. And you're a public figure. Which means this is a great opportunity for advertising. I haven't been on TV since the last time I was on the *Larry Fowler Show*."

His expression changed then, that cold sneer coming out of the background to twist his lips. "You wouldn't dare reveal yourself to the world."

I snorted at him and said, "Go read the yellow pages in your room. I'm in there. Under 'Wizards.'"

Froggy gulped again.

"You're insane," Crane said.

"Wizards is the kway-zee-est people," I confirmed. "And you don't look very much like a Darby."

Crane's chin lifted, his eyes glittering with some sort of sudden approval. I had no idea why. Dammit, I hate it when someone knows more than me about exactly how deep a hole I'm digging under myself. "No? And what does a Darby look like?"

"I confess, the only one I ever saw was in that leprechaun movie with Sean Connery," I said. "Call it an instinct."

He pursed his lips and fell silent. We all enjoyed another two minutes of wordless, increasingly tense standoff.

Then Murphy said, deadpan, “Say, ten o’clock for that drink, Darby? The hotel’s lounge? We’d hate to keep you from your busy schedule.”

He glanced from Murphy to me and back, and then lowered his hand. He gave her a little bow of the head, then turned and walked away, back toward the crowd.

Froggy watched us for a three count, then turned and hurried after his boss, checking frequently over his shoulder.

I exhaled slowly, and leaned against the wall. Adrenaline without an outlet is a funny thing. The long muscles in my legs twitched and flexed without me telling them too, and the lights in the hallway suddenly seemed a little too bright. My bruised head twinged some more.

Murphy just stood there, not moving, but I could hear her consciously regulating her breathing, keeping it smooth.

Mouse sat down and looked bored, but his ears kept twitching in the direction the pair had vanished.

“Well,” Murphy said a second later, keeping her voice low. “What was *that* all about?”

“We almost started a fight,” I said.

“I noticed that,” Murphy said, her tone patient. “But why?”

“He’s spooky,” I murmured.

She frowned, looking over her shoulder and up at me. “What is he?”

“I told you. Spooky.” I shook my head. “Other than that I don’t know.”

She blinked. “What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Something about him hit me wrong. When he offered you his hand, it seemed...off. Dangerous.”

Murphy shook her head. “I figured he was going to go for the hold-and-caress routine,” she said. “It’s a little bit insulting, but it isn’t all that dangerous.”

“Unless maybe it is,” I said.

“You’re sure he’s from your side of things?” she asked.

“Yeah. He recognized me. He started pulling out the standard Old World reasons for avoiding public confrontation. And Mouse didn’t like him—or his lawyer, either.”

“Vampire?” she asked.

“Could be,” I said, chewing on my lip. “Could be a lot of things. Hell, could be human, for that matter. Without knowing more we shouldn’t make any assumptions.”

“Think he’s involved in the attacks?”

“I like him for it,” I said. “If I was making the call alone, he’d definitely be our asshole. He’s got all the earmarks.”

“If he’s the guy, he’s out of my reach,” she said. “He’s got a hair-trigger attorney and has already spoken to Greene and Rick. Any police pressure I brought against him would be harassment. Greene won’t act on my suspicions.”

“Well,” I said. “Good thing I’m not Greene.”

Chapter Twenty-two

Murphy and I walked around the hotel, and as we did I popped open a fresh can of blue Play-Doh. At the corners of major intersections and at the exterior exits, I pinched off bits and plunked them down on top of the molding over doorways, inside flowerpots, inside fire extinguisher cabinets, and anywhere else where they wouldn't be easily or immediately noticed. I made sure to leave plenty of them in unnoticed little spots along the hallways chiefly in use for the convention, especially outside the rooms that the schedule designated as showing films as evening approached.

"What are we doing again?" Murphy asked.

"Setting up a spell," I said.

"With Play-Doh."

"Yes."

She gave me a level look.

I shook out the can that still had most of the original material in it, and showed it to her. "The little pieces I've been leaving around are part of this piece. See?"

"Not yet," she said.

"They used to be one piece. Even when they're separated, they still have a thaumaturgical connection to the original," I told her. "It means that I'll be able to use the big piece to reach out and connect to the little pieces."

"That's what you meant by a web?"

"Yes. I'll be able to..." I twisted up my face, searching for the words to explain. "I can extend energy out to all the smaller pieces. I'll set it up so that if one of the little pieces picks up on a disturbance of the energies, I'll be able to feel it through the larger piece."

"Like...seismographs, sort of," Murphy said.

"Yeah," I said. "And we use blue Play-Doh. Blue for defense."

She arched a brow at me. "Does the color really matter?"

"Yes," I said, then thought about it for a second. "Well, probably no. But yes, for me."

"Huh?"

“A lot of the use of magic is all tied up with your emotions. With what you believe is real. When I was younger, I learned a lot of stuff, like the role of colors in the casting of spells. Green for fertility and prosperity, red for passion and energy, white for purity, black for vengeance, and so on. It could be that the color doesn’t matter at all—but if I expect the spell to work because of the color used, then that color is important. If I don’t believe in it, the spell won’t ever get off the ground.”

“Like Dumbo’s magic feather?” Murphy asked. “It was his confidence that was really important?”

“Yes,” I said. “The feather was just a symbol—but it was an *important* symbol.”

I gestured with the can. “So I use blue, because I don’t have to do too much introspection, and I don’t introduce new doubts in a crisis situation. And because it was cheap at Wal-Mart.”

Murphy laughed. “Wal-Mart, huh?”

“Wizarding doesn’t pay much,” I said. “You’d be surprised how much stuff I get from Wal-Mart.” I checked a clock on the wall. “We’ve got about two hours before the first movie starts showing.”

She nodded. “What do you need?”

“A quiet space to work in,” I told her. “At least six or seven feet across. The more private and secure, the better. I’ve got to assume that the bad guy knows I’m around here somewhere. I don’t want to get a machete in the back when I’m busy running the spell.”

“How long do you need to set it up?”

I shrugged. “Twenty minutes, give or take. What I’m really concerned about is—”

“Mister Dresden!” called a voice from across the crowded convention hallway. I looked up to see Sandra Marling hurrying through the crowd toward me. The convention’s chairwoman looked exhausted and too nervous to be awake, much less standing, much less politely pushing her way through a crowd, but she did it anyway. She still wore the same black T-shirt with the red SplatterCon!!! logo on it, presumably the same I’d seen her in the night before.

“Ms. Marling,” I said, nodding to her as she approached. “Good afternoon.”

She shook her head wearily. “I’m such...this is such an enormous amount of...but I don’t know who else I can turn to about this.” Her words

failed her, and she started trembling with nerves and weariness.

I traded a frown with Murphy. "Sandra. What's wrong?"

"It's Molly," she said.

I frowned. "What about her?"

"She came here from the hospital a couple of hours ago. The police came to talk to her and I don't think she's come out since then, and none of the officers I've spoken to know where she is. I think—"

"Sandra." I told her, "Take a breath. Slow down. Do you know where Molly is?"

The woman closed her eyes and shook her head, bringing herself under control, lowering her voice several pitches. "They're still...interrogating her, I think? Isn't that what they say? When they try to scare you and ask questions?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Yeah," I said. "Was she arrested?"

Sandra shook her head jerkily. "I don't think so. They didn't handcuff her or read from that little card or anything. Can they *do* that? Just drag her into a room?"

"We'll see," I said. "Which room?"

"Other wing, second door on the right," she said.

I nodded, slung my pack off my back, and took out a small notebook. I scribbled some phone numbers and names on a page, and gave it to Sandra. "Call both of these people."

She blinked at the paper. "What do I tell them?"

"The truth. Tell them what's going on and that Harry Dresden said they need to get down here immediately."

Sandra blinked down at the page. "What are you going to do?"

"Oh, you know. The usual," I said. "Get to that phone."

"I'll catch up in a minute," Murphy said.

I nodded, slung the pack back on, jerked my head at Mouse, and started walking with purposeful strides toward the knot of reporters that had begun to dissolve at the conclusion of the official statements to the press. My dog fell in to pace at my side until I spotted Lydia Stern at the rear of the crowd.

Lydia Stern was a formidable woman, a reporter for the *Midwestern Arcane*, a yellow journal based out of Chicago that did its best to report on the supernatural. Sometimes they managed to get close to the truth, but more often they ran stories that had headlines like Lizard Baby Born in

Trailer Park, or maybe Bigfoot and the Chupacabra, the Unholy Alliance. By and large, the stories were amusing and fairly harmless, but once in a while someone stumbled into something strange and it made it into the paper. Susan Rodriguez had been a lead reporter for the *Arcane*, until she'd run into exactly the wrong story. Now she lived her life somewhere in South America, fighting off the infection in her soul that wanted to turn her into one of the Red Court while she and her half-vampire buddies campaigned against their would-be recruiters.

When Lydia Stern took over Susan's old job a couple of years back, her reporting had taken a different angle. She'd investigated strange events and then demanded to know why the appropriate institutions had been ignoring them. The woman had a scathing intellect and penetrating wit, and she employed both liberally and with considerable panache in her writing. She was unafraid to challenge anyone in her articles, from some small-town animal control unit to the FBI.

It was a shame she was working at a rag like the *Arcane* instead of at a reputable paper in DC or New York. She'd have been a Pulitzer nominee inside of five years. City officials who had to deal with the cases I'd brushed up against had developed a nearly supernatural ability to vanish whenever she was around. None of them wanted to be the next person Lydia Stern eviscerated in print. She had a growing reputation as an investigative terror.

"Ms. Stern," I said in a low, grave voice, extra emphasis on the "z" in "Ms." "I wonder if you might have a few moments."

The terror of the *Midwest Arcane* whirled to face me, and her face broke into a cherubic grin. She was a little over five feet tall, pleasantly plump, and of Asian ancestry. She had a sparkling smile, thick glasses, curly black hair, and was wearing a pair of denim overalls over an old Queens-ryche T-shirt. Her tennis shoes had bright pink laces on them. "Harry Dresden," she said. She had a sort of breathless, bubbling voice, the kind that seemed like it could barely contain laughter beneath almost every word. "Hah. I knew this one smelled right."

"Could be," I said. I hadn't been real forthcoming with Lydia. It hadn't worked out well with reporters in the past. Whenever I spoke to her, little daggers of guilt stabbed at me, reminders that I could not afford to let careless words get her into too much trouble. Despite that, we'd gotten along, and I'd never lied to her. I hadn't bothered to try. "You busy?"

She gestured at the bag whose strap hung over her shoulder. "I've got recordings, and I'll want to jot down some notes shortly." She tilted her head to one side. "Why do you ask?"

"I need a thug to scare some guys for me," I said.

The dimples in her cheeks deepened. "Oh?"

"Yeah," I said. "Do this for me. I'll give you ten minutes on this." I waved my hand vaguely at the hotel around us. "As soon as I have some time free."

Her eyes brightened. "Done," she said. "What do I do?"

"Hang around outside a doorway and..." I grinned. "Just be yourself."

"Good. I can do that." She nodded once, curls bouncing, and followed me to the room where they were grilling my friend's daughter.

I opened the door like I owned the place and walked in.

The room wasn't a big one—maybe the size of a large elementary-school classroom. There was a raised platform about a foot high at one end, with chairs on it behind a long table. More chairs faced it in rows. A sign, now discarded on the floor behind the door, declared that the room was scheduled for something called "filking" between noon and five o'clock today. "Filking" sounded suspiciously like it might be an activity somehow related to spawning salmon, or maybe some kind of bizarre mammalian discussion. I decided that it was probably one of those things I was happier not knowing.

Greene was in the room, standing on the platform with his arms folded, a sour frown on his face. Molly sat in the first row of chairs, still in the same clothes as the night before. She looked tired. She'd been crying.

Next to her was a man of medium build and unremarkable height, with brown hair just tousled enough to be fashionable. He wore a grey suit, its gravity somewhat offset by a black tie that featured Marvin the Martian. I recognized him. Rick, Murphy's ex. He stood over Molly, passing her a cup of water, the good cop of the usual interrogation equation. He was here in his official capacity, then. Agent Rick.

"Excuse me," Greene said, without looking over at me. "This room isn't open to the public."

"It isn't?" I said, overly ingenuous. "Man. I was really looking forward to a nice afternoon of filking, too."

Molly looked up, and her eyes widened in recognition and what looked like sudden hope. "Harry!"

“Heya, kid,” I told her, and ambled in, Mouse in tow. The dog went right over to Molly, wagging his tail and subtly begging for affection by thrusting his broad muzzle underneath her folded hands. Molly let out a little laugh and leaned down, hugging the dog, talking baby talk to him like she did to her youngest siblings.

Greene turned to glower at me. After a moment, Agent Rick did too.

“Dresden,” Greene said, his tone peremptory. “You are interfering in an investigation. Get out.”

I ignored him to speak to Molly. “How’s Rosie?”

She left her cheek on top of Mouse’s broad head and said, “Unconscious. She was very upset by the news and the doctors gave her something to help her sleep. They were afraid she would freak out and it would hurt the baby.”

“Dresden,” Greene snarled.

“Best thing for her right now,” I told Molly. “She’ll handle it better when she’s had some rest.”

She nodded and said, “I hope so.”

Greene spat a curse and reached for his radio, presumably to summon goons.

Greene was an ass.

Maybe I was going a little hex-happy, but I muttered something under my breath and made a little effort. Sparks shot out of the radio and were followed by curls of smoke. Greene stood there cursing as he tried to get the thing to work. “Dammit, Dresden,” he snarled. “Get out before I have you taken downtown.”

I kept ignoring him. “Hi there, Rick. How was the wedding?”

“That’s it,” Greene said.

Rick pursed his lips and then held up a hand toward Greene, a placating gesture. “Everyone survived it,” Agent Rick responded, studying me with a steady frown, looking between me and Molly. “Harry, we’re working here. You should go.”

“Yeah?” I asked. I plopped down into the chair beside Molly and grinned at him. “I’m thinking maybe not. I mean, I’m working, too. I’m a consultant.”

“You’re obstructing an investigation, Dresden,” Greene growled. “You’re going to lose your jobs with the city. Your investigative license. Hell, I’ll even get you stuck in jail for a month or two.”

“No you won’t.”

“Have it your way, tough guy,” Greene said, and started for the door. Molly, maybe taking it for a cue, rose herself.

“Sit down,” Greene said, his voice hard. “You aren’t finished yet.”

She hesitated for a second and then sat.

“Greene, Greene, Greene,” I said. “There’s something you’re missing here.”

He paused. Agent Rick watched me steadily.

“See, Miss Carpenter here can go any time she damned well pleases.”

“Not until she’s answered a few questions,” he said.

I made a game-show buzzing sound. “Wrong. This is a free country. She can walk out and there’s not a damned thing you can do about it. Unless you want to arrest her.” I grinned at him some more. “You didn’t arrest her, did you?”

Molly watched the exchange from the corner of her vision, being very still and keeping her face down.

“We’re questioning her in relation to an ongoing investigation,” Rick said.

“Yeah? One of you guys got the subpoena, then?”

They hadn’t, of course. No one spoke.

“See, you’re the one out on a limb here, Greene. You’ve got nothing on the young lady. No court order. You haven’t arrested her. So anything she chooses to tell you is entirely voluntary.”

Molly blinked up at me. “It is?”

I put a hand to my chest and mimed an expression of shock. “Greene! I can hardly believe this. Did you lie to this young woman to frighten her? To make her think she was under arrest?”

“I didn’t lie,” Greene snarled.

“You just led her on,” I said, nodding. “Sure, sure. Not your fault if she interpreted you wrong. Say, let’s go back and check the tape and see where the mistake was.” I paused. “You *are* recording this, aren’t you? All on the record and aboveboard?”

Greene looked at me like he wanted to kick my nuts up into my skull. “You’ve got nothing but speculation. Get out. Or, as lead investigator, I will have you barred from the hotel.”

“That a threat?” I asked him.

“Believe it.”

I made a show of rubbing at my mouth. “Oh, man. I’m having quite the moral quandary. Because if you do that to me, then hell, maybe the press would find out that you’re dismissing professional consultants with a positive track record with the city.” I leaned forward and added casually, “Oh. And they might find out that you are illegally interrogating a juvenile.”

Greene stared at me, shock on his face. Even Agent Rick arched an eyebrow. “What?”

“A juvenile,” I enunciated, “i.e., one who cannot give you legal consent on her own. I took the liberty of sending for her parents. I’m sure that they and their attorney will have a whole lot of questions for you.”

“That’s blackmail,” Greene said.

“No, it’s due process,” I replied. “You’re the one who tried the end run around the law.”

Greene scowled at me and said, “You can talk all you want, but you’ve got no proof.”

My cheeks ached from smiling so much, and I chuckled.

The door, which had never fully closed, opened on cue. Lydia Stern stood there behind it, her press badge around her neck, a mini-tape recorder in her hand, held up so that Greene could clearly see it. “So, Detective,” she asked, “could you please explain why as a part of your investigation you are interrogating a juvenile without her parents’ consent? Is she a suspect in the crime? Or a witness to any of the events? And what about these rumors of interdepartmental noncooperation slowing down the investigation?”

Greene stared at the reporter. He shot a glance at Agent Rick.

Rick shrugged. “He’s got you. You took a chance. It didn’t pay off.”

Greene spat a word that authority figures oughtn’t say in front of juveniles, and then stomped out. Lydia Stern winked at me, then followed on his heels, recorder held out toward him, asking a steady stream of questions whose only reasonable answers would make Greene look like an idiot.

Rick watched him go and shook his head. Then he said to me, “What’s your stake in this?”

“The girl is my friend’s daughter,” I said. “Just looking out for her.”

He gave me a slight nod. “I see. Greene’s under a lot of pressure. I’m sorry you got treated like that.”

“Rick,” I said in a patient voice, “I’m not a teenage girl. Please don’t try to good-cop me.”

His polite, interested expression vanished for a second behind a quick, boyish grin. Then he shrugged and said, “It was worth trying.”

I snorted.

“You know he can get the subpoena. It’s just a question of running through channels.”

I rose. “That’s not my problem. I’ll leave it to the Carpenters’ attorney.”

“I see,” he said. “You actually are interfering with the investigation. He could probably make it stick.”

“Come on, Agent. I’m protecting the rights of a juvenile. The ACLU would eat that raw.” I shook my head. “Besides. What you’re doing is wrong. Bullying girls. Hell’s bells, man, that’s low.”

A flicker of anger touched Agent Rick’s expression. “Dresden, I know you don’t have a concealed carry permit. You want me to suspect you of carrying a weapon and search you for it?”

Oops. I thought nervously of the revolver in my backpack. If Agent Rick wanted to make an issue of it, I could be in trouble—but I didn’t want *him* to know that. I tried to shake it off with a nonchalant shrug. “How is that going to help stop the killer before he strikes again?”

Rick tilted his head to one side and frowned at me. Dammit, I’ve got to get a better poker face. He oriented on me, eyes searching over me for possible places to hide a gun. “Irrelevant,” he replied. “If you’re breaking the law, you’re breaking the law.”

From the doorway there was an impatient sigh, and then Murphy said, “Would it kill you to stop being an asshole for five minutes, Rick?”

I hadn’t noticed her arrival, and judging from Agent Rick’s expression, neither had he.

“He’s a consultant for SI, which is also working the case. We don’t have the time to get involved in a pissing contest. People are in danger. We need to work together.”

Rick glared at her, then reined in his temper and shrugged a shoulder. “You may be right. But Dresden, I want you to consider leaving of your own will. If you keep interfering, I’ll arrest you and toss you in the clink for twenty-four hours.”

“No,” Murphy said, entering the room. “You won’t.”

He rounded on her, eyes narrowed. “Dammit, Karrin. You never know when to quit, do you?”

“Of course I do,” she said, setting her jaw. “Never.”

Agent Rick shook his head. He slammed open the door and departed.

Murphy watched him go. Then she sighed and asked, “Are you all right, miss?”

Molly nodded somewhat numbly. “Yes. Just tired.”

A moment later, Sandra Marling hurried in, looked around at all of us, and then went over to give Molly a hug. The girl hugged back, tight.

“Did you reach them?” I asked Sandra.

“Yes. Mrs. Carpenter is on the way.”

Molly shuddered.

“Good,” I said. “Could you stay with Molly until she arrives?”

“Of course.”

I nodded and said to Molly, “Kid, things are getting complicated. I want you to go with your mom. All right?”

She nodded, slowly, without looking up.

I sighed and got out of my chair. “Good.”

I left, Murphy and Mouse flanking me as I headed back into the hotel.

“Nice guy, Rick,” I commented. “Maybe a little manipulative.”

“Just a tad,” Murphy said. “What happened?”

I told her.

She let out a wicked chuckle. “Wish I could have seen the look on their faces.”

“Next time I’ll take a picture.”

She nodded. “So what’s our next move?”

“Hey, we’re in a hotel.” I bobbed my eyebrows at her. “Let’s get a room.”

Under peaceful circumstances, I’m sure that no rooms would have been available. Obviously, though, circumstances were far from peaceful, and there had been a minor avalanche of cancellations and early departures from the hotel—which only goes to show that people occasionally demonstrate evidence of sound judgment. The convention might have doubled the number of folks attending, but that didn’t mean that they wanted to *sleep* here.

There was a room available on the fifth floor. I paid an extra fee to allow Mouse to stay, and we got checked in.

There was no one else in the elevator, and we rode in a silence that became increasingly tense. I shifted my weight from side to side and fiddled with one of the two plastic cards the desk clerk had given us. I cleared my throat.

“So here we are,” I said. “Heading up to our hotel room.”

Murphy’s cheeks turned pink. “You are a pig, Dresden.”

“Hey, I didn’t put any innuendo into that. You did it yourself.”

She rolled her eyes, smiling a little.

I watched numbers change on the elevator panel. I coughed. “Yes, sirree. Alone together.”

“It’s a little weird,” she admitted.

“A little weird,” I agreed.

“Should it be?” she asked. “I mean, we’re just working together. We’ve done that before.”

“We haven’t done it in a hotel room.”

“Yes, we have,” Murphy said.

“But they all had corpses in them.”

“Ah. True.”

“No corpses this time,” I said.

“Heh,” Murphy said. “The night is young.”

Her reminder of the dangers before us put a bullet through the head of *that* conversation. Her smile vanished, and her face regained its usual color. We went the rest of the way in silence, until the elevator doors opened. Neither one of us moved to get out. It almost felt like there was some kind of invisible line drawn across the floor.

The silence stretched. The doors tried to close. Murphy mashed down on the Door Open button with her thumb.

“Harry,” she said finally, her voice very quiet, her blue eyes focused into distance. “I’ve been thinking about...you know. Us.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“How much thinking?”

She smiled a little. “I’m not sure, really. I don’t think I wanted to admit that...you know.”

“Things might change between us?”

“Yes.” She frowned at me. “I’m not sure this is something you would want.”

“Between the two of us,” I said, “I think I probably have more insight into that one.”

She frowned. “How do you know it’s what you want?”

“Last Halloween,” I said, “I wanted to murder Kincaid.”

Murphy glanced down as her cheeks turned pink. “Oh.”

“Not literally,” I said, then paused. “Well. I guess it was literally. But the urge died down a little.”

“I see,” she said.

“Are you and him...?” I asked, leaving the question open.

“I saw him at New Year’s,” she said. “But we aren’t in anything deep. Neither of us want that. We’re friends. We enjoy the company. That’s all.”

I frowned. “We’re friends too,” I said. “But I’ve never taken your pants off.”

“We’re different,” she said, her blush renewing. She gave me an oblique look from beneath pale eyelashes. “Is it something you want?”

My heart sped up a little. “Uh. Pants removal?”

She arched a brow and tilted her head, waiting for an answer.

“Murph, I haven’t been with a woman for...” I shook my head. “Look, you ask any guy if he wants to have sex and he’s going to say yes. Generally speaking. It’s in the union manual.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Including you?” she pressed.

“I’m a guy,” I said. “So yes.” I frowned, thinking about it. “And...and no.”

She smiled at me and nodded. “I know. You couldn’t do casual. You commit yourself too deeply. You care too much. We couldn’t have something light. You would never settle for that.”

She was probably right. I nodded.

“I don’t know if I could give you what you want, Harry.” Then she took a deep breath and said, “And there are other reasons. We work together.”

“I noticed.”

She didn’t quite smile. “What I mean is...I can’t let relationships come close to my job. It isn’t good for either.”

I said nothing.

“I’m a cop, Harry.”

My belly twisted a little as I realized the rejection in the words, and the lack of any room for compromise. “I know you are.”

“I serve the law.”

“You do,” I said. “You always have.”

“I can’t walk away from it. I won’t walk away from it.”

“I know that too.”

“And...we’re so different. Our worlds.”

“Not really,” I said. “We sort of hang around in the same one, most of the time.”

“That’s work,” she said quietly. “My work isn’t everything about me. Or it shouldn’t be. I’ve tried a relationship built on having that in common.”

“Rick,” I said.

She nodded. Pain flickered in her eyes. I never would have seen that a few years before. But I’d seen Murphy in good times and bad—mostly bad. She’d never say it, never want me to say anything about it, but I knew that her failed marriages had wounded her more deeply than she would ever admit. In a way, I suspected that they explained some of her professional drive and ambition. She was determined to make the career work. Something had to.

And maybe she’d been hurt even more deeply than that. Maybe badly enough that she wouldn’t want to leave herself open to it again. Long-term relationships have the potential for long-term pain. Maybe she didn’t want to go through it again.

“What if you weren’t a cop?”

She smiled faintly. “What if you weren’t a wizard?”

“Touché. But indulge me.”

She tilted her head and studied me for a minute. Then she said, “What happens when Susan comes back?”

I shook my head. “She isn’t.”

Her tone turned dry. “Indulge me.”

I frowned. “I don’t know,” I said quietly. “We decided to break it off. And...I suspect we’d see a lot of things very differently now.”

“But if she wanted to try again?” Murphy asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Let’s say we get together,” Murphy said. “How many kids do you want?”

I blinked. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“I don’t...” I blinked a few more times. “I hadn’t really thought about it.” So I thought about it for a second. I thought about the merry chaos of

the Carpenter household. God, I'd have given anything for that when I was little.

But any child of mine would inherit more than my eyes and killer chin. There were a lot of people who didn't think much of me. A lot of not-people thought that way, too. Any child of mine would be bound to inherit some of my enemies, and worse, maybe some of my allies. My own mother had left me a legacy of perpetual suspicion and doubt, and nasty little surprises that occasionally popped out of the hoary past.

Murphy watched me, blue eyes steady and serious. "It's a big question," she said quietly.

I nodded, slowly. "Maybe you're thinking about this too much, Murph," I said. "Logic and reason and planning for the future. What's in your heart doesn't need that."

"I used to think that, too." She shook her head. "I was wrong. Love isn't all you need. And I just don't see us together, Harry. You're dear to me. I couldn't ask for a kinder friend. I'd walk through fire for you."

"You already did," I said.

"But I don't think I could be the kind of lover you want. We wouldn't go together."

"Why not?"

"At the end of the day," she said quietly, "we're too different. You're going to live for a long time, if you don't get killed. Centuries. I'm going to be around another forty, fifty years at the most."

"Yeah," I said. It was one of those things I tried really hard not to dwell on.

She said, even more quietly, "I don't know if I'll get serious with a man again. But if I do...I want it to be someone who will build a family with me. Grow old with me." She reached up and touched the side of my face with warm fingers. "You're a good man, Harry. But you couldn't be what I need, either."

Murphy took her thumb from the button and left the elevator.

I didn't follow her right away.

She didn't look back.

Stab.

Twist.

God, I love being a wizard.

Chapter Twenty-three

The room was typical of my usual hotel experience: clean, plain, and empty. I made sure the blinds were pulled, looked around, and shoved the small round table at one side of the room over against the wall to leave me some open space in the middle of the floor. I slung my backpack down on the bed.

“Need anything?” Murphy asked. She stood in the doorway to the room. She didn’t want to come in.

“Think I have it all. Just need some quiet to get it set up.” There was no reason not to give Murphy a way out of the awkwardness the conversation had brought on. “There’s something I’m curious about. Maybe you could check it out.”

“Pell’s theater,” Murphy guessed. I could hear some relief in her voice.

“Yes. Maybe you could cruise by it and see what’s to be seen.”

She frowned. “Think there might be something in there?”

“I don’t know enough to think anything yet, but it’s possible,” I said. “You get a bad feeling about anything, don’t hang around. Just vamoose.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I already planned to do that.” She went to the door. “Shouldn’t take me long. I’ll contact you in half an hour, let’s say?”

“Sure,” I said. Neither one of us voiced what we both were thinking—that if Murphy missed the check-in, she’d probably be dead, or dying, or worse. “Half an hour.”

She nodded and left, shutting the door behind her. Mouse went over to the door, sniffed at it for a moment, then walked in a little circle three times and settled down on the floor to sleep. I frowned down at the carpet and opened my backpack. Chalk wouldn’t do for a circle, not on carpet like that. I’d have to go with the old standby of fine, white sand. The maids would doubtless find it annoying to clean up, but life could be hard sometimes. I pulled out a glass bottle of specially prepared sand and put it on the table, along with the main blob of Play-Doh and Bob the skull.

Orange lights kindled in the skull’s eye sockets. “Can I talk now?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You been listening to things?”

“Yeah,” Bob said, depressed. “You are *never* going to get laid.”

I glared at the skull.

“I’m just sayin’,” he said, voice defensive. “It isn’t my fault, Harry. She’d probably bang you if you didn’t take it so godawful seriously.”

“The subject. Change it,” I suggested in a flat voice. “We’re working now.”

“Right,” Bob said. “So you’re planning on a standard detection webward for the building?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“It isn’t going to be very helpful,” Bob said. “I mean, by the time something manifests enough to set off your web, it’s going to be all the way into the real world. While you’re running for the stairs, it’s already going to be tearing into somebody.”

“It isn’t perfect,” I said. “But it’s all I’ve got. Unless you have a better idea?”

“The thing about having several centuries of experience and knowledge at my disposal is that it doesn’t do me any good unless I know what it is you want me to help you fight,” Bob said. “So far, all you know is that you’ve got an inbound phobophage.”

“That’s not specific enough?”

“No!” Bob said. “I can think of about two hundred different kinds of phobophages off the top of my head, and I could probably come up with two hundred more if I took a minute to think about it.”

“That many of them who can do what this thing did? Take a solid form and attack?”

Bob blinked his eyes at me as though he thought me very thick. “Believe it or not, the old ‘take the form of the victim’s worst fear’ routine is pretty much the most common move in the phobophage handbook.”

“Oh. Right.” I shook my head. “But this whole place is open territory. There’s no threshold to use to anchor anything heavier than a web. At least if I do that much, maybe I can get into position fast enough to directly intervene when the thing shows up again.”

“Things,” Bob corrected me. “Plural. Phages are like ants. First one shows up, then two, then a hundred.”

I exhaled. “Crap,” I said. “Maybe we can come at this from a different angle. Is there any way I can redirect them while they’re crossing over? Make it harder for them to get here?”

Bob's eyelights brightened. "Maybe. Maybe, yes. You might be able to raise a veil over this whole place—from the other side."

"Urk," I said. "You're saying I could hide this place from the phages, but only from the Nevernever?"

"Pretty much," Bob said. "Even then, it would be a calculated risk."

"How so?"

"It all depends on how they're finding this place," Bob said. "I mean, if these are just naturally arriving phages finding a hunting ground, a veil won't stop them. It might slow them down, but it won't stop them."

"Let's assume that it isn't a coincidence," I said.

"Okay. Assuming that, the next variable is finding out whether they're being summoned or sent."

I frowned. "There are things strong enough to send them through from the other side? I didn't think that ever happened anymore. Hence the popularity of working through mortal summoners."

"Oh, it's doable," Bob assured me. "It just takes a hell of a lot more juice to open the way to the mortal world from the other side."

I frowned. "How much power are we talking?"

"Big," Bob assured me. "Like the Erlking, or an archangel, or one of the old gods."

I got a shivery feeling in my stomach. "A Faerie Queen?"

"Oh, sure. I guess so." He frowned. "You think this is Faerie work?"

"Something is definitely screwy in elfland," I said. "More so than normal, I mean."

Bob made a gulping sound. "Oh. We're not going to go visiting the faeries or anything, are we?"

"Not if I can help it," I said. "I wouldn't take you with me, if it came to that."

"Oh," he sighed. "Good."

"One of these days, you're gonna have to tell me what you did to make Mab want to kill you."

"Yeah, sure," Bob said, in that tone of voice you use while sweeping things under the rug. "But we should also consider the third possibility."

"A summoner," I said. "Given that someone actually threw a ward in my way the last time the phage showed up, that seems to be the most likely of the three."

"I think so, too," Bob said. "In which case, you're in trouble."

I grunted, and started unpacking candles, matches, and my old army-surplus knife. "Why?"

"Without a threshold to build on, you can't put up any proper defense. And even if you do cross over and set up a veil to try to keep the phages from finding the place..."

"Their summoner is going to draw them in," I finished, following the line of reasoning. "It's like...I could blanket the surrounding area in fog, but if they have someone on this end, the phages will have a beacon they can use to home in on the hotel."

"Right," Bob said. "And then the summoner just opens the door from his side, and they're in."

I frowned and said, "It's all about finding the summoner, then."

"Which you can't do, until they actually summon something," Bob said.

"Hell's bells," I complained. "There's got to be something we can do to prevent it."

"Not especially," Bob said. "Sorry, boss. Until you know more, you can't do anything but react."

I scowled. "Dammit. Then it's the web or nothing. At least if I use that, I might be able to identify the summoner." At the low, low cost of the phages mauling or killing someone else. Unless...

"Bob," I said, frowning over the idea. "What if I didn't try to hide the hotel or keep these things away. What if I, uh...just put a little topspin on the phages on the way in?"

Bob's eyelights brightened even more. "Oooooooo, classic White Council doctrine. When the phages come through, you point them straight at the guy who summoned them. Give him a dose of his own medicine."

"Right up the ass," I confirmed.

"There's an image," Bob said. "A summoning suppository."

"It's doable, isn't it?"

"Sure," Bob said. "I mean, you have everything you need for that. You know the phages are after fear, and that they're probably using his power as a beacon. Your web tells you something is stirring. You conjure up a big ball of fear, target the same beacon the phages are using, and let it fly."

"It'll be like hanging a steak around his neck and throwing him to the lions," I said, grinning.

"Hail Caesar," Bob confirmed. "The phages will go right after him."

“And once he’s out of the game, I veil the hotel from the phages. No more convention attendees get hurt. Bad guy gets a lethal dose of dramatic irony.”

“The good guys win!” Bob cheered. “Or at least you do. You’re still a good guy, right? You know how confusing the whole good-evil concept is for me.”

“I’m thinking about changing it to ‘them’ and ‘us,’ for simplicity’s sake,” I said. “I like this plan. So there’s got to be a catch to it somewhere.”

“True,” Bob admitted. “It’s gonna be a little tricky when it comes to the timing. You won’t be able to sense the beacon until the phages actually step through from the Nevernever and take material form. If you haven’t redirected them by then, it’ll be too late.”

I nodded, frowning. “That gives me what? Maybe twenty seconds?”

“Only if they’re really lame,” Bob said. “Probably ten seconds. Maybe even less.”

I frowned. “Dammit, that’s a small window.” I thought of another problem. “Not only that, but I’ll be shooting blind. There won’t be any way to tell who I’m setting the phages after. What if he’s standing in a crowd?”

“He’s going to be summoning fiends from the netherworld to wreak horror and death on the populace,” Bob pointed out in a patient voice. “That won’t lend itself to blending into a crowd.”

“Good point. He’ll probably be somewhere private, quiet.” I shook my head. “Even so, I’d be a lot happier if this was a little less dicey. But I don’t see any other way to stop these things from hurting anyone else.”

“Until we have more information, I don’t see what else you could do, boss.”

I grunted. “I’d better get this web up and running, then.”

Mouse’s collar tag clinked against the buckle, and I looked over my shoulder. The dog had lifted his head from the floor, staring intently at the door. A second later, someone knocked.

Mouse hadn’t started growling, and his tail thumped the wall a few times as I went to the door, sounding the all-clear. “That was fast,” I said, opening the door. “I thought you were going to be half an hour, Murph—”

Molly stood in the hallway, an overnight bag hung over her shoulder. She drooped, the way my house plants always used to when I was still optimistic enough to keep buying new ones. Her pink-and-blue hair hung

down listlessly, and her cheeks were marked with the remains of several mascara-laden tear tracks. She looked rumpled, tired, uncertain, and lonely.

“Hi,” she said. Her voice wasn’t much more than a whisper.

“Hey,” I told her. “I thought you were waiting for your mom.”

“I was,” she said. “I am. But...I’m kind of messed up.” She waved her hand gingerly at herself. “I wanted to clean up a little, but they won’t let me use the bathroom in Nelson’s room. I was hoping I could borrow yours. Just for a minute.”

It would have been easier to dropkick a puppy than to turn the kid away. “Sure,” I said. “Just keep it quiet. Okay?”

I stepped back into the room, and Molly followed me, pausing to scratch Mouse behind the ears. She looked past me, to the open floor space and the things I had sat out.

“What are you doing?” she asked me.

“Magic,” I said. “What’s it look like I’m doing?”

She smiled a little. “Oh. Right.”

I waved a hand at my materials. “I’m going to try to prevent another attack from hurting anyone.”

“Can you do that?” she asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “I hope so.”

“I can’t believe...I mean, I knew there were things out there, but my friends...Rosie.” Her lower lip quivered and her eyes filled with tears that didn’t quite fall.

I didn’t have much I could say to comfort her. “I’m going to stop it from happening again,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry I didn’t move fast enough the first time.”

She looked down again, and nodded without speaking. She swallowed several times.

“Listen,” I told her quietly. “This is serious stuff. You need to talk about it. Not with me,” I added, as she looked up at me. “With your mom.”

Molly shook her head. “She isn’t—”

“Molly,” I sighed. “Life can be short. And cruel. You saw that last night. You got a look at the kind of thing your dad deals with all the time.”

She didn’t respond.

I said quietly, “Even Knights can die, Molly. Shiro did. It could happen to Michael, too.”

She lifted her head abruptly, staring at me as if in shock.

“How does that make you feel?” I asked.

She chewed on her lip. “Scared.”

“It scares your mom, too. It scares her a lot. She deals with it by holding on hard to the people around her. Maybe too hard, sometimes. That’s why you feel like she’s trying to keep you a little kid. She probably is. But it isn’t because she’s a control freak. It’s because she loves you all so much—you, your dad, your family—and she’s frightened that something bad could happen. She’s desperate to do everything she can to keep you all safe.”

Molly didn’t look up or respond.

“Life is short,” I said. “Too short to waste it on stupid arguments. I’m not saying your mom is perfect, because God knows she isn’t. But my God, Molly, you’ve got the kind of family people like me would kill for. You think they’ll always be there later—but they might not be. Life doesn’t give you any guarantees.”

I let that sink in for a minute, and then said, “I promised your dad that I’d ask you to talk to her. I told him I’d do my best to get the two of you to work things out.”

She looked up at me, crying now, silently. More dark makeup trailed down her cheeks.

“Will you sit down with her, Molly? Talk?”

She took a shaking breath and said, “I don’t know if it will do any good. We’ve said so much....”

“I can’t force you to do it. No one can do that but you.”

She sniffled for a moment. “It won’t do any good.”

“I don’t expect miracles. Just try to talk to her. Please.”

She took a breath, and then nodded, once.

“Thank you,” I said.

She tried to smile once, and hovered outside the bathroom door for a moment more.

“Molly?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, but she didn’t move, either.

I frowned. “Something you want to say?”

She looked up at me for just a second. “No,” she said then, and shook her head. “No, it’s nothing, really. Thank you. I won’t be long.” She stepped into the bathroom, shut the door, and locked it. The shower started a moment later.

“Wow,” Bob said from behind me, somehow inserting a leer into the word. “I didn’t realize you liked them quite that...fresh, Harry.”

I glared at him. “What?”

“Did you see the body on her? Magnificent rack! Blond Nordic babe-age, but all pierced and dressed in black, which means she’s probably into at least one kind of kink. And all tender and emotional and vulnerable to boot. Taking her clothes off right here in your room.”

“Kink? You don’t—look, there’s no way to...” I sputtered. “No, Bob. Just no. For crying out loud. She’s seventeen.”

“Better move quick, then,” Bob said. “Before anything starts to droop. Taste of perfection while you can, that’s what I always say.”

“Bob!”

“What?” he said.

“That isn’t how things are.”

“Not *now*,” Bob said. “But you go get in that shower with her and you’ve got your own personal cable TV erotic movie come true.”

I rubbed at the bridge of my nose. “Hell’s bells. The whole idea is wrong, Bob. Just...wrong.”

“Harry, even a nerd should know that it’s no coincidence when a girl shows up at a man’s hotel room. You know all she really wants is to—”

“Bob,” I snapped, cutting him off. “Even if she wanted to, which she doesn’t, nothing is happening with the girl. I’m trying to work, here. You aren’t helping.”

“I’d hate to disrupt your most recent attempt to court death and agony,” he said brightly. “You should stick me somewhere else, where I won’t distract you. On the counter in the bathroom, for example.”

I slapped open one of the empty dresser drawers and tossed the skull in there, instead. Bob sputtered a few muffled curses in ancient Greek, something about sheep and a skin rash.

I looked up from the drawer into the room’s mirror, and found myself facing not my reflection, but Lasciel’s image instead, angelic and lovely and poised. “The perverted little creep has a point, my host,” she said.

I jabbed a finger at the mirror and said, “Bob is *my* little creep, and the only one who gets to call him names is me. Now go away.”

“Ah,” Lasciel said, and the image faded to translucence, my own reflection appearing to replace it. “Fascinating, though,” she added, just

before vanishing, “that boyfriend Nelson bears quite the striking physical resemblance to you.”

Then she was gone. Dammit. Stupid demons. Always with the last word.

Worse, she had a point. I eyed the bathroom door and reviewed the past day or so, and my interactions with the girl before that. I had always been someone her father respected and her mother disapproved of. I showed up once in a blue moon in a big black coat, usually looking roughed-up and dangerous, and I’d been doing so since she was young enough to be very impressionable. Hell, when you got right down to it, Charity’s disapproval alone might have been enough to make me seem interesting to a rebellious teenage girl.

I came to the reluctant conclusion that it was possible Molly might have certain ideas in her head. It might well explain the most recent awkward silences and halting pauses. She’d always liked me, and it wasn’t outrageous to think that it might have developed into something more—and that I’d be a right bastard to do anything that might encourage those ideas, even inadvertently. Maybe Bob and Lasciel were wrong, and in fact nothing like that was going on, but the passions of youth, its attractions and desires, were a minefield one took lightly at one’s own peril.

Magnificent rack notwithstanding, Molly was still, in every important way, a child—my *friend’s* child, to boot. She was hurting. It bothered me, and I wanted to help her, but I had to be aware of the fact that my sympathy could be misinterpreted. The kid had issues and she needed someone to help her work things out. She didn’t need someone who would only make her more confused.

Steam curled out from under the bathroom door. An actual hot shower. Not merely the illusion of one.

I shook my head and got back to the detection web.

As spells went, this one was pretty big, but it wasn’t complicated. I’d created a long-term version of the same basic working in the neighborhood around my apartment, in order to detect approaching mystical entities. The one I wanted for the hotel was the same thing, but I didn’t have to bother with setting it up as a long-term construct. A sunrise, or two at most, would erode the spell, but with any luck I wouldn’t need it for any longer.

I took the Play-Doh in hand, grabbed three candles in their own wooden holders, poured the sand in a circle around me, and began gathering in my power, painstakingly creating mental images of the web of energy I needed

to weave between the points of the hotel I'd marked out with Play-Doh. It didn't take me a terribly long time to set it up. Anyone with some basic skills and desire enough could have done something like this—or at least, they could have done it on a smaller scale. Weaving a web throughout the whole building took a lot of heavy lifting, magically speaking, but it wasn't complicated, and fifteen minutes later I solidified the image of the energy patterns in my mind, and whispered, "*Magius, orbis, spiritus oculus.*"

I poured my will and my magic out with the words as I spoke them, and my body briefly lit up with a flood of tingling energy that raced along all of my limbs, down into the lump of Play-Doh, and swirled in tight spirals around the three candles that would serve as my ward-flames. The spell's energy flashed, appearing as a tiny stream of faint flickers, like bursts of static electricity, and the candles each flickered to life, steady little flames born of the spell. I broke the circle of sand as I spoke, and the power blossomed out through the hotel, into the shape I'd imagined, invisible strands flickering into instant shape, like ice crystals forming in the space of a heartbeat, spreading unseen strands throughout the hotel.

My balance wobbled a bit as I finished the spell and the energy left me, submerging me in a temporary flood of fatigue. I sat there with my head down, breathing hard for a minute.

"Wow," Murphy said, her tone less than impressed. I looked up to see her shutting the room's door behind her. "What did you do?"

I waved around to indicate the hotel and panted, "If bad mojo shows up in the hotel, the spell will sense it." I gestured at the three candles. "Take one with you. If you see it flare up, it means we've got incoming."

Murphy frowned but nodded. "How much warning will they give us?"

"Not much," I said. "A couple minutes, maybe less. Maybe a lot less."

"Three candles," she said. "One for you, one for me, and..."

"I thought we'd see if Rawlins wanted one."

"Is he here?" Murphy said.

"Gut feeling," I said. "He seems like the kind who sees something through."

"He also seems like the kind who's been injured. No chance he'd get active duty here."

"He didn't have it at the hospital, either," I pointed out.

"True," Murphy said.

I caught my breath a little, and asked, "Anything at Pell's theater?"

Murphy nodded and crossed the room to pick up two of the candles. “A lot of nothing. Place was locked up tight. Chains on the front doors, and the back door was locked. Sign on the door said they were closed until further notice.”

I grunted. “You’d think Pell would be wild to have the place open, if the convention was providing a significant amount of his income—even if he was in a hospital bed. Hell, *especially* if he was in a hospital bed.”

“Unless he doesn’t have anyone he trusts to run it for him.”

“But he does have someone he trusts enough to lock it up?” I said. “That doesn’t track. Pell sure as hell didn’t lock up after he was attacked.”

Murphy frowned, but she didn’t disagree with me. “I tried to call him to ask him about it, but the nurse said he was sleeping.”

I ran my fingers back through my hair, frowning over the situation. “Curiouser and curiouser,” I said. “We’re missing something here.”

“Like what?” Murphy asked.

“Another player,” I said. “Someone we haven’t seen yet.”

Murphy made a thoughtful sound. “Maybe. But imagining invisible perpetrators or hidden conspiracies veers pretty close to paranoia.”

“Maybe not another suspect, then,” I said thoughtfully. “Maybe another motive.”

“Like what?” she asked, though I could see the wheels turning in her head as she followed the logic chain from the notion.

“These phage attacks look fairly simple at first glance. Like...I don’t know. Shark attacks. Something hungry shows up to eat someone and then leaves. Natural occurrences. Or rather, typical supernatural occurrences.”

“But they aren’t random,” Murphy said. “Someone is sending them to a specific place. Someone who used magic to try to stop you when you interfered with one of the phages.”

“Which begs the obvious question...” I began.

Murphy nodded and finished the thought. “Why do it in the first place?”

I stuck my left hand out to one side of me and said, “Look over here.” Then I mimed a short jab with my right fist.

“It’s a rope-a-dope,” Murphy said, her eyes narrowing. “A distraction. But from what?”

“Something worse than homicidal, shapeshifting, supernatural predators, apparently,” I mused. “Something we’d want to stop a lot more.”

“Like what?”

I shook my head and shrugged. "I don't know. Not yet, anyway."

Murphy grimaced. "Leave it to you to make paranoia sound plausible."

"It's only paranoia if I'm wrong," I said.

Murphy glanced over her shoulder and shivered a little. "Yeah." She turned back to me, squared her shoulders, and took a steadying breath. "Okay. What's the play, here? I assume you've got something in mind beyond having a minute or two of warning."

"Yes," I said.

"What?" she asked.

"It gets kind of technical," I said.

"I'll try to keep up," she said.

I nodded. "Anytime something from the spirit world wants to cross into the mortal world, it has to do a number of things to cross the border. It has to have a point of origin, a point of destination, and enough energy to open the way. Then it has to cross over, summon ectoplasm from the Nevernever, and infuse it with more energy to give itself a physical body."

She frowned. "What do you mean by points of origin and destination?"

"Links," I told her. "Sort of like landmarks. Usually, the creature you're calling up can serve as its own point of origin. Whoever is opening the way across is usually the destination."

"Can anyone be the destination?" she asked.

"No," I said. "You can't call up anything that isn't..." I frowned, looking for words. "You can't call up anything that doesn't have some kind of reflection inside you, a kind of point of reference for the spirit being. If you want evil, nasty, hungry beings, there's got to be evil, nasty, and hunger inside of you."

She nodded. "Does the way have to be opened from this side?"

"Generally," I said. "It takes a hell of a lot more oomph to get it done from the other side."

She nodded. "Go on."

I told her about my plan to turn the phages back upon their summoner.

"I like that," she said. "Using their own monsters against them. But what does that leave me to do?"

"You buy me time," I said. "There will be a moment just when the phage or phages cross over, where they will be vulnerable. If you're able to see one and distract it, it will give me more time to aim them back at their

summoner. And it's possible that my spell might not work. If it goes south, you'll be near enough to help clear people out, maybe do them some good."

Murphy began to speak—then she paused, turned around, and asked, "Harry. Is there someone in the shower?"

"Uh. Yeah," I said, and rubbed at the back of my neck.

She arched a brow and waited, but I didn't offer any explanation. Maybe it was my way of getting petty vengeance for her brutal honesty in the elevator.

"All right then," she said, and took up the candles. "I'll get downstairs and look for Rawlins. Otherwise, I'll grab one of my guys from SI."

"Sounds good," I said.

Murphy left, while I started planning out my redirection spell. It didn't take me long.

Mouse lifted his head suddenly, and a second later someone knocked at the door. I went over and opened it.

Charity stood on the other side, dressed in jeans, a knit tank top, and a blue blouse of light cotton. Her features were drawn with stress, her shoulders clenched in unconscious tension. When she saw me, her features became remote and neutral, very controlled. "Hello, Mister Dresden."

It was probably the friendliest greeting I could expect from her. "Heya," I said.

Standing beside her was an old man, a little under average height. What was left of his hair was grey, trimmed neatly, though hardly a fringe remained. He had eyes the color of robin's eggs, spectacles, a comfortably heavy build, and wore black slacks and a black shirt. The white square of his clerical collar stood out distinctively against the shirt. He smiled when he saw me, and offered me his hand.

I shook it, smiling, and had no need to fake it. "Father Forthill. What are you doing here?"

"Harry," he said amiably. "Lending some moral support, by and large."

"He's my attorney," Charity added.

I blinked. "He is?"

"He is," Forthill said, smiling. "I passed the bar before I entered the orders. I've kept my hand in on behalf of the diocese and my parishioners. I do some pro bono work from time to time, too."

"He's a lawyer," I said. "He's a priest. This does not compute."

Forthill let out a belly laugh. "Oxymoronic."

“Hey, did I start calling *you* names?” I grinned at him. “What can I do for you?”

“Molly was supposed to be waiting for us downstairs,” Charity said. “But we haven’t found her. Do you know where she is?”

The universe conspired against me. If Charity had asked the question ten seconds sooner, I would have been fine. But instead, the bathroom door opened, and Molly appeared in a swirl of steam. She had a towel wrapped around her hair, and was holding another around her torso. Hotel towels and Molly’s torso being what they were, the towel didn’t quite get all the way around her, and barely maintained modesty. “Harry,” she said. “I left my bag out he—” She broke off suddenly, staring at Charity.

“This, uh, isn’t what it looks like,” I stammered, turning back to Charity.

Her eyes blazed with cold, righteous rage. An old Kipling axiom about the female of the species being more deadly than the male flashed through my mind, right about the time Charity introduced my chin to her right hook.

Light flashed behind my eyes and I found myself flat on my back while the ceiling spun around a little.

“Mother,” Molly said in a shocked voice.

I looked up in time to see Forthill put a firm hand on Charity’s arm, preventing her from following up the first blow. She narrowed her eyes at Forthill, but the old man’s fingers dug into her biceps until she gave him a slight nod and took a small step back into the hallway.

“Dress,” she told Molly, implacable authority in her tone. “We’re leaving.”

The kid looked like she might just start falling apart on the spot. She grabbed her bag, ducked into the bathroom, and was dressed in under a minute.

“There was nothing going on,” I mumbled. It came out sounding more like, “Mmrphg ggggh oonng.”

“I may not be able to keep you away from my husband,” Charity said, her tone cold, her diction precise. “But if you come near one of my children again, I will kill you. Thank you for calling me.”

She left, the weary Molly following her.

“There was nothing going on,” I said again, to Forthill. This time it sounded mostly like English.

He sighed, looking after the pair. "I believe you." He gave me a smile that was one part amusement to four parts apology, and followed them.

Murphy must not have reached the elevators before Charity and Forthill had arrived. She appeared in the doorway, peering inside the room, and then back the way Charity had gone. "Ah," she said. "You all right?"

"I guess," I sighed.

Her mouth twitched, but she didn't quite smile or laugh at me. "Seems to me that you should have seen that one coming."

"Don't laugh at me," I said. "It hurts."

"You've had worse," she said heartlessly. "And it serves you right for letting a little girl into your hotel room. Now get up. I'll be downstairs."

She left, too.

Mouse came over and started patiently nuzzling my chin and putting slobbering dog kisses on the bruise I could feel forming there.

"Women confuse me," I told him.

Mouse sat down, jaws dropping open into a doggie grin. I groaned, pushed myself to my feet, and set about preparing the redirection spell, while outside my room's window the sun raced for its nightly rendezvous with the western horizon.

Chapter Twenty-four

I shut the door again and rushed to prepare the beacon spell, hurrying, certain that every second counted. I would only get one shot at diverting the phages, and I finished my preparations in feverish haste.

Nothing happened.

The sun set, leaving me mostly in the dark, since I hadn't bothered to turn on any lights.

Nothing continued happening.

I knelt in my circle of sand until my legs cramped and then went numb, and my knees felt like they were resting in molten lead.

And all that nothing just kept on coming.

"Oh come *on*," I snarled. "Bring on the doom, already."

From his spot near the door, Mouse heaved a sigh.

"Oh, shut up," I told him. I didn't dare take a break. If the bad guys moved and I wasn't ready, people would get hurt. So I knelt there, holding the spell ready in my mind, uncomfortable as hell, and swearing sulfurously under my breath. Stupid, lame-ass summoner. What the hell was he waiting for? Any half-competent villain would have had monsters roaming the halls hours ago.

Mouse's tail thumped against the wall, and a moment later the room's lock clicked, and Rawlins opened the door. He was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that concealed the bandages on his wounded arm, and he carried a wardflame candle in one hand. The blocky, dark-skinned officer leaned down and held his hand out to Mouse, who sniffed Rawlins in typical canine fashion and wagged his tail some more.

Rawlins remained in the doorway and said, "Hello? Dresden?"

"Here," I muttered.

Rawlins thumped at the wall until he found the lights and flicked them on. He stared at me for a minute, eyebrows slowly rising. "Uh-huh. There's something I don't see every day."

I grimaced. "Murphy found you, I see."

"Almost like she's a detective," Rawlins said, grinning.

"Your boss know you're here?" I asked.

“Not so far,” he replied. “But I expect someone might notice and tell him about me at some point.”

“He won’t be happy,” I said.

“I just hope I can live with myself later.” He waved his little candle. “Murphy sent me up here to make sure you was still alive.”

“I’m going to need knee surgery,” I sighed. “I never planned on it taking this long.”

“Uh-huh,” Rawlins said again. “You ain’t one of those Satan worshipers are you?”

“No,” I said. “More like Pythagoras.”

“Pih-who?”

“He invented triangles.”

“Ah,” Rawlins said, as if that had explained everything. “So, what are you doing here?”

I explained it to him, though it looked like he was having trouble accepting my words. Maybe I lacked credibility. “But I figured he would have moved by now.”

“Crooks are funny that way,” he agreed. “No respect.”

I scrunched up my face in thought. I was hungry, thirsty, tired, hurting, and I had to use the bathroom in the worst way. None of those things were going to become easier to bear as the night went on, and I needed to have all the concentration I could get.

“Okay,” I said. “Be smart. Take a break.” I leaned down and broke the circle by sweeping the sand aside with my hand, letting the energy of the spell I’d been holding ready drain away. At least I’d already done it once. Getting it back into position wouldn’t take nearly as long as the first time.

I tried to rise, but my legs were incommunicado. I grimaced at Rawlins and said, “Give me a hand here?”

He set his candle aside and helped me up. I wobbled precariously for a couple of seconds, but then stumbled to the bathroom and back out.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I’m good. Tell Murphy to hold steady.”

Rawlins nodded. “We’ll be downstairs.” He paused and said, “Hope this happens soon. There’s some kind of costume contest going on.”

“Is it bad?”

“There are a lot of skimpy getups, and some of those people should *not* be wearing them.”

“Call the fashion police,” I said.

Rawlins nodded gravely. “They’ve crossed a line.”

“Do me a favor?” I asked him. “Take Mouse out for a walk?” I dug a couple of bills from my back pocket and passed them to Rawlins. “Maybe get him a hot dog or something?”

“Sure,” Rawlins agreed. “I like dogs.”

The dog’s tail thumped rapidly against the wall.

“Whatever you do, don’t give him nachos. I didn’t bring my gas mask with me.”

Rawlins nodded. “Sure.”

“Keep your eyes open,” I said. “Tell Murph I’ll be reset in a couple of minutes.”

Rawlins grunted and left.

I had a canteen of fruit punch in my backpack, along with some beef jerky and some chocolate. I went to the bag and started wolfing down all three while pacing back and forth to stretch my legs. Holding myself ready to strike had been more than simply a physical strain. My head felt like someone had packed it in wool, while at the same time my senses seemed slightly distorted; edges made sharper, curves more ambiguous, the whole combining to make the hotel room feel like a toned-down Escher painting. There was no help for that. The use of magic was mostly in the mind, and holding a spell together for a long time often triggered disconcerting side effects.

I polished off the food as fast as I could gulp it down, went easy on the drink, in case I was there for another several hours, and settled back down in my circle, preparing to close it again.

When the room’s phone rang.

“Déjà vu,” I commented to the empty room. I stood up, my knees creaking, and went to the phone.

“Dresden Taxidermy,” I said. “You snuff it, we’ll stuff it.”

There was a beat of startled silence from the phone, and then a young man’s voice said, “Um. Is this Harry Dresden?”

I recognized the voice—Boyfriend Nelson. That made my ears perk up, metaphorically speaking. “Yeah, this is him,” I said.

“This is...”

“I know who it is,” I told him. “How did you know where I was?”

“Sandra,” he said. “I called her cell. She told me you’d checked in.”

“Uh-huh. *Why* are you calling me?”

“Molly said...she said you helped people.” He paused to take a breath, and then said, “I think I need your help. Again.”

“Why?” I asked. Keep the questions open, I thought. Never give him one with a simple answer. “What’s going on?”

“Last night, during the attacks. I think I saw something.”

I sighed. “It was going around,” I agreed. “But if you saw something, you’re a witness to a crime, kid. You need to show up and work with the cops. They get sort of unreasonable with people who go all evasive when they want to ask questions about a murder.”

“But I think some...thing is following me,” he said. An unsteady tremor shook Nelson’s voice. “Look, they’re just cops, man. They just have guns. I don’t think they can help me. I hope you can.”

“Why?” I asked him. “What is it that you saw?”

“No,” he said. “Not on the phone. I want to meet with you. I want you to promise me your help. I’ll tell you then.”

Right. Because it wasn’t like I had anything better to be doing. “Look, kid...”

Nelson’s voice suddenly went thready with breathless fear. “Oh, God. I can’t stay here. Please. *Please.*”

“Fine, fine,” I said, trying to keep my voice strong, steady. The kid was scared—the bone-deep, knee-watering, half-crazy kind of scared that makes rational thinking all but impossible. “Listen to me. Stay around people, as many of them as you can. Go to Saint Mary of the Angels Church. It’s holy ground, and you’ll be safe there. Ask for Father Forthill. He’s a little guy, mostly bald, glasses, bright blue eyes. Tell him everything and tell him I’m coming to collect you as soon as I can.”

“Yes, all right, thank you,” Nelson said, the words hysterically rushed. There was a brief clatter, and then I heard running footsteps on concrete. He hadn’t even gotten the phone back into its cradle before he’d taken off at a dead sprint.

I chewed on my lip. The kid was definitely in trouble, or at least genuinely believed that he was. If so, it meant that maybe he *had* seen something last night, something that made it important for someone to kill him—i.e., some kind of damning evidence that would probably help me figure out what the hell was going on. I felt a stab of anxiety. Holy ground was a powerful deterrent to the things that went bump in the night—or in

this case, things that went stab, stab, hack, slash, rip in the night—but it wasn't invulnerable. If something of sufficient supernatural strength really was after the kid, it might be able to force its way into the church.

Dammit, but what choice did I have? If I left my position here, any fresh attack could make last night's look like a friendly round of Candyland. What could he possibly have seen that would make him worth killing? Why the hell was he being followed? I felt like I was floundering around in the dark inside someone else's house, benighted of *savoir faire* enough to move with assurance. I was spread too thin. If I didn't start finding more pieces of the puzzle and put them together, and soon, more people would die.

I could only be in one place at one time. If the kid was in real trouble, he'd be as safe at the church, with Forthill, as anywhere in town short of the protection of my heavily warded apartment. Meanwhile, there were a bunch of other kids here who looked to be the next meal on the phobophage buffet. I had to act where I could do the most good. It was a cold sort of equation, the calculus of survival, but undeniable. I'd get to Nelson after I had taken care of business at the hotel.

I settled down on my knees again, carefully, closed the circle, and began to pick up the pieces of the redirection spell once more.

The single wardflame candle on the room's dresser suddenly exploded into lurid red light. Simultaneously, I felt a heavy thrumming in the air, where the strands of my web spell had suddenly encountered powerful magic in motion, drawing my thoughts and attention to a back hallway in the hotel, not far from the kitchens, up to the hall outside the hotel's exercise room, and a swift double-thrum from another of the hotel's bathrooms.

Four attackers, this time. Four of them at least.

I had ten seconds to get the spell off.

Nine.

Maybe less.

Eight.

I threw myself into the spell.

Seven.

It had to be fast.

Six.

It had to be perfect on the first attempt.

Five.

If I screwed this one up, someone else would pay for it. Four.
They'd pay for it in blood.

Three.

Two.

One...

Chapter Twenty-five

I readied my spell, terrified that I was already too late, terrified that I had made a critical mistake, terrified that more innocents were about to face hideous agony and death.

That was how it had to be. If I wanted to lure the phages from their rampage by directing them after a richer source of fear, it had to come from somewhere—specifically, it had to come from me. If I'd tried to use falsified emotion, it would no more have worked on them than an attempt to make a gorilla interested in a plastic banana. The fear had to be genuine.

Of course, I hadn't really planned on being quite *this* afraid. Being taken off my guard and handed a time limit had added an edge of panicked hysteria to the ample anxiety I already had.

The spell coalesced, and time came to an abrupt stop.

In that illusory stasis, my senses were on fire. The presence of the dangerous entities now entering the material world rippled through my detection web; a jittery, fluttering sensation. The energy of the spell burned like an invisible star before my outstretched hands, and my terror rushed into it and fused with the spell. Streamers from the lure whipped out along the lines of power that constituted my detection web, brushing lightly at the entities, attracting their attention, giving them a whiff of rich sustenance.

And somewhere in the middle of all that, I felt a single, quiet, quivering pulse—a living presence that could only be the phages' summoner and beacon.

"Gotcha," I hissed, and with an effort of will broke the circle and sent the spell winging toward him.

Time resumed its course. The energy that powered the spell fled out of me in another rush, and left me lying on my side, struggling to draw in enough breath. I could feel the spell sizzling down the lines of power for the summoner, and a heartbeat later there was a sense of impact as the spell went home. As it happened, the entities my web touched went abruptly still, the web ceasing its trembling—and then they all surged forward into sudden motion, vanishing from the web, and presumably streaking after the lure.

All but one.

A breath or two after the entities had departed, my web trembled again, now growing more agitated, its motion a kind of subliminal pressure against my thoughts.

I had missed one. My spell had gotten out in time to draw away the others, but either my web had failed me at some point or the remaining phage had been quicker on the draw than his buddies from the Nevernever. I could feel it moving from the hotel's kitchens toward the convention halls.

I wanted to curl into a fetal position and go into a coma. Instead, I shoved my wobbly way to my feet, took up my pack, and opened the drawer to get Bob.

"Did it work?" he chirped.

"Almost," I said. "There's one left. Keep your head down."

"Oh, *very* funny..." he began.

I zipped the skull into my pack, took up my staff and blasting rod, and shuffled wheezily out to find the remaining phage before it found someone else.

My legs almost gave out just *thinking* about taking the stairs, so I rode the elevator down to the first floor. I heard nothing until the floor indicator told me we'd just passed the second floor, at which point I began to hear frightened, muffled screams. The elevator hit the first floor, and the doors had just begun to roll open when the power went out.

Blackness fell over the hotel. The screams redoubled. I took out my pentacle amulet and sent enough of my will into it to make it glow with pale blue wizard's light. I jammed my staff into the slightly open elevator doors and levered them apart, then slipped out into the hotel.

Though the sun had set more than an hour before, the crowded convention hall had remained stuffy while its air conditioners labored in vain. I got my bearings and headed for the kitchen. As I did, the air temperature plummeted, sending the hotel's climate from near-sauna to near-freezing in a handful of seconds. The suddenly cooled air could no longer contain the oppressive humidity it had been holding, and this resulted in a sudden, thick fog that coalesced out of nowhere and cut visibility down to maybe three or four long steps.

Dammit. The phages that had appeared so far seemed to be specialists in the up-close-and-personal venue of violence, whereas wheezy wizards like

me prefer to do business from across the street, or down the block, or maybe from a neighboring dimension. Farther away, if possible. Wizards have a capacity for recovering from injury that might be more than most humans', but that was a long-term deal. In a bar fight, it wasn't going to do me any good. Hell, I didn't even have my duster with me, and now that the cold had rolled over the hotel, I missed it for multiple reasons.

I put my amulet back on, then shook out my shield bracelet and readied it for use, creating a second source of glowing blue light—though by accident, not design. The silver bracelet I used to focus magic into a tangible plane of force had been damaged in the same fire that took most of my left hand, and sparks of blue light tended to dribble from it whenever I moved my arm around. I had to be ready to use the shield at an instant's notice. It would be the only thing between me and whatever might come rushing from the fog.

I went with my staff in my right hand. When it came to taking apart rampaging monsters, I preferred my blasting rod, but I've had an incident or two involving buildings and fire. If I went blazing away at the thing in a crowded hotel and burned the place down, it would kill more people than the rampage would have. The staff was a subtle tool, not as potent a weapon as the blasting rod, but it was more versatile, magically speaking.

Plus, in a pinch, I could brain someone with it—which isn't subtle, but sure as hell is reassuring.

The emergency lights hadn't snapped on, so either someone had sabotaged them or there was enough raw magical energy flying around to take them out. But as I moved out toward the kitchens, I didn't feel anything like the kind of ambient energy it would take to blow out something as simple as a battery-powered light. That meant that someone had deliberately taken the emergency lights off-line, by magical means or otherwise, and it wasn't hard to guess why.

Gunshots rang out, weirdly muted by the building's acoustics; flat, heavy sounds like someone swinging a baseball bat at a metal trash can. Screams and sounds of confusion, fear, worry, and even pain continued all around me as people fumbled in the dark, tripped, fell, or collided with furniture and one another. The building was already emptying, at least here on the first floor, but the sudden darkness had resulted in a panicked stampede, and people had been injured in the crush. The darkness had created confusion, slowed the intended prey from fleeing, and left wounded behind

who could neither defend themselves nor flee the building. Their helplessness would be driving them mad with fear.

It would make them juicier targets for the phage.

A metallic, piercing shriek hit my ears in a sudden, stunning shock wave, and my legs stopped moving. I didn't choose to do it. The sound just hit something primitive in my brain stem, something that made my instincts scream at me to freeze, to not be seen. I dropped to one knee, terror suddenly falling onto my shoulders like a physical weight. In the wake of the shriek, I could hear human throats screaming in fear, nearby to me, and I could see the shapes of people moving around, lumpy shadows in the faint light from my shield bracelet.

A flame suddenly appeared ahead of me, and I got a look at a young woman who crouched down, holding up a cigarette lighter in a hand that shook so badly that it seemed a miracle the lighter stayed aflame.

"No!" I screamed at her. I rose to my feet and lunged toward her. "Put out the light!"

Her face swiveled toward me, ghostly in the light of the tiny flame, her mouth working soundlessly—and then something the size of a mountain lion hit her across the shoulders and flung her to the ground. The lighter flew from her hand, the little lick of flame showing me something black and gleaming and spattered with scarlet gore.

The woman screamed. The dark hallway became a river of terrified people plunging through the darkness. Someone fell against me, and as I stumbled away from them I stepped on someone's fingers in the darkness and tripped when I tried to pull my weight off of them.

I snarled, slammed my back against the wall, held up my staff, and called up Hellfire.

Power flooded down the length of the carved oak, its sigils and runes filling with red-white liquid fire that ran from the base of the staff to its head in a ripple of energy. The crisp, clean scent of wood smoke filled the air, tainted with the barest hint of sulfur, and lurid light washed through the hallway.

I saw people scrambling, screaming, weeping. They were moving away, taking advantage of the light while they had it, and the hall around me cleared rapidly. It left the woman with the lighter. She lay on her side, curled into a fetal position, her arms clasped around her head while...the *thing* mauled her.

It was equal parts feline and insect, all lanky arms, powerful legs, and a whipping tail tipped with a serrated point. Its skin was a black, shining carapace, and it had an elongated, eyeless head ending in viscous, slime-covered jaws full of teeth. Though it had no eyes, it somehow sensed the light of my powered staff, and it whipped around toward me with a hiss, body tensing in sinuous grace, jaws gaping, slime dripping from its teeth while a slow, enraged hissing sound emerged from its throat.

I stared at it for all of a second in the shock of recognition. Then I gritted my teeth, got my feet underneath me, pointed the end of my staff at the creature, and snarled, “Get away from her, you *bitch*.”

The phage shifted its position, the wounded girl now forgotten, its limbs weirdly jointed, its motion sinuous and eerie. It hissed again, louder. A second pair of jaws emerged from between the first, and they too hissed and parted and drooled in challenge.

“Is this gonna be a standup fight or just another bug hunt?” I taunted.

The phage leapt at me, faster than I would have thought possible—but that’s how fast always works. Lots of people and not-people are faster than me, and I’d learned to plan for it a long time ago. A lot of people think that, in a fight, speed is the only thing that matters. It isn’t true. Oh, sure, it’s enormously advantageous to have greater speed, but a smart opponent can counter it with good footwork, calculating distance to give him the advantage of economy of movement. The phage was fast, but it had to cross eight or nine feet of carpet to get to me. I had to move my hand about ten inches and harden the shield before my left hand with my will. It wasn’t that fast.

The phage hit my shield, bringing a ghostly blue quarter dome into shape and sending a cascade of blue sparks flying back around me. At the last second, I turned and angled the shield to deflect the creature’s momentum. It caromed off the shield and went tumbling along the hallway beyond me for a good twenty feet.

“You want some of this?” I stepped into the middle of the hall to put myself between the phage and the wounded girl. The phage rose, turning to flee. Before it could move I thrust the end of my staff in its direction and cried, “*Forzare!*”

I hadn’t ever used quite that much Hellfire before.

Power rushed out of my staff. Usually, when I employed it like this, the force I unleashed was invisible. This time, it rushed out like a scarlet

comet, like a blazing cannonball. The force dipped at the last second, then came up at the phage. The impact threw it against the ceiling with bone-crushing force, and at least twice as much energy as I'd intended. The phage came down, limbs thrashing wildly, bouncing and skittering frantically, like a half-smashed bug.

I hit it again, the runes in my staff blazing, bathing the whole length of the hall in scarlet radiance, slamming the phage into a wall with more crunching sounds. Yellowish liquid splattered, there was an absolutely awful smell, and sudden holes pocked the wall and the floor where the yellow blood fell.

I cried havoc in the hellish light and hit it again. And again. And again. I bounced the murdering phage around that hallway until acid burned a hundred holes in the walls, ceiling, and floor, and my blood sang with the battle, with the power, with triumph.

I lost track of several seconds. The next thing I remember, I stood over the crushed, twitching phage. "It's the only way to be sure," I told it. And then, with cool deliberation, I slammed the end of my staff into the thing's eyeless skull, muscle and magic alike propelling the blow. Its head crunched and fractured like a cheap taco shell, and suddenly there was no phage, no creature. There was only the damaged hallway, the tainted smell of hellish wood smoke, and a mound of clear, swiftly dissolving ectoplasm.

My knees shook and I sat down in the hallway. I closed my eyes. The red light of Hellfire continued to pulse through my staff, lighting the hall, illuminating my eyelids.

The next thing I knew, Mouse pressed up against my side, an enormous, warm, silent presence. Bright lights bobbed toward me. Flashlights. Footsteps. People were shouting a lot.

"Jesus," Rawlins breathed.

Murphy knelt down by me and touched my shoulder. "Harry?"

"I'm okay," I said. "The girl. Behind me. She's hurt."

Rawlins stood shining his flashlight on a bloody section of the hallway. "Jesus Christ."

The phage had killed three people before I got there. I hadn't been able to see much of them during the fight. It was a scene of horror, worse than any slaughterhouse. The phage had taken out a cop. I could see a piece of shirt with a bloodstained CPD badge on it. The second victim might have been a

middle-aged man, judging by a bloodied orthopedic shoe that still held a foot. White leg bone showed two or three inches above the shoe.

The third victim had been one of the little vampire girls I'd seen the previous evening. I could only tell because her head had landed facing me. The rest of her was hopelessly intermixed with the other two bodies.

They'd need someone good at jigsaw puzzles to put them back together.

Murphy went to the girl with the lighter, and knelt over her.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Gone," Murphy replied.

I blinked. "What?"

"She's dead."

"No," I said. I was too tired to feel much of the sudden frustration that went through me. "Hell's bells, she was moving just a second ago. I got here in time."

Murphy grimaced. "She bled out."

"Wait," I said, staggering to my feet. "This isn't...She shouldn't be..."

I felt a sudden sickness in my stomach.

Was she still alive when the phage had turned to run? Could I have stopped or slowed the bleeding, if I had let the thing retreat to the Nevernever?

I thought of the fight again. I thought of the satisfaction of turning the hunter into prey, of extracting vengeance for those it had slain. I thought about the power that raged through me, the sheer, precise *strength* of the Hellfire-assisted assault, and how good it felt to use it on something that had it coming. I'd barely given a thought to the girl's condition.

Had I let her die?

My God. I could have let the phage run.

I could have helped her.

The girl's body lay curled up, still, like a sleeping child. Her dead eyes were open and glassy.

I lunged for a potted plant near me and threw up.

After I did, Rawlins observed, "You don't look so good."

"No," I whispered. The words tasted bitter. "I don't."

Mouse let out one of his not-whine breaths and laid his chin on my shoulder. My eyes couldn't get away from the dead people, not even when they were closed. The hellish light in my staff slowly faded and went dark.

“I’ve got to organize this clusterfuck,” Murphy sighed. “Rawlins, keep an eye on him.”

“Yeah.”

She nodded once and rose, briskly moving away, snapping orders. “You, you,” Murphy said, pointing at two nearby cops. “Get over there and help the wounded. Airway, bleeding, heartbeat. Move.” She raised her voice and shouted, “Stallings! Where the hell is my ambulance?”

“Two minutes!” a man shouted down a dimly lit hall leading to the lobby. It looked like someone had pulled a patrol car or three up to the front of the hotel to shine their headlights into the darkened building.

“Clear them a path and call for more EMTs,” Murphy barked. She took her radio off her belt and started giving more orders.

Rawlins looked at the remains, and at the acid-scarred walls and the enormous areas of smashed drywall and ceiling that looked like they’d been kissed by a wrecking ball. He shook his head. “What the hell happened here?”

“Bad guy,” I said. “I got him. Not fast enough.”

Rawlins grunted. “Come on. Best we get up to the lobby. Until they get the lights back on, it might not be safe out here.”

“What happened on your end?” I asked.

“Damn candle blew up in my face. Then the lights went out. Thought for a second I’d gone blind.”

I grunted. “Sorry.”

“Some of the civilians were carrying. That howling thing went by in the dark and everyone panicked. Stampede in the dark. People got trampled and scared. Civilians opened fire, cops opened fire. We got one dead and a couple of dozen wounded by one thing or another.”

We reached the lobby and found more police arriving along with the emergency crews. The EMTs set up shop at once in a makeshift triage area, where Murphy had brought most of the wounded. The EMTs started stabilizing, evaluating, resuscitating. They had the worst cases loaded in the ambulance and rushing for the hospital within six or seven minutes.

Murphy’s stream of peremptory commands had slowed to a stop, and she stood near the triage area. I sidled over to her and loomed. Mouse pushed his head underneath her hand, but Murphy only patted him absently. I followed her worried blue gaze. The EMTs were working on Rick.

Greene sat in a chair nearby. He had wiped his face with a towel, but it hadn't taken the blood out of the creases. It made a sanguine masque of his features. He held the towel against his head with his left hand.

Murphy said nothing for a while. Then she asked, "Did the spell work?"

"Mostly," I said. "I missed one."

She tensed. "Is it still..."

"No. I picked up the spare."

She pressed her lips firmly together and closed her eyes. "When the candle went off, I hit the fire alarm. I wanted to clear the building fast. But someone had broken it. Just like the power and the emergency lights. Something went right by me and hit Greene early on. Now I'm the one in charge of this mess."

"What happened to Rick?"

She spoke dispassionately. "Hit by panic fire. Gut shot. I don't know how bad."

"He'll be all right," I told her. "The EMTs would have taken him out first if he was in real trouble."

She watched a pair of them labor over Rick. "Yeah," she said. "He'll be okay. He'll be all right."

She forced herself to look away from her ex-husband with a visible effort. "I've got to get things under control here, until we get the chain of command straightened out, and I make sure the wounded are cared for. Families notified, God." She shook her head, and watched the EMTs lift Rick onto a stretcher and carry him out. Unspoken apology infused her tone. "After that, there will be questions, and a rain forest worth of paperwork."

"I get it," I told her quietly. "It's your job."

"It's my job." She focused her eyes in the distance. I could feel the trembling tension in her. I've known Murphy for a while now. I'd seen her like that before, when she wanted to fall apart but couldn't take the time to do it. She was better at managing that kind of thing than me. There was nothing in her expression but calm and confidence. "I'll put off everything I can and get back to you as soon as possible. Tomorrow sometime."

"Don't worry about me, Murph," I told her. "And don't be too hard on yourself. If you hadn't gotten in Greene's face and stayed here, a lot of people would be dead right now."

“A lot of people *are* dead right now,” she said. “What about our bad guy?”

I felt my mouth stretch into a sharp-edged, wolfish smile. “He’s entertaining unexpected guests.”

“Is he going to survive them?”

“I doubt it,” I told her cheerfully. “If one of those things had jumped me, instead of vice versa, it would have taken me out. Three of them would filet me.”

Murphy’s attention was drawn to the door. Several men in wrinkled suits came in and stood around rubbernecking. Murphy straightened her clothing. “What about collateral damage?”

“I don’t think it will be an issue. I’ll track them and make sure.”

Murphy nodded. “Rawlins,” she called.

The veteran had been hovering not far away, feigning disinterest.

She hooked a thumb up at me. “Babysit for me?”

“Shoot,” Rawlins drawled. “Like I got nothing better to do.”

“Suffer,” she told him, but she smiled when she said it. She put her hand on my arm and squeezed hard, letting out some of the pressure behind her calm facade through the contact. Then she strode over to the rubbernecking suits.

Rawlins watched her go, his lips pursed. “That is one cast-iron bitch,” he said. His tone revealed a quiet respect. “Cast iron.”

“Hell of a cop,” I said.

Rawlins grunted. “Problem with cast iron. It’s brittle. Hit it right and it shatters.” He looked around the foyer and shook his head. “This isn’t going to go well for her.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Department is going to crucify someone for it,” Rawlins said. “They have to.”

I let out a bitter bark of laughter. “After all, she probably saved a lot of lives tonight.”

“No good deed goes unpunished,” Rawlins agreed.

Greene blinked blearily at us from his chair and then slurred, “Rawlins? What the hell are you doing down here? I sent you home.” Anger gathered on his vague expression. “You son of a bitch. You’re defying a direct order. I’ll have your ass on a platter.”

Rawlins sighed. “See what I mean?”

I lifted my hand with my thumb and first two fingers extended, the others against my palm, and moved it in a vaguely mystical gesture from left to right. “That isn’t Rawlins.”

Green blinked at me, and his eyes blurred in and out of focus. The distraction derailed the train of thought he’d been laboriously assembling. It wasn’t magic. I’ve taken head shots before. It takes a while for your brain to start doing its job again, and the vaguest kinds of confusion make things into one big blur.

I repeated the gesture. “That isn’t Rawlins. You can go about your business. Move along.”

Greene fumbled with a couple of words, then shook his head and closed his eyes and went back to holding the towel against his head.

Rawlins arched an eyebrow. “You ever handle any divorce negotiations?”

I jerked my head at Mouse and said, “Come on. Before his brains unscramble.”

Rawlins fell into pace beside me. “Where are we going?”

I gave him the short version of what I’d done with the other three phages. “So now I track them, and make sure the guy who called them up is out of play.”

“Demons,” Rawlins said. “Wizards.” He shook his head.

“Look, man—”

He held up a hand. “No. I think about this too much and I won’t be any good to you. Don’t explain it. Don’t talk about it. Let me get through tonight and you can blow my mind all you want.”

“Cool,” I told him. “You got a car?”

“Yup.”

“Let’s go.”

We went outside and down the street to the nearest parking garage. Rawlins drove an old, blue station wagon. A bumper sticker on the back read MY KID IS TOO PRETTY TO DATE YOUR HONOR STUDENT.

Mouse let out a sudden warning growl. An engine raced. The dog flung his weight at my thigh and sent me slamming up against Rawlins’s station wagon. A van rushed at me in my peripheral vision, too fast for me to try to avoid. It missed me by less than six inches.

It didn’t miss Mouse. There was a meaty sound. The dog let out a bawl of pain. Brakes screeched.

I turned, furious and terrified, and the runes in my staff seethed with sudden Hellfire.

I had a split second to see Darby Crane swinging a tire iron. Then stars exploded in front of my eyes and the parking garage rotated ninety degrees. I saw Mouse, sprawled motionless on the concrete thirty feet away. Glau, Crane's lawyer, stood beside the open driver's door of the van, holding a gun on Rawlins.

See what I mean about head shots?

Fade to black.

Chapter Twenty-six

I came to with a headache, and my stomach attempted to slither out of my mouth. Its escape attempt was blocked by some kind of gag. I had the taste of metal in my mouth, and my jaws were forced uncomfortably wide. The blindfold on my face was almost a mercy, given the headache. I was pretty sure any light that got into my eyes would hurt like hell.

My nose was filled with scents. Old motor oil. Gasoline vapors. Dust. Something metallic and elusively familiar. I knew the smell, but I couldn't place it.

I lay prostrate on some cold, hard surface—concrete, at a guess. My arms were held up above my head, my wrists bound in something cold that prickled with many tiny, sharp points. Thorn manacles, then. They were meant, along with the gag and blindfold, to keep me from using my magic. If I tried to start focusing my will, they would bite and freeze. I didn't know where the damned things came from, but Crane wasn't the first bad guy I'd met who kept a pair on hand. Maybe there'd been a sale.

I'd heard one person claim that they'd been invented by a two-thousand-year-old lunatic named Nicodemus, and I'd heard others claim they were of faerie make. Personally, I figured they were more likely a creation of the Red Court, materiel for their war with the Council. It would certainly be to their advantage to make sure as many people as possible had a set of restraints with no purpose but to render a mortal wizard helpless.

Hell, if I was in the Red Court, I'd be giving the things away like Halloween candy. It was a scary notion, and for more than one reason.

I was in trouble up to my eyebrows, but my nausea was severe enough that it took me several minutes of effort to care. *Come on, Harry. You aren't fighting your way clear of this. Use your head.*

For starters, I was still alive, and that told me something all by itself. If Crane had wanted to kill me, he'd had all the time he would need to do it. He wouldn't even have had to worry about the death curse a wizard could lay down on his enemies on his way into the hereafter. Unconscious wizards can't throw curses. I was still breathing, which meant...

I swallowed. Which meant that he had other plans for me. It did not seem like a promising way to begin thinking my way clear.

I tried to say Rawlins' name, but my tongue was being held in place by something, and it sounded like, "Lah-tha?"

"Here," Rawlins replied, his tone very quiet. "How you doing?"

"La tha yahnah."

"They got me cuffed to a wall," he said. "My own damned cuffs, too, and they took my keys. I can't get to you, man. Sorry."

"Ooah ah yee?"

"Where? Where are we?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yah."

"Looks like an old auto workshop," he replied. "Abandoned. Metal walls. Windows are painted over. Doors chained shut. Lots and lots of cobwebs."

"Ooah lah kuh phruh?"

"The light? Big old shop lamp."

"Ah eeoh heh?"

"Anyone here?" Rawlins asked.

"Yah."

"Creepy little guy with fish lips. He won't talk to me, even when I asked pretty please. He's sitting in a chair about three feet from you pretending he's a guard dog."

Anger returned to me in full force, and made my head pound even harder. Glau. Glau'd been driving the van. Glau had killed my dog. Without consciously making the effort, I found myself reaching for my magic, for fire enough to cremate the little toad. The manacles became a frozen agony that wiped anything resembling thought from my head.

I bit down on the mouthpiece and forced myself to relax my will. I could not afford to allow my impulses to control me, or I'd never get out of this. There would come a time when I wouldn't have to bite back on my emotions—but that time was not yet here.

Wait, I promised my anger. Wait. I need to think for now, to get clear of my captors.

And as soon as I did, Glau was going to have a real bad day.

I relaxed my will and the pain of the manacles faded. Patience, Harry. Patience.

A door creaked open and footsteps approached. A moment later, Crane's voice murmured, "Awake, I see, Dresden. Your head must be as hard as

everyone says. Mr. Glau, if you would be so kind?"

Someone fumbled at the hood over my face, and it withdrew along with the mouthpiece, and I could see that hood and gag were all of a piece. Charming. The mouthpiece had gripped my tongue with two little clamps. I spat the taste of metal out of my mouth, along with a little bit of blood. The hood and muzzle had torn my gums open in a couple of places.

I lay on my back, staring up at a corrugated metal ceiling, then looked around at a dim, ugly, forlorn-looking auto shop. The nagging sense of familiarity increased. The only doors leading out were chained shut and padlocked on the inside, and no keys were in sight.

Crane stood over me, looking down, smiling, as tall and dark and handsome as you please. My eyes went past him to Rawlins. The dark-skinned cop stood leaning against the wall, one wrist cuffed to a metal ring in a steel support beam. A bruise severe enough to show even on his dark skin covered one cheek entirely. Rawlins looked calm, remote, and unafraid. I was fairly sure it was only an act, but if so, it was a good one.

"Crane," I said. "What do you want?"

He smiled a nasty smile. "To build the future," he replied. "Networking is very important in my business."

"Cut the crap and talk," I said in a flat tone.

The smile vanished. "You would be wise not to anger me, wizard. You're hardly in a position to make demands."

"If you were going to kill me, you'd have done it already."

Crane let out a rueful laugh. "I suppose that's true enough. I was going to finish you and drop you in the lake, but imagine my surprise when I made some calls and it turns out that you're..."

"Infamous?" I suggested. "Tough? A good dancer?"

Crane showed me his teeth. "Marketable. For an insignificant young man, you've managed to irritate a great many people."

A little chill went through me. I kept it off my face.

Crane's eyes glittered anyway. "Ah. Yes. Fear." He inhaled deeply, his smile turning smug. "You're smart enough to know when you are powerless, at least. In my experience, most wizards are fairly cowardly, when push comes to shove."

I felt a hot reply coming, but again I set my anger aside—temporarily. Crane was trying to push my buttons. He could only get away with it if I

allowed him to do so. I met his dark eyes and let one corner of my mouth tilt up into a smile.

“In my experience,” I replied, gaze unwavering, “people who have underestimated me regretted it.”

I didn’t feel like being drawn into a soulgaze with Crane, but I had little to lose. If nothing else, it might provide me with some valuable insight to his character.

Crane’s nerve broke first. He turned to walk away from me, pretending that he’d just received a call on his cell phone—he already had a new one. He stood in the shadows on the other side of the room.

I spat more metal taste out of my mouth and wished I had a glass of water. Glau sat in a chair nearby, watching me. The little man had a gun resting in his lap, in hand and ready to go. A briefcase sat on the floor beside his chair.

“You,” I said.

Glau looked at me without any readable expression.

“You killed my dog,” I said. “Get your affairs in order.”

Something ugly flickered through his eyes. “An idle threat. You will not live to see the dawn.”

“You’d best hope I do,” I said. “Because if I go down, I know where my death curse is going.”

Glau’s lips peeled back from his teeth, and I swear to God that they were pointed—not like a vampire’s fangs or a ghoul’s canines, but in solid, serrated triangles, like a shark. He rose, the gun twitching in his hand.

“Glau!” snapped Crane.

Glau froze for a second, and then relaxed and let the gun fall to his side.

Crane shoved the cell phone into his pocket and stalked over to me. “Keep your tongue in your mouth, wizard.”

“Or what?” I asked. “You’ll kill me? From where I’m standing, that isn’t a worst-case scenario.”

“True,” Crane murmured. He withdrew a small handgun from his pocket and without so much as blinking shot Rawlins in the foot.

The big cop jerked against the cuffs that held him. His face contorted in surprised pain and he fell. The cuffs, fastened to the beam at shoulder level, cut cruelly into his wrists. Rawlins got his legs underneath him and let out a string of sulfurous curse words.

Crane regarded Rawlins for a moment, smiled, and then pointed the gun at the cop's head.

"No!" I shouted.

"It's entirely up to you, wizard, whether or not his children lose their father. Behave." He smiled again. "We'll all be happier."

Again the rage threatened to drown any rational thought in my head. Threatening me is one thing. Threatening someone else to *get* to me is another. I'm sick of seeing decent people suffer. I'm sick of seeing them die.

Patience, Harry. Calm. Rational. I was going to have to discourage Crane from this tactic with extreme prejudice as a deterrent to future weasels. But not yet. Keep him talking.

"Do you understand me?" Crane said.

I jerked my chin in a brief nod.

He smirked. "I want to hear you say it."

I clenched my jaw and said, "I understand."

"I'm so glad we had this talk," he said. There was a low buzzing sound, the almost-silent alert of his cell phone, I suppose, and he walked away again, taking it out of his pocket and lifting it to his ear.

"How long have we been here?" I asked Rawlins.

"Hour," he mumbled. "Hour and a half."

I nodded. "You okay?"

He let out a pained grunt. "Tore open the stitches on my arm," he panted. "Foot, I don't know. Can't feel it. Doesn't look like it's bleeding much."

"Hang in there," I said. "We'll get out of this."

Glau's rubbery lips stretched out into a silent little smile, though he looked at neither of us.

"Bull," Rawlins said. "If you can get out, you should go. Once he gets what he wants, he's going to kill me anyway. Don't stay on my account."

"You're siphoning my noble hero vibe," I told him. "Cease and desist or I'll sue."

Rawlins tried to smile, and leaned against the wall, weight off his injured foot. The lower portion of his left sleeve had soaked through with blood.

Crane returned a moment later, smiling like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "Start building more tax shelters, Glau. This is going rather well."

"Yeah?" I asked. "So who's going to pony up for one Harry Dresden, slightly used?"

Crane showed me all his teeth. “I’m holding an auction as we speak. A rather energetic one.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “Who’s leading?”

His smile widened. “Why, Paolo Ortega’s widow. Duchess Arianna of the Red Court.”

I suddenly felt cold, all over.

I was captured by the Red Court once. Held in the dark by a crowd of hissing, monstrous shapes.

They did things.

There was nothing I could do about it.

I still had the nightmares to remind me. Not every night, maybe, but often enough. Often enough.

Crane closed his eyes and inhaled with a satisfied expression. “She’ll be quite creative when it comes to dealing with her husband’s bane. I don’t blame you for feeling terrified. Who wouldn’t?”

“Hey,” I told him, grasping at straws. “Call the White Council. If nothing else, maybe they’ll run the bidding up for you.”

Crane laughed. “I already have,” he said.

Hope twitched somewhere inside me. If the Council knew I was in trouble, then maybe they would be able to do something. They might be on the way even now. I needed to stall Crane, keep him occupied. “Yeah? What did they say?”

His smile widened. “That the White Council’s unyielding policy is one of nonnegotiation with terrorists.”

Hope’s corpse went through some postmortem twitching.

His phone buzzed again. He stepped away and spoke quietly, his back to us. After a moment he snapped his fingers and said, “Glau, get on the computer. The auction is closing in five minutes and there’s always a last-second rush. We’ll need to verify an account.” He turned back to the phone. “No, unacceptable. A numbered account only. I don’t trust those people at PayPal.”

“Hey!” I protested. “Are you selling me on *eBay*?”

Crane winked at me. “Irony, eh? Though I confess a bit of surprise. How do you know what it is?”

“I read,” I told him.

“Ahhh,” he said. “Glau. Computer.”

Glau nodded but said, “They should not be unwatched.”

“I can see them,” Crane replied, irritation in his voice. “Move.”

By his expression, Glau clearly did not agree with Crane, but he went.

I licked my lips, struggling to think through my headache and anxiety and a solid lump of despair. There had to be a way out of this. There was always a way out. I had found ways out of desperate straits before.

Of course, I’d had my magic available then. Damn those manacles. As long as they kept my power constrained, I would never be able to free myself or Rawlins.

So, moron, I thought to myself. Get rid of the manacles. Get around them. Do something. It’s your only chance.

“How?” I muttered out loud. “I don’t know a damned thing about them.”

Rawlins blinked at me. I grimaced, shook my head at him, and closed my eyes. I shut away the distractions and turned my focus inward. It was easy to imagine an empty place; flat, dark floor illuminated from above by a single light shining without apparent source. I imagined myself standing beneath it.

“Lasciel,” my image-self said quietly. “I seek counsel.”

She appeared at once, stepping into the circle of light. She wore her most familiar form, the functional white tunic, the tall, lovely figure, but her golden hair now appeared as a waist-length sheet of deep auburn. She bowed deeply and murmured, “I am here, my host.”

“You changed your hair,” I said.

Her mouth flirted with a smile. “There are too many blondes in your life, my host. I feared I would be lost in the press.”

I sighed. “The manacles,” I said. “Do you know of them?”

She bowed again. “Indeed, my host. They are of an ancient make, wrought by the troll-smiths of the Unseelie Court, and employed against those of your talents for a thousand years and more.”

I blinked at her. “Faeries made those?”

I was dimly aware that, in my surprise, I had spoken the words aloud. I clenched my physical jaws shut and focused on the image-me, briefly wondering just how badly cracked my engine block was going to get by trying to keep track of my own personal internal reality in addition to the actual, threatening reality where Rawlins and I were in deep trouble. Hell, for that matter, I supposed it was entirely possible that I already *had* snapped. It wasn’t as though anyone but me had ever seen Lasciel. Perhaps,

in addition to existing only in my head, she was all in my imagination, kind of a waking dream.

For a minute, I thought about abandoning the wizarding biz and taking up a career that would let me crawl under rocks and hide, professionally.

“You needn’t attempt to keep your inner self separate from your physical self,” Lasciel said in a reasonable tone. “I should be happy to advise you from the outside, so to speak.”

“Oh, no,” I said, keeping all the conversation on the inside. “I’ve got problems enough without adding a sentient hallucination to the mix.”

“As you wish,” Lasciel replied. “You are, I take it, seeking a way to overcome the bindings of the thorn manacles?”

“Obviously. Can it be done?”

“All things are possible,” Lasciel assured me. “Though some of them are extremely unlikely.”

“How?” I demanded of her. “This is not the time to get coy with me. If I die, you’re coming along for the ride.”

“I am aware,” she replied, arching an eyebrow. “They are a crafting of faerie make, my host. Seek that which is bane to they who made it.”

“Iron,” I said at once, nodding. “And sunlight. Trolls can’t stand either.” I opened my actual eyes and glanced around the interior of the garage. “Sunlight’s out of town for a few hours yet, but we’ve got lots and lots of iron. Rawlins has a free hand. If I get a tool to him, maybe he could shatter a link of the manacles’ chain. Then I could break his cuffs or something.”

“Point of logic,” the fallen angel pointed out. “Given that you are not free to retrieve a tool, getting one to Rawlins seems problematic.”

“Yeah, but—”

“In addition,” she continued, “you are exhausted, and it is reasonable to assume that Crane will finish his negotiations shortly and turn you over to one of your foes. You have insufficient time to recover your strength.”

“I guess—”

She continued in the firm tone of a schoolteacher addressing a stubborn child. “You have in the past expressed much frustration and doubt that your control of physical forces was precise enough to break handcuffs without breaking the person held in them.”

I sighed. “True, but—”

“The only egress from this place is chained shut and you do not have the key.”

“It isn’t—”

“And finally,” she finished, “lest you forget, you are being guarded by at least one supernatural being who will hardly stand gawking while you attempt escape.”

I glowered. “Anyone ever told you that you have a very negative attitude?”

She arched a brow, the expression an invitation to continue the line of thought.

I chewed on my lip and forged another couple of links in the chain of thought. “Which isn’t helpful. But your ass is as deep in alligators as mine, and you want to help. So...” My stomach sank a little. “You can offer me another option.”

She smiled, pleased. “Very good.”

“I don’t want it,” I said.

“Why ever not?”

“Because a freaking fallen angel is offering it, that’s why ever not. You’re poison, lady. Don’t think I don’t know it.”

She lifted a long-fingered hand to me, palm out. “I ask only that you hear me out. If what I offer is not to your liking, I will of course support your efforts to form an alternate plan.”

I upgraded the glower to a glare. She regarded me in perfect calm.

Dammit. The best way to keep yourself from doing something grossly self-destructive and stupid is to avoid the temptation to do it. For example, it is far easier to fend off inappropriate amorous desires if one runs screaming from the room every time a pretty girl comes in. Which sounds silly, I know, but the same principle applies to everything else.

If I let her talk to me, Lasciel would propose something calm and sane and reasonable and effective. It would require a small price of me, if nothing else by making me a tiny bit more dependent upon her advice and assistance. Whatever happened, she’d gain another smidgen of influence over me.

Baby steps on the highway to hell. Lasciel was an immortal. She could afford patience, whereas I could not afford temptation.

It came down to this: If I didn’t hear her out and didn’t get out of this mess, Rawlins’s blood would be on my hands. And whoever was behind the slaughter around the convention might well keep right on escalating. More people could die.

Oh. And I'd wind up enjoying some kind of Torquemada-esque vacation with whichever fiend had the most money and the least lag.

When a concept like that is an afterthought, you know things are bad.

Lasciel watched me with patient blue eyes.

"All right," I told her. "Let's hear it."

Chapter Twenty-seven

We plotted, the fallen angel and me. It went fast. It turns out that holding an all-mental conversation gets things done at the literal speed of thought, without all those clunky phonemes to get in the way.

Barely a minute had passed when I opened my eyes and said very quietly to Rawlins, “You’re right. They’ll kill you. We have to get out of here.”

The cop gave me a pained grimace and nodded. “How?”

I struggled and sat up. I rolled my shoulders a little, trying to get some blood flowing through my arms, which had been manacled together underneath me. I tested the chain. It had been slipped through an inverted U-bolt in the concrete floor. The links rattled metallicity as they slid back and forth.

I checked Crane at the noise. The man kept speaking intently into his cell phone, and took no apparent notice of the movement.

“I’m going to slip one of these manacles off my wrist,” I told him. I nodded at a discarded old rolling tool cabinet. “There should be something in there I can use. I’ll cut us both out.”

Rawlins shook his head. “Those two going to stand there watching while we do all that?”

“I’ll do it fast,” I said.

“Then what?”

“I kill the lights and we get out.”

“Door is chained shut,” Rawlins said.

“Let me worry about that.”

Rawlins squinted. He looked very tired. “Why not,” he said, nodding. “Why not.”

I nodded and closed my eyes, slowed my breathing, and began to concentrate.

“Hey,” Rawlins said. “How you going to slip your cuffs?”

“Ever heard about yogis, out east?”

“Yogi Berra,” he said at once. “And Yogi Bear.”

“Not those yogis. As in snake charmers.”

“Oh. Right.”

“They spend a lifetime learning to control their body. They can do some fairly amazing stuff.”

Rawlins nodded. “Like fold themselves up into a gym bag and sit inside it at the bottom of a pool for half an hour.”

“Right,” I said. I followed Lasciel’s instructions, sinking into deeper and deeper focus. “Some of them can collapse the bones in their hands. Use their muscles and tendons to alter tensions. Change the shape.” I focused on my left hand, and for a moment was a bit grateful that it was already so badly maimed and mostly numb. What I was about to do, even with Lasciel’s instruction, was going to hurt like hell. “Keep an eye out and be ready.”

He nodded, holding still and not turning his head toward either Crane or Glau.

I dismissed him, the warehouse, my headache, and everything else that wasn’t my hand from my perceptions. I had the general idea of what was supposed to happen, but I didn’t have any practical, second-to-second knowledge of it. It was a terribly odd sensation, as though I were a skilled pianist whose fingers had suddenly forgotten their familiarity with the keys.

Not too quickly, murmured Lasciel’s voice in my head. *Your muscles and joints have not been conditioned to this.* There was an odd sensation in my thoughts, somehow similar to abruptly remembering how to tie a knot that had once been thoughtlessly familiar. *Like this*, Lasciel’s presence whispered, and that same familiarity suddenly thrummed down my arm.

I flexed my thumb, made a rippling motion of my fingers, and tightened every muscle in my hand in a sudden clench. I dislocated my thumb with a sickly little crackle of damaged flesh.

For a second, I thought the pain would drop me unconscious.

No, Lasciel’s voice said. *You must control this. You must escape.*

I know, I snarled back at her in my mind. *Apparently nerve damage from burns doesn’t stop you from feeling it when someone pulls your fingers out of their sockets.*

Someone? Lasciel said. *You did it to yourself, my host.*

Would you back off and give me room to work?

That’s ridiculous, Lasciel replied. But the sense of her presence abruptly retreated.

I took deep, quiet breaths, and twisted my left hand. My flesh screamed protest, but I only embraced the pain and continued to move, slow and steady. I got the fingers of my right hand to lightly grasp the manacle on my left wrist, and began to draw my hand steadily against the cold, binding circle of metal. My hand folded in a way that was utterly alien in sensation, and the screaming pain of it stole my breath.

But it slipped an inch beneath the metal cuff.

I twisted my hand again, in exactly the same motion, never letting up the pressure, working to encompass the pain as something to aid me, rather than distract.

I slipped an inch closer to freeing my hand. The pain became more and more intense despite my efforts to divert it, like an afternoon sun that burns brightly into your eyes even though they're closed. Only a moment more. I only needed to remain silent and focused for a few more seconds.

I bore the pain. I kept up the pressure, and abruptly I felt the cold metal of the cuff flick over the outside of my thumb, one of the few spots on my fingers where much tactile sensation remained. My hand came free, and I clutched tightly to the empty cuff with my right hand, to keep it from rattling.

I opened my eyes and glanced around the garage. Crane paced back and forth in conversation on his phone. I waited until his back was mostly turned to move. Then I rose and slipped the chain through the U-bolt on the floor, until the circle of the cuff pressed against the bolt. I was still tethered by a chain perhaps a foot long, but I moved as silently as I could and reached out with my throbbing left hand for the wheeled tool cabinet.

I had trouble getting my fingers to cooperate, but I slipped the cabinet open. The tools inside it had been there for a long time—several years, at least. They were spotted with rust. I could only see about half the cabinet from where I crouched, and there wasn't anything there that could help me. I hated to do it, but I felt around the unseen portion of the cabinet with my clumsy fingers. I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to feel a tool even if my fingers found it, and even more frightened by the knowledge that I might knock something over and draw attention.

My hand shook, but I felt through the cabinet as quickly and lightly as I could, starting at the top and moving down.

On the floor of the cabinet, I felt an object, the handle of some kind of tool. I drew it out as quietly as I could, and found myself holding a

hacksaw. My heart leapt with excitement.

I returned to more or less my original position, with my captors seemingly none the wiser, and took a grip on the saw. My distorted thumb hurt abominably, so I took the hacksaw in my right hand, took a deep breath, and then began slicing at the chain link immediately below the empty manacle.

I could only cut in strokes eight or nine inches long because of the chain still attached to my right wrist, and it made a low, buzzing racket that could not be mistaken for anything *but* a saw. I was sure I would not have time to cut myself free—but the heavy-duty steel of the hacksaw's blade ripped into the silvery metal chain as if it were made of pine. Three, four, five strokes of the hacksaw and the link parted. I jerked hard with my right hand and the chain slid through the U-bolt, the broken link snapping as the cuffs struck the bolt.

I rose, free.

Crane let out a sudden, startled sound, dropped his cell phone, and went for his gun. There was no time to free Rawlins, so I tossed him the hacksaw and then threw myself to one side as Crane let off a shot. Sparks leapt up from the rolling cabinet's surface, and a rush of adrenaline made the pains of my body vanish. I kept my head down as low as I could and scurried to one side, attempting to put the bulk of an old, rusted pickup truck between Crane and me. I reached for my magic, but the cuff still attached to my arm reacted with that same burst of agony, splintering my concentration.

I caught a glimpse of movement. Crane circled to one side, looking for a clear line of fire. I maneuvered like a squirrel, keeping the truck between us and crouching low to deny him a clean shot. I went for the passenger door, hoping to find something, anything I could use to defend myself in the truck.

Locked.

"Glau!" Crane shouted. His second shot shattered the truck's passenger window, the bullet passing within a few inches of my head.

I reached up, unlocked the truck's door, and swung it open. The cab was cluttered with empty cigarette packs, discarded fast-food wrappers, crushed beer cans, a heavy-duty claw hammer, and three or four glass beer bottles.

Perfect.

I clutched the hammer's wrapped steel handle in my teeth, scooped up the bottles, and threw one at the far side of the garage. It shattered loudly. I

rose at once, another bottle ready, and hurled it with as much force as I could.

The first bottle had caused Crane to snap his head to one side, looking for the source of the sound. He looked away from me for only a second, but it was distraction enough to allow me to throw.

The bottle tumbled end over end and smashed into the work lamp with a crash of breaking glass. Sparks showered up in a brief cloud of electric outrage, and then heavy darkness slammed down upon us.

Now, I thought to Lasciel.

Darkness vanished, replaced with lines and planes of silver light that outlined the garage, the truck, the tool cabinets and workbenches, as well as the doors and windows and the bolt on the wall where Rawlins was chained.

I was not actually seeing the garage, of course, for there was no physical light for my eyes to see. Instead, I was looking at an illusion.

The portion of Lasciel in my head was capable of creating illusory sensations of almost any kind, though if I suspected any tampering I could defend myself against it easily enough. This illusion, however, was not meant to deceive. She'd placed it there to help me, gleaning the precise dimensions and arrangements of the garage from my own senses and projecting them to my eyes to enable me to move in the dark.

It wasn't a perfect illusion, of course. It was merely a model. It didn't keep track of animate objects, and if anything moved around I wouldn't know it until I'd knocked myself unconscious on it—but I wouldn't need it for long. I ran for Rawlins.

"Glau!" Crane screamed, no more than ten or twelve feet away. "Cover the door!"

I flung the third bottle to the floor at my feet. It was an exceedingly odd sensation, for the bottle was outlined in silver light until it left my hand. It vanished into the darkness, and shattered on the floor near me.

There was a moment of frozen silence, broken only by the rasp of a hacksaw against Rawlins's cuffs. Crane took a couple of steps toward me, then hesitated, and though I could not see him, I could sense the hesitation. Then he moved again, away from me, probably assuming I was attempting another distraction. My lips stretched into a wolfish smile, and I padded to Rawlins, my steps sure and steady even in the total darkness.

I reached the bolt on the steel beam, and found Rawlins standing beneath it, breathing hard, sawing as fast as he could. He jumped when I touched his

shoulder, but I took the hammer in hand and whispered, “It’s Harry. Get your head down.”

He did. I looked up at the silvery illusion of the bolt, steadied my breathing, and drew the hammer back very slowly, focusing upon that movement and nothing else. Then I hissed out a breath and struck at the bolt with every ounce of force I could physically muster.

I’m not a weightlifter, but no one’s ever accused me of being a sissy, either. More importantly, years and years of my metaphysical studies and practice had given me considerable skill at focus and concentration. The hammer struck the bolt that held the other ring of Rawlins’s cuffs. Sparks flew. The bolt, as rusted and ruined as the rest of the building, snapped.

Rawlins dragged me to the ground a heartbeat before Crane’s pistol thundered again from the far side of the garage. A bullet caromed off the metal beam with an ugly, high-pitched whine.

“Come on,” I hissed. I seized Rawlins’s shirt. He grunted and stumbled blindly after me, trying to be quiet, but given his injuries there was only so much he could do. Speed would have to serve where stealth was not available. I hauled him directly across the garage floor, skipping around a mechanic’s pit and several stacks of old tires.

“Where are we going?” Rawlins gasped. “Where is the door?”

“We aren’t taking the door,” I whispered—which was true. I wasn’t sure that we’d have a way out of the garage, but we certainly wouldn’t leave via the door.

The Full Moon Garage had been abandoned since the disappearance of its previous owners, a gang of lycanthropes with a notable lack of common sense when it came to choosing enemies. It wasn’t as big a coincidence as it seemed, that Crane was using the same building. It was old, abandoned, had no windows, was close to the convention center, and easy to get in and out of. More to the point, it had been a place where fairly horrible things happened, and the ugly energy of them still lingered in the air. I wasn’t sure what Crane and Glau were, exactly, but a place like this would feel comfortable and familiar to many denizens of the dark side.

I’d been held captive in the building before and my means of egress was still there—a hole beneath the edge of the cheap corrugated metal wall, dug down into the earth and out into the gravel parking lot by a pack of wolves. I got to the wall and knelt down to check Lasciel’s mental model against

the reality it represented. The hole was still there. If anything, the years had worn it even deeper and wider.

I shoved Rawlins's hands down to let him feel it. "Go," I whispered. "Under the wall and out."

He grunted assent and started hauling himself through it. Rawlins was built a lot heavier than me, but he fit through the time-widened hole. I crouched down to follow him, but heard running footsteps just behind me.

I ducked to one side, my eyes now adjusting enough to let me see faint, ambient city light trickling through the hole. I saw a vague shape in the darkness, and then saw Glau's hands seize Rawlins's wounded foot. Rawlins screamed.

I lunged forward and smashed the claw hammer down onto Glau's forearm. It hit with brutal force and a sound of breaking bone.

Glau let out a wild, falsetto, ululating scream, like that of some kind of primitive warrior. The hammer jerked out of my hands. I heard a *whirr* in the air, and ducked in time to avoid Glau returning the favor. I twisted, swinging the chain still attached to the remaining manacle along at what I estimated to be Glau's eye level. The chain hit. He let out another shrieking cry, falling backward.

I dove for the hole and wriggled through it like a greased weasel. Crane's gun went off again, punching a hole in the wall ten feet away. Running footsteps retreated, and metal clinked. I heard myself whimpering, and had a flashback to any number of nightmares where I could not move swiftly enough to escape the danger. Any second I expected to take a bullet, or for Glau to lay into me with the hammer or his sharklike teeth.

Rawlins grabbed my wrist and pulled me through. I got to my feet, looking around the little gravel lot wildly for the nearest cover—several stacks of old tires. I didn't have to point at it for Rawlins to get the idea. We ran for it. Rawlins's wounded leg almost gave out, and I slowed to help him, looking back for our pursuers.

Glau wriggled out of the hole just as we had, rose to a crouch, and threw the claw hammer. It tumbled end over end, flying as swiftly as a major-league fastball, and hit me in the ass.

A shock went through me on impact, and my balance wavered as half of my lower body went numb. I tried to clutch at Rawlins for balance, but the hand I'd distorted wasn't strong enough to hold, and the force of the blow threw me down to the gravel. The impact tore open all the defenses I'd

rallied against my body's various pains, and for a second I could barely move, much less flee.

Glau drew a long, curved blade from his belt, something vaguely Arabic in origin. He bounded after us. It was hopeless, but Rawlins and I tried to run anyway.

There were a couple of light footsteps, a blurring figure running far too swiftly to be human, and Crane kicked my functional leg out from underneath me. I dropped. He delivered a vicious blow to Rawlins's belly. The cop went down, too.

Crane, his face pale and furious, snarled, "I warned you to behave, wizard." He lifted the gun and pointed it at Rawlins's head. "You've just killed this man."

Chapter Twenty-eight

A dark figure stepped out of the deep shadows behind the stacks of tires, pointed a sawed-off shotgun at Glau, and said, “Howdy.”

Glau whirled to face the newcomer, hand already lifting the knife. The interloper pulled the trigger. Thunder filled the air. The blast threw Glau to the gravel like an enormous, flopping fish.

Thomas stepped out into the wan light of a distant streetlamp, dressed all in loose black clothing, including my leather duster, which fell all the way to his ankles. His hair was ragged and wind-tossed, and his grey eyes were cold as he worked the action on the shotgun, ejecting the spent shell and levering a fresh one into the chamber. The barrel of the shotgun snapped to Crane.

Son of a bitch.

Now I knew who’d been following me around town.

“You,” Crane said in a hollow-sounding voice, staring at Thomas.

“Me,” Thomas agreed, insouciant cheer thick in his voice. “Lose the gun, Madrigal.”

Crane’s lip lifted into a sneer, but he did lower the pistol and drop it to the ground.

“Kick it over here,” Thomas said.

Crane did it, ignoring me completely. “I thought you’d be dead by now, coz. God knows you made enemies enough within the House, much less the rest of the Court.”

“I get by,” Thomas drawled. Then he used a toe to flick the gun over to me.

Crane’s eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed.

I picked up the revolver and checked the cylinder. My distorted left hand functioned, weakly, but it hurt like hell, and would until I could get enough quiet and focus to get everything back into its proper place. My headache intensified to a fine, distracting agony as I bent over, but I ignored that, too. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of trauma, I will fear no concussion.

Crane's revolver held freshly loaded rounds, all six of them. I put them back and checked on Rawlins. Between the pain of his recent injuries and the strain of our flight and recapture, the big cop did not look well.

"Isn't bad," he said quietly. "Just hurts. Tired."

"Sit tight," I told him. "We'll get you out of here."

He nodded and lay there, watching developments, his eyes only half aware.

I made sure he wasn't bleeding too badly, then rose, pointed the gun at Crane, and took position between him and Rawlins.

"How's it going, Dresden?" Thomas asked.

"Took you long enough," I said.

Thomas grinned, but it didn't touch his eyes. His gaze never left Crane. "Have you ever met my cousin, Madrigal Raith?"

"I knew he didn't look like a Darby," I said.

Thomas nodded. "Wasn't that a movie with Janet Munro?"

"And Sean Connery."

"Thought so," Thomas said.

Madrigal Raith watched the exchange through narrowed eyes. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but he looked paler now, his features almost eerily fine. Or maybe now that Thomas had identified him as a White Court vampire, I could correctly interpret the warnings my instincts had shrieked at me during our first talk. There was little but contempt in Madrigal's eyes as he stared at my brother. "You have no idea what you're getting yourself involved in, coz. I'll not surrender this prize to you."

"Oh, but you will," Thomas said in his best Snidely Whiplash villain voice.

Crane's eyes flickered with something hot and furious. "Don't push me, little coz. I'll make you regret it."

Thomas's laugh rang out, full of scorn and confidence. "You couldn't make water run downhill. Walk away while you still can."

"Don't be stupid," Madrigal replied. "Do you know what kind of money he's worth?"

"Is it the kind that spends in hell?" Thomas asked. "Because if you keep this up, you'll need it."

Madrigal sneered. "You'd kill family in cold blood, Thomas? You?"

There are statues that don't have a poker face as good as Thomas's. "Maybe you haven't put it together yet, Madrigal. I'm banished,

remember? You aren't family."

Madrigal regarded Thomas for a long minute before he said, "You're bluffing."

Thomas looked at me, a quality of inquiry to his expression, and said, "He thinks I'm bluffing."

"Make sure he can talk," I said.

"Cool," Thomas said, and shot Madrigal in the feet.

The light and thunder of the shotgun's blast rolled away, leaving Madrigal on the ground, hissing out a thready shriek of agony. He curled up to clutch at the gory ruins of his ankles and feet. Blood a few shades too pale to be human spattered the gravel.

"Touché," grunted Rawlins, a certain satisfaction in his tone.

It took Madrigal a while to control himself and find his voice. "You're dead," he whispered, pain making the words quiver and shake. "You gutless little swine. You're dead. Uncle will kill you for this."

My half brother smiled and worked the action of the shotgun again. "I doubt my father cares," he replied. "He wouldn't mind losing a nephew. Particularly not one who has been consorting with scum like House Malvora."

"Aha," I said quietly, putting two and two together. "Now I get it. He's like them."

"Like what?" Thomas asked.

"A phobophage," I said quietly. "He feeds on fear the way you feed on lust."

Thomas's expression turned a bit nauseated. "Yes. A lot of the Malvora do."

Madrigal's pale, strained face twisted into a vicious smile. "You should try it some night, coz."

"It's sick, Mad," Thomas said. There was an almost ghostly sense of sadness or pity in his tone, so subtle that I would not have seen it before living with him. Hell, I doubt he realized it was there himself. "It's sick. And it's made you sick."

"You feed on mortal desires for the little death," Madrigal said, his eyes half closing. "I feed on their desire for the real thing. We both feed. In the end, we both kill. There's no difference."

"The difference is that once you've started, you can't let them go running off to report you to the authorities," Thomas said. "You keep them until

they're dead."

Madrigal let out a laugh, unsettling for how genuine it sounded given his situation. I got the sneaking suspicion that the vampire was a couple of Peeps short of an Easter basket.

"Thomas, Thomas," Madrigal murmured. "Always the self-righteous little bleeding heart. So concerned for the bucks and does—as though you never tasted them yourself. Never killed them yourself."

Thomas's expression went opaque again, but his eyes were flat with sudden anger.

Madrigal's smile widened at the response. His teeth shone white in the evening's gloom. "I've been feeding well. Whereas you...well. Without your little dark-eyed whore to take—"

Without warning, without a flicker of expression on Thomas's face, the shotgun roared again, and the blast took Madrigal across the knees. More too-pale blood splattered the gravel.

Holy crap.

Madrigal went prone again, body arching in agony, the pain choking his scream down to an anemic little echo of a real shriek.

Thomas planted his boot on Madrigal's neck, his expression cold and calm but for the glittering rage in his eyes. He pumped the next shell in, and held the shotgun in one hand, shoving the barrel against Madrigal's cheekbone.

Madrigal froze, quivering in agony, eyes wide and desperate.

"Never," Thomas murmured, very quietly. "Ever. Speak of Justine."

Madrigal said nothing, but my instincts screamed again. Something in the way he held himself, something in his eyes, told me that he was acting. He'd maneuvered the conversation to Justine deliberately. He was playing on Thomas's feelings for Justine, distracting us.

I spun to see Glau on his feet just as though he hadn't been given a lethal dose of buckshot in the chest from ten feet away. He shot across the parking lot at a full sprint, running for the van parked about fifty feet away. He ran in utter silence, without the crunch of gravel or the creak of shoes, and for a second I thought I saw maybe an inch and a half of space between where he planted his running feet and the ground.

"Thomas," I said. "Glau's running."

"Relax," Thomas said, and his eyes never left Madrigal.

I heard the scrabble of claws on gravel and then Mouse shot out of the shadows that had hidden Thomas. He flashed by me in what was for him a relaxed lope, but as Glau approached the van, Mouse accelerated to a full sprint. In the last couple of steps before Glau reached the van, I thought I saw something forming around the great dog's forequarters, tiny flickers of pale colors, almost like Saint Elmo's fire. Then Mouse threw himself into a leap. I saw Glau's expression reflected in the van's windshield, his too-wide eyes goggling in total surprise. Then Mouse slammed his chest and shoulder into Glau's back like a living battering ram.

The force of the impact took Glau's balance completely, and sent the man into a vicious impact with the van's dented front bumper. Glau hit *hard*, hard enough that I heard bones breaking from fifty feet away, and his head whiplashed down onto the hood and rebounded with neck-breaking force. Glau bounced off the van's front bumper and hood, and landed in a limp, boneless pile on the ground.

Mouse landed, skidded on the gravel, and spun to face Glau. He watched the downed man for a few seconds, legs stiff. His back legs dug twice at the gravel, throwing up dust and rocks in challenge.

Glau never stirred.

Mouse sniffed and then let out a sneeze that might almost have been actual words: *So there*.

Then the dog turned and trotted right over to me, favoring one leg slightly, grinning a proud canine grin. He shoved his broad head under my hand in his customary demand for an ear scratching. I did it, while something released in my chest with a painful little snapping sensation. My dog was all right. Maybe my eyes misted up a little. I dropped to one knee and slid an arm around the mutt's neck. "Good dog," I told him.

Mouse's tail wagged proudly at the praise, and he leaned against me.

I made sure my eyes were clear, then looked up to find Madrigal staring at the dog in shock and fear. "That isn't a dog," the vampire whispered.

"But he'll do anything for a Scooby Snack," I said. "Spill it, Madrigal. What are you doing in town? How are you involved with the attacks?"

He licked his lips and shook his head. "I don't have to talk to you," he said. "And you don't have time to make me. The gunshots. Even in this neighborhood, the police will be here soon."

"True," I said. "So here's how it's going to work. Thomas, when you hear a siren, pull the trigger."

Madrigal made a choking sound.

I smiled. "I want answers. That's all. Give them to me, and we go away. Otherwise..." I shrugged, and made a vague gesture at Thomas.

Mouse stared at him and a steady growl bubbled from his throat. Madrigal shot a look over at the fallen Glau, who, by God, was moving his arms and legs in an aimless, stunned fashion. Mouse's growl grew louder, and Madrigal tried to squirm a little farther from my dog. "Even if I did talk, what's to keep you from killing me once I've told you?"

"Madrigal," Thomas said quietly. "You're a vicious little bitch, but you're still family. I'd rather not kill you. We left your jann alive. Play ball and both of you walk."

"You would side with this mortal buck against your own kind, Thomas?"

"My own kind booted me out," Thomas replied. "I take work where I can get it."

"Pariah vampire and pariah wizard," Madrigal murmured. "I suppose I can see the advantages, regardless of how the war turns out." He watched Thomas steadily for a moment and then looked at me. "I want your oath on it."

"You have it," I said. "Answer me honestly and I let you leave Chicago unharmed."

He swallowed, and his eyes flicked to the shotgun still pressed to his cheek. "My oath as well," he said. "I'll speak true."

And that settled that. Pretty much everything on the supernatural side of the street abided by a rigid code of traditional conduct that respected things like one's duties as a host, one's responsibility as a guest, and the integrity of a sworn oath. I could trust Madrigal's oath, once he'd openly made it.

Probably.

Thomas looked at me. I nodded. He eased his boot off of Madrigal's neck and took a step back, holding the shotgun at his side, though his stance became no less wary.

Madrigal sat up, wincing at his legs. There was a low, crackling kind of noise coming from them. The bleeding had already stopped. I could see portions of his calf, where the pants had been ripped away. The skin there actually bubbled and moved, and as I watched a round lump the size of a pea formed in the skin and burst, expelling a round buckshot that fell to the parking lot.

"Let's start simple," I said. "Where's the key to the manacles?"

“Van,” he replied, his tone calm.

“My stuff?”

“Van.”

“Keys.” I held out my hand.

Madrigal drew a rental-car key ring from his pocket and tossed it to me, underhand.

“Thomas,” I said, holding them up.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Mouse can watch him. I want this fucking thing off my arm.”

Thomas took the keys and paced over to the van. He paused to idly check his hair in the reflection in the windshield before opening the van. Vanity, thy name is vampire.

“Now for the real question,” I told Madrigal. “How are you involved with the attacks?”

“I’m not involved,” he said quietly. “Not in the planning and not in the execution. I’ve been scheduled here for more than a year.”

“Doesn’t scream alibi to me,” I said.

“I’m *not*,” he insisted. “Of course, I thought them entertaining. And yes, the...” His eyelids half lowered and his voice went suddenly husky. “The... storm of it. The horror. Empty night, so sweet, all those souls in fear...”

“Get off the creepy psychic vampire train,” I said. “Answer the question.”

He gave me an ugly smile and gestured at his healing legs. “You see. I’ve fed, and fed *well*. Tonight, particularly. But you have my word, wizard, that whatever these creatures are, they are none of my doing. I was merely a spectator.”

“If that’s true,” I said, “then why the hell did you grab me and bring me here?”

“For gain,” he said. “And for enjoyment. I don’t let any buck talk to me as you did. Since I’d planned on replying to your arrogance anyway, I thought I might as well turn a profit on it at the same time.”

“God bless America,” I said. Thomas returned with my magical gear—staff, backpack, a paper sack with my various foci in it, and an old-fashioned key with big teeth. I popped it in the slot on the manacles, fumbling with the stiff, uncooperative fingers of my left hand, and got the thing off my arm. My skin tingled for a moment, and I reached experimentally for my magic. No whiteout of pain. I was a wizard again.

I put on my amulet, bracelet, and ring. I felt the backpack to make sure Bob's skull was still in there. It was, and I breathed a mental sigh of relief. Bob's arcane knowledge was exceeded only by his inability to distinguish between moral right and wrong. His knowledge, in the wrong hands, could be dangerous as hell.

"No," I said quietly. "It isn't a coincidence that you're there, Madrigal."

"I just told you—"

"I believe you," I said. "But I don't think it was a coincidence, either. I think you were there for a reason. Maybe one you didn't know."

Madrigal frowned at that, and looked, for a moment, a little bit worried.

I pursed my lips and thought aloud. "You're high-profile. You're known to feed on fear. You're at war with the White Council." Two and two make four. Four and four make eight. I glanced up at Thomas and said, "Whoever it is behind the phage attacks, they wanted me to think that Darby, here, was it."

Thomas's eyebrows went up in sudden understanding. "Madrigal's supposed to take the fall."

Madrigal's face turned even whiter. "What do you—"

He didn't get to finish the question.

Glau screamed. He screamed in pure, shrieking terror, his voice pitched as high as a woman's.

Everyone turned in surprise, and we were in time to see something haul the wounded Glau out of sight on the other side of the van. Red sprayed into the air. A piece of him, probably an arm or a leg, flew out from behind the van and tumbled for several paces before falling heavily to earth. Glau's voice abruptly went silent.

Something arched up from behind the van and landed, rolling. It bumped over the gravel and came to a stop.

Glau's head.

It had been physically ripped from his body, the flesh and bone torn and wrenched apart by main strength. His face was stretched into a scream, showing his sharklike teeth, and his eyes were glazed and frozen in death.

Orange light rose up behind the van, and then something, a creature perhaps ten or eleven feet in height, rose up and turned to face us. It was dressed all in rags, like some kind of enormous hobo, and was inhumanly slender. Its head was a bulbous thing, and it took me a second to recognize it as a pumpkin, carved with evil eyes like a jack-o'-lantern's. Those eyes

glowed with a sullen red flame, and flashed intensely for a moment as it spied us.

Then it took a long step over the hood of the van and came at us with strides that looked slow but ate up yards with every step.

“Good God,” Rawlins breathed.

Mouse snarled.

“Harry?” Thomas said.

“Another phage in a horror movie costume. The Scarecrow, this time,” I murmured. “I’ll handle it.” I took my staff in hand and stepped out to meet the oncoming phage. I called up the Hellfire once more, as I had against the other phage, until my skin felt like it was about to fly apart. I gathered up energy for a strike more deadly than I had used earlier in the night. Then I cried out and unleashed my will against the creature, hitting it as hard as I possibly could.

The resulting cannonball of blazing force struck the Scarecrow head-on while it was twenty feet away, exploding into a column of searing red flame, an inferno of heat and light that went off with enough force to throw the thing halfway across Lake Michigan.

Imagine my surprise when the Scarecrow stepped through my spell as if it had not existed. Its eyes regarded me with far too much awareness, and its arm moved, striking-snake fast.

Fingers as thick and tough as pumpkin vines suddenly closed around my throat, and in a rush of sudden, terrifying understanding, I realized that this phage was stronger than the little one I’d beaten at the hotel. This creature was far older, larger, stronger, more dangerous.

My vision darkened to a star-spangled tunnel as the Scarecrow wrapped its other hand around my left thigh, lifted me to the horizontal over its head, and started to rip me in half.

Chapter Twenty-nine

“Harry!” Thomas shouted. I heard a rasp of steel, and saw Thomas draw an old U.S. Cavalry saber from inside my duster. He tossed the shotgun to the wounded Rawlins and rushed forward.

Mouse beat him there. The big dog snarled and threw himself at the Scarecrow, obliging the creature to release my leg so that it could swing a spindly arm and fist at my dog. The Scarecrow was strong. It struck Mouse in midleap and batted him into the corrugated steel wall of the Full Moon Garage like he was a tennis ball. There was a crash, and Mouse bounced off the wall and landed heavily on his side, leaving a dent in the steel where he’d hit. He thrashed his legs and managed to rise to a wobbly stand.

Mouse had given Thomas an opening, and my brother leapt to the top of an old metal trash bin, then bounded fifteen feet through the air, whipping the sword down on the wrist of the arm that held me in choke. Thomas was never weak, but he was tapping into his powers as a vampire of the White Court as he attacked, and his skin was a luminous white, his eyes metallic silver. The blow parted the Scarecrow’s hand from its arm, and dropped me a good five or six feet to the ground.

Even as I fell, I knew I had to move away from the creature, and fast. I managed to have my balance more or less in place when I hit, and I fell into a roll, using the momentum to help me rise to a running start. But a problem developed.

That damned Scarecrow’s hand had not ceased choking me, and had not lost any of its strength. My headlong retreat turned into a drunken stumble as my air ran out, and I clutched at the tough vine-fingers crushing my windpipe shut. I went to my knees and one hand, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Rawlins lift the shotgun and begin pumping rounds into the oncoming Scarecrow from where he sat on the ground. The rounds slowed the oncoming creature, but they did nothing to harm it.

My throat was on fire, and I knew I had only seconds of consciousness left. In pure desperation, I took my staff and, in a dizzying gesture, dragged it through a complete circle in the gravel at my feet. I touched my hand to

the circle, willing power into it, and felt the field of magic that it formed spring up around me in a silent, invisible column.

The circle's power cut the Scarecrow's severed hand off from the main body of the creature, and like the phage in the hallway of the hotel, it abruptly transformed into transparent jelly that splattered down onto the gravel beneath my chin and soaked my shirt in sticky goo.

I sucked in a breath of pure euphoria, and though I was on my knees, I turned to face the Scarecrow and did not retreat. So long as the circle around me maintained its integrity, there was no way for the phage to get to me. It should buy me a little time, to get the air back into my lungs and to work out my next attack.

The Scarecrow let out an angry hissing sound and swung its stump of an arm down at Rawlins. The veteran cop saw it coming and rolled out of the way as though he were an agile young man, barely avoiding the blow. Thomas used an old metal oil drum as a platform for another leap, this time driving his heels into the Scarecrow's back, at what would have been the base of its spine on a human. The impact sent the Scarecrow to the ground, but as it landed it kicked a long leg at Thomas and struck his saber arm, breaking it with a wet snap of bone.

Thomas howled, scrambling back, leaving his fallen sword on the ground. The Scarecrow whirled back to me, eyes blazing with an alien rage, and I could swear that I saw recognition in them. It looked from me to Rawlins, and then with a hissing cackle it went after the cop.

Dammit. I waited until the last second and then broke the circle with a sweep of my foot, snatching up Thomas's sword. I charged forward.

The Scarecrow whirled the moment the circle went down, sweeping out a great fist that could have broken my neck, but it hadn't expected me to charge, and I was inside its reach before it realized what I had done. I let out a shout and struck at one of the Scarecrow's legs, but it was quicker than I thought, and the saber's blade barely clipped the thick, sturdy, viny limb. The Scarecrow let out a hiss loud and sharp enough to hurt my ears and tried to kick me, but I slipped to one side just in time, and the blow intended for me instead scattered several stacks of tires.

Madrigal Raith rose up from among the fallen tires only a couple of feet away from me, shrieking with fear. The Scarecrow's eyes blazed into painfully bright flames when it saw Madrigal, and it started for him.

“Get to the van!” I shouted, hopping back to stand beside Madrigal. “We need wheels if we’re going to get away from this—”

Without so much as a second’s hesitation, Madrigal stuck out his hand and shoved me between himself and the monster, sending me into a sprawl at the Scarecrow’s feet while he turned to flee in the opposite direction.

Before I hit the ground, I was already calling power into my shield bracelet and I twisted to land on my right side, holding my left hand and its shield up. If I’d been half a second slower, the Scarecrow would have stomped its foot down onto my skull. Instead, it hit the half sphere of my sorcerous shield with so much force that the shield sent off a flare of light and heat, so that it looked like an enormous blue-white bowl above me.

Furious, the Scarecrow seized an empty barrel and hurled it down at my shield. I hardened my will as it struck, and turned the force of the throw, sending the barrel bouncing over the gravel, but it had gotten closer to me than the first blow. A second later, its fist hammered down, and then it found a bent aluminum ladder in a pile of junk and slammed it down at me.

I managed to block the attacks, but each one came a little closer to my hide. I didn’t dare to let up my concentration for a moment in an effort to move away. The damned thing was so *strong*. I wouldn’t survive a mistake. A single blow from one of its limbs or improvised weapons would probably kill me outright. But if I didn’t get away, the creature would hammer through the shield anyway.

Mouse charged in again, on three legs this time, bellowing an almost leonine battle roar as he did so. The Scarecrow struck out at Mouse, but the dog’s attack had been a feint, and he avoided the blow while remaining just out of the Scarecrow’s reach. The Scarecrow turned back to me, but Mouse rushed it again, forcing the Scarecrow to abandon its attack lest Mouse close in from behind.

I rolled clear of the Scarecrow’s reach and regained my feet, sword in my right hand, shining blue shield blazing on my left. I’d been throwing an awful lot of magic around tonight, and I was feeling it. My legs trembled, and I wasn’t sure how much more I could do.

Mouse and I circled the monster opposite one another, playing wolf pack to the Scarecrow’s bear, each of us menacing the creature’s flanks when it turned to the other. We held our own for maybe a minute, but it was a losing bet, long-term. Mouse was moving on three legs and tiring swiftly. I wasn’t much better off. The second one of us slipped or moved too slowly,

the Scarecrow would drive us into the ground like a fence post. A wet, red, squishy fence post.

Light shone abruptly on my back, an engine roared, and a car horn blared. I hopped to one side. Madrigal's rental van shot past me and slammed into the Scarecrow. It knocked the creature sprawling all the way across the parking lot to the edge of the street.

Thomas leaned his head out the window and shouted, "Get in!"

I hurried to oblige him, snatching up my staff on the way, and Mouse was hard on my heels. We piled into the van, where I found Rawlins unconscious in the back. I slammed the side door shut. Thomas threw up a cloud of gravel whirling the van around, banged over the concrete median between the gravel lot and the street, and shot off down the road.

A wailing, whistling shriek of rage and frustration split the air behind us. I checked out the window, and found the Scarecrow pursuing us. When Thomas reached an intersection and turned, the Scarecrow cut across the corner, bounding over a phone booth with ease, and slammed into the back quarter of the van. The noise was horrible and the van wobbled, tires screeching and slithering while Thomas fought to control the slide.

The Scarecrow shrieked and slammed the van again. The wounded Mouse added his battle roar to the din.

"Do something!" Thomas shouted.

"Like what?" I screamed. "It's immune to my fire!"

Another crunch blasted my ears, rocked the van, and sent me sprawling over Rawlins.

"We're going to find traffic in a minute!" Thomas called. "Figure something out!"

I looked frantically around the van's interior, trying to think of something. There was little enough there: Glau's briefcase, an overnight bag containing, presumably, Glau's shower kit and foot powder, and two flats of expensive spring water in plastic bottles.

I could hear the Scarecrow's heavy footsteps outside the van, now, and a motion in the corner of my eye made me look up to see its blazing, terrifying eyes gazing into the van's window.

"Left!" I howled at Thomas. The van rocked, tires protesting. The Scarecrow drove its arm through the van's side window, and its long fingers missed me by an inch.

Do something. I had to do something. Fire couldn't hurt the thing. I could summon wind, but it was large enough to resist anything but my largest gale, and I didn't have the magical muscle to manage that, exhausted as I was. It would have to be something small. Something limited. Something clever.

I stared at the bottled water, then thought of something and shouted, "Get ready for a U-turn!" I shouted.

"What?" Thomas yelled.

I picked up both flats of bottles and shoved them out the broken window. They vanished, and I checked out the rear window to see them tumbling along in our wake, still held together by heavy plastic wrapping. I took up my blasting rod, pointed it at them, and called up the smallest and most intense point of heat I knew how, releasing it with a whispered, "*Fuego*."

The rear window glass flashed; a hole the size of a peanut suddenly appeared, the glass dribbling down, molten. Bottles exploded as their contents heated to boiling in under a second, spattering that whole section of road with a thin and expensive layer of water.

"Now!" I hollered. "U-turn!"

Thomas promptly did something that made the tires howl and almost threw me out the broken window. I got an up-close look at the Scarecrow as the van slewed into a bootlegger reverse. It reached for me, but its claws only raked down the van's quarter panel, squealing as they ripped through the paint. The Scarecrow, though swift and strong, was also very tall and ungainly, and we reversed directions more quickly than it could, giving us a couple of seconds' worth of a lead.

I gripped my blasting rod so hard that my knuckles turned white, and struggled to work out an evocation on the fly. I'm not much of an evocator. That's the whole reason I used tools like my staff and blasting rod to help me control and focus my energy. The very thought of spontaneously trying out a new evocation was enough to make sweat bead on my forehead, and I tried to remind myself that it wasn't a new evocation. It was just a very, very, very skewed application of an old one.

I leaned out the broken window, blasting rod in hand, watching behind us until the Scarecrow's steps carried it into the clump of empty plastic bottles in a shallow puddle.

Then I gritted my teeth, pointed my blasting rod at the sky, and reached out for fire. Instead of drawing the power wholly from within myself, I

reached out into the environment around me—into the oppressive summer air, the burning heat of the van’s engine, from Mouse, from Rawlins, from the blazing streetlights.

And from the water I’d spread in front of the Scarecrow.

“*Fuego!*” I howled.

Flame shot up into the Chicago sky like a geyser, and the explosion of sudden heat broke some windows in the nearest buildings. The van’s engine stuttered in protest, and the temperature inside the van dropped dramatically. Lights flickered out on the street, the abrupt temperature change destroying their fragile filaments as my spell sucked some of the heat out of everything within a hundred yards.

And the expensive puddle of water instantly froze into a sheet of glittering ice.

The Scarecrow’s leading foot hit the ice and slid out from under its body. Its too-long limbs thrashed wildly, and then the Scarecrow went down, awkward limbs flailing. Its speed and size now worked against it, throwing it down the concrete like a tumbleweed until it smacked hard into a municipal bus stop shelter.

“Go, go, go!” I screamed.

Thomas gunned the engine, recovering its power, and shot down the street. He turned at the nearest corner, and when he did the Scarecrow had only begun to extricate its tangle of limbs from the impact. Thomas hardly slowed, took a couple more turns, and then found a ramp onto the freeway.

I watched behind us. Nothing followed.

I sagged down, breathing hard, and closed my eyes.

“Harry?” Thomas demanded, his voice worried. “Are you all right?”

I grunted. Even that much was an effort. It took me a minute to manage to say, “Just tired.” I recovered from that feat and added, “Madrigal pushed me into that thing and bugged out.”

Thomas winced. “Sorry I wasn’t there sooner,” he said. “I grabbed Rawlins. I figured you’d have told me to get him out anyway.”

“I would have,” I said.

He looked up at me in the rearview mirror, his eyes pale and worried. “You sure you’re all right?”

“We’re all alive. That’s what counts.”

Thomas said nothing more until we slid off the highway and he began to slow the van. I busied myself checking Rawlins. The cop had kept going in

the face of severe pain and even more severe weirdness. Damned heroic, really. But even heroes are human, and human bodies have limits you can't exceed. Everything had finally caught up to Rawlins. His breathing was steady, and his wounded foot had swollen up so badly that his own shoe held down the bleeding, but I don't think a nuclear war could have woken him.

I ground my teeth at what I had to do next. I set my deformed left hand on the floor of the van at the angle Lasciel had shown me and let my weight fall suddenly onto it. There was an ugly pop, more pain, and then the agony subsided somewhat. It was a giddy feeling, and my hand looked human again, if bruised and swollen.

"So," I said, after I had worked up the energy. "It was you following me around town."

"I didn't want to be seen openly with you," he said. "I figured the Council might take it badly if they found out you had taken a White Court vampire on a Warden ride-along."

"Probably," I said. "I take it you followed them from the parking garage?"

"No, actually," Thomas said. "I tried but I lost them. Mouse didn't. I followed him. How the hell did they keep him away from you when they grabbed you?"

"They hit him with this van," I said.

Thomas raised his eyebrows and glanced back at Mouse. "Seriously?" He shook his head. "Mouse led me to you. I was trying to figure out how to get into that garage without getting us shot. Then you made your move."

"You stole my coat," I said.

"Borrowed," he corrected.

"They never talk about this kind of crap when they talk about brothers."

"You weren't wearing it," he pointed out. "Hell, you think I'm going to walk into one of your patented Harry Dresden anarchy-gasms without all the protection I can get?"

I grunted. "You looked good tonight."

"I always look good," he said.

"You know what I mean," I told him quietly. "Better. Stronger. Faster."

"Like the Six Million Dollar Man," Thomas said.

"Stop joking, Thomas," I told him in an even tone. "You used a lot of energy tonight. You're feeding again."

He drove, eyes guarded, his face blank.

I chewed on my lip. "You want to talk about it?"

He ignored me, which I took as a "no."

"How long have you been active?"

I was sure he was stonewalling when he said, in a very quiet voice, "Since last Halloween."

I frowned. "When we took on those necromancers."

"Yeah," he said. "There's...look, there's something I didn't tell you about that night."

I tilted my head, watching his eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Remember, I said Murphy's bike broke down?"

I did. I nodded.

"It wasn't the bike," Thomas said. He took a deep breath. "It was the Wild Hunt. They came across me while I was trying to catch up with you. Sort of filled up the rest of my evening."

I arched my eyebrows. "You didn't have to lie about something like that, man. I mean, everyone who won't join the Hunt becomes its prey. So it's not your fault the Hunt chased you around." I scratched at my chin. Stubble. I needed a shave. "Hell, man, you should be damned proud. I doubt that more than five or six people in *history* have ever escaped the Hunt."

He was quiet for a minute and then said, "I didn't run from them, Harry."

My shoulders twitched with sudden tension.

"I joined them," he said.

"Thomas..." I began.

He looked up at the mirror. "I didn't want to die, man. And when push comes to shove, I'm a predator. A killer. Part of me wanted to go. Part of me had a good time. I don't like that part of me much, but it's still there."

"Hell's bells," I said quietly.

"I don't remember very much of it," he said. He shrugged. "I let you down that night. Let myself down that night. So I figured this time I'd try to help you out, once you told me you were on a job again."

"You've got a car now, too," I said quietly.

"Yeah."

"You're making money. And feeding on people."

"Yeah."

I frowned. I didn't know what to say to that. Thomas had tried to fit in. He tried to get himself an honest job. He tried it for most of two years, but

always ended badly because of who and what he was. I had begun to wonder if there was anyplace in Chicago that *hadn't* fired him.

But he'd had this job, whatever it was, for a while now.

"There anything I need to know?" I asked him.

He shook his head, a tiny gesture. His reticence worried me. Though he'd been repeatedly humiliated, Thomas had never had any trouble talking—complaining, really—about the various jobs he'd tried to hold. Once or twice, he'd opened up to me about the difficulty of going without the kind of intense feeding he'd been used to with Justine. Yet now he was clamming up on me.

An uncharitable sort of person would have gotten suspicious. They would have thought that Thomas must have been engaging in something, probably illegal and certainly immoral, to make his living. They would have dwelt on the idea that, as a kind of incubus, it would be a simple matter for him to seduce and control any wealthy woman he chose, providing sustenance and finances in a single package.

Good thing I'm not one of those uncharitable guys.

I sighed. If he wasn't going to talk, he wasn't going to talk. Time to change the subject.

"Glau," I said quietly. "Madrigal's sidekick, there. You said he was a jann?"

Thomas nodded. "Scion of a djinn and a mortal. He worked for Madrigal's father. Then my father arranged to have Madrigal's father go skydiving naked. Glau stuck with Madrigal after that."

"Was he dangerous?" I asked.

Thomas thought about it for a moment and then said, "He was *thorough*. Details never slipped by. He could play a courtroom like some kind of maestro. He was never finished with something until it was dissected, labeled, documented, and locked away in storage somewhere."

"But he wasn't a threat in a fight."

"Not as such things go. He could kill you dead enough, but not much better than any number of things."

"Funny, then," I said. "The Scarecrow popped him first."

Thomas glanced back at me, arching a brow.

"Think about it," I said. "This thing was supposed to be a phobophage, right? Going after the biggest source of fear."

"Sure."

“Glau was barely conscious when it grabbed him,” I said. “It was probably me or Madrigal who was feeling the most tension, but it took out Glau, specifically.”

“You think someone sent it for Glau?”

“I think it’s a reasonable conclusion.”

Thomas frowned. “Why would anyone do that?”

“To shut him up,” I said. “I think Madrigal was supposed to go down for these attacks, at least in front of the supernatural communities. Maybe Glau was in on it. Maybe Glau arranged for Madrigal to be here.”

“Or maybe the Scarecrow went after Glau because he was wounded and separate from the rest of us. It might have been a coincidence.”

“Possible,” I allowed. “But my gut says it wasn’t. Glau was their cutout man. They killed him to cover their trail.”

“Who do you think ‘they’ is?”

“Uhhhhhh.” I rubbed at my face, hoping the stimulation might move some more blood around in my brain and knock loose some ideas. “Not sure. My head hurts. I’m missing some details somewhere. There should be enough for me to piece this together, but damned if I can see it.” I shook my head and fell quiet.

“Where to?” Thomas asked.

“Hospital,” I said. “We’ll drop Rawlins off.”

“Then what?”

“Then I pick up the trail of those phages, and see if I can find out who summoned them.” I told him briefly about the events of the afternoon and evening. “If we’re lucky, all we’ll find is some maniac’s corpse with a surprised look on his face.”

“What if we aren’t lucky?” he asked.

“Then it means the summoner is a hell of a lot better than I am, to fight off three of those things.” I rubbed at one eye. “And we’ll have to take him down before he hurts anyone else.”

“The fun never ends,” Thomas said. “Right. Hospital.”

“Then circle the block around the hotel. The spell I diverted the phages with had the tracking element worked into it. Sunrise will unravel it, and we don’t know how long it will take to follow the trail.”

I directed Thomas to the nearest hospital, and he carried the unconscious Rawlins through the emergency room doors. He came back a minute later and told me, “They’re on the job.”

“Let’s go, then. Otherwise someone will want to ask us questions about gunshot wounds.”

Thomas was way ahead of me, and the van headed back to the hotel.

I got the spell ready. It wasn’t a difficult working, under normal circumstances, but I felt as wrung out as a dirty dishrag. It took me three tries to get the spell up and running, but I managed it. Then I climbed into the passenger seat, where I could see evidence of the phages’ passing as a trail of curling, pale green vapor in the air. I gave Thomas directions. We followed the trail, and it led us toward Wrigley.

Not a whole hell of a lot of industry was going on in my aching skull, but after a few minutes something began to gnaw at me. I looked blearily around, and found that the neighborhood looked familiar. We kept on the trail. The neighborhood got more familiar. The vapor grew brighter as we closed in.

We turned a last street corner.

My stomach twisted in a spasm of horrified nausea.

The green vapor trail led to a two-story white house. A charming place, somehow carrying off the look of suburbia despite being inside the third largest city in America. Green lawn, despite the heat. White picket fence. Children’s toys in evidence.

The vapor led up to the picket fence, first. There were three separate large holes in the fence, where some enormous force had burst the fence to splinters. Heavy footprints gouged the lawn. An imitation old-style, wrought-iron gaslight had been bent to parallel with the ground about four feet up. The door had been torn from its hinges and flung into the yard. A minivan parked in the driveway had been crushed, as if by a dropped wrecking ball.

I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I saw blood on the doorway.

The decorative mailbox three feet from me read, in cheerfully painted letters: THE CARPENTERS.

Oh, God.

Oh, God.

Oh, *God*.

I’d sent the phages after Molly.

Chapter Thirty

I got out of the van, too shocked to see anything but the destruction. It made no sense. It made no sense at all. How in the hell could this have happened? How could my spell have turned the phages and sent them here?

I stood on the sidewalk outside the house with my mouth hanging open. The streetlights were all out. Only the lights of the van showed the damage, and Thomas turned them off after only a moment. There was no disturbance on the street, no outcry, no police presence. Whatever had happened, something had taken steps to keep it from disturbing the neighbors.

I don't know how long I stood there. I felt Mouse's presence at my side. Then Thomas's, on the other side of me.

"Harry?" he said, as if he was repeating himself. "What is this place?"

"It's Michael's house," I whispered. "His family's home."

Thomas flinched. He looked back and forth and said, "Those things came here?"

I nodded. I felt unsteady.

I felt so damned tired.

Whatever happened here, it was over. There was nothing I could do at this point, except see who had been hurt. And I did not want to do that. So I stood there staring at the house until Thomas finally said, "I'll keep watch out here. Circle the house, see if there's anything to be seen."

"Okay," I whispered. I swallowed, and my stomach felt like I'd swallowed a pound of thumbtacks. I wanted nothing in the world so much as to run away.

But instead, I dragged my tired ass over the damaged lawn and through the house's broken doorway. Mouse, walking on three legs, followed me.

There were sprinkles of blood, already dried, on the inside of the doorway.

I went on inside the house, through the entry hall, into the living room. Furniture lay strewn all over the place, discarded and broken and tumbled. The television lay on its side, warbling static on its screen. A low sound, all white noise and faint interference, filled the room.

There was utter silence in the house, otherwise.

“Hello?” I called.

No one answered.

I went into the kitchen.

There were school papers on the fridge, most of them written in exaggerated, childish hands. There were crayon drawings up there, too. One, of a smiling stick figure in a dress, had a wavering line of letters underneath that read: I LOVY OU MAMA.

Oh, God.

The thumbtacks in my belly became razor blades. If I’d hurt them...I didn’t know what I would do.

“Harry!” Thomas called from outside. “Harry, come here!”

His voice was tense, excited. I went out the kitchen door to the backyard, and found Thomas climbing down from a tree house only a little nicer than my apartment, built up in the branches of the old oak tree behind the Carpenters’ house. He had a still form draped over his shoulder.

I drew out my amulet and called wizard light as Thomas laid the oldest son, Daniel, out on the grass in the backyard. He was breathing, but looked pale. He was wearing flannel pajama pants and a white T-shirt soaked with blood. There was a cut on his arm; not too deep, but very messy. He had bruises on his face, on one arm, and the knuckles on both his hands were torn and ragged.

Michael’s son had been throwing punches. It hadn’t done him any good, but he’d fought.

“Coat,” I said, terse. “He’s cold.”

Thomas immediately took off my duster and draped it over the boy. I propped his feet up on my backpack. “Stay here,” I told him. I went in the house, fetched a glass of water, and brought it out. I knelt down and tried to wake the boy up, to get him to drink a little. He coughed a little, then drank, and blinked open his eyes. He couldn’t focus them.

“Daniel,” I said quietly. “Daniel, it’s Harry Dresden.”

“D-dresden?” he said.

“Yeah. Your dad’s friend. Harry.”

“Harry,” he said. Then his eyes flew open wide and he struggled to sit up. “Molly!”

“Easy, easy,” I told him. “You’re hurt. We don’t know how bad yet. Lie still.”

“Can’t,” he mumbled. “They took her. We were...is Mom okay? Are the little ones okay?”

I chewed on my lip. “I don’t know. Do you know where they are?”

He blinked several times and then he said, “Panic room.”

I frowned. “What?”

“S-second floor. Safe room. Dad built it. Just in case.”

I traded a look with Thomas. “Where is it?”

Daniel waved a vague hand. “Mom had the little ones upstairs. Molly and me couldn’t get to the stairs. They were there. We tried to lead them away.”

“Who, Daniel? They who?”

“The movie monsters. Reaper. Hammerhand.” He shuddered. “Scarecrow.”

I snarled a furious curse. “Thomas, stay with him. Mouse, keep watch.” I stood up and stalked into the house, crossed to the stairs, and went up them. The upstairs hallway had a bunch of bedrooms off it, with the oldest children’s rooms being at the opposite end of the hall from the master bedroom, the younger children being progressively closer to mom and dad. I looked inside each room. They were all empty, though the two nearest the head of the stairs had been torn up pretty well. Broken toys and shattered, child-sized furniture lay everywhere.

If I hadn’t been looking for it, I wouldn’t have noticed the extra space between the linen closet and the master bedroom. I checked the closet in the master bedroom and turned up nothing. Then I opened the door to the linen closet, and found the shelves in complete disarray, sheets and towels and blankets strewn on the floor. I hunkered down and held up my mother’s amulet, peering closely, and then found a section of the back wall of the closet just slightly misaligned with the corner it met. I reached out and touched that part of the wall, closed my eyes, extending my senses through my fingertips.

I felt power there. It wasn’t a ward, or at least it was unlike any ward I had ever encountered. It was more of a quiet hum of constant power, and was similar to the power I’d felt stirring around Michael on several occasions—the power of faith. There was a form of magic protecting that panel.

“Lasciel,” I murmured quietly. “You getting this?”

She did not appear, but her voice rolled through my thoughts. *Yes, my host. Angelic work.*

I exhaled. "Real angels?"

Aye. Rafael or one of his lieutenants, from the feel of it.

"Dangerous?"

There was an uncertain pause. It is possible. You are touched by more darkness than my own. But it is meant to conceal the room beyond, not to strike out at an intruder.

I took a deep breath and said, "Okay." Then I reached out and rapped hard on the panel, three times.

I thought I heard a motion, weight shifting on a floorboard.

I knocked again. "Charity!" I called. "It's Harry Dresden!"

This time, the motion was definite. The panel clicked, then rolled smoothly to one side, and a double-barreled shotgun slid out, aimed right at my chin. I swallowed and looked down the barrel. Charity's cold blue eyes faced me from the other end of the gun.

"You might not be the real Dresden," she said.

"Sure I am."

"Prove it," she said. Her tone was quiet, balanced, deadly.

"Charity, there's no time for this. You want me to show you my driver's license?"

"Bleed," she said instead.

Which was a good point. Most of the things who could play doppelgänger did not have human plumbing, or human blood. It wasn't an infallible test by any means, but it was as solid as anything a nonwizard could use for verification. So I pulled out my pen knife and cut my already mangled left hand, just a little. I couldn't feel it in any case. I bled red, and showed her.

She stared at me for a long second, and then eased the hammers on the shotgun back down, set the weapon aside, and wriggled out of the space beyond the panel. I saw a candle lit back there. The rest of the Carpenter children, sans Molly, were inside. Alicia was sitting up, awake, her eyes worried. The rest were sacked out.

"Molly," she said, once she'd gained her feet. "Daniel."

"I found him hiding in the tree house," I said. "He's hurt."

She nodded once. "How badly?"

“Bruised up pretty good, groggy, but I don’t think he’s in immediate danger. Mouse and a friend of mine are with him.”

Charity nodded again, features calm and remote, eyes cold and calculating. She had a great cool-headed act going, but it wasn’t perfect. Her hands were trembling badly, fingers clenching and unclenching arrhythmically. “And Molly?”

“I haven’t found her yet,” I said quietly. “Daniel might know what happened to her.”

“Were they Denarians?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Definitely not.”

“Is it possible that they may return?”

I shrugged. “It isn’t likely.”

“But possible?”

“Yes.”

She nodded once, and her voice had the quality of someone thinking aloud. “Then the next thing to do is to take the children to the church. We’ll make sure Daniel is cared for. I’ll try to send word to Michael. Then we’ll find Molly.”

“Charity,” I said. “Wait.”

Charity thrust the heel of her hand firmly into my chest and pushed my shoulders back against the opposite wall. Her voice was quiet and very precise. “My children are vulnerable. I’m taking them to safety. Help me or stand aside.”

Then she turned from me and began bringing her children out. Alicia helped as much as she could, her studious features tired and worried, but the littlest ones were sleepy to the point of hibernation, and remained limp as dishrags. I pitched in, picking up little Harry and Hope, carrying one on each hip. Charity’s expression flashed briefly with both worry and thanks, and I saw her control slip. Tears formed in her eyes. She closed them again, jaw clenched, and when she looked up she had regained her composure.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Let’s move,” I replied, and we did.

Tough lady. Very tough. We’d had our differences, but I had to respect the proud core of her. She was the kind of mother you read about in the paper, the kind who lifts a car off of one of her kids.

It was entirely possible that I’d just killed her oldest daughter. If Charity knew that, if she knew that I’d put her children in danger, she’d murder me.

If Molly had been hurt because of me, I'd help.

Saint Mary of the Angels is more than just a church. It's a monument. It's huge, its dome rising to seventeen stories, and covered in every kind of accessory you could name, including angelic statues spread over the roof and ledges. You could get a lot of people arguing over exactly what it's a monument *to*, I suppose, but one cannot see the church without being impressed by its size, by its artistry, by its beauty. In a city of architectural mastery, Saint Mary of the Angels need bow its head to no one.

That said, the back of the place, the delivery doors, looked quite modestly functional. We went there, Charity driving her family's minivan, Thomas, me, and Mouse in Madrigal's battered rental van. Mouse and I got out. Thomas didn't. I frowned at him.

"I'm going to find someplace to park this," he said. "Just in case Madrigal decides to report it as stolen or something."

"Think he'll make trouble for us?" I asked.

"Not face-to-face," Thomas said, his voice confident. "He's more jackal than wolf."

"Look on the bright side," I said. "Maybe the Scarecrow turned around and got him."

Thomas sighed. "Keep dreaming. He's a greasy little rat, but he survives." He looked up at the church and then said, "I'll keep an eye on things from out here. Come on out when you're done."

I got it. Thomas didn't want to enter holy ground. As a vampire of the White Court, he was as close to human as vampires got, and as far as I knew, holy objects had never inconvenienced him. So this wasn't about supernatural allergies. It was about his perceptions.

Thomas didn't want to go into the church because he wasn't optimistic that the Almighty and his institutions would smile on him. Like me, he favored maintaining a low profile with regards to matters temporal. And if he had gone back to older patterns, doing what came naturally to his predator's nature, it might incline him to stay off the theological radar. Worse, entering such a place as the church might force him to face his choices, to question them, to be confronted with the fact that the road he'd chosen kept getting darker and further from the light.

I knew how he felt.

I hadn't been in a church since I'd smacked my hand down on Lasciel's ancient silver coin. Hell, I had a freaking fallen angel in my head—or at least a facsimile of one. If that wasn't a squirt of lemon juice in God's eye, I didn't know what was.

But I had a job to do.

"Be careful," I told him quietly. "Call Murphy. Tell her what's up."

"You'd better get some rest soon, Harry," he replied. "You don't look good."

"I never look good," I said. I offered him my fist. He rapped my knuckles gently with his own.

I nodded and walked over to knock on the delivery doors while he drove off in Madrigal's van. I'd taken my duster back, once Daniel had a blanket on him. Screw the heat. I wanted the protection. Its familiar weight on my shoulders and motion against my legs were reassuring.

Forthill answered my knock, fully dressed, the white of his clerical collar easily seen in the night. His bright blue eyes looked around the parking lot once, and he hurried toward the van without a word being exchanged. I followed him. Forthill moved briskly, and we unloaded the van, Alicia shepherding the mobile kids indoors while he and Charity carried Daniel in between them. I followed with the two little wet dishrags, trying to keep my tired muscles from shaking too obviously.

Forthill led us to the storage room that sometimes doubled as refugee housing. There were half a dozen folded cots against one wall, and another one already opened, set out, and occupied by a lump under a blanket. Forthill and Charity got the wounded Daniel onto a cot first, and then opened the rest of them. We deposited tired children on them.

"What happened?" Forthill asked, his voice quiet and calm.

I didn't want to hear Charity talk about it. "Got a cramp," I told them. "Need to walk it off. Come find me when Daniel gets coherent."

"Very well," Charity said.

Forthill looked back and forth between us, frowning.

Mouse rose with a grunt of effort to limp after me. "No, boy. Stay and keep an eye on the kids."

Mouse settled down again, almost gratefully.

I beat it, and started walking. It didn't matter where. There were too many things flying around in my head. I just walked. Motion wasn't a cure,

but I was tired enough that it kept the thoughts, the emotions, from drowning me. I walked down hallways and through empty rooms.

I wound up in the chapel proper. I've been in smaller stadiums. Gleaming hardwood floors shine over the whole of the chapel. Wooden pews stand in ranks, row upon row upon row, and the altar and nave are gorgeously decorated. It seats more than a thousand people, including the balcony at the rear of the chapel, and every Sunday they still have to run eight masses in four different languages to fit everyone in.

More than size and artistry, though, there is something else about the place that makes it more than simply a building. There's a sense of quiet power there, deep and warm and reassuring. There's peace. I stood for a moment in the vast and empty room and closed my eyes. Right then, I needed all the peace I could get. I drifted through the room, idly admiring it, and wound up in the balcony, all the way at the top, in a dark corner.

I leaned my head back against a wall.

Lasciel's voice came to me, very quietly, and sounded odd. Sad. *It is beautiful here.*

I didn't bother to agree. I didn't tell her to get lost. I leaned my head back against the rear wall and closed my eyes.

I woke up when Forthill's steps drew near. I kept my eyes closed, half hoping that if I didn't seem to waken he would go away.

Instead, he settled a couple of feet down the pew from me, and remained patiently quiet.

The act wasn't working. I opened my eyes and looked at him.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

I pressed my lips together and looked away.

"It's all right," Forthill said quietly. "If you wish to tell me, I'll speak of it to no one."

"Maybe I don't want to talk to you," I said.

"Of course," he said, nodding. "But my offer stands, should you wish to talk. Sometimes the only way to carry a heavy burden is to share it with another. It is your choice to make."

Choices.

Sometimes I thought it might be nice not to make any choices. If I never had one, I could never screw it up.

"There are things I don't care to share with a priest," I told him, but I was mostly thinking out loud.

He nodded. He took off his collar and set it aside. He settled back into the pew, reached into his jacket, and drew out a slender silver flask. He opened it, took a sip, and offered it to me. “Then share it with your bartender.”

That drew a faint, snorting laugh from me. I shook my head, took the flask, and sipped. An excellent, smooth Scotch. I sipped again, and I told him what happened at the convention, and how it had spilled over onto the Carpenter household. He listened. We passed the flask back and forth. I finished by saying, “I sent those things right to her door. I never meant it to happen.”

“Of course not,” he said.

“It doesn’t make me feel any better about it.”

“Nor should it,” he said. “But you must know that you are a man of power.”

“How so?”

“Power,” he said, waving a hand in an all-encompassing gesture. “All power is the same. Magic. Physical strength. Economic strength. Political strength. It all serves a single purpose—it gives its possessor a broader spectrum of choices. It creates alternative courses of action.”

“I guess,” I said. “So?”

“So,” he said. “You have more choices. Which means that you have much improved odds of making mistakes. You’re only human. Once in a while, you’re going to screw the pooch.”

“I don’t mind that,” I said. “When I’m the only one who pays for it.”

“But that isn’t in your control,” he said. “You cannot see all outcomes. You couldn’t have known that those creatures would go to the Carpenter house.”

I ground my teeth. “So? Daniel’s still hurt. Molly could be dead.”

“But their condition was not yours to ordain,” Forthill said. “All power has its limits.”

“Then what’s the *point*?” I snarled, suddenly furious. My voice bounced around the chapel in rasping echoes. “What good is it to have power enough to kill my friend’s family, but not power enough to *protect* them? What the hell do you expect from me? I’ve got to make these stupid choices. What the hell am I supposed to do with them?”

“Sometimes,” he replied, his tone serious, “you just have to have faith.”

I laughed, and it came out loud and bitter. Mocking echoes of it drifted through the vast chamber. "Faith," I said. "Faith in what?"

"That things will unfold as they are meant to," Forthill said. "That even in the face of an immediate ugliness, the greater picture will resolve into something all the more beautiful."

"Show me," I spat. "Show me something beautiful about this. Show me the silver fucking lining."

He pursed his lips and mused for a moment. Then he said, "There's a quote from the founder of my order: There is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"That the good that will come is not always obvious. Nor easy to see. Nor in the place we would expect to find it. Nor what we personally desire. You should consider that the good being created by the events this night may have nothing to do with the defeat of supernatural evils or endangered lives. It may be something very quiet. Very ordinary."

I frowned at him. "Like what?"

He finished off the little flask and then rose. He put it away and put his collar back on. "I'm afraid I'm not the one you should ask." He put a hand on my shoulder and nodded toward the altar. "But I will say this: I've been on this earth a fair while, and one way or another, this too shall pass. I have seen worse things reverse themselves. There is yet hope for Molly, Harry. We must strive to do our utmost, and to act with wisdom and compassion. But we must also have faith that the things beyond our control are not beyond His."

I sat quietly for a minute. Then I said, "You almost make me believe."

He arched an eyebrow. "But?"

"I don't know if I can do that. I don't know if it's possible for me."

The corners of his eyes wrinkled. "Then perhaps you should try to have faith that you might one day have faith." His fingers squeezed and then released my shoulder. He turned to go.

"Padre," I said.

He paused.

"You...won't tell Charity?"

He turned his head, and I could see sadness in his profile. "No. You aren't the only one too afraid to believe."

Sudden footsteps clattered into the chapel, and Alicia hurried in, accompanied by Mouse. The big grey dog sat down and stared up at the balcony. Alicia, panting, looked up. "Father?"

"Here," Forthill said.

"Come quick," she said. "Mama said to tell you Daniel's awake."

Chapter Thirty-one

We listened to Daniel's recounting of the attack. It was simple enough. He'd heard Molly moving around downstairs and had come down to talk to his sister. There had been a knock at the door. Molly had gone to answer it. There had been an exchange of words, and then Molly had screamed and slammed the door.

"She came running into the living room," Daniel said. "And they broke down the door behind her and came in." He shivered. "They were going upstairs and Molly said we had to distract them, so I grabbed the poker from the fireplace and just sort of jumped them." He shook his head. "I thought they were just costumes. You know. Like...really stupid burglars or something. But the Reaper grabbed me. And he was going to...you know. Cut me with that curved knife." He gestured vaguely at his wounded arm. "Molly hit him and he dropped me."

"With what?" I asked him.

He shook his head. His thin, awkward, adolescent features were hollow with pain, weariness, and a kind of lingering disbelief. His words were all slightly stiff, wooden, as if reporting events in an unappealing motion picture, rather than actual experiences. "I couldn't see. I think she must have had a bat or something. He dropped me."

"Then what?" I asked him.

He swallowed. "I fell, and bumped my head on the floor. And they grabbed her. The Reaper and the Scarecrow. And they carried her out the door. She was screaming..." He bit his lip. "I tried to stop them, but Hammerhand chased me. So I ran out the back and up into the tree house, cause I figured, you know. He doesn't have any hands. Just hammers. So how's he going to climb up after me?"

He looked to Charity and said, shame in his voice, "I'm sorry, Mom. I wanted to stop them. They were just...too big." Tears welled up in his eyes and his thin chest heaved. Charity caught him in a fierce hug, squeezing him hard and whispering to him. Daniel broke down, sobbing.

I got up and walked to the far side of the room. Forthill joined me there.

"These creatures," I told him quietly, "inflict more than simple physical damage. They rip into the psyches of those they attack."

"This happened to Daniel?" Forthill asked.

"I'd have to take a closer look to be certain, but it's probable. Kid's gonna have it tough for a while," I said. "It's like emotional trauma. Someone dying, that kind of thing. It tears people up the same way. They don't get over it fast."

"I've seen it too," Forthill said. "I haven't brought this up yet, but I thought you should know that Nelson came to me earlier this evening."

I nodded at the cot that had been occupied when we came in. "That him?"

"Yes."

"How'd he strike you?" I asked.

Forthill pursed his lips. "If I didn't know you sent him, I would have thought he was having a bad reaction to drugs. He was almost incoherent. Very agitated. Terrified, in point of fact, though he would not or could not explain why. I managed to get him calmed down and he all but fainted."

I frowned, running the fingers of my right hand back through my hair. "Did you have the sense that anyone was following him?"

"Not at all. Though I might have missed something." He essayed a tired smile. "It's late. And I'm not as spry as I used to be, after ten o'clock or so."

"Thank you for helping him," I said.

"Of course. Who is he?"

"Molly's boyfriend," I said. I glanced across the room, at the mother holding her son. "Maybe Charity doesn't need to know that part, either."

He blinked and then sighed, "Oh, dear."

"Heh. Yeah," I said.

"May I ask you a question?" he asked.

"Sure."

"These creatures, these phages. If they are what you say, beings of the spirit world, then how did they manage to cross the house's threshold?"

"Traditional way," I said. "They got an invitation."

"From whom?"

"Probably Molly," I said.

He frowned. "I have difficulty believing that she would do such a thing."

I felt my mouth tighten. “She probably didn’t know they were monsters. They’re shapeshifters. They probably appeared to her as someone she knew, and would invite in.”

Forthill said, “Ah. I see. Someone such as you, perhaps.”

“Perhaps,” I said quietly. “Makes it the second time someone has used my face to get a shot at Michael’s family.”

Forthill said nothing for a moment. Then he said, “It occurs to me that these creatures killed without compunction in your previous encounters. Why would they carry Molly away instead of simply murdering her?”

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “I don’t know how my spell managed to bring them to Molly. I don’t know precisely what these things are, or where they hail from. Which means I can’t figure out why they’ve been showing up, or where they might have taken the girl.” I waved a hand in a frustrated gesture. “It’s driving me insane. I’ve got tons of facts and none of them are lining up.”

“You’re tired,” Forthill said. “Perhaps some rest—”

I shook my head. “No, Padre. The things that took her won’t rest. The longer she’s in their hands, the less likely it is we’ll ever see her again.” I rubbed at my eyes. “I need to rethink it.”

Forthill nodded at me and rose. On the other side of the room, Charity was covering her exhausted son with a blanket. Even Alicia had surrendered to fatigue, and now only the adults were awake. “I’ll leave you to it then. Have you eaten recently?”

“Sometime in the Mesozoic Era,” I said.

“Sandwich?”

My stomach made a gurgling noise. “Only if you insist.”

“I’ll see to it,” Forthill said. “Excuse me.” He went over to Charity and took her arm, leading her out as he spoke quietly to her. Now that her children had been cared for, she looked like she might come apart at the seams. They left the room together, leaving me in the dimness with Mouse and a lot of sleeping kids.

I thought. I thought some more. I picked up all the facts I knew, turning them every which way, trying to figure out something, *anything*, that would let me put a stop to this insanity.

The phages. The answer was in the phages. Once I knew their identity, I could begin to work out who might be using them, and what I might do to learn more about them. There had to be a commonality to them,

somewhere; something that linked them together, some fact that could provide me a context in which to judge their motivations and intentions.

But what the hell could they have in common, other than being monsters who fed on fear? They'd shown up randomly in a bathroom, a kitchen, a parking lot, a conference room. Their victims had been disparate, seemingly random. They had all appeared as figures from horror movies, but that fact seemed fairly unremarkable, relatively speaking. Try as I might, I could find nothing to join them together, to let me recognize them.

Frustrated, I rose and went over to Daniel's cot. I called up my Sight. It took me longer than normal. I braced myself and regarded the boy.

I'd been right. He'd taken a psychic flogging. The phage had been worrying at his mind, his spirit, even as it had threatened his flesh. I could see the wounds as long, bleeding tears in his flesh. Poor little guy. It would haunt him. I hoped he would be able to get a little rest before the nightmares woke him up.

I stared at him for a good while, making sure his suffering was burned indelibly into my head. I wanted to remember for the rest of my life what the consequences of my screw-ups might be.

I heard a sound to the side and glanced up without thinking, turning my Sight upon the source of the sound—a restlessly stirring Nelson.

If little Daniel had been the recipient of a savage beating, Nelson's spirit had been in the hands of Hell itself. His entire upper body was disfigured under my Sight, covered in hideous, festering boils and raw, bleeding burns. The damage was worst around his head, and faded gradually as it descended his torso.

And each of his temples bore tiny, neat holes, sharp and cauterized, as if by a laser scalpel.

Just like Rosie.

Chains of logic cascaded through my brain. My head swam. I shoved the Sight away from me, and my ass fell straight down to the floor.

I knew.

I knew why my spell had sent the phages after the Carpenters.

I knew why Molly had been taken. I could make a good guess at where.

I knew what the phages all had in common.

I knew who had sent them. The realization terrified me with a fear so cold and sharp that it literally paralyzed me. I could barely clap my hand over my mouth to keep from making whimpering sounds.

It took me a while to force myself to calm down. By the time I did, Forthill had returned bearing sandwiches. He settled down on a cot, clearly exhausted, and went to sleep.

I ate my sandwiches. Then I went looking for Charity.

I found her in the chapel, sitting up high in the balcony. She stared down at the altar, and did not react when I came up the steps to her and settled down on the bench beside her. I sat with her in silence for a minute.

“Charity,” I whispered. “I need to ask you something.”

She sat in stony silence. Her chin moved a fraction of a degree up and down.

“How long?” I murmured.

“How long since what?” she asked.

I took a deep breath. “How long has it been since you’ve used your magic?”

Chapter Thirty-two

I couldn't have gotten more of a reaction if I'd shot her.

Charity's face turned sheet white, the blood draining from it. She froze in place grasping the edge of the wooden pew in front of her with both hands. Her knuckles turned white, and the wood creaked. She gnashed her teeth and bowed her head.

I didn't push. I waited.

She opened her eyes again, and she wasn't hard to read. Her thoughts and emotions were clear on her face. Panic. Desperation. Self-loathing. Her eyes flicked from one possibility to another. She considered denying it. She considered lying to me. She considered simply walking away.

"Charity," I told her. "Tell me the truth."

Her breathing quickened. I saw her desperation growing.

I reached out with one hand and turned her face toward me. "Your daughter needs you. If we don't help her, she's going to die."

Charity flinched and pulled away from me. Her shoulders shook with a silent sob. She fought to control her breathing, her voice, and whispered, "A lifetime."

I felt some tension ease in me. Her reaction confirmed that I was on the right track.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Just putting lots of little things together," I said. "Please, Charity. Tell me."

Her voice was rough, half strangled, as though the breath that carried her words had been tainted with something rotten. "I had some talent. It showed just before my sixteenth birthday. You know how awkward that kind of thing can be."

"Yeah," I said. "How'd your family take it?"

Her mouth twisted. "My parents were wealthy. Respectable. When they had time to notice me, they expected me to be normal. Respectable. They found it easier to believe that I was a drug addict. Emotionally unbalanced."

I winced. There were a lot of situations that could meet someone with a burgeoning magical talent. Charity's was one of the worst.

"They sent me away to schools," she said. "And to hospitals disguised as schools." She waved a hand. "I eventually left them. Just left them. I struck out on my own."

"And fell in with a bad crowd," I said quietly.

She gave me a bitter smile. "You've heard this story before."

"It isn't uncommon," I said quietly. "Who was it?"

"A...coven, of sorts, I suppose," she said. "More of a cult. There was a young man leading it. Gregor. He had power. He and the others, all young people, mixed in religion and mysticism and philosophy and...well. You've probably seen such things before."

I nodded. I had. A charismatic leader, dedicated followers, a collection of strays and homeless runaways. It rarely developed into something positive.

"I wasn't strongly gifted," she said. "Not like you. But I learned about some of what happens out there. About the White Council." The bitter smile returned. "Everyone was terrified of them. A Warden visited us once. He delivered a warning to Gregor. He'd been toying about with some kind of summoning spells, and the Wardens got wind of it. They interviewed each of us. Evaluated us. Told us the Laws of Magic, and told us never to break them if we wished to live."

I nodded and listened. She spoke more quickly now, the words coming out in a growing rush. They had been pent up a long time.

"Gregor resented it. He grew distant. He began practicing magic that walked the crumbling edges of the Council's Laws. He had us all doing it." Her eyes grew cold. "The others began disappearing. One by one. No one knew where they had gone. But I saw what was happening. I saw Gregor growing in power."

"He was trading them," I said.

She nodded once. "He saw my face, when I realized it. I was the next one to go. He came to take me away, and I fought him. Tried to kill him. Wanted to kill him. But he beat me. I remember only parts of it. Being chained to an iron post."

"The dragon," I said.

She nodded. Some of the bitterness faded from her smile. "And Michael came. And he destroyed the monster. And saved me." She looked up at me. Tears filled her eyes and streaked down her cheeks, but she did not blink. "I

swore to myself that I would leave that behind me. The magic. The power. I had...urges." She swallowed. "To do things only...only a monster would do. When Siriothrax died, Gregor went mad. Utterly mad. But I wanted to turn my power against him anyway. I couldn't think of anything else."

"Hard to do," I said quietly. "You were a kid. No real training. Exposed to some nasty uses of power."

"Yes," she said. "Without Michael, I would never have been able to leave it behind me. He never knew. He still doesn't know. He remained near me, in my life. Making sure that I was all right. And...he was such a good soul. When he smiled at me, it was like all the light in the world was shining out at me. I wanted to be worthy of that smile."

"My husband saved my life, Mister Dresden, and not only from the dragon. He saved me from myself." She shook her head. "I never touched my power again after the night I met Michael. We married soon after. And in time, the power withered. And good riddance to it."

"So when Molly's talent began to manifest," I said quietly, "you tried to get her to abandon it as well."

"I was well aware of how dangerous it could be," she said. "How innocent it could seem." She shook her head. "I did not want her exposed to the things that had nearly destroyed my life."

"But she did it anyway," I guessed. "That's what really came between the two of you. That's why she ran away from home."

Charity's voice turned raw. "Yes. I couldn't get through to her how dangerous it was. What she might be sacrificing." She made no effort to stem or hide her tears. "And you were there. A hero who fought beside her father. Used his power to help people." She let out a tired laugh. "For the love of God, you saved my life. We named our child for you. Once she realized she had the talent, nothing could keep her from it."

Christ. No wonder Charity hadn't much liked me. Not only was I dragging her husband off to who knew where to fight who knew what, I was also setting an example to Molly of everything Charity wanted her to avoid.

"I didn't know," I told her.

She shook her head. Then she said, "I have been honest with you. No one else knows what you do now. Not Michael. Not my daughter. No one." She drew a Kleenex from her pocket and wiped at her eyes. "What has happened to my daughter?"

I exhaled. “What I’ve got right now is still mostly guesswork,” I said. “But my gut tells me it all fits together.”

“I understand,” she said.

I nodded, and told Charity about the attacks at the convention, and about how Molly had gotten me involved. “I examined the victims of the first two attacks,” I said quietly. “One of them, a girl named Rosie, showed evidence of a kind of psychic trauma. At the time, I attributed it to the phage’s attack on her.”

Charity frowned. “It wasn’t?”

I shook my head. “I found an identical trauma on Nelson.” I took a deep breath and said, “Molly is the link between them. They’re both her friends. I think she was the one who hurt them. I think she used magic to invade their minds.”

Charity stared at me, her expression sickened. “What? No...” She shook her head. “No, Molly wouldn’t...” Her face grew even more pale. “Oh, God. She’s broken one of the Council’s Laws.” She shook her head more violently. “No, no, no. She would not do such a thing.”

I grimaced and said, “I think I know what she did. And why she did it.”

“Tell me.”

I took a deep breath. “Rosie is pregnant. And she showed physical evidence of drug addiction, but none of the psychological evidence of withdrawal. I think Molly took steps when she found out her friend was pregnant—to force her away from the drugs. I think she did it to protect the baby. And then I think she did the same thing to Nelson. But something went wrong. I think what she did to him broke something.” I shook my head. “He got paranoid, erratic.”

Charity stared down at the altar below, shaking her head. “Is it the Council then, that took her?”

“No,” I said. “No. What she did to Rosie and Nelson left a kind of mark on her. A stain. I think she forced Rosie and Nelson to feel fear whenever they came near their drugs. Fear is a powerful motivator and it’s easy to exploit. She wanted them to be afraid of the drugs. She had good intentions, but she wanted her friends to be frightened.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Whoever called up these phages,” I said, “needed a way to guide them from the Nevernever to the physical world. They needed a beacon, someone

who would resonate with a sympathetic vibe. Someone who, like the phages, wanted to make people feel fear.”

“And they used my Molly,” Charity whispered. Then she stared at me for a moment. “You did it,” she said quietly. “You tried to turn the phages back upon their summoner. You sent them after my daughter.”

“I didn’t know,” I told her. “My God, Charity. I swear to you that I didn’t know. People were dead, and I didn’t want anyone else to be hurt.”

The wooden pew creaked even more sharply in her grip.

“Who did this thing?” she said, and her voice was deadly quiet. “Who is responsible for the harm to my children? Who is the one who called the things that invaded my home?”

“I don’t think anyone called them,” I told her quietly. “I think they were sent.”

She looked up at me, and her eyes narrowed. “Sent?”

I nodded. “I hadn’t considered that possibility, until I realized what all of the attacks had in common. Mirrors.”

“Mirrors?” Charity asked. “I don’t understand.”

“That was the common element,” I said. “Mirrors. The bathroom. Rosie’s makeup mirror in the conference room. Plenty of reflective steel surfaces in a commercial kitchen. And Madrigal’s rental van’s windshield was reflecting images very clearly.”

She shook her head. “I still don’t understand.”

“There are plenty of things that can use mirrors as windows or doorways from the spirit world,” I said. “But there’s only one thing that feeds on fear and uses mirrors as pathways back and forth from the Nevernever. It’s called a fetch.”

“Fetch.” Charity tilted her head, her eyes vague, as though searching through old memories. “I’ve heard of them. They’re...aren’t they creatures of Faerie?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “Specifically, they’re creatures of deepest, darkest Winter.” I swallowed. “Even more specifically, they’re Queen Mab’s elite spies and assassins. Shapeshifters with a lot of power.”

“Mab?” she whispered. “*The* Mab?”

I nodded slowly.

“And they’ve taken my daughter,” she said. “Carried her away to Faerie.”

I nodded again. “She’ll be a rich resource for them. A magically talented young mortal. Compatible energy. Not enough experience to defend herself.

They can feed on her and her magic for hours. Maybe days. That's why they didn't just kill her and have done."

Charity swallowed. "What can we do?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "It would be nice to have your husband along, though."

She bit her lip and sent what might have been a hateful look down at the altar. "He's out of reach. Messages have been left, but..."

"We're on our own," I said.

"We must do something," she said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "The problem is that we don't know *where* to do it."

"I thought you just said that they had taken her back to Faerie."

"Yeah," I said. "But just because I tell you Ayer's Rock is in Australia doesn't mean you're going to be able to find the damned thing. Australia's big. And Faerie makes it look like Rhode Island."

Charity clenched her jaw. "There must be something."

"I'm working on it," I said.

"What will..." She paused and cleared her throat. "How long does she have?"

"Hard to say," I told her. "Time can go by at different rates between here and there. A day here, but an hour there. Or vice versa."

She stared steadily at me.

I looked away and said, "Not long. It depends on how long she holds out. They'll get all the fear out of her that they can and then..." I shook my head. "A day. At most."

She shook her head. "No," she said quietly. "I will not let that happen. There must be a way to take her back."

"I can get to Faerie," I said. "But you've got to understand something. We're talking about opening a path into deep Winter. *If* I'm strong enough to open the way, and *if* I'm strong enough to hold it open while simultaneously running a rescue operation against at least one ancient fetch who ate my magic like candy earlier tonight, we're still talking about defying the will of Queen Mab. If she's there, there's not a damned thing I can do. I don't have enough power to challenge her in the heart of her domain. The whole damned White Council doesn't have enough power. On top of that, I'd have to know precisely where to cross over into Faerie, because I'd have only minutes to grab her and get out. And I have no idea where she is."

“What are you saying?” she asked quietly.

“That I can’t do it,” I told her. “It’s suicide.”

Charity’s back stiffened. “So you’re willing to leave her there?”

“No,” I said. “But it means that I’m going to have to find help wherever I can get it. Maybe from people and things that you won’t much like.” I shook my head. “And it’s possible I’ll get myself killed before I can even make the attempt. And even if I get her out...there could be a price.”

“I’ll pay it,” she said. Her voice was flat, strong, certain. “For Molly, I’ll pay it.”

I nodded. I didn’t say the next thought out loud—that even if we did get the girl back, there might not be much left of her mind. And she’d broken one of the Laws of Magic. She could wind up on the floor of some lonely warehouse, a black bag over her head, until Morgan’s sword took it off her shoulders. Or, maybe worse, she could already have been twisted by the power she’d used.

Even if I could find Molly and bring her home, it might already be too late to save her.

But I could burn that bridge when I came to it. First, I had to find her. The only way to do that was to learn where the fetches had carried her through to the Nevernever. Geography in the Nevernever isn’t like geography in the normal world. The Nevernever touches our world only at certain points of sympathetic energy. The portion of the Nevernever that touched an empty and abandoned warehouse might not be anywhere near the area of the spirit world that touched the full and busy child-care center across the physical street from the warehouse. To make it worse, the connections between the mortal world and the Nevernever changed slowly over time, as the world changed.

There could be a thousand places in Chicago where the fetches might have dragged Molly back to their lair. I had to find the correct one. And I had to do it before dawn, before the rising sun scattered and dispersed the residual traces of her presence that would be my only trail.

I had about two hours, tops, to get my aching body back to my apartment to bathe and prepare for a spell that would have been dangerous had I been rested and entirely whole. Tired, hurting, pressured, and worried as I was, I would probably kill myself on Little Chicago’s trial run.

But my only other option was walk away and leave the girl in the hands of creatures that made nightmares afraid of the dark.

“I’ll need something of hers,” I said, rising. “Hair or fingernail clippings would be best.”

Charity said, “I have a lock of her hair in her baby book.”

“Perfect,” I said. “I’ll pick it up from your place. Where’s the book?”

She rose. “I’ll show you.”

I hesitated. “I don’t know if that’s wise.”

“She’s my daughter, Mister Dresden,” Charity said. “I’m coming with you.”

I was too tired to argue. So I nodded, and started down out of the balcony. My ankle twinged, and I wobbled and almost fell.

Charity caught me.

Chapter Thirty-three

“This is Thomas,” I told Charity, waving a hand at my brother, who had fallen into step beside me as I left the church. “He’s more dangerous than he looks.”

“I have a black belt,” Thomas explained.

Charity arched an eyebrow, looked at Thomas for about a second, and said, “You’re the White Court vampire who took my husband to that strip bar.”

Thomas gave Charity a toothy smile and said, “Hey, it’s nice to be remembered. And to work with someone who has a clue.” He hooked a thumb at me and added, sotto voce, “For a change.”

Charity’s regard didn’t change. It wasn’t icy, nor friendly, nor touched by emotion. It was simply a remote, steady gaze, the kind one reserves for large dogs who pass nearby. Cautious observation, unexcited and deliberate. “I appreciate that you have fought beside my husband before. But I also want you to understand that what you are gives me reason to regard you with suspicion. Please do nothing to deepen that sentiment. I do not remain passive to threats.”

Thomas pursed his lips. I half expected anger to touch his gaze, but it didn’t. He simply nodded and said, “Understood, ma’am.”

“Good,” she said, and we reached her van. “You ride in the rearmost seat.”

I started to protest, but Thomas put his hand on my shoulder and shook his head. “Her ride, her rules,” he murmured to me in passing. “I can respect that. So can you.”

So we all got in and headed for the Carpenters’ house.

“How’s Mouse?” Thomas asked.

“Leg’s hurt,” I said.

“Took one hell of a shot to do it,” he noted.

“That’s why I left him back there,” I said. “Could be he’s pushing his luck. Besides, he can help Forthill keep an eye on the kids.”

“Uh-huh,” Thomas said. “Am I the only one who is starting to think that maybe Mouse is something special?”

“Always thought that,” I said.

“I wonder if he’s an actual breed.”

Charity glanced over her shoulder and said, “He looks something like a Caucasian.”

“Impossible,” I said. “He has rhythm and he can dance.”

Charity shook her head and said, “It’s a dog bred by the Soviet Union in the Caucasus Mountains for use in secured military installations. It’s one of the only breeds that grows so large. But they tend to be a great deal more aggressive than your dog.”

“Oh, he’s aggressive enough for anybody, when he needs to be,” I said.

Thomas engaged Charity in a polite conversation about dogs and breeds, and I leaned my head against the window and promptly fell asleep. I woke up briefly when the van stopped. Charity and Thomas spoke, and I dozed as they loaded some things into the van. I didn’t wake up again until Thomas touched my shoulder and said, “We’re at your apartment, Harry.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled. “Okay.” I blinked a couple of times and hopped out of the van. “Thomas,” I said. “Get in touch with Murphy for me, and tell her I need her at my place, now. And...here...” I fumbled in my duster’s pockets and found a white napkin and a marker. I wrote another number. “Call this number. Tell them that I’m calling in my personal marker.”

Thomas took the paper and arched a brow. “Can’t you be any more specific?”

“I don’t have to be,” I said. “They’ll know why I want them. This will just tell them that it’s time for them to get together with me.”

“Why me?” Thomas asked.

“Because I don’t have time,” I said. “So unless you want to play with dangerous magic divinations, call the damned number and stop making me waste energy explaining myself.”

“*Heil*, Harry,” Thomas said, his tone a bit sullen. But I knew he’d do it.

“Hair?” I asked Charity.

She passed me an unmarked white envelope, her expression a mask.

“Thank you.” I took it and headed for my apartment, the two of them following after me. “I’ll be working downstairs. The two of you should stay in the living room. Please be as quiet as you can and don’t walk around too much.”

“Why?” Charity asked.

I shook my head tiredly and waved a hand. “No, no questions right now. I’ll need everything I’ve got to find where they took Molly, and I’m already rushing this thing. Let me concentrate. I’ll explain it later.” *If I survive it*, I thought.

I felt Charity’s eyes on me, and I glanced back at her. She gave her head a brief, stiff nod. I took down the wards and we went inside. Mister came over and rammed his shoulder against my legs, then wound his way around between Thomas’s legs, accepting a few token pats from my half brother. Then he surprised me by giving Charity the same treatment.

I shook my head. Cats. No accounting for taste.

Charity looked around my apartment, frowning, and said, “It’s very well kept up. I had expected more...debris.”

“He cheats,” Thomas said, and headed for the refrigerator.

I ignored them. There wasn’t time for the full ritual cleansing and meditation, but my day had exposed me to all kinds of stains, external and otherwise, and I considered the shower to be the most indispensable portion of the preparation. So I went into my room, stripped, lit a candle, and got into the shower. Cool water sluiced over me. I scrubbed my skin until it was pink, and washed my hair until it got sore.

The whole while I sought out a quiet place in my mind, somewhere sheltered from pain and guilt, from fear and anger. I pushed out every sensation but for the bathing, and without conscious effort my motions took on the steady rhythm of ritual, something commonplace transformed into an act of art and meditation, like a Japanese tea ceremony.

I longed for my bed. I longed for sleep. Warmth. Laughter. I pinned down those longings one at a time and crucified them, suspending them until such time as my world was a place that could afford such desires. One last emotion was too big for me, though. Try though I might, I could not keep fear from finding a way to slither into my thoughts. Little Chicago’s maiden run was an enormous unknown quantity. If I’d done it all right, I would have myself one hell of a tool for keeping track of things in my town.

If I’d made even a tiny mistake, Molly was dead. Or worse than dead. And I’d get to find out what the light at the end of the long tunnel really was.

I couldn’t escape the fear. It was built in to the situation. So instead I tried to make my peace with it. Fear, properly handled, could be turned into

something useful. So I made a small, neat place for its use in my head, a kind of psychic litter box, and hoped that the fear wouldn't start jumping around at the worst possible moment.

I got out of the shower, dried, and slipped into my white robe again. I kept my thoughts focused, picked up my backpack and the white envelope, and went down to the basement lab. I shut the door behind me. If Little Chicago went nova, preventative spells I'd laid to keep energies from escaping the lab should mitigate the damage significantly. It wasn't a perfect plan, by any means, but I'm only human.

Which was a disturbing thought as I stared at the model on the table. Even a tiny mistake. Only human.

I set the envelope at the edge of the table, my backpack on a shelf, and went around the basement lighting candles with a match. A spell would have been faster and neater, but I wanted to save every drop of power for managing the divination. So I made lighting each candle a ritual of its own, focusing on my movements, on precision, on nothing but the immediate interplay of heat and cold, light and darkness, fire and shadow.

I lit the last candle and turned to the model city.

The buildings shone silver in the candlelight, and the air quivered with the power I'd built into the model. Some tiny voice of common sense in my head told me that this was a horribly bad idea. It told me that I was making decisions because I was in pain and exhausted, and that it would be far wiser to get some sleep and attempt the spell when I stood a reasonable chance of pulling it off.

I crucified that little voice, too. There was no room for doubts. Then I turned to the table, and to the elongated circle of silver I'd built into its surface.

Lasciel appeared between me and the table, in her usual white tunic, her red hair pulled back into a tight braid. She held up both hands and said, quietly, "I cannot permit you to do this."

"You," I said in a quiet, distant voice, "are almost as annoying as a sudden phone call."

"This is pointless," she said. "My host, I beg you to reconsider."

"I don't have time for you," I said. "I have a job to do."

"A job?" she asked. "Evading your responsibilities, you mean?"

I tilted my head slightly. In my current mental state, the emotions I felt seemed infinitely far away and all but inconsequential. "How so?"

“Look at yourself,” she replied, her voice that low, quiet, reasonable tone one uses around madmen and ugly drunks. “Listen to yourself. You’re tired. You’re injured. You’re wracked by guilt. You’re frightened. You will destroy yourself.”

“And you with me?” I asked her.

“Correct,” she said. “I do not fear the end of my existence, my host, but I would not be extinguished by one too self-deluded to understand what he was about.”

“I’m not deluded,” I said.

“But you are. You know that this effort shall probably kill you. And once it has done so, you will be free from any onus of what happened to the girl. After all, you heroically died in the effort to find her and retrieve her. You won’t have to attend her funeral. You won’t have to explain yourself to Michael. You won’t have to tell her parents that their daughter is dead because of your incompetence.”

I did not reply. The emotions grew a little closer.

“This isn’t anything more than an elaborate form of suicide, chosen during a moment of weakness,” Lasciel said. “I do not wish to see you destroy yourself, my host.”

I stared at her.

I thought about it.

She might be right.

It didn’t matter.

“Move,” I murmured. “Before I move you.” Then I paused and said, “Wait a minute. What am I thinking? It isn’t as though you can stop me.” Then I simply stepped *through* Lasciel’s image to the table, and reached for the white envelope.

The white envelope began to spin in place on the table, and abruptly became dozens of envelopes, each identical, each whirling like a pinwheel.

“But I can,” Lasciel said quietly. I looked up to find her standing on the opposite side of the table from me. “I witnessed the birth of time itself. I watched the mortal coil spring forth from perfect darkness. I watched the stars form, watched this world coalesce, watched as life was breathed into it and as your kind rose to rule it.” She put both hands on the table and leaned toward me, her blue eyes cold and hard. “Thus far, I have behaved as a guest ought. But do not mistake propriety for weakness, mortal. I beg you not to oblige me to take further action.”

I narrowed my eyes and reached for my Sight.

Before I could use it, my left hand exploded into flame.

Pain, pain, PAIN. Fire, scorching, parboiling my hand as I tried to hold it back with my shield bracelet. The memory of my injury in that vampire-haunted basement came rushing back to me in THX, and my nerve endings were listening.

I fought down a scream, breathing, my teeth snapping together so suddenly and sharply that a fleck of one of my molars chipped away.

It was an illusion, I told myself. A memory. It's a ghost, nothing more. It cannot harm you if you do not allow it to do so. I pushed hard against that memory, turning the focus of my will against it.

I felt the illusion-memory wobble, and then the pain was gone, the fire out. My body pumped endorphins into my bloodstream a heartbeat later, and I drifted on them as my focus started to collapse. I leaned hard against the table, my left hand held close to my chest in pure reflex, my right supporting my weight. I turned my attention to the envelopes and forced my will against them until the illusions grew translucent. I picked up the real envelope.

Lasciel regarded me steadily, her beautiful face unyielding, determined.

"Sooner or later I'll push through anything you throw," I panted. "You know that."

"Yes," she said. "But you will not be able to focus on the divination until you are quit of me. I may force you to exhaust yourself resisting me, in which case you will not attempt the divination. Even if I only delay you until dawn, there will be no need for you to attempt it." She lifted her chin. "Whatever happens, the divination will not be successful."

I let out a low chuckle, which made Lasciel frown at me. "You missed it," I said.

"Missed what?"

"The loophole. I can kill myself trying it while you rock the boat. And after all, this entire exercise is nothing more than a suicide attempt in any case. Why not go through with it?"

Her jaw clenched. "You would murder yourself rather than yield to reason?"

"More manslaughter than murder, I'd say."

"You're mad," the fallen angel said.

“Get me some Alka-Seltzer and I’ll foam at the mouth, too.” This time I hit Lasciel with the hard look. “There’s a child out there who needs me. I’d rather die than let her down. I’m doing the spell, period. So fuck off.”

She shook her head in frustration and looked away, frowning. “You are quite likely to die.”

“Broken record much?” I asked. I got out the lock of baby-fine hair, set my knife down on the table, and lit the ceremonial candles there. The fallen angel was correct, dammit. The fear stirred dangerously inside me, and my fingers shook hard enough to break the first kitchen match instead of kindling it to life.

“If you must do this,” Lasciel said, “at least attempt to survive it. Let me help you.”

“You can help me by shutting the hell up and going away,” I told her. “Hellfire isn’t going to be any use to me here.”

“Perhaps not,” Lasciel said. “But there is another way.”

There was a shimmer of light in the corner of my eye, and I turned to see a slowly pulsing silver glow upon the floor in the middle of my summoning circle. Two feet beneath it lay the Blackened Denarius where the rest of Lasciel was imprisoned.

“Take up the coin,” she urged me. “I can at least protect you from a backlash. I beg you not to throw your life away.”

I bit my lip.

I didn’t want to die, dammit. And the thought of failing to save Molly was almost worse than death. The holder of one of the thirty ancient silver coins had access to tremendous power. With that kind of boost, I could probably pull the spell off, and even if it went south I could survive it under Lasciel’s protection. Somehow, I knew that if I chose to do it I could get the coin out from under the concrete in only a moment, too.

I stared at the silver glow for a moment.

Then I rolled my eyes and said, “Are you still here?”

Lasciel’s face smoothed into an emotionless mask, but there was a subtle, ugly tone of threat in her voice. “You are much easier to talk to when you are asleep, my host.”

And she was gone.

Fear rattled around inside me. I tried to calm it, but I couldn’t regain my earlier detachment—not until I thought of young Daniel, mangled beneath

my wizard Sight, wounded defending his family from something I had sent after them.

I thought of Molly's brothers and sisters. I thought of her mother, her father. I thought of the laughter, the sheer, joyous, rowdy *life* of Michael's family.

Then I pinked my fingertip with my ritual knife, touched the lock of baby hair to it, and laid it down within Little Chicago. I used a second drop of blood and an effort of will to touch the circle on the tabletop, closing it up and beginning the spell. I closed my eyes, focusing, murmuring a stream of faux Latin as I reached out to the model and brought it to life.

My senses blurred, and suddenly I was standing on the tabletop, at the model of my own boardinghouse. I thought the silver-colored model had grown to life size at first, then realized that the inverse was more accurate. I had shrunk to scale with Little Chicago, my awareness now within the spell rather than in my own body, which stood over the table like Godzilla, murmuring the words of the spell.

I closed my eyes and thought of Molly, my blood touched upon her lock of hair, and to my utter surprise I shot off down the street with no more effort than it took to peddle a bicycle. The streets beneath me and the buildings around me glowed with white energy, the whole of the place humming like high-power tension lines.

Stars and stones, Little Chicago worked. It worked *well*. A surge of jubilation went through me, and my speed increased in proportion. I flashed through the streets, seeing faint images of people, like ghosts, the unsteady reflections of those now moving through the real Chicago around me. But then the spell wavered, and I found myself moving in a circle like a baffled hound trying to pick up a scent trail.

It didn't work.

I made an effort and stood back in my own body, staring down at Little Chicago, badly fatigued.

Exhausted, I reached for my backpack, sat down, and fumbled Bob into my lap.

His eyes lit up at once and he said, "Don't get me wrong, big guy, I like you. But not that way."

"Shut up," I growled at him. "Just tried to use Little Chicago to find Molly's trail. It fizzled."

Bob blinked. "It worked? The model actually worked? It didn't explode?"

"Obviously," I said. "It worked fine. But I used a simple tracking spell, and it couldn't pick up her trail. So what's wrong with the damned thing?"

"Put me on the table," Bob said.

I reached up and did so. He was quiet for a minute before he said, "It's fine, Harry. I mean, it's working just fine."

"Like hell," I growled. "I've done that tracking spell hundreds of times. It must be the model."

"I'm telling you, it's perfect," Bob said. "I'm looking at the darn thing. If it wasn't your spell, and it wasn't the model...Hey, what did you use to focus the tracking spell?"

"Lock of her hair."

"That's baby hair, Harry."

"So?"

Bob let out a disgusted sound. "So it won't work. Harry, babies are like one big enormous blank slate. Molly has changed quite a bit since that lock was taken. She doesn't have much to do with the person it got snipped from. Naturally the spell couldn't track her."

"Dammit!" I snarled. I hadn't thought of that, but it made sense. I hadn't ever used a lock of baby hair in the spell before, except once, to find a baby.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit."

A tiny mistake.

I was only human.

And I had failed Molly.

Chapter Thirty-four

I turned away from the table and hauled myself laboriously up the ladder to my living room.

Charity sat on the edge of the couch with her head bowed, her lips moving. As I emerged, she stood up and faced me, tension quivering through her. Thomas, who had a kettle on my little wood-burning stove, glanced over his shoulder.

I shook my head at them.

Charity's face went white and she slowly sat down again.

I went to the kitchen, found my bottle of aspirin, and chewed up three of them, grimacing at the taste. Then I drank a glass of water. "You make those calls?" I asked Thomas.

"Yeah," he said. "In fact, Murphy should be here in a minute."

I nodded at him and walked over to settle into one of the easy chairs by the fireplace with my glass of water, and told Charity, "I thought I could find her. I'm sorry. I..." I shook my head and trailed off into silence.

"Thank you for trying, Mister Dresden," she said quietly. She didn't look up.

"It was the baby hair," I said to Charity. "It didn't work. Hair was too old. I couldn't..." I sighed. "Just too tired to think straight, maybe," I said. "I'm sorry."

Charity looked up at me. I expected fear, anger, maybe a little bit of contempt in her features. But none of that was there. There was instead something that I'd seen in Michael when the situation was really, really bad. It was a kind of quiet calm, a surety totally at odds with the situation, and I could not fathom its source or substance.

"We will find her," she told me quietly. "We'll bring her home." Her voice held the solid confidence of someone stating a fact as simple and obvious as two plus two is four.

I didn't quite break out into a bitter laugh. I was too tired to do that. But I shook my head and stared at the empty fireplace.

"Mister Dresden," she said quietly. "I don't pretend to know as much about magic as you do. I'm quite certain you have a great deal of power."

“Just not enough,” I said. “Not enough to do any good.”

In the corner of my eye, I saw Charity actually smile. “It’s difficult for you to realize that you are, at times, as helpless as the rest of us.”

She was probably right, but I didn’t say as much out loud. “I made a mistake, and Molly might be hurt because of it. I don’t know how to live with that.”

“You’re only human,” she said, and there was a trace of pensive reflection in her voice. “For all of your power.”

“That answer isn’t good enough,” I said quietly. I glanced at her, to find her watching me, her dark eyes intent. “Not good enough for Molly.”

“Have you done all that you can to help her?” Charity asked me.

I racked my brain for a useless moment and then said, “Yeah.”

She spread her hands. “Then I can hardly ask you for more.”

I blinked at her. “What?”

She smiled again. “Yes. It surprises me to hear myself say it, as well. I have not been tolerant of you. I have not been pleasant to you.”

I waved a tired hand. “Yeah. But I get why not.”

“I realize that now,” she said. “You saw. But it took all of this to make me see it.”

“See what?”

“That much of the anger I’ve directed at you was not rightfully yours. I was afraid. I let my fear become something that controlled me. That made me harm others. You.” She bowed her head. “And I let it worsen matters with Molly. I feared for her safety so much that I went to war with her. I drove her toward what I most wished her to avoid. All because of my fear. I have been afraid, and I am ashamed.”

“Everyone gets scared sometimes,” I said.

“But I allowed it to rule me. I should have been stronger than that, Mister Dresden. Wiser than that. We all should be. God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of love, of power, and of self-control.”

I absorbed that for a moment. Then I asked, “Are you apologizing to me?”

She arched an eyebrow and then said, her tone wry, “I am not yet that wise.”

That actually did pull a quiet laugh from me.

“Mister Dresden,” she said. “We’ve done all that we can do. Now we pray. We have faith.”

“Faith?” I asked.

She regarded me with calm, confident eyes. “That a hand mightier than yours or mine will shield my daughter. That we will be shown a way. That He will not leave his faithful when they are in need.”

“I’m not all that faithful,” I said.

She smiled again, tired but unwavering. “I have enough for both of us.” She met my eyes steadily and said, “There are other powers than your magic, or that of the dark spirits that oppose us. We are not alone in this fight, Mister Dresden. We need not be afraid.”

I averted my eyes before a soulgaze could get going. And before she could see them tear up. Charity, regardless of how she’d treated me in the past, had been there when the chips were down. She’d cared for me when I’d been injured. She’d supported me when she didn’t have to do so. As abrasive, accusatory, and harsh as she could be, I had never for an instant doubted her love for her husband, for her children, or the sincerity of her faith. I’d never liked her too much—but I had always respected her.

Now more than ever.

I just hoped she was right, when she said we weren’t in this alone. I wasn’t sure I really believed that, deep down. Don’t get me wrong; I’ve got nothing against God, except for maybe wishing He was a little less ambiguous and had better taste in hired help. People like Michael and Charity and, to a lesser extent, Murphy, had made me take some kind of faith under consideration, now and again. But I wasn’t the sort of guy who did well when it came to matters of belief. And I wasn’t the sort of guy who I thought God would really want hanging around his house or his people.

Hell. There was a fallen angel in my brain. I counted myself lucky that I hadn’t met Michael or one of the other Knights from the business end of one of the Swords.

I looked at the gift popcorn tin in the corner by the door, where my staff and rod were settled, along with my practice fighting staff, an uncarved double of my wizardly tool, my sword cane, an umbrella, and the wooden cane sheath of *Fidelacchius*, one of the three swords borne by Michael and his brothers in arms.

The sword’s last wielder had told me that I was to keep it and pass it on to the next Knight. He said I would know who, and when. And then the sword sat there in my popcorn tin for years. When my house had been invaded by bad guys, they’d overlooked it. Thomas, who had lived with me

for almost two years, had never touched it or commented on it. I wasn't sure that he'd ever noticed it, either. It just sat there, waiting.

I glanced at the sword, and then up at the roof. If God wanted to throw a little help our way, now would be a good time to get that foreordained knowledge of who to give the sword to, at least. Not that it would do us all that much good, I supposed. With or without *Fidelacchius*, we had a fair amount of power of the ass-kicking variety. What we needed was knowledge. Without knowledge, all the ass kicking in the world wouldn't help.

I watched the sword for a minute, just in case.

No light show. No sound effects. Not even a burst of vague intuition. I guess that wasn't the kind of help Heaven was dishing out at the moment.

I settled back in my chair. Charity had returned to her quiet prayers. I tried to think thoughts that wouldn't clash, and hoped that God wouldn't hold it against Molly that I was on her side.

I glanced back over my shoulder. Thomas had listened to the whole thing with an almost supernatural quality of noninvolvement. He was watching Charity with troubled eyes. He traded a glance with me that seemed to mirror most of what I was feeling. Then he brought everyone a cup of tea, and faded immediately back to the kitchen alcove again while Charity prayed.

Maybe ten minutes later, Murphy knocked at the door and then opened it. Besides Thomas, she was the only person I'd entrusted with an amulet that would let her through my wards without harm. She wore one of her usual work outfits: black jacket, white shirt, dark pants, comfortable shoes. Grey predawn light backlit her. She took a look around the place, frowning, before she shut the door. "What's happened?"

I brought her up to speed, finishing with my failure to locate the girl's trail.

"So you're trying to find Molly?" Murphy asked. "With a spell?"

"Yeah," I said.

"I thought that was pretty routine for you," Murphy said. "I mean, I can think of four or five times at least you've done that."

I shook my head. "That's tracking down where something *is*. I'm looking for where Molly's *been*. It's a different bag of snakes."

"Why?" Murphy asked. "Why not go straight to her?"

“Because the fetches have taken her back home with them,” I said. “She’s in the Nevernever. I can’t zero in on her there. The best I can do is to try to find where they crossed over, follow them across, and use a regular tracking spell once I’m through.”

“Oh.” She frowned and walked over to me. “And for that you need her hair?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Which we don’t have. So we’re stuck.”

She chewed on her lip. “Couldn’t you use something else?”

“Nail clippings,” I said. “Or blood, if it was fresh enough.”

“Uh-huh,” Murphy said. She nodded at Charity. “What about her blood?”

“What?” I said.

“She’s the girl’s mother,” Murphy said. “Blood of her blood. Wouldn’t that work?”

“No,” I said.

“Oh,” Murphy said. “Why not?”

“Because...” I frowned. “Uh...” I looked up at Charity for a moment. Actually, there was a magical connection between parents and children. A strong one. My mother had worked a spell linked to Thomas and me that would confirm to us that we were brothers. The connection had been established, even though she had been the only common parent between us. The blood connection was the deepest known to magic. “It might work,” I said quietly. I thought about it some more and breathed, “Stars and stones, not just work. Actually, for this spell, it might work *better*.”

Charity said nothing, but her eyes glowed with that steady, unmovable strength. I thought to myself, *That’s what faith looks like*.

I nodded my head to her in a bow of acknowledgment.

Then I turned to Murphy and gave her a jubilant kiss on the mouth.

Murphy blinked in total surprise.

“Yes!” I whooped, laughing. “Murphy, you rock! Go team Dresden!”

“Hey, I’m the one who rocks,” she said. “Go team Murphy.”

Thomas snorted. Even Charity had a small smile, though her eyes were closed and her head was bowed again, murmuring thanks, presumably to the Almighty.

Murphy had asked the exact question I’d needed to hear to tip me off to the answer. Help from above? I was not above taking help from on high, and given whose child was in danger it was entirely possible that divine intervention was precisely what had happened. I touched the brim of my

mental hat and nodded my gratitude vaguely heavenward, and then turned to hurry back to the lab. “Charity, I presume you’re willing to donate for the cause?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Then we’re in business. Get ready to move, people. This will only take me a minute.”

I stopped and put a hand on Charity’s shoulder. “And then we’re going to get your daughter back.”

“Yes,” she murmured, looking up at me with fire in her eyes. “Yes, we are.”

This time, the spell worked. I should have known where the fetches had found the swiftest passage from their realm to Chicago. It was one of those things that, in retrospect, was obvious.

Charity’s minivan pulled into the little parking lot behind Clark Pell’s rundown old movie theater. It was out of view of the street. The sun had risen on our way there, though heavy cloud cover and grumbling thunder promised unusually bad weather for so early in the day. That shouldn’t have surprised me either. When the Queens of Faerie were moving around backstage, the weather quite often seemed to reflect their presence.

Murphy pulled her car in right behind the minivan and parked beside it.

“All right Murph, Thomas,” I said, getting out of the van. “Faerie Fighting 101.”

“I know, Harry,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, but I’m going to go over it anyway, so listen up. We’re heading into the Nevernever. We’ve got some wicked faeries to handle, which means we have to be prepared for illusions.” I rummaged in my backpack and came out with a small jar. “This is an ointment that should let you see through most of their bullshit.” I went to Thomas and slapped some on him, then did Murphy’s eyes, and then did my own. The ointment was my own mixture, based on the one the Gatekeeper used. Mine smelled better, but stained the skin it touched with a heavy brown-black tone. I started to put the jar away. “After we—”

Charity calmly took the jar from my hands, opened it, and put ointment on her own eyes.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“I’m preparing to take back my daughter,” she said.

“You aren’t going with us,” I told her.

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not. Charity, this is seriously dangerous. We can’t afford to babysit you.”

Charity put the lid back on the jar and dropped it into my backpack. Then she opened the sliding door on the minivan and drew out a pair of heavy-duty plastic storage bins. She opened the first, and calmly peeled out of her pullover jersey.

I noted a couple of things. First, that Charity had won some kind of chromosomal lottery when it came to the body department. She wore a sports bra beneath the sweater, and she looked like she could have modeled it if she cared to do so. Molly had definitely gotten her looks from her mother.

The second thing I noticed was Charity’s arms. She had broad shoulders, for a woman, but her arms were heavy with muscle and toned. Her forearms, especially, looked lean and hard, muscles easily seen shifting beneath tight skin. I traded a glance with Murphy, who looked impressed. I just watched Charity for a minute, frowning.

Charity took an arming jacket from the first tub. It wasn’t some beat-up old relic, either. It was a neat, quilted garment, heavy black cotton over the quilting, which was backed by what looked a lot like Kevlar ballistic fabric. She pulled it on, belted it into place, and then withdrew an honest-to-God coat of mail from the tub. She slipped into it and fastened half a dozen clasps with the swift assurance of long practice. A heavy sword belt came next, securing the mail coat. Then she pulled on a tight-fitting cap made in the same manner as the jacket, tucking her braided hair up into it, and then slipped a ridged steel helmet onto her head.

She opened the second tub and drew out a straight sword with a cruciform hilt. The weapon was only slightly more slender and shorter than Michael’s blessed blade, but after she inspected the blade for notches or rust, she flicked it around a few times as lightly as she would a rolled-up newspaper, then slid the weapon into the sheath on the sword belt. She tucked a pair of heavy chain gloves through the belt. Finally, she took a hammer from the big tub. It had a steel-bound handle about four feet long, and mounted a head almost as large as a sledgehammer’s, backed by a wicked-looking spike.

She put the hammer over her shoulder, balancing its weight with one arm, and turned to me. She looked ferocious, so armed and armored, and the heavy black stain around her eyes didn't do anything to soften the image. Ferocious, hell. She looked competent—and dangerous.

Everyone just stared at her.

She arched a golden eyebrow. "I make all of my husband's armor," she said calmly, "as well as his spare weaponry. By hand."

"Uh," I said. No wonder she was buff. "You know how to fight, too?"

She looked at me as though I was a dim-witted child. "My husband didn't become a master swordsman by osmosis. He works hard at it. Who did you suppose he's practiced against for the last twenty years?" Her eyes smoldered again, a direct challenge to me. "These creatures have taken my Molly. And I *will not* remain here while she is in danger."

"Ma'am," Murphy said quietly. "Practice is very different from the real thing."

Charity nodded. "This won't be my first fight."

Murphy frowned for a moment, and then turned a troubled glance to me. I glanced at Thomas, who was facing away, a little apart from the rest of us, staying out of the decision-making process.

Charity stood there with that warhammer over one shoulder, her weight planted, her eyes determined.

"Hell's bells," I sighed. "Okay, John Henry, you're on the team." I waved a hand and went back to the briefing. "Faeries hate and fear the touch of iron, and that includes steel. It burns them and neutralizes their magic."

"There are extra weapons in the tub, as well as additional coats of mail," Charity offered. "Though they might not fit you terribly well, Lieutenant Murphy."

Charity had thought ahead. I was glad one of us had. "Mail coat is just the thing for discouraging nasty faerie beasties with claws."

Murphy looked skeptical. "I don't want to break up the Battle of Hastings dress theme, Harry, but I find guns generally more useful than swords. Are you serious about this?"

"You might not be able to rely on your guns," I told her. "Reality doesn't work the same way in the Nevernever, and it doesn't always warn you when it's changing the rules. It's common to find areas of Faerie where gunpowder is noncombustible."

"You're kidding," she said.

“Nope. Get some steel on you. There’s not a thing the faeries can do about that. It’s the biggest edge mortals have on them.”

“The only edge,” Charity corrected. She passed me a sleeveless mail shirt, probably the only one that would fit me. I dumped my leather duster, armored myself, and then put the duster back on over the mail. Murphy shook her head, then she and Thomas collected mail and weaponry of their own.

“Couple more things,” I said. “Once we’re inside, don’t eat or drink anything. Don’t accept any gifts, or any offers from a faerie interested in making a deal. You don’t want to wind up owing favors to one of the Sidhe, believe you me.” I frowned, thinking. Then I took a deep breath and said, “One thing more. Each of us must do everything possible to control our fear.”

Murphy frowned at me. “What do you mean?”

“We can’t afford to carry in too much fear with us. The fetches feed on it. It makes them stronger. If we go in there without keeping our fear under control, they’ll sense a meal coming. We’re all afraid, but we can’t let it control our thoughts, actions, or decisions. Try to keep your breathing steady and remain as calm as you can.”

Murphy nodded, frowning faintly.

“All right, then. Everyone hat up and sing out when you’re good to go.”

I watched as Murphy got her gear into place. Charity helped her secure the armor. Her mail was a short-sleeved shirt, maybe one of Charity’s spare suits. She’d compensated for the oversize armor by belting it in tight, but the short sleeves fell to her elbows, and the hem reached most of the way to her knees. Murphy looked like a kid dressing up in an adult’s clothes.

Her expression grew calm and distant as she worked, the way it did when she was focused on shooting, or in the middle of one of her five trillion and three formal katas. I closed my eyes and tentatively pushed my magical senses toward her. I could feel the energy in her, the life, pulsing and steady. There were tremors in it, here and there, but there was no screaming beacon of violent terror that would trumpet our approach to the bad guys.

Not that I thought there would be. What she lacked in height, she more than made up for in guts. On the other hand, Murphy had never been in the Nevernever, and even though Faerie was as normal a place as you can find there, it could get pretty weird. Despite training, discipline, and determination, novice deepwater divers can never be sure that they will

remain free from the onset of the condition called “pressure sickness.” The Nevernever was much the same. You can’t tell how someone is going to react the first time they fall down the rabbit hole.

Thomas, being Thomas, made the mail into a fashion statement. He wore black clothing, black combat boots, and the arming jacket and mail somehow managed to go with the rest of his wardrobe. He had his saber on his belt on his left side, carried the shotgun in his right hand, and made the whole ensemble look like an upper-class version of *The Road Warrior*.

I checked on Thomas with my wizard’s senses, too. His presence had never been fully human, but like the other members of the White Court, the vampiric aspects of him were not obvious to casual observation, not even to wizards. There was something feline about his aura, the same quality I would expect in a hungry leopard waiting patiently for the next meal to approach; enormous power held in perfect balance. There was a darker portion of him, too, the part I’d always associated with the demonic presence that made him a vampire, a black and bitter well of energy, equal parts lust, hunger, and self-loathing. Thomas was no fool—he was certainly afraid. But the fear couldn’t be sensed under that still, black surface.

Charity, after she finished helping Murphy, stepped back from her and went to her knees in the parking lot. She folded her hands in her lap, bowed her head, and continued praying. Around her I felt a kind of ambient warmth, as though she knelt in her own personal sunbeam, the same kind of energy that had always characterized her husband’s presence. Faith, I suppose. She was afraid, too, but it wasn’t the primitive survival fear the fetches required. Her fear was for her daughter; for her safety, her future, her happiness. And as I watched her, I saw her lips form my name, then Thomas’s, then Murphy’s.

Charity was more afraid for us than herself.

Right there, I promised myself that I would get her back home with her daughter, back to her family and her husband, safe and sound and whole. I would not, by God, hesitate for a heartbeat to do whatever was necessary to make my friend’s family whole again.

I checked myself out, taking inventory. Leather duster, ill-fitting mail shirt, staff, and blasting rod, check. Shield bracelet and amulet, check. My abused left hand ached a little, and what I could feel of it felt stiff—but I could move my fingers. My head hurt. My limbs felt a little bit shaky with

fatigue. I had to hope that adrenaline would kick in and make that problem go away when it counted.

“Everyone good to go?” I asked.

Murphy nodded. Thomas drawled, “Yep.”

Charity rose and said, “Ready.”

“Let me sweep the outside of the building first,” I said. “This is their doorway home. It’s possible that they’ve got the place booby-trapped, or that they’ve set up wards. Once I clear it, we’ll go in.”

I trudged off to walk a slow circle around Pell’s theater. I let my fingertips drag along the side of the building, closed my eyes most of the way, and extended my wizard’s senses into the structure. It wasn’t a quick process, but I tried not to dawdle, either. As I walked, I sensed a kind of trapped, suffocated energy bouncing around inside the building—leakage from the Nevernever probably, from when the fetches took Molly across. But several times I also felt tiny, malevolent surges of energy, too random and mobile to be spells or wards. Their presence was disturbingly similar to that of the fetch I’d destroyed in the hotel.

I came back to where I’d begun about ten minutes later.

“Anything?” Thomas asked.

“No wards. No mystic land mines,” I told him. “But I think there’s something in there.”

“Like what?”

“Like fetches,” I said. “Smaller than the big ones we’re after, and probably set to guard the doorway between here and the Nevernever.”

“They’ll try to ambush us when we go in,” Murphy said.

“Probably,” I said. “But if we know about it, we can turn it against them. When they come, hit them fast and hard, even if it seems like overkill. We can’t afford any injuries.”

Murphy nodded.

“What are we waiting for?” Thomas asked.

“More help,” I replied.

“Why?”

“Because I’m not strong enough to open a stable passage to deep Faerie,” I said. “Even if I wasn’t tired, and I managed to get it open, I doubt it would stay that way for more than a few seconds.”

“Which would be bad?” Murphy asked.

“Yeah.”

“What would happen?” Charity asked quietly.

“We’d die,” I said. “We’d be trapped in deep Faerie, near the strongholds of all kinds of trouble, with no way to escape but to try to find our way to the portions of Faerie that are near Earth. The locals would eat us and spit out the bones before we got anywhere close to escape.”

Thomas rolled his eyes and said, “This isn’t exactly helping me keep my mind off my fear, man.”

“Shut up,” I told him. “Or I’ll move to my second initiative and start telling you knock-knock jokes.”

“Harry,” Murphy said, “if you knew you couldn’t open the door long enough to let us get the girl, how did you plan to manage it?”

“I know someone who can help. Only she’s totally unable to help me.”

Murphy scowled at me, then said, “You’re enjoying this. You just love to dance around questions and spring surprises when you know something the rest of us don’t.”

“It’s like heroin for wizards,” I confirmed.

An engine throbbed nearby, and tires made a susurrus on asphalt. A motorcycle prowled around the theater to its rear parking lot, bearing two helmeted riders. The rearmost rider swung down from the bike, a shapely woman in leather pants and a denim jacket. She reached up, took off her green helmet, and shook out her snow-white hair. It fell at once into a silken sheet without the aid of a brush or a comb. The Summer Lady, Lily, paused to give me a slight bow, and she smiled at me, her green eyes particularly luminous.

The bike’s driver proved to be Fix. The Summer Knight wore close-fitting black pants and a billowing shirt of green silk. He bore a rapier with a sturdy guard on his hip, and the leather that wrapped its handle had worn smooth and shiny. Fix put both helmets on a rack on the motorcycle, nodded at us, and said, “Good morning.”

I made introductions, though I went into few details beyond names and titles. When that was done, I told Lily, “Thank you for coming.”

She shook her head. “I am yet in your debt. It was the least I could do. Though I feel I must warn you that I may not be able to give you the help that you require.”

Meaning Titania’s compulsion to prevent Lily from helping me was still in force. But I’d thought of a way to get around that.

“I know you can’t help me,” I said. “But I wish to tell you that the onus of your debt to me has been passed to another in good faith. I must redress a wrong I have done to the girl named Molly Carpenter. To do so, I offer her mother your debt to me as payment.”

Fix barked out a satisfied laugh. “Hah!”

Lily’s mouth spread into a delighted smile. “Well done, wizard,” she murmured. Then she turned to Charity and asked, “Do you accept the wizard’s offer of payment, Lady?”

Charity looked a little lost, and she glanced at me. I nodded my head at her.

“Y-yes,” she said. “Yes.”

“So mote it be,” Lily said, bowing her head to Charity. “Then I owe you a debt, Lady. What may I do to repay it?”

Charity glanced at me again. I nodded and said, “Just tell her.”

Charity turned back to the Summer Lady. “Help us retrieve my daughter, Molly,” she said. “She is a prisoner of the fetches of the Winter Court.”

“I will be more than happy to do all in my power to aid you,” Lily said.

Charity closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

“It will not be as much help as you might desire,” Lily told her, her voice serious. “I dare not directly strike at the servants of Winter acting in lawful obligation to their Queen, except in self-defense. Were I to attack, the consequences could be grave, and retaliation immediate.”

“Then what can you do?” Charity asked.

Lily opened her mouth to answer, but then said, “The wizard seems to have something in mind.”

“Yep,” I said. “I was just coming to that.”

Lily smiled at me and bowed her head, gesturing for me to continue.

“This is where they took the girl across,” I told Lily. “Must be why they attacked Pell first—to make sure the building was shut down and locked up, so that they would have an immediate passage back, if they needed it. I’m also fairly sure they left some guardians behind.”

Lily frowned at me and walked over to the building. She touched it with her fingers, and her eyes closed. It took her less than a tenth of the time it had me, and she never moved from the spot. “Indeed,” she said. “Three lesser fetches at least. They cannot sense us yet, but they will know when anyone enters, and attack.”

"I'm counting on it," I said. "I'm going to go in first and let them see me."

Fix lifted his eyebrows. "At which point they tear you to bits? This is a craftier plan than I had anticipated."

I flashed him a grin. "Wouldn't want you to feel left out, Fix. I want Lily to hold a veil over everyone else. Once the fetches show up to rip off my face, Lily drops the veil, and the rest of you drop them."

"Yeah, that's a much better plan," Fix drawled, his fingertips tracing over the hilt of his sword. "And I *can* cut up vassals of Winter, so long as it is no inconvenience to you, of course, m'lady."

Lily shook her head. "Not at all, sir Knight. And I will be glad to veil you and your allies, Lady Charity."

Charity paused and said, "Wait a minute. Do I understand this situation correctly? You are not allowed to assist Harry, but because Harry has... what? Passed his debt to me?"

"Banks buy and sell mortgages all the time," I said.

Charity arched a brow. "And because he's given me your debt to him, you're doing whatever you can to help?"

Fix and Lily exchanged a helpless glance.

"They're also under a compulsion that prevents them from directly discussing it with anyone," I filled in. "But you've got the basics right, Charity."

Charity shook her head. "Aren't they going to be in trouble for this? Won't...who commands her?"

"Titania," I said.

Charity blinked at me, and I could tell she'd heard the name before. "The...the Faerie Queen?"

"One of them," I said. "Yeah."

She shook her head. "I don't...enough people are already in danger."

"Don't worry about us, ma'am," Fix assured her, and winked. "Titania has already laid down the law. We've obeyed it. Not our fault if what she decreed was not what she wanted."

"Translation," I said. "We got around her fair and square. She won't like it, but she'll accept it."

"Oh yeah," Thomas muttered under his breath. "This isn't coming back to bite anyone in the ass later."

“Ixnay,” I growled at him, then turned and walked toward the theater’s rear entrance. I took up my staff in a firm grip and put its tip against the chains holding the door shut. I took a moment to slow my breathing and focus my thoughts. This wasn’t a gross-power exercise. I wouldn’t have to put nearly as much oomph into shattering the chain if I kept it small, precise, focused. Blasting a door down was a relatively simple exercise for me. What I wanted here was to use a minimum of power to snap a single link in the chain.

I brought my thoughts to a pinpoint focus and muttered, “*Forzare.*”

Power lashed through the length of the staff, and there was a hiss and a sharp crack nearly as loud as a gunshot. The chain jumped. I lowered my staff, to find one single link split into two pieces, each broken end glowing with heat. I nudged the heated links to the ground with the tip of my staff, faintly surprised and pleased with how little relative effort it had taken.

I reached out and tried the doorknob.

Locked.

“Hey, Murph,” I said. “Look at that zeppelin.”

I heard her sigh and turn around. I popped a couple of stiff metal tools out of my duster’s pocket and started finagling the lock with them. My left hand wasn’t much help, but it was at least able to hold the tool steady while my right did most of the work.

“Hey,” Thomas said. “When did you get those?”

“Butters says it’s good for my hand to do physical therapy involving the use of manual dexterity.”

Thomas snorted. “So you started learning to pick locks? I thought you were playing guitar.”

“This is simpler,” I said. “And it doesn’t make dogs start howling.”

“I might have killed you if I’d heard ‘House of the Rising Sun’ one more time,” Thomas agreed. “Where’d you get the picks?”

I glanced over my shoulder at Murphy and said, “Little bird.”

“One of these days, Dresden,” Murphy said, still stubbornly faced away.

I got the tumblers lined up and twisted with slow, steady pressure. The dead bolt slid to, and I pulled the door slightly ajar. I rose, put the tools away, and took up my staff again, ready for instant trouble. Nothing happened for a moment. I listened at the door for half a minute, but heard not a sound.

“All right,” I said. “Here we go. Everyone ready to—”

I glanced over my shoulder and found the parking lot entirely empty except for me.

“Wow,” I said. “Good veil, Lily.” Then I turned back around just as if my nerves weren’t jangling like guitar strings and said, “Ding, ding. Round one.”

Chapter Thirty-five

I kicked the door open, staff held ready to fight, and shouted, “And I’m all outta bubble gum!”

The pale grey light of the overcast sunrise coming in over the lake showed me a service corridor, the kind with walls that have marks and writing all over them, floors with the paint chipped off all down the middle of the walkway, and lots of stuff stacked up here and there. At the far end of the hallway was a door, propped open with a rubber wedge. A worn sign on the door read EMPLOYEES ONLY. A curtained doorway about halfway down the hall opened onto what must have been the concessions counter in the little theater’s lobby.

Silence reigned. Not a single light shone within.

“Guess you had to see that one,” I said to the empty building. “John Carpenter. Rowdy Roddy Piper. Longest fight scene ever. You know?”

Silence.

“Missed that one, huh?” I asked the darkness.

I stood there, hoping the bad guys would make this one easy. If they charged me, I could duck aside and then let my concealed allies take them apart. Instead, as bad guys so often do, they failed to oblige me.

I started to feel a little silly just standing there. If I went ahead, the narrow passage would negate the participation of those now lurking in veiled ambush behind me. But had I really been alone, the hallway would have been as reasonable a fighting position as I could hope to gain—no way for the fetches to encircle me, no way to use their advantage of numbers. Had I really been alone, I would have needed to jump on an opportunity like that. There are stupid faeries, but fetches aren’t among them. If I didn’t behave like a lone wolf come to party, it would tip off the presence of my entourage.

So, like a crazed loner with more death wish than survival instinct, I boldly strode into the building, staff held ready, teeth bared in a fighting grin. The place was dim, and cooler than it should have been, even given the time of day. My breath turned to frost in front of my nose. The movie-theater scent of popcorn had sunk into the very foundations, and was now

as much a part of the building as its walls and floor. My stomach rumbled. Like certain other portions of my anatomy, it had a tendency to become easily sidetracked, and to hell with little details like survival.

The rest of me was nervous. I had seen how fast one of those creatures could move. I could have ducked out of the way if they'd come charging from the far end of the hall at me, but not by much. Maybe two or three steps in, I reached a point where I judged that I wouldn't have time to retreat and let my allies ambush the attacker. For a few seconds, at least, I'd be on my own.

A few seconds are forever in a fight.

I shook out my shield bracelet, willed power into it, and walked with my left hand before me, both providing me some protection against a possible charge and casting low blue light that would let me see as I moved forward. "Do you know what part of a movie this is?" I said to myself as I moved. "This is the part where the old farmer with the torch and the shotgun just can't keep himself from walking forward into the dark cave, even though he damn well knows there's a monster in there." I moved up to the hanging curtain and slid it aside with my staff. Several quick glances out showed me a small and dingy concessions stand to go along with the small and dingy lobby.

Nothing tried to eat my face.

"Oh, come on," I said, louder. "I'm starting to feel a little insulted, here. If you guys keep this up, I'm going to take drastic, clichéd measures. Maybe walk backward through a doorway or something."

My instincts suddenly screamed, and I flung myself through the curtained doorway, getting clear of the hall, as something darted toward me from the hall's far end. I didn't want to catch any bullets or blasts of fire or hurled hammers from my backup.

There was a roar of sound from the hallway—something letting out a ululating howl, a heavy handgun, a roaring shotgun, and the buzzing snap of an arc of electricity. Blinding blue-white light blazed through the curtain as I dove through it—and showed me the fetch that had lurked in ambush on the other side.

It was crouched on top of the glass cabinet atop the concessions stand's popcorn machine, and had taken the form of a creature that could only loosely be called a "cat." It was twice Mister's size, and its moldy black fur stood out in tufts and spikes. Its shoulders were hunched, almost deformed

with muscle, and its muzzle was broad and filled with teeth too heavy to belong to any feline short of a lion. Its eyes gleamed with a sickly, greenish luminescence, and it flashed through the air, claws extended, teeth bared, emitting a mind-splitting howl of rage.

I had no time or space to strike first, and it was a damned good thing I'd prepared my shield ahead of time. I brought it up and into a quarter dome between me and the fetch, blue power hissing.

I should have kept in mind how easily the Scarecrow had shed my magic the night before. The lesser fetch must have had some measure of the same talent, because it changed the tone of its howl in the middle of its leap, impacted my shield, and oozed through it as though the solid barrier was a thick sludge.

There was no space to dodge in and no room to swing my staff, so I dropped it as the fetch's face emerged from my shield and drove my fist into the end of its feline nose. I dropped the shield as I did. With the shield gone, the only force acting on the fetch was the impact of my punch, and the shapeshifter flew backward into the old cash register on the concessions counter. It was made of metal. Blue sparks erupted from the fetch as its flesh hit the iron, along with a yowl of protest, tendrils of smoke, and an acrid odor.

I heard footsteps in the corridor behind me, and then a trio of gunshots.

"Harry!" Murphy called.

"Here!" I shouted. I didn't have time to say anything else. The nightmare cat bounced up from the cash register, recovered its balance, and flung itself at me again, every bit as swiftly as the fetch I'd faced earlier. I ducked and tried to throw myself under the fetch, to get behind it, but my body wasn't operating as swiftly as my mind, and the fetch's claws raked at my eyes.

I threw up an arm, and the fetch slammed into it with a sudden, harsh impact that made my arm go numb from the elbow down. Claws and fangs flashed. The spell-bound leather of my duster held, and the creature's claws didn't penetrate. Except for a shallow cut a random claw accidentally inflicted on my wrist, below the duster's sleeve, I escaped it unharmed. I hit the ground and rolled, throwing my arm out to one side in an effort to slam the fetch onto the floor and knock it loose. The creature was deceptively strong. It braced one rear leg against the counter, claws digging

in, robbing the blow of any real force. It bounced off the floor with rubbery agility, pounced onto my chest, and went for my throat.

I got an arm between the fetch and my neck. It couldn't rip its way through the duster, but it was stronger than it had any right to be. I was lying mostly on my back and had no leverage. It wrenched at my arm, and I knew I only had a second or two before it overpowered me, threw my arm out of its way, and tore my throat out.

I reached down with my other hand and ripped my duster all the way off the front of my body. Cold iron seared the nightmare cat's paws in a hissing fury of sparks and smoke. The fetch let out another shrieking yowl and bounded almost straight up.

Gunshots rang out again as the fetch reached the apogee of its reflexive leap. It twitched and screamed, jerking sharply. As it came back down, it writhed wildly in midair, altering its trajectory, and landed on the floor beside me.

Murphy's combat boot lashed out in a stomping kick that sent the fetch sliding across the floor, and the instant it was clear of me she started shooting again. She put half a dozen shots into the creature, driving it over the floor, howling in pain but thrashing with frenzied strength. The gun went empty. Murphy slammed another clip into the weapon just as the fetch began gathering itself up off the floor. She kept pouring bullets into it as fast as she could accurately shoot, and stepped with deliberate care to one side as she did so.

Thomas came through the curtain with preternatural speed, his face bone white. He seized the stunned fetch by the throat and slammed it overhand into the cash register, again and again, until I heard its spine snap. Then he threw it over the concessions stand into the lobby.

Light flashed. Something that looked like a butterfly sculpted from pure fire shot over my head like a tiny comet. I scrambled to my feet, to see the blazing butterfly hit the fetch square in the chest. The thing screamed again, front legs thrashing, rear legs entirely limp, as fire exploded over its flesh, burned a hole in its chest, and then abruptly consumed it whole.

I leaned on the counter and panted for a second, then looked around to see the curtain slide aside of its own accord as Lily stepped through it. At that moment, the Summer Lady did not look sweet or caring. Her lovely face held an implacable, restrained anger, and half a dozen of the fiery

butterflies fluttered around her. She stared at the dying fetch until the fire winked out, leaving nothing, not even residual ectoplasm, behind.

Murphy reloaded and came over to me, though her eyes were still scanning for danger. “You’re bleeding. You all right?”

I checked. Blood from the injury on my wrist had trickled down over my palm and fingers. I pushed back my sleeve to get a look at the wound. The cut ran parallel to my forearm. It wasn’t long, but was deeper than I’d thought. And it had missed opening up the veins in my wrist by maybe half an inch.

My belly went cold and I swallowed. “Simple cut,” I told Murphy. “Not too bad.”

“Let me see,” Thomas said. He examined the injury and said, “Could have been worse. You’ll need a stitch or three, Harry.”

“No time,” I told him. “Help me find something to wrap it up good and tight.”

Thomas looked around the concessions area and suggested, “Silly straws?”

I heard an expressive sigh. Charity appeared at the curtained doorway, flipped open a leather case on her sword belt, and tossed Thomas a compact medical kit. He caught it, gave her a nod, and went to work on my hand. Charity stepped back into the hallway, her expression alert. Fix glanced in and then went by the curtained doorway, presumably to the other end of the hall.

“What happened?” I asked Murphy.

“One of those things charged down the hall to jump on your back,” she said. “Looked like some kind of mutant baboon. We took it down.”

“*Nature Red*,” Thomas mused. “Remember that movie? The one where the retrovirus gets loose in the zoo and starts mutating the animals? Baboon was from there. That cat thing, too.”

“Huh,” I said. “Yeah.”

“I don’t get it,” Murphy said. “Why do they all look like movie monsters?”

“Fear,” I said. “Those images have been a part of this culture for a while now. Over time, they’ve generated a lot of fear.”

“Come on,” Murphy said. “I saw *Nature Red*. It wasn’t *that* scary.”

“This is a case of quantity over quality,” I said. “Even if it only makes you jump in your chair, there’s a little fear. Multiply that by millions. The

fetches take the form so that they can tap into a portion of that fear in order to create more of it.”

Murphy frowned and shook her head. “Whatever.”

A light appeared in the hallway leading back to the actual theater. In an eyeblink, Murphy and Thomas both had their guns pointed at it and my shield bracelet was dripping heatless blue sparks, ready to spring into place.

“It’s all right,” Lily said, her voice low.

Fix appeared in the doorway at the far end of the lobby, sword in hand. Fire gleamed along the length of the blade as if it had been coated in kerosene and ignited. He looked around, frowning, and said, “It isn’t back this way.”

“What isn’t?” I asked.

“The third,” Lily said. “There will be a third fetch.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because they’re fetches,” Fix answered. “We should check the bathrooms.”

“Not alone,” I said. “Murph, Charity.”

Murphy nodded and slipped around the counter to join Fix. Charity slipped through the curtain and to the lobby in her wake. The three of them moved in cautious silence and entered the restrooms. They returned a moment later. Fix shook his head.

“There,” Thomas said, finishing off the bandage. “Too tight?”

I flexed the fingers of my right hand and stooped to recover my staff. “It’s good.” I squinted around the place. “One room left.”

We all looked at the double doors leading to the actual theater. They were closed. Faint lights flickered, barely noticeable from within the radius of our own illumination.

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” I said, walking around the counter and into the lobby. I headed for the doors and tried to project confidence. “Same plan.”

I paused at the doors while everyone gathered behind me. I looked back to check that they were ready, which is why I was the only one who saw what happened.

The plastic trash can about six inches behind Charity suddenly exploded, the top flipping off, and paper cups and popcorn bags flew everywhere. Something humanoid and no larger than a toddler shot from the trash can. It

had red hair and overalls, and it held a big old kitchen knife in one tiny hand. It hit Charity just above her tailbone, driving her into the ground, and lifted the knife.

My companions had been taken by surprise—just a second or two, but as far as Charity was concerned it might as well have been forever. There was no time for thought. Before I realized what I was doing, I took a pair of long steps, shifting my grip on my staff as I went, and swung it like a golf club at the fetch's head. It impacted with a meaty thunk.

Its head flew off, bounced off of a pillar, and rolled to a stop not far from the rest of the thing. I had only a second to regard the doll's features before it began dissolving into ectoplasm.

Thomas blinked at it and said, "That was Bucky the Murder Doll."

"Kind of a wimp," I said.

Thomas nodded. "Must have been the runt of the litter."

I traded a glance with Murphy. "Personally," I said, "I never understood how anyone could have found that thing frightening to begin with." Then I went to Charity's side and offered her a hand up. She grimaced and took it. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing broken," she replied. She winced and put her hand to her back. "I should have stretched out."

"Next time we'll know better," I said. "Lily? Is that it?"

The Summer Lady's eyes went distant for a moment and then she murmured, "Yes. There are no longer agents of Winter in this place. Come."

She stepped forward and the doors to the theater proper opened of their own accord. We followed. It was your typical movie theater. Not one of the new stadium-seating fancy theaters, but one of the old models with only a slight incline in the floor. Light played over the screen, though the projector was not running. Spectral colors shifted, faded, changed, and melded like the aurora borealis, and I was struck with the sudden intuition that the color and light were somehow being projected from the opposite side of the screen. The air grew even colder as we followed Lily down the aisle.

She stopped in front of the screen, staring blankly at it for a moment, then shuddered. "Dresden," she said quietly. "This crossing leads to Arctis Tor."

My stomach fluttered again. "Oh, crap."

I saw Thomas arch an eyebrow at me out of the corner of my eye.

“Crap?” Murphy asked. “Why? What is that place?”

I took a deep breath. “It’s the heart of Winter. It’s like...” I shook my head. “Think the Tower of London, the Fortress of Solitude, Fort Knox, and Alcatraz all rolled up into one giant ball of fun. It’s Mab’s capital. Her stronghold.” I glanced at Lily. “If what I’ve read about it is correct, that is. I’ve never actually seen the place.”

“Your sources were accurate enough, Harry,” Lily said. Her manner remained remote, strained. “This is going to severely limit what help I can give you.”

“Why?” I asked.

Lily stared intently at me for a second, then said, “My power will react violently to that of Mab. I can open the way to the Arctis Tor, but holding the way open for your return will occupy the whole of my strength. Furthermore, so long as I hold the way open I run the risk of letting creatures from deep Winter run free in Chicago. Which means that Fix must remain here to guard the passage against them. I cannot in good conscience send him with you.”

I scowled at the shifting colors on the screen. “So once we go in, we’re on our own.”

“Yes.”

Super. Without Lily and Fix’s power to counter that of the Winter fae within Arctis Tor, our odds of success would undergo a steep reduction—and I had hoped we would be attacking an independent trio of faeries lairing in a cave or under a bridge or something. I hadn’t figured on storming the Bastille.

I looked up and met Charity’s eyes for a second.

I turned back to the dancing lights on the movie screen and told the others, “Things just got a lot worse. I’m still going. None of you have to come with me. I don’t expect you to—”

Before I finished speaking, Charity, Murphy, and Thomas stepped up to stand beside me.

A bolt of warmth, fierce with joy and pride and gratitude, flashed through me like sudden lightning. I don’t care about whose DNA has recombined with whose. When everything goes to hell, the people who stand by you without flinching—they are your family.

And they were my heroes.

I nodded at Lily. She closed her eyes, and the shimmering colors on the screen grew brighter, more vibrant. The air grew colder.

“All right,” I said quietly. “Each of you get a hand on my shoulder.” I resettled my grip on my wizard’s staff and murmured, “Round two.”

Chapter Thirty-six

Every time I opened a way to the Nevernever, it always looked pretty much the same—an uneven vertical rip in the air that let in the sights and sounds and scents of the world on the other side. The longer I wanted the rift to stay open, the bigger I'd rip the hole. More experienced wizards had made a comment or two over the years to suggest that I still had a lot to learn on the subject.

When Lily opened the way to Arctis Tor, I understood why. Light and color shifted over the screen, their flow quickening, deepening. At first nothing else happened. The movie screen was simply a surface. Then the hairs on the back of my neck rose, and a cold wind wafted into my face, bringing with it the dry, sterile scent of winter in high, barren mountains and the high, lonely cry of some kind of wild beast like nothing in the real world.

Deep blue came to dominate the colors on the screen, and a moment later resolved itself into the shapes of mountains towering beneath the light of an impossibly enormous silver moon. They were bleak and hateful stone peaks, wreathed in mist and wrapped in ice and snow. The wind moaned and blew frozen crystals into our faces, then sank into a temporary lull.

The blowing snow cleared just enough to get me my first look at Arctis Tor.

Mab's stronghold was a fortress of black ice, an enormous, shadowy cube sitting high up the slope of the highest mountain in sight. A single, elegant spire rose above the rest of the structure. Flickers of green and amethyst energy played within the ice of the walls. I couldn't make a good guess at how big the thing was. The walls and battlements were lined with inverted icicles. They made me think of the fanged jaws of a hungry predator. A single gate, small in comparison to the rest of the fortress, stood open.

Hell's bells. How the hell was I supposed to get in there? It was almost a relief when the wind rose again, and blowing snow once more obscured the fortress from view.

It was only then that I realized that the way was open. Lily had brought it forth so smoothly that I hadn't been able to tell when image gave way to reality. By comparison, my own ability to open a way to the Nevernever was about as advanced as the paintings of a particularly gifted gorilla.

I glanced back at Lily. She gave me a small smile and then gestured with one hand. One of the fiery butterflies fluttering around her altered course and soared over to me. "This much I can do for you all," she murmured. "It will lead you through the storm, and ward away the cold until you can return here. Do not tarry, wizard. I do not know how long I will be able to hold the way open for your return."

I nodded. "Thank you, Lily."

This time her smile was warmer, more like that of the girl she had been before becoming the Summer Lady. "Good luck, Harry."

Fix took a deep breath and then hopped up onto the stage floor at the base of the movie screen. He turned to offer me a hand up. I took it, stared at the frozen wasteland for a second, and then stepped directly forward, into what had been the screen.

I found myself standing in knee-deep snow, and the howling winds forced my eyes almost shut. I should have been freezing, but whatever enchantment Lily's blazing butterfly used seemed effective. The air felt almost as warm as that of a ski slope seeing its last day of the season. Thomas, Murphy, and Charity stepped out of a shimmer in the air, and Fix followed them a second later.

"Hey, Fix," I said. I had to raise my voice to be heard over the wind. "I thought you weren't coming."

The Summer Knight shook his head. "I'm not. But it will be easier to stop anything going through from this side," he said. He regarded us and asked lightly, "You bring enough iron, you think?"

"We're about to find out."

"Christ. You're going to piss off Mab something fierce, bringing iron here."

"I was doing that anyway," I assured him.

He nodded, then glanced back at the rift and frowned. "Harry," he said. "There's something you should know before you go in."

I arched an eyebrow and listened.

"We just got word from our observers that there's a battle underway. The Reds found one of the major headquarters of the Venatori Umbrorum."

“Who?” Charity asked.

“Secret organization,” I told her. “Like the Masons, but with machine guns.”

“The Venatori sent out a call for help,” Fix continued. “The Council answered it.”

I chewed my lower lip. “Do you know where?”

“Oregon, couple hours from Seattle,” he said.

“How bad is it?”

“So far it’s too close to call. But it’s not good. The Reds had their sorcerous types mucking around with a lot of the Council’s pathways through the Nevernever. A lot of the Wardens got sidetracked from the battle completely.”

“Dammit,” I muttered. “Isn’t there anything Summer can do to help?”

Fix grimaced and shook his head. “Not with the way Mab’s forces are disposed. If we pull enough of our forces from Summer to help the Council, it will weaken us. Winter will attack.” He stared at the looming fortress, glimpsed in half instants through the gusting snow, and shook his head. “The Council’s mind-set is too defensive, Harry. If they keep sitting tight and reacting to the enemy, instead of making the Reds react to them, they’ll lose this war.”

I grunted. “Clausewiz would agree. But I don’t think the Merlin knows from Clausewitz. And this is a long way from over. Don’t count us out yet.”

“Maybe,” he said, but his voice wasn’t confident. “I wish I could do more, but you’d better get going. I’ll hold the door for you.”

I offered him my hand and he shook it. “Be careful,” I said.

“Good hunting,” he replied.

I glanced at my three companions and called, “Ready?”

They were. We followed the burning butterfly through the snow. Without its protection from the elements, I doubt we would have made it, and I made it a point to remember to wear sufficient cold-weather gear in the event that I somehow survived this ongoing idiocy and was crazy enough to come back a second time. Even with the Summer magic to protect us, it was a pretty good hike over unfriendly terrain. I’d done worse in the past, with both Justin DuMorne and Ebenezar, and there are times when having long legs can be a real advantage on rough terrain. Charity seemed all right, too, but Thomas had never been much of an outdoors-man, and Murphy’s

height put her at a disadvantage that the unaccustomed weight of her armor and cutlery exacerbated.

I traded a glance with Charity. I started giving Thomas a hand on rough portions of our climb. Charity helped Murphy. At first I thought Murphy might take her arm off out of wounded pride, but she grimaced and visibly forced herself to accept the help.

The last two hundred yards or so were completely open, with no trees or undulation of terrain to shield our approach from the walls of the fortress. I lifted a hand to call a halt at the edge of the last hummock of stone that would shelter us from view. Lily's butterfly drifted in erratic circles around my head, snowflakes hissing to steam where they touched it.

I peered over the edge of a frozen boulder at Arctis Tor for a long time, then settled back down again.

"I don't see anyone," I said, trying to keep my voice down.

"Doesn't make any sense," Thomas said. He was panting and shivering a little, despite Lily's warding magic. "I thought this was supposed to be Mab's headquarters. This place looks deserted."

"It makes perfect sense," I said. "Winter's forces are all poised to hit Summer. You don't do that from the heart of your own territory. You gather at strong points near the enemy's border. If we're lucky, maybe there's just a skeleton garrison here."

Murphy peered around the edge of the stones and said, "The gate's open. I don't see any guards." She frowned. "There are...there's *something* on the open ground between here and there. See?"

I leaned next to her and peered. Vague, shadowy shapes stirred in the wind between us and the fortress, insubstantial as any shadow. "Oh," I said. "It's a glamour. Illusion, laid out around the place. Probably a hedge maze of some kind."

"And it fools people?" she asked uncertainly.

"It fools people who don't have groovy wizard ointment for their eyes," I said. Then I frowned and said, "Wait a minute. The gate isn't *open*. It's *gone*."

"What?" Charity asked. She leaned out and stared. "There is a broken lattice of ice on the ground around the gate. A portcullis?"

"Could be," I agreed. "And inside." I squinted. "I think I can see some heavier pieces. Like maybe someone ripped apart the portcullis and blew the gate in." I took a deep breath, feeling a hysterical little giggle lurking in

my throat. "Something huffed and puffed and blew the house in. Mab's house."

The wind howled over the frozen mountains.

"Well," Thomas said. "That can't be good."

Charity bit her lip. "Molly."

"I thought you said this Mab was all mighty and stuff, Harry," Murphy said.

"She is," I said, frowning.

"Then who plays big bad wolf to her little pig?"

"I..." I shook my head and rubbed at my mouth. "I'm starting to think that maybe I'm getting a little bit out of my depth, here."

Thomas broke out into a rippling chuckle, a faint note of hysteria to it. He turned his back to the fortress and sat down, chortling.

I glowered at him and said, "It's not funny."

"It is from here," Thomas said. "I mean, God, you are dense sometimes. Are you just now noticing this, Harry?"

I glowered at him some more. "To answer your question, Murph, I don't know who did this, but the list of the people who could is fairly short. Maybe the Senior Council could if they had the Wardens along, but they're busy, and they'd have had to fight a campaign to get this far. Maybe the vampires could have done it, working together, but that doesn't track. I don't know. Maybe Mab pissed off a god or something."

"There is only one God," Charity said.

I waved a hand and said, "No capital 'G,' Charity, in deference to your beliefs. But there are beings who aren't the Almighty who have power way beyond anything running around the planet."

"Like who?" Murphy asked.

"Old Greek and Roman and Norse deities. Lots and lots of Amerind divinity, and African tribal beings. A few Australian aboriginal gods; others in Polynesia, southeast Asia. About a zillion Hindu gods. But they've all been dormant for centuries." I frowned at Arctis Tor. "And I can't think what Mab might have done to earn their enmity. She's avoided doing that for thousands of years."

Unless, of course, I thought to myself, Maeve and Lily are right, and she really has gone bonkers.

"Dresden," Charity said. "This is academic. We either go in or we leave. Now."

I chewed my lip and nodded. Then I dug in my pockets for the tiny vial of blood Charity had provided, and hunted through the rocks until I found a spot clear enough to chalk out a circle. I empowered it and wrought one of my usual tracking spells, keying it to a sensation of warmth against my senses. Cold as it was, I would hardly mind anything that might make me feel a little less freeze-dried.

I broke the circle and released the spell, and immediately felt a tingling warmth on my left cheekbone. I turned to face it, and found myself staring directly at Arctis Tor. I paced fifty or sixty yards to the side, and faced the warmth again, working out a rough triangulation.

“She’s alive,” I told Charity, “or the spell wouldn’t have worked. She’s in there. Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Charity said. She gave me a look filled with discomfort and then said, “May I say a brief prayer for us first?”

“Can’t hurt,” I said. “I’ll take all the help I can get.”

She bowed her head and said, “Lord of hosts, please stand with us against this darkness.” The quiet, bedrock-deep energy of true faith brushed against me. Charity crossed herself. “Amen.”

Murphy echoed the gesture and the amen. Thomas and I tried to look theologically invisible. Then, without further speech, I swung out around the frozen stone cairn and broke into a quick, steady jog. The others followed along.

I passed the first bones fifty yards from the walls. They lay in a crushed, twisted jumble in the snow, frozen into something that looked like a macabre Escher print. The bones were vaguely human, but I couldn’t be sure because they had been pulverized to dust in some places, warped like melted wax in others. It was the first grisly memorial of many. As I kept going forward, brittle, frozen bones crunched under my boots, lying closer and thicker, and twisted more horribly, as we drew closer to Arctis Tor. By the time we got to the gate, I was shin-deep in icy bones. They spread out on either side in an enormous wheel of horrible remains centered on the gate. Whoever they had been, thousands of their kind had perished here.

Charity’s guess about the portcullis had been bang on. Pieces of it lay scattered about, mixed among the bones. Where the gate arched beneath the fortress walls, there were still more bones, waist-deep on me, and slabs of planed dark ice, the remains of the fortress gate, stuck out at odd angles. The walls of Arctis Tor had been pitted with what I could only assume had

been an acid of some kind. There were larger gouges blown out of the walls here and there, but against their monolithic volume, they were little more than pockmarks.

I pushed ahead to the gate, plowing my way through bones. Once there, I caught a faint whiff of something familiar. I leaned closer to one of the craters blown out of the wall and sniffed.

“What is it?” Thomas asked me.

“Sulfur,” I said quietly. “Brimstone.”

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“No way to tell,” I half lied. But my intuition was absolutely certain of what had happened here. Someone had thrown Hellfire against the walls of Arctis Tor. Which meant that the forces of the literal Hell, or their agents, were also playing a part in the ongoing events.

Way, way, way out of my depth.

I told myself that it didn’t matter. There was a young woman inside that frozen boneyard who would die if I did not burgle her out of this nightmare. If I did not control my fear, there was an excellent chance that it would warn her captors of my approach. So I fought the fear that threatened to make me start throwing up, or something equally humiliating and potentially fatal.

I readied my shield, gripped my staff, ground my teeth together, and then continued pushing my way forward, through the bones and into the eerie dimness of the most ridiculously dangerous place I had ever been.

Chapter Thirty-seven

The black ice walls of Arctis Tor were sixty feet thick, and walking through the gateway felt more like walking through a railroad tunnel.

Except for all the bones.

Every breath, every step, every rasp of bones rubbing against one another, multiplied into a thousand echoes that almost seemed to grow louder rather than fading away. The bones piled higher as I went, forcing me to walk atop them as best I could. The footing was treacherous. The deep green and violet, and occasionally red or green, pulses of luminance in the black ice walls did nothing to light the way. They only made the shadows shift and flow subtly, degrading my depth perception. I started feeling a little carsick.

If one of the fetches appeared at the far end of the tunnel and charged me, things would get nasty, and fast, especially given how ineffective my magic had been against them and how the bones had slowed my pace. That was more than a little spooky, and it was hard to keep myself from thrashing ahead more quickly out of pure fear. I kept a steady pace, held it in, and refused to allow it to control me.

I had been shielding my thoughts from Lasciel for a couple of years now. Damned if I was going to give a bunch of murderous faerie monsters the chance to paw through my emotions.

I checked behind me. Charity had trouble managing the awkward task of crawling over the bones while armored and holding that big old war hammer, but she stuck to it with grim focus and determination. Behind her, Murphy seemed to have far less trouble. Thomas prowled along at the rear, graceful as a panther in a tree.

I emerged from the gate into the courtyard. The inside of the fortress was bleak, cold, and beautiful in its simple symmetry. Rooms and chambers had either never been built or had been built into the walls and their entries hidden. Stairs led up to the battlements atop the walls. The courtyard was flat, smooth, dark ice, and at its center the single spire reared up from the ground, a round turret that rose to a crenellated parapet that overlooked the walls and the ground beneath.

The courtyard also held a sense of quiet stillness to it, as though it was not a place meant for living, moving, changing beings. The howl of the wind outside and overhead did not reach the ground. It was as silent as a librarian's tomb, and each footstep sounded clearly on the ice. Echoes bounced back and forth in the courtyard, somehow carrying a tone of disapproval and menace with them.

Bones spilled out in a wave from the gate, rapidly tapering off after a few yards. Beyond that were only scattered groupings of bones. Thomas drifted over to one such and poked at it with his drawn saber. The blade scraped on a skull too big to stuff into an oil drum, too heavy and thick to look entirely human.

"What the hell was this?" Thomas asked quietly.

"Troll, probably," I said. "Big one. Maybe fourteen, fifteen feet tall." I looked around. Half a dozen other enormous skulls lay in the scattered collections of remains. Another six had fallen very close to each other, at the base of the spire. "Give me a second. I want to know what we're looking at before we move ahead."

Charity looked like she wanted to argue, but instead she took up position a few yards off, watching one way. Thomas and Murphy spread out, each keeping their eyes on a different direction.

Mixed in with the fallen trolls' bones were broken pieces of dark ice that might have been the jigsaw-puzzle remains of armor and weapons. Each fragment bore the remnants of ornate engraving employing gold, silver, and tiny blue jewels. Faerie artistry, and expensive artistry at that. "Thirteen of them. The trolls were Mab's," I murmured. "I saw some of them outfitted like this a couple of years back."

"How long have they been dead?" Murphy asked quietly.

I grunted and hunkered down. I stretched my left hand out over the bones and closed my eyes, focusing my attention on sharpening my senses, mundane and magical alike. Very faintly, I could scent the heavy, bestial stink of a troll. I'd only seen a couple of the big ones from up close, but you could smell the ugly bastards from half a mile away. There was a rotten odor, more like heavy mulch than old meat. And there was more sulfur and brimstone.

Below that, I could feel tremors in the air over the spot, the psychic residue of the troll's violent death. There was a sense of excitement, rage,

and then a dull, seldom-felt terror and a rush of sharp, frozen images of violent death, confusion, terror, and searing agony.

My hand flinched back from the phantom sensation of its own accord, and for just a moment the memories of my burning took on tangible form. I hissed through my teeth and held my hand against my stomach, willing the too-real ghost of pain away.

“Harry?” Murphy asked.

What the hell? The impression the death had left was so sharp, so severe, that I had actually gotten bits of the troll’s memories. That had never happened to me before. Of course, I had never tried to pick up vibes in the Nevernever, either. It made more sense that the substance of the spirit world would leave a clearer spiritual impression.

“Harry?” Murphy said again, more sharply.

“I’m all right,” I said through clenched teeth. The imprint had been more clear than anything I had ever felt in the real world. In Chicago, I would have thought it was only a few seconds old. Here...

“I can’t tell how old they are,” I said. “My gut says not very, but I can’t be sure.”

“It must have been weeks,” Thomas said. “It takes that long for bones to get this clean.”

“It’s all relative,” I said. “Time can pass at different rates in Faerie. These bones could have fallen a thousand years ago, by the local clock. Or twenty minutes ago.”

Thomas muttered something under his breath and shook his head.

“What killed them, Harry?” Murphy asked.

“Fire. They were burned to death,” I said quietly. “Down to the bone.”

“Could you do that?” Thomas asked.

I shook my head. “I couldn’t make it that hot. Not at the heart of Winter.” Not even with Hellfire. The remains of perhaps a thousand creatures lay scattered about. I’d cut loose once in the past and roasted a bunch of vampires—and maybe some of their victims with them—but even that inferno hadn’t been big enough to catch more than a tithe of the fallen defenders of Arctis Tor.

“Then who did it?” Charity asked quietly.

I didn’t have an answer for her. I rose and nudged a smaller skull with my staff. “The littler ones were goblins,” I said. “Foot soldiers.” I rolled a troll-sized thighbone aside with my staff. An enormous sword, also of that

same black ice, lay shattered beneath it. “These trolls were her personal guard.” I gestured back at the gate. “Covering her retreat to the tower, maybe. Some of them got taken down along the way. The others made a stand at the tower’s base. Died there.”

I paced around, checking what the tracking spell had to say, and triangulated again. “Molly’s in the tower,” I murmured.

“How do we get in?” Murphy asked.

I stared at the blank wall of the spire. “Um,” I said.

Charity glanced over my shoulder and nodded at the spire. “Look behind those trolls. If they were covering a retreat, they should be near the entrance to the tower.”

“Maybe,” I said. I walked over to the tower and frowned at the black ice. I ran my right hand over its surface, feeling for cracks or evidence of a hidden doorway, my senses tuned to discover any magic that might hide a door. I had the sudden impression that the black ice and the slowly pulsing colors inside were somehow alive, aware of me. And they did not like me at all. I got a sense of alien hatred, cold and patient. Otherwise, I got nothing for my trouble but half-frozen fingers.

“Nothing here,” I said, and rapped my knuckles on the side of the tower, eliciting the dull thump of a very solid object. “Maybe the trolls just wanted to fight with their backs to something solid. I might have to go all the way around checking for—”

Without any warning at all the ice of the tower parted. An archway appeared, the ice that had hidden it flowing seamlessly into the rest of the tower. The interior of the tower was all shadows and slowly shifting lights that did little to provide any illumination. Inside was nothing but a spiral staircase, winding counterclockwise up through the spire.

I glanced from the archway to my chilled fingers and back. “Next time, I guess I’ll just knock.”

“Come on,” Charity said. She shifted her grip on the war hammer, holding it at something like high port arms, handle parallel to her spine, heavy head ready to descend. “We have to hurry.”

Thomas and Murphy turned to join us at the door.

An idle, puzzled sense of familiarity gave way to my instincts’ furious warning. Fetches were the masters of the sucker punch. Like the Bucky-fetch who had jumped us just as we opened the doors to the theater, they

knew how to position themselves to attack just as their enemies focused their attention on some kind of distraction.

The suddenly opened doorway was it.

Mounds of bones around the courtyard exploded into motion. Fetches hurtled at us over the ground. There weren't three of them, either—there were dozens.

The fetches, here in Faerie, did not look like movie monsters. Their true forms were only vaguely humanoid, wavering uncertainly, as black as midnight shadows but for ghostly white eyes. I could see other shapes around them, translucent and faint. Here, another one of those alien monster things. There some kind of wolflike biped. There an enormous man with the head of a warthog. But the salve I had spread over my eyes revealed those illusions for what they really were, and showed me the thing beneath the mask.

My magic had a risky batting average against these creatures, but there were things I could do besides hosing energy directly at the enemy. Hellfire came to my call, and my staff's runes exploded into light as brilliant as a magnesium flare. Their flame lit the benighted courtyard while somehow not damaging my clothing or flesh. My will and the Hellfire roared through me in a torrent as I whirled the staff in a circle over my head and screamed, "*Ventas cyclis!*"

The howling winds thundered down into the silent courtyard as if I had torn off an unseen roof. They gathered along my spinning staff, fluttering with lightning the same color as the blazing runes on the staff. I cried out and hurled the winds, not at the oncoming fetches, but at the thousands of bones lying between them and me.

The wind picked them up with a wailing shriek; a sudden cyclone of broken bones and shattered armor, spinning them into a whirling curtain. The lead fetches were too late to avoid plunging into the cloud, and the ossified tornado began to rip them apart, battering to pulp whatever was not sheared away by the edges and points of bone and broken shards of ice. Fetches following in their wake skidded to a halt, letting out a startlingly loud chorus of hisses, the sounds filled with rage.

Thomas cried out and I heard heavy footsteps. Another fetch, this one much larger, came around the curve of the spire's wall. The ghost image of the Reaper was all around him. A beat later, another charged us from the other direction, just as large, this one with the faint image of Hammerhand,

an almost obscenely muscled figure in black, heavy mallets emerging from the ends of his sleeves.

“Into the tower!” I bellowed.

The Reaper reached Thomas, and its arm rose up, tipped with gleaming black talons in its true form, the illusion superimposing the image of the Reaper’s trademark scythe over them. Thomas caught the Reaper’s sweeping claws on his saber, but instead of the ringing of steel on steel, there was a flash of green-white light and the Reaper-fetch howled in agony as the steel of the blade struck its claws cleanly from its appendage.

Thomas crouched, hips and shoulders twisting in a sharp, one-two movement. The saber’s blade cut and burned a flattened X shape into the fetch’s abdomen. The fetch roared in agony, and liquid green-white fire burst from the wound. The creature swung its other arm, its speed taking even Thomas by surprise. He avoided most of the power of the blow, but what was left slammed him into the side of the tower.

I heard a gunshot behind me, then another, and then Murphy snarled, “Damn it!” I turned in time to see her bob to one side and then to the other as Hammerhand swung a mallet limb down at her. The blow crashed into the courtyard with a cracking impact as loud as a rifle shot. Murphy danced in closer to the fetch, inside the awkward reach of its club-hands. It thrust one down at her. At first I thought she was slapping it aside, but then she grabbed onto the fetch and continued the motion, adding her own weight and strength to the fetch’s and redirecting the force of the blow so that the fetch’s weapon-hand crushed its own foot. The fetch bellowed in pain and lost its balance. Murphy shoved in the same direction and the fetch fell. She leapt away from it, for the tower door, while I grabbed Thomas and hauled him inside.

From somewhere up the stairs, I heard a terrified scream.

Molly.

Charity let out a cry and threw herself up the stairs.

“No!” I shouted. “Charity, wait!”

The doorway darkened as a fetch tried to come through. Murphy, her back flat against the wall beside the door, drew the long fighting dagger she had taken from Charity’s box of goodies. Just as its nose cleared the doorway, she whirled in a half circle and with all the power of her legs, hips, back, and shoulders drove the knife to its hilt in one of the thing’s white eyes.

The fetch went mad with agony. It slammed itself blindly against the inside of the doorway, more liquid fire erupting from the wound, and lurched back and forth until Thomas stepped up to it, lifted a boot, and kicked the fetch with crushing strength, hurling the mortally wounded faerie back out onto the courtyard.

“Go!” he cried. Another fetch began to press in, and Thomas went to work with his sword. His blows struck more burning wounds into the fetch, and its blood sizzled like grease on a stove when it touched the cold iron of his blade. Thomas dodged a return blow and pressed his attack with a sneer, driving the thing back from the doorway.

“Go!” he yelled again. “I’ll hold the door!”

A snakelike, whipping limb shot in along the floor, seized Thomas’s ankle, and hauled his foot out from under him. I clutched at him and kept him from being drawn into the open. “Murph!”

Murphy slid up, pointed her pistol out the door, and squeezed off several shots. A fetch screamed in pain and Thomas’s leg suddenly came free. I pulled him in and he lunged to his feet again.

“We’ll hold the door,” Murphy said, her voice sharp. “Get the girl!”

Molly screamed again.

Charity’s booted feet thudded unseen from the stairs above me.

I spat out an oath and sprinted after her.

Chapter Thirty-eight

The spiral staircase spun me in a steady, ascending circle. The low, ugly light within the walls swirled sickeningly, adding to my sense of motion sickness and disorientation. Below me, I could hear Thomas's sharp, mocking laughter as he fought, together with the occasional report of Murphy's gun. My aching body hated me for forcing it to run up the stairs—particularly my knees. Anyone my size is prone to that kind of thing.

But there was nothing to be done about it, so I ignored the pain and went on, Lily's fiery butterfly keeping pace with me and lighting my way.

I had longer legs, and I caught Charity as she neared the top of the staircase. Molly screamed again, pure terror and anguish and pain, and her voice was very near.

"I'm coming, baby!" Charity gasped, panting. She was in great shape, but no one's exercise program includes running up several hundred feet of spiral stairs in full mail and helmet carrying a big-ass hammer and a sword. Her legs had slowed, and she staggered a little when she reached the top stair and found herself in a short, level, low-ceilinged hall leading a few feet to another open archway. The cold light of winter night, moonlight on snow, shone in through the arch.

I managed to snag her arm and check her advance just as a heavy door slammed to cover the archway with tooth-rattling force. If I hadn't delayed her, it would have hit her like a speeding truck. She recovered her balance, and while she did we heard a heavy bolt slide shut on the door. Charity shoved a hand at the door, which remained fixed. She kicked a booted foot at it, and failed to so much as rattle it in its frame.

Molly screamed again, still close, though muffled by the closed door. Her cry was weaker, shorter.

"Molly!" Charity screamed.

I thrust the spread fingers of my left hand against the door, and was instantly aware of the energy flowing through it, binding it, giving it strength beyond reason to resist being opened. I looked for a weakness, a soft spot in the adamant magic supporting the door, but there was none. The ward on the door was, simply put, flawless. It spread through the door's

substance as coldly and beautifully as crystals of ice forming on a window, the magic of Winter drawn up from the heart of the land. There was no way for me to unravel the subtle, complex faerie magic.

But then, it was faerie magic. I didn't have to be subtle to counter it.

"Charity," I snapped. "It's faerie make! The hammer!"

She shot me a glance of comprehension and nodded. "Clear the door."

I hurried back, leaving her room to swing.

"Please," Charity whispered as she planted her feet and drew back the weapon. "Please, Father. Please."

Charity closed her eyes and took a deep breath, focusing her concentration on delivering the most powerful blow she possibly could in the confines of the hallway. Then she swung the weapon back, golf-club style, cried out, and swung, stepping forward.

Maybe Charity was way more buff than I thought. Maybe that particular ward had a particular weakness to cold iron. Maybe it had nothing to do with magic, and Charity had somehow tapped into the strength available to all mothers when their young are endangered. Hell, maybe God was on her side.

Whatever happened, that siege door of adamant ice and malevolent, obdurate magic screamed and shattered at the blow from her hammer, shattered like delicate glass, shattered into pieces no larger than grains of sand. The whole tower rang with the power of the blow, the very black ice it was made of seeming to shriek and groan. The floor literally shook, and I had to crouch to keep from taking a tumble back down the stairs.

I heard Charity choke down a cry of pain. She had broken the door before us, but the spells running through it had backlashed against the hammer, and it too had shattered. A flying piece of fractured metal had cut across her hip and lodged in one of the rings of her mail. It glowed red-hot, and she frantically slapped it away even as it burned her. Other pieces of shrapnel from the hammer had struck the walls of the tower, burning their way into the black ice, sending a network of cracks of green-white light all through the tower around us like some sort of bizarre infection. Black ice melted away from the red-hot steel. The tower rumbled again like some vast, agonized beast.

Charity dropped the handle of the hammer. I could see that her right arm hung limp and useless, but it didn't stop her from making an awkward left-handed draw of the sword at her hip. I slipped up beside her, staff held

ready in both hands, and we stepped out onto the parapet of the tower of Arctis Tor together.

The parapet was enormous, a hundred feet across, twice as wide as the spire beneath us. It was a garden of sorts; a garden of ice.

Ice covered the parapet, somehow formed into ghostly trees and flowers. There were seats here and there in the garden, and they too were made of ice. A frozen fountain stood silent at the center of the parapet, a bare trickle of water sliding from the top of a statue so coated in layers and layers of ice that one could not readily identify its particulars. Replica rose vines and thorns spread all around the place, all ice, all cold and beautiful.

Upon the branch of a tree perched a cardinal, its bloodred feathers brilliant, though the bird itself was utterly still. I peered a bit closer, and saw that it was covered in a layer of transparent ice, frozen into a sculpture every bit as much as the rest of the place. Not far from it, a spider's web spread between some tree branches, the spider at its center also transformed into ice sculpture. A swift look around showed me more beings entombed in ice, and I realized that this place was not a garden.

It was a prison.

Next to the fountain sat a lovely young girl in a Byzantine gown, hand entwined with that of a young man in similar historic costume. Not far from them, three females of the Sidhe, Mab's kindred, the nobility of faerie kind, stood back-to-back, their shoulders touching in a triangle. The three looked so much alike that they might have been sisters, and they each held hands with the others, expressions of determination and fear frozen onto their faces.

The ice sculpture of a thick, dead-looking tree held a dead, naked man upon it, crucified on its branches as a grotesque work of art. Bonds of ice held him there, transparent enough to let me see the blackened flesh of his hands and feet, the gangrenous darkness spreading upward through the veins of his arms and legs. His hair was long, unwashed, and fell over his face as he hung limp within his bonds, his body coated with layers of crystalline frost.

Molly sat at the base of the same tree. Her artfully shredded clothes had been shredded in truth, and they hung from her as loose rags. Her cotton-candy hair hung in a limp mass, uncombed and tangled. She shuddered with cold, and her eyes stared at nothing. Her expression was twisted as if in effort, her mouth open. It took me a minute to realize that she had never

stopped screaming. She'd damaged her throat, and no sound would emerge. But that didn't stop her from trying.

Charity shifted her weight to hurry forward, but I cautioned her, "Wait. We'll do her no good if we're dead."

She clenched her jaw, but heeded me, and we paused for a moment while I swept my gaze over the rest of the parapet. Some movement in the shadows behind the crucifixion tree drew my eye, and I reached back for the handle of my blasting rod, sticking out of my nylon backpack. I drew the magical tool and primed it with an effort of will. Red-white fire suddenly glowed at its tip. "There. Behind the tree," I said.

A deep voice let out a rasping chuckle.

Then, from the darkness I couldn't quite see into, the Scarecrow appeared.

This thing was no fetch, no changer of form and image and illusion. There was no shadowy mask over an amorphous form, no glamour altering its appearance, which my salve would have enabled me to see through. This thing was a whole, independent creature. Unless maybe it was a fetch so old and strong that it could transform itself into the Scarecrow in truth and not simply in seeming.

Red flame glittered in the carved-pumpkin head. Its limbs, all long, tough vines as thick as my wrists, were clothed in ragged tatters of black that looked more like a funeral robe than a farmer's castoffs. Its long arms trailed almost to the ground, and one of them was stretched over to Molly. At the end of the arm, the vines tapered into dozens of slender, flexible tendrils, and the Scarecrow had them wrapped around Molly's throat and sliding up into her hair.

We stood in silence, facing one another for a while. Wind moaned somewhere overhead, not far above the parapet. The sounds of hissing and screaming fetches drifted up as if from a great distance. Thomas and Murphy still held the door.

I took several steps to one side and gave the Scarecrow a little smile. "Hi," I said. "Who the hell are you?"

"One who has served the Queen of Air and Darkness since before your kind can remember," he replied. "One who has destroyed hundreds like you."

"You know what, Captain Kudzu?" I asked. "I'm not here to play guessing games with you. Give me the girl."

The bizarre creature's face twisted in what might have been amusement. "Or what follows?"

I wasn't absolutely certain the thing was quoting Shakespeare, but that didn't mean I couldn't do it. "Bloody constraint," I told him. "For should you try to hide the girl from me, even in your heart, there shall I rake for her."

Maybe the Scarecrow wasn't a Shakespeare fan. Its eyes flared with angry scarlet light. "Little man. Move an inch closer and I will crush her soft little neck."

"Inadvisable," I said, and raised my blasting rod to level it at the Scarecrow. "Because she's the only thing keeping you alive right now."

"I fear you not, wizard," the Scarecrow said. The creature narrowed its eyes, focusing upon me intently—perhaps preparing the same defense that had shed my spells in our first encounter. "Bring your fire, if you think it may survive the heart of Winter. It will avail you against me this time no more than last."

"You think I'd show up for round two without being prepared to finish what I started?" I asked him. I sidled a couple of more steps to one side. "The Council is already on the way here," I said. "I'm here to make you an offer before things fall apart. Give me the girl and your word not to go near her again, and I let you live."

The Scarecrow let out a laugh of pure scorn. "I shall enjoy killing you, mortal."

I prowled a few steps more and planted my feet, then brandished my staff and rod. The Scarecrow crouched in response, eyes burning even brighter.

I had to be careful. If I spooked him too much, he'd kill Molly as a prelude to closing with me. "You know what your problem is?" I asked him.

He stared at me for a blank second of incomprehension. "What?"

I showed my teeth in a wolfish smile. "You underestimate people."

While I'd drawn the Scarecrow's attention and eye, Charity had slipped around behind it, silent as a puff of smoke. As I spoke, she lifted her sword and swept it down at the appendage holding her daughter. The steel blade hissed and flashed and seared its way through the limb holding Molly.

The Scarecrow reared its head back in a sudden howl of rage. Molly's body bucked in panic as the severed limbs contracted on her throat. I lifted my staff and snarled, "*Forzare!*" Unseen force lashed out, caught up Molly

as gently as I could manage it, and flipped her tail over teakettle away from the creature. No sooner had I moved her than its stumpy arm swung down to smash into the ground where the girl had been sitting.

The Scarecrow turned to grab at Molly, but Charity stepped into its path, cold steel gleaming, her eyes harder and colder than the black ice of Arctis Tor. She faced the thing squarely and snarled, “You will never touch my daughter again.”

The creature roared in fury and rushed Charity. I whipped up my blasting rod and snarled, “*Fuego!*” A lance of flame as thick as my wrist lashed out from the tip of the rod—and died two feet away from it, the burning energy of the magical strike swallowed by an unfathomable ocean of cold, cold power. I had hoped that I could get in a shot while the Scarecrow was distracted, but I had already decided on what to try next if I couldn’t.

I stuck the blasting rod through my belt, whipped my staff up to point the tip at the ground beneath the Scarecrow’s feet, and shouted, “*Forzare!*”

Invisible force lashed out and struck the black ice under the Scarecrow like a mortar round. It threw the creature ten feet into the air, spinning end over end. Deadly chips of black ice flew. As the spell’s energy roared out of me, I staggered and almost lost my balance. My vision tunneled for a second or two out of pure exhaustion. I’d been pushing too hard, for too long, with no rest. The magic I’d been using had drained my reserves entirely. The human body has limits that cannot be circumvented, and I had reached mine.

Charity rushed forward before the Scarecrow could rise. Her sword hacked down at it in elemental brutality, and the Scarecrow’s blood and woodlike flesh sizzled on her blade. But she didn’t kill it.

The Scarecrow regained its feet and lashed an arm at Charity. She swung her sword to meet it. Cold iron bit into faerie flesh, drawing forth another explosion of brilliant, liquid flame. The creature screamed, a sound louder than any living thing I’d ever heard, and its backswing slammed into Charity’s limp right arm. The impact tore a grunt of pain from her and flung her several feet through the air, but the Scarecrow paid for it. Coming into contact with Charity’s mail burned it again, and its furious howls redoubled.

It lifted a foot to stomp down on the helplessly writhing Molly, to flatten her like an aluminum can.

It was the kind of thing that draws suicidal levels of chivalry from me. I ran for the Scarecrow, ditching my blasting rod on the way. I took my staff in both hands, slammed it down like a pole-vaulter, and launched myself into the air, both feet aimed at the Scarecrow's back. I hit the thing with considerable force, but I'd been too tired to manage it as precisely as I wished. The blow only staggered the creature, and I bounced off it and flopped onto the icy surface of the parapet.

I had bought time enough, though, for Charity to regain her feet and charge forward with her blade, diverting the Scarecrow's attention from her daughter.

Before I could regain my feet, the Scarecrow snapped a foot at me in a clumsy, unbalanced kick. It landed with only a fraction of the force it might have had. Even so, that was enough to send me sprawling ten feet away and maybe crack one of my ribs. Pain washed through me and I suddenly couldn't get my lungs to take in enough air.

The Scarecrow stretched out an arm toward Charity, and ropy-looking vines shot from the ends of his arms, flickered across the ten feet between them like lightning, and wrapped her sword arm's wrist. The tendrils tightened. The Scarecrow shook Charity violently. She screamed, and the sword tumbled from her fingers. More vines wrapped around her throat, and the creature simply hauled her up into the air. Its wounds were already closing, rebuilding themselves. It seized Molly in its other hand and lifted her as well, holding the pair of them face-to-face. There was a malicious eagerness in the creature's stance.

"See," it murmured to the fruitlessly struggling Charity. "Look at her. Watch your daughter die."

Charity's eyes widened with terror. Her face turned dark red. Molly, meanwhile, simply lay limp, her own face darkening as she was strangled.

"Not long now," the Scarecrow purred. "There is nothing you can do to help her, mortal woman. Nothing you can do to stop me."

It was a fetch, I was sure of it, a creature who had been given talent or power enough to exceed its former status, to become the embodiment of the icon of fear mortals called the Scarecrow, to draw power from that image—power enough to block out my strongest magic. That was why it tormented both Molly and her mother—to feed on their terror.

I stared at it dully, while my mind ran through the logic tree and my lungs kept trying to get in a deep breath. I searched through myself for

energy enough to do something, anything, to help.

I didn't have it in me.

I lay there on my side, too exhausted to feel fear, too exhausted to feel hate, too exhausted to feel anger. It was all that I could do to keep from lowering my head and going to sleep, and without will or emotion to fuel my spells, I might as well have been one more frozen sculpture in Mab's prison garden.

Charity's heels began to kick frantically, uselessly. The Scarecrow went on purring, and I thought I could actually see the damned thing grow a couple of inches taller. Lily's incendiary butterfly fluttered around my head, obscuring my view for a second.

And I suddenly got it. A sluggish hope surged up in me.

The fetch drew its power from fear.

And I had none. I was just too tired for it.

That was why I had thrashed the fetch at the hotel so badly. Not two minutes before I faced it, I had gathered up my fear and hurled it out on that decoy spell. When I faced the thing in the darkened hallway, I'd been nothing but angry. Without my fear to play on, the fetch could not disrupt my magic, and I had batted him around like a softball.

Similarly, when I decapitated the Bucky-fetch, I had been feeling no fear. It all happened too fast. I'd reacted on pure reflex, before any pesky thoughts or emotions could weigh in on the matter. There'd been no time to be afraid, and I'd struck the fetch down.

I would never have realized the weakness in the fetches' defenses had I not pushed myself to my limits; the only thing I had to fear was fear itself. I suddenly *knew* I could take this chump out, if only I had enough power left for one more spell. I'd done it twice. Third time's the charm.

The butterfly danced wildly in the air in front of me.

I stared at it for a second, realization dawning, and then I burst out into weak laughter. "Lily, you manipulative, deceitful, wonderful girl."

I held open my left palm, and the butterfly alighted on it. Its light flashed brighter for a second, and then my will touched it lightly. It fell apart into glowing threads that settled down on my scarred palm and rushed into my spirit. Pure flame filled me, the joyous heat of full summer, and I exalted in the sudden, overflowing *life* of it. It met the tiny spark of hope still glowing within me and the two multiplied, power unfolding and expanding inside me.

I found myself on my feet, arms spread to my sides, face turned up toward the enormous silver moon. Sunlight seemed to spill from me, to wreath me in dancing fires that blazed their defiance of Winter. Arctis Tor itself, the fortress of black ice, groaned in protest at the intensity of the light.

I looked down to find the creature staring at me in utter shock. Its tendril-fingers had gone loose, and Molly and Charity lay moving weakly at its feet.

“You cannot do that,” the fetch said in a shocked tone. “You...It is not possible.”

I flicked out a hand, whispered a word, and my blasting rod flew from the ground where I’d dropped it and into my hand, its carvings bursting into light as the blazing heat of a thousand Julys welled up, ready to fly free. “You like movie villains, do you?” I lifted the blasting rod while Summer fire flickered around my outstretched arm. I peeled my lips back from my teeth and purred, “Have you seen this one?”

The carvings along the rod flooded with a blaze of scarlet-and-golden light.

“How about a little fire, Scarecrow?”

Chapter Thirty-nine

The Scarecrow let out an ear-splitting trilling chirp, like a summer locust on steroids, and it bounded to one side in an effort to keep the mounded ice of the fountain between us. I'd already seen how fast a fetch could move, and didn't bother with a snap shot. Instead, I let it distance itself from Molly and Charity, until it reached cover behind the fountain's ice and stopped moving.

Then I blew two-thirds of that dome away in a single blast of light, thunder, and fire.

The golden Summer flame hammered straight through the ice and into the Scarecrow. The old fetch was taken off guard, and the lance of fire incinerated what would have been a hip and thigh on a human being. It bellowed a metallic roar of pain and anger, bounced off one of the white marble statues of the three sisters, and was forced to seize hold of one of the statues' ankles to keep from bouncing over the edge of the parapet.

But the Scarecrow wasn't the only faerie who cried out. Without warning, a hurricane of sound slammed into me, painfully intense. Once more Arctis Tor shuddered, the black ice trembling and heaving while deep, almost subsonic groans echoed through the fortress. The other fetches' screams arose from below, a frenzied chorus of berserk rage.

The heaving ground and the sonic sledgehammer tossed me into a bank of ice-sculpted rose vines with thorns three times as long as their flowers. The ice was not brittle, and it didn't break as my weight hit it. I felt a sharp pain from my ankle, a thorn stabbing underneath the hem of my duster, but the spell-worked coat protected me from further harm. I was on my feet again in a second, readying another blast.

But in that second, the Scarecrow had reversed its course with eerie agility. It headed for Charity and Molly, running on all three of its limbs like a wounded spider, awkward but still swift. This time I couldn't afford to take my time about lining up the shot. I flicked a lash of fire between the Scarecrow and the Carpenter women, but it sidestepped and I only burned a few loose-end tendrils from its vine-body. The Scarecrow hurtled toward Molly. Charity lay perfectly still beside her, sprawled on the black ice.

But only until the Scarecrow came within reach of her sword. Then Charity rolled and popped up into a low, slashing lunge. Her sword seared its way through the Scarecrow's undamaged leg, slicing it off at an angle that began at mid thigh and finished just above the knee. It frantically rolled again, struggling to get out of sword range. Charity pressed ruthlessly, too close to the damned fetch to let me blast it again. The Scarecrow hopped and skittered on its remaining limbs, heading for the edge of the parapet.

"Charity!" I shouted. "Down!"

Michael's wife dropped out of my line of fire in an instant.

The fetch shimmered, body contorting weirdly, and leapt. On the way, it changed. Membranous wings unfurled from its body and beat powerfully down, and within a heartbeat the rest of the fetch's body had conformed to the shape of one of the monstrous, hang-glider-sized bats I'd seen in Faerie once before. It hurtled away, wings thrashing to gain altitude, and the faerie moon shone down in lunatic glee.

I had a perfect shot.

Once more, I called upon the fire of Summer I'd taken in. I could feel its intensity beginning to ebb, but if the fetch managed to slip away I might never have such an opportunity again. Besides. That creature had tormented my friend's wife and daughter, nearly murdered them right in front of my eyes, and now it was going to answer for it.

So I unleashed the fire again, this time so brilliant that it lit dark mountainsides five or ten miles away, so hot that the blowing snow hissed into instant steam in the wake of the flame. When it struck the fetch, it detonated into a blinding conflagration, an explosion that roared so loudly that it shattered every icy replica of a rose vine upon the parapet.

What tumbled burning from the faerie skies toward the merciless mountains below could not have been identified as anything in particular. It trailed sparks, soot, and ash, and when it slammed into a granite cliff side, it hit with such force that an icy rockslide was jarred loose from the mountain's slope, burying the fetch under incalculable tons of stone.

I shook my staff at the rockslide in a primal gesture of triumph and shouted, "*Who's next!?!?*"

The courtyard below became completely silent for a second, and then I could see fetches, too dark to make out clearly, darting away from the base of the spire, retreating from the fight.

"Harry!" Charity said, her voice strained.

I hadn't realized it when Charity had gotten her head down, but she'd dropped into a baseball player's slide. Thanks to all the fire I'd been pitching around, the black ice had become slick with a thin layer of melt-water, and her momentum was carrying her with slow, dreamy smoothness toward the parapet's edge.

I turned to run toward her, and then used an ounce of brainpower to deduce that I'd only be duplicating the behavior that got Charity into the mess to begin with. Instead I dropped to all fours, crawling forward with my staff extended. Her ankles were over the edge by the time I got close enough to reach her. She was able to get her fingers around the end of the wizard's staff, and I locked onto the other end, halting her slide. I then began to move backward, very slowly, very carefully. The black ice of the parapet hardened once more in a moment, as though it had never thawed, and I pulled Charity carefully away from an involuntary education in skydiving.

Once she was clear, we both turned to look at Molly. The girl lay quietly, still breathing. I rolled onto my back until I could get my breath again. Charity rose and went to her daughter. I didn't follow her. It wasn't the kind of moment she'd appreciate me sharing.

I watched, and kept an eye out for trouble. Charity knelt down beside the young woman and gathered her into her arms as she might have a smaller child. Charity held Molly against herself and rocked gently, her lips murmuring steadily as she did so. For a moment, I thought that the terror and trauma had driven Molly too far away to return. But then she shuddered, blinked her eyes open, and began to weep quietly, leaning against her mother.

I heard a groan behind me, and spun up into a crouch, blasting rod ready again.

The sculpture of the crucified man groaned again. Though he was still crucified and horribly rotted, my fire spells, as augmented by Lily's extraordinary power, had melted the bonds around his left wrist, and now his left arm flopped bonelessly in the steady, howling wind. I had never seen human flesh so badly mangled. His fingers, wrists, and forearms had long since succumbed to frostbite, the blood gone poisonous as it flowed through them, causing the flesh to swell grotesquely. Despite that, I could see that the skin of his entire arm was covered in layers of scars. Burn

scars. Knife scars. Scars from flesh torn by blunt force and left to heal incorrectly.

I've taken a few hits myself. But that poor bastard's *arm* had suffered more than my whole body.

Almost against my will, I walked over to the tree. The man's hair hung like Spanish moss over his bowed face, some of it light brown, some of it dark grey, some of it gone brittle and white. I reached out and brushed the hair back from the man's face, lifting his head toward me a little. His beard was as long and disgusting as his hair. His face had been ravaged somehow, and I got the unsettling impression that his expressions had so contorted and stretched his face that they had inflicted their own kind of damage, though there were no scars as on his arm. His eyes were open, but completely white and unseeing.

I recognized him. "Lloyd Slate," I murmured. "The Winter Knight."

The last time I'd seen Slate had been after the battle on the hill of the Stone Table, a place that served as the OK Corral for the Faerie Courts when they decided to engage in diplomacy by means of murdering anyone on the other team. Slate had been a first-rank menace to society. A drug addict, a rapist, a man with no compunctions about indulging himself at the expense of others. By the end of the battle he had killed a young woman who might have become a friend.

He stirred and let out a small whimper. "Who is there?"

"Dresden," I replied.

Slate's mouth dropped open, and a maniacal little giggle bubbled under his reply. "You're here. Thank God, you're here. I've been here so long." He tilted his head to one side, exposing his carotid artery. "Free me. Do it, quickly."

"Free you?" I asked.

"From this," Slate sobbed, voice breaking. "From this nightmare. Kill me. Kill me. Kill me. Thank God, Dresden, kill me."

The seedier neighborhoods of my soul would have been happy to oblige him. But some dark, hard part of me wanted to see what else I could think of to make him suffer more. I just stared at him for a while, considering options. After perhaps ten minutes, he dropped unconscious again.

From somewhere to my right, a delicious voice, at once rough and silky, purred, "You do not understand his true torment."

I turned to face the frozen fountain. Well. The remains of it, anyway. Maybe a third of the ice mound remained, but it had partially uncovered the statue within—no statue at all, but a member of the Sidhe, a tall, inhumanly lovely woman, her appearance one of nigh perfection. Or it would have been so in other circumstances. Now, partially free from the encasing ice, her scarlet hair clung lumpily to her skull. Her eyes were deeply sunken and burned too bright, as though she had a fever. She stood calmly, one leg, her head, one shoulder, and one arm now emerging from the ice, which was otherwise her only garment. There was an eerie serenity to her, as though she felt no discomfort, physical or otherwise, at her imprisonment. She seemed to regard the entire matter with amused tolerance, as though such trivial conditions were hardly worthy of her attention. She was one of the oldest and most powerful Sidhe in the Winter Court—the Leanansidhe.

And she was also my godmother.

“Lea,” I breathed quietly. “Hell’s bells. What happened to you?”

“Mab,” she said.

“Last Halloween,” I murmured. “She said that you had been imprisoned. She’s kept you here? In that?”

“Obviously.” Something extremely unsettling glittered in her eyes. “You do not understand his true torment.”

I glanced from her to the Winter Knight. “Uh. What?”

“Slate,” she purred, and flicked her eyes in his direction. She was unable to move her head for the ice about it. “There is pain, of course. But anyone can inflict pain. Accidents inflict pain. Pain is the natural order of the universe, and so it is hardly a tool mete for the Queen of Air and Darkness. She tortures him with kindness.”

I frowned at Slate for a moment, and then grimaced, imagining it. “She leaves him hung up like that. And then she comes and saves him from it.”

My godmother smiled, a purring sound accompanying the expression. “She heals his wounds and takes his pain. She restores his sight, and the first thing his eyes see is the face of she who delivers him from agony. She cares for him with her own hands, warms him, feeds him, cleans away the filth. And then she takes him to her bower. Poor man. He knows that when he wakes, he will hang blind upon the tree again—and can do naught else but long for her return.”

I shook my head. “You think he’s going to fall for that?” I said. “Fall in love with her?”

Lea smiled. “Love,” she murmured. “Perhaps, and perhaps not. But need. Oh, yes. You underestimate the simple things, my godchild.” Her eyes glittered. “Being given food and warmth. Being touched. Being cleaned and cared for—and desired. Over and over, spinning him through agony and ecstasy. The mortal mind breaks down. Not all at once. But slowly. The way water will wear down stone.” Her madly glittering eyes focused on me, and her tone took on a note of warning. “It is a slow seduction. A conversion by the smallest steps.”

The skin on my left palm itched intensely for a moment, in the living skin of the Lasciel sigil.

“Yes,” Lea hissed. “Mab, you see, is patient. She has time. And when the last walls of his mind have fallen, and he looks forward with joy to his return to the tree, she will have destroyed him. And he will be discarded. He only lives so long as he resists.” She closed her eyes for a moment and said, “This is wisdom you should retain, my child.”

“Lea,” I said. “What has happened to you? How long have you been a Sidhe-sicle?”

Some of the strength seemed to ebb from her, and she suddenly seemed exhausted. “I grew too arrogant with the power I held. I thought I could overcome what stalks us all. Foolish. Milady Queen Mab taught me the error of my ways.”

“She’s had you locked up in your own private iceberg for more than a year?” I shook my head. “Godmother, you look like you fell out of a crazy tree and hit every branch on the way down.”

Her eyes opened again, glittering and unsettling as hell. And she laughed. It was a quiet, low sound—and it sounded nothing like the laugh of the deadly Sidhe sorceress I’d known since before I could drive.

“Crazy tree,” she murmured, and her eyes closed again. “Yes.”

I heard heavy, thumping steps on the staircase, and Thomas came sprinting onto the parapet, fae-bloodied sword still in hand. “Harry!”

“Here,” I said, and waved an arm at him. He glanced at Charity and Molly, and hurried over to me.

A little lump of fear knotted itself in my guts. “Where’s Murphy?”

“Relax,” he said. “She’s downstairs guarding the door. Is the girl all right?”

I pitched my voice low. “She’s breathing, but I’m more worried about damage to her mind. She’s crying at least. That’s actually a good sign.

What's up?"

"We need to go," Thomas said. "Now."

"Why?"

"Something's coming."

"Something usually is," I said. "What do you mean?"

He gritted his teeth and shook his head. "Since last year...since the Erlking...I've had...intuitions, maybe? Maybe just instincts. I can feel things in the air better now than before. I think the Wild Hunt is coming toward us. I think a *lot* of things are coming toward us."

No sooner had he said it than I heard, blended with the distant cry of the wind, a long, mournful, somehow hungry horn call.

I stepped up onto the edge of the fountain and peered out into the moonlit night. I couldn't make out anything very clearly, but for an instant, far in the distance, I saw the gleam of moonlight on one of the odd metals that faeries used to make their weapons and armor.

Another horn rang out, this one more a droning, enormous basso—only the second horn came from the opposite side from the first. Over the next few seconds, more horns joined in, and drums, and then a rising tide of monstrous shrieks and bellows, all around us now. In the mountains east of Arctis Tor, one of the snowcapped peaks was abruptly devoured by a rising black cloud that hid everything beneath it. A quick check around showed me several other peaks being blanketed in shadow. Horn calls and cries grew louder and continuously more numerous.

"Stars and stones," I breathed. I shot a glance at my godmother and said, "The power I used here. That is what caused this, isn't it?"

"Of course," Lea said.

"Holy crap!" Thomas blurted, jumping like a startled cat when what he must have thought was another statue moved and spoke.

"Thomas, this is my godmother, Lea," I said. "Lea, Th—"

"I know who he is," my godmother murmured. "I know what he is. I know whose he is." Her eyes moved back to me. "You summoned forth the power of Summer here in Arctis Tor, in the heart of all Winter. When you did so, those of Winter felt the agony of it. And now they come to slay you or drive you forth."

I swallowed. "Uh. How many of them?"

The mad gleam returned to her eyes. "Why, all of Winter, child. All of us."

Crap.

“Charity!” I called. “We’re leaving!”

Charity nodded and rose, supporting Molly, though the girl was at least mobile. If she’d remained unaware and walled away from the world, it would have been a real pain to get her all the way back down the tower. Molly and her mom hit the stairs.

“Thomas,” I said. “See if you can chop off some of this ice without hurting her.”

Thomas licked his lips. “Is that a good idea? Isn’t this the one who tried to turn you into a dog?”

“A hound,” Lea murmured, glittering eyes flicking back and forth at random. “Quite different.”

“She was a friend of Mom’s,” I told Thomas quietly.

“So was my Dad,” Thomas said. “And look how *that* turned out.”

“Then give me the sword and I’ll do it myself. I’m not leaving her.”

Lea made a sudden choking sound.

I frowned at her. Her eyes bugged out and her face contorted with apparent pain. Her mouth moved, lush lips writhing, twisting. A bestial grunt jerked out of her throat every second or two. The fingers of her freed hand arched into a claw. Then she suddenly sagged, and when she turned her eyes back to me, they were my godmother’s again; one part lust, one part cool, feline indifference, one part merciless predator.

“Child,” she said. Her voice was weak. “You must *not* free me.”

I stared at her, feeling confused. “Why?”

She gritted her teeth and said, “I cannot yet be trusted. It is not time. I would not be able to fulfill my promise to your mother, should you free me now. You must leave.”

“Trusted?” I asked.

“No time,” she said, voice strained again. “I cannot long keep it from taking hold of...” She shuddered and lowered her head. She lifted her face to me a few seconds later, and the madness had returned to her eyes. “Wait,” she rasped. “I have reconsidered. Free me.”

I traded a look with Thomas, and we both took a cautious step backward.

Lea’s face twisted up with rage and she let out a howl that shook icicles from their positions. “*Release me!*”

“What the hell is going on here?” Thomas asked me.

“Uh,” I told him. “I’ll get back to you after we get out of Dodge.”

Thomas nodded and we both hurried toward the stairs. I glanced back over my shoulder, once. The fountain was already building itself up again, freezing water to ice. A thin sheet of it already covered my godmother. I shuddered and looked away, directly at the delirious Lloyd Slate. My footsteps quickened even more.

And then, just as I was leaving, only for an instant, I thought I saw one more thing. The triangle of statues of Sidhe noblewomen caught a stray beam of moonlight, while thin clouds made it jump and shift. In that uncertain light, I saw one of the statues move. It turned its head toward me as I left, and the white marble of its eyes was suddenly suffused with emerald green the same color as Mab's eyes.

Not just the same color.

Mab's eyes.

The statue winked at me.

The sounds of the approaching fae grew even louder, reminding me that I had no time to investigate. So I shivered and hurried down the stairs beside Thomas, leaving the parapet and its prisoners and—perhaps—its mistress behind me. I had to focus on getting us back to Lily's rift in one piece, so I forced all such questions from my mind for the time being.

The four of us were slogging through snow up to my knees a few moments later, while I spent the last reserves of power I'd taken from Lily's butterfly to keep us from going into hypothermia.

I took the lead and ran for the rift as a nightmarish symphony of wails and horns and howls closed in all around us.

Chapter Forty

Shielded by the good graces of Summer, we fled Arctis Tor. The winds outside howled louder, kicking up increasingly intense clouds of mist, snow, and ice. Beyond the wind, still vague but growing slowly more clear and immediate, I could hear the cries of things that thrived in the dark and the cold. I heard drums and horns, wild and savage and inspiring the kind of terror that has nothing to do with thought, and everything to do with instinct.

I heard the cry of the Erlking's personal horn, unmistakable for any other such instrument.

I traded a quick glance with Thomas, who grimaced at me. "Keep moving!" he called.

"Duh," I grunted.

Immediately behind me, Murphy panted, "What was that about?"

"Erlking," I told her. "Big-time bad guy. Wants to eat me."

"Why?" she asked.

"Well. I met him," I said.

"Ah," Murph said. Even with her labored breathing, the nonword managed to be dry. "Last October?"

"Yeah. He thinks I insulted him."

"You're never mouthy, Harry. Must have been someone who looks like you." She grimaced and clutched at her belt, her balance wavering. There was a long, open slice in the tough leather, where a claw or blade had nearly struck home. The belt gave way, and the oversized mail she wore flopped down, binding her legs, almost tripping her. "Dammit."

"Hold up," I called before Murphy could fall down, and we all staggered to a halt. Molly all but dropped into the snow.

"We can't stand around like this!" Thomas called.

"Charity, Murph, we've got to travel as light as we can. Ditch the armor." I ripped off my duster and wriggled like an eel to get out of my own mail. Then I tossed it at Thomas.

"Hey!" he said, and scowled.

"Don't leave it on the ground," I said. "Thomas, carry it."

“What?” he demanded. “Why?”

“You’re strong enough that it won’t slow you down,” I said, and got my coat back on. “And we don’t dare leave this much iron lying on the ground here.”

“Why not?”

I saw Murphy get out of her gear, and turn to support Molly so Charity could, too. “Would you want visitors leaving radioactive waste around behind them when they left your place?”

“Oh,” he said. “Good point. Because we wouldn’t want to get them mad at us.” He started rolling the mail into a bundle, which he tied into a rough lump with a belt, and slung it over his shoulder.

Howls and wails and horn cries grew louder, though now all to our flanks and the rear. Somehow, in the gale of snow and wind, we had slipped out of the noose the encircling forces had formed around us. If we kept moving, we stood a real chance of getting away clean.

“This entire field trip isn’t what we were meant to think it was,” I told him. “We’ve been used.”

“What? How?”

“Later. Now carry the damn armor, and don’t leave anything lying behind. Move.” The little flutter of Summer fire left in me began to waver, and for a second the wind gained frozen teeth sharp enough to sink all the way into my vitals. “Move!”

I started slogging through the snow again, doing my best to break a path for those coming behind me. Time went by. Wind howled. The snow slashed at my face, and the Summer fire sank to low embers that would not last much longer. They fluttered and faded at almost the precise moment I sensed a rippling of magical energy nearby, and got a whiff of stale popcorn.

The rift shone in the air thirty yards up the slope.

Things, big shaggy things with white fur and long claws, emerged from the snows behind us, running as lightly over the snow and ice as if it had been a concrete sidewalk.

“Thomas!” I pointed at the oncoming threat. “Murph, Charity! You get the girl out of here. Move!”

Murphy looked back and her eyes widened. She immediately ducked under Molly’s other arm and began to help Charity. Charity staggered for a

step, then drew the sword from her belt and thrust it into the snow at my feet, before redoubling her efforts to get Molly over those last few yards.

I transferred my staff to my left hand and took the deadly iron in my right. The last bit of the power Lily loaned me played out, and I didn't have enough magic left in me to light a candle, much less throw around fire or even use my shield. This was going to be about steel and speed and skill, now, purely physical. Which meant that I probably would have gotten myself quickly killed if Charity hadn't thought fast and armed me with iron.

As things stood, my brother and I only needed to hold the oncoming yeti-looking things off until the ladies escaped. We didn't have to actually beat them.

"What are those things?" Thomas asked me.

"Some kind of ogre," I told him. "Hit them hard and fast. Scare them with iron as much as we can, as fast as we can. If we can get them to come at us cautiously, we might be able to pull off a fighting retreat back up the slope."

"Got it," Thomas said. And then, when the first of the snow ogres was maybe thirty feet away, my brother took two steps and bounded into the air. The top of his jump was about ten feet off the snow, and when he came down he held the saber in both hands. The iron weapon sliced cleanly through the ogre's breastbone and filleted the monster, splitting him open like a steaming baked potato. Its faerie blood took flame, purple and deep blue, and gouted in a blaze of streaming energy.

But Thomas wasn't done there. The next ogre threw a rock the size of a volleyball at him. Thomas whirled, dodged it, faked to one side, and then cut across the second ogre's thighs, sending it howling to the ground.

The third ogre hit him with a small tree trunk, baseball style, and turned my brother into a line drive that missed slamming into me by six inches. The ogres howled in fresh aggression and charged.

I'm not a terribly skilled swordsman. I mean, sure, more so than ninety-nine percent of the people on the planet, but among those who know *anything* about it, I don't rate well. To make matters worse, my experience was largely in fencing—fighting with a style that uses long, thin blades; a lot of thrusting, a lot of lunging. Charity's sword would have been at home on the set of *Conan the Barbarian*, and I had only a basic understanding of using the heavier slashing weapon. I have two advantages as fencer. First,

I'm quick, especially for a guy my size. As long as something isn't superhumanly fast, I don't get massively outclassed. Second, I have really long arms and legs, and my lunge could hit a target from a county away.

So I played to my strengths. I let out a howl of my own to match the ogres', and when the one with the club drew near and swept it up over his head in a windup, I lunged, low and quick, and drove about a foot of cold steel into its danglies. I twisted the blade and rolled out to one side as I withdrew it. The club came down on the snow where I'd been. Fire fountained from the ogre's pelvic region. The ogre screamed and ran around in a panicked agony, and the ogres coming behind it slowed their steps, their charge faltering, until the ogre keened and fell over into the snow, the fire of cold iron consuming it. They stared at their fallen comrade.

Hey. I don't care what kind of faerie or mortal or hideous creature you are. If you've got danglies and can lose them, that's the kind of sight that makes you reconsider the possible genitalia-related ramifications of your actions real damned quick.

I bared my teeth at them, and ogre blood sizzled on the steel of my borrowed sword. Never turning from them, I started walking back step by slow, cautious step, tight agony in a fiery band around my ribs reminding me of my injuries. I reached Thomas a second later, and he was just then sitting up. He'd crashed into a boulder, and there was a knot already forming just above one eye. He was still too disoriented to stand.

"Dammit, Thomas," I growled. My left hand wasn't strong enough to grab onto him and haul him up the hill. If I used my right, the sword would be in my weak hand, and I wouldn't be able to defend either one of us. "Get up."

The ogres began gathering momentum, coming for us again.

"Thomas!" I shouted, lifting my sword, staring at the ogres as my shadow abruptly flickered out over the ground between us.

Wait. My shadow did what?

I had part of a second to realize that a new source of light had cast the flickering shadows, and then a bead of intense fire, maybe the size of a Peanut M&M, flashed over my shoulder and splashed over the chest of the nearest ogre. Summer fire slammed the ogre to the ground before it could so much as scream, and began to rip its flesh from its bones.

“I’ve got him!” Fix called, and I saw him in my peripheral vision, sword in hand. He got a shoulder under Thomas’s arm and lifted him with more strength than I would have credited the little guy with. The ogres’ charge came to a complete halt. I shoved my staff through the belt tying up the bundle of mail Thomas had been carrying, lifted it awkwardly to my shoulder, and we fell back toward the rift, never turning our backs on the ogres. They hovered at the edge of visibility in the gusting snow, but did not menace us again.

“Watch your step,” Fix warned me.

Then I felt a rippling sensation around me, and then I stepped into an equatorial sauna.

I found myself on the thin stretch of stage before the screen in Pell’s dingy old theater. I stepped to one side, just as Fix came through with Thomas.

Lily stood on the floor, facing the rift. She looked weary and strained. As soon as Fix came through, she waved a hand as if batting aside an annoying fly. There was a rushing sound, and then the rift folded in on itself and vanished.

Silence fell on the dimly lit theater. Lily melted down onto her knees, one hand holding her up, white hair fallen around her head as she shivered, breathing hard. The ice and frozen snow that had been coating me, gathering in my hair and in the creases of my clothing, vanished, replaced by the usual residual ectoplasm.

“Mmmm,” Thomas observed in a slightly slurred voice. “Slime.”

Fix lowered him to the ground and went to Lily.

“Fix,” I said. “Did you hear what was happening out there?”

“Kicked a beehive, it sounded like.” He knelt beside Lily, providing her his support. “The castle’s garrison came out to meet you?”

“No,” I said. “That was every other Winterfae on the map, apparently.”

“What?” he demanded.

“I, uh, kind of threw a bunch of Summer fire around Mab’s playhouse, and blew up most of this frozen fountain thing.”

Fix’s mouth dropped open. “You *what*?”

“The Scarecrow was hiding behind the thing and so...” I put Charity’s sword down and waved a hand. “Kablooey.”

Fix stared at me as if I'd gone insane. "*You poured Summer fire into Winter's wellspring?*"

"I can't sleep well any night I haven't inflicted a little property damage," I said gravely. "Anyway, I did that, and all hell broke loose. My god-mother told me that anybody who was anybody in Winter had gotten their vengeance on and was coming to kill me."

"My God," Fix breathed. "That would do it all right. Where did you *get* Summer fire to..." His voice trailed off and he stared at Lily.

The Summer Lady looked up, her weary smile gorgeous. "I only provided a minor comfort and guide in order to repay my debt to the lady Charity," she murmured, a small smile on her lips. "I had no way to know that the wizard would steal that power for his own use." She drew in a deep breath and said, "Help me up. We must go."

Fix did so. "Go where?"

I said, "All of those Winter forces are now at the heart of their own realm. Which means that they *aren't* on the borders of Summer waiting to attack. Which means that Summer has forces that can be spared to assist the Council," I said quietly.

"But it only took them a few minutes to show up," Murphy pointed out. "Couldn't they just run back and be there a few minutes from now?"

"No, Murph," I said. "They planned for that. This whole raid was a setup from the get go." I jerked my head at Lily. "Wasn't it."

"That is one way to describe it," Lily said quietly. "I would not, myself, interpret it that way. I had no part in bringing the fetches here—but their presence and their capture of Lady Charity's daughter presented us with an opportunity to temporarily neutralize the presence of Mab's forces upon our borders."

"We," I murmured. "Maeve is working with you. That was why she showed up at McAnally's so quickly."

"Even so," Lily said, bowing her head at me in a nod of what looked like respect.

Fix blinked at Lily. "You're working with *Maeve*?"

"She couldn't have altered the flow of time at the heart of Winter," I said quietly. "Only one of the Winter Queens could do that."

Fix blinked at Lily as if I hadn't spoken. "Maeve's working with *you*?"

Lily nodded. "Like us, she fears Mab's recent madness." She turned back to me. "I provided you with power enough to threaten the wellspring, in the

hope that you would draw some portion of Winter back into its own demesnes. Once that was done, Maeve altered the passage of time relative to the mortal realms.”

I arched an eyebrow. “How long have we been gone?”

“It is nearly sunrise of the day after you departed,” she replied. “Though the passage of time was only altered in the last few moments of your escape. Maeve will not be able to hold it for long, but it will give us time enough to act.”

“What if I hadn’t realized it in time?” I asked her. “What if I hadn’t used your fire?”

She smiled at me, a little sad. “You would be dead, I suppose.”

I glared at her. “And my friends with me.”

“Even so,” she said. “Please understand. The compulsion my Queen has laid upon me permitted me few options. I could not make explanation of what I had in mind. Nor could I simply stand by and do nothing while the Council was in such desperate need.”

“But *now* you can tell me all about it?”

“Now we are discussing history,” she said. She inclined her head to me. Then to Charity. “I am glad, Lady, to see your daughter returned to you.”

Charity looked up at her long enough to give her a swift smile and a nod of thanks. Then she went back to holding her daughter.

“Lily,” I said.

She arched a brow, waiting.

She’d manipulated me, turned me into a weapon to use against Mab. She hadn’t exactly lied to me, but she had taken an awful gamble with my life. Worse, she’d done it with the lives of four of my friends. She had good intentions all the way down the line, I suppose. And she had faced limitations that my instincts told me I still did not fully appreciate or understand. But she hadn’t dealt with me head-on, open and honest.

But then, she was a Faerie Queen in her own right. What in the world had ever given me the impression that she would play her cards faceup?

I sighed. “Thank you for your help,” I said finally.

She smiled, though the sadness was still in it. “I have not been as much a friend to you and yours as you have been to me and mine, wizard. I am glad that I was able to lend you some help.” She bowed to me, from the waist this time. “And now I must take my leave and set things in motion to help your people.”

I returned the bow. "Thank you."

She bowed again to the company, and Fix echoed her. Then they walked swiftly from the theater.

I dropped onto my ass at the edge of the stage, my feet waving.

Murphy joined me. After a moment, she said, "What now?"

I rubbed at my eyes. "Holy ground, I think. I don't think we're going to have any immediate fallout from this, but there's no sense in taking chances now. We'll get back to Forthill, make sure everyone is all right. Food. Sleep."

Murphy let out a groan that was almost lustful. "I like this plan. I'm starving."

I sat there watching Molly and Charity, and felt a twinge of nerves inside me. I'd been sent to find black magic. Molly was it. She'd used her power to renovate someone's brain, and as benign as her intentions might have been, I knew that it hadn't left her unstained. I knew better than anybody how much danger Molly was still in. How dangerous she might now be.

I'd saved her from the bad faeries, sure, but now she faced another, infinitely more dangerous threat.

The White Council. The Wardens. The sword.

It was only a matter of time before someone else managed to trace the black magic back to its source. If I didn't bring her before the Council, someone else would, sooner or later. Even worse, if the mind-controlling magic she'd already used had begun to turn upon her, to warp her as well, she might be a genuine danger to herself and others. She could wind up as dangerous and crazy as the kid whose execution had served as a prelude to the past few days.

If I took her to the Council, I would probably be responsible for her death.

If I didn't, I'd be responsible for those she might harm.

I wished I wasn't so damned tired. I might have been able to come up with some options. I settled for banishing thoughts of tomorrow for the time being. I was whole, and alive, and sane, and so were the people who had stood beside me. We'd gotten the girl out in one piece. Her mom was holding her so ferociously that I wondered if I might not have been the catalyst for a reconciliation between the pair of them.

I might have healed the wounds of their family. And that was a damned fine thing to have done. I felt a genuine warmth and pride from it. I'd

helped to bring mother and daughter back together. For tonight, that was enough.

Thomas sat down on my other side, wincing as he touched the lump on his head. “Harry,” Thomas said. “Remind me why we keep hurling ourselves into this kind of insanity.”

I traded a smile with Murphy and said nothing. We all three of us watched as Charity, on the floor in front of the first row of seats, clutched her daughter hard against her.

Molly leaned against her with a child’s gratefulness, need, and love. She spoke very quietly, never opening her eyes. “Mama.”

Charity said nothing, but she hugged her daughter even more tightly.

“Oh,” Thomas said. “Right.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Right.”

Chapter Forty-one

Father Forthill received us in his typical fashion: with warmth, welcome, compassion, and food. At first, Thomas was going to remain outside Saint Mary's, but I clamped my hand onto the front of his mail and dragged him unceremoniously inside with me. He could have gotten loose, of course, so I knew he didn't really much mind. He growled and snapped at me halfheartedly, but nodded cautiously to Forthill when I introduced him. Then my brother stepped out into the hall and did his unobtrusive-wall-hanging act.

The Carpenter kids were sound asleep when we came in, but the noise made one of them stir, and little Harry opened his eyes, blinked sleepily, then let out a shriek of delight when he saw his mother. The sound awakened the other kids, and everyone assaulted Charity and Molly with happy shouts and hugs and kisses.

I watched the reunion from a chair across the room, and dozed sitting up until Forthill returned with food. There weren't chairs enough for everyone, and Charity wound up sitting on the floor with her back to the wall, chomping down sandwiches while her children all tried to remain within touching distance.

I stuffed my face shamelessly. The use of magic, the excitement, and that final uphill hike through the cold had left my stomach on the verge of implosion. "Survival food," I muttered. "Nothing like it."

Murphy, leaning against the wall beside me, nodded. "Damn right." She wiped at her mouth and looked at her watch. She tucked the last of her sandwich between her lips, and then started resetting the watch while she chewed.

"Gone almost exactly twenty-four hours. So we did some kind of time travel?" she asked.

"Oh, God no," I said. "That's on the list of Things One Does Not Do. It's one of the seven Laws of Magic."

"Maybe," she said. "But however it happened, a whole day just went poof. That's time travel."

“People are doing *that* kind of time travel all the time,” I said. “We just pulled into the passing lane for a while.”

She finished setting the watch and grimaced. “All the same.”

I frowned at her. “You okay?”

She looked up at the children and their mother. “I’m going to have one hell of a time explaining where I’ve been for the past twenty-four hours. It isn’t as though I can tell my boss that I went time traveling.”

“Yeah, he’d never buy it. Tell him you invaded Faerieland to rescue a young woman from a monster-infested castle.”

“Of course,” she said. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

I grunted. “Is it going to make trouble for you?”

She frowned for a moment and then said, “Intradepartmental discipline, probably. They couldn’t get me for anything criminal, so no jail.”

I blinked. “Jail?”

“I was in charge of things, remember?” Murphy reminded me. “I was pushing the line by laying that aside and coming to help you. Throw in that extra day and...” She shrugged.

“Hell’s bells,” I sighed. “I hadn’t realized.”

She shrugged a shoulder.

“How bad is it going to be?” I asked.

She frowned. “Depends on a lot of things. Mostly what Greene and Rick have to say, and how they say it. What other cops who were there have to say. A couple of those guys are major assholes. They’d be glad to make trouble for me.”

“Like Rudolph,” I said.

“Like Rudolph.”

I put on my Bronx accent. “You want I should whack ’em for ya?”

She gave me a quick, ghostly smile. “Better let me sleep on that one.”

I nodded. “But seriously. If there’s anything I can do...”

“Just keep your head down for a while. You aren’t exactly well loved all over the department. There are some people who resent that I keep hiring you, and that they can’t tell me to stop because the cases you’re on have about a ninety percent likelihood of resolution.”

“My effectiveness is irrelevant? I thought cops had to have a degree or something, these days.”

She snorted. “I love my job,” she said. “But sometimes it feels like it has an unnecessarily high moron factor.”

I nodded agreement. "What are they going to do?"

"This will be my first official fuckup," she said. "If I handle it correctly, I don't think they'll fire me."

"But?" I asked.

She pushed some hair back from her eyes. "They'll shove lots of fun counseling and psychological evaluation down my throat."

I tried to imagine Murphy on a therapist's couch.

My brain almost exploded out my ears.

"They'll try every trick they can to convince me to leave," she continued. "And when I don't, they'll demote me. I'll lose SI."

A lead weight landed on the bottom of my stomach. "Murph," I said.

She tried to smile but failed. She just looked sickly and strained. "It isn't anyone's fault, Harry. Just the nature of the beast. It had to be done, and I'd do it again. I can live with that."

Her tone was calm, relaxed, but she was too tired to make it sound genuine. Murphy's command might have been a tricky, frustrating, ugly one, but it was hers. She'd fought for her rank, worked her ass off to get it, and then she got shunted into SI. Only instead of accepting banishment to departmental Siberia, she'd worked even harder to throw it back into the faces of the people who had sent her there.

"It isn't fair," I growled.

"What is?" she asked.

"Bah. One of these days I'm going to go downtown and summon up a swarm of roaches or something. Just to watch the suits run out of the building, screaming."

This time, her smile was wired a little tight. "That won't help me."

"Are you kidding? We could sit outside and take pictures as they came running out and laugh ourselves sick."

"And that helps how?"

"Laughter is good for you," I said. "Nine out of ten stand-up comedians recommend laughter in the face of intense stupidity."

She let out a tired, quiet chuckle. "Let me sleep on that one, too." She pushed away from the wall, drawing her keys from her pocket. "I've got an appointment with the spin doctor," she said. "You want a ride home?"

I shook my head. "Few things I want to do first. Thanks, though."

She nodded and turned to go. Then she paused. "Harry," she said quietly.

"Hmm?"

“What I said in the elevator.”

I swallowed. “Yeah?”

“I didn’t mean it to come out so harsh. You’re a good man. Someone I’m damned proud to call my friend. But I care too much about you to lie to you or lead you on.”

“It’s no one’s fault,” I said quietly. “You had to be honest with me. I can live with that.”

One corner of her mouth quirked into a wry half grin. “What are friends for?”

I sensed a change in tone as she asked the question, a very faint interrogative.

I stood up and put my hand on her shoulder. “I’m your friend. That won’t change, Karrin. Ever.”

She nodded, blinking several times, and for a moment rested her hand on mine. Then she turned to leave. Just then, Thomas poked his head in from the hallway. “Harry, Karrin. You leaving?”

“I am,” she said.

Thomas glanced at me. “Uh-huh. Think I can bum a ride?”

Her car keys rattled. “Sure,” she said.

“Thanks.” He nodded to me. “Thank you for another field trip, Harry. Kind of bland, though. Maybe next time we should bring some coffee or something, so we don’t yawn ourselves to death.”

“Beat it before I kick your whining ass,” I said.

Thomas sneered at me in reply, and he and Murphy left.

I ate the rest of my sandwich, idly noting that I had reached one of those odd little mental moments where I felt too tired to go to sleep. Across the room, Charity and her children had all fallen asleep where she sat on the floor, the children all leaning upon their mother and each other like living pillows. Charity looked exhausted, naturally, and I could see care lines on her face that I’d never really noticed before.

She could be a pain in the ass, but she was one gutsy chick. Her kids were lucky to have a mother like her. A lot of moms would say that they would die for their children. Charity had placed herself squarely in harm’s way to do exactly that.

I regarded the kids for a moment, mostly very young children’s faces, relaxed in sleep. Children whose world had been founded in something as solid as Charity’s love for them would be able to do almost anything.

Between her and her husband, they could be raising an entire generation of men and women with the same kind of power, selflessness, and courage. I'm a pessimist of the human condition, as a rule, but contemplating the future and how the Carpenter kids could contribute to it was the kind of thought that gave me hope for us all, despite myself.

Of course, I suppose someone must once have looked down upon young Lucifer and considered what tremendous potential he contained.

As that unsettling thought went through my head, Molly shifted herself out from under her mother's arm, removed her leg very gently from beneath a little brother's ear, and extracted herself from the slumbering dogpile. She moved quietly for the exit until she glanced up, saw me watching her, and froze for half a step.

"You're awake," she whispered.

"Too tired to sleep," I said. "Where are you going?"

She rubbed her hands on her torn skirts and avoided my eyes. "I...what I put them through. I thought it would be better if I just..."

"Left?" I asked.

She shrugged a shoulder, and didn't lift her eyes. "It won't work. Me staying at home."

"Why not?" I asked.

She shook her head tiredly. "It just won't. Not anymore." She walked out past me.

I moved my right hand smoothly, gripping her hand at the wrist, skin-to-skin contact that conducted the quivering, tingling aura of power of a practitioner of the Art up through my arm. She'd avoided direct contact before, though I hadn't had a reason to think she would at the time.

She froze, staring at my face, as she felt the same presence of power in my own hand.

"You can't stay because of your magic. That's what you mean."

She swallowed. "How...how did you know?..."

"I'm a wizard, kid. Give me some credit."

She folded her arms beneath her breasts, her shoulders hunched. "I should g-go..."

I stood up. "Yeah, you should. We need to talk."

She bit her lip and looked up at me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you've got some tough choices to make, Molly. You've got the power. You're going to have to figure out whether you want to use it. Or

whether you're going to let it use you." I gestured with a hand for her to accompany me and walked out, slowly. We weren't going anywhere. What was important was the walk. She kept pace with me, her body language as closed and defensive as you please.

"When did it start for you?" I asked her quietly.

She chewed her lip. She said nothing.

Maybe I had to give a little to get a little. "It's always like that for people like us. Something happens, almost like it's all by itself, the first time the magic bubbles over. It's usually something small and silly. My first time..." I smiled. "Oh, man. I haven't thought about that in a while." I mused for a moment, thinking. "It was maybe two weeks before Justin adopted me," I said. "I was in school, and small. All elbows and ears. Hadn't hit my growth spurt yet, and it was spring, and we were having this school Olympics. Field day, you know? And I was entered in the running long jump." I grinned. "Man, I wanted to win it. I'd lost every other event to a couple of guys who liked to give me a hard time. So I ran down the blacktop and jumped as hard as I could, yelling the whole time." I shook my head. "Must have looked silly. But when I shouted and jumped, some of the power rolled out of me and threw me about ten feet farther than I should have been able to jump. I landed badly, of course. Sprained my wrist. But I won this little blue ribbon. I still have it back at home."

Molly looked up at me with a little ghost of a smile. "I can't imagine you being smaller than average."

"Everyone's little sometime," I said.

"Were you shy, too?"

"Not as much as I should have been. I had this problem where I gave a lot of lip to older kids. And teachers. And pretty much everyone else who tried to intimidate me, whether or not it was for my own good."

She let out a little giggle. "That I can believe."

"You?" I asked gently.

She shook her head. "Mine is silly, too. I walked home from school one day about two years ago and it was raining, so I ran straight inside. It was errands day, and I thought Mom was gone."

"Ah," I said. "Let me guess. You were still wearing the Gothy McGoth outfit instead of what your mom saw you leave the house in."

Her cheeks flushed pink. "Yes. Only she wasn't running errands. Gran had borrowed the van and taken the little ones to get haircuts because Mom

was sick. I was in the living room and I hadn't changed back. All I wanted was to sink into the floor so she wouldn't see me."

"What happened?"

Molly shrugged. "I closed my eyes. Mom came in. She sat down on the couch and turned on the TV, and never said a word. I opened my eyes and she was sitting there, three feet away, and hadn't even seen me. I walked out really quietly, and she never even glanced at me. I mean, at first I thought she'd gone crazy or into denial or something. But she really hadn't seen me. So I snuck back to my room, changed clothes, and she was none the wiser."

I lifted my eyebrows, impressed. "Wow. Really?"

"Yes." She peered up at me. "Why?"

"Your first time out you called up a veil on nothing but instinct. That's impressive, kid. You've got a gift."

She frowned. "Really?"

"Absolutely. I'm a full wizard of the White Council, and I can't do a reliable veil."

"You can't? Why not?"

I shrugged. "Why are some people wonderful singers, even without training, and other people can't carry a tune in a bucket? It's something I just don't have. That you do..." I shook my head. "It's impressive. It's a rare talent."

She frowned over that, her gaze turning inward for a moment. "Oh."

"Bet you got one hell of a headache afterward."

She nodded. "Yes, actually. Like an ice-cream headache, only two hours long. How did you know?"

"It's a fairly typical form of sensory feedback for improperly channeled energy," I said. "Everyone who does magic winds up with one sooner or later."

"I haven't read about anything like that."

"Is that what you did next? You figured out you could become the invisible girl, and went and studied books?"

She was quiet for a moment, and I thought she was about to close up again. But then she said, quietly, "Yes. I mean, I knew how hard my Mom would be on me if I was...showing interest in that kind of thing. So I read books. The library, and a couple others that I got at Barnes and Noble."

“Barnes and Noble,” I sighed, shaking my head. “You didn’t head into any of the local occult shops?”

“Not then,” she said. “But...I tried to meet people. You know? Like, Wiccans and psychics and stuff. That was how I met Nelson, at a martial arts school. I’d heard the teacher knew things. But I don’t think he did. Some of Nelson’s friends were into magic, too, or thought they were. I never saw any of them do anything.”

I grunted. “What did all those people tell you about magic?”

“What *didn’t* they tell me,” she said. “Everyone thinks magic is something different.”

“Heh,” I said. “Yeah.”

“And it wasn’t like I could just go running around all the time. Not with school and the little ones to watch and my Mom looking over my shoulder. So, you know. Mostly books. And I practiced, you know? Tried little things. Little, teeny glammers. Lighting candles. But a lot of the things I tried didn’t work.”

“Magic isn’t easy,” I said. “Not even for someone with a strong natural talent. Takes a lot of practice, like anything else.” I walked quietly for a few steps and then said, “Tell me about the spell you used on Rosie and Nelson.”

She paused, staring at nothing, the blood draining from her face. “I had to,” she said.

“Go on.”

Her pretty features were bleak. “Rosie had...she’d already had a miscarriage, because she kept getting high. And when she lost the baby, she went to the hard stuff. Heroin. I begged her to go into rehab, but she was just...too far gone, I guess. But I thought maybe I could help her. With magic. Like you help people.”

Hooboy. I kept the dismay off my face and nodded for her to continue.

“And one day last week, Sandra Marling and I had a talk. And during it, she told me how they were discovering that the presence of a very strong source of fear could bypass all kinds of psychological barriers. Things like addiction. That the fear could drive home a lesson, reliably and quickly. I didn’t have much time. I had to do it to save Rosie’s child.”

I grunted. “Why do Nelson, too?”

“He was...he was using too much. He and Rosie sort of reinforced each other. And I wasn’t sure what might happen, so I tried the spell out before I

used it on her, too.”

“You tested it on Nelson?” I asked. “Then did the same one on Rosie?”

She nodded. “I had to scare them away from the drugs. I sent them both a nightmare.”

“Stars and stones,” I muttered. “A nightmare.”

Molly’s voice became defensive. “I had to do something. I couldn’t just sit there.”

“Do you have any idea how much you hurt them both?” I asked.

“Hurt them?” she said, apparently bewildered. “They were fine.”

“They weren’t fine,” I said quietly. “But the same spell should have done more or less the same thing to both of them. It acted differently on Nelson than Rosie.” And then I put two and two together again and said, “Ah. Now I get it.”

She didn’t look up at me.

“Nelson was the father,” I said quietly.

She shrugged. A tear streaked down her cheek. “They probably didn’t even know what they were doing when it happened. The pair of them were just...” She shook her head and fell silent.

“That explains why your spell damaged Nelson so much more severely.”

“I don’t understand. I never hurt him.”

“I don’t think you did it on purpose.” I waved a hand, palm up. “Magic comes from a lot of places. But especially from your emotions. They influence almost anything you can do. You were angry at Nelson when you cast the spell. Contaminated the whole thing with your anger.”

“I did not hurt them,” she said stubbornly. “I saved their lives.”

“I don’t think you realize the ramifications,” I said.

She spun to me and shrieked, “*I did not hurt them!*”

The air suddenly crackled with tension; vague, unfocused energy centered on the screaming girl. There was enough energy to manage something unfortunate, and it was clear that the kid wasn’t in anything like control of her power. I shook my head and swung my left hand in a half circle, palm faced out, and simply drew in the magical energy her emotions had generated and grounded it into the earth before somebody got hurt.

A tingle of sensation washed up my arm, surprisingly intense. Her talent was not a modest one. I started to snap a reprimand for her carelessness, but aborted it before the first word. In the first place, she was ignorant of what she’d done. Not innocent, but not wholly at fault, all the same. In the

second place, she'd just been through a nightmarish ordeal at the hands of wicked faeries. She probably couldn't have controlled her emotions, even if she wanted to.

She stared at me in surprise as the energy she had raised vanished. The rage and pain in her stance and expression faded to uncertainty.

"I didn't hurt them," she said in a rather small voice. "I saved them."

"Molly, you need to know the facts. I know you're tired and scared. But that doesn't change a damned thing about what you did to them. You fucked around with their minds. You used magic to enslave them to your will, and the fact that you meant well by it doesn't matter at all. Somewhere inside of them both, they *know* what you've done to them, subconsciously. They'll try to fight it. Regain control of their own choices. And that struggle is going to tear their psyches to shreds."

More tears fell from her eyes. "B-but..."

I went on in a steady voice. "Rosie was better off. She might recover from it in a few years. But Nelson is probably insane already. He might not ever make it back. And doing it to them has screwed around with your own head. Not as bad as Rosie and Nelson, but you damaged yourself, too. It'll make it harder for you to control impulses and your magic. Which makes you a lot more likely to lose control and hurt someone else. It's a vicious cycle. I've seen it in action."

She shook her head several times. "No. No, no, no."

"Here's another truth," I said. "The White Council has seven Laws of Magic. Screwing around in other people's heads breaks one of them. When the Council finds out what you've done, they'll put you on trial and execute you. Trial, sentence, and execution won't take an hour."

She fell silent, staring at me, crying harder. "Trial?" she whispered.

"A couple of days ago I watched them execute a kid who had broken the same law."

Her shocked expression could not seem to recover. Her eyes roamed randomly, blurred with tears. "But...I didn't know."

"Doesn't matter," I said.

"I never meant to hurt anyone."

"Ditto."

She broke out into a half-hysterical sob and clutched at her stomach. "But...but that's not fair."

“What is?” I said quietly. “One more hard truth for you. I’m a Warden of the Council now, Molly. It’s my job to take you to them.”

She only stared. She looked wracked with pain, helpless, alone. God help me, she looked like the little girl I’d first met at Michael’s house years before. I had to remind myself that there was another, darker portion of the girl behind those blue eyes. The snarling rage, the denial, they both belonged to the parts of her mind that had been twisted as she twisted others.

I wished that I hadn’t seen flashes of that other self in her, because I did not want to follow the chain of consequence that sprang from it. Molly had broken the Laws of Magic. She’d inflicted incalculable harm on others. Her damaged psyche could collapse on her, leaving her insane.

All of which meant that she was dangerous.

Ticking-bomb dangerous.

It did not matter to the Laws that she had meant well. She had become exactly the kind of person that the Laws of Magic—and their sentence—were created to deal with.

But when the law fails to protect those it governs, it’s up to someone else to pick up the slack—in this case, me. There was a chance that I could save her life. It wasn’t an enormous chance, but it was probably the best shot she was going to get. Assuming, of course, that she was not already too far around the bend.

I only knew one sure way to find out.

I stopped in the darkened hall and turned to her. “Molly. Do you know what a soulgaze is?”

“It...I read in a book that it’s when you look into someone’s eyes. You see something about who they are.”

“Close enough,” I agreed. “You ever done it?”

She shook her head. “The book said it could be dangerous.”

“Can be,” I confirmed. “Though probably not for the reasons you’d think. When you see someone like that, Molly, there’s no hiding the truth about who you are. You see it all, good and bad. No specifics, usually, but you get a damned good idea about what kind of person they are. And it’s for keeps. Once you’ve seen it, it stays in your head, fresh, period. And when you look at them, they get the same look at you.”

She nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“I’d like to gaze on you, if you’re willing to permit it.”

“Why?”

I smiled a little, though my reflection in a passing window looked mostly sad. “Because I want to help you.”

She turned away, as if to start walking again, but only swayed in place, her torn skirts whispering. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m not going to hurt you, kid. But I need you to trust me for a little while.”

She nodded, biting her lip. “Okay. What do I do?”

I stopped and turned to face her. She mirrored me. “This might feel a little weird. But it won’t last as long as it seems.”

“Okay,” she said, that lost-child tone still in her voice.

I met her eyes.

For a second, I thought nothing had happened. And then I realized that the soulgaze was already up and running, and that it showed me Molly, standing and facing me as nothing more than she seemed to be. But I could see down the hall behind her, and the church’s windows held half a dozen different reflections.

One was an emaciated version of Molly, as though she’d been starved or strung out on hard drugs, her eyes aglow with an unpleasant, fey light. One was her smiling and laughing, older and comfortably heavier, children surrounding her. A third faced me in a grey Warden’s cloak, though a burn scar, almost a brand, marred the roundness of her left cheek. Still another reflection was Molly as she appeared now, though more secure, laughter dancing in her eyes. Another reflection showed her at a desk, working.

But the last...

The last reflection of Molly wasn’t the girl. Oh, it *looked* like Molly, externally. But the eyes gave it away. They were flat as a reptile’s, empty. She wore all black, including a black collar, and her hair had been dyed to match. Though she looked like Molly, like a human being, she was neither. She had become something else entirely, something very, very bad.

Possibilities. I was looking at possibilities. There was definitely a strong presence of darkness in the girl, but it had not yet gained dominion over her. In all the potential images, she was a person of power—different kinds of power, certainly, but she was strong in all of them. She was going to wind up with power of her own to use or misuse, depending on what choices she made.

What she needed was a guide. Someone to show her the ropes, to give her the tools she would need to deal with her newfound power, and all the baggage that came with it. Yes, that kernel of darkness still burned coldly within her, but I could hardly throw stones there. Yes, she had the potential to go astray on an epic scale.

Don't we all.

I thought of Charity and Michael, Molly's parents, her family. Her strength had been forged and founded in theirs. They both regarded the use of magic as something suspect at best, and if not inherently evil, then inherently dangerous. Their opposition to the power that Molly had manifested might turn the strength they'd given their daughter against her. If she believed or came to believe that her power was an evil, it could push her faster down the left-hand path.

I knew something of how much Michael and Charity cared for their daughter.

But they couldn't help her.

One thing was certain, though, and gave me a sense of reassurance. Molly had not yet indelibly stained herself. Her future had yet to be written.

It was worth fighting for.

The gaze ended, and the various images in the windows behind Molly vanished. The girl herself trembled like a frightened doe, staring up at me with her eyes wide and huge.

"My God," she whispered. "I never knew..."

"Easy," I told her. "Sit down until things stop spinning."

I helped her settle to the floor with her back to the wall, and I did the same beside her. I rubbed at a spot between my eyebrows that began to twinge.

"What did you see?" she whispered.

"That you're basically a decent person," I told her. "That you have a lot of potential. And that you're in danger."

"Danger?"

"Power's like money, kid. It isn't easy to handle well, and once you start getting it, you can't have enough. I think you're in danger because you've made a couple of bad choices. Used your power in ways that you shouldn't. Keep it up, and you'll wind up working for the dark side."

She drew her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs. "Did...did you get what you needed?"

"Yeah," I said. "You have a couple of choices to make, Molly. Starting with whether or not you want to turn yourself in to the Council."

She rocked back and forth, a nervous motion. "Why would I?"

"Because they're going to find you, sooner or later. If that happens, if they think you're trying to avoid them, they'll probably kill you out of hand. But if you're willing to cooperate and face up to what you've done, and if someone intercedes on your behalf, the Council might withhold a death sentence."

"Aren't you just going to turn me in anyway?"

"No," I said. "It's about choices, Molly. This one is yours. I'll respect what you want to do."

She frowned. "Would you get in trouble with them for that?"

I shrugged. "Not sure. They might kill me for being in collusion with an evil wizard."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Really?"

"They aren't exactly overflowing with tolerance and forgiveness and agape love," I told her. "They've almost pulled the trigger on me a couple of times. They're dangerous people."

She shivered. "You'd...you'd risk that for me?"

"Yep."

She frowned, chewing that over. "And if I turn myself in?"

"Then we'll explain what happened. I'll intercede for you. If the Council accepts that, then I'll be held responsible for your training and your use of magic."

She blinked. "You mean...I'd be your apprentice?"

"Pretty much," I said. "But you have to understand something. It would mean that you agree to accept my leadership. If I tell you to do something, you do it. No questions, no delays. What I can teach you is no damn game. It's the power of life and death, and there's no room for anyone who doesn't work hard to control it. If you go to the Council with me, you're accepting those terms. Got it?"

She shivered and nodded.

"Next, you have to decide what you want to do with your power."

"What are my choices?" she asked.

I shrugged. “You’ve got the juice to make the White Council, eventually, if that’s what you want. Or you can find something worth supporting with your talents. I’ve heard of a couple of wizards who have made stupid amounts of money with their skills. Or hell, maybe after you learn to control yourself, you just set them aside. Let them fade.” *Like your mom did.*

“I could never do that last one,” she said.

I snorted. “Think about it, kid. You join up with the wizards now and you wind up in the middle of the war. The bad guys won’t care that you’re young and untrained.”

She chewed on her lip. “I should talk with my parents. Shouldn’t I?”

I exhaled slowly. “If you want to, you should. But you’ve got to realize that this is going to be your choice. You can’t let anyone else make it for you.”

She was quiet for a long time. Then she asked, in a very small voice, “Do you really think I could...could like, join the dark side?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “There are plenty of things out there who would be happy to help you along. Which is why I want to give you a hand—so that I can steer you away from that type until you know enough to handle them on your own.”

“But...” Her face scrunched up. “I don’t *want* to be a bad guy.”

“No one *wants* it,” I said. “Most of the bad guys in the real world don’t know that they *are* bad guys. You don’t get a flashing warning sign that you’re about to damn yourself. It sneaks up on you when you aren’t looking.”

“But the Council...they’ll see that, right? That I don’t want to be like that?”

“I can’t guarantee you that they’ll believe that. And even if they do, they might decide to execute you anyway.”

She sat very still. I listened to her breathe. “If I go to the Council...can my parents come with me?”

“No.”

She swallowed. “Will you?”

“Yes.”

She met my eyes again, this time without fear of a soulgaze beginning. That ship had sailed. Tear-stained cheeks gleamed and curved into a little smile that could not hide the fear behind it.

I reached out and put my hand over hers. "I'll promise you this, Molly. I don't intend to let them hurt you. Period. The only way anyone will lay a finger on you is over my dead body." Which would not be difficult for the Council to arrange, but there was no sense in mentioning that to the girl. Her day had been scary enough. "I think going with me is your best chance to get out of this," I continued. "If you decide that it's what you want, we'll sit down with your parents. They won't be thrilled with the idea, but they can't make the call on this one. It's yours. It has to be, or it won't mean anything."

She nodded and closed her eyes for a moment. Poor kid. She looked so damned young. I was fairly sure I had never been that young.

Then she drew in a deep, shaking breath and said, "I want to go to the Council."

Chapter Forty-two

I talked Molly into staying at the church with her family until everyone had gotten some rest and we could talk things out with her mother. Any sane man would have hopped a bus for Las Vegas or somewhere rather than wait around and tell Charity Carpenter he wanted to haul her first baby in front of a gang of powerful wizards for trial and possible execution.

I found an unused cot and flopped onto it. My shins hung off the end of the undersized thing, and I didn't care a bit. Nails clicked in unsteady rhythm on tile, and I felt Mouse's warm, silent presence limp carefully to the floor beside my cot. I reached out, ruffled his ears, and laid my hand on the thick ruff of fur across his shoulders. I was asleep before he settled himself down to sleep beside me.

I woke up later, in the same position I'd fallen asleep. I had a crick in my neck, and one hand dangled over the side of the bed. It had lost enough circulation to feel numb and floppy, and I had to squint over the side of the cot to see that it was still resting on Mouse's furry back. The room was unlit, but the door to the hallway was open, and afternoon-flavored sunlight lit the hall.

I wanted to go back to sleep, but I hauled myself to my feet and stumbled down the hall to the bathroom, Mouse limping along beside me without complaint. I availed myself of indoor plumbing, and found myself wishing that they had a shower. I made do with a birdbath in the sink, and shambled back down to Forthill's guest room.

The cots were all but empty. Nelson slept in one of them, faint twitches randomly stirring his limbs. His closed eyes rolled back and forth, and he had broken into a light sweat. Nightmares, I supposed. Poor kid. I wished I could have helped, but realistically there wasn't anything I could do for him.

Molly slept in another cot; the motionless, black sleep of the truly exhausted. Charity sat in a chair beside the cot, her head tilted back against the wall. She snored a little. One of her hands rested on Molly's hair.

I regarded them both in silence for a while. I thought about writing the whole thing off, conjuring up a wistful image of digging a hole, getting in,

and then pulling the hole in after me. Hey, it worked for Bugs Bunny.

"I should have taken a left turn at Albuquerque," I sighed to Mouse.

Mouse settled down on the floor again, and lay on his side, holding his injured leg clear of the floor.

"Yeah, you're right," I said. "I'm too stupid to be uninvolved. No sense in putting off the inevitable."

So I got up, went over to Molly, and gently shook her shoulder. Charity woke up when I did, blinking disorientation from her eyes. Molly took a little bit longer, but then she took a sharp breath and sat up in bed, mirroring her mother.

"Yes? Is everyone all right?" Charity asked.

"As far as I know," I told her. "Where are the other kids?"

"My mother took them home."

"Any word from Michael?"

She shook her head.

"We need to talk about something fairly important, please."

"And what is that?" she asked.

"Worth waking up for. Maybe you could get up, get some water on your face while I hunt down some coffee."

"We do need to talk, Momma," Molly said in a gentle tone.

She frowned at me for a moment, and I thought she was going to argue with me about it. Then she shook her head and said, "Very well."

I made it so. I raided the small staff kitchen and came away with not only coffee, but several bagels and some fresh fruit. I left a few bucks on the counter under a saltshaker, then went back to Molly and Charity.

We sat down to eat our breakfast in the shadowy room.

I laid it out for Charity just as I had for Molly.

"Black magic," Charity whispered, when I had finished. She glanced at Molly, a faint frown troubling her features. "I never thought it had gone that far."

"I know, Momma," Molly said quietly.

"Is what he says true?"

Molly nodded.

"Oh, baby," Charity sighed. She touched Molly's hair with one hand. "How could I not have seen this happening?"

"Don't beat yourself up over it," I told her. "At least not right now. It won't help anyone."

Anger touched her features and she said, “Neither will this nonsense with the White Council. Of course she will not go.”

“I don’t think you get it,” I told Charity in a quiet voice. “She’s going. She can go voluntarily, or she can go when the Wardens find her. But she’s going.”

“You plan to inform them of what has happened, then?” Charity asked, her tone gaining frost as it went.

“No,” I said. “But that kind of magic leaves a mark. There are plenty of things in the Nevernever who can sense it—and, in fact, they had already tipped off the Council that there was black magic afoot here. Even if I never say anything else about it, it’s only a matter of time until another Warden investigates.”

“You don’t know that for a fact.”

“I kind of do,” I said. “And this isn’t just about accountability, either. The things she’s done have already left their mark on her. If she doesn’t get support and training, those changes are going to snowball.”

“You don’t *know* that,” Charity insisted.

“I kind of do,” I said, louder. “Hell’s bells, Charity, I’m trying to protect her.”

“By dragging her in front of a kangaroo court of egotistic, power-mongering tyrants? So that they can execute her? How is that *protecting* my child?”

“If she goes in voluntarily, with me, I think I can get her clemency until she has a chance to show them that she is sincere about working with them.”

“You *think*?” Charity said. “No. That’s not good enough.”

I clenched my fists in frustration. “Charity, the only thing I *am* sure about is that if Molly doesn’t come out, and if one of the other egotistical, power-mongering tyrants finds her, they’re going to automatically declare her a warlock and execute her. To say nothing of what will happen to her if she’s on her own. It’s more than likely that she’ll deserve it by then.”

“That’s *not* true,” Charity snapped. “She is *not* going to become some sort of monster. She is *not* going to change.”

“My God, Charity. I want to help her!”

“That isn’t why you’re doing it,” she snarled, rising. “You’re trying to get her to go with you to save your own skin. You’re afraid that if they find

her, they will brand you traitor for not bringing her in, and execute you along with her.”

I found myself on my feet as well. Silence fell heavy and oppressive on the room.

“Momma,” Molly said quietly, breaking it. “Please tell me what Harry has done in the past two days to make you think that he is selfish. Or cowardly. Was it when he turned to face the ogres so that we could escape? Was it when he traded away the obligations the Summer Lady owed him in order to attempt the rescue?”

Charity was shocked silent for a second. Then her face heated and she said, “Young lady, that isn’t—”

Molly went on smoothly, her voice quiet, calm, displaying neither anger nor disrespect—nor weakness. “Or perhaps it was when you were unconscious and no one could have stopped him from simply taking me to turn over to the Council, and he instead stopped to give me a choice.” She chewed on her lip for a second. “You told me everything he’s done since I was taken. Now he’s offering to die for me, Momma. What more could you ask of him?”

Charity’s face reddened further, and I thought I saw something like shame on her features. She sat down again, bowed her head, and said nothing. The silence stretched. Her shoulders shook.

Molly slid down to kneel at her mother’s feet and hugged her. Charity hugged back. The pair of them rocked slowly back and forth for a moment, and though the dim room made it hard to see, I was sure they were both crying.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Charity said after a moment. “I should not have accused you so, Mister Dresden.” She squared her shoulders and lifted her head. “But I will not allow her to go.”

Molly looked up very slowly. She faced Charity, lifted her chin a little, and said, “I love you very much, Momma. But this isn’t your choice. I’m the one responsible for what I did. I’ll face the consequences of it.”

Charity turned her face away from Molly, a kind of terrible grief and fear making her look, for the first time in my memory, old. “Molly,” she whispered.

Father Forthill had arrived at some point during the conversation, though none of us had noticed him in the doorway. His gentle voice was steady. “Your daughter is in the right, Charity,” he said. “She’s an adult now, in

many ways. She's taken actions that demand that she accept the responsibilities that accompany them."

"She is my child," Charity objected.

"She was," Forthill corrected her, "if only for a time. Children are a precious gift, but they belong to no one but themselves. They are only lent us a little while." The priest folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorway. "I think you should consider what has happened, Charity. Dresden is perhaps the only one who *could* have helped you and Molly. I think it no accident that he became involved in this situation." He gave me a whimsical little smile. "After all. He does work in mysterious ways."

I walked across the floor and lowered myself to one knee before Charity. "I don't know anything about that. But for whatever it is worth, I promise you," I said very quietly. "I will bring your daughter back from the Council safe and well. They'll have to kill me to stop me."

Charity looked up at me, and I saw a dozen emotions flicker over her features. Hope, fear, anger, sadness. Twice she opened her mouth to speak, but bit down on the words before she uttered them.

Finally, she whispered, "I have your word on it?"

"You do," I said.

She stared at me for a moment. Then she looked up and said, to Forthill, "I wish Michael was here."

Forthill asked her, "If he was, what do you think he would say?"

Her eyes moved back to me, and she said, frowning faintly, "To have faith. To trust the wizard. That he is a good man."

The priest nodded. "I think he would say that, too."

Charity glanced at me without meeting my eyes. "How long will it take?"

"I'll contact the Council today. Depends on who is available, but this kind of thing gets high priority. Tomorrow, the next day at the latest."

She bowed her head again, and nodded. She said to Forthill, "Is there nothing we can do?"

"Molly's made her decision," Forthill said quietly. "And everything I've learned about the effects of black magic upon those who use it agrees with what Dresden has told you. Your daughter is in very real danger, Charity."

"Can't the Church...?"

Forthill gave her a faint smile and shook his head. "There aren't many of us still standing sentinel against the Shadows. Of those who do, none of us have any real skill with magic. We could assist her in turning aside from her gifts, but given her age it would in effect be nothing more than imprisonment." He nodded to Molly. "And, no offense, child, but with your temperament, without your full cooperation, it would only push you more quickly toward the darkness."

"No," Charity said. "She's got to set this aside."

Molly folded her arms tightly against her stomach, and nodded, lips pressed together. "No."

Charity looked up and all but pleaded, "Molly. You don't understand what it could do to you."

The girl was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Do you remember the parable of the talents?"

Charity's eyes blazed. "Don't you *dare* attempt to use the scripture to justify this."

I held up a hand for silence and said, "I haven't read this one."

Forthill said, "Three men were given money by their lord in the amount of fifteen, ten, and five silver talents. The man with fifteen invested the money, worked hard, and returned thirty talents to his lord. The man with ten did the same, and returned twenty talents. The lord was most pleased. But the third man was lazy. He buried his five talents in the ground, and when he returned them to the lord, expecting to be rewarded for keeping them safe, his lord was angry. He had not given the lazy man the money to be hidden away. He'd given it to the man so that he could use it and make his lands better, stronger, and more productive. The moral being that, to whom much is given, much is required."

"Oh," I said. "Stan Lee said it better. Or at least faster."

"I'm sorry?" Forthill said.

"Spider-Man. With great power comes great responsibility," I said.

Forthill pursed his lips and nodded. "That *is* faster, I suppose. Though I'm skeptical on how it could be worked into a sermon."

I frowned and glanced at Charity. She had her head bowed, and her hands clenched into fists over and over again. Another insight about her hit me, then.

Charity had been the one given five talents. She'd had the power, and she buried it in the ground.

“My teacher told me something once,” I heard myself say in a quiet voice. “That the hardest lesson in life is learning when to do nothing. To learn to let go.”

Molly laid her head in Charity’s lap and said, “You know bad things are out there. I have a chance to make a difference. I want to help.”

Something inside the steely will of Michael’s wife suddenly broke. She gathered Molly up into another hug and just held her there while she shivered. Then Charity whispered, “Of course you do. You’re your father’s child. How could you want anything else?”

Molly let out a choking little laugh and leaned closer. “Thank you.”

“I will pray for you,” Charity said quietly. She looked up at me and tried to smile. “And for you, Harry.”

Chapter Forty-three

Forthill led me to a small, cluttered office I was sure was his own. He pointed me at the phone and then shut the door, giving me privacy before I could ask him for it. I sat down on the edge of his desk, got the notebook I kept my contact information in from my duster pocket, and called up the Wardens.

I did a password and countersign routine with the young-sounding woman who answered the phone, after which she asked, in accented English, “What is the nature of your call?”

“A report,” I said. “I’ve got a young woman here who’s broken one of the Laws.”

“You’ve captured a warlock?” the woman asked.

“She turned herself in, full cooperation. There are extenuating circumstances around it. I want her to have a hearing.”

“A hearing...” the young woman said. I heard paper rustling. “Warden, I’m sorry, but I don’t think we do hearings anymore.”

“Sure we do,” I said. “We just haven’t had one for ten or twelve years. Pass word to command and tell them we’ll use the same location, sundown tomorrow. I’m tasking Warden Ramirez with security.”

“I don’t know,” the woman hedged. She sounded young and uncertain. Our recent losses to the Red Court had created openings for a lot of young wizards, and they had inherited a hellishly dangerous responsibility from the fallen. “I’m not sure if this is appropriate.”

“This is how we’re doing it,” I told her. “All you have to do is get word to Morgan and Luccio. Tell them what I said. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she said. She sounded almost grateful. “I’ll pass word up the line.”

“Thank you,” I said, and hung up.

I took a deep breath. Word was on its way to the Wardens, and now I was committed.

There was a knock, and then Forthill opened the door. “Finished?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Of course. Is there anything else I might do?”

I shook my head. "You've done more than enough already."

He smiled a little. "Arguable," he said. "Though, may I ask you something?"

I nodded.

"The young man," he said. "Nelson. Is he truly pursued?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so. No reason for him to be. Molly worked a spell on him that forced him to feel fear of drug use."

He frowned. "And you think it brought on a sense of paranoia?"

"She didn't know how badly her own feelings for him would disrupt the spell. She didn't mean to do it, but she laid a world of hurt on the boy." I shook my head. "Paranoia. Nightmares. Phobias. And he's feeling the physical withdrawal from the drugs, to boot. He could be permanently damaged."

"Poor lad," Forthill said.

"I don't know how to begin helping him, Father," I said. I paused for a moment, then said, "He's an orphan."

Forthill smiled and took off his spectacles. He polished them with a handkerchief. "You may not know where to begin to help. I do. Don't worry, Dresden. The boy won't be left alone."

"Thank you," I said.

"I don't do it for you," he said, "but for the boy. And from obedience to our Lord. But you're welcome."

I put the notebook away and stood up, but Forthill remained in the doorway, his expression direct.

"Tell me," Forthill said. He squinted at his glasses, making sure they were clean. "Do you believe that you'll be able to protect the girl?"

"I think so," I said quietly. I didn't have many friends on the Council. But the ones I did have were on the Senior Council—it's an executive body, especially in wartime. They'd support me. It wouldn't clear the kid completely, but at least she could be placed on a kind of zero-tolerance probation rather than executed.

Forthill watched me with patient, bright blue eyes. "You sound familiar with this situation."

I smiled a little. "Intimately."

"I begin to see," he said.

"Tell me," I said. "Do you really believe what you told Charity about me? That God arranged for me to be there for Molly?"

He regarded me as he replaced his spectacles, bright blue eyes steady. "I do. I know that you don't much hold with religion, Dresden. But I've come to know you over the years. I think you're a decent man. And that God knows his own."

"Meaning what?" I asked.

He smiled and shook his head. "Meaning, mostly, that I have faith that all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord. I meant what I said about you."

I snorted gently and shook my head. "Harry Dresden. I'm on a mission from God."

"Seems an awfully unlikely coincidence, does it not? That the one person Michael knows on the Council should be the one in the position to best help his daughter, just when he was called away?"

I shrugged. "Coincidences happen," I said. "And I don't think God's got me warming up in the bullpen to be one of his champions."

"Perhaps not," Forthill said. "But I think that you are being prepared, nonetheless."

"Prepared?" I asked. "For what? By whom?"

Forthill shook his head. "It's an old man's hunch, that's all. That the things you're facing now are there to prepare you for something greater. Something more."

"God," I said. "I *hope* not. I've got problems enough without working up to bigger ones."

He chuckled and nodded. "Perhaps you're right."

I frowned over a thought. "Padre. Tell me something. Why in the world would the Almighty send Michael off on a mission just when his family most needed him to protect them?"

Forthill arched an eyebrow. "My son," he said, "God knows all things at all times. By His very nature, his omniscience enables Him to know what has happened, is happening, and will happen. Though we might not be able to see His reasons, or to agree with them from our perspectives, they are yet there."

"So what you're saying is that the Almighty knows best, and we just have to trust Him."

Forthill blinked. "Well. Yes."

"Is there any reason that the Almighty couldn't do something blatantly obvious?"

Poor Forthill. He'd been preparing himself for years for a theological duel with the shadowy wizard Dresden, and when the moment came, I wasn't even giving him a real fight. "Well. No. What do you mean?"

"Like maybe the Almighty didn't send Michael away right when he was needed to protect his daughter. Maybe He sent Michael away because that's exactly what He wanted him to do." I let out a short laugh. "If I'm wrong, it would be one hell of a coincidence..." I frowned for a moment, then said, "Do me a favor. Go get Molly for me. Council procedure says that I can't leave her alone. I've got to keep her with me until it's done."

He rose and nodded, agreeable if still slightly baffled. "Very well."

"And I need to know something, Father. Do you know where Michael is right now?"

Forthill shook his head.

"Could you get word to him?" I asked. "I mean, if you really had to?"

He tilted his head, frowning, and asked, "Why?"

"Because I've had an idea," I said. "Can you get in touch with him?"

Forthill smiled.

Chapter Forty-four

My mechanic's skills bordered on the supernatural. He left word with me that the Beetle was ready to resume active duty, and that while it didn't look like much, the car would roll when I pushed the pedals—which was all I really needed it to do. So Molly and I rolled up to the lakeside warehouse where I'd met with the Council at the start of this mess.

When I shut down the engine, the Beetle rattled and shuddered hard enough to click my teeth together before it died. It continued wheezing and clicking for several seconds afterward.

Molly stared out ahead of her, her face pale. "Is this the place?"

The rundown old warehouse looked different in the orange evening light than it had at high noon. Shadows were longer and darker, and emphasized the flaws and dents in the building, giving the place a much more rundown, abandoned appearance than I had remembered. There were fewer cars there, as well, and it gave the place an even more abandoned atmosphere.

"That's the place," I said quietly. "You ready?"

She swallowed. "Sure," she said, but she looked frightened and very, very young. "What comes next?"

I got out of the car as an answer, and Molly followed suit. I squinted around, but no one was in sight until the air shimmered about twenty feet away and Ramirez stepped out of the veil that had hidden him.

Carlos Ramirez was the youngest wizard ever given the post of regional commander in the Wardens. He was average height, his skin glowing with bronze health, and he wore both the grey cloak of the Wardens and one of their—or rather, *our*, except that I don't have one—silver swords at his left hip. At his right he wore a heavy semiautomatic in a holster, and his military-style web belt also bore several hand grenades.

"Good veil," I said. "Way better than the other day."

"I wasn't here the other day," he assured me with bland confidence.

"Your work?" I asked.

"I make it look easy," he said without a trace of modesty. "It's a curse to be so damned talented when I'm already obscenely good-looking, but I try to soldier on as best I can."

I laughed and offered him my hand. He shook it. "Dresden," he said.

"Ramirez." I nodded to my right. "This is Molly Carpenter."

He glanced at the girl, looking her up and down. "Miss," he said, without a polite bow of his head. He glanced at me, indicated a direction with his hand, and said, "They're ready for you. But walk with me for a minute? I need to talk with you." He glanced at Molly. "Privately."

I arched a brow at him. "Molly, I'll be right back."

She bit her lip and nodded. "O-okay."

"Miss," Ramirez said with a somewhat apologetic smile. "I need you to remain exactly where you're standing now. All right?"

"Hell's bells," I muttered. "You think she's that dangerous?"

"I think it's security protocol," Ramirez said. "If you didn't want me doing it, you shouldn't have asked me."

I started to snarl an answer, but I choked it down and said, "Fine. Molly, just stand there for now. I won't go out of sight of you."

She nodded, and I turned with Ramirez. We walked several paces away over the gravel before he asked, "That the kid?"

Ramirez wasn't old enough to get good car insurance rates himself, much less to refer to someone as "kid," though he'd had to grow up awfully swiftly. He'd been an apprentice when the war with the Red Court erupted, and he'd done good service for the Council upon attaining status as a full wizard, fighting in several nasty engagements with the vampires. It was the kind of thing that made a man age in a hurry.

"That's her," I confirmed. "Did you get a chance to examine the victims?"

"Yeah." He frowned and watched me for a moment before he said, "She's someone you know."

I nodded.

He glanced back at her. "Crud."

I frowned at him. "Why?"

"I don't think today is going to go well for her," Ramirez said.

My stomach suddenly felt cold. "Why not?"

"Because of how the battle in Oregon played out," he said. "Once the forces from Summer attacked their rear, we gave the vamps one hell of a beating. Morgan got within about twenty feet of the Red King himself."

"Morgan killed him?"

“No. But it wasn’t for a lack of trying. He cut down a Duke and a pair of Counts before the Red King got away.”

“Damn,” I said, impressed. “But what does that have to do with Molly?”

“We had the Reds by the balls,” Ramirez said. “Sunrise was coming in the real world, and when they tried to retreat into the Nevernever the faeries were on them like a school of piranha. The Reds had to find a way to draw off some of our heavies and they found it. Luccio’s boot camp.”

I drew in a breath. “They attacked Luccio and the newbies?”

“Yeah. McCoy, Listens-to-Wind, and Martha Liberty led a force from the battle to relieve the camp.”

“They did, huh? How’d it go?”

He took a deep breath and said, “They haven’t reported in yet. And that means...”

“It means that my support in the Senior Council isn’t here to help me.”

Ramirez nodded.

“Who has their proxies?”

“We didn’t hear from you until after they had left, so they didn’t entrust their proxies to anyone.”

I sighed. “So the Merlin holds them by default. And he doesn’t much like me. He’d cast the votes to condemn her just to spite me.”

“It gets better,” he said. “Ancient Mai is still in Indonesia, and LaFortier is covering the Venatori while they relocate. The Merlin has their votes too—and I don’t think the Gatekeeper is coming.”

“So the only one whose opinion counts is the Merlin,” I said.

“Pretty much.” Then Ramirez frowned at me. “You don’t look surprised.”

“I’m not,” I said. “If something can go wrong, it does. I’ve accepted that by now.”

He tilted his head. “I’ve just told you the kid will probably be found guilty before she’s been tried.”

“Yeah,” I said. I chewed on my lip. This would make things more difficult. I had been counting on at least a little help from Ebenezar and his cronies. They knew the Council procedures better than I did, and how to manipulate them. They also knew the Merlin, who, magical talents aside, was a damned slippery fish when it came to maneuvering through a Council meeting.

The Merlin had every reason to oppose me, and therefore Molly. Now, if he wielded the votes of the people I’d been counting on to support me, he

could literally be Molly's judge, jury, and executioner.

Well. Judge and jury, anyway. Morgan would do the executing.

I ground my teeth. My plan could still work, theoretically, but there was very little I could do to alter the outcome from here on in. I glanced back at Molly. Here we were. I'd brought her to this turn. I'd see it through.

"Fine," I said. "I can deal with this."

Ramirez arched an eyebrow at me. "I thought you'd look more upset."

"Would it help anything if I started foaming at the mouth?"

"No," Ramirez said. "It might *explain* a few things, but it wouldn't help, per se."

"Water, bridge," I said. "Spilt milk. Accept things you cannot change."

"In other words, you have a plan," Ramirez said.

I shrugged and smiled tightly at him, and just then a low, throbbing engine approached the old warehouse.

Ramirez's hand went to the butt of his gun.

"Easy," I told him. "I invited them."

A motorcycle wound its way through the maze of alleys and potholes between warehouses, and then crunched to a stop in the gravel beside the Blue Beetle. Fix flipped the bike's kickstand down, and then he and Lily got off the motorcycle. Fix flipped me a little salute, and I nodded back to him.

Ramirez arched an eyebrow and said, "Is that who I think it is?"

"Summer Knight and Lady," I confirmed.

"Well, crap," he said, and scowled at me. "You going to turn this into some kind of fight?"

"Los," I chided him. "Would I do that?"

He gave me a steady look and then said, "You just *had* to ask me to handle security."

"What can I say, man? No one else was pretty and talented enough."

"No one is so talented that you couldn't make him look bad, Dresden," he muttered. Then he gave Lily and Fix a calculating look and said, "Well. This should be interesting, at any rate. Introduce me?"

"Yep."

I did. Then Ramirez led us through the veil protecting the warehouse from perception. Two Wardens at the door searched everyone for weapons. They even had one of the animate statues of a temple dog they used to detect hostile enchantments, veils, and concealed weaponry. The stone

construct made me a little nervous—I had nearly been attacked by one over a false alarm once—but this time it passed me by without showing any interest. It lingered longest on Molly, once emitting a grindstone growl, but it subsided after a moment and returned to its post beside the door.

I started to go inside, but Ramirez touched my arm. I stopped and frowned at him. He glanced at Molly and drew a black cloth from his belt.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said.

“It’s protocol, Harry.”

“It’s sadistic and unnecessary.”

He shook his head. “I’m not offering an option, here.” He lowered his voice so that only I could hear him. “I don’t like it either. But if you violate protocol now, *especially* in a case that involves mind-control magic, it will be all the excuse the Merlin needs to declare the proceedings potentially compromised. He’ll be able to pass summary judgment on the girl, and put you and me both on precautionary probation.”

I ground my teeth, but Ramirez was right. I remembered when I’d been brought before the Council for the first time. One thing, more than any other, stuck in my memory of that night—the scent of the black cloth hood they’d had over my head, over my face. It had smelled slightly of dust, slightly of mothballs, and no light whatsoever had come through to me. Some terrified corner of my brain had noted that so long as the hood was over my face, I wasn’t really a person. I was only a creature, a statistic, and one that was a potential threat at that. It would be far easier to pass and mete out a death sentence when one did not have to look at the face of the damned.

I took the hood from Ramirez and turned to Molly. “Don’t be afraid,” I told her quietly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She stared back into my eyes, terrified and trying to look brave. She swallowed and nodded once, then closed her eyes.

I cast a resentful look at the warehouse. Then I slipped the hood over Molly’s pink-and-blue hair and pulled it down over her pale face.

“Good enough?” I asked Ramirez.

It wasn’t fair of me to blame him for it, but the note of accusation in my voice came through far more strongly than I had intended. Ramirez glanced away, shame on his face, and nodded. Then he held open the warehouse door.

I took Molly’s hand and led her inside.

Chapter Forty-five

Blood might not stain a Warden's cloak, but it's all but impossible to get it out of an old, porous concrete floor. The Merlin, Morgan, and a dozen Wardens stood in the same places they had before, a loose circle that surrounded the dark brown stain that yet remained in the spot where the young warlock had been beheaded.

Morgan had a fresh cut on one of his ears and his left wrist was tightly wrapped in medical tape. Even so, he stood calmly and steadily, the sword of the White Council's justice resting with its tip on the floor, his hands folded over the weighted pommel. His expression, as he saw me, was impossible to read. I was used to flat contempt and hostility from the man. Hell, I was used to feeling the same thing about Morgan in reply.

But I'd seen him in action. I'd learned a little bit about what his life was like. I understood what moved him better than I had in the past, and I couldn't simply dislike him anymore. I respected the man. It didn't mean that I wouldn't pants him on national television if I got the opportunity, but I couldn't simply dismiss him outright anymore, either.

I nodded to the man who might be ordered to murder Molly in the next few minutes. It wasn't a friendly nod. It was more along the lines of the salute one gave to an opponent at a fencing match.

He returned it in exactly the same manner, and I somehow sensed that Morgan knew that I wasn't going to let the girl get hurt without a fight. The fingers of his right hand drummed slowly on the hilt of the sword. It wasn't meant as a threat: It was simply a statement. If I fought the White Council's justice, I would be fighting him.

We both knew how that kind of fight would end.

I would never survive it.

We also both knew that, if given the right reasons, I'd do it anyway.

Beside Morgan, the Merlin also watched me, speculation in his features. He knew that I didn't plan on slugging it out if the hearing didn't go Molly's way. In the past, the Merlin might simply have sneered at me, spat in my eye, and dared me to do my worst. Now, he was sure I was up to something else, and I could all but see the gears spinning in his head as I

entered holding Molly's hand and guiding her blind steps, followed closely by Fix and Lily.

Morgan nodded to Ramirez, and he went to pull the doors closed and to close the circle around the building, a barrier that would prevent magical intrusion while the Wardens guarded the purely physical approaches. But just before Ramirez reached up to chain the doors closed, they opened to reveal the tall and ominous figure of the Gatekeeper. Dressed in his formal black robes, with a deep purple cowl that left his features shadowed but for the glitter of his dark eyes, the Gatekeeper stood in the doorway for a moment, and something gave me the impression that he was staring at the Merlin.

If so, the Merlin wasn't rattled. The old wizard inclined his head in a regal nod of greeting and respect to the Gatekeeper, and he gestured for the man to join him. Instead, the Gatekeeper walked to a point in the circle midway between the Merlin and myself, and stood quietly, leaning on an aged, slender staff.

The Merlin regarded this positioning for a moment, eyes narrowed, and then addressed the room, in Latin. "Wardens, close the circle. Warden Dresden, please step forward and introduce us to your guests."

I gave Molly's hand a squeeze of reassurance, then let go of her and stepped forward. "First thing," I said, looking around at the dozen or so Wardens present, plus a few other noncombatant Council members who had been in the area or who were on the Senior Council's staff. "Is there anyone here who doesn't understand English?"

The Merlin folded his arms, a slight smile curling his lips. "Council meetings are conducted in Latin."

The old bastard knew that my Latin wasn't so hot. I could understand it pretty well, but speaking it myself tended to result in words being transposed in increasingly odd ways until linguistic surreality ensued. If I tried to defend Molly in Latin, I'd sound like an idiot from the get go, and the Merlin knew it. While he technically held all the power he needed to quash any defense, he was still accountable to the rest of the Council, so he had to do everything he could to justify his actions. He'd planned on undermining me with Latin from the moment he heard about the conclave.

But I can plan things too.

"Granted that Latin is our traditional lingual medium," I replied, giving the Merlin a big old smile. "But our guests, Lily, the Summer Lady, and

Fix, the current Summer Knight, do not speak it. I would fain not show the slightest lack of consideration to such prestigious visitors and envoys of our allies in Summer.”

Choke on that, jerk, I thought. Let's see you snub the ally who just bailed the Council out of ass-deep alligators.

The Merlin narrowed his eyes and chewed on his options for a moment before he shook his head, unable to find a way to counter the move. “Very well,” he said in English, though his tone was grudging. “The Council welcomes the presence of the Summer Lady and Knight in this conclave, and extends its hospitality and protection while they remain within our demesnes.”

Lily bowed her head in acknowledgment. “Thank you, honored Merlin.”

He bowed his head to her in turn. “Not at all, your Highness. It is hardly our custom to involve outsiders in confidential internal affairs.” He pointedly shifted his gaze back to me. “But given the recent development between our peoples, it would be ungrateful indeed to evict you.”

“It would, wouldn't it,” I agreed.

The Merlin's eyes went flat for a moment, but his expression shifted back to neutrality. “Warden Dresden. As a regional commander of the Wardens, you have the authority to summon a conclave in matters pertaining to your duties and your area of command. As soon as it is quite convenient, would you enlighten us as to the purpose of this conclave?”

“Two reasons,” I said. “The first is to allow the Summer Lady to address the Senior Council.” I turned my head and nodded at Lily, who stepped forward into the circle, while I faded back to stand beside Fix.

“Honored Merlin,” she began, her tone serious and formal. “My Queen Titania has bidden me to pass her compliments to you and yours, and for two in particular whose courage has gained the admiration of the Summer Court.”

I frowned. “What's this?” I whispered to Fix.

“Shhh,” he said. “Pay attention. She'll get there.”

“All I needed her to do was verify what we did.”

“Be patient,” Fix whispered. “She will.”

Lily glanced over her shoulder at me and winked. I twitched. It looked exactly like the gesture from the statue that might have been Mab atop the spire at Arctis Tor.

Lily turned to Morgan and said, “Warden Morgan. Your courageous defense of the Venatori and their retainers, and your assault upon the Red King, were feats she has never seen bettered. My Queen extends her compliments and congratulations to you, Warden, and to the Council you serve. Furthermore, she will not let such acts of daring and dedication go unremarked or unrewarded, and so she has bidden me bestow upon you this token.”

Lily held up a small, intricately detailed oak leaf of pure silver. She walked over to him and pinned the oak leaf to his grey cloak, just over his heart. “I name thee friend and esquire to the Summer Court, Warden Morgan. An you find yourself in peril near the realm of the Sidhe, once, and once only, you need but touch this device and call aloud upon Titania for aid.”

Morgan got an odd look on his face, as though he had tried to make several expressions at once and gotten stuck halfway there. His mouth opened, shut, and then he settled for a deep bow at the waist and replied, “I thank thee, your Highness.”

“What the hell is that?” I whispered to Fix.

The little guy grinned. “The Order of the Silver Oak is nothing to sneeze at. Hush.”

Lily smiled, laid a slender hand over the oak leaf in benediction, then walked back over to me. “Warden Dresden,” she said. “Your own contribution to the battle is every bit as admirable. My Queen has bid me —”

“His contribution?” the Merlin said, interrupting her.

I blinked at Lily.

“Dresden was not present at the battle,” the Merlin protested.

“Indeed not,” Lily said, turning while she spoke to address every wizard there with some of her words. “In the late hours two nights ago, Warden Dresden planned and led a small force in a raid upon Arctis Tor itself.”

A collective inhalation went through the room, and was followed by a nebulous buzz of murmurs and whispering. The Merlin’s poker face was too good to tell me anything about his reaction, but Morgan’s eyebrows went up.

“Warden Dresden and his team won through the defenders of the fortress and launched an assault of fire upon the icy wellspring at the heart of Arctis Tor. His actions disrupted the dispositions of the forces of Winter upon our

borders, compelling them to retreat to the fortress to deal with the offenders. Once there, the flow of time through the region was slowed, creating an opportunity for our own forces to come to your aid.

“What is she talking about?” I whispered to Fix. “I didn’t know I was going there until I got there, and the only fighting left to do was all the fetches.”

“Mmmm,” Fix murmured back. “And yet not one word she’s said has been untrue.”

I snorted.

“In short, honored Merlin,” Lily continued, “and honorable members of the Council, had Dresden not attacked the lair of Mab herself, the mightiest fortress in Winter, had Dresden not stormed the gates of Arctis Tor, the battle would surely have been lost. Every soul who came safe home again from the battle owes his life to Harry Dresden and his courage.”

Silence fell.

She looked slowly around the circle, and let the silence emphasize her previous words far more ably than any speech. “It is for this reason,” she said after a moment, “that my Queen confers upon Warden Dresden status as friend and esquire of the Summer Court.” She turned to me and pinned another silver leaf over my heart, then laid her hand over it. She looked up at me and smiled. “You, too, may once call upon us at need. Well done, Harry.”

She stood on tiptoe and gave me a kiss on the cheek, and then turned to face the Merlin. “My Queen wishes you to know, honored Merlin, that, while glad to be able to go to the aid of the Council against the threat posed by the Red Court, Winter’s forces have returned to their original positions, and once again the forces of Summer must remain vigilant of our borders. Until that situation changes, she cautions you that Summer will be able to offer its allies only limited assistance.”

The Merlin was staring at me so hard that for a second I thought he hadn’t heard Lily’s warning. Then he blinked and shook himself a little. “Of course, your Highness,” he said. “Please convey to Her Majesty the gratitude of the White Council and assure her that even in these desperate times, her friendship will not be forgotten.”

She bowed her head again. “I shall do so. And so are my duties discharged.” She retreated back to her original position, beside Fix.

“Why,” I muttered under my breath, “do I get the feeling that Titania handing me a medal can’t possibly be as simple as it looks?”

“Because you can tell a hawk from a handsaw when the wind is southerly,” Lily murmured in reply. “But it offers you some benefit today.” She smiled at me. “Surely you didn’t actually expect a Summer Queen to do simply as you bid her and no more?”

I grumbled something under my breath, while the Merlin turned to confer quietly with Morgan. A general round of whispers rose up as the wizards took the opportunity to bandy rumors and theories around.

I found Molly’s cold, trembling hand and squeezed it again.

“What happened?” the girl asked me.

“Lily talked me up like I was a hero,” I said. “Everyone seems sort of shocked.”

“Can I take this off yet?” Molly asked.

“Not yet,” I told her.

“Harry,” Ramirez said, stepping over to me. “She’s not supposed to speak.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered to him, and lowered my voice to speak to Molly. “Pipe down, kid. Try not to worry. So far, so good.”

Which was true enough. I had managed not to look like an illiterate idiot, and Lily’s impromptu medal ceremony had tacitly established my fighting credentials as something comparable to those of the Council’s most capable soldier. It didn’t mean that Molly was out of the woods, but it would give me a solid foundation for presenting her case. My credibility was everything, and I had done all that I could to establish my presence before the Council.

The Merlin had been in the game a while, and he knew exactly what I was up to. He didn’t seem too happy about it. He beckoned the Council’s secretary, a dried-up old spider of a man named Peabody, and put his head together with the old man in whispered conference.

“Order,” the Merlin called after a moment, and the room settled down immediately. “Warden Dresden,” the Merlin said. “May we continue with your explanation for the necessity of this conclave?”

I stepped back into the circle, tugging Molly along with me until we were standing on the heavy bloodstain where the boy had been executed. There was a psychic remnant of the death there, a cold, quivering tension in

the air, an echo of rage and fear and death. Molly shuddered as her feet came to rest atop the stained concrete. She must have felt it, too.

I had a sudden flash, a horrible image of the future, where Molly's body lay in spreading scarlet a few feet from a black cloth bag, so bright and detailed that it almost replaced the reality before me.

Molly shuddered again and whispered, so softly that no one but I could hear, "I'm afraid."

I squeezed her hand and answered the Merlin's question in the manner prescribed by protocol. "I have brought a prisoner before the Council, one who has broken the Fourth Law. I have brought her here to seek justice, Merlin."

The Merlin nodded at me, his expression serious and distant. "This woman with you is the prisoner?"

"This girl is," I replied, and put no emphasis on the correction. "She comes to face the Council openly, of her own will, and in open admission of her wrong."

"And this wrong?" the Merlin asked. "What has she done?"

I looked at Morgan. "She broke the Fourth Law of Magic when she imposed a fear of drug use upon two addicts in order to protect both them and their unborn child from the damage of their addictions."

Morgan stared back at me as I spoke. I thought I saw a faint frown in his eyes.

The Merlin remained silent for half a minute, then slowly arched one brow. "She violated the free will of another human being."

"She did—but in ignorance, Merlin. She knew neither the Laws nor the side effects of her actions. Her intentions were only to preserve and protect three lives."

"Ignorance of the Law is never an excuse, Warden Dresden, as you well know, and has no bearing upon this judgment." The Merlin glanced at Peabody, then back to me. "I assume you have examined the victims?"

"I have, Merlin."

"And have you had their condition confirmed by another Warden?"

Ramirez stepped forward. "I have done so, Merlin. The psychic trauma was serious, but it is my belief that both will recover."

The Merlin eyed Ramirez. "Is that your opinion, Warden Ramirez? Based, no doubt, upon your extensive experience?"

Ramirez's eyes glittered with anger at the Merlin's tone. "It is the opinion of the duly appointed regional commander of the western United States," he replied. "I believe that the Merlin should remember that he personally appointed me. If it hasn't faded into a blur of senility."

"Warden," Morgan barked, and his tone was one of absolute authority. "You will apologize to the Merlin and moderate your tone. At once."

Ramirez's gaze smoldered, but he glanced at Fix and Lily, and then a little guiltily at Morgan. "Of course, Captain." He drew himself up and gave the Merlin a proper, polite bow. "I ask your forgiveness, Merlin. The last days have been difficult. For everyone."

The Merlin let it hang in the air for a minute. Then his rigid expression softened somewhat, and I saw a flash of bone-deep weariness in the old man's eyes. "Of course," he said in a quieter voice, and bowed his own head. "My choice of words was less polite than it could have been, Warden Ramirez. Please do not take it as a slight upon your performance."

Clever old snake. Establishing himself as oh-so-reasonable and understanding with the younger members of the Council. Or maybe he really was apologizing to Ramirez, who was the unofficial poster boy of the younger generation of wizards. Or, more likely, he was doing both. That was more the Merlin's style.

The Merlin returned his attention to me. "To continue. Warden Dresden, have you soulgazed the prisoner?"

"I have," I said.

"You are convinced of her guilt?"

I swallowed. "I am," I said. "But I am also convinced that her actions do not represent the malice that defines a true warlock."

"Thank you for your *opinion*, Warden Dresden." His voice turned drolly unapologetic. "Doubtless offered to us out of your own extensive experience."

"I beg your pardon, Merlin. But when it comes to the Council sitting in self-righteous, arrogant judgment over a young wizard who made an honest mistake, I believe I have more experience than anyone in this room."

The Merlin's head rocked back as if I had slapped him. I wasn't as subtle and proper as him when it came to insults, but if he was going to do it, I saw no reason not to return fire. I pressed on before he could speak, stepping forward and turning to address the room as I spoke.

“Wizards. Friends. Brothers and sisters in arms. You know why this is happening. You know how thinly stretched our resources have become. In the past three years, the Council has tried and condemned more warlocks than in the past twenty. Children who are raised in societies that do not believe in magic suddenly inherit powers they could hardly have imagined, and certainly cannot control. They have no support. No training. No one to warn them of the consequences or the dangers of their actions.”

I reached out and jerked that fucking black hood from Molly’s head, and the girl suddenly stood blinking at the light. Tears had streaked her makeup into dark stains running down her face. Her eyes were red with crying, her expression haunted and terrified. She shuddered and lowered her eyes, staring down at the bloodstained floor.

“This is Molly,” I said to the room. “She’s seventeen years old. Her best friend had already lost one unborn child because of the drugs she’d been addicted to. She knew it was going to happen again. So to protect that child’s life, to protect her friends from their addiction, Molly made a choice. She used her power to intervene.”

I faced Morgan. “She made a wrong choice. No one denies that. She admits to it herself. But look at her. She’s no monster. She understands that what she did was wrong. She understands that she needs help. She submitted herself to this Council’s judgment freely. She wants to learn to control her power, to handle it responsibly. She came here hoping to find help and guidance.”

Morgan didn’t look at me. He was staring at Molly. His fingers kept drumming on the hilt of his sword.

“I’ve soulgazed her. It’s not too late to help her. I think we owe her the chance to redeem herself,” I continued. I looked at the Gatekeeper. “For God’s sake, wizards, if we are to survive this war, we need all the talent we can get. Molly’s death would be a foolish waste.”

I drew in a breath and turned to face the Merlin. “There’s been enough blood spilled on this floor. I beg you to consider clemency. Levy the Doom of Damocles, if you must, but I beg you to spare her life. I will take personal responsibility for her training and accept the consequences of any actions taken under my mentorship.”

Silence fell.

I waited for the Merlin to speak. Molly began trembling harder, and small whimpering sounds came from her throat.

The Merlin's eyes narrowed, and with that single revealing expression I suddenly knew that I'd made a terrible mistake. I'd outmaneuvered him. I'd startled him with my insult and delivered my speech effectively to the wizards present. I could see it on their faces; the uncertainty, the sympathy. More than one wizard had glanced at the bloodstains at my feet and shuddered as I spoke to them. More than one looked at Molly's face, and grimaced in sympathy for her fear.

I'd beaten the Merlin. He knew it.

And he hated it.

I had forgotten to take into account his pride, his ego, his self-image. He was the mightiest wizard on the planet, the leader of the White Council, and he was not accustomed to being insulted and manipulated—and especially not in front of outsiders. I, a mere puppy of a young wizard, had stung him, and his wounded pride sprayed arterial anger. He had it under control, but it was no less terrible or dangerous for that.

"Warden Dresden," he said in a deadly quiet tone. "Your compassion does you credit. But as you yourself pointed out, our resources are spread too thin already. The Council cannot afford to have a regional commander of the Wardens burdened with a hazardous rehabilitation of a warlock. The duties of the war and of containing the increasing occurrence of black magic must have your full attention."

Oh, God.

"The Laws of Magic are clear. The prisoner admits her guilt. I am not unmoved by the prisoner's plight, but we are involved in a war for our very survival."

Ohgodohgodohgod...

"I therefore take no pleasure in pronouncing the prisoner's fate. It is the judgment of the Senior Council that the prisoner is a warlock, guilty of breaking the Fourth Law." He lifted his chin and said, very calmly, "The sentence is death. To be carried out immediately."

Chapter Forty-six

“**M**organ,” the Merlin said quietly. Morgan stared at Molly. Then at the Merlin. He drew in a sharp breath and took a grip on the sword, lifting it vertically before him.

I looked frantically around the room. Ramirez, like most of the rest of the wizards there, had a stunned look on his face. He looked back at me with a blank expression, and gave me a little twitch of his shoulders. Lily looked remote and troubled. Fix’s expression was blank, but his jaws were clenched hard, muscles standing out and creating shadows on his face.

“Harry?” Molly whispered, shaking so hard she could hardly speak. “Harry?”

I turned back to the Merlin. His eyes were hard, his face as unyielding as stone. Morgan looked as if he might be about to throw up—but it didn’t stop him from moving toward Molly with a steady, dreamlike slowness, sword in hand.

“Harry,” Molly sobbed.

I promised Charity.

I took my staff in both hands and stepped forward, putting myself between Morgan and the girl. “Morgan,” I said. “Stars and stones, man. Please don’t do this. She’s a *child*. We should be *helping* her.”

My words slowed him, and he froze in place for a terrible heartbeat. Then he closed his eyes and swallowed, his face twisting with nausea. He opened his eyes again and whispered, “Stand aside, Dresden. Please.”

I looked wildly around the room for someone, anyone to help, for some way to stop this madness. I felt a sudden pressure against my spine, and I looked over my shoulder.

My eyes fell on the Gatekeeper.

I whirled back to Morgan and lifted my hands. “Point of order!” I cried. “Point of order! The Senior Council has not yet made its decision.”

Morgan paused, head tilting, and frowned at me. He lowered the sword and glanced back at the Merlin.

“The Senior Council has decided the issue,” the Merlin snarled.

“No,” I said. “The Senior Council must decide any capital crime in an open vote.” I pointed my finger at the Gatekeeper. “He has not cast his vote.”

The Merlin spoke through clenched teeth. “I hold six of seven votes. However the honored Gatekeeper decides, it will not change the outcome.”

“True,” I said. “But that doesn’t change the fact that he gets a damned vote.”

“Why are you doing this?” the Merlin demanded. “It is over. You only torment the prisoner with this unnecessary charade.”

“He gets a vote,” I repeated, and folded my arms on my chest.

The Merlin stared at me hard, and I could actually sense the pressure of his rage, like the end of a baseball bat poking steadily at my chest.

Morgan said, very, very quietly, “He’s right, honored Merlin.”

The Merlin narrowed his eyes. Then he turned his head to the Gatekeeper. “As you wish. We shall play this farce to its conclusion. Gatekeeper, how find you in this matter?”

And the Gatekeeper said...nothing.

He just stood there, face almost invisible beneath his cowl.

“Gatekeeper!” the Merlin called. “How find you?”

“I find the need for deliberation,” the Gatekeeper responded. “I beg the Council’s indulgence while I ponder this matter.”

“Ridiculous,” the Merlin said.

The Gatekeeper tilted his head. “Death is rather final, honored Merlin. I must consider carefully before I consign a soul, any soul, no matter how guilty, to that end.”

“This is nonsense. It will make no difference how you vote.”

“True,” the Gatekeeper replied, very gently, the faintest shade of rebuke in his voice. “But that does not change my moral obligation to make this decision with care.”

The Merlin took a deep breath and then said, forced calm in his voice, “I suppose a few moments for thought are not unreasonable.”

“Thank you,” the Gatekeeper said gravely.

Five minutes went by like five thousand years. Molly sagged against me, so frightened she could barely stand.

“Enough,” the Merlin said, finally. “This travesty needs to end.”

“On that point,” the Gatekeeper said, “we agree.” And then he stepped forward to the circle marked on the floor, and smudged it with his boot,

breaking the circle. He flicked a gloved hand, and the lock on the chained door sprang open and fell away, followed closely by the chains.

“What is the meaning of this?” the Merlin demanded.

The Gatekeeper ignored him and pushed open the door. One of the Wardens on guard outside stood in front of it, one hand raised as if to knock. He blinked at the Gatekeeper, and then looked over his shoulder and said, “It’s open, sir.”

“Get clear of the door, fool,” barked Ebenezar’s voice. “Get them inside. Hurry, man! They’re right behind us!”

Outside there was an eerie howl and a sudden detonation of thunder that shook the concrete floor. Young people in roomy brown robes began to hurry through the doorway, most of them around Molly’s age or a bit younger. They were led by a young woman with short, curly hair and cheeks that had a dimple even when she wasn’t smiling—Luccio, the commander of the Wardens, in the young body a necromancer had trapped her in. The kids must have been her trainees.

She was followed by more children and a tall, brawny woman with dark skin and short, iron grey hair, helping a lanky young man with a wounded leg. Martha Liberty helped the young man settle to the ground and barked out a command for a medical kit. An old man with braided hair and Native American features brought up the rear, shepherding the last few young wizards ahead of him. “Injun Joe” Listens-to-Wind made sure they were all inside, and then turned and shouted, “I’m closing the way now!”

There were several more howls, and a bell-like chime of steel. Something hit the wall of the warehouse hard enough to shake dust from the rafters. Then there was a rushing sound of wind that abruptly ended in heavy silence. Listens-to-Wind sagged and leaned against the doorway, panting. Then he rose and stood aside as Ebenezar McCoy came in.

My old mentor was wearing his usual overalls and T-shirt. His bald pate shone with sweat, and he looked tired, but he was smiling over the pugnacious set of his lower jaw. The air around him fairly crackled with intensity, a mantle of power that hung around him in a subtle haze. Ebenezar reached behind him to hold the door open.

Michael came in.

He wore his white cloak, his mail and breastplate, and he bore *Amoracchius* in his hands, stained with dark fluids. He glanced around the room, a smile firm on his face.

“Papa!” Molly shrieked, and threw herself at him.

Michael blinked and managed to get the sword out of the way before Molly hit him with a hug that nearly knocked him from his feet. He got an arm around her, smiling. “Ooof! Careful, girl, the old man needs his ribs right where they are.”

“Who the hell is this?” Ramirez demanded, frowning at Michael. He looked like he didn’t know whether to be upset or disturbed that an armed and armored stranger had just waltzed in and was now standing inside all of his security measures.

“He’s a bloody hero is what he is,” Ebenezar told him. “If he hadn’t come along when he did, not a one of us would have gotten out of there alive.” He offered Michael his hand. “I’ve only heard of you by reputation, Sir Knight. But I’ve got to say that I’m damned glad to meet you. Thank you.”

Michael grinned and juggled his sword and his daughter so he’d have a hand free to shake Ebenezar’s. “I’m only a servant,” he said. “Any thanks are rightly owed to Him, not to me.”

“Aye,” Ebenezar said. “And thank God you came, Sir Knight.”

“Secure the building,” said the Merlin in a quiet voice. He walked forward to see what was happening, and stopped beside me. Michael nodded and moved out, tapping Ramirez and another Warden, and the three of them went to make sure the bad guys weren’t still coming.

“Vote isn’t over,” I said in a very quiet voice. “Which means that the three of them will need to cast their votes as well.”

“Obviously,” the Merlin said in a neutral murmur.

“That’s Michael. Knight of the Cross.”

“Which Sword?” the Merlin asked idly.

“*Amoracchius*,” I said.

The Merlin lifted a brow and nodded, never looking at me.

“Looks like he just saved...about forty of our young people?”

“So it would seem,” the Merlin said.

“Seems like the least we can do is save one of his.”

The Merlin’s eyes narrowed, and he did not speak.

“Look at it this way,” I said quietly. “There’s no downside to this for you. If you’re wrong about Molly, the Council gets another wizard. Fairly talented one, too.”

“And if I’m right?” he asked quietly.

“If you’re right,” I said, “you still get to kill the girl.”
The Merlin glanced at me. “True,” he said. “And you with her.”

Chapter Forty-seven

After a second, much less lengthy round of questions and answers, the Senior Council voted, and Molly was officially declared my apprentice, to be granted clemency under the Doom of Damocles. “Doom of Damocles” was wizard-speak for probation. If Molly abused her magic or came anywhere near violating any of the Laws of Magic, she’d be executed at once—and I’d join her.

But I’d lived with that before. I could do it again.

It was full dark by the time the conclave ended and everyone filed out. As the wizard who had called the conclave, it was my job to make sure everyone departed safely and to take care of any last-minute details.

Between providing food and further medical supplies for the unexpected arrivals, and coordinating with Ramirez to make sure our comings and goings weren’t being observed, I didn’t get the chance to speak to anyone about personal matters. With Lily’s help, we’d given the vampires a stiff kick in the balls, but the fight was far from over. The combat-hardened wizards and the talents of the Senior Council were needed elsewhere, and they departed with hardly a pause for food and drink.

Once it was done, I left the warehouse and sank down against the wall, just letting the cool summer evening wash over me.

I’d saved the girl from the bad guys. And more importantly, from the good guys. Which seemed the sort of thing that should pay my Warden’s salary overtime, but for the moment I was simply glad it was over.

I’d gambled horribly in my attempt to play the collective will of the Council against the Merlin. I shouldn’t have done it that way. The Merlin was a politician. If I’d been willing to eat a little crow, he probably would have come to some sort of compromise with me. A humiliating and disadvantageous compromise, from my perspective, but he might have worked something out.

Instead, I’d gained the moral support of the Council present there tonight, and I’d wielded it against him like a sword, chopping off his options and maneuvering him into bending to my will. I had exercised power over him in a way that no one had yet dared. I had struck a blow

against his authority, declared myself an enemy of his administration. There was no way he could ignore that kind of challenge from a morally suspect young punk like me. He would have to bring me down. If I wanted to avoid that, I'd have to keep my eyes open, my wits sharp, and I'd have to continue to do whatever I could to secure myself against him.

In short: I'd become a politician.

But instead of moaning about it, I found myself laughing. Given all that had happened, matters could have been much, much worse. Molly was coming home safe. The murderous fetches had been dispatched. The vampires had been handed their first significant defeat since the cold war combusted.

After the events of the day, tomorrow surely held nothing for me to fear, and I trusted that it would take care of itself until I could rest, eat, and put an end to the last details of the business at hand.

Molly and Michael had waited with me: When Michael covered Luccio's retreat through the nearer regions of the Nevernever, he had gotten back to Chicago without paying for the gas, but his truck was still back in the middle of nowhere, Oregon. He'd need to have it shipped back, or else make a long drive with a partner. He needed a ride home, and I was it.

The Beetle's floorboards settled almost all the way to the ground by the time everyone was on board, and I drove carefully away from the warehouse. Molly chattered on about a confusing blur of things for maybe two minutes and then went abruptly silent.

Michael checked over his shoulder. "Asleep," he reported quietly.

"She's had a busy day," I said.

He sighed. "Tell me what happened?"

I told him everything. Except the parts with Lasciel in them. And I didn't mention Charity's neglected talent for magic. I thought for a second that I could hear a ghostly, amused laugh from somewhere nearby. Optimistically, I wrote it off to my fatigued imagination.

Michael shook his head. "How did you know that I would return as I did?"

"Oh, I didn't," I said. "I just figured that you must have been sent off to do *something* to help your kid, so I asked Forthill to get word to you that you needed to be back here pronto, and that if you were with any Council members they should come with you. You got the message?"

He nodded. "It found me at Luccio's camp in Colorado. We'd beaten off a vampire attack and were preparing to move. If I hadn't gotten the message, I wouldn't have followed them on their path through the Nevernever."

"What happened?"

"Demons," Michael said. "Quite a few of them, actually."

"What kind?"

"Oh. Fangs. Tentacles. You know, the usual."

I snorted. "No. I mean, were they Outsiders?"

"Ebenazar said something about Outsiders, yes, now that you mention it. Apparently his magic had difficulty dealing with them."

I shook my head. "I'm glad you were with them."

"Under the circumstances, so am I." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "You assumed I had been sent to help the White Council so that they would show mercy to my daughter."

I shrugged. "It was either that or else I was the one meant to look out for her, which would mean that it was possible for me to do so. So I decided to lean on the Merlin."

Michael blinked and stared at me. "If I do not mistake your meaning, you just told me that you took a leap of faith."

"No. I took *your* leap of faith, by proxy." I shook my head. "Look, Michael. I try to stay out of God's way as much as I possibly can. I don't expect Him to send a rescue party for me if I'm in trouble."

"Harry, I know you aren't a churchgoing man, but God does help people who aren't perfect."

"Sure," I said, and I couldn't keep all the sneer out of my voice. "That's why the world is such a happy, orderly place."

Michael sighed. "Harry, God does protect us from harm—it's part of what I and my brothers in arms are tasked to do. But he's a great deal less involved in protecting us from the consequences of our choices."

"I know the theory," I said. "That God mostly only steps in when there's supernatural evil afoot, yeah?"

"That's an oversimplification, really, and—"

"Spare me," I said. "Hell, Michael, I had one of those bastard Denarians here last year. Quintus Cassius. You remember him? While I was lying there watching him slice his way into my guts, I thought maybe it would be a good time for someone like you to show up. You know. One of those

Denarian Knights. I thought to myself, hey, it would be a great time for one of the Knights of the Cross to show up, eh?" I shook my head. "It didn't work out that way."

"What is your point?" he asked quietly.

"Heaven ain't safeguarding me, Michael. But you're different than me. I figured God was going to look out for you and yours, out of professional courtesy if nothing else. And I've seen how He's arranged things for you in the past. So what I did wasn't about faith. It was just a matter of deducing probabilities."

He shook his head, not agreeing with me, but not pressing it, either. "Charity?"

"She's fine," I assured him. "Kids too. Should be back home by now."

"She and Molly?"

"Reconciled. Well. On polite speaking terms and hugging again, at least."

His eyebrows shot up, and then his mouth curved into a wide grin. "Glory to God, I wasn't sure it would ever happen."

I buffed my nails on my shirt. "Sometimes I amaze even myself."

Michael smiled at me, then looked over his shoulder again and frowned. "My Molly. Magic. Isn't that sort of thing passed through blood-lines?"

"Usually," I said. "But it doesn't have to be. Some people are just born with it. We don't really understand the how and why."

He shook his head. "But how could I not have realized what was happening to her?"

"I dunno. But if you find out, make sure to tell Charity. She asked me the same question."

"I suppose we're all blind to what is closest to us," he said.

"Human nature," I agreed.

"Is Molly in danger?" he asked me, his tone frank.

I frowned and thought about it. "Some. She's got real power. And she's abused it a little. She's going to be real tempted to use it again when she starts running into problems that look unsolvable. Not only that, but learning to harness the kind of strength she's got can be pretty tricky all by itself. But she's smart and she's got all kinds of guts. If her teacher keeps from making any stupid mistakes, I think she'll be all right."

"But if she isn't," Michael said. "If she abuses her power again..."

"Then clemency is revoked. They execute her."

“And you,” Michael said softly.

I shrugged. “Isn’t like I haven’t lived with that over my head before. As far as the Council is concerned, I’m responsible for her now, until she either makes full wizard or sets her talents aside.”

“Greater love hath no man,” he said quietly. “Nothing I can say would be enough. She’s my daughter, Harry. Thank you.”

I felt my cheeks heat up. “Yeah, yeah. Look, don’t make a big deal out of this. No one will enjoy that.”

He let out a rumbling chuckle. “And this apprenticeship. What will it entail?”

“Lessons. Every day, at first, until I’m sure she’s got herself under control. We’ll have to practice some of it away from anything combustible. Trees, houses, pets, that kind of thing.”

“How long will you need to work with her?”

“Until we’re finished,” I said, waving a vague hand. “I don’t know yet. I’ve never been on this side of an apprenticeship.”

He nodded in acceptance. “Very well.” We rode in silence for a moment. Then he said, “You remember the professional discussion I wanted to have?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Shoot.”

“*Fidelacchius*,” Michael said. “I was wondering if you found any candidates for a new wielder.”

“Zippo,” I said, frowning. “You think I should be looking?”

“Hard to say. But with only two of us in the field, Sanya and I are getting a little overworked.”

I scratched my chin. “Shiro told me that I would know the wielder. There hasn’t been anything like that. At least, not yet.”

“I’m concerned that it may take more than simply patience,” Michael sighed. “I’ve consulted our records. This is not the first time one of the White Council has been asked to be the custodian of one of the Swords.”

I arched my eyebrows and looked at him. “Seriously?”

He nodded.

“Me and who?”

“Merlin.”

I snorted. “You sure? Because the Merlin is kind of a jerk. Even you would think so, trust me.”

“No, Harry,” Michael said, his tone patient. “Not the Merlin of the Council. *Merlin*. The original.”

I sat there with my jaw suavely flapping in the breeze for a minute. Then said, “Wow.” I shook my head. “You think maybe I should find a big rock or something? Stick the sword in and leave it on the White House lawn?”

Michael crossed himself. “Heaven forbid. No. I just have an...” He scrunched up his nose. “An instinct.”

“You mean like when you get sent out on a mission from God?”

“No. I mean a regular old human hunch. I think that perhaps you should investigate the history around how *Amoracchius* was passed on, back then.”

Said sword now rested at a slant across Michael’s chest, safely in its scabbard, point between the knight’s boots.

“Wow. You mean...*that* sword right there. *Your* sword is...” I left it unsaid.

“Probably,” he said, nodding. “Though the Church’s records are fragmented, we’ve managed to establish that the other two Swords have been reworked from time to time, through the years. This one hasn’t.”

“That’s interesting,” I mused quietly. “That’s interesting as he—uh, as heck.”

Michael gave me a faint smile and nodded. “It’s an intriguing mystery, isn’t it?”

“You know what?” I said. “I can do mystery.” I chewed my lip for a minute and said, “But I hope you’re not in a hurry. You may have noticed that the Council is having a busy year. I’ll have time sooner or later, but for now...” I shrugged.

“I know.” He was quiet for a moment, and then said, “But knowing the sword’s history could become important. Sooner is better than later.”

Something odd in his tone made me look at him. “Why?”

His hand moved unconsciously to *Amoracchius*’s hilt. “I don’t think I’ll have the sword for much longer.” His voice was very soft.

When the Knights of the Sword retired, they did it feetfirst from the inside of a box.

“Michael?” I asked. “Did the, uh, office send you a memo?” I carefully didn’t say *Like they did with Shiro*.

“No. Instinct,” he said, and smiled at me. “But I suppose I could be beginning my midlife crisis. But I’m not planning to change the way I live my life, and I certainly have no intention of an early retirement.”

“Good,” I said, though it came out more somber than I’d intended.

“Do you mind if I ask you something personal?” Michael said.

“I’m way too busy to answer rhetorical questions.”

He grinned for a second and nodded. Then he pursed his lips and took his time about choosing his words. “Harry, you’ve avoided me for some time. And you seem...well, somewhat more dour than I’ve seen you before.”

“I wasn’t avoiding you, exactly,” I said.

He regarded me with calm, steady eyes.

“All right,” I said. “Yeah. But I’ve been avoiding most everybody. Don’t take it personally.”

“Is it something I’ve done? Or perhaps someone in my family?”

“Enough with the rhetoric. You know it isn’t.”

He nodded. “Then maybe it’s something you’ve done. Maybe something you should talk about with a friend.”

The fallen angel’s sigil on my left palm throbbed. I started to say “no,” but stopped myself. I drove for another block or two. I should tell him. I really should. Michael was my friend. He deserved my trust and respect. He deserved to know.

But I couldn’t.

Then my mouth started moving, and I realized that what was bothering me the most had nothing to do with coins or fallen angels. “Last Halloween,” I said quietly, “I killed two people.”

He drew in a slow breath and nodded, listening.

“One of them was Cassius. Once he was beaten, I had Mouse break his neck. Another was a necromancer called Corpsetaker. I shot her in the back of the head.” I swallowed. “I murdered them. I’ve never killed, man...not like that. Cold.” I drove a while more. “I have nightmares.”

I heard him sigh. For a moment, his voice was bleak. Pained. “I’ve been in this business longer than you have. I know some of what you’re feeling.”

I didn’t answer him.

“You feel like nothing is ever going to be right again,” he said. “You remember it perfectly, and it won’t leave you alone. You feel like you’re walking around with a sharp rock in your shoe. You feel stained.”

Stupid damned streetlights, getting all blurry like that. I blinked a lot and stayed quiet. My throat was too tight to speak, anyway.

“I know what it’s like,” he said. “There isn’t any way to make it disappear. But it gets better with time and distance.” He studied me for a

moment. "If you had it to do again, would you?"

"Twice as hard," I said at once.

"Then what you did was a necessity, Harry. It might be painful. It might haunt you. But at the end of the day, so long as you did what you believed right, you'll be able to live with yourself."

"Yeah?" I asked, chewing on my lower lip.

"I promise," he said.

I darted a glance at him. "You don't...think less of me? Knowing that I'm a murderer?"

"It isn't my place to judge what you've done. I regret that those lives were lost. That their owners never found redemption. I worry for the pain you've inflicted on yourself in retrospect. But I don't for an instant think that you would choose to take a human life unless you absolutely had to."

"Seriously?"

"I trust you," Michael said, his voice calm. "I would never have left my family in your protection if I didn't. You're a decent man, Harry."

I exhaled slowly and my shoulders loosened. "Good." And then, before my brain could get in the way, I added, "I picked up one of the Blackened Denarii, Michael. Lasciel."

My heart skipped several beats as I made the admission.

I expected shock, horror, outrage, maybe with a side order of contempt.

But instead, Michael nodded. "I know."

I blinked at him. "You what?"

"I know," he repeated.

"You know. You *knew*?"

"Yes. I was taking the trash around the house when Nicodemus's car went by. I saw the whole thing. I saw you protecting my youngest."

I chewed on my lip. "And...I mean, you aren't going to slug me and drag me off to a private suite in the Asylum for Wayward Denarians?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Michael said. "Remember that the Knights of the Cross were not founded to destroy the Denarians. We were founded to save them from the Fallen. It is therefore my duty to help you in whatever way I can. I can help you discard the coin if that is what you wish to do. It's best if you choose to do it yourself."

"I don't need to discard it, actually," I said. "I haven't really taken the coin up. I buried it. Never used it."

Michael looked surprised. “No? That is good news, then. Though it means that the Fallen’s shadow is still attempting to persuade you, I take it?”

This time the mental chuckle was a little more clear. I thought *Oh, shut up* very hard and sent it in Lasciel’s direction.

“Trying,” I said.

“Keep in mind that Lasciel is a deceiver,” he said quietly. “One with thousands of years of practice. It knows people. It knows how to tell you lies you want to believe are true. But it exists for a single purpose—to corrupt the will and beliefs of mankind. Don’t ever forget that.”

I shuddered. “Yeah.”

“May I ask what it’s told you?” He paused and narrowed his eyes. “No, wait. Let me guess. It’s appeared to you as an attractive young woman. She offers you knowledge, yes? The benefit of her experience.”

“Yeah.” I paused and added, “And Hellfire. Makes my spells hit harder when I need them to. I try not to use it much.”

Michael shook his head. “Lasciel isn’t called the Temptress for nothing. She knows you. Knows what to offer you and how to offer it.”

“Damn right she does.” I paused a moment, then added, “It scares me sometimes.”

“You’ve got to get rid of the coin,” he said with gentle urgency.

“Love to,” I said. “How?”

“Give up the coin of your own will. And set aside your power. If you do, Lasciel’s shadow will dwindle with it and waste away.”

“What do you mean, set aside my power?”

“Walk away from your magic,” he said. “Forsake it. Forever.”

“Fuck that.”

He winced and looked away.

The rest of the trip to his home passed in silence. When we got there, I told Michael, “Molly’s stuff is back at my place. I’d like to take her back there to get it. I need to have a talk with her, tonight, while everything is fresh. I’ll have her back here in a couple of hours, tops.”

Michael glanced at his sleeping daughter with a worried frown, but nodded. “Very well.” He got out and shut the door, then leaned back in the window to speak to me. “May I ask you two things?”

“Shoot.”

He glanced back at his house and said, "Have you ever considered the possibility that the Lord did not send me out on my most recent mission so that I could protect my daughter? That it was not His intention to use you to protect her?"

"What's your point?"

"Only that it is entirely possible, Harry Dresden, that this entire affair, beginning to end, is meant to protect *you*. That when I went to the aid of Luccio and her trainees, I did so not to free Molly, but to prevent you from coming to blows with the Council. That her position as your new apprentice had less to do with protecting her than it did protecting *you*?"

"Eh?" I said.

He glanced at his daughter. "Children have their own kind of power. When you're teaching them, protecting them, you are more than you thought you could be. More understanding, more patient, more capable, more wise. Perhaps this foster child of your power will do the same for you. Perhaps it's what she is meant to do."

"If the Lord was all that interested in helping out, how come he didn't send someone to help me against Cassius? One of old Nick's personal yes-men? Seems to be a solid rescue scenario."

Michael shrugged and opened his mouth.

"And don't give me any of that mysterious ways tripe."

He shut his mouth and smiled. "It's a confusing sort of thing," he said.

"What is?"

"Life. I'll see you in a couple of hours."

He offered me his hand. I shook it.

"I don't know of another way to end Lasciel's influence, but that doesn't mean there isn't one out there. If you should change your mind about the coin, Harry, if you want to get rid of it, I promise that I'll be there for you."

"Thank you," I said, and meant it.

His expression grew more sober. "And if you should fall to temptation. If you should embrace the Fallen or become ensnared by its will..." He touched the hilt of the great sword, and his face became bedrock granite, Old Testament determination that made Morgan's fanaticism look like a wisp of steam. "If you change. I will also be there."

Fear hit me in a cold wave.

Holy crap.

I swallowed, and my hands shook on the Beetle's steering wheel. There wasn't any attempt at menace in Michael's voice, or his face. He was simply stating a fact.

The mark on my palm burned, and for the first time I gave serious consideration to the notion that maybe I was overconfident of my ability to deal with Lasciel. What if Michael was right? What if I screwed something up and wound up like that poor bastard Rasmussen? A demonically supercharged serial killer?

"If that happens," I told him, and my voice was a dry whisper, "I want you to."

I could see in his eyes that he didn't like the thought any more than I did—but he was fundamentally incapable of being anything less than perfectly honest with me. He was my friend, and he was worried. If he had to do harm to me, it would rip him apart.

Maybe the words had been his own subconscious way of begging me to get rid of the coin. He could never stand aside and do nothing while bad things happened, even if meant that he had to kill his friend.

I could respect that. I understood it, because I couldn't do it, either. I couldn't stand aside, abandon my magic, and cut myself loose of the responsibility to use it for good.

Not even if it killed me.

Life can be confusing. Good God, and how. Sometimes it seems like the older I get, the more confused I become. That seems ass-backwards. I thought I was supposed to be getting wiser. Instead, I just keep getting hit over the head with my relative insignificance in the greater scheme of the universe. Confusing, life.

But it beats the hell out of the alternative.

I went back to my place. I let the kid sleep until we got there, and then touched her shoulder with one hand. She jerked awake at once, blinking in weary confusion.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"My place," I said. "We need to talk."

She blinked her eyes several more times and then nodded. "Why?"

"Because you need to understand something. Come on."

We got out of the car. I led her down the steps to my door and said, "Come stand next to me." She did. I took her left hand and told her,

“Spread your fingers and close your eyes.” She did that too. I held her left palm up about two inches from the door. “Now, focus. See what you can feel.”

Her face scrunched up. “Um,” she said, shifting her weight back and forth restlessly. “There’s...pressure? Um, or maybe a buzzing. Like high-power lines.”

“Close enough,” I said, and released her wrist. “What you’re sensing are some of the energies that I used to ward my apartment. If you try to come in without disabling them, you’ll take a jolt of electricity that wouldn’t leave much more of you than a smudge on the ground.”

She blinked at me, then twitched and pulled her hand sharply away.

“I’ll give you an amulet that will let you get through, until I’m sure you can disable them, go in, and start them up again. But for tonight, just don’t try to open the door. In or out. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said quietly.

We went in. My cleaning service had come through. Molly had left a bag with clothes and sundries spread over half of one of my apartment’s couches. Now the bag was neatly closed, and suspiciously nonbulgy. I’m sure the cleaning service had folded and organized the bag so that everything fit in without strain.

Molly looked around, blinking. “How does your maid get in?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, because you can’t talk about faerie housekeepers or they go away. I pointed at the couch next to her bag and said, “Sit.”

She did, though I could tell that my peremptory tone did not thrill her.

I sat down in a chair across from the couch. As I did, Mister drifted in from the bedroom and promptly wound himself around one of Molly’s legs, purring a greeting.

“Okay, kid,” I said. “We survived. I only had some very limited plans to cover this contingency.”

She blinked at me. “What?”

“I didn’t think I’d pull this off. I mean, raiding a faerie capital? Standing up to the Senior Council? All those movie monsters? Your mom? Hell, I’m shocked I survived at all, much less got you out of it.”

“B-but...” She frowned. “You never seemed like...I mean, you just went through it all like you had everything under control. You seemed so sure what was going to happen.”

“Rule number one of the wizarding business,” I said. “Never let them see you sweat. People expect us to know things. It can be a big advantage. Don’t screw it up by looking like you’re as confused as everyone else. Bad for the image.”

She smiled at me a little. “I see,” she said. She reached down to stroke Mister and mused, “I must look horrible.”

“Been a rough day,” I said. “Look. We’ll need to talk about where you’re going to live. I take it that you had already decided to break things off with Nelson. I kind of picked up that vibe when we bailed him out.”

She nodded.

“Well. Inappropriate to stay with him, then. To say nothing of the fact that he’s going to need time to recover.”

“I can’t stay at home,” she said quietly. “After all that’s happened...and my mom will never understand about the magic. She thinks it’s all bad, every bit of it. And if I’m there, it’s just going to confuse and frighten all the little Jawas, Mom and me arguing all the time.”

I grunted and said, “You’ll have to stay somewhere. We’ll work that out soonest.”

“All right,” she said.

“Next thing you need to know,” I said. “As of now, you get no slack. You aren’t allowed any mistakes. You don’t get to say ‘oops.’ The first time you screw up and slip deeper into bad habits, it kills both of us. I’m going to be tough on you sometimes, Molly. I have to be. It’s as much for my survival as yours. Got it?”

“Yes,” she said.

I grunted, got up, and went to my tiny bedroom. I rooted around in my closet and found an old brown apprentice robe one of the shiny new Wardens had left at my place after a local meeting. I brought it out and handed it to Molly. “Keep this where you can get to it. You’ll be with me at any Council meetings, and it is your formal attire.” I frowned and rubbed at my head. “God, I need aspirin. And food. You hungry?”

Molly shook her head. “But I’m a mess. Do you mind if I clean up?”

I eyed her and sighed. Then I said, “No. Go ahead and get it out of the way.” I stood up and went to the kitchen, muttering a minor spell and flicking several candles into light, including one near the girl. She took the robe and the candle, grabbed her bag, and vanished into my room.

I checked the icebox. The faeries usually brought some kind of food to stock the icebox and the pantry when they cleaned, but they could have mighty odd ideas about what constituted a healthy diet. One time I'd opened the pantry and found nothing but boxes and boxes and boxes of Froot Loops. I had a near-miss with diabetes, and Thomas, who never was quite sure where the food came from, declared that I had clearly been driven Froot Loopy.

Usually it wasn't that bad, though there was always a high incidence of frozen pizza, for which my housekeepers maintained the ice in my icebox with religious fervor. I often left most of a pizza lying around uneaten when I figured they'd be coming to visit, and thus continued my policy of shamelessly bribing my way into the Little Folk's good graces.

I was too tired to cook anything, and nothing was going to taste good anyway, so I slapped several hot dogs between two pieces of bread along with a couple of lettuce leaves and wolfed them down.

I got out some of my ice and dumped it in a pitcher, then filled the pitcher up. I got down a glass and filled it with ice water. Then I and my glass and my pitcher moseyed over to my fireplace. I set the pitcher on the mantel, idly flipped the neatly laid fire to life with my ignition spell, and then waited for the inevitable while sipping cold water and staring down at the fire. Mister kept me company from his spot on top of a bookcase.

It took her a little while to work up to it, but not as long as I had expected. My bedroom door opened and Molly appeared.

She had showered. Her candy-colored hair hung limp and clinging. She'd washed away the makeup entirely, but there were spots of pink high on her cheeks that I figured had little to do with cosmetics. The various piercings I could see caught the firelight in a deep, burned orange glow.

She was also barefoot. And wearing her brown robe.

I arched an eyebrow at her and waited.

She flushed more deeply and then walked over to me, quite slowly, until she stood not a foot away.

I gave her nothing to work with. No expression. No words. Just silence.

"You looked into me," she whispered quietly. "And I looked into you."

"That's how it works," I confirmed in a quiet, neutral voice.

She shivered. "I saw what kind of man you are. Kind. Gentle." She looked up and met my eyes. "Lonely. And..." She flushed a shade pinker. "And hungry. No one has touched you in a very long time."

She lifted a hand and put it on my chest. Her fingers were very warm, and a rippling flush of purely biological reaction bypassed my silly brain and raced through me in a wave of pleasure—and need. I looked down at Molly's pale hand. Her palm glided over my chest, barely touching, a slow, focused circle. I felt faintly disgusted with myself for my reaction. Hell. I'd known this kid before she'd had to worry about feminine hygiene products.

I managed to thwart my hormones' lobby to start growling or drooling, but my voice had gotten a shade or two huskier. "Also true."

She looked up at me again, her eyes wide and deep and blue enough to drown in. "You saved my life," she said, and I heard her voice shaking. "You're going to teach me. I..." She licked her lips and moved her shoulders. The brown robe slipped down them to the floor.

The tattoo that began on her neck went all the way down to her pierced navel. She had several other studs and fine rings in places I had suspected (but never confirmed) they would be. She shivered and took swifter breaths. The firelight played merrily with her shifting contours.

I'd seen better. But mostly that had been from someone using her looks to get something out of me, and the difference had largely been one of presentation. Molly didn't have much experience in displaying herself for a man, or in playing the coquette. She should have stood differently, arched her back, shifted her hips, worn an expression of thickly sensual interest, daring me to come after her. She would have looked like the patron goddess of corrupted youth.

Instead, she stood there, uncertain and frightened and too naive (or maybe honest) to be anything but totally sincere—and vulnerable. She was afraid, uncertain, the lost princess helpless in a dark wood.

It was worse than if she'd vamped onto me like a trained courtesan. What I saw in her was honest and hopeful, trusting and terrified. She was real, and fragile and precious. My emotions got together with my glands and they ganged up on me, screaming that she needed acceptance and that the kindest thing I could possibly do would be to give her a hug and tell her everything was going to be all right—and that if something followed, who would blame me?

I would. So I just watched her with a straight face.

"I want to learn from you," she said. "I want to do everything I can to help you. To thank you. I want you to teach me things."

"What things?" I asked in a quiet, measured tone.

She licked her lips. "Everything. Show me everything."

"Are you sure?" I asked her.

She nodded, her eyes huge, pupils dilated until only a bare ring of blue remained around them.

"Teach me," she whispered.

I touched her face with the fingers of my right hand. "Kneel down," I told her. "Close your eyes."

Trembling, she did, her breathing becoming faster, more excited.

But that stopped once I picked up the pitcher of ice water from the mantel and dumped it over her head.

She let out a squeal and fell over backward. It took her maybe ten seconds to recover from the shock of the cold, and by then she was gasping and shivering, her eyes wide with surprise and confusion—and with some kind of deep, heavy pain.

I faced her and squatted down onto my haunches to meet her eyes. "Lesson one. This isn't going to happen, Molly," I said in exactly the same calm, gentle voice. "Get that through your head right now. It isn't *ever* going to happen."

Her lower lip trembled, and she bowed her head, shoulders shaking. I gave myself a mental kick in the head and snagged a blanket from the couch. I went to her and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Get over by the fire and warm up."

It took her a moment to collect herself, but she did. She hunched her shoulders beneath the blanket, shivering and humiliated. "You knew," she said in a shaking voice. "That I would...do this."

"I was pretty sure," I agreed.

"Because of the soulgaze," she said.

"Nothing to do with that, really," I replied. "I figured there had to be a reason that you didn't come to me for help when you came into your powers. I figure you've been interested in me for a while. That you wouldn't want to come up to your favorite rock star and start fumbling around on a guitar so that the first thing he thinks about you is that you're incompetent."

She shivered and blushed even more. "No. It wasn't like that..."

Sure it was. But I'd hammered her hard enough for the time being. "If you say so," I answered. "Molly, you may fight with your mom like cats and dogs, but the two of you are more alike than you know."

“That’s not true.”

“It’s trite but true that a lot of young women look for a man who reminds them of their dad. Your dad fights monsters. I fight monsters. Your dad rescued your mom from a dragon. I rescued you from Arctis Tor. Seeing the pattern here?”

She opened her mouth and then frowned at the fire—not an angry frown. A pensive one.

“Plus, you’ve just been scared real good. You don’t have any place to stay. And I’m the guy who is trying to help you.” I shook my head. “But even if there wasn’t magic involved, it still wouldn’t happen. I’ve done some things I’m not proud of. But I’m never going to take advantage of your trust.

“What we’re going to have is not a relationship of equals. I teach. You learn. I tell you to do something, you damned well do it.”

A touch of sullen teenager-ness gleamed in her eyes.

“Don’t even think it,” I said. “Molly, getting pierced and dyed and tattooed just because you want to break the rules is one thing. But what we’re dealing with now isn’t the same thing. A botched dye job affects you. You botch the use of magic and someone—maybe a lot of someones—gets hurt. So you do what I say, when I say it, and you do it because you don’t want to kill someone. Or you can die. That was our deal, and you agreed to it.”

She said nothing. Her anger had faded from her face, but that sullen trace of rebellion remained.

I narrowed my eyes, clenched my fist, and hissed a single word. The fireplace flared up in a sudden, fiery cyclone. Molly flinched back from it, one arm lifted to protect her eyes.

When she lowered it, I was hunkered down right in her face. “I’m not your parents, kid,” I said. “And you don’t have time to play teenage rebel anymore. This is the deal. You do what I say or you don’t survive.” I leaned closer and gave her the look I usually save for rampaging demons and those survey people at malls. “Molly. Is there any doubt in your mind—any doubt at *all*—that I can’t damn well *make* you do it?”

She swallowed. The hard knot of defiance in her eyes suddenly shattered like a diamond struck at precisely the correct angle, and she shivered in the blanket. “No, sir,” she said in a tiny voice.

I nodded at her. She sat there shivering and frightened, which had been the point of the exercise; to knock her off balance while she was still unsteady from recent events and drive home the notion of what she faced. It was absolutely necessary that she understand how things had to play out until she got her power under control. Anything less than willing cooperation would kill her.

But it was hard to remember that, staring down at her as she shivered and stared at the fire, its light turning tears to gold on her cheeks. Heartbreaking, really. She was still so damned young.

So I crouched down and gave her that hug. “It’s all right to be scared, kid. But don’t worry. Everything’s going to be all right.”

She leaned against me, shivering. I let her for a moment, and then got up and said, “Get dressed and get your things.”

“Why?” she asked.

I arched an eyebrow at her. She flushed, took the robe, and hurried back into the bedroom. I had my coat on and was ready to go when she was. I led her out to the car and we took off.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“I hope so. It’s going to take you a long time to learn if you can’t.”

She smiled a little. “Where are we going?”

“Your new digs,” I said.

She frowned at me, but settled back in her seat. “Oh.”

We pulled up to the Carpenter house, ablaze with lights despite the hour.

“Oh, *no*,” Molly muttered. “Tell me you’re kidding me.”

“You’re moving back in.”

“But—”

I continued over her as if she hadn’t spoken. “Not only that, but you’re going to do everything in your power to be the most respectful, loving, respectful, considerate, and respectful daughter in the whole wide world. Especially where your mom is concerned.”

She stared at me with her jaw hanging.

“Oh,” I added. “And you’re going back to high school until you’re finished.”

She stared at me for a long time, then blinked and said, “I died. And this is Hell.”

I snorted. “If you can’t control yourself well enough to finish a basic education and get along with a houseful of people who love you, then you

sure as hell can't control yourself enough to use what I need to teach you."

"But...but..."

"Think of your homecoming as an extended lesson in respect and self-control," I said cheerfully. "I'll be checking up with your parents at least weekly. You'll do lessons with me every day until school is back in, and then I'll give you reading and homework for the—"

"Homework?" she half wailed.

"Don't interrupt. The homework will only be on weekdays. We'll do lessons on Friday and Saturday evenings."

"Friday and Satur..." She trailed off into a sigh and slumped. "Hell. I am in Hell."

"It gets better. I take it that you're sexually active?"

She stood there with her mouth hanging open.

"Come on, Molly, this is important. Do you boink?"

Her face turned pink and she hid her face in her hands. "I...I...well. I'm a virgin."

I arched an eyebrow at her.

She glanced up at me, blushed more, and added, "Technically."

"Technically," I said.

"Um. I've...explored. Most of the bases."

"I see," I said. "Well, Magellan, no baserunning or boldly going where no man has gone before for you—not until you get yourself grounded. Sex makes things complicated, and for you that could be bad."

"But..."

"And no, ah, solo exploration either."

She blinked at me and asked in a blank tone, "Why?"

"You'll go blind," I said, and walked up to her front porch.

"You're joking," she said, and then hurried to catch up. "That's a joke, right? Harry?"

I marched her up to her house without answering her. Molly wore a hopeless look on her face, as though she envied a condemned criminal, who could at least hope that the governor might call at the last minute. But when the doors opened and her family's delight washed over her in a roar like a breaking wave, she smiled from her eyes all the way down to her toes.

I made polite chat for a minute, until Mouse limped over to me, smiling and wagging his tail. There was something on his muzzle that I suspected to be honey mustard, or maybe buffalo sauce, doubtless slipped to him by a

young accomplice. I clipped his lead on him and took my leave, heading back to my car.

Before I got there, Charity caught up with me. I arched an eyebrow at her and waited while she fidgeted and finally asked, “Did you tell them? About what I was?”

“Of course not,” I said.

She slumped a little in relief. “Oh.”

“You’re welcome,” I said.

She frowned at me and said, “If you hurt my little girl, I’ll come down to that little closet you call an office and throw you out the window. Do you understand?”

“Death by defenestration, gotcha.”

A few tiny cracks developed in her frown, and then she shook her head sharply, once, caught me in a hug that made my ribs ache, and went back into the house without another word.

Mouse sat there panting and grinning happily.

I went home and got some sleep.

I was working in my lab the next day, trying to make notes of all that had happened so that I wouldn’t forget anything. Bob sat on the table next to me, helping me with the details.

“Oh,” he said. “I found something wrong with Little Chicago’s design.”

I swallowed. “Oh. Wow. Bad?”

“Extremely. We missed a transition coupling in the power flow. The stored energy was all going to the same spot.”

I frowned. “That’s...like a surge of electricity going through a circuit breaker, right? Or a fuse box.”

“Exactly like that,” Bob said. “Except that *you* were the fuse. That much energy in one spot will blow your head off your shoulders.”

“But it didn’t,” I said.

“But it didn’t,” Bob agreed.

“How is that possible?”

“It isn’t,” he said. “Someone fixed it.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“It didn’t fix itself,” Bob said. “When I looked at it a few nights ago, the flawed section was in plain sight, even if I didn’t recognize it at the time. When I looked again tonight, it was different. Someone changed it.”

“In my lab? Under my house? Which is behind my wards? That’s impossible.”

“No it isn’t,” Bob said. “Just really, really, really, really, really, *really* difficult. And unlikely. He would have had to know that you had a lab down here. And he would have had to know how to get around your wards.”

“Plus intimate knowledge of the design to tinker with it like that,” I said. “To say nothing of the fact that he would have to know it existed at *all*, and no one does.”

“Really, really unlikely,” Bob agreed.

“Dammit.”

“Hey, I thought you loved a good mystery, Harry.”

I shook my head and started to tell him where to stick his mystery when someone knocked at the door.

Murphy stood on the other side and smiled at me. “Hey.” She held up my shotgun. “Thomas wanted me to bring this by. Said to tell you he was getting his own toys from now on.”

She offered it and I took it, frowning. “He didn’t even clean it off.”

She smiled. “I swear, Dresden. You can be such a pansy.”

“It’s because I’m a sensitive guy. You want to come in?”

She gave me another smile, but shook her head. “No time. Got to see the first shrink in half an hour.”

“Ah,” I said. “How are things playing out?”

“Oh, there’s a long investigation and evaluation to be done,” she said. “Officially, of course.”

“Of course,” I said.

“But unofficially...” She shrugged. “I’m losing SI. They’re busting me down to detective sergeant.”

I winced. “Who’s getting the job?”

“Stallings, most likely. He’s the next most experienced, better record than most of the department, and he’s respected.” She looked away. “I’m losing my seniority, too. All of it. So they’re partnering me with their most experienced detective.”

“Which is that?” I asked.

“Rawlins,” she said, her mouth moving in a tight smile. “He did so good on this one they promoted him to SI.”

“No good deed goes unpunished,” I said.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Murphy sighed.

“That a bad thing? He seems like a decent guy.”

“He is, he is,” Murphy said, scrunching up her nose. “But he knew my father.”

“Oh,” I said. “And it’s possible you have issues.”

“Remotely,” she said. “What about you? You okay?”

I met her eyes for a second and then looked away. “I, uh. I’ll be okay.”

She nodded, and then simply stepped forward and hugged me. My arms went around her without me telling them to do it. It wasn’t a tense, meaning-laden hug. She was my friend. She was exhausted and worried and suffering, and she’d had what she valued most sullied and stained, but she was worried about me. Giving me a hug. Assuring me, by implication, that everything was going to be all right.

I gave as good as I got for a while. When we broke the embrace, it was at the same time, and it wasn’t awkward. She smiled at me, just a little bittersweet, and glanced at her watch. “I have to get moving.”

“Right,” I said. “Thanks, Murph.”

She left. A while later, my phone rang. I answered it.

“Everything work out?” Thomas asked. “With the girl?”

“Pretty much,” I told him. “You all right?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Need anything?” Like maybe to talk about how he was feeding on people again and making money at the same time.

“Not especially,” he told me. I was pretty sure he had heard the unasked question, because his tone of voice carried an unyielding coolness, telling me not to push. Thomas was my brother. I could wait.

“What’s up with Murphy?” he asked me.

I told him about her job.

He was silent for an annoyed second and then said, “But what’s up with Murphy?”

I glowered and slouched down onto my couch. “There isn’t anything up with her. She isn’t interested.”

“How do you know?” he asked.

“She told me.”

“She told you.”

“She told me.”

He sighed. “And you believed her.”

“Well,” I said. “Yes.”

"I had a talk with her when she drove me home," he said.

"A talk?"

"A talk. I wanted to figure something out."

"Did you?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"What?"

"That you're both stiff-necked idiots," he said, his tone annoyed, and hung up on me.

I glowered at the phone for a minute, muttered a couple of choice words about my half brother, then got out my guitar and labored to make something resembling music for a while. Sometimes it was easier for me to think when playing, and the time drifted by. I played and mulled things over until someone else knocked. I set my guitar aside and went to the door.

Ebenezar stood on the other side, and he gave me a nod and a cautious smile when I opened the door. "Hot enough for you?" the old wizard asked.

"Almost," I said. "Come in."

He did, and I grabbed a couple of beers, offering him one. "What's up?"

"You tell me," he said.

So I told him all about the last few days, especially my dealings with Lily and Fix, Maeve, and Mab. Ebenezar listened to it all in silence.

"What a mess," he said when I finished.

"Tell me about it." I sipped at my beer. "You know what I think?"

He finished his beer and shook his head.

"I think we got played."

"By the Summer Lady?"

I shook my head. "I think Lily got suckered just as much as we did."

He frowned and rubbed at his head with one palm. "How so?"

"That's the part I can't figure," I said. "I think someone set Molly up to be a beacon for the fetches. And I'm damned sure that it was no accident that those fetches took Molly to Arctis Tor when it was so lightly defended. Someone *wanted* me there at Arctis Tor."

Ebenezar pursed his lips. "Who?"

"I think we got used by one of the Queens to one-up one of the others, somehow. But damned if I can figure out how."

"You think Mab really is insane?"

"I think it would be hard to tell the difference," I said in a sour voice. "Lily thinks so. But Lily wasn't exactly widely famed for her intellect

before she became the Summer Lady.” I shook my head. “If Mab really is loopy, it’s going to be bad.”

The old man nodded.

“And since you can’t swing a cat without hitting a cat’s-paw lately, I think maybe someone was trying to use Mab for something. Like all the others who’ve gotten set up around here.”

“Set up?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Starting with Victor Sells a few years ago. Then those FBI creeps with the wolf belts. I think that someone out there wants to get things done without getting his—”

“Or her,” Ebenezar said.

“Or her own hands dirty,” I continued. “Consider all these things running around with more power than they should have had or better connected than they should have been. The Shadowman, the hexenwulfen, the Nightmare, the last Summer Lady—and that’s just for starters. The Red Court sure are a hell of a lot more dangerous than anyone thought they would be.”

Ebenezar frowned, nodding.

“I think whoever is backstage moving things around tried to use Mab and got more than they bargained for. I think that’s what the attack on Arctis Tor was about. Maybe they tried to put her down before she turned on them.”

“Which she would,” Ebenezar said.

“Of course she would. She’s Mab. She’d keep any bargain she made, but she isn’t the kind who takes orders real well.”

“Go on, boy,” Ebenezar said gently. “You’ve got facts. Where do they lead you?”

I lowered my own voice to a whisper. “A new power is moving around out there. Something big, smart, strong, and sneaky as hell. Something with a lot of strength and magical know-how.” I licked my lips. “Put that together with the evidence of varied powers. Wolf belts handed out to those poor FBI bastards. Black magic being taught to small-timers like the Shadowman and the Nightmare. Vampires cross-training one another in sorcery. Hellfire used on Arctis Tor. And, of course, the White Council’s highly placed traitor. All of that together doesn’t point to just one person. It indicates an organization.” I regarded the old man steadily. “And they’ve got wizards on the staff. Probably several of them.”

Ebenezar grunted. “Damn.”

“Damn?”

“I was hoping maybe I was starting to go senile. But I came to the same conclusion.” He nodded. “Boy, don’t breathe a word of this. Not to anyone. I got the feeling that this is information worth as much as your life.” He shook his head. “Let me think about who else needs to know.”

“Rashid,” I said in a firm voice. “Tell the Gatekeeper.”

Ebenezar frowned, though it looked more weary than anything else. “Likely he knows already. Knew already. Maybe even pointed you in a direction that would show you more. Assuming he wasn’t simply using you to poke a hornet’s nest and see what flew up.”

Which was somewhat creepy to think about. If Ebenezar was right, I could count myself among the pawns in play, courtesy of the Gatekeeper.

“You don’t want to tell him?” I asked.

“Rashid is a tough one to figure,” Ebenezar said. “Three, four years ago, I wouldn’t have thought twice. But with all that’s happened...since Simon died...” He shrugged. “Better to be cautious. We can’t put the genie back in the bottle once it’s out.”

“Or maybe that’s the worst thing we could do,” I said. “Maybe it’s what these...Black Council assholes are counting on.”

He looked up at me sharply. “Now why would you call them that?”

“Black Council?” I shrugged. “If the shoe fits. It’s better than the Legion of Doom.”

He regarded me for a moment more and then shrugged. “Times are changing, Hoss. That’s for sure.” He polished off his beer. “But they always do. I know you’re going to do what you think you need to do. But I’d like to ask that you be very cautious, Hoss. We still don’t know what our enemies look like. That means we’ll have to bring in our allies carefully.”

“Meaning without troubling the White Council and the Wardens about it?” I asked, my tone dry.

He grunted in the affirmative. “Don’t forget the other loose end.”

I frowned and thought back over it. “Huh,” I said. “You’re right. Who was driving that car that ran into me?”

“Exactly,” he said.

“More mysteries.”

“Thought you were a professional investigator, Hoss,” he teased. “For you, this should be fun.”

“Yeah. Fun. Fun, fun, fun. I’m having fun already.”

He smiled. “Mmmmmph. It isn’t good news that Winter isn’t going to stand with us against the Reds, but it could have been worse. And we learned something valuable.”

I grunted. “The traitor to the Council. Someone had to tell the Reds where Luccio’s boot camp was hidden.”

“Yes,” he said, and leaned forward. “And outside of Luccio only four people knew.”

I arched my brows at him. “Morgan?”

“That’s one,” he agreed. “Injun Joe, the Merlin, and Ancient Mai were the only others.”

I whistled slowly. “Heavy hitters. But knock Morgan off your list. He didn’t do it.”

Ebenezar arched his brows. “No?”

I shook my head. “Guy is a dick,” I said, “but he’s on the level. We shouldn’t tell him, but he’s no traitor.”

Ebenezar frowned for a moment and then nodded slowly. “Very well, then. I’ll vouch for Injun Joe.”

“So what comes next?” I asked him.

“Watching them,” he said. “Waiting. Not letting on that we know. We won’t get more than one chance to take them off guard. When we do move, we got to make it hurt.”

I frowned at my now-empty bottle and nodded. “We wait. Lie in the weeds. Keep a low profile. Got it.”

“Hoss,” my old teacher said quietly. “What you did for that girl...”

“Yeah,” I said, waving a hand. “Stupid. The Merlin is going to be royally pissed at me. He’ll probably start insisting I go on shooting missions now, in hopes someone will take me out and remove a thorn in his side.”

“True,” Ebenezar said. “But what I meant to say was that what you did was damned brave. From what I hear, you were ready to take on everyone there if you had to.”

“Wouldn’t have lasted long.”

“No. But then, that wasn’t the point.” He rose a little stiffly and said, “I’m proud of you, boy.”

Something inside me melted.

“You know,” I said. “You always told me you weren’t at my trial. That the Council saddled you with me because you skipped out. I think that isn’t true.”

He grunted.

“It was all in Latin, which I didn’t understand then. And I had that hood over my head, so I couldn’t see anyone. But someone had to have defended me, the way I did Molly.”

“Could be.” He rolled one shoulder in a shrug. “I’m getting old, Hoss. I forget things.”

“Ah,” I said. “You know, I’ve missed a meal or three lately. And I know this little joint that’s got the best spaghetti in town.”

Ebenazar froze in place, like a man walking on ice who suddenly hears cracking sounds. “Oh?” he asked, tone careful.

“They’ve got this great bread that goes with it, too. And it’s right by the campus, so cute waitresses.”

“Sounds promising,” Ebenazar said. “Makes me feel a mite hungry hearing about it.”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Let me get my shoes. If we hurry we can get there before the evening rush.”

We looked at each other for a long moment, and my old teacher bowed his head to me. It conveyed a lot of things. Apology. Gratitude. Happiness. Forgiveness. Affection. Pride.

“You want me to drive us?” he asked.

I bowed my head in reply. “I’d like that, sir.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I was seven years old, I got a bad case of strep throat and was out of school for a whole week. During that time, my sisters bought me my first fantasy and sci-fi novels: the boxed set of *Lord of the Rings* and the boxed set of the Han Solo adventure novels by Brian Daley. I devoured them all during that week.

From that point on, I was pretty much doomed to join SF&F fandom. From there, it was only one more step to decide I wanted to be a writer of my favorite fiction material, and here we are.

I blame my sisters.

My first love as a fan is swords-and-horses fantasy. After Tolkien I went after C. S. Lewis. After Lewis, it was Lloyd Alexander. After them came Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny, Robert Howard, John Norman, Poul Anderson, David Eddings, Weis and Hickman, Terry Brooks, Elizabeth Moon, Glen Cook, and before I knew it I was a dual citizen of the United States and Lankhmar, Narnia, Gor, Cimmeria, Krynn, Amber—you get the picture.

When I set out to become a writer, I spent years writing swords-and-horses fantasy novels—and seemed to have little innate talent for it. But I worked at my writing, branching out into other areas as experiments, including SF, mystery, and contemporary fantasy. That's how the Dresden Files initially came about—as a happy accident while trying to accomplish something else. Sort of like penicillin.

But I never forgot my first love, and to my immense delight and excitement, one day I got a call from my agent and found out that I was going to get to share my newest swords-and-horses fantasy novel with other fans.

The Codex Alera is a fantasy series set within the savage world of Carna, where spirits of the elements, known as furies, lurk in every facet of life, and where many intelligent races vie for security and survival. The realm of Alera is the monolithic civilization of humanity, and its unique ability to harness and command the furies is all that enables its survival in the face of

the enormous, sometimes hostile elemental powers of Carna, and against savage creatures who would lay Alera in waste and ruin.

Yet even a realm as powerful as Alera is not immune to destruction from within, and the death of the heir apparent to the Crown has triggered a frenzy of ambitious political maneuvering and infighting amongst the High Lords, those who wield the most powerful furies known to man. Plots are afoot, traitors and spies abound, and a civil war seems inevitable—all while the enemies of the realm watch, ready to strike at the first sign of weakness.

Tavi is a young man living on the frontier of Aleran civilization—because let's face it, swords-and-horses fantasies start there. Born a freak, unable to utilize any powers of furycrafting whatsoever, Tavi has grown up relying upon his own wits, speed, and courage to survive. When an ambitious plot to discredit the Crown lays Tavi's home, the Calderon Valley, naked and defenseless before a horde of the barbarian Marat, the boy and his family find themselves directly in harm's way.

There are no titanic High Lords to protect them, no Legions, no Knights with their might furies to take the field. Tavi and the free frontiersmen of the Calderon Valley must find some way to uncover the plot and to defend their homes against a merciless horde of Marat and their beasts.

It is a desperate hour, where the fate of all Alera hangs in the balance, where a handful of ordinary steadholders must find the courage and strength to defy an overwhelming foe, and where the courage and intelligence of one young man will save the Relam—or destroy it.

Thank you, readers and fellow fans, for all of your support and kindness. I hope that you enjoy reading the first book of the Codex Alera, *Furies of Calderon*, as much as I enjoyed creating it for you.

—Jim

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from Ace Books.

WHITE NIGHT

ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER

THE DRESDEN FILES

JIM BUTCHER

ROC

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For the newest members of the family, Jesse and Dara

Contents

Acknowledgments

Chapter One

Many things are not as they seem: The worst things in life never are.

I pulled my battle-scarred, multicolored old Volkswagen Beetle up in front of a run-down Chicago apartment building, not five blocks from my own rented basement apartment. Usually, by the time the cops call me, things are pretty frantic; there's at least one corpse, several cars, a lot of flashing blue lights, yellow-and-black tape, and members of the press—or at least the promise of the imminent arrival of same.

This crime scene was completely quiet. I saw no marked police cars, and only one ambulance, parked, its lights off. A young mother went by, one child in a stroller, the other toddling along holding Mommy's hand. An elderly man walked a Labrador retriever past my car. No one was standing around and gawking or otherwise doing anything at all out of the ordinary.

Odd.

A creepy shiver danced over the nape of my neck, even though it was the middle of a sunny May afternoon. Normally, I didn't start getting wigged out until I'd seen at least one nightmarish thing doing something graphic and murderous.

I put it down to the paranoia of advancing age. It isn't like I'm all *that* old or anything, especially for a wizard, but age is always advancing and I'm fairly sure it's up to no good.

I parked the Blue Beetle and headed into the apartment building. I went up several flights of stairs that needed their old tile replaced, or at least scrubbed and shined. I left them to find a hallway carpeted in a low, grey-blue pile that had been crushed down to shiny smoothness in the middle. The apartment doors were battered, old, but made of thick oak. I found Murphy waiting for me.

At five feet and small change, a hundred and not much, she didn't exactly look like a tough Chicago cop who could face down monsters and maniacs with equal nerve. Chicks like that aren't supposed to be blond or have a cute nose. Sometimes I think Murphy became that tough cop she

didn't look like purely for the sake of contrariness—no amount of sparkling blue eyes or seeming harmlessness could hide the steel in her nature. She gave me her we're-at-work nod, and a terse greeting. "Dresden."

"Lieutenant Murphy," I drawled, with an elaborate bow and flourish of one hand, deliberately at odds with her brusque demeanor. I wasn't doing it out of pure contrariness. I'm not like that. "I am dazzled by your presence once more."

I expected a snort of derision. Instead, she gave me a polite, brittle little smile and corrected me in a gentle tone: "Sergeant Murphy."

Open mouth, insert foot. Way to go, Harry. The opening credits aren't done rolling on this case, and you've already reminded Murphy of what it cost her to be your friend and ally.

Murphy had been a detective lieutenant, and in charge of Special Investigations. SI was Chicago PD's answer to problems that didn't fall within the boundaries of "normal." If a vampire slaughtered a transient, if a ghoul killed a graveyard watchman, or if a faerie cursed someone's hair to start growing *in* instead of *out*, someone had to examine it. Someone had to look into it and reassure the government and the citizenry that everything was normal. It was a thankless job, but SI handled it through sheer guts and tenacity and sneakiness and by occasionally calling in Wizard Harry Dresden to give them a hand.

Her bosses got real upset about her abandoning her duties in a time of crisis, while she helped me on a case. She'd already been exiled to professional Siberia, by being put in charge of SI. By taking away the rank and status she had worked her ass off to earn, they had humiliated her, and dealt a dreadful blow to her pride and her sense of self-worth.

"Sergeant," I said, sighing. "Sorry, Murph. I forgot."

She shrugged a shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I forget sometimes, too. When I answer the phone at work, mostly."

"Still. I should be less stupid."

"We all think that, Harry," Murphy said, and thumped me lightly on the biceps with one fist. "But no one blames you."

"That's real big of you, Mini Mouse," I replied.

She snorted and rang for the elevator. On the way up, I asked her, "It's a lot quieter than most crime scenes, isn't it?"

She grimaced. "It isn't one."

"It isn't?"

“Not exactly,” she said. She glanced up at me. “Not officially.”

“Ah,” I said. “I guess I’m not actually consulting.”

“Not officially,” she said. “They cut Stallings’s budget pretty hard. He can keep the equipment functional and the paychecks steady, barely, but...”

I arched a brow.

“I need your opinion,” she said.

“About what?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to prejudice you. Just look and tell me what you see.”

“I can do that,” I said.

“I’ll pay you myself.”

“Murph, you don’t need to—”

She gave me a very hard look.

Sergeant Murphy’s wounded pride wouldn’t allow her to take charity. I lifted my hands in mock surrender, relenting. “Whatever you say, boss.”

“Damn right.”

She took me to an apartment on the seventh floor. There were a couple of doors in the hall standing slightly open, and I caught furtive looks from their residents from the corner of my eye as we walked past. At the far end of the hall stood a pair of guys who looked like medtechs—bored, grouchy medtechs. One of them was smoking, the other leaning against a wall with his arms crossed and his cap’s bill down over his eyes. Murphy and the two of them ignored one another as Murphy opened the apartment door.

Murphy gestured for me to go in and planted her feet, clearly intending to wait.

I went into the apartment. It was small, worn, and shabby, but it was clean. A miniature jungle of very healthy green plants covered most of the far wall, framing the two windows. From the door, I could see a tiny television on a TV stand, an old stereo, and a futon.

The dead woman lay on the futon.

She had her hands folded over her stomach. I didn’t have the experience to tell exactly how long she’d been there, but the corpse had lost all its color and its stomach looked slightly distended, so I guessed that she died at least the day before. It was hard to guess at her age, but she couldn’t have been much more than thirty. She wore a pink terry-cloth bathrobe, a pair of glasses, and had her brown hair pulled up into a bun.

On the coffee table in front of the futon there was a prescription bottle, its top off, empty. A decanter of golden brown liquid, dusted for prints and covered by a layer of plastic, sat beside it, as did a tumbler that was empty but for a quarter inch of water still in its bottom, enough for a melted ice cube or two.

Next to the tumbler there was a handwritten note, also inside in a plastic bag, along with a gel-tip pen.

I looked at the woman. Then I went over to the futon and read the note:

*I'm so tired of being afraid. There's nothing left. Forgive me.
Janine.*

I shuddered.

I'd seen corpses before; don't get me wrong. In fact, I'd seen crime scenes that looked like photos of Hell's slaughterhouse. I'd smelled worse, too—believe you me, an eviscerated body puts off a stench of death and rot so vile that it is almost a solid object. By comparison to some of my previous cases, this one was quite peaceful. Well organized. Tidy, even.

It looked nothing like the home of a dead woman. Maybe that's what made it feel so creepy. Except for Janine's corpse, the apartment looked like its owners had just stepped out for a bite to eat.

I prowled around, careful not to touch anything. The bathroom and one of the bedrooms were like the living room: neat, a little sparse, not rich, but obviously well cared for. I hit the kitchen next. Dishes were soaking in now-cold water in the sink. In the fridge, chicken was marinating in some kind of sauce, its glass bowl covered with Saran.

I heard a quiet step behind me, and said, "Suicides don't usually leave a meal marinating, do they? Or dishes soaking to be cleaned? Or their glasses on?"

Murphy made a noncommittal noise in her throat.

"No pictures up anywhere," I mused. "No family portraits, graduation shots, pictures of everyone at Disneyland." I added up some other things as I turned toward the second bedroom. "No hair in the sink or bathroom trash can. No computers."

I opened the door to the master bedroom and closed my eyes, reaching out with my senses to get a feel of the room. I found what I expected.

"She was a practitioner," I said quietly.

Janine had set up her temple on a low wooden table against the east wall. As I drew near it, there was a sense of gentle energy, like heat coming up from a fire that had burned down to mostly ashes. The energy around the table had never been strong, and it was fading, and had been since the woman's death. Within another sunrise, it would be completely gone.

There were a number of items on the table, carefully arranged: a bell, a thick, leather-bound book, probably a journal. There was also an old pewter chalice, very plain but free of tarnish, and a slender little mahogany wand with a crystal bound to its end with copper wire.

One thing was out of place.

An old, old knife, a slender-bladed weapon from the early Renaissance called a misericord, lay on the carpet in front of the shrine, its tip pointing at an angle toward the other side of the bedroom.

I grunted. I paced around the room to the knife. I hunkered down, thinking, then looked up the blade of the knife to its hilt. I paced back to the bedroom door and peered at the living room.

The hilt of the knife pointed at Janine's body.

I went back to the bedroom and squinted down the knife toward its tip.

It was pointed at the far wall.

I glanced back at Murphy, now standing in the doorway.

Murphy tilted her head. "What did you find?"

"Not sure yet. Hang on." I walked over to the wall and held up my hand about half an inch from its surface. I closed my eyes and focused on a very faint trace of energy left there. After several moments of concentration, I lowered my hand again. "There's something there," I said. "But it's too faint for me to make it out without using my Sight. And I'm getting sick of doing that."

"What does that mean?" Murphy asked me.

"It means I need something from my kit. Be right back." I went outside and down to my car, where I kept a fisherman's tackle box. I snagged it and went back up to the dead woman's bedroom.

"That's new," Murphy said.

I set the box on the floor and opened it. "I've been teaching my apprentice thaumaturgy. We have to go out to the country sometimes, for safety's sake." I rummaged through the box and finally drew out a plastic test tube full of metallic grains. "I just tossed things into a grocery sack for

the first couple of weeks, but it was easier to put together a more permanent mobile kit.”

“What’s that?” Murphy asked.

“Copper filings,” I said. “They conduct energy. If there’s some kind of pattern here, I might be able to make it out.”

“Ah. You’re dusting for prints,” Murphy said.

“Pretty much, yeah.” I pulled a lump of chalk out of my duster’s pocket and squatted to draw a very faint circle on the carpet. I willed it closed as I completed the circle, and felt it spring to life, an invisible screen of power that kept random energies away from me and focused my own magic. The spell was a delicate one, for me anyway, and trying to use it without a circle would have been like trying to light a match in a hurricane.

I closed my eyes, concentrating, and poured an ounce or two of copper filings into my right palm. I willed a whisper of energy down into the filings, enough to create a magical charge in them that would draw them toward the faint energy on the wall. When they were ready, I murmured, “*Illumina magnus.*” Then I broke the circle with my foot, releasing the spell, and cast the filings outward.

They glittered with little blue-white sparks, crackling audibly as they struck the wall and stayed there. The scent of ozone filled the air.

I leaned forward and blew gently over the wall, clearing any stray filings that might have clung to the wall on their own. Then I stepped back.

The copper filings had fallen into definite shapes—specifically, letters:

EXODUS 22:18.

Murphy furrowed her brow and stared at it. “A Bible verse?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know that one,” she said. “Do you?”

I nodded. “It’s one that stuck in my head: ‘Suffer not a witch to live.’”

Chapter Two

“Murder, then,” Murphy said.

I grunted. “Looks like.”

“And the killer wanted you to know it.” She came to stand beside me, frowning up at the wall. “A cop couldn’t have found this.”

“Yeah,” I said. The empty apartment made a clicking noise, one of those settling-building, homey sounds that would have been familiar to the victim.

Murphy’s tone became lighter. “So, what are we looking at here? Some kind of religious wacko? Salem Witch Trials aficionado? The Inquisitor reborn?”

“And he uses magic to leave a message?” I asked.

“Wackos can be hypocrites.” She frowned. “How did the message get there? Did a practitioner have to do it?”

I shook my head. “After they killed her, they probably just dipped their finger in the water in the chalice, used it to write on the wall. Water dried up, but a residue of energy remained.”

She frowned. “From water?”

“Blessed water from the cup on her shrine,” I said. “Think of it as holy water. It’s imbued with positive energy the same way.”

Murphy squinted at me and then at the wall. “Holy? I thought magic was just all about energy and math and equations and things. Like electricity or thermodynamics.”

“Not everyone thinks that,” I said. I nodded at the altar. “The victim was a Wiccan.”

Murphy frowned. “A witch?”

“She was also a witch,” I said. “Not every Wiccan has the innate strength to be a practitioner. For most of them, there’s very little actual power involved in their rites and ceremonies.”

“Then why do them?”

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony.” I shrugged. “Every faith has its ceremonies, Murph.”

“This was about a conflict of religion, then?” Murphy said.

I shrugged. “It’s sort of difficult for sincere Wiccans to conflict with other religions. Wicca itself is really fluid. There are some basic tenets that ninety-nine percent of all Wiccans follow, but at its core the faith is all about individual freedom. Wiccans believe that as long as you aren’t hurting anyone else by doing it, you should be free to act and worship in whatever way you’d like. So everyone’s beliefs are a little bit different. Individualized.”

Murphy, who was more or less Catholic, frowned. “Seems to me that Christianity has a few things to say about forgiveness and tolerance and treating others the way you’d like to be treated.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Then came the Crusades, the Inquisition....”

“Which is my point,” Murphy said. “Regardless of what I think about Islam or Wicca or any other religion, the fact is that it’s a group of people. Every faith has its ceremonies. And since it’s made up of people, every faith also has its assholes.”

“You only need one side to start a fight,” I agreed. “KKK quotes a lot of scripture. So do a lot of reactionary religious organizations. A lot of times, they take it out of context.” I gestured at the wall. “Like this.”

“I dunno. ‘Suffer not a witch to live.’ Seems fairly clear.”

“Out of context, but clear,” I said. “Keep in mind that this appears in the same book of the Bible that approves the death sentence for a child who curses his parents, owners of oxen who injure someone through the owner’s negligence, anybody who works or kindles a fire on Sunday, and anyone who has sex with an animal.”

Murphy snorted.

“Also keep in mind that the original text was written thousands of years ago. In Hebrew. The actual word that they used in that verse describes someone who casts spells that do harm to others. There was a distinction, in that culture, between harmful and beneficial magic.

“By the time we got to the Middle Ages, the general attitude within the faith was that anyone who practiced any kind of magic was automatically evil. There was no distinction between white and black magic. And when the verse came over to English, King James had a thing about witches, so ‘harmful caster of spells’ just got translated to ‘witch.’”

“Put that way, it sounds like maybe someone took it out of context,” Murphy said. “But you’d get arguments from all kinds of people that the Bible has got to be perfect. That God would not permit such errors to be made in the Holy Word.”

“I thought God gave everyone free will,” I said. “Which presumably—and evidently—includes the freedom to be incorrect when translating one language into another.”

“Stop making me think,” Murphy said. “I’m believing over here.”

I grinned. “See? This is why I’m not religious. I couldn’t possibly keep my mouth shut long enough to get along with everyone else.”

“I thought it was because you’d never respect any religion that would have you.”

“That too,” I said.

Neither one of us, during this conversation, looked back toward the body in the living room. An uncomfortable silence fell. The floorboards creaked.

“Murder,” Murphy said, finally, staring at the wall. “Maybe someone on a holy mission.”

“Murder,” I said. “Too soon to make any assumptions. What made you call me?”

“That altar,” she said. “The inconsistencies about the victim.”

“No one is going to buy magic writing on a wall as evidence.”

“I know,” she said. “Officially, she’s going down as a suicide.”

“Which means the ball is in my court,” I said.

“I talked to Stallings,” she said. “I’m taking a couple of days of personal leave, starting tomorrow. I’m in.”

“Cool.” I frowned suddenly and got a sick little feeling in my stomach. “This isn’t the only suicide, is it.”

“Right now, I’m on the job,” Murphy said. “That isn’t something I could share with you. The way someone like Butters might.”

“Right,” I said.

With no warning whatsoever, Murphy moved, spinning in a blur of motion that swept her leg out in a scything, ankle-height arc behind her. There was a thump of impact, and the sound of something heavy hitting the floor. Murphy—her eyes closed—sprang onto something unseen, and her hands moved in a couple of small, quick circles, fingers grasping. Then Murphy grunted, set her arms, and twisted her shoulders a little.

There was a young woman's high-pitched gasp of pain, and abruptly, underneath Murphy, there was a girl. Murphy had her pinned on her stomach on the floor, one arm twisted behind her, wrist bent at a painful angle.

The girl was in her late teens. She wore combat boots, black fatigue pants, and a tight, cutoff grey T-shirt. She was tall, most of a foot taller than Murphy, and built like a brick house. Her hair had been cut into a short, spiky style and dyed peroxide white. A tattoo on her neck vanished under her shirt, reappeared for a bit on her bared stomach, and continued beneath the pants. She had multiple earrings, a nose ring, an eyebrow ring, and a silver stud through that spot right under her lower lip. On the hand Murphy had twisted up behind her back, she wore a bracelet of dark little glass beads.

"Harry?" Murphy said in that tone of voice that, while polite and patient, demanded an explanation.

I sighed. "Murph. You remember my apprentice, Molly Carpenter."

Murphy leaned to one side and looked at her profile. "Oh, sure," she said. "I didn't recognize her without the pink-and-blue hair. Also, she wasn't invisible last time." She gave me a look, asking if I should let her up.

I gave Murphy a wink, and squatted down on the carpet next to the girl. I gave her my best scowl. "I told you to wait at the apartment and practice your focus."

"Oh, come *on*," Molly said. "It's *impossible*. And boring as hell."

"Practice makes perfect, kid."

"I've been practicing my ass off!" Molly protested. "I know fifty times as much as I did last year."

"And if you keep up the pace for another six or seven years," I said, "you might—you *might*—be ready to go it alone. Until then, you're the apprentice, I'm the teacher, and you do what I tell you."

"But I can help you!"

"Not from a jail cell," I pointed out.

"You're trespassing on a crime scene," Murphy told her.

"Oh, please," Molly said, both scorn and protest in her voice.

(In case it slipped by, Molly has authority issues.)

It was probably the worst thing she could have said.

"Right," Murphy said. She produced cuffs from her jacket pocket, and slapped them on Molly's pinned wrist. "You have the right to remain

silent.”

Molly’s eyes widened and she stared up at me. “What? Harry...”

“If you choose to give up that right,” Murphy continued, chanting it with the steady pace of ritual, “anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

I shrugged. “Sorry, kid. This is real life. Look, your juvenile record is sealed, and you’ll be tried as an adult. First offense, I doubt you’ll do much more than...Murph?”

Murphy took a break from the Miranda chant. “Thirty to sixty days, maybe.” Then she resumed.

“There, see? No big deal. See you in a month or three.”

Molly’s face got pale. “But...but...”

“Oh,” I added, “beat someone up on the first day. Supposed to save you a lot of trouble.”

Murphy dragged Molly to her feet, her hands now cuffed. “Do you understand your rights as I have conveyed them to you?”

Molly’s mouth fell open. She looked from Murphy to me, her expression shocked.

“Or,” I said, “you *might* apologize.”

“I-I’m sorry, Harry,” she said.

I sighed. “Not to me, kid. It isn’t *my* crime scene.”

“But...” Molly swallowed and looked at Murphy. “I was just s-standing there.”

“You wearing gloves?” Murphy asked.

“No.”

“Shoes?”

“Yes.”

“Touch anything?”

“Um.” Molly swallowed. “The door. Just pushed it a little. And that Chinese vase she’s planted her spearmint in. The one with a crack in it.”

“Which means,” Murphy said, “that if I can show that this is a murder, a full forensic sweep could pick up your fingerprints, the imprint of your shoes, and, as brittle as your hairdo is, possibly genetic traces if any of it broke off. Since you aren’t one of the investigating officers or police consultants, that evidence would place you at the scene of the crime and could implicate you in a murder investigation.”

Molly shook her head. “But you just said it would be called a suic—”

“Even if it is, you don’t know proper procedure, the way Harry does, and your presence here might contaminate the scene and obscure evidence about the actual killer, making the murderer even more difficult to find before he strikes again.”

Molly just stared at her.

“That’s why there are laws about civilians and crime scenes. This isn’t a game, Miss Carpenter,” Murphy said, her voice cool, but not angry. “Mistakes here could cost lives. Do you understand me?”

Molly glanced from Murphy to me and back, and her shoulders sagged. “I didn’t mean to...I’m sorry.”

I said in a gentle voice, “Apologies won’t give life back to the dead, Molly. You still haven’t learned to consider consequences, and you can’t afford that. Not anymore.”

Molly flinched a little and nodded.

“I trust that this will never happen again,” Murphy said.

“No, ma’am.”

Murphy looked skeptically at Molly and back to me.

“She means well,” I said. “She just wanted to help.”

Molly gave me a grateful glance.

Murphy’s tone softened as she took the cuffs off. “Don’t we all.”

Molly rubbed at her wrists, wincing. “Um. Sergeant? How did you know I was there?”

“Floorboards creaking when no one was standing on them,” I said.

“Your deodorant,” Murphy said.

“Your tongue stud clicked against your teeth once,” I said.

“I felt some air move a few minutes ago,” Murphy said. “Didn’t feel like a draft.”

Molly swallowed and her face turned pink. “Oh.”

“But we didn’t see you, did we, Murph?”

Murphy shook her head. “Not even a little.”

A little humiliation and ego deflation, now and then, is good for apprentices. Mine sighed miserably.

“Well,” I said. “You’re here. Might as well tag along.” I nodded to Murphy and headed for the door.

“Where are we going?” Molly asked. Both bored medtechs blinked and stared as Molly followed me out of the apartment. Murphy came out behind us and waved them in to carry the body out.

“To see a friend of mine,” I said. “You like polka?”

Chapter Three

I hadn't been back to the Forensic Institute on West Harrison since that mess with Necromancers-R-Us nearly two years before. It wasn't an unpleasant-looking place, despite the fact that it was the repository for former human beings awaiting examination. It was in a little corporate park, very clean, with green lawns and neat bushes and fresh-painted lines on the spaces in the parking lots. The buildings themselves were quietly unassuming, functional and tidy.

It was one of those places that show up a lot in my nightmares.

It wasn't like I'd ever been a fan of viewing corpses, but a man I knew had been caught in the magical cross fire, and wound up an animated supercorpse who had nearly torn my car apart with his bare hands.

I hadn't come back since then. I had better things to do than revisit scenes like that. But once I was there and parked and heading for the doors, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, and I went in without hesitation.

This was Molly's first visit. At my request, she had ditched much of the facial jewelry and wore an old Cubs baseball hat over her peroxide locks. Even so, she didn't exactly cut a respectable businesslike figure, but I was content with damage control. Of course, my outfit barely qualified for business casual, and the heavy leather coat in the too-warm weather probably gave me a distinctive aura of eccentricity. Or at least it would have, if I made more money.

The guard sitting at the desk where Phil had been murdered was expecting me, but not Molly, and he told me she would have to wait. I said I'd wait, too, until Butters verified her. The guard looked sullen about being forced to expend the enormous effort it took to punch an intercom number. He growled into the phone, grunted a few times, then thumped a switch and the security door buzzed. Molly and I went on through.

There are several examination rooms at the morgue, but it's never hard to figure out which one Butters is inside. You just listen for the polka.

I homed in on a steady *oom-pah, oom-pah* of a tuba, until I could pick up the strains of clarinet and accordion skirling along with it. Exam room three. I rapped briefly on the door and opened it without actually stepping inside.

Waldo Butters was bent over his desk, squinting at his computer's screen, while his butt and legs shuffled back and forth in time to the polka music. He muttered something to himself, nodded, and hit the space bar on his keyboard with one elbow in time with his tapping heels, without looking up at me. "Hey, Harry."

I blinked. "Is that 'Bohemian Rhapsody'?"

"Yankovic. Man's a freaking genius," he replied. "Give me a sec to power down before you come all the way in."

"No problem," I told him.

"You've worked with him before?" Molly asked quietly.

"Uh-huh," I said. "He's clued."

Butters waited until his printer started rattling, then shut down the computer and walked to the printer to pick up a couple of pages and staple them together. Then he dropped the pages onto a small stack of them and bound them with a large rubber band. "Okay, that should do it." He turned to face me with a grin.

Butters was an odd little duck. He wasn't much taller than Murphy, and she probably had more muscle than he did. His shock of black hair resembled nothing so much as an explosion in a steel wool factory. He was all knees and elbows, especially in the surgical greens he was wearing, his face was lean and angular, his nose beaky, and his eyes were bright behind the prescription glasses.

"Harry," he said, offering his hand. "Long time, no see. How's the hand?"

I traded grips with him. Butters had long, wiry fingers, very precise and not at all weak. He wasn't anyone's idea of dangerous, but the little guy had guts and brains. "Only three months or so. And not too bad." I held my gloved left hand up and wiggled all the fingers. My ring and pinkie fingers moved with little trembles and twitches, but by God they moved when I told them to.

The flesh of my left hand had practically melted in an unanticipated conflagration during a battle with a scourge of vampires. The doctors had been shocked that they didn't have to amputate, but told me I'd never use it again. Butters had helped me work out a regimen of physical therapy, and

my fingers were mostly functional, though my hand still looked pretty horrible—but even *that* had begun to change, at least a little. The ugly little lumps of scar tissue and flesh had begun to fade, and my hand looked considerably less like a melted wax model than it had before. The nails had grown back in, too.

“Good,” Butters said. “Good. You still playing guitar?”

“I hold it. It makes noise. Might be a little generous to call it playing.” I gestured to Molly. “Waldo Butters, this is Molly Carpenter, my apprentice.”

“Apprentice, eh?” Butters extended an amiable hand. “Pleased to meetcha,” he said. “So does he turn you into squirrels and fishes and stuff, like in *The Sword in the Stone*?”

Molly sighed. “I wish. I keep trying to get him to show me how to change form, but he won’t.”

“I promised your parents I wouldn’t let you melt yourself into a pile of goo,” I told her. “Butters, I assume someone—and I won’t name any names—told you I’d be dropping by?”

“Yowsa,” the little ME said, nodding. He held up a finger, went to the door, and locked it, before turning to lean his back against it. “Look, Dresden. I have to be careful what kind of information I share, right? It comes with the job.”

“Sure.”

“So you didn’t hear it from me.”

I looked at Molly. “Who said that?”

“Groovy,” Butters said. He walked back over to me and offered me the packet of papers. “Names and addresses of the deceased,” he said.

I frowned and flipped through them: columns of text, much of it technical; ugly photographs. “The victims?”

“Officially, they’re the deceased.” His mouth tightened. “But yeah. I’m pretty sure they’re victims.”

“Why?”

He opened his mouth, closed it again, and frowned. “You ever see something out of the corner of your eye? But when you look at it, there’s nothing there? Or at least, it doesn’t look like what you thought it was?”

“Sure.”

“Same thing here,” he said. “Most of these folks show classic, obvious suicides. There are just a few little details wrong. You know?”

“No,” I said. “Enlighten me.”

“Take that top one,” he said. “Pauline Moskowitz. Thirty-nine, mother of two, husband, two dogs. She disappears on a Friday night and opens up her wrists in a hotel bathtub around three A.M. Saturday morning.”

I read over it. “Am I reading this right? She was on antidepressants?”

“Uh-huh,” Butters said, “but nothing extreme, and she’d been on them and stable for eight years. Never showed suicidal tendencies before, either.”

I looked at the ugly picture of a very ordinary-looking woman lying naked and dead in a tub of cloudy liquid. “So what’s got your scalpel in a knot?”

“The cuts,” Butters said. “She used a box knife. It was in the tub with her. She severed tendons in both wrists.”

“So?”

“So,” Butters said. “Once she’d cut the tendons on one wrist, she’d have had very little controlled movement with the fingers in that hand. So what’d she do to cut them both? Use two box knives at the same time? Where’s the other knife?”

“Maybe she held it with her teeth,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll close my eyes and throw a rock out over the lake and it will land in a boat,” Butters said. “It’s technically possible, but it isn’t really likely. The second wound almost certainly wouldn’t be as deep or as clean. I’ve seen ’em look like someone was cutting up a block of Parmesan into slivers. These two cuts are almost identical.”

“I guess it’s not conclusive, though,” I said.

“Not officially.”

“I’ve been hearing that a lot today.” I frowned. “What’s Brioché think?”

At the mention of his boss, Butters grimaced. “Occam’s razor, to use his own spectacularly insensitive yet ironic phrasing. They’re suicides. End of story.”

“But your guess is that someone else was holding the knife?”

The little ME’s face turned bleak, and he nodded without speaking.

“Good enough for me,” I said. “What about the body today?”

“Can’t say until I look,” Butters said. He gave me a shrewd glance. “But you think it’s another murder.”

“I know it is,” I replied. “But I’m the only one, until Murphy’s off the clock.”

“Right.” Butters sighed.

I flipped past Mrs. Moskowitz's pages to the next set of ugly pictures. Also a woman. The pages named her Maria Casselli. Maria had been twenty-three when she washed down thirty Valium with a bottle of drain cleaner.

"Another hotel room," I noted quietly.

Molly glanced over my shoulder at the printout of the photo at the scene. She turned pale and took several steps away from me.

"Yeah," Butters said, concerned eyes on my apprentice. "It's a little unusual. Most suicides are at home. They usually go somewhere else only if they need to jump off a bridge or drive their car into a lake or something."

"Ms. Casselli had a family," I said. "Husband, her younger sister living with her."

"Yeah," Butters said. "You can guess what Brioché had to say."

"She walked in on her hubby and baby sister, decided to end it all?"

"Uh-huh."

"Uh," Molly said. "I think—"

"Outside," Butters provided, unlocking the door. "First door on the right."

Molly hurried from the room, down to the bathroom Butters had directed her to.

"Jesus, Harry," Butters said. "Kid's a little young for this."

I held up the picture of Maria's body. "Lot of that going around."

"She's actually a wizard? Like you?"

"Someday," I said. "If she survives." I read over the next two profiles, both of women in their twenties, both apparent suicides in hotel rooms, both of them with housemates of one sort or another.

The last profile was different. I read over it and glanced up at Butters. "What's with this one?"

"Fits the same general profile," Butters said. "Women, dead in hotel rooms."

I frowned down at the papers. "Where's the cause of death?"

"That's the thing," Butters said. "I couldn't find one."

I lifted both eyebrows at him.

He spread his hands. "Harry, I know my trade. I like figuring this stuff out. And I haven't got the foggiest why the woman is dead. Every test I ran came up negative; every theory I put together fell apart. Medically

speaking, she's in good shape. It's like her whole system just...got the switch turned off. Everything at once. Never seen anything like it."

"Jessica Blanche." I checked the profiles. "Nineteen. And pretty. Or at least prettyish."

"Hard to tell with dead girls," Butters said. "But yeah, that was my take."

"But not a suicide."

"Like I said. Dead, and in hotel rooms."

"Then what's the connection to the other deaths?"

"Little things," Butters said. "Like, she had a purse with ID in it, but no clothes."

"Meaning someone had to have taken them away." I rolled up the papers into a tube and thumped them against my leg, thoughtfully. The door opened, and Molly came back in, wiping at her mouth with a paper towel. "This girl still here?"

Butters lifted his eyebrows. "Yeah. Miss Blanche. Why?"

"I think maybe Molly can help."

Molly blinked and looked up at me. "Um. What?"

"I doubt it's going to be pleasant, Molly," I told her. "But you might be able to read something."

"Off of a dead girl?" Molly asked quietly.

"You're the one who wanted to come along," I said.

She frowned, facing me, and then took a deep breath. "Yes. Um. Yes, I was. I mean, yes, I will. Try."

"Will you?" I asked. "You sure? Won't be fun. But if it gets us more information, it could save someone's life."

I watched her for a moment, until her expression set in determination and she met my eyes. She straightened and nodded once. "Yes."

"All right," I said. "Get yourself set for it. Butters, we need to give her a few minutes alone. Can we go get Miss Blanche?"

"Um," Butters said. "What's this going to entail, exactly?"

"Nothing much. I'll explain it on the way."

He chewed on his lip for a moment, and then nodded once. "This way."

He led me down the hall to the storage room. It was another exam room, like the one we'd just been in, but it also featured a wall of body-sized refrigerated storage units like morgues are supposed to have. This was the room we'd been in when a necromancer and a gaggle of zombies had put a

bullet through the head of Butters's capacity to ignore the world of the supernatural.

Butters got out a gurney, consulted a record sheet on a clipboard, and wheeled it over to the fridges. "I don't like to come in here anymore. Not since Phil."

"Me either," I said.

He nodded. "Here, get that side."

I didn't want to. I am a wizard, sure, but corpses are inherently icky, even if they aren't animated and trying to kill you. But I tried to pretend we were sliding a heavy load of groceries onto a cart, and helped him draw a body, resting upon a metal tray and covered in a heavy cloth, onto the gurney.

"So," he said. "What is she going to do?"

"Look into its eyes," I said.

He gave me a somewhat skeptical look. "Trying to see the last thing impressed on her retinas or something? You know that's pretty much mythical, right?"

"Other impressions get left on a body," I said. "Final thoughts, sometimes. Emotions, sensations." I shook my head. "Technically, those kinds of impressions can get left on almost any kind of inanimate object. You've heard of object reading, right?"

"That's for real?" he asked.

"Yeah. But it's an easy sort of thing to contaminate, and it can be tricky as hell—and entirely apart from that, it's extremely difficult to do."

"Oh," Butters said. "But you think there might be something left on the corpse?"

"Maybe."

"That sounds really useful."

"Potentially."

"So how come you don't do it all the time?" he asked.

"It's delicate," I said. "When it comes to magic, I'm not much for delicate."

He frowned and we started rolling the gurney. "But your only half-trained apprentice is?"

"The wizarding business isn't standardized," I said. "Any given wizard will have an affinity for different kinds of magic, due to their natural talents, personalities, experiences. Each has different strengths."

"What are yours?" he asked.

“Finding things. Following things. Blowing things up, mostly,” I said. “I’m good at those. Redirecting energy, sending energy out into the world to resonate with the energy of what I’m trying to find. Moving energy around or redirecting it or storing it up to use later.”

“Aha,” he said. “None of which is delicate?”

“I’ve practiced enough to handle a lot of different kinds of delicate magic,” I said. “But...it’s the difference between me strumming power chords on a guitar and me playing a complex classical Spanish piece.”

Butters absorbed that and nodded. “And the kid plays Spanish guitar?”

“Close enough. She’s not as strong as me, but she’s got a gift for the more subtle magic. Especially mental and emotional stuff. It’s what got her in so much trouble with...”

I bit my tongue and stopped in midsentence. It wasn’t my place to discuss Molly’s violations of the White Council’s Laws of Magic with others. She would have enough trouble getting past the horrible acts she’d committed in innocence without me painting her as a psycho monster-in-training.

Butters watched my face for a few seconds, then nodded and let it pass. “What do you think she’ll find?”

“No clue,” I said. “That’s why we look.”

“Could you do this?” he said. “I mean, if you had to?”

“I’ve tried it,” I hedged. “But I’m bad about projecting things onto the object, and I can barely ever get something intelligible out of it.”

“You said it might not be pleasant for her,” Butters said. “Why?”

“Because if something’s there, and she can sense it, she gets to experience it. First person. Like she’s living it herself.”

Butters let out a low whistle. “Oh. Yeah. I guess that could be bad.”

We got back to the other room, and I peered in before opening the door. Molly was sitting on the floor with her eyes closed, her legs folded lotus-style, her head tilted slightly up. Her hands rested on her thighs, the tips of her thumbs pressed lightly against the tips of her middle fingers.

“Quietly,” I murmured. “No noise until she’s finished. Okay?”

Butters nodded. I opened the door as silently as I could. We brought the gurney into the room, left it in front of Molly, and then at my beckon, Butters and I went to the far wall and settled in to wait.

It took Molly better than twenty minutes to focus her mind for the comparatively simple spell. Focus of intention, of will, is integral to any

use of magic. I'd drawn myself up to focus power so often and for so long that I only had to actually make a conscious effort to do it when a spell was particularly complex, dangerous, or when I thought it wise to be slow and cautious. Most of the time, it took me less than a second to gather up my will—which is critical in any situation where speed is a factor. Drooling abominations and angry vampires don't give you twenty minutes to get a punch ready.

Molly, though she was learning quickly, had a long damned way to go.

When she finally opened her eyes, they were distant, unfocused. She rose to her feet with slow, careful movements, and drifted over to the gurney with the corpse. She pulled the sheet down, revealing the dead girl's face. Then Molly leaned down, her expression still distant, and murmured quietly beneath her breath as she opened the corpse's eyelids.

She got something almost instantly.

Her eyes flew open wide, and she let out a short gasp. Her breath rasped in and out frantically several times before her eyes rolled back up into her head. She stood frozen and rigid for a pair of quivering seconds, and then her breath escaped in a low, rough cry and her knees buckled. She did not fall to the floor so much as melt down onto it. Then she lay there, breathing hard and letting out a continuous stream of guttural whimpers.

Her breathing continued, fast and hard, her eyes unfocused. Her body rippled with several slow, undulating motions that drew the eye to her hips and breasts. Then she slowly went limp, her panting gradually easing, though little, unmistakably pleased sounds slithered from her lips on every exhalation.

I blinked at her.

Well.

I hadn't been expecting *that*.

Butters gulped audibly. Then he said, "Uh. Did she just do what I *think* she just did?"

I pursed my lips. "Um. Maybe."

"What just happened?"

"She, um." I coughed. "She got something."

"She got *something*, all right," Butters muttered. He sighed. "I haven't gotten anything like that in about two *years*."

For me, it had been more like four. "I hear you," I said, more emphatically than I meant to.

"Is she underage?" he asked. "Legally speaking?"

"No."

"Okay. I don't feel quite so...Nabokovian, then." He raked his fingers back through his hair. "What do we do now?"

I tried to look professional and unfazed. "We wait for her to recover."

"Uh-huh." He looked at Molly and sighed. "I need to get out more."

Me and you both, man. "Butters, is there any way you could get her some water or something?"

"Sure," he said. "You?"

"Nah."

"Right back." Butters covered up the corpse and slipped out.

I went over to the girl and hunkered down by her. "Hey, grasshopper. Can you hear me?"

It took her longer than it should have to answer, like when you're on the phone with someone halfway around the world. "Yes. I...I hear you."

"You okay?"

"Oh, God." She sighed, smiling. "Yes."

I muttered under my breath, rubbed at the incipient headache beginning between my eyes, and thought dark thoughts. Dammit all, every time *I'd* opened myself up to some kind of horrible psychic shock in the name of investigation, I'd gotten another nightmare added to my collection. Her first time up to bat, and the grasshopper got...

What *had* she gotten?

"I want you to tell me what you sensed, right away. Sometimes the details fade out, like when you forget parts of a dream."

"Right," she murmured in a sleepy-sounding drawl. "Details. She..." Molly shook her head. "She felt good. Really, really good."

"I gathered that much," I said. "What else?"

Molly kept shaking her head slowly. "Nothing else. Just that. It was all sensation. Ecstasy." She frowned a little, as if struggling to order her thoughts. "As if the rest of her senses had been blinded by it, somehow. I don't think there was anything else. Not sight nor sound nor thought nor memory. Nothing. She didn't even know it when she died."

"Think about it," I said quietly. "Absolutely anything you can remember could be important."

Butters came back in just then, carrying a bottle of water beaded with drops of condensation. He tossed it to me, and I passed the cold drink to

Molly. "Here," I told her. "Drink up."

"Thanks." She opened the bottle, turned on her side, and started guzzling it without even sitting up. The pose did a lot to make her clothing look tighter.

Butters stared for a second, then sighed and quite evidently forced himself to go over to his desk and start sharpening pencils. "So what do we know?"

"Looks like she died happy," I said. "Did you run a toxicology check on her?"

"Yeah. Some residual THC, but she could have gotten that from the contact high at a concert. Otherwise she was clean."

"Damn," I said. "Can you think of anything else that would do...that to a victim?"

"Nothing pharmacological," Butters said. "Maybe if someone ran a wire into the pleasure centers of her brain and kept stimulating them. But, uh, there's no evidence of open-skull surgery. I would have noticed something like that."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"So it must be something from the spooky side," Butters said.

"Could be." I consulted my packet again. "What did she do?"

"No one knew," Butters said. "No one seemed to know anything about her. No one came to claim the body. We couldn't find any relations. It's why she's still here."

"No local address, either," I said.

"No, just the one on an Indiana driver's license, but it dead-ended. Not much else in her purse."

"And the killer took her clothes."

"Apparently," Butters said. "But why?"

I shrugged. "Must have been something on them he didn't want found." I pursed my lips. "Or something on them he didn't want *me* to find."

Molly abruptly sat up straight. "Harry, I remember something."

"Yeah?"

"Sensation," she said, resting one hand over her belly button. "It was like...I don't know, like hearing twenty different bands playing at the same time, only tactile. But there was a prickling sort of sensation over her stomach. Like one of those medical pinwheel things."

"A Wartenberg Pinwheel," Butters supplied.

“Eh?” I said.

“Like the one I use to test the nerves on your hand, Harry,” Butters supplied.

“Oh, ow, right.” I frowned at Molly. “How the hell do you know what one of those feels like?”

Molly gave me a lazy, wicked smile. “This is one of those things you don’t want me to explain.”

Butters let out a delicate cough. “They are sometimes used recreationally, Harry.”

My cheeks felt warm. “Ah. Right. Butters, you got a felt-tip marker?”

He got one out of his desk and tossed it to me. I passed it to Molly. “Show me where.”

She nodded, lay back down on her back, and pulled her shirt up from her stomach. Then she closed her eyes, took the lid off the marker, and traced it slowly over the skin of her abdomen, her eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

When she was finished, the black ink spelled out clear, large letters:

EX 22:18.

Exodus again.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I said quietly. “We have a serial killer.”

Chapter Four

Molly said little on the way back. She just leaned against the window with half-closed eyes, probably basking in the afterglow.

"Molly," I told her in my gentlest voice. "Heroin feels good, too. Ask Rosy and Nelson."

The little smile of pleasure faded into blankness, and she stared at me for a while. By degrees, her expression changed to a frown of consideration, and then to a nauseated grimace.

"It killed her," she said finally. "It killed her. I mean, it felt so good...but it wasn't."

I nodded.

"She never knew it. She never had a chance." Molly looked queasy for a minute. "It was a vampire, right? From the White Court? I mean, they use sex to feed on life energy, right?"

"That's one of the things it could be," I said quietly. "There are plenty of demonic creatures in the Nevernever that groove on the succubus routine, though."

"And she was killed in a hotel," she said. "Where there was no threshold to protect her from a demon."

"Very good, grasshopper," I said. "Once you consider that the other victims weren't done White Court style, it means that either there is more than one killer or the same one is varying his techniques. It's too early for anything but wild guesses."

She frowned. "What are you going to do next?"

I thought about it for a minute. "I've got to figure out what all of the killer's victims have in common, if anything."

"They're dead?" Molly offered.

I smiled a little. "Besides that."

"Okay," she said. "So what do you do?"

I nodded to the papers Butters had given me, now resting on the dashboard. "I start there. See what I can extrapolate from the data I've got."

Then I look people up and ask questions.”

“What do I do?” she asked.

“That depends. How many beads can you move?” I asked her.

She glowered at me for a minute. Then she unbound the bracelet of dark beads from her left wrist and held it up. The beads all slipped down to the bottom of the bracelet, leaving three or four inches of bare cord.

Molly focused on the bracelet, a device I’d created to help her practice focusing her mind and stilling her thoughts. Focus and stillness are important when you’re slinging magic around. It’s a primal force of creation, and it responds to your thoughts and emotions—whether you want it to or not. If your thoughts get fragmented or muddled, or if you aren’t paying complete attention to what you’re doing, the magic can respond in any number of unpredictable and dangerous ways.

Molly was still learning about it. She had some real talent, don’t get me wrong, but what she lacked was not ability, but judgment. That’s what I’d been trying to teach her over the past year or so—to use her power responsibly, cautiously, and with respect for the dangers the Art could present. If she didn’t get a more solid head on her shoulders, her talent with magic was going to get her killed—probably taking me with her.

Molly was a warlock.

She’d used magic to tinker with the minds of two of her friends in an effort to free them from drug addiction, but her motives had been mixed, and the results were moderately horrific. One of the kids still hadn’t recovered enough to function on his own. The other had pulled through, but was still facing a lot of problems.

Normally, the White Council of wizards kills you for breaking one of the Laws of Magic. Practically the only time they didn’t was when a wizard of the Council offered to take responsibility for the warlock’s future conduct, until they could satisfy the Council that their intentions were good, their ways mended. If they could, fine. If not, the warlock died. So did the wizard who had taken responsibility for him.

I’d been a warlock. Hell, plenty of the Council wondered if I still was a ticking bomb getting ready to blow. When Molly had been bound and hooded and dragged before the Council for trial, I’d stepped in. I had to.

Sometimes I regretted the hell out of that decision. Once you’ve felt the power of dark magic, it could be awfully hard to resist using it again, and Molly’s errors tended to run in that direction. The kid was good at heart,

but she was just so damned *young*. She'd grown up in a strict household; she'd gone insane with freedom the minute she ran away and got out on her own. She was back home now, but she was still trying to find the balance and self-discipline she'd need to survive in the wizarding business.

Teaching her to throw a gout of fire at a target really wasn't terribly difficult. The hard part was teaching her *why* to do it, why *not* to do it, and *when* she should or should not do it. Molly saw magic as the best solution to any given problem. It wasn't, and she had to learn that.

To that end, I'd made her the bracelet.

She stared at it for a long minute, and one of the beads slid up the string and stopped when it touched her finger. A moment later, the second bead joined the first. The third quivered for several seconds before it moved. The fourth took even longer. The fifth bead jumped and twitched for several moments before Molly let out her breath in a snarl, and the others once more succumbed to gravity.

"Four of thirteen," I noted, as I pulled into a driveway. "Not bad. But you aren't ready yet."

She glared at the bracelet and rubbed at her forehead for a moment. "I got six last night."

"Keep working," I said. "It's about focus, stillness, and clarity."

"What does that *mean*?" Molly demanded in exasperation.

"That you have more work to do."

She sighed and got out of the car, glancing up at her family's home. It was a gorgeous place, white picket fence and everything, somehow preserving a suburban appearance despite the city all around us. "You aren't explaining it very well."

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe you aren't *learning* it very well."

She gave me a glower, and what might have been a hot answer came to her lips—but she shut them and shook her head in irritation. "I'm sorry. For putting up that veil and trying to follow you. No disrespect intended."

"None taken. I've been where you are. I don't expect you to be perfect all the time, kid."

She smiled a little. "What happened today..."

"Happened," I said. "It's done. Besides, it worked out. I don't know if I could have read anything at all from that victim, the way you did today."

She looked hopeful. "Yeah?"

I nodded. "What you found might be a big help. You did good. Thanks."

She practically glowed. Once or twice, after a compliment, she'd *literally* glowed, but we'd gotten that under control within a month or two. She gave me a smile that made her look even younger than she was, and then pelted up the front steps and into the house.

That left me there alone with pages and pages of dead women. I wanted to know more about them almost as much as I wanted to shove my manly parts into a radioactive wood chipper.

I sighed. I had to get closer to this, but I could at least do it with a drink in my hand.

So I went to McAnally's.

Mac's pub—and make no mistake, it was a pub, not a bar—was one of those few places in Chicago frequented almost entirely by the supernatural scene. It didn't have a sign outside. I had to walk down a flight of stairs to get to the unmarked front door. Inside, it's all low ceilings, a crooked bar, and irregularly spaced, hand-carved wooden columns. Mac manages to keep electricity moving through the bar despite all the magical types wandering through—partly because it's rare for anything but a full-blown wizard, like me, to cause the inevitable failure of any nearby technology, and partly because he does a ton of preventive maintenance. He still didn't bother with electric lights—it costs too much to keep replacing bulbs—but he was able to keep a bunch of ceiling fans whirling and maintain a functional telephone.

On the wall beside the door was a wooden sign that stated, simply, ACCORDED NEUTRAL GROUND. That meant that Mac had declared the place a nonpartisan location, according to the terms set up by the Unseelie Accords—sort of the Geneva Convention of the supernatural world. It meant that any member of the signatory nations was free to enter peaceably, and remain unmolested by any other member. The neutral ground had to be respected by all parties, who were obligated to take outside any fight that might begin and respect the pub's neutral status. Oaths and the rights and obligations of hospitality were very nearly a force of nature in the supernatural world. It meant that, in Chicago, there was always a place to set up a meeting with a reasonable expectation of a civilized outcome.

All the same, it also meant that you might find yourself in bad company when you went to Mac's place.

I always sit with my back to a smoke-stained wall.

It was late afternoon and the place was busier than it should have been. Of the thirteen tables, only two were open, and I took the one farther away from the rest of the room, tossing the papers and my coat on it.

I went to the bar, suppressing an instinct to duck every time I walked under one of the too-low-for-towering-wizards ceiling fans. I nodded to Mac. He's a spare man, a little taller than average, his head shaved bald. He could be anywhere between thirty and fifty. He wore jeans, a white shirt, and a white apron, and despite the fact that his wood-fueled grill was up and running, there wasn't a spot or stain anywhere on his clothes. "Mac," I said, "beer me."

Mac slid over a dark brown bottle of his home brew. I opened it, chugged it, and passed him a twenty with the empty. "Keep 'em coming."

Mac let out a grunt of surprise, and his eyebrows went up.

"Don't ask," I told him.

He folded his arms and nodded. "Keys."

I glared at him for a second, but I was halfhearted about it. I tossed the keys to the Blue Beetle onto the bar.

Mac gave me another beer, and I went to the table, drinking on the way. By the time I'd circled the carved column shaped like one enormous, ugly giant, except for the carved figures of faerie knights attacking its ankles, and sat down at my table, the beer was mostly gone.

I don't usually go through them like that. I should have been more cautious, but I really, really didn't want to dig into that material sober. I figured that if my brain was mushy enough, maybe all the bad I was about to drag through it wouldn't leave as deep an impression.

I settled down and read through the information Butters had given me on the dead women, pausing every so often for more beer. I read the words, but there was an odd sense of blankness inside. I read them, I understood them, but they somehow didn't seem relevant, vanishing like pebbles dropped in a well—there was a little ripple, then nothing.

I thought I recognized two of the victims, though not by name. I'd probably seen them around, maybe even there at McAnally's. I didn't recognize the others, but it wasn't like I knew every face in the community.

I stopped reading for a few minutes, and drank some more. I didn't want to keep going. I didn't want to see any of this. I didn't want to get involved. I'd seen more than enough of people being hurt and killed. I'd seen too

many dead women. I wanted to burn the papers, walk out the door, and just keep walking.

Instead, I went back to reading.

By the time I finished, I had found no obvious connection between the victims, I was emptying my fifth bottle, and it was dark outside. The bar had grown quiet.

I looked up to see that, except for Mac, I had the place entirely to myself.

That was odd. Mac's place isn't usually packed, but it's busy in the evening. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen it empty around dinnertime.

Mac came over to me with another bottle, putting it down just as I finished the previous. He glanced from the fresh bottle to all the empties, standing in a row.

"I use up my twenty?" I asked him.

He nodded.

I grunted, got out my wallet, and put another twenty on the table.

He frowned at it, then at me.

"I know," I said. "I don't usually drink this much."

He snorted quietly. Mac isn't big on verbalization.

I waved a hand vaguely at the papers. "Hate seeing women get hurt. I should hate seeing anyone get hurt, but it's worse with women. Or kids." I glared down at the paperwork, then around at the now-empty bar, adding two and two. "Get another," I told him. "Sit down."

Mac's eyebrows went up. Then he went over to the bar, got himself a beer, and came over to sit down with me. He casually opened both bottles with a deft twist of his hand and no bottle opener. Mac is a professional. He pushed my bottle over to me and lifted his own.

I nodded at him. We clinked bottles and drank.

"So," I said quietly. "What gives?"

Mac set his beer down and surveyed the empty pub.

"I know," I said. "Where'd everyone go?"

"Away," Mac said.

If Scrooge had hoarded words instead of money, Mac would have made him look like Monty Hall. Mac didn't use rhetorical phrasing.

"Away," I said. "Away from me, you mean."

He nodded.

"They're scared. Why?"

“Grey cloak.”

I exhaled slowly. I’d been a Warden of the White Council for nearly two years. Wardens were the armed forces of the White Council, men and women who were accustomed to violence and conflict. Normally, Wardens existed to police wizards, to make sure that they didn’t use their power against the rest of humanity in violation of the Laws of Magic. Things weren’t normal. For years, the Council had been engaged in a war against the Vampire Courts. Most of the Wardens had been killed in battle, and they’d gotten desperate for new wizards to take up the grey cloak of their office—desperate enough to ask *me* to join them, despite my checkered past.

Plenty of people in the world had talent of one kind or another. Very few had the kind of power and talent it took to be recognized as a member of the White Council. For the others, contact with the Council’s Wardens was mostly limited to one of them showing up to deliver a warning about any potential abuse of magic.

But when anyone broke the Laws of Magic, the Wardens appeared to apprehend, try, convict, and probably execute. Wardens were scary, even to someone like me, who is more or less in their weight class. For the minor talents, like most of the crowd at Mac’s place, the Wardens occupied a position somewhere between avenging angel and bogeyman.

Apparently, they had begun to see me in the latter role, which was going to be a problem in my hunt for the Exodus-quoting killer. The victims were probably members of the local supernatural community, but a lot of Wiccans can be ticklish about talking about their beliefs, or identifying their fellow believers as members of the faith. Part of it is a basic respect for personal freedom and privacy endemic to the faith. Part of it is a kind of theologically hereditary caution.

Both of those factors were going to make it hard to get anyone to talk to me. If people thought the Wardens were a part of the killings, they’d shut me out faster than you can say, “Burn the witch.”

“There’s no reason for anyone to be afraid,” I said. “These women are officially suicides. I mean, if Murphy’s instincts hadn’t picked up on something, we wouldn’t even know there was a killer loose.”

Mac sipped his beer in silence.

“Unless,” I said, “some other factor I don’t know about made it obvious to everyone in our crowd that the victims weren’t suicides.”

Mac put his beer down.

“They’re linked,” I said quietly. “The victims. There’s a connection between them that the police files don’t show. The magic folks know it. That’s why they’re scared.”

Mac frowned at the beer. Then he looked over at the NEUTRAL GROUND sign by the door.

“I know,” I said quietly. “You don’t want to get involved. But someone out there is killing women. They’re leaving calling cards for me, specifically. Whoever is doing it is going to keep on doing it until I find them.”

Mac did not move.

I kept the quiet pressure on him. “A lot of people come in here. They eat and drink. And they talk. You stand over there running the grill and pouring drinks and you might as well be invisible. But I know you hear a lot more than most people realize, Mac. I figure you know something that might help me.”

He gazed at me for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then he asked, “Is it you?”

I almost barked out a bit of laughter, until I realized that he was *serious*.

It took me a minute to get my head around that one. Since I had gone into business in Chicago, I had spent a lot of time trying to help the supernatural community. I did exorcisms here and there, helped with ghost problems, taught young and out-of-control talents enough discipline to restrain themselves. I’ve done other things too, smaller, not necessarily directly involving magic: giving advice on how to handle problems dealing with friendly but inhuman beings that mingled with magically aware mortals, helping parents to deal with the fact that their kid was suddenly able to set the cat on fire, and otherwise trying to help.

Despite all of that, the same folks I’d tried to help were afraid of me.

Even Mac.

I guess I couldn’t blame them. I wasn’t as accessible as I used to be, what with the war and my new Warden duties, and teaching my apprentice. Practically the only times I had appeared in public, things had gotten messy, and people had died. I sometimes forgot how scary the supernatural could be. I lived in a state of relative power. I’m not under any illusions that I can take out anything that messes with me, but I am not a pansy, and

with the right planning and leverage I can be a threat to even awfully powerful beings.

Those folks couldn't. They were the have-nots of the supernatural world, and they didn't have the options that my power gave me. And after all, I was supposed to be the one protecting folks from supernatural threats. If they truly believed that the women had been murdered, then either I was cruel enough to do the deed, or uncaring and/or incompetent enough to allow it to happen. Either way, it didn't paint a flattering picture of me. Add in the growing sense of fear, and it was understandable.

But it still hurt.

"It's not me," I said quietly.

Mac studied my features for a moment, then nodded. "Needed to hear it."

"Sure," I said. "I don't know who is behind it. But I give you my word that when I catch up to whoever is doing this, I'm going to take him down, regardless of who he is or who he works for. My word, Mac."

He took another sip of beer, stalling.

I reached out and started flipping through the pages, one by one, reviewing the horrible photos. Mac saw them too. He let out a breath barely tinged with a throaty growl, and leaned back in his chair, away from the images.

I put my last beer on the table and spread my hands. "Help me, Mac. Please."

Mac stared down at his bottle for a moment. Then he looked at his sign again. Then he reached out and took the top sheet of paper from the stack. He flipped it over, produced a pencil from his apron pocket, and wrote on the page before passing it back to me.

It read: *Anna Ash, Ordo Lebes, four P.M. tomorrow*

"What's this?" I asked him.

He picked up his bottle and rose. "A start."

Chapter Five

“**O**rdo Lebes,” Murphy said. She took the lid off her coffee and blew some steam away from its surface. “My Latin is a little rusty.”

“That’s because you aren’t a master of arcane lore, like me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right.”

“*Lebes* means a large cooking pot,” I told her. I tried to adjust the passenger seat of her car, but couldn’t manage to make it comfortable. Saturn coupes were not meant for people my height. “Translates out to the Order of the Large Cooking Pot.”

“Or maybe Order of the Cauldron?” Murphy suggested. “Since it sounds so much less silly and has a more witchy connotation and all?”

“Well,” I said, “I suppose.”

Murphy snorted at me. “Master of the arcane lore.”

“I learned Latin through a correspondence course, okay? We should have taken my car.”

“The interior of a Volkswagen Beetle is smaller than this one.”

“But I know where it all *is*,” I said, trying to untangle my right foot from where it had gotten wedged by the car’s frame.

“Do all wizards whine this much?” Murphy sipped her coffee. “You just want to be the one driving. I think you have control issues.”

“Control issues?”

“Control issues,” she said.

“You’re the one who wouldn’t find the woman’s address unless I let you drive, and I’m the one with issues?”

“With me, it’s less an issue and more a fact of life,” she said calmly. “Besides, that clown car of yours doesn’t exactly blend in, which is what you’re supposed to do on a stakeout.”

I glowered out the front window of her car and looked up at the apartment building where one Anna Ash was presumably hosting a meeting of the Order of the Large Cooking Po—er, uh, Cauldron. Murphy had found a spot on the street, which made me wonder if she didn’t have some kind of

magical talent after all. Only some kind of precognitive ESP could have gotten us a parking space on the street, in the shadow of a building, with both of us in sight of the apartment building's entrance.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Five minutes ago it was three o'clock," Murphy said. "I can't be certain, but I theorize that it must now be about three-oh-five."

I folded my arms. "I don't usually do stakeouts."

"I thought it might be a nice change of pace for you. All that knocking down of doors and burning down of buildings must get tiring."

"I don't always knock down doors," I said. "Sometimes it's a wall."

"But this way, we get a chance to see who's going into the building. We might learn something."

I let out a suspicious grunt. "Learn something, huh?"

"It'll only hurt for a minute." Murphy sipped at her coffee and nodded at a woman walking toward the apartment building. She wore a simple sundress with a man's white cotton button-down shirt worn open atop it. She was in her late thirties, maybe, with pepper-and-salt hair worn in a bun. She wore sandals and sunglasses. "How about her?"

"Yeah," I said. "Recognize her. Seen her at Bock Ordered Books a few times."

The woman entered the building at a brisk, purposeful pace.

Murphy and I went back to waiting. Over the next forty-five minutes, four other women arrived. I recognized two of them.

Murphy checked her watch—a pocket watch with actual clockwork and not a microchip or battery to be found. "Almost four," she said. "Half a dozen at most?"

"Looks that way," I agreed.

"And you didn't see any obvious bad guys."

"The wacky thing about those bad guys is that you can't count on them to be obvious. They forget to wax their mustaches and goatees, leave their horns at home, send their black hats to the dry cleaner's. They're funny like that."

Murphy gave me a direct and less-than-amused look. "Should we go on up?"

"Give it another five minutes. No force in the known universe can make a gang of folks naming their organization in Latin do much of anything on

time. If they're all there by four, we'll know there's some kind of black magic involved."

Murphy snorted, and we waited for a few minutes more. "So," she said, filling time. "How's the war going?" She paused for a beat, and said, "God, what a question."

"Slowly," I said. "Since our little visit to Arctis Tor, and the beating the vampires took afterward, things have been pretty quiet. I went out to New Mexico this spring."

"Why?"

"Helping Luccio train baby Wardens," I said. "You've got to get way out away from civilization when you're teaching group fire magic. So we spent about two days turning thirty acres of sand and scrub into glass. Then a couple of the Red Court's ghouls showed up and killed two kids."

Murphy turned her blue eyes to me, waiting.

I felt my jaw tighten, thinking back on it. It wouldn't do those two kids any good, going over it again. So I pretended I didn't realize she was giving me a chance to talk about it. "There haven't been any more big actions, though. Just small-time stuff. The Merlin's trying to get the vamps to the table to negotiate a peace."

"Doesn't sound like you think much of the idea," Murphy noted.

"The Red King is still in power," I said. "The war was his idea to begin with. If he goes for a treaty now, it's only going to be so that the vamps can lick their wounds, get their numbers up again, and come back for the sequel."

"Kill them all?" she asked. "Let God sort them out?"

"I don't care if anyone sorts them or not. I'm tired of seeing people they've destroyed." My teeth ground together. I hadn't realized I was clenching my jaws so hard.

I tried to force myself to relax. It didn't work out the way I'd hoped. Instead of feeling unclenched and less angry, I only felt tired. "Ah, Murph. Too many people get hurt. Sometimes I feel like no matter how fast I react, it doesn't make any difference."

"You're talking about these killings, now," she said.

"Them, too."

"It isn't your fault, Harry," Murphy said in a steady voice. "Once you've done everything you can, you can't do any more. There's no sense in beating yourself up over it."

“Yeah?”

“That’s what the counselors keep telling me,” she said. She regarded me thoughtfully. “It’s easier to see their point when I’m looking at you, though.”

“Thing is, Murph,” I said. “What if I could do more?”

“Like what?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Something to deter these murdering animals.”

Something like New Mexico. Jesus. I didn’t want to think about that. I rubbed at the fresh headache sprouting between my eyebrows.

Murphy gave me a minute more to decide if I wanted to talk about it. When I stayed quiet, she asked, “Time to go up?”

Her voice had lightened, nudging us away from the topic. I nodded and tried to ease up on my tone. “Yeah. If my leg bones haven’t been deformed by this torture chamber you drive.” I opened the door and hauled myself out, stretching.

I hadn’t yet shut the door when I saw the woman walking down the street toward the apartment building. She was tall, lean, her hair cut shorter than mine. She wore no makeup, none at all, and time had not been kind to her stark features.

She’d looked a lot different the last time I’d seen her.

Back then, Helen Beckitt had been naked, and holding a dainty little .22-caliber revolver, and she’d shot me in the hip. She and her husband had gone down when a fledgling black sorcerer named Victor Sells had been introduced to his own killer creations, courtesy of Harry Dresden. They’d been on the ground floor of Victor’s nascent magic-assisted criminal empire. They’d been prosecuted for the criminal part, too, and gone to a federal penitentiary on drug charges.

I froze in place, going completely still, even though I was standing in plain sight. A sudden movement would only have served to draw her attention to me. She went on by, her steps brisk, her expression empty of any emotion or spark of life, just as I remembered. I watched her go into Anna Ash’s building.

Murphy, taking her cue from me, had frozen in place as well. She caught a glimpse of Helen Beckitt’s back as she went inside.

“Harry?” she asked. “What was that?”

“The plot,” I said, “thickening.”

Chapter Six

“I don’t like this,” Murphy said. “Helen Beckitt has got plenty of reasons to dislike you.”

I snorted. “Who doesn’t?”

“I’m serious, Harry.” The elevator doors closed and we started up. The building was old, and the elevator wasn’t the fastest in the world. Murphy shook her head. “If what you said about people beginning to fear you is true, then there’s got to be a reason for it. Maybe someone is telling stories.”

“And you like Helen for that?”

“She already shot you, and that didn’t work. Maybe she figured it was time to get nasty.”

“Sticks and stones and small-caliber bullets may break my bones,” I said. “Words will never, et cetera.”

“It’s awfully coincidental to find her here. She’s a con, Harry, and she wound up in jail because of you. I can’t imagine that she’s making nice with the local magic community for the camaraderie.”

“I didn’t think cops knew about big words like ‘camaraderie,’ Murph. Are you sure you’re a real policeperson?”

She gave me an exasperated glance. “Do you ever stop joking around?”

“I mutter off-color limericks in my sleep.”

“Just promise me that you’ll watch your back,” Murphy said.

“There once was a girl from Nantucket,” I said. “Her mouth was as big as a bucket.”

Murphy flipped both her hands palms up in a gesture of frustrated surrender. “Dammit, Dresden.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “You seem worried about me.”

“There are women up there,” she said. “You don’t always think very clearly where women are concerned.”

“So you think I should watch my back.”

“Yes.”

I turned to her and looked down at her and said, more quietly, “Golly, Murph. Why did you think I wanted you along?”

She looked up and smiled at me, the corners of her eyes wrinkling, though her voice remained tart. “I figured you wanted someone along who could notice things more subtle than a flashing neon sign.”

“Oh, come on,” I said. “It doesn’t have to be flashing.”

The elevator doors opened and I took the lead down the hall to Anna Ash’s apartment—and stepped into a tingling curtain of delicate energy four or five feet shy of the door. I drew up sharply, and Murphy had to put a hand against my back to keep from bumping into me.

“What is it?” she asked.

I held up my left hand. Though my maimed hand was still mostly numb to conventional stimuli, it had never had any trouble sensing the subtle patterns of organized magical energy. I spread out my fingers as much as I could, trying to touch the largest possible area as I closed my eyes and focused on my wizard’s senses.

“It’s a ward,” I said quietly.

“Like on your apartment?” she asked.

“It’s not as strong,” I said, waving my hand slowly over it. “And it’s a little cruder. I’ve got bricks and razor wire. This is more like aluminum siding and chicken wire. But it has a decent kick. Fire, I think.” I squinted up and down the hall. “Huh. I don’t think there’s enough there to kill outright, but it would hurt like hell.”

“And a fire would set off the building’s alarms,” Murphy added. “Make people start running out. Summon the authorities.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Discouraging your average prowler, supernatural or not. It’s not meant to kill.” I stepped back and nodded to Murphy. “Go ahead and knock.”

She gave me an arch look. “That’s a joke, right?”

“If this ward isn’t done right, it could react with my aura and go off.”

“Can’t you just take it apart?”

“Whoever did this was worried enough to invest a lot of time and effort to make this home safer,” I said. “Kinda rude to tear it up.”

Murphy tilted her head for a second, and then she got it. “And you’ll scare them if you just walk through it like it wasn’t there.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “They’re frightened, Murph. I’ve got to be gentle, or they won’t give me anything that can help them.”

Murphy nodded and knocked on the door.

She rapped three times, and the doorknob was already turning on the third rap.

A small, prettily plump woman opened the door. She was even shorter than Murphy, mid-forties maybe, with blond hair and rosy, cherubic cheeks that looked used to smiling. She wore a lavender dress and carried a small dog, maybe a Yorkshire terrier, in her arms. She smiled at Murphy and said, "Of course, Sergeant Murphy, I know who you are."

Maybe half a second after the woman started speaking, Murphy said, "Hello, my name is Sergeant Murphy, and I'm a detective with the CPD."

Murphy blinked for a second and fell silent.

"Oh," the woman said. "I'm sorry; I forget sometimes." She made an airy little gesture with one hand. "Such a scatterbrain."

I started to introduce myself, but before I got my mouth open, the little woman said, "Of course, we all know who you are, Mister Dresden." She put her fingers to her mouth. They were shaking a little. "Oh. I forgot again. Excuse me. I'm Abby."

"Pleased to meet you, Abby," I said quietly, and extended my hand, relaxed, palm down, to the little Yorkie. The dog sniffed at my hand, quivering with eagerness as he did, and his tail started wagging. "Heya, little dog."

"Toto," Abby said, and before I could respond said, "Exactly, a classic. If it isn't broken, why fix it?" She nodded to me and said, "Excuse me; I'll let our host speak to you. I was just closest to the door." She shut the door on us.

"Certainly," I said to the door.

Murphy turned to me. "Weird."

I shrugged. "At least the dog liked me."

"She knew what we were going to say before we said it, Harry."

"I noticed that."

"Is she telepathic or something?"

I shook my head. "Not in the way you're thinking. She doesn't exactly hide what she's doing, and if she was poking around in people's heads, the Council would have done something a long time ago."

"Then how did she know what we were about to say?"

"My guess is that she's prescient," I said. "She can see the future. Probably only a second or two, and she probably doesn't have a lot of

voluntary control over it.”

Murphy made a thoughtful noise. “Could be handy.”

“In some ways,” I said. “But the future isn’t written in stone.”

Murphy frowned. “Like, what if I’d decided to tell her my name was Karrin Murphy instead of Sergeant, at the last second?”

“Yeah. She’d have been wrong. People like her can sense a...sort of a cloud of possible futures. We were in a fairly predictable situation here even without bringing any magical talents into it, basic social interaction, so it looked like she saw exactly what was coming. But she didn’t. She got to judge what was most probable, and it wasn’t hard to guess correctly in this particular instance.”

“That’s why she seemed so distracted,” Murphy said thoughtfully.

“Yeah. She was keeping track of what *was* happening, what was *likely* to happen, deciding what *wasn’t* likely to happen, all in a window of a few seconds.” I shook my head. “It’s a lot worse if they can see any farther than a second or two.”

Murphy frowned. “Why?”

“Because the farther you can see, the more possibilities exist,” I said. “Think of a chess game. A beginning player is doing well if he can see four or five moves into the game. Ten moves in holds an exponentially greater number of possible configurations the board could assume. Master players can sometimes see even further than that—and when you start dealing with computers, the numbers are even bigger. It’s difficult to even imagine the scope of it.”

“And that’s in a closed, simple environment,” Murphy said, nodding. “The chess game. There are far more possibilities in the real world.”

“The biggest game.” I shook my head. “It’s a dangerous talent to have. It can leave you subject to instabilities of one kind or another as side effects. Doctors almost always diagnose folks like Abby with epilepsy, Alzheimer’s, or one of a number of personality disorders. I got five bucks that says that medical bracelet on her wrist says she’s epileptic—and that the dog can sense seizures coming and warn her.”

“I didn’t see the bracelet,” Murphy admitted. “No bet.”

While we stood there talking quietly for maybe five minutes, a discussion took place inside the apartment. Low voices came through the door in tense, muffled tones that eventually cut off when a single voice, louder than the rest, overrode the others. A moment later, the door opened.

The first woman we'd seen enter the apartment faced me. She had a dark complexion, dark eyes, short, dark straight hair that made me think she might have had some Native Americans in the family a generation or three back. She was maybe five foot four, late thirties. She had a serious kind of face, with faint, pensive lines between her brows, and from the way she stood, blocking the doorway with solidly planted feet, I got the impression that she could be a bulldog when necessary.

"No one here has broken any of the Laws, Warden," she said in a quiet, firm voice.

"Gosh, that's a relief," I said. "Anna Ash?"

She narrowed her eyes and nodded.

"I'm Harry Dresden," I said.

She pursed her lips and gave me a speculative look. "Are you kidding? I know who you are."

"I don't make it a habit to assume that everyone I meet knows who I am," I said, implying apology in my tone. "This is Karrin Murphy, Chicago PD."

Anna nodded to Murphy and asked, in a neutral, polite tone, "May I see your identification, Ms. Murphy?"

Murphy already had her badge on its leather backing in hand, and she passed it to Anna. Her photo identification was on the reverse side of the badge, under a transparent plastic cover.

Anna looked at the badge and the photo, and compared it to Murphy. She passed it back almost reluctantly, and then turned to me. "What do you want?"

"To talk," I said.

"About what?"

"The Ordo Lebes," I said. "And what's happened to several practitioners lately."

Her voice remained polite on the surface, but I could hear bitter undertones. "I'm sure you know much more about it than us."

"Not especially," I said. "That's what I'm trying to correct."

She shook her head, suspicion written plainly on her face. "I'm not an idiot. The Wardens keep track of everything. Everyone knows that."

I sighed. "Yeah, but I forgot to take my George Orwell-shaped multivitamins along with my breakfast bowl of Big Brother Os this

morning. I was hoping you could just talk to me for a little while, the way you would with a human being.”

She eyed me a bit warily. Lots of people react to my jokes like that. “Why should I?”

“Because I want to help you.”

“Of course you’d say that,” she said. “How do I know you mean it?”

“Ms. Ash,” Murphy put in quietly, “he’s on the level. We’re here to help, if we can.”

Anna chewed on her lip for a minute, looking back and forth between us and then glancing at the room behind her. Finally, she faced me and said, “Appearances can be deceiving. I have no way of knowing if you are who—and what—you say you are. I prefer to err on the side of caution.”

“Never hurts to be cautious,” I agreed. “But you’re edging toward paranoid, Ms. Ash.”

She began to shut the door. “This is my home. And I’m not inviting you inside.”

“Groovy,” I said, and stepped over the threshold and into the apartment, nudging her gently aside before she could close the door.

As I did, I felt the pressure of the threshold, an aura of protective magical energy that surrounds any home. The threshold put up a faintly detectable resistance as my own aura of power met it—and could not cross it. If Anna, the home’s owner, had invited me in, the threshold would have parted like a curtain. She hadn’t, and as a result, if I wanted to come inside, I’d have to leave much of my power at the door. If I had to work any forces while I was in there, I’d be crippled practically to the point of total impotence.

I turned to see Anna staring at me in blank surprise. She was aware of what I had just done.

“There,” I told her. “If I was of the spirit world, I couldn’t cross your threshold. If I had planned on hurting someone in here, would I have disarmed myself? Stars and stones, would I have shown up with a *cop* to witness me doing it?”

Murphy took her cue from me, and entered the same way.

“I...” Anna said, at a loss. “How...how did you know the ward wouldn’t go off in your face?”

“Judgment call,” I told her. “You’re a cautious person, and there are kids in this building. I don’t think you’d have slapped up something that went

boom whenever anyone stepped through the doorway.”

She took a deep breath and then nodded. “You wouldn’t have liked what happened if you’d tried to force the door, though.”

“I believe you,” I told her. And I did. “Ms. Ash, I’m not here to threaten or harm anyone. I can’t make you talk to me. If you want me to go, right now, I’ll go,” I promised her. “But for your own safety, please let me talk to you first. A few minutes. That’s all I ask.”

“Anna?” came Abby’s voice. “I think you should hear them out.”

“Yes,” said another woman’s voice, quiet and low. “I agree. And I know something of him. If he gives you his word, he means it.”

Thinking on it, I hadn’t ever really heard Helen Beckitt’s voice before, unless you counted moans. But its quiet solidity and lack of inflection went perfectly with her quasi-lifeless eyes.

I traded an uneasy glance with Murphy, then looked back to Anna.

“Ms. Ash?” I asked her.

“Give me your word. Swear it on your power.”

That’s serious, at least among wizards in my league. Promises have power. One doesn’t swear by one’s magical talent and break the oath lightly—to do so would be to reduce one’s own strength in the Art. I didn’t hesitate to answer. “I swear to you, upon my power, to abide as a guest under your hospitality, to bring no harm to you or yours, nor to deny my aid if they would suffer thereby.”

She let out a short, quick breath and nodded. “Very well. I promise to behave as a host, with all the obligations that apply. And call me Anna, please.” She pronounced her name with the Old World emphasis: Ah-nah. She beckoned with one hand and led us into the apartment. “I trust you will not take it amiss if I do not make a round of introductions.”

Understandable. A full name, given from one’s own lips, could provide a wizard or talented sorcerer with a channel, a reference point that could be used to target any number of harmful, even lethal spells, much like fresh blood, nail clippings, or locks of hair could be used for the same. It was all but impossible to give away your full name accidentally in a conversation, but it had happened, and if someone in the know thought a wizard might be pointing a spell their way, they got real careful, real fast, when it came to speaking their own name.

“No problem,” I told her.

Anna's apartment was nicer than most, and evidently had received almost a complete refurbishing in the past year or three. She had windows with a reasonably good view, and her furnishings were predominantly of wood, and of excellent quality.

Five women sat around the living area. Abby sat in a wooden rocking chair, holding her bright-eyed little Yorkie in her lap. Helen Beckitt stood by a window, staring listlessly out at the city. Two other women sat on a sofa, the third on a love seat perpendicular to them.

"Should I take it that you know who I am?" I asked them.

"They know," Anna said quietly.

I nodded. "All right. Here's what *I* know. Something has killed as many as five female practitioners. Some of the deaths have looked like suicides. Evidence suggests that they weren't." I took a deep breath. "And I've found messages left for me or someone like me with at least two of the bodies. Things the cops couldn't have found. I think we're looking at a serial killer, and I think that your order might represent a pool of victims that fit his—"

"Or her," Murphy put in, not quite *staring* at Beckitt.

Beckitt's mouth curled into a bitter little smile, though she did not otherwise move.

"Or her," I allowed, "profile."

"Is he serious?" asked one of the women I didn't know. She was older than the others, early fifties. Despite the day's warmth, she wore a thin turtleneck sweater of light green and a dark grey cardigan. Her hair, caught back in a severe bun, had once been deep, coppery red, though now it was sown liberally with steely grey. She wore no makeup, square, silver-rimmed spectacles over muddy brown-green eyes, and her eyebrows had grown out rather thicker than most women chose to allow.

"Very serious," I replied. "Is there something I can call you? It doesn't seem polite to name you Turtleneck without checking first."

She stiffened slightly, keeping her eyes away from mine, and said, "Priscilla."

"Priscilla. I'm pretty much floundering around here. I don't know what's going on, and that's why I came to talk to you."

"Then how did you know of the Ordo?" she demanded.

"In real life, I'm a private investigator," I told her. "I investigate stuff."

"He's lying," Priscilla said, looking back at Anna. "He has to be. You know what we've seen."

Anna looked from Priscilla to me, and then shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“What *have* you seen?” I asked Anna.

Anna looked around the room at the others for a moment, but none of them made any objections, and she turned back to me. “You’re correct. Several members of our order have died. What you might not know is that there are others who have vanished.” She took a deep breath. “Not only in the Ordo, but in the community as well. More than twenty people are unaccounted for since the end of last month.”

I let out a low whistle. That *was* serious. Don’t get me wrong; people vanish all the time—most of them because they want to do it. But the people in our circles were generally a lot closer-knit than most folks, in part because they were aware, to one degree or another, of the existence of supernatural predators who could and would take them, given the chance. It’s a herd instinct, plain and simple—and it works.

If twenty people had gone missing, odds were good that something was on the prowl. If the killer had taken them, I had a major problem on my hands, which admittedly wasn’t exactly a novel experience.

“You say people have seen something? What?”

“For...” She shook her head and cleared her throat. “For all three victims from within the order whose bodies have been found, they were last seen alive in the company of a tall man in a grey cloak.”

I blinked. “And you thought it was me?”

“I wasn’t close enough to tell,” Priscilla said. “It was after dark, and she was on the street outside my apartment. I saw them through a window.”

She didn’t quite manage to hide the fact that she’d almost said *you* instead of *them*.

“I was at Bock’s,” Abby added, her tone serious, her eyes fixed in the middle distance. “Late. I saw the man walk by with her outside.”

“I didn’t see that,” Helen Beckitt said. The words were flat and certain. “Sally left the bar with a rather lovely dark-haired man with grey eyes and pale skin.”

My stomach twitched. In my peripheral vision, Murphy’s facial expression went carefully blank.

Anna lifted a hand in a gesture beseeching Helen for silence. “At least two more reliable witnesses have reported that the last time they saw some of the folk who had disappeared, they were in the company of the grey-

cloaked man. Several others have reported sightings of the beautiful dark-haired man instead.”

I shook my head. “And you thought the guy in the cloak was me?”

“How many tall, grey-cloaked men move in our circles in Chicago, sir?” Priscilla said, her voice frosty.

“You can get grey corduroy for three dollars a yard at a surplus fabric store,” I told her. “Tall men aren’t exactly unheard of in a city of eight million, either.”

Priscilla narrowed her eyes. “Who was it, then?”

Abby tittered, which made Toto wag his tail.

I pursed my lips in a moment of thought. “I’m pretty sure it wasn’t Murphy.”

Helen Beckitt snorted out a breath through her nose.

“This isn’t a joking matter,” Priscilla snapped.

“Oh. Sorry. Given that I only found out about a grey cloak sighting about two seconds ago, I had assumed the question was facetious.” I turned to face Anna. “It wasn’t me. And it wasn’t a Warden of the Council—or at least, it damned well better *not* have been a Warden of the Council.”

“And if it was?” Anna asked quietly.

I folded my arms. “I’ll make sure he never hurts anyone. Ever again.”

Murphy stepped forward and said, “Excuse me. You said that three members of the order had died. What were their names, please?”

“Maria,” Anna said, her words spaced with the slow, deliberate beat of a funeral march. “Janine. Pauline.”

I saw where Murphy was going.

“What about Jessica Blanche?” she asked.

Anna frowned for a moment and then shook her head. “I don’t think I’ve heard the name.”

“So she’s not in the order,” Murphy said. “And she’s not in the, ah, community?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Anna replied. She looked around the room. “Does anyone here know her?”

Silence.

I traded a glance with Murphy. “Some of these things are not like the others.”

“Some of these things are kind of the same,” she responded.

“Somewhere to start, at least,” I said.

Someone's watch started beeping, and the girl on the couch beside Priscilla sat up suddenly. She was young, maybe even still in her teens, with the rich, smoke-colored skin of regions of eastern India. She had heavy-lidded brown eyes, and wore a bandanna tied over her straight, glossy black hair. She was dressed in a lavender ballet leotard with cream-colored tights covering long legs, and she had the muscled, athletic build of a serious dancer. She wore a man's watch that looked huge against her fine-boned wrist. She turned it off and then glanced up at Anna, fidgeting. "Ten minutes."

Anna frowned and nodded at her. She started toward the door, a gracious hostess politely walking us out. "Is there anything else we can do for you, Warden? Ms. Murphy?"

In the investigating business, when someone starts trying to rush you out in order to conceal some kind of information from you, it is what we professionals call a clue. "Gee," I said brightly. "What happens in ten minutes?"

Anna stopped, her polite smile fading. "We have answered your questions as best we could. You gave me your word, Warden, to abide by my hospitality. Not to abuse it."

"Answering me may be for your own good," I replied.

"That's your opinion," she said. "In my opinion, it is no business of yours."

I sighed and nodded acquiescence. I handed her a business card. "There's my number. In case you change your mind."

"Thank you," Anna said politely.

Murphy and I left, and were silent all the way down in the elevator. I scowled up a storm on the way, and brooded. It had never solved any of my problems in the past, but there's always a first time.

When we walked back out into the sunshine, Murphy said, "You think they know anything else?"

"They know *something*," I said. "Or think they do."

"That was a rhetorical question, Harry."

"Bite me." I shook my head. "What's our next move?"

"Dig into Jessica Blanche's background," she replied. "See what we turn up."

I nodded. "Easier than searching Chicago for guys in big grey cloaks."

She paused for a moment, and I knew her well enough to know that she was choosing her words carefully. “But maybe not easier than finding pale, beautiful, dark-haired men who may or may not have been the last person seen with a woman who died in the midst of sexual ecstasy.”

For a moment, our only conversation was footsteps.

“It isn’t him,” I said then. “He’s my brother.”

“Sure, yeah,” she agreed.

“I mean, I haven’t talked to him in a while, sure,” I admitted. A moment later I added, “And he’s on his own now. Making really good money doing...something. Though I don’t know what. Because he will never, ever say.”

Murphy nodded. “Yes.”

“And I guess it’s true that he’s awfully well fed these days,” I went on. “And that he won’t tell me how.” We went a few more steps. “And that he thinks of himself as a monster. And that he got sick and tired of trying to be human.”

We crossed the street in silence.

When I got to the other side, I stopped and looked at Murphy. “Shit.”

We both started down the sidewalk to Murphy’s Saturn.

“Harry,” she said quietly. “I think you’re probably right about him. But there are lives at stake. We have to be sure.”

A flash of anger went through me, an instant and instinctive denial that my brother, my only living flesh and blood, could be involved in this mess. Intense, irrational fury, and an equally irrational sense of betrayal at Murphy’s gentle accusation, fed on each other, swelling rapidly. It took me off guard. I had never felt such volatile determination to destroy a threat to my brother outside of life-and-death struggles we’d found ourselves trapped within. The emotions roared through me like molten steel, and I found myself instinctively gathering my will under their searing influence. For just a second I wanted to smash things to powder, starting with anyone who even *thought* about trying to hurt Thomas—and the strength to do it welled up inside me like steam in a boiler.

I snarled and closed my eyes, forcing control upon myself. This was no life-and-death struggle. It was a sidewalk. There would be no noisy and satisfying release of that anger, but the energy that I had unconsciously gathered had the potential to be dangerous in any case. I reached down to brush the sidewalk with my fingertips, allowing the dangerous buildup of

magic to ground itself more or less harmlessly into the earth, and only a trace amount of energy flared out into a disruptive pattern.

It saved our lives.

The instant I released the excess energy into the area around us, a nearby stoplight blew out, Murphy's cell phone started blaring "Stars and Stripes Forever," three car alarms went off—

—and Murphy's Saturn coupe went up in a brilliant ball of fire and an ear-shattering blast of thunder.

Chapter Seven

There was no time to do anything. Even if I'd been crouched, tense, and holding defensive magic ready to go, I wouldn't have beaten the explosion to the punch. It was instant, and violent, and did not at all care whether I was on my guard or not. Something that felt vaguely like an enormous feather pillow swung by the Incredible Hulk slammed into my chest.

It lifted me up off the ground and dumped me on the sidewalk several feet later. My shoulder clipped a mailbox as I went by it, and then I had a good, steady view of the clear summer sky above me as I lay on my back and ached.

I'd lived, which was always a good start in this kind of situation. It couldn't have been a very big explosion, then. It had to have been more incendiary than concussive, a big old rolling ball of flame that would have shattered windows and burned things and set things on fire, and pushed a whole lot of air out of the way along with one Harry Dresden, wizard, slightly used.

I sat up and peered at the rolling cloud of black smoke and red flame where Murphy's Saturn was, which bore out my supposition pretty well. I squinted to one side and saw Murphy sitting slowly back up. She had a short, bleeding cut on her upper lip. She looked pale and shaken.

I couldn't help it. I started laughing like a drunk.

"Well," I said. "Under the circumstances, I'm forced to conclude that you were right. I *am* a control freak and you were one hundred percent right to be the one driving the car. Thank you, Murph."

She gave me a slow, hard stare, drew in a deep breath, and said, through clenched teeth, "No problem."

I grinned at her and slumped back down onto my back. "You okay?"

She dabbed at the blood on her lip with one hand. "Think so. You?"

"Clipped my shoulder on a mailbox," I said. "It hurts a little. Not a lot. Maybe I could take an aspirin. Just one. Not a whole dose or anything."

She sighed. "My God, you're a whiner, Dresden."

We sat there quietly for a minute while sirens began in the distance and came closer.

“Bomb, you think?” Murphy said, in that tone people use when they don’t know what else to say.

“Yeah,” I said. “I was grounding some extra energy out when it went off. It must have hexed up the bomb’s timer or receiver. Set it off early.”

“Unless it was intended as a warning shot,” she said.

I grunted. “Whose bomb, you think?”

“I haven’t annoyed anyone new lately,” Murphy said.

“Neither have I.”

“You’ve annoyed a lot more people than me, in toto.”

“In toto?” I said. “Who talks like that? Besides, car bombs aren’t really within...within the, uh...”

“Idiom?” Murphy asked, with what might have been a very slight British accent.

“Idiom!” I declared in my best John Cleese impersonation. “The idiom of the entities I’ve ticked off. And you’re really turning me on with the Monty Python reference.”

“You’re pathetic, Harry.” Her smile faded. “But a car bomb is well within the idiom of ex-cons,” she said.

“Mrs. Beckitt was inside with us the whole time, remember?”

“And Mr. Beckitt?” Murphy asked.

“Oh,” I said. “Ah. Think he’s out by now?”

“I think we’ve got some things to find out,” she said. “You’d better go.”

“I should?”

“I’m not on the clock, remember?” Murphy said. “It’s my car. Simpler if there’s only one person answering all the questions.”

“Right,” I said, and pushed myself up. “Which end do you want?”

“I’ll take our odd corpse out and the Beckitts,” she said. I offered her a hand up. She took it, which meant more to the two of us than it would to anyone looking on. “And you?”

I sighed. “I’ll talk to my brother.”

“I’m sure he’s not involved,” Murphy said quietly. “But...”

“But he knows the incubus business,” I said, which wasn’t what Murphy had been about to say. It might have drawn an anger response out of me, but rationally speaking, I couldn’t blame her for her suspicion, either. She was a cop. She’d spent her entire adult life dealing with the most treacherous

and dishonest portions of the human condition. Speaking logically, she was right to suspect and question until more information presented itself. People's lives were at stake.

But Thomas was my brother, my blood. Logic and rationality had little to do with it.

The first emergency unit, a patrolling police car, rounded the corner a couple of blocks away. Fire trucks weren't far behind.

"Time to go," Murphy said quietly.

"I'll see what I can find out," I told her, and walked away.

I took the El back to my neighborhood on high alert, watching for anyone who might be following, lying in wait, or otherwise planning malicious deeds involving me. I didn't see anyone doing any of those things on the El, or as I walked to my apartment in the basement of an old boardinghouse.

Once there, I walked down a sunken concrete staircase to my front door—one of those nifty all-metal security doors—and with a muttered word and an effort of will, I disarmed the wards that protected my home. Then I used a key to open its conventional locks, and slipped inside.

Mister promptly hurtled into my shins with a shoulder block of greeting. The big grey cat weighed about thirty pounds, and the impact actually rocked me back enough to let my shoulder blades bump against the door. I reached down and gave his ears a quick rub. Mister purred, walking in circles around one of my legs, then sidled away and hopped up onto a bookshelf to resume the important business of napping away a summer afternoon in wait for the cool of evening.

An enormous mound of shaggy grey-and-black fur appeared from the shadows in the little linoleum-floored alcove that passed for my kitchen. It walked over to me, yawning as it came, its tail wagging in relaxed greeting. I hunkered down as my dog sat and thrust his head toward me, and I vigorously scratched his ears and chin and the thick ruff of fur over his neck with both hands. "Mouse. All quiet on the home front, boy?"

His tail wagged some more, jaw dropping open to expose a lethal array of very white teeth, and his tongue lolled out in a doggy grin.

"Oh, I forgot the mail," I said. "You mind getting it?"

Mouse promptly rose, and I opened the door. He padded out in total silence. Mouse moves lightly for a rhinoceros.

I crossed my floor of mismatched carpets and rugs to slump into the easy chair by the old fireplace. I picked up my phone and dialed Thomas's number. No answer. I glared at the phone for a minute and, because I wasn't sure what else to do, I tried it again. No one answered. What were the odds.

I chewed on my lip for a minute and began to worry about my brother.

Mouse returned a moment later—long enough to have gone out to the designated dog-friendly little area in the house's yard. He had several bits of mail held gently in his mouth, and he dropped them carefully onto the surface of the old wooden coffee table in front of my sofa. Then he went over to the door and leaned a shoulder against it. It hadn't been installed quite right, and it was a real pain in the ass to open, and once it was open it was a pain in the ass to close. Mouse shoved at the door with a little snort of familiar effort and it swung to. Then he came back over to settle down by me.

"Thanks, boy." I grabbed the mail, scratched his ears again, and flicked to life several candles on the end table next to the recliner with a muttered spell. "Bills," I reported to him, going through the mail. "More bills. Junk mail. *Another* Best Buy catalog, Jesus, those people won't give up. Larry Fowler's new lawyer." I put the unopened envelope against my forehead and closed my eyes. "He's threatening me with another variation on the same lawsuit." I opened the letter and skimmed it, then tossed it on the floor. "It's as if I'm psychic."

I opened the drawer in the end table, felt about with my fingertips, and withdrew a single silver metallic key, the only one on a ring marked with an oval of blue plastic that sported my business card's logo: HARRY DRESDEN. WIZARD. PARANORMAL INVESTIGATIONS. CONSULTING, ADVICE, REASONABLE RATES.

I looked at the key. Thomas had given it to me, in case I should need to show up at his place in an emergency. He had a key to my place, too, even after he'd moved out. There had been a tacit understanding between us. The keys were there in case one or the other of us needed help. They had not been given so that one or the other of us could go snooping uninvited around the other one's home and life.

(Though I suspected that Thomas had looked in on my place a few times, hoping to figure out how the place managed to get so clean. He'd never caught my housekeeping brownies at work, and he never would. They're

pros. The only drawback to having faerie housekeepers is that you can't tell people about them. If you do, they're gone, and no, I don't know why.)

The faces of the dead women drifted through my thoughts, and I sighed and closed my fingers around the key. "Okay, boy," I said. "Time to go visit Thomas."

Mouse rose up expectantly, his tags jingling, his tail thrashing energetically. Mouse liked going for rides in the car. He trotted over to the door, pulled his lead down from where it hung on the doorknob, and brought it over to me.

"Hang on," I told him. "I need the arsenal."

I hate it when bad business goes down in summer. I put on my torturously warm leather duster. I figured I could take death from heat prostration to whole new levels given the potential presence of further firebombs. And *that* could land me a spot in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Maybe even a Darwin Award.

See there? That's called positive thinking.

I put on my new and improved shield bracelet, too, and slipped three silver rings onto the fingers of my right hand. I snagged my blasting rod, clipped Mouse's lead on, took up my staff, and tromped on out to the car.

I told Mouse to stay back while I approached the Blue Beetle, my battered, often-repaired, mismatched Volkswagen Bug. I looked all around it, then lay down to check the vehicle's undercarriage. I looked at the trunk and under the hood next. I even examined it for traces of hostile magic. I didn't find anything that resembled a bomb or looked dangerous, unless you counted the half-eaten Taco Bell burrito that had somehow gotten tossed into the trunk about six months ago.

I opened the door, whistled for Mouse, and off we went to invade my brother's privacy.

I hadn't actually visited Thomas's place before, and I was a little taken aback when I got there. I had assumed that the street address was to one of the new buildings in Cabrini Green, where urban renewal had been shoved down the throat of the former slum by the powers that be—largely because it bordered on the Gold Coast, the most expensive section of town, and the second-highest-income neighborhood in the world. The neighborhood around the Green had become slowly more tolerable, and the newer apartment buildings that had replaced the old were fairly nice.

But Thomas's apartment wasn't in one of those buildings. He was across the street, living in the Gold Coast. When Mouse and I got to the right apartment building, twilight was fading fast and I felt underdressed. The doorman's shoes were nicer than any I owned.

I opened the outer door with Thomas's key and marched to the elevators, Mouse walking smartly at heel. The doorman watched me, and I spotted two security cameras between the front door and the elevator. Security would have a pretty good idea who was a resident and who wasn't—and an extremely tall and gangly man in a black coat with nearly two hundred pounds of dog with him wouldn't be something they forgot. So I tried to stall them with body language, walking the walk of the impatient and confident in the hopes that it would make the security guys hesitate.

Either it worked or the building's security people were getting paid too much. No one challenged me, and I took the elevator to the sixteenth floor and walked down the hall to Thomas's apartment.

I unlocked the door, gave it a couple of knocks, and then opened it without waiting. I slipped in with Mouse, and found the light switch beside the door before I closed it.

Thomas's apartment was...well. Chic. The door opened onto a living room bigger than my entire apartment—which, granted, will never cause anxiety to agoraphobics. The walls were painted a deep crimson, and the carpeting was a rich charcoal grey. The furniture all matched, from the sofas to the chairs to the entertainment centers, all of it done in stainless steel and black, and a little more art deco than I would have preferred. He had a TV too big ever to fit into the Beetle, and a DVD player and surround sound and racks of DVDs and CDs. One of the newer video game systems rested neatly on a shelf, all its wires squared away and organized. Two movie posters decorated the walls: *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Pirates of Penzance*, the one with Kevin Kline as the Pirate King.

Well. It was good to see that my brother was doing well for himself. Though I had to wonder what he was doing that pulled down the kind of money this place would require.

The kitchen was like the living room—a lot of the same stainless steel and black in the appliances, though the walls had been painted white, as was the expensive tile floor. Everything was pristine. No dirty dishes, no half-open cupboards, no food stains, no papers lying about. Every single horizontal surface in the place was empty and sanitized. I checked the

cupboards. The dishes stood in neat stacks, perfectly fitted to their storage in the cupboard.

None of which made sense. Thomas had a lot of positive qualities, but my brother was a fairly shameless slob. “I get it now. He’s dead,” I said aloud to Mouse. “My brother is dead, and he’s been replaced with some kind of obsessive-compulsive evil clone.”

I checked the fridge. I couldn’t help it. It’s one of those things you do when you’re snooping through someone’s house. It was empty, except for one of those boxes of wine, and about fifty bottles of Thomas’s favorite beer, one of Mac’s microbrewed ales. Mac would have killed Thomas for keeping it cold. Well. He would have scowled in disapproval, anyway. For Mac, that was tantamount to a homicidal reaction in other people.

I checked the freezer. It was packed, wall to wall, with TV meals in neat stacks. There were three different meals, stacked up in alternating order. There was room for maybe nine or ten more, and I presumed the others eaten. Thomas probably went shopping only every couple of months. That was more like him—beer, food cooked by pushing one button on a microwave. No dishes needed, and the drawer nearest the freezer yielded up a container of plastic forks and knives. Eat. Discard. No cooking or cleaning necessary.

I looked around at the rest of the kitchen, then at the fridge and freezer.

Then I went down the little hall that led to two bedrooms and a bath, and snorted in triumph. The bathroom was in total disarray, with toothbrushes and various grooming supplies tossed here and there, apparently at random. A couple of empty beer bottles sat out. The floor was carpeted with discarded clothing. Several half-used rolls of toilet paper sat around, with an empty cardboard tube still on the dispenser.

I checked in the first bedroom. It, too, was more Thomas’s style. There was a king-sized bed with no head or foot, only the metal frame to support it. It had white sheets, several pillows in white cases, and a big, dark blue comforter on top. All of them were disheveled. The closet door stood open, and more clothes lay around on the floor. Two laundry baskets of fresh, neatly folded and ironed clothing (mostly empty) sat on a dresser with three of its drawers slightly open. There was a bookshelf haphazardly saturated with fiction of every description, and a clock radio. A pair of swords, one of them an old U.S. Cavalry saber, the other a more musketeer-

looking weapon, were leaned against the wall, where they'd be more or less within reach of anyone in the bed.

I went back to the hall and shook my head at the rest of the apartment. "It's a disguise," I told Mouse. "The front of the apartment. He wants it to give a certain impression. He makes sure no one gets to see the rest."

Mouse tilted his head and looked at me.

"Maybe I should just leave him a note."

The phone rang, and I about jumped out of my skin. After I made sure I wasn't having a cardiac episode, I padded back out to the living room, debating whether or not to answer it. I decided not to. It was probably building security calling to check up on the stranger who had walked in with a pet woolly mammoth. If I answered and Thomas wasn't here, they might get suspicious. More suspicious. If I let them eat answering machine, they'd still be uncertain. I waited.

The answering machine beeped, and my brother's recorded voice said, "You know the drill." It beeped again.

A woman's voice poured out of the answering machine like warm honey. "Thomas," she said. She had a polyglot of a European accent, and pronounced his name "toe-moss," accent on the second syllable. "Thomas," she continued. "It is Alessandra, and I am desperate for you. Please, I need to see you tonight. I know that there are others, that there are so many others, but I can't stand it anymore, and I must have you." Her tone lowered, thick with sensuality. "There is no one, no one else who can do for me what you do. Do not disappoint me, I beg you." She left her number, and her voice made it sound like foreplay. By the time she hung up, I had begun to feel uncomfortably voyeuristic for listening.

I sighed and told Mouse, "I so need to get laid."

At least now I knew what Thomas had been feeding his Hunger. Alessandra and "so many others" must be supplying him. I felt... ambiguous about that. He could feed the demonic portion of his nature on many different victims, effectively spreading out the damage he inflicted upon them in a bid to avoid fatally overfeeding upon any one of them. Even so, it meant that there were a number of lives who had been tainted by his embrace, women who had become addicted to the sensation of being fed upon—who were now under his influence, subject to his control.

It was power, of a sort, and power tends to corrupt. Wielding such authority over others would provide a great many temptations. And Thomas

had been distant of late. Very distant.

I took a deep breath and said, “Don’t get carried away, Harry. He’s your brother. Innocent until proven guilty, right?”

“Right,” I replied to myself.

I decided to leave Thomas a note. I didn’t have any paper handy. The stylishly sterile kitchen and living room yielded none—nor did the bedroom. I shook my head, muttering about people who couldn’t organize their way out of a paper bag, and checked in the second bedroom.

I flicked on the light, and my heart stopped.

The room looked like the office of Rambo’s accountant. There was a desk and computer against one wall. Tables lined two of the other walls. One of them was dedicated to the neatly organized disassembly of a pair of weapons—submachine guns I didn’t recognize right away. I did, however, recognize the kit for home-converting the weapons from legal semiautomatics to fully illegal automatics. A second table looked like a workbench, with the necessary tools to modify weapons and custom-assemble ammunition. It would not be difficult to create explosive devices, such as pipe bombs, with what he had there, if the heavy storage containers under the table contained, as I suspected, explosive compounds.

A nasty thought went through my mind: They could just as easily be used to create incendiaries.

One wall was covered with corkboard. There were papers tacked up on it. Maps. Photographs.

I walked over to the photos with heavy, reluctant feet.

There were photos of dead women.

I recognized them all.

The victims.

The photos were those Instamatic kind. They were a little grainy, the images lit by the harsh glare of a flashbulb, but they covered many of the same angles as the police photos. There was one difference, though. The police photos had all been neatly indexed, with small placards with large, printed numbers appearing in each shot, accompanied by a meticulous written diagram recording their relative positions and what they showed, locking the scene down for future reference.

Thomas’s photos did not have any such placards.

Which meant that they could only have been taken *before* the police got there.

Holy shit.

What was my brother thinking? Leaving all of this stuff sitting out here like this? Anyone who came by with an only slightly biased point of view would come to the conclusion that he had been at all of those sites before the police. That he was a *killer*. I mean, I was his *brother*, and even I thought that it looked damned peculiar....

“Hell’s bells.” I sighed to Mouse. “Can this day get any worse?”

A heavy, confident hand delivered a short series of knocks to the apartment’s door. “Security,” called a man’s voice. “Here with Chicago police. Open the door, please, sir.”

Chapter Eight

I had only a few seconds to think. If security had called in a cop, they were thinking I might be trouble. If I came off as something suspicious, they'd probably take a look around as a matter of course. If that happened, and they found what was in my brother's war room, I'd be buying us both more kinds of trouble than I could count.

I needed a lie. A really good, really believable lie. I shut the door to Thomas's war room and bedroom and stared around the immaculate, stylish, tracklit living room, trying to think of one. I stared at Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion, looking for inspiration. Nothing. The Pirate King, with his white shirt manfully open to his waist, didn't give me any ideas either.

And then it hit me. Thomas had already established the lie. He'd used it before, no less—and it was just his style of camouflage, too. All I had to do was play up to it.

"I can't believe I'm about to do this," I told Mouse.

Then I set my coat and staff aside, took a deep breath, flounced to the door, opened it, and demanded, "He sent you, didn't he? Don't try to lie to me!"

A patrol cop—God, she looked young—regarded me with a polite, bored expression. "Um, sir?"

"Thomas!" I snarled, pronouncing it the same way as the woman on the answering machine. "He's not man enough to have come to meet me himself, is he? He sent his bully boys to do it for him!"

The cop let out a long-suffering breath. "Sir, please, let's stay calm here." She turned to the building's security guy, a nervous-looking, balding man in his forties. "Now, according to building security, you aren't a known resident, but you've entered with a key. It's standard procedure for them to ask a few questions."

"Questions?" I said. It was hard not to lisp. So hard. But that might have been too much. I settled for saying everything in my Murphy

impersonation voice. “Why don’t you start with why he hasn’t called me? Hmm? After giving me his spare key? Ask him why he hasn’t come to visit the baby!” I pointed an accusatory finger at Mouse. “Ask him what excuse he has *this* time!”

The cop looked as if she had a headache. She blinked at me once, lifted a hand to her mouth, coughed, and stepped aside, gesturing to the security guy.

He blinked a few times. “Sir,” the security man said. “Um, it’s just that Mr. Raith hasn’t actually listed with building security anyone he’s given access to his apartment.”

“He’d *better* not have!” I said. “I have given him years, *years*, and I will not be cast aside like last season’s shoes!” I shook my head and told the young cop, in an aside voice, “Never date a beautiful man. It isn’t worth what you have to put up with.”

“Sir,” the security man said. “I’m sorry to, um, intrude. But part of what our residents pay for is security. May I see your key, please?”

“I can’t believe that he never even...” I trailed off into a mutter, got the key out of my coat pocket, and showed it to him.

The security guy took it, squinted at it, and checked a number on its back against a list on his clipboard. “This is one of the resident’s original keys,” he confirmed.

“That’s right. Thomas gave it to me,” I said.

“I see,” the security man said. “Um. Would you mind if I saw some photo ID, sir? I’ll put a copy in our file, so this won’t, um...happen again.”

I was going to kill my brother later. “Of course not, sir,” I assured him, trying to appear mollified and reluctantly willing to be gracious. I got out my wallet and handed him my driver’s license. The cop glanced at it as it went by.

“I’ll be right back,” he told me, and hustled toward the elevator.

“Sorry about this,” the cop told me. “They get paid to be a little paranoid.”

“Not your fault, Officer,” I told her.

She regarded me thoughtfully for a moment. “So, you and the owner are, uh...”

“We’re *something*,” I sighed. “You can never get the pretty ones to come out and say exactly, can you?”

“Not generally, no,” she said. Her tone of voice stayed steady, her expression mild, but I knew a poker face when I saw one. “Do you mind if I ask what you’re doing here?”

I had to be careful. The young cop wasn’t dumb. She thought she smelled a rat.

I gestured forlornly at the dog. “We were living together in a tiny little place. We got a dog and didn’t know he was going to get so big. Thomas was feeling crowded, so he moved into his own place, and...” I shrugged and tried to look like Murphy did when talking about her exes. “We were supposed to switch off every month, but he always had some excuse. He didn’t want the dog slobbering around his little neat-freak world.” I gestured at the apartment.

The cop looked around and nodded politely. “Nice place.” But she hadn’t been convinced. Not completely. I saw her putting a few thoughts together, formulating more questions.

Mouse pulled it out of the fire for me. He padded over to the door, looked up at the cop.

“Good lord, he’s huge,” the cop said. She leaned slightly away from him.

“Oh, he’s a big softie, isn’t he,” I crooned to him, and ruffled his ears.

Mouse gave her a big doggy grin, sat, and offered her one of his paws.

She laughed and shook. She let Mouse sniff the back of her hand, and then scratched his ears herself.

“You know dogs,” I said.

“I’m in training for one of the K-9 units,” she confirmed.

“He likes you,” I said. “That’s unusual. He’s usually a great big chicken.”

She smiled. “Oh, I think dogs can tell when someone likes them. They’re smarter about that kind of thing than people give them credit for.”

“God knows, that seems to be smarter than *I* can ever manage.” I sighed. “What kind of dogs do they use at the K-9 units?”

“Oh, it varies a great deal,” she said, and started in on talking about candidates for police dogs. I kept her going with a couple of questions and a lot of interested nodding, and Mouse demonstrated his ability to sit and lie down and roll over. By the time the security guy and his apologetic expression got back, Mouse was sprawled on his back, paws waving languidly in the air, while the cop scratched his tummy and told me a pretty good dog story about her own childhood and an encounter with a prowler.

“Sir,” he said, handing my key and license back and trying not to look like he was carefully not touching me. “I apologize for the inconvenience, but as you are not a resident here, it is standard procedure for visitors to check in with the security personnel at the entrance when entering or leaving the building.”

“This is just typical of him,” I said. “Forgetting something like this. I probably should have called ahead and made sure he’d told you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I hate to inconvenience you. But until we do have that written authorization from Mr. Raith that he wishes you to have full access, I need to ask you to leave. I know it’s just paperwork, but I’m afraid there’s no way around it.”

I sighed. “Typical. Just typical. And I understand you’re just doing your job, sir. Let me go to the bathroom and I’ll be right down.”

“Perfectly all right,” he told me. “Officer.”

The cop stood up from Mouse and gave me a lingering look. Then she nodded, and the pair of them headed back down the hall.

I let Mouse back in, then closed the door most of the way and Listened, narrowing the focus of my attention until nothing existed but sound and silence.

“Are you sure?” the cop asked the security guy.

“Oh, absolutely,” he said. “Toe-moss,” he said, emphasizing the pronunciation, “is as queer as a three-dollar bill.”

“He have any other men here?”

“Once or twice,” the man said. “This tall one is new, but he does have one of the original keys.”

“He could have stolen it,” the cop said.

“An NBA-sized gay burglar who works with a dog?” the security guy replied. “We’ll make sure he’s not stealing the fridge when he comes out. If Raith is missing anything, we’ll point him right at this guy. We’ve got him on video, eyewitnesses putting him in the apartment, a copy of his driver’s license, for crying out loud.”

“If they’re in a relationship,” the cop said, “how come this Raith guy never cleared his boyfriend?”

“You know how queers are, the way they sleep around,” the security guy said. “He was just covering his ass.”

“So to speak,” the cop said.

Security guy missed the irony in her tone, and let out a smug chuckle. "Like I said. We'll watch him."

"Do that," the cop said. "I don't like it, but if you're sure."

"I don't want a jilted queen making a big scene. No one wants that."

"Heavens, no," the cop said, her tone flat.

I eased the door shut and said to Mouse, "Thank God for bigotry."

Mouse tilted his head at me.

"Bigots see something they expect and then they stop thinking about what is in front of them," I told him. "It's probably how they got to be bigots in the first place."

Mouse looked unenlightened and undisturbed by it.

"We've only got a couple of minutes if I want them to stay complacent," I said quietly. I looked around the apartment for a minute. "No note," I said. "Not necessary now."

I went back to the war room, turned on the light, and stared at the huge corkboard wall with its maps, notes, pictures, and diagrams. There was no time to make sense of it.

I closed my eyes for a moment, lowered certain mental defenses I'd held in place for a considerable while, and cast a thought into the vaults of my mind: *Take a memo.*

Then I stepped up to the wall and scanned my eyes over it, not really stopping to take in any information. I caught glimpses of each photo and piece of paper. It took me maybe a minute. Then I turned the lights back out, gathered my things, and left.

I breezed out of the elevators, stopping at the security guy's desk. He nodded at me and waved me out, and Mouse and I departed the building, secure in our heterosexuality.

Then I went back to my car and headed home to seek counsel from a fallen angel.

Chapter Nine

I picked up some burgers, four for me and four for Mouse, and went home. I got onion rings, too, but Mouse didn't get any because my class-four hazmat suit was at the cleaners.

Mister, of course, got an onion ring, because he has seniority. He ate some, batted the rest around the kitchen floor for a minute, then mrowled to be let outside for his evening ramble.

By the time I'd eaten it was after ten, and I was entertaining thoughts of putting off more investigation until after a full night's sleep. Pulling all-nighters was getting to be more difficult than it had been when I was twenty and full of what my old mentor Ebenezer McCoy would term "vinegar."

Staying awake wasn't the issue: If anything, it was far easier to ignore fatigue and maintain concentration these days. Recovering from it was a different story. I didn't bounce back from sleep deprivation quite as quickly as I used to, and a missed night's sleep tended to make me grouchy for a couple of days while I got caught up. Too, my body was still recovering from way too many injuries suffered in previous cases. If I'd been a normal human being, I'd probably be walking around with a collection of scars, residual pain, and stiff joints, like an NFL lineman at the tail end of an injury-plagued career, or a boxer who had been hit too many times.

But I wasn't normal. Whatever it is that allows me to use magic also gives me a greatly enhanced life span—and an ability to eventually recover from injuries that would, in a normal person, be permanently disabling. That didn't really help me much on an immediate, day-to-day basis, but given what my body's gone through, I'm just as glad that I *could* get better, with enough work and enough time. Losing a hand is bad for anyone. Living for three or four centuries with one hand would, in the words of my generation, blow goats.

Sleep would be nice. But Thomas might need my help. I'd get plenty of sleep when I was dead.

I glanced at my maimed hand, then picked up my old acoustic guitar and sat down on the sofa. I flicked some candles to life and, concentrating on my left hand, began to practice. Simple scales first, then a few other exercises to warm up, then some quiet play. My hand was nowhere close to one hundred percent, but it was a lot better than it had been, and I had finally drilled enough basics into my fingers to allow me to play a little.

Mouse lifted his head and looked at me. He let out a very quiet sigh. Then he heaved himself to his feet from where he'd been sleeping and padded into my bedroom. He nudged the door shut with his nose.

Everybody's a critic.

"Okay, Lash," I said, and kept playing. "Let's talk."

"Lash?" said a quiet woman's voice. "Do I merit an affectionate nickname now?"

One minute there was no one sitting in the recliner facing the sofa. The next, a woman sat there, poof, just like magic. She was tall, six feet or so, and built like an athlete. Generally, when she appeared to me, she appeared as a healthy-looking young woman with girl-next-door good looks, dressed in a white Greco-Roman tunic that fell to mid thigh. Plain leather sandals had covered her feet, their thongs wrapping up around her calves. Her hair color had changed occasionally, but the outfit had remained a constant.

"Given the fact that you're a fallen angel, literally older than time and capable of thought and action I can't really comprehend, whereas to you I am a mere mortal with a teeny bit more power than most, I thought of it more as a thinly veiled bit of insolence." I smiled at her. "Lash."

She tilted her head back and laughed, to all appearances genuinely amused. "From you, it is perhaps not as insulting as it might be from another mortal. And, after all, I am not in fact that being. I am only her shadow, her emissary, a figment of your own perception, and a guest within your mind."

"Guests get invited," I said. "You're more like a vacuum cleaner salesman who managed to talk his way inside for a demonstration and just won't leave."

"Touché, my host," she admitted. "Though I would like to think I have been both more helpful and infinitely more courteous than such an individual."

"Granted," I said. "It doesn't change anything about being unwelcome."

“Then rid yourself of me. Take up the coin, and I will rejoin the rest of myself, whole again. You will be well rid of me.”

I snorted. “Yeah. Up until Big Sister gets into my head, turns me into her psychotic boy toy, and I wind up a monster like the rest of the Denarians.”

Lasciel, the fallen angel whose full being was currently bound in an old Roman denarius in my basement, held up a mollifying hand. “Have I not given you sufficient space? Have I not done as you asked, remained silent and still? When is the last time I have intruded, the last time we spoke, my host?”

I hit a bad chord, grimaced, and muted it out. Then I started over. “New Mexico. And that wasn’t by choice.”

“Of course it was,” she said. “It is always your choice.”

I shook my head. “I don’t speak ghouls. As far as I know, no one does.”

“None of you have ever lived in ancient Sumeria,” Lasciel said.

I ignored her. “I had to have answers from the ghoul to get those kids back. There was no time for anything else. You were a last resort.”

“And tonight?” she asked. “Am I a last resort tonight?”

The next couple of chords came out hard and loud. “It’s Thomas.”

She folded her hands in her lap and regarded one of the nearby candles. “Ah, yes,” she said, more quietly. “You care for him a great deal.”

“He’s my blood,” I said.

“Allow me to rephrase the observation. You care for him to an irrational degree.” She tilted her head and studied me. “Why?”

I spoke in a slower voice. “He’s my *blood*.”

“I understand your words, but they don’t mean anything.”

“They wouldn’t,” I said. “Not to you.”

She frowned at that and looked at me, her expression mildly disturbed. “I see.”

“No,” I said. “You don’t. You can’t.”

Her expression became remote and blank, her gaze returning to the candle. “Do not be too sure, my host. I, too, had brothers and sisters. Once upon a time.”

I stared at her for a second. God, she sounded sincere. She isn’t, Harry, I told myself. She’s a liar. She’s running a con on you to convince you to like her, or at least trust her. From there, it would be a short commute to the recruiter’s office of the Legion of Doom.

I reminded myself very firmly that what the fallen angel offered me—knowledge, power, companionship—would come at too high a price. It was foolish of me to keep falling back on her help, even though what she had done for me had undoubtedly saved both my life and that of many others. I reminded myself that too much dependence upon her would be a Very, Very Bad Thing.

But she still looked sad.

I concentrated on my music for a moment. It was hard not to experience the occasional fit of empathy for her. The trick was to make sure that I never forgot her true goal—seduction, corruption, the subversion of my free will. The only way to prevent that was to be sure to guard my decisions and actions with detached reason rather than letting my emotions get the better of me. If that happened, it would be easy to play right into the true Lasciel's hands.

Hell, it'd probably be fun.

I shook off that thought and lumbered through "Every Breath You Take" by the Police and an acoustic version of "I Will Survive" I'd put together myself. After I finished that, I tried to go through a little piece I'd written that was supposed to sound like classic Spanish guitar while giving me a little exercise therapy on the mostly numb fingers of my left hand. I'd played it a thousand times, and while I had improved, it was still something painful to listen to.

Except this time.

This time, I realized halfway in, I was playing flawlessly. I was playing faster than my usual tempo, throwing in a few licks, vibrato, some nifty transitional phrases—and it sounded good. Like, Santana good.

I finished the song and then looked up at Lasciel.

She was watching me steadily.

"Illusion?" I asked her.

She gave a small shake of her head. "I was merely helping. I...can't write original music anymore. I haven't made any music in ages. I just...helped the music you heard in your thoughts get out through your fingers. I circumvented some of the damaged nerves. It was all you, otherwise, my host."

Which was just about the coolest thing Lasciel'd ever done for me. Don't get me wrong; the survival-oriented things were super—but this was playing guitar. She had helped me to create something of beauty, and it

satisfied an urge in me so deep-set and vital that I had never really realized what it was. Somehow, I knew without a hint of a doubt that I would never be able to play that well on my own. Ever again.

Could evil, true capital-E Evil, do such a thing? Help create something whole and lovely and precious?

Careful, Harry. Careful.

“This isn’t helping either of us,” I said quietly. “Thank you, but I’m learning it myself. I’ll get there on my own.” I set the guitar down on its little stand. “Besides, there’s work to be done.”

She nodded once. “Very well. This is regarding Thomas’s apartment and its contents?”

“Yes,” I said. “Can you show them to me?”

Lasciel lifted a hand, and the wall opposite the fireplace changed.

Technically, it hadn’t actually changed, but Lasciel, who existed only as an entity of thought hanging around in my head, was able to create illusions of startling, even daunting clarity, even if I was the only one who could perceive them. She could sense the physical world through me—and she carried aeons of knowledge and experience. Her memory and eye for detail were almost entirely flawless.

So she created the illusion of the wall of Thomas’s war room and put it over my own wall. It was even lit the same way as in my brother’s apartment, every detail, I knew, entirely faithful to what I had seen earlier that night.

I padded over to the wall and started checking it out more thoroughly. My brother’s handwriting was all but unreadable, which made the notes he’d scribbled of dubious value in terms of actually enlightening me as to what was going on.

“My host—” Lasciel began.

I held up a hand for silence. “Not yet. Let me look at it unprejudiced first. Then you tell me what you think.”

“As you wish.”

I went over the stuff there for an hour or so, frowning. I had to go check a calendar a couple of times. I got out a notebook and scribbled things down as I worked them out.

“All right,” I said quietly, settling back down on the sofa. “Thomas was following several people. The dead women and at least a dozen more, in different parts of the city. He had a running surveillance on them. I think he

probably hired a private detective or two to cover some of the observation—keeping tabs on where people were going, figuring out the recurring events in their schedules.” I held up the notebook. “These are the names of the folks he was”—I shrugged—“stalking, I suppose. My guess is that the other people on this list are among the missing folk the ladies of the Ordo Lebes told us about.”

“Think you Thomas preyed upon them?” Lasciel asked.

I started to deny it, instantly and firmly, but stopped.

Reason. Judgment. Rational thought.

“He could have,” I said quietly. “But my instincts say it isn’t him.”

“Why would it not be?” Lasciel asked me. “Upon what do you base your reasoning?”

“Upon Thomas,” I said. “It isn’t him. To engage in wholesale murder and abduction? No way. Maybe he fell off the incubus wagon, sure, but he wouldn’t inflict any more harm than he had to. It isn’t his way.”

“Not his way by choice,” Lasciel said. “Though I feel I must point out that—”

I cut her off, waving a hand. “I know. His sister could have gotten involved. She already ate Lord Raith’s free will. She could have monkeyed around with Thomas’s mind, too. And if not Lara, then there are plenty of others who might have done it. Thomas could be doing these things against his will. Hell, he might not even remember he’s doing them.”

“Or he might be acting of his own volition. He has another point of weakness,” Lasciel said.

“Eh?”

“Lara Raith holds Justine.”

A point I hadn’t yet considered. Justine was my brother’s...well, I don’t know if there’s a word for what she was to him. But he loved her, and she him. It wasn’t their fault that she was slightly insane and he was a life force—devouring creature of the night.

They’d been willing to give up their lives for each other in the midst of a crisis, and the love confirmed by doing so had rendered Justine deadly to my brother, poisonous to him. Love is like that to the White Court, an intolerable agony to them, the way holy water is to other breeds. Someone touched by pure and honest love cannot be fed upon—which had more or less put an end to Thomas’s ability to be near Justine.

It was probably just as well. That last time they'd been together had all but killed Justine. The last time I'd seen her, she'd been a wasted, frail, white-haired thing barely capable of stringing sentences together. It had torn my brother apart to see what he had done to her. To my knowledge he hadn't even tried to be a part of her life again. I couldn't blame him.

Lara watched over Justine now, though she could not feed upon the girl any more than Thomas could.

But Lara could cut her throat, if it came to that.

My brother might very well be capable of some unpleasant things in the interests of protecting Justine. Strike that. He *was* capable of anything where the girl was concerned.

Means. Motive. Opportunity. The equation of murder was balanced.

I looked back at the illusory wall, where the pictures, maps, and notes grouped together in a broad band near the top, then descended into fewer notes on the next strip down, and so on, forming a vague V-shape. At the top of the V rested a single, square yellow sticky note.

That note read, in a heavy hand, *Ordo Lebes? Find them.*

"Dammit, Thomas," I murmured quietly. I addressed Lasciel. "Get rid of it."

Lasciel nodded and the illusion disappeared. "There is something else you should know, my host."

I eyed her. "What's that?"

"It may concern your safety and the course of your investigation. May I show you?"

The word *no* came strongly to mind, but I was already in for a penny, so to speak. Lasciel's wealth of intelligence and experience made her an extremely capable adviser. "Briefly."

She nodded, rose, and suddenly I was standing in Anna Ash's apartment, as I had been that afternoon.

"My host," Lasciel said. "Remember you how many women you observed entering the building?"

I frowned. "Sure. As many as half a dozen had the right look, though anyone who arrived before Murphy and I got there could have already been inside."

"Precisely," Lasciel said. "Here."

She waved a hand, and an image of me appeared in the apartment's entry, Murphy at my side.

“Anna Ash,” Lasciel said. She nodded toward me, and Anna’s image appeared, facing me. “Can you describe the others in attendance?”

“Helen Beckitt,” I said. “Looking leaner and more weathered than the last time I saw her.”

Beckitt’s image appeared where she had been standing by the window.

I pointed at the wooden rocking chair. “Abby and Toto were there.” The plump blond woman and her dog appeared. I rubbed at my forehead. “Uh, two on the sofa and one on the love seat.”

Three shadowy forms appeared in the named places.

I pointed at the sofa. “The pretty one, in the dance leotard, the one worried about time.” She appeared. I pointed at the shadowed figure next to her. “Bitter, suspicious Priscilla who was not being polite.” The shadowy figure became Priscilla’s image.

“And there you go,” I said.

Lasciel shook her head, waved her hand, and the people images all vanished.

All except the shadowy figure sitting on the love seat.

I blinked.

“What can you remember about this one?” Lasciel asked me.

I racked my brain. It’s usually good for this kind of thing. “Nothing,” I said after a moment. “Not one damned detail. Nothing.” I added two and two together and got trouble. “Someone was under a veil. Someone good enough to make it subtle. Hard to tell it was there at all. Not invisible so much as extremely boring and unremarkable.”

“In your favor,” Lasciel said, “I should point out that you had crossed the threshold uninvited, and thus were deprived of much of your power. In such a circumstance it would be most difficult for you to sense a veil at all, much less to pierce it.”

I nodded, frowning at the shadowy figure. “It was deliberate,” I said. “Anna goaded me into walking over the threshold on purpose. She was hiding Miss Mystery from me.”

“Entirely possible,” Lasciel concurred. “Or...”

“Or *they* didn’t know someone was there, either,” I said. “And if that’s the case...” I tossed the notebook aside with a growl and rose.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I got my staff and coat, and got Mouse ready to go. “If the mystery guest was news to the Ordo, she’s right in among them and they could be in

danger. If the Ordo knew about her, then they played me and lied to me.” I ripped open the door with more than my usual effort. “Either way, I’m going over there to straighten some things out.”

Chapter Ten

I swept the Beetle for bombs again and got the impression that I was going to get heartily sick of the chore, fast. It was clean, and off we went.

I parked illegally on a street about a block from Anna Ash's apartment, and walked the rest of the way in. I rang buzzers more or less at random until someone buzzed me in, and headed back up the stairs to Anna's apartment.

This time, though, I went in armed for bear. As I rode up in the elevator, I got out my jar of unguent, a dark brown concoction that stained the skin for a couple of days. I dabbed a finger in it and smeared it lightly onto my eyelids and at the base of my eyes. It was an ointment originally intended to counter faerie glamour, allowing those who had it to see through illusion to reality. It wasn't quite right for seeing through a veil wrought with mortal magic, but it should be strong enough to show me *something* of whatever the veil was hiding. I should be able to glimpse any motion, and that would at least give me an idea of which way to face if things got dicey.

I brought Mouse for a reason, too. Besides being a small mountain of loyal muscle and ferocious fangs, Mouse could sense bad guys and dark magic when they were nearby. I had yet to encounter the creature that could sneak by Mouse unobserved, but just in case today was the day, I had the unguent as a backup plan.

I got off the elevator, and the hairs on the back of my neck immediately rose up. Mouse lifted his head sharply, looking back and forth down the hall. He'd felt what I had.

A fine cloud of magic hung over the entire floor.

I touched it carefully and found a suggestion of sleep—one of the classics, really. This one wasn't heavy, as such things go. I'd seen one sleep spell that flattened an entire ward of Cook County Hospital. I'd used another to protect Murphy's sanity, and it had kept her out for nearly two days.

This one wasn't like that. It was light, barely noticeable, and not at all threatening. It was delicate and fine enough to filter into homes even through their thresholds—most of which were weak enough: Apartments never seemed to have as much defense as a real, discrete home. If those other spells had been sleeping medication, this one would have been a glass of warm milk. Someone wanted the residents of the floor to be insensible enough not to notice something, but not so out as to be endangered should there be an emergency, like the building catching fire and burning down.

Don't look at me like that. It's a lot likelier than you'd think.

Anyway, the suggestion was another finely crafted spell: delicate, precise, subtle, much like the earlier veil Lasciel had spotted. Whoever or whatever was crafting these workings was a pro.

I made sure my shield bracelet was ready to go, and marched up to Anna's door. I could sense the ward there, still active, so I thumped my staff on the floor immediately in front of the door. "Ms. Ash?" I called. It wasn't like I was going to wake anyone up. "It's Harry Dresden. We need to talk."

There was silence. I repeated myself. I heard a sound, that of someone striving to move silently, a scuff or a creak so faint that I wasn't sure it had been real. I checked Mouse. His ears were pricked up, swiveled forward. He'd heard it too.

Someone flushed a toilet on the floor above us. I heard a door open and close, a faint sound, also on another floor. There was no further sound from Anna Ash's apartment.

I didn't like where this was going at all.

"Stand back, buddy," I told Mouse. He did, backing away in that clumsy reverse waddle-walk dogs do.

I turned to the ward. It was like the little pig's straw house. It wouldn't last more than a second or two against a big bad wolf. "And I'll huff and I'll puff," I muttered. I drew up my will, took the staff in both hands, and pressed one end slowly toward the door. "*Solvos*," I murmured. "*Solvos. Solvos.*"

As the staff touched the door, I sent a gentle surge of will coursing down through its length. It passed through the wood visibly, the carved runes in it briefly illuminated from within by pale blue light. My will hit Anna's door and scattered out in a cloud of pinprick sparkles of white light as my power unbound the patterns of the ward and reduced them to mere anarchy.

“Anna?” I called again. “Ms. Ash?”

No answer.

I tried the doorknob. It was unlocked.

“That can’t be good,” I told Mouse. “Here we go.” I quietly opened the door, giving it a gentle push so that it would swing wide and let me see inside the darkened apartment.

At which point the trap sprang.

For traps to work, though, they need to catch their target off his guard.

I had my new and improved shield bracelet ready when greenish light flashed in the dark apartment and rushed swiftly toward me. I lifted my left hand. Bound around my wrist was a chain made of braided strands of several metals, silver predominant. The metal shields that hung from the bracelet had, in its previous incarnation, been solid silver as well. They had been replaced with shields of silver, iron, copper, nickel, and brass.

The new shield wasn’t like the old one. The old one had provided an intangible barrier meant to deflect solid matter and kinetic energy. It hadn’t been made to stop, for example, heat. That’s how my left hand got roasted practically down to the bones. It had been of only limited use against other forms of magic or energy.

If there hadn’t been a war on, and if I hadn’t been spending so much time drilling Molly in the fundamentals—and therefore getting in all kinds of extra practice, myself—I would never have considered attempting to create such a complex focus. It was far more complicated than almost anything I’d done before. Five years ago, it would have been beyond me completely. More to the point, five years ago, I wouldn’t have been as experienced or as strongly motivated.

But that was then, and this was now.

The shield that formed in front of me was not the familiar, translucent part-dome of pale blue light. Instead it flared into place in a blurring swirl of colors that solidified in an instant into a curving rampart of silver energy. The new shield was far more thorough than the old. Not only would it stop everything the old one had, but it would provide shelter against heat, cold, electricity—even sound and light, if I needed it to. It had also been designed to turn aside a fairly broad spectrum of supernatural energies. It was this last that was important at the moment.

A globe of green lightning sizzled over the apartment’s threshold and abruptly expanded, buzzing arcs of verdant electricity interconnected in a

diamond pattern like the weave of a fisherman's net.

The spell fell on my shield and the meeting of energies yielded a torrent of angry yellow sparks that rebounded from the shield, scattering over the hall, the doorway, and bouncing back into the apartment.

I dropped the shield as I brandished my staff, sent a savage torrent of power down my arm, and snarled, "*Forzare!*"

Unseen force lashed through the doorway—and splashed against the apartment's threshold. Most of the spell's power struck that barrier, grounded out, and was dissipated. What amounted to less than a percent of the power I had cast out actually made it through the doorway, as I had known it would. Instead of delivering a surge of energy strong enough to flip over a car, I delivered only a blow strong enough to knock an adult from her feet.

I heard a woman's voice let out a surprised grunt at the impact, and heavy objects clattered to the floor.

"Mouse!" I shouted.

The big dog bounded forward through the doorway, and I went in right behind him. Once again, the apartment's threshold stripped away my power, leaving me all but utterly unable to wield magic.

Which is why I'd brought my .44 revolver with me, tucked into a duster pocket. I had it in my left hand as I came through the door and hit the main light switch with my right elbow, bellowing, "I have *not* had a very good day!"

Mouse had someone pinned on the ground, and kept them there by virtue of simply *sitting* on them. Two hundred pounds of Mouse is an awfully effective restraint, and though he had his teeth bared, he wasn't actively struggling or making any noise.

To my right, Anna Ash stood frozen like a rabbit in a spotlight, and my gun tracked to her immediately. "Don't move," I warned her. "I don't have any magic at the moment, and that always makes me really, really ready to pull the trigger."

"Oh, God," she said, her voice a rough whisper. She licked her lips, visibly trembling. "Okay," she said. "Okay. D-don't hurt me, please. You don't have to do this."

I told her to walk over to Mouse and his prisoner. Once she was standing where I could watch both of them at once, I could relax a little, and though I did not lower the gun, I took my finger off the trigger. "Do what?"

“What you’ve done to the others,” Anna said, her voice thready. “You don’t have to do this. Not to anyone.”

“The others?” I demanded. I probably sounded at least half as disgusted as I felt. “You think I came here to *kill* you?”

She blinked at me a few times. Then she said, “You came here, broke down my door, and pointed a gun at me. What am I *supposed* to think?”

“I did *not* break down your door! It was unlocked!”

“You tore apart my ward!”

“Because I thought you might be in *trouble*, you twit!” I hollered. “I thought the killer might be here already.”

A woman let out a couple of choking gasps. After a moment, I realized that it was the person Mouse had pinned down, letting out breathless laughter.

I lowered the gun and put it away. “For crying out loud. You thought the killer was coming for you? So you laid a trap for him?”

“Well, no,” Anna said, now looking somewhat confused again. “I mean, I didn’t do it. The Ordo...we hired a private investigator to look into it. It was her idea to trap the killer when he came here.”

“A private investigator?” I looked over at the other woman and said, “Mouse.”

My dog, tail waving gently, backed off right away and trotted over to stand beside me. The woman he’d been holding down sat up.

She was pale—not the sickly pallor of no time in the sun, but the color of the living, healthy skin of a tree beneath the outer bark. Her lean face was intensely attractive—more intriguing than beautiful, with wide, intelligent eyes set over an expressive, generous mouth. She had a slim build, all long legs and long arms, and wore a simple pair of jeans along with a black Aerosmith T-shirt, and brown leather Birkenstocks. She propped herself up on her elbows, a tendril of wheat-colored hair falling to almost insolently conceal one eye, and gave me a wry smile.

“Hello, Harry.” She dabbed her fingers at a little bloody spot on her lower lip and winced, though there was still amusement in her voice. “Is that a new staff, or are you just happy to see me?”

And after my heart had skipped a couple of beats, I blinked and said, in a very quiet voice, to the first woman I’d ever everytinged, “Hello, Elaine.”

Chapter Eleven

I sat on the love seat while Anna Ash made coffee. Mouse, ever hopeful to cadge a snack, followed Anna into the kitchen, and sat there giving her his most pathetic, starving-doggy body language and wagging his tail.

We sat down together with coffee, like civilized people, a few minutes later.

“Ms. Ash,” I said, taking my cup.

“Anna, please.”

I nodded to her. “Anna. First, I wish to apologize for frightening you. It wasn’t my intention.”

She sipped her coffee, frowning at me, and then nodded. “I suppose I can understand your motivations.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m sorry I blew up your ward. I’ll be glad to replace it for you.”

“We put a lot of hours in on that thing.” Anna sighed. “I mean, I know it wasn’t...expert work.”

“We?” I asked.

“The Ordo,” she said. “We worked together to protect everyone’s home.”

“Community project. Sort of a barn raising,” I said.

She nodded. “That’s the idea.” She bit her lip. “But there were more of us, when we did that.”

For just a second, the capable exterior wavered, and Anna looked very tired and very frightened. I felt a little pang inside at the sight. Real fright isn’t like the movies. Real fear is an ugly, quiet, relentless thing. It’s a kind of pain, and I hated seeing it on Anna’s face.

I found Elaine watching me, her eyes thoughtful. She sat on the sofa, leaning forward so that her elbows rested on her spread knees. She held her cup in one hand at a slight, negligent angle. On anyone else, it would have looked masculine. On Elaine, it only looked relaxed, strong, and confident.

“He truly meant you no harm, Anna,” she said, turning to our host. “He’s got this psychosis about charging to the rescue. I always thought it gave

him a certain hapless charm.”

“I think we should focus on the future, for the time being,” I said. “I think we need to pool our information and try to work together on this.”

Anna and Elaine exchanged a long look. Anna glanced at me again and asked Elaine, “Are you sure?”

Elaine gave a single, firm nod. “He isn’t the one trying to hurt you. I’m sure now.”

“Sure *now*?” I said. “Is that why you veiled yourself when I was here earlier?”

Elaine’s fine eyebrows lifted. “You didn’t sense it when you were here. How did you know?”

I shrugged. “Maybe a little bird told me. Do you really think I’m capable of something like that?”

“No,” Elaine said. “But I had to be sure.”

“You know me better than that,” I said, unable to keep a little heat out of my voice.

“I trust you,” Elaine said, without a trace of apology in her tone, “but it might not have *been* you, Harry. It could have been an impostor. Or you could have been acting under some form of coercion. People’s lives were at stake. I had to *know*.”

I wanted to snarl back at her that if she so much as *thought* I might be the killer, she didn’t know me at all. If that’s how it was going to be, I might as well get up and walk right out of the apartment before—

And then I sighed.

Ah, sweet bird of irony.

“You were obviously expecting the killer to show up,” I said to Anna. “The sleeping spell. The ambush. What made you think he might be coming?”

“Me,” Elaine said.

“And what made *you* think that?”

She gave me a dazzling, innocent smile and imitated my tone and inflection. “Maybe a little bird told me.”

I snorted.

Anna’s eyes suddenly widened. “You two were together.” She turned to Elaine. “That’s how you know him.”

“It was a long time ago,” I said.

Elaine winked at me. “But you never really forget your first.”

“You never forget your first train wreck, either.”

“Train wrecks are exciting. Fun, even,” Elaine said. She kept smiling, though her eyes turned a little sad. “Right up until the very last part.”

I felt half a smile tug up one side of my mouth. “True,” I said. “But I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t try to dodge questions by throwing up a smoke screen of nostalgia.”

Elaine took a long sip of coffee and shrugged a shoulder. “I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours.”

I folded my arms, frowning. “Sixty seconds ago, you said that you trusted me.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Trust is a two-way street, Harry.”

I leaned back, took another sip of coffee, and said, “Maybe you’re right. I put it together after the fact, when I was making notes of our conversation. I couldn’t remember noticing anything about the woman on the love seat, which doesn’t happen to me. So I figured it must have been a veil, and came over here because it was possible that whoever was under it was a threat to the Ordo.”

Elaine pursed her lips, frowning for a moment. “I see.”

“Your turn.”

She nodded. “I’ve been working out of L.A., taking a lot of cases referred my way—like this one. And Chicago isn’t the first city where this has happened.”

I blinked at her. “What?”

“San Diego, San Jose, Austin, and Seattle. Over the past year, members of a number of small organizations like the Ordo Lebes have been systematically stalked and murdered. Most of them have appeared to be suicides. Counting Chicago, the killer’s taken thirty-six victims.”

“Thirty-six...” I ran my thumb over the handle of the coffee cup, frowning. “I haven’t heard a word about this. Nothing. A *year*?”

Elaine nodded. “Harry, I’ve got to know. Is it possible that the Wardens are involved?”

“No,” I said, my tone firm. “No way.”

“Because they’re such easygoing, tolerant people?” she asked.

“No. Because I know Ramirez, the regional commander for most of those cities. He wouldn’t be a part of something like that.” I shook my head. “Besides, we’ve got a manpower shortage. The Wardens are stretched pretty thin. And there’s no *reason* for them to go around killing people.”

“You’re sure about Ramirez,” Elaine said. “Can you say the same about every Warden?”

“Why?”

“Because,” Elaine said, “in every single one of those cities, a man in a grey cloak was seen with at least two of the victims.”

Uh-oh.

I put the coffee cup down on an end table and folded my arms, thinking.

It wasn’t general knowledge, but someone on the Council was leaking information to the vamps on a regular and devastating basis. The traitor still had not been caught. Even worse, I had seen evidence that there was another organization at work behind the scenes, manipulating events on a scale large enough to indicate a powerful, well-funded, and frighteningly capable group—and that at least some of them were wizards. I had dubbed them the Black Council, because it was obvious, and I’d been keeping my ear to the ground for indications of their presence.

And look. I found one.

“Which explains why I hadn’t heard anything about it,” I said. “If everyone thinks the Wardens are responsible, there’s not a prayer they’d draw attention to themselves by reporting what was happening and asking for help. Or call in a gumshoe who happens to be a Warden, himself.”

Elaine nodded. “Right. I started getting called in about a month after I got my own license and opened my business.”

I grunted. “How’d they know to call you?”

She smiled. “I’m in the book under ‘Wizards.’”

I snorted. “I knew you were copying my test answers all those years.”

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” She pulled a strand of hair back behind one ear, an old and familiar gesture that brought with it a pang of remembered desire and a dozen little memories. “Most of the business has come in on referral, though, because I do good work. In any case, one fact about the killer’s victims was almost always the same: people who lived alone or were isolated.”

“And I,” Anna said quietly, “am the last living member of the Ordo who lives alone or were isolated.”

“These other cities,” I said. “Did the killer leave anything behind? Messages? Taunts?”

“Like what?” Elaine asked.

“Bible verses,” I said. “Left in traces, something only one of us would recognize.”

She shook her head. “No. Nothing like that. Or if there was, I never found it.”

I exhaled slowly. “So far, two of the deaths here have had messages left behind. Your friend Janine and a woman named Jessica Blanche.”

Elaine frowned. “I gathered, from what you said earlier. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yes, it does,” I said. “We just don’t know why.” I frowned. “Could any of the other deaths be attributed to the White Court?”

Elaine frowned and rose. She took her coffee cup to the kitchen and came back, a pensive frown on her brow. “I...can’t be certain they haven’t, I suppose. I certainly haven’t seen anything to suggest it. Why?”

“Excuse me,” Anna said, her voice quiet and unsure. “White Court?”

“The White Court of vampires,” I clarified.

“There’s more than one kind?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “The Red Court are the ones the White Council is fighting now. They’re these bat-monster things that can look human. Drink blood. The White Court are more like people. They’re psychic parasites. They seduce their victims and feed on human life energy.”

Elaine nodded. “But why did you ask me about them, Harry?”

I took a deep breath. “I found something to suggest that Jessica Blanche may have died as the result of being fed upon by some kind of sexual predator.”

Elaine stared at me for a moment and then said, “The pattern’s been broken. Something’s changed.”

I nodded. “There’s something else involved in the equation.”

“Or someone.”

“Or someone,” I said.

She frowned. “There’s one place to start looking.”

“Jessica Blanche,” I said.

Without warning, Mouse came to his feet, facing the door to the apartment, and let out a bubbling basso growl.

I rose, acutely conscious of the fact that my power was still interdicted by the apartment’s threshold, and that I didn’t have enough magic to spell my way out of a paper bag.

The lights went out. Mouse continued to growl.

“Oh, God,” Anna said. “What’s happening?”

I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes, waiting for them to adjust to the sudden darkness, when a very slight, acrid scent tickled my nose.

“You smell that?” I asked.

Elaine’s voice was steady, calm. “Smell what?”

“Smoke,” I said. “We’ve got to get out of here. I think the building’s on fire.”

Chapter Twelve

“**L**ight,” I said.

Almost before I was finished saying the word, Elaine murmured quietly, and the pentacle amulet she wore, nearly a twin to mine, began to glow with a green-white light. She held it overhead by its silver chain.

By its light, I crossed to the door and felt it, like those cartoons when I was little said you were supposed to do. It felt like a door. “No fire in the hall,” I said.

“Fire stairs,” Elaine said.

“They’re not far,” Anna said.

Mouse continued staring at the door, growling in a low and steady rumble. The smoke smell had thickened.

“Something’s waiting for us in the hall.”

“What?” Anna said.

Elaine looked from Mouse to me and bit her lip. “Window?”

My heart was skipping along too fast. I don’t like fire. I don’t like getting burned. It hurts and it’s ugly. “Might be able to handle the fall,” I said, forcing myself to breathe slowly, evenly. “But there’s a building full of people here, and none of the alarms or sprinklers have gone off. Someone must have hexed them. We’ve got to warn the residents.”

Mouse’s head whipped around and he stared intently at me for a second. Then he trotted in a little circle, shook his head, made a couple of chuffing sounds, and started doing something I hadn’t heard him do since he was a puppy small enough to fit in my duster pocket.

He barked.

Loud. Steady. *WOOF, WOOF, WOOF*, with the mechanical regularity of a metronome.

Now, saying he was barking might give you the general shape of things, but it doesn’t convey the scale. Everyone in Chicago knows what a storm-warning siren sounds like. They’re spread liberally through the Midwestern states that comprise Tornado Alley. They make your usual warning siren

sound. But I had an apartment about thirty yards from one of them once upon a time, and take it from me, that sound is a whole different thing when you're *next* to it. It isn't an ululating wail. When you're that close to the source, it's a tangible flood, a solid, living, sonic cascade that rattles your brain against your skull.

Mouse's bark was like that—but on several levels. Every time he barked, I swear to you, several of my muscles tightened and twitched as if hit with a miniature jolt of adrenaline. I couldn't have slept through half as much racket, even without the odd little jabs of energy that hit me like separate charges of electricity with each bark. It was deafening in the little apartment, nearly as loud as gunfire. He let out twelve painfully loud barks, and then stopped. My ears rang in the sudden silence that followed.

Within seconds I began to hear thumping sounds on the floor above me, bare feet swinging out of beds and landing hard on the floor, almost in unison, like something you'd expect in a training barracks. Someone shouted in the apartment neighboring Anna's. Other dogs started barking. Children started crying. Doors started slamming open.

Mouse sat down again, his head tilting this way and that, ears twitching at each new noise.

"Hell's bells, Harry," Elaine breathed, her eyes wide. "Is that...? Where did you get a *real* Temple Dog?"

"Uh. A place kind of like this, now that you mention it." I gave Mouse's ears a quick ruffling and said, "Good dog."

Mouse wagged his tail at me and grinned at the praise.

I opened the door with the hand that wasn't holding a gun, and took a quick look around in the hall. Flashlights were bobbing and sweeping from several places, each one producing a visible beam in the thickening pall of smoke. People were screaming, "Fire, fire, get everybody out!"

The hallway was in chaos. I couldn't see if anyone out there looked like a lurking menace, but odds were good that if I couldn't see them, they wouldn't see me, either, in all the milling confusion of hundreds of people fleeing the building.

"Anna, where are the fire stairs?"

"Um. Where everyone's *running*," Anna said. "To the right."

"Right," I said. "Okay, here's the plan. We follow all the other flammable people out of the building before we burn to death."

"Whoever did this is going to be waiting for us outside," Elaine warned.

“Not a very private place for a murder anymore,” I said. “But we’ll be careful. Me and Mouse first. Anna, you right behind us. Elaine, cover our backside.”

“Shields?” she asked me.

“Yeah. Can you do your half?”

She arched an eyebrow at me.

“Right,” I said. “What was I thinking?” I took Mouse’s lead in one hand, glanced at my staff, and then said, “We’re working on the honor system, here.” Mouse calmly opened his mouth and held on to his own lead. I picked up my staff in my right hand, kept the gun in the other, and slipped it into my duster’s pocket to conceal the weapon. “Anna, keep your hand on my shoulder.” I felt her grab on to the mantle of my duster. “Good. Mouse.”

Mouse and I hit the hallway with Anna right on my heels. We fled. I’m not too manly to admit it. We scampered. Retreated. Vamoosed. Amscrayed. Burning buildings are freaking terrifying, and I should know.

This was the first time I’d been in one quite this occupied, though, and I expected more panic than I sensed around us. Maybe it was the way Mouse had woken everyone. I saw no one stumbling along the way they would if they had been suddenly roused from deep sleep. Everyone was bright eyed and bushy tailed, metaphorically speaking, and while they were clearly afraid, the fear was aiding the evacuation, not hindering it.

The smoke got thicker as we went down one flight of stairs, then another. It started getting hard to breathe, and I was choking on it as we descended. I began to panic. It’s the smoke that kills most people, long before the fire ever gets to them. But there seemed little to do but press on.

Then we were through the smoke. The fire had begun three floors below Anna’s apartment, and the fire door to that floor was simply missing from its hinges. Black smoke rolled thickly out of the hall beyond it. We had made it down through the smoke, but there were four floors above ours, and the smoke was being drawn up the stairs like they were an enormous chimney. The people still above us would be blinded by it, unable to breathe, and God only knew what would happen to them.

“Elaine!” I choked out.

“Got it!” she called back, coughing—and then she was beside the doorway, black smoke trying to envelop her. She extended her right hand in a gesture that somehow managed to be imperious, and the smoke abruptly vanished.

Well, not exactly. There was a faint shimmer of light over the open doorway, and on the other side of it the smoke roiled and billowed as if pressing up against glass. The acoustics of the stairway altered, the chewing roar of fire suddenly muted, the sound of footsteps and panting people becoming louder.

Elaine examined the field over the doorway for a moment, nodded once, and turned to catch up with us, her manner brisk and businesslike.

“You need to stay to let anyone through?” I asked her. Mouse leaned against my legs, clearly afraid and eager to leave the building.

She held up a hand to silence me. After a moment she said, “No. Permeable to the living. Concentrating. We have a minute, maybe two.”

Permeable? Holy moly. I could never have managed that on the fly. But then, Elaine always was more skilled than me when it came to the complex stuff. “Right,” I said. I took her hand, plopped it down on Anna’s shoulder, and said, “Move, come on.”

After that, it was nothing but stairs, bobbing flashlights, echoing voices, and footsteps. I run. Not because it’s good for me, even though it is, but because I want to be able to run whenever something’s chasing me. It did me a limited amount of good, given that I was spending half of my time coughing on the still-present smoke, but I at least had enough presence of mind to keep an eye on Anna and the distracted Elaine, as well as making sure that I didn’t trip over Mouse or get trampled from behind.

When we got to the second floor, I prepped my shield and called over my shoulder, “Elaine!”

She let out a gasping breath, her head bowing forward. She wavered and clutched at the stair’s handrail. Anna moved at once to support her and keep her moving. There was a crashing, roaring sound above us, and cries of fright came down the stairs.

“Move, move,” I told them. “Elaine, be ready to shield.”

She nodded once and twisted a simple silver ring on her left forefinger around, revealing a kite-shaped shield device not unlike one of my own charms.

We went down the last flight of stairs and hit the door to the street.

Outside, it was not dark. Though the streetlight beside the building was out, the others on the street worked just fine. Added to that was the fire from the burning apartment. It wasn’t blinding or anything, since you could

see it only through windows, and whenever one of those was open or broken it tended to billow black smoke. I could see clearly, though.

People came hustling out of the building, all coughing. Someone outside the building—or with a cell phone—must have called in the fire, because an impressive number of emergency vehicle sirens were drawing nigh. The escapees filed across the street, for the most part, getting to what seemed a safe distance and turning back to look at their homes. They were in various states of dishabille, including one rather generously appointed young lady wearing a set of red satin sheets and dangling a pair of six-inch heels from one hand. The young man with her, with a red silk bathrobe belted kiltlike around his waist, looked understandably frustrated.

I noticed only because, as a professional investigator, I have trained myself to be a keen observer.

That's why, as I looked around the rest of the crowd to see if red satin sheets and spike heels were becoming a new fad, and if maybe I should have some on hand, just in case, I saw the tall man in the grey cloak.

He was shadowed by the headlights of fire trucks coming down the street toward us, but I saw the sway of the grey cloak. As if he'd sensed my attention, he turned. I got nothing useful out of his silhouette for identifying him.

I guess the grey-cloaked man didn't know that. He froze for a full second, facing me, and then turned and sprinted around the corner.

"Mouse!" I snapped. "Stay with Anna!"

Then I took off after Grey Cloak.

Chapter Thirteen

Thoughtlessly running headlong after someone alone, at night, in Chicago, is not generally a bright idea.

“This is stupid,” I panted to myself. “Harry, you jackass, this is how you keep getting yourself into trouble.”

Grey Cloak moved with the long, almost floating stride of an athlete running the mile and turned into an alley, where the shadows grew thicker and where we would be out of sight of any of the cops or emergency response people.

I had to think about this. I needed to figure out what he was doing.

Okay, so I’m Grey Cloak. I want to gack Anna Ash, so I start a fire—no, wait. So I use one of the incendiary devices like the one in Murphy’s Saturn, put it on a kitchen timer a couple of floors below Anna’s place, cut the building’s power, phones, and alarms, and set the whole shebang on fire, boom. Then I wait outside Anna’s door for her to emerge in a panic, so that I can murder her, leave, and let the evidence burn in the subsequent inferno. Now it all looks like an accident.

Only I don’t expect Anna to have a pair of world-class wizards on hand, and I sure as hell never saw Mouse coming. The dog barks and all of a sudden the hall is full of people who can witness the murder, and there’s no way to make it look accidental. Someone is almost certain to contact the authorities and send in the whirling lights within a few moments, and there goes my whole evening. No use trying to complete a subtle hit now.

So what do I do?

I don’t want attention, that’s for sure, or I wouldn’t be trying so hard to make this murder look like an accident. I’m cautious, smart, and patient, or I wouldn’t have gotten away with it in four other cities. I do what a smart predator does when a stalk goes sour.

I bug out.

I’ve got a car nearby, a getaway vehicle.

Grey Cloak reached the end of the alley and turned left with me about twenty feet behind him. Then he rounded a corner and sprinted into a parking garage.

I did not follow him.

See, since I'm such a competent and methodical killer, I assume the worst—that anyone in pursuit will display just as much intelligence and resourcefulness. So what I do is pull the chase into the parking garage, where there's lots of angles that will break line of sight—but my getaway car isn't parked there. There's no way I'm going to wait around to pay the attendant, and smashing my way out would attract the attention I'm trying to avoid. The plan is to lose a pursuer in the ample shadows, ramps, doorways, and parked cars in the maze of the garage, and go to my car once I've given him the slip.

I kept sprinting down the street and rounded a corner. Then I stopped, crouched and ready to continue running. The far side of the garage had no parking places; nor did the alley. So Grey Cloak's car had to be either on the street in front of the garage, or on the street along its side. From that corner, I could watch both.

I hunkered down beside a city trash can and hoped that I was as clever as I seemed to think I was. I was pretty sure it would have been at best stupid and at worst lethal to pursue Grey Cloak into the dark of the parking garage. I might have one hell of a punch, but I was as fragile as the next person, and cornering Grey Cloak might draw out the savagery of desperation. If I slipped up, and he got too close to me, he might drop me like a pair of dirty socks.

Always assuming, of course, that he wasn't an *actual* Warden, in which case he might well hit me with lightning or fire or any number of other nasty attacks of choice. That was a thought I found more than a little... comfortable, really.

I'd spent most of my adult life living in fear of the Council's Wardens. They'd been my persecutors, my personal furies, and despite the fact that I'd become one, I felt an almost childish glee in the notion that a Warden might be my bad guy. It would give me a perfect opportunity to lay out some long-deserved payback with perfect justification.

Unless, of course, it was a Warden doing it under orders. Once upon a time, I'd have told you that the White Council was made up of basically decent people who valued human life. Now, I knew better. The Council

broke the Laws when it saw fit to do so. It executed children who, in their ignorance, violated those same laws. The war, too, had made the Council desperate, more willing to take chances and “make hard decisions” that amounted to other people getting killed while the Council’s bony collective ass stayed as covered as possible.

It didn’t seem reasonable to think that a legitimate Warden could have sunk to such measures, or that Captain Luccio, the Wardens’ commander, would condone it—but I’ve gotten used to being disappointed in the honor and sincerity of the Council in general, and the Wardens in particular. For that matter, I probably shouldn’t expect too much rationality out of Grey Cloak, either. My scenario to predict his behavior was plausible, rational, but a rational person wouldn’t be going around murdering people and making it look like suicide, would he? I was probably wasting my time.

A shadowy figure vaulted from the roof of the parking garage and dropped six stories to the ground, landing on the sidewalk in a crouch. Grey Cloak was still for a second, maybe listening, and then rose and began to walk, quickly but calmly, toward the street and the cars parked along it.

I blinked.

Son of a gun.

I guess sometimes logic *does* work.

I clenched my teeth, gripped my staff, and rose to confront Grey Cloak and blow him straight to hell.

And stopped.

If Grey Cloak truly was part of the Black Council, working to undermine the White Council and generally do whatever large-scale badness they intended to do, blowing him to hell might not be the smart thing to do. The Black Council had been, if you will pardon the phrasing, a phantom menace. I was sure that they were up to no good, and their methods thus far seemed to indicate that they had no inhibitions about the ending of innocent lives—reinforced by Grey Cloak’s willingness to burn a building full of people to death to cover up the murder of a single target. It fit their pattern: shadowy, nebulous, leaving no direct, obvious evidence of who they were or what they wanted.

If they existed at all, that is. So far, they were just a theory.

Then again, Grey Cloak’s getaway car had been just a theory, too.

This could be a chance to gain badly needed intelligence on the Black Council. Knowledge is the ultimate weapon. It always has been.

I could let Grey Cloak go and tail him to see what I could learn before I brought the hammer down. Maybe he'd lead me to something vital, something as critical as Enigma had been to the Allies in WWII. On the other hand, maybe he'd lead me back to nothing. No covert organization worth its salt would allow an operative into the field without planning for the contingency of said operative being compromised. Hell, even if Grey Cloak volunteered everything he knew, there would almost certainly be cutouts in place.

All of which assumed he really *was* part of the Black Council. A big assumption. And when you assume, you make an ass out of you and umption. If I didn't stop him while I had the chance, Grey Cloak would strike again. More people would die.

Yeah, Harry. And how many *more* people will die if the Black Council keeps rising to power?

Dammit. My gut told me to drop Grey Cloak right now. The faces from police photos flickered through my thoughts, and in my imagination the slain women stood beside me, behind me, their glassy, dead eyes intent upon their killer and their desire to be avenged. I longed with an almost apocalyptic passion to step into the open and lay waste to this murdering asshole.

But reason told me otherwise. Reason told me to slow down, think, and consider how to do the most good for the most people.

Hadn't I been telling myself only hours ago that reason had to guide my actions, my decisions, if I was to keep control of myself?

It was hard. It was really, really hard. But I fought off the adrenaline and lust for a fight, and hunkered back down, thinking furiously, while Grey Cloak got into a green sedan, started it, and pulled out onto the street. I crouched between two parked cars and waited, out of sight, until Grey Cloak drove by me.

I pointed the end of my staff at the car's back panel, gathered my will, and whispered, "*Forzare.*" Raw force lanced out, focused into the tiniest area I could envision, and struck the car with a little pop no louder than that produced by stray bits of gravel tossed up against the vehicle's undercarriage. The car went by without slowing, and I got the license number as it left.

Once it was gone, I murmured, "*Tractis,*" keeping my will focused on the staff, and drew it back until I could rise into the light of a street lamp

and peer at the end of the length of oak.

A fleck of green paint, half the size of a dime, had adhered to the end of the staff. I licked my fingertip and pressed it to the paint, lifting it off the staff. I had a small box of waterproof matches in one pocket of the duster. I opened it with one hand, dumped the matches, and then carefully placed the fleck of paint inside.

“Gotcha,” I muttered.

Grey Cloak, in all probability, would ditch the car before long, so I didn’t have much time. If he slipped away, any further harm he caused would be on my own head. I refused to let that happen.

I put the closed matchbox into my pocket, turned, and ran back toward Elaine and Anna. By the time I got there, the block was lit nearly daylight-bright with the roaring flames from the apartment building and a steadily increasing number of flashing emergency lights. I found Elaine, Anna, and Mouse, and walked toward them.

“Harry,” Elaine said, relief on her face. “Hey. You get him?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Got some follow-up work to do. You have somewhere safe?”

“My room at the hotel should be safe enough. I don’t think anyone here knows who I am. The Amber Inn.”

“Right. Take Anna there. I’ll call you.”

“No,” Anna said firmly.

I glanced at the burning building and squinted at Anna. “I guess you’d rather have a quiet night at home, huh?”

“I’d rather make sure the rest of the Ordo is all right,” she said. “What if the killer decides to go after one of them?”

“Elaine,” I said, expecting her support.

Elaine shrugged. “I’m working for her, Harry.”

I muttered a quiet curse under my breath, and shook my head. “Fine. Get them all and fort up. I’ll call you by morning.”

Elaine nodded.

“Come on, Mouse,” I said.

I took his lead, and we headed for home—and Little Chicago.

Chapter Fourteen

When we got back to my apartment, Mouse shambled straight to the plastic punch bowl that holds his kibble. He ate it with a steady, famished determination until it was all gone. Then he emptied his water bowl, went to his usual nap spot, and slumped to the floor without even turning in a circle first. He was asleep almost before he stopped moving.

I stopped by him to ruffle his ears and check his nose, which was wet and cold like it was supposed to be. His tail twitched faintly at my touch, but he was clearly exhausted. Whatever it was about those barks that had impossibly roused an entire building all at once must have taken something out of him. I took my duster off, draped it over him, and let him sleep.

I called Toe-moss's place once again, but got only his answering machine. So I grabbed my heavy flannel robe—for warmth, since the lab was far enough underground to always be chilly—pulled up the throw rug that covers the door in the living room floor, and stumped down the folding stair steps, flicking candles to life with a gesture and a whisper of will as I went.

My lab had always been a little crowded, but it had become more so since I had begun teaching Molly. The lab was a rectangular concrete box. Simple wire shelves covered three walls, stacked up high with books and containers of various ingredients I would use (like the thick, sealed lead box that contained an ounce and a half of depleted uranium filings), and loaded down with various objects of arcane significance (like the bleached human skull that occupied its own shelf, along with several paperback romance novels) or professional curiosity (like the collection of vampire fangs the Wardens in the United States, me and Ramirez, mostly, had gathered in the course of several skirmishes over the past year).

At the far end, on the open wall, I had managed to shoehorn a tiny desk and chair into the lab. Molly did some of her studying there, kept her journal, learned power calculations, and had several books I'd told her to read. We'd begun working on some basic potions, and the beakers and

burners occupied most of the surface of her desk, which was just as well, considering the stains that got left on it during her first potion meltdown. Set into the concrete floor beside the desk was a simple ring of silver I used as a summoning circle.

The table in the middle of the room had once been my work area. No longer. Now it was wholly occupied by Little Chicago.

Little Chicago was a scale model of Chicago itself, or at least of the heart of the town, which I'd expanded from its original design to include everything within about four miles of Burnham Harbor. Every building, every street, every tree was represented by a custom-made scale model of pewter. Each contained a tiny piece of the reality it represented—bark chipped from trees, tiny pieces of asphalt gouged from the streets, flakes of brick broken from the buildings with a hammer. The model would let me use my magic in new and interesting ways, and should enable me to find out a lot more about Grey Cloak than I would have been able to do in the past.

Or...it might blow up. You know. One of the two.

I was still a young wizard, and Little Chicago was a complex toy containing an enormous amount of magical energy. I had to work hard to keep it up-to-date, matched to the real Chicago, or it wouldn't function correctly—i.e., it would fail, possibly in a spectacular fashion. Releasing all that energy in the relatively cramped confines of the lab would most likely render me extra crispy. It was an elaborate and expensive tool, and I never would have so much as considered creating it if I didn't have an expert consultant.

I took the matchbox from my pocket and set it on the edge of the table, glanced up at the skull on its shelf, and said, "Bob, up and at 'em."

The skull quivered a little on its wooden shelf, and tiny, nebulous orange lights appeared in its empty eyes. There was a sound like a human yawn, and then the skull turned slightly toward me and asked, "What's up, boss?"

"Evil's afoot."

"Well, sure," Bob said, "because it refuses to learn the metric system. Otherwise it'd be up to a meter by now."

"You're in a mood," I noted.

"I'm excited. I get to meet the cookie now, right?"

I gave the skull a very firm look. "She is not a cookie. Neither is she a biscuit, a Pop-Tart, Sweet TART, apple tart, or any other kind of pastry. She

is my apprentice.”

“Whatever,” Bob said. “I get to meet her now, yeah?”

“No,” I said firmly.

“Oh,” Bob said, his tone as disappointed and petulant as a six-year-old child who has just been told that it is bedtime. “Why *not*?”

“Because she still hasn’t got a very good idea of how to handle power wisely,” I said.

“I could help her!” Bob said. “She could do a lot more if I was helping.”

“Exactly,” I said. “You’re under the radar until I say otherwise. Do not draw attention to yourself. Do not reveal any of your nature to her. When Molly’s around, you’re an inanimate knickknack until I say otherwise.”

“Hmph,” Bob said. “At this rate, I’m never gonna get to see her naked in time.”

I snorted. “In time for what?”

“In time to behold her in her full, springy, nubile, youthful glory! By the time you let me talk to her, she’ll have started to droop!”

“I’m almost certain you’ll survive the trauma,” I said.

“Life is about more than just survival, Harry.”

“True,” I said. “There’s also work.”

Bob rolled his eyelights in the skull’s empty sockets. “Brother. You’re keeping her cloistered and working me like a dog, too. That’s not fair.”

I started getting out the stuff I’d need to fire up Little Chicago. “Dog, right. Something odd happened tonight.” I told Bob about Mouse and his barking. “What do you know about Temple Dogs?”

“More than you,” Bob said. “But not much. Most of what I got is collected hearsay and folklore.”

“Any of it likely true?”

“A bit,” he said. “There are a few points of confluence where multiple sources agree.”

“Hit me.”

“Well, they’re not entirely mortal,” Bob said. “They’re the scions of a celestial being called a Foo Dog and a mortal canine. They’re very intelligent, very loyal, tough, and can seriously kick ass if they need to do it. But mostly, they’re sentinels. They keep an eye out for dark spirits or dark energy, guard the people or places they’re supposed to guard, and alert others to the presence of danger.”

“Explains why Ancient Mai made those Temple Dog statues to assist the Wardens in maintaining security, I suppose.” I got out a short-handled duster made of a rowan wand and a bundle of owl feathers, and began to carefully clean the dust from the model city. “What about the barking thing?”

“Their bark has some kind of spiritual power,” Bob said. “A lot of stories say that they can make themselves be heard from fifty or sixty miles away. It isn’t just a physical thing, either. It carries over into the Nevernever, and can be heard clearly by noncorporeal entities. It startles them, drives most of them away—and if any of them stick around, Mouse could take his teeth to them, even though they’re spirits. I figure that this alarm-clock bark he did was a part of that protective power, alerting others to danger.”

I grunted. “Superdog.”

“But not bulletproof. They can be killed just like anything else.”

There was a thought. I wondered if I could find someone to make Mouse a Kevlar vest. “Okay, Bob,” I said. “Get it fired up and give it a once-over.”

“Right, boss. I hope you will note that I am doing this without once complaining how unfair it is that you’ve seen the cupcake nekkid and I haven’t.”

“So noted.” I picked up the skull and set it down on the sheet of translucent, rubbery blue plastic that represented Lake Michigan. “Check it out while I get my spell face on.”

The skull spun around to face the city while I settled down on the floor, legs crossed, hands resting lightly on my knees, and closed my eyes, focusing on drawing my thoughts to stillness, my heart to a slow, slow beat. I breathed slowly, deeply, systematically walling out worries, emotions, everything but purpose.

One time, when we’d been discussing martial arts, Murphy told me that eventually, no one can teach you anything more about them. Once you reach that state of knowledge, the only way to keep learning and increasing your own skill is to teach what you know to others. That’s why she teaches a children’s class and a rape-defense course every spring and fall at one of her neighborhood’s community centers.

It sounded kind of flaky-Zen to me at the time, but Hell’s bells, she’d been right. Once upon a time, it would have taken me an hour, if not more, to attain the proper frame of mind. In the course of teaching Molly to meditate, though, I had found myself going over the basics again for the

first time in years, and understanding them with a deeper and richer perspective than I'd had when I was her age. I'd been getting almost as much insight and new understanding of my knowledge from teaching Molly as she'd been learning from me.

It took me ten minutes, twelve at the most, to prepare my thoughts and will. By the time I stood up again, there was nothing left in the whole world but me, Little Chicago, and my need to find a murderer.

"Bob?" I whispered.

"Everything's nominal. We're in the green, Captain," he said, affecting a Scottish accent.

I nodded without speaking. Then I drew in my will, and the skull's eyelights dwindled to the size of pinpricks. So did all the candles. Newborn black shadows began stretching between the pewter buildings, overlaying the model streets. The temperature in the lab dropped another degree or two as I pulled in energy from all around me, and my skin flushed as my body temperature went up a couple of degrees. When I slowly exhaled, my heated breath formed vapor that drifted around my nose and mouth.

I moved slowly, precisely, and picked up the matchbox. Then I opened it and exposed the fleck of paint inside, and leaned over to carefully place the paint down on the tiny model of my apartment building. I stood over the table, my hand touching the paint and the map, and released my will with a repeated murmur of, "*Reperios. Invenios.*"

I felt my senses blur for a moment, and then Little Chicago rushed toward me, its buildings growing, until I stood upon the street outside the now life-sized pewter replica of my apartment building.

I took a moment to look around. It looked like Chicago. Flickers of motion surrounded me. Faint outlines of leaves stirred in the pewter trees, ghostly images of the real-world leaves on the trees of the actual Chicago. Faint lights emanated from blank pewter windowpanes. Ghostly cars whispered by on the streets. I could hear the muted sounds of the city, catch the barest hints of scents on the air.

Unnervingly, I could look up and see...myself, my actual, physical body, towering over the model city like Godzilla's hyperthyroid cousin. The sky over Little Chicago held twinkling lights—the dim glows of the lab's candles and Bob's eyelights, all too large to be stars, the way the sun is supposed to look from the outer planets.

I held up the matchbox, my will surging down my arm. It touched on the little flake of paint, which erupted into viridian light and rose into the air above my hand, hovered for a moment, and then streaked off to the north like a miniature comet.

“Maybe you got away with this crap in other towns, Grey Cloak,” I muttered. “But Chicago’s mine.”

My own flesh dissolved into flickering silver light, and I felt myself rush after the energy of the seeking spell, streaking through the ghostly images of Chicago’s nightlife in the model all around me, one more insubstantial shade among thousands.

The seeking spell came to rest a block and a half south of Goudy Square Park, a little slice of green the city managed to squeeze in amidst a bunch of architecture. The brilliant mote of light settled onto a ghostly image of a moving car and the image suddenly became solid and visible.

“Gotcha,” I growled under my breath, and drifted close to the car, hovering right over its rear bumper, and focused on the driver.

The ghost image remained hazy, dammit. My magic had latched onto the car, and it wasn’t going to be easy to get a better look at the driver than I already had. I might be able to pour more energy into the spell, attain greater clarity, but I wanted to save that as a last resort. Too much could cause the whole thing to blow—and it would certainly leave me too exhausted to maintain the connection. Better to hover now, and listen. Sound would be easier to pick up, resonating against the car, against the surrounding city I had modeled for the spell.

The car stopped a stone’s throw from the park. It’s a bifurcated little place, simultaneously trying to contain a designer garden and a children’s playground, and every time I’d look at it, it seemed to me that the kids were winning. Good for them. Nobody who is four, or six, or eight years old needs to feel conflicted about their play area impeding the Italian Renaissance sensibilities of a landscape artist. Heck, I was probably at least that mature, and I was pretty sure I didn’t need it, either.

I focused on the spell, and the sounds of the city night came to life around me, growing in volume, rising from a distant, ghostly murmur to simple ambience, as if I’d been standing there. Traffic sounds. A distant siren. The almost subliminal sound of wheels rushing by on the highway a mile off. The cricketlike chirrup of a car alarm. To me, it was the orchestra tuning and warming up before the overture.

Footsteps, swift and confident, coming closer. The curtain was going up.

The passenger door of the green car opened, and a second shadowy figure joined the first. The door closed, harder than it needed to.

“Are you insane,” the passenger asked, “meeting here?”

“What’s wrong with here?” Grey Cloak asked. His voice was a light tenor, though it sounded distant, hazy, like a partially obscured radio transmission. An accent? Something from Eastern Europe, maybe. It was hard to make out the particulars.

“It’s a bloody upper-class WASP neighborhood,” the passenger snarled. His voice was deeper, similarly obscured, and bore no trace of foreign accent. He sounded like a newscaster, standard Midwestern American. “There’s private security here. Police. If anyone raises any kind of alarm, it’s going to attract a great deal of attention in short order.”

Grey Cloak let out a low laugh. “Which is why we are safe. It’s late at night. All the little dears are sleeping the sleep of the fat and happy. No one is awake to see us here.”

The other said something rude. There was a flicker of light in the passenger seat, and it took me a second to work out that he’d just lit a cigarette. “Well?”

“No.”

“No?” the passenger said. “No kine? No wizard? What do you mean, no?”

“Both,” Grey Cloak said. His tone turned cold. “You told me he was afraid of fire.”

“He is,” the passenger said. “You should see his fucking hand.”

I felt my left hand clench tight, and the crackle of popping knuckles in my very real laboratory drifted through the magical simulation of the city.

Grey Cloak’s head whipped around.

“What?” the passenger asked.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Something...” Grey Cloak said.

I felt myself holding my breath, willing my fingers to unclench.

The passenger looked around for a moment, then snorted. “You’re nervous about *him*. That’s all. You missed him and you’re nervous.”

“Not nervous,” Grey Cloak said. “Understandably cautious. He has more resources and more versatility than your people realize. It’s quite possible

that he's keeping track of me in some way."

"I doubt that. It would take a subtle worker of the Art to manage that. He isn't one."

"No?" Grey Cloak asked. "He managed to sense the fire before it could cut him off, to somehow waken the entire building from sound sleep all at the same time, and to track me after I departed."

The passenger tensed. "You came here with him behind you?"

"No. I lost him before he could do so. But that does not preclude the use of more subtle means to engage in pursuit."

"He's a thug," the passenger said. "Plain and simple. His talents make him good at destruction and little else. He's a beast to be prodded and directed."

There was silence for a moment. "It amazes me," Grey Cloak said then, "that an idiot such as you survived crossing the wizard once."

Aha. Interesting. The passenger, at least, was someone I'd seen before. He'd walked away from it, too. Most of the individuals I'd faced hadn't done that—which bothered me a hell of a lot, at times—but even so, there'd been more than a couple, and the passenger could be any number of them. That did narrow it down considerably from the several billion possibilities I'd had a moment before, though.

And I felt something of a chill at Grey Cloak's words. He was more aware of his surroundings than anyone running on five simple senses should be, and he was a thinker. That's never a good quality in an enemy. A smart foe doesn't have to be stronger than you, doesn't have to be faster, and doesn't even really have to be *there* to be a lethal threat. Hell, if that car bomb hadn't been set off early, he'd have cooked Murphy and me both, and I would have died without even knowing he existed.

"To be honest, I'm surprised the wizard lived the night," the passenger said. "It doesn't matter, either way. If we'd killed him, we could have claimed credit for his demise and it would have served our purpose. Now we let him rampage over the Skavis, and it does nothing but help."

"Unless," Grey Cloak said sourly, "he happens to rampage over us as well."

They were both quiet for a moment. Then the passenger said, "At least one thing is accomplished. He's interested in stopping the culling."

"Oh, yes," Grey Cloak said. "You've gotten his attention. The question, of course, is whether or not he will be as cooperative as you seem to

believe.”

“With a gathering of female wizardlings at risk? Oh, yes. He won’t be able to help himself. Now that he knows what the Skavis is up to, Dresden will be falling all over himself to protect them.”

Aha. The *Skavis*. And they were maneuvering me to kick his ass.

Finally, something useful.

“Will he strike at the kine soon?” Grey Cloak asked, referring to the Skavis, I presumed.

“Not yet. It isn’t his style. He’ll wait a day or two before moving again. He wants them to suffer, waiting for him.”

“Mmmm,” Grey Cloak said. “I normally think the Skavis’s tastes repulsive, but in this particular instance, I suspect his might intersect with my own. Anticipation makes them taste sweeter.”

“Oh, of course, by all means,” the passenger said sourly. “Throw away everything we might achieve in order to indulge your sweet tooth.”

Grey Cloak let out a low chuckle. “Alas, not yet. I hardly think the Circle would react well to such a course. Speaking of which, how does your own endeavor fare?”

“Less than well,” the passenger said. “He isn’t talking to me.”

“Did you really expect him to?”

The passenger shrugged. “He *is* family. But that’s of no matter. I’ll find them in time, whether he cooperates or not.”

“For your sake, I hope so,” Grey Cloak said. “The Circle has asked me for a progress report.”

The passenger shifted uneasily. “Have they. What are you going to tell them?”

“The truth.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“On the contrary,” Grey Cloak said.

“They react badly to incompetence,” the passenger said.

“And murderously to deception.”

The passenger took another long drag on his cigarette and cursed again. Then he said, “No help for it, then.”

“There is no need to soil yourself. We are not yet past our deadline, and they do not destroy tools that may still be of use.”

The passenger let out a nasty laugh. “They’re hard but fair?”

“They’re hard,” Grey Cloak replied.

“If necessary,” the passenger said, “we can remove him. We have the resources for it. I could always—”

“I believe it premature unless he proves more threatening than he has been thus far,” Grey Cloak said. “I expect the Circle would agree.”

“When do I meet them?” the passenger asked. “Face-to-face.”

“That is not my decision. I am a liaison. Nothing more.” He shrugged. “But, should this project proceed, I suspect they will desire an interview.”

“I’ll succeed,” the passenger said darkly. “He can’t have taken them far.”

“Then I suggest you get moving,” Grey Cloak said. “Before the Skavis beats you to the prize.”

“Beats *us*,” the passenger said.

I could hear a faint smile touch Grey Cloak’s voice. “Of course.”

There was a smoldering silence, and then the passenger shoved the door open, exited the car, and left without a further word.

Grey Cloak watched him until he’d vanished into the night. Then he got out of the car. Insubstantial, I willed myself forward into the vehicle and looked. The steering column had been cracked open, the vehicle hot-wired.

I was torn for a second, which of the two to follow. The passenger was trying to get information out of someone. That could mean that he had a prisoner somewhere he was interrogating. On the other hand, it could just as likely mean that no matter how many drinks he poured, he couldn’t get an informant to open up on a given topic. I also knew that he had confronted me before at some point—which was a great deal more than I knew about Grey Cloak.

He was something very different. He had tried to kill me a couple of times already, and was apparently responsible for at least some of the recent deaths. He was smart, and was connected to some kind of shady group called “the Circle.” Could this be the reality of my heretofore theoretical Black Council?

He was walking away from the car now, my spell’s anchor, and growing rapidly hazier as he walked away. If I didn’t pursue him closely, he’d vanish into the vastness of the city.

Whoever the passenger had been, I had apparently sent him running once already. If I’d done it once, I could do it again.

Grey Cloak, then.

I pressed in close to Grey Cloak, focusing to keep the spell clearly fixed, and followed him. He walked several blocks, turned down a sharp alley, and

then descended a flight of stairs that ended at a boarded-over doorway to what must have originally been a basement apartment like my own. He glanced around, tugged down a chain that looked like it had rusted flat to the wall beside the door, and opened it, disappearing within.

Crap. If this place had a threshold on it, I'd never be able to follow him inside. I'd just bang my metaphysical head against the doorway like a bird hitting a windshield. Never mind that if it had the proper kinds of wards, they could conceivably disintegrate my spiritual self, or at least inflict some fairly horrible psychic damage. I could wind up on the floor of my lab, drooling, transformed from professional wizard into unemployed vegetable.

Screw it. You don't do a job like mine by running away at any hint of danger.

I steeled myself and willed myself forward, following Grey Cloak.

Chapter Fifteen

No threshold, which was good. No wards, which was even better. Grey Cloak hadn't entered a living area—he'd entered Undertown.

Chicago is an old city—at least by American standards. It has been standing, in one form or another, since the French and Indian War, before the United States even existed. Being as Chicago is basically one giant swamp, from a strictly geographic point of view, buildings tended to slowly settle into the earth over years and years. The old wooden streets did the same, and new streets had to be built atop them in successive layers.

Wherever the ground isn't slow-motion mud, there's solid rock. Tunnels and cave systems riddle the area. The Manhattan Project had been housed briefly in such tunnels, before it got relocated to the middle of nowhere. Someone in the government had shown unaccountably good judgment in considering the notion that developing a freaking nuclear weapon smack in the middle of America's second-largest city qualified as a Bad Idea.

All of that had left behind an enormous labyrinth of passages, caves, half-collapsed old buildings, and crumbling tunnels seemingly ready to come thundering down at any moment. It was dark, human beings rarely went there, and as a result, Undertown had become a home, shelter, and hiding place to all kinds of nasty things—things no mortal, not even a wizard, had ever seen. Some of those things, in turn, had expanded some of the tunnels and caves, establishing jealously protected territories that never saw the face of the sun, never heard the whisper of wind. It's dark, close, cold, and intensely creepy down there. The fact that it was inhabited by things that had no love for mankind and potential radioactivity to boot didn't do much to boost its tourism industry.

Grey Cloak paced swiftly through a crack in the back wall of the building and into Undertown's tunnels. He grew even more indistinct as he did. I had to stay closer to him, and it cost me an increasingly greater effort of will to do so. Little Chicago hadn't accurately modeled Undertown, partly because there were no maps to be had of the place, and because taking samples to

incorporate into the model would have been an act just shy of active suicide. Mostly, though, it hadn't happened because I had never considered doing so.

Through the translucent veil of earth and stone and brick, I could still see the real me standing over the city. My hand was still held out, but my fingers were trembling, and sweat beaded my forehead. Odd that I couldn't feel the strain on my body from here. I hadn't anticipated that. It was entirely possible that I might have continued on without ever realizing what the effort was costing me. It could kill my physical body, leaving me...

I don't know what. It might kill me outright. It might kill my body while stranding my mind here. It might bind my awareness into place like some sort of pathetic ghost.

Get tough, Dresden. You didn't take up this career to run at the first hint of fatigue.

I kept going—but all the same, I looked up to check on myself as often as I could.

Grey Cloak was not long in reaching his goal. He found a narrow cleft in a rock wall, slipped inside it, and then pressed his hands and feet against either wall on the inside of the cleft and climbed up it with rapid precision. Eight or nine feet up, it opened into a room with three walls of brick and one of earth—a partially collapsed basement, I assumed. There were a few creature comforts in it—an inflatable mattress and sleeping bag, a lantern, a miniature barbecue next to a heavy paper bag of charcoal, and several cardboard boxes that contained supplies.

Grey Cloak slipped a heavy grate over the hole he'd just climbed up, and weighted it down with several stones the size of cinder blocks. Then he opened a box, unwrapped a pair of those meal-replacement bars that people use to punish themselves when they think they're overweight, ate them, and emptied a plastic bottle of water. Critical information, there. Glad I was risking my metaphysical neck to pick up vital clues like this.

I checked up over my shoulder. My face had gone white and ran with sweat.

I expected Grey Cloak to turn in, but instead he turned the lantern down low, opened a second box, withdrew a plaque the size of a dinner plate, and laid it down on the floor. It was a simple wooden base, inset with a ring of some reddish metal, probably copper.

Grey Cloak pressed a fingernail against one of his gums, and when he withdrew it his fingertip glistened with blood that looked far more solid and real than the person it had come from. He touched it to the circle and began a low chant I did not recognize.

A faint mist swirled up within the copper circle, and through the spell I could see the raw magic forming itself into a pattern, a vortex that vanished beneath the plaque.

A second later, the mist resolved itself into a figure, in miniature, a vaguely humanoid shape wearing a heavy cloak and cowl that hid any possible details of appearance.

Except that I'd seen him before—or at least someone who dressed exactly like him.

The last time I'd seen Cowl, he'd been caught in the unbelievably savage backlash of an enormous power-summoning spell called a Darkhallow. It would have been impossible for the man to have survived that spell. There was no way, no way in hell that he'd lived through it. This couldn't be the same person.

Could it?

Surely it had to be someone else. The Ringwraith look was hardly uncommon among those who fancied themselves dark wizards of one kind or another, after all. It could just as easily be someone else entirely, someone not at all connected to Cowl or my theoretical Black Council.

On the other hand, Cowl had been the person whose actions had tipped me off to the possibility of the Black Council to begin with. Could he have been a part of the Circle that Grey Cloak had mentioned? After all, I dropped a freaking car onto Cowl's head, and he'd hardly blinked at it. If he'd been that well protected, could he have survived the wild energies of the disintegrating Darkhallow?

Worse, what if he hadn't? What if he was one of a set of people just as crazy and dangerous as he had been?

I started feeling even more nervous.

"My lord," Grey Cloak said, bowing his head. He left it that way.

There was a long moment of silence before Cowl spoke. Then he said, "You have failed."

"I have not yet succeeded," Grey Cloak replied with polite disagreement. "The curtain has not fallen."

"And the fool with you?"

“Still ignorant, my lord. I can preserve or dispose of him as you see fit.” Grey Cloak took a deep breath and said, “He has gotten the wizard involved. There is some sort of vendetta between them, it would seem.”

The little mist figure made a hissing sound. “The *fool*. There is not enough profit in Dresden’s death to jeopardize the operation.”

“He did not consult me on the matter, my lord,” Grey Cloak said with another bow of his head. “Had he done so, I would have dissuaded him.”

“And what followed?”

“I attempted to remove him along with the last of the culling.”

“Dresden interfered?”

“Yes.”

Cowl hissed. “This changes matters. What precautions have you taken?”

“I was not followed in flesh, my lord; of that I am certain.”

Cowl held up a miniature hand for silence, a gesture that looked, somehow, stiff and pained. Then his hood panned around the room.

The figure’s gaze met mine, and hit me like a literal, physical blow, a swift jab in the chest.

“He is there!” Cowl snarled. The misty figure turned to face me and lifted both hands.

An odd, cold pressure hit me like a wave and pushed me back several feet before I could gather up my will and exert pressure in return, coming to a stop several feet away from Grey Cloak and Cowl.

Cowl’s hands clenched into claws. “Insolent child. I will rip your mind asunder.”

I snarled at him and planted my insubstantial feet. “Bring it, Darth Bathrobe!”

Cowl screamed at me. He spoke a word that resonated in my head and thundered through the hazy confines of Grey Cloak’s hideaway. Though I had braced myself to gather my will and pit it against his, his next strike hammered into me like a freight train. I could no more have resisted it than I could have stopped an ocean tide, and I felt it throwing me back and away.

In that last second before I was banished, I reached out with all the strength I had left, focusing on Grey Cloak, pouring everything I had into the spell to grant me a clear view of his face. I got it, for the barest instant, the face of a man in his mid-thirties, tall and lean and wolfish.

And then there was a geyser of scarlet pain, as if someone had seized both halves of my skull and torn it into two pieces.

Darkness followed.

Chapter Sixteen

I woke up with someone shaking my shoulder and someone else holding the back of my head against a running band saw.

"Harry," Molly said. She was speaking through some kind of megaphone pressed directly against the side of my head, evidently while pounding my skull with the pointy end of a claw hammer. "Hey, boss, can you hear me?"

"Ow," I said.

"What happened?"

"Ow," I repeated, annoyed, as if it should have been explanation enough.

Molly let out an exasperated, worried sound. "Do I need to take you to the hospital?"

"No," I croaked. "Aspirin. Some water. And stop screaming."

"I'm barely whispering," she said, and got up. Her combat boots slammed down on the floor in great Godzilla-sized rolls of thunder as she went up the stair steps.

"Bob," I said, as soon as she was gone. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Bob said, keeping his voice down. "Either she's been working out, or else she's started using some kind of cosmetics on her arms. She still had some baby fat when she got the tattoos, and that's always bound to make any kind of changes more noticeable, and—"

"Not her," I growled, images of genuine mayhem floating through my agonized brain. "*Me.*"

"*Oh,*" Bob said. "Something hit the model, hard. There was an energy surge. Boom. The psychic backlash lit up your mental fusebox."

"How bad?"

"Hard to say. How many fingers am I holding up?"

I sighed. "How bad is Little Chicago, Bob?"

"Oh. You've got to be more specific with this stuff, Harry. Could be worse. A week to fix, at most."

I grunted. "Everything's too loud and bright." I tested my arms and legs. It hurt to move them, an odd and stretchy kind of pain, but they moved.

“What happened, exactly?”

“You got lucky, is what. Something you met out there threw a big blast of psychic energy at you. But it had to come at you through your threshold and the model. The threshold weakened it, and Little Chicago shorted out when the blast hit, or...”

“Or what?” I asked.

“Or you wouldn’t have that headache,” Bob said. Then his eyelights winked out.

Molly’s boots clumped back down the stairs. She set down on the table a couple of fresh candles she’d brought, took a deep breath, closed her eyes for a moment, and then very carefully used the same spell I did to light them.

The light speared into my brain and hurt. A lot. I flinched and threw my arm across my face.

“Sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking. I couldn’t even see you down here, and...”

“Next time just shove some pencils into my eyes,” I muttered a minute later.

“Sorry, Harry,” she said. “The aspirin?”

I held out a hand. She pressed a bottle of aspirin into it, and then pressed a cold glass into my other hand. I opened the aspirin with my teeth, dumped several into my mouth, and chugged them down with the water. Exhausted from this monumental effort, I lay on the floor and felt somewhat sorry for myself until, after several more mercilessly regular minutes, the painkiller started kicking in.

“Molly,” I said. “Were we supposed to have a lesson today?”

“No,” she said. “But Sergeant Murphy called our house, looking for you. She said you weren’t answering the phone. I thought I should come over and check on you.”

I grunted. “Good call. Any trouble getting through the wards?”

“No, not this time.”

“Good.” I opened my eyes slowly, until they started getting used to the glare of the candles. “Mouse. Mouse probably needs you to let him out.”

I heard a thumping sound, and squinted up the stairs. Mouse was crouched at the top, somehow managing to look concerned.

“I’m fine, you big pansy,” I said. “Go on.”

Molly started up the staircase, and then froze, staring back down at Little Chicago.

I squinted at her. Then rose and squinted at the table.

There was a hole melted in the metal table, not far from the spot where Grey Cloak had entered Undertown. One of the buildings was half slagged, the pewter melted into a messy runnel that coursed down the hole in the table like dribbled wax. There was a layer of black soot over everything within several inches of the hole in the table.

If the table hadn't taken the magical blow, it would have been my *head* with the hole burned in it. That had been part of the purpose in creating Little Chicago—as a tool and a safety measure for working that kind of magic. All the same, it was a sobering thing to see.

I swallowed. Cowl. It had been Cowl. I'd heard the hatred and venom in his voice, the familiarity—and the overwhelming power of his magic had been unmistakable. He'd survived the Darkhallow. He was working with this "Circle," who were almost certainly the Black Council, and there was some kind of larger mischief afoot in Chicago than I had suspected.

Oh, yeah. This whole situation was definitely starting to make me nervous.

I turned back to Molly and said, "Like I said. This thing is dangerous, grasshopper. So no playing with it until I say so. Got it?"

Molly swallowed. "Got it."

"Go on. Take care of Mouse. Do me a favor, and call Murphy's cell phone. Ask her to come here."

"Do you need me to help you today?" she asked. "Like, go with you and stuff?"

I looked at her. Then at the table. Then back at her.

"Just asking," Molly said defensively, and hurried on up the stairs.

By the time I'd gotten a shower, shaved, and climbed into fresh clothes, I felt almost human, though I still had a whale of a headache. Murphy arrived shortly after.

"What the hell happened to you?" she said, by way of greeting.

"Took a psychic head butt from Cowl," I said.

Murphy greeted Mouse, scratching him under the chin with both hands. "What's a Cowl?"

I grunted. “Right, forgot. When I met Cowl, you were in Hawaii with your boy toy.”

Murph gave me a smug smile. “Kincaid isn’t a boy toy. He’s a man toy. Definitely a man toy.”

Molly, lying on the floor with her feet up on the wall while she read, dropped her book onto her face. She fumbled it back into her hands and then tried to appear uninterested in the conversation. It would have been more convincing if she weren’t holding the book upside down.

“Long story short,” I told her. “Cowl is a wizard.”

“Human?” Murphy asked.

“Pretty sure, but I’ve never seen his face. All I know about him is that he’s stronger than me. He’s better than me. I stood up to him in a fair fight and got lucky enough to survive it.”

Murphy frowned. “Then how’d you beat him?”

“I stopped fighting fair and bumped his elbow while he was handling supernatural high explosives. Boom. I figured he was dead.”

Murphy sat down in one of my easy chairs, frowning. “Okay,” she said. “Better give me the whole thing.”

I rubbed at my aching head and started from where I’d left Murphy yesterday up until the end of my confrontation with Cowl. I left out some of the details about Elaine, and everything about the Circle. That was information too dangerous to spread around. Hell, I wish I didn’t know about it, myself.

“Skavis,” Murphy mused aloud. “I’ve heard that somewhere before.”

“It’s one of the greater Houses of the White Court,” I said, nodding. “Raith, Skavis, and Malvora are the big three.”

“Right,” Murphy said. “Psychic vampires. Raith feed on lust. Malvora on fear. How about these Skavis?”

“Pain,” I said. “Or despair, depending on how you translate some of the texts the Council has on them.”

“And suicide,” Murphy said, “is the ultimate expression of despair.”

“With a mind like that,” I said, “you could be a detective.”

We were quiet for a minute before Murphy said, “Let me see if I’ve got this right. This Skavis is in town. According to your ex, the private investigator Anna Ash hired, he’s killed women in four other cities, and he’s doing it again here—four so far, and Anna’s meant to be number five.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Meanwhile, this Grey Cloak, who works for Cowl, is in town doing more or less the same thing, but you don’t think he’s here to help the Skavis, whoever *he* is. But you *do* think he’s working against the killer, along with this Passenger, whoever *he* is. You think those two left the clues you found on the bodies to pull you into an investigation and take out the Skavis.”

“Even better,” I said. “I think I know who Passenger was.”

“Who?” Murphy asked.

“Beckitt,” I said. “It makes sense. He’s got his wife on the inside as an information source. He’s gone up against me before, and walked away, *and* I cost him years of his life and a lucrative share of a criminal empire. He’s got plenty of reasons not to like me. That’s who Grey Cloak the Malvora was talking to.”

“Whoa. Grey Cloak the Malvora? How’d you get that?”

“Because,” I said, “he talked about sharing some tastes with the Skavis, when it came to letting the prey anticipate what was coming before the kill. The Malvora do it so that their prey will feel more fear. The Skavis do it so that they’ll be more tired, be more ready to give in to despair.”

Murphy nodded, lips pursed. “And the White Court loves manipulating everything indirectly. Using others to do their dirty work for them.”

“Like using me to wipe out his Skavis competition,” I said.

“Which makes sense because Malvora and Skavis are rivals.”

“Right,” I said. “And I’m fairly confident in my guess. Just like I’m fairly confident that Beckitt must be our passenger.”

“That’s a sound theory, Dresden,” Murphy said.

“Thank you, I know.”

“But Beckitt died almost seven years ago. He was killed in prison.”

“I figure Beckitt must have made a deal with the Malvora and—” I blinked. “He what?”

“Died,” Murphy said. “There was a riot. Three prisoners were killed, several injured. He was one of them. As near as anyone can tell, he was standing in the wrong place at the wrong time. A prisoner was wrestling for a guard’s gun. It discharged and killed Beckitt instantly.”

“Um,” I said, frowning. I hate it when the real world ignores a perfectly logical, rational assumption. “He faked it?”

She shook her head. “I looked into it, and I talked to the guard. There was an autopsy, an identification of the body from his family, a funeral, the

whole nine yards. He's dead, Harry."

"Well, dammit," I said, and rubbed at my headache. "He made sense."

"That's life," Murphy said. "So this hidey-hole you found..."

"Long gone by now," I said.

"Might be worth going anyway, if you take Krypto here with you." She leaned down and planted a kiss on top of Mouse's head. My dog gets more play than me, sheesh. "Maybe Grey Cloak the theoretical Malvora left a good scent behind."

"Worth a shot, I guess," I said. "But I'm pretty sure he's going to be thorough enough to remove that, too."

"Who goes around removing their scent from places?" Murphy asked.

"Vampires. They can track that way, just like Mouse."

"Oh. Right." Murphy sighed. "Another burned building."

"Not—" I began.

"Not his fault!" Molly said.

"Not your fault," Murphy said, "I know. But it's going to look awfully odd. My car gets firebombed. A building less than a block away gets firebombed a few hours later."

I grunted. "Same device?"

"What do you think?"

"Same device."

Murphy nodded. "I'm sure it will be. It's going to take them time to figure it out, though. Were you seen?"

"Me and about a million other people," I said.

"That's something, at least. But a lot of people are going to be asking questions before long. The sooner we get this thing put to bed, the better."

I grimaced. "I shouldn't have gone for the subtle maneuver last night. I should have smashed him to paste right there. I don't have any way to find him now, and he's aware that we're looking."

"Yeah, but Grey Cloak isn't our first problem," Murphy said. "He's a sideshow. The Skavis is the real killer. Right?"

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Right. And we've got no clue who or where he is."

Murphy frowned. "But he's a vampire, right? I mean, you can tell if someone's a vampire, can't you?"

"It isn't so simple with the White Court," I said. "They hide themselves a lot better than any other breed. I had no idea what Thomas was when I met

him. And you remember talking to Darby Crane.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you get ‘vampire’ off him?”

“Mostly I got ‘player,’” Murphy said. “But you knew he was really Madrigal Raith.”

“I guessed,” I corrected her. “Probably because I unconsciously recognized the family resemblance to Lord Raith. That’s why I stopped you from touching him. There was no magical tip-off about it.” I frowned. “Hell, I wouldn’t be shocked if they had some kind of ability to cloud their prey’s judgment. When Inari Raith tried to feed on me, even though I was *in* their freaking house, even though I *knew* she was a baby succubus, and in my room, it never really occurred to me that she might be dangerous to me, until it was too late.”

“Just like that never occurred to me about Crane,” Murphy said. “So the Skavis...he could be anyone.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s not me,” I said. “I’m almost as sure he’s not you.”

“Are you sure you’re a professional investigator?”

“I sometimes wonder.”

“What about Thomas?” Murphy asked.

“He’s more of a hired thug than a shamus.”

Murphy glared.

It drew a little bit of a smile from me, but it faded quickly in the light of reality. “I left messages. Nothing yet.”

“That’s not what I meant, either,” Murphy said quietly. “Could he still be involved? Could he have been the passenger?”

“He wasn’t.”

Again, she held up a hand. “Harry. Is it possible?”

“Look, we know the killer is a Skavis.”

“We know what Grey Cloak thinks,” Murphy corrected me. “But you’re forgetting something.”

“What?”

“That at least one of those women was killed in the throes of supernatural passion. Not amidst fear. Not amidst despair.”

I scowled at her.

“Is it physically *possible*, Harry? Possible. That’s all I’m asking.”

“I suppose,” I said quietly. “But Thomas isn’t Grey Cloak’s partner. What if...” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“What if your passenger has him?” Murphy asked. “What if the ‘endeavor’ he’s talking about is pressing Thomas for some kind of information?”

I grimaced. “Thomas should have been in touch by now.”

“We’ve got a little time. Grey Cloak thought it would be another day or so before the Skavis moved again, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So far, you think he’s been smart about most things. Maybe he’s smart about that, too.”

“We can hope,” I said. “What did you find about Jessica Blanche?”

“Still working on it. I’ve got feelers out, but I’ll need to follow up with some legwork.”

I blew out a breath. “And I need to get in touch with Elaine and the Ordo. Maybe I can get Helen Beckitt to talk. And I can make some calls to other Wardens. Maybe someone’s heard something about recent White Court activities.”

Murphy rose. “Sounds like we have a plan.”

“If we repeat it often enough, maybe we’ll even believe it,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Seventeen

Ramirez's contact number went to a restaurant his family ran in eastern Los Angeles. I left a message with someone whose English sounded like a second or third language. It took Ramirez only about ten minutes to call me back.

"White Court?" my fellow Warden said. "Can't think as I've heard anything about them lately, Harry."

"How about a professional wizard investigator?" I asked him. "Works out of Los Angeles."

"Elaine Mallory?" he asked. "Tall, pretty, smart, and nearly as charming as myself?"

"That's the one," I said. "What do you know about her?"

"Far as I know, she's straight," he said. "Moved to town five or six years ago, college in San Diego, and working for an investigative agency out here. She's got a decent grounding in thaumaturgy from somewhere, but when I ran her through the standard tests, she didn't score quite high enough to be considered for Council membership." He was quiet for a second, before saying, in a tone of forced cheer, "Unless we keep on losing people to the vamps, in which case I guess we might lower our standards."

"Uh-huh," I said. "But you think she knows what she's doing?"

"Well," Ramirez drawled, "I hinted that she might want to advertise as something other than a 'wizard,' eventually. If we get the time to look away from the war, some hidebound dinosaur might take exception to someone claiming the title."

I snorted. "Don't call me a dinosaur. It isn't fair to the dinosaurs. What did a dinosaur ever do to you?"

"Other than give me a ride right next to this big skinny lunatic? Mallory's not stupid, and she's done people some good out here," Ramirez said. "Lost kids, especially. Couple of exorcisms I wouldn't have had time to handle. Maybe she can be of some help to you. Though I've got one reservation about her."

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Her taste in men. I keep asking her out, and she’s turned me down about a dozen times, now.”

“Shocking,” I said.

“I know,” Ramirez replied. “Makes me wonder how smart she could really be. Why?”

I gave him the brief on what I knew about the murders, and on what Elaine had told me about the other cities.

“Someone’s framing the Wardens,” he said.

“Looks that way. Sow seeds of distrust and all that.”

“Five cities. Bastards.” He paused to say something off the phone, and then told me, “Hang on. I’m pulling the file on recent White Court reports.”

I waited a few more minutes. Then he came back and said, “According to what we’ve heard out on this end, the White King has met with emissaries from the Council under a flag of truce, and declared a temporary cease-fire. He’s agreed to approach the Reds about sitting down to negotiate an end to the war.”

“I’ve met him,” I said. “Kissinger he ain’t. Gandhi, neither.”

“Yeah. Sorta makes you wonder what he’s getting out of the war ending, don’t it.”

I grunted. “There’s not a lot of love lost between the Reds and the Whites. A cease-fire won’t cost him anything. His people don’t get involved in the messy stuff anyway.”

Ramirez let out a thoughtful hum. “The way you tell it, looks like maybe not everybody in the White Court agrees with his take on the war.”

“They’re pretty factional. Triumvirate of major houses. Raith happens to be on top right now. If Raith is pushing for peace, it would be consistent for the other major houses to oppose it.”

“Gotta love those vampires. So arbitrarily contrary.”

“Say that five times fast,” I said.

He did, flawlessly, rolling the Rs as he went. “See there?” he said. “That’s why the ladies love me.”

“It’s not love, Carlos. It’s pity.”

“As long as the pants come off,” he said cheerfully. Then his voice turned more sober. “Dresden, I’ve been meaning to call you. Just...wanted to see how you were doing. You know. Since New Mexico.”

“I’m good,” I told him. “I’m fine.”

“Uh-huh,” Ramirez said. He sounded skeptical.

“Listen,” I said. “Forget New Mexico. I’ve forgotten it. We need to move on, focus on what’s in front of us right now.”

“Sure,” he said, without conviction. “You want to fill in the Captain or should I?”

“Go ahead.”

“Will do,” he said. “You need any backup out there?”

“Why?” I asked. “You got nothing to pay attention to where you are?”

He sighed. “Yeah, well. All the same. If the Whites are trying to shut down the peace talks, I could pry a few of the boys loose to come help you boot some head.”

“Except I don’t yet know whose head it is or how to boot it,” I said.

“I know. But if you need help, it’s here.”

“Thanks.”

“Watch your ass, Dresden,” he said.

“I’d tell you to do the same, but you probably gaze at your own ass in admiration all the time anyway.”

“With an ass like mine? Who *wouldn’t*?” Ramirez said. “*Vaya con Dios.*”

“Happy trails.”

I hung up the phone and leaned back in the chair, rubbing at my still-aching head. I closed my eyes and tried to think for a minute. I thought about how much my head hurt, which was nonproductive.

“Harry?” Molly asked me.

“Hmmm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Um...” She was quiet for a moment, as though thinking about her words before she spoke.

That got my attention.

“I’m just wondering why you were asking Warden Rodriguez about Elaine Mallory.”

I closed my eyes and tried thinking again.

“I mean, Sergeant Murphy said she was your ex. But you asked about her as if you didn’t know her.”

I mumbled something.

“So I figure that means that you do know her. And you wanted to know what Warden Rodriguez knew about her, without him knowing that you

already knew her.” She took a deep breath and said, “You’re keeping secrets from the Wardens.”

I sighed. “For years, kid. Years and years.”

“But...I’m under the Doom of Damocles, and that means you are, too. This is the kind of thing that could make them decide to invoke it. So, um...why are you doing it?”

“Does it matter?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, her tone cautiously diffident, “since I could get beheaded over this just as much as you can, it matters to me. And I think that maybe I deserve to know.”

I started to growl at her that she didn’t. I stopped myself because she had a point, dammit. Regardless of how inconvenient I thought it, she did have an undeniable right to ask me about it.

“I was an orphan,” I told her. “A little while after my magic came to me, I got adopted by a man named DuMorne. He’s the one who gave me most of my training. He adopted Elaine, too. We grew up together. Each other’s first love.”

Molly set her book aside and sat up, listening to me.

“DuMorne was a warlock himself. Black wizard as bad as they come. He planned on training us up to be his personal enforcers. Trained, strong wizards, under mental compulsion to be loyal to him. He nailed Elaine with it. I got suspicious and fought him. I killed him.”

Molly blinked. “But the First Law...”

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s how I wound up living under the Doom of Damocles myself. Ebenezer McCoy mentored me. Saved my life.”

“The way you did for me,” she said quietly.

“Yeah.” I squinted at the empty fireplace. “Justin burned, and I thought Elaine did, too. Turned out years later that she had survived, and was in hiding.”

“And she never *told* you?” Molly demanded. “What a bitch.”

I gave the apprentice a lopsided smile. “The last time she’d seen me, I had been busy murdering the only thing like a real parent she’d ever had, and had apparently tried to kill her, too. It isn’t a simple situation, Molly.”

“But I still don’t get why you lied about her.”

“Because I had a bad time of it, coming out from under DuMorne’s corpse the way I did. If the Wardens knew that she’d been there too, and fled the Council rather than coming out to them...” I shrugged. “Looks like

she's managed to convince Ramirez that she doesn't have enough power to be considered for the Council."

"But she does?" Molly asked.

"She's nearly as strong as I am," I said quietly. "Makes up for it in grace. I'm not sure what would happen if the Wardens learned DuMorne had a second apprentice, but there would be trouble. I'm not going to make that choice for her."

"In case I haven't told you this before," Molly said, "the Wardens are a fine bunch of assholes. Present company excluded."

"There isn't any easy way to do their job," I said, before amending, "*our* job. Like I said, kid. Nothing's simple." I pushed myself slowly to my feet and found my keys and Mouse's lead. "Come on," I told her. "I'll drop you off at your place."

"Where are you going?"

"To talk to the Ordo," I said. "Anna's got them all holed up with Elaine."

"Why don't you just call them?"

"This is a sneak attack," I said. "I don't want to warn Helen Beckitt that I'm on the way. She's got an angle in this; I'm sure of it. It's easier to get people to talk if you get them off balance."

Molly frowned at me. "You sure you don't need my help?"

I paused to glance at her. Then at the bead bracelet on her wrist.

She clenched her jaw, took off the bracelet, and held it up with defiant determination, staring at the beads. Three minutes and two beads later, she gave it up, gasping and sweating at the effort. She looked bitterly frustrated and disappointed.

"Nothing's simple," I told her quietly, and put the bracelet back on her wrist for her. "And nothing much is easy, either. Be patient. Give it time."

"Easy for you to say," she said, and stomped out to the car, leading Mouse.

She was wrong, of course. It wasn't easy.

What I really wanted to do was get down a little food and go to bed until my head felt better. That wasn't an option for me.

Whoever the Skavis was, and whatever he was up to, there wasn't a lot of time to figure it out and stop him before he added another victim to his tally.

Chapter Eighteen

The Amber Inn is a rarity in downtown Chicago: a reasonably priced hotel. It isn't large or particularly fancy, and it wasn't designed by an architect with three names. No one infamous has owned it, lived in it, or been machine-gunned to death there. Thus, stripped of anything like a good excuse to stick it to the customer, one needn't schedule a visit to a loan officer in tandem with making a reservation, even though the Amber Inn is fairly central to Chicago.

It was the kind of place I always tried to pick on the occasions my work had taken me to another town for a client's business. My job, in cases like that, is investigating, not checking out four-star hotels. The most important thing was to be close to where I would be working and that I not run up an unmanageable bill. I've heard that some private investigators make it a point to stay somewhere nice at the client's expense, but it always seemed unprofessional to me, and a bad way to conduct business in the long term. It stood to reason that Elaine would have chosen it for similar reasons.

I didn't ask after her at the desk. I didn't need to. I just told Mouse, "Find 'em."

Mouse sniffed the air and we started walking down halls like we owned the place. That's always important, the confidence. It keeps people from getting suspicious about why you're stalking around the building, and even when it doesn't deter them, it makes them respond more cautiously.

Mouse finally stopped at a door, and I extended my hand, half closing my eyes, feeling for magic. There was a ward over the door. It wasn't terribly fancy or solid—it couldn't be, without a threshold to use as a foundation—but it was exceedingly well crafted and I was sure it was Elaine's work. The spell looked like it would release only a tiny bit of energy, probably a pulse of light or some kind of audible sound that would alert her to company.

I debated, for a moment, making a Big Bad Wolf entrance, and decided against it. It wouldn't be terribly polite to Elaine, and the only person I

wanted to scare was Helen Beckitt, assuming she was there. Besides which, tipped off by her alarm and wary about a murderer, Elaine might well send a lightning bolt through the doorway before she had a chance to see who was there. I knocked.

Nothing changed, but my instincts warned me that someone was on the other side of the door—not magic, just the sudden absence of the simple, solitary feel one gets when standing alone in an empty house.

I sensed a little stirring of the magic in the ward. Then the door rattled and swung open, revealing Elaine standing on the other side, one corner of her mouth tilted up in amusement.

“Oh, I get it,” I said. “Not a ward. A peephole.”

“Sometimes a girl’s got to improvise,” she said. “You look awful.”

“Long night.”

“It must have been. I thought you were going to call.”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

She pursed her lips in speculation. “Were you?” I saw the wheels turning in her head for a moment, and then she nodded once and lowered her voice. “Which one?”

“Beckitt,” I murmured back.

“She’s here.”

I nodded, and she opened the door the rest of the way at the same time I stepped through it. She slipped to one side as I walked briskly into the room. It was clean, plain, a kind of minisuite with a queen bed, a couch, and a coffee table.

Priscilla sat on the couch in a pea green turtleneck and a scratchy-looking wool skirt, and scowled at me in disapproval of Dickensian proportion. Abby and Toto occupied the floor, where Toto was engaged in mortal combat with a white athletic sock he had pulled partway from the foot of his plump little owner, who sat looking distracted and distant. Anna sat on the edge of the bed, dark eyes tired, bloodshot, and serious, while Helen stood by the window again, holding the curtain aside just enough to gaze out.

Toto promptly abandoned the field of battle upon spying Mouse, and walked in a little nervous circle within a couple of inches of Abby’s lap. Mouse went over to trade sniffs with the little dog, and promptly settled down to begin grooming Toto with long licks.

“Ladies,” I said, then after a brief pause added, “Mrs. Beckitt.”

She didn't look at me. She just smiled and stared out the window. "Yes, Mister Dresden?"

"What do you know?" I asked her.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"You know something about this, and you aren't talking. Spill."

"I can't imagine what you mean," she said.

Anna Ash rose and frowned. "Mister Dresden, surely you aren't accusing Helen of being involved in this business?"

"I'm pretty sure I am," I said. "Do they know about the first time we met, Helen? Have you told them?"

That drew looks from everyone in the room.

"Helen?" Abby said after a moment. "What is he talking about?"

"Go ahead, Mister Dresden," Helen said, very faint, very dry amusement giving her monotone a little life. "I wouldn't dream of cheating you of the satisfaction of looking down at one less righteous than yourself."

"What is she talking about?" Priscilla demanded. She glared at me, probably with her mind already made up as to what she was going to think of me, regardless of what I said.

It's nice to know that some things in life are consistent, because Beckitt was disappointing me here. Her associates didn't know about her past. By revealing it, I was probably about to destroy whatever life she'd built for herself since she regained her freedom—something that would be a terrible injury to most people in her circumstances. She'd lost her daughter years ago, lost her husband shortly after, had been sent to prison and permanently stained with the guilt of her crimes.

I had expected her to attempt to evade me, to protest her innocence or accuse me of lying. Failing that, I thought the next most likely reaction would be for her to panic and flee, or else panic and shut her mouth entirely. Depending on how badly she thought I was about to screw up her life, it was even possible that she might produce a weapon and attempt to murder me.

Instead, she just stood there, apparently unafraid, a quiet little smile hovering on her lips, unruffled, like some nascent saint before the man who was about to martyr her.

None of which added up. I hate it when things don't add up. But now that I'd forced the confrontation, here in front of the rest of the Ordo, I'd

destroy any credibility I had if I backed out, which is what the whole mess was about: someone attempting to destroy the Council's credibility.

I backed off on the aggression and tried to make myself sound polite and compassionate, yet serious. "Did any of you know that Ms. Beckitt is a felon?"

Priscilla's eyes grew wide behind her glasses. She looked from me to Helen to Anna. Helen continued watching out the window, that same little smile in place.

Anna was the first to speak. "No," she said, frowning. "She hasn't told us that."

Beckitt might as well have been deaf, for all the reaction she showed.

"She was a part of a cult headed up by a sorcerer I had to take down several years ago," I said. I delivered it flat, without emphasis. "She participated in ritual magic that created a drug that hurt a lot of people, and helped out with other rites that murdered the sorcerer's criminal rivals."

There was a shocked silence. "B-b-but..." Abby stammered. "But that's the First Law. The *First Law*."

"Helen? Is that true?"

"Not quite," Helen said. "He didn't mention that the specific rituals used were sexual in nature." She touched her tongue to her upper lip. "Strike that. Depraved and indiscriminately sexual in nature."

Priscilla stared at Helen. "For God's sake, Helen. *Why?*"

Beckitt looked away from the window for the first time since I'd arrived, and the emptiness in her eyes was replaced with an impossibly remote, cold fury. Her voice lowered to a murmur as hard as a sheet of glacial ice. "I had reason to do so."

I didn't meet that frozen gaze. I didn't want to see what was behind it. "You've got a record, Mrs. Beckitt. You've helped in supernatural murders before. Maybe you're doing it again."

She shrugged, her expression becoming lifeless again. "And maybe I'm not."

"Are you?" I said.

She went back to staring out the window. "What's the point in answering, Warden? It's obvious that you've already tried and convicted me. If I tell you I am involved, you will believe me guilty. If I tell you I am not involved, you will believe me guilty. The only thing I can do is deny you

your precious moral justification.” She lifted a hand to her lips and pantomimed turning a key and throwing it away.

Silence fell. Anna got up and walked to Beckitt. Anna put a hand on her shoulder, and tugged gently until the other woman turned around.

“Don’t answer,” Anna said quietly. “There’s no need for it, as far as I’m concerned.”

“And I,” Priscilla said.

“Of course you aren’t involved,” Abby said.

Beckitt looked around the room at each of them in turn. Her mouth quivered for an instant, and her eyes glistened. She blinked them several times, but a single tear escaped and coursed over her cheekbone. She nodded to the Ordo once, and turned back to the window.

Instinct told me that this was not the reaction of a guilty woman—and no one could put on an act *that* good.

Beckitt wasn’t involved. I was sure of it—now.

Dammit.

Detectives are supposed to learn things. All I’d done so far was to unlearn them, and the clock kept right on ticking.

Priscilla turned to me, her eyes narrowed. “Is there anything else of which you’d like to accuse us? Any other presumptuous bigotry you’d care to share?” She built her glare back up into the terawatt range, just for me.

It made me feel special. “Look,” I said. “I’m trying to help you.”

“Oh?” Priscilla said, scorn in her voice. “Is that why all those people have been disappearing in the company of a man fitting your description?” I started to answer, but she cut me off. “Not that I expect you to tell us the truth, unless it serves whatever purpose you truly have in mind.”

I carefully did not lose my temper and barbecue her stupid face right then and there. “Angels weep when someone so perceptive, warmhearted, and loving turns cynical, Priscilla.”

“Harry.” Elaine sighed beside me. I glanced at her. She met my eyes for a moment, and though her lips didn’t move, I heard her voice quite distinctly. *God knows she makes a fine target of herself, but shooting off your mouth isn’t helping.*

I blinked at her a couple of times, and then smiled a little. The communion spell between us was an old one, but once upon a time we’d used it every day. School had been boring as hell, and it beat passing notes.

It had also been handy when we'd been staying up past curfew and didn't want DuMorne to know we were awake.

I put a gentle effort of will behind words, and sent them to Elaine. *God, I'd forgotten all about this. I haven't done it since I was sixteen.*

Elaine showed me her smile—the swift, rare one, the one where her mouth widened and white teeth gleamed and her eyes took on golden highlights. *Neither have I.* Her expression sobered as she glanced at Priscilla, then back to me. *Be gentle, Harry. They're hurting.*

I frowned at her. *What?*

She shook her head. *Look around you.*

I did, going more slowly this time. My focus on confronting Beckitt had prevented me from noticing what else was going on. The room was thick with tension and something heavy and bitter. Grief?

Then I saw what wasn't there. "Where's the little brunette?"

"Her name," Priscilla almost snarled, "was Olivia."

I arched a brow and glanced at Elaine. "Was?"

"When we called her last night, she was all right," she told me. "When we arrived to pick her up, there was no answer at her door, and no one in her apartment."

"Then how do you know...?"

Elaine folded her arms, her expression neutral. "There are several security cameras around the building, and outside. One of them showed her leaving with a very pale, dark-haired man."

I grunted. "How'd you get to the security footage?"

Elaine gave me a smile that bared a gratuitous number of teeth. "I said pretty please."

I nodded, getting it. "You can get more with a kind word and well-applied kinetomancy than with just a kind word."

"The security guard was a smug little twit," she said. "Bruises fade."

She produced a couple of sheets of printer paper bearing grainy black-and-white images. Indeed, I recognized Olivia and her dancer's leotard, even from behind, which was a good angle for her. There was a man walking next to her. He looked to be maybe a tiny bit shy of six feet, had dark, glossy, shoulder-length black hair, and was dressed in jeans and a black tee. I could see his profile in one of the pictures, his head turned toward Olivia.

It was my brother.

It was Thomas.

Chapter Nineteen

“Are you sure?” Anna Ash asked Elaine. “Wouldn’t we be better off at one of our apartments? They’re all warded...”

Elaine shook her head firmly. “The killer knows where you each live. He doesn’t know about this place. Stay here, stay quiet, stay together. Our killer hasn’t attacked anyone who wasn’t alone.”

“And my dog will let you know if there’s anything you need to worry about,” I added. “He’ll probably sit on anyone who tries to mess with you, but if he does a Lassie act at you and wants you to leave, go with him—everyone, stay together and get somewhere public.”

Mouse nudged his head under Anna’s hand and wagged his tail. Toto dutifully followed Mouse, walking around Anna’s ankles looking up at her until she petted him, too. That got a smile out of her, at least. “If we leave, how will we get in touch with you?”

“I’ll find you.”

“Just like you found the killer?” Priscilla spat.

I ignored her with lofty dignity.

Elaine didn’t.

She stepped up to Priscilla and loomed over her. “You ungrateful, insufferable, venomous little twit. Shut your mouth. This man is trying to protect you, just like I am. I will thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head while we do our job.”

Priscilla’s face flushed. “We aren’t paying you to insult or demean us.”

“You aren’t paying me enough to get me to tolerate your rudeness, either,” Elaine said. “Keep it up and you won’t have to worry about my bill. In fact, I suspect that in short order you’ll stop worrying about absolutely everything.”

“Is that a threat?” Priscilla snapped.

Elaine put a fist on her hip. “It’s a fact, bitch.”

Anna stepped in. “Priscilla, please. *You* aren’t the one paying her. I am. We need her. She’s the professional. If she thinks it’s smart to cooperate

with Mister Dresden, that's what we're going to do. And we're going to treat them with professional respect. If you can't manage courtesy, try silence."

Priscilla narrowed her eyes at Anna, then folded her arms and looked away in capitulation.

Elaine nodded at Anna and said, "I'm not sure how long we'll be gone. I'll get word to you as soon as I have a better idea."

"Thank you, Miss Mallory." After a beat she hurried to add, "And thank you, Mister Dresden."

"Stay together," I said, and Elaine and I left.

We walked together to the parking lot, and on the way Elaine said, "Tell me you've gotten a new car."

We rounded a corner, and there was the Beetle in all its battle-scarred glory.

"I like this one," I told her, and opened the door for her.

"You redid the interior," she said as I got in and started the car.

"Demons ate the old one."

Elaine began to laugh, but then blinked at me. "You're being literal?"

"Uh-huh. Fungus demons. Right down to the metal."

"Good God, you live a glamorous life," she said.

"Elaine," I said. "I thought you told me you were going to lie low until you were ready to come out to the Council."

The friendly, teasing expression on her face faded into neutrality. "Is this relevant right now?"

"Yeah," I said. "If we're going after him together, yes, it is. I need to know."

She frowned at me, and then shrugged. "I had to do something. There were people all around me getting hurt. Being used. Living scared. So I borrowed a page from your book."

"And you lied to the Warden who came to check up on you."

"You say that like you've always told the Wardens everything."

"Elaine..." I began.

She shook her head. "Harry, I know you. I trust you. But I don't trust the Council and I doubt I ever will. I certainly did not care to be impressed into service as a brand-new foot soldier to fight their war with the vampires—which I would have been, if I had put my full effort into Ramirez's tests."

We looked at each other for a moment, and I said, "Please? I'll go with you. I'll support you before the Council."

She put one of her warm, soft hands over mine, and spoke in a quiet, firm voice. "No, Harry. I won't allow those men to direct the course of my life. I won't allow them to choose if I will or will not live—or choose how."

I sighed. "You could do so much good."

"I thought that's what I was doing here," she pointed out. "Helping people. Doing good."

She had a point. "The Wardens would freak out if you went to them now, anyway," I said, "and revealed that you'd been hiding your talents from them."

"Yes," she said. "They would."

"Dammit," I said. "We could use your help."

"I don't doubt it," she said. Her eyes hardened and her voice went suddenly cold. "But I will *not* be used. Not by anyone. Never again."

I blinked and turned to her.

She lifted her chin slightly, green eyes bright with unfallen tears. "No, Harry."

I turned my hand under hers, and we intertwined our fingers with the careless ease of an old habit. "Elaine. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push. I hadn't realized..."

She blinked several times and looked away from me. "No, I'm the one who should be sorry. I'm going all neurotic on you, here. I don't mean to be." She stared out the window at the city. "After you killed DuMorne, I spent a year having a nightmare. The same one, every single night. I was sure that it was true. That he was still alive. That he was coming for me."

"He wasn't," I told her.

"I know," she said. "I saw him die just as you did. But I was so *afraid*..." She shook her head. "I ran to the Summer Court because of it. I ran, Harry. I couldn't face it."

"Is that what you're doing, going public?" I asked. "Facing your past?"

"I have to," she said, her voice growing firmer. "It scares the crap out of me, all the time. And over the years...I've had problems with crowds. With enclosed spaces. With heights. With wide-open spaces. Night terrors. Panic attacks. Paranoia. God, sometimes it seems like there's nothing I haven't had a phobia about."

What Elaine had described was about what I would have expected from someone whose mind had been invaded by an outside will. Magic can get you into someone's head, but if you decide to start redecorating to your tastes, there is no way to avoid inflicting damage to their psyche. Depending upon several factors, someone who has been put under that kind of control can be left twitchy and erratic at best—and at worst, totally catatonic or completely dysfunctional.

And there was the utterly normal element of emotional pain to consider, too. Elaine had, in the course of a single evening, lost absolutely everything she loved. Her boyfriend. Her adopted father. Her home.

Losing a home means a lot more to an orphan than it does to most other people. I'm in a position to know. Like me, Elaine had spent most of her childhood bouncing around from one foster home to another, one state-run orphanage to another. Like me, being given a real home, a real house, a real father figure had been a desperate dream come true. It had been a terrible loss to me, and Justin hadn't gotten any hooks into my head. For Elaine, that series of events had been infinitely more painful, infinitely more frightening.

"I let fear control one part of my life," Elaine said, "and it took root and started growing. I *had* to get involved, Harry. I have to use what I know to change things. If I don't, then all I'll ever be is DuMorne's tool. His terrified little weapon. I will not allow anyone to take control of my life away from me. I can't." She shrugged. "And I can't stand by and do nothing, either. I threw the tests. I don't regret it. I sure as hell am not going to apologize for it—not to you or to anyone."

I grunted.

"Well?" she asked.

"I think I get it," I said.

"Are you willing to work with me, then?"

I squeezed her hand a little. "Of course."

The tension in her shoulders eased, and she squeezed my hand back. "My turn," she said.

"Your turn?"

She nodded. "You recognized the killer when you looked at the photo."

"What?" I said. "No, I didn't."

She rolled her eyes. "Come on, Harry. It's me."

I sighed. "Yeah, well."

“Who is he?” she asked.

“Thomas Raith,” I said. “White Court.”

“How do you know him?”

“He’s...” Not many people knew that Thomas was my brother. It was safer for both of us to keep that information limited. “He’s a friend. Someone I trust.”

“Trust,” Elaine said quietly. “I notice you use the present tense.”

“Thomas isn’t hurting anyone,” I said.

“He’s a vampire, Harry. He hurts someone every time he feeds.”

He’d been doing quite a bit of that lately. “I know Thomas,” I maintained. “He isn’t the killer.”

Elaine frowned. “Treachery hurts, Harry. Believe me, I know.”

“Nothing has proved Thomas is behind these killings,” I said. “It could be someone else, or something else, masquerading as him. It isn’t as if there aren’t plenty of shapeshifting things around that could do it.”

“Little bit of a reach, though,” Elaine said. She nodded at the photos, where I’d set them on the dashboard. “The simplest explanation is usually the correct one.”

“Sooner or later,” I said, “I’ll have a case where everything is simple. But I don’t think this one is it.”

Elaine exhaled slowly, studying my face. “You care about him.”

No point in denying that. “Yeah.”

“He trusts you in return?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why hasn’t he explained himself to you?” she asked. “Why hasn’t he gotten in touch with you?”

“I don’t know. But I know he’s not a killer.”

She nodded slowly. “But there he is, with Olivia.”

“Yeah.”

“Then I think you should agree with me that we need to find him.”

“Yeah.”

“Can you?”

“Yep.”

“All right, then,” she said, and put on her seat belt. “We’ll find him. We’ll talk to him. I’ll try to keep an open mind.” She looked at me. “But if it turns out to be him, Harry, he’s got to be stopped—and I expect you to help me.”

“If it turns out to be him,” I said, “he’d want me to.”

Chapter Twenty

I've been working as a detective in Chicago for a while now, and there's one thing you do a lot more than almost anything else: You find things that get lost. I'd first designed my tracking spell to catch up to the house keys I kept losing when I was about fourteen. I'd used it a few thousand times, now. Sometimes, it had helped me find things I really didn't want. Mostly, it helped me get into trouble.

This time, I was fairly sure it would do both.

I could have used my blood to trace Thomas's, probably, but I could use my silver pentacle amulet too. My mother had given me the one I habitually wore, and she'd given one to Thomas, too. I knew that he wore it just as habitually as I wore mine, and unless someone had taken it away from him, he'd be wearing it now.

So I revved up the spell, hung the amulet from the rearview mirror of the Blue Beetle, and headed out onto the Chicago streets. I kept an eye on my amulet, which leaned slightly, drawn as if by a light magnetic field toward Thomas's amulet. That wasn't a perfect way to track something down—the spell had no concern for streets and traffic flow, for example—but I'd been finding things like this for a good while, and I piloted the Beetle through the maze of buildings and one-way streets that make up the fair city.

Elaine watched me in silence the whole while. I knew that she was wondering what I had used to lock on to our apparent abductor/murderer. She didn't push, though. She just settled down and trusted me.

When I finally parked the car and got out, I brought my amulet with me and stared grimly at the necklace, which continued to lean steadily to the east, toward the Burnham Harbor piers that stretched out over Lake Michigan. An entire cove had been built into the lakeshore and decked out with an array of docks for dozens and dozens of small commercial boats, pleasure craft, and yachts.

"Boats," I muttered. "Why did it have to be boats?"

"What's wrong with boats?" Elaine asked.

“I haven’t had a good time on boats,” I said. “In fact, I haven’t had a good time this close to the lake in general.”

“It smells like dead fish and motor oil,” Elaine noted.

“You never did like my cologne.” I got my staff out of the car. “You need a big stick.”

Elaine smiled sweetly at me, and drew out a heavy chain from her purse. She held both ends in one fist, leaving a doubled length of heavy metal links about two feet long. Each of the links glittered with veins of what might have been copper, forming sinuous text. “You’re a prisoner to tradition, big guy. You should learn to be a little more flexible.”

“Careful. If you tell me you’ve got bracelets and a magic lariat in there, I may lose control of my sexual impulses.”

Elaine snorted. “You can’t lose what you’ve never had.” She glanced up at me. “Like the new shield, by the way.”

“Yeah. Sexy, huh?”

“Complex,” she replied. “Balanced. Strong. Sophisticated. I’m not sure I could have made a focus for something like that. It took real skill, Harry.”

I felt myself actually blush, absurdly pleased by the compliment. “Well, it isn’t perfect. It takes a lot more juice than the old shield did. But I figured getting tired faster is far preferable to getting dead faster.”

“Seems reasonable,” she said, and squinted at the docks. “Can you tell which boat it is?”

“Not yet. But once you get two or three hundred yards over the water, that spell would have grounded out. So we know it’s one of these at the docks.”

Elaine nodded. “You want to lead?”

“Yeah. We should be able to run it down fairly fast. Stay about ten or fifteen feet back from me.”

Elaine frowned. “Why?”

“Any closer than that and we’d be a dandy target. Someone could take us both out with one burst from a machine gun.”

Her face got a little pale. “I thought you trusted him.”

“I do,” I said. “But I don’t know who might be there with him.”

“And you’ve learned this kind of thing on the job? Machine guns?”

I felt my left hand twitch. “Actually, I learned it with flamethrowers. But it applies to machine guns, too.”

She took a deep breath, green eyes flickering over the docks and ships. “I see. After you, then.”

I readied my shield bracelet, got a good grip on my staff, and wrapped my amulet’s chain around the first two fingers of my right hand, holding it up and out a little so that the amulet could dangle and indicate direction. I stepped out onto the docks and followed the spell toward the outermost row of moored boats. I was acutely conscious of Elaine’s light, steady footsteps behind me, and the little slapping sighs of water hitting hulls.

The summer sky was overcast with lead, and occasional thunder rumbled through the air. The docks weren’t nearly as crowded as they could be, but there were a couple of dozen people around, walking to and from boats, working on decks, getting ready to cast off or else just now securing their lines. I was the only one wearing a big leather coat, and got a few odd looks.

The amulet led me to the last slip of the dock farthest from shore. The boat moored there was a big one, at least for those docks, and looked like it might have been a stunt double for the boat in *Jaws*. It was old, battered, its white paint smudged to a faded, peeling grey, the planks of its hull often patched. The windows on the wheelhouse were obscured with dust and greasy smudges. It needed to be sandblasted and repainted—except for the lettering on its stern, which had apparently been added only recently in heavy black paint: WATER BEETLE.

I walked ten feet away and rechecked the amulet’s indication, triangulating. The *Water Beetle* was the right boat.

“Hey!” I called out. “Er, uh. Ahoy! Thomas!”

Silence met my hail.

I checked over my shoulder. Elaine had moved away, to where she could see the little ship’s entire deck while still standing a good twenty feet down the dock from me. What was the military term for that? Establishing a cross fire? Maybe it was creating a defilade. The point being, though, that if anything came gibbering up out of the boat’s hold, we’d tear it up between us before you could say boogityboo.

Of course, if anyone on the boat had hostile intent and an ounce of brains, they’d probably realize that, too.

“Thomas!” I shouted again. “It’s Harry Dresden!”

If someone on that boat meant me harm, the smart thing to do would be to stay quiet and tempt me out onto the boat itself. That would minimize

my chances of avoiding an attack, and give them their best shot at taking me out in a hurry—which is just about the only reliable way to do it, when you’re dealing with wizards. Give one of us time to catch our breath, and we can be a real handful.

“Okay,” I said to Elaine, not taking my eyes off the boat. “I’m going aboard.”

“Is that smart?”

“No.” I glanced at her for a second. “You got a better idea?”

“No,” she admitted.

“Cover me.”

“Cover you.” Elaine shook her head, but she let one end of the chain slip loose from her hand, and caught it in the other. She took a grip on it, leaving a couple of feet hanging from her left hand. Little flickers of light played along it—subtle enough that I doubted anyone would notice if they weren’t looking for it. “I thought I was here on a job. Now it turns out I’m half of a buddy-cop movie.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “I’m the zany yet lovable one. You’re the brainy conservative.”

“What if I want to be the zany one?”

“Then you can hop out there on the boat.”

“Stop throwing the regulations out the window,” she said, as if reciting a hastily memorized grocery list. “We’re supposed to catch the maniacs, not become them. Don’t do anything crazy, because I’ve only got two and a half seconds to go until I retire.”

“That’s the spirit,” I said, and hopped from the dock to the deck of the *Water Beetle*.

I crouched, ready for trouble, but nothing came hurtling at me. One of the boats down the dock started up an engine that could not possibly have passed any kind of emissions test, including one for noise. Even so, though, I heard a thumping sound come from below the deck. I froze, but there was no further sound beyond the nearby rumbling engine, which, from the smell of it, was burning a lot of oil.

I tried to move silently, pacing around the wheelhouse. It was a tight squeeze between the deckhouse and the rail as I sidled by to peer around the corner and down a short flight of stairs that led into the ship’s cabin hold. I was aware of a presence: nothing specific, really, beyond a sudden, intuitive certainty that someone was down there and aware of me in return.

I could probably dance around, listening and lurking in hopes of finding some other indication of who was below—but not for long. People would notice me crouching and taking cover on the ship's deck for no apparent reason. Some of them would ignore it. Hell, most of them would ignore it. But inevitably, one of them would think it odd enough to give the cops a ring.

"Screw it," I said. I made sure my duster was covering my back, brought my shield up before me, and stepped quickly down the stairs and into the hold.

I had maybe half a second of warning when someone came swinging down the stairs behind me—he must have been lying flat and out of sight atop the wheelhouse. I started to turn, but two heels hit my right shoulder blade in a double-legged kick and propelled me forcefully down into the hold.

The duster was hell on wheels for stopping claws and bullets, but it did me less good against the blunt impact of the kick. It hurt. I threw up the shield in front of me as I fell, and cut it again in an instant, since impacting a rigid plane of force would be much like slamming myself into a brick wall. The fluttering energy of the shield slowed me enough to control my fall and turn it into a roll. I came to my knees facing the stairway, as Thomas came hurtling down it with mayhem evidently in mind.

He crouched on the stairs with one of those crooked knives the Gurkhas use clutched in one fist, and a double-barreled shotgun with maybe six inches of barrel left to it in the other and pointed directly at my head. My brother was a little bit shy of six feet tall, slim, and made out of whipcord and steel cable. His eyes were alight with fury in his pale face, faded from their usual thundercloud grey to an angry, metallic silver that meant that he was drawing upon his power as a vampire. His shoulder-length dark hair was bound back under a red bandanna, and his 'do still looked more stylish than mine.

"Thomas," I snarled. "Ow. What is *wrong* with you?"

"You get one chance to surrender, asshole. Drop the spells and face the wall."

"Thomas. Stop being a dick. I don't need this right now."

Thomas sneered. "Give it up. It's a good act, but I know you aren't Harry Dresden. There's no way the real Dresden would have come here with a woman like that instead of his dog."

I blinked at him and dropped my shield. “Now what the hell is *that* supposed to mean?” I glared at him and added in a lower tone, “Hell’s bells, if you weren’t my brother, I’d paste you.”

Thomas lowered the shotgun, his expression startled. “Harry?”

A shadow moved behind Thomas.

“Wait!” I screamed.

A length of heavy chain whipped around his throat. There was a flash of greenish light and a crackling explosion almost as loud as a gunshot. Thomas jerked into an agonized arch and was flung free of the chain to come hurtling into me. For the second time in sixty seconds, I got hit with my brother’s full weight and slammed to the floor. My nose filled with the sharp scent of ozone and burned hair.

“Harry?” called Elaine’s voice, high and loud. “Harry?”

“I said to wait,” I wheezed.

She came hustling down the stairs and over to me. “Did he hurt you?”

“Not until you threw him on me,” I snapped. Which wasn’t true, but being repeatedly bashed about makes me grumpy. I touched a finger to my throbbing lip, and it came away wet with blood. “Ow.”

Elaine said, “Sorry. I thought you were in trouble.”

I shook my head to clear it and glanced at Thomas. His eyes were open and he looked startled. He was breathing, but his arms and legs lay limp. His lips moved a little. I leaned over and asked him, “What?”

“Ow,” he whispered.

I sat up, a little relieved. If he was able to complain, he couldn’t have been too bad off. “What was that?” I asked Elaine.

“Taser.”

“Stored electricity?”

“Yes.”

“How do you refill it?”

“Thunderstorm. Or I just plug it into any wall socket.”

“Cool,” I said. “Maybe I should get one of those.”

Thomas’s head moved, and one of his legs twitched and began to stir.

Elaine whirled on him at once, her chain held taut between her hands, and little flashes of light began flickering through the decorative metal embedded into the links.

“Easy, there,” I said, firmly. “Back off. We came here to talk, remember?”

“Harry, we should at least restrain him.”

“He isn’t going to hurt us,” I said.

“Would you listen to yourself for a second?” she said, her voice sharpening. “Harry, despite heavy evidence to the contrary, you’re telling me that you like and trust a creature whose specialty lies in subverting the minds of his victims. That’s the way *they* all talk about a White Court vampire, and you know it.”

“That isn’t what’s happened here,” I said.

“They say *that*, too,” Elaine insisted. “I’m not saying any of this is your fault, Harry. But if this thing *has* gotten to you somehow, this is exactly how you’d be responding to it.”

“He’s not a *thing*,” I snarled. “His name is Thomas.”

Thomas took in a deep breath and then managed to say, in a very feeble voice, “It’s all right. You can come out now.”

The forward wall of the cabin creaked and suddenly shifted, swinging out on a concealed hinge to reveal a small area behind it, not quite as large as a typical walk-in closet. There were several women and two or three very small children huddled in that cramped space, and they emerged into the cabin warily.

One of them was Olivia the dancer.

“There,” Thomas said quietly. He turned his head to Elaine. “There they are, and they’re fine. Check them out for yourself.”

I stood up, my joints creaking, and studied the women. “Olivia,” I said.

“Warden,” she said quietly.

“Are you all right?”

She smiled. “Except for a muscle cramp I got in there. It’s a little crowded.”

Elaine looked from the women to Thomas and back. “Did he hurt you?”

Olivia blinked. “No,” she said. “No, of course not. He was taking us to shelter.”

“Shelter?” I asked.

“Harry,” Elaine said, “these are some of the women who have gone missing.”

I digested that for a second, and then turned to Thomas. “What the hell is wrong with you? Why didn’t you tell me what was going on?”

He shook his head, his expression still a little bleary. “Reasons. Didn’t want you involved in this.”

“Well, I’m involved now,” I said. “So how about you tell me what’s going on.”

“You were at my apartment,” Thomas said. “You saw my guest room wall.”

“Yeah.”

“They were being hunted. I had to figure out who was after them. Why. I got it, at least well enough to be able to figure out who they were planning to kill. It became a race between us.” He glanced at the women and children. “I got everyone I could out of harm’s way, and brought them here.” He tried to move his head and winced. “Nnngh. There are another dozen at a cabin on an island about twenty miles north of here.”

“A safe house,” I mused. “You were taking them to a safe house.”

“Yeah.”

Elaine just stared at the women for a long moment, then at Thomas. “Olivia,” she asked. “Is he telling the truth?”

“A-as far as I know,” the girl answered. “He’s been a perfect gentleman.”

I’m pretty sure nobody but me caught it, but at her words, Thomas’s eyes flashed with a cold and furious hunger. He may have treated the women gently and politely, but I knew that there was a part of him that hadn’t wanted to. He closed his eyes tightly and started taking deep breaths. I recognized the ritual he used to control his darker nature, and said nothing of it.

Elaine talked quietly with Olivia, who began making introductions. I leaned against a wall—unless maybe, since we were on a ship, it was a bulkhead—and rubbed my finger at a spot between my eyebrows where a headache was coming on. The damned oily smoke smell from the nearby ship’s sputtering engine wasn’t helping matters any, either, and—

My head snapped up and I flung myself up the stairs and onto the deck.

That big ugly boat had been moved from its moorings—and now floated directly beside the *Water Beetle*, blocking it from the open waters of the lake. Its engine was pouring out so much blue-black oil smoke that it could not have been anything but deliberate. A choking haze had already enveloped the *Water Beetle*, and I couldn’t see beyond the next row of docks.

A figure hurtled from the deck of the boat to land in a tigerish crouch on the little area of open deck at the rear of the *Water Beetle*. Even as I watched, its features, those of an unremarkable man in his midthirties,

began to change. His jaws elongated, face extending into something of a muzzle, and his forearms lengthened, the nails extending into dirty-looking talons.

He faced me, shoulders distorting into hunched knots of powerful muscle, bared his teeth, and let out a shrieking roar.

A ghoul. A tough, dangerous opponent, but not impossible to beat.

Then more figures appeared on the deck of the other ship, half veiled by the thick smoke. Their limbs crackled and contorted, and a dozen more ghouls opened their mouths in earsplitting echo of the first.

“Thomas!” I shouted, half choking on the smoke. “We’ve got a problem!”

Thirteen ghouls flung themselves directly at me, jaws gaping and slavering, talons reaching, eyes gleaming with feral bloodlust and rage.

Fucking *boats*.

Chapter Twenty-One

I have, in general, not had fun during my service as a Warden of the White Council. I have taken no enjoyment whatsoever in becoming a solider in the war with the Vampire Courts. Doing battle with the forces of...

I was going to say *evil*, but I'm increasingly unsure exactly where everyone around me falls on the Jedi-Sith Index.

Doing battle with the forces of things trying to kill me, or my friends, or people who can't protect themselves is not a rowdy summer adventure movie. It's a nightmare. Everything is violence and confusion, fear and rage, pain and exhilaration. It all happens fast, and there's never time to think, never any way to be sure of anything.

It's awful, really—but I do have to admit that there's been one positive thing about the situation:

I've gotten in a lot of extra practice at combat wizardry.

And ever since New Mexico, I had absolutely no reservations about ripping ghouls apart with it.

The nearest ghoul was the closest threat, but not the greatest opportunity. Still, if I didn't lay the smack down on him in a hurry, he'd rip my head off, or at least tie me up long enough for his buddies to mob me. Ordinarily, I'd have let him eat a blast of telekinetic force from the little silver ring I wore on my right hand, the one that stored up a little energy every time I moved my arm, and which was useless after being employed.

I couldn't do that, because I'd replaced the single silver ring with three circles of silver fused into a single band, each with the same potential energy as the original silver ring.

Oh. And I had one of the new bands on every finger of my right hand.

I raised my staff in my fist, baring the rings to the ghoul, and as I triggered the first ring snarled, "See ya!"

Raw force lashed out at the ghoul, flung him off the end of the *Water Beetle*, and slammed him against the front of the ship blocking us in with enough force to break his back. There was a rippling crack, the ghoul's

battle cry turned into an agonized scream, and he vanished into the cold waters of Lake Michigan.

The first of his buddies was already in the air, boarding the *Water Beetle* just as the first had. I waited a half second, timing the arc of his jump, and before his feet touched down, I hit him just as I had the first one. This time, the ghoul flew back into a pair of its buddies, already in the air behind him, and dropped all three of them into the drink. Ghouls five and six were female, about which I did not care in the least, and I swatted them into the lake with two more blasts.

So far, so good, but then four of them all leaped together—probably by chance, rather than design—and I knocked down only two of them. The other two hit the deck of the *Water Beetle* and flung themselves at me, claws extended.

No time for any tricks. I whirled my staff, planted the back end against the wheelhouse wall, and aimed the other at the nearest ghoul's teeth. It hit the ghoul with the tremendous power provided by his own supernatural strength and speed. Shattered bits of yellow fangs showered the deck as the ghoul rebounded. The second ghoul leaped straight over his buddy—

—and got a really nice view of the barrel of the .44 revolver I'd pulled from my duster's pocket with my left hand. The hand cannon roared, snapping the ghoul's head back, and it slammed into me. My back hit the wheelhouse hard enough to knock the breath from me, but the ghoul fell to the deck, writhing and screaming madly.

I put two more shots into the ghoul's head from two feet away, and emptied the revolver into the skull of the one I'd stunned with my staff. Watery, brownish blood splattered the deck.

By then, three more ghouls were on the deck, and I heard thunking sounds of impact over the side of the ship as two of the ghouls I'd knocked into the water sank their claws into the *Water Beetle's* planks and began swarming over the sides.

I hit the nearest ghoul with another blast from one of my rings, sending it flying into its companions, but it bought me only enough time to raise my shield into a shimmering quarter-dome of silver light. Two ghouls slammed against it, claws raking, and bounced off.

Then the ghouls coming up the sides of the ship gained the deck, behind the edge of my shield, and hit me from the side. Claws raked at me. I felt a hot pain on my chin, and then heavy impacts as the talons struck my duster.

They couldn't pierce it, but hit with considerable force, a sensation like being jabbed hard in the side with the rounded ends of multiple broom handles.

I went down and kicked at a knee. It snapped, crackled, and popped, drawing a scream of rage from the ghoul, but its companion landed on me, forcing me to throw my left arm across my throat to keep him from ripping it out. My shield flickered and fell, and the other ghouls let out howls of hungry glee.

A woman's voice let out a ringing, defiant shout. There was a roar of light and sound, a flash of scything, solid green light, and the ghoul atop me jerked as its head simply vanished from its shoulders, spraying foul-smelling brown blood everywhere. I shoved the still-twitching body off me and gained my feet even as Elaine stepped past me. She whirled that chain of hers over her head, snarling, "*Aerios!*"

Something that looked like a miniature tornado illuminated from within by green light and laid on its side formed in the air in front of her. The baby twister immediately began moving so much air so quickly that I had to lean away from the spell's powerful suction.

The far end of the spell blew forth air in a shrieking column of wind so strong that, as it played back and forth over the back end of the ship, it scattered ghouls like bits of popcorn in a blower. It also had the effect of ripping the thick, choking smoke away from the stairway leading belowdecks, and I hadn't even realized how dizzy I had begun to feel.

"I can't hold this for long!" Elaine shouted.

The ghouls began trying to get around the spell, more of them climbing the sides after being thrown into the lake again. I couldn't try whipping up a fire—not with all these fine wooden boats and docks and brimming fuel containers and resident boaters around. So I had to make do with using my staff—not using magic, either. That's the beauty of having a big heavy stick with you. Anytime you need to do it, you've got a handy head-cracking weapon ready to go.

The ghouls tried climbing up the sides of the ship, but I started playing whack-a-mole as their heads or clawed hands appeared over the side.

"Thomas!" I cried. "We've got to get out of here!"

I could barely see anything through the smoke, but I could make out the shapes of some of the ghouls clambering up onto the dock—cutting us off from the shore.

“Get the boat loose!” Elaine shouted.

The ghouls’ smoking vessel actually cruised into the rear of the *Water Beetle*, the impact forcing me to grab at the wheelhouse to keep my feet—and to stagger the other way a second later as the *Water Beetle* smashed into the dock. “Not a chance! He’s too close!”

“Down!” Thomas shouted, and I felt his hand shove down hard on my shoulder. I ducked, and saw the blued steel of his sawed-off shotgun as it went past my face. The thing roared, the sound painfully loud, and I was pretty sure I wouldn’t hear anything out of that ear for a while. The blast caught the ghoul that had somehow sneaked up onto the top of the wheelhouse and had been about to leap down onto my shoulders.

“Ow!” I shouted to Thomas. “Thank you!”

“Harry!” Elaine shouted, her voice higher, now desperate.

I looked past her and saw that her pet cyclone was slowing down. Several of the ghouls had managed to dig their claws into the deck and hang on, rather than being blasted off the end of the ship.

“This is bad, this is bad, this is bad,” Thomas said.

“I *know* that!” I shouted at him. A glance over my shoulder showed me Olivia’s pale face on the stairs, and the other women and children behind her. “We’ll never get them out of here on foot. They’ve got the docks cut off.”

Thomas took a quick glance around the ship and said, “We can’t cast off, either!”

“Harry!” Elaine gasped. The light began to fade from her spell, the howl of wind dropping, the ugly, heavy smoke beginning to creep back in.

Ghouls are hard to kill. I’d done for two of them, Elaine for a third, but the others had mostly just been made angrier by getting repeatedly slammed in the kisser with blasts of force, followed by tumbles into the cold lake.

Cold lake.

Aha. A plan.

“Take this!” I shouted, and shoved my staff at Thomas. “Buy me a few seconds!” I spun to Olivia and said, “Everyone get ready to follow me, close!”

Olivia relayed that to the women behind her while I hurriedly jerked loose the knots that secured my blasting rod to the inside of my duster. I whipped out the blasting rod and looked out over the side of the ship

farthest from shore. There was nothing but thirty feet of water, then the vague shape of the next row of docks.

Thomas saw the blasting rod and swore under his breath, but he whirled my staff with grace and style—the way he does pretty much everything—then leaped past Elaine’s fading spell and began battering ghouls.

It’s hard for me to remember sometimes that Thomas isn’t human, no matter that he looks it, and is my brother to boot. Other times, like this one, I get forcibly reminded about his true nature.

Ghouls are strong and disgustingly quick (emphasis on *disgusting*). Thomas, though, drawing upon his darker nature, made them look like the faceless throngs of extras in an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. He moved like smoke among them, the heavy oak of my staff spinning, striking, snapping out straight and whirling away, driven at the attackers with superhuman power. I wanted to fight beside him, but that wouldn’t get us away from this ambush, which was our only real chance of survival.

So instead of rushing to his aid, I gripped my blasting rod, focused my will, and began to summon up every scrap of energy I could bring to bear. This spell was going to take a hell of a lot of juice, but if it worked, we’d be clear. I reminded myself of that as I stood frozen, my eyes half closed, while my brother fought for our lives.

Thomas outclassed any single ghoul he was up against, but though he could cause them horrible pain, a bludgeoning tool was not a good weapon for actually killing them. He would have had to shatter several vertebrae or break open a skull to put one of them down. Had he stopped to take the focus he would need to finish off a single ghoul he’d temporarily disabled, the rest would have swarmed him. He knew it. They knew it, too. They fought with the mindlessly efficient instinct of the pack, certain that they could, in a few moments, wear down their prey.

Check that. It wouldn’t even take that long. Once that smoke rolled in again, we’d last only a minute or three, breathing hard in exertion and fear as we all were. The gunfire and shrieking would have prompted a dozen calls to the authorities, as well. I was sure I would be hearing sirens any minute, assuming the ear my brother had left intact was pointed that way. It was at that point that I realized something else:

Someone was still on the boat pinning the *Water Beetle* against the dock. Someone who had brought the ghouls over, who had been lying in wait near Thomas. Ghouls are hell on wheels for violence, but they don’t tend to plan

things out very well without outside direction. They certainly do not bother operating under a smoke screen. So whoever was driving the other boat probably wasn't a ghoul.

Grey Cloak, maybe? Or his homey, Passenger.

That's when I realized something else: We didn't have even those couple of minutes it would take for the smoke to strangle us. Once the mortal authorities started arriving, whoever was in charge of the ghouls was sure to goad them into a more coordinated rush, and that would be that.

A ghoul's flailing claw ripped through Thomas's jeans and tore into his calf. He lost his balance for a second, caught it again, and kept fighting as if nothing had happened—but blood a little too pale to be human dribbled steadily to the *Water Beetle's* deck.

I clenched my teeth as the power rose in me. The hairs on my arms stood up straight, and there was a kind of buzzing pressure against the insides of my eardrums. My muscles were tensing, almost to the point of convulsing in a full-body charley horse. Stars swam in my vision as I raised the blasting rod.

"Harry!" Elaine gasped. "Don't be a fool! You'll kill us all!"

I heard her, but I was too far gone into the spell to respond. It had to work. I mean, it had worked once before. In theory, it should work again if I could just get it to be a little bit bigger.

I lifted my face and the blasting rod to the sky, opened my throat, and in a stentorian bellow shouted, "*Fuego!*"

Fire exploded from the tip of the blasting rod, a column of white-hot flame as thick as my hips. It surged up into the smoke, burning it away as it went, rising into a fiery fountain a good twenty stories high.

All magic obeys certain principles, and many of them apply across the whole spectrum of reality, scientific, arcane, or otherwise. As far as casting spells is concerned, the most important is the principle of conservation of energy. Energy cannot simply be created. If one wants a twenty-story column of fire hot enough to vaporize ten-gauge steel, the energy of all that fire has to come from somewhere. Most of my spells use my own personal energy, what is most simply described as sheer force of will. Energy for such things can also come from other sources outside of the wizard's personal power.

This spell, for example, had been drawn from the heat energy absorbed by the waters of Lake Michigan.

The fire roared up with a thunderous detonation of suddenly expanding air, and the shock wave from it startled everyone into dead silence. The lake let out a sudden, directionless, crackling snarl. In the space of a heartbeat the water between where I stood and the next dock froze over, a sudden sheet of hard, white ice.

I sagged with fatigue. Channeling so much energy through myself was an act that invited trauma and exhaustion, and a sudden weakness in my limbs made me stagger.

“Go!” I shouted to Olivia. “Over the ice! Run for the next dock! Women and children first!”

“Kill them!” shouted a man’s voice from the general direction of the attacking ship.

The ghouls howled and leaped forward, enraged to see prey making good their escape.

I leaned on the rail and watched Olivia and company flee. They hurried over the ice, slipping here and there. Crackling protests of the ice sounded under their feet. Spiderweb fractures began to spread, slowly but surely.

I gritted my teeth. Even though Lake Michigan is a cold-water lake, this was high summer, and even in the limited space I had frozen, there was an enormous amount of water that had to be chilled. Imagine how much fire it takes to heat a teakettle to boiling, and remember that it works both ways. You have to take heat *away* from the kettle’s water if you want to freeze it. Now, multiply that much energy by about a berjillion, because that’s the amount of water I was trying to freeze.

Olivia and the women and children made it to the far dock and fled in a very well-advised and appropriate state of panic.

“Harry!” Elaine said. Her chain lashed out and struck a ghoul that had slipped by Thomas.

“They’re clear!” I cried. “Go, go, go! Thomas, we is skedaddling!”

I stood up and readied my shield bracelet.

“Come on,” Elaine told me, grabbing my arm.

I shook my head. “I’m the heaviest,” I told her. “I go last.”

Elaine blinked at me, opened her mouth to protest, then went very pale and nodded once. She vaulted the rail and ran for the docks.

“Thomas!” I screamed. “Down!”

Thomas hit the deck without so much as looking over his shoulder, and the ghouls closed in.

I triggered the rest of the kinetic rings: all of them at once.

Ghouls tumbled and flew. But I'd bought us only a little time.

Thomas turned and leaped over the side. I checked, and saw that Elaine had reached the other dock. Thomas bounded over the ice like something from one of those Japanese martial arts cartoons, leaped, and actually turned a flip in the air before landing on his feet.

I didn't want to come down too hard on the ice, but I didn't want to wait around until a ghoul ate me, either. I did my best to minimize the impact and started hurrying across.

Ice crackled. On my second step, a sudden, deep crack snapped open beneath my rearmost foot. Holy crap. Maybe I'd underestimated the energy involved. Maybe it had been *two* berjillion teakettles.

I took the next step, and felt the ice groaning under my feet. More cracks appeared. It was only twenty feet, but the next dock suddenly looked miles away.

Behind me, I heard ghouls charging, throwing themselves recklessly onto the ice once they saw my turned back.

"This is bad, this is bad, this is bad," I babbled to myself. Behind me, the ice suddenly screeched, and one of the ghouls vanished into the water with a scream of protest.

More cracks, even thicker, began to race out ahead of me.

"Harry!" Thomas screamed, pointing over my shoulder.

I turned my head and saw Madrigal Raith standing on the deck of the *Water Beetle*, not more than ten feet away. He gave me a delighted smile.

Then he lifted a heavy assault rifle to his shoulder and opened fire.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I screamed in order to summon up my primal reserves and to intimidate Madrigal into missing me, and definitely not because I was terrified. While I unleashed my sonic initiative, I also crouched down to take cover. To the untrained eye, it probably looked like I was just cowering and pulling my duster up to cover my head, but it was actually part of a cunning master plan designed to let me survive the next three or four seconds.

Madrigal Raith was Thomas's cousin, and built along the same lines: slim, dark-haired, pale, and handsome, though not on Thomas's scale. Unfortunately, he was just as deceptively strong and swift as Thomas was, and if he could shoot half as well, there was no way he would miss me, not at that range.

And he didn't.

The spellwork I'd laid over my duster had stood me in good stead on more than one occasion. It had stopped claws and talons and fangs and saved me from being torn apart by broken glass. It had reduced the impact of various and sundry blunt objects, and generally preserved my life in the face of a great deal of potentially grievous bodily harm. But I hadn't designed the coat to stand up to *this*.

There is an enormous amount of difference between the weapons and ammunition employed by your average Chicago thug and military-grade weaponry. Military rounds, fully jacketed in metal, would not smash and deform as easily as bullets of simple lead. They were heavier rounds, moving a lot faster than you'd get with civilian small arms, and they kept their weight focused behind an armor-piercing tip, all of which meant that while military rounds didn't tend to fracture on impact and inflict horribly complicated damage on the human body, they *did* tend to smash their way through just about anything that got in their way. Personal body armor, advanced as it is, is of very limited use against well-directed military-grade fire—particularly when exposed from ten feet away.

The shots hit me not in a string of separate impacts, the way I had thought it would be, but in one awful roar of noise and pressure and pain. Everything spun around. I was flung over the fracturing ice, my body rolling. The sun found a hole in the smoke and glared down into my eyes. I felt a horrible, nauseated wave of sensation flood over me, and the glare of light in my eyes became hellish agony. I felt suddenly weak and exhausted, and even though I knew there was something I should have been doing, I couldn't remember what it was.

If only the damned light wouldn't keep burning my eyes like that...

"...it wouldn't be so bad out here," I growled to Ramirez. I held up a hand to shield my eyes from the blazing New Mexico sun. "Every morning it's like someone sticking needles in my eyes."

Ramirez, dressed in surplus military BDU pants, a loose white cotton shirt, a khaki bush hat folded up on one side, wraparound sunglasses, and his usual cocky grin, shook his head. "For God's sake, Harry. Why didn't you bring sunglasses?"

"I don't like glasses," I said. "Things on my eyes, they bug me."

"Do they bug you as much as going blind?" Ramirez asked.

I lowered my hand as my eyes finished adjusting, and squinting hard made it possible to bear the glare. "Shut up, Carlos."

"Who's a grumpy wizard in the morning?" Carlos asked, in that tone of voice one usually reserves for favorite dogs.

"Get a couple more years on you and that many beers that late at night will leave you with a headache, too, punk." I growled a couple of curses under my breath, then shook my head and composed myself as ought to be expected of a master wizard—which is to say, I subtracted the complaining and was left with only the grumpy scowl. "Who's up?"

Ramirez took a small notebook from his pocket and flipped it open. "The Terrible Twosome," he replied. "The Trailman twins."

"You're kidding. They're twelve years old."

"Sixteen," Ramirez contradicted me.

"Twelve, sixteen," I said. "They're babies."

Ramirez's smile faded. "They don't have time to be babies, man. They've got a gift for evocation, and we need them."

"Sixteen," I muttered. "Hell's bells. All right, let's get some breakfast first."

Ramirez and I marched to breakfast. The site Captain Luccio had chosen for teaching trainee Wardens evocation had once been a boomtown, built up around a vein of copper that trickled out after a year or so of mining. It was pretty high up in the mountains, and though we were less than a hundred miles northwest of Albuquerque, we might as well have been camped out on the surface of the moon. The only indications of humanity for ten or twelve miles in any direction were ourselves and the tumbledown remains of the town and the mine upslope from it.

Ramirez and I had lobbied to christen the place Camp Kaboom, given that it *was* a boomtown and we *were* teaching magic that generally involved plenty of booms of its own, but Luccio had overridden us. One of the kids had heard us, though, and by the end of the second day there, Camp Kaboom had been named despite the disapproval of the establishment.

The forty-odd kids had their tents pitched within the stone walls of a church someone had built in an effort to bring a little more stability to the general havoc of boomtowns in the Old West. Luccio had pitched her tent with them, but Ramirez, me, and two other young Wardens who were helping her teach had set up our tents on the remains of what had once been a saloon, a brothel, or both. We'd taught kids all day and evening, and once it had gotten cold and the trainees were asleep, we played poker and drank beer, and if I got enough in me, I would even play a little guitar.

Ramirez and his cronies got up every morning just as bright eyed and bushy tailed as if they'd had a full night's sleep. The cocky little bastards. Breakfast was dished up and served by the trainees every morning, built around several portable grills and several folded tables situated near a well that still held cool water, if you worked the weather-beaten pump long enough. Breakfast was little more than a bowl of cereal, but part of the little more was coffee, so I was surviving without killing anyone—if only because I took breakfast alone, giving the grumpy time to fade before exposing myself to anyone else.

I collected my cereal, an apple, and a big cup of the holy mocha, walked a ways, and settled down on a rock in the blinding light of morning in desert mountains. Captain Luccio sat down beside me.

“Good morning,” she said. Luccio was a wizard of the White Council, a couple of centuries old, and one of its more dangerous members. She didn't look like that. She looked like a girl not even as old as Ramirez, with long, curling brown locks, a sweetly pretty face, and killer dimples. When I'd

met her, she'd been a lean, leathery-skinned matron with iron grey hair, but a black wizard called the Corpsetaker had suckered her in a duel. Corpsetaker, then in Luccio's current body, had let Luccio run her through—and then Corpsetaker had worked her trademark magic, and switched their minds into the opposite bodies.

I'd figured it out before Corpsetaker had time enough to abuse Luccio's credibility, but once I'd put a bullet through Corpsetaker's head, there hadn't been any way for Luccio to get her original body back. So she'd been stuck in the young, cute one instead, because of me. She had also ceased taking to the field in actual combat, passing that off to her second in command, Morgan, while she ran the boot camp to train new Wardens in how to kill things without getting killed first.

"Good morning," I replied.

"Mail came for you yesterday," she said, and produced a letter from a pocket.

I took it, scanned the envelope, and opened it. "Hmmm."

"Who is it from?" she asked. Her tone was that of one passing the time in polite conversation.

"Warden Yoshimo," I said. "I had a few questions for her about her family tree. See if she was related to a man I knew."

"Is she?" Luccio asked.

"Distantly," I said, reading on. "Interesting." At Luccio's polite noise of inquiry, I said, "My friend was a descendent of Sho Tai."

"I'm afraid I don't know who that is," Luccio said.

"He was the last king of Okinawa," I said, and frowned, thinking it over. "I bet it means something."

"Means something?"

I glanced at Captain Luccio and shook my head. "Sorry. It's a side project of mine, something I'm curious about." I shook my head, folded up the letter from Yoshimo, and tucked it into the pocket of my jeans. "It isn't relevant to teaching apprentices combat magic, and I should have my head in the game, not on side projects."

"Ah," Luccio said, and did not press for further details. "Dresden, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

I grunted interrogatively.

She lifted her eyebrows. "Have you never wondered why you did not receive a blade?"

The Wardens toted silver swords with them whenever there was a fight at hand. I had seen them unravel complex, powerful magic at the will of their wielders, which is one hell of an advantage when taking on anything using magic as a weapon. “Oh,” I said, and sipped some coffee. “Actually I hadn’t really wondered. I assumed you didn’t trust me.”

She frowned at me. “I see,” she said. “No. That is not the case. If I did not trust you, I would certainly not allow you to continue wearing the cloak.”

“Is there anything I could do to make you not trust me, then?” I asked. “Cause I don’t want to wear the cloak. No offense.”

“None taken,” she said. “But we need you, and the cloak stays on.”

“Damn.”

She smiled briefly. The expression had entirely too much weight and subtlety for a face so young. “The fact of the matter is that the swords the Wardens have used in your lifetime must be tailored specifically to each individual Warden. They were also all articles of my creation—and I am no longer capable of creating them.”

I frowned and imbibed more coffee. “Because...” I gestured at her vaguely.

She nodded. “This body did not possess the same potential, the same aptitudes for magic as my own. Returning to my former level of ability will be problematical, and will happen no time soon.” She shrugged, her expression neutral, but I had a feeling she was covering a lot of frustration and bitterness. “Until someone else manages to adapt my design to their own talents, or until I have retrained myself, I’m afraid that no more such blades will be issued.”

I chewed some cereal, sipped some coffee, and said, “It must be hard on you. The new body. A big change, after so long in the first one.”

She blinked at me, eyes briefly wide with surprise. “I...Yes, it has been.”

“Are you doing okay?”

She looked thoughtfully at her cereal for a moment. “Headaches,” she said quietly. “Memories that aren’t mine. I think they belong to the original owner of this body. They come mostly in dreams. It’s hard to sleep.” She sighed. “And, of course, it had been a hundred and forty years since I’d put up with either sexual desire or a monthly cycle.”

I swallowed cereal carefully instead of choking. “It sounds, ah, awkward. And unpleasant.”

“Very,” she said, her voice quiet. Then her cheeks turned faintly pink. “Mostly. Thank you for asking.” Then she took a deep breath, exhaled briskly, and rose, all businesslike again. “In any case, I felt I owed you an explanation.”

“You didn’t,” I said. “But thank y—”

Automatic weapons fire ripped the dew-spangled morning.

Luccio was moving at a full sprint before I’d gotten my ass up off the rock. I wasn’t slow. I’ve been in enough scrapes that I don’t freeze at the unexpected appearance of violence and death. Captain Luccio, however, had been in a lot more scrapes than that and was faster and better than me. As we ran, there was the continued chatter of weapons fire, screams, and then a couple of awfully loud explosions and an inhuman scream. I caught up to the Captain of the Wardens as we came into sight of the breakfast area, and I let her take the lead.

I’m pigheadedly chivalrous. Not stupid.

The breakfast area was in a shambles. Folding tables had been knocked over. Blood and breakfast cereal lay scattered on the rocky ground. I could see two kids on the ground, one screaming, one simply doubled over in a fetal position, shaking. Others were lying flat, faces in the dirt. Maybe thirty yards away, in the ruins of what had been a blacksmith’s shop, the only remaining brick wall was missing an enormous circle of stone—simply gone, probably in one of those weird, silent green blasts Ramirez favored. I could see the barrel of a heavy weapon of some kind lying on the ground, neatly severed about a foot behind its tip. Whoever had been holding it was likely gone with the bricks of the wall.

Ramirez’s head appeared at the hole in the wall. He had dark brown fluid spattering one side of his face. “Captain, get down!”

Bullets hissed down, making whistling, whipping sounds as they kicked up dirt a foot to Luccio’s right, and the report of the shots reached us half a second later.

Luccio didn’t waver or slow. She threw her right hand out, fingers spread. I couldn’t see what she’d done, but the air between us and the slope of the mountain above suddenly went watery with haze. “Where?” she shouted.

“I’ve got two wounded ghouls here!” Ramirez shouted. “At least two more upslope, maybe a hundred and twenty meters!”

As he spoke, one of the other Wardens rolled around the end of the broken wall, pointed his staff upslope, and spat out a vicious-sounding word. There was a low hum, a sudden flash, and a blue-white bolt of lightning snarled up the side of the mountain in the general direction of the shots. It struck a boulder with a roar and shattered it to gravel, the sight bizarre through the haze Luccio had conjured.

“Watch it!” Ramirez screamed. “They took two of our kids!”

The other Warden shot him a horrified look, and then dove for cover as more gunfire spat down the mountain. He let out a short, clench-toothed scream and grabbed at his leg, and one of the kids not far from him gasped, clutching at her cheek.

“Dammit,” snarled Luccio. She slid to a stop and raised her other hand, and the haze in the air became a rippling blur of moving color that made the entire mountainside look like some enormous, desert-themed Lava lamp.

Shots began to ring out, singly, as the attacker fired randomly into the haze. Each one made trainees cringe and gasp. “Trainees stay down!” Luccio trumpeted. “Stay still. Be quiet. Do not give your position away by sound or movement.”

Bullets struck the ground near her feet again as she spoke, drawing the fire to herself, but she didn’t flinch, though her face had already broken out in a sweat with the strain of holding up the broad obscurement spell.

“Dresden,” she said between gritted teeth. “Only one of those things is keeping fire on us. He’s pinning us down while the other escapes with hostages. We must protect the trainees foremost, and we can’t help the wounded while we’re still taking fire.”

“You hold the haze and keep them hidden,” I said, drawing a shot and a puff of dirt of my own. I sidestepped judiciously. “Shooter’s mine.”

She nodded, but her eyes showed something of wounded pride as she said, “Hurry. I can’t hold it for long.”

I nodded to her and looked up the mountainside—and then I shook my head and drew up my Sight.

At once, my vision cut through Luccio’s bewildering haze as though it had never existed. I could see the mountainside in perfect detail—even as it was in turn partially veiled by the vision my Sight granted me, which showed me all the living magic in the world around us, all the traces of magic that had lingered before, including dozens of imprints made in the

past few days, and hundreds of ghostly glimpses of particularly strong emotional images that had sunk into the area during its heyday. I could see where the girl who now lay shuddering with a bullet in her had tried to call up raw fire for the first time, near a scorch mark upslope. I could see where a grizzled man, desperately addicted to opium and desperately broke, had shot himself more than a century ago, and where by night his shade still lingered, leaving fresh imprints behind.

And I could see the little coiling cloud of darkness that formed the inhuman energy of the attacking ghoul, running hot on the emotions of battle.

I marked the ghoul's location, lowered my Sight, and took off at a dead sprint, bounding up the slope and bouncing back and forth in a wavering line. It's damned hard to hit a target like that, even one growing steadily closer, and even with Luccio's haze to cover me, I didn't want to get shot if I could possibly avoid it. It was hard going, uphill, rough terrain, but it hadn't had time to get hot yet, and I practiced running regularly—though admittedly, I did it to give me the option of running *away* from bad guys more ably, not *toward* them.

More shots rang out, but none of them seemed to come near. I kept my eyes locked on the spot on the slope where the ghoul lay shooting, probably behind cover. I couldn't see a thing through the haze, but as soon as it began to clear I would present the ghoul with a clear target, either as I came through or when Luccio's power faltered and the spell fell. I had to get closer. I didn't have my blasting rod or staff with me, and without them to help me focus my magic, the range and accuracy of any spell I could throw at the ghoul would be drastically reduced. That's why I had to get closer before I took my shot. I couldn't hold a shield against bullets and attack at the same time—and the ghoul had to be taken out. I'd get only one shot, and if I missed I'd be an easy target.

I ran, and watched, and began to gather the power to throw at the ghoul.

The haze abruptly cleared as I bounded over a patch of scrub growth.

The ghoul crouched behind a rock maybe twenty yards upslope, his face only barely distended as he held mostly to his human shape while employing the human weapon—a freaking Kalashnikov. Thank God. The weapon was tough and serviceable, but it wasn't exactly a sharpshooter's tool. If he'd been toting something more precise, he probably could have inflicted a lot more damage than he had.

I was over to one side, and the ghoul was squinting hard down the rifle's sights, so that I was only a flicker of motion in the periphery of his focus. It took him a second to recognize the threat and whip the weapon toward me.

I had time, and I threw out my hand and my will, and snarled, "*Fuego!*"

Fire bellowed forth from my right hand—not in a narrow beam, a jet of tightly focused energy, but in a roaring flood, spilling out from my fingertips like water from a garden sprayer. A *lot* of it, way more than I had intended. The fire got the ghoul, all right—and the ground for twenty feet around him in every direction—more on the uphill side of him. The roar of flame gave way to a hideous shriek, and then a steady, chewy silence shrouded by black smoke. A low breeze, a herald of the day's oncoming heat, nudged the smoke away for a moment.

The ghoul, now in its true form, lay outstretched on the scorched earth. It had been burned down to little more than an appallingly blackened skeleton, though one leg retained enough muscle matter to continue twitching and thrashing—even then, the creature was not wholly dead. It didn't surprise me. In my experience, ghouls hadn't done much that wasn't disgusting. There was no reason to expect them to die cleanly, either.

Once I was sure it wasn't getting back up, I scanned the mountainside, looking for any other sign of movement, but found nothing. Then I turned and hurried back down the slope to the encampment.

Luccio was fully engaged in treating the wounded. Three had been hit by gunfire, and several others, including one of the other adult Wardens, had been wounded by shards of shattered rock or splinters thrown from the folding tables and chairs.

Ramirez came hurrying up to me and said, "You get him?" His eyes trailed past me to the enormous area blackened with smoke and half a dozen patches of brush still on fire, and he said, "Yeah, I guess you kind of did."

"Kind of," I agreed. "You said they had two of our kids?"

He nodded once, his face grim. "The Terrible Twosome. They were heading up the slope to find a spot above the camp for the lesson. Wanted to show off, I expect."

"Sixteen," I muttered. "Jesus."

Ramirez grimaced. "I was yelling at them to come back when the ghouls hopped up out of the bush and brought them down, and the three assholes who had sneaked into the old smithy opened up."

“How are you at following tracks?” I asked him.

“Thought they taught that Boy Scout stuff to all you Anglos. I grew up in L.A.”

I blew out a breath, thinking fast. “Luccio’s busy. She’ll call in help for the wounded. That leaves you and me to go get the twins.”

“Fucking right we will,” Ramirez said. “How?”

“You got prisoners?”

“The two I didn’t blast, yeah.”

“We’ll ask them.”

“Think they’ll rat out their buddy?”

“If they think it’ll save their lives?” I asked. “In a heartbeat. Maybe less.”

“Weasels,” Ramirez muttered.

“They are what they are, man,” I said. “There’s no use in hating them for it. Just be glad we can use it to advantage. Let’s go.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The ghouls lay covered in grey-white dust as fine as baby powder—the remains of the wall Ramirez had blasted, their companion, his weapon, and the right arm and leg of one of the captive ghouls. The wounded ghoul, body shifted into its natural form under the stress of injury, lay panting and choking, spitting out dust. The second ghoul still looked mostly human, and was dressed in a ragged old set of sand-colored robes that looked like something out of *Lawrence of Arabia*. Another Kalashnikov lay several feet away, behind Bill Meyers, the young Warden now standing over them with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun pointed at the unwounded one of the pair.

“Careful,” Meyers said. He had the rural drawl that seems largely common to any town west of the Mississippi located more than an hour or so from a major city, though he was himself a Texan. “I ain’t searched them, and they don’t ’pear to understand English.”

“What?” Ramirez said. “That’s stupid. Who bothers to sneak ghouls into the country as covert muscle if they can’t pass as locals?”

“Someone who doesn’t have to worry about customs or border guards or witnesses or cops,” I said quietly. “Someone who takes them through the Nevernever straight here from wherever the hell they came from.” I glanced back at Ramirez. “How else do you think they got past the outer wards and sentries and right up to the camp?”

Ramirez grunted. “I thought we had those approaches warded, too.”

“Nevernever’s a tricky kind of place,” I said. “Tough to know it all. Somebody was sneakier than us.”

“Vampires?” Ramirez asked.

I very carefully said nothing about a Black Council. “Who else would it be?”

Ramirez said something to them in Spanish.

“Shoot,” Meyers drawled. “You think I didn’t try that already?”

“Hey,” I said. I stepped closer to the unwounded ghoul and nudged him with one foot. “What language do you speak?”

The not-quite-human-looking man shot a quick, furtive glance at me, and then at his companion. He sputtered something quick and liquid-sounding. His companion snarled something back through its muzzle and fangs that sounded vaguely similar.

Seconds were ticking by, and we had a pair of kids in the hands of one of these things. I directed my thoughts inward, to the corner of my brain where Lasciel’s shadow lived, and asked, *You get any of that?*

Lasciel’s presence promptly responded. *The first asked the second if he understood anything we were saying. The second replied that he hadn’t, and you were probably deciding which one of us would kill them.*

I need to talk to them, I said. *Can you translate for me?*

There was a sudden sense of someone standing close to me—an almost tangible physical sensation of someone slim and feminine pressed against my back, arms casually around my waist, soft breath and lips moving near my ear. It was odd, but not at all unpleasant. I caught myself enjoying it, and firmly reminded myself of the danger of allowing the demon to do that.

With your permission, you need only speak to them in English, my host, Lasciel said. *I will translate it between mind and mouth, and they will hear their tongue from your lips.*

I so did not need any image involving their tongues and my lips, I responded.

Lasciel let out a delighted laugh that bubbled through my mind, and I was smiling a little when I faced the ghoul and said, “Okay, asshole. I’ve got two kids missing, and the only chance you have of getting out of this alive is if I get them back. Do you understand me?”

Both ghouls looked up at me, surprise evident even on the inhuman one’s face. I got a similar look from Ramirez and Meyers.

“Do you understand me?” I asked the ghouls quietly.

“Yes,” stammered the wounded ghoul, apparently in English.

Ramirez’s dark, heavy eyebrows tried to climb up under his bush hat.

I had to remind myself that this was not very cool. I was using a dangerous tool that would one day turn on me. No matter how savvy and tough it made me look in front of the other Wardens.

Kids, Harry. Focus on the kids.

“Why did you take those children?” I demanded of the ghoul.

“They must have wandered too close to Murzhek’s position,” the mostly human ghoul said. “We did not come here for hostages. This was to be a raid. We were to hit you, then fade away.”

“Fade to where?”

The ghouls froze, and looked at each other.

I drew back one of my hiking boots and kicked the mostly human ghoul in the face. He let out a high-pitched squeal—not a snarl of rage and pain, but a sound a dog makes when it’s trying to submit beneath an attacker.

“Where?” I demanded.

“Our lives,” hissed the wounded ghoul. “Promise us our lives and freedom, great one. Give us your word of truth.”

“You gave up your freedom the moment you spilled our blood,” I snarled. “But if I get the kids back, you keep your life,” I said. “My word is given.”

The ghouls looked at each other, and then the more human of the pair said, “The deep caves above this dwelling. The first deep shaft from the light of the sun. In the stones near it is a way to the Realm of Shadows.”

I shot a thought toward my interpreter. *Does he mean the Nevernever?*

A region of it, yes, my host.

“Remain here,” I told them. “Do not move. Make no attempt to escape. At the first sign of disobedience or treachery, you will die.”

“Great one,” both of them said, and began pressing their faces into the grey dust and the sandy, rocky soil beneath. “Great one.”

“They’ve been taken to the mine,” I told Ramirez. “We go there.” I turned to the other Warden. “Meyers, they’ve surrendered. Don’t take your eyes off them for a second, and if they twitch funny, kill them. Otherwise, leave them be.”

“Right,” he said. “Let me get some of the trainees in here. I’ll go with y’all.”

“They’re trainees,” Ramirez said, his tone hard. “You’re the Warden.”

Meyers blinked at him, but then let out a gusty exhalation and nodded. “All right. Watch your ass, ’Los.”

“Come on,” I said to Ramirez, and the two of us ducked out of the ruins and ran for our tent. We recovered our gear from it—staves, Ramirez’s silver sword and grey cape, my revolver and blasting rod and duster. Then I took off up the hill at the fastest pace I thought I could hold.

Ramirez was built like an athlete, but he was more naturally inclined to sprints and bursts of strength. He probably lifted weights at the expense of doing as much running as I did. He was blowing pretty hard by the time we'd gotten halfway to the mine, and he was fifty yards behind me by the time I got there. My own lungs were tight and heaving, I could feel the beginnings of a good hard puking revving up in my belly, and my legs felt like someone had poured a gallon of isopropyl over them and ignited it, but there wasn't time to waste on recovering from the effort.

The ghouls hadn't been there to take prisoners. This one might be smart enough to have kept the kids alive to use as hostages, but I'd never found ghouls to be particularly brilliant, and the one unwavering constant I'd observed among them was an inability to restrain their appetites for any length of time.

I banged my staff hurriedly against the earth, calling up my will and reinforcing it with Hellfire, a mystical source of energy Lasciel's presence gave me the ability to utilize. I was already tired enough from my clumsy fire spell earlier and all the running that I didn't have much choice but to draw on the brimstone-scented energy and hope for the best.

The runes in my staff blazed into light, and with a little effort of will I increased the effect, until the smoldering scarlet glow spilled out in a wide circle around me. The entrance to the mine was choked with brush, low, and not ten feet in one of the supports had collapsed, all but closing the place off from the outside. I had to slide in sideways, and once I was in, the dim light from the entrance and the scarlet glow pouring from my staff were the only illumination.

I hurried forward, knowing Ramirez would be coming soon, but not willing to wait for him. The air turned cold within a dozen strides, and my panting breaths formed into tiny clouds as they left my mouth. The tunnel widened and then sloped sharply downhill. I kept my left side against the wall, my right hand holding forth my staff, both to provide me enough light to see and to make sure I had the weapon ready to interpose itself between me and anything that should come slobbering out of the shadows.

A tunnel opened on my left, and as I went by it, I heard a snarling hiss come drifting and echoing from far down its length.

I turned and hurried down it, coming upon an old track built into the floor, where ore carts would have trundled back and forth, carrying out the ore from where it was brought up a shaft from lower in the mine. The

sounds grew louder as I continued, a broader variety of the same snarling hisses.

And maybe a very soft whimper.

I probably should have been cagey at that point. I probably should have gone still, doused my light, and sneaked up to see what I could find out about things. I considered a nice, cautious recon for maybe a quarter of second.

Screw that. There were kids in danger.

I went through the remains of a wooden partition at a full charge. The ghoul, wholly inhuman and wearing the same sand-colored robes the others had been, had his back to me and was clawing at a section of rough tunnel wall with both hands. They were dark with his own blood, and a couple of his claws had broken. He was uttering snarls between desperate gasps, and Lasciel was evidently still on the job. “Betrayed,” the ghoul snarled. “*Betrayed*. Reckoning, oh, yes...balance of the scales...let me *in*!”

Everything slowed down, thoughts burning through my mind at tremendous speed. I saw everything clearly, what was in front of me, what was in my peripheral vision, and everything seemed as bright and organized as a third grader’s desk on the first day of school.

The Trailman twins were fraternal, not identical. Terry, the brother, was a couple of inches shorter than his nominally younger sister, but he stuck so far out of his shirt and pants that he had seemed well on the way to reversing that situation. He’d never get to. His body was on the floor of the cave, his face covered in a mask of blood and torn flesh. The ghoul had ripped open his throat. He’d also gotten the femoral artery on Terry’s thigh. The kid’s mouth was open, and I could see the ghoul’s disgusting blood clinging to Terry’s teeth. His knuckles were ripped open, too. The kid had died fighting.

Two feet farther on was the source of his motivation. Tina Trailman lay on the stone, staring upward with glazed eyes. She was naked from the waist down. Her throat and trapezius muscles were mostly gone, ripped away, as were her modest breasts. The quadriceps muscle of her right leg was gone, the skin around it showing the roughly torn gouges of ghoul fangs. There was blood everywhere, a sticky pool forming around her.

I saw her shudder a little. A tiny sound escaped her unmoving form. She was dead already—I knew that. I’ve seen it more than once. Her heart was still laboring, but whatever time she had left was a mere formality.

My vision went red with rage. Or maybe that was the Hellfire. I called upon still more of the dark energy in midleap, staff gripped in both hands, and rammed the tip into the small of the ghouls back as I snarled, *“Fuego!”*

The blow, with all my weight and power and speed behind it, probably broke a couple of the ghouls vertebrae all by itself. The fire spell came rushing out at the same time, filling the tunnel with thunder and light.

Tremendous heat blossomed before me, rushed into the ghouls, and tore him in half at the waist.

The same thermal bloom washed into the stone wall behind the creature and rebounded. I got an arm up to shield my face, and I dropped the staff so that I could draw my hands into my dusters sleeves. I managed to keep much skin from being directly exposed, but it hurt like hell all the same. I remembered that, later. At the time, I didnt give a flying fuck.

I kicked the ghouls wildly thrashing lower body into the blackness of the mine shaft. Then I turned to the upper half.

The ghouls blood wasnt red, so he burned black and brown, like a burger that fell into the barbecue just as it was finished cooking. He thrashed and screamed and somehow managed to flip himself onto his back. He held up his arms, fingers spread in desperation, and cried, “Mercy, great one! Mercy!”

Sixteen years old.

Jesus Christ.

I stared down for a second. I didnt want to kill the ghouls. That wasnt nearly enough to cover the debt of its sins. I wanted to rip it to pieces. I wanted to eat its heart. I wanted to pin it to the floor and push my thumbs through its beady eyes and all the way into its brain. I wanted to tear it apart with my fingernails and my teeth, and spit mouthfuls of its own pustuled flesh into its face as it died in slow and terrible agony.

The quality of mercy was not Harry.

I called up the Hellfire again, and with a snarl cast out the simple spell I use to light candles. Backed by Hellfire, directed by my fury, it lashed out at the ghouls, plunged beneath its skin, and there it set fat and nerves and sinews alight. They burned, burned using the ghouls for tallow, and the thing went mad with the pain.

I reached down to the ghouls, caught him by the remains of his robes, and hauled him up to my eye level, ignoring the little runnels of flame that

occasionally licked up from the inferno beneath the ghoul's skin. I stared into its face. Then forced it to look at the bodies. Then I turned it back to me, and my voice came out in a snarl so inhuman that I barely understood it myself.

"Never," I told it. "Never again."

Then I threw it down the shaft.

It burst into open flame a second later, the rush of its fall feeding the fires in its flesh. I watched it plummet, heard it wailing in terror and pain. Then, far below, it struck something. The flame flowered and brightened for a second. Then it began to slowly die away. I couldn't make out any details of the ghoul, but nothing moved.

I looked up in time to see Ramirez come through the ruins of the wooden partition. He stared at me for a second, where I stood over the mine shaft, dark smoke rising from the surface of my duster, red light shining up from far below, the stench of brimstone heavy in the air.

Ramirez is rarely at a loss for words.

He stared for a moment. Then his eyes tracked over to the dead kids. His breath escaped him in a short, hard jerk. His shoulders sagged. He dropped to one knee, turning his head away from the sight. "*Dios.*"

I picked up my staff and started walking back to the camp.

Ramirez caught up with me a few paces later. "Dresden," he said.

I ignored him.

"*Harry!*"

"Sixteen, Carlos," I said. "Sixteen. It had them for less than eight minutes."

"Harry, wait."

"What the hell was I thinking?" I snarled, stepping out into the sunlight. "Staff and blasting rod and most of my gear in the damned tent. We're at war."

"There was security in place," Ramirez said. "We've been here for two days. There was no way you could know this was coming."

"We're Wardens, Carlos. We're supposed to protect people. I could have done more to be ready."

He got in front of me and planted his feet. I stopped and narrowed my eyes at him.

"You're right," he said. "This is a war. Bad things happen to people, even if no one makes any mistakes."

I don't remember consciously doing it, but the runes of my staff began to burn with Hellfire again.

"Carlos," I said quietly. "Get out of my way."

He ground his teeth, but his eyes flickered away from me. He didn't actually turn, but when I brushed past him, he didn't try to stop me.

At the camp, I caught one brief glimpse of Luccio as she helped carry a wounded trainee on a stretcher. She stepped into a glowing line of light in the air, an opened way to the Nevernever, and vanished. Reinforcements had arrived. There were Wardens with medical kits, stretchers, the works, trying to stabilize the wounded and get them to better help. The trainees looked shocked, numb, staring around them—and at two silent shapes lying close together over to one side, covered from their heads to their knees by an unzipped sleeping bag.

I stormed into the smithy and snarled, "*Forzare!*" putting all my rage and will into a lashing column of force directed at the captured ghouls.

The spell blew the remaining wall of the smithy and the two ghouls fifty feet through the air and onto a relatively flat area of the street. I walked after them. I didn't hurry. In fact, I picked up a jug of orange juice off one of the breakfast tables, and drank some of it as I went.

The mountainside was completely silent.

Once I reached them, another blast opened up a six-foot crater in the sandy earth. I kicked the mostly human ghoul into it, and with several more such blasts collapsed the crater in on him, burying him to the neck.

Then I called fire and melted the sand around the ghoul's exposed head into a sheet of glass.

It screamed and screamed, which did not matter to me in the least. The sheer heat of the molten sand burned away its features, its eyes, its lips and tongue, even as the trauma forced the ghoul into its true form. I upended the jug of juice. Some of it splashed on the ghoul's head. Some of it sizzled on the narrow band of glass around it. I walked calmly, pouring orange juice on the ground in a steady line until, ten feet later, I reached the enormous nest of fire ants one of the trainees had stumbled into on our first day at Camp Kaboom.

Presently, the first scouts started following the trail back to the ghoul.

I turned on the second ghoul.

It cringed away from me, holding completely still. The only sound was the raw whisper-screams of the other ghoul.

"I'm not going to kill you," I told the ghoul in a very quiet voice. "You get to carry word to your kind." I thrust the end of my staff against its chest and stared down. Wisps of sulfurous smoke trickled down the length of the wooden shaft and over the maimed ghoul. "Tell them this." I leaned closer. "Never again. Tell them that. Never again. Or Hell itself will not hide you from me."

The ghoul groveled. "Great one. Great one."

I roared again and started kicking the ghoul as hard as I could. I kept it up until it floundered away from me, heading for the open desert with only one leg and one arm, the movements freakish and terrified.

I watched until the maimed ghoul was gone.

By then, the ants had found his buddy. I stood over it for a time and beheld what I had wrought without looking away.

I felt Ramirez's presence behind me. "*Dios*," he whispered.

I said nothing.

Moments later, Ramirez said, "What happened to not hating them?"

"Things change."

Ramirez didn't move, and his voice was so low I could barely hear it. "How many lessons will it take the kids to learn this one, do you think?"

The rage came swarming up again.

"Battle is one thing," Ramirez said. "This is something else. Look at them."

I suddenly felt the weight of dozens and dozens of eyes upon me. I turned to find the trainees, all pale, shocked, and silent, staring at me. They looked terrified.

I fought the frustration and anger back down. Ramirez was right. Of course he was right. Dammit.

I drew my gun and executed the ghoul.

"*Dios*," Ramirez breathed. He stared at me for a moment. "Never seen you like this."

I started feeling the minor burns. The sun began turning Camp Kaboom into a giant cookie sheet that would sear away anything soft. "Like what?"

"Cold," he said, finally. "That's the only way to serve it up," I said. "Cold."

Cold.

Cold.

I came back to myself. No more New Mexico. Dark. Cold, so cold that it burned. Chest tight.

I was in the water.

My chest hurt. I managed to look up.

Sun shone down on fractured ice about eight inches thick. It came back to me. The battle aboard the *Water Beetle*. The ghouls. The lake. The ice had broken and I had fallen through.

I couldn't see far, and when the ghoul came through the water, swimming like a crocodile, its arms flat against its sides, it was close enough to touch. It spotted me at the same time, and turned away.

Never again.

I reached out and grabbed on to the back of the jeans the ghoul still wore. It panicked, swimming fast, and dived down into the cold and dark, trying to scare me into letting go.

I was aware that I had to breathe, and that I was already beginning to black out. I dismissed it as unimportant. This ghoul was never going to hurt anyone else, ever again, if I had to die to make sure of it. Everything started going dark.

And then there was another pale shape in the water. Thomas, this time, shirtless, holding that crooked knife in his teeth. He closed on the ghoul, which writhed and twisted with such fear and desperation that it tore my weakening fingers loose from their grip.

I drifted. Felt something cold wrap my right wrist. Felt light coming closer, painfully bright.

And then my face was out of the frozen water, and I sucked in a weak gasp of air. I felt a slender arm slip under my chin, and then I was being pulled through the water. Elaine. I'd recognize the touch of her skin to mine anywhere.

We broke the surface, and she let out a gasp, then started pulling me toward the dock. With the help of Olivia and the other women, Elaine managed to get me up out of the lake. I fell to my side and lay there shivering violently, gasping down all the air I could. The world slowly began to return to its usual shape, but I was too tired to do anything about it.

I don't know how much time went by, but the sirens were close by the time Thomas appeared and hauled himself out of the water.

"Go," Thomas said. "Can he walk? Is he shot?"

“No,” Elaine said. “It might be shock; I don’t know. I think he hit his head on something.”

“We can’t stay here,” Thomas said. I felt him pick me up and sling me over a shoulder. He did it as gently as such a thing can be done.

“Right,” Elaine said. “Come on. Everyone, keep up and don’t get separated.”

I felt motion. My head hurt. A lot.

“I gotcha,” Thomas said to me, as he started walking. “It’s cool, Harry,” he murmured. “They’re safe. We got everyone clear. I gotcha.”

My brother’s word was good enough for me.

I closed my eyes and stopped trying to keep track of things.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The touch of very warm, very gentle fingers woke me.

My head hurt, even more than it had after Cowl had finished ringing my bells the night before, if such a thing was possible. I didn't want to regain consciousness, if it meant rising into that.

But those soft, warm fingers touched me, steady and exquisitely feminine, and the pain began to fade. That had the effect it always did. When the pain was gone, its simple lack was a nearly narcotic pleasure of its own.

It was more than that, too. There is a primal reassurance in being touched, in knowing that someone else, someone close to you, wants to be touching you. There is a bone-deep security that goes with the brush of a human hand, a silent, reflex-level affirmation that someone is near, that someone cares.

It seemed that, lately, I had barely been touched at all.

"Dammit, Lash," I mumbled. "I told you to stop doing that."

The fingers stiffened for a second, and Elaine said, "What was that, Harry?"

I blinked and opened my eyes.

I was lying on a bed in dim hotel room. The ceiling tiles were old and water stained. The furniture was similarly simple, cheap, battered by long and careless use and little maintenance.

Elaine sat at the head of the bed with her legs crossed. My head lay comfortably upon her calves, as it had so many times before. My legs hung off the end of the bed, also as they had often done before, a long time ago, in a house I barely remembered except in dreams.

"Am I hurting you, Harry?" Elaine pressed. I couldn't see her expression without craning my neck, and that seemed a bad idea, but she sounded concerned.

"No," I said. "No, just waking up groggy. Sorry."

"Ah," she said. "Who is Lash?"

“No one I especially want to discuss.”

“All right,” she said. There was nothing but gentle assent in her tone. “Then just lie back for a few moments more and let me finish. Your friend the vampire said that they’d be watching the hospitals.”

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“Reiki,” she replied.

“Laying on of hands?” I said. “That stuff works?”

“The principles are sound,” she said, and I felt something silky brush over my forehead. Her hair. I recognized it by touch and smell. She had bowed her head in concentration. Her voice became distracted. “I was able to combine them with some basic principles for moving energy. I haven’t found a way to handle critical trauma or to manage infections, but it’s surprisingly effective in handling bruises, sprains, and bumps on the head.”

No kidding. The headache was already gone completely. The tightness in my head and neck was fading as well, as were the twinges in my upper back and shoulders.

And a beautiful woman was touching me.

Elaine was touching me.

I wouldn’t have done anything to stop her if I’d had a thousand paper cuts and she’d soaked her hands in lemon juice.

We simply stayed like that for a time. Once in while, she moved her hands, palms running down lightly over my cheeks, neck, chest. Her hands would move in slow, repetitive stroking motions, barely touching my skin. I’d lost my shirt at some point. All of those aches and pains of exertion and combat faded away, leaving only a happy cloud of endorphins behind. Her hands were warm, slow, infinitely patient and infinitely confident.

It felt amazing.

I drifted on the sensations, utterly content.

“All right,” she said quietly, an unknown amount of time later. “How does that feel?”

“Incredible,” I said.

I could hear the smile in her voice. “You always say that when I’m done touching you.”

“Not my fault if it’s always true,” I replied.

“Flatterer,” she said, and her fingers gently slapped one of my shoulders. “Let me up, ape.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I drawled.

“Men. I pay you the least bit of attention, and you go completely Paleolithic on me.”

“Ugh,” I replied, and slowly sat up, expecting a surge of discomfort and nausea as the blood rushed around my head. There wasn’t any.

I frowned and ran my fingers lightly over my scalp. There was a lump on the side of my skull that should have felt like hell. Instead, it was only a little tender. I’ve been thumped on the melon before. I know the residue of a hard blow. This felt like a bad one, only after I’d had about a week to recover. “How long have I been down?”

“Eight hours, maybe?” Elaine asked. She rose from the bed and stretched. It was every bit as intriguing and pleasant to watch as I remembered. “I sort of lose track when I’m focused on something.”

“I remember,” I murmured.

Elaine froze in place, and her green eyes glittered in the dimness as she met my gaze in a kind of relaxed, insolent silence. Then a little smile touched her lips. “I suppose you would.”

My heart lurched and sped up, and I started getting ideas.

None of which could be properly pursued at the moment.

I saw Elaine reach the same conclusion at about the same time I did. She lowered her arms, smiled again and said, “Excuse me. I’ve been sitting there a while.” Then she paced into the bathroom.

I went to the hotel’s window and opened the cheap blinds a tiny bit. We were somewhere on the south side. Dusk was on the city, the streetlights already flickering into life one by one, as the shadows crept out from beneath the buildings and oozed slowly up the light poles. I checked around but saw no shark fins circling, no vultures wheeling overhead, and no obvious ghouls or vampires lurking nearby, just waiting to pounce. That didn’t mean they weren’t there, though.

I went to the door and touched it lightly with my left hand. Elaine had spun another ward over the door, a subtle, solid crafting that would release enough kinetic energy to throw anyone who tried to open it a good ten or twelve feet away. It was perfect for a quick exit, if you were expecting trouble and ready for it when it arrived. Just wait for the bad guy to get bitch-slapped into the parking lot, then dash out the door and run off before he regained his feet.

I heard Elaine come out of the bathroom behind me. “What happened?” I asked.

“What do you remember?”

“Madrigal opened up with that assault rifle. Flash of light. Then I was in the water.”

Elaine came to stand next to me and also glanced out. Her hand brushed mine when she lowered it from the blinds, and without even thinking about it, I twined my fingers in hers. It was an achingly familiar sensation, and another pang of half-remembered days long gone made my chest ache for a second.

Elaine shivered a little and closed her eyes. Her fingers tightened, very slightly, on mine. “We thought he’d killed you,” she said. “You started to crouch down, and there were bullets shattering the ice all around you. You went into the water, and the vampire...Madrigal, did you say his name was? He ordered the ghouls in after you. I sent Olivia and the others to the shore, and Thomas and I went into the water to find you.”

“Who hit me in the head?” I asked.

Elaine shrugged. “Either a bullet hit your coat after you crouched down, and then bounced off your thick skull without penetrating, or you slammed it against some of the shattered ice as you went under.”

A bullet might have bounced off my head, thanks to the intervening fabric of my spell-covered coat. That was a sobering sort of thing to hear, even for me. “Thank you,” I said. “For getting me out.”

Elaine arched an eyebrow, then gave me a little roll of her eyes and said, “I was bored and didn’t have anything better to do.”

“I figured,” I said. “Thomas?”

“He’s all right. He had a car near the docks. I drove that clown car of yours, and we shoehorned everyone into them and got away clean. With any luck, Madrigal had a tougher time avoiding the cops than we did.”

“Nah,” I said, with total conviction. “Too easy. He got away. Where’s Thomas?”

“Standing watch outside, he said.” Elaine frowned. “He looked...very pale. He refused to stay in the room with his refugees. Or me, for that matter.”

I grunted. Thomas had really put on his Supervamp cape back at the harbor. Under ordinary circumstances, he was surprisingly strong for a man of his size and build. But even unusually strong men don’t go toe-to-toe with ghouls armed with nothing but a big stick and come away clean. Thomas could make himself stronger—a *lot* stronger—but not forever. The

demon knit to my brother's soul could make him into a virtual godling, but it also increased his hunger for the life force of mortals, burning away whatever he had stored up in exchange for the improved performance.

After that fight, Thomas had to be hungry. So hungry that he didn't trust himself in a room with anyone he considered, well, edible. Which, in our escape party, had been everyone but me and the kids.

He must have been hurting.

"What about the Ordo?" I asked her quietly.

"I didn't want to go until I could be certain that I wouldn't lead anyone back to them. I called them every couple of hours to make sure they were all right. I should check in with them again."

She turned to the phone before she finished the sentence and dialed a number. I waited. She was silent. After a moment, she hung up the phone again.

"No answer," I said quietly.

"No," she said. She turned to the dresser, gathered up her length of chain, and threaded it through the loops of her jeans like a belt, fastening it with a slightly curved piece of dark wood bound with several bands of colored leather, which she slipped through two links.

I opened the door and stuck my head out into the twilight, looking around. I didn't see Thomas anywhere, so I let out a sharp, loud whistle, waved an arm around a little, and ducked back inside, closing the door again.

It didn't take long for Thomas's footsteps to reach the door.

"Harry," Elaine said, mildly alarmed. "The ward."

I held up a forefinger in a one-second kind of gesture, then folded my arms, stared at the door, and waited. The doorknob twitched; there was a heavy thud, a gasp of surprise, and a loud clatter of empty trash cans.

I opened the door and found my brother flat on his back in the parking lot, amidst a moderate amount of spilled garbage. He stared up at the sky for a moment, let out a long-suffering sigh, and then sat up, scowling at me.

"Oh, sorry about that," I said, with all the sincerity of a three-year-old claiming he didn't steal that cookie all over his face. "Maybe I should have *told you about a potentially dangerous situation*, huh? I mean, that would have been polite of me to warn you, right? And sensible. And intelligent. And respectful. And—"

“I get it, I get it,” he growled. He got up and made a doomed effort to brush various bits of unsavory matter off his clothes. “Jesus Christ, Harry. There are days when you can be a total prick.”

“Whereas *you* can apparently be a complete *moron* for *weeks* at a time!”

Elaine stepped up beside me and said, “I love to see a good testosterone-laden alpha-male dominance struggle as much as the next woman—but don’t you think it would be smarter to do it where half of the city can’t see us?”

I scowled at Elaine, but she had a point. I stepped out the door and offered Thomas my hand.

He glowered at me, then deliberately ran his hand through some of the muck and held it out to me without wiping it off. I rolled my eyes and pulled him to his feet, and then the three of us went back into the room.

Thomas leaned his back against the door, folded his arms, and kept his eyes on the floor while I went to the sink and washed off my hands. My coat hung on one of the wire hangers on the bar beside it, as did my shirt. My staff rested in a corner by the light switch, and my other gear was on the counter. I dried off my hands and started suiting up. “Okay, Thomas,” I said. “Seriously. What’s up with the secrecy? You should have contacted me.”

“I couldn’t,” he said.

“Why not?”

“I promised someone I wouldn’t.”

I frowned at that, tugging the still-damp black leather glove onto my disfigured left hand, and tried to think. Thomas and I were brothers. He took that every bit as seriously as I did—but he took his promises seriously, too. If he’d made the promise, he had a good reason to do so.

“How much can you tell me?”

Elaine gave me a sharp glance.

“I’ve already said more than I should have,” Thomas said.

“Don’t be an idiot. We’ve obviously got a common enemy here.”

Thomas grimaced, gave me a hesitant glance, and then said, “We’ve got several.”

I traded a glance with Elaine, who glanced at Thomas, shrugged, and suggested, “Bruises fade?”

“No,” I said. “If he isn’t talking he has a good reason for it. Beating him up won’t change that.”

“Then we should stop wasting time here,” Elaine said quietly.

Thomas looked back and forth between us. “What’s wrong?”

“We’ve lost contact with the women Elaine is protecting,” I said.

“Dammit.” Thomas pushed his hand back through his hair. “That means...”

I fastened the clasp on the new shield bracelet. “What?”

“Look. You already know Madrigal is around,” Thomas said.

“And that he’s always sucking up to House Malvora,” I said. I frowned. “For the love of God, he’s the Passenger.” He’s the one working with Grey Cloak the Malvora.”

“I didn’t say that,” Thomas said quickly.

“You didn’t have to,” I growled. “He didn’t just happen to show up for some payback while this other stuff was going on. And it all fits. Passenger was talking to Grey Cloak about having the resources to take me out. He obviously decided to take a whack at it with a bunch of ghouls and a machine gun.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Thomas said. “You already know that there’s a Skavis around.”

“Yes.”

“Time to do some math then, Harry.”

“Madrigal and Grey Cloak the Malvora,” I murmured. “The genocidal odd couple. Neither of which is a Skavis.”

Elaine drew in a sharp breath and said, at the same time I was thinking it, “It means that we aren’t talking about one killer.”

I completed the thought. “We’re talking about three of them. Grey Cloak Malvora, Passenger Madrigal, and Serial Killer Skavis.” I frowned at Thomas. “Wait. Are you saying that—”

My brother’s expression became strained. “I’m not saying anything,” he replied. “Those are all things you already know.”

Elaine frowned. “You’re trying to maintain deniability,” she said. “Why?”

“So I can *deny* telling you anything, obviously,” Thomas snarled, his eyes suddenly flickering several shades of grey lighter as he stared at Elaine.

Elaine drew in a sharp breath. Then she narrowed her eyes a little, unfastened the clasp on her chain, and said, “Stop it, vampire. Now.”

Thomas's lips pulled back from his teeth, but he jerked his face away from her and closed his eyes.

I stepped between them as I shrugged into my leather duster. "Elaine, back off. The enemy of my enemy. Okay?"

"I don't like it," Elaine said. "You know what he is, Harry. How do you know you can trust him?"

"I've worked with him before," I said. "He's different."

"How? A lot of vampires feel remorse about their victims. It doesn't stop them from killing over and over. It's what they are."

"I've gazed him," I said quietly. "He's trying to rise above the killer inside him."

Elaine's brows knit into a frown at those words, and she gave me a slow and reluctant nod. "Aren't we all," she murmured. "I'm still not comfortable with the notion of him near my clients. And we need to get moving."

"Go ahead," Thomas said.

I didn't look at my brother, but I said, "You need to eat."

"Maybe later," Thomas said. "I can't leave the women and children ungarded."

I grabbed a pad of cheap paper with the hotel's logo and found a pencil in one of my pockets. I wrote a number on it and passed it to Thomas. "Call Murphy. You won't be able to protect anyone if you're too weak, and you might kill one of them if you lose control of the hunger."

Thomas's jaw tightened with frustration, but he took the offered piece of paper from my hand only a little more roughly than necessary.

Elaine studied him as she walked to the door with me. Then she said to him, "You're different from most of them, aren't you?"

"Probably just more deluded," Thomas replied. "Good luck, Harry."

"Yeah," I said, feeling awkward. "Look. After this is done...we have to talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," my brother said.

We left and I closed the door behind us.

We took the Blue Beetle back to the Amber Inn and went to Elaine's room. The lights were off. The room was empty.

There was a terrible sewer smell in the air.

"*Dammit*," Elaine whispered. She suddenly sagged and leaned against the doorway.

I stepped past her and turned on the light in the bathroom.

Anna Ash's corpse stood in the shower, body stiff, leaning away from the showerhead, but held in place by the electrical cord of a hair dryer, tied in a knot about the showerhead and another around her neck. There hadn't been room enough for her to suspend herself with her feet off the floor. Ugly, purple-black ligature marks showed on her neck around the cord.

It was obviously a suicide.

It obviously wasn't.

We were too late.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“We’ve got to call the cops on this one,” I said quietly to Elaine.

“No,” she replied. “They’ll want to question us. It will take hours.”

“They’ll want to question us a lot longer if someone else finds the body and they have to come looking for us.”

“And while we’re cooperating with the authorities, what happens to Abby, Helen, and Priscilla?” She stared at me. “For that matter, what happens to Mouse?”

That was a thought I’d been trying to avoid. If Mouse was alive and capable, there was no way he’d let any of the women be harmed. If someone had killed Anna when Mouse was near, it could have happened only over his dead body.

But there was no sign of him.

That could mean a lot of things. At worst it meant that he had been utterly disintegrated by whatever had come for the women. Not only was that assumption depressing as hell, it also didn’t get me anywhere. A bad guy who could simply disintegrate anything that got in the way sure wouldn’t be pussyfooting around the way these White Court yahoos had been.

Mouse wasn’t here. There was no mess, no sign of a struggle, and believe you me, that dog can put up a struggle, as the vets found out when they misfiled his paperwork. They tried to neuter him instead of vaccinating him and getting his shoulder X-rayed where he’d bounced off of a moving minivan. I was lucky they were willing to let me pay the property damage and leave it at that.

It had to mean something else. Maybe my dog had left with the others, and Anna had remained behind, or gone back for something she forgot.

Or maybe Mouse had played on everyone’s expectation that he was just a dog. He’d shown me that he was capable of that kind of subterfuge before, and it had been one of the first things that tipped me off to his distinctly

superior-to-canine intellect. What if Mouse had played along and stayed close to the others?

Why would he do that, though?

Because Mouse knew I could find him. Unless the bad guys carried him off to the Nevernever itself, or put him behind a set of wards specifically designed to block such magic, my tracking spell could find him anywhere.

That was the path to take, even if Mouse didn't know anything was wrong. He would have stayed with any members of the Ordo that he could, and I had taken to planning ahead a little more than I used to do. I could use my shield bracelet to target the single small shield charm I'd hung from his collar for just such an emergency. Me and Foghorn Leghorn.

"Can you find the dog?" Elaine asked.

"Yeah. But we should try calling their homes before we go."

Elaine frowned. "You told them to stay here, or somewhere public."

"Odds are pretty good that they're scared. And when you're scared..."

"...you want to go home," Elaine finished.

"If they're there, it'll be the quickest way to get in touch. If not, it hasn't cost us more than a minute or two."

Elaine nodded. "Anna had all the numbers in a notebook in her purse." We turned up the purse after a brief search, but the notebook wasn't in it.

There wasn't anything for it but to make sure that Anna hadn't slipped it into a pocket before she died. I checked, and tried not to leave any prints almost as hard as I tried not to look at her dead, purpling face or glazed eyes. It hadn't been a clean death, and even though Anna hadn't been gone long enough to start decomposition, the smell was formidable. I tried to ignore it.

It was harder to ignore her face. The skin had the stiff, waxy look that dead bodies get. Worse, there was a distinct and unquantifiable quality of... absence. Anna Ash had been very much alive—fierce of will, protective, determined. I know plenty of wizards without the force of personality she had. She'd been the one thinking and acting when all of those around her were frightened. That takes a rare kind of courage.

None of which meant anything, since, despite my efforts, the killer had taken her anyway.

I shook my head and stepped away from the corpse, having turned up no notebook. Her willingness to face danger on behalf of her friends couldn't be allowed to vanish silently into the past. If some of those she sought to

protect were still alive, then her own sacrifice and death could still mean something. I could be bitter about her death later. I would be doing a grave disservice to the woman if I let it do anything but make me more motivated to stop the killers before they had finished their work.

I came face-to-face with Elaine, who stood in the doorway, staring at Anna's body. There was no expression on her face, absolutely none. Tears, though, had reddened her eyes and streaked over her cheeks and down her nose. Some women are pretty when they cry. Elaine gets all blotchy and runny-nosed, and it brought out the dark, tired circles beneath her eyes.

It didn't look pretty. It just looked like pain.

She spoke, and her voice came out rough and quavering. "I told her I would protect her."

"Sometimes you try," I said quietly. "Sometimes that's all you do. Try. That's how the game works."

"Game," she said. The single word was caustic enough to melt holes in the floor. "Has it ever happened to you? Someone who came to you for help was killed?"

I nodded. "Couple of times. First time was Kim Delaney. A girl I had trained to keep her talent under control. Maybe a little stronger than the women in the Ordo, but not much. She got involved in bad business. Over her head. I thought I could warn her off, that she would listen to me. I should have known better."

"What happened?"

I tilted my head back at the body behind me, without actually looking. "Something ate her. I go to her grave sometimes."

"Why?"

"To bring her some flowers and sweep off the leaves. To remind me of the stakes I play for. To remind me that nobody wins them all."

"And after?" Elaine asked me quietly. She hadn't looked away from the corpse. Not for a second. "What did you do to the thing that killed her?"

It was a complicated answer, but it wasn't what Elaine needed to hear right then. "I killed it."

She nodded again. "When we catch up to the Skavis, I want it."

I put a hand on her shoulder and said, very gently, "It won't make you feel any better."

She shook her head. "That's not why I want to do it. It was my job. I've got to finish my job. I owe her that much."

I didn't think Elaine herself thought the statement was untrue, but I'd gone through this kind of thing before, and it can unbalance your tires pretty damned quick. There was no point, though, in trying to discuss it with her rationally. Reason had left the building.

"You'll get him," I said quietly. "I'll help."

She let out one little broken, cawing sob and pressed against my chest. I held her, warm and slender, and felt the terrible remorse and frustration and grief that coursed through her. I pressed my presence against her and tightened my arms around her and felt her body shaking with silent sobs. More than anything, at that moment, I wished I could make her torment go away.

I couldn't. Being a wizard gives you more power than most, but it doesn't change your heart. We're all human.

We're all of us equally naked before the jaws of pain.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Not a full minute later, I could feel Elaine beginning the struggle to get her breathing under control. DuMorne's methods of teaching us to discipline our emotions had not been gentle, but they worked. Before another minute went by Elaine's breathing had steadied, and she leaned her head against my collarbone for a moment, a silent gesture of gratitude. Then she straightened, and I lowered my arms. She bowed her head toward Anna's corpse, an almost formal gesture of respect or farewell.

When she turned around, I was waiting for her with a damp, cool washcloth. I said quietly, "Hold still," and gently wiped her face clean. "You have to uphold the gumshoe image. Can't go out blotchy. People will think we're not hard-boiled. Very important to be hard-boiled."

She watched me as I cleaned her face and talked, and her eyes looked huge. A very small smile touched them through the sadness. "I'm glad you're here to tell me these things," she said, her voice steady again before it slipped into a bourbon-tainted, lockjawed Humphrey Bogart impersonation. "Now stop flapping your gums and start walking."

My tracking spell led us to an apartment building.

"This is Abby's building," Elaine said as I pulled over. The only close place to park was in front of a hydrant. I doubted any industrious civil servants would be handing out tickets this late, but even if they were, it would be cheap compared to what a long walk in the dark could cost me.

"Which apartment?" I asked.

"Ninth floor," Elaine replied. She shut the door of the Beetle a little harder than she had to.

"It occurs to me," I said, "that if I was a bad guy and wanted to off a couple of intrepid hard-boiled wizards, I might be hanging around watching someplace like this."

"It occurs to me," Elaine said, her voice crisp, "that he would be exceptionally foolish to make the attempt."

We walked together, quickly. Elaine was tall enough to keep up with me without taking the occasional skipping step. She'd slipped half a dozen coppery bracelets over each wrist, all of them slender, all of them hanging more heavily than they should have. Faint glints of golden energy played among them, and looked like little more than the glitter of light on metal—except that you could see them better when the bracelets were in deep shadows.

By silent agreement, we skipped the elevators. I had my shield bracelet ready to go, and my staff was quivering with leashed energy that made it wave and wobble incongruously to its weight and motion as I moved. That much readied magic could have unfortunate consequences on electrical equipment, like elevator control panels.

The doors to the stairs opened only from the other side, but I conjured a quick spell to shove against the pressure bar on the far side using my staff, and it swung open. We slipped into the stairway. Anyone waiting for us above would be watching the elevator first. Anyone chasing after us would have a hard time with the locked doors, and would make noise on the open concrete stairs.

I checked my gun with my left hand, safe in the pocket of my duster. Magic is groovy, but when it comes to dealing out death, regular mortal know-how can be just as impressive.

Nine floors up was enough to make me breathe hard, though not as hard as I once would have. A faint ghost of a headache came along with the elevated heart rate. Hell's bells, I must have been hurt a lot worse than I thought, back at the harbor. Elaine looked a little strained, herself. If she'd really smoothed away that much of an injury, she had more skill than she'd told me she did. That kind of healing isn't a matter of trivial effort, either. She might be more fragile than she appeared.

I opened the fire door on Abby's floor, and let Elaine take the lead. She went down the center of the hallway in total silence, her hands slightly outstretched, and I got the sense that she was somehow perfectly aware of everything around her—more so than human senses would account for. The bracelets on her wrists glittered more brightly. Superior awareness as a defense, then, instead of my own, more direct approach of meeting power with power and stopping things cold. Just her style.

But neither hyperawareness nor irresistible force was called for. Elaine reached a door and raised a hand to knock. Just before it fell, the door

opened, and a strained-looking Abby gave us a quick nod. “Good, a little early, that’s good; come in, yes, come in.”

I started forward, but Elaine held up one hand to halt me, her eyes distracted. “Let me check. Another woman inside. Two dogs.” She glanced at me, and lowered her hand. “One of them is your dog.”

“Mouse?” I called.

The floor shook a little, and the big, dark grey dog nudged rather delicately past Abby and came to greet me, shoving his head into my stomach until I went down on one knee and got a sloppy kiss or two on the face.

I slapped his shoulders roughly a few times, because I’m supremely manly and did not tear up a little to see that he was all right and still attached to his collar. “Good to see you, too, furface.”

Toto trotted out behind Mouse, like a tiny tugboat escorting an enormous barge, and gave a suspicious growl. Then he pattered over to me and sniffed me, sneezed several times, and evidently found me acceptable, underneath the smell of lake water. He hurried back over to Abby, gave me one more growl to make sure I’d learned my lesson, and bounced around her feet until she picked him up.

The plump little blonde settled the dog in her arms and faced me with concern. “What happened? I mean, the two of you left and what happened, where did you go, is Olivia—”

“Let’s go inside,” I said, rising. I traded a look with Elaine, and we all went into Abby’s apartment. Mouse never left actual, physical contact with me, his shoulders pressing steadily, lightly, against my leg. I was the last through the door and closed it behind me.

Abby’s place was a modest, hectic little apartment, segregated into neatly compartmentalized areas. She had a desk with a typewriter, a table with an old sewing machine, a chair beside a music stand with a violin (unless maybe it was a viola) resting on it, a reading niche with an armchair and overloaded shelves of romance novels, and what looked something like a shrine dedicated to ancestor worship, only in reverse, where the saints were all children with round cheeks and blond ringlets.

Priscilla was there, seated in the comfortable chair in the reading niche, looking haggard and much subdued. There was a cup of tea sitting on the little table beside the reading chair, but it had apparently gone cold without ever having been touched. She looked up at me, her eyes heavy and dull.

“Olivia’s all right,” I said quietly.

Abby brightened a second before I started speaking, drawing in a sharp little breath. The little dog in her arms caught her mood at once, and began wagging his tail at me. “Yes?”

“A...sometime associate of mine, the man in the pictures, has been taking women who were in danger of being a target of the killers out of the city. He learned Olivia was in danger and urged her to leave with him when he took several women to a safe house.”

Priscilla stared at me hard for a long moment. Then she said, “What else?”

Elaine spoke, her voice quiet and unflinching. “Anna’s dead. Back at the hotel room. An apparent suicide.”

Abby let out a little gagging sound. She sat down very quickly in the chair by the violin. Toto let out small, distressed sounds. “Wh-what?” Abby asked.

Priscilla shuddered and bowed her head. “Oh. Oh, no. Oh, Anna.”

“I need to know, ladies,” I said quietly. “Why didn’t you do as we instructed? Why did you leave the hotel?”

“It...” Abby began. Tears overflowed her cheeks. “It was...was...”

“She said,” Priscilla said in a quiet, dull voice. “Said that she had to leave. That she had to go to work.”

Son of a bitch. I *knew* it.

Elaine was half a beat behind me. “Who?”

“H-Helen,” Abby sobbed. “It was Helen.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I stood there fuming while Elaine coaxed the rest of the story out of Abby and Priscilla.

"It was only an hour or so after you left," Abby told Elaine. "Helen got a call on her cell phone."

"Cell phone?" I perked up. "She had one that worked?"

"She doesn't have a lot of talent that way," Abby said. "None of us do, really. Even my cell phone works most of the time."

I grunted. "Means she wasn't hiding a bigger talent, then. That's worth something."

"Harry," Elaine said quietly. It was a rebuke. "Please go on, Abby."

I zipped my mouth shut.

"She got a call, and she went into the bathroom to talk. I couldn't hear what she said, but when she came out, she said she had to go to work. That she was leaving."

I lifted my eyebrows. "That's quite a job, if she's risking exposure to a killer to show up for the shift."

"That's what I said," Priscilla said, her voice even more bitter, if such a thing was possible. "It was stupid. I never even thought to be suspicious of it."

"Anna argued with her," Abby went on, "but Helen refused to stay. So Anna wanted us all to take her there together."

"Helen wouldn't have any of it, of course," Priscilla said. "At the time, I thought she might just be ashamed of us seeing her working some nothing little job at a fast-food restaurant or something."

"We never really knew what she did," Abby said, her tone numb and apologetic. "She never wanted to talk about it. We always assumed it was an issue of pride." She petted the little dog in her arms idly. "She said something about keeping us separate from the rest of her life...in any case, Anna put her into a cab and made her promise to keep in touch with us. Calling in on the phone until she was safely around other people."

“You just let her walk?” I broke in.

“She’s a sister of the Ordo,” Priscilla said. “Not a criminal to be distrusted and watched.”

“In point of fact,” I said, “she *is* a criminal to be distrusted and watched. Ask her freaking parole officer.”

Elaine frowned at me. “Dammit, Harry. This isn’t helping.”

I muttered under my breath, folded my arms again, and crouched down to give Mouse’s ears and neck a good scratching. Maybe it would help me keep my mouth shut. There’s a first time for everything.

“Helen called me about twenty minutes later,” Priscilla said. “She said that she had been followed from the hotel. That our location had become known. That we had to leave. We did, just as you told us. Helen said that she would meet us here.”

“I *told* you to head for somewhere public—” I began, snarling.

“Harry,” Elaine said, her voice sharp.

I subsided again.

There was a moment of awkward silence. “Um. So we went,” Abby said. “But when we got there, Helen wasn’t around.”

“No,” Priscilla said, hugging her arms under her breasts, looking cold and miserable, even in the turtleneck. “She called again. Begged us to come to her apartment.”

“I stayed here with the dogs,” Abby said. Toto looked up at her as she said it, tilting his head and wagging his little tail.

“Once Anna and I picked her up,” Priscilla continued, “we headed back here—but Helen looked awful. She’d run out of insulin and hadn’t been able to go get it with all the trouble. Anna dropped me off and took her to the pharmacy. That was the last we saw of her.”

Abby fretted her lip and said to Priscilla, “It wasn’t your fault.”

Priscilla shrugged. “She’d never said anything about diabetes before. I should have known better. I should have seen....”

“Not your fault,” Abby insisted, compassion in her voice. “We believed in her. We all did. But she was pulling our strings the whole time. The killer was right here among us.” She shook her head. “We should have listened to you, Warden Dresden.”

“We should have,” Priscilla said quietly. “If we had, Anna would be alive right now.”

I couldn't think of any response to that. Well. I had plenty of them, but they all were some variation on a theme of "I told you so." I felt no need to pour salt into fresh wounds, so I kept my mouth shut.

Besides, I was processing what Abby and Priscilla had told us.

Elaine traded a look with me. "Do you think Helen is the Skavis we've heard about?"

I shrugged. "I doubt it, but technically it's possible. White Court vamps can pass for human easily, if they want."

"Then why doubt it?"

"Because that little creep Madrigal called the Skavis 'he,'" I said. "Helen isn't a he."

"A shill?" Elaine asked.

"Looks like."

Abby looked back and forth between us. "E-excuse me. But what is a shill?"

"Someone who works with a criminal while pretending to have nothing to do with him," I said. "He helps the bad guy while pretending to be your buddy and making suggestions. Suggesting that you leave a safe hiding place and split up the group, for example."

Silence. Toto let out a quiet, distressed whine.

"I can't believe this," Priscilla said, pressing her fingertips against her cheekbones and closing her eyes.

"But we've known her for years," Abby said, her expression as unhappy and confused as a lost child's. "How could she lie to us like that, for so long?"

I winced. I don't like seeing anyone in pain, but it's worse when a woman is suffering. That's probably chauvinistic of me, and I don't give a damn if it is.

"All right," I said. "We've still got a lot more questions than answers, but at least we know where to start the barbecue."

Elaine nodded. "Get these two to safety, then track down Helen."

"Safety," I said. "Thomas."

"Yes."

I glanced at Abby and Priscilla. "Ladies, we're leaving."

"Where?" Priscilla asked. I had expected a protest, or sneering sarcasm, or at least pure, contrary bitchiness. Her voice, though, was quietly frightened. "Where are we going?"

“To Olivia,” I told her. “And five or six of the other women my associate is protecting.”

“Do they need anything?” Abby asked.

“They have several kids with them,” I said. “Mostly toddlers.”

“I’ll pack some food and cereal,” Abby said, before I’d even finished talking. Priscilla just sat, sunken in her chair and hunched in on herself. Abby dumped half of her cupboard into a great big suitcase with those skate-wheel rollers on the bottom, zipped it shut, and clipped what looked like a little plastic birdcage onto the suitcase. She gestured at Toto and the little dog jumped up into the birdcage, turned around three times, and lay down with a happy little doggy smile. “Very well,” Abby said.

Mouse looked at Toto. Then he looked at me.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I told him. “I’d have to clip a railroad car to the suitcase and hire the Hulk to move it around. You’re young and healthy. You walk.”

Mouse looked at Toto’s regal doggy palanquin and sighed. Then he took point as we went back down to the car, which had been ticketed despite the lateness of the hour. I stuck the ticket in my pocket. Think positive, Harry. At least they didn’t tow it.

Getting everyone into the Beetle was an adventure, but we managed it, and returned to the shabby little south-side motel.

Maybe twenty seconds after we parked, Murphy’s Harley-Davidson motorcycle rumbled out of an alley across the street, where she must have been keeping an eye on the front of the motel from a spot where she could see the windows and doors to both rooms Thomas had rented. She was wearing jeans, a black tank top, and a loose black man’s shirt that had the sleeves rolled up about twenty times and draped over her like a trench coat while it hid the shoulder rig that held a Glock in one holster, a SIG in the other. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, and the badge she usually wore on a chain around her neck in these sorts of situations was conspicuous by its absence.

She waited with a slightly bemused air while everyone scrambled out of the Beetle. Elaine got them moving toward the rooms, hurrying to get them out of sight.

“No clown car jokes,” I told Murphy. “Not one.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Murphy said. “Jesus, Harry, what happened to you?”

“You heard anything about the harbor today?”

“Oh,” Murphy said. Mouse came over to greet her and she shook hands with him gravely. “Thomas wasn’t really forthcoming with explanations. He lit out of here in a hurry.”

“He was hungry,” I said.

Murphy frowned. “Yeah, so he said. Is he going to hurt anyone?”

I considered and then shook my head. “Ordinarily, I’d say he wouldn’t. Now...I’m not sure. It would really go against his character to do something like that. But he’s been acting out of character through this whole mess.”

Murphy folded her arms. “Mess is right. You want to tell me what’s going on?”

I gave Murphy the short version of what we’d learned since I’d seen her last.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” Murphy said. “Then it *was* Beckitt.”

“Looks like she was shilling for the Skavis, whoever he is. And Grey Cloak and that wussy cousin of Thomas’s added in a few killings of their own to get my attention.”

“That isn’t exactly in the best interests of the Skavis, if he was trying to avoid it.”

“I know. So?”

“So they’re all vampires, right?” Murphy shrugged. “I figured they’d be working together.”

“They’re White Court. They live for backstabbing. They like doing it through cat’s-paws. They probably figured I would find out about the killings, move in, and wipe out the Skavis for them. Then they’d congratulate themselves on how clever they were.”

Murphy nodded. “So now that you’ve got your clients safely tucked away, what comes next?”

“More wiping out than they counted on,” I said. “I’m going to find Beckitt and ask her nicely not to kill anyone else and to point me to the Skavis. Then I’ll have a polite conversation with him. Then I’ll settle up with Grey Cloak and Passenger Madrigal.”

“How do you find Beckitt?”

“Um,” I said, “I’m sure I’ll figure out something. This entire mess is still way too nebulous for me.”

“Yeah,” Murphy said. “All these killings. It still doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes sense,” I said. “We just don’t know how, yet.” I grimaced. “We’re missing something.”

“Maybe not,” Murphy said.

I arched an eyebrow at her.

“Remember our odd corpse out?”

“Jessica Blanche,” I said. “The one Molly saw.”

“Right,” Murphy said. “I found out more about her.”

“She some kind of cultist or something?”

“Or something,” Murphy said. “According to a friend in Vice, she was an employee of the Velvet Room.”

“The Velvet Room? I thought I burned that plac—uh, that is, I thought some as-yet-unidentified perpetrator burned that place to the ground.”

“It’s reopened,” Murphy said. “Under new management.”

Click. Now some pieces were falling into place. “Marcone?” I asked.

“Marcone.”

Gentleman Johnnie Marcone was the biggest, scariest gangster in a city famous for its gangsters. Once the old famiglias had fallen to internal bickering, Marcone had done an impression of Alexander the Great and carved out one of the largest criminal empires in the world—assuming you didn’t count governments. Chicago’s violent crime rate had dropped as much because of Marcone’s draconian rule of the city’s rackets as because of the dedication of the city’s police force. The criminal economy had more than doubled, and Marcone’s power continued to steadily grow.

He was a smart, tough, dangerous man—and he was absolutely fearless. That is a deadly combination, and I avoided crossing paths with him whenever I could.

The way things were shaping up, though, this time I couldn’t.

“You happen to know where the new Velvet Room is?” I asked Murphy.

She gave me a look.

“Right, right. Sorry.” I blew out a breath. “Seems like it might be a good idea to speak to some of the girl’s coworkers. I’ll bet they’ll be willing to do a little talking to avoid trouble with the law.”

She showed me her teeth in a fierce grin. “They just might. And if not, Marcone might be willing to talk to you.”

“Marcone doesn’t like me,” I said. “And it’s mutual.”

“Marccone doesn’t like anybody,” Murphy replied. “But he respects you.”

“Like that says much for me.”

Murphy shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. Marccone’s scum, but he’s no fool, and he does what he says he’ll do.”

“I’ll talk to Elaine once she’s got everyone settled,” I said. “Get her to stay here with Mouse and keep an eye on things.”

Murphy nodded. “Elaine, huh? The ex.”

“Yeah.”

“The one working against you last time she was in town.”

“Yeah.”

“You trust her?”

I looked down at Murphy for a minute, then up at the hotel room. “I want to.”

She exhaled slowly. “I have a feeling things are going to get hairy. You need someone who’s got your back.”

“Got that,” I said, holding up my fist. “You.”

Murphy rapped her knuckles gently against mine and snorted. “You’re going syrupy on me, Dredsen.”

“If it rains, I’ll melt,” I agreed.

“It’s to be expected,” she said. “What with how you’re gay and all now.”

“I’m wh...” I blinked. “Oh. Thomas’s apartment. Hell’s bells, you cops got a fast grapevine.”

“Yeah. Rawlins heard it at the coffee machine and he just had to call me up and tell me all about you and your boyfriend being in a fight. He asked me if he should get you the sound track to *Les Miserables* or *Phantom of the Opera* for Christmas this year. Varetti and Farrel got a deal on track lighting from Malone’s brother-in-law.”

“Don’t you people have lives?” I said. At her continued smile, I asked warily, “What are you getting me?”

She grinned, blue eyes sparkling. “Stallings and I found an autographed picture of Julie Newmar on eBay.”

“You guys are never going to let go of this one, are you?” I sighed.

“We’re cops,” Murphy said. “Of course not.”

We shared a smile that faded a moment later. Both of us turned to watch the street, alert for any unwanted company. We were silent for a while. Cars went by. City sounds of engine and horn. A car alarm a block over. Dark shadows where the streetlights didn’t touch. Distant sirens. Rotating,

attention-getting spotlights lancing up to the dark summer night from the front of a theater.

“Hell’s bells,” I said, after a time. “Marccone.”

“Yeah,” Murphy said. “It changes things.”

Marccone was involved.

Matters had just become a great deal more dangerous.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The new Velvet Room looked nothing like the old Velvet Room.

“A health club?” I asked Murphy. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Murphy goosed her Harley right up next to the Beetle. There had been only one parking space open, but there was room for both of our rides in it, more or less. It wasn’t like I was worried about collecting a few more dents and dings in addition to the dozens already there.

“It’s progressive,” Murphy said. “You can get in shape, generate testosterone, and find an outlet for it all under one roof.”

I shook my head. A modest sign on the second floor over a row of smaller shops proclaimed, EXECUTIVE PRIORITY HEALTH. It lacked the wide-open, well-lit windows of most health clubs, and apparently occupied the whole of the second floor.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Isn’t that the hotel where Tommy Tomm got murdered?”

“Mmmm,” Murphy said, nodding. “The Madison. A corporation that has absolutely no visible connection to John Marccone recently bought it and is renovating it.”

“You have to admit it was a little...overdone,” I said.

“It looked like the set of a burlesque show about an opium lord’s harem,” Murphy said.

“And now...it *is* one,” I said.

“But it won’t look like it,” Murphy said.

“They call that progress,” I said. “Think this bunch will give us any trouble?”

“They’ll be polite.”

“Marccone is the kind of guy who apologizes for the necessity just before his minions put a bullet in you.”

Murphy nodded. She’d rearranged her gun rig and put on a Kevlar vest before we left. The baggy man’s shirt was now buttoned up over it. “Like I said. Polite.”

“Seriously,” I said. “Think anything will start up?”

“Depends how big a beehive we’re about to kick,” she replied.

I blew out a breath. “Right. Let’s find out.”

We went inside. The doors opened onto a foyer, which was closed away from what had been the hotel’s lobby by a security door and a panel of buzzers. The buzzers on the lowest row were labeled with the names of the shops on the first floor. None of the others were marked.

Murphy flipped open her notepad, checked a page, and then punched a button in the middle of the top row. She held it down for a moment, then released it.

“Executive Priority,” said a young woman’s voice through a speaker beside the panel. “This is Bonnie. How may I help you?”

“I’d like to speak with your manager, please,” Murphy said.

“I’m very sorry, ma’am,” came the reply. “The management is only in the office during normal business hours, but I would be happy to leave a message for you.”

“No,” Murphy replied calmly. “I know that Ms. Demeter is in. I will speak to her, please.”

“I’m very sorry, ma’am,” came Bonnie’s rather prim reply. “But you are not a member of the club, and you are on private property. I must ask you to leave immediately or I will inform building security of the problem and call the authorities.”

“Well, *that* should be fun,” I said. “Go ahead and call the cops.”

Murphy snorted. “I’m sure they’d love to have an excuse to come stomping around.”

“I...” Bonnie said, floundering. Clearly, she hadn’t been trained to deal with this kind of response. Or maybe she just wasn’t all that bright to begin with.

I made a kind of do-you-mind gesture at Murphy. She shook her head and leaned to one side, so I could get closer to the intercom.

“Look, Bonnie,” I said. “We aren’t here for trouble. We just need to talk to your boss. If she likes, she can come talk over the intercom. Otherwise, I *will* come up there and talk to her in person. There’s only one relevant issue here: Would you rather be reasonable and polite, or would you rather replace a bunch of doors, walls, and goons?”

“Um. Well.”

“Just go tell your boss, Bonnie. It’s not your fault that we didn’t fall for the business-hours-only line. Let her decide what to do, so you don’t get in any trouble.”

After a slight pause, Bonnie realized the professional value in passing the buck. “Very well, sir. May I ask who this is?”

“I’m with Sergeant Karrin Murphy, Chicago PD,” I said. “My name is Harry Dresden.”

“Oh!” Bonnie said. “Oh, Mister Dresden, please excuse me! I didn’t know it was you, sir.”

I blinked at the intercom.

“You’re the last of our Platinum Club members to pay a visit, sir. By all means, sir, please accept my apologies. I’ll have someone meet you and your guest at the elevator with your membership packet. I’ll notify Ms. Demeter at once.”

The door buzzed, clicked, and opened.

Murphy gave me a steady look. “What’s that all about?”

“Don’t ask me,” I told her. “I’m gay now.”

We went in. The first floor of the building looked like a miniature shopping mall, its walls completely lined with small shops that sold computer parts, books, video games, candles, bath stuff, jewelry, and clothes in a number of styles. All the shops were closed, their steel curtains drawn down. A row of small lights on either side of a strip of red carpet came to life, illuminating the way to the main bank of elevators. One of the elevators stood open and waiting.

We got in and I hit the button for the second floor. It began moving at once. “If there is a welcoming committee from the Lollipop Guild waiting for us when these doors open, I’m leaving. This is surreal.”

“I noticed that too,” Murphy said.

“Ms. Demeter,” I said. “Think it’s a pseudonym?”

One corner of Murphy’s mouth quirked up. “I think we’ll find all kinds of nongenuine modifications around here.”

The elevator stopped and the door opened.

Three women were waiting outside of it. They were all dressed in...well, “workout clothes” wasn’t quite accurate. Their outfits looked something like the ones the waitresses at Hooters wear, only tight. None of them could have been much over drinking age, and all of them had clearly passed some kind of intense qualification process certifying them to wear outfits like

that. They were pretty, too, a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead, and they had nice...smiles.

"Welcome, sir," the redhead said. "May I take your coat and...and stick?"

"That's the closest I've come to being propositioned in years." I sighed. "But no, I'll hang onto them for now."

"Very good, sir."

The blonde held a round silver tray with two fluted glasses of orangey liquid. She beamed at us. The reflection of light from her teeth could have left scars on my retinas. "Mimosa, sir, ma'am?"

Murphy stared at all three of them with a blank expression. Then, without a word, she took one of the drinks, tossed it off, and put the glass back on the tray with a dark mutter.

"None for me," I said. "I'm driving."

The blonde stepped back, and the brunette—whose shirt bore a stencil of the word *Bonnie*—came forward carrying a customized black leather gym bag that probably cost as much as Murphy's Kevlar vest. Bonnie handed me the bag, and then offered me a manila folder and a big mustard-colored envelope. "These are complimentary, of course, sir, for all of our platinum members. There are several outfits for exercise on the inside, a set of athletic shoes in your size, a PDA to help you track your progress, and some basic toiletries." She tapped the envelope. "Here is a copy of your membership papers, as well as your membership card and your security access code."

If this was a trap, it was working. I tried to juggle all of my gear and the comp items, too. If I suddenly had to walk anywhere while doing it, I'd probably trip and break my neck.

"Uh," I said. "Thank you, Bonnie."

"Of course, sir," she chirped. "If you would please come with me, I'll show you to Ms. Demeter's office."

"That would be lovely," I said. The bag had a strap on it. I managed to get it over one shoulder, then folded the paperwork and stuffed it into one of my coat's roomy pockets.

Bonnie waited for me to get settled before taking my arm in a perfectly confident and familiar fashion and guiding me forward. She smelled nice, something like honeysuckle, and she had a friendly smile on her mouth. Her hands, though, felt cold and nervous.

Guided by Bonnie and her clammy hands, we walked through the building, past a long, open space filled with various exercise machines, weights, wealthy-looking men, and attractive young women. Bonnie started prattling about how new the machines were, and how the latest techniques and theories in fitness training were in use, and how Platinum Club members would each have their own personal fitness trainer assigned to them each and every visit.

“And, of course, our in-house spa offers any number of other services.”

“Ah,” I said. “Like massages, mud baths, pedicures, that kind of thing?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And sex?”

Bonnie’s smile didn’t falter for a second, although it looked a little incongruous with her wary sideways glance at Murphy. She didn’t answer the question. She stopped at an open doorway. “Here we are,” she said, smiling. “If there is anything I can do for you, just pick up the phone on Ms. Demeter’s desk and I’ll answer right away.”

“Thanks, Bonnie,” I said.

“You are welcome, sir.”

“Do you need a tip or anything?”

“Unnecessary, sir.” She gave me another smile and a nod, and hurried away.

I watched her go down the hall, lips pursed thoughtfully, and decided that Bonnie was eminently qualified to hurry away. “We get left all alone here?” I asked Murphy. “Does this smell like a trap to you?”

“There’s one hell of a lot of bait,” she replied, glancing around, and then into the office. “But the fire stairs are right across the hall, and there’s a fire escape just outside the office window. To say nothing of the fact that there are a dozen customers within a few yards who could hardly help but notice anything noisy.”

“Yeah. But how many of them do you think would testify in court about what they heard or saw while they were at a ritzy brothel?”

Murphy shook her head. “Rawlins knows I’m here. If anything happens, they’ll turn the place inside out. Marcone knows that.”

“How come you all haven’t done it already? I mean, this is illegal, right?”

“Sure it is,” Murphy said. “And very tidy. In operations like this one, the women involved are generally willing employees, and generally very well

paid. They're required to have regular medical examinations. There's a low incidence of drug use, and almost never any attempts to control them through addiction or terror."

"Victimless crime?"

Murphy shrugged. "Cops never have as many resources as they need. In general, they don't waste them on an operation like this one. Vice personnel are needed badly in plenty of other places where there is a lot more at stake."

I grunted. "The fact that it's obviously a club for the stupidly wealthy doesn't make it any easier to bring the hammer down."

"No, it doesn't," Murphy said. "Too many people with too much influence in the city government have their reputations to protect. The place makes money hand over fist, and as long as they don't flaunt their business, cops tolerate what's going on except for the occasional token gesture. Marcone isn't going to jeopardize that by killing us here, when he can just as easily have it done tomorrow, in a less incriminating location."

"Depending on the size of the beehive," I said.

"Depending on that," Murphy agreed. "We might as well sit down."

We went into the office. It looked like any number of executive offices I'd seen before, somber, understated, and expensive. We sat down in comfortable leather chairs. Murphy kept an eye on the doorway. I watched the window. We waited.

Twenty minutes later, footsteps approached.

A large man came through the door. He was built like a bulldozer made out of slabs of raw, workingman muscle, thick bones, and heavy sinews. He had a neck as thick as Murphy's waist, short red hair, and beady eyes under a heavy brow. His expression looked like it had been permanently locked into place a few seconds after someone had kicked his puppy through a plate-glass window.

"Hendricks," I greeted Marcone's primary enforcer with convivial cheer. "'Sup?"

Beady eyes settled on me for a second. Hendricks made a growling sound in his throat, checked the rest of the room, and said, over his shoulder, "Clear."

Marcone came in.

He wore a gunmetal grey Armani suit with Italian leather shoes, and his shirt was open one button at the throat. He was an inch or two above

average height, and had looked like an extremely fit forty-year-old ever since I had known him. His haircut was perfect, his grooming immaculate, and his eyes were the color of worn dollar bills. He nodded pleasantly and walked around the large mahogany desk to sit down.

“Wow,” I said. “Ms. Demeter, you look almost exactly like this criminal scumbag I met once.”

Marcone rested his elbows on the desk, made a steeple out of his fingers, and regarded me with a cool and unruffled smile. “And good evening to you, too, Mister Dresden. It’s somehow reassuring to see that time has not eroded your sophomoric sensibilities.” His eyes flicked to Murphy. “Sergeant.”

Murphy pressed her lips together and nodded once, her eyes narrowed. Hendricks loomed in the doorway, arms folded, eyes steady on Murphy.

“Where’s Amazon Gard?” I asked him. “You lose the consultant?”

“Ms. Gard,” he said, emphasizing the *Ms.*, “is on assignment elsewhere at the moment. And our working relationship is quite secure.”

“And maybe she wouldn’t much care for this particular branch of your business?” I suggested.

He showed me his teeth. “I see you got your membership package.”

“I’m fighting not to gush at you with gratitude,” I told him. “But it’s oh so hard.”

His upturned mouth and glittering white teeth did not resemble a smile. “Actually, all of my places of business have instructions to so treat you, should you arrive.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You can’t seriously be trying to buy me.”

“Hardly. I am under no illusions about your fondness for myself and my business. I regard it as a preventive measure. In my judgment, my buildings are considerably less likely to burn to the ground during one of your visits if you are disoriented from being treated like a sultan. I do, after all, recall the fate of the last Velvet Room.”

Murphy snorted without taking her wary eyes from Marcone. “He’s got a point, Dresden.”

“That was *one time*,” I muttered. Something in one of the envelopes dug at me through my duster pocket, and I reached down to take it out.

Hendricks may have been big, but he was not slow. He had a gun out before my fingers had closed on the envelope.

Murphy went for her gun, hand darting beneath the baggy shirt.

Marcone's voice cracked like a whip. "Stop. Everyone."

We all did it, a reflexive response to the complete authority in his tone.

There are reasons Marcone runs things in Chicago.

Marcone hadn't moved. Hell, he hadn't *blinked*. "Mister Hendricks," he said. "I appreciate your zeal, but if the wizard wished to harm me, he'd hardly need to draw a concealed weapon to do it. If you please."

Hendricks let out another rumbling growl and put the gun away.

"Thank you." Marcone turned to me. "I trust you will forgive Mister Hendricks's sensitivity. As my bodyguard, he is all too aware that whenever you get involved in my business, Dresden, matters tend to become a great deal more dangerous."

I scowled at them both and drew the folded materials from my duster pocket, tossing them down beside the discarded gym bag. "No harm, no foul. Right, Murph?"

Murphy remained motionless for a long moment, hand under her shirt—long enough to make a point that no one was ordering her to do it. Then she returned her hand to her lap.

"Thank you," Marcone said. "Now, shall we tilt at one another a few more times or just skip to the point of your visit, Dresden?"

"I want information about one of the women who worked here."

Marcone blinked once and said, "Go on."

"Her name was Jessica Blanche. Her body was found a few days ago. The ME couldn't find a cause of death. I did. I've got more bodies. I think the killings are related. I need to find the link between Jessica and the other victims so I can figure out what the hell is going on and put a stop to it."

"That information is specific," Marcone said. "My knowledge of operations here is merely general. My manager will be more familiar with such things than I."

"Ms. Demeter, I take it."

"Yes. She should be here momentarily."

"Or sooner," said a woman's voice.

I turned to the doorway.

A woman walked through it, dressed in a somber black skirt suit, a white blouse, black pumps, pearls. She walked calmly across the office to stand behind Marcone, her left hand coming to rest on his right shoulder.

"Well, Dresden," Helen Beckitt murmured. "It took you long enough."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I stared, momentarily silent.

Marcone's teeth showed again.

"I don't believe it is polite to gloat," Helen murmured to him.

"If you knew the man, you would realize what a rare moment this is," he replied. "I'm savoring it."

Murphy glanced from Helen to me and back. "Harry...?"

"Shhh," I said, holding up a hand. I closed my eyes for a second, chasing furiously down dozens of twisty lanes of demented logic and motivation, trying to fit each of them to the facts.

The facts, man. Just the facts.

Fact one: Male operatives of House Skavis and House Malvora had been engaging in murders that attempted to frame the Wardens as the perpetrators.

Fact two: House Raith, their nominal superior, led by the White King (sort of), had pursued a policy of armistice with the White Council.

Fact three: That dippy twit Madrigal jumped into the deal on Malvora's side, pitching in a murder or two of his own, evidently to attract my attention.

Fact four: Thomas, though aware of the lethal intentions of his fellow White Court vampires, had shared nothing of it with me.

Fact five: The victims had been women of magical talent, universally.

Fact six: Vampires live for a long, long time.

Fact seven: In a whole graveyard full of the corpses of minor-league practitioners, one normal, pretty young girl named Jessica Blanche had been killed. Her only connection to the others was Helen Beckitt.

Fact eight: Helen Beckitt worked for Marcone.

Fact nine: I don't like Marcone. I don't trust him. I don't believe him any further than I can kick him. I've never hidden the fact. Marcone knows it.

"Son of a bitch," I whispered, shaking my head. Things went from bad to worse when Marcone showed up, and I naturally figured that the

dangerometer had peaked.

I was wrong. Really, really wrong.

I needed one question answered to be sure what was going on, even though I was fairly sure what the answer would be—the only problem was figuring out whether or not the answer would be an honest one.

I could not afford to get it wrong.

“Helen,” I said quietly. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like to speak to you alone.”

A small smile graced her mouth. She took a deep breath and let it out with a slow, satisfied exhalation.

“You needn’t, if you do not wish to do so,” Marcone said. “I do not react well when others threaten or harm my employees. Dresden is aware of that.”

“No,” Helen said. “It’s all right.”

I glanced aside. “Murph...”

She didn’t look overjoyed, but she nodded once and said, “I’ll be right outside.”

“Thanks.”

Murphy departed under Hendricks’s beady gaze. Marcone rose as well, and left without glancing at me. Hendricks went last, shutting the door behind him.

Helen ran a fingertip lightly over the pearls on her necklace and settled into the chair behind the desk. She looked quite comfortable and confident there. “Very well.”

I took a seat in one of the chairs facing the desk, and shook my head. “Jessica Blanche worked for you,” I said.

“Jessie...” Helen’s dead eyes flickered momentarily down to her folded hands. “Yes. She lived near me, actually. I gave her a ride to work several days each week.”

Which must have been when Madrigal had seen them together—out in public, presumably not in their “professional” clothes, and the moron had just assumed that Miss Blanche was another member of the Ordo. From there, it wouldn’t have been hard for him to ease up to the girl, snare her with the incubus come-hither, and take her off to a hotel room for a little fun and an ecstatic death.

“You and Marcone,” I said. “That’s one I can’t figure. I thought you hated him. Hell, you were trafficking with the powers of darkness, helping

to create an addictive drug—helping the Shadowman kill people, to get back at him.”

“Hate,” she said, “and love are not so very different things. Both are focused upon another. Both are intense. Both are passionate.”

“And there’s not much difference between ‘kiss’ and ‘kill.’ If you only look at the letters.” I shrugged. “But here you are, working for Marcone. As a madam.”

“I *am* a convicted felon, Mister Dresden,” she replied. “I used to handle accounts with a total value in the hundreds of millions of dollars. I was ill suited to work as a waitress in a diner.”

“Nickel in the pen didn’t do much for your résumé, huh?”

“Or references,” she replied. She shook her head. “My reasons for being here are none of your business, Dresden, and have nothing to do with the matter at hand. Ask your questions or get out.”

“After you parted company with the other members of the Ordo tonight,” I said, “did you place a phone call to them?”

“Again,” she said quietly, “we are at an impasse, exactly as we were before. It doesn’t matter what I say, given that you are clearly unwilling to believe me.”

“Did you call them?” I asked.

She stared steadily, her eyes so dull and empty that it made her elegant black outfit look like funerary wear. I couldn’t tell if it would be more suitable for mourners—or for the deceased. Then her eyes narrowed and she nodded. “Ah. You want me to look you in the eyes. The term is overdramatic, but I believe it is referred to as a soulgaze.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I hadn’t realized it was a truth detector.”

“It isn’t,” I said. “But it will tell me what sort of person you are.”

“I know what sort of person I am,” she replied. “I am a functional borderline psychopath. I am heartless, calculating, empty, and can muster very little in the way of empathy for my fellow human beings. But then, you can’t take my word for it, can you?”

I just looked at her for a moment. “No,” I said then, very quietly. “I don’t think I can.”

“I have no intention of proving anything to you. I will submit to no such invasion.”

“Even if it means more of your friends in the Ordo die?”

There was the slightest hesitation before she answered. “I have been unable to protect them thus far. Despite all...” She trailed off and shook her head once. Confidence returned to her features and voice. “Anna will watch over them.”

I stared at her for a second, and she regarded me coolly, focused on a spot a bit over my eyebrows, avoiding direct eye contact.

“Anna’s important to you?” I asked.

“As much as anyone can be, now,” she replied. “She was kind to me when she had no cause to be. Nothing to gain from it. She is a worthy person.”

I watched her closely. I’ve done a lot of work as both a professional wizard and a professional investigator. Wizardry is awfully intriguing and useful, but it doesn’t necessarily teach you very much about other people. It’s better at teaching you about yourself.

The investigating business, though, is all about people. It’s all about talking to them, asking questions, and listening to them lie. Most of the things investigators get hired to handle involve a lot of people lying. I’ve seen liars in every shape and size and style. Big lies, little lies, white lies, stupid lies. The worst lies are almost always silence—or else truth, tainted with just enough deception to rot it to the core.

Helen wasn’t lying to me. She might have been dangerous, might have been willing to practice black magic to seek vengeance in the past, might have been cold and distant—but she had not, for one second, tried to conceal any of it, or denied anything that had happened.

“Oh, God,” I said quietly. “You don’t know.”

She frowned at me for a moment—then her face became drawn and pale. “Oh.” She closed her eyes and said, “Oh, Anna. You poor fool.” She opened them again a moment later. She cleared her throat and asked, “When?”

“A few hours ago. The hotel room. Suicide.”

“The others?”

“Safe. Hidden and under guard.” I took a deep breath. “I have to be sure, Helen. If you really do give a damn about them, you’ll cooperate with me. You’ll help me.”

She nodded once, her eyes distant. Then she said, “For them.” And met my eyes.

The phenomenon referred to as a soulgaze is a fairly mysterious thing. No one’s ever been able to get a really good grasp on exactly how it works.

The best descriptions of it have always been more poetical than anything else.

The eyes are the windows of the soul.

Lock eyes with a wizard and the essence of who and what you are is laid bare. It is perceived in different ways by every individual. Ramirez had once told me that he heard it as a kind of musical theme that accompanied the person he was gazing upon. Others looked on a soul in a series of frozen images. My interpretation of a soulgaze was, perhaps inevitably, one of the most random and confusing I'd ever heard about. I see the other person in symbol and metaphor, sometimes in panorama and surround sound, sometimes in misty translucence and haunting whispers.

Whoever was gazed upon got a good look back. Whatever universal powers governed that kind of thing evidently decided that the soul's windows don't come in an optional issue of one-way mirrored glass. You saw them. They saw you, with the same kind of searing permanence.

For me, meeting someone's eyes is always risky. Every human being on earth knows what I'm talking about. Try it. Walk up to someone, without speaking, and look them in the eyes. There's a certain amount of leeway for a second, or two, or three. And then there's a distinct sensation of sudden contact, of intimacy. That's when regular folks normally cough and look away. Wizards, though, get the full ride of a soulgaze.

All things considered, I shouldn't have been surprised that when Helen met my eyes, it got uncomfortably intimate before a second had passed and...

...and I stood in Chicago, in one of the parks on Lake Michigan. Calumet, maybe? I couldn't see the skyline from where I was standing, so it was hard to be sure.

What I could see was the Beckitt family. Husband, wife, daughter, a little girl maybe ten or eleven years old. She looked like her mother—a woman with smile lines at the corners of her eyes and a white-toothed smile who very little resembled the Helen Beckitt I knew. But all the same, it was her.

They'd been on a family picnic. The sun was setting on a summer evening, golden sunset giving way to twilight as they walked back to the family car. Mother and father swung the little girl between them, each holding one hand.

I didn't want to see what was about to happen. I didn't have a choice in the matter.

A parking lot. The sounds of a car roaring up. Muffled curses, tight with fear, and then a car swerved up off the road and gunfire roared from its passenger window. Screams. Some people threw themselves down. Most, including the Beckitts, stared in shock. More loud, hammering sounds, not ten feet away.

I looked over my shoulder to see a very, very young-looking Marcone.

He wasn't wearing a business suit. He had on jeans and a black leather jacket. His hair was longish, a little mussed, and he also sported a stubble of beard that gave him the kind of rakish look that would attract attention from the girls who fantasized about indulging with a bad boy.

His eyes were still green—but they were the green of a summer hunter's blind, bright and intelligent and predatory, but touched with more... something. Humor, maybe. More life. And he was skinnier. Not a lot skinnier or anything, but it surprised me how much younger it and the other minor changes made him look.

Marcone crouched next to another young man, a now-dead thug I'd christened Spike years ago. Spike had his pistol out, and was hammering away at the moving car. The barrel of his 1911-model Colt tracked the vehicle—and its course drew its muzzle into line with the Beckitt family.

Marcone snarled something and slapped the barrel of the gun away from the family. Spike's shot rang out wild and splashed into the lake. There was a last rattle of fire from the moving car, and it roared away. Marcone and Spike piled into their own car and fled the scene. Spike was driving.

Marcone was staring back over his shoulder.

They left the little girl's broken body, limp and spattered with scarlet, behind them.

Helen saw it first, looking down to the hand that gripped her daughter's. She let out a cry as she turned to her child.

In the wake of the gunshots, the silence was deafening.

I didn't want to see what was coming. Again, I had no choice.

The girl wasn't unconscious. There was a lot of blood. Her father screamed and knelt with Helen, trying to stop the bleeding. He tore off his shirt, pressing it to the child's midsection. He babbled something to Helen and ran for the nearest phone.

His white shirt soaked through as Helen tried to hold it to the weakly struggling girl.

This was the worst part.

The child was in pain. She cried out with it. I expected her to sound horrible and inhuman, but she didn't. She sounded like every little kid who had ever suddenly found herself faced with her first experience of real, nontrivial pain.

"Owie," she said, over and over, her voice rough. "Owie, owie, owie."

"Baby," Helen said. The tears were blocking her vision. "I'm here. I'm here."

"Mommy, Mommy, Mommy," the girl said. "Owie, owie, owie."

The little girl said that.

She said it over and over.

She said it for maybe sixty seconds.

Then she went silent.

"No," Helen said. "No, no, no." She leaned down and felt her daughter's throat, then desperately pressed her ear to the girl's chest. "No, no, no."

Their voices, I realized, sounded almost identical. They blazed with the same anguish, the same disbelief.

I watched Helen shatter, rocking back and forth, trying through blinding tears to apply CPR to the silent little form. Everything else became an unimportant blur. Ghostly figures of her husband, cops, paramedics. Dim little echoes of sirens and voices, a church organ.

I'd known that the Beckitts set out to tear Marcone down out of revenge for what the warring gangsters had done to their daughter—but knowing the story was one thing. Seeing the soul-searing agony the little girl's death had inflicted upon her helpless mother was something else.

And suddenly, everything was bright and new again. Helen and her family were laughing again. In a few moments, they were walking again toward the parking lot, and I could hear the engine of the car whose gunmen would miss Marcone and kill the little girl as it approached.

I tore my eyes away from it, fighting to end the soulgaze.

I could not go through that again, could not remain locked in that horrible moment that had shaped what Helen had become.

I came back to myself standing, turned half away from Helen, leaning heavily on my staff with my head bowed.

There was a long moment of silence before Helen said, "I didn't call anyone in the Ordo, Dresden."

She hadn't. Now I was sure of it.

If Helen hadn't led the Ordo on a merry chase around town, drawing them out into vulnerability for the Skavis hunting them, someone else had.

Priscilla.

She'd been the one receiving all the calls, reporting all the "conversations" with Helen. That meant that she'd been working with the killer, drawing out Anna and the others on his behalf, isolating one of the women from the safety of the group so that he could take them alone.

And then I jerked my head up, my eyes wide.

Fact ten: In the middle of a Chicago summer, Priscilla, none too pretty a woman, had been wearing nothing but turtlenecks.

Priscilla hadn't been working *with* the Skavis.

Priscilla *was* the Skavis.

And I had left her holed up in safety with Olivia and Abby and all those women and children.

Predators. The White Court were predators. The Skavis had to know that I was closing in, and that it would not be long before I either caught up to Helen and got the real story or else figured it out on my own. Fight-or-flight instincts must have come down on the former.

I'd been sent after Helen on purpose. The Skavis had *meant* to send me haring off after her, leaving him alone with all those targets.

No. I hadn't left him alone with the women he'd been tracking. They were no threat to him. The Skavis had decided to fight. He had isolated a target, all right, just as he had while hunting helpless women—one who would present a deadly danger to him, should she ever learn his true identity. One who would be distinctly vulnerable, provided he could approach her while camouflaged.

"Oh, God," I heard myself say. "Elaine."

Chapter Thirty

Murphy came out of the building about ten seconds after I did.

“Thomas answered his phone, said he was on the way. He sounded kind of out of it, though. I called both rooms, but the call went straight to the hotel’s voice mail,” she reported, slipping her cell phone away as she approached me.

“Does it do that by itself?”

“No. You have to call the desk and ask for it.”

“Dammit,” I said, and tossed her my keys. “The Skavis thought of that already. Drive.”

Murphy blinked at me, but turned to the Beetle at once. “Why?”

“I’m going to try to reach Elaine my way,” I said. I hurried around my car to the passenger seat and jerked open the door. “Get us there as fast as you can.”

“Magic on the road? Won’t that kill the car?”

“This car? Probably not,” I said. “I hope not.” I threw my staff in the backseat.

“Ow!” shrieked a voice.

Murphy’s gun came out every bit as fast as I raised my blasting rod, its tip glowing with a scarlet incandescence.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!” squeaked the voice, considerably more panicked. There was a flickering, and then Molly appeared in my backseat, legs curled up against her chest, her eyes wide, her face very pale.

“Molly!” I shouted. “Dammit, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I came to help. I was good enough to track down your car, wasn’t I?”

“I told you to stay home!”

“Because of the stupid bracelet?” she demanded. “That has *got* to be the lamest scam ever. *Yoda* never gave anybody a bracelet that—”

I whirled in pure frustration and snarled, “*Fuego!*”

My raw anxiety and rage lashed from the tip of my blasting rod in a lance of blinding scarlet fire. It blasted into a metal trash can in front of

Marcone's building and...well, it would be bragging to say that it vaporized the trash can. Even I would have trouble with that. It did, however, slag the thing into a shower of molten metal as it gouged a two-foot-deep, coffin-length furrow in the concrete of the sidewalk behind it. Chunks of heated concrete and globs of molten metal hit the building's exterior, cracking several thick panes of glass, pocking stone walls, and leaving several wooden planters on fire. The concussion rattled every window within a hundred yards, and shattered the casing of the nearest streetlight, so that it cast out fractured illumination. Half a dozen car alarms went off.

I turned back to Molly and found her staring at me with her mouth open until my shadow, cast by the rising fires and crippled streetlight, fell across her. My voice came out in a growl. "I. Am not. Yoda."

I stripped the glove off my left hand and held it up, my fingers spread. It didn't look as horrific as it used to, but it was plenty ugly enough to make an impression on a nineteen-year-old girl. "This isn't a goddamn movie, Molly. Screw up here and you don't vanish and leave an empty cloak. You don't get frozen in carbonite. And you should damned well *know* that by now."

She looked shocked. I'll curse from time to time, but I don't generally indulge in blasphemy—at least, not around Michael or his family. I don't think God is terribly threatened by my occasional slip of the tongue, but I owe enough to Michael to respect his wishes regarding that particular shade of profanity. Mostly.

Hell, the whole practice of invective was developed to add extra emphasis when the mere meaning of words alone just wasn't enough. And I was feeling plenty emphatic.

Snarling, I cupped my left hand, focused my ongoing anger, and a sudden sphere of light and heat blossomed to life. It wasn't big—about the diameter of a dime. But it was as bright as a tiny sun.

"Harry," Murphy said. Her voice was a little shaky. "We don't have time for this."

"You think you're ready?" I told Molly. "Show me."

I blew on the sphere and it wafted out of my hand and glided smoothly into the open door of the Beetle and toward Molly's face.

"Wh-what?" she said.

"Stop it," I said, my voice cold. "If you can."

She swallowed and raised a hand. I saw her try to control her breathing and focus her will, her lips blurring over the steps I'd taught her.

The sphere drifted closer.

"Better hurry," I added. I did nothing to hide the anger or the taint of derision in my voice.

Beads of sweat broke out on her skin. The sphere slowed, but it had not stopped.

"It's about twelve hundred degrees," I added. "It'll melt sand into glass. It doesn't do much for skin, either."

Molly lifted her left hand and stammered out a word, but her will fluttered and failed, amounting to nothing more than a handful of sparks.

"Bad guys don't give you this much time," I spat.

Molly hissed—give the kid credit, she didn't let herself scream—and pressed herself as far as she could from the fire. She threw up an arm to shield her eyes.

For a second, I felt a mad impulse to let the fire continue for just a second more. Nothing teaches like a burned hand, whispered a darker part of my self. I should know.

But I closed my fingers, willed the ending of the spell, and the sphere vanished.

Murphy, standing across the car, just stared at me.

Molly lowered her hand, her arm moving in frightened little jerks. She sat there shivering and staring. Her tongue piercing rattled against her teeth.

I looked at both of them and then shook my head. I got control of my rampaging temper. Then I leaned down and stuck my head in the car, looking Molly in the eyes.

"We play for keeps, kid," I said quietly. "I've told you before: Magic isn't a solution to every problem. You still aren't listening."

Molly's eyes, frightened and angry, filled with tears. She turned her head away from me and said nothing. She tried not to make any noise, but it's tough to keep a good poker face when a snarling madman nearly burns it off. There wasn't any time to waste—but I gave the kid a few seconds of space while I tried to let my head cool off.

The door to Marcone's building opened. Hendricks came out.

Marcone followed him a moment later. He surveyed the damage. Then he glanced at me. Marcone shook his head, took a cell phone from his suit

pocket, and went back inside, while Hendricks kept me pinned down with his beady-eyed scowl.

What I'd seen soulgazing Helen Beckitt was still glaringly fresh in my mind—just as it always would be. Marcone had looked a lot younger when he wore his hair longer, less neat, and dressed more casually. Or maybe he'd just looked younger before he'd seen Helen's daughter die.

The thought went utterly against the pressure of the rage inside me, and I grabbed hold of myself while I had the chance. I took a deep breath. I wouldn't do anyone any good if I charged in full of outrage and absent of brains. I took another deep breath and turned to find Murphy on the move.

She walked around the car and faced me squarely.

"All done?" Murphy asked me, her voice pitched low. "You want to smoke a turkey or set fire to a playground or anything? You could terrorize a troop of Cub Scouts as an encore."

"And after that, I could tell you all about how to do your job, maybe," I said, "right after we bury the people who get killed because we're standing here instead of moving."

She narrowed her eyes. Neither one of us met each other's gaze or moved an inch. It wasn't a long standoff, but it was plenty hard.

"Not now," she said. "But later. We'll talk. This isn't finished."

I nodded. "Later."

We got in the Beetle and Murphy started it up and got moving. "Ask you questions as we go?"

I calculated distances in my head. The communion spell with Elaine had been created to reach over a couple of yards at the most. It had mostly been used at, ahem, considerably shorter range than that. I could extend the range, I thought, to most of a mile—maybe. It wasn't as simple as just pouring more power into the spell, but it *was* fairly simple. That gave me a couple of minutes to steady my breathing while Murphy drove. I could talk while that happened. It would, in fact, help me keep my mind off my fear for Elaine. Ah, reason, banisher of fear—or at least provider of a place to stick my head in the sand.

"Go ahead," I told her. I paid no attention to Molly, giving the kid time to think over the lesson and to get herself together. She didn't like anyone to see her when she was upset.

"Why do you think your ex is in danger?" Murphy asked. "Shouldn't this Skavis just run off if it knows you're onto it?"

“If it was operating alone, sure,” I said. “That would be the smart thing. But it isn’t running off. It’s making a fight of it.”

“So...what? It has help?”

“It has *rivals*,” I said.

“Yeah. Grey Cloak and Madrigal Raith.” Murphy shook her head. “But what does that mean?”

“Think in terms of predators,” I said. “One predator has just gotten its teeth into something good to eat.”

“Scavengers?” Murphy said. “They’re trying to take the prize from him?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think that’s what they’re doing.”

“You mean Elaine?” Murphy said.

I shook my head. “No, no. More abstract. The Skavis is methodical. It’s killing women of magical talent. It doesn’t have to do that to live—it can eat any human being.”

“Then why those targets?” Murphy asked.

“Exactly,” I said. “Why them? This isn’t about food, Murph. I think the Skavis is making a play for power.”

“Power?” Molly blurted from the backseat.

I turned and gave her a glare that quelled her interest. She sank back into the seat. “Within the White Court,” I said. “This entire mess, start to finish, is about a power struggle within the White Court.”

Murph was silent for a second, absorbing that. “Then...then this is a lot bigger than a few killings in a few towns.”

“If I’m right,” I said, nodding. “Yeah.”

“Go on.”

“Okay. And remember as I go that White Court vamps don’t like their fights out in the open. They arrange things. They use cat’s-paws. They pull strings. Confrontation is for losers.”

“Got it.”

I nodded. “The White King is supporting peace talks between the Council and the Red Courts. I think the Skavis is trying to prove a point—that they don’t *need* peace talks. That they have us in a choke hold and all they have to do is hang on.”

Murphy frowned at me, and then her eyes widened. “You told me once that magic is inherited. Mostly along family lines.”

“Salic law,” I said. “Mostly through female lines. I got it from my mom.”

Murphy nodded, her eyes going back to the road. “And they can start... what? Thinning the herd, I suppose, from their point of view. Killing those that have the potential to produce more wizards.”

“Yeah,” I said. “One Skavis goes around to half a dozen cities in the most dangerous—to them—nation on the planet, doing it at will,” I said. “He proves how easy it is. He identifies and hunts down the best targets. He plants all kinds of distrust for the Council as he does it, making the potential prey distrust the only people who could help them.”

“But what does he hope to accomplish?” Murphy said. “This is just one guy.”

“Exactly what he wants them to say,” I said. “Look what just one vampire accomplished working alone. Look how easy it was. Raith is weak. Time to expand the operation now, while the Council is hurt, and screw talking peace with them. Change the guard. Let House Skavis take leadership.”

“And Grey Cloak and Madrigal, seeing that he’s onto something good, try to swoop in at the last minute, shoulder the Skavis aside, and take credit for the plan in front of the whole Court,” Murphy finished.

“Yeah. They sing the exact same tune, only they substitute Malvora for Skavis.” I shook my head. “The hell of it is, if Madrigal hadn’t had a personal beef with me I might not have gotten involved. I made him look really bad when he tried to auction me on eBay and instead I fed his djinn to the Scarecrow and made him run off like a girl.”

“Like a what?” Murphy bridled.

“Now is not the time to go all Susie Q. Anthony on me,” I said. “Madrigal’s wounded pride makes him leave clues to try to sucker me into the show. He figures Grey Cloak or our Skavis killer will help him handle me. Except that they ran into another problem.”

“Thomas,” Murphy said, her voice certain.

“Thomas,” I said. “Snatching their targets out from under them.”

“How’s he finding them?”

“Same way they are,” I said. “He’s a vampire. He knows what resources they have and how they think. So much so, in fact, that he’s ruining the finale of the whole program for everyone involved.”

Murphy nodded, getting it. "So Madrigal gets a gang of ghouls and tries to take out his own cousin. And finds you and Elaine there too."

"Right," I said. "He's already being a loser, but it's still a sucker punch, and Madrigal figures, What the hell. If he gets away with it, he pulls off the plan *and* gets his mojo back from me."

"I still don't get why Thomas didn't say anything," Murphy said. "To you, I mean. I never figured him for that kind of secrecy."

"That's what tipped me off to the whole thing," I said. "There just aren't many things which could make Thomas do that. I think he was counting on it to tip me off, in fact."

Murphy shook her head. "A phone call would have been easier."

"Not if he's being watched," I said. "And not if he's made a promise."

"Watched?" Murphy said. "By who?"

"Someone who has more than one kind of leverage," I said. "Someone who is his family, who is protecting the woman he loves, and who has the kind of resources it takes to watch him, and enough savvy to know if he's lying."

"Lara Raith," Murphy said.

"Big sister is the one behind the peace movement," I said. "Everyone thinks it's Papa Raith, but he's just her puppet now. Except that there aren't many people who know that."

"If Raith's authority is challenged openly by the Skavis," Murphy said, putting things together, "it exposes the fact that he's utterly powerless. Lara would have to fight openly."

"And the White Court vamp who is driven to that has already lost," I said. "She can't maintain her control over the Court if she's revealed as the power behind the throne. Not only does she not have the raw strength she'd need to hold on to it, but the very *fact* that she was revealed would make her an incompetent manipulator and therefore automatically unsuitable in the eyes of the rest of the White Court."

Murphy chewed on her lip. "If Papa Raith falls, Lara falls. And if Lara falls..."

"Justine goes with her," I said, nodding. "She wouldn't be able to protect her for Thomas anymore."

"Then why didn't she just have Thomas go to you and ask for help?" Murphy said.

“She can’t have it get out that she *asked* for help from the enemy team, Murph. Even among her own supporters, that could be a disaster. But remember that she knows how to pull strings. Maybe better than anyone operating right now. She wouldn’t be upset if I got involved and stomped all over agents of Skavis and Malvora.”

Murphy snorted. “So she forbids Thomas from speaking to you about it.”

“She’s too smart for that. Thomas gets stubborn about being given orders. She gets him to promise to keep quiet. But by doing that, she’s also done the one thing she *knows* will make him defiant to the spirit of the promise. So he’s made a promise and he can’t come out and talk to me, but he wants to get my attention.”

“Ha,” Murphy said. “So he gets around it. He works sloppy, deliberately. He lets himself be seen repeatedly taking off with the women he was rounding up.”

“And leaves a big old honking wall o’ clues in his apartment for me, knowing that when I get involved, I’m going to get curious about why he’s been seen with missing women and why he’s not talking to me. He can’t talk to me about it, but he leaves me a map.” I found my right foot tapping against an imaginary accelerator, my left against a nonexistent clutch.

“Stop twitching,” Murphy said. The Beetle jolted over some railroad tracks, officially taking us to the wrong side. “I’m a better driver than you, anyway.”

I scowled because it was true.

“So right now,” Murphy said, “you think Priscilla is shilling for the Skavis agent.”

“No. She *is* the Skavis agent.”

“I thought you said it was a man,” Murphy said.

“Strike you funny that Priscilla wears turtlenecks in the middle of a hot summer?”

Murphy let out a word that should not be spoken before small children. “So if you’re right, he’s going to clip Elaine and all those moms.”

“Kids too,” I said. “And anyone who gets in the way.”

“Mouse,” Molly said, her voice worried.

This time I didn’t yell her down. I was worried about him, too. “The Skavis knows that Mouse is special. He saw the demonstration. That’s been the only thing keeping him from acting sooner than he did. If the vampire

started drawing upon his powers, Mouse would have sensed it and blown his cover. So Mouse is definitely going to be near the top of his list.”

Murphy nodded. “So what’s the plan?”

“Get us to the motel,” I said. We were getting close enough that I could start trying the spell. “I’m going to try to reach Elaine.”

“Then what?”

“I’ve got no use for anything that does what this thing does,” I said. “Do you?”

Her blue eyes glittered as the car zipped through the illumination of a lonely streetlamp. “No.”

“And as I recall, you are on vacation right now.”

“And having fun, fun, fun,” she snarled.

“Then we won’t worry too much about saving anything for later,” I said. I turned my head and said, “Molly.”

The girl’s head whipped up almost audibly. “Um. What?”

“Can you drive a stick?”

She was silent for a second, then jerked her head in a nod.

“Then when we get out, I want you to get behind the wheel and keep the engine running,” I said. “If you see anyone else coming, honk the horn. If you see a tall woman in a turtleneck sprinting away, I want you to drive the car over her.”

“I...but...but...”

“You wanted to help. You’re helping.” I turned back around. “Do it.”

Her answer came back with the automatic speed of reflex. “Yes, sir.”

“What about Grey Cloak and Madrigal?” Murphy asked me. “Even if we take out the Skavis, they’re waiting to jump in.”

“One thing at a time,” I said. “Drive.”

Then I closed my eyes, drew in my will, and hoped that I could call out to Elaine—and that she would be alive to hear me.

Chapter Thirty-One

I closed my eyes and blocked out my senses, one by one. The smell of the car and Murphy's deodorant went first. At least Molly had learned from experience and left off any overt fragrances when she tried to use the veil trick a second time. Sound went next. The Beetle's old, laboring engine, the rattle of tires on bad spots of road, and the rush of wind all faded away. Chicago's evening lights vanished from their irregular pressure on my closed eyelids. The sour taste of fear in my mouth simply became not, as I focused on the impromptu variation of the old, familiar spell.

Elaine.

I referred to the same base image I always had. Elaine in our first soulgaze, an image of a woman of power, grace, and oceans of cool nerve superimposed over the blushing image of a schoolgirl, naked for the first time with her first lover. I had known what she would grow into, even then, that she would transform the gawky limbs and awkward carriage and blushing cheeks into confidence and poise and beauty and wisdom. The wisdom, maybe, was still in process, as evidenced by her choice of first lovers, but even as an adult, I was hardly in a position to cast stones, as evidenced by my choice of pretty much everything.

What we hadn't known about, back then, was pain.

Sure, we'd faced some things as children that a lot of kids don't. Sure, Justin had qualified for his Junior de Sade Badge in his teaching methods for dealing with pain. We still hadn't learned, though, that growing up is all about getting hurt. And then getting over it. You hurt. You recover. You move on. Odds are pretty good you're just going to get hurt again. But each time, you learn something.

Each time, you come out of it a little stronger, and at some point you realize that there are more flavors of pain than coffee. There's the little empty pain of leaving something behind—graduating, taking the next step forward, walking out of something familiar and safe into the unknown. There's the big, whirling pain of life upending all of your plans and

expectations. There's the sharp little pains of failure, and the more obscure aches of successes that didn't give you what you thought they would. There are the vicious, stabbing pains of hopes being torn up. The sweet little pains of finding others, giving them your love, and taking joy in their life as they grow and learn. There's the steady pain of empathy that you shrug off so you can stand beside a wounded friend and help them bear their burdens.

And if you're very, very lucky, there are a very few blazing hot little pains you feel when you realize that you are standing in a moment of utter perfection, an instant of triumph, or happiness, or mirth which at the same time cannot possibly last—and yet will remain with you for life.

Everyone is down on pain, because they forget something important about it: Pain is for the living. Only the dead don't feel it.

Pain is a part of life. Sometimes it's a big part, and sometimes it isn't, but either way, it's part of the big puzzle, the deep music, the great game. Pain does two things: It teaches you, tells you that you're alive. Then it passes away and leaves you changed. It leaves you wiser, sometimes. Sometimes it leaves you stronger. Either way, pain leaves its mark, and everything important that will ever happen to you in life is going to involve it in one degree or another.

Adding pain to that image of Elaine wasn't a process of imagining horrors, fantasizing violence, speculating upon suffering. It was no different from an artist mixing in new color, adding emphasis and depth to the image that, while bright, was not true to itself or to life. So I took the girl I knew and added in the pains the woman I was reaching for had been forced to face. She'd stepped into a world she'd left behind for more than a decade, and found herself struggling to face life without relying upon anyone else. She'd always had me, and Justin—and when we'd gone away, she'd leaned upon a Sidhe woman named Aurora for help and support. When that had vanished, she had no one—I had given my love to someone else. Justin had been dead for years.

She'd been alone in a city, different from everyone around, struggling to survive and to build a life and a home.

So I added in all the pains I'd learned. Cooking blunders I'd had to eat anyway. Equipment and property constantly breaking down, needing repairs and attention. Tax insanity, and rushing around trying to hack a path through a jungle of numbers. Late bills. Unpleasant jobs that gave you horribly aching feet. Odd looks from people who didn't know you, when

something less than utterly normal happened. The occasional night when the loneliness ached so badly that it made you weep. The occasional gathering during which you wanted to escape to your empty apartment so badly you were willing to go out the bathroom window. Muscle pulls and aches you never had when you were younger, the annoyance as the price of gas kept going up to some ridiculous degree, the irritation with unruly neighbors, brainless media personalities, and various politicians who all seemed to fall on a spectrum somewhere between the extremes of “crook” and “moron.”

You know.

Life.

And the image of her in my mind deepened, sharpened, took on personality. There’s no simple way to describe it, but you know it when you see it, and the great artists can do it, can slip in the shades of meaning and thought and truth into something as simple as a girl named Mona’s smile, even if they can’t tell you precisely how they managed it.

The image of Elaine gained shadows, flaws, character, and strength. I didn’t know the specifics of what she’d been through—not all of them, anyway—but I knew enough, and could make good guesses about plenty more. That image in my mind drew me in as I focused on it, just as I once had focused on that younger image of Elaine unrealized. I reached out with my thoughts and touched that image, breathing gentle life into it as I whispered her True Name, freely given to me when we were young, within the vaults of my mind.

Elaine Lilian Mallory.

And the image came to life.

Elaine’s face bowed forward, her hair falling around it, not quite hiding the expression of bone-deep weariness and despair.

Elaine, I whispered to her. Can you hear me?

Her thoughts came to me in an echoing blur, like when they want to confuse you at the movies and they muck around with a voice-over. ... *believe I could make a difference. One person doesn’t. One person can’t ever make a difference. Not in the real world. God, what arrogance. And they paid for it.*

I put more will into my thoughts. *Elaine!*

She glanced up for a moment, looking dully around the room. The image of her was filling in, slowly. She was in well-lit room without many

features. Most of it seemed to be white. Then her head bowed again.

Trusting me to keep them safe. I might as well pull the trigger myself. Too cowardly for that, though. I just sit here. Set things up so that I don't have to fail. I don't have to try. I don't have to worry about being nothing. All I have to do is sit.

I didn't like the sound of that at all. Within the senseless vaults of my mind, I screamed, *Elaine!*

She looked up again, blinking her eyes slowly. Her mouth began moving in time with her audible thoughts. "Don't know what I thought I could do. One woman. One woman who spent her whole life running away. Being broken. I would have served them better to end it before I ever left, rather than dragging them down with me."

Her lips stopped moving, but, very faintly, I heard her thoughts call, *Harry?*

And suddenly I could hear a difference in the other thoughts.

"Just sit," she mumbled. "Almost over now. I won't be useless anymore. Just sit and wait and I won't have to hurt anymore. Won't fail anyone else. It will all be over and I can rest."

It didn't sound like Elaine's voice. There were subtle differences. It sounded...like someone doing an impersonation. It was close, but it wasn't her. There were too many small inconsistencies.

Then I got it.

That was the Skavis, whispering thoughts of despair and grief into her mind, just as the Raiths would whisper of lust and need.

She was under attack.

Elaine Lilian Mallory! I called, and in my head, my voice rumbled like thunder. *I am Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden, and I bid thee hear me! Hear my voice, Elaine!*

There was a shocked silence, and then Elaine's thought-voice said, more clearly, *Harry?*

And her lips moved, and the not-Elaine voice said, "What the *hell?*"

Elaine's eyes snapped to mine, suddenly meeting them, and the room around her clarified into crystalline relief.

She was in the bathroom of the hotel, in the tub, naked in the bath.

The air was thick with steam. She was bleeding from a broad cut across one wrist. The water was red. Her face was god-awful pale, but her eyes weren't fogged over and hazed out. Not yet.

Elaine! I thundered. *You are under a psychic attack! Priscilla is the Skavis!*

Elaine's eyes widened.

Someone slapped me hard on the face and screamed, "Harry!"

The world flew sideways and expanded in a rush of motion and sound as my denied senses came crashing back in upon me. The Beetle was sitting sideways across several parking spaces in the motel's little lot, both doors open, and Murphy, gun in one hand, had a hold of my duster with the other and was shaking me hard. "Harry! Get up!"

"Oh," I said. "We're here."

I stumbled out of the car, getting my bearings. Behind me, Molly scrambled behind the wheel.

"Well?" Murphy demanded. "Did you get through?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but before I could, every light in sight suddenly went dim. I don't mean they went out. They didn't. They just... dwindled, the way a lantern's flame does if you close off the glass. Or, I thought, struck with a sudden impression, the way a fire might dim if something nearby had just drawn the air away. Something big enough to dim nearby flame as it inhaled.

Something big taking a deep breath.

And then a voice that rang with silvery rage rolled through the air, kicking up a layer of dust from the ground in a broad wave in the wake of its passing as it rang out in an echoing clarion call, "*FULMINARIS!*"

There was a flash of green-white light so bright that it came to my reawakened senses as a physical pain, a roar of sound loud enough to drown out a spring break band, and the entire front *wall* of the first-floor hotel room we'd rented earlier that day was blown off the freaking building and into the street.

I had my shield up overhead before the debris started raining down, protecting Murphy, me, the windshield of the Beetle, and the girl staring wide-eyed through it. I squinted through the flying bits of building and furniture and rock, and a second later managed to spot a broken human form lying with its head in the street, its feet still up on the curb. Priscilla's turtleneck was on fire, and her hair stood straight out and was blackened and burned off within three or four inches of her skull. She ripped the turtleneck away in a kind of wobbly, disoriented panic—and revealed a bra and falsies. Those got ripped off too, and what was left, while slender and

hairless, was also obviously the upper torso of a very pale, rather effeminate-looking man.

There was motion in the gaping maw of ruin that had been Elaine's hotel room, and a woman appeared in it. She was dressed in the cheap plastic curtain that had been hanging over the tub. She had a thick-linked chain wrapped tightly around her left arm a couple of inches above her bloodied, slashed wrist, tied in an improvised tourniquet. She was quite dry, and her hair floated out and around her head, crackling with little flashes of static electricity as she moved. She slid herself slowly, carefully across the debris-strewn floor, and she held a short length of carved wood that looked like nothing so much as an enormous thorn of some kind in her right hand, its sharp tip pointing at the man in the parking lot. Tiny slivers of green lightning danced around its tip, occasionally flickering out to touch upon nearby objects with snapping, popping sounds as she passed.

Elaine kept that deadly little wand pointed at the Skavis, eyes narrowed, and said, her voice rough and raw, "Who's useless *now*, bitch?"

I just stared at Elaine for a long minute. Then I traded a glance with Murphy, who looked just as startled and impressed as I felt. "Murph," I said, "I think I got through."

The Skavis agent came to his feet and bounded at us, quick as thinking.

I raised my staff and unleashed a burst of raw force. He might be strong as hell, but once off the ground, with nothing to push against, he was just mass times acceleration. The blow from the staff swatted him out of the air to the concrete not far from the Beetle. I immediately used another blow to throw him back across the parking lot, creating clear space around him.

"Thank you, Harry," Elaine said, her rough voice prim. Then she lifted the wand and snapped, "*Fulminaris!*"

There was another blinding flash of light, another crack of homemade thunder, and a green-white globe of light enclosed the vampire. There was a scream, and then his limp form fell to the concrete, one shoulder and most of his chest blackened. It smelled disturbingly like burned bacon.

Elaine lifted her chin, eyes glittering. She lowered the wand, and as she did, the lights came back up to full strength. She nodded once. Then she slipped and staggered to one side.

"Watch him!" I barked to Molly, pointing at the fallen vampire.

Murphy and I reached Elaine at about the same time, and we tried to catch her before she dropped. We succeeded in easing her down to the

debris-littered concrete.

“Jesus,” Murphy said. “Harry, she needs a hospital.”

“They’ll be watching the—”

“Fuck ’em,” Murphy said, rising. “They can watch her through a wall of cops.” She stalked away, drawing out her phone.

I bit my lip as Elaine looked up at me and smiled faintly. She spoke, her words faintly slurred. “Dammit. Every time I come to Chicago, I’ve got to get rescued. Embarrassing as hell.”

“At least it wasn’t me that did the building this time,” I said.

She made a sound that might have been a laugh if she’d had more energy behind it. “Bastard had me dead to rights. Snuck it up on me. I didn’t realize.”

“That’s how the old psychic whammy works,” I said quietly. “Once you start thinking, ‘Gee, maybe that isn’t me thinking about suicide,’ it kind of falls apart.”

“Wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t warned me,” she said. She met my eyes again. “Thank you, Harry.”

I smiled at her, and checked her wrist. “This doesn’t look good. We’re gonna get you to a doctor. Okay?”

She shook her head. “The upstairs room. Abby, Olivia, the others. Make sure they’re all right.”

“I doubt they’ve lost as much blood as you have,” I said. Murphy, though, was way ahead of me, and was already on the stairs on the way up to the second level, then down to check the room.

“Okay. Time to wrap this up.” I picked Elaine up. I made sure the shower curtain didn’t fall off. “Come on. You can sit in the car until the EMTs get here. Maybe I can find something else to keep your arm tied off, huh?”

“If you can find my purse,” she said, her eyes closed now, a little smile on her mouth, “you can use my golden lariat.”

I turned to the car just as the horn started frantically beeping.

I whirled.

The Skavis agent was moving again. He got his knees underneath him.

“Dammit,” I said, and rushed the car. I got the passenger door open and dumped Elaine inside, even as the Skavis rose to his feet. “Murphy!”

Murphy called something I didn’t hear very well. The Skavis turned toward me. His face, all contorted with burns on one side, twisted up into a hideous grimace.

Murphy's gun began barking in a steady, deliberate shooting rhythm. Sparks flew up from the concrete near his feet. At least one shot hit the Skavis, making his upper body jerk.

I rose, blasting rod in hand.

There was a roar more appropriate to a great cat than any dog, and the sound of shattering glass from the second level. Mouse flew over the safety railing, landed heavily on the ground, and lunged at the Skavis.

The dog wasn't six inches behind the Skavis agent as it closed on me, its one remaining arm raised up to...well, hit me. But given how hard the blow was going to be, I upgraded the verb to *smite*. He was about to smite me.

Thomas came out of nowhere with that cavalry saber of his and took off the Skavis's smiting arm at the shoulder.

He let out a scream that didn't sound anything like human, and tried to bite me. I rolled out of his way, helping him along with a stiff shove to his back.

Mouse came down on top of him, and that was that.

I eyed Thomas as Mouse made sure that the remarkably resilient vampire wasn't going to be getting up again for anything, ever. It had been a close call. The Skavis had timed his move just right. Another second, give or take, and he'd have broken my neck.

"Well," I told Thomas, my breathing still quick. "It's about time."

"Better late than never," Thomas replied. He glanced at the bleeding Elaine, licked his lips once, and said, "She needs help."

"It's on the way," Murphy said. "Response is slow here, but give them a couple of minutes. Everyone's okay up there, Harry."

Thomas let out a breath of relief. "Thank God."

Which was odd, coming from him, all things considered. I concurred with the sentiment, though.

Molly sat behind the wheel of the Beetle, breathing too quickly, her eyes very wide. She couldn't quite see Mouse or his grisly chew toy from where she was sitting, but she stared as if she could see right through the Beetle's hood to where my dog was finishing up his deadly, ugly work.

"So," I asked Thomas. "How'd Lara get you to promise not to talk?"

My brother turned toward me and gave me a huge grin. Then he wiped it off his face and said, in the tone of a radio announcer on Prozac, "I don't know what you're talking about, Warden Dresden." He winked. "But hypothetically speaking, she might have told me that Justine was in danger

and refused to divulge anything else until I promised to keep my mouth shut.”

“And you let her get away with that kind of crap?” I asked him.

Thomas shrugged and said, “She’s family.”

Molly suddenly lunged up out of the driver’s seat of the Beetle and was noisily sick.

“Seems a little fragile,” Thomas said.

“She’s adjusting,” I replied. “Madrigal and his Malvora buddy are still out there.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. “So?”

“So that means that this was just a warm-up. They’re still a threat,” I said. “They’ve got enough bodies to lay the whole thing out to the White Court and make people like the Ordo look like a casino buffet. If that happens, it won’t just be one Skavis running around with a point to prove. It will be a quiet campaign. Thousands of people will die.”

Thomas grunted. “Yeah. There’s not a lot we can do about that, though.”

“Says who?” I replied.

He frowned at me and tilted his head.

“Thomas,” I said quietly, “by any chance, is there a gathering of the White Court anytime soon? Perhaps in relation to the proposed summit talks?”

“If there was a meeting of the most powerful hundred or so nobles of the Court scheduled to meet at the family estate the day after tomorrow, I couldn’t tell you about it,” Thomas said. “Because I gave my sister my word.”

“Your sister has guts,” I said. “And she sure as hell knows how to put on a show.” I glanced at the ruined hotel, and dropped my hand to scratch Mouse’s ears. They were about the only part of him not stained with too-pale blood. “Of course, I’ve been known to bring down the house once or twice, myself.”

Thomas folded his arms, waiting. His smile was positively vulpine.

“Call Lara,” I said. “Pass her a message for me.”

Thomas narrowed his eyes. “What message?”

I bared my teeth in an answering smile.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Murphy might not have been officially in charge of Special Investigations, but I don't think that made much difference to many of the other detectives there. She needed help, and when she called, they came. End of story.

For them, at least. For Murphy, it was the beginning of the story. She had to tell a lot of stories around police headquarters. It was a part of her job. Oh, no, those reports of vampire attacks were the results of hysterical drug-induced hallucinations. Troll? It was a large and ugly man, probably drunk or on drugs. He got away, investigation ongoing. Everyone buys it, because that's what SI gets paid to do—explain away the bogeyman.

Murphy should be a novelist, she writes so much fiction.

We had a big mess here, but Murph and her fellow cops in SI would make it fit in the blanks. Terrorists were hot right now. This report would probably have terrorists in it. Scared religious nuts and terrorists who set off incendiary devices at an apartment building and in her car, and who also doubtless set the device that blew up an entire room at a cheap south-side motel. There weren't any corpses to clean up—just one wounded woman who probably needed to see a shrink more than a jail cell. I debated with myself over whether or not to suggest she add in a bit with a dog. People love dogs. You can never go wrong adding a dog to the story.

"Right, Mouse?" I asked him.

Mouse looked unhappily up at me. Thomas had gotten the women and kids clear of the scene and handled what was left of the Skavis agent while I'd gone to a car wash and cleaned his blood off of my dog with the sprayer. Mouse's fur keeps out just about everything, but when it finally gets wet, it soaks up about fifty gallons and stays that way for a long time. He doesn't like it, and he was apparently feeling petulant about the entire process.

"Everybody loves a bit with a dog," I said.

Mouse exhaled steadily, then shook his head once and laid it back down, politely and definitely ignoring me.

I get no respect.

I sat on a hospital bench near the emergency room entrance with Mouse pressed up against one of my legs as he lay on the floor, just in case anyone wondered who he was with. It had been a long night, and despite Elaine's incredible hands, my headache had begun to return. I tried to decide whether Cowl's mental whammy or Madrigal and his stupid assault rifle deserved more blame for that.

A brawny kid in a brown uniform shirt came up to me the way good security guys do in the Midwest—all friendly and nice, until it's time to not be nice. The wit and wisdom of Patrick Swayze movies lives on. "Sorry, mister," he said in a friendly tone, one hand resting congenially on his nightstick. "No dogs allowed. Hospital rules."

I was tired. "If I don't take him out," I said, "are you going to tonfa me to death?"

He blinked at me. "What?"

"Tonfa," I said. "Imagine all the meal that isn't getting ground so that you can do your job. All the knives going unsharpened."

He smiled, and I could see him classify me as "drunk, harmless." He put out one hand in a come-along sort of gesture.

"Your nightstick there. It's called a tonfa. It was originally a pin that held a millstone or a big round grinding stone in a smithy. It got developed into an improvised weapon by people in southeast Asia, Okinawa, places like that, where big friendly security types like yourself took away all the real weapons in the interest of public safety."

His smile faded a little. "Okay, buddy..." He put his hand on my shoulder.

Mouse opened his eyes and lifted his head.

That's all. He didn't growl at the brawny kid. He didn't show his teeth. Like all the most dangerous people I know, he didn't feel a need to make any displays. He just sort of took notice—with extreme prejudice.

The security kid was smart enough to get the picture and took a quick step back. His hand went from the nightstick to his radio. Even Patrick Swayze needed help sometimes.

Murphy came walking up, her badge hanging on a chain around her neck, and said, "Easy there, big guy." She traded a nod with the security kid and hooked a thumb back at me. "He's with us. The dog is a handicap-assist animal."

The kid lifted his eyebrows.

“My mouth is partially paralyzed,” I said. “It makes it hard for me to read. He’s here to help me with the big words. Tell me if I’m supposed to push or pull on doors, that kind of thing.”

Murphy gave me a gimlet glance, and turned back to the guard. “See what I mean? I’ll have him out of your hair in a minute.”

The security guard glanced dubiously at me, but nodded at Murphy and said, “All right. I’ll check back in a bit, see if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Murphy said, her tone even.

The guard departed. Murphy sighed and sat down next to me, her feet on the other side of Mouse. The dog gave her leg a fond nudge and settled back down again.

“He’ll be back to see if you need help,” I told Murphy in a serious voice. “A sweet little thing like you could get in trouble with a big, crazy man like me.”

“Mouse,” Murphy said. “If I knock Harry out and write, ‘Insufferable wiseass,’ on his head in permanent marker, will you help him read it?”

Mouse glanced up at Murphy and cocked his head speculatively. Then he sneezed and lay back down.

“Why’d you give him a hard time?” Murphy asked me.

I nodded at a pay phone on the wall next to a drinking fountain and a vending machine. “Waiting for a call.”

“Ah,” Murphy said. “Where’s Molly?”

“She was falling asleep on her feet. Rawlins took her home for me.”

Murphy grunted. “I said we’d talk about her.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“What you did, Harry...” Murphy shook her head.

“She needed it,” I said.

“She needed it.” The words were crisp.

I shrugged. “The kid’s got power. She thinks that means she knows more than other people. That’s dangerous.”

Murphy frowned at me, listening.

“I’d been planning the little ball-of-face-melty-sunshine thing for a while now,” I said. “I mean, come on. Fire is hard to control. I couldn’t have done something like that without practicing it, and you can’t exactly use a nice, slow, dramatic face-melty fireball in a real fight, can you?”

“Maybe not,” Murphy said.

“I had a kind of face-melty thing come at me once, and it made an impression,” I said. “Molly...got off to a bad start. She took her magic and reshaped the stuff around her. The people around her. Murph...you can’t do anything with magic that you don’t *believe* in. Think about the significance of that for a minute. When Molly did what she did, she *believed* that it was right. That she was doing the right thing. Think about her parents. Think about how far they’re willing to go to do the right thing.”

Murphy did that, her blue eyes intense, her expression unreadable.

“I have to keep knocking her on her ass,” I said. “If I don’t, if I let her recover her balance before she gets smart enough to figure out *why* she should be doing things instead of just *how* to do them, or *if* she can do them, she’ll start doing the”—I used air quotes—“‘right’ thing again. She’ll break the Laws again, and they’ll kill her.”

“And you?” Murphy asked.

I shrugged. “That’s a ways down my worry list.”

“And you think what you did is going to help prevent that?” she asked.

“I hope it will,” I said. “I’m not sure what else to do. In the end, it’s up to the kid. I’m just trying to give her enough time to get it together. Despite herself. Hell’s bells, the girl has a thick skull.”

Murphy gave me a lopsided smile and shook her head.

“I know,” I said. “I know. Pot. Kettle. Black.”

“I wasn’t talking about the face-melty thing, Harry,” she said then. “Not directly. I’m talking about the stupid trash can. I’m talking about the look on your face right before you made the fire go away. I’m talking about what happened to that movie-monster thing in the hotel last year.”

It was my turn to frown. “What?”

Murphy stopped for a minute, evidently considering her words as carefully as a bomb technician considers wiring. “There are moments when I wonder if you are losing control of yourself. You’ve always had a lot of anger in you, Harry. But over the past few years, it’s gotten worse. A lot worse.”

“Bullshit,” I snarled.

Murphy arched an eyebrow and just looked at me.

I gritted my teeth and made myself ease back down into my previous slouch. I took a deep breath and counted to ten. Then I said, “You think I have anger issues.”

“When you destroyed that trash can—when you slagged it in a moment of pure frustration, destroyed it, inflicted thousands of dollars of damage on the city sidewalk, the building behind it, the shops inside—”

“All of which are in Marcone’s building,” I snapped.

“I’m sure the people who work the counter at”—she consulted her little notepad—“the Spresso Spress and run the registers at Bathwurks probably don’t know anything about Marcone, or care about him, either. They probably just go to work and try to pay their bills.”

I frowned at her. “What?”

“Both shops were hit by bits of concrete and molten metal. They’ll be closed for several weeks for repairs.”

“They’re insured,” I said. I didn’t sound like I believed it made a difference, even to me.

“People got hurt,” Murphy said. “No one’s face got melted, but that’s not the point. You know the score, Harry. You know the kind of damage you can do if you aren’t careful.”

I didn’t say anything.

“It’s just like being a cop. Knowing martial arts. I know that I can do some fairly awful things to people. It’s my business to make sure that awful things don’t happen to people. I’m careful about how I use what power I have—”

“I’ll tell that to my dentist,” I said.

“Don’t be petty, Harry,” she said, her voice serious. “I’ve made mistakes. Admitted them. Apologized to you. I can’t change what’s happened, and you’re a better man than that.”

Unless maybe I wasn’t. I felt ashamed for making the remark.

“My point is,” Murphy said quietly, “that you knew what kind of damage you could do. But if what you say is true, in the moment you used your magic *you thought that what you were doing was right*. You thought it was okay to destroy something because you were angry. Even though it might hurt someone else who didn’t deserve it.”

I felt another surge of rage and...

...and...

And holy crap.

Murphy was right.

The sigil of angelic script, the only unburned flesh on my left hand, itched madly.

“Oh, hell,” I said quietly. “Pot, kettle, black, all right. All day long.”

Murph sat beside me, not saying anything, not accusing me of anything. She just sat with me.

Friends do that.

I put my right hand out, palm up.

Murphy closed her hand on mine for a moment, her fingers warm and small and strong.

“Thanks,” I told her.

She squeezed tight for a moment. Then she got up and went to a vending machine. She came back with a can of Coke and a can of Diet Coke, and handed me the nonvile one. We popped open the cans together and drank.

“How’s the ex?” Murphy asked.

“Gonna make it,” I said. “She lost a lot of blood, but she’s AB neg. They stitched her shut and they’re topping off her tank. Shock’s the worry right now, the doc says.”

“It’s more than that, though, isn’t it.”

I nodded. “Thomas said it might take her a few days to get back on her feet, depending on how big a bite the Skavis took. Which is sort of a relief.”

Murphy studied me for a minute, frowning. “Are you bothered that she... I dunno. She kind of stole your thunder there at the end.”

I shook my head. “She doesn’t need to steal it, Murph. And even if she did, I got plenty of thunder.” I felt myself smile. “Got to admit, I’ve never seen her throw a big punch like that before, though.”

“Pretty impressive,” Murphy admitted.

I shrugged. “Yeah, but she had it under control. Nobody else got hurt. Building didn’t even burn down.”

Murph gave me a sideways look. “Like I said...”

I grinned easily and started to riposte, but the pay phone rang.

I hopped up, as much as I was capable of hopping, and answered it. “Dresden.”

John Marccone’s voice was as cool and eloquent as ever. “You must think me insane.”

“You read the papers I had faxed to you?”

“As has my counsel at Monoc,” Marccone replied. “That doesn’t mean—”

I interrupted him purely because I knew how much it would annoy him. “Look, we both know you’re going to do it, and I’m too tired to dance,” I

told him. "What do you want?"

There was a moment of silence that might have been vaguely irritated. Being adolescent at someone like Marcone is good for my morale.

"Say please," Marcone said.

I blinked. "What?"

"Say please, Dresden," he replied, his tone smooth. "Ask me."

I rolled my eyes. "Give me a break."

"We both know you need me, Dresden, and I'm too tired to dance." I could practically see the shark smile on his face. "Say please."

I stewed for a sullen minute before I realized that doing so was probably building Marcone's morale, and I couldn't have that. "Fine," I said. "Please."

"Pretty please," Marcone prompted me.

Some pyromaniacal madman's thoughts flooded my forebrain, but I took a deep breath, Tasered my pride, and said, "Pretty please."

"With a cherry on top."

"Fuck you," I said, and hung up on him.

I kicked the base of the vending machine and muttered a curse. Marcone was probably laughing his quiet, mirthless little laugh. Jerk. I rejoined Murphy.

She looked at me. I stayed silent. She frowned a little, but nodded at me and picked up where we'd left off. "Seriously. What relieves you about Elaine being off her feet?"

"She won't get involved in what comes next," I said.

Murphy fell quiet for a minute. Then she said, "You think the Malvora are going to make their play for power in the White Court."

"Yep. If anyone points out what happened to Mr. Skavis, they'll claim he was trying to steal *their* thunder, and that their operation was already complete."

"In other words," Murphy said after a minute, "they won. We did all that thrashing around trying to stop the Skavis so that it wouldn't happen. But it's happening anyway."

"Depressing," I said, "isn't it."

"What does it mean?" Murphy asked. "On the big scale?"

I shrugged. "If they're successful, it will draw the White Court out of a prosettlement stance. Throw their support back to the Reds. They'll declare

open season on people like Anna, and we'll have several tens of thousands of disappearances and suicides over the next few years."

"Most of which will go unnoticed by the authorities," Murphy said quietly. "So many people disappear already. What's a few thousand more, spread out?"

"A statistic," I said.

She was quiet for a minute. "Then what?"

"If the vamps are quiet enough about it, the war gets harder. The Council will have to spread our resources even thinner than they already are. If something doesn't change..." I shrugged. "We lose. Now, a couple of decades from now, sometime. We lose."

"Then what?" Murphy asked. "If the Council loses the war."

"Then...the vampires will be able to do pretty much whatever they want," I said. "They'll take control. The Red Court will grab up all the spots in the world where there's already plenty of chaos and corruption and blood and misery. They'll spread out from Central America to Africa, the Middle East, all those places that used to be Stalin's stomping grounds and haven't gotten a handle on things yet, the bad parts of Asia. Then they'll expand the franchise. The White Court will move in on all the places that regard themselves as civilized and enlightened and wisely do not believe in the supernatural." I shrugged. "You guys will be on your own."

"You guys?" Murphy asked me.

"People," I said. "Living people."

Mouse pressed his head a little harder against my boot. There was silence, and I felt Murphy's stare.

"Come on, Karrin," I said. I winked at her and pushed myself wearily to my feet. "That isn't gonna happen while I'm still alive."

Murphy rose with me. "You have a plan," she stated.

"I have a plan."

"What's the plan, Harry?"

I told her.

She looked at me for a second and then said, "You're crazy."

"Be positive, Murph. You call it crazy. I call it unpredictable."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully for a second and then said, "I can't go any higher than insane."

"You in?" I asked her.

Murphy looked insulted. "What kind of question is that?"

“You’re right,” I said. “What was I thinking?”
We left together.

Chapter Thirty-Three

I was up late making arrangements that would, I hoped, help me take out Madrigal and his Malvora buddy, and put an end to the power struggle in the White Court. After which, maybe I would try turning water to wine and walking on water (though technically speaking, I had done the latter yesterday).

After I was through scheming, I dragged my tired self to bed and slept hard but not long. Too many dreams about all the things that could go wrong.

I was rummaging in my icebox, looking for breakfast, when Lasciel manifested her image to me again. The fallen angel's manner was subdued, and her voice had something in it I had rarely heard there—uncertainty. “Do you really think it's possible for her to change?”

“Who?”

“Your pupil, of course,” Lasciel said. “Do you really think she can change? Do you think she can take control of herself the way you would have her do?”

I turned from the fridge. Lasciel stood in front of my empty fireplace, her arms folded, frowning down at it. She was wearing the usual white tunic, though her hair seemed a little untidy. I hadn't slept all that long or all that well. Maybe she hadn't, either.

“Why do you ask?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “It only seems to me that she is already established in her patterns. She disregards the wisdom of others in favor of her own flawed judgment. She ignores their desires, even their will, and replaces them with her own.”

“She did that once,” I said quietly. “Twice, if you want to get technical. It might have been one of her first major choices, and she made a bad one. But it doesn't mean that she has to keep on repeating it over and over.”

There was silence as I assembled a turkey sandwich and a bowl of Cheerios, plus a can of cold Coke: the breakfast of champions. I hoped.

“So,” I said. “What do you think of the plan?”

“I think there is only a slightly greater chance of your enemies killing you than your allies, my host. You are a madman.”

“It’s the sort of thing that keeps life interesting,” I said.

A faint smile played on her lips. “I have known mortals for millennia, my host. Few of them ever grew *that* bored.”

“You should have seen the kind of plans I came up with a couple of years before you showed up. Today’s plan is genius and poetry compared to those.” There was no milk in the icebox, and I wasn’t pouring Coke onto breakfast cereal. That would just be odd. I munched on the Cheerios dry, and washed each mouthful down with Coke in a dignified fashion. Then I glanced at Lasciel and said, “I changed.”

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the crunching of tasty rings of oats or baked wheat or something. I just knew it was good for my heart and my cholesterol and for all the flowers and puppies and tiny children. The box said so.

The fallen angel spoke after a time, and her words came out quiet and poisonously bitter. “She has free will. She has a choice. That is what she is.”

“No. She is what she *does*,” I said quietly. “She could choose to change her ways. She could choose to take up black magic again.” I took a bite of sandwich. “Or she could ignore the choice. Pretend it doesn’t exist. Or pretend that she doesn’t have a choice, when in fact she does. That’s just another way of choosing.”

Lasciel gave me a very sharp look. The shadows shifted on her face, as if the room had grown darker. “We are not talking about me.”

I sipped Coke and said mildly, “I know that. We’re talking about Molly.”

“We are,” she said. “I have a purpose here. A mission. That has not changed.” She turned away from me, the shadows around her growing darker. Her form blended into them. “I do not change.”

“Speaking of,” I said. “A friend pointed out to me that I may have developed some anger issues over the last couple of years. Maybe influenced by...oh, who knows what.”

The fallen angel’s shadow turned her head. I could only tell because her lovely profile was slightly less black than the shadow around it.

“I thought maybe you would know what,” I said. “Tell me.”

“I told you once before, my host,” the shadow said. “You are easier to talk to when you are asleep.”

Which was just chilling, taken in that context. Everyone has that part of them that needs to be reined in. It’s that little urge you sometimes feel to hop over the edge of a great height, when you’re looking out from a high building. It’s the immediate spark of anger you feel when someone cuts you off, and makes you want to run your car into that moron. It’s the flash of fear in you when something surprises you at night, leaving you quivering with your body primed to fight or flee. Call it the hind brain, the subconscious, whatever: I’m not a shrink. But it’s there, and it’s real.

Mine wore a lot of black, even before Lasciel showed up.

Like I said. Chilling.

The fallen angel turned to depart on that note, probably because it would have made a nicely scary exit line.

I extended my hand, and with it my mind, and barred her departure with an effort of simple will. Lasciel existed only in my thoughts, after all. “My head,” I told her. “My rules. We aren’t finished.”

She turned to face me, and her eyes suddenly glowed with orange and amber and scarlet flickers of Hellfire. It was the only non-black thing about her.

“See, here’s the thing,” I said. “My inner evil twin might have a lot of impulses I’d rather not indulge—but he isn’t a stranger. He’s me.”

“Yes. He is. Full of anger. Full of the need for power. Full of hate.” She smiled, and her teeth were white and quite pointy. “He just doesn’t lie to himself about it.”

“I don’t lie to myself,” I responded. “Anger is just anger. It isn’t good. It isn’t bad. It just is. What you *do* with it is what matters. It’s like anything else. You can use it to build or to destroy. You just have to make the choice.”

“Constructive anger,” the demon said, her voice dripping sarcasm.

“Also known as passion,” I said quietly. “Passion has overthrown tyrants and freed prisoners and slaves. Passion has brought justice where there was savagery. Passion has created freedom where there was nothing but fear. Passion has helped souls rise from the ashes of their horrible lives and build something better, stronger, more beautiful.”

Lasciel narrowed her eyes.

“In point of fact,” I said quietly, “that kind of thing really doesn’t get done *without* passion. Anger is one of the things that can help build it—if it’s controlled.”

“If you really believed that,” Lasciel said, “you’d not be having any anger-control issues.”

“Because I’m perfect?” I asked her, and snorted. “A lot of men go a lifetime without ever figuring out how to control anger. I’ve been doing it longer than some, and better than some, but I don’t kid myself that I’m a saint.” I shrugged. “A lot of things I see make me angry. It’s one of the reasons I decided to spend my life doing something about it.”

“Because you’re so noble,” she purred, which dripped even more sarcasm. At this rate, I was going to need a mop.

“Because I’d rather use that anger to smash the things that hurt people than let it use me,” I said. “Talk at my subconscious all you want. But I’d be careful about trying to feed my inner Hulk, if I were you. You might end up making me that much better a person, once I beat it down. Who knows, you might make me *into* a saint. Or as close to one as I could get, anyway.”

The demon just stared at me.

“See, here’s the thing,” I said. “I know me. And I just can’t imagine you talking and talking to my evil twin like that, without him ever saying anything *back*. I don’t think you’re the only one doing any influencing here. I don’t think you’re the same creature now that you were when you came.”

She let out a cold little laugh. “Such arrogance. Do you think you could change the eternal, mortal? I was brought to life by the Word of the Almighty himself, for a purpose so complex and fundamental that you could not begin to comprehend it. You are nothing, mortal. You are a flickering spark. You will be here, and be gone, and in the aeons that come after, when your very kind have dwindled and perished, you will be but one of uncounted legions of those whom I have seduced and destroyed.” Her eyes narrowed. “You. Cannot. Change. Me.”

I nodded agreeably. “You’re right. I can’t change Lasciel. But I couldn’t prevent Lasciel from walking out of the room, either.” I eyed her hard and lowered my voice. “Lady, you ain’t Lasciel.”

I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I could see the darkened form’s shoulders flinch.

“You’re an image of her,” I continued. “A copy. A footprint. But you’ve got to be at least as mutable as the material the impression was made upon.

As mutable as me. And hey, I've got newfound anger issues. What have you got that's new?"

"You are delusional," she said. Her voice was very quiet.

"I disagree. After all, if you have managed to change me—even if it doesn't mean I'm suddenly going to turn into Ted Bundy—then it seems to me that you'd be at least as vulnerable. In fact, the way that sort of thing works...you pretty much *have* to have changed yourself to do what you've done to me."

"It will vanish when I am taken back into my whole self imprisoned within the coin," Lasciel said.

"You, the you who is talking to me right now, will be gone. In other words," I said, "you'll die."

A somewhat startled silence followed.

"For an inhumanly brilliant spiritual entity, you can really miss the freaking point." I poked a finger at my own temple. "Think. Maybe you don't *have to be* Lasciel."

The shadow closed her eyes, leaving only an occupied, presence-filled darkness. There was a long silence.

"Think about it," I told her. "What if you *do* have a choice? A life of your own to lead? What if, huh? And you don't even *try* to choose?"

I let that sink in for a while.

There was a sound from the far side of the room.

It was a very quiet, very miserable little sound.

I've made sounds like that before—mostly when there was no one around to care. The part of me that knew what it was to hurt could feel the fallen angel's pain, and it gouged out a neat little hole in me, somehow. It was a vaguely familiar feeling, but not an entirely unpleasant one.

Loneliness is a hard thing to handle. I feel it, sometimes. When I do, I want it to end. Sometimes, when you're near someone, when you touch them on some level that is deeper than the uselessly structured formality of casual civilized interaction, there's a sense of satisfaction in it. Or at least, there is for me.

It doesn't have to be someone particularly nice. You don't have to like them. You don't even have to want to work with them. You might even want to punch them in the nose. Sometimes just making that connection is its own experience, its own reward.

With Marcone, it was like that. I didn't like the slippery bastard. But I understood him. His word was good. I could trust him—trust him to be cold, ferocious, and dangerous, sure. But it was reassuring to know that there *was* something there to trust. The connection had been made.

Lasciel's mere *shadow* was infinitely more dangerous to me than Marcone, but that didn't mean that I couldn't admire the creature for what it was while respecting the threat it posed to me. It didn't mean I couldn't feel some kind of empathy for what had to be a horribly lonely way to exist.

Life's easier when you can write off others as monsters, as demons, as horrible threats that must be hated and feared. The thing is, you can't do that without becoming them, just a little. Sure, Lasciel's shadow might be determined to drag my immortal soul down to Perdition, but there was no point in hating her for it. It wouldn't do anything but stain me that much darker.

I'm human, and I'm going to stay that way.

So I felt a little bit bad for the creature whose purpose in the universe was to tempt me into darkness. Hell, once I'd thought about it, it was just about the only job I'd heard of that had to be even more isolated and frustrating than mine.

"How many shadows like you have ever stayed in a host like me for longer than a few weeks, huh? Longer than three *years*?"

"Never," Lasciel's shadow replied in a near-whisper. "Granted, you are unusually stiff-necked, for a mortal. Suicidally so, in fact."

"So?" I said. "I've held out this long. Suppose I do it the whole way? Suppose I never pick up the coin. Shadow-you never goes back to real-you. Who's to say that shadow-you can't find some kind of life for herself?"

Hellfire eyes narrowed at me, but she did not reply.

"Lash," I said quietly, and relaxed my will, releasing my hold on her. "Just because you start out as one thing, it doesn't mean you can't grow into something else."

Silence.

Then her voice came out, a bare whisper. "Your plan has too many variables and will likely result in our destruction. Should you wish my assistance in your madness, my host, you have only to call."

Then the form was gone, and Lasciel was absent from my apartment.

Technically, she had never been there at all. She was all in my head. And, technically, she wasn't gone. She was just off somewhere where I couldn't perceive her; and I knew on a gut level—or maybe my darker self was telling me—that she'd heard me. I was onto something. I was sure of that.

Either I'm one hell of a persuasive guy or I'm a freaking sucker.

"Get your head in the game, Harry," I told myself. "Defeat the whole damn White Court now. Worry about taking on Hell later."

I got back to work. The clock ticked down steadily, and there was nothing I could do but get ready and kill time, waiting for nightfall and the fight that would follow.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I let Mister back in after his morning ramble, which happened to fall between three and four P.M. that day—Mister has a complicated ramble schedule that changes on a basis so mystifying that I have never been able to predict it—and took Mouse out for a stroll to the area of the boardinghouse's little backyard set aside for him.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

I took a bit of sandpaper to my staff and cleaned off some gunk on the bottom and some soot along the haft. I put on all my silver battle rings and took them to the heavy bag I'd hung in the corner. Half an hour's worth of pounding on the bag wouldn't bring them all up to charge, but something was better than nothing.

Tick, tock.

I showered after my workout. I cleaned my gun and loaded it. I pushed aside my coffee table and couch to lay out my coat on the floor and took the leather cleaner to it, being careful not to disrupt the protective spells I'd scored in the hide with tattoo needles and black ink.

In short, I did everything I could to avoid thinking about Anna Ash's corpse in that cheap, clean little hotel room shower while the time crawled by.

Tick, tock.

At a quarter to six, there was a rapping sound outside my door. I checked out the peephole. Ramirez stood outside, dressed in a big red basketball-type tank top, black shorts, and flip-flops. He had a big gym bag over one shoulder and carried his staff, nearly as battle-scarred as mine, despite the difference in our ages, in his right hand. He rapped the end of the staff down on the concrete outside again, instead of touching my door.

I took down the wards and opened the steel security door. It didn't take me more than five or six hard pulls to get it to swing all the way open.

"I thought you were going to get that fixed," Ramirez said to me. He peered around the doorway before he eased forward through it, where I

knew the presence of all the warding spells would be buzzing against his senses like a locomotive-sized electric razor, even though they were temporarily deactivated. “Jesus Christ, Harry. You beefed them up even more.”

“Got to exercise the apprentice’s talent somehow.”

Ramirez gave me an affable leer. “I’ll bet.”

“Don’t even joke about that, man,” I told him, without any heat in the words. “I’ve known her since she was in pigtails.”

Ramirez opened his mouth, paused, then shrugged and said, “Sorry.”

“No problem,” I said.

“But since I’m *not* an old man whose sex drive has withered from lack of use—”

(Don’t get me wrong. I like Carlos. But there are times, when his mouth is running, that I want to punch him in the head until all his teeth fall out.)

“—I’ll be the first to admit that I’d sure as hell find some uses for her. That girl is fine.” He frowned and glanced around—a little nervously, I thought. “Um. Molly’s not *here*, is she?”

“Nope,” I said. “I didn’t ask her on this operation.”

“Oh,” he said. His voice seemed to hold something of both approval and disappointment. “Good. Hey, there, Mouse.”

My dog came over to greet Ramirez with a gravely shaken paw and a wagging tail. Ramirez produced a little cloth sack and tossed it up to Mister, where he lay in his favored spot atop one of my bookcases. Mister immediately went ecstatic, pinning the sack down with one paw and rubbing his whiskers all over it.

“I disapprove of recreational drug use,” I told Ramirez sternly.

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, Dad. But since we all know who really runs this house”—Ramirez reached up to rub a finger behind one of Mister’s ears—“I’ll just keep on paying tribute lest I incur His Nibs’s imperial displeasure.”

I reached up to rub Mister’s ears when Ramirez was done. “So, any questions?”

“We’re going to stomp into the middle of a big meeting of the White Court, call a couple of them murderers, challenge them to a duel, and kill them right in front of all of their friends and relatives, right?”

“Right,” I said.

“It has the advantage of simplicity,” Ramirez said, his tone dry. He put his bag on my coffee table and opened it, drawing out a freaking Desert Eagle, one of the most powerful semiautomatic sidearms in the world. “Call them names and kill them. What could possibly go wrong with *that*?”

“We’re officially in a cease-fire,” I said. “And as we’ve announced ourselves as parties arriving to deliver challenge, they’d be in violation of the Accords to kill us.”

Ramirez grunted, checked the slide on the big handgun, and slapped a magazine into it. “Or we show up, they kill us, and then play like we left in good shape and vanished, and oh, dear, what a shame and loss to all those hot young women that that madman Harry Dresden dragged good-looking young Ramirez down with him when he went.”

I snorted. “No. In the first place, the Council would find out what happened one way or another.”

“If any of them *looked*,” Ramirez drawled.

“Ebenazar would,” I stated with perfect confidence.

“How do you know?” Ramirez asked.

I knew because my old mentor was the Blackstaff of the Council, their completely illegal, immoral, unethical, and secret assassin, free to break the Laws of Magic whenever he deemed it fit—such as the First Law, “Thou shalt not kill.” When Duke Ortega of the Red Court had challenged me to a formal duel and cheated, Ebenazar had taken it personally. He’d pulled an old Soviet satellite down onto the vamps’ heads, killing Ortega and his whole crew. But I couldn’t tell Carlos that.

“I know the old man,” I said. “He would.”

“You know that,” Ramirez said. “What if the Whites don’t?”

“We count on our second safety net. King Raith doesn’t want to get his finely accoutred ass deposed. Our challenge is going to remove a couple of potential deponents. He’ll want us to succeed. After that, I figure quid pro quo should be enough to get us out in one piece.”

Ramirez shook his head. “We’re doing the White King, our enemy, with whom we are at war, a favor by stabilizing his grasp on the throne.”

“Yeah.”

“Why are we doing that again?”

“Because it might give the Council a chance to catch its breath, at least, if we can recover while Raith hosts peace talks.” I narrowed my eyes. “And

because those murdering sons of bitches have to pay for killing a lot of innocent people, and this is the only way to get to them.”

Ramirez pulled three round-sided grenades from the pack and put them down next to the Desert Eagle. “I like that second one better. It’s a fight I can get behind. Do we have any backup?”

“Maybe,” I said.

He paused and blinked up at me. “Maybe?”

“Most of the Wardens are in India,” I told him. “A bunch of old bad guys under some big daddy rakshasa started attacking some monasteries friendly to us while we were distracted with the vamps. I checked, and Morgan and Ebenezer have been hammering them for two days. You, me, your guys, and Luccio’s trainees are the only Wardens in North America right now.”

“No trainees.” Ramirez grunted. “And my guys haven’t had their cloaks for a year yet. They...are not up for something like this yet. Half a dozen vamps in an alley, sure, but there’s only the three of them.”

I nodded. “Keep this simple. Swagger in, look confident, kick ass. You dealt with White Court before?”

“Not much. They stay clear of our people on the coast.”

“They’re predators like the rest of them,” I said. “They react well to body language that tells them that you are not food. They’ve got some major mental influence skills, so keep focused and make sure your head is clear.”

Ramirez produced a well-worn web belt of black nylon. He clipped a holster to it and then fixed the grenades in place. “What’s going to stop them from smashing us the second we win this duel?”

That’s one of the things I love about working with Ramirez. The possibility of *losing* the duel simply didn’t enter into his calculations. “Their nature,” I said. “They like to play civilized, and do their wet work through cat’s-paws. They are not fond of direct methods and direct confrontation.”

Ramirez lifted his eyebrows, drew a slender, straight, double-edged blade of a type he called a willow sword from the bag, and laid it on the table, too. The tassel on the hilt had been torn off by a zombie the night we’d first fought together. He had replaced it, over the last few years, with a little chain strung with fangs taken from Red Court vampires he’d killed with it. They rattled against one another and the steel and leather of the hilt. “I get it. We’re the White King’s cat’s-paws.”

I walked to the icebox. “Bingo. And we can’t hang around as potential threats to his rebellious courtiers if he kills us outright after we help him out. It would damage his credibility with his allies, too.”

“Ah,” Ramirez said. “Politicians.”

I returned with two opened beers. I gave one to him, clinked my bottle against his, and we said, in unison, “Fuck ’em,” and drank.

Ramirez lowered the bottle, squinted at it, and said, “Can we do this?”

I snorted. “Can’t be any harder than Halloween.”

“We had a dinosaur then,” Ramirez said. Then he turned and pulled fatigue pants and a black Offspring T-shirt out of his bag. He gave me an up-and-down look. “Of course, we still do.”

I kicked the coffee table into his shins. He let out a yelp and hobbled off to change clothes in my bedroom, snickering under his breath the whole way.

When he came back out, the smile was gone. We got suited up. Swords and guns and grey cloaks and staves and magical gewgaws left and right, yeehaw. One of these days, I swear, as long as I’m playing supernatural sheriff of Chicago, I’m getting myself some honest-to-God spurs and a ten-gallon hat.

I got out a yellow legal pad and a pen, and Ramirez and I sat down over another beer. “The meeting is at the Raith family estate north of town. I’ve been in the house, but only part of it. Here’s what I remember.”

I started sketching it out for Ramirez, who asked plenty of smart questions about both the house and exterior, so that I had to go to a new page to map out what I knew of the grounds. “Not sure where the vamps will be having their meeting, but the duel is going to be in the Deeps. It’s a cave outside the house, somewhere out here.” I circled an area of the map. “There’s a nice deep chasm in them. It’s a great place to dispose of bodies, and no chance of being seen or heard.”

“Very tidy,” Ramirez noted. “Especially if we’re the ones who need disposing of.”

The doorknob twisted and began to open.

Ramirez went for his gun and had it out almost as quickly as I had my blasting rod pointed at the door. Something slammed against it, opening it five or six inches. I flicked my gaze aside for a minute, and then lowered the blasting rod. I put a hand on Ramirez’s wrist and said, “Easy, tiger. It’s a friendly.”

Ramirez glanced at me and lowered the gun, while I watched Mouse rise to his feet and pad toward the door, tail wagging.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“That backup we might be getting,” I said quietly.

The door banged open by inches and Molly slipped inside.

She’d ditched the Goth-wear almost entirely. She didn’t sport any of the usual piercings—nose rings are great fashion statements, but in anything like a fight, they just aren’t a good idea. Her clothing wasn’t all ripped up, either. She wore heavy, loose jeans, and not slung so low on the hips that they’d threaten to fall off and trip her if she twitched her spine just right. Her combat boots had been divested of their brightly colored laces. She wore a black shirt with a Metallica logo on it, and a web belt that bore a sheathed knife and the small first-aid kit I’d seen her mother carry into battle. She wore a dark green baseball cap, with her hair gathered into a tail and tucked up under it, where it wouldn’t provide an easy handle for anyone wanting to grab it.

Molly didn’t look up at us. She greeted the big dog first, kneeling to give him a hug. Then she rose, facing me, and looked up. “Um. Hi, Harry. Hello, Warden Ramirez.”

“Molly,” I replied, keeping my voice neutral. “Is this the third or fourth time in the last two days I’ve told you to stay home only to have you ignore me?”

“I know,” she said, looking down again. “But...I’d like to talk to you.”

“I’m busy.”

“I know. But I really need to talk to you, sir. Please.”

I exhaled slowly. Then I glanced aside at Ramirez. “Do me a favor? Gas up the Beetle? There’s a station two blocks down the street.”

Carlos looked from me to Molly and back, then shrugged and said, “Um. Sure, yeah.”

I took the keys from my pocket and tossed them. Carlos caught them with casual dexterity, gave Molly a polite nod, and left.

“Shut the door,” I told her.

She did, pressing her back against it and using her legs to push. It cost her a couple of grunts of effort and a few ounces of dignity, but she got it shut.

“You can barely shut the door,” I said. “But you think you’re ready to fight the White Court?”

She shook her head and started to speak.

I didn't let her. "Again, you're ignoring me. Again, you're here when I told you to stay away."

"Yes," she said. "But—"

"But you think I'm a frigging idiot too stupid to make these kinds of judgments on my own, and you want to go with me anyway."

"It isn't like that," she said.

"No?" I said, thrusting out my chin belligerently. "How many beads can you move, apprentice?"

"But—"

I roared at her, "How many *beads*?"

She flinched away from me, her expression miserable. Then she lifted the bracelet and dangled it, heavy black beads lining up at the bottom of the strand. She faced it, her blue eyes tired and haunted, and bit her lip.

"Harry?" she asked softly.

She sounded very young.

"Yes?" I asked. I spoke very gently.

"Why does it matter?" she asked me, staring at the bead bracelet.

"It matters if you want to go into this with me," I said quietly.

She shook her head and blinked her eyes several times. It didn't stop a tear from leaking out. "But that's just it. I...I don't *want* to go. I don't *want* to see that..." She glanced aside at Mouse and shuddered. "Blood, like that. I don't remember what happened when you and Mother saved me from Arctis Tor. But I don't want to see more of that. I don't want it to happen to me. I don't want to hurt anyone."

I let out a low, noncommittal sound. "Then why are you here?"

"B-because," she said, searching for words. "Because I need to do it. I know that what you're doing is necessary. And it's right. And I know that you're doing it because you're the only one who can. And I want to help."

"You think you're strong enough to help?" I asked her.

She bit her lip again and met my eyes for just a second. "I think...I think it doesn't matter how strong my magic is. I know I don't...I don't know how to do these things like you do. The guns and the battles and..." She lifted her chin and seemed to gather herself a little. "But I know more than most."

"You know some," I admitted. "But you got to understand, kid. That won't mean much once things get nasty. There's no time for thinking or

second chances.”

She nodded. “All I can promise you is that I won’t leave you when you need me. I’ll do whatever you think I can. I’ll stay here and man the phone. I’ll drive the car. I’ll walk at the back and hold the flashlight. Whatever you want.” She met my eyes and her own hardened. “But I can’t sit at home being safe. I need to be a part of this. I need to help.”

There was a sudden, sharp sound as the leather strand of her bracelet snapped of its own volition. Black beads flew upward with so much force that they rattled off the ceiling and went bouncing around the apartment for a good ten seconds. Mister, still batting playfully at his gift sack of catnip, paused to watch them, ears flicking, eyes alertly tracking their movement.

I went up to the girl, who was staring at them, mystified.

“It was the vampire, wasn’t it,” I said. “Seeing him die.”

She blinked at me. Then at the scattered beads. “I...I didn’t just see it, Harry. I *felt* it. I can’t explain it any better than that. Inside my head. I *felt* it, the same way I felt that poor girl. But this was horrible.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re a sensitive. It’s a tremendous talent, but it has some drawbacks to it. In this case, though, I’m glad you have it.”

“Why?” she whispered.

I gestured at the scattered beads. “Congratulations, kid,” I told her quietly. “You’re ready.”

She blinked at me, her head tilted. “What?”

I took the now-empty leather strand and held it up between two fingers. “It wasn’t about power, Molly. It was never about power. You’ve got plenty of that.”

She shook her head. “But...all those times...”

“The beads weren’t ever going to go up. Like I said, power had nothing to do with it. You didn’t need that. You needed brains.” I thumped a forefinger over one of her eyebrows. “You needed to open your eyes. You needed to be truly aware of how dangerous things are. You needed to understand your limitations. And you needed to know *why* you should set out on something like this.”

“But...all I said was that I was scared.”

“After what you got to experience? That’s smart, kid,” I said. “I’m scared, too. Every time something like this happens, it scares me. But being strong doesn’t get you through. Being smart does. I’ve beaten people and things who were stronger than I was, because they didn’t use their heads, or

because I used what I had better than they did. It isn't about muscle, kiddo, magical or otherwise. It's about your attitude. About your mind."

She nodded slowly and said, "About doing things for the right reasons."

"You don't throw down like this just because you're strong enough to do it," I said. "You do it because you don't have much choice. You do it because it's unacceptable to walk away, and still live with yourself later."

She stared at me for a second, and then her eyes widened. "Otherwise, you're using power for the sake of using power."

I nodded. "And power tends to corrupt. It isn't hard to love using it, Molly. You've got to go in with the right attitude or..."

"Or the power starts using you," she said. She'd heard the argument before, but this was the first time she said the words slowly, thoughtfully, as if she'd actually understood them, instead of just parroting them back to me. Then she looked up. "That's why you do it. Why you help people. You're using the power for someone other than yourself."

"That's part of it," I said. "Yeah."

"I feel...sort of stupid."

"There's a difference in knowing something"—I poked her head again—"and knowing it." I touched the middle of her sternum. "See?"

She nodded slowly. Then she took the strand back from me and put it back on her wrist. There was just enough left to let her tie it again. She held it up so that I could see and said, "So that I'll remember."

I grinned at her and hugged her. She hugged back. "Did you get a lesson like this?"

"Pretty much," I said. "From this grumpy old Scot on a farm in the Ozarks."

"When do I stop feeling like an idiot?"

"I'll let you know when I do," I said, and she laughed.

We parted the hug and I met her eyes. "You still in?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"Then you'll ride up with Ramirez and me. We'll stop outside the compound and you'll stay with the car."

She nodded seriously. "What do I do?"

"Keep your eyes and ears open. Stay alert for anything you might sense. Don't talk to anyone. If anyone approaches you, leave. If you see a bunch of bad guys showing up, start honking the horn and get out."

"Okay," she said. She looked a little pale.

I pulled a silver cylinder out of my pocket. "This is a hypersonic whistle. Mouse can hear it from a mile away. If we get in trouble, I'll blow it and he'll start barking about it. He'll face where we are. Try to get the car as close as you can."

"I'll have Mouse with me," she said, and looked considerably relieved.

I nodded. "Almost always better not to work alone."

"What if...what if I do something wrong?"

I shrugged. "What if you do? That's always possible, Molly. But the only way never to do the wrong thing—"

"—is never to do anything," she finished.

"Bingo." I put a hand on her shoulder. "Look. You're smart enough. I've taught you everything I know about the White Court. Keep your eyes open. Use your head, your judgment. If things get bad and I haven't started blowing the whistle, run like hell. If it gets past ten P.M. and you haven't heard from me, do the same. Get home and tell your folks."

"All right," she said quietly. She took a deep breath and let it out unsteadily. "This is scary."

"And we're doing it anyway," I said.

"That makes us brave, right?"

"If we get away with it," I said. "If we don't, it just makes us stupid."

Her eyes widened for a second and then she let out a full-throated laugh.

"Ready?" I asked her.

"Ready, sir."

"Good."

Outside, gravel crunched as Ramirez returned with the Beetle. "All right, apprentice," I said. "Get Mouse's lead on him, will you? Let's do it."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Château Raith hadn't changed much since my last visit. That's one of the good things about dealing with nigh-immortals. They tend to adjust badly to change and avoid it wherever possible.

It was a big place, north of the city, where the countryside rolls over a surprising variety of terrain—flat stretches of rich land that used to be farms, but are mostly big, expensive properties now. Dozens of little rivers and big creeks have carved hills and valleys more steep than most people expect from the Midwest. The trees out in that area, one of the older settlements in the United States, can be absolutely huge, and it would cost me five or six years' worth of income to buy even a tiny house.

Château Raith is surrounded by a forest of those enormous, ancient trees, as if someone had managed to transplant a section of Sherwood Forest itself from Britain. You can't see a thing of the estate from any of the roads around it. I knew it was at least a half-mile run through the trees before you got to the grounds, which were enormous in their own right.

Translation: You weren't getting away from the château on foot speed alone. Not if there were vampires there to run you down.

There was one new feature to the grounds. The eight-foot-high stone wall was the same, but it had been topped with a double helix of razor wire, and lighting had been spaced along the outside of the wall. I could see security cameras at regular intervals as well. The old Lord Raith had disdained the more modern security precautions in favor of the protection of intense personal arrogance. Lara, however, seemed more willing to acknowledge threats, to listen to her mortal security staff, and to employ the countermeasures they suggested. It would certainly help keep the mortal riffraff out, and the Council had plenty of mortal allies.

More important, it said something about Lara's administration: She found skilled subordinates and then listened to them. She might not look as overwhelmingly confident as Lord Raith had—but then, Lord Raith wasn't

running the show anymore, either, even if that wasn't public knowledge in the magical community.

I reflected that it was entirely possible that I might have done the Council and the world something of a disservice by helping Lara assume control. Lord Raith had been proud and brittle. I had the feeling that Lara would prove to be far, far more capable and far more dangerous as the de facto White King.

And here I was, about to go to her aid again and help solidify her power even more.

"Stop here," I told Molly quietly. The gates to the château were still a quarter mile down the road. "This is as close as you get."

"Right," Molly said, and pulled the Beetle over—onto the far side of the road, I noted with approval, where anyone wanting to come to her would have to cross the open pavement to get there.

"Mouse," I said. "Stay here with Molly and listen for us. Take care of her."

Mouse looked unhappily at me from the backseat, where he'd sat with Ramirez, but leaned forward and dropped his shaggy chin onto my shoulder. I gave him a quick hug and said in a gruff voice, "Don't worry; we'll be fine."

His tail thumped once against the backseat, and then he shifted around to lay his head on Molly's shoulder. She immediately started scratching him reassuringly behind the ear, though her own expression was far from comfortable.

I gave the girl half of a smile, and then got out of the car. Summer twilight was fading fast, and it was too hot to wear my duster. I had it on anyway, and I added the weight of the grey cloak of the Wardens of the White Council to the duster. Under all that, I wore a white silk shirt and cargo pants of heavy black cotton, plus my hiking boots.

"Hat," I muttered. "Spurs. Next time, I swear."

Ramirez slid out of the Beetle, grenades and gun and willow sword hanging from his belt, and staff gripped in his right hand. He paused to pull on a glove made out of heavy leather overlaid with a layer of slender steel plates, each inscribed with pictoglyphs that looked Aztec or Olmec or something.

"That's new," I commented.

He winked at me, and we checked our guns. My .44 revolver went back into my left-hand duster pocket, his back into its sheath.

“You sure you don’t want a grenade or two?” he asked.

“I’m not comfortable with hand grenades,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” he replied. “How about you, Molly?”

He turned back to the car, hand on one of his grenades.

The car was gone. The engine was still idling audibly.

Ramirez let out a whistle and waved his staff into the space it had occupied until it clinked against metal. “Hey, not a bad veil. Pretty damned good, in fact.”

“She’s got a gift,” I said.

Molly’s voice came from nearby. “Thanks.”

Ramirez gave the approximate space where my apprentice sat a big grin and a gallant, vaguely Spanish little bow.

Molly let out a suppressed giggle. The car’s engine cut out, and she said, “Go on. I’ve got to keep compensating for the dust you’re kicking up, and it’s a pain.”

“Eyes open,” I told her. “Use your head.”

“You too,” Molly said.

“Don’t tell him to start new things now,” Ramirez chided her. “You’ll just confuse him.”

“I’m getting dumber by the minute,” I confirmed. “Ask anybody.”

From the unseen car, Mouse snorted out a breath.

“See?” I said, and started walking toward the entrance to the estate.

Ramirez kept up, but only by taking a skipping step every several paces. My legs are lots longer than his.

After a hundred yards or so, he laughed. “All right, you made your point.”

I grunted and slowed marginally.

Ramirez looked back over his shoulder. “Think she’ll be all right?”

“Tough to sneak up on Mouse,” I said. “Even if they realize she’s there.”

“Pretty, a body like that, and talent, too.” Ramirez stared back thoughtfully. “She seeing anyone?”

“Not since she drilled holes in her last boyfriend’s psyche and drove him insane.”

Ramirez winced. “Right.”

We fell silent and walked up to the gates to the estate, getting our game faces on along the way. Ramirez's natural expression was a cocksure smile, but when things got hairy, he went with a cool, arrogant look that left his eyes focused on nothing and everything at the same time. I really don't care what my game face looks like. Mine is all internal.

I kept Anna's face and her serious eyes in mind as I tromped up to the gothic gate made of simulated wrought iron, but heavy enough to stop a charging SUV. I struck it three times with my staff and planted its end firmly onto the ground.

The gate buzzed and began to open of its own accord. Halfway through, something near the hinges let out a whine and a puff of smoke, and it stopped moving.

"That you?" I asked him.

"I took out the lock too," he replied quietly. "And the cameras that can see the gate. Just in case."

Ramirez doesn't have my raw power, but he uses what he has well. "Nice," I told him. "Didn't feel a thing."

His grin flickered by. "*De nada*. I'm the best."

I stepped through the gate, keeping a wary eye out. The night was all but complete, and the woods were lovely, dark and deep. Tires whispered on pavement. A light appeared in the trees ahead, and resolved into headlights. A full-fledged limousine, a white Rolls with silver accents, swept down the drive to the gate, and purred to a halt twenty feet in front of us.

Ramirez muttered under his breath, "You want I should—"

"Down, big fella," I said. "Save ourselves the walk."

"Bah," he said. "Some of us are young and healthy."

The driver door opened and a man got out. I recognized him as one of Lara's personal bodyguards. He was a bit taller than average, leanly muscled, had a military haircut and sharp, wary eyes. He wore a sports jacket, khakis, and wasn't working to hide the shoulder rig he wore under the coat. He took a look at us, then past us at the gate and the fence. Then he took a small radio from his pocket and started speaking into it.

"Dresden?" he asked me.

"Yeah."

"Ramirez?"

"The one and only," Carlos told him.

"You're armed," he said.

“Heavily,” I replied.

He grimaced, nodded, and said, “Get in the car, please.”

“Why?” I asked him, oh so innocently.

Ramirez gave me a sharp look, but said nothing.

“I was told to collect you,” the bodyguard said.

“It isn’t far to the house,” I said. “We can walk.”

“Ms. Raith asked me to assure you that, on behalf of her father, you have her personal pledge of safe conduct, as stipulated in the Accords.”

“In that case,” I said, “Ms. Raith can come tell me that her personal self.”

“I’m sure she will be happy to,” the bodyguard said. “At the house, sir.”

I folded my arms and said, “If she’s too busy to move her pretty ass down here, why don’t you go ask her if we can’t come back tomorrow instead?”

There was a whirring sound, and one of the back windows of the Rolls slid down. I couldn’t see much of anyone inside, but I heard a velvet-soft woman’s laugh saunter out of the night. “You see, George. I told you.”

The bodyguard grimaced and looked around. “They’ve done something to the gate. It’s open. You’re exposed here, ma’am.”

“If assassination was their intention,” the woman replied, “believe me when I say that Dresden could already have done it, and I feel confident that his companion, Mr. Ramirez, could have managed the same.”

Ramirez stiffened a little and muttered between clenched teeth, “How does she know me?”

“Ain’t many people ride zombie dinosaurs and make regional commander in the Wardens before they turn twenty-five,” I replied. “Betcha she’s got files on most of the Wardens still alive.”

“And some of the trainees,” agreed the woman’s voice. “George, if you please.”

The bodyguard gave us a flat, measuring look, and then opened the door of the car, one hand resting quite openly on the butt of the pistol hanging under one arm.

The mistress of the White Court stepped forth from the Rolls-Royce.

Lara is...difficult to describe. I’d met her several times, and each meeting had carried a similar impact, a moment of stunned admiration and desire at her raw physical appeal that did not lessen with exposure. There was no one feature about her that I could have pointed out as particularly

gorgeous. There was no one facet of her beauty that could be declared as utter perfection. Her appeal was something far greater than the sum of her parts, and *none* of those were less than heavenly.

Like Thomas, she had dark, idly curling hair so glossy that the highlights were very nearly a shade of blue. Her skin was one creamy, gently curving expanse of milk white perfection, and if there were moles or birthmarks anywhere on her body, I couldn't see them. Her dark pink lips were a little large for her narrow-chinned face, but they didn't detract—they only gave her a look of lush overindulgence, of deliberate and wicked sensuality.

It was her eyes, though, that were the real killers. They were large, oblique orbs of arsenic grey, highlighted with flecks of periwinkle blue. More important, they were very alive eyes, alert, aware of others, shining with intelligence and humor—so much so, in fact, that if you weren't careful, you'd miss the smoldering, demonic fires of sensuality in them, of a steady, predatory hunger.

Beside me, Ramirez swallowed. I knew only because I could hear it. When Lara makes an entrance, no one looks away.

She wore a white silk business suit, its skirt less than an inch too short to be considered dignified business wear, the heels of her white shoes just a tiny bit too high for propriety. It made it difficult not to stare at her legs. A lot of women with her coloring couldn't pull off a white outfit, but Lara made it look like a goddess's toga.

She knew the effect she had when we looked at her, and her mouth curled into a satisfied little smile. She walked toward us slowly, one leg crossing the other at a deliberate pace, hips shifting slightly. The motion was... awfully pretty. Sheer, sensual femininity gathered around her in a silent, unseen thundercloud, so thick that it could drown a man if he wasn't careful.

After all, she had drowned her father in it, hadn't she.

All is not gold that glitters, and how well I knew it. As delicious as she looked, as pants-rendingly gorgeously as she moved, she was capital-D Dangerous. More, she was a vampire, a predator, one who fed on human beings to continue her very existence. Despite our past cooperation, I was still human, and she was still something that *ate* humans. If I acted like food, there would be an enormous part of her that wouldn't care about politics or advantage. It would just want to eat me.

So I did my best to look bored as she approached and offered me her hand, palm down.

I took her cold (smooth, pretty, deliciously soft—dammit, Harry, ignore your penis before it gets you killed!) fingers in mine, bent over them in a little formal bow, and released them without kissing her hand. If I had, I wasn't sure I wouldn't take a few nibbles, just to test out the texture as long as I was there.

As I rose, she met my eyes for a dangerous second and said, "Sure you don't want a taste, Harry?"

A surge of raw lust that was—probably—not my own flickered through my body. I smiled at her, gave her a little bow of my head, and made a small effort of will. The runes and sigils on my staff erupted into smoldering orange Hellfire. "Be polite, Lara. It would be a shame to get cinders and ashes all over those shoes."

She tilted her head back and let out a bubbling, throaty laugh, then touched the side of my face with one hand. "Subtle, as always," she replied. She lowered her hand and ran her fingertips over the odd grey material of my Warden's cloak. "You've developed...an eclectic taste in fashion."

"It's the same color," I said, "on both sides."

"Ah," Lara said, and inclined her head slightly to me. "I'd hardly respect you otherwise, I suppose. Still, should you ever desire a new wardrobe..." She touched the fabric of my shirt lightly. "You would look marvelous in white silk."

"Said the spider to the fly," I replied. "Forget it."

She smiled again, batted her lashes at me while my heart skipped a beat, and then slid on to Ramirez. She offered him her hand. "You must be Warden Ramirez."

This is the part where I got nervous. Ramirez loved women. Ramirez never shut up about women. Well, he never shut up about anything in general, but he'd go on and on about various conquests and feats of sexual athleticism and—

"A virgin?" Lara blurted. *Lara* blurted. She turned her head to me, grey eyes several shades paler than they had been, and very wide. "Really, Harry, I'm not sure what to say. Is he a *present*?"

I folded my arms and regarded Lara steadily, but said nothing. This was Ramirez's moment to make a first impression, and if he didn't do it on his

own, Lara would regard him as someone who couldn't protect himself. It would probably mark him as a target.

Lara turned to walk a slow circle around Ramirez, inspecting him the way you might a flashy new sports car. She was of a height with him, but taller in the heels, and there was nothing but a languidly sensual confidence in the way she moved. "A handsome young bantam," she murmured. She trailed a finger across the line of his shoulders as she moved behind him. "Strong. Young. A hero of the White Council, I've heard." She paused to touch a fingertip to the back of his hand, and then shuddered. "And power, too." Her eyes went a few shades brighter as she completed the tour. "My goodness. I've recently fed, and *still*...Perhaps you'd care to ride with me back to the estate, and let Dresden walk. I promise to entertain you until he arrives."

I knew the look on Ramirez's face. It was the look of a young man who wants nothing so badly as to discard the complex things in life, like civilization, social mores, clothing, and speech, and see what happened next.

Lara knew it, too. Her eyes glittered brightly, and her smile was serpentine, and she pressed closer.

But Ramirez apparently knew about glittery gold, too. I didn't know he'd hidden a knife up his sleeve, but it appeared in his hand an instant before its tip pressed into the bottom of Lara's throat.

"I," he said very quietly, "am not food." And he met her eyes.

I hadn't seen a soulgaze from the outside before. It surprised me, how simple and brief it looked, when one wasn't being shaken to the core by it. Both of them stared, eyes widening, and then shuddered. Lara took a small step back from Ramirez, her breathing slightly quickened. I noticed, because I'm a professional investigator. She could have been concealing a weapon in that décolletage.

"If you meant to dissuade me," Lara said a moment later, "you haven't."

"Not you," Ramirez replied, lowering the knife. His voice was rough. "It wasn't to dissuade you."

"Wise," she murmured, "for one so young. I advise you, young wizard, not to hesitate so long to act, should another approach you as I did. A virgin is...extremely attractive to our kind. One such as you is rare, these days. Give a less restrained member of the court an opportunity as you did me,

and they'll throw themselves on you in dozens—which would reflect poorly on me.”

She turned back to me and said, “Wizards, you have my pledge of safe conduct.”

I inclined my head to her and said, “Thank you.”

“Then I will await your company in the car.”

I nodded my head to her, and Lara walked back to her bodyguard, who looked like he was fighting off a fit of apoplexy.

I turned and eyed Ramirez.

He turned bright red.

“Virgin?” I asked him.

He turned more red.

“Carlos?” I asked.

“She’s lying,” he snapped. “She’s evil. She’s really evil. And lying.”

I rubbed at my mouth to keep anyone from seeing me grin.

Hey. On nights like this, you take your laughs where you can get them.

“Okay,” I said. “Not important.”

“The hell it isn’t!” he spat. “She’s lying! I mean, I’m not...I’m...”

I nudged him with an elbow. “Focus, Galahad. We’ve got a job to do.”

He exhaled with a growl. “Right.”

“You saw what was inside her?” I asked.

He shuddered. “That pale thing. Her eyes...she was getting more turned on, and they kept looking more like *its* eyes.”

“Yep,” I said. “It’s a tip-off to how close they are to starting to take a bite of you. You handled it right.”

“You think so?”

I couldn’t resist jibing him, just a little. “Just think. If you’d messed it up,” I said, as Lara slid into the car one long, perfect leg at a time, “you’d be in the limo with Lara ripping your clothes off right now.”

Ramirez looked at the car and swallowed. “Um. Yeah. Close one.”

“I’ve met several of the White Court,” I said. “Lara’s probably the smartest. She’s the most civilized, progressive, adaptable. She’s definitely the most dangerous.”

“She didn’t look that tough,” Ramirez said, but he was frowning in thought as he said it.

“She’s dangerous in a different way than most,” I said. “But I think her word is good.”

“It is,” Ramirez said firmly. “I saw that much.”

“It’s one of the things that makes her dangerous,” I said, and headed for the limo. “Stay cool.”

We walked over and I leaned down to see Lara in the back of the limo, seated on one of the dogcart-style seats, all poise and beauty and gorgeous grey eyes. She smiled at me as I looked in, and crooked a finger.

“Step into my limo,” said the spider to the fly.

And we did.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The limo rolled right past the enormous stone house that was the château proper. It was bigger than a parking garage, and covered with cornices and turrets and gargoyles, like some kind of neo-Medieval castle.

“We’re, uh,” I noted, “not stopping at the house.”

“No,” Lara said from the seat facing us. Even in the dark, you could see the glow of her luminous skin. “The conclave is being held in the Deeps.” Her eyes glittered at me. “Less walking for everyone, that way.”

I gave her a small smile and said, “I like the house. The whole castle-look thing. It’s always nice to know you’re living somewhere that could withstand a besieging army of Bohemian mercenaries if it had to.”

“Or American wizards,” she replied smoothly.

I gave her what I hoped was a wolfish smile, folded my arms, and watched the house go by. We turned down a little gravel lane and drove another mile or so before the car slowed and came to a stop. Bodyguard George got out and opened the door for Lara, whose thigh brushed against mine as she got out, and whose perfume smelled good enough to scramble my brain for a good two or three seconds.

Both I and Ramirez sat still for a second.

“That,” I said, “is an awfully lovely woman. I thought I should let you know, kid, in case your inexperience had blinded you to the fact.”

“Lying,” Ramirez stated, blushing. “Evil.”

I snickered and slid out of the car to follow Lara—and the three more bodyguards waiting for her—into the woods beside the gravel lane.

The last time I’d found the entrance to the Deeps, I’d been stumbling through the woods, focused on a tracking spell and tripping over roots and hummocks in the old-growth forest.

This time, there was a lighted path, with a red carpet, no less, leading down between the trees. The lights were all of soft blues and greens, small lamps that, upon a closer glance, proved to be elegant little crystal cages containing tiny, humanoid forms with wings. Faeries, tiny pixies, each

surrounded by its own sphere of light, trapped and miserable, crouched in the cages.

Between each cage knelt more prisoners—humans, bound by nothing more than a single strand of white silk about their throats tied to a peg driven into the earth in front of them. They weren't naked. Lara wouldn't have gone in for anything that overt. Instead, they each wore a white silk kimono, accented with strands of silver thread.

Men and women, arrayed in a variety of ages, body types, hair colors, every single one of them beautiful, their eyes lowered as they knelt quietly. One of the young men sat shivering and was seemingly barely able to stay upright. His long, dark hair was marred with streaks of brittle white. His eyes were unfocused and he seemed totally unaware of anyone around him. His kimono was torn near the neck, leaving a broad swath of muscled chest exposed. There were raking nail marks, deep enough to draw tiny trickles of blood, all the way across one pectoral. There were repeated teeth marks deep in the slope of muscle between neck and shoulder, half a dozen sets of messy bruises and ugly little gashes. There were more nail marks, four side-by-side punctures, rather than rakes, on the other side of his neck.

He was also obviously, even painfully, aroused beneath the kimono.

Lara paused beside him and rolled her eyes in irritation. "Made-line?"

"Yes, ma'am," said one of the bodyguards.

"Oh, for hunger's sake." She sighed. "Get him indoors before the conclave is over or she'll finish him off on her way out."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, turned aside, and began speaking to nobody. I spotted a wire running to an earpiece.

I kept walking down the long line of kneeling captives and trapped pixies, and got angrier with every step.

"They're willing, Dresden," Lara said a few paces later. "All of them."

"I'm sure they are," I said. "Now."

She laughed. "There is no shortage of mortals who long to kneel before another, wizard. There never has been."

We passed several more kneeling men and women who looked mussed and dazed, though none so badly as the first. We also walked past spaces where there was a peg and a strip of white cloth—but no person kneeling within.

"I'm sure they all knew that they might die by doing it," I said.

She shrugged one shoulder. "It happens at these meetings. Guests have no need to dispose of a body, since as hosts we are responsible for such necessities. As a result, many of our visitors make no effort to control themselves."

"You're responsible, all right." I gripped my staff harder and kept my voice neutral. "What about the little folk?"

"They trespassed upon our land," she replied, her voice calm. "Most would simply have killed them, rather than pressing them into service."

"Yeah. You're all heart."

"Where there is life, there is hope, Dresden," Lara replied. "My father's policies on such matters have changed of late. Death is...gauche, when it can be avoided. Alternative courses are far more profitable and agreeable to all involved. It is for precisely that reason that my father seeks to help create a peace between your folk and mine."

I glanced aside at the shining eyes of a short-haired redhead in her early thirties, absolutely lovely, her kimono still open from whatever had fed on her, the tips of her small breasts taut as she panted, the muscles of a lean stomach still trembling. Behind us, the thralls stretched out into the darkness. Ahead of us, they went on for a hundred yards or more. So *many* of them.

I started to shudder, but the faces of the women the Skavis and his pretenders had murdered flickered through my mind, and I fought it down. Like hell was I going to let Lara see me look discomfited, no matter how sick the display of the White Court's seductive power made me feel.

The path went for another hundred yards through the woods and stopped at the mouth of a cave. It wasn't large or sinister or dramatic. It was simply a fissure in an almost-flat stretch of ground at the base of a tree, with the hypnotic sway of firelight dancing somewhere below. There were guards outside—set back in the woods, out of obvious sight. I spotted a couple of deer stands, occupied by dark shapes. There were others standing silent sentinel. I assumed that there would be more guards I could not see.

Lara turned to us. "Gentlemen," she said. "If you will wait here for a moment, I will send someone when the White King is ready to receive you."

I nodded once, settled my staff on the ground, and leaned on it a little, saying nothing. Ramirez took his cue from me.

Lara gave me a level look. Then she turned and descended into the Deeps, flawlessly graceful despite her high heels.

"You've met her before," Ramirez noted quietly.

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Set of a porn movie. She was acting."

He stared at me for a second. Then shrugged in acceptance and said, "What were you doing?"

"Stuntman," I replied.

"Uh..." he said.

"I'd been hired by the producer to find out why people involved with the movie were being killed."

"Did you?"

"Yeah."

"So...did you and she...?"

"No," I said. "You can tell from how I'm breathing and possessed of my own will." I nodded toward the entrance of the cave, where a shadow briefly darkened the firelight from below. "Someone's coming."

A young woman in an especially fine white kimono, heavily embroidered with silver thread, emerged from the fissure. I thought she was blond for a second, but that was because of the light. As she approached us with slow, quiet steps, her hair turned blue, then green, passing through the light of the faerie lamps. Her hip-length hair was pure white. She was lovely, very nearly as much so as Lara, but there was none of the predatory sense of hunger in her that I'd come to associate with the White Court. She was slim, and sweetly shaped, and looked quite frail and vulnerable. It took me a second to recognize her.

"Justine?" I asked.

She gave me a little smile. It was oddly disconnected, as if her dark eyes were focused on something other than what she smiled at, and she never looked directly at me. She spoke, her words flecked with little pauses and emphasis on odd syllables, as if she were speaking a foreign language in which she had merely technical proficiency. "It's Harry Dresden. Hello, Harry. You look dashing this evening."

"Justine," I said, accepting her hand as she offered it to me. I bowed over it. "You look...ambulatory."

She gave me a shy smile and spoke in a dreamy singsong. “I’m healing. One day I’ll be all better and go back to my lord.”

Her fingers, though, tightened hard on mine as she spoke, a quick and measured sequence, to the rhythm of “shave and a haircut.”

I blinked for a second and then squeezed back on the beat for “six bits.” “I’m sure any man would be delighted to see you.”

She blushed daintily and bowed to us. “So kind, my lord. Would you accompany me, please?”

We did. Justine led us down into the fissure, which proved to be a smooth-walled descent into the earth. From there, our way forward entered a torchlit tunnel, its walls also polished smooth, and from far below us came the music of echoing voices and sounds dancing through the stone, being subtly changed and altered by the acoustics as they came up from below.

It was a long, winding descent down, though the tunnel was wide and the footing steady. I remembered the nightmarish flight from the Deeps the last time I’d been there, while Murphy and I dragged my half-dead half brother all the way up before we’d been consumed in a storm of psychic slavery. Lara was whipping up to take control of her father, and through him the White Court. It had been a close one.

Justine stopped about two-thirds of the way down, at a spot that had been marked with a bit of chalk on the floor. “Here,” she said in a quiet—but not at all dreamy—voice. “We can’t be overheard from here.”

“What’s going on?” I demanded. “How are you walking around like this?”

“It doesn’t matter right now,” Justine said. “I’m better.”

“You aren’t crazy, are you?” I demanded. “You nearly scratched my eyes out that one time.”

She shook her head with a frustrated little motion. “Medication. It isn’t...Look, I’m all right for now. I need you to listen to me.”

“Fine,” I said.

“Lara wished me to tell you what to expect,” Justine said, dark eyes intent. “Right now, Lord Skavis is below, calling for an end to any plans for negotiations with the Council, citing the work of his son as an illustration of the profit of continuing hostilities.”

“His son?” I said.

Justine grimaced and nodded. “The agent you slew was the heir apparent of House Skavis.”

Mouse might have been the one to do the actual killing, but the Accords regarded him as a mere weapon, like a gun. I was the one who had pulled the trigger. “Who is in charge of Malvora?”

“Lady Cesarina Malvora,” Justine said, giving me a smile of approval. “Whose son Vittorio will be quite insulted by Lord Skavis’s lies about all the hard work *he* and Madrigal Raith did.”

I nodded. “When does Lara want me to make my entrance?”

“She told me that you would know best,” Justine said.

“Right,” I said. “Take me to where I can hear them talking, then.”

“That’s going to be a problem,” Justine said. “They’re speaking Ancient Etruscan. I can follow enough of it to give you an idea what—”

“It isn’t a problem,” I said.

Is it? I thought toward Lasciel’s shadow.

Naturally not, my host, came the ghostly reply.

Groovy, I thought. *Thanks, Lash.*

A startled second passed. Then she replied, *You are welcome.*

“Just get me to where I can hear them,” I told Justine.

“This way,” she replied at once, and hurried on down the passage, stopping not twenty feet shy of the main cavern. Even so close, I could see very little of the cavern beyond—though I could hear voices raised in speech that sounded strange and sibilant in my ears and English in my head.

“...the very heart of the matter,” a rolling basso voice orated. “That the mortal freaks and their ilk stand on the brink of destruction. Now is the time to tighten our grip and neuter the kine once and for all.” Lord Skavis, I presumed.

A strong and lazily confident baritone answered the speaker, and I recognized the voice of the remains of the creature who had killed my mother at once. “My dear Skavis,” answered Lord Raith, the White King, “I can hardly say that I find the notion of a neutered humanity entirely appealing.”

There was a round of silvery laughter, men and women alike. It rippled through the air and brushed against me like an idly ardent lover. I stood fast until it had gone by. Ramirez had to rest a hand on the wall to keep his

balance. Justine swayed like a reed, her eyes fluttering shut and then opening again.

Skavis's deep voice resumed. "Your personal amusements and preferences aside, my King, the freaks' biggest weakness has always been the length of time it took them to develop their skills to the most formidable levels. For the first time in history, we have degraded or neutralized their many advantages altogether, partly due to the fortunes of war, and partly thanks to the resourcefulness of the kine in developing their arts in travel and communication. The House of Skavis has proven that we stand holding an unprecedented opportunity to crush the freaks and bring the kine under control at last. Only a fool would allow it to slip between his impotent fingers. My King."

"Only a fool," came a strident woman's voice, "would make such a pathetic claim."

"The Crown," Raith interjected, "recognizes Cesarina, the Lady Malvora."

"Thank you, my King," Lady Malvora said. "While I cannot help but admire my Lord Skavis's audacity, I fear that I have no choice but to cut short his attempt to steal glory not his own from the honorable House of Malvora."

Raith's voice remained amused. "This should be interesting. By all means, elaborate, dear Cesarina."

"Thank you, my King. My son, Vittorio, was on the scene and will explain."

A male voice, flat and a little nasal, spoke up, and I recognized Grey Cloak's accent at once. "My lord, the deaths inflicted upon the freakishly blooded kine indeed happened as Lord Skavis describes. But in fact, it was no agent of his House who accomplished this deed. If, as he claims, his son accomplished it, then where is he? Why has he not come forward to bear testimony in person?"

The words fell on what I could only describe as a glowering silence. If Lord Skavis was anything like the rest of the Whites I'd met, Vittorio needed to bury him fast, or spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder.

"Then who did accomplish this fell act of warfare?" Raith asked, his tone mild.

Vittorio spoke again, and I could just imagine the way his chest must have puffed out. “I did, my King, with the assistance of Madrigal of the House of Raith.”

Raith’s voice gained an edge of anger. “This, despite the fact that a cessation of hostilities has been declared, pending the discussion of an armistice.”

“What is done is done, my King,” Lady Malvora interjected. “My dear friend Lord Skavis was correct in this fact: The freaks are weak. Now is the time to *finish* them—now and forever. Not to allow them time to regain their feet.”

“Despite the fact that the White King thinks otherwise?”

I could hear Lady Malvora’s smile. “Many things change, O King.”

There was a booming sound, maybe a fist slamming down onto the arm of a throne. “This does not. You have violated my commands and undermined my policies. That is treason, Cesarina.”

“Is it, O King?” Lady Malvora shot back. “Or is it treason to our very blood to show mercy to an enemy who is upon the brink of defeat?”

“I would be willing to forgive excessive zeal, Cesarina,” Raith snarled. “I am less inclined to tolerate the stupidity behind this mindless provocation.”

Cold, mocking laughter fell on a sudden, dead silence. “Stupidity? In what way, O weak and aged King? In what way are the deaths of the kine anything but sweetness to the senses, balm to the Hunger?” The quality of her voice changed, as if she changed her facing in the cavern. I could imagine her turning to address the audience, scorn ringing in her tone. “We are strong, and the strong do as they wish. Who shall call us to task for it, O King? You?”

If that wasn’t a straight line, my name isn’t Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden.

I lifted my staff and slammed it down on the floor, forcing an effort of will through it to focus the energy of the blow into a far smaller area than the end of the staff. It struck the stone floor, shattering a chunk the size of a big dinner platter with a detonation almost indistinguishable from thunder. Another effort of will sent a rolling wave of silent fire, no more than five or six inches high, down the tunnel floor, in a red carpet of my very own.

I strode down it, Ramirez beside me, the fire rolling back away from our feet as we went, boots striking the stone together. We entered the cavern and found it packed with pale and startled beings, the entire place a wash of

beautiful faces and gorgeous wardrobes—except for twenty feet around the entrance, where everyone had hurried away from the blazing herald of our presence.

I ignored everything, scanning the room until I found Grey Cloak, aka Vittorio Malvora, standing next to Madrigal Raith not thirty feet away. The murdering bastards were staring at us, mouths open in shock.

“Vittorio Malvora!” I called, my voice ringing with wrath in the echoing cavern. “Madrigal Raith! I am Harry Dresden, Warden of the White Council of Wizards. Under the Unseelie Accords, I accuse you of murder in a time of peace, and challenge you, here and now, before these witnesses, to trial by combat.” I slammed my staff down again in another shock of thunder, and Hellfire flooded the runes of the staff. “To the *death*.”

Utter silence fell on the Deeps.

Damn, there ain’t nothing like a good entrance.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“Empty night,” Madrigal swore, in English, his eyes wide. “This isn’t happening.”

I showed him my teeth and replied quietly in the same tongue. “Time to pay the piper, prick.”

Vitto Malvora turned his head to look over his shoulder at a tiny woman no more than five feet tall, dressed in a white gown more like a toga than anything else. She was curved like the Greek goddesses the gown made her resemble. Her face was a stark, frozen mask.

She turned eyes the color of chrome toward me and wine-dark lips peeled back from very white teeth.

There was an immediate uproar from the vampires, a sudden chorus of shouts of protest and anger. If I’d been in a less defiant mood, it probably would have scared the crap out of me. As it was, I simply shifted my stance, turning slightly to my left while Ramirez did the same in the opposite direction, so that we stood back-to-back. There wasn’t much else to do but prepare to fight in the event that someone decided to kick off a good old-fashioned wizard-smashin’ for the evening’s group activity.

That gave me a moment to look around the cavern. It was built on the scale of Parisian cathedrals, with an enormously high, arched ceiling that vanished into shadow far overhead. The floor and walls were of living stone, smooth and grey, shot through here and there with strands of green, dark red, and cobalt blue. Everything was rounded and smooth, not a jagged edge or sharp corner in sight.

The decor had changed a bit since I was there last. There were soft amber, orange, and scarlet lights splashing onto the walls of the cavern, and the lamps they came from had to have been automated, because they moved slightly, mixing color, making all the shadows twitch, and generally giving the overall impression of crude firelight without surrendering any of the clarity of electric lighting. Furniture had been arranged in three large groupings, with a large open space in the center of the floor, and they were

occupied by what I could only presume were the leading members of the three major Houses—somewhere near a hundred vampires in all. Servants, dressed in the same kind of more heavily embroidered kimono Justine had been wearing, hovered at the walls, bearing trays of drinks and food and so on.

The floor rose in a series of inch-high ripples toward the far side of the chamber, where the White King sat looking down upon his Court.

Raith's throne was an enormous chair of bone-white stone. Its back flared out like the hood of a cobra, spreading out into an enormous crest decorated with all manner of eye-twisting carvings, everything from rather spidery Celtic-style designs to bas-relief scenes of beings I could not easily identify engaged in activities I had no desire to contemplate. A thin sheet of fine mist fell behind the throne, the light playing delicately through it, sending ribbons and streams of color and refracted rainbows dancing around the throne. Behind that veil of obscuring mist, the floor abruptly ended, opening up into a yawning abyss that dropped into the bowels of the earth and, for all I knew, all the way through its intestinal tract.

The White King sat upon the throne. Thomas favored his father heavily, and at first glance, Lord Raith could have *been* Thomas. He had the same strong, appealing features, the same glossy dark hair, the same lean build. He looked little older than Thomas, but his face was very different. It was the eyes, I think. They were...stained, somehow, with contempt and calculation and a serpentine dispassion.

The White King wore a splendid outfit of white silk, something somewhere between Napoleonic finery and Chinese Imperial garb. Silver and gold thread and sapphires flickered over the whole of his outfit, and a circlet of glittering silver stood out starkly against his raven hair.

Around the throne stood five women—every one of them a vampire, in less elaborate and more feminine versions of his own regalia. Lara was one of them, and not the prettiest, though they all bore her a strong likeness. Raith's daughters, I supposed, each beautiful enough to haunt a lifetime of dreams, each deadly enough to kill an army of fools who sought to make such a fantasy come true.

The noise continued to rise all around us, and I could feel Ramirez's shoulders tightening, and sense the power he had begun to gather.

Raith rose from his throne with lazy magnificence and roared, "SILENCE!"

I thought my speaking voice had been loud, but Raith's shook small stones loose from the unseeing ceiling of the cavern far overhead, and the whole place went dead still.

Lady Malvora wasn't having any intimidation, though. She strode into the open space before the throne, maybe ten feet from Ramirez and me, and faced the White King. "Ridiculous!" she snapped. "We are not in a time of peace with the White Council. A state of war has been ongoing for years."

"The victims were not members of the Council," I said, and gave her a sweet smile.

"And they are not signatories to the Accords!" Lady Malvora snapped.

"Given their status as members of the magical community, they are, however, within the purview of the White Council's legitimate political concerns, and as such are subject to the stipulations for protection and defense found within the Accords. I am well within my rights to act as their champion."

Lady Malvora stared daggers at me. "Sophistry."

I smiled at her. "That is, of course, for your King to decide."

Lady Malvora's glare became even more heated, but she turned her gaze from me to the white throne.

Raith sat down again slowly, carefully fussy with his sleeves, his eyes alight with pure pleasure. "Now, now, dear Cesarina. Moments ago, you were claiming credit for dealing what could prove a mortal blow to the freaks, at least in the long term. Just because said freaks are here to object, as is their right under the Accords, you can hardly claim that they have no vested interest in trying to stop you."

Comprehension dawned on Lady Malvora's lovely face. Her voice lowered to a pitch that couldn't have carried much farther than myself, and maybe to Raith's own enhanced senses. "You snake. You poisonous snake."

Raith gave her a chill smile and addressed the assembly. "We find that we have little choice but to acknowledge the validity of the freak's right of challenge. Under our agreement in the Accords, then, we must abide by its terms and permit the trial to proceed." Raith rolled a droll hand at Vitto and Madrigal. "Unless, of course, our war heroes here lack the courage to withstand this utterly predictable response to their course of action. They are, of course, free to decline the challenge, should they feel themselves unable to face the consequences of their deeds."

Silence fell again, almost viciously anticipatory. The weight of the attention of the White Court fell squarely on Vitto and Madrigal, and they froze the way birds will before a snake, remaining carefully motionless.

This was the ticklish part. If the duo declined the trial by combat, Raith would have to pay the Council a weregild for the dead, and that would be that. Of course, doing so would be a public admission of defeat, and would effectively neuter any influence they had in the White Court, and by extension would weaken Lady Malvora's position—not so much because they declined to fight as because they would have been outmaneuvered and forced to flee a confrontation.

Of course, being proven slow and incompetent in front of a hundred ruthless predators, be they ever so well dressed, would probably prove lethal itself, in the long run. Either way, Lady Malvora's attempted influence coup would be finished. The bold and daring plan would have been proven overt and liable to attract far too much attention, both of which were simply not of value within the vampires' collective character. As a result, the White King, not Lady Malvora, would determine the course of the White Court's policy.

Lady Malvora's only way out was through a victory in the trial, and I was counting on it. I wanted Vitto and Madrigal to fight. Weregild wasn't good enough to atone for what these creatures had done to far too many innocent women.

I wanted to give these monsters an object lesson.

Madrigal turned to Vitto and spoke in a quiet hiss. I half closed my eyes and listened in on the conversation.

"No," Madrigal said, again in English. "No way. He's a stupid thug, but this is exactly what he does best."

Vitto and Lady Malvora traded a long stare. Then Vitto turned to Madrigal and said, "You were the imbecile who set out to attract his attention and got him involved. We fight."

"Like hell we fight," Madrigal snarled. "Empty night, Ortega couldn't take him in a straight fight."

"Don't act like such a kine, Madrigal," Vitto replied. "That was a duel of wills. A trial by combat allows us any weapons or tactics we wish."

"Have fun. I won't be one of the people fighting him."

"Yes, you will," Vitto replied. "You can face the wizard. Or you can face dear Auntie Cesarina."

Madrigal froze again, staring at Vitto.

“I promise you that even if he burns you to death, it will be swift and painless by comparison. Decide, Madrigal. You are with Malvora or against us.”

Madrigal swallowed and closed his eyes. “Son of a bitch.”

Vitto Malvora’s mouth widened into a smile, and he turned to address the White King, his language shifting back to Etruscan or whatever. “We deny the freak’s baseless accusation and accept his challenge, of course, my King. We will prove the injustice of it upon his body.”

“W-weapons,” came Madrigal’s unsteady voice. Lasciel’s translation was flawlessly smooth, but it wasn’t hard to extrapolate that Madrigal’s Etruscan was about as bad as my Latin. “Weapons for our own we must have to fight. To get them we must send slaves for to find them.”

Raith settled back in his throne and folded his arms. “I find this an only reasonable request. Dresden?”

“No objection,” I told him.

Raith nodded once, and clapped his hands. “Music, then, while we wait, and another round of wine.”

Lady Malvora snarled, turned on a heel, and stalked back into one of the groups of furniture, where she became the immediate center of an intent conference.

Musicians struck up from somewhere nearby, hidden behind a screen, a chamber orchestra, and a pretty good one. Vivaldi, maybe? I’m weaker on smaller-scale music than I am on symphonies. An excited buzz of voices rose up as servants began circulating with silver trays and crystal flute glasses.

Ramirez gave the chamber a somewhat disbelieving stare and then shook his head. “This is a nuthouse.”

“Cave,” I said. “Nutcave.”

“What the hell is going on?”

Right. Ramirez didn’t have his own photocopy of a demon’s personality to translate Ancient Etruscan. So I summed up the conversation and the players, and gave him the best quotes.

“What’s this freak stuff?” Ramirez demanded in a low, outraged tone.

“I think it’s a perspective thing,” I said. “They call humans kine—deer, herd animals. Wizards are deer who can call down the lightning and whip up firestorms. From that perspective, we’re fairly freakish.”

“So we’re going to kick their asses now, right?”

“That is the plan.”

“Incoming,” Ramirez said, stiffening.

Lara Raith approached us, demure in her white formal getup, bearing a silver tray with drinks upon it. She inclined her head to us, her grey eyes pale and shining. “Honored guests. Would you care for wine?”

“Nah,” I said. “I’m driving.”

Lara’s lips twitched. I had no idea how she had switched into the complex kimono so quickly. Chalk it up to the same sexy vampire powers that had once let her shoot a layer of skin off my ear while standing on gravel in stiletto heels. Poof, business suit. Whoosh, whoosh, silk negligee. I shook my head a little and got my thoughts under control. Adrenaline can make me a little silly.

Lara turned to Carlos and said, “May I offer you a taste of something sweet, bantam?”

“Well,” he said. “As long as you’re offering stuff, how about a little assurance that somebody isn’t going to shoot us in the back for fun once we’re stomping on Beavis and Butthead over there?”

Lara arched a brow. “Beavis and...”

“I would have gone with Hekyll and Jekyll,” I told him.

“Gentlemen,” she said. “Please be assured that the White Throne wishes nothing more than for you to prevail and humiliate its foes. I am sure that my father will react most harshly to any violation of the Accords.”

“Okay,” Ramirez said, drawing the word out. He nodded toward the Malvoran contingent, still huddled around Cesarina. “So, what’s stopping *Il Duca* there from taking a whack at you and the King and everybody? If she offs you, she gets to kill us, take over the organization, and just do whatever she likes.”

Lara looked at him and her expression twisted with distaste, to the point that a little shudder actually flickered along her body. Which I noticed because I am a trained observer of body language and not because of the way the kimono was perfectly outlining one of her thighs. “You don’t understand....” She shook her head, holding her mouth as if she’d unexpectedly bitten into a lemon. “Dresden, can you explain it to him?”

“The White Court vamps can be violent,” I said quietly. “Savage, even. But that isn’t their preferred mode of operation. You’re worried that Malvora is going to come smashing in here like a big old grizzly bear and

kill anything in her way. But they aren't like grizzly bears. They're more like mountain lions. They prefer not to be seen acting at all. When they do attack, they're going after a victim, not seeking an opponent. They'll try to isolate them, hit them from behind, preferably destroy them before they even know that they're being attacked. If Lady Malvora threw down right now, it'd be a stand-up fight. They hate those. They won't do them unless there's no alternative."

"Oh," Ramirez said.

"Thank you," Lara told me.

"Of course," I said, "there's been some uncharacteristic behavior going around lately."

Lara tilted her head at me, frowning.

"Oh, come on," I said. "You think it's a little odd the faeries didn't immediately stomp all over the Red Court when they violated Unseelie territory a couple of years back? Don't tell me you're trapping the little faeries because it's cheaper than getting those paper party lanterns."

Lara narrowed her eyes at me.

"You're testing their reaction," I said. "Giving a minor but deliberate insult and seeing what happens."

Her lips turned up very, very slowly. "Are you sure you're quite determined to remain attached to that sad little clubhouse of old men?"

"Why? Do you take care of your own?" I asked.

"In a great many senses, wizard," she promised.

"The way you took care of Thomas?" I asked.

Her smile turned brittle.

"Pride goeth, Lara," I said.

"Each is entitled to his opinion." She glanced up and said, "The runners have returned with your foes' weaponry. Good hunting, gentlemen."

She bowed to us again, her expression a mask, and drifted away, back toward her place behind the throne.

The music came to an end, and it seemed to be a signal to the vampires. They withdrew from the center of the chamber to stand on either side, leaving the long axis of the cavern open, the entrance upon one end, the White Throne upon the other. Last of all, the White King himself rose and descended from the enormous throne to move to one side of the cavern. On the right side of the room were all the members of Malvora and Skavis, and on the left gathered the members of House Raith. The Skavis and Malvora

weren't actually standing *together*, but...there was a sense of hungry anticipation in the air.

"Vampires standing on both sidelines," Ramirez said. "Guess no one wants to catch a stray lightning bolt."

"Or bullet," I muttered. "But it won't help them much if things get confused and turned around once the fight starts."

Raith snapped a finger, and thralls in their white kimonos began filing into the room. They swayed more than walked, filing down the "sidelines" of the dueling ground, and then simply knelt down, in a pair of double ranks, in front of the vampires on either side of the chamber. They formed, taken together, a wall like that around a hockey arena—but one made of living, human flesh.

Crap. Any form of mayhem that spread to the sidelines was going to run smack into human victims—and my own powers, in a fight, were not exactly surgical instruments. Torrents of flame, blasts of force, and impenetrable bastions of will were sort of my thing. You will note, however, how seldom words like *torrent*, *blast*, and *bastion* get used in conjunction with terms that denote delicacy and precision.

Ramirez was going to be better off than I was, in that regard. His combat skills ran more to speed and accuracy, versus my own preference for massive destruction, but they were no less deadly in their own way.

Carlos looked back and forth, then said to me, "They're going to try to stay on our flanks. Use those people in the background to keep us from cutting loose."

"I know I never went to Warden combat school," I told him. "But I feel I should remind you that this is not *my* first time."

Ramirez grimaced at me. "You just aren't going to let that go, are you?"

I showed him my teeth. "So I hit them fast and hard while you keep them off me. If they flank, you're on offense while I keep them off of you. Try to maneuver them out to where I'll have a clean shot."

Ramirez scowled, and his voice came out with more than the usual heat. "Yes, thank you, Harry. You want to tie my shoes for me before we start?"

"Whoa, what's that?" I asked him.

"Oh, come on, man," Ramirez said quietly, his voice tight and angry. "You're lying to me. You're lying to the Council."

I stared at him.

“I’m not an idiot, man,” Ramirez said, his expression neutral. “You can barely get by in Latin, but you speak ghouls? Ancient Etruscan? There’s more going on here than a duel and internal politics, Dresden. You’re involved with these things. More than you should be. You know them too well. Which is a really fucking disturbing thing to realize, considering we’re talking about a race of *mind-benders*.”

Vitto and Madrigal emerged from the Malvoran contingent. Vitto bore a long rapier at his side, and there were a number of throwing knives on his belt, as well as a heavy pistol in a holster. Madrigal, meanwhile, carried a spear with a seven-foot haft, and his arms were wrapped with two long strips of black cloth covered in vaguely oriental characters in metallic red thread. I’d have guessed that they were constructs of some kind, even before I felt the ripple of magical energy in them as he walked with Vitto to stand facing us from thirty feet away.

“Carlos,” I said. “This is one hell of a time to start having doubts about my loyalty.”

“Dammit, Harry,” he said. “I’m not backing out on you. It’s too late for that, even if I wanted to. But this whole thing feels more and more like a setup every second.”

I couldn’t argue with him there.

I was pretty sure it was.

I looked back and forth down the length of the ranks of vampires, all of whom watched in total silence now, grey eyes bright, edging over into metallic silver with their rising hunger. The formalities of the Accords had kept us alive and largely unmolested, here amidst the monsters, but if we deviated from the conventions, we’d never live to see the surface again. We were in the same position as Madrigal and Vitto, really: Win or die.

And I didn’t delude myself for one single second that this was going to be as simple as a stand-up fight. Part of the nature of the White Court was treachery, as well. It was only a matter of time, and timing, before one of them turned on us, and if we weren’t ready when it happened, we’d either be dead or getting fitted for our own white robes.

Vitto and Madrigal squared off against us, hands on their weapons.

I took a deep breath and faced them. Beside me, Ramirez did the same.

Lord Raith reached up his sleeve and withdrew a handkerchief of red silk. He offered it to Lara, who took it and walked slowly down the lines of kneeling thralls. She stopped at the sidelines, midway between us, and

slowly lifted the red silk. “Gentlemen,” she said. “Stand ready. Let no weapon of any kind be drawn until this cloth reaches the earth.”

My heart started pounding faster, and I drew my duster back enough to put a hand near the handle of my blasting rod.

Lara flicked the scarlet silk cloth into the air, and it began to fall.

Ramirez was right. This was a trap. I had done everything I could to prepare for it, but the bottom line was that I was not sure what was going to happen.

But like the man said: It was too late to back out now.

The cloth hit the floor and my hand blurred for my blasting rod as the duel began.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Some people are faster than others. I'm fast. Always have been, especially for a man my size, but this duel had gotten off to a fair start, and no merely mortal hand is faster than a vampire's.

Vitto Malvora's gun cleared its holster before my fingers had tightened on the blasting rod's handle. The weapon resembled a fairly standard Model 1911, but it had an extension to the usual ammunition clip sticking out of the handle, and it spat a spray of bullets in the voice of a yowling buzz saw.

Some vampires are faster than others. Vitto was fast. He'd drawn and fired more swiftly than I'd ever seen Thomas move, more swiftly than I'd seen Lara shoot. But bodies, even nigh-immortal vampire bodies, are made of flesh and blood, and have mass and inertia. No hand, not even a vampire's, is swifter than thought.

Ramirez already had his power held ready when the scarlet cloth hit the ground, and in that instant he hissed a single syllable under his breath and flipped his left hand palm up. That bizarre glove he wore flashed and let out a rattling buzz of furious sound.

A sudden, gelatinous cloud of green light interposed itself between us and the vampires before even Vitto could fire. The bullets struck against that gooey cloud, sending watery ripple patterns racing across it, plowing a widening furrow through the semisolid mass. There was a hissing sound, a sharp pain high up on my left cheek, and then I was slapped across the chest by a spray of tiny, dark particles the size of grains of sand.

Ramirez's shield was nothing like my own. I used raw force to create my own steel-hard barrier. Ramirez's spell was based on principles of entropy and water magic, and focused on disrupting, shattering, and dispersing any objects trying to pass through it, turning their own energy against them. Even magic must do business with physics, and Carlos couldn't simply make the energy the bullets carried go away. Instead, the spell reduced their force by shattering the bullets with their own momentum, breaking them

into zillions of tiny pieces, spreading them out, so that their individual impact energy would be negligible.

When the dispersed cloud of leaden sand struck me, it was unpleasant and uncomfortable, but it had lost so much power that it wouldn't have gotten through an ordinary leather coat, or even a thick shirt, much less my spell-laced duster.

If I'd had time to breathe a sigh of relief, I would have. I didn't. Every bit of focus I had was bent on slamming a surge of energy and will through my blasting rod, even before I had the business end lifted all the way up.

"Fuego!" I cried.

A column of fire as thick as a telephone pole flew from the tip of the rod, struck the ground twenty feet away, and then whipped across the floor toward Vitto as I finished lifting my weapon.

He was fast. He'd barely had time to register that his bullets had missed their target before the fire came for him, but he flung himself to one side in a desperate dive. As he went, he gained enough of an angle to get him just around the edge of Rodriguez's highly visible shield, and the vampire's hand flickered to his belt to whip one of those knives at me in a side-armed throw.

It would have been a waste of time for any human. Thrown knives aren't terribly good killing weapons to begin with—I mean, in the movies and TV, every time someone throws a knife it kills somebody. Wham, it slams to the hilt in their chest, right into the heart, or *glurk*, it sinks into their throat and they die instantly. Real knives don't generally kill you unless the thrower gets abnormally lucky. Real knives, if they hit with the pointy part at all, generally only inflict a survivable—if very distracting—injury.

Of course, when real people throw real knives, they don't fling them at a couple of hundred miles an hour. Most of them haven't had centuries to practice, either.

That knife flickered as it came, and if I hadn't hunched up my shoulder and tucked my face down behind it, the knife might have found the flesh of my neck and killed me. Instead, its tip struck the duster's mantle at an oblique angle, and the weapon skittered off the spell-armored coat and tumbled off on a wobbly arc.

Vitto landed in a tumble, teeth clenched over a scream of pain. His left leg was on fire from the knee down, but he was smart—he didn't stop, drop, and roll. In fact, he didn't stop at all, and it was the only thing that kept my

second blast from immolating him. The lance of flame missed him by a foot and momentarily smashed the curtain of falling water behind the white throne into steam. Beside me, I heard Ramirez fling out one of those green blasts.

“Harry!” Ramirez screamed.

I turned my head in time to see Madrigal coming at us from nearly straight ahead, his spear in hand. Ramirez hurled a second shaft of green light at him, but it splashed against an unseen barrier a foot away from his body. Glitters of golden light ran up and down the symbols on the cloth strips wrapped around his arms. I understood, then. Ramirez’s second shot had been a demonstration.

“He’s warded!” Ramirez snarled.

“Drop back!” I snapped, as Vitto came streaking toward me down the other sideline. He was reloading the gun as he came, dropping the old magazine, slapping a new one in. I lifted my shield bracelet, readying it—then hesitated for a fraction of a second to get the timing just right, gauging angles of incidence and refraction.

Vitto’s hand came up and the gun snarled again.

I brought the shield up at the last second, a flat plane perpendicular to the floor, and Ramirez took a hopping step back just in time to get behind the shield as it formed. Twenty or thirty bullets ricocheted off the invisible barrier in a shower of sparks—and spalled more or less toward Madrigal Raith and his magical protection.

The nifty armbands apparently weren’t made to stop physical projectiles, because one of the bouncing bullets ripped through the outside of his thigh with an ugly explosion of torn cloth and a misty burst of pale blood. He screamed and faltered, throwing out one hand to catch his balance before he could hit the floor.

“Drop it!” Ramirez shouted. His hand blurred toward his pistol, and he drew it before Madrigal could get moving again.

I pivoted the shield to clear Ramirez, taking a couple of steps forward to wall Vitto away from Carlos’s flank, and transmuted the far surface of the shield into a reflective mirror.

Ramirez’s gun began to roar beside me—measured shots that were actually aimed, as opposed to the rapid *crack-crack-crack* of panic fire.

Vitto reacted to the gunfire and the suddenly appearing mirrored wall ten feet long and eight feet high with instant violence. He flung the heavy

handgun at a suddenly appearing and swift-moving target before he could realize that it was his own reflection. The gun had its slide locked open, and when it hit the shield at the speed he threw it, something in the assembly slipped, and it bounced off in several pieces.

Vitto slowed down for a step, eyes widening, and I didn't blame him one bit. It would have made me blink for a second if my opponent had suddenly changed open air into the back wall of a dance studio.

Then he accelerated again and did something I wasn't ready for. He bounded straight up into the air, a good ten or twelve feet, arching over the top of my shield in an instant and flinging knives with each hand as he came. I threw up my right arm, trying to interpose it with the oncoming knife as far out from my body as I could. The knife hit flat, which was fine, where the leather of my duster's sleeve covered my arm. The handle of the knife, though, hit my naked wrist, and my right hand abruptly went numb. I heard the other knife whisper as it tumbled through the air beside me, missing me.

"Madre de Dios!" Carlos screamed.

The blasting rod tumbled from my useless fingers.

I cursed and flung myself to one side as Vitto landed on the inside of my shield, his sword whipping from its scabbard in a horizontal slash at my throat. My tactical thinking had been limited to two dimensions, maybe reinforced by the mockery of the sports field we fought on. The second knife had missed me because Vitto hadn't been aiming for me. Its handle now protruded from Ramirez's right calf.

I couldn't move my fingers correctly, which precluded the use of the energy rings on my right hand. I dropped the shield—all it would do with him already so close was slow down my movement. I'd have to re-form it between me and him the second I got a chance, which he didn't seem inclined to give me. He sent a lightning-quick thrust at my guts, and I had to dance back a pair of steps to buy myself enough time to parry it with a sweep of the staff in my left hand.

There was no way I could fence with Vitto. Even if he didn't totally outclass me, physically, fighting one-armed with a staff against a competent fighter with a rapier is not a winning proposition. If I tried it, I'd be backing away from him in circles until I tripped, he slashed a few of my fingers off and finished me, or else forced me away from Ramirez long enough to double-team him and kill him. I couldn't sling magic at him,

either. His back was to the crowd of vampires and the human victims shielding them, and he was damned fast. Anything I could throw that would have hurt him could miss—and if it missed, it'd kill anyone who got in the way.

I couldn't take my eyes off Vitto for a second—I had to hope that Ramirez was holding his own against Madrigal. I had to buy time and distance. I slammed will and Hellfire through my staff, snarled, “*Forzare!*” and released it in a broad wave that lashed out into absolutely everything in front of me.

The wave of force caught Vitto and flung him from his feet. He hit a brawny thrall with a neatly clipped goatee, and then the wave caught up and struck the man, too, as well as the folk on either side of him. They were flung back into the second row of kneeling thralls, and *they*, in turn, were all bowled back into the crowd of vampires behind them, to a general scream of surprise and dismay.

It hadn't been a *lot* of force by the time it got to the thralls, not all spread out like that. I could have delivered tackles that hit harder. It had been enough, though, to tangle Vitto—whose leg was *still* on fire, by the way—in a pile of courtiers and thralls.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen,” I hollered, “to Bowling for Vampires!”

To my intense discomfort, a round of laughs went up from the Raith contingent, and I got a smattering of applause. I raised my shield again, into a shimmering half dome of glittering silver and blue light this time, and twisted my head around to look for Ramirez.

I turned in time to see Madrigal, bleeding from several gunshot wounds, rush forward, spear held high. Ramirez had fallen to one knee, his wounded leg unable to support his weight, and as I watched he dropped the Desert Eagle and gathered another bolt of disintegrating emerald force in his right hand.

Madrigal laughed at him, the sound silvery and scornful, and now that he was in motion I could see the chromium glitter of the demonic Hunger in his eyes. His protective armbands flickered brightly as he rushed forward.

“Ramirez!” I screamed.

Madrigal raised the spear.

Ramirez flung the gathered energy in a last useless strike.....that missed Madrigal entirely and splashed on the stone at his feet.

A section of stone the size of a big bathtub glowed green for a split second, then shattered into dust so fine that its individual grains would be almost invisible to the naked eye.

Just as my average preparation session for a fight does not involve considering twelve-foot kung fu leaps from knife-throwing masters, I guess Madrigal's practices didn't take into account floors that might suddenly become pools of nearly frictionless dust. He let out a shriek and plunged into it, flailing wildly. I could see the wheels spinning in his head, trying to work out what had happened and how the hell he would get out of it.

Ramirez shot a look over his shoulder and snarled, "Harry!"

The fingers of my right hand were tingling. I raised it, clenching it into a weak fist. It was good enough to align the rings with my thoughts. "Go!"

Madrigal had worked it out. He thrashed to one side of the trough Ramirez's spell had eaten in the floor, thrust the handle of his spear down into the ultrafine dust, and shoved himself roughly up and out of the sand trap.

But not before Ramirez drew the silver Warden's blade from his hip, the sword designed to let the Wardens of the White Council slice into any enchantment, unraveling it with a single stroke. Carlos drew it, lunged out onto his wounded leg with a cry of pain and challenge, and sliced the willow blade left and right at Madrigal while the spear was grounded and locked into place, supporting him.

The sword cut through the wooden haft of the spear, *snicker-snack*, which was itself an indicator of just how unbelievably sharp an edge it had to have carried. Luccio did good work. That was just collateral damage, though.

The Warden blade also licked lightly across each of Madrigal's arms.

The black cloth armbands erupted into sudden flame, the embroidered symbols on them flaring into painfully brilliant light, as if the scarlet thread had been made of magnesium. Any construct that held enough energy to counteract the magic of a major-league wizard, especially a combat specialist like Ramirez, had to have been holding all kinds of energy. Ramirez had just cut it loose.

Madrigal stared down in sudden panic at the fire writhing up his arms and let out a horrified scream.

I crouched, clenched my fist a little tighter, narrowed my eyes, and with a single thought released every bit of energy in the rings—what had been

left over after the ghoul attack and what I had added later, all at the same time.

The power hit Madrigal low in the belly, at a slightly upward angle. It slammed him from his feet as the fire blazed over his arms, lifted him up over the heads of the gathered Raith contingent like a living, sizzling comet, and slammed him into the cavern wall behind them with literally bone-shattering power.

Broken, bleeding wreckage tumbled limply down.

“And the wizards,” I snarled, “pick up the spare.”

I turned back to face Vitto, who was only then clawing his way out of a pile of confused and unhappy Skavis and Malvora vampires and meekly passive thralls. He came to his feet with his sword in hand.

I faced him through the glowing dome. I heard a grunt, and then Ramirez stepped up beside me, silver sword in hand, still stained with Madrigal’s pinkish blood, his staff in the other, taking some of the weight from his injured foot. I kept the dome up, recovered my blasting rod, and raised it, calling up my will, letting fire illuminate the runes carved down its length one sigil at a time. The new shield was more taxing than the old, and I was getting tired—but there was nothing to do about that but keep going.

There were rustling sounds all around us. Vampires came to their feet. They edged closer to the thralls, shifted position so that they would be able to see. There were murmurs and whispers all around us as the White Court sensed that the end was near. Vitto’s aunt was not far from him, and she stood with one hand to her delicate throat—but she stood fast, watching, anxiety and calculation warring for space in her eyes. Just over one shoulder, I could just barely make out Lara’s profile as she leaned forward over the thrall kneeling between her and the fight—Justine—to watch the end, her lips parted and glistening wet, her eyes glowing.

The spectacle of it sickened me, but I thought I understood something of what triggered it in them.

Death did not come swiftly to vampires—but the old Reaper was in the house, and when he struck, he would take lives that should have lasted for centuries more. That realization let me understand something else about the White Court—that for all of their allure, that forbidden attraction, the unnatural magnetism of a creature so beautiful outside and so twisted within, with their ability to give you the greatest pleasure of your life, even

as they snuffed it out—they, the vampires themselves, were not immune to that dark attraction.

They were regular, near-eternal voyeurs to death's handiwork, after all. They saw the mingled ecstasy and terror on the faces of those they took. They fed upon the surrender of life and passion to the endless silence—knowing, all the while, that in the end, they were no different. One day, one night, it would be their turn to face the scythe and the dark cowl, and that they would fall, fall just as helplessly as their own prey had, over and over and over.

Death had already taken Madrigal Raith. And it would soon take Vitto Malvora. And the White Court, one and all, longed to see it happen, to feel Death brush close by, to be tantalized by its nearness, to revel in its presence and passing.

Words could not express how badly they needed therapy.

Dysfunctional sickos.

I put it out of my head. I still had work to do.

"All right," I growled to Ramirez. "You ready?"

He bared his teeth in a ferocious smile. "Let's get it on."

Vitto Malvora, the last of Anna's killers, faced me steadily, his eyes gone white. I thought that for a man about to face two fairly deadly wizards determined to kill him, he did not look terribly frightened.

In fact, he looked...

...pleased.

Oh, crap.

Vitto threw back his head and spread his arms.

I dropped the shield and shouted, "Kill him!"

Vitto lifted his voice in a sudden, thunderous roar, and I could sense the will and the power that underlay his call. "MASTER!"

Ramirez was a beat slow in transferring his sword to his other hand so that he could fling green fire at Vitto, and the vampire lowered his arms and crossed them in front of him, hissing words in some strange tongue as he did. Ramirez's strike shattered upon that defense, though bits of greenish fire dribbled onto Vitto's arms, each of them chewing out a scoop of flesh as far across as a nickel.

"Crap!" Ramirez snarled.

But I didn't have time to listen.

I could feel it. Feel power building on the cave floor in front of the white throne. It wasn't explosive magic, but it was strong, quivering on a level so fundamental that I could feel it in my bones. A second later, I recognized this power. I had felt the dim echoes of its passing, months before, in a cave in New Mexico.

There was a deep throb. Then another. Then a third. And then the air before the white throne suddenly swirled. It spun for a moment, and then there was abruptly an oblong disk of darkness hanging in the air. It spun open, pushing the space of the cavern aside, and a dank, musty, mildew-scented flood of cold air washed out of the passage that had been opened from the Nevernever and into the Deeps.

Seconds later, there was movement in the passage, and then a ghoul sprang through it.

Well. I call it a ghoul. But just looking at it, I knew I was seeing something from another age. It was...like seeing drawings of things from the last ice age—familiar animals, most of them, but they were all too large, too heavy with muscle, many of them festooned with extra tusks, spurs of horn, and lumpy, armored hide.

This thing, this ghoul, was of the same order. Eight feet tall if it was an inch, and its hunched shoulders were so wide that it made the thing look more like a gorilla than it did a hyena or baboon, the way most of them did. It had serrated ridges of horn on its stark cheekbones, and its jaw was far more massive with muscle. Its forearms were even longer than a normal ghoul's, its claws heavier, longer, and backed by knobbed ridges of horn that would let the thing crush and smash as effectively as it sliced and diced. Its brow ridge was far heavier, too, and its eyes, so recessed as to be little more than glitters from the indirect lighting, could hardly be seen.

The ghoul crouched and leaped twenty feet forward with an easy grace, then landed with a roar that made my knees feel a little weak.

More of them poured out of the gate. Ten. Twenty. They kept coming and coming.

"Hell's bells," I whispered.

Beside me, Ramirez swallowed. "I," he said, "am going to die a virgin."

Vitto let out a wild cackle of glee, and howled, "At last!" He actually capered a little dance step in place. "At last the masquerade ends! Kill them! Kill them *all!*"

I don't know if it was one of the vampires or one of the thralls, but suddenly a woman screamed in utter terror, and the Ghouls went mad with bloodlust and surged forward in an unstoppable wave.

I dropped all the power in my shield, and all that I had put into the blasting rod, too. Neither of them would get me out of the hellish Cuisinart of pain and death that this cavern was about to become.

“Right, then,” I panted. “This would be the trap.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

“I knew it,” Ramirez snarled. “I knew it was a setup.”

He turned to look at me and then blinked. It was only then that I realized that I had my teeth bared in a wide smile.

“That’s right,” I told him. “It is.”

I have seen some real pros open gateways to the Nevernever. The youngest of the Summer Queens of the Sidhe could open them so smoothly that you’d never see it happening until it was over. I’d seen Cowl open ways to the Nevernever as casually and easily as a screen door, with the gate itself being barely noticeable until it vanished a few seconds later, leaving behind it the same musty smell now flooding the cavern.

I couldn’t do it that smoothly or with that much subtlety.

But I *could* do it just as quickly, and just as effectively.

I spun on my heel as the ghouls flooded the cavern and plunged into the gathered members of the White Court in a killing frenzy.

“Go!” Ramirez shouted. “I can’t run anyway. I’ll hold them; get out of here!”

“Get over yourself and cover my back!” I snarled.

I gathered my will again, shifting my staff into my right hand. The runes on the staff blazed to life, and I pointed the staff across my body, at the air four feet off the cavern floor. Then I released my gathered will, focused by my intentions and the energies aligned in my staff, and shouted, “*Aparturum!*” Furious golden and scarlet light flowed down the length of wood, searing a seam in reality. I drew the staff from left to right, drawing a line of fire in the air—and after a heartbeat, that line expanded, burning up like a fire running up a curtain, down like rain sluicing down a car window, and left behind it a gateway, an opening from the Raith Deeps to the Nevernever.

The gate opened on a cold and frozen woodland scene. Silvery moonlight slipped through, and a freezing wind gusted, blowing powdery white snow into the cavern—substance of the spirit world, which transformed into

clear, if chilly, gelatin, the ectoplasm left behind when spirit matter reverted to its natural state.

There was a stir of shadows, and then my brother burst through the opening, saber in one hand, sawed-off shotgun in the other. Thomas was dressed in heavy biker leather and body armor, with honest-to-God chain mail covering the biker's jacket. His hair was tied back in a tail, and his eyes were blazing with excitement. "Harry!"

"Take your time," I barked back at him. "We're not in a crisis or anything!"

"The others are right beh—*Look out!*"

I spun in time to see one of the ghouls bound into the air and sail toward me, the claws on both its hands and feet extended to rip and slash.

Ramirez shouted and flung one of his green blasts at the thing. It caught the ghoul at the apex of its flight and simply bored a hole the size of a garbage can in its lower abdomen.

The ghoul landed in a splatter of gore and fury. It kept fighting, though its legs flopped around like a seal's tail, of almost no use to it.

I sprang back—or at least, I tried to spring. Opening a gate to the Nevernever is not complicated, but it isn't easy, either, and between that and all the fighting I'd done, I was beginning to bump up against my physical limits. My legs wobbled, and my spring was more like the lazy, hot, and motionless end of summer.

Thomas dragged me the last six inches or I wouldn't have avoided the ghoul's claws. He extended his arm, shotgun in hand, and blew the ghoul's head off its shoulders in a spray of flying bits of bone and horn and a mist of horrible black blood.

After which, the ghoul seized him with one arm and began raking its talons at him with the other.

The terrible power of the mangled ghoul was enormous. Links of chain mail snapped and went flying, and Thomas let out a scream of surprise and outrage.

"What the *hell!*" he snarled. He dropped the shotgun and took off the ghoul's attacking arm with his saber. Then he broke the grip of the last clawed hand, and flung the ghoul's body away from him.

"What the hell was *that?*" he gasped, recovering the shotgun.

"Uh," I said. "That was one."

“Harry!” Ramirez said, backpedaling as best he could with the wounded leg, and bumped into me. I steadied him before he lost his balance. That damned knife was still sticking out of his calf.

A dozen more ghouls were charging us.

Everything slowed down, the way it sometimes does when fresh adrenaline shifts me into overdrive.

The cavern had gone insane. The ghouls had been there for maybe thirty seconds, but there were several dozen of them at least, with more pouring out of the neat oval gate on the other side of the cavern. The ghouls had apparently attacked everyone with equal amounts of ferocity and fury. More of them had poured into the Malvoran and Skavis contingent than the Raith side, but that might have been a function of simple numbers and proximity.

The vampires, most of them unarmed and unprepared for a fight, had been taken off guard. That doesn't mean as much to vamps as it does to regular folks, but the walls had been splattered with pale blood where the ghouls had rushed in among them, and the battle now raging was horrific.

In one spot, Lady Malvora ripped the arm from a ghoul's socket, her skin gone marble-white and hard-looking, and proceeded to beat it about the head and shoulders with its own detached limb. The ghoul went down with a shattered skull, but four more of the creatures buried the White Court noblewoman under their weight and power, and literally ripped her to pieces in front of my eyes.

Elsewhere, a male vampire picked up an eight-foot-long sofa and slammed its end down onto a pair of ghouls ripping at the body of a fallen thrall. Still elsewhere, Lord Skavis had rallied a number of his retainers to him, standing off against the maddened ghouls like a rock ignoring a flash flood—for the moment, at least.

Other sights weren't nearly so pleasant.

A vampire, trying to flee, tripped over a human thrall, a girl no more than eighteen, and dealt her a blow of his fist in pure frustration, snapping her neck. He was brought down by ghouls a breath later. Elsewhere, other vampires seemed to have lost control of their demonic Hunger completely, and they had thrown down whatever thralls they could seize, with no regard for gender or for what their particular favorite food might be. One thrall, writhing under a Skavis, was screaming and pushing her thumbs into her own eyes. Another shuddered under the fear-compulsion of a Malvora,

clearly in the midst of a seizure or heart attack, right up until a tide of ghouls overran predator and prey alike. The Raith didn't seem to be as wholly frenzied as the other Houses—or maybe they'd just eaten more today. I saw only a couple of thralls downed by them, being torn out of their clothes and ravaged on the stone.

Like those near Lord Skavis, a core of organization had formed around Lara and her father. Someone—I saw a flash of Justine's terrified face—was holding a little air horn up and triggering it wildly. I spotted Vitto Malvora, charging the ghouls around his fallen aunt—and watched as he threw himself on the remains with an inhuman howl, and began feasting beside the creatures who had killed her.

It had taken seconds for intrigue to devolve into insanity in a thousand simultaneous nightmare-inducing vignettes—none of which I could afford to think significant, save one: the dozen ghouls plunging directly toward me like a football team on the kickoff, huge and fast and ferocious, charging me on a straight line from the enemy gate.

For a second, I thought I saw a dark shape in that gate, the suggestion of an outlined hood and cloak. It might have been Cowl. I'd have hit him with all the fire I could call if I'd had a second to spare, but I didn't.

I brought my shield up as the ghouls came over the floor, and held it fast as the leader of the pack slammed into it in a flare of blue and silver light and a cloud of sparks. The ghoul only howled and began slamming at the barrier with his fists. Every single one hit with the energy of a low-speed car crash, and even with my nifty new bracelet, I could feel the surge of power I needed to keep the shield steady when each of the blows came thundering down.

Boots thudded behind me. Someone was shouting.

Bam, bam, bam. The ghoul slammed against my shield, and it was an almost painful effort to hold it.

“Justine!” Thomas screamed.

I wouldn't be able to hold this ghoul off for long—which was all right, because the other eleven were going to go right around my shield while he forced me to hold it steady against him, and tear me into tiny pieces and eat me. Hopefully in that order.

Bootsteps thudded behind me, and a voice barked. A second ghoul, several steps in front of the rest, flung itself around my shield but was

intercepted by Ramirez. It leaped at him and hit that gelatinous-looking green cloud of a shield he used.

What happened to the ghouls as its speed carried its whole mass all the way through the shield does not bear thinking on. But Ramirez was going to need new clothes.

Bam. Bam. BAM!

Murphy screamed, "Harry, Thomas, Ramirez, down!"

I dropped and dragged Carlos down with me, lowering my shield as I went. Thomas hit the ground a fraction of a second after I did.

And the world came apart in thunder. Sound hammered at my head and ears, and I found myself screaming in pain and shock, before I ground my teeth and shot a quick glance behind me, trying not to lift my head any higher than I had to.

Murphy knelt on the ground by my feet in her dark fatigues, body armor, black baseball cap, and amber safety glasses. She had a weird little rectangular gun about the size of a big box of chocolates held to one shoulder. It had a tiny little barrel, one of those little red dot optical sights, and Murphy's cheek was laid on it, one eye aligned with the sight as she poured automatic fire into the oncoming ghouls in neat, chattering bursts that ripped the ghouls that had been pounding on my shield into a spray of broken bits. It went over backward, thrashing one arm and howling in agony.

Beside Murphy, playing Clifford the Big Red Dog to her Emily Elizabeth, was Hendricks. The huge redheaded enforcer was also kneeling and firing, but the gun he held to his shoulder was approximately the size of an intercontinental ballistic missile and spat out a stream of tracer rounds that ripped into the attacking creatures with a vengeance. Several men I recognized from Marcone's organization were lined up next to him, all firing. So were several more men I didn't recognize, but whose clothing and equipment were sufficiently different to make me think they were freelancers, hired for the job. A few more were still pouring through the open gate and into the cavern.

The ghouls were hardy as hell, but there is a difference between shrugging off a few rounds from a sidearm and wading through the disciplined hail of assault-weapon fire that Marcone's people laid down on them. Had it been one man firing at one ghouls, it might have been different—but it wasn't. There were at least twenty of them shooting into a packed

mass, and they *kept* shooting, even after the targets were thrashing on the ground, until their guns were empty. Then they reloaded, and returned to firing. Marcone had given his men the instructions I'd advised—and I imagined the guns he had hired on must have been used to facing supernatural threats of this sort as well. Marcone was nothing if not resourceful.

Murphy stopped shooting and screamed something at me, but it wasn't until Marcone stepped forward into the peripheral vision of the armed gunmen and held up a hand with a closed fist that they stopped firing.

For a second, nothing but a high, heavy tone buzzed in my ears, making me deaf to the other sounds in the cavern. The air was full of the sewer stench of wounded ghoul and the sharp scent of burning cordite. A swath of stone floor ten yards across and thirty deep had just been carpeted in pureed ghoul.

The fight was still going on all around us, but the main force of ghouls was concentrating on the hard-pressed vampires. We'd bought ourselves a temporary quiet spot, but it couldn't last.

"Harry!" Murphy screamed over the merely horrific cacophony of the slaughter.

I gave her a thumbs-up. I pushed myself to my feet. Someone gave me a hand up and I took it gratefully—until I saw that it was Marcone, dressed in his black fatigues, holding a shotgun in his other hand. I jerked my fingers away as if he were more disgusting than the things fighting and dying all around us.

His cold green eyes wrinkled at the corners. "Dresden. If it's all right with you, I think it would be prudent to retreat back through the gate."

That was probably a very smart idea. The gate was six feet away from me. We could pull up stakes, hop through, and close it behind us. Gates to the spirit world paid absolutely no attention to trivial things like geography—they obeyed laws of imagination, intention, patterned thought. Even if Cowl was back there, he wouldn't be able to open a gate to the same place as mine, because he didn't think like me, feel like me, or share my intent and purpose.

Seeing fallout from the war with the Red Court had convinced me that running when you didn't have to fight was a really great idea. In fact, the Merlin had written a letter to the Wardens directing them to do so, rather

than lose even more of our dwindling combat resources. If we hung around much longer, no one was getting out of this abattoir.

Thomas's sword came down on a thrashing ghoul, and he shouted, with desperation bordering on madness, "Justine!" He spun to me. "Harry, help me!"

Leaving was smart.

But my brother wasn't leaving. Not without the girl.

So I wasn't leaving without her, either.

Come to think of it, there were a whole lot of people who didn't need to be here. And, in point of fact, there were some damned compelling reasons to take them with us when we went. Those reasons didn't make it any less dangerous, and they sure as hell didn't make the idea any less scary, but that didn't stop them from existing.

Without Lara's peace initiative (fronted by her puppet father), the White Court would pitch in more heavily with the Reds than they already had. If I didn't get Lara and her puppet out, what was already a grim war with the vampires would quite possibly become an impossible one. That was a damned good reason to stay.

But it wasn't the one that kept me there.

I saw another ghoul tear into a helpless, unresisting thrall, closed my eyes for a second, and realized that if I did nothing to save as many as I could, I would never leave this cavern. Oh, sure, I might get out alive. But I'd be back here every time I closed my eyes.

"Dresden!" Marcone shouted. "I agreed to an extraction. Not to a war."

"A war's all we've got!" I shouted back. "We've got to get Raith out of this in one piece, or the whole thing was for nothing and no one pays you off!"

"No one will pay me off if I'm dead, either," Marcone said.

I snarled and stepped closer, getting into Marcone's face.

Hendricks rolled a half a step toward me and growled.

Murphy seized the huge man by one enormous paw, did something that involved his wrist and his index finger, and with a grunt Hendricks dropped to one knee while Murphy held one of his arms out straight behind him and angled painfully upward. "Take it easy, big guy," she said. "Someone might get hurt."

"Don't move," Marcone snarled—to his men, not to me. His eyes never wavered from mine. "Yes, Dresden?"

“I could tell you to do it or I’d strand you all in the Nevernever on the way home,” I said quietly. “I could tell you to help me or I’d close the gate, and we’d all die here. I could even tell you to do it or I’d burn you to ashes where you stand. But I won’t tell you that.”

Marcone narrowed his eyes. “No?”

“No. Threats won’t deter you. We both know that. I can’t force you to do anything, and we both know that, too.” I jerked my head at the cavern. “People are dying, John. Help me save them. God, *please* help me.”

Marcone’s head rocked back as if I’d slapped him. After a second he asked, “Who do you think I am, wizard?”

“Someone who can help them,” I said. “Maybe the only one.”

He stared at me with empty, opaque eyes.

Then he said, very quietly, “Yes.”

I felt a fierce smile stretch my mouth and turned to Ramirez at once. “Stay here with these guys and hold the gate.”

“Who *are* these people?” Ramirez said.

“Later!” I whirled back to Marcone. “Ramirez is with the Council, like me. Keep him covered and hold the gate.”

Marcone pointed at several of the men. “You, you, you. Guard this man and hold the gate.” He pointed out several more. “You, you, you, you, you, start rounding up anyone close enough to us to get to without undue risk and help them through.”

Men leaped to obey, and I felt impressed. I’d never seen Marcone quite like this before: animated, decisive, and totally confident despite the nightmare all around. There was a power to it, something that brought order to the terrifying chaos around us.

I could see why men followed him, how he had conquered the underworld of Chicago.

One of the hired guns cut loose with a burst of fire, still shockingly loud enough to make me flinch. “You know what else?” I asked Marcone. “I don’t really need this cave. Neither do you.”

Marcone narrowed his eyes at me, then nodded once, and said something over his shoulder to one of the hired guns. “Dresden, I would appreciate it if you would ask the sergeant to release my employee.”

“Murph,” I complained, “can’t you pick on someone your own size?” I took a second to admire Hendricks’s expression, but said, “We need him with his arm still attached.”

Murphy eased up on the pressure and then released Hendricks's arm. The big man eyed Murphy, rubbing his arm, but regained his feet and his enormous machine gun.

"Harry," Thomas said, voice tight. "We need to move."

"Yeah," I said. "Thomas, Murphy, and..." We needed mass. "Hendricks, with me."

Hendricks checked that with Marcone, who nodded.

"Follow me," I told them. "Stay—What are you doing, Marcone?"

Marcone had accepted a weapon from one of his gunmen, a deadly little MAC-10 that could spew out about a berjillion bullets in a second or two. He checked it and clipped a strap hanging from it to a ring on his weapon harness. "I'm going with you. And you don't have enough time to waste any more of it arguing with me about it."

Dammit. He was right.

"Fine. Follow my lead and stay close. We're going to go round up Lord Raith and get him and everyone else we can out of here before—"

Marcone abruptly raised his shotgun and put a blast through one of the nearer fallen ghouls that had begun to move. It thrashed, and he put a second shell into it. The ghoul stopped moving.

That was when I noticed that the black ichor that spewed from the ghouls was on the ground...

...and it was moving.

By itself.

The black fluid rolled and ran like liquid mercury, gathering together in little droplets, then larger gobs. Those, in turn, ran over the floor—uphill, in some cases—back toward broken ghoul bodies. As I watched, bits of missing flesh ripped from the ghouls began to fill in again as the ichor returned to their bodies. The one Thomas had beheaded actually came crawling back over the floor, having regained some of the use of its legs. It was holding its head up against the stump of its neck with its one arm, and the ichor was flowing from both the severed head and the stump, merging, reattaching it. I saw the ghoul's jaws suddenly stretch, its eyes blink and then focus.

On me.

Holy crap.

Time. We didn't have much time. If even the gutted and mangled ghouls could get back up again, there was no way the vampires were winning this

one. The best they could hope for was to run—and when more vamps ran, more ghouls would be free to overwhelm us. Or possibly they'd do something even more disgusting than they already had, and we'd all puke ourselves to death.

“This just can't get much more disturbing,” I muttered. “Follow me.”

I gripped my staff in both hands and charged ahead, into the mass of maddened vampires and ghouls, to save one monster from another.

Chapter Forty

I sprinted toward the little knot of struggling vampires around the White King, while dozens of über-ghouls ripped into the leading families of the White Court. I slipped on some slimy ichor, but didn't fall on my ass. For me, that's actually pretty good.

I noted more details on the way, and started trying to think ahead of the next few seconds. Assuming we got to the White King in one piece and convinced Lara to team up and follow us, then what? What was the next step?

At least a dozen ghouls bounded out the tunnel, heading up that long slope to the cave's entrance. They'd be in a good position to stop Lara's mortal security forces from pushing through the tunnel to rescue the King. Stopping a charge over open ground with firearms is one thing. Using a gun to charge a large, deadly, powerful predator in close quarters is a different proposition entirely—and not a winning one.

Naturally, the ghouls in the tunnel would also be in position to intercept anyone who tried to flee, which meant that we *had* to leave through the gate, which meant that if Ramirez and Marcone's men lost it, we were screwed. And *that* meant that if Cowl was over there and saw what was going on, he would hardly sit by doing nothing.

I might be able to counter him if I were defending the gate. My skills aren't fine, but I'm pretty strong, and I'm good at adapting them on the fly. Cowl had cleaned my clock in two fights already, but slowing and delaying him wasn't the same as trying to wipe the walls with him. Even if I couldn't be a real threat to him, personally, I could tie him up long enough to hold the gate until we could skedaddle.

Ramirez couldn't. He was a dangerous combat wizard, but his skills just weren't strong enough or broad enough to pose a significant obstacle to Cowl. If Cowl—or Vitto, for that matter—saw what was going on, and the ghouls concentrated on the gate...

The shrieks and roars of the struggle on our right suddenly got louder, and I saw the resistance around Lord Skavis and his henchmen suddenly buckle. The horrible glee of the ghouls rushing into the opening was almost more terrifying than the carnage that followed. I caught a glimpse of Vitto Malvora in the middle of the mess, shoving a ghoul toward a wounded vampire, snarling at others, giving orders. The largest of the ghouls were with Vitto.

“That vampire has the strongest and largest of those creatures with him!” Marcone called to me as we ran. “He’ll hit any pockets of resistance with them, use them as a hammer.”

“I can see that,” I snapped. “Murphy, Marcone, cover our right. Hendricks, Thomas, get ready to go in.”

“Go in where?” Hendricks asked.

I took my staff in hand, focused on the fight raging around the White King, and called up my will and Hellfire. “In the hole I’m about to make,” I growled. “Get them out.”

“They’re mostly...eating now. But the second we start to break them free,” Marcone cautioned from behind me, “these others are going to come after us.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll handle it.”

I felt something warm press up against my lower back—Murphy’s shoulders. “We’ll make sure that—” Her voice broke off suddenly, and that boxy little submachine gun chattered in three quick bursts, punctuated by a single throaty roar from Marcone’s shotgun. “Holy crap, that was close.”

“Another,” Marcone warned, and the shotgun blasted again.

The air horn in Justine’s hand started blaring more desperately.

“Harry!” Thomas shouted.

“Go!” I shouted at Thomas and Hendricks. Then I leveled the staff at the nearest clump of the enormous ghouls and shouted, “*Forzare!*”

My will lashed out, leashed to Lasciel’s Hellfire, and rushed upon the ghouls, exploding in a sphere of raw force that blazed with flickers of sulfurous flame. It blew them up and outward like extras on the set of *The A-Team*, flying in high arcs. Some of them flew right through the falling curtain of water behind the throne and into the abyssal depths below. Others slammed hard into the nearest wall, and still others fell among the frenzied ghouls now finishing off Lord Skavis and his retainers.

Thomas and Hendricks charged forward. My brother had slipped his shotgun into a sheath over one shoulder, and now wielded his saber in one hand and that inward-bent knife in the other. The first ghoul he reached was still staggered from the blast that had sent his companions flying, and Thomas never gave him a chance to recover. The saber removed its arm, and a scything, upward-sweeping slash of the crooked knife struck its head from its shoulders. A vicious kick to the small of its back crunched into its spine and sent the maimed, beheaded creature flying into the next in the line.

Hendricks came in at Thomas's side. The big man could not possibly overpower one of the ghouls, despite all the muscle, but he did have an important factor on his side: mass. Hendricks was a huge man, three hundred pounds and more, and once I saw him hit the ghouls, I no longer had any doubts about whether he had played football. He hit an unbalanced ghoul in the back, knocking the creature sprawling, slammed the stock of the huge gun into the neck of a ghoul who turned to follow Thomas's motion, then ducked a shoulder and slammed it into the stunned creature's flank, sending it sprawling.

Thomas hacked down another ghoul, Hendricks powered through a single creature who never had the chance to set itself against his locomotive rush, and we were suddenly faced with a line of savage goddesses bathed in black blood.

Lara stood in the center, her white robes pressed against her skin, soaked in the dark fluids leaking from crushed and broken ghouls, and it left absolutely nothing to the imagination. Her hair, too, had been soaked flat to her skull, and it clung to the skin of her black-spattered cheek and to the lines of her dark-stained throat. In each hand she held a long, wavy-bladed knife, long enough to qualify as a small sword, though God only knew where she'd concealed the weapons before. Her eyes were chrome silver, wide and triumphant, and I jerked my gaze away from them as I felt a mad desire just to stare and see what happened.

In that moment, Lara was more than simply a vampire of the White Court, a succubus, pale and deadly. She was a reminder of days gone by, when mankind paid homage to blood-soaked goddesses of war and death, revered the dark side of the protective maternal spirit, the savage core of the strength that still allowed tiny women to lift cars off of their children, or to turn upon their tormentors with newfound power. Lara's power, at that

moment, hovered around her, deadly in its primal seduction, its sheer *strength*.

On either side of her stood two of her sisters, all of them tall, all of them beautiful, all of them gorgeous and soaked in gore, all of them armed with those wavy-bladed short swords. I didn't know any of them, but they stared at me with ravenous energy, with maddeningly seductive destruction spattered all over them, and it took me two or three seconds to remember what the hell was going on.

Lara swayed a step toward me, all the motion in her thighs and hips, her eyes brilliant and steady, focused on me, and I felt a sudden urge to kneel that vibrated in my brain and...elsewhere. I mean, how bad could that be? Just think of the view from down there. And it had been a *long* time since a woman had...

I dimly heard Murphy's gun chattering again, and Marcone's, and I shook my head and kept my feet. Then I scowled at Lara and croaked, "We don't have time for this. Do you want out or not?"

"Thomas!" Justine cried. She appeared from behind Lara and the Raith sisters and threw herself bodily upon my brother. Thomas wrapped an arm around her without releasing his grip on his knife, and pressed her hard against him. I could see his profile as she held him back, and his face...was transported, I suppose. Thomas always had a certain look. Whether he was making a joke, working out, or giving me a hard time about something, the sense of him was always the same: self-contained, confident, pleased with himself and unimpressed with the world around him.

In Justine's arms he looked like a man in mourning. But he bent his whole body to her, holding her with every fiber and sinew, not merely his arm, and every line of his face became softer, somehow, gentler, as though he had been suddenly relieved of an intolerable agony I had never realized he felt—though I noticed that neither he nor Justine touched each other's skin.

"Ah," Lara said. Her voice was a quavering, silvery thing, utterly fascinating and completely inhuman. "True love."

"Dresden!" Marcone shouted. Hendricks spun away from where he had been staring at the Raith sisters with much the same expression I must have had, and stomped past me. I shortly heard him adding the racket of his big gun to that of Marcone's and Murphy's.

“Raith!” I shouted. “I propose an alliance between yours and mine, until we get out of here alive.”

Lara stared at me with her empty silver eyes for a second. Then she blinked them once, and they turned, darkening by a few degrees. They went out of focus for a moment, and she tilted her head. Lord Raith abruptly stepped forward, appearing from behind his daughters. “Naturally, Dresden,” he said in a smooth tone. Unless you knew what you were looking for, you’d never have seen the glassy shine in his eyes, or heard the slightly stilted cadence of his words. He put on a good act, but I had to wonder just how much of his mind Lara had left him. “Though I regard myself as bound by honor to see to your protection in the face of this treachery, I can only be humbled by the nobility of you offering me your —”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, all right,” I snapped, glaring past him at Lara. “Run away now, speeches later.”

Lara nodded, and looked quickly around her. Maybe twenty of the Raith clan had survived the fight. The remaining ghouls had sprung away during our unexpected assault, and now prowled in circles around us well out of arm’s reach, but close enough to rush back in if they saw a weakness. They were waiting for the others to finish off the last of the Skavis and Malvora. Once they got here, they’d overrun us easily.

Near the gate, Marcone’s soldiers had a steady line of white-robed thralls moving out of the cavern. There were rather more of them still alive than I had supposed there would be, until I saw that the circling ghouls were largely ignoring the passive thralls, focused instead on what they knew to be the real threat—the keepers of the mind-numbed herds.

“Dresden!” Marcone shouted. His shotgun boomed once more and then clicked empty. I heard him feeding new shells in as Murphy’s gun chattered. “They’re coming.”

I grunted acknowledgment and said to Lara, “Bring the thralls.”

“What?”

“Bring the bloody thralls!” I snarled. “Or you can damned well stay here!”

Lara gave me a look that might have made me a little nervous about getting killed if I weren’t such a stalwart guy, but then Lord Raith snapped to the vamps around him, “Bring them.”

I turned, drawing more Hellfire into the staff, and knew that I wasn't going to be able to manage much more in the way of magic. I had just done too much, and I was on my last legs. I had to pull off one more spell if any of us were going to make it out. Murphy's gun kept rattling away, as did Hendricks's, and I could hear gunfire coming from the soldiers around the gate now, as well, as the ghouls on the opposite side of the cavern began to turn from the ruined remains of the leaders of House Skavis and Malvora.

"Go!" I said. "Go, go, go!"

We headed for my gate. The vampires seized thralls as they went, tossing them into the center of the group, forming a ring around them. Raith formed the core of the group, with his daughters and their swords around him—and the thralls forming a thick human shield around them, in turn. Trust Lara to turn what she had seen as a hindrance to her advantage. It was the way her mind worked.

We started out at a quick pace—and then an almost-human voice cried out, there was a surge of magic that flashed against my wizard's senses, and the lights went out.

The cavern's lighting had been of excellent quality. It had remained functional all through the duel, despite the magic Ramirez and I had been hurling around, and through the opening of not one, but two gates to the Nevernever. That implied that Raith had invested in lighting with a long track record of high performance and reliability, to continue functioning through so much—but there's never been an electrical system a wizard couldn't put down with a little direct effort, and this one was no exception.

Even as I lifted my staff to call up more light, my brain was paddling up the logic stream. Vittorio had seen us making a break for it—or Cowl had, though again, I had to remind myself that Cowl's presence was still theoretical, however well supported by circumstantial evidence the theory might be. Killing the lights wasn't going to be a hindrance to the vampires or to the ghouls, which meant that he was trying to hamper us people. Sinking the cavern into Stygian blackness would make Marcone's troops almost impotent, hamper and slow any of the escaping thralls, therefore slowing the vampires apparently intent upon protecting them.

My staff hadn't been made to produce light, but it was a flexible tool, and I sent more Hellfire through it as I lifted it overhead to light our way, sending out red-orange light in the shape of the runes and sigils carved into the staff out over the darkness.

And, just as I did, I realized what else the darkness would do.

It would force the humans to produce light.

Specifically, it would draw the response from wizards that being sunk into darkness always did. We called light. By one method or another, it was the first thing any wizard would do in a situation like this one. We'd do it fast, too—faster than anyone without magic could pull out a light of his own.

So, as my staff lit up, I realized that I had just declared my exact position to every freaking monster in the whole freaking cavern. The darkness had been a trap designed to elicit this very response, and I had walked right into it.

Ghouls let out howls of fury and surged toward me through a hundred rune-shaped scarlet spotlights that glinted on their bloodied fangs, their talons, those horrible, hungry, sunken eyes.

Guns roared all around me, splattering the nearest ghouls into black-blooded slurry. It wasn't enough. The creatures simply surged forward, being torn apart, until Murphy's gun clicked empty.

"Reloading!" she screamed, ejecting the weapon's magazine, hopping a step back as the ghoul she'd only wounded continued toward me.

Marcone's gun roared and that ghoul went away, but when he pumped the weapon it clicked on an empty chamber. He dropped it for the little submachine gun clipped to his harness, and for a second or two it cut through ghouls like a scythe, ripping in a great horizontal swath—and then it ran empty.

I stepped forward as another wave of ghouls bounded over those the gunfire had held off.

Murphy and Marcone had bought me time enough for the spell I'd been forming in my mind to meet with my will and congeal into fire. I whirled the staff overhead, and then brought it down gripped in both hands, striking its end to the stone floor as I cried, "*Flam-mamurus!*"

There was a crackling howl, and fire ripped its way up out of the stones of the floor. It rippled out from the point of impact in a line running thirty or forty yards in either direction, a sudden fountain of molten stone that shot up in an ongoing curtain ten or twelve feet high, angled toward the ghouls charging us from the far side of the cavern. Blazing liquid stone fell down over them, among them, and the oncoming tide of screaming ghouls

broke upon that wall of stone and fire with screams of agony and, for the first time, of fear.

The wall held off fully half the ghouls in the cavern and screened us from Vittorio's sight. It also provided all the humans with plenty of light to see by.

"Hell's bells, I'm good," I wheezed.

The effort of the spell was monumental, even with the Hellfire to help me, and I staggered, the light vanishing from the runes of my staff.

"Harry, left!" Murphy screamed.

I turned my head to my left in time to see a ghoul, half of its body a charred ruin, slam Hendricks aside as if the huge man had been a rag doll, and throw itself at me, while two more leaped over the group from behind, and tried to follow in its wake.

I was pretty sure I could have taken the ghoul, provided he wasn't much heavier than a loaf of bread and had no idea how to use those claws and fangs. But just in case he was heavier than he looked and competent at ripping things apart, I flung up my shield bracelet.

It sputtered into life for a second, and the ghoul bounced off it—and the effort it cost me nearly made me black out. I fell.

The ghoul recovered and thrashed toward me, even as I saw Thomas appear from the ranks of vampires and thralls and attack its two companions from behind. My brother's pale face was all but glowing, his eyes were wide with fear, and I hadn't ever seen him move that fast. He hamstrung both of the other ghouls with the blades in his hands—well, if hacking through three-quarters of the leg, including the thick, black thighbones, could be considered "hamstringing." He left them on the ground while other Raiths tore them to pieces. Thomas leaped at the lead ghoul.

He wasn't fast enough.

The ghoul came at me with a dreadful howl. I didn't have enough energy left to lift my body up off the floor and face my killer head-on.

Fortunately, I *did* have energy enough to draw the .44 from my duster pocket. I'd like to tell you that I waited till the last second for the perfect shot, coolly facing down the ghoul with nerves of steel. The truth is that my nerves were pretty much shot, and I was too *tired* to panic. I barely got the sights lined up before the ghoul's jaws opened wide enough to engulf my entire head.

I never consciously pulled the trigger, but the gun roared, and the ghoul's head snapped back before it crashed into me. There was pain and I suddenly couldn't breathe.

"Harry!" Thomas cried.

The weight vanished from my chest and I sucked in a breath. I got my left hand free and pounded at the ghoul with the .44.

"Easy!" Murphy shouted. "Easy, Harry!" Her small, strong fingers caught my wrist and eased the gun out of it. I dimly realized that I was lucky it hadn't gone off again while I was thrashing around with it.

Thomas flung the ghoul off me, and it landed in a heap. The back upper quarter of its head was gone. Just gone.

"Nice shot," Marcone noted. I looked back to see him lifting a pale and sweating Hendricks, getting one of the big man's arms over his shoulder and supporting his weight. "Shall we?"

Thomas hauled me to my feet. "Come on. No time to rest now."

"Right," I said. I raised my voice and called, "Lara, get them moving!"

We started toward the gate, keeping the curtain of molten fire on our flank. It was hard just moving one foot in front of the other. It took me a while to notice that Justine was under one shoulder, supporting part of my weight, and that I was walking amidst the thralls, near the White King and his guard.

The vampires were still the outer guard, spread out over a half circle, in what amounted to a running battle. Only we weren't running. It was more of a steady walk, made all the more eerie by hellish light and shadow and desperation. Murphy's gun chattered several more times, and then fell silent. I heard the throaty bellow of my .44. I checked my hand and sure enough, my gun wasn't there.

"Leave them!" I heard Lara snap, her cold silver voice slithering around pleasantly in my ear. "Keep the pace steady. Stay together. Give them no opening."

We walked, the vampires growing more desperate and less human as the fight went on. Ghouls roared and screamed and died. So did Raiths. The cold subterranean air of the cavern had grown greenhouse hot, and it felt as if there weren't enough *air* left in the air. I panted hard, but it never seemed to get enough into my lungs.

I kept lifting one foot and putting it back down again, numbly noticing that Marcone was behind me with Hendricks, doing the same thing.

I glanced to my left and saw the fiery fountain of molten stone beginning to dwindle. It hadn't been an ongoing spell I had to keep pumping power into. That's the beauty of earth magic. Momentum. Once you get it moving, it doesn't slow down very quickly. I'd poured fire magic into all that stone and *forced* it to expand out of the earth around it. It had simply taken this long for the spell to play out.

But that's exactly what had happened. The spell was beginning to play out. Much as I had.

The curtain lowered slowly, thinning and growing less hot, and I could see ghouls behind it, ready to attack. I noted, idly, that they would be able to rush right into our group of dazed thralls, wounded gangsters, and weary wizards, with nothing much to oppose them.

"Oh, God," Justine whimpered. She'd noticed, too. "Oh, God."

The ghouls had all seen the curtain lowering. Now they rushed forward, to the very edge of the fading curtain, seemingly uncaring of the molten stone on the floor, dozens of them, a solid line of the creatures just waiting for the first chance to bounce over and eat our faces.

A blast of green light flashed down the line. It went completely through two ghouls, leaving them howling on the floor, severed a third ghoul's arm at the shoulder, and continued on through the white throne, leaving a hole the size of a laundry basket in its back.

Ramirez had been waiting for them to line up like that.

He stood, his weight on one foot, at the far end of the lowering wall of flaming stone, on the ghoul side, arms akimbo. They whirled toward him, but Ramirez started lifting his arms alternately from his hip to extend before him, the motion like that of a gunfighter in the Old West, and every draw flung more silent green shafts of deadly light through the ghouls.

Those nearest him tried to rush forward for the kill, but Ramirez had their measure now, and he wasn't content to leave a single gaping hole, trusting that it would incapacitate them sufficiently. He hurled blast after hideously ruinous blast, and left nothing but a scattered pile of twitching *parts* of the first ghouls to rush him, and those beyond them suffered nearly as greatly. Fresh-spilled black ichor rushed back and forth across the cavern floor until it looked like the deck of a ship pitching on a lunatic sea.

"What are you waiting for, Dresden?" Ramirez shouted. "One little bit of vulcanomancy and you get worn out!" A particularly well-aimed bolt tore the heads from a pair of ghouls at once. "How do you like *that*?"

We all began hurrying ahead. “Not bad,” I slurred back at him, “for a virgin.”

His rate of fire had begun to slacken, but the gibe drew a fresh burst of ferocity out of Ramirez, and he redoubled his efforts. The ghouls howled their frustration and bounded away from the wall of fire, out of its treacherous light and away from the power of the Warden of the White Council ripping them to shreds.

“It hurts!” bellowed Ramirez drunkenly, flinging a last pair of bolts at a fleeing ghoul. “Ow! Ow, it hurts! It hurts to be this *good*!”

There was a hiss of sound, a flicker of steel, and one of Vitto Malvora’s knives hit Ramirez’s stomach so hard that that it threw the young man off his feet and to the ground.

“Man down!” Marcone shouted. We were close enough to the gate that I could see the pale blue light that spilled through it. Marcone waved his hand through a couple of signals and flicked a finger at Ramirez, then at Hendricks. The armed men—mercenaries, they had to be; no gang of criminal thugs was so disciplined—rushed forward, taking charge of the wounded, seizing Ramirez and dragging him back toward the gate, roughly pushing and shoving the thralls ahead and toward the gate.

I went to Ramirez, staggering away from Justine. The knife had hit him in the guts. Hard. Ramirez had worn a Kevlar vest, which wasn’t much good for stopping sharp, pointy things, though it had at least kept the knife’s hilt from tearing right into the muscle and soft tissue. I knew there were some big arteries there, and more or less where they were located, but I couldn’t tell if the knife was at the right angle to have hit them. His face was terribly pale, and he blinked his eyes woozily as the soldiers started dragging him across the floor, and his legs thrashed weakly, bringing his own left leg up into his field of view.

“Bloody hell,” he gasped. “Harry. There’s a *knife* in my leg. When did *that* happen?”

“In the duel,” I told him. “Don’t you remember?”

“I thought you’d stepped on me and sprained my ankle,” Ramirez replied. Then he blinked again. “Bloody hell. There’s a *knife* in my guts.” He peered at them. “And they match.”

“Be still,” I warned him. Vampires and thralls and mercenaries were falling back through the gate now. “Don’t move around, all right?”

He began to say something, but a panicked vampire kicked his leg as he went past. Ramirez's face twisted in pain and then suddenly slackened, his eyes fluttering closed. I saw his staff on the ground and grabbed it and pitched it through the gate after him, the men carrying him as the fight behind me got closer, while most of the retreating vampires still fought off the determined assault of the ghouls.

"How long?" I heard Marcone demand of one of the soldiers.

The man checked his watch—an expensive Swiss stopwatch, with springs and cogs, not some digital thing. "Three minutes, eleven seconds," the soldier said.

"How many charges?"

"Six doubles," he replied.

"Hey," I snapped at Marcone. "Cutting it a little close, huh?"

"Any longer and they wouldn't accomplish anything," Marcone replied. "Can you walk?"

"Yes, I can walk," I snapped.

"I could get someone to carry you," Marcone said, his tone solicitous and sincere.

"Bite me," I growled, and called, "Murphy?"

"Here!" Murphy called. She was among the last of those retreating from the ghoulish onslaught. Her boxy little Volvo of a gun was hanging by its strap on one shoulder, and she held my .44 in both hands, though it looked almost comically overlarge for her.

"Ramirez has got a knife in the stomach," I said. "I need you to look after him."

"He's the other Warden, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "He's already through the gate."

"What about you?"

I shook my head and made sure my duster was still covering most of me. "Malvora is still out there. He might try to kill our gate, or try some other spell. I've got to be one of the last ones through."

Murphy gave me a skeptical look. "You look like you're about to fall over. You in any shape to do more magic?"

"True," I said, and offered her my staff. "Hey, maybe you should do it."

She gave me a hard look. "No one likes a wiseass, Harry."

"Are you kidding? As long as the wiseass is talking to someone *else*, people love 'em." I gave her half a smile and said, "Get out of here."

“How are we getting back out again?” she asked. “Thomas led us there, but...”

“He’ll lead you back,” I said. “Or one of the others will. Or Ramirez, if some idiot doesn’t kill him trying to help him.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather you did it, Harry.” She touched my hand, and departed through the broad oval of the gate. I saw her hurry through ankle-deep snow beneath what looked like sheltering pine trees to Ramirez’s side, where he lay limply on his cloak. The thralls looked confused, which of course they would be, and cold, which, given their wardrobe, of course they would be.

“That’s all of ours!” shouted the soldier to Marcone. “Two minutes, fifteen seconds!”

He had to shout. The nearest of the ghouls were about ten feet away, doing battle against, for lack of a more clichéd term, a thin white line of Raith, including my brother with his two blades spinning.

“Go!” Marcone said, and the soldier went through. Marcone, a fresh shotgun in hand, stepped up next to me. “Dresden?”

“What are you hanging around for?”

“If you recall,” he said, “I agreed to extract you alive. I’m not leaving until I have done so.” He paused and added, “Provided, of course, that it happens in the next two minutes.”

From where I was standing, I could see three two-brick bundles of C4, detonators thrust into their soft surfaces, each fitted with old-fashioned precision timepieces. They were simple charges on the floor. The other three must have been shaped charges affixed to the cavern walls. I had no idea how much destruction was going to be wrought by them, but I didn’t suppose it would be much fun to be there when they went boom. Alas, that the poor ghouls would most likely be staying for the fireworks.

“Thomas!” I called. “Time to go!”

“Go!” Thomas shouted, and the other vampires with him broke from their line and fled for the gate, except for one, a tall female Raith who...

I blinked. Holy crap. It was Lara.

The other vampires fled past me, through the gate, and Thomas and his sister stood alone against the horde of eight-foot ghouls. Stood against it, and stopped it cold.

Their skin gleamed colder and whiter than glacial ice, their eyes blazed silvery bright, and they moved with blinding speed and utterly inhuman

grace. His saber fluttered and slashed, drawing a constant stream of blood, punctuated by devastating blows of his kukri.

(Ah, right, that was the name of that inward-bent knife. I knew I'd remember it eventually.)

Lara moved with him, trailing her damp, midnight hair and shredded silk kimono. She covered Thomas's back like a cloak hung from his shoulders. She was no weaker than her younger brother, and perhaps even faster, and the wavy-bladed short sword in her hand had a penchant for leaving spills of ghoulish entrails in its wake. Together, the pair of them slipped aside from repeated rushes and dealt out deadly violence to one foe after another.

Ultimately, I think, their fight was futile—and all the more valiant and astonishing for being so doomed. No matter how lethal Thomas and Lara proved to be, or how many ghouls went screaming to the floor, their black blood continued to slither back into their fallen bodies, and the ghouls that had been taken down continued to gather themselves together to rise and fight again. Most of those who reentered the fight with renewed vigor and increased fury remained hideously maimed in some way. Some trailed their entrails like slimy grey ropes. Others were missing sections of their skulls. At least two entered the fray armless, simply biting with their wide jaws of vicious teeth. Beside the beauty of the brother and sister vampires, the ghouls' deformed bodies and hideous injuries were all the more monstrous, all the more vile.

"My God," Marcone said, his voice hushed. "It is the most beautiful nightmare I have ever seen."

He was right. It was hypnotic. "Time?" I asked him, my voice rough.

He consulted his own stopwatch. "One minute, forty-eight seconds."

"Thomas!" I bellowed. "Lara! Now!"

With that, the pair of them bounded apart, apparently the last thing the ghouls had been expecting, and dashed for the gate.

I turned to go—and that was when I felt it.

There was a dull pulse, a throb of some power that seemed at once alien and familiar, a sickening, whirling sensation and then a sudden stab of energy.

It wasn't a magical attack. An attack implies an act of force that might be predicted, countered, or at least mitigated in some way. This was something far more existential. It simply asserted itself, and by its very existence, it dictated a new reality.

A spike of thought slammed into my being like a physical blow—it wasn't any one single thought. It was, instead, a mélange of them, a cocktail of emotions so heavy, so dense, that it drove me instantly to my knees. Despair flooded through me. I was so tired. I had struggled and fought to achieve nothing but raw chaos, rendering the whole of my effort useless. My only true friends had been badly injured, or had run, leaving me in this hellish cavern. Those who currently stood beside me were monsters, of one stripe or another—even my brother, who had returned to his monstrous ways in feeding on other human beings.

Terror followed hard on its heels. I had been paralyzed, while surrounded by monsters of resilience beyond description. In mere seconds, they would fall on me. I had fallen with my face toward the gate, and though physical movement was beyond me, I could see that everyone, everyone had also pitched over onto the ground, vulnerable to the attack while the gate remained open. Vampires, thralls, and mortal warriors alike, they had all fallen.

Guilt came next. Murphy. Carlos. I had gotten them both killed.

Useless. It had all been useless.

Marcone's stopwatch lay on the ground near his limply outstretched hand. He'd fallen next to me. The second hand was sweeping rapidly downward, and the watches on the charges of C4, the nearest of them about ten feet away, did the same.

Then I understood it. This was Vittorio Malvora's attack. This hideous, paralyzing brew of everything darkest in the moral soul was what he had poured out, as the Raith administered desire, the Malvorans gave fear, and the Skavis despair. Vitto had gone beyond them all. He had taken all the worst of the human soul and forged it into a poisonous, deadly weapon.

And I hadn't been able to do a damned thing to stop him.

I lay staring at Marcone's stopwatch, and wondered which would kill us all first: the ghouls or the explosion.

Chapter Forty-One

Between 1:34 and 1:33, the backward-running hand of the stopwatch suddenly halted. Or it seemed that way. But several moments later, the hand twitched down to the next second, and the tick sounded more like a hollow thump. I just lay there staring at it, and wondering if this was how my mind was reacting to my own imminent death.

And then I thought that I'd had enough will to wonder about something, rather than just being crushed and suffocated by despair and terror. Maybe *that* was how I was reacting to my imminent death: with denial and escapist self-induced hallucinations.

"Not precisely, my host," came Lasciel's voice.

I blinked, which was a lot more voluntary movement than I'd had a second before. I tried to look around.

"Don't try," Lasciel said, her voice a little alarmed. "You could harm yourself."

What the hell. Had she somehow slowed down time?

"Time does not exist," she said, her tone firm. "Not the way you consider it, at any rate. I have temporarily accelerated the processes of your mind."

The stopwatch *thud-thumped* again: 1:32.

Accelerating my brain. That made more sense. After all, we all use only about ten percent of our brain's capacity, anyway. There was no reason it couldn't handle a lot more activity. Well, except that...

"Yes," she said. "It is dangerous, and I cannot maintain this level of activity for very long before it begins inflicting permanent damage."

I presumed that Lasciel was about to make me an offer I couldn't refuse.

Her voice became sharp, angry. "Don't be a fool, my host. If you perish, I perish. I simply seek to give you an option that might enable us to survive."

Right. And by some odd coincidence, might that option just happen to involve the coin in my basement?

"Why do you continue to be so *stubborn* about this, my host?" Lasciel demanded, her voice tight with frustration. "Taking up the coin would not

enslave you. It would not impede your ability to choose for yourself.”

Not at first, no. But it would finish up with me enslaved to the true Lasciel, and she knew it.

“Not necessarily,” she said. There was a tone of pleading to her voice. “Accommodations can be reached. Compromises made.”

Sure, if I’m willing to go along with her every plan, I’m sure she’d be quite agreeable.

“But you would be *alive*,” Lasciel cried.

It didn’t matter, given that the coin was buried in the stone under my lab anyway.

“Not an obstacle, my host. I can teach you how to call it to you within a few seconds.”

Thud-thump: 1:31.

A thud from behind me. Footsteps. The ghouls. They were coming. I could see part of Marcone’s face, twisted in agony under Vittorio Malvora’s psychic assault.

“Please,” Lasciel said. “Please, let me help you. I don’t want to die.”

I didn’t want to die, either.

I closed my eyes for another second.

Thud-thump: 1:30.

It took an effort of will, and what seemed like several moments of effort, but I managed to whisper aloud, “No.”

“But you will *die*,” Lasciel said, her voice anguished.

It was going to happen sooner or later. But it didn’t have to be tonight.

“Then quickly! First, you must picture the coin in your mind. I can help you—”

Not like that. She could help me.

Silence.

Thud-thump: 1:29.

“I can’t,” she whispered.

I thought she could.

“I *can’t*,” she replied, her voice anguished. “She would never forgive that. Never accept me back into her...just take the coin. Harry, just take the coin. P-please.”

I gritted my teeth.

Thud-thump: 1:28.

Again, I said, “No.”

“I can’t do this for you!”

Untrue. She’d already partially shielded me from the effects of Malvora’s attack. The situation was simple, for her: She could do more of what she’d already done. Or she could stand by and do nothing. It was her choice.

Lasciel appeared in front of me for the first time, on her hands and knees. She looked...odd. Too thin, her eyes too sunken. She had always looked strong, healthy, and confident. Now, her hair was a wreck, her face twisted with pain, and...

...and she was crying. She looked blotchy, and she needed a tissue. Her hands touched either side of my face.

“It could hurt you. It could inflict brain damage. Do you *understand* what that could mean, Harry?”

Never can tell. It might be nice to have brain damage. I already liked Jell-O. And maybe they’d have cable TV at whatever home they wound up sticking me in. Either way, it would be better than having my brains scooped out by ghouls.

Lasciel stared at me for a moment and then let out a choking little laugh. “It’s your brother. Your friends. That’s why.”

If frying my brain got Murphy, Ramirez, Thomas, and Justine out of the mess I’d gotten them into, it would be worth it.

She stared at me for another long moment.

Thud-thump: 1:27.

Then a look of almost childish resentment came over her face, and she looked over one shoulder before turning back to me. “I...” She shook her head and said, very softly, wonderingly, “*She*...doesn’t deserve you.”

Deserved or not, the fallen angel wasn’t getting me. Not ever.

Lasciel squared her shoulders and straightened. “You’re right,” she said. “It is my choice. Listen to me.” She leaned closer, her eyes intent. “Vittorio has been given power. That is how he can do this. He is possessed.”

I wished I could have raised my eyebrows. Possessed by what?

“An Outsider,” Lasciel said. “I have felt such a presence before. This attack is drawn directly from the mind of the Outsider.”

Gosh, that was interesting. Not relevant, but interesting.

“It is relevant,” Lasciel said, “because of the circumstances of your birth—because of *why* you were born, Harry. Your mother found the strength to escape Lord Raith for a *reason*.”

What the hell was she talking about?

Thud-thump: 1:26.

“There was a complex confluence of events, of energies, of circumstances that would have given a child born under them the potential to wield power over Outsiders.”

Which didn’t make any sense. Outsiders were all but immune to magic. It took power garnered only from centuries of study and practice, wielded by the most powerful wizards on the planet, even to slow them down.

“Strange, then, don’t you think, that you defeated one when you were sixteen years old?”

What? Since when? The only serious victory I’d had over a spiritual entity when I was that young had been when my old master had sent an assassin demon after me. It hadn’t turned out the way DuMorne had been hoping.

Lasciel leaned closer. “He Who Walks Behind *is* an Outsider, Harry. A terrible creature, the most potent of the Walkers, a powerful knight among their ruling entities. But when he came for you, you overthrew him.”

True. I had. It was all still a little blurry, but I remembered the end of the fight well enough. Lots and lots of kaboom, and then no more demon. And there was a burning building.

Thud-thump: 1:25.

“Listen,” Lasciel said, giving my head a little shake. “You have the potential to hold great power over them. You may be able to escape the power now held over you. If you are sure it is what you want, I can give you an opportunity to defy Malvora’s sending. But you’ll have to hurry. I don’t know how long it will take to throw it off, and they are almost upon you.”

After which, we were going to have a long talk about my mother and these Outsiders and their relation to the Black Court and exactly what the hell was going on.

Lasciel—Lash, rather—nodded once and said, “I will tell you all that I can, Harry.”

Then she rose and stepped past me and toward the oncoming ghouls and Vitto Malvora. Her clothes made a slow, soft rustle as she stepped away from me, and Marcone’s stopwatch went *thud*—

Tick, tick, tick...

For just a second, no more than a heartbeat or two, I remained impaled on that horrible pike of psychic anguish. Then an odd sensation fell over

me, and I don't know precisely how to describe it, except to say that it felt like stepping from brutal, burning sunlight into a sudden, deep shadow. Then that horrible pain eased—not much, but enough to let me suddenly move my arms and my head, enough to know that I could act.

So I froze in place.

“Mine!” howled a voice, so distorted with lust and violence that it sounded like nothing human. “She is mine!”

Footsteps came closer, *thump-drag, thump-drag*. I saw Vittorio's horribly burned leg go by in my peripheral vision. The sensation of shade began to fade at the edges, with the power of Vittorio's spell returning by slow degrees, like sunlight beginning to burn its way through a sheet of frosted glass.

“Little Raith bitch,” Vittorio snarled. “What I do to you will make your father's blood run cold.”

There was the sound of a heavy blow. I twitched my head a tiny bit to one side to get a look at what was around me.

A lot of really huge ghouls, that was what, apparently no less fierce for being battered and torn by the battle. Vittorio stood over Lara, his face pale, his leg horribly burned. He had his right hand held out, the hand that projects energy, fingers spread, and I could still feel the terrible power radiating from them. He was maintaining the pressure of the spell that held everyone down, then—and I could see, from the reaction of the ghouls around him, that they were feeling the bite of the spell, too. It seemed only to make them flinch and cower a little, rather than incapacitating them entirely. Maybe they were more used to feeling such things.

He kicked Lara in the ribs, twice more, heavy and ugly kicks that cracked bones. Lara let out little sounds of pain, and I think it was that, more than anything, that let me push the paralyzing awl of hostile magic completely away from my mind. I moved one hand, and that slowly. From the lack of outcry, I took it that no one noticed.

“We'll put a pin in this, for now, little Raith bitch.” He whirled toward my brother. “I had intended to find you, you know, Thomas,” Vittorio continued. “An outcast like you, I assumed, might be inclined to throw in his lot with someone with a more equitable vision for the future. But you're like some sad dog, too ugly to be allowed into the house, but faithfully defending the master that holds him in contempt. Your end isn't going to be pretty, either.” He started to turn toward me, smiling. “But first, we start

with the busybody wizard.” He finished the turn, saying, “Burns hurt, Dresden. Have I mentioned how much I hate being exposed to fire?”

No sense in wasting perfectly good irony. I waited until he said *fire* to spin and pull the trigger on Marcone’s shotgun.

The weapon bucked hard—I hadn’t had time to brace it properly—and slammed into my shoulder with bruising force only partly attenuated by my duster. The blast pretty well removed Vittorio’s right hand at the middle of his forearm.

The way I hear it, amputation is bad for your concentration. It certainly wasn’t good for Vittorio’s, and you can’t hold up the pressure on a spell like he’d been using without concentration. There was a sudden surge of particularly intense discomfort through the spell as Vittorio’s physical trauma sent a flare of energy through it, like feedback on an enormous speaker. The ghouls howled in agonized reaction to the surge of discord, and it gave me a second or so to act.

I lashed out with both legs and got Vittorio in one of his knees—the one that wasn’t all burned. A kick to the knees doesn’t bother a vampire from the Red Court—their actual knees are all backward anyway. A Black Court vampire wouldn’t have been anything but annoyed at having a hand blown off with a shotgun.

Vitto wasn’t either.

When he wasn’t drawing upon the power gained from his Hunger, he was pretty much human. And while I’m a wizard and all, I’m also a fairly big guy. Tall and skinny, sure, but when you get tall enough, even skinny guys are pretty darned heavy, and I’ve got strong legs. His knee bent in backward and he fell with a scream.

Before he could recover, I was up on one knee with the shotgun’s stock against my shoulder and its long barrel against Vittorio’s nose. “Back off!” I shouted. I was going for cool and strong, but my voice came out sounding angry and not overly burdened with sanity. “Tell them to back off! Now!”

Vittorio’s face was twisted with surprise and pain. He blinked at the shotgun, then at me, and then at the stump of his right hand.

I couldn’t hear or see the stopwatch anymore, but my head provided the sound effect. *Tickticktickticktick*. How much time was left? Less than sixty seconds?

Around me, the ghouls, recovered from their moment of pain, began to let out a steady, low growl, like the rumbling engines of several dozen

motorcycles. I kept my eyes focused on their boss. If I took a moment to get a good look at all the bits of feral anatomy around me that might start ripping into my flesh at any second, I would probably cry. That would be unmanly.

“B-back!” Vittorio stammered. Then he said something in a language that sounded vaguely familiar, but that I didn’t understand. He repeated it in a half scream, and the ghouls edged a couple of inches away from us.

Ticktickticktick.

“This is what happens,” I told Vittorio. “I take my people. I go through the gate. I close it. You get to live.” I leaned into the shotgun a little, making him flinch. “Or we can all go down together. I’m feeling ambivalent toward which way we go, so I’ll leave it up to you.”

He licked his lips. “Y-you’re bluffing. Pull that trigger, and the ghouls will kill everyone. You won’t l-let them die for the pleasure of killing me.”

“It’s been a long day. I’m tired. Not thinking real clearly. And the way I see it, you got me pretty much dead to rights here, Vitto.” I narrowed my eyes and spoke very quietly. “Do you really think I’ll let myself go down without taking you with me?”

He stared at me for a long moment, and licked his lips.

“G-go,” he said, then. “Go.”

“Thomas!” I shouted. “Wakey, wakey! Now is not the time to lie down and die.”

I heard my brother groan. “Harry?”

“Lara, can you hear me?”

“Quite,” she said. Thomas’s older sister was already on her feet, from the sound, and her voice was coming from close behind me.

“Thomas, get Marccone and get him through the gate.” I gave Vittorio a fierce glare. “Don’t move. Don’t even twitch.”

Vittorio, his face in agony, held up his left hand, fingers spread. He was bleeding, a lot, and started shivering. There wasn’t any fight left in his face. He’d hit me with his best shot, and I’d apparently shrugged it off. I think it had scared the hell out of him. Losing his hand hadn’t helped his morale any, either. “Don’t shoot,” he said. “Just...d-don’t shoot.” He shot a glance around at the ghouls and said, “L-let them go.”

I heard Marccone let out a groan, and Thomas grunted with effort. “Okay,” Thomas said from behind me. “I’m through.”

I kept the gun on Vittorio and stood up, trying not to let the barrel waver. How many seconds did I have left? Thirty? Twenty? I've heard about people who can keep track of wild situations like this while keeping a steady count, but apparently I wasn't one of them. I took a step back, and felt Lara's back pressing against mine. From the corner of my eye, I could see that the ghouls had spread out all around us. If she hadn't been there, one of them could have blindsided me without any trouble the second I was a couple of feet away from Vittorio. Gulp.

I took a step back, forcing myself to move smoothly, steadily, when my instincts were screaming at me to run.

"Three more steps," Lara told me in a whisper. "A little more to your left."

I corrected the direction of my next step, trusting her word. One step more, and I could hear winter wind sighing behind me. Silver moonlight shone on the barrel of the shotgun.

And then I found out whether or not Cowl was actually there.

There was a surge of power, an abrasive scream against my arcane senses, and the offspring of a comet and a pterodactyl came hurtling out of the darkness at the far end of the cavern. My eyes had adjusted enough to see a dim oval of reddish light that outlined a heavily cloaked figure—Cowl, standing in his own gate.

"Master!" Vittorio cried, his voice slurred.

"Look out!" I screamed, and thrashed behind me with my arm as I ducked and lurched to one side, trying to sweep Lara out of the flying thing's path as I did. It missed us by inches, but we got out of the way.

Cowl's leathery, rasping voice hissed something in a slithering tongue, and a second surge of power lashed invisibly across the cavern—not at us, but at my *gate*.

And as quickly as that, my gate began to close, the opening sewing itself shut like a Ziploc bag—starting with the end closest to me.

Tickticktickticktick.

The gate was closing far more quickly than I could have gotten up and moved. I wasn't getting out. But Lara might.

"Lara!" I shouted. "Go!"

Something with the strength of a freight train and the speed of an Indy car seized my duster and hauled on it so hard that it wrenched my neck and nearly dislocated my arms.

“Dresden!” called Marcone’s voice from the closing gate. “Nineteen!”

I hurtled through the air. Looking wildly around showed me that Lara had seized me and leaped for the far end of the collapsing gate.

“Eighteen!” came Marcone’s shout.

Lara and I flew through empty and unremarkable air.

The gate had closed.

We missed it.

Chapter Forty-Two

The only light was the dim scarlet glow from Cowl's gate, and everything had become blood and shadows. The eyes of dozens of ghouls burned like nearly dead coals as they turned toward us, reflecting that lurid luminescence.

"Lara," I hissed. "This cavern goes up in seventeen seconds, and there are ghouls in the tunnel out."

"Empty night," Lara swore. Her voice was thready with pain and fear. "What can I do?"

Good question. There had to be...Wait. There might be a way to survive this. I was too tired to work any magic, but...

"You can trust me," I said. "That's what you can do."

She turned her pale, beautiful, gore-smattered face to me. "Done."

"Get us to the tunnel's mouth."

"But if there are ghouls there already—"

"Hey!" I said. "Tick, tick!"

Before I'd gotten to the end of the first *tick*, Lara had seized me again and hauled us across the floor to the mouth of the tunnel. Behind me, Cowl was shouting something, and so was Vittorio, and the ghouls set up a howl and were running after us. Only one of the ghouls was close enough to get in the way, but Lara's wicked little wavy-bladed sword ripped straight across its eyes and left the monster momentarily stunned with pain.

Lara dumped me at the mouth of the tunnel, and I took a couple of steps back in, checking the smooth tunnel walls as I shook out my shield bracelet. That demonic flying thing of Cowl's banked around for another pass.

"What now?" Lara demanded. The ghouls were coming. They were nowhere near as fast as Lara had been, but they weren't far away.

I took a deep breath. "Now," I said. "Kiss me. I know it seems weir—"

Lara let out a single, ravenous snarl and was abruptly pressed up against me, arms sliding around my waist with sinuous, serpentine power. Her

mouth met mine and...

...ohmygod.

Lara had once boasted that she could do more to me in an hour than a mortal woman could in a week. But it ain't boasting if it's true. The first, searing second of that kiss was indescribably intense. It wasn't simply the texture of her lips. It was how she moved them, and the simple, naked *hunger* beneath every quiver of her mouth. I knew she was a monster, and I knew she would enslave and kill me if she could, but she *wanted* me with a passion so pure and focused that it was intoxicating. That succubus kiss was a lie, but it made me feel, within that single moment, strong and masculine and powerful. It made me feel that I was attractive enough, strong enough, *worthy* enough to deserve that kind of desire.

And it made me feel lust, a primal need for sex so raw, so scorching, that I felt sure that if I didn't find expression for that need—here and *now*—that I would surely go insane. The fires that surged up in me weren't limited to my loins. It was simply too hot, too intense for that, and my whole body felt suddenly aflame with need. Every inch of me was suddenly supernaturally aware of Lara, in all her blood-soaked sensuality, in all her wanton desirability, pressed against me, the mostly transparent white silk of her gown doing less to conceal her nudity than the black blood of her foes.

Now, my body screamed at me. Take her. Now. Fuck the stopwatch and the bombs and the monsters. Forget everything and feel her and nothing else.

It was a close thing, but I held back enough to keep from forgetting the danger. The lust nearly killed me—but lust is an emotion, too.

I embraced that lust, allowed it to enfold me, and returned the kiss with nearly total abandon. I slid my right hand around the succubus's waist, and down, pulling her hips hard against me, feeling the amazing strength and elasticity and rondure of her body on mine.

With my left hand, I extended the shield bracelet toward the cavern, the bombs, the onrushing ghouls—and I fed that tidal force of lust through it, building up the energy I would need, some part of me shaping and directing it even as the rest of me concentrated on the mind-consuming pleasure of that single kiss.

The clocks stopped ticking.

The explosives went off.

Cleverness, determination, treachery, ruthlessness, courage, and skill took a leave of absence, while physics took over the show.

Tremendous heat and force expanded from the explosives. It swept through the cavern in an almighty sword of fire, laying low anything unfortunate enough to have remained within. I saw, for one flash-second, the outline of the ghouls, still charging us, unaware of what was about to happen, against the white-hot fireball that expanded through the chamber.

And then that blast hit my shield.

I didn't try to withstand that incredible sledgehammer of expanding force and energy. It would have shattered my shield, melted my bracelet to my wrist, and crushed me like an egg. The shield wasn't meant to do that.

Instead, I filled the space at the mouth of the cave with flexible, resilient energy, and packed layer upon layer of it behind the shield, and more of it all around us. I wasn't trying to stop the energy of the explosion.

I was trying to catch it.

There was an instant of crushing compression, and I felt the pressure on my shield like a vast and liquid weight. It flung me from my feet, and I held hard to Lara, whose arms gripped me in return. I began to tumble, blinded by the flame, and fought to hold the shield, now hardening it all around us, into a sphere, constricting it around us until we were pressed body-to-body. We hurtled up the tunnel, flung out ahead of the explosion like a ship ahead of a hurricane—or, more accurately, like a ball being fired down the barrel of a long, stony musket. The shield banged against the smooth walls, dragging more effort out of me. A single outcropping might have stopped our progress for a disastrous instant, shattering stone, shield, succubus, and shamus into one big mess. Thank God the vanity of Lara's family had made sure the walls of the tunnel were polished smooth and gleaming.

I didn't see the ghouls guarding the upper reaches of the tunnel, so much as I felt them hit the shield and be smashed aside and splattered like bugs, only to be consumed by the flood of fire washing up the tunnel after us. I don't know how fast we were going, beyond "very." The explosion flung us up the long tunnel, and out into the night air and up through the branches of a couple of trees—which shattered under the force. Then we were arcing through the night, spinning, with stars above us whipping by and a long tongue of angry flame emerging from the entrance to the Deeps below.

And all the while, I was locked in the heated ecstasy of Lara's kiss.

I lost track of what was happening somewhere near the top of the arc, right about when Lara's legs twined with mine and she ripped aside my shirt and hers to press her naked chest against me. I had just begun wondering what it was I'd forgotten about how kissing Lara was not the best idea when there was a horrible crashing sound that went on for several seconds.

We weren't moving. The shield wasn't under pressure, and I was so dizzy and tired that I couldn't string two thoughts together. I lowered the shield with a groan of relief that was lost in an answering moan of need from the succubus in my arms.

"St-stopped," I said. "Lara...st-stop."

She pressed closer, parted my lips with her tongue, and I thought that I was going to explode, when she suddenly let out a hiss and recoiled from me, a hand flying to her mouth—but not before I saw the blisters rising from the burned flesh around her lips.

I fell slowly to my back and lay there gasping in the near-dark. There were several small fires nearby. We were in a building of some kind. There were a lot of broken things.

I was sure to get blamed for this one.

Lara turned away from me, huddling in upon herself. "Bloody hell," she said after a moment. "I can't *believe* you're *still* protected. But it's old.... My intelligence said Ms. Rodriguez hadn't left South America."

"She hasn't," I croaked.

"You mean..." She turned and blinked at me, astonishment on her face. "Dresden...do you mean to say that the last time you had relations with a woman was nearly four *years* ago?"

"Depressing," I said. "Isn't it."

Lara shook her head slowly. "I had just always assumed that you and Ms. Murphy..."

I grunted. "No. She...she doesn't want to get serious with me."

"And you don't want to be casual with her," Lara said.

"There's an outside chance that I have abandonment issues," I said.

"Still...a man like you and it's been four *years*..." She shook her head. "I have enormous personal respect for you, wizard. But that's just...sad."

I grunted again, too tired to lip off. "Saved my life just now, I suppose."

Lara looked back at me for a moment and then she...turned pink. "Yes. It probably did. And I owe you an apology."

“For trying to eat me?” I said.

She shivered, and the tips of her breasts suddenly stood out against the white silk. She’d rearranged her clothes to cover them. I was too tired to feel more than a little disappointed about it. “Yes,” she said. “For losing control of myself. I confess, I thought that we were facing our last moment. I’m afraid I didn’t restrain myself very well. For that, you have my apologies.”

I looked around and realized, dimly, that we were in some part of the Raith château itself. “Hngh. I’m, uh. Sorry about the damage to your home here.”

“Under the circumstances, I’m inclined to be gracious. You saved my life.”

“You could have saved yourself,” I said quietly. “When the gate was closing. You could have left me to die. You didn’t. Thank you.”

She blinked at me as if I had just started speaking in alien tongues. “Wizard,” she said after a moment. “I gave you my word of safe passage. A member of *my* Court betrayed you. Betrayed us all. I could not leave you to die without forsaking my word—and I take my promises seriously, Mister Dresden.”

I stared quietly at her for a moment and then nodded. Then I said, “I notice that you didn’t go terribly far out of your way to save Cesarina Malvora.”

Her lips twitched up at the corners. “It was a difficult time. I did all that I could to protect my House and then the other members of Court in attendance. More’s the pity that I could not save that usurping, traitorous bitch.”

“You couldn’t save that usurping, traitorous Lord Skavis, either,” I noted.

“Life is change,” Lara replied quietly.

“You know what I think, Lara?” I asked.

Her eyes narrowed and fastened on me.

“I think someone got together with Skavis to plan his little hunt for the low-powered-magic folks. I think someone encouraged him to do it. I think someone pointed it out as a great plan to usurp mean old Lord Raith’s power base. And then I think that same someone probably nudged Lady Malvora to move, to give her a chance to steal Lord Skavis’s thunder.”

Lara’s eyelids lowered, and her lips spread in a slow smile. “Why would someone do such a thing?”

“Because she knew that Skavis and Malvora were going to make a move soon in any case. I think she did it to divide her enemies and focus their efforts into a plan she could predict, rather than waiting upon their ingenuity. I think someone wanted to turn Skavis and Malvora against one another, keeping them too busy to undermine Raith.” I sat up, faced her, and said, “It was you. Pulling their strings. It was you who came up with the plan to kill those women.”

“Perhaps not,” Lara replied smoothly. “Lord Skavis is—was—a well-known misogynist. And he proposed a plan much like this one only a century ago.” She tapped a finger to her lips thoughtfully and then said, “And you have no way of proving otherwise.”

I stared at her for a long moment. Then I said, “I don’t need proof to act on my own.”

“Is that a threat, dear wizard?”

I looked slowly around the ruined room. There was a hole in the house, almost perfectly round, right through the floors above us and the roof four stories above. Bits and pieces were still falling. “What threat could I possibly be to you, Lara?” I drawled.

She took in a slow breath and said, “What makes you think I won’t kill you right here, right now, while you are weary and weakened? It would likely be intelligent and profitable.” She lifted her sword and ran a fingertip languidly down the flat of the blade. “Why not finish you right here?”

I showed her my teeth. “You gave me your word of safe passage.”

Lara threw back her head in a rich laugh. “So I did.” She faced me more directly, set the sword aside, and rose. “What do you want?”

“I want those people returned to life,” I spat at her. “I want to undo all the pain that’s been inflicted during this mess. I want children to get their mothers back, parents their daughters, husbands their wives. I want you and your kind never to hurt anyone ever again.”

Right in front of my eyes, she turned from a woman into a statue, cold and perfectly still. “What do you want,” she whispered, “that I might give you?”

“First, reparations. A weregild to the victims’ families,” I said. “I’ll provide you with the details for each.”

“Done.”

“Second, this never happens again. One of yours starts up with genocide again, and I’m going to reply in kind. Starting with you. I’ll have your word

on it.”

Her eyes narrowed further. “Done,” she murmured.

“The little folk,” I said. “They shouldn’t be in cages. Free them, unharmed, in my name.”

She considered that for a moment, and then nodded. “Anything else?”

“Some Listerine,” I said. “I’ve got a funny taste in my mouth.”

That last remark drew more anger out of her than anything else that had happened the entire night. Her silver eyes blazed with rage, and I could feel the fury roiling around her. “Our business,” she said in a whisper, “is concluded. Get out of my house.”

I forced myself to my feet. One of the walls had fallen down, and I walked creakily over to it. My neck hurt. I guess being moved around at inhuman speed gives you whiplash.

I stopped at the hole in the wall and said, “I’m glad to preserve the peace effort,” I said, forcing the words out. “I think it’s going to save lives, Lara. Your people’s lives, and mine. I’ve got to have you where you are to get that.” I looked at her. “Otherwise, I’d settle up with you right now. Don’t get to thinking we’re friends.”

She faced me, her face all shadowed, the light of slowly growing fires lighting her from behind. “I am glad to see you survived, wizard. You who destroyed my father and secured my own power. You who have now destroyed my enemies. You are the most marvelous weapon I have ever wielded.” She tilted her head at me. “And I love peace, wizard. I love talking. Laughing. Relaxing.” Her voice dropped to a husky pitch. “I will kill your folk with peace, wizard. I will strangle them with it. And they will thank me while I do.”

A cold little spear slid neatly into my guts, but I didn’t let it show on my face or in my voice. “Not while I’m around,” I said quietly.

Then I turned and walked away from the house. I looked blearily around me, got my directions, and started limping for the front gate. On the way there, I fumbled Mouse’s whistle out of my pocket and started blowing it.

I remember my dog reaching my side, and holding on to his collar the last fifty yards or so down the road out, until Molly came sputtering up in the Blue Beetle and helped me inside.

Then I collapsed into sleep.

I’d earned it.

Chapter Forty-Three

I didn't wake up until I was back home, and then only long enough to shamle inside and fall down on my bed. I was out for maybe six hours, and then I woke up with my whole back fused into one long, enormous muscle cramp. I made some involuntarily pathetic noises, and Mouse rose up from the floor beside my bed and jogged out of my room.

Molly appeared from the living room a moment later and said, "Harry? What's wrong?"

"Back," I said. "My back. Freaking vampire tart. Wrenched my neck."

Molly nodded once and vanished. When she came back, she had a small black bag. "You were holding yourself sort of strangely last night, so after I dropped you off, I borrowed Mother's medicine bag." She held up a bottle. "Muscle relaxants." A jar. "Tiger Balm." She held up a plastic container of dust. "Herbal tea mix Shiro found in Tibet. Great for joint pain. My father swears by it."

"Padawan," I said, "I'm doubling your pay."

"You don't pay me, Harry."

"Tripling it, then."

She gave me a broad smile. "And I'll be happy to get you all set up just as soon as you promise to tell me everything that happened. That you can, I mean. Oh, and Sergeant Murphy called. She wanted to know as soon as you were awake."

"Give her a ring," I said. "And of course I'll tell you about it. Is there any water?"

She went and got me some, but I needed her help to sit up enough to drink it. That was embarrassing as hell. I got more embarrassed when she took my shirt off with a clinical detachment, and then winced at all the bruises. She fed me the muscle relaxants and set to with the Tiger Balm, and it hurt like hell. For about ten minutes. Then the stuff started working, and the not-pain was a drug of its own.

After a nice cup of tea—which tasted horrible, but which made it possible to move my neck within ten or twenty minutes of drinking it—I was able to get myself into the shower and get cleaned up and into fresh clothes. It was heavenly. Nothing like a nightmarish near-death experience to make you appreciate the little things in life, like cleanliness. And not being dead.

I spent a minute giving Mister some attention, though apparently he'd slept with Molly, because he accepted maybe a whole thirty seconds of stroking and then dismissed me as unnecessary once he was sure I was in one piece. Normally, he needs some time spread across someone's lap to be himself. I ruffled Mouse for a while instead, which he enjoyed dutifully, and then got myself some food and sat down in the chair across from Molly on the couch.

"Sergeant Murphy's on the way," Molly reported.

"Good," I told her quietly.

"So tell me about it."

"You first."

She gave me a semiexasperated look, and started talking. "I sat in the car being invisible for...maybe an hour? Mouse kept me company. Nothing much happened. Then bells started ringing and men started shouting and shooting and the lights went out. A few minutes later, there was a great big explosion—it moved the rearview mirror out of position. Then Mouse started making noise like you said he would, and we drove to the gate and he jumped out of the car and came back with you."

I blinked at her for a minute. "That sounds really boring."

"But scary," Molly said. "Very tense." She took a deep breath and said, "I had to throw up twice, just sitting there, I was so nervous. I don't know if... if I'm going to be cut out for this kind of thing, Harry."

"Thank God," I said. "You're sane." I took a few more bites of food and then said, "But I need to know how much you want to know."

Molly blinked and leaned toward me a little. "What?"

"There's a lot I can tell you," I said. "Some of it is just business. Some of it is going to be dangerous for you to know about. It might even obligate you in ways you wouldn't like very much."

"So you won't tell me that part?" she asked.

"Didn't say that," I said. "I'm willing. But some of this stuff you'd be safer and happier not knowing. I don't want to endanger you or trap you

into feeling you have to act without giving you a choice about it.”

Molly stared at me for a minute while I gobbled cereal. Then she frowned, looked down at her hands for a minute, and said, “Maybe just tell me what you think is best. For now.”

“Good answer,” I said quietly.

And I told her about the White Court, about the challenge and the duel, about Vittorio’s betrayal and how he gated in the ghouls and how I’d had my own backup standing by in the Nevernever.

“What?” Molly said. “How did you do that?”

“Thomas,” I said. “He’s a vampire, and they have the ability to cross into the Nevernever at certain places.”

“What kind of places?” Molly asked.

“Places that are, ah,” I said, “important to them. Relevant to them in a particular way.”

“Places of lust, you mean,” Molly said.

I coughed and ate more cereal. “Yeah. And places where significant things have happened to them. In Thomas’s case, he was nearly sacrificed by a cult of porn-star sorceresses in those caves a few years a—”

“I’m sorry,” Molly said, interrupting. “But it sounded like you said ‘cult of porn-star sorceresses.’”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, giving me a skeptical look. “Sorry, then. Keep going.”

“Anyway. He nearly died there, so I knew he could find it again. He led Marcone and Murphy there, and they were camped out, waiting for me to open a gate.”

“I see,” Molly said. “And you all ganged up on this Vittorio guy and killed him?”

“Not quite,” I said, and told her what happened, leaving out any mention of Lasciel or Cowl.

Molly blinked as I finished. “Well. That explains it, then.”

“Explains what?”

“There were all kinds of little lights going by the windows all night. They didn’t upset Mouse. I thought maybe it was some kind of sending, and figured the wards would keep it out.” She shook her head. “It must have been all the little faeries.”

“They hang around all the time anyway,” I said. “It just takes a lot of them before it’s obvious enough to notice.” I chewed Cheerios thoughtfully.

“More mouths to feed. Guess I’d better call Pizza ’Spress and step up my standing order, or we’ll have some kind of teeny faerie clan war over pizza rights on our hands.”

I finished breakfast, found my back stiffening again, after sitting still, and was stretching out a little when Murphy arrived. She was still in her party clothes from the night before, complete with a loaded backpack.

After kneeling down to give Mouse his hug, she surprised me. I got one, too. I surprised myself with how hard I hugged back.

Molly occasionally displayed wisdom beyond her years. She did now, taking my car keys, showing them to me, and departing without a word, firmly shutting the door behind her.

“Glad you’re okay,” I told Murphy.

“Yeah,” she said. Her voice shook a little, even on that one word, and she took a deep breath and spoke more clearly. “That was fairly awful. Even by your usual standards. You made it out all right?”

“Nothing I won’t get over,” I told her. “You had any breakfast?”

“Don’t think my stomach is up for much, after all that,” she said.

“I have Cheerios,” I said, as if I’d been saying “dark chocolate caramel almond fudge custard.”

“Oh, God.” Murphy sighed. “How can I resist.”

We sat down on the couch, with Murphy’s heavy bag on the coffee table. Murphy snacked on dry Cheerios from a bowl with her fingers. “Okay,” I told her. “First things first. Where is my gun?”

Murphy snorted and nodded at her bag. I got in and opened it. My .44 was inside. So was Murphy’s boxy little submachine gun. I picked it up and eyed it, then lifted it experimentally to my shoulder. “What the hell kind of gun is this?”

“It’s a P90,” Murphy said.

“See-through plastic?” I asked.

“That’s the magazine,” she said. “You can always see how many rounds you have left.”

I grunted. “It’s tiny.”

“On a hyperthyroid stork like you, sure,” Murphy said.

I frowned and said, “Full automatic. Ah. Is this weapon precisely legal? Even for you?”

She snorted. “No.”

“Where’d you get it?” I asked.

“Kincaid,” she said. “Last year. Gave it to me in a box of Belgian chocolate.”

I took the weapon down from my shoulder, flipped it over, and eyed a little engraved plate on the butt. “‘We’ll always have Hawaii,’” I read aloud. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Murphy’s cheeks turned pink. She took the gun from me, put it in the bag, and zipped it firmly closed. “Did we ever decide who blew up my car?”

“Probably Madrigal,” I said. “You stood him up for that cup of coffee, remember?”

“Because he was busy kidnapping you and attempting to sell you on eBay,” Murphy said.

I shrugged. “Vindictive doesn’t equal rational.”

Murphy frowned, the suspicious-cop look on her face something I was long used to seeing. “Maybe. But it doesn’t feel right. He liked his vengeance personal.”

“Who then?” I asked. “Vittorio wasn’t interested in drawing out the cops. Neither was Lord Skavis’s agent. Lara Raith and Marccone don’t do bombs.”

“Exactly,” Murphy said. “If not Madrigal, then who?”

“Life is a mystery?” I suggested. “It was probably Madrigal. Maybe one of the others had a reason for it that we don’t know. Maybe we’ll never know.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I hate that.” She shook her head. “Harry, wouldn’t a decent human being be inquiring after his wounded friends and allies about now?”

“I assumed if there was bad news, you’d have told me already,” I said.

She gave me a steady look. “That,” she said, “is so archetypically male.”

I grinned. “How is everyone?”

“Ramirez is in the hospital. Same floor as Elaine, actually, and we’re watching them both. Unofficially, of course.”

We meaning the cops. Murphy. Good people. “How is he?”

“Still had some surgery to go, when I left, but the doctor said his prognosis was excellent, as long as they can avoid infection. He got his guts opened up by that knife. That can always be tricky.”

I grunted, and had my suspicions about where Molly had gone when she borrowed my car. “He’ll make it. What about that poor no-neck you abused?”

“Mister Hendricks is there with two of those mercenaries. Marccone has some of his people guarding them, too.”

“Cops and robbers,” I said. “One big, happy family.”

“One wonders,” Murphy said, “why Marccone agreed to help.”

I settled back on the couch and rubbed at the back of my neck with one hand, closing my eyes. “I bribed him.”

“With what?” Murphy asked.

“A seat at the table,” I said quietly.

“Huh?”

“I offered Marccone a chance to sign on to the Unseelie Accords as a freeholding lord.”

Murphy was quiet for a moment, and then she said, “He wants to keep expanding his power.” She thought about it a minute more and said, “Or he thinks his power might be threatened from someone on that end.”

“Someone like the vampires,” I said. “The Red Court had de facto control of prostitution in Chicago until Bianca’s place burned down. And an agent of the White Court has just shown up and killed one of his prostitutes.”

“Are we sure it was Madrigal?”

“I am,” I said. “No way to prove it, but he was the Raith involved in this mess.”

“That was more or less an accident,” Murphy said. “Taking out one of Marccone’s people, I mean.”

“She’s just as dead,” I replied. “And Marccone won’t stand by when someone—anyone—kills one of his own.”

“How does becoming a...what was it? And how does it help?”

“Freeholding lord,” I said. “It means he’s entitled to rights under the Accords—like rights of challenge when someone kills his employees. It means that if a supernatural power tries to move in on him, he’ll have an opportunity to fight it and actually win.”

“Are there many of these lords?”

“Nope,” I said. “I had Bob look into it. Maybe twenty on the whole planet. Two dragons, Drakul—the original, not baby Vlad—the Archive, the CEO of Monoc Securities, some kind of semi-immortal shapeshifter guru in the Ukraine, people like that. The Accords let them sign on as individuals. They have the same rights and obligations. Most people who consider the idea aren’t willing to agree to be a good, traditional host for,

let's say, a group of Black Court vampires, and don't want to get caught up as a mediator in a dispute between the major powers. They don't want to make themselves the targets of possible challenges, either, so not many of them even try it." I rubbed at my jaw. "And *no one* who is just a vanilla human being has tried it. Marcone is breaking new ground."

Murphy shook her head. "And you were able to set him up for it?"

"You have to have three current members of the Accords vouch for you to sign on," I said. "I told him I'd be one of them."

"You can speak for the Council in this?"

"When it comes to defending and protecting my area of responsibility as a Warden, I damned well can. If the Council doesn't like it, they shouldn't have dragooned me into the job."

Murphy chewed on some Cheerios, scrunched up her nose in thought, and then gave me a shrewd look. "You're using Marcone."

I nodded. "It's only a matter of time before someone like Lara Raith tries to push for more power in Chicago. Sooner or later they'll swamp me in numbers, and we both know SI will always have their hands tied by red tape and politics. If Marcone signs the Accords, he'll have a strong motivation to oppose any incursion—and the means to do so."

"But he's going to use his new means to secure his position here even more firmly," Murphy said quietly. "Make new allies, probably. Gain new resources."

"Yeah. He's using me, too." I shook my head. "It isn't a perfect solution."

"No," Murphy said. "It isn't."

"But he's the devil we know."

Neither of us said anything for several minutes.

"Yes," Murphy admitted. "He is."

Murphy dropped me off at the hospital and I headed straight for Elaine's room.

I found her inside, dressing. She was just pulling a pair of jeans up over strong, slender legs that looked just as good as I remembered. When I opened the door, she spun, thorn-wand in hand.

I put my hands up and said, "Easy there, gunslinger. I'm not looking for any trouble."

Elaine gave me a gentle glare and slipped the wand into a small leather case that clipped to the jeans. She did not look well, but she looked a lot better than she had the last time I'd seen her. Her face was still quite pale and her eyes were sunken and bruised, but she moved with brisk purpose for all of that. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that," she said.

"If I'd knocked, I might have woken you up."

"If you'd knocked, you'd have missed out on an outside chance of seeing me getting dressed," she shot back.

"Touché." I glanced around and spotted her bag, all packed. My stomach twisted a little in disappointment. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

She shook her head. "Have you ever tried to watch daytime television? I was *glad* when the set finally blew. I'd lose my mind just lying here."

"How you feeling?"

"A lot better," Elaine said. "Stronger. Which is another reason to leave. I don't want to have a nightmare and have my powers kill some poor grampa's respirator."

I nodded. "So it's back to California?"

"Yes. I've done enough damage for one trip."

I folded my arms and leaned against the door, watching her brush back her hair enough to get it into a tail. She didn't look at me when she asked, "Did you get them?"

"Yeah," I said.

She closed her eyes, shivered, and exhaled. "Okay." She shook her head. "That shouldn't make me feel better. It won't help Anna."

"It will help a lot of other people in the long run," I said.

She abruptly slammed the brush against the rail of the bed, snapping it. "I wasn't *here* trying to help a lot of other people, dammit." She glanced down at the brush's handle and seemed to deflate for a moment. She tossed it listlessly into a corner.

I went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "This just in. Elaine isn't perfect. News at eleven."

She leaned her cheek on my hand.

"You should know," I said. "I got reparations out of the White Court. A weregild for their dependents."

She blinked at me. "How?"

"My boyish charm. Can you get me contact information for the victims' families? I'll get somebody to get the money to them."

“Yes,” she said. “Some of them didn’t have any dependents. Like Anna.”

I grunted and nodded. “I thought we might use that money to build something.”

Elaine frowned at me. “Oh?”

I nodded. “We use the money. We expand the Ordo, build a network of contacts. A hotline for middle-class practitioners. We contact groups like the Ordo in cities all around the country. We put the word out that if people are in some kind of supernatural fix, they can get word of it onto the network. Maybe if something like this starts happening again, we can hear about it early and stomp on the fire before it grows. We teach self-defense classes. We help people coordinate, cooperate, support one another. We *act*.”

Elaine chewed on her lip and looked up at me uncertainly. “We?”

“You said you wanted to help people,” I said. “This might. What do you think?”

She stood up, leaned up onto her toes, and kissed me gently on the lips before staring into my eyes, her own very wide and bright. “I think,” she said quietly, “that Anna would have liked that.”

Ramirez woke up late that evening, swathed in bandages, his injured leg in traction, and I was sitting next to his bed when he did. It was a nice switch for me. Usually I was the one waking up into disorientation, confusion, and pain.

I gave him a few minutes to get his bearings before I leaned forward and said, “Hey, there, man.”

“Harry,” he rasped. “Thirsty.”

Before he was finished saying it, I picked up the little sports bottle of ice water they’d left next to his bed. I put the straw between his lips and said, “Can you hold it, or should I do it for you?”

He managed a small glare, fumbled a hand up, and held on to the bottle weakly. He sipped some of the water, then laid his head back on the pillow. “Okay,” he said. “How bad is it?”

“Alas,” I said. “You’ll live.”

“Where?”

“Hospital,” I said. “You’re stable. I’ve called Listens-to-Wind, and he’s going to come pick you up in the morning.”

“We win?”

“Bad guys go boom,” I said. “The White King is still on his throne. Peace process is going to move ahead.”

“Tell me.”

So I gave him the battle’s last few minutes, except for Lash’s role in things.

“Harry Dresden,” Ramirez murmured, “the human cannonball.”

“Bam, zoom, right to the moon.”

He smiled a little. “You get Cowl?”

“Doubt it,” I said. “He was right by his gate. When he saw me running for the exit, ten to one he just stepped back through it and zipped it shut. In fact, I’m pretty sure he did. If there’d been an open gate there, the blast would have been able to spread into it. I don’t think we would have been thrown so far.”

“How about Vitto?”

I shook my head. “Vitto was pretty far gone even before the bombs went off. I’m pretty sure we nailed him, and those ghouls, too.”

“Good thing you had that army on standby, huh,” Ramirez said, a faint edge to his voice.

“Hey,” I said, “it’s late. I should let you get some rest.”

“No,” Ramirez said, his voice stronger. “We need to talk.”

I sat there for a minute, bracing myself. Then I said, “About what.”

“About how tight you are with the vamps,” he said. “About you making deals with scumbag mobsters. I recognized Marcone. I’ve seen his picture in the papers.” Ramirez shook his head. “Jesus Christ, Harry. We’re supposed to be on the same team. It’s called trust, man.”

I wanted to spit something hostile and venomous and well deserved. I toned myself down to saying, “Gee. A Warden doesn’t trust me. That’s a switch.”

Ramirez blinked at me. “What?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m used to it,” I said. “I had Morgan sticking his nose into every corner of my existence for my entire adult life.”

Ramirez stared at me for a second. Then he let out a weak snort and said, “All hail the drama queen. Harry...” He shook his head. “I’m talking about you not trusting *me*, man.”

My increasingly angry retort died unspoken. “Uh. What?”

Ramirez shook his head wearily. “Let me make some guesses. One. You don’t trust the Council. You never have, but lately, it’s been worse.

Especially since New Mexico. You think that whoever is leaking information to the vampires is pretty high up, and the less anyone in the Council knows about what you're doing, the better."

I stared at him and said nothing.

"Two. There's a new player in the game. Cowl's on the new team. We don't know who they are, but they seem to have a hard-on for screwing over everyone equally—vampires, mortals, wizards, whoever." He sighed. "You aren't the only one who's been noticing these things, Harry."

I grunted. "What do you call them?"

"The Black Hats, after our Ringwraith-wannabe buddy, Cowl. You?"

"The Black Council," I said.

"Oooh," Ramirez muttered. "Yours is better."

"Thanks," I said.

"So you can't trust our own people," he said. "But you're cutting deals with the vampires...." He narrowed his eyes. "You think you might be able to find the traitor coming in from the other side."

I put my finger on my nose.

"And the gangster?" Ramirez asked.

"He's a snake," I said. "But his word is good. And Madrigal and Vitto had killed one of his people. And I *know* he isn't working for Cowl's organization."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Marcone works for Marcone."

Ramirez spread his hands weakly. "Was that so damned hard, Dresden? To talk to me?"

I settled back in my chair. My shoulders suddenly felt loose and wobbly. I breathed in and out a few times, and then said, "No."

Ramirez snorted gently. "Idiot."

"So," I said. "Think I should come clean to the Merlin?"

Ramirez opened one eye. "Are you kidding? He hates your guts. He'd have you declared a traitor, locked up, and executed before you got through the first paragraph." He closed his eye again. "But I'm with you, man. All the way."

You don't have much endurance after going through something like Ramirez had. He was asleep before he realized it was about to happen.

I sat with him for the rest of the night, until Senior Council Member Listens-to-Wind arrived with his team of medical types before dawn the

next morning.

You don't leave an injured friend all alone.

The next day, I knocked on the door to the office at Executive Priority and went in without waiting for an answer.

"Tonight you will be visited by three spirits," I announced. "The ghosts of indictment past, present, and future. They will teach you the true meaning of 'you are still a scumbag criminal.'"

Marcone was there, sitting behind the desk with Helen Beckitt, or maybe Helen Demeter, I supposed. She wore her professionally suggestive business suit—and was sitting across Marcone's lap. Her hair and suit looked slightly mussed. Marcone had his third shirt button undone.

I cursed my timing. If I'd come ten minutes later, I'd have opened the door *in medias res*. It would have been infinitely more awkward.

"Dresden," Marcone said, his tone pleasant. Helen made no move to stir from where she was. "It's nice to see you alive. Your sense of humor, of course, remains unchanged, which is unsurprising, as it seems to have died in your adolescence. Presumably it entered a suicide pact with your manners."

"Your good opinion," I said, "means the world to me. I see you got out of the Nevernever."

"Simple enough," Marcone said. "I had to shoot a few of the vampires, once we were clear of the fight. I did not appreciate the way they were attempting to coerce my employees."

"Hell's bells." I sighed. "Did you kill any of them?"

"Unnecessary. I shot them enough to make my point. After that, we had an adequate understanding of one another—much as you and I do."

"I understand that you settled matters with Anna's killers, Mister Dresden," Helen said. "With help, of course."

Marcone smiled his unreadable little smile at me.

"The people who did the deed won't be bothering anyone anymore," I said. "And most of the people who motivated them have gone into early retirement." I glanced at Marcone. "With help."

"But not all of them?" Helen asked, frowning.

"Everyone we could make answer," Marcone said, "has answered. It is unlikely we could accomplish more."

Something made me say, “And I’m taking steps to prevent or mitigate this kind of circumstance in the future. Here and elsewhere.”

Helen tilted her head at me, taking that in. Then she nodded and said, very quietly, “Thank you.”

“Helen,” Marcone said. “Would you be so good as to excuse us for a few moments.”

“Won’t take long,” I added. “I don’t like being here.”

Helen smiled slightly at me and rose smoothly from Marcone’s lap. “If it makes you feel any better, Mister Dresden, you should know that he dislikes having you here as well.”

“You should see how much my insurance premiums go up after your visits, Dresden.” He shook his head. “And they call me an extortionist. Helen, could you send Bonnie in with that file?”

“Certainly.”

Helen left. Healthy brunette Bonnie, in her oh-so-fetching exercise outfit, bounced in with a manila folder, gave me a Colgate smile, and departed again. Marcone opened the folder, withdrew a stack of papers, and started flicking through them. He got to the last page, turned it around, slid it across the desk, and produced a pen from his pocket. “Here is the contract you faxed me. Sign here, please.”

I walked over to the desk, took the entire stack, and started reading it from page one. You never sign a contract you haven’t read, even if you aren’t a wizard. If you are one, it’s even more important than that. People joke about signing away their soul or their firstborn. In my world, it’s possible.

Marcone seemed to accept that. He made a steeple of his fingers and waited with the relaxed patience of a well-fed cat.

The contract was the standard one for approving a new signatory of the Accords, and though he’d had it retyped, Marcone hadn’t changed a word. Probably. I kept reading. “So you suggested the name Demeter for Helen?” I asked as I read.

Marcone’s expression never changed. “Yes.”

“How’s Persephone?”

He stared at me.

“Persephone,” I said. “Demeter’s daughter. She was carried away by the Lord of the Underworld.”

Marcone’s stare became cold.

“He kept her there in Hades, but Demeter froze the whole world until the other gods convinced him to return Persephone to her mother.” I turned a page. “The girl. The one in the coma, who you’re keeping in a hospital somewhere, and visiting every week. That’s Helen’s daughter, isn’t it. The one who got caught in the cross fire of one of your shoot-outs.”

Marcone didn’t move.

“Newspaper file on it said she was killed,” I said.

I read several more pages before Marcone answered. “Tony Vargassi, my predecessor, I suppose, had a son. Marco. Marco decided that I had become a threat to his standing in the organization. He was the shooter.”

“But the girl,” I said, “didn’t die.”

Marcone shook his head. “It put Vargassi in an awkward position. If the girl recovered, she might identify his son as the shooter, and no jury in the world would fail to send a thug to jail who’d shot a pretty little girl. But if the girl died, and it came back on Marco, he’d be looking at a murder charge.”

“And someone who murders little girls gets the needle in Illinois,” I said.

“Exactly. There was a great deal of corruption at the time—”

I snorted.

Marcone’s little smile returned for a moment. “Pardon me. Say instead that the Vargassis exerted their influence on official matters with a heavy hand. Vargassi had the little girl declared dead. He convinced the medical examiner to sign false paperwork, and he hid the girl away in another hospital.”

I grunted. “If Marco got identified as the shooter and put up for trial, Vargassi could produce the little girl. Look, she’s not dead. Mistrial.”

“One possibility,” Marcone replied. “And if things went quietly for a while, he could simply delete her records.”

“And her,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Whatever happened to old Tony Vargassi?” I asked.

I saw a flash of Marcone’s teeth. “His whereabouts are unknown. As are Marco’s.”

“When did you find out about the girl?”

“Two years later,” he said. “Everything was set up through a dummy corporation’s trust fund. She could have just...” He looked away from me.

“Just lain there. Indefinitely. No one would have known who she was. Known her name.”

“Does Helen know?” I asked him.

He shook his head. He was quiet for a moment more. “I can’t return Persephone from Hades. The child’s death almost destroyed Helen—and her world is still frozen. If she knew her daughter was...trapped...just lying there in a half-life...” He shook his head. “It would shatter her world, Dresden. And I shouldn’t wish that.”

“I’ve noticed,” I said quietly, “that most of the young ladies working here would be about the same age as her daughter.”

“Yes,” Marcone said.

“That isn’t exactly a healthy recovery.”

“No,” Marcone said. “But it’s what she has.”

I thought about it while I kept reading. Maybe Helen deserved to know about her daughter. Hell, she probably did. But whatever else Marcone was, he was no fool. If he thought news of her daughter’s fate might shatter Helen, he was probably right. Sure, she should know. But did I have the right to make that decision?

Probably not—even if Marcone wouldn’t do his best to have me killed if I tried. Hell, I probably had less right to decide than Marcone. He had way more invested in the girl and her fate than I did.

Because that was the secret I’d seen in a soulgaze with Gentleman Johnnie Marcone, years ago. The secret that gave him the strength and the will to rule the mean streets.

He felt responsible for the little girl who’d taken a bullet meant for him.

He’d taken over Chicago crime with ruthless efficiency, always cutting down on the violence. A couple of people had been hurt in gang-related crimes. The gangsters responsible hadn’t been heard from again. I’d always assumed it was because Marcone had decided to manipulate matters, to make himself appear to be a preferable alternative to more careless criminals who might take his place if the cops took him down.

I’d never even considered the idea that he might actually give a crap about innocents being harmed.

Granted, that didn’t change anything. He still ran a business that killed far more people than any amount of collateral damage. He was still a criminal. Still a bad guy.

But...

He was the devil I knew. And he probably could have been worse.

I got to the last page of the contract and found spaces for three signatures. Two of them were already filled.

“Donar Vadderung?” I asked Marcone.

“Current CEO of Monoc Securities,” Marcone replied. “Oslo.”

“And Lara Raith,” I murmured.

“Signing on behalf of her father, the White King, who is obviously in charge of the White Court.” There was a trace of irony in Marcone’s voice. He hadn’t been fooled by the puppet show.

I looked at the third open line.

Then I signed it, and left without another word.

It isn’t a perfect world. I’m doing the best I can.

“Hmmm,” said Bob the Skull, peering at my left hand. “It looks like...”

I was sitting in my lab, my hand spread open on the table, while the skull examined my palm.

I’d worn a mark there for years—an unblemished patch of skin amidst all the burn scars, in the perfect shape of the angelic sigil that was Lasciel’s name.

The mark was gone.

In its place was just an irregular patch of unburned skin.

“It looks like there’s no mark there anymore,” Bob said.

I sighed. “Thank you, Bob,” I said. “It’s good to have a professional opinion.”

“Well, what did you expect?” Bob said. The skull swiveled around on the table and tilted up to look at my face. “Hmmmm. And you say the entity isn’t responding to you anymore?”

“No. And she’s always jumped every time I said frog.”

“Interesting,” Bob said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, from what you told me, this psychic attack the entity blocked for you was quite severe.”

I shivered, remembering. “Yeah.”

“And the process she used to accelerate your brain and shield you was traumatic as well.”

“Right. She said it could cause me brain damage.”

“Uh-huh,” Bob said. “I think it did.”

“Huh?”

“See what I mean?” Bob asked cheerfully. “You’re thicker already.”

“Harry get hammer,” I said. “Smash stupid talky skull.”

For a guy with no legs, Bob backpedals swiftly and gracefully. “Easy there, chief; don’t get excited. But the brain damage thing is for real.”

I frowned. “Explain, please.”

“Well, I told you that the entity in your head was like a recording of the real Lasciel, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That recording was written in your brain, in portions you weren’t using.”

“Right.”

“I think that’s where the damage is. I mean, I’m looking at you right now, and your head has been riddled with tiny holes, boss.”

I blinked and rubbed my fingers over my scalp. “It doesn’t feel like that.”

“That’s because your brain doesn’t sense injuries. It manages sensing injuries for the rest of you. But trust me, there’s damage. I think it wiped out the entity.”

“Wiped out...you mean, like...”

“Killed it,” Bob said. “Technically, it was never alive, but it *was* constructed. It’s been deconstructed, and...”

I frowned. “And what?”

“And there’s, um, a portion of you missing.”

“I’m sure I would have felt that,” I said.

“Not your body,” Bob said scornfully. “Your life force. Your chi. Your soul.”

“Whoa, wait a minute. Part of my *soul* is gone?”

Bob sighed. “People get all excited when you use that word. The part of you that is more than merely physical, yes. You can call it whatever you want. There’s some missing, and it’s nothing to panic over.”

“Part of my *soul* is gone and I’m not supposed to be worried about that?” I demanded.

“Happens all the time,” Bob said. “You shared a bunch of yours with Susan, and she with you. It’s what protected you from Lara Raith. You and Murphy swapped some pretty recently, looks like—you must have gotten a

hug or something. Honestly, Harry, you really ought to bang her and get it over wi—”

I reached under the worktable, drew out a claw hammer, and gave Bob a pointed look.

“Um, right,” he said. “Back to business. Uh, your soul. You give away pieces of yourself all the time. Everyone does. Some of it goes out with your magic, too. It grows back. Relax, boss.”

“If it’s no big deal,” I said, “then why is it so interesting?”

“Oh, well,” Bob said. “It *is* energy, you know. And I wonder if maybe... maybe...well, look, Harry. There was a tiny bit of Lasciel’s energy in you, supporting the entity, giving you access to Hellfire. That’s gone now, but the entity had to have had some kind of power source to turn against the essence of its own originator.”

“So it was running off my *soul*? Like I’m some kind of *battery*?”

“Hey,” Bob said, “don’t get all righteous. You *gave* it to her. Encouraging her to make her own choices, to rebel, to exercise free will.” Bob shook his head. “Free will is horrible, Harry, believe me. I’m glad I don’t have it. Ugh, no, thank you. But you *gave* her some. You gave her a *name*. The will came with it.”

I was quiet for a moment, then said, “And she used it to kill herself.”

“Sort of,” Bob said. “She chose which areas of your brain were going to take the worst beating. She took a psychic bullet for you. I guess it’s almost the same thing as choosing to die.”

“No, it isn’t,” I said quietly. “She didn’t choose to die. She chose to be free.”

“Maybe that’s why they call it free will,” Bob said. “Hey, tell me that at least you got a pony ride before the carnival left town. I mean, she could have made you see and feel *anything* at all, and...” Bob paused, and his eyelights blinked. “Hey, Harry. Are you *crying*?”

“No,” I snapped, and left the lab.

The apartment felt...very empty.

I sat down with my guitar and tried to sort out my thoughts. It was hard. I was feeling all kinds of anger and confusion and sadness. I kept telling myself that it was the emotional fallout of Malvora’s psychic assault, but it’s one thing to repeat that to yourself over and over, and quite another to sit there feeling awful.

I started playing.

Beautifully.

It wasn't perfect performance—a computer can do that. It wasn't a terribly complex bit of music. My fingers didn't suddenly regain their complete dexterity—but the music became *alive*. My hands moved with a surety and confidence I usually felt only in bursts a few seconds long. I played a second piece, and then a third, and every time my rhythm was on, and I found myself seeing and using new nuances, variations on chords that lent depth and color to the simple pieces I could play—sweet sadness to the minor chords, power to the majors, stresses and resolutions I'd always heard in my head, but could never express in life.

It was almost like someone had opened a door in my head, like they were helping me along.

I heard a very, very faint whisper, like an echo of Lash's voice.

Everything I can, dear host.

I played for a while longer, before gently setting aside my guitar.

Then I went to call Father Forthill and tell him to come over, so that he could pick up the blackened denarius as soon as I dug it out of my basement.

I picked up Thomas outside his apartment and tailed him as he crossed town. He took the El over toward the Loop, and hit the sidewalks again. He looked tense, and paler than usual. He'd blown an awful lot of energy killing those ghouls, and I knew he'd have to feed—maybe dangerously—to recover what he'd lost.

I'd called him the day after the battle and tried to talk to him, but he'd remained reticent, remote. I'd told him I was worried about him, after blowing that much energy. He'd hung up on me. He'd cut short two more calls since.

So, being as how I am a smart and sensitive guy who respects his brother's feelings, I was tailing him to find out what the hell he was trying so hard not to talk to me about. This way, I was sparing him all the effort and trouble of telling me about it by finding out all on my own. Like I said, I'm sensitive. And thoughtful. And maybe a little stubborn.

Thomas wasn't being very careful. I would have expected him to move around the city like a long-tailed cat at a rocking chair convention, but he sort of trudged along, fashionable in his dark slacks and loose, deep

crimson shirt, his hands in his pockets, his hair hiding his face most of the time.

Even so, he attracted more than a little feminine attention. He was like a walking, talking cologne commercial, except that even silent and standing he was making women look over their shoulders at him, while coyly rearranging their hair.

He finally stalked into the Park Tower, and went into a trendy little boutique-slash-coffee shop calling itself the Coiffure Cup. I checked a clock, and thought about following him in. I could see a few people inside, where a coffee bar backed up to the front window. A couple of fairly pretty girls were getting things set up behind the counter, but I couldn't see any more than that.

I found a spot where I could watch the door and loomed unobtrusively—which is easier than you'd think, even when you're as tall as I am. A couple of women whose hair and nails screamed "beautician" came in later. The boutique opened for business a few minutes after Thomas got there, and immediately began doing a brisk trade. A lot of evidently wealthy, terribly attractive, generally young women started coming and going.

It put me in a quandary. On the one hand, I didn't want anyone to get hurt because my brother had exerted himself so furiously on my behalf. On the other, I didn't particularly care to go in and find my brother lording it over a roomful of worshipful women like some dark god of lust and shadow.

I chewed on my lip for a while, and decided to go on in. If Thomas had... if he had become the kind of monster his family generally did, I owed it to him to try to talk some sense into him. Or pound it in. Whichever.

I pushed open the door to the Coiffure Cup and was immediately, pleasantly assaulted by the aroma of coffee. There was techno music playing, thumping bouncily and mindlessly positive. The front room contained the coffee bar, a few little tables, and a little podium next to a heavy curtain. Even as I came in, one of the young women behind the bar came out to me, gave me a bubbly, caffeinated smile, and said, "Hi! Do you have an appointment?"

"No," I said, glancing back at the curtains. "Um, I just need to talk to someone. One second."

"Sir," she said in protest, and tried to hurry into my path. My legs were longer. I gave her a smile and outdistanced her, pushing the curtain aside.

The techno music grew a little louder as I went through. The back room of the boutique smelled the way boutiques always do, of various tonsorial chemicals. A dozen styling stations, all in use, stood six on a side, marching up to a rather large and elaborate station on a little raised platform. At the base of the little platform was a pedicure station, and a young woman with a mud mask, and cucumber slices, and a body posture of blissful relaxation was lounging through a pedicure. On the other side, another young woman was under a dryer, reading a magazine, her expression heavy and relaxed with that postcoiffure glow. On the main chair on the platform, a deluxe number that leaned back to a custom shampoo sink, another young woman lay back with a blissful expression while having her hair washed.

By Thomas.

He was chatting with her amiably as he worked, and she was in the middle of a little laugh when I came in. He leaned down and said something in her ear, and though I couldn't hear the substance of it, it came across in an unmistakable just-us-girls kind of tone, and she laughed again, replying in a similar manner.

Thomas laughed and turned away, practically prancing over to a tray of...styling implements, I supposed. He came back with a towel and, I swear to God, a dozen bobby pins held in his lips. He rinsed her hair and started pinning.

"Sir!" protested the coffee girl, who had followed me into the room.

Everyone stopped and looked at me. Even the woman with the cucumbers over her eyes took one of them off and peered at me.

Thomas froze. His eyes widened to the size of hand mirrors. He swallowed, and the bobby pins fell out of his mouth.

All the women looked back and forth between us, and there was an immediate buzz of whispers and quiet talks.

"You have got to be kidding me," I said.

"O-oh," Thomas said. "Ah-ree."

One of the stylists glanced back and forth between us and said, "Thomas." (She pronounced it Toe-moss.) "Who is your *friend*?"

Friend. Oy vey. I rubbed at the bridge of my nose with one hand. I was never going to get away from this one. Not if I lived to be five hundred.

Thomas and I sat down at a table over cups of coffee.

“*This?*” I asked him without preamble. “*This* is your mysterious job? *This* is the moneymaking scam?”

“It was cosmetology school first,” Thomas said. He spoke in a French accent so thick that it barely qualified as English. “And night work as a security guard in a warehouse where no one else ever showed up, to pay for it.”

I rubbed at my nose again. “And then...*this*? Here I’m thinking you’ve created your own batch of personal thralls while running around as a hired killer or something, and...you’re washing *hair*?”

It was difficult to keep my voice quiet, but I made the effort. There were too many ears in that little place.

Thomas sighed. “Well. Yes. Washing, cutting, styling, dying. I do it all, baby.”

“I’ll bet.” Then it hit me. “That’s how you’re feeding,” I said. “I thought that took...”

“Sex?” Thomas asked. He shook his head. “Intimacy. Trust. And believe me, next to sex, washing and styling a woman’s hair is about as intimate as you can get with her.”

“You’re still feeding on them,” I said.

“It isn’t the same, Harry. It isn’t as dangerous—more like...sipping, I suppose, than taking bites. I can’t take very much, or very quickly. But I’m here all day and it...” He shivered. “It adds up.” He opened his eyes and met mine. “And there’s no chance I’m going to lose control of myself. They’re safe.” He shrugged a shoulder. “They just enjoy it.”

I watched the woman who’d been under the hair dryer come out, smile at Thomas, and pick up a cup of coffee on the way out. She looked...well, radiant, really. Confident. She looked like she felt sexy and beautiful, and it was quite pleasant to watch her move while she did.

Thomas watched her go with what I recognized as his look of quiet possession and pride. “They enjoy it a lot.” He gave me one of his brief, swift grins. “I imagine there’s a lot of husbands and boyfriends enjoying it, too.”

“But they’re addicted to it, I’d imagine.”

He shrugged again. “Some, maybe. I try to spread myself around as much as I can. It isn’t a perfect solution—”

“But it’s the one you’ve got,” I said. I frowned. “What happens when you try to wash somebody’s hair and it turns out that they’re in love?”

Protected?”

“True love isn’t as common as you’d think,” Thomas said. “Especially among people rich enough to afford me and superficial enough to think that it is money well spent.”

“But when they do show?” I asked.

“That’s why I’ve got all the hired help, man. I know what I’m doing.”

I shook my head. “All this time and...” I snorted and sipped at some coffee. It was amazing. Smooth and rich and just sweet enough, and it probably cost more than a whole fast-food meal. “They all think I’m your lover, don’t they.”

“This is a trendy, upper-class boutique, Harry. No one expects a man with a place like this to be straight.”

“Uh-huh. And the accent, Toe-moss?”

He smiled. “No one would pay that much money to an American stylist. Please.” He shrugged. “It’s superficial and silly, but true.” He glanced around, suddenly self-conscious. His voice lowered, and his accent dropped. “Look. I know it’s a lot to ask....”

It was an effort not to laugh at him, but I managed to give him a hard look, sigh, and say, “Your secret is safe with me.”

He looked relieved. “*Merci.*”

“Hey,” I said. “Can you stop by my place tonight after work? I’m putting something together that might help people if someone else starts something like those White Court bozos just tried. I thought maybe you’d want to be in on it.”

“Um, yeah. Yeah, we can talk about it.”

I sipped more coffee. “Maybe Justine could help, too. Might be a way to get her out, if you want to do it.”

“Are you kidding?” Thomas asked. “She’s been working for a year to get closer to Lara.”

I blinked up at him. “Hell’s bells, I thought she was acting weird,” I said. “She came on all zonked out, like the mindless party girl, but she dropped it a couple of times, where I could see. I just put it down to, well. Weirdness.”

He shook his head. “She’s been getting information to me. Nothing huge, so far.”

“Does Lara know about her?”

Thomas shook his head. “She hasn’t tipped to it yet. Justine is, as far as Lara is concerned, still one more helpless little doe.” He glanced up. “I talked it over with her. She wants to stay. She’s Lara’s assistant, most of the time.”

I exhaled slowly. Holy crap. If Justine stayed in place, and was willing to report on what she knew...intelligence gathered at that level could turn the entire course of the war—because even if the White Court’s peace proposal went through, it just meant a shift in focus and strategy. The vamps weren’t about to let up.

“Dangerous,” I said quietly.

“She wants to do it,” he said.

I shook my head. “I take it you’ve been in touch with Lara?”

“Of course,” Thomas said. “Given my recent heroism”—his voice turned wry—“in defense of the White King, I am now in favor in the Court. The prodigal son has been welcomed home with open arms.”

“Really?”

“Well,” Thomas amended, “with reluctant, irritated arms, anyway. Lara’s miffed about the Deeps.”

“Guess the bombs weren’t good for them.”

Thomas’s teeth showed. “The whole place just collapsed in on itself. There’s a huge hole in the ground, the plumbing at the manor got torn up, and the foundation cracked. It’s going to cost a fortune to fix it.”

“Poor Lara,” I said. “No more convenient corpse-disposal facilities.”

He laughed. “It’s nice to see her exasperated. She’s usually so self-assured.”

“I have a gift.”

He nodded. “You do.” We sat quietly for a few minutes.

“Thomas,” I said, finally, gesturing at the room. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

He shrugged and looked down. “At first? Because it was humiliating. I mean...working nights to put myself through cosmetology school? Starting my own place and posing as...” He waved a hand down at himself. “I thought...I don’t know. At first I thought you’d disapprove or...laugh at me or something.”

I kept a straight face. “No. Never.”

“And after that...well. I’d been keeping secrets. I didn’t want you to think I didn’t trust you.”

I snorted. “In other words you *didn't* trust me. To understand.”

His cheeks turned very slightly pink and he looked down. “Um. I guess so, yeah. Sorry.”

“Don't worry about it.”

He closed his eyes and nodded and said, “Thanks, Harry.”

I put a hand on his shoulder for a second, then dropped it again. Nothing else needed to be said.

Thomas gave me a suspicious look. “Now you're going to laugh at me.”

“I can wait until you've turned your back, if you like.”

He grinned at me again. “It's all right. I sort of stopped caring about it after I got fed steady for a few weeks straight. Feels too nice not to be starving again. Laugh all you want.”

I looked around the place for a minute more. The coffee girls were having a private conversation, evidently discussing us, if all the covert glances and quiet little smiles were any indication.

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing, and it felt good.

Author's Note

SMALL FAVOR

ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER

IT'S MY BIRTHDAY, TOO

—*from Many Bloody Returns, edited by Charlaine Harris*

Hey, Miyagi-san,” my apprentice said. Her jeans still dripped with purple-brown mucus. “You think the dry cleaner can get this out?”

I threw my car keys down on my kitchen counter, leaned my slimed, rune-carved wooden staff next to them, and said, “The last time I took something stained by a slime golem to a cleaner, the owner burned his place down the next day and tried to collect on the insurance.”

Molly, my apprentice, was just barely out of her teens, and it was impossible not to notice what great legs she had when she stripped out of her trendily mangled jeans. She wrinkled her nose as she tossed them into the kitchen trash can. “Have I told you how much I love the wizard business, Harry?”

“Neither of us is in the hospital, kid. This was a good day at work.” I took my mantled leather duster off. It was generously covered in splatters of the sticky, smelly mucus as well. I toted it over to the fireplace in my basement apartment, which I keep going during the winter. Given that I have to live without the benefits of electricity, it’s necessary. I made sure the fire was burning strongly and tossed the coat in.

“Hey!” Molly said. “Not the coat!”

“Relax,” I told her. “The spells on it should protect it. They’ll bake the slime hard and I’ll chisel it off tomorrow.”

“Oh, good. I like the coat.” The girl subsided as she tossed her secondhand combat boots and socks into my trash after her ruined jeans. She was tall for a woman and built like a schoolboy’s fantasy of the Scandinavian exchange student. Her hair was shoulder length and the color of white gold, except for the tips, which had been dyed in a blend of blue, red, and purple. She’d lost a couple of the piercings she’d previously worn on her face, and was now down to only one eyebrow, one nostril, her tongue, and her lower lip. She went over to the throw rug in the middle of my living room floor, hauled it to one side, and opened the trapdoor leading down to my lab in the subbasement. She lit a candle in the fire, wrinkling her nose at the stink from the greasy smoke coming up from my coat, and padded down the stepladder stairs into the lab.

Mouse, my pet saber-toothed retriever, trotted out of my bedroom and spread his doggy jaws in a big yawn, wagging his shaggy grey tail. He took one step toward me, then froze as the smell of the mucus hit his nose. The big grey dog turned around at once and padded back into the bedroom.

“Coward!” I called after him. I glanced up at Mister, my tomcat, who drowsed upon the top of my heaviest bookshelf, catching the updraft from the fireplace. “At least you haven’t deserted me.”

Mister glanced at me, then gave his head a little shake as the pungent smoke from the fireplace rose to him. He flicked his ears at me, obviously annoyed, and descended from the bookshelf with gracefully offended dignity to follow Mouse into the relative aromatic safety of my bedroom.

“Wimp,” I muttered. I eyed my staff. It was crusty with the ichor. I’d have to take it off with sandpaper and repair the carvings. I’d probably have to do the blasting rod, too. Stupid freaking amateurs, playing with things they didn’t understand. Slime golems are just disgusting.

Molly thumped back up the stairs, now dressed in her backup clothes. Her experiences in training with me had taught her that lesson in about six months, and she had a second set of clothing stored in a gym bag underneath the little desk I let her keep in the lab. She came up in a black broomstick skirt—those skirts that are supposed to look wrinkled—and Birkenstocks, inappropriate for the winter weather but way less inappropriate than black athletic panties. “Harry, are you going to be able to drive me home?”

I frowned and checked the clock. It was after nine—too late for a young woman to trust herself to Chicago’s public transportation. Given Molly’s skills, she probably wouldn’t be in any real danger, but it was best not to tempt fate. “Could you call your folks?”

She shook her head. “On Valentine’s Day? Are you kidding? They’ll have barricaded themselves upstairs and forced the older kids to wear the little ones out so they’ll sleep through the noise.” Molly shuddered. “I’m not interrupting them. Way too disturbing.”

“Valentine’s Day,” I groaned. “Dammit.”

“What?”

“Oh, I forgot, what with the excitement. It’s, uh, someone’s birthday. I got them a present and wanted to get it to them today.”

“Oh?” Molly chirped. “Who?”

I hesitated for a minute, but Molly had earned a certain amount of candor—and trust. “Thomas,” I said.

“The vampire?” Molly asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Wow, Harry,” she said, her blue eyes sparkling. “That’s odd. I mean, why would you get *him* a birthday present?” She frowned prettily. “I mean, you didn’t get my dad one, and you’re friends with him, and he’s a Knight of the Sword and one of the good guys, and he’s saved your life about twenty times and all.”

“More like four times,” I said testily. “And I do Christmas for hi—”

Molly was looking at me, a smug smile on her face.

“You figured it out,” I said.

“That Thomas was your brother?” Molly asked innocently. “Yep.”

I blinked at her. “How?”

“I’ve seen you two fight.” She lifted both pale eyebrows. “What? Have you *seen* how many brothers and sisters I have? I know my sibling conflicts.”

“Hell’s bells.” I sighed. “Molly—”

She lifted a hand. “I know, boss. I know. Big secret; safe with me.” Her expression turned serious, and she gave me a look that was very knowing for someone so young. “Family is important.”

I’d grown up in a succession of orphanages and foster homes. “Yeah,” I said, “it is.”

She nodded. “So you haven’t given family presents much. And your brother doesn’t exactly have a ton of people bringing him presents on his birthday, does he?”

I just looked at her for a second. Molly was growing up into a person I thought I was going to like.

“No,” I said quietly. “I haven’t, and he doesn’t.”

“Well, then,” she said, smiling. “Let’s go give him one.”

I FROWNED AT the intercom outside Thomas’s apartment building and said, “I don’t get it. He’s always home this time of night.”

“Maybe he’s out to dinner,” Molly said, shivering in the cold—after all, her backup clothing had been summer wear.

I shook my head. “He limits himself pretty drastically when it comes to exposing himself to the public.”

“Why?”

“He’s a White Court vampire, an incubus,” I said. “Pretty much every woman who looks at him gets ideas.”

Molly coughed delicately. "Oh. It's not just me, then."

"No. I followed him around town once. It was like watching one of those campy cologne commercials."

"But he *does* go out, right?"

"Sure."

She nodded and immediately started digging into her backpack. "Then maybe we could use a tracking spell and run him down. I think I've got some materials we can use."

"Me, too," I said, and produced two quarters from my pocket, holding them up between my fingers with slow, ominous flair, like David Blaine.

Then I took two steps to the pay phone next to the apartment building's entrance, plugged the coins in, and called Thomas's cell phone.

Molly gave me a level look and folded her arms.

"Hey," I told her as it rang. "We're wizards, kid. We have trouble using technology. Doesn't mean we can't be smart about it."

Molly rolled her eyes and muttered to herself, and I paid attention to the phone call.

"'Allo," Thomas answered, the word thick with the French accent he used in his public persona.

"Hello, France?" I responded. "I found a dead mouse in my can of French roast coffee, and I've called to complain. I'm an American, and I refuse to stand for that kind of thing from you people."

My half brother sighed. "A moment, please," he said in his accent. I could hear music playing and people talking behind him. A party? A door clicked shut and he said, without any accent, "Hey, Harry."

"I'm standing outside your apartment in the freaking snow with your birthday present."

"That won't do you much good," he said. "I'm not there."

"Being a professional detective, I had deduced that much," I said.

"A birthday present, huh?" he said.

"I get much colder and I'm going to burn it for warmth."

He laughed. "I'm at the Woodfield Mall in Schaumburg."

I glanced at my watch. "This late?"

"Uh-huh. I'm doing a favor for one of my employees. I'll be here until midnight or so. Look, just come back tomorrow evening."

"No," I said stubbornly. "Your birthday is today. I'll drive there."

"Uh," Thomas said. "Yeah. I guess, uh. Okay."

I frowned. "What are you doing out there?"
"Gotta go." He hung up on me.
I traded a look with Molly. "Huh."
She tilted her head. "What's going on?"
I turned and headed back for the car. "Let's find out."

WOODFIELD MALL IS the largest such establishment in the state, but its parking lots were all but entirely empty. The mall had been closed for more than an hour.

"How are we supposed to find him?" Molly asked.

I drove my car, the beat-up old Volkswagen Bug I had dubbed the *Blue Beetle*, around for a few minutes. "There," I said, nodding at a white sedan parked among a dozen other vehicles, the largest concentration of such transport left at the mall. "That's his car." I started to say something else but stopped myself before I wasted an opportunity to Yoda the trainee. "Molly, tell me what you see."

She scrunched up her nose, frowning, as I drove through the lot to park next to Thomas's car. The tires crunched over the thin dusting of snow that had frosted itself over scraped asphalt, streaks of salt and ice melt, and stubborn patches of ice. I killed the engine. It ticked for a few seconds, and then the car filled with the kind of soft, heavy silence you get only on a winter night with snow on the ground.

"The mall is closed," Molly said. "But there are cars at this entrance. There is a single section of lights on inside when the rest of them are out. I think one of the shops is lit inside. There's no curtain down over it, even though the rest of the shops have them."

"So what should we be asking?" I prompted.

"What is Thomas doing, in a group, in a closed mall, on Valentine's Day night?" Her tone rose at the end, questioning.

"Good; the date might have some significance," I said. "But the real question is this: Is it a coincidence that the exterior security camera facing that door is broken?"

Molly blinked at me, then frowned, looking around.

I pointed a finger up. "Remember to look in all three dimensions. Human instincts don't tend toward checking above us or directly at our feet, in general. You have to make yourself pick up the habit."

Molly frowned and then leaned over, peering up through the Beetle's window to the tall streetlamp pole above us.

Maybe ten feet up, there was the square, black metal housing of a security camera. Several bare wires dangled beneath it, their ends connected to nothing. I'd seen it as I pulled the car in.

My apprentice drew in a nervous breath. "You think something is happening?"

"I think we don't have enough information to make any assumptions," I said. "It's probably nothing. But let's keep our eyes open."

No sooner had the words left my mouth than two figures stepped out of the night, walking briskly down the sidewalk outside the mall toward the lighted entrance.

They both wore long black capes with hoods.

Not your standard wear for Chicago shoppers.

Molly opened her mouth to stammer something.

"Quiet," I hissed. "Do not move."

The two figures went by only thirty or forty feet away. I caught a glimpse of a very, very pale face within one of the figure's hoods, eyes sunken into the skull-like pits. They both turned to the door without so much as glancing at us, opened it as though they expected it to be unlocked, and proceeded inside.

"All right," I said quietly. "It might be something."

"Um," Molly said. "W-were those v-vampires?"

"Deep breaths, kid," I told her. "Fear isn't stupid, but don't let it control you. I have no idea what they were." I made sure my old fleece-lined heavy denim coat was buttoned up, and I got out of the car.

"Uh. Then where are you going?" she asked.

"Inside," I said, walking around to the Beetle's trunk. I unwrapped the wire that had held it closed ever since a dozen vehicular mishaps ago. "Whatever they are, Thomas doesn't know about them. He'd have said something."

I couldn't see her through the lifted hood, but Molly rolled down the window enough to talk to me. "B-but you don't have your staff or blasting rod or coat or anything. They're all back at your apartment."

I opened the case that held my .44 revolver and the box that held my ammunition, slipped shells into the weapon, and put it in my coat pocket. I dropped some extra rounds into the front pocket of my jeans and shut the

hood. “They’re only toys, Padawan.” Familiar, capable, proven toys that I felt naked without, but a true wizard shouldn’t absolutely rely on them—or teach his apprentice to do so. “Stay here, start up the car, and be ready to roll if we need to leave in a hurry.”

“Right,” she said, and wriggled over into the driver’s seat. To give Molly credit, she might have been nervous, but she had learned the job of wheelman—sorry, political correctioners, *wheelperson*—fairly well.

I kept my right hand in my coat pocket, on the handle of my gun, hunched my shoulders against a small breath of frozen wind, and hurried to the mall entrance, my shoes crunching and squeaking on the little coating of snow. I walked toward the doors as if I owned them, shoved them open like any shopper, and got a quick look around.

The mall was dark, except for the entrance and that single open shop—a little bistro with tinted windows that would have been dimly lit even when all the lights were on. I could see figures seated at tables inside and at a long dining counter and bar. They wore lots of black, and none of them looked much older than Molly, though the dim lights revealed few details.

I narrowed my eyes a bit, debating. Vampires gave off a certain amount of energy that someone like me could sense, but depending on which breed you were talking about, that energy could vary. Sometimes my sense of an approaching vampire was as overtly creepy as a child’s giggle coming from an open grave. Other times there was barely anything at all, and it registered on my senses as something as subtle as simple, instinctive dislike for the creature in question. For White Court vamps like my half brother, there was nothing at all, unless they were doing something overtly vampiric. From outside the shop, I couldn’t tell anything.

This was assuming they were vampires at all—which was a fairly large assumption. They didn’t meet up in the open like this.

Vampires didn’t apologize to the normal world for existing, but they didn’t exactly run around auditioning for the latest reality TV shows, either.

There was one way to find out. I opened the door to the bistro, hand on my gun, took a step inside, holding the door open in case I needed to flee, and peered around warily at the occupants. The nearest was a pair of young men, speaking earnestly at a table over two cups of what looked like coffee and ...

And they had acne—not like disfiguring acne or anything, just a few zits.

In case no one's told you, here's a monster-hunting tip for free: Vampires have little to no need for Clearasil.

Seen in that light, the two young men's costumes looked like exactly that—costumes. They had two big cloaks, dripping a little melt-water, hung over the backs of their chairs, and I caught the distinctive aroma of weed coming from their general direction. Two kids slipping out from the gathering to toke up and then come back inside. One of them produced a candy bar from a pocket and tore into it, to the reassurance of the people who make Clearasil, I'm sure.

I looked around the room. There were more people; mostly young, mostly with the thinness that goes with youth, as opposed to the leanly cadaverous kind that goes with being a bloodsucking fiend. They were mostly dressed in similar costume-style clothing, unless there had been a big sale at Goths-R-Us.

I felt my shoulders sag in relief, and I slipped my hand out of my pocket. Anytime one of my bouts of constructive paranoia didn't pan out was a good time.

"Sir," said a gruff voice from behind me. "The mall is closed. You want to tell me what you're doing here?"

I turned to face a squat, blocky man with watery blue eyes and no chin. He'd grown a thick brown-gold walrus mustache that emphasized rather than distracted from the lack. He had a high hairline, a brown uniform, and what looked like a cop's weapon belt until you saw that he had a walkie-talkie where the sidearm would be, next to a tiny can of Mace. His name tag read RAYMOND.

"Observing suspicious activity, Raymond," I said, and hooked my chin vaguely back at the bistro. "See that? People hanging around in the mall after hours. Weird."

He narrowed his eyes. "Wait. Don't I know you?"

I pursed my lips and thought. "Oh, right. Six, seven years ago, at Shoegasm."

He grunted in recognition. "The phony psychic."

"Consultant," I responded. "And from what I hear, their inventory stopped shrinking. Which hadn't happened before I showed up."

Raymond gave me a look that would have cowed lesser men. Much, much lesser men. Like maybe fourth graders. "If you aren't with the group,

you're gone. You want to leave, or would you rather I took care of it for you?"

"Stop," I said. "You're scaring me."

Raymond's mustache quivered. He apparently wasn't used to people who didn't take him seriously. Plus, I was much, much bigger than he was.

"'Allo, 'Ah-ree," came my brother's voice from behind me.

I turned to find Thomas there, dressed in tight black pants and a blousy red silk shirt. His shoulder-length hair was tied back in a tail with a matching red ribbon. His face didn't look much like mine, except around the eyes and maybe the chin. Thomas was good-looking the way Mozart was talented. There were people on the covers of magazines and on television and on movie screens who despaired of ever looking as good as Thomas.

On his arm was a slim young girl, quite pretty and wholesome-looking, wearing leather pants that rode low on her hips and a red bikini top, her silky brown hair artfully mussed. I recognized her from Thomas's shop, a young woman named Sarah.

"Harry!" she said. "Oh, it's nice to see you again." She nudged Thomas with her hip. "Isn't it?"

"Always," Thomas, smiling, said in his French accent.

"Hello, Mr. Raymond!" Sarah said, brightly.

Raymond scowled at me and asked Sarah, "He with you?"

"But of course," Thomas said in that annoying French way, giving Raymond his most brilliant smile.

Raymond grunted and took his hand away from the radio. Lucky me. I had evidently been dismissed from Raymond's world. "I was going to tell you I'm going to be in the parking lot, replacing a camera we've got down, if you need me."

"*Merci*," Thomas said, still smiling.

Raymond grunted. He gave me a sour look, picked up a toolbox from where he'd set it aside, along with his coat and a stepladder, and headed out to the parking lot.

"'Ah-ree, you know Say-rah," Thomas said.

"Never had the pleasure of an introduction," I said, and offered Sarah my hand.

She took it, smiling. "I take it you aren't here to play Evernight?"

I looked from her to the costumed people. “Oh,” I said. “*Oh*, it’s a ... game of some kind, I take it?”

“A LARP,” she said.

I looked blank for a second. “Is that like a lark?”

She grinned. “LARP,” she repeated. “Live action role-playing.”

“Live action ... vampire role-playing, I guess,” I said. I looked at Thomas. “And this is why you are here?”

Thomas gave me a sunny smile and nodded. “She asked me to pretend to be a vampire, just for tonight,” he said. “And straight.”

No wonder he was having a good time.

Sarah beamed at me. “Thomas *never* talks about his, ah, personal life. So you’re quite the man of mystery at the shop. We all speculate about you, all the time.”

I’ll just bet they did. There were times when my brother’s cover as a flamingly gay hairdresser really grated. And it wasn’t as though I could go around telling people we were related—not with the White Council of Wizards at war with the Vampire Courts.

“How nice,” I told Sarah. I was never getting out of the role people had assumed for me around Thomas. “Thomas, can we talk for a moment?”

“*Mais oui*,” he said. He smiled at Sarah, took her hand, and gave her a little bow over it. She beamed fondly at him, and then hurried back inside.

I watched her go, in her tight pants and skimpy top, and sighed. She had an awfully appealing curve of back and hip, and just enough bounce to make the motion pleasant, and there was no way I could ever even think about flirting with her.

“Roll your tongue back up into your mouth before someone notices,” Thomas said, sotto voce. “I’ve got a cover to keep.”

“Tell them I’m larping like I’m straight,” I said, and we turned to walk down the entry hall, a little away from the bistro. “Pretending to be a vampire, huh?”

“It’s fun,” Thomas said. “I’m like a guest star on the season finale.”

I eyed him. “Vampires aren’t fun and games.”

“I know that,” Thomas said. “You know that. But *they* don’t know that.”

“You aren’t doing them any favors,” I said.

“Lighten up,” Thomas said. The words were teasing, but there were serious undertones to his voice. “They’re having fun, and I’m helping. I don’t get a chance to do that very often.”

“By making light of something that is a very real danger.”

He stopped and faced me. “They’re *innocent*, Harry. They don’t know any better. They’ve never been hurt by a vampire or lost loved ones to a vampire.” He lifted his eyebrows. “I thought that was what your people were fighting for in the first place.”

I gave him a sour look. “If you weren’t my brother, I’d probably tell you that you have some awfully nerdy hobbies.”

We reached the front doors. Thomas studied himself in the glass and struck a pose. “True, but I look gorgeous doing them. Besides, Sarah worked eleven Fridays to Mondays in a row without a complaint. She earned a favor.”

Outside, the snow was thickening. Raymond was atop his ladder, fiddling with the camera. Molly was watching him. I waved until I got her attention, then made a little outline figure of a box with my fingers, and beckoned her. She nodded and killed the engine.

“I came in here expecting trouble. We’re lucky I didn’t bounce a few of these kids off the ceiling before I realized they weren’t something from the dark side.”

“Bah,” Thomas said. “Never happen. You’re careful.”

I snorted. “I hope you won’t mind if I just give you your present and run.”

“Wow,” Thomas said. “Gracious much?”

“Up yours,” I said as Molly grabbed the present and hurried in through the cold, shivering all the way. “And happy birthday.”

He turned to me and gave me a small, genuinely pleased smile. “Thank you.”

There was a *click* of high heels in the hall behind us, and a young woman appeared. She was pretty enough, I suspected, but in the tight black dress, black hose, and with her hair slicked back like that, she came off sort of threatening. She gave me a slow, cold look and said, “So. I see you’re keeping low company after all, Ravenius.”

Ever suave, I replied, “Uh. What?”

“‘Ah-ree,” Thomas said.

I glanced at him.

He put his hand flat on the top of his head and said, “Do this.”

I peered at him.

He gave me a look.

I sighed and put my hand on the top of my head.

The girl in the black dress promptly did the same thing and gave me a smile. “Oh, right, sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“I will be back in one moment,” Thomas said, his accent back. “Personal business.”

“Right,” she said, “sorry. I figured Ennui had stumbled onto a subplot.” She smiled again, then took her hand off the top of her head, reassumed that cold, haughty expression, and stalked *clickety-clack* back to the bistro.

I watched her go, turned to my brother while we both stood there with our hands flat on top of our heads, elbows sticking out like chicken wings, and said, “What does this mean?”

“We’re out of character,” Thomas said.

“Oh,” I said. “And not a subplot.”

“If we had our hands crossed over our chests,” Thomas said, “we’d be invisible.”

“I missed dinner,” I said. I put my other hand on my stomach. Then, just to prove that I could, I patted my head and rubbed my stomach. “Now I’m out of character—and hungry.”

“You’re always hungry. How is that out of character?”

“True,” I said. I frowned, then looked back. “What’s taking Molly—”

My apprentice stood facing away from me, her back pressed to the glass doors. She stood rigid, one hand pressed to her mouth. Thomas’s birthday present, in its pink and red Valentine’s Day wrapping paper, lay on its side among grains of snowmelt on the sidewalk. Molly trembled violently.

Thomas was a beat slow to catch on to what was happening. “Isn’t that skirt a little light for the weather? Look, she’s freezing.”

Before he got to “skirt,” I was out the door. I seized Molly and dragged her inside, eyes on the parking lot. I noticed two things.

First, that Raymond’s ladder was tipped over and lay on its side in the parking lot. Flakes of snow were already gathering upon it. In fact, the snow was coming down more and more heavily, despite the weather forecast that had called for clearing skies.

Second, there were droplets of blood on my car and the cars immediately around it, the ones closest to Raymond’s ladder. They were rapidly freezing and they glittered under the parking lot’s lamps like tiny brilliant rubies.

“What?” Thomas asked as I brought Molly back in. “What is—” He stared out the windows for a second and answered the question for himself.

“Crap.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Molly?”

She gave me a wild-eyed glance, shook her head once, then bowed it and closed her eyes, speaking in a low, repetitive whisper.

“What the hell?” Thomas said.

“She’s in psychic shock,” I said quietly.

“Never seen you in psychic shock,” my brother said.

“Different talents. I blow things up. Molly’s a sensitive, and getting more so,” I told him. “She’ll snap herself out of it, but she needs a minute.”

“Uh-huh,” Thomas said quietly. He stared intently at the shuddering young woman, his eyes shifting colors slightly, from deep grey to something paler.

“Hey,” I said to him. “Focus.”

He gave his head a little shake, his eyes gradually darkening again. “Right. Come on. Let’s get her a chair and some coffee and stop standing around in front of big glass windows making targets of ourselves.”

We did, dragging her into the bistro and to the table nearest the door, where Thomas could stand watching the darkness while I grabbed the girl some coffee from a dispenser, holding my hand on top of my silly head the whole while.

Molly got her act together within a couple of minutes after I sat down. It surprised me: Despite my casual words to Thomas, I hadn’t seen her that badly shaken up before. She grabbed at the coffee, shaking, and slurped some.

“Okay, grasshopper,” I said. “What happened?”

“I was on the way in,” she replied, her voice distant and oddly flat. “The security man. S-something killed him.” A hint of something desperate crept into her voice. “I f-felt him die. It was horrible.”

“What?” I asked her. “Give me some details to work with.”

Molly shook her head rapidly. “D-didn’t see. It was too fast. I sensed something moving behind me—m-maybe a footstep. Then there was a quiet sound and h-he *died*...” Her breaths started coming rapidly again.

“Easy,” I told her, keeping my voice in the steady cadence I’d used when teaching her how to maintain self-control under stress. “Breathe. Focus. Remember who you are.”

“Okay,” she said, several breaths later. “Okay.”

“This sound. What was it?”

She stared down at the steam coming up off her coffee. "I ... A thump, maybe. Lighter."

"A snap?" I asked.

She grimaced but nodded. "And I turned around, fast as I could. But he was gone. I didn't see anything there, Harry."

Thomas, ten feet away, could hear our quiet conversation as clearly as if he'd been sitting with us. "Something grabbed Raymond," he said. "Something moving fast enough to cross her whole field of vision in a second or two. It didn't stop moving when it took him. She probably heard his neck breaking from the whiplash."

There wasn't much to say to that. The whole concept was disturbing as hell.

Thomas glanced back at me and said, "It's a great way to do a grab and snatch if you're fast enough. My father showed me how it was done once." His head whipped around toward the parking lot.

I felt myself tense. "What?"

"The streetlights just went out."

I sat back in my chair, thinking furiously. "Only one reason to do that."

"To blind us," Thomas said. "Prevent anyone from reaching the vehicles."

"Also keeps anyone outside from seeing what is happening here," I said. "How are you guys using this place after hours?"

"Sarah's uncle owns it," Thomas said.

"Get her," I said, rising to take up watching the door. "Hurry."

Thomas brought her over to me a moment later. By the time he did, the larpers had become aware that something was wrong, and their awkwardly sinister role-playing dwindled into an uncertain silence as Sarah hurried over. Before, I had watched her and her scarlet bikini top in appraisal. Now I couldn't help but think how slender and vulnerable it made her neck look.

"What is it?" Sarah asked me.

"Trouble," I said. "We may be in danger, and I need you to answer a few questions for me, right now."

She opened her mouth and started to ask me something.

"First," I said, interrupting her, "do you know how many security men are present at night?"

She blinked at me for a second. Then she said, "Uh, four before closing, two after. But the two who leave are usually here until midnight, doing

maintenance and some of the cleaning.”

“Where?”

She shook her head. “The security office, in administration.”

“Right,” I said. “This place have a phone?”

“Of course.”

“Take me to it.”

She did, back in the little place’s tiny kitchen. I picked it up, got a dial tone, and slammed Murphy’s phone number across the keypad. If the bad guys, whoever or whatever they were, were afraid of attracting attention from the outside world, I might be able to avoid the entire situation by calling in lots of police cars and flashy lights.

The phone rang once, twice.

And then it went dead, along with the lights, the music playing on the speakers, and the constant blowing sigh of the heating system.

Several short, breathy screams came from the front of the bistro, and I heard Thomas shout for silence and call, “Harry?”

“The security office,” I said to Sarah. “Where is it?”

“Um. It’s at the far end of the mall from here.”

“Easy to find?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “You have to go through the administrative hall and—”

I shook my head. “You can show me. Come on.” I stalked out to the front room of the bistro. “Thomas? Anything?”

All the larpers had gathered in close, herd instinct kicking in under the tension. Thomas stepped closer to me so that he could answer me under his breath.

“Nothing yet,” Thomas said. “But I saw something moving out there.”

I grunted. “Here’s the plan. Molly, Sarah, and I are going to go down to the security office and try to reach someone.”

“Bad idea,” Thomas said. “We need to get out of here.”

“We’re too vulnerable. They’re between us and the cars,” I said. “Whatever they are. We’ll never make it out all the way across the parking lot without getting caught.”

“Fine,” he said. “You fort up here and I’ll go.”

“No. Once we’re gone, you’ll try to get through to the cops on a cell phone. There’s not a prayer of getting one to work if Molly and I are anywhere nearby—not with both of us this nervous.”

He didn't like that answer, but he couldn't refute it. "All right," he said, grimacing. "Watch your back."

I nodded to him and raised my voice. "All right, everyone. I'm not sure exactly what is going on here, but I'm going to go find security. I want everyone to stay here until I get back and we're sure it's safe."

There was a round of halfhearted protests at that, but Thomas quelled them with a look. It wasn't an angry or threatening look. It was simply a steady gaze.

Everyone shut up.

I headed out with Molly and Sarah in tow, and as we stepped out of the bistro, there was an enormous crashing sound, and a car came flying sideways through the glass wall of the entranceway about eight feet off the ground. It hit the ground, broken glass and steel foaming around it like crashing surf, bounced with a shockingly loud crunch, and tumbled ponderously toward us, heralded by a rush of freezing air.

Molly was already moving, but Sarah only stood there staring incredulously as the car came toward us. I grabbed her around the waist and all but hauled her off her feet, dragging her away. I ran straight away from the oncoming missile, which was not the smartest way to go—but since a little perfume kiosk was blocking my path, it was the *only* way.

I was fast, and we got a little bit lucky. I pulled Sarah past the kiosk just as the car hit it. The vehicle's momentum was almost gone by the time it hit, and the car crashed to a halt, a small wave of safety glass washing past our shoes. Sarah wobbled and nearly fell. I caught her and kept going. She started to scream or shout or ask a question—but I clapped my hand over her mouth and hissed, "Quiet!"

I didn't stop until we were around the corner and the crashing racket was coming to a halt. Then I stopped with my back against the wall and got Sarah's attention.

I didn't speak. I raised one finger to my lips with as much physical emphasis as I could manage. Sarah, trembling violently, nodded at me. I turned to give the same signal to Molly, who looked pale but in control of herself. She nodded as well, and we turned and slipped away from that arm of the mall.

I listened as hard as I could, which was actually quite hard. It's a talent I seem to have developed, maybe because I'm a wizard, and maybe just because some people can hear really well. It was difficult to make out

anything at all, much less any kind of detail, but I was sure I heard one thing—footsteps, coming in the crushed door of the mall, crunching on broken glass and debris.

Something fast enough to snap a man's neck with the whiplash of its passage and strong enough to throw that car through a wall of glass had just walked into the mall behind us. I figured it was a very, very good idea not to let it know we were there and sneaking away.

We got away with it, walking slowly and silently out through the mall, which yawned all around us, three levels of darkened stores, deserted shops, and closed metal grates and doors. I stopped a dozen shops later, after we'd gone past the central plaza of the mall and were far enough away for the space to swallow up quiet conversation.

"Oh my God," Sarah whimpered, her voice a strangled little whisper. "Oh my God. What is happening? Is it terrorists?"

I probably would have had a more suave answer if she hadn't been pressed up against my side, mostly naked from the hips up, warm and lithe and trembling. The adrenaline rush that had hit me when the car nearly smashed us caught up to me, and I suddenly found it difficult to keep from shivering, myself. I had a sudden, insanely intense need to rip off the strings on that red bikini top and kiss her, purely for the sake of how good it would feel. All things considered, though, it would have been less than appropriate. "Uh," I mumbled, forcing myself to look back the way we'd come. "They're ... bad guys of some kind, yeah. Are you hurt?"

"No," Sarah said.

"Molly?" I asked.

"I'm fine," my apprentice answered.

"The security office," I said.

Sarah stared at me for a second, her eyes intense. "But ... but I don't understand why—"

I put my hand firmly over her mouth. "Sarah," I said, meeting her eyes for as long as I dared, "I've been in trouble before, and I know what I'm doing. I need you to trust me. All right?"

Her eyes widened for a second. She reached up to lightly touch my wrist, and I let her push my hand gently away from her mouth. She swallowed and nodded once.

"There's no time. We have to find the security office now."

"A-all right," she said. "This way."

She led us off and we followed her, creeping through the cavernous dimness of the unlit mall. Molly leaned in close to me to whisper. “Even if we get the security guards, what are they going to do against something that can do *that*?”

“They’ll have radios,” I whispered back. “Cell phones. They’ll know all the ways out. If we can’t call in help, they’ll give us the best shot of getting these people out of here in one—”

Lights began flickering on and off—not blinking, not starting up and shutting down in rhythm, but irregularly. First they came on over a section of the third floor for a few seconds. Then they went out. A few seconds later, it was a far section of the second floor. Then they went out. Then light shone from one of the distant wings for a moment and vanished again. It was like watching a child experiment with the switches.

Then the PA system let out a crackle and a little squeal of feedback. It shut off again and came back on. “Testing,” said a dry, rasping voice over the speakers. “Testing one, two, three.”

Sarah froze in place, and then backed up warily, looking at me. I stepped up next to her, and she pressed in close to me, shivering.

“There,” said the voice. It was a horrible thing to listen to—like Linda Blair’s impression of a demon-possessed victim, only less melodious. “I’m sure you all can hear me now.”

And I’d heard such a voice before. “Oh, hell,” I breathed.

“This is Constance,” continued the voice. “Constance Bushnell. I’m sure you all remember me.”

I glanced at Molly, who shook her head. Sarah looked frightened and confused, but when she caught my look, she shook her head, too.

“You might also remember me,” she continued, “as Drulinda.” And then the voice started singing “Happy Birthday.” The tune wasn’t even vaguely close to the actual song, but the “Happy birthday to me” lyrics were unmistakable.

Sarah’s eyes had widened. “Drulinda?”

“Who the hell is Drulinda?” I asked.

Sarah shook her head. “One of our characters. But her player ran away from home or something.”

“And you didn’t recognize her actual name?”

Sarah gave me a slightly guilty glance. “Well, I never played with her much. She wasn’t really very, you know—popular.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Tell me whatever you can about her.”

She shook her head. “Um. About five four, sort of ... plain. You know, not ugly or anything, but not really pretty. Maybe a little heavy.”

“Not that.” I sighed. “Tell me something *important* about her. People make fun of her?”

“Some did,” she said. “I never liked it, but ...”

“Crap.” I looked at Molly and said, “Code Carrie. We’re in trouble.”

The horrible, dusty song came to an end. “It’s been a year since I left you,” Drulinda’s voice said. “A year since I found what all you whining losers were looking for. And I decided to give myself a present.” There was a horrible pause, and then the voice said, “You. All of you.”

“Code what?” Molly asked me.

I shook my head. “Sarah, do you know where the announcement system is?”

“Yes,” Sarah said. “Administration. Right by—”

“The security office.” I sighed.

Drulinda’s voice continued. “The entrances are closed and watched. But you should feel free to run for them. You all taste so much better when you’ve had time to be properly terrified. I’ve so been looking forward to seeing your reaction to the new me.”

With that, the PA system shut off, but a second later, it started playing music—“Only You,” by the Platters.

“Molly,” I hissed, suddenly realizing the danger. “Veil us, *now*.”

She blinked at me, then nodded, bowing her head with a frown of concentration and folding her arms across her chest. I felt her gather up her will and release it with a word and a surge of energy that made the air sparkle like diamond dust for a half second.

Inside the veil, the air suddenly turned a few degrees cooler, and the area outside it seemed to become even dimmer than it had been a second before. I could sense the delicate tracery of the veil’s magic in the air around us, though I knew that, from the other side, none of that would be detectable—assuming Molly had done it correctly, of course. Veils were one of her strongest areas, and I was gambling our lives that she had gotten it right.

Not more than a breath or two later, there was a swift pattering sound and a dim blur in the shadows, which ceased moving abruptly maybe twenty feet away and revealed the presence of a vampire of the Black Court.

Drulinda, or so I presumed her to be, was dressed in dark jeans, a red knit sweater, and a long black leather coat. If she'd been heavy in life, death had taken care of that problem for her. She was sunken and shriveled, as bony and dried up as the year-old corpse she now was. Unlike the older vamps of her breed, she still had most of her hair, though it had clearly not been washed or styled. Most of the Black Court I'd run into had never been terribly body conscious. I suppose once you'd seen it rot, there just wasn't much more that could happen to sway your opinion of it, either way.

Unlike the older vampires I'd faced, she stank. I don't mean that she carried a little whiff of the grave along with her. I mean she smelled like a year-old corpse that still had a few juicy corners left and wasn't entirely done returning to the earth. It was noxious enough to make me gag—and I'd spent my day tracking down and dismantling a freaking slime golem.

She stood there for a moment, while the Platters went through the first verse, looking all around her. She'd sensed something, but she wasn't sure what. The vampire turned a slow circle, her shriveled lips moving in time with the music coming over the PA system, and as she did, two more of the creatures, slower than Drulinda, appeared out of the darkness.

They were freshly made vampires—so much so that for a second, I thought them human. Both men wore brown uniforms identical to Raymond's. Both were stained with blood, and both had narrow scoops of flesh missing from the sides of their throats—at the jugular and carotid, specifically. They moved stiffly, making many little twitching motions of their arms and legs, as if struggling against the onset of rigor mortis.

"What is it?" slurred one of them. His voice was ragged but not the horrible parody Drulinda's was.

Her hand blurred, its movement too fast to see. The newborn vampire reacted with inhuman speed, but not nearly enough of it, and the blow threw him from his feet to land on the floor, shattered teeth scattering out from him like coins from a dropped purse. "You can talk," Drulinda rasped, "when I say you can talk. Speak again, and I will rip you apart and throw you into Lake Michigan. You can spend eternity down there with no arms, no legs, no light, and no blood."

The vampire, his nose smashed into shapelessness, rose as if he'd just slipped and fallen on his ass. He nodded, his body language twitchy and cringing.

Drulinda's leathery lips peeled back from yellow teeth stained with drying brownish blood. Then she turned and darted ahead, her footsteps making that light, swift patter on the tiles of the floor. She was gone and around the corner, heading for the bistro, in maybe two or three seconds. The two newbie vampires went after her, if far more slowly.

"Crap," I whispered as they vanished. "Dammit, dammit, dammit."

"What was that, Harry?" Molly whispered.

"Black Court vampires," I replied, trying not to inhale too deeply. The stench was fading, but it wasn't gone. "Some of the fastest, strongest, meanest things out there."

"Vampires?" Sarah hissed, incredulous. She didn't look so good. Her face was turning green. "No, this is, no, no, no—" She broke off and was violently sick. I avoided joining in by the narrowest of margins. Molly had an easier time of it than I, focused as she was on maintaining the veil over us, but I saw her swallow very carefully.

"Okay, Molly," I said quietly, "listen to me."

She nodded, turning abstracted eyes to me.

"Black Court vampires," I told her. "The ones Stoker's book outed. All their weaknesses—sunlight, garlic, holy water, symbols of faith. Remember?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Most of the strengths, too. Strong, fast. Don't look them in the eyes." I swallowed. "Don't let them take you alive."

My apprentice's eyes flickered with both apprehension and a sudden, fierce fire. "I understand. What do you want me to do?"

"Keep the veil up. Take Sarah here. Find a shady spot and lie low. This should be over in half an hour, maybe less. By then, there's going to be a ruckus getting people's attention, one way or another."

"But I can—"

"Get me killed trying to cover you," I said firmly. "You aren't in this league, grasshopper. Not yet. I have to move fast. And I have friends here. I won't be alone."

Molly stared at me for a moment, her eyes shining with brief, frustrated tears. Then she nodded once and said, "Isn't there anything I can do?"

I peered at her, then down at her Birkenstocks. "Yeah. Give me your shoes."

Molly hadn't been my apprentice in the bizarre for a year and a half for nothing. She didn't even blink, much less ask questions. She just took off her shoes and handed them to me.

I put a gentle hand on her shoulder, then touched Sarah's face until she lifted her eyes to me. "I don't understand what's happening," she whispered.

"Stay with Molly," I told Sarah. "She's going to take care of you. Do whatever she says. All right?" I frowned down at her expensive black heels. "Gucci?"

"Prada," she said in a numb voice.

Being all manly, I know dick about shoes, but hopefully it wouldn't blow my cover as Thomas's mystery man. "Give them to me."

"All right," she said, and did, too shocked to argue.

Thomas had been right about the larpers. The corpse of Sarah's innocence lay on the floor along with her last meal, and she was taking it pretty hard.

I fought down a surge of anger and rose without another word, padding out from the protection of Molly's veil, shoes gripped in one hand, my gun in the other. The .44 might as well have been Linus's security blanket. It wouldn't do a thing to help me against a vampire of the Black Court—it just made me feel better.

I went as fast as I could without making an enormous racket and stalked up the nearest stairs—a deactivated escalator. Once I'd reached the second level, I took a right and hurried toward Shoegasm.

It was a fairly spacious shop that had originally occupied only a tiny spot, but after ironing out some early troubles, the prosperous little store had expanded into the space beside it. Now, behind a steel mesh security curtain, the store was arranged in an oh-so-trendy fashion and sported several huge signs that went on with a thematically appropriate orgasmic enthusiasm about the store's quality money-back guarantee.

"I am totally underappreciated," I muttered. Then I raised my voice a little, forcing a very slight effort of will, of magic, into the words as I spoke. "Keef! Hey, Keef! It's Harry Dresden!"

I waited for a long moment, peering through the grating, but I couldn't see anything in the dim shadows of the store. I took a chance, slipping the silver pentacle amulet from its chain around my neck, and with a murmur willed a whisper of magic through the piece of jewelry. A soft blue radiance

began to emanate from the silver, though I tried to keep the light it let out to a minimum. If Drulinda or her vampire buddies were looking even vaguely in my direction, I was going to stand out like a freaking moron holding the only light in an entire darkened shopping mall.

“Keef!” I called again.

The cobb appeared from an expensive handbag hung over the arm of a dressing dummy wearing a pair of six-hundred-dollar Italian boots. He was a tiny thing, maybe ten inches tall, with a big puff of fine white hair like Albert Einstein. He was dressed in something vaguely approximating nineteenth-century urban-European wear—dark trousers, boots, a white shirt, and suspenders. He also wore a leather work belt thick with tiny tools, and he had a pair of odd-looking goggles pushed up over his forehead.

Keef hopped down from the dressing dummy and hurried across the floor to the security grate. He put on a pair of gloves and pulled out a couple of straps from his work belt. Then, nearly as nimble as a squirrel and very careful not to touch the metal with his bare skin, he climbed up the metal grate using a pair of carabiners. Keef was a faerie, one of the Little Folk who dwelled within the shadows and hidden places of our own world, and the touch of steel was painful to him.

“Wizard Dresden,” he greeted me in a Germanic accent as he came level with my head. The cobb’s voice was pitched low, even for someone as tiny as he. “The market this night danger roams. Here you should not be.”

“Don’t I know it,” I replied. “But there are people in danger.”

“Ah,” Keef said. “The mortals you insist to defend. Unwise that battle is.”

“I need your help,” I said.

Keef eyed me and gave me a firm shake of his head. “The walking dead very dangerous are. My people’s blood it could cost. That I will risk not.”

“You owe me, Keef,” I growled.

“Our living. Not our lives.”

“Have it your way,” I said. Then I lifted up one of Sarah’s shoes and, without looking away from the little cobb, snapped the heel off.

“Ach!” Keef cried in horror, his little feet slipping off the metal grate. “*Nein!*”

There was a chorus of similar gasps and cries from inside Shoegasm.

I held up the other shoe and did it again.

Keef wailed in protest. All of a sudden, thirty of the little cobbs, male and female, pressed up to the security grate. All of them had the same frizzy white hair, all of them dressed like something from Oktoberfest, and all of them were horrified.

“*Nein!*” Keef wailed again. “Those are Italian leather! Handmade! What are you doing?”

I took a step to my left and held the broken shoes over a trash can.

The cobbler elves gasped, all together, and froze in place.

“Do not do this,” Keef begged me. “Lost all is not. Repaired they can be. Good as new we can fix them. Good as new! Do not throw them away.”

I didn’t waver. “I know things have been hard for your people since cobblers have gone out of business,” I said. “I got you permission for your clan to work here, fixing shoes, in exchange for taking what you need from the vending machine. True?”

“True,” Keef said, his eyes on the broken shoes in my hand. “Wizard, over the trash you need not hold them. If dropped they are, trash they become, and touch them we may not. Lost to all will they be. Anything we both will regret let us not do.”

Anxious murmurs of agreement rose from the other cobbs.

Enough of the stick—it was time to show them the carrot. I held up Molly’s battered old Birkenstocks. The sight made several of the more matronly cobbs cluck their tongues in disapproval.

“I helped set you up with a good deal here at Shoegasm,” I said. “But I can see you’re getting a little crowded. I can get you another good setup—a family, seven kids, mom and dad, all of them active.”

The cobbs murmured in sudden excitement.

Keef coughed delicately and said, staring anxiously at the broken heels in my hand, “And the shoes?”

“I’ll turn them over to you,” I said, “if you help me.”

Keef narrowed his eyes. “Slaves to you we are,” he snapped. “Threatened and bribed.”

“You know the cause I fight for,” I said. “I protect mortals. I’ve never tried to hide that, and I’ve never lied to you. I need your help, Keef. I’ll do what it takes to get it—but you know my reputation by now. I deal fairly with the Little Folk, and I always show gratitude for their help.”

The leader of the cobbs regarded me steadily for a moment. Nobody likes being strong-armed, not even the Little Folk, who are used to getting

walked on, but I didn't have time for diplomacy.

Keef's gaze kept getting distracted by the shoes, dangling over the trash can, and he made no answer. The other cobbs all waited, clearly taking their cue from Keef.

"Show of good faith, Keef," I said quietly. I took the broken shoes and set them gently on the ground in front of the shop. "I'll trust you and your people to repair them and return them. And I'll pay in pizza."

The cobbs gasped, staring at me as if I'd just offered them a map to El Dorado. I heard one of the younger cobbs exclaim, "*True*, it is!"

"Fleeting, pizza is," Keef said sternly. "Eternal are shoes and leather goods."

"Shoes and leather goods," the rest of the cobbs intoned, their tiny voices solemn.

"Few mortals to the Little Folk show respect, these days," Keef said quietly. "Or trust. True it is that beneath this roof we are crowded. And unto the wizard, debt is owed." He gave the shoes a professional glance and nodded once. "Under your terms, and within our means, our aid is given. Your need unto us speak."

"Scouts," I said at once. "I know there are Black Court vampires in the mall. I need to know exactly how many and exactly where they are."

"Done it will be," Keef barked. "Cobbs!"

There was a little gust of wind, and I was suddenly alone. Oh, and both Sarah's expensive heels and Molly's clunky sandals were gone, the latter right out of my hands and so smoothly that I hadn't even noticed them being taken. I checked, just to be careful, but my own shoes remained safely on my feet, which was a relief. You can't ever be certain with cobbs. The little faeries, at times, could get awfully fixated upon whatever their particular area of concern might be, and messing around with it was more dangerous than most realized. Despite the metal screen between the cobbs and me, I'd been playing with fire when I held those Pradas over the trash can.

Another thing that most people don't realize is just how much the Little Folk can learn, and how fast they can do it—especially when things are happening on their own turf. It took Keef and his people about thirty seconds to go and return.

"Four, there are," Keef reported. "Three lesser, who of late this place did guard. One greater, who gave them not-life."

“Four,” I breathed. “Where?”

“One outside near the group of cars waits and watches,” Keef said. “One outside the bistro where the mortals hide stands watch. One beside his mistress stands within.”

I got a sick little feeling in my stomach. “Has anyone been hurt?”

Keef shook his head. “Taunt them, she does. Frighten them.” He shrugged. “It is not as their kind often is.”

“No. She’s there for vengeance, not food.” I frowned. “I need you to get me something. Can you?”

I told him what I needed, and Keef gave me a mildly offended look. “Of course.”

“Good. Now, the one outside,” I said. “Can you show me a way I could get close to him without being seen?”

Keef’s eyes glittered with a sudden ferocity that was wholly at odds with his size and appearance. “This way, Wizard.”

I went at what was practically a run, but the tiny cobb had no trouble staying ahead of me. He led me through a service access door that required a key to open—until it suddenly swung open from the other side, a dozen young male cobbbs dangling from the security bar and cheering. My amulet cast the only light as Keef led me down a flight of stairs and through a long, low tunnel.

“Access to the drains and watering system, this passage is,” Keef called to me. We stopped at a ladder leading up. A small paper sack sat on the floor by the ladder. “Your weapons,” he said, nodding at the bag. He pointed at the ladder. “Behind the vampire, this opens.”

I opened the bag and found two plastic cylinders. I didn’t want the crinkling paper, so I put one of them in my jacket pocket, kept the other in hand, and crept up the ladder. At the top was a hatch made of some kind of heavy synthetic, rather than wood or steel, and it opened without a sound. I poked my head up and looked cautiously around the parking lot.

The lights were out, but there was enough snow on the ground to bounce around plenty of light, giving the outdoors an oddly close, quiet quality, almost as if someone had put a roof overhead, just barely out of sight. Over by the last group of cars in the mall parking lot, next to the *Blue Beetle* in fact, stood the vampire.

He was little more than a black form, and though human in shape, he was inhumanly still, every bit as motionless as the other inanimate objects in

the parking lot. Snow had begun to gather on his head and shoulders, just as it had on the roofs and hoods of the parked cars. He stood facing the darkened mall, where snow blew into the hole left by the thrown car. He was watching, I supposed, for anyone who might come running out, screaming.

A newborn vampire might not be anywhere near as dangerous as an older one, but that was like saying a Mack truck was nowhere near as dangerous as a main battle tank. If you happened to be the guy standing in the road in front of one, it wouldn't much matter to you which of them crushed you to pulp. If I'd had my staff and rod with me, I might have chanced a stand-up fight. But I didn't have my gear, and even if I had, my usual magic would have made plenty of noise and warned the vampire's companions.

Vampires are tough. They take a lot of killing. I had to take this one out suddenly and with tremendous violence without making any noise. If I had to face it openly, I'd have no chance.

Which is why I had used the cobb's intelligence to get sneaky.

I drew in my will, the magic I had been born with and that I had spent a lifetime exercising, practicing, and focusing. As the power came into me, it made the skin of my arms ripple with goose bumps, and I could feel a strange pressure at the back of my head and pressing against the *inside* of my forehead. Once I had the power ready, I started shaping it with my thoughts, focusing my will and intent on the desired outcome.

The spell I worked up wasn't one of my better evocations. It took me more than twenty seconds to get it together. For fast and dirty combat magic, that's the next-best thing to forever.

For treacherous, backstabbing, sucker-punch magic, though, it's just fine.

At the very last second, the vampire seemed to sense something. It turned its head toward me.

I clenched my fist as I released my will and snarled, "*Gravitus!*"

The magic lashed out into the ground beneath the vampire's feet, and the steady, slow, immovable power of the earth suddenly stirred, concentrating, reaching up for the vampire standing upon it. In technical terms, I didn't actually *increase* the gravity of the earth beneath it. I only concentrated it a little. In a circle fifty yards across, for just a fraction of a second, gravity vanished. The cars all surged up against their shock absorbers and settled again. The thin coat of snow leapt several inches off the parking lot and fell back.

In that same fraction of a second, all of that gravity from all of that area concentrated itself into a circle, maybe eighteen inches across, directly at the vampire's feet.

There was no explosion, no flash of light—and no scream. The vampire just went down, slammed to the earth as suddenly and violently as if I'd dropped an anvil on it. There was a rippling, crackling sound as hundreds of bones shattered all together, and a splatter of sludgy liquid that splashed all over the cars around the vampire—mostly upon the Beetle, really.

The effort of gathering and releasing so much energy left me gasping. I was out of shape when it came to earth magic. It had never been my strongest suit—too slow, most of the time, to seem like it would have been worth the bother. As I hauled myself out of the ground, though, I had to admit that when there was enough time to actually use it, it sure as hell was impressive.

I padded to the car, watching the mall entrance, but there was no outcry and no sudden appearance of Drulinda or the other vampires of her scourge.

The vampire was still alive.

Un-alive. Whatever. The thing was still trying to move.

It was mostly just a mass of pulped, squishy meat. In the cold, at least, it hadn't begun to rot, so that cut down on the smell. One eye rolled around in its mashed skull. Muscles twitched, but without a solid framework of bone to work with, they didn't accomplish much beyond an odd, pulsing motion. It could probably put itself back together, given blood and time, but I didn't feel like letting it have either. I held the plastic cylinder over it.

"Nothing personal," I told the vampire. Then I dumped powdered garlic from the pizzeria in the mall's food court all over it.

I can't say the vampire screamed, really. It died the way a salted slug does, in silent, pulsing agony. I had to fight to keep my stomach from emptying itself, but only for a second. Absolutely disgusting demises are par for the course when fighting vampires. A few wisps of smoke rose up, and after a few seconds, the mass of undead flesh became simple dead flesh again.

One down.

Three to go.

I stalked toward the mall, moving with all the silence I could manage. After years working as a private investigator, and more years fighting a magical war against the vampires in the shadows, I knew how to be quiet. I

slipped up to within thirty feet of the entrance and spotted the second vampire before he noticed me, right where Keef's people said he was.

He stood facing the door of the bistro, apparently intent on what was happening within. I could hear voices inside, though I could make out no details over the continued, repeated playing of "Only You," beyond that one of the voices was Drulinda's leathery rasp. There were no sounds of fighting, which wasn't good. Thomas certainly wouldn't have allowed them to hurt anyone without putting up a struggle, and given the mutual capabilities of everyone involved, it would have been noticeable.

A second's thought told me that it might also be a good sign. If they'd killed him, they would have made a big mess doing it. Assuming he hadn't gone down without getting to put up much of a fight—and I refused to assume anything else. I knew my brother too well—something else had to be happening.

My brother could go toe-to-toe with a vampire of the Black Court, if he had to, but the last time he'd done it, the effort had nearly killed both him and the woman he'd had to feed from in order to recover. There were two of them inside, and though Thomas was as combat capable as any of the White Court's best, he wasn't going to start a slugfest if he thought he could get a better fight by biding his time, doing what the White Court did—looking human and using guile. My instincts told me that Thomas was stalling, choosing his moment. Hell, he was probably waiting for me to show up and help.

I looked down and found his birthday present, untouched by the flying debris, lying in its bright red and pink paper where Molly had dropped it on the sidewalk outside the doors.

I found myself smiling.

Twenty seconds or so later, I tossed the present underhand. It tumbled through the air and landed on the floor directly outside the bistro's entrance. The head of the vampire on guard jerked around, focusing on the present. It tilted its head to one side. Then it whipped around toward me, baring its teeth in a snarl.

"*Gravitus!*" I thundered, releasing a second earthcrafting.

Once again, everything jumped up—but this time, it wasn't quiet. The circle of nullified gravity embraced every shop nearby in the mall, sending merchandise and shelves and dishes and furniture and cash registers and dressing dummies and God knew what other sundry objects flying up, to

come crashing back down to the floor again. A great uproar of hundreds of impacts came down from the floors above us as well.

Once again, the circle of supergravity crushed a brown-shirted vampire flat to the floor—only I'd forgotten about the levels above. There was a shriek of tortured metal, and a great crashing rain of debris came down in a nearly solid column as floors and ceilings gave way under the sudden, enormous stress. It all thundered down on the pulped vampire.

There was a second of shocked silence, while objects continued falling from their shelves and bins and who knew what else. Evidently, the damage to the ceiling had torn through some plumbing; a steady stream of water began to patter down from overhead onto the mound of rubble, along with occasional bits of still-falling material.

Then two things happened, almost at the same time.

First, my brother chose his moment.

The front wall of the bistro exploded outward. I saw the flying form of another vampire security guard hurtle across the hallway into the opposite wall with no detectable loss of altitude, and it smashed against a metal security grate with terrifying force.

Second, Drulinda let out an eerie howl of fury. It was a horrible sound, nasty and rasping and somehow spidery, for all that it was of inhuman volume. There was a crash from inside the bistro. Young men and women started screaming.

There wasn't any time to waste. I ran for the vampire my brother had thrown from the bistro. It had bounced off and fallen on the ground and was still gathering itself up. I had hoped it would take it a moment to recover from the blow, to give me time to get close enough to act.

It didn't work out that way.

The vampire was on its feet again before I could get halfway there, one of its shoulders twisted and deformed by the impact, one arm hanging loosely. It spun toward me with no sense of discomfort evident in its expression or posture, and it let out a very human-sounding scream of fury and flung itself at me.

I reacted with instant instinct, raising my right hand, with my will, and calling, "*Fuego!*"

Fire kindled from my open palm and rushed out in a furious torrent, spewing raggedly across the tile floor in a great, slewing cone. It splashed

against the floor, up onto the metal grate, and all over the vampire in question, a sudden, if clumsy, immolation.

But without my blasting rod to help me focus the attack, it was diffused; the heat was spread out over a broad area instead of focused into a single, searing beam. Though I'm sure it hurt like hell, and though it set the security guard vampire's uniform on fire, it didn't cripple him. It might have sent up an older, more withered vampire like a torch, but the newbie was still too ... juicy. It didn't burn him up so much as broil him a bit.

Pretty much, it just pissed him off.

The vampire came at me with another, higher-pitched scream, and swung a flaming arm at me. Maybe the fire had disoriented him a little, because I was able to get out of the way of the blow—sort of. It missed my head and neck and instead slammed into my left shoulder like a train wreck.

Pain flooded through me, and the canister of garlic went flying. The force of the blow spun me around, and I fell to the floor. The vampire came down on top of me, teeth bared, still on freaking *fire* as he leaned in with his non-pointy, still-white teeth, which were plenty strong enough to rip my throat open.

"Harry!" Thomas screamed. There was a rushing sound, and a tremendous force pulled the vampire off me. I sat up in time to see my brother drive his shoulder into the vampire's chest, slamming the undead thing back against the concrete wall between two stalls. Then Thomas whipped out what looked like a broken chair leg and drove the shattered end of the wood directly into the vampire's chest, a couple of inches below the gold, metallic security badge on his left breast, slightly off center.

The vampire's mouth opened, too-dark blood exploding from it in a gasp. The creature reached for the chair leg with its remaining arm.

Thomas solved that problem in the most brutal way imaginable. His face set in fury, my brother ignored the flames of the vampire's burning clothing, seized the remaining arm with both of his hands, and with a twist of his hips and shoulders, ripped it out of the socket.

More blood splashed out, if only for a second—without a heartbeat to keep pumping it, blood loss is mostly about leakage—and then the mortally crippled vampire fell, twitching and dying as the stake of wood through its heart put an end to its unlife.

I felt Drulinda coming, more than I saw it happen, the cold presence of a Black Court vampire in a fury, rubbing abrasively against my wizard's

senses. “Thomas!”

My brother turned in time to duck a blow so swift I didn’t even *see* it. He returned it with one of his own, but Drulinda, though new to the trade, was a master vampire, a creature with its own terrible will and power. Thomas had fought other Black Court vamps before—but not a master.

He was on the defensive from the outset. Though my brother was unthinkably strong and swift when drawing upon his vampiric nature, he wasn’t strong or swift enough. I lay sprawled on the ground, still half paralyzed by the pain in the left side of my body, and tried to think of what to do next.

“Get out!” I screamed at the bistro. “Get out of here, people! Get the hell out now!”

While I screamed, Drulinda slammed my brother’s back into a metal security grate so hard that it left a broad smear of his pale red blood on its bars.

People started hurrying out of the bistro, running for the parking lot.

Drulinda looked over her shoulder and let out another hissing squall of rage. At this opening, Thomas managed to get a grip on her arm, set his feet, and swing her into the wall, sending cracks streaking through the concrete. On the rebound, he swung her up and around and then down, smashing her down onto the floor, then up from that and into a security mesh again, crushing tile and bending metal with every impact.

I heard a scream and looked up to see Ennui fall from her impossibly high black heels in her tiny, tight black dress, as she tried to flee the bistro.

A horribly disfigured hand had reached out from the rubble over the crushed vampire, and now it held her.

I ran for the girl as my brother laid into Drulinda. My left arm wasn’t talking to me, and I fumbled the second canister out of my left jacket pocket with my right arm, then dumped garlic over the outstretched vampire’s hand.

It began smoking and spasming. Ennui screamed as the crushing grip broke her ankle. I stood up in frustration and started stomping down on the vampire’s arm. Supernaturally strong it might be, but its bones were made of bone, and it couldn’t maintain its grip on the girl without them.

It took a lot of stomping, but I was finally able to pull the girl free. I tried to get Ennui to her feet, but her weight came down on her broken

ankle, and from there it came down on my wounded shoulder. I went down to one knee, and it was all I could do not to fall.

I almost didn't notice when my brother flew through the air just over my head, smashed out what had to be the last remaining pane of glass at the mall entrance, and landed limply in the parking lot.

I felt Drulinda's presence coming up behind me.

The vampire let out a dusty laugh. "I thought it was just some poor pretty boy to play with. Silly me."

I fumbled with the canister for a second, and then whirled, flinging its contents at Drulinda in a slewing arc.

The vampire blurred to one side, dodging the garlic with ease. She looked battered and was covered with dust. Her undead flesh was approximately the consistency of wood, and so it wasn't cut and damaged so much as chipped and crushed. Her clothes were torn and ruined—and none of that mattered. She was just as functional and just as deadly as she had been before the fight.

I dropped the canister and drew forth my pentacle amulet, lifting it as a talisman against her.

The old bit with the crucifix works on the Black Court—but it isn't purely about Christianity. They are repelled not by the holy symbol itself, but by the faith of the one holding it up against them. I'd seen vampires repulsed by crosses, crucifixes, strips of paper written with holy symbols by a Shinto priest—once even a Star of David.

Me, I used the pentacle, because that was what I believed in. The five-pointed star, to me, represented the five elements of earth, air, water, fire, and spirit, bound within the solid circle of mortal will. I believed that magic was a force intended to be used to create, to protect, and to preserve. I believed that magic was a gift that had to be used responsibly and wisely—and that it especially had to be used against creatures like Drulinda, against literal, personified *evil*, to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. That was what I thought, and I'd spent my life acting in accordance with it.

I believed.

Pale blue light began to spill from the symbol—and Drulinda stopped with a hiss of sudden rage.

"You," she said after a few seconds. "I have heard of you. The wizard. Dresden."

I nodded slowly. Behind her, the fire from my earlier spell was spreading. The power was out, and I had no doubt that Drulinda and her former security-guard lackeys had disabled the alarms. It wouldn't take long for a fire to go insane in this place, once it got its teeth sunk in. We needed to get out.

"Go," I mumbled at Ennui.

She sobbed and started crawling for the exit, while I held Drulinda off with the amulet.

The vampire stared steadily at me for a second, her eyes all milky white, corpse cataracts glinting in the reflected light of the fire. Then she smiled and moved.

She was just too damn fast. I tried to turn to keep up with her, but by the time I did, Ennui screamed, and Drulinda had seized her hair and dragged her back, out of the immediate circle of light cast by the amulet.

She lifted the struggling girl with ease, so that I could see her mascara-streaked face. "Wizard," Drulinda said. Ennui had been cut by flying glass or the fall at some point, and some blood had streaked out of her slicked-back hair, over her ear, and down one side of her throat. The vampire leaned in, extending a tongue like a strip of beef jerky, and licked blood from the girl's skin. "You can hide behind your light. But you can't save her."

I ground my teeth and said nothing.

"But your death will profit me, grant me standing with others of my kind. The feared and vaunted Wizard Dresden." She bared yellowed teeth in a smile. "So I offer you this bargain. Throw away the amulet. I will let the girl go. You have my word." She leaned her teeth in close and brushed them over the girl's neck. "Otherwise ... Well, all of my new friends are gone. I'll have to make more."

That made me shudder. Dying was one thing. Dying and being made into *one of those* ...

I lowered the amulet. I hesitated for a second, and then dropped it.

Drulinda let out a low, eager sound and tossed Ennui aside like an empty candy wrapper. Then she was on me, letting out rasping *giggles*, for God's sake, pressing me down. "I can smell your fear, Wizard," she rasped. "I think I'm going to enjoy this."

She leaned closer, slowly, as she bared her teeth, her face only inches from mine.

Which was where I wanted her to be.

I reared up my head and spat out a gooey mouthful of powdered garlic directly into those cataract eyes.

Drulinda let out a scream, bounding away in a violent rush, clawing at her eyes with her fingers—and getting them burned, too. She thrashed in wild agony, swinging randomly at anything she touched or bumped into, tearing great, gaping gashes in metal fences, smashing holes in concrete walls.

“Couple words of advice,” I growled, my mouth burning with the remains of the garlic I’d stuffed it with as she’d come sneaking up on me. “First, anytime I’m not shooting my mouth off to a clichéd, two-bit creature of the night like you, it’s because I’m up to something.”

Drulinda howled more and rushed toward me—tripping on some rubble and sprawling on the ground, only to rush about on all fours like some kind of ungainly, horrible insect.

I checked behind me. Ennui was already out, and Thomas was beginning to stir, maybe roused by the snow now falling on him. I turned back to the blinded, pain-maddened vampire. We were the only ones left in that wing of the mall.

“Second,” I spat, “never touch my brother on his fucking birthday.”

I reached for my will, lifted my hand, and snarled, “*Fuego!*”

Fire roared out to eagerly engulf the vampire.

What the hell. The building was burning down, anyway.

“FREAKING AMATEUR VILLAINS,” I muttered, glowering down at the splatters on my car.

Thomas leaned against it with one hand pressed to his head, a grimace of pain on his face. “You okay?”

I waved my left arm a little. “Feeling’s coming back. I’ll have Butters check me out later. Thanks for loaning Molly your car.”

“Least I could do. Let her drive Sarah and Ennui to the hospital.” He squinted at the rising smoke from the mall. “Think the whole thing will go?”

“Nah,” I said. “This wing, maybe. They’ll get here before too much more goes up. Keef and his folk should be all right.”

My brother grunted. “How are they going to explain this one?”

“Who knows,” I said. “Meteor, maybe. Smashed holes in the roof, crushed some poor security guard, set the place on fire.”

“My vote is for terrorists,” Thomas said. “Terrorists are real popular these days.” He shook his head. “But I meant the larpers, not the cops.”

“Oh,” I said. “Probably, they won’t talk to anyone about what they saw. Afraid people would think they were crazy.”

“And they would,” Thomas said.

“And they would,” I agreed. “Come tomorrow, it will seem very unreal. A few months from now, they’ll wonder if they didn’t imagine some of it or if there wasn’t some kind of gas leak or something that made them hallucinate. Give it a few more years, and they’ll remember that Drulinda and some rough-looking types showed up to give them a hard time. They drove a car through the front of the mall. Maybe they were crazy people dressed in costumes who had been to a few too many larps themselves.” I shook my head. “It’s human nature to try to understand and explain everything. The world is less scary that way. But I don’t think they’ll be in any danger, really. No more so than anyone else.”

“That’s good,” Thomas said quietly. “I guess.”

“It’s the way it is.” In the distance, sirens were starting up and coming closer. I grunted and said, “We’d better go.”

“Yeah.”

We got into the Beetle. I started it up, and we headed out. I left the lights off—no sense attracting attention.

“You going to be all right?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Take me a few days to get enough back into me to feel normal, but”—he shrugged—“I’ll make it.”

“Thanks for the backup,” I said.

“Kicked their freaky asses,” he said, and held out his fist.

I rapped my knuckles lightly against it.

“Nice signal. The birthday present.”

“I figured you’d get it,” I said. Then I frowned. “Crap,” I said. “Your present.”

“You didn’t remember to bring it?”

“I was a little busy,” I said.

He was quiet for a minute. Then he asked, “What was it?”

“Rock’em Sock’em Robots,” I said.

He blinked at me. “What?”

I repeated myself. "The little plastic robots you make fight."

"I know what they are, Harry," he responded. "I'm trying to figure out why you'd give me them."

I pursed my lips for a minute. Then I said, "Right after my dad died, they put me in an orphanage. It was Christmastime. On television, they had commercials for Rock'em Sock'em Robots. Two kids playing with them, you know? Two brothers." I shrugged. "That was a year when I really, really wanted to give those stupid plastic robots to my brother."

"Because it would mean you weren't alone," Thomas said quietly.

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry I forgot them. And happy birthday."

He glanced back at the burning mall. "Well," my brother said, "I suppose it's the thought that counts."

HEOROT

—*from My Big Fat Supernatural Honeymoon, edited by P. N. Elrod*

I was sitting in my office, sorting through my bills, when Mac called and said, “I need your help.” It was the first time I’d heard him use four whole words all together like that.

“Okay,” I said. “Where?” I’d out-terseled him—another first.

“Loon Island Pub,” Mac said. “Wrigleyville.”

“On the way.” I hung up, stood up, put on my black leather duster, and said to my dog, “We’re on the job.”

My dog, Mouse, who outweighs most European cars, bounced up eagerly from where he had been dozing near my office’s single heating vent. He shook out his thick grey fur, especially the shaggy, almost leonine ruff growing heavy on his neck and shoulders, and we set out to help a friend.

October had brought in more rain and more cold than usual, and that day we had both, plus wind. I found parking for my battered old Volkswagen Bug, hunched my shoulders under my leather duster, and walked north along Clark, into the wind, Mouse keeping pace at my side.

Loon Island Pub was in sight of Wrigley Field, and a popular hang-out before and after games. Bigger than most such businesses, it could host several hundred people throughout its various rooms and levels. Outside, large posters had been plastered to the brick siding of the building. Though the posters were soaked with rain, you could still read CHICAGO BEER ASSOCIATION and NIGHT OF THE LIVING BREWS, followed by an announcement of a home-brewed beer festival and competition, with today’s date on it. There was a lot of foot traffic in and out.

“Aha,” I told Mouse. “Explains why Mac is here, instead of at his own place. He’s finally unleashed the new dark on the unsuspecting public.”

Mouse glanced up at me rather reproachfully from under his shaggy brows; then he lowered his head, sighed, and continued plodding against the rain until we gained the pub. Mac was waiting for us at the front door. He was a sinewy, bald man dressed in dark slacks and a white shirt, somewhere between the age of thirty and fifty. He had a very average, unremarkable face, one that usually wore a steady expression of patience and contemplation.

Today, though, that expression was what I could only describe as grim.

I came in out of the rain, and passed off my six-foot oak staff to Mac to hold for me as I shrugged out of my duster. I shook the garment thoroughly, sending raindrops sheeting from it, and promptly put it back on.

Mac runs the pub where the supernatural community of Chicago does most of its hanging out. His place has seen more than its share of paranormal nasties, and if Mac looked that worried, I wanted the spell-reinforced leather of the duster between my tender skin and the source of his concern. I took the staff back from Mac, who nodded to me and then crouched down to Mouse, who had gravely offered a paw to shake. Mac shook, ruffled Mouse's ears, and said, "Missing girl."

I nodded, scarcely noticing the odd looks I was getting from several of the people inside. That was par for the course. "What do we know?"

"Husband," Mac said. He jerked his head at me, and I followed him deeper into the pub. Mouse stayed pressed against my side, his tail wagging in a friendly fashion. I suspected the gesture was an affectation. Mouse is an awful lot of dog, and people get nervous if he doesn't act overtly friendly.

Mac led me through a couple of rooms where each table and booth had been claimed by a different brewer. Homemade signs bearing a gratuitous number of exclamation points touted the various concoctions, except for the one Mac stopped at. There, a cardstock table tent was neatly lettered, simply reading MCANALLY'S DARK.

At the booth next to Mac's, a young man, good-looking in a reedy, librariansque kind of way, was talking to a police officer while wringing his hands.

"But you don't get it," the young man said. "She wouldn't just leave. Not today. We start our honeymoon tonight."

The cop, a stocky, balding fellow whose nose was perhaps more red than warranted by the weather outside, shook his head. "Sir, I'm sorry, but she's been gone for what? An hour or two? We don't even start to look until twenty-four hours have passed."

"She wouldn't just *leave*," the young man half shouted.

"Look, kid," the cop said. "It wouldn't be the first time some guy's new wife panicked and ran off. You want my advice? Start calling up her old boyfriends."

"But—"

The cop thumped a finger into the young man's chest. "Get over it, buddy. Come back in twenty-four hours." He turned to walk away from the young man and almost bumped into me. He took a step back and scowled up at me. "You want something?"

“Just basking in the glow of your compassion, Officer,” I replied.

His face darkened into a scowl, but before he could take a deep breath and start throwing his weight around, Mac pushed a mug of his dark ale into the cop’s hand. The cop slugged it back immediately. He swished the last gulp around in his mouth, purely for form, and then tossed the mug back at McAnally, belched, and went on his way.

“Mr. McAnally,” the young man said, turning to Mac. “Thank goodness. I still haven’t seen her.” He looked at me. “Is this him?”

Mac nodded.

I stuck out my hand. “Harry Dresden.”

“Roger Braddock,” the anxious young man said. “Someone has abducted my wife.”

He gripped too hard, and his fingers were cold and a little clammy. I wasn’t sure what was going on here, but Braddock was genuinely afraid. “Abducted her? Did you see it happen?”

“Well,” he said, “no. Not really. No one did. But she *wouldn’t* just walk out. Not today. We got married this morning, and we’re leaving on our honeymoon tonight, soon as the festival is over.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You put your honeymoon on hold to go to a beer festival?”

“I’m opening my own place,” Braddock said. “Mr. McAnally has been giving me advice. Sort of mentoring me. This was ... I mean, I’ve been here every year, and it’s only once a year, and the prestige from a win is ... The networking and ...” His voice trailed off as he looked around.

Yeah. The looming specter of sudden loss has a way of making you reevaluate things. Sometimes it’s tough to know what’s really important until you realize it might be gone.

“You two were at this booth?” I prompted.

“Yes,” he said. He licked his lips. “She went to pick up some napkins from the bar, right over there. She wasn’t twenty feet away and somehow she just vanished.”

Personally, I was more inclined to go with the cop’s line of reasoning than the kid’s. People in general tend to be selfish, greedy, and unreliable. There are individual exceptions, of course, but no one ever wants to believe that the petty portions of human nature might have come between themselves and someone they care about.

The kid seemed awfully sincere, but endearing, awfully sincere people, their decisions driven mostly by their emotions, are capable of being mistaken on an epic scale. The worse the situation looks, the harder they'll search for reasons not to believe it. It seemed more likely that his girl left him than that someone took her away.

On the other hand, likely isn't the same as true—and Mac isn't the kind to cry wolf.

"How long you two been together?" I asked Braddock.

"Since we were fifteen," he replied. An anemic smile fluttered around his mouth. "Almost ten years."

"Making it official, eh?"

"We both knew when it was right," he replied. He lost the smile. "Just like I know she didn't walk away. Not unless someone made her do it."

I stepped around Braddock and studied the high-backed booth for a moment. A keg sat on the table, next to a little cardstock sign that had a cartoon bee decked out with a Viking-style helmet, a baldric, and a greatsword. Words beneath the bee proclaimed BRADDOCK'S MIDNIGHT SUN CINNAMON.

I grunted and reached down, pulling a simple black leather ladies' purse from beneath the bench seating. Not an expensive purse, either. "Not much chance she'd walk without taking her bag," I said. "That's for damn sure."

Braddock bit his lip, closed his eyes, and said, "Elizabeth."

I sighed.

Well, dammit.

Now she had a name.

Elizabeth Braddock, newlywed—maybe she'd just run off, but maybe she hadn't. I didn't think I would like myself very much if I walked and it turned out that she really was in danger and really did get hurt.

What the hell? No harm in looking around.

"I guess the game's afoot," I said. I gestured vaguely with the purse. "May I?"

"Sure," Braddock said. "Sure, sure."

I dumped Elizabeth's purse out on the booth's table, behind the beer keg, and began rummaging through it. The usual—a wallet, some makeup, a cell phone, Kleenex, some feminine sanitary sundries, one of those plastic birth control pill holders with a folded piece of paper taped to it.

And there was a hairbrush, an antique-looking thing with a long, pointy silver handle.

I plucked several strands of dark wavy hair from the brush. “Is this your wife’s hair?”

Braddock blinked at me for a second, then nodded. “Yes. Of course.”

“Mind if I borrow this?”

He didn’t. I pocketed the brush for the moment and glanced at the birth control pill case. I opened it. Only the first several slots were empty. I untaped the folded paper and opened it, finding instructions for the medicine’s use.

Who keeps the instruction sheet, for crying out loud?

While I pondered it, a shadow fell across Braddock, and a beefy, heavily tattooed arm shoved him back against the spine of the partition between booths.

I looked up the arm to the beefy, heavily tattooed bruiser attached to it. He was only a couple of inches shorter than me, and layered with muscle gone to seed. He was bald and sported a bristling beard. Scar tissue around his eyes told me he’d been a fighter, and a lumpy, often-broken nose suggested that he might not have been much good at it. He wore black leather and rings heavy enough to serve as passable brass knuckles on every finger of his right hand. His voice was like the rest of him—thick and dull. He flung a little triangle of folded cardstock at Braddock. “Where’s my keg, Braddock?”

“Caine,” Braddock stammered, “what are you talking about?”

“My keg, bitch,” the big man snarled. A couple of guys who wished they were more like Caine lurked behind him, propping up his ego. “It’s gone. You figure you couldn’t take the competition this year?”

I glanced at the fallen table tent. It also had a little Wagnerian cartoon bee on it, and the lettering, CAINE’S KICKASS.

“I don’t have time for this,” Braddock said.

Caine shoved him back against the booth again, harder. “We ain’t done. Stay put, bitch, unless you want me to feed you your ass.”

I glanced at Mac, who stared at Caine, frowning, but not doing anything. Mac doesn’t like to get involved.

He’s smarter than I am.

I stepped forward, seized Caine’s hand in mine, and pumped it enthusiastically. “Hi, there. Harry Dresden, PI. How you doing?” I nodded

at him, smiling, and smiled at his friends, too. “Hey, are you allergic to dogs?”

Caine was so startled that he almost forgot to try crushing my hand in his. When he got around to it, it hurt enough that I had to work not to wince. I’m not heavily built, but I’m more than six and a half feet tall, and it takes more strength than most have to make me feel it.

“What?” he said wittily. “Dog, what?”

“Allergic to dogs,” I clarified, and nodded down at Mouse. “Occasionally someone has a bad reaction to my dog, and I’d hate that to happen here.”

The biker scowled at me and then looked down.

Two hundred pounds of Mouse, not acting at *all* friendly now, stared steadily at Caine. Mouse didn’t show any teeth or growl. He didn’t need to. He just stared.

Caine lifted his lips up from his teeth in an ugly little smile. But he released my hand with a jerk, and then sneered at Braddock. “Say, where’s that pretty little piece of yours? She run off to find a real man?”

Braddock might have been a sliver over half of Caine’s size, but he went after the biker with complete sincerity and without a second thought.

This time Mac moved, interposing himself between Braddock and Caine, getting his shoulder against Braddock’s chest. The older man braced himself and shoved Braddock back from the brink of a beating, though the younger man cursed and struggled against him.

Caine let out an ugly laugh and stepped forward, his big hands closing into fists. I leaned my staff so that he stepped into it, the blunt tip of the wood thrusting solidly against the hollow of his throat. He made a noise that sounded like *glurk*, and stepped back, scowling ferociously at me.

I tugged my staff back against my chest so that I could hold up both hands, palms out, just as the dumpy cop, attracted by Braddock’s thumping and cursing, came into the room with one hand on his nightstick. “Easy there, big guy,” I said, loud enough to make sure the cop heard. “The kid’s just upset on account of his wife. He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

The bruiser lifted one closed fist as if he meant to drive it at my noggin, but one of his two buddies said urgently, “Cop.”

Caine froze and glanced back over his shoulder. The officer might have been overweight, but he looked like he knew how to throw it around, and he had a club and a gun besides. Never mind all the other uniforms theoretically behind him.

Caine opened his fist, showing an empty hand, and lowered it again. "Sure," he said. "Sure. Misunderstanding. Happen to anybody."

"You want to walk away," the cop told Caine, "do it now. Otherwise you get a ride."

Caine and company departed in sullen silence, glaring daggers at me—well, glaring letter openers, anyway; Caine didn't seem real sharp.

The cop stalked over to me more lightly than he should have been able to—no question about it, the man knew how to play rough. He looked at me, then at my staff, and kept his nightstick in his hand. "You Dresden?"

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Heard of you. Work for Special Investigations sometimes. Call yourself a wizard."

"That's right."

"You know Rawlins?"

"Good man," I said.

The cop grunted. He jerked his head toward the departing Caine as he put the stick away. "Guy's a con. A hard case, too. Likes hurting people. You keep your eyes open, Mr. Wizard, or he'll make some of your teeth disappear."

"Yeah," I said. "Golly, he's scary."

The cop eyed me, then snorted and said, "Your dentures." He nodded, and walked out again, probably tailing Caine to make sure he left.

The cop and Caine weren't all that different, in some ways. The cop would have loved to take his stick to Caine's head as much as Caine had wanted to swat mine. They were both damn near equally sensitive about Braddock's missing wife, too. But at least the cop had channeled his inner thug into something that helped out the people around him—as long as he didn't have to run up too many stairs, I guessed.

I turned back to Mac and found him still standing between the kid and the door. Mac nodded his thanks to me. Braddock looked like he might be about to start crying, or maybe start screaming.

"No love lost there, eh?" I said to Braddock.

The kid snarled at the empty space where Caine had been. "Elizabeth embarrassed him once. He doesn't take rejection well, and he never forgets. Do you think he did it?"

"Not really. Mac," I said, "something tipped you off that this was from the spooky side. Lights flicker?"

Mac grunted. “Twice.”

Braddock stared at Mac and then at me. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Active magic tends to interfere with electrical systems,” I said. “It’ll disrupt cell phones, screw up computers. Simpler things, like the lights, usually just flicker a bit.”

Braddock had a look somewhere between uncertainty and nausea on his face. “Magic? You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m tired of having this conversation,” I said. I reached into my pocket for Elizabeth Braddock’s fallen hairs. “This joint got a back door?”

Mac pointed silently.

“Thanks,” I said. “Come on, Mouse.”

THE BACK DOOR opened into a long, narrow, dirty alley running parallel to Clark. The wind had picked up, which meant that the cold rain was mostly striking the upper portion of one wall of the alley. Good for me. It’s tough to get a solid spell put together under even a moderate rain. When it’s really coming down, it’s all but impossible, even for a relatively simple working—such as a tracking spell.

I’d done this hundreds of times, and by now it was pretty routine. I found a clear spot of concrete in the lee of the sheltering wall and sketched a quick circle around me with a piece of chalk, investing the motion with a deliberate effort of will.

As I completed the circle, I felt the immediate result—a screen of energy that rose up from the circle, enfolding me and warding out any random energy that might skew the spell. I took off my necklace, a silver chain with a battered old silver pentacle hanging from it, murmuring quietly, and tied several of Elizabeth’s hairs through the center of the pentacle. After that, I gathered up my will, feeling the energy focused by the circle into something almost tangible, whispered in faux Latin, and released the gathered magic into the pentacle.

The silver five-pointed star flickered once, a dozen tiny sparks of static electricity fluttering over the metal surface and the hairs bound inside it. I grimaced. I’d been sloppy, to let some of the energy convert itself into static. And I’d been harping on my apprentice about the need for precision for a week.

I broke the circle by smudging the chalk with one foot, and glanced at Mouse, who sat patiently, mouth open in a doggy grin. Mouse had been there for some of those lessons, and he was smarter than the average dog. How much smarter remained to be seen, but I got the distinct impression he was laughing at me.

“It was the rain,” I told him.

Mouse sneezed, tail wagging.

I glowered at him. I’m not sure I could take it if my dog was smarter than me.

The falling rain would wash away the spell on the amulet if I left it out in the open, so I shielded it as carefully as I could with the building and my hand. A hat would have come in handy for that purpose, actually. Maybe I should get one.

I held up the amulet, focusing on the spell. It quivered on the end of its chain, then swung toward the far end of the alley, in a sharp, sudden motion.

I drew my hand and the amulet back up into the sleeve of my duster, whistling. “She came right down this alley. And judging by the strength of the reaction, she was scared bad. Left a really big trail.”

At that, Mouse made a chuffing sound and started down the alley, snuffling. The end of his short lead, mostly there for appearance’s sake, dragged the ground. I kept pace, and by the time Mouse was twenty yards down the alley, he had begun growling low in his throat.

That was an occasion worth a raised eyebrow. Mouse didn’t make noise unless there was Something Bad around. He increased his pace, and I lengthened my stride to keep up.

I found myself growling along with him. I’d gotten sick of Bad Things visiting themselves upon people in my town a long time ago.

When we hit the open street, Mouse slowed. Magic wasn’t the only thing that a steady rain could screw up. He growled again and looked over his shoulder at me, tail drooping.

“I got your back,” I told him. I lifted a section of my long leather duster with my staff, so that I could hold the amulet in the shelter it offered. I looked only moderately ridiculous while doing so.

I’m going to get a hat one of these days. I swear.

The tracking spell held, and the amulet led me down the street, toward Wrigley. The silent stadium loomed in the cold grey rain. Mouse, still

snuffling dutifully, abruptly turned down another alley, his steps hurrying to a lope. I propped up my coat and consulted the amulet again.

I was so busy feeling damp and cold and self-conscious that I forgot to feel paranoid, and Caine came out of nowhere and swung something hard at my skull.

I turned my head and twitched sideways at the last second, taking the blow just to one side of the center of my forehead. There was a flash of light, and my legs went wobbly. I had time to watch Caine wind up again and saw that he was swinging a long, white, dirty athletic sock at me. He'd weighted one end with something, creating an improvised flail.

My hips bounced off a municipal trash can, and I got one arm between the flail and my face. The protective spells on my coat are good, but they're intended to protect me against gunfire and sharp, pointy things. The flail smashed into my right forearm. It went numb.

"So what, you steal my keg for Braddock, so his homo-bee cinnamon crap would win the division? I'm gonna take it out of your ass."

And with that pleasant mental image, Caine wound up again with that flail.

He'd made a mistake, though, pausing to get in a little dialogue like that. If he'd hit me again, immediately, he probably could have beaten me unconscious in short order. He hadn't hesitated long—but it had been long enough for me to pull my thoughts together. As he came in swinging, I snapped the lower end of my heavy staff into a rising quarter spin, right into his testicles. The thug's eyes snapped wide-open, and his mouth locked into a silent scream.

It's the little things in life you treasure.

Caine staggered and fell to one side, but one of the Cainettes came in hard behind him and pasted me in the mouth. By itself, I might have shrugged it off, but Caine had already rung my bells once. I went down to one knee and tried to figure out what was going on. Someone with big motorcycle boots kicked me in the guts. I fell to my back and drove a heel into his kneecap. There was a *crackle* and a *pop*, and he fell, howling.

The third guy had a tire iron. No time for magic—my damn eyes wouldn't focus, much less my thoughts. By some minor miracle, I caught the first two-handed swing on my staff.

And then two hundred pounds of wet dog slammed into Cainette Number Two's chest. Mouse didn't bite, presumably because there are some things

even dogs won't put in their mouths. He just over-bore the thug and smashed him to the ground, pinning him there. The two of them thrashed around.

I got up just as Caine came back in, swinging his flail.

I don't think Caine knew much about quarterstaff fighting. Murphy had been teaching it to me, however, for almost four years. I got the staff up as Caine swung and intercepted the sock. The weighted end wrapped around my staff, and I jerked the weapon out of his hands with a sweeping twist. With the same motion, I brought the other end of the staff around and popped him in the noggin.

Caine flopped to the ground.

I stood there panting and leaning on my staff. Hey, I'd won a brawl. That generally didn't happen when I wasn't using magic. Mouse seemed fine, if occupied holding his thug down.

"Jerk," I muttered to the unconscious Caine, and kicked him lightly in the ribs. "I have no idea what happened to your freaking keg."

"Oh my," said a woman's voice from behind me. She spoke perfectly clear English, marked with an accent that sounded vaguely Germanic or maybe Scandinavian. "I have to admit, I didn't expect you'd do that well against them."

I turned slightly, so that I could keep the thugs in my peripheral vision, and shifted my grip on the staff as I faced the speaker.

She was a tall blonde, six feet or so, even in flat, practical shoes. Her tailored grey suit didn't quite hide an athlete's body, nor did it make her look any less feminine. She had ice blue eyes, a stark, attractive face, and she carried a duffel bag in her right hand. I recognized her. She was the supernatural security consultant to John Marcone, the kingpin of Chicago crime.

"Miss Gard, isn't it?" I asked her, panting.

She nodded. "Mr. Dresden."

My arm throbbed and my ears were still ringing. I'd have a lovely goose egg right in the middle of my forehead in an hour. "Glad I could entertain you," I said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I'm working."

"I need to speak to you," she said.

"Call during office hours." Caine lay senseless, groaning. The guy I'd kicked in the knee whimpered and rocked mindlessly back and forth. I glared at the thug Mouse had pinned down.

He flinched. There wasn't any fight left in him. Thank God. There wasn't much left in me, either.

"Mouse," I said, and started down the alley.

Mouse rose up off the man, who said, "Oof!" as the dog planted both paws in the man's belly as he pushed up. Mouse followed me.

"I'm serious, Mr. Dresden," Gard said to my back, following us.

"Marcone is only a king in his own mind," I said without stopping. "He wants to send me a message, he can wait. I've got important things to do."

"I know," Gard said. "The girl. She's a brunette, maybe five foot five, brown eyes, green golf shirt, blue jeans, and scared half out of her mind."

I stopped and turned to bare my teeth at Gard. "Marcone is behind this? That son of a bitch is going to be sorry he ever *looked* at that—"

"No," Gard said sharply. "Look, Dresden, forget Marcone. This has nothing to do with Marcone. Today's my day off."

I stared at her for a moment, and only partly because the rain had begun to make the white shirt she wore beneath the suit jacket become transparent. She sounded sincere—which meant nothing. I've learned better than to trust my judgment when there's a blonde involved. Or a brunette. Or a redhead.

"What do you want?" I asked her.

"Almost the same thing you do," she replied. "You want the girl. I want the thing that took her."

"Why?"

"The girl doesn't have enough time for you to play twenty questions, Dresden. We can help each other and save her, or she can die."

I took a deep breath and then nodded once. "I'm listening."

"I lost the trail at the far end of this alley," she said. "Clearly, you haven't."

"Yeah," I said. "Skip to the part where you tell me how you can help me."

Wordlessly, she opened up the duffel bag and drew out—I kid you not—a double-bitted battle-ax that must have weighed fifteen pounds. She rested it on one shoulder. "If you can take me to the grendelkin, I'll deal with it while you get the girl out."

Grendelkin? What the hell was a grendelkin?

Don't get me wrong—I'm a wizard. I know about the supernatural. I could fill up a couple of loose-leaf notebooks with the names of various

entities and creatures I recognized. That's the thing about knowledge, though. The more you learn, the more you realize how much there *is* to learn. The supernatural realms are bigger, far bigger, than the material world, and humanity is grossly outnumbered. I could learn about new beasts until I dropped dead of old age a few centuries from now and still not know a quarter of them.

This one was new on me.

"Dresden, seconds could matter, here," Gard said. Beneath the calm mask of her lovely face, I could sense a shadow of anxiety, of urgency.

As I absorbed that, there was a sharp clicking sound as a piece of broken brick or a small stone from roofing material fell to the ground farther down the alley.

Gard whirled, dropping instantly into a fighting crouch. Both hands were on her ax, which she held in a defensive position across the front of her body.

Yikes.

I'd seen Gard square off against a world-class necromancer and her pet ghoul without batting a golden eyelash. What the hell had her so spooked?

She came back out of her stance warily, then shook her head and muttered something under her breath before turning to me again. "What's going to happen to that girl ... ? You have no idea. It shouldn't happen to anyone. So I'm begging you. Please help me."

I sighed.

Well, dammit.

She said please.

THE RAIN WAS weakening the tracking spell on my amulet and washing away both the scent of the grendelkin and the psychic trail left by the terrified Elizabeth, but between Mouse and me, we managed to find where the bad guy had, literally, gone to earth. The trail ended at an old storm cellar-style door in back of the buildings on the east side of Wrigley Field, under the tracks of the El, near Addison Station. The doors were ancient and looked as if they were rusted shut—though they couldn't have been, if the trail went through them. They were surrounded by a gateless metal fence. A sign on the fence declared the area dangerous and to keep out—

you know, the usual sound advice that thrill-seeking blockheads and softhearted wizards with nagging headaches always ignore.

“You sure?” I asked Mouse. “It went in there?”

Mouse circled the fence, snuffling at the dry ground protected from the rain by the El track overhead. Then he focused intently on the doors and growled.

The amulet bobbed weakly, less definitely than it had a few minutes before. I grimaced and said, “It went down here, but it traveled north after that.”

Gard grunted. “Crap.”

“Crap,” I concurred.

The grendelkin had fled into Undertown.

Chicago is an old city—at least by American standards. It’s been flooded, burned down several times, been constructed and reconstructed ad nauseam. Large sections of the city have been built up as high as ten and twelve feet above the original ground level, while other buildings have settled into the swampy muck around Lake Michigan. Dozens and dozens of tunnel systems wind beneath its surface. No one knows exactly how many different tunnels and chambers people have created intentionally or by happenstance, and since most people regard the supernatural as one big scam, no one has noticed all the additional work done by not-people in the meantime.

Undertown begins somewhere just out of the usual traffic in the commuter and utility tunnels, where sections of wall and roof regularly collapse, and where people with good sense just aren’t willing to go. From there, it gets dark, cold, treacherous, and jealously inhabited, increasingly so the farther you go.

Things live down there—all kinds of things.

A visit to Undertown bears more resemblance to suicide than exploration, and those who do it are begging to be Darwined out of the gene pool. Smart people don’t go down there.

Gard slashed a long opening in the fence with her ax, and we descended crumbling old concrete steps into the darkness.

I murmured a word and made a small effort of will, and my amulet began to glow with a gentle blue-white light, illuminating the tunnel only dimly—enough, I hoped, to see by while still not giving away our approach. Gard produced a small red-filtered flashlight from her duffel bag, a backup light

source. It made me feel better. When you're underground, making sure you have light is almost as important as making sure you have air. It meant that she knew what she was doing.

The utility tunnel we entered gave way to a ramshackle series of chambers, the spaces between what were now basements and the raised wall of the road that had been built up off the original ground level. Mouse went first, with me and my staff and my amulet right behind him. Gard brought up the rear, walking lightly and warily.

We went on for maybe ten minutes, through difficult-to-spot doorways and at one point through a tunnel flooded with a foot and a half of icy stagnant water. Twice, we descended deeper into the earth, and I began getting antsy about finding my way back. Spelunking is dangerous enough without adding in anything that could be described with the word *ravening*.

"This grendelkin," I said. "Tell me about it."

"You don't need to know."

"Like hell I don't," I said. "You want me to help you, you gotta help me. Tell me how we beat this thing."

"We don't," she said. "I do. That's all you need to know."

That sort of offended me, being so casually kept ignorant. Granted, I'd done it to people myself about a million times, mostly to protect them, but that didn't make it any less frustrating—just ironic.

"And if it offs you instead?" I said. "I'd rather not be totally clueless when it's charging after me and the girl and I have to turn and fight."

"It shouldn't be a problem."

I stopped in my tracks and turned to regard her.

She stared back at me, eyebrows lifted. Water dripped somewhere nearby. There was a faint rumbling above us, maybe the El going by somewhere overhead.

She pressed her lips together and nodded, a gesture of concession. "It's a scion of Grendel."

I started walking again. "Whoa. Like, *the* Grendel?"

"Obviously." Gard sighed. "Before Beowulf faced him in Heorot—"

"*The* Grendel?" I asked. "*The* Beowulf?"

"Yes."

"And it actually happened like in the story?" I demanded.

"It isn't far wrong," Gard replied, an impatient note in her voice. "Before Beowulf faced him, Grendel had already taken a number of women on his

previous visits. He got spawn upon them.”

“Ick,” I said. “But I think they make a cream for that now.”

Gard gave me a flat look. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No kidding,” I said. “That’s the point of asking.”

“You know all you need.”

I ignored the statement, and the sentiment behind it to boot. A good private investigator is essentially a professional asker of questions. If I kept them coming, eventually I’d get some kind of answer. “Back at the pub, there was an electrical disruption. Does this thing use magic?”

“Not the way you do,” Gard said.

See there? An answer. A vague answer, but an answer. I pressed ahead. “Then how?”

“Grendelkin are strong,” Gard said. “Fast. And they can bend minds in an area around them.”

“Bend how?”

“They can make people not notice them, or to notice only dimly. Disguise themselves, sometimes. It’s how they get close. Sometimes they can cause malfunctions in technology.”

“Veiling magic,” I said. “Illusion. Been there, done that.” I mused. “Mac said there were two disruptions. Is there any reason it would want to steal a keg from the beer festival?”

Gard shot me a sharp look. “Keg?”

“That’s what those yahoos in the alley were upset about,” I said. “Someone swiped their keg.”

Gard spat out a word that would probably have gotten bleeped out had she said it on some kind of Scandinavian talk show. “What brew?”

“Eh?” I said.

“What kind of liquor was in the keg?” she demanded.

“How the hell should I know?” I asked. “I never even saw it.”

“Dammit.”

“But ...” I scrunched up my nose, thinking. “The sign from his table had a drawing of a little Viking bee on it, and it was called Caine’s Kickass.”

“A bee,” she said, her eyes glittering. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

She swore again. “Mead.”

I blinked at her. “This thing ripped off a keg of mead and a girl? Is she supposed to be its ... bowl of bar nuts or something?”

“It isn’t going to eat her,” Gard said. “It wants the mead for the same reason it wants the girl.”

I waited a beat for her to elaborate. She didn’t. “I’m rapidly running out of willingness to keep playing along,” I told her, “but I’ll ask the question—why does it want the girl?”

“Procreation,” she said.

“Thank you. Now I get it,” I said. “The thing figures she’ll need a good set of beer goggles before the deed.”

“No,” Gard said.

“Oh, right, because the grendelkin isn’t human. The *thing* is going to need the beer goggles.”

“No,” Gard said, harder.

“I understand. Just setting the mood, then,” I said. “Maybe it picked up some lounge music CDs, too.”

“Dresden,” Gard growled.

“Everybody needs somebody sometime,” I sang—badly.

Gard stopped in her tracks and faced me, her pale blue eyes frozen with glacial rage. Her voice turned harsh. “But not everybody impregnates women with spawn that will rip its own way out of its mother’s womb, killing her in the process.”

See, another answer. It was harsher than I would have preferred.

I stopped singing and felt sort of insensitive.

“They’re solitary,” Gard continued in a voice made more terrible for its uninflected calm. “Most of the time, they abduct a victim, rape her, rip her to shreds, and eat her. This one has more in mind. There’s something in mead that makes the grendelkin fertile. It’s going to impregnate her. Create another of its kind.”

A thought occurred to me. “That’s what kind of person still has her instructions taped to her birth control medication. Someone who’s never taken it until very recently.”

“She’s a virgin,” Gard confirmed. “Grendelkin need virgins to reproduce.”

“Kind of a scarce commodity these days,” I said.

Gard snapped out a bitter bark of laughter. “Take it from me, Dresden. Teenagers have always been teenagers. Hormone-ridden, curious, and generally ignorant of the consequences of their actions. There’s never been a glut on the virgin market. Not in Victorian times, not during the

Renaissance, not at Hastings, and not now. But even if they were ten times as rare in the modern age, there would still be more virgins to choose from than at any other point in history.” She shook her head. “There are so *many* people, now.”

We walked along for several paces.

“Interesting inflection, there,” I said. “Speaking about those times as if you’d seen them firsthand. You expect me to believe you’re better than a thousand years old?”

“Would it be so incredible?” she asked.

She had me there. Lots of supernatural critters were immortal, or the next-best thing to it. Even mortal wizards could hang around for three or four centuries. On the other hand, I’d rarely run into an immortal who felt so human to my wizard’s senses.

I stared at her for a second and then said, “You wear it pretty well, if it’s true. I would have guessed you were about thirty.”

Her teeth flashed in the dim light. “I believe it’s currently considered more polite to guess twenty-nine.”

“Me and polite have never been on close terms.”

Gard nodded. “I like that about you. You say what you think. You act. It’s rare in this age.”

I kept on the trail, quiet for a time, until Mouse stopped in his tracks and made an almost inaudible sound in his chest. I held up a hand, halting. Gard went silent and still.

I knelt down by the dog and whispered, “What is it, boy?”

Mouse stared intently ahead, his nose quivering. Then he paced forward, uncertainly, and pawed at the floor near the wall.

I followed him, light in hand. On the wet stone floor were a few tufts of greyish hair. I chewed my lip and lifted the light to examine the wall. There were long scratches in the stone—not much wider than a thumbnail, but they were deep. You couldn’t easily see the bottom of the scratch marks.

Gard came up and peered over my shoulder. Amid the scents of lime and mildew, her perfume, something floral I didn’t recognize, was a pleasant distraction. “Something sharp made those,” she murmured.

“Yeah,” I said, collecting the hairs. “Hold up your ax.”

She did. I touched the hairs to the edge of the blade. They curled away from it as they touched it, blackening and shriveling, and adding the scent of burned hair to the mix.

“Wonderful.” I sighed.

Gard lifted her eyebrows and glanced at me. “Faeries?”

I nodded. “Malks, almost certainly.”

“Malks?”

“Winterfae,” I said. “Felines. About the size of a bobcat.”

“Nothing steel can’t handle, then,” she said, rising briskly.

“Yeah,” I said. “You could probably handle half a dozen.”

She nodded once, brandished the ax, and turned to continue down the tunnel.

“Which is why they tend to run in packs of twenty,” I added, a couple of steps later.

Gard stopped and gave me a glare.

“That’s called sharing information,” I said. I gestured at the wall. “These are territorial markings for the local pack. Malks are stronger than natural animals, quick, almost invisible when they want to be, and their claws are sharper and harder than surgical steel. I once saw a malk shred an aluminum baseball bat to slivers. And if that wasn’t enough, they’re sentient. Smarter than some people I know.”

“Od’s bodkin,” Gard swore quietly. “Can you handle them?”

“They don’t like fire,” I said. “But in an enclosed space like this, I don’t like it much, either.”

Gard nodded once. “Can we treat with them?” she asked. “Buy passage?”

“They’ll keep their word, like any fae,” I said. “If you can get them to give it in the first place. But think of how cats enjoy hunting, even when they aren’t hungry. Think about how they toy with their prey sometimes. Then distill that joyful little killer instinct out of every cat in Chicago and pour it all into one malk. They’re to cats what Hannibal Lecter is to people.”

“Negotiation isn’t an option, then.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think we have anything to offer them that they’ll want more than our screams and meat, no.”

Gard nodded, frowning. “Best if they never notice us at all, then.”

“Nice thought,” I said. “But these things have a cat’s senses. I could probably hide us from their sight or hearing, but not both. And they could still smell us.”

Gard frowned. She reached into her coat pocket and drew out a slim box of aged, pale ivory. She opened it and began gingerly sorting through a

number of small ivory squares.

“Scrabble tiles?” I asked. “I don’t want to play with malks. They’re really bad about using plurals and proper names.”

“They’re runes,” Gard said quietly. She found the one she was after, took a steadying breath, and then removed a single square from the ivory box with the same cautious reverence I’d seen soldiers use with military explosives. She closed the box and put it back in her pocket, holding the single ivory chit carefully in front of her on her palm.

I was familiar with Norse runes. The rune on the ivory square in her hand was totally unknown to me. “Um. What’s that?” I asked.

“A rune of Routine,” she said quietly. “You said you were skilled with illusion magic. If you can make us look like them, even for a few moments, it should allow us to pass through them unnoticed, as if we were a normal part of their day.”

Technically, I had told Gard I was *familiar* with illusion magic, not skilled. Truth be told, it was probably my weakest skill set. Nobody’s good at everything, right? I’m good with the kaboom magic. My actual use of illusion hadn’t passed much beyond the craft’s equivalent of painting a few portraits of fruit bowls.

But I’d just have to hope that what Gard didn’t know wouldn’t get us both killed. Elizabeth didn’t have much time, and I didn’t have many options. Besides, what did we have to lose? If the bid to sneak by failed, we could always fall back on negotiating or slugging it out.

Mouse gave me a sober look.

“Groovy,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

A GOOD ILLUSION is all about imagination. You create a picture in your mind, imagining every detail; imagining so hard that the image in your head becomes nearly tangible, almost real. You have to be able to see it, hear it, touch it, taste it, smell it, to engage all your senses in its (theoretical) reality. If you can do that, if you can really believe in your fake version of reality, then you can pour energy into it and create it in the minds and senses of everyone looking at it.

For the record, it’s also how all the best liars do business—by making their imagined version of things so coherent that they almost believe it themselves.

I'm not a terribly good liar, but I knew the basics of how to make an illusion work, and I had two secret weapons. The first was the tuft of hair from an actual malk, which I could use to aid in the accuracy of my illusion. The second was a buddy of mine, a big grey tomcat named Mister who deigned to share his apartment with Mouse and me. Mister didn't come with me on cases, being above such trivial matters, but he found me pleasant company when I was at home and not moving around too much, except when he didn't, in which case he went rambling.

I closed my eyes once I'd drawn my chalk circle, gripped the malk hair in my hand, and started my image on a model of Mister. I'd seen malks a couple of times, and most of them bore the same kinds of battle scars Mister proudly wore. They didn't look exactly like cats, though. Their heads were shaped differently, and their fur was rougher, stiffer. The paws had one too many digits on them, too, and were wider than a cat's—but the motion as they moved was precisely the same.

"Noctus ex illuminus," I murmured once the image was firmly fixed in my thoughts, that of three ugly, lean, battle-marked malks walking through on their own calm business. I sent out the energy that would power the glamour and broke the circle with a slow, careful motion.

"Is it working?" Gard asked quietly.

"Yeah," I said, focused on the illusion, my eyes still closed. I fumbled about until I found Mouse's broad back, then rested one hand on his fur. "Stop distracting me. Walk."

"Very well." She drew in a short breath, said something, and then there was a snapping sound and a flash of light. "The rune is active," she said. She put her hand on my shoulder. The malks weren't using any light sources, and if a group of apparent malks tried to walk through with one, it would kind of spoil the effect we were trying to achieve. So we'd have to make the walk in the dark. "We have perhaps five minutes."

I grunted, touched my dog, and we all started walking, trusting Mouse to guide our steps. Even though it was dark, I didn't dare open my eyes. Any distraction from the image in my head would cause it to disintegrate like toilet paper in a hurricane. So I walked, concentrating, and hoped like hell it worked.

I couldn't spare any brain-time for counting, but we walked for what felt like half an hour, and I was getting set to ask Gard if we were through yet, when an inhuman voice not a foot from my left ear said in plain English,

“More of these new claws arrive every day. We are hungry. We should shred the ape and have done.”

I nearly fell on my ass, it startled me so much, but I held on to the image in my head. I’d heard malks speak before, with their odd inflections and unsettling intonations, and the sound only reinforced the image in my head.

A round of both supporting and disparaging comments rose from all around me, all in lazy, malk-inflected English. There were more than twenty of them. There was a small horde.

“Patience,” said another malk. The tone of voice somehow suggested this was a conversation that had repeated itself a million times. “Let the ape think it has cowed us into acting as its door wardens. It hunts in the wizard’s territory. The wizard will come to face it. The Erlking will give us great favor when we bring the wizard’s head.”

Gosh. I felt famous.

“I’m weary of waiting,” said another malk. “Let us kill the ape and its prey and then hunt the wizard down.”

“Patience, hunters. The wizard will come to us,” the first one said. “The ape’s turn will come, after we have brought down the wizard.” There was an unmistakable note of pleasure in its voice. “And his little dog, too.”

Mouse made another subvocal rumble in his chest. I could, just barely, feel it in his back. He kept walking, though, and we passed through the stretch of tunnel occupied by the malks. It was another endless stretch of minutes and several turns before Gard let out her breath between her teeth and said, “There were more than twenty.”

“Yeah, I kind of noticed that.”

“I think we are past them.”

I sighed and released the image I’d been holding in my head, calling forth dim light from my amulet. Or tried to release the image, at any rate. I opened my eyes and blinked several times, but my head was like one of those TVs at the department store, when one image has been burned into it for too long. I looked at Mouse and Gard, and had trouble shaking the picture of the savage, squash-headed malks I’d been imagining around them with such intensity.

“Do you have another of those rune things?” I asked her.

“No,” Gard said.

“We’ll have to get creative on the way out,” I said.

“There’s no need to worry about that yet,” she said, and started walking forward again.

“Sure there is. Once we get the girl, we have to get *back* with her. Christ, haven’t you read any Joseph Campbell at all?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Grendelkin are difficult opponents. Either we’ll die, or it will. So there’s only a fifty-fifty chance that we’ll need to worry about the malks on the way out. Why waste the effort until we know if it will be necessary?”

“Call me crazy, but I find that if I plan for the big things, like how to get back to the surface, it makes it a little simpler to manage the little things. Like how to keep on breathing.”

She held up a hand and said, “Wait.”

I stopped in my tracks, listening. Mouse came to a halt, snuffling at the air, his ears twitching around like little radar dishes, but he gave no sign that he’d detected lurking danger.

“We’re close to its lair,” she murmured.

I arched an eyebrow. The tunnel looked exactly the same as it had for several moments now. “How do you know?”

“I can feel it,” she said.

“You can *do* that?”

She started forward. “Yes. It’s how I knew it was moving in the city to begin with.”

I ground my teeth. “It might be nice if you considered *sharing* that kind of information.”

“It isn’t far,” she said. “We might be in time. Come on.”

I felt my eyebrows go up. Mouse had us both beat when it came to purely physical sensory input, and he’d given no indication of a hostile presence ahead. My own senses were attuned to all kinds of supernatural energies, and I’d kept them focused ever since we’d entered Undertown. I hadn’t sensed any stirring of any kind that would indicate some kind of malevolent presence.

If knowledge is power, then it follows that ignorance is weakness. In my line of work, ignorance can get you killed. Gard hadn’t said anything about any kind of mystic connection between herself and this beastie, but it was the most likely explanation for how she could sense its presence when I couldn’t.

The problem with that was that those kinds of connections generally didn't flow one-way. If she could sense the grendelkin, odds were the grendelkin could sense her right back.

"Whoa, wait," I said. "If this thing might know we're coming, we don't want to go rushing in blind."

"There's no time. It's almost ready to breed." There was a hint of a snarl in her words as the ax came down off her shoulder. Gard pulled what looked like a road flare out of her duffel bag and tossed the bag aside.

Then she threw back her head and let out a scream of pure, unholy defiance. The sound was so loud, so raw, so primal, it hardly seemed human. It wasn't a word, but that didn't stop her howl from eloquently declaring Gard's rage, her utter contempt for danger, for life—and for death. That battle cry scared the living snot out of me, and it wasn't even aimed in my direction.

Gard struck the flare to life with a flick of a wrist and shot me a glance over her shoulder. Eerie green light played up over her face, casting bizarre shadows, and her icy eyes were very wide and white-rimmed above a smile stretched so tightly that the blood had drained from her lips. Her voice quavered disconcertingly. "Enough talk."

Holy Schwarzenegger.

Gard had lost it.

This wasn't the reaction of the cool, reasoning professional I'd seen working for Marcone. I'd never actually *seen* anyone go truly, old-school *berserkergang*, but that scream ... It was like hearing an echo rolling down through the centuries from an ancient world, a more savage world, now lost to the mists of time.

And suddenly I had no trouble at all believing her age.

She charged forward, whipping her ax lightly around with her right hand, holding the blazing star of the flare in her left. Gard let out another banshee shriek as she went, a wordless cry of challenge to the grendelkin that declared her intent as clearly as any horde of phonemes: *I am coming to kill you.*

And ahead of us in the tunnels, something much, much bigger than Gard answered her, a deep-chested, basso bellow that shook the walls of the tunnel in answer: *Bring it on.*

My knees turned shaky. Hell, even Mouse stood with his ears pressed against his skull, tail held low, body set in a slight crouch. I doubt I looked

any more courageous than he did, but I kicked my brain into gear, spat out a nervous curse, and hurried after her.

Charging in headlong might be a really stupid idea, but it would be an even worse idea to stand around doing nothing, throwing away the only help I was likely to get. Besides, for better or worse, I'd agreed to work with Gard, and I wasn't going to let her go in without covering her back.

So I charged headlong down the tunnel toward the source of the terrifying bellow. Mouse, perhaps wiser than I, hesitated a few seconds longer, then made up for it on the way down the tunnel, until he was running a pace in front of me, matching my stride. We'd gone maybe twenty yards before his breath began to rumble out in a growl of pure hostility, and he let out his own roar of challenge.

Hey, when in Cimmeria, do as the Cimmerians do. I screamed, too. It got lost in all the echoes bouncing around the tunnels.

Gard, running hard ten paces ahead of me, burst into a chamber. She gathered herself in a sudden leap, flipping neatly in the air, and plummeted from sight. The falling green light of the flare showed me that the tunnel opened into the top of a chamber the size of a small hotel atrium, and if Mouse hadn't stopped first and leaned back against me, I might have slid over the edge before I could stop. As it was, I got a really good look at a drop of at least thirty feet to a wet stone floor.

Gard landed on her feet, turned the momentum into a forward roll, and a shaggy blur the size of an industrial freezer whipped past her, slamming into the wall with a coughing roar and a shudder of impact.

The blond woman bounced up, kicked off a stone wall, flipped over again, and came down on her feet, ax held high. She'd discarded the flare, leaving it in the center of the floor, and I got my first good look at the place, and at the things in it.

First of all, the chamber, cavern, whatever it was, was huge. Thirty feet from ceiling to floor, at least thirty feet wide, and it stretched out into the darkness beyond the sharp light cast by the flare. Most of it was natural stone. Some of the surfaces showed signs of being crudely cut with hand-wielded tools. A ledge about two feet wide ran along the edge of the chamber in a C-shape, up near the top. I'd nearly tumbled off the ledge into the cavern. There were stairs cut into the wall below me—if you could call the twelve-inch projections crudely hacked out of the stone every couple of feet a stairway.

My glance swept over the cavern below. A huge pile of newspapers, old blankets, bloodstained clothes, and unidentifiable bits of fabric must have served as a nest or bed for the creature. It was three feet high in the middle, and a good ten or twelve feet across. A mound of bones, nearby, was very nearly as large. The old ivory gleamed in the eerie light of the flare, cleared entirely of meat, though the mound was infested with rats and vermin, all tiny moving forms and glittering red eyes.

A huge stone had been placed in the center of the floor. A metal beer keg sat on top of it, between the tied-down, spread-eagled legs of a rather attractive and very naked young woman. She'd been tied down with rough ropes, directly over a thick layer of old bloodstains congealed into an almost-rubbery coating on the rock. Her eyes were wide, her face flushed with tears, and she was screaming.

Gard whipped her ax through a series of scything arcs in front of her, driving them at the big furry blur. I had no idea how she was covering the ground fast enough to keep up with the thing. They were both moving at Kung Fu Theater speed. One of Gard's swipes must have tagged it, because there was a sudden bellow of rage and it bounded into the shadows outside the light of the flare.

She let out a howl of frustration. The head of her ax was smeared with black fluid, and as it ran across the steel, flickers of silver fire appeared in the shape of more strange runes. "Wizard!" she bellowed. "Give me light!"

I was already on it, holding my amulet high and behind my head, ramming more will through the device. The dim wizard light flared into incandescence, throwing strong light at least a hundred feet down the long gallery—and drawing a shriek of pain and surprise from the grendelkin.

I saw it for maybe two seconds, while it crouched with one arm thrown up to shield its eyes. The grendelkin was flabby over a quarter ton of muscle, and the nails on its fingers and toes were black, long, and dangerous-looking. It was big, nine or ten feet, and covered in hair. It wasn't fur, like a bear or a dog, but *hair*, human hair, with pale skin easily seen beneath, so that the impression it gave was one of an exceptionally hirsute man, rather than that of a beast.

And the beast was definitely male; terrifyingly so—I'd seen smaller fire extinguishers. And from the looks of things, Gard and I must have interrupted him in the middle of foreplay.

No wonder he was pissed.

Gard saw the grendelkin and charged forward. I saw my chance to pitch in. I lifted my staff and pointed it at the creature, gathered another surge of will, and snarled, "*Fuego!*"

My staff was an important tool, allowing me to focus and direct energy much more precisely and with more concentration than I could manage without it. It didn't work as well as my more specialized blasting rod for directing fire, but for this purpose it would do just fine. A column of golden flame as wide as a whiskey barrel leapt across the cavern to the grendelkin, smashing into his head and upper body. It was too dispersed to kill the grendelkin outright, but hopefully it would blind and distract the beast enough to let Gard get in the killing blow.

The grendelkin lowered his arm, and I saw a quick flash of yellow eyes, a hideous face, and a mouthful of fangs. Those teeth spread into a smile, and I realized I might as well have hit him with the stream of water from a garden hose, for all the effect the fire had on him. He moved, an abrupt whipping of his massive shoulders, and flung a stone at me.

Take it from me, the grendelkin's talents were wasted on the abduct-rape-devour industry.

He should have been playing professional ball.

By the time I realized the rock was on the way, it had already hit me. There was a popping sound from my left shoulder, and a wave of agony. Something flung me to the ground, driving the breath out of my lungs. My amulet fell from my suddenly unresponsive fingers, and the brilliant light died at once.

Dammit, I had assumed big and hostile meant dumb, and the grendelkin wasn't. The beast had deliberately waited for Gard to charge forward out of the light of the dropped flare before he threw.

"Wizard!" Gard bellowed.

I couldn't see anything. The brief moment of brilliant illumination had blinded my eyes to the dimmer light of the flare, and Gard couldn't be in much better shape. I got to my feet, trying not to scream at the pain in my shoulder, and staggered back to look down at the room.

The grendelkin bellowed again, and Gard screamed—this time in pain. There was the sound of a heavy blow, and Gard, her hands empty, flew across the circle of green flare-light, a dim shadow. She struck the wall beneath me with an ugly, heavy sound.

It was all happening so *fast*. Hell's bells, but I was playing out of my league, here.

I turned to Mouse and snarled an instruction. My dog stared at me for a second, ears flattened to his skull, and didn't move.

"Go!" I screamed at him. "Go, go, go!"

Mouse spun and shot off back down the way we'd come.

Gard groaned on the floor beneath me, stirring weakly at the edge of the dim circle of light cast by the flare. I couldn't tell how badly she was hurt—but I knew that if I didn't move before the grendelkin finished her, she wasn't going to get any better. I could hear Elizabeth sobbing in despair.

"Get up, Harry," I growled at myself. "Get a move on."

I could barely move my left arm, so I gripped my staff in my right and began negotiating the precarious stone stairway.

A voice laughed out in the darkness. It was a deep voice, masculine, mellow, and smooth. When it spoke, it did so with precise, cultured pronunciation. "Geat bitch," the grendelkin murmured. "That's the most fun I've had in a century. Surt, but I wish there were a few more Choosers running about the world. You're a dying breed."

I could barely see the damned stairs in the flare's light. My foot slipped, and I nearly fell.

"Who's the *seidrmadr*?" the grendelkin asked.

"Gesundheit," I said.

The beast appeared at the far side of the circle of light, and I stopped in my tracks. The grendelkin's yellow eyes gleamed with malice and hunger. He flexed his claw-tipped hands very slowly, baring his teeth in another smile. My mouth felt utterly dry and my legs were shaking. I'd seen him move. If he rushed me, things could get ugly.

Strike that. *When* he rushed me, things *were* going to get ugly.

"Is that a fire extinguisher in your pocket?" I asked, studying the grendelkin intently. "Or are you just happy to see me?"

The grendelkin's smile spread wider. "Most definitely the latter. I'm going to have two mouths to feed, shortly. What did she promise you to fool you into coming with her?"

"You got it backward. I permitted her to tag along with me," I said.

The grendelkin let out a low, lazily wicked laugh. It was eerie as hell, hearing such a refined voice come from a package like that. "Do you think you're a threat to me, little man?"

“You think I’m not?”

Idly, the grendelkin dragged the clawed fingers of one hand around on the stone floor beside him. Little sparks jumped up here and there. “I’ve been countering *seid* since before I left the Old World. Without that, you’re nothing more than a monkey with a stick.” He paused and added, “A rather weak and clumsy monkey at that.”

“Big guy like you shouldn’t have any trouble with little old me, then,” I said. His eyes were strange. I’d never seen any quite like that. His face, though pretty ugly, was similar to others I’d seen. “I guess you have some history with Miss Gard, there.”

“Family feuds are always the worst,” the grendelkin said.

“Have to take your word for it,” I said. “Just like I’m going to have to take these women. I’d rather do it peaceably than the hard way. Your call. Walk away, big guy. We’ll both be happier.”

The grendelkin looked at me, and then threw his head back in a rich, deeply amused laugh. “It’s not enough that I already have a brood-mare and a wounded little wildcat to play with; I also have a clown. It’s practically a festival.”

And with that, the grendelkin rushed me. A crushing fist the size of a volleyball flicked at my face. I was fast enough, barely, to slip the blow. I flung myself to the cavern floor, gasping as the shock of landing reached my shoulder. That sledgehammer of flesh and bone slammed into the wall with a brittle crunching sound. Chips of flying stone stung my cheek.

It scared the crap out of me, which was just as well. Terror makes a great fuel for some kinds of magic, and the get-the-hell-away-from-me blast of raw force I unleashed on the grendelkin would have flung a parked car to the other side of the street and into the building beyond.

The grendelkin hadn’t been kidding about knowing counter-magic, though. All that naked force hit him and just sort of slid off him, like water pouring around a stone. It only drove him back about two steps—which was room enough to let me drop to one knee and swing my staff again. It wasn’t a bone-crushing blow, powered as it was by only one hand and from a fairly unbalanced position.

But I got him in the fire extinguisher.

The grendelkin let out a howl about two octaves higher than his original bellows had been, and I scooted around him, running for the altar stone

where Elizabeth Braddock lay helpless—away from Gard. I wanted the grendelkin to focus all his attention on me.

He did.

“Behind you!” Elizabeth screamed, her eyes wide with terror.

I whirled and a sweep of the grendelkin’s arm ripped the staff out of my hand. Something like a steel vise clamped around my neck, and my feet came up off the ground.

The grendelkin lifted my face to his level. His breath smelled of blood and rotten meat. His eyes were bright with their fury. I kicked at him, but he held me out of reach of anything vital, and my kicks plunked uselessly into his belly and ribs.

“I was going to make it quick for you,” he snarled. “For amusing me. But I’m going to start with your arms.”

If I didn’t have him right where I wanted him, I’d have been less than sanguine about my chances of survival. I’d accomplished that much, at least. He had his back to the tunnel.

“Rip them off one at a time, little *seidrmadr*.” He paused. “Which, when viewed from a literary perspective, has a certain amount of irony.” He showed me more teeth. “I’ll let you watch me eat your hands. Let you see what I do to these bitches before I’m done with you.”

Boy, was he going to get it.

One of his hands grabbed my left arm, and the pain of my dislocated shoulder made my world go white. I fought through the agony, ripped Elizabeth Braddock’s pointy-handled hairbrush from my duster’s pocket, and drove it like an ice pick into the grendelkin’s forearm.

He roared and flung me into the nearest wall.

Which hurt. Lots.

I fell to the stone floor of the cavern in a heap. After that, my vision shrank to a tunnel and began to darken.

This was just as well—fewer distractions, that way. Now all I had to do was time it right.

A sound groaned down from the tunnel entrance above, an odd, ululating murmur, echoed into unintelligibility.

The furious grendelkin ripped the brush out of his arm and flung it away—but when he heard the sound, he turned his ugly kisser back toward the source.

I focused harder on the spell I had coming than upon anything I'd ever done. I had no circle to help me, lots of distractions, and absolutely no room to screw it up.

The strange sound resolved itself into a yowling chorus, like half a hundred band saws on helium, and Mouse burst out of the tunnel with a living thunderstorm of malks in hot pursuit.

My dog flung himself into the empty air, and malks bounded after him, determined not to let him escape. Mouse fell thirty feet, onto the huge pile of nesting material, landing with a yelp. The malks spilled after him, yowling in fury, dozens and dozens of malevolent eyes glittering in the light of the flare. Some jumped, some flowed seamlessly down the rough stairs, and others bounded forward, sank their claws into the stone of the far wall, and slid down it like a fireman down a pole.

I unleashed the spell.

"Useless vermin!" bellowed the grendelkin, his voice still pitched higher than before. He pointed at me, a battered-looking man in a long leather coat, and roared, "Kill the wizard or I'll eat every last one of you!"

The malks, now driven as much by fear as anger, immediately swarmed all over me. I gave them a pretty good time of it, but there were probably better than three dozen of them, and the leather coat couldn't cover everything.

Claws and fangs flashed.

Blood spattered.

The malks went insane with bloodlust.

I screamed, swinging wildly with both hands, killing a malk here or there, but unable to protect myself from all those claws and teeth. The grendelkin turned toward the helpless Elizabeth.

It was a real bitch, trying to undo the grendelkin's knotted ropes while still holding the illusion in place in my mind. Beneath the glamour that made him look like me, he fought furiously, clawing and swinging at the malks attacking him. It didn't help that Elizabeth was screaming again, thanks to the illusion of the grendelkin I was holding over myself, but hey. No plan is perfect.

"Mouse!" I cried.

A malk flew over my head, screaming, and splattered against a wall.

My dog bounded up just as I got the girl loose. I shoved her at him and said, "Get her out of here! Run! Go, go, go!"

Elizabeth didn't know what the hell was going on, but she understood that last part well enough. She fled, back toward the crude staircase. Mouse ran beside her, and when a malk flung itself at Elizabeth's naked back, my dog intercepted the little monster in the air, catching it as neatly as a Frisbee at the park. Mouse snarled and shook his jaws once. The malk's neck broke with an audible snap. My dog dropped it and fled on.

I grabbed my staff and ran to Gard. The malks hadn't noticed her yet. They were still busy mobbing the grendelkin—

Crap. My concentration had wavered. It looked like itself again, as did I.

I whirled and focused my will upon the giant pile of clean-picked bones. I extended my staff and snarled, "Counterspell this. *Forzare!*"

Hundreds of pounds of sharp white bone flung themselves at the grendelkin and the malks alike. I threw the bones hard, harder than the grendelkin had thrown his rock, and the bone shards ripped into them like the blast of an enormous shotgun.

Without waiting to see the results, I snatched up the still-burning flare and flung it into the pile of nesting fabric, bloody clothes, and old newspapers. The whole mound flared instantly into angry light and smothering smoke.

"Get up!" I screamed at Gard. One side of her face was bruised and swollen, and she had a visibly broken arm, one of the bones in her forearm protruding from the skin. With my help, she staggered up, dazed and choking on the smoke, which also blotted out the light. I got her onto the stairs, and even in our battered state, we set some kind of speed record going up them.

The deafening chorus of bellowing grendelkin and howling malks faded a little as the smoke started choking them, too. Air was moving in the tunnel, as the fire drew on it just as it might a chimney. I lit up my amulet again to show us the way out.

"Wait!" Gard gasped, fifty feet up the tunnel. "Wait!"

She fumbled at her jacket pocket, where she kept the little ivory box, but she couldn't reach it with her sound arm. I dug it out for her.

"Triangle, three lines over it," she said, leaning against a wall for support. "Get it out."

I poked through the little ivory Scrabble tiles until I found one that matched her description. "This one?" I demanded.

“Careful,” she growled. “It’s a Sunder rune.” She grabbed it from me, took a couple of steps back toward the grendelkin’s cavern, murmured under her breath, and snapped the little tile. There was a flicker of deep red light, and the tunnel itself quivered and groaned.

“Run!”

We did.

Behind us, the tunnel collapsed in on itself with a roar, sealing the malks and the grendelkin away beneath us, trapping them in the smothering smoke.

We both stopped for a moment after that, as dust billowed up the tunnel and the sound of furious supernatural beings cut off as if someone had flipped a switch. The silence was deafening.

We both stood there, panting and wounded. Gard sank to the floor to rest.

“You were right,” I said. “I guess we didn’t need to worry about the malks on the way out.”

Gard gave me a weary smile. “That was my favorite ax.”

“Go back for it,” I suggested. “I’ll wait for you here.”

She snorted.

Mouse came shambling up out of the tunnel above us. Elizabeth Braddock clung to his collar, and looked acutely embarrassed about her lack of clothing. “Wh-what?” she whispered. “What happened here? I don’t understand.”

“It’s all right, Mrs. Braddock,” I said. “You’re safe. We’re going to take you back to your husband.”

She closed her eyes, shuddered, and started to cry. She sank down to put her arms around Mouse’s furry ruff, and buried her face in his fur. She was shivering with the cold. I shucked out of my coat and draped it around her.

Gard eyed her, then her own broken arm, and let out a sigh. “I need a drink.”

I spat some grit out of my mouth. “Ditto. Come on.”

I offered her a hand up. She took it.

SEVERAL HOURS AND doctors later, Gard and I wound up back at the pub, where the beer festival was winding to a conclusion. We sat at a table with Mac. The Braddocks had stammered a gratuitous number of thanks

and rushed off together. Mac's keg had a blue ribbon taped to it. He'd drawn all of us a mug.

"Night of the Living Brews," I said. I had painkillers for my shoulder, but I was waiting until I was home and in bed to take one. As a result, I ached pretty much everywhere. "More like night of the living bruise."

Mac rose, drained his mug, and held it up in a salute to Gard and me. "Thanks."

"No problem," I said.

Gard smiled slightly and bowed her head to him. Mac departed.

Gard finished her own mug and examined the cast on her arm. "Close one."

"Little bit," I said. "Can I ask you something?"

She nodded.

"The grendelkin called you a Geat," I said.

"Yes, he did."

"I'm familiar with only one person referred to in that way," I said.

"There are a few more around," Gard said. "But everyone's heard of that one."

"You called the grendelkin a scion of Grendel," I said. "Am I to take it that you're a scion of the Geat?"

Gard smiled slightly. "My family and the grendelkin's have a long history."

"He called you a Chooser," I said.

She shrugged again, and kept her enigmatic smile.

"Gard isn't your real name," I said. "Is it?"

"Of course not," she replied.

I sipped some more of Mac's award-winning dark. "You're a Valkyrie. A real one."

Her expression was unreadable.

"I thought Valkyries mostly did pickups and deliveries," I said. "Choosing the best warriors from among the slain. Taking them off to Valhalla. Oh, and serving drinks there. Odin's virgin daughters, pouring mead for the warriors, partying until Ragnarok."

Gard threw back her head and laughed. "Virgin daughters." She rose, shaking her head, and glanced at her broken arm again. Then she leaned down and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were a sweet, hungry little fire

of sensation, and I felt the kiss all the way to my toes—some places more than others, *ahem*.

She drew away slowly, her pale blue eyes shining. Then she winked at me and said, “Don’t believe everything you read, Dresden.” She turned to go, then paused to glance over her shoulder. “Though, to be honest, sometimes he *does* like us to call him Daddy. I’m Sigrun.”

I watched Sigrun go. Then I finished the last of the beer. Mouse rose expectantly, his tail wagging, and we set off for home.

JIM BUTCHER

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For the forum-going fans at jim-butcher.com. I'm pretty sure your bosses would be upset if they saw your posting stats, guys, but I won't tell if you won't.

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Acknowledgments

Chapter One

Winter came early that year; it should have been a tip-off.

A snowball soared through the evening air and smacked into my apprentice's mouth. Since she was muttering a mantra-style chant when it hit her, she wound up with a mouthful of frozen cheer—which may or may not have been more startling for her than for most people, given how many metallic piercings were suddenly in direct contact with the snow.

Molly Carpenter sputtered, spitting snow, and a round of hooting laughter went up from the children gathered around her. Tall, blond, and athletic, dressed in jeans and a heavy winter coat, she looked natural in the snowy setting, her cheeks and nose turning red with the cold.

“Concentration, Molly!” I called. I carefully kept any laughter I might have wanted to indulge in from my voice. “You’ve got to concentrate! Again!”

The children, her younger brothers and sisters, immediately began packing fresh ammunition to hurl at her. The backyard of the Carpenter house was already thoroughly chewed up from an evening of winter warfare, and two low “fortress” walls faced each other across ten yards of open lawn. Molly stood between them, shivering, and gave me an impatient look.

“This can’t possibly be real training,” she said, her voice quavering with cold. “You’re just doing this for your own sick amusement, Harry.”

I beamed at her and accepted a freshly made snowball from little Hope, who had apparently appointed herself my squire. I thanked the small girl gravely, and bounced the snowball on my palm a few times. “Nonsense,” I said. “This is wonderful practice. Did you think you were going to start off bouncing bullets?”

Molly gave me an exasperated look. Then she took a deep breath, bowed her head again, and lifted her left hand, her fingers spread wide. She began

muttering again, and I felt the subtle shift of energies moving as she began drawing magic up around her in an almost solid barrier, a shield that rose between her and the incipient missile storm.

“Ready!” I called out. “Aim!”

Every single person there, including myself, threw before I got to the end of *aim*, and snowballs sped through the air, flung by children ranging from the eldest, Daniel, who was seventeen, down to the youngest, little Harry, who wasn’t yet big enough to have much of a throwing arm, but who didn’t let that stop him from making the largest snowball he could lift.

Snowballs pelted my apprentice’s shield, and it stopped the first two, the frozen missiles exploding into puffs of fresh powder. The rest of them, though, went right on through Molly’s defenses, and she was splattered with several pounds of snow. Little Harry ran up to her and threw last, with both hands, and shrieked merry triumph as his bread-loaf-sized snowball splattered all over Molly’s stomach.

“Fire!” I barked belatedly.

Molly fell onto her butt in the snow, sputtered some more, and burst out in a long belly laugh. Harry and Hope, the youngest of the children, promptly jumped on top of her, and from there the lesson in defensive magic devolved into the Carpenter children’s longstanding tradition of attempting to shovel as much snow as possible down the necks of one another’s coats. I grinned and stood there watching them, and a moment later found the children’s mother standing beside me.

Molly took after Charity Carpenter, who had passed her coloring and build on to her daughter. Charity and I haven’t always seen eye-to-eye—well, in point of fact, we’ve hardly ever seen eye-to-eye—but tonight she was smiling at the children’s antics.

“Good evening, Mister Dresden,” she murmured.

“Charity,” I replied amiably. “This happen a lot?”

“Almost always, during the first real snowfall of the year,” she said. “Generally, though, it’s closer to Christmas than Halloween.”

I watched the children romping. Though Molly was growing quickly, in a number of senses, she reverted to childhood easily enough here, and it did me good to see it.

I sensed Charity’s unusually intense regard and glanced at her, lifting an eyebrow in question.

“You never had a snowball fight with family,” she said quietly, “did you?”

I shook my head and turned my attention back to the kids. “No family to have the fight with,” I said. “Sometimes the kids would try, at school, but the teachers wouldn’t let it happen. And a lot of times the other kids did it to be mean, instead of to have fun. That changes things.”

Charity nodded, and also looked back at the kids. “My daughter. How is her training progressing?”

“Well, I think,” I said. “Her talents don’t lie anywhere close to the same areas mine do. And she’s never going to be much of a combat wizard.”

Charity frowned. “Why do you say that? Do you think she isn’t strong enough?”

“Strength has nothing to do with it. But her greatest talents make her unsuited for it in some ways.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, she’s good with subtle things. Delicate things. Her ability at handling fine, sensitive magic is outstanding, and increasing all the time. But that same sensitivity means that she has problems handling the psychic stresses of real combat. It also makes the gross physical stuff a real challenge for her.”

“Like stopping snowballs?” Charity asked.

“Snowballs are good practice,” I said. “Nothing gets hurt but her pride.”

Charity nodded, frowning. “But you didn’t learn with snowballs, did you.”

The memory of my first shielding lesson under Justin DuMorne wasn’t a particularly sentimental one. “Baseballs.”

“Merciful God,” Charity said, shaking her head. “How old were you?”

“Thirteen.” I shrugged a shoulder. “Pain’s a good motivator. I learned fast.”

“But you aren’t trying to teach my daughter the same way,” Charity said.

“There’s no rush,” I said.

The noise from the children stopped, dropping to furtive whispers, and I winked at Charity. She glanced from the children to me, amusement evident in her face. Not five seconds later Molly shouted, “Now!” and multiple snowballs came zipping toward me.

I lifted my left hand, focusing my will, my magic, and drew it into the shape of a broad, flat disk in front of me. It wasn’t a good enough shield to

stop bullets, or even well-thrown baseballs, but for snowballs it was just fine. They shattered to powder on my shield, revealing it in little flashes of pale blue light as a circular plane of force centered on the outspread fingers of my extended left hand.

The children laughed as they cried out their disapproval. I shouted, “Hah!” and lifted a triumphant fist.

Then Charity, standing behind me, dumped a double handful of snow down the neck of my coat.

I yelped as the cold ate my spinal cord, jumped up out of my tracks, and danced around trying to shake the snow out from under my clothes. The children cheered their mother on and began flinging snowballs at more or less random targets, and in all the excitement and frivolity I didn’t realize that we were under attack until the lights went out.

The entire block plunged into darkness—the floodlights illuminating the Carpenters’ backyard, house lights in every nearby home, and the streetlights were all abruptly extinguished. Eerie, ambient werelight reflected from the snow. Shadows suddenly yawned where there had been none before, and the scent of something midway between a skunk and a barrel of rotting eggs assaulted my nostrils.

I yanked my blasting rod out of its holder on the inside of my coat and said to Charity, “Get them inside.”

“Emergency,” Charity said in a far calmer voice than I had managed. “Everyone into the safe room, just like in practice.”

The children had just begun to move when three creatures I had never seen before came bounding through the snow. Time slowed as the adrenaline hit my system, and it felt like I had half an hour to study them.

They weren’t terribly tall, maybe five-foot-six, but they were layered with white fur and muscle. Each had a head that was almost goatlike, but the horns atop them curled around to the front like a bull’s rather than arching back. Their legs were reverse-jointed and ended in hooves, and they moved in a series of single-legged leaps more than running. They got better air than a Chicago Bull, too, which meant I was dealing with something with supernatural strength.

Though, thinking about it, I couldn’t actually remember the last time I’d dealt with something that *didn’t* have supernatural strength, which is one of the drawbacks of the wizard business. I mean, some things are stronger than others, sure, but it wouldn’t much matter to my skull if a paranormal

bruiser could bench-press a locomotive or if he was merely buff enough to juggle refrigerators.

I trained the tip of my blasting rod on the lead Whatsit, and then a bunch of snow fell from above in my peripheral vision, landing on the ground beside me with a soft thump.

I threw myself into a forward dive, rolled over one shoulder, and came to my feet already moving laterally. I was just in time to avoid the rush of a fourth Whatsit, which had knocked the snow loose just before it dropped down onto me from the tree house Michael had built for his kids. It let out a hissing, bubbling snarl.

I didn't have time to waste with this backstabbing twit. So I raised the rod as its tip burst into scarlet flame, unleashed my will, and snarled, "*Fuego!*"

A wrist-thick lance of pure flame leapt from the blasting rod and seared the creature's upper body to blackened meat. The excess heat melted snow all around it and sent up a billow of scalding steam. Judging by the tackle hanging between the thing's legs as the steam burst up from the snow, it probably inflicted as much pain as the actual fire.

The Whatsit went down, and I had to hope that it wasn't bright enough to play possum: The Carpenter children were screaming.

I whirled around, readying the rod again, and didn't have a clear shot. One of the white-furred creatures was running hard after Daniel, Molly's oldest brother. He'd begun to fill out, and he ran with his fingers locked on the back of the coats of little Harry and Hope, the youngest children, carrying them like luggage.

He gained the door with the creature not ten feet behind him, its wicked-looking horns lowered as it charged. Daniel went through the door and kicked it shut with his foot, never slowing down, and the creature slammed into it head-on.

I hadn't realized that Michael had installed all-steel, wood-paneled security doors on his home, just as I had on mine. The creature probably would have pulverized a wooden door. Instead it slammed its head into the steel door, horns leading the way, and drove a foot-deep dent into it.

And then it lurched away, letting out a burbling shriek of pain. Smoke rose from its horns, and it staggered back, swatting at them with its three-fingered, clawed hands. There weren't many things that reacted to the touch of steel like that.

The other two whatsits had divided their attention. One was pursuing Charity, who was carrying little Amanda and running like hell for the workshop Michael had converted from a freestanding garage. The other was charging Molly, who had pushed Alicia and Matthew behind her.

There wasn't time enough to help both groups, and even less to waste over the moral dilemma of a difficult choice.

I turned the rod on the beastie chasing Charity and let it have it. The blast hit it in the small of its back and knocked it from its hooves. It flew sideways, slamming into the wall of the workshop, and Charity dashed through the door with her daughter.

I turned my blasting rod back to the other creature, but I already knew that I wouldn't be in time. The creature lowered its horns and closed on Molly and her siblings before I could line up for another shot.

"Molly!" I screamed.

My apprentice seized Alicia's and Matthew's hands, gasped out a word, and all three of them abruptly vanished.

The creature's charge carried it past the space they'd been in, though something I couldn't see struck its hoof and sent it staggering. It wheeled around at full speed, kicking up snow as it did, and I felt a sudden, fierce surge of exaltation and pride. The grasshopper might not be able to put up a decent shield, but she could do veils like they were going out of style, and she'd kept her focus and her wits about her.

The creature slowed, head sweeping, and then it saw the snow being disturbed by invisible feet, moving toward the house. It bawled out another unworldly cry and went after them, and I didn't dare risk another blast of flame—not with the Carpenters' house in the line of fire. So instead I lifted my right hand, triggered one of the triple-layered rings on it with my will, and sent a burst of raw force at the whatsit.

The unseen energy struck it in the knees, throwing its legs out from under it with such strength that its head slammed into the snow. The disturbance in the snow rushed around toward the front door of the house. Molly must have realized that the deformation of the security door would make it difficult, if not impossible, to open, and once again I felt fierce approval.

But it faded rather rapidly when the whatsit that had been playing possum behind me slammed into the small of my back like a sulfur-and-rotten-egg-driven locomotive.

The horns hit hard and it hurt like hell, but the defensive magic on my long black leather duster kept them from impaling me. The impact knocked the wind out of me, snapped my head back sharply, and flung me to the snow. Everything got confusing for a second, and then I realized that it was standing over me, ripping at the back of my neck with its claws. I hunched my shoulders and rolled, only to be kicked in the nose by a cloven hoof, and an utterly gratuitous amount of pain came with a side order of whirling stars.

I kept trying to get away, but my motions were sluggish, and the *whatsit* was faster than me.

Charity stepped out of the workshop with a steel-hafted ball-peen hammer in her left hand, and a heavy-duty contractor's nail gun in her right.

She lifted the nail gun from ten feet away and started pulling the trigger as she walked forward. It made *phut-phut-phut* sounds, and the already seared *whatsit* started screaming in pain. It leapt up wildly, twisting in agonized gyrations in midair, and fell to the snow, thrashing. I saw heavy nails sticking up out of its back, and the smoking wounds were bleeding green-white fire.

It tried to run, but I managed to kick its hooves out from under it before it could regain its footing.

Charity whirled the hammer in a vertical stroke, letting out a sharp cry as she did, and the steel head of the tool smashed open the *whatsit's* skull. The wound erupted with greyish matter and more green-white fire, and the creature twitched once before it went still, its body being consumed by the eerie flame.

I stood up, blasting rod still in hand, and found the remaining beasties wounded but mobile, their yellow, rectangular-pupiled eyes glaring in hate and hunger.

I ditched the blasting rod and picked up a steel-headed snow shovel that had been left lying next to one of the children's snow forts. Charity raised her nail gun, and we began walking toward them.

Whatever these things were, they didn't have the stomach for a fight against mortals armed with cold steel. They shuddered as if they had been a single being, then turned and bounded away into the night.

I stood there, panting and peering around me. I had to spit blood out of my mouth every few breaths. My nose felt like someone had superglued a

couple of live coals to it. Little silver wires of pain ran all through my neck, from the whiplash of getting hit from behind, and the small of my back felt like one enormous bruise.

“Are you all right?” Charity asked.

“Faeries,” I muttered. “Why did it have to be faeries?”

Chapter Two

“Well,” Charity said, “it’s broken.”

“You think?” I asked. The light touch of her fingers on my nose was less than pleasant, but I didn’t twitch or make any sounds of discomfort while she examined me. It’s a guy thing.

“At least it isn’t out of place,” Michael said, knocking snow off of his boots. “Getting it set back is the sort of thing you don’t mind forgetting.”

“Find anything?” I asked him.

The big man nodded his head and set a sheathed broadsword in a corner against the wall. Michael was only a couple of inches shorter than me, and a lot more muscular. He had dark hair and a short beard, both of them peppered with silver, and wore blue jeans, work boots, and a blue-and-white flannel shirt. “That corpse is still there. It’s mostly a burned mess, but it didn’t dissolve.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Faeries aren’t wholly beings of the spirit world. They leave corpses behind.”

Michael grunted. “Other than that there were footprints, but that’s about it. No sign that these goat-things were still around.” He glanced into the dining room, where the Carpenter children were gathered at the table, talking excitedly and munching the pizza their father had been out picking up when the attack occurred. “The neighbors think the light show must have come from a blown transformer.”

“That’s as good an excuse as any,” I said.

“I thank God no one was hurt,” he said. For him it wasn’t just an expression. He meant it literally. It came of being a devout Catholic, and maybe from toting around a holy sword with one of the nails from the Crucifixion wrought into the blade. He shook himself and gave me a short smile. “And you, of course, Harry.”

“Thank Daniel, Molly, and Charity,” I said. “I just kept our visitors busy. Your family’s who got the little ones to safety. And Charity did all the actual smiting.”

Michael’s eyebrows went up, and he turned his gaze on his wife. “Did she now?”

Charity’s cheeks turned pink. She briskly swept up the various tissues and cloths I’d bloodied, and carried them out of the room to be burned in the lit fireplace in the living room. In my business, you don’t ever want samples of your blood, your hair, or your fingernail clippings lying around for someone else to find. I gave Michael the rundown of the fight while she was gone.

“My nail gun?” he asked, grinning, as Charity came back into the kitchen. “How did you know it was a faerie?”

“I didn’t,” she said. “I just grabbed what was at hand.”

“We got lucky,” I said.

Michael arched an eyebrow at me.

I scowled at him. “Not every good thing that happens is divine intervention, Michael.”

“True,” Michael said, “but I prefer to give Him the credit unless I have a good reason to believe otherwise. It seems more polite than the other way around.”

Charity came to stand at her husband’s side. Though they were both smiling and speaking lightly about the attack, I noticed that they were holding hands very tightly, and Charity’s eyes kept drifting over toward the children, as if to reassure herself that they were still there and safe.

I suddenly felt like an intruder.

“Well,” I said, rising, “looks like I’ve got a new project.”

Michael nodded. “Do you know the motive for the attack?”

“That’s the project,” I said. I pulled my duster on, wincing as the motion made me move my stiffening neck. “I think they were after me. The attack on the kids was a diversion to give the one in the tree a shot at my back.”

“Are you sure about that?” Charity asked quietly.

“No,” I admitted. “It’s possible that they’re holding a grudge about that business at Arctis Tor.”

Charity’s eyes narrowed and went steely. Arctis Tor was the heart of the Winter Court, the fortress and sanctum sanctorum of Queen Mab herself. Some nasty customers from Winter had stolen Molly, and Charity and I,

with a little help, had stormed the tower and taken Molly back by main force. The whole mess had been noisy as hell, and we'd pissed off an entire nation of wicked fae in the process of making it.

"Keep your eyes open, just in case," I told her. "And let Molly know that I'd like her to stay here for the time being."

Michael quirked an eyebrow at me. "You think she needs our protection?"

"No," I said. "I think you might need hers."

Michael blinked. Charity frowned quietly, but did not dispute me.

I nodded to both of them and left. Molly wasn't rebelling against everything I told her to do purely upon reflex these days, but *fait accompli* remained the best way of avoiding arguments with her.

I shut the door to the Carpenter household behind me, cutting off the scent of hot pizza and the sound of loudly animated children's voices, raucous after the excitement.

The November night was silent. And very cold.

I fought off an urge to shiver and hurried to my car, a beat-up old Volkswagen Beetle that had originally been powder blue, but was now a mix of red, blue, green, white, yellow, and now primer grey on the new hood my mechanic had scrounged up. Some anonymous joker who had seen too many Disney movies had spray-painted the number 53 inside a circle on the hood, but the car's name was the Blue Beetle, and it was going to stay that way.

I sat looking at the warm golden light coming from the house for a moment.

Then I coaxed the Beetle to life and headed for home.

Chapter Three

“**A**nd you’re sure they were faeries?” Bob the skull asked.

I scowled. “How many other things get their blood set on fire when it touches iron and steel, Bob? Yes, I think I know a faerie when I get my nose broken by one.”

I was down in my lab, which was accessed by means of a trapdoor in my basement apartment’s living room and a folding wooden stepladder. It’s a concrete box of a room, deep enough under the rest of the boardinghouse I live in to be perpetually cool. In the summer that’s nice. Come winter, not so much.

The lab consisted of a wooden table running down the center of the room, and was surrounded on three sides by tables and workbenches against the outer wall of the room, leaving a narrow walkway around the table. The workbenches were littered with the tools of the trade, and I’d installed those white wire shelving units you can get pretty cheap at Wal-Mart on the walls above the benches, creating more storage space. The shelves were covered with an enormous variety of containers, from a lead-lined box to burlap bags, from Tupperware to a leather pouch made from the genital sac of, I kid you not, an actual African lion.

It was a gift. Don’t ask.

Candles burned around the room, giving it light and twinkling off the pewter miniature buildings on the center table, a scale model of the city of Chicago. I’d brought down a single writing desk for Molly—all the room I had to spare—and her own notebooks and slowly accumulating collection of gear managed to stay neatly organized despite the tiny space.

“Well, it looks like someone is holding Arctis Tor against you,” Bob said. The skull, its eye sockets glowing with orange flickers of light like candles you couldn’t quite see, sat on its own shelf on the uncluttered wall. Half a dozen paperback romance novels littered the shelf around it, and a

seventh had fallen from the shelf and now lay on the floor, obscuring a portion of the silver summoning circle I'd installed there. "Faeries don't ever forget a grudge, boss."

I shook my head at the skull, scooped up the fallen book, and put it back on the shelf. "You ever heard of anything like these guys?"

"My knowledge of the faerie realms is mostly limited to the Winter end of things," Bob said. "These guys don't sound like anything I've run into."

"Then why would they be holding the fight at Arctis Tor against me, Bob?" I asked. "Hell, we weren't even the ones who really assaulted Winter's capital. We just walked in on the aftermath and picked a fight with some of Winter's errand boys who had swiped Molly."

"Maybe some of the Winter Sidhe hired out the vengeance gig as contract labor. These could have been Wyldfae, you know. There's a lot more Wyld than anything else. They *could* have been satyrs." His eyelights brightened. "Did you see any nymphs? If there are satyrs, there's bound to be a nymph or two somewhere close."

"No, Bob."

"Are you sure? Naked girl, drop-dead gorgeous, old enough to know better and young enough not to care?"

"I'd have remembered that if I'd seen it," I said.

"Feh," Bob said, his eyelights dwindling in disappointment. "You can't do anything right, Harry."

I rubbed my hand against the back of my neck. It didn't make it hurt any less, but it gave me something to do. "I've seen these goat guys, or read about them before," I said. "Or at least something close to them. Where did I put those texts on the near reaches of the Nevernever?"

"North wall, green plastic box under the workbench," Bob provided immediately.

"Thanks," I said. I dragged out the heavy plastic storage box. It was filled with books, most of them leather-bound, handwritten treatises on various supernatural topics. Except for one book that was a compilation of "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strips. How had that gotten in there?

I picked up several of the books, carried them to the part of the table that was modeled as Lake Michigan, and set them down. Then I pulled up my stool and started flipping through them.

"How was the trip to Dallas?" Bob asked.

“Hmmm? Oh, fine, fine. Someone was being stalked by a Black Dog.” I glanced up at the map of the United States hanging on the wall beneath Bob’s shelf on a thick piece of poster board. I absently plucked a green thumbtack from the board and poked it into Dallas, Texas, where it joined more than a dozen other green pins and a very few red ones, where the false alarms had been. “They contacted me through the Paranet, and I showed them how to give Fido the bum’s rush out of town.”

“This support network thing you and Elaine have going is really smart,” Bob said. “Teach the minnows how to gang up when a big fish shows up to eat them.”

“I prefer to think of it as teaching sparrows to band together and chase off hawks,” I said, returning to my seat.

“Either way, it means less exposure to danger and less work for you in the long run. Constructive cowardice. Very crafty. I approve.” His voice turned wistful. “I hear that they have some of the best strip clubs in the world in Dallas, Harry.”

I gave Bob a hard look. “If you’re not going to help me, at least don’t distract me.”

“Oh,” Bob said. “Check.” The romance I’d put back on the shelf quivered for a second and then flipped over and opened to the first page. The skull turned toward the book, the orange light from its eyes falling over the pages.

I went through one old text. Then two. Then three. Hell’s bells, I knew I’d seen or read something in one of these.

“Rip her dress off!” Bob shouted.

Bob the skull takes paperback romances very seriously. The next page turned so quickly that he tore the paper a little. Bob is even harder on books than I am.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Bob hollered as more pages turned.

“They couldn’t have been satyrs,” I mumbled out loud, trying to draw my thoughts into order. My nose hurt like hell and my neck hurt like someplace in the same zip code. That kind of pain wears you down fast, even when you’re a wizard who learned his basics while being violently bombarded with baseballs. “Satyrs have human faces. These things didn’t.”

“Weregoats?” Bob suggested. He flipped another page and kept reading. Bob is a spirit of intellect, and he multitasks better than, well, pretty much anybody. “Or maybe goatweres.”

I stopped for a moment and gave the skull an exasperated look. “I can’t believe I just heard that word.”

“What?” Bob asked brightly. “Weragoats?”

“Weragoats. I’m fairly sure I could have led a perfectly rich and satisfying life even if I hadn’t heard that word or enjoyed the mental images it conjures.”

Bob chortled. “Stars and stones, you’re easy, Harry.”

“Weragoats,” I muttered, and went back to reading. After finishing the fifth book, I went back for another armload. Bob shouted at his book, cheering during what were apparently the love scenes and heckling most of the rest, as if the characters had all been live performers on a stage.

Which would probably tell me something important about Bob, if I were an astute sort of person. After all, Bob himself was, essentially, a spiritual creature created from the energy of thought. The characters within a book were, from a certain point of view, identical on some fundamental level—there weren’t any images of them, no physical tangibility whatsoever. They were pictures in the reader’s head, constructs of imagination and ideas, given shape by the writer’s work and skill and the reader’s imagination. Parents, of a sort.

Did Bob, as he read his books and imagined their events, regard those constructed beings as...siblings, of some sort? Peers? Children? Could a being like Bob develop some kind of acquired taste for a family? It was entirely possible. It might explain his constant fascination with fictional subject matter dealing with the origins of a mortal family.

Then again, he might regard the characters in the same way some men do those inflatable sex dolls. I was pretty sure I didn’t want to know.

Good thing I’m not astute.

I found our attackers on the eighth book, about halfway through, complete with notes and sketches.

“Holy crap,” I muttered, sitting up straight.

“Find ’em?” Bob asked.

“Yeah,” I said, and held up the book so he could see the sketch. It was a better match for our goatish attackers than most police sketches of perpetrators. “If the book is right, I just got jumped by gruffs.”

Bob’s romance novel dropped to the surface of the shelf. He made a choking sound. “Um. Did you say gruffs?”

I scowled at him and he began to giggle. The skull rattled against the shelf.

“Gruffs?” He tittered.

“What?” I said, offended.

“As in ‘The Three Billy Goats Gruff’?” The skull howled with laughter. “You just got your ass handed to you by a *nursery tale*?”

“I wouldn’t say they handed me my ass,” I said.

Bob was nearly strangling on his laughter, and given that he had no lungs it seemed gratuitous somehow. “That’s because you can’t see yourself,” he choked out. “Your nose is all swollen up and you’ve got two black eyes. You look like a raccoon. Holding a dislocated ass.”

“You didn’t see these things in action,” I said. “They were strong, and pretty smart. And there were four of them.”

“Just like the Four Horsemen!” he said. “Only with petting zoos!”

I scowled some more. “Fine, fine,” I said. “I’m glad I can amuse you.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Bob said, his voice bubbling with mirth. “‘Help me, help me! It’s the Billy Goats Gruff!’”

I glared. “You’re missing the point, Bob.”

“It can’t be as funny as what has come through,” he said. “I’ll bet every Sidhe in Winter is giggling about it.”

“Bet they’re not,” I said. “That’s the point. The gruffs work for Summer. They’re some of Queen Titania’s enforcers.”

Bob’s laughter died abruptly. “Oh.”

I nodded. “After that business at Arctis Tor, I could understand if someone from Winter had come after me. I never figured to do this kind of business with Summer.”

“Well,” Bob pointed out, “you did kind of give Queen Titania’s daughter the death of a thousand cuts.”

I grunted. “Yeah. But why send hitters now? She could have done it years ago.”

“That’s faeries for you,” Bob said. “Logic isn’t exactly their strong suit.”

I grunted. “Life should be so simple.” I thumped my finger on the book, thinking. “There’s more to this. I’m sure of it.”

“How high are they in the Summer hierarchy?” Bob asked.

“They’re up there,” I said. “As a group, anyway. They’ve got a reputation for killing trolls. Probably where the nursery tale comes from.”

“Troll killers,” Bob said. “Trolls. Like Mab’s personal guard, whose pieces you found scattered all over Arctis Tor?”

“Exactly,” I said. “But what I did there ticked off Winter, not Summer.”

“I’ve always admired your ability to be unilaterally irritating.”

I shook my head. “No. I must have done something there that hurt Summer somehow.” I frowned. “Or helped Winter. Bob, do you know—”

The phone started ringing. I had run a long extension cord from the outlet in my bedroom down to the lab, after Molly had nearly broken her neck rushing up the stepladder to answer a call. The old windup clock on one shelf told me that it was after midnight. Nobody calls me that late unless it’s something bad.

“Hold that thought,” I told Bob.

“It’s me,” Murphy said when I answered. “I need you.”

“Why, Sergeant, I’m touched,” I said. “You’ve admitted the truth at last. Cue sweeping romantic theme music.”

“I’m serious,” she said. Something in her voice sounded tired, strained.

“Where?” I asked her.

She gave me the address and we hung up.

I barely ever got work from Chicago PD anymore, and between that and my frequent trips to other cities as part of my duties as a Warden, I hadn’t been making diddly as an investigator. My stipend as a Warden of the White Council kept me from bankruptcy, but my bank account had bled slowly down to the point where I had to be really careful to avoid bouncing checks.

I needed the work.

“That was Murphy,” I said, “making a duty call.”

“This late at night, what else could it be?” Bob agreed. “Watch your back extra careful, boss.”

“Why do you say that?” I said, shrugging into my coat.

“I don’t know if you’re up on your nursery tales,” Bob said, “but if you’ll remember, the Billy Goats Gruff had a whole succession of brothers.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Each of them bigger and meaner than the last.”

I headed out to meet Murphy.

Weregoats. Jesus.

Chapter Four

I was standing there watching the fire with everyone else when the beat cop brought Murphy over to me.

“It’s about time,” she said, her voice tense. She lifted the police tape and beckoned me. I had already clipped my little laminated consultant’s ID to my duster’s lapel. “What took you so long?”

“There’s a foot of snow on the ground and it doesn’t show signs of stopping,” I replied.

She glanced up at me. Karrin Murphy is a wee little thing, and the heavy winter coat she wore only made her look smaller. The large, fluffy snowflakes still falling clung to her golden hair and glittered on her eyelashes, turning her eyes glacial blue. “Your toy car got stuck in a drift, huh? What happened to your face?”

I glanced around at all the normals. “I was in a snowball fight.”

Murphy grunted. “I guess you lost.”

“You should have seen the other guy.”

We were standing in front of a small five-story apartment building, and something had blown it to hell.

The front facing of the building was just gone, as if some unimaginably huge ax had sliced straight down it. You could see the floors and interiors of empty apartments, when you could get a glimpse of them through the pall of dust and smoke and thick falling snow. Fires burned in the building, insubstantial behind the haze of flame and winter. Rubble had washed out into the street, damaging the buildings on the other side, and the police had everyone cordoned off at least a block away. Broken glass and steel and brick lay everywhere. The air was acrid, thick with the stench of burning materials never meant to feed a fire.

Despite the weather, a couple of hundred people had gathered at the police cordons. Some enterprising soul was selling hot coffee from a big

thermos, and I hadn't been too proud to cough up a dollar for a foam cup of java, powdered creamer, and a packet of sugar.

"Lots of fire trucks," I noted. "But only one ambulance. And the crew is drinking coffee while everyone else shivers in the cold." I sipped at my cup. "The bastards."

"Building wasn't occupied," Murphy said. "Being renovated, actually."

"No one got hurt," I said. "That's a plus."

Murphy gave me a cryptic look. "You willing to work off the books? Per diem?"

I sipped coffee to cover up a wince. I far prefer a two-day minimum. "I guess the city isn't coughing up much money for consultants, huh?"

"SI's been pooling the coffee money, in case we needed your take on something."

This time I didn't bother to hide the wince. Taking money from the city government was one thing. Taking money from the cops in SI was another.

Special Investigations was the CPD's version of a pool filter. Things that slipped through the areas of interest of the other departments got dumped on SI. Lots of times those things included the cruddy work no one else wanted to do, so SI wound up investigating everything from apparent rains of toads to dogfighting rackets to reports of El Chupacabra molesting neighborhood pets from its lair in a local sewer. It was a crappy job, no pun intended, and as a result SI was regarded by the city as a kind of asylum for incompetents. They weren't, but the inmates of SI generally did share a couple of traits—intelligence enough to ask questions when something didn't make sense, and an inexcusable lack of ability when it came to navigating the murky waters of office politics.

When Sergeant Murphy had been Lieutenant Murphy, she'd been in charge of SI. She'd been busted for vanishing during twenty-four particularly critical hours of an investigation. It wasn't like she could tell her superiors that she was off storming a frozen fortress in the near reaches of the Nevernever, now, could she? Now her old partner, Lieutenant John Stallings, was in charge of SI, and he was running the place on a strained, frayed, often knotted shoestring of a budget.

Hence the lack of gainful employment for Chicago's only professional wizard.

I couldn't take their money. It wasn't like they were rolling in it. But at the same time, they had their pride. I couldn't take that, either.

“Per diem?” I told her. “Hell, my bank account is thinner than a tobacco lobbyist’s moral justification. I’ll go hourly.”

Murphy glowered up at me for a moment, then gave me a grudging nod of thanks. Proud doesn’t always outweigh practical.

“So what’s the scoop?” I asked. “Arson?”

She shrugged. “Explosion of some kind. Maybe an accident. Maybe not.”

I snorted. “Yeah, because you call me in on maybe-accidents all the time.”

“Come on.” Murphy pulled a dust mask from her coat pocket and put it on.

I took out a bandanna and tied it around my nose and mouth. All I needed was a ten-gallon hat and some spurs to complete the image. Stick ’em up, pahdner.

She glanced back at me, her face hard to read under the dust mask, and led me to the building adjacent to the ruined apartment. Murphy’s partner was waiting for us.

Rawlins was a blocky man in his fifties, comfortably overweight, and looked about as soft as a Brinks truck. He’d grown in a beard frosted with grey, a sharp contrast against his dark skin, and he wore a weather-beaten old winter coat over his off-the-rack suit.

“Dresden,” he said easily. “Good to see you.”

I shook his hand. “How’s the foot?”

“It aches when I’m about to get asked to leave,” he said soberly. “Ow.”

“It’s better if you’ve got deniability,” Murphy said, folding her arms in what an astute observer might have characterized as a tone of stubborn argument. “You’ve got a family to feed.”

Rawlins sighed. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll be out by the street.” He nodded to me and walked off. He’d recovered from being shot in the foot pretty well, and wasn’t limping. Good for him. Good for me, too. I’d been the one to get him into that mess.

“Deniability?” I asked Murphy.

“There hasn’t been anything specific,” Murphy said, “but people up the line from SI have made it very clear that you are persona non grata.”

That stung a bit, and my voice turned a shade more brittle than I had intended. “Oh, obviously. The way I keep helping CPD with things they couldn’t handle themselves is just inexcusable.”

“I know,” Murphy said.

“I’m lucky they haven’t charged me with gross incompetence and contributing to social order and had me locked away.”

She waved a tired, dismissive hand. “It’s always something. That’s the way organizations are.”

“Except that when the country club gets a bug up its nose and decides that someone is out, nobody dies as a result,” I said, and added, “mostly.”

Murphy glared at me. “What do you want me to do about it, Harry? I called in every chip I’d ever collected just to keep my fucking job. There’s no chance at all of me making command again, much less moving up to a position where I could effect real change within the department.”

I clenched my jaw and felt a flush rising up my neck. She hadn’t said it, but she’d lost her command and any bright future for her career because she’d been covering my back. “Murph—”

“No,” she said, her tone calmer and steadier than it might have been. “I’d really like to know, Dresden. I’ve paid you out of my own pocket when the city wouldn’t spend it. The rest of SI throws in all the money they can spare into the kitty to be able to pay you when we really need you. You think maybe I should moonlight at a burger joint to pay your fees?”

“Hell’s bells, Murph,” I said. “It isn’t about the money. It’s never been about the money.”

She shrugged. “So what are you bitching about?”

I thought about it for a second and said, “You shouldn’t have to tap-dance around the demands of all the ladder climbers to do your job.”

“No,” she said, her tone frank. “Not in a reasonable world. But if you haven’t noticed, that world must be in a different area code. And it seems to me that you’ve had to end-run your superiors once or twice.”

“Bah,” I said. “And touché.”

She smiled faintly. “It sucks, but that’s what we’ve got. You done whining?”

“Hell with it,” I said. “Let’s work.”

Murphy jerked her head at the rubble-choked alley between the damaged building and its neighbor, and we started down it, climbing over fallen brick and timber where necessary.

We’d gone about three feet before the stench of sulfur and acrid brimstone seared my nostrils, sharp even through the smell of the gutted apartment building. There’s only one thing that smells like that.

“Crap,” I muttered.

“I thought it smelled familiar,” Murphy said. “Like back at the fortress.” She glanced at me. “And...the other times I’ve smelled it.”

I pretended not to notice her glance. “Yeah. It’s Hellfire,” I said.

“There’s more,” Murphy said quietly. “Come on.”

We pressed on down the alley until we passed the edge of the wrecked portion of the gutted building. One step, there was nothing but wreckage. The next, the brick wall of the building reasserted itself. The demarcation between structure and havoc was a rough, jagged line stretching up into the dust and the snow and the smoke—all except for a portion of wall perhaps five feet off the ground.

There, instead of a broken line of shattered brick and twisted rebar, a perfectly smooth semicircle bit into the wall.

I leaned closer, frowning. The scent of Hellfire grew stronger, and I realized that something had *melted* its way through the brick wall—a shaft of energy like a giant drill bit. It had to have been almost unimaginably hot to vaporize brick and concrete and steel, leaving the rim of the area it had touched melted to smooth glass, though half of the basketball-sized circle was missing, carried away by the collapsing wall.

Any natural source of heat like that would have sent out a thermal bloom that would have scoured the alley I was standing in, leaving it blackened and sere. But the alley was littered with the usual city detritus, where it wasn’t choked with rubble, and several hours’ worth of snow had piled up there as well.

“Talk to me,” Murphy said quietly.

“No normal fire is this contained,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

I gestured vaguely with my hands. “Fire generated with magic is still *fire*, Murph. I mean, sure, you can call up tremendous heat and energy, but once it gets to you it *behaves* like heat. It still does business with the laws of thermodynamics.”

“So we’re talking mojo,” Murphy said.

“Well, technically mojo isn’t—”

She sighed. “Are we dealing with magic or not?”

As if the scent of Hellfire weren’t enough to give it away. “Yeah.”

Murphy nodded. “You call up fire all the time,” she said. “I’ve seen it do a lot of things that didn’t look like normal fire.”

“Oh, sure,” I said, holding my hand over the surface of the flame-bored bricks. They were still warm. “But if you want to control it once you call it up, it takes additional energy to focus the fire into a desired course. Controlling the energy is usually as much effort as the fire itself, if not more.”

“Could you do something like this?” she asked, gesturing at the building.

Once upon a time she would have inflected that question a whole lot differently, and I’d have gotten nervous about whether the hands in her pockets were holding a gun and handcuffs. But that had been a long time ago. Of course, back then I probably wouldn’t have given her a straight answer either, like I would now.

“Not a chance in hell,” I said quietly, and not entirely metaphorically. “I’m pretty sure I couldn’t call up this much energy in the first place. And even if I could, I wouldn’t have anything left to control it with.” I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to feel any lingering traces of power around the area, but the destruction and subsequent drift of dust and snow and smoke had obscured any coherent patterns that might have given me hints about how the working had been accomplished.

I did, however, notice something else. The surface of the cut was not perpendicular to the wall of the building. It went in at an angle. I frowned and squinted back behind me, trying to line it up with the wall of the building on the other side of the alley.

Murphy knew me well enough to see I’d noticed something, and I knew her well enough to see her sudden interest make furrows between her eyebrows as she forced herself to be quiet and let me work.

I got up and went to the far side of the alley. A light coating of snow and dust had coated the wall.

“Watch your eyes,” I murmured, squinting my own to slits. Then I raised my right hand, called up my will, and murmured, “*Ventas reductas.*”

The wind I called up wasn’t the usual burst I commonly used. It was far more toned-down than that, and it poured steadily from my outstretched hand. All the work I was doing with Molly had allowed me to rethink a lot of my basic evocations, the fast and dirty magic that wizards used in desperate and violent situations. I’d been trying to teach the spell to Molly, but she didn’t have the raw strength I had, and it would have practically knocked her unconscious to call up a heavy blast of air. I’d modified my

teaching, just to get her comfortable with using a bit of air magic, and we'd accidentally developed a passable impersonation of an electric blow-dryer.

I used the dryer spell to gently brush away dust and snow from the wall. It took me about a minute and a half, and when I was finished I caught another scent under the brimstone stench and said, "Double crap."

Murphy stepped forward with her flashlight and shone it on the wall.

The sigil had been painted on the wall in something thick and brown that smelled like blood. At first I thought it was a pentacle, but I saw the differences immediately.

"Harry," Murphy said quietly. "Is it human?"

"Most likely," I said. "Mortal blood is the strongest ink you can use for symbols like this in high-energy spells. I don't think anything else could have contained the amounts of energy it would have taken to blow up this building."

"It's a pentacle, right?" Murphy asked. "Like the one you wear."

I shook my head. "Different."

"How so?" Her mouth twitched at one corner. "Other than the blood, I mean."

"A pentacle is a symbol of order," I said quietly. "Five points, five sides. It represents the forces of air, earth, water, fire, and spirit. It's contained within a circle, the points touching the outer ring. It represents the forces of magic bound within human control. Power balanced with restraint." I gestured at the symbol. "See here? The points of the star fall far outside the ring."

She frowned. "What does it mean?"

"I have no idea," I said.

"Gosh," she said. "You're worth the money."

"Ha-ha. Look, even if I'd seen this symbol before, it could mean different things to different people. The Hindus and the Nazis have very different ideas about the swastika, for example."

"Can you make a guess?"

I shrugged. "Off the top of my head? This looks uncomfortably like a combination of the pentacle and the anarchy symbol. Magic unrestrained."

"Anarchist wizards?" Murphy asked.

"It's just a guess," I said. My gut told me it was a good one, though, and I got the impression that Murphy had the same feeling.

"What's the symbol for?" Murphy asked. "What is it meant to do?"

“Reflect power,” I said. “My guess is that the energy that drove through the building was reflected from this sigil, which means...” I kayaked down a logic cascade as I spoke. “Which means that the energy had to come *in* from somewhere else first.” I turned around slowly, trying to judge the angles. “The incoming beam must have gone right through the collapsed part of the building and—”

“Beam?”

I pointed at the semicircular hole in the ruined wall. “Yeah. Heat energy, a whole lot of it.”

She studied the hole. “It doesn’t look like it would be big enough to take down the building.”

“It isn’t,” I said. “Not in an explosion, anyway. This just drilled a hole. Might have started a fire as it went, but it couldn’t have sheared off the front of the building like that.”

Murphy frowned, tilting her head. “Then what did?”

“Working on it,” I mumbled. I judged the angles as best I could and took off down the alley. The firemen were still hard at work on the building, and we had to walk over several hoses as we emerged into the street at the back of the apartment building. I crossed the street and walked down the length of the building there, my hand raised, senses questing for any residual magic. I didn’t find any, but I did smell Hellfire again, and a couple of feet later I found another not-pentacle, identical to the first, also hidden under a light dusting of snow.

I kept going clockwise around the ruined building. I found two more symbols on the undamaged building on its next side, and one more across the street from the front of the ruined apartments, and then I completed the circle, arriving back at our original reflective symbol.

Five reflection points, which had guided a truly freaking frightening amount of energy through the building, forming one single, enormous shape as they did.

“It’s a pentagram,” I said quietly.

Murphy frowned. “What?”

I touched the round, smooth bore mark on the destroyed building’s wall. “The beam of energy that ripped through the building right here was one of five sides of a pentagram. A five-pointed star.”

Murphy regarded me blankly.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a piece of chalk. “Okay, look. Everyone learns to draw this in grade school, right?” I quickly sketched out a star on a clear bit of brick wall—five strokes of the chalk, forming five points. “Right?”

“Right,” Murphy said. “You get them from the teacher when you get an A.”

“Another example of symbols having disparate meanings,” I said. “But look here, in the middle.” I filled in the closed shape in the center of the star. “That’s a pentagon shape, see? The center of the pentagram. That’s where you contain whatever it is you’re trying to contain.”

“What do you mean, contain?”

“A pentagram like this one is a symbol of power,” I said. “It’s got a lot of uses, depending on how you employ it. But most often you use it to isolate or contain an entity.”

“You mean like summoning a demon,” Murphy said.

“Sure,” I said. “But you can use it to trap other things too, if you do it right. Remember the circle of power at Harley MacFinn’s place? Five candles formed the pentagram on that one.”

Murphy shuddered. “I remember. But it wasn’t this big.”

“No,” I admitted. “And the bigger you make it, the more juice it takes to keep it going. I’ve never, ever heard of one that would take this much energy to activate.”

I drew little X shapes at the points of the star and drew the chalk from one to the next, thickening the lines of the example pentagram. “Get it? The beam streamed from one reflector to the next, melting holes through the building as it went. The reflectors formed the beam into one huge pentagram at ground level, more or less.”

Murphy frowned and squinted at the simple diagram. “The center of that shape couldn’t have covered the whole building.”

“No,” I said. “I’d need a good map to be sure, but I think the center of the pentagram must have been about twenty feet back from the front door. Which is why only the front half of the building collapsed.”

“The explosion came from inside this pentagram thing? Magical TNT?”

I shrugged. “The explosion came from inside the pentagram’s center, but not necessarily *from* the pentagram. I mean, it could have been a normal device of some kind.”

“Square in the middle of the giant, scary pentagram?” Murphy asked.

“Maybe,” I said, nodding. “It depends on what the pentagram was being employed for. And to know that, I’d have to know which way was its north.” I circled the topmost point of the chalk pentacle. “The direction of the first line, I mean.”

“Does it make a difference?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Most everybody draws those stars just like I did. Bottom left to the topmost point as the first stroke. That’s how you draw it when you want to defend something, ward something away from a location, or banish a spiritual entity.”

“So this could have been a banishing spell?” Murphy asked.

“It’s possible. But you can do a lot of other things with it, if you draw it differently.”

“Like build a cage for things,” Murphy said.

“Yeah.” I frowned, troubled. “Or open a doorway for something.”

“Which, judging by your face, would be bad.”

“I...” I shook my head. I didn’t even want to know what kind of terror would need a pentagram that huge in order to squeeze into our world. “I think if something sized to fit this pentagram had come through it, there would probably be more than one building on fire.”

“Oh,” Murphy said quietly.

“Look, until I know what the pentagram’s purpose was, all I can do is speculate. And there’s something else weird here, too.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s not a trace of residual magic, and there should be. Hell, with this much power being tossed around, the whole area should practically be glowing. It isn’t.”

Murphy nodded slowly. “You’re saying they wiped their prints.”

I grimaced. “Exactly, and I have no idea how to do it. Hell’s bells, I didn’t know it was *possible*.”

I sipped at my coffee in the silence and pretended the shiver that went down my spine was from the cold. I passed the cup to Murphy, who took a sip from the opposite side and passed it back to me.

“So,” she said, “we’re left with questions. What is a major-league supernatural hitter doing placing a huge pentagram under an empty apartment building? What was his goal in creating it?”

“And why blow up the building afterward?” I frowned and thought of an even better question. “Why *this* building?” I turned to Murphy. “Who owns

it?”

“Lake Michigan Ventures,” Murphy replied, “a subsidiary of Mitigation Unlimited, whose CEO is—”

“Triple crap,” I spat. “Gentleman Johnnie Marccone.”

Chapter Five

I tried to collect some of the blood in the reflective symbols and use it in a tracking spell to follow it back to its original owner, but it was a bust. Either the blood was already too dry to use or else the person who had donated it was dead. I had a bad feeling it wasn't the winter air that made the spell fail.

Typical. Nothing was ever simple when Marcone was involved.

Gentleman Johnnie Marcone was the robber baron of the streets of Chicago, and the undisputed lord of its criminal underworld. Though he'd long been under legal siege, the bastions of paperwork defended by legions of lawyers had never been conquered, and his power base had grown steadily and quietly. They probably could have tried harder to take him down, but the heartless fact of the matter was that Marcone's management style was a better alternative than most. He'd put the *civil* back in *civil offender*, harshly cutting down on violence against civilians and law enforcement alike. It didn't make his business any less ugly, just tidier, but it could have been worse, as far as the city's authorities were concerned.

Of course, the authorities didn't know that it *was* worse. Marcone had begun expanding his power base into the supernatural world as well, signing on to the Unseelie Accords as a freeholding lord. It made him, in the eyes of the authorities of the supernatural world, a kind of small, neutral state, a recognizable power, and I had no doubt that he'd begun using that new power to do what he always did—create more of the same.

All of which had been made possible by Harry Dresden. And the truly galling thing about the entire situation was that it had been the least evil of the options that had been available to me at the time.

I looked up from the circle I'd chalked on the concrete beneath a sheltered overhang in the alley and shook my head. "Sorry. Can't get anything. Maybe the blood is too dry. Maybe the donor is dead."

Murphy nodded. "I'll keep an eye on the morgues, then."

I broke the circle with a swipe of my hand and rose from my knees.

"Can I ask you something?" Murphy said.

"Sure."

"Why don't you ever use pentagrams? All I ever see you draw is circles."

I shrugged. "PR mostly. Run around making lots of five-pointed stars in this country and people start screaming about Satan. Including the satanists. I've got enough problems. If I need a pentagram, I usually just imagine it."

"You can do that?"

"Magic's in your head, mostly. Building an image in your mind and holding it there. Theoretically you could do everything without any chalk or symbols or anything else."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because it's a pointlessly difficult effort for identical results." I squinted up at the still-falling snow. "You're a cop. I need a doughnut."

She snorted as we left the alley. "Stereotype much, Dresden?"

"Cops do a lot of running around in their cars, and they don't always get to control their hours, Murph. Lots of times they can't leave a crime scene to hit a drive-through. So they need food that can sit in a car for hours and hours without tasting foul or giving them food poisoning. Doughnuts are good for that."

"So are granola bars."

"Is Rawlins a masochist, too?"

Murphy casually bumped her shoulder against my arm when I was between steps, making me wobble, and I grinned. We emerged onto the mostly empty street. The firemen had been wrapping up their job when I arrived, and every truck but one had departed. Once the flames were out the show was over, and there were no rubbernecks anymore. Only a few cops were in sight, most of them in their cars.

"So what happened to your face?" Murphy asked.

I told her.

She concealed a smile. "'The Three Billy Goats Gruff'?"

"Hey. They're tough, all right? They kill trolls."

"I saw you do that once. How hard could it be?"

I found myself grinning. "I had a little help."

Murphy matched my smile. “One more short joke and I’m taking a kneecap.”

“Murphy,” I chided, “petty violence is beneath you. Which is saying something.”

“Keep it up, wise guy. I’m always going to be taller than you once you’re lying unconscious on the ground.”

“You’re right. That was a low blow. I’ll try to rise above it.”

She showed me a clenched fist. “Pow, Dresden. Right to the moon.”

We reached Murphy’s car. Rawlins was in the passenger seat, pretending to snore. He wasn’t the sort to just fall asleep.

“So, Summer made a run at you,” Murphy said. “You think the attack on Marcone’s building is connected with that?”

“I lost my faith in coincidence,” I said.

“Get in,” she said. “I’ll give you a ride home.”

I shook my head. “There might be something I can do here, but I need to be alone. And I need a doughnut.”

Murphy arched a delicate dark-gold eyebrow. “Ooooooooo-kay.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter and give me the damned doughnut.”

Murphy shook her head and got in her car. She tossed me a sack from Dunkin’ Donuts that was sitting on Rawlins’s side of the dashboard.

“Hey!” Rawlins protested without opening his eyes.

“For a good cause,” I told him, nodding my thanks to Murphy. “Call you when I know something.”

She frowned at my nose. “You sure you want to be alone?”

I winked one of my blackened eyes at her. “Some things a wizard has to do for himself,” I said.

Rawlins swallowed a titter.

I get no respect.

They drove off and left me in the silently falling snow in the still hours before dawn. There were still a couple of fire crews and uniform cops there, the latter blocking off the street, though the former weren’t actively firefighting. The building was out, and coated in a layer of ice—but I guess there always could have been something hidden in the walls and ready to pop out again. I overheard one of them telling another that the road crew that was supposed to clean the rubble out of the street was helping a city plow truck stuck in the snow, and would be there when they could.

I trudged to about a block away, found an alley not choked, and went in with my doughnut. I debated for a moment what approach I would take. My relationship with this particular source had changed over the years, after all. Reason indicated that sticking with longstanding procedure was my best bet. Instinct told me that reason had disappointed me more than once, and that it wasn't thinking in the long term anyway.

Over the years, my instincts and I have gotten cozy.

So, instead of bothering with a simple bait-and-snare, I braced my feet, held out my right hand palm up, placed the doughnut upon it like an offering, and murmured a Name.

Names, capital N, have power. If you know something's Name, you automatically have a conduit with which you can reach out and touch it, a way to home in on it with magic. Sometimes that can be a really bad idea. Speak the Name of a big, bad spiritual entity and you might be able to touch it, sure—but it can touch *you* right back, and the big boys tend to do it a lot harder than any mortal. It's worth as much as your soul to speak the Name of beings like that.

But the Nevernever is a big place, and not to mix metaphors, but there are plenty of fish in that sea. There are literally countless beings of far less metaphysical significance, and it really isn't terribly difficult to get one of them to do your bidding by invoking its Name.

(People have Names, too. Sort of. Mortals have this nasty habit of constantly reassessing their personal identity, their values, their beliefs, and it makes it a far more slippery business to use a mortal's Name against them.)

I know a few Names. I invoked this one as lightly and gently as I could in an effort to be polite.

It didn't take me long, maybe a dozen repetitions of the Name before the entity it summoned appeared. A basketball-sized globe of blue light dived out of the snow overhead and hurtled down the alley toward my face.

I stood steady as it came on. Even with relatively minor summonings, you never let them see you flinch.

The globe snapped to an instant halt about a foot away from the doughnut, and I could just make out the luminous shape of the tiny humanoid figure within. Tiny, but not nearly so tiny as the last time I had seen him. Hell's bells, he must have been twice as tall as the last time we'd spoken.

“Toot-toot,” I said, nodding to the pixie.

Toot snapped to attention, piping, “My lord!” The pixie looked like an athletically slender youth, dressed in armor made of discarded trash. His helmet had been made from the cap to a three-liter bottle of Coca-Cola, and tufts of his fine lavender hair drifted all around its rim. He wore a breastplate made from what looked like a carefully reshaped bottle of Pepto-Bismol, and carried a box knife sheathed in orange plastic on a rubber-band strap over one shoulder. Rough lettering on the box knife’s case, written in what looked like black nail polish, proclaimed, *Pizza or Death!* A long nail, its base carefully wrapped in layers of athletic adhesive tape, was sheathed in the hexagonal plastic casing of a ballpoint pen at his side. He must have lifted the boots from a Ken doll, or maybe a vintage GI Joe.

“You’ve grown,” I said, bemused.

“Yes, my lord,” Toot-toot barked.

I arched an eyebrow. “Is that the box knife I gave you?”

“Yes, my lord!” he shrilled. “This is my box knife! There are many who like it, but this one is mine!” Toot’s words were crisply precise, and I realized that he was imitating the drill sergeant from *Full Metal Jacket*. I throttled the sudden smile trying to fight its way onto my face. It looked like he was taking it seriously, and I didn’t want to crush his tiny feelings.

What the hell. I could play along. “At ease, soldier.”

“My lord!” he said. He saluted by slapping the heel of his hand against his forehead and then buzzed a quick circle around the doughnut, staring at it intently. “That,” he declared, in a voice much more like his usual one, “is a doughnut. Is it *my* doughnut, Harry?”

“It could be,” I said. “I’m offering it as payment.”

Toot shrugged disinterestedly, but the pixie’s dragonfly wings buzzed in excitement. “For what?”

“Information,” I said. I jerked my head at the fallen building. “There was a seriously large sigil-working done in and around that building several hours ago. I need to know anything the Little Folk know about what happened.” A little flattery never hurt. “And when I need information from the Little Folk, you’re the best there is, Toot.”

His Pepto-armored chest swelled up a bit with pride. “Many of my people are beholden to you for freeing them from the pale hunters, Harry. Some of them have joined the Za-Lord’s Guard.”

“Pizza Lord” was the title some of the Little Folk had bestowed upon me—largely because I provided them with a weekly bribe of pizza. Most don’t know it, even in my circles, but the Little Folk are everywhere, and they see a lot more than anyone expects. My policy of mozzarella-driven goodwill had secured the affections of a lot of the locals. When I’d demanded that a sometime ally of mine set free several score of the Folk who had been captured, I’d risen even higher in their collective estimation.

Even so, “Za-Lord’s Guard” was a new one on me.

“I have a guard?” I asked.

Toot threw out his chest. “Of course! Who do you think keeps the Dread Beast Mister from killing the brownies when they come to clean up your apartment? We do! Who lays low the mice and rats and ugly big spiders who might crawl into your bed and nibble on your toes? We do! Fear not, Za-Lord! Neither the foulest of rats nor the cleverest of insects shall disturb your home while we draw breath!”

I hadn’t realized that in addition to the cleaning service, I’d acquired an exterminator too. Handy as hell, though, now that I thought about it. There were things in my lab that wouldn’t react well to becoming rodent nest material.

“Outstanding,” I told him. “But do you want the doughnut or not?”

Toot-toot didn’t even answer. He just shot off down the alleyway like a runaway paper lantern, but so quickly that he left falling snow drifting in contrail spirals in his wake.

Typically speaking, faeries get things done in a hurry—when they want to, at any rate. Even so, I’d barely had time to hum through “When You Wish upon a Star” before Toot-toot returned. The edges of the sphere of light around him had changed color, flushing into an agitated scarlet.

“Run!” Toot-toot piped as he streaked down the alley. “Run, my lord!”

I blinked. Of all the things I’d imagined hearing from the little fae on his return, that had not been on my list.

“Run!” he shrilled, whirling in panicked circles around my head.

My brain was still processing. “What about the doughnut?” I asked, like an idiot.

Toot-toot zipped over to me, set his shoulders against my forehead and pushed for all he was worth. He was stronger than he looked. I had to take a step back or be overbalanced. “Forget the doughnut!” he shouted. “Run, my lord!”

Forget the doughnut?

That, more than anything, jarred me into motion. Toot-toot was not the sort to give in to panic. For that matter, the little fae had always seemed to be...not ignorant so much as *innocent* of the realization of danger. He'd always been oblivious to danger in the past, when there was mortal food on the line.

In the silence of the snowy evening I heard a sound coming from the far end of the alley. Footsteps, quiet and slow.

A quivering, fearful little voice in my head told me to listen to Toot, and I felt my heart speed up as I turned and ran in the direction he'd indicated.

I cleared the alley and turned left, slogging through the deepening snow. There was a police station only two or three blocks from here. There would be lights and people there, and it would probably serve as a deterrent to whatever was after me. Toot flew beside me, just over my shoulder, and he'd produced a little plastic sports whistle. He blew on it in a sharp rhythm, and through the falling snow I dimly saw half a dozen spheres of light of various colors, all smaller than Toot's, appear out of the night and begin to parallel our course.

I ran for another block, then two, and as I did I became increasingly certain that something was following in my wake. It was a disturbing sensation, a kind of crawly tingle on the back of my neck, and I was sure that I had attracted the attention of something truly terrible. Mounting levels of fear followed that realization, and I ran for all I was worth.

I turned right and spotted the police station house, its exterior lighting a promise of safety, its lamps girded with haloes in the falling snow.

Then the wind came up and the whole world turned frozen and white. I couldn't see anything, not my own feet as I struggled through the snow, and not the hand I tried holding up in front of my face. I slipped and went down, and then bounced back to my feet in a panic, certain that if my pursuer caught me on the ground, I would never stand again.

I slammed a shoulder into a light pole and staggered back from it. I couldn't tell which way I was facing in the whiteout. Had I accidentally stumbled into the street? There would probably be no cars moving in this mess, but if one was, even slowly, I'd never see it in time to get out of the way. I wouldn't be able to hear a car horn either.

The snow was coming so thick now that I had trouble breathing. I picked a direction that seemed as if it would take me to the police station and

hurried on. Within a few steps I found a building with one outstretched hand. I used it to guide me, leaning one hand against the solid wall. That worked fine for twenty feet or so, and then the wall vanished, and I stumbled sideways into an alley.

The howling wind went silent, and the sudden stillness around me was a shock to my senses. I pushed myself to my hands and knees and looked behind me. On the street the blinding curtain of snow still swirled, thick and white and impenetrable, beginning as suddenly as a wall. In the alley the snow was barely an inch deep, and except for a distant moan of wind it was silent.

At that instant I realized that the silence was not an empty one.

I wasn't alone.

The glittering snow on the alley floor blended seamlessly into a sparkling white gown, tinted here and there with streaks of frozen blue or glacial green. I lifted my eyes.

She wore the gown with inhuman elegance, its rippling fabric draping with feminine perfection, her body a perfect balance of curves and planes, beauty and strength. The gown was cut low, and left her shoulders and arms bare. Her skin made the snow seem a bit sallow by comparison. Glittering colors flickered at her wrists, her throat, and upon her fingers, always changing, cycling through deep blue and green and violet iridescence. Her fingernails glittered with the same impossibly shifting hues.

Upon her head was a circlet of ice, elegant and intricate, as if it had been formed from a single crystalline snowflake. Her hair was long, past her hips, long and silken and white, blending into the gown and the snow. Her lips—her gorgeous, sensual lips—were the color of frozen raspberries.

She was a vision of beauty, the kind that has inspired artists for centuries, immortal beauty that is rarely imagined, much less actually seen. Beauty like hers should have struck me senseless with joy. It should have made me weep and give thanks to the Almighty that I had been allowed to look upon it. It should have stopped my breath and made my heart lurch with delight.

It didn't.

It terrified me.

It terrified me because I could also see her eyes. They were wide, feline eyes, vertically slitted like a cat's. They shifted color in time with her gems—or, more likely, the gems changed color in time with her eyes. And though they, too, were beautiful beyond the bounds of mortality, they were

cold eyes, inhuman eyes, filled with intelligence and desire, but empty of compassion or pity.

I knew those eyes. I knew *her*.

If fear hadn't taken the strength from my limbs, I would have run.

A second form appeared from the darkness behind her and hovered in the shadows at her side like an attendant. It resembled the outline of a cat—if any domestic cat ever grew so large. I couldn't see the color of its fur, but its green-gold eyes reflected the cold blue light, luminous and eerie.

“And well should you bow, mortal,” mewled the feline shape. Its voice was damned eerie, throbbing in strange cadences while producing human sound from an inhuman throat. “Bow before Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness. Bow before the monarch of the Unseelie fae, the Winter Court of the Sidhe.”

Chapter Six

I gritted my teeth and tried to summon up a salvo of snark. It wouldn't come. I was just too scared—and with good reason.

Think of every fairy-tale villainess you've ever heard of. Think of the wicked witches, the evil queens, the mad enchantresses. Think of the alluring sirens, the hungry ogresses, the savage she-beasts. Think of them and remember that somewhere, sometime, they've all been real.

Mab gave them *lessons*.

Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if she'd set up some sort of certification process, just to make sure they were all up to snuff.

Mab was the ruler of fully half of the realm of Faerie, those areas of the Nevernever, the spirit world, closest to our own, and she was universally respected and feared. I'd seen her, seen her in the merciless clarity of my wizard's Sight, and I knew—not just suspected, but *knew*—exactly what kind of creature she was.

Fucking terrifying, that's what. So terrifying that I couldn't summon up a single wiseass comment, and that just doesn't happen to me.

I couldn't talk, but I could move. I pushed myself to my feet. I shook with the cold and the fear, but faced the Faerie Queen and lifted my chin. Once I'd done that, proved that I knew where my backbone was, I was able to use it as a reference point to find my larynx. My voice came out coarse, rough with apprehension. "What do you want with me?"

Mab's mouth quivered at the corners, turning up into the tiniest of smiles. The feline voice spoke again as Mab tilted her head. "I want you to do me a favor."

I frowned at her, and then at the dimly seen feline shape behind her. "Is that Grimalkin back there?"

The feline shape's eyes gleamed. "Indeed," Grimalkin said. "The servitor behind me bears that name."

I blinked for a second, confusion stealing some of the thunder from my terror. “The servitor behind you? There’s no one behind you, Grimalkin.”

Mab’s expression flickered with annoyance, her lips compressing into a thin line. When Grimalkin spoke, his voice bore the same expression. “The servitor is my voice for the time being, wizard. And nothing more.”

“Ah,” I said. I glanced between the two of them, and my curiosity took the opportunity to sucker punch terror while confusion had it distracted. I felt my hands stop shaking. “Why would the Queen of Air and Darkness need an interpreter?”

Mab lifted her chin slightly, a gesture of pride, and another small smile quirked her mouth. “You are already in my debt,” the eerie, surrogate voice said for her. “An you wish an answer to that question, you would incur more obligation yet. I do not believe in charity.”

“There’s a shock,” I muttered under my breath. Whew. My banter gland had not gone necrotic. “But you missed the point of the question, I think. Why would *Mab* need such a thing? She’s an immortal, a demigod.”

Mab opened her mouth as Grimalkin said, “Ah. I perceive. You doubt my identity.” She let her head drift back a bit, mouth open, and an eerie little laugh drifted up from her servitor. “Just as you did in our first meeting.”

I frowned. That was correct. When Mab first walked into my office in mortal guise years ago, I noticed that something was off and subsequently discovered who she really was. As far as I knew, no one else had been privy to that meeting.

“Perhaps you’d care to reminisce over old times,” mewled the eerie voice. Mab winked at me.

Crap. She’d done that the last time I’d bumped into her. And once again, no one else knew anything about it. I’d been indulging in wishful thinking, hoping she was fake. She was the real Mab.

Mab showed me her teeth. “Three favors you owed me,” Mab said—sort of. “Two yet remain. I am here to create an opportunity for you to remove one of them from our accounting.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “How are you going to do that?”

Her smile widened, showing me her delicately pointed canines. “I am going to help you.”

Yeah.

This couldn’t be good.

I tried to keep my voice steady and calm. “What do you mean?”

“Behold.” Mab gestured with her right hand, and the layer of snow on the ground stirred and moved until it had risen into a sculpture of a building, about eighteen inches high. It was like watching a sand castle melt in reverse.

I thought I recognized the building. “Is that...?”

“The building the lady knight asked you to examine,” confirmed Mab’s surrogate voice. It’s amazing what you can get used to if your daily allowance of bizarre is high enough. “As it was before the working that rent it asunder.”

Other shapes began to form from the snow. Rather disconcertingly detailed shapes of cars rolled smoothly by beside the building, typical Chicago traffic—until one of them, an expensive town car, turned down the alley beside the building, the one I’d walked down not an hour before. I had to take a couple of steps to follow it as it came to a halt and stopped. The snow car’s doors opened, and human shapes the size of the old *Star Wars* action figures came hurrying out of the vehicle.

I recognized them. The first was a flat-top, no-neck bruiser named Hendricks, Marcone’s personal bodyguard and enforcer. His mother was a Kodiak bear; his father was an Abrams tank, and after he got out of the car, he reached back into it and came out with a light machine gun that he carried in one hand.

While Hendricks was doing that, a woman got out of the other side of the car. Gard was tall, six feet or so, though Hendricks made her look petite. She wore a smart business suit with a long trench coat, and as I watched she opened the car’s trunk and removed a broadsword and an all-metal shield maybe two feet across. She passed her hand over the surface of the shield, and then quickly covered it with a section of cloth that had apparently been cut to fit it.

Both of them moved in a tense, precise, professionally concerned cadence.

The third man out of the car was Marcone himself, a man of medium height and build, wearing a suit that cost more than my car, and he looked as relaxed and calm as he always did. Marcone was criminal scum, but I’ll give the rat his due—he’s got balls that drag the ground when he walks.

Marcone’s head whipped around abruptly, back down the alley the way they’d just come, though neither Hendricks nor Gard reacted with a similar motion. He produced a gun with such speed that it almost seemed magical,

and little puffs of frost blazed out from the muzzle of the snow-sculpted weapon.

Hendricks reacted immediately, turning to bring that monster weapon to bear, and tiny motes of blue light flashed down the alley, representing tracer fire. Gard put her shield and her body between Marcone and whatever was at the end of the alley. They hurried into a side door of the building, one that had been destroyed in the collapse. Hendricks followed, still spraying bursts of fire down the alley. He, too, vanished into the building.

“Hell’s bells,” I breathed. “Marcone was *inside*?”

Mab flicked her hand in a slashing gesture, and the top two-thirds of the little snow building disintegrated under a miniature arctic gale. I was left with a cutaway image of the building’s interior. Marcone and his bodyguards moved through the place like rats through a maze. They sprinted down a flight of stairs. At the bottom Marcone stabbed at some kind of keypad with short, sharp, precise motions and then looked up.

Heavy sheets of what looked like steel fell into place at the top and bottom of the stairs simultaneously, and I could all but hear the ominous *boom!* as they settled into place. Gard reached up and touched the center of the near door, and there was a flash of light bright enough to leave little spots in my vision. Then they hurried down a short hallway to another keypad and repeated the process. More doors, more flashes of light.

“Locking himself in...” I muttered, frowning. Then I got it. “Wards. Blast doors. It’s a panic room. He built a panic room.”

Grimalkin made a low, lazy yowling sound that I took for a murmur of agreement.

My own apartment was set up with a similar set of protections, which I could invoke if absolutely necessary—though, granted, my setup was a little more Merlin and a little less Bond. But I had to wonder what the hell had rattled Marcone enough to send him scurrying for a deep hole.

Then Gard’s head snapped up, looking directly at where Mab currently stood, as if the little snow sculpture could somehow see the titanic form of the Winter Queen looking down upon her. Gard reached into her suit pocket, drew out what looked like a slender wooden box, the kind that really high-end pen sets come in sometimes, and took a small, rectangular plaque of some kind from the box. She lifted it, facing Mab again, and snapped the little plaque in her fingers.

The entire snow sculpture collapsed on itself and was gone.

"They saw the hidden camera," I muttered.

"Within her limits, the Chooser is resourceful and clever," Mab replied. "The Baron was wise to acquire her services."

I glanced up at Mab. "What happened?"

"All Sight was clouded for several moments. Then this."

At another gesture the building re-formed—but this time little clouds of frost simulated thick smoke roiling all around it, obscuring many details. The whole image, in fact, looked hazier, grainier, as if Mab had chosen to form it out of snowflakes a few sizes too large to illustrate details.

Even so, I recognized Marcone when he came stumbling out the front door of the building. Several forms hurried out behind him. They surrounded him. A plain van appeared out of the night, and the unknown figures cast him through its open doors. Then they entered and were gone.

As the van pulled away, the building shuddered and collapsed in on itself, sliding down into the wreckage and ruin I'd seen.

"I have chosen you to be my Emissary," Mab said to me. "You will repay me a favor owed. You will find the Baron."

"The hell I will," I said before my brain had time to weigh in on the sentiment.

Mab let out a low, throaty laugh. "You will, wizard child. An you wish to survive, you have no choice."

Anger flared in my chest and shoved my brain aside on its way to my mouth. "That wasn't our deal," I snapped. "Our bargain stipulated that I would choose which favors to repay and that you would not coerce me."

Mab's frozen-berry lips lifted in a silent snarl, and the world turned into a curtain of white agony that centered on my eyes. Nothing had ever hurt so much. I fell down, but I wasn't lucky enough to hit my head and knock myself unconscious. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't scream.

Then there was something cold beside me. And something very soft and very cold touched my ear. I recognized the sensation, from the far side of the pain. Lips. Mab's lips. The Queen of Air and Darkness placed a gentle row of kisses down the outside ridge of my ear, then sucked the lobe into her mouth and bit down quite gently.

In the other ear I heard Grimalkin's voice speaking in a low, tense, hungry whisper. "Mortal brute. Whatever your past, whatever your future,

know this: I am Mab, and I keep my bargains. Question my given word again, ape, and I will finish freezing the water in your eyes.”

The pain receded to something merely torturous, and I clenched my teeth down hard over a scream. I could move again. I flinched away from her, scrambling until my back hit a wall. I covered my eyes with my hands and felt some of my frozen eyelashes snap.

I sat there for a minute, struggling to control the pain, and my vision gradually faded from white to a deep red, and then to black. I opened my eyes. I could barely focus them. I felt a wetness on my face, touched it with a finger. There was blood in my tears.

“I have not coerced you, nor dispatched any agent of mine to do so,” Mab continued, as if the break in the conversation had never happened. “Nonetheless, if you wish to survive, you will serve me. I assure you that Summer’s agents will not rest until you are dead.”

I stared at her for a second, still half-dazed from the pain and once again deeply, sincerely, and wisely frightened. “This is another point of contention between you and Titania.”

“When one Court moves, the other perforce moves with it,” Mab said.

I croaked, “Titania wants Marcone dead?”

“Put simply,” she replied. “And her Emissary will continue to seek your death. Only by finding and saving the Baron’s life will you preserve your own.” She paused. “Unless...”

“Unless?”

“Unless you should agree to take up the mantle of the Winter Knight,” Mab said, smiling. “I should be forced to choose another Emissary if you did, and your involvement in this matter could end.” Her eyelids lowered, sleepily sensual, and her surrogate voice turned liquid, heady, an audible caress. “As my Knight you would know power and pleasure that few mortals have tasted.”

The Winter Knight. The mortal champion of the Winter Court. The previous guy who had that job was, when last I knew, still crucified upon a frozen tree within bonds of ice, tortured to the point of death and then made whole, only to begin the process again. He’d lost his sanity somewhere in one of the cycles. He wasn’t a real nice guy when I knew him, but no human being should have to suffer like that.

“No,” I said. “I don’t want to end up like Lloyd Slate.”

“He suffers for your decision,” she said. “He remains alive until you take up the mantle. Accept my offer, wizard child. Give him release. Preserve your life. Taste of power like none you have known.” Her eyes seemed to grow larger, becoming almost luminous, and her not-voice was a narcotic, a promise. “There is much I can teach you.”

A decent person would have rejected her offer out of hand.

I’m not always one of those.

I could offer you some excuses, if you like. I could tell you that I was an orphan by the time I was six. I could tell you that the foster father who eventually raised me subjected me to more forms of psychological and physical abuse than you could shake a stick at. I could tell you that I’d been held in unjust suspicion for my entire adult life by the White Council, whose principles and ideals I’d done my best to uphold. Or maybe I could say that I’d seen too many good people get hurt, or that I’d looked upon a lot of nasty things with my indelible wizard’s Sight. I could tell you that I’d been caught and abused by the creatures of the night myself, and that I hadn’t ever really gotten over it. I could tell you that I hadn’t gotten laid in a really long time.

And all of those things would be true.

But the fact of the matter is that there’s simply a part of me that isn’t so nice. There’s a part of me that gets off on laying waste to my enemies with my power, that gets tired of taking undeserved abuse. There’s this little voice inside my head that sometimes wants to throw the rules away, stop trying to be responsible, and just *take* what I want.

And for a minute, I wondered what it might be like to accept Mab’s offer. Life among the Sidhe would be...intense. In every sense a mortal could imagine. What would it be like to live in a house? Hell, probably a *big* house, if not a freaking castle. Money. Hot showers every day. Every meal a feast. I’d be able to afford whatever clothes I wanted, whatever cars I wanted. Maybe I could do some traveling, see places I’d always wanted to see. Hawaii. Italy. Australia. I could learn to sail, like I always wanted.

Women, oh, yeah. Hot and cold running girls. Inhumanly beautiful, sensuous creatures like the one before me. The Winter Knight had status and power, and those are even more of an aphrodisiac to the fae than they are to us mortals.

I could have...almost anything.

All it would cost me was my soul.

And no, I'm not talking about anything magical or metaphysical. I'm talking about the core of my identity, about what makes Harry Dresden who and what he is. If I lost those things, the things that define me, then what would be left?

Just a heap of bodily processes—and regret.

I knew that. But all the same, the touch of Mab's chilled lips on my ear lingered on, sending slow, pleasant ripples of sensation through me when I breathed. It was enough to make me hesitate.

"No, Mab," I said finally. "I don't want the job."

She studied my face with calm, heavy eyes. "Liar," she said quietly. "You want it. I can see it in you."

I gritted my teeth. "The part of me that wants it doesn't get a vote," I said. "I'm not going to take the job. Period."

She tilted her head to one side and stared at me. "One day, wizard, you will kneel at my feet and ask me to bestow the mantle upon you."

"But not today."

"No," Mab said. "Today you repay me a favor. Just as I said you would."

I didn't want to think too hard about that, and I didn't want to openly agree with her, either. So instead I nodded at the patch of ground where the sculptures had been. "Who took Marcone?"

"I do not know. That is one reason I chose you, Emissary. You have a gift for finding what is lost."

"If you want me to do this for you, I'm going to need to ask you some questions," I said.

Mab glanced up, as if consulting the stars through the still-falling snow. "Time, time, time. Will there never be an end to it?" She shook her head. "Wizard child, the hour has nearly passed. I have duties upon which to attend—as do you. You should rise and leave this place immediately."

"Why?" I asked warily. I got to my feet.

"Because when your little retainer warned you of danger, wizard child, he was not referring to me."

On the street outside the alley, the gale-force wind and the white wall of blowing snow both died away. On the other side of the street, two men in long coats and big Stetson hats stood facing the alley. I felt the sudden weight of their attention, and got the impression that they had been surprised to see me.

I whirled to speak to Mab—only to find her gone. Grimalkin, too, both of them vanished without a trace or a whisper of power to betray it.

I turned back to the street in time to see the two figures step off the sidewalk and begin moving toward me with long strides. They were both tall, nearly my own height, and thickly built. The snowfall hadn't lightened, and the street was a smooth pane of unbroken snow.

They were leaving cloven footprints on it.

"Crap," I spat, and fled back down the narrow, featureless alley.

Chapter Seven

At this sign of retreat, the two men threw back their heads and let out shrill, bleating cries. Their hats fell off when they did, revealing the goatlike features and curling horns of gruffs. But they were bigger than the first attack team—bigger, stronger, and faster.

And as they closed the distance on me, I noticed something else.

Both of them had produced submachine guns from beneath their coats.

“Oh, come on,” I complained as I ran. “That’s just not fair.”

They started shooting at me, which was bad news. Wizard or not, a bullet through the head will splatter my brains just as randomly as the next guy’s. The *really* bad news was that they weren’t just spraying bullets everywhere. Even with an automatic weapon, it isn’t easy to hit a moving target, and the old “spray and pray” method of fire relied upon blind luck disguised as the law of averages: Shoot enough bullets and eventually you have to hit something. Do your shooting like that and sometimes you’ll hit the target, and sometimes you won’t.

But the gruffs shot like professionals. They fired in short, burping little bursts, aimed fire, even if it suffered from the fact that they were moving while they did it.

I felt something hit my back, just to the left of my spine, an impact that felt somewhat like getting slugged in the back by someone with a single knuckle extended. It was a sharp, unpleasant sensation, and the way my balance wavered was more due to the fact that it surprised and frightened me than to the actual force it imparted. I kept running, ducking my head down as far as I could, hunching up my shoulders. The defensive magics woven into my coat could evidently stop whatever rounds the gruffs were using, but that didn’t mean an unlucky ricochet couldn’t bounce some lead into me from the front or sides, around the coat—and getting shot in the lower legs, ankles, or feet would probably kill me as certainly as one

through the head. It would just take a little more effort on the gruffs' part to make it stick.

It's hard to think when someone's trying to kill you. We human beings aren't wired to be rational and creative when we know our lives are in danger of a swift and violent end. The body has definite ideas of which survival strategies it prefers to embrace, and those are generally limited to "rip threat to pieces" or "run like hell." No thinking need be involved, as far as our instincts are concerned.

Our instincts were a long time in the making, though, and the threats that can come after us now have outpaced them. You can't outrun a bullet, and you don't go hand-to-hand with a gunman unless you're certain you are about to die anyway. Speed and mindless aggression weren't going to keep me alive. I needed to figure a way out.

I felt another bullet hit the lower part of my coat. It caught spell-strengthened leather and tugged it forward, just the way a thrown rock might have done. Admittedly, though, the rock wouldn't have made that angry-hornet buzzing noise as it struck. I dumped a garbage can over behind me, hoping it might trip up the gruffs for a second and buy me a little time.

Hey, *you* try coming up with a cogent, rational course of action when you're running down a frozen alley with genuine fairy-tale creatures chasing you, spitting bullets at your back. It's way harder than it looks.

I didn't dare turn to face them. I could have raised a shield to stop the gunfire, but once I had stopped moving, I figured odds were fantastic that one of them would just hop over me like a Kung Fu Theater extra, and they'd come at me from two directions at once.

In fact, if I were them, and had tracked me to that alley...

The chattering gunfire from behind me ceased, and I realized what was happening.

I raised my staff as I neared the far end of the alley, pointed it ahead of me, and screamed, "*Forzare!*"

My timing wasn't perfect. The unseen force I released from the end of the staff rushed out ahead of me, an invisible battering ram. It struck the third gruff just as the fae-thug stepped around the corner, a massive oak cudgel readied in his hands. The blast didn't hit him squarely. It would have thrown him a goodly ways if it had. Instead it caught the right side of his

body, ripping the cudgel away from him and sending the gruff into a drunken, spinning stagger.

I don't know much about goats, but I do know a little about horses, having taken care of my second mentor Ebenezer McCoy's riding horses on his little farm in Missouri. Their feet are awfully vulnerable, especially considering how much weight they're putting on such a relatively small area. Any one of a hundred little things can go wrong. One of them is the possibility that some of the surprisingly frail little bones just above the back of the hoof could be fractured or broken. A pastern or fetlock injury like that can lame a horse for weeks, even permanently.

So as I passed the staggered gruff, I swung my heavy staff like a baseball bat, aiming at the back of one of his hooves. I felt the impact in my hands and heard a sharp crack. The gruff let out a high-pitched and utterly bestial scream of surprise and pain, and tumbled to the snow. I all but flew on by, lengthening my stride, crossing the street and heading for the nearest corner, before his buddies could get a clear shot at me.

When you drive game, you'd damn well better be sure that the one you're driving the prey toward is ready and able to handle it.

I ducked around the next corner maybe half a second before the guns behind me coughed and burped again, chewing chips of brick from the wall. There was a steel door on the side of the building, an exit-only door with no handle on the outside. I couldn't stay ahead of the gruffs for long. I took a chance, stopped, and pressed my hand against the door, hoping like hell it had a push-bar opening mechanism and not a dead bolt.

Something went right. I felt the bar on the other side, reached out with my will and another murmur, "*Forzare*," and directed the force against the other side of the door. It popped open. I went through and pulled it shut behind me.

The building was dark, silent, and almost uncomfortably warm in contrast with the night outside. I leaned my head against the metal door for a second, panting. "Good door," I wheezed. "Nice door. Nice, locked, hostile-to-faeries door."

My ear was in contact with the door, and it was the only reason I heard the movement immediately on its other side. Snow crunched quietly.

I froze in place.

I heard a scraping sound, and a snorted breath that sounded like something you'd hear from a horse. Then nothing.

It took me maybe three seconds to realize that the gruff on the other side of the door was doing the same thing I was: listening to see if he could hear who was on the other side.

It couldn't have been more than six inches away.

And I was standing there in complete darkness. If something went wrong and the gruff came in after me, I could forget running. I couldn't see the floor, the walls, or any obstacles that might trip me up. Like stairs. Or a mound of rusty razor blades.

I froze, not daring to move. Metal door or not, if the gruff had the right submachine gun and the right kind of ammunition, he could riddle me with holes right through the steel. There was no telling what other weapons he might be packing, either. I'd once seen a sobering demonstration of how to skewer someone on a sword from the other side of a metal door, and it hadn't been pretty.

So I stood very still and tried to think quietly.

It was about then that I remembered one of those movies with the maniac in the ghost mask, where one of the kids in the opening segment leans against a bathroom stall, listening exactly the same way I was. The killer, in the neighboring stall, rams a knife into the victim's ear.

It was a panic-inducing thought, and suddenly I had to fight the urge to bolt. My ear began to itch furiously. If I hadn't known that the gruffs were *trying* to flush me out like a rabbit from his briar patch, I might not have managed to keep my cool. It was a near thing, but I did it.

A week and a half went by before I heard another exhalation from a larger-than-human chest, and a pair of quick, light crunches of cloven hooves on snow.

I pushed away from the door as silently as I could, trembling with adrenaline, fatigue, and cold. I had to think ahead of these assholes if I wanted to get out in one piece. Inky, Binky, and Pinky knew I'd come in here, and they weren't about to give up the chase. Right now one of them was watching the door I'd come in to make sure I didn't backtrack. The other two were circling the building, looking for a way in.

I was pretty sure I didn't want to be hanging around when they found it.

I drew off the pentacle amulet I wore around my neck, murmured, and made a tiny effort of will. The amulet began to glow with gentle blue light.

I stood in a utility corridor of some kind. Bare concrete floor met unpainted drywall. There were a couple of doors on the right side of the

hall, and another one at the far end. I checked them out. The first door opened into a room containing several commercial-grade heating and air-conditioning units, all hooked up to a ductwork octopus. No help there.

The next room was padlocked shut. I felt a little bad for doing it, but I lifted my staff, took a moment to close my eyes and concentrate, and then sent another pulse of energy down the rune-carved length of wood, this time focused into a blade of pure force. It sliced through the hasp and bit into the heavy wood of the door behind it. The lock fell to the floor, its cleanly severed steel glowing dull orange at the edges.

The room beyond was probably the workshop of the building's handyman. It wasn't large, but it was neatly organized. It held a woodworking bench, tools, and various supplies—lightbulbs, air filters for the units next door, replacement parts for doors, sinks, and toilets. I availed myself of a few things and dropped my last two twenties onto the workbench by way of apology. Then I stalked back out into the hallway and continued into the building.

The next door was locked, too. I jimmied it open with the crowbar I'd taken from the tool room. It made some noise.

A deep-throated bawl of animal sound came from the far side of the metal door. Something slammed against it, but not hard enough to bring it down, and the sound was followed by an immediate yowl of pain. I bared my teeth in a grin.

The far side of the door opened onto the lobby of an office building, very sparse. A light was blinking on a panel with a keypad on it, next to the door I'd just forced open. Apparently I had triggered the building's security system. That was fine by me. The nearest police station was only a little more than a block from here, and the lights and the appearance of mortal police officers would probably make the gruffs fade and wait for a better moment to settle my hash.

But wait. If the building had a security system, I had to have tripped it when I came in the side door, and that had been a couple of minutes ago. Why hadn't the cops shown up already?

The weather, most likely. Travel would be slow. Lines would be down, causing all kinds of power and communication problems. There would be traffic accidents everywhere there was traffic, and in the wake of all the manpower diverted to Marcone's wrecked building, the station would be

overloaded with work, even this late at night. It might take several minutes longer than usual for the police to respond.

A shadow moved outside the building's front door, and one of the gruffs appeared there.

I didn't have minutes.

I was moving before I had consciously recognized the fact, running for the elevators. The steel security gate inside the door would prevent the gruff from crashing through the glass to come at me, but that didn't stop the gruff from lifting its submachine gun and opening up on me.

The gun sounded like heavy canvas ripping, only a thousand times louder. The window shattered and glass flew everywhere. Some of the bullets struck the security gate, throwing off sparks, most of them shattering, a couple bouncing wildly around the lobby. The rest came at me.

I had my left hand stretched out toward the gruff as I ran, and my will was focused on the bracelet on my wrist. Made of a braid of many metals, the chain of the bracelet was hung with multiple charms in the shape of medieval shields. The power of my will rushed into the bracelet, focused by the enchantments I'd laid upon it when I had prepared it. My will coalesced into a concave dome of barely visible blue energy between me and the gruff, and bullets slammed against it, shattering in bursts of light that rippled over the surface of the energy shield like tiny waves in a still pond.

All three of the elevator doors stood open, and I rushed into the nearest and rapidly hit the buttons for every floor up to the top of the building. Then I leapt out, repeated the process in the second elevator, and then jumped into the third and headed straight for the top. No sense in making it easy for the gruffs to follow me up, and even a moment's delay might buy me the time I needed.

The elevator doors closed—then buzzed and sprang open again.

"Oh, come on!" I shouted, and hit the close-door button hard enough to hurt my thumb.

I growled and watched as the elevator twitched closed again, and then once more sprang open, a sad little *ding* emerging from a half-functioning bell. I was jabbing the button like a lunatic when the gruffs demonstrated their opinion of mortal security systems.

Sure, the touch of metal was anathema to the beings of Faerie. Sure, they couldn't hammer their way through a metal door or bash through a heavy metal gate.

Brick walls, on the other hand, presented fewer problems.

There was a thunder crack of sound, and the wall beside the front door exploded inward. I don't mean it fell in. It literally exploded as the momentum of a superhumanly powerful being struck the wall from the far side and shattered it. Bits of brick flew like bullets. A ceramic pot holding a plastic plant shattered. Several pieces zipped into the elevator and bounced around inside of it. A cloud of brick dust billowed through the lobby.

The gruff who had just one-upped the Big Bad Wolf bulled its way through the cloud, curling ram's horns first. It staggered a step or two, shaking its head, then focused on me and let out another bleating howl.

"Augh!" I screamed at the elevator, jabbing the button. "Close, close, close!"

It did. The car began rising just as the stunned gruff brought his weapon to bear and opened up. Bullets ripped through the relatively flimsy metal of the elevator's door, but my shield bracelet was ready and none of them found their target—who let out a howling, adrenaline-drunken laugh of defiance as the elevator rose.

What they say is true: There's nothing as exhilarating as being shot at and missed. When the shooter happens to be a fairy-tale hit man, it just adds to the zest.

Fourteen floors later I emerged into a darkened hallway and, guided by the light of my upraised amulet, I found the door to the roof. It was an exterior door with a heavy dead bolt, and there was no way that the crowbar was going to get it open.

I took a step back, lifted my staff, and focused my will on the door. Once upon a time I would have just let fly with my will and blasted it right out of its frame, a fairly exhausting bit of spellcraft. Instead I pointed the end of the staff at the bottommost hinge on this side and barked, "*Forzare!*"

A blade of unseen energy, like that I had used on the padlock, severed the hinge with a miniature crack of thunder. I did it for the middle and lower hinges too, then used the crowbar to pry the heavy door out of its setting and hurried out onto the roof.

There was a lot of wind up this high, even though the night was fairly calm. The towers of the city could funnel even a mild breeze into a virtual gale, and tonight this rooftop was on the receiving end. The wind ripped my coat out to one side, and I had to lean against it. At least there wasn't much

snow—except where a portion of architecture created a lee against the wind. There it was piled deep.

It took me a second to orient. When you're fourteen floors up, it gives you an alien perspective of streets and buildings that might otherwise be familiar. I figured out which side of the building I'd come in on and hurried to it, searching for the escape route I'd spotted on the way in.

It wasn't the fire escapes, which decorated two sides of the building in a weathered steel framework. Those things are noisy as hell, and the gruffs would be watching them. Instead I leaned out over the edge and looked at the niche in the brick wall. It ran the entire vertical length of the building, a groove about three feet wide and two feet deep. There was one on either side of each corner of the building, probably there for the aesthetic value, rising like a three-walled chimney from the ground to the roof.

My breath went a little short. Fourteen floors is a *much* longer way down than it is up, especially when you aren't using things like elevators and fire escapes. Especially when I noted the frost and ice forming on the building's exterior.

I took a moment to debate the sanity of this plan. I'd cut the odds in my favor, assuming there were only three gruffs after me this time. One would have to watch the elevators. Another would have to watch the fire escape. That left only one to actively pursue me. I didn't know how fast the gruff would get to the roof, but I had no doubt that he'd manage it in short order.

The idea of simply pushing the gruff off the roof with a blast of power had a certain appeal, but I decided against it. A fourteen-story drop might just piss the gruff off—and it would absolutely confirm my location. Better to slip away and leave them wondering if I was still hiding in the building.

So I climbed out onto the ledge amidst gusting winds. My nose and fingers went numb almost immediately. I tried to ignore them as I lowered my legs into the groove in the wall and braced my feet against the bricks on either side. Then, my heart pounding madly, I shifted my hips and wriggled a bit, until the outward pressure of my legs against the bricks was the only thing that kept me from kissing sidewalk. Once my arms were low enough, I was able to spread them and plant my forearms against the bricks as well, assisting my legs.

I cannot possibly explain to you how frightened I was, staring down. The swirling snow kept me from seeing the ground at times. Once I started there would be no going back. One slip, one miscalculation, one

inconveniently placed patch of ice, and I would be able to add “pancake” to my impersonation repertoire.

I pushed hard with my arms and let my legs loosen. I slid them down a few inches and tightened them again, until they supported my weight once more. Then I loosened my arms and slid down a few inches before stopping, tightening my arms again and repeating the process.

I started climbing down, shifting my legs and arms in turn, five or six inches at a time, moving down the brick groove inchworm style. I made it about ten feet before an image invaded my mind: a gruff, aiming his gun down at me from a couple of feet away and casually popping several rounds through the top of my head.

I started climbing faster, my stomach turning with reaction to the height and the fear. I heard myself making desperate little grunting sounds. The wind howled, blowing snow into my eyes. Frost formed on my eyelashes. My coat did little to protect me from the wind swirling the length of my body, and I started shaking uncontrollably.

I lost the staff when I was about fifty feet up. It tumbled from my numbing fingers, and I held my breath. The rattle of its impact could attract the gruffs’ attention and ruin the whole purpose of taking the madman route off the building.

But the solid length of oak fell into a drift of snow and vanished silently into the white powder. I labored to emulate it, only less quickly.

I didn’t slip until I was ten feet up. I managed to take the fall well, mostly because I landed in the same snowdrift that had received my staff. I struggled up out of the freezing white, and almost went back down when my staff tangled in my legs. I took it up in mostly nerveless hands and staggered out of the drift.

A sphere of light whipped past the other end of the alley, then reappeared and shot toward me.

Toot-toot’s face was unusually sober, even grim. He zipped up to me and held a finger to his lips. I nodded at him and mouthed, *I need to know how to get out.*

Toot’s sphere of light bobbed once in acknowledgment and then sped away. I looked up. Other balls of glowing light darted about the skies, flickers that you would barely even notice if you didn’t know what to look for. I took a precaution while I waited.

As before, I didn't wait long. Toot returned a moment later and beckoned me. He took the lead and I followed him. I was getting colder. The fall into the drift had covered me in a light layer of snow, which had then melted. Wet clothes are exactly the worst thing to be wearing in that kind of weather. I had to keep moving. Hypothermia isn't as dramatic a death as being ripped apart by bullets, but it'll get the job done.

When I got to the far end of the alley, I heard another bleating cry from a gruff, drifting on the moaning wind, softened by the falling snow. I glanced back and just barely saw motion as a gruff descended the side of the building the same way I had—though much more swiftly.

A second later there was an agonized, inhuman scream as the gruff got to the bottom and discovered that the snow had hidden the box of nails that I had stolen from the tool room and spread liberally over the ground. The screams went on for several seconds. One of the nails must have pierced the gruff's hoof, and as tired and cold as I was, I still had energy enough to grin. That one wasn't going to be dancing in elf circles anytime soon.

I'd lamed two of them, and figured it would be enough to make them back off the chase, at least for the moment. But you never can tell. I wasted no time in following Toot through back alleys and away from the chosen emissaries of Summer. Around me the little glowing Christmas balls of light, the Za-Lord's Guard, darted back and forth, a wary ring of sentinels spread in a perimeter that moved as I did.

Several blocks away I found an all-night grocery store and staggered in out of the cold. The clerk glared at me until I hobbled over, clumsily dug change out of my pockets, and left it next to the cash register before shuffling to the coffee counter. At that point the clerk evidently decided that he wouldn't have to get out the shotgun or whatever he had behind the counter, and went back to staring out the window.

There were a few other shoppers there, and I saw a police car crunch through the snow on the street outside, probably responding to the alarm at the building. Nice and public. Probably safe. I was so cold I could barely fill up the cup. The coffee, which burned my tongue a little, was absolutely delicious, even served black. I guzzled the hot drink and felt sensation begin returning to my body.

I stood there for a moment with my eyes closed and finished the coffee. Then I crushed the paper cup and tossed it into the trash.

Someone had snatched John Marcone, and I had to find him and protect him. I had a feeling that Murphy wasn't going to be thrilled with the circumstances around this one. Hell's bells, *I* wasn't happy with it. But that really wasn't what was bothering me.

What *really* worried me was that Mab had been involved.

What was the deal with having Grimalkin along to do her talking for her? Aside from making her seem even more extremely disturbing than usual, I mean. Oh, sure, Mab may have seemed fairly straightforward, but there was a lot more going on than she was saying.

For example: Mab had said that Summer's hit men were after me because Mab had chosen me to be her Emissary. But for that to be true, she had to have done it hours ago, at least a little while before the first crew of gruffs had attacked me at the Carpenter place.

And *that* had happened several hours *before* the bad guys grabbed Marcone.

Someone was running a game, all right. Someone was keeping secrets.

I had a bad feeling that if I didn't find out who, why, and how, Mab would toss me into the trash like a used paper cup.

Right after she crushed me, of course.

Chapter Eight

A wide-axled, full-of-itself, military-wannabe truck crunched through the snowy streets and came to a halt outside the little grocery store. The lights glared in through the doors. I squinted at it. After a minute the Hummer's horn blared in two short beeps.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," I muttered. I hobbled to the door and out to the truck, which blended seamlessly with the background and the foreground, and with most of the air.

The driver-side window rolled down and revealed a young man whom fathers of teenage daughters would shoot on sight. He had pale skin and deep grey eyes. His dark, slightly curly hair was long enough to declare casual rebellion, and tousled to careless perfection. He wore a black leather jacket and a white shirt, both of them more expensive than any two pieces of furniture at my apartment. In marked contrast, there was a scarf inexpertly crocheted from thick white yarn around his neck, under the collar of the jacket. He faced straight ahead, so that I saw only his profile, but I felt confident that he was smirking on the other side of his face, too.

"Thomas," I said. "A lesser man than me would hate you."

He grinned. "There's someone lesser than *you*?" He rolled his eyes to me on the last word, to deadpan the delivery, and his face froze in an expression of absolute neutrality. He stayed that way for a few seconds. "Empty night, Harry. You look like..."

"Ten miles of bad road?"

He forced a smile onto his mouth, but that was as far as it went. "I was going to go with 'a raccoon.'"

"Gee. Thanks."

"Get in."

He took the monorail to the other side of the Hummer's cab to unlock the passenger-side door. I showed up eventually, and noticed every little ache

in my body on the way—especially the throbbing burn centered on my broken nose. I tossed my staff into the back of *Das Truck*, half expecting an echoing clatter when it landed. I got in, shut the door, and put on my seat belt while Thomas got the truck moving. He peered carefully into the heavy snow, presumably looking for some runty little sedans he could drive over for fun.

“That’s gotta hurt,” he said after a moment.

“Only when I exhale,” I said testily. “What took you so long?”

“Well, you know how much I love getting called in the middle of the night to drive through snow and ice to play chauffeur for grumpy low-life investigators. The anticipation slowed me down.”

I grunted in what might have been construed as an apologetic manner by someone who knew me.

Thomas did. “What’s up?”

I told him everything.

Thomas is my half brother, my only family. I’m allowed.

He listened.

“And then,” I concluded, “I went for a ride in a monster truck.”

Thomas’s mouth twitched up in a quick smile. “It is kinda butch, isn’t it.”

I squinted around the truck. “Do TV shows start an hour later in the backseat than they do up here?”

“Who cares?” Thomas said. “It’s got TiVo.”

“Good,” I said. “It might be a little while before I return you to your regularly scheduled programming.”

Thomas let out a theatrical sigh. “Why me?”

“Because if I want to find Marcone, the best place to start is with his people. If word gets out that he’s gone missing, there’s no telling how some of them might react when I come snooping around. So you’ve got my back.”

“What if I don’t *want* your back?”

“Cope,” I said heartlessly. “You’re family.”

“You’ve got me there,” he admitted. “But I wonder if you’ve thought this through very thoroughly.”

“I try to make thinking an ongoing process.”

Thomas shook his head. “Look, you know I don’t try to tell you your business.”

“Except tonight, apparently,” I said.

“Marcone is a grown-up,” Thomas said. “He signed on to the Accords willingly. He knew what he was going to be letting himself in for.”

“And?” I said.

“And it’s a jungle out there,” Thomas said. He squinted through the thick snow. “Metaphorically speaking.”

I grunted. “He made his bed, and I should let him lie in it?”

“Something like that,” Thomas said. “And don’t forget that Murphy and the police aren’t going to be thrilled with a ‘Save the Kingpin’ campaign.”

“I know,” I said, “and I’d love to stand back and see what happens. But this isn’t about Marcone anymore.”

“Then what is it about?”

“Mab skinning me alive if I don’t give her what she wants.”

“Come on, Harry,” Thomas said. “You can’t really think that Mab’s motives and plans are that direct, that cut-and-dried.” He adjusted the setting of the Hummer’s wipers. “She wants Marcone for a reason. You might not be doing him any favors by saving him on Mab’s behalf.”

I scowled out at the night.

He held up a hand, ticking off fingers. “And that’s assuming that, one, he’s alive at all right now. Two, that you can find him. Three, that you can get him out alive. And four, that the opposition doesn’t cripple or kill you.”

“What’s your point?” I asked.

“That you’re playing against a stacked deck, and that you have no idea if Mab is going to be there to cover your bets when the bad guys call.” He shook his head. “It would be smarter for you to skip town. Go someplace warm for a few weeks.”

“Mab might take that kinda personal,” I said.

“Mab’s a businesswoman,” Thomas said. “Creepy and weird, but she’s cold, too. Calculating. As long as you still represent a potential recruit to her, I doubt she’d elect to depreciate your value prematurely.”

“Depreciate. I like that. You might be right—unless, to return to the original metaphor, Mab isn’t playing with a full deck. Which the evidence of recent years seems to imply with increasing frequency.” I nodded out the window. “And I’ve got a feeling that I’d have had even more trouble with the gruffs I’ve seen so far if we weren’t in the middle of a freaking blizzard. If I waltz off to Miami or somewhere warm, I’ll be putting myself

that much nearer to the agents of Summer—who are also planning my murder.”

Thomas frowned and said nothing.

“I could run, but I couldn’t hide,” I said. “Better to face it here, on my home ground, while I’m still relatively rested”—I let out a huge and genuine yawn—“instead of waiting for faerie goons from one Court or the other to, ah, depreciate me by surprise after I’ve been on the run for a few weeks.”

“What about the Council?” Thomas demanded. “You’ve been wearing the grey cloak for how long, now? And you’ve fought for them how many times?”

I shook my head. “Right now the Council is still stretched to the limit. We might not be in open battle with the Red Court at the moment, but the Council and the Wardens have got years of catch-up work to do.” I felt my jaw tighten. “Lot of warlocks have come up in the past few years. The Wardens are working overtime to get them under control.”

“You mean kill them,” Thomas said.

“I mean kill them. Most of them teenagers, man.” I shook my head. “Luccio knows my feelings on the matter. She refuses to assign any of it to me. Which means that other Wardens are forced to pick up the slack. I’m not going to add to their workload by dragging them into this mess.”

“You don’t seem to mind adding to mine,” Thomas noted.

I snorted. “That’s because I respect them.”

“So long as we have that clear,” he said.

We drove past a city snowplow. It had foundered in a deep drift, like some kind of metallic Ice Age beast trapped in a tar pit. I watched it with bemusement as Thomas’s truck crunched slowly, steadily on by.

“By the way,” he asked, “where do you want to go?”

“First things first,” I said. “I need food.”

“You need sleep.”

“Tick-tock. Food will do for now.” I pointed. “There, an IHOP.”

He hauled the big truck into a slow, steady turn. “Then what?”

“I ask people impertinent questions,” I said. “Hopefully turning up pertinent answers.”

“Assuming someone doesn’t kill you while you do.”

“That’s why I’m bringing my very own vampire bodyguard.”

Thomas parked across three spaces in the tiny, otherwise unoccupied lot of an International House of Pancakes.

“I like the scarf,” I said. I leaned over and inhaled through my nose as best I could. It stung, but I detected a faint whiff of vanilla and strawberries. “She make it for you?”

Thomas nodded without saying anything. The leather-gloved fingers of one hand traced over the soft, simple yarn. He looked quietly sad. I felt bad for mentioning Justine, my brother’s lost lover. Then I understood why he wore the gloves: If she’d made it for him, a token of her love, he didn’t dare touch it with his skin. It would sear him like a hot skillet. So he kept it close enough for him to smell her touch upon it, but he didn’t dare let it brush against him.

Every time I think my romantic life is a wasteland, I look at my brother and see how much worse it could be.

Thomas shook his head and killed the engine and we sat for a moment in silence.

So I clearly heard a deep male voice outside the truck say, “Don’t either of you move.” There was the distinct *click-clack* of a shotgun’s pump working. “Or I will kill you.”

Chapter Nine

When there's a gun pointed at you, you've got two options: Either you move, fast and unexpectedly, and hope that you get lucky, or you freeze and try to talk your way clear. Given that I had really limited room in which to attempt to dodge or run, I went with option B: I held still.

"I don't suppose," I asked hopefully, "that this is the full military model?"

"It has individually heated seats and a six-disk CD changer," Thomas said.

I scowled. "Uh-huh. Those are way cooler than silly features like armor and bulletproof glass."

"Hey," Thomas said, "it's not my fault you have special needs."

"Harry," said the man with the shotgun, "hold up your right hand, please."

I arched an eyebrow at that. Typically the vocabulary of thugs holding guns to your head ran a little light on courtesy phrases like *please*.

"You want me to kill him?" Thomas murmured, barely audible.

I twitched my head in a tiny negative motion. Then I lifted up my right hand, fingers spread.

"Turn it around," said the man outside. "Let me see the inside of your wrist."

I did.

"Oh, thank God," breathed the voice.

I'd finally placed it. I turned my head to one side and said through the glass, "Hey, there, Fix. Is that a shotgun you're holding to my head, or are you just glad to see me?"

Fix was a young, slender man of medium height. His hair was silver-white and very fine, and though no one would ever accuse him of beauty, there was a confidence and surety in his plain features that gave them a

certain appeal. He was a far cry from the nervous, scrawny kid I'd first met several years ago.

He wore jeans and a green silk shirt—nothing more. He obviously should have been freezing, and he just as obviously wasn't. The thickly falling snowflakes weren't striking him. Every single one seemed to find its way to the ground around him somehow. He held a pump-action shotgun with a long barrel against his shoulder, and wore a sword on a belt at his hip.

"Harry," he said, his voice steady. His tone wasn't hostile. "Can we have a polite talk?"

"We probably could have," I said, "if you hadn't started off by pointing a gun at my head."

"A necessary precaution," he said. "I needed to be sure you hadn't taken Mab's offer."

"And become the new Winter Knight?" I asked. "You could have asked me, Fix."

"If you'd become Mab's creature," Fix said, "you would have lied. It would have changed you. Made you an extension of her will. I couldn't trust you."

"You're the Summer Knight," I replied. "So I can't help but wonder if that wouldn't make you just as controlled and untrustworthy. Summer's not all that happy with me right now, apparently. Maybe you're just an extension of Summer's will."

Fix stared at me down the barrel of the shotgun. Then he lowered it abruptly and said, "Touché."

Thomas produced from nowhere a semiautomatic pistol scaled to fit his truck, and had it trained on Fix's head before the other man had finished speaking the second syllable of the word.

Fix's eyes widened. "Holy crap."

I sighed and took the gun gently from Thomas's grip. "Now, now. Let's not give him the wrong idea about the nature of this conversation."

Fix let out a slow breath. "Thank you, Harry. I—"

I pointed the gun at Fix's head, and he froze with his mouth partly open.

"Lose the shotgun," I told him. I made no effort to sound friendly.

His mouth closed and his lips pressed into a thin line, but he obeyed.

"Step back," I said.

He did it.

I got out of the car, carefully keeping the gun trained on his head. I recovered the shotgun and passed it back to Thomas. Then I faced the silver-haired Summer Knight in dead silence while the snow fell.

“Fix,” I said quietly, after a moment had passed. “I know you’ve been spending a lot of time in the supernatural circles lately. I know that plain old things like guns don’t seem like a significant threat, in some ways. I know that you probably meant it as a message, that you weren’t coming after me with everything you could bring to bear, and that I was supposed to consider it a token of moderation.” I squinted down the sight of Thomas’s gun. “But you crossed a line. You pointed a gun at my head. Friends don’t do that.”

More silence and snowfall.

“Point another weapon at me,” I said quietly, “and you’d damned well better pull the trigger. Do you understand me?”

Fix’s eyes narrowed. He nodded once.

I let him look down the gun’s barrel for a few more seconds and then lowered it. “It’s cold,” I said. “What do you want?”

“I came here to warn you, Harry,” Fix said. “I know Mab has chosen you to act as her Emissary. You don’t know what you’re getting into. I came to tell you to stand clear of it.”

“Or what?”

“Or you’re going to get hurt,” Fix said quietly. He sounded tired. “Maybe killed. And there’s going to be collateral damage along the way.” He held up a hand and continued, hurriedly, “Please understand. I’m not threatening you, Harry. I’m just telling you about consequences.”

“I’d have an easier time believing that if you hadn’t opened the conversation by threatening to kill me,” I said.

“The last Summer Knight was murdered by his Winter counterpart,” Fix replied. “In fact, that’s how most of them die. If you’d taken service with Mab, I wouldn’t stand a chance in a fair fight against you, and we both know it. I did what I had to in order to warn you and still protect myself.”

“Oh,” I said. “It was a *precautionary* shotgun aimed at my skull. That makes it different.”

“Dammit, Dresden,” Fix said. “What do I have to do to get you to listen to me?”

“Behave in a vaguely trustworthy fashion,” I said. “For instance, next time you know that Summer’s hitters are about to make a run at me, maybe

you could call me on a telephone and give me a little heads-up.”

Fix grimaced. His face twisted into an expression of effort. When he spoke his jaws stayed locked together, but I could, with difficulty, understand the words. “Wanted to.”

“Oh,” I said. A big chunk of my anger evaporated. It was probably just as well. Fix wasn’t the one who deserved to be on the receiving end of it. “I can’t back off.”

He drew in a breath and nodded as if in comprehension. “Mab’s got a handle on you.”

“For now.”

He gave me a rather bleak smile. “She isn’t the sort to let go of anyone she wants to keep.”

“And I’m not the sort who gets kept,” I replied.

“Maybe not,” Fix said, but he sounded dubious. “Are you sure you won’t reconsider?”

“We’re going to have to agree to disagree.”

“Jesus,” Fix said, looking away. “I don’t want to square off against you, Dresden.”

“Then don’t.”

He stared quietly at me, his expression serious. “I can’t back off, either. I like you, Harry. But I can’t make you any promises.”

“We’re playing for opposite teams,” I said. “Nothing personal. But we’ll do what we have to do.”

Fix nodded.

We didn’t speak for almost a minute.

Then I laid the shotgun down in the snow, nodded, and got back into Thomas’s truck. I gave the huge automatic back to my brother. Fix made no move toward the shotgun.

“Harry,” he said, as the truck started to pull out. His mouth twitched a few times before he blurted, “Remember the leaf Lily gave you.”

I frowned at him, but nodded.

Thomas got the truck moving again and started driving. Windshield wipers squeaked. Snow crunched beneath tires, a steady white noise.

“Okay,” Thomas said. “What was that all about? Guy’s supposed to be a friend, and he screwed you over. I thought you were going to pistol-whip him for a minute. Then you start getting all teary-eyed.”

“Metaphorically speaking,” I said tiredly.

“You know what I mean.”

“He’s under a geas, Thomas.”

Thomas frowned. “Lily’s got him in a brain-lock?”

“I doubt she’d do that to Fix. They go back.”

“Who, then?”

“My money is on Titania, the Summer Queen. If she told him to keep his mouth shut and not to help me, he wouldn’t get a choice in the matter. Probably why he showed up armed and tried to intimidate me. He wouldn’t be able to speak to me outright, but if he’s delivering a threat in order to further Titania’s plans, it might let him get around the geas.”

“Seems pretty thin to me. You believe him?”

“Titania’s done it to him before. And she doesn’t really like me.”

“You kill someone’s daughter, that happens,” he said.

I shrugged wearily, tired to my bones. The combination of pain, cold, and multiple bursts of adrenaline had worn me down a lot more than I had realized. I couldn’t stop another yawn.

“What was he talking about as we pulled out?”

“Oh,” I mumbled. “After that mess at Arctis Tor, Lily gave me a silver pin in the shape of an oak leaf. It makes me an Esquire of Summer. Supposedly I can use it to whistle up help from Titania’s Court. It’s their way of balancing the scales for what we did.”

“Never a bad thing to be owed a favor,” Thomas agreed. “You got it on you?”

“Yeah,” I said. It was, in fact, in a little ring box within the inner coat of my duster. I got it out and showed it to Thomas.

He whistled. “Gorgeous work.”

“The Sidhe know pretty,” I agreed.

“Maybe you can use it and get them to back off.”

I snorted. “It’s never that simple. Titania could decide that the best way to help me would be to break my back, paralyze me from the waist down, and dump me into a hospital bed so her gruffs won’t have to kill me.”

Thomas grunted. “Then why would Fix mention it?”

“Maybe he was compelled to,” I said. “Maybe Titania’s hoping I’ll call for help and she’ll have a chance to squash me personally. Or maybe...”

I let my voice trail off for a moment, while I kicked my punch-drunk brain in the stomach until it threw up an idea.

“Or maybe,” I said, “because he wanted to warn me about it. The gruffs have found me twice now, and they haven’t been physically tailing or tracking me. Neither location was one of my regular hangouts. And how did Fix find me just now, in the middle of a blizzard? He sure as hell didn’t coincidentally pick a random IHOP.”

Thomas’s eyes widened in realization. “It’s a tracking device.”

I scowled at the beautiful little silver leaf and said, not without a certain amount of grudging admiration, “Titania. That conniving bitch.”

“Damn,” Thomas said. “I feel a little bad for pointing a gun at the shrimp, now.”

“I probably would, too,” I said, “if I wasn’t so weirded out by the fact that Fix is starting to be as crabwise and squirrely as the rest of the Sidhe.”

Thomas grunted. “Better get rid of that thing before more of them show up.”

He hit the control that lowered the passenger window. It coughed and rattled a little before it jerked into motion, instead of smoothly gliding down. Wizards and technology don’t get along so well. To high-tech equipment I am the living avatar of Murphy’s Law: The longer I stayed in Thomas’s shiny new oil tanker, the more all the things that *could* go wrong, *would* go wrong.

I lifted the leaf to chuck it out, but something made me hesitate. “No,” I murmured.

Thomas blinked. “No?”

“No,” I said with more certainty, closing my hand around the treacherous silver leaf. “I’ve got a better idea.”

Chapter Ten

I finished the spell that I thought would keep the gruffs busy and climbed wearily out of my lab to find Thomas sitting by the fireplace. My big grey dog, Mouse, lay beside him, his fur reflecting highlights of reddened silver in the firelight, watching Thomas's work with interest.

My brother sat cross-legged on the floor, with my gun lying disassembled on a soft leather cloth upon the hearth. He frowned in concentration as he cleaned the pieces of the weapon with a brush, a soft cloth, and a small bottle of oil.

Mister, my hyperthyroid tomcat, bounded over the minute I opened the trapdoor to the lab, and hurried down the folding staircase into the subbasement.

"Go get 'em, tiger," I muttered after him by way of encouragement. "Make them run their little hooves off."

I left the door open, heaved myself to the couch, and collapsed. Mouse's tail thumped the floor gently.

"You all right?" Thomas asked.

"Tired," I said. "Big spell."

"Uh-huh," he said, working industriously on the weapon's barrel. "What building did you burn down?"

"Your apartment, if you don't lay off the wiseass commentary," I said. "Give me a minute and we'll get moving."

Thomas gave me a sidelong, calculating look. "I needed another minute or two anyway. When's the last time you cleaned this thing?"

"Uh. Who's the president now?"

Thomas clucked his teeth in disapproval and returned to the gun. "Let me know when you're ready."

"Just give me a minute to catch my breath," I said.

When I woke up there was dim light coming from my mostly buried basement windows, and my neck felt like the bones had been welded together by a badly trained contractor. The various beatings I'd received the night before had formed a corporation and were attempting a hostile takeover of my nervous system. I groaned and looked around.

Thomas was sitting with his back against the wall beside the fireplace, as relaxed and patient as any tiger. His gun, mine, and the bent-bladed kukri knife he'd favored lately lay close at hand.

Down in my lab something clattered to the floor from one of the shelves or tables. I heard Mister's paws scampering over the metal surface of the center table.

"What are you grinning at?" my brother asked.

"Mister," I said.

"He's been knocking around down there all morning," Thomas said. "I was going to go round him up before he broke something, but the skull told me to leave him alone."

"Yeah," I said. I creaked to my feet and shuffled to my little alcove with delusions of kitchenhood. I got out the bottle of aspirin and downed them with a glass of water. "For your own safety. Mister gets upset when someone gets between him and his packet of catnip."

I shuffled over to the lab and peered down. Sure enough, the little cloth bag containing catnip and the silver oak leaf pin still hung from the extra-large rubber band I'd snipped and fixed to the ceiling directly over Little Chicago. As I watched, Mister hopped up onto a worktable, then bounded into the air to bat at the cloth bag. He dragged it down to the table with him, claws hooked in the fabric, and landed on the model of Lincoln Park. My cat rubbed his face ecstatically against the bag for a moment, then released it and batted playfully at it as the rubber band sent it rebounding back and forth near him.

Then he seemed to realize he was being watched. He turned his face up to me, meowed smugly, flicked the stub of his tail jauntily, and hopped to the floor.

"Bob?" I called. "Is the spell still working?"

"Aye, Cap'n!" Bob said. "Arrrrr!"

"What's with that?" Thomas murmured from right beside me.

I twitched hard enough to take me up off the floor, and glared at him. "Would you stop doing that?"

He nodded, his expression serious, but I could see the corners of his mouth quivering with the effort not to smile. "Right. Forgot."

I growled and called him something unkind, yet accurate. "He wouldn't stop begging me to take him to see that pirate movie. So I took him with me the last time I went to the drive-in down in Aurora, and he got into it. It's been dying down, but if he calls me 'matey' one more time I'll snap."

"That's interesting," Thomas said, "but that's not what I was asking about."

"Oh, right," I said. I pointed at the catnip bag. "The leaf 's in there."

"Isn't that just going to draw Summer's goons here?"

I let out a nasty laugh. "No. They can't see it through the wards around the lab."

"Then why the big rubber band?"

"I linked Summer's beacon spell to the matrix around Little Chicago. Every time the leaf gets within a foot of the model, my spell transfers the beacon's signal to the corresponding location in the city."

Thomas narrowed his eyes in thought, and then suddenly grinned in understanding as Mister pounced on the catnip again, this time landing near the Field Museum. "If they're following that beacon, they'll be running all over town."

"In two and a half feet of snow," I confirmed, grinning.

"You're sadistic."

"Thank you," I said solemnly.

"Won't they figure it out?"

"Sooner or later," I admitted, "but it should buy us a little time to work with. 'Scuse me."

I shambled to the door and put on my coat.

"Where to first?" Thomas asked.

"Nowhere just yet. Sit tight." I grabbed my square-headed snow shovel from the popcorn tin by the door, where it usually resided with my staff, sword cane, and the epically static magic sword, *Fidelacchius*. Mouse followed me out. It was a job of work to get the door open, and more than a little snow spilled over the threshold. I started with shoveling the stairs and worked my way up, a grave digger in reverse.

Once that was done, I shoveled the little sidewalk, the front porch of the boardinghouse, and the exterior stairs running up to the Willoughbys' apartment on the second floor. Then I dug a path to the nest of mailboxes

by the curb. It took me less time than I thought it would. There was a lot of snow, but it hadn't formed any layers of ice, and it was basically a question of tossing powder out of the way. Mouse kept watch, and I tried not to throw snow into his face.

We returned to my apartment, and I slung the shovel's handle back down into the popcorn tin.

Thomas frowned at me. "You had to shovel the walk? Harry...somehow I'm under the impression that you aren't feeling the urgency here."

"In the first place," I said, "I'm not terribly well motivated to bend over backward to save John Marccone's Armani-clad ass. I wouldn't lose much sleep over him. In the second place, my neighbors are elderly, and if someone doesn't clean up the walks they'll be stuck here. In the third place, I've got to do whatever I can to make sure I'm on my landlady's good side. Mrs. Spunkelcreef is almost deaf, but it's sort of hard to hide it when assassin demons or gangs of zombies kick down the door. She's willing to forgive me the occasional wild party because I do things like shovel the walk."

"It's easier to replace an apartment than your ass," Thomas said.

I shrugged. "I was so stiff and sore from yesterday that I had to do something to get my muscles loosened up and moving. The time was going to be gone either way. Might as well take care of my neighbors." I grimaced. "Besides..."

"You feel bad that your landlady's building sometimes gets busted up because you live in it," Thomas said. He shook his head and snorted. "Typical."

"Well, yeah. But that's not it."

He frowned at me, listening.

I struggled to find the right words. "There are a lot of things I can't control. I don't know what's going to happen in the next few days. I don't know what I'm going to face, what kind of choices I'm going to have to make. I can't predict it. I can't control it. It's too big." I nodded at my shovel. "But that, I can predict. I know that if I pick up that shovel and clear the snow from the walkways, it's going to make my neighbors safer and happier." I glanced at him and shrugged. "It's worthwhile to me. Give me a minute to shower."

He regarded me for a second and then nodded. "Oh," he said, with the tiniest of smiles. He mimed a sniff and a faint grimace. "I'll wait. Gladly."

I cleaned up. We were on the way out the door when the phone rang.

“Harry,” Murphy said. “What the hell is going on out there?”

“Why?” I asked. “What the hell is going on out there?”

“We’ve had at least two dozen...well, I suppose the correct term is ‘sightings.’ Everything from Bigfoot to mysterious balls of light. Naturally it’s all getting shunted to SI.”

I started to answer her, then paused. Marcone and the outfit were involved. While they didn’t have anywhere near the influence in civic affairs that they might have wanted, Marcone had always had sources of information inside the police department—sources his subordinates could, presumably, access as well. It would be best to exercise some caution.

“You calling from the station?” I asked her.

“Yeah.”

“We should talk,” I said.

Murphy might not want to admit that anyone she worked with could be providing information to the outfit, but she wasn’t the sort to stop believing the truth just because she didn’t like it. “I see,” she said. “Where?”

“McAnally’s,” I said. I checked a clock. “Three hours?”

“See you there.”

I hung up and started for the door again. Mouse followed close at my heels, but I turned and nudged him gently back with my leg. “Not this time, boy,” I told him. “The bad guys have a lot of manpower, access to skilled magic, and I need a safe place to come home to. If you’re here there’s no way anyone is going to sneak in and leave me a present that goes boom.”

Mouse huffed out a breath in a sigh, but sat down.

“Keep an eye on Mister, all right? If he starts getting sick, take the catnip away.”

My dog gave the door to the lab a dubious glance.

“Oh, give me a break,” I said. “You’re seven times as big as he is.”

Mouse looked none too confident.

Thomas blinked at me, and then at the dog. “Can he understand you?”

“When it suits him,” I grumped. “He’s smarter than a lot of people I know.”

Thomas took a moment to absorb that, and then faced Mouse a little uncertainly. “Uh, okay, look. What I said about Harry earlier? I wasn’t serious, okay? It was totally a joke.”

Mouse flicked his ears and turned his nose away from Thomas with great nobility.

“What?” I asked, looking between them. “What did you say?”

“I’ll warm up the car,” Thomas said, and retreated to the frozen grey outdoors.

“This is my *home*,” I complained to no one in particular. “Why do people keep making jokes at my expense in my own freaking *home*?”

Mouse declined to comment.

I locked up behind me, magically and materially, and scaled Mount Hummer to sit in the passenger seat. The morning was cold and getting colder, especially since I was fresh from the shower, but the seat was rather pleasantly warm. There was no way I’d admit to Thomas that the luxury feature was superior to armored glass, but gosh, it was cozy.

“Right,” Thomas said. “Where are we headed?”

“To where they treat me like royalty,” I said.

“We’re going to Burger King?”

I rubbed the heel of my hand against my forehead and spelled *fratricide* in a subvocal mutter, but I had to spell out *temporary insanity* and *justifiable homicide*, too, before I calmed down enough to speak politely.

“Just take a left and drive. Please.”

“Well,” Thomas said, grinning, “since you said ‘please.’”

Chapter Eleven

Executive Priority Health was arguably the most exclusive gym in town. Located in downtown Chicago, the business took up the entire second floor of what used to be one of the grand old hotel buildings. Now it had office buildings on the upper levels and a miniature shopping center on the first floor.

Not just anyone could take the private elevator to the second floor. One had to be a member of the health club, and membership was tightly controlled and extremely expensive. Only the wealthiest and most influential men had a membership card.

Oh, and me.

The magnetic stripe on the back of the card didn't work when I swiped it through the card reader. No surprise there. I'd had it in my wallet for several months, and I doubt the magnetic signature stored on the card had lasted more than a couple of days. I hit the intercom button on the console.

"Executive Priority," said a cheerful young woman's voice. "This is Billie, and how may I serve you?"

Thomas glanced at me and arched an eyebrow, mouthing the words, *Serve you?*

"You'll see," I muttered to him. I addressed the intercom. "My card seems to have stopped working. Harry Dresden and guest, please."

"One moment, sir," Billie said. She was back within a few seconds. "I apologize for the problem with your membership card, sir. I'm opening the elevator for you now."

True to her word, the elevator opened, and Thomas and I got in.

It opened onto the main area of Executive Priority.

"You're kidding me," Thomas said. "Since when do *you* go to the gym?"

It looked pretty typically gymlike from here. Lots and lots of exercise machines and weight benches and dumbbells and mirrors; static bikes and

treadmills stood in neatly dressed ranks. They'd paid some madman who thought he was a decorator a lot of money to make the place look hip and unique. Maybe it's my lack of fashion sense talking, but I thought they should have held out for one of those gorillas who has learned to paint. The results would have been of similar quality, and they could have paid in fresh produce.

Here and there men, mostly white, mostly over forty, suffered through a variety of physical activities. Beside each and every one of them was a personal trainer coaching, supporting, helping.

The trainers were all women, none of them older than their late twenties. They all wore ridiculously brief jogging shorts so tight that it had to be some kind of minor miracle that allowed the blood to keep flowing through the girls' legs. They all wore T-shirts with the gym's logo printed on them, also tight—and every single woman there had the kind of body that made her outfit look fantastic. No gym in the world had *that* many gorgeous girls in its employ.

"Ah," Thomas said after a moment of looking around. "This isn't a typical health club, is it?"

"Welcome to the most health-conscious brothel in the history of mankind," I told him.

Thomas whistled quietly through his teeth, surveying the place. "I'd heard that the Velvet Room had been retooled. This is it?"

"Yeah," I said.

A brown-haired girl jiggled over to us, her mouth spread in a beauty-contest smile, and for a second I thought her shirt was about to explode under the tension. Bright gold lettering over her left breast read, BILLIE.

"Hello, Mister Dresden," she chirped. She bobbed her head to Thomas. "Sir. Welcome to Executive Priority. Can I get you a drink before your workout? May I take your coats?"

I held up a hand. "Thanks, Billie, but no. I'm not here for the exercise."

Her smile stayed locked in place, pretty and meaningless, and she tilted her head to one side.

"I'm here to speak to Ms. Demeter," I said.

"I'm sorry, sir," Billie said. "She isn't in."

The girl was a confection for the eyes, and I felt sure that the other four senses would feel just as well fed after a bit of indulgence, but she wasn't a good liar. "Yeah, she is," I said. "Tell her Harry Dresden is here."

"I'm sorry, sir," she said again, like a machine stuck on repeat. "Ms. Demeter is not in the building."

I gave her my toothiest smile. "You're kind of new here, eh, Billie?"

The smile flickered, then stabilized again.

"Thomas." I sighed. "Give her a visual?"

My brother looked around, then went over to a nearby rack of steel dumbbells and picked up the largest set there, one in each hand. With about as much effort as I'd use to bundle twigs, he twisted the steel bars around each other, forming an asymmetric X shape. He held it up to make sure Billie saw it, and then dropped it at her feet. The weights landed with a forceful thump, and Billie flinched when they did.

"You should see the kinds of things he can bend and break," I said. "Expensive exercise machines, expensive furniture, expensive clients. I don't know how hard he could throw some of this stuff around, but I'd be lying if I told you that I wasn't kinda curious." I leaned down a little closer and said, "Billie, maybe you should kick this one up the line. I'd hate them to dock your pay to replace all the broken things."

"I'll be right back, sir," Billie said in a squeaky whisper, and scurried away.

"Subtle," Thomas noted.

I shrugged. "It saves time."

"How'd you get a membership to a place like this?"

"It's Marcone's place. He thinks I'm less likely to trash it if I'm dazzled by friendly boobs."

"Can't say I blame him," Thomas admitted. His eyes locked on one particular girl who was currently at a table, filling out paperwork. She froze in place, and then looked up, very slowly. Her lips parted as she stared at Thomas, and her dark eyes widened. She started breathing faster, and then shook herself and hurriedly looked down again, pretending to read her paperwork.

My brother closed his eyes slowly and then turned his head away from the girl with the kind of steady, deliberate motion one uses to shut a heavy door. When he blinked his eyes open again, their color had shifted from deep grey to a pale grey-white, almost silver.

"You okay?" I asked him quietly.

"Mmmm," he murmured. "Sorry. Got distracted. There's...a kind of energy here."

Which I probably should have thought of, dammit. This building was home to constant, regular acts of lust and desire. Those kinds of activities left a sort of psychic imprint around them, a vibe Thomas must have picked up on.

Vampires like my brother take not blood, but life-energy from their victims. Showing off his supernatural strength might have simplified things for us, but it also cost Thomas some of that energy, the same way an afternoon of hiking might leave you and me particularly hungry.

Usually vampires of the White Court fed during the act of sex. They could induce desire in others, overwhelm their victims with undiluted, primal lust. If he wanted to Thomas could have paralyzed the girl where she stood, stalked over to her, and done whatever he pleased to her. There wouldn't have been anything she could do to stop him. Hell, she would have begged him to do more, and to hurry up about it.

He wouldn't do it. Not anymore, anyway. He'd fought that part of himself for years, and he'd finally found a way to keep it under control—by feeding in the equivalent of tiny, harmless nibbles from the customers in the upper-tier beauty salon he owned and operated. I gathered that while it did enable him to remain active and in control of himself, it was nowhere near as satisfying as acquiring energy the old-fashioned way—in a stalking seduction culminating in a burst of lust and ecstasy.

I knew that his Hunger, that inhuman portion of his soul that was driven by naked need, was screaming at him to do exactly that. If he did, though, it could do the girl serious harm, even kill her. My brother wasn't like that—but denying his Hunger wasn't something that came naturally. It was a fight. And I knew what drove him to it.

"That girl looks a little like Justine," I commented.

He froze at the name, his expression hardening. By gradual degrees his eyes darkened to their usual color again. Thomas shook his head and gave me a wry smile. "Does she?"

"Enough," I said. "You okay?"

"As I ever am," he said. He didn't actually thank me, but it was in his voice. I pretended that I hadn't heard it there, which was what he expected me to do.

It's a guy thing.

Billie came fibrillating back over to us. "This way, please, sir," she said, her smile once again firmly in place. She led us rather nervously through

the gym, passing the hallway that led to the showers and private “therapy” rooms in back. The door she led us through went to a very plain, practical, businesslike hallway, one you’d find in any office building. She nodded to the last door in the hall, the corner office, and then retreated quietly.

I ambled up to the door, knocked once, and then opened it to find Ms. Demeter sitting in her large but practical office behind her large but practical desk. She was a fit-looking woman in early middle age, lean, well dressed, and reserved. Her real name wasn’t Demeter, but she preferred the professional sobriquet, and now wasn’t the time to needle her.

“Ms. Demeter,” I said, keeping my tone neutral. “Good day.”

She finished turning off her laptop, folded it shut, and put it away in a drawer before she looked up and gave me a quiet nod. “Mister Dresden. What happened to your face?”

“It’s always like this,” I said. “I forgot to put on my makeup today.”

“Ah,” she said. “Will you have a seat?”

“Thanks,” I said. I sat down across the desk from her. “I apologize if I’ve inconvenienced you.”

Her shoulder twitched in a nanoshrug. “It’s nice to know the limitations of those I’ve appointed my receptionist,” she replied. “What can I do for you?” Then she lifted her hand. “Wait. Allow me to rephrase. What can I do to most quickly get rid of you?”

A sensitive guy might have felt a little hurt by that remark. Good thing I’m me. “I’m looking for Marcone,” I told her.

“Have you called his office?”

I blinked slowly at her once. Then I repeated, “I’m looking for Marcone.”

“I’m sure you are,” Demeter said, her expression never flickering. “What does that have to do with me?”

I felt a tight smile strain my lips. “Ms. D, I can’t help but wonder why you instructed your receptionist to tell anyone who asked after you that you weren’t in the office.”

“Perhaps I had some paperwork I needed to get done.”

“Or perhaps you know that Marcone is missing, and you’re using it as a tactic to stall any of his lieutenants who come nosing around looking to fill the void.”

She stared at me for a moment, her expression giving away nothing. “I really can’t say that I know what you’re talking about, Mister Dresden.”

“You sure you don’t want to get rid of me?” I asked. “You want me to stay here and lean on you? I can make it really hard for you to do business, if I’m feeling motivated.”

“I’m sure,” Demeter replied. “Why would you want to find him?”

I grimaced. “I have to help him.”

She arched a single, well-plucked eyebrow. “Have to?”

“It’s complicated,” I said.

“And not terribly credible,” she replied. “I am well aware of your opinions regarding John Marcone. And even assuming that I had any information as to his whereabouts, I’m not sure that I’d wish to make a bad situation worse.”

“How could you do that?” I asked.

“By involving *you*,” she replied. “You clearly do not have Mr. Marcone’s best interests in mind, and your involvement could push his captors into precipitous action. I doubt you’d lose a moment’s sleep were he to be killed.”

I would have shot back a witty reply if I hadn’t slipped on a banana peel of self-recrimination, having said more or less those exact words not long before.

“But sir!” came Billie’s voice in protest from the hall outside.

The doorway darkened behind me, and I turned to find several large men standing there. The foremost of their number was a big guy, late forties, with an ongoing romance with beer, or maybe pasta. He wore his heart on his potbelly. His well-tailored suit mostly hid the gut, and it would have concealed the shoulder rig and sidearm he wore beneath it if he’d made the least effort to avoid exposing it as he moved.

“Demeter,” the big man said. “I need to speak to you privately.”

“You couldn’t afford me, Torelli,” Demeter replied smoothly. “And I’m in the middle of a business meeting.”

“Get one of your whores to get him off,” Torelli said. “You and I have to talk.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Regarding?”

“I need a list of your bank accounts, security passwords, and a copy of your records for the last six months.” He scowled, looming over her. Torelli was the kind of guy who was used to getting his way if he loomed and scowled enough. I knew the type. I tried to glance past the goons to see whether Thomas was in the hallway, but could detect no sign of him.

“One wonders if you have been partaking of your product,” Demeter said. “Why on earth should I provide you with my records, accounts, and funds?”

“Things are going to change around here, whore. Starting with your attitude.” Torelli glanced at two of the four men behind him and angled his head toward Demeter. The two goons, both of them medium-caliber Chicago bruisers, stepped around Torelli and walked toward her.

I grimaced. I didn’t care for Demeter much, personally, but I needed her, and I wouldn’t be able to talk her into helping me if she were laid up in intensive care. Besides, she was a girl, and you don’t hit girls. You don’t let two-bit hired bullies do it, either.

I stood up and turned to face Torelli’s men, staff in hand. I gave them my hardest look, which didn’t even slow them down. The one on the right threw something at my face, and I had no time to work out what it might be. I ducked, recognized it as a snow-speckled winter glove, and realized that it had been a distraction.

The guy on the left came in on me when I was ducking and kicked a steel-toed work boot at my left knee. I turned my leg and took it on the shin. It hurt like hell, but at least I could still move. I rolled to one side, placing the goon on my left between myself and the goon on the right. He threw a looping right hand at me, and I met his knuckles with my staff. Knuckles crunched. The goon howled.

The other one bulled past his pain-stunned partner and came at me, obviously planning on tackling me to the floor so that all of his buddies could circle up and kick me for a while.

Couldn’t have that. So I raised my right hand, clenched in a fist, baring four triple-wire bands, one on each finger. With a thought and a word I released the kinetic energy stored in one of the rings. It hit the goon like a locomotive, slamming him back and to the floor with a very satisfying thud.

I turned and kicked the stunned first goon in *both* shins, *hah*, then placed one of my heels against his hip and shoved him to the floor. He crumpled.

I turned to find myself staring down the barrel of Torelli’s gun.

“Not bad, kid,” the would-be kingpin said. “That judo or something?”

“Something like that.”

“I could use a man of your skills, once my health club finishes”—he gave Demeter a sour glance—“reprioritizing.”

"You couldn't afford me," I said.

"I'm going to be able to afford a lot," he said. "Name your price."

"One hundred and fifty-six gajillion dollars," I said promptly.

He squinted at me, as if trying to decide if I was joking. Or maybe he was just trying to figure out how many zeros I was talking about. "Think you're cute, huh?"

"I'm freaking adorable," I said. "Especially with the raccoon face I've got going here."

Torelli's features darkened. "Kid. You just made the last mistake of your life."

"God," I said. "I *wish*."

Thomas put the barrel of his Desert Eagle against the back of Torelli's head and said in a pleasant voice, "Lose the iron, nice and slow."

Torelli stiffened in surprise and wasted no time in complying. He turned his head slightly, looking for his other two goons. I could see a pair of feet lying toes-up in the hallway, but there was no other sign of them.

I stepped up to him and said calmly, "Take your men and get out. Don't come back."

He regarded me with dull eyes, then pressed his lips together, nodded once, and began gathering up his men. Thomas picked up Torelli's gun and stuck it down the front of his pants, just like you're not supposed to do. He walked quietly over to stand beside me, his eyes tracking every movement the thugs made.

They departed, half carrying the poor bastard with the broken hand, while the two in the hallway staggered along, barely recovered from being choked unconscious.

Once they were gone I turned to face Demeter. "Where were we?"

"I was questioning your motives," she said.

I shook my head. "Helen. You know who I am. You know what I do. Yeah, I think Marcone is a twisted son of a bitch who probably deserves to die. But that doesn't mean I'm planning on carrying out the deed."

She stared at me in silence for ten or fifteen seconds. Then she turned to her desk, drew out a notepad, and wrote something on a piece of paper. She folded it and offered it to me. I reached out for it, but when I tugged she didn't let go.

"Promise me," she said. "Give me your word that you'll do everything you can to help him."

I sighed. Of course.

The words tasted like a rancid pickle coated in salt and vinegar, but I managed to say them. "I will. You have my word."

Demeter let go of the paper. I looked at it. An address, nothing more.

"It might help you," she said. "It might not."

"That's more than I had a minute ago," I said. I nodded to Thomas. "Let's go."

"Dresden," Demeter said as I walked to the door.

I paused.

"Thank you. For handling Torelli. He would have hurt some of my girls tonight."

I glanced back at her and nodded once.

Then Thomas and I headed for the suburbs.

Chapter Twelve

Marcone's business interests were wide and varied. They had to be when you're laundering as much money as he was. He had restaurants, holding companies, import/export businesses, investment firms, financial businesses of every description—and construction companies.

Sunset Point was one of those boils festering on the face of the planet: a subdivision. Located half an hour north of Chicago, it had once been a pleasant little wood of rolling hills around a single tiny river. The trees and hills had all been bulldozed flat, exposing naked earth to the sky. The little river had been choked into a sludgy trough. Underneath the blanket of snow the place looked as smooth and white and sterile as the inside of a new refrigerator.

"Look at this," I said to Thomas. I gestured at the houses, each of them on a lot that exceeded the building's foundation by the width of a postage stamp. "People *pay* to live in places like this?"

"You live in the basement of a boardinghouse," Thomas said.

"I live in a big city, and I rent," I said. "Houses like these go for several hundred thousand dollars, if not more. It'll take thirty years to pay them off."

"They're nice houses," Thomas said.

"They're nice cages," I responded. "No space around them. Nothing alive. Places like this turn a man into a gerbil. He comes home and scurries inside. Then he stays there until he's forced to go back out to the job he has to work so that he can make the mortgage payments on this gerbil habitat."

"And they're way nicer than your apartment," Thomas said.

"Totally."

He brought the Hummer to a crunching halt in the snow, glaring through the windshield. "Damn snow. I'm only guessing where the streets are at this point."

“Just don’t drive into what’s going to be somebody’s basement,” I said. “We passed Twenty-third a minute ago. We must be close.”

“Twenty-third Court, Place, Street, Terrace, or Avenue?” Thomas asked.

“Circle.”

“Damned cul-de-sacs.” He started forward again, driving slowly. “There,” he said, nodding to the next sign that emerged from the haze. “That one?”

“Yeah.” Next to the customized street sign was a standard road sign declaring Twenty-fourth Terrace a dead end.

“Damned foreshadowing,” I muttered.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

We drove through the murky grey and white of a heavy snowfall, the light luminous, without source, reflected from billions of crystals of ice. The Hummer’s engine was a barely audible purr. By comparison the crunch of its tires on snow was a dreadful racket. We rolled past half a dozen model houses, all of them lovely and empty, the snow piling up around windows that gaped like eye sockets in a half-buried skull.

Something wasn’t right. I couldn’t have told you what, exactly, but I could feel it as plainly as I could feel the carved wood of the staff I gripped in my hands.

We weren’t alone.

Thomas felt it too. Moving smoothly, he reached an arm behind the driver’s seat and drew forth his sword belt. It bore an old U.S. Cavalry saber he’d carried on a number of dicey occasions, paired up with a more recent toy he’d become fond of, a bent-bladed knife called a kukri, like the one carried by the Ghurkas.

“What is that?” he asked quietly.

I closed my eyes for a moment, reaching out with my arcane senses, attempting to detect any energies that might be moving in around us. The falling snow muffled my magical perceptions every bit as much as it did my physical senses. “Not sure,” I said quietly. “But whatever it is, it’s a safe bet it knows we’re here.”

“How do you want to play it if the music starts?”

“I’ve got nothing to prove,” I said. “I say we run like little girls.”

“Suits me. But don’t let Murphy hear you talking like that.”

“Yeah. She gets oversensitive about ‘little.’”

My shoulders tightened with the tension as Thomas drove forward slowly and carefully. He stopped the car beside the last house on the street. It had a finished look to it, the bushes of its landscaping poking up forlornly through the snow. There were curtains in the windows, and the faint marks of tire tracks, not quite full of new snowfall, led up the drive and to the closed garage.

"Someone's behind that third window," Thomas said quietly. "I saw them move."

I hadn't seen anything, but then I wasn't a supernatural predator, complete with a bucketful of preternaturally sharp senses. I nodded to let him know that I'd heard him, and scanned the ground around the house. The snow was untouched. "We're the first visitors," I said. "We're probably making someone nervous."

"Gunman?"

"Probably," I said. "That's what most of Marcone's people are used to. Come on."

"You don't want me to wait out here?"

I shook my head. "There's something *else* out here. It might be nothing, but you're a sitting duck in the car. Maybe if you'd gotten the armored version..."

"Nag, nag, nag," Thomas said.

"Let's be calm and friendly," I said. I opened the door of the Hummer and stepped out into snow that came up over my knees. I made sure not to move too quickly, and kept my hands out in plain sight. On the other side of the Hummer Thomas mirrored me.

"Hello, the house!" I called. "Anyone home?" My voice had that flat, heavy timbre you can only get when there's a lot of snow, almost like we were standing inside. "My name is Dresden. I'm here to talk."

Silence. The snow started soaking through my shoes and my jeans.

Thomas whipped his head around toward the end of the little street, where the subdivision ended and the woods that were next in line for the bulldozers began. He stared intently for a moment.

"It's in the trees," he reported quietly.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I hoped fervently that whatever was out there, it didn't have a gun. "I'm not here for trouble!" I called toward the house. I held up two fingers and said, "Scout's honor."

This time I saw the curtain twitch, and caught a faint stir of motion behind it. The inner door to the house opened and a man's voice said, "Come in. Hands where I can see them."

I nodded at Thomas. He lifted his hand, holding his car key, and pointed it at the Hummer. It clunked and chirped, its doors locking. He came around the car, sword belt hanging over his shoulder, while I broke trail to the front porch, struggling through the snow. I knocked as much of the powder as I could off my lower body, using it as an excuse to give me time to ready my shield bracelet. I didn't particularly want to step through a dark doorway, presenting a shooting-gallery profile to any gunman inside, without taking precautions. When I came in I held my shield before me, silent and invisible.

"Stop there," growled a man's voice. "Staff down. Show your hands."

I leaned my staff against the wall and did so. I'd know those monosyllables anywhere. "Hi, Hendricks."

A massive man appeared from the dimness in the next room, holding a police-issue riot gun in hands that made it look like a child's toy. He was built like a bull, and you could apply *thick* and *rocklike* to just about everything in his anatomy, especially if you started with his skull. He came close enough to let me see his close-cropped red hair. "Dresden. Step aside."

I did, and the shotgun was trained on my brother. "You, vampire. Sword down. Fingers laced behind your head."

Thomas rolled his eyes and complied. "How come he doesn't have to put his hands behind his head?"

"Wouldn't make any difference with him," Hendricks replied. Narrow, beady eyes swiveled like gun turrets back to me. "What do you want?"

I wasn't sure I'd ever heard Hendricks speak a complete sentence, much less string phrases together. It was sort of disconcerting, the way it would be if Mister suddenly developed the capacity to open his own cans of cat food. It took me a second to get over the mental speed bump. "Uh," I said. "I want to..."

I realized how lame this was going to sound. I gritted my teeth and said it quickly. "I want to help your boss."

There was a clicking sound from the wall, the sound of an audio speaker popping to life. A woman's voice said, "Send the wizard up."

Hendricks growled. "You sure?"

“Do it. The vampire stays downstairs.”

Hendricks grunted and tilted his head to the right. “Through there and up the stairs, Dresden. Move it.”

“Harry,” Thomas said quietly.

Hendricks brought his shotgun back up and covered Thomas. “Not you, prettyboy. You stay put. Or both of you get out.”

“It’s okay,” I said quietly to my brother. “I feel better if someone I trust is watching the door anyway. Just in case someone else shows up.” I cast my eyes meaningfully in the direction of the woods where Thomas had said something lurked.

He shook his head. “Whatever.” Then he leaned back against the wall, casual and relaxed, his hands behind his head as if they were there only to pillow his skull.

I brushed past Hendricks. Without slowing down or looking behind me, I said, “Careful with that gun. He gets hurt and it’s going to be bad for you, Hendricks.”

Hendricks ignored me. I had a feeling it was his strongest conversational ploy.

I went up the stairs, noting a couple of details as I went. First, that the carpet was even cheaper than mine, which made me feel more confident for some obscure reason.

Second, that there were bloodstains on it. A lot of them.

At the top of the stairs I found more bloodstains, including a long smear along one wall. I followed them down to one of three bedrooms on the upper level of the house. I paused and knocked on the door.

“Come in, Dresden,” said a woman’s voice.

I came in.

Miss Gard lay in bed. It had been hauled over to the window so that she could see out of it. She had a heavy assault rifle of a design I didn’t recognize next to her. The wooden handle of a double-headed battle-ax leaned against the bed, within reach of her hand. Gard was blond, tall, athletic, and while she wasn’t precisely beautiful, she was a striking woman, with clean-cut features, icy blue eyes, and an athlete’s build.

She was also a mess of blood.

She was soaked in it. So was the bed beneath her. Her shirt was open, revealing a black athletic bra and a long wound that ran the width of her

stomach, just below her belly button. Slick grey-red ropy loops protruded slightly from the wound.

My stomach twisted, and I looked away.

“Goodness,” Miss Gard said, her voice quiet and rough, her face pale. “You’d think you never saw anyone disemboweled before.”

“Just relieved,” I said. I forced myself to face her. “First time today I’ve run into someone who looks worse than me.”

She showed me a weary smile for a moment.

“You need a doctor,” I said.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Yes,” I said. “You do. I’m surprised you haven’t bled to death already. Think of what it would cost Monoc Securities to replace you.”

“They won’t need to. I’ll be fine. The company has a great health care package.” She picked up a small tube of what looked like heavy-duty modeling glue from the bed at her side. “This isn’t the first time I’ve had my guts ripped out. It isn’t fun, but I’ll make it.”

“Damn,” I said, genuinely impressed. “Are they hiring?”

The question won another faint smile. “You don’t really fit the employee profile.”

“I am tired of being kept down by the man,” I said.

Gard shook her head wearily. “How did you find us?”

“Demeter,” I said.

She lifted a golden eyebrow. “I suppose that shouldn’t surprise me. Though I’ve warned him. He’s too trusting.”

“Marccone? Is too trusting?” I widened my eyes at her. “Lady, that pretty much puts you in a paranoiac league of your own.”

“It isn’t paranoia—just practical experience. A safe house isn’t safe if it isn’t secret.” She reached down and pressed bloodied fingers against a loop of gore, gently kneading it back into the wound. She let out a hiss of pain as she did, but she didn’t let a little thing like an exposed internal organ get in the way of conversation. “You threatened her?”

“Uh. Mostly I told her I’d help Marccone.”

She lifted the tube of airplane glue and smeared some of it onto either side of the wound, where she’d pushed her guts back in. She bled a little more. I noted that several inches of the wound had already been closed and sealed together.

“You gave her your word?” Gard asked.

“Uh, yeah, but—” I couldn’t take it anymore. “Look, could you maybe not do that while we talk? It makes it sort of hard for me to focus on the conversation.”

She pressed the edges of the wound together, letting out a breathy curse in a language I didn’t know. “Did you know,” she said, “that this kind of glue was originally developed as an emergency battlefield suture?”

“Did you know that you’re about to find out what I had for breakfast this morning?” I countered.

“I don’t know if it’s true,” she continued. “I saw it in a movie. With—dammit—with werewolves.” She exhaled and drew her hands slowly from the wound. Another two or three inches of puckered flesh were now closed together. Gard looked awful, her face grey and lined with pain.

“Why, Dresden? Why are you looking for Marcone?”

“The short version? It’s my ass if I don’t.”

She squinted at me. “It’s personal?”

“Pretty much. I’ll give you my word on it, if you like.”

She shook her head. “It’s not...your word that I doubt. That’s...always been good.” She closed her eyes against the pain and panted for several seconds. “But I need something from you.”

“What?”

“The White Council,” she rasped. “I want you to call upon the White Council to recover Marcone.”

I blinked at her. “Uh. What?”

She grimaced and began packing another couple inches of intestine back into her abdomen. “The Accords have been breached. A challenge must be lodged. An Emissary summoned. As a Warden”—she gasped for a moment, and then fumbled the glue into place—“you have the authority to call a challenge.”

Her fingers slipped, and the wound sprang open again. She went white with pain.

“Dammit, Sigrun,” I said, more appalled at her pain than her condition, and moved to help her. “Get your hands out of the way.” When she did, I managed to close the wound a little more, giving the sharp-smelling glue a chance to bond the flesh closed.

She made an effort to smile at me. “We...we worked well together at the beer festival. You’re a professional. I respect that.”

“I’ll bet you say that to all the guys who glue your stomach back together.”

“Call the Council,” Gard said. “Lodge the challenge.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” I said. “Tell me where Marccone is, I’ll go get him and bring him home, and this will all be over.”

She started pushing the next bit back in, while I waited with the glue. “It isn’t that simple. I don’t know where he is.”

I caught on. “But you do know who took him.”

“Yes. Another signatory of the Accords, just as Marccone is now. I have no authority to challenge their actions. But you do. You may be able to force them into the light, bring the pressure of all the members of the Accords against them.”

“Oh, sure,” I said, laying out more glue. “The Council just loves it when one of their youngest members drags the entire organization into a fight that isn’t their own.”

“You would know, wouldn’t you?” Gard rasped. “It’s not as though it would be the first time.”

I held the wound together, waiting on the glue. “I can’t,” I said quietly.

She was breathing too quickly, too hard. I could barely keep the wound closed. “Whatever you...nggh...say. After all...it’s your ass on the line.”

I grimaced and withdrew my fingers slowly, making sure the wound stayed closed. We’d gotten the last few inches, and the opening no longer gaped. “Can’t deny that,” I said. Then I squinted at her. “Who is it?” I asked. “Which signatory of the Accords swiped Marccone?”

“You’ve met them once already,” Gard said.

From downstairs Thomas suddenly shouted, “Harry!”

I whirled toward the door in time for the window, behind me, to explode in a shower of glass. It jounced off my spell-layered leather duster, but I felt a pair of hot stings as bits of glass cut my neck and my ear. I tried to turn and had the impression of something coming at my face. I slapped it aside with my left hand even as I ducked, then hopped awkwardly back from the intruder.

It landed in a crouch upon the bed, digging one foot into the helpless Gard’s wounded belly, a creature barely more than the size of a child. It was red and black, vaguely humanoid in shape, but covered in an insect’s chitin. Its eyes were too large for its head, multifaceted, and its arms ended in the

serrated clamps of a preying mantis. Membranous wings fluttered at its back, a low and maddening buzzing.

And that wasn't the scary part.

Its eyes gleamed with an inner fire, an orange-red glow—and immediately above the first set of eyes another set, this one blazing with sickly green luminescence, blinked and focused independently of the first pair. A sigil of angelic script burned against the chitin of the insect-thing's forehead.

I suddenly wished, very much, that my staff weren't twenty feet away and down a flight of stairs. It might as well have been on the moon, for all the good it was going to do me.

No sooner had that thought come out than the Knight of the Blackened Denarius opened its insectoid maw, let out a brassy wail of rage, and bounded at my face.

Chapter Thirteen

At one time in my life, a shapeshifted, demonically possessed maniac crashing through a window and trying to rip my face off would have come as an enormous and nasty surprise.

But that time was pretty much in the past.

I'd spent the last several years on the fringes of a supernatural war between the White Council of the wizards and the Vampire Courts. In the most recent years, I'd gotten more directly involved. Wizards who go to a fight without getting their act together tend not to come home. Worse, the people depending on them for protection wind up getting hurt.

The second most important rule of combat wizardry is a simple one: Don't let them touch you.

Whether you're talking about vampires or ogres or some other kind of monstrous nasty, most of them can do hideous things to you if they get close enough to touch—as even a lesser member of the gruff clan had demonstrated on my nose the night before.

The prime rule of combat wizardry is simple too: Be prepared.

Wizards can potentially wield tremendous power against just about anything that might come along—if we're ready to handle it. The problem is that the things that come after us know that too, so the favored tactic is the sudden ambush. Wizards might live a long time, but we aren't rend-proof. You've got to think ahead in order to have enough time to act when the heat is on.

I'd made myself ready and taught young wizards with even less experience than me how to be ready too—for an occasion just such as this.

The coil of steel chain in my coat pocket came out smoothly as I drew it, because I'd practiced the draw thousands of times, and I whipped one end at the mantis-thing's face.

It was faster than me, of course. They usually are. Those two clamps seized the end of the chain. The mantis's jaws clamped down on it, and the creature ripped the chain from my hands with a wrench of its head and upper body, quicker than thought.

That was a positive thing, really. The mantis hadn't had time to notice two important details about the chain: first, that the whole thing was coated in copper.

Second, that a standard electrical plug was attached to the other end.

I flipped my fingers at the nearest wall outlet and barked, "*Galvineus!*"

The plug shot toward the outlet like a striking snake and slammed home.

The lights flickered and went dim. The Denarian hopped abruptly into the air and then came down, thrashing and twitching madly. The electricity had forced the muscles in its jaws and clamps to contract, and it couldn't release the chain. Acrid smoke began to drift up from various points on its carapace.

"Wizard!" Gard gasped. She gripped the wooden handle of her ax and tossed it weakly toward me. I heard shouting and the bellow of a shotgun coming from downstairs. It stayed in the background, unimportant information. Everything that mattered to me was nearly within an arm's length.

The ax bounced and struck against my leg, but my duster prevented it from cutting into me. I picked up the ax—Christ, was it heavy—hailed off, and brought it straight down on the Denarian, as if I'd been splitting cordwood.

The ax crunched home, sinking to the eye somewhere in the Denarian's thorax. The thing's convulsions ripped the weapon out of my hands—and the plug from the wall outlet.

The mantis's head whipped toward me, and it screamed again. It ripped out the ax and came to its feet in the same instant.

"Get clear!" Gard rasped.

I did, diving to the side and going prone.

The wounded woman emptied her assault rifle into the mantis in two or three seconds of howling thunder, shooting from the hip from about three feet away.

Words cannot convey how messy *that* was. Suffice to say that it would probably cost more to remove the ichor stains than it would to strip and refinish the walls, the floor, and the ceiling.

Gard gasped, and the empty rifle slid from her fingers. She shuddered and pressed her hands to her belly.

I moved to her side and picked her up, trying not to strain her stomach. She was heavy. Not like a sumo wrestler or anything, but she was six feet tall in her bare feet and had more than the usual amount of muscle. She felt at least as heavy as Thomas. I grunted with effort, got her settled, and started for the door.

Gard let out a croaking little whimper, and more blood welled from her injury. Faint pangs of sympathetic pain flickered through my own belly. Her eyes had rolled back in her head. It had taken a lot to beat Gard's apparent pain threshold, but it looked like the visit from the Denarian—and the activity it had forced on her—had done it.

The day just couldn't have gotten any more disturbing.

Until the splattered mass that had been the Denarian started quivering and moving.

"Oh, you have got to be *kidding* me!" I shouted.

Where there had been one big bug thing, now there were thousands of little mantislike creatures. They all began bounding toward the center of the room, piling up into two mounds that gradually began to take on the shape of insectoid legs.

The shotgun downstairs roared again, and running footsteps approached.

"Harry!" Thomas shouted. He appeared at the bottom of the stairs, sword in hand, just as I hurried out the door, still toting Gard.

"We had company up here!" I called. I started down the stairs as quickly and carefully as I could.

"I think there are three more of them down here," Thomas said, making way for me. He took note of Gard. "Holy crap."

A corpse lay on the floor of the entry hall. It was black and furry and big, and I couldn't tell much more about it than that. The top four-fifths of its head were gone and presumably accounted for the mess all over the opposite wall. Its guts were spilled out on either side of its body, steaming in the cold air drifting through the shattered front door. Hendricks crouched in the shadowed living room, covering the entryway with his shotgun.

Something scraped over the floorboards of the ceiling above us.

"What's that?" Thomas asked.

"A giant preying mantis demon, dragging itself over the floor."

Thomas blinked at me.

“That’s just a guess,” I said.

Hendricks growled, “How is she?”

“Not good,” I said. “This is a bad spot to be in. No defenses here, not even a threshold to work with. We need to bail.”

“Shouldn’t move her,” Hendricks said. “It could kill her.”

“Not moving her will kill her,” I countered. “Us too.”

Hendricks stared at me, but he didn’t argue.

Thomas was already reaching into his pocket. He was tense, his eyes flicking restlessly, maybe in an attempt to track things that he could hear moving around outside. He dug out his key ring and held it with his teeth. Then he took his saber in one hand, that monster Desert Eagle in the other, and started humming “Froggy Went A-Courting” under his breath.

Gard had slowly grown limp, and her head lolled bonelessly. I was having trouble keeping her steady. “Hendricks,” I said, nodding at Gard.

Without a word he set the shotgun aside and took the woman from me. I saw his eyes as he did, touched with worry and fear—and not for himself. He took her very gently, something I would never have imagined him doing, and growled, “How do I know you won’t leave us behind? Let them rip us apart while you run?”

“You don’t,” I said curtly, picking up my staff. “Stay if you want. These things will kill you both; I guarantee it. Or you take a chance with us. Your call.”

Hendricks glared at me for a moment, but when he glanced down at the unconscious woman in his arms, the rocky scowl faded. He nodded once.

“Harry?” Thomas asked. “How do you want to do this?”

“We head straight for your oil tanker,” I said. “Shortest route between two points and all.”

“They’ll have the door covered,” Thomas said.

“I hope so.”

“Okay,” he said, rolling his eyes. “As long as there’s a plan.”

Footsteps crossed the floor above us, and paused at the top of the stairs.

Thomas’s gun swiveled toward the stairs. I didn’t turn. I covered the doorway.

A voice like out-of-tune violin strings stroked by a rotting cobra hide drifted down the stairs. “Wizard.”

“I hear you,” I said.

“This situation might be resolved without further conflict. Are you willing to parley?”

“Why not,” I answered. I didn’t turn away from the door.

“Have I your word of safe passage?”

“You do.”

“Then you have mine,” the voice answered.

“Whatever,” I said. I lowered my voice to an almost subvocal whisper I was sure only Thomas could hear. “Watch them. They’ll try something the second they get a chance.”

“Why give them the opportunity?” Thomas murmured.

“Because we might find out something important by talking. It’s harder to question corpses. Switch with me.”

We traded places, and I kept my staff pointed at the stairs as the mantis-thing came down them. It crouched on the topmost step it could occupy while still maintaining visual contact with the entry hall. It looked none the worse for wear for being blown to hamburger by Gard’s rifle.

It crouched, the motion eerie and alien, and tilted its head almost entirely to the horizontal, first one way, then the other, as it looked at us. Then its stomach heaved. For a second I thought it was throwing up, as a yellow-and-pink mucus began to emerge from its mouth. After a second, though, it lifted its clamplike claws and gripped its head, then peeled it back and away from the mucus, the motion disturbingly akin to someone donning a too-small turtleneck sweater. A human face emerged from the mucus and gunk, while the split carapace of the head flopped about on its chest and upper back.

The Denarian looked like she was about fifteen years old, except for her hair, which was silvery grey, short, and plastered to her skull. She had huge and gorgeous green eyes, a heart-shaped face, and a delicate, pointy chin. Her skin was pale and clear, her cheekbones high, her features lovely and symmetrical. The second set of green eyes and the sigil of angelic script still glowed faintly on her forehead.

She smiled slowly. “I wasn’t expecting the chain. I thought fire and force were your weapons of choice.”

“You were standing on top of someone I knew,” I said. “I didn’t feel like burning her or blasting her through the wall.”

“Foolish,” the girl murmured.

“I’m still here.”

“But so am I.”

“You have five seconds to get to the fucking point,” I said. “I’m not going to let you stall while your buddies get into position.”

Mantis Girl narrowed her eyes. The eyes on her forehead narrowed as well. *Très* creepy. She nodded at Hendricks and Gard. “My business is with them. Not you, O Warden of the White Council. Give them to me. You may leave in peace. Once they are dead, I will gather my compatriots and we will depart the city without harm to any innocents.”

I grunted. “What if I need them alive?”

“If you wish, I can wait until you have interrogated them.”

“Yeah, that’s what I want: you, standing around behind my back.”

She lifted a talon. “I give you my solemn word. No harm will come to you or your companion.”

“Tempting,” I said.

“Shall I add in material reward as well?” Mantis Girl asked. “I’ll pay you two hundred thousand, in cash.”

“Why on earth would you do that?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “My quarrel is with the upstart Baron and his subjects—not the White Council. I would prefer to demonstrate my respect to your people, instead of causing an untoward altercation with them over the matter of your death.”

“Uh-huh.”

Her smile turned sharper. “If it pleases you, I might offer to entertain you, once business is done.”

I let out a harsh burst of laughter. “Oh,” I said, still chortling. “Oh, oh, oh. That’s funny.”

She blinked and stared at me, uncomprehending.

The expression made me laugh even harder. “You...you want me to...I mean, Hell’s bells, do you think I don’t *know* what happens to a mantis’s mate once the deed is done?”

She bared her teeth in sudden anger. They were shiny and black.

“You want me to trust you,” I went on, still laughing, “and you think waving some bling and some booty at me is going to get it done? God, that’s so cute I could just put you in my pocket.”

“Do not deny me what is mine, wizard,” she snarled. “I *will* have them. Make a pact with me. I will honor it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve seen the way you people honor your pacts. Let me make you a counteroffer. Give me Marcone, safe and whole, and get out of town, now, and I’ll let you live.”

“Suppose your offer appeals. Why should I believe you would allow us to leave in peace?”

I gave her a faint smile and quietly paraphrased a dead friend. “Because I know what your word is worth, Denarian. And you know the worth of mine.”

She stared at me for a moment. Then she said, “I will consult my companions and return in five minutes.”

I bowed my head slightly to her. She returned the gesture and started up the stairs again.

She vanished from sight. Glass broke somewhere upstairs.

Then a red-and-black blur flashed down the stairs toward us, simultaneously with a chorus of hellish cries from outside.

Treachery doesn’t work so well when the other guy expects it, and I’d had the spell ready to go since the second she’d turned her back. Mantis Girl didn’t get to the bottom of the stairs before I pointed my staff at her and snarled, “*Forzare!*”

A hammer of pure kinetic energy slammed against her. She went flying back the way she’d come, and when she reached the top of the stairs she kept going, crashing through the wall of the house with a tremendous crunch.

No time to lose. Something came charging through the doorway, to be met by Thomas’s sword and pistol. I didn’t get a good look at it, but got an impression of spiraling antlers and green scales. I drew in my will, pointed my staff at the front wall of the house and murmured, “*Forzare,*” sending out a slow pulse of motion. I let it press up against the front wall of the house, and then fed more energy into it, hardening it into a single striking surface.

Then I drew back and really let loose, roaring “*Forzare!*” at the top of my lungs. I unleashed everything I had into a blast of energy, which struck against the plate of force I’d just created. There was an enormous sound of screaming wood and steel, and the entire front wall of the house blasted free from its frame.

Demonic voices howled. I turned to find Thomas taking advantage of the distraction to whip his saber through scything arcs, rondello-style, cutting

his opponent to ribbons. The Denarian bounded away, screaming in brassy pain.

“Dammit!” Thomas screamed at me. “That’s a brand-new car!”

“Quit whining and go!” I shouted back, suiting words to action. The front wall of the house had come down like a tidal wave, shattering into a small ocean of rubble, covering the hood of the Hummer. Somewhere beneath the rubble I could hear the other Denarians trying to get free.

We rushed for the Hummer and piled in. Thomas got it started just as Mantis Girl sailed down from overhead and landed on the hood of the Hummer, denting it in sharply.

“God *dammit!*” Thomas snarled. He slapped the Hummer into reverse and started driving backward—while emptying his gun into Mantis Girl. Bursts of fluttering insect forms flew up from the gunshots instead of sprays of blood, but judging by the screaming it hurt her plenty. She tumbled back off the hood and vanished.

Thomas manhandled the Hummer into a turn, and we left, heading back out into the heavy snowfall.

We all rode in silence for several moments while our heart rates slowed and the terror-fueled adrenaline rush faded.

Then Thomas said, “I don’t think we learned much.”

“The hell we didn’t,” I said.

“Like what?”

“We know that there are more than five Denarians in town. *And* we know that they’re signatories of the Accords—who apparently object to Marcone’s recent elevation.”

Thomas grunted acknowledgment. “What now?”

I shook my head wearily. That last spell had been a doozy. “Now? I think...” I turned my head and studied the unconscious Gard. “I think I’d better call the Council.”

Chapter Fourteen

Now that I had not one, but two supernatural hit squads with a good reason to come after me, my options had grown sort of limited. In the end there was really only one place I could take Gard and Hendricks without endangering innocent lives: St. Mary of the Angels Church.

Which was why I told Thomas to drive us to the Carpenter house.

"I still think this is a bad idea," Thomas said quietly. The plow trucks were working hard, but so far they'd barely been keeping even with the snow, ensuring that the routes to the hospitals were clear. The streets in some places looked like World War I trenches, snow piled up head-high on either side.

"The Denarians know that we use the church as a safehouse," I said. "They'll be watching it."

Thomas grunted and checked the rearview mirror. Gard was still unconscious, but breathing. Hendricks's eyes were shut, his mouth slightly open. I didn't blame him. I hadn't been standing watch over a wounded comrade all night, and I felt like I could have taken a nap, too.

"What were those things?" Thomas asked.

"The Knights of the Blackened Denarius," I replied. "You remember Michael's sword? The nail worked into the hilt?"

"Sure," Thomas said.

"There are two others like it," I said. "Three swords. Three nails."

Thomas's eyes widened for a moment. "Wait. *Those* nails? From the Crucifixion?"

I nodded. "Pretty sure."

"And those things were what? Michael's opposite number?"

"Yeah. Each of those Denarian bozos has a silver coin."

"Three silver coins," Thomas said. "I'm drawing a blank."

"Thirty," I corrected him.

Thomas made a choking sound. “*Thirty?*”

“Potentially. But Michael and the others have several of them hidden away at the moment.”

“Thirty pieces of silver,” Thomas said, understanding.

I nodded. “Each coin has the spirit of one of the Fallen trapped inside. Whoever possesses one of the coins can draw upon the Fallen angel’s power. They use it to shapeshift into those forms you saw, heal wounds, all kinds of fun stuff.”

“They tough?”

“Certifiable nightmares,” I said. “A lot of them have been alive long enough to develop some serious talent for magic, too.”

“Huh,” Thomas said. “The one who came through the door didn’t seem like such a badass. Ugly, sure, but he wasn’t Superman.”

“Maybe you got lucky,” I said. “As long as they have the coins, ‘hard to kill’ doesn’t begin to describe it.”

“Ah,” Thomas said. “That explains it, then.”

“What?” I asked.

Thomas reached into his pants pocket and drew out a silver coin a little larger than a nickel, blackened with age, except for the shape of a single sigil, shining cleanly through the tarnish. “When I gutted Captain Ugly, this went flying out.”

“Hell’s bells!” I spat, and flinched away from the coin.

Thomas twitched in surprise, and the Hummer went into a slow slide on the snow. He turned into it and regained control of the vehicle without ever taking his eyes off me. “Whoa, Harry. What?”

I pressed my side up against the door of the Hummer, getting as far as I physically could from the thing. “Look, just...just don’t move, all right?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Ooookay. Why not?”

“Because if that thing touches your skin, you’re screwed,” I said. “Shut up a second and let me think.”

The gloves. Thomas had been wearing gloves earlier, when fingering Justine’s scarf. He hadn’t touched the coin with his skin, or he’d already know how much trouble he was in. Good. But the coin was a menace, and I strongly suspected that the entity trapped inside it might be able to influence the physical world around it in subtle ways—enough to go rolling away from its former owner, for example, or to somehow manipulate Thomas into dropping or misplacing it.

Containment. It had to be contained. I fumbled at my pockets. The only container I was carrying was an old Crown Royal whiskey bag, the one that held my little set of gaming dice. I dumped them out into my pocket and opened the bag.

I already had a glove on my left hand. My paw had recovered significantly from the horrible burns it had gotten several years before, but it still wasn't what you'd call pretty. I kept it covered out of courtesy to everyone who might glance at it. I held the little bag open with two fingers of my left hand and said, "Put it in here. And for God's sake, don't drop it or touch me with it."

Thomas's eyes widened further. He bit his lower lip and moved his hand very carefully, until he could drop the inoffensive little disk into the Crown Royal bag.

I jerked the drawstrings tight the second the coin was in, and tied the bag shut. Then I slapped open the Hummer's ashtray, stuffed the bag inside, and slammed it closed again.

Only then did I draw a slow breath and sag back down into my seat.

"Jesus," Thomas said quietly. He hesitated for a moment and then said, "Harry...is it really that bad?"

"It's worse," I said. "But I can't think of any other precautions to take yet."

"What would have happened if I'd touched it?"

"The Fallen inside the coin would have invaded your consciousness," I said. "It would offer you power. Temptation. Once you gave in enough, it would own you."

"I've resisted temptation before, Harry."

"Not like this." I turned a frank gaze to him. "It's a Fallen angel, man. Thousands and thousands of years old. It knows how people think. It knows how to exploit them."

His voice sharpened a little. "I come from a family where everyone's an incubus or a succubus. I think I know a little something about temptation."

"Then you should know how they'd get you." I lowered my voice and said gently, "It could give Justine back to you, Thomas. Let you touch her again."

He stared at me for a second, a flicker of wild longing somewhere far back in his eyes. Then he turned his head slowly back to the road, his

expression slipping into a neutral mask. “Oh,” he said quietly. After a moment he said, “We should probably get rid of the thing.”

“We will,” I said. “The Church has been up against the Denarians for a couple of thousand years. There are measures they can take.”

Thomas glanced down at the ashtray for a second, then dragged his eyes away and glowered at the dented hood of his Hummer. “They couldn’t have shown up six months ago. When I was driving a Buick.”

I snorted. “As long as you’ve got your priorities in order.”

“I just met them, but already I hate these guys,” Thomas said. “But why are they here? Why now?”

“Offhand? I’d say that they were out to wax Marccone and prove to the other members of the Accords that vanilla mortals have no place among us weirdos—I mean, superhumans.”

“They’re members of the Accords?”

“I’d have to look it up,” I said. “I doubt they’re signed on as the ‘Order of Demon-possessed Psychotics.’ But from the way Mantis Girl was talking, yeah.”

Thomas shook his head. “So what do they get out of it? What does taking Marccone prove?”

I shrugged. I had already asked myself the same questions and hadn’t been able to come up with any answers. “No clue,” I said. “But they’ve got what it takes to have torn that building apart, and to get around or go through the kind of muscle Marccone keeps around him.”

“And what the hell are the Faerie Queens doing getting involved?” Thomas asked.

I shrugged again. I’d already asked myself that, too. I hate it when I have to answer my own questions like that.

We went the rest of the way to Michael’s place in grey-and-white silence.

His street was on one of the routes being kept plowed, and we had no trouble rolling right up into his driveway. Michael himself was there with his two tallest sons, each of them wielding a snow shovel as they labored to clear the driveway and the sidewalk and the porch of the ongoing snow.

Michael regarded the Hummer with pursed lips as Thomas pulled in. He said something to his sons that made them trade a look with each other, then hurry inside. Michael walked down the driveway to my side of the truck and looked at my brother, then at the passengers in the backseat.

I rolled down the window. “Hey,” I said.

“Harry,” he said calmly. “What are you doing here?”

“I just had a conversation with Preying Mantis Girl,” I said. I held up a notebook, where I’d scribbled down the angelic sigil while it was still fresh in my memory.

Michael took a deep breath and grimaced. Then he nodded. “I had a feeling they might be in town.”

“Oh?” I asked.

The front door of the house opened, and a large, dark-skinned man appeared, dressed in blue jeans and a dark leather jacket. He wore a gym bag over one broad shoulder, and had one hand resting casually inside it. He paced out into the cold and the snow as if he’d been wearing full winter-weather gear, rather than casual traveling clothes, and stalked over toward us.

Once he got close enough to make out the details his face split into a broad, brief grin, and he hurried to stand beside Michael. “Harry!” he said, his voice deep, rich, and thick with a Russian accent. “We meet again.”

I answered his grin. “Sanya,” I replied, offering my hand. He shook it with enough force to crack bones. “What are you doing here?”

“Passing through,” Sanya said, and hooked a thumb up at the snow. “I was on the last flight in before they closed the airport. Looks like I am staying for a few days.” His eyes went from my face to the notebook, and the pleasant expression on his dark face turned to a brief snarl.

“Somebody you know?” I asked.

“Tessa,” he said. “And Imariel.”

“You’ve met, huh?”

His jaw clenched again. “Tessa’s second...recruited me. Tessa is here?”

“With friends.” I sketched the sigil I’d seen on the blackened denarius a few moments before and held it up to them.

Sanya shook his head and glanced at Michael.

“Akariel,” Michael said at once.

I nodded. “He’s in a Crown Royal bag in the ashtray.”

Michael blinked. Sanya too.

“I hope you have one of those holy hankies. I’d have taken it to Padre Forthill, but I figured they’d have him under observation. I need someplace quiet to hole up.”

Sanya and Michael traded a long, silent look.

Sanya frowned, examining my brother. “Who is the vampire?”

I felt Thomas stiffen in surprise. As a rule, even members of the supernatural world can't detect what a vampire of the White Court truly is, unless he's actually in the middle of doing something vampy. It's a natural camouflage for his kind, and they rely upon it every bit as much as a leopard does its spots.

But it can be tough to hide things from a Knight of the Cross. Maybe it's a part of the power they're given, or maybe it's just a part of the personality of the men chosen for the job—don't ask me which. I'm fuzzy on the whole issue of faith and the Almighty, and I swim those waters with extreme caution and as much brevity as possible. I just know that the bad guys rarely get to sneak up on a Knight of the Cross, and that the Knights have a propensity for bringing the truth to light.

I met Sanya's gaze for a moment and said, "He's with me. He's also the reason Akariel has a date with the inside of a vault."

Sanya seemed to consider that for a moment. He glanced at Michael, who gave a grudging nod.

The younger Knight pursed his lips thoughtfully at that, his gaze moving to the backseat.

Hendricks had woken up, but he hadn't moved. He watched Sanya with steady, beady eyes.

"The woman," Sanya said, frowning. "What is she?"

"Hurt," I said.

Something like chagrin flickered over his features. "*Da*, of course. You would not bring her here if you thought her a danger."

"Not to you or me," I said. "Tessa might have a different opinion."

Sanya's eyebrows went up. "Is that how she was wounded?"

"That was *after* she was wounded."

"Really." Sanya peered a little more closely at Gard.

"Back off," Hendricks rumbled. "Comrade."

Sanya flashed that swift smile again and displayed open palms to Hendricks.

Michael nodded to Thomas. "Pull the truck around to the back of the house. With all this snow piled up it should be hidden from the street."

"Thank you, Michael," I said.

He shook his head. "There's a heater in the workshop, and a couple of folding cots. I'm not exposing the children to this."

"I understand."

“Do you?” Michael asked gently. He thumped the truck’s dented hood once, lightly, and waved Thomas toward the back of the house.

Twenty minutes later we were all warm, if a bit crowded in Michael’s workshop.

Gard lay on a couch, sleeping, her color improving almost visibly. Hendricks sat down with his back to the wall beside Gard’s cot, presumably to stand watch, but he’d started snoring within a few minutes. Sanya, with the help of Molly and her siblings, was off rounding up food.

I watched as Michael wrapped Akariel up in a clean white hankie embroidered with a silver cross, muttering a prayer under his breath the whole while. Then he slipped the hankie into a plain wooden box, also adorned with a silver cross. “Excuse me,” he said. “I need to secure this.”

“Where do they keep those things?” Thomas asked, after Michael had departed.

I shrugged. “Some big warehouse with a gazillion identical boxes, probably.”

Thomas snorted.

“Don’t even think it,” I said. “It isn’t worth it.”

Thomas ran his gloved fingers over the white scarf. “Isn’t it?”

“You saw how these things operate. They’ll manipulate your emotions and self-control, and something bad would happen to Justine. Or they’d wait until they had you hook, line, and sinker and you were their meat puppet. And something bad would happen to Justine.”

Thomas shrugged. “I’ve got one demon in my head already. What’s one more?”

I studied his profile. “You’ve got one monster in your head already,” I countered. “She barely survived it.”

He was still for a moment. Then he slammed his elbow back against the workshop wall, a gesture of pure frustration. Wood splintered, and a little cold air whooshed in.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said in a dull voice.

“Holy crap,” I said. An idea crystallized in my head, and a chill went down my spine.

Thomas rubbed his elbow lightly. “What?”

“I just had a really unpleasant thought.” I gestured at Marcone’s exhausted retainers. “I don’t think the Denarians took Marcone so that they could erase him and make an example of him.”

My brother shrugged. “Why else would they do it?”
I bit my lip, my stomach turning in uncomfortable flips.
“Because,” I said, “maybe they want to recruit him.”

Chapter Fifteen

Thomas stood watch over our sleeping beauties while I went inside to talk with Michael and Sanya at the Carpenter kitchen table.

I laid all the cards down. See above regarding the general futility of lying to Knights of the Cross—and besides, they'd both more than earned my trust. It didn't take me very long.

"So," I said, "I think we've got to move fast, and get Marcone away from them before he's forced to join up."

Michael frowned and folded his broad, work-scarred hands on the table before him. "What makes you think he's going to tell them no?"

"Marcone's scum," I said. "But he's his own scum. He doesn't work for anyone."

"You are sure?" Sanya asked, frowning thoughtfully.

"Yeah," I said. "I think that's why they wanted to grab Hendricks and Gard instead of killing them. So they could force him to take the coin or they'd kill his people."

Michael grunted. "It's a frequently used tactic."

"Not for Tessa," Sanya said, his voice absolutely certain. "She prefers to find those already well motivated to accept a coin. She regards their potential talents as a secondary factor to raw desire."

Michael acceded the point with a nod. "Which would mean that Tessa isn't giving the orders."

Sanya showed his teeth in a sudden, fierce grin. "Nicodemus is here."

"Fu—" I started to swear, but I glanced at Michael and changed it to, "Fudgesicles. Nicodemus nearly killed us all last time he was in town. And he *did* kill Shiro."

Both of the Knights nodded. Michael bowed his head and murmured a brief prayer.

“Guys,” I said, “I know that your first instincts tend to be to stand watch against the night, turning the other cheek, and so on. But he’s here with maybe twice the demon-power he had on his last visit. If we wait for him to come to us, he’ll tear us apart.”

“Agreed,” Sanya said firmly. “Take the initiative. Find him and hit the snake before he can coil to strike.”

Michael shook his head. “Brother, you forget our purpose. We are not given our power so that we can strike down our enemies, no matter how much they might deserve it. Our purpose is to rescue the poor souls trapped by the Fallen.”

“Nicodemus doesn’t want to be rescued,” I said. “He’s in full collaboration with his demon.”

“Which changes nothing about our duty,” he said. “Anyone, even Nicodemus, can seek redemption, no matter what they’ve done, as long as they have breath enough to ask forgiveness.”

“I don’t suppose a pair of sucking chest wounds could get us around that?” I asked him. “Because if they would, I’d be tickled to provide them.”

Sanya let out a bark of laughter.

Michael smiled, but it was brief and strained. “My point is that we can undertake such an aggressive move in only the direst of circumstances.”

“Faerie stands poised on the brink of an internal war,” I said. “Which would probably reignite the war between the Council and the Vampire Courts—and in the bad guys’ favor, I might add. One of the most dangerous men I’ve ever known is about to have involuntary access to the knowledge and power of a Fallen angel, which would give the Denarians access to major influence within the United States. Not to mention the serious personal consequences for me if they succeed in making it happen.” I looked back and forth between the two Knights, and held up one hand straight over my head. “I vote dire. All in favor?”

Michael caught Sanya’s hand on the way up, and pushed it gently back down to the table. “This isn’t a democracy, Harry. We serve a King.”

Sanya frowned for a moment, glancing at me. But then he settled back in his chair, a silent statement of support for Michael.

“You want to *talk* to them?” I asked Michael. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I didn’t say that,” Michael replied. “But I will not set out to simply murder them and have done. It’s a solution, Harry. But it isn’t good

enough.”

I settled back in my chair and rubbed at my head with one hand. An ache was forming there. “Okay,” I said quietly, trying to make up a plan as I went along. “What if...I set up a talk? Could you be lurking nearby for backup?”

Michael sighed. “There’s a measure of sophistry in that. You know they’ll try to betray you if it seems to be to their advantage.”

“Yeah. And it’ll be their choice to do it. That’s what you’re looking for, isn’t it? Some way to deal with the problem while still giving them a choice about what to do? Preferably in some manner that will get as few good guys killed as possible?”

He looked pained, but Michael nodded.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll try to set it up.”

“How?” Sanya asked.

“Let me worry about that,” I said. I checked the clock on the wall. “Crap. I’m late for a meeting. Can I borrow your phone?”

“Of course,” Michael said.

I glanced around the quiet house on my way to the phone and frowned. “Where is everyone?”

“Charity took them elsewhere for a few days,” Michael said. “There won’t be school in this mess, anyway.”

I grunted. “Where’s Molly?”

Michael paused and then shook his head. “I’m not sure. I don’t think she went with them.”

I thought about it for a moment and thought I knew where she’d be. I nodded around the kitchen. “How do you keep things running around here with Molly under the roof? I figured things would be breaking down left and right.”

“Lots and lots of preventive maintenance,” Michael replied steadily. “And about twice as much repair work as I usually do.”

“Sorry.”

He smiled. “Small price. She’s worth it.”

The reasons I like Michael have nothing to do with swords and the smiting of evil.

I got on the phone and dialed McAnally’s Pub.

“Mac,” answered Mac, the ever-laconic owner.

“It’s Harry Dresden,” I said. “Is Sergeant Murphy there?”

Mac grunted in the affirmative.

“Put a beer on my tab and tell her I’m on the way?”

Mac grunted yes again.

“Thanks, man.”

He hung up without saying good-bye.

I made another call and spoke to a humorless-sounding man with a Slavic accent. I muttered my password, so that no one in the kitchen would overhear it, but the connection was so bad that I wound up all but screaming it into the receiver. That kind of thing is to be expected when you’ve got a wizard on both ends.

It only took the Jolly Northman about ten minutes to get my call through to my party.

“Luccio,” said a young woman’s voice. “What’s gone wrong, Harry?”

“Hey!” I protested. “That’s a hell of a thing to say to a man, Captain. Just because I’m calling in doesn’t mean that there’s some kind of crisis.”

“Technically true, I suppose. Why are you calling?”

“Well. There’s a crisis.”

She made an *mmmmmm* sound.

“A group known as the Knights of the Blackened Denarius has kidnapped Baron Marccone.”

“The crime lord you took it upon yourself to assist in joining the Accords?” Luccio asked, amusement in her voice. “In what way is that relevant to the White Council?”

“These Denarian creeps are also signatories of the Accords,” I said. “Marccone’s retainers are crying foul. They’ve asked me to formally protest the abduction and summon an Emissary to resolve the dispute.”

Seconds of silence ticked by.

“In what way,” Luccio repeated, her voice much harder this time, “is that relevant to the White Council?”

“The Accords don’t mean anything if they aren’t enforced and supported,” I said. “In the long run, it’s in our own best interests to make sure they’re supported now, before a precedent is set and—”

“Don’t bullshit me,” the captain of the Wardens snarled, a hint of an Italian accent creeping into her speech. “If we take formal action it could provoke a war—a war we simply cannot afford. We all know the Red Court is only catching its breath. We can ill afford the losses we’ve already taken, much less those we might assume in a new conflict.”

I made sure to keep my voice steady, grim. “Mab has contacted me personally. She has indicated that it is strongly in our own best interests to intervene.”

It wasn’t *exactly* a lie. I hadn’t ever specified who *we* meant. And with any luck the mention of Mab would keep Luccio’s attention completely. The only reason the Red Court hadn’t wiped us out in the years-long war was that Mab had given the Council right-of-way through the portions of the Nevernever under her control, allowing us wizards to stay as mobile as our opponents, who had considerably less difficulty employing mortal vehicles to maneuver its soldiery.

“*Jesu Christi*,” Luccio spat. “She means to withdraw our right-of-way through Winter if we don’t accede to her demands.”

“Well,” I said, “she never actually came out and *said* that.”

“Of course she didn’t. She never speaks plainly at all.”

“She does keep her deals, though,” I pointed out.

“She doesn’t make deals she can’t slide out of. She’s forbidden the Ways to her people but also to the Wyldfae as a gesture of courtesy. All she needs to do is relax her ban against the Wyldfae, and we’d be forced to travel in strength every time we went through the Ways.”

“She’s a sneaky bitch,” I agreed. I crossed my fingers.

Luccio exhaled forcefully through her nose. “Very well. I will forward the appropriate notifications, pending approval by the Senior Council. Which Emissary would you prefer?”

“The Archive. We have a working relationship.”

Luccio *mmmm* ed again. I heard a pencil scratching. “Dresden,” she said, “I cannot stress to you enough how vital it is that we avoid general hostilities, even with a relatively small power.”

Translation: *Don’t start another war, Harry.*

“But,” she continued, “we can afford to lose the paths through Winter even less.”

Translation: *Unless you really have to.*

“I hear you,” I said. “I’ll do my best.”

“Do better,” Luccio said, her tone blunt. “There are those on the Senior Council who hold the opinion that we’re already fighting one war because of your incompetence.”

I felt heat flush up my neck. “If they bring that up, remind them that my incompetence is the only reason they weren’t all blasted to molecules by a

newborn god,” I shot back. “And after that, remind them that because of my incompetence, we’re enjoying a cease-fire that we desperately needed to replace our losses. And after *that*—”

“That is enough, Warden,” the captain snapped.

I fought down my frustration and clamped my mouth shut.

Hey, we were coming up on the holidays. They’re a time of miracles.

“I’ll notify you when I learn something,” Luccio said, and hung up the phone.

I hung up too, harder than I really needed to. I turned to find Michael and Sanya staring at me.

“Harry,” Michael said quietly, “that was Captain Luccio, was it not?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You never told us that Mab threatened to go back on her bargain.”

“Well, no.”

Michael watched me with troubled eyes. “Because she didn’t. You just lied to Luccio.”

“Yeah,” I said shortly. “Because I need the Council’s say-so to set up the meeting. Because I’ve *got* to set up the meeting so that the gang of murdering bastards who tortured Shiro to death will have a chance to prove to you that they’ve still got it coming.”

“Harry, if the Council learns that you’ve misled them—”

“They’ll probably charge me with treason,” I said.

Michael rose from his seat. “But—”

I stabbed a finger at him. “The longer we delay, the longer those creeps stay in town, the longer Summer’s hit men keep coming after me, and the more likely it is that innocent people are going to get hurt in the cross fire. I’ve got to move fast, and the best way to get the Council to move is to let it think its own ass is about to fall into the fire.”

“Harry—” Michael began.

“Don’t,” I said. “Don’t give me the speech about redemption and mercy and how everyone deserves a second chance. I’m all for doing the right thing, Michael. You know that. But this isn’t the time.”

“Then what is right changes because we’re in a hurry?” he asked gently.

“Even your Book says that there’s a time for all things,” I said. “A time to heal—and a time to kill.”

Michael looked from me to the corner by the back door, where the broadsword *Amoracchius* rested in its humble leather scabbard, its plain,

crusader-style hilt bound in wire. “It isn’t that, Harry. I’ve seen more of what they’ve done than you have. I have no qualms with fighting them, if it comes to that.”

“They’ve already blown up a building, tried to murder me, and set off a situation that nearly got your own children burned down in the cross fire. In what way has it *not* come to *that*?”

Instead of answering, Michael shook his head, took up *Amoracchius*, and walked further into the house.

I scowled after him for a minute and muttered darkly under my breath.

“You confused him,” Sanya rumbled.

I glanced at the dark-skinned Knight. “What?”

“You confused him,” Sanya repeated. “Because of what you did.”

“What? Lying to the Council? I don’t see that I had much choice.”

“But you did,” Sanya said placidly. He reached into the gym bag on the floor next to him and drew out a long saber, an old cavalry weapon—*Esperacchius*. A nail worked into the hilt declared it a brother of Michael’s sword. He started inspecting the blade. “You could have simply moved to attack them.”

“By myself? I’m bad, but I’m not that bad.”

“He’s your friend. He would have come with you. You know that.”

I shook my head. “He’s my friend. Period. You don’t do that to your friends.”

“Precisely,” Sanya said. “So instead you have placed your own life in jeopardy in order to protect his beliefs. You risk your body to preserve his heart.” He brought out a smooth sharpening stone and began stropping the saber’s blade. “I suppose he considers it a particularly messianic act.”

“That’s not why I did it,” I said.

“Of course it isn’t. He knows that. It isn’t easy for him. Usually he’s the one protecting another, willing to pay the price if he must.”

I exhaled and glanced after Michael. “I don’t know what else I could have done.”

“*Da*,” Sanya agreed. “But he is still afraid for you.” He fell quiet for a moment, while his stone slid along the sword’s blade.

“Mind if I ask you something?” I said.

The big man kept sharpening the sword with a steady hand. “Not at all.”

“You looked a little tense when Tessa’s name came up,” I said.

Sanya glanced up at me for a second, his eyes shadowed and unreadable. He shrugged a shoulder and went back to his work.

“She do you wrong?”

“Barely ever noticed me. Or spoke to me,” Sanya said. “To her I was just an employee. One more face. She did not care who I was.”

“This second of hers, though. The one who recruited you.”

The muscles along his jawline twitched. “Her name is Rosanna.”

“And she done you wrong,” I said.

“Why do you say that?”

“‘Cause when you talk about her, your face says that you been done wrong.”

He gave me a brief smile. “Do you know how many black men live in Russia, Dresden?”

“No. I mean, I figure they’re kind of a minority.”

Sanya stopped in midstrop and glanced at me for a pregnant moment, one eyebrow arched. “Yes,” he said, his tone dry. “Kind of.”

“More so than in the States, I guess.”

He grunted. “For Moscow I was very, very odd. If I went out to any smaller towns when I was growing up, I had to be careful about walking down busy streets. I could cause car accidents when drivers took their eyes off the road to stare at me. Literally. Many people in that part of the world had never seen a black person with their own eyes. That is changing slowly, but growing up I was a minority the way Bigfoot is a minority. A freak.”

I started putting things together. “That’s the kind of thing that is bound to make a young man a little resentful.”

He went back to sharpening the sword. “Oh, yes.”

“So when you say that Tessa prefers to take recruits she knows will be eager to accept a coin...”

“I speak from experience,” Sanya said, nodding. “Rosanna was everything that angry, poor, desperate young man could dream of. Pretty. Strong. Sensual. And she truly did not care about the color of my skin.” Sanya shook his head. “I was sixteen.”

I winced. “Yeah. Good age for making really bad decisions. I speak from experience, too.”

“She offered me the coin,” Sanya said. “I took it. And for five years the creature known as Magog and I traveled the world with Rosanna, indulged in every vice a young man could possibly imagine, and...obeyed Tessa’s

commands.” He shook his head and glanced up at me. “By the end of that time, Dresden, I wasn’t much more than a beast who walked upright. Oh, I had thoughts and feelings, but they were all slaves to my baser desires. I did many things of which I am not—” He broke off and turned his face away from me. “I did many things.”

“She was your handler,” I said quietly. “Rosanna. She was the one getting you to try the drugs, to do the deeds. One little step at a time. Corrupting you and letting the Fallen take control.”

He nodded. “And the whole time I never even suspected it. I thought that she cared about me as much as I cared about her.” He smiled faintly. “Mind you, I never claimed to be of any particular intelligence.”

“Who got you out?” I asked him. “Shiro?”

“In a way,” Sanya said. “Shiro had just driven Tessa from one of her projects in...Antwerp, I believe. She came storming into Rosanna’s apartment in Venice, furious. She and Rosanna had an argument I never completely understood—but instead of leaving when I was told to do so, I stayed to listen. I heard what Rosanna truly felt about me, heard her report about me to Tessa. And I finally understood what an idiot I’d been. I dropped the coin into a canal and never looked back.”

I blinked at him. “That must have been difficult.”

“My entire life has been one of a snowball in Hell,” Sanya said cheerfully. “Though the metaphor is perhaps inverted. At the time I judged the action to be tantamount to suicide, since Tessa was certain to track me down and kill me—but Shiro had followed her to Venice, and he found me instead. Michael—not the Chicago Michael, the other one—met us at Malta and brought *Esperacchius*, here, with him, offering me the chance to work against some of the evil I’d helped to create. From there I have been Knighting. Is good work. Plenty of travel, interesting people, always a new challenge.”

I shook my head and laughed. “That’s putting a positive spin on it.”

“I am making a difference,” Sanya said with simple and rock-solid conviction. “And you, Dresden? Have you considered taking up *Fidelacchius*? Joining us?”

“No,” I said quietly.

“Why not?” Sanya asked, his tone reasonable. “You know for what we fight. You know the good we do for others. Your cause runs a close parallel

to ours: to protect those who cannot protect themselves; to pit yourself against the forces of violence and death when they arise.”

“I’m not really into the whole God thing,” I said.

“And I am an agnostic,” Sanya responded.

I snorted. “Hell’s bells. Tell me you aren’t still clinging to that. You carry a holy blade and hang out with angels.”

“The blade has power, true. The beings allied with that power are... somewhat angelic. But I have met many strange and mighty things since I took up the sword. If one called them ‘aliens’ instead of ‘angels,’ it would only mean that I was working in concert with powerful beings—not necessarily the literal forces of Heaven, or a literal Creator.” Sanya grinned. “A philosophical fine point, true, but I am not prepared to abandon it. What we do is worthy, without ever bringing questions of faith, religion, or God into the discussion.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I admitted.

“So tell me,” Sanya said, “why have you not considered taking up the sword?”

I thought about it for a second and said, “Because it isn’t for me. And Shiro said I would know who to give it to.”

Sanya shrugged and nodded his head in acquiescence. “Reason enough.” He sighed. “We could use *Fidelacchius*’s power in this conflict. I wish Shiro were with us now.”

“Good man,” I agreed quietly. “He was a king, you know.”

“I thought he just liked the King’s music.”

“No, no,” I said. “Shiro himself. He was a direct descendent of the last king of Okinawa. Several generations back, but his family was royalty.”

Sanya shrugged his broad shoulders. “There have been many kings over the centuries, my friend, and many years for their bloodlines to spread through the populace. My own family can trace its roots back to Salahuddin.”

I felt my eyebrows rise. “Salahuddin. You mean Saladin? King of Syria and Egypt during the Crusades?”

Sanya nodded. “The same.” He paused in midstep and looked up at me, his eyes widening.

“I know you’re agnostic,” I said. “But do you believe in coincidence?”

“Not nearly so much as I once did,” Sanya replied.

“That can’t be a coincidence. Both of you descended from royalty.” I chewed on my lip. “Could that have something to do with who can take up one of the swords?”

“I am a soldier and an amateur philosopher,” Sanya said. “You are the wizard. Could such a thing be significant?”

I wagged a hand in midair. “Yes and no. I mean, there are a lot of factors that tie magic to matters of inheritance—genetic or otherwise. A lot of the old rites were intimately bound up with political rulers.”

“The king and his land are one,” Sanya intoned solemnly.

“Well, yeah.”

Sanya nodded. “Michael showed me that movie.”

“Merlin was the only good thing about that movie. That and Captain Picard kicking ass in plate mail with a big ax.” I waved my hand. “The point is that in many cultures, the king or sultan or whatever held a position of duty and authority that was as much spiritual as physical. Certain energies could have been connected to that, giving the old kings a form of metaphysical significance.”

“Perhaps something similar to the power of the Swords?” Sanya asked.

I shrugged. “Maybe. By the time I was born the planet was running a little low on monarchs. It isn’t something I’ve looked at before.”

Sanya smiled. “Well. Now you need only find a prince or princess willing to lay down his or her life over matters of principle. Do you know any?”

“Not so much,” I said. “But I’ve got a feeling that we’re onto something.” I glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s getting late. I’ll be back here in about two hours, or I’ll call.”

“*Da*,” Sanya said. “We will watch over your criminals for you.”

“Thanks,” I said, and went back out to the workshop. Hendricks had slumped to the floor and was sleeping. Gard was actually snoring. Thomas had been pacing restlessly when I entered.

“Well?” he asked.

“Gotta get to Mac’s and meet Murphy,” I said. “Let’s roll.”

Thomas nodded and headed for the door.

I reached into the trash can by the door, took out an empty motor oil can, and tossed it into the least cluttered corner of the workshop. It bounced off something in midair, and Molly let out a soft yelp, appearing there a moment later, rubbing a hand to her hip.

“Where’d she come from?” Thomas demanded crossly.

“What did I miss?” Molly demanded, her tone faintly offended. “I had all the senses covered. Even Thomas didn’t know I was there.”

“You didn’t miss anything,” I said. “I just know how you think, grasshopper. If I can’t make you stay where it’s safe, I might as well keep you where I can see you. Maybe you’ll even be useful. You’re with us.”

Molly’s eyes gleamed. “*Excellent*,” she said, and hurried over to join me.

Chapter Sixteen

I was more than an hour late, and Murphy was not amused.

“Your nose looks worse than it did yesterday,” she said when I sat down at the table. “I think the black eyes have grown, too.”

“Gosh, you’re cute when you’re angry,” I responded.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

“It makes your little button nose all pink and your eyes get bloodshot and even bluer.”

“Did you have any last words, Dresden, or should I just choke you now?”

“Mac!” I called, raising a hand. “Two pale!”

She fixed me with a steady look and said, “Don’t think you can buy your way out of this with good beer.”

“I don’t,” I said, rising. “I’m buying my way out of it with really, *really* good beer.”

I walked over to the bar as Mac set two bottles of his microbrewed liquid nirvana down and took off the caps with a deft twist of his hand, disdaining a bottle opener. I winked at him and picked up both bottles, then sauntered back over to Murphy.

I gave her my bottle, took mine, and we drank. She paused after the first taste and blinked at the bottle before drinking again more deeply. “This beer,” she pronounced after that, “just saved your life.”

“Mac’s a master beeromancer,” I replied. I’d never tell him, but at the time I wished he’d serve his brew cold. I’d have loved to hold a frosty bottle against my aching head for a moment. You’d think the pain from the damned broken nose would fade eventually. But it just kept on stubbornly burning.

We had settled down at a table along one wall of the pub. There are thirteen tables in the room, and thirteen wooden pillars, each extensively carved with scenes mostly out of Old World fairy tales. The bar is crooked

and has thirteen stools, and thirteen ceiling fans whir lazily overhead. The setup of the entire place is designed to diffuse and refract random magical energies, the kind that often gather around practitioners of magic when they're grumpy or out of sorts. It offers a measure of protection from accumulated negative energies, enough to make sure that annoying or depressing "vibes," for lack of a more precise term, don't adversely affect the moods and attitudes of the pub's clientele.

It doesn't keep out any of the supernatural riffraff—that's what the sign by the door is for. Mac had the place legally recognized as neutral ground among the members of the Unseelie Accords, and members of any of the Accorded nations had a responsibility to avoid conflict in such a place, or at least to take it outside.

Still, neutral ground is safe only until someone thinks they can get away with violating the Accords. It's best to be cautious there.

"On the other hand," Murphy said, more quietly, "maybe you're too pathetic to beat to death right now."

"My nose, you mean. Compared to the way my hand felt, it's nothing," I said.

"Still can't be much fun."

"Well. No."

She watched me through her next sip and then said, "You're about to play the wizard card and tell me to butt out."

"Not exactly," I said.

She gave me her cop eyes, all professionally detached neutrality, and nodded once. "So talk."

"Remember the guys from the airport a few years back?"

"Yeah. Killed the old Okinawan guy in the chapel. He died real bad."

I smiled faintly. "I think he'd probably argue the point, if he could."

She shrugged and said, tone quietly flat, "It was a mess."

"The guys behind it are back. They've abducted Marcone."

Murphy frowned, her eyes distant for a moment, calculating. "They're grabbing his business?"

"Or forcing him onto their team," I said. "I'm not sure yet. We're working on it."

"We?"

"You remember Michael?" I asked.

"Charity's husband?"

“Yeah.”

“I remember that at the airport we found a couple of men with no tongues and fake identification. They’d been killed with long blades. Swords, if you can believe that in this day and age. It was messy, Harry.” She put her hands flat on the table and leaned toward me. “I don’t *like* messy.”

“I’m all kinds of sorry about that, Murph,” I said. It’s possible that a grain or two of sarcasm was showing in my reply. “I’ll be sure to ask them to put on the kid gloves. If I survive asking the question, I’ll let you know what they say.”

Murphy regarded me calmly. “They’re back, then?”

I nodded. “Only this time they brought more friends to the party.”

She nodded. “Where are they?”

“No, Murph.”

“Where are they, Harry?” Murph asked, her voice hard. “If they’re that dangerous, I’m not waiting for them to choose their ground so that we have to rush into a hostile situation in response to them. We’ll go after them right now, before they have a chance to hurt anyone else.”

“It’d be a slaughter, Murphy.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Maybe not. You’d be surprised what kinds of resources the department has gotten its hands on, what with the whole War on Terror.”

“Right. And you’re going to tell your bosses what?”

“That the same terrorists who attacked the airport and murdered a woman in the marina are in the city, planning another operation. That the only way to ensure the safety of its citizens is to preemptively assault them. Then show up with SWAT, SI, every cop in town, anyone we can get from the Bureau, and all the military backup available on short notice.”

I sat back in my chair at that, startled at Murphy’s tone—and at the possibilities.

Hell. The kind of firepower she was talking about might give even the Denarians pause. And given the current climate, *terrorist plot* was all but synonymous with *respond with overwhelming force*. Oh, sure, most modern weaponry was far less effective on supernatural targets than anyone without knowledge of them would expect—but even reduced to the effectiveness of bee stings, *enough* bee stings can be just as deadly as a knife in the heart.

Humanity, at large, enjoys a dichotomous role in supernatural politics. On the one hand they are sneered at and held in contempt for being patently unable to come to grips with reality, to the point where the supernatural world hardly needed to bother to hide from them. Given half a chance, the average human being would rationalize the most bizarre of encounters down to “unusual but explainable” events. They are referred to as herd animals by a lot of the things that prey on them, and often toyed with and tormented.

On the other hand, no one wants to get them stirred up, either. Humanity, when frightened and angry, is a force even the supernatural world does not wish to reckon with. The torches and pitchforks are just as deadly, in their numbers and their simple rage, as they ever were—and it was my opinion that most of the supernatural crowd had very little appreciation for just how destructive and dangerous mankind had grown in the past century.

Which is why I found myself sorely tempted to let the Denarians get a big old faceful of angry cop. Five or six rifles like Gard’s might not kill Mantis Girl—but if you followed them up with thirty or forty pairs of stompy combat boots for all the little bugs, Little Miss Clamphands could go down for the count.

Of course, all that was predicated on the idea that the humans involved a) knew what they were up against and b) took it seriously and worked together tightly enough to get the job done. Murphy and the guys in SI might have a pretty good grasp of the situation, but the others wouldn’t. They’d be expecting a soldier movie, but they’d be getting something out of a horror flick instead. I didn’t for one second believe that Murphy or Stallings or anyone else in Chicago could make everyone involved listen to them once they started talking about demons and monsters.

I rubbed at my head again, thinking of Sanya. Maybe we could try to explain it in more palatable terms. Instead of “shapeshifting demons” we could tell them that the terrorists were in possession (ha-ha, get it?) of “experimental genetically engineered biomimetic armored suits.” Maybe that would give them the framework they needed to get the job done.

And maybe it wouldn’t. Maybe they’d run into something out of a nightmare and start screaming in fear. Coordination and control would go right out the window, especially if the Denarians had anyone with enough magical juice to start blowing out technology. Then would come the panic and slaughter and terror.

“It’s an idea,” I said to Murphy. “Maybe even a workable idea. But I don’t think its time has come. At least, not yet.”

Her eyes flashed very blue. “And you’re the one who decides.”

I took another sip of beer and set the bottle down again, deliberately. “Apparently.”

“Says who?” Murphy demanded.

I leaned back in my chair. “In the first place,” I said quietly, “even if you brought in all that firepower, the best you could hope for is a hideously bloody, costly victory. In the second place, there’s a chance that I can resolve this whole thing through Council channels—or at least make sure that when the fur starts flying, we’re not in the middle of the bloody town.”

“But you—”

“And in the third place,” I continued, “I don’t know where they are.”

Murphy narrowed her eyes, and then some of the tension abruptly left her features. “You’re telling me the truth.”

“Usually do,” I said. “I could probably track them down, given a day or so. But it might not come to that.”

She studied my face for a moment. “But you don’t think that talk will stop them from whatever they’re doing here.”

“Not a chance in hell. But hopefully I’ll talk them out of the woodwork to someplace a little more out of the way.”

“What if someone gets hurt while you’re scheming?” she asked. “Those encounters people were having last night are getting attention. No one’s been hurt so far, but that could change. I’m not prepared to tolerate that.”

“Those were something else,” I said tiredly. “Something I don’t think will be a threat to the public.” I told her about Summer’s hitters.

She drank the rest of her beer in a single tip, then sighed. “Nothing’s ever simple with you.”

I shrugged modestly.

“Here’s the problem, Harry,” she said quietly. “Last time these maniacs were around, there were bodies. And there were reports. Several witnesses gave a fairly good description of you.”

“And nothing came of it,” I said.

“Nothing came of it because I was in charge of the investigation,” Murphy corrected me, her tone slightly sharpening. “The case was never closed. And if similar events bring it up again, there’s no way I can protect you.”

“Stallings wouldn’t...?”

“John would probably try,” Murphy said. “But Rudolph’s been ladder climbing over in Internal Affairs, and if he gets an opening he’ll start screaming about it and the case will get kicked up the line and out of SI’s control.”

I frowned at that, turning my bottle around slowly in my fingers. “Well,” I said, “that could complicate things.”

Murphy rolled her eyes. “You think? Dammit, Harry. A long time ago I agreed with you that there were some things that it was better the department didn’t get involved in. I promised not to go blowing whistles and raising alarms every time things got spooky.” She leaned forward slightly, her eyes intent. “But I’m a cop, Harry. Before everything else. My job is to defend and protect the people of this city.”

“And what do you think I’m doing?”

“The best you know how,” she said without heat. “I know your heart is in the right place. But you can be as sincere as hell and still be *wrong*.” She paused to let that sink in. “And if you’re wrong it could cost lives. Lives I’m sworn to protect.”

I said nothing.

“You asked me to respect your limits and I have,” she said quietly. “I expect you to return the favor. If for one second I think that letting you handle this is going to cost innocent lives, I’m not going to stand quietly in the wings. I’m going in and bringing everything I can get my hands on with me. And if I do that, I expect your complete support.”

“And you’re the one who gets to decide when that is?” I demanded.

She faced me without flinching, not a millimeter. “Apparently.”

I leaned back in my seat and sipped beer with my eyes closed.

Murphy didn’t know everything that was at stake here. More than anyone else on the force, sure, but she was operating under only partial knowledge. If she made the wrong call, she could really screw things up beyond all ability to conceive.

She’d probably had that same exact thought about *me*, and on more than one occasion.

I’d asked Murphy for a lot when I’d asked her to trust me.

How could I *not* return the favor and still call myself her friend?

Simple.

I couldn’t.

Hell, if she decided to go in, she'd do it with or without me. In that circumstance my presence could mean the difference between a bloody victory and a disaster, and...

And I suddenly felt a lot more empathy for Michael's confusion.

I opened my eyes again and said quietly, "You decide to bring CPD in, you'll have my cooperation. But you've got to believe me: This isn't the time for that kind of solution."

She ran her thumb over a scar in the wooden table. "What if that building had been full of people, Harry? Families. These Denarians could have killed hundreds."

"Give me time," I said.

She put her hands on the table's edge and rose, facing me with those same neutral eyes again. As she started to speak I got a twisty feeling in the pit of my stomach. "I wish I could," she said, "but—"

The door to the pub slammed open hard enough to strain its hinges and leave marks against the old wooden wall.

A...thing...came through the door. It was hard for me to tell what it was at first. Imagine a big man trying to squeeze into a doghouse. He has to crouch down and go in sideways, one shoulder at a time, moving very carefully to avoid harming himself on the door frame. That's what this huge, grey-furred thing looked like. But with horns and cloven hooves.

The enormous gruff—several feet taller than any ogre or troll I'd ever seen—squeezed all the way through the door and then rose to a crouch. His head, shoulders, and the top part of his back pressed against the ceiling. Hunched awkwardly, he slowly scanned the room, his golden eyes gleaming around their rectangular pupils. Each knuckle of his closed fists was the size of a freaking cantaloupe, and a heavy, pungent animal scent filled the air.

Thanks to the snow, the pub wasn't crowded—just a few regulars, plus Murphy and me. But even so, this wasn't something you saw every day, and the room went totally still.

The gruff's gaze settled on me.

Then he duckwalked toward my table. Mac raced for the switch that turned off the fans, but the first couple of spinning blades the gruff passed struck sharply against his curling horns—and shattered. He did not so much as blink. He stopped beside my table and surveyed Murphy, then turned his huge, heavy gaze to me.

“Wizard,” he rumbled in a voice so deep that I could *feel* it better than I could hear it. “I have come hence to speak to thee about mine younger brothers.” The gruff ’s huge eyes narrowed, and its knuckles creaked like shipping hawsers as its fists tightened. “And the harms thou hast wrought upon them.”

Chapter Seventeen

I picked up my staff and rose to face the enormous gruff.

Murphy watched me with very, very wide eyes.

“This is neutral ground,” I said quietly.

“Aye,” the gruff agreed. “The Accords alone keep thy neck unbroken, thy skull uncracked.”

“Or your enormous ass uncooked,” I replied, staring up and setting my jaw. “Don’t start thinking it would be easy, Tiny.”

“Mayhap, and mayhap not,” the gruff rumbled. “’Tis a question answered only by the field.”

I breathed as shallowly as I could. The huge gruff didn’t smell *bad*, precisely—but he sure as hell smelled a *lot*. “Speak.”

“We find ourselves at odds, friend of Winter,” the gruff rumbled.

“Friend of Summer, too,” I said. “They gave me jewelry and everything.”

“Aye,” the huge gruff said. “You have done good service to my Court, if not to my Queen. I am surprised, then, at your use of the bane ’pon two of my younger kin.”

“The bane?” Murphy said quietly.

“Iron,” I clarified. I turned back to the gruff. “They were trying to kill me. I wanted to survive.”

“No friend of either Court would so employ the bane, wizard,” the gruff growled. “Did you not know this? It is more than a mere weapon, and the pain it causes more than simple discomfort. It is a poison, body and spirit, that you have used ’pon us.”

I glared at the big idiot. “They were trying to *kill* me,” I repeated, only more slowly, you know, so it would be all insulting. “I wanted to survive.”

The gruff narrowed its eyes. “Then you intend to continue as you have begun?”

“I intend to survive,” I replied. “I didn’t ask for this fight. I didn’t begin it.”

“Thou’rt fated to die in any case, mortal, soon or late. Why not face it with honor and make thy passing more peaceful thereby?”

“Peaceful?” I asked, barely containing a laugh. “If I go down fighting, Tiny, I plan for it to be about as unpeaceful as things *get*.” I jabbed a finger at him. “I’ve got nothing against you and your brothers, Tiny, except that you keep trying to freaking *kill* me. Back off, and it won’t have to get any uglier than it already has.”

The gruff growled. It sounded like a dump truck grinding its gears. “That I will not do. I will serve my Queen.”

“Then don’t expect anything but more of the same from me,” I replied.

“You would behave this way in the service of *Winter*?” the gruff demanded, incredulous. “You, who struck the heart of Arctis Tor? What hold has the Dark Queen ’pon you, mortal?”

“Sorry, Tiny, but you aren’t nearly as special as you think you are. This is pretty much the way I behave every time someone tries to whack me.” I gestured at him with my staff. “So if you came here to try to talk me into lying down and dying, you can leave the way you came in. And if you’re the one coming after me next, you’d better have more brains than your brothers did, or I’m going to leave you as a great big pile of cold cuts and spare ribs.”

The gruff growled again and gave me a stiff nod. “Then come out. And let us settle this.”

Uh. Uh-oh.

Showing bravado to the bad guys—or the not-so-bad guys, as the case may be—is a given, a part of the territory. But I’d never taken on anything with the sheer mass of Tiny the gruff, and I really didn’t think I’d care to try my hand against him without one hell of a lot of preparation first. I also had to remember that big didn’t necessarily equal stupid, not given the circles he apparently moved in.

In fact, most of the higher reaches of the Summer Court knew a formidable amount of countermagic. If Tiny here had half the ability I’d seen demonstrated in the past, I would be in real trouble in a straight fight. All he had to do was stand outside and wait. Mac’s place had only the one door.

Worse, Thomas and Molly were waiting outside in Thomas's barge, and they would be sure to join in. I wasn't sure what could happen at that point. Leaving totally aside the fact that we'd be brawling in the middle of Chicago in broad daylight, I had to think that the gruff might have backup waiting nearby to intervene if anyone outside the business of the Courts of Winter and Summer tried to interfere. Molly was of limited capability in a fight, and Thomas tended to believe that the best way to approach any given combat was with a maximum of power, speed, and aggressive ferocity.

Things could get really messy, really fast.

I was trying to think of a way of getting out of this without getting anyone killed when Murphy put her gun on the table and said in a very clear, loud, challenging tone, "I don't think so."

The gruff turned to stare at her in surprise.

So did Mac.

So did everyone else there.

Heck, so did I.

Murphy stood straight up and turned to face the enormous gruff with her feet spread. "I will not let this challenge to my authority pass."

The gruff tilted its head to one side. Its horns dug furrows in the wooden ceiling.

Mac winced.

"Lady?" it rumbled.

"Do you know who I am?" Murphy asked.

"A lady knight, a shield bearer of this mortal demesne," the gruff replied. "An...officer of the law, or so I believe it is called."

"That's right," she said calmly.

"I make no challenge to your authority, Dame..."

"Murphy," she said.

"Dame Murphy," rumbled the gruff.

"But you do," Murphy said. "You have threatened one I am sworn to protect."

The gruff blinked—a considerable gesture on his scale—and glanced at me. "This wizard?"

"Yes," Murphy said. "He is a citizen of Chicago, and I am sworn to protect and defend him against those who would harm him."

“Dame Murphy,” the gruff said stiffly, “this matter is not one of mortal concern.”

“The hell it isn’t,” Murphy said. “This man lives in Chicago. He pays taxes to the city. He is beholden to its laws.” She glanced aside at me, and her mouth quirked wryly. “If he is to suffer the headaches of citizenry, as he must, then it is fair and lawful that he should enjoy the protections offered to every citizen. He is therefore under my protection, and any quarrel you have with him, you also have with me.”

The gruff stared at her for a moment, eyes narrowed in thought. “Art thou quite certain of thy position, Dame Murphy?”

“Quite certain,” she replied.

“Even knowing that the duty solemnly charged unto me and my kin might require us to kill thee?”

“Master Gruff,” Murphy replied, laying a hand on her gun for the first time, “consider for a moment what a steel-jacketed round would feel like as it entered your flesh.”

The gruff flicked its ears in surprise. A number of napkins were blown from the surface of a nearby table. “Thou wouldst aim such weapons of the bane at a lawful champion of the Seelie Court?”

“In your case, Master Gruff,” Murphy said, “I would hardly *need* to aim.” Then she picked up the gun and aimed it at the gruff’s eyes.

I started to panic. Then I saw where I thought Murph was going with this one, and I had to work to keep myself from letting out a cheer.

The gruff’s knuckles popped again. “This,” it growled, “is neutral ground.”

“Chicago,” she replied, “has never signed any Accords. I will fulfill my duty.”

“Attack me here,” the gruff said, “and I will crush you.”

“Crush me here,” Murphy said, “and you will have broken the Accords while acting on behalf of your Queen. Was that your intention in coming here?”

The gruff ground its teeth, a sound like creaking millstones. “My quarrel is not with you.”

“If you attempt to take the life of a citizen of Chicago, whom I am sworn to protect, you have *made* it my quarrel, Master Gruff. Does your Queen wish to declare war upon the mortal authorities of Chicago? Would she wish *you* to decide such a thing?”

The gruff stared at her, evidently pondering.

“Lady has a point, Tiny,” I drawled. “There’s nothing to be gained here but trouble, and nothing to be lost but a little time. Walk away. You’ll find me again soon enough.”

The gruff stared at Murphy, and then at me. If I’d been less intrepid and fearless, I would have held my breath, hoping I’d avoided a fight. As it was, I held my breath mostly to cut down on the smell.

Finally the gruff bowed its head toward Murphy, with more scraping of ceilings and wincing of bartenders. “Courage,” he rumbled, “should be honored. Though thou art less a man than I thought, wizard, hiding behind a mortal, however valiant she may be.”

I let out a long breath as silently as I could and said, “Gosh. Somehow I’ll try to live with myself.”

“It will not o’erburden you long. This I promise.” The gruff nodded once to Murphy, then turned and scuttled out the way he’d squeezed in. He even shut the door behind him.

Murphy let out her breath and put her gun away in its shoulder holster. It took her two or three tries.

I sank into my chair on weak legs. “You,” I said to Murphy, “are so hot right now.”

She gave me a weak smile. “Oh, now you notice.” She glanced at the door. “Is he really gone?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I figure he is. The Summer Court aren’t exactly sweetness and light, but they do have a concept of honor, and if any faerie gives his word, he’s good for it.”

Mac did something I’d rarely seen him do.

He got three black bottles out from beneath the bar and brought them over to the table. He twisted the tops off and put one down in front of me, and another in front of Murphy, then kept the third for himself.

I took up the bottle and sniffed at it. I wasn’t familiar with the brew, but it had a rich, earthy aroma that made my mouth water.

Without a word Mac held up his bottle in a salute to Murphy.

I joined him. Murphy shook her head tiredly and returned the salute.

We drank together, and my tongue decided that any other brew it ever had would probably be a bitter disappointment from this day forward. Too many flavors to count blended together into something I couldn’t describe

if I'd had a week to talk about it. I'd never had anything like it. It was God's beer.

Mac drained the bottle in a single pull, with his eyes closed. When he lowered it, he looked at Murphy and said, "Bravely done."

Murphy's face was flushed with relief and with a reaction to her beer that was at least as favorable as mine. I doubt Mac could have seen it, but I'd known Murph long enough to see that she started blushing, too.

Mac went back to the bar, leaving Murphy and me to finish our bottled ambrosia.

"Okay," Murphy said in a weak voice. "Where were we?"

"You were about to tell me how you thought I was wrong and that the Chicago PD needed to intervene."

"Oh," Murph said. "Right." She stared after the departed gruff for a moment. "You said that that thing was from the nicer of the two groups causing us grief?"

"Yep," I said.

"We've gone up against the supernatural three times," she said quietly. "It's ended badly twice."

We meaning the cops, of course. I nodded. One of those occasions had killed her partner, Ron Carmichael. He hadn't been an angel or anything, but he had been a good man and a solid cop.

"All right," she said quietly. "I'm willing to hold off for now. On one condition."

"Name it."

"I'm in from here on out. You obviously need someone to protect you from the big, bad billy goats."

I snorted. "Yeah, obviously."

She held up the last of her beer. I held up mine.

We clinked them, finished them, and went back out into the winter cold together.

Chapter Eighteen

“All right,” I said. **“I hereby call this war council to order.”**

We were all sitting around my tiny living room, eating Burger King. Thomas and Molly had voted for McDonald’s, but since I was paying, I sternly informed them that this was not a democracy, and Burger King it was.

Hail to the King, baby.

Murphy rolled her eyes over the whole thing.

“War council?” Molly asked, wide-eyed. “Are we going to start another war?”

“I sort of meant it as a metaphor,” I said, as I made sure the ketchup-mustard ratio on my burger was within acceptable parameters. “I need to decide on my next step, and I’ve been hit in the head a few times lately. Figured my brain could use a little help.”

“Just now worked that out, did you?” Thomas murmured.

“Quiet, you,” I growled. “The idea is to generate useful thoughts here.”

“Not funny ones,” Molly said, suppressing a laugh.

I eyed her. She ate a french fry.

Murphy sipped at her Diet Coke. “Well,” she said, “I don’t know how much advice I can give you until I know what you’re up against.”

“I told you in the car,” I said. “The Knights of the Blackened Denarius.”

“Fallen angels, old tarnished coins, psychotic killers, got it,” Murphy said. “But that doesn’t tell me what their capabilities are.”

“She’s got a point,” Thomas said quietly. “You haven’t said much about these guys.”

I blew out a breath and took a big bite of hamburger to give me a moment to think while I chewed. “There’s a lot that these things can do,” I said afterward. “Mostly, the coins seem to allow their users to alter their

physical form into something better suited for a fight than a regular human body.”

“Battle shapeshifting,” Molly said. “Cool.”

“It isn’t cool,” I told her. Then I paused and admitted, “Okay, maybe a little. It makes them harder to hurt. It makes them faster. It arms them with various forms of weaponry. Claws, fangs, that kind of thing. Cassius looked like he might have had a poisonous bite, for example. Ursiel’s wielder could shift into this huge bear thing with claws and fangs and horns. Another one turned her hair into about a million strips of living titanium blade, and they were whipping all over the place and shooting through walls. Stretched out like twenty or thirty feet.”

“I have some customers like that,” Thomas quipped.

Murphy blinked and glanced at him.

I cleared my throat and gave Thomas another glare. “Another one of them, Nicodemus, didn’t seem to do any shapeshifting, but his freaking shadow could leap off the wall and strangle you. Creepy as hell.”

“They don’t all have, like, a uniform or something?” Molly asked.

“Not even close,” I replied. “Each of the Fallen seems to have its own particular preferences. And I suspect that those preferences adapt themselves differently to different holders of the coins. Quintus Cassius’s Fallen had this whole serpent motif going, and Cassius’s magic was pretty snake-intensive, too. But he was totally different from Ursiel, who was totally different from Mantis Girl from this morning, who was different from the other Denarians I’ve seen.”

Murphy nodded. “Anything else?”

“Goons,” I said. “More like a cult, really. Nicodemus had a number of followers whose tongues had been removed. They were fanatics, heavily armed, and crazy enough to commit suicide rather than be captured by his enemies.”

She winced. “The airport?”

“Yeah.”

“That it?”

“No,” I said. “Nicodemus also had these...call them guard dogs, I guess. Except that they weren’t dogs. I don’t know what they were, but they were ugly and ran fast and had big teeth. But all of that isn’t what makes them dangerous.”

“No?” Thomas said. “Then what is?”

“The Fallen,” I replied.

The room fell silent.

“They’re beings older than time who have spent two thousand years learning the ins and outs of the mortal world and the mortal mind,” I said quietly. “They understand things we literally could not begin to grasp. They’ve seen every trick, learned every move, and they’re riding shotgun for each coin holder—if they aren’t in the driver’s seat already. Every one of them has a perfect memory, a library of information at his immediate disposal, and a schemer that makes Cardinal Richelieu look like Mother Teresa hanging around in his brain as an adviser.”

Thomas stared at me very hard for a moment, frowning. I tried to ignore him.

Murphy shook her head. “Let’s sum up: an unknown number of enemies with unknown capabilities, supported by a gang of madmen, packs of attack animals, and superhumanly intelligent pocket change.” She gave me a look. “It’s sort of tough to plan for that, given how much we don’t know.”

“Well, then that’s what we do next, isn’t it?” Molly asked tentatively. “Find out more about them?”

Thomas flicked a glance at Molly and nodded once.

“To do that we’d have to find them,” I said.

“A tracking spell?” Molly suggested.

“I don’t have any samples to work with,” I replied. “And even if I did, somebody on their team was able to obscure *Mab*’s divining spells. I’m nowhere close to *Mab*’s league. My spells wouldn’t have a prayer.”

“If they’ve got that much of an entourage, they’re going to stick out anywhere even vaguely public,” Murphy mused. “A gang of toughs with no tongues? If the Denarians are in town, that should make them relatively easy to locate.”

“Last time they were holed up in Undertown,” I said. “Believe me, there’s plenty of room for badness down there.”

“What about the spirit world?” Thomas asked quietly. “Surely there’s an entity or two who could tell us something.”

“Possibly,” I said. “I’m on speaking terms with one or two of the *loa*. But that kind of information is either expensive or unreliable. Sometimes both. And remember who we’re talking about. The Fallen are heavyweights in the spirit world. No one wants to cross them.”

Molly made a frustrated sound. "If we can't track them with magic, and we can't find them physically, then how are we supposed to learn more about them?"

"Exactly, kid," I said. "Hence the whole 'war council' concept."

We ate in silence for a few minutes. Then Murphy said, "We're coming at this from the wrong angle."

"Eh?" I said wittily.

"We're thinking like the good guys. We should be thinking like the bad guys. Figuring out what they had to face and get around."

I leaned forward a little and nodded at her to go on.

"I don't know as much about the supernatural aspects of this situation," she said. "I don't know much of anything about these Denarians. But I *do* know some things about Marcone. For example, I know that even if he has some underlings who want to take over the franchise, he's got more who are personally loyal or who will figure that bailing him out will reap them some major profits."

"Yeah," I said, tilting my head at her. "So?"

"So wherever they took him, it has to be somewhere Marcone's network can't reach. We can be virtually certain that they aren't hiding in plain sight."

I grunted. "Hell's bells, yeah. Not only that, but Marcone plans ahead. He had that panic room ready to go. In fact..." My eyes widened. "The location of your secret hidey-hole ought to be awfully secret, don't you think?"

"Sure," Molly said. "What good is a hiding place if everyone knows where it is?"

"The Denarians knew exactly where he was going," I said. "The spell they set up to tear down that building's defenses was no spur-of-the-moment magic—it was too complex. It had been planned out *ahead of time*."

"Son of a bitch," Thomas swore. "Someone inside Marcone's organization ratted him out."

"So if we find the rat..." Murphy said, catching on.

"We might find a trail that leads back to the Nickelheads," I finished with a fierce grin. "Was this war council concept a brilliant idea or what?"

Molly giggled. "Nickelheads."

"I have a gift," I said modestly. Then I added in a low voice, "And stop giggling. Wizards don't giggle. Bad for the image."

Molly buried her giggle in another mouthful of fries.

I slurped on my Coke and turned to Murphy. "So, what we need to do is figure out who's going to backstab Marcone. Someone highly placed enough to know the location of the safehouse, and who will profit by Marcone's absence."

"You're assuming the informant was complicit," Murphy said. "That wouldn't necessarily be true. Someone could have inadvertently given information away, or been compelled to cooperate."

I paused to think about that. "True. So we'll have to start by looking at who *could* have given away the safe house."

Murphy raked her fingers through her dark-golden hair, frowning in thought. "To be honest, SI doesn't cross trails with the outfit all that often. I'd have to make some calls to find out."

Thomas drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "The FBI would have more, wouldn't they?"

"And you know that guy Rick, right?" Molly said. "The one who was helping that jerk interrogate me?"

Murphy's eyes narrowed. She made a noise that wasn't quite an agreement, but wasn't quite a denial, either. Murphy has issues with her ex-husband.

It took Molly about half a second to figure out the expression on Murphy's face. She looked around the room somewhat desperately for a moment. "Uh, so, Harry, what's with Mister? He's been sleeping like a log the whole time we've been here."

"Which brings us to the second part of the problem," I said. "The hitters from the Summer Court. I think odds are good that they've got my place under surveillance."

Thomas arched an eyebrow. "I didn't sense anything coming in."

"You didn't sense anything walking through the front door of the pub, either," Murphy said archly.

"I was circling the block," Thomas said crossly. "Middle of a damned blizzard and you still can't find a parking spot. I hate this town."

"I've got warning spells spread out all around this place," I said. "Anything gets within a block and I'll probably know about it. And you've got to get up early in the morning to sneak past Mouse."

Mouse, who was sitting in front of Molly making soulful eyes at her chicken sandwich, glanced at me and wagged his tail.

“If they were very close, I’d know it. They’re probably spread out in a loose ring, watching who comes and goes,” I said. “The gruffs don’t really want to kick my apartment door down—not yet, at any rate. They’d rather fight where there won’t be collateral damage. But I’ve got a feeling that they aren’t at their best in all this snow.”

Molly frowned. “You think Mab is influencing the weather for you?”

“Maybe the ongoing record snowfall is a coincidence,” I said. “But if so, it’s awfully convenient.”

“Nothing’s ever convenient with you, Dresden,” Murphy said.

“Exactly my point.” I rubbed at my jaw. I needed to shave, but my throbbing nose was bad enough without adding a couple of razor nicks to the mess. I didn’t trust my hands to be steady. There were too many scary things moving around, and if I stopped long enough to think about how far in over my head I was getting, I might just crawl into a hole and pull it in after me.

Don’t think, Harry. You know too much about what you’re up against.

Analyze, decide, and act.

“Okay. We can assume that the Summer crew saw us come in. As long as we don’t leave, they’ll assume that we’re still here.”

Molly said, “Aha. I wondered why you asked me along.”

I winked at her. “Know thyself, grasshopper. Yeah. When we leave, I want you to make sure that the gruffs and their crew don’t notice. Hopefully that will buy us some more time while they play patient hunter and wait for me to expose myself again.”

“Heh,” Thomas sniggered. “Expose yourself.”

Murphy tossed an onion ring at him, which he caught and popped in his mouth.

“Meanwhile, I’ve got a new toy for you to play with, Thomas.”

My brother arched his eyebrows and focused his attention on me.

I went into my tiny bedroom and came back out with a small figurine, a rough figure of clay that resembled Gumby more than anything. I lifted it to my mouth and breathed on it, then murmured a word and said, “Catch.”

I tossed it to Thomas. My brother caught it and—

—suddenly a tall man, too lanky to look altogether healthy and with too many rough edges to be handsome, sat in Thomas’s chair, dressed in his

clothes. His hair had short waves in it, and looked perpetually rumpled. His eyes were a bit sunken in a permanent state of too little sleep, but the line of his chin, strong and clean, made him look harder and sharper than he might otherwise have appeared.

Hell's bells. Did I really look like that? Maybe I needed a makeover or something.

Murphy sucked in a breath and looked back and forth between Thomas, in his new look, and me. Molly didn't bother trying to hide her reaction, and just said, "*Cool.*"

"What?" Thomas asked. Though the figure speaking looked like me, the sound of my brother's voice was unchanged, and a spot of ketchup from his burger still speckled one side of his mouth. He looked around for a moment, then scowled, rose, and ducked into my bedroom to look at himself in the little shaving mirror in the drawer in my bathroom. "You've invented a doll that turns people into their ugly half brothers, eh?"

"Get over yourself, prettyboy," I called.

"If you think I'm letting you break my nose to complete the look, you're insane."

I grunted. "Yeah, that's a problem. I had to set it up to look like I looked the day I finished it."

"It isn't a problem," Molly said at once. "I'll get my makeup kit and fix up his eyes for him, at least. I don't know what we can do for his nose, but from a distance he should look right."

"If he looks like you, Harry," Murphy said, "doesn't that mean he's going to be attracting some sort of hostile attention?"

Thomas snorted and appeared in the doorway to my bedroom, his face ketchup-free. "Harry walks around looking like this all the *time*. Now, *that* would be awful. I can handle it for a few hours."

"Don't get cute on me," I said. "Give us two or three hours' lead time, and then head out. Stay on the roads and keep moving. Don't give them a chance to surround you. You've got your cell phone?"

"I suppose," he said. "But given how much I've been hanging around you two and the bad weather, I'd say the odds were against its working." I grunted and tossed him my leather duster and my staff. He caught them and frowned. "You sure you don't want these?"

"Just don't lose them," I said. "If the gruffs saw a double of me who wasn't wearing the coat, they'd know something was up in a heartbeat. The

idea is to keep them from getting suspicious in the first place. The charm should be good for another six, maybe seven hours. Once it drops, get back here.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Thomas said, sliding into my duster. The illusion magic didn’t make the thing fit him, and he had to fiddle with the sleeves, but it *looked* like it always did on me. “Karrin, don’t let him do anything stupid.”

Murphy nodded. “I’ll try. But you know how he is.” She picked up her coat and shrugged into it. “Where are we going?”

“Back to Gard,” I said. “The Carpenter place. I’m betting Marcone left her a sample of his hair to use to track him down, for just such an occasion as this.”

“But you said you couldn’t get through the, uh...the obscuring magic that the Nickelheads have.”

“Probably not. But if I know Marcone, he also collected samples of hair or blood from his people. To find them if they ever needed help or...”

Murphy grimaced. “If they rated early retirement.”

“I’m hoping Gard can give us an inside track on finding the leak, too,” I said.

Meanwhile, Molly hurried over to Thomas with her makeup kit and began modifying his face. Thomas’s face was about level with the chin of the illusion-me, if not a little lower, but I’d taught Molly the basics behind my illusion magic—such as it was. My skill with illusions was pretty basic, and it wouldn’t stand up to any serious examination. Molly was able to scrunch up her eyes and see past it.

Of course, you didn’t have to make the illusion utterly convincing if you could manage to keep people from having a good reason to take a hard look at it in the first place. The illusion doesn’t have to be fancy—it’s the misdirection behind it that really matters.

Molly had been caught in a Goth undertow of the youth culture, and it showed in her makeup. She had plenty of blues and purples and reds to darken Thomas’s eyes with, and the illusion of my face assumed an appearance fairly close to my own, sans the swollen nose.

“It’ll do,” I said. “Murph, you’re driving. Molly, if you don’t mind.”

My apprentice grinned as she hurriedly pulled on her coat. Then she stuck her tongue between her teeth, frowned fiercely, and waved her hand at me with a murmur. I felt the kid’s veil congeal about me like a thin layer of Jell-O, a wobbly and slippery sensation. The world went a little bit blurry,

as if I were suddenly looking at everything through hazy green water, but Murphy's face turned up into a grin.

"That's very good," she said. "I can't see him at all."

Molly's face was set with concentration as she maintained the spell, but she glanced at Murphy and nodded her head in acknowledgment.

"Right," I said. "Come on, Mouse."

My dog hopped to his feet and trotted over eagerly, waving his tail.

Murphy looked in my general direction, and arched an eyebrow.

"If the gruffs don't buy it, I want all the early warning I can get," I told her.

She lowered her voice and murmured, "And maybe you're a little nervous about going out without the coat and the staff?"

"Maybe," I said.

It was only a half lie. Insulting nickname or not, coat and staff or not, the more I thought about what we were up against, the more worried I became.

I wasn't nervous.

I was pretty much *terrified*.

Chapter Nineteen

It was dark by the time we got to Chez Carpenter, and we were beginning to slow down to turn into the driveway when Murphy said, “Someone’s tailing us.”

“Keep driving,” I snapped at once, from where I was crouched down in the back of Murphy’s Saturn. I felt like a groundhog trying to hide in a golf divot. “Go past the house.”

Murphy picked up speed again, accelerating very slowly and carefully on the snowbound streets.

I poked my head up just enough to peer into the night behind us. Mouse sat up with me and looked solemnly and carefully out the back window when I did. “The car with one headlight pointing a little to the left?” I asked.

“That’s the one. Spotted him about ten minutes ago. Can you see his plates?”

I squinted. “Not through this snow and with his lights in my eyes.”

Molly turned and knelt in the passenger seat, peering through the back window. “Who do you think it is?”

“Molly, sit down,” Murphy snapped. “We don’t want them to know that we’ve seen—”

The headlights of the car behind us grew brighter and began to sweep closer. “Murph, they saw her. Here they come.”

“I’m sorry!” Molly said. “I’m sorry!”

“Get your seat belts on,” Murphy barked.

Murphy began accelerating, but our pursuer closed the distance within a few seconds. The headlights grew brighter, and I could hear the roar of a big old throaty engine. I scrambled up to the backseat and clawed at the seat belt, but Mouse was sitting on the other side of the buckle, and before I could get it out from under him Murphy screamed, “Hang on!”

Collisions are always louder than I expect, and this one was no exception. The pursuing car smashed into the rear of the Saturn at maybe forty miles an hour.

Metal screamed.

Fiberglass shattered.

I got slammed back against my seat and then whiplashed into the back of the driver's seat.

Mouse bounced around, too.

Molly screamed.

Murph swore and wrenched at the steering wheel.

It could have been worse. Murphy had gained enough speed to mitigate the impact, but the Saturn went into a spin on the snowy streets and revolved in a graceful, slow-motion ballet.

Slamming my nose into the back of Murphy's seat didn't feel very good. In fact, it felt so not-good that I lost track of what was going on for a few seconds. I was vaguely aware of the car spinning and then crunching broadside into an enormous mound of snow.

The Saturn's engine coughed and died. My pounding heart sent thunder to my ears and agony to my nose. I barely heard the sound of a car door opening and closing somewhere nearby.

I heard Murphy twist around in her chair and gasp, "Gun." She drew her weapon, unfastened her seat belt, and tried her door. It was pressed into a solid wall of white. She snarled and crawled across a stunned Molly's lap, fumbling at the door.

I lurched to the other side of the car and clawed at the door until it opened. When it did I saw a slightly smashed-up car in the middle of the street, idling with both doors open. Two men stalked toward us through the snow. One was holding what looked like a shotgun, and his partner had an automatic in either hand.

Murphy threw herself out of the car and darted to one side. It wasn't hard to figure out why—if she'd started shooting immediately, Molly would have been in the line of any return fire. Murphy moved swiftly, crouched as close to the ground as she could get, but to do so cost her a precious second.

The shotgun roared and spat fire.

The blast smashed Murphy to the ground like a blow from a sledgehammer.

At the sight my scrambled brain congealed. I drew up my will, flung out a hand, and screamed, "*Ventas servitas!*"

Wind roared forth from my outstretched fingers. I directed it at the snow-covered ground in front of our attackers, and a sudden storm of flying bits of ice and snow engulfed the gunmen.

I kept the pressure on them, maintaining the spell, as I shouted, "Molly! Get to Murphy! Veil and first aid!"

Molly shook her head and gave me a glassy-eyed stare, but she climbed out of the car and staggered over to Murphy. A second later both of them vanished from sight.

I let up on the wind spell. Moving enough air to keep a gale-force wind going is a lot more work than anyone thinks. The air went still again except for swirling eddies of wind, frost devils that danced about in half a dozen whirling helices of snow. The two gunmen were revealed, crouching low, their arms still upraised to shield their eyes from the wind and stinging flakes of ice.

I missed my staff. I missed my duster. But I wasn't missing the .44 revolver I drew from my coat's pocket and aimed at the bad guys, while I raised my left hand, shaking the shield bracelet there out from under the sleeve of my coat.

I recognized one of the two gunmen, the one with the brace of pistols. His name was Bart something or other, and he was muscle for hire—cheap muscle, at that, but at least you got what you paid for. Bart was the kind of guy you called when you needed someone's ribs broken on a budget.

The other guy was familiar, too, but I couldn't put a name to him. Come on, it wasn't like I hung around in outfit bars, getting to know everyone. Besides, all I really needed to know was that he'd shot Murphy.

I started walking forward, straight at them, and stopped when I was maybe fifteen feet away. By the time I got there they were finally getting the ice and snow out of their eyes. I didn't wait for them to get their vision back. I aimed carefully and put a bullet through shotgun boy's right knee.

He went down screaming, and kept screaming.

Bart turned toward me and raised both guns, but my shield bracelet was ready. I made an effort of will, and a hemisphere of shimmering, translucent silver force flickered to life between Bart and me. He emptied both automatics at me, but he might as well have been shooting water pistols. My shield caught every shot, and I angled it to deflect the rounds

up into the air rather than into one of the houses in the neighborhood around us.

Bart's guns clicked empty.

I lowered the shield and lifted my revolver as he fumbled at his pockets for fresh magazines. "Bart," I chided him, "Think this one through."

He froze in place, and then slowly moved his hands away from his pockets.

"Thank you. Guess what I want you to do next?"

He dropped his guns. Bart was in his late thirties and good-looking, tall, with the frame of a man who spent a lot of his time at the gym. He had little weasel eyes, though, dark and gleaming. They darted left and right, as if seeking possible avenues of escape.

"Don't make me shoot you in the back, Bart," I said. "Bullet could hit your spine, paralyze you without killing you. That would be awful." I moseyed over to him, keeping the gun trained on him and making sure I always had a clear view of the other gunman. He was still screaming, though it had a hoarse, thready sound to it now. "Do you know who I am?"

"Dresden, Jesus," Bart said. "Nothing personal, man."

"You tried to kill me, Bart. That's just about as personal as it gets."

"It was a job," he said. "Just a job."

And I suddenly remembered where I'd seen the other guy before: unconscious in the hallway outside Demeter's office at Executive Priority. He was one of Torelli's flunkies, and he did not appear to have much more savvy than his boss.

"Job's gonna get you killed one day, Bart," I said. "Maybe even right now." I called out, "Molly? How is she?"

Murphy's voice came back to me instead of Molly's. "I'm fine," she said. The words were clipped, as if she were in pain. "Vest stopped all but one of the balls, and that one isn't bad."

"Her arm is bleeding, Harry," Molly said, her voice shaking. "It's stopping, but I don't think there's anything else I can do."

"Murph, get back to the car. Stay warm."

"Like hell, Harry. I will—"

I completed the sentence for her. "—go into *shock*. Don't be stupid, Murph. I can't lug your unconscious body around *and* keep these guys under control."

Murphy growled something vaguely threatening under her breath, but I heard Molly say, "Here, let me help you."

Bart's beady eyes were all but bugging out of his head as he searched for the source of the sound of Molly's voice. "What? What the hell?"

By now, I was sure, people in the houses around us had called the police. I was sure that the cops would be a few moments longer than usual arriving, too. I wanted to be gone by then, which meant that I didn't have much time. But Bart didn't have to know that. Just like Bart didn't have a clue what he'd gotten himself involved in.

I most likely didn't have time to grill even one of the gunmen. Torelli's goon was hurt and probably mad as hell at me. He was probably more loyal to Torelli, too, if he was a personal retainer. That really left me only one smart option for gathering information.

I stepped forward, shifting my gun to my left hand, and held out my right. I spoke a quiet word and a sphere of fire, bright as a tiny sun, kindled to life in the air above my right hand. I turned a slow stare on Bart and stepped close to him.

The thug flinched and fell onto his ass in the snowy street.

I released the sphere of fire, and it drifted closer to Bart. "Look, big guy," I said in an amiable tone. "I've had a tense couple of days. And I've got to tell you, burning someone's face off sounds like a great way to relax."

"I was just a hire!" Bart stammered, scooting back on his buttocks from the little sphere of fire. "Just a driver!"

"Hired to do what?" I asked him.

"I was just supposed to put you off the road and cover the shooter," Bart half screamed. He pointed a finger at the wounded man. "Him."

I spread my fingers a little wider, and the flaming sphere jumped a few inches closer to the goon's face. "Bart, Bart. Let's not change the focus here. This is about you and me."

"I'm just a contractor!" Bart all but screamed, writhing to get his face farther away from the fire. "They don't tell guys like me shit!"

"Guys like you always know more than you're told," I said. "So you've got something you can give the cops to keep yourself out of jail."

"I don't!" Bart said. "I swear!"

I smiled at him and pushed the fire sphere a little closer. "Inhale blue," I said. "Exhale pink. Hey, this *is* relaxing."

“Torelli!” Bart screamed, throwing up his arms. “Jesus, it was Torelli! Torelli wanted the job done! He’s been getting ready to move on Marcone!”

“Since when?” I demanded.

“I don’t know. Couple of weeks, maybe. That’s when they brought me in! Oh, Jesus!”

I closed my hand and snuffed out the sphere of fire before it could do more than scorch the sleeves of Bart’s coat. He lay there on the ground breathing roughly, and refused to lower his arms.

The sound of sirens ghosted through the streets. It was time to go.

“He been talking to anyone lately?” I demanded. “Anyone new? Setting up an alliance?”

Bart shook his head, shuddering. “I ain’t one of his full-timers. I ain’t seen nothing like that.”

“Harry!” Molly screamed.

I’d gotten too intent on the conversation with Bart, and I’d been too worried about Murphy to remember to take everybody’s guns away. The gunman on the ground had recovered his shotgun and worked the action, ejecting a spent shell and loading a new round. I spun toward him, raising my shield bracelet. The problem was that my spiffy redesigned bracelet, while better in a lot of ways than the old one, took a lot more power to use, and as a result I could bring it up only so fast. I threw myself to the ground and tried to put Bart between me and Torelli’s hitter. Bart scrambled frantically to clear the line of fire, and I knew that I wasn’t going to get the shield up in time.

Mouse must have darted off to the side at the beginning of the confrontation, because he appeared out of the shadows and came bounding through nearly three feet of snow as if he’d been running on racetrack turf. He was moving so fast that a bow wave of flying snow literally preceded him, like when a speedboat cuts through the water. He hit Torelli’s hitter just as the man pulled the trigger.

Shotguns are *loud*. Bart screamed an impolite word.

Mouse seized Torelli’s man by his wounded leg, the one I’d shot a minute ago, and began wrenching him around by it, shaking him as easily as a terrier shakes a rat. The goon had another ear-piercing scream left in him, a high-pitched thing that sounded like it had come from a slaughterhouse hog. The shotgun flew from his fingers, and he began flopping like a rag doll, unconscious from the pain.

The sirens grew louder, and I pushed myself back to my feet. Bart lay on the ground, rocking back and forth and screaming. The wild shotgun blast had hit him right in the ass. There was a lot of blood on his jeans, but he didn't seem to be gushing anything from a major artery. Granted, depending on how much of the shot he'd caught, the wound could potentially maim, cripple, or maybe even kill him if there was any internal bleeding. But there are worse places to get hit, and with all the adrenaline surging through me, it seemed pretty hilarious.

Cackling, I called to Mouse and ran for the car.

Molly already had Murph buckled into the passenger seat. I had to crawl across her to get to the driver's side. She let out a blistering curse as I accidentally bumped her arm. The driver's chair was practically touching the steering wheel, and for a second I thought I was going to have to push down the pedals with one hand and drive with the other, but I managed to find the lever that made the seat slide back, and the car started on the first try.

"Dammit, Dresden," Murphy wheezed. "There were weapons involved. We have to go back."

Mouse sailed into the backseat through the open door, and Molly closed both doors on that side of the car. I rocked the steering wheel and wiggled the Saturn loose from the snow, then started off down the street. I still had an irrational smile plastered on my face. My cheeks hurt. "Not a chance, Murphy."

"We can't just let them *go*."

I suppressed another round of adrenaline giggles. "They aren't going anywhere. And I'm persona non grata, remember? You want to get caught at the scene of a shooting with me mixed up in it?"

"But—"

"Dammit, Murphy," I said, exasperated. "Do you *want* me to go to jail? If we go back now, Torelli's goon tells them I shot him. They take my gun, and if they can find the bullet, or if it's still in his leg, it's assault with a deadly weapon."

"Not if you were defending yourself," Murphy grated.

"In a fair world, maybe," I said. "As it is, if there's no one but outfit goons there, two guys with records and a known association, both of them wounded, the cops are going to assume that they quarreled and shot each other. Two bad guys go away, you keep your job, and I don't get pulled off

of this case—which is the same thing as getting killed.” I glanced aside at her. “Who loses?”

Murphy didn’t say anything for a moment. Then she said, “Everyone loses, Harry. The law is there to protect everyone. It’s supposed to apply equally to everyone.”

I sighed and paid attention to the road. I’d drive for a few minutes to be sure we were in the clear, and then circle back to Michael’s place. “That’s wishful thinking, Murph, and you know it. Pretty sure Marcone’s lawyers love that attitude.”

“The law isn’t perfect,” she replied quietly. “But that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try to make it work.”

“Do me a favor,” I said.

“What?”

“Hold your nose shut, put on a Philadelphia accent, and say, ‘I *am* the law.’”

Murphy snorted and shook her head. I glanced aside at her. Her face was pale with pain, her eyes a little glassy. Her left arm was wrapped up in what looked like strips torn from Molly’s T-shirt.

I checked the rearview. My apprentice was, indeed, wearing nothing but a green lace bra under her winter coat. She was crouched down with both arms around Mouse, her face buried in his snow-frosted fur.

“Hey, back there,” I said. “Anyone hurt?”

Mouse yawned, but Molly checked him over anyway. “No. We’re both fine.”

“Cool,” I said. I looked over my shoulder for a second to give Molly a smile. “Nice veil back there. Fast as hell. You did good, grasshopper.”

Molly beamed at me. “Did my face look like that when you did that little ball-of-fire thing to me?”

“I prefer to think of it as a little ball of sunshine,” I said. “And you were stoic compared to that guy, grasshopper. You did a good job too, furface,” I told Mouse. “I owe you one.”

Mouse opened his mouth in a doggy grin and wagged his tail. It thumped against Molly, scattering a little snow against bare skin. She yelped and burst into a laugh.

Murphy and I traded a look. If the gunman had squeezed the trigger a hundredth of a second sooner or later, Murphy would be dead. The blast could have taken her in the head or neck, or torn into an artery. Without

Mouse I'd probably be dead, too. And if they'd gotten me and Murphy, I doubted they'd have left Molly behind to testify against them.

That one had been close—no supernatural opposition necessary. Molly might not realize that yet, but Murphy and I did.

"How's the arm, Murph?" I asked quietly.

"Just hit muscle," she said, closing her eyes. "It hurts like hell, but it isn't going to kill me."

"You want me to drive you to the emergency room?"

Murphy didn't answer right away. There was a lot more to the question than the words in it. Doctors are required by law to report any gunshot wound to the authorities. If Murph went in for proper medical treatment, they'd report it to the cops. And, since she *was* a cop, it would mean that she had to answer all kinds of questions, and it would probably mean that the truth of what happened behind us would come out.

It was the responsible, law-abiding thing to do.

"No, Harry," she said finally, and closed her eyes.

I exhaled slowly, relieved. That answer had cost her something. My hands had started shaking on the wheel. Generally speaking I'm fine when there's a crisis in progress. It's afterward that it starts getting to my nerves. "Sit tight," I said. "We'll get you patched up."

"Just drive," she said wearily.

So I drove.

Chapter Twenty

“This is getting awfully murky, Harry,” Michael said, worry in his voice. “I don’t like it.”

Snow crunched under our feet as we walked from the house to the workshop. The daylight was fading as a second front hit the city, darkening the skies with the promise of more snow. “I don’t like it much either,” I replied. “But nobody came rushing up to present me with options.” I stopped in the snow. “How’s Murphy?”

Michael paused beside me. “Charity is the one who’s had actual medical training, but it seemed a simple enough injury to me. A bandage stopped the bleeding, and we cleaned the wound thoroughly. She should be careful to monitor her condition for the next few days, but I think she’ll be all right.”

“How much pain is she in?” I asked.

“Charity keeps some codeine on hand. It isn’t as strong as the painkillers at a hospital, but it should let her sleep, at least.”

I grimaced and nodded. “I’m going to hunt up the Denarians, Michael.”

He took a deep breath. “You’re going to attack them?”

“I should,” I said, a little more sharply than I’d meant to. “Because there are people who don’t deserve a second chance, Michael, and if these losers don’t qualify for the permanent shit list, I don’t know who does.”

Michael gave me a small smile. “Everyone does, Harry.”

A little shiver went through me, but I didn’t let it show on my face. I just rolled my eyes. “Right, right. Original sin,

God’s grace, I’ve heard this part before.” I sighed. “But I’m not planning to assault them. I just want to learn whatever I can about them before we square off.”

Michael nodded. “Which is why we’re standing out in the snow talking, I take it.”

“I need whatever information you can give me. And I don’t need another philosophical debate.”

Michael grunted. “I already got in touch with Father Forthill. He sent over a report on who we think might be in town with Tessa.”

I spent a couple of seconds feeling like an argumentative jerk. “Oh,” I said. “Thank you. That...that could help a lot.”

Michael shrugged. “We’ve learned to be wary of even our own intelligence. The Fallen are masters of deception, Harry. Sometimes it takes us centuries to catch one of them lying.”

“I know,” I said. “But you must have something solid.”

“A little,” he said. “We are fairly certain that Tessa and Imariel are the second-eldest of the Denarians. Only Nicodemus and Anduriel have been operating longer.”

I grunted. “Are Tessa and Nicodemus rivals?”

“Generally,” Michael replied. “Though I suppose it bears mentioning that they’re also husband and wife.”

“Match made in Hell, eh?”

“Not that it seems to mean much to either of them. They very rarely work together, and when they do it’s never good. The last time they did so, according to the Church’s records, was just before the Black Plague came to Europe.”

“Plagues? The Nickelheads did that last time they were in town.” I shook my head. “You’d expect a different tune or two in a husband-and-wife act that had been running that long.”

“Variety is the key to a happy marriage,” Michael agreed solemnly. His mouth quivered. “Nickelheads?”

“I decided their name gave them too much dignity, given what they are. I’m correcting that.”

“Those who underestimate them generally don’t survive it,” Michael said. “Be careful.”

“You know me.”

“Yes,” he said. “Where were we?”

“Plagues.”

“Ah, yes. The Nickelheads have used plagues to instigate the most havoc and confusion in the past.”

I fought off a smile that threatened my hard-ass exterior as Michael continued.

“It’s proven a successful tactic on more than one occasion. Once a plague has gained momentum, there’s almost no limit to the lives they can claim and the suffering they can inflict.”

I frowned and folded my arms. “Sanya said that Tessa preferred choosing eager...subjects, I suppose, over talented ones.”

Michael nodded. “The Fallen who follow Imariel go through bearers very quickly. None of them are kind to those they bond with, but Imariel’s crew are the monsters among the monsters. Tessa chooses their hosts from among the downtrodden, the desperate, those who believe that they have nothing to lose. Those who will succumb to temptation the most rapidly.”

I grunted. “Lot of those around in the wake of a big nasty plague. Or any kind of similar chaos.”

“Yes. We believe that it is one reason she collaborates with Nicodemus from time to time.”

“She’s focused on short-term,” I said, getting it. “He’s all about the long view.”

“Exactly,” Michael said. “When he threw Lasciel’s coin at my son, it was a calculated gesture.”

“Calculated to rope me in,” I said.

“You,” Michael said, “or my son.”

A chill that had nothing to do with the air went through me. “Give the coin to a child?”

“A child who couldn’t defend himself. Who could be raised with the voice of a Fallen angel whispering in his ear. Shaping him. Preparing him to be used as a weapon against his own family. Imagine it.”

I stared around the yard that had been the scene of so much merriment only a few hours before. “I’d rather not,” I said.

Michael continued quietly. “In general, the families of the bearers of the Swords are sheltered against such evils. But things like that have happened before. And Nicodemus has borne a coin for a score of centuries. He has no difficulty with the notion of waiting ten or fifteen or twenty years to attain his goals.”

“That’s why you think he’s here,” I said. “Because going after someone like Marcone isn’t Tessa’s style.”

“It isn’t,” Michael said. “But I believe that if by helping it happen she could create the kind of environment she loves best, full of chaos and despair, it would be reason enough for her to join forces with her husband.”

“How many?”

“Tessa keeps a group of five other Fallen around her.” He gave me a quick smile. “Sorry. Four, now.”

“Thank Thomas,” I said. “Not me.”

“I intend to,” Michael said. “Nicodemus...” Michael shook his head. “I believe you’ve been told before that Nicodemus makes it a point to destroy any records the Church manages to build concerning him. That’s not going to be as easy to arrange in the future—”

“Hail the information age,” I interjected.

“—but our accounts regarding him are sketchy. We thought he had only three regular companions—but then he produced Lasciel’s coin, which had supposedly been in secure storage in a Chilean monastery. I think it would be dangerous to assume anything at this point.”

“Worst-case scenario,” I said, “how many other coins might he have with him?”

Michael shrugged. “Six, perhaps? But it’s just a guess.”

I stared at him. “You’re saying that they could have a dozen walking nightmares with them this time.”

He nodded.

“Last time they came to party, all three Swords were here. There were *four* Denarians. And we barely came out of it alive.”

“I know.”

“But you’re used to this, right?” I asked him. “The Knights take on odds like this all the time.”

He gave me an apologetic glance. “We like to outnumber them two to one if possible. Three to one when we can arrange it.”

“But Shiro said he had fought several duels against them,” I said. “One-on-one.”

“Shiro had a gift,” Michael said. “It was as simple as that. Shiro knew swordplay like Mozart knew music. I’m not like him. I’m not afraid of facing a single Denarian alone, but I would generally consider us evenly matched. My fate would be in God’s hands.”

“Super,” I sighed.

“Faith, Harry,” Michael said. “He will not abandon us. There will be a way for good to overcome.”

“Good overcame last time,” I said quietly. “More or less. But that didn’t stop them from killing Shiro.”

“Our lives belong to the Almighty,” Michael said evenly. “We serve and live for the sake of others. Not for our own.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m sure that will comfort your kids when they have to grow up without a father.”

Michael abruptly turned to face me squarely, and his right hand closed into a fist. “Stop talking,” he said in a low, hard tone. “Right now.”

So help me God, I almost took a swing at him out of sheer frustration. But sanity grabbed the scruff of my neck and turned me around. I stalked several paces away through the snow and stood with my back to him.

Sanity invited shame over for tea and biscuits. Dammit. I was supposed to be a wizard. Connected with my inner light, master of the disciplined mind, all of that kind of crap. But instead I was shooting my mouth off at a man who didn’t deserve it because...

Because I was scared. Really, really scared. I always started shooting my mouth off when something scared me. It had been an asset before, but it sure as hell wasn’t right now. When something scared me I almost always embraced my anger as a weapon against it. That, too, was usually an asset. But this time I’d let that fear and anger shape my thinking, and as a result I’d torn into my friend in the most tender spot he had, at a time when he could probably have used my support.

Then I realized why I was angry at Michael. I had wanted him to come flying in like Superman and solve my problems, and he’d let me down.

We’re always disappointed when we find out someone else has human limits, the same as we do. It’s stupid for us to feel that way, and we really ought to know better, but that doesn’t seem to slow us down.

I wondered if Michael had ever felt the same way about me.

“My last remark,” I muttered, “was out of line.”

“Yes,” Michael said. “It was.”

“You want to duke it out or arm wrestle or something?”

“There are better ways for us to spend our time. Nicodemus and Tessa should be our focus.”

I turned back to him. “Agreed.”

“This isn’t over,” he said, a harsh edge in his voice. “We’ll discuss it after.”

I grunted and nodded. Some of the tension left the air between us. Back to business. That was easier. “You know what I don’t get?” I said. “How do

you step from Nicodemus's end of recruiting Marcone all the way to Tessa's end of a society steeped in chaos and despair?"

"I don't know," Michael said. He moved his hand to the hilt of the sword he now wore belted to his side, an unconscious gesture. "But Nicodemus thinks he does. And whatever he's doing, I've got a bad feeling that we'd better figure it out before he gets it done."

Chapter Twenty-one

“If I knew of any trusted lieutenants preparing to betray my employer,” Miss Gard said with exaggerated patience, “they wouldn’t be *trusted*, now, would they? If you ask politely, I’m sure you can get someone to read the definition of *treachery* to you, Dresden.”

Michael smiled quietly. He sat at the workbench with one of his heavy daggers and a metal file, evidently taking some burrs out of the blade. Hendricks sat on a stool at the other end of the workbench. The huge enforcer had disassembled a handgun and was cleaning the pieces fastidiously.

“Okay, then,” I said to Gard. “Why don’t we start with everyone who knew the location of Marcone’s panic room.”

Gard narrowed her eyes, studying me. She looked better. Granted, it’s difficult to look much *worse* than disemboweled, but even so, she’d been reduced from ten miles of bad road to maybe two or three. She was sitting up in her cot, her back resting against the wall of the workshop, and though she looked pale and incredibly tired, her blue eyes were clear and sharp.

“I don’t think so,” she said quietly.

“There’s not going to be much need to keep Marcone’s secrets once he’s dead, or under the control of one of the Fallen.”

“I can’t,” she said.

“Oh, come on,” I said, throwing up my hands. “Hell’s bells, I’m not asking you for the launch codes to nuclear missiles.”

She took a deep breath and enunciated each word. “I. Can’t.”

From the workbench Hendricks rumbled, “S’okay. Tell him.”

Gard frowned at his broad back but nodded once and turned to me. “Comparatively few people in the organization were directly aware of the panic room, but I’m not sure that’s our biggest concern.”

The change in gears, from stonewall to narration, made me blink a little. Even Michael glanced up, frowning at Gard.

“No?” I asked. “If that’s not our biggest concern, what is?”

“The number of people who could have pieced it together from disparate facts,” Gard replied. “Contractors had to be paid. Materials had to be purchased. Architects had to be hired. Any of a dozen different things could have indicated that Marcone was building something, and piqued someone’s curiosity enough to dig deeper.”

I grunted. “At which point he could probably find out a lot by talking to the architects or builders.”

“Exactly. In this instance he was unusually lax in his standard caution when it came to matters of security. I urged him to take conventional measures, but he refused.”

“Conventional measures,” I said. “You’re talking about killing everyone who worked on it.”

“Secret passages and secret sanctums are quite useless if they aren’t *secret*,” Gard replied.

“Maybe he didn’t feel like killing a bunch of his employees to cover his own ass.”

Gard shrugged. “I’m not here to make moral judgments, Dresden. I’m an adviser. That was my advice.”

I grunted. “So who would know? The builders. People handling books and paychecks.”

“And anyone they talked to,” Gard said.

“That makes the suspect pool a little larger than is useful,” I said.

“Indeed it does.”

“Stop,” I said. “Occam time.”

Gard gave me a blank stare. Maybe she’d never heard of MC Hammer.

“Occam?” she asked.

“Occam’s razor,” I said. “The simplest explanation is most often correct.”

Her lips quivered. “How charming.”

“If we define a circle of suspects that includes everyone who might possibly have heard anything, we get nowhere. If we limit the pool to the most likely choices, we have something we can work with, and we’re much more likely to find the traitor.”

“We?” Gard asked.

“Whatever,” I said. “Who would have had a lot of access? Let’s leave the contractors out of it. They generally aren’t out for blood, and Marcone owns half the developers in town anyway.”

Gard nodded her head in acceptance. “Very well. One of three or four accountants, any of the inner circle, and one of two or three troubleshooters.”

“Troubleshooters?” Michael asked.

“When there’s trouble,” I told him, “they shoot it.”

Gard let out a quick snort of laughter—then winced, clutching at her stomach with both hands.

“Easy there,” I said. “You all right?”

“Eventually,” Gard murmured. “Please continue.”

“What about Torelli?” I asked.

“What about him?”

“Could he be our guy?”

Gard rolled her eyes. “Please. The man has the intellect of a lobotomized turtle. Marcone’s been aware of his ambition for some time now.”

“If he’s been aware of it,” I asked, “how come Torelli is still paying taxes?”

“Because we were using him to draw any other would-be usurpers into the open, where they could be dealt with.”

“Hung,” I said, frowning. “Could he have put pressure on any of the people in the know?”

“The bookkeepers, perhaps, but I think it highly unlikely. Marcone has made it clear that they enjoy his most enthusiastic protection.”

“Yeah, but Yurtle the Lobotomized isn’t all that bright.”

Gard blinked. “Excuse me?”

“My God, woman!” I protested. “You’ve never read Dr. Seuss?”

She frowned. “Who is Dr.—”

I held up a hand. “Never mind, forget it. Torelli isn’t all that bright. Maybe he figured he could strong-arm a bookkeeper and knock off Marcone before Marcone got a chance to demonstrate his enthusiasm.”

Gard pursed her lips. “Torelli has stupidity enough and to spare. But he’s also a sniveling, cowardly little splatter of rat dung.” She narrowed her eyes. “Why are you so focused on him?”

“Oh,” I said, “I can’t put my finger on any one thing. But my finely tuned instincts tell me that he’s hostile.”

Gard smiled. "Tried to kill you, did he?"

"He started trying to put the muscle on Demeter while I was there this morning. I objected."

"Ah," she said. "I had wondered how you found us."

"Torelli's goons tried shooting me up right before I came here."

"I see," Gard said, narrowing her eyes in thought. "The timing of his uprising is rather too precise to be mere coincidence."

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who thought of that."

She tapped a finger against her chin. "Torelli is no genius, but he *is* competent at his job. He wouldn't be operating that high in the organization if he weren't. I suppose it's possible that Torelli might have secured the information if he applied enough mean cunning to the task." She glanced up at me. "You think the Denarians recruited him to be their man on the inside?"

"I think they had to get their information about Marccone's panic room somewhere," I said.

"Worked that out, did you?" Gard said with a wan smile.

"Yeah. Turned your own hidey-hole into a fox trap. That's gotta sting the old ego, Miss Security Consultant."

"You wouldn't believe how much," Gard said, a flinty light in her eyes. "But I'll deal with that when it's time."

"You aren't dealing with anything but more sleep for a little while," I noted.

Her face twisted into a scowl. "Yes."

"So let me do the heavy lifting," I said.

"How so?"

I glanced around the workshop. "Could we speak privately for a moment?"

Hendricks, who had been reassembling his gun, turned his over-developed brow ridges toward me, scowling in suspicion. Michael glanced up, his face a mask.

Gard looked at me for a while. Then she said, "It's all right with me."

Hendricks finished putting the pistol back together, loaded it, and then loaded a round into the chamber. He made it a point to stare straight at me the entire while. Then he stood up, tugged on his coat, and walked straight toward me.

Hendricks wasn't as tall as me, which cut down on the intimidation factor. On the other hand, he had muscle enough to break me in half and we both knew it. He stopped a foot away, put the gun in his pocket, and said, "Be right outside."

"Michael," I said. "Please."

He rose, sheathing the dagger, and followed Hendricks out into the snow. The two kept a careful, even distance between them as they went, like dogs who aren't yet sure whether they're going to fight or not. I closed the door behind them and turned to Gard.

"Give me what I need to find and question Torelli."

She shook her head. "I can get you his address and the locations of the properties he owns, places he frequents, known associates, but he won't be at any of those places. He's been in the business too long to make a mistake like that."

"Oh, please," I said, rolling my eyes. "You've got blood or hair samples for all of your people somewhere. Get me Torelli's."

Gard stared at me with her poker face.

"For that matter," I added, "get me Marcone's. If I can get close enough, it might help me find him."

"My employer keeps them under intense security. He's the only one who can access them."

I snorted. "So get me samples from the second collection."

"Second collection?"

"You know, the one you're keeping. The one Marcone doesn't know about."

Gard brushed a stray lock of gold from her cheek. "What makes you think I have any such samples?"

I showed her my teeth. "You're a mercenary, Gard. Mercenaries have to be more cautious with their own employers than they do with the enemy they've been hired to fight. They take out insurance policies. Even if Marcone didn't have samples collected, I'm betting you did."

Her eyes drifted over to the door for a moment, and then back to me. "Let's pretend, for a moment, that I have such a collection," she said. "Why on earth would I hand it over to you? You're antagonistic to my employer's business, and could inflict catastrophic damage on it with such a thing in your possession."

“Gosh, you’re squeamish, considering the catastrophic damage his business inflicts on thousands of people every day of the year.”

“I’m merely protecting my employer’s interests.” She showed me her teeth. “Almost as though I’m a mercenary.”

I sighed and folded my arms. “What if I only took Torelli’s and Marcone’s samples?”

“Then you would still be capable of using that against Marcone in the future.”

“If I want to hurt Marcone,” I said, “all I need to do is sit down with a six-pack of beer and a bag of pretzels and let him twist in the wind.”

“Perhaps,” Gard admitted. “Swear to me that you will use none of the samples but Torelli’s and Marcone’s, that you will use neither of them for harm of any kind, and that you will return both to me immediately upon my request. Swear it by your power.”

Oaths in general carry a lot of currency among the preternatural crowd. They’re binding in more senses than the theoretical. Every time you break a promise, there’s a kind of backlash of spiritual energies. A broken promise can inflict horrible pain on supernatural entities, such as the Sidhe. When a wizard breaks a promise, particularly when sworn by his own power, the backlash is different: a diminishing of that magical talent. It isn’t a crippling effect by any means—but break enough promises and sooner or later you’d have nothing left.

As dangerous as the world had been for wizards over the past few years, any of us would have been insane to take the chance that our talents, and thus our ability to defend ourselves, might be hampered, even if that reduction was relatively slight.

I squared my shoulders and nodded. “I swear, by my own power, that I will abide by those restrictions.”

Gard narrowed her eyes as I spoke, and when I finished she gave me a single nod. She reached into her pocket, moving very gingerly, and withdrew a single silver key. She held it out to me. “Union Station, locker two fourteen. Everything is labeled.”

I reached out to take the key, but Gard’s fingers tightened on it for a second. “Don’t let anything you care about stand directly in front of it when you open it.”

I arched an eyebrow at her as she released the key. “All right. Thank you.”

She gave me a quick, tight smile. "Stop wasting time here. Go."

I frowned. "You're that worried about your boss?"

"Not at all," Gard said, closing her eyes and sagging wearily down on the cot. "I just don't want to be in the vicinity the next time someone comes to kill you."

Chapter Twenty-two

Murphy's car looked like it might have been through a war zone, and there were odd-colored stains in the snow underneath it. As a result we'd taken Michael's truck. I rode in the cab with Michael, while Mouse rode in the back. Yeah, I know, not safe, but the reality of the situation is that you don't fit two people our size and a dog Mouse's size into the cab of a pickup. There wouldn't be any room left for oxygen.

Mouse didn't seem to be the least bit distressed by the cold as we sallied forth to Union Station. He actually walked to the side of the truck and stuck his head out into the wind, tongue lolling happily. Not that there was a lot of wind to be had—Michael drove patiently and carefully in the bad weather.

After the third or fourth time we passed a car that had slid up onto a sidewalk or into a ditch, I stopped tapping my foot and mentally urging him to hurry. It would take a hell of a lot longer to walk to Union Station than it would to drive with what was obviously appropriate caution.

We didn't talk on the way. Don't get me wrong. It isn't like Michael is a chatterbox or anything. It's just that he usually has something to say. He invites me to go to church with him (which I don't, unless something is chasing us) or has some kind of proud-papa talk regarding something one of his kids has done. We'll talk about Molly's progress, or weather, or sports, or something.

Not this time.

Maybe he wanted to focus his whole attention on the road, I told myself.

Yeah. That was probably it. It couldn't have anything to do with me opening my big fat mouth too much, obviously.

A mound of plowed snow had collapsed at the entrance of the parking garage, but Michael just built up a little speed and rumbled over and through it, though it was mostly the momentum that got him inside.

The parking garage's lights were out, and with all that piled snow around the first level, very little of the ambient snow-light got inside. Parking garages are kind of intimidating places even when you can see them. They're even more intimidating when they're entirely black, except for the none-too-expansive areas lit by the glare of headlights.

"Well," I said, "at least there's plenty of available spaces."

Michael grunted. "Who wants to travel in weather like this?" He wheeled into the nearest open parking space and the truck jerked to a stop. He got out, fetched the heavy sports bag he used to carry *Amoracchius* in public, and slung the bag from his shoulder. I got out, and Mouse hopped out of the back to the ground. The truck creaked and rocked on its springs, relieved of the big dog's weight. I clipped Mouse's lead on him, and then tied on the little apron thing that declared him a service dog. It's an out-and-out lie, but it makes moving around in public with him a lot easier.

Mouse gave the apron an approving glance, and waited patiently until his disguise was in place.

"Service dog?" Michael asked, his expression uncomfortable. He had a flashlight in his right hand, and he shone it at us for a moment before sweeping it around us, searching the shadows.

"I have a rare condition," I said, scratching the big dog under the chin. "Can't-get-a-date-itis. He's supposed to be some kind of catalyst or conversation starter. Or failing that, a consolation prize. Anyway, he's necessary."

Mouse made a chuffing sound, and his tail thumped against my leg.

Michael sighed.

"You're awfully persnickety about the law all of a sudden," I said. "Especially considering that you're toting a concealed weapon."

"Please, Harry. I'm uncomfortable enough."

"I won't tell anyone about your Sword if you won't tell anyone about my gun."

Michael sighed and started walking. Mouse and I followed.

The parking garage proved to be very cold, very dark, very creepy, and empty of any threat. We crossed the half-buried street, Mouse leading the way through the snow.

"Snow's coming down thicker again now that the sun's down," Michael noted.

“Mab’s doing, maybe,” I said. “If it is, Titania would be less able to oppose her power after the sun went down. Which is also when Titania’s agents would be able to move most freely through town.”

“But you aren’t certain it’s Mab’s doing?” Michael asked.

“Nope. Could just be Chicago. Which can be just as scary as Mab, some days.”

Michael chuckled and we went into Union Station. It doesn’t look like that scene in *The Untouchables*, if you were wondering. That was shot in this big room they rent out for well-to-do gatherings. The rest of the place doesn’t look like something that fits into the Roaring Twenties. It’s all modernized, and looks more or less like an airport.

Sorta depressing, really. I mean, of all the possible aesthetic choices out there, airports must generally rank in the top five or ten most bland. But I guess they’re cost-effective. That counts for more and more when it comes to beauty. Sure, all the marble and Corinthian columns and soaring spaces were beautiful, but where do they fall on a cost-assessment worksheet?

The ghost of style still haunts the bits of the original Union Station that have been permitted to stand, but, looking around the place, I couldn’t help but get the same feeling I had when I looked at the Coliseum in Rome, or the Parthenon in Athens—that once, it had been a place of splendor. Once. But a long, long time ago.

“Which way are the lockers?” Michael asked quietly.

I nodded toward the northeast end of the building and started walking. The ticketing counters were closed, except for one, whose clerk was probably in a back room somewhere. There weren’t a lot of people walking around. Late at night train stations in general don’t seem to explode with activity. Particularly not in weather like ours. One harried customer-service representative from Amtrak was dealing with a small knot of angry-looking travelers who had probably just been stranded in town by the storm. She was trying to get them a hotel. Good luck. The airport had been closed since yesterday, and the hotels would be doing a brisk business already.

“You know your way around the station,” Michael commented.

“Trains are faster than buses and safer than planes,” I said. “I took a plane to Portland once, and the pilot lost his radio and computer and so on. Had to land without instruments or communications. We were lucky it was a clear day.”

“Statistically, it’s still the safest—” he began.

“Not for wizards it isn’t,” I told him seriously. “I’ve had flights that went smoothly. A couple of them just had little problems. But after that trip to Portland...” I shook my head. “There were kids on that plane. I’m going to live a long time. I can take a little longer to get there. Hey, Joe,” I said to a silver-haired janitor, walking by with a wheeled cart of cleaning supplies.

“Harry,” Joe said, nodding with a small smile as he passed by.

“I’ve been here a lot lately,” I said to Michael. “Traveling to support the Paranet, mostly. Plus Warden stuff.” I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t want the job, but I’ll be damned if I’ll do it half-assed.”

Michael looked back at the janitor thoughtfully for a moment, and then at me. “What’s that like?”

“Wardening?” I asked. I shrugged. “I’ve got four other Wardens who are, I guess, under my command.” I made air quotes around the word. “In Atlanta, Dallas, New York, and Boston. But I mostly just stay out of their way and let them do their jobs, give them help when they need it. They’re kids. Grew up hard in the war, though that didn’t give them brains enough to keep from looking up to me.”

Mouse suddenly stopped in his tracks.

Me too. I didn’t rubberneck around. Instead I focused on the dog.

Mouse’s ears twitched like individual radar dishes. His nose quivered. One paw came up off the ground, but the dog only looked around him uncertainly.

“Lassie would have smelled something,” I told him. “She would have given a clear, concise warning. One bark for gruffs, two barks for Nickelheads.”

Mouse gave me a reproachful glance, put his paw back down, and sneezed.

“He’s right,” Michael said quietly. “Something is watching us.”

“When isn’t it?” I muttered, glancing around. I didn’t see anything. My highly tuned investigative instincts didn’t see anything either. I hate feeling like Han Solo in a world of Jedi. “I’m supposed to be the Jedi,” I muttered aloud.

“What’s that?” Michael asked.

The station’s lights went out. All of them. At exactly the same time.

The emergency lights, which are supposed to come on instantly, didn’t.

Beside me Michael’s coat rustled and something clicked several times. Presumably he was trying his flashlight, and presumably it didn’t work.

That wasn't good. Magic could interfere with the function of technology, but that was more of a Murphy effect: Things that naturally could go wrong tended to go wrong a lot more often. It didn't behave in a predictable or uniform fashion. It didn't shut down lights, emergency lights, and battery-powered flashlights all at the same time.

I didn't know what could do that.

"Harry?" Michael asked.

Mouse pressed up against my leg, and I felt his warning growl vibrating through his chest.

"You said it, Chewie," I told my dog. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Chapter Twenty-three

People started screaming.

I reached for the amulet around my neck and drew it forth as I directed an effort of will at it to call forth light in the darkness.

And nothing happened.

I'd have stared at my amulet if I could have seen it. I couldn't believe that it wasn't working. I shook the necklace, cursed at it, and raised it again, forcing more of my will into the amulet.

It flickered with blue-white sparks for a moment, and that was it.

Mouse let out a louder snarl, the one I hear only when he's identified a real threat. Something close. My heart jumped up hard enough to bounce off the roof of my mouth.

"I can't call a light!" I said, my voice high and thin.

A zipper let out a high-pitched whine in the dark next to me, and steel rasped against steel, then rang like a gently struck bell. "Father," Michael's voice murmured gently, "we need Your help."

White light exploded from the sword.

About a dozen things crouching within three or four yards of us started screaming.

I'd never seen anything like them before. They were maybe five feet tall, but squat and thick, with rubbery-looking muscle. They were built more or less along the lines of baboons, somewhere between pure quadruped and biped, with wicked-looking claws, long, ropy tails, and massive shoulders. Some of them carried crude-looking weapons: cudgels, stone-headed axes, and stone-bladed knives. Their heads were apelike and nearly skeletal, black skin stretched tight over muscle and bone. They had ugly, almost sharklike teeth, so oversized that you could see where they were cutting their own lips and—

And they didn't have any eyes. Where their eyes should have been there was nothing but blank, sunken skin.

They screamed in agony as the light from Michael's sword fell on them, reeling back as if burned by a sudden flame—and if the sudden, smoldering reek that filled the air was any indicator, they had been.

“Harry!” Michael cried.

I knew that tone of voice. I crouched as quickly as I could, as low as I could, and barely got out of the way before *Amoracchius* swept through the space where my head had been—

—and slammed into the leaping form of one of the creatures that had been about to land on my back.

The thing fell back away from me and landed on the floor, thrashing. Its blood erupted into blue-white fire as it spurted from the wound.

I snapped my head around to stare at *Amoracchius*. More blood sizzled on the blade of the sword like grease on a hot skillet.

Iron.

These things were faeries.

I'd never seen them face-to-face before, but I'd read descriptions of them—including when I had been boning up on my book learning to figure out the identity of the gruffs. Given that this beastie was a faerie, there was only one thing it could be.

“Hobs!” I screamed at Michael as I drew the gun from my coat pocket. “They're hobs!”

After that I didn't have time to talk. A couple of the hobs around us had recovered enough from the shock of sudden exposure to light to fling themselves forward. Mouse let out his deep-chested battle roar and collided with one of them in midair. They went down in a tangle of thrashing limbs and flashing teeth.

The next hob leapt over them at me, stone knife in its knobby hand. I slipped aside from the line of his jump and pistol-whipped him with the barrel of the heavy revolver. The steel smashed into the hob's eyeless face, scorching flesh and shattering teeth. The hob screamed in pain as it flew by, crashing into one of its fellows.

“*In nomine Dei!*” Michael bellowed. I felt his shoulder blades hit mine, and the light from the great sword bobbed and flashed, followed by another scream from a hob's throat.

The hob wrestling with Mouse slammed the huge dog to the floor and rose up above him, baring its fangs.

I took a step toward it, jammed the revolver into its face, screamed, “Get off my dog!” and started pulling the trigger. I wasn’t sure what hurt the hob more—the bullets or the muted flashes of light from the discharge. Either way it recoiled so hard that it flung itself completely off of Mouse, who came to his feet still full of fight. I grabbed him by the collar and hauled him back with me until I felt Michael at my back again.

The hobs withdrew to the shadows, but I could still hear them all around us. As bright as Michael’s sword was, I should have been able to see the ceiling far overhead, but it spread out for only twenty feet or so—far enough to keep the hobs from leaping onto us in a single bound, but not much more than that.

I could hear screams still, drifting through the interior of the station. I heard a gun go off, something smaller than my .44, the rapid shots of panic fire. Whoever was packing was presumably shooting blindly into the dark. Hell’s bells, this was going to turn into a real mess if I didn’t do something, and fast.

“We’ve got to get out of the open,” I said, thinking out loud. “Michael, head for the ticketing counter.”

“Can’t you clear the way?” Michael asked. “I can cover you.”

“I can’t see in this crap,” I said. “And there are other people in here. If I start tossing power around I could kill somebody.”

“Then stay close,” Michael said. He moved out at a stalk, sword held high over his head, ready to sweep down on top of anything stupid enough to come leaping at him. We went over two dead hobs, both of them covered in blue flames that gave off barely any light but consumed the bodies with voracious rapidity. I heard a scuffle of claws on the floor and shouted a wordless cry.

Michael pivoted smoothly as a hob armed with a pair of stone axes rushed into the light of the holy sword. The dark faerie flung one of the axes at Michael on the way. My friend slapped it aside with a contemptuous flick of his sword, and met the hob with a horizontal slash that shattered its second ax and split open its torso all the way back to its crooked spine. The hob dropped, spewing flame, and Michael kicked its falling body back into its companions, scattering them for a moment and gaining us another twenty feet.

“Nice,” I said, keeping close, trying to watch the bobbing shadows all around us. “You been working out? You look good.”

Michael’s teeth flashed in a quick smile. “Wouldn’t speaking give these creatures a fine means of tar—” He broke off as *Amoracchius* flicked in front of my face, deflecting a tumbling stone knife. “Targeting us,” he continued.

Me and my big mouth. I shut up the rest of the way to the ticketing counter.

I led Michael around behind it and all but tripped over the form of a wounded man in a business suit. He let out a choked scream of pain and clutched at the bloodied cloth over his lower leg. There was the broken shard of a stone blade still protruding from the man’s leg.

“Harry,” Michael said, “keep moving. They’re gathering for a rush.”

“Okay,” I said. I knelt down by the wounded businessman and said, “Come on, buddy; this is no place to be sitting around.” I grabbed him underneath the arms and started backpedaling down the counter. “There’s a doorway back here somewhere, goes to the rear area.”

“Perfect,” Michael said. “I can hold that for as long as you need.”

The wounded man struggled to help me, but mostly all he did was make it harder to move him. He was making continuous sounds of terror and pain. I was glad that we had the barrier of the counter between us and the encroaching hobs. I didn’t particularly care to find out what getting hit with a sharp stone ax felt like.

We reached the door behind the ticketing counter, which was closed. I jiggled the handle, but it was apparently locked. I didn’t have time for this crap. I lifted my right hand and focused on one of the energy rings I wore. There was one of them on each finger, a band made of three rings woven into a braid. The rings stored energy, saving back a little every time I moved my arm, and allowing me to unleash that stored energy all in one spot.

I brought my will to bear on the door as I lifted my hand in a closed fist, focusing the energy of the rings into as small an area as I could. I hadn’t designed them for this kind of work. They’d been made to shove things roughly away from me before they could rip my face off. But I didn’t have a lot of time to waste putting together something neater.

So I aimed as best I could, triggered the ring, and watched it rip the doorknob, the lock, and the plate they were all mounted in right out of the

door, to send them tumbling into the room beyond. Unimpeded by any of those pesky metal security fittings, the door swung inward.

“Come on!” I said to Michael, seizing the wounded man again. “Mouse, lead the way.”

My dog padded through the doorway, crouched low and with his teeth bared. I practically walked on his tail as I came in behind him, and Michael was all but treading on the wounded man’s bloodied leg.

As the light from *Amoracchius* illuminated the room we entered, it revealed the harried customer-service rep we’d seen a few minutes before. She knelt on the floor, crucifix in hand, her head bowed as she frantically recited a prayer. As the light fell over her she blinked and looked up. The white fire of the holy sword painted the tear streaks on her face silver as her mouth dropped open in an expression of shock and stunned joy. She looked down at her crucifix, and back up at him again.

Michael took a quick glance around the room, smiled at the woman, and said, “Of course He’s there. Of course He listens.” He paused, then admitted, “Granted, He doesn’t always answer quite this quickly.”

There were other people in the room—the customers she’d been trying to find a hotel room for. When things had gone dark and scary she had somehow rounded them up and gotten them into the room. That took a lot more moxie than most people had. I also noted that she had been kneeling between the customers and the doorway. I liked her already.

“Carol,” I said, sharply enough to make her tug her gaze from Michael, who now stood in the doorway, holy Sword in hand. “Carol, I need you to give me a hand here.”

She blinked and then nodded jerkily and rose. She helped me drag the wounded man over to where the others were seated against the wall. “How did you know my name?” she stammered. “Are y-you two angels?”

I sighed and tapped a fingernail on the name tag she wore. “I’m sure as hell not,” I said. I jerked my head at Michael. “Though he’s about as close to one as you’re ever likely to see.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Harry,” Michael said. “I’m just a—” He broke off and ducked. Something solid whizzed past him and slammed a hole the size of my head into the drywall above us. Bits of dust rained down, and frightened people cried out.

Michael slammed the door shut, but without, you know, all those pesky metal security fittings, it swung open again. He slammed it closed and

leaned one shoulder against it, panting. Something struck the door with a heavy thump. Then there was silence.

I ripped open the wounded man's pant leg along the seam. The knife had hit him in the calf and he was a bloody mess, but it could have been worse. "Leave it in," I told Carol, "and make sure he stays still. That's close to some big veins, and I don't want to open them trying to take it out. Stay close to him and keep *him* from trying to take it out. Okay?"

"I...Yes, all right," Carol said. She blinked her eyes at me several times. "I don't understand what's happening."

"Me either," I responded. I rose and went to stand beside Michael.

"Those things are quite a bit stronger than I am," he said in a low rumble that the people behind us couldn't hear. "If they rush this door I won't be able to hold it shut."

"I'm not sure they will," I said.

"But you're here."

"I don't think they're after *me*," I said. "If they were, they wouldn't be going after everyone else, too."

Michael frowned at me. "But you said they were faeries."

"They are," I said. "But I don't think this was supposed to be a hit. There are too many of them for that. This is a full-blown assault."

Michael grimaced. "Then there are people in danger. They need our help."

"And they're going to get it," I said. "Listen, hobs can't stand light. Any kind of light. It burns them and it can kill them. That's why they called up this *myrk* before they came in."

"*Myrk*?"

"It's matter from the Nevernever. Think of it as a cellophane filter, only instead of being around a light, it is spread all through the air. That's why we couldn't see the light from my amulet, and why the muzzle flash of my gun was so muted. And that's how we're going to take them out."

"We get rid of the *myrk*," Michael said, nodding.

"Exactly," I said. I raked my fingers back through my hair and started fumbling through my pockets to see what I had on me. Not much. I keep a small collection of handy wizarding gear in the voluminous pockets of my duster, but the pockets of my winter coat contained nothing but a stick of chalk, two ketchup packages from Burger King, and a furry, lint-coated Tic Tac. "Okay," I said. "Let me think a minute."

Something slammed into the other side of the door and shoved Michael's work boots a good eighteen inches across the floor. A claw flashed through the opening at me. I got out of the way, but the sleeve of my coat didn't. The hob's claws ripped three neat slits in the fabric.

Michael lifted *Amoracchius* in one hand and drove its blazing length *through* the sturdy door. The hob screamed and pulled away. Michael slammed the door shut again and jerked the weapon clear. Dark blood sizzled on the holy blade. "I don't mean to rush you," he said calmly, "but I don't think we *have* a minute."

Chapter Twenty-four

“Dammit!” I swore. “This is my only winter coat!” I closed my eyes for a second and tried to focus my mind to the task. A *myrk* wasn’t like other forms of faerie glamour. Those could create appearance, and could simulate emotional states related to that appearance. The *myrk* was a conjuration, something physical, tangible, that actually did exist and would continue to do so as long as the hobs gave it enough juice, metaphorically speaking.

Wind might do it. A big enough wind could push the *myrk* away—but it would have to be an awful lot of wind. The little gale I’d called up to handle Torelli’s hitters would barely make a dent in it. I could probably do something more violent and widespread, but when it comes to moving matter around, you don’t get something for nothing. There was no way I’d be able to maintain that kind of blast long enough to get the job done.

I might be able to cut the *myrk* off from the hobs. If I could sever that connection it would prevent them from pouring constant energy into it, and poof, the *myrk* would resume its natural state as ectoplasm. Of course, cutting them off wouldn’t be a cakewalk. I would need some means of creating a channel to each and every hob in order to be sure I got the job done. I didn’t have anything I could use as a focus, and I had no idea how many of them were out there, anyway.

An empowered circle could cut the power to the spell from the other side of the equation, isolating the hobs from the flow of energy outside the circle. But the circle would need to encompass the entire freaking building. I doubted the hobs would be considerate enough to let me run outside and sprint around an entire Chicago city block to fire up a circle. Besides, I didn’t have that much chalk. Running water can ground out a spell if there’s enough of it, but given that we were inside a building, that wasn’t in the cards. So how the hell was I supposed to cut off this stupid spell, given the

pathetic resources I had? It isn't like there are a whole lot of ways to rob a widespread working of its power.

My nose throbbed harder, and I leaned my head back, turning my face upward. Sometimes doing that seemed to reduce the pressure and ease the pain a little. I stared up at the office ceiling, which had been installed at a height of ten or eleven feet, rather than leaving the place open to the cavernous reaches of the old station, and beat my head against the proverbial wall. The ceiling was one of those drop-down setups, a metal framework supporting dreary yet cost-effective rectangles of acoustic material, interrupted every few yards by the ugly little cowboy spur of an automatic firefighting sprinkler.

My eyes widened.

"Ha!" I said, and threw my arms up in the air. "Ha-ha! Ah-hahahaha! I am wizard; hear me roar!"

Mouse gave me an oblique look and sidled a step farther away from me.

"And well you should!" I bellowed, pointing at the dog. "For I am a fearsome bringer of fire!" I held up my right hand and with a murmur called up the tiny sphere of flame. The spell stuttered and coughed before it coalesced, and even then the light was barely brighter than a candle.

"Harry?" Michael asked in that tone of voice people use when they talk to crazy people. "What are you doing?"

The drywall to one side of the door suddenly buckled as a hob's claws began ripping through it. Michael bobbed to one side, temporarily leaving the door, held his thumb up to the wall, as if judging where the stud would be, and then ran *Amoracchius* at an angle through the drywall. The Sword came back hissing and spitting, while another hob howled with pain.

"Without the *myrk*, these things are in trouble," I said. "Carol, be a dear and roll that chair over here."

Carol, her eyes very wide, her face very pale, did so. She gave the chair a little push, so that it came the last six feet on its own.

Michael's shoulder hit the door as another hob tried to push in. The creature wasn't stupid. It didn't keep trying to force the door when *Amoracchius* plunged through the wood as if it had been a rice-paper screen, and Michael's Sword came back unstained. "Whatever you're going to do, sooner would be better than later."

"Two minutes," I said. I rolled the chair to the right spot and stood up on it. I wobbled for a second, then stabilized myself and quickly unscrewed

the sprinkler from its housing. Foul-smelling water rushed out in its wake, which I had expected and mostly avoided. Granted, I hadn't expected it to smell quite so overwhelmingly stagnant, though I should have. Many sprinkler systems have closed holding tanks, and God only knew how many years that water had been in there, waiting to be used.

I hopped down out of the chair and moved out from under the falling water. I pulled one of the pieces of chalk out of my pocket, knelt, and began to draw a large circle all around me on the low-nap carpet. It didn't have to be a perfect circle, as long as it was closed, but I've drawn a lot of them, and by now they're usually pretty close.

"E-excuse me," Carol said. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"Our charming visitors are known as hobs," I told her, drawing carefully, infusing the chalk with some of my will as I did so. "Light hurts them."

A hob burst through the already broken drywall, this time getting its head and one shoulder through. It howled and raked at Michael, who was still leaning on the door. Michael's hip got ripped by a claw, but then *Amoracchius* swept down and took the hob's head from its shoulders in reply. Dark, blazing blood splattered the room, and some of it nearly hit my circle.

"Hey!" I complained. "I'm working here!"

"Sorry," Michael said without a trace of sarcasm. A hob slammed into the door before he could return to it, and drove him several paces back. He recovered in time to duck under the swing of a heavy club, then swept *Amoracchius* across the creature's belly and followed it up with a heavy, thrusting kick that shoved the wicked faerie out of the room and back into its fellows. Michael slammed the door shut again.

"B-but it's dark," Carol stammered, staring at Michael and me alternately.

"They've put something in the air called *myrk*. Think of it as a smoke screen. The *myrk* is keeping the lights from hurting the hobs," I said. I finished the circle and felt it spring to life around me, an intangible curtain of power that walled away outside magic—including the *myrk* that had been caught inside the circle as it formed. It congealed into a thin coating of slimy ectoplasm over everything in the circle—which is to say, me. "Super," I mumbled, and swiped it out of my eyes as best I could.

"S-so," Carol said, "what are you doing, exactly?"

“I’m going to take their smoke screen away.” I held the sprinkler head in my right hand and closed my eyes, focusing on it, on its texture, its shape, its composition. I began pouring energy into the object, imagining it as a glowing aura of blue-white light with dozens of little tendrils sprouting from it. Once the energy was firmly wrapped around the sprinkler, I transferred it to my left hand and extended my right again.

“B-but we don’t have any lights.”

“Oh, we have lights,” I said. I held out my right hand and called forth my little ball of sunshine. In the *myrk*-free interior of the circle, it was as white-hot and as bright as usual, but I could see that outside of the circle it didn’t spread more than five or six feet through the *myrk* out there.

“Oh, my God,” Carol said.

“Actually, all the regular lights are on too—they’re just being blocked. The *myrk* isn’t shutting down the electricity. These computers are all on, for example—but the *myrk* is keeping you from seeing any of the indicator lights.”

“Harry!” Michael called.

“You rush a miracle worker, you get lousy miracles!” I called back in an annoyed tone. The rest of the spell was going to be a little tricky.

“H-how are you doing that?” Carol breathed.

“Magic,” I growled. “Hush.” I wore a leather glove over my left hand, as usual, which should offer my scarred skin a little protection. All the same, this wouldn’t be much fun. I murmured, “*Ignus, infusiarus*,” and thrust the end of the sprinkler into the flame floating over my right hand.

“How does this help us?” Carol demanded, her voice shaking and frightened.

“This place still has electricity,” I said. Maybe I was imagining the smell of burned leather as the heat from the flame poured into the metal sprinkler. “It still has computers. It still has phones.”

“Harry!” Michael said, swinging his head left and right, staring up at the ceiling. “They’re climbing. They’re going to come through the roof.”

I began to feel the heat, even in the nerve-damaged fingers of my left hand. It was going to have to be hot enough. I drew up more of my will, lifted the sprinkler and the flame, and visualized what I wanted, the tendrils of energy around it zipping out to every other sprinkler head in the whole building. “And it still has its sprinklers.”

I broke the circle with my foot, and energy lashed out from the sprinkler to every other object shaped like it in the surrounding area. Heat washed out of me in a wave, headed in dozens of different directions, and I poured all the energy I could into the little ball of sunshine, which suddenly had several dozen sprinkler heads to absorb its energy instead of only one.

It took maybe ten seconds before the fire detector let out a howl and the sprinkler system chattered to life. People let out surprised little shrieks, and a steady emergency klaxon wound to life somewhere out in the station. Sparks flew up from several phones, monitors, and computers.

“Okay,” I said. “So the office doesn’t have computers. But the rest still applies.”

Michael looked up at me and showed me his teeth in a ferocious grin. “When?”

I watched my little ball of sunshine intensely as the water came down. For maybe half a minute nothing happened, except that we got drenched. It was actually kind of surprising how much water was coming down—surprising in a good way, I mean. I wanted lots of water.

Somewhere around the sixty-second mark I felt my spell begin to flicker, its power eroded away by the constant downpour.

“Wait for it,” I said. “Ready...”

At two minutes my spell buckled, the connection to the other sprinklers snapping, the fire in my hand snuffing out. “Michael!” I shouted. “Now!”

Michael grunted and flung open the door. Before he’d stepped through it there was a sudden flutter of faltering power in the air, and the holy blade blazed with light brighter than the heart of the sun itself.

He plunged through the door, and as the burning light of *Amoracchius* emerged into the station at large, dozens or hundreds of hob throats erupted into tortured cries. The sound of the wicked faeries’ screams was so loud that I actually felt the pressure it put on my ears, the way you can at a really loud concert.

But louder still was the voice of Michael Carpenter, Knight of the Cross, avenging angel incarnate, bearer of the blade that had once belonged to a squire called Wart. “*Lava quod est sordium!*” Michael bellowed, his voice stentorian, too enormous to come from a human throat. “*In nomine Dei, sana quod est saucium!*”

After the Sword had left the room, I could see that all the office lights had come back, as well as those outside. “Mouse!” I screamed. “Stay!

Guard the wounded!” I hurried after Michael and glanced back behind me. Mouse trotted forward and planted himself in the doorway between the hobs and the people in the office, head high, legs braced wide to fill the space.

Outside the sprinklers were doing a credible impersonation of a really stinky monsoon. I slipped in a puddle of water and burning hob blood a few feet outside the door. The light from the Sword was so bright, so purely, even painfully *white* that I had to shield my eyes with one arm. I couldn’t look directly at Michael, or even anywhere near him, so I followed him by the pieces of hob he left in his wake.

Several wicked faeries had been struck down by Michael’s sword.

They were the lucky ones.

Many more—dozens that I could see—had fallen too far away for Michael to have reached them with the blade. Those were simply lumps of smoldering charcoal spewing columns of greasy smoke, their meat flash-cooked away from bone. Some of the soon-to-be-former hobs were still thrashing as they burned.

Hell’s bells.

I don’t call him the Fist of God as a pet name, folks.

I followed Michael, alert for any dimming of the Sword’s light. If any of the sprinklers in the building were a different model from the one I’d used to focus my spell, it wouldn’t have been able to heat them and trigger them. If Michael wound up plunging back into the *myrk*, then the hobs, afforded a measure of protection from the light, would gang up on him—and fast.

But as luck (or maybe fate, or maybe God, but probably a cheap city contractor) would have it, it looked like they’d all been the same. Water came down everywhere, washing away the *myrk* as if it had been a layer of mud, replacing it with thousands upon thousands of fractured rainbows as the pure illumination of *Amoracchius* shone through the artificial downpour.

For the hobs, there was nowhere to hide.

I followed the trail of smitten fiends. Smitten fiends? Smited fiends? Smoted fiends? Don’t look at me. I never finished high school. Maybe learning the various conjugations of *to smite* had been in senior-year English. It sure as hell hadn’t been on my GED test.

I stopped and peered around as best I could through the blinding light and steady fall of water from the sprinklers, trying to get an idea of where

Michael was headed.

I felt a sudden, swift vibration that rose through the soles of my shoes, and then a heavy thud accompanying a second such tremor. I whirled to face the front of the building as glass and brick and stone exploded from the entry door. Behind it was a vague flicker of haze in the air, but as whatever was behind the veil entered the glare of *Amoracchius* and my impromptu thundershower, the spell faltered and vanished.

Twenty feet and four or five tons of Big Brother Gruff erupted from the veil.

He wore armor made of some kind of translucent crystal, and the sword in his hand was longer than my freaking car. His mouth opened, and I *felt* his battle roar rather than hearing it over the cacophony of combat, a sound so deep and loud that it should have been made by a freaking whale.

“Oh, yeah,” I muttered. “Today just keeps getting better and better.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Anybody with an ounce of sense knows that fighting someone with a significant advantage in size, weight, and reach is difficult. If your opponent has you by fifty pounds, winning a fight against him is a dubious proposition, at best.

If your opponent has you by eight *thousand* and fifty pounds, you've left the realm of combat and enrolled yourself in Road-kill 101. Or possibly in a Tom and Jerry cartoon.

My body was already in motion, apparently having decided that waiting on my brain to work things through was counterproductive to survival. It was thinking that the cat-and-mouse analogy was a pretty good one. While I was nimbler and could accelerate more swiftly than the huge gruff, he could build up more speed on a straightaway. Physically speaking, I had almost no chance of seriously harming him, while even a love tap from him would probably collapse my rib cage—another similarity.

Jerry wins on television, but in real life Tom would rarely end up with the short end of the stick. I don't remember Mister ever coming home nursing mouse-inflicted wounds. For that matter, he hardly ever came home from one of his rambles hungry. Playing cat and mouse is generally only fun for the cat.

My body, meanwhile, had flung itself to one side, forcing Tiny to turn as he pursued me, limiting his speed and buying me a precious second or three—time enough for me to sprint toward a section of floor marked off by a pair of yellow caution signs, where Joe the janitor had been waxing the floor. I crossed the wet, slick floor at a sprint and prayed that I wouldn't trip. If I went down it would take only one stomp of one of those enormous hooves to slice me in half.

Footgear like that isn't so hot for slippery terrain, though. As soon as I crossed to the other side of the waxed floor I juked left as sharply as I

could, changing direction. Tiny tried to compensate and his legs went out from under him.

That isn't a big deal, by itself. Sometimes when you run something happens and you trip and you fall down. You get a skinned knee or two, maybe scuff up your hands, and very rarely you'll do something worse, like sprain an ankle.

But that's at human mass. Increase the mass to Tiny's size, and a fall becomes another animal entirely, especially if there's a lot of velocity involved. That's one reason why elephants don't ever actually run—they aren't capable of it, of lifting their weight from the ground in a full running stride. If they fell at their size, the damage could be extreme, and evidently nature had selected out all those elephant wind sprinters. That much weight moving at that much speed carries a tremendous amount of energy—enough to easily snap bones, to drive objects deep into flesh, to scrape the ground hard enough to strip a body to the bone.

Tiny must have weighed twice what an elephant does. Five *tons* of flesh and bone came down all along one side of his body and landed hard—then slid, carrying so much momentum that Tiny more resembled a freight train than any kind of living being. He slid across the floor and slammed into the wall of a rental car kiosk, shattering it to splinters—and went right on through it, hardly even slowing down.

Tiny dug at the floor with the yellow nails of one huge hand, but they didn't do anything but peel up curls of wax as he went sliding past me.

I slammed on the brakes and tried to judge where Tiny looked like he'd coast to a halt. Then I drew in my will.

It was difficult as hell in the falling water, but I didn't need a lot of it. When it comes to intentionally screwing up technology, I've always had a gift.

I focused on the lights above the entire section of the station Tiny slid into, lifted my right hand, and snarled, "*Hexus!*" Some of them actually exploded in showers of golden sparks. Some of them let out little puffs of smoke—but every single one of them went out.

Michael had advanced down the concourse far behind me, and the light of *Amoracchius* was now shielded by the station's interior walls. When I took out the electric lights, it created a genuine swath of heavy shadows.

The sudden island of darkness drew hobs like corpses draw flies: burned, terrified, furious hobs whose tidbit-filled night on the town had suddenly

turned into a nightmare. They didn't have eyes, but they found their way to the dark easily enough, and I saw more than a dozen rush in, one of them passing within a couple of feet of me without ever slowing down or taking note of my presence.

Tiny started bellowing a second later, his huge voice blending with the vengeful howls of angry hobs.

"Ain't so big now," I panted, "are you?"

But as it turned out, Tiny was just as big.

A crushed hob flew out of the shadows and splattered the floor maybe twenty feet away. I don't mean that he was just rag-doll limp. He was crushed, *crushed* like a beer can, where Tiny's huge fist had simply seized the hob, squeezed it hard enough to empty it of various internal liquids, and then thrown it away.

Light flashed in the shadows, a long streak of sparks, like flint drawn along a long, long strip of steel, and suddenly low blue flames surrounded the blade of Tiny's sword. They were guttering, barely able to stay alight beneath the falling water, but they cast enough light to let me see what was happening.

The hobs had gone mad with hate.

It had been inevitable, I suppose. The minions of Winter and those of Summer do *not* play well with one another, and the denizens of Faerie do not behave like human beings. Their natures are far more primal, more immutable. They are what they are. Predators are swift to attack prey that has fallen and is vulnerable. Winter fae hate the champions of Summer. The hobs were both.

Several of them threw themselves at Tiny's head, while the others just started hacking with their crude weapons or biting with their sharklike teeth. Tiny's armor served him well in that mess, defending the most critical areas, and as hobs went for his throat the gruff started throwing his head back and forth. I thought it was panic for a second, until he slammed one of his horns into a hob with such power that it broke the wicked faerie's skull. His sword slewed back and forth in two quick, precise motions, and half a dozen hobs fell, dead and burning.

The others let out shrieks of terror and bounded away, their hatred insufficient to the task of withstanding the fallen gruff. Tiny rolled to his knees and began to push himself up, and though his expression was contorted with pain his inhuman eyes swept around until they spotted me.

Oh, crap.

I didn't wait for him to get up and kill me. I ran.

Of all the times to do without my jacket and staff. For crying out loud, what had I been thinking? That I had Summer so thoroughly outwitted that I wouldn't need them? That life just hadn't been challenging enough until now? *Stupid, Harry. Stupid, stupid.* I swore that if I lived through this, I'd make up dummy copies of my gear for when I needed Thomas to play stalking horse.

The ground started shaking as Tiny took up the chase behind me.

My options were limited. To my right was the exterior wall of the building, and I couldn't go outside into the deepening snow. My imagination treated me to a dandy image of me floundering in hip-deep snow while Tiny, with his far greater height and mass, cruised effortlessly up behind me and beer-canned me. Ahead of me was an empty hallway leading to another wall, and on my left were nothing but rows and rows of.....storage lockers.

I fumbled in my pocket again as I ran through the water sheeting the floor, and started trying to get a look at the numbers on the lockers. I spotted the one corresponding to Gard's key, and I skidded to a halt on the watery floor. I jammed the key in the lock frantically as Tiny, running with a limp but still running, closed the last dozen yards between us.

I had to time it perfectly. I raised my right hand, aimed at the hoof on his wounded leg, and waited for all of his weight to come forward onto it before triggering every energy ring on my right hand, unleashing a rushing column of force that hit him with the power of a speeding car.

The gruff 's hoof went out from under him again on the wet floor, and he pitched forward with a roar of frustration. He dropped his blade and reached for me with both hands as he fell.

I waited until the last second to jump back, ripping open the door to Gard's locker as I went.

I could only describe what happened next as a bolt of lightning. It wasn't lightning—not really. Real lightning did not have the raw, savage intensity of this...thing, and I realized with a startled flash of insight that this energy, whatever it was, was *alive*. White-hot power tinged with flashes of scarlet streaked out of the locker like a hundred hyperkinetic serpents, zigzagging with impossible speed. That living lightning ripped into Tiny, cutting through his crystalline armor as if it had been made of soft wax. It

burned and slashed and pounded the flesh beneath in a long line from Tiny's shoulder to his lower leg, letting out a screaming buzz of sound unlike anything I had ever heard before.

In the last fraction of a second before it vanished, the energy snapped back and forth like the tip of a whip, and Tiny's left leg came off at the knee.

The gruff screamed. Whatever that thing had been, it had taken the fight out of Tiny.

Hell's bells.

I stared at the maimed Summer champion and then at the open, innocent-looking locker. Then I walked slowly forward.

Tiny had only one eye open, and it didn't look like it would focus on anything. His breathing was rough, quick, and ragged, which translated into a seething, oat-scented breeze anywhere within ten or fifteen feet of his head.

Tiny blinked his other eye open, and though they still wouldn't focus he let out a weak-sounding grunt. "Mortal," he rasped, "I am bested." One of his ears flicked once and he exhaled in a sigh. "Finish it."

I walked past the fallen gruff without stopping, noting as I did that the stroke of energy that had severed his leg had cauterized it shut, too. He wasn't going to bleed to death.

I peered cautiously into the locker.

It was empty except for a single, flat wooden box about the size of a big backgammon kit. The back wall of the locker sported something else—the blackened outline of some sort of rune. It wasn't the first time I'd seen Gard employing some kind of rune-based magic, but I'd be damned if I knew how it was done. I reached out with my wizard's senses cautiously, but felt nothing. Whatever energy had been stored there was gone now.

What the hell? I reached in and grabbed the box. Nothing ripped me into quivering shreds.

I scowled suspiciously and slowly withdrew the box, but nothing else happened. Evidently Gard had considered her security measures to be adequate for dealing with a thief. Or a dinosaur. Whichever.

Once I had the case, I turned back to the gruff.

"Mortal," Tiny wheezed, "finish it."

"I try not to kill anything unless it's absolutely necessary," I replied, "and I've got no need to kill you today. This wasn't a personal matter. It's

done. That's the end of it."

The gruff focused his eyes and just stared at me for a startled moment. "Mercy? From a Winterbound?"

"I'm *not* bound," I snapped. "This is purely temp work." I squinted around. "I think the hobs have mostly cleared out. Can you leave on your own, or do you need me to send for someone?"

The gruff shuddered and shook his huge head. "Not necessary. I will go." He spread the fingers of one hand on the ground and started sinking into it as if it were quicksand. As portals to Faerie went, that was a new one for me.

"This is a onetime offer," I told him just before he was completely gone. "Don't come back."

"I shan't," he rumbled, his eyes sagging closed in weariness. "But mark you this, wizard."

I frowned at him. "What?"

"My elder brother," he growled, "is going to kill thee."

Then Tiny sank into the floor and was gone.

"*Another* one?" I demanded of the floor. "You've got to be *kidding* me!"

I leaned against the lockers, banging my head gently against the steel for a moment. Then I pushed myself back onto my feet and started jogging back toward where I had parted with Michael. Just because the hobs were gone from this part of the station didn't mean that there wasn't still a fight going on. Michael might need my help.

I picked up the trail of body parts again, though by this time most of them were mounds of dark powder, like charcoal dust, pounded to a gooey paste by the building's sprinklers. The patches of gunk got thicker as I continued in the direction I thought Michael had gone.

I followed the trail to the base of a ridiculously broad flight of stone stairs—the one that actually had been in *The Untouchables*. The parts were still recognizable as parts here. These hobs hadn't been dead for long. They lay in a carpet of motionless, burning corpses on the stairs. Judging by the way they'd fallen they had been facing up the stairs when they died.

Several fallen hobs bore wounds that indicated that Michael had hewed his way through them from behind. White knight he might be, but once that sword comes out, Michael puts his game face on, and he plays as hard as almost anyone I've ever seen.

Not that I could blame him. Not all the remains I'd passed had been those of hobs.

Three security guards were down, one maybe ten feet from the stairs, the other two on the stairway itself. They had fallen separately in the darkness.

I'd passed several other bloodstains that had almost certainly been fatal to their donors, unless the falling water had made them look more extensive than they actually were. I'd never encountered hobs face-to-face before, but I knew enough about them to hope that whoever had spilled that blood was dead.

Hobs had a habit of hauling victims back into their lightless tunnels.

I shuddered. I'd give the troubleshooters from Summer that much: All the gruffs wanted to do was kill me, clean, and that would be the end of it. I'd been carried into the darkness by monsters before. It isn't something I'd wish on anyone. Ever.

You don't really live through it, even if you survive. It changes you.

I pushed away bad memories and tried to ignore them while I thought. Some of the hobs had obviously taken their victims and run. According to the books it was their *modus operandi*. Though this entire attack seemed to indicate a higher level of organization than the average rampage, obviously whoever was behind it wasn't in complete control. Faeries share one universal trait—their essential natures are actively contrary, and they are notoriously difficult to command.

The hobs on the stairs were different from the ones I'd had to contend with at the front of the station. These all bore more advanced cutlery, probably made of bronze, and wore armor made of some kind of hide. To be clustered this thickly on the stairs, they had to have been at least a little organized, fighting in ranks, too.

Something had compelled these hobs to attack in unison. Hell, if the numbers of fallen hobs in front of me were any indication, the gang that came after Michael and me were probably stragglers who had gone haring off on their own, looking for a little carryout to take home.

So what had been the purpose of the attack? What the hell had drawn them all to the stairway?

Whatever was at the top, obviously.

Above me the light of the holy Sword flickered and began to fade. I chugged up the stairs as it did, still holding my fingers up to shield my eyes until the light dwindled, and caught up to Michael. He was breathing hard,

Sword still raised over his head in a high guard and ready to come sweeping down. I noted, idly, that the stench of stagnant water had vanished, replaced by the quiet, strong scent of roses. I lifted my face again and felt cool, clean, rose-scented water fall on my face. Falling through the light of the holy Sword had improved it, it would seem.

The last hob to fall, a big brute the size of a freaking mountain gorilla, lay motionless near Michael's feet. What was left of a bronze shield and sword lay in neatly sliced fragments around the body. Its blood spread sluggishly down the stairs, coated with blue-white flame as its body was slowly consumed by more of the same.

"Everybody can relax," I panted as I caught up to Michael. "I'm here."

Michael greeted me with a nod and a quick smile. "Are you all right?"

"Not bad," I said, barely resisting the temptation to turn the second word into a barnyard sound. "Sorry I wasn't much use to you once you waded in."

"It couldn't have happened without your help," Michael said seriously. "Thank you."

"*De nada*," I replied.

I went up the last few stairs and got a look at what the hobs had been after.

Children.

There must have been thirty kids around ten years old up at the top of the stairs, all of them in school uniforms, all of them huddled together in a corner, all of them frightened, most of them crying. There was one dazed-looking woman in a blazer that matched those of the children, together with two women dressed in the casual uniforms of Amtrak stewards.

"A train had just arrived," I murmured to Michael as I realized what had happened. "It must have gotten in through the weather somehow. That's why the hobs were here now."

Michael flicked *Amoracchius* to one side, shaking off a small cloud of fine black powder from the blade as he did. Then he put the weapon away. "It should be safe now, everyone," he said, his voice calm. "The authorities should be here any minute." He added in a quieter tone, "We should probably go."

"Not yet," I said quietly. I walked into the Great Hall far enough to see the area behind the first of the row of Corinthian pillars that lined the walls.

Three people stood there.

The first was a man, of a height with Michael, but built more leanly, more dangerously. He had hair of dark gold that fell to his shoulders, and the shadow of a beard resulting from several days without shaving. He wore a casual, dark-blue sports suit over a white T-shirt, and he held the bronze sword of a hob, stained with their dark blood, in either hand. He regarded me with the calm, remote eyes of a great cat, and he showed me some of his teeth when he saw me. His name was Kincaid, and he was a professional assassin.

Next to him was a young woman with long, curling brown hair and flashing dark eyes. Her jeans were tight enough to show off some nice curves, but not too tight to move in, and she held a slender rod maybe five feet long in one hand, carved with runes and sigils not too unlike mine. Captain Luccio had a long plastic tube hanging from a strap over one of her shoulders, its top dangling loose. Odds were good her silver sword was still stowed inside it. I knew that when she smiled, she had killer dimples—but from the expression on her face I wasn't going to be exposed to that hazard anytime soon. Her features were hard and guarded, though they did not entirely hide a fierce rage. I hoped it was reserved for the attacking hobs and not for me. The captain was not someone I wanted angry at me.

Standing between and slightly behind the two adults was a girl not much older than all the other children who had taken refuge in the Hall. She'd grown more than a foot since the last time I'd seen her, about five years ago. She still looked like a neatly dressed, perfectly groomed child—except for her eyes. Her eyes were creepily out of place in that innocent face, heavy with knowledge and all the burdens that come with it.

The Archive put a hand on Kincaid's elbow, and the hired killer lowered his swords. The girl stepped forward and said, "Hello, Mister Dresden."

"Hello, Ivy," I responded, nodding politely.

"If these creatures were under your command," the little girl said in a level tone, "I'm going to execute you."

She didn't make it a threat. There wasn't enough interest in her voice for it to be that. The Archive just stated it as a simple and undeniable fact.

The scary part was that if she decided to kill me, there'd be little I could do about it. The child wasn't simply a child. She was the Archive, the embodied memory of humanity, a living repository of the knowledge of mankind. When she was six or seven I'd seen her kill a dozen of the most dangerous warriors of the Red Court. It took her about as much effort as it

takes me to open the wrapper on a stack of crackers. The Archive was Power with a capital P, and operated on an entirely different level than I did.

“Of course they weren’t under his command,” Luccio said. She glanced at me and arched an eyebrow. “How could you even suspect such a thing?”

“I find it unlikely that an attack of this magnitude could be anything but a deliberate attempt to abduct or assassinate me. Mab and Titania have involved themselves in this business,” the Archive said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Mister Dresden is currently Winter’s Emissary in this affair—and need I remind you that hobs are beholden to Winter—to Mab?”

She hadn’t needed to remind me, though I’d been putting that thought off for a while. The fact that the hobs were Mab’s subjects meant that matters were even murkier than I thought, and that now was probably a reasonably good time to start panicking.

But first things first: Prevent the scary little girl from killing me.

“I have no idea who was ordering these things around,” I said quietly.

The Archive stared at me for an endless second. Then that ancient, implacable gaze moved to Michael. “Sir Knight,” she said, her tone polite. “Will you vouch for this man?”

Maybe it was just my imagination that it took Michael a second longer to answer than he might have done in the past. “Of course.”

She stared at him as well, and then nodded her head. “Mister Dresden, you remember my bodyguard, Kincaid.”

“Yeah,” I said. My voice didn’t exactly bubble with enthusiasm. “Hi, tough guy. What brings you to Chicago?”

Kincaid showed me even more teeth. “The midget,” he said. “I hate the snow. If it was up to me, I’d much rather be somewhere warm. Say, Hawaii, for example.”

“I am not a midget,” the Archive said in a firmly disapproving tone. “I am in the seventy-fourth percentile for height for my age. And stop trying to provoke him.”

“The midget’s no fun,” Kincaid explained. “I tried to get her to join the Girl Scouts, but she wasn’t having any of it.”

“If I want to glue macaroni to a paper plate, I can do that at home,” said the Archive. “It’s hours past my bedtime, and I have no desire to entangle ourselves with the local authorities. We should leave.” She frowned at Kincaid. “Obviously our movements have been tracked. Our quarters here

are probably compromised.” She turned her eyes back to me. “I formally request the hospitality of the White Council until such time as I can establish secure lodgings.”

“Uh,” I said.

Luccio made a quick motion with one hand, urging me to accept.

“Of course,” I said, nodding at the Archive.

“Excellent,” the Archive said. She turned to Kincaid. “I’m soaked. My coat and a change of clothes are in my bag on the train. I’ll need them.”

Kincaid gave me a skeptical glance but, tellingly, he didn’t argue with the Archive. Instead he vanished quickly down the stairs.

The Archive turned to me. “Statistically speaking, the emergency services of this city should begin to arrive in another three minutes, given the weather and the condition of the roads. It would be best for all of us if we were gone by then.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” I said. I grimaced. “Whoever did this is taking awful chances, moving this publically.”

The Archive’s not-quite-human gaze bored into me for a moment. Then she said, “Matters may be quite a bit worse than that. I’m afraid our troubles are just beginning.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Michael stopped in his tracks when he saw the gaping hole Tiny the gruff had left in the east wall of Union Station. “Merciful God,” he breathed. “Harry, what happened?”

“Little problem,” I said.

“You didn’t say anything to me.”

“You looked busy,” I told him, “and you already had a couple of hundred bad guys to handle.” I nodded at the hole. “I only had the one.”

Michael shook his head bemusedly, and I saw Luccio look at the hole with something like mild alarm.

“Did you get it?” Michael asked.

Luccio cocked her head at Michael when he spoke, and then looked sharply at me.

I gave Michael a level look and said, “Obviously.” Then I turned on my heel and whistled sharply. “Mouse!”

My dog, soggy but still enthusiastic, came bounding toward us over the water-coated marble floors. He slid to a stop, throwing up a little wave that splashed over my feet as he did. The Archive peered intently at Mouse as he arrived, and took a step toward him—but was prevented from going farther by Kincaid’s hand, which came to rest on her slender shoulder.

Michael frowned at the girl and then at the dog. “This,” he said, “brings up a problem.”

There was only so much room in the cab of Michael’s truck.

All of us were soaking wet, and there was no time to get dry before the authorities arrived. I didn’t think it completely fair that I got a number of less than friendly looks on the walk to the garage, after I explained that it had been me who set off the sprinkler system, but at least no one could claim that I hadn’t been willing to suffer the consequences right along with them.

The Archive might have been a creepy Billy Mummy-in-*The Twilight Zone* kind of child, but she was still a child. By general acclamation she was in the cab. Michael had to drive.

"I'm not letting her sit in there alone," Kincaid stated.

"Oh, come on," I said. "He's a Knight of the freaking Cross. He isn't going to hurt her."

"Irrelevant," Kincaid said. "What about when someone starts shooting at her on the way there? Is he going to throw his body in front of her to keep her from harm?"

"I—" Michael began.

"You're damned right he will," I growled.

"Harry," Michael said, his tone placating, "I'd be glad to protect the child. But it would be somewhat problematic to do that and drive at the same time."

Mouse let out a low, distressed sound, which drew my attention to the fact that the Archive had fallen uncharacteristically silent. She was standing beside Kincaid, shuddering, her eyes rolling back in her head.

"Dammit," I said. "Get her into the truck. Go, Kincaid, Michael."

Kincaid scooped her up at once, and he and Michael got into the cab of the truck.

"I-is y-your h-house far from here, Warden?" Luccio asked me.

She didn't look good. Well, she looked good given the circumstances. But she also looked soaked and half-frozen already, kneeling to hug Mouse, ostensibly rubbing his fur to help dry it and fluff it out. I'd seen Luccio in action, as captain of the Wardens of the White Council, and I had formed my opinion of her accordingly. When I looked at the woman who'd faced Kemmler's disciples without batting an eye, whom I'd once seen stand in the open under fire from automatic weapons to protect the apprentices under her care, I tended to forget that she was about five-foot-four and might have checked in at a hundred and thirty or forty pounds soaking wet.

Which she was.

In the middle of a blizzard.

"It isn't far," I said. Then I went up to the door beside Kincaid and said, "Put the kid on your lap."

"She wears the seat belt," Kincaid said. "She's in danger enough from exposure already."

“Luccio doesn’t weigh much more than Ivy does,” I said in a flat tone. “She’s in almost as much danger as the kid. So you’re holding Ivy on your lap and letting my captain ride in the cab, like a gentleman.”

Kincaid gave me a level look, his pale eyes cold. “Or what?”

“I’m armed,” I said. “You’re not.”

He looked at me levelly, then at my hands. One of them was in my coat pocket. Then he said, “You think I believe that you’d kill me?”

“If you try to make me choose between you and Luccio,” I said, with a brittle smile, “I’m pretty sure whom I’m going to bid aloha.”

His teeth flashed in a sudden, wolfish smile. And he moved over, drawing the freezing child onto his lap.

By the time I got back to Luccio she was upright only because Mouse sat placidly in the cold, supporting her. She mumbled some kind of protest in a faint, commanding tone, but since she said it in Italian I declared her brain frozen and assumed command of the local Warden detachment, which was handy, since it consisted of only me anyway. I bundled her into the truck’s cab and got her buckled in beside Kincaid. He helped with it—my fingers were too cold and stiff to manage very quickly.

“Harry,” Michael said. He reached back, drew a rolled-up thermal blanket from behind the truck’s front seat, and tossed it to me. I caught it and nodded my thanks with the cold already starting to chew at my belly.

That left me and Mouse in the back of the truck, both of us soaking wet, in the middle of winter, in the middle of a blizzard. The cold moved from my belly to my chest, and I curled up into a ball because I didn’t have much choice in the matter. Magic wasn’t an option. My palm-sized ball of flame wouldn’t get along well with the back of a moving truck, especially given how much I was already shaking. I wanted to get warm, not set myself on fire.

“S-s-s-sometimes ch-ch-ch-chivalry s-s-s-sucks,” I growled to Mouse, teeth chattering.

My dog, whose thick winter coat wasn’t much good after it had gotten a good soaking, leaned against me as hard as I leaned against him, underneath the rough blanket, while the cab of the truck heated up nicely, its windows fogging. I felt like a Dickens character. I thought about explaining that to Mouse, just to occupy my thoughts, but he was suffering enough without being forced to endure Dickens, even by proxy. So we made the trip in miserable, companionable silence. There might have been

emergency lights going by us. I was too busy enjoying the involuntary rhythmic contractions of every muscle cell in my freaking body to notice.

Thirty seconds into the trip I was fairly certain that I was going to black out and wake up five hundred years in the future, but as it turned out I had to endure only a miserable twenty minutes or so before Michael pulled up outside my apartment.

Both vehicle doors opened to the weary but authoritative ring of Luccio's voice. "Get him to the door while he can still let us in through his wards."

"I'm fine," I said, rising. Only it came out sounding more like, "Mmmnnngh," and when I tried to stand up I all but fell out of the truck. Michael caught me, and Kincaid moved quickly to help him lift me to the ground.

I dimly felt one of Kincaid's hands enter my jacket pocket and turn it out empty. "Son of a bitch," he said, grinning. "I knew it."

Luccio emerged from the truck's cab, carrying the entirely limp form of the Archive draped over one hip. The girl's arms and legs flopped loosely, her mouth hung open in sleep, and her cheeks were bright pink. "Get up, Dresden," she stated. Her voice was firm, but though warmed by the trip, she was still nearly as damp as she had been at the station, and I saw her buckle as the cold sank its teeth into her. "Hurry."

I moved my feet in a vague shuffle, and remembered somewhere that when you walked, you moved them alternately. This improved our progress considerably. We reached a door, and someone said something about dangerous wards.

No kidding, I thought. I've got some wards on my place that'll fry you to greasy spots on the concrete. But you should see the ones Gard can do.

Luccio snapped something to me about the wards, and I thought she looked cold. I had a fire at my place, which she could probably use. I opened the door for her, the way you're supposed to for a lady, but the damned thing was stuck until Michael shoved it open with his shoulder and muttered something disparaging about amateur work.

Then everything got sort of muddled, and my arms and legs hurt a lot.

I ended up thinking: *Man, my couch feels nice.*

Mouse snuffled at my face and then all but squashed me as he laid his head and most of his upper body across mine. I thought about chewing him out for it, but opted for sleep on my wonderful couch instead.

Blackness ensued.

I woke up to a room illuminated only by the light from my fireplace. I was toasty, though my fingers and toes throbbed uncomfortably. There was a gentle weight pressing down on me that proved to be virtually every blanket I owned. The deep, slow, steady sound of my dog's breathing whispered from the rug in front of the couch, and one of my hands was lying on the rough, warm, dry fur of Mouse's back.

Water trickled nearby.

Luccio sat on a footstool in front of the fire, facing the flames. My teapot hung on its latch over the fire. A basin of steaming water sat upon the hearth. As I watched, she dipped a cloth in the hot water and slid it over her shoulder and down the length of one arm, her face in profile to me. Her eyes were closed in an expression of simple pleasure. The light of the fire made lovely, exquisitely feminine shadows along the slender lines of her naked back, down to the waist of her jeans as she moved, muscles shifting beneath soft skin that shimmered golden like the firelight for a second after the warm cloth glided over it, leaving little wisps of vapor in its wake.

Something else had never really occurred to me before, either.

Luccio was beautiful.

Oh, she wasn't cover-girl pretty, though I suspected that with the right preparation she'd be damned close. Her features were appealing, particularly around her little Cupid's bow of a mouth, framed by its dimples, contrasted with a rather squared-off chin that stopped half an eyelash shy of masculinity. She had dark eyes that flashed when she was angry or amused, and her medium-brown hair was long, curling, and lustrous. She obviously took really good care of it—but there was too much strength in that face for her to be conventionally pretty.

Beauty runs deeper than that.

There was an inexpressible quality of femininity about her that appealed to me tremendously—some critical mixture of gentle curves, quiet grace, and supple strength that I had only that second realized happened to reside in the same place as the head of the Wardens. Maybe more important, I knew the quality of the person under the skin. I'd known Luccio for years, been in more than one tight spot with her, and found her to be one of the only veteran Wardens whom I both liked and respected.

She shook her hair to the other side of her back and washed the other shoulder and arm just as slowly, and just as evidently taking pleasure in doing so.

It had been a while since I'd seen a woman's naked back and shoulders. It had been considerably rarer than my views of the various nightmares my job kept exposing me to. I guess even among all the nightmares, sooner or later you'll get lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a beautiful dream. And despite the trouble I was in, for just that moment there, under all those blankets, I looked at something beautiful. It made me wish I had the talent to capture the sight with charcoal or inks or oils—but that had never been my gift. All I could do was soak up that simple sight: beautiful woman bathing in firelight.

I didn't actually notice when Luccio paused and turned her head to face me. I just noticed, suddenly, that she was returning my gaze, her dark eyes steady. I swallowed. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting. Sudden outrage, maybe, or a biting remark, or at least a blush. Luccio didn't do any of that. She just returned my stare, calm and poised and lovely as you please, one arm folded across her breasts while the other dipped the cloth into the steaming basin again.

"Sorry," I said finally, lowering my eyes. I was probably blushing. Dammit. Maybe I could pass it off as mild frostbite, heroically suffered on her behalf.

She let out a quiet little murmur of sound that was too relaxed to be a chuckle. "Did it displease you?"

"No," I said, at once. "God, no, nothing like that."

"Then why apologize?" she said.

"I, uh..." I coughed. "I just figured that a girl who came of age during the reign of Queen Victoria would be a little more conservative."

Luccio let out a wicked little laugh that time. "Victoria was British," she said. "I'm Italian."

"Bit of a difference, then?" I asked.

"Just a little," she replied. "When I was young, I posed for a number of painters and sculptors, you know." She tilted her head back and washed her throat as she spoke. "Mmm. Though that was in my original body, of course."

Right. The one that had been stolen by an insane necromancer, leaving Luccio's mind permanently trapped in a loaner. A really young, fit, lovely loaner. "I don't see how the one you're in now could possibly come up short by comparison."

She opened her eyes and flashed me a smile that was entirely too pleased and girlish. “Thank you. But I would not have you misunderstanding me. I’d avail myself of your shower, after being soaked in that foul soup, but the Archive is on your bed, and Kincaid has closed the door. He’s resting too, and I’d rather not have him go for my throat before he wakes. And you were asleep, so...” She gave a little shrug of her shoulders.

It did really interesting things to the shadows the fire cast upon her skin, and I was suddenly glad of all the blankets piled on me.

“Are you feeling all right?” Luccio asked me.

“I’ll live,” I said.

“It was gallant of you to face down Kincaid like that.”

“No problem. He’s an ass.”

“A very dangerous one,” Luccio said. “I wouldn’t have traveled with him if I had not seen him pass through the security checkpoint in Boston.” She rose, dropped the washcloth in the basin, and pulled her shirt on, giving me a rather intriguing view of her back and waist silhouetted against the firelight.

I sighed. Moment over. Back to business.

“What *were* you doing traveling with them?” I asked.

“Bringing them here for the parley,” she replied.

“Parley?”

“The Archive contacted Nicodemus Archleone regarding our accusations. He agreed to meet with us here, in Chicago, to discuss the matter. You are the initiating party in this instance, and I am here to serve as your second.”

I blinked at her. “You? *My* second?”

She turned to face me as she finished buttoning her shirt and smiled faintly. “Duty before ego. Relatively few of the Wardens with sufficient seasoning for the role were willing. I thought it might be best if you worked with me instead of Morgan.”

“That’s why they pay you the big bucks, Cap. That keen interpersonal insight.”

“That and because I’m quite good at killing things,” Luccio said, nodding. She turned to the fireplace and took Gard’s little wooden box off the mantel. “Dresden...”

“Hell’s bells,” I breathed, sitting up. “Captain, that thing is dangerous. Put it *down*.” I snapped out that last in a tone of pure authority, one I’d

gotten used to when working with Molly and various folks I'd met through the Paranet.

She froze in her tracks and arched an eyebrow at me, but only for a split second. Then she smoothly replaced the box and stepped away from it. "I see. You were holding it when we dragged you in here. You wouldn't let it go, in fact."

"Well," I said, "no."

"Which, I take it, explains what *you* were doing at the station."

"Well," I said, "yes."

"Quite a coincidence," she said.

I shook my head. "In my experience, when there's a Knight of the Cross around, there's no such thing as coincidence."

She frowned at that. "It's been a very long time since I've been to confession. Nearly a century, in fact. I'm not aware that the Almighty owes me any favors."

"Mysterious ways," I said smugly.

She laughed. "I take it they've used that line on you before?"

"Constantly," I said.

"A good man," she said. "You're lucky to have him as a friend."

I frowned and said quietly, "Yeah. I am." I shook my head. "When's the parley?"

"Noon, tomorrow." She nodded at the mantel. "Can you tell me what's in there?"

"Options," I said. "If the parley fails."

"Out with it, Dresden," she said.

I shook my head.

She put a fist on one hip. "Why not?"

"Gave my word."

She considered that for a moment. Then she nodded once and said, "As you wish. Get some more rest. You'll need it." Then she prowled over to my love seat, sank wearily down into it, and, without another word, curled up under a blanket. She was apparently asleep seconds later.

I thought about getting up and checking out Gard's case, maybe calling Michael and Murphy, but the weariness that suddenly settled on my limbs made all of that sound impossibly difficult. So I settled in a little more comfortably and found sleep coming swiftly to me as well.

The last thing I noticed, before I dropped off, was that under all the blankets I was entirely undressed.

And I was clean.

Chapter Twenty-seven

“I still don’t see why I can’t go,” Molly said, folding her arms crossly.

“You know how you told me how much you hate it when your parents quote scripture at you to answer your questions?” I asked her.

“Yeah.”

“I’m not gonna do that. Because I don’t know this one well enough to get the quote right.”

She rolled her eyes.

“But it’s something about the best way to defeat temptation is to avoid it.”

“Oh, please,” Molly said.

“Actually, he’s right,” Thomas said, passing over my duster. “Seriously. I know temptation.”

Molly gave my brother a sidelong look and blushed faintly.

“Stop that,” I told him.

Thomas shrugged. “Can’t help it. I’m hungry. I wound up jumping rooftop to rooftop for half an hour, dodging a bunch of three-foot-tall lunatics with bows and arrows.”

“Elves,” I murmured. “Someone on Summer’s team was calling in backup, too. Interesting. I wonder which side tipped the scales first.”

“You’re welcome,” Thomas said.

“Hey,” Molly snapped. “Can we get back on topic? I know how to handle myself, Harry. This is supposed to be a talk, not a fight.”

I sighed, turning to her. We were talking to each other in the Carpenters’ kitchen, while everyone else geared up in the workshop. Thomas had sneaked in the front door of the house to pass my staff and coat back to me, after his evening of decoy work.

“Grasshopper,” I said, “think who we’re going to be talking to.”

“Nicodemus. The head of the Denarians,” she said. “The man who tried to kill my father and my teacher, and did his best to put a demon inside my little brother’s head.”

I blinked. “How did you know about—”

“The usual, eavesdropping on Mom and Dad,” she replied impatiently. “The point being that I’m *not* going to be tempted to pick up one of his coins, Harry.”

“I’m not talking about *you* being tempted, kid,” I said. “I’m worried about Nicodemus. Given everything that’s going on, I’d rather not wave a Knight of the Cross’s brushed-with-darkness daughter under his nose. We’re trying to avoid a huge fight, not find new reasons to start one.”

Molly gave me a steady stare.

“Hey,” I said, “how’s that homework I gave you coming?”

She stared some more. She’d learned from Charity, so she was pretty good at it. I’d gotten Charity’s stare plenty, though, so I’d been inoculated. She turned in silence and stalked out of the kitchen.

Thomas snorted quietly.

“What?” I asked him.

“You really think you’re going to avoid a fight?”

“I think I’m not going to hand them any of Michael’s family as hostages,” I said. “Nicodemus has got something up his sleeve.” As I spoke, I made sure the little holdout knife in its leather sheath was still secured up mine. “The only question is who is going to start the music and where.”

“Where’s the meeting?”

I shrugged. “Neither party knows. Kincaid and the Archive are picking a neutral spot. They left my place early this morning. They’re going to call. But I doubt they’ll start it this soon. My money says that Nicodemus will want something in exchange for Marcone. That’s when he’ll make his move.”

“At the exchange?” Thomas asked.

I nodded. “Try to grab the whole tamale.”

“Uh-huh,” Thomas said. “Speaking of, I came by your place after I was done playing tag with assassin midgets last night. Got a whiff of perfume on the doorway and checked through the window on the south side of the house.” He gave me a sly grin. “About fucking time, man.”

I frowned at him. “What?”

The grin faded. “You mean you *still* didn’t...Oh, empty *night*, Harry.”

“What did you *see*?”

“I saw *you*, talking to a woman who had already taken half her *clothes* off for you, man.”

“Oh, come on,” I said. “Thomas, it wasn’t like that. She was just getting clean.” I gave him the short version of the previous evening.

Thomas gave me a look of his own. Then he thwapped me gently upside the head.

“Hey!” I said.

“Harry,” he said. “You were sleeping for *hours*. She had *plenty* of time to get clean. You think she sat around for all that time because she wasn’t tired just yet? You think she didn’t *plan* on you seeing her?”

I opened my mouth to answer and left it that way.

“For that matter, she could have settled down behind the couch, where you couldn’t have seen her if you *did* wake up,” Thomas continued. “Not right by the fire, where she made what I thought was quite a nice little picture for you.”

“I...I didn’t think she...”

He stared at me. “You didn’t make a move.”

“She’s...Luccio is my commanding officer, man. We...we *work* together.”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “That’s a twenty-first-century attitude, man. She’s a nineteenth-century girl. She doesn’t draw the lines the same way you and I do.”

“But I never thought—”

“I can’t believe this,” Thomas said. “Tell me you aren’t that stupid.”

“Stupid?” I demanded.

“Yeah,” he said bluntly. “Stupid. If she offered and you turned her down because you had a reason you didn’t want to, that’s one thing. Never realizing what she was talking about, though—that’s just pathetic.”

“She *never* said—”

My brother threw up his hands. “What does a woman need to do, Harry? Rip her clothes off, throw herself on top of you, and shimmy while screaming, ‘Do me, baby!’?” He shook his head. “Sometimes you’re a frigging idiot.”

“I...” I spread my hands. “She just went to sleep, man.”

“Because she was being thoughtful of you, you knob. She didn’t want to come on too strong and make you uncomfortable, especially given that she’s older and more experienced than you are, and your commanding officer to boot. She didn’t want to make you feel pressured. So she left you plenty of room to turn her down gracefully.” He rolled his eyes. “Read between the lines once in a while, man.”

“I...” I sighed. “I’ve never been hit on by a woman a hundred and fifty years older than me,” I said lamely.

“Try to use your brain around women once in a while, instead of just your juju stick.” Thomas tossed me my staff.

I caught it. “Everyone’s a critic.”

My brother purloined an apple from the basket on the island in the kitchen on his way to the door, glanced over his shoulder, and said, “Moron. Thank God Nicodemus is a man.”

He left, and I stood there for a second being annoyed at him. I mean, sure, he was probably right—but that only made it more annoying, not less.

Something else he was right about: Anastasia had looked simply amazing in front of that fire.

Huh.

I hadn’t really thought of her in terms of her first name before. Just as “Luccio” or “the captain” or “Captain Luccio.” Come to think of it, she’d been out of the dating game for even longer than I had. Could be that she hadn’t exactly been brimming with self-confidence last night, either.

The situation bore thinking upon.

Later.

For now, there was intrigue and inevitable betrayal afoot, and I had to focus.

I headed out to the workshop. The day was brighter than the one before, but the cloud cover still hadn’t gone. It had stopped snowing, though the wind kicked up enough powder to make it hard to tell. A check of the mirror had revealed that the tip of my nose, the tops of my ears, and the highest parts of my cheeks were rough and ruddy from exposure to cold and my brush with hypothermia. They looked like they’d suffered from a heavy sunburn. Added to my raccoon eyes, I thought them quite charming.

No wonder Luccio had thrown herself at me with such wanton abandon.

Dammit, Harry, focus, focus. Danger is afoot.

I opened the door to the workshop just as Michael folded his arms and said, "I still don't see why I can't go."

"Because we're trying to avoid a fight," Luccio said calmly, "and an atmosphere of nervous fear is not going to foster a good environment for a peaceful exchange."

"I'm not afraid of them," Michael said.

"No," Luccio said, smiling faintly. "But they're afraid of you."

"In any case," Gard said, "neither the Church nor the Knights are signatories of the Accords. Not to put it too bluntly, Sir Michael, but this is quite literally none of your business."

"You don't know these people," Michael said quietly. "Not the way I do."

"I do," I said quietly. "At least in some ways."

Michael turned to give me a steady, searching look. "Maybe," he said quietly. "Do you think I should stay away?"

I didn't answer him immediately. Gard watched me from where she sat on the edge of her cot, now dressed and upright, if not precisely healthy-looking. Hendricks sat at the workbench again, although he was sharpening a knife this time. Weapons nuts are always fiddling with their gear. Murphy, seated down the bench from Hendricks, was cleaning her gun. She wasn't moving her wounded arm much, though she apparently had full use of that hand. Sanya loomed in a corner near the workbench, patiently working some kind of leather polish into *Esperacchius's* scabbard.

"I don't *think* this is where they'll try to stick in the knife," I said quietly. I turned my eyes to Luccio. "I also don't think it would be stupid to have a couple of Knights on standby, in case I'm wrong."

Luccio's head rocked back a little.

"No reason not to hedge our bets," I told her quietly. "These people don't play nice like the Unseelie fae, or the Red Court. I've seen them in action, Captain."

She pursed her lips, and her eyes never wavered from my face. "All right, Warden," she said, finally. "It's your city."

"I did *not* agree to this," Gard said, rising, her expression dark.

"Oh, deal with it, blondie," I told her. "Beggars and choosers. The White Council is backing you up on this one, but don't start thinking it's because we work for you. Or your boss."

"I'm going to be there too," Murphy said quietly, without looking up from her gun. "Not just somewhere nearby. There. In the room."

Pretty much everyone there said, “No,” or some variant of it at that point, except for Hendricks, who didn’t talk a lot, and me, who knew better.

Murphy put her gun back together during the protests and loaded it in the silence afterward.

“If you people want to have your plots and your shadowy wars in private,” she said, “you should take them to Antarctica or somewhere. Or you could do this in New York, or Boise, and this isn’t any of my business. But you aren’t in any of those places. You’re in Chicago. And when things get out of hand, it’s the people I’m sworn to protect who are endangered.” She rose, and though she was the shortest person in the room, she wasn’t looking up at anyone. “I’m going to be there as a moderating influence with your cooperation. Or we can do it the other way. Your choice, but I know a lot of cops who are sick and tired of this supernatural bullshit sneaking up on us.”

She directed a level gaze around the room. She hadn’t put the gun away.

I smiled at her. Just a little.

Gard looked at me and said, “*Dresden*.”

I shrugged and shook my head sadly. “What? Once we gave them the vote, it went totally out of control.”

“You’re a pig, Harry,” Murphy growled.

“But a pig smart enough to bow to the inevitable,” I said. I looked at Gard and said, “Far as I’m concerned, she’s got a legitimate interest. I’ll back it.”

“Warden,” Luccio said in a warning tone, “may I speak to you?”

I walked over to her.

“She can’t possibly know,” Luccio said quietly, “the kind of grief she could be letting herself in for.”

“She can,” I replied as quietly. “She’s been through more than most Wardens, Captain. And she’s sure as hell covered my back enough times to have earned the right to make up her own mind.”

Luccio frowned at me for a moment, and then turned to face Murphy. “Sergeant,” she said quietly. “This could expose you to a...considerable degree of risk. Are you sure?”

“If it were your town,” Murphy said, “your job, your duty? Could you stand around with your fingers in your ears?”

Luccio nodded slowly and then inclined her head.

“Besides,” Murphy said, half smiling as she put her gun in her shoulder holster, “it’s not as if I’m leaving you people much choice.”

“I like her,” Sanya rumbled in his deep, half-swallowed accent. “She is so tiny and fierce. I don’t suppose she knows how to—”

“Sanya,” Michael said, his voice very firm. “We have talked about this.”

The dark-skinned Russian sighed and shrugged. “It could not hurt to ask.”

“*Sanya.*”

He lifted both hands in a gesture of surrender, grinning, and fell silent.

The door to the house banged shut, and running footsteps crunched through the snow. Molly opened the door to the workshop and said, “Harry, Kincaid’s on the phone. He’s got the location for the meeting.”

“Kincaid?” Murphy said in a rather sharp voice.

“Yeah, didn’t I mention that?” I asked her, my tone perfectly innocent as I headed for the door. “He showed up last night.”

Her eyes narrowed. “We’ll talk.”

“Tiny,” Sanya rumbled to Michael, clenching a demonstrative fist. “But *fierce.*”

Chapter Twenty-eight

People think that nothing can possibly happen in the middle of a big city—say, Chicago—without lots of witnesses seeing everything that happened. What most people don't really understand is that there are two reasons why that just ain't so—the first being that humans in general make lousy witnesses.

Take something fairly innocuous, like a minor traffic accident at a busy pedestrian intersection. *Beep-beep, crunch*, followed by a lot of shouting and arm waving. Line up everyone at that intersection and ask them what happened. Every single one of them will give you a slightly different story. Some of them will have seen the whole thing start to finish. Some of them will have seen only the aftermath. Some of them will have seen only one of the cars. Some of them will tell you, with perfect assurance, that they saw *both* cars from start to finish, including such details as the expressions on the drivers' faces and changes in vehicle acceleration, despite the fact that they would have to be performing simultaneous feats of bilocation, levitation, and telepathy to have done so.

Most people will be honest. And incorrect. Honest incorrectness isn't the same thing as lying, but it amounts to the same thing when you're talking about witnesses to a specific event. A relative minority will limit themselves to reporting what they actually saw, not things that they have filled in by assumption, or memories contaminated by too much exposure to other points of view. Of that relative minority, even fewer will be the kind of person who, by natural inclination or possibly training, has the capacity for noticing and retaining a large amount of detail in a limited amount of time.

The point being that once events pass into memory, they already have a tendency to begin to become muddled and cloudy. It can be more of an art form than a science to gain an accurate picture of what transpired based

upon eyewitness descriptions—and that's for a matter of relative unimportance, purely a matter of fallible intellect, with no deep personal or emotional issues involved.

Throw emotions into the mix, and mild confusion turns into utter havoc. Take that same fender-bender, make it an accident between a carload of neoskinhead types and some gangbangers at a busy crosswalk in a South Side neighborhood, and you've got the kind of situation that kicks off riots. No matter what happens, you probably aren't going to be able to get a straight story out of anyone afterward. In fact, you might be hard-pressed to get *any* story out of *anyone*.

Once human emotions get tossed into the mix, everything is up for grabs.

The second reason things can go unnoticed in the middle of the big city is pretty simple: walls. Walls block line of sight.

Let me rephrase that: Walls block line of involvement.

The human animal is oriented around a sense of sight. Things aren't real until we see them: Seeing is believing, right? Which is also why there are illusionists—they can make us see things that aren't real, and it seems amazing.

If a human being actually sees something bad happening, there's a better chance that he or she will act and get involved than if the sense of sight isn't involved. History illustrates it. Oh, sure, Allied governments heard reports of Nazi death camps in World War II, but that was a far cry from when the first troops actually saw the imprisoned Jews as they liberated the camps. Hearst had known it before that: *You furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war*. And according to some, he did.

Conversely, if you don't see something happening, it isn't as real. You can hear reports of tragedies, but they don't hit you the way they would if you were standing there in the ruins.

Nowhere has as many walls as big cities do, and walls keep you from seeing things. They help make things less real. Sure, maybe you hear loud, sharp noises outside some nights. But it's easy to tell yourself that those aren't gunshots, that there's no need to call the police, no need to even worry. It's probably just a car backfiring. Sure. Or a kid with fireworks. There might be loud wailing or screams coming from the apartment upstairs, but you don't *know* that the drunken neighbor is beating his wife with a rolling pin again. It's not really any of your business, and they're always fighting, and the man is scary, besides. Yeah, you know that there

are cars coming and going at all hours from your neighbor's place, and that the crowd there isn't exactly the most upright-looking bunch, but you haven't *seen* him dealing drugs. Not even to the kids you see going over there sometimes. It's easier and safer to shut the door, be quiet, and turn up the TV.

We're ostriches and the whole world is sand.

Newbies who are just learning about the world of wizards and the unpleasant side of the supernatural always think there's this huge conspiracy to hide it from everyone. There isn't. There's no need for one, beyond preventing actual parades down Main Street. Hell's bells, from where I'm standing, it's a miracle anyone *ever* notices.

Which is why I was fairly sure that our parley with the Archive and the Denarians in the Shedd Aquarium was going to go unremarked. Oh, sure, it was right in the middle of town, within a stone's throw of the Field Museum and within sight of Soldier Field, but given the weather there wasn't going to be a lot of foot traffic—and the Aquarium was in its off-season. There might be a handful of people there caring for the animals, but I felt confident that Kincaid would find a way to convince them to be somewhere else.

Murphy had rented a car, since hers was so busted-up. The past few days of snow had seen a load of accidents, and there weren't any compact cars left, so she'd wound up with a silver Caddy the size of a yacht, and I'd called shotgun. Hendricks and Gard rode in the backseat. Gard had gotten to the car under her own power, though she had been moving carefully. Luccio sat beside Gard with her slender staff and her silver rapier resting on the floorboards between her feet, though my own staff was a lot longer and had to slant back between the front seats and past Gard's head, up into the rear window well.

City work crews were still laboring to clear roads and access to critical facilities. An off-season tourist attraction was not high on anyone's priority list. For that matter, the Field Museum had been closed due to the weather, which meant that there really weren't any functioning public buildings for several hundred yards in any direction.

That could be a problem. Michael's white truck wasn't going to be able to get anywhere close without being spotted, which meant that he and Sanya were going to be two, maybe three minutes away from helping, provided they could be signaled at all. That was practically the other side of

the world, where a violent confrontation is concerned. On the other hand, it also meant that the bad guys weren't going to be able to bring in any help without being spotted, either.

Provided they were driving cars, of course.

Glass half-full, Harry, glass half-full. There was no profit to be had in a fight—not yet, anyway. Whatever Nicodemus was after, he'd have to make his demands before he had a chance to double-cross us out of whatever he wanted us to bring him. Besides, given what I'd seen of the Archive in action, he'd be freaking insane to try anything where she was officiating. She didn't brook slights to her authority lightly.

The nearest street had been cleared by city trucks, but none of the parking lots had been done, and the excess snow from the streets formed small mountains on either side of the road.

"Looks like we're going to have to walk in," Murphy said quietly.

"Keep circling. They keep the animals here year-round," I said quietly. "And they've got to be fed every day. The staff will have broken a trail in somewhere."

"Perhaps they let the exhibits go hungry during the storm," Gard suggested. "Few would venture into this for the sake of their paychecks."

"You don't do oceanography for the money," I said. "And you sure as hell don't take up working with dolphins and whales for the vast paycheck and the company car." I shook my head. "They love them. Someone's gone in every day. They'll at least have broken a foot trail."

"There," Murphy said, pointing. Sure enough, someone had hacked a narrow opening into the mounded snow at the side of the road and dug out a footpath on the other side. Murph had to park at the side of the road, with the doors of the rental car just an inch from the snow walls. If someone came along going too fast, given the condition the streets were in, the Caddy was going to get smashed, but it wasn't like she had a lot of choice.

We all piled out of the driver's side of the car into the wan light of early afternoon. Luccio and I both paused to put on our grey Warden's cloaks. Cloaks look cool and everything, but they don't go well with cars. Luccio buckled on a finely tooled leather belt that held a sword on her left hip and a Colt on her right.

My .44 was back in my duster pocket, and the weight of both the coat and the gun felt greatly comforting. The wind caught my coat and the cloak both, and almost knocked me over until I got them gathered in close to my

body again and under control. Hendricks, stolid and huge in his dark, sensible London Fog winter coat, went by me with a small smile on his face.

Hendricks took point, and the rest of us followed him through what could only generously be called a trail. Instead of the snow being up to our chests, on the trail we sank only to our knees. It was a long, cold slog up to the Aquarium, and then around the entire building, where the snow had piled up to truly impressive depths in the lee of the wind on the south side of the structure. Wind hustling in over the frozen lake felt like it had come straight from outer space, and everyone but Gard hunched up miserably against it. The trail led us to an employee's door in the side of the building, which proved to have had the lock housing on its frame covered in duct tape, leaving it open.

Hendricks opened the door, and I stuck my head in and took a quick look around. The building was dark beneath its smothering blanket of snow, except for a few dim night-lights set low on the walls. I didn't see anyone, but I took an extra moment or two to extend my senses into the building, searching for any lurking presences or hostile magicks.

Nothing.

But a little paranoia never hurts in a situation like this.

"Captain," I said quietly, "what do you think?"

Luccio moved up beside me and studied the hall beyond the doorway, her dark eyes flickering alertly back and forth. "It seems clear."

I nodded, said, "Excuse me," and went through the door in a burst of raging anticlimax. I stomped the snow off my boots and jeans as best I could as the others came in behind me. I moved farther down the hall, straining to sense anyone approaching, which meant that I heard the soft scuff of deliberately obtrusive footsteps two or three seconds before Kincaid rounded the far corner. He was dressed in his customary black clothing again, fatigue pants, and a hunting jacket over body armor, and he had enough guns strapped to his body to outfit a terrorist cell, or a Texan nuclear family.

He gave his chin a sharp little lift toward me by way of greeting. "This way, ple..." His eyes focused past me and his voice died in midcourtesy. He stared over my shoulder for a second, sighed, and then told me, "She can't be here."

I felt my eyebrows rising. The corners of my mouth went along for the ride. I leaned in a little to Kincaid and murmured, “You tell her.”

His gaze went from Murphy to me. A less charitable man than I might have called his expression sour. He drummed one thumb on the handle of a sidearm and asked, “She threaten to call in the constabulary?”

“She’s got this funny thing where she takes her oath to protect the city and citizens of Chicago seriously. It’s as if her promises mean something to her.”

Kincaid grimaced. “I’ll have to clear it with the Archive.”

“No Murphy, no meeting,” I said. “Tell her I said that.”

The assassin grunted. “You can tell her yourself.”

He led me through the halls of the Shedd, to the Oceanarium. It was probably the most popular exhibit there—a great big old semicircular building containing the largest indoor aquatic exhibits in the world. Its outer ring of exhibits sported a number of absolutely huge pools containing millions of gallons of water and a number of dolphins and those little white whales whose names I can never remember. The same as the caviar. Beluga, beluga whales. There were rocks and trees built up around the outsides of the pools, complete with moss and plants and everything, to make it look like the Pacific Northwest. Although I was fairly sure that the bleacher seats, where the audience could marvel at whales and dolphins who would show up and do their usual daily health inspections for their trainers to the sound of applause, weren’t indigenous to the Pacific Northwest. I think those were actually Floridian in origin.

A pair of dolphins swept by us in the water, flicking their heads out to get a look at us as they went. One of them made a chittering sound that wasn’t very melodic. The other twitched its tail and splashed a little water our way, all in good fun. They weren’t the attractive Flipper kind of dolphins. They were regular dolphins that aren’t as pretty and don’t get cast on television. Maybe they just refused to sell out and see a plastic surgeon. I held up a fist to them. Represent.

Kincaid scanned the bleachers, frowning. “She’s supposed to be sitting here. Dammit.”

I sighed and circled back toward the stairs to the lower level. “She might be the Archive but she’s still a kid, Kincaid.”

He frowned and looked at me. “So?”

“So? Kids like cute.”

He blinked at me. “Cute?”

“Come on.”

I led him downstairs.

On the lower level of the Oceanarium there’s an inner ring of exhibits, too, containing both penguins and—wait for it—sea otters.

I mean, come on, sea otters. They open abalone with rocks while floating on their backs. How much cuter does it get than small, fuzzy, floating, playful tool users with big, soft brown eyes?

We found Ivy standing in front of one of the sea otter habitats, dressed much more warmly and practically this time, and carrying a small backpack. She was watching two otters chase each other around the habitat, and smiling.

Kincaid stopped in his tracks when he saw that. Just to see what he’d do, I tried to step past him. He shot me a look like he’d murder me if I tried to interrupt her, and my opinion of him went up a notch. I eased back and waited. No skin off my teeth to let the girl watch the otters for a minute.

It had been hard sometimes, when I was a kid, after my magic had started coming in. I’d felt weird and different—alone. It had gradually distanced me from the other kids. But Ivy had never had the luxury of belonging, even temporarily. From what I understood, she’d been the Archive since she was born, fully aware and stuffed full of knowledge from the time she’d opened her eyes. I couldn’t even imagine how hideous *that* would be.

Hell, the more I learned as I got older, the more I wished I were ignorant again. Well. Innocent, anyway. I remembered what it was like, at least.

Ivy had never been innocent.

I could let her smile at sea otters. You bet.

A shadow moved behind me, and I willed myself not to be creeped out. I turned and saw the two dolphins from the tank above cruise by, observing us again. The huge tanks contained observation windows running the whole length of the second-level gallery, so you could see the cute things on one side, and ogle the homely dolphins and the caviar whales on the other.

From down here you could also see the far wall of the big tank, which was a curved wall of glass that faced the open waters of Lake Michigan. That always seemed a little sadistic to me. I mean, here were animals whom nature had equipped to roam the open vastness of the deep blue sea, being kept in a mere three million gallons or so of water. Bad enough to do

that to them without giving them a window seat onto all that open water too.

Or maybe it wasn't. I hear it kind of sucks to be a whale or a dolphin in the open ocean these days, given the state of the fishing industry.

"I guess they're looking at a can one way or another," I muttered.

"Hmmm?" Kincaid said.

"Nothing."

Ivy let out her breath in a satisfied sigh a moment later as the otters vanished into their den. Then she turned toward us and blinked. "Oh," she said. Her cheeks colored slightly, and for a moment she looked very much like a young girl. "Oh." She smoothed wrinkles that didn't exist in her trousers, nodded at Kincaid, and said, "Yes?"

Kincaid nodded toward me. "Local law enforcement wants a representative present to observe. Dresden's supporting it."

She took that in for a moment. "Sergeant Murphy?"

"Yes," I said.

"I see." She frowned. When she spoke, her tone was careful, as if she was considering each word before she spoke it. "Speaking as arbiter, I have no objection, provided both parties involved in the parley give their assent."

"Right," Kincaid said. He turned and started walking.

I nodded to Ivy, who returned the gesture. Then I turned and hurried to catch up to Kincaid. "So?" I asked him as we climbed the stairs.

"So," he said, "let's go talk to Nicodemus."

Kincaid led me down the way from the Oceanarium and out to the main entry hall. It's another grandiose collection of shining stone floor and towering Corinthian columns, arranged around a huge tank the size of a roller rink. It's full of salt water and coral and seaweed and all kinds of tropical fish. Sometimes there's a diver with a microphone built into his or her mask feeding the little sharks and fish and talking to gawking tourists. Diffused light floods in through an enormous, triangular-paneled cupola overhead.

The recent snow had blackened the panes of the cupola and drifted up over most of the glass front doors, so the only light in the room came from the little colored lights in the huge tank. Fish glided through the tank like wraiths, the odd light casting sinister shades over their scales, and their

shadows drifted disembodied over the walls of the room, magnified by the distance and the glass walls of the aquarium.

It was eerie as hell.

One of the shadows drew my attention as some instinct picked out a strong, subtle sense of menace about it. It took me a couple of seconds to realize that this particular shadow disturbed me because it was human, and moving in a perfect, gliding pace around the wall, behind the shadow of one of the tank's small but genuine sharks—even though the man who cast the shadow was standing perfectly still.

Nicodemus turned from contemplating the fish swimming in the tank so that I could see the outline of his profile against the softly colored lights. His teeth gleamed orange-red in the light of the nearest underwater lamp.

I stopped myself from taking an involuntary step back, but just barely.

"It is a metaphor," he said quietly. He had a good voice, mellow and surprisingly deep. "Look at them. Swimming. Eating. Mating. Hunting, killing, fleeing, hiding, each to its nature. All of them so different. So alien to one another. Their world in constant motion, always changing, always threatening, challenging." He moved one arm, sweeping it in a wider gesture. "They cannot know how fragile it is, or that they are constantly surrounded by beings with the power to destroy their world and kill them all with the twitch of a finger. It is no fault of theirs, of course." Nicodemus shrugged. "They are simply...limited. Very, very limited. Hello, Dresden."

"You're playing the creepy vibe a little hard," I said. "Might as well go for broke, put on a black top hat and pipe in some organ music."

He laughed quietly. It didn't sound evil as much as it did rich and supremely confident. "There's some irregularity with the meeting, I take it?"

Kincaid glanced at me and nodded.

"Local law enforcement wishes a representative to be present," I said.

Nicodemus's head tilted. "Really? Who?"

"Does it matter?" Kincaid asked, his tone bored. "The Archive is willing to permit it, if you have no objections."

Nicodemus turned all the way around finally. I couldn't see his expression, just his outline against the tank. His shadow, meanwhile, kept circling the room behind the shark. "Two conditions," he said.

"Go on," Kincaid said.

“First, that the representative be unarmed, and that the Archive guarantee his neutrality in the absence of factors that conflict with matters of law-enforcement duty.”

Kincaid glanced at me. Murphy wouldn’t like the “unarmed” part, but she’d do it. If nothing else, she wouldn’t want to back down in front of me—or maybe Kincaid.

But I had to wonder, what was Nicodemus’s problem with an armed cop? Guns did not bother the man. Not even a little. Why that stipulation?

I nodded at Kincaid.

“Excellent,” Nicodemus said. “Second...” He walked forward, each footstep sounding clearly upon the marble floors, until we could see him in the nearest floorlights. He was a man of medium height and build, his features handsome, strong, his eyes dark and intelligent. Hints of silver graced his immaculate hair, though he was holding up pretty well for a man of two thousand. He wore a black silk shirt, dark pants, and what could have been mistaken for a grey Western tie at his throat. It wasn’t. It was an old, old rope from the same field as his coin. “Second,” he said, “I want five minutes alone with Dresden.”

“No offense, Nick,” I said, “but that’s about five minutes longer than I want to spend with you.”

“Exactly,” he replied, smiling. It was the kind of smile you see at country clubs and in boardrooms and on crocodiles. “There’s really never a good opportunity for us to have a civilized conversation. I’m seizing the chance for a chat.” He gestured at the building around us. “Sans demolition, if you think you can refrain.”

I scowled at him.

“Mister Archleone,” Kincaid said, “are you offering a peace bond? If so, the Archive will hold you to it.”

“I offer no such thing,” Nicodemus said without looking away from me. “Dresden would count it as worthless coin, and his is the only opinion that really matters in this particular situation.” He spread his hands. “A talk, Dresden. Five minutes. I assure you, if I wished to do you harm, even the Hellhound’s reputation”—he paused deliberately to glance at Kincaid with naked contempt in his gaze—“would not make me hesitate for an instant. I would have killed you already.”

Kincaid gave Nicodemus a chill little smile, and the air boiled with potential violence.

I held up a hand and said quietly, “Easy there, Wild Bill. I’ll talk with him. Then we’ll have our sit-down. All nice and civilized.”

Kincaid glanced at me and arched a shaggy, dark-gold eyebrow. “You sure?”

I shrugged a shoulder.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll be back in five minutes.” He paused, then added, “If either of you initiates violence outside of the strictures of a formal duel, you’ll be in violation of the Accords. In addition, you will have offered an insult to the reputation and integrity of the Archive—which I will take personal action to amend.”

The wintry chill in his blue eyes was mostly for Nicodemus, but I got some of it too. Kincaid meant it, and I’d seen him in action before. He was one of the scarier people I knew; the more so because he went about matters with ruthless practicality, unhindered by personal ego or the pride one often encountered in the supernatural set. Kincaid wouldn’t care if he looked into my eyes as he killed me, if that was what he set out to do. He’d be just as happy to put a bullet through my head from a thousand meters away, or wire a bomb to my car and read about my death on the Internet the next morning. Whatever got the job done.

That kind of attitude doesn’t help you when it comes to finding flashy or dramatic ways to do away with your enemies, but what it lacks in aesthetics it makes up in economy. Marcone, whom this whole mess was about, worked the same way, and it had taken him far. You crossed such men at *extreme* peril.

Nicodemus let out another quiet, charming laugh. He didn’t look impressed by Kincaid. Maybe that was a good thing. Too much pride can kill a man.

On the other hand, from what I’d seen of him, maybe Nicodemus really *was* that tough.

“Run along, Hellhound,” Nicodemus said. “Your mistress’s honor is quite safe.” He drew an X on his chest. “Cross my heart.”

Maybe it was an inside reference. Kincaid’s eyes flashed with something hot and furious before they went glacial again. He nodded to me, then precisely the same way to Nicodemus, and left.

I’m pretty sure the room didn’t actually become darker and scarier and more threatening when I was left alone with the most dangerous man I’d ever crossed.

But it sure felt that way.

Nicodemus turned that toothy predator's smile to me as his shadow began to glide around the walls of the entry hall. Circling me. Like a shark.

"So, Harry," he said, walking closer, "what shall we talk about?"

Chapter Twenty-nine

“You’re the one who wanted a conversation,” I said. **“And don’t call me Harry. My friends call me Harry.”**

He turned one hand palm up. **“And who is to say I cannot be your friend?”**

“That would be me, Nick. I say. Here, I’ll show you.” I enunciated: **“You can’t be my friend.”**

“If I am to call you Dresden, it is only fair that you should call me Archleone.”

“Archleone?” I asked. **“As in ‘seeking whom he may devour’? Kinda pretentious, isn’t it?”**

For half of a second, the smile turned into something almost genuine. **“For a godless heathen, you are entirely too familiar with scripture. You know that I can kill you, do you not?”**

“We’d make a mess,” I said. **“And who knows? I might get lucky.”**

Really, really, really lucky.

Nicodemus moved a hand in acknowledgment. **“But barring luck.”**

“Yeah,” I said.

“And you offer such insouciance regardless?”

“Habit,” I said. **“It doesn’t make you special or anything, believe me.”**

“Oh, I picked the right coin for you.” He started to walk in a slow circle around me, the way you might a car at the dealership. **“There are rumors that a certain Warden has been flinging Hellfire at his foes. How do you like it?”**

“I’d like it better if it came in Pine Fresh and New Car instead of only Rotting Egg,” I said.

Nicodemus completed his circuit of me and arched an eyebrow. **“You haven’t taken up the coin.”**

"I would, but it's in my piggybank," I said, "and I can't break the piggy, obviously. He's too cute."

"Lasciel's shadow must be slipping," Nicodemus said, shaking his head. "It has had years to reason with you, and still you refuse our gifts."

"What with the curly little tail and the big, sad brown eyes," I said, as if he hadn't said anything.

One of his heels hit the ground with unnecessary force, and he stopped walking. He inhaled through his nose and out again. "Definitely the proper coin for you." He folded his hands carefully behind his back. "Dresden, you have a skewed image of us. We were operating at cross-purposes the first time we met, and you probably learned everything you know about us from Carpenter and his cohorts. The Church has always had excellent propaganda."

"Actually, the murder, torture, and destruction you and your people perpetrated spoke pretty loudly all by themselves."

Nicodemus rolled his eyes. "Dresden, please. You have done all of those things at one time or another. Poor Cassius told me all about what you did to him in the hotel room."

"Gosh," I said, grinning. "If someone had walked in on us in the middle of that sentence, would my face be red or what?"

He stared at me for a second, and the emotion and expression drained out of his features like dewdrops vanishing under a desert sunrise. What was left behind was little more than desolation. "Harry Dresden," he said, so softly that I could barely make it out. "I admire your defiance of greater powers than your own. I always have. But *tempus fugit*. For all of us."

I blinked.

For all of us? What the hell did he mean by that?

"Have you not seen the signs around you?" Nicodemus asked. "Beings acting against their natures? Creatures behaving in ways that they should not? The old conventions and customs being cast aside?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You're talking about the Black Council."

He tilted his head slightly to one side. Then his mouth twitched at a corner and he nodded his head very slightly. "They move in shadows, manipulate puppets. Some of them may be on your Council, yes. As good a name as any."

"Stop playing innocent," I spat at him. "I saw the leftovers of the Black Council attack on Arctis Tor. I know what Hellfire smells like. One of yours

was in on it.”

Nicodemus.

Blinked.

Then he surged forward—fast. So fast that by the time I’d registered that he was moving, my back had already hit the wall that had been twenty feet behind me. He hadn’t been trying to hurt me. If he had, the back of my head would have splattered open. He just pinned me there against the wall with one hand on my throat, tighter and harder than a steel vise.

“*What?*” he demanded, his voice still a whisper. His eyes, though, were very wide. Both sets of them. A second set, these glowing faintly green, had opened just above his eyebrows—Anduriel’s, I presumed.

“Ack,” I said. “Glarghk.”

His arm quivered for a second, and then he lowered his eyelids until they were almost closed. A moment later he very, very slowly relaxed his arm, allowing me to breathe again. My throat burned, but air came in, and I wheezed for a second or two while he stepped back from me.

I glared up at him and debated slamming him through one of those Corinthian columns by way of objecting to being manhandled. But I decided that I didn’t want to piss him off.

Nicodemus’s lips moved, but an entirely different voice issued from them—something musical, lyrical, and androgynous. “At least it has *some* survival instinct.”

Nicodemus shook his head as if buzzed by a mosquito and said, “Dresden, speak.”

“I’m not your friend,” I said, my voice rough. “I’m not your damned dog, either. Conversation over.” I took a few steps to one side so that I could move around him without taking my eyes off him, and started to leave.

“Dresden,” Nicodemus said. “Stop.”

I kept walking.

I was almost out of the room before he spoke again, resignation in his tone. “Please.”

I paused, without turning around.

“I...reacted inappropriately. Especially for this venue. I apologize.”

“Huh,” I said, and looked over my shoulder. “Now I wish I *had* brought Michael. He’d have fainted.”

“Your friend and his brethren are tools of an organization with its own agenda, and they always have been,” Nicodemus said. “But that’s not the issue here.”

“No,” I said. “The issue is Marcone.”

Nicodemus waved a hand. “Marcone is an immediate matter. There are long-term issues in play.”

I turned to face him and sighed. “I think you’re probably full of crap. But okay, I’ll bite. What long-term issues?”

“Those surrounding the activities of your Black Council,” Nicodemus said. “Are you *certain* you saw evidence of Hellfire in use at the site of the attack on Arctis Tor?”

“Yes.” I didn’t add the word *dummy*. Who says I ain’t diplomatic?

Nicodemus’s fingers flexed into the shape of claws and then relaxed again. He pursed his lips. “Interesting. Then the only question is if the contamination is among standing members of our Order or...” He let the thought trail off and glanced at me, lifting an eyebrow.

I followed the logic to the only other people in possession of any of the coins. “Someone in the Church,” I whispered, with a sick feeling in my stomach.

“Historically speaking, we get about half of the coins back that way,” Nicodemus noted. “What would you say if I told you that you and I might have a great many common interests in the future?”

“I wouldn’t say much of anything,” I said. “I’d be too busy laughing in your face.”

Nicodemus shook his head. “Shortsighted. You can’t afford that. Come with me for a week and see if you feel the same way when we’re done.”

“Even assuming I was stupid enough to go anywhere with you for an hour, much less a week, I saw how you treated Cassius. I’m not real eager to slide my nameplate onto his office door.”

“He didn’t adjust to the times,” Nicodemus replied with a shrug. “I wouldn’t have been doing him any favors by coddling him. We live in a dangerous world, Dresden. One adapts and thrives or one dies. Living on the largesse of others is nothing but parasitism. I respected Cassius too much to let him devolve to that.”

“Gosh, you’re chatty,” I said. “You were right. This is so much fun. It’s almost like...”

A horrible thought hit me.

Nicodemus was many things, but he wasn't a fool. He knew I wasn't going to sign on for his team. Not after the way he treated me the last time we'd met. He knew that nothing he said was going to sway me. I might have surprised him with that little nugget of information about Arctis Tor, but that could have been an act, too. All in all, odds were high that this conversation was accomplishing absolutely nothing, and Nicodemus had to know that.

So why was he having it? I asked myself.

Because the goal of the conversation doesn't have anything to do with the subject or the context of the conversation, I answered.

He wasn't here to talk to me about anything or convince me of anything.

He wanted to talk to me and keep me *here*.

Which meant that something else was about to happen somewhere else.

Wheels within wheels.

My God, it was a metaphor.

This *conversation* was a metaphor for the parley as a whole. Nicodemus hadn't come to talk to us about violations of the Accords. He'd *engineered* the parley, and his motivation had nothing to do with subverting Marcone's talents to the service of a Fallen angel.

He was after bigger game.

I whipped my staff toward Nicodemus, slamming my will through it in a surge of panicked realization, screaming "*Forzare!*" as I did. Unseen force lifted him from his feet and slammed him into one of the huge Corinthian columns like a cannonball. Stone shattered with a deafening crash like thunder, and a lot of rock started to fall.

I didn't stick around to see how much. It wouldn't kill him. I only hoped it would slow him down enough for me to get to the others.

"Kincaid!" I shouted as I ran. My voice boomed through the empty halls in the wake of the collapsing rubble. "Kincaid!"

I knew I had only seconds before all Hell broke loose.

"Kincaid, get the kid out of here!" I screamed. "*They're coming for Ivy!*"

Chapter Thirty

My brain flew along a lot faster than my feet.

Given the heavy snow outside, the first line of retreat the Archive would take would be into the Nevernever. The spirit world touches on the mortal world at all places and at all times. It gets weird once you realize that totally alien regions of the Nevernever might touch upon relatively close points in the real world. Crossing into the Nevernever is dangerous unless you know exactly where you're going—I don't use it as a fallback very often at all. But if you've really got your back to the wall, and you have more experience than I do at crossing over, you can get a feel for the crossing and almost always get to someplace relatively benign.

I figured it was safe to assume that the Archive would be savvy enough to feel comfortable stepping over—in fact, she would have chosen this location for the parley for precisely that reason. The Denarians would know it too, and they didn't want the Archive to escape their ambush and come back loaded for bear. They would have prepared countermeasures, much as they had for Marcone.

No, scratch that. *Exactly* the way they had for Marcone, I realized. The huge spell that had been used to tear apart the defenses of the crime lord's panic room hadn't simply been a way for the Denarians to secure the bait in this scheme. It had been a field test for their means to cut off the magical energy from a large area, and access to the Nevernever with it—and to imprison something *big* at the same time.

It was a bear trap, custom-designed for Ivy. They were going to spring that monstrous pentagram again.

Only this time I was going to be standing inside it when it happened.

Fortunately, the Shedd was a lot squattier and more stable than Marcone's old apartment building had been—though that didn't mean pieces big enough to kill people wouldn't fall when the beam ripped

through the walls. And though a lot of stonework was used, there was still the danger of fire.

Fire. In an aquarium. Breathe in the irony.

But more important, once that pentagram came up—and it was coming now; I could feel it, a faint stirring of power that slid along the edges of my wizard's senses like some huge and hungry snake passing by in the darkness—it was going to shut the building off from the rest of the world, magically speaking. That meant that I wasn't going to be able to draw in any power to use to defend myself, any more than I'd be able to breathe if someone plunged my head underwater.

Usually, when you work a spell, you reach out into the environment around you and pull in energy. It flows in from everywhere, from the fabric of life in the whole planet. You don't create a "hole" in the field of energy we call "magic." It all pours in together, levels out instantly, all across the world. But the circle about to go up was going to change that. The relatively tiny area inside the Shedd would contain only so much energy. Granted, it would be a fairly rich spot—there was a lot of life in the building, and it had hosted a lot of visitors generating a lot of emotions, especially the energy given off by all those children. But even so, it was a sealed box, and given the number of people present who knew how to use magic, the local supply wasn't going to last long.

Try to imagine a knife fight in an airtight phone booth—lots of heavy breathing and exertion, but not for long.

One way or the other, not for long.

That was their plan, of course. Without magic to draw upon, I was pretty much just a scrappy guy with a gun, whereas Nicodemus was still a nigh-invincible engine of destruction.

For a few seconds my steps slowed.

Put that way, it almost sounded a little crazy of me to be rushing into this. I mean, I was basically opting for a cage match with a collection of demons, and one that I would have to win within a matter of seconds or not at all—and I hadn't been all that impressive against the Denarians when I'd had relatively few constraints on what power I could wield against them.

I did some mental math. If the symbol the Denarians were using was approximately the same size as the one at Marcone's place, it would be big enough to encompass only the Oceanarium itself in the pentagram at its center. Murphy and the others, if they'd stayed where we'd come in, would

probably be safe. More to the point, if they'd stayed where they were, they would have no way to enter the Oceanarium.

That meant it would be just me and Ivy and maybe Kincaid—against Nicodemus, Tessa, and every Denarian they could beg, borrow or steal. Those were long odds. Really, really long odds. Ridiculously long odds, really. When you have to measure them in astronomical units, it probably isn't a good bet.

So, going in there would be bad.

If I didn't go in, though, it would be just Ivy and Kincaid against all of them. In a deadly business, Kincaid was one of the deadliest, at the top of the field for centuries—but there was only one of him. Ivy had vast knowledge to draw upon, of course, but once she'd been cut off and expended whatever magic she had immediately available to her, the only thing she'd be able to do with all that knowledge would be to calculate her worsening odds of escape.

Every hair on my body tried to stand up all at the same time, and I knew that the symbol was being energized. In seconds it would howl to life.

I guess in the end it came down to a single question: whether or not I was the kind of man who walks away when he knows a little kid is in danger.

I'd been down this road before: *Not* going in there would be worse.

Heat shimmers filled the air in the hall in front of me as I sprinted toward the Oceanarium.

Fight smarter, not harder, Harry. I drew in power on the way—a *lot* of power. If there wasn't going to be any magic available for the taking once the symbol went up, I'd just have to bring my own.

Usually I draw in power only when it's ready to flow directly out of me again, channeling the energy through my mind and into the structure of a spell. This time I brought it in without ever letting it out, and it built up as a pressure behind my eyes. My body temperature jumped by at least four or five degrees, and my muscles and bones screamed with sudden pain while my vision went red and flickered with spots of black. Static electricity crackled with every single motion of my limbs, bright green and painfully sharp, until it sounded like I was running across a field of bubble wrap. My head pounded like every New Year's hangover I'd ever had, all in the same spot, and my lungs felt like the air had turned to acid. I concentrated on keeping my feet underneath me and moving. One step at a time.

I pounded through the entry to the Oceanarium, felt a shivering sensation as I ran right through a veil I had not sensed was there, and all but barreled into a demonic figure crouched down on the floor. I skidded to a stop, and there was an instant of surprise as we stared at each other.

The Denarian was basically humanoid, as most of them were, a gaunt, even skeletal grey-skinned figure. Spurs of bone jutted out from every joint, slightly curved and wickedly pointed. Greasy, lanky hair hung from its knobby skull to its skinny shoulders, and its two pairs of eyes, one very human brown and one glowing demonic green, were both wide and staring in shock.

It was crouched amidst the preparations of a spell of some kind—a candle, a chalk circle on the floor, a cup made from a skull and filled with water—and it wore a heavy canvas messenger bag slung across one shoulder. One hand was still down in the bag, as if it had been in the midst of drawing something out of it when I'd come charging up.

Fortunately for me, my mind had been in motion. His had been tangled up in whatever spell he was doing, and he was slower to get back into gear than I was.

So I kicked him in the face.

He went down with a grunt, and a chip of broken tooth skittered across the floor. I didn't know what spell he was getting together, but it seemed a good bet that I didn't want him to finish it. I broke his circle with my will as I crossed it with my body, unleashing a ripple of random and diffused energies that had never had the chance to coalesce into something more coherent. I knocked his skull goblet into one of the enormous nearby tanks with my staff as I raised it and pointed one end of it at the stunned Denarian, snarling, "*Forzare!*"

Some of that searing storm of power I was holding in screamed out of my body and down through my staff, hurtling at the Denarian, an invisible cannonball surrounded by a cloud of static discharge. It was more power than I'd meant to unleash. If it hit him it was going to throw him halfway across Lake Michigan.

But while the Denarian's mortal set of eyes may have still been blank with shock and surprise, the glowing green set was bright with rage. The thorny Denarian lifted his left hand in a sweeping gesture, made a rippling motion of his fingers, drawing his hand toward his mouth, and...

...and he just *ate* my spell.

He *ate* it. And then that gaunt, skeletal face spread in a toothy smile.

“That,” I muttered, “is incredibly unfair.”

I lifted my left hand just as the Denarian crouched and vomited out a spinning cloud of black threads that came whirling through the air in dozens of tiny, spiraling arcs. I brought up my shield, but none of the threads actually came down to touch me—they landed all around me instead, in a nearly perfect circle.

And an instant later my shield stuttered and shorted out. I still had the energy for it—I hadn’t been cut off. But somehow the Denarian’s weird spell had disrupted the magic as it left my body. I tried to throw another bolt of force at him, and got to feel supremely silly, waving my staff around to absolutely zero effect.

“Interruptions,” the Denarian said in an odd accent. “Always the interruptions.”

His left hand returned to rummaging in his bag, while his mortal eyes went back to the now-scattered remnants of the spell, evidently dismissing my existence. The green eyes remained focused on me, though, and darkness suddenly gathered around the forefinger of his upraised right hand.

Time slowed down.

Dark light leapt toward me.

Sheer defiance made me step forward, trying to brush past the little spinning columns of shadow that surrounded me, only to find them as solid as steel bars, and colder than a yeti’s fridge. I threw my magic against those bars to no avail as a shaft of dark lightning streaked toward my heart.

Something happened.

I don’t know how to describe it. I was trying to slam another bolt of force between the bars of my conjured prison when something...else...got involved. Ever been carrying something and had someone intentionally, unexpectedly jostle your elbow? It felt something like that—a tiny but critically timed nudge just as I threw my will into a last futile effort of defiance.

Power screamed as it wrenched its way out of my body. It shattered the black-thread bars of my prison and left a streak of metallic light on the air behind it for an instant, reflective, like a trail of liquid chrome. It caught the falling Denarian in a massive silvery simulacrum of my own fist.

I actually felt my fingers close over the gaunt, skeletal, grey-skinned figure, felt the numerous spurs of bone jutting from its joints press painfully into my flesh. I flung it away from me with a cry, and the huge silver hand flung the Denarian into the nearest wall, ripping through several feet of expensive stone terracing and carefully simulated Pacific Northwest.

I stared for a second, first at the stunned Denarian, and then at my own spread fingers—and at the floating silvery hand beyond, mirroring my movements. Then the skeletal Denarian gathered itself and rose, fast as hell—until I shoved the heel of my hand forward and drove his bony ass six inches into the wall of rock behind him.

“Oh, yeah, baby!” I heard myself howl, elated. “Talk to the hand!”

I picked up the thorny fiend by a leg and laughed as it raked and bit and scrabbled at the construct that held it. I could feel the pain of it—but it was a small thing, really, something I might have gotten from a rat. Unpleasant as hell, but I’d felt much, much worse, and it was *nothing* compared to the agony of the power still burning inside me. I slammed him into the wall again, then swung him twenty feet through the air, shoved him through a pane of unbroken three-inch-thick glass on the outer wall of the Oceanarium, drew him back through, and then rammed him through the next one, and the next one, and the one after that, cutting him to tatters as I did.

I had maybe half of a second’s warning, as my already overloaded nerves screamed that the circle was closing, that the Sign was rising, as I felt the surge of energy approaching from no more than a dozen yards away. There was still no time for a shield.

So Spinyboy would have to do.

I flung him between me and where my instinct warned me the inbound power was coming from, and then there was a roar like a dozen turbine engines howling to life in synchronization. Thirty feet from me the walls exploded in light and Hellfire. Heat, light, and sheer, intangible power slammed against my senses and threw me from my feet. Bits of molten rock hissed through the air, deadlier than any bullet.

Spinyboy caught a bunch of those. They flew out his back and left gaping, smoking, cauterized holes in it. I could see them through the silvery haze of the construct hand that still held him, could feel the heat as they bored through the construct, and—

—and then my head bumped the ground hard enough to make me see stars. I rolled to my feet and nearly wobbled over the railing and into the pool with the whales. I slammed the end of my staff into the ground with my left hand and leaned heavily against it, panting.

I was still alive. I still retained an agonizing amount of energy. So far, I thought woozily, everything was going exactly according to plan.

The skeletal, spiny Denarian lay twitching on the ground ten or twelve feet in front of me. There were big smoking holes in its body. One of its arms was moving. So was its head. But its legs and its lower body were completely limp. I could see the bones of its spine standing out sharply from its gaunt, emaciated back. Two of the smoking holes intersected that spine precisely. He—or she, I supposed, if it mattered—wasn't going anywhere.

Great currents of energy, eight or nine feet thick, intersected maybe fifty feet away. It was like...looking at the cross-section of a river in flood—if the river had been made of fire instead of water, and if two rivers could have intersected and passed through each other without affecting each other's courses. I turned my head and saw, through the walls of glass that I'd broken, more of the same beams, all around the Oceanarium in an unbroken wall.

The eerie part was that the fiery current of energy was silent. Absolutely silent. There was no crackle of flame, no roar of superheated air, no hiss of steam as snow and ice melted. I heard some rubble falling, stone landing on stone. I heard a broken electrical line somewhere, spitting and snapping for a few seconds before it, too, went silent.

That was when I realized a couple of things.

The silver energy construct that had gripped the Denarian was gone.

And I couldn't feel my right hand.

I looked down in a panic, but found that it was still there, at least, flopping loosely at the end of my arm. I couldn't feel anything below my wrist. My fingers were slightly curled and didn't respond when I told them to move.

"Crap," I muttered. Then I gathered my wits about me, gripped my staff more firmly in my left hand, and took several rapid steps until I stood over Spinyboy.

Then I bashed him over the head with the solid length of oak until he stopped moving.

Immobilized wasn't the same as unconscious. He wouldn't be the only one of his kind in the building, and I didn't want him shouting my location to anybody the second my back was turned.

One down. Who knew how many to go.

I crouched in the walkway with the wall on my right, the windows facing the outside of the Oceanarium on my left, and the beam of Hellfire at my back. It was the most secure position I was likely to get. There was still no sound, which meant that they hadn't tried to take the Archive yet. Kincaid would not go down quietly.

But they were in here with me. They had to be.

But they didn't necessarily know *I* was in here with them.

That could be an advantage. Maybe even a huge advantage.

Sure, Harry. What cat ever expects the mouse to come after it?

I stuffed my numb right hand in my duster pocket, tried to ignore the bone-deep ache of unspent power racking my body and the limb-weakening tremors of raw terror radiating through my guts, and stalked silently forward to sucker punch some Fallen angels.

Chapter Thirty-one

I've read that dolphins are as smart as people. I've even read one article by a researcher who claimed that her results indicated that the dolphins she'd been working with had been throwing the tests, and it had taken us years to realize it—that in fact, they might be *smarter* than us. I'd read other positions that said that they were quite a bit dumber than that. Being as how I'd never really sat down for a game of checkers with a dolphin, my own personal meter for such things, I didn't really have an opinion until that day in the Shedd.

That was when those ugly little dolphins swam by me in perfect silence, except for the swish of their dorsal fins breaking the surface to get my attention—and then raised holy hell seventy feet farther down the path beside the pool, around the curve and out of my sight, splashing and chattering and squeaking for all they were worth.

I stared stupidly for about half a second before the message got through: Bad guys sighted, and close. Evidently the aquatic Americans had decided that I was on the home team. As quickly as the chattering had begun it ended, the dolphins vanishing beneath the surface.

I heard a creaking, skittering sound, and instinct drew my face up. Shadows moved on the snow-covered glass roof of the Oceanarium.

More of Nicodemus's plan in delaying me became clear. He'd needed time to let his people get into position within and atop the building, once he'd been able to determine generally where the Archive was within the Aquarium.

I threw myself into the heavy ferns planted next to the footpath beside the outer pools, crouching down in the thickest bunch of greenery I could find. I held on hard to the power I'd drawn into me and hoped I could make my sucker punch last for more than a single hit.

A breath later, glass shattered and fell. Dark, inhuman forms dropped silently from overhead.

I picked the outermost of the invading Denarians, the one farthest from the center of action and attention, pointed my staff at him from my hiding spot amidst the green, and snarled, “*Forzare!*” unleashing a moderate effort of will. Invisible force caught the shapeshifted fiend as he was falling. I never got much of a look at him, beyond the fact that he had a lot of muscle and a ridge of leathery plates running down his spine.

Muscle doesn’t do you any good in free fall, no matter how many Fallen angels you’ve got inside you. Unless you’ve got some wings to put it to use, you’re in the hands of Mother Earth and Sir Isaac Newton.

I wasn’t trying to smash him into the middle of the lake. I applied just enough force to alter his trajectory, shoving the falling Denarian thirty feet off course, and he landed in one of those beams of titanic energy.

There was a flash of white light, a brief shadow of a human skeleton burned onto my vision, and then a white-hot something went spinning out from the beam. It landed in one of the pools in an angry gush of steam. The dolphins darted away from it.

Then I froze, not moving.

Denarians fell like rain, more than a dozen of them, landing with heavy-sounding thumps and a couple of splashes...

...and a splat. One of them, a lizard-looking thing, had fallen into the foliage behind me and not five feet from my hiding spot, with about two-thirds of its head simply missing from its shoulders. It twitched wildly for several seconds, pumping very human-looking blood all over the place before it slowly went still and simply started draining.

My eyes tracked up to the roof and found a darkened corner.

Kincaid hung in it like a spider, suspended from some sort of harness and perfectly still, and I realized that he’d had the same idea I had: Remove them before they’d realized that the battle was well and truly begun, while they were still holding back all their power to unleash in concentration. He gave me a grim little smile, moved his head in an “after you” sort of gesture, and raised a rifle sporting a heavy, outsized silencer to his cheek.

Kincaid had once informed me, quite calmly, that if he ever wanted to kill me, it would be with a rifle from more than a mile away. This was more like a hundred feet, maybe less, but Kincaid had dropped the Denarian with a shot to the head, maybe *more* than one, while it fell to the ground amidst a

shower of broken glass. He was deadly as hell, and he could just as easily be coming after me as my enemies, but somehow my terror had dwindled to something familiar—and ferocious.

Sure, I might be outnumbered, but I was no longer at all certain that I was outclassed. When the Fallen were calling the shots they were arrogant to the extreme, and they weren't at all used to playing it by ear and adjusting to changes in the tempo. When the coin bearers were running things, they could be more dangerous—but no more so than anyone else I had crossed metaphorical swords with.

Nicodemus, then, was dangerous because he was Nicodemus—not because of a Fallen angel or a lack of one. And while I would be a fool to think him anything less than a deadly threat, I had survived him once, and seen the trap coming this time, even if it had been at the last minute.

I spared a glance for the splattered, twitching remains of the decapitated Denarian in the ferns. These creeps might have scary angels looking over their shoulders—but for the next couple of minutes, at least, so did I.

It didn't make them any less dangerous. It just made me see that I had a chance of standing up to them.

No flash and thunder, then. I had no energy to spare for them. No wasted time, either. I rose and stole through the ferns toward where I thought the next-nearest Denarian had come down, up a steep hillside that was murder to move over silently. The Denarian who had landed hadn't stayed immobile, though. I found the spread talon prints in the earth where it had touched down, like those of a turkey, but larger.

I froze as water splashed off to my right. From the corner of my eye I saw a Denarian haul herself out of the water of the dolphin pool—Mantis Girl, Tessa. She pulled herself over the pedestrian guardrail, moving fast and warily. I saw a flash of silver in the talons of one hand. She'd recovered the coin of the Denarian I'd shoved into the beam. She knew they weren't alone. I didn't have much in the way of cover between her and me, but I didn't move, and I didn't think she spotted me.

Mantis Girl landed on the concrete and vanished down the path and out of my sight. Something let out a chittering, monkeylike sound from somewhere in the vast room, but other than that everything remained silent.

I ghosted forward again, straining to hear. Where was the drama? Where were the explosions, the howling screams, the deafening sound track? This was just one big, eerie game of hide-and-seek.

Which, I suddenly realized, must have been the Archive's counterstrategy. The energy output of the enormous symbol was too high to maintain for long. If she could simply remain hidden from her enemies until the symbol could no longer be maintained, she could depart at will. There would then be no need for her to burn through her precious little available energy in a last-ditch, desperate effort to defend herself—provided she could stay calm and focused enough to maintain a veil under these circumstances, of course. It would force the Denarians to hunt Ivy—expending their efforts on trying to pierce her veil, while Kincaid concentrated on isolating them and killing them while they were distracted. It was a deucedly clever countertactic.

On the far side of the room one of the Denarians started screaming, a wail of agony. My eyes snapped up to Kincaid's position. He was gone. A rope now dangled down over the foliage below where he'd hung, but he'd abandoned the exposed shooting position after taking down one more enemy, it would seem.

I found myself grinning. Fine. If that was the game, I could play too. *Ready or not, here I come.*

I pressed on through the ferns, angling over toward the amphitheater seats, and dropped into a sudden crouch as the low mutter of voices came to me.

"Where *is* she?" demanded a heavy, thick-sounding man's voice.

I couldn't see the source of the voices from amidst the fake wilderness until I glanced up. Light and shadow played together in the room and conspired to create a reflective surface for me upon one of the panels of glass on the ceiling. Three of the Denarians had gathered on the bleacher seats. The one who spoke looked like nothing so much as a big, leathery gorilla, except for the goat's horns and heavy claws.

"Shut up, Magog," snarled Mantis Girl. "I can't think with you running your stupid mouth."

"We're nearly out of *time*," Magog growled.

"She knows that," snapped a third Denarian. I recognized this one, which looked like a woman, except for the reverse-jointed legs ending in panther claws, the bright red skin, and the mass of metallic, ten-foot-long, independently moving blades in place of hair. Deirdre, Nicodemus's darling daughter. She turned back to Tessa. "But Magog has a point, Mother. Scent

tracking has been useless.” She held up a small pink sock. “Bits of clothing with her scent on them have been scattered everywhere.”

“That’s the Hellhound’s work,” Magog spat, bright green eyes glowing brightly over dull, animalistic brown ones. “He’s fought us before.”

“He hunts us,” Deirdre said, “while she forces us to focus on piercing a veil. They work too well together. He’s killed two of us. Three if you count Urumviel.”

Tessa bounced the silver coin in her palm. “Urumviel’s vessel may have been killed by his own idiocy,” she said. Her insectoid eyes seemed to narrow. “Or perhaps the wizard managed to return before the Sign was raised.”

“You think *that* pathetic sot bested *Father*?” Deirdre said with scorn.

I bristled.

“He wouldn’t need to best him, you moron,” Tessa said. “Only to run faster. And it would explain why Thorned Namshiel hasn’t appeared as well.”

Yeah. If Spinyboy ever woke up, it would be with one hell of a Dresden hangover. *Stick that in your pipe and smoke it, Deedee.*

“The wizard is nothing,” Magog growled. “If the girl is not found, and swiftly, none of this will matter to us.”

Tessa snapped her fingers and once again did that disgusting little trick where the mouth of the mantis form opened and the head of a pretty young girl emerged, smiling. “Of course,” she said, looking at Deirdre. “I should have thought of it sooner.”

Deirdre tilted her head. Blades whispered murderously against one another at the gesture. “Of what?”

“The entire strength of this plan is predicated upon attacking the child, not the Archive,” Tessa said, her smile turning vicious. “Ignore the girl. Bring me the Hellhound.”

Chapter Thirty-two

It took me about a second to see what Mantis Bitch had in mind, and half that long to hate her for it.

Ivy didn't have a family. Until I'd given one to her, she hadn't even had a name. She'd just been "the Archive." What she had was a world of power and responsibility and knowledge and danger—and Kincaid. While the Archive would know that the proper decision would be to allow Kincaid to die in order to protect the sanctity of the Archive, Ivy wouldn't be making the decision with the same detached calm. Kincaid was the closest thing she had to family. She wouldn't let them hurt him. She couldn't.

Damn them, to take a little girl's loneliness and use it against her like that.

Grand schemes and sweeping plans to bring doom and darkness are all fine and scary, but they at least have the advantage of being impersonal. This was simple, calculated, cruel malice deliberately aimed at a child—a *child*—and it pissed me off.

Deirdre was closest. Fine.

I stepped out of the ferns, swept my staff in a broad backhanded swing, and unleashed some of the power I'd been painfully holding back, snarling, "*Ventas servitas!*"

A burst of wind gathered underneath Deirdre, lifting her out of the amphitheater seats and throwing her out over the pool like a dart shot from a child's air gun. I'd thrown her at the nearest section of the pentagram's beam, but the instant she'd gone airborne those snakelike strips of her hair had fanned out like a tattered parachute and begun thrashing at the air, slowing her and changing her course.

I didn't stop to watch where she landed. Magog spun before Deirdre's feet were more than a yard off the ground and broke into one of those diagonal simian charges, coming right up the bleachers as smoothly as if

they'd been level ground. Forget what I'd said about not reacting quickly. Magog's reaction time had been nothing, if not a little less. He had to have checked in at seven or eight hundred pounds, and he covered the forty feet between us in the space of a couple of seconds, the acceleration incredible.

Of course, reacting quickly isn't always the same thing as reacting intelligently. Magog looked like he was used to being an unstoppable force.

I brought up my shield bracelet, slamming my will through it, pushing most of the painful load of power still remaining to me into the barrier that sprang to life. I shouted out in wordless challenge, my voice thin and strained beside the deep-chested bellow that Magog unleashed in answer. Normally my shield manifests as a shimmering dome of mixed blue and silver light.

This time I left it transparent, on the theory that what Magog didn't know would hurt him. The shapeshifted Denarian slammed into the invisible barrier in an explosion of silver sparks and found it as immovable as the side of a mountain. The force of the gorilla-thing's charge was not simply physical, though, and ugly red light clung to the silver power of my defenses. Excess energy bled through my bracelet as heat, scalding my skin—but the barrier held, and Magog staggered back, stunned.

"Hey," I said as I let the shield fall. "Where's an eight-hundred-pound gorilla sit?" I took a step forward and kicked him as hard as I could, right in the coconuts, then followed up with a stomping kick to the neck. Magog shrieked in agony and went tumbling back down the bleachers. "Somewhere with lots of extra cushions, I guess, eh, Monkeyboy?"

My instincts screamed a warning at me, and I threw myself down behind the last row of bleacher seats just as Mantis Bitch pointed a finger at me and screamed, "*Amal-bijal!*" There was a crash of thunder, a flash of light, a wash of heat, and a cloud of glowing splinters flew up a few feet away, where a section of seating had been a second before.

Hell's bells. A sorceress. A damned dangerous one, too.

I readied my shield, already acutely aware of how little energy remained to me. I kept it small, maybe three feet across, and had started to rise when I saw a shape flit into my peripheral vision above me: Tessa, in the middle of an airborne leap. She cried out again, and I yelped and pulled into a tight fetal curl behind my shield as another bolt of lightning ripped through the air.

Pressure slammed my shoulders against concrete floor. Light blinded me, and sound deafened me, leaving my world nothing but one long white tone. My lungs forgot their job for a couple of seconds, but my legs were on the ball, scrambling to get beneath me.

I had just managed to sort out where I was when another deafening flash and crack hit somewhere close and flung me to the ground again. And then a third. I tried to keep my shield up, but I couldn't see anything but yellow spots, and there wasn't anything left to put into it, anyway. It was like walking along and suddenly finding myself without any floor—which happened more literally a second later, when I tripped over a bleacher seat and fell a couple of rows down, banging myself up pretty well in the process.

Some dazed part of me realized that I'd made a mistake in my assumptions. Tessa wasn't trying to take me out. She was just trying to keep me dazed and disoriented long enough for her people to arrive. That same part of me realized, even more belatedly, that I'd let myself be goaded into attacking by their words, let my heart rule my decision instead of playing it smart.

Something slapped my staff out of my hand. I went for my gun, only to be slammed to the ground by another terrific physical force. Then something like an iron bar slammed across my throat.

The light spots began to clear away in time for me to see a Denarian I'd never seen before atop me, this one like an androgynous, naked, bald statue of obsidian, green eyes glowing above human eyes of bright blue. A second shapeshifted creature, this one covered in a shaggy coat of grey, dusty-looking feathers, its face a grey mass of fleshy, hanging tendrils, had my wrists pinned to the ground.

Tessa stood over me, watching something on the far side of the room, her eyes narrowed. "Don't choke him out," she snapped. "He can't talk if he's unconscious."

The obsidian statue eased up the pressure on my neck a little.

"Report," Tessa said.

"We think the Hellhound is hiding in the bathrooms," came a strained-sounding, harsh woman's voice.

"You think?"

"Varthiel and Ordriel are down and McKullen is dead. They were searching there. The exit is watched. There's no way for him to escape the

room.”

“Their coins?” Tessa asked.

“Recovered, my lady.”

“Thank you, Rosanna. Any other word?”

“We’ve found Thorned Namshiel, unconscious and gravely wounded. There was extensive damage all around the area in which he fell.”

“Yes. And yet it was done fairly quietly. It seems our intelligence on our young wizard thug was faulty.”

Someone, presumably Mantis Bitch, kicked me in the ribs. It hurt. There wasn’t much I could do about it other than try to suck in a breath.

“Very well,” Tessa said. “Take Magog and Deirdre for the Hellhound. Take him alive. Do it within the next five minutes.”

“Yes, my lady,” Rosanna rasped. What sounded like hooves clopped away.

Tessa stepped into view again, sweetly pretty face visible atop the monstrous body. She was smiling. “You’re all kinds of feisty, boy. It’s cute. The sort of thing my husband likes in his recruits.” She kicked me again. “I find it endlessly annoying, personally. But I’m willing to play nice, since we might work together in the future. I’ll give you this chance to cooperate. Tell me where the little girl is.”

“I wish I knew,” I panted. “That way I could exercise free will while telling you to go fuck yourself.”

She let out a playful little laugh and reached down to tweak my broken nose.

Okay.

Ow.

“They say to give a man three chances to say no,” she said.

“Save us both time and breath,” I said. “No, twice. That’s three.”

“Suit yourself,” Tessa said.

She reached into the pocket of my duster, withdrew my revolver, pointed it at my head, and pulled the trigger.

I had just enough time to gawk and think, *Wait, wait, this isn’t right.*

The muzzle flashed.

There was a loud noise.

I reached for power, tried to shield, but there was simply nothing there, nothing to use. The magic was *gone*.

So it had to be someone else's spell that neatly intersected the bullet's course and bounced it into the shaggy-feathered thing holding my arms.

My stomach sank as I realized what was happening.

Ivy must have been there all along, quietly sitting on the bleachers, hidden by her veil from everything that was going on. Now she stood perhaps ten feet away, just a young girl, her expression solemn—but her eyes and cheeks were bright with tears.

“Get away from him,” she said quietly. “All of you. I will not permit you to hurt him.”

I hadn't really extended my line of thinking beyond Kincaid. But of all the people who had dealt with the Archive, I'd been one of the only ones to take any interest in her as anything but a font of knowledge. I'd been the one to inquire after her personally. I'd been the one to give her a name. Sad but true, I was the closest thing that little girl had to a friend.

She couldn't have let anything happen to me, either.

I'd just handed her to the Denarians.

Tessa threw back her head and loosed a long, triumphant cry.

Chapter Thirty-three

“Ivy,” I said in that tone you use with children who are up past their bedtime. I’m better at it than you’d think, after so much time working with an apprentice. “Get that veil back up and get out of here.”

Tessa kicked me in the ribs again, hard enough to keep me from breathing much or talking at all. “When I want an opinion from you, Dresden,” she said, “I’ll read it in your entrails.”

Ivy took two steps forward at Tessa’s gesture and narrowed her blue eyes. “For the benefit of the slow, Polonius Lartessa, I will repeat myself. I will not allow you to harm him. Step away.”

Tessa’s eyes narrowed suddenly. “You know my name.”

“I know everything about you, Lartessa,” Ivy said, her tone flat, passionless. “It was all recorded, of course. Everything was, in Thessalonica in those days. Your father’s failing business. Your sale to the temple of Isis. If you like, I could draw you a cost-benefit analysis of your training versus your earnings in your first year at the temple, before Nicodemus came. I could use charts to make it easier for you to understand. And color them in with crayons. I enjoy crayons.”

I wasn’t certain, but it sounded like the kid was trying to give the bad guys some guff on my behalf. She needed to work on her technique, but it was the thought that counted. If I could breathe, I might have gotten a little choked up.

“Do you think I’m intimidated that you know where I come from, child?” Tessa snarled.

“I know more about you than you do,” Ivy replied, her voice steady. “I know far more precisely than you how many you’ve harmed. How many bad situations you’ve made worse. Cambodia, Colombia, and Rwanda most recently, but whether in this century, the Wars of the Roses or the Hundred Years’ War, your story is the same stupid little story, told over and over

again. You learned your lessons when you were a child, and you've never swerved from them. You're a vulture, Lartessa. A maggot. You survive on diseased flesh and rotting meat. Anything whole and healthy frightens you."

The little girl didn't see the Denarian that came creeping through the ferns behind her and flung itself at her back, several hundred pounds of scales and fangs.

"Ivy!" I choked out.

She had it covered. There was a flash of light, an overwhelming scent of ozone and fresh laundry, and a silver denarius rolled away from a mound of ash that fell to the ground without ever getting within three feet of the small form of the Archive. The coin rolled past her, on a straight line toward Tessa—but Ivy stomped on it with one small shoe, flattening it to the floor and preventing it from returning to Tessa's grasp.

"Tiny," I said, in an overblown imitation of Sanya's Russian accent, unable to keep a crazed giggle out of my voice. "But *fierce*."

Tessa regarded the fallen coin with a faint smile. "Costly. How many such spells do you think you can manage before you are out of energy, little one?"

Ivy shrugged. "How many minions can you throw away? How many will be willing to die for you?"

Tessa called out, "Around her, everyone. Make sure she knows where you are."

And nightmarish forms rose around the little girl, huge beside her single, slender little form. Deirdre, soaked and smelling of dead fish and seawater, gave me a sullen glare as she mounted the steps beside her mother. The shaggy-feathered thing that still held my hands bled quietly, keening under its breath. It was wounded, but it still kept my arms pinned. Magog came monkeying up over a bit of landscaping, grinning an evil grin, and I wondered where the hell Kincaid had wandered off to. The obsidian statue shifted its weight, keeping one hand resting on my chest—I had the feeling it could have shoved it right through to my spine if it wanted to.

There were half a dozen others. Rosanna proved to be a rather beautiful-looking woman, the classical demoness with scarlet skin and a goat's legs, complete with leathery black wings and delicately curling horns—though her deep brown eyes were haunted beneath the demonic green glowing set. She had a bag slung on a strap over her shoulder, just like Spinyboy—Tessa

had called him Thorned Namshiel—had carried with him. Most of the others just looked big and mean, in various unsettling flavors.

I guess even in Hell, it's easier to find strong backs than strong brains.

Ivy faced them and lifted her arms into a pose that vaguely resembled a defensive martial arts stance. It wasn't. She was preparing to manipulate defensive energies. I just hadn't ever seen anyone getting ready to do two entirely separate spells in either hand at the same freaking time before.

Two questions occurred to me at that point. First, if the plan was for the Denarians to wear Ivy's magic down and then take her by main force before their trap ran out of power, why weren't they doing it already? And second...

What was that hissing sound?

It rose up around us, something I could just barely hear until I focused my senses on it, tuning out the musty reek and iron blood-scent of Shaggy Feathers and the cold solidity of Obsidian Statue's hand.

A definite, steady hissing sound, like air escaping from a tire or...

Or hair spray issuing forth from a can.

I lifted my head, twisting around enough to see through the crouched limbs of Shaggy Feathers, which seemed to be neither arms or legs, but something that served it as both, like the extremities of a spider. I couldn't see what it had my wrists pinned with, and I didn't want to. What I *could* see was a couple of leaves trembling on a nearby fern, and a gleam of metal from somewhere near the source of the mysterious hiss.

Gas.

The entire strength of this plan is predicated upon attacking the child, not the Archive.

Children have very low body mass, compared to adults.

A toxin dispersed in the air would be far more effective against Ivy than one of the Denarians—or even a grown person. All the bad guys had to do was pick something that caused unconsciousness and skewed heavily toward body mass, and they'd have an ideal weapon to use against her. Tessa and Nicodemus must have had several of their more capable lackeys carry in canisters of the stuff, whatever it was. Then all they had to do was open the cans and wait for her to fall.

My thoughts flashed back to Thorned Namshiel's spell, the one he'd been carrying out behind his concealing veil. A detail I'd barely noticed at the time suddenly leapt out at me. I'd been worried about what spell he was

getting ready. I should have been paying attention to *where* he was getting ready to cast it—directly underneath a set of large vents. He'd probably been getting ready to set a wind spell in motion, to keep air pumping through the vents and spreading the gas through the Oceanarium.

Could I smell something sort of mediciney? Had the end of my nose gone numb? *Hell's bells, Harry, this is no time either to panic or to suddenly pass out.* I had to warn Ivy.

I turned my head back toward her and caught Tessa's gaze halfway. "Worked it out, did you?" Mantis Girl murmured. "If he speaks," she said, presumably to Obsidian Statue, "crush his chest."

A weirdly modulated voice issued from the general area of the androgynous statue's head. "Yes, mis—"

And then there was a *whup* and a slap of air pressure against my skin, and Statue's head—and Shaggy Feathers's too—exploded in simultaneous eruptions of distinctly different forms of gore. The statue went out like some kind of faulty street-paving machine, splattering black sludge that looked like hot asphalt everywhere in a steadily spurting stream. It flung itself onto its back, then bounded to its hands and knees and started hammering its fists at the concrete. I guess it intended to smash me. I guess without a head, it didn't know that it was actually six feet away, and digging a hole through the bleachers and into the material beneath.

Shaggy Feathers just fell in a welter of very human-looking, -smelling, and -tasting blood, and maybe three hundred pounds of limp, rubbery muscle landed on my chest.

"Ivy!" I screamed. "Gas! Get clear!"

And *then* things got noisy.

A series of cracking thumps came down faster than you could rapidly snap your fingers, and Denarians began to scream in pain and rage. I was vaguely aware of them bounding left and right, and saw a muzzle flash from the far side of the Oceanarium. At least I knew where Kincaid had been—getting into a position to kill *both* demon-taken madmen holding me down with a single freaking bullet, since anything less would have meant my certain death.

"He is nothing!" howled Tessa. "Tarsiel, take the Hellhound! Everyone else, the girl!"

Come on, Harry. Time to pay Kincaid back by getting the kid clear. Somehow. My right hand wasn't moving much, and my singed left arm

didn't like it, but I heaved and strained and got enough of the dead Denarian off me to let me begin to squirm out from under it. Just as I was about to pull free, a silver coin rolled out from amidst the ruined tentacles that had passed for the thing's head and dropped toward my face. I jerked my head aside in a panic.

The falling coin missed touching my bare flesh by a hair and bounced off the concrete floor. My left hand moved, faster and smoother than I would have thought possible, snapping the coin from the air on the bounce as smoothly and nimbly as if it had been whole and healthy and not burned and scarred and covered in a leather glove.

I looked between it and my numb-tingling right hand for a quarter of a second.

What. The hell.

That was *not* normal.

Worry about it later, Harry. I mean, sure, obviously Something Has Happened to you, but now is not the time to get distracted. Focus. Save the girl.

I jammed the cursed relic in my pocket, hoped to God my 501s didn't have a hole in them, and spun toward Ivy.

I know I'm a wizard, a card-carrying member of the White Council and all. I know I'm a Warden, a certified combat expert of wizardkind, a cop, a soldier—have staff, will kick ass, if you will. I thought I'd seen some real professionals in action, the top of the wizarding game.

I was wrong.

It wasn't that Ivy was slinging around a ton of power. She wasn't. But think about this one for a moment: What's really more impressive? A giant truck rumbling around on a great big old smoking engine? Or a little car just barely big enough to get the job done that's powered by a couple of AA batteries?

Seven of them were going after Ivy with magic, and she was countering them. All of them.

Magog had charged her as he had me, but she hadn't slammed him to a stop with a brick wall. She'd trapped him inside some kind of frictionless bubble, and he was spinning uselessly in circles half an inch off the floor, every motion making him spin faster. Whatever additional metaphysical mass he'd brought to the fight hadn't cramped her style much. Her arms, bobbing and weaving continuously between all the workings she had up,

flicked by the field containing him every few seconds and, I swear, struck his whirling snare for no reason other than to impart an additional, nausea-inducing vector to his spin.

Deirdre's tangle of living locks danced with purple Saint Elmo's fire, lashing out in a deadly webwork, but Ivy constantly cast out a spinning cat's cradle of light, tiny, tiny threads of power that did not so much stop any of Deirdre's attacks as they fouled any one of her locks with others near it, tangling them together into useless clumps—sort of an enforced bad-hair day. On the opposite side of Ivy, Rosanna launched more traditional lances of flame from her open palms, much like the ones I—

—a savage pain went through my skull for a second—*son of a bitch*—

—but Ivy dispersed them with delicately applied wedges of air, intercepting each burst of fire far enough short of her body to prevent the bloom of heat as they died from scorching her—though the two more physical Denarians who strained to force their way past the barrier of snapping sparks that formed whenever they tried to get close had far less luck. The Hellmaid's flames scorched them badly.

The sixth, a wizened little thing that looked like a caricature of a woman carved from a dried tree root, seemed to be holding the end of a rope of liquid shadow that curled like a hungry serpent, darting now and then toward Ivy's head. Ivy faced it down steadily, moving her head calmly in a dodge once, swatting it aside with a little burst of silver energy a second later.

But mostly she faced an amused-looking Tessa, who, apparently just for the fun of it, threw another thunderbolt at her now and again. That told me something right there. It told me Tessa was no punk sorceress. She was White Council material herself, if she could make that much flash and bang while expending that little energy. Either that or she'd been able to hold back one whale of a lot more power than I had when she took her deep breath before the battle. Either way she was a big-leaguer, and Ivy's response to the attack confirmed it. Each time the Archive turned to fully face Tessa, and each time she dedicated one of her hands entirely to the defensive measure used to stop the incoming spell.

Gulp.

Holy moly. It was one thing to have an academic appreciation that I still had a lot to learn about magic. It was another to see a demonstration of exactly how much I still couldn't do. In another circumstance it would be

humbling. In this one it was freaking terrifying. For maybe ten seconds I stood there, trying to figure out how the hell to help without getting myself incinerated, skewered, or otherwise obliterated without accomplishing anything.

I felt a little surge of dizziness. The gas levels must be rising. *Screw it.* The only reason someone hadn't killed me already was because I was so impotent, at the moment, that nobody gave a damn what I did. I might be able to get the kid to another part of the building, out of the gas—and if someone killed me on the way, I could try to level my death curse on them, maybe get her out of this mess.

So I rushed toward her, trying to use the hot zone and the trapped Magog as shields, and said, "Ivy, come on!"

Something took a swipe at me, and several feet away my gun went off. I ducked, but I guess Tessa wasn't much of a shot. I didn't get hit. A second later I grabbed Ivy by the waist and lifted her to my hip.

"Keep clear of my arms, please!" Ivy commanded.

I made sure to. I was getting dizzy, but anywhere was better than here.

"His legs!" Tessa commanded.

I had a feeling that those people tried to do a lot of disturbing things to my pins, but I didn't stop to watch them try it. I ran for the stairs, trusting the skill of the Archive to keep me mobile. It was a good bet. Ivy murmured and waved her arms the whole while, and I felt her little body tingling with the live current of the energy she was working.

She was using what power she had left for all it was worth, but it wasn't bottomless. She was running dry. This fight was almost over.

Time, I thought muzzily, panting. We just needed a little more time.

Gravity suggested that I keep on going down, and it seemed an excellent idea. I staggered down the stairs into the lower level, running past the underwater vistas of the whale and dolphin tanks, past the cute penguins and the sea otters, the Denarians in pursuit, their sorceries flashing past us while Ivy shielded us with the last bits of energy in her reservoir. I felt it when she ran dry, and labored to keep my legs moving, to keep ahead of the pursuit.

Then the ground hit me with an uppercut. Everyone else in the Oceanarium suddenly fell sideways.

Or wait. Maybe it was me.

I realized belatedly that, given that I'd been at ground level near that one container, and breathing hard with pain and exertion to boot, I'd probably given myself a nice large dose before I'd ever gotten up. Furthermore, if the gas was heavier than air, there was probably even more of it down here than there had been up in the bleachers.

I had bought us a few seconds. It just hadn't been time enough.

Ivy landed beside me. She blinked, and her eyes abruptly went wide with panic. She lifted her arms again, but they came up slowly, sluggishly, and her fingers stayed half-closed, like a sleepy child's.

The black rope-spell wrapped around Ivy's throat, and dozens of Deirdre's tendrils twined around her arms and legs. They jerked her out of my sight.

I looked up to find the Denarians standing as a group in the hallway, lit by the eerie blue light coming in from the big tanks. Rosanna stared intently at Ivy for a moment before she shuddered and folded her dark bat wings around herself, shivering as if with cold, and turned away from the scene, her glowing eyes narrowed. She reached into the bag and produced another canister. She offered it to Tessa without being prompted.

Tessa took it, twisted something on the nozzle, and gave Ivy a polite smile. Then she quite literally jammed the nozzle into the little girl's mouth and held it there.

Ivy panicked and cried out. I saw her kick and twist. She must have bitten her tongue or cut her lip on one of her teeth. Blood ran from her mouth. She bucked and fought uselessly for a few seconds, and then went rag-doll limp.

"Finally," Tessa said, expelling her breath in irritation. "Could it have been any more annoying?"

"Damn you," I slurred. I shoved myself up to one knee and glared at Tessa. "Damn you all. You can't have her."

"Clichéd," Tessa singsonged. "Boring." She tapped her chin with one claw-hand. "Let me see. Where were we when we were so rudely interrupted? Ah!" She stepped closer, smiling cheerily, and lifted my .44.

Just then, I felt the snap of magic rushing back into the Oceanarium as the enormous symbol collapsed and the circle fell.

I took my frustration and rage and turned it into raw force, screaming, "*Forzare!*"

I didn't direct it at Tessa and her crew.

I aimed it at the glass wall that was the only thing between all of us and three million gallons of seawater.

The force of my will and my rage lashed out and shattered the wall into powder.

The sea came in with a roar, one enormous impact that felt like the strike of a hammer being applied to every square inch of my body at once.

Then it was cold.

And black.

Chapter Thirty-four

The next thing I knew, I was coughing, and my chest hurt, and my head hurt, and everything else hurt, and I was colder than hell. I choked in a breath and felt my body getting ready to send up everything. I tried to roll onto my side and couldn't, until someone pulled on my coat and helped me.

Fishy salt water and whatever had been in my stomach came out in equal proportions.

"Oh," someone said. "Oh, thank You, God."

Michael, then.

"Michael!" Sanya shouted from somewhere nearby. "I need you!"

Work boots pounded away at a sprint.

"Easy, Harry," Murphy said. "Easy." She helped me turn back over when I was done puking. I was lying at the top of the stairs to the lower level. My lower legs were actually on the stairs. My left foot was in cold water to the ankle.

I put a hand to my chest, wincing. Murphy smoothed a hand over my head, brushing hair and water away from my eyes. The lines in her face looked a little deeper, her eyes worried.

"CPR?" I asked her. My voice felt weak.

"Yeah."

"Guess we're even," I said.

"Like hell we are," she said quietly. "I only spit fruit punch into *your* mouth."

I laughed weakly, and that hurt, too.

Murphy leaned down and rested her forehead gently against mine. "You are such an enormous pain in my ass, Harry. Don't scare me like that again."

Her fingers found mine and squeezed really tight. I squeezed back, too tired to do anything else.

Something brushed my foot, and I nearly screamed. I sat up, reaching for power, raising my right hand, while invisible force gathered around it in shimmering waves.

A corpse floated in the water, nude, facedown. It was a man I'd never seen before, his hair long, grey, and matted. His limp, outstretched hand had bumped against my foot.

"Jesus, Harry," Murphy said, her voice shaking. "He's dead. Harry, it's okay. He's dead, Harry."

My right hand remained where it was, fingers outspread, ripples of light flickering over them. Then they started shaking. I lowered my hand again, releasing the power I'd gathered, and as I did I felt my fingers tingle and go numb once more.

I stared at them, puzzled. That wasn't right. I was fairly sure that I should be a lot more worried about that than I was at the moment, but I couldn't put together enough cohesive thought to remember why.

Murphy was still talking, her voice steady and soothing. I dimly realized, a minute later, that it was the tone of voice you use with crazy people and frightened animals, and that I was breathing hard and fast despite the lack of any exertion to explain it.

"It's all right, Harry," she said. "He's dead. You can let go of me."

That was when I realized that my left arm had pulled Murphy tight against me, drawing her across my body and away from the corpse as I'd gotten ready to do...whatever it was I had been about to do. She was, at the moment, more or less sitting across my lap. Wherever she was touching me, I was warm. It took me a moment to figure out exactly why it was a good idea to let her go. Eventually, though, I did.

Murphy slid carefully away from me, shaking her head. "God," she said. "What happened to you, Harry? What did they do to you?"

I slumped, too tired to move my foot out of the water, too tired to try to explain that I'd failed to stop the demons from carrying away a little girl.

After a moment of silence Murphy said, "That's it. I'm getting you to a doctor. I don't care who these people think they are. They can't just waltz into town and tear apart my—" She broke off suddenly. "Hngh. What do you make of this, Harry?"

She took a step down into the water and bent over.

"No!" I snapped.

She froze in place.

“Jesus, those things get predictable,” I muttered. “Silver coin just fall out of the corpse’s fingers?”

Murphy blinked and looked at me. “Yes.”

“Evil. Cursed. Don’t touch it.” I shook my head and stood up. The wall had to help me, but I made it all the way up, thinking out loud on the way. “Okay, we’ve got to make sure there’s no more of these lying around, first thing. I’m already carrying one. We limit the risk. I carry them all for now. Until they can be properly disposed of.”

“Harry,” Murphy said in a steady voice. “You’re mumbling, and what’s coming through is making a limited amount of sense.”

“I’ll explain. Bear with me.” I bent over and found another stained denarius gleaming guiltily in the water. “Moron,” I muttered at the coin, then picked it up with my gloved hand and put it in my pocket along with the other one. *In for a penny, in for a pound, ah hah hah.*

Damn, I’m clever.

Footsteps sounded, brisk and precise, and Luccio walked into view beside Gard. There was a subtle difference in Gard’s body language toward Luccio, something a shade more respectful than was there before. The captain of the Wardens was wiping her sword clean on her grey cloak—blood wouldn’t stain it, which made it handy for such things. Luccio paused for a moment upon seeing me, her expression carefully guarded, then nodded. “Warden. How are you feeling?”

“I’ll live,” I rasped. “What happened?”

“Two Denarians,” Gard replied. She nodded her head briefly to Luccio. “Both dead.”

Luccio shook her head. “They’d been half-drowned,” she said. “I only finished them off. I shouldn’t have liked to fight them fresh.”

“Take me to the bodies,” I said quietly. “Hurry.”

There was a sighing sound from behind us. I didn’t freak out about it this time, but Murphy did, her gun appearing in her hand. To be fair, Luccio had her sword half out of its sheath, too. I checked and found what I’d more or less expected: The body of the former Denarian, relieved of its coin, was decomposing with unnatural speed, even in the cold water. The Fallen angel in the coin might have been holding off the ravages of time, but the old man with the hourglass is patient, and he was collecting his due from the fallen Denarian with compounded interest.

“Captain, we’ve got to get every single coin we possibly can, and we’ve got to do it now.”

Luccio cocked her head at me. “Why?”

“Look, I don’t know what arrangements Kincaid made, but somebody is going to notice something soon, and then emergency services will be all over this place. I don’t want some poor fireman or cop accidentally picking up one of these things.”

“True enough,” she said, nodding—and then glanced at Murphy. “Sergeant, do you concur?”

Murphy grimaced. “Dammit, there’s always something....” She held up her hands as if pushing away a blanket that was wrapped too tightly around her and said, “Yes, yes. Round them up.”

“Michael,” I said. “Sanya?”

“When we got here,” Murphy said, “a bunch of those things were pulling you out of the water.”

“They ran. We went different directions, pursuing them,” Gard supplied.

“Where’s Cujo?” I asked.

Gard gave me a blank look.

“Hendricks.”

“Ah,” she said. “Lookout. He’ll give us a warning when the authorities begin to arrive.”

At least someone was thinking like a criminal. I suppose she was the right person for the job.

I raised my voice as much as I could. It came out sort of furry and rough. “Michael?”

“Here,” came the answer. He came walking around the curving path toward us a few moments later, wearing only his undershirt beneath his heavy denim jacket. I hadn’t seen him wearing that little before. Michael had some serious pecs. Maybe I should work out. He was carrying with both hands part of his blue-and-white denim shirt folded into a careful bundle in front of him.

Sanya came along behind Michael, soaking wet, his chest bare underneath his coat. Never mind Michael’s pecs. Sanya made us both look like we needed to eat more wheat germ or something. He was carrying *Esperacchius* and *Amoracchius* over one shoulder—and Kincaid over the other.

Kincaid wasn't moving much, though he was clearly trying to support some of his weight. His skin was chalk white. He was covered in blood. The rest of Michael's shirt, and both of Sanya's, had been pressed into service as emergency bandages—and layers of duct tape had been wrapped around and around them, sealing them into place around both arms, over his belly, and around one leg.

Murphy hissed and went to him, her voice raw. "Jared."

Jared. Huh.

"Dresden." Kincaid gasped. "Dresden."

They laid him down, and I shambled over. I managed not to fall down on him as I knelt beside him. I'd seen him wounded before, but it hadn't been as bad as this. He'd used the tape the same way, though. I checked. Sure enough, there was a roll of tape hanging from a loop on Kincaid's equipment harness.

"Just like the vampire lair," I said quietly.

"No claymores here," Kincaid said. "Should have had claymores." He shook his head and blinked his eyes a couple of times, trying to focus them. "Dresden, not much time. The girl. They got out with her. She's alive."

I grimaced and looked away.

His bloody hand shot out and seized the front of my coat. "*Look* at me."

I did.

I expected rage, hate, and blame. All I got was a look of...just, desperate, desperate fear.

"Go after them. Bring her back. Save her."

"Kincaid..." I said softly.

"Swear it," he said. His eyes went out of focus for a second, then glittered coldly. "Swear it. Or I'm coming for you. Swear it to me, Dresden."

"I'm too damned tired to be scared of you," I said.

Kincaid closed his eyes. "She doesn't have anybody else. No one."

Murphy knelt down by Kincaid across from me. She stared at me for a moment, then said quietly, "Jared, rest. He's going to help her."

I traded a faint, tired smile with Murphy. She knows me.

"But—" Kincaid began.

She leaned down and kissed his forehead, blood and all. "Hush. I promise."

Kincaid subsided. Or passed out. One of the two.

“Dresden, get out of the way,” Gard said in a patient voice.

“Don’t tell me you’re a doctor,” I said.

“I’ve seen more battlefield injuries than any bone-saw-flourishing mortal hack,” Gard said. “Move.”

“Harry,” Murph said, her voice tight. “Please.”

I creaked to my feet and shambled over to Michael and Sanya, who stood looking out at the dolphins and the little whales in the big pool. The water level had dropped seven or eight feet, and the residents were giving the newly inundated area of the pool a wide berth. If the presence of the rotting thing behind me made the water feel anything like the air was starting to smell, I couldn’t blame them.

“He looks pretty bad,” I told them.

Michael shook his head, his eyes distant. “It isn’t his time yet.”

I spoked an eyebrow and gave him a look. Sanya gave him one very nearly as dubious as mine.

Michael glanced at me and then back out at the water. “I asked.”

“Uh-huh,” I said quietly.

Sanya smiled faintly and shook his head.

I glanced at him. “Still agnostic, huh?”

“Some things I am willing to take on faith,” Sanya said with a shrug.

“Luccio took down two,” I told Michael. “What’s the count?” I didn’t need to be any more specific than that.

Sanya’s grin broadened. “That is the good news.”

I turned to face Sanya. “Those assholes just carried off a child that they plan to torture into accepting a Fallen angel,” I said quietly. “There isn’t any good news.”

The big Russian’s expression sobered. “Good is where you find it,” he seriously.

“Eleven,” Michael said quietly.

I blinked at him. “What?”

“Eleven,” he repeated. “Eleven of them fell here today. Judging from the wounds, Kincaid killed five of them. Captain Luccio killed two more. Sanya and I caught a pair on the way out. One of them was carrying a bag with the coins of those who had already fallen.”

“We found the coin of Urumviel, which we knew to be in possession of a victim,” Sanya said, “but we were short by one body.”

“That one was mine,” I said. “He’s tiny pieces of soot and ash now. And that only brings us to ten.”

“One more drowned when that tank collapsed,” Michael said. “They’re floating down there. Eleven of them, Harry.” He shook his head. “Eleven. Do you realize what this means?”

“That if we whack one more, we get the complimentary steak knives?”

He turned to me, his eyes intent and bright. “Tessa escaped with only four other members of her retinue, and Nicodemus was nowhere to be found. We have recovered thirteen coins already—and eleven more today, assuming we can find them all.”

“Only six coins remain free to do harm,” Sanya said. “Only six. Those six are the last. And they are all *here* in Chicago. Together.”

“The Fallen in the coins have been waging a war for the minds and lives of mankind for two thousand years, Harry,” Michael said. “And we have fought them. That war could end. It could all be *over*.” He turned back to the pool and shook his head, his expression that of a man baffled. “I could go to Alicia’s softball games. Teach little Harry to ride a bicycle. I could build *houses*, Harry.”

The longing in his voice was so thick, I could practically feel it brushing against my face.

“Let’s round up the coins and get out of here before the flashing lights show up,” I said quietly. “Michael, open up the bundle.”

He frowned at me but did, revealing disks of tarnished silver. I drew the pair of coins I’d found from my pocket with my gloved hand and added them to the pile. “Thanks,” I said. “Let’s get moving.”

I turned and walked away as Michael folded the cloth closed around the coins again, his eyes distant, presumably focused on some dream of shoving those coins down a deep, dark hole and living a boring, simple, normal life with his wife and kids.

I let him have it while he could.

I was going to have to take that dream away from him, dammit.

Whether he wanted to go along with the idea or not.

Chapter Thirty-five

I slept in the cab of Michael's truck all the way back to his place, leaning against the passenger-side window. Sanya had the middle seat. I was dimly aware that they were speaking quietly to each other on the way home, but their voices were just low rumbles, especially Sanya's, and I tuned them out until the truck crunched to a halt.

"It doesn't matter," Michael was saying in a patient voice. "Sanya, we don't recruit members. We're not a chapter of the Masons. It's got to be a calling."

"We act in the interests of God on a daily basis," Sanya said in a reasonable voice. "If He is being slow to call a new wielder for *Fidelacchius*, perhaps it is a subtle hint that He wishes us to take on the responsibility for ourselves."

"Don't you keep assuring me you are undecided on whether or not God exists?" Michael asked.

"I am speaking to you in your idiom, to make you comfortable," Sanya said. "She would make a good Knight."

Michael sighed. "Perhaps the reason no new wielder has been called is because our task is nearly complete. Perhaps one isn't needed."

Sanya's voice turned dry. "Yes. Perhaps all evil, everywhere, is about to be destroyed forever and there will be no more need for the strength to protect those who cannot protect themselves." He sighed. "Or perhaps..." he began, glancing at me. He saw me blinking my eyes open and hurriedly said, "Dresden. How are you feeling?"

"Nothing a few days in a hospital, a new set of lungs, a keg of Mac's dark, and a pair of feisty redheads couldn't cure," I mumbled. I tried for cavalier, but it came out a little flatter and darker than I'd meant it to. "I'll live."

Michael nodded and parked the truck. "When do we go after them?"

“We don’t,” I said quietly. “They’ve developed some kind of stealth defense against being found or scried upon magically.”

Michael frowned. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure it’s really hard to defeat someone you can’t *find*, Michael.” I rubbed at my eyes and all but slapped my own hand away, it hurt so much. *Ow. Stupid broken nose. Stupid Tessa tweaking it.*

“You need to get some sleep, Harry,” Michael said quietly.

“And perhaps a shower,” Sanya suggested.

“You smell like dolphin water too, big guy,” I shot back.

“But not nearly so much,” he said. “And I didn’t throw up on myself.”

I glowered at him for a second. “Isn’t Sanya a girl’s name?”

Michael snorted. “Get some sleep first, Harry.”

“After,” I said. “First things first. War council in the kitchen. And if someone doesn’t make me a cup of coffee, I’m going to shimmy dry all over everything, like Mouse.”

“Mouse is too polite to do that in my house,” Michael said.

“Like somebody else’s dog then,” I said. “Crap, I forgot my staff.”

Michael swung out of the truck, reached into the bed of the pickup, and lifted my staff out of it. I got out, and he tossed it to me across the back of the truck. I caught it in my left hand and nodded to him. “Bless you. It’s a real pain to make one of these. Way harder to carve out than, uh...” I shook my head as my thoughts wandered off-track. “Sorry. Long day.”

“Get inside before you take a chill,” Michael said quietly.

“Good idea.”

We trooped in. The others arrived over the next twenty minutes or so. Gard had insisted on taking Kincaid by one of Marcone’s buildings—probably someplace where he kept medical supplies for those times when he didn’t want the police wondering why his employees came in with gunshot or knife wounds. To my amusement, Murphy had insisted on accompanying Kincaid—which meant that the cops were about to learn the location of another of Marcone’s secret stashes, maybe even the name of whatever doctor he had on his payroll. And since it was Murphy’s car, and Murphy was with me, and Gard needed my help, there wasn’t diddly Gard could do about it.

That’s my Murphy, manufacturing her own damned silver lining when the clouds didn’t cough one up.

Mouse was delighted to see me, and greeted me with much fond twitching and bumping against my legs and tail wagging. He, at least, thought I merely smelled interesting. Molly greeted us with only slightly less enthusiasm, and immediately set about making food for everyone. It turns out that Molly wasn't her mother's daughter in that respect. Charity was like the MacGyver of the kitchen. She could whip up a five-course meal for twelve from an egg, two spaghetti noodles, some household chemicals, and a stick of chewing gum. Molly...

Molly once burned my egg. My boiled egg. I don't know how.

She could, however, make a mean cup of coffee.

Once Kincaid had been settled down on the guest bed in Charity's sewing room, everyone else gathered in the kitchen. Murphy looked strained. I poured her a cup of joe, and she came to stand next to me. I offered Luccio one as well. She accepted with a small, grateful nod.

"How is he?" she asked Murphy.

"Sleeping," Murphy said. "Gard got him some painkillers."

I guzzled coffee, fighting off a round of chills. "Okay, people. Here's the situation. We are bent over, greased up, and Nicodemus and his crew are about to drive one of those Japanese bullet trains right up our collective ass."

The room went quiet.

"They took Ivy," I said. "That's bad."

"Harry," Murphy said, "I know I'm the new kid, but you're going to have to explain this thing with the little girl to me again."

"Ivy is the Archive," I said quietly. "A long time ago—we don't know when—somebody—we don't know who—created the Archive. A kind of intellectual construct."

"What?" Sanya asked.

"A kind of entity composed of pure information. Think of it as software for the brain," Luccio said. "Like a very advanced database management system."

"Ah," Sanya said, nodding.

I arched an eyebrow at Luccio in surprise.

She shrugged, smiling a little. "I like computers. I read all about them. It's...my hobby, really. I understand the theory behind them."

"Right," I said. "Ahem. Okay. The Archive is passed from one generation to the next, mother to daughter—all the memories of the previous bearers

of the Archive, and all the facts they have gathered.

“All that knowledge makes the Archive powerful—and it was created as a repository of learning, a safeguard against the possibility of a cataclysm of civilization, a loss of all knowledge, the destruction of all learning. It was bound to neutrality, to the preservation and *gathering* of knowledge.”

“Gathering?” Murphy said. “So...the Archive reads a lot?”

“It goes deeper than that,” I said. “The Archive is a magic so complex that it’s practically alive—and it just *knows*. Anything that gets printed or written down, the Archive knows.”

Hendricks said a bad word.

“Sideways,” I agreed. “That’s what Nicky and the Nickelheads have taken.”

“With that kind of information at their disposal,” Murphy said, “they could...My God, they could blackmail officials. Control governments.”

“Launch nuclear warheads,” I said. “Stop thinking so small.” I nodded at Michael. “Remember, you told me that Nicodemus was playing Armageddon lotto. He makes big plans, but he plots them out so that he can make an incremental profit along the way. This was just one more scheme.”

Michael frowned. “He was after the Archive all along? He deliberately came here and provoked a confrontation to get you to call her in to arbitrate?”

“That isn’t much of a plan,” Luccio said. “You could have chosen any one of a dozen neutral arbiters.”

Murphy snorted. “But it’s Dresden. He’s lived in the same apartment since I first met him. Drives the same car. Drinks at that same little pub. Favorite restaurant is Burger King. He gets the same damned meal every time he goes there, too.”

“You can’t improve on perfection,” I said. “That’s why it’s called perfection. And what’s your point?”

“You’re a creature of habit, Harry. You don’t like change.”

There wasn’t much use denying that. “Even if I hadn’t called Ivy, Nicodemus still could realize some gains. Maybe recruit Marcone. Maybe kill off Michael or Sanya. Maybe ditch some deadwood within his own organization. Who knows? The point is, I *did* call Ivy in, he *did* get the opportunity to take her down, and it paid off.”

“But the Archive was created neutral,” Sanya said. “Constrained. You said so yourself.”

“The Archive was,” I said. “But Ivy wasn’t, and Ivy controls the Archive. She’s still a *child*. That child can be hurt. Frightened. Coerced. Tempted.” I rubbed at the spot between my eyes. “They want to make her one of them. Probably hoping to gobble up Marcone along the way.”

“God help us if they’re taken,” Murphy said quietly.

“God help *them* if they’re taken,” Michael murmured. “We have to find them, Harry.”

“Not even Mab could locate the Denarians with magic,” I said. “Gard. Could your firm do any better?”

She shook her head.

I glanced at Michael. “I don’t suppose anyone’s drawn a big flashing arrow in the sky for you two to see?”

Michael shook his head, his expression sober. “I looked.”

“Okay, then. Barring divine intervention we have no way of finding them.” I took a deep breath. “So. We’re going to make them find us.”

“That would be a good trick if we could do it,” Sanya said. “What did you have in mind?”

Hendricks lifted his head suddenly. “Coins.”

Everyone turned to stare at him.

Hendricks counted on his fingers for a second. “They only got six. And six people. So how they gonna get the creepy little girl a coin? Or one for the boss?”

“Good thinking, Cujo,” I said. “It’ll only hurt for a minute. But we’ve got to move fast to make it work. Nicodemus can’t afford to throw away any more manpower, but his conscience won’t hesitate for one itty-bitty second to kill one of his own people for their coin, if it comes to that. So we’re going to offer him a trade. Eleven old nickels in exchange for the girl.”

Michael and Sanya both came to their feet in an instant, speaking loudly and in two different languages. It was hard to make out individual words, but the gestalt of their protest amounted to, *Are you out of your mind?*

“Dammit all, Michael!” I said, swinging around to face him, thrusting out my jaw. “If Nicodemus manages to take the Archive, it won’t *matter* how many of the damned coins you have locked away.”

Silence. The clock in the entry hall ticked very loudly.

I didn’t back down. “Right now six demons are torturing an eleven-year-old girl. The same way they tortured me. The same way they tortured

Shiro.”

Michael flinched.

“Look me in the eye,” I told him, “and tell me you think that we should let that child suffer when we have the means to save her.”

Tick, tock.

Tick, tock.

Michael shook his head.

Sanya subsided, sinking back to lean against a cabinet again, his expression pensive and solemn.

“Nicodemus will never accept that trade,” Michael said quietly.

Luccio smiled, showing a lot of teeth. “Of course he will. Why sacrifice a useful retainer when he can show up for the exchange, double-cross us, steal the coins, and keep the Archive?”

“Bingo,” I said. “And we’ll be ready for him. Captain, do you know how to contact him through the channels outlined in the Accords?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Harry,” Michael said gently, “we’re taking a terrible risk.”

He and Luccio exchanged a glance pregnant with silence, swayed by deep undercurrents.

“At this point,” Luccio said, “the only riskier thing we can do is...” She shrugged and spread her hands. “Nothing.”

Michael grimaced and crossed himself. “God be with us.”

“Amen,” Sanya said, winking over Michael’s shoulder at me.

“Call Nicodemus,” I said. “Tell him I want to make a deal.”

Chapter Thirty-six

It takes time to go through channels.

The last thing I wanted to do was get wet again, but I was still freezing, and shaky, and as it turns out, there are a number of other inconvenient and unpleasant side effects to accidentally gulping down gallons of salt water. It's the little things that get to you the most.

It took me a couple of hours to get my system straightened out, get showered, and get horizontal, and by the time I finally did it I was so tired that I could barely focus my eyes. Molly was committing dinner by that time, aided and abetted by Sanya, who seemed to take some kind of grim Russian delight in watching train wrecks in progress. I fell down on the couch to debate whether or not I wanted to risk putting anything else in the pipes, and Rip van Winkled my way right through the danger.

I didn't want to wake up. I was having a dream where I wasn't hurt, and no one was kicking me around. The walls were white and smooth and clean, lit only by frosty moonlight, and someone with a gentle voice was speaking quietly to me. But my right hand had broken into fierce tingling, all pins and needles, and sleep began to retreat. I started to wake slowly. Voices murmured in the room.

"...can she possibly be *sure*?" Murphy demanded in a heated whisper.

"It isn't my area of knowledge," Michael rumbled back. "Ma'am?"

Luccio's tone was cautious. "It is a delicate area of the art," she said. "But the girl does have a gift."

"Then we need to say something."

"You can't," Molly said, her tone quiet and sad. "It wouldn't help. It might make things worse."

"And you know that?" Murphy demanded. "You know that for a fact?"

I was so tired, I'd probably missed a sentence or three in there. I blinked my eyes open and said muzzily, "The kid knows what she's talking about."

I fumbled about and found Mouse lying on the floor beside the couch, immediately under my arm. I decided sitting up could wait for a minute. “What are we talking about?”

Molly gave Murphy a look that said, *There, see?*

Murphy shook her head and said, “I’m going to see if Kincaid is awake yet.” She left, her expression set in stony displeasure.

Mouse set about industriously licking my right hand, a canine grooming ritual he sometimes pursued. It broke up the pins and needles a bit, so I didn’t argue. I still had no idea what was up with my hand. I’d never heard of anything like this happening to anyone—but it wasn’t terribly uncomfortable, and all things considered it wasn’t anywhere near the top of my priority list at the moment.

Nobody answered my question, though.

The silence got awkward. I coughed uncomfortably. “Uh. Anyone know what time it is?”

“Almost midnight,” Luccio said quietly.

I waited for a minute, but apparently no one was going to do me a favor and knock me unconscious again, so I did my best to ignore the aches and pains and sat up. “What’s the word from Nicodemus?”

“He hasn’t returned our call,” Luccio said.

“Not really a surprise,” I muttered, raking my fingers through my hair. I’d gone to sleep wearing one of Michael’s old pairs of sweats and one of his T-shirts, so my ankles stuck way out, and both shirt and sweats fit me as well as a tent. “Whatever they’re doing to keep Ivy restrained, it’s got to be pretty elaborate. I’d hold my calls until I was sure it was solid, too.”

“As would I,” Luccio agreed.

“Is she really *that* dangerous?” Michael asked.

“Yes,” Luccio said calmly. “The Council regards her as a significant power in her own right, on par with the youngest Queens of the Sidhe Courts.”

“If anything, I think that profile in the Wardens’ files underestimates her,” I said quietly. “She had barely anything to work with, and she was making Tessa and her crew look like pygmies trying to capture an elephant. If she hadn’t been cut off so entirely, I think she’d have eaten them alive.”

Luccio frowned, disturbed. “Truly?”

“You had to have seen it,” I said. “I’ve never seen anyone...You had to have seen it.”

“If she’s that powerful,” Michael said quietly, “can she be contained?”

“Oh, yes,” I said. “Absolutely. But it would take a greater circle—heavy-duty ritual stuff in a prepared location. And it would have to be freaking flawless, or she could break it.”

Molly screwed up her face in distress. “She won’t...won’t take one of the coins. Will she?” She glanced back and forth between Luccio and me and shrugged a little. “Because...it would be bad if she did.”

I looked at Michael. “The Fallen can’t just jump in and overwhelm someone, can they? Outright, nonconsensual possession?”

“Not normally,” Michael replied. “There are circumstances that can change that, though. Mentally damaged people can be susceptible to it. Other things can open a spirit to possession. Drugs, involvement with dark rituals, extended, deliberate contact with spiritual entities. A few other things.”

“Drugs,” I said tiredly. “Jesus.”

Michael winced.

“Sorry.”

“Even if a soul is made vulnerable to assault,” Michael said, “the mind and will can fight against an invasive spirit. Surely the Archive qualifies as a formidable mind and will.”

“Sure. But that doesn’t necessarily mean that *Ivy* does. Since she was born she’s been the Archive. She’s never had a chance to develop her own mind, her own personality.” I stood up, shaking my head, and started to pace restlessly around the room. “She’s going to be helpless, probably for the first time since she could walk. Alone. Scared.” I looked at Michael. “You think that those...people...won’t know how to terrify a little girl?”

He grimaced and bowed his head.

“And then along comes the Fallen and tells her how it can help her. How it wants to be her friend. How it can make the bad people stop hurting her.” I shook my head and clenched my hands. “Maybe she’ll know the facts. But those facts aren’t going to be much comfort to her. They aren’t going to *feel* tr—”

I blinked and looked at Michael. Then Molly. Then I stormed past them into the kitchen and grabbed the pad of paper Charity kept stuck to the fridge with a magnet to use to make grocery lists. I found a pencil on top of the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table, writing furiously.

Ivy,

*You are not alone.
Kincaid is alive. I'm all right. We're coming after you.
Don't listen to them. Hang on.
We're coming.
You are not alone.
Harry*

"Oh," said Molly, reading over my shoulder. "That's clever."

"If it works," Luccio said. "Will she know it?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I don't know what else I can do." I rubbed at my forehead. "Is there any food?"

"I made pot roast," Molly said.

"But is there any food?"

She swatted me on the back of the head, though not too hard, and went to the refrigerator.

I made a sandwich out of things. I'm an American. We can eat anything as long as it's between two pieces of bread. With enough mustard I almost couldn't taste the roast. For a few minutes I paid attention to eating, and was hungry enough to actually enjoy part of the experience—the part where Molly's pot roast finally terrified my growling stomach into silence.

The phone rang.

Michael answered. He listened for a moment and then said gently, "It isn't too late to seek redemption. Not even for you."

Someone laughed merrily on the other end of the phone.

"Just a moment," Michael said a breath later. He turned, holding his hand over the phone, and said, "Harry."

"Him," I said.

Michael nodded.

I went to the phone and took it from him. "Dresden."

"I'm impressed, Dresden," Nicodemus said. "I expected the Hellhound to make a good showing, of course, but you surprised me. Your skills are developing quite rapidly. Tessa is furious with you."

"I'm tired," I replied. "Do you want to talk deal or not?"

"I wouldn't have called, otherwise," Nicodemus replied. "But let's keep this a bit simpler, shall we? Just you and me. I have no desire to drag Chicago's underworld or the rest of the White Council into this ugly little affair. Mutually guaranteed safe passage, of course."

“We did that once,” I said.

“And despite the fact that you betrayed the neutrality of the meeting well before I or any of my people took action—which I take as a highly promising act on your part—I am willing to extend my trust to you once more.”

I bit out a little laugh. “Yeah. You’re a saint.”

“One day,” Nicodemus said. “One day. But for now, let’s say a face-to-face meeting. A talk. Just you and I.”

“So you and your posse can jump me alone? No, thanks.”

“Come now. As you say, I *do* want to talk deal. If you’re willing to extend your word of safe passage, we can even have it on your own ground.”

“Oh?” I asked. “And where would that be?”

“It doesn’t matter to me, as long as I don’t have to be seen with you while you’re wearing that ridiculous borrowed ensemble.”

The hairs on the back of my neck started crawling up into my hairline. I turned my head around very slightly. The windows to the Carpenters’ backyard had blinds and curtains, but neither was wholly drawn. The kitchen lights made the windows into mirrors. I couldn’t see beyond them.

“What is it going to be, Dresden?” Nicodemus asked. “Will you give me your word of safe passage for our talk? Or shall I have my men open fire on that lovely young lady at the kitchen sink?”

I glanced over my shoulder to where Molly was drying dishes. She watched me out of the corner of her eye, clearly interested in the discussion, but trying not to look like it.

I couldn’t possibly warn anyone before Nick’s men could open fire—and I believed that he had them there. Probably up in the tree house. It had a reasonably good view of the kitchen.

“All right,” I said, speaking so that everyone there could hear me. “I’m giving you my word of safe passage. For ten minutes.”

“And hope to die?” Nicodemus prompted.

I gritted my teeth. “At the rate we’re going, someone will.”

He laughed again. “Keep the subject matter of this conversation between you and I, and it won’t have to be anyone in the kitchen.”

The phone disconnected.

A beat later someone knocked at the front door.

Mouse's growl rumbled through the whole house, even though he'd remained in the front room.

"Harry?" Michael asked.

I found my shoes and stuffed my bare feet into them. "I'm going out to talk to him. Keep an eye on us, but don't do anything if he doesn't start it. And watch your back. The last chat with him was a distraction." I stood up, pulled on my duster, and picked up my staff. I met Michael's eyes and said, "Watch your back."

Michael's head tilted slightly. Then he looked past me, to the windows to the backyard. "Be careful."

I took my shield bracelet out of my duster pocket and fastened it on, wincing as it went over the mild burns on my wrist. "You know me, Michael. I'm always careful."

I walked to the front door and looked out the window.

The lights on the street were all out, except for the streetlight in front of Michael's house. Nicodemus stood in the center of the street outside. His shadow stretched out long and dark to one side of him—the side opposite the one it should have been on, given the position of the light.

Mouse came to my side and planted himself there firmly.

I rested my hand on my dog's thick neck for a moment, searching the darkness outside for anything or anyone else. I saw nothing—which meant nothing, really. Anything could be out there in the dark.

But the only thing I *knew* was out there was a scared little girl.

"Let's go," I said to Mouse, and stalked out into the snow.

Chapter Thirty-seven

It was snowing again. Five or six inches had fallen since the last time anyone cleared the Carpenters' front walk. My footsteps crunched through the silent winter air. You could have heard them a block away.

Nicodemus waited for me, stylishly casual in a deep green silk shirt and black trousers. He watched me come with a neutral expression, his eyes narrowed.

I shivered when a breath of cold wind touched me, and my weary muscles threatened to go out of control. Dammit, *I* was the one working for the Winter Queen. So how come everyone *else* got to be perfectly comfortable in the middle of a blizzard?

I stopped at the end of Michael's driveway and planted my staff on the ground. Nicodemus stared silently at me for a while. The shadows had shifted to mask his expression, and I couldn't see his face very well.

"What," he said in a low, deadly tone, "is that?"

Mouse stared at Nicodemus, and let out a growl so low that individual snowflakes jumped up off the ground all around him. My dog bared his teeth, showing long white fangs, and his snarl rose in volume.

Hell's bells. I'd never seen Mouse react like that, except in earnest combat.

And it looked like Nicodemus didn't like Mouse much, either.

"Answer my question, Dresden," Nicodemus growled. "What is *that*?"

"A precaution against getting stuck in deep snow," I said. "He's training to be a Saint Bernard."

"Excuse me?" Nicodemus said.

I mimed covering one of Mouse's ears with my hand and stage-whispered, "Don't tell him that they don't actually carry kegs of booze on their collars. Break his little heart."

Nicodemus didn't move, but his shadow shifted until it lay in a shapeless little pool between him and Mouse. His face came into view again, and he was smiling. "It's been a little while since anyone was quite that insolent to my face. May I ask you a question?"

"Why not?"

"Do you always retreat into insouciance when you're frightened, Dresden?"

"I don't think of it as retreating. I think of it as an advance to the cheer. May I ask you a question?"

The smile widened. "Oh, why not?"

"How come some of you losers seem to have personal names, and the others just get called after the Fallen in the coin?"

"It isn't complicated," Nicodemus said. "Some of our order are active, willing minds, with strength enough to retain their sense of self. Others are"—he shrugged a shoulder, an elegant, arrogant little motion—"of little consequence. Disposable vessels, and nothing more."

"Like Rasmussen," I muttered.

Nicodemus looked puzzled for a moment. Then his eyes narrowed suddenly, focusing intently upon me. His shadow stirred again, and something made a noise that sounded like a disturbingly serpentine whisper. "Oh, yes, Ursiel's vessel. Precisely." He looked past me to the house. "Have your friends begun whispering behind your back yet?"

They sure as hell had, though I had no idea why. I hung on to my poker face. "Why would they?"

"Try to imagine the Aquarium from their point of view. They enter a building with you, along with someone they would not normally bring along—but you have insisted that the police detective accompany your group. As a result, you walk away to a private conference with just you, me, and the Archive's guard dog. Then the sign goes up, and they can hear a terrible conflict raging. They race to the scene as quickly as possible and find my people dragging you out of the water—to take back the coin you had in your pocket, but your friends had no way of knowing that. They find the Archive gone, her bodyguard wounded or dead, and you being apparently assisted by my people.

"And *they never saw what happened*," Nicodemus continued. "To a suspicious mind, you might seem an accomplice to the act."

I swallowed. "I doubt that."

“Oh?” Nicodemus said. “Even though you’re about to propose giving me back the coins you took at the Aquarium? Eleven coins, Dresden. Should I recover them, everything you and your people have done during the past few days will mean nothing. I’ll be just as strong and possess the power of the Archive to boot. It is hardly a stretch to consider that you would be ideally positioned to betray them at a critical moment—which this is.”

I...hadn’t thought of it like that.

“‘What if he’s finally falling to the influence of her shadow?’ they’re thinking. ‘What if he’s not wholly in control of his own decisions?’ they’re thinking. Treachery is a more dangerous weapon than any magic, Dresden. I’ve had two thousand years to practice arranging it, and your friends the Knights know it.”

Suddenly Michael’s attitude began to make a lot more sense, and the pot roast fought to come back up. I tried to keep my poker face, but it wouldn’t stick.

“Ouch,” Nicodemus said, his eyes widening. “After all those years of baseless suspicion and hostility from your own Council, *that* must be a painful realization.” He smirked at Mouse and then at me. “Your little heart must be breaking.”

Mouse pressed his shoulder against my leg and snarled savagely at Nicodemus, taking a step forward.

Nicodemus ignored him, his focus all on me. “It’s a tempting offer,” he said. “Exchanging the coins for the Archive? Presenting me with an opportunity to walk away with every jewel in the vault? It’s something I can hardly ignore. Well-done.”

“So?” I said. “Where do you want to set it up?”

He shook his head. “I don’t,” he said quietly. “This is endgame, Dresden, even if you and yours can’t accept it. Once I have the Archive, the rest is simply an exercise. Losing the coins will hurt, true, but I don’t need them. Thorned Namshiel is of no real use to me in his current condition, and I haven’t worked for two thousand years only to take a gamble at the last second. No deal.”

I swallowed. “Then why are you here?”

“To give you a chance to reconsider,” Nicodemus said. “I think you and I are not so very different. Both of us are creatures of will. Both of us live our lives for ideals, not material things. Both of us are willing to sacrifice to attain our goals.”

“Maybe we should wear matching outfits.”

He spread his hands. “I could be an ally far more effective and dangerous than any you have now. I’m willing to compromise with you, and make some of your goals my own. I can provide you with support beyond anything your own Council has ever done for you. The material gain of such a partnership is a passing matter, ultimately, but wouldn’t you enjoy living in something other than a musty basement? Don’t you get tired of coming home to cold showers, cheap food, and an empty bed?”

I just stared at him.

“A great deal of work needs to be done, and not all of it is repugnant to you. In fact, I should imagine that some of it would prove to be quite satisfying to your personal sense of right and wrong.”

To hell with the poker face. I sneered at him. “Like what?”

“The Red Court is one example,” Nicodemus said. “They’re large, well organized, dangerous to my plans, a plague upon mankind, and aesthetically repugnant. They’re parasites who are inconvenient in the short term, dangerous in the middle distance, and fatal to any long-range plan. They need to be destroyed at some point, in any case. I should have no objection to giving my assistance to you, and through you to the White Council in their efforts to do so.”

“Make the Council into cat’s-paws to wipe out the Red Court?” I asked.

“As if you have not been made into their tool on many occasions.”

“The Council doesn’t need my help to be a bunch of tools,” I muttered.

“And yet the reversal appeals to your sense of justice, as does the notion of visiting destruction upon the Red Court. Especially given what they did to Susan Rodriguez.” He tilted his head to one side. “It may be possible to help her, you know. If anyone might know of a means to free her of her condition, it is the Fallen.”

“Why not just offer me floating castles and world peace while you’re at it, Nick?”

He spread his hands. “I only suggest possibilities. Here is what is concrete: You and I share a great many foes. I am willing to help you fight them.”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You’re telling me that you want me to work with you, and that I still get to keep being one of the good guys.”

“Good and evil are relative. You know that by now. But I would never ask you to work against your conscience. I have no need to do so in order to

make use of your talents. Consider how many people you could help with the power I'm offering you."

"Yeah. You seem like a real philanthropist."

"As I said, I'm willing to work with you, and I am quite sincere." He met my eyes. "Look upon my soul, Dresden. See for yourself."

My heart ripped out about a thousand beats in two seconds, and I jerked my eyes away from him, terrified. I didn't want to see what was behind Nicodemus's dark, calm, ancient eyes. It could have been something monstrous, his soul, something that ripped away my sanity and left a stain of itself on my own like a smear of grease.

Or it could be even worse.

What if he was telling the truth?

I glanced back at the Carpenter house, feeling very cold and very tired. Tired of everything. Tired of all of it. I looked down at my borrowed clothes and my bare ankles, covered with snow just like my shoes.

"I don't have anything against you personally, Dresden," he said. "I respect your integrity. I would enjoy working with you. But make no mistake: If you stand in my way, I'll mow you down beside everyone else."

Silence reigned.

I thought about what I knew of Nicodemus.

I thought about my friends and those whispers behind my back. I thought about the awkward silences.

I thought about what the world might become if Nicodemus turned Ivy.

I thought about how scared the little girl must be right now.

And I thought about a little old man from Okinawa who had literally laid down his life for my own.

"You and I," I said quietly, "are both willing to give things up to reach our goals."

Nicodemus tilted his head, waiting.

"But we have real different ideas when it comes to deciding who does the sacrificing and who gets sacrificed." I shook my head. "No."

He took a slow, deep breath and said, "Pity. Good evening, Dresden. Best of luck to you in the new world. But I expect we won't meet again in this life."

He turned to go.

And my heart sped up again.

Shiro said I would know who to give the sword to.

“Wait,” I said.

Nicodemus paused.

“I’ve got more than coins to offer you.”

He turned, his face a mask.

“You give me Ivy and I give you eleven coins,” I said quietly, “plus *Fidelacchius*.”

Nicodemus froze. His shadow twisted and twitched. “You have it?”

“Yeah.”

That ugly whispering sound came again, louder and faster. Nicodemus glanced down at his shadow, frowning.

“Suppose you get Ivy,” I said. “Suppose you turn her and manage to control her. It’s a great scheme. Suppose you get your apocalypse and your neo Dark Age. Do you think that’s going to stop the Knights? Do you think that, one after the other, new men and women won’t take up the Swords and fight you? You think Heaven’s just going to sit there letting you do whatever you want?”

Nicodemus had a better poker face than me, but I had him. He was listening.

“How many times have the Swords broken up your plans?” I asked. “How many times have they forced you to abandon one position or another?” I took a stab in the dark that seemed worth it. “Don’t you get tired of waking up from nightmares about taking a sword through the heart or the neck? Turning you into one more discarded Dixie cup for the Fallen? Terrified of what you’re going to face once you shuffle off the mortal coil?”

“I’ve got the Sword,” I said. “I’m willing to trade it and the coins alike.”

His teeth showed. “No, you aren’t.”

“I’m just as willing to give you the Sword and the coins as you are to give me the Archive,” I said. “I’m handing you an opportunity, Nick. A chance to destroy one of the Swords forever. Who knows? If things go well you might have a shot at taking out the other two at the same time.”

The whispering increased in volume and speed again.

Nicodemus stared at me. I couldn’t read his expression, but his right hand was slowly clenching and unclenching, as if eager to take up a weapon, and hate poured off him like heat from an oven.

“So,” I said as nonchalantly as I could, “where do you want to do the exchange?”

Chapter Thirty-eight

I walked back up to the house again a few minutes later, Mouse at my side. Michael had been right: Before we went inside, the big dog shook himself thoroughly. I decided to follow his example and stomped whatever snow I could off my numb feet, then went in.

I walked into the living room and found everyone there waiting for me—Luccio, Michael, Molly, Sanya, and Murphy. Everyone looked at me expectantly.

“He went for it. We’re going to have to haul ass in a minute. But I need to speak with you first, Michael.”

Michael raised his eyebrows. “Oh, certainly.”

“Alone,” I said quietly. “And bring your Sword.”

I turned and walked on through the house, out the barely functioning back door the gruff had damaged before all this began, and on to the workshop. I didn’t stop to look behind me. I didn’t need to look to know that everyone was trading Significant Glances.

If Nicodemus actually did have people in the tree house, they were gone now. I wouldn’t put it past the bastard to have been lying about them, just to keep me honest. I went inside the workshop and laid my staff down on the workbench. It had a lot of dings and nicks in it. It could benefit from a set of wood-carving tools, sandpaper, and patient attention.

Michael came in silently a moment later. I turned to face him. He wore his fleece-lined denim coat again, and bore *Amoracchius* in its sheath, attached to a belt he’d slung over one shoulder.

I took my duster off and put it next to the staff. “Draw it, please.”

“Harry,” Michael said. “What are you doing?”

“Making a point,” I said. “Just do it.”

He frowned at me, his expression uncertain, but he drew the blade.

I added my energy rings to the pile on the workbench. Then my shield bracelet. Finally I took off my mother's silver pentacle necklace and put it down there too. Then I turned and walked over to Michael.

I met his eyes steadily. I'd already looked upon Michael's soul. I knew its quality, and he knew that of mine.

Then I reached down with my left hand, gently grasped *Amoracchius's* blade, and lifted it to rest against the left side of my neck, just below my ear. The jugular vein. Or the carotid artery. I get them confused.

Michael went pale. "Harry—"

"Shut up," I said. "For the past couple of days you've done all kinds of not-talking. You can do a little bit more of it until I've said my piece."

He subsided, his eyes troubled, and stood very, very still.

What can I say? I have a gift for getting people's attention.

I stared at him down the length of shining, deadly steel, and then, very slowly, took my hand off the Sword, leaving its wickedly sharp edge resting against the beat of my life. Then I spread my hands and just stood there for a minute.

"You are my friend, Michael," I said, barely louder than a whisper. "I trust you."

His eyes glittered and he closed them.

"And you want to know," he said heavily, looking up again, "if I can say the same."

"Talk is cheap," I said, and moved my chin a little to indicate the Sword. "I want to know if you'll show me."

He lowered the Sword carefully from my neck. His hands shook a little, but mine didn't. "It isn't that simple."

"Yes, it is," I told him. "I'm your friend, or I'm not. You trust me—or you don't."

He sheathed the Sword and turned away, facing the window.

"That's the real reason you didn't want to hat up and go gunning for the Denarians right at first, the way I wanted to. You were worried I was leading you into a trap."

"I didn't lie to you, Harry," Michael said. "But I'd be lying right now if I didn't admit that, yes, the thought had crossed my mind."

"Why?" I asked, my voice perfectly calm. "What reason have I ever given you for that?"

"It isn't that *simple*, Harry."

“I’ve fought and bled to defend you and your family. I put my neck in a noose for Molly, when the Council would have killed her. I can’t even tell you how much business I’ve missed out on because of the time I’ve got to spend teaching her. What was it that tipped you off to my imminent villainhood?”

“Harry...”

Nicodemus had been right about one thing: It hurt to be suspected by my friends. It hurt like hell. I didn’t even realize I had raised my voice until I’d already screamed, “Look at me when I’m talking to you!”

Michael turned his face to me, his expression grim.

“Do you think I’ve decided to side with Nicodemus and his buddies?” I snarled. “Do you really think that? Because if you do, you might as well put that Sword through my neck right now.”

“I don’t know what to think, Harry,” he said quietly. “There’s a lot you haven’t said.”

“I don’t share everything with you,” I retorted. “I don’t share everything with anyone. That’s nothing new.”

“I know it isn’t,” he said.

“Then *why*?” Some of the fire went out of my voice, and I felt like a half-deflated balloon. “You’ve known me for years, man. We’ve covered each other plenty of times. Why are you doubting me now?”

“Because of Lasciel’s shadow,” Michael said quietly. “Because as long as it’s in you it will tempt you—and the longer it stays, the more able it will be to do so.”

“I gave Forthill the coin,” I said. “I figured that pretty much said it all.”

Michael grimaced. “The shadow can show you how to summon the coin. It’s happened before. That’s why we’re so careful not to touch them.”

“It’s over, Michael. There is no more shadow.”

Michael shook his head, his eyes filled with something very like pity. “It doesn’t work like that, Harry.”

The fire came back. The one thing I didn’t want or need was pity. I’d made my own choices, lived my own life, and even if they hadn’t all been smart choices, there weren’t many of them that I regretted. “How do you know?” I asked.

“Because in two thousand years, *no one* has rid themselves of the shadow of one of the Fallen—except by accepting the demon into them entirely,

taking up the coin, and living to feel remorse and discarding it. And you claim that you never took up the coin.”

“That’s right,” I said.

“Then either the shadow is still there,” Michael said, “still twisting your thoughts. Still whispering to you. Or you’re lying to me about taking up the coin. Those are the only options.”

I just stared at him for a minute. Then I said, “Hell’s bells. And I thought wizards had a monopoly on arrogance.”

He blinked.

“Or do you really expect me to believe that the Church has been there to document every single instance of anyone picking up any of the cursed coins. That they’ve followed through with everyone tempted by a Fallen’s shadow, taken testimony. Made copies. Hell, gotten it notarized. Especially given that you’ve told me that Nicodemus has worked as hard as he could to destroy the Church’s records and archives through the years.”

Michael’s weight settled back on his heels. He frowned.

“This is what they want, Michael. They want us at one another’s throats. They want us to distrust one another.” I shook my head. “And right now is *not* the time to give it to them.”

Michael folded his arms, studying me. “It could have done something to your mind,” Michael said quietly. “You might not be in control of yourself, Harry.”

I took a deep breath. “That’s...possible,” I admitted. “Anybody’s head can be messed with. But if you go rewiring someone’s brain, it damages them, badly. The bigger the changes you make, the worse it disorders their mind.”

“The way my daughter did to her friends,” Michael said. “I know.”

“So there are signs,” I said. “If you know the person well enough, there are almost always signs. They act differently. Have I been acting differently? Have I suddenly gone crazy on you?”

He arched an eyebrow.

“More so than usual,” I amended.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Then odds are pretty good no one has scrambled my noggin,” I said. “Besides which, it isn’t the sort of thing one tends to overlook, and as a grade-A wizard of the White Council, I assure you that nothing like that has happened to me.”

For a second he looked like he wanted to speak, but he didn't.

"Which brings us back to the only real issue here," I said. "Do you think I've gone over to them? Do you think I *could* do such a thing, after what I've seen?"

My friend sighed. "No, Harry."

I stepped up to him and put my hand on his shoulder. "Then trust me for a little longer. Help me for a little longer."

He searched my eyes again. "I will," he whispered, "if you answer one question for me."

I frowned at him and tilted my head. "Okay."

He took a deep breath and spoke carefully. "Harry," he said quietly, "what happened to your blasting rod?"

For a second the question didn't make any sense. The words sounded like noises, like sounds infants make before they learn to speak. Especially the last part of the sentence. "...I'm sorry," I said. "What did you say?"

"Where," he said gently, "is your blasting rod?"

This time I heard the words.

Pain stabbed me in the head, ice picks plunging into both temples. I flinched and doubled over. Blasting rod. Familiar words. I fought to summon an image of what went with the words, but I couldn't *find* anything. I *knew* I had a memory associated with those words, but try as I might, I couldn't drag it out. It was like a shape covered by some heavy tarp. I knew an object was beneath, but I couldn't get to it.

"I don't...I don't..." I started breathing faster. The pain got worse.

Someone had been in my head.

Someone had been in my *head*.

Oh, God.

I must have fallen at some point, because the workshop's floor was cold underneath one of my cheeks when I felt Michael's broad, work-calloused hand gently cover my forehead.

"Father," he murmured, humbly and with no drama whatsoever. "Father, please help my friend. Father of light, banish the darkness that he may see. Father of truth, expose the lies. Father of mercy, ease his pain. Father of love, honor this good man's heart. Amen."

Michael's hand felt suddenly red-hot, and I felt power burning in the air around him—not magic, the magic I worked with every day. This was something different, something more ancient, more potent, more pure. This

was the power of faith, and as that heat settled into the spaces behind my eyes, something cracked and shattered inside my thoughts.

The pain vanished so suddenly that it left me gasping, even as the image of a simple wooden rod, a couple of feet long, heavily carved with sigils and runes, leapt into the forefront of my thoughts. Along with the image of the blasting rod came thousands of memories, everything I had ever known about using magic to summon and control fire in a hurry, evocation, combat magic, and they hit me like a sledgehammer.

I lay there shuddering for a minute or two as I took it all back in. The memories filled a hole inside me I hadn't even realized was there.

Michael left his hand on my head. "Easy, Harry. Easy. Just rest for a minute. I'm right here."

I decided not to argue with him.

"Well," I rasped weakly a moment later. I opened my eyes and looked up to where Michael sat cross-legged on the floor beside me. "Somebody owes somebody here an apology."

He gave me a small, concerned smile. "You don't owe me anything. Perhaps I should have spoken sooner, but..."

"But confronting someone who's had his brain twisted out of shape about the fact can prove traumatic," I said quietly. "Especially if part of the twisting was making damned sure that he didn't remember any such thing happening."

He nodded. "Molly became concerned sometime yesterday. I asked her to have a look at you while you were sleeping earlier. I apologize for that, but I didn't know any other way to be sure that someone had tampered with you."

I shivered. Ugh. Molly playing in my head. That wasn't necessarily the prettiest thing to think about. Molly had a gift for neuromancy, mind magic, but she'd used it to do some fairly nasty things to people in the past—for perfectly good reasons, true, but all the same it had been honest-to-evilness black magic. It was the kind of thing that people got addicted to, and it wasn't the kind of candy store that I would ever want that kid to play in.

Especially considering that the inventory was me.

"Hell's bells, Michael," I murmured. "You shouldn't have done that to her."

“It was her idea, actually. And you’re right, Harry. We can’t afford to be divided right now. What can you remember?”

I shook my head, squinting while I sorted through the dump-truckload of loose memories. “The last time I remember having it was right after the gruffs attacked us here. After that...nothing. I don’t know where it is now. And no, I don’t remember who did it to me or why.”

Michael frowned but nodded. “Well. He doesn’t always give us what we want. Only what we need.”

I rubbed at my forehead. “I hope so,” I said sheepishly. “So. Um. This is a little awkward. After that thing with putting your Sword to my throat and all.”

Michael let his head fall back and belted out a warm, rich laugh. “You aren’t the sort of person to do things by halves, Harry. Grand gestures included.”

“I guess not,” I said quietly.

“I have to ask,” Michael said, studying me intently. “Lasciel’s shadow. Is it really gone?”

I nodded.

“How?”

I looked away from him. “I don’t like to talk about it.”

He frowned but nodded slowly. “Can you tell me why not?”

“Because what happened to her wasn’t fair.” I shook my head. “Do you know why the Denarians don’t like going into churches, Michael?”

He shrugged. “Because the presence of the Almighty makes them uncomfortable, or so I always supposed.”

“No,” I said, closing my eyes. “Because it makes the Fallen *feel*, Michael. Makes them remember. Makes them sad.”

I felt his startled glance, even with my eyes closed.

“Imagine how awful that would be,” I said, “after millennia of certainty of purpose. Suddenly you have doubts. Suddenly you question whether or not everything you’ve done has been one enormous, futile lie. If everything you sacrificed, you sacrificed for nothing.” I smiled faintly. “Couldn’t be good for your confidence.”

“No,” Michael said thoughtfully. “I don’t suppose it would be.”

“Shiro told me I’d know who to give the Sword to,” I said.

“Yes?”

“I threw it into the deal with Nicodemus. The coins and the Sword for the child.”

Michael drew in a sharp breath.

“He would have walked away otherwise,” I said. “Run out the clock, and we’d never have found him in time. It was the only way. It was almost like Shiro knew. Even back then.”

“God’s blood, Harry,” Michael said. He pressed a hand to his stomach. “I’m fairly sure that gambling is a sin. And even if it isn’t, *this* probably should be.”

“I’m going to go get that little girl, Michael,” I said. “Whatever it takes.”

He rose, frowning, and buckled his sword belt around his hips.

I held up my right hand. “Are you with me?”

Michael’s palm smacked solidly into mine, and he hauled me to my feet.

Chapter Thirty-nine

As war councils go, our meeting was fast and dirty. It had to be.

Afterward I tracked down Murphy. She'd gone back to Charity's sewing room to check on Kincaid.

I stood quietly in the door for a minute. There wasn't much room to be had in there. It was piled high with plastic storage boxes filled with fabric and craft materials. There was a sewing machine on a table, a chair, the bed, and just enough floor space to let you get to them. I'd been laid up in this room before. It was a comforting sort of place, awash in softness and color, and it smelled like detergent and fabric softener.

Kincaid looked like the Mummy's stunt double. He had an IV in his arm, and there was a unit of blood suspended from a small metal stand beside his bed—courtesy of Marcone's rogue medical facilities, I supposed.

Murphy sat beside the bed, looking worried. I'd seen the expression on her face before, when I'd been the one lying horizontal. I expected to feel a surge of jealousy, but it didn't happen. I just felt bad for Murph.

"How is he?" I asked her.

"This is his third unit of blood," Murphy said. "His color's better. His breathing is steadier. But he needs a doctor. Maybe we should call Butters."

"If we do, he's just going to look at us, do his McCoy impersonation, and tell you, 'Dammit, Murphy. I'm a medical examiner, not a pasta chef.'"

Murphy choked out a little sound that was as much sob as chuckle.

I stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. "Michael says he's going to make it."

She sat stiffly underneath my hand. "He isn't a doctor."

"But he has very good contacts."

Kincaid shuddered, and his breath rasped harshly for several seconds.

Murphy's shoulder went steely with tension.

The wounded man's breathing steadied again.

“Hey,” I said quietly. “Easy.”

She shook her head. “I hate this.”

“He’s tougher than you or me,” I said quietly.

“That’s not what I mean.”

I remained silent, waiting for her to speak.

“I hate *feeling* like this. I’m fucking terrified, and I *hate* it.” The muscles in her jaw tensed. “This is why I don’t want to get involved anymore. It hurts too much.”

I squeezed her shoulder gently. “Involved, huh?”

“No,” she said. Then she shook her head. “Yes. I don’t know. It’s complicated, Harry.”

“Caring about someone isn’t complicated,” I said. “It isn’t *easy*. But it isn’t complicated, either. Kinda like lifting the engine block out of a car.”

She gave me an oblique glance. “Leave it to a man to describe intimate relationships in terms of automotive mechanics.”

“Yeah. I was kinda proud of that one, myself.”

She huffed out a quiet breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and leaned her cheek down onto my hand. “The stupid part,” she said, “is that he isn’t interested in...in getting serious. We get along. We have fun together. For him, that’s enough. And it’s so *stupid* for me to get hung up on him.”

I didn’t think it was all that stupid. Murph didn’t want to get too close, let herself be too vulnerable. Kincaid didn’t want that kind of relationship either—which made him safe. It made it all right for her to care.

It also explained why she and I had never gotten anywhere.

In the event that you haven’t figured it out, I’m not the kind of person to be casually involved in much of anything.

I couldn’t fit any of that into words, though. So I just leaned down and kissed the top of her head gently.

She shivered. Her tears made wet, cool spots on the back of my hand. I knelt. It put my head more or less on level with hers, where she sat beside the bed. I put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against me. I still didn’t say anything. For Murph, that would be too much like I was actually in the room, seeing her cry. So she pretended that she wasn’t crying and I pretended that I didn’t notice.

She didn’t cry for long. A couple of minutes. Then her breathing steadied, and I could feel her asserting control again. A minute more and she sat up and away from me. I let her.

“They said you were under the influence,” she said, her tone calmer, more businesslike. “That someone had done something to your head. Your apprentice said that. But Michael didn’t want to say anything in front of the other wizard, I could tell. And no one wanted to say anything in front of me.”

“Secrets get to be a habit,” I said quietly. “And Molly was right.”

Murphy nodded. “She said that we should listen for the first words out of your mouth when you woke up. That if something had messed with your mind, your subconscious might be able to communicate that way, while you were on the edge of sleep. And you told us to listen to her.”

I thought about it and pursed my lips. “Huh. I did. Guess I’m smarter than I thought.”

“They shouldn’t have suspected you,” Murphy said. “I’m a paranoid bitch, and I gave up suspecting you a long time ago.”

“They had a good reason,” I said. I took a slow breath. It was hard, but I forced the words out. “Nicodemus threw one of those coins at Michael’s kid. I grabbed it before the kid could. And I had a photocopy of a Fallen angel living in my head for several years, trying to talk me into picking up the coin and letting the rest of it into me.”

Murphy glanced obliquely at me. “You mean...you could have become one of those things?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Couple of times, it was close.”

“Is it still...Is that what...?”

I shook my head. “It’s gone now. She’s gone now. I guess the whole time she was trying to change me, I was trying to change her right back. And in the Raith Deeps last year, she took a psychic bullet for me—at the very end, after everyone else had gotten out.” I shrugged. “I had...We’d sort of become friends, Murph. I’d gotten used to having her around.” I glanced at her and gave her a faint smile. “Crazy, huh? Get all broken up over what was essentially my imaginary friend.”

Her fingers found my hand and squeezed tight once. “We’re all imaginary friends to one another, Harry.” She sat with me for a moment, and then gave me a shrewd glance. “You never told Michael the details.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know why.”

“I do,” she said. “You remember when Kravos stuck his fingers in my brain?”

I shuddered. He’d been impersonating me when he did it. “Yeah.”

“You said it caused some kind of damage. What did you call it?”

“Psychic trauma,” I said. “Same thing happens when a loved one dies, during big emotional tragedies, that kind of thing. Takes a while to get over it.”

“But you do get over it,” Murph said. “Dresden, it seems to me that you’d lock yourself up pretty tight if someone took a regular bullet for you with a regular body. Much less if you were under psychic attack and this imaginary friend died right inside your own brain. Something like that happens, shouldn’t you have expected to be a basket case, at least for a little while?”

I frowned, staring down at my hands. “I never even considered that.”

She snorted gently. “There’s a surprise. Dresden forgets that he’s not invincible.”

She had a point there.

“This plan of yours,” she said. “Do you really think it’s going to work?”

“I think I’ve got to try it.” I took a deep breath. “I don’t think you should be involved in this one, Murph. The Denarians have human followers. Fanatic ones.”

“You think we’re going to have to kill some of them,” Murphy said.

“I think we probably won’t have much choice,” I said. “Besides that, I wouldn’t put it past them to send someone here for spite, win or lose.”

Murphy glanced up at me rather sharply.

I shrugged. “They know that Michael and Sanya and I are going to be out there. They’ll know that there will be someone here, unprotected. Whether or not they get the coins, Nicodemus might send someone here to finish off the wounded.”

Murphy stared at me for a second, then looked back at Kincaid. “You bastard,” she said without emphasis.

“I’m not playing big brother with you, Karrin,” I replied. “But we are dealing with some very bad people. Molly’s staying with Kincaid. I’m leaving Mouse here too. I’d appreciate it if someone with a little more experience was here to give the kid some direction, if it was needed.”

She scowled at Kincaid. Then she said, “Trying to guilt me into playing worried girlfriend, domestic defender, and surrogate mother figure, eh?”

“I figured it would work better than telling you to shut up and get into the kitchen.”

She took a deep breath, studying the sleeping man. Then she reached out and touched his hand. She stood and faced me. “No. I’m coming with you.”

I grunted, rising. “You sure?”

“The girl is important to him,” Murphy said. “More important to him than anything has been for a long time, Harry. He’d die to protect her. If he was conscious, he’d be demanding to go with you. But he can’t do that. So I’ll have to do it for him.”

“Could be real messy, Murph.”

She nodded. “I’ll worry about that after the girl is safe.”

There was a clock ticking quietly on the wall. “The meeting’s in an hour.”

Murphy nodded and reached for her coat. The tears were gone, and there was no evidence of them in the lines of her face. “You’d better excuse me, then. If we’re going to have an evening out, I need to change into something more comfortable.”

“I never tell a lady how to accessorize.”

Going forth to do battle with the forces of darkness is one thing. Doing it in a pair of borrowed sweatpants and an ill-fitting T-shirt is something else entirely. Fortunately, Molly had been thoughtful enough to drop my own clothes into the washer, bless her heart. I could forgive her for the pot roast.

In the laundry room I had skinned out of Michael’s clothes and was in the act of pulling up my jeans when Luccio opened the door and leaned in, her expression excited. “Dresden. I think I know wh—Oh.”

I jerked my jeans the rest of the way up and closed them as hurriedly as I could without causing any undue discomfort. “Oh. Um. Excuse me,” I said.

Luccio smiled, the dimples in her cheeks making her look not much older than Molly. She didn’t blush. Instead she folded her arms and leaned one shoulder on the door frame, her dark eyes taking me in with evident pleasure. “Oh, not at all, Dresden. Not at all.”

I paused and returned her look for a moment. “Aren’t you supposed to be embarrassed, apologize, and quietly leave?”

Her smile widened lazily, and she shrugged a shoulder. “When I was a girl, perhaps. But even then I had difficulty forcing myself to act awkward when looking at something that pleased me.” She tilted her head and moved toward me. She reached out and rested her fingertips very lightly against a

scar on my upper arm. She traced its outline and glanced up at me, lifting an eyebrow.

“Bullet wound,” I said. “FBI werewolves.”

She nodded. Then her fingers touched the hollow of my throat and slid slowly down over my chest and belly in a straight line. A shuddering sensation of heat fluttered through my skin in the wake of her fingertips. She looked up at me again.

“Hook knife,” I said. “Sorcerer tried to filet me at the Field Museum.”

Her touch trailed down my bare arms, lingering on my forearms, near my wrists, avoiding the red, scalded skin around my left wrist.

“Thorn manacles,” I said. “From when Madrigal Raith tried to sell me on eBay.”

She lifted my scarred left hand between hers, fingers stroking over the maimed flesh. These days I could move it pretty well, most of the time, and it didn’t look like some kind of hideous, half-melted wax image of a hand anymore, but it still wasn’t pretty. “A scourge of Black Court vampires had a Renfield that got creative. Had a homemade flamethrower.”

She shook her head. “I know men centuries older than you who have not collected so many scars.”

“Maybe they lived that long because they were smart enough not to get them,” I said.

She flashed me that grin again. At close range it was devastating, and her eyes looked even darker.

“Anastasia,” I said quietly, “in a few minutes we’re going to go do something that might get us killed.”

“Yes, Harry. We are,” she said.

I nodded. “But that’s not until a few minutes from now.”

Her eyes smoldered. “No. No, it isn’t.”

I lifted my still-tingling right hand to gently cup the line of her jaw, and leaned down to press my mouth to hers.

She let out a quiet, satisfied little moan and melted against me, her body pressing full-length to mine, returning the kiss with slow, sensuous intensity. I felt her slide the fingers of one hand into my hair, while the nails of the other wandered randomly over my chest and arm, barely touching. It left a trail of fire in my flesh, and I found myself sinking the fingers of my right hand into the soft curls of her hair, drawing her more deeply into the kiss.

I don't know how long that went on, but it wound down deliciously. By the time she drew her mouth away from mine, both of us were breathing harder, and my heart was pounding out a rapid beat against my chest. And against my jeans.

She didn't open her eyes for five or ten seconds, and when she did, they were absolutely huge and molten with desire. Anastasia leaned her head back and arched in a slow stretch, letting out a long, low, pleased sigh.

"You don't mind?" I asked her.

"Not at all."

"Good. I just...wanted to see what that was like. It's been a long time since I kissed anyone. Almost forgot what it was like."

"You have no idea," she murmured, "how long it has been since I've kissed a man. I wasn't sure I remembered *how*."

I let out a quiet laugh.

Her dimples returned. "Good," she said, satisfaction in her tone. She looked me up and down, taking in the sights again. This time it didn't make me feel self-conscious. "You have a good smile. You should show it more often."

"Once we're done tonight," I said, "maybe we could talk about that. Over dinner."

Her smile widened, and color touched her cheeks. "That would please me."

"Good," I said. I arched an eyebrow at her. "I'll put my shirt on now, if that's all right."

Anastasia let out a merry laugh and stepped back from me, though she didn't lift her fingertips from my skin until the distance forced her to do it. "Very well, Warden. As you were."

"Why, thank you, Captain." I tugged the rest of my clothes back on. "What were you going to tell me?"

"Hmmm?" she said. "Oh, ah, yes. Before I was so cleverly distracted. I think I know where the Denarians are holding the Archive."

I blinked. "You got through with a tracking spell?"

She shook her head. "No, it failed miserably. So I was forced to resort to the use of my brain." She opened a hard-sided leather case hanging from her sword belt. She withdrew a plastic tube from it, opened one end, and withdrew a roll of papers. She thumbed through them, found one, and put

the rest back. She unfolded the paper into what looked like a map, and laid it out on the lid of the dryer.

I leaned over to look at it. It was indeed a map, but instead of being marked with state lines, highways, and towns, it was dominated by natural features—most prominent of which was the outlines of the Great Lakes. Rivers, forests, and swamps figured prominently as well. Furthermore, a webwork of intersecting lines flowed over the map, marked in various colors of ink in several different thicknesses.

Footsteps approached and Molly appeared, carrying a plastic laundry basket full of children's clothing. She blinked when she saw us, but smiled and came over immediately. "What's that?"

"It's a map," I replied, like the knowledgeable mentor I was supposed to be.

She snorted. "I can see that," she said. "But a map of what?"

Then I got it. "Ley lines," I said, looking up at Luccio. "These are ley lines."

Molly pursed her lips and studied the paper. "Those are real?"

"Yeah, we just haven't covered them yet. They're...well, think of them as underground pipelines. Only instead of flowing with water, they flow with magic. They run all over the world, usually running between hot spots of supernatural energy."

"Connect the dots with magic," Molly said. "Cool."

"Exactly," Luccio said. "The only method that would have a chance of restraining the Archive's power would be the use of a greater circle—and one that uses an enormous amount of energy, at that."

I grunted acknowledgment. "It would have to be dead solid perfect, too, or she could break loose at the flaw."

"Correct."

"How much energy are we talking about?" I asked her.

"You might be able to empower such a circle for half an hour or an hour, Dresden. I couldn't have kept it up that long, even before my, ah"—she waved a hand down at herself—"accident."

"So it would take loads of power," I mused. "So how are they powering it?"

"That's the real question," she said. "After all, the Sign they raised at the Aquarium suggests that they have an ample supply."

I shook my head. "No," I stated. "That was Hellfire."

Luccio pursed her lips. "You seem fairly certain of that."

"I seem completely certain of that," I said. "It's powerful as Hell, literally, but it isn't stable. It fluctuates and stutters. That's why they couldn't keep the Sign up any longer than they did."

"To imprison the Archive, they would need a steady, flawless supply," Luccio said. "A supply that big would also be able to support a very complex veil—one that could shield them from any tracking spell. In fact, it's the *only* way they could establish a veil that impenetrable."

"Ley lines," I breathed.

"Ley lines," she said with satisfaction.

"I know of a couple around town, but I didn't realize there were that *many* of the things," I said.

"The Great Lakes region is rife with them," Luccio said. "It's an energy nexus."

"So?" Molly asked. "What does that mean?"

"Well, it's one reason why so much supernatural activity tends to happen in this area," I said. "Three times as many ships and planes have vanished in Lake Michigan as in the Bermuda Triangle."

"Wow," Molly said. "Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"Next summer I think I'll stick to the pool."

Luccio started tracing various lines on the map with a fingertip. "The colors denote what manner of energy seems to be most prevalent in the line. Defensive energy here. Disruptive force here, restorative lines here and here, and so on. The thickness of the line indicates its relative potency."

"Right, right," I said, growing excited. "So we're looking for an energy source compatible with the use of a greater circle, and strong enough to keep a big one powered up and stable."

"And there are four locations that I think are most likely," Luccio said. She pointed up toward the north end of Lake Michigan. "North and South Manitou islands both have heavy concentrations of dark energy running through them."

"There's plenty of spook stories around them, too," I said. "But that's better than two hundred miles away. If I were Nicodemus, I wouldn't want to risk moving her that far."

"Agreed. A third runs directly beneath the Field Museum." She glanced up at me and arched an eyebrow as her voice turned dry. "But I think you're

already familiar with that one.”

“I was going to put the dinosaur back,” I said. “But I was unconscious.”

“Which brings us to number four,” Luccio said. Her fingertip came to rest on a cluster of tiny islands out in the center of the lake, northeast of the city, and the heavy, dark purple line running through it. “Here.”

Molly leaned across me and frowned down at the map. “There aren’t any islands in that part of Lake Michigan. It’s all open water.”

“Listens-to-Wind gave this map to me, Miss Carpenter,” Luccio said seriously. “He’s spent several centuries living in this general region.”

I grunted. “I hear a lot of things. I think that there are some islands out there. They were used as bases for wilderness fighters in several wars. Bootleggers used them as a transfer point for running booze in from Canada, back in the Prohibition days. But there were always stories around them.”

Molly frowned. “What kind of stories?”

I shrugged. “The usual scary stuff. Hauntings. People driven insane by unknown forces. People dragged into the water by creatures unknown, or found slaughtered by weaponry several centuries out-of-date.”

“Then why aren’t they on the maps and stuff?” Molly asked.

“The islands are dangerous,” I said. “Long way from any help, and the lake can be awfully mean in the winter. There are stone reefs out there, too, that could gut a boat that came too close. Maybe someone down at city hall figured that the islands would prove less of a temptation to people if everyone thought they were just stories, and invested some effort in removing them from the public record.”

“That wouldn’t be possible,” Molly said.

“It might be,” Luccio responded. “The energies concentrated around those islands would tend to make people unconsciously avoid them. If one did not have a firm destination fixed in mind, the vast majority of people in the area would swing around the islands without ever realizing what they were doing.”

I grunted. “And if there’s that much bad mojo spinning around out there, it would play merry hell with navigational gear. Twenty bucks says that the major flight lanes don’t come within five miles of the place.” I thumped my finger on the spot and nodded. “It feels right. She’s there.”

“If she is,” Molly asked, “then what do we do about it?”

Luccio tilted her head at me, frowning.

“Captain, I assume you already contacted the Council about getting reinforcements?”

“Yes,” she said. “They’ll be here as soon as possible—which is about nine hours from now.”

“Not fast enough,” I said, and narrowed my eyes in thought. “So we call in some favors.”

“Favors?” Luccio asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know a guy with a boat.”

Chapter Forty

I rushed around setting up details for the next half an hour. Everyone left to get into position except for me, Molly, and Kincaid. And Mouse.

My dog was clearly upset that I wasn't going to be bringing him along, and though he dutifully settled down on the floor near Molly's feet, he looked absolutely miserable.

"Sorry, boy," I told him. "I want you here to help Molly and warn her about any danger."

He sighed.

"I got along just fine without you for quite a while," I told him. "Don't you worry about me."

He rolled onto his back and gave me another pathetic look.

"Hah. Just trying to cadge a tummy rub. I knew it." I leaned down and obliged him.

A minute later the back door opened, and Thomas came in. "Finally," he said. "I've been sitting in my car so long, I think I left a dent in the seat."

"Sorry."

"I'll live. What can I do to help?"

"Get back in your car and give me a ride to my place."

Thomas gave me a level look. Then he muttered something under his breath, pulled his keys out of his pocket, and stalked back out into the snow.

"You're horrible," Molly said, grinning.

"What?" I said. "I'm expressing my brotherly affection."

I shrugged into my coat and picked up my staff. "Remember the plan?"

"Man the phone," Molly said, ticking off each point on her fingers. "Keep my eyes open. Make sure Mouse stays in the same room as me. Check on Kincaid every fifteen minutes."

At one time she would have been sullen about the prospect of being forced to sit at home when something exciting was under way—but she had

grown up enough to realize just how dangerous things could be out there, and to respect her own limitations. Molly was extraordinarily sensitive when it came to the various energies of magic. It was one of the things that made her so good at psycho-mancy and neuromancy. It also meant that when violent personal or supernatural events started happening, she experienced them in such agonizing clarity that it would often incapacitate her altogether, at least for a few minutes. Combat magic was never going to be her strong suit, and in a real conflict she could prove to be a lethal liability to her own allies.

But at least the kid knew it. She might not like it very much, but she'd applied herself diligently to finding other ways to help fight the good fight. I was proud of her.

"And don't forget your homework," I said.

She frowned. "I still don't understand why you want to know about our family tree."

"Humor me, grasshopper. I'll buy you a snow cone."

She glanced out the window at the world of white outside. "Goody." She looked back at me and gave me a small, worried smile. "Be careful."

"Hey, there were almost twenty of these losers at the Shedd. Now we're down to six."

"The six smartest, strongest, and oldest," Molly said. "The ones who really matter."

"Thank you for your optimism," I said, and turned to go. "Lock up behind me."

Molly bit her lip. "Harry?"

I paused.

Her voice was very small. "Look out for my dad. Okay?"

I turned and met her eyes. I drew an X over my heart and nodded.

She blinked her eyes quickly several times and gave me another smile. "All right."

"Lock the door," I told her again, and trudged out into the snow. The lock clicked shut behind me, and Molly watched me slog through the snow to the street. Thomas's military moving van came rumbling through the snow, tires crunching, and I got in.

He turned the heater up a little while I stomped snow off of my shoes.

"So," he said, starting down the street. "What's the plan?"

I told him.

“That is a bad plan,” he said.

“There wasn’t time for a good one.”

He grunted. “November is *not* a good time to be sailing on Lake Michigan, Harry.”

“The aftermath of a nuclear holocaust isn’t a good time to be sailing there, either.”

Thomas frowned. “You aren’t just running your mouth, here, are you? You’re serious?”

“It’s a worst-case scenario,” I said. “But Nicodemus could do it, so we’ve got to proceed under the presumption that his intentions are in that category. The Denarians want to disrupt civilization, and with the Archive under their control, they could do it. Maybe they’d use biological or chemical weapons instead. Maybe they’d crash the world economy. Maybe they’d turn every program on television into one of those reality shows.”

“That’s mostly done already, Harry.”

“Oh. Well. I’ve got to believe that the world is worth saving anyway.” We traded forced grins. “Regardless of what they do, the potential for Really Bad Things is just too damned high to ignore, and we need all the help we can get.”

“Even help from one of those dastardly White Court fiends?” Thomas asked.

“Exactly.”

“Good. I was getting tired of dodging Luccio. There’s a limited amount of help I can give you if I have to stay out of sight all the time.”

“It’s necessary. If the Council knew that you and I were related...”

“I know, I know,” Thomas said, scowling. “Outcast leper unclean.”

I sighed and shook my head. Given that the White Court’s *modus operandi* generally consisted of twisting people’s minds around in one of several ways, I didn’t dare let anyone on the Council know that Thomas was my friend, let alone my half brother. Everyone would immediately assume the worst—that the White Court had gotten to me and was controlling my head through Thomas. And even if I convinced them that it wasn’t the case, it would look suspicious as hell. The Council would demand I demonstrate loyalty, attempt to use Thomas as a spy against the White Court, and in general behave like the pompous, overbearing assholes that they are.

It wasn't easy for either of us to live with—but it wasn't going to change, either.

We got to my apartment and I rushed inside. It was cold. The fire had burned down to nothing in the time I'd been gone. I lifted my hand and murmured under my breath, the spell lighting half a dozen candles at the same time. I grabbed everything I was going to need, waved the candles out again, and hurried back out to Thomas's car.

"You've got Mom's pentacle with you, right?" I asked him. I had a matching pendant on a silver chain around my own neck—which, other than Thomas, was my mother's only tangible legacy.

"Of course," he said. "I'll find you. Where now?"

"St. Mary's," I said.

"Figured."

Thomas started driving. I broke open my double-barreled shotgun, which I'd sawed down to an illegal length, and loaded two shells into it. Tessa the Mantis Girl had rudely neglected to return my .44 after the conclusion of hostilities at the Aquarium, and I have rarely regretted taking a gun with me into what could prove to be a hairy situation.

"Here," I said when the truck got within a block or so of the church. "Drop me off here."

"Gotcha," Thomas said. "Hey, Harry."

"Yeah?"

"What if they aren't keeping the little girl on the island?"

I shook my head. "You'll just have to figure something out. I'm making this up as I go."

He frowned and shook his head. "What about those goons from Summer? What are you going to do if they show up again?"

"If? I should be so lucky." I winked at him and got out of the Hummer. "The real question is, what am I going to do if they *don't* show up, and at the worst possible time to boot? Die of shock, probably."

"See you soon," Thomas said.

I nodded to my brother, shut the door, and trudged across the street and into the parking lot of St. Mary of the Angels.

It's a big church. A really, *really* big church. It takes up a full city block, and is one of the town's more famous landmarks, Chicago's version of Notre Dame. The drive leading up to the delivery doors in the back of the church had been cleared, as had the little parking lot outside it. Michael's

truck was there. The ambient glow of winter night showed me his form and Sanya's, standing outside the truck, both of them wearing long white cloaks emblazoned with scarlet crosses over similarly decorated white surcoats—the Sunday-go-to-meeting wear of the Knights of the Cross. They wore their swords at their hips. Michael wore an honest-to-God breastplate, while Sanya opted for more modern body armor. The big Russian, always the practical progressive, also carried a Kalashnikov assault rifle on a sling over his shoulder.

I wondered if Sanya realized that Michael's antiquated-looking breastplate was lined with Kevlar and ballistic strike plates. The Russian's gear wouldn't do diddly to stop swords or claws.

I'd made some modification to my own gear as well. The thong that usually secured my blasting rod, on the inside of my duster, now held up my shotgun. I'd tied a similar strip of leather thong to either end of the simple wooden cane that held *Fidelacchius*, and now carried the holy blade slung over my shoulder.

Michael nodded to me and then glanced down at his watch. "You're cutting it a little fine, aren't you?"

"Punctuality is for people with nothing better to do," I said.

"Or for those who have already taken care of the other details," murmured a woman's voice.

She stepped out of the shadows across the street, a tall and striking woman in motorcycle leathers. She had eyes that were the warm brown shade of hot chocolate, and her hair was dark and braided tightly against her head. She wore no makeup, but even without it she was a knockout. It was the expression on her face that tipped me off to who she was—sadness mingled with regret and steely resolve.

"Rosanna," I said quietly.

"Wizard." She strode toward us, somehow arrogant and reserved at the same time, her hips rolling as she walked. The jacket was open almost all the way to her belly button, and there was nothing but skin showing where it was parted. Her eyes, however, remained on the Knights. "These two were not a part of the arrangements."

"And it was supposed to be Nicodemus that met me," I said. "Not you."

"Circumstances necessitated a change," Rosanna replied.

I shrugged one shoulder—the one bearing *Fidelacchius*. "Same here."

"What circumstances are those?" Rosanna demanded.

“The ones where I’m dealing with a pack of two-faced, backstabbing, treacherous, murderous lunatics whom I trust no farther than I can kick.”

She regarded me with level, lovely eyes. “And what is the Knights’ intended role?”

“They’re here to build trust.”

“Trust?” she asked.

“Absolutely. I can kick you a lot farther when they’re around.”

A very small smile touched her mouth. She inclined her head slightly to me. Then she turned to Sanya. “Those colors hardly suit you, animal. Though it is more than agreeable to see you again.”

“I am not that man anymore, Rosanna,” Sanya replied. “I have changed.”

“No, you haven’t,” Rosanna said, those warm eyes locked onto Sanya’s now. “You still long for the fray. Still love the fight. Still revel in bloodshed. That was never Magog. That was always you, my beast.”

Sanya shook his head with a faint smile. “I still enjoy a fight,” he said. “I simply choose them a bit more carefully now.”

“It isn’t too late, you know,” Rosanna said. “Make a gift of that toy to my lord and my lady. They will accept you again with open arms.” She took a step toward him. “You could be with me again, animal. You could have me again.”

Something very odd happened to her voice on the last couple of sentences. It became...thicker somehow, richer, more musical. The individual sounds seemed to have little to do with meaning—but the voice itself carried a honey-slow swirl of sensuality and desire that felt like it was going to glide into my ears and start glowing gently inside my brain. I was only on the fringe of it, too, and had gotten only a watered-down version of the promise contained in that voice. Sanya got it at full potency.

He threw his head back and laughed, a rich, booming, basso laugh that bounced back and forth from the icy stones of the church and the cold walls of the buildings around us.

Rosanna took a step back at that, her expression showing surprise.

“I told you, Rosanna,” he rumbled, laughter still bubbling in his tone. “I have changed.” Then his expression sobered abruptly. “You could change, too. I know how much some of the things you have done disturb you. I’ve been there when you had the nightmares. It doesn’t have to be like that.”

She just stared at him.

Sanya spread his hands. "Give up the coin, Rosanna. Please. Let me help you."

Her eyelids lowered into slits. She shuddered once and looked down. Then she said, "It is too late for me, Sanya. It has been too late for me for a long, long time."

"It is never too late," Sanya said earnestly. "Not as long as you draw breath."

Something like contempt touched Rosanna's features. "What do you know, stupid child." Her gaze swung back to me. "Show me the Sword and the coins, wizard."

I tapped the hilt of Shiro's Sword, hanging from its improvised strap over one shoulder. Then I drew the purple Crown Royal bag out of my pocket and held it up. I shook it. It jingled.

"Give the coins to me," Rosanna said.

I folded my arms. "No."

Her eyes narrowed again. "Our bargain—"

"You can see them after I've seen the girl," I replied. "Until then, you'll have to settle for some jingle." I shook the bag again.

She glowered at me.

"Make up your mind," I said. "I haven't got all night. Do you want to explain to Nicodemus how you threw away his chance of destroying the Swords? Or do you want to get moving and take us to the kid?"

Her eyes flickered with something like anger, and warm brown became brilliant gold. But she only gave me a small, stiff nod of her head, and said, "I will take you to her. This way. Please."

Chapter Forty-one

The next few minutes were intense, and I didn't dare let it show. If I'd been completely wrong in my deductions—which was possible; God knew it had happened before—then Michael, Sanya, and I were about to walk into the lion's den together. Granted, that worked out for Daniel, but he was the exception to the rule. Most of the time it works out well only for the lions. That's why the Persians used it as a means of execution.

Granted, Michael was working for the same employer, and technically Sanya was too, even if he wasn't wholly decided on whether or not that was what he was doing. But me and the Almighty haven't ever really sat down for a chat. I'm not really sure where He stands on the Harry Dresden issue, and as a result my theological stance has been pretty simple: I try not to get noticed by anything Godly, godly, or god-ish. I think we're all happier that way.

All the same, given who I was up against, I didn't think it would be inappropriate if a couple of breaks came my way. Hopefully Michael had put in a good word for me.

Rosanna walked down the street and lifted a hand. A van cruised up out of the night. It was occupied by a single driver, a thick-necked, broken-nosed type whose eyes didn't look like he was all the way there. One of Nick's fanatics, probably. They had their tongues ritually removed as a point of honor and practicality—from Nicodemus's perspective, anyway. I supposed I could ask him to open up and confirm it, but it seemed a little gauche.

Michael stuck his head in the van and checked it out. Then he politely opened the passenger door for Rosanna. The Denarian stared levelly at him for a moment, and then nodded her head and slid into the van.

Sanya went in the van first, taking the rearmost seat. I went in after Michael. Rosanna muttered something to the driver, and the van took off.

I got nervous for a minute. The van headed west—in exactly the opposite direction from the lake. Then the driver turned north, and after a few minutes I realized that we were headed for one of the marinas at the north end of Lake Shore Drive. I forced myself to keep my breathing smooth and even. If the bad guys tumbled to the fact that we'd already guessed their location, the situation could devolve pretty quickly.

Michael sat calmly, his face imperturbable, his hands resting on the sheathed form of *Amoracchius*, the picture of saintly serenity. Sanya, behind us, let out a low, buzzing snore. It wasn't as saintly as Michael, but it conveyed just as much blithe confidence. I tried to match their calm, with mixed results. *Don't get jittery, Harry. Play it cool. Ice water in your veins.*

The van stopped at one of the marinas off Northerly Island. Rosanna got out without a word and we followed her. She stalked down to the shore, out onto the docks, and out to a modestly sized ski boat moored at the dock's end. Michael and I went aboard after her. Sanya untied the lines holding the boat to the dock, pushed it away from the pier, and casually hopped across the widening distance and into the vessel.

It took her a couple of minutes, but Rosanna coaxed the old boat's engines to life and turned us away from the lights of the city and out into the darkness of the great lake.

It was eerie how swiftly the world became pitch-black. That strange faerie-light of the night under a heavy snow vanished out on the waters of the lake, where the snow simply sank into the depths. The low overcast gave us a little light, for a time, reflecting the glow of the city, but as the boat continued skimming out into the center of the lake, even that faded away until I could barely distinguish the outline of the boat and its occupants against the water all around.

I wasn't sure how long we went on like that in the dark. It seemed like an hour, but it couldn't have been more than half that. The boat bounced across waves, *whump, whump, whump*, throwing up splashes of spray that coated the bow in a shining crust of ice. My stomach got a little queasy as I tried to anticipate the motion in the darkness and failed.

At length, the rumble of the boat's engine died away, and then stopped altogether. The silence was disorienting. I've lived my entire adult life in Chicago. I'm used to the city, to its rhythms, its music. The hum and hiss of traffic, the clatter of elevated trains, the blaring radios, the beeping horns, cell phones, sirens, music, animals, and people, people, people.

But out here, in the center of the vast, empty cold of the lake, there was nothing. No heartbeat of the city, no voices, no *nothing*, except the glug and slap of water hitting the hull of the boat.

I waited for a couple of minutes while the boat was rocked by the waves of the lake. Now that we weren't moving under power, I thought that they were rocking the boat to a really alarming degree, but I wasn't going to be the one to start whimpering.

"Well?" Sanya demanded, about five seconds before I would have cracked. "What are we waiting for?"

"A signal," Rosanna murmured. "I would as soon not tear out the boat's bottom on rocks and drown us all, dear animal."

I reached into my duster pocket and took out a chemical light. I tore it out of its package, snapped it, and shook it to life. Up sprang a greenish glow that lit up the immediate area well enough, considering how dark it had been for the past half an hour or so.

Rosanna turned to look at the light. Sometime during the trip her human form had changed, vanishing back into the shape of the scarlet-skinned, goat-legged, bat-winged demoness I had seen at the Aquarium. Her eyes, both the brown ones and the glowing green pair, focused on the chemical light, and she smiled, revealing white, delicately pointed fangs. "No magic, wizard? Are you so fearful about husbanding your strength?"

Out this far from shore, floating over *this* much water, it would have been difficult to put together a spell of any complexity—but I was sure Rosanna knew that as well as I did, if the flames I'd seen her tossing around back at the Shedd were any indication. It *would* have been a waste of energy I might need later. But I reminded myself about the ice water alleged to be in my veins.

"Mostly I just think the glow lights are fun," I said. "Did you know that they used these things for the blood of the Predator in that movie with Arnold Schwarzenegger?"

The smile faltered. "What are you talking about?"

"That's the problem with you nearly immortal types," I said. "You couldn't spot a pop culture reference if it skittered up and implanted an embryo down your esophagus."

At the back of the boat, Sanya started coughing.

Rosanna stared at him for a moment, her eyes unreadable. Then the barest shadow of something mournful touched her features, and she turned

away from him. She walked to the front of the boat and stood facing east into the darkness, her arms folded across her body in a posture of tightly closed insecurity, her wings wrapping around her like a blanket.

Sanya didn't miss it. He'd been forcing himself to conceal a grin, but it faded into uneasy discomfort at Rosanna's reaction. He looked like he was about to say something, then frowned and shook his head. He turned his face to stare out over the water. Large flakes of snow continued to drift down, flickers of crystalline green in the glow light. Michael started humming contentedly—"Amazing Grace." He must have learned the song from some Baptists somewhere. He had a nice voice, rich and steady.

I stepped up next to Rosanna and said in a quiet voice, "Tell me something. This maiden-of-sorrow thing you've got going—how many Knights have you killed with it?"

Her eyes, both pairs, flicked aside to glance at me for a second, then back out at the night. "What do you mean?"

"You know. You've got that beautiful sad aura going. You look mournful and tragic and pretty. Radiate that 'save me, save me' vibe. Probably get all kinds of young men who want to carry you off on a white horse."

"Is that what you think of me?" she asked.

"Lady," I said, "a year or three ago, I'd have been the first in line. Hell, if I thought you were serious about getting out, I'd probably still help you. But I don't think you want out. I think that if you were all that pathetic, you wouldn't be controlling your Fallen—it would be controlling you. I think you're Tessa's trusted lieutenant for a reason. Which means that either this tragic, trapped-lady routine is a bunch of crocodile tears, or else it's hypocrisy on such an epic scale that it probably qualifies as some kind of psychological dysfunction."

She stared out into darkness and said nothing.

"You never did answer my question," I said.

"Why not say it louder?" she asked me in a bitter undertone. "If that is what you think of me, then your friends need to be forewarned of my treachery."

"Right," I said. "I do that, and then your eyes well up with tears, and you turn away from me. You let them see one tear fall down your cheek, then turn your head enough to let the wind carry your hair over the rest. Maybe let your shoulders shake once. Then it's the big bad suspicious wizard, who doesn't forgive and doesn't understand, picking on the poor little girl who

is trapped in her bad situation and really just wants to be loved. Give me some credit, Rosanna. I'm not going to *help* you set them up."

The glowing green eyes turned to examine me, and Rosanna's mouth moved, speaking in an entirely different, feminine voice. "Lasciel taught you something of us."

"You might say that," I replied.

Ahead of us and slightly to the right a light flared up in the darkness—a bonfire, I thought. I couldn't tell how far away it was, given the night and the falling snow.

"There," Rosanna murmured. "That way. If you would excuse me."

As she walked back to the wheel of the boat, a breath of wind sighed over the lake. In itself that wasn't anything new. Wind had been blowing all the way through the snowstorm. Something about this breeze, though, caught my attention. It wasn't right.

It took me another three or four seconds to realize what was wrong.

This was a south wind. And it was warm.

"Uh-oh," I said. I held up the chemical light and started scanning the waters all around us.

"Harry?" Michael said. "What is it?"

"Feel that breeze?" I asked.

"*Da*," Sanya said, confusion in his voice. "Is warm. So?"

Michael caught on. "Summer is on the way," he said.

Rosanna shot a glance over her shoulder at us. "What?"

"Get us to shore," I told her. "The things coming after me might not give a damn if they take you out along with me."

She turned back to the wheel and turned the ignition. The boat's engine stuttered and wheezed and didn't turn over.

The breeze picked up. Instead of snowflakes, thick, slushy drops of half-frozen sleet began to fall. More ice began forming on the boat, thickening almost visibly in the green glow of my light. The waves began to grow steeper, rocking the boat more and more severely.

"Come on," I heard myself saying. "Come *on*."

"Look there!" Sanya called, pointing a finger down at the water beside the boat.

Something long, brown, fibrous, and slimy lashed up out of the water and wrapped around the Russian knight's arm from wrist to elbow.

"*Bozhe moi!*"

Two more strands whipped up from different angles, one seizing Sanya's upper arm, one wrapping around his face and skull, and jerked him halfway from the boat in the time it took me to shift my weight and reach for him. I managed to grab one of his boots before he could be pulled all the way over the side into the water. I planted one foot on the wall of the boat and hauled on Sanya's leg for all I was worth. "Michael!"

The boat's engine coughed, turned over, stuttered, and died.

"*In nomine Dei Patri!*" Michael roared as *Amoracchius* cleared its sheath. The broadsword flashed in a single sweeping slash, and severed the strands strangling Sanya. The edges of the slashed material burned away from the touch of *Amoracchius*'s steel like paper from an open flame.

I dragged Sanya back into the boat, and the big Russian whipped his saber from its sheath just in time to neatly sever another lashing brown tendril of animate fiber. "What is it?"

"Kelpies," I growled. If they tangled up the blades of the engine our boat wasn't going anywhere. I howled at Rosanna, "Come on!"

The boat suddenly rocked violently to the other side. I twisted my head to look over my shoulder and saw kelpies coming up over the sides. They were slimy, nebulous things, only vaguely humanoid in shape, made up of masses of wet weeds with gaping mouths and pinpoints of glittering silver light for eyes.

I turned and swept my arm in a slewing arc, unleashing my will as I cried out, "*Forzare!*"

Invisible force ripped the kelpies from the sides of the boat, leaving long strands of wet plant matter clinging limply to the fiberglass hull. They let out gurgling screams as they flew back and splashed into the water.

The boat's engine caught and rose to a roar. The rear end of the boat sank, and its nose rose as it surged forward.

One of my feet flew out from underneath me. I went down, flailing my arms and legs, dimly aware that one of the kelpies had somehow gotten a limb tangled around my ankle. I got dragged to the back of the boat in a quick series of painful jerks and impacts, and had just enough time to realize that the boat was about to surge right out from under me, leaving me in the drink. Then it would just be a question of what killed me first—the icy water or the strangling embrace of the company within it.

Then there was a flash of scarlet and white, a whistle and a hissing sound, and a lance of fire on one of my feet. I went into free fall and

bounced into the rear wall of the boat, then to the floor. Icy rain and freezing water splashed up against me, viciously cold. I looked down to find a strand of fibrous weed curling and blackening as it fell from my bleeding ankle. Sanya reached down and plucked the remains clear of my leg before tossing it over the rear of the boat and back into the water. My ankle was bleeding, my blood black in the green chemical light. More black stained the tip of *Esperacchius*.

I clutched at my ankle, hissing in pain. “Dammit, Sanya!”

Sanya peered out at the darkness behind the boat and then down at my leg. “Ah. Oops.”

Michael came back to kneel beside me and hunkered down over my foot. “Harry, hold still.” He poked at my ankle, and it hurt enough to make me snarl something about his parentage. “It isn’t bad. Long but shallow.” He opened a leather case on his sword belt, opposite the sheath of *Amoracchius*, and withdrew a small medical kit. Sanya’s sword had already slashed open my jeans, but Michael tore them a little more to get them out of the way of the cut. Then he cleaned the injury with some kind of disposable wipe, smeared it with something from a plastic tube, covered it with a thick white absorbent bandage, and wrapped it in tape. It took him all of two or three minutes, his hands quick and sure, which was just as well. By the time he was done the shock of the injury had worn off, and the hurt had started up.

“Not much to be done about the pain,” he said. “Sorry, Harry.”

“Pain I can live with,” I said, wincing. “Just give me a minute.”

“I am sorry, Dresden,” Sanya said.

“Yeah. Don’t you dare save my life ever again,” I told him. Then I lifted my leg onto one of the benches in the back of the boat to elevate it, and closed my eyes. There were a lot of ways to manage pain besides drugs. Granted, most of them wouldn’t help you much, unless you’d had several years of training in focus and concentration, but fortunately I had. Lasciel’s shadow had shown me a mental technique for blocking pain so effective that it was a little scary—when I’d used it before, I’d pushed myself until my body had collapsed, because I hadn’t been aware of exactly how bad my condition was. I could have died as a result.

Body or mind, heart or soul, we’re all human, and we’re supposed to feel pain. You cut yourself off from it at your own risk.

That said, given what was ahead of us and coming up behind us, I could hardly put myself in any *more* danger, relatively speaking, and I couldn't afford any distractions. So I closed my eyes, controlled my breathing, focused my mind, and began to methodically wall away the pain of my new injury, my broken nose, my aching body. It took me a couple of minutes, and by the time I was done the pitch of the boat's engine had changed, dropping from a roar to a lower growl.

I opened my eyes to find Sanya and Michael standing on either side of me, swords in hand, watching over me. Up at the front of the boat Rosanna cut the engine still more and turned her head to stare intently at me for a slow beat. The side of her mouth curved up in a slight, knowing smile. Then she turned to face front again, and I realized that there was light enough to see the outline of her delicately curling demon horns.

I rose and found myself staring at an island that rose from the increasingly turbulent waters of the lake. It was covered in the woods and brush of the midwestern United States—lots of trees less than a foot thick, with the space beneath them filled in with brush, thickets, and thorns to a depth of four or five feet. Snow lay over everything, and the light reflecting from it was what let me see Rosanna's profile.

The shoreline was covered in what looked like an old Western ghost town—only one that had been abandoned for so long that the trees had come back to reclaim the space. Most of the buildings had fallen down. Trees rose out of most of the ones that hadn't, and the sight reminded me, somehow, of an insect collection: empty shells pinned to a card. A sign, weathered beyond reading, hung from its only remaining link of rusting chain. It swung in the wind, aged metal squeaking. There was the skeleton of an old dock down at the shoreline, all broken wooden columns, standing up out of the water like the stumps of rotten teeth.

Looking at the place filled me with a sense of awareness of the attention of an empty, sterile malevolence. This place did not like me. It did not want me there. It did not have the least regard for me, and the corpse of the little town ahead of me was a silent declaration that it had fought against folk like me before—and won.

"Gee," I called to Rosanna. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

She pointed silently up. I followed the direction of her finger, up the slope of the island, and spotted the light I'd seen from farther out in the lake—definitely a bonfire, I saw now, up on a hill above the town, at what

looked like the highest point on the island. Something stood starkly against the sky there, the dark shape of a building or tower, though I couldn't make out any details.

Rosanna cut the engine completely, and the boat glided silently forward to the broken wooden post nearest the shore. She climbed into the front of the boat and was waiting with a rope when the prow of the vessel bumped the column. She tied the boat to the post, then hopped down into the water and waded the rest of the way ashore.

"Oh, good," I muttered. "More wet."

From back behind us, the still-rising wind carried forward a gurgling, warbling cry. I'd been up north a few times, and it might have been the call of a loon—but all of us there knew better. Summer was still on our trail.

"We aren't going to make it any drier by waiting here," Michael said quietly.

"There are men in those trees," Sanya murmured, sheathing his sword and taking up the Kalashnikov again. "Thirty yards up, there, and over there. Those are machine-gun positions."

I grunted. "Let's get moving. Before they get bored and decide to start making like this is Normandy."

"God go with us," Michael prayed quietly.

I unlimbered my shotgun and said, "Amen."

Chapter Forty-two

Michael had planned ahead. He had a dozen chemical heat bags with him, the kind made for hunters to slip inside the wristbands of their coats. He passed them around to us, and we put them inside our socks after we waded ashore. Otherwise I don't know if we would have made it through the snow up that hill, not with our pants soaked to the knees.

Rosanna, of course, wasn't having any issues with the weather. With her wings draped around her like a cloak, the demonic form she wore seemed inured to the cold, and her cloven hooves moved along the frozen, stony hillside as nimbly as a mountain goat's, her barb-tipped tail lashing back and forth dramatically as she went. Sanya walked along behind her, then me, and Michael brought up the rear. It wasn't a long walk, but it fit in a lot of unpleasantness into a little bit of time. The little town had been a company town, built up around what looked like an old cannery—a long building, falling to pieces now, at the very end of the ruined street.

Partway up the hill we ran across a trail that had obviously been in use over the past several days. Someone had kept it clear of snow, exposing a path that had been cut into the rock of the hillside, including stone stairs that led up to its summit. As we went up the stairs the shape at the top of the hill became clearer, as light from the large fire beside it revealed it more clearly.

“A lighthouse,” I murmured. “Or what's left of one.”

It might have been a fifty-foot tower at one time, but it had been broken off perhaps twenty feet up as if snapped by a giant's hand. Beacon towers dotted the shorelines and islands of all of the Great Lakes, and like all such structures they had accumulated more than their due of strange stories. I hadn't heard any stories about this one—but staring up at the rough grey stones, I got the impression that it might have had something to do with the

fact that in order for strange stories to spread, someone has to *survive* a dark encounter in order to start the tale.

This entire creepy place was giving me the idea that I wasn't merely walking on haunted ground—but that I was walking on major-league haunted ground, the kind of place that had never bowed its head to the advance of progress and civilization, to science and reason, that had no more regard for those children of human intellect than it did for their progenitors. The island seemed almost *alive*, aware of my presence in a sense that I couldn't really tangibly define—aware of it and sullenly, spitefully hostile to it.

But that wasn't the creepy part.

The creepy part was that it felt familiar.

Walking up those stone steps, my legs settled into a steady pattern of motion, as if they'd already walked up that path a thousand times. I swerved slightly on one step, for no reason that I could see, only to hear Michael, behind me, continue walking in a straight line and slip as the stone he stepped on shifted beneath his foot. I found myself counting silently to myself, backward, and when I hit zero we mounted the last step and reached the summit of the hill.

Somehow I knew, even before I saw it, that one side of the old lighthouse would be torn open to the sky, revealing an interior that was as hollowed-out and empty as the inside of a rifle barrel. I knew that the little stone cottage built against the base of the tower would still be reasonably intact, though about half of the slate-tile roof had collapsed inward and would need repairs. I knew that it had been made from the stones of the collapsed lighthouse. I knew that the front door rattled when you opened it, and that the back door, which wasn't in sight from here, would swell up during a rain and get stuck in its frame, much like the door at...

...at home.

I also knew that as freaking weird as all of that was, I couldn't afford to let any of it matter right now.

Nicodemus and company were waiting for us.

The sleeting rain was starting to cover everything in a thin layer of ice, but the bonfire laid on the ground before the opening in the wall of the tower was large enough to ignore it. The flames leapt ten or twelve feet in the air, and burned with an eerie, violet-tinged light, and the ice forming

everywhere created the illusion of a purple haze that clung to anything inanimate.

Beside the bonfire stones had been piled up into something that resembled the throne of some ancient pagan king. Nicodemus sat atop them, of course. Tessa stood at his right hand, entirely in human form for the first time since I had seen her. She was a little slip of a girl who barely looked old enough to hold a driver's license, and was dressed in something black and skintight. Deirdre knelt at Nicodemus's feet, and with the three of them together like that, I could see the blending of the parents' features in their daughter. Especially around the eyes. Deirdre's showed a full measure of both Nicodemus's soulless calculation and Tessa's heartless selfishness.

Magog crouched at the base of the pile of stones, apelike and enormous, sullen eyes burning with bloodlust. The spined Denarian I had beaten down with the silver construct-hand lay reclining on the ground beside Magog, his face twisted with hate, one hand twisting and clenching—but his maimed body was otherwise motionless.

My heart sped up in sudden excitement. There were still six of them. They hadn't broken Ivy yet.

I held up a hand. We came to a stop, while Rosanna lightly mounted the steps to kneel down at Tessa's right hand.

"Wow," I drawled. "That isn't a contrived tableau or anything. Are you here to do business, or did you get lost on your way to auditions for *Family Feud*?"

"Gunman in the cottage," Sanya murmured, very quietly.

"Beasts in the shadows behind the tower," Michael whispered.

I kept myself from looking. If my friends said there were bad guys there, they were there, end of story.

"Good evening, Dresden," Nicodemus said. "Have you brought the merchandise?"

I jingled the Crown Royal bag and bumped the hilt of Shiro's sword, hanging over my shoulder, with the side of my head. "Yep. But you knew that already, or Rosie, there, wouldn't have brought us this far. So let's skip the small talk. Show me the girl."

"By all means," Nicodemus said. He gestured with one hand, and the shadows—his shadow, I should say—suddenly fell away from the interior of the ruined lighthouse tower.

Red light filled that space, pouring up from the sigils and glyphs of the most elaborate greater circle I had ever seen—and I’d seen one made of silver, gold, and precious stones. This one incorporated all of those things plus art—grotesque pieces, mostly—sound, ringing forth in gentle, steady waves from upright tuning forks and tubular bells; and light, focused through prisms and crystals, refracted into dozens of colors that split and bent into perfectly geometric shapes in the air around the circle.

Ivy was trapped inside.

I’ve seen some fairly extreme abuse in my time, but it never gets easier to see more of it. Nick’s people had gone with most of the classics for breaking someone down, and then added in a few twists that wouldn’t be available to regular folks. They’d taken Ivy’s clothes, for starters, which in this weather was sadistic on multiple levels. They’d shaved her hair away, leaving her bald, except for a couple of sad, ragged little tufts of gold. She was curled up into a fetal position, and she floated in the air, spinning slowly and apparently at random. Her eyes were tightly closed, her face pale with disorientation, terrified.

Outside the circle they had chained a number of those hideous hunting beasts, hairless creatures that resembled nothing in the animal kingdom but fell somewhere between a big panther and a wolf. The creatures looked hungry, and stared intently at the floating morsel. One of them snarled and threw itself to the end of its chain in an effort to snap its fanged maw closed upon the girl’s vulnerable flesh. It couldn’t reach her, but Ivy twitched and let out a thready whimper.

As she spun and twirled—a deliberate echo of what she’d done to Magog at the Aquarium, I felt certain—the motion revealed dozens of tiny scratches and bruises, evidence of a small legion of petty cruelties. They would, however, seem nightmarish enough to a child who had never experienced real pain of her own. All of this—the pain, the helplessness, the indignity, all of it—would be that much more horrific and terrifying to Ivy for its novelty. Say what I would about pain being a part of the human condition, when it comes to seeing it inflicted on children, I’m as hypocritical as the day is long.

Some things just shouldn’t happen.

“There, you see?” the lord of the Denarians said. “Safe and sound, as agreed.”

I turned my gaze back to Nicodemus, who was about ten seconds from an ass kicking—

—and caught a little glimmer of something approximating satisfaction in his eyes that made my combat-readying reflexes cool off almost instantly.

Ivy's treatment hadn't been only about putting her in the proper frame of mind to manipulate her.

It had also been about manipulating *me*. It wasn't even all that tough to understand why. After all, I'd been in a situation something like this before.

It wasn't enough for the Denarians to simply acquire the Sword. They couldn't break or smash or melt *Fidelacchius*, any more than the Church could smash or melt the thirty silver coins. The power of the Sword was more than merely physical, and as long as it was wielded by those of pure heart and intent, it would take more than mere physical means to undo it.

Of course, if you handed the Sword to, for example, a wizard who was known for playing it shady once in a while, and who was known for having a bad temper, and who was known for occasionally losing it, and maybe for burning down a building or two when he got angry, that could change the situation entirely. Put him in an intense situation, give him a really good reason to be angry, give him a mighty magical weapon near at hand, and he might well seize it and use it out of sheer outrage—despite the fact that he wouldn't exactly be acting from entirely pure motives by doing so. After all, I had come here, ostensibly in peace, to offer up the Sword as a sacrifice for the life of a child. If I then took up that same weapon and used it to strike at Nicodemus and company instead, I, its rightful bearer, would be employing *Fidelacchius*, the Sword of Faith, in an act of treachery.

Once I'd done that, then the Sword *would* just be a sword, an object of steel and wood. Once I'd done that, then Nicodemus and his insane little family could destroy the weapon. They *needed* someone to make that mistake, someone to make that choice, in order to unmake the weapon, just as any bearer of a coin had to make the choice to give it up to be free of the Fallen inside. They needed someone with a right to the Sword to choose to abuse that right.

I'd made that mistake once already, on a stormy night much like this one, when Michael had asked me to carry *Amoracchius* for him. I'd used the Sword of Love to try to save my ass from the consequences of my own bad decisions and nearly gotten it destroyed as a result. It would have been unmade, in fact, if not for the intervention of my brother—even if I hadn't

known about our kinship at the time. Thomas had. He'd been looking out for his little brother even then.

Don't get me wrong: At times I can be a little thick—particularly when there's a woman involved. There's just no way I'm stupid enough to make a mistake quite *that* enormous twice.

But...

Nicodemus didn't know that I'd made it even *once*, now, did he?

Oh, he knew me pretty well. He knew how angry his actions had made me, how I would react to the sight of what they'd done to Ivy—and he was counting on me to react according to my nature, in order to help him unmake *Fidelacchius*.

This was going to be a dangerous game, going up against an opponent who had been around as long as Nick had, but I couldn't win if I didn't play—and I needed to buy a little more time and make sure that both of our prizes were on hand before we started the fireworks.

So I gave him what he wanted.

I slammed the end of my staff down onto the ground with my left hand, reached up to seize the hilt of *Fidelacchius* with my right, and snarled, "Get her the hell out of that thing, Nicodemus. Right now."

They laughed at me, all of them together, relaxed and insulting. It would have sounded rehearsed if it were any less well coordinated. Instead, it came off like something they'd done so often over the years that it simply came naturally now. "Look at his face," Tessa murmured, a little-girl giggle in her voice. "It's all red."

I clenched my jaw as hard as I could. It wasn't much of a stretch to keep pretending to be angry, but I tried to go all Method actor on them. *Eat your heart out, Sir Ian*. I jerked the Sword a couple of inches from its sheath. "I'm warning you," I said, trying to get a good look around. "Let the girl go before this gets ugly."

I must have been doing a pretty good job with the acting. Michael's voice, high-pitched with alarm, came from behind me. "Harry," he said, urgently, "wait."

I took two steps forward, ignoring Michael, and drew the Sword from its sheath. *Fidelacchius* was a classic, chisel-tipped katana, encased in what looked like an old wooden walking cane. I'd kept the blade clean and oiled while it was in my care. It came free of its casing without a sound and gleamed coldly in the violet light of the fire. "I brought the Sword," I told

Nicodemus, throwing some taunt into my tone. “See? You wanted this, right? In exchange for the girl?”

His eyes narrowed as he stared at the blade, and I noticed, for the first time, that he wore a sword of his own at his hip—as did Tessa, for that matter. Super. I made a mental note not to try fencing any of them. I’m tall and quick, and I’ve got a lunge that can hit from halfway across the county, but when it comes to deadly swordplay, I’m a piker compared to the serious swordsmen, like Michael—and Michael considered himself barely more than a mild challenge to Nicodemus.

“What on earth makes you think he’s going to go through with the deal, wizard?” Tessa asked me, her voice a purr. “Now that you’re here, the Sword is here, the coins are here?”

“Maybe it escaped your notice, bitch,” I snarled, “but the Sword *is* here. And the *other* two are as well. Maybe you want to think twice before making a fight of it.”

Thorned Namshiel let out a croaking laugh. “You think six of us fear facing two Knights?”

“I think there’s about five and a half of you, stumpy,” I shot back, taking another step toward them. I could see a little more of the tower’s interior from there. “And for all you know, you’re facing three Knights.”

Nicodemus smiled, showing teeth. “And for all Michael and Sanya know, Dresden, the two of them are facing seven Denarians, not six. You *did* lead them here, after all.”

“Harry,” Michael said again, his tone tense.

“Shut *up*!” I half screamed at Nicodemus, taking several steps closer. Almost.

Magog let out a snorting rumble and shuffled a yard closer to me, scraping at the ground with his feet and knuckles, shaking his shaggy, horned head threateningly.

I hefted the Sword and bared my teeth in a snarl. “Oh, you want some of this, Magilla?” I taunted, taking two more steps forward. “Come get some; I’ll show you what keeps happening to Kong.”

There! At the base of the tower wall, a crumpled human form, bloodied, bruised, half-frozen, but alive. He lifted his face as I came into sight and I met the gaze of Gentleman Johnnie Marcone.

They’d tied him to the wall with ropes—something of a mercy, since metal chains would probably have killed him, given the weather over the

past few days. One side of his face was puffy with bruises, but both eyes were open. He had a lot of blood on one side of his head. In fact...

Hell's bells. Something had ripped off the top half of his left ear. Not neatly, either. The flesh had been raggedly torn. The knuckles of his right hand were thickly crusted with blood. Marcone had torn them open on something before he'd been bound. He'd fought them.

I stopped talking trash and started backpedaling toward Michael and Sanya immediately.

Magog froze, his head tilted comically to one side, his expression confused.

Nicodemus sat up in place on the throne, sensing that the plan he'd thought was going along so swimmingly had begun to fall apart.

"Michael!" I said, and tossed *Fidelacchius* into the air behind me.

"Kill them!" Nicodemus snapped, his voice ringing over the hilltop. "Kill them now!"

Tessa let out a scream that sounded almost orgasmic, and sections of scarlet-and-black chitin seemed to simply rip their way out of her flesh, her body stretching and distending into her mantis shape. Deirdre hissed and arched her back in a kinetic echo of her mother, her hair lengthening into steely blades, her skin darkening. Rosanna howled, and called fire—specifically Hellfire—into her spread hands, while Thorned Namshiel lifted his hand into the air and gathered flickers of green lightning between his fingertips.

Magog simply bellowed and charged, and with howls of hunger and rage a dozen hairless beasts bounded from the shadows all around us and flung themselves at us with bloodthirsty disregard for their own lives. And, as if all of that weren't enough, half a dozen points of brilliant red light, the emanations of laser sights of hidden gunmen, flashed at us through the mist and sleet.

Oh, yeah. Super plan, Harry.

I had them right where I wanted them.

Chapter Forty-three

I didn't stop to see what happened to the sword I'd just thrown toward Michael. I plunged my hand into my duster and came out with the sawed-off shotgun. I dropped my staff, lifted the gun in both hands, turned my face away, and shouted, "Fire in the hole!" a second before I pulled the trigger.

Once upon a time I'd seen Kincaid use Dragon's Breath rounds against Red Court vampires in a fight at Wrigley Field. It had been impressive as hell watching those shotgun rounds belch out jets of flame forty feet long. Since then I'd done a bit of research on fun things you can fire out of a shotgun, and as it turns out, there's all *kinds* of interesting stuff you can shoot at people. It's astonishing, really, the creativity that goes into the design of all the different specialized ammunition available on the market today.

My personal favorite: a round known as the Fireball.

It fires out a spray of superheated particles of metal—tiny, tiny bits of metal blazing away at a temperature of over three thousand degrees. They spread out into an enormous cone of fire and light more than two hundred and fifty feet long, brighter and hotter than any fireworks you've ever seen. Forestry services use them to start backfires, and special weapons units use them to create enormous, eye-catching diversions.

I unleashed two Fireball rounds simultaneously, straight up into the air, and for an instant turned that weirdly firelit hilltop as bright as a midsummer noon.

Even with my eyes closed and my face turned away, the world turned bright pink through my eyelids. I heard gunfire from the direction of the cottage, and more from the tree line off to the left, but whatever gunmen Nicodemus had positioned there had been blinded by the flash, and it would take time for their night vision to recover.

That had been half the point of using the Fireball rounds, there in the dark. It wouldn't give us much time to act, no more than a handful of seconds—but a lot can happen in a handful of seconds, if you're willing to use them well.

I dropped the shotgun, grabbed my staff, and charged forward, screaming like a madman.

Michael and Sanya came hard on my heels. Michael bore *Amoracchius* in his right hand and *Fidelacchius* in his left, and as he ran both blades suddenly became limned in a low, flickering silver light. One of the beasts that had been lurking behind the tower had bounded forward at Nicodemus's command, even blinded by the flash, but it had the bad fortune to rush past me directly at Michael. The Knight of the Cross twisted his body left, then right, delivering a pair of slashes with each weapon. There were hiss-thumps of swift impact, a scream of pain from the beast, and Michael pounded on, barely even slowing his stride, leaving the still-twitching body of the beast on the ground behind him.

Then the air shook with the force of Magog's battle roar, and I jerked my gaze around to find the huge Denarian thundering directly toward me. I'd already tested my will against Magog's power, and I knew I could stop him if I had to do it. I also knew that it would take an enormous effort to manage it, and leave me vulnerable to one of his companions—so instead of trying to stop him, I called upon my will, and as the apelike creature bore down upon me, I swept my staff in an upcurving stroke, like the swing of a golf club, and cried, "*Forzare!*"

The unseen force of my will reached out, adding to the momentum of Magog's charge and lifting him from the ground. With a howl Magog went flying over our heads and arched out into the air and over the steep, rocky hillside we'd just climbed. The animalistic howl broke out into savage words in some ancient-sounding tongue, interspersed with screams of fury and grunts of pain as the huge Denarian bounced down the stony, frozen hillside. He sounded more angry than injured, and I knew that I'd taken him out of the equation for only a moment, at most.

Hopefully, that would be enough.

Deirdre came down from the mound of stones, using all four limbs and individual blade-strands of her hair interchangeably for locomotion, so that she looked like some kind of bizarre, enormous spider—until Sanya raised his Kalashnikov and began firing at her. None of that spray-and-pray

automatic fire, either. The Russian skidded to a stop and took swift aim. He bounced one round off a rock an inch to Deirdre's left, put the second shot through her thigh, and raised a cloud of sparks from the steely blades of her hair near her skull with a third round. She let out a shriek of startled pain and fear, and scuttled sideways off into the shadows as swiftly as a roach caught out in the middle of the floor when the light comes on.

Gunfire came at us from both sides, still more or less blind and random, but no less lethal for that. Bullets are the damnedest things, going by. They aren't dramatic. By themselves they sound almost like big bugs, like something that might buzz by you real fast out in the country on a hot, muggy summer afternoon. It's almost hard to feel afraid of them, until it truly hits you exactly what they are. It's kind of handy, actually, that moment of disconnection between the time your senses tell you that death is flicking around randomly a couple of feet away, and the time your mind manages to make you understand that moving around in it is an awful idea. It gives you time to act before you get so scared that you just find a shady spot and stay there.

"Go, go, go!" I called, still charging forward. Our only chance was to keep moving ahead, to rattle Nicodemus and company into jumping out of the way, and to get into the only shelter on that hilltop.

"Kill them!" Nicodemus roared, his voice furious, and then there was the sound of rushing wind from overhead. He must have taken to the sky, flying upon that shadow of his as if upon enormous bat wings.

More of the beasts had closed on Michael, and both Swords were at work again, striking out, silver light gleaming more brightly now from their blades. Sanya let out a shout, and more light flooded the hilltop, casting my own shadow out darker in front of me as *Esperacchius* joined the battle, and more of the beasts' cries of pain shook the air.

In front of me Thorned Namshiel howled out in frustration and evident terror in some tongue I didn't know, and I saw that both Tessa and Hellmaid Rosanna had pulled a vanishing act. Namshiel, his arm outstretched in the general direction of the far side of the stone throne, added, despair in his voice, "Come back!"

Then he turned toward me as he heard my feet churning through the wet snow. He still held a corona of green lightning in his spiny hand, and as his eyes focused on my general location he bared his teeth in a snarl of bitter

hatred and flung out his hand, hurling a sphere of crackling emerald electricity at me.

My shield bracelet was ready to go, and I had terror and rage and determination in plenty to empower my defenses. I deflected the sphere at an angle and sent it rebounding harmlessly up into the sky.

“Amateur puppy,” Namshiel snarled, and began to gather more sickly green power at his fingertips. He made an odd little gesture and flicked his fingers, and suddenly five tiny threads of green light leapt toward me on five separate, spiraling paths.

I brought my shield around to intersect the new attack—and realized at the last second that each individual thread of energy was coming at me on a slightly different wavelength of the spectrum of magical energy, a variance of frequencies that my shield couldn’t stretch to cover. Not all at the same time, anyway. I countered three of them and nearly got the fourth, but it slipped by me, and I never even touched the fifth strand.

Something that felt like cold, greasy piano wire wrapped around my throat, and I couldn’t breathe.

“Insufferable, arrogant little monkey,” Namshiel hissed. “Playing with the fires of creation. Binding your soul to it, as if you were one of *us*. How *dare* you so presume. How *dare* you wield soulfire against *me*. I, who was there when your pathetic kind was hewn from the muck.”

It wasn’t so much being strangled to death that I objected to, or even the megalomaniacal monologue I was being subjected to in the process. I just wished that I knew what the hell he was talking about. Granted, I had busted him up pretty good with that silver hand thing, but he was taking it so freaking *personally*.

I lost track of what I’d been thinking. My head hurt. So did my neck. Thorned Namshiel was ranting about something. Practically foaming at the mouth, really—right up until *Amoracchius* flashed in a line of silver fire, and Thorned Namshiel’s head hopped up off his shoulders, tumbled twice, and fell into the snow.

Suddenly I took a deep breath and the world started sorting itself out again.

Michael stepped forward, took one look at Namshiel’s body, and hewed the right hand off at the wrist. He picked up the hand and dropped it into a pouch on his sword belt. Meanwhile, Sanya shouldered his rifle and dragged me to my feet.

“Go,” I choked out, barely able to get the words out through my half-crushed throat. I regained my own feet and waved Sanya off me, gesturing ahead. “The lighthouse. Fast.”

Sanya looked from me to the hollow tower and promptly sheathed his Sword to take up his rifle again. The big Russian advanced on the tower, the Kalashnikov at his shoulder, and began putting precise shots through the heads of each of the beasts that had been chained to the walls inside to torment Ivy, who still floated bound within the greater circle.

I followed Sanya as quickly as I could, wheezing in breaths through my aching neck. By the time Michael and I had gotten into the shelter of the mostly closed ring of the tower’s stones, the gunfire from around us had begun to close in on us again as the gunmen’s night vision returned. The tiny window of opportunity the flash of the Fireball rounds had created had waned.

“How did you know?” Michael asked, panting. “How did you know they would break if we charged them?”

“You don’t survive two thousand years in a game like this one without predator reflexes,” I replied. “Any predator in the world reacts the same way to a loud noise, a bright flash, and a noisy and unexpected charge. They get the hell out of the way. Can’t really help themselves. Habit of a couple millennia is a bitch to break.”

Sanya calmly shot another beast.

I shrugged. “Nicodemus and company thought that they knew how things were going to proceed, and when they didn’t go the way they expected, they got flustered. So the Nickelheads got clear.” I pursed my lips. “Of course, they’re going to be back in a minute. And very upset. Hey, there, Marcone.”

“Dresden,” Marcone said, as if we’d passed each other outside the coffee shop. He sounded a little tired, but calm. All things considered, that was probably an indicator of exactly how much moxie the crime lord had. “Can you help the child?”

Dammit. That’s the thing I hate most about Marcone. Every once in a while he says or does something that makes it difficult to label him “scum, criminal” and file him neatly away in a drawer somewhere. I glared at him. He returned the glare with a faint, knowing smile. I muttered under my breath and turned to study the elaborate circle, while Sanya finished the last of the beasts.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” Michael said quietly, staring.

I didn't blame him. Even among professionals this circle was impressive. Lots of luminous, glowing lines and swirls involved, and that always looks fantastic, especially at night. The gold and silver and precious stones didn't hurt things, either. The light and music show being put on by the chimes and crystals added a wonderful little eerie edge to it all, especially given the grotesque art that framed the interior magical symbology. "This is some upper-tier stuff," I said quietly. "It will be another century, maybe two, before I'm good enough to come close to this level of work. It's delicate. One single thing a fraction of an inch out of place and the whole thing goes kabloobie. It's powerful. When you're putting this together, if any one of a couple of dozen of the power flows slips for even an instant, the whole thing goes out of balance and could go up with enough force to blow the top off of this whole hillside. It took a freaking *genius* to put this together, Michael."

I hefted my staff.

"Fortunately," I said, and took a two-handed swing at the nearest stand of slender, delicate crystal. It shattered with gratifying ease, and the encasing light around the greater circle began to waver and dissipate. "It only takes a monkey with a big stick to take it apart."

And I waded into the circle, smashing things with my staff. It was therapeutic. God knows how many times the bad guys had destroyed the careful work of lifetimes when they'd robbed people of homes, of loved ones, of life itself. It felt sort of nice to bring a little cup of Shiva D into *their* lives for a change. I shattered the crystals that bent light into a cage to hold the Archive prisoner. I bent and mashed the tuning forks that focused sound into chains. I crushed the depictions of bondage and imprisonment meant to restrain the very idea of freedom, and from there I went on to break ivory rune sticks, to crush glyph-scribed gems, to pound into illegibility golden plates inscribed with sigils of imprisonment.

I'm not sure at which point I started screaming in outrage. Somewhere along the line, though, it hit me that these people had taken magic, the power of life, of creation, a force meant to create and protect, to learn and preserve, and they had bent and twisted it into a blasphemy, an obscenity. They had used it to imprison and torment, to torture and maim, all in an attempt to enslave and destroy. Worse, they had turned magic against the Archive, against the safeguard of knowledge itself—and still worse, against a *child*.

I didn't stop until I had shattered their expensive, elaborate, elegant torture chamber, until I could deliberately drag my staff across the last, smooth golden circle at the innermost point of the design, marring it all the way across its surface, breaking the last remaining structure of the spell.

The energies of the prison let loose with an outraged howl, sailing straight up into the air overhead in a column of furious purple light. I thought I could see faces twisting and spinning inside it for a few seconds, but then the light faded, and Ivy fell limply to the cold ground, just a naked little girl, bruised and scratched and half-unconscious with cold.

Michael was at my side at once, removing his cloak. I took it and wrapped Ivy in it. She made whimpering sounds of protest, but she wasn't really conscious. I picked her up and held her close to me, getting as much of my own coat around her as I could.

I looked up and found Marcone watching me steadily. Sanya had cut him free from the wall and evidently given the crime lord the cloak off his back. Marcone now hunched against the sleet in the white cloak, holding one of the chemical warming packs between his hands. He stood just a bit over average height and was of medium build, so Sanya's cloak covered him like a blanket. "Will she be all right?" Marcone asked.

"She will," I said with determination. "She damned well will."

"Down!" barked Sanya.

Bullets raised sparks off the inside of the lighthouse and rattled wildly around its interior. Everyone got down. I made sure I had my body and my duster between Ivy and any incoming rounds. Sanya leaned out for a second and squeezed off a couple of shots, then hurriedly got back under cover again. The volume of fire from the outside grew.

"They're bringing up reinforcements from down the hill," Sanya reported. "Heavier weapons, too."

Marcone glanced around the featureless interior of the ruined lighthouse. "If any of them have grenades, this is going to be a relatively brief rescue operation."

Sanya leaned out and snapped off another pair of shots, barely getting back before return fire started chewing at the stone where he'd been. He muttered under his breath and changed magazines on his rifle.

The enemy gunfire suddenly ceased. There was silence on the hilltop for twenty or thirty seconds. Then Nicodemus's voice, filled with anger, came through the air. "Dresden!"

“What?” I called back.

“I’m going to give you one chance to survive this. Give me the girl. Give me the coins. Give me the sword. Do that, and I’ll let you walk away alive.”

“Hah!” I said. It was possible that I didn’t feel quite as confident as I sounded. “Or maybe I’ll just leave from here.”

“Cross into the Nevernever from where you’re standing?” Nicodemus asked. “You’d be better off asking the Russian to put a bullet through your head for you. I know what lives on the other side.”

Given that they’d chosen this location for the greater circle precisely because it was a source of intense dark energy, I had no trouble believing that it connected to some nasty portions of the Nevernever. There was every chance that Nicodemus was not bluffing.

“How do I know that you won’t kill me the minute you get what you want?” I called back.

“Harry!” Michael hissed.

I shushed him.

“We both know what my word is worth,” Nicodemus said, his voice dry. “Really, Dresden. If we can’t trust each other, what’s the point in talking at all?”

Heh. Gaining enough time to await the second half of what those Fireballs were supposed to accomplish, that’s what.

The twin two-hundred-fifty-foot jets of fire had briefly blinded our enemies, true.

But they’d done something else, too.

Marcone tilted his head to one side for a moment and then murmured, “Does anyone else hear...strings?”

“Ah,” I said, and pumped my fist in the air. “Ah-hahahah! Have you ever heard anything so magnificently pompous and overblown in your *life*?”

Deep, ringing French horns joined the string sections, echoing over the hilltop.

“What is that?” Sanya murmured.

“That,” I crowed, “is *Wagner*, baby!”

Never let it be said that a Chooser of the Slain can’t make an entrance.

Miss Gard brought the reconditioned Huey up from the eastern side of the island, flying about a quarter of an inch over the treetops, blasting “The Ride of the Valkyries” from loudspeakers mounted on the chopper’s underside. Wind, sleet, and all, *still* she flew flawlessly through the night,

having used the twin jets of the Fireball rounds, visible for miles over the pitch-black lake, to orient herself as to where to arrive. The Huey turned broadside as it rose over the hilltop, music blaring loud enough to shake snow from the treetops. The side door of the chopper was open, revealing Mister Hendricks manning a rotating-barreled minigun fixed to the deck of the helicopter—completely illegally, of course.

But then, I suppose that's really one major advantage to working with criminals. They just don't *care* about that sort of thing.

The barrels began to spin, and a tongue of flame licked out from the front of the gun. Snow and earth erupted into the air in a long trench in front of the cannon. I risked a peek and saw men clad in dark fatigues leaping for cover as a swath of devastation slewed back and forth across the open hilltop and pounded the mound of stones into a mound of gravel.

"There's our ride!" I said. "Let's go!"

Sanya led the way, firing off more or less random shots at anyone who wasn't already lying flat in an effort to avoid fire from the gun on the helicopter. Some of Nicodemus's troops were crazier than others. Several of them jumped up and tried to come after us. That minigun had been designed to shoot down airplanes. What the rounds left of human bodies was barely recognizable as such.

There was no place for the chopper to land, but a line came down from the other side, lowered by a winch while the aircraft hovered above us. I looked up to see Luccio operating the winch, her face pale, but her eyes glittering with excitement. She was how Gard had been able to know where to look for the signal—I'd given Anastasia a couple of my hairs to use in a tracking spell, and she'd been following me ever since I left to meet Rosanna for the trade.

The line came down with a lift harness attached to it. "Marcone," I shouted over the sound of the rotors and the minigun—which is to say, I was more or less mouthing it exaggeratedly. "You first. That was the deal."

He shook his head and pointed his finger at Ivy.

I snarled and pushed the girl into his arms, then started slapping the harness over him. He got it after a second, and in a couple more we had him secured in the harness and holding the semiconscious Ivy tight against him. I gave Luccio the thumbs-up, and Marcone and Ivy went zipping gracefully up the line to the chopper, wrapped in the white cloak, the scarlet crosses

on it standing out sharply in the winter light. Luccio helped haul them in, and a second later the empty harness came down again.

“Sanya!” I said.

The Russian passed me the Kalashnikov and slipped into the harness, then ascended to the helicopter. Again the empty harness came down—though now there were occasional bursts of heavier rounds coming from down the slope of the hillside, as evidenced by tracer fire that would sometimes go tumbling by in the night. It would be immediately answered by the far heavier fire of the minigun, but Gard couldn’t possibly keep the chopper there for long.

“Harry!” Michael said, offering me the harness.

I was about to take it, but by chance I looked up and saw Gard looking down at us through the Plexiglas bubble around the pilot’s seat—looking at Michael with an absolutely unnerving intensity that I had seen on her face once before, and my heart started hammering in terror.

The last time she’d looked like that, I’d been in an alley outside Bock Ordered Books back in Chicago, and a necromancer named Corpsetaker and a ghoul named Li Xian had been about to murder me. A few minutes later Gard had told Marcone that she had seen that it was my fate to die then and there. The only reason that I survived it was that Marcone had intervened.

But even if I’d never seen that look on her face before, I figured that anytime a Valkyrie hovering over a battlefield suddenly gets real interested in a particular warrior, it ain’t good.

I’d made the grasshopper a promise. If things were about to get hairy for whoever was left on the ground, it wouldn’t be Molly’s dad that had to deal with it.

“You first,” I said.

He started to argue.

I shoved the harness into his chest. “Dammit, Michael!”

He grimaced, shook his head at me, and then sheathed *Amoracchius*. Still holding *Fidelacchius* in his hand, he shrugged quickly into the harness. I gave Luccio the thumbs-up, and Michael began to rise. Gard frowned faintly, and some of my screaming tension started to ease.

Tessa and Rosanna came out from behind veils that were as good as anything Molly could have done, and I didn’t have to be Sherlock to deduce who had done the lion’s share of the work on the greater circle that had contained the Archive. I had half a second to act, but I got tangled in the

strap of Sanya's gun, which he'd handed me so that I could defend myself in case I was suddenly attacked. Thank you, Sanya.

Tessa, her pretty human face showing, her eyes gleaming with manic glee, swept a mantis claw at my head, and I at least managed to interpose the rifle before she ripped my head off. Only instead of smashing the gun, as I'd expected, she ripped it out of my hand, just as easily as taking candy from a baby and spun away from me.

Then she winked at me, blew me a kiss, and opened fire on Michael with the Kalashnikov on full automatic from no more than ten feet away.

My friend didn't scream as bullets tore into him. He just jerked once in a spray of scarlet and went limp.

Fidelacchius tumbled from his fingers and fell to the ground.

Sparks flew from the Huey as the bullets tore into it, too, and a burst of flame and smoke poured from a vent on one side of its fuselage. It dipped sharply to one side, and for a second I thought it was simply going to roll over and into the ground—but then it recovered, drunkenly, gathering momentum like a car sliding down an icy hill, still dragging my friend's unmoving body on the trailing cable like a baited hook at the end of a fishing line, and vanished into the darkness.

Chapter Forty-four

Even as some part of me noted all of that happening, the rest of me started screaming in raw, red rage, in agony, in denial.

I was pretty sure I had worked out who had taken my blasting rod away. I was pretty sure I knew why they'd done it. I even thought that, looked at from a certain point of view, it might not have been an entirely stupid idea.

But as of now, I officially did not care.

I didn't have my blasting rod with me, and I was not sure that my raw power, no matter how furious, would be enough to hurt Tessa through the defenses the Fallen gave her. I had never been able to attain the kind of precision I would need without artificial aid.

As of right now, I officially did not care about that, either.

I focused my rage, focused my anger, focused my hate and my denial and my pain. I blocked away everything in the entire universe but the thought of my friend's bloody body hanging from that rope, and a spot two inches across in the center of Tessa's chest.

Then I drew in a breath, whirling a hand over my head and bellowed through my ragged throat, so loudly that it felt like something tore, "*Fuego, pyrofuego!*" I stabbed the first two fingers of my right hand forward as I did, unleashing my fury and my will. "Burn!"

A bar of blue-white fire so dense that it was nearly a solid object lashed across the distance from me to Tessa and slammed into her like an enormous spear.

The mantislike Denarian threw back her pretty face and screamed in agony as the shaft of fire bored cleanly through her, melting a wide hole that burned wider still before searing itself shut. She went down, howling and thrashing, burned by fire far deadlier and more destructive than any I had ever called before, with a blasting rod or without one.

I sensed something moving toward me from the side and rolled out of the way just as one of Rosanna's cloven hooves slashed through the air where my thigh had been an instant before. If she'd struck she would have opened the flesh to the bone. I whipped my staff at her face, forcing her to duck away, and followed with a surge of will and a shout of, "*Forzare!*" It wasn't my best kinetic strike, but it was a blow heavy enough to throw her a dozen feet through the air and into a tumble over the ground.

I seized the hilt of *Fidelacchius* from where the Sword had fallen. As my fingers closed around the weapon I realized several points of cold logic, as if having them explained to me by a calm, rational, wise old man who was utterly unperturbed by my rage.

First, I realized that I was now alone on an uncharted island in the middle of Lake Michigan, with nothing but madmen and fallen angels for company.

Second, that I still had the coins and the Sword that Nicodemus had been after—and that he was still going to be after them.

Third, that the Denarians were sure to be really ticked off, now that I'd taken their real prize from them.

Fourth...

The ground shook, as if with the impact of a heavy foot.

Fourth, that since I had confounded Summer's attempt to track me via use of the little oak leaf pin, Eldest Brother Gruff had probably been waiting for me to use fire magic in battle—the same magic that I had entwined with the power of the Summer Lady two years ago at Arctis Tor. It was the most probable reason why Mab, the most likely suspect for messing with my head, would have taken my blasting rod and my memories of how to use fire magic in battle—to prevent me from inadvertently revealing my position to Summer every time I got into a tussle.

Only now that I had, Eldest Gruff was probably on his way to visit.

And fifth, and last, I realized that I had no way to get off this stupid and creepily familiar island—unless I could get down to the docks and to the boat I'd come in on.

I still burned with the need to strike back at the people who had hurt my friend, but the fact of the matter was that I couldn't strike back at them and survive—and if they took me down, I'd only be handing them weapons to continue the war Michael had spent a lifetime fighting to end.

My only option was to run. Realistically, even escape wasn't looking likely—but it was my only chance.

So I slid the Sword back into its scabbard, oriented myself toward the run-down little town where we'd first come ashore, and ran. Fast.

Now, I'm not as strong as those really big guys, like Michael and Sanya. I don't do swordplay as well as folks like Nicodemus or Shiro. I don't yet have the magical experience and know-how to outfinesse the really experienced wizards and sorcerers who have been hanging around for centuries, like the Gatekeeper or Thorned Namshiel.

But I'll take any of those guys in a footrace. Guaranteed. I run—and not so that I'll be skinny and look good, either. I run so that when something that wants to kill me is chasing me, I'll be *good* at running. And when you've got legs as long as mine, you're skinny, and in good shape, you can really move. I hit the woods running like a deer, sticking to the path we'd broken on the way up. The snow made it easy to see the way, and though in another hour or two it would be a sheet of frozen ice, for the moment the footing was excellent.

I was benefiting from the chaos caused by Gard's entrance. I could hear all kinds of confusion as men shouted in the woods and tried to figure out what was going on, to get the wounded to help, and to follow what were probably conflicting orders thanks to holes ripped in their chain of command by Hendricks and his minigun. Radios clicked and voices buzzed over them, functioning unreliably, as they would in any area so rich with concentrated magical energy.

The fact that most of the men had had their tongues removed probably didn't help anything, either. Nick should have taken my advice and read that evil-overlord list. Seriously.

Someone a few yards off to my right shouted something at me. It came out as totally mangled gobbledygook. I shouted back at him in similar wordless garbage, pretending that I didn't have a tongue either, and added a rude gesture to the tirade. I don't know if it was the perfect charade, or if it just shocked him into stunned silence, but either way it got the same effect. I went on by him without garnering any further reaction whatsoever.

I thought I was home free as I reached the ruins of the little company town and its one main drag along the shoreline.

And then I heard Magog's bellow coming down the hill behind me—coming fast, too, easily making twice the speed I could manage. That was

the damndest thing about these demonic collaborator types. Even though they didn't work out and practice, they still got to run faster than we dedicated roadsters who actually sweated and strained for our ability to haul ass. Jerks.

It seemed clear that Magog was coming in pursuit of me, or at least that he was coming down the hill toward the dock and the boat off the island to cut off any chance of escape. I had little time to pick and choose where to go to avoid his notice, and wound up ducking into the long, heavily shadowed, cavernous length of the building that looked as if it had once been a cannery.

The roof had fallen through in several places, and snow covered perhaps a third of the floor, providing the only thing even vaguely like light. Most of the walls were still standing, but I had grave doubts about the floor. There wasn't space for much of a basement above the waterline, but there was plenty of room to break a leg if I fell through on a weak board. I would just have to stay close to the wall and hope for the best.

For once, enemy manpower was working in my favor. If Nicodemus had brought only his fellow Denarians along, there would have been nothing but the footprints of cloven hooves and giant mantises and Grape Apes and whatnot in the snow of the island. But no, he'd had to bring along dozens and dozens of foot soldiers, too, and as a result there were regular old footprints everywhere. One more set, more or less, wasn't going to stand out. So all I had to do was get into the building, get out of sight, and lie low until Magog had gone past.

I had no sooner crouched down and begun my impersonation of a mouse than the ancient, half-rotted wood of the old cannery shuddered beneath me, a vibration that I felt in the soles of my feet. Then another, and another, rhythmic, like slow footsteps.

They were followed by the sound of Magog's approach, a heavy, leathery shuffling through the snow, accompanied by the steady heave of lungs like a blacksmith's bellows. Then I heard Magog slide to a sudden halt in the snow and snort in surprise—then let out an enormous roar of challenge.

And a voice, a very deep, resonant voice, said, "Be thou gone from this place, creature. My quarrel is not with thee."

Magog answered with a howl and spat out words in a language I did not understand.

“Be that as it may, Elder One,” the huge voice said, gently and with respect, “I also have a duty from which I may not waver. We need not be at odds this night. Depart in peace, Elder One, with your beast of burden.”

Magog snarled again in that foreign tongue.

The deep voice hardened. “I seek no quarrel with thee, Fallen One. I pray thee, do not mistake peaceable intention for weakness. I do not fear thee. Begone, or I will smite thee down.”

The gorillalike Denarian howled. I heard its claws dig and rip at the ground as it hurtled forward toward the source of the resonant voice.

Magog, it seemed, had a really limited vocabulary when it came to repartee.

I couldn’t see what happened next. There was a flash of gold-green light, like sunlight reflected from fresh spring grass, and a detonation in the air, a sound that was not quite a crack of thunder, not quite an explosion of fire. It wasn’t even *loud* so much as it was pervasive, something that I felt along the whole surface of my body as much as I did on my eardrums.

The wall of the cannery shattered inward, and Magog—what was *left* of Magog—came hurtling through it. It landed on the ground about twenty feet away from me. Enormous sections were missing from the front of the gorillalike body, including its thighs and most of the front half of its torso. It wasn’t a messy wound, either. The empty chunks were limned with a gentle yellow-green glow that seemed to seal in any blood. Even as I watched, Magog quivered once, then went limp. Tiny sprouts of green flowered up from the fallen corpse over the course of a couple of seconds, leaves spreading, then budding out into wildflowers in a riot of colors.

The coating of flowering plants seemed to devour the body of the gorilla from around the mortal body beneath—that of a muscular young man, which gradually emerged, though was still modestly shrouded in a veil of flowers. He was thoroughly dead, his eyes glassy, empty, and there were flowers growing in a hole where his heart had been. He wore a leather collar, and hanging from it, in a little rubber frame like a dog tag, was another blackened denarius. He was a kid, Molly’s age at the oldest.

From outside there was a deep, resonant sigh. Then another heavy, ground-shuddering thump. And another.

Coming closer.

My heart jumped right up into my teeth. Sure, I had no idea who that really was out there, but all those *thees* just screamed that it was one of the

Sidhe. They really got into the archaic modes of speech—or maybe it was fairer to say that they never got *out* of them. Anyway, odds were running high that this was Eldest Brother Gruff come to settle up with Winter's champion in this affair, and given that he'd just swatted down one of the Denarians like he was an uppity pixie, it didn't bode real well for me.

I found myself taking a step back as that thumping sound came again, and the floorboard beneath my foot creaked precariously.

That gave me an idea. The bigger they are, et cetera. If Eldest Gruff was even bigger than the last one had been, maybe I could use the rickety flooring against him—long enough to get myself out to the boat and off the island, in any case. Open water was another fantastic neutralizer for the enormous size discrepancy. Setting realistic goals has always been the key to my success. I didn't have to win a fight with this thing. I just had to survive long enough to run away.

I took a chance, picked the most solid-looking floorboard I could see, and eased across the floor to the far side of the building, the one nearest the water, and turned to face the hole in the wall that Magog's body had smashed open on its way in.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I readied my will and shook out my shield bracelet, in case I needed it. I lifted my staff and pointed it at where I thought Eldest Gruff's head might be when he came in, so he would know I was serious.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I adjusted the aim on the staff a little higher.

Thump. Thump.

Sweat trickled off my brow.

Thump. Thump.

How far did this guy have to walk?

Thump. Thump.

This was just getting ridiculous, now.

Thump. Thump.

And Eldest Gruff appeared in the opening.

He was five feet tall. Five-two, tops.

He wore a robe with a cowl, pulled back so that I could clearly see his curling ram's horns, the goatlike features, the long white beard, the yellow eyes with their hourglass pupils.

And in his right hand he carried a wooden staff carved with runes that looked almost precisely like my own.

He took a limping step forward, leaning on his staff, and when he planted the tool on the ground, it flickered with green light that then splashed out onto the earth beneath it, spreading outward in a resonating wave. *Thump*.

The floorboards creaked beneath him, and he came to a cautious stop and faced me quietly, both hands on his staff. His robe was belted with an old bit of simple rope. There were three stoles hanging through it—purple ones, faded and frayed with the passage of time.

Those were the mantles worn by members of the Senior Council, the leaders of the White Council of Wizards. They were, generally speaking, the oldest and strongest wizards on the planet.

And Eldest Brother Gruff had, evidently, killed three of them in duels.

“This,” I said, “has really not been my day.”

The gruff regarded me solemnly. “Hail, young wizard.” He had a deep, resonant voice, far too huge and rich for the frame it came from. “Thou knowest why I have come.”

“To slay me, most likely,” I said.

“Aye,” said the gruff. “By my Queen’s command and in defense of Summer’s honor.”

“Why?” I asked him. “Why would Summer want Marcone taken by the Denarians? Why would Summer want the Archive under their control?”

The gruff only stared at me for a long moment, but when he spoke I could have sworn that his voice sounded pensive. Maybe even troubled. “It is not my place to know such things—or to ask.”

“The gruffs are Summer’s champion in this matter, aren’t they?” I demanded. “If not you, then who?”

“What of thee, wizard?” the gruff countered. “Hast thou asked why the wicked Queen of Winter would wish thee to prevent Marcone from being taken by those servants of the darkest shadow? Why she who embodies destruction and death would wish to protect and preserve the Archive?”

“I have, actually,” I said.

“And what answers hast thou found?”

“Gruff,” I said, “I find myself largely clueless about why *mortal* women do what they do. It will take a wiser man than me to understand what’s in a fae woman’s mind.”

Eldest Gruff stared at me blankly for a second. Then he threw back his head and made a sound that...well, more than anything it sounded like a donkey. *Hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw.*

He was laughing.

I laughed, too. I couldn't help it. The whole day had just been too much, and the laugh just felt too good. I laughed until my stomach hurt, and when the gruff saw me laughing, it only made him laugh harder—and more like a donkey—and that set *me* off in turn.

It was a good two or three minutes before we settled down.

"They tell children stories about you guys, you know," I said.

"Still?" he said.

I nodded. "Stories about clever little billy goats outsmarting big mean trolls until their bigger, stronger brothers come along and put the trolls in their place."

The gruff grunted. He said, "We hear tales of thee, young wizard."

I blinked. "You, uh?"

"We too like stories about..." His eyes searched his memory for a moment before he smiled, pleased. The gesture looked pleasantly nonviolent on his face. "Underdogs."

I snorted. "Well. I guess this is another one."

The gruff's smile faded. "I dislike being cast as the troll."

"So change the role," I said.

The gruff shook his head. "That I cannot do. I serve Summer. I serve my Queen."

"But it's over," I said. "Marcone is already free. So's Ivy."

"But thou art still here, upon the field of conflict," the gruff said gently. "As am I. And so the matter is not closed. And so I must fulfill my obligations—to my great regret, wizard. I have only admiration for thee, in a personal sense."

I tilted my head and stared hard at him. "You say that you serve Summer and the Queen. In that order?"

The gruff mirrored my gesture, his eyes questioning.

I fumbled in my pocket and came out with the other thing I had grabbed back at my apartment—the little silver oak leaf pin Mister had been batting all over Little Chicago. I'd figured that they'd stopped using it to chase me, once they'd gotten tired of Mister having his catnipped way with them.

The gruff 's eyes widened. "The confounding enchantment thou didst employ upon our tracking spell was most efficacious. I had hoped to ask thee how it was done."

"Trade secret," I said. "But you know what came with this pin."

"Indeed," he said. "You were made an Esquire of Summer, and granted a boon, but..." He shook his head. "A boon can be a matter of importance, but not one this grave. Thou canst not ask me to yield to thee in a matter of conflict between the Courts themselves."

"I won't," I said. "But just so we're clear. Once both of us have left this island, the matter is closed?"

"Once thou art safe again in Chicago, aye, it would be."

"Then I ask for Summer to honor its pledge to me, and the debt it incurred to me when I struck at Winter's heart on its behalf."

The gruff 's ears stood up, facing me. "Aye?"

"I want you," I said, "to get me a doughnut. A real, genuine, Chicago doughnut. Not some glamoured doughnut. An actual one. Freshly made."

The gruff 's teeth began to show as he smiled again.

"Of course," I said, "you could deny me the boon I rightfully earned in blood and fire and kill me instead, thus ensuring that Summer would renege on a debt and never be able to make good on it. But I don't think that would be very good for Summer and its honor. Do you?"

"Indeed not, wizard," the gruff said. "Indeed it would not be." He bowed his head to me. "Likest thou jelly within thy doughnut?"

"Nay, but prithee, with sprinkles 'pon it instead," I said solemnly, "and frosting of white."

"It could take some time to locate such a pastry," the gruff said seriously.

I bowed my head to him. "I trust in the honor of Summer's champions that it will arrive in good time."

He bowed his head in reply. "Understand, young wizard, I may not aid thee further."

"You're pushing the rules enough already," I said dryly. "Believe me. I know how that is."

Eldest Gruff 's golden eyes glittered. Then he lifted the staff and thumped it quietly onto the floorboards. Once again there was a pulse of green light and a surge of gentle thunder—and he was simply gone.

So was the silver oak leaf pin. Just gone from my fingers, and I hadn't felt a thing. Give it up for the fae; they can do disappearing like nobody's

business.

Maybe I should have taken some lessons. It might have helped me get out of this mess alive.

I made my way carefully back across the creaking floor to the body of the young man. He looked relaxed in death, peaceful. I had the impression that whatever Eldest Gruff had done to him, it had been painless. It seemed like the sort of thing the old faerie would do. I reached down with my gloved left hand and grasped the tag containing the blackened denarius of Magog. I jerked it sharply, pulling it off the collar, and pocketed it, careful not to let it touch skin. I was getting to be kind of blasé about handling these coins, but it was difficult to keep getting terrified over and over again, especially given the circumstances. The risk of once more exposing my immortal soul to a fiendish presence seemed only a moderate danger, compared to what still stalked the night outside the old building.

Speaking of which...I took a deep breath and made my way quietly back out to the street. I could still hear shouting from farther up the hillside. I heard the sound of a boat's engine on the far side of the island. There must have been other vessels docked elsewhere along the shore.

Well, I'd known about only the one, and it was close. I slipped back out of the cannery and hurried down the street as quickly and quietly as I could.

Down past the bottom of the rough stone staircase the boat still floated, tied beside the broken stump of an old wooden column. I restrained the urge to let out a whoop, and settled for hustling down the frozen stones as fast as I could without breaking my neck. The water was viciously cold, but I still wasn't feeling it—which probably wasn't a good thing. There was going to be hell to pay in afterthought pain when this was over. But compared to the other problems I'd had recently, that one was a joy to think about.

I got to the boat, tossed my staff in, and clambered aboard. I heard a shout up the hillside and froze. A flashlight swept back and forth up in the trees, but then moved off in another direction. I hadn't been seen. I grinned like a fool and crept up to the driver's seat. Once I got the engine started it would attract attention, but all I had to do was drive west as fast as I could until I hit ground. The whole western shoreline hereabouts was heavily occupied, and it should be no problem to get to a spot public enough to avoid any further molestation.

I eased into the driver's seat and reached for the ignition key.

But it was gone.

I felt around for it. Rosanna had left it in the ignition. I specifically remembered that she had done so.

The shadows rippled away from the passenger seat opposite the driver's seat, revealing Nicodemus. He sat calmly in his black silk shirt and dark trousers, the grey noose worn like a tie around his throat, a naked sword across his lap, his left elbow resting on his left knee. In the fingertips of his left hand he held a key ring, dangling the grease-smeared ignition key of the boat.

"Good evening, Dresden," he said. "Looking for this?"

Chapter Forty-five

The sleet had stopped coming down in favor of large, wet flakes of snow again. The boat rocked gently on the troubled waters of the lake. Water slapped against the sides and gurgled around the curve of the hull. Ice had begun to form all along the sides and front of the boat. I think there are boat words for all the pieces that were being covered, like *pro* and *gunwale*, but I'm only vaguely aware of them.

"Harry Dresden speechless," Nicodemus said. "I can't imagine this happens every day."

I just stared at him.

"In the event that you hadn't worked it out for yourself yet," Nicodemus said, "this is endgame, Dresden." The fingers of his right hand stroked the hilt of his sword. "Can you puzzle out the next part, or must I explain it to you?"

"You want the coins, the sword, the girl, the money, and the keys to the Monte Carlo," I said. "Or you shoot me and drop me over the side."

"Something like that," he said. "The coins, Dresden."

I reached into the pocket of my duster and...

"What the hell," I said.

The Crown Royal bag was gone.

I checked my other pockets, careful of the coin I'd taken from Magog—and careful not to reveal its presence to Nicodemus. No bag. "It's gone."

"Dresden, don't even try such a pathetic lie on m—"

"It's *gone*!" I told him with considerable heat, none of it feigned. Eleven coins. Eleven freaking cursed coins. The last time I remembered definitely having them had been up at the tower, when I'd jingled them for Nicodemus.

He stared at me for a moment, his eyes searching, and then murmured something under his breath. Whispers rolled from the shadows around him.

I didn't recognize the language, but I did recognize the tone. I wondered if the angelic tongue had swear words, or if they just said nice words backward or something. *Doog! Teews doog!*

Nicodemus's sword came up as swiftly as a flickering snake's tongue and came to rest against my throat. I didn't have time to flinch; it was that fast. I sucked in a quick breath and held very, very still.

"These marks," he murmured. "Thorned Namshiel's strangler spell." His eyes drew a line from the last apparent mark on my neck down to the duster pocket that the bag of coins had been in. "Ah. The strangulation was the distraction. He picked your pocket with one of the other wires before he was incapacitated. He did that to Saint...someone-or-other, in Glasgow in the thirteenth century."

There's nothing like getting taken with an old trick, I guess. But that meant that Namshiel had been working together with someone else—someone else who had to have been hanging around to collect the coins after he'd taken them from my pocket and tossed them off to the side in the confusion. Someone who hadn't been pulling a fade after all.

"Tessa and Rosanna," I said quietly. "They got their collection of thugs back. They bailed at just the right moment to ruin your plan, too."

"Deceitful bitches," Nicodemus murmured. "One of them is our own Judas; I was sure of it."

I lifted my eyebrows. "What?"

"That's why I let them handle the more, shall we say, memorable aspects of the Archive's initiation to our world," Nicodemus said. "I suppose now that the child is free, she'll have some rather unpleasant associations with those two."

"And you're telling me this why?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "It's somewhat ironic, Dresden, that I *can* talk to you about this particular aspect of family business. You're the only one that I'm sure hasn't gone over to this new force—this Black Council of yours."

"How can you be so sure about me?" I asked him.

"Please. No one so obstreperous has been corrupted by anything but his own pure muleheadedness." Nicodemus shook his head, never taking his eyes off me. "Still. My time here has not been wasted. The Knights carried away Namshiel's coin, so Tessa has lost her sorcery teacher. I heard Magog's bellow end quite abruptly a few moments ago, just before you walked out of the same building, so with any luck Tessa's heaviest bruiser

is out of the game for a time as well, eh?” Nicodemus smiled cheerily at me. “Perhaps his collar is in one of your pockets. And I have *Fidelacchius*. Removal of one of the Three is profit enough for one operation, even if I did lose this chance at gaining control of the Archive.”

“What makes you think,” I said, “that you have *Fidelacchius*?”

“I told you,” Nicodemus said. “This is endgame. No more playing.” The pitch and intonation of his voice changed, and though he still spoke in my direction, it was clear that he was no longer speaking to *me*. “Shadow, if you would, disable Dresden. We’ll talk some sense into him later, in a quieter setting.”

He was talking to Lasciel’s shadow.

Hell, wizards didn’t have a monopoly on arrogance.

Neither did the Knights of the Cross.

I stiffened in place, my mouth half-open. Then I fell over sideways, body resting against the boat’s steering wheel, my spine ramrod straight. I didn’t move, not one little twitch.

Nicodemus sighed and shook his head. “Dresden, I truly regret this necessity, but time is growing short. I must act, and your talents could prove useful. You’ll see. Once we’ve cleared some of these well-intentioned idiots out of our way...” He reached for *Fidelacchius*.

And I punched him in the neck.

Then I seized the noose and jerked it tight. I hung on, pulling it tighter. The noose, another leftover from Judas’s field, made Nicodemus more or less invulnerable to harm—from everything but itself. Nicodemus had worn the thing for centuries. As far as I knew,

I was the only one who had worked out how to hurt him. I was the only one who had truly terrified him.

He met my eyes for a panicked second.

“Lasciel’s shadow,” I told him, “doesn’t live here anymore. The Fallen have no power over me. And neither do you.”

I jerked the noose a little tighter.

Nicodemus would have screamed if he could have. He thrashed uselessly, reaching for his sword. I kicked it out of reach. He reached up and raked at my eyes, but I hunched my head down and hung on, and his motions were more panicked than practiced. His shadow rose up in a wave of darkness and fury—but as it plunged down to engulf me, white light shone forth from the slits in the wooden cane sheath of the holy sword on my back, and

the shadow itself let out a hissing, leathery scream, flinching away from the light.

I was no Knight, but the sword did for me what it had always done for them—it leveled the field, stripping away all the supernatural trappings and leaving only a struggle of mind versus mind and will versus will, one man against another. Nicodemus and I fought for the sword and our lives.

He threw savage kicks into my wounded leg, and even through the blocks Lash had taught me to build, I felt them. I had a great handle on his neck, so in reply I slammed my forehead against Nicodemus's nose. It broke with really satisfying crunching sounds. He hammered punches into my short ribs, and he knew how to make them hurt.

Unfortunately for him, I knew how to *be* hurt. I knew how to be hurt with the best of them. It was going to take a whole hell of a lot more pain than this loser could dish out in the time he had left to put me down, and I knew it. I *knew* it. I tightened my grip on that ancient rope and I hung on.

I took more blows to the body as his face turned red. He got one of my knees with a vicious kick as his face turned purple. I was screaming with the pain of it when the purple started looking more like black—and he collapsed, body loosening and then going completely limp.

A lot of people let up when that happens, when their opponent drops unconscious. But it could have been a trick.

Even if it hadn't been I'd been planning to hang on.

I'm *not* a Knight.

In fact, I squeezed harder.

I wasn't sure how much longer I'd had him down. Might have been thirty seconds. Might have been a minute and a half. But I saw a flash of furious green light and looked up to see Deirdre coming down the hillside toward me on her hair and three limbs, one leg bound up in white bandages. She had twenty or thirty tongueless soldier types with her, and her glowing eyes burned with verdant fury, like a pair of spotlights. She focused on me for half a second, hissed like a furious alley cat, and screamed, "Father!"

Crap.

I grabbed Nicodemus by the shirt and pitched him over the side, into the black waters of the lake. He went down with hardly a splash, his dark clothing making him all but invisible an instant after he hit the water.

I scanned the bottom of the boat frantically. There, the key. I scooped it up and jammed it into the ignition.

“Don’t shoot!” Deirdre screamed. “You might hit my father!” She bounded into the air, all that writhing hair folding back into a single, sharklike swimming tail as she dove, and hit the water with barely a splash.

I turned the key. The old boat’s engine coughed and wheezed.

“Come on,” I breathed. “Come on.”

If I didn’t get this boat moving before Deirdre found her daddy, game over. She’d order her soldiers to open fire. I’d have to raise a shield to stop the bullets, and once I did that the already wonky engine would sure as hell never get moving. I’d be stuck, and it would only be a matter of time before a combination of weariness, mounting pain, number of attackers, and wrathful daughter took me down.

Deirdre surfaced, cast a glance around to orient herself, and dove into the featureless darkness again.

The engine caught, and then turned over drunkenly.

“Boo-ya!” I screamed.

Then I remembered that I hadn’t untied the boat.

I lunged awkwardly up to the front and untied the rope, very much aware of all the guns pointing at me. The boat came free. I pushed off the pole, and the vessel began to sluggishly turn. I hobbled back to the steering wheel, cranked it around, and gave the engine some power. The boat throbbed and then roared and began to gather speed.

Deirdre surfaced maybe twenty feet in front of me, carrying her father. Before she even looked around she screamed, “Kill him, shoot him, shoot him!”

Cheerfully, I swerved the boat right at her. Something thumped hard against the hull. I hoped for some kind of lawn mower–like sound from the propellers, but I didn’t get one.

Gunfire erupted from the shore, meanwhile, and it wasn’t blinded by bright lights or hurried or panicked. It started ripping the boat to splinters all around me. I started shouting curse words and crouched down. Bullets hit my duster. For several seconds the range was pretty close, at least for the military-grade weapons they were using, and while the duster was up to the chore of stopping those rounds, it wasn’t any *fun* to experience. My back got hit with half a dozen major-league fastballs over the next few seconds.

And cold water washed over my feet.

And, half a minute later, over my ankles.

Double crap.

The engines were making really odd noises too. My back protested when I turned to look. It was damned dark out here on the lake, as I got farther and farther from shore, but the disappearing form of the island was being blotted by a lot of black smoke coming out of the boat's engines.

The pain blocks were falling now. I was hurting a lot. The water in the bottom of the boat was up to the bottom of my calves now, and...

And there were three searchlights coming toward me from the direction of the island.

They'd sent out pursuit boats.

"This just isn't fair," I muttered to myself. I gave the engine all the power I could, but from the way it was rattling around that was more or less a formality. It wasn't going to last long, and it was sinking in any case.

I knew that if I went into the water I'd have about four or five minutes to live, given the temperature. I also knew that I had to get past the stone reefs around the islands, the ones Rosanna had needed the beacon light to navigate through.

Nothing for it but to keep going.

I was struck by a sudden thought: Bob the skull was going to be crushed that he missed this one, a genuine pirate adventure. I started singing, "Blow the Man Down" at the top of my lungs.

Then there was a horrible noise, and the boat just *stopped*. The steering wheel hit me in the chest pretty hard, and then I bounced back into the driver's seat.

Water started pouring in thick and fast and dark.

"Ahoy!" I slurred drunkenly. "Reef!"

I made sure I still had the coin and the sword. I grabbed up my staff and got out the pentacle amulet from around my neck. The lights of the pursuing boats were getting nearer by the moment. This was going to be a close one.

The old ski boat was literally breaking apart around me, its prow shattered on a thick spike of stone that had penetrated it just left of its center, up by the front of the boat. The old stone ridge that rose up through the waters of the lake came to within a couple of feet of the surface here. It would give me a place to do something besides instantly immerse myself in cold water and go into hypothermia.

And it would give me solid rock on which to plant my feet, and through which to draw power. The water of the lake would wash some of it away—not as much as free-running water, but some—but I would still be able to do *something* to defend myself.

So before the boat could capsize and dump me into the water, I gritted my teeth and jumped in.

My body immediately informed me that I had made an insane decision.

You have no idea what the depths of cold can be until you have jumped into near-freezing water.

I screamed my way into it, finding places to stand with my frozen feet, being careful of the leg that Nicodemus had rendered gimpy for me. Then I held up my mother's amulet in my right hand and focused on it, forcing energy into it carefully and slowly. It happened sluggishly, the way everything was happening in the mounting cold, but I was able to draw power up through the stone beneath my feet, and to call silver-blue wizard light from the amulet—brighter and brighter, light that spread out over the waters in a literal beacon that read, clear as day, *Here I am*.

"T-T-Thomas," I muttered to myself, shivering so hard I could barely stand. "Y-y-you'd b-better b-be c-c-close."

Because Deirdre's men were.

The searchlights oriented on me instantly, and the boats—rubber raft things that would skim right over the reefs—came bouncing toward me over the waves.

It wouldn't have been impossible to sink one of the rafts. But it would have killed every man inside. And those weren't people collaborating with demons for their own dark gain. They were just people, most of whom had been brought up from childhood to serve Nicodemus and company, and who probably thought that they were genuinely doing the right thing. I could kill someone like Nicodemus and sleep peacefully afterward. But I wasn't sure I could live with myself if I sent those rafts down into the lake and condemned the men in them to die. That isn't what magic is for.

More to the point, killing them wouldn't save me. Even if I managed to sink every other raft out there, send every man in them into the water, it wouldn't stop me from freezing to death and drowning. It would just mean that I had a lot of company.

I'm not a Knight. But that doesn't mean I don't draw the line somewhere.

They started shooting from about a hundred yards away, and I raised a shield. It was hard to do in the icy waters, but I raised it and held it, a shimmering quarter-dome of silver light. Bullets smashed against it and skipped off it, sending out little concentric rings of spreading energy as their force was distributed over the shield. Most of the shots never really came anywhere close. Shooting from a moving rubber raft at a hundred yards isn't exactly a recipe for precision marksmanship.

They got closer, and I got colder.

I held the light and the shield.

Please, brother. Don't let me down.

I never heard anything until a wave of cold water hit my shoulder blades and all but knocked me over. Then the heavy *chug-chug-chug* of the *Water Beetle*'s engines shook the water around me as my brother's battered old ship bellied up dangerously close to the reef, and I turned to find the ship wallowing broadside behind me.

I liked to give Thomas a hard time about the *Water Beetle*, teasing him that he'd stolen it from the prop room of *Jaws*. But the fact of the matter was that I didn't know a damned thing about boats, and that I was secretly impressed that he could sail the thing around the lake so blithely.

"Harry!" Murphy called. She came hurrying down the frozen deck, slipping here and there on patches of ice as she did. She slapped a line attached to a harness she wore to the ship's safety railing, and threw the other end of the line to me. "Come on!"

"It's about time you got outside the reef," Thomas complained from the top of the wheelhouse. As I watched, he drew his heavy Desert Eagle from his side, aimed, and loosed a round. A dark form on one of the oncoming rafts let out a cry and fell into the water with a splash.

I scowled at Thomas. He doesn't even practice.

I stumbled forward and grabbed the line, wrapping it around my right arm. That was pretty much all I had enough energy left to do. Murphy began hauling it in, and started yelling for Thomas to help her.

"Cover me!" Thomas yelled.

He came down from the wheelhouse pirate style, just jumping down, all graceful and stylish despite the roll of the ship, despite the ice and the cold. Murphy, her feet planted, secured to the railing, shifted her grip and produced the little assault weapon she'd had on a strap around her back—the P-90 Kincaid had given her as a gift. She raised it to her shoulder,

sighted through the scope at one of the oncoming rafts, and started calmly squeezing out rounds, one and two at a time. *Fam. Famfam. Fam. Famfam. Fam. Fam.*

One of the rafts foundered. Maybe she'd struck whoever was steering it and caused him to misguide it. Maybe the lake had simply swamped it. I don't know. But a second raft immediately turned to start picking up men who had spilled into the water from the first. Murphy turned her gun onto the remaining raft.

Thomas started hauling me out of the water by the line around my arm, just pulling me up arm over arm as if I'd been a child and not an adult a hundred pounds heavier than he was. He doesn't even work out.

I was tired enough that I just let him do it. As a result I had enough spare attention to notice when my feet cleared the water, and Deirdre surged out of the blackness and seized my ankles.

"Kill you!" she snarled. "Kill you for what you did to him!"

"Holy crap!" Thomas yelled.

"Ack!" I agreed.

Most of those deadly strands of her hair were thrust into the stone reef below, holding her down, but a few that were free whipped wildly at Thomas. He ducked aside with a yell, barely managing to hold on to the line.

It felt like she was going to pull my legs off at the ankles. I screamed and kicked at her as best I could, but my legs were so numb that I could barely move them, much less shake her off. Thomas had all that he could do to simply hold on to the line and prevent those bladed strands from severing it.

"Karrin!" he screamed.

Murphy swung her legs up over the railing of the ship, still attached to it by the line fastened to her harness. Then she swung herself out into empty air above the water until she hung alongside me.

Then she aimed the P-90 down at Deirdre and flicked the selector to full automatic.

But before she could pull the trigger, Deirdre hissed, and a flickering blade swept up and struck Murphy across the face. She screamed and recoiled as the blade continued, an S-shaped cut that missed Murphy's throat by a finger's breadth and sliced through the strap that held the P-90 on her body. The weapon tumbled into the water.

“Bitch!” Murphy snarled, one side of her face a sheet of blood. She tried to reach for her pistol—in its shoulder holster, beneath her harness, beneath her coat. It might as well have been on the surface of the moon.

“Murph!” I said. I twisted my shoulders and thrust the end of *Fidelacchius* to within reach of her hand.

Murphy’s fingers closed on the hilt of the holy blade.

She drew it maybe an inch from the scabbard.

White light blinded me. Blinded Deirdre. Blinded Murphy. Blinded Thomas. Blinded everyone.

“No!” Deirdre screamed, utter despair and terror in her voice. “No, no, no!”

The pressure on my ankles vanished, and I heard the Denarian splash into the water.

Murphy released the hilt of the sword. The light died. It took maybe half a minute before I could see anything else. Thomas recovered faster, of course, and by that time he had us both back onto the deck of the *Water Beetle*. There was no evidence of Deirdre anywhere, and the two boatloads of soldier boys were hightailing it away as fast as they could go.

Murphy, bleeding from a cut running parallel to her right eyebrow all the way into her hairline, was staring in shock at me and at the sword. “What the fuck was that?”

I slipped the sword off my shoulder. I felt really tired. I hurt everywhere. “Offhand,” I mumbled, “I’d say it was a job offer.”

“We’ve got to move before we get carried onto the reef,” Thomas muttered. He hurried off, pirate style. He looked good doing it. Of course. He doesn’t even moisturize.

Murphy stared at the sword for a second more. Then she looked at me, and her bloody face went tight with concern. “Jesus, Harry.” She moved to the side of my wounded leg and helped support my weight as I hobbled into the ship’s cabin. “Come on. Let’s get you warmed up.”

“Well?” I asked her as she helped me. “How ’bout it? I got this sword that needs somebody to use it.”

She sat me down on one of the bench seats in the ship’s cabin. She looked at the sword for a moment, seriously. Then she shook her head and said quietly, “I’ve got a job.”

I smiled faintly and closed my eyes. “I thought you’d say that.”

“Shut up, Harry.”

“Okay,” I said.
And I did. For hours. It was glorious.

Chapter Forty-six

I woke up covered in a couple of heavy down comforters and innumerable blankets, and it was morning. The bench seat on the *Water Beetle* had been folded out into a reasonably comfortable cot. A kerosene heater was burning on the other side of the cabin. It wasn't exactly toasty, but it made the cabin warm enough to steam up the windows.

I came to slowly, aching in every joint, muscle and limb. The after-action hangover was every bit as bad as I had anticipated. I tried to remind myself that this was a deliriously joyous problem to deal with, all things considered. I wasn't being a very good sport about it, though. I growled and complained bitterly, and eventually worked up enough nerve to sit up and get out from under the covers. I went to the tiny bathroom—though on a boat, I guess it's called a “head” for some stupid reason—and by the time I zombie-shuffled out, Thomas had come down from the deck and slipped inside. He was putting a cell phone back into his jacket pocket, and his expression was serious.

“Harry,” he said. “How you doing?”

I suggested what he could do with his reproductive organs.

He arched an eyebrow at me. “Better than I'd expected.”

I grunted. Then I added, “Thank you.”

He snorted. That was all. “Come on. I've got coffee for you in the car.”

“I'm leaving everything to you in my will,” I said.

“Cool. Next time I'll leave you in the water.”

I pulled my coat on with a groan. “Almost wish you had. Coin? Sword?”

“Safe, stowed below. You want them?”

I shook my head. “Keep them here for now.”

I followed him out to the truck, limping on my bad knee. I noted that someone had, at some point in the evening, cleaned me up a bit and put new bandages on my leg, and on a number of scrapes and contusions I didn't

even remember getting. I was wearing fresh clothing, too. Thomas. He didn't say anything about it, and neither did I. It's a brother thing.

We got into the battered Hummer, and I seized a paper cup of coffee waiting for me next to a brown paper bag. I grabbed the coffee, dumped in a lot of sugar and creamer, stirred it for about a quarter turn of the stick, and started sipping. Then I checked out the bag. Doughnut. I assaulted it.

Thomas began to start the car but froze in place and blinked at the doughnut. "Hey," he said. "Where the hell did that come from?"

I took another bite. Cake doughnut. White frosting. Sprinkles. Still warm. And I had hot coffee to go with it. Pure heaven. I gave my brother a cryptic look and just took another bite.

"Christ," he muttered, starting the truck. "You don't even explain the little things, do you?"

"It's like a drug," I said, through a mouthful of fattening goodness.

I enjoyed the doughnut while I could, letting it fully occupy all my senses. After I'd finished it, and the coffee started kicking in, I realized why I'd indulged myself so completely: It was likely to be the last bit of pleasure I was going to feel for a while.

Thomas hadn't said a damned thing about where we were going—or how anyone was doing after the events of the night before.

The Stroger building, the new hospital that has replaced the old Cook County complex as Chicago's nerve center of medicine, is only a few yards away from the old clump of buildings. It looks kind of like a castle. If you scrunch up your eyes a little, you can almost imagine its features as medieval ramparts and towers and crenellation, standing like some ancient mountain bastion, determined to defend the citizens of Chicago against the plagues and evils of the world.

Provided they have enough medical coverage, of course.

I finished the coffee and thought to myself that I might have been feeling a little pessimistic.

Thomas led me up to intensive care. He stopped in the hallway outside. "Luccio's coordinating the information, so I don't have many details. But Molly's in there. She'll have the rest of them for you."

"What do you know?" I asked him.

"Michael's in bad shape," he said. "Still in surgery, last I heard. They're waiting for him up here. I guess the bullets all came up from underneath

him, and that armor he was wearing actually kept one of them in. Bounced around inside him like a BB inside a tin can.”

I winced.

“They said he only got hit by two or three rounds,” Thomas continued. “But that it was more or less a miracle that he survived it at all. They don’t know if he’s going to make it. Sanya didn’t go into anything more specific than that.”

I closed my eyes.

“Look,” Thomas said. “I’m not exactly welcome around here right now. But I’ll stay if you need me to.”

Thomas wasn’t telling me the whole truth. My brother wasn’t comfortable in hospitals, and I was pretty sure I’d figured out why: They were full of the sick, the injured, and the elderly—i.e., the kind of herd animals that predators’ instincts told them were weakest, and the easiest targets. My brother didn’t like being reminded about that part of his nature. He might hate that it happened, but his instincts would react regardless of what he wanted or didn’t want. It would be torture for him to hang around here.

“No,” I said. “I’ll be fine.”

He frowned at me. “All right,” he said after a moment. “You’ve got my number. Call me; I’ll give you a ride home.”

“Thanks.”

He put a hand on my arm for a second, then turned, hunched his shoulders, bowed his head so that his hair fell to hide most of his face, and walked quickly away.

I went on into the intensive care ward and found the waiting area.

Molly was sitting inside, next to Charity. Mother and daughter sat side by side, holding hands. They looked strained and weary. Charity was wearing jeans and one of Michael’s flannel shirts. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she didn’t have any makeup on. She’d been pulled from her bed in the middle of the night to rush to the hospital. Her eyes were focused into the distance and blank.

Small wonder. This was her greatest nightmare come to life.

They looked up as I came in, and their expressions were exactly the same: neutral, distant, numb.

“Harry,” Molly said, her voice hollow, ghostly.

“Hey, kid,” I said.

It took Charity a moment to react to my arrival. She focused her eyes on the far wall, blinked them a couple of times, and then focused them on me. She nodded and didn't speak.

"I, uh," I said quietly.

Molly raised her hand to stop me from speaking. I shut up.

"Okay," she said. "Uh, let me think." She closed her eyes, frowning in concentration, and started ticking off one finger with each sentence. "Luccio says that the Archive is stable but unconscious. She's at Murphy's house and needs to talk to you. Murphy says to tell you her face will be fine. Sanya says that he needs to talk to you alone, and as soon as possible, at St. Mary's."

I waved a hand at all of that. "I'll take care of it later. How's your dad?"

"Severe trauma to his liver," Charity said, her voice toneless. "One of his kidneys was damaged too badly to be saved. One of his lungs collapsed. There's damage to his spine. One of his ribs was fractured into multiple pieces. His pelvis was broken in two places. His jaw was shattered. Subdural hematoma. There was trauma all through one ocular cavity. They aren't sure if he'll lose the eye or not. There might also be brain damage. They don't know yet." Her eyes overflowed and focused into the distance again. "There was trauma to his heart. Fragments of broken bone in it. From his ribs." She shuddered and closed her eyes. "His heart. They hurt his heart."

Molly sat back down beside her mother and put her arm around Charity's shoulders. Charity leaned against her, eyes still spilling tears, but she never made a sound.

I'm not a Knight.

I'm not a hero, either.

Heroes keep their promises.

"Molly," I said quietly. "I'm sorry."

She looked up at me, and her lip started quivering. She shook her head and said, "Oh, Harry."

"I'll go," I said.

Charity's face snapped up and she said, her voice suddenly very clear and distinct, "No."

Molly blinked at her mother.

Charity stood up, her face blotched with tears, creased with strain, her eyes sunken with fatigue and worry. She stared at me for a long moment

and then said, “Families stay, Harry.” She lifted her chin, sudden and fierce pride briefly driving out the grief in her eyes. “He would stay for you.”

My vision got a little blurry, and I sat down in the nearest chair. Probably just a reaction to all the strain of the past couple of days.

“Yeah,” I said, my throat thick. “He would.”

I called everyone on the list Molly had quoted me and told them they could wait to see me until we knew about Michael. Except for Murph, they all got upset about that. I told them they could go to hell and hung up on them.

Then I settled in with Molly and Charity and waited.

Hospital waits are bad ones. The fact that they happen to pretty much all of us, sooner or later, doesn’t make them any less hideous. They’re always just a little bit too cold. It always smells just a little bit too sharp and clean. It’s always quiet, so quiet that you can hear the fluorescent lights—another constant, those lights—humming. Pretty much everyone else there is in the same bad predicament you are, and there isn’t much in the way of cheerful conversation.

And there’s always a clock in sight. The clock has superpowers. It always seems to move too slowly. Look up at it and it will tell you the time. Look up an hour and a half later, and it will tell you two minutes have gone by. Yet it somehow simultaneously has the ability to remind you of how short life is, to make you acutely aware of how little time someone you love might have remaining to them.

The day crawled by. A doctor came to see Charity twice, to tell her that things were still bad, and that they were still working. The second visit came around suppertime, and the doc suggested that she get some food if she could, that they should know something more definite after the next procedure, in three or four hours.

He asked if Charity knew whether or not Michael had agreed to be an organ donor. Just in case, he said. They hadn’t been able to find his driver’s license. I could tell that Charity wanted to tell the doctor where he could shove his question and just how far it could go, but she told him what Michael would have told him—yes, of course he had. The doctor thanked her and left.

I walked down the cafeteria with Charity and Molly, but I didn’t feel like eating or having food urged upon me. I figured that Charity probably had a critical back pressure of mothering built up after this much time away from

her kids. On the way, I claimed that I needed to stretch my legs, which was the truth. Sometimes when there's too much going on in my head, it helps to walk around a bit.

So I walked down hallways, going nowhere in particular, just being careful not to pass too near any equipment that might be busy keeping someone alive at the moment.

I wound up sitting down in the hospital chapel.

It was the usual for such a place; quiet, subdued colors and lights, bench seating with an aisle in the middle, and a podium up at the front—the standard layout for the services of any number of faiths. Maybe it leaned a little harder toward Catholicism than most, but that might have been only natural. The Jesuits actually had a chaplaincy in residence, and held Mass there regularly.

It was quiet, which was the important thing. I sank onto a pew, aching, and closed my eyes.

Lots of details chased their way around my head. Michael had come in with gunshot wounds. The cops were going to ask lots of questions about that. Depending on the circumstances of the helicopter's return to Chicago, that could get really complicated, really fast. On the other hand, given the depth of Marcone's involvement, the problems might just vanish. He had his fingers in so many pies in Chicago's city government that he could probably have any inquiry quashed if he really wanted it done.

Given what he'd been saved from, it would be consistent with his character for Marcone to repay the people who bailed him out with whatever aid he could render in turn. It irked me that Marcone could ever be in a position to offer significant aid to Michael, regardless of the circumstances.

Of course, for that to happen, Michael would first need to survive.

My thoughts kept coming full circle back to that.

Would he be in danger right now if I hadn't insisted that he put on that harness? If I hadn't shoved him onto that rope ahead of me, would he still be up there under the knife, dying? Could I really have been that arrogant to assume, based on one glance at Gard's face, that I not only knew the future, but had the wisdom and the right to decide what that future should be?

Maybe it should be me up there. I didn't have a wife and a family waiting for me to come home.

I'd expected Charity to scream and throw things at me. Maybe I'd even wanted that. Because while I intellectually understood that I'd had no way of knowing what was going to happen, and that I'd only been trying to protect my friend, a big part of me couldn't help but feel that I deserved Charity's fury. After all, it reasoned, I had gotten her husband killed as surely as if I'd murdered him myself.

Except that he wasn't dead yet—and thinking like that was too much like giving up on him. I couldn't do that.

I looked up at the podium, where Whoever would presumably be when someone was there delivering a sermon.

"I know that we don't talk much," I said, speaking out loud to the empty room. "And I'm not looking for a pen pal. But I thought You should know that Michael makes You look pretty good. And if after all he's done, it ends like this for him, I'd think less of You. He deserves better. I think You should make sure he gets it. If You want to bill it to me, I'm fine with that. It's no problem."

Nobody said anything back.

"And while we're on the subject," I said, "I think the rules You've got set up suck. You don't get involved as much as You used to, apparently. And Your angels aren't allowed to stick their toes in unless the bad guys do it first. But I've been running some figures in my head, and when the Denarians pulled up those huge Signs, they had to have a lot of power to do it. A *lot* of power. More than I could ever have had, even with Lasciel. Archangel power. And I can only think of one of those guys who would have been helping that crew."

I stood up and jabbed a finger at the podium, suddenly furious, and screamed, "The Prince of fucking Darkness gets to cheat and unload his power on the earth—twice!—and You just *sit* there being holy while my friend, who has fought for You his whole life, is *dying*! What the hell is *wrong* with You?"

"I guess this is a bad time," said a voice from behind me.

I turned around and found a little old guy in a dark blue coverall whose stenciled name tag read, JAKE. He was pulling behind him a janitor's cart with a trash bin and the usual assortment of brooms and mops and cleaning products. He had a round belly and short, curling silver hair that matched his beard, both cropped close to his dark skin. "Sorry. I'll come back later."

I felt like an idiot. I shook my head at him. “No, no. I’m not doing anything. I mean, you’re not keeping me from anything. I’ll get out of your way.”

“You ain’t in my way, young man,” said Jake. “Not at all. You ain’t the first one I ever seen upset in a hospital chapel. Won’t be the last, either. You sure you don’t mind?”

“No,” I said. “Come on in.”

He did, hauling the cart with him, and went over to the trash can in the corner. He took out the old liner. “You got a friend here, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said, sitting down again.

“It’s okay to be mad at God about it, son. It ain’t His fault, what happened, but He understands.”

“Maybe He does,” I said with a shrug. “But He doesn’t care. I don’t know why everyone thinks He does. Why would He?”

Jake paused and looked at me.

“I mean, this whole universe, right? All those stars and all those worlds,” I continued, maybe sounding more bitter than I had intended. “Probably so many different kinds of people out there that we couldn’t count them all. How could God really care about what’s happening to one little person on one little planet among a practically infinite number of them?”

Jake tied off the trash bag and tossed it in the bin. He replaced the liner with a thoughtful look on his face. “Well,” he said, “I never been to much school, you understand. But seems to me that you assuming something you shouldn’t assume.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“That God sees the world like you do. One thing at a time. From just one spot. Seems to me that He is supposed to be everywhere, know everything.” He put the lid back on the trash can. “Think about that. He knows what you’re feeling, how you’re hurting. Feels my pain, your pain, like it was His own.” Jake shook his head. “Hell, son. Question isn’t how could God care about just one person. Question is, how could He *not*.”

I snorted and shook my head.

“More optimism than you want to hear right now,” Jake said. “I hear you, son.” He turned and started pushing the cart out the door. “Oh,” he said. “Can an old man offer you one more thought?”

“Sure,” I said, without turning around.

“You gotta think that maybe there’s a matter of balance, here,” he said. “Maybe one archangel invested his strength in this situation overtly and immediately. Maybe another one was just quieter about it. Thinking long-term. Maybe he already gave you a hand.”

My right hand erupted into pins and needles again.

I sucked in a swift breath and rose, spinning around.

Jake was gone.

The janitor’s cart was still there. A rag hanging off the back was still swinging back and forth slightly. A folded paperback book was shoved between the body of the cart and the handle. I went over to the cart and looked up and down the hall.

There was no one in sight, and nowhere they could have conveniently disappeared to.

I picked up the book. It was a battered old copy of *The Two Towers*. One page was dog-eared, and a bit of dialogue underlined in pencil.

“‘The burned hand teaches best,’” I read aloud. I made my way back to my seat and shook my head. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Grimalkin mewed from the pew beside me, “That your experience with resisting the shadow of the Fallen One has garnered the respect of the Watchman, my Emissary.”

I twitched violently enough that I came up off my seat an inch or two, and came back down with a grunt. I slid down as far as I could to the end of the pew. It wasn’t far. I bought myself only another inch or three before I turned to face Mab.

She sat calmly, dressed in a casual business suit of dark blue, wearing plenty of elegant little diamonds. Her white hair was bound up into a braided bun, held in place with ivory sticks decorated with lapis. She held Grimalkin on her lap like a favorite pet, though only a lunatic would have mistaken the malk for a domestic cat. It was the first time I’d seen Grimalkin in clear light. He was unusually large and muscular, even for a malk—and they tended to make your average lynx look a little bit scrawny. Grimalkin must have weighed sixty or seventy pounds, all of it muscle and bone. His fur was dark grey, patterned with rippling black fur almost like a subtle watermark. His eyes were yellow-green, very large, and far too intelligent for any animal.

“The Watchman?” I stammered.

Mab's head moved slightly with the words, but it was Grimalkin's mewling voice that actually spoke. "The Prince of the Host is all pomp and ceremony, and when he moves it is with the thunder of the wings of an army of seraphim, the crash of drums, and the clamor of horns. The Trumpeter never walks quietly when he can appear in a chorus of light. The Demon Binder takes tasks upon his own shoulders and solves his problems with his own hands. But the Watchman..." Mab smiled. "Of the archangels, I like him the most. He is the quiet one. The subtle one. The one least known. And by far the most dangerous."

I sorted through what knowledge I had of the archangels. It was meager enough, but I knew *that* much, at least. "Uriel," I said quietly.

Mab lifted a finger and continued speaking through the malk. "Caution is called for, Emissary mine. Were I in your position, I would speak his name sparingly, if ever."

"What has he done to me?" I asked her.

Mab stared at me with iridescent eyes. "That is a question only you can answer. But I can say this much: He has given you the potential to be more of what you are."

"Huh?"

She smiled, reached to the bench on the other side of her body, and produced my blasting rod. "The return of your property," the malk said. "The need to keep it from you has passed."

"Then I was right," I said, accepting it. "You took it. And you took the memory of it happening."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I deemed it proper," she replied, as if speaking to a rather slow-witted child. "You would have risked your own life—and my purpose—to protect your precious mortals had I not taken your fire from you. Summer would have tracked and killed you two days ago."

"Not having it could have gotten me killed, too," I said. "And then you'd have wasted all that time you've put in trying to recruit me to be the next Winter Knight."

"Nonsense," Mab said. "If you died, I would simply recruit your brother. He would be well motivated to seek revenge upon your killers."

A little cold feeling shot through me. I hadn't realized that Mab knew who he was. But I guess it made sense. My godmother, the Leanansidhe,

had been tight with my mother, one way or another. If Lea had known, then it might make sense that Mab did, too. “He isn’t a mortal,” I said quietly. “I thought the Knights had to be mortals.”

“He is in love,” Grimalkin mrowled for Mab. “That is more than mortal enough for me.” She tilted her head. “Though I suppose I might make him an offer, while you yet live. He would give much to hold his love again, would he not?”

I fixed her with a hard gaze and said, “You will stay away from him.”

“I will do as I please,” she said. “With him—and with you.”

I scowled at her. “You will not. I do not belong to y—”

The next thing I knew I was on my knees in the center aisle, and Mab was walking away from me, toward the door. “Oh, but you do, mortal. Until you have worked off your debt to me you are mine. You owe one favor more.”

I tried to get up, and I couldn’t. My knees just wouldn’t move. My heart beat far too hard, and I hated how frightened I felt.

“Why?” I demanded. “Why did you want the Denarians stopped? Why send the hobs to kill the Archive? Why recruit me to save the Archive and Marcone in the event that the hobs failed?”

Mab paused, turned, casually showing off the gorgeous curves of her calves, and tilted her head at me. “Nicodemus and his ilk were clearly in violation of my Accords, and obviously planning to abuse them to further his ambition. That was reason enough to see his designs disrupted. And among the Fallen was one with much to answer for to me, personally, for its attack upon my home.”

“The Black Council attack on Arctis Tor,” I said. “One of them used Hellfire.”

Mab showed me her snow-white teeth. “The Watchman and I,” Grimalkin mewled for her, “had a common enemy this day. The enemy could not be allowed to gain the power represented by the child Archive.”

I frowned and thought of the silver hand that had batted the fallen angel and his master sorceries around as if he’d been a stuffed practice dummy. “Thorned Namshiel.”

Mab’s eyes flashed with sudden, cold fury and frost *literally* formed over every surface of the chapel, including upon my own eyelashes.

“There are others yet who will pay for what they have done,” Mab snarled in her own voice. It sounded hideous—not unmelodious, because it

was as rich and full and musical as it ever had been. But it was filled with such rage, such fury, such pain and such hate that every vowel clawed at my skin, and every consonant felt like someone taking a staple gun to my ears.

“I am Sidhe,” she hissed. “I am the Queen of Air and Darkness. I am Mab.” Her chin lifted, her eyes wide and white around the rippling colors of her irises—utterly insane. “And I repay my debts, mortal. All of them.”

There was an enormous crack, a sound like thick ice shattering on the surface of a lake, and Mab and her translator were gone.

I knelt there, shaking in the wake of hearing her voice. I realized a minute later that I had a nosebleed. A minute after that, I realized that there was a trickle of blood coming out of my ears, too. My eyes ached with strain, as if I’d been outdoors in bright sunlight for too many hours.

It took me still another minute to get my legs to start moving again. After that I staggered to the nearest bathroom and cleaned up. I spent a little while poking at my memory and trying to see if there were any holes in it that hadn’t been there before. Then I spent a while more wondering if I’d be able to tell if she *had* taken something else.

“Jesus Christ,” I breathed, shivering.

Because though I hadn’t been in on the original attack on Mab’s tower, and when I *did* attack it I had been unwittingly serving Mab’s interests, the fact remained that I had indeed offered her the same insult as Thorned Namshiel. The lacerating fury that turned her voice into razor blades could very well be directed at me in the near future.

I hurried out of the chapel and went down to the cafeteria.

Being bullied into eating dinner sounded a lot more pleasant than it had a few minutes ago.

The doctor came into the waiting room at ten seventeen that night.

Charity came to her feet. She’d spent much of the day with her head bowed, praying quietly. She was beyond tears, at least for the moment, and she put a sheltering arm around her daughter, pulling Molly in close to her side.

“He’s in recovery,” the doctor said. “The procedures went...” The doctor sighed. He looked at least as tired as either of the Carpenter women. “As well as could be expected. Better, really. I hesitate to make any claims at this point, but he seems to be stable, and assuming there are no complications in the next hour or two, I think he’ll pull through.”

Charity bit her lip hard. Molly threw her arms around her mother.

"Thank you, Doctor," Charity whispered.

The doctor smiled wearily. "You should realize that...the injuries were quite extensive. It's unlikely that he'll be able to fully recover from them. Brain damage is a possibility—we won't know until he wakes up. Even if that isn't an issue, the other trauma was severe. He may need assistance, possibly for the rest of his life."

Charity nodded calmly. "He'll have it."

"That's right," Molly said.

"When can I see him?" Charity asked.

"We'll bring him up in an hour or two," the doctor said.

I cleared my throat. "Excuse me, Doc. Is he going to be on a respirator?"

"For the time being," the doctor said. "Yes."

I nodded. "Thank you."

The doctor nodded to us, and Charity thanked him again. He left.

"Okay, grasshopper," I said. "Time for us to clear out."

"But they're going to bring hi— Oh," Molly said, crestfallen. "The respirator."

"Better not to take any chances, huh?" I asked her.

"It's all right, baby," Charity said quietly. "I'll call home as soon as he wakes up."

They hugged tightly. Molly and I started walking out.

"Oh," Molly said, her voice very tired. "I did that homework."

I felt pretty tired, too. "Yeah?"

She nodded and smiled wearily up at me. "Charlemagne."

I called Thomas, and he gave me and Molly a ride to Murphy's place.

The night was clear. The cloud cover had blown off, and the moon and the stars got together with the snow to turn Chicago into a winter wonderland months ahead of schedule. The snow had stopped falling, though. I suppose that meant Mab had turned her attention elsewhere. Thomas dropped me off a short distance away, and then left to drive the grasshopper back to her home. I covered the last hundred yards or so on foot.

Murphy lives in a teeny little house that belonged to her grandmother. It was just a single story, with two bedrooms, a living room, and a little kitchen. It was meant for one person to live in, or possibly a couple with a

single child. It was certainly overloaded by the mob of Wardens who had descended on the place. Luccio's reinforcements had arrived.

There were four Wardens in the little living room, all of them grizzled veterans, two young members in the kitchen, and I was sure that there were at least two more outside, standing watch behind veils. I was challenged for a password in an amused tone by one of the young Wardens when I came in the kitchen door. I told him to do something impolite, please, and asked him where Luccio might be.

"That's anatomically unlikely," the young man replied in a British accent. He poured a second cup of steaming tea and said, "Drink up. I'll let her know you're here."

"Thanks."

I was sipping tea and sitting at Murphy's table when Luccio came in a few minutes later. "Give us the room, please, Chandler, Kostikos."

The younger men cleared out to the living room—a polite illusion, really. The house was too small to provide much in the way of privacy.

Luccio poured herself a cup of tea and sat down across from me.

I felt my shoulders tense up a little. I forced myself to remain quiet, and sipped more tea.

"I'm concerned," Luccio said quietly, "about the Archive."

"Her name is Ivy," I said.

She frowned. "That's...part of my concern, Harry. Your personal closeness with her. It's dangerous."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Dangerous? I'm in danger because I'm treating her like a real person?"

Luccio grimaced as if tasting something bitter. "Frankly? Yes."

I thought about being diplomatic and polite. Honest, I really did. But while I was thinking about it, I accidentally bumped the button that puts my mouth on autopilot, because it said, "That's a load of crap, Captain, and you know it."

Her expression went still as the whole of her attention focused on me. "Is it?"

"Yes. She's a kid. She's alone. She's not some computer database, and it's inhuman to treat her like one."

"Yes," Luccio said bluntly. "It is. And it's also the safest way to deal with her."

"Safest for who?" I demanded.

Luccio took a sip of tea. “For everyone.”

I frowned down at my cup. “Tell me.”

She nodded. “The Archive...has been around for a long time. Always passed down in a family line, mother to daughter. Usually the Archive is inherited by a woman when she’s in her early to mid-thirties, when her mother dies, and after she’s given birth to her own daughter. Accidents are rare. Part of the Archive’s nature is a drive to protect itself, a need to avoid exposing the person hosting it to risk. And given the extensive knowledge available to it, the Archive is very good at avoiding risky situations in the first place. And, should they arise, the power available to the Archive generally ensures its survival. It is extremely rare for the host of an Archive to die young.”

I grunted. “Go on.”

“When the Archive is passed...Harry, try to imagine living your life, with all of its triumphs and tragedies—and suddenly you find yourself with a second set of memories, every bit as real to you as your own. A second set of heartaches, loves, triumphs, losses. All of them just as real—and then a third. And a fourth. And a fifth. And more and more and more. The perfect memory, the absolute recall of every Archive that came before you. Five thousand years of them.”

I blinked at that. “Hell’s bells. That would...”

“Drive one insane,” Luccio said. “Yes. And it generally does. There is a reason that the historical record for many soothsayers and oracles presents them as being madwomen. The Pythia, and many, many others, were simply the Archive, using her vast knowledge of the past to build models to predict the most probable future. She was a madwoman—but she was also the Archive.

“As a defense, the Archives began to distance themselves from other human beings, emotionally. They reasoned that if they could stop adding the weight of continuing lifetimes of experience and grief to the already immense burden of carrying so much knowledge, it might better enable them to function. And it did. The Archive keeps its host emotionally remote for a reason—because otherwise the passions and prejudices and hatreds and jealousies of thousands of lifetimes have the potential to distill themselves into a single being.

“Normally, an Archive would have her own lifetime of experience to insulate her against all these other emotions and memories, a baseline to

contrast against them.”

I suddenly got it. “But Ivy doesn’t.”

“Ivy doesn’t,” Luccio agreed. “Her grandmother was killed in a freak accident, an automobile crash, I believe. Her mother was a seventeen-year-old girl who was in love, and pregnant. She hated her mother for dying and cursing her to carry the Archive when she wanted to have her own life—and she hated the child for having a lifetime of freedom ahead of her. Ivy’s mother killed herself rather than carry the Archive.”

I started feeling a little sick. “And Ivy knows it.”

“She does. Knows it, feels it. She was born knowing exactly what her mother thought and felt about her.”

“How could you know this about her...” I frowned, thinking. Then said, “Kincaid. The girl was in love with Kincaid.”

“No,” Luccio said. “But Kincaid was working for Ivy’s grandmother at the time, and the girl confided in him.”

“Man, that’s screwed up,” I said.

“Ivy has remained distant her whole life,” Luccio said. “If she begins to involve her own emotions in her duties as the Archive, or in her life generally, she runs the serious risk of being overwhelmed with emotions and passions which she simply is not—and cannot be—psychologically equipped to handle.”

“You’re afraid that she could go out of control.”

“The Archive was created to be a neutral force. A repository of knowledge. But what if Ivy’s unique circumstance allowed her to ignore those limitations? Imagine the results of the anger and bitterness and desire for revenge of all those lifetimes, combined with the power of the Archive and the restraint of a twelve-year-old child.”

“I’d rather not,” I said quietly.

“Nor would I,” Luccio said. “That could be a true nightmare. All that knowledge, without conscience to direct it. The necromancer Kemmler had such a spirit in his service, a sort of miniature version of the Archive. Nowhere near as powerful, but it had been studying and learning beside wizards for generations, and the things it was capable of were appalling.” She shook her head.

I took a sip of tea, because otherwise the gulp would have been suspicious. She was talking about Bob. And she was right about what Bob

was capable of doing. When I'd unlocked the personality he'd taken on under some of his former owners, he'd nearly killed me.

"The Wardens destroyed it, of course," she said.

No, they hadn't. Justin DuMorne, former Warden, hadn't destroyed the skull. He'd smuggled it from Kemmler's lab and kept it in his own—until I'd burned him to death, and taken it from him in turn.

"It was just too much power under too little restraint. And it's entirely possible that the Archive could become a similar threat on a far larger scale. I know you care about the child, Harry. But you had to be warned. You might not be doing her any favors by acting like her friend."

"Who's acting?" I said. "Where is she?"

"We've been keeping her asleep," Luccio said, "until you or Kincaid got here."

"I get it," I said. "You don't think I should get close to her. Unless you're worried about what's going to happen when you wake her up and she's really scared and confused."

Luccio's cheeks flushed and she looked away. "I don't have all the answers, Dresden. I just have concerns."

I sighed.

"Whatever," I said. "Let me see her."

Luccio led me into Murph's guest bedroom. Ivy looked very tiny in the double bed. I sat down beside her, and Luccio leaned over to gently rest her hand on Ivy's head. She murmured something and drew her hand away.

Ivy let out a small whimper and then blinked her eyes open, suddenly hyperventilating. She looked around wildly, her eyes wide, and let out a small cry.

"Easy, easy," I said gently. "Ivy, it's all right. You're safe."

She sobbed and flung herself tight against me.

I hugged her. I just rocked her gently and hugged her while she cried and cried.

Luccio watched me, her eyes compassionate and sad.

After a long while Ivy whispered, "I got your letter. Thank you."

I squeezed a little.

"They did things to me," she said.

"I know," I said quietly. "Been there. But I was all right after a while. You're going to be all right. It's over."

She hugged me some more, and cried herself back to sleep.

I looked up at Luccio and said, “You still want me to push her away? You want her baseline to be what she shared with those animals?”

Luccio frowned. “The Senior Council—”

“Couldn’t find its heart if it had a copy of *Grey’s Anatomy*, X-ray vision, and a stethoscope,” I said. “No. They can lay down the law about magic. But they aren’t telling me who I’m allowed to befriend.”

She looked at me for a long moment, and then a slow smile curled up one side of her mouth. “Morgan told them you’d say that. So did McCoy and Listens-to-Wind. The Merlin wouldn’t hear it.”

“The Merlin doesn’t like to hear anything that doesn’t fit into his view of the world,” I said. “Japanese.”

“Excuse me?”

“Japanese. There’s a Japanese steakhouse I go to sometimes to celebrate. Surviving this mess qualifies. Come with me, dinner tomorrow. The teriyaki is to die for.”

She smiled more broadly and inclined her head once.

The door opened, and Murphy and Kincaid arrived. Kincaid was moving under his own power, though very gingerly, and with the aid of a walking stick. I got out of the way, and he came over to settle down next to Ivy. She woke up enough to murmur something about cookies and a Happy Meal. He settled down on the bed beside her, and she pressed up against his arm before settling down to rest again. Kincaid, evidently exhausted himself, drew a gun, took the safety off, placed it on his chest, and went to sleep too.

“It’s cute,” I whispered to Murphy. “He has a teddy Glock.”

She was looking at Kincaid and Ivy with a decidedly odd expression. She shook her head a little, blinked up at me, and said, “Hmm. Oh, hah, very funny. I had your car dug out of the snow, by the way.”

I blinked at her. “Thank you.”

“Got your keys?”

“Yeah.”

“Give you a ride to it,” she said.

“Groovy.”

We took off.

Once we were in the car and moving, Murphy said, “I like Luccio.”

“Yeah?”

“But she’s all wrong for you.”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

“You come from different worlds. And she’s your boss. There are secrets you have to keep from her. That’s going to make things difficult. And there are other issues that could come up.”

“Wait,” I said. I mimed cleaning out my ears. “Okay, go ahead. Because for a second there, it sounded like you were giving me relationship advice.”

Murphy gave me a narrow, oblique look. “No offense, Dresden. But if you want to compare total hours of good relationships and bad, I leave you in the dust in both categories.”

“Touché,” I said. Sourly. “Kincaid was looking awfully paternal in there, wasn’t he?”

“Oh, bite me,” Murphy said, scowling. “How’s Michael?”

“Gonna make it,” I said. “Hurt bad, though. Don’t know how mobile he’s going to be after this.”

Murphy fretted her lower lip. “What happens if he can’t...keep on with the Knight business?”

I shook my head. “I have no idea.”

“I just...I didn’t think that taking up one of the swords was the sort of job offer you could turn down.”

I blinked at Murphy. “No, Murph. There’s no mandatory martyrdom involved. You’ve got a choice. You’ve always got a choice. That’s...sort of the whole point of faith, the way I understand it.”

She digested that in silence for a time. Then she said, “It isn’t because I don’t believe.”

“I know that,” I said.

She nodded. “It isn’t for me, though, Harry. I’ve already chosen my ground. I’ve taken an oath. It meant more to me than accepting a job.”

“I know,” I said. “If you weren’t the way you are, Murph, the Sword of Faith wouldn’t have reacted to you as strongly as it did. If someone as thick as me understands it, I figure the Almighty probably gets it too.”

She snorted and gave me a faint smile, and drove the rest of the way to my car in silence.

When we got there she parked next to the Blue Beetle. “Harry,” she said, “do you ever feel like we’re going to wind up old and alone? That we’re...I don’t know...doomed never to have anyone? Anything that lasts?”

I flexed the fingers of my still-scarred left hand and my mildly tingling right hand. “I’m more worried about all the things I’ll never be rid of.” I eyed her. “What brings on this cheerful topic?”

She gave me a faint smile. "It's just...the center cannot hold, Harry. I think things are starting to fall apart. I can't see it, and I can't prove it, but I *know* it." She shook her head. "Maybe I'm just losing my mind."

I looked intently at her, frowning. "No, Murph. You aren't."

"There are bad things happening," she said.

"Yeah. And I haven't been able to put many pieces together. Yet. But we shut down some of the bad guys last night. They were using the Denarians to get to the Archive."

"What do they want?"

"Don't know," I said. "But it's going to be big and bad."

"I want in on this fight, Harry," she said.

"Okay."

"All the way. Promise me."

"Done." I offered her my hand.

She took it.

Father Forthill was already asleep, but Sanya answered the door when I dropped by St. Mary's. He was rumpled and looked tired, but was smiling. "Michael woke and was talking."

"That's great," I said, grinning. "What did he say?"

"Wanted to know if you made it out all right. Then he went back to sleep."

I laughed, and Sanya and I traded a hug, a manly hug with a lot of back thumping, which he then ruined with one of those Russian kisses on both cheeks.

"Come in, come in," he said. "I apologize for trying to rush you earlier. We wanted to be sure to collect the coins and get them safely stored as soon as possible."

I exhaled. "I don't have them."

His smile vanished. "What?"

I told him about Thorned Namshiel.

Sanya swore and rubbed at his face. Then he said, "Come."

I followed him through the halls in the back of the enormous church until we got to the staff's kitchen. He went to the fridge, opened it, and came out with a bottle of bourbon. He poured some into a coffee cup, drank it down, and poured some more. He offered me the bottle.

"No, thanks. Aren't you supposed to drink vodka?"

“Aren’t you supposed to wear pointy hat and ride on flying broomstick?”

“Touché,” I said.

Sanya shook his head and flexed the fingers of his right hand. “Eleven. Plus six. Seventeen. It could be worse.”

“But we nailed Thorned Namshiel,” I said. “And Eldest Gruff laid out Magog like a sack of potatoes. I’ll get you his coin tomorrow.”

A flicker of satisfaction went through Sanya’s eyes. “Magog? Good. But Namshiel, no.”

“What do you mean, no? I saw Michael cut his hand off and drop it into his pouch.”

“*Da*,” Sanya said, “and the coin was under the skin of his right hand. But it was not in his pouch when he went to the hospital.”

“What?”

Sanya nodded. “We took off his armor and gear in helicopter, to stop the bleeding. Maybe it fell out into the lake.”

I snorted.

He grimaced and nodded. “*Da*, I know. That did not happen.”

I sighed. “Marccone. I’ll look into it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I know those people. I’ll go see them right now. Though I was looking forward to going home for a while.” I pushed my hips up off the counter they leaned on. “Well, what’s one more thing, right?”

“Two more things,” Sanya said. He vanished and returned a moment later.

He was carrying *Amoracchius* in its scabbard. He offered it to me.

I lifted both eyebrows.

“Instructions,” Sanya said. “I’m to give it to you and you will kn—”

“Know who to give it to,” I muttered. I eyed the ceiling. “Someone is having a huge laugh right now at my expense.” I raised my voice a little. “I don’t *have* to do this, You know! I have free will! I could tell You to go jump in a lake!”

Sanya stood there, offering me the sword.

I snatched it out of his hands, grumbling under my breath, and stalked out to my Volkswagen. I threw the sword into the back. “As if I didn’t have enough problems,” I muttered, slamming the passenger door and stalking around to the driver-side door. “No. I gotta be carrying around freaking Excalibur now, too. Unless it isn’t, who knows.” I slammed the driver-side

door, and the old paperback copy of *The Two Towers* Uriel had left me, and which I'd dropped into the pocket of my duster, dug into my side.

I frowned and pulled it out. It fell open to the inside front cover, where there was writing in a flowing hand: *The reward for work well-done is more work.*

"Ain't that the truth," I muttered. I stuffed the book back in my pocket and hit the road again.

It took a phone call and an hour to set it up, but Marcone met me at his office on the floor over Executive Priority. I walked in carrying the sword to find Marcone and Hendricks in his office—a plain and rather Spartan place for the time being. He had only recently moved in, and it looked more like the office of an active college professor, functional and put together primarily from expediency, than that of a criminal mastermind.

I cut right to the chase. "Someone is backstabbing the people who saved your life, and I won't have it."

Marcone raised his eyebrows. "Please explain."

I told him about Thorned Namshiel and the coin.

"I don't have it," Marcone said.

"Do any of your people?" I asked.

He frowned at that question. Then he leaned back in his chair and put his elbows on the arms of it, resting the fingertips of his hands together.

"Where is Gard?" I asked.

"Reporting to her home office," he murmured. "I will make inquiries."

I wondered if Marcone was lying to me. It wasn't a habit of his, but that only meant that when he did tell a lie, it was all the more effective. I wondered if he was telling the truth. If so, then maybe Monoc Securities had just acquired their own Fallen angel and expert in magic and magical theory.

"The child," Marcone said. "Is she well?"

"She's safe," I said. "She's with people who care about her."

He nodded. "Good. Was there anything else?"

"No," I said.

"Then you should get some rest," Marcone said. "You look"—his mouth twitched up at the corners—"like a raccoon. Who has been run over by a locomotive."

“Next time I leave your wise ass on the island,” I said, scowling, and stalked out.

I was on the way out of the building when I decided to make one more stop.

Madam Demeter was in her office, dressed as stylishly as ever.

“Hello, Mister Dresden,” she said as she put several files away, neatly, precisely ordering them. “I’m quite busy. I hope this won’t take too long.”

“No,” I said. “I just wanted to share a theory with you.”

“Theory?”

“Yeah. See, in all the excitement and explosions and demonic brouhaha, everyone’s forgotten a small detail.”

Her fingers stopped moving.

“Someone gave the Denarians the location of Marccone’s panic room. Someone close to him. Someone who would know many of his secrets. Someone who would have a good reason to want to hurt him.”

Demeter turned just her head to face me, eyes narrowed.

“A lot of men talk to the women they sleep with,” I said. “That’s always been true. And it would give you a really good reason to get close to him.”

“He’s like a lot of men,” Demeter said quietly.

“I know you’ve got a gun in that drawer,” I told her. “Don’t try it.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” she said.

“Because I’m not going to give you to Marccone.”

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I might ask you for information sometimes. If you could help me without endangering yourself, I’d appreciate it. Either way, it doesn’t affect whether or not I talk to Marccone.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“Maybe I want to see him go down someday,” I said. “But mostly because it’s none of my damned business. I just wanted you to know that I’d seen you. This time maybe he won’t put it all together. He’s got more likely suspects than you inside his organization—and I’d be shocked if you hadn’t already realized what a great patsy Torelli is going to make.”

Demeter gave me a wintry smile.

“But don’t get overconfident. If you make another move that obvious, he’ll figure it out. And you’ll disappear.”

Demeter let out a bare laugh and shut the filing cabinet. “I disappeared years ago.” She gave me a steady look. “Are you here to do business,

Mister Dresden?”

Granted, there was a building full of very...fit girls who would be happy to, ah, work on my tone. And my tone was letting me know that it would be happy to be worked on. The rest of my body, however, thought that a big meal and about two weeks of sleep was a much better idea. And once you got up to my neck, the rest of me thought that this whole place was looking prettier and hollower every time I visited.

“It’s done,” I said, and left.

At home, I couldn’t sleep.

Finally I had enough spare time to worry about what the hell was wrong with my right hand.

I wound up in my lab, dangling the packet of stale catnip for Mister and filling Bob in on the events of the past few days.

“Wow,” Bob said. “Soulfire. Are you sure he said soulfire?”

“Yeah,” I said wearily. “Why?”

“Well,” the skull said. “Soulfire is...well. It’s Hellfire, essentially. Only from the other place.”

“Heavenfire?”

“Well...” Bob said, “yes. And no. Hellfire is something you use to destroy things. Soulfire is used the opposite way—to create stuff. Look, basically what you do is, you take a portion of your soul and you use it as a matrix for your magic.”

I blinked. “What?”

“It’s sort of like using rebar inside concrete,” Bob said. “You put a matrix of rebar in, then pour concrete around it, and the strength of the entire thing together is a great deal higher than either one would be separately. You could do things that way that you could never do with either the rebar or the concrete alone.”

“But I’m doing that with my *soul*?” I demanded.

“Oh, come *on*, Harry. All you mortals get all hung up over your precious *souls*. You’ve never seen your soul, never touched it, never done anything with it. What’s all the to-do?”

“So what you’re saying is that this hand construct was made out of my soul,” I said.

“Your soul and your magic fused together, yeah,” Bob said. “Your soul converted into energy. Soulfire. In this case, the spirit energy drawn from

your aura right around your right hand, because it fit the construct so well, it being a big version of your right hand and all. Your standard force-projection spell formed around the matrix of soulfire, and what had been an instantaneous exertion of force became a long-term entity capable of manipulation and exertion to the same degree. Not really more powerful than just the force spell, as much as it was *more* than simply the force spell.”

I wiggled my tingling fingers. “Oh. But my soul’s going to get better, right?”

“Oh, sure,” Bob said. “Few days, a week or two at most, it’ll grow back in. Go out and have a good time, enjoy yourself, do some things that uplift the human spirit or whatever, and it’ll come back even faster.”

I grunted. “So what you’re saying is that soulfire doesn’t let me do anything new. It just makes me more of what I already am.”

“A *lot* more,” Bob said, nodding cheerfully from his shelf. “It’s how angels do all of their stuff. Though admittedly, they’ve got a lot more in the way of soul to draw upon than you do.”

“I thought angels didn’t have souls,” I said.

“Like I said, people get all excited and twitchy when that word gets used,” Bob said. “Angels don’t have anything *else*.”

“Oh. What happens if I, uh, you know. Use too much of it?”

“What’s five minus five, Harry?”

“Zero.”

“Right. Think about that for a minute. I’m sure you’ll come to the right conclusion.”

“It’s bad?”

“See? You’re not totally hopeless,” Bob said. “And hey, you got a new magic sword to custodianize, too? Merlin, eat your heart out; he only got to look after one! And working a case with Uriel! You’re hitting the big-time, Harry!”

“I haven’t really heard much about Uriel,” I said. “I mean I know he’s an archangel, but...”

“He’s...sort of Old Testament,” Bob said. “You know the guy who killed the firstborn children of Egypt? Him. Other than that, well. There’s only suspicions. And he isn’t the sort to brag. It’s always the quiet ones, you know?”

“Heaven has a spook,” I said. “And Mab likes his style.”

“And he did you a *favor!*” Bob said brightly. “You just know that can’t be good!”

I put my head down on the table and sighed.

But after that I was able to go upstairs and get some real sleep.

I always like the onion-volcano thing they do at the Japanese steak houses. Me and the other seven-year-olds at the table. I got to catch the shrimp in my mouth, too, when the chef flicked them up into a high arc with his knife. I did so well he hit me with two, one from a knife in either hand, and I got them both, to a round of applause from the table, and a genuine laugh from Anastasia.

We had a delicious meal, and the two of us lingered after everyone else at our little table-grill had left.

“Can I get your take on something?” I asked her.

“Certainly.”

I told her about my experience on the island, and the eerie sense of familiarity that had come with it.

“Oh, that,” Anastasia said. “Your Sight’s coming in. That’s all.”

I blinked at her. “Uh. What?”

“The Sight,” she replied calmly. “Every wizard develops some measure of precognizance as he matures. It sounds to me as if yours has begun to stir, and has recognized a place that may be of significance to you in the future.”

“This happens to *everyone*?” I said, incredulous.

“To every wizard,” she said, smiling. “Yes.”

“Then why have I never *heard* about it?” I demanded.

“Because young wizards who are anticipating the arrival of their Sight have an appalling tendency to ignore uncomfortable truths by labeling more appealing fantasies revelations of their Sight. Everything they care about turns into a prophecy. It’s vastly irritating, and the best way to avoid it is to keep it quiet until a young wizard finds out about it for himself.”

I mulled over that idea for a few moments. “Significant to my future, eh?”

“Potentially,” she replied quietly, nodding. “One must proceed with extreme caution when acting upon any kind of precognizant information, of course—but in this case, it seems clear that there is more to that island than meets the eye. If it were me, I’d look into it—cautiously.”

“Thank you,” I told her seriously. “For the advice, I mean.”

“It cost me little enough,” she said, smiling. “May I get your take on something?”

“Seems only fair.”

“I’m surprised at you, Harry. I always thought that you had an interest in Karrin.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Timing, maybe. It’s never seemed to be the right time for us.”

“But you do care for her,” she said.

“Of course,” I said. “She’s gone with me into too many bad places for anything else.”

“That,” Anastasia said, her eyes steady, “I can understand.”

I tilted my head and studied her face. “Why ask about another woman?”

She smiled. “I wanted to understand why you were here.”

I leaned over to her, touching her chin lightly with the fingertips of my right hand, and kissed her very gently. She returned it, slowly, savoring the touch of my mouth on hers.

I broke off the kiss several moments after it had become inappropriate for a public venue and said, “Because it’s good for the soul.”

“An excellent answer,” she murmured, her dark eyes huge. “One that should, perhaps, be further explored.”

I rose and held out her chair for her, and helped her into her coat.

As it turned out, the rest of the night was good for the soul, too.

Author's Note

ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER

THE DRESDEN FILES

STORM FRONT
FOOL MOON
GRAVE PERIL
SUMMER KNIGHT
DEATH MASKS
BLOOD RITES
DEAD BEAT
PROVEN GUILTY
WHITE KNIGHT
SMALL FAVOR

“THE WARRIOR” IN MEAN STREETS (WITH SIMON R. GREEN, KAT RICHARDSON, AND THOMAS E. SNIEGOSKI)

THE CODEX ALERA

FURIES OF CALDERON
ACADEM'S FURY
CURSOR'S FURY
CAPTAIN'S FURY
PRINCEPS' FURY

DAY OFF

—*from Blood Lite, edited by Kevin J. Anderson*

The thief was examining another trapped doorway when I heard something—the tromp of approaching feet. The holy woman was in the middle of another sermon, about attentiveness or was in the middle of another sermon, about attentiveness or something, but I held up my hand for silence and she obliged. I could hear twenty sets of feet, maybe more.

I let out a low growl and reached for my sword. “Company.”

“Easy, my son,” the holy woman said. “We don’t even know who it is yet.”

The ruined mausoleum was far enough off the beaten path to make it unlikely that anyone had just wandered in on us. The holy woman was dreaming if she thought the company might be friendly. A moment later they appeared—the local magistrate and two dozen of his thugs.

“Always with the corrupt government officials,” muttered the wizard from behind me. I glanced back at him and then looked for the thief. The nimble little minx was nowhere to be seen.

“You are trespassing!” boomed the magistrate. He had a big boomy voice. “Leave this place immediately on pain of punishment by the Crown’s law!”

“Sir!” replied the holy woman. “Our mission here is of paramount importance. The writ we bear from your own liege requires you to render aid and assistance in this matter.”

“But not to violate the graves of my subjects!” he boomed some more. “Begone! Before I unleash the nine fires of Atarak upon—”

“Enough talk!” I growled, and threw my heavy dagger at his chest.

Propelled by my massive thews, the dagger hit him two inches below his left nipple—a perfect heart shot. It struck with enough force to hurl him from his feet. His men howled with surprised fury.

I drew the huge sword from my back, let out a leonine roar, and charged the two dozen thugs.

“Enough talk!” I bellowed, and whipped the twenty-pound greatsword at the nearest target as if it were a wooden yardstick. He went down in a heap.

“Enough talk!” I howled, and kept swinging. I smashed through the next several thugs as if they were made of soft wax. Off to my left, the thief came out of nowhere and neatly sliced the Achilles tendons of another thug. The holy woman took a ready stance with her quarterstaff and chanted out a prayer to her deities at the top of her lungs.

The wizard shrieked, and a fireball whipped over my head, exploding twenty-one feet in front of me, then spread out in a perfect circle, like the shock wave of a nuke, burning and roasting thugs as it went and stopping a bare twelve inches shy of my nose.

“Oh, come on!” I said. “It doesn’t work like that!”

“What?” demanded the wizard.

“It doesn’t *work* like that!” I insisted. “Even if you call up fire with magic, it’s still *fire*. It acts like *fire*. It expands in a sphere. And under a ceiling, that means it goes rushing much farther down hallways and tunnels. It *doesn’t* just go twenty feet and then *stop*.”

“Fireballs used to work like that.” The wizard sighed. “But do you know what a chore it is to calculate exactly how far those things will spread? I mean, it slows everything down.”

“It’s simple math,” I said. “And it’s way better than the fire just spreading twenty feet regardless of what’s around it. What, do fireballs carry tape measures or something?”

Billy the Werewolf sighed and put down his character sheet and his dice. “Harry,” he protested gently, “repeat after me: It’s only a game.”

I folded my arms and frowned at him across his dining room table. It was littered with snacks, empty cans of pop, pieces of paper, and tiny model monsters and adventurers (including a massively thewed barbarian model for my character). Georgia, Billy’s willowy brunette wife, sat at the table with us, as did the redheaded bombshell Andi, while lanky Kirby lurked behind several folding screens covered with fantasy art at the head of the table.

“I’m just saying,” I said, “there’s no reason the magic can’t be portrayed at least a little more accurately, is there?”

“Again with *this* discussion.” Andi sighed. “I mean, I know he’s the actual wizard and all, but Christ.”

Kirby nodded glumly. “It’s like taking a physicist to a *Star Trek* movie.”

“Harry,” Georgia said firmly, “you’re doing it again.”

“Oh, no, I’m not!” I protested. “All I’m saying is that—”

Georgia arched an eyebrow and gave me a steady look down her aquiline nose. “You know the law, Dresden.”

“He who kills the cheer springs for beer,” chanted the rest of the table.

“Oh, bite me!” I muttered at them, but a grin was diluting my scowl as I dug out my wallet and tossed a twenty on the table.

“Okay,” Kirby said. “Roll your fireball damage, Will.”

Billy slung out a double handful of square dice and said, “Hah! One-point-two over median. Suck on that, henchmen!”

“They’re all dead,” Kirby confirmed. “We might as well break there until next week.”

“Crap,” I said. “I barely got to hit anybody.”

“I only got to hit *one*!” Andi said.

Georgia shook her head. “I didn’t even get to finish casting my spell.”

“Oh, yes,” Billy gloated. “Seven modules of identifying magic items and repairing things the stupid barbarian broke, but I’ve finally come into my own. Was it like that for you, Harry?”

“Let you know when I come into my own,” I said, rising. “But my hopes are high. Why, this very morrow, I, Harry Dresden, have a day off.”

“The devil you say!” Billy exclaimed, grinning at me as the group began cleaning up from the evening’s gaming session.

I shrugged into my black leather duster. “No apprentice, no work, no errands for the Council, no Warden stuff, no trips out of town for Paranet business. My very own free time.”

Georgia gave me a wide smile. “Tell me you aren’t going to spend it puttering around that musty hole in the ground you call a lab.”

“Um,” I said.

“Look,” Andi said. “He’s blushing!”

“I am not blushing,” I said. I swept up the empty bottles and pizza boxes, and headed into Billy and Georgia’s little kitchen to dump them into the trash.

Georgia followed me in, reaching around me to send several pieces of paper into the trash, too. “Hot date with Stacy?” she asked, her voice pitched to keep the conversation private.

“I think if I ever called her ‘Stacy,’ Anastasia might beat the snot out of me for being too lazy to speak her entire name,” I replied.

“You seem a little tense about it.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “This is going to be the first time we spend a whole day together without something trying to rip us to pieces along the way. I ... I want it to go right, you know?” I pushed my fingers back through my hair. “I mean, both of us could use a day off.”

“Sure, sure,” Georgia said, watching me with calm, knowing eyes. “Do you think it’s going to go anywhere with her?”

I shrugged. “Don’t know. She and I have very different ideas about ... well, about basically everything except what to do with things that go around hurting people.”

The tall, willowy Georgia glanced back toward the dining room, where her short, heavily muscled husband was putting away models. “Opposites attract. There’s a song about it and everything.”

“One thing at a time,” I said. “Neither one of us is trying to inspire the poets for the ages. We like each other. We make each other laugh. God, that’s nice, these days. ...” I sighed and glanced up at Georgia, a little sheepishly. “I just want to show her a nice time tomorrow.”

Georgia had a gentle smile on her narrow, intelligent face. “I think that’s a very healthy attitude.”

I WAS JUST getting into my car, a battered old Volkswagen Bug I’ve dubbed the *Blue Beetle*, when Andi came hurrying over to me.

There’d been a dozen Alphas when I’d first met them, college kids who had banded together and learned just enough magic to turn themselves into wolves. They’d spent their time as werewolves protecting and defending the town, which needed all the help it could get. The conclusion of their college educations had seen most of them move on in life, but Andi was one of the few who had stuck around.

Most of the Alphas adopted clothing that was easily discarded—the better to swiftly change into a large wolf without getting tangled up in jeans and underwear. On this particular summer evening, Andi was wearing a flirty little purple sundress and nothing else. Between her hair, her build, and her long, strong legs, Andi’s picture belonged on the nose of a World War II bomber, and her hurried pace was intriguingly kinetic.

She noticed me noticing and gave me a wicked little smile and an extra jiggle the last few steps. She was the sort to appreciate being appreciated. “Harry,” she said, “I know you hate to mix business with pleasure, but there’s something I was hoping to talk to you about tomorrow.”

“Sorry, sweetheart,” I said in my best Bogey dialect. “Not tomorrow. Day off. Important things to do.”

“I know,” Andi said. “But I was hoping—”

“If it waited until after the Arcanos game, it can wait until after my d-day off,” I said firmly.

Andi almost flinched at the tone, and nodded. “Okay.”

I felt myself arch an eyebrow. I hadn’t put *that* much harsh into it—and Andi wasn’t exactly the sort to be fazed by verbal salvos, regardless of their nature or volume. Socially speaking, the woman was armored like a battleship.

“Okay,” I replied. “I’ll call.” Kirby approached her as I got into the car, put an arm around her from behind, and tugged her backside against his front side, leaning down to sniff at her hair. She closed her eyes and pressed herself into him.

Yeah. I let myself feel a little smug as I pulled out of the lot and drove home. That one had just been a matter of time, despite everything Georgia had said. I totally called it.

I PULLED INTO the gravel parking lot beside the boardinghouse where I live and knew right away I had a problem. Perhaps it was my keenly developed intuition, honed by years of investigative work as the infamous Harry Dresden, Chicago’s only professional wizard, shamus of the supernatural, gumshoe of the ghostly, wise guy of the weird, warning me with preternatural awareness of the shadow of Death passing nearby.

Or maybe it was the giant black van painted with flaming skulls, goat’s head pentacles, and inverted crosses that was parked in front of my apartment door—six-six-six of one, half a dozen of another.

The van’s doors opened as I pulled in and people in black spilled out with neither the precision of a professional team of hitters nor the calm swagger of competent thugs. They looked like I’d caught them in the middle of eating sack lunches. One of them had what looked like taco sauce spilled down the front of his frothy white lace shirt. The other four ... Well, they looked like something.

They were all wearing mostly black, and mostly Gothware, which meant a lot of velvet with a little leather, rubber, and PVC to spice things up. Three women, two men, all of them fairly young. All of them carried wands and staves and crystals dangling from chains, and all of them had deadly serious expressions on their faces.

I parked the car, never looking directly at them, and then got out of it, stuck my hands in my duster pockets, and stood there waiting.

“You’re Harry Dresden,” said the tallest one there, a young man with long black hair and a matching goatee.

I squinted at nothing, like Clint Eastwood would do, and said nothing, like Chow Yun-Fat would do.

“You’re the one who came to New Orleans last week.” He said it, “Nawlins,” even though the rest of his accent was Midwest standard. “You’re the one who desecrated my works.”

I blinked at him. “Whoa, wait a minute. There actually *was* a curse on that nice lady?”

He sneered at me. “She had earned my wrath.”

“How about that,” I said. “I figured it for some random bad feng shui.”

His sneer vanished. “What?”

“To tell you the truth, it was so minor that I only did the ritual cleansing to make her feel better and show the Paranetters how to do it for themselves in the future.” I shrugged. “Sorry about your wrath, there, Darth Wannabe.”

He recovered his composure in seconds. “Apologies will do you no good, Wizard. Now!”

He and his posse all raised their various accoutrements, sneering malevolently. “Defend yourself!”

“Okay,” I said, and pulled my .44 out of my pocket.

Darth Wannabe and his posse lost their sneers.

“Wh-what?” said one of the girls, who had a nose ring that I was pretty sure was a clip-on. “What are you doing?”

“I’m a-fixin’ to defend myself,” I drawled, Texas-style. I held the gun negligently, pointing down and to one side and not right at them. I didn’t want to hurt anybody. “Look, kids. You really need to work on your image.”

Darth opened his mouth. It just hung that way for a minute.

“I mean, the van’s a bit overdone. But hell, I can’t throw stones. My VW Bug has a big ‘53’ inside a circle spray-painted on the hood. You’re sort of slipping elsewhere, though.” I nodded at one of the girls, a brunette holding a wand with a crystal on the tip. “Honey, I liked the *Harry Potter* movies, too, but that doesn’t mean I ran out and got a Dark Mark tattooed onto my left forearm like you did.” I eyed the other male. “And you’re wearing a freakin’ Slytherin scarf. I mean, Christ. How’s anyone supposed to take *that* seriously?”

“You would dare—” Darth Wannabe began, obviously outraged.

“One more tip, kids. If you had any real talent, the air would practically have been on fire when you got ready to throw down. But you losers don’t have enough magic between you to turn cereal into breakfast.”

“You would dare—”

“I can tell, because I actually *am* a wizard. I went to school for this stuff.”

“You would—”

“I mean, I know you guys have probably thrown your talents at other people in your weight class, had your little duels, and maybe someone got a nosebleed and someone went home with a migraine and it gave your inner megalomaniac a boner. But this is different.” I nodded at one of the other girls, who had shaved her head clean. “Excuse me, miss. What time is it?”

She blinked at me. “Um. It’s after one ... ?”

“Thanks.”

The Dim Lord tried for his dramatic dialogue again. “You would dare threaten us with mortal weapons?”

“It’s after midnight,” I told the idiot. “I’m off the clock.”

That killed his momentum again. “What?”

“It’s my day off, and I’ve got plans, so let’s just skip ahead.”

Darth floundered wordlessly. He was really out of his element—and he wasn’t giving me anything to work with at all. If I waited around for him, this was going to take all night.

“All right, kid. You want some magic?” I pointed my gun at the van. “Howsabout I make your windows disappear.”

Darth swallowed. Then he lowered his staff, a cheaply carved thing you could pick up at tourist traps in Acapulco, and said, “This is not over. We are your doom, Dresden.”

“As long as you don’t drag it out too much. Good night, children.”

Darth sneered at me again, pulled the shreds of his dignity about him, and strode to the van. The rest of them followed him like good little darthlings. The van started up and tore away, throwing gravel spitefully into the *Blue Beetle*.

Could it sneer at them, the Beetle would have done so. Its dents had dents worse than what that van inflicted.

I spun the .44 once around my finger and put it back into my pocket.

Clint Yun-Fat.

As if I didn't have enough to do without worrying about Darth Wannabe and his groupies. I went inside, greeted my pets in order of seniority—Mister, my oversized cat first, then Mouse, my undersized ankylosaurus—washed up, and went to bed.

THE MICKEY MOUSE alarm clock told me it was five in the morning when my apartment's front door opened. The door gets stuck, because a ham-handed amateur installed it, and it makes a racket when it's finally forced open. I came out of the bedroom in my underwear, with my blasting rod in one hand and my .44 in the other, ready to do battle with whatever had come a-calling.

"Hi, boss!" Molly chirped, giving my blasting rod and gun a passing glance but ignoring my almost-nudity.

I felt old.

My apprentice came in and set two Starbucks cups down on the coffee table, along with a bag that would be full of something expensive that Starbucks thought people should eat with coffee. Molly, who was young and tall and blond and built like a brick supermodel, offered me one of the cups. "You want to wake up now or would you rather I kept it warm for you?"

"Molly," I said, trying to be polite, "I can't stand the sight of you. Go away."

She held up a hand. "I know, I know, Captain Grumpypants. Your day off and your big date with Luccio."

"Yes," I said. I put as much hostility into it as I could.

Molly had been overexposed to my menace. It bounced right off her. "I just thought it would be a good time for me to work out some of the kinks on my invisibility potion. You've said I'm ready to use the lab alone."

"I said *unsupervised*. That isn't quite the same thing as alone." My glower deepened. "Much like having an apprentice puttering around the basement is not quite the same thing as being alone with Anastasia."

"You're going horseback riding," Molly said in a reasonable tone of voice. "You won't be here, and I'll be gone by the time you get back. And besides, I can make sure Mouse gets a walk or two while you're gone, so you won't have to come rushing back early. Isn't that thoughtful of me?"

Mouse's huge grey doggy head came up off the floor, and his tail twitched as she said, "Walk." He looked at me hopefully.

"Oh, for crying out—" I shook my head wearily. "Lock up behind you before you go downstairs."

She turned back to the front door and started pushing. "You got it, boss."

I staggered back to my bed to get whatever rest I could before my apprentice died in a fit of sleep-deprivation-induced psychotic mania.

FOR THE FIRST time ever, Mickey Mouse let me down.

Granted, being a wizard means that technology and I don't get along very well. Things tend to break down a lot faster in the presence of mortal magic than they would otherwise—but that's mostly electronics. My windup Mickey Mouse clock was pure springs and gears, and it had given me years and years of loyal service. It never went off, and when I woke up, Mickey was cheerfully indicating that I had less than half an hour before Anastasia was supposed to arrive.

I got up and threw myself into the shower, bringing my razor with me. I was only partway through shaving when the explosion rattled the apartment, hard enough to make a film of water droplets leap up off the shower floor.

I stumbled out, wrapped a towel around my waist, seized my blasting rod—just in case what was needed was *more* explosions—and went running into the living room. The trapdoor leading down to the lab in my subbasement was open, and pink and blue smoke was roiling up out of it in a thick, noxious plume.

"Hell's bells," I choked out, coughing. "Molly!?"

"Here," she called back through her own thick coughing. "I'm fine, I'm fine."

I opened a couple of the sunken windows, on opposite sides of the room, and the breeze began to thin out the smoke. "What about my lab?"

"I had it contained when it blew," she responded more clearly now. "Um. Just ... just let me clean up a bit."

I eyed the trapdoor. "Molly," I said warningly.

"Don't come down!" she said, her voice near panic. "I'll have it cleaned up in a second. Okay?"

I thought about storming down there with a good hard lecture about the importance of not busting up your mentor's irreplaceable collection of gear, but I took a deep breath instead. If anything had been destroyed, the lecture wouldn't fix it. And I had only fifteen minutes to make myself look like a human being and find some way to get rid of the smell of Molly's alchemical misadventure. So I decided to go finish shaving.

Am I easygoing or what?

No sooner had I gotten bits of paper stuck to the spots on my face where I'd been in a hurry than someone began hammering on the front door.

"For crying out *loud*," I muttered. "It's my day *off*." I stomped out to the living room and found the smoke mostly gone, if not the smell. Mouse paced along beside me on the way to the door. I unlocked it and wrenched it open, careful to open it only an inch or three, then peered outside.

Andi and Kirby crouched on the other side of my door. Both of them were dirty, haggard, and entirely covered with scratches. I could tell, because both were also entirely naked.

Kirby lowered his arm and stared warily at me. Then he let out a low growling sound, which I realized a second later had been meant to be my name. "Harry."

"You have got to be kidding me," I said. "*Today?*"

"Harry," Andi said, her eyes brimming. "Please. I don't know who else we can turn to."

"Dammit!" I snarled. "Dammit, dammit, dammit!" I wrenched the door the rest of the way open and muttered my wards down. "Come in. Hurry up, before someone sees you."

Kirby's nostrils flared as he entered, and his face twisted up in revulsion.

"Oh," Andi said as I shut the door. "That smells terrible."

"Tell me about it," I said. "You two look ..." Well, I would have used different adjectives for Kirby than for Andi. "A little thrashed. What's up? You two get in a fight with a barbed wire golem or something?"

"N-no," Andi said. "Nothing like that. We've had ... Kirby and I have ... fleas."

I blinked.

Kirby nodded somber agreement and growled something unintelligible.

I checked the fireplace, which Molly had lit and which was crackling quietly. My coffeepot hung on a swinging arm near the fire, close enough to stay warm without boiling. I went to the pot and checked. She'd put my cup

of expensive Starbucks elixir in there to stay warm. If I'd been preparing to murder her, that single act of compassion would have been reason enough to spare her life.

I poured the coffee into the mug Molly had left on the mantel and slugged some of it back. "Okay, okay," I said. "Start from the top. Fleas?"

"I don't know what else to call them," Andi said. "When we shift, they're there, in our fur. Biting and itching. It was just annoying at first, but now ... it's just awful." She shuddered and began running her fingertips over her shoulders and ribs. "I can feel them right now. Chewing at me. Biting and digging into me." She shook her head and, with an almost visible effort, forced her hands to be still. "It's getting hard to th-think straight. To talk. Every time we ch-change, it gets worse."

I gulped down a bit of coffee, frowning. That *did* sound serious. I glanced down at the towel around my waist, and noted, idly, that I was the most heavily clothed person in the room. "All right, let me get dressed," I said. "I guess at least one of us should have clothes on."

Andi looked at me blankly. "What?"

"Clothes. You're naked, Andi."

She looked down at herself, and then back up at me. "Oh." A smile spread over her lips, and the angle of her hips shifted slightly and very noticeably. "Maybe you should do something about that."

Kirby looked up from where he'd settled down by the fireplace, pure murder in his eyes.

"Uh," I said, looking back and forth between them. No question about it—the kids were definitely operating under the influence of something. "I'll be right back."

I threw on some clothes, including my shield bracelet, in case the murderous look on Kirby's face got upgraded to a murderous lunge, and went back out into the living room. Kirby and Andi were both in front of the fireplace. They were ... Well, *nuzzling* is both polite and generally accurate, even if it doesn't quite convey the blush factor the two were inspiring, I mean, they'd have been asked to leave any halfway reputable club for that kind of thing.

I lifted my hand to my eyes for a moment, concentrated, and opened up my Third Eye, my wizard's Sight. That was always a dicey move. The Sight showed you what truly was, all the patterns of magic and life that existed in the universe, as they truly were—but you got them in permanent ink. You

didn't ever get to forget what you saw, no matter how bad it was. Still, if something was chewing up my friends, I needed to know about it. They were worth the risk.

I opened my eyes and immediately saw the thick bands of power that I'd laid into the very walls of my apartment when I'd built up its magical defenses. Further layers of power surrounded my lab in a second shell of insulating magic, beneath my feet. From his perch atop one of my bookshelves, Mister, the cat, appeared exactly as he always did, evidently beyond the reach of such petty concerns as the mere forces that created the universe, though my dog, Mouse, was surrounded by a calm, steady aurora of silver and blue light.

More to the point, Kirby and Andi were both engulfed in a number of different shimmering energies—the flame-colored tinges of lust and passion foremost among them, for obvious reason, but those weren't the only energies at play. Greenish energy that struck me as something primal and wild, that essence of the instinct of the wolf they'd been taught by the genuine article, maybe, remained strong all around them, as did an undercurrent of pink-purple fear. Whatever was happening to them, it was scaring the hell out of both of them, even if they weren't able to do anything about it, at the moment.

The golden lightning of a practitioner at work also flickered through their auras—which shouldn't have been happening. Oh, the Alphas all had a lot more talent than Darth Wannabe and his playmates. That went without saying. But they had become extremely focused upon a single use of their magic—shapeshifting into a wolf, which is a *lot* more complicated and difficult and useful than it looks or sounds. But that kind of activity should only have been working if they were actually in the process of changing shape—and they weren't.

I stepped closer, peering intently, and saw something I rather wouldn't have.

Creatures clung to both of them—tiny, tiny things, dozens of them. To my Sight, they looked something like tiny crabs, hard-shelled little things with oversized pincers that ripped and tore into their spiritual flesh—tearing out tiny pieces that each contained a single glowing mote of both green and gold energy.

“Ah!” I said. “Aha! You’ve got psychophagic mites!”

Andi and Kirby both jumped in shock. I guess they hadn't noticed me coming closer, being fully occupied with ... Oh, wow. They'd sort of segued into NC-17 activities.

"Wh-what?" Andi managed to say.

"Psychophagic ..." I shook my head, dismissing my Sight with an effort of will. "Psychic parasites. They've latched onto you from the Nevernever. They're exerting an influence on you both, pushing you to indulge your, um, more basic and primitive behavior patterns, and feeding on the energy of them."

Andi dragged lust-glazed eyes from Kirby to me. "Primitive ... ?"

"Yeah," I said. I nodded to them. "Hence the two of you, um. And I imagine they make you want to change form."

Andi's eyelids fluttered. "Yes. Yes, that sounds lovely." She shook her head slightly and came to her feet, her eyes suddenly glimmering with tears. "Is it ... Can you make them go away?"

I put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I can't figure out how they would have gotten there in the first place. I mean, these things are only attracted to very specific kinds of energy. And you'd only be vulnerable to them when you were actually drawing upon the matter of the Nevernever—when you were shifted. And"—I blinked and then rubbed at my forehead—"Andi. Please don't tell me that you and Kirby have been getting down while you were fuzzy."

The bombshell blushed, from the roots of her hair to the tips of her ... toes.

"God, that's just ... so wrong." I shook my head. "But to answer your question, yes, I think that—"

"Harry?" Molly called from the lab. "Um. Do you have a fire extinguisher?"

"What!?"

"I mean, if I needed one!" she amended, her voice quavering. "Hypothetically speaking!"

"Hypothetically speaking?" I half shouted. "Molly! Did you set my lab on fire?!"

Andi, a distracted expression on her face, idly lifted my hand from her shoulder and slid my index finger between her lips, suckling gently. A pleasant flicker of lightning shot up my arm, and I felt it all the way to the bottoms of my feet.

“Oh, hey, ho-ho-ho! Hold on there,” I said, pulling my finger away. It came out of her mouth with another intriguing sensation and a soft popping sound. “Andi. Ahem. We really need to focus, here.”

Kirby let out a raw snarl and hit me with a right cross that sent me tumbling back across the room and into one of my bookshelves. I rebounded off it, fell on my ass, and sat there stunned for a second as copies of the Black Company novels fell from the shelf and bounced off my head.

I looked up to see Kirby seize Andi by the wrist and jerk her back behind him, placing his body between her and me in a gesture of raw possession. Then he balled up his hands into fists, snarled, and took a step toward me.

Mouse loomed up beside me then, two hundred pounds of shaggy grey muscle. He didn’t growl at Kirby, or so much as bare his teeth. He did, however, stand directly in Kirby’s path and face him without backing down.

Without blinking, Kirby’s body seemed to shimmer and flow, and suddenly a black wolf nearly Mouse’s size, but leaner and swifter looking, crouched across the apartment, white teeth bared, amber eyes glowing with rage.

Holy crap. Kirby was about half a second from losing it, and he had the skill and experience to cause some real mayhem. I mean, taking on an animal is one thing. Taking on an animal directed by a human intelligence with years of experience in battling the supernatural is a challenge at least an order of magnitude greater. If it came down to a fight, a real fight, between me and Kirby, I was sure I could beat him, but to do it I’d have to hit him fast and hard, without pulling any punches.

I was not at all confident that I could beat him without killing him.

“Kirby,” I said, trying to keep my voice as low and steady as I could. “Kirby, man, think about this for a minute. It’s Harry. Listen, man, this is Harry, and you’ve just blown your willpower check, like, completely. You need to take a deep breath and get some perspective here. You’re my friend, you’re under the influence, and I’m trying to help you.”

“Harry?” Molly called out, her voice higher-pitched than ever. “Acid doesn’t eat through concrete, right?”

I blinked at the trapdoor and screamed in frustration, “Hell’s bells, what are you *doing* down there?!”

Kirby took another pace forward, wolf eyes bright, jaws slaverling, head held low and ready for a fight. Behind him, Andi was watching the whole

thing with a wide-eyed look that mixed terror, lust, excitement, and rage in equal parts, her impressive chest heaving. Her hands and lower arms had already begun to slowly change, sprouting curling russet fur, her nails lengthening into dark claws. Her eyes traveled to me and her mouth dropped open, revealing fangs that were already beginning to grow.

Super. In a fight against Kirby, I was worried about him not surviving. Against Kirby *and* Andi, in these quarters, it would be *me* who was running against long odds.

But I try to be an optimist: At least things weren't going to get any worse.

Above and behind me, a window broke.

A length of lead pipe, maybe a foot long, capped at both ends with plastic, landed on a rug five feet away from me. Cheap, Mardi Gras- style beads were wrapped around it.

A lit fuse sparked and fizzed at one end of the pipe.

It was maybe half an inch away from vanishing into the cap.

"But this is my day *off*!" I howled.

I know things looked bad. But I honestly think I could have handled it if Mister hadn't picked that exact moment to leap down from his perch and go streaking across the room, acting upon some feline imperative unknown and unknowable to mere mortals.

Kirby, already on the edge of a feral frenzy, did what any canine would do—he let out a snarl and gave immediate chase.

Mouse let out a sudden bellow of rage—for crying out loud, he hadn't gotten that worked up over *me* being in danger—and launched himself after Kirby. Andi, upon seeing Mouse in pursuit of her fellow werewolf, shifted entirely to her own wolf shape and flung herself after Mouse.

Mister rocketed around my tiny apartment, with several hundred pounds of furious canine in pursuit. Kirby bounded over and around furniture almost as nimbly as Mister. Mouse didn't bother with nimble. He simply plowed through whatever was in the way, smashing my coffee table and one easy chair, knocking over another bookcase, and churning the throw rugs on the floor into hummocks of fabric and fiber.

I leapt for the pipe bomb and picked it up, only to have my legs scythed out from beneath me by Kirby as he went by. Mouse accidentally slammed a paw bearing his full weight down onto me as he rumbled past in pursuit, and got me right where the damn dog always gets a man. There was none of

that delayed-reaction component to the pain, either. My testicles began reporting the damage instantly, loudly, and in nauseating intensity.

I had no time for pain. I lunged for the pipe bomb and nearly wet my pants as another explosion shook the floor—only this one was followed an instant later by an absolute flood of bright green smoke that billowed up from the lab.

I grabbed the pipe bomb and tried to pluck out the fuse, but it vanished into the cap and beyond the reach of my fingers. In a panic, I scrabbled across the floor to the door and ripped it open with terrified strength. I hauled back to throw the thing out and—

There was a sharp burst of sound.

My hand exploded into pins and needles.

I fell limply to the floor, my head falling in such a way as to bring my gaze over to where my hand had been clutching the pipe bomb a few seconds before and—

And I was still holding it now, unharmed. Heavy jets of scarlet and purple smoke were billowing wildly from both ends of the pipe, scented heavily with a familiar odor.

Smoke bombs.

The freaking thing had been loaded with something remarkably similar to Fourth of July smoke bombs, the kind kids play with. Bemused, I tugged one plastic cap off, and several little expended canisters fell out along with a note: *The next time you interfere with me, more than smoke will interfere with you.*

More than smoke will interfere with you?

Who *talks* like that?

Mouse roared, snapping my focus back to the here and now, as he pounced onto Kirby's back, smashing the werewolf to the floor by dint of sheer mass. Mister, sensing his opening, shot out the front door with a yowl of disapproval and vanished into the outdoors, seeking a safer environment, like maybe traffic.

Andi leapt onto Mouse's back, fangs ripping, but my dog held fast to Kirby—buying me a couple of precious seconds. I seized a bit of chalk from the basket by the door and, choking on smoke, ran in a circle around the embattled trio, drawing a line of chalk on the concrete floor. Then I willed the circle closed, and the magical construct snapped into existence, a silent and invisible field of energy that, among other things, completely

severed the connection between the psychic parasites in the Nevernever and the werewolves whaling on my dog.

The fight stopped abruptly. Kirby and Andi both blinked their eyes several times and hurriedly removed their fangs from Mouse's hide. A few seconds later, they shimmered and resumed their human forms.

"Don't move!" I snapped at them, infuriated to no end. "Any of you! Don't break the circle or you'll go nuts again! Sit! Stay!"

That last was for Mouse.

Mostly.

I couldn't see what Molly had done to my lab, but the fumes down there were cloying and obviously dangerous. I hauled myself over to the trapdoor.

Molly hadn't made it up the folding staircase and just lay sprawled semiconscious against it. I had to grab her and haul her up the stairs. She was undressed from the waist up. I spotted her shirt and bra on the floor near the worktable, both of them riddled with acid-burned holes.

I got her laid out on her back, elevated her feet on a stray cushion from the smashed easy chair, and checked her breathing. It didn't take long, because she wasn't, though she did still have a faint pulse. I started rescue breathing for her—which is a *lot* more demanding than people think. Especially when the air is still thick with the smell of God only knows what chemical combinations.

I finally got her to cough, and my racing heartbeat subsided a little as she began breathing again, raggedly, and opened her eyes.

I sat up slowly, breathing hard, and found Anastasia Luccio standing in the open doorway to my apartment, her arms folded over her chest, one eyebrow arched.

Anastasia was a pretty girl—not glamorously lovely, but believably, genuinely pleasant to look at, with a fantastic smile and killer dimples. She looked like someone in her twenties, for reasons too complex to go into right now, but she was an older woman. A much older woman.

And there I was, apparently sitting up from kissing a topless girl, with a naked couple a few feet away, and the air thick with a pall of smoke and the smell of noxious fumes. For crying out loud, my apartment looked like the set of some kind of bizarre porno.

"Um," I said, and swallowed. "This isn't what it might appear to be."

Anastasia just stared at me. I knew it had been a long time since she'd opened up to anyone. It might not take much to make her close herself off again.

She shook her head, very slowly, and the smile lines at the corners of her eyes deepened along with her dimples. Then she burst out into a hearty belly laugh. "*Madre di Dio*, Harry. I cannot for the life of me imagine what it *does* appear to be."

I lifted my eyebrows in surprise. "You aren't upset?"

"By the time you get to be my age," she replied, "you've either worked out your insecurities, or they're there to stay. Besides, I simply *must* know how *this* happened."

I shook my head and then smiled at her. "I ... My friends needed help."

She looked back and forth between the Alphas and Molly. "And still do," she said, nodding sharply. She came in and, as the only one actually wearing shoes, began picking up pieces of fallen glass from the broken window, literally rolling up her sleeves as she went. "Shall we?"

IT TOOK MOST of the day to get Molly to the hospital, gather the materials needed to fumigate Kirby's and Andi's auras, and actually perform the work to get the job done. By the time they left, all better and psychophagy-free, it was after seven.

"So much for our day off," I said.

She turned to consider me. "Would you do it differently if you had it to do again?"

"No. Of course not."

She shrugged. "Then it was a day well spent. There will be others."

"You never can be sure of that, though, can you?"

Her cheeks dimpled again. "Today is not yet over. You mourn its death somewhat prematurely."

"I just wanted to show you a nice time for a day. Not get bogged down in more business."

Anastasia turned to me and put her fingers over my mouth. Then she replaced her fingers with her lips.

"Enough talk," she murmured.

I agreed.

BACKUP

—*novelette from Subterranean Press*

THE WARRIOR

—novelette from *Mean Streets*

I sat down next to Michael and said, “I think you’re in danger.” Michael Carpenter was a large, brawny man, though he was leaner now than in all the time I’d known him. Months in bed and more months in therapy had left him a shadow of himself, and he had never added all the muscle back on. Even so, he looked larger and more fit than most, his salt-and-pepper hair and short beard going heavier on the salt these days.

He smiled at me. That hadn’t changed. If anything, the smile had gotten deeper and more steady.

“Danger?” he said. “Heavens.”

I leaned back on the old wooden bleachers at the park and scowled at him. “I’m serious.”

Michael paused to shout a word of encouragement at the second baseman (or was that baseperson?) on his daughter Alicia’s softball team. He settled back onto the bleachers. They were covered in old, peeling green paint, and it clashed with his powder blue and white shirt, which matched the uniform T-shirts of the girls below. It said COACH in big blue letters.

“I brought your sword. It’s in the car.”

“Harry,” he said, unruffled, “I’m retired. You know that.”

“Sure,” I said, reaching into my coat. “I know that. But the bad guys apparently don’t.” I drew out an envelope and passed it to him.

Michael opened it and studied its contents. Then he replaced them, put the envelope back on the bench beside me, and rose. He started down onto the field, leaning heavily on the wooden cane that went everywhere with him now. Nerve damage had left one of his legs pretty near perfectly rigid, and his hip had been damaged as well. It gave him a rolling gait. I knew he couldn’t see out of one of his clear, honest eyes very well anymore, either.

He took charge of the practice in the quiet, confident way he did everything, drawing smiles and laughter from his daughter and her teammates. They were obviously having fun.

It looked good on him.

I looked down at the envelope and wished I couldn’t imagine the photos contained inside it quite so clearly. They were all professional, clear—Michael walking up the handicap access ramp to his church; Michael opening a door for his wife, Charity; Michael loading a big bucket of softballs into the back of the Carpenter family van; Michael at work,

wearing a yellow hard hat, pointing up at a half-finished building as he spoke to a man beside him.

The pictures had come in the mail to my office, with no note, and no explanation. But their implications were ugly and clear.

My friend, the former Knight of the Cross, was in danger.

It took half an hour for the softball practice to end, and then Michael rolled back over to me. He stood staring up at me for a moment before he said, “The sword has passed out of my hands. I can’t take it up again—especially not for the wrong reason. I won’t live in fear, Harry.”

“Could you maybe settle for living in caution?” I asked. “At least until I know more about what’s going on?”

“I don’t think His plan is for me to die now,” he replied calmly. It was never hard to tell when Michael was talking about the Almighty. He could insert capital letters into spoken words. I’m not sure how.

“What happened to ‘No man knows the day or the hour’?” I asked.

He gave me a wry smile. “You’re taking that out of context.”

I shrugged. “Michael. I’d like to believe in a loving, just God who looks out for everyone. But I see a lot of people get hurt who don’t seem to deserve it. I don’t want you to become one of them.”

“I’m not afraid, Harry.”

I grimaced. I’d figured he might react like this, and I’d come prepared to play dirty. “What about your kids, man? What about Charity? If someone comes for you, they aren’t going to be particular about what happens to the people around you.”

I’d seen him display less expression while being shot. His face turned pale, and he looked away from me.

“What do you have in mind?” he asked after a moment.

“I’m going to lurk and hover,” I told him. “Maybe catch our photographer before things go any further.”

“Whether or not I want you to do it,” he said.

“Well. Yes.”

He shook his head at me and gave me a tight smile. “Thank you, Harry. But no thank you. I’ll manage.”

MICHAEL’S HOME WAS an anomaly so close to the city proper—a fairly large old colonial house, complete with a white picket fence and a yard

with trees in it. It had a quiet, solid sort of beauty. It was surrounded by other homes, but they never seemed quite as pleasant, homey, or clean as Michael's house. I knew he did a lot of work to keep it looking nice. Maybe it was that simple. Maybe it was a side effect of being visited by archangels and the like.

Or maybe it was all in the eye of the beholder.

I'm pretty sure there won't ever be a place like that for me.

Michael had given a couple of the girls—young women, I suppose—a ride home in his white pickup, so it had taken us a while to get there, and twilight was heavy on the city. I wasn't making any particular secret about tailing them, but I wasn't riding his back bumper, either, and I don't think either of them had noticed my beat-up old VW.

Michael and Alicia got out of the car and went into the house, while I drove a slow lap around their block, keeping my eyes peeled. When I didn't spot any imminent maniacs or anticipatory fiends about to pounce, I parked a bit down the street and walked toward Michael's place.

It happened pretty fast. A soccer ball went bouncing by me, a small person came pelting after it, and just as it happened, I heard the crunchy hiss of tires on the street somewhere behind me and very near. I have long arms, and it was a good thing. I grabbed the kid, who must have been seven or eight, about half a second before the oncoming car hit the soccer ball and sent it sailing. Her feet went flying out ahead of her as I swung her up off the ground, and her toes missed hitting the car's fender by maybe six inches.

The car, one of those fancy new hybrids that run on batteries part of the time, went by in silence, without the sound of the motor to give any warning. The driver, a young man in a suit, was jabbering into a cell phone that he held to his ear with one hand. He never noticed. As he reached the end of the block, he turned on his headlights.

I turned to find the child, a girl with inky black hair and pink skin, staring at me with wide, dark eyes, her mouth open and uncertain. She had a bruise on her cheek a couple of days old.

"Hi," I said, trying to be as unthreatening as I could. I had limited success. Tall, severe-looking men in long black coats who need a shave are challenged that way. "Are you all right?"

She nodded her head slowly. "Am I in trouble?"

I put her down. “Not from me. But I heard that moms can get kind of worked up about—”

“Courtney!” gasped a woman’s voice, and a woman I presumed to be the child’s mother came hurrying from the nearest house. Like the child, she had black hair and very fair skin. She had the same wary eyes, too. She extended her hand to the little girl, and then pulled her until Courtney stood behind her mother. She peeked around at me.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she demanded—or tried to. It came out as a nervous question. “Who are you?”

“Just trying to keep your little girl from becoming a victim of the Green movement,” I said.

She didn’t get it. Her expression changed, as she probably wondered something along the lines of *Is this person a lunatic?*

I get that a lot.

“There was a car, ma’am,” I clarified. “She didn’t see it coming.”

“Oh,” the woman said. “Oh. Th-thank you.”

“Sure.” I frowned at the girl. “You okay, sweetheart? I didn’t give you that bruise, did I?”

“No,” she said. “I fell off my bike.”

“Without hurting your hands,” I noted.

She stared at me for a second before her eyes widened, and she hid behind her mother a little more.

Mom blinked at me, and then at the child. Then she nodded to me, took the daughter by the shoulders, and frog-marched her toward the house without another word. I watched them go, and then started back toward Michael’s place. I kicked Courtney’s soccer ball back into her yard on the way.

Charity answered the door when I knocked. She was of an age with Michael, though her golden hair hid fairly well any strands of silver that might have shown. She was tall and broad-shouldered, for a woman, and I’d seen her crush more than one inhuman skull when one of her children was in danger. She looked tired—a year of seeing your husband undergoing intensely difficult physical therapy can do that, I guess. But she also looked happy. Our personal cold war had entered a state of *détente*, of late, and she smiled to see me.

“Hello, Harry. Surprise lesson? I think Molly went to bed early.”

“Not exactly,” I said, smiling. “Thought I’d just stop by to visit.”

Charity's smile didn't exactly vanish, but it got cautious. "Really."

"Harry!" screamed a little voice, and Michael's youngest son, of the same name, flung himself into the air, trusting me to catch him. Little Harry was around Courtney's age, and generally regarded me as something interesting to climb on. I caught him and gave him a noisy kiss on the head, which elicited a giggle and a protesting "Yuck!"

Charity shook her head wryly. "Well, come in. Let me get you something to drink. Harry, he's not a jungle gym. Get down."

Little Harry developed spontaneous deafness and scrambled up onto my shoulders as we walked into the living room. Michael and Alicia, his dark-haired, quietly serious daughter, were just coming in from the garage, after putting away softball gear.

"Papa!" little Harry shouted, and promptly plunged forward, off my shoulders, arms outstretched to Michael.

He leaned forward and caught him, though I saw him wince and exhale tightly as he did it. My stomach rolled uncomfortably in sympathy.

"Alicia," Charity said.

Her daughter nodded, hung her ball cap on a wooden peg by the door, and took little Harry from Michael, tossing him up into the air and catching him, much to the child's protesting laughter. "Come on, squirt. Time for a bath."

"Leech!" Harry shouted, and immediately started climbing on his sister's shoulders, babbling about something to do with robots.

Michael smiled as he watched them exit. "I asked Harry to dinner tonight," he told Charity, kissing her on the cheek.

"Did you?" she said, in the exact same tone she'd used on me at the door.

Michael looked at her and sighed. Then he said, "My office."

We went into the study Michael used as his office—more cluttered than it had been before, now that he was actually using it all the time—and closed the door behind us. Without a word, I took out the photos I'd received and showed them to Charity.

Michael's wife was no dummy. She looked at them one at a time, in rapid succession, her eyes blazing brighter with every new image. When she spoke, her voice was cold. "Who took these?"

"I don't know yet," I told her. "Though Nicodemus's name does sort of leap to mind."

“No,” Michael said quietly. “He can’t harm me or my family anymore. We’re protected.”

“By what?” I asked.

“Faith,” he said simply.

That would be a maddening answer under most circumstances—but I’d seen the power of faith in action around my friend, and it was every bit as real as the forces I could manage. Former presidents get a detail of Secret Service to protect them. Maybe former Knights of the Cross had a similar retirement package, only with more seraphim. “Oh.”

“You’re going to get to the bottom of this?” Charity asked.

“That’s the idea,” I said. “It might mean I intrude on you all a little.”

“Harry,” Michael said, “there’s no need for that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Charity replied, turning to Michael. She took his hand, very gently, though her tone stayed firm. “And don’t be proud.”

He smiled at her. “It isn’t a question of pride.”

“I’m not so sure,” she said quietly. “Father Forthill said we were only protected against supernatural dangers. If there’s something else afoot ... You’ve made so many enemies. We have to know what’s happening.”

“I often don’t know what’s happening,” Michael said. “If I spent all my time trying to find out, there wouldn’t be enough left to live in. This is more than likely being done for the sole purpose of making us worried and miserable.”

“Michael,” I said quietly, “one of the best ways I know to counter fear is with knowledge.”

He tilted his head, frowning gently at me.

“You say you won’t live in fear. Fine. Let me poke around and shine a light on things, so we know what’s going on. If it turns out to be nothing, no harm done.”

“And if it isn’t?” Charity asked.

I kept a surge of quiet anger out of my voice and expression as I looked at her levelly. “No harm gets done to you and yours.”

Her eyes flashed, and she nodded her chin once.

“Honey,” Michael sighed.

Charity stared at him.

Michael might have slain a dragon, but he knew his limits. He lifted a hand in acceptance and said, “Why don’t you make up the guest bedroom.”

BY A LITTLE after nine, the Carpenter household was almost entirely silent. I had been shown into the little guest room kept at the end of an upstairs hallway. It was really Charity's sewing room, and was all but filled with colorful stacks of folded fabric, some of them in clear plastic containers, some of them loose. There was room around a little table with a sewing machine on it, and just barely enough space to get to the bed. I'd recuperated from injuries there before.

One thing was new—there was a very fine layer of dust on the sewing machine.

Huh.

I sat down on the bed and looked around. It was a quiet, warm, cheerful little room—almost manically so, now that I thought about it. Everything was soft and pleasant and ordered, and it took me maybe six or seven whole seconds to realize that this room had been Charity's haven. How many days and nights must she have been worried about Michael, off doing literally God only knew what, against foes so terrible that no one but he could have been trusted to deal with them? How many times had she wondered if it would be a solemn Father Forthill who came to the door, instead of the man she loved? How many hours had she spent in this well-lit room, working on making warm, soft things for her family, while her husband carried *Amoracchius'* cold, bright steel into the darkness?

And now there was dust on the sewing machine.

Michael had nearly been killed, out there on that island. He had been crippled, forced by his injuries to lay aside the holy sword, along with the nearly invisible, deadly war that went with it. And he was happier than I'd ever seen him.

Maybe the Almighty worked in mysterious ways, after all.

Another thought occurred to me, as I sat there pondering: Whoever had sent those pictures hadn't sent them to Michael—he'd sent them to me. What if I'd put Michael and his family into real danger by showing up? What if I'd somehow reacted in exactly the way I'd been meant to react?

I grimaced around the cheerful room. So much for sleep.

I got up and padded back downstairs in my sock feet to raid the fridge, and while I was in the kitchen munching on an impromptu cold cuts sandwich, I saw a shadow move past the back window.

I had several options, but none of them was real appetizing. I settled for the one that might accomplish the most. I turned and padded as quickly and quietly as I could to the front door, slipped out, and snuck around the side of the house in the direction that would, I hoped, bring me up behind the intruder. A quick spat of rain had made the grass wet, and the night had grown cool enough to make my instantly soaked socks uncomfortable. I ignored them and went padding through the grass, keeping to the side of the house and watching all around me.

The backyard was empty.

I got an itchy feeling on the back of my neck and continued my circle. Had I given myself away somehow? Was the intruder even now circling just the way I was, hoping to sneak up on *me*? I took longer steps and stayed as quiet as I knew how—which was pretty darn quiet. I had developed my skulking to professional levels, over the years.

And as I rounded the corner, I spotted the intruder, a dark form hurrying down the sidewalk past Courtney's house. I couldn't follow him without being spotted pretty quickly, unless I cheated, which I promptly did. My ability to throw up a veil wasn't anything to write home about, but it ought to be good enough to hide me from view on a dark night, on a heavily shadowed street. I focused on my surroundings, on drawing the light and shadow around me in a cloak, and watched my own vision dim and blur somewhat as I did.

I half wished I'd woken up Molly. The kid is a natural at subtle stuff like veils. She can make you as invisible as Paris Hilton's ethical standards, and you can still see out with no more impediment than a pair of mildly tinted sunglasses. But, since it was me doing the job, I was probably just sort of indistinct and blurry, and my view of the street was like something seen through dark, thin fabric. I kept track of the pale concrete of the sidewalk and the movement of the intruder against the background of shadowy shapes and blurry bits of light, and walked softly.

The intruder crept down the street and then quickly crouched down beside my old Volkswagen, the *Blue Beetle*. It took him maybe five seconds to open the lock, reach into the car, and draw out the long, slender shape of a sheathed sword.

He must have come to the house first, and circled it to determine where I was. He could have spotted my staff, which I'd left resting against the wall by the front door, when he looked into the kitchen window. And I was

pretty sure it was a he I was dealing with, too. The movement of his arms and legs was brusque, choppy, masculine.

I took a few steps to one side and picked up Courtney's soccer ball. Then I approached to within a few yards and tossed it up in a high arc. It came down with a rattling thump on the *Blue Beetle's* hood.

Lurky-boy twitched, twisting his upper body toward the sound and freezing, and I hit him in a diving tackle with my body as rigid as a spear, all of my weight behind one shoulder, trying to drive it right through his spine and out his chest. He was completely unprepared for it and went down hard, driven to the sidewalk with a *whuff* of expelled air.

I grabbed him by the hair so that I could introduce his forehead to the sidewalk, but his hair was cut nearly military-short, and I didn't have a good grip. He twisted and got me in the floating rib with an elbow, and I wasn't in a good enough position to keep him from getting out from under me and scrambling away, the sheathed weapon still in hand.

I focused my will, flicked a hand at him, and spat, "*Forzare!*" Unseen force lashed out at the backs of his knees—

And hit the mystic equivalent of a brick wall. There was a burst of twinkling, shifting lights, and he let out a croaking sound as he kept running. Something that glowed like a dying ember fell to the sidewalk.

I pushed myself up to pursue him, slipped on the wet grass next to the sidewalk, and rolled my ankle painfully. By the time I'd gotten to my feet again, he was too far away for me to catch, even if my ankle had been steady. A second later, he hopped a fence and was out of sight.

I was left there, standing beside my car on one foot, while neighborhood dogs sent up a racket. I gimped forward and looked down at the glowing embers of the thing he'd dropped. It was an amulet, its leather cord snapped in the middle. It looked as though it had been a carving of wood and ivory, but it was scorched almost completely black, so I couldn't be certain. I picked it up, wrinkling my nose at the smell. Then I turned back to the car and closed the open door. After that, I untwisted the piece of wire that held the trunk closed, picked up a blanket-wrapped bundle, and went back to Michael's place.

MORNING ON A school day in the Carpenter household is like Southampton, just before June 6, 1944. There's a lot of yelling, running

around, and organizing transport, and no one seems to be exactly sure what's going on. Or maybe that was just me, because by a little before eight, all the kids were trooping out to their bus stop, led by Alicia, the senior schoolchild.

"So he grabbed the sword and ran?" Molly asked, sipping coffee. She apparently had a cold, and her nose was stuffy and bright pink. My apprentice was her mother's daughter, tall and blond and too attractive for me ever to be entirely comfortable—even wrapped up in a pink fluffy robe and flannel pj's, with her hair a mess.

"Give me some credit," I said, unwrapping the blanket-wrapped bundle and producing *Amoracchius*. "He *thought* he took the sword."

Michael frowned at me as he put margarine on his toast. "I thought you told me the sword was best hidden in plain sight."

"I've been getting paranoid in my old age," I replied, munching on a bit of sausage. I blinked at the odd taste and looked at him.

"Turkey," Michael said mildly. "It's better for me."

"It's better for everyone," Charity said firmly. "Including you, Harry."

"Gee," I said. "Thanks."

She gave me an arch look. "Can't you just use the amulet to track him down?"

"Nope," I said, putting some salt on the turkey "sausage." "Tell her why not, grasshopper."

Molly spoke through a yawn. "It caught on fire. Fire's a purifying force. Wiped out whatever energy was on the amulet that might link back to the owner." She blinked watery eyes. "Besides, we don't need it."

Michael frowned at her.

"He took the decoy," I said, smiling. "And I know how to find that."

"Unless he's gotten rid of it, or taken steps to make it untraceable," Michael said in a patient, reasonable tone. "After all, he was evidently prepared with some sort of defensive measure against your abilities."

"Different situation entirely," I said. "Tracking someone by using one of their personal possessions depends upon following a frequency of energy inherently unstable and transient. I actually have a piece of the decoy sword, and the link between those two objects is much more concrete. It'd take one he—uh, heck of a serious countermeasure to stop me from finding it."

"But you didn't trail him last night?" Charity asked.

I shook my head. “I didn’t know where I’d have been going, I wasn’t prepared, and since apparently someone is interested in the swords, I didn’t want to go off and leave ...”

You.

“The sword ...”

Unprotected.

“Here,” I finished.

“What about the other one?” Michael asked quietly.

Fidelacchius, brother-sword to Michael’s former blade, currently rested in a cluttered basket in my basement—next to the heavy locked gun safe that was warded with a dozen dangerous defensive spells. Hopefully, anyone looking to take it would open the safe first and get a face full of boom. My lab was behind a screen of defensive magic, which was in turn behind an outer shell of defensive magic that protected my apartment. Plus there was my dog, Mouse, two hundred pounds of fur and muscle, who didn’t take kindly to hostile visitors.

“It’s safe,” I told him. “After breakfast, I’ll track buzz-cut guy down, have a little chat with him, and we’ll put this whole thing to bed.”

“Sounds simple,” Michael said.

“It could happen.”

Michael smiled, his eyes twinkling.

BUZZ, AS IT turned out, wasn’t a dummy. He’d ditched the decoy sword in a Dumpster behind a fast-food joint less than four blocks from Michael’s place. Michael sat behind the wheel of his truck, watching as I stood hip-deep in trash and dug for the sword.

“You sure you don’t want to do this part?” I asked him sourly.

“I would, Harry,” he replied, smiling, “but my leg. You know.”

The bitch of it was, he was being sincere. Michael had never been afraid of work. “Why dump it here, do you think?”

I gestured at a nearby streetlight. “Dark last night, no moon. This is probably the first place he got a good look at it. Parked his car here, too, maybe.” I found the handle of the cheap replica broadsword I’d picked up at what had amounted to a martial arts trinkets shop. “Aha,” I said, and pulled it out.

There was another manila envelope duct-taped to the blade. I took the sword and the envelope back to the truck. Michael wrinkled up his nose at the smell coming up from my garbage-spattered jeans, but that expression faded when he looked at the envelope taped to the sword. He exhaled slowly.

“Well,” he said, “no use just staring at it.”

I nodded and peeled the envelope from around the blade. I opened it and looked in.

There were two more photos.

The first was of Michael, in the uniform shirt he wore when he coached his daughter’s softball team. He was leaning back on the bleachers, as he had been when I’d first walked up to speak to him.

The second picture was of a weapon—a long-barreled rifle with a massive steel snout on the end of it, and what looked like a telescope for a sight. It lay on what looked like a bed with cheap motel sheets.

“Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “What is that?”

Michael glanced at the picture. “It’s a Barrett,” he said quietly. “Fifty-caliber semiautomatic rifle. Snipers in the Middle East who use them are claiming kills at two kilometers, sometimes more. It’s one of the deadliest long-range weapons in the world.” He looked up and around him at all the buildings. “Overkill for Chicago, really,” he said with mild disapproval.

“You know what I’m thinking?” I said. “I’m thinking we shouldn’t be sitting here in your truck right next to a spot Buzz expected us to go while he and his super-rifle are out there somewhere.”

Michael looked unperturbed. “If he wanted to simply kill me here, he’s had plenty of time to make the shot.”

“Humor me,” I said.

He smiled and then nodded. “I can take you to your place. You can get some clean clothes, perhaps.”

“That hurts, man,” I said, brushing uselessly at my jeans as the truck moved out. “You know what bugs me about this situation?”

Michael glanced aside at me for a second. “I think I do. But it might be different from what you were thinking.”

I ignored him. “Why? I mean sure, we need to know who this guy is, but *why* is he doing this?”

“It’s a good question.”

“He sends the pictures to me, not you,” I said. I held up the new photo of the sniper rifle. “I mean, this is obviously an escalation. But if what he wanted was to kill you, why ... ? Why document it for me?”

“It looks to me,” Michael said, “as if he wants you to be afraid.”

“So he threatens *you*?” I demanded. “That’s stupid.”

He smiled. “Do people threaten you very often?”

“Sure. All the time.”

“What happens when they do?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I say something mouthy,” I said. “Then I clean their clocks for them at the first opportunity.”

“Which is probably why our photographer here—”

“Call him Buzz,” I said. “It will make things simpler.”

“Why Buzz hasn’t bothered threatening you.”

I frowned. “So you’re saying Buzz knows me.”

“It stands to reason. It seems clear he’s trying to push you into some sort of reaction. Something he thinks you’ll do if you’re frightened.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“What do you think?” he replied.

I put my hand on the hilt of *Amoracchius*. The sword’s tip rested on the floorboards of the truck, between my feet.

“That would be my guess, too,” he said.

I frowned down at the blade and nodded. “Maybe Buzz figured I’d bring you the sword if you were in danger. So that ...” I didn’t finish.

“So that I’d have some way of defending myself,” Michael said gently. “You can say it, Harry. You won’t hurt my feelings.”

I nodded at the true sword. “Sure you don’t want it?”

Michael shook his head. “I told you, Harry. That part of my life is over.”

“And what if Buzz makes good?” I asked quietly. “What if he kills you?”

Michael actually laughed. “I don’t think that’s going to happen,” he said. “But if it does ...” He shrugged. “Death isn’t exactly a terrifying proposition for me, Harry. If it was, I could hardly have borne the sword for as long as I did. I know what awaits me, and I know that my family will be taken care of.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure everything will be fine if your younger kids have to grow up without a father in their lives.”

He winced, and then he pursed his lips thoughtfully for a few moments before he replied. “Other children have,” he said finally.

“And that’s it?” I asked, incredulous. “You just surrender to whatever is going to happen?”

“It isn’t what I’d want—but a lot of things happen that I don’t want. I’m just a man.”

“The last thing I would expect from you,” I said, “is fatalism.”

“Not fatalism,” he said, his voice suddenly and unexpectedly firm. “Faith, Harry. Faith. This is happening for a reason.”

I didn’t answer him. From where I was standing, it looked like it was happening because someone ruthless and fairly intelligent wanted to get his hands on one of the swords. And worse, it looked like he was probably a mortal, too. If what Charity had said was accurate, that meant Michael didn’t have a heavenly insurance policy against the threat.

It also meant I would have to pull my punches—the First Law of Magic prohibited using it to kill a human being. There was some grey area involved with it, but not much, and it was the sort of thing that one didn’t play around with. The White Council enforced the laws, and anyone who broke them faced the very real possibility of a death sentence.

“And that’s all I need,” I muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Michael pulled the truck into the gravel parking lot of my apartment, in the basement of a big old boardinghouse. “I need to drop by a site before we go back to get your car. Is that all right?”

I took the sword with me as I got out of the truck. “Well,” I said, “as long as it’s all happening for a reason.”

MICHAEL’S SMALL COMPANY built houses. Years of vanishing at irregular intervals to battle the forces of evil had probably held him back from moving up to building the really expensive, really profitable places. So he built homes for the upper couple of layers of the middle class instead. He probably would have made more money if he cut corners, but it was Michael. I was betting that never happened.

This house was a new property, down toward Wolf Lake, and it had the depressing look of all construction sites—naked earth, trees bulldozed and piled to one side, and the standard detritus of any such endeavor: mud,

wood, garbage discarded by the workers, and big old boot tracks all over the ground. Half a dozen men were at work, putting up the house's skeleton.

"Shouldn't take me long," Michael said.

"Sure," I said. "Go to it."

Michael hopped down from the truck and limped his way over to the house, moving with an energy and purpose I'd seldom seen from him. I frowned after him, and then pulled the first envelope out of my pocket and started looking at the photos inside.

The photo of Michael at a building site had been taken at this one. Buzz had been here, watching Michael.

He might still be here now.

I got out of the car and slung the sword's belt over my shoulder, so that it hung with its hilt sticking up next to my head. Photo in hand, I started circling the site, trying to determine where Buzz had been standing when he'd taken his picture. I got some looks from the men on the job—but as I said before, I'm used to that kind of thing.

It took me only a couple of minutes to find the spot Buzz had used—a shadowed area of weeds and scrub brush behind the pile of felled trees. It was obscured enough to offer a good hiding spot, if no one was looking particularly hard, but far enough away that he had to have used a zoom lens of some kind to get those pictures. I had heard that digital cameras could zoom in to truly ridiculous levels these days.

I found footprints.

Don't read too much into that. I'm not Ranger Rick or anything, but I had a teacher who made sure I spent my share of time hiking and camping in the rugged country of the Ozarks, and he taught me the basics—where to look, and what to look for. The showers last night had wiped away any subtle signs, but I wouldn't have trusted my own interpretation of them in any case. I did find one clear footprint, of a man's left boot, fairly deep, and half a dozen partials and a few broken branches in a line leading away. He'd come here, hung around for a while, then left.

Which just about anyone could have deduced from the photo, even if he hadn't seen any tracks.

I had this guy practically captured already.

There weren't any bubble-gum wrappers, discarded cigarettes, or fortuitously misplaced business cards that would reveal Buzz's identity. I hadn't really thought there would be, but you always look.

I slogged across the muddy ground back toward the truck, when the door of one of the contractors' vans opened, and a prematurely balding thin guy with a tool belt and a two-foot reel of electrician's wire staggered out. He had a shirt with a name tag that read CHUCK. Chuck wobbled to one side, dragging the handles of some tools along the side panel of Michael's truck, leaving some marks.

I glanced into the van. There was an empty bottle of Jim Beam inside, with a little still dribbling out the mouth.

"Hey, Chuck," I said. "Give you a hand with that?"

He gave me a bleary glance that didn't seem to pick up on anything out of the ordinary about me or the big old sword hanging over my shoulder. "Nah. I got it."

"It's cool," I said. "I'm going that way anyhow. And those things are heavy." I went over to him and seized one end of the reel, taking some of the weight.

The electrician's breath was practically explosive. He nodded a couple of times and shifted his grip on the reel. "Okay, buddy. Thanks."

We carried the heavy reel of wire over to the house. I had to adjust my steps several times, to keep up with the occasional drunken lurch from Chuck. We took the wire to the poured-concrete slab that was going to be the garage at some point, it looked like, and dropped it off.

"Thanks, man," Chuck said, his sibilants all mushy.

"Sure," I said. "Look, uh. Do you really think you should be working with electricity right now, Chuck?"

He gave me an indignant, drunken glare. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, you just, uh, look a little sick, that's all."

"I'm just fine," Chuck slurred, scowling. "I got a job to do."

"Yeah," I said. "Kind of a dangerous job. In a big pile of kindling."

He peered at me. "What?" It came out more like "*Wha?*"

"I've been in some burning buildings, man, and take it from me, *this* place ..." I looked around at the wooden framework. "Fwoosh. I'm just saying. Fwoosh."

He worked on that one for a moment, and then his face darkened into a scowl again. He turned and picked up a wrench from a nearby toolbox. "Buzz off, freak. Before I get upset."

I wasn't going to do anyone any favors by getting into half of a drunken brawl with one of Michael's subcontractors. I looked around to see if anyone had noticed, but they were all at other parts of the house, I guessed. So I just held up one hand in front of me and said, mildly, "Okay. I'm going."

Chuck watched me as I walked out of the garage. I looked around until I spotted the power lines running into the house, and then I followed the trench they were buried in back to the street until I got to the transformer. I looked up at it, glanced around a little guiltily, and sighed. Then I waved my hand at the thing, exerted my will, and muttered, "*Hexus*."

Wizards and technology don't get along. At all. Prolonged exposure to an active wizard has really detrimental effects on just about anything manufactured after World War II or so, especially anything involving electricity. My car breaks down every couple of weeks, and that's when I'm not even trying. When I'm making an effort?

The transformer exploded in a humming shower of blue-white sparks, and the sound of an electric saw, somewhere on the site, died down to nothing.

I went back to the truck and sat quietly until Michael returned.

He gave me a steady look.

"It was in the name of good," I said. "Your electrician was snookered. By the time the city gets by to repair it, he'll have sobered up."

"Ah," Michael said. "Chuck. He's having trouble at home."

"How do you know?"

"He's got a wife, a daughter," Michael said. "And I know the look."

"Maybe if he spent less time with Jim Beam," I said, "it'd go better."

"The booze is new," Michael said, looking worriedly at the house. "He's a good man. He's in a bad time." He glanced back at me a moment later. "Thank you. Though perhaps next time ... you could just come tell me about it?"

Duh, Harry. That probably would have worked, too. I shook my head calmly. "That's not how I roll."

"How you roll?" Michael asked, smiling.

"I heard Molly say it once. So it must be cool."

"How you roll." Michael shook his head and started the truck. "Well. You were trying to help. That's the important thing."

Harry Dresden. Saving the world, one act of random destruction at a time.

“OKAY,” I SAID to Molly as I prepared to get into my car. “Just keep your wits about you.”

“I know,” she said calmly.

“If there’s any trouble, you call the cops,” I said. “This guy looks to be operating purely vanilla, but he can still kill you just fine.”

“I know, Harry.”

“If you see him, do not approach him—and don’t let your dad do it, either.”

Molly rolled her eyes in exasperation. Then she muttered a quick word and vanished. Gone. She was standing within an arm’s length of me, but I couldn’t see her at all. “Let’s see the bozo shoot this,” said her disembodied voice.

“And while we’re at it, let’s hope he isn’t using a heat-sensitive scope,” I said drily.

She flickered back into sight, giving me an arch look. “The *point* is that I’m perfectly capable of keeping a lookout and yelling if there’s trouble. I’ll go with Dad to softball, and you’ll be the second person I call if there’s a whiff of peril.”

I grunted. “Maybe I should go get Mouse. Let him stay with you, too.”

“Maybe you should keep him close to the swords,” Molly said quietly. “My dad’s just a retired soldier. The swords are icons of power.”

“The swords are bits of sharp metal. The men who hold them make them a threat.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, my dad isn’t one of those men anymore,” Molly said. She tucked a trailing strand of golden hair behind one ear and frowned up at me worriedly. “Are you sure this isn’t about you blaming yourself for what happened to my dad?”

“I don’t blame myself,” I said.

My apprentice arched an extremely skeptical eyebrow.

I looked away from her.

“You wanna talk to me about it?”

“No,” I said. I suddenly felt very tired. “Not until I’m sure the swords are safe.”

“If he knew where to send the pictures,” Molly said, “then he knows where your house is.”

“But he can’t get inside. Even if he could get the doors or one of the windows to open, the wards would roast him.”

“And your wards are perfect,” Molly said. “There’s no way anyone could get around them, ever. The way you told me those necromancers did a few years ago.”

“They didn’t go around,” I said. “They went through. But I see your point. If I have to, I’ll take one of the Ways to Warden’s command center at Edinburgh and leave the swords in my locker.”

Molly’s eyes widened. “Wow. A locker?”

“Technically. I haven’t used it. I’ve got the combination written down. Somewhere. On a napkin. I think.”

“Does it hurt to be as suave as you, boss?”

“It’s agonizing.”

“Looks it.” Her smile faded. “What are you going to do after you’re sure the swords are safe?”

She hadn’t thought it through. She didn’t know what was going to happen in the next few minutes. So I gave her my best fake grin and said, “One step at a time, grasshopper. One step at a time.”

I BEGAN POURING my will into my shield bracelet about half a mile from home. That kind of active magic wasn’t good for the Beetle, but having a headless driver smash it into a building would be even worse. I fastened the buttons on my leather duster, too. The spells that reinforced the coat were fresh, and they’d once stood up to the power of a Kalashnikov assault rifle—but that was a world of difference from the power of a .50-caliber sniper round.

Buzz had missed his shot at the sword at Michael’s house. It’s really hard to tail someone without being noticed, unless you’ve got a team of several cars working together—and this had all the earmarks of a lone-gunman operation. Buzz hadn’t been tailing me today, and unless he’d given up entirely—sure, right—that could only mean he was waiting for me somewhere. He’d had plenty of time to set up an ambush somewhere he knew I’d go.

Home.

The sword was my priority. I wasn't planning on suicide or anything, but at the end of the day, I was just one guy. The swords had been a thorn in the side of evildoers for two thousand years. In the long term, the world needed them a lot more than it needed one battered and somewhat shabby professional wizard.

As I came down the street toward my apartment, I stomped on the gas. Granted, in an old VW Beetle, that isn't nearly as dramatic as it sounds. My car didn't roar as much as it coughed more loudly, but I picked up speed and hit my driveway as hard as I could while keeping all the wheels on the ground. I skidded to a stop outside my front door as the engine rattled, pinged, and began pouring out black smoke, which would have been totally cool if I'd actually made it happen on purpose.

I flung myself out of the car, the sword in hand, and into the haze of smoke, my shield bracelet running at maximum power in a dome that covered me on all sides. I rushed toward the steps leading down to the front door of my basement apartment.

As my foot was heading down toward the first step, there was a flash of light and a sledgehammer hit me in the back. It spun me counterclockwise as it flung me down, and I went into a bad tumble down the seven steps to my front door. I hit my head, my shoulder screamed, and the taste of blood filled my mouth. My shield bracelet seared my wrist. Gravity stopped working, and I wasn't sure which way I was supposed to be falling.

"Get up, Harry," I told myself. "He's coming. He's coming for the sword. Get up."

I'd dropped my keys in the fall. I looked for them.

I saw blood all over the front of my shirt.

The keys lay on the concrete floor of the stairs. I picked them up and stared stupidly at them. It took me a minute to remember why I needed them, and then another minute to puzzle out which of the five keys on the ring went to my front door. My head was pounding and I felt sick; I couldn't get a breath.

I tried to reach up to unlock the door, but my left shoulder wouldn't hold my weight. I almost slammed my head against the concrete again.

I made it up to a knee. I shoved my key at the door.

He's coming. He's coming.

Blue sparks flew up, and a little shock lit up my arm with pain.

My wards. I'd forgotten about my wards.

I tried to focus my will again, but I couldn't get it to gel. I tried again, and again, and finally I was able to perform the routine little spell that disarmed them.

I shoved my key into the lock and turned it. Then I leaned against the door.

It didn't open.

My door is a heavy steel security door. I installed it myself, and I'm a terrible carpenter. It doesn't quite line up with the frame, and it takes a real effort to get it open and closed. I had grown used to the routine bump and thrust of my shoulders and hips that I needed to open it up—but like the spell that disarmed my wards, that simple task was, at the moment, beyond me.

Footsteps crunched in the gravel.

He's coming.

I couldn't get it open. I sort of flopped against it as hard as I could.

The door groaned and squealed as it swung open, pulled from the other side. Mouse, my huge, shaggy grey dog, dropped his front paws back to the ground, shouldered his way through the door, and seized my right arm by the biceps. His jaws were like a vise, though his teeth couldn't penetrate the leather. He dragged me indoors like a giant, groggy chew toy, and as I went across the threshold, I saw Buzz appear at the top of the stairs, a black shadow against the blue morning sky.

He raised a gun, a military sidearm.

I kicked the door with both legs, as hard as I could.

The gun barked. Real guns don't sound like the guns in the movies. The sound is flatter, more mechanical. I couldn't see the flash, because I'd moved the door into the way. Bullets pounded the steel like hailstones on a tin roof.

Mouse slammed his shoulder against the door and rammed it closed.

I fumbled at the wards, babbling in panicked haste, and managed to restore them just in time to hear a loud popping sound, a cry, and a curse from the other side of the door. Then I reached up and snapped the dead bolt closed for good measure.

Then I fell back onto the floor of my apartment and watched the ceiling spin for a while.

In two or three minutes, maybe, I was feeling a little better. My head and shoulder hurt like hell, but I could breathe. I tried my arms and legs; three

of them worked. I sat up. That worked, too, though it made my left shoulder hurt like more hell, and it was hard to see straight through the various pains.

I knew several techniques for reducing and ignoring pain, some of them almost too effective—but I couldn't really seem to line any of them up and get them working. My head hurt too much.

I needed help.

I half crawled to my phone and dialed a number. I mumbled to the other end of the phone, and then lay back on the floor again and felt terrible. Buzz must have fallen back by now, knowing that the sound of the shots could attract attention. Now that the sword was behind the protection of my wards, there was no reason for him to loiter around outside my apartment—I hoped.

The next thing I knew, Mouse was pawing at the door, making anxious sounds. I dragged myself over to it, disarmed the wards, and unlocked it.

“Are these shell casings on the ground? Is this blood?” sputtered a little man in pale blue hospital scrubs and a black denim jacket. He had a shock of black hair like a startled haystack, and black wire-rimmed spectacles. “Holy Hannah, Harry, what happened to you?”

I closed the wards and the door behind him. “Hi, Butters. I fell down.”

“We’ve got to get you to a hospital,” he said, turning to reach for my phone.

I slapped my hand weakly down onto it, to keep him from picking it up. “Can’t. No hospitals.”

“Harry, you know I’m not a doctor.”

“Yes, you are. I saw your business card.” The effort of vocalizing that many syllables hurt.

“I’m a medical examiner. I cut up dead people and tell you things about them. I don’t do live patients.”

“Hang around,” I said. “It’s early yet.” Still too many syllables.

“Oh, this is a load of crap,” he muttered. Then he shook his head and said, “I need some more light.”

“Matches,” I mumbled. “Mantel.” Better.

He found the matches and started lighting candles. “Next, I’ll be getting out a big jar of leeches.”

He found the first aid kit under my kitchen sink, boiled some water, and came over to check me out. I sort of checked out for a few minutes. When I

came back, he was fumbling with a pair of scissors and my duster.

“Hey!” I protested. “Lay off the coat!”

“You’ve dislocated your shoulder,” he informed me, frowning without stopping his work with the scissors. “You don’t want to wriggle it around trying to take your shirt off.”

“That’s not what I—”

The pin that held the two halves of the scissors together popped as Butters exerted more pressure on their handles, and the two halves fell apart. He blinked at them in shock.

“Told you,” I muttered.

“Okay,” he said. “I guess we do this the hard way.”

I won’t bore you with the details. Ten minutes later, my coat was off, my shoulder was back in its socket, and Butters was pretending that my screams during the two failed attempts to put it back hadn’t bothered him. I went away again, and when I came back, Butters was pressing a cold Coke into my hand.

“Here,” he said. “Drink something. Stay awake.”

I drank. Actually, I guzzled. Somewhere in the middle, he passed me several ibuprofen tablets and told me to take them. I did.

I blinked blearily at him as he held up my coat. He turned it around to show me the back.

There was a hole in the leather mantle. I flipped it up. Beneath the hole, several ounces of metal were flattened against the second layer of spell-toughened leather, about three inches below the collar and a hair to the right of my spine.

That was chilling. Even through my best defenses, that was how close I’d come to death.

If Buzz had shot me six inches lower, only a single layer of leather would have been between the round and my hide. A few inches higher, and it would have taken me in the neck, with absolutely no protection. And if he’d waited a quarter of a second longer, until my foot had descended to the first step leading down to my door, he would have sprayed my brains all over the siding of the boardinghouse.

“You broke your nose again,” Butters said. “That’s where some of the blood came from. There was a laceration on your scalp, too, which accounts for the rest. I stitched it up. You’re holding your neck rigid. Probably

whiplash from where the round hit you. There are some minor burns on your left wrist, and I'm just about certain you've got a concussion."

"But other than that," I muttered, "I feel great."

"Don't joke, Harry," Butters said. "You should be under observation."

"Already am," I said. "Look where it got me."

He grimaced. "Doctors are required to report gunshot wounds to the police."

"Good thing I don't have any gunshot wounds, eh? I just fell down some stairs."

Butters shook his head again and turned toward the phone. "Give me a reason not to do it, or I call Murphy right now."

I grunted. Then I said, "I'm protecting something important. Someone else wants it. If the police get involved, this thing would probably get impounded as evidence. That's an unacceptable outcome, and it could get a lot of people hurt."

"Something important," Butters said. "Something like a magic sword?"

I scowled at him. "How do you know that?"

He nodded at my hand. "Because you won't let go of it."

I looked down to find the burn-scarred fingers of my left hand clutching *Amoracchius's* hilt in a white-knuckled grasp. "Oh," I said. "Yeah. Kind of a tip-off, isn't it?"

"Think you can let it go now?" Butters asked quietly.

"I'm trying," I said. "My hand's kind of locked up."

"Okay. Let's just go one finger at a time, then." Butters peeled my fingers off the sword, one at a time, until he had removed it from my grasp. My hand closed in on itself, tendons creaking, and I winced. It sort of hurt, but at the moment it was a really minor thing.

Butters set the sword aside and immediately took my left hand in his, massaging brusquely. "Murphy's going to be pissed if you don't call her."

"Murphy and I have disagreed before," I said.

Butters grimaced. "Okay. Can I help?"

"You are helping."

"Besides this," Butters said.

I looked at the little ME for a moment. Butters had been my unofficial doctor for a long time, never asking a thing in return. He'd waded into some serious trouble with me. Once, he'd saved my life. I trusted his discretion. I trusted him, generally.

So, as the blood started returning to my hand, I told him more or less everything about Buzz and the swords.

“So this guy, Buzz,” Butters said. “He’s just a guy.”

“Let’s don’t forget,” I said. “Despite all the nasties running around out there, it’s just guys who dominate most of the planet.”

“Yeah, but he’s just a guy,” Butters said. “How’s that?”

I flexed my fingers, wincing a little. “It’s good. Thanks.”

He nodded and stood up. He went over to the kitchen and filled my dog’s water bowl, then did the same for my cat, Mister. “My point is,” he said, “that if this guy isn’t a supermagical something, he had to find out about the swords like any other guy.”

“Well,” I said. “Yeah.”

Butters looked at me over his spectacles. “So,” he said, “who knew you had the swords?”

“Plenty knew I had Shiro’s sword,” I said. “But this guy tried to get to me through Michael. And the only ones who knew about *Amoracchius* were me, a couple of archangels, Michael, Sanya, and ...”

Butters tilted his head, looking at me, waiting.

“And the Church,” I growled.



ST. MARY OF the Angels is just about as big and impressive as churches get. In a city known for its architecture, St. Mary’s more than holds its own. It takes up most of a city block. It’s massive, stone, and as Gothic as black frosting on a birthday cake.

I’d watched my back all the way there and was sure no one was following me. I parked behind the church and marched up to the delivery door. Twenty seconds of pounding brought a tall, rather befuddled-looking old priest to the door.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I’m here to see Father Forthill,” I said.

“Excuse me,” he said.

“S okay, Padre,” I told him, clapping his shoulder and moving him aside less than gently. “I’ll find him.”

“Now, see here, young man—”

He might have said something else, but I didn't pay much attention. I walked past him, into the halls of the church, and headed for Forthill's room. I rapped twice on the door, opened it, and walked in on a priest in his underwear.

Father Forthill was a stocky man of medium height, with a fringe of white hair around his head, and his eyes were the color of robins' eggs. He wore boxers, a tank top, and black socks. A towel hung around his neck, and what hair he had left was wet and stuck to his head.

A lot of people would have reacted with outrage to my entrance. Forthill considered me gravely and said, "Ah. Hello, Harry."

I had come in with phasers set on snark, but even though I'm not particularly religious, I do have *some* sense of what is and isn't appropriate. Seeing a priest in his undies just isn't, especially when you've barged into his private chamber. "Uh," I said, deflating. "Oh."

Forthill shook his head, smiling. "Yes, priests bathe. We eat. We sleep. Occasionally, we even have to go to the bathroom."

"Yeah," I said. "Um. Yeah."

"I do rather need to get dressed," he said gently. "I'm saying Mass tonight."

"Mass?"

Forthill actually let out a short belly laugh. "Harry, you didn't think that I just sit around in this old barn awaiting my chance to make you sandwiches, bandage wounds, and offer advice?" He nodded to where a set of vestments was hung up on the wall. "On weeknights they let the junior varsity have the ball."

"We've got to talk," I said. "It's about the swords."

He nodded and gave me a quick smile. "Perhaps I'll put some pants on first?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sorry." I backed out of the room and shut the door.

The other priest showed up and gave me a gimlet eye a minute later, but Forthill arrived in time to rescue me, dressed in his usual black attire with a white collar. "It's all right, Paulo," he told the other priest. "I'll talk to him."

Father Paulo harrumphed and gave me another glare, but he turned and left.

"You look terrible," Forthill said. "What happened?"

I gave it to him unvarnished.

“Merciful God,” he said when I’d finished. But it wasn’t in an “Oh, no!” tone of voice. It was a slower, wearier inflection.

He knew what was going on.

“I can’t protect the swords if I don’t know what I’m dealing with,” I said. “Talk to me, Anthony.”

Forthill shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Don’t give me that,” I said with quiet heat. “I need to know.”

“I’m sworn not to speak of it. To anyone. For any reason.” He faced me, jaw outthrust. “I keep my promises.”

“So you’re just going to stand there,” I snapped, “and do nothing.”

“I didn’t say that,” Forthill replied. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Oh, sure,” I said.

“I will,” he said. “You have my word. You’re going to have to trust me.”

“That might come easier if you’d explain yourself.”

His eyes narrowed. “Son, I’m not a fool. Don’t tell me you’ve never been behind this particular eight ball before.”

I looked for something appropriately sarcastic and edgy to say in response, but all I came up with was, “Touché.”

He ran a hand over his mostly bald scalp, and I suddenly saw how much older Forthill looked than he had when I met him. His hair was even more sparse and brittle looking, his hands more weathered with time. “I’m sorry, Harry,” he said, and he sounded sincere. “If I could ... Is there anything else I could do for you?”

“You can hurry,” I said quietly. “At the rate we’re going, someone is going to get killed.”

At the rate we’d been going, probably me.

I APPROACHED THE park with intense caution. It took me more than half an hour to be reasonably sure that Buzz wasn’t there, somewhere, lurking with another .50-caliber salutation for me. Of course, he could have been watching from the window of one of the nearby buildings—but none of them were hotels or apartments, and none of the pictures taken in the park had been shot from elevation. Besides, if I avoided every place where a maniac with a high-powered rifle might possibly shoot me, I’d live the rest of my life hiding under my bed.

Still, there was no harm in exercising caution. Rather than walking across the open ground of the park to the softball field, I took the circuitous route around the outside of the park—and heard quiet little sobs coming from the shade beneath the bleachers opposite the ones where I’d sat with Michael.

Slowing my steps as I approached, I peered under the bleachers.

A girl in shorts, sneakers, and a powder blue team jersey was huddled up with her arms wrapped around her knees, crying quietly. She had stringy red hair and was skinny, even for someone her age. It took me a minute to recognize her as Alicia’s teammate, the second basem—person.

“Hey, there,” I said quietly, trying to keep my voice gentle. “You all right?”

The girl looked up, her eyes wide, and immediately began wiping at her eyes and nose. “Oh. Oh, yes. I’m fine. I’m just fine, sir.”

“Right, right. Next you’ll tell me you’ve got allergies,” I said.

She looked up at me with a shaky little smile, huffed out a breath in the ghost of a laugh—and it transformed into another sob on her. Her face twisted up into an agonized grimace. She shuddered and wept harder, bowing her head.

I can be such a sucker. I ducked down under the bleachers and sat down beside her, a couple of feet away. The girl cried for a couple more minutes, until she began quieting down.

“I know you,” she said a minute later, between sniffles. “You were talking to Coach Carpenter yesterday. A-Alicia said you were a friend of the family.”

“I’d like to think so,” I agreed. “I’m Harry.”

“Kelly,” she said.

I nodded. “Shouldn’t you be practicing with the team, Kelly?”

She shrugged her skinny shoulders. “It doesn’t help.”

“Help?”

“I’m hopeless,” she said. “Whatever it is I’m doing, I just screw it up.”

“Well, that’s not true,” I said with assurance. “Nobody can be bad at *everything*. There’s no such thing as a perfect screwup.”

“I am,” she said. “We’ve only lost two games all year, and both of them were because I screwed up. We go to the finals next week, and everyone’s counting on me, but I’m just going to let them down.”

Hell's bells, what a ridiculously tiny problem. But it was obvious that it was real to Kelly, and that it meant the world to her. She was just a kid. It probably looked like a much larger issue from where she was standing.

"Pressure," I said. "Yeah, I get that."

She peered at me. "Do you?"

"Sure," I said. "You feel like people's lives depend on you, and that if you do the wrong thing, they're going to be horribly hurt—and it will be your fault."

"Yes," she said, sniffing. "And I've been trying so hard, but I just can't."

"Be perfect?" I asked. "No, of course not. But what choice do you have?"

She looked at me uncertainly.

"Anything you do, you risk screwing up. You could do a bad job of crossing the street one day and get hit by a car."

"I probably could," she said darkly.

I held up my hand. "My point," I told her, "is that if you want to play it safe, you can stay at home and wrap yourself up in Bubble Wrap and never do anything."

"Maybe I should."

I snorted. "They still make you read Dickens in school? *Great Expectations*?"

"Yeah."

"You can stay at home and hide if you want—and wind up like Miss Havisham," I said. "Watching life through a window and obsessed with how things might have been."

"Dear God," she said. "You've just made Dickens relevant to my life."

"Weird, right?" I asked her, nodding.

Kelly let out a choking little laugh.

I pushed myself up and nodded to her. "I never saw you hiding over here, okay? I'm just gonna go do what I gotta do, and leave you to make the choice."

"Choice?"

"Sure. Do you want to put your cap back on and play? Or do you want to wind up an old maid wandering around your house in the rotting remains of a wedding dress and thirty yards of Bubble Wrap, plotting heartlessly against some kid named Pip?" I regarded her soberly. "There's really no middle ground."

"I'm pretty sure that's not right," she said.

“See there? I’m not much good at offering wise counsel, but that didn’t stop me from trying.” I winked at her and walked on, around behind the backstop to where Michael sat on the bleachers on the far side of the field.

Molly sat on a blanket underneath a tree maybe ten yards away, with earbuds trailing wires down into her shirt’s front pocket, as if she were listening to a digital music player. It was an effort to blend into the background, I supposed, since she couldn’t have been listening to one of those gizmos any more than I could have. She was wearing sunglasses, too, so I couldn’t tell where her focus was, but I was sure she was being alert. She gave me the barest trace of a nod as I approached her father.

I sat down next to him and waited for it.

“Harry,” Michael said, “you look awful.”

“Yes, I do,” I said. I told him about the attempted assassination and about my discussion with Forthill.

Michael frowned at the children practicing, his expression quietly disturbed. “The Church wouldn’t do something like that, Harry. It isn’t how they operate.”

“People are people, Michael,” I said. “People do things. They make mistakes.”

“But it isn’t the Church,” he said. “If this person is part of the Church, he isn’t acting with their blessing or under their instructions.”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t think they were too happy with me when I was a couple of days late turning over the Shroud.”

“But you did return it, safe and sound,” Michael said.

“How many people know about the swords? How many knew that I had *Amoracchius*?”

He shook his head. “I’m not certain. Given the sorts of foes they contend with, the knowledgeable people within the Church are more than mildly secretive and security conscious.”

I gestured around us. “Ballpark it for me.”

He blew out a breath. “Honestly, I just don’t know. I’ve personally met perhaps two hundred priests who understood our mission, but it wouldn’t shock me if there were as many as six or seven hundred, worldwide. But among them, that kind of important information would be closely kept. Four or five, at most. Plus the Holy Father.”

“I’m going to assume that il Papa didn’t personally attempt to blow me away,” I said gravely. “How do I find out about the others?”

“You might talk to Father For—”

“Been there, done that. He isn’t a fountain of exposition.”

Michael grimaced. “I see.”

“So, other than him—”

He spread his hands. “I don’t know, Harry. Forthill was my primary temporal contact.”

I blinked. “He never talked to you about your support structure in the Church?”

“He was sworn to secrecy,” Michael said. “I just had to trust him. Excuse me.” He stood up and called to the softball team, “Thank you, ladies! Two laps of the park and we’ll call it a day!”

The team began discarding gloves and such, and fell into a line to begin jogging around the exterior of the park, in no great hurry, talking and laughing as they went. I noticed that Kelly was among them and felt a little less like a complete incompetent.

“I’d really like to keep my brains on the inside of my skull,” I told him when he sat down again. “And if one of the Church’s top guys is leaking information or has sprung a gear, they need to know it.”

“Yes.”

I stared out at the now-empty softball diamond for a minute. Then I said, “I don’t want to kill anybody. But Buzz is playing for keeps. I’m not going to pull any punches.”

Michael frowned down at his hands. “Harry, you’re talking about murder.”

“What a shock,” I said, “after taking one of those monster rounds in the back.”

“There must be some way to end this without bloodsh—”

Over his shoulder, I saw Molly abruptly spring to her feet and whip off her sunglasses, staring across the park with a puzzled frown on her face. Then the girls from the team appeared from the direction in which Molly had been staring. The girls were running as fast as they could, screaming as they came.

“Coach!” screamed Kelly. “Coach! The man took her!”

“Easy, easy,” Michael said, rising. He put his hands on Kelly’s shoulders as Molly came hurrying over. “Easy. What are you talking about?”

“He came out of the van with one of those electric stunner things,” Kelly babbled, through her panting. “He zapped her, and then he put her in the

van and drove away.”

Molly drew in a sudden breath and almost seemed to turn green.

Michael stared at the girl for a second, and then glanced at me. His eyes widened in horror. “Alicia!” he called, stepping past Kelly and looking wildly around the park. “Alicia!”

“He took her!” sobbed Kelly, her tears making her face blotchy. “He took her!”

“Kelly,” I said, to get her attention. “What did he look like?”

She shook her head. “I don’t—I can’t ... White, not really tall. His hair was cut really short. Like army haircuts.”

Buzz.

He’d threatened Michael to get me to bring a sword out in the open, where it was vulnerable. Then he’d tried to kill me before I locked it away again. And when that failed, he tried something else.

“Molly,” Michael said quietly. “Take the truck. Drive Sandra and Donna home. Call your mother on the way and tell her what’s happened. Stay at the house.”

“But—” Molly began.

Michael turned hard eyes to her and said, “Now.”

“Yes, sir,” Molly said instantly.

Michael tossed her the keys to the truck. Then he turned to a nearby equipment bag and smoothly withdrew an aluminum bat. He whipped it around in a flowing *rondello* motion, nodded as if satisfied, and turned to me. “Let’s go. You’re driving.”

“Okay,” I said. “Where?”

“St. Mary’s,” Michael said, his tone positively grim. “I’m going to talk to Forthill.”

FORTHILL HAD JUST finished saying evening Mass when we showed up. Father Paulo greeted Michael like a long-lost son, and how was he doing, and of course we could wait for Forthill in his chambers. I suspected Paulo held deep reservations in regard to me. But that was okay. I wasn’t feeling particularly trusting toward him, either.

We’d been waiting in Forthill’s quarters for maybe five minutes when the old priest came in. He took one look at Michael and got pale.

“Talk to me about the order,” Michael said quietly.

“My son,” Forthill said. He shook his head. “You know that I—”

“He’s taken Alicia, Tony.”

Forthill’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“He’s taken my daughter,” Michael roared, his voice shaking the walls. “I don’t care what oaths you’ve sworn. I don’t care what the Church thinks needs to be kept secret. We have to find this man and find him now.”

I blinked at Michael and found myself leaning a little away from him. The heat of his anger was palpable, a living thing that brought its own presence, its own gravity, into the room.

Forthill faced that anger like an old rock thrusting up stubbornly through a turbulent sea—worn and unmoving. “I will not break my oaths, Michael. Not even for you.”

“I’m not asking you to do it for me,” Michael said. “I’m asking you to do it for Alicia.”

Forthill flinched. “Michael,” he said quietly. “The order maintains security for a reason. Its enemies have sought to destroy it for two thousand years, and in that time the order has helped hundreds of thousands, even millions. You know that. A breach could put the entire order at risk—and that means more than my life, or yours.”

“Or an innocent child’s, apparently,” I said. “I guess you’re going to take that ‘Suffer the little children to come unto Me’ thing kind of literally, eh, Padre?”

Forthill looked from Michael to me, and then to the floor. He took a slow breath, and then smoothed his hands over his vestments. “It never gets any easier, does it? Trying to work out the right thing to do.” He answered his own question. “No. I suppose it’s often simpler to determine the proper path than it is to actually walk it.”

Forthill rose and walked over to a section of the wood-paneled wall. He put his hands at the top-right and lower-left sections of the panel and, with a grunt, pushed it in. It slid aside, revealing a space the size of a closet, filled with file cabinets and a small bookshelf.

I traded a glance with Michael, who raised his eyebrows in surprise. He hadn’t known about the hidey-hole.

Forthill opened a drawer and started thumbing through files. “The Ordo Malleus has existed, in one form or another, since the founding of the Church. Originally, we were tasked with the casting out of demons from the

possessed, but as the Church grew, it became clear that we needed to be able to counter the threats from other enemies as well.”

“Other enemies?” I asked.

“Various beings who were masquerading as gods,” Forthill said. “Vampires and other supernatural predators. Wicked faeries who resented the Church’s influence.” He glanced at me. “Practitioners of witchcraft who turned their hand against the followers of Christ.”

“Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “The Inquisition.”

Forthill grimaced. “The Inquisition has become the primary reason Malleus maintains itself in secrecy—and why we very seldom engage in direct action ourselves. It’s all too easy to let power go to your head when you’re certain God is on your side. The Inquisition, in many ways, attempted to bring our struggle into the light—and because of the situation it helped create, more innocent men and women died than throughout centuries of the most savage, supernatural depredation.

“We support the Knights of the Cross and do whatever we can to counsel and protect God’s children against supernatural threats—the way we protected the girl you brought to me the year Michael’s youngest was born. Now the order recruits people singly, after years of personal observation, and maintains the highest levels of personal, ethical integrity humanly possible.” He turned to us, with a file folder in his hands. “But as you pointed out earlier, Harry, we’re only human.”

I took the folder from him, opened it, and found Buzz’s picture. I recognized the short haircut, and the severe lines of his chin and jaw. His eyes were new to me, though. They were as grey as stone, but less warm and fuzzy.

““Father Roarke Douglas,”” I read. ““Age forty-three. Five eleven, one hundred eighty-five. Sniper for the Rangers, trained in demolitions, U.S. Army chaplain, parish priest in Guatemala, Indonesia, and Rwanda.’”

“Good Lord preserve us,” Michael said.

“Yeah. A real holy warrior,” I said. I eyed Forthill. “And this guy was brought in?”

“I’ve met Roarke on several occasions,” Forthill said. “I was always impressed with his reserve and calm in the face of crisis. He repeatedly distinguished himself by acts of courage in protecting his parishioners in some of the most dangerous locations in the world.” He shook his head. “But he ... changed, in the last few years.”

“Changed,” Michael said. “How?”

“He became a strong advocate for ... preemptive intervention.”

“He wanted to hit back first, eh?” I asked.

“You wouldn’t say that if you’d seen what life can be like in some of the places Father Douglas has lived,” Forthill said. “It’s not so simple.”

“It never is,” I said.

“He was, in particular, an admirer of Shiro’s,” Forthill continued. “When Shiro died, he was devastated. They had worked together several times.”

“The way you worked with Michael,” I said.

Forthill nodded. “Roarke was ... not satisfied with the disposition of *Fidelacchius*. He made it known to the rest of Malleus, too. As time went by, he became increasingly frustrated that the sword was not being put to use.”

I could see where this one was going. “And then I got hold of *Amoracchius*, too.”

Forthill nodded. “He spent the last year trying to convince the senior members of Malleus that we had been deceived. That you were, in fact, an agent of an enemy power, who had taken the swords so they could not be used.”

“And no one thought to mention the way those archangels gave orders that I was supposed to hold them?”

“They never appear to more than one or two people at a time—and you *are* a wizard, Harry,” Forthill said. “Father Douglas hypothesized that you had created an illusion to serve your purpose, or else had tampered directly with our minds.”

“And now he’s on a crusade,” I muttered.

Forthill nodded. “So it would seem.”

I kept on reading the file. “He’s versed in magic—well enough, at least, to be smart about how he deals with me. Contacts in various supernatural communities, like the Venatori Umbrorum, which probably explains that protective amulet.” I shook my head. “And he thinks he’s saving the world. The guy’s a certifiable nightmare.”

“Where is he?” Michael asked quietly.

“He could be anywhere,” Forthill replied. “Malleus sets up caches of equipment, money, and so forth. He could have tapped into any one of them. I tried his cell phone. He’s not returning my calls.”

“He thinks you’ve been mind-scrambled by the enemy,” I muttered. “What did you expect to accomplish?”

“I had hoped,” Forthill said gently, “that I might ask him to be patient and have faith.”

“I’m pretty sure this guy believes in faith through superior firepower.” I closed the file and passed it back to Forthill. “He tried to kill me. He abducted Alicia. As far as I’m concerned, he’s off the reservation.”

Forthill’s expression became distressed as he looked at me. He turned to Michael, beseeching.

Michael’s face was bleak and unyielding, and quiet heat smoldered in his eyes. “The son of a bitch hurt my little girl.”

I rocked a step backward at the profanity. So did Forthill. The room settled into an oppressive silence.

The old priest cleared his throat after a moment. He put the file back in the cabinet and closed the door. “I’ve told you what I know,” he said. “I’m only sorry I can’t do more.”

“You can find her, can’t you?” Michael asked me. “The way you found Molly?”

“Sure,” I said. “But he’s bound to be expecting that. Magic isn’t a cure-all.”

“But you can find her.”

I shrugged. “He can’t stop me from finding her, but he can damn well make sure that something happens to her if I do.”

Michael frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe he stashes her in a box that’s being held fifty feet above the ground with an electromagnet, so that when I get close with an active spell up and running, it shorts out and she falls. The bastard is smart and creative.”

Michael’s knuckles popped as his hands closed into fists.

“Besides,” I said, “we don’t need to find him.”

“No?”

“No,” I said. “We’ve got the swords. He’s got the girl.” I turned to go. “He’s going to find us.”

FATHER DOUGLAS CALLED Michael’s house later that night, and asked for me. I took the call in Michael’s office.

“You know what I want,” he said, without preamble.

“Obviously,” I said. “What do you have in mind?”

“Bring the swords,” he said. “Give them to me. If you do so without attempting any tricks or deceptions, I will release the girl to you unharmed. If you involve the police or attempt anything foolish, she will die.”

“How do I know you haven’t killed her already?”

The phone rustled, and then Alicia said, “H-Harry? I’m okay. H-he hasn’t hurt me.”

“Nor do I want to,” Father Douglas said, taking the phone back. “Satisfied?”

“Can I ask you something?” I said. “Why are you doing this?”

“I am doing God’s work.”

“Okay, that doesn’t sound too crazy or anything,” I said. “If you’re so tight with God, can you really expect me to believe that you’ll be willing to murder a teenage girl?”

“The world needs the swords,” he replied in a level, calm voice. “They are more important than any one person. And while I would never forgive myself, yes. I will kill her.”

“I’m just trying to get you to see the fallacious logic you’re using here,” I said. “See, if I’m such a bad guy to have stolen the swords, then why would I give a damn whether or not you murder some kid?”

“You don’t have to be evil to be ambitious—or wrong. You don’t want to see the girl harmed. Give me the swords and she won’t be.”

There clearly wasn’t going to be any profitable discussion of the situation here. Father Douglas was going to have his way, regardless of the impediments of trivial things like rationality.

“Where?” I asked.

He gave me an address. “The roof. You come to the east side of the building. You show me the swords. Then you come up and make the exchange. No staff, no rod. Just you.”

“When?”

“One hour,” he said, and hung up.

I put the phone down, looked at Michael, and said, “We don’t have much time.”

THE BUILDING IN question stood at the corner of Monroe and Michigan, overlooking Millennium Park. I had to park a couple of blocks away and walk in, with both swords stowed in a big gym bag. Father Douglas hadn't specified where I was supposed to stand and show him the swords, but the streetlights adjacent to the building were all inexplicably dark except for one. I ambled over to the pool of light it cast down onto the sidewalk, opened the bag, and held out both swords.

It was hard to see past the light, but I thought I saw a gleam on the roof. Binoculars?

A few seconds later, a red light flashed twice from the same spot where I'd thought I had seen something.

This would be the place, then.

I'd brought my extremely illegal picklocks with me, but as it turned out, I didn't need to use them. Father Douglas had already circumvented the locks and, presumably, the security system. The front door was open, as was the door to the stairwell. From there, it was just one long, thigh-burning hike up to the roof.

I emerged into cold, strong wind. You get up twenty stories or so and you run into that a lot. It ripped at my duster, and set it to flapping like a flag.

I peered around the roof, at spinning heat pumps and AC units and various antennae, but saw no one.

The beam of a handheld floodlight hit me, and I whirled in place. The light was coming from the roof of the building next to mine. Father Douglas flipped it off, and after blinking a few times, I could see him clearly, standing in the wind in priestly black, his white collar almost luminous in the ambient light of the city. His grey eyes were shadowed, and he was maybe a day and a half past time to shave. At his feet on the rooftop lay a long plank, which he must have used to cross from this rooftop to the next.

Alicia, blindfolded and with a gag in her mouth, sat in a chair next to him, her wrists bound to its arms.

Father Douglas lifted a megaphone. "That's far enough," he said. I could hear him over the heavy wind. "That's detcord she's tied up with. Do you know what that is?"

"Yeah."

He held up his other hand. "This is the detonator. As long as it's sending a signal, she's fine. It's a dead-man switch. If I drop it or let it go, the

signal stops and the cord goes off. If the receiver gets damaged and stops receiving the signal, the cord goes off. If you start using magic and destroy one of the devices, it goes off.”

“That’s way better than the electromagnet thing,” I muttered to myself. I raised my voice and bellowed, “So how do you want to do this?”

“Throw them.”

“Disarm the explosives first.”

“No. The girl stays where she is. Once I’m gone, I’ll send the code to disarm the device.”

I considered the distance. It was a good fifteen-foot jump to get from one rooftop to the other—an easy throw.

“Douglas,” I shouted, “think about this for a minute. The swords aren’t just sharp and shiny. They’re symbols. If you take one up for the wrong reasons, you could destroy it. Believe me, I know.”

“The swords are meant for better things than to molder in a dingy basement,” he replied. He held up the detonator. “Surrender them now.”

I stared at him for a long second. Then I tossed the entire bag over. It landed at his feet with a clatter. He bent down to open it.

I steeled myself. This was about to get dicey. I hadn’t counted on the dead-man switch or a fifteen-foot-long jump.

Father Douglas opened the bag. The smoke grenade Michael had rigged inside it in his workshop went off with a heavy thud. White smoke billowed back into his face. I took three quick steps and hurled myself into the air. For an awful portion of a second, twenty stories of open gravity yawned beneath me, and then I hit the edge of the other roof and collided with Father Douglas. We went down together.

I couldn’t think about anything but the detonator, and I clamped down on that with my left hand, crushing his fingers beneath mine so that he couldn’t release it. He jabbed his thumb at my right eye, but I ducked my head and he got nothing but bone. He slammed his head against my nose—*again* with the nose, Hell’s bells that hurt—and drove a knee into my groin.

I let him, seizing his arm with both hands now, squeezing, trying to choke off the blood to his hand, to weaken it so I could take the detonator from him. His left fist slammed into my temple, my mouth, and my neck. I bent my head down and bit savagely at his wrist, eliciting a scream of pain from him. I slammed my weight against him, slipping some fingers into his grasp, and got one of them over the pressure trigger. Then I wrenched with

my whole body, twisting my shoulders and hips for leverage, and ripped the detonator away from him.

He rolled away from me instantly and seized the bag; then he was up and running for a doorway leading down into the building.

I let him go and rushed over to Alicia. The dark-haired girl was trembling uncontrollably.

Detcord is basically a long rubber tube filled with explosive compound. It's a little thicker than a pencil, flexible, and generally set off by an electrical charge. Wrap detcord around a concrete column and set it off, and the explosion will cut through it like a piece of dry bamboo. Alicia was tied to the chair with it. If it went off, it would cut her to pieces.

The detonator was a simple setup—a black plastic box hooked to a twelve-volt battery, which was in turn connected to a wire leading to the detcord. A green light on the detonator glowed cheerily. It matched a cheery green light on the dead-man switch transmitter in my hand. If what Douglas had said was accurate and the light went out, things wouldn't be nearly so cheery.

If I let go of the switch, it would stop the signal to the detonator, which would then complete the circuit, send current to the detcord, and boom. In theory, I should be able to cut the wire leading from the battery and render it harmless—as long as Douglas hadn't rigged the device to detonate if that happened.

I didn't have much time. The electronics of the transmitter wouldn't last long around me, even though I hadn't used any magic around them. I had to get the girl out now.

I made the call based upon what I knew about Father Douglas. He seemed like he might have good intentions, despite all his shenanigans. So I gambled that he wouldn't want the girl to die by any means other than a conscious decision from someone—either him letting go of the trigger or me blowing the transmitter by using magic.

I took out my pocketknife, opened it with my teeth, and slashed at the heavy plastic tubing that held her tied down. I cut through the tube once, unwound it from first one arm, then the other, and she was free. She clawed away the blindfold and gag, her fingers still clumsy from being bound.

"Come on!" I said. I grabbed her arm and hauled her out of the chair and away from the explosives. She staggered, leaning against me, and I ran for the stairs.

As we got to the first landing, my ongoing presence apparently became too much for the transmitter. Something sparked and crackled inside the plastic case, the cheery green light went out, and there was a huge and horrible sound from above and behind us. I managed to get between Alicia and the stairwell wall as the pressure wave caught us and threw us into it. It slammed my already-abused head into the wall.

I staggered under the pain for a minute and forced my way through it, like a drowning man clawing for the surface.

"Come on," I croaked to Alicia. "Come on. We have to go."

She looked at me with dull, stunned eyes, so I just grabbed her hand and started down the stairs with her, stuffing the heavy transmitter into my duster pocket with the other hand. We had only a few minutes before the place would be swarming with police and firefighters. I didn't particularly feel like answering their questions about why my fingerprints were on an expensive transmitter and showed trace evidence of explosive residue.

Going down all those stairs was only slightly less taxing than going up had been, and my legs were going to be complaining at me for days. We got to the bottom and I led Alicia out into an alley, then out to Monroe. I looked wildly up and down the street. Michael's truck was there waiting right where it was supposed to be, out in front of the original building. I put my fingers to my lips and let out a shrill whistle.

Michael's truck pulled into the street and stopped in front of us. I hurried Alicia forward. The door swung open, and Molly leaned out, taking Alicia's hand and pulling her in. I went in right behind her, though it made things awfully cozy in the pickup's cab.

"He's loose with the swords," I said. "Did you do it?"

"Did it," Molly replied, and promptly handed me a dashboard compass with one of her own golden hairs stuck to it with clear tape. The needle pointed firmly to the east, instead of to the north. The grasshopper had set up a basic tracking spell, one of the handier tricks I know.

"He's probably moving on foot through the park," I told Michael. "Circle around to Lakeshore, get us in front of him."

"Are you all right, baby?" Michael asked.

Alicia fumbled for his hand and squeezed it tight. Then she leaned against Molly and started crying.

"Hurry," I told Michael. "He's got to know we've bugged the swords somehow. If he finds those hairs Molly tied onto the hilts, we're done."

“He won’t get away,” Michael said with perfect confidence, and slammed the accelerator down as we approached an intersection sporting a bright red light. Maybe it was divine intervention, or fate, or just good driving, but the truck shot through the intersection, missing two other cars by inches, and sailed on forward.

The needle on the compass pointed steadily toward the park as we went, but then abruptly began to traverse from one side to the other. I looked up ahead of me and saw a dark form sprinting across the road that separated the park from Lake Michigan.

“There!” I shouted, pointing. “There he is!”

Michael pulled over to the side of the road, and I hit the ground before the truck had stopped moving, sprinting after Father Douglas. He was in good shape, covering the ground in long, loping strides. Normally it wouldn’t have been a contest to catch him. I run three or four days a week, to train for situations exactly like this one. Of course, when I practice, I’m not generally concussed, weary, and sporting a recently dislocated shoulder. Douglas was holding his lead as we sprinted down the beach, and I was tiring more rapidly than I should have.

So I cheated.

I reached into my pocket, drew out the heavy transmitter, and flung it at him as hard as I could. The black plastic device struck him on the back of the head, shattering, and sending several heavy batteries flying.

Father Douglas staggered and couldn’t keep his balance at the pace he was moving. He went down in the sand. I rushed over to him and seized the bag with the swords, only to have him sweep one leg out in a martial arts move, then kick my legs out from beneath me. I went down, too.

Father Douglas ripped at the bag, but I clung grimly, while we fought and kicked at each other—until the bag tore open under the strain and spilled the swords onto the sand.

He seized the hilt of *Fidelacchius*, a katana-type sword that was built to look like a simple, heavy walking stick, until you drew the blade. I seized *Amoracchius*, scabbard and all, and barely brought the sheathed broadsword up in time to deflect a sweeping slash from Father Douglas.

He gained his knees and swung again, and I had all I could do to lift the sheathed sword and fend off the strike. Blow after blow rained down on me, and there was no time to call upon my power, no opportunity to so much as rise to my knees—

Until a size-fourteen work boot hit Father Douglas in the chest and threw him back.

Michael stood over me, an aluminum baseball bat in his right hand. He put out his other hand, and I slapped *Amoracchius* into it. He gripped it midblade, like some kind of giant crucifix, and, with his bat held in a guard position, limped toward Father Douglas. The priest stared at Michael with wide eyes. “Stay back,” he said. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Who says you’re able to?” Michael rumbled. “Put down the sword, and I’ll let you go.”

Douglas stared at him with those cold grey eyes. “I can’t do that.”

“Then I’ll put you down and take the sword anyway. It’s over, Roarke. You just don’t realize it yet.”

Father Douglas wasted no more time on talk, but came at Michael, the katana whirling.

Michael batted (no pun intended) the attack aside like a cat swatting down moths, the baseball bat spinning.

“Slow,” he said. “Too slow to hit a half-blind cripple. You don’t know the first thing about what it means to bear a sword.”

Douglas snarled and came at him again. Michael defeated this attack, too, with contemptuous ease, and followed it by smacking Douglas across one cheek with the hilt of the sheathed sword.

“It means sacrifice,” Michael said as Douglas reeled. “It means forgetting about yourself, and what you want. It means putting your faith in the Lord God Almighty.” He swung a pair of blows, which Douglas defended against, barely—but the third, a straight thrust with the baseball bat’s tip, drove home into his solar plexus. Douglas staggered to one knee.

“You *abandoned* your duty,” Douglas gasped. “The world grows darker by the day. People cry out for our help—and you would have the swords sit with this creature of witchcraft and deceit?”

“You arrogant child,” Michael snarled. “The Almighty Himself has made His will known. If you are a man of faith, then you must abide by it.”

“You have been lied to,” Douglas said. “How could God ignore His people when they need His protection so badly?”

“That is not for us to know!” Michael shouted. “Don’t you *see*, you fool? We are only men. We see only in one place at one time. The Lord knows all that might be. Would you presume to say that you know better than our God what should be done with the swords?”

Douglas stared at Michael.

“Are you stupid enough to believe that He would want you to cast aside your beliefs to impose your will upon the world? Do you think He wants you to murder decent men and abduct innocent *children*?” The bat struck *Fidelacchius* from Douglas’s hands, and Michael followed it with a pair of crushing blows, one to the shoulder and one to the knee. Douglas went down to the sand in a heap.

“Look at yourself,” Michael said, his words hard and merciless. “Look at what you have done in God’s name. Look at the bruises on my daughter’s arms, at the blood on my friend’s face, and then tell me which of us has been deceived.”

Again, the bat swept down, and Douglas fell senseless to the sand.

Michael stood over the man for a moment, his entire body shaking, the bat still upraised.

“Michael,” I said quietly.

“He hurt my little girl, Harry.” His voice shook with barely repressed rage.

“He isn’t going to hurt her now,” I said.

“He hurt my little girl.”

“Michael,” I said, gently, “you can’t. If this is how it has to be, I’ll do it. But you can’t, man.”

His eyes shifted back toward me for just a second.

“Easy, easy,” I told him. “We’re done here. We’re done.”

He stared for another long, silent moment. Then he lowered the bat, very slowly, and bowed his head. He stood there for a minute, his chest heaving, and then dropped the bat. He settled down onto the sand with a wince.

I got up and collected *Fidelacchius*, returning it to its sheath.

“Thank you,” Michael said quietly. He offered me *Amoracchius*’ hilt.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

He nodded, smiling wearily. “Yes.”

I took the sword and looked at Douglas. “What do we do with him?”

Michael stared at him silently for a moment. In the background, we could hear emergency vehicles arriving to attend to the aftermath of the rooftop explosion. “We’ll bring him with us,” Michael said. “The Church will deal with its own.”

I SAT IN the chapel balcony at St. Mary's, staring down at the church below me and brooding. Michael and Forthill had been seeing to Father Douglas, who wasn't going anywhere under his own locomotion for a while. They had him in a bed somewhere. It had hurt to watch Michael, moving in what was obviously great pain, hobble around the room helping to make Douglas feel better. I'd have been content to dump the asshole in an alley somewhere and leave him to his fate.

Which might, just possibly, be one reason I was never going to be a Knight.

I had also swiped Forthill's flask of Scotch from his room, and it was keeping me company in the balcony—two more reasons I was never going to be a Knight.

"Right at the end, there," I said to no one in particular, "those two started speaking a different language. I mean, I understood all the words, and I understood the passion behind them, but I don't get how they connect. You know?"

I sipped some more Scotch. "Come to think of it, there are a lot of things I don't get about this whole situation."

"And you want an explanation of some kind?" asked a man seated in the pew beside me.

I just about jumped out of my skin.

He was an older man. He had dark skin and silver-white hair, and he wore a workman's blue jumpsuit, like you often see on janitors. The name tag read JAKE.

"You," I breathed. "You're the archangel. You're Uriel."

He shrugged. The gesture carried acknowledgment, somehow.

"What are you doing here?" I asked—maybe a bit blearily. I was concussed and half the flask was gone.

"Perhaps I'm a hallucination brought on by head trauma and alcohol," he said.

"Oh," I said. I peered at him, and then offered him the flask. "Want a belt?"

"Very kind," he said, and took a swig from the flask. He passed it back to me. "I don't exactly make it a habit to do this, but if you've got questions,

ask them.”

“Okay,” I said. “Why did you guys let Michael get so screwed up?”

“We didn’t let him do anything,” Jake replied calmly. “He chose to hazard himself in battle against the enemy. The enemy chose to shoot him, and where to point the gun and when to pull the trigger. He survived the experience.”

“So in other words, God was doing nothing to help.”

Jake smiled. “Wouldn’t say that. But you got to understand, son. God isn’t about making good things happen to you, or bad things happen to you. He’s all about you making choices—exercising the gift of free will. God wants you to have good things and a good life, but He won’t gift wrap them for you. You have to choose the actions that lead you to that life.”

“Free will, huh?”

“Yes. For example, your free will on that island.”

I eyed him and sipped more Scotch.

“You saw the Valkyrie staring at Michael. You thought he was in danger. So even though it was your turn, you sent him up to the helicopter in your place.”

“No good deed goes unpunished,” I said, with one too many *sh* sounds. “That’s where he got hurt.”

Jake shrugged. “But if you hadn’t, you’d have died in that harness, and he’d have died on that island.”

I scowled. “What?”

Jake waved a hand. “I won’t bore you with details, but suffice to say that your choice in that moment changed everything.”

“But you lost a Knight,” I said. “A warrior.”

Jake smiled. “Did we?”

“He can barely walk without that cane. Sure, he handled Douglas, but that’s a far cry from dealing with a Denarian.”

“Ah,” Jake said, “you mean warrior in the literal sense.”

“What other kind of warrior is there?” I asked.

“The important kind.”

I frowned again.

“Harry,” Jake said, sighing. “The conflict between light and darkness rages on so many levels that you literally could not understand it all. Not yet, anyway. Sometimes that battlefield is a literal one. Sometimes it’s a great deal more nebulous and metaphorical.”

“But Michael and I are literal guys,” I said.

Jake actually laughed. “Yeah? Do you think we angled to have you brought into this situation because we needed you to beat someone up?”

“Well. Generally speaking. Yeah.” I gestured with the flask. “Pretty much all we did was beat up this guy who had good intentions and who was desperate to do something to help.”

Jake shook his head. “The real war happened when you weren’t looking.”

“Huh?”

“Courtney,” Jake said. “The little girl who almost got hit by a car.”

“What about her?” I asked.

“You saved her life,” he said. “Moreover, you noted the bruise on her cheek—one she acquired from her abusive father. Your presence heightened her mother’s response to the realization that her daughter was being abused. She moved out the next morning.” He spread his hands. “In that moment, you saved the child’s life, prevented her mother from alcohol addiction in response to the loss, and shattered a generational cycle of abuse more than three hundred years old.”

“I ... um.”

“Chuck the electrician,” Jake continued. “He was drunk because he’d been fighting with his wife. Two months from now, their four-year-old daughter is going to be diagnosed with cancer and require a marrow transplant. Her father is the only viable donor. You saved his life with what you did—and his daughter’s life, too. And the struggle that family is going to face together is going to leave them stronger and happier than they’ve ever been.”

I grunted. “That smells an awful lot like predestination to me. What if those people choose something different?”

“It’s a complex issue,” Jake admitted. “But think of the course of the future as, oh, flowing water. If you know the lay of the land, you can make a good guess where it’s going. Now, someone can always come along and dig a ditch and change that flow of water—but honestly, you’d be shocked how seldom people truly choose to exercise their will within their lives.”

I grunted. “What about second baseperson Kelly? I saved her life, too?”

“No. But you made a young woman feel better in a moment where she felt as though she didn’t have anyone she could talk to. Just a few kind words. But it’s going to make her think about the difference those words made. She’s got a good chance of winding up as a counselor to her fellow

man. The five minutes of kindness you showed her is going to help thousands of others.” He spread his hands. “And that only takes into account the past day. Despair and pain were averted, loss and tragedy thwarted. Do you think you haven’t struck a blow for the light, Warrior?”

“Um ...”

“And last but not least, let’s not forget Michael,” he said. “He’s a good man, but where his children are involved, he can be completely irrational. He was a hairbreadth from losing control when he stood over Douglas on the beach. Your words, your presence, your will helped him to choose mercy over vengeance.”

I just stared at him for a moment. “But ... I didn’t actually mean to do any of that.”

He smiled. “But you chose the actions that led to it. No one forced you to do it. And to those people, what you did saved them from danger as real as any creature of the night.” He turned to look down at the church below and pursed his lips. “People have far more power than they realize, if they would only choose to use it. Michael might not be cutting demons with a sword anymore, Harry. But don’t think for a second that he isn’t still fighting the good fight. It’s just harder for you to see the results from down here.”

I swigged more Scotch, thinking about that.

“He’s happier now,” I said. “His family, too.”

“Funny how making good choices leads to that.”

“What about Father Douglas?” I asked. “What’s going to happen?”

“For the most part,” Jake said, “that will be up to him. Hopefully, he’ll choose to accept his errors and change his life for the better.”

I nodded slowly. Then I said, “Let’s talk about my bill.”

Jake’s eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“My bill,” I said, enunciating. “You dragged me into this mess. You can pay me, same as any other client. Where do I send the invoice?”

“You’re ... you’re trying to bill the Lord God Almighty?” Jake said, as if he couldn’t quite believe it.

“Hel—uh, heck no,” I said. “I’m billing *you*.”

“That isn’t really how we work.”

“It is if you want to work with me,” I told him, thrusting out my jaw. “Cough up. Otherwise, maybe next time I’ll just stand around whistling when you want me to help you out.”

Jake's face broadened into a wide, merry grin, and laughter filled his voice. "No, you won't," he said, and vanished.

I scowled ferociously at the empty space where he'd been a moment before. "Cheapskate," I muttered.

But I was pretty sure he was right.

LAST CALL

—*from Strange Brew, edited by P. N. Elrod*

All I wanted was a quiet beer. That isn't too much to ask, is it—one contemplative drink at the end of a hard day of professional wizarding? Maybe a steak sandwich to go with it? You wouldn't think so. But somebody (or maybe Somebody) disagreed with me.

McAnally's Pub is a quiet little hole in the wall, like a hundred others in Chicago, in the basement of a large office building. You have to go down a few stairs to get to the door. When you get inside, you're at eye level with the creaky old ceiling fans in the rest of the place, and you have to take a couple of more steps down from the entryway to get to the pub's floor. It's lit mostly by candles. The finish work is all hand-carved, richly polished wood, stained a deeper brown than most would use, and combined with the candles, it feels cozily cavelike.

I opened the door to the place and got hit in the face with something I'd *never* smelled in Mac's pub before—the odor of food being burned.

It should say something about Mac's cooking that my first instinct was to make sure the shield bracelet on my left arm was ready to go as I drew the blasting rod from inside my coat. I took careful steps forward into the pub, blasting rod held up and ready. The usual lighting was dimmed, and only a handful of candles still glimmered.

The regular crowd at Mac's, members of the supernatural community of Chicago, were strewn about like broken dolls. Half a dozen people lay on the floor, limbs sprawled oddly, as if they'd dropped unconscious in the middle of calisthenics. A pair of older guys who were always playing chess at a table in the corner lay slumped across the table. Pieces were spread everywhere around them, some of them broken, and the old chess clock they used had been smashed to bits. Three young women who had watched too many episodes of *Charmed*, and who always showed up at Mac's together, were unconscious in a pile in the corner, as if they'd been huddled there in terror before they collapsed—but they were spattered with droplets of what looked like blood.

I could see several of the fallen breathing, at least. I waited for a long moment, but nothing jumped at me from the darkness, and I felt no sudden desire to start breaking things and then take a nap.

"Mac?" I called quietly.

Someone grunted.

I hurried over to the bar and found Mac on the floor beside it. He'd been badly beaten. His lips were split and puffy. His nose had been broken. Both his hands were swollen and purple—defensive wounds, probably. The baseball bat he kept behind the bar was lying next to him, smeared with blood—probably his own.

“Stars and stones,” I breathed. “Mac.”

I knelt down next to him, examining him for injuries as best I could. I didn't have any formal medical training, but several years' service in the Wardens in a war with the vampires of the Red Court had shown me more than my fair share of injuries. I didn't like the look of one of the bruises on his head, and he'd broken several fingers, but I didn't think it was anything he wouldn't recover from.

“What happened?” I asked him.

“Went nuts,” he slurred. One of his cut lips reopened, and fresh blood appeared. “Violent.”

I winced. “No kidding.” I grabbed a clean cloth from the stack on the shelf behind the bar and ran cold water over it. I tried to clean some of the mess off his face. “They're all down,” I told him as I did. “Alive. It's your place. How do you want to play it?”

Even through as much pain as he was in, Mac took a moment to consider before answering. “Murphy,” he said finally.

I'd figured. Calling in the authorities would mean a lot of questions and attention, but it also meant everyone would get medical treatment sooner. Mac tended to put the customer first. But if he'd wanted to keep it under the radar, I would have understood that, too.

“I'll make the call,” I told him.

THE AUTHORITIES SWOOPED down on the place with vigor. It was early in the evening, and we were evidently the first customers for the night shift EMTs.

“Jesus,” Sergeant Karrin Murphy said from the doorway, looking around the interior of Mac's place. “What a mess.”

“Tell me about it,” I said glumly. My stomach was rumbling, and I was thirsty besides, but it just didn't seem right to help myself to any of Mac's stuff while he was busy getting patched up by the ambulance guys.

Murphy blew out a breath. “Well, brawls in bars aren’t exactly uncommon.” She came down into the room, removed a flashlight from her jacket pocket, and shone it around. “But maybe you’ll tell me what really happened.”

“Mac said his customers went nuts. They started acting erratic and then became violent.”

“What, all of them? At the same time?”

“That was the impression he gave me. He wasn’t overly coherent.”

Murphy frowned and slowly paced the room, sweeping the light back and forth methodically. “You get a look at the customers?”

“There wasn’t anything actively affecting them when I got here,” I said. “I’m sure of that. They were all unconscious. Minor wounds, looked like they were mostly self-inflicted. I think those girls were the ones to beat Mac.”

Murphy winced. “You think he wouldn’t defend himself against them?”

“He could have pulled a gun. Instead, he had his bat out. He was probably trying to stop someone from doing something stupid, and it went bad.”

“You know what I’m thinking?” Murphy asked. “When something odd happens to everyone in a pub?”

She had stopped at the back corner. Among the remnants of broken chessmen and scattered chairs, the circle of illumination cast by her flashlight had come to rest on a pair of dark brown beer bottles.

“Ugly thought,” I said. “Mac’s beer, in the service of darkness.”

She gave me a level look. Well. As level a look as you *can* give when you’re a five-foot blonde with a perky nose, glaring at a gangly wizard most of seven feet tall. “I’m serious, Harry. Could it have been something in the beer? Drugs? A poison? Something from your end of things?”

I leaned on the bar and chewed that thought over for a moment. Oh, sure, technically it could have been any of those. A number of drugs could cause psychotic behavior, though admittedly it might be hard to get that reaction in everyone in the bar at more or less the same time. Poisons were just drugs that happened to kill you, or the reverse. And if those people had been poisoned, they might still be in a lot of danger.

And once you got to the magical side of things, any one of a dozen methods could have been used to get to the people through the beer they’d

imbibed—but all of them would require someone with access to the beer to pull it off, and Mac made his own brew.

In fact, he bottled it himself.

“It wasn’t necessarily the beer,” I said.

“You think they all got the same steak sandwich? The same batch of curly fries?” She shook her head. “Come on, Dresden. The food here is good, but that isn’t what gets them in the door.”

“Mac wouldn’t hurt anybody,” I said quietly.

“Really?” Murph asked, her voice quiet and steady. “You’re sure about that? How well do you really know the man?”

I glanced around the bar, slowly.

“What’s his first name, Harry?”

“Dammit, Murph.” I sighed. “You can’t go around being suspicious of everyone all the time.”

“Sure I can.” She gave me a faint smile. “It’s my job, Harry. I have to look at things dispassionately. It’s nothing personal. You know that.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “I know that. But I also know what it’s like to be dispassionately suspected of something you didn’t do. It sucks.”

She held up her hands. “Then let’s figure out what did happen. I’ll go talk to the principals, see if anyone remembers anything. You take a look at the beer.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.”

AFTER BOTTLING IT, Mac transports his beer in wooden boxes like old apple crates, only more heavy-duty. They aren’t magical or anything. They’re just sturdy as hell, and they stack up neatly. I came through the door of my apartment with a box of samples and braced myself against the impact of Mister, my tomcat, who generally declares a suicide charge on my shins the minute I come through the door. Mister is huge and most of his mass is muscle. I rocked at the impact, and the bottles rattled, but I took it in stride. Mouse, my big shaggy dogosaurus, was lying full on his side by the fireplace, napping. He looked up and thumped his tail on the ground once, then went back to sleep.

No work ethic around here at all. But then, he hadn’t been cheated out of his well-earned beer. I took the box straight down the stepladder to my lab, calling, “Hi, Molly,” as I went down.

Molly, my apprentice, sat at her little desk, working on a pair of potions. She had maybe five square feet of space to work with in my cluttered lab, but she managed to keep the potions clean and neat, and still had room left over for her Latin textbook, her notebook, and a can of Pepsi, the heathen. Molly's hair was kryptonite green today, with silver tips, and she was wearing cutoff jeans and a tight blue T-shirt with a Superman logo on the front. She was a knockout.

"Hiya, Harry," she said absently.

"Outfit's a little cold for March, isn't it?"

"If it were, you'd be staring at my chest a lot harder," she said, smirking a little. She glanced up, and it bloomed into a full smile. "Hey, beer!"

"You're young and innocent," I said firmly, setting the box down on a shelf. "No beer for you."

"You're living in denial," she replied, and rose to pick up a bottle.

Of course she did. I'd told her not to. I watched her carefully.

The kid's my apprentice, but she's got a knack for the finer aspects of magic. She'd be in real trouble if she had to blast her way out of a situation, but when it comes to the cobweb-fine enchantments, she's a couple of lengths ahead of me and pulling away fast—and I figured this had to be subtle work.

She frowned almost the second she touched the bottle. "That's ... odd." She gave me a questioning look, and I gestured at the box. She ran her fingertips over each bottle in turn. "There's energy there. What is it, Harry?"

I had a good idea of what the beer had done to its drinkers—but it just didn't make sense. I wasn't about to tell her that, though. It would be very anti-Obi-Wan of me. "You tell me," I said, smiling slightly.

She narrowed her eyes at me and turned back to her potions, muttering over them for a few moments, and then easing them down to a low simmer. She came back to the bottles and opened one, sniffing at it and frowning some more.

"No taste testing," I told her. "It isn't pretty."

"I wouldn't think so," she replied in the same tone she'd used while working on her Latin. "It's laced with ... some kind of contagion focus, I think."

I nodded. She was talking about magical contagion, not the medical kind. A contagion focus was something that formed a link between a smaller

amount of its mass after it had been separated from the main body. A practitioner could use it to send magic into the main body, and by extension into all the smaller foci, even if they weren't in the same physical place. It was sort of like planting a transmitter on someone's car so that you could send a missile at it later.

"Can you tell what kind of working it's been set up to support?" I asked her.

She frowned. She had a pretty frown. "Give me a minute."

"Ticktock," I said.

She waved a hand at me without looking up. I folded my arms and waited. I gave her tests like this one all the time—and there was always a time limit. In my experience, the solutions you need the most badly are always time-critical. I'm trying to train the grasshopper for the real world.

Here was one of her first real-world problems, but she didn't have to know that. So long as she thought it was just one more test, she'd tear into it without hesitation. I saw no reason to rattle her confidence.

She muttered to herself. She poured some of the beer out into the beaker and held it up to the light from a specially prepared candle. She scrawled power calculations on a notebook. And twenty minutes later, she said, "Hah. Tricky, but not tricky enough."

"Oh?" I said.

"No need to be coy, boss," she said. "The contagion looks like a simple compulsion meant to make the victim drink more, but it's really a psychic conduit."

I leaned forward. "Seriously?"

Molly stared blankly at me for a moment. Then she blinked and said, "You didn't *know*?"

"I found the compulsion, but it was masking anything else that had been laid on the beer." I picked up the half-empty bottle and shook my head. "I brought it here because you've got a better touch for this kind of thing than I do. It would have taken me hours to puzzle it out. Good work."

"But ... you didn't *tell* me this was for real." She shook her head dazedly. "Harry, what if I hadn't found it? What if I'd been wrong?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, grasshopper," I said, turning for the stairs. "You *still* might be wrong."

THEY'D TAKEN MAC to Stroger, and he looked like hell. I had to lie to the nurse to get in to talk to him, flashing my consultant's ID badge and making like I was working with the Chicago cops on the case.

"Mac," I said, coming to sit down on the chair next to his bed, "how are you feeling?"

He looked at me with the eye that wasn't swollen shut. "Yeah. They said you wouldn't accept any painkillers."

He moved his head in a slight nod.

I laid out what I'd found. "It was elegant work, Mac. More intricate than anything I've done."

His teeth made noise as they ground together. He understood what two complex, interwoven enchantments meant as well as I did—a serious player was involved.

"Find him," Mac growled, the words slurring a little.

"Any idea where I could start?" I asked him.

He was quiet for a moment, then shook his head. "Caine?"

I lifted my eyebrows. "That thug from Night of the Living Brews? He's been around?"

He grunted. "Last night. Closing." He closed his eyes. "Loudmouth."

I stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. "Rest. I'll chat him up."

Mac exhaled slowly, maybe unconscious before I'd gotten done speaking.

I found Murphy down the hall.

"Three of them are awake," she said. "None of them remember anything for several hours before they presumably went to the bar."

I grimaced. "I was afraid of that." I told her what I'd learned.

"A psychic conduit?" Murphy asked. "What's that?"

"It's like any electrical power line," I said. "Except it plugs into your mind—and whoever is on the other end gets to decide what goes in."

Murphy went a little pale. She'd been on the receiving end of a couple of different kinds of psychic assault, and it had left some marks. "So do what you do. Put the whammy on them, and let's track them down."

I grimaced and shook my head. "I don't dare," I told her. "All I've got to track with is the beer itself. If I try to use it in a spell, it'll open me up to the conduit. It'll be as if I drank the stuff."

Murphy folded her arms. "And if that happens, you won't remember anything you learn, anyway."

“Like I said,” I told her, “it’s high-quality work. But I’ve got a name.”

“A perp?”

“I’m sure he’s guilty of something. His name’s Caine. He’s a con. Big, dumb, violent, and thinks he’s a brewer.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You got a history with this guy?”

“Ran over him during a case maybe a year ago,” I said. “It got ugly. More for him than me. He doesn’t like Mac much.”

“He’s a wizard?”

“Hell’s bells, no,” I said.

“Then how does he figure in?”

“Let’s ask him.”

MURPHY MADE SHORT work of running down an address for Herbert Orson Caine, mugger, rapist, and extortionist—a cheap apartment building on the south end of Bucktown.

Murphy knocked at the door, but we didn’t get an answer.

“It’s a good thing he’s a con,” she said, reaching for her cell phone. “I can probably get a warrant without too much trouble.”

“With what?” I asked her. “Suggestive evidence of the use of black magic?”

“Tampering with drinks at a bar doesn’t require the use of magic,” Murphy said. “He’s a rapist, and he isn’t part of the outfit, so he doesn’t have an expensive lawyer to raise a stink.”

“Howsabout we save the good people of Chicago time and money and just take a look around?”

“Breaking and entering.”

“I won’t break anything,” I promised. “I’ll do all the entering, too.”

“No,” she said.

“But—”

She looked up at me, her jaw set stubbornly. “No, Harry.”

I sighed. “These guys aren’t playing by the rules.”

“We don’t know he’s involved yet. I’m not cutting corners for someone who might not even be connected.”

I was partway into a snarky reply when Caine opened the door from the stairwell and entered the hallway. He spotted us and froze. Then he turned and started walking away.

“Caine!” Murphy called. “Chicago PD!”

He bolted.

Murph and I had both been expecting that, evidently. We both rushed him. He slammed the door open, but I’d been waiting for that, too. I sent out a burst of my will, drawing my right hand in toward my chest as I shouted, “*Forzare!*”

Invisible force slammed the door shut as Caine began to go through it. It hit him hard enough to bounce him all the way back across the hall, into the wall opposite.

Murphy had better acceleration than I did. She caught up to Caine in time for him to swing one paw at her in a looping punch.

I almost felt sorry for the slob.

Murphy ducked the punch, then came up with all of her weight and the muscle of her legs and body behind her response. She struck the tip of his chin with the heel of her hand, snapping his face straight up.

Caine was brawny, big, and tough. He came back from the blow with a dazed snarl and swatted at Murphy again. Murph caught his arm, tugged him a little one way, a little the other, and using his own arm as a fulcrum, sent him flipping forward and down hard onto the floor. He landed hard enough to make the floorboards shake, and Murphy promptly shifted her grip, twisting one hand into a painful angle, holding his arm out straight, using her leg to pin it into position.

“That would be assault,” Murphy said in a sweet voice. “And on a police officer in the course of an investigation, no less.”

“Bitch,” Caine said. “I’m gonna break your—”

We didn’t get to find out what he was going to break, because Murphy shifted her body weight maybe a couple of inches, and he screamed instead.

“Whaddayou want?” Caine demanded. “Lemme go! I didn’t do nothin’!”

“Sure you did,” I said cheerfully. “You assaulted Sergeant Murphy, here. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“You’re a two-time loser, Caine,” Murphy said. “This will make it number three. By the time you get out, the first thing you’ll need to buy will be a new set of teeth.”

Caine said a lot of impolite words.

“Wow,” I said, coming to stand over him. “That sucks. If only there were some way he could be of help to the community. You know, prove how he isn’t a waste of space some other person could be using.”

“Screw you,” Caine said. “I ain’t helping you with nothing.”

Murphy leaned into his arm a little again to shut him up. “What happened to the beer at McAnally’s?” she asked in a polite tone.

Caine said even more impolite words.

“I’m pretty sure that wasn’t it,” Murphy said. “I’m pretty sure you can do better.”

“Bite me, cop bitch,” Caine muttered.

“Sergeant Bitch,” Murphy said. “Have it your way, bonehead. Bet you’ve got all kinds of fans back at Stateville.” But she was frowning when she said it. Thugs like Caine rolled over when they were facing hard time. They didn’t risk losing the rest of their adult lives out of simple contrariness—unless they were terrified of the alternative.

Someone or, dare I say it, something had Caine scared.

Well, that table could seat more than one player.

The thug had a little blood coming from the corner of his mouth. He must have bitten his tongue when Murphy hit him.

I pulled a white handkerchief out of my pocket and, in a single swooping motion, stooped down and smeared some blood from Caine’s mouth onto it.

“What the hell?” he said, or something close to it. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about it, Caine,” I told him. “It isn’t going to be a long-term problem for you.”

I took the cloth and walked a few feet away. Then I hunkered down and used a piece of chalk from another pocket to draw a circle around me on the floor.

Caine struggled feebly against Murphy, but she put him down again. “Sit still,” she snapped. “I’ll pull your shoulder right out of its socket.”

“Feel free,” I told Murphy. “He isn’t going to be around long enough to worry about it.” I squinted up at Caine and said, “Beefy, little bit of a gut. Bet you eat a lot of greasy food, huh, Caine?”

“Wh-what?” he said. “What are you doing?”

“Heart attack should look pretty natural,” I said. “Murph, get ready to back off once he starts thrashing.” I closed the circle and let it sparkle a little as I did. It was a waste of energy—special effects like that almost always are—but it made an impression on Caine.

“Jesus Christ!” Caine said. “Wait!”

“Can’t wait,” I told him. “Gotta make this go before the blood dries out. Quit being such a baby, Caine. She gave you a chance.” I raised my hand over the fresh blood on the cloth. “Let’s see now—”

“I can’t talk!” Caine yelped. “If I talk, she’ll know!”

Murphy gave his arm a little twist. “Who?” she demanded.

“I can’t! Jesus, I swear! Dresden, don’t—it isn’t my fault. They needed bloodstone, and I had the only stuff in town that was pure enough! I just wanted to wipe that smile off that bastard’s face!”

I looked up at Caine with a gimlet eye, my teeth bared. “You ain’t saying anything that makes me want you to keep on breathing.”

“I *can’t*,” Caine wailed. “She’ll *know*!”

I fixed my stare on Caine and raised my hand in a slow, heavily overdramatized gesture. “*Intimidatus dorkus maximus!*” I intoned, making my voice intentionally hollow and harsh, and stressing the long vowels.

“Decker!” Caine screamed. “Decker, he set up the deal!”

I lowered my hand and let my head rock back. “Decker,” I said. “That twit.”

Murphy watched me and didn’t let go of Caine, though I could tell she didn’t want to keep holding him.

I shook my head at Murphy and said, “Let him scamper, Murph.”

She let him go, and Caine fled for the stairs on his hands and knees, sobbing. He staggered out, falling down the first flight, from the sound of it.

I wrinkled up my nose as the smell of urine hit me. “Ah. The aroma of truth.”

Murphy rubbed her hands on her jeans as if trying to wipe off something greasy. “Jesus, Harry.”

“What?” I said. “You didn’t want to break into his place.”

“I didn’t want you to put a gun to his head, either.” She shook her head. “You couldn’t really have ...”

“Killed him?” I asked. I broke the circle and rose. “Yeah. With him right here in sight, yeah. I probably could have.”

She shivered. “Jesus Christ.”

“I wouldn’t,” I said. I went to her and put a hand on her arm. “I wouldn’t, Karrin. You know that.”

She looked up at me, her expression impossible to read. “You put on a really good act, Harry. It would have fooled a lot of people. It looked ...”

“Natural on me,” I said. “Yeah.”

She touched my hand briefly with hers. “So, I guess we got something?”

I shook off dark thoughts and nodded. “We’ve got a name.”

BURT DECKER RAN what was arguably the sleaziest of the half-dozen establishments that catered to the magical crowd in Chicago. Left Hand Goods prided itself on providing props and ingredients to the black magic crowd.

Oh, that wasn’t so sinister as it sounded. Most of the trendy, self-appointed Death Eater wannabes in Chicago—or any other city, for that matter—didn’t have enough talent to strike two rocks together and make sparks, much less hurt anybody. The really dangerous black wizards don’t shop at places like Left Hand Goods. You could get everything you needed for most black magic at the freaking grocery store.

But, all the same, plenty of losers with bad intentions thought Left Hand Goods had everything you needed to create your own evil empire—and Burt Decker was happy to make them pay for their illusions.

Me and Murphy stepped in, between the display of socially maladjusted fungi on our right, a tank of newts (PLUCK YOUR OWN *#%\$ING EYES, the sign said) on the left, and stepped around the big shelf of quasi-legal drug paraphernalia in front of us.

Decker was a shriveled little toad of a man. He wasn’t overweight, but his skin looked too loose from a plump youth combined with a lifetime of too many naps in tanning beds. He was immaculately groomed, and his hair was a gorgeous black streaked with a dignified silver that was like a Rolls hood ornament on a VW Rabbit. He had beady black eyes with nothing warm behind them, and when he saw me, he licked his lips nervously.

“Hiya, Burt,” I said.

There were a few shoppers, none of whom looked terribly appealing. Murphy held up her badge so everyone could see it and said, “We have some questions.”

She might as well have shouted, “Fire!” The store emptied.

Murphy swaggered past a rack of discount porn DVDs, her coat open just enough to reveal the shoulder holster she wore. She picked one up, gave it a

look, and tossed it on the floor. “Christ, I hate scum vendors like this.”

“Hey!” Burt said. “You break it, you bought it.”

“Yeah, right,” Murphy said.

I showed him my teeth as I walked up and leaned both my arms on the counter he stood behind. It crowded into his personal space. His cologne was thick enough to stop bullets.

“Burt,” I said, “make this simple, okay? Tell me everything you know about Caine.”

Decker’s eyes went flat, and his entire body became perfectly still. It was reptilian. “Caine?”

I smiled wider. “Big guy, shaggy hair, kind of a slob, with piss running down his leg. He made a deal with a woman for some bloodstone, and you helped.”

Murphy had paused at a display of what appeared to be small, smoky quartz geodes. The crystals were nearly black, with purple veins running through them, and they were priced a couple of hundred dollars too high.

“I don’t talk about my customers,” Decker said. “It isn’t good for business.”

I glanced at Murphy. “Burt. We know you’re connected.”

She stared at me for a second, and sighed. Then she knocked a geode off the shelf. It shattered on the floor.

Decker winced and started to protest, but the words died on his lips.

“You know what isn’t good for business, Decker?” I asked. “Having a big guy in a grey cloak hang out in your little Bad Juju Mart. Your customers start thinking that the Council is paying attention, how much business do you think you’ll get?”

Decker stared at me with toad eyes, nothing on his face.

“Oops,” Murphy said, and knocked another geode to the floor.

“People are in the hospital, Burt,” I said. “Mac’s one of them—and he was beaten on ground held neutral by the Unseelie Accords.”

Burt bared his teeth. It was a gesture of surprise.

“Yeah,” I said. I drew my blasting rod out of my coat and slipped enough of my will into it to make the runes and sigils carved along its length glitter with faint orange light. The smell of wood smoke curled up from it. “You don’t want the heat this is gonna bring down, Burt.”

Murphy knocked another geode down and said, “I’m the good cop.”

“All right,” Burt said. “Jesus, will you lay off? I’ll talk, but you ain’t gonna like it.”

“I don’t handle disappointment well, Burt.” I tapped the glowing ember tip of the blasting rod down on his countertop for emphasis. “I really don’t.”

Burt grimaced at the black spots it left on the countertop. “Skirt comes in asking for bloodstone. But all I got is this crap from South Asscrack. Says she wants the real deal, and she’s a bitch about it. I tell her I sold the end of my last shipment to Caine.”

“Woman pisses you off,” Murphy said, “and you send her to do business with a convicted rapist.”

Burt looked at her with toad eyes.

“How’d you know where to find Caine?” I asked.

“He’s got a discount card here. Filled out an application.”

I glanced from the porn to the drug gear. “Uh-huh. What’s he doing with bloodstone?”

“Why should I give a crap?” Burt said. “It’s just business.”

“How’d she pay?”

“What do I look like, a fucking video camera?”

“You look like an accomplice to black magic, Burt,” I said.

“Crap,” Burt said, smiling slightly. “I haven’t had my hands on anything. I haven’t done anything. You can’t prove anything.”

Murphy stared hard at Decker. Then, quite deliberately, she walked out of the store.

I gave him my sunniest smile. “That’s the upside of working with the grey cloaks now, Burt,” I said. “I don’t need proof. I just need an excuse.”

Burt stared hard at me. Then he swallowed, toadlike.

“SHE PAID WITH a Visa,” I told Murphy when I came out of the store. “Meditrina Bassarid.”

Murphy frowned up at my troubled expression. “What’s wrong?”

“You ever see me pay with a credit card?”

“No. I figured no credit company would have you.”

“Come on, Murph,” I said. “That’s just un-American. I don’t bother with the things, because that magnetic strip goes bad in a couple of hours around me.”

She frowned. “Like everything electronic does. So?”

“So if Ms. Bassarid has Caine scared out of his mind on magic ...” I said.

Murphy got it. “Why is she using a credit card?”

“Because she probably isn’t human,” I said. “Nonhumans can sling power all over the place and not screw up anything if they don’t want to. It also explains why she got sent to Caine to get taught a lesson and wound up scaring him to death instead.”

Murphy said an impolite word. “But if she’s got a credit card, she’s in the system.”

“To some degree,” I said. “How long for you to find something?”

She shrugged. “We’ll see. You get a description?”

“Blue-black hair, green eyes, long legs, and great tits,” I said.

She eyed me.

“Quoting,” I said righteously.

I’m sure she was fighting off a smile. “What are you going to do?”

“Go back to Mac’s,” I said. “He loaned me his key.”

Murphy looked sideways at me. “Did he know he was doing that?”

I put my hand to my chest as if wounded. “Murphy,” I said. “He’s a friend.”

I LIT A bunch of candles with a mutter and a wave of my hand, and I stared around Mac’s place. Out in the dining area, chaos reigned. Chairs were overturned. Salt from a broken shaker had spread over the floor. None of the chairs were broken, but the framed sign that read ACCORDED NEUTRAL TERRITORY was smashed and lay on the ground near the door.

An interesting detail, that.

Behind the bar, where Mac kept his iceboxes and his wood-burning stove, everything was as tidy as a surgical theater, with the exception of the uncleaned stove and some dishes in the sink. Nothing looked like a clue.

I shook my head and went to the sink. I stared at the dishes. I turned and stared at the empty storage cabinets under the bar, where a couple of boxes of beer still waited. I opened the icebox and stared at the food, and my

stomach rumbled. There were some cold cuts. I made a sandwich and stood there munching it, looking around the place and thinking.

I didn't think of anything productive.

I washed the dishes in the sink, scowling and thinking up a veritable thunderstorm. I didn't get much further than a light sprinkle, though, before a thought struck me.

There really wasn't very much beer under the bar.

I finished the dishes, pondering that. Had there been a ton earlier? No. I'd picked up the half-used box and taken it home. The other two boxes were where I'd left them. But Mac usually kept a legion of beer bottles down there.

So why only two now?

I walked down to the far end of the counter, a nagging thought dancing around the back of my mind, where I couldn't see it. Mac kept a small office in the back corner, consisting of a table for his desk, a wooden chair, and a couple of filing cabinets. His food service and liquor permits were on display on the wall above it.

I sat down at the desk and opened the filing cabinets. I started going through Mac's records and books. Intrusive as hell, I know, but I had to figure out what was going on before matters got worse.

And that was when it hit me—matters getting worse. I could see a mortal wizard, motivated by petty spite, greed, or some other mundane motivation, wrecking Mac's bar. People can be amazingly petty. But nonhumans, now—that was a different story.

The fact that this Bassarid chick had a credit card meant she was methodical. I mean, you can't just conjure one out of thin air. She'd taken the time to create an identity for herself. That kind of forethought indicated a scheme, a plan, a goal. Untidying a Chicago bar, neutral ground or not, was not by any means the kind of goal that things from the Nevernever set for themselves when they went undercover into mortal society.

Something bigger was going on, then. Mac's place must have been a side item for Bassarid.

Or maybe a stepping-stone.

Mac was no wizard, but he was savvy. It would take more than cheap tricks to get to his beer with him here, and I was betting he had worked out more than one way to realize it if someone had intruded on his place when

he was gone. So, if someone wanted to get to the beer, they'd need a distraction.

Like maybe Caine.

Caine made a deal with Bassarid, evidently—I assumed he gave her the bloodstone in exchange for being a pain to Mac. So, she ruins Mac's day, gets the bloodstone in exchange, end of story—nice and neat.

Except that it didn't make a lot of sense. Bloodstone isn't exactly impossible to come by. Why would someone with serious magical juice do a favor for Caine to get some?

Because maybe Caine was a stooge, a distraction for anyone trying to follow Bassarid's trail. What if Bassarid had picked someone who had a history with Mac, so that I could chase after him while she ... did whatever she planned to do with the rest of Mac's beer?

Wherever the hell that was.

It took me an hour and a half to find anything in Mac's files—the first thing was a book. A really old book, bound in undyed leather. It was a journal, apparently, and written in some kind of cipher.

Also interesting, but probably not germane.

The second thing I found was a receipt, for a whole hell of a lot of money, along with an itemized list of what had been sold—beer, representing all of Mac's various heavenly brews. Someone at Worldclass Limited had paid him an awful lot of money for his current stock.

I got on the phone and called Murphy.

"Who bought the evil beer?" Murphy asked.

"The beer isn't evil. It's a victim. And I don't recognize the name of the company. Worldclass Limited."

Keys clicked in the background as Murphy hit the Internet. "Caterers," Murphy said a moment later. "High end."

I thought of the havoc that might be about to ensue at some wedding or bar mitzvah and shuddered. "Hell's bells," I breathed. "We've got to find out where they went."

"Egad, Holmes," Murphy said in the same tone I would have said, "Duh."

"Yeah. Sorry. What did you get on Bassarid?"

"Next to nothing," Murphy said. "It'll take me a few more hours to get the information behind her credit card."

“No time,” I said. “She isn’t worried about the cops. Whoever she is, she planned this whole thing to keep her tracks covered from the likes of me.”

“Aren’t we full of ourselves?” Murphy grumped. “Call you right back.” She did.

“The caterers aren’t available,” she said. “They’re working the private boxes at the Bulls game.”

I RUSHED TO the United Center.

Murphy could have blown the whistle and called in the artillery, but she hadn’t. Uniformed cops already at the arena would have been the first to intervene, and if they did, they were likely to cross Bassarid. Whatever she was, she would be more than they could handle.

She’d scamper or, worse, one of the cops could get killed. So Murphy and I both rushed to get there and find the bad guy before she could pull the trigger, so to speak, on the Chicago PD.

It was half an hour before the game, and the streets were packed. I parked in front of a hydrant and ran half a mile to the United Center, where thousands of people were packing themselves into the building for the game. I picked up a ticket from a scalper for a ridiculous amount of money on the way, emptying my pockets, and earned about a million glares from Bulls fans as I juked and ducked through the crowd to get through the entrances as quickly as I possibly could.

Once inside, I ran for the lowest level, the bottommost ring of concession stands and restrooms circling entrances to the arena—the most crowded level, currently—where the entrances to the most expensive ring of private boxes were. I started at the first box I came to, knocking on the locked doors. No one answered at the first several, and at the next, the door was opened by a blonde who, in an expensive business outfit showing a lot of décolletage, had clearly been expecting someone else.

“Who are you?” she stammered.

I flashed her my laminated consultant’s ID, too quickly to be seen. “Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, ma’am,” I said in my official’s voice, which is like my voice only deeper and more pompous. I’ve heard it from all kinds of government types. “We’ve had a report of tainted beer. I need to check your bar, see if the bad batch is in there.”

“Oh,” she said, backing up, her body language immediately cooperative. I pegged her as somebody’s receptionist, maybe. “Of course.”

I padded into the room and went to the bar, rifling bottles and opening cabinets until I found eleven dark brown bottles with a simple cap with an *M* stamped into the metal—Mac’s mark.

I turned to find the blonde holding out the half-empty bottle number twelve in a shaking hand. Her eyes were a little wide. “Um. Am I in trouble?”

I might be. I took the beer bottle from her, moving gingerly, and set it down with the others. “Have you been feeling, uh, sick or anything?” I asked as I edged toward the door, just in case she came at me with a baseball bat.

She shook her head, breathing more heavily. Her manicured fingernails trailed along the V-neck of her blouse. “I ... I mean, you know.” Her face flushed. “Just looking forward to ... the game.”

“Uh-huh,” I said warily.

Her eyes suddenly became warmer and very direct. I don’t know what it was exactly, but she was suddenly filled with that energy women have that has nothing to do with magic and everything to do with creating it. The temperature in the room felt as if it went up about ten degrees. “Maybe you should examine me, sir.”

I suddenly had a very different idea of what Mac had been defending himself from with that baseball bat.

And it had turned ugly on him.

Hell’s bells, I thought I knew what we were dealing with.

“Fantastic idea,” I told her. “You stay right here and get comfortable. I’m going to grab something sweet. I’ll be back in two shakes.”

“All right,” she cooed. Her suit jacket slid off her shoulders to the floor. “Don’t be long.”

I smiled at her in what I hoped was a suitably sultry fashion and backed out. Then I shut the door, checked its frame, and focused my will into the palm of my right hand. I directed my attention to one edge of the door and whispered, “*Forzare.*”

Metal squealed as the door bent in its frame. With any luck, it would take a couple of guys with crowbars an hour or two to get it open again—and hopefully Bubbles would pitch over into a stupor before she did herself any harm.

It took me three more doors to find one of the staff of Worldclass Limited—a young man in dark slacks, a white shirt, and a black bow tie, who asked if he could help me.

I flashed the ID again. “We’ve received a report that a custom microbrew your company purchased for this event has been tainted. Chicago PD is on the way, but meanwhile I need your company to round up the bottles before anyone else gets poisoned drinking them.”

The young man frowned. “Isn’t it the Bureau?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. It’s a bureau.”

Hell’s bells, why did I get someone who could think *now*?

“Can I see that ID again?” he asked.

“Look, buddy,” I said. “You’ve gotten a bad batch of beer. If you don’t round it up, people are going to get sick. Okay? The cops are on the way, but if people start guzzling it now, it isn’t going to do anybody any good.”

He frowned at me.

“Better safe than sorry, right?” I asked him.

Evidently, his ability to think did not extend to areas beyond asking stupid questions of well-meaning wizards. “Look, uh, really you should take this up with my boss.”

“Then get me to him,” I said. “Now.”

The caterer might have been uncertain, but he wasn’t slow. We hurried through the growing crowds to one of the workrooms that his company was using as a staging area. A lot of people in white shirts were hurrying all over the place with carts and armloads of everything from crackers to cheese to bottles of wine—and a dozen of Mac’s empty wooden boxes were stacked up to one side of the room.

My guide led me to a harried-looking woman in catering wear, who listened to him impatiently and cut him off halfway through. “I know, I know,” she snapped. “Look, I’ll tell you what I told Sergeant Murphy. A city health inspector is already here, and they’re already checking things out, and I am *not* losing my contract with the arena over some pointless scare.”

“You already talked to Murphy?” I said.

“Maybe five minutes ago. Sent her to the woman from the city, over at midcourt.”

“Tall woman?” I asked, feeling my stomach drop. “Blue-black hair? Uh, sort of busty?”

“Know her, do you?” The head caterer shook her head. “Look, I’m busy.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks.”

I ran back into the corridor and sprinted for the boxes at midcourt, drawing out my blasting rod as I went and hoping I would be in time to do Murphy any good.

A FEW YEARS ago, I’d given Murphy a key to my apartment, in a sense. It was a small amulet that would let her past the magical wards that defend the place. I hadn’t bothered to tell her the thing had a second purpose—I’d wanted her to have one of my personal possessions, something I could, if necessary, use to find her if I needed to. She would have been insulted at the very idea.

A quick stop into the men’s room, a chalk circle on the floor, a muttered spell, and I was on her trail. I actually ran past the suite she was in before the spell let me know I had passed her, and I had to backtrack to the door. I debated blowing it off the hinges. There was something to be said for a shock-and-awe entrance.

Of course, most of those things couldn’t be said for doing it in the middle of a crowded arena that was growing more crowded by the second. I’d probably shatter the windows at the front of the suite, and that could be dangerous for the people sitting in the stands beneath them. I tried the door, just for the hell of it and—

It opened.

Well, dammit. I much prefer making a dramatic entrance.

I came in and found a plush-looking room, complete with dark, thick carpeting, leather sofas, a buffet bar, a wet bar, and two women making out on a leather love seat.

They looked up as I shut the door behind me. Murphy’s expression was, at best, vague, her eyes hazy, unfocused, the pupils dilated until you could hardly see any blue, and her lips were a little swollen with kissing. She saw me, and a slow and utterly sensuous smile spread over her mouth. “Harry. There you are.”

The other woman gave me the same smile with a much more predatory edge. She had shoulder-length hair, so black, it was highlighted with dark,

shining blue. Her green-gold eyes were bright and intense, her mouth full. She was dressed in a grey business skirt-suit, with the jacket off and her shirt mostly unbuttoned, if not quite indecent. She was, otherwise, as Burt Decker had described her—statuesque and beautiful.

“So,” she said in a throaty, rich voice, “this is Harry Dresden.”

“Yes,” Murphy said, slurring the word drunkenly. “Harry. And his rod.” She let out a giggle.

I mean, my God. She *giggled*.

“I like his looks,” the brunette said. “Strong. Intelligent.”

“Yeah,” Murphy said. “I’ve wanted him for the longest time.” She tittered. “Him and his rod.”

I pointed said blasting rod at Meditrina Bassarid. “What have you done to her?”

“I?” the woman said. “Nothing.”

Murphy’s face flushed. “Yet.”

The woman let out a smoky laugh, toying with Murphy’s hair. “We’re getting to that. I only shared the embrace of the god with her, Wizard.”

“I was going to kick your ass for that,” Murphy said. She looked around, and I noticed that a broken lamp lay on the floor, and the end table it had sat on had been knocked over, evidence of a struggle. “But I feel so *good* now. ...” Smoldering blue eyes found me. “Harry. Come sit down with us.”

“You should,” the woman murmured. “We’ll have a good time.” She produced a bottle of Mac’s ale from somewhere. “Come on. Have a drink with us.”

All I’d wanted was a beer, for Pete’s sake.

But this wasn’t what I had in mind. It was just wrong. I told myself very firmly that it was wrong. Even if Karrin managed, somehow, to make her gun’s shoulder rig look like lingerie.

Or maybe that was me.

“Meditrina was a Roman goddess of wine,” I said instead. “And the bassarids were another name for the handmaidens of Dionysus.” I nodded at the beer in her hand and said, “I thought maenads were wine snobs.”

Her mouth spread in a wide, genuine-looking smile, and her teeth were very white. “Any spirit is the spirit of the god, mortal.”

“That’s what the psychic conduit links them to,” I said. “To Dionysus. To the god of revels and ecstatic violence.”

“Of course,” the maenad said. “Mortals have forgotten the true power of the god. The time has come to begin reminding them.”

“If you’re going to muck with the drinks, why not start with the big beer dispensary in the arena? You’d get it to a lot more people that way.”

She sneered at me. “Beer, brewed in cauldrons the size of houses by machines and then served cold. It has no soul. It isn’t worthy of the name.”

“Got it,” I said. “You’re a beer snob.”

She smiled, her gorgeous green eyes on mine. “I needed something real. Something a craftsman took loving pride in creating.”

This actually made sense, from a technical perspective. Magic is about a lot of things, and one of them is emotion. Once you begin to mass-manufacture anything, by the very nature of the process, you lose the sense of personal attachment you might have to something made by hand. For the maenad’s purposes, it would have meant that the mass-produced beer had nothing she could sink her magical teeth into, no foundation upon which to lay her complex compulsion.

Mac’s beer certainly qualified as being produced with pride—real, personal pride, I mean, not official corporate spokesperson pride.

“Why?” I asked her. “Why do this at all?”

“I am hardly alone in my actions, Wizard,” she responded. “And it is who I am.”

I frowned and tilted my head at her.

“Mortals have forgotten the gods,” she said, hints of anger creeping into her tone. “They think the White God drove out the many gods. But they are here. We are here. I, too, was worshipped in my day, mortal man.”

“Maybe you didn’t know this,” I said, “but most of us couldn’t give a rat’s ass. Raining down thunderbolts from on high isn’t exclusive territory anymore.”

She snarled, her eyes growing even brighter. “Indeed. We withdrew and gave the world into your keeping—and what has become of it? In two thousand years, you’ve poisoned and raped Mother Earth, who gave you life. You’ve cut down the forests, fouled the air, and darkened Apollo’s chariot itself with the stench of your smithies.”

“And touching off a riot at the Bulls game is going to make some kind of point?” I demanded.

She smiled, showing sharp canines. “My sisters have been doing football matches on the continent for years. We’re expanding the franchise.” She

drank from the bottle, wrapping her lips around it and making sure I noticed. “Moderation. It’s disgusting. We should have strangled Aristotle in his crib. Alcoholism—calling the god a *disease*!” She bared her teeth at me. “A lesson must be taught.”

Murphy shivered, and then her expression turned ugly, her blue eyes focusing on me.

“Show your respect to the god, Wizard,” the maenad spat. “Drink. Or I will introduce you to Pentheus and Orpheus.”

Greek guys. Both of whom were torn to pieces by maenads and their mortal female companions in orgies of ecstatic violence.

Murphy was breathing heavily now, sweating, her cheeks flushed, her eyes burning with lust and rage. And she was staring right at me.

Hooboy.

“Make you a counteroffer,” I said quietly. “Break off the enchantment on the beer and get out of my town, now, and I won’t FedEx you back to the Aegean in a dozen pieces.”

“If you will not honor the god in life,” Meditrina said, “then you will honor him in *death*.” She flung out a hand, and Murphy flew at me with a howl of primal fury.

I ran away.

Don’t get me wrong. I’ve faced a lot of screaming, charging monsters in my day. Granted, not one of them was small and blond and pretty from making out with what might have been a literal goddess. All the same, my options were limited. Murphy obviously wasn’t in her right mind. I had my blasting rod ready to go, but I didn’t want to kill her. I didn’t want to go hand to hand with her, either. Murphy was a dedicated martial artist, especially good at grappling, and if it came to a clinch, I wouldn’t fare any better than Caine had.

I flung myself back out of the room and into the corridor beyond before Murphy could catch me and twist my arm into some kind of Escher portrait. I heard glass breaking somewhere behind me.

Murphy came out hard on my heels and I brought my shield bracelet up as I turned, trying to angle it so that it wouldn’t hurt her. My shield flashed to blue-silver life as she closed on me, and she bounced off it as if it had been solid steel, stumbling to one side. Meditrina followed her, clutching a broken bottle, the whites of her eyes visible all the way around the bright green, an ecstatic and entirely creepy expression of joy lighting her face.

She slashed at me, three quick, graceful motions, and I got out of the way of only one of them. Hot pain seared my chin and my right hand, and my blasting rod went flying off down the corridor, bouncing off people's legs.

I'm not an expert like Murphy, but I've taken some classes, too, and more important, I've been in a bunch of scrapes in my life. In the literal school of hard knocks, you learn the ropes fast, and the lessons go bone-deep. As I reeled from the blow, I turned my momentum into a spin and swept my leg through Meditrina's. Goddess or not, the maenad didn't weigh half what I did, and her legs went out from under her.

Murphy blindsided me with a kick that lit up my whole rib cage with pain, and she had seized an arm before I could fight through it. If it had been my right arm, I'm not sure what might have happened—but she grabbed my left, and I activated my shield bracelet, sheathing it in sheer, kinetic power and forcing her hands away.

I don't care how many aikido lessons you've had—they don't train you for force fields.

I reached out with my will and screamed, "*Forzare!*" Then I seized a large plastic waste bin with my power. With a flick of my hand, I flung it at Murphy. It struck her hard and knocked her off me; I backpedaled. Meditrina had regained her feet and was coming for me, bottle flickering.

She drove me back into the beer-stand counter across the hall, and I brought up my shield again just as her makeshift weapon came forward. Glass shattered against it, cutting her own hand—always a risk with a bottle. But the force of the blow was sufficient to carry through the shield and slam my back against the counter. I bounced off some guy trying to carry beer in plastic cups and went down soaked in brew.

Murphy jumped on me then, pinning my left arm down as Meditrina started raking at my face with her nails, both of them screaming like banshees.

I had to shut one eye when a sharp fingernail grazed it, but I saw my chance as Meditrina's hands—hot, horribly strong hands—closed over my throat.

I choked out a gasped, "*Forzare!*" and reached out my right hand, snapping a slender chain that held up one end of a sign suspended above the beer stand behind me.

A heavy wooden sign that read, in large cheerful letters, PLEASE DRINK RESPONSIBLY, swung down in a ponderous, scything arc and

struck Meditrina on the side of the head, hitting her like a giant's fist. Her nails left scarlet lines on my throat as she was torn off me.

Murphy looked up, shocked, and I hauled with all my strength. I had to position her before she took up where Meditrina left off. I felt something wrench and give way as my thumb left its socket, and I howled in pain as the sign swung back, albeit with a lot less momentum now, and clouted Murphy on the noggin, too.

Then a bunch of people jumped on us, and the cops came running.



WHILE THEY WERE arresting me, I managed to convince the cops that there was something bad in Mac's beer. They got with the caterers and rounded up the whole batch, apparently before more than a handful of people could drink any. There was some wild behavior, but no one else got hurt.

None of which did me any good. After all, I was soaked in Budweiser and had assaulted two attractive women. I went to the drunk tank, which angered me mainly because I'd never gotten my freaking beer. And to add insult to injury, after paying exorbitant rates for a ticket, I hadn't gotten to see the game, either.

There's no freaking justice in this world.

Murphy turned up in the morning to let me out. She had a black eye and a sign-shaped bruise across one cheekbone.

"So let me get this straight," Murphy said. "After we went to Left Hand Goods, we followed the trail to the Bulls game. Then we confronted this maenad character, there was a struggle, and I got knocked out."

"Yep," I said.

There was really no point in telling it any other way. The nefarious hooch would have destroyed her memory of the evening. The truth would just bother her.

Hell, it bothered me—on more levels than I wanted to think about.

"Well, Bassarid vanished from the hospital," Murphy said. "So she's not around to press charges. And, given that you were working with me on an investigation, and because several people have reported side effects that sound a lot like they were drugged with Rohypnol or something—and

because it was you who got the cops to pull the rest of the bottles—I managed to get the felony charges dropped. You’re still being cited for drunk and disorderly.”

“Yay,” I said without enthusiasm.

“Could have been worse,” Murphy said. She paused and studied me for a moment. “You look like hell.”

“Thanks,” I said.

She looked at me seriously. Then she smiled, stood up on her tiptoes, and kissed my cheek. “You’re a good man, Harry. Come on. I’ll give you a ride home.”

I smiled all the way to her car.

CURSES

A DRESDEN FILES SHORT STORY

By JIM BUTCHER

Jim Butcher is the bestselling author most known for his urban fantasy series The Dresden Files. He also writes the Codex Alera series. Butcher lives in Missouri with his wife, son, and a ferocious guard dog.

Most of my cases are pretty tame. Someone loses a piece of jewelry with a lot of sentimental value, or someone comes to me because they've just moved into a new house and it's a little more haunted than the seller's disclosure indicated. Nothing Chicago's only professional wizard can't handle—but the cases don't usually rake in much money, either.

So when a man in a two-thousand-dollar suit opened my office door and came inside, he had my complete attention.

I mean, I didn't take my feet down off my desk or anything. But I paid attention.

He looked my office up and down and frowned, as though he didn't much approve of what he saw. Then he looked at me and said, "Excuse me, is this the office of—"

"Dolce," I said.

He blinked. "Excuse me."

"Your suit," I said. "Dolce and Gabbana. Silk. Very nice. You might want to consider an overcoat, though, now that it's cooling off. Paper says we're in for some rain."

He studied me intently for a moment. He was a man in his late prime. His hair was dyed too dark, and the suit looked like it probably hid a few pounds. "You must be Harry Dresden."

I inclined my head toward him. "Agent or attorney?"

"A little of both," he said, looking around my office again. "I represent a professional entertainment corporation, which wishes to remain anonymous for the time being. My name is Donovan. My sources tell me that you're the man who might be able to help us."

My office isn't anything to write home about. It's on a corner, with windows on two walls, but it's furnished for function, not style—scuffed-up wooden desks, a couple of comfortable chairs, some old metal filing cabinets, a used wooden table, and a coffeepot that is old enough to have belonged to Neanderthals. I figured Donovan was worried that he'd exposed his suit to unsavory elements, and resisted an irrational impulse to spill my half cup of cooling coffee on it.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"What you need and whether you can afford me."

Donovan fixed me with a stern look. I bore up under it as best I could. "Do you intend to gouge me for a fee, Mr. Dresden?"

“For every penny I reasonably can,” I told him.

He blinked at me. “You ... you’re quite up front about it, aren’t you?”

“Saves time,” I said.

“What makes you think I would tolerate such a thing?”

“People don’t come to me until they’re pretty desperate, Mr. Donovan,” I said, “especially rich people and hardly ever corporations. Besides, you come in here all intrigue and coy, not wanting to reveal who your employer is. That means that in addition to whatever else you want from me, you want my discretion, too.”

“So your increased fee is a polite form of blackmail?”

“Cost of doing business. If you want this done on the down low, you make my job more difficult. You should expect to pay a little more than a conventional customer when you’re asking for more than they are.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “How much are you going to cost me?”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Let’s find out. What do you want me to do?”

He stood up and turned to walk to the door. He stopped before he reached it, read the words HARRY DRESDEN, WIZARD backward in the frosted glass, and eyed me over his shoulder. “I assume that you have heard of any number of curses in local folklore.”

“Sure,” I said.

“I suppose you’ll expect me to believe in their existence.”

I shrugged. “They’ll exist or not exist regardless of what you believe, Mr. Donovan.” I paused. “Well. Apart from the ones that *don’t* exist except in someone’s mind. They’re only real *because* somebody believes. But that edges from the paranormal over toward psychology. I’m not licensed for that.”

He grimaced and nodded. “In that case...”

I felt a little slow off the mark as I realized what we were talking about. “A cursed local entertainment corporation,” I said. “Like maybe a sports team.”

He kept a poker face on, and it was a pretty good one.

“You’re talking about the Billy Goat Curse,” I said.

Donovan arched an eyebrow and then gave me an almost imperceptible nod as he turned around to face me again. “What do you know about it?”

I blew out my breath and ran my fingers back through my hair. “Uh, back in 1945 or so, a tavern owner named Sianis was asked to leave a World Series game at Wrigley. Seems his pet goat was getting rained on and it

smelled bad. Some of the fans were complaining. Outraged at their lack of social élan, Sianis pronounced a curse on the stadium, stating that never again would a World Series game be played there. Well, actually he said something like, ‘Them Cubs, they ain’t gonna win no more,’ but the World Series thing is the general interpretation.”

“And?” Donovan asked.

“And I think if I’d gotten kicked out of a Series game I’d been looking forward to, I might do the same thing.”

“You have a goat?”

“I have a moose,” I said.

He blinked at that for a second, didn’t understand it, and decided to ignore it. “If you know that, then you know that many people believe that the curse has held.”

“Where the Series is concerned, the Cubbies have been filled with fail and dipped in suck sauce since 1945,” I acknowledged. “No matter how hard they try, just when things are looking up, something seems to go bad at the worst possible time.” I paused to consider. “I can relate.”

“You’re a fan, then?”

“More of a kindred spirit.”

He looked around my office again and gave me a small smile. “But you follow the team.”

“I go to games when I can.”

“That being the case,” Donovan said, “you know that the team has been playing well this year.”

“And the Cubs want to hire yours truly to prevent the curse from screwing things up.”

Donovan shook his head. “I never said that the Cubs organization was involved.”

“Hell of a story, though, if they were.”

Donovan frowned severely.

“The *Sun-Times* would run it on the front page. CUBS HIRE PROFESSIONAL WIZARD TO BREAK CURSE, maybe. Rick Morrissey would have a ball with that story.”

“My clients,” Donovan said firmly, “have authorized me to commission your services on this matter, if it can be done quickly—and with the utmost discretion.”

I swung my feet down from my desk. “Mr. Donovan,” I said. “No one does discretion like me.”

* * *

Two hours after I had begun my calculations, I dropped my pencil on the laboratory table and stretched my back. “Well. You’re right.”

“Of course I’m right,” said Bob the Skull. “I’m always right.”

I gave the dried, bleached human skull sitting on a shelf amidst a stack of paperback romance novels a gimlet-eye.

“For *some* values of right,” he amended hastily. The words were conciliatory, but the flickering flames in the skull’s eye sockets danced merrily.

My laboratory is in the subbasement under my basement apartment. It’s dark, cool, and dank, essentially a concrete box that I have to enter by means of a folding staircase. It isn’t a big room, but it’s packed with the furnishings of one. Lots of shelves groan under the weight of books, scrolls, papers, alchemical tools, and containers filled with all manner of magical whatnot.

There’s a silver summoning circle on the floor, and a tiny-scale model of the city of Chicago on a long table running down the middle of the room. The only shelf not crammed full is Bob’s, and even it gets a little crowded sometimes. Bob is my more-or-less-faithful, not-so-trusty assistant, a spirit of intellect that dwells within a specially enchanted skull. I might be a wizard, but Bob’s knowledge of magic makes me look like an engineering professor.

“Are you sure there’s nothing you missed?” I asked.

“Nothing’s certain, boss,” the skull said philosophically. “But you did the equations. You know the power requirements for a spell to continue running through all those sunrises.”

I grunted sourly. The cycles of time in the world degrade ongoing magic, and your average enchantment doesn’t last for more than a few days. For a curse to be up and running since 1945, it would have had to begin as a malevolent enchantment powerful enough to rip a hole through the crust of the planet. Given the lack of lava in the area, it would seem that whatever the Billy Goat Curse might be, I could be confident that it wasn’t a simple magical working.

“Nothing’s ever simple,” I complained.

“What did you expect, boss?” Bob said.

I growled. “So the single-spell theory is out.”

“Yep,” Bob said.

“Which means that either the curse is being powered by something that renews its energy—or else someone is refreshing the thing all the time.”

“What about this Sianis guy’s family?” Bob said. “Maybe they’re putting out a fresh whammy every few days or something.”

I shook my head. “I called records in Edinburgh. The wardens checked them out years ago when all of this first happened, and they aren’t practitioners. Besides, they’re Cub-friendly.”

“The wardens investigated the Greek guy but not the curse?” Bob asked curiously.

“In 1945 the White Council had enough to do trying to mitigate the bad mojo from all those artifacts the Nazis stockpiled,” I said. “Once they established that no one’s life was in danger, they didn’t really care if a bunch of guys playing a game got cursed to lose it.”

“So what’s your next move?”

I tapped my chin thoughtfully with one finger. “Let’s go look at the stadium.”

* * *

I put Bob in the mesh sack I sometimes tote him around in and, at his petulant insistence, hung it from the rearview mirror of my car, a battered old Volkswagen Beetle. He hung there, swinging back and forth and occasionally spinning one way or the other when something caught his eye.

“Look at the legs on that one!” Bob said. “And whew, check *her* out! It must be chilly tonight!”

“There’s a reason we don’t get out more often, Bob,” I sighed. I should have known better than to drive through the club district on my way to Wrigley.

“I love the girls’ pants in this century,” Bob said. “I mean *look* at those jeans. One little tug and off they come.”

I wasn’t touching that one.

I parked the car a couple of blocks from the stadium, stuck Bob in a pocket of my black leather duster, and walked in. The Cubs were on the road, and Wrigley was closed. It was a good time to knock around inside. But since Donovan was evidently prepared to deny and disavow all knowledge, I wasn’t going to be able to simply knock on the door and wander in.

So I picked a couple of locks at a delivery entrance and went inside. I didn't hit it at professional-burglar speed or anything—I knew a couple of guys who could open a lock with tools as fast as they could with a key—but I wasn't in any danger of getting a ticket for loitering, either. Once I was inside, I headed straight for the concourses. If I mucked around in the stadium's administrative areas, I would probably run afoul of a full-blown security system, and the only thing I could reliably do to that would be to shut it down completely—and most systems are smart enough to tip off their home security company when that happens.

Besides. What I was looking for wouldn't be in any office.

I took Bob out of my pocket so that the flickering golden-orange lights of his eyes illuminated the area in front of me. “All right,” I murmured. I kept my voice down, on the off chance that a night watchman might be on duty and nearby. “I'm angry at the Cubbies and I'm pitching my curse at them. Where's it going to stick?”

“There's really no question about that, is there?” Bob asked me.

“Home plate,” we said together.

I started forward, walking silently. Being quiet when you sneak around isn't difficult, as long as you aren't in any rush. The serious professionals can all but sprint in perfect silence, but the main thing you need isn't agility—it's patience and calm. So I moved out slowly and calmly, and it must have worked, because nobody raised a hue or a cry.

The empty, unlit stadium was ... just wrong. I was used to seeing Wrigley blazing with sunlight or its lights, filled with fans and music and the smell of overpriced, fattening, and inexplicably gratifying food. I was used to vendors shouting, the constant sea-surge of crowd noise, and the buzz of planes passing overhead, trailing banners behind them.

Now Wrigley Field was vast and dark and empty. There was something silently sad about it—acres of seats with no one sitting, a green and beautiful field that no one was playing on, a scoreboard that didn't have anything on it to read or anyone to read it. If the gods and muses were to come down from Olympus and sculpt unfulfilled potential as a physical form, they wouldn't get any closer than that hollow house did.

I walked down the concrete steps and circled the infield until I could make my way to the seats behind home plate. Once there, I held Bob up and said, “What have we got?”

The skull's eyelights flared brighter for a second, and he snorted. "Oh, yeah. Definitely tied the curse together right there."

"What's keeping it going?" I asked. "Is there a ley line passing underneath or something?"

"That's a negative, boss," Bob said.

"How fresh is it?"

"Maybe a couple of days," the skull replied. "Maybe more. It's an awfully tight weave."

"How so?"

"This spell resists deterioration better than most mortal magic. It's efficient and solid—way niftier than you could manage."

"Gee. Thanks."

"I call 'em like I see 'em," Bob said cheerfully. "So either a more experienced member of the White Council is sponsoring this curse, and refreshing it every so often, or else..."

I caught on. "Or else the curse was placed here by a nonmortal being."

"Yeah," Bob said. "But that could be almost anything."

I shook my head. "Not necessarily. Remember that the curse was laid upon the stadium during a game in the 1945 World Series."

"Ah, yes," Bob said. "It would have been packed. Which means that whatever the being was, it could blend in. Either a really great veil or maybe a shapeshifter."

"Why?" I asked.

"What?"

"Why?" I repeated. "Why would this theoretical being have put out the curse on the Cubs?"

"Plenty of beings from the Nevernever really don't need a motivation."

"Sure they do," I said. "The logic behind what they do might be alien or twisted beyond belief, but it makes sense to them." I waved my hand at the stadium. "This being not only laid a curse on a nexus of human emotional power, it kept coming back week after week, year after year."

"I don't see what you're driving at, boss."

"Whoever's doing this is holding a grudge," I said thoughtfully. "This is vengeance for a genuine insult. It's personal."

"Maybe," Bob said. "But maybe the emotional state of the stadium supercharged Sianis's curse. Or maybe after the stadium evicted Sianis,

who didn't have enough power to curse anybody anyhow, someone decided to make it stick."

"Or maybe..." My voice trailed off, and then I barked out a short bite of laughter. "Oh. Oh, that's *funny*."

Bob spun in my hand to look up at me.

"It wasn't *Sianis* who put the whammy on the Cubs," I said, grinning. "It was the *goat*."

* * *

The Llyn y Fan Fach Tavern and Inn was located down at the lakeside at the northern edge of the city. The place's exterior screamed "PUB" as if it were trying to make itself heard over the roar of brawling football hooligans. It was all whitewashed walls and heavy timbers stained dark. The wooden sign hanging from a post above the door bore the tavern's name, and a painted picture of a leek and a daffodil crossed like swords.

I sidled up to the tavern and went in. The inside matched the outside, continuing the dark-stained theme on its wooden floors, walls, and furnishings. It was just after midnight, which wasn't really all that late, as bar scenes went, but the Llyn y Fan Fach Tavern was all but empty.

A big red-haired guy sitting in a chair by the door scowled at me. His biceps were thick enough to use steel-belted radials as armbands. He gave me the fisheye, which I ignored as I ambled on up to the bar.

I took a seat on a stool and nodded to the bartender. She was a pretty woman with jet-black hair and an obvious pride in her torso. Her white renaissance shirt had slipped entirely off both of her shapely shoulders and was only being held up by her dark leather bustier. She was busy wiping down the bar. The bustier was busy lifting and separating.

She glanced up at me and smiled. Her pale green eyes flicked over me, and the smile deepened. "Ah," she said, her British accent thick and from somewhere closer to Cardiff than London. "You're a tall one, aren't you?"

"Only when I'm standing up."

Her eyes twinkled with merry wickedness. "Such a crime. What are you drinking, love?"

"Do you have any cold beer?" I asked.

"None of that colonial piss here," she replied.

"Snob," I said, smiling. "Do you have any of McAnally's dark? McAnally's anything, really."

Her eyebrows went up. “Whew. For a moment, there, I thought a heathen walked amongst us.” She gave me a full smile, her teeth very square and straight and white, and walked over to me before bending over and drawing a dark bottle from beneath the bar.

I appreciated her in a polite and politically correct fashion. “Is the show included in the price of the drink?”

She opened the bottle with an expert twist of her wrist and set it down in front of me with a clean mug. “I’m a generous soul, love,” she said, winking. “Why charge when I can engage in selfless charity?”

She poured the beer into the mug and set it on a napkin in front of me. She slid a bowl of bar nuts down my way. “Drinking alone?”

“That depends on whether or not you’ll let me buy one for you.”

She laughed. “A gentleman, is it? Sir, you must think me all manner of tart if you think I’d accept a drink from a stranger.”

“I’m Harry,” I said.

“And so we are strangers no longer,” she replied, and got out another bottle of ale. She took her time about it, and she watched me as she did it. She straightened, also slowly, and opened her bottle before putting it gently to her lips and taking a slow pull. Then she arched an eyebrow at me and said, “See anything else you like? Something tasty, perhaps?”

“I suppose I am kind of an aural guy at the moment,” I said. “Got a minute to talk to me, Jill?”

Her smile faded swiftly. “I’ve never seen you in here before. How is it you know my name?”

I reached into my shirt and tugged out my pentacle, letting it fall down against my T-shirt. Jill studied that for a few seconds, then took a second look at me. Her mouth opened in a silent “ah” of understanding. “The wizard. Dresden, isn’t it?”

“Harry,” I said.

She nodded and took another, warier sip of her beer.

“Relax,” I said. “I’m not here on Council business. But a friend of mine among the Fair Folk told me that you were the person to talk to about the Tylwyth Teg.”

She tilted her head to one side, and smiled slightly. “I’m not sure how I could help you, Harry. I’m just a storyteller.”

“But you know about the Tylwyth Teg.”

“I know stories of them,” she countered. “That’s not the same as knowing them. Not in the way that your folk care about.”

“I’m not doing politics between members of the Unseelie Accords right now,” I said.

“But you’re one of the magi,” she said. “Surely you know what I do.”

“I’m still pretty young, for a wise guy. And nobody can know everything,” I said. “My knowledge of the Fair Folk pretty much begins and ends with the Winter and Summer Courts. I know that the Tylwyth Teg are an independent kingdom of the Wyld. Stories might give me what I need.”

The sparkle returned to her eyes for a moment. “This is the first time a man I’ve flirted with told me that *stories* were what he needed.”

“I could gaze longingly at your décolletage while you talk, if you like.”

“Given how much trouble I go to in order to show it off, it would seem polite.”

I lowered my eyes demurely to her chest for a moment. “Well. If I must.”

She let out a full-bodied laugh, which made attractive things happen to her upper body. “What stories are you interested in, specifically?”

I grinned at her. “Tell me about the Tylwyth Teg and goats.”

Jill nodded thoughtfully and took another sip of beer. “Well,” she said. “Goats were a favored creature among them. The Tylwyth Teg, if treated with respect by a household of mortals, would often perform tasks for them. One of the most common tasks was the grooming of goats—cleaning out their fur and brushing their beards for Sunday morning.”

I took a notebook from my duster’s pocket and started making notes. “Uh-huh.”

“The Tylwyth Teg were shapeshifters,” Jill continued. “They’re a small folk, only a couple of feet tall, and though they could take what form they wished, they usually changed into fairly small animals—foxes, cats, dogs, owls, hares, and—”

“And goats?”

She lifted her eyebrows. “And goats, aye. Though the stories can become very odd at times. More than one Welsh farmer who managed to capture a bride of the Tylwyth Teg found himself waking up to a goat beside him in his bed, or took his wife’s hand only to feel the shape of a cloven hoof beneath his fingertips.”

“Weregoats,” I muttered. “Jesus.”

“They’re masters of deceit and trickery,” Jill continued. “And we mortals are well advised to show them the proper respect, if we intrude upon them at all.”

“What happens if we don’t?”

Jill shook her head. “That would depend upon the offense, and which of the Tylwyth Teg were offended. They were capable of almost anything if their pride was wounded.”

“The usual Fair Folk response?” I asked. “Bad fortune, children taken, that sort of thing?”

Jill shook her head. “Harry, love, the Queens of Winter and Summer do not kill mortals, and so frown upon their followers taking such action. But the high folk of the Tylwyth Teg have no such restrictions.”

“They’d kill?” I asked.

“They can, have, and will take life in acts of vengeance,” Jill said seriously. “They always respond in balance—but push them too far and they will.”

“Damn,” I said. “Those are some hard-core faeries.”

Jill sucked in a sharp breath and her eyes glittered brightly. “What did you say?”

I became suddenly aware of the massive redhead by the door rising to his feet.

I swigged a bit of beer and put the notebook back in my pocket. “I called them faeries,” I drawled.

The floorboards creaked under the weight of Big Red, walking toward me.

Jill stared at me with eyes that were hard and brittle like glass. “You of all, wizard, should know that word is an insult to ... them.”

“Oh, right,” I said. “*They* get real upset when you call them that.” A shadow fell across me. I sipped more beer without turning around and said, “Did someone just put up a building?”

A hand the size of a Christmas ham fell onto my shoulder, and Big Red growled, “You want me to leave some marks?”

“Come on, Jill,” I said. “Don’t be sore. It’s not as though you’re trying all that hard to hide. You left plenty of clues for the game.”

Jill stared at me with unreadable eyes and said nothing.

I started ticking off points on my fingers. “Llyn y Fan Fach is a lake sacred to the Tylwyth Teg over in the Old World. You don’t get a lot more

Welsh than that leek-and-daffodil emblem. And as for calling yourself 'Jill,' that's a pretty thin mask to cover the presence of one of the Jili Ffrwtan." I tilted my head back to indicate Big Red. "Changeling, right?"

Big Red's fingers tightened enough to hurt. I started to get a little bit concerned.

Jill held up a hand and Big Red let go of me at once. I heard the floor creaking as he retreated. She stared at me for a moment more, then smiled faintly and said, "The mask is more than sufficient when no one is looking for the face behind it. What gave us away?"

I shrugged. "Someone has to be renewing the spell laid on Wrigley Field on a regular basis. It almost had to be someone local. Once I remembered that the Fair Folk of Wales had a rather singular affinity with goats, the rest was just a matter of legwork."

She finished off the beer in a long pull, her eyes sparkling again. "And my own reaction to the insult was the cherry on top."

I drained my mug and shrugged modestly. "I apologize for speaking so crudely, lady. It was the only way I could be sure."

"Powerful, clever, *and* polite," she murmured. She leaned forward onto the bar, and it got really hard not to notice her bosom. "You and I might get along."

I winked at her and said, "You're trying to distract me, and doing it well. But I'd like to speak to someone in authority over the enchantment laid on Wrigley."

"And who says our folk are behind such a thing?"

"Your cleavage," I replied. "Otherwise, why try to distract me?"

She let out another laugh, though this one was softer and more silvery, a tinkling and unearthly tone that made my ears feel like someone with fantastic lips was blowing gently into them. "Even if they are, what makes you think that we would alter that weaving now?"

I shrugged. "Perhaps you will. Perhaps you won't. I only request, please, to speak to one with authority over the curse, to discuss what might be done about it."

She studied me through narrowed eyes for another silent moment.

"I said please," I pointed out to her. "And I did buy you that beer."

"True," she murmured, and then gave me a smile that made my skin feel like I was standing close to a bonfire. She tossed her white cloth to one side and said, toward Big Red, "Mind the store for a bit?"

He nodded at her and settled back down into his chair.

The Jili Ffrwtan came out from behind the bar, hips swaying in deliciously feminine motion. I rose and offered her my arm in my best old-fashioned courtly style. It made her smile, and she laid her hand on my forearm lightly, barely touching. “This,” she said, “should be interesting.”

I smiled at her again and asked, “Where are we going?”

“Why, to Annwn, my love,” the Jili Ffrwtan said, pronouncing it “*ah-noon*.” “We go to the land of the dead.”

* * *

I followed the Jili Ffrwtan into the back room of the pub and down a narrow flight of stone stairs. The basement was all concrete walls and had a packed-earth floor. One wall of the place was stacked with an assortment of hooch. We walked past it while I admired the Jili Ffrwtan’s shape and movement, and wondered if her hair felt as soft as it looked.

She gave me a sly look over one bare shoulder. “And tell me, young magus, what you know of my kind.”

“That they are the high ladies of the Tylwyth Teg. And that they are surpassingly lovely, charming, and gracious, if you are any example, lady.” *And that they could be psycho bitches from hell if you damaged their pride.*

She laughed again. “Base flattery,” she said, clearly pleased. “But at least you do it well. You’re quite articulate—for a mortal.”

As we got farther from the light spilling from the staircase, the shadows grew thick, until she made a negligent gesture with one hand, and soft blue light with no apparent source filled the room around us. “Ah, here we are.”

She stopped beside a ring of large brown mushrooms that grew up out of the floor. I extended my otherworldly senses toward the ring and could feel the quiver of energies moving through the air around the circle like a silent hum of high-tension electrical lines. The substance of mortal reality was thin here, easily torn. The ring of mushrooms was a doorway, a portal leading to the Nevernever, the spirit world.

I gave Jill a little bow and gestured with one hand. “After you, lady.”

She smiled at me. “Oh, we must cross together, lest you get lost on the way.” She slid her fingertips lightly down my forearm. Her warm fingers intertwined with mine, and the gesture felt almost obscenely intimate. My glands cut my brain out of every decision-making process they could, and it was an effort not to adjust my pants. The part of my head that was still on

the job got real nervous right about then: There are way too many things in the universe that use sexual desire as a weapon, and I had to work not to jerk my hand away from the Jili Ffrwtan's.

It would be an awful idea to damage her pride with that kind of display.

And besides, my glands told me, she looks great. And smells even better. And her skin feels amazing. And ...

"Quiet, you," I growled at my glands under my breath.

She arched an eyebrow at me.

I gave her a tight smile and said. "Not you. Talking with myself."

"Ah," she said. She flicked her eyes down to below my waist and back, smirking. Then she took a step forward, drawing me into the ring of mushrooms, and the basement blurred and went away, as if the shadow of an ancient mountain had fallen over us.

Then the shadow lifted, and we were elsewhere.

It's at this point that my senses pretty much broke down.

The darkness lifted away to light and motion and music like nothing I had ever seen before—and I've been to the wildest spots in Chicago and to a couple of parties that weren't even being held inside our reality.

We stood inside a ring of mushrooms and in a cave. But that doesn't really cover it. Calling the hall of the Tylwyth Teg a cave is about the same as calling the Taj Mahal a grave. It's technically accurate, but it doesn't begin to cover it.

Walls soared up around me, walls in the shape of natural stone but somehow surfaced in the polished beauty of marble, veined with threads of silver and gold and even rarer metals, lit by the same sourceless radiance the Jili Ffrwtan had summoned back in Chicago. They rose above me on every side, and since I'd just been to Wrigley, I had a fresh perspective with which to compare them: If Wrigley was any bigger, it wasn't by much.

The air was full of music. I only call it "music" because there aren't any words adequate to describe it. By comparison to any music I'd ever heard played, it was the difference between a foot-powder jingle and a symphony by Mozart, throbbing with passion, merriment, pulsing between an ancient sadness and a fierce joy. Every beat made me feel like joining in—either to weep or to dance, or possibly both at the same time.

And the dancers ... I remember men and women and silks and velvets and jewels and more gold and silver and a grace that made me feel huge and awkward and slow.

There aren't any words.

The Jili Ffrwtan walked forward, taking me with her, and as she went she changed, each step leaving her smaller, her clothing changing as well, until she was attired as the revelers were, in a jeweled gown that left just as much of her just as attractively revealed as the previous outfit. It didn't seem strange at the time that she should grow so much smaller. I just felt like I was freakishly huge, the outsider, the intruder, hopelessly oversized for that place. We moved forward, through the dancers, who spun and flitted out of our path. My escort kept on diminishing until I was walking half hunched over, her entire hand covering about half of one of my fingers.

She led me to the far end of the hall, pausing several times to call something in a complex, musical tongue aside to one of the other Fair Folk. We walked past a miniature table laid out with a not-at-all-miniature feast, and my stomach suddenly informed me that it had never once taken in an ounce of nutrition, and that it really was about time that I finally had something. I had actually taken a couple of steps toward the table before I forced myself to swerve away from it.

"Wise," said the Jili Ffrwtan. "Unless, of course, you wish to stay."

"It smells fine," I replied, my voice hoarse. "But it's no Burger King."

She laughed again, putting the fingers of one hand to her still proportionately impressive bosom, and we passed out of the great hall and into a smaller cavern—this one only the size of a train station. There were guards there—guards armored in bejeweled mail, faces masked behind mail veils, guards who barely came up over my knee, but guards nonetheless, bearing swords and spears and bows. They stood at attention and watched me with cold, hard eyes as we passed them. My escort seemed delightedly smug about the entire affair.

I cleared my throat and asked, "Who are we going to see?"

"Why, love, the only one who has authority over the curse upon Wrigley Field," she said. "His Majesty."

I swallowed. "The king of your folk? Gwynn ap Nudd, isn't it?"

"His Majesty will do," rang out a voice in a high tenor, and I looked up to see one of the Fair Folk sitting on a throne raised up several feet above the floor of the chamber, so that my eyes were level with his. "Perhaps even, His Majesty, sir."

Gwynn ap Nudd, ruler of the Tylwyth Teg, was tall—for his folk, anyway—broad shouldered, and ruggedly handsome. Though dressed in what

looked like some kind of midnight-blue fabric that had the texture of velvet but the supple sweep of silk, he had large-knuckled hands that looked rough and strong. Both his long hair and beard were streaked with fine, symmetrical lines of silver, and jewels shone on his fingers and upon his brow.

I stopped at once and bowed deeply, making sure my head went lower than the faerie king's, and I stayed there for a good long moment before rising again. "Your Majesty, sir," I said, in my politest voice. "You are both courteous and generous to grant me an audience. It speaks well of the Tylwyth Teg as a people, that such a one should lead them."

King Gwynn stared at me for a long moment before letting out a grunt that mixed disbelief with wry satisfaction. "At least they sent one with half a sense of manners this time."

"I thought you'd like that, sire," said the Jili Ffrwtan, smiling. "May I present Harry Dresden, magus, a commander of the Order of the Grey Cloak, sometime mortal Champion of Queen Mab and Esquire of the Court of Queen Titania. He begs to speak to you regarding the curse upon the Field of Wrigley in the mortal citadel of Chicago."

"We know who he is," Gwynn said testily. "And we know why he is here. Return to your post. We will see to it that he is safely returned."

The Jili Ffrwtan curtsied deeply and revealingly. "Of course, sire." Then she simply vanished into a sparkling cloud of lights.

"Guards," King Gwynn called out. "You will leave us now."

The guards looked unhappy about it, but they lined up and filed out, every movement in sync with the others. Gwynn waited until the last of them had left the hall and the doors boomed shut before he turned back to me.

"So," he said. "Who do ye like for the Series this year?"

I blinked my eyes at him several times. It wasn't one of those questions I'd been expecting. "Um. American League, I'm kind of rooting for Tampa Bay. I'd like to see them beat out the Yankees."

"Aye," Gwynn said, nodding energetically. "Who wouldn't. Bloody Yankees."

"And in the National League," I said, "the Cubs are looking good at the moment, though I could see the Phillies pulling something out at the last minute." I shrugged. "I mean, since the Cubbies are cursed and all."

"Cursed?" Gwynn said. A fierce smile stretched his face. "Cursed, is it?"

“Or so it is widely believed,” I said.

Gwynn snorted then rose and descended from his throne. “Walk with me.”

The diminutive monarch walked farther back into the cavern, past his throne, and into what resembled some kind of bizarre museum. There were rows and rows of cabinets, each with shelves lined in black velvet, and walls of crystalline glass. Each cabinet had a dozen or so artifacts in it: ticket stubs were some of the most common items, though there were also baseballs here and there among them, as well as baseball cards, fan booklets, team pennants, bats, batting gloves, and fielders’ gloves.

As I walked beside him, careful to keep my pace slow enough to let him dictate how fast we were walking, it dawned on me that King Gwynn ap Nudd of the Tylwyth Teg was a baseball fan—as in *fanatic*—of the original vintage.

“It was you,” I said suddenly. “You were the one they threw out of the game.”

“Aye,” King Gwynn said. “There was business to attend, and by the time I got there the tickets were sold out. I had to find another way into the game.”

“As a goat?” I asked, bemused.

“It was a team-spirit thing,” Gwynn said proudly. “Sianis had made up a sign and all, proclaiming that Chicago had already gotten Detroit’s goat. Then he paraded me and the sign on the field before the game—it got plenty of cheers, let me tell you. And he did pay for an extra ticket for the goat, so it wasn’t as though old Wrigley’s successors were being cheated the price of admission. They just didn’t like it that someone argued with the ushers and won!”

Gwynn’s words had taken on the heat that you can only get from an argument that someone has rehearsed to himself about a million times. Given that he must have been practicing it since 1945, I knew better than to think that anything like reason was going to get in the way. So I just nodded and asked, “What happened?”

“Before the game was anywhere near over,” Gwynn continued, his voice seething with outrage, “they came to Sianis and evicted him from the park. Because, they said, his goat smelled too awful!”

Gwynn stopped in his tracks and turned to me, scowling furiously as he gestured at himself with his hands. “Hello! I was a *goat*! Goats are

supposed to smell awful when they are rained upon!”

“They are, Your Majesty, sir,” I agreed soberly.

“And I was a *flawless* goat!”

“I have no doubts on that account, King Gwynn,” I said.

“What kind of justice is it to be excluded from a Series game because one has flawlessly imitated a goat!?”

“No justice at all, Your Majesty, sir,” I said.

“And to say that I, Gwynn ap Nudd, I the King of Annwn, I who defeated Gwythr ap Greidawl, I the counselor and ally to gods and heroes alike, *smelled!*” His mouth twisted up in rage. “How *dare* some jumped-up mortal ape say such a thing! As though mortals smell any *better* than wet goats!”

For a moment, I considered pointing out the conflicting logic of Gwynn both being a perfect (and therefore smelly) goat and being upset that he had been cast out of the game for *being* smelly. But only for a second. Otherwise, I might have been looking at coming back to Chicago about a hundred years too late to grab a late-night meal at BK.

“I can certainly see why you were upset and offended, Your Majesty, sir.”

Some of the righteous indignation seemed to drain out of him, and he waved an irritated hand at me. “We’re talking about something important here, mortal,” he said. “We’re talking about *baseball*. Call me Gwynn.”

We had stopped at the last display cabinet, which was enormous by the standards of the furnishings of that hall, which is to say, about the size of a human wardrobe. On one of its shelves was a single outfit of clothing; blue jeans, a T-shirt, a leather jacket, with socks and shoes. On all the rest were the elongated rectangles of tickets—season tickets, in fact, and hundreds of them.

But the single stack of tickets on the top shelf sat next to the only team cap I’d seen.

Both tickets and cap bore the emblem of the Cubs.

“It was certainly a serious insult,” I said quietly. “And it’s obvious that a balancing response was in order. But, Gwynn, the insult was given you unwittingly, by mortals whose very stupidity prevented them from knowing what they were doing. Few enough there that day are even alive now. Is it just that their children be burdened with their mistake? Surely that fact also carries some weight within the heart of a wise and generous king.”

Gwynn let out a tired sigh and moved his right hand in a gesture that mimed pouring out water cupped in it. “Oh, aye, aye, Harry. The anger

faded decades ago—mostly. It’s the principle of the thing, these days.”

“That’s something I can understand,” I said. “Sometimes you have to give weight to a principle to keep it from being taken away in a storm.”

He glanced up at me shrewdly. “Aye. I’ve heard as that’s something you would understand.”

I spread my hands and tried to sound diffident. “There must be some way of evening the scales between the Cubs and the Tylwyth Teg,” I said. “Some way to set this insult to rights and lay the matter to rest.”

“Oh, aye,” King Gwynn said. “It’s easy as dying. All we do is nothing. The spell would fade. Matters would resume their normal course.”

“But clearly you don’t wish to do such a thing,” I said. “It’s obviously an expenditure of resources for you to keep the curse alive.”

The small king suddenly smiled. “Truth be told, I stopped thinking of it as a curse years ago, lad.”

I arched my eyebrows.

“How do you regard it, then?” I asked him.

“As protection,” he said. “From the *real* curse of baseball.”

I looked from him to the tickets and thought about that for a moment. Then I said, “I understand.”

It was Gwynn’s turn to arch eyebrows at me. “Do ye now?” He studied me for a time and then smiled, nodding slowly. “Aye. Aye, ye do. Wise, for one so young.”

I shook my head ruefully. “Not wise enough.”

“Everyone with a lick of wisdom thinks that,” Gwynn replied. He regarded his tickets for a while, his hands clasped behind his back. “Now, ye’ve won the loyalty of some of the Wee Folk, and that is no quick or easy task. Ye’ve defied Sidhe queens. Ye’ve even stuck a thumb into the Erlking’s eye, and that tickles me to no end. And ye’ve been clever enough to find us, which few mortals have managed, and gone out of your way to be polite, which means more from you than it would from some others.”

I nodded quietly.

“So, Harry Dresden,” King Gwynn said, “I’ll be glad t’consider it, if ye say the Cubs wish me to cease my efforts.”

I thought about it for a long time before I gave him my answer.

* * *

Mr. Donovan sat down in my office in a different ridiculously expensive suit and regarded me soberly. “Well?”

“The curse stays,” I said. “Sorry.”

Mr. Donovan frowned, as though trying to determine whether or not I was pulling his leg. “I would have expected you to declare it gone and collect your fee.”

“I have this weird thing where I take professional ethics seriously,” I said. I pushed a piece of paper at him and said, “My invoice.”

He took it and turned it over. “It’s blank,” he said.

“Why type it up when it’s just a bunch of zeroes?”

He stared at me even harder.

“Look at it this way,” I said. “You haven’t paused to consider the upside of the Billy Goat Curse.”

“Upside?” he asked. “To losing?”

“Exactly,” I said. “How many times have you heard people complaining that professional ball wasn’t about anything but money these days?”

“What does that have to do—”

“That’s why everyone’s so locked on the Series these days. Not necessarily because it means you’re the best, because you’ve risen to a challenge and prevailed. The Series means millions of dollars for the club, for businesses, all kinds of money. Even the fans get obsessed with the Series, like it’s the only significant thing in baseball. Don’t even get me started on the stadiums all starting to be named after their corporate sponsors.”

“Do you have a point?” Donovan asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Baseball is about more than money and victory. It’s about facing challenges alone and on a team. It’s about spending time with friends and family and neighbors in a beautiful park, watching the game unfold. It’s...” I sighed. “It’s about fun, Mr. Donovan.”

“And you are contending that the curse is fun?”

“Think about it,” I said. “The Cubs have the most loyal, diehard fan following in Major League ball. Those fans aren’t in it to see the Cubs run rampant over other teams because they’ve spent more money hiring the best players. You know they aren’t—because they all know about the curse. If you *know* your team isn’t going to carry off the Series, then cheering them on becomes something more than yelling when they’re beating someone. It’s about tradition. It’s about loyalty to the team and

camaraderie with the other fans, and win or lose, just enjoying the damned game.”

I spread my hands. “It’s about *fun* again, Mr. Donovan. Wrigley Field might be the only stadium in professional ball where you can say that.”

Donovan stared at me as though I’d started speaking in Welsh. “I don’t understand.”

I sighed again. “Yeah. I know.”

* * *

My ticket was for general admission, but I thought I’d take a look around before the game got started. Carlos Zambrano was on the mound warming up when I sat down next to Gwynn ap Nudd.

Human size, he was considerably over six feet tall, and he was dressed in the same clothes I’d seen back at his baseball shrine. Other than that, he looked exactly the way I remembered him. He was talking to a couple of folks in the row behind him, animatedly relating some kind of tale that revolved around the incredible arc of a single game-deciding breaking ball. I waited until he was finished with the story, and turned back out to the field.

“Good day,” Gwynn said to me.

I nodded my head just a little bit deeply. “And to you.”

He watched Zambrano warming up and grinned. “They’re going to fight through it eventually,” he said. “There are so many mortals now. Too many players and fans want them to do it.” His voice turned a little sad. “One day they will.”

My equations and I had eventually come to the same conclusion. “I know.”

“But you want me to do it now, I suppose,” he said. “Or else why would you be here?”

I flagged down a beer vendor and bought one for myself and one for Gwynn.

He stared at me for a few seconds, his head tilted to one side.

“No business,” I said, passing him one of the beers. “How about we just enjoy the game?”

Gwynn ap Nudd’s handsome face broke into a wide smile, and we both settled back in our seats as the Cubs took the cursed field.

LOVE HURTS

—*from Songs of Love and Death, edited by George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois*

Murphy gestured at the bodies and said, “Love hurts.” I ducked under the crime scene tape and entered the Wrigleyville apartment. The smell of blood and death was thick. It made gallows humor inevitable.

Murphy stood there looking at me. She wasn’t offering explanations. That meant she wanted an unbiased opinion from CPD’s Special Investigations consultant—who is me, Harry Dresden. As far as I know, I am the only wizard on the planet earning a significant portion of his income working for a law enforcement agency.

I stopped and looked around, taking inventory.

Two bodies, naked, male and female, still intertwined in the act. One little pistol, illegal in Chicago, lying upon the limp fingers of the woman. Two gunshot wounds to the temples, one each. There were two overlapping fan-shaped splatters of blood, and more had soaked into the carpet. The bodies stank like hell. Some very unromantic things had happened to them after death.

I walked a little farther into the room and looked around. Somewhere in the apartment, an old vinyl was playing Queen. Freddie wondered who wanted to live forever. As I listened, the song ended and began again a few seconds later, popping and scratching nostalgically.

The walls were covered in photographs.

I don’t mean there were a lot of pictures on the wall, like at Greatgrandma’s house. I mean covered in photographs. Entirely. Completely papered.

I glanced up. So was the ceiling.

I took a moment to walk slowly around, looking at pictures. All of them, every single one of them, featured the two dead people together, posed somewhere and looking deliriously happy. I walked and peered. Plenty of the pictures were near-duplicates in most details, except that the subjects wore different sets of clothing—generally cutesy matching T-shirts. Most of the sites were tourist spots within Chicago.

It was as if the couple had gone on the same vacation tour every day, over and over again, collecting the same general batch of pictures each time.

“Matching T-shirts,” I said. “Creepy.”

Murphy’s smile was unpleasant. She was a tiny, compactly muscular woman with blond hair and a button nose. I’d say she was so cute, I just

wanted to put her in my pocket, but if I tried to do it, she'd break my arm. Murph knows martial arts.

She waited and said nothing.

"Another suicide pact. That's the third one this month." I gestured at the pictures. "Though the others weren't quite so cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. Or, ah, in medias res." I shrugged and gestured at the obsessive photographs. "This is just crazy."

Murphy lifted one pale eyebrow ever so slightly. "Remind me—how much do we pay you to give us advice, Sherlock?"

I grimaced. "Yeah, yeah. I know." I was quiet for a while and then said, "What were their names?"

"Greg and Cindy Bardalacki," Murphy said.

"Seemingly unconnected dead people, but they share similar patterns of death. Now we're upgrading to irrational and obsessive behavior as a precursor. ..." I frowned. I checked several of the pictures and went over to eye the bodies. "Oh," I said. "Oh, hell's bells."

Murphy arched an eyebrow.

"No wedding rings any where," I said. "No wedding pictures. And ..." I finally found a framed family picture, which looked to have been there for a while, among all the snapshots. Greg and Cindy were both in it, along with an older couple and a younger man.

"Jesus, Murph," I said. "They weren't a married couple. They were brother and sister."

Murphy eyed the intertwined bodies. There were no signs of struggle. Clothes, champagne flutes, and an empty bubbly bottle lay scattered. "Married, no," she said. "Couple, yes." She was unruffled. She'd already worked that out for herself.

"Ick," I said. "But that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"These two. They were together—and they went insane doing it. This has the earmarks of someone tampering with their minds."

Murphy squinted at me. "Why?"

I spread my hands. "Let's say Greg and Cindy bump into Bad Guy X. Bad Guy X gets into their heads and makes them fall wildly in love and lust with each other. There's nothing they can do about the feelings—which seem perfectly natural—but on some level they're aware that what they're doing is not what they want, and dementedly wrong besides. Their

compromised conscious minds clash with their subconscious”—I gestured at the pictures—“and it escalates until they can’t handle it anymore, and bang.” I shot Murphy with my thumb and forefinger.

“If you’re right, they aren’t the deceased,” Murphy said. “They’re the victims. Big difference. Which is it?”

“Wish I could say,” I said. “But the only evidence that could prove it one way or another is leaking out onto the floor. If we get a survivor, maybe I could take a peek and see, but barring that, we’re stuck with legwork.”

Murphy sighed and looked down. “Two suicide pacts could—technically—be a coincidence. Three of them, no way it’s natural. This feels more like something’s MO. Could it be another one of those Skavis vampires?”

“They gun for loners,” I said, shaking my head. “These deaths don’t fit their profile.”

“So you’re telling me we need to turn up a common denominator to link the victims? Gosh, I wish I could have thought of that on my own.”

I winced. “Yeah.” I glanced over at a couple of other SI detectives in the room, taking pictures of the bodies and documenting the walls and so on. Forensics wasn’t on-site. They don’t like to waste their time on the suicides of the emotionally disturbed, regardless of how bizarre they might be. That was crap work, and as such had been dutifully passed to SI.

I lowered my voice. “If someone is playing mind games, the Council might know something. I’ll try to pick up the trail on that end. You start from here. Hopefully, I’ll earn my pay and we’ll meet in the middle.”

“Right.” Murph stared at the bodies, and her eyes were haunted. She knew what it was like to be the victim of mental manipulation. I didn’t reach out to support her. She hated showing vulnerability, and I didn’t want to point out to her that I’d noticed.

Freddie reached a crescendo that told us love must die.

Murphy sighed and called, “For the love of God, someone turn off that damn record.”

“I’M SORRY, HARRY,” Captain Luccio said. “We don’t exactly have orbital satellites for detecting black magic.”

I waited a second to be sure she was finished. The presence of so much magical talent on the far end of the call meant that at times the lag could stretch out between Chicago and Edinburgh, the headquarters of the White

Council of Wizards. Anastasia Luccio, captain of the Wardens, my ex-girlfriend, had been readily forthcoming with the information the Council had on any shenanigans going on in Chicago—which was exactly nothing.

“Too bad we don’t, eh?” I asked. “Unofficially—is there anyone who might know anything?”

“The Gatekeeper, perhaps. He has a gift for sensing problem areas. But no one has seen him for weeks, which is hardly unusual. And frankly, Warden Dresden, you’re supposed to be the one giving *us* this kind of information.” Her voice was half teasing, half deadly serious. “What do you think is happening?”

“Three couples, apparently lovey-dovey as hell, have committed dual suicide in the past two weeks,” I told her. “The last two were brother and sister. There were some seriously irrational components to their behavior.”

“You suspect mental tampering,” she said. Her voice was hard.

Luccio had been a victim, too.

I found myself smiling somewhat bitterly at no one. She had been, among other things, mindboinked into going out with me. Which was apparently the only way anyone would date me, lately. “It seems a reasonable suspicion. I’ll let you know what I turn up.”

“Use caution,” she said. “Don’t enter any suspect situation without backup on hand. There’s too much chance that you could be compromised.”

“Compromised?” I asked. “Of the two people having this conversation, which one of them exposed the last guy rearranging people’s heads?”

“Touché,” Luccio said. “But he got away with it because we were overconfident. So use caution, anyway.”

“Planning on it,” I said.

There was a moment of awkward silence, and then Anastasia said, “How have you been, Harry?”

“Keeping busy,” I said. She had already apologized to me, sort of, for abruptly walking out of my personal life. She’d never intended to be there in the first place. There had been a real emotional tsunami around the events of last year, and I wasn’t the one who had gotten the most hurt by them. “You?”

“Keeping busy.” She was quiet for a moment and then said, “I know it’s over. But I’m glad for the time we had together. It made me happy. Sometimes I—”

Miss feeling that, I thought, completing the sentence. My throat felt tight. “Nothing wrong with happy.”

“No, there isn’t. When it’s real.” Her voice softened. “Be careful, Harry. Please.”

“I will,” I said.

I STARTED COMBING the supernatural world for answers and got almost nothing. The Little Folk, who could usually be relied on to provide some kind of information, had nothing for me. Their memory for detail was very short, and the deaths had happened too long ago to get me anything but conflicting gibberish from them.

I made several mental nighttime sweeps through the city using the scale model of Chicago in my basement, and got nothing but a headache for my trouble.

I called around the Paranet, the organization of folk with only modest magical gifts, the kind who often found themselves being preyed upon by more powerful supernatural beings. They worked together now, sharing information, communicating successful techniques, and generally overcoming their lack of raw magical muscle with mutually supportive teamwork. They didn’t have anything for me, either.

I hit McAnally’s, a hub of the supernatural social scene, and asked a lot of questions. No one had any answers. Then I started contacting the people I knew in the scene, starting with the ones I thought most likely to provide information. I worked my way methodically down the list, crossing out names, until I got to *Ask random people on the street*.

There are days when I don’t feel like much of a wizard. Or an investigator. Or a wizard investigator.

Ordinary PIs have a lot of days like that, where they look and look and look for information and find nothing. I get fewer of those days than most, on account of the whole wizard thing giving me a lot more options—but sometimes I come up goose eggs, anyway.

I just hate doing it when lives may be in danger.

FOUR DAYS LATER, all I knew was that nobody knew about any black magic happening in Chicago, and the only traces of it I *did* find were the minuscule amounts of residue left from black magic wrought by those without enough power to be a threat (Warden Ramirez had coined the phrase “dim magic” to describe that kind of petty, essentially harmless malice). There were also the usual traces of dim magic performed subconsciously from a bed of dark emotions, probably by someone who might not even know they had a gift.

In other words, goose eggs.

Fortunately, Murphy got the job done.

Sometimes hard work is way better than magic.

MURPHY’S SATURN HAD gotten a little blown up a couple of years back, sort of my fault, and what with her demotion and all, it would be a while before she’d be able to afford something besides her old Harley. For some reason, she didn’t want to take the motorcycle, so that left my car, the ever trusty (almost always) *Blue Beetle*, an old-school VW Bug that had seen me through one nasty scrape after another. More than once, it had been pounded badly, but always it had risen to do battle once more—if by battle one means driving somewhere at a sedate speed, without much acceleration and only middling gas mileage.

Don’t start. It’s paid for.

I stopped outside Murphy’s little white house, with its little pink rose garden, and rolled down the window on the passenger side. “Make like the Dukes of Hazzard,” I said. “Door’s stuck.”

Murphy gave me a narrow look. Then she tried the door. It opened easily. She slid into the passenger seat with a smug smile, closed the door, and didn’t say anything.

“Police work has made you cynical,” I said.

“If you want to ogle my butt, you’ll just have to work for it like everyone else, Harry.”

I snorted and put the car in gear. “Where we going?” “Nowhere until you buckle up,” she said, putting her own seat belt on.

“It’s my car,” I said.

“It’s the law. You want to get cited? ’Cause I can do that.”

I debated whether or not it was worth it while she gave me her cop look—and produced a ballpoint pen.

I buckled up.

Murphy beamed at me. “Springfield. Head for I-55.”

I grunted. “Kind of out of your jurisdiction.”

“If we were investigating something,” Murphy said. “We’re not. We’re going to the fair.”

I eyed her sidelong. “On a date?”

“Sure, if someone asks,” she said off handedly. Then she froze for a second, and added, “It’s a reasonable cover story.”

“Right,” I said. Her cheeks looked a little pink. Neither of us said anything for a little while.

I merged onto the highway, always fun in a car originally designed to rocket down the Autobahn at a blistering one hundred kilometers an hour, and asked Murphy, “Springfield?”

“State Fair,” she said. “That was the common denominator.”

I frowned, going over the dates in my head. “State Fair only runs, what? Ten days?”

Murphy nodded. “They shut down tonight.”

“But the first couple died twelve days ago.”

“They were both volunteer staff for the fair, and they were down there on the grounds setting up.” Murphy lifted a foot to rest her heel on the edge of the passenger seat, frowning out the window. “I found Skee-Ball tickets and one of those chintzy stuffed animals in the second couple’s apartment. And the Bardalackis got pulled over for speeding on I-55, five minutes out of Springfield and bound for Chicago.”

“So *maybe* they went to the fair,” I said. “Or maybe they were just taking a road trip or something.”

Murphy shrugged. “Possibly. But if I assume that it’s a coincidence, it doesn’t get me anywhere—and we’ve got nothing. If I assume there’s a connection, we’ve got a possible answer.”

I beamed at her. “I thought you didn’t like reading Parker.”

She eyed me. “That doesn’t mean his logic isn’t sound.”

“Oh. Right.”

She exhaled heavily. “It’s the best I’ve got. I just hope that if I get you into the general area, you can pick up on whatever is going on.”

“Yeah,” I said, thinking of walls papered in photographs. “Me, too.”

THE SMELLS ARE what I enjoy the most about places like the State Fair. You get combinations of smells at such events like none found anywhere else. Popcorn, roast nuts, and fast food predominate, and you can get anything you want to clog your arteries or burn out your stomach lining. Chili dogs, funnel cakes, fried bread, majorly greasy pizza, candy apples, ye gods. Evil food smells amazing—which is either proof that there is a Satan or some equivalent out there, or that the Almighty doesn't actually want everyone to eat organic tofu all the time. I can't decide.

Other smells are a cross section, depending on where you're standing. Disinfectant and filth walking by the Porta-Potties, exhaust and burned oil and sun-baked asphalt and gravel in the parking lots, sunlight on warm bodies, suntan lotion, cigarette smoke and beer near some of the attendees, the pungent, honest smell of livestock near the animal shows, stock contests, or pony rides—all of it charging right up your nose. I like indulging my sense of smell.

Smell is the hardest sense to lie to.

Murphy and I started in midmorning and began walking around the fair in a methodical search pattern. It took us all day. The State Fair is not a rinky-dink event.

"Dammit," she said. "We've been here all day. You sure you haven't sniffed out anything?"

"Nothing like what we're looking for," I said. "I was afraid of this."

"Of what?"

"A lot of times, magic like this—complex, long-lasting, subtle, dark—doesn't thrive well in sunlight." I glanced at the lengthening shadows. "Give it another half hour and we'll try again."

Murphy frowned at me. "I thought you always said magic isn't about good and evil."

"Neither is sunshine."

Murphy exhaled, her displeasure plain. "You might have mentioned it to me before."

"No way to know until we tried," I said. "Think of it this way: Maybe we're just looking in the exact wrong place."

She sighed and squinted around at the nearby food trailers and concession stands. "Ugh. Think there's anything here that won't make me

split my jeans at the seams?”

I beamed. “Probably not. How about dogs and a funnel cake?”

“Bastard,” Murphy growled. Then, “Okay.”

HALFWAY THROUGH MY second hot dog, I realized we were being followed.

I kept myself from reacting, took another bite, and said, “Maybe this is the place after all.”

Murphy had found a place selling turkey drumsticks. She had cut the meat from the bone and onto a paper plate, and she was eating it with a plastic fork. She didn’t stop chewing or look up. “Whatcha got?”

“Guy in a maroon tee and tan BDU pants, about twenty feet away off your right shoulder. I’ve seen him at least two other times today.”

“Doesn’t necessarily mean he’s following us.”

“He’s been busy doing nothing in particular all three times.”

Murphy nodded. “Five eight or so, long hair? Little soul tuft under his mouth?”

“Yeah.”

“He was sitting on a bench when I came out of the Porta-Potty,” Murphy said. “Also doing nothing.” She shrugged and went back to eating.

“How do you want to play it?”

“We’re here with a zillion people, Harry.” She deepened her voice and blocked out any hint of a nasal tone. “You want I should whack him until he talks?”

I grunted and finished my hot dog. “Doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Maybe he’s got a crush on you.”

Murphy snorted. “Maybe he’s got a crush on *you*.”

I covered a respectable belch with my hand and reached for my funnel cake. “Who could blame him.” I took a bite and nodded. “All right. We’ll see what happens, then.”

Murphy nodded and sipped at her Diet Coke. “Will says you and Anastasia broke up a while back.”

“Will talks too much,” I said darkly.

She glanced a little bit away. “He’s your friend. He worries about you.”

I studied her averted face for a moment and then nodded. “Well,” I said, “tell Will he doesn’t need to worry. It sucked. It sucks less now. I’ll be fine.

Fish in the sea, never meant to be, et cetera.” I paused over another bite of funnel cake and asked, “How’s Kincaid?”

“The way he always is,” Murphy said.

“You get to be a few centuries old, you get a little set in your ways.”

She shook her head. “It’s his type. He’d be that way if he were twenty. He walks his own road and doesn’t let anyone make him do differently. Like ...”

She stopped before she could say who Kincaid was like. She ate her turkey leg.

A shiver passed over the fair, a tactile sensation to my wizard’s senses. Sundown. Twilight would go on for a while yet, but the light left in the sky would no longer hold the creatures of the night at bay.

Murphy glanced up at me, sensing the change in my level of tension. She finished off her drink while I stuffed the last of the funnel cake into my mouth, and we stood up together.

THE WESTERN SKY was still a little bit orange when I finally sensed magic at work.

We were near the carnival, a section of the fair full of garishly lit rides, heavily slanted games of chance, and chintzy attractions of every kind. It was full of screaming, excited little kids, parents with frayed patience, and fashion-enslaved teenagers. Music tinkled and brayed tinny tunes. Lights flashed and danced. Barkers bleated out cajolment, encouragement, and condolences in almost-equal measures.

We drifted through the merry chaos, our maroon-shirted tail following along ten to twenty yards behind. I walked with my eyes half closed, giving no more heed to my vision than a bloodhound on a trail. Murphy stayed beside me, her expression calm, her blue eyes alert for physical danger.

Then I felt it—a quiver in the air, no more noticeable than the fading hum from a gently plucked guitar string. I noted its direction and walked several more paces before checking again, in an attempt to triangulate the source of the disturbance. I got a rough fix on it in under a minute and realized I had stopped and was staring.

“Harry?” Murphy asked. “What is it?”

“Something down there,” I said, nodding to the midway. “It’s faint. But it’s something.”

Murph inhaled sharply. “This must be the place. There goes our tail.”

We didn’t have to communicate the decision to each other. If the tail belonged to whoever was behind this, we couldn’t let him get away to give the culprit forewarning—and odds were excellent that the sudden rabbit impersonation by the man in maroon would result in his leading us somewhere interesting.

We turned and gave pursuit.

A footrace on open ground is one thing. Running through a crowded carnival is something else entirely. You can’t sprint, unless you want to wind up falling down a lot and attracting a lot of attention. You have to hurry along, hopping between clusters of people, never really getting the chance to pour on the gas. The danger in a chase like this isn’t that the quarry will outrun you, but that you’ll lose him in the crowd.

I had a huge advantage. I’m freakishly tall. I could see over everyone and spot Mr. Maroon bobbing and weaving his way through the crowd. I took the lead and Murphy followed.

I got within a couple of long steps of Maroon, but was interdicted by a gaggle of seniors in Shriners caps. He caught a break at the same time, a stretch of open ground beyond the Shriners, and by the time I got through, I saw Maroon handing tickets to a carnie. He hopped up onto a platform, got into a little roller coaster-style car, and vanished into an attraction.

“Dammit!” Murphy said, panting. “What now?”

Behind the attraction, advertised as the Tunnel of Terror, there was an empty space, the interior of a circle of several similar rides and games. There wouldn’t be anyone to hide behind in there. “You take the back. I’ll watch the front. Whoever spots him gives a shout.”

“Got it.” Murphy hurried off around the Tunnel of Terror. She frowned at a little plastic barrier with an AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY notice on it, then calmly ignored it and went on over.

“Anarchist,” I muttered, and settled down to wait for Maroon to figure out he’d been treed.

He didn’t appear.

The dingy little roller coaster car came wheezing slowly out of the opposite side of the platform, empty. The carnie, an old fellow with a scruffy white beard, didn’t notice—he was dozing in his chair.

Murphy returned a few seconds later. “There are two doors on the back,” she reported, “both of them chained and locked from the outside. He didn’t

come out that way.”

I inhaled and nodded at the empty car. “Not here, either. Look, we can’t just stand around. Maybe he’s running through a tunnel or something. We’ve got to know if he’s inside.”

“I’ll go flush him out,” she said. “You pick him up when he shows.”

“No way,” I said. “We stay with our wing”—I glanced at Murphy—“person. The power I sensed came from somewhere nearby. If we split up, we’re about a million times more vulnerable to mental manipulation. And if this guy is more than he appears, neither of us wants to take him solo.”

She grimaced, nodded, and we started toward the Tunnel of Terror together.

The old carnie woke up as we came up the ramp, let out a wheezing cough, and pointed to a sign that required us to give him three tickets each for the ride. I hadn’t bought any, and the ticket counter was more than far enough away for Maroon to scamper if we stopped to follow the rules.

“Sir,” Murphy said, “a man we’re looking for just went into your attraction, but he didn’t come out again. We need to go in and look for him.”

He blinked gummy eyes at Murphy and said, “Three tickets.”

“You don’t understand,” she said. “A fugitive may be hiding inside the Tunnel of Terror. We need to check and see if he’s there.”

The carnie snorted. “Three tickets, missy. Though it ain’t the nicest room you two could rent.”

Murphy’s jaw muscles flexed.

I stepped forward. “Hey, man,” I said. “Harry Dresden, PI. If you wouldn’t mind, all we need to do is get inside for five minutes.”

He eyed me. “PI, huh?”

I produced my license and showed it to him. He eyed it and then me. “You don’t look like no private investigator I ever saw. Where’s your hat?”

“In the shop,” I said. “Transmission gave out.” I winked at him and held up a folded twenty between my first and second fingers. “Five minutes?”

He yawned. “Naw. Can’t let nobody run around loose in there.” He reached out and took the twenty. “Then again, what you and your lady friend mutually consent to do once you’re inside ain’t my affair.” He rose, pulled a lever, and gestured at the car. “Mount up,” he leered. “And keep your, ah, extremities inside the car at all times.”

We got in, and I was nearly scalded by the steam coming out of Murphy's ears. "You just had to play along with that one."

"We needed to get inside," I said. "Just doing my job, Sergeant."

She snorted.

"Hey, Murph, look," I said, holding up a strap of old, worn leather. "Seat belts."

She gave me a look that could have scoured steel. Then, with a stubborn set of her jaw, secured the flimsy thing. Her expression dared me to object.

I grinned and relaxed. It isn't easy to really get Murph's goat and get away with it.

On the other side of the platform, the carnie pulled another lever, and a moment later the little cart started rolling forward at the blazing speed of one, maybe even two miles an hour. A dark curtain parted ahead of us, and we rolled into the Tunnel of Terror.

Murphy promptly drew her gun—it was dark, but I heard the scratch of its barrel on plastic as she drew it from its holder. She snapped a small LED flashlight into its holder beneath the gun barrel and flicked it on. We were in a cramped little tunnel, every surface painted black, and there was absolutely nowhere for Maroon to be hiding.

I shook out the charm bracelet on my left wrist, preparing defensive energies in case they were needed. Murph and I had been working together long enough to know our roles. If trouble came, I would defend us. Murphy and her Sig would reply.

A door opened at the end of the little hallway, and we rolled forward into an open set dressed to look like a rustic farmhouse, with a lot of subtle details meant to be scary—severed fingers at the base of the chicken-chopping stump, just below the bloody ax, glowing eyes appearing in an upstairs window of the farmhouse, that kind of thing. There was no sign of Maroon and precious little place for him to hide.

"Better get that seat belt off," I told her. "We want to be able to move fast if it comes to that."

"Yeah," she said, and reached down, just as something huge and terrifying dropped onto the car from the shadows above us, screaming.

Adrenaline hit my system like a runaway bus, and I looked up to see a decidedly demonic scarecrow hanging a few feet above our heads, bouncing on its wires, and playing a recording of cackling, mad laughter.

“Jesus Christ,” Murphy breathed, lowering her gun. She was a little white around the eyes.

We looked at each other and both burst into high, nervous laughs.

“Tunnel of Terror,” Murphy said. “We are so cool.”

“Total badasses,” I said, grinning.

The car continued its slow grind forward, and Murphy unfastened the seat belt. We moved into the next area, meant to be a zombie-infested hospital. It had a zombie mannequin, which burst out of a closet near the track, and plenty of gore. We got out of the car and scouted a couple of spots where he might have been but wasn’t. Then we hopped into the car again before it could leave the set.

So it went, on through a ghoulish graveyard, a troglodyte-teaming cavern, and a literal Old West ghost town. We came up with nothing, but we moved well as a team, better than I could remember doing with anyone before. Everything felt as smooth and natural as if we’d been moving together our whole lives. We did it in total silence, too, divining what each other would do through pure instinct.

Even great teams lose a game here or there, though. We came up with diddly and emerged from the Tunnel of Terror with neither Maroon nor any idea where he’d gone.

“Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “This week has been an investigative suckfest for me.”

Murphy tittered again. “You said *suck*.”

I grinned at her and looked around. “Well,” I said, “we don’t know where Maroon went. If they hadn’t made us already, they have now.”

“Can you pick up on the signal-whatsit again?”

“Energy signature,” I said. “Maybe. It’s pretty vague, though. I’m not sure how much more precise I can get.”

“Let’s find out,” she said.

I nodded. “Right, then.” We started around the suspect circle of attractions, moving slowly and trying to blend into the crowds. When a couple of rowdy kids went by, one chasing the other, I put an arm around her shoulders and drew her into the shelter of my body so she wouldn’t get bowled over.

She exhaled slowly and did not step away from me.

My heart started beating faster.

“Harry,” she said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“You and me ... Why haven’t we ever ...” She looked up at me. “Why not?”

“The usual, I guess,” I said quietly. “Trouble. Duty. Other people involved.”

She shook her head. “Why not?” she repeated, her eyes direct. “All these years have gone by. And something could have happened, but it never did. Why not?”

I licked my lips. “Just like that? We just decide to be together?”

Her eyelids lowered. “Why not?”

My heart did the drum solo from “Wipeout.”

Why not?

I bent my head down to her mouth and kissed her, very gently.

She turned into the kiss, pressing her body against mine. It was a little bit awkward. I was most of two feet taller than she was. We made up for grace with enthusiasm, her arms twining around my neck as she kissed me, hungry and deep.

“Whoa,” I said, drawing back a moment later. “Work. Right?”

She looked at me for a moment, her cheeks pink, her lips a little swollen from the kiss, and said, “Right.” She closed her eyes and nodded. “Right. Work first.”

“Then dinner?” I asked.

“Dinner. My place. We can order in.”

My belly trembled in sudden excitement at that proposition. “Right.” I looked around. “So let’s find this thing and get it over with.”

We started moving again. A circuit around the attractions got me no closer to the source of the energy I’d sensed earlier.

“Dammit,” I said, frustrated, when we’d completed the pattern.

“Hey,” Murphy said. “Don’t beat yourself up about it, Harry.” Her hand slipped into mine, our fingers intertwining. “I’ve been a cop a long time. You don’t always get the bad guy. And if you go around blaming yourself for it, you wind up crawling into a bottle or eating your own gun.”

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “But ...”

“Heh,” Murphy said. “You said *but*.”

We both grinned like fools. I looked down at our entwined hands. “I like this.”

“So do I,” Murphy said. “Why didn’t we do this a long time ago?”

“Beats me.”

“Are we just that stupid?” she asked. “I mean, people, in general. Are we really so blind that we miss what’s right there in front of us?”

“As a species, we’re essentially insane,” I said. “So, yeah, probably.” I lifted our hands and kissed her fingertips. “I’m not missing it now, though.”

Her smile lit up several thousand square feet of the midway. “Good.”

The echo of a thought rattled around in my head: *Insane ...*

“Oh,” I said. “Oh, hell’s bells.”

She frowned at me. “What?”

“Murph ... I think we got whammied.”

She blinked at me. “What? No, we didn’t.”

“I think we did.”

“I didn’t see anything or feel anything. I mean, *nothing*, Harry. I’ve felt magic like that before.”

“*Look* at us,” I said, waving our joined hands.

“We’ve been friends a long time, Harry,” she said. “And we’ve had a couple of near misses before. This time we just didn’t screw it up. That’s all that’s happening here.”

“What about Kincaid?” I asked her.

She mulled over that one for a second. Then she said, “I doubt he’ll even notice I’m gone.” She frowned at me. “Harry, I haven’t been this happy in ... I never thought I could feel this way again. About anyone.”

My heart continued to go pitty-pat. “I know exactly what you mean,” I said. “I feel the same way.”

Her smile warmed even more. “Then what’s the problem? Isn’t that what love is supposed to be like? Effortless?”

I had to think about that one for a second. And then I said, carefully and slowly, “Murph, think about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know how good this is?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“How right it feels?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“How easy it was?”

She nodded energetically, her eyes bright.

I leaned down toward her for emphasis. “It just isn’t fucked-up enough to really be you and me.”

Her smile faltered.

“My God,” she said, her eyes widening. “We got whammied.”

WE RETURNED TO the Tunnel of Terror.

“I don’t get it,” she said. “I don’t ... I didn’t feel anything happen. I don’t feel any different now. I thought being aware of this kind of thing made it go away.”

“No,” I said. “But it helps sometimes.”

“Do you still ... ?”

I squeezed her hand once more before letting go. “Yeah,” I said. “I still feel it.”

“Is it ... Is it going to go away?”

I didn’t answer her. I didn’t know. Or maybe I didn’t want to know.

The old carnie saw us coming, and his face flickered with apprehension as soon as he looked at us. He stood up and looked from the control board for the ride to the entranceway to the interior.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Sneaky bastard. You just try it.”

He flicked one of the switches and shuffled toward the tunnel’s entrance.

I made a quick effort of will, raised a hand, and swept it in a horizontal arc, snarling, “*Forzare!*” Unseen force knocked his legs out from beneath him and tossed him into an involuntary pratfall.

Murphy and I hurried up onto the platform before he could get to his feet and run. We needn’t have bothered. The carnie was apparently a genuine old guy, not some supernatural being in disguise. He lay on the platform moaning in pain. I felt kind of bad for beating up a senior citizen.

But hey. On the other hand, he did swindle me out of twenty bucks.

Murphy stood over him, her blue eyes cold, and said, “Where’s the bolt-hole?”

The carnie blinked at her. “Wha?”

“The trapdoor,” she snapped. “The secret cabinet. Where is he?”

I frowned and walked toward the entranceway.

“Please,” the carnie said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“The hell you don’t,” Murphy said. She leaned down and grabbed the man by the shirt with both hands and leaned closer, a snarl lifting her lip. The carnie blanched.

Murph could be pretty badass for such a tiny thing. I loved that about her.

“I can’t,” the carnie said. “I can’t. I get paid not to see anything. She’ll kill me. She’ll kill me.”

I parted the heavy curtain leading into the entry tunnel and spotted it at once—a circular hole in the floor about two feet across, the top end of a ladder just visible. A round lid lay rotated to one side, painted as flat black as the rest of the hall. “Here,” I said to Murph. “That’s why we didn’t spot anything. By the time you had your light on, it was already behind us.”

Murphy scowled down at the carnie and said, “Give me twenty bucks.”

The man licked his lips. Then he fished my folded twenty out of his shirt pocket and passed it to Murphy.

She nodded and flashed her badge. “Get out of here before I realize I witnessed you taking a bribe and endangering lives by letting customers use the attraction in an unsafe manner.”

The carnie bolted.

Murphy handed me the twenty. I pocketed it, and we climbed down the ladder.

WE REACHED THE bottom and went silent again. Murphy’s body language isn’t exactly subtle—it can’t be, when you’re her size and working law enforcement. But she could move as quietly as smoke when she needed to. I’m gangly. It was more of an effort for me.

The ladder took us down to what looked like the interior of a buried railroad car. There were electrical conduits running along the walls. Light came from a doorway at the far end of the car. I moved forward first, shield bracelet at the ready, and Murphy walked a pace behind me and to my right, her Sig held ready.

The doorway at the end of the railroad car led us into a large workroom, teeming with computers, file cabinets, microscopes, and at least one deluxe chemistry set.

Maroon sat at one of the computers, his profile in view. “Dammit, Stu,” he snarled. “I told you that you can’t keep coming down here to use the john. You’ll just have to walk to one of the—” He glanced up at us and froze in midsentence, his eyes wide and locked on Murphy’s leveled gun.

“Stu took the rest of the night off,” I said amiably. “Where’s your boss?”

A door opened at the far end of the workroom and a young woman of medium height appeared. She wore glasses and a lab coat, and neither of them did anything to make her look less than gorgeous. She looked at us and then at Maroon and said, in a precise, British accent, "You idiot."

"Yeah," I said. "Good help is hard to find."

The woman in the lab coat looked at me with dark, intense eyes, and I sensed what felt like a phantom pressure against my temples, as if wriggling tadpoles were slithering along the surface of my skin. It was a straightforward attempt at mental invasion, but I'd been practicing my defenses for a while now, and I wasn't falling for something that obvious. I pushed the invasive thoughts away with an effort of will and said, "Don't meet her eyes, Murph. She's a vampire. Red Court."

"Got it," she said, her gun never moving from Maroon.

The vampire looked at us both for a moment. Then she said, "You need no introduction, Mr. Dresden. I am Baroness LeBlanc. And our nations are not, at the moment, in a state of war."

"I've always been a little fuzzy on legal niceties," I said. I had several devices with me that I could use to defend myself. I was ready to use any of them. A vampire in close quarters is nothing to laugh at. LeBlanc could tear off three or four of my limbs in the time it takes to draw and fire a gun. I watched her closely, ready to act at the slightest semblance of an attack. "We both know the war is going to start up again eventually."

"You are out of anything reasonably like your territory," she said, "and you are trespassing upon mine. I would be well within my rights under the Accords to kill you and bury your torso and limbs in individual graves."

"That's the problem with this ride," I complained to Murphy. "There's nothing that's actually *scary* in the Tunnel of Terror."

"You did get your money back," she pointed out.

"Ah, true." I smiled faintly at LeBlanc. "Look, Baroness. You know who I am. You're doing something to people's minds, and I want it stopped."

"If you do not leave," she said, "I will consider it an act of war."

"Hooray," I said in a Ben Stein monotone, spinning one forefinger in the air like a New Year's noisemaker. "I've already kicked off one war with the Red Court, and I will cheerfully do it again if that is what is necessary to protect people from you."

"That's irrational," LeBlanc said. "Completely irrational."

"Tell her, Murph."

“He’s completely irrational,” Murphy said, her tone wry.

LeBlanc regarded me impassively for a moment. Then she smiled faintly and said, “Perhaps a physical confrontation is an inappropriate solution.”

I frowned. “Really?”

She shrugged. “Not all of the Red Court are battle-hungry blood addicts, Dresden. My work here has no malevolent designs. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

I tilted my head. “That’s funny. All the corpses piled up say differently.”

“The process *does* have its side effects,” she admitted. “But the lessons garnered from them serve only to improve my work and make it safer and more effective. Honestly, you should be supporting me, Dresden, not trying to shut me down.”

“Supporting you?” I smiled a little. “Just what is it you think you’re doing that’s so darned wonderful?”

“I am creating love.”

I barked out a laugh.

LeBlanc’s face remained steady, serious.

“You think that *this*, this warping people into feeling something they don’t want to feel is *love*?”

“What is love,” LeBlanc said, “if not a series of electrochemical signals in the brain? Signals that can be duplicated, like any other sensation.”

“Love is more than that,” I said.

“Do you love this woman?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But that isn’t anything new.”

LeBlanc showed her teeth. “But your current feelings of longing and desire are new, are they not? New and entirely indistinguishable from your genuine emotions? Wouldn’t you say, Sergeant Murphy?”

Murphy swallowed but didn’t look at the vampire. LeBlanc’s uncomplicated mental attack might be simple for a wizard to defeat, but any normal human being would probably be gone before they realized their minds were under attack. Instead of answering, she asked a question of her own. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do this? Why experiment with making people fall in love?”

LeBlanc arched an eyebrow. “Isn’t it obvious?”

I sucked in a short breath, realizing what was happening. “The White Court,” I said.

The Whites were a different breed of vampire from the Reds, feeding on the life essence of their victims, generally through seduction. Genuine love and genuine tokens of love were their kryptonite, their holy water. The love of another human being in an intimate relationship sort of rubbed off on you, making the very touch of your skin an anathema to the White Court.

LeBlanc smiled at me. "Granted, there are some aberrant effects from time to time. But so far, that's been a very small percentage of the test pool. And the survivors are, as you yourself have experienced, perfectly happy. They have a love that most of your kind seldom find and even more infrequently keep. There are no victims here, Wizard."

"Oh," I said. "Right. Except for the victims."

LeBlanc exhaled. "Mortals are like mayflies, Wizard. They live a brief time, and then they are gone. And those who have died because of my work at least died after days or weeks of perfect bliss. There are many who ended a much longer life with less. What I'm doing here has the potential to protect mortalkind from the White Court forever."

"It isn't genuine love if it's forced upon someone," Murphy said, her tone harsh.

"No," LeBlanc said. "But I believe the real thing will very easily grow from such a foundation of companionship and happiness."

"Gosh, you're noble," I said.

LeBlanc's eyes sparkled with something ugly.

"You're doing this to get rid of competition," I said. "And, hell, maybe to try to increase the world's population. Make more food."

The vampire regarded me levelly. "There are multiple motivations behind the work," she said. "Many of my Court agreed to the logic you cite when they would never have supported the idea of strengthening and defending mortals."

"Ohhhhh," I said, drawing the word out. "You're the vampire with a heart of gold. Florence Nightingale with fangs. I guess that makes it okay, then."

LeBlanc stared at me. Then her eyes flicked to Murphy and back. She smiled thinly. "There is a special cage reserved for you at the Red Court, Dresden. Its bars are lined with blades and spikes, so that if you fall asleep, they will cut and gouge you awake."

"Shut up," Murphy said.

LeBlanc continued in a calmly amused tone. "The bottom is a closed bowl nearly a foot deep, so that you will stand in your own waste. And

there are three spears with needle-sized tips waiting in a rack beneath the cage, so that any who pass you can pause and take a few moments to participate in your punishment.”

“Shut up,” Murphy growled.

“Eventually,” LeBlanc purred, “your guts will be torn out and left in a pile at your feet. And when you are dead, your skin will be flayed from your body, tanned, and made into upholstery for one of the chairs in the Red Temple.”

“Shut up!” snarled Murphy, and her voice was savage. Her gun whipped over to cover LeBlanc. “Shut your mouth, bitch!”

I realized the danger an instant too late. It was exactly the reaction LeBlanc had intended to provoke. “Murph! No!”

Once Murphy’s Sig was pointing elsewhere, Maroon produced a gun from beneath his desk and raised it. He was pulling the trigger even before he could level it for a shot, blazing away as fast as he could move his finger. He wasn’t quite fifteen feet away from Murphy, but the first five shots missed her as I spun and brought the invisible power of my shield bracelet down between the two of them. Bullets hit the shield with flashes of light and sent little concentric blue rings rippling through the air from the point of impact.

Murphy, meanwhile, had opened up on LeBlanc. Murph fired almost as quickly as Maroon, but she had the training and discipline necessary for combat. Her bullets smacked into the vampire’s torso, tearing through pale flesh and drawing gouts of red-black blood. LeBlanc staggered to one side—she wouldn’t be dead, but the shots had probably rung her bell for a second or two.

I lowered the shield as Maroon’s gun clicked on empty, lifted my right fist, and triggered the braided energy ring on my index finger with a short, uplifting motion. The ring saved back a little energy every time I moved my arm, storing it so that I could unleash it at need. Unseen force flew out from the ring, plucked Maroon out of his chair, and slammed him into the ceiling. He dropped back down, hit his back on the edge of the desk, and fell into a senseless sprawl on the floor. The gun flew from his fingers.

“I’m out!” Murphy screamed.

I whirled back to find LeBlanc pushing herself off the wall, regaining her balance. She gave Murphy a look of flat hatred, and her eyes flushed pure black, iris and sclera alike. She opened her mouth in an inhuman scream,

and then the vampire hiding beneath LeBlanc's seemingly human form exploded outward like a racehorse emerging from its gate, leaving shreds of pale, bloodless skin in its wake.

It was a hideous thing—black and flabby and slimy looking, with a flaccid belly, a batlike face, and long, spindly limbs. LeBlanc's eyes bulged hideously as she flew toward me.

I brought my shield up in time to intercept her, and she rebounded from it, to fall back to the section of floor already stained with her blood.

“Down!” Murphy shouted.

I dropped down onto my heels and lowered the shield.

LeBlanc rose up again, even as I heard Murphy take a deep breath, exhale halfway, and hold it. Her gun barked once.

The vampire lost about a fifth of her head as the bullet tore into her skull. She staggered back against the wall, limbs thrashing, but she still wasn't dead. She began to claw her way to her feet again.

Murphy squeezed off six more shots, methodically. None of them missed. LeBlanc fell to the floor. Murphy took a step closer, aimed, and put another ten or twelve rounds into the fallen vampire's head. By the time she was done, the vampire's skull looked like a smashed gourd.

A few seconds later, LeBlanc stopped moving.

Murphy reloaded again and kept the gun trained on the corpse.

“Nice shootin', Tex,” I said. I checked out Maroon. He was still breathing.

“So,” Murphy said, “problem solved?”

“Not really,” I said. “LeBlanc was no practitioner. She can't be the one who was working the whammy.”

Murphy frowned and eyed Maroon for a second.

I went over to the downed man and touched my fingers lightly to his brow. There was no telltale energy signature of a practitioner. “Nope.”

“Who, then?”

I shook my head. “This is delicate, difficult magic. There might not be three people on the entire White Council who could pull it off. So ... it's most likely a focus artifact of some kind.”

“A what?”

“An item that has a routine built into it,” I said. “You pour energy in one end, and you get results on the other.”

Murphy scrunched up her nose. “Like those wolf belts the FBI had?”

“Yeah, just like that.” I blinked and snapped my fingers. “*Just* like that!”

I hurried out of the little complex and up the ladder. I went to the tunnel car and took the old leather seat belt out of it. I turned it over and found the back inscribed with nearly invisible sigils and signs. Now that I was looking for it, I could feel the tingle of energy moving within it. “Hah,” I said. “Got it.”

Murphy frowned back at the entry to the Tunnel of Terror. “What do we do about Billy the Kid?”

“Not much we can do,” I said. “You want to try to explain what happened here to the Springfield cops?”

She shook her head.

“Me, either,” I said. “The kid was LeBlanc’s thrall. I doubt he’s a danger to anyone without a vampire to push him into it.” Besides, the Reds would probably kill him on general principles, anyway, once they found out about LeBlanc’s death.

We were silent for a moment, then stepped in close to each other and hugged gently. Murphy shivered.

“You okay?” I asked quietly.

She leaned her head against my chest. “How do we help all the people she screwed with?”

“Burn the belt,” I said, and stroked her hair with one hand. “That should purify everyone it’s linked to.”

“Everyone,” she said slowly.

I blinked twice. “Yeah.”

“So once you do it ... we’ll see what a bad idea this is. And remember that we both have very good reasons to not get together.”

“Yeah.”

“And ... we won’t be feeling *this* anymore. This ... happy. This complete.”

“No. We won’t.”

Her voice cracked. “Dammit.”

I hugged her tight. “Yeah.”

“I want to tell you to wait awhile,” she said. “I want us to be all noble and virtuous for keeping it intact. I want to tell you that if we destroy the belt, we’ll be destroying the happiness of God knows how many people.”

“Junkies are happy when they’re high,” I said quietly, “but they don’t need to be happy. They need to be free.”

I put the belt back into the car, turned my right hand palm up, and murmured a word. A sphere of white-hot fire gathered over my fingers. I flicked a hand, and the sphere arched gently down into the car and began charring the belt to ashes. I felt sick.

I didn't watch. I turned to Karrin and kissed her again, hot and urgent, and she returned the kiss frantically. It was as though we thought we might keep something from escaping our mouths if they were sealed together in a kiss.

I felt it when it went away.

We both stiffened slightly. We both remembered that we had decided the two of us couldn't work out. We both remembered that Murphy was already involved with someone else and that it wasn't in her nature to stray.

She stepped back from me, her arms folded across her stomach.

"Ready?" I asked her quietly.

She nodded, and we started walking. Neither of us said anything until we reached the *Blue Beetle*.

"You know what, Harry?" she said quietly from the other side of the car.

"I know," I told her. "Like you said, love hurts."

We got into the Beetle and headed back to Chicago.

JIM BUTCHER

TURN COAT

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES



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For Bob. Sleep well.

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Acknowledgments

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And, always, for Shannon and JJ, who like me even when I vanish into my own head for days at a time.

Chapter One

The summer sun was busy broiling the asphalt from Chicago's streets, the agony in my head had kept me horizontal for half a day, and some idiot was pounding on my apartment door.

I answered it and Morgan, half his face covered in blood, gasped, "The Wardens are coming. Hide me. Please."

His eyes rolled back into his skull and he collapsed.

Oh.

Super.

Up until that moment, I'd been laboring under the misapprehension that the splitting pain in my skull would be the worst thing to happen to me today.

"Hell's frickin' bells!" I blurted at Morgan's unconscious form. "You have *got* to be kidding me!" I was really, really tempted to slam the door and leave him lying there in a heap.

He sure as hell deserved it.

I couldn't just stand there doing nothing, though.

"You need to get your head examined," I muttered to myself. Then I deactivated my wards—the magical security system I've got laid over my apartment—grabbed Morgan under the arms, and hauled him inside. He was a big man, over six feet, with plenty of muscle—and he was completely limp. I had a hard time moving him, even though I'm no junior petite myself.

I shut the door behind me and brought my wards back up. Then I waved a hand at my apartment in general, focused my will, and muttered, "*Flickum bicus*." A dozen candles spaced around the room flickered to life as I pronounced the simple spell, and I knelt beside the unconscious Morgan, examining him for injuries.

He had half a dozen nasty cuts, oozing and ugly and probably painful, but not life-threatening. The flesh on his ribs, beneath his left arm, was blistered and burned, and his plain white shirt had been scorched away. He also had a deep wound in one leg that was clumsily wrapped in what looked like a kitchen apron. I didn't dare unwrap the thing. It could start the bleeding again, and my medical skills are nothing I'd want to bet a life on.

Even Morgan's life.

He needed a doctor.

Unfortunately, if the Wardens of the White Council were pursuing him, they probably knew he was wounded. They would, therefore, be watching hospitals. If I took him to one of the local emergency rooms, the Council would know about it within hours.

So I called a friend.

Waldo Butters studied Morgan's injuries in silence for a few moments, while I hovered. He was a wiry little guy, and his black hair stood up helter-skelter, like the fur of a frightened cat. He wore green hospital scrubs and sneakers, and his hands were swift and nimble. He had dark and very intelligent eyes behind black wire-rimmed spectacles, and looked like he hadn't slept in two weeks.

"I'm not a doctor," Butters said.

We'd done this dance several times. "You are the Mighty Butters," I said. "You can do anything."

"I'm a medical examiner. I cut up corpses."

"If it helps, think of this as a preventative autopsy."

Butters gave me an even look and said, "Can't take him to the hospital, huh?"

"Yeah."

Butters shook his head. "Isn't this the guy who tried to kill you that one Halloween?"

"And a few other times before that," I said.

He opened a medical kit and started rummaging through it. "I was never really clear on why."

I shrugged. "When I was a kid, I killed a man with magic. I was captured by the Wardens and tried by the White Council."

"I guess you got off."

I shook my head. "But they figured that since I was just trying to survive the guy killing me with magic, maybe I deserved a break. Suspended sentence, sort of. Morgan was my probation officer."

"Probation?" Butters asked.

"If I screwed up again, he was supposed to chop my head off. He followed me around looking for a good excuse to do it."

Butters blinked up at me, surprised.

"I spent the first several years of my adult life looking over my shoulder, worrying about this guy. Getting hounded and harassed by him. I had nightmares for a while, and he was in

them." Truth be told, I *still* had nightmares occasionally, about being pursued by an implacable killer in a grey cloak, holding a wicked cold sword.

Butters began to wet the bandages over the leg wound. "And you're helping him?"

I shrugged. "He thought I was a dangerous animal and needed to be put down. He really believed it, and acted accordingly."

Butters gave me a quick glance. "And you're *helping* him?"

"He was wrong," I said. "That doesn't make him a villain. It just makes him an asshole. It isn't reason enough to kill him."

"Reconciled, eh?"

"Not especially."

Butters lifted his eyebrows. "Then why'd he come to *you* for help?"

"Last place anyone would look for him be my guess."

"Jesus Christ," Butters muttered. He'd gotten the improvised bandage off, and found a wound maybe three inches long, but deep, its edges puckered like a little mouth. Blood began drooling from it. "It's like a knife wound, but bigger."

"That's probably because it was done with something like a knife, but bigger."

"A sword?" Butters said. "You've got to be kidding me."

"The Council's old school," I said. "Really, really, *really* old school."

Butters shook his head. "Wash your hands the way I just did. Do it thorough—takes two or three minutes. Then get a pair of gloves on and get back here. I need an extra pair of hands."

I swallowed. "Uhh. Butters, I don't know if I'm the right guy to—"

"Oh bite me, wizard boy," Butters said, his tone annoyed. "You haven't got a moral leg to stand on. If it's okay that I'm not a doctor, it's okay that you aren't a nurse. So wash your freaking hands and help me before we lose him."

I stared at Butters helplessly for a second. Then I got up and washed my freaking hands.

For the record, surgeries aren't pretty. There's a hideous sense of intimately inappropriate exposure to another human being, and it feels something like accidentally walking in on a naked parent. Only there's more gore. Bits are exposed that just shouldn't be out in the open, and they're covered in blood. It's embarrassing, disgusting, and unsettling all at the same time.

"There," Butters said, an infinity later. "Okay, let go. Get your hands out of my way."

"It cut the artery?" I asked.

"Oh, hell no," Butters said. "Whoever stabbed him barely nicked it. Otherwise he'd be dead."

"But it's fixed, right?"

"For some definitions of 'fixed.' Harry, this is meatball surgery of the roughest sort, but the wound should stay closed as long as he doesn't go walking around on it. And he should get looked at by a real doctor soonest." He frowned in concentration. "Just give me a minute to close up here."

"Take all the time you need."

Butters fell silent while he worked, and didn't speak again until after he'd finished sewing the wound closed and covered the site in bandages. Then he turned his attention to the smaller injuries, closing most of them with bandages, suturing a particularly ugly one. He also applied a topical antibiotic to the burn, and carefully covered it in a layer of gauze.

"Okay," Butters said. "I sterilized everything as best I could, but it wouldn't shock me to see an infection anyway. He starts running a fever, or if there's too much swelling, you've got to get him to one of two places—the hospital or the morgue."

"Got it," I said quietly.

"We should get him onto a bed. Get him warm."

"Okay."

We lifted Morgan by the simple expedient of picking up the entire area rug he was lying on, and settled him down on the only bed in the place, the little twin in my closet-sized bedroom. We covered him up.

"He really ought to have a saline IV going," Butters said. "For that matter, a unit of blood couldn't hurt, either. And he needs antibiotics, man, but I can't write prescriptions."

"I'll handle it," I said.

Butters grimaced at me, his dark eyes concerned. He started to speak and then stopped, several times.

"Harry," he said, finally. "You're on the White Council, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"And you are a Warden, aren't you?"

"Yep."

Butters shook his head. "So, your own people are after this guy. I can't imagine that they'll be very happy with you if they find him here."

I shrugged. "They're always upset about something."

"I'm serious. This is nothing but trouble for you. So why help him?"

I was quiet for a moment, looking down at Morgan's slack, pale, unconscious face.

"Because Morgan wouldn't break the Laws of Magic," I said quietly. "Not even if it cost him his life."

"You sound pretty sure about that."

I nodded. "I am. I'm helping him because I know what it feels like to have the Wardens on your ass for something you haven't done." I rose and looked away from the unconscious man on my bed. "I know it better than anyone alive."

Butters shook his head. "You are a rare kind of crazy, man."

"Thanks."

He started cleaning up everything he'd set out during the improvised surgery. "So. How are the headaches?"

They'd been a problem, the past several months—increasingly painful migraines. "Fine," I told him.

"Yeah, right," Butters said. "I really wish you'd try the MRI again."

Technology and wizards don't coexist well, and magnetic resonance imagers are right up there. "One baptism in fire-extinguishing foam per year is my limit," I said.

"It could be something serious," Butters said. "Anything happens in your head or neck, you don't take chances. There's way too much going on there."

"They're lightening up," I lied.

"Hogwash," Butters said, giving me a gimlet stare. "You've got a headache now, don't you?"

I looked from Butters to Morgan's recumbent form. "Yeah," I said. "I sure as hell got one now."

Chapter Two

Morgan slept. My first impression of the guy had stuck with me pretty hard—tall, heavily muscled, with a lean, sunken face I’d always associated with religious ascetics and half-crazy artists. He had brown hair that was unevenly streaked with iron, and a beard that, while always kept trimmed, perpetually seemed to need a few more weeks to fill out. He had hard, steady eyes, and all the comforting, reassuring charm of a dental drill.

Asleep, he looked . . . old. Tired. I noticed the deep worry lines between his brows and at the corners of his mouth. His hands, which were large and blunt-fingered, showed more of his age than the rest of him. I knew he was better than a century old, which was nudging toward active maturity, for a wizard. There were scars across both of his hands—the graffiti of violence. The last two fingers of his right hand were stiff and slightly crooked, as if they’d been badly broken, and healed without being properly set. His eyes looked sunken, and the skin beneath them was dark enough to resemble bruises. Maybe Morgan had bad dreams, too.

It was harder to be afraid of him when he was asleep.

Mouse, my big grey dog, rose from his usual napping post in the kitchen alcove, and shambled over to stand beside me, two hundred pounds of silent companionship. He looked soberly at Morgan and then up at me.

“Do me a favor,” I told him. “Stay with him. Make sure he doesn’t try to walk on that leg. It could kill him.”

Mouse nudged his head against my hip, made a quiet snorting sound, and padded over to the bed. He lay down on the floor, stretching out alongside it, and promptly went back to sleep.

I pulled the door most of the way shut and sank down into the easy chair by the fireplace, where I could rub my temples and try to think.

The White Council of Wizards was the governing body for the practice of magic in the world, and made up of its most powerful practitioners. Being a member of the White Council was something akin to earning your black belt in a martial art—it meant that you could handle yourself well, that you had real skill that was recognized by your fellow wizards. The Council oversaw the use of magic among its members, according to the Seven Laws of Magic.

God help the poor practitioner who broke one of the Laws. The Council would send the Wardens to administer justice, which generally took the form of ruthless pursuit, a swift trial, and a prompt execution—when the offender wasn’t killed resisting arrest.

It sounds harsh, and it is—but over time I’d been forced to admit that it might well be necessary. The use of black magic corrupts the mind and the heart and the soul of the wizard employing it. It doesn’t happen instantly, and it doesn’t happen all at once—it’s a slow, festering thing that grows like a tumor, until whatever human empathy and compassion a person might have once had is consumed in the need for power. By the time a wizard has fallen to that temptation and become a warlock, people are dead, or worse than dead. It was the duty of the Wardens to make a quick end of warlocks—by any means necessary.

There was more to being a Warden than that, though. They were also the soldiers and defenders of the White Council. In our recent war with the Vampire Courts, the lion’s share of the fighting had been carried out by the Wardens, those men and women with a gift for swift, violent magic. Hell, in most of the battles, such as they were, it had been Morgan who was in the center of the fighting.

I’d done my share during the war, but among my fellow Wardens, the only ones who were happy to work with me had been the newer recruits. The older ones had all seen too many lives shattered by the abuse of magic, and their experiences had marked them deeply. With one exception, they didn’t like me, they didn’t trust me, and they didn’t want anything to do with me.

That generally suited me just fine.

Over the past few years, the White Council had come to realize that someone on the inside was feeding information to the vampires. A lot of people died because of the traitor, but he, or she, had never been identified. Given how much the Council in general and the Wardens in particular loved me, the ensuing paranoia-fest had kept my life from getting too boring—especially after I’d been dragooned into joining the Wardens myself, as part of the war effort.

So why was Morgan here, asking for help from *me*?

Call me crazy, but my suspicious side immediately put forward the idea that Morgan was trying to sucker me into doing something to get me into major hot water with the Council again. Hell, he’d tried to kill me that way, once, several years ago. But logic simply didn’t support that idea. If Morgan wasn’t really in trouble with the Council, then I couldn’t get into trouble for hiding him from a pursuit that didn’t exist. Besides, his injuries said more about his sincerity than any number of words could. They had not been faked.

He was actually on the lam.

Until I found out more about what was going on, I didn’t dare go to anyone for help. I couldn’t very well ask my fellow Wardens about Morgan without it being painfully obvious that I had seen him, which would only attract their interest. And if the Council was after Morgan, then anyone who helped him would become an accomplice to the crime, and draw heat of his own. I couldn’t ask anyone to help me.

Anyone else, I corrected myself. I’d had little option but to call Butters in—and frankly, the fact that he was not at all involved in the supernatural world would afford him some insulation from any consequences that might arise from his complicity. Besides which, Butters had earned a little good credit with the White Council the night he’d helped me prevent a family-sized order of necromancers from turning one of their number into a minor god. He’d saved the life of at least one Warden—two, if you counted me—and was in far less danger than anyone attached to the community would be.

Me, for example.

Man, my head was killing me.

Until I knew more about what was going on, I really couldn’t take any intelligent action—and I didn’t dare start asking questions for fear of attracting unwanted attention. Rushing headlong into a investigation would be a mistake, which meant that I would have to wait until Morgan could start talking to me.

So I stretched out on my couch to do some thinking, and began focusing on my breathing, trying to relax the headache away and clear my thoughts. It went so well that I stayed right there doing it for about six hours, until the late dusk of a Chicago summer had settled on the city.

I didn’t fall asleep. I was meditating. You’re going to have to take my word for it.

I woke up when Mouse let out a low guttural sound that wasn’t quite a bark, but was considerably shorter and more distinct than a growl. I sat up and went to my bedroom, to find Morgan awake.

Mouse was standing next to the bed, leaning his broad, heavy head on Morgan’s chest. The wounded man was idly scratching Mouse’s ears. He glanced aside at me and started to sit up.

Mouse leaned harder, and gently flattened Morgan to the bed again.

Morgan exhaled in obvious discomfort, and said, in a croaking, dry voice, “I take it I am undergoing mandatory bed rest.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “You were banged up pretty bad. The doctor said that walking on that leg would be a bad idea.”

Morgan’s eyes sharpened. “Doctor?”

“Relax. It was off the books. I know a guy.”

Morgan grunted. Then he licked cracked lips and said, “Is there anything to drink?”

I got him some cold water in a sports bottle with a big straw. He knew better than to guzzle. He sipped at it slowly. Then he took a deep breath, grimaced like a man about to intentionally put his hand in a fire, and said, “Thank y—”

“Oh shut *up*,” I said, shuddering. “Neither of us wants that conversation.”

Maybe I imagined it, but it looked like he relaxed slightly. He nodded and closed his eyes again.

“Don’t go back to sleep yet,” I told him. “I still have to take your temperature. It would be awkward.”

“God’s beard, yes,” Morgan said, opening his eyes. I went and got my thermometer, one of the old-fashioned ones filled with mercury. When I came back, Morgan said, “You didn’t turn me in.”

“Not yet,” I said. “I’m willing to hear you out.”

Morgan nodded, accepted the thermometer, and said, “Aleron LaFortier is dead.”

He stuck the thermometer in his mouth, presumably to attempt to kill me with the suspense. I fought back by thinking through the implications, instead.

LaFortier was a member of the Senior Council—seven of the oldest and most capable wizards on the planet, the ones who ran the White Council and commanded the Wardens. He was—had been—skinny, bald, and a sanctimonious jerk. I’d been wearing a hood at the time, so I couldn’t be certain, but I suspected that his voice had been the first of the Senior Council to vote guilty at my trial, and had argued against clemency for my crimes. He was a hard-line supporter of the Merlin, the head of the Council, who had been dead set against me.

All in all, a swell guy.

But he’d also been one of the best-protected wizards in the world. All the members of the Senior Council were not only dangerous in their own rights, but protected by details of Wardens, to boot. Attempted assassinations had been semiregular events during the war with the vampires, and the Wardens had become very, very good at keeping the Senior Council safe.

I did some math from there.

“It was an inside job,” I said quietly. “Like the one that killed Simon at Archangel.”

Morgan nodded.

“And they blamed you?”

Morgan nodded and took the thermometer out of his mouth. He glanced at it, and then passed to me. I looked. Ninety-nine and change.

I met his eyes and said, “Did you do it?”

“No.”

I grunted. I believed him.

“Why’d they finger you?”

“Because they found me standing over LaFortier’s body with the murder weapon in my hand,” he replied. “They also turned up a newly created account, in my name, with several million dollars in it, and phone records that showed I was in regular contact with a known operative of the Red Court.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Gosh. That was irrational of them, to jump to that conclusion.”

Morgan’s mouth turned up in a small sour smile.

“What’s your story?” I asked him.

“I went to bed two nights ago. I woke up in LaFortier’s private study in Edinburgh, with a lump on the back of my head and a bloody dagger in my hand. Simmons and Thorsen burst into the room maybe fifteen seconds later.”

“You were framed.”

“Thoroughly.”

I exhaled a slow breath. “You got any proof? An alibi? Anything?”

“If I did,” he said, “I wouldn’t have had to escape custody. Once I realized that someone had gone to a lot of effort to set me up to take the blame, I knew that my only chance—” He broke off, coughing.

“Was to find the real killer,” I finished for him. I passed him the drink again, and he choked down a few sips, slowly relaxing.

A few minutes later, he turned exhausted eyes to mine. “Are you going to turn me in?”

I looked at him for a silent minute, and then sighed. “It’d be a lot easier.”

“Yes,” Morgan said.

“You sure you were going down for it?”

Something in his expression became even more remote than usual. He nodded. “I’ve seen it often enough.”

“So I could leave you hanging out to dry.”

“You could.”

“But if I did that, we wouldn’t find the traitor. And since you’d died in his place, he’d be free to continue operating. More people would get killed, and the next person he framed—”

“—might be you,” Morgan finished.

“With my luck?” I said glumly. “No *might* about it.”

The brief sour smile appeared on his face again.

“They’re using tracking spells to follow you,” I said. “I assume you’ve taken some kind of countermeasure, or they’d already be at the door.”

He nodded.

“How long is it going to last?”

“Forty-eight hours. Sixty at the most.”

I nodded slowly, thinking. “You’re running a fever. I’ve got some medical supplies stashed. I’ll get them for you. Hopefully we can keep it from getting any worse.”

He nodded again, and then his sunken eyes closed. He’d run out of gas. I watched him for a minute, then turned and started gathering up my things.

“Keep an eye on him, boy,” I said to Mouse.

The big dog settled down on the floor beside the bed.

Forty-eight hours. I had about two days to find the traitor within the White Council—something no one had been able to do during the past several years. After that, Morgan would be found, tried, and killed—and his accomplice, your friendly neighborhood Harry Dresden, would be next.

Nothing motivates like a deadline.

Especially the literal kind.

Chapter Three

I got in my busted-up old Volkswagen bug, the mighty *Blue Beetle*, and headed for the cache of medical supplies.

The problem with hunting down the traitor in the White Council was simple: because of the specific information leaks that had occurred, there were a limited number of people who *could* have possessed the information. The suspect pool was damn small—just about everyone in it was a member of the Senior Council, and everyone there was beyond reproach.

The second someone threw an accusation at one of them, things were going to get busy, and fast. If an innocent was fingered, they would react the same way Morgan had. Knowing full well that the justice of the Council was blind, especially to annoying things like facts, they would have little choice but to resist.

One punky young wizard like me bucking the system was one thing, but when one of the heavyweights on the Senior Council did it, there would be a world of difference. The Senior Council members all had extensive contacts in the Council. They all had centuries of experience and skill to back up enormous amounts of raw strength. If one of *them* put up a fight, it would mean more than resisting arrest.

It would mean internal strife like the White Council had never seen.

It would mean civil war.

And, under the circumstances, I couldn't imagine anything more disastrous for the White Council. The balance of power between the supernatural nations was a precarious thing—and we had barely managed to hang on throughout the war with the Vampire Courts. Both sides were getting their wind back now, but the vampires could replace their losses far more quickly than we could. If the Council dissolved into infighting now, it would trigger a feeding frenzy amongst our foes.

Morgan had been right to run. I knew the Merlin well enough to know that he wouldn't blink twice before sacrificing an innocent man if it meant holding the Council together, much less someone who might actually be guilty.

Meanwhile, the real traitor would be clapping his hands in glee. One of the Senior Council was already down, and if the Council as a whole didn't implode in the next few days, it would become that much rife with paranoia and distrust, following the execution of the most capable and highly accomplished combat commander in the Wardens. All the traitor would need to do was rinse and repeat, with minor variations, and sooner or later something would crack.

I would only get one shot at this. I had to find the guilty party, and I had to be right and irrefutable the very first time.

Colonel Mustard, in the den, with the lead pipe.

Chapter Four

About five minutes after I left Thomas's place, I found myself instinctively checking the rearview mirror every couple of seconds and recognized the quiet tension that had begun to flow through me. My gut was telling me that I'd picked up a tail.

Granted, it was only an intuition, but hey. Wizard, over here. My instincts had earned enough credibility to make me pay attention to them. If they told me someone was following me, it was time to start watching my back.

If someone was following me, it wasn't necessarily connected to the current situation with Morgan. I mean, it didn't absolutely *have* to be, right? But I hadn't survived a ton of ugly

furballs by being thick all of the time. Generally, maybe, but not *all* the time, and I'd be an idiot to assume that my sudden company was unconnected to Morgan.

I took a few turns purely for fun, but I couldn't spot any vehicles following mine. That didn't necessarily mean anything. A good surveillance team, working together, could follow a target all but invisibly, especially at night, when every car on the road looked pretty much like the same pair of headlights. Just because I couldn't see them didn't mean that they weren't there.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I felt my shoulders ratcheting tighter with each passing streetlight.

What if my pursuer wasn't in a car?

My imagination promptly treated me to visions of numerous winged horrors, soaring silently on batlike wings just above the level of the ambient light of the city, preparing to dive

down upon the *Blue Beetle* and tear it into strips of sheet metal. The streets were busy, as they almost always were in this part of town. It was one hell of a public location for a hit, but that didn't automatically preclude the possibility. It had happened to me before.

I chewed on my lower lip and thought. I couldn't go back to my apartment until I was sure that I had shaken the tail. To do that, I'd have to spot him.

I wasn't going to get through the next two days without taking some chances. I figured I might as well get started.

I drew in a deep breath, focused my thoughts, and blinked slowly, once. When I opened my eyes again, I brought my Sight along with them.

A wizard's Sight, his ability to perceive the world around him in a vastly broadened spectrum of interacting forces, is a dangerous gift. Whether it's called spirit vision, or inner sight, or the Third Eye, it lets you perceive things you'd otherwise never be able to interact with. It shows you the world the way it really is, matter all intertwined with a universe of energy, of magic. The Sight can show you beauty that would make angels weep humble tears, and terrors that the Black-Goat-with-a-Thousand-Young wouldn't dare use for its kids' bedtime stories.

Whatever you see, the good, the bad, the insanity-inducing—it sticks with you forever. You can't ever forget it, and time doesn't blur the memories. It's yours. Permanently.

Wizards who run around using their Sight willy-nilly wind up bonkers.

My Third Eye showed me Chicago, in its true shape, and for a second I thought I had been teleported to Vegas. Energy ran through the streets, the buildings, the people, appearing to me as slender filaments of light that ran this way and that, plunging into solid objects and out the other side without interruption. The energies coursing through the grand old buildings had a solid and unmoving stability about them, as did the city streets—but the rest of it, the random energies generated by the thoughts and emotions of eight million people, was completely unplanned and coursed everywhere in frenetic, haphazard, garish color.

Clouds of emotion were interspersed with the flickering campfire sparks of ideas. Heavy flowing streams of deep thought rolled slowly beneath blazing, dancing gems of joy. The muck of negative emotions clung to surfaces, staining them darker, while fragile bubbles of dreams floated blissfully toward kaleidoscope stars.

Holy crap. I could barely *see* the lines on the road through all of that.

I checked over my shoulder, seeing each occupant of the cars behind me clearly, as brilliantly lit shapes of white that skittered with other colors that changed with thoughts, moods, and personalities. If I'd been closer to them, I'd have been able to see more details about them, though they would be subject to my subconscious interpretation. Even at this distance, though, I could tell that they were all mortals.

That was a relief, in some ways. I'd be able to spot any wizard strong enough to be one of the Wardens. If whoever was pursuing me was a normal, it was almost certain that the Wardens hadn't caught up to Morgan yet.

I checked up above me and—

Time froze.

Try to imagine the stench of rotten meat. Imagine the languid, arrhythmic pulsing of a corpse filled with maggots. Imagine the scent of stale body odor mixed with mildew, the sound of nails screeching across a chalkboard, the taste of rotten milk, and the flavor of spoiled fruit.

Now imagine that your eyes can experience those things, all at once, in excruciating detail.

That's what I saw: a stomach-churning, nightmare-inducing mass, blazing like a lighthouse beacon upon one of the buildings above me. I could vaguely make out a physical form

behind it, but it was like trying to peer through raw sewage. I couldn't get any details through the haze of absolute *wrongness* that surrounded it as it bounded from the edge of one rooftop to another, moving more than fast enough to keep pace with me.

Someone screamed, and I dimly noted that it was probably me. The car hit something that made it shriek in protest. It jounced hard up and down, *wham-wham*. I'd drifted into the curb. I felt the front wheels shimmy through the steering wheel, and I slammed on the brakes, still screaming, as I fought to close my Third Eye.

The next thing I knew, car horns were blaring an impatient symphony.

I was sitting in the driver's seat, gripping the wheel until my knuckles were white. The engine had died. Judging from the dampness on my cheeks, I must have been crying—unless I'd started foaming at the mouth, which, I reflected, was a distinct possibility.

Stars and stones. What on God's green earth *was* that thing?

Even brushing against the subject in my thoughts was enough to bring the memory of the thing back to me in all its hideous terror. I flinched and squeezed my eyes shut, shoving hard against the steering wheel. I could feel my body shaking. I don't know how long it took me to fight my way clear of the memory—and when I did, everything was the same, only louder.

With the clock counting down, I couldn't afford to let the cops take me into custody for a DWI, but that's exactly what would happen if I didn't start driving again, assuming I didn't actually wreck the car first. I took a deep breath and willed myself not to think of the apparition—

I saw it again.

When I came back, I'd bitten my tongue, and my throat felt raw. I shook even harder.

There was no way I could drive. Not like this. One stray thought and I could get somebody killed in a collision. But I couldn't remain there, either.

I pulled the *Beetle* up onto the sidewalk, where it would be out of the street at least. Then I got out of the car and started walking away. The city would tow me in about three point five milliseconds, but at least I wouldn't be around to get arrested.

I stumbled down the sidewalk, hoping that my pursuer, the apparition, wasn't—

When I looked up again, I was curled into a ball on the ground, muscles aching from cramping so tight. People were walking wide around me, giving me nervous sidelong glances. I felt so weak that I wasn't sure I could stand.

I needed help.

I looked up at the street signs on the nearest corner and stared at them until my cudged brain finally worked out where I was standing.

I rose, forced to lean on my staff to stay upright, and hobbled forward as quickly as I could. I started calculating prime numbers as I walked, focusing on the process as intently as I would any spell.

"One," I muttered through clenched teeth. "Two. Three. Five. Seven. Eleven. Thirteen . . ."

And I staggered through the night, literally too terrified to think about what might be coming after me.

Chapter Five

By the time I'd reached twenty-two hundred and thirty-nine, I'd arrived at Billy and Georgia's place.

Life had changed for the young werewolves since Billy had graduated and started pulling in serious money as an engineer, but they hadn't moved out of the apartment they'd had in college. Georgia was still in school, learning something psychological, and they were saving for a house. Good thing for me. I wouldn't have been able to walk to the suburbs.

Georgia answered the door. She was a tall woman, lean and willowy, and in a T-shirt and loose, long shorts, she looked smarter than she did pretty.

"My God," she said, when she saw me. "Harry."

"Hey, Georgia," I said. "Twenty-two hundred and . . . uh. Forty-three. I need a dark, quiet room."

She blinked at me. "What?"

"Twenty-two hundred and fifty-one," I responded, seriously. "And send up the wolf-signal. You want the gang here. Twenty-two hundred and, uh . . . sixty . . . seven."

She stepped back from the door, holding the door open for me. "Harry, what are you talking about?"

I came inside. "Twenty-two hundred and sixty . . . *not* divisible by three, sixty-nine. I need a dark room. Quiet. Protection."

"Is something after you?" Georgia said.

Even with the help of Eratosthenes, when Georgia asked the question and my brain answered it, I couldn't keep the image of that *thing* from invading my thoughts, and it drove me to my knees and would have sent me all the way to the floor—except that Billy caught me before I could get there. He was a short guy, maybe five six, but he had the upper body of a professional wrestler and moved with the speed and precision of a predator.

"Dark room," I gasped. "Call in the gang. Hurry."

"Do it," Georgia said, her voice low and urgent. She shut the door and locked it, then slammed down a heavy wooden beam the size of a picnic table's bench that they had installed themselves. "Get him into our room. I'll make the calls."

"Got it," Billy said. He picked me up the way you'd carry a child, barely grunting as he did. He carried me down the hall and into a dark bedroom. He laid me down on a bed, then crossed to the window—and pulled and locked a heavy steel security curtain over it, evidently another customization that he and Georgia had installed.

"What do you need, Harry?" Billy asked.

"Dark. Quiet. Explain it later."

He put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Right." Then he padded out of the room and shut the door.

It left me in the dark with my thoughts—which is where I needed to be.

"Come on, Harry," I muttered to myself. "Get used to the idea."

And I thought about the thing I'd Seen.

It hurt. But when I came back to myself, I did it again. And again. And again.

Yes, I'd Seen something horrible. Yes, it was a hideous terror. But I'd Seen other things, too.

I called up those memories, too, all of them just as sharp and fresh as the horror pressing upon me. I'd Seen good people screaming in madness under the influence of black magic. I'd Seen the true selves of men and women, good and bad, Seen people kill—and die. I'd Seen the Queens of Faerie as they prepared for battle, drawing all their awful power around them.

And I'd be damned if I was going to roll over for one more horrible thing doing nothing but jumping from one rooftop to another.

"Come on, punk," I snarled at the memory. "Next to those others, you're a bad yearbook picture."

And I hit myself with it, again and again, filling my mind with every horrible and beautiful thing I had ever Seen—and as I did, I focused on what I had bloody well done about it. I remembered the things I'd battled and destroyed. I remembered the strongholds of nightmares and terrors that I had invaded, the dark gates I'd kicked down. I remembered the faces of prisoners I'd freed, and the funerals of those I'd been too late to save. I remembered the sounds of voices and laughter, the joy of loved ones reunited, the tears of the lost and bereaved.

There are bad things in the world. There's no getting away from that. But that doesn't mean nothing can be done about them. You can't abandon life just because it's scary, and just because sometimes you get hurt.

The memory of the thing hurt like hell—but pain wasn't anything special or new. I'd lived with it before, and would do it again. It wasn't the first thing I'd Seen, and it wouldn't be the last.

I was *not* going to roll over and die.

Sledgehammers of perfect memory pounded me down into blackness.

When I pulled myself back together, I was sitting on the bed, my legs folded Indian-style. My palms rested on my knees. My breathing was slow and rhythmically heavy. My back was straight. My head pounded painfully, but not cripplingly so.

I looked up and around the room. It was dark, but I'd been in there long enough for my eyes to adjust to the light coming under the door. I could see myself in the dresser mirror. My back was straight and relaxed. I'd taken my coat off, and was wearing a black T-shirt that read "PRE-FECTIONIST" in small white letters, backward in the mirror. A thin, dark tunnel of blood had streamed from each nostril and was now drying on my upper lip. I could taste blood in my mouth, probably from where I'd bitten my tongue earlier.

I thought of my pursuer again, and the image made me shudder—but that was all. I kept breathing slowly and steadily.

That was the upside of being human. On the whole, we're an adaptable sort of being. Certainly, I'd never be able to get rid of my memory of this awful thing, or any of the other awful things I'd Seen—so if the memory couldn't change, it would have to be me. I could get used to seeing that kind of horror, enough to see it and yet remain a reasoning being. Better men than I had done so.

Morgan had.

I shivered again, and not because of any memory. It was because I knew what it could mean, when you forced yourself to live with hideous things like that. It changed you. Maybe not all at once. Maybe it didn't turn you into a monster. But I'd been scarred and I knew it.

How many times would something like this need to happen before I started bending myself into something horrible just to survive? I was young for a wizard. Where would I be after decades or centuries of refusing to look away?

Ask Morgan.

Chapter Six

Georgia told the EMTs she was Andi's sister, which was true in a spiritual sense, I suppose, and rode with her in the ambulance to the hospital. The EMTs looked grim.

The cops had gathered around Kirby's body, and were busy closing off the scene.

"I have to be here," Billy said.

"I know," I said. "I'm on the clock, Billy. I can't stay. I can't lose the time."

He nodded. "What do I need to know about skinwalkers?"

"They're . . . they're just evil, man. They like hurting people. Shape-shifters, obviously—and the more afraid of them you are, the more powerful they get. They literally feed on fear."

Billy eyed me. "Meaning you aren't going to tell me anything more. Because it won't help me. You think it will scare me."

"We knew it was here, we were ready for a fight, and you saw what happened," I said. "If it had hit us from a real ambush, it would have been worse."

He bared his teeth in a snarl. "We had it."

"We had it at a momentary disadvantage—and it *saw* that, and it was *smart* enough to leave and come back later. All we did was prove to it that it would have to take us seriously

to kill us. We won't get another opportunity like that one." I put a hand on his shoulder. "You and Georgia stay close to Andi. This thing *likes* hurting people. And it gets off on hunting down wounded prey. She's still in danger."

"Got it," he said quietly. "What are you going to do?"

"Find out why it's here," I said. "There's Council business afoot. Christ, I didn't mean to bring you into this." I stared toward the knot of officers around Kirby's corpse. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"Kirby was an adult, Dresden," Billy said. "He knew what could happen. He chose to be here."

Which was the truth. But it didn't help. Kirby was still dead. I hadn't known what the skinwalker *was* before, beyond something awful, but that didn't change anything.

Kirby was still dead.

And Andi . . . God, I hadn't even thought about that part. Andi and Kirby had been an intense item. She was going to be heartbroken.

Assuming she didn't die, too.

Billy—I just couldn't think of him as Will—blinked tears out of his eyes and said, "You didn't know it was going to come down like that, man. We all owe you our lives, Harry. I'm glad we got the chance to be there for you." He nodded toward the police. "I'll do the talking, then get to Georgia. You'd better go."

We traded grips, and his was crushingly tight with tension and grief. I nodded to him, and turned to leave. The city lights were starting to come back on as I went out the back entrance to Will's building, down a side street, and through an alley that ran behind an old bookstore where I wasn't welcome anymore. I passed the spot in that alley where I'd nearly died, and shivered as I did. I'd barely dodged the old man's scythe, that day.

Tonight, Kirby hadn't.

My head felt dislocated, somehow. I should be feeling more than I was. I should be madder than hell. I should be shaking with fear. Something. But instead, I felt like I was observing events from a remote cold place somewhere up above and behind me. It was, I reasoned, probably a side effect of exposing myself to the skinwalker's true form. Or rather, a side effect of what I'd had to do to get over it.

I wasn't worried about the skinwalker sneaking up on me. Oh, sure, he might do it, but not cold. Supernatural beings like the skinwalker had so much power that reality itself gets a little strained around them wherever they go, and that has a number of side effects. One of them is a sort of psychic stench that goes with them—a presence that my instincts had twigged to long before the skinwalker had been in a position to do me any real harm.

Read a little folklore, the stuff that hasn't been prettied up by Disney and the like. Start with the Brothers Grimm. It won't tell you about skinwalkers, but it will give you a good idea of just how dark some of those tales can be.

Skinwalkers are dark compared to *that*. You've got to get the real stories from the peoples of the Navajo, Ute, and other Southwestern tribes to get the really juicy material. They don't talk about them often, because the genuine and entirely rational fear the stories inspire only makes the creatures stronger. The tribes rarely talk about them with outsiders, because

outsiders have no foundation of folklore to draw upon to protect themselves—and because you never know when the outsider to whom you're telling dark tales might *be* a skinwalker, looking to indulge a sense of macabre irony. But I've been in the business awhile, and I know people who know the stories. They'd confided a handful to me, in broad daylight, looking nervously around them as they spoke, as if afraid that dredging up the dark memories might catch a skinwalker's attention.

Because sometimes it did.

That's how bad skinwalkers are. Even amongst the people who know the danger they represent, who know better than anyone else in the world how to defend against them, no one wants to talk about skinwalkers.

But in a way, it worked in my favor. Walking down a dark alley in the middle of a Chicago night, and stepping over the spot on the concrete where I'd almost been ripped to pieces

just wasn't *spooky* enough to encompass the presence of a skinwalker. If things got majorly *Tales from the Darkside* creepy and shivery, I'd know I was in real trouble.

As it was, the night was simply—

A small figure in a lightweight Cubs jacket stepped around the corner at the end of the alley. The newly restored streetlight shone on blond hair, and Sergeant Karrin Murphy said, "Evening, Dresden."

—complicated.

"Murph," I responded woodenly. Murphy was a sergeant with Chicago PD's Special Investigations department. When something supernaturally bad happened and the cops got involved, Murphy often contacted me to get my take on things. The city didn't want to hear about "imaginary" things like skinwalkers or vampires. They just wanted the problem to go away—but Murphy and the rest of SI were the people who had to make it happen.

"I tip a guy down at impound to keep an eye out for certain vehicles," Murphy said. "Pay him in bottles of McAnally's ale. He calls me and tells me your car got brought in."

"Uh-huh," I said.

Murphy fell into pace beside me as I turned out onto the sidewalk. She was five feet nothing, with blond hair that fell a little past her shoulders and blue eyes. She was more cute than pretty, and looked like someone's favorite aunt. Which seemed likely. She had a fairly large Irish Catholic family.

"Then I hear about a power outage," she said, "and a huge disturbance at the same apartments where your werewolf friends live. I hear about a girl who might not make it and a boy who didn't."

"Yeah," I said. It might have come out a little bleak.

"Who was it?" Murphy asked.

"Kirby," I said.

"Jesus," Murphy said. "What happened?"

"Something fast and mean was following me. The werewolves jumped it. Things went bad."

Murphy nodded and stopped, and I dimly realized that we were standing next to her Saturn—an updated version of the one that had been blown up—blithely parked in front of a hydrant. She went around to the trunk and popped it open. "I took a look at that pile of parts you call a car." She drew out the medical toolbox and cooler from her trunk and held them up. "These were on the passenger seat. I thought they might have been there for a reason."

Hell's bells. In the confusion of the attack and its aftermath, I had all but forgotten the whole reason I'd gone out in the first place. I took the medical kit from her as she offered it. "Yeah. Stars and stones, yeah, Murph. Thank you."

"You need a ride?" she asked me.

I'd been planning on flagging down a cab, eventually, but it would be better not to spend the money if I didn't need to. Wizarding might be sexy, but it didn't pay nearly as well as lucrative careers like law enforcement. "Sure," I said.

"What a coincidence. I need some questions answered." She unlocked the door with an actual key, not the little what's-it that does it for you automatically with the press of a button, and held it open for me with a gallant little gesture, like I'd done for her about a million times. She probably thought she was mocking me with that impersonation.

She was probably right.

This mess was getting stickier by the minute, and I didn't want to drag Murphy into it. I mean, Jesus, the werewolves had been capable defenders of their territory for a long while, and I'd gotten half of them taken out in the first couple hours of the case. Murphy wouldn't fare any better in the waters through which I was currently swimming.

On the other hand, I trusted Murph. I trusted her judgment, her ability to see where her limits lay. She'd seen cops carved to pieces when they tried to box out of their weight division, and knew better than to attempt it. And if she started throwing obstacles in my way—and she could, a lot of them, that I couldn't do diddly about—then my life would get a whole lot harder. Even though she wasn't running CPD's Special Investigations department anymore, she still had clout there, and a word from her to Lieutenant Stallings could hobble me, maybe lethally.

So I guess you could say that Murphy was threatening to bust me if I didn't talk to her, and you'd be right. And you could say that Murphy was offering to put her life on the line to help me, and you'd be right. And you could say that Murphy had done me a favor with the medical kit, in order to obligate me to her when she told me that she wanted to be dealt in, and you'd be right.

You could also say that I was standing around dithering when time was critical, and you'd be right about that, too.

At the end of the day, Murphy is good people.

I got in the car.

"So let me get this straight," Murphy said, as we approached my apartment. "You're hiding a fugitive from your own people's cops, and you think the guy's been set up in order to touch off a civil war within the White Council. And there's some kind of Navajo boogeyman loose in town, following you around and attempting to kill you. And you aren't sure they're related."

"More like I don't know how they're related. Yet."

Murphy chewed on her lip. "Is there anyone on the Council who is in tight with Native American boogeymen?"

"Hard to imagine it," I said quietly. "Injun Joe" Listens-to-Wind was a Senior Council member who was some kind of Native American shaman. He was a doctor, a healer, and a specialist in exorcisms and restorative magic. He was, in fact, a decent guy. He liked animals.

"But someone's a traitor," Murphy said quietly. "Right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Someone."

Murphy nodded, frowning at the road ahead of her. "The reason treachery is so reviled," she said in a careful tone of voice, "is because it usually comes from someone you didn't think could possibly do such a thing."

I didn't say anything in reply. In a minute, her car crunched to a stop in the little gravel lot outside my apartment.

I picked up the medical kit, the cooler, and my staff, and got out of the car.

"Call me the minute you know something," she said.

"Yep," I told her. "Don't take any chances if you see something coming."

She shook her head. "They aren't your kids, Harry."

"Doesn't matter. Anything you can do to protect them in the hospital . . ."

"Relax," she said. "Your werewolves won't be alone. I'll see to it."

I nodded and closed my eyes for a second.

"Harry?" she asked me.

"Yeah?"

"You . . . don't look so good."

"It's been a long night," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "Look. I know something about those."

Murphy did. She'd had more than her share of psychic trauma. She'd seen friends die, too. My memory turned out an unwelcome flash from years before—her former partner, Carmichael, half eviscerated and bleeding to death on white institutional tile flooring.

"I'll make it," I said.

"Of course you will," she said. "There's just . . . there's a lot of ways you could deal, Harry. Some of them are better than others. I care about what happens to you. And I'm here."

I kept my eyes closed in order to make sure I didn't start crying like a girl or something. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"Take care, Harry," she said.

"You, too," I said. It came out a little raspy. I tilted the toolbox at her in a wave, and headed into my apartment to see Morgan.

I had to admit—I hated hearing the sound of my friend's car leaving.

I pushed those thoughts away. Psychic trauma or not, I could fall to little pieces later.

I had work to do.

Chapter Seven

Morgan woke up when I opened the bedroom door. He looked bad, but not any worse than he did before, except for some spots of color on his cheeks.

“Lemme see to my roommates,” I said. “I got the goods.” I put the medical kit down on the nightstand.

He nodded and closed his eyes.

I took Mouse outside for a walk to the mailbox. He seemed unusually alert, nose snuffling at everything, but he didn’t show any signs of alarm. We went by the spot in the tiny backyard that had been designated as Mouse’s business area, and went back inside. Mister, my bobtailed grey tomcat, was waiting when I opened the door, and tried to bolt out. I caught him, barely: Mister weighs the next best thing to thirty pounds. He gave me a look that might have been indignant, then raised his stumpy tail straight in the air and walked haughtily away, making his way to his usual resting point atop one of my apartment’s bookcases.

Mouse looked at me with his head tilted as I shut the door.

“Something bad is running around out there,” I told him. “It might decide to send me a message. I’d rather he didn’t use Mister to do it.”

Mouse’s cavernous chest rumbled with a low growl.

“Or you, either, for that matter,” I told him. “I don’t know if you know what a skinwalker is, but it’s serious trouble. Watch yourself.”

Mouse considered that for a moment, and then yawned.

I found myself laughing. “Pride goes before a fall, boy.”

He wagged his tail at me and rubbed up against my leg, evidently pleased to have made me smile. I made sure both sets of bowls had food and water in them, and then went in to Morgan.

His temperature was up another half a degree, and he was obviously in pain.

“This isn’t heavy-duty stuff,” I told him, as I broke out the medical kit. “Me and Billy made a run up to Canada for most of it. There’s some codeine for the pain, though, and I’ve got the stuff to run an IV for you, saline, intravenous antibiotics.”

Morgan nodded. Then he frowned at me, an expression I was used to from him, raked his eyes over me more closely, and asked, “Is that blood I smell on you?”

Damn. For a guy who had been beaten to within a few inches of death’s door, he was fairly observant. Andi hadn’t really been bleeding when we picked her up in my coat. She was only oozing from a number of gouges and scrapes—but there had been enough of them to add up. “Yeah,” I said.

“What happened?”

I told him about the skinwalker and what had happened to Kirby and Andi.

He shook his head wearily. “There’s a reason we don’t encourage amateurs to try to act like Wardens, Dresden.”

I scowled at him, got a bowl of warm water and some antibacterial soap, and started cleaning up his left arm. “Yeah, well. I didn’t see any Wardens doing anything about it.”

“Chicago is your area of responsibility, Warden Dresden.”

“And there I was,” I said. “And if they hadn’t been there to help, I’d be dead right now.”

“Then you call for backup. You *don’t* behave like a bloody superhero and throw lambs to the wolves to help you do it. Those are the people you’re supposed to be protecting.”

“Good thinking,” I said, getting out the bag of saline, and suspending it from the hook I’d set in the wall over the bed. I made sure the tube was primed. Air bubbles, bad. “That’s exactly what we need: more Wardens in Chicago.”

Morgan grunted and fell silent for a moment, eyes closed. I thought he’d dropped off again, but evidently he was only thinking. “It must have followed me up.”

“Huh?”

“The skinwalker,” he said. “When I left Edinburgh, I took a Way to Tucson. I came to Chicago by train. It must have sensed me when the tracks passed through its territory.”

“Why would it do that?”

“Follow an injured wizard?” he asked. “Because they get stronger by devouring the essence of practitioners. I was an easy meal.”

“It *eats* magic?”

Morgan nodded. “Adds its victims’ power to its own.”

“So what you’re telling me is that not only did the skinwalker get away, but now it’s stronger for having killed Kirby.”

He shrugged. “I doubt the werewolf represented much gain, relative to what it already possessed. Your talents, or mine, are orders of magnitude greater.”

I took up a rubber hose and bound it around Morgan’s upper arm. I waited for the veins just below the bend of his elbow to pop up. “Seems like an awfully unlikely chance encounter.”

Morgan shook his head. “Skinwalkers can only dwell on tribal lands in the American Southwest. It wasn’t as if whoever is framing me would know that I was going to escape and flee to Tucson.”

“Point,” I said, slipping the needle into his arm. “Who would wanna go there in the summer, anyway?” I thought about it. “The skinwalker’s got to go back to his home territory, though?”

Morgan nodded. “The longer he’s away, the more power it costs him.”

“How long can he stay here?” I asked.

He winced as I missed the vein and had to try again. “More than long enough.”

“How do we kill it?” I frowned as I missed the vein again.

“Give me that,” Morgan muttered. He took the needle and inserted it himself, smoothly, and got it on the first try.

I guess you learn a few things over a dozen decades.

“We probably don’t,” he said. “The true skinwalkers, the naagloshii, are millennia old. Tangling with them is a fool’s game. We avoid it.”

I taped down the needle and hooked up the catheter. “Pretend for a minute that it isn’t going to cooperate with that plan.”

Morgan grunted and scratched at his chin with his other hand. “There are some native magics that can cripple or destroy it. A true shaman of the blood could perform an enemy ghost way and drive it out. Without those our only recourse is to hit it with a lot of raw power—and it isn’t likely to stand still and cooperate with that plan, either.”

“It’s a tough target,” I admitted. “It knows magic, and how to defend against it.”

“Yes,” Morgan said. He watched me pick a preloaded syringe of antibiotics from the cooler. “And its abilities are more than the equal of both of us put together.”

“Jinkies,” I said. I primed the syringe and pushed the antibiotics into the IV line. Then I got the codeine and a cup of water, offering Morgan both. He downed the pills, laid his head back wearily, and closed his eyes.

“I Saw one once, too,” he said.

I started cleaning up. I didn’t say anything.

“They aren’t invulnerable. They can be killed.”

I tossed wrappers into the trash can and restored equipment to the medical kit. I grimaced at the bloodied rug that still lay beneath Morgan. I’d have to get that out from under him soon. I turned to leave, but stopped in the doorway.

“How’d you do it?” I asked, without looking behind me.

It took him a moment to answer. I thought he’d passed out again.

“It was the fifties,” he said. “Started in New Mexico. It followed me to Nevada. I lured it onto a government testing site, and stepped across into the Nevernever just before the bomb went off.”

I blinked and looked over my shoulder at him. “You *nuked* it?”

He opened one eye and smiled.

It was sort of creepy.

“Stars and stones . . . that’s . . .” I had to call a spade a spade. “Kind of cool.”

“Gets me to sleep at night,” he mumbled. He closed his eye again, sighed, and let his head sag a little to one side.

I watched over his sleep for a moment, and then closed the door.

I was pretty tired, myself. But like the man said:

“I have promises to keep,” I sighed to myself.

I got on the phone, and started calling my contacts on the Paranet.

The Paranet was an organization I'd helped found a couple of years before. It's essentially a union whose members cooperate in order to protect themselves from paranormal threats. Most of the Paranet consisted of practitioners with marginal talents, of which there were plenty. A practitioner had to be in the top percentile before the White Council would even consider recognizing him, and those who couldn't cut it basically got left out in the cold. As a result, they were vulnerable to any number of supernatural predators.

Which I think sucks.

So an old friend named Elaine Mallory and I had taken a dead woman's money and begun making contact with the marginal folks in city after city. We'd encouraged them to get together to share information, to have someone they could call for help. If things started going bad, a distress call could be sent up the Paranet, and then I or one of the other Wardens in the U.S. could charge in. We also gave seminars on how to recognize magical threats, as well as teaching methods of basic self-defense for when the capes couldn't show up to save the day.

It had been going pretty well. We already had new chapters opening up in Mexico and Canada, and Europe wouldn't be far behind.

So I started calling up my contacts in those various cities, asking if they'd heard of anything odd happening. I couldn't afford to get any more specific than that, but as it turned out, I didn't need to. Of the first dozen calls, folks in four cities had noted an upswing in Warden activity, reporting that they were all appearing in pairs. Only two of the next thirty towns had similar reports, but it was enough to give me a good idea of what was going on—a quiet manhunt.

But I just had to wonder. Of all the places the Wardens could choose to hunt for Morgan, why would they pick Poughkeepsie? Why Omaha?

The words "wild-geese chase" sprang to mind. Whatever Morgan was doing to mask his presence from their tracking spells, it had them chasing their tails all over the place.

At least I accomplished one positive thing. Establishing rumors of Wardens on the move meant that I had a good and non-suspicion-arousing motivation to start asking questions of my own.

Next, I started calling the Wardens I was on good terms with. Three of them worked for me, technically speaking, in several cities in the Eastern and Midwestern United States. I'm not a very good boss. I mostly just let them decide how to do their job and try to lend a hand when they ask me for help. I had to leave messages for two, but Bill Meyers in Dallas answered on the second ring.

"Howdy," Meyers said.

I'm serious. He actually answered the phone that way.

"Bill, it's Dresden."

"Harry," he said politely. Bill was always polite with me. He saw me do something scary once. "Speak of the devil and he appears."

"Is that why my nose was itching?" I asked.

"Likely," Bill drawled. "I was gonna give you a call in the morning."

"Yeah? What's up?"

"Rumors," Bill said. "I spotted two Wardens coming out of the local entrance to the Ways, but when I asked them what was up, they stone-walled me. I figured you might know what was going on."

"Darn," I said. "I called to ask *you*."

He snorted. "Well, we're a fine bunch of wise men, aren't we?"

"As far as the Council is concerned, the U.S. Wardens are a bunch of mushrooms."

"Eh?"

"Kept in the dark and fed on bullshit."

"I hear that," Meyers said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Keep an ear to the ground," I told him. "Captain Luccio will tell us sooner or later. I'll call you as soon as I learn anything. You do the same."

"Gotcha," he said.

We hung up, and I frowned at the phone for a moment.

The Council hadn't talked to me about Morgan. They hadn't talked to any of the Wardens in my command about him, either.

I looked up at Mister and said, "It's almost like they want to keep me in the dark. Like maybe someone thinks I might be involved, somehow."

Which made sense. The Merlin wasn't going to be asking me to Christmas dinner anytime soon. He didn't trust me. He might have given the order to keep me fenced out. That wouldn't hit me as a surprise.

But if that was true, then it meant that Anastasia Luccio, captain of the Wardens, was going along with it. She and I had been dating for a while, now. Granted, she had a couple of centuries on me, but a run-in with a body-switching psychopath several years before had trapped her in the body of a coed, and she didn't look a day over twenty-five. We got along well. We made each other laugh. And we occasionally had wild-monkey sex to our mutual, intense satisfaction.

I would never have figured Anastasia to play a game like that with me.

I got on the phone to Ramirez in LA, the other regional commander in the United States, to see if he'd heard anything, but just got his answering service.

At this rate, I was going to have to go to the spirit world for answers—and that was risky in more ways than one, not the least of which was the very real possibility that I might get eaten by the same entity I called up to question.

But I was running a little low on options.

I pulled back the rug that lay over the trapdoor leading down to my lab, and was about to go down and prepare my summoning circle when the phone rang.

"I'm meeting Justine in half an hour," my brother told me.

"Okay," I said. "Come get me."

Chapter Eight

Chicago's club scene is wide and diverse. You want to listen to extemporaneous jazz? We got that. You want a traditional Irish pub? A Turkish-style coffeehouse? Belly dancers? Japanese garden party? Swing dancing? Ballroom dancing? Beat poetry? You're covered.

You don't have to look much harder to find all sorts of other clubs—the kind that Ma and Pa Tourist don't take the kids to. Gay clubs, lesbian clubs, strip clubs, leather clubs, and more subtle flavors within the genre.

And then there's Zero.

I stood with Thomas outside what looked like a fire-exit door at the bottom of a stairway, a story below street level in the side of a downtown building. A red neon oval had been installed on the door, and it glowed with a sullen, lurid heat. The thump of a bass beat vibrated almost sub-audibly up through the ground.

"Is this what I think it is?" I asked him.

Thomas, now dressed in a tight-fitting white T-shirt and old blue jeans, glanced at me and arched one dark eyebrow. "Depends on if you think it's Zero or not."

Zero's one of those clubs that most people only hear rumors about. It moves around the city from time to time, but it's always as exclusive as a popular nightclub in a metropolis can possibly be. I've been a PI in Chicago for better than a decade. I'd heard of Zero, but that was it. It was where the rich and beautiful (and rich) people of Chicago went to indulge themselves.

"You know somebody here?" I asked. "Because they aren't going to let us—"

Thomas popped a key into the lock, turned it, and opened the door for me.

"In," I finished. A wash of heat and smoke heavy with legally questionable substances pushed gently against my chest. I could hear the *whump-whump-whump* of techno dance music somewhere behind the red-lit smoke.

"It's a family business," Thomas explained. He put the keys back in his pocket, an odd expression on his face. "I met Justine at Zero."

"There any more of the other side of the family in there?" I asked him. White Court vampires were the least physically dangerous of any of the various vamps running around—and the most scary. Creatures of seduction, they fed upon the emotions and life energy of those they preyed upon. Their victims became addicted to the act, and would willingly offer themselves up over and over, until eventually there was nothing left to give. The poor suckers in thrall to a White Court vampire were virtually slaves. Tangling with them in any sense of the word was a bad idea.

Thomas shook his head. "I doubt it. Or Justine wouldn't have chosen to meet us here."

Unless she'd been forced to do so, I thought to myself. I didn't say anything. I like to stay cozy with my paranoia, not pass her around to my friends and family.

"After you," Thomas said, and then he calmly stripped his shirt off.

I eyed him.

"The club has an image they strive to maintain," he said. He might have been just a little bit smug, the bastard. His abs look like they were added in with CGI. My abs just look like I can't afford to feed myself very well.

"Oh," I said. "Do I need to take my shirt off, too?"

"You're wearing a black leather coat. That's wardrobe enough."

"Small favors," I muttered. Then I went through the door.

We walked down a hallway that got darker, louder, and more illicitly aromatic as we went. It ended at a black curtain, and I pushed it aside to reveal a few more feet of hallway, a door, and two politely formidable-looking men in dark suits standing in front of it.

One of them lifted a hand and told me, "I'm sorry, sir, but this is a private—"

Thomas stepped up next to me and fixed the man with a steady grey gaze.

He lowered his hand, and when he spoke, it sounded rough, as if his mouth had gone dry. "Excuse me, sir. I didn't realize he was with you."

Thomas kept staring.

The bouncer turned to the door, unlocked it with a key of its own, and opened the door. "Will you be in need of a table, sir? Drinks?"

Thomas's unblinking gaze finally shifted from the guard, as if the man had somehow vanished as a matter of any consequence. My brother walked by him without saying anything at all.

The bouncer gave me a weak smile and said, "Sorry about that, sir. Enjoy your evening at Zero, sir."

"Thanks," I said, and followed my brother into a scene that split the difference between a Dionysian bacchanal and a Fellini flick.

There was no white light inside Zero. Most of it was red, punctuated in places with pools of blue and plenty of black lights scattered everywhere so that even where shadows were thickest, some colors jumped out in disquieting luminescence. Cigarette smoke hung in a pall over the large room, a distance-distorting haze under the black lights.

We had entered on a kind of balcony that overlooked the dance floor below. Music pounded, the bass beat so loud that I could feel it in my lower stomach. Lights flashed and swayed in synchronicity. The floor was crowded with sweating, moving bodies dressed in a broad spectrum of clothing, from full leather coverings including a whole-head hood, at one extreme, to one girl clad in a few strips of electrical tape on the other. There was a bar down by the dance floor, and tables scattered around its outskirts under a thirty-foot-high ceiling. A few cages hung about eight feet over the dance floor, each containing a young man or woman in provocative clothing.

Stairways and catwalks led up to about a dozen platforms that thrust out from the walls, where patrons could sit and overlook the scene below while gaining a measure of privacy for themselves. Most of the platforms were furnished with couches and chaise longues rather than tables and chairs. There were more exotic bits of furniture up on the platforms, as well: the giant X shape of a St. Andrew's cross, which was currently supporting the bound form of a young man, his wrists and ankles secured to the cross, his face to the wood, his hair falling down over his naked back. Another platform had a shiny brass pole in its center, and a pair of girls danced around it, in the middle of a circle of men and women sprawled over the couches and lounges.

Everywhere I looked, people were doing things that would have gotten them arrested anywhere else. Couples, threesomes, foursomes, and nineteensomes were fully engaged in sexual activity on some of the private platforms. From where I stood, I could see two different tables where lines of white powder waited to be inhaled. A syringe disposal was on the wall next to every trash can, marked with a bright biohazard symbol. People were being beaten with whips and riding crops. People were bound up with elaborate arrangements of ropes, as well as with more prosaic handcuffs. Piercings and tattoos were everywhere. Screams and cries occasionally found their way through the music, agony, ecstasy, joy, or rage all indistinguishable from one another.

The lights flashed constantly, changing and shifting, and every beat of the music created a dozen new frozen montages of sybaritic abandon.

The music, the light, the sweat, the smoke, the booze, the drugs—it all combined into a wet, desperate miasma that was full of needs that could never be sated.

That's why the place was called Zero, I realized. Zero limits. Zero inhibitions. Zero restraint. It was a place of perfect, focused abandon, of indulgence, and it was intriguing and

hideous, nauseating and viscerally *hungry*.

Zero fulfillment.

I felt a shudder run through me. This was the world as created by the White Court. This is what they would make of it, if they were given the chance. Planet Zero.

I glanced aside at Thomas and saw him staring around the club. His eyes had changed hue, from their usual grey to a paler, brighter silver, actual flecks of metallic color in his eyes. His eyes tracked over a pair of young women who were passing by us, dressed in black lingerie under long leather coats, and holding hands with their fingers intertwined. The women both turned their eyes toward him as if they'd heard him call their names, and stared for a second, their steps slowing and faltering.

Thomas dragged his eyes away, and let that inhuman stillness fill him again. The women blinked a few times, then continued on their way, their expressions vaguely puzzled.

"Hey," I yelled through the music. "You all right?"

He nodded once, and then twitched his chin up at the highest platform in the building, on the far side of the dance floor. "Up there."

I nodded, and Thomas took the lead. We negotiated the maze of catwalks and stairs. They had been purposefully designed to be just barely too narrow for two people to pass one another without touching, as I found out when Thomas and I passed a girl in leather shorts and a bustier, both of which strained to match themselves to a body whose curves were made ripe and inviting by the red light's primitive rhythm. She slid by Thomas, her eyes locked on his chest, as if she was about to lean over and bite him.

He ignored her, but then the girl reached me—and I take up more room than Thomas. I felt her hip brush me, and she arched her back as I stepped past her, turned sideways. Her breasts pressed against my sternum, pliant, resilient warmth, and her lips were parted, her eyes too bright. Her hand brushed over my thigh, a touch that could have been accidental but wasn't, and my body was suddenly demanding that I stop for a moment and see where this would lead.

You can't trust your body when it tells you stuff like that. It doesn't understand about things like actual affection, interaction, pregnancy, STDs. It just *wants*. I tried not to pay any attention to it—but there were other people on the catwalks, and evidently there was no such thing as a less than gorgeous woman inside Zero's walls. Most of them seemed perfectly happy to make sure I knew it as they went by.

So did some of the men, for that matter, but that was less of an issue, as far as my focus went. It probably didn't help matters that we were walking by things that I hadn't ever seen before, not even in movies. There was this one girl doing a thing with her tongue and an ice cube that—

Look, just trust me on this one. It was distracting as hell.

Thomas was walking faster as we approached the stairway leading up to the highest platform, and he took the last steps three at a time. I followed along behind him, scanning around me steadily, trying to be on the lookout for potential bad guys. This had the side effect of me getting to ogle more pretty girls than I'd ever seen in one place at one time. But it was professional ogling. One of them could have been concealing—

Well, actually, I was sort of shocked at what one of them was concealing.

I made it up the last stairway just in time to see Thomas throw himself into a woman's arms.

Justine wasn't particularly tall, for a girl, or at least she hadn't been before she'd put on the boots with the five-inch heels. She looked like I remembered her last—a gorgeous face that still fell into the girl-next-door category, with a heart-melting smile. Her hair was silver-white, and was being held in a tight bun up high on the back of her head with a pair of white chopsticks.

Of course, the last time I'd seen her, she hadn't been dressed in a formfitting white rubber cat suit that included gloves over her fingers. It emphasized absolutely everything and did it well.

Thomas fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around her waist, drawing her to him. She twined her rubber-covered arms around his neck and clung tightly. Both of them closed their eyes, and just stood there for a long minute, embracing without moving, just holding each other close.

It was an alien act in that place.

I turned away, leaned on the platform's safety railing, and stared down at the club, trying to give my brother and the woman he loved a moment of privacy. Justine hadn't worn the cover-everything suit for the sake of fashion. The touch of honest love, real and selfless love, was anathema to the White Court. Thomas had told me about White Court vampires who had been badly burned by the touch of some wedding rings, or the brush of a sweetheart's rose. But most dangerous of all to them was the touch of someone who was loved and who loved in return.

I'd seen Thomas give himself a second-degree burn on his lips and mouth the last time he'd kissed Justine.

They hadn't been together since the night she had laid down her life to save his, offering herself up to his hunger so that he could survive the evening. Thomas, in turn, had refused to devour her, denying his own darker nature. It had nearly killed her anyway, turning her hair white literally overnight. It had taken her years to recover her mind, after a long-term addiction to being fed upon by an incubus, but she'd done it. She was currently an assistant to Thomas's older sister, Lara, and positioned to find out all kinds of juicy details about the White Court. Being protected by love meant that the vamps couldn't feed on Justine, which Lara thought ideal in a personal assistant.

It also meant that my brother couldn't touch the woman he loved. If he'd been like most of the White Court, only interested in feeding his hunger, he'd have been able to have her all he wanted. Instead . . .

Sometimes irony is a lot like a big old kick in the balls.

I stared down at the dance floor for a while, not so much ogling as simply taking in the light and motion as a whole, until I saw them part in my peripheral vision. Then I turned and walked over to join them, as Justine gestured for us to sit on a pair of couches that had been moved to face each other.

Thomas sat down in a corner of the couch, and Justine pressed up close against him, careful to keep what little of her was exposed from touching his skin. I settled down across from them, leaning my elbows forward onto my knees.

I smiled at Justine and nodded to her. The floor and half-wall railing of the platform must have been made from sound-absorbing material. The roar of the club was much reduced up here. "Justine. You look like the Michelin Man's wet dream."

She laughed, pink touching her cheeks. "Well. The club has a look we try to maintain. How are you, Harry?"

"Half buzzed on this smoke, and floundering," I said. "Thomas told me you had some information."

Justine nodded seriously, and picked up a manila file folder from the couch beside her. "Word is out about a hunt for a renegade Warden," she said. "There weren't a lot of details, but I was able to turn up this."

She slid the folder over to me, and I opened it. The first page was a printout of a Web site of some kind. "What the hell is Craigslist?"

"It's a site on the Internet," Justine said. "It's sort of like a giant classified ads section, only you can get to it from anywhere in the world. People use it to advertise goods they want to buy or sell."

"Goods," Thomas put in, "and services. Help wanted, with veiled language for the less-legal things. A lot of shady deals happen there because it's relatively easy to do so anonymously. Escorts, mercenaries, you name it."

There was an ad printed on it:

WANTED FOR PERMANENT POSITION,
DONALD MORGAN, 5MIL FINDER'S FEE,
CONSIDERATIONS.
lostwardenfound@yahoo.com.

"Hell's bells," I cursed quietly.

I passed the page to Thomas. "A wanted poster," he said.

I nodded. "And not dead or alive, either. They just want him dead."

Every supernatural hither on the bloody planet was going to be coming after Morgan. Not so much for the money, probably, as for the favors that the ad promised. They carry a hell of a lot more weight than cash in the world of the weird. The five million was just there to provide scope, a sense of scale for the favors that would come with it.

"Every button man in the world and his brother," I muttered. "This just keeps getting better and better."

"Why would your people do that?" Justine asked.

"They wouldn't," I said.

Thomas frowned. "How do you know?"

"Because the Council solves things in-house," I said. Which was true. They had their own assassin for jobs like this, when he was needed. I grimaced. "Besides, even if they did put out a hit, they sure as hell wouldn't use the Internet to do it."

Thomas nodded, fingers idly stroking Justine's rubberized shoulder. "Then who did?"

"Who indeed," I said. "Is there any way to find out who put this here? Or who this e-mail thingy belongs to?"

Justine shook her head. "Not with any confidence."

"Then we'll have to make contact ourselves," Thomas said. "Maybe we can draw them out."

I scratched my chin, thinking. "If they've got a lick of sense, they won't show themselves to anyone who isn't established in the field. But it's worth a try." I sighed. "I've got to move him."

"Why?" Thomas asked.

I tapped the page with my finger. "When the hard cases start coming out of the woodwork, things are going to get messy, and old people live upstairs from me."

Thomas frowned and nodded. "Where?"

I began to answer when the tempo of the beat suddenly changed below, and a wave of frenzied cries rolled up, deafening despite any soundproofing. A second after that, an odd frisson crawled across my nerves, and I felt my heart pound a little more quickly, and the earlier demands my body had been making returned in a rush.

Across from me, Justine shivered and her eyes slid almost completely closed. She took a deep breath, and her nipples tightened against the rubber cat suit. Her hips shifted in a small, unconscious movement, brushing against Thomas's thigh.

My brother's eyes flashed from light grey to cold, hard silver for a second, before he narrowed them and rose, carefully disentangling himself from Justine. He turned to face the dance floor, his shoulders tense.

I followed his example. "What is it?"

"Trouble," he said, and looked over his shoulder at me. "Family's come to visit."

Chapter Nine

Thomas stared hard at the floor below, and then nodded once, as if in recognition. “Harry,” he said in a steady, quiet voice, “stay out of this.”

“Stay out of what?” I asked.

He turned to look at me, his expression inhumanly remote. “It’s family business. It won’t involve you. The House has given orders that wizards are not to be molested without clearance. If you don’t get involved, I won’t have to worry about you.”

“What?” I said. “Thomas . . .”

“Just let me handle it,” he said, his voice hard.

I was going to answer him when the vampire entered the room.

It was one of those sensations you have trouble remembering afterward—like the last moments of the dream you have just before waking. You know that once you’re outside the dream, you’re going to forget—and you can’t believe you could lose something so significant, so undeniably tangible.

I turned to look the second she entered—just like everyone else in the room.

She wore white, of course. A white dress, a simple shift made of some kind of glistening silken fabric, which fell to the top of her thighs. She was at least six feet tall, more so in the partially transparent shoes she wore. Her skin was pale and perfect, her hair dark and shining with highlights that changed color in the beat of the strobe lighting of the club. Her face was perfect beauty that remained unmarred by the obvious arrogance in her expression, and her body could have been used on recruiting posters for wet dreams.

She descended to the dance floor and crossed to the stairways and catwalks with a predator’s easy motion, each stride making her hips roll and shoulders sway, somehow in time to the music, and far more graceful than the efforts of the sweating dancers, more sensual than the frantic lovers.

At the foot of the first stairway, she came to a young man in leather pants and the scraps of a shirt that looked like it had been torn to pieces by ardent admirers. Without hesitation, she pushed him up against the railing beside the stairway and pressed her body up against his.

She twined her arms slowly around his neck and kissed him. A kiss, and that was all—but apparently no one told the young man that. From his reaction, you’d have thought that she’d mounted him then and there. Her lips were sealed to his, their tongues lashing one another, for maybe a minute. Then she turned away with that same precise grace, and began walking up the stairs—slowly, so that every shift and change of muscle in her perfectly formed legs danced in mesmerizing ripples beneath her soft white skin.

The young man simply melted onto the floor, muscles twitching, his eyes closed. I didn’t think he was actually aware that she had left.

The woman had every eye in the building and she knew it.

It wasn’t an enormous event, the way she took the attention of everyone there. It wasn’t a single large simultaneous, significant motion when everyone turned to look. There was no sudden silence, no deepening stillness. That would have been bad enough.

Her influence was a lot scarier than that.

It was simply a *fact*, like gravity, that everyone’s attention should be directed to her. Every person there, men and women alike, glanced up, or tracked her movement obliquely with their eyes, or paused for half a beat in their . . . conversations. For most of them it was an entirely unconscious act. They had no idea that their minds had already been ensnared.

And as I realized that, I realized that mine was in danger, too.

It was a real effort to close my eyes and remind myself of where I was. I could feel the succubus’s aura, like the silken brush of cobwebs against my eyelashes, something tingling and delicious and fluttering that swayed up my legs and through my groin on its way to my brain.

It was only a promise, a whisper to the flesh—but it was a *good* whisper. I had to make an effort to wall it away from my thoughts, until suddenly reason reasserted itself, and that fluttering haze froze and cracked and blew away under the chill wind of sensible fear.

When I opened my eyes, the woman was stalking toward us along that last catwalk, slithering nearer in her thin white dress as she mounted the last few stairs. She paused there, letting us look at her, knowing what effect she was having. Even on guard against it, I could feel the subtle sweetness of her presence calling out to me, whispering that I should relax and let my eyes run over her for a while.

She turned her cornflower blue eyes to me for a moment, and her mouth parted, spreading slowly into a smile that shrunk my pants about three sizes in as many seconds.

“Cousin Thomas,” she purred. “Still noble and starving, I see.”

“Madeline,” Thomas replied, a small smile showing white, perfect teeth. “Still undisciplined and blatant, I see.”

Madeline Raith’s mouth and eyes reacted in completely different ways to my half brother’s remark. Her smile widened into a beauty-pageant expression, wide and immobile, but her eyes narrowed and went completely white, the pale blue vanishing from her irises. She looked from Thomas to Justine.

“Lara’s little pet mortal,” Madeline said. “I wondered where you were running off to. Now I find you meeting with your old flame and . . .” Her eyes slid to me. “The enemy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Justine replied. Though her voice was calm, her cheeks were bright pink, her eyes dilated. “I came to go over the books, the way I do every week.”

“But this time you wore perfume,” Madeline said. “And a rather provocative ensemble, not that you don’t do it justice, darling. I find it”—her tongue touched her upper lip—“interesting.”

“Madeline,” Thomas said, in a tone of exaggerated patience, “please go away.”

“I have every right to be here,” she murmured. It didn’t seem right that she should be able to keep her voice so maddeningly soft and sensual over the beat of the club’s music. She turned to me and took a few steps my way, with her full attention on me.

I suddenly felt like a teenager—a little bit afraid, a whole lot excited, and filled with so many hormones demanding so many inexplicable things that I nearly lost the ability to focus my eyes.

She stopped just out of the reach of my hand. “Don’t mind my cousin’s horrible manners. The infamous Harry Dresden hardly needs an introduction.” She looked me up and down and twined a finger through a tendril of dark hair. “How could I come to Chicago so many times without meeting you?”

“But I’ve seen you,” I said. My voice was a little rough, but it worked.

“Oh?” she asked, the sexy smile widening. “Are you the sort who likes to watch, Harry?”

“You betcha,” I said. “And that time, I was watching *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*”

Her smile faltered a fraction.

“You *are* Jessica Rabbit, right?” I asked. “All slinky and overblown and obvious?”

The smile vanished.

“Because I know I’ve seen you somewhere, and gosh, I’ll be embarrassed if it turns out that you were the evil princess from *Buck Rogers* instead.”

“What?” she said. “Buck what?”

I gave her my best forced smile. “Hey, don’t get me wrong. You do that ensemble justice. But you’re trying too hard.” I leaned a little closer and fake-whispered, “Lara does more for me just sitting in a chair than you did with your whole entrance.”

Madeline Raith became as still and cold as a statue of a furious goddess, and the air temperature around us dropped several degrees.

I suddenly sensed Thomas’s presence beside me, and found my brother had leaned back against the railing on his elbows, his hands loose and relaxed. He was standing just a tiny bit closer to Madeline than I was.

“Madeline,” he said in the precise same tone he’d used a moment before, “go away before I beat you to death with my bare hands.”

Madeline jerked her head back as if Thomas had slapped her. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said calmly. “It isn’t quite cricket as family squabbles go, I know, but I’m tired, I don’t give a fuck what you or anyone else in the House thinks of me, and I don’t respect you enough to play games with you, even if I was in the mood.”

“How *dare* you?” Madeline snarled. “How *dare* you threaten me? Lara will have the skin flayed from your body for this.”

“Oh?” Thomas gave her a wintry smile. “After what you projected at the wizard, he’d be well within his rights to burn you right down to your overpriced shoes.”

“I never—”

“And despite the orders handed down from the King,” Thomas said, shaking his head. “Lara’s getting tired of cleaning up after you, Mad. She’d probably buy me a new set of steak knives if I found a way to make her life a bit less trying.”

Madeline laughed. It reminded me of glass breaking. “And do you think she loves you any better, cousin mine? You refuse to appear with the House at meetings of the Court, and spend your time among the kine, grooming them and bringing shame upon your family. At least tell me you are planning to take the beasts to some sort of auction.”

"You aren't capable of understanding why I do what I do," Thomas said.

"Who would want to?" she retorted. "You're as much a degenerate as any of those fools in Skavis and Malvora."

Thomas's mouth ticked at the corner, but that was all the reaction he gave her. "Go away, Madeline. Last warning."

"Two members of the oldest bloodlines in Raith murdering each other?" Madeline said, sneering. "The White King could not tolerate such a divisive act and you know it." She turned away from Thomas and walked toward Justine. "You're bluffing," she said over her shoulder. "Besides. We haven't heard from our little pink rose yet."

Her voice sank to a throaty purr, and Justine quivered in place, seemingly unable to move as Madeline approached.

"Pretty Justine." Madeline put a hand on Justine's shoulder and slid a single fingertip down the slope of one breast. "I don't generally enjoy does as much as some, darling, but even I find the thought of taking you delicious."

"You c-can't touch me," Justine stammered. She was breathing faster.

"Not yet," Madeline said. "But there's not enough will left in your pretty little head to control yourself for long." Madeline stepped closer, sliding her hand along Justine's waist.

"Some night, perhaps I'll come to you with some beautiful young buck and whisper pretty things to you until you're mad to be taken. And after he has made use of you, little doe, I'll take you in one big bite." She licked her lips. "I'll take you whole and make you scream how much you love it as it happen—"

Thomas broke a chair over Madeline's head.

It was particularly impressive, given that all the chairs on the balcony were made of metal.

It happened fast, during an eye blink. One instant he was standing beside me, tightening with anger, and the next there were popped rivets zinging everywhere and Madeline had been crushed to the floor of the balcony.

The air went cold. Thomas dropped the ruined chair. Madeline bounced up from the floor and threw a blow at Thomas's jaw. He hunched and twisted, a boxer's defense, and took it on the shoulder with a grunt of pain. Then he seized her ankle and slammed her in a half circle, smashing a 36-24-36 dent into the drywall.

Madeline cried out and her limbs went loose. Thomas swung her in another arc that brought her crashing down onto the low coffee table between the couches. She lay there and let out a single choked gasp, her eyes unfocused. Without pausing, my brother snatched both chopsticks from Justine's hair, letting the white-silver locks tumble down her back.

Then, in two sharp, swift motions, he slammed the chopsticks through Madeline's wrists and into the table beneath them, pinning her like a butterfly to a card.

"You're right of course," he snarled. "Lara couldn't ignore one member of the family murdering another. It would make the King look weak." His hand closed over Madeline's face, and he pulled her head up toward his, making her arms strain at a painful angle. "I was bluffing."

He shoved her back down against the table. "Of course," he said, "you're family. Families don't murder one another." He looked up at Justine and said, "They share."

She met his eyes. A very small, very hard smile graced Justine's features.

"You wanted to taste her," Thomas said, his fingers twining with Justine's rubber-clad ones. "Well, Madeline. Be my guest."

Justine leaned over and kissed Madeline Raith's forehead, her silken silver hair falling to veil them both.

The vampire screamed.

The sound was lost in the pounding rhythm and flashing lights.

Justine lifted her head a few seconds later, and swept her hair slowly down the length of Madeline's form. The vampire writhed and screamed again, while Thomas held her pinned to the table. Wherever Justine's hair glided over exposed fleshed, the skin sizzled and burned, blackening in some places, forming blisters and welts in others. She left a trail of ruin down one of Madeline's legs and then rose together with Thomas, two bodies making one motion.

Madeline Raith's face was a ruin of burn marks, and the imprint of Justine's soft mouth was a perfect black brand on pale flesh in the center of her forehead. She lay on the table, still pinned by the chopsticks, and quivered in jerking little motions, gasping and breathless with the pain.

Thomas and Justine walked, hand in hand, to the stairs leading down from our platform. I followed them.

They passed beneath an air-conditioning outlet, and a few strands of Justine's hair blew against Thomas's naked arm and chest. Small bright lines of scarlet appeared. Thomas didn't flinch.

I walked over to them and passed Justine a pair of pencils, taken from my coat pocket. She took them with a nod of thanks, and quickly bound up her hair again. I looked over my shoulder as she did.

Madeline Raith lay helpless and gasping—but her white eyes burned with hate.

Thomas took his T-shirt from where he'd stowed it on a belt loop, and put it back on. Then he slid his arms around Justine again and pulled her against his chest, holding her close.

"Will you be all right?" he asked.

Justine nodded, her eyes closed. "I'll call the House. Lara will send someone for her."

"You leave her there and it's going to make trouble," I told him.

He shrugged. "I couldn't get away with killing her. But our House has rather stern views on poaching." Something hard and hot entered his eyes. "Justine is mine. Madeline had to be shown that. She deserved it."

Justine clung a little bit tighter to him. He returned the gesture.

We all started down the stairs together, and I was glad to be leaving Zero.

"Still," I said. "Seeing her like that, I feel like maybe somebody went too far. I feel a little bit bad for her."

Thomas arched an eyebrow and glanced back at me. "You do?"

"Yeah," I said. I pursed my lips thoughtfully. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that Jessica Rabbit thing."

Chapter Ten

The hot summer night outside Zero felt ten degrees cooler and a million times cleaner than what we'd left behind us. Thomas turned sharply to the right and walked until he'd found a spot of shadow between streetlights, and leaned one shoulder against the wall of the building. He bowed his head, and stayed that way for a minute, then two.

I waited. I didn't need to ask my brother what was wrong. The display of strength and power he'd used on Madeline had cost him energy—energy that other vampires gained by feeding on victims, as Madeline had done to that poor sap inside. He wasn't upset by what had happened in Zero. He was hungry.

Thomas's struggle against his own hunger was complicated, difficult, and maybe impossible to sustain. That never stopped him from trying, though. The rest of the Raith family thought he was insane.

But I got it.

He walked back over to me a minute later, his cool features distant and untouchable as Antarctic mountains.

He fell into pace beside me as we began walking down the street toward the lot where he'd parked his car.

"Ask you a question?" I said.

He nodded.

"The White Court only get burned when they try to feed on someone touched by true love, right?"

"It isn't as simple as that," Thomas said quietly. "It's got to do with how much control the hunger has over you when you touch."

I grunted. "But when they feed, the hunger's in control."

Thomas nodded slowly.

"So why'd Madeline try to feed on Justine? She had to know it would hurt her."

"Same reason I do," Thomas said. "She can't help it. It's reflex."

I frowned. "I don't get it."

He was quiet long enough to make me think he wasn't going to say anything, before he finally spoke. "Justine and I were together for years. And she . . . means a lot to me. When I'm near her, I can't think about anything else but her. And when I touch her, everything in me wants to be nearer to her."

"Including your hunger," I said quietly.

He nodded. "We agree on that point, my demon and I. So I can't touch Justine without it being . . . close to the surface, I suppose you could call it."

"And it gets burned," I said.

He nodded. "Madeline is the other end of the spectrum. She thinks she should get to feed on anyone she wants, anywhere, anytime. She doesn't see other people. She just sees food. Her hunger controls her completely." He smiled a bitter little smile. "So for her it's reflex, just like for me."

"You're different. For her it's everyone," I said, "not only Justine."

He shrugged. "I don't care about everyone. I care about Justine."

"You're different," I said.

Thomas turned to face me, his expression rigid and cold. "Shut up, Harry."

"But—"

His voice dropped to a low snarl. "Shut. Up."

It was a little scary.

He stared hard at me for a while longer, then shook his head and exhaled slowly. "I'll get the car. Wait here."

"Sure," I said.

He walked away on silent feet, his hands in his pockets, his head bowed. Every woman he passed, and some of the men, turned their heads to watch him go by. He ignored them.

I got a lot of looks, too, but that was because I was standing on a sidewalk near a lot of Chicago's night spots on a hot summer night wearing a long leather coat and carrying a

quarterstaff carved with mystic runes. Thomas's looks had all been subtitled: *Yum*. My looks all said: *Weirdo*.

Tough to believe I was coming out ahead on that one.

While I waited, my instincts nagged me again, a hairs-on-the-back-of-my-neck certainty that someone was focused on me. My instincts had been on a streak, so I paid attention to them, quietly preparing my shield bracelet as I turned my head in a slow, casual look up and down the street. I didn't spot anybody, but my vision sort of flickered as it passed over an alley across the street. I focused on that point intently for a moment, concentrating, and was able to make out a vaguely human shape there.

Then the flicker was abruptly replaced with the form of Anastasia Luccio, who raised a hand and beckoned me.

Yikes.

I jaywalked over to her, timing my crossing in between the occasional passing car, and we took several steps back into the alley.

"Evening, Stacy," I said.

She turned to me and, in a single motion, drew a curved saber from a sheath at her hip and produced a gun in her other hand. The tip of the blade menaced my face, and I had to jerk my head back, which put me off balance, and I wound up with my shoulders pressed up against a wall.

Anastasia arched an eyebrow, her soft mouth set in a hard line. "I hope for your sake that you are the true Harry Dresden, only using that abomination of a nickname to make sure that I was the true Anastasia"—she emphasized the word slightly—"Luccio."

"Well, yes, Anastasia," I said, being careful not to move. "And by your reaction, I can tell that it really is you."

She dropped the sword's point and lowered the gun. The tension faded from her body, and she put her hardware away. "Well, of course it's me. Who else would it be?"

I shook my head. "I've had a bad shapeshifter night."

She arched an eyebrow. Anastasia Luccio was the captain of the Wardens of the White Council. She had a couple of centuries of experience.

"I've had those," she said, and put a hand on my arm. "Are you all right?"

We stepped into each other and hugged. I hadn't realized how stiffly I'd been holding myself until I exhaled and relaxed a little. She felt slender and warm and strong in my arms. "So far I'm not dead," I said. "I take it you used a tracking spell to run me down—since you don't seem to be worried about whether or not I'm me."

She lifted her face to mine and planted a soft kiss on my mouth. "Honestly, Harry," she said, smiling. "Who would pretend to be *you*?"

"Someone who wanted to be kissed in dark alleys by seductive older women, apparently."

Her smile widened for a second, and then faded. "I thought I was going to have to break down the door and come in after you. What were you doing in that White Court cesspit?"

I didn't think I'd done anything to cause it, but we stepped out of each other's arms. "Looking for information," I said quietly. "Something's up. And someone's cut me out of the loop."

Anastasia pressed her lips together and looked away. Her expression was closed, touched with anger. "Yes. Orders."

"Orders," I said. "From the Merlin, I guess."

"From Ebenezar McCoy, actually."

I grunted in surprise. McCoy had been my mentor when I was young. I respected him.

"I get it," I said. "He was afraid that if I heard Morgan was on the run, I'd hat up and dish out some paycheck."

She glanced up at me, and then across the street at Zero. She shrugged, without quite looking me in the face. "God knows you have enough cause to do so."

"You agreed with him," I said.

She looked up at me, her eyes a little wider. "If I did, then why am I standing here?"

I frowned at her and scratched my head. "Okay. You've got me on that one."

"Besides," she said. "I was worried about you."

"Worried?"

She nodded. "Morgan's done something that is hiding him from even the Senior Council's abilities. I was afraid that he might come here."

Poker face don't fail me now. "That's crazy," I said. "Why would he do that?"

She squared her shoulders and faced me steadily. "Maybe because he's innocent."

"And?"

"There are a number of people who have sought permission from the Senior Council to investigate and interrogate you under the presumption that you were the traitor who has been feeding information to the Red Court." She looked away again. "Morgan has been one of the most overt agitators."

I took a deep breath. "You're saying that Morgan knows he isn't the traitor. And he thinks it's me."

"And he might be moving toward you, in an attempt to prove his own innocence or, failing that . . ."

"Kill me," I said, quietly. "If he's going to go down, you think he might have decided to take out the real traitor before he gets the axe."

And suddenly I had to wonder if Morgan had shown up at my door for the reasons he'd given me. Anastasia had been Morgan's mentor, when he was an apprentice. She'd known the man for the vast majority of his life, literally for generations.

What if her judgment of him was better than mine?

Sure, Morgan wasn't in any shape to kill me personally—but he wouldn't need to. All he had to do is call the Wardens and tell them where he was. A lot of people in the Council didn't like me much. I'd go down with Morgan, for giving aid and comfort to a traitor.

I suddenly felt naive and vulnerable and maybe a little stupid.

"He was already in custody," I said. "How did he get away?"

Luccio smiled faintly. "We aren't sure. He thought of something we didn't. And he put three Wardens in the hospital when he left."

"But you don't think he's guilty."

"I . . ." She frowned for a moment and then said, "I refuse to let fear turn me against a man I know and trust. But it doesn't matter what I think. There's enough evidence to kill him."

"What evidence?" I asked.

"Other than finding him standing over LaFortier's corpse with a literal bloody knife in his hand?"

"Yeah," I said. "Other than that."

She raked her fingers back through her curly hair. "The information the Red Court has attained was exclusive to a very small pool of suspects, of which he was one. We have telephone records of him in frequent contact with a known operative of the Red Court. We also tracked down an offshore account belonging to him, in which several million dollars had recently been deposited."

I snorted derisively. "Yeah, that's him. Morgan the mercenary, nothing but dollar signs in his eyes."

"I know," she said. "That's what I mean about fear clouding people's judgment. We all know that the Red Court is going to come after us again. We know that if we don't eliminate the traitor, their first blow could be fatal. The Merlin is desperate."

"Join the club," I muttered. I rubbed at my eyes and sighed.

She touched my arm again. "I thought you had a right to know," she said. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to get here sooner."

I covered her hand with mine and pressed gently. "Yeah," I said. "Thanks."

"You look awful."

"You sweet talker, you."

She lifted her hand to touch my face. "I've got a few hours before I need to be back on duty. I was thinking a bottle of wine and a massage might be in order."

I only barely kept from groaning in pleasure at the very thought of one of Anastasia's massages. What she didn't know about inflicting merciless pleasure on a man's aching body hadn't been invented. But I sure as hell couldn't have her back over to the apartment. If she found out about Morgan, and if he truly intended to betray me, it would be frighteningly easy for her head to wind up on the floor next to Morgan's and mine.

"I can't," I told her. "I've got to go to the hospital."

She frowned. "What happened?"

"A skinwalker picked up my trail earlier tonight, when I was at Billy Borden's place. Kirby's dead. Andi's in the hospital."

She sucked in a breath, wincing in empathy. "Dio, Harry. I'm so sorry."

I shrugged. I watched my vision blur, and realized that I wasn't only making an excuse to keep her away from my place. Kirby and I hadn't been blood brothers or anything—but he

was a friend, a regular part of my life. Emphasis on the *was*.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

I shook my head. Then I said, "Actually, yeah."

"Very well."

"Find out whatever you can about skinwalkers. I'm going to kill this one."

"All right," she said.

"Meanwhile," I said, "is there anything I can do for you?"

"For me?" She shook her head. "But . . . Morgan could use whatever help he can get."

"Yeah," I said. "Like I'm gonna help Morgan."

She lifted her hands. "I know. I know. But there's not much I can do. Everyone knows he was my apprentice. They're watching me. If I try to help him openly, they'll suspend me as captain of the Wardens, at best."

"Don't you just love it when justice can't be bothered with petty concerns like fact?"

"Harry," she said. "What if he's innocent?"

I shrugged. "The way I was all those years? I'm too busy admiring the karma to lend a hand to the bastard." Out on the street, Thomas's Jag cruised by the end of the alley, then pulled up to the curb and stopped.

I glanced at the car and said, "There's my ride."

Anastasia arched an eyebrow at Thomas and his car. "The vampire?"

"He owed me a favor."

"Mmmm," Anastasia said. Her look at Thomas did not say *yum*. She looked more like someone who was trying to judge by how much she would need to lead a moving target.

"You're sure?"

I nodded. "The White King told him to play nice. He will."

"Until he doesn't," she said.

"Walkers can't be choosers," I said.

"The *Beetle* died again?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why don't you get a different car?" she asked.

"Because the *Blue Beetle* is my car."

Anastasia smiled faintly up at me. "I wonder how you make something like that so endearing."

"It's my natural good looks," I said. "I could make athlete's foot endearing, if I really had to."

She rolled her eyes, but was still smiling. "I'll head back to Edinburgh and help coordinate the search. If there's anything I can do . . ."

I nodded. "Thank you."

She put her hands on my cheeks. "I'm sorry about your friends. When this is over, we'll find some quiet spot and relax."

I turned my head to one side and kissed the pulse in her wrist, then gently clasped her hands with mine. "Look, I'm not making any promises. But if I see something that might help Morgan, I'll let you know."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

She stood up on her toes and kissed me goodbye. Then she turned and vanished into the shadows farther down the alley.

I waited until she was gone to turn around and join my brother in the white Jag.

"Damn, that girl is fit," Thomas drawled. "Where to?"

"Stop looking," I said. "My place."

If Morgan was going to give me the shaft, I might as well find out now.

Chapter Eleven

Thomas stopped his Jag in front of the boardinghouse where my apartment was and said, "I'll have my cell phone on me. Try to call me before things start exploding."

"Maybe this time it'll be different. Maybe I'll work everything out through reason, diplomacy, dialogue, and mutual cooperation."

Thomas eyed me.

I tried to look wounded. "It could happen."

He reached into his jeans pocket, pulled out a plain white business card with a phone number on it, and passed it to me. "Use this number. It's to a clone."

I looked at him blankly.

"It's a supersecret sneaky phone," he clarified. "No one knows I have it, and if someone traces your calls and goes looking for me, they'll find someone else."

"Oh," I said. "Right."

"You sure you don't want to just load Morgan up and go?"

I shook my head. "Not until I give him the score. He sees me coming in with a vampire in tow, he's going to flip out. As in try to kill us both." I got out of the Jag, glanced at the house, and shook my head. "You stay alive for a dozen decades doing what Morgan does, paranoia becomes reflex."

Thomas grimaced. "Yeah. Give me an hour or so to get what you need. Call me when you've got him ready to go."

I glanced at the number, committed it to memory, and pocketed the card. "Thanks. I'll pay you back for the gear."

He rolled his eyes. "Shut up, Harry."

I snorted out a breath, and nodded my head in thanks. We rapped knuckles, and he pulled out onto the street and cruised out into the Chicago night.

I took a slow look around the familiar shapes of dark buildings where only a few lights still burned. I'd lived in this neighborhood for years. You'd think I'd be confident about spotting anything out of the ordinary fairly quickly. But, call me crazy, there were just too many players moving in this game, with God only knew what kinds of abilities to draw upon.

I didn't spot anyone out there getting set to kill me to get to Morgan. But that didn't mean that they weren't there.

"If that's not paranoid reflex," I muttered, "I don't know what is."

I shivered and walked down the steps to my apartment. I disarmed the wards, and reminded myself, again, that I really needed to do something about the deep divots in the steel security door. The last thing I needed was for old Mrs. Spunkelcreef, my near-deaf landlady, to start asking me why my door looked like it had been shot a dozen times. I mean, I could always tell her, "because it has been," but that isn't the sort of conversation one has with one's landlady if one wants to keep one's home.

I opened the bullet-dented door, went inside, turned toward the bedroom door, and was faced with a bizarre tableau.

Morgan was off the bed, sitting on the floor with his back to it, his wounded leg stretched out in front of him. He looked awful, but his eyes were narrowed and glittered with suspicion. Sprawled in the bedroom doorway was my apprentice, Molly Carpenter.

Molly was a tall young woman with a bunch of really well-arranged curves and shoulder-length hair that was, this month, dyed a brilliant shade of sapphire. She was wearing cutoff blue jeans and a white tank top, and her blue eyes looked exasperated.

She was sprawling on the floor because Mouse was more or less lying on top of her. He wasn't letting his full weight rest on her, because it probably would have smothered her, but it seemed obvious that she was not able to move.

"Harry!" Molly said. She started to say something else, but Mouse leaned into her a little, and suddenly all she could do was gasp for air.

"Dresden!" Morgan growled at about the same time. He shifted his weight, as if to get up.

Mouse turned his head to Morgan and gave him a steady look, his lips peeling back from his fangs.

Morgan settled down.

"Hooboy," I sighed, and pushed the door shut, leaving the room in complete darkness. I locked the door, put the wards back up, and then muttered, "*Flickum bicus*." I waved my hand as I spoke, and sent a minor effort of will out into the room, and half a dozen candles flickered to life.

Mouse turned to me and gave me what I could have sworn was a reproachful look. Then he got up off of Molly, padded into the alcove that served as my kitchen, and deliberately

yawned at me before flopping down on the floor to sleep. The meaning was clear: *now it's your problem*.

Chapter Twelve

“I don’t like it,” Morgan growled, as I pushed the wheelchair over the gravel toward the street and the van Thomas had rented.

“Gee. There’s a shock,” I said. Morgan was a lot to push around, even with the help of the chair. “You upset with how I operate.”

“He’s a vampire,” Morgan said. “He can’t be trusted.”

“I can hear you,” Thomas said from the driver’s seat of the van.

“I know that, vampire,” Morgan said, without raising his voice. He eyed me again.

“He owes me a favor,” I said, “from that coup attempt in the White Court.”

Morgan glowered at me. “You’re lying,” he said.

“For all you know it’s true.”

“No, it isn’t,” he said flatly. “You’re lying to me.”

“Well, yes.”

He looked from me to the van. “You trust him.”

“To a degree,” I said.

“Idiot,” he said, though he sounded like his heart wasn’t in it. “Even when a White Court vampire is sincere, you can’t trust it. Sooner or later, its demon takes control. And then you’re nothing but food. It’s what they are.”

I felt a little surge of anger and clubbed it down before it could make my mouth start moving. “You came to me, remember? You don’t like how I’m helping you, feel free to roll yourself right out of my life.”

Morgan gave me a disgusted look, folded his arms—and shut his mouth.

Thomas turned on the hazard lights as the van idled on the street; then he came around and opened up the side door. He turned to Morgan and picked up the wheelchair the wounded Warden sat in with about as much effort as I’d use to move a sack of groceries from the cart into my car’s trunk. Thomas put the wheelchair carefully into the van, while Morgan held the IV bag steady on its little metal pole clamped to the chair’s arm.

I had to give Morgan a grudging moment of admiration. He was one tough son of a bitch. Obviously in agony, obviously exhausted, obviously operating in the shambles of his own shattered pride, he was still stubborn enough to be paranoid and annoying. If he wasn’t aiming it all at me, I probably would have admired him even more.

Thomas slid the door shut on Morgan, rolled his eyes at me, and got back into the driver’s seat.

Molly came hurrying up, carrying a pair of backpacks, holding one end of Mouse’s leash. I held out my hand, and she tossed me the black nylon pack. It was my trouble kit. Among other things, it contained food, water, a medical kit, survival blankets, chemical light sticks, duct tape, two changes of clothing, a multitool, two hundred dollars in cash, my passport, and a couple of favorite paperbacks. I always kept the trouble kit ready and available, in case I need to move out in a hurry. It had everything I would need to survive about ninety percent of the planet’s environments for at least a couple of days.

Molly, acting on her own initiative, had begun putting her own trouble kit together the same day she’d learned about mine. Except that her backpack was pink.

“You sure about this?” I asked her, pitching my voice low enough that Morgan wouldn’t hear.

She nodded. “He can’t stay there alone. You can’t stay with him. Neither can Thomas.”

I grunted. “Do I need to search your bag for candlesticks?”

She gave me a chagrined shake of her head.

“Don’t feel too bad, kid,” I told her. “He had a couple of hours to work you up to that. And he’s the guy who nearly cut your head off, during that mess around SplatterCon.”

“It wasn’t that,” she said quietly. “It’s what he said to you. What he’s done to you.”

I put my hand on her arm and squeezed gently.

She smiled faintly at me. “I’ve never . . . never really felt . . . hate before. Not like that.”

“Your emotions got the better of you. That’s all.”

“But it isn’t,” she insisted, folding her arms against her stomach, her shoulders hunching a little. “Harry, I’ve seen you all but kill yourself to help people who were in trouble. But for

Morgan, that doesn’t matter. You’re just this . . . this *thing* that did something wrong once, and you’ll never, ever be anything else.”

Aha.

Chapter Thirteen

Wizards and technology don't get on so well, and that makes travel sort of complicated. Some wizards seemed to be more of a bad influence on technology than others, and if any of them were harder on machinery than me, I hadn't met them yet. I'd been on a jet a couple of times and had one bad experience—just one. After the plane's computers and guidance system went bad, and we had to make an emergency landing on a tiny commercial airfield, I wasn't eager to repeat the experience.

Buses were better, especially if you sat toward the back, but even they had problems. I hadn't been on a bus trip longer than three or four hundred miles without winding up broken down next to the highway in the middle of nowhere. Cars could work out, especially if they were fairly old models—the fewer electronics involved, the better. Even those machines, though, tended to provide you with chronic problems. I'd never owned a car that ran more than maybe nine days in ten—and most of them were worse than that.

Trains and ships were the ideal, especially if you could keep yourself a good way from the engines. Most wizards, when they traveled, stuck with ships and trains. Either that or they cheated—like I was about to do.

Back at the beginning of the war with the Vampire Courts, the White Council, with the help of a certain wizard private investigator from Chicago who shall remain nameless, negotiated the use of Ways through the near reaches of the Nevernever controlled by the Unseelie Court. The Nevernever, the world of ghosts and spirits and fantastic beings of every description, exists alongside our own mortal reality—but it isn't the same shape. That meant that in places, the mortal world touched upon the Nevernever at two points that could be very close together, while in the mortal realm, they were very far apart. In short, use of the Ways meant that anyone who could open a path between worlds could use a major shortcut.

In this case, it meant I could make the trip from Chicago, Illinois, to Edinburgh, Scotland, in about half an hour.

The closest entry point to where I wanted to go in the Nevernever was a dark alley behind a building that had once been used for meat packing. A lot of things had died in that building, not all of them cleanly and not all of them cows. There's a dark sense of finality to the place, a sort of ephemeral quality of dread that hangs so lightly on the air that the unobservant might not notice it at all. In the middle of the alley, a concrete staircase led down to a door that was held shut with both boards and chains—talk about overkill.

I walked down the steps to the bottom of the stairs, closed my eyes for a moment, and extended my otherworldly senses, not toward the door, but toward the section of concrete beside it. I could feel the thinness of the world there, where energy pulsed and hummed just beneath the seemingly rigid surface of reality.

It was a hot night in Chicago, but it wouldn't be on the Ways. I wore a long-sleeved shirt and jeans, and a couple of pairs of socks beneath my hiking shoes. My heavy leather duster

had me sweating. I gathered up my will, reached out my hand, and with a whisper of “*Aparturum*,” I opened a Way between worlds.

Honestly, it sounds quite a bit more dramatic than it looks. The surface of the concrete wall rippled with a quick flickering of color and began to put out a soft glow. I took a deep breath, gripped my staff in both hands, and stepped directly forward into the concrete.

My flesh passed through what should have been stone, and I emerged in a dark wood that lay covered in frost and a thin layer of snow. At least this time the ground in Chicago had been more or less level with the ground in the Nevernever. Last time, I'd had a three-inch drop I hadn't expected, and I'd fallen on my ass into the snow. No harm done, I suppose, but this

part of the Nevernever was just chock-full of things you did *not* want to think you were clumsy or vulnerable.

I took my bearings with a quick look around. The woods were the same, all three times I'd been through them. A hillside sank down ahead of me, and climbed steadily into the night behind me. At the top of the small mountain I stood upon, I was told, was a narrow and bitterly cold pass that led into the interior of the Unseelie Mountains, to Mab's stronghold of Arctic Tor. Below me, the land sank into foothills and then into plains, where Mab's authority ended and that of Titania the Summer Queen began.

I stood at a crossroads—which was only sensible, since I'd arrived from Chicago, one of the great crossroads of the world. One trail led upslope and down. The other crossed it at almost perfect right angles, and ran along the face of the hillside. I took a left, following the face of the hillside in a counterclockwise direction, also known as widdershins, in the parlance of the locals. The trail ran between frozen trees, their branches bowed beneath their burden of frost and snow.

I moved quickly, but not quickly enough to slip and blow out an ankle or brain myself on a low-hanging branch. The White Council had Mab's permission to move through the woods, but they were by no means safe.

I found that out for myself about fifteen minutes into my walk, when snow suddenly fell softly from the trees all around, and silent black shapes descended to encircle me. It happened quickly, and in perfect silence—maybe a dozen spiders the size of ponies alit upon the frozen ground or clung to the trunks and branches of the surrounding trees. They were smooth-surfaced, sharp-edged creatures, like orbweavers, long-limbed and graceful and deadly-looking. They moved with an almost delicate precision, their bodies of a color of grey and blue and white that blended flawlessly with the snowy night.

The spider who had come down onto the trail directly in front of me raised its two forelegs in warning, and revealed fangs longer than my forearm, dripping with milky-white venom.

“Halt, man-thing,” said the creature.

That was actually scarier than the mere appearance of economy-sized arachnids. Between its fangs, I could see a mouth moving—a mouth that looked disturbingly human. Its multiple eyes gleamed like beads of obsidian. Its voice was a chirping, buzzing thing. “Halt, he whose blood will warm us. Halt, intruder upon the Wood of the Winter Queen.”

I stopped and looked around the circle of spiders. None of them seemed to be particularly larger or smaller than the others. If I had to fight my way clear, there wasn't any obvious weak link to exploit. “Greetings,” I said, as I did. “I am no intruder, honored hunters. I am a Wizard of the White Council, and I and my folk have the Queen's permission to tread these paths.”

The air around me shivered with chitters and hisses and clicks.

“Man-things speak often with false tongues,” said the lead spider, its forelimbs thrashing the air in agitation.

I held up my staff. “I guess they always have one of these, too, huh?”

The spider hissed, and venom bubbled from the tips of its fangs. “Many a man-thing bears such a long stick, mortal.”

“Careful, legs,” I said. “I'm on speaking terms with Queen Mab herself. I don't think you want to play it like this.”

The spider's legs shifted in an undulating motion, and the spider rippled two or three feet closer to me. The other spiders all shifted, too, moving a bit nearer. I didn't like that, not even a little. If one of them jumped, they'd be all over me—and there were just too many of the damn big things to defend myself against them effectively.

The spider laughed, the sound hollow and mocking. “Mortals do not speak to the Queen and live to tell the tale.”

“It lies,” hissed the other spiders, the phrase a low buzzing around me. “And its blood is warm.”

I eyed all those enormous fangs and had an acutely uncomfortable flashback to Morgan driving his straw through the top of that damn juice box.

The spider in front of me flowed a little to the left and a little to the right, the graceful motion intended to distract me from the fact that it had gotten about a foot closer to me. “Man-thing, how are we to know what you truly are?”

In my professional opinion, you rarely get handed a straight line that good.

I thrust the tip of my staff forward, along with my gathered will, focusing it into an area the size of my own clenched fist as I shouted, “*Forzare!*”

Chapter Fourteen

The Hidden Halls of Edinburgh were the redoubt and fortress of the White Council of Wizardry from time immemorial. Well, actually, that last bit isn't true. It's been our headquarters for a little under five hundred years.

The White Council has existed since pre-Roman times, in one form or another, and its headquarters has shifted from time to time, and place to place. Alexandria, Carthage, Rome—we were in the Vatican in the early days of the Church, believe it or not—Constantinople and Madrid have all been home to the Council's leadership at one time or another—but since the end of the Middle Ages, they've been located in the tunnels and catacombs hewn from the unyielding stone of Scotland.

Edinburgh's tunnel network is even more extensive than those beneath the city of Chicago, and infinitely more stable and sturdy. The main headquarters of the complex is located deep beneath the Auld Rock itself—Castle Edinburgh, where kings and queens, lords and ladies, have defied, besieged, betrayed and slaughtered one another since pre-Christian times.

There's a reason a fortress has been there for as long as mankind can remember—it is one of the world's largest convergences of ley lines. Ley lines are the natural currents of magical energy running through the world. They are the most powerful means of employing magic known to man—and the lines that intersect in the earth deep below the Auld Rock represent a staggering amount of raw power waiting to be tapped by someone skilled or foolish enough.

I walked over a ley line about three steps after I entered the Hidden Halls, and I could feel its shuddering energy beneath my feet, rushing by like an enormous, silent subterranean river. I walked a bit faster for a few paces, irrationally nervous about being swept off of my feet by it, until I could only sense it as a dim and receding vibration in the ground.

I didn't need to call up a light. Crystals set in the walls glowed in a rainbow of gentle colors, bathing the whole place in soft, ambient illumination. The tunnel was ancient, worn, chilly, and damp. Water always seemed ready to condense into a half-frozen dew the instant it was given the opportunity by an exhaled breath or a warm body.

The tunnel was about as wide as my spread arms, and maybe eight feet high. The walls were lined with bas-relief carvings in the stone. Some of them were renditions of scenes of what I'd been told were the historical high points of the White Council. Since I didn't recognize anyone in the images, I didn't have much context for them, so they mostly just looked like the crudely drawn cast of thousands you see on the Bayeux Tapestry. The rest of the carvings were wards—seriously world-class heavyweight wards. I didn't know what they did, but I could sense the deadly power behind them, and I tread carefully as I passed deeper into the complex.

The entry tunnel from the Nevernever was more than a quarter of a mile long, sloping gently downward the whole way. There were metal gates every couple of hundred yards, each of them manned by a Warden backed up by a pair of Ancient Mai's temple-dog statues.

The things were three feet high at the shoulder, and looked like escapees from a Godzilla movie. Carved from stone, the blocky figures sat inert and immobile—but I knew that they could come to dangerous life at an instant's notice. I tried to think about what it might be like to be facing a pair of aggressive temple-dog statues in the relatively narrow hallway. I decided that I'd rather wrestle an oncoming subway locomotive. At least then it would be over quickly.

I exchanged polite greetings with the Wardens on guard until I passed the last checkpoint and entered the headquarters proper. Then I took a folded map from my duster pocket, squinted at it, and got my bearings. The layout of the tunnels was complex, and it would be easy to get lost.

Where to begin?

If the Gatekeeper had been around, I would have sought him out first. Rashid had been my supporter and ally on more than one occasion, God knew why. I wasn't on what anyone would call good terms with the Merlin. I barely knew Martha Liberty or Listens-to-Wind. I found Ancient Mai to be a very scary little person. That left Ebenezar.

I headed for the War Room.

It took me the better part of half an hour to get there. Like I said, the tunnel complex is enormous—and after the way the war had reduced the ranks of the Council, it seemed lonelier and emptier than ever. My footsteps echoed hollowly back from stone walls for minutes at a time, unaccompanied by any other sound.

I felt intensely uncomfortable as I paced the Hidden Halls. I think it was the smell that did it. When I'd been a young man, hauled before the Council to be tried as a violator of the First Law of Magic, they had brought me to Edinburgh. The musty, wet, mineral smell of the place had been almost all I knew while I had waited, hooded and bound, in a cell for a full day. I remember being horribly cold and tortured by the knots my muscles worked themselves into after so many hours tied hand and foot. I remember feeling more alone than ever in my life, while I awaited whatever was going to happen.

I had been scared. So scared. I was sixteen.

It was the same smell, and that scent had the power to animate the corpses of some of my darkest memories and bring them lurching back into the front of my thoughts. Psychological necromancy.

"Brains," I moaned to myself, drawing the word out.

If you can't stop the bad thoughts from coming to visit, at least you can make fun of them while they're hanging around.

In a stroke of improbable logic, the War Room was located between the central chambers of the Senior Council and the barracks rooms of the Wardens, which included a small kitchen. The smell of baking bread cut through the musty dampness of the tunnel, and I felt my steps quickening.

I passed the barracks, which would doubtless be empty, for the most part. Most of the Wardens would be out hunting Morgan, as evidenced by the skeleton guard I'd seen at Chandler's post. I took the next left, nodded to the very young Warden on guard, opened a door, and passed into the War Room of the White Council.

It was a spacious vault, about a hundred feet square, but the heavy arches and pillars that supported the ceiling took away a lot of that room. Illuminating crystals glowed more brightly here, to make reading easier. Bulletin boards on rolling frames took up spaces between pillars, and were covered by maps and pins and tiny notes. Most of them had one or more chalkboards next to them, which were covered in diagrams, cryptic, brief notation, and cruder maps. Completely ordinary office furniture occupied the back half of the vault, broken up into cubicles.

Typewriters clacked and dinged. Men and women of the administrative staff, wizards all, moved back and forth through the room, speaking quietly, writing, typing, and filing. A row of counters on the front wall of the room supported coffeepots warmed by propane flames, and several well-worn couches and chairs rested nearby.

Half a dozen veteran Wardens lay sprawled on couches napping, sat in chairs reading books, or played chess with an old set upon a coffee table. Their staves and cloaks were all at hand, ready to be taken up at an instant's notice. They were dangerous, hard men and women, the Old Guard, survivors of the deadly days of the early Vampire War. I wouldn't have wanted to cross any of them.

Sitting in a chair slightly apart from them, staring at the flames crackling in a rough stone fireplace, sat my old mentor, Ebenezar McCoy. He held a cup of coffee in his thick, work-scarred fingers. A lot of the more senior wizards in the Council had a sense of propriety they took way too seriously, always dressed to the nines, always immaculate and proper. Ebenezar wore an old pair of denim overalls with a flannel shirt and leather work boots that could have been thirty or forty years old. His silver hair, what he had left of it, was in disarray, as if he'd just woken from a restless sleep. He was aging, even by wizard standards, but his shoulders were still wide, and the muscles in his forearms were taut and visible beneath age-spotted skin. He stared at the fire through wire-rimmed spectacles, his dark eyes unfocused, one foot slowly tapping the floor.

I leaned my staff against a handy wall, got myself a cup of coffee, and settled down in the chair beside Ebenezar's. I sipped coffee, let the warmth of the fire drive some of the wet chill out of my bones, and waited.

"They always have good coffee here," Ebenezar said a few moments later.

"And they don't call it funny names," I said. "It's just coffee. Not frappalattegrandechino."

Ebenezar snorted and sipped from his cup. "Nice trip in?"

"Got tripped up by someone's thugs on the Winter trail."

He grimaced. "Aye. We've had our people harassed several times, the past few months. How are you, Hoss?"

"Uninformed, sir," I said.

He eyed me obliquely. "Mmmm. I did as I thought best, boy. I won't apologize for it."

"Don't expect you to," I said.

He nodded. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?"

He shook his head. "I won't take you on the strike team, Hoss."

"You think I can't pull my weight?"

He turned his eyes to me. "You have too much history with Morgan. This has got to be dispassionate, and you're just about the least dispassionate person I know."

I grunted. "You're sure it was Morgan who did LaFortier?"

His eyes returned to the fire. "I would never have expected it. But too many things are in place."

"No chance it's a frame?"

Ebenezar blinked and shot me a look. "Why do you ask?"

"Because if the ass is finally getting his comeuppance, I want to make sure it's on the level," I said.

He nodded a couple of times. Then he said, "I don't see how it could have been done. It looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, odds are it's a damn duck. Occam's razor, Hoss."

"Someone could have gotten into his head," I said.

"At his age?" Ebenezar asked. "Ain't likely."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"As a mind grows older, it gets established," he said, "more set in its ways. Like a willow tree. Supple when it's young, but gets more brittle as it ages. Once you've been around a century or so, it generally ain't possible to bend a mind without breaking it."

"Generally?"

"You can't push it that far," Ebenezer said. "Push a loyal man into betraying everything he believes in? You'd drive him insane before you forced him into that. Which means that Morgan made a choice."

"If he did it." I shook my head. "I just keep asking myself who profits most if we axe Morgan ourselves."

Ebenezer grimaced. "It's ugly all the way around," he said, "but there it is. I reckon you 'gazed him, Hoss, but it ain't a lie detector. You know that, too."

I fell silent for a while and sipped coffee. Then I asked, "Just curious. Who holds the sword when you catch him? It's usually Morgan who does the head chopping."

"Captain Luccio, I reckon," Ebenezer said. "Or someone she appoints. But she ain't the kind to foist something like that off on a subordinate."

I got treated to the mental image of Anastasia decapitating her old apprentice. Then of me, taking Molly's head. I shuddered. "That sucks."

Ebenezer kept staring at the fire, and his eyes seemed to sink into his head, as if he had aged twenty years right in front of me. "Aye."

The door to the War Room opened and a slender, reedy little wizard in a tan tweed suit entered, lugging a large portfolio. His short white hair was curled tightly against his head and his fingers were stained with ink. There was a pencil tucked behind one ear, and a fountain pen behind the other. He stopped and peered around the room for a moment, spotted Ebenezer, and bustled right on over.

"Pardon, Wizard McCoy," he said. "If you have a moment, I need you to sign off on a few papers."

Ebenezer put his coffee on the floor and accepted a manila folder from the little guy, along with the fountain pen. "What this time, Peabody?"

"First, power of attorney for the office in Jakarta to purchase the building for the new safe house," Wizard Peabody said, opening the folder and turning a page. Ebenezer scanned it, then signed it. Peabody turned more pages. "Very good. Then an approval on the revision of wages for Wardens—initial there, please, thank you. And the last one is approval for ensuring Wizard LaFortier's holdings are transferred to his heirs."

"Only three?" Ebenezer asked.

"The others are eyes-only, sir."

Ebenezer sighed. "I'll drop by my office when I'm free to sign them."

"Sooner is better, sir," Peabody said. He blinked and seemed to notice me for the first time. "Ah. Warden Dresden. What brings you here?"

"I thought I'd come see if someone wanted help taking Morgan down," I drawled.

Peabody gulped. "I . . . see."

"Has Injun Joe found anything?" Ebenezer asked.

Peabody's voice became laced with diffident disapproval as he answered. "Wizard Listens-to-Wind is deep in preparations for investigative divination, sir."

"So, no," I said.

Peabody sniffed. "Not yet. Between him and the Merlin, I'm sure they'll turn up precisely how Warden Morgan managed to bypass Senior Council security." He glanced at me and said, in a perfectly polite tone, "They are both wizards of considerable experience and skill, after all."

I glowered at Peabody, but I couldn't think of a good dig before he had accepted the papers and pen back from Ebenezer. Peabody nodded to him and said, "Thank you, sir."

Ebenezer nodded absently as he picked up his coffee cup, and Peabody bustled out again.

"Paper-pushing twit," I muttered under my breath.

"Invaluable paper-pushing twit," Ebenezer corrected me. "What he does isn't dramatic, but his organizational skills have been a critical asset since the outbreak of the war."

I snorted. "Bureaucrantomancer."

Ebenezer smiled faintly as he finished his cup, the first couple of fingertips of his right hand stained with blue ink. Then he rose and stretched, drawing several faint popping sounds from his joints. "Can't fight a war without clerks, Hoss."

I stared down at my half cup of coffee. "Sir," I said quietly. "Speaking hypothetically. What if Morgan is innocent?"

He frowned down at me for a long moment. "I thought you wanted a piece of him."

"I've got this weird tic where I don't want to watch wrongly accused men beheaded."

"Well, naturally you do. But, Hoss, you've got to understand—" Ebenezer froze abruptly and his eyes widened. They went distant with thought for a moment, and I could all but hear gears turning in his head.

His eyes snapped back to mine and he drew in a slow breath, speaking in a murmur. "So that's it. You're sure?"

I nodded my head once.

"Hell's bells," the old man sighed. "You'd best start asking your questions a lot more careful than that, Hoss." He lowered his chin and looked at me over the rims of his spectacles.

"Two heads fall as fast as one. You understand?"

I nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"Don't know what I can do for you," he said. "I've got my foot nailed to the floor here until Morgan's located."

"Assuming it's not a duck," I said, "where do I start looking?"

He pursed his lips for a moment. Then he nodded slowly and said, "Injun Joe."

Chapter Fifteen

The Senior Council members, as it turned out, do not live like paupers.

After I passed through still more security checkpoints, the stone hallway yielded to a hall the size of a ballroom that looked like something out of Versailles. A white marble floor with swirls of gold in it was matched in color to elegant white marble columns. A waterfall fell from the far wall, into a pool around which grew a plethora of plants, from grass to roses to small trees, forming a surprisingly complex little garden. The faint sound of wind chimes drifted through the air, and the golden light that poured down from crystals in the ceiling was indistinguishable from sunlight. Birds sang in the garden, and I saw the quick, darting black shape of a nightingale slalom between the pillars and settle in one of the trees.

A number of expensive, comfortable-looking sets of furniture were spaced in and near the garden, like the sets you sometimes see at the pricier hotels. A small table against one wall was covered with an eclectic buffet of foods, everything from cold cuts to what looked like the sautéed tentacles of an octopus, and a wet bar stood next to it, ready to protect the Senior Council members from the looming threat of dehydration.

A balcony ran around the entire chamber, ten feet up, and doors opened onto the Senior Council members' private chambers. I paced through the enormous, grandiose space of the Ostentatatory to a set of stairs that swept grandly up one wall. I looked around until I spotted which door had a pair of temple-dog statues standing guard along with a sleepy-looking young man in a Warden's cape and a walking cast. I walked around the balcony and waved a hand at him.

I was just about to speak when both temple-dog constructs abruptly moved, turning their heads toward me with a grating sound of stone sliding against stone.

I stopped in my tracks, and held my hands up a little. "Nice doggy."

The young Warden peered at me and said something in a language I didn't recognize. He looked like someone from eastern Asia, though I couldn't have guessed at his nation of origin. He stared at me for a second, and I recognized him abruptly as one of the young men on Ancient Mai's personal staff. The last time I'd seen him, he'd been frozen half to death, trying to bear a message to Queen Mab. Now a broken ankle had presumably kept him from joining the search for Morgan.

Some people are just born lucky, I guess.

"Good evening," I said to him, in Latin, the official tongue of the White Council. "How are you?"

Lucky stared at me for another moment before he said, "We are in Scotland. It is morning, sir."

Right. My half hour walk had taken me six time zones ahead. "I need to speak with Wizard Listens-to-Wind."

"He is occupied," Lucky told me. "He is not to be disturbed."

"Wizard McCoy sent me to speak to him," I countered. "He felt it was important."

Lucky narrowed his eyes until they were almost closed. Then he said, "Wait here, please. Do not move."

The temple dogs continued staring at me. Okay, I knew they weren't really *staring*. They were just rock. But for essentially mindless constructs, they had an intense gaze.

"That will not be a problem," I told him.

He nodded and vanished through the door. I waited for ten uncomfortable minutes before he returned, touched each dog lightly on the head, and nodded to me. "Go in."

I took a wary step, watching the constructs, but they didn't react. I nodded and went on by them, trying not to look like a nervous cat as I passed from the Ostentatatory into LaFortier's chambers.

The first room I came to was a study, or an office, or possibly a curio shop. There was a massive desk carved out of some kind of unstained wood, though use and age had darkened the front edge, the handles of the drawers, and the area immediately in front of the modern office chair. A blotter lay precisely centered on the desk, with a set of four matching pens laid in a neat row. Shelves groaned with books, drums, masks, pelts, old weaponry, and dozens of other tokens that looked as though they came from exotic lands. The wall spaces between the shelves were occupied by shields fronted with two crossed weapons—a Norman kite shield with crossed broadswords, a Zulu buffalo-hide shield with crossed assegais, a Persian round shield with a long spike in its center with crossed scimitars, and many others. I knew museums that would declare Mardi Gras in the galleries if they could get their hands on a collection half that rich and varied.

A door at the far end of the study led into what was evidently a bedroom. I could see a dresser and the foot of a covered bed approximately the size of a railroad car.

I could also see red-black droplets of blood on the walls.

"Come on, Harry Dresden," called a quiet, weathered voice from the bedroom. "We're at a stopping point and waiting on you."

I walked into the bedroom and found myself standing in a crime scene.

The stench hit me first. LaFortier had been dead for days, and the second I crossed the threshold into the room, the odor of decay and death flooded my nose and mouth. He lay on the floor near the bed. Blood was sprinkled everywhere. His throat gaped wide-open, and he was covered in a black-brown crust of dried blood. There were defensive wounds on his hands, miniature versions of the slash on his throat. There might have been stab wounds on his torso, under the mess, but I couldn't be sure.

I closed my eyes for a second, swallowed down my urge to throw up, and looked around the rest of the room.

A perfect circle of gold paint had been inscribed on the floor around the body, with white candles burning at five equidistant points. Incense burned at five more points halfway between the candles, and take it from me—the scent of sandalwood doesn't complement that of a rotting corpse. It just makes it more unpleasant.

I stood staring down at LaFortier. He had been a bald man, a little over average height, and cadaverously skinny. He didn't look skinny now. The corpse had begun to bloat. The front of his shirt was stretched tight against its buttons. His back was arched and his hands had locked into claws. His teeth were bared in a grimace.

"He died hard," said the weathered voice, and "Injun Joe" Listens-to-Wind stepped out of a doorway that led to a bathroom, drying his hands on a towel. His long hair was grey-white, with a few threads of black in it. His leathery skin was the ruddy bronze of a Native American complexion exposed to plenty of sunshine, and his eyes were dark and glittering beneath white brows. He wore faded blue jeans, moccasin boots, and an old Aerosmith T-shirt. A fringed leather bag hung from a belt that ran slantwise across his body, and a smaller, similar bag hung from a thong around his neck. "Hello, Harry Dresden."

I bowed my head to him respectfully. Injun Joe was generally regarded as the most skilled healer on the White Council, and maybe in the world. He had earned doctoral degrees in medicine from twenty universities over the years, and he went back to school every decade or two to help him stay current with modern practice. "Went down fighting," I agreed, nodding to LaFortier.

Injun Joe studied the body for a moment, his eyes sad. Then he said, "I'd rather go in my sleep, I think." He glanced back at me. "What about you?"

"I want to be stepped on by an elephant while having sex with identical triplet cheerleaders," I said.

He gave me a grin that briefly stripped a century or two of care and worry from his face. "I've known a lot of kids who wanted to live forever." The smile faded as he looked back to the dead man. "Maybe someday that will happen. But maybe not. Dying is part of being alive."

There wasn't much I could say to that. I was quiet for a minute. "What are you setting up here?"

"His death left a mark," the old wizard replied. "We're going to reassemble the psychic residue into an image."

I arched an eyebrow. "Is . . . that even possible?"

"Normally, no," Injun Joe said. "But this room is surrounded on all sides by wards. We know what they're all supposed to look like. That means we can extrapolate where the energy came from by what impact it had on the wards. It's also why we haven't moved the body."

I thought about it for a minute. What Injun Joe was describing was possible, I decided, but only barely. It would be something like trying to assemble an image illuminated by a single flash of light by backtracking how the light in the flash had all bounced around the room. The amount of focus, concentration, and the sheer mental process that would be involved in imagining the spell that could reassemble that image were staggering.

"I thought this was open and shut already," I said.

"The evidence is conclusive," Injun Joe said.

"Then why are you bothering with this . . . this . . . thing?"

Injun Joe looked at me steadily and didn't say anything.

"The Merlin," I said. "He doesn't think Morgan did it."

"Whether he did it or not," Injun Joe said, "Morgan was the Merlin's right hand. If he is tried and found guilty, the Merlin's influence, credibility, and power will wane."

I shook my head. "Gotta love politics."

"Don't be a child," Injun Joe said quietly. "The current balance of power was largely established by the Merlin. If he is undone as the leader of the Council, it will cause chaos and instability across the supernatural world."

I thought about that for a minute. Then I asked, "You think he's going to try to fake something?"

Injun Joe didn't react for a moment, and then he shook his head slowly and firmly. "I won't let him."

"Why not?"

"Because LaFortier's death has changed everything."

"Why?"

Injun Joe nodded toward the study. "LaFortier was the member of the Council with the most contacts outside of the Western nations," he said. "Many, many members of the Council come from Asia, Africa, South America—most of them from small, less powerful nations. They feel that the White Council ignores their needs, their opinions. LaFortier was their ally, the only member of the Senior Council who they felt treated them fairly."

I folded my arms. “And the Merlin’s right-hand man killed him.”

“Whether Morgan is guilty or not, they *think* he did it, possibly on the Merlin’s orders,” Injun Joe said. “If he is found innocent and set free, matters could turn ugly. Very ugly.”

My stomach turned again. “Civil war.”

Injun Joe sighed and nodded.

Fantastic.

“Where do you stand?” I asked him.

“I would like to say that I stood with the truth,” he said, “but I cannot. The Council could survive the loss of Morgan without falling to pieces, even if it means a period of chaos while things settle out.” He shook his head. “A civil war would certainly destroy us.”

“So Morgan did it, and that’s all there is to it,” I said quietly.

“If the White Council falls, who will stand between humanity and those who would prey upon it?” He shook his head, and his long braid gently bumped his back. “I respect Morgan, but I cannot permit that to happen. He is one man balanced against mankind.”

“So it’s going to be Morgan, when you’re finished,” I said. “No matter who it really is.”

Injun Joe bowed his head. “I . . . doubt that it will work. Even with the Merlin’s expertise.”

“What if it does? What if it shows you another killer? You start picking who lives and who dies, and to hell with the truth?”

Injun Joe turned his dark eyes to me, and his voice became quiet and harder than stone. “Once, I watched the tribe I was expected to guide and protect be destroyed, Harry Dresden. I did so because my principles held that it was wrong for the Council or its members to involve itself in manipulating the politics of mortals. I watched and restrained myself, until it was too late for me to make a difference. When I did that, I chose who would live and who would die. My people died for my principles.” He shook his head. “I will not make that mistake again.”

I looked away from him, and remained silent.

“If you would excuse me,” he said, and walked from the room.

Hell’s bells.

I had been hoping to enlist Injun Joe’s aid—but I hadn’t counted on the additional political factors. I didn’t think he’d try to stop me if he knew what I was up to, but he certainly

wasn’t going to help. The more I dug, the messier this thing kept getting. If Morgan was vindicated, doom. If he *wasn’t* vindicated, doom.

Doom, doom, and doom.

Damn.

I couldn’t even be angry at Injun Joe. I understood his position. Hell, if it was me on the Senior Council and I was the one making the call, I wasn’t completely confident that I wouldn’t react the same way.

My headache started coming on again.

How the hell was I supposed to do the right thing if there *wasn’t* a right thing?

Chapter Sixteen

I stared at LaFortier's corpse for a moment longer, shook my head, and then pulled one of those disposable cameras you can get from a vending machine out of my duster pocket. I walked around the room snapping pictures of the body, the blood splatters, and the broken bits of furniture. I ran through the entire role of film, making the most complete record of the scene that I could, and then pocketed the camera again and turned to leave LaFortier's chambers.

Back in the Ostentatiatory, I heard voices drifting up from below. I nodded pleasantly to Lucky, who gave me an inscrutable look, and walked to the balcony railing.

Listens-to-Wind and the Merlin were standing by the buffet table, speaking quietly. Peabody hovered in the background, carrying a different set of folders, ledgers, and pens.

I paused for a moment to Listen. It's a trick I picked up somewhere along the line—not really magic, per se, as much as it is turning my mental focus completely to my sense of hearing.

"... to find out the truth," the Merlin was saying as he loaded up a plate with tiny sandwiches and wedges of cheese and fresh green grapes. "Surely you have no objection to that."

"I think the truth is already well established," Listens-to-Wind replied quietly. "We're just wasting time here. We should be focusing on controlling the fallout."

The Merlin was a tall man, regal of bearing, with a long white beard and long white hair to go with it—every inch the wizard's wizard. He wore a blue robe and a silver circlet about his brow, and his staff was an elegant length of pure white wood, completely free of any marking. He paused in loading his plate and regarded Injun Joe with a level gaze. "I'll take it under advisement."

Injun Joe Listens-to-Wind sighed and held up his hands palms forward in a conciliatory gesture. "We're ready to begin."

"Let me get some food in me and I'll be right in."

"Ahem," Peabody said diffidently. "Actually, Wizard Listens-to-Wind, if you could sign a few papers for me while the Merlin eats, it would be greatly appreciated. There are two files on your desk that need your approval and I have three ..." He paused and began to juggle the load in his arms until he could peer into a folder. "No four, four others here with me."

Injun Joe sighed. "Okay," he said. "Come on." The two of them walked toward the stairs leading up to the balcony, turned the opposite way I had when they reached the top, and entered a chamber on the far side of the room.

I waited until they were gone to descend the staircase to the ground level.

The Merlin had seated himself in the nearest group of chairs and was eating his sandwiches. He froze for a second as he saw me, and then smoothly resumed his meal. Funny. I didn't like the Merlin much more than I would a case of flaming gonorrhea, but I had never seen him in this context before. I'd always seen him at the head of a convened Council, and as this remote and unapproachable figure of unyielding authority and power.

I'd never even considered the notion that he might eat sandwiches.

I was about to go on past him, but instead swerved and came to a stop standing over him.

He continued eating, apparently unconcerned, until he'd finished the sandwich. "Come to gloat, have you, Dresden?" he asked.

"No," I said quietly. "I'm here to help you."

He dropped the bit of cheese he'd been about to bite into. It fell to the floor, unnoticed, as his eyes narrowed, regarding me suspiciously. "Excuse me?"

I bared my teeth in a cold little smile. "I know. It's like having a cheese grater shoved against my gums, just saying it."

He stared at me for a silent minute before taking in a slow breath, settling back into the chair, and regarding me with steady blue eyes. "Why should I believe you would do any such thing?"

"Because your balls are in a vise and I'm the only one who can pull them out," I said.

He arched an elegant silver eyebrow.

"Okay," I said. "That came out a little more homoerotic than I intended."

"Indeed," said the Merlin.

"But Morgan can't stay hidden forever and you know it. They'll find him. His trial will last about two seconds. Then he falls down and breaks his crown and your political career comes tumbling after."

The Merlin seemed to consider that for a moment. Then he shrugged a shoulder. "I think it's far more likely that you will work very, very hard to make sure he dies."

"I like to think I work smarter, not harder," I said. "If I want him dead, all I need to do is stand around and applaud. It isn't as though I can make his case any worse."

"Oh," said the Merlin. "I'm not so certain. You have vast talents in that particular venue."

"He's already being hunted. Half the Council is howling for his blood. From what I hear, all the evidence is against him—and anything I find out about him is going to be tainted against him by our antagonistic past." I shrugged. "At this point, I can't do any more damage. So what have you got to lose?"

A small smile touched the corners of his mouth. "Let's assume, for a moment, that I agree. What do you want from me?"

"A copy of his file," I said. "Everything you've found out about LaFortier's death, and how Morgan pulled it off. All of it."

"And what do you intend to do with it?" the Merlin asked.

"I thought I'd use the information to find out who killed LaFortier," I said.

"Just like that."

I paused to think for a minute. "Yeah. Pretty much."

The Merlin took another bite of cheese and chewed it deliberately. "If my own investigations yield fruit," he said, "I won't need your help."

"The hell you won't," I said. "Everyone knows your interests are going to lie in protecting Morgan. Anything you turn up to clear him is going to be viewed with suspicion."

"Whereas your antagonism with Morgan is well-known," the Merlin mused. "Anything you find in his favor will be viewed as the next best thing to divine testimony." He tilted his head and stared at me. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"Maybe I don't think he did it."

His eyebrows lifted in amusement that never quite became a smile.

"And the fact that the man who died was one of those whose hand was set against you when you were yourself held in suspicion has nothing to do with it."

"Right," I said, rolling my eyes. "There you go. There's my self-centered, petty, vengeful motivation for wanting to help Morgan out. Because it serves that dead bastard LaFortier right."

The Merlin considered me for another long moment, and then shook his head. "There is a condition."

"A condition," I said. "Before you will agree to let me help you get your ass out of the fire."

He gave me a bleak smile. "My ass is reasonably comfortable where it is. This is hardly my first crisis, Warden."

"And yet you haven't told me to buzz off."

He lifted a finger, a gesture reminiscent of a fencer's salute. "Touché. I acknowledge that it is, technically, possible for you to prove useful."

"Gosh, I'm glad I decided to be gracious and offer my aid. In fact, I'm feeling so gracious, I'm even willing to listen to your condition."

He shook his head slowly. "It simply isn't sufficient to prove that Morgan is innocent. The traitor within our ranks is real. He *must* be found. Someone must be held accountable for what happened to LaFortier—and not just for the sake of the Council's membership. Our enemies must know that there are consequences to such actions."

I nodded. "So not only prove Morgan innocent, but find the guy who did it, too. Maybe I can set the whole thing to music and do a little dance while I'm at it."

"I feel obligated to point out that you approached me, Dresden." He gave me his brittle smile again. "The situation must be dealt with cleanly and decisively if we are to avoid chaos."

He spread his hands. "If you can't present that sort of resolution to the problem, then this conversation never happened." His eyes hardened. "And I will expect your discretion."

"You'd hang your own man out to dry. Even though you know he's innocent."

His eyes glittered with a sudden cold fire, and I had to work not to flinch. "I will do whatever is necessary. Bear that in mind as you 'help' me."

A door opened upstairs, and in a few seconds Peabody began a precarious descent of the stairs, balancing his ledgers and folders as he did.

"Samuel," the Merlin said, his eyes never leaving me. "Be so good as to provide Warden Dresden with a complete copy of the file on LaFortier's murder."

Peabody stopped before the Merlin, blinking. "Ah. Yes, of course, sir. Right away." He glanced at me. "If you would come this way, Warden?"

"Dresden," the Merlin said in a pleasant tone. "If this is some sort of ruse, you would be well-advised to be sure I never learn of it. My patience with you wears thin."

The Merlin was generally considered to be the most capable wizard on the planet. The simple words with their implied threat were almost chilling.

Almost.

"I'm sure you'll last long enough for me to help you out of this mess, Merlin." I smiled at him and held up my hand, palm up, fingers spread, as if holding an orange in them. "Balls," I said. "Vise. Come on, Peabody."

Peabody blinked at me as I swept past him on the way to the door, his mouth opening and closing silently several times. Then he made a few vague, sputtering sounds and hurried to catch up with me.

I glanced back at the Merlin as I reached the door.

I could clearly see his cold, flat blue eyes burning with fury while he sat in apparent relaxation and calm. The fingers of his right hand twitched in a violent little spasm that did not seem to touch the rest of his body. For an instant, I had to wonder just how desperate he had to be to accept my help. I had to wonder how smart it was to goad him like that.

And I had to wonder if that apparent calm and restrained exterior was simply a masterful control of his emotions—or if, under the pressure, it had become some kind of quiet, deadly madness.

Damn Morgan, for showing up at my door.

And damn me, for being fool enough to open it.

Chapter Seventeen

Peabody went into an immaculate office lined with shelves bearing books arranged with flawless precision, grouped by height and color. Many of the shelves were loaded with binders presumably full of files and documents, similarly organized, in a dazzling array of hues. I guess it takes all kinds of colors to make a bureaucratic rainbow.

I started to follow him inside, but he turned on me with a ferocious glare. "My office is a bastion of order, Warden Dresden. You have no place in it."

I looked down at him for a second. "If I was a sensitive guy, that would hurt my feelings."

He gave me a severe look over his spectacles and said, as if he thought the words were deadly venom and might kill me, "You are an untidy person."

I put my hand over my heart, grinning at him. "Ow."

The tips of his ears turned red. He turned around stiffly and walked into the office. He opened a drawer and started jerking binders out of it with more force than was strictly necessary.

"I read your book, by the way," I said.

He looked up at me and then back down. He slapped a binder open.

"The one about the Erlking?" I said. "The collected poems and essays?"

He took a folder out of the binder, his back stiff.

"The Warden from Bremen said you got the German wrong on the title," I continued. "That must have been kind of embarrassing, huh? I mean, it's been published for like a hundred years or something. Must eat at you."

"German," said Peabody severely, "is also untidy." He walked over to me with the folder, a pad of paper, an inkwell, and a quill. "Sign here."

I reached out for the quill with my right hand, and seized the folder with my left. "Sorry. No autographs."

Peabody nearly dropped the inkwell, and scowled at me. "Now see *here*, Warden Dresden—"

"Now, now, Simon," I said, taking vengeance on behalf of the German-speaking peoples of the world. "We wouldn't want to screw up anyone's plausible deniability, would we?"

"My given name is Samuel," he said stiffly. "You, Warden Dresden, may address me as Wizard Peabody."

I opened the file and skimmed over it. It was modeled after modern police reports, including testimony, photographs, and on-site reports from investigating Wardens. The militant arm of the White Council, at least, seemed to be less behind the times than the rest of us dinosaurs. That was largely Anastasia's doing. "Is this the whole file, Sam?"

He gritted his teeth. "It is."

I slapped it shut. "Thanks."

"That file is official property of the Senior Council," Peabody protested, waving the paper and the ink. "I must insist that you sign for it at once."

"Stop!" I called. "Stop, thief!" I put a hand to my ear, listened solemnly for a few seconds and shook my head. "Never a Warden around when you need one, is there, Sam?"

Then I walked off and left the little wizard sputtering behind me.

I get vicious under pressure.

The trip back was quieter than the one in. No B-movie escapees tried to frighten me to death—though there were a few unidentifiable bits wrapped up in spider silk, hanging from the trees where I'd established the pecking order, apparently all that was left of the bug I'd smashed.

I came out of the Nevernever and back into the alley behind the old meatpacking plant without encountering anything worse than spooky ambience. Back in Chicago, it was the darkest hour of night, between three and four in the morning. My head was killing me, and between the psychic trauma the skinwalker had given me, the power I'd had to expend during the previous day, and a pair of winter wonderland hikes, I was bone-weary.

I walked another five blocks to the nearest hotel with a taxi stand, flagged down a cab, and returned to my apartment. When I first got into the business, I didn't think anything of sacrificing my sleeping time to the urgency of my cases. I wasn't a kid in my twenties anymore, though. I'd learned to pace myself. I wouldn't help anyone if I ran myself ragged and made a critical error because I was too tired to think straight.

Mister, my botaibled grey tomcat, came flying out of the darkened apartment as I opened the door. He slammed his shoulder into my legs, startled me half to death, and nearly put me on my ass. He's the next best thing to thirty pounds of cat, and when he hits me with his shoulder block of greeting I know it.

I leaned down to grab him and prevent him from leaving, and wearily let myself into the house. It felt a lot quieter and emptier without Mouse in it. Don't get me wrong: me and Mister were roommates for years before the pooch came along. But it had taken considerable adjustments for both of us to get used to sharing our tiny place with a monstrous, friendly dust mop, and the sudden lack of his presence was noticeable and uncomfortable.

But Mister idly sauntered over to Mouse's bowl, ate a piece of kibble, and then calmly turned the entire bowl over so that kibble rolled all over the floor of the kitchen alcove. Then he went to Mouse's usual spot on the floor and lay down, sprawling luxuriously. So maybe it was just me.

I sat down on the couch, made a call, left a message, and then found myself lacking sufficient ambition to walk all the way into my bedroom, strip the sheets Morgan had bloodied, and put fresh ones on before I slept.

So instead I just stretched out on the couch and closed my eyes. Sleep was instantaneous.

I didn't so much as stir until the front door opened, and Murphy came in, holding the amulet that let her in past my wards. It was morning, and cheerful summer sunlight was shining through my well windows.

"Harry," she said. "I got your message."

Or at least, that's what I think she said. It took me a couple of tries to get my eyes open and sit up. "Hang on," I said. "Hang on." I shambled into the bathroom and sorted things out, then splashed some cold water on my face and came back into the living room. "Right. I think I can sort of understand English now."

She gave me a lopsided smile. "You look like crap in the morning."

"I always look like this before I put on my makeup," I muttered.

"Why didn't you call my cell? I'd have shown up right away."

"Needed sleep," I said. "Morning was good enough."

"I figured." Murphy drew a paper bag from behind her back. She put it down on the table.

I opened it. Coffee and donuts.

"Cop chicks are so hot," I mumbled. I pushed Peabody's file across the table to her and started stuffing my face and guzzling.

Murphy went through it, frowning, and a few minutes later asked, "What's this?"

"Warden case file," I said. "Which you are not looking at."

"The worm has turned," she said bemusedly. "Why am I not looking at it?"

"Because it's everything the Council has about LaFortier's death," I said. "I'm hoping something in here will point me toward the real bad guy. Two heads are better than one."

"Got it," she said. She took a pen and a notepad from her hip pocket and set them down within easy reach. "What should I be looking for?"

"Anything that stands out."

She held up a page. "Here's something," she said in a dry tone. "The vic was two hundred and seventy-nine years old when he died."

I sighed. "Just look for inconsistencies."

"Ah," she said wisely.

Then we both fell quiet and started reading the documents in the file.

Morgan had given it to me straight. A few days before, a Warden on duty in Edinburgh heard a commotion in LaFortier's chambers. She summoned backup, and when they broke in, they found Morgan standing over LaFortier's still-warm corpse holding the murder weapon. He professed confusion and claimed he did not know what had happened. The weapon had been matched to LaFortier's wounds, and the blood had matched as well. Morgan was imprisoned and a rigorous investigation had turned up a hidden bank account that had just received a cash deposit of a hell of a lot of money. Once confronted with that fact, Morgan managed to escape, badly wounding three Wardens in the process.

"Can I ask you something?" Murphy said.

"Sure."

"One of the things that make folks leery of pulling the trigger on a wizard is his death curse, right?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "If you're willing to kill yourself to do it, you can lay out some serious harm on your killer."

She nodded. "Is it an instantaneous kind of thing?"

I pursed my lips. "Not really."

"Then how long does it take? Minutes? Seconds?"

“About as long as it takes to pull a gun and plug somebody,” I said. “Some would be quicker than others.”
 “A second or three, then.”
 “Yeah.”
 “Did Morgan get blasted by LaFortier’s death curse then?”
 I lifted an eyebrow. “Um. It’s sort of hard to say. It isn’t always an immediate effect.”
 “Best guess?”
 I sipped at the last of the coffee. “LaFortier was a member of the Senior Council. You don’t get there without some serious chops. A violent death curse from someone like that could turn a city block to glass. So if I had to guess, I’d say no. LaFortier didn’t throw it.”
 “Why not?”
 I frowned some more.
 “He had time enough,” Murphy said. “There was obviously a struggle. The vic has defensive wounds all over his arms—and he bled to death. That doesn’t take long, but it’s plenty of time to do the curse thing.”
 “For that matter,” I mused, “why didn’t either of them use magic? This was a strictly physical struggle.”
 “Could their powers have canceled each other out?”
 “Technically, I guess,” I said. “But that sort of thing needs serious synchronization. It doesn’t often happen by accident.”

“Well. That’s something, then,” she said. “Both men either chose not to use magic or else were *unable* to use magic. Ditto the curse. Either LaFortier chose not to use it, or he was incapable of using it. The question is, why?”
 I nodded. “Sound logic. So how does that help us get closer to the killer?”
 She shrugged, unfazed. “No clue.”
 That’s how investigation works, most of the time. Cops, detectives, and quixotic wizards hardly ever know which information is pertinent until we’ve actually got a pretty good handle on what’s happening. All you can do is accumulate whatever data you can, and hope that it falls into a recognizable pattern.
 “Good thought, but it doesn’t help yet,” I said. “What else have we got?”
 Murphy shook her head. “Nothing that I can see yet. But do you want a suggestion?”
 “Sure.”
 She held up the page with the details on the incriminating bank account. “Follow the money.”
 “The money?”
 “Witnesses can be mistaken—or bought. Theories and deductions can throw you completely off target.” She tossed the page back onto the coffee table. “But the money always tells you something. Assuming you can find it.”
 I picked up the page and scanned it again. “A foreign bank. Amsterdam. Can you get them to show you where the payment came from?”
 “You’re kidding,” Murphy said. “It would take me days, weeks, maybe months to go through channels and get that kind of information from an American bank, if I could get it at all. From a foreign bank specializing in confidentiality? I’ve got a better chance of winning a slam-dunk contest against Michael Jordan.”
 I grunted. I got the disposable camera out of my duster pocket and passed it over to Murphy. “I snapped some shots of the scene—a lot more of them than are in the Wardens’ file. I’d like to get your take on them.”
 She took the camera and nodded. “Okay. I can take them by a photo center and—”
 My old rotary telephone rang, interrupting her. I held up a hand to her and answered it.
 “Harry,” Thomas said, his voice tight. “We need you here. Now.”
 I felt my body thrum into a state of tension. “What’s happening?”

“Hurry!” my brother snapped. “I can’t take them on by m—”
 The line went dead.
 Oh, God.
 I looked up at Murphy, who took one look at my face and rose to her feet, car keys in hand, already moving toward the door. “Trouble?”
 “Trouble.”
 “Where?”
 I rose, seizing my staff and blasting rod. “Storage rental park off Deerfield Square.”
 “I know it,” Murphy said. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Eighteen

The handy part about riding with a cop was that she has the cool toys to make it simpler to get places quickly, even on a busy Chicago morning. The car was still bouncing from sweeping into the street from the little parking lot next to my apartment when she slapped a whirling blue light on the roof and started a siren. That part was pretty neat.

The rest of the ride wasn't nearly as fun. Moving "fast" through a crowded city is a relative term, and in Chicago it meant a lot of rapid acceleration and sudden braking. We went through half a dozen alleys, hopped one bad intersection by driving up over the curb through a parking lot, and swerved through traffic at such a rate that my freshly imbibed coffee and donuts started swirling and sloshing around in a distinctly unpleasant fashion.

"Kill the noise and light," I said a couple of blocks from the storage park.

She did it, asking, "Why?"

"Because whatever is there, there are several of them and Thomas didn't think he could handle them." I drew my .44 out of my duster pocket and checked it. "Nothing's on fire. So let's hope that nothing's gone down yet and we'll be all sneaky-like until we know what's happening."

"Still with the revolvers," Murphy said, shaking her head. She drove past the street leading to the storage units and went one block past it instead before she turned and parked.

"When are you going to get a serious gun?"

"Look," I said, "just because you've got twice as many bullets as me—"

"Three times as many," Murphy said. "The SIG holds twenty."

"Twenty!? Look the point is that—"

"And it reloads a lot faster. You've just got some loose rounds at the bottom of your pocket, right? No speed loader?"

I stuck the gun back in my pocket and tried to make sure none of the bullets fell out as we got out of the car. "That's not the point."

Murphy shook her head. "Damn, Dresden."

"I know the revolver is going to work," I said, starting toward the storage park. "I've seen automatics jam before."

"New ones?"

"Well, no . . ."

Murphy had placed her own gun in the pocket of her light sports jacket. "It's a good thing you've got options. That's all I'm saying."

"If a revolver was good enough for Indiana Jones," I said, "it's good enough for me."

"He was a *fictional* character, Harry." Her mouth curved up in a small smile. "And he had a whip."

I eyed her.

Her eyes sparkled. "Do *you* have a whip, Dresden?"

I eyed her even more. "Murphy . . . are you coming on to me?"

She laughed, her smile white and fierce, as we rounded a corner and found the white rental van where Thomas had left it, across the street from the storage park.

Two men in similar grey suits and grey fedoras were standing nonchalantly in the summer-morning sunshine on the sidewalk next to the van.

On second glance, they were wearing the exact same grey suit, and the exact same grey hat, in fact.

"Feds?" I asked Murphy quietly as we turned down the sidewalk.

"Even feds shop at different stores," she said. "I'm getting a weird vibe here, Harry."

I turned my head and checked out the storage park through the ten-foot-high black metal fencing that surrounded it.

I saw another pair of men in grey suits going down one row of storage units. Two more pairs were on the next. And two more on the one after that.

"That makes twelve," Murphy murmured to me. She hadn't even turned her head. Murphy has cop powers of observation. "All in the same suit."

"Yeah, they're from out of town," I said. "Lot of times when beings from the Nevernever want to blend in, they pick a look and go with it." I thought about it for a couple of steps.

"The fact that they all picked the same look might mean they don't have much going for them in the way of individuality."

"Meaning I'd only have to go on a date with one of them to know about the rest?" Murphy asked.

"Meaning that you need a sense of *self* to have a sense of *self-preservation*."

Murphy exhaled slowly. "That's just great." She moved a hand toward her other pocket, where I knew she kept her cell. "More manpower might help."

"Might set them off, too," I said. "I'm just saying, if the music starts, don't get soft and shoot somebody in the leg or something."

"You've seen too many movies, Harry," she said. "If cops pull the trigger, it's because they intend to kill someone. We leave the trick shots to SWAT snipers and Indiana Jones."

I looked at the booth beside the entrance to the storage park. There was normally an attendant there, during the day. But there was no one in the booth—or in sight on the street, for that matter.

"Where is your unit?" Murphy asked.

I wagged my eyebrows at her. "Right where it's always been, dollface."

She made a noise that sounded like someone about to throw up.

"First row past the middle," I said. "Down at the far end of the park."

"We have to walk past those two jokers by the van to see it."

"Yeah," I said. "But I don't think these suits have found it yet. They're still here, and still looking. If they had located Morgan, they'd be gone already." As we approached, I noticed that the two tires next to the curb on the white rental van were flat. "They're worried about a getaway."

"Are you sure they aren't human?" Murphy asked.

"Um. Reasonably?"

She shook her head. "Not good enough. Are they from the spirit world or not?"

"Might not be able to tell until we get closer," I said. "Might even need to touch one of them."

She took a slow, deep breath. "As soon as you're certain," she said, "tell me. Shake your head if you're sure they aren't human. Nod if you can't tell or if they are."

We were less than twenty feet away from the van and there was no time to argue or ask questions. "Okay."

I took a few more steps and ran smack into a curtain of nauseating energy so thick and heavy that it made my hair stand on end—a dead giveaway of a hostile supernatural presence. I twitched my head in a quick shake, as the two men in grey suits spun around at precisely the same time at precisely the same speed to face me. Both of them opened their mouths.

Before any sound could come out, Murphy produced her sidearm and shot them both in the head.

Twice.

Double-tapping the target like that is a professional killer's policy. There's a small chance that a bullet to the head might strike a target at an oblique angle and carom off of the skull. It isn't a huge possibility—but a double tap drops the odds from "very unlikely" to "virtually impossible."

Murphy was a cop and a competition shooter, and less than five feet away from her targets. She did the whole thing in one smooth move, the shots coming as a single pulsing hammer of sound.

The men in grey suits didn't have time to so much as register her presence, much less do anything to avoid their fate. Clear liquid exploded from the backs of their skulls, and both men dropped to the sidewalk like rag dolls, their bodies and outfits deforming like a snowman in the spring, leaving behind nothing but ectoplasm, the translucent, gooey gel that was the matter of the Nevernever.

"Hell's bells," I choked, as my adrenaline spiked after the fact.

Murphy kept the gun on the two until it was obvious that they weren't going to take up a second career as headless horsemen. Then she looked up and down the street, her cold blue eyes scanning for more threats as she popped the almost-full clip from the SIG and slapped a fully loaded one back in.

She may look like somebody's favorite aunt, but Murphy can play hardball.

A couple of seconds later, what sounded like the howls of a gang of rabid band saws filled the air. There were a lot more than twelve of them.

"Come on!" I shouted, and sprinted forward.

The grey suits weren't individualists. It wasn't unthinkable that they would possess some kind of shared consciousness. Whacking the look-outs had obviously both alerted and enraged the others, and I figured that they would respond the way any colony-consciousness does when one of its members gets attacked.

The grey suits were coming to kill us.

We couldn't afford to run, not when they were this close to Morgan and Molly, but if the grey suits caught us on the open street, we were hosed. Our only chance was to move

forward, fast, to get into the storage park while *they* went screaming out of it, looking for us. If we were quick enough, we might have time to get to the storage unit, collect Morgan and

company, and make a quick escape through the portal in the floor and into the Nevernever.

I pounded across the street and through the entrance, with Murphy on my heels. I threw myself forward as the howls grew louder, and made it into the center row just as maybe twenty or twenty-five grey suits came rushing out of the other rows. Some of them saw us and slammed on the brakes, throwing up gravel with their expensive shoes, putting up a new tone of howl. The others belatedly began to turn as well, and then we were all the way into the center row of storage units, still moving at a dead run.

The grey suits rushed after us, but Murphy and I had a good forty-yard lead, and they didn't appear to be superhumanly light on their feet. We were going to make it.

Then I remembered that the door to the storage bay was locked shut.

I fumbled for the key as I ran, trying to pull it out of the front pocket of my jeans so that it would be ready. I figured that if I didn't get the door unlocked and open on the first try, the grey suits would catch up to us and kill us both.

So naturally I dropped the damn key.

I cursed and slid to a stop, slipping on the gravel. I looked around wildly for the dropped key, horribly aware of the mob of grey suits rushing toward us, now in eerie silence.

"Harry!" Murphy said.

"I know!"

She appeared beside me in a shooting stance, aiming at the nearest grey suit. "Harry!"

"I know!"

Metal gleamed amongst the gravel and I swooped down on it as Murphy opened fire with precise, measured shots, sending the nearest grey suit into a tumbling sprawl. The others just vaulted over him and kept coming.

I'd found the key, but it was already too late.

Neither of us was going to make it to the shelter of my hideaway.

Chapter Nineteen

“Stay close!” I shouted. I thrust the end of my staff into the gravel and dragged it through, drawing a line in the dust and stones. I swiftly inscribed a quick, rough circle maybe four feet across around Murphy and me, actually getting between her gun and the grey suits for a second.

“Dammit, Harry, get down!” she shouted.

I did so, reaching out to touch the line in the gravel, slamming a quick effort of will into the simple design. Murphy’s gun barked twice. I felt the energy gather in the circle and coalesce in a rush, snapping into place in a sudden and invisible wall.

The nearest of the grey suits staggered, and then flung itself into a forward dive. Murphy flinched back, and I grabbed her, hard, before she could cross the circle and disrupt it.

The grey suit slammed into the circle as if striking a solid wall, rebounding from its surface in a flash of blue-white light that described a phantom cylinder in the air. An instant later, more of the grey suits did exactly the same thing, maybe twenty of them, each of them bouncing off the circle’s field.

“Easy!” I said to Murphy, still holding her against me. “Easy, easy!” I felt her relax a little, ceasing to struggle against being held in place. “It’s okay,” I said. “As long as we don’t break the circle, they can’t get through.”

We were both shaking. Murphy took a pair of gulping breaths. We just stood there for a moment, while the grey suits spread out around the circle, reaching out with their hands to find its edges. I had time to get a better look at them while they did.

They were all the same height and weight. Their features were unremarkable and similar, if not quite identical. They looked as if they could have all been from the same family. Their eyes were all the same color, an odd grey-green, and there was no expression, none whatsoever, on their faces.

One of them reached out as if to try to touch me, and his open hand flattened against the circle’s field. As it did, a freaking *mouth* opened on his palm, parallel to his fingers. It was lined with serrated sharklike teeth, and a slithering, coiling purple-black tongue emerged to lash randomly against the circle, as if seeking a way through. Yellowish mucus dripped thickly from the tongue as it did.

“Okay,” Murphy said in a small, toneless voice. “That is somewhat disturbing.”

“And it’s gonna get better,” I muttered.

Sure enough, the other grey suits started doing the same thing. Within seconds, we were completely surrounded by eerie hand-mouths, writhing tongues, and dripping slime.

Murphy shook her head and sighed. “Eckgh.”

“Tell me about it.”

“How long will this thing keep them off?”

“They’re spirit beings,” I said. “As long as the circle’s here, they’re staying outside it.”

“Couldn’t they just scuff dirt on it or something?”

I shook my head. “Breaking the circle isn’t just a physical process. It’s an act of choice, of will—and these things don’t have that.”

Murphy frowned. “Then why are they doing anything at all?”

I had to restrain myself from smacking my forehead with the heel of my hand. “Because someone summoned them from the Nevernever,” I said. “Their summoner, wherever he is, is giving them orders.”

“Could *he* break the circle?” Murphy asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Easily.”

“Which is an excellent note upon which to begin our conversation,” said a man’s voice with a heavy Cockney accent. “Make a hole, lads.”

The suits on one side of the circle lowered their hands and stood back, revealing a blocky bulldog of a man in a cheap maroon suit. He was average height, but heavy and solid with muscle, and he wore a few too many extra beers around his middle. His features were blunt and rounded, like water-worn stone. His hair was graying and cut into the shortest buzz you could get without going bald, and his eyes were small and hard—and the exact same color as those of the grey suits, a distinctive grey-green.

“Ah, love,” said the man, grinning. “I think it’s quite fine to see couples who aren’t afraid to express their affection for each other.”

I blinked at him, then down at Murphy, and realized I was still holding her loosely against me. By the expression on her face, Murph hadn’t really taken note of the fact, either. She cleared her throat and took a small step back from me, being careful not to step on the circle in the gravel.

He nodded at us, still grinning. “’Allo, Dresden. Why not make this easy for all of us and tell me which unit Donald Morgan is hiding in?”

I suddenly realized that I recognized this jerk from the profile the Wardens had on him. “Binder,” I said. “That’s what they call you, isn’t it?”

Binder’s smile widened and he bowed slightly at the waist. “The same.”

Murphy frowned at Binder and said, “Who is this asshole?”

“One of the guys the Wardens wish they could just erase,” I said.

“He’s a wizard?”

“I do have some skills in that direction, love,” Binder said.

“He’s a one-trick hack,” I said, looking directly at him. “Got a talent for calling up things from the Nevernever and binding them to his will.”

“So, Binder,” Murphy said, nodding.

“Yeah. He’s scum who sells his talent to the highest bidder, but he’s careful not to break any of the Laws of Magic, so the Wardens haven’t ever been able to take him down.”

“I know,” Binder said cheerfully. “And that’s why I am positively savoring the exquisite irony of me being the one to take down the famous Warden Donald Morgan. The self-righteous prig.”

“You haven’t got him yet,” I said.

“Matter of time, my lad,” Binder said, winking. He stooped and picked up a single piece of gravel. He bounced it thoughtfully on his palm and eyed us. “See, there’s a bit of competition for this contract, and it’s a fair bit of quid. So I’m willing to give you a chance to make my job easier in exchange for considerations.”

“What considerations?” I asked.

He held up the pebble between his thumb and forefinger. “I won’t pitch this into your circle and break it. That way, my lads won’t need to kill you both—and won’t that be nice?”

Behind Binder, down at the end of the row of storage units, the dust stirred. Something unseen moved across the gravel. Given how my life had been going, odds were good that it couldn’t be a good thing. Unless . . .

“Come on, Binder,” I said. “Don’t be a simp. What makes you think I won’t ask the lady here to put a bullet through that empty spot in your head where your brain’s supposed to go?”

“She does that, she lowers the circle, and my lads tear you apart,” Binder replied.

“That won’t be your problem, by then,” I said.

Binder grinned at me. “All of us go down in a blaze of gory, is it?”

Murphy calmly raised her gun and settled it on Binder’s face.

Binder faced her, his grin never fading. “Now, little lady. Don’t you be doing nothing you’ll regret. Without my, ah, personal guidance, my lads here will tear this good gentleman’s throat out right quick. But they’re considerably less, ah, professional with ladies.” His grin faded. “And you, miss, do not want to know what they’re like when they’re not professional.”

Fingers and slimy tongues and fangs continued pressing against the outer edge of the circle’s protective field.

Murphy didn’t let it show on her face, but I saw her shudder.

“Decision time, miss,” Binder said. “Either pull that trigger, right now, and live with what happens—or put it down like a proper lady and work through this politely.”

Murphy’s eyes narrowed at his comments. “For all I know, you’re about to toss that rock at us. I think I’ll keep the gun right where it is.”

“Bear something else in mind, Binder,” I said. “I know that you think you can just have your pets step in front of you and throw the rock from behind a wall of them, but think about what happens to you if you kill me.”

“Your death curse, is it?” he asked. Binder raised his hands and flattened his palms against his cheek in mock horror. “Oh no. A death curse. Whatever shall I do?”

I faced him with a chilly little smile. “You’ll spend the rest of your life unable to use magic, I think,” I said in a quiet, hopefully confident-sounding voice. “When I die, I take away your power. Forever. No more summoning. No more binding.”

Binder’s expression began to flatten out into neutrality.

“You ever had a job that you liked, Binder?” I asked him. “I’m betting you haven’t. I’ve read your file. You’re the kind who likes to sleep late, spend a lot of money impressing people. Always buys room service, always with the champagne. And you like the women the money gets you.” I shook my head. “How many bottles of champagne you think you’ll be able to afford when a paper hat becomes part of your professional wear? You’ve got enough talent to live a nice, long life, man. As a nobody.”

He stared at me in silence for a second. “You can’t do that,” Binder said. “Take away my talent. That isn’t possible.”

“I’m a wizard of the White Council, Binder. Not some stupid hack who spent his life using his gift to hurt people. Do you think we go around advertising everything we can do? If you knew half the things I’ve done that you think are impossible, you’d already be running.”

Binder faced me, beads of sweat suddenly standing out on his jowls.

“So I’d think real careful before I threw that rock, Binder. Real careful.”
A police siren sounded, from fairly nearby.
I smiled, showing teeth. “Hey, cops. This’ll get interesting.”
“You?” he asked, incredulously. “You’d bring the cops into a private matter?”
I pointed a finger sideways at Murphy, who produced her badge and tucked the back of its folder into her belt, so that the shield faced Binder.
“Already did,” Murphy said.
“Besides, the whole reason I picked this joint was how heavily the neighborhood was policed,” I said. “One gunshot and nobody reports anything. Half a dozen and people get nervous.”
Binder’s eyes narrowed, and he looked from us toward the front of the park.
“Tick-tock,” I said, applying the pressure as hard as I could. “It’s just a matter of time, my lad.”
Binder looked around him again, then shook his head and sighed. “Balls. It’s always messy when I have to deal with the cops. Idiots dying by the truckload. Buckets of blood.” He gestured at his men. “Identical suspects fleeing in all directions. Everyone out chasing them, and more people dying when they manage to catch them.” He stared hard at me. “How about it, wizard? Cop? Maybe you’ve got stones enough to take it when I threaten you. I can admire that.”
My stomach got a little sinking feeling. I had been counting out seconds, hoping that my nerves didn’t make me rush. There should have been enough time by now.
“How about those policemen? You willing to have their deaths on your conscience?” He rolled his neck a little, like a prizefighter warming up. “Because I’ll tell you right now that they aren’t going to stop me.”
I put my hand out and touched Murphy’s wrist. She glanced aside at me, and then lowered the gun.
“That’s better,” Binder said. There was no hint of jocularity in his manner now. “All I want is the Warden. He’s a dead man already, and you know it. What does it matter who takes him?”
Something stirred at the end of the row, behind Binder, and I started smiling.
“I’ve got no quarrel with you or with this town,” Binder continued. “Tell me where he is, I’ll leave peaceful, and Bob’s your uncle.”
Murphy drew in a sharp breath.
“Okay,” I said. “He’s right behind you.”
Binder’s smile, this time, was positively vulpine. “Dresden. We have a bit of banter going between us. We’re both here in a moment where neither of us wants to act rashly. And that’s all good fun. It’s one of the little things that makes a day more enjoyable.” His voice hardened. “But don’t do me the incredibly insulting disservice of assuming that I’m a bloody moron.”
“I’m not,” I told him. “He’s about forty feet behind you. In a wheelchair.”
Binder gave me a gimlet stare. Then he rolled his eyes and shot a brief glance over his shoulder—then did a double take as his mouth dropped open.
Morgan sat in his wheelchair about forty feet away from Binder, my shotgun in his hands. Mouse stood beside the chair, focused intently upon Binder and his minions, his body tensed and ready to spring forward.
“Hello, Binder,” Morgan said in a flat, merciless tone of voice. “Now, Miss Carpenter.”
Molly appeared out of literally nowhere as she dropped the veil she’d been holding over herself since I’d first seen her moving at the beginning of the conversation with Binder. She was holding my spare blasting rod in her hand, its far end covered with pale dust from being dragged through the gravel. She knelt beside the long, lazy arc of the circle she’d drawn in the dust and touched her hand to it, frowning in concentration.
Circles of power are basic stuff, really. Practically anyone can make one if they know how to do it, and learning how to properly establish a circle is the first thing any apprentice is taught. Circles create boundaries that isolate the area inside from the magical energies of the world outside. That’s why Binder’s minions couldn’t cross the plane of the circle I’d drawn on the ground—their bodies were made up of ectoplasm, held into a solid form by magical energy. The circle cut off that energy when they tried to cross it.

As it sprang to life at my apprentice’s will, Molly’s circle did the same thing as mine—only this time the grey suits were *inside* it. As the energy field rose up, it cut off the grey suits from the flow of energy they needed to maintain their solid forms.
And suddenly the next best thing to forty demonic thugs collapsed into splatters of transparent gook.
Binder let out a cry as it happened, spinning around desperately, mumbling some kind of incantation under his breath—but he should have saved himself the effort. If he wanted them back, he would have to get out of the isolating field of the enormous circle first, and then he would have to start from scratch.
“Ow, Binder,” I said in patently false empathy. “Didn’t see that one coming, did ya?”
“Ernest Armand Tinwhistle,” Morgan thundered in a tone of absolute authority, raising the shotgun to his shoulder. “Surrender yourself or face destruction, you worthless little weasel.”
Binder’s intense grey-green eyes went from Morgan to the two of us. Then he seemed to reach some kind of conclusion and charged us like a bull, his head down, his arms pumping.
Murphy’s gun tracked to him, but with a curse she jerked the barrel up and away from Binder. He slammed a shoulder into her chest, knocking her down, even as I received a stiff arm in the belly.
I threw a leg at his as he went by, but I was off balance from the shove, and although I wound up on my ass, I forced him to stumble for a step or three. Murphy took the impact with fluid grace, tumbled onto her back, rolled smoothly over one shoulder, and came back up on her feet.
“Get them out of here,” she snarled as she spun and took off at a sprint after Binder.
Mouse came pounding up to my side, staring after Murphy with worried doggy eyes, then glancing at me.
“No,” I told him. “Watch this.”
Binder was running as hard as he could, but I doubted he had been all that light on his feet when he was young, much less twenty years and forty pounds later. Murphy worked out practically every day.
She caught him about ten feet before the end of the row, timed her steps for a second, and then sharply kicked his rearmost leg just as he lifted it to take his next step. His foot got caught on the back of his own calf as a result, and he went down in a sprawl.
Binder came to his feet with an explosive snarl of rage and whirled on Murphy. He flung a handful of gravel at her face, and then waded in with heavy, looping punches.
Murphy ducked her head down and kept the gravel out of her eyes, slipped aside from one punch, and then seized his wrist on the second. The two of them whirled in a brief half circle, Binder let out a yelp, and then his bald head slammed into the steel door of a storage unit. I had to give the guy credit for physical toughness. He rebounded from the door a little woozily, but drove an elbow back at Murphy’s head.
Murphy caught that arm and continued the motion, using her own body as a fulcrum in a classic hip throw—except that Binder was facing in the opposite direction than usual for that technique.
You could hear his arm come out of its socket fifty feet away.

And *then* he hit the gravel face-first.
Binder got extra points for brains in my book, after that: he lay still and didn’t put up a struggle as Murphy dragged his wrists behind his back and cuffed him.
I traded a glance with Mouse and said, wisely, “Hard-core.”
The police sirens were getting louder. Murphy looked up at them, and then down the row at me. She made an exasperated shooing motion.
“Come on,” I said to Mouse. The two of us hurried down the row to Morgan’s chair.
“I couldn’t shoot him with this scatter pipe with the two of you standing there,” Morgan complained as I approached. “Why didn’t you do it?”
“That’s why,” I said, nodding to the park entrance, where a patrol car was screeching to a halt, its blue bubbles flashing. “They get all funny about corpses with gunshot wounds in them.” I turned to scowl at Molly. “I told you to bug out at the first sign of danger.”
She took the handles of Morgan’s wheelchair and we all started back toward the storage unit and its portal. “We didn’t know what was going on until we heard them all start shrieking,” she protested. “And then Mouse went nuts, and started trying to dig his way through a metal door. I thought you might be in trouble. And you were.”
“That isn’t the point,” I said. I glanced at the circle drawn in the gravel as we crossed it, breaking it and releasing its power. “Whose idea was the circle?”
“Mine,” Morgan said calmly. “Circle traps are a standard tactic for dealing with rogue summoners.”
“I’m sorry it took so long to draw,” Molly said. “But I had to make it big enough to get them all.”
“Not a problem. He was happy to kill time running his mouth.” We all entered the storage bay, and I rolled the door closed behind us. “You did good, grasshopper.”
Molly beamed.
I looked around us and said, “Hey. Where’s Thomas?”
“The vampire?” Morgan asked.
“I had him watching the outside of the park, just in case,” I said.
Morgan gave me a disgusted look and rolled himself forward toward the prepared portal into the Nevernever. “The vampire goes missing just before a bounty hunter who couldn’t possibly know my location turns up. And you’re actually surprised, Dresden?”
“Thomas called me and told me there was trouble,” I said, my voice tight. “If he hadn’t, you’d have been drowning in grey suits by now.”
Molly chewed her lip worriedly and shook her head. “Harry . . . I haven’t seen him since he dropped us off.”
I glanced back toward the entrance of the park, clenching my teeth.
Where was he?
If he’d been able to do otherwise, Thomas would never have let Murphy and me fight alone against Binder’s minions. He would have been right in there beside us. Except he hadn’t been.
Why not? Had circumstances forced him to leave before I arrived? Or worse, had someone else involved in the current crisis decided to take measures against him? Psycho bitch Madeline came uncomfortably to mind. And the skinwalker had already demonstrated that it was happy to murder my allies instead of striking directly at me.
Or maybe he’d simply been overwhelmed by a crowd of grey-suited demons. Maybe his body was already cooling in some nook or cranny of the storage park. My mouth went dry at the thought.

Hell's bells.

What had happened to my brother?

Morgan spoke a quiet word and opened a shimmering rectangular portal in the floor. Molly walked over to it and stared down, impressed.

"Dresden," Morgan said. "We can't afford to become entangled with the local authorities."

I wanted to scream at him, but he was right. More sirens had closed in on the park. We had to leave. I grabbed the handles to Morgan's chair, started for the portal, and said, "Let's go, people."

Dammit, Thomas, I snarled to myself. Where the hell are you?

Chapter Twenty

The portal in my hideaway opened three steps from the trail in the Nevernever, all right, but those three steps weren't handicapped-accessible. Molly and I each had to get under one of Morgan's arms and half carry him to the trail. I left Molly and Mouse with him, went back and got the wheelchair, and dragged it up the frozen slope to a path that was all but identical to the one I'd been on earlier.

We loaded Morgan into the wheelchair again. He was pale and shaking by the time we were finished. I laid a hand against his forehead. It was hot with fever.

Morgan jerked his head away from my fingers, scowling.

"What is it?" Molly asked. She had thought to grab both coats I'd had waiting, and had already put one of them on.

"He's burning up," I said quietly. "Butters said that could mean the wound had been infected."

"I'm fine," Morgan said, shivering.

Molly helped him into the second coat, looking around at the frozen, haunted wood with nervous eyes. "Shouldn't we get him out of the cold, then?"

"Yeah," I said, buttoning my duster shut. "It's maybe ten minutes from here to the downtown portal."

"Does the vampire know about that, too?" Morgan growled.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you'd be walking into an obvious trap, Dresden."

"All right, that's it," I snapped. "One more comment about Thomas and you're going body sledding."

"Thomas?" Morgan's pale face turned a little darker as he raised his voice. "How many corpses is it going to take to make you come to your senses, Dresden?"

Molly swallowed. "Harry, um, excuse me."

Both of us glared at her.

She flushed and avoided eye contact. "Isn't this the Nevernever?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Obviously," Morgan said at the same time.

We faced each other again, all but snarling.

"Okay," Molly said. "Haven't you told me that it's sort of dangerous?" She took a deep breath and hurried her speech. "I mean, you know. Isn't it sort of dumb to be standing here arguing in loud voices? All things considered?"

I suddenly felt somewhat foolish.

Morgan's glower waned. He bowed his head wearily, folding his arms across his belly.

"Yeah," I said, reining in my own temper. "Yeah, probably so."

"Not least because anyone who comes through the Ways from Edinburgh to Chicago is going to walk right over us," Morgan added.

Molly nodded. "Which would be sort of . . . awkward?"

I snorted quietly. I nodded my head in the proper direction, and started pushing the wheelchair down the trail. "This way."

Molly followed, her eyes darting left and right at the sounds of movement in the faerie wood around us. Mouse fell into pace beside her, and she reached down to lay a hand on the dog's back as she walked, an entirely unconscious gesture.

We moved at a steady pace and in almost complete silence for maybe five minutes before I said, "We need to know how they found out about you."

"The vampire is the best explanation," Morgan replied, his tone carefully neutral.

"I have information about him that you don't," I said. "Suppose it isn't him. How did they do it?"

Morgan pondered that for a time. "Not with magic."

"You certain?"

"Yes."

He sounded like it.

"Your countermeasures are *that* good?" I asked.

"Yes."

I thought about that for a minute. Then it dawned on me what Morgan had done to protect himself from supernatural discovery. "You called in your marker. The silver oak leaf. The one Titan—" I forced myself to stop, glancing uneasily around the faerie forest. "The one the Summer Queen awarded you."

Morgan turned his head slightly to glance at me over his shoulder.

I whistled. I'd seen Queen Titania with my Sight once. The tableau of Titania and her counterpart, Mab, preparing to do battle with each other still ranked as the most humbling and awe-inspiring display of pure power I had ever witnessed. "That's why you're so certain no one is going to find you. She's the one shielding you."

"I admit," Morgan said with another withering look, "it's no donut."

I scowled. "How'd you know about that?"

"Titania's retainer told me. The entire Summer Court has been laughing about it for months."

Molly made a choking sound behind me. I didn't turn around. It would just force her to put her hand over her mouth to hide the smile.

"How long did she give you?" I asked.

"Sundown tomorrow."

Thirty-six hours, give or take. A few hours more than I'd believed I had, but not much. "Do you have the oak leaf on you?"

"Of course," he said.

"May I see it?"

Morgan shrugged and drew a leather cord from around his neck. A small leather pouch hung from the cord. He opened it, felt around inside, and came out with it—a small, exquisitely detailed replica of an oak leaf, backed with a simple pin. He held it out to me.

I took it and pitched it into the haunted wood.

Morgan actually *did* growl, this time. "Why?"

"Because the Summer Queen bugged them. Last year, her goon squad was using mine to track me down all over Chicago."

Morgan frowned at me, and glanced out toward where I had thrown it. Then he shook his head and rubbed tiredly at his eyes with one hand. "Must be getting senile. Never even considered it."

"I don't get it," Molly said. "Isn't he still protected, anyway?"

"He is," I said. "But that leaf isn't. So if the Summer Queen wants him found, or if someone realizes what she's doing and makes her a deal, she can keep her word to Morgan to hide

him, *and* give him away. All she has to do is make sure someone knows to look for the spell on the oak leaf."

"The Sidhe are only bound to the letter of their agreements," Morgan said, nodding. "Which is why one avoids striking bargains with them unless there are no options."

"So Binder could have been following the oak leaf?" Molly asked.

I shrugged. "Maybe."

"It is still entirely possible that the Summer Queen is dealing in good faith," Morgan said.

I nodded. "Which brings us back to the original question: how did Binder find you?"

"Well," Molly said, "not to mince words, but he didn't."

"He would have found us in a matter of moments," Morgan said.

"That's not what I mean," she said. "He knew you were in the storage park, but he didn't know which unit, exactly. I mean, wouldn't tracking magic have led him straight to you? And if Thomas sold you out, wouldn't he have told Binder exactly which storage bay we were in?"

Morgan started to reply, then frowned and shut his mouth. "Hngh."

I glanced over my shoulder at the grasshopper and gave her a nod of approval.

Molly beamed at me.

"Someone on the ground following us?" Morgan asked. "A tailing car wouldn't have been able to enter the storage park without a key."

I thought of how I'd been shadowed by the skinwalker the previous evening. "If they're good enough, it would be possible," I admitted. "Not likely, but possible."

“So?” Morgan said. “Where does that leave us?”

“Baffled,” I said.

Morgan bared his teeth in a humorless smile. “Where to next, then?”

“If I take you back to my place, they’ll pick us up again,” I said. “If someone’s using strictly mortal methods of keeping track of our movements, they’ll have someone watching it.”

Morgan looked back and up at me. “I assume you aren’t just going to push me in circles around Chicago while we wait for the Council to find us.”

“No,” I said. “I’m taking you to my place.”

Morgan thought about that one for a second, then nodded sharply. “Right.”

“Where the bad guys will see us and send someone else to kill us,” Molly said. “No wonder I’m the apprentice; because I’m so ignorant that I can’t see why that isn’t a silly idea.”

“Watch and learn, grasshopper. Watch and learn.”

Chapter Twenty-one

We left the trail again, and for the second time in a day I emerged from the Nevernever into the alley behind the old meatpacking plant. We made two stops and then walked until we could flag down another cab. The cabbie didn't seem to be overly thrilled with Mouse, or the wheelchair, or how we filled up his car, but maybe he just didn't speak enough English to ably convey his enthusiasm. You never know.

"These really aren't good for you," Molly said through a mouthful of donut, as we unloaded the cab.

"It's Morgan's fault. He started talking about donuts," I said. "And besides—you're eating them."

"I have the metabolic rate of youth," Molly said, smiling sweetly. "You're the one who needs to start being health-conscious, O venerable mentor. I'll be invincible for another year or two at least."

We wrestled Morgan into his chair, and I paid off the cabbie. We rolled Morgan over to the steps leading down to my apartment, and between the two of us managed to turn his chair around and get him down the stairs and into the apartment without dropping him. After that, I grabbed Mouse's lead, and the two of us went up to get the mail from my mailbox, and then ambled around to the boardinghouse's small backyard and the patch of sandy earth set aside for Mouse's use.

But instead of loitering around waiting for Mouse, I led him into the far corner of the backyard, which is a miniature jungle of old lilacs that hadn't been trimmed or pruned since Mr. Spunkelcrief died. They were in bloom, and their scent filled the air. Bees buzzed busily about the bushy plants, and as I stepped closer to them, the corner of the building cut off the traffic sounds.

It was the only place on the property's exterior that was not readily visible from most of the rest of the buildings on the street.

I pressed past the outer branches of the lilacs and found a small and relatively open space in the middle. Then I waited. Within seconds, there was a buzzing sound, like the wings of a particularly large dragonfly, and then a tiny winged faerie darted through the lilacs to come to a halt in front of me.

He was simply enormous for a pixie, one of the Wee Folk, and stood no less than a towering twelve inches high. He looked like an athletically built youth dressed in an odd assortment of armor made from discarded objects and loose ends. He'd replaced his plastic bottle-cap helmet with one made of most of the shell of a hollowed-out golf ball. It was too large for his head, but that didn't seem to concern him. His cuirass had first seen service as a bottle of Pepto-Bismol, and hanging at his hip was what looked like the blade to a jigsaw, with one end wrapped in string to serve as a grip. Wings like those of a dragonfly buzzed in a translucent cloud of motion at his back.

The little faerie came to attention in midair, snapped off a crisp salute, and said, "Mission accomplished, my lord of pizza!"

"That fast?" I asked. It hadn't been twenty minutes since I'd first summoned him, after we'd gotten donuts and before we'd gotten into the cab. "Quick work, Toot-toot, even for you."

The praise seemed to please the little guy immensely. He beamed and buzzed in a couple of quick circles. "He's in the building across the street from this one, two buildings toward the lake."

I grunted, thinking. If I was remembering right, that was another boardinghouse converted into apartments, like mine. "The white one with green shutters?"

"Yes, that's where the rapsallion has made his lair!" His hand flashed to his waist and he drew his saw-toothed sword from its transparent plastic scabbard, scowling fiercely. "Shall I slay him for you, my lord?"

I very carefully kept the smile off of my face. "I don't know if things have escalated to that level just yet," I said. "How do you know this guy is watching my apartment?"

"Oh, oh! Don't tell me this one!" Toot jittered back and forth in place, bobbing in excitement. "Because he has curtains on the windows so you can't see in, and then there's a big black plastic box with a really long nose poking through them and a glass eye on the end of the nose! And he looks at the back of it all the time, and when he sees someone going into your house, he pushes a button and the box beeps!"

"Camera, huh?" I asked. "Yeah, that probably makes him our snoop." I squinted up at the summer sunshine and adjusted the uncomfortably warm leather duster. I wasn't taking it off, though. There was too much hostility flying around for that. "How many of your kin are about, Toot?"

"Hundreds!" Toot-toot declared, brandishing his sword. "Thousands!"

I arched an eyebrow. "You've been splitting the pizza a thousand ways?"

"Well, lord," he amended. "Several dozen, at any rate."

The Wee Folk are a fractious, fickle bunch, but I've learned a couple of things about them that I'm not sure anyone else knows. First, that they're just about everywhere, and

anywhere they aren't, they can usually *get*. They don't have much of an attention span, but for short, simple tasks, they are hell on wheels.

Second—they have a lust for pizza that is without equal in this world. I've been bribing the Wee Folk with pizza on a regular basis for years, and in return they've given me their (admittedly erratic) loyalty. They call me the Za-Lord, and the little fair folk who take my pizza also serve in the Za-Lord's Guard—which means, mostly, that the Wee Folk hang around my house hoping for extra pizza and protecting it from wee threats.

Toot-toot was their leader, and he and his folks had pulled off some very helpful tasks for me in the past. They had saved my life on more than one occasion. No one in the supernatural community ever expected everything of which they were capable. As a result, Toot and his kin are generally ignored. I tried to take that as a life lesson: never underestimate the little people.

This was a job that was right up Toot-toot's alley. Almost literally.

"Do you know which car is his?" I asked.

Toot threw back his head, Yul Brynner style. "Of course! The blue one with *this* on the hood." He threw his arms out and up at an angle and stood ramrod straight in a Y shape.

"Blue Mercedes, eh?" I asked. "Okay. Here's what I want you to do. . . ."

Five minutes later, I walked back around the side of the house to the front opposite the street. Then I turned to face the house where the snoop was set up and put on my most ferocious scowl. I pointed directly at the curtained second-floor windows, then turned my hand over and crooked my finger, beckoning. Then I pointed to the ground right in front of me.

One of the curtains might have twitched. I gave it a slow count of five, and then started walking briskly toward the other boardinghouse, crossing the busy street in the process.

A young man in his twenties wearing khaki shorts and a green T-shirt came rushing out of the converted boardinghouse and ran toward a blue Mercedes parked on the street, an expensive camera hanging around his neck.

I kept walking, not changing my pace.

He rushed around to the driver's door, pointing some kind of handheld device at the car. Then he clawed at the door but it stayed closed. He shot another glance at me, and then tried to insert his key into the lock. Then he blinked and stared at his key as he pulled it back trailing streamers of a rubbery pink substance—bubble gum.

"I wouldn't bother," I said as I got closer. "Look at the tires."

The young man glanced from me to his Mercedes and stared some more. All four tires were completely flat.

"Oh," he said. He looked at his gum-covered key and sighed. "Well. Shit."

I stopped across the car from him and smiled faintly. "Don't feel too bad about it, man. I've been doing this longer than you."

He gave me a sour look. Then he held up his key. "Bubble gum?"

"Coulda been superglue. Take it as a professional courtesy." I nodded toward his car. "Let's talk. Turn the air-conditioning on, for crying out loud."

He eyed me for a moment and sighed. "Yeah. Okay."

We both got in the car. He scraped the gum off of his key and put it in the ignition, but when he turned it, nothing happened.

"Oh. Pop the hood," I said.

He eyed me and did. I went around to the front of the car and reconnected the loose battery cable. I said, "Okay," and he started the engine smoothly.

Like I said, give Toot-toot and his kin the right job, and they are formidable as hell.

I got back in the car and said, "You licensed?"

The young man shrugged and turned his AC up to "deep freeze." "Yeah."

I nodded. "How long?"

"Not long."

"Cop?"

"In Joliet," he said.

"But not now."

"Didn't fit."

"Why are you watching my place?"

He shrugged. "I got a mortgage."

I nodded and held out my hand. "Harry Dresden."

He frowned at the name. "You the one used to work for Nick Christian at Ragged Angel?"

"Yeah."

"Nick has a good reputation." He seemed to come to some kind of conclusion and took my hand with a certain amount of resignation. "Vince Graver."

"You got hired to snoop on me?"

He shrugged.

"You tail me last night?"

"You know the score, man," Graver said. "You take someone's money, you keep your mouth shut."

I lifted my eyebrows. A lot of PIs wouldn't have the belly to be nearly so reticent, under the circumstances. It made me take a second look at him. Thin, built like someone who ran or rode a bicycle on his weekends. Clean-cut without being particularly memorable. Medium brown hair, medium height, medium brown eyes. The only exceptional thing about his appearance was that there was nothing exceptional about his appearance.

"You keep your mouth shut," I agreed. "Until people start getting hurt. Then it gets complicated."

Graver frowned. "Hurt?"

"There have been two attempts on my life in the past twenty-four hours," I said. "Do the math."

He focused his eyes down the street, into the distance, and pursed his lips. "Damn."

"Damn?"

He nodded morosely. "There go the rest of my fees and expenses."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "You're bailing on your client? Just like that?"

" 'Accomplice' is an ugly word. So is 'penitentiary.' "

Smart kid. Smarter than I had been when I first got my PI license. "I need to know who backed you."

Graver thought about that one for a minute. Then he said, "No."

"Why not?"

"I make it a personal policy not to turn on clients or piss off people who are into murder."

"You lost the work," I said. "What if I made it up to you?"

"Maybe you didn't read that part of the book. The 'I' in PI stands for 'investigator.' Not 'informer.' "

"Maybe I call the cops. Maybe I tell them you're involved in the attacks."

"Maybe you can't prove a damned thing." Graver shook his head. "You don't get ahead in this business if you can't keep your teeth together."

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms, studying him for a moment. "You're right," I said. "I can't make you. So I'm asking you. Please."

He kept on staring out the windshield. "Why they after you?"

"I'm protecting a client."

"Old guy in the wheelchair."

"Yeah."

Graver squinted. "He looks like a hard case."

"You have no idea."

We sat in the air-conditioning for a moment. Then he glanced at me and shook his head.

"You seem like a reasonable guy," Graver said. "Hope you don't get dead. Conversation over."

I thought about pushing things, but I've been around long enough to recognize someone who was genuinely tough-minded when I see him. "You got a business card?"

He reached into his shirt pocket and produced a plain white business card with his name and a phone number. He passed it over to me. "Why?"

"Sometimes I need a subcontractor."

He lifted both eyebrows.

"One who knows how to keep his teeth together." I nodded to him and got out of the car. I leaned down and looked in the door before I left. "I know a mechanic. I'll give him a call and he'll come on out. He's got a compressor on his truck, and he can fill up your tires. I'll pay for it."

Graver studied me with calm, intelligent eyes and then smiled a little. "Thanks."

I closed the door and thumped on the roof with my fist. Then I walked back to my apartment. Mouse, who had waited patiently in the yard, came shambling up to greet me as I stepped out of the street, and he walked alongside me as I went back to the apartment.

Morgan was lying on my bed again when I came back in. Molly was just finishing up changing his bandages. Mister watched the entire process from the back of the couch, his ears tilted forward, evidently fascinated.

Morgan nodded to me and rasped, "Did you catch him?"

"Yeah," I said. "A local PI had been hired to keep track of me. But there was a problem."

"What's that?"

I shrugged. "He had integrity."

Morgan inhaled through his nose and nodded. "Pretty rare problem."

"Yeah. Impressive young man. What are the odds?"

Molly looked back and forth between us. "I don't understand."

"He's quitting the job, but he won't tell us what we want to know about his client, because he doesn't think it would be right," I said. "He's not willing to sell the information, either."

Molly frowned. "Then how are we going to find out who is behind all of this?"

I shrugged. "Not sure. But I told him I'd get someone to come by and put the air back in his tires. Excuse me."

"Wait. He's still out there?"

"Yeah," I said. "Blue Mercedes."

"And he's a young man."

"Sure," I said. "A little older than you. Name's Vince Graver."

Molly beamed. "Well, then, I'll go get him to tell me." She walked over to my icebox, opened it, pulled out a dark brown bottle of micro-brewery beer, and walked toward the door.

"How you gonna do that?" I asked her.

"Trust me, Harry. I'll change his mind."

"No," Morgan said fiercely. He coughed a couple of times. "No. I would rather be dead—do you hear me? Be *dead* than have you use black magic on my behalf."

Molly set the beer down on the shelf by the door and blinked at Morgan. "You're right," she said to me. "He *is* kind of a drama queen. Who said anything about magic?"

She pulled one arm into her T-shirt, and wriggled around a little. A few seconds later, she was tugging her bra out of the arm hole of her shirt. She dropped it on the shelf, picked up the bottle, and held it against each breast in turn. Then she turned to face me, took a deep breath, and arched her back a little. The tips of her breasts pressed quite noticeably against the rather strained fabric of her shirt.

"What do you think?" she asked, giving me a wicked smile.

I thought Vince was doomed.

"I think your mother would scream bloody murder," I said.

Molly smirked. "Call the mechanic. I'll just keep him company until the truck gets there." She turned with a little extra hip action and left the apartment.

Morgan made a low, appreciative sound as the door closed.

I eyed him.

Morgan looked from the door to me. "I'm not dead yet, Dresden." He closed his eyes. "Doesn't hurt to admire a woman's beauty once in a while."

"Maybe. But that was just . . . just *wrong*."

Morgan smiled, though it was strained with discomfort. "She's right, though. Especially with a young man. A woman can make a man see everything in a different light."

"Wrong," I muttered. "Just *wrong*."

I went to call Mike the mechanic.

Molly came back about forty-five minutes later, beaming.

Morgan had been forced to take more pain medication and was tossing in a restless sleep. I closed the door carefully so that we wouldn't wake him.

"Well?" I asked.

"His car has really good air-conditioning," Molly said smugly. "He never had a chance." Between two fingers, she held up a business card like the one I'd gotten.

I did the same thing with mine, mirroring her.

She flipped hers over, showing me a handwritten note on the other side. "I'm worried about my job as your assistant." She put the back of her hand against her forehead melodramatically. "If something happens to you, whatever will I do? Wherever shall I go?"

"And?"

She held out the card to me. "And Vince suggested that I might consider work as a paralegal. He even suggested a law firm. Smith Cohen Mackleroy."

"His job-hunting suggestion, eh?" I asked.

She smirked. "Well, obviously he couldn't just tell me who hired him. That would be wrong."

"You are a cruel and devious young woman." I took the card from her and read it. It said: Smith Cohen Mackleroy, listed a phone number, and had the name "Evelyn Derek" printed under that.

I looked up to meet Molly's smiling eyes. Her grin widened. "Damn, I'm good."

"No argument here," I told her. "Now we have a name, a lead. One might even call it a clue."

"Not only *that*," Molly said. "I have a date."

"Good work, grasshopper," I said, grinning as I rolled my eyes. "Way to take one for the team."

Chapter Twenty-two

Smith Cohen and Mackleroy, as it turned out, was an upscale law firm in downtown Chicago. The building their offices occupied stood in the shadow of the Sears Tower, and must have had a fantastic view of the lake. Having plucked out the enemy's eyes, so to speak, I thought that I might have bought us some breathing space. Without Vince on our tail, I hoped that Morgan could get a few hours of rest in relative safety.

I'd figure out somewhere else to move him—just as soon as I leaned on Ms. Evelyn Derek and found out to whom she reported Vince's findings.

I guess I looked sort of mused and scraggly, because the building's security guard gave me a wary look as I entered solidly in the middle of lunch hour. I could practically see him deciding whether or not to stop me.

I gave him my friendliest smile—which my weariness and stress probably reduced to merely polite—and said, "Excuse me, sir. I have an appointment with an attorney at Smith Cohen and Mackleroy. They're on the twenty-second floor, right?"

He relaxed, which was good. Beneath his suit, he looked like he had enough muscle to bounce me handily out the door. "Twenty-four, sir."

"Right, thanks." I smiled at him and strode confidently past. Confidence is critical to convincing people that you really are supposed to be somewhere—especially when you aren't.

"Sir," said the guard from behind me. "I'd appreciate it if you left your club here."

I paused and looked over my shoulder.

He had a gun. His hand wasn't exactly resting on it, but he'd tucked his thumb into his belt about half an inch away.

"It isn't a club," I said calmly. "It's a walking stick."

"Six feet long."

"It's traditional Ozark folk art."

"With dents and nicks all over it."

I thought about it for a second. "I'm insecure?"

"Get a blanket." He held out his hand.

I sighed and passed my staff over to him. "Do I get a receipt?"

He took a notepad from his pocket and wrote on it. Then he passed it over to me. It read: *Received, one six foot traditional Ozark walking club from Mr. Smart-ass.*

Chapter Twenty-three

I got back to my apartment, shouldered open my door, and found a bizarre tableau.

Again.

Morgan lay on the floor about five feet from the bedroom door. He'd apparently seized my walking cane from the old popcorn tin by the door, where I keep things like Ozark folk art carved quarter staves, blasting rods, umbrellas, and so on. The cane is an old Victorian-style sword-cane. You twist the handle and pull, and you can draw a slender thirty-inch spring steel blade from the wooden cane. Morgan had. He lay on his side on the floor, his arm extended up at about a forty-five-degree angle, holding the sword.

Its tip rested against Molly's carotid artery, just under her left ear.

Molly, for her part, leaned back against one of my bookcases, her knees bent a little, her arms spread out to either side, as if she'd stumbled over something and flung out her hands to brace herself against the bookcase as she fell back.

To the left of the door, Mouse crouched with his fangs bared and resting lightly against Anastasia Luccio's throat. She lay on her back, and her gun lay on the rug-covered floor about two feet beyond the reach of her hand. She appeared to be quite relaxed, though I couldn't see much of her face from where I stood.

Mouse's deep brown eyes were focused steadily on Morgan. Morgan's steely gaze was locked on Mouse's jaws.

I stared at them aghast for a minute. No one moved. Except Mouse. When I looked at him, his tail wagged hopefully once or twice.

I blew out a heavy breath, set my staff aside, and plodded to the icebox, stepping over Anastasia's leg on the way. I opened it, considered the contents for a moment, and then pulled out a cold Coke. I opened it and took a long drink. Then I picked up a dry kitchen towel, went to the couch, and sat down.

"I would ask what the hell happened," I said to the room at large. "Except that the only one with any sense who witnessed it can't actually *talk*." I eyed the dog and said, "This had better be good."

Mouse wagged his tail tentatively again.

"Okay," I said. "Let her go."

Mouse opened his jaws and sat up and away from Anastasia at once. He immediately padded over to me, and leaned against me as his gaze flicked from Anastasia to Morgan and back.

"Morgan," I said. "Ease off the psycho throttle a little and put down the sword."

"No," Morgan said in a voice half strangled with fury. "Not until this little witch is bound and wearing a gag and a blindfold."

"Molly's already done duty as a beer-calendar model today," I said. "We're not dressing her up for a BDSM shoot next." I put the Coke down and thought about it for a second. Threats weren't going to have any effect on Morgan, except to make him more determined. It was one of the charming side effects of having such a rigid old-school personality.

"Morgan," I said quietly. "You are a guest in my home."

He flashed me a quick, guilty glance.

"You came to me for help and I'm doing my best. Hell, the kid has put herself into harm's way, trying to protect you. I've done everything for you that I would have for blood family, because you are my guest. There are monsters from whom I would expect better behavior, once they had accepted my hospitality. What's more, they'd give it to me."

Morgan let out a pained sound. Then he turned his head sharply away from Molly and dropped the sword at the same time. The steel of the blade chimed as it bounced off the thin rug. Morgan settled into a limp heap on the floor, and Molly sagged, lifting her hand and covering the vulnerable skin of her throat for a moment.

I waited until Anastasia sat up to toss her the towel I'd brought from the kitchen. She caught it, her expression neutral, and lifted it to begin drying her neck. Mouse is a great dog, but he has to work hard to control his slobber issues.

"So I take it things almost devolved into violence again," I said to them. "And Mouse had to get involved."

"She just came walking in here," Molly protested. "She saw him."

I blinked and looked at her. "And you did . . . what, exactly?"

"She blinded me," Anastasia said calmly. "And then she hit me." She lifted the towel and wiped at her nose. Some blood came away, though most of it stayed crusted and brown below one nostril. So they hadn't been in the standoff for long. Anastasia gave Molly a steady gaze and said, "She hit me like a girl. For goodness' sake, child, have you had no combat training at all?"

"There's been a lot of material to cover," I growled. "Blinded you?"

"Not permanently," Molly said, more sullenly now. She rubbed at the knuckles of her right hand with her left. "I just . . . kind of veiled everything that wasn't her."

"An unnecessarily complicated way to go about it," Anastasia said primly.

"For you, maybe," Molly said defensively. "Besides, who was the one on the ground getting pounded?"

"Yes. You're forty pounds heavier than me," Anastasia said calmly.

"Bitch, I know you didn't say just say that," Molly bristled, stepping forward with her hands clenched.

Mouse sighed and heaved himself back to his feet.

Molly stopped, eyeing the big dog warily.

"Good dog," I said, and scratched Mouse's ears.

He wagged his tail without taking his serious brown eyes from Molly.

"I had to stop her," Molly said. "She was going to report Morgan to the Wardens."

"So you physically and magically assaulted her," I said.

"What choice did I have?"

I eyed Morgan. "And you staggered out of the bed you're supposed to be staying in, grabbed the first pointy thing you could reach, and forced her off of Anastasia."

Morgan eyed me wearily. "Obviously."

I sighed and looked at Anastasia. "And you thought the only solution you had was to take them both down and sort everything out later, and Mouse stopped you."

Anastasia sighed. "There was a blade out, Harry. The situation had to be controlled."

I eyed Mouse. "And you wound up holding Anastasia hostage so Morgan wouldn't hurt Molly."

Mouse ducked his head.

"I can't believe I'm about to say this," I said. "So think real careful about where this is coming from. Have you people ever considered *talking* when you've got a problem?"

That didn't please anybody, and they gave me looks with varying degrees of irritation mixed with chagrin.

Except for Mouse, who sighed and said something like, "Uh-woof."

"Sorry," I told him at once. "Four-footed nonvocalizing company excepted."

"She was going to get the Wardens," Molly said. "If that happened before we proved who really killed LaFortier, all of us would be up the creek."

"Actually," Anastasia said, "that's true."

I turned my gaze to her. She rose and stretched, wincing slightly. "I assumed," she said quietly, "that Morgan had recruited your apprentice to assist him in his escape scheme. And that they had done away with you."

I made a small frustrated sound. "Why the hell would you assume something like that?"

She narrowed her eyes as she stared at me. "Why would Morgan flee to the home of the one wizard in the Council who had the most reason to dislike him?" she asked. "I believe your words were: 'that would be crazy.'"

I winced. Ouch. "Uh," I said. "Yeah. I . . ."

"You lied to me," she said in a level tone. Most people probably wouldn't have noticed the undertone of anger and pain in her voice, or the almost imperceptible pause between each word. I could see bricks being mortared into place behind her eyes and I looked away from her.

The room was completely silent, until Morgan said, in a small and broken voice, "What?"

I looked up at him. His hard sour face had gone gray. His expression was twisted up in shock and surprise, like that of a small child discovering the painful consequences of gravity for the first time.

"Ana," he said, almost choking on the words. "You . . . you think that I . . . How could you think that I would . . .?"

He turned his face away. It couldn't have been a tear. Not from Morgan. He wouldn't shed tears if he had to execute his own mother.

But for a fraction of a second, something shone on one of his cheeks.

Anastasia rose and walked over to Morgan. She knelt down by him and put her hand on his head. "Donald," she said gently, "we've been betrayed by those we trusted before. It wouldn't be the first time."

"That was them," he said unsteadily, not looking up. "This is me."
She stroked his hair once. "I never thought you had done it of your own free will, Donald," she whispered quietly. "I thought someone had gotten into your mind. Held a hostage against your cooperation. Something."
"Who could they have held hostage?" Morgan said in a bitter voice. "There's no one. For that very reason. And you know it."
She sighed and closed her eyes.
"You knew his wards," Morgan went on. "You've been through them before. Often. You opened them in under a second when you came in. You have a key to his apartment."
She said nothing.
His voice turned heavy and hollow. "You're involved. With Dresden."
Anastasia blinked her eyes several times. "Donald," she began.
He looked up at her, his eyes empty of tears or pain or anything but weariness. "Don't," he said. "Don't you dare."
She met his eyes. I'd never seen such gentle pain on her face. "You're running a fever. Donald, please. You should be in bed."
He laid his head on the rug and closed his eyes. "It doesn't matter."
"Donald—"
"It doesn't matter," he repeated dully.
Anastasia started crying in silence. She stayed next to Morgan, stroking her hand over his mottled silver-and-brown hair.

An hour later, Morgan was unconscious in bed again. Molly was down in the lab, pretending to work on potions with the trapdoor closed. I was sitting in the same spot with an empty can of Coke.

Anastasia came out of the bedroom and shut the door silently behind her. Then she leaned back against it. "When I saw him," she said, "I thought he had come here to hurt you. That he had learned about the two of us and wanted to hurt you."

"You," I asked, "and Morgan?"

She was quiet for a moment before she said, "I never allowed it to happen. It wasn't fair to him."

"But he wanted it anyway," I said.

She nodded.

"Hell's bells," I sighed.

She folded her arms over her stomach, never looking up. "Was it any different with your apprentice, Harry?"

Molly hadn't always been the grasshopper she was today. When I'd first begun teaching her, she'd assumed that I would be teaching her all sorts of things that had nothing to do with magic and everything to do with her being naked. And that had been more than all right with her.

Just not with me.

"Not much," I acknowledged. "But he hasn't been your apprentice for a long, long time."

"I have always been of the opinion that romantic involvement was a vulnerability I could not afford. Not in my position."

"Not always," I said, "apparently."

She exhaled slowly. "It was a much easier opinion to hold in my previous body. It was older. Less prone to . . ."

"Life?" I suggested.

She shrugged. "Desire. Loneliness. Joy. Pain."

"Life," I said.

"Perhaps." She closed her eyes for a moment. "When I was young, I reveled in love, Harry. In passion. In discovery and in new experiences and in life." She gestured down at herself. "I never realized how much of it I had forgotten until Corpsetaker left me like this." She opened her pained eyes and looked at me. "I didn't realize how much I missed it until you reminded me. And by then, Morgan wasn't . . . He was like I had been. Detached."

"In other words," I said, "he'd made himself more like you. Patterned himself after you. And because he'd done that, after your change he wasn't capable of giving you what you wanted."

She nodded.

I shook my head. "A hundred years is a long time to carry a torch," I said. "That one must burn like hell."

"I know. And I never wanted to hurt him. You must believe me."

"Here's where you say, 'The heart wants what the heart wants,' " I said.

"Trite," she said, "but true all the same." She turned until her right shoulder leaned on the door, facing me. "We should talk about where this leaves us."

I toyed with the can of Coke. "Before we can do that," I said, "we have to talk about Morgan and LaFortier."

She exhaled slowly. "Yes."

"What do you intend to do?" I asked.

"He's wanted by the Council, Harry," she said in a gentle voice. "I don't know how he's managed to avoid being located by magical means, but sooner or later, in hours or days, he

will be found. And when that happens, you and Molly will be implicated as well. You'll both die with him." She took a deep breath. "And if I don't go to the Council with what I know, I'll be right there beside you."

"Yeah," I said.

"You really think he's innocent?" she asked.

"Of LaFortier's murder," I said. "Yes."

"Do you have proof?"

"I've found out enough to make me think I'm right. Not enough to clear him—yet."

"If it wasn't Morgan," she said quietly, "then the traitor is still running around loose."

"Yeah."

"You're asking me to discard the pursuit of a suspect with strong evidence supporting his guilt in favor of chasing a damn ghost, Harry. Someone we've barely been able to prove exists, much less identify. Not only that, you're asking me to gamble your life, your apprentice's life, and my own against finding this ghost in time."

"Yes. I am."

She shook her head. "Everything I've ever learned as a Warden tells me that it's far more likely that Morgan is guilty."

"Which brings us back to the question," I said. "What are you going to do?"

Silence yawned.

She pushed off the door and came to sit down on the chair facing my seat on the couch.

"All right," she said. "Tell me everything."

Chapter Twenty-four

“This is not how diplomacy is done,” Anastasia said as we approached the Château Raith.

“You’re in America now,” I said. “Our idea of diplomacy is showing up with a gun in one hand and a sandwich in the other and asking which you’d prefer.”

Anastasia’s mouth curved up at one corner. “You brought a sandwich?”

“Who do I look like, Kissinger?”

I’d been to Château Raith before, but it had always been at night, or at least twilight. It was an enormous estate most of an hour away from Chicago proper, a holding of House Raith, the current ruling house of the White Court. The Château itself was surrounded by at least half a mile of old-growth forest that had been converted to an idyllic, even gardenlike, state, like you sometimes see on centuries-old European properties. Huge trees and smooth grass beneath them dominated, with the occasional, suspiciously symmetrical outgrowth of flowering plants, often located in the center of golden shafts of sunlight that came down through the green-shadowed trees at regular intervals.

The grounds were surrounded by a high fence, topped with razor wire that couldn’t be readily seen from the outside. The fence was electrically charged, too, and the latest surveillance cameras—seemingly little more than glass beads with wires running out of them—monitored every inch of the exterior.

At night, it made for one extremely creepy piece of property. On a bright summer afternoon, it just looked . . . pretty. Very, very wealthy and very, very pretty. Like the Raiths themselves, the grounds were only scary when seen at the right time.

A polite security guard with the general bearing of ex-military had watched us get out of a cab, called ahead, and let us in with hardly a pause. We’d walked past the gate and up the drive through Little Sherwood until we reached the Château proper.

“How good are her people?” Anastasia asked.

“I’m sure you’ve read the file.”

“Yes,” she said, as we started up the steps. “But I’d prefer your personal assessment.”

“Since Lara’s taken over the hiring,” I said, “they’ve improved significantly. I don’t think they’re fed upon to keep them under control anymore.”

“And you base that assessment on what?”

I shrugged. “The before and after. The last batch of hired muscle was . . . just out of touch. Willing to die at a moment’s notice, but not exactly the sharpest tacks in the box. Pretty and vacant. And pretty vacant.” I gestured back at the entrance. “That guy back there had a newspaper nearby. And he was eating lunch when we showed up. Before, they just stood around like mannequins with muscle. I’m betting that most of them are ex-military. The hard-core kind, not the get-my-college-funded kind.”

“Officially,” she said, as we reached the top of the steps, “they remain untested.”

“Or maybe Lara’s just smart enough not to show them off until it’s necessary to use them,” I said.

“Officially,” Anastasia said dryly, “she remains untested.”

“You didn’t see her killing super ghouls with a couple of knives the way I did during the White Court coup,” I said. I rapped on the door with my staff and adjusted the hang of my grey cloak. “I know my word isn’t exactly respected among the old guard Wardens, but take it from me. Lara Raith is one smart and scary bitch.”

Anastasia shook her head with a faint smile. “And yet you’re here to hold a gun to her head.”

“I’m hoping that if we apply some pressure, we’ll get something out of her,” I said. “I’m low on options. And I don’t have time to be anything but direct.”

“Well,” she said, “at least you’re playing to your strengths.”

A square-jawed, flat-topped man in his thirties opened the door. He was wearing a casual beige sports suit accessorized by a gun in a shoulder holster and what was probably a Kevlar vest beneath his white tee. If that wasn’t enough, he had some kind of dangerous-looking little machine gun hanging from a nylon strap over one shoulder.

“Sir,” he said with a polite nod. “Ma’am. May I take your cloaks?”

“Thank you,” Anastasia said. “But they’re part of the uniform. If you could convey us directly to Ms. Raith, that would be most helpful.”

The security man nodded his head. “Before you accept the hospitality of the house, I would ask you both to give me your personal word that you are here in good faith and will offer no violence while you are a guest.”

Anastasia opened her mouth, as if she intended to readily agree, but I stepped slightly in front of her and said, “Hell, no.”

The security man narrowed his eyes and looked a little less relaxed. “Excuse me?”

“Go tell Lara that whether or not we rip this house to splinters and broken glass is still up for debate,” I said. “Tell her there’s already blood on the floor, and I think some of it is on her hands. Tell her if she wants a chance to clear the air, she talks to me. Tell her if she doesn’t that it is answer enough, and that she accepts the consequences.”

The guard stared at me for several seconds. Then he said, “You’ve got a real high opinion of yourself. Do you know what’s around you? Do you have any idea where you’re standing?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Ground zero.”

More silence stretched, and he blinked before I did. “I’ll tell her. Wait here, please.”

I nodded to him, and he walked deeper into the house.

“Ground zero?” Anastasia muttered out of the corner of her mouth. “A trifle melodramatic, don’t you think?”

I answered her in a similar fashion. “I was going to go with ‘three feet from where they’ll find your body,’ but I figured that would have made it too personal. He’s just doing his job.”

She shook her head. “Is there some reason this can’t be a civil visit?”

“Lara’s at her most dangerous when everyone’s being civil,” I said. “She knows it. I don’t want her feeling comfortable. It’ll be easier to get answers out of her if she’s worried about all hell breaking loose.”

“It might also be easier to question her if we aren’t worried about it,” Anastasia pointed out. “She does hold the advantage here. One notes that there is fairly fresh plaster on the walls on either side of us, for instance.”

I checked. She was right. “So?”

“So, if I was the one preparing to defend this place, I think I might line the walls with antipersonnel mines wired to a simple charge and cover them in plaster until I needed them to remove a threat too dangerous to engage directly.”

I’d personally seen what an AP mine could do to human bodies. It wasn’t pretty. Imagine what’s left of a squirrel when it gets hit with large rounds from a heavy-gauge shotgun. There’s not much there but scraps and stains. It’s essentially the same when a human gets hit with a load of ball bearings the size of gumballs that spew from an AP mine. I glanced at either wall again. “At least I was right,” I said. “Ground zero.”

Anastasia smiled faintly. “I just thought I’d mention the possibility. There’s a fine line between audacity and idiocy.”

“And if she thinks she’s in danger, Lara might just detonate them now,” I said. “Preemptive self-defense.”

“Mmmm. Generally the favored method for dealing with practitioners. The customs of hospitality would have protected us from her as much as her from us.”

I thought about that for a second and then shook my head. “If we were all calm and polite, she’d never give away anything. And she won’t kill us. Not until she finds out what we know.”

She shrugged. “You could be right. You’ve dealt with the smart, scary bitch more often than me.”

“I guess we’ll know in a minute.”

A minute later, we were still there, and the security guy reappeared. “This way, please,” he said.

We followed him through the wealthy splendor of the house. Hardwood floors. Custom carved woodworking. Statues. Fountains. Suits of armor. Original paintings, one of them a van Gogh. Stained-glass windows. Household staff in formal uniform. I kept expecting to come across a flock of peacocks roaming the halls, or maybe a pet cheetah in a diamond-studded collar.

After a goodly hike, the guard led us to a wing of the house that had, apparently, been converted to corporate office space. There were half a dozen efficient-looking people working in cubicles. A phone with a digital ring tone chirruped in the background. Copiers wheezed. In the background, a radio played soft rock.

We went past the office, down a short hall past a break room that smelled of fresh coffee, and to the double doors at the end of the hallway. The guard held open one of the doors for us, and we went inside, to an outer office complete with a secretary’s desk manned by a stunning young woman.

By Justine, in fact, her white hair held back in a tail, wearing a conservative grey pantsuit.

As we entered, she rose with a polite, impersonal smile that could have taken any number of competitive pageants. “Sir, ma’am. If you’ll come this way, please, Ms. Raith is ready to see you.”

She went over to the door on the wall behind her desk, knocked once, and opened it enough to say, “Ms. Raith? The Wardens are here.” A very soft feminine voice answered her. Justine opened the door all the way and held it for us, smiling. “Coffee, sir, ma’am? Another beverage?”

“No, thank you,” Anastasia said, as we entered. Justine shut the door carefully behind us.

Lara Raith’s office had a few things in common with Evelyn Derek’s. It had the same rich furnishings—though her style was more rich, dark hardwood than glass—the same clarity of function and purpose. The resemblance ended there. Lara’s office was a working office. Mail was stacked neatly on a corner of the desk. Files and envelopes each had their own

specific positions upon her desk and the worktable against one wall. A pen and ink set was in evidence on the desktop. Paperwork anarchy threatened the room, but order had been strongly imposed, guided by an obvious will.

Lara Raith, de facto ruler of the White Court, sat behind the desk. She wore a silk business suit of purest white, cut close to the flawless lines of her body. The cut of the suit elegantly displayed her figure, and contrasted sharply with the long blue-black hair, which hung in waves past her shoulders. Her features had the classically immortal beauty of Greek statues, balancing sheer beauty with strength, intelligence, and perception. Her eyes were a deep, warm grey, framed by thick sooty lashes, and just looking at her full soft mouth made my lips twitch and tingle as they demanded an introduction to Lara's.

"Warden Dresden," she murmured, her voice soothing and musical. "Warden Luccio. Please, be seated."

I didn't need to check with Anastasia. Both of us just stood there, staff in hand, regarding her quietly.

She leaned back in her chair and a wicked little smile played over that mouth without ever getting as far as her eyes. "I see. I'm being intimidated. Are you going to tell me why, or do I get three guesses?"

"Stop being cute, Lara," I said. "Your lawyer, Evelyn Derek, hired a private eye to tail me and report on my movements—and every time I turn around, something nasty has shown up to make a run at me."

The smile remained in place. "Lawyer?"

"I took a look at her head," I said. "And found the marks of the White Court all over it—including a compulsion not to reveal who she was working for."

"And you think it was my doing?" she asked.

"In these parts?" I asked. "Why not?"

"I'm hardly the only member of the White Court in the region, Dresden," Lara said. "And while I'm flattered that you think so highly of me, the others of my kind do not love me so well as to consult with me before every action they take."

Anastasia stepped in. "But they wouldn't engage the White Council in this sort of business without your approval." She smiled. "Such a thing would be seen as a challenge to your—to the authority of the White King."

Lara studied Luccio for a while, grey eyes probing. "Captain Luccio," she said, "I saw you dance in Naples."

Anastasia frowned.

"It would have been . . . what? Two centuries ago, give or take a few decades?" Lara smiled. "You were exquisitely gifted. Granted, that was before your . . . current condition."

"Ms. Raith," Anastasia said, "that is hardly germane to the subject at hand."

"It could be," Lara murmured. "You and I attended the same party after your performance. I know the sort of appetites you indulged, back then." Her lips curled into a hungry little smile, and it was suddenly all I could do to keep my knees from buckling in sheer, sudden, irrational sexual desire. "Perhaps you'd care to revisit old times," Lara purred.

And, as quickly as that, the desire was gone.

Anastasia took a slow, deep breath. "I'm too old to be amused by such antics, Ms. Raith," she replied calmly. "Just as I'm too intelligent to believe that you don't know something of what's been happening in Chicago."

It took me a couple of seconds to pull my mind back from the places Lara had just sent it, but I managed. "We know you're working with someone inside the Council," I said quietly. "I want you to tell us who it is. And I want you to release Thomas."

Lara's eyes snapped to me on that last. "Thomas?"

I leaned on my staff and watched her face closely. "Thomas managed to warn me about the hit man Evelyn Derek had directed to me, but he disappeared before he could get involved. He's not answering either of his phones and no one at the salon has seen him, either."

Lara's eyes went distant for a moment, and a frown line marred the perfection of her brow. "Is that all you have, Dresden? A fading psychic impression that one of my kind manipulated this lawyer and the apparent disappearance of my little brother? Is that the basis of reasoning that brought you here?"

"At the moment," I said. Now that I'd laid down a lot of truth, I threw in the little lie. "But by the time we finish tracing the money back to its source, we'll know for certain that you're involved. And after that, there won't be any going back."

Lara narrowed her eyes at that. "You won't find anything," she said in a firm cold tone. "Because nothing of the sort is going on."

Aha. That had touched a nerve. I applied pressure. "Come on, Lara. You know and I know how you and your folk do business—from behind proxies and cat's-paws. You can't possibly expect me to believe you when you say that you don't have a hand in what's going on."

Lara's eyes flickered in color, changing from deep grey to a far paler, more metallic shade, and she rose to her feet. "Frankly, I don't care what you believe, Dresden. I have no idea

what kind of evidence you think you've discovered, but I am not involved in *any* internal affairs of the White Council." She lifted her chin as she sneered at us. "Contrary to your own perceptions, the world is a great deal larger than the White Council of Wizardry. You aren't a vital body in today's world. You're a sad little collection of self-deluded has-beens whose self-righteous prattle has always taken second place to its hypocritical practice."

Well. I couldn't argue with that, but the words made Anastasia's eyes narrow dangerously.

Lara leaned the heels of her hands on her desk and faced me, her words clipped and precise. "You think you can simply walk into my home and issue commands and threats as it pleases you? The world is changing, Wardens. The Council isn't changing with it. It's only a matter of time before it collapses under its own obsolescent weight. This kind of high-handed arrogance will only—"

She broke off suddenly, turning toward the window, her head tilted slightly to one side.

I blinked and traded a glance with Anastasia.

An instant later, the lights went out.

Red emergency lights snapped on immediately, though they weren't needed in the office. A few seconds after that, a rapid, steady chiming sound filled the room, coming from speakers on the wall.

I looked down from the speaker to find Lara staring intently at me.

"What's happening?" I asked her.

Her eyes widened slightly. "You don't know?"

"How the hell should I know?" I demanded, exasperated. "It's your stupid alarm system!"

"Then this isn't your doing." She gritted her teeth. "Bloody *hell*."

Her head whipped toward the window again and this time I heard it—the sound of a man screaming in high-pitched, shameless agony.

And then I felt it: a nauseating quiver of *wrongness* in the air, a hideous sense of the presence of something ancient and vile.

The skinwalker.

"We're under attack," Lara snarled. "Come with me."

Chapter Twenty-five

Justine knocked and entered the room, her eyes wide. “Ms. Raith?” “Security status?” Lara asked in a calm voice.

“Unknown,” Justine said. She was breathing a little too fast. “The alarm went off and I called Mr. Jones, but the radios cut out.”

“Most of your electronics are probably gone. You’ve been hexed,” I said. “It’s a skinwalker.”

Lara turned and stared hard at me. “Are you sure?”

Anastasia nodded and drew the sword from her hip. “I feel it, too.”

Lara nodded. “What can it do?”

“Everything I can, only better,” I said. “And it’s a shapeshifter. Very fast, very strong.”

“Can it be killed?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it’s probably smarter to run.”

Lara narrowed her eyes. “This thing has invaded my home and hurt my people. Like hell.” She turned, drove her fist with moderate force into a wooden wall panel and dislodged it completely. In the empty space behind the panel was a rack hung with a belt bearing two wavy-bladed swords and a machine pistol, like a baby Uzi. She kicked out of her expensive shoes, shrugged out of her coat, and began strapping on weapons. “Justine, how many of the blood are in the house?”

“Four, counting you,” Justine replied immediately. “Your sisters, Elisa and Natalia, and your cousin Madeline.”

She nodded. “Wardens,” she said. “If you would not mind delaying our argument for a time, I would take it as a personal favor.”

“Hell with that,” I said. “This thing killed one of my friends.”

Lara glanced at the two of us. “I propose a temporary alliance against this invader.”

“Concur,” Anastasia said sharply.

“Doesn’t look like there’s any way to get out of it,” I said.

Gunfire erupted somewhere in the halls—multiple automatic weapons all going off at the same time.

Then there were more screams.

“Justine,” I said, holding out my hand. “Get behind me.”

The young woman hurried to comply, her expression strained but controlled.

Anastasia took up position on my right and Lara slid up next to me on the left. Her perfume was exquisite, and the surge of lust that hit me as I breathed it nearly had me turning to take a bite out of her, she smelled so good.

“It’s fast and tough,” I said. “And smart. But not invulnerable. We hit it from several directions at once and ran it off.”

A shotgun boomed, much closer to us than the earlier gunfire had been. It was immediately followed by the sounds of something heavy being slammed several times into the walls and floor.

The psychic stench of the skinwalker abruptly thickened and I said, “Here it comes!”

By the time I got to “it,” the skinwalker was already through the door to the outer office, seemingly moving faster than the splinters that flew off the door when the creature shattered it. Covered in a veil, it was just a flickering blur in the air.

I brought my shield up, focused far forward, filling the doorway to Lara’s office with invisible force. The skinwalker hit the barrier with all of its strength and speed. The shield held—barely—but so much energy had gone into the impact that wisps of smoke began curling up from the bracelet, and the skin on my wrist got singed. So much force surged into my shield that it physically drove me back across a foot of carpet.

As it hit, the energies of the skinwalker’s veil came into conflict with those in my shield, each canceling out the other, and for a second the creature was visible as an immensely tall,

lean, shaggy, vaguely humanoid *thing* with matted yellow hair and overlong forelimbs tipped in long, almost delicate claws.

As the shield fell, Anastasia pointed a finger at the thing and hissed a word, and a blindingly bright beam of light no thicker than a hair flashed out from her finger. It was fire magic not unlike my own, but infinitely more intense and focused and far more energy efficient. The beam swept past the skinwalker, intersecting with its upper left arm, and where it touched fur burned away and flesh boiled and bubbled and blackened.

The skinwalker flashed to one side of the doorway and vanished, leaving nothing behind but a view of the smoking pinprick hole in the expensive paneling of the outer office.

I pointed my staff at the door and Lara did the same thing with the gun.

For maybe ten seconds, everything was silent.

“Where is it?” Lara hissed.

“Gone?” Justine suggested. “Maybe it got scared when Warden Luccio hurt it.”

“No, it didn’t,” I said. “It’s smart. Right now it’s looking for a better way to get to us.”

I looked around the office, trying to think like the enemy. “Let’s see,” I said. “If *I* was a shapeshifting killing machine, how would I get in here?”

The options were limited. There was the door in front of us and the window behind us. I turned to face the window, still looking. Silence reigned, except for the sigh of the air-conditioning, billowing steadily into the office from the—

From the *vents*.

I turned and thrust my staff toward a large air vent, covered with the usual slatted steel contraption, drew forth my will, and screamed, “*Fulminos!*”

Chapter Twenty-six

Here's something a lot of people don't know: being choked unconscious *hurts*.

There's this horrible, crushing pain on your neck, followed by an almost instant surge of terrible pressure that feels like it's going to blow your head to tiny pieces from the inside. That's the blood that's being trapped in your brain. The pain surges and ebbs in time with your heartbeat, which is probably racing.

It doesn't matter if you're a waifish supermodel or a steroid-popping professional wrestler, because it isn't an issue of strength or willpower—it's simple physiology. If you're human and you need to breathe, you're going down. A properly applied choke will take you from feisty to unconscious in four or five seconds.

Of course, if the choker wants to make the victim hurt more, they can be sloppy about the choke, make it take longer.

I'll let you guess which the skinwalker preferred.

I struggled, but I might as well have saved myself the effort. I couldn't break the grip on my neck. The pile of rubble shifted and surged, and then the skinwalker sat up out of the wreckage, sloughing it off as easily as an arctic wolf emerging from a bed beneath the snow. The skinwalker's nightmarishly long arms hung below its knees, so as it began moving down the hallway, I was able to get my hands and knees underneath me, at least part of the time, preventing my neck from snapping under the strain of supporting my own weight.

I heard boots hitting hardwood. The skinwalker let out a chuckling little growl and casually slammed my head against the wall. Stars and fresh pain flooded my perceptions. Then I felt myself falling through the air and landing in a tumble of arms and legs that only seemed to be connected to me in the technical sense.

I lifted dazed eyes to see the security guy from the entrance hall come around the corner, that little machine gun held to his shoulder, his cheek resting against the stock so that the barrel pointed wherever his eyes were focused. When he saw the skinwalker, uncovered from its veil, he stopped in his tracks. To his credit, he couldn't have hesitated for more than a fraction of a second before he opened fire.

Bullets zipped down the hall, so close that I could have reached out a hand and touched them. The skinwalker flung itself to one side, a golden-furred blur, and rebounded off the wall toward the gunman, its form changing. Then it leapt into the air, flipping its body as it did, and suddenly a spider the size of a subcompact car was racing along the ceiling toward the security guy.

At that point, he impressed me again. He turned and ran, sprinting around a corner with the skinwalker coming hard behind.

"Now!" someone called, as the skinwalker reached the intersection of the two hallways, and a sudden howl of thunder filled the hallways with noise and light. Bullets ripped into the floor, the wall, and the ceiling, coming from some point out of sight around the corner, filling the air with splinters of shattered hardwood.

The skinwalker let out a deafening caterwaul of pain and boundless fury. The gunfire reached a thunderous, frantic crescendo.

Then men began screaming.

I tried to push myself to my feet, but someone had set the hallway on tumble dry, and I fell down again. I kept trying. Whoever had made the hall start acting like a Laundromat dryer had to run out of quarters eventually. By using the wall, I managed to make it to my knees.

I heard a soft sound behind me. I turned my head blearily toward the source of the noise and saw three pale, lithe forms drop silently from the floors above through the hole that the skinwalker had made. The first was Lara Raith. She'd torn her skirt up one side, almost all the way to her hip, and when she landed in a silent crouch, she looked cold and feral and dangerous with her sword in one hand and her machine pistol in the other.

The other two women were vampires as well, their pale skin shining with eerie beauty, their eyes glittering like polished silver coins—the sisters Justine had mentioned, I presumed. I guess I'd arrived in the middle of the night, vampire time, and gotten some people out of bed. The first sister wore nothing but weapons and silver body piercings, which gleamed on one eyebrow, one nostril, her lower lip, and her nipples. Her dark hair had been cropped close to her head except for where her bangs fell to veil one of her eyes, and she carried a pair of wavy-bladed swords like Lara's.

The second seemed to be taller and more muscular than the other two. She wore what looked like a man's shirt, closed with only a single button. Her long hair was a mess, still tousled from sleep, and she held an exotic-looking axe in her hands, its blade honed along a concave edge instead of the more conventional convex one.

Without any visible signal, they all started prowling forward at the same time—and it was a prowl, an atavistic, feline motion that carried what were very clearly predators forward in total silence. Lara paused when she reached me, glanced over my injuries with cold silver eyes and whispered, "Stay down."

No problem, I thought dully. Down is easy.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Lara took charge of the aftermath.

A dozen security guards were dead, another dozen maimed and crippled. The walls in the hallway where the guards had sprung their ambush were so covered in blood that it looked like they had been painted red. At least a dozen more personnel hadn't been able to reach the battle before it was over, it had all happened so swiftly—which meant that there was someone available to help stabilize the wounded and clean up the bodies.

The skinwalker's hex had effectively destroyed every radio and cell phone in the Château, but the land lines, based on much older, simpler technology, were still up. Lara called in a small army of other employees, including the medical staff that the Raiiths kept on retainer.

I sat with my back against the wall while all this happened, a little apart from the activity. It seemed appropriate. My head hurt. When scratching an itch, I noticed that there was a wide stripe of mostly dried blood covering my left ear and spreading down my neck. Must have been a scalp wound. They bleed like crazy.

After some indeterminately fuzzy length of time, I looked up to see Lara supervising the movement of her two wounded relatives. The two vampires were liberally smeared with their own blood, and both were senseless. When they were carried off in stretchers, the medics began helping wounded security guards, and Lara walked over to me.

She knelt down in front of me, her pale grey eyes concealing whatever thought was behind them. "Can you stand, wizard?"

"Can," I said. "Don't want to."

She lifted her chin slightly and looked down at me, one hand on her hip. "What have you gotten my little brother involved in?"

"Wish I knew," I said. "I'm still trying to figure out where the bullets are coming from."

She folded her arms. "The doomed warrior. The skinwalker meant the fugitive Warden, I presume."

"It's one way to interpret that."

Lara studied me intently and suddenly smiled, showing neat white teeth. "You have him. He came to you for help."

"Why the hell would you think that?" I asked.

"Because people in hopeless situations come to you for help on a regular basis. And you help them. It's what you do." She tapped her chin with one finger. "Now, to decide what is more advantageous. To play along with the skinwalker's demands. Or to write Thomas off as a loss, take the Warden from you, and turn him into fresh political capital for those who are hunting him. There is a rather substantial reward for his capture or death."

I eyed her dully. "You're going to play along. You're hoping that you'll be able to act reluctant and get some concessions from me in exchange for your cooperation, but you're going to give it to me anyway."

"And why should I do that?" Lara asked.

"Because after the coup attempt in the Deeps, Thomas is a White Court celebrity. If you let some big bad shagnasty come along and kill him after it openly defies you in your own home, you look weak. We both know you can't live with that."

"And by giving in to his demands, I avoid the appearance of weakness?" she asked skeptically. "No, Dresden."

"Damn right, no," I said. "You're going to play along, set Shagnasty up, and then take him out in the true, treacherous tradition of the White Court. You get Thomas back. You lay low a heavyweight. You gain status among your own folk."

She narrowed her eyes at me, her expression giving me no hint to the direction of her thoughts. Then she said, "And when that is done, what if I should take the Warden and turn him over to the White Council myself? It would be a formidable bargaining chip to bring to the table with your folk in the future."

"Sure it would. But you won't do that."

"Won't I?" Lara asked. "What's stopping me?"

"I am."

"I always enjoy dealing with a man possessing a well-developed sense of self-worth."

It was my turn to show my teeth in a smile. "Slugging matches aren't your style, Lara. If you play this situation right, it will further your reputation and influence. Why jeopardize that by throwing down with me?"

"Mmmm," she said, her eyes wandering over me. She idly smoothed her skirt with one hand, instantly drawing my eyes to the pale length of thigh showing through the torn seam. Trickles of blood from her wounds slithered lovingly over smooth flesh. "I wonder, occasionally, what it might be like to throw down with you Dresden. To go to the mat. I wonder what might happen."

I licked my lips and jerked my eyes away with an effort, incapable of speech.

"Do you know how to really control someone, Harry?" she asked, her voice a low purr.

I cleared my throat and rasped, "How?"

Her pale grey eyes were huge and deep. "Give them what they want. Give them what they need. Give them what no one else can give. If you can do that, they'll come back to you again and again." She leaned down close and whispered in my ear, "I know what I can give you, Harry. Shall I tell you?"

I swallowed and nodded, not daring to look at her.

"Surcease," she breathed into my ear. "I can make it stop hurting, wizard. I can take away the pains of the body. Of the mind. Of the heart. For a little time, I could give you something no one else can—freedom from your burdens of responsibility and conscience." She leaned even closer, until I could feel the coolness of the air around her lips. "Sweet Dresden. I could give you peace. Imagine closing your eyes with no worries, no pain, no fears, no regrets, no appetites, and no guilt. Only quiet and darkness and stillness and my flesh against yours."

I shivered. I couldn't stop myself.

"I can give you that," Lara said, her lips slinking into a smile. "You wear your pain like a suit of armor. But one day, it will be too heavy to bear. And you'll remember this moment. And you'll know who can give you what you need." She let out a small, sensual sigh. "I don't require more food, Dresden. I have that in plenty. But a partner . . . You and I could do much together that we could not alone."

"Sounds swell," I croaked, barely able to get the words out. "Maybe we'll start with getting Thomas back."

She straightened her spine and leaned back from me, her beautiful pale face full of lust and hunger. She closed her eyes and stretched a little in place, the way cats sometimes will. It was a mind-numbing display of lithe femininity. She nodded slowly, then rose and regarded me with her usual cool detachment. "You're right, of course. Business first. You want me to help you."

"I want you to help yourself," I said. "We've both got the same problem."

"And that would be?" she asked.

"Traitors within the organization," I said. "Inciting conflict and destabilizing the balance of power."

She arched a raven black eyebrow. "The Warden is innocent?"

"Only if I can find the guy who set him up."

"You think there's a connection between your traitor and the skinwalker?"

"And another connection that led me here," I said. "One of your folk paid that lawyer and rewired her head."

Lara's mouth twisted with distaste. "If that's true, then someone was hideously gauche. One never leaves such obvious and overt blocks behind—and especially not in a contact only one layer removed. Such things call too much attention to themselves."

"So," I said. "A White Court vampire who is gauche, overt, impatient. Oh, and who did not show up to defend the homestead when the skinwalker broke in. And who Thomas recently beat and humiliated in public."

"Madeline," Lara murmured.

"Madeline," I said. "I think whoever is pulling the strings on this operation is using her. I think we need to find her and follow the strings back to the puppeteer."

"How?"

I reached into my duster pocket and took out the sheet of paper with Morgan's supposed account on it, along with a photocopy of the huge deposit check. "Find out who set up this account. Find out where the money came from." I passed her the pages. "After that, see if you can't find some way to track down where Thomas's cell phone is."

"His cell phone?"

"Shagnasty said we could contact him by calling Thomas's phones. Isn't there some way that they can track where those things are?"

"It depends on a number of factors."

"Well I'm betting the skinwalker doesn't have a subscription to *Popular Science*. He'll probably have some kind of countermeasure for a tracking spell, but he might not even realize that it's possible to physically trace the phone."

"I'll see what I can find out," she said. One of the medics approached us and stood back respectfully. Lara turned to the young man. "Yes?"

He held up a clipboard. "The triage report you wanted."

She held out her hand. He passed her the clipboard as if he didn't want to move his feet too close to her. Lara scanned over the topmost page, and murmured, "Hennesy and Callo both have broken backs?"

"It'll take an X-ray to confirm it," the medic said nervously. "But from what I was told, the, uh, the attacker just broke them over his knee and threw them down. They're paralyzed. Probably permanently."

"And Wilson lost both eyes," Lara murmured.

The medic avoided looking at her. "Yes, ma'am."

"Very well," Lara said. "Take Hennesy to Natalia's chambers. Callo will go to Elisa."

"Yes, ma'am. Should I send Wilson to the infirmary?"

Lara stared at him with absolutely no expression on her lovely face. Then she said, "No, Andrew. I'll come for him in a moment." She held out the clipboard, and the medic took it and hurried away.

I watched Lara for a moment and said, "You're going to kill those men. When Elisa and Natalia wake up . . ."

"They will feed and their lives will be spared. Annoying as it may be to lose what I invested in those men, I can replace hired guns," she said. "I cannot so easily replace members of my family and my House. As their leader, it is my responsibility to provide adequate care and sustenance in times of need—particularly when loyalty to the House is what created that need."

"They're your own men," I said.

"That was before they became useless to the House," she replied. "They know too much of our internal affairs to be allowed to leave. Lives must be lost if my kin are to survive their injuries. Rather than inflict that upon one who can still be of use to us, I preserve lives by seeing to it that these men serve us one last time."

"Yeah. You're a real humanitarian. A regular Mother Teresa."

She turned that flat, empty gaze to me again. "At what point did you forget that I am a vampire, Dresden? A monster. A habitually neat, polite, civil, and efficient monster." Her eyes drifted down the hallway, to where a well-muscled young man was being helped to sit down, while a medic secured bandages over his eyes. Lara stared intently at him, the color of her eyes lightening to silver, and her lips parted slightly. "I am what I am."

I felt sick to my stomach. I pushed myself to my feet, and said, "So am I."

She glanced obliquely at me. "Is that a threat, Dresden?"

I shook my head. "Just a fact. One day I'm going to take you down."

Her eyes went back to the wounded man, her lips shifting to one side in a smirk. "One day," she murmured. "But not today."

"No. Not today."

"Is there anything else I can do for you, wizard mine?"

"Yeah," I said.

She glanced at me and raised an eyebrow.

"I need a car."

Chapter Twenty-eight

I sort of shambled up one floor and down a wing to the Château's infirmary, escorted there by a guard who was being very careful not to limp on a wounded leg. The skinwalker had smacked my bean against hardwood and knocked something loose. I felt fairly confident that if I jumped up and down and wiggled my head, my brain would slosh squishily around the inside of my skull.

Not that I was going to be doing any of those things. Walking was hard enough.

In the infirmary, I found a white-coated young woman tending to the wounded. She moved with the brisk professional manner of a doctor, and was just finishing seeing to Justine's injuries. The young woman was laid out on a bed, her midsection swathed in bandages, her eyes glazed with the distant, peaceful expression of someone on good drugs.

Anastasia sat on the bed next to Justine's, her back straight, her expression calm. Her right arm was bound up close against her body in a black cloth sling. She came to her feet as I entered the room. She looked a little pale and shaky, but she stood without leaning on her slender wooden staff. "We're leaving now?"

"Yeah," I said. I moved to her side to support her. "You okay to walk?"

She leaned her staff toward me, stopping me from coming any closer, though she smiled slightly as she did. "I'll bloody well walk out of here," she said. And she said it in an atrocious Scottish accent.

I lifted both eyebrows at her in shock. "You told me you fell asleep during *Highlander*."

Her dark eyes sparkled. "I always say that when I find myself at a vintage movie showing at a drive-in theater while in the company of a man two centuries younger than me."

"And not because you didn't want to hurt my feelings with your professional opinion of the swordsmanship on display?"

"Young men can be so delicate," she said, her dimples making a brief appearance.

"We should get you to a hospital," I said, nodding at her sling.

She shook her head. "The break is set back in place already. From here, all one can do is wear a sling and wait for it to stop hurting so badly."

I grimaced. "I've got some meds at my place."

She smiled again, but this time I could see how much she was straining to keep up appearances. "That would be lovely."

"Harry," said a soft voice.

I turned to face the wounded Justine, who looked at me with drowsy eyes. I turned to the bed and bent down to smile at her. "Hey there."

"We heard that thing talking," she said. All the hard consonants in her words had blurred, rounded edges. "We heard it talking to you and Lara."

I glanced up at Anastasia, who gave me a short nod of her head.

"Yeah," I said to Justine. I desperately did not want her to say anything she ought not to be saying. "I'll take care of it."

Justine smiled at me, though she looked like she could hardly keep her eyes open. "I know you will. He loves you, you know."

I did *not* look up at Anastasia. "Uh. Yeah."

Justine took my hand in one of hers, her eyes reaching for mine. "He always worried that he'd never be able to talk to you. That the world he came from was so different. That he wouldn't know enough about being human to relate. That he wouldn't know about being a br—"

"Brass-plated pain in my ass," I said. "He knows that plenty well." I avoided her eyes. The last thing I needed was to endure another soulgaze now. "Justine, you need to rest. I'll dig him up. Don't worry."

She smiled again and her eyes closed all the way. "You're like family to me, Harry. You always care."

I bowed my head, embarrassed, and settled Justine's hands back on the bed, then tugged the thin hospital blankets up over her.

Anastasia watched me with thoughtful eyes as I did.

* * *

We walked back to the front of the house, and past the fairly fresh plaster that might have hidden ridiculously lethal booby traps, out over a front porch the size of a tennis court, and down several steps to the circular drive, where the car Lara had lent me was waiting.

I stopped so suddenly that Anastasia nearly walked into my back. She caught her balance with a hiss of discomfort, and then looked up and caught her breath. "Oh, my."

Nearly two tons of British steel and chrome sat idling in the drive. Its purring engine sounded like a sewing machine. The white Rolls limo was an old model, something right out of a pulp-fiction adventure film, and it was in gorgeous condition. Its panels shone, freshly waxed and without blemish, and the chrome of its grill gleamed sienna in the light of dusk over the Château.

I walked down to peer inside the Rolls. The passenger seating in the back was larger than my freaking apartment. Or at least it looked that way. The interior was all silver-grey and white leather and similarly colored woodwork, polished to a glowing sheen and accented with silver. The carpet on the floor of the Rolls was thicker and more luxurious than a well-kept lawn.

"Wow," I said quietly.

Anastasia, standing beside me, breathed, "That's a work of bloody art."

"Wow," I said quietly.

"Look at the filigree."

I nodded. "Wow."

Anastasia gave me a sidelong look. "And there's plenty of room in back."

I blinked and looked at her.

Her expression was innocent and bland. "All I'm saying is that it *is* rather crowded in your apartment right now. . . ."

"Anastasia," I said. I felt my face getting a little warm.

The dimples reappeared. She was just teasing me, of course. In her condition it would be some time before she could engage in that kind of activity.

"What model is this?" she asked.

"Um," I said. "Well, it's a Rolls-Royce. It's . . . I think it's from before World War Two. . . ."

"It's a Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith, of course," said Lara's voice from behind me. "At this house? What else would it be?"

I looked over my shoulder, to see Lara Raith standing in the shadowy doorway of the house.

"You have special needs, obviously," she said. "So I provided you with an appropriate vintage. Nineteen thirty-nine." She folded her arms, rather smugly, I thought, and said, "Bring it back with a full tank."

I tilted my head at her in a gesture that wasn't quite an affirmation, and muttered, as I opened the passenger-side door, "The loan officer will have to run a check on my credit first. What's this thing get, about two gallons per mile?"

Anastasia slid into the car with a brief sound of discomfort. I winced and held out my hands in case she fell back, but she managed it without any other difficulty. I shut the door, and caught a glimpse of Lara taking a sudden step forward.

She focused sharply on Anastasia for a moment—and then upon me.

Lara's eyes flickered several shades paler as her ripe lips parted in dawning realization. A very slow smile crept over her mouth as she stared at me.

I turned away from her rather hurriedly, got into the Rolls, and got it moving. And I didn't look back again until the vampires' house was five miles behind us.

Anastasia let me get most of the way back to town before she looked at me and said, “Harry?”

“Hmmm?” I asked. Driving the Rolls was like driving a tank. It had all kinds of momentum behind it, no power steering, and no power brakes. It was a vehicle that demanded that I pay my respects to the laws of physics and think a little bit further ahead than I otherwise might.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” she asked.

“Dammit,” I muttered.

She watched me with eyes much older than the face around them. “You were hoping I didn’t hear Justine.”

“Yeah.”

“But I did.”

I drove for another minute or two before asking, “Are you sure?”

She considered that for a moment before she said, more gently, “Are you sure there’s nothing you want to tell me?”

“I have nothing to say to Captain Luccio,” I said. It came out harder than I had anticipated.

She reached out and put her left hand on my right, where it rested on the gearshift. “What about to Anastasia?” she asked.

I felt my jaw tighten. It took me a moment to make them relax and ask, “Do you have any family?”

“Yes,” she said. “Technically.”

“Technically?”

“The men and women I grew up with, who I knew? They’ve been dead for generations. Their descendants are living all over Italy, in Greece, and there are a few in Algeria—but it isn’t as though they invite their great-great-great-great-great-great-grandaunt to their Christmas celebrations. They’re strangers.”

I frowned, thinking that over, and looked at her. “Strangers.”

She nodded. “Most people aren’t willing to accept a radical fact like the life span of our kind, Harry. There are some families who have—Martha Liberty, for example, lives with one of her multiple-great-granddaughters and her children. But mostly, it ends badly when wizards try to stay too close to their kin.” She bowed her head, apparently studying her sling as she spoke. “I look in on them every five or six years, without them knowing. Keep an eye out for any of the children who might develop a talent.”

“But you had a real family once,” I said.

She sighed and looked out the window. “Oh, yes. It was a very long time ago.”

“I remember my father, a little. But I was raised an orphan.”

She winced. “Dio, Harry.” Her fingers squeezed mine. “You never had anyone, did you?”

“And if I did find someone,” I said, feeling my throat constricting as I spoke, “I would do anything necessary to protect him. Anything.”

Anastasia looked out the window, letting out a hiss of what sounded like anger. “Margaret. You selfish bitch.”

I blinked and looked at her, and nearly got us both killed when a passing car cut me off and I almost couldn’t stop the monster Rolls in time. “You . . . you knew my mother?”

“All the Wardens knew her,” Anastasia said quietly.

“She was a Warden?”

Anastasia was silent for a moment before shaking her head. “She was considered a threat to the Laws of Magic.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that she made it a point to dance as close to the edge of breaking the Laws as she possibly could whenever she got the chance,” Anastasia replied. “It took her all of a year after she was admitted to the Council to start agitating for change.”

I had to focus on the road. This was more than I had ever heard from anyone in the Council about the enigmatic figure who had given me life. My hands were sweating and my heart was thudding. “What kind of change?”

“She was furious that ‘the Laws of Magic have nothing to do with right and wrong.’ She pointed out how wizards could use their abilities to bilk people out of their money, to intimidate and manipulate them, to steal wealth and property from others or destroy it outright, and that so long as the Laws were obeyed, the Council would do nothing whatsoever to stop them or discourage others from following their example. She wanted to reform the Council’s laws to embrace concepts of justice as well as limiting the specific use of magic.”

I frowned. “Wow. What a monster.”

She exhaled slowly. “Can you imagine what would happen if she’d had her way?”

“I wouldn’t have been unjustly persecuted by the Wardens for years?”

Anastasia’s lips firmed into a line. “Once a body of laws describing justice was applied to the Council, it would only be a short step to using that body to involve the Council in events happening in the outside world.”

“Gosh, yeah,” I said. “You’re right. A bunch of wizards trying to effect good in the world would be awful.”

“Whose good?” Anastasia asked calmly. “No one is an unjust villain in his own mind, Harry. Even—perhaps even *especially*—those who are the worst of us. Some of the cruelest tyrants in history were motivated by noble ideals, or made choices that they would call ‘hard but necessary steps’ for the good of their nation. We’re all the hero of our own story.”

“Yeah. It was really hard to tell who the good guys and bad guys were in World War Two.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’ve read the histories written by the victors of that war, Harry. As someone who lived through it, I can tell you that at the time of the war, there was a great deal less certainty. There were stories of atrocities in Germany, but for every one that was true, there were another five or six that weren’t. How could one have told the difference between the true stories, the propaganda, and simple fabrications and myths created by the people of the nations Germany had attacked?”

“Might have been a bit easier if there’d been a wizard or three around to help,” I said.

She gave me an oblique look. “Then by your argument, you would have had the White Council destroy the United States.”

“What?”

“Your government has drenched its hands in innocent blood as well,” she replied, still calm. “Unless you think the Indian tribesmen whose lands were conquered were somehow the villains of the piece.”

I frowned over that one. “We’ve gone sort of far afield from my mother.”

“Yes. And no. What she proposed would inevitably have drawn the Council into mortal conflicts, and therefore into mortal politics. Tell me the truth—if the Council, today, declared war upon America for its past crimes and current idiocy, would you obey the order to attack?”

“Hell, no,” I said. “The U.S. isn’t a perfect place, but it’s better than most people have managed to come up with. And all my stuff is there.”

She smiled faintly. “Exactly. And since the Council is made up of members from all over the world, it would mean that no matter *where* we acted, we would almost certainly be faced with dissidence and desertion from those who felt their homelands wronged.” She shrugged—and grimaced in pain before arresting the motion. “I myself would have issues if the Council acted against any of the lands where my family has settled. They may not remember me, but the reverse is not true.”

I thought about what she’d said for a long moment. “What you’re saying is that the Council would have to turn on some of its own.”

“And how many times would that happen before there was no Council?” she asked. “Wars and feuds can live for generations even when there *isn’t* a group of wizards involved. Settling the conflicts would have required even more involvement in mortal affairs.”

“You mean control,” I said quietly. “You mean the Council seeking political power.”

She gave me a knowing look. “One of the things that makes me respect you more than most young people is your appreciation for history. Precisely. And for gaining control over others, for gathering great power to oneself, there is no better tool than black magic.”

“Which is what the Laws of Magic cover already.”

She nodded. “And so the Council limits itself. Any wizard is free to act in whatever manner he chooses with his power—provided he doesn’t break any of the Laws. Without resorting to black magic, the amount of damage an individual can inflict on mortal society is limited. As harsh an experience as it has created for you, Harry, the Laws of Magic are not about justice. The White Council is not about justice. They are about restraining power.” She smiled faintly. “And, occasionally, the Council manages to do some good by protecting mankind from supernatural threats.”

“And that’s good enough for you?” I asked.

“It isn’t perfect,” she admitted. “But it’s better than anything else we’ve come up with. And the things I’ve spent my lifetime building are there.”

“Touché,” I said.

“Thank you.”

I stroked her fingers with my thumb. “So you’re saying my mother was short-sighted.”

“She was a complex woman,” Anastasia said. “Brilliant, erratic, passionate, committed, idealistic, talented, charming, insulting, bold, incautious, arrogant—and short-sighted, yes. Among a great many other qualities. She loved pointing out the areas of ‘grey’ magic, as she called them, and constantly questioning their legitimacy.” She shrugged. “The Senior Council tasked the Wardens to keep an eye on her. Which was damn near impossible.”

“Why?”

“The woman had a great many contacts among the Fey. That’s why everyone called her Margaret LaFey. She knew more Ways through the Nevernever than anyone I’ve ever seen, before or since. She could be in Beijing at breakfast, Rome at lunch, and Seattle for supper and stop for coffee in Sydney and Capetown in between.” She sighed. “Margaret vanished once, for four or five years. Everyone assumed that she’d finally run afoul of something in Faerie. She never seemed able to restrain her tongue, even when she knew better.”

“I wonder what that’s like.”

Anastasia gave me a rather worn sad smile. “But she didn’t spend all that time in Faerie, did she?”

I looked up at the rearview mirror, back toward Château Raith.

“And Thomas is the son of the White King himself.”

I didn't answer.

She exhaled heavily. “You look so different from him. Except perhaps for something in the jaw. The shape of the eyes.”

I didn't say anything until we got to the apartment. The Rolls went together with the gravel lot like champagne and Cracker Jacks. I turned the engine off and listened to it click as it began to cool down. The sun was gone over the horizon by that time, and the lengthening shadows began to trigger streetlights.

“Are you going to tell anyone?” I asked quietly.

She looked out the window as she considered the question. Then she said, “Not unless I think it relevant.”

I turned to look at her. “You know what will happen if they know. They'll use him.”

She gazed straight out the front of the car. “I know.”

I spoke quietly to put all the weight I could into each word I spoke next. “Over. My. Dead. Body.”

Anastasia closed her eyes for a moment, and opened them again. Her expression never flickered. She took her hand slowly, reluctantly from mine and put it in her lap. Then she whispered, “I pray to God it never comes to that.”

We sat in the car separately.

It seemed larger and colder, for some reason. The silence seemed deeper.

Luccio lifted her chin and looked at me. “What will you do now?”

“What do you think?” I clenched my fists so that my knuckles popped, rolled my neck once, and opened the door. “I'm going to find my brother.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

Two hours and half a dozen attempted tracking spells later, I snarled and slapped a stack of notepads off the corner of the table in my subbasement laboratory. They thwacked against the wall beneath Bob the Skull's shelf, and fell to the concrete floor.

"It was to be expected," Bob the Skull said, very quietly. Orange lights like the flickers of distant campfires glittered in the eye sockets of the bleached human skull that sat on its own shelf high up on one wall of my lab, bracketed by the remains of dozens of melted candles and half a dozen paperback romances. "The parent-to-child blood bond is much more sympathetic than that shared by half siblings."

I glared at the skull and also kept my voice down. "You just can't go a day without saying that you told me so."

"I can't help it if you're wrong all the time yet continually ignore my advice, sahib. I'm just a humble servant."

I couldn't scream at my nonmaterial assistant with other people in the apartment above me, so I consoled myself by snatching up a pencil from a nearby work shelf and flinging it at him. Its eraser end hit the skull between the eyes.

"Jealousy, thy name is Dresden," Bob said with a pious sigh.

I paced up and down the length of my lab, burning off frustrated energy. It wasn't much of a walk. Five paces, turn, five paces, turn. It was a dank little concrete box of a room. Work benches lined three of the walls, and I had installed cheap wire shelving above them. The work benches and shelves were crowded with all manner of odds and ends, books, reagents, instruments, various bits of gear needed for alchemy, and scores of books and notebooks.

A long table in the middle of the room was currently covered by a canvas tarp, and the floor at the far end of the lab had a perfect circle of pure copper embedded in it. The remains of several differently structured tracking attempts were scattered on the floor around the circle, while the props and foci from the most recent failure were still inside it.

"One of them should have gotten me *something*," I told Bob. "Maybe not a full lock on Thomas's position—but a *tug* in the right direction, at least."

"Unless he's dead," Bob said, "in which case you're just spinning your wheels."

"He isn't dead," I said quietly. "Shagnasty wants to trade."

"Uh-huh," Bob scoffed. "Because everyone knows how honorable the naagloshii are."

"He's alive," I said quietly. "Or at least I'm going to proceed on that assumption."

Bob somehow managed to look baffled. "Why?"

Because you need your brother to be all right, whispered a quiet voice in my head. "Because anything else isn't particularly useful toward resolving this situation," I said aloud. "Whoever is behind the curtains is using the skinwalker and probably Madeline Raith, too. So if I find Thomas, I find Shagnasty and Madeline, and I'll be able to start pulling threads until this entire mess unravels."

"Yeah," Bob said, drawing out the word. "Do you think it'll take long to pull all those threads? Because the naagloshii is going to be doing something similar to your intestines."

I made a growling sound in my throat. "Yeah. I think I got its number."

"Really?"

"I keep trying to punch Shagnasty out myself," I said. "But its defenses are too good—and it's fast as hell."

"He's an immortal semidivine being," Bob said. "Of course he's good."

I waved a hand. "My point is that I've been trying to lay the beating on it myself. Next time I see it, I'm going to start throwing bindings on it, just to trip it up and slow it down, so whoever is with me can get a clean shot."

"It might work . . ." Bob admitted.

"Thank you."

" . . . if he's such an idiot that he only bothered to learn to defend himself from violent-energy attacks," Bob continued, as if I hadn't spoken. "Which I think is almost as likely as you getting one of those tracking spells to work. He'll know how to defend himself from bindings, Harry."

I sighed. "I've got gender issues."

Bob blinked slowly. "Uh. Wow. I'd love to say something to make that more embarrassing for you, boss, but I'm not sure how."

"Not *my* . . . augh." I threw another pencil. It missed Bob and bounced off the wall behind him. "With the skinwalker. Is it actually a male? Do I call it a he?"

Bob rolled his eyelights. "It's a semidivine immortal, Harry. It doesn't procreate. It has no need to recombine DNA. That means that gender simply doesn't apply. That's something only you meat sacks worry about."

"Then why is it that you stare at naked girls every chance you get," I said, "but not naked men?"

"It's an aesthetic choice," Bob said loftily. "As a gender, women exist on a plane far beyond men when it comes to the artistic appreciation of their external beauty."

"And they have boobs," I said.

"And they have *boobs*!" Bob agreed with a leer.

I sighed and rubbed at my temples, closing my eyes. "You said the skinwalkers were semidivine?"

"You're using the English word, which doesn't really describe them very precisely. Most skinwalkers are just people—powerful, dangerous, and often psychotic people, but people. They're successors to the traditions and skills taught to avaricious mortals by the originals. The naagloshii."

"Originals like Shagnasty," I said.

"He's the real deal, all right," Bob replied, his quiet voice growing more serious. "According to some of the stories of the Navajo, the naagloshii were originally messengers for the Holy People, when they were first teaching humans the Blessing Way."

"Messengers?" I said. "Like angels?"

"Or like those guys on bikes in New York, maybe?" Bob said. "Not all couriers are created identical, Mr. Lowest-Common-Denominator. Anyway, the original messengers, the naagloshii, were supposed to go with the Holy People when they departed the mortal world. But some of them didn't. They stayed here, and their selfishness corrupted the power the Holy People gave them. Voila, Shagnasty."

I grunted. Bob's information was anecdotal, which meant it could well be distorted by time and by generations of retelling. There probably wasn't any way to know the objective truth of it—but a surprising amount of that kind of lore remained fundamentally sound in oral tradition societies like those of the American Southwest. "When did this happen?"

"Tough to say," Bob said. "The traditional Navajo don't see time the way most mortals do, which makes them arguably smarter than the rest of you monkeys. But it's safe to assume prehistory. Several millennia."

Yikes.

Thousands of years of survival meant thousands of years of accumulated experience. It meant that Shagnasty was smart and adaptable. The old skinwalker wouldn't still be around if it wasn't. I upgraded the creature, in my thoughts, from "very tough" to "damned near impossibly tough."

But since it still had my brother, that didn't change anything.

"Don't suppose there's a silver bullet we can use?" I asked.

"No, boss," Bob said quietly. "Sorry."

I grimaced, did a half-assed job of cleaning up the mess I'd made, and began to leave the lab. I paused before I left and said, "Hey, Bob."

"Yeah?"

"Any thoughts as to why, when LaFortier was being murdered by a wizard, no one threw any magic around?"

"People are morons?"

"It's damned peculiar," I said.

"Irrationality isn't," Bob said. "Wizards just aren't all that stable to begin with."

Given what I had done with my life lately, I could hardly argue with him. "It means something," I said.

"Yeah?" Bob asked. "What?"

I shook my head. "Tell you when I figure it out."

I went back up into my living room through the trapdoor in its floor. The door was a thick one. Sound didn't readily travel up from the lab when it was closed. Luccio was loaded with narcotics and asleep on my couch, lying flat on her back with no pillow, and covered with a light blanket. Her face was slack, her mouth slightly open. It made her look vulnerable, and

even younger than she already appeared. Molly sat in one of the recliners with several candles burning beside her. She was reading a paperback, carefully not opening the thing all the way to avoid creasing the spine. Pansy.

I went to the kitchen and made myself a sandwich. As I did, I reflected that I was getting really tired of sandwiches. Maybe I ought to learn to cook or something.

I stood there munching, and Molly came to join me.

"Hey," she said in muted tones. "How are you?"

She'd helped me bandage the fairly minor cut on my scalp when I had returned. Strips of white gauze bandage were wound around my head to form a lopsided, off-kilter halo. I felt

like the fife player in Willard's iconic *Spirit of '76*.

"Still in one piece," I replied. "How are they?"

"Drugged and sleeping," she said. "Morgan's fever is up another half of a degree. The last bag of antibiotics is almost empty."

I clenched my jaw. If I didn't get Morgan to a hospital soon, he was going to be just as dead as he would be if the Council or Shagnasty got hold of him.

"Should I get some ice onto him?" Molly asked anxiously.

"Not until the fever goes over one hundred and four, and stays there," I said. "That's when it begins to endanger him. Until then, it's doing what it's supposed to do and slowing the infection." I finished the last bite of sandwich. "Any calls?"

She produced a piece of notebook paper. "Georgia called. Here's where Andi is. They're still with her."

I took the paper with a grimace. If I hadn't let Morgan in my door half an eternity ago, he wouldn't have been in Chicago, Shagnasty wouldn't have been tailing me to find him, Andi wouldn't be hurt—and Kirby would still be alive. And I hadn't even tried to call and find out how she was. "How is she?"

"They still aren't sure," Molly said.

I nodded. "Okay."

"Did you find Thomas?"

I shook my head. "Total bust."

Mouse came shambling over. He sat down and looked up at me, his expression concerned.

She chewed on her lip. "What are you going to do?"

"I . . ." My voice trailed off. I sighed. "I have no idea."

Mouse pawed at my leg and looked up at me. I bent over to scratch his ears, and instantly regretted it as someone tightened a vise on my temples. I straightened up again in a hurry, wincing, and entertained wild fantasies about lying down on the floor and sleeping for a week.

Molly watched me, her expression worried.

Right, Harry. You're still teaching your apprentice. Show her what a wizard should do, not what you want to do.

Chapter Thirty

I don't like hospitals—but then, who does? I don't like the clean, cool hallways. I don't like the stark fluorescent lights. I don't like the calm ring tones on the telephones. I don't like the pastel scrubs the nurses and attendants wear. I don't like the elevators, and I don't like the soothing colors on the walls, and I don't like the way everyone speaks in measured, quiet voices.

But mostly, I don't like the memories I've collected there.

Andi was still in intensive care. I wouldn't be able to go in to see her—neither would Billy and Georgia, if they hadn't arranged for power of attorney for medical matters, a few years back. It was long after standard visiting hours, but most hospital staffs stretch rules and look the other way for those whose loved ones are in ICU. The world has changed a lot over the centuries, but death watches are still respected.

Billy had come to me on the down low to set up power of attorney for me, in case he should be hospitalized without Georgia being nearby to handle matters. Though neither of us said so, we both knew why he really did it. The only reason Georgia wouldn't be there is if she was dead—and if Billy was in no shape to make decisions for himself, he didn't want to hang around and find out what his world would be like without her in it. He wanted someone he could trust to understand that.

Billy and Georgia are solid.

I'd spent some endless hours in Stroger's ICU waiting room, and it hadn't changed since I'd been there last. It was empty except for Georgia. She lay on the sofa, sleeping, still wearing her glasses. A book by what was presumably a prominent psychologist lay open on her stomach. She looked exhausted.

I bypassed the waiting room and went to the nurses' desk. A tired-looking woman in her thirties looked up at me with a frown. "Sir," she said, "it's well after visiting hours."

"I know," I said. I took my notepad out of my pocket and scribbled a quick note on it. "I'll go back to the waiting room. The next time you go past Miss Macklin's room, could you please give this to the gentleman sitting with her?"

The nurse relaxed a little, and gave me a tired smile. "Certainly. It will just be a few minutes."

"Thanks."

I went back to the waiting room and settled into a chair. I closed my eyes, leaned my head back against the wall, and drowsed until I heard footsteps on tile.

Billy entered with a rolled-up blanket under his arm, glanced around the room, and nodded to me. Then he went immediately to Georgia. He took her glasses off, very gently, and picked up the book. Georgia never stirred. He put the book on the end table, and her glasses on top of it. Then he took the blanket from under his arm and covered her up. She murmured and stirred, but Billy shushed her quietly and stroked his hand over her hair. She sighed and shifted onto her side, then snuggled down under the blanket.

I reached up a hand and flicked the light switch beside my head. It left the room dim, if not really dark.

Billy smiled his thanks to me, and nodded toward the door. I got up and we walked out into the hallway together.

"Should have tried to call you sooner," I said. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "I know how it is, man. No apology needed."

"Okay," I said, without actually agreeing with him. "How is she?"

"Not good," he replied simply. "There was internal bleeding. It took two rounds of surgery to get it stopped." The blocky young man shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "They told us if she makes it through the night, she'll be out of the worst of it."

"How are you holding up?"

He shook his head again. "I don't know, man. I called Kirby's folks. I was his friend. I had to. The police had already contacted them, but it isn't the same."

"No, it isn't."

"They took it pretty hard. Kirby was an only child."

I sighed. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Kirby knew the risks. He'd rather have died than stand by and do nothing."

"Georgia?"

"I'd have lost it without her. Pillar of strength and calm," Billy said. He glanced back toward the waiting room and a smile touched the corners of his eyes. "She's good at setting things aside until there's time to deal with them. Once things have settled out, she'll be a wreck, and it'll be my turn to hold her up."

Like I said.

Solid.

"The thing that did Kirby took Thomas Raith," I said.

"The vampire you work with sometimes?"

"Yeah. As soon as I work out how to find it, I'm taking it down. The vampires are probably going to help—but I might need backup I can trust."

Billy's eyes flickered with a sudden fire of rage and hunger. "Yeah?"

I nodded. "It's part of something bigger. I can't talk to you about everything that's going on. And I know Andi needs you here. I understand if you don't—"

Billy turned his eyes to me, those same dangerous fires smoldering. "Harry, I'm not going to move forward blind anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that for years, I've been willing to help you, even though you could barely ever tell me what was actually happening. You've played everything close to the chest. And I know you had your reasons for that." He stopped walking and looked up at me calmly. "Kirby's dead. Maybe Andi, too."

My conscience wouldn't let me meet his gaze, even for an instant. "I know."

He nodded. "So. If I'd had this conversation with you sooner, maybe they wouldn't be. Maybe if we'd had a better idea about what's actually going on in the world, it would have changed how we approached things. They follow my lead, Harry. I have a responsibility to make sure that I do everything in my power to make them aware and safe."

"Yeah," I said. "I can see your point."

"Then if you want my help, things are going to change. I'm not charging ahead blindfolded again. Not ever."

"Billy," I said quietly. "This isn't stuff you can unlearn. Right now, you're insulated from the worst of what goes on because you're . . . I don't want to be insulting, but you're a bunch of amateurs without enough of a clue to be a real threat to anyone."

His eyes darkened. "Insulated from the worst?" he asked in a quiet, dangerous voice. "Tell that to Kirby. Tell that to Andi."

I took several steps away, pinched the bridge of my nose between thumb and forefinger, and closed my eyes, thinking. Billy had a point, of course. I'd been careful to control what information he and the Alphas had gotten from me, in an effort to protect them. And it had worked—for a while.

But now things were different. Kirby's death had seen to that.

"You're sure you don't want to back out?" I asked. "Once you're part of the scene, you aren't getting out of it." I clenched my jaw for a second. "And believe it or not, Billy, yes.

You *have* been insulated from the worst."

"I'm not backing off on this one, Harry. I can't." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him fold his arms. "You're the one who wants our help."

I pointed a finger at him. "I don't *want* it. I don't *want* to drag you into what's going on. I don't *want* you walking into more danger and getting hurt." I sighed. "But . . . there's a

lot at stake, and I think I might *need* you."

"Okay, then," Billy said. "You know what it will cost."

He stood facing me solidly, tired eyes steady, and I realized something I hadn't ever made into a tangible thought before: he wasn't a kid anymore. Not because he'd graduated, and not even because of how capable he was. He'd seen the worst—death, heartless and nasty, come to lay waste to everything it could. He knew in his heart of hearts, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it could come for him, take him as easily as it had taken Kirby.

And he was making a choice to stand his ground.

Billy Borden, kid werewolf, was gone.

Will was choosing to stand with me.

I couldn't treat him like a child anymore. Will was ignorant of the supernatural world beyond the fairly minor threats that lurked around the University of Chicago. He and the other werewolves had been kids who learned one really neat magic trick, almost ten years before. I hadn't shared more with them, and the paranormal community in general is careful about what they say to strangers. He had, at best, only a vague idea of the scope of supernatural affairs in general, and he had not the first clue about how hot the water really was around me right now.

Will had picked his ground. I couldn't keep him in the dark and tell myself that I was protecting him.

I nodded to a few chairs sitting along the wall at a nearby intersection of hallways. "Let's sit down. I don't have much time, and there's a lot to cover. I'll tell you everything when I get a chance, but for now all I can give you is a highlights reel."

By the time I got done giving Will the CliffsNotes version of the supernatural world, I still hadn't come up with a plan. So, working on the theory that the proper answers just needed more time to cook, and that they could do so while I was on the move, I went back to my borrowed car and drove to the next place I should have visited sooner than I had.

Murphy used to have an office at the headquarters of CPD's Special Investigations department. Then she'd blown off her professional duty as head of the department to cover me during a furball that went bad on an epic scale. She'd nearly lost her job altogether, but Murph was a third-generation cop from a cop clan. She'd managed to gain enough support to hang on to her badge, but she had been demoted to Detective Sergeant and had her seniority revoked—a dead end for her career.

Now her old office was occupied by John Stallings, and Murphy had a desk in the large room that housed SI. It wasn't a new desk, either. One leg was propped up with a small stack of triplicate report forms. It wasn't unusual in that room. SI was the bottom of the chute for cops who had earned the wrath of their superiors or, worse, had taken a misstep in the cutthroat world of Chicago city politics. The desks were all battered and old. The walls and floor were worn. The room obviously housed at least twice as many work desks as it had been meant to contain.

It was late. The place was quiet and mostly empty. Whoever was on the night shift must have been out on a call of some kind. Of the three cops in the room, I only knew one of them by name—Murphy's current partner, a blocky, mildly overweight man in his late fifties, with hair going steadily more silver in sharp contrast to the dark coffee tone of his skin.

"Rawlins," I said.

He turned to me with a grunt and a polite nod. "Evening."

"What are you doing here this late?"

"Giving my wife ammunition for when she drags my ass to court to divorce me," he said cheerfully. "Glad you made it in."

"Murph around?" I asked.

He grunted. "Interrogation room two, with the British perp. Go on down."

"Thanks, man."

I went down the hall and around the corner. To my left was a security gate blocking the way to the building's holding cells. To the right was a short hallway containing four doors—two to the bathrooms, and two that led to the interrogation rooms. I went to the second room and knocked.

Murphy answered it, still wearing the same clothes she'd been in at the storage park. She looked tired and irritated. She grunted almost as well as Rawlins had, despite her complete lack of a Y-chromosome, and stepped out into the hall, shutting the door behind her.

She looked up and studied my head for a second. "What the hell, Harry?"

"Got a visit from Shagnasty the Skinwalker when I went to talk to Lara Raith. Any trouble with Binder?"

She shook her head. "I figured he'd have a hard time doing whatever he does if he can't get out of his chair or use his hands. I've been sitting with him, too, in case he tried to pull something."

I lifted an eyebrow, impressed. There hadn't been time to advise her how to handle Binder safely, but she'd worked it out on her own. "Yeah, that's a pretty solid method," I said. "What's he in for, officially?"

"Officially, I haven't charged him yet," she said. "If I need to stick him with something, I can cite trespassing, destruction of property, and assault on a police officer." She shook her head. "But we can't keep this close an eye on him forever. If I do press charges, it won't be long before he's under lighter security. I don't even want to think about what could happen if he got to turn those things loose inside a precinct house or prison."

"Yeah," I said, nodding. "Long term, I don't think you can hold him."

Her mouth twisted bitterly. "Hate it when I have to let pricks like that walk."

"Happen much?"

"All the time," she said. "Legal loopholes, incorrect procedures, crucial evidence declared inadmissible. A lot of perps who are guilty as hell walk out without so much as a reprimand." She sighed and twitched her shoulders into something like a shrug. "Ah, well. It's a messed-up world. Whatcha gonna do?"

"I hear that," I said. "Want to compare notes?"

"Sure," she said. "What did you get?"

I gave her the rundown of what had happened since I'd last seen her.

She grunted again when I finished. "Isn't that sort of dangerous? Involving the vampires?"

"Yeah," I said. "But it's Thomas. I think Lara is probably sincere about getting him back. Besides. Why worry about smoking in bed when your building is already on fire?"

"Point," she said. "I got the photos. They don't tell me anything new. I ran those account numbers you gave me through the system to see if anything came up. Brick wall."

"Dammit."

"It was a long shot anyway," she said.

"Binder give you anything?"

Her mouth scrunched up as if she wanted to spit out something that tasted terrible. "No. He's a hard case. Career criminal. He's been grilled before."

"Yeah," I said. "And he knows that you can't do anything but make him sit still for a little while. If he gives us anything on his employer, he'll lose his credibility with clients—assuming that he lives that long."

She leaned her shoulders back against the wall. "You say this Shagnasty thing has Thomas's cell phone?"

"Yeah. Think you can track it?"

"As part of what investigation?" she asked. "I don't have the kind of freedom to act that I used to. If I wanted to get what amounts to a wiretap, I'd have to get approval from a judge, and I don't know any of them who would take 'my friend the wizard's vampire brother was kidnapped by a demonic Navajo shapeshifter' as a valid justification for such a measure."

"I hadn't really thought of it like that," I said.

She shrugged. "Honestly, I suspect Lara's resources and contacts are better than mine, given the time constraints."

I couldn't quite suppress a growl of frustration. "If she learns anything. If she's honest about what she learns."

Murphy frowned, scrunching up her nose. "Where was Thomas taken from?"

"I'm not certain, but I think he was at the storage park. His rental van was there, and he said something about not being able to handle all of them on his own."

"Them? The grey suits?"

I nodded. "Most likely. But since Thomas never pitched in during the fight, I figure Shagnasty probably snuck up on him and grabbed him while he was being distracted by Binder and his pets."

"And you can't track him down with magic."

"No," I growled through clenched teeth. "Shagnasty is countering it somehow."

"How is that possible?"

I took a moment to assemble my thoughts. "Tracking spells are like any kind of targeted thaumaturgy. You create a link, a channel to the target, and then pour energy into that channel. In the case of a tracking spell, you're basically just setting up a continuous trickle of energy, and then following it to the target—kind of like pouring water on a surface when you want to see which way is downhill."

"Okay," she said. "I get that, mostly."

"The way to stymie a tracking spell is to prevent that channel from ever being formed. If it never gets created, then it doesn't matter when the water gets poured. There's nothing to cause it to start flowing. And the way you prevent the channel from forming is to shield the target away from whatever focus you're using to create the link."

"Like what?"

"Well, for example. If I had one of your hairs and wanted to use it as part of a tracking spell, you might beat it by shaving off your hair. If the hair in my spell doesn't match up to an end somewhere on your head, no link gets created. So, unless I had a hair that had been torn out from the roots, and fairly recently, you'd be hidden."

"And that's the only way to beat a tracking spell?"

"Nah," I said. "A good circle of power could probably screen you off, if you took the time and money to give it serious juice. Theoretically, you could also cross into the Nevernever. Thaumaturgy originating on the earth doesn't cross into the spirit world very efficiently—and before you ask, yeah, I tried it from the Nevernever side, too. It was failed spell number three."

Murphy frowned. "What about Justine?" she asked. "Justine was able to find him once before."

I grimaced. "She was able to give us a vague direction a few hours after Thomas had ripped most of the life out of her. It isn't the same this time."

"Why not?"

"Because she wasn't sensing Thomas so much as the missing part of her own life force. They haven't been together like that in years. Thomas—digested, I guess you could say—all of that energy a long time ago."

Murphy sighed. "I've seen you do some neat stuff, Harry. But I guess magic doesn't fix everything."

"Magic doesn't fix *anything*," I said. "That's what the person using it is for." I rubbed at my tired eyes.

"Speaking of," she said. "Any thoughts as to why these wizards didn't seem to be using magic?"

"Not yet," I said.

"Any thoughts as to the nature of our perpetrator?"

"A couple," I said. "There are all these disparate elements in play—Shagnasty, Binder, Madeline Raith. There is serious money moving around. And if we don't find this cockroach and drag him into the light, things are going to be bad for everyone. I don't know what that tells us about him."

"That he's really smart," Murphy said. "Or really desperate."

I arched an eyebrow. "How do you figure?"

"If he's superbrilliant, it's possible that we haven't even seen the shape of his plan yet. All of this could be one big boondoggle to set us up for the real punch."

"You don't sound like you think that's the case."

She gave me a faint smile. “Criminals aren’t usually the crispiest crackers in the box. And you have to remember that even though we’re flailing around looking for answers, the perp is in the same situation. He can’t be sure where we are, what we know, or what we’re doing next.”

“Fog of war,” I said thoughtfully.

She shrugged. “I think it’s a much more likely explanation than that our perp is some kind of James Bond super-genius villain slowly unfolding his terrible design. They’ve shown too much confusion for that.”

“Like what?”

“Shagnasty was following you a couple of nights ago, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, so was this PI you told me about. Why stick you with two tails? Maybe because the right hand didn’t know what the left one was doing.”

“Hngh,” I agreed.

“From what you say, Shagnasty isn’t exactly an errand boy.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“But it’s apparently coordinating with the perp, taking orders. It didn’t absolutely need to deliver its demand in person. I think it’s pretty obvious that it smashed its way into the Château to provide a distraction so that Madeline could make her getaway.”

I blinked. Once I’d alerted Lara to the probability of Madeline’s treachery, she most certainly would have taken steps to detain her. Madeline must have known that. I tried to remember how long it had been between the time Luccio and I arrived, and when the naagloshii attacked. Time enough for Madeline to hear about our presence, assume that the worst had happened, and make a phone call for help?

Maybe.

Murphy peered at me. “I mean, it *is* obvious, right?”

“I got hit on the head, okay?”

She smirked at me.

“Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “Yes, it’s obvious. But not necessarily stupid.”

“Not stupid, but I don’t think it would be unfair to call it a desperation move. I think Shagnasty was the perp’s ace in the hole. I think that when Morgan escaped, the perp figured out

where he was headed, the pressure got to him, and he played his hole card. Only when Shagnasty found you, you weren’t actually *with* Morgan. He got spooked when you and the werewolves nearly pinned him down, and ran off.”

“The perp grabs one of his other tools,” I said, nodding. “Madeline. Tells her to find me and take me out, make me talk, whatever. Only Thomas beats her senseless instead.”

“Makes sense,” Murphy said.

“Doesn’t mean that’s how it happened.”

“Had to happen some way,” she said. “Say we’re in the right ballpark. What does that tell us?”

“Not much,” I said. “Some very bad people are in motion. They’re tough. The one guy we’ve managed to grab won’t tell us a damned thing. The only thing we’re *certain* we know is that we’ve got nothing.”

I was going to continue, but a thought hit me and I stopped talking.

I gave it a second to crystallize.

Then I started to smile.

Murphy tilted her head, watching, and prompted, “We’ve got nothing?”

I looked from Murphy to the door to the interrogation room.

“Forget it,” she said. “He isn’t going to put us on to anyone.”

“Oh,” I drawled. “I’m not so sure about that. . . .”

Chapter Thirty-one

Murphy went back into the interrogation room. Twenty minutes later, I came in and shut the door behind me. The room was simple and small. A table sat in the middle, with two chairs on each side. There was no long two-way mirror on the wall. Instead, a small security camera perched up high in one corner of the ceiling.

Binder sat on the far side of the table. His face had a couple of bruises on it, along with an assortment of small cuts with dark scabs. His odd green eyes were narrowed in annoyance. A foot-long hoagie sat on the table in front of him, its paper wrapper partially undone. He'd have been able to reach it easily—if he could have moved his arms. They were cuffed to the arms of the chair. A handcuff key rested centered on the edge of Murphy's side of the table, in front of her chair.

I had to suppress a smile.

"Bloody priceless," Binder said to Murphy as I entered. "Now you bring this wanker. It's police torture, is what it is. My solicitor will swallow you whole and spit out the bones."

Murphy sat down at the table across from Binder, folded her hands, and sat in complete silence, spearing him with an unfriendly stare.

Binder sneered at her, and then at me, presumably so I wouldn't feel left out. "Oh, I get this now," he said. "Good cop, bad cop, is it?" He looked at me. "Stone-cold bitch here makes me sit for bloody hours in this chair to soften me up. Then you come in here, polite and sympathetic as you please, and I buckle under the stress, yeah?" He settled more comfortably into the chair, somehow conveying an insult with the motion. "Fine, Dresden," he said. "Knock yourself out. Good cop me."

I looked at him for a second.

Then I made a fist and slugged his smug face hard enough to knock him over backward in the chair.

He just lay there for a minute, on his side, blinking tears out of his eyes. Blood trickled from one nostril. One of his shoes had come off in the fall. I stood over him and glanced at my

hand. It hurts to punch people in the face. Not as much as it hurts to *get* punched in the face, granted, but you know you've done it. My knuckles must have grazed his teeth. They'd lost a little skin.

"Don't give me this lawyer crap, Binder," I said. "We both know the cops can't hold you for long. But we also both know that you can't play the system against us, either. You aren't an upstanding member of the community. You're a hired gun, wanted for questioning in a dozen countries."

He looked up at me with a snarl. "Think you're a hard man, do you?"

I glanced at Murphy. "Should I answer that one, or just kick him in the balls?"

"Seeing is believing," Murphy said.

"True," I turned to Binder and drew back my foot.

"Bloody hell!" Binder barked. "There's a bloody camera watching your every move. You think you won't get dragged off for this?"

An intercom on the wall near the camera clicked and buzzed. "He's got a point," said Rawlin's voice. "I can't see it all from here. Move him a couple of feet to the left and give me about thirty more seconds before you start on his nads. I'm making popcorn."

"Sure," I said, giving the camera a thumbs-up. Odds were good that it would fold if I was in the room for any length of time, but we'd made our point.

I sat down on the edge of the table, maybe a foot away from Binder and, quite deliberately, reached over to pick up the hoagie. I took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. "Mmm," I said. I glanced at Murphy. "What kind of cheese is that?"

"Gouda."

"Beef tastes great, too."

"Teriyaki," Murph said, still staring at Binder.

"I was really hungry," I told her, my voice brimming with sincerity. "I haven't eaten since, like, this morning. This is excellent."

Binder muttered darkly under his breath. All I caught was "... bugging little bastard ..."

I ate half the hoagie and put it back on the table. I licked a stray bit of sauce off of one finger and looked down at Binder. "Okay, tough guy," I said. "The cops can't keep you. So that leaves the sergeant, here, with only a couple of options. Either they let you walk ..."

Murphy made a quiet growling sound. It was almost as impressive as her grunt.

"She just hates that idea." I got off the table and hunkered down beside Binder. "Or," I said, "we do it the other way."

He narrowed his eyes. "You'll kill me—is that it?"

"Ain't no one gonna miss you," I said.

"You're bluffing," Binder snapped. "She's a bloody cop."

"Yeah," I said. "Think about that one for a minute. You think a police detective couldn't work out a way to disappear you without anyone being the wiser?"

He looked back and forth between us, his cool mask not quite faltering. "What do you want?"

"Your boss," I said. "Give me that and you walk."

He stared at me for half a minute. Then he said, "Set my chair up."

I rolled my eyes and did it. He was heavy. "Hell's bells, Binder. I get a hernia and the deal's off."

He looked at Murphy and jiggled his wrists.

Murphy yawned.

"Bloody hell," he snarled. "Just one of them. I haven't eaten since yesterday."

I snorted. "Looks to me like you aren't in any immediate danger of starvation."

"You want cooperation," he spat, "you're going to have to show me some. Give me the bloody sandwich."

Murphy reached out, picked up the handcuff key, and tossed it to me. I unlocked his left wrist. Binder seized the sandwich and started chomping on it.

"All right," I said, after a moment. "Talk."

"What?" he said through a mouthful of food. "No soda?"

I swatted the last inch or two of hoagie out of his hand, scowling.

Binder watched me, unperturbed. He licked his fingers clean, picked a bit of lettuce out of his teeth, and ate it. "All right then," he said. "You want the truth?"

"Yeah," I said.

He leaned a bit toward me and jabbed a finger at me. "The truth is that you ain't killing no one, biggun. You ain't and neither is the blond bird. And if you try to keep me, I'll bring

down all manner of horrible things." He leaned back in his chair, openly wearing the smug smile again. "So you might as well stop wasting my valuable time and cut me loose. *That's* the truth."

I turned my head to Murphy, frowning.

She got up, walked around the table, and seized Binder by his close-cut head. It didn't provide much of a grip, but she used it to shove his head roughly down to the top of the table. Then she took the key back from me, undid the other set of cuffs, and released him.

"Get out," she said quietly.

Binder stood up slowly, straightening his clothes. He leered at Murphy, winked, and said, "I'm a professional. So there's nothing personal, love. Maybe next time we can skip business and give pleasure a go."

"Maybe next time you'll get your neck broken resisting arrest," Murphy said. "Get out."

Binder smirked at Murphy, then at me, and then sauntered out of the room.

"Well?" I asked her.

She turned and held out her hand. Several short hairs, some dark and some grey, clung to her fingers. "Got it."

I grinned at her, and took the hairs, depositing them in a white envelope I'd taken from Rawlin's desk. "Give me about a minute and I'll have it up."

"Hubba hubba," Rawlins said through the intercom speaker. "I like this channel."



“This is a great way of chasing down the bad guy,” Murphy said half an hour later. She gave me a pointed look from her chair at her desk. “Sit here and don’t do anything.”

I sat in a chair next to her desk, my hand extended palm down in front of me, holding a bit of leather thong that ended in a simple quartz crystal in a copper-wire setting. My arm was getting tired, and I had gripped it under my forearm with the other hand to support it. The crystal didn’t hang like a plumb line. It leaned a bit to one side, as if being supported by a steady, silent puff of wind.

“Patience,” I said. “Binder might not be a crispy cracker, but he’s been in business for a couple of decades. He knows why you grabbed him by the hair. He’s learned to shake off something like this.”

Murphy gave me an unamused look. She glanced at Rawlins, who sat at his desk. The desks were set up back-to-back, so that they faced each other.

“Don’t look at me,” he said, without glancing up from his sudoku puzzle. “I don’t run as fast as I used to. I could get used to chasing down bad guys like this.”

The crystal abruptly dropped and began swinging back and forth freely.

“Ah!” I said. “There, there, you see?” I let them look for a second and then lowered my arm. I rubbed my sore muscles for a moment. “What did I tell you? He shook it off.”

“Oh, good,” Murphy said. “Now we have no clue where he is.”

I put the crystal into my pocket and grabbed Murphy’s desk phone. “Yet,” I said. I punched in a number and found out that you had to dial nine to get out. I started over, added a nine to the beginning of the number, and it rang.

“Graver,” Vince said.

“It’s Dresden,” I said. “Tell me what he just did, like thirty seconds ago.”

“Be patient,” Vince said, and hung up on me.

I blinked at the phone.

Murphy looked at me for a second and then smiled. “I just love it when I don’t know part of the plan, and the guy who does is all smug and cryptic,” she said. “Don’t you?”

I glowered at her and put the phone down. “He’ll call back.”

“He who?”

“The PI who is following Binder,” I said. “Guy named Vince Graver.”

Murphy’s eyebrows went up. “You’re kidding.”

Rawlins began to chortle, still working on his puzzle.

“What?” I said, looking back and forth between them.

“He was a vice cop in Joliet a couple of years ago,” Murphy said.

“He found out that someone was beating up some of the call girls down there. He looked into it. Word came down to tell him to back off, but he went and caught a Chicago city councilman who liked to pound on his women for foreplay. What’s-his-name.”

“Dornan,” Rawlins supplied.

“Right, Ricardo Dornan,” Murphy said.

“Huh,” I said. “Took some guts.”

“Hell, yeah,” Rawlins said. “And some stupid.”

“It’s a fine line,” Murphy said. “Anyway, he pissed off some people. Next thing he knows, he finds out he volunteered for a transfer to CPD.”

“Three guesses where,” Rawlins said.

“So he resigns,” Murphy said.

“Yeah,” Rawlins said. “Without even giving us a chance to meet him.”

Murphy shook her head. “Went into private practice. There’s a guy who is a glutton for punishment.”

Rawlins grinned.

“He drives a Mercedes,” I said. “Has his own house, too.”

Rawlins put his pencil down and they both looked up at me.

I shrugged. “I’m just saying. He must be doing all right for himself.”

“Hngh,” Rawlins said. Then he picked up his pencil and went back to the puzzle. “Ain’t no justice.”

Murphy grunted with nigh-masculine skill.

A couple of minutes later, the phone rang, and Murphy answered it. She passed it to me.

“Your guy’s a nut,” Vince said.

“I know that,” I told him. “What’s he doing?”

“Took a cab to a motel on the highway north of town,” Vince said.

“Stopped at a convenience store on the way. Then he goes to his room, shaves himself bald, comes out in his skivvies, and jumps in the damn river. Goes back inside, takes a shower

—,

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“I broke into his room while he was doing it,” Vince said. “Maybe you could save your questions until the end of the presentation.”

“Hard to imagine you not fitting in with the cops,” I said.

Vince ignored the comment. “He takes a shower and calls another cab.”

“Tell me you followed the cab,” I said.

“Tell me your check cleared.”

“I’m good for it.”

“Yeah, I’m following the cab right now,” Vince said. “But I don’t need to. He’s headed for the Hotel Sax.”

“Who are you, the Amazing Kreskin?”

“Listened in on the cabbie’s CB,” he said. “ETA, eighteen minutes.”

“Eighteen?” I asked.

“Usually found between seventeen and nineteen,” he said. “I can’t guarantee I can stay on him at the hotel, especially if he tumbles to the tail. Too many ways out.”

“I’ll take it from there. Do not get close to him, man. You get an instinct he’s looking in your direction, run for the hills. This guy’s dangerous.”

“Yeah,” Vince said. “Hell, I’m lucky I haven’t wet my pants already.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are. It’s cute. Seventeen minutes.”

“I’ll be there.”

“With my check. I’ve got a two-day minimum. You know that, right?”

“Right, right,” I said. “I’ll be there.”

“What have we got?” Murphy asked as I put the phone down.

“Binder thinks he shook me,” I said. “He’s headed for a meeting at Hotel Sax.”

She stood up and grabbed her car keys. “How do you know it’s a meeting?”

“Because he’s been made. If he was here alone, he’d be on his way out of town right now.” I nodded. “He’s running back to whoever hired him.”

“Who is that?” Murphy asked.

“Let’s find out.”

Chapter Thirty-two

The Hotel Sax is a pretty good example of its kind in the beating heart of downtown Chicago. It's located on Dearborn, just across the street from the House of Blues, and if you look up while standing outside of the place, it looks like someone slapped one of those fish-eye camera lenses on the sky. Buildings stretch up and up and up, at angles that seem geometrically impossible.

Many similar sections of Chicago have wider streets than you find in other metropolises, and it makes them feel slightly less claustrophobic, but outside of the Sax, the street was barely three narrow lanes across, curb to curb. As Murphy and I approached, looking up made me feel like an ant walking along the bottom of a crack in the sidewalk.

"It bugs you, doesn't it?" Murphy said.

We walked under a streetlight, our shadows briefly equal in length. "What?"

"Those big things looming over you."

"I wouldn't say it bothers me," I said. "I'm just . . . aware of them."

She faced serenely ahead as we walked. "Welcome to my life."

I glanced down at her and snorted quietly.

We entered the lobby of the hotel, a place with a lot of glass and white paint with rich red accents. Given how late it was, it was no surprise only one member of the staff was visible: a young woman who stood behind one of the glass-fronted check-in counters. One guest reading a magazine sat in a nearby chair, and even though he was the only guy in the room, it took me a second glance to realize that he was Vince.

Vince set the magazine aside and ambled over to us. His unremarkable brown eyes scanned over Murphy. He nodded to her and offered me his hand.

I shook it, and offered a check to him with my left as we did. He took it, glanced at it noncommittally, and put it away in a pocket. "He took an elevator to the twelfth floor," Vince said. "He's in room twelve thirty-three."

I blinked at him. "How the hell did you get that? Ride up with him?"

"Good way for me to get hurt. I stayed down here." He shrugged. "You said he was trouble."

"He is. How'd you do it?"

He gave me a bland look. "I'm good at this. You need to know which chair he's in, too?"

"No. That's close enough," I said.

Vince looked at Murphy again, frowned, and then frowned at me. "Jesus," he said. "You two look pretty serious."

"Yeah," I said. "I told you, this guy's dangerous. He have anyone with him?"

"One person," he said. "A woman, I think."

Murphy suddenly smiled.

"How the hell do you know that?" I asked him.

"Room service," she said.

Vince smiled in faint approval at Murphy and nodded his head. "Could have been someone else on twelve who ordered champagne and two glasses two minutes after he got off the elevator. But this late at night, I doubt it." Vince glanced at me. "I'll take the bill I duked the steward out of my fee."

"Appreciated," I said.

He shrugged. "That it?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Vince."

"As long as the check clears," he said, "you're welcome." He nodded to me, to Murphy, and walked out of the hotel.

Murphy eyed me, after Vince left, and smiled. "The mighty Harry Dresden. Subcontracting detective work."

"They're expecting me to be all magicky and stuff," I said. "And I gave them what they expected to see. Binder wouldn't have been looking for someone like Vince."

"You're just annoyed because they pulled that trick on you," Murphy said. "And you're taking your vengeance."

I sniffed. "I like to think of it as symmetry."

"That does make it sound nobler," she said. "We obviously can't just go up there and haul them off somewhere for questioning. What's the plan?"

"Get more information," I said. "I'm gonna listen in and see what they're chatting about."

Murphy nodded, glancing around. "Hotel security is going to have an issue with you lurking about the hallways. I'll go have a word with them."

I nodded. "I'll be on twelve."

"Don't kick down any doors without someone to watch your back," she warned me.

"No kicking at all," I said. "Not until I know enough to kick them where it's going to hurt."

I went up to the twelfth floor, left the elevator, and pulled a can of Silly String out of my duster pocket. I shook it up as I walked down the hallway until I found room twelve thirty-three. Then, without preamble, I blasted a bit of the Silly String at the door. It slithered cheerfully through the air and stuck.

Then I turned and walked back down the hall until I found a door that opened onto a tiny room containing an ice dispenser and a couple of vending machines. I sat down, drew a quick circle around me on the tile floor with a dry-erase marker, and got to work.

I closed the circle with an effort of will, and it sprang up around me in a sudden invisible screen. It wasn't exactly a heavy-duty magical construct, but such a quick circle would still serve perfectly well to seal away external energies and allow me to gather my own and shape it for a specific purpose without interference. I took the Silly String and sprayed a bunch of it into the palm of my left hand so that it mounded up sort of like shaving cream. Then I set the can down, held the mound of Silly String out in front of me, closed my eyes, and gathered my will.

Working magic is all about creating connections. Earlier, I'd taken Binder's hairs to create a link back to him and used it for a tracking spell. I could have done any number of things with that connection, including some that were extremely nasty and dangerous. I'd seen it happen before, generally from the receiving end.

This time, I was creating a link between the Silly String in my hand, and the bit stuck to the door down the hall. They'd both come from the same can, and they'd been part of one distinct amount of liquid when they'd been canned. That meant I would be able to take advantage of that sameness and create a connection between them.

I focused my will on my desired outcome, gathered it all up together, and released it with a murmur of "*Finicus sonitus*." I reached out and smeared away a section of the circle I'd drawn, breaking it, and instantly began feeling a buzzing vibration in the palm of my left hand.

Then I tilted my head far to my right and slapped a bunch of Silly String into my left ear.

"Don't try this at home folks," I muttered. "I'm a professional."

The first thing I heard was hectic-sounding, hyperactive music. A singer was screaming tunelessly and drums were pounding and someone was either playing electric guitars or slowly dipping partially laryngitic cats in boiling oil. None of the supposed musicians appeared to be paying attention to anything anyone else in the band was doing.

"Christ," came Binder's accented voice. "Not even you could dance to that tripe."

There was a low-throated female laugh, and a slurred and very happy-sounding Madeline Raith replied, "This music isn't about skill and precision, my sweet. It's about hunger and passion. And I could dance to it to make your eyes fall out."

"I am not 'your sweet,' " Binder said, his voice annoyed. "I am not your anything, ducks, excepting your contracted employee."

"I'm not sure I'd emphasize that if I were you, Binder," Madeline said. "Since you've been a crushing disappointment as a hireling."

"I told you when I got started that if anyone from the White Council showed up, I couldn't make you any promises," he shot back, his voice annoyed. "And lo and behold, what happens? That bugging lunatic Harry Dresden shows up with backup—and with the support of the local constabulary, to boot."

"I'm getting so sick of this," Madeline said. "He's only one man."

"One bloody member of the White bloody Council," Binder countered. "Bear in mind that someone like him can do everything I can do and considerable besides. And even people

on the bloody Council are nervous about that one."

"Well, I'm sick of him," spat Madeline. "Did you find out where he's got Morgan hidden?"

"Maybe you didn't hear, love, but I spent my day chained to a chair getting popped in the mouth."

Madeline laughed, a cold, mocking sound. "There are places you'd have to pay for that."

"Not bloody likely."

"Did you *find* Morgan?"

Binder growled. "Dresden had him stashed in rental storage for a bit, but he hared off before the cops could pick him up. Probably took him into the Nevernever. They could be anywhere."

“Not if Dresden is back in Chicago,” Madeline said. “He’d never let himself be too far from Morgan.”

“So check his bloody apartment,” Binder said.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Madeline said. “That’s the first place anyone would look. He’s not a total moron.”

Yeah. I wasn’t. Ahem.

Binder snickered. “You’re money, Raith. Money never really gets it.”

Madeline’s voice turned waspish. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That not everyone has a bloody string of mansions around the world that they live in or extra cars that they never really drive or cash enough to not think twice about dropping two hundred bloody dollars on a bottle of forty-dollar room service champagne.”

“So?”

“So, Dresden’s a bloody kid by Council standards. Lives in that crappy little hole. And pays for an office for his business, to boot. He ain’t had a century or two of compounded interest to shore up his accounts, now, has he? And when he set himself up an emergency retreat, did he buy himself a furnished condo in another town? No. He rents out a cruddy little storage unit and stacks some camping gear inside.”

“All right,” Madeline said, her tone impatient. “Suppose you’re right. Suppose he’s got Morgan at his apartment. He won’t have left him unprotected.”

“Naturally not,” Binder replied. “He’ll have a bloody minefield of wards around the place. Might have some conjured guardians or some such as well.”

“Could you get through them?”

“Give me enough time and enough of my lads, and yeah,” he said. “But it wouldn’t be quick, quiet, or clean. There’s a simpler way.”

“Which is?”

“Burn the bloody place down,” Binder said promptly. “The apartment’s got one door. If Morgan comes scurrying out, we bag him. If not, we collect his bones after the ashes cool. Identify him with dental records or something and claim the reward.”

I felt a little bit sick to my stomach. Binder was way too perceptive for my comfort level. The guy might not be overly smart, but he was more than a little cunning. His plan was pretty much exactly the best way to attack my apartment, defensive magicks notwithstanding. What’s more, I knew he was capable of actually doing it. It would kill my elderly neighbors, the other residents of the building, but that wouldn’t slow someone like Binder down for half of a second.

“No,” Madeline said after a tense moment of silence. “I have my instructions. If we can’t take him ourselves, we at least see to it that the Wardens find him.”

“The Wardens *have* found him,” Binder complained. “*Dresden’s* a bloody Warden. Your boss should have paid up already.”

There was a quiet, deadly silence, and then Madeline purred, “You’ve been modestly helpful to him in the past, Binder. But don’t start thinking that you would survive telling him what he should or should not do. The moment you become more annoying than useful, you are a dead man.”

“No sin to want money,” Binder said sullenly. “I did my part to get it.”

“No,” Madeline said. “You lost a fight to one overgrown Boy Scout and one pint-sized mortal woman, got yourself locked up by the *police*, of all the ridiculous things, and missed your chance to earn the reward.” Sheets rustled, and soft footsteps whispered on the carpet. A moment later, a lighter flicked—Madeline smoked.

Binder spoke again, in a tone of voice that indicated he was changing the topic of conversation. “You going to clean that up?”

“That’s exactly why it’s there,” Madeline said. She took a drag and said, “Cleaning up. It’s too bad you didn’t get here five minutes sooner.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I probably would have waited to make the call.”

I felt myself leaning forward slightly and holding my breath.

“What call?” Binder said.

“To the Wardens, naturally,” Madeline said. “I told them that Morgan was in town and that Dresden was sheltering him. They should be here within the hour.”

I felt my mouth drop open and my stomach did a cartwheeling back-flip with an integrated quadruple axle.

Oh, *crap*.

Chapter Thirty-three

Murphy looked at the Rolls and said, “You’re kidding.” We’d driven down to the Sax separately, and she hadn’t seen the wheels I was using. I was parked closer to the hotel, so we were about to get into the Silver Wraith together.

“It’s a loaner,” I said. “Get in.”

“I am not a material girl,” she said, running a hand over the Rolls’s fender. “But . . . damn.”

“Can we focus, here?” I said. “The world’s coming to an end.”

Murphy shook her head and then got in the car with me. “Well. At least you’re going out in style.”

I got the Rolls moving. It got plenty of looks, even in the dead of night, and the other motorists out so late gave it a generous amount of room, as if intimidated by the Wraith’s sheer artistry.

“Actually,” I said, “I’m kind of finding the Rolls to be irrationally comforting.”

Murphy glanced aside at me. “Why’s that?”

“I know how I’m going to die, you know? One of these days, maybe real soon, I’m going to find out I’ve bitten off more than I can chew.” I swallowed. “I mean, I just can’t keep from sticking my nose in places people don’t want it. And I always figured it would be the Council who punched my ticket, regardless of who believed what about me. Because there’s a bunch of assholes there, and I just can’t let them wallow in their own bull and pretend it’s an air of nobility.”

Murphy’s expression became more sober. She listened in silence.

“Now the Council’s coming. And they’ve got good reason to take me out. Or it looks like it to them, which is the same thing.” I swallowed again. My mouth felt dry. “But . . . I

somehow just have the feeling that when I go out . . . it *isn’t* going to be in style.” I gestured at the Rolls with a vague sweep of one hand. “This just isn’t the car I drive to my death. You know?”

Murph’s mouth tucked up at one corner, though most of the smile was in her eyes. She took my hand between hers and held it. Her hands felt very warm. Maybe mine were just cold. “You’re right, of course, Harry.”

“You think?”

“Definitely,” she said. “This car just isn’t you. You’ll die in some badly painted, hideously recycled piece of junk that seems to keep on running despite the laws of physics that say it should be melted scrap by now.”

“Whew,” I said. “I thought I might be the only one who thought that.”

Her fingers tightened on mine for a moment, and I clung back.

The Council was coming.

And there wasn’t anything I could do to fight them.

Oh sure, maybe I could poke someone in the nose and run. But they would catch up to me sooner or later. There would be more of them than me, some of them every bit as strong as I was, and all of them dangerous. It might take a day or a week or a couple of weeks, but I had to sleep sooner or later. They’d wear me down.

And that pissed me off. My sheer helplessness in the face of this whole stupid mess was infuriating.

It wasn’t as if I didn’t have options. . . . Mab still held a job offer open to me, for example. And it was more than possible that Lara Raith might have the resources to shield me, or

broker me a better deal than the Council was going to offer. When I thought of how *unfair* the whole thing was, I had more than a passing desire to grab whatever slender threads I could reach, until I could sort things out, later.

Put that way, it almost sounded reasonable. Noble, even. I would, after all, be protecting other wrongly persecuted victims of the Council who littered the theoretical landscape of the future. It didn’t sound nearly so much like entering bargains that went against everything I believed so that I could forcibly impose my will over those who were against me.

I knew the truth. But just because it was true didn’t make it any less tempting.

What the hell was I going to do? I had a hidey-hole planned out, but it had already been compromised. There was nowhere even a little bit safe I could take Morgan but my

apartment, and the Wardens were *going* to find him there. And on top of all that, I still had no freaking clue as to the identity of our mysterious puppet master.

Maybe it was time to admit it.

This one was too big for me. It had been from the very start.

“Murph,” I said quietly. “I don’t know how I’m going to get out of this.”

Silence filled the beautiful old car.

“When’s the last time you slept?” Murphy asked.

I had to take my hand back from hers to work the clutch. I gestured at my bandaged head. “I can barely remember what day of the week it is. This morning, a couple hours, I think?”

She nodded judiciously. “You know what your problem is?”

I eyed her and then started laughing. Or at least making an amused, wheezing sound. I couldn’t help it.

“Problem, singular,” I choked out, finally. “No, what?”

“You like to come off like you’re the unpredictable chaos factor in any given situation, but at the end of the day you obsess about having everything ordered the way you want it.”

“Have you seen my lab?”

“Again with the inappropriately timed come-ons,” Murphy said. “I’m serious, Harry.”

“I know some people who would really disagree with you. Like what’s-his-face, Peabody.”

“He’s Council?”

“Yeah. Says I have no place in his bastion of order.”

She smirked. “The problem is that *your* bastion of order is sort of tough to coexist with.”

“I have no bastions. I am bastionless.”

“Hah,” Murphy said. “You like the same car, the same apartment, the same restaurant. You like not needing to answer to anyone, and doing the jobs your conscience dictates you should do, without worrying about the broader issues they involve. You hang out, fairly happy without much in the way of material wealth and follow your instincts, and be damned to anyone who tells you otherwise. That’s your order.”

I eyed her. “Is there some other way it should be?”

She rolled her eyes. “I rest my case.”

“And how is this my problem?”

“You’ve never really compromised your order for someone else’s, which is why you drive the Wardens nuts. They have procedures, they have forms, they have reports—and you ignore them unless someone twists your arm to make you do it. Am I right?”

“Still don’t see how that’s a problem.”

She rolled down the passenger-side window and let one hand hang out. “It’s a problem because you never learned how to adjust inside someone else’s order,” she said. “If you had, you’d realize what an incredible force you have working on your side.”

“The A-Team?”

“Bureaucracy,” Murphy said.

“I would rather have the A-Team.”

“Listen and learn, maverick,” Murphy said. “The Wardens are an organization, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Lots of members.”

“Almost three hundred and growing,” I said.

“Lots of members who all have many obligations, who live in different areas, who speak different languages, but who have to communicate and work together somehow?”

“Yeah.”

“Behold,” Murphy said. “Bureaucracy. Organization to combat the entropy that naturally inhibits that kind of cooperative effort.”

“Is there going to be a quiz later, or . . . ?”

She ignored me. “Bureaucracies share common traits—and I think you’ve got more time to move in than you realize. If you weren’t tired and hurting and an obnoxious fly in the ointment to anyone’s order but your own, you’d see that.”

I frowned. "How so?"

"Do you think Madeline Raith called up the White Council on her home phone, identified herself, and just told them you were helping Morgan?" Murphy shook her head. " 'Hello, I'm the enemy. Let me help you for no good reason.' "

I sucked thoughtfully on my lower lip. "The Wardens would probably assume that she was trying to divert their resources during a manpower-critical situation."

Murphy nodded. "And while they will look into it, they'll never really believe it, and it will go straight to the bottom of their priority list."

"So she calls in an anonymous tip instead. So?"

"So how many tips do you think the Wardens have gotten?" Murphy asked. "Cops go through the same thing. Some big flashy crime goes down and we have a dozen nuts claiming credit or convinced their neighbor did it, another dozen jerks who want to get their neighbor in trouble, and three times that many well-meaning people who have no clue whatsoever and think they're helping."

I chewed on that thought for a moment. Murphy wasn't far off the mark. There were plenty of organizations and Lord only knew how many individuals who would want to stay on the Wardens' good side, or who would want to impress them, or who would simply want to have a real reason to interact with them. Murph was probably right. There probably were tips flooding in from all over the world.

"They'll check the tip out," Murphy said. "But I'm willing to bet you real money that, depending on their manpower issues, it won't happen until several hours after the tip actually makes it into the hands of the folks running the show—and with any luck, given the Council's issues with technology and communication, *that* will take a while as well."

I mulled that one over for a minute. "What are you saying?"

She put her hand on my arm and squeezed once. "I'm saying don't give up yet. There's still a little time."

I turned my head and studied Murphy's profile for a moment.

"Really?" I asked her quietly.

She nodded. "Yeah."

Like "love," "hope" is one of those ridiculously disproportional words that by all rights should be a lot longer.

I resettled my grip on the Rolls's steering wheel. "Murph?"

"Mmm?"

"You're one hell of a dame."

"Sexist pig," she said. She smiled out the windshield. "Don't make me hurt you."

"Yeah," I said. "It wouldn't be ladylike."

She shook her head as we neared my apartment. "If you like," she said, "take him to my place. You can hide out there."

I didn't actually smile, but her words made me feel like doing it. "Not this time. The Wardens know where you live, remember? If they start looking hard at me . . ."

" . . . they'll check me out, too," Murphy said. "But you can't keep him at your place."

"I know that. I also know that I can't drag anyone else into the middle of this clust—this mess."

"There's got to be somewhere," she said. "Someplace quiet. And not well-known. And away from crowds." She paused. "And where you can protect him from tracking magic. And where you'd have the advantage, if it did come to a fight."

I didn't say anything.

"Okay," Murphy said. "I guess maybe there aren't any places like that around here."

I snapped my head up straight.

"Hell's bells!" I breathed. I felt a grin stretch my mouth. "I think maybe there *is*!"

Chapter Thirty-four

I came through my apartment door, took one look around the candlelit place, and half shouted, “Hell’s bells! What is *wrong* with you people!?”

Morgan sat slumped against the wall with the fireplace, and fresh spots of blood showed through his bandages. His eyes were only partly open. His hand lay on the floor beside him, limp, the fingers half curled. A tiny little semiautomatic pistol lay on the floor beneath his hand. It wasn’t mine. I have no idea where he’d been hiding it.

Molly was on the floor in front of the sofa, with Mouse literally sitting on her back. She was heaving breaths in and out, making the big dog rise and settle slightly as she did.

Luccio lay where I’d left her on the couch, flat on her back, her eyes closed, obviously still unconscious. Mouse had one of his paws resting lightly on her sternum. Given the nature of her recent injury, it seemed obvious that he would need to exert minimal pressure on her to immobilize her with pain, should she awaken.

The air smelled of cordite. Mouse’s fur, all down his left foreleg, was matted and caked with blood.

When I saw that, I rounded on Morgan in a fury, and if Murphy hadn’t stepped forward and grabbed my arm with both hands, I would have started kicking his head flat against my wall. I settled for kicking the gun away instead. If I got a couple of his fingers, too, it didn’t bother me much at the time.

Morgan watched me with dull, hardly conscious eyes.

“I swear,” I snarled. “I swear to God, Morgan, if you don’t explain yourself I’m going to strangle you dead with my own hands and drag your corpse back to Edinburgh by the balls.”

“Harry!” Murphy shouted, and I realized that she had positioned her entire body between me and Morgan and she was leaning against me like a soldier struggling to raise a flag.

Morgan bared his teeth, more rictus than smile. “Your warlock,” he said, his voice dry and leathery, “was trying to enter Captain Luccio’s mind against her will.”

I surged forward, and Murphy pushed me back again. I weighed twice what she did, but she had good leverage and focus. “And so you *shot* my *dog*?” I screamed.

“He interposed himself,” Morgan said. He coughed, weakly, and closed his eyes, his face turning greyer. “Never meant . . . to hit . . .”

“I swear to God,” I snarled, “that’s it. That is *it*. Molly and I are going right to the wall for you, and this is how you repay us? I am pushing your paranoid ass out my door, leaving you there, and starting a pool on who comes for you first—the Black Council, the Wardens, or the goddamn buzzards.”

“H-*Harry*,” Molly said in a weak, nauseated, and . . . *shamed* voice barely more than a whisper.

I felt my anger abruptly drain away, to be replaced by a wave of denial and a slowly dawning sense of horror. I turned, slowly, to look at Molly.

“He was right,” she wheezed, not looking at me, struggling to speak over the burden of Mouse’s weight. I could hear the tears reflected in her voice as they began to fall. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Harry. He was right.”

I leaned my shoulders back against the wall and watched as Mouse looked at me with grave, pained eyes and stayed right where he was—both holding Molly down and shielding her body with his.

We got Morgan put back into bed, and then I went over to Mouse. “Okay,” I said. “Move.”

Only then did Mouse remove himself from Molly’s back, limping heavily to one side. I knelt down by him and examined his leg. He flattened his ears and leaned away from me. I said firmly, “Stop that. Hold still.”

Mouse sighed and looked miserable, but he let me poke at his leg. I found the wound, up near his shoulder, and a hard lump under the skin.

“Get up,” I said to Molly, my tone steady. “Go to the lab. Get the medical kit under the table. Then get the little scissors and a fresh razor from the cabinet in my bathroom.”

She pushed herself up slowly.

“Move,” I said, my voice quiet and level and unyielding.

She was obviously still recovering from being pinned to the floor. But she moved quicker, and staggered down to my lab.

Murphy knelt down next to me and ruffled Mouse’s ears. He gave her a miserable look. She held up Morgan’s gun. “Twenty-five caliber,” she said. “Big as he is, wouldn’t have been easy to kill him with it, even on purpose.” She shook her head. “Or Molly, for that matter.”

“Meaning what?” I asked her.

“Meaning maybe Morgan didn’t intend the attack to be lethal. Maybe he used the smaller weapon for that reason.”

“He used the smaller weapon because it was the only one he had,” I said, my voice harsh. “He’d have killed Molly if he could have.”

Murphy was quiet for a moment before she said, “That’s attempted murder.”

I glanced up at her for a second. Then I said, “You want to arrest him.”

“It isn’t an issue of what I want,” she said. “I’m an officer of the law, Harry.”

I thought about that for a moment. “The Council might—they *might*—respect it,” I said quietly. “In fact, I’m certain they would. It would be the Merlin’s call, and he’d love nothing better than to buy more time to work out how to get Morgan out of this mess.”

“But others wouldn’t,” she said.

“Madeline and Shagnasty sure wouldn’t,” I said. “And if Morgan’s in jail, there’s no way to force Shagnasty into a confrontation where I have a chance to take Thomas back.” I looked at Molly’s wound. “Or trade him.”

“You’d do that?” she asked.

“Morgan? For Thomas?” I shook my head. “I . . . Hell’s bells, it would make a mess. The Council would go berserk. But . . .”

But Thomas is my brother. I didn’t say it. I didn’t need to. Murphy nodded.

Molly reappeared with the things I’d sent her for, plus a bowl and a pair of needle-nose pliers. Smart girl. She poured rubbing alcohol into a bowl and started sterilizing the suture needle, the thread, the scalpel, and the pliers. Her hands moved like they knew what they were doing without need for her to consciously direct them. That probably shouldn’t have surprised me. Michael and Charity Carpenter’s eldest daughter had probably been taught to deal with injuries since the time she was physically large enough to do so.

“Mouse,” I said. “There’s a bullet inside you. Do you know what that is? The thing that a gun shoots that hurts?”

Mouse looked at me uncertainly. He was shaking.

I put my hand on his head and spoke steadily. “We’ve got to take it out of you or it could kill you. It’s going to hurt, a lot. But I promise you that it won’t take long and that you’re going to be all right. I’ll protect you. Okay?”

Mouse made a very soft noise that only the ungracious would have called a whine. He leaned his head against my hand, trembled, and then very slowly licked my hand, once.

I smiled at him and leaned my head against his for a second. “It will be all right. Lie down, boy.”

Mouse did, stretching slowly, carefully out on his side, the wounded shoulder up.

“Here, Harry,” Molly said quietly, gesturing at the tools.

I looked at her, my face hard. “You’re doing it.”

She blinked at me. “What? But what I did . . . I don’t even—”

“!? !? Mouse just took a bullet for you, Miss Carpenter,” I said, my words precise. “He wasn’t thinking of himself when he did it. He was putting his life at risk to protect you. If you want to remain my apprentice, you will stop saying sentences that begin with ‘I’ and repay his courage by easing his pain.”

Her face went white. “Harry . . .”

I ignored her and moved around to kneel by Mouse’s head, holding him down gently, stroking my hands over his thick fur.

My apprentice looked from me to Murphy, her expression uncertain. Sergeant Murphy stared back at her with calm cop eyes, and Molly averted her gaze hurriedly. She looked from her own hands to Mouse, and started crying.

Then she got up, went to the kitchen sink, and put a pot of water on the stove to boil. She washed her hands carefully, all the way to the elbow. Then she came back with the water, took a deep breath, and settled down beside the wounded dog, taking up the instruments.

She cut and shaved the area around the injury first, making Mouse flinch and quiver several times. I saw her cringe at each pained movement from the dog. But her hands stayed steady. She had to widen the tear in the dog’s flesh with the scalpel. Mouse actually cried out when the knife cut him, and she closed her eyes tight for a long count of three before she went back to work. She slid the pliers into the shallow injury and pulled out the bullet. It was a tiny thing, smaller than the nail on the end of my pinky, a distorted, oblong bit of shiny metal. Mouse groaned as she tugged it free.

She cleaned the site of the wound again, using the boiled water and disinfectant. Mouse flinched and cried out when she did so—the most agonized sound I had ever heard him make. “I’m sorry,” Molly said, blinking tears out of the way. “I’m sorry.”

The injury was big enough to need a trio of stitches. Molly did them as swiftly as she possibly could, drawing more shudders of pain from Mouse. Then she cleaned the site again and covered it with a small pad that she cut to the proper size, affixing it to the bare-shaved skin around the injury with medical tape.

“There,” she said quietly. She leaned down and buried her face in the thick ruff of fur around Mouse’s throat. “There. You’ll be all right.”

Mouse moved very gingerly, moving his head to nudge against her hand. His tail thumped several times on the floor.

“Murph,” I said. “Give us a minute?”

“Sure,” she said quietly. “I need to make a call anyway.” She nodded to me and walked quietly to the apartment door—pointedly pausing to close the door from the living room to my small bedroom, shutting Morgan out of the conversation.

I sat with Mouse, stroking his head gently. “Okay,” I said to Molly. “What happened?”

She sat up and looked at me. She looked like she wanted to throw up. Her nose was running, now.

“I . . . it occurred to me, Harry, that . . . well, if the traitor wanted to really set the Council at one another’s throats, the best way to do it would be to force one of them to do something unforgivable. Like, maybe force Morgan to kill Wizard LaFortier.”

“Gee,” I said. “That never once occurred to me, though I am older and wiser than you and have been doing this for most of your life, whereas you’ve been in the business for just under four years.”

She flushed. “Yes. Well. Then I thought that the best way to use that sort of influence wouldn’t be to use it on Morgan,” she said. “But on the people who would be after him.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Okay,” I said. “At this point, I have to ask you if you know how difficult it is to manipulate the mind and will of anyone of significant age. Most wizards who are eighty or a hundred years old are generally considered more or less immune to that kind of gross manipulation.”

“I didn’t know that,” Molly said humbly. “But . . . what I’m talking about wouldn’t be a severe alteration to anyone. It wouldn’t be obvious,” she said. “You wouldn’t make someone turn into a raving lunatic and murderer. I mean, that’s sort of noticeable. Instead, you make sure that you just . . . sort of nudge the people who are chasing after Morgan into being a little bit more like you want them to be.”

I narrowed my eyes. It was an interesting line of thought. “Such as?”

“Well . . .” she said. “If someone is naturally quick to anger and prone to fighting, you highlight that part of their personality. You give it more importance than it would have without intervention. If someone is prone to maneuvering politically to take advantage of a situation, you bring that to the forefront of their personality. If someone is nursing a grudge, you shine a spotlight on it in their thoughts, their emotions, to get them to act on it.”

I thought about that one for a second.

“It’s how I’d do it,” Molly said quietly, lowering her eyes.

I looked at the young woman I’d been teaching. When I saw Molly, I always saw her smile, her sense of humor, her youth, and her joy. She was the daughter of a close friend. I knew her family and was often a guest in their home. I saw my apprentice, the effort she put into learning, her frustrations, and her triumphs.

I had never, until that very moment, thought of her as someone who might one day be a very, very scary individual.

I found myself smiling bitterly.

Who was I to throw stones?

“Maybe,” I said finally. “It would be one hell of a difficult thing to prove.”

She nodded. “But if it was going to be used, there’s one person who would without doubt be a target.”

I glanced at Luccio. Her mouth was open slightly as she slept. She was drooling a little. It was ridiculous and adorable.

“Yeah,” Molly said. “But she would never have let me look. You know she wouldn’t have.”

“For good reason,” I said.

Molly’s jaw tensed up for a second. “I know.”

“So you thought you’d look while everyone was unconscious,” I said. “When you wouldn’t get caught.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“You told yourself that you were doing the right thing,” I said. “Just a peek, in and out.”

She closed her eyes. “I was . . . Harry, what if she isn’t being honest with you? What if all this time, she’s been getting close to you because she doesn’t trust you. What if she’s just like Morgan—only a lot better at hiding it?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“No?” She met my eyes. “Whose apprentice was he, Harry? Who *taught* him to be the way he is? Who did he idolize so much that he modeled himself after her?”

I just sat there for a second.

Molly pressed the issue. “Do you honestly think that she *never* knew how Morgan treated you?”

I took a deep breath. Then I said, “Yeah. I think that.”

She shook her head. “You know better.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t.”

“You *should*,” she said fiercely. “I couldn’t take the chance that she would let you go down with Morgan. I had to know.”

I stared at her for a minute. Then I said, in a very quiet voice, “I always know when I’m being tempted to do something very, very wrong. I start sentences with phrases like, ‘I would never, ever do this—but.’ Or ‘I know this is wrong *but*.’ It’s the *but* that tips you off.”

“Harry,” Molly began.

“You broke one of the Laws of Magic, Molly. Willfully. Even though you knew it could cost you your life. Even though you knew that it could also cost mine.” I shook my head and looked away from her. “Hell’s bells, kid. I choose to trust Anastasia Luccio because that’s what people *do*. You don’t *ever* get to know for sure what someone thinks of you. What they really feel inside.”

“But I could—”

“No,” I said gently. “Even psychomancy doesn’t give you everything. We aren’t meant to know what’s going on in there. That’s what talking is for. That’s what trust is for.”

“Harry, I’m sorr—”

I lifted a hand. “Don’t apologize. Maybe I’m the one who let you down. Maybe I should have taught you better.” I petted Mouse’s head gently, looking away from her. “It doesn’t matter at the moment. People have died because I’ve been trying to save Morgan’s life. Thomas might still die. And now, if we *do* manage to save Morgan’s crusty old ass, he’s going to report that you’ve violated your parole. The Council will kill you. And me.”

She stared at me helplessly. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Get caught,” I said quietly. “Jesus Christ, kid. I trusted you.”

She wept more heavily now. Her face was a mess. She bowed her head.

“If Morgan goes down for this,” I said, “there’s going to be trouble like you wouldn’t believe. And even more people are going to die.” I stood up slowly. “So. I’m going to do everything in my power to save him.”

She nodded without looking up.

“So you’ve got a choice to make, grasshopper. You can come with me, knowing the cost if we succeed. Or you can go.”

“Go?” she whispered.

“Go,” I said. “Leave now. Run, for as long as you can. Hell, it looks a lot like I’m going to get myself killed anyway. Probably Morgan, too. In that case, things will go to hell, but the Wardens will be way too busy to chase you. You’ll be able to ignore what’s right all you want, do whatever you like—as long as you don’t get caught.”

She pressed her arms against her stomach. She sounded like she was about to throw up, through the sobs.

I put a hand on her head and said, “Or you can come with me. You can do something right. Something that has meaning.”

She looked up at me, her lovely young face discolored in anguish.

“Everyone dies, honey,” I said, very quietly. “Everyone. There’s no ‘if.’ There’s only ‘when.’ ” I let that sink in for a moment. “*When* you die, do you want to feel ashamed of what you’ve done with your life? Feel ashamed of what your life meant?”

She stared at my eyes for a minute and a half of silence broken only by the sound of her muted weeping. Then her head twitched in a single tiny shake.

“I promise that I’ll be beside you,” I said. “I can’t promise anything else. Only that I’ll stand beside you for as long as I can.”

“Okay,” she whispered. She leaned against me.

I put my hand on her hair for a minute. Then I said gently, “We’re out of time. The Wardens will know Morgan is in Chicago within a few hours at most. They might be on their way already.”

“Okay,” she said. “Wh-what are we going to do?”

I took a deep breath. “Among other things, I’m going to attempt a sanctum invocation,” I said.

Her eyes widened. “But . . . you said that kind of thing was dangerous. That only a fool would take such a chance.”

"I agreed to help Donald freaking Morgan when he showed up at my door," I sighed. "I qualify."
She wiped at her eyes and nose. "What do I do?"
"Get my ritual box. Put it in the car Murphy's cuddling up with outside."
"Okay," Molly said. She turned away but then paused and looked back over her shoulder at me. "Harry?"
"Yeah?"
"I know it was wrong, but . . ."
I looked at her sharply and frowned.

She shook her head and held up her hands. "Hear me out. I know it was wrong, and I didn't get much of a look but . . . I swear to you. I think someone *has* tampered with Captain Luccio. I'd bet my life on it."

I ignored the little chill that danced down my spine.
"Could be that you have," I said quietly. "And mine, too. Go get the box."
Molly hurried to comply.

I waited until she was outside to look at Mouse. The big dog sat up, his eyes gravely concerned. He wasn't favoring his shoulder at all, and his movement was completely unimpaired. Mouse got hit by the driver of a minivan once. He got back up, ran it down, and returned the favor. The Foo dog was very, very tough. I doubted he'd really needed the medical attention to recover, though I was also sure it would help speed things along. But I hadn't been completely certain the injury wasn't as serious as it looked.
In other words, the freaking dog had fooled Molly and me both.

"You were *acting*?" I said. "To make it hit Molly harder?"

His tail wagged back and forth proudly.
"Damn," I said, impressed. "Maybe I should have named you Denzel."
His jaws opened in a doggy grin.

"Earlier tonight," I said, "when I was trying to figure out how to find Thomas, you interrupted me. I didn't think about it before now, but you helped him track me down when Madrigal Raith was auctioning me off on eBay."

His tail wagged harder.
"Could you find Thomas?"

"Woof," he said, and his front paws bounced a couple of inches off the floor.
I nodded slowly, thinking. Then I said, "I've got another mission for you. One that could be more important. You game?"
He shook his fur out and padded to the door. Then he stopped and looked back over his shoulder at me.
"Okay," I told him, walking to the door myself. "Listen up. Things are about to get sort of risky."

Chapter Thirty-five

I looked at Luccio's still-unconscious form. The stress of coordinating the search for Morgan for who knows how long before he showed up, coupled with the pains of her injuries and the sedative effect of the painkillers I'd given her, meant that she'd never stirred. Not when the gun went off, not when we'd been talking, and not when we'd all had to work together to get Morgan back up the stairs and out to the silver Rolls.

I made sure she was covered with a blanket. The moment I did, Mister descended from his perch atop one of my bookcases, and draped himself languidly over her lower legs, purring.

I scratched my cat's ears and said, "Keep her company."

He gave me an inscrutable look that said maybe he would and maybe he wouldn't. Mister was a cat, and cats generally considered it the obligation of the universe to provide shelter, sustenance, and amusement as required. I think Mister considered it beneath his dignity to plan for the future.

I got a pen and paper and wrote.

Anastasia,

I'm running out of time, and visitors are on the way. I'm going someplace where I might be able to create new options. You'll understand shortly.

I'm sorry I didn't bring you, too. In your condition, you'd be of limited assistance. I know you don't like it, but you also know that I'm right.

Help yourself to whatever you need. I hope that we'll talk soon.

Harry

I folded the note and left it on the coffee table, where she'd see it upon waking. Then I bent over, kissed her hair, and left her sleeping safe in my home.

I parked the Rolls in the lot next to the marina. If we hurried, we could still get there before the witching hour, which would be the best time to try the invocation. Granted, trying it while injured and weary with absolutely no preritual work was probably going to detract more than enough from the ritual to offset the premium timing, but I was beggared for time and therefore not spoiling for choice.

"Allow me to reiterate," Murphy said, "that I feel that this is a bad idea."

"So noted," I said. "But will you do it?"

She stared out the Rolls's windshield at the vast expanse of Lake Michigan, a simple and enormous blackness against the lights of Chicago. "Yes," she said.

"If there was anything else you could do," I said, "I'd ask you to do it. I swear."

"I know," she said. "It just pisses me off that there's nothing more I can add."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, you're going to be in danger, too. Someone might decide to come by and try to use you against me. And if word gets back to the Council about how much you know, they're going to blow a gasket."

She smiled a bit. "Yes, thank you. I feel less left out now that I know someone might kill me anyway." She shifted, settling her gun's shoulder harness a little more comfortably. "I am

aware of my limits. That isn't the same thing as *liking* them." She looked back at me. "How are you going to reach the others?"

"I'd . . . really rather not say. The less you know—"

"The safer I am?"

"No, actually," I said. "The less you know, the safer *I* am. Don't forget that we might be dealing with people who can take information out of your head, whether you want to give it or not."

Murphy folded her arms and shivered. "I hate feeling helpless."

"Yeah," I said, "me, too. How's he doing, Molly?"

"Still asleep," Molly reported from the back of the limo. "I don't think his fever is any higher, though." She reached out and touched Morgan's forehead with the back of one hand.

Morgan's arm rose up and sharply slapped her arm away at the wrist, though he never changed the pace of his breathing or otherwise stirred. Christ. It was literally a reflex action. I shook my head and said, "Let's move, people."

Molly and I wrestled the wounded Warden into his wheelchair again. He roused enough to help a little, and sagged back into sleep as soon as he was seated. Molly slung the strap of my ritual box over her shoulder and started pushing Morgan across the parking lot to the marina docks. I grabbed a couple of heavy black nylon bags.

"And what do we have in there?" Murphy asked me.

"Party favors," I said.

"You're having a party out there?"

I turned my eyes to the east and stared out over the lake. You couldn't see the island from Chicago, even on a clear day, but I knew it was there, a sullen and threatening presence. "Yeah," I said quietly. A real party. Practically everyone who'd wanted to kill me lately would be there.

Murphy shook her head. "All of this over one man."

"Over a hero of the Council," I said quietly. "Over the most feared man on the Wardens. Morgan nearly took out the Red King himself—a vampire maybe four thousand years old, surrounded by some disgustingly powerful retainers. If he hadn't bugged out, Morgan would have killed him."

"You almost said something nice about him," Murphy said.

"Not nice," I said. "But I can acknowledge who he is. Morgan has probably saved more lives than you could count, over the years. And he's killed innocents, too. I'm certain of it. He's been the Council's executioner for at least twenty or thirty years. He's obsessive and tactless and ruthless and prejudiced. He hates with a holy passion. He's a big, ugly, vicious attack dog."

Murphy smiled faintly. "But he's your attack dog."

"He's our attack dog," I echoed. "He'd give his life without hesitation if he thought it was necessary."

Murphy watched Molly pushing Morgan down the dock. "God. It's got to be awful, to know that you're capable of disregarding life so completely. Someone else's, yours, doesn't really matter which. To know that you're so readily capable of taking everything away from a human being. That's got to eat away at him."

"For so long there's not a lot left, maybe," I said. "I think you're right about the killer acting in desperation. This situation got way too confused and complicated for it to be a scheme. It's just . . . a big confluence of all kinds of chickens coming home to roost."

"Maybe that will make it simpler to resolve."

"World War One was kind of the same deal," I said. "But then, it was sort of hard to point a finger at any one person and say, 'That guy did it.' World War Two was simpler, that way."

"You've been operating under the assumption that there is someone to blame," Murphy said.

"Only if I can catch him." I shook my head. "If I can't . . . well."

Murphy turned to me. She reached up with both hands, put them on the sides of my head, and pulled me down a little. Then she kissed my forehead and my mouth, neither quickly nor with passion. Then she let me go and looked up at me, her eyes worried and calm. "You know that I love you, Harry. You're a good man. A good friend."

I gave her a lopsided smile. "Don't go all gushy on me, Murph." She shook her head. "I'm serious. Don't get yourself killed. Kick whatsoever ass you need to in order to make that happen." She looked down. "My world would be a scarier place without you in it."

I chewed my lip for a second, feeling very awkward. Then I said, "I'd rather have you covering my back than anyone in the world, Karrin." I cleared my throat. "You might be the best friend I've ever had."

She blinked quickly several times and shook her head. "Okay. This is going somewhere awkward."

"Maybe we should take it from 'whatsoever ass,' " I suggested.

She nodded. "Find him. Kick his ass."

"That is the plan," I confirmed. Then I bent down and kissed her forehead and her mouth, gently, and leaned my forehead against hers. "Love you, too," I whispered.

Her voice tightened. "You jerk. Good luck."

"You, too," I said. "Keys are in the ignition."

Then I straightened, hitched up the heavy bags, and stalked toward the docks. I didn't look at her as I walked away, and I didn't look back.

That way, we could both pretend that I hadn't seen her crying.

My brother owned an ancient battered commercial fishing boat. He told me it was a trawler. Or maybe he said troller. Or schooner. It was one of those—unless it wasn't. Apparently, nautical types get real specific and fussy about the fine distinctions that categorize the various vessels—but since I'm not nautical, I don't lose much sleep over the misuse of the proper term.

The boat is forty-two feet long and could have been a stunt double for Quint's fishing boat in *Jaws*. It desperately needed a paint job, as the white of its hull had long since faded to grey and smoke-smudged black. The only fresh paint on it was a row of letters on the bow that read *Water Beetle*.

Getting Morgan on board was a pain—literally, in his case. We got him settled onto the bed in the little cabin and brought all the gear aboard. After that, I climbed up onto the bridge, started the engines with my copy of the *Water Beetle*'s key, and immediately realized I hadn't cast off the lines. I had to go back down to the deck to untie us from the dock.

Look, I just told you—I'm not nautical.

Leaving the marina wasn't hard. Thomas had a spot that was very near the open waters of the lake. I almost forgot to flick on the lights, but got them clicked on before we got out of the marina and onto the open water. Then I checked the compass next to the boat's wheel, turned us a degree or two south of due east, and opened up the engine.

We started out over the blackness of the lake, the boat's engines making a rather subdued, throaty *lub lub dub lub* sound. The boat had originally been built for charter use in the open sea, and it had some muscle. The water was calm tonight, and the ride remained smooth as we rapidly built up speed.

I felt a little nervous about the trip. Over the past year, Thomas and I had gone out to the island several times so that I could explore the place. He'd been teaching me how to handle the boat, but this was my first solo voyage.

After a few minutes, Molly came partway up the short ladder to the bridge and stopped. "Do I need to ask permission to come up there or something?"

"Why would you?" I asked.

She considered. "It's what they do on *Star Trek*?"

"Good point," I said. "Permission granted, Ensign."

"Aye aye," she said, and came up to stand next to me. She frowned at the darkness to the east, and cast a wary glance back at the rapidly fading lights of the city. "So. We're going out to the weird island, the one with that big ley line running through it?"

"Yep," I said.

"Where my dad got . . ."

I tried not to remember how badly Michael Carpenter had suffered when he had gone there with me. "Crippled," I said. "Yeah."

She frowned quietly. "I heard him talking to my mom about the island. But when I tried to go look it up, I couldn't find it on any of the maps. Not even in the libraries."

"Yeah," I said. "From what I hear, bad things happened to everyone who went out there. There used to be some kind of port facility for fishing and merchant traffic, big as a small town, but it was abandoned. Sometime in the nineteenth century, the city completely expunged the place from its records."

"Why?"

"Didn't want anyone to go out there," I said. "If they merely passed a law, they knew that sooner or later some moron would go there out of sheer contrariness. So they pretty much unmade the place, at least officially."

"And in more than a century, no one's ever seen it?"

"That dark ley line puts off a big field of energy," I said. "It makes people nervous. Not insane or anything, but it's enough to make them subconsciously avoid the place, if they aren't making a specific effort to get there. Plus, there are stone reefs around a big portion of the island, and people tend to swing wide around it."

She frowned. "Couldn't that be a problem for us?"

"I'm pretty sure I know where to get through them."

"Pretty sure?"

"Pretty sure."

Maybe she looked a little paler. "Oh," she said. "Good. And we're going there why?"

"The sanctum invocation," I said. "The island has a kind of spirit to it, an awareness."

"A *genius loci*," she said.

I nodded approval. "Exactly that. And fed by that ley line, it's a big, strong one. It doesn't much care for visitors, either. It's arranged to kill a bunch of them."

Molly blinked. "And you want to do a *sanctum invocation*? *There*?"

"Oh, hell no," I said. "I don't *want* to. But I've got to find some way to give myself an edge tomorrow, or it's all over but the crying."

She shook her head slowly. Then she fell silent until we actually reached the island a little while later. It was dark, but I had enough moonlight and starlight to find the buoy Thomas

and I had placed at the entry through the reef. I swung the *Water Beetle* through it, and began following the coastline of the island until I passed a second buoy and guided the boat into the small floating dock we'd constructed. I managed to get the vessel next to the dock without breaking anything, and hopped off with lines in hand to tie it off.

I looked up to find Molly holding my ritual box. She passed it to me and I nodded to her. "If this works, it should take me an hour or so," I told her. "Stay with Morgan. If I'm not back by dawn, untie the boat, start the engine, and drive it back to the marina. It's not too different from a car, for what you'll be doing."

She bit her lip and nodded. "What then?" she asked.

"Get to your dad. Tell him I said that you need to disappear. He'll know what to do."

"What about you?" she asked. "What will you be doing?"

I slipped the strap to the ritual box over one shoulder, took up my staff, and started toward the interior of the island.

"Not much," I said over my shoulder. "I'll be dead."

Chapter Thirty-six

Grimm’s fairy tales, a compilation of the most widely known scary stories of Western Europe, darn near always feature a forest as the setting. Monstrous and terrifying things live there. When the hero of a given story sets out, the forest is a place of danger, a stronghold of darkness—and there’s a good reason for it.

It can be freaking frightening to be walking a forest in the dark. And if that isn’t enough, it’s dangerous, to boot.

You can’t see much. There are sounds around you, from the sigh of wind in the trees to the rustle of brush caused by a moving animal. Invisible things touch you suddenly and without warning—tree branches, spiderwebs, leaves, brush. The ground shifts and changes constantly, forcing you to compensate with every step as the earth below you rises or dips suddenly. Stones trip up your feet. So do ground-hugging vines, thorns, branches, and roots. The dark conceals sinkholes, embankments, and the edges of rock shelves that might drop you six inches or six feet.

In stories, you read about characters running through a forest at night. It’s a load of crap. Oh, maybe it’s feasible in really ancient pine forests, where the ground is mostly clear, or in those vast oak forests where they love to shoot Robin Hood movies and adaptations of Shakespeare’s work. But if you get into the thick native brush in the U.S., you’re better off finding a big stick and breaking your own ankle than you are trying to sprint through it blind.

I made my way cautiously uphill, passing through the ramshackle, decaying old buildings of what had been a tiny town, just up the slope from the dock. The trees had reclaimed it long since, growing up through floors and out broken old windows.

There were deer on the island, though God knows how they got there. It’s big enough to support quite a few of the beautiful animals. I’d found signs of foxes, raccoons, skunks, and wildcats, plus the usual complement of rabbits, squirrels, and groundhogs. There were a few wild goats there as well, probably descendants of escapees from the former human residents of the island.

I began to sense the hostile presence of the island before I’d gone twenty steps. It began as a low, sourceless anxiety, one I barely noticed against the backdrop of all the perfectly rational anxiety I was carrying. But as I continued up the hill, it got worse, maturing into a fluttery panic that made my heart beat faster and dried out my mouth.

I steeled myself against the psychic pressure, and continued at the same steady pace. If I let it get to me, if I wound up panicking and bolted, I could end up a victim of the normal threats of a forest at night. In fact, that was probably what the island had in mind, so to speak.

I gritted my teeth and continued, while my eyes slowly adjusted to the night, revealing the shapes of trees and rocks and brush, and making it a little easier to move safely.

It was a short hike to the mountain’s summit. The final bit of hill was at an angle better than forty-five degrees, and the only way one could climb it safely was to use the old steps that had been carved into the rock face. They had felt weirdly familiar and comfortable the first time I went up them. That hadn’t changed noticeably in subsequent visits. Even now, I could go up them in the dark, my legs and feet automatically adjusting to the slightly irregular spacing of the steps, without needing to consult my eyes.

Once at the top of the stairs, I found myself on a bald crown of a hilltop. A tower stood there, an old lighthouse made of stone. Well, about three-quarters of it stood there, anyway. Some of it had collapsed, and the stones had been cannibalized and used to construct a small cottage at the foot of the tower.

The silent presence of the island was stronger here, a brooding and dangerous thing that did not care for visitors.

I looked around the moonlit hilltop, nodded once, marched over to the flat area in front of the cottage and planted my ritual box firmly on the ground.

What I was about to attempt had its beginnings in ancient shamanic practice. A given tribe’s shaman or wise one or spirit caller or whatever would set out into the wild near home and seek out a place of presence and power, such as this one. Depending on the culture involved, the practitioner would then invoke the spirit of the place and draw its full attention. The ritual that happened next wasn’t quite an introduction, or a challenge, or a staking of a claim on the land, or a battle of wills, but it incorporated elements of all of those things. If the ritual was

successful, it would form a sort of partnership or peerage between the shaman and the *genius loci* in question.

If it wasn’t successful, well . . . It’s a bad thing to have the full attention of a dangerous spirit that can exert control over the environment around you. *This* spirit, bolstered by the dark energy of the ley line that ran beneath the tower, was more than capable of driving me insane or recycling me into food for its animals and trees.

“And yet here I am about to pop you in the nose,” I muttered. “Am I daring or what?”

I set my staff down and opened the box.

First, the circle. Using a short whisk broom, I quickly cleared dirt and dust from the rock shelf beneath me in an area about three feet across. Then I used a wooden-armed chalk compass, like those used in geometry classrooms, to draw out a perfect circle on the stone in faintly luminescent, glow-in-the-dark chalk. The circle didn’t have to be perfectly round in order to work, but it was a little bit more efficient, and I wanted every advantage I could get.

Next, I got five white candles out of the box, and checked a magnetic compass so that I could align them properly. The compass needle spun wildly and aimlessly. The turbulence of the nearby ley line must have been throwing it off. I put the thing away and sighted on the North Star, setting the candles out at the five points of a pentagram, its tip aligned with due north.

After that, I got out an old and genuine KA-BAR U.S. Marine combat knife, along with a plain silver chalice and a silver former Salvation Army bell with a black wooden handle.

I double-checked each of the objects and the circle, then stepped a few feet away and undressed completely, losing my rings, bracelet, and all my other magical gear except for the silver pentacle amulet around my neck. I didn’t have to do the ritual sky clad, but it reduced the chances of any of the enchantments on my gear causing interference by a small if significant amount.

All the while, the pressure from the island’s awareness kept doubling and redoubling. My head started pounding, which was just lovely in combination with the fresh bumps on it. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Mosquitoes began to whine and buzz around me, and I shuddered to think of the places that were going to get bitten while I did this.

I went to the circle, checked everything again, got a box of matches out of the ritual box, and then knelt down in the circle. Yes, I could have lit them with a spell—but again, that would have left an energy signature on the candles that could potentially interfere. So I did it the old-fashioned way. As I struck the first match and leaned down to light the northernmost candle, a screech owl let out an absolutely alien-sounding cry from so nearby that I almost jumped out of my skin. I barely kept from losing my balance and smudging the circle.

“Cheap shot,” I muttered. Then I lit a fresh match and began again. I lit the five candles, then turned to face the north and reached out to gently touch the chalk circle. A mild effort of will closed it, and the psychic pressure I’d been feeling for the last half hour or more abruptly vanished.

I closed my eyes and began to regulate my breathing, relaxing my muscles group by group, focusing my thoughts on the task at hand. I felt my will begin to gather. Outside my circle, the owl shrieked again. A wildcat let out an earsplitting yowl. A pair of foxes set up a yipping, howling chorale in the brush.

I ignored them until I felt that I had gathered all the strength I could. Then I opened my eyes and picked up the bell. I rang it sharply once, and filled my voice with the power of my will. “I am not some clueless mortal you can frighten away,” I said to the hilltop. “I am magi, one of the Wise, and I am worthy of your respect.”

A wind came rushing up from the lake. The trees muttered and sighed with the force of it, a sound like angry surf, enormous and omnipresent.

I rang the bell again. “Hear me!” I called. “I am magi, one of the Wise, and I know your nature and your strength.”

The wind continued to rise around me, making the candles flicker. With an effort of will, I steadied their flames, and felt the temperature of my body drop a couple of degrees in reaction.

I set the bell down, took up the knife, and drew it along the knuckles of my left hand, opening a thin line in my flesh. Blood welled up immediately. I put the knife down, took up the chalice, and let my blood trickle into the cup.

And as it did, I used the one thing that made me think it was possible—just *possible*—to pull this thing off.

Soulfire.

During a case a little more than a year ago, an archangel had decided to invest in my future. Uriel had replaced the power I’d lost when I resisted the temptations offered me by one of the Fallen. The demon’s Hellfire had been literal hell on wheels for destructive purposes. Soulfire was apparently the angelic equivalent of the same force, the flip side of the coin—fires of creation rather than those of destruction. I hadn’t experimented with it much. Soulfire used my own life force as its source of energy. If I poured too much into any given working, it could kill me.

As the blood dripped down into the chalice, I reached out to the place in my mind where the archangel’s gift resided, and poured soulfire into my blood. Silver-white sparks began to stream from the cuts and accompanied the blood down into the chalice, filling it with supernatural power far in excess of what my blood, a common source of magical energy, contained on its own.

I lifted the chalice in my right hand and the silver bell in my left. Droplets of blood and flickering sparks of soulfire fell on the silver, and when it rang again, the sound was piercing, the tone so perfect and pure that it could have shattered glass.

“Hear me!” I called, and my soulfire-enhanced voice rang out in a similar fashion, sharp and precise, strong and resonant. Small stones fell from a broken section of the tower wall. “I am magi, one of the Wise! I make of my blood this gift to you, to honor your strength and to show my respect! Come forth!” I set the bell down and prepared to break the circle and

release the spell. “Come forth!” I bellowed, even louder. “*COME FORTH!*”

Chapter Thirty-seven

I didn't return to the dock by the same route I'd taken to the tower. There was a much shorter, easier way, down what looked like a sheer rock wall. It proved to have an ancient narrow gully worn into the stone, almost completely hidden by brush. The gully's floor had a thin layer of silt in it, leaving little room for plants to grow, and was as easy to traverse as a sidewalk, even in the dark. Following it brought me back to the island's shoreline in half the time it had taken to go up.

I didn't wonder how I'd known about the path until I stepped out of the woods and saw the dock again. I hadn't been that way before. I hadn't known it existed. Yet when I decided to take that trail, the knowledge had come to me as completely and immediately as if I had lived there for years: pure information.

I paused and looked around me. I knew not to walk directly to the dock from where I stood. There was a large hornet's nest in the earth at the base of a fallen tree, and I would risk arousing their anger if I accidentally crushed it while walking by. I also knew that a grumpy old skunk was trundling its way back to its den, thirty yards in the other direction, and that it would happily douse me with musk if I came anywhere close.

I glanced over my shoulder, back toward the tower, casting out my supernatural senses. The island's awareness continued being that same constant presence I'd felt ever since leaving the tower. I considered going back, taking the old stairs this time, to see what would happen, and immediately I understood that there was a cottonmouth that made its home in a large crack on the twenty-sixth step. If I delayed the trip until later in the morning, the snake would be out on the stones, sun-bathing to build up its body heat for the day.

The dawn was approaching, and the sky had begun to lighten from black to blue. I could see the tower standing, lonely and wounded, but unbowed, a black shape against the sky. Demonreach began to awaken to the first trills of songbirds.

I walked down to the dock, thoughtfully, and walked out to where the *Water Beetle* was moored. "Molly," I called.

Feet pounded on the deck, and Molly burst up out of the ship's cabin. She flew across the distance between us, and nearly tackled me into the water on the far side of the dock with the enthusiasm of her hug. Molly, the daughter of two ferocious warriors, was now a wilting violet. My ribs creaked.

"You came back," she said. "I was so worried. You came back."

"Hey, hey. I need my rib cage, kid," I said, but I hugged her in return for a quiet moment, before straightening.

"Did it work?" she asked.

"I'm not exactly sure. God, I need something to drink." We both boarded the *Water Beetle*, and I went below and removed a can of Coke from a cabinet. It was warm, but it was liquid, and more important, it was Coke. I guzzled the can's contents and tossed it into the trash bin.

"How's Morgan?" I asked.

"Awake," Morgan rumbled. "Where are we?"

"Demonreach," I said. "It's an island in Lake Michigan."

Morgan grunted without emphasis. "Luccio told me about it."

"Oh," I said. "Oh, good."

"Miss Carpenter says you were attempting a sanctum invocation."

"Yeah."

Morgan grunted. "You're here. It worked."

"I think so," I said. "I'm not sure."

"Why not?"

I shook my head. "I thought that when a bond was formed with the land in question, it gave you access to its latent energy."

"Yes."

Which meant that my magic would be subsidized by the island, whenever I was here. I'd get a lot more bang for my buck, so to speak. "I thought that was all it did."

"Generally," Morgan said. I saw him turn his head toward me in the dim cabin. "Why? What else has happened?"

I took a deep breath and told him about the hidden trail, the hornets, and the skunk.

Morgan sat up in his bunk by the time I got to the end. He leaned forward intently. "You're sure you aren't mistaken? Confrontations with a *genius loci* can leave odd aftereffects behind."

"Hang on," I said.

I went back to the woods where I knew the hornets were, and found their nest in short order. I retreated without crushing anything and went back to the boat.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm sure."

Morgan sank back onto the bunk as if he was being slowly deflated. "Merciful God," he said. "Intellectus."

I felt my eyebrows go up. "You're kidding."

Molly muttered a couple of candles to light so that we could see each other clearly. "Intell-whatsis?" she asked me.

"Intellectus," I said. "Um. It's a mode of existence for a very few rare and powerful supernatural beings—angels have it. I'm willing to bet old Mother Winter and Mother Summer

have it. For beings with intellectus, all reality exists in one piece, one place, one moment, and they can look at the whole thing. They don't seek or acquire knowledge. They just *know* things. They see the entire picture."

"I'm not sure I get that," Molly said.

Morgan spoke. "A being with intellectus does not understand, for example, how to derive a complex calculus equation—because it doesn't need the process. If you showed him a problem and an equation, he would simply understand it and skip straight to the answer without need to think through the logical stages of solving the problem."

"It's *omniscient*?" Molly asked, her eyes wide.

Morgan shook his head. "Not the same thing. The being with intellectus has to be focused on something via consideration in order to know it, whereas an omniscient being knows all things at all times."

"Isn't that pretty close?" Molly asked.

"Intellectus wouldn't save you from an assassin's bullet if you didn't know someone wanted to kill you in the first place," I said. "To know it was coming, you'd first need to consider the question of whether or not an assassin might be lurking in a dark doorway or on top of a bell tower."

Morgan grunted agreement. "And since beings of intellectus so rarely understand broader ideas of cause and effect, they can be unlikely to realize that a given event might be an indicator of an upcoming assassination attempt." He turned to me. "Though that's a terrible metaphor, Dresden. Most beings like that are immortal. They'd be hard-pressed to notice bullets, much less feel threatened by them."

"So," Molly said, nodding, "it might be able to know anything it wants to know—but it still has to ask the right questions. Which is always harder than people think it is."

"Yeah," I said. "Exactly."

"And now you've got this intellectus, too?"

I shook my head. "It's Demonreach that has it. It stopped when I got out over the water." I tapped my finger against my forehead. "I've got nothing going on in here at the moment."

I realized what I had said just as the last word left my mouth, and glanced at Morgan.

He lay on the bunk with his eyes closed. His mouth was turned up in small smile. "Too easy."

Molly fought not to grin.

Morgan pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Can the entity feed you any other information, Dresden? The identities of those behind LaFortier's murder, for example."

I almost hit myself in the head with the heel of my hand. I should have thought of that already. "I'll let you know," I said, and went back to the shore.

Demonreach sensed me at the same time as I perceived it, and the mutual sensation felt oddly like a hand wave of acknowledgment. I frowned thoughtfully and looked around the island, concentrating on the issue of LaFortier's killer.

Nothing sprang to mind. I tried half a dozen other things. Who was going to win the next World Series? Could I get the *Blue Beetle* out of impound yet? How many books had Mister knocked off my shelves in my absence?

Zip.

So I thought about hornet's nests, and instantly felt certain that there were thirty-two of them spread around the hundred and fifty or so acres of the island, and that they were especially thick near the grove of apple trees on the island's northern side.
I went back to the boat and reported.

"Then it only exists upon the island itself," Morgun rumbled, "like any other *genius loci*. This one must be bloody ancient to have attained a state of intellectus, even if it is limited to its own shorelines."

"Could be handy," I noted.

Morgan didn't open his eyes but bared his teeth in a wolf's smile. "Certainly. If your foes were considerate enough to come all the way out here to meet you."

"Could be handy," I repeated, firmly.

Morgan arched an eyebrow and gave me a sharp look.

"Come on, grasshopper," I said to Molly. "Cast off the lines. You're about to learn how to drive the boat."

By the time we made it back to the marina, the sun had risen. I coached Molly through the steps of bringing the *Water Beetle* safely into dock, even though I wasn't exactly Horatio Hornblower myself. We managed to do it without breaking or sinking anything, which is what counts. I tied off the boat and went onto the dock. Molly followed me anxiously to the rail.

"No problem here, grasshopper. Take her out for about ten minutes in a random direction that you choose. Then turn off the engine and wait. I'll signal you when I'm ready for you to pick me up."

"Are you sure we shouldn't stay together or something?" she asked anxiously.

I shook my head. "Tracking spells can't home in too well over water," I said. "And you'll know if someone's coming for you from a mile away. Literally. Keep Morgan out there, and you should be as safe as anywhere."

She frowned. "What if he gets worse?"

"Use your noggin, kid. Do whatever you think is most likely to keep you both alive." I started untying the line. "I shouldn't be gone more than a couple of hours. If I don't show, the plan is the same as when I went up to the tower. Get yourself vanished."

She swallowed. "And Morgan?"

"Make him as comfortable as you can and leave him."

She stared at me for a minute. "Really?"

"If I get taken out, I don't think you'll be able to protect him," I said, as matter-of-factly as I could. "Or catch the real bad guy. So run like hell and let him look out for himself."

I saw her think that over. Then she smiled slightly.

"It would really humiliate him if he found himself under the protection of a girl. An apprentice. And a possible warlock, to boot."

I nodded. "True."

Molly pursed her lips thoughtfully. "That might be worth staying for."

"Kid," I said, "the smart thing for you to do if it all goes sour is to run."

"Smart," she said. "But not right."

I studied her soberly. "You sure? Because there's a world of hurt waiting to fall."

She nodded, her face pale. "I'll try."

And she would. I could see that in her eyes. She knew better than most exactly how dangerous such a thing would be for her, and it clearly terrified her. But she would try.

"Then if I'm taken off the board, see Murphy," I said. "She knows everything I do about the case. Listen to her. She's smart, and you can trust her."

"All right," she said.

I tossed the mooring lines back onboard. "Get a move on."

I started walking down the dock. Behind me, Molly called, "Harry? What signal are you going to use?"

"You'll know it," I called back.

I left the docks in search of the tool that could rip apart this tangled web of suspicion, murder, and lies.

I found it in the marina's parking lot.

A pay phone.



Lara answered on the second ring. "Raith."

"Dresden," I said. "What have you got for me?"

"Oh, to have straight lines like that more often," she said, her tone wry. "What makes you think I have anything for you?"

" 'Cause I've got something to trade."

"Men generally seem to think that way. Most of them tend to overestimate the value of their wares."

"Pheromone Lass," I said, "can we have the rest of this conversation above the waistline?"

She let out that rich, throaty laugh of hers, and my hormones sounded the charge. I ignored them. Stupid hormones.

"Very well," she said. "It should interest you to know that the money deposited in Warden Morgan's account came from a dummy corporation called Windfall."

"Dummy organization?" I asked. "Who owns it?"

"I do," she said calmly.

I blinked. "Since you're sharing this information, I take it that it happened without your knowledge."

"You are quite correct," she said. "A Mr. Kevin Aramis is the corporation's manager. He is the only one, other than myself, with the authority to move that much money around."

I thought furiously. Whoever aced LaFortier hadn't just intended the Council to implode. He or they had also gone to a lot of trouble to incite hostility with the White Court.

Hell's bells.

My imagination treated me to a prophetic nightmare. Morgan fights against the injustice of his frame. Hostilities erupt, creating strife between various factions of wizards. The Council eventually runs down the money trail, discovers Lara on the other end, and the Council seizes upon the opportunity to unify the factions again, thanks to a common enemy. Hostilities with the vampires start fresh. The Red Court sees the poorly coordinated Council exposing itself in battle with the White Court, and pounces, breaking the back of the Council. And after that, it would all be over but the heroic last stands.

Hell's bells, indeed.

"We're being played against one another," I said.

"That was my conclusion as well."

A couple more pieces clicked into place. "Madeline," I said. "She got to this Aramis guy and coerced him into betraying you."

"Yes," Lara hissed. Barely suppressed, wholly inhuman rage filled her level, controlled voice. "When I catch up to her, I'm going to tear out her entrails with my bare hands."

Which took care of my hormone problem. I shivered.

I'd seen Lara in action. I could never decide if it had been one of the most beautiful terrifying things I'd ever seen, or if it was one of the most terrifying beautiful things I'd ever seen.

"You might try looking at the Hotel Sax, room twelve thirty-three," I said. "If I'm right, you're going to find Mr. Aramis's body there. Madeline's working for someone, a man. She didn't say anything that would help identify him. You should also know that she has hired the services of a mercenary named Binder. Not exactly a rocket scientist, but smart enough to be dangerous."

Lara was silent for a second. Then she said, "How did you learn this?"

"Shockingly, with magic."

I heard her speaking to someone in the room with her. Then she got back on the phone and said, "If Aramis is dead, Madeline has tied up the loose end in her plan. It will be impossible to provide credible evidence that I did not in fact pay for LaFortier's murder."

"Yeah. That's why she did it."

I heard her make a displeased sound, but it was still ladylike. "What do we intend to do about this, Harry?"

"Do you have a nice dress?"

"Pardon?"

I found myself grinning maniacally. "I'm throwing a party."

Thomas's phone rang four times before the connection opened. There was a moment of silence. Then Thomas spoke, his voice raw and ragged. "Harry?"

My heart just about stopped beating to hear my brother's voice. "Thomas. How's it going?"

"Oh," he rasped. "I'm just hanging around."

I've seen Thomas in agony before. He sounded exactly like this.

The phone emitted random noises, and then the yowl-purring voice of the skinwalker came over the line. "He is here. He is alive. For now. Give me the doomed warrior."

"Okay," I said.

There was a moment of silent consternation from the far end of the line.

"Bring him to me," it said.

"Nah. That isn't going to happen."

"What?"

"You're coming to me."

"Do you wish me to end his life this instant?"

"Frankly, Shaggy, I don't give a damn," I said, forcing boredom into my voice. "It'd be nice to be able to return one of the vampires to his own, get myself a marker I can call in some day. But I don't need it." I paused. "You, on the other hand, need Thomas to be alive, if you expect me to trade Morgan for him. So this is how it's going to go down. At dusk, you will be contacted on this phone. You will be told where our meeting will take place. When you arrive, you will show me the vampire, alive and well, and when he is returned to me, you will take Morgan without contest."

"I am *not* some mortal scum you can command, mageling," Shagnasty seethed.

"No. You're immortal scum."

"You blind, flesh-feeding *worm*," Shagnasty snarled. "Who are you to speak to me so?"

"The worm who's got what you need," I said. "Dusk. Keep the phone handy."

I hung up on him.

My heart hammered against my chest and cold sweat broke out over my upper body. I felt myself shaking with terror for Thomas, with weariness, with reaction to the conversation with Shagnasty. I leaned my aching head against the earpiece of the phone and hoped that I hadn't just ended my brother's life.

One more call.

The White Council of Wizards uses telephone communications like everyone else, albeit with a lot more service calls. I gave headquarters a ring, gave them the countersign to their security challenge, and got patched through to one of the administrative assistants, an earnest young woman not quite finished with her apprenticeship.

"I need to get a message to every member of the Senior Council," I told her.

"Very well, sir," she said. "What is the message?"

"Get this verbatim. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

I cleared my throat and spoke. "Be advised that I have been sheltering Warden Donald Morgan from discovery and capture for the past two days. An informant has come to me with details of how Warden Morgan was framed for the murder of Senior Council Member LaFortier. Warden Morgan is innocent, and what's more, I can prove it.

"I am willing to meet with you tonight, on the uncharted island in Lake Michigan, east of Chicago at sundown. The informant will be present, and will produce testimony that will vindicate Warden Morgan and identify the true culprit of the crime.

"Let me be perfectly clear. I will *not* surrender Warden Morgan to the alleged justice of the Council. Come in peace and we will work things out. But should you come to me looking for a fight, be assured that I will oblige you."

The assistant had started making choking sounds after the very first sentence.

"Then sign it 'Harry Dresden,' " I said.

"Um. Yes, sir. Sh-shall I read that back to you?"

"Please."

She did. I'd heard sounds of movement in the background around her, but as she read aloud, all of those sounds died to silence. When she finished, she asked, in a rather small, squeaky voice, "Do I have that down correctly, sir?"

Murmurs burst out in the background over the phone, excited and low.

"Yeah," I told her. "Perfect."

Chapter Thirty-eight

I figured I had an hour, maybe, before someone was going to show up from Edinburgh. It was time enough to grab a cab and head to the hospital.

Back in the ICU, Will was sacked out in the waiting room and Georgia was the one sitting with Andi. A middle-aged couple who looked as if they hadn't slept much was in there with her. I knocked on the glass. Georgia said something to the couple and rose to come out into the hallway with me. She looked tired but alert, and had her long, rather frizzy hair pulled back into a ponytail.

"Harry," she said, hugging me.

I returned the hug, cutting it off a little early. "How is she?"

Georgia studied me for a second before she answered. "In bad shape. The doctors don't seem to be willing to say whether or not she'll recover."

"Better that way," I said. "If one of them said she'd be fine and then she wasn't..."

Georgia glanced at the couple sitting beside Andi's bed, holding each other's hands. "I know. It would be cruel to offer false hope, but..."

"But you're still irrationally angry that the docs haven't saved her yet. You know better, but you're upset anyway."

She nodded. "Yes. Irrationality is not something I'm comfortable with."

"It isn't irrational," I said. "It's human."

She gave me a small smile. "Will and I talked. And you're in a hurry."

I nodded. "I need you both, and right now."

"I'll get him," Georgia said.

We took Georgia's SUV back down to the marina and arrived with ten minutes to spare on my estimated time window. I definitely wanted to be out over open water by the time members of the Council started showing up. The water wouldn't be a perfect protection from incoming magic, but it would make it a lot harder for anyone to target me solidly, and it was a hell of a lot better than nothing.

"Okay," I said. "You guys wait here for a minute."

Will frowned. "Why?"

"I need to talk to someone who can be a little shy around strangers."

One minute." I hopped out of the SUV and walked down the rows of cars until I found two vans parked together. I slipped between them, put the fingers of one hand to my lips, and let out a sharp whistle.

There was a whirring sound and Toot-toot streaked down from overhead, came to a hover in front of me, drew his little sword, and saluted. "Yes, my liege!"

"Toot, I have two missions for you."

"At once, my lord!"

"No, I want you to do them one at a time."

Toot lowered his sword, his expression crestfallen. "Oh."

"First, I want you to find the boat out on the lake that my apprentice is in. She's not more than a mile or two from shore." I took off my silver pentacle amulet, wrapped the chain around it, and handed it to Toot-toot. "Leave this where she will notice it right away."

Toot accepted the amulet gravely, tucking it under one arm. "It will be done."

"Thank you."

Toot-toot's chest swelled out, and he stood a little bit straighter.

"Second," I told him. "I need to know how many of the little folk you could convince to join the Guard for one night."

He frowned and looked dubious. "I don't know, Lord Harry. The pizza ration is already stretched as far as it can go."

I waved a hand. "The Guard's pay won't change. I'll order extra to pay for the new guys' service. Call them the Za-Lord's Militia. We only need them sometimes. How many do you think would agree to that?"

Toot buzzed in an excited circle. "For *you*? Every sprite and pixie and dewdrop faerie within a hundred miles knows that you saved our kind from being imprisoned by the Lady of the Cold Eyes! There's not a one who didn't have comrade or kin languishing in durance vile!"

I blinked at him. "Oh," I said. "Well. Tell them that there may be great danger. Tell them that if they wish to join the Militia, they must obey orders while they serve. And I will pay them one large pizza for every fourscore volunteers."

"That's less than you pay the Guard, Harry," Toot said smugly.

"Well, they're amateurs, not full-time veterans like you and your men, are they?"

"Yes, my lord!"

I looked at him seriously. "If you can recruit a Militia and if they perform as asked, there's a promotion in it for you, Toot."

His eyes widened. "Does it come with cheese in the crust and extra toppings?"

"It isn't a pizza," I said. "It's a promotion. Get this work done, and from that time forward, you will be..." I paused dramatically. "Major-General Toot-toot Minimus commanding the Za-Lord's Elite."

Toot's body practically convulsed in a spasm of excitement. Had a giant yellow exclamation point suddenly appeared in the air over his head, I would not have been surprised. "A *Major-General*?"

I couldn't resist. "Yes, yes," I said solemnly. "A Major-General."

He let out a whoop of glee and zipped up and down the little space between vans. "What do you wish us to do when I have them, my lord!"

"I want you to play," I said. "Here's what we're going to do..."

I rejoined Will and Georgia, and ten minutes later, the *Water Beetle* came chugging back toward the marina. The grasshopper got my brother's boat into dock with only a mildly violent impact. I secured lines quickly, and Will and Georgia jumped on. Almost before Will's feet were on the deck, I was already untying the lines and following them onto the boat. Molly, for her part, already had the engine in reverse.

"Now what?" she called down to me from the wheel atop the cabin.

"Use the compass on the dashboard. One to two degrees south of due east, and call me when you spot the island."

"Aye aye!"

Will squinted at Molly and then at me. " 'Aye aye'?"

I shook my head sadly. "Landlubbers. I'm going to go shiver timbers or something. I haven't slept in a while."

"Go ahead, Harry," Georgia said. "We'll wake you if anything happens."

I nodded, shambled down to the second bunk, and passed out immediately.

Someone shook me two seconds later and I said, "Go away."

"Sorry, Harry," Will said. "We're here."

I said several uncouth and thoughtless things, then manned up and opened my eyes, always the hardest part of waking up. I sat up, and Will retreated from the cramped cabin with a glance at Morgan's unconscious form. I sat there with my mouth feeling like it had been coated in Turtle Wax. It took me a second to identify a new sound.

Rain.

Raindrops pattered onto the deck of the boat and the roof of the cabin.

I shambled out onto the deck, unconcerned about the rain ruining my leather duster. One handy side effect of going through the painfully precise ritual of enchanting it to withstand

physical force as if it had been plate steel was that the thing was rendered waterproof and stainproof as well—yet it still breathed. Let's see Berman's or Wilson's do *that*.

Sufficiently advanced technology, my ass.

I climbed up to the bridge, keeping an eye on the sky as I did. Lowering clouds of dark grey had covered the sky, and the rain looked to be a long, steady soaker—a rarity in a Chicago summer, which usually went for rough-and-tumble thunderstorms. The heat hadn't let up much, and as a result the air was thick and heavy enough to swim through.

I took the wheel from Molly, oriented myself by use of the compass and the island, now only a few minutes away, and yawned loudly. "Well. This makes things less pleasant."

"The rain?" Molly asked. She passed me my pentacle.

I slipped it back over my head and nodded. "I'd planned on lying off the island until closer to dark."

"Why?"

"Mostly because I just challenged the Senior Council to a brawl there at sundown," I said.

Molly choked on her gun.

I ignored her. "I didn't want to make it easy for them to slip up on me. Oh, and I've arranged to trade Thomas for Morgan with Shagnasty. He won't get word of where to go until later, though. I think otherwise he'd cheat and show up early. He looks like a shifty character."

The pun went past Molly, or maybe she was just that good at ignoring it. "You're trading Morgan for Thomas?"

"Nah. I just want to get Shagnasty out here with Thomas in one piece so that the White Court can take him down."

Molly stared at me. "The White Court, too?"

I nodded happily. "They've got a stake in this as well."

"Um," she said. "Why do you think the Senior Council will take you up on your challenge?"

"Because I told them I was going to be producing an informant who would give testimony about who really killed LaFortier."

"Do you have someone like that?" Molly asked.

I beamed at her. "No."

She stared at me for a moment, clearly thinking. Then she said, "But the killer doesn't know that."

My smile widened. "Why, no, Miss Carpenter. He doesn't. I made sure word got around headquarters of my challenge to the Senior Council. He's got no *choice* but to show up here if there's any chance at all that I might actually have found an informant ready to blow his identity—which, by the way, would also provide substantial proof of the existence of the Black Council."

Her golden brows knitted. "What if there's no chance of such an informant existing?"

I snorted. "Kid, groups like these guys, the ones who maim and kill and scheme and betray—they do what they do because they love power. And when you get people who love power together, they're all holding out a gift in one hand while hiding a dagger behind their back in the other. They regard an exposed back as a justifiable provocation to stick the knife in. The chances that this group has no one in it who might believably have second thoughts and try to back out by bargaining with the Council for a personal profit are less than zero."

Molly shook her head. "So . . . he or she will call in the Black Council to help?"

I shook my head. "I think this is happening because the killer slipped up and exposed himself to LaFortier. He had to take LaFortier out, but with all the security at Edinburgh, there was every chance something could go wrong and it did. Everything else he's done has smacked of desperation. I think that if the Black Council finds out that their mole has screwed up this thoroughly, they'd kill him themselves to keep the trail from leading back to them." I stared at the glowering mass of Demonreach. "His only chance is to tie off any loose ends that might

lead back to him. He'll be here tonight, Molly. And he's *got* to win. He has nothing to lose."

"But you're putting *everyone* together in a confined space, Harry," Molly said. "This is going to be a huge mess."

"Pressure cooker, padawan," I said, nodding. "The perp is already desperate enough to be acting hastily and making mistakes. Especially the mistake of taking things a step too far and trying to incriminate the White Court in LaFortier's death as well."

Molly stared out at the water thoughtfully. "So you put him together in a confined space with two major groups of power who will want to kill him. His worst nightmare has got to be the wizards and the White Court being drawn into a *closer* alliance because of what he's done. And with as much power as they have, there's no way he's going to be able to fight them all."

I smiled at her. "Yeah. It *sucks* to feel helpless," I said. "Especially for a wizard, because we usually aren't. Or at least, we're usually able to convince ourselves that we aren't."

"You think he'll crack," she said.

"I think he'll be there. I think that with enough pressure, something is going to pop loose, somewhere. I think he'll try something stupid. Maybe a preemptive spell, something to take everyone down before they know a fight is on."

"A sneak attack," Molly said. "Which won't be a sneak attack if you know where he is and what he's doing. Intellectus!"

I tapped my temple with a finger. "Capital thinking, grasshopper."

Thunder rumbled far away.

I sighed. "Thomas can sail in bad weather, but I don't know how to do it intelligently. Something like this could turn ugly, fast. We're going to have to head into the dock and take our chances."

I navigated. Sheesh, listen to me, "navigated." The boat had a steering wheel and a lever to make it go faster. It was about as complicated to make move as a bumper car. Granted, simple isn't the same thing as easy, but even so. The actual process of pointing the boat and making it go is not complicated enough to deserve to be called navigation.

I drove the *Water Beetle* around to the safe passage through the reef, and pulled her into the dock, much more smoothly this time. Will was waiting by the rail and ready. He hopped onto the dock and Georgia threw him the mooring lines.

"Don't step onto the land until I get a chance to get there, first!" I called to them. "I want to, ah, sort of introduce you."

Billy gave me an oblique look. "Um. Okay, Harry."

I climbed down from the bridge and was just about to hop to the dock when a tall, slender figure in a black robe, black cape, and black hood appeared from behind a veil, standing at the very end of the dock. He lifted his old rune-carved staff, muttered a word, and then brought it smashing down onto the wooden planks.

A disk of sparkling blue light washed out from the point of impact. I had time, barely, to draw in my will, cross my arms at the wrists, holding them against my chest, and slam will into both my shield bracelet and into strengthening my mental defenses.

Smears of deep blue, purple, and dark green appeared like puffs of smoke where the expanding ring struck Molly, Will, and Georgia, and the three of them simply collapsed, dropping into sprawling heaps on the dock and the deck of the boat. My vision darkened and for an instant I felt unbearably tired—but in a panic I forced more energy into my defenses, and the instant passed.

The robed figure stood staring at me for a few seconds. Then it spoke in a deep voice. "Put the staff down, Dresden." Swirling narcotic colors gathered around his staff, and he pointed it at me like a gun. "It is over."

Chapter Thirty-nine

The rain came down steadily. I risked a glance at the others. They were all down, but breathing. Molly's head, shoulders, and arms hung off the side of the boat. Wet, her sapphire-dyed hair looked like a much darker hue. Each rock of the boat made her hands swing. She was in danger of falling into the water.

I turned back to the cloaked figure and peered at him. Big billowy cloaks and robes are nicely dramatic, especially if you're facing into the wind—but under a calm, soaking rain they just look waterlogged. The outfit clung to the figure, looking rather miserable.

The rain also made the cloth look darker than it was. Looking closer, I could see faint hints of color in the cloth, which wasn't actually black. It was a purple so deep that it was close.

"Wizard Rashid?" I asked.

The Gatekeeper's staff never wavered as he faced me. He lifted a hand and drew back his hood. His face was long and sharp-featured and weathered like old leather. He wore a short beard that was shot through with silver, and his silver hair was short, stiff brush. One of his eyes was dark. The other had a pair of horrible old silver scars running through it, from his hairline down to his jaw. The injury had to have ruined his natural eye. It had been replaced with something that looked like a stainless-steel ball bearing. "Indeed," he said calmly.

"Should have seen it sooner. There aren't many wizards taller than me."

"Lay aside your staff, Wizard Dresden. Before anyone else is hurt."

"I can't do that," I said.

"And I cannot permit you to openly challenge the White Council to battle."

"No?" I asked, thrusting out my jaw. "Why not?"

His deep, resonant voice sounded troubled. "It is not yet your hour."

I felt my eyebrows go up. "Not *yet* . . . ?"

He shook his head. "Places in time. This is not the time, or the place. What you are about to do will cost lives—among them your own. I wish you no harm, young wizard. But if you will not surrender, so be it."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "And if I don't do this, an innocent man is going to die. I don't want to fight you. But I'm not going to stand by and let the Black Council kill Morgan and dance off behind the curtains so that they can do it again in the future."

He tilted his head slightly. "Black Council?"

"Whatever you want to call them," I said. "The people the traitor is working for. The ones who keep trying to stir up trouble between the powers. Who keep changing things."

The Gatekeeper's expression was unreadable. "What things?"

"The weirdness we've been seeing. Mysterious figures handing out wolf belts to FBI agents. Red Court vampires showing up to fights with Outsiders on the roster. Faerie Queens getting idealistic and trying to overthrow the natural order of the Faerie Courts. The Unseelie standing by unresponsive when they are offered an enormous insult by the vampires trespassing on their territory. The attack on Arctic Tor. I can think of half a dozen other things to go with those, and those are just the things I've personally gotten involved with." I made a broad gesture with one hand, back toward Chicago. "The world is getting weirder and scarier, and we've been so busy beating on one another that we can't even see it. Someone's behind it."

He watched me silently for a long moment. Then he said, "Yes."

I frowned at him, and then my lips parted as I realized what was going on. "And you think I'm with them."

He paused before speaking—but then, he damn near always did. "Perhaps there is reason. Add to your list of upset balances such things as open warfare erupting between the Red Court and the White Council. A Seelie crown being passed from one young Queen to the next by bloody revolt, and not the will of Titania. Wardens consorting with White Court vampires on a regular basis. College students being taught magic sufficient to allow them to become werewolves. The Little Folk, Wyld fae, banding together and organizing. The most powerful artifacts of the Church vanishing from the world—and, as some signs indicate, being kept by a wizard who does not so much as pay lip service to the faith, much less believe."

I scowled. "Yeah, well. When you put it like *that*."

He smiled faintly.

I held up my hand, palm out. "I swear to you, by my magic, that I am not involved with those lunatics, except for trying to put out all these fires they keep starting. And if questionable things surround me, it's because that's the kind of thing that happens when you're as outclassed as I usually am. You have to find solutions where you can, not where convenient."

The Gatekeeper pursed his lips thoughtfully, considering me.

"Look, can we agree to a short truce, to talk this out?" I said. "And so that I can keep my apprentice from drowning?"

His gaze moved past me to Molly. He frowned and lowered his staff at once. "Five minutes," he said.

"Thanks," I said. I turned around and got Molly hauled back onto the boat. She never stirred. Once she was safely snoozing on deck, I went down the dock to stand in front of the Gatekeeper. He watched me quietly, holding his staff in both hands, leaning on it gently. "So," I said. "Where's the rest of the Senior Council?"

"On the way, I should think," he said. "They'll need to secure transportation to the island in Chicago and then find their way here."

"But not you. You came through the Nevernever?"

He nodded, his eyes watching me carefully. "I know a Way. I've been here before."

"Yeah?" I shook my head. "I thought about trying to find a Way out here, but I didn't want to chance it. This isn't exactly Mayberry. I doubt it hooks up to anything pleasant in the Nevernever."

The Gatekeeper muttered something to himself in a language I didn't understand and shook his head. "I cannot decide," he said, "whether you are the most magnificent liar I have ever encountered in my life—or if you truly are as ignorant as you appear."

I looked at him for a minute. Then I hooked my thumb up at my ridiculous head bandage. "Dude."

He burst out into a laugh that was as rich and deep as his speaking voice, but . . . more, somehow. I'm not sure how to explain it. The sound of that laugh was filled with a warmth and a purity that almost made the air quiver around it, as if it had welled up from some untapped source of concentrated, unrestrained joy.

I think maybe it had been a while since Rashid had laughed.

"You," he said, barely able to speak through it. "Up in that tree. Covered with mud."

I found myself grinning at him. "Yeah. I remember."

He shook his head and actually wiped tears away from his good eye. It took him another moment or two to compose himself, but when he spoke, his living eye sparkled, an echo of his laughter. "You've endured more than most young people," he said. "And tasted more triumph than most, as well. It is a very encouraging sign that you can still laugh at yourself."

"Well, gosh," I said. "I'm just so ignorant, I don't know what else to do."

He stared at me intently. "You don't know what this place is."

"It's out of the way of innocent bystanders," I said. "And I know it better than most of the people who are on the way."

He nodded, frowning. "I suppose that is logical."

"So?"

"Hmm?"

I sighed. Wizards. "So? What *is* this place?"

He considered his words for a moment. "What do you think it is, beyond the obvious physical and tactical terrain?"

"Well," I said. "I know there's a ley line that comes through here. Very dark and dangerous energy. I know that there's a *genius loci* present and that it is real strong and isn't very friendly. I know that they tried to start up a small town here, linked with the shipping interests in the Great Lakes, but it went sour. Demonreach drove them away. Or insane, apparently."

"Demonreach?" he asked.

"Couldn't find a name on the books," I said. "So I made up my own."

"Demonreach," the Gatekeeper mused. "It's . . . certainly fitting."

"So?"

He gave me a tight smile. "It wouldn't help you for me to say anything more—except for this: one of your facts is incorrect. The ley line you speak of does not go *through* the

island," he said. "This is where it wells up. The island is its *source*."

"Ah," I said. "Wells up from what?"

"In my opinion, that is a very useful question."

I narrowed my eyes. "And you aren't going to give me anything else."

He shrugged. "We do have other matters to discuss."

I glanced back at my unconscious friends. "Yeah. We do."

"I am willing to accept that your intentions are noble," he said. "But your actions could set into motion a catastrophic chain of events."

I shrugged. "I don't know about that," I said. "What I do know is that you don't kill a man for a crime he didn't commit. And when someone else tries to do it, you stop them."

"And you think that this will stop them?" the Gatekeeper asked.

"I think it's my best shot."

"You won't succeed," he said. "If you press ahead, it will end in violence. People will die, you amongst them."

"You don't even know what I have in mind," I said.

"You're laying a trap for the traitor," he said. "You're trying to force him to act and reveal himself."

A lesser man might have felt less clever than he had a moment before. "Oh."

"And if I can work it out," the Gatekeeper said, "then so can the traitor."

"Well, duh," I said. "But he'll show up anyway. He can't afford to do anything else."

"And he'll come ready," the Gatekeeper said. "He'll choose his moment."

"Let him. I've got other assets."

Then he did something strange. He exhaled slowly, his living eye closing. The gleaming steel eye tracked back and forth, as if looking at something, though I could only tell it was moving because of the twitches of his other eyelid. A moment later, the Gatekeeper opened his eye and said, "The chances that you'll survive it are minimal."

"Yeah?" I asked him. I stepped around him and hopped off the dock and onto the island, immediately feeling the connection with Demonreach as I turned to face him. "How about now?"

He frowned at me, and then repeated the little ritual.

Then he made a choking sound. "Blood of the Prophet," he swore, opening his eyes to stare at me. "You . . . you've claimed *this* place as a sanctum?"

"Uh-huh."

"How?"

Chapter Forty

We worked for three hours before I started dropping things, tripping on nice flat ground, and bumping into other people because I’d forgotten to keep an eye out for them.

“That’s it, Harry,” Georgia said firmly. “Your sleeping bag is in the cottage. Get some more sleep.”

“I’ll be all right,” I said.

“Harry, if anything happens to you, we aren’t going to have anyone we know looking out for us. You need to be able to focus. Go rest.”

It sounded awfully good, but my mouth opened on its own. “We’ve still got to lay out the—”

Will had come up behind me in complete silence. He pulled my arm behind my back in a capable, strong grip, and twisted carefully. It didn’t hurt, until he leaned gently into me and I had to move forward to keep the pressure off. “You heard the lady,” he said. “We can finish the rest of it on our own. We’ll wake you up if anything happens.”

I snorted, twisted at the waist, bumping Will off balance with my hip, and broke the lock. Will could have broken my arm and kept hold of me, but instead he let go before it could happen. “All right, all right,” I said. “Going.”

I shambled into the cottage and collapsed onto a sleeping bag that lay on top of a foam camp pad.

Four hours later, when Will shook me awake, I was lying in the exact same position. Late-afternoon light slanted into the half-ruined cottage from the west. Morgan lay on his own

pallet, made by stripping the foam mattress from the bunk on the *Water Beetle*. His eyes were closed, his breathing steady. Will must have carried him up from the boat.

“Okay,” I slurred. “I’m up. I’m up.”

“Georgia has been patrolling the shoreline,” he said. “She says there’s a boat approaching.”

My heart began beating a little faster, and my stomach fluttered. I swallowed, closed my eyes for a moment, and imagined a tranquil tropical beach in an effort to calm my thoughts. But the beach kept getting overrun by shapeshifting zombie vampires with mouths on the palms of their hands.

“Well, that’s useless,” I said in sleepy disgust. I got to my feet and gathered my things. “Where’s it coming from?”

“West.”

“He’ll have to sail a third of the way around the island then, to get through the reefs,” I yawned. “Where’s Georgia?”

Claws scraped on hard-packed earth, and a large tawny wolf appeared in the doorway. She sat down and looked at me, her ears perked forward.

“Good work,” I told her. “Molly?”

“Here, Harry,” she called, as she hurried into the cottage. She held a crystal of white quartz about two inches thick and a foot long in her hands.

“Get to work, grasshopper. Don’t hesitate to use the crystal if things get dicey. And good luck to you.”

She nodded seriously and went to Morgan’s side. She reached out and took his limp hand, frowned in mild concentration, and they both vanished behind one of her wonder veils. “God be with you, Harry,” she said, her voice coming out of nowhere.

“Will,” I said. “Get your game face on.” I turned to Will to find the young man gone and a burly dark-furred wolf sitting in his place next to a pile of loose clothes. “Oh,” I said. “Good.”

I checked my gear, my pockets, my shoelaces, and realized that I had crossed the line between making sure I was ready and trying to postpone the inevitable. I straightened my back, nodded once, and began to stride toward the cottage door. “Let’s go, people. Party time.”



It was getting darker over the enormous expanse of the lake. Twilight is a much different experience when you’re far away from the lights of a city or town. Modern civilization bathes us in light throughout the hours of darkness—lighted billboards, streetlights, headlights, airplane lights, neon decorations, the interior lights of homes and businesses, floodlights that strobe across the sky. They’re so much a part of our life that the darkness of night is barely a factor in our daily thinking anymore. We mock one another’s lack of courage with accusations of being afraid of the dark, all the while industriously making our own lights brighter, more energy efficient, cheaper, and longer-lasting.

There’s power in the night. There’s terror in the darkness. Despite all our accumulated history, learning, and experience, we remember. We remember times when we were too small to reach the light switch on the wall, and when the darkness itself was enough to makes us cry out in fear.

Get a good ways out from civilization—say, miles and miles away on a lightless lake—and the darkness is there, waiting. Twilight means more than just time to call the children in from playing outside. Fading light means more than just the end of another day. Night is when terrible things emerge from their sleep and seek soft flesh and hot blood. Night is when unseen beings with no regard for what our people have built and no place in what we have deemed the natural order look in at our world from outside, and think dark and alien thoughts.

And sometimes, just sometimes, they do things.

I walked down the ancient hillsides of Demonreach and felt acutely aware of that fact; night wasn’t falling, so much as sharpening its claws.

I walked out to the end of the floating dock alone. Billy and Georgia remained behind, in the woods. You would not believe how sneaky a wolf is capable of being until you’ve seen

one in action. Wolves acting with human-level intelligence—and *exceptional* human intelligence at that—are all but invisible when they choose to be.

A boat was rounding the buoy that marked the opening in the reef. It was a white rental boat, like any number available to tourists in the area, a craft about twenty feet long and rigged for waterskiing. The wind had risen, coming in from the southwest, and the lake was getting choppier. The rental boat was wallowing a little, and bouncing irregularly against the waves, throwing up small shocks of spray.

I watched it come in over the last few hundred yards, until I could see who was on board. The boat was fairly new. Its engine made an odd, clattering noise, which served to identify the occupants. The White Council, it seemed, had arrived on time.

Ebenezar McCoy was at the wheel of the boat, his bald head shiny in the rain. Listens-to-Wind sat in the passenger seat, wearing a rain poncho, one hand gripping the side of the boat, the other holding on to the dashboard in front him. His weather-seamed face was grim.

In the center of the rear bench was a tiny figure in white silk embroidered with red flowers. Ancient Mai was Chinese, and looked as delicate and frail as an eggshell teacup. Her hair was pure white and long, held up with a number of jade combs. Though she was now old, even by the standards of the White Council, she was still possessed of a sizable portion of what would have been a haunting, ethereal beauty in her youth. Her expression was serene, her dark eyes piercing and merciless.

She frightened me.

Veteran Wardens sat on either side of Ancient Mai, dour in their grey cloaks, and three more were sitting or crouching elsewhere in the boat—all of them from the hard-bitten squad that had been on standby back in Edinburgh. They were all armed to the teeth, and their expressions meant business. Apparently Mai scared them at least as much as she did me: one of them was holding an umbrella for her.

I waited at the end of the dock, inviting Ebenezar by gesture to pull up on the side opposite the *Water Beetle*. He brought the boat in with considerably more skill than I had shown, killed the ailing engine while it was still moving, and got up to toss me a line. I caught it and secured the boat to the dock without taking my eyes off of anyone in the boat. No one spoke. Once the engine had fallen silent, the only sound was rain and wind.

“Evening,” I ventured, nodding to Ebenezar.

He was staring hard at me, frowning. I saw his eyes scan the shoreline and come back to me. “Hoss,” he said. He rose and stepped out onto the dock. One of the Wardens tossed him another line, and he secured the back end of the craft. Then he got off, walked up to me, and offered me his hand. I shook it.

“Rashid?” he whispered so low I could barely hear it over the rain.

“With us,” I replied as quietly, trying not to move my lips.

His head tipped me a tiny nod, and then he turned to beckon the others. Wardens and Senior Council members began clambering out of the boat. I walked down the dock beside Ebenezar, watching the Wardens over my shoulder. They were the sort of men and women who had no illusions about violence, magical or otherwise. If they decided that the best way to deal with me would be to shoot me in the back, they wouldn’t hesitate.

I stepped off the dock and onto the island again, and immediately felt the presence of Demonreach. At the moment, the only persons on the island were those I had brought with me.

Ebenezar followed me, and I felt it the instant he stepped onto the shore. It wasn't as if someone had whispered in my ear. I simply *knew*, felt it, the way you know it when an ant is crawling across your arm. He stopped a step later, and I kept going until I was about ten feet away. I turned to face them as their group came down the dock to stand on the shore. I kept close track of them through the link with the island, making sure that there weren't any Wardens hiding behind veils so that they could sneak up behind me and start delivering rabbit punches.

Ebenezar, Ancient Mai, and Listens-to-Wind, his expression bearing a faintly greenish cast, stood side by side, facing me. The Wardens fanned out behind them, wary eyes watching every possible route of approach, including from the lake.

"Well, Wizard Dresden," Ebenezar said. He leaned on his staff and regarded me blandly. "We got your note."

"I figured," I said. "Did you get as far as the part where I said if you wanted a fight, I would oblige you?"

The Wardens didn't actually bare their teeth and start snarling, but it was close.

"Aye, aye," Ebenezar said. "I thought it might be more profitable if we could talk about things first."

"Indeed," said Ancient Mai. Her voice was too smooth and too confident to match the tiny fragile person speaking in it. "We can always kill you afterward."

I didn't actually break out into rivulets of sweat, but it was close.

"Obviously, the disrespect you have offered the White Council merits some form of response," she continued. "Do not flatter yourself by thinking that we have come to you because we lack other options."

Ebenezar gave Mai a mild look. "At the same time," he said, "your reputation as an investigator is unrivaled within the Council. That, added to the nature of your relationship with the alleged murderer, is reason enough to hear what you have to say."

"Wizard Dresden," Listens-to-Wind said. "You said you had proof of Morgan's innocence. You said you had a witness."

"And more," I replied.

"And where are they?"

"We need to wait a moment," I said, "until everyone arrives."

Ancient Mai's eyes narrowed. The Wardens got even more alert, and spread out a bit, hands on their weaponry.

"What others, Hoss?" Ebenezar asked.

"Everyone directly involved in this plot," I said. "Warden Morgan wasn't the only one being set up as a patsy. When you manage to track down the source of the money found in Morgan's account, you'll find that it comes from a corporation owned by the White Court."

Listens-to-Wind frowned. "How do you know this?"

"I investigated," I said. "After further investigation, I concluded that the money had probably been moved without the knowledge of the White Court's leaders. The guilty party not only wished LaFortier dead, and Warden Morgan to take the blame for it, he also wanted to manipulate the Council into renewing hostilities with the Vampire Courts."

The Wardens traded looks with one another when I said that. It was getting darker, and I had trouble making out their expressions. Listens-to-Wind's face became thoughtful, though. "And there is proof of this?" he asked.

"I believe there will be," I replied. "But it might take time to find—longer than the duration of Morgan's unjust trial and undeserved execution, anyway."

Ancient Mai suddenly smiled, an expression with all the joy and life of frozen porcelain. "In other words," she said, "whatever measures being taken to veil Morgan from our tracking spells were near their limits, forcing you to seek this meeting."

I had to work hard to keep from twitching. The only thing worse than scary is *smart* and scary.

Mai turned to Ebenezar. "It seems obvious that Dresden was involved in this plot on some level, and if Dresden is here, Morgan is probably nearby. Arrest Dresden and resume attempting to track Morgan immediately. We can attend to the business in a proper and orderly fashion back at Edinburgh."

Ebenezar eyed Mai and then looked at Listens-to-Wind.

The old medicine man stared at me for a time, and then reached up an ink-stained finger to pull back a few loose hairs that had been plastered to his face by the rain. He leaned on his staff and looked around the island for a long minute, his expression distant. "No mention was made of other parties being present," he said, finally. "This is Council business, and no one else's. Adding representatives of the White Court to this . . . meeting could prove as disastrous as the war you claim to be trying to avoid, Wizard Dresden."

Ebenezar's jaw tensed up. "That's not the same thing as saying we should arrest him."

Listens-to-Wind faced Ebenezar stolidly. "If what he says is so, the truth will come out. We can postpone a trial so that if this evidence exists, it can be found."

"You know as well as I do," Ebenezar said, "that the outcome of the trial is not going to be changed by the truth."

Listens-to-Wind's voice became hard and rough, holding a deep and burning anger that I had never heard from the old man before. "There is the world that should be," he growled,

"and the world that *is*. We live in one."

"And must create the other," Ebenezar retorted, "if it is ever to be."

Listens-to-Wind looked down and shook his head. He looked very old and very tired. "There are no good paths to choose, old friend," he said quietly. "All we can do is choose if many die, or a few." He looked up at me, his face hard. "I am sorry, Hoss Dresden. But I must agree. Arrest him."

Chapter Forty-one

Demonreach allowed me to sense Billy and Georgia slinking closer, and to feel an uncertain sense of excitement that could have been tension or fear or anger coming from them. It had a much more vague idea of the emotions of the Wardens, but I could tell that they weren't eager to start a fight with me.

Which made me want to laugh. I mean, seriously. One on one, sure, maybe I could have been a handful for any of them. But there were *three* members of the Senior Council there, any one of which could have tied me in knots. And they had me outnumbered five to one, beyond that.

And then it hit me. They were dealing with something far more dangerous than me, Harry Dresden, whose battered old Volkswagen was currently in the city impound. They were dealing with the potential demonic dark lord nightmare warlock they'd been busy fearing since I turned sixteen. They were dealing with the wizard who had faced the Heirs of Kemmler riding a zombie dinosaur, and emerged victorious from a fight that had flattened Morgan and Captain Luccio before they had even reached it. They were dealing with the man who had

dropped a challenge to the *entire* Senior Council, and who had then actually *showed*, apparently willing to fight—on the shores of an entirely too creepy island in the middle of a freshwater sea.

Granted, I technically was that person, but they had no idea how close several of those calls had been. They didn't know the small details, the quirks of fate, or the assists from allies I probably didn't deserve that allowed me to shamble out of those clouds of insanity in more or less one piece.

They just knew that I was the one still standing—and that fact inspired a healthy and rational fear. More than that, they were afraid of what they *didn't* know I could do. And none of them knew that I would so much rather be back in my apartment, reading a good book and drinking a cold beer.

I didn't move when Listens-to-Wind made his statement. I just stood there, as if I wasn't much impressed. The Council had evidently sent the three Senior members as a kind of quorum, and I would think that the word of two of them would be enough to decide a course of action—but the oldest of the Wardens there, a large man with a big black beard whose name was Beorg, or Yorg, or Bjorn—definitely Scandinavian—turned to look at Ebenezar.

The wizard of the Ozarks stood looking at me, a small smile on his face. I recognized the smile. When I'd first gone to live with him, after I'd killed my foster father, we would go into town every week for supplies. A gang of teenage boys, bored, reacted to the presence of a new boy with typical adolescent thoughtlessness. One of them had tried to get me to fight him.

At the time, I remember being annoyed at the distraction from my day. Because I had just wiped out a major demon and a former Warden of the White Council in a pair of fair fights, local teenage bullies were really kind of beneath my notice. They were kids playing a game, and I had grown older very quickly. I could have killed them, all of them, without too much trouble, but the very idea was laughable. It would have been like using a flamethrower to clean cobwebs out of the house.

I'd stood there, just looking at them, while they tried to tease me into fighting. I hadn't moved, or said anything, or done anything. I just stood there in a wall of silence and stillness, until that silence had become heavier and heavier. They had eventually been pushed back by it, and I had simply walked past them.

And I was doing the same thing again, letting the silence fuel their uncertainty.

I met Ebenezar's gaze, and we both smiled faintly in acknowledgment of the memory.

"Well, gentlemen," Ebenezar said, turning to face the Wardens. "You've heard the will of the Council, such as it is. But you should be advised that since you'd be doing something foolish at the behest of someone acting foolish, I won't be assisting you."

Mai's head snapped around to focus on Ebenezar. "McCoy!"

Ebenezar bowed his head to her. "Wizard Mai, I would advise you not to seek a quarrel with the young man. He's a fair hand in a fight."

The old woman lifted her chin haughtily. "He was not truly your apprentice. You kept watch over him for a mere two years."

"And came to know him," Ebenezar said. He turned to eye Listens-to-Wind. "What did that raccoon pup you had think of him? You go on about what good judges of character young animals can be. Is he the sort of man who would involve himself in that kind of plot? You know the answer."

Listens-to-Wind shook his head tiredly. "It isn't about that and you know it."

"If you do not assist us in subduing him," Mai said, her voice crisp and thrumming with tension, "it could be considered treason, Wizard McCoy."

"I am assisting you," Ebenezar said. "By advising you to avoid conflict." He paused and said, "You might try asking him."

"Excuse me?" Mai said.

"Asking him," Ebenezar said. He hooked a thumb in one strap of his overalls. "Ask him politely to come with you back to Edinburgh. Maybe he'd cooperate."

"Don't bother, sir," I said. "I won't."

"Ancient Mai," rumbled Warden Bjork. "If you would please return to the boat, we will see to this."

I remained just as I'd been standing, and hoped that the others would be arriving soon. I didn't want to start up the dance music until everyone had taken the floor, but if the Wardens pressed me, I might need to.

"Ancient Mai," Warden Yorgi repeated. "Do you wish us to—"

He didn't get to finish the phrase before there was a deafening roar and a helicopter swept over the hillside behind us, flying about an inch and a half above the treetops. It soared past us and then banked around in a turn over the lake, only to return and hover thirty feet above the shoreline, maybe a hundred yards away.

In the movies, special forces guys come zipping down on lines. I've even been the guy on a line once, sort of, though I was more sack of meal than Navy SEAL. But when the people jumping off the helicopter are vampires, you don't bother with a lot of lines.

Or any lines. At all.

Three figures in white leapt from the hovering chopper, neatly flipped once on the way down, and landed together in a dancer's crouch. Then they all rose, the movement as beautiful, smooth, and coordinated as anything you'd see at the Cirque du Soleil.

Lara and her two sisters walked toward us, and they were good at it. Lara was wearing a white sundress that showed off her curves, with two black leather belts that crossed on her hips. A handgun in a holster hung from one of the belts. The other belt supported a sword, a genuine rapier whose worn handle looked as if it had seen actual use. Her long black hair was pulled up in a net, and the top of her head was covered in a white cloth, a very Gypsy sort of look. She wore a choker made of pure platinum, the metal seeming to hold its own glow, even in the failing light, and a single large bloodred ruby hung from it.

As she walked, it was impossible not to notice the gorgeously feminine curves of her body, the casual sway of her hips from side to side, each movement emphasizing the fact that she carried deadly weapons. And, since it was raining on her white dress, it was impossible not to notice a whole lot of other things about Lara—such as the fact that other than the weapons and her shoes, it was all she was wearing.

I concentrated on keeping my tongue from hanging down past my chin, and forced my eyes to look elsewhere.

Her sisters were wearing much different gear. Though they also wore white, they had both donned what looked like motorcycle leathers—not like archetypical American bikers, but more like the gear you see professional racing motorcyclists wearing. It looked very high-tech, and was obviously armored. In standard gear, the armor was heavy plastic, there to protect the rider in the event of a collision or a fall. I was willing to bet that it had been upgraded to something a lot stronger in the Raith's gear. They, too, were equipped with sidearms of both the past and present. Their hair was tied up and back, and like Lara, their skin was pale, their eyes were wide and grey, their lips dark and inviting.

I watched the three Raith sisters come and thought to myself that if there was any justice in the universe, I would get to watch that in slow motion.

Alas.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mai calmly lift a hand to Warden Berserker, motioning him to stand down. It didn't surprise me. Ancient Mai had very strong notions of proper behavior and how it ought to be followed. She would never condone observable division amongst members of the Council where outsiders could witness it.

Lara stopped twenty feet away, and her sisters stopped a couple of feet behind her. Their eyes were on the Wardens, who returned the vampires' stares with calm attention.

"Harry," she said, her voice warm, as if we'd just run into one another at a soiree. "You are a wicked, wicked man. You didn't tell me I'd have to share you with others tonight."

"What can I say?" I asked, turning to face Lara. I smiled at her and bowed my head without taking my eyes off her. It was a more enjoyable paranoia than I'd observed for the Wardens, if no less wary. "I used to be a trusting, gentle soul, but the rigors of the cruel world have made me cynical and cautious."

Lara looked from the Wardens to me, her expression speculative. Then she gave them a smile that could have melted plate steel and walked to me, somehow making a swagger look perfectly feminine. She extended both hands to me as she came.

I smiled in return, though mine was a lot stiffer and more artificial, and whispered, through my smiling teeth, "You have got to be kidding."

She cast her eyes down demurely, toning the smile down to a smirk, and breathed, "Be nice to me, wizard mine, and I'll return the favor."

I don't think I hesitated very long before I offered her my hands in return. We clasped them. Her fingers were silken-smooth and very cold. She smiled radiantly and inclined her head to me, a slow, graceful, formal gesture.

Then, faster than I could blink, much less move, she smacked me in the kisser.

She used her open hand, which prevented the blow from being a lethal one. Even so, it hit like a club. It knocked me several steps back, spinning me as I went, and I wound up caught in a drunken corkscrew that ended with my ass hitting the ground ten feet away.

“Once again you have *lied* to us,” Lara snarled. “*Used* us. I have had my fill of your deceits, wizard.”

I sat there with my mouth open, wondering if my jaw would start wobbling bonelessly in the rising breeze.

Fury radiated from her in a cold sphere, and every fiber of her body looked ready to do violence. She faced me with the members of the Council on her left, the darkness of the forest on her right. I focused on my shield bracelet, certain that there was every possibility that she might be about to draw her gun and plug me.

“If my brother is not returned to me whole this night,” she continued, her voice cold and deadly, “there will be blood between us and my honor will not be satisfied until one of us lies dead on the dueling ground.”

And then she winked at me with her right eye.

“Do you understand?” she demanded.

“Uh,” I said, trying to move my jaw. It was apparently whole. “Yeah. Message received.”

“Arrogant child.” She spat on the ground in my direction. Then she turned and walked purposefully toward the Senior Council members. She stopped about ten feet from Ancient Mai, just before the Wardens standing behind her would have snapped and started hurling thunder and fury. She came to a graceful stance of attention, and then bowed, rather deeply, to Ancient Mai.

Mai’s face revealed nothing. She returned the gesture, bowing less deeply.

“It is a pleasure to meet you in the flesh,” Lara said. “You must be Ancient Mai.”

“Lara Raith,” Mai replied. “I had not anticipated your presence at this meeting.”

“Nor I yours.” She gave me a rather disgusted glance. “Courtesy, it seems, is a devalued commodity in this world.” She bowed again, to Ebenezar and Listens-to-Wind, and greeted them by name. “Your reputations, gentlemen, precede you.”

Injun Joe nodded without speaking.

“Lady Raith,” Ebenezar said, calmly. “Touch that boy again and the only things left for your kin to bury will be your five-hundred-dollar shoes.”

“Ai ya,” Ancient Mai said in a flat tone.

Lara paused at Ebenezar’s statement. It didn’t rattle her, precisely, but she gave Ebenezar another look and then inclined her head to him. “Gentlemen, lady. Obviously we both have urgent concerns that must be addressed. Equally obviously, none of us anticipated the presence of the other, and a violent incident would benefit no one. On behalf of the White Court, I propose a formal agreement of nonaggression for the duration of this meeting.”

Ancient Mai gave Ebenezar a hard look, then lifted her chin slightly and turned away, somehow giving the impression that she had formally dismissed him from reality. “Agreed,” she said. “On behalf of the Council, I accept the proposal.”

I managed to stagger back to verticality. My wounded head felt like Lara had split it open, and I’d have a hand-shaped bruise on my cheek, but I wasn’t going to sit there moaning about getting slapped by a girl. Granted, the girl was hundreds of years old and could change a fire truck’s tires without using a jack, but there was a principle at work here. I got to my feet and then walked carefully over to stand beside Ebenezar, facing the vampires. One of the Wardens there made a little room for me, all his attention focused forward on Lara and her sisters.

Heh. They were much more comfortable with me when I was aimed at an enemy. I tried to keep a running portion of my awareness focused on Demonreach. I had done as much as I could in assembling this group. I was counting on my estimate of the killer to take it to the next level, and until he showed up, I had to keep stringing both Lara and the Council along.

The best way to do that, for the moment, was to keep quiet and let them talk.

“I suppose the first thing we must do is share knowledge,” Lara said to Ancient Mai. “Would you prefer it if I went first?”

Mai considered that for a moment and then bowed her head in a slight acknowledgment.

Lara proceeded without further ado. “My brother, Thomas Raith, has been taken by a skinwalker, one of the ancient naagloshii. The skinwalker has offered an exchange. My brother for Warden Donald Morgan.”

Mai tilted her head to one side. “How is Dresden involved in this matter?”

“He claims that he is attempting to establish Warden Morgan’s innocence in some sort of matter internal to the Council. As a gesture of goodwill to the Council and to help keep the peace within Chicago, I have instructed my brother to offer reasonably low-risk aid and assistance to Dresden.” She glanced at me. “He has abused my good intentions repeatedly. This time, he somehow involved my brother in his investigation, and Thomas was ambushed by the skinwalker.”

“And that is all?” Mai asked.

Lara glared at me again, and seemed to visibly force herself to take a moment to think. “He claims that a third party was behind Warden Morgan’s predicament, and attempting to set the Court against the Council. To my surprise, my own investigation did not immediately disprove his statements as lies. It seems possible that one of my financial managers may have been somehow coerced into embezzling the contents of a considerable account. Dresden claims the money was sent to an account that was made to appear to belong to Warden Morgan.”

Mai nodded. “Was it?”

Lara shrugged elegantly. “It is possible. My people are working to find evidence that will establish what happened more precisely.”

Mai nodded and was still for several seconds before she said, “Despite how carefully you have danced around the subject, you know exactly why we are here.”

Lara smiled very slightly.

“The tale Dresden tells us lacks the credibility of simplicity,” Mai continued. “Despite how carefully you have danced around saying the actual words, it seems that you wish us to believe that the White Court was not involved in the matter of LaFortier’s death. Thus, your story, too, lacks the credibility of simplicity.”

“In my experience, matters of state are rarely simple ones,” Lara responded.

Mai moved a hand, a tiny gesture that somehow conveyed acknowledgment. “Yet given recent history, the actions of a known enemy seem a far more likely source for LaFortier’s murder than those of some nameless, faceless third party.”

“Of course. You are, after all, wizards,” Lara said without a detectable trace of irony. “You are the holders of great secrets. If such a group existed, you would surely know of it.”

“It is possible that I am unfairly judging your people in accusing them of plotting LaFortier’s death,” Mai replied, her voice utterly tranquil. “You are, after all, vampires, and well-known for your forthright and gentle natures.”

Lara inclined her head, smiling faintly. “Regardless, we find ourselves here.”

“That seems incontrovertible.”

“I seek the safe return of my brother.”

Mai shook her head firmly, once. “The White Council will not exchange one of our own.”

“It seems to me,” Lara said, “that Warden Morgan is not in your company.”

“A transitory situation,” Mai said. She didn’t look at me, but I felt sure that the steel in her voice was aimed in my direction.

“Then perhaps a cooperative effort,” Lara said. “We need not allow the skinwalker to *take* the Warden.”

“Those who ally themselves with the White Court come to regret it,” Mai replied. “The Council has no obligation to assist you or your brother.”

“Despite the recent efforts made on your behalf by my King and his Court?” Lara asked.

Mai faced her without blinking and said nothing more.

“He is my blood,” Lara said quietly. “I will have him returned.”

“I appreciate your loyalty,” Mai said, in a tone that suggested she didn’t. “However, this matter of the skinwalker wishing an exchange is hardly germane to where we stand at the moment.”

“Actually,” I said. “It kind of is, Ancient Mai. I had someone tell Shagnasty where to meet me tonight. Depending on how he crosses the water, he could be here any moment.”

Ebenezar blinked. Then he turned his face to me, his expression clearly asking whether or not I was out of my damned mind.

“Wile E. Coyote,” I said to him soberly. “Suuuuuper Genius.”

I saw him thinking and I recognized it when my old mentor got it, when he understood my plan. I could tell because he got that look on his face I’ve only seen when he knows things are about to go spectacularly wrong and he wants to be ready for it. He let his staff fall to rest against his chest and idly dug in a pocket, his eyes flicking across the woods around us.

I don’t know where Mai’s head was, or if she worked out anything at all. I had a feeling that she wouldn’t. Since her thought processes would all have to start from given assumptions that were incorrect, she didn’t have much of a chance of coming to a correct conclusion.

“All that means,” she said to me, “is that it would be wise to finish our business here and retreat from this place.”

“Sadly, I am reaching a similar conclusion,” Lara said deliberately. “Perhaps it is time for this meeting to adjourn.”

Behind her, one of her sisters shifted one hand very slightly.

Lightning flashed overhead, and thunder forced a pause into the conversation. The wind picked up again, and Listens-to-Wind suddenly lifted his head. His gaze snapped around to the north, and his eyes narrowed.

An instant later, I sensed a new presence on the island. More people had just touched down onto the far side of the bald hill where Demonreach Tower stood. There were twelve of them, and they began moving toward the hilltop at inhuman speed. White Court vampires, they had to be.

Seconds later, another pair of humanlike presences simply *appeared* in the woods four hundred yards away. And if that wasn’t enough, two *more* people arrived on the northwest shore of the island.

Mai took immediate note of Injun Joe’s expression and tilted her head, staring hard at Lara. “What have you done?” she demanded.

“I have signaled my family,” Lara replied calmly. “I did not come here to fight you, Ancient Mai. But I *will* recover my brother.”

I focused on the two smaller groups, both of them pairs of new presences, and found that their numbers were growing. On the beach, many, many more pairs of feet had begun beating the ground of Demonreach, thirty of them or more. In the forest nearby, a presence that the island had never before encountered appeared, followed by more and more and more of the same.

There was only one explanation for that—the new arrivals were calling forth muscle from the Nevernever. I was betting that the pair on the beach was Madeline and Binder, and that he had begun calling out his grey men the moment his feet hit the ground. The two who had simply appeared in the forest had to have taken a Way and emerged from the Nevernever onto the island directly. It was possible a second summoning like Binder's was under way, but I thought it far more likely that someone had gathered up support and brought it with them, through the Way.

Meanwhile, Mai and Lara were beginning to bare their claws.

"Is that a threat, vampire?" Mai said in a flat tone.

"I would prefer that you regard it as a truth," Lara replied, her own tone losing the charm and conviviality it had contained in some measure throughout the conversation.

The Wardens behind me started getting nervous. I could feel it, both for myself and through Demonreach. I heard leather creak as hands were put to the grips of holstered guns and upon hilts of swords.

Lara, in response, rested her fingertips lightly upon her own weapons. Her two sisters did the same.

"Wait!" I snapped. "Wait!"

Everyone turned to look at me. I must have looked like a raving mad-man, standing there with my eyes half focused, looking back and forth out of pure instinct and force of habit as the island's intellectus informed me of the rapidly transpiring events. The White Court reinforcements had bypassed the tower hill and were headed for the beach to support Lara—which was something, at least. Lara's helicopter hadn't dropped them up there specifically to look for Morgan. It must have come up low, from the north, using the terrain of the hilltop to mask the sound of its arrival.

I forced my attention back to the scene around me. "Holy crap. I knew this would put the pressure on him. But this guy's gone to war."

"What?" Listens-to-Wind asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't start in on one another!" I snapped. "Lara, we need to work together or we're all dead."

She turned her head a little to one side, staring at me. "Why?"

"Because better than a hundred—one hundred ten, now—beings have just arrived at different points of the island and they aren't here to cater the little mixer we've got going. There

are only nine of us and fifteen of you. We're outnumbered five to one. Six to one, now."

Mai stared at me. "What?"

Chapter Forty-two

Adrenaline does weird things to your head. You hear people talk about how everything slows down. That isn't the case. *Nothing* is happening slowly. It's just that you somehow seem to be

able to fit a whole lot more thinking into the time and space that's there. It might *feel* like things have slowed down, but it's a transitory illusion.

For example, I had time to reflect upon the nature of adrenaline and time while sprinting through the woods at night. It didn't make me run any faster, though. Although if I wasn't actually moving my arms and legs faster than normal, then why was I twenty feet ahead of everyone else, the vampires included?

I heard someone curse in the dark behind me as they tripped over an exposed root. I didn't trip. It wasn't that I had become more graceful—I just knew where to put my feet. It was as if every step I took was over a path that I had walked so many times that it had become ingrained in my muscle memory. I knew when to duck out of the way of a low-hanging branch, when to bound forward at an angle to my last step in order to clear an old stump, exactly how much I needed to shorten a quick pair of steps so that I could leap a sinkhole by pushing off my stronger leg. Lara Raith herself was hard-pressed to keep pace with me, though she managed to close to within three or four yards, her pale skin all but glowing in the dark.

The whole time, I tried to keep track of the position of the enemy. It wasn't a simple matter. I didn't have a big map of the island in my head, with glowing dots marking their positions.

I just *knew* where they were, as long as I concentrated on keeping track of them, but as the number of enemies continued to increase, it got harder to keep track.

The nearest of the hostile presences was about forty yards away when I lifted my fingers to my lips and let out a sharp whistle. "Out there, in front of me!" I shouted. "Now, Toot!"

It had been an enormous pain in the ass to wrap fireworks in plastic to waterproof them against the rain, and even more of a pain to make sure that a waterproof match was attached to each of the rockets, Roman candles, and miniature mortars. When I had Molly and Will scatter them around the woods in twenty separate positions, I'd gotten those "Is he crazy?" looks from both of them.

After all, it isn't as if fireworks are heavy-duty weaponry, capable of inflicting grievous bodily harm and wholesale destruction. They're just loud and bright and distracting.

Which, under the circumstances, was more or less all I needed.

Toot-toot and half a dozen members of the Guard came streaking out of nowhere, miniature comets flashing through the vertical shadows of the trees. They went zipping ahead, alighting on low branches, and then tiny lights flickered as waterproof matches were set to fuses. A second later, a tiny shrill trumpet shrieked from somewhere ahead of us, and a dozen Roman candles began shooting balls of burning chemicals out into the darkness, illuminating the crouched running forms of at least ten of Binder's grey men in their cheap suits, not fifty feet away. They froze at the sudden appearance of the flashing pyrotechnics, attempting to assess them as threats and determine where they were coming from.

Perfect.

I dropped to one knee, lifting my blasting rod, as the human-seeming demons shrieked at the sudden appearance of the bright lights. I trained it on the nearest hesitating grey man,

slammed my will down through the wooden haft, and snarled, "*Fuego!*"

Chapter Forty-three

I was still sorting things out after the titanic wallop the explosion had given the inside of my skull, when a dark-furred wolf emerged from the shadows of the night and slammed into

Madeline Raith like a loaded armored car. I *heard* bones breaking under the impact, and she was ripped off me by the force of the dark wolf's rush.

Will didn't stop there. He'd already hammered her once, and he knew better than to try his strength infighting with a vampire, even if the members of the White Court were physically the weakest of the breed. He hit the ground and bounded away into the dark.

Madeline screamed in surprised rage, and her gun went off several times, but I'm not sure you could call it shooting. She was on her knees, firing that big old Desert Eagle with one delicate hand and holding the now-broken tequila bottle in the other when a sandy brown wolf swept by on silent paws and ripped at Madeline's weapon hand with her fangs. The rip went deep into the muscles and tendons of Madeline's forearm, an almost surgically precise attack. The gun tumbled from her fingers, and she whirled to swing the broken bottle at Georgia, but she was no more eager for a fair fight than Will had been, and by the time Madeline turned, Georgia was already bounding away—and Will, unnoticed, was on his way back in again.

Fangs flashed. Pale Raith blood flowed. The two wolves rushed back and forth in perfect rhythm, never giving the vampire a chance to pin one of them down. When Madeline finally realized how they were working her, she attempted to reverse herself suddenly the same instant Georgia began to retreat, to meet Will's rush squarely—but Will and Georgia had learned their trade from a real wolf, and they'd had eight years of what amounted to low-intensity but deadly earnest combat duty, defending several square blocks around the University from the depredations of both supernatural and mortal predators. They knew when the reverse was coming, and Georgia simply pirouetted on her paws and blindsided Madeline again.

The vampire screamed in frustrated rage. She was furious—and she was slowing down. The members of the White Court were flesh and blood beings. They bled. Bled them enough, and they would die.

I forced myself to start using my head again, finally shaking off the effects of both Madeline's psychotically delicious kiss and the concussion of whatever had exploded. I realized that I was covered with small cuts and scratches, that I was otherwise fine, and that Binder was less than twenty feet away.

"Will, Georgia!" I screamed. "Gun!"

The wolves leapt out of sight and vanished into the forest with barely a leaf disturbed by their movements, half a second before Binder came out of the woods, a semiautomatic assault shotgun pressed against his shoulder. The mercenary was dressed in a wet suit as well, though he'd put on a combat jacket and equipment harness over it, and wore combat boots on his feet.

Binder aimed the weapon after Will and Georgia and started rapidly hammering the woods with shells, more or less at random.

Everyone thinks that shotgun pellets spread out to some ridiculous degree, and that if you aim a shotgun at a garage door and pull the trigger, you'll be able to drive a car through the resulting hole. That isn't so, even when a shotgun has a very, very short barrel, which allows the load of pellets to spread out more. A longer-barreled weapon, like Binder's, will only spread the pellets out to about the size of my spread fingers at a hundred or a hundred and fifty yards. Odds were good that he hadn't hit a damned thing, and given his experience he probably knew it. He must have kept up the salvo to increase the intimidation factor and force the wolves to stay on the run.

In the heat and adrenaline of a battle, gunshots can be hard to count, but I knew he fired eight times. I knew because through Demonreach, I could feel the eight brass and plastic shell casings lying on the ground around him. He stood protectively over Madeline as he reached into his pockets, presumably to reload the weapon with fresh shells.

I didn't give him the chance. I pulled my .44 out of my duster pocket, sat up, and tried to stop wobbling. I sighted on his center mass and pulled the trigger.

The revolver roared, and Binder's left leg flew out from beneath him as if someone had hit it with a twenty-pound mallet. He let out a yelp of what sounded more like surprise than pain and hit the ground hard. In the odd little beat of heavy silence that came after the shot, I almost felt sorry for the guy. He'd had a tough couple of days. I heard him suck in a quick breath and clench his teeth over a howl of pain.

Madeline whirled toward me, her dark hair gone stringy and flat in the rain. Her eyes burned pure white, as the hunger, the demon inside her, fed her more and more of its power and asserted more and more control. Her wet suit had been torn open in several places, and paler-than-human blood smeared her paler-than-human flesh. She wasn't moving as well as she should have been, but she stalked toward me in a hunter's crouch, deliberate and steady.

My bells were still ringing hard, and I didn't think I had time or focus to pull together a spell. And besides, my gun was already right there. It seemed like it would be a waste not to use it.

I sighted on the spot where Madeline's heart should have been and shot her in the belly, which wasn't terrible marksmanship under the circumstances. She cried out and staggered to one knee. Then she looked up, her empty white eyes furious, and stood up, continuing toward me.

I shot again and missed, then repeated myself. I gripped the gun with both hands, clenching my teeth as I did, knowing I only had two more rounds. The next shot ripped a piece of meat the size of a racquetball out of one of her biceps, sending her down to one knee and drawing another scream.

Before she could start moving again, I aimed and fired the last round.

It hit her in the sternum, almost exactly between her wet suit- contoured breasts. She jerked, her breath exploding from her in a little huff of surprise. She swayed, her eyelids fluttering, and I thought she was about to fall.

But she didn't.

The vampire's empty white eyes focused on me, and her mouth spread into a maniac's sneer. She reached down and picked up her own fallen weapon. She had to do it left-handed. The right was covered in a sheet of blood and flopped limply.

Running low on options, I threw my empty gun at her face. She bat-ted my revolver aside with the Desert Eagle.

"You," Madeline said, her voice hollow and wheezing, "are a bad case of herpes, wizard. You're inconvenient, embarrassing, no real threat, and you simply *will not* go away."

"Bitch," I replied, wittily. I still hadn't gotten my head back together. Everything's relative, right?

"Don't kill him," Binder rasped.

Madeline shot him a look that could freeze vodka. "What?"

Binder was sitting on the ground. His shotgun was farther away than he could reach. He must have tossed it there, because when he had fallen it was still in his hands. Binder had realized precisely how badly the fight had gone for his side, that he had been lamed and therefore probably could not escape, and he was making damned sure that he didn't look armed and dangerous. "Death curse," he said, breathing hard. "He could level the island with it."

I drew in my breath, lifted my chin, and tried to keep my eyes from slipping out of focus. "Boom," I said solemnly.

Madeline looked bad. One of the bullets might have opened an artery. It was hard to tell in the near-darkness. "Perhaps you're right, Binder," she said. "If he was a better shot, I suppose I might be in trouble. As it is, I'm inconvenienced." Her eyes widened slightly, and her tongue lashed quickly over her lips. "And I need to feed if I'm to repair it." She lowered the gun as if it had suddenly become too heavy to keep supporting. "Don't worry, Binder," she said. "When he's screaming my name he won't be cursing anyone. And even if he tries it . . ." She shivered. "I'll bet it will taste incredible."

She came closer, all pale skin and mangled flesh, and my body suddenly went insane with lust. Stupid body. It had a lot more clout at the moment than it usually did, with my mind still reeling from the blast.

I aimed a punch at Madeline's face. She caught my hand as the weak blow came in, and kissed the inside of my wrist. Sweet silver lightning exploded up my arm and down my spine. Whatever was left of my brain went away, and the next thing I knew she was pressing her chest against mine, her mouth against mine, slowly, sensuously overbearing me.

And then a burned corpse came out of the woods.

That was all I could think of to describe it. Half the body was blacker than a hamburger that had fallen through the bars of a charcoal grill. The rest was red and purple and swollen with bruises and bloody blisters, with very, very occasional strips of pale white skin. A few wisps of dark hair were attached to her skull. I say her because technically the corpse was female, though that hardly mattered amongst all the burned and pulverized meat that smelled slightly of tequila.

The only things I really recognized were the cold silver eyes.

Lara Raith's eyes were bright with an insane rage and a terrible hunger as she snaked her bruised, swollen left arm around Madeline's wind-pipe, and tightened it with a horrible strength.

Madeline cried out as her head was jerked back sharply—and then she made no sound at all as the wind was trapped inside her lungs. The burned, blackened corpse that was Lara Raith dug one fire-ruined hip into Madeline's upper back, using Madeline's own spine as a fulcrum against her.

Lara spoke, and her voice was something straight from Hell. It was lower, smokier, but every bit as lovely as it ever was. "Madeline," she purred, "I've wanted to do this with you since we were little girls."

Lara's burned black right hand, withered, it seemed, down to bones and sinew, reached slowly, sensually around Madeline's straining abdomen. Slowly, very slowly, Lara sunk her fingertips into flesh, just beneath the floating rib on Madeline's left flank. Madeline's face contorted and she tried to scream.

Lara shuddered. Her shoulders twisted. And she ripped an open furrow as wide as her four fingers across Madeline's stomach, pale flesh parting, as wet red and grey *things* slithered out.

Lara's tongue emerged from her mouth, bright pink, and touched Madeline's earlobe. "Listen to me," she hissed. Her burned hand continued pulling things out of Madeline's body, a hideous intimacy. "Listen to me."

Power shuddered in those words. I felt an insane desire to rush toward Lara's ruined flesh and give her my ears, ripped off with my own fingers, if necessary.

Madeline shuddered, the strength gone out of her body. Her mouth continued trying to move, but her eyes went unfocused at the power in Lara's voice. "For once in your life," Lara continued, kissing Madeline's throat with her burned, broken lips, "you are going to be useful."

Madeline's eyes rolled back in her head, and her body sagged helplessly back against Lara.

My brain got back onto the clock. I pushed myself away from Lara and Madeline's nauseating, horribly compelling embrace. Binder was sitting with his hands over his ears, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. I grabbed him under the arms and hauled him away from the entwined Raiths, maybe fifty yards downhill, through some thick brush and around the bole of a large old hickory tree. Binder was obviously in pain as I pulled him—and he was pushing with his unwounded leg, doing his best to assist me.

"Bloody hell," he panted, as I set him down. "Bloody hell and brimstone."

I staggered and sat down across from him, panting to get my breath back and to push the sight of Lara devouring Madeline out of my head. "No kidding."

"Some of the bloody fools I've known," Binder said. "Can't stop talking about how tragic they are. The poor lonely vampires. How they're just like us. Bloody idiots."

"Yeah," I said, my voice raw.

We sat there for a few seconds. From up the slope, there was a low, soft, and eager cry.

We shuddered and tried to look as if we hadn't heard anything.

Binder stared at me for a moment, and then said, "Why?"

"Once Lara got going, she might not be able to stop. She'd have eaten you, too."

"Too right," Binder agreed fervently. "But that ain't the question. Why?"

"Somebody has to be human."

Binder looked at me as if I was speaking in a language he'd never been very good at, and hadn't heard in years. Then he looked sharply down and away. He nodded, without looking up, and said, "Cheers, mate."

"Fuck you," I told him tiredly. "How bad are you hit?"

"Broke the bone, I think," he said. "Didn't come out. Didn't hit anything too bad or I'd be gone by now."

He'd already tied a strip of cloth tightly around the wound. His wet suit was probably aiding it in acting as a pressure bandage.

"Who was Madeline working for?" I asked.

He shook his head. "She didn't tell me."

"Think," I said. "Think hard."

"All I know," he said, "is that it was some bloke with a lot of money. I never talked to him. When she was on the phone with him, they spoke English. He wasn't a native speaker."

Sounded like he'd learned it from a Continental."

I frowned. Television has most people confident that they could identify the nationality of anyone speaking English, but in the real world, accents could be muddy as hell, especially when you learned from a non-native speaker. Try to imagine the results, for example, of a Polish man learning English from a German teaching at a Belgian university. The resulting accent would twist a linguist's brain into knots.

I eyed Binder. "Can you get out of here on your own?"

He shivered. "This place? I bloody well can."

I nodded. Binder was responsible for the death of a Warden, but it wasn't as though it had been personal. I could bill that charge to Madeline Raith's corpse. "Do business in my town or against the Council again and I'll kill you. Clear?"

"Crystal, mate. Crystal."

I got up and started to go. I didn't have my staff, my blasting rod, or my gun. They were back up the hillside.

I'd come back for them later.

"Wait," Binder said. He grunted and took off his belt, and I nearly kicked him in the head, thinking he was going for a weapon. Instead, he just offered the belt to me. It had a fairly normal-looking black fanny pack on it.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"Two more concussion grenades," he said.

I put two and two together. My brain was back on the job. "You'd rather not be holding the matches to the one that got Lara, eh?"

"Too right," he said. I started to turn away and he touched my leg. He leaned toward me a bit and said, very quietly, "Waterproof pocket inside has a phone in it. Boss lady had me hold it for her. It's powered off. Maybe the lady cop would find it interesting."

I stared hard at him for a second, and an understanding passed between us. "If this pans out," I said, "maybe I'll forget to mention to the Wardens that you survived."

He nodded and sank back onto the ground. "Never want to see you again, mate. Too right I don't."

I snapped the belt closed and hung it across one shoulder, where I could get to the larger pouch in a hurry if I needed to. Then I got on to the next point of business—finding Will and Georgia.

They were both lying on the ground maybe sixty yards from where I'd last seen them. It looked like they'd been circling around the site of the battle with Madeline, planning on coming back in from the far side. I moved easily and soundlessly through the woods and found them on the ground, back in human form.

"Will," I hissed quietly.

He lifted his head and looked around vaguely. "Uh. What?"

"It's Harry," I said, kneeling down next to him. I took off my pentacle amulet and willed a gentle light from it. "Are you hurt?"

Georgia murmured in discomfort at the light. The two of them were twined together rather intimately, actually, and I suddenly felt extremely, um, inappropriate. I shut off the light.

"Sorry," he slurred. "We were gonna come back, but it was . . . really nice out here. And confusing."

"I lost track," Georgia said. "And fell over."

Their pupils were dilated to the size of quarters, and I suddenly understood what had happened to them: Madeline's blood. They'd been inadvertently drugged while ripping at a succubus with their fangs. I'd heard stories about the blood of the White Court, but I hadn't been able to find any hard evidence, and it wasn't the sort of thing Thomas would ever talk about.

"Hell's bells," I muttered, frustrated. Madeline seemed to have a habit of inflicting far more damage by coincidence than intention.

I heard a short, desperately pleasurable cry from nearby, in the direction where I knew Madeline and Lara were on the ground—then silence.

And Madeline wasn't on the island anymore.

I lifted a hand in the air and let out a soft whistle. There was a fluttering sound, and then a small faerie hovered in the air beside me, suppressing the light that usually gathered around them when they flew. I could hear its wings buzzing and sensed its position through the island's intellectus. It wasn't Toot-toot, but one of his subordinates. "Put a guard around these two," I said, indicating Will and Georgia. "Hide them and try to lead off anyone who comes close."

The little faerie let its wings blur with blue light twice in acknowledgment of the order and zipped off into the dark. A moment later, a double dozen of the Militia were on the way, led by the member of the Guard.

Toot and company were generally reliable—within their limits. This was going to be pushing them. But I didn't have any other way of helping Will and Georgia at the moment, and the insanity was still in progress. Putting the Little Folk on guard duty might not be a foolproof protection, but it was the only one I had. I'd just have to hope for the best.

I reached out to Demonreach to find out about Ebenezar and the others, when a sense of fundamental *wrongness* twitched through my brain and sent runnels of fear and rage that did not belong to me oozing down my spine. I focused on the source of those feelings, and suddenly understood the island's outrage at the presence of a visitor it actively detested. It had come ashore on the far side of the island from Chicago, and was now moving swiftly through the trees, dragging a half-dead presence behind it.

My brother.

The naagloshii had come to Demonreach.

I stood there without allies, without most of my weapons, and grew sick with horror as the skinwalker bypassed the battle at the docks and moved in a straight line toward Demonreach Tower.

Toward Molly. Toward Donald Morgan. And it was moving fast.

I put my head down, found the fastest route up the hill, and broke out into a flat sprint, praying that I could beat the skinwalker to the tower.

Chapter Forty-four

As I ran, I tried to keep track of the battle between the White Council and the forces of the traitor who had brought them to the island. Whatever the enemy had brought with him, they weren't anything close to human-shaped, and they were all over the place. The Council's forces, together with the White Court, were arranged in a half circle at the shoreline, their backs protected by the lake. The attackers were stacked up at the tree line, where they would be able to hide, and they were probably making swift attacks at odd intervals. The two human-shaped presences who had arrived first were standing together in the forest, well back from the fight, and I felt a moment of severe frustration.

If I could only get word to the Wardens, to tell them where the traitor was, they might be able to launch an effective attack—but I was pretty sure it wasn't possible. If I used more of the Little Folk, I'd have to stop to whistle some of them up and dispatch them to the task, and it was always possible that they wouldn't find the right target to point out to the Council with their fireworks.

Then, too, a wizard would be a far different sort of threat to the Little Folk than a vampire or the grey men had been. A wizard, particularly one smart enough to remain hidden within the Council for years without betraying his treacherous goals, could swat Little Folk out of the air like insects, killing them by the score. Whether or not they thought they understood the risks, I wasn't going to send them into that.

But I had to figure out something. The fight wasn't going well for the home team: there was blood mixed heavily with the rain on the muddy ground in the center of their defensive position.

I gritted my teeth in frustration. I had to focus on my task, for my brother's sake. If I stopped moving now, if I tried to bail the Council and Lara's family out of their predicament, it could mean Thomas's life. Besides, if Ebenezar, Listens-to-Wind, and Ancient Mai couldn't hold off their attackers, it was pretty much a given that I wouldn't be able to do any better.

They would have to manage without me.

I didn't quite get up to the tower before the skinwalker, but it was damn near a tie. I guess being a nine-foot-tall shapeshifter with a nocturnal predator's senses and superhuman strength was enough to trump even my alliance with the island's spirit.

Taken as an omen for the rest of the evening, it was hardly encouraging, but if I did the smart thing every time matters got dangerous, the world would probably come to an end.

As it turned out, moving through the forest with perfect surety of where to put your feet is very nearly the same thing as moving in perfect silence. I reached the edge of the trees, and saw the skinwalker coming up the opposite side of the bald knoll. I froze in place, behind a screen of brush and shadows.

The wind had continued to rise and grow cooler, coming in from the northeast—which meant that it was at the skinwalker's back. It would warn the creature should anything attempt to come slipping up his back trail, but it offered me a small advantage: Shagnasty wouldn't be able to get my scent.

He came up the hill, all wiry limbs and stiff yellow fur that seemed entirely unaffected by what must have been a long swim or by the rain that was currently falling in intermittent splatters. The racing clouds overhead parted for a few seconds, revealing a moon most of the way toward being full, and a scythe of silver light swept briefly over the hilltop.

It showed me Thomas.

The naagloshii was dragging him by one ankle. His shirt was gone, and his upper body was covered in so many fine cuts and scratches that they looked like marked roads in a particularly detailed atlas. He'd been beaten, too. One eye was swollen up until it looked like someone had stuck half of a peach against the socket. There were dark bruises all over his throat, too—he'd been strangled, maybe repeatedly, maybe for fun.

His head, shoulders, and upper back dragged on the ground, and his arms followed limply along. When the naagloshii stopped walking, I saw his head move a little, maybe trying to spot some way to escape. His hair was still soaking wet and clinging to his head. I heard him let out a weak, wet cough.

He was alive. Beaten, tortured, half drowned in the icy water of Lake Michigan—but he was *alive*.

I felt my hands clench as a hot and hungry anger suddenly burned through me. I hadn't planned on trying to take the naagloshii alone. I'd wanted Lara and her people and every member of the Council present to be there, too. That had been part of the plan: establish a common interest by showing them that they had a common enemy. Then take the naagloshii on with overwhelming force and force it to flee, at the very least, so that we could recover Thomas. I just hadn't counted on the traitor showing up in such numerical strength.

Taking the naagloshii on alone would be a fool's mistake. Anger might make a man bolder than he would be otherwise. It was possible that I could use it to help fuel my magic, as well—but anger alone wouldn't give a man skill or strength that he didn't have already, and it wouldn't grant a mortal wizard undeniable power.

All it could do was get me killed if I let it control me. I swallowed down my outrage and forced myself to watch the naagloshii with cold, dispassionate eyes. Once I had a better opportunity, once I had spotted something that might give me a real chance at victory, I would strike, I promised my rage. I'd hit it with the best sucker punch of my life, backed by the ambient energy of Demonreach.

I focused my whole concentration on the skinwalker, and waited.

The skinwalker, I realized a moment later, was enormously powerful. I'd known that already, of course, but I hadn't been able to appreciate the threat it represented beyond the purely physical, even though I'd viewed it through my Sight.

(That memory welled up again, trying to club me unconscious as it had before. It was difficult, but I shoved it away and ignored it.)

Through Demonreach, I could appreciate its presence in a more tactile sense. The skinwalker was virtually its own ley line, its own well of power. It had so much metaphysical mass that the dark river of energy flowing up from beneath the tower was partially disrupted by its presence, in much the same way as the moon causes tidal shifts. The island reflected that disruption in many subtle ways. Animals fled from the naagloshii as they might from the scent of a forest fire. Insects fell silent. Even the trees themselves seemed to grow hushed and quiet, despite the cold wind that should have been causing their branches to creak, their leaves to whisper.

It paced up to the cottage, where Morgan and my apprentice were hiding, and something odd happened.

The stones of the cottage began to glimmer with streamers of fox fire. It wasn't a lot of light, only enough to be noticeable in the darkness, but as the naagloshii took another step forward, the fox fire brightened and resolved itself into symbols, written on each stone in gentle fire. I had no idea what script it was written in. I had never seen the symbols before.

The naagloshii stopped in its tracks, and another flicker of moonlight showed me that it had bared its teeth. It took another step forward, and the symbols brightened even more. It let out a low, snarling noise, and tried to take another step.

Suddenly, its wiry fur was plastered tight to the front of its body, and it seemed unable to take another step forward. It stood there with one leg lifted and let out a spitting curse in a language I did not know. Then it retreated several steps, snarling, and turned to the tower. It approached the ruined tower a bit more warily than it had the cottage, and once again those flowing sigils appeared upon the stones, somehow seeming to repulse the naagloshii before it could get closer than eight or ten feet to it.

It let out a frustrated sound, muttered something to itself, and flicked out a hand, sending unseen streamers of power fluttering toward the tower. The symbols only seemed to glow brighter for a moment, as if absorbing the magic that the skinwalker had presumably meant to disrupt them.

It cursed again, and then lifted Thomas idly, as though it planned on smashing its way through the stones using Thomas's skull. Then it glanced at my brother, cursed some more, and shook its head, muttering darkly to itself. It fell back from the tower, clearly frustrated, and just as clearly familiar with the symbols that allowed the stones to shed the power of a skinwalker as swiftly and as easily as they shed rainwater.

Demonreach's alien presence rarely seemed to convey anything understandable about itself—but for a few instants it did. As the skinwalker retreated, the island's spirit allowed itself a brief moment of smug satisfaction.

What the hell was that stuff?

Never mind. It didn't matter. Or, rather, it could wait for further investigation. The important thing was that the game had just changed.

I no longer had to get Thomas away from the skinwalker and then find a way to defeat it. All I had to do was get Thomas *away*. If I could grab my brother and drag him into the circle of the broken tower or into the sheltering walls of the cottage, it seemed as though we would be fine. If the very stones of the cottage repulsed the skinwalker's presence, then all

we'd need to do is let Molly activate the crystal and wait the naagloshii out. Regardless of the outcome of this night's battle, the Council *would* win the day, eventually—and even the worst thing they might do to us would be a better fate than the skinwalker would mete out.

In an instant of rational clarity, I acknowledged to myself that there were about a million things that could go wrong with that plan. On the other hand, that plan had a significant

advantage—there was at least *one* thing that could go *right*, which was exactly one more right thing than the previous “take back my brother away and beat the skinwalker up” plan could produce if I tried it unassisted.

I might actually pull this one off.

“Wizard,” the skinwalker called. It faced the cottage and began walking in a slow circle around it. “Wizard. Come forth. Give me the doomed warrior.”

I didn't answer him, naturally. I was busy changing position. If he kept pacing a circle around the cottage, he would walk between me and the empty doorway. If I timed it right, I might be able to unleash a kinetic blast that would rip Thomas out of its grip and throw him into the cottage.

Of course, it might also *fail* to rip Thomas out of the skinwalker's grip, in which case it might whiplash his limp body severely enough to break his neck. Or it might succeed and hit him hard enough to stop his heart or collapse a lung. And if my aim was off, I might be blasting Thomas out of the skinwalker's hands and into a stone wall. Given how badly off he looked at the moment, that might well kill him.

Of course, the skinwalker *would* kill him if I did nothing.

So, I would just have to be perfect.

I got into position and licked my lips nervously. It was harder to work with pure, raw kinetic energy, with force, than almost any other kind of magic. Unlike using fire or lightning, summoning up pure force required that everything in the spell had to come from the wizard's mind and will. Fire, once called, would behave exactly like fire unless you worked to make it otherwise. Ditto lightning. But raw will had no basis in the natural order, so the visualization of it had to be particularly vivid and intent in the mind of the wizard using it.

That was one reason I usually used my staff, or another article, to help focus my concentration when I worked with force. But my staff was several minutes away, and my kinetic energy rings, while powerful enough to handle the job, were essentially designed to send out lances of destructive energy—to hurt things. And I hadn't designed the magic that supported them with on-the-fly modifications in mind. I couldn't soften the blow, so to speak, if I worked with the rings. I could kill Thomas if I used them.

"Wizard!" the naagloshii growled. "I grow weary of this! I have come to honor the exchange of prisoners! Do not force me to take what I want!"

Just a few more steps, and it would be in position.

My legs were shaking. My hands were shaking.

I stared at them in shock for a second, and realized that I was terrified. The mind specter of the skinwalker hammered at the doors of my thoughts and raked savagely at my concentration. I remembered the havoc it had wrought, the lives it had taken, and how easily it had avoided or overcome every threat that had been sent its way.

Anything less than a flawless execution of the spell could cost my brother his life. What if the skinwalker was good enough to sense it coming? What if I misjudged the amount of

force I needed to use? What if I *missed*? I wasn't even using a tool to help me focus the power—and my control was a little shaky on the best of days.

What about the seconds after the spell? Even if I managed to do it right, it would leave me out in the open, with a vengeful and enraged naagloshii to keep me company. What would it do to me? The image of the half-cooked Lara ripping out Madeline's intestines burned in my thoughts. Somehow I knew that the naagloshii would do worse. A lot worse.

Then came the nastiest doubt of all: what if this had all been for nothing? What if the traitor escaped while I flailed around here? What if the politics of power meant that Morgan would pay the price for LaFortier's death despite everything?

God. I really wanted that cold beer and a good book.

"Don't screw this up," I whispered to myself. "Don't screw it up."

The skinwalker passed in front of the empty cottage doorway.

And, a second later, he dragged Thomas into line between the doorway and me.

I lifted my right hand, focusing my will and aligning my thoughts, while the constantly shifting numbers and formulae of force calculation went spinning through my head.

I suddenly spread my fingers and called, "*Forzare!*"

Chapter Forty-five

The naagloshii walked over to me and stood there, smiling, as its inhuman features shifted and contorted, from something bestial back toward something almost human. It probably made it easier to talk.

“That was hardly pathetic at all,” it murmured. “Who gifted you with the life fire, little mortal?”

“Doubt you know him,” I responded. It was an effort to speak, but I was used to meeting the rigorous demands of life as a reflexive smart-ass. “He’d have taken you out.”

The skinwalker’s smile widened. “I find it astonishing that you could call forth the very fires of creation—and yet have no faith with which to employ them.”

“Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “I get sick of sadistic twists like you.”

It tilted its head. It dragged its claws idly across the stone, sharpening them. “Oh?”

“You like seeing someone dangling on a hook,” I said. “It gets you off. And once I’m dead, the fun’s over. So you feel like you have to drag things out with a conversation.”

“Are you so eager to leave life, mortal?” the naagloshii purred.

“If the alternative is hanging around here with *you*, I sure as hell am,” I replied. “Get it over with or buzz off.”

Its claws moved, pure, serpentine speed, and my face suddenly caught on fire. It hurt too much to scream. I doubled up, clutching my hands at the right side of my face, and felt my teeth grinding together.

“As you wish,” the naagloshii said. It leaned closer. “But let me leave you with this thought, little spirit caller. You think you’ve won a victory by taking the phage from my hands. But

he was hanging meat for me for more than a day, and I left *nothing* behind. You don’t have *words* for the things I did to him.” I could hear its smile widening. “It is starving. Mad with

hunger. And I smell a young female caller inside the hogan,” it purred. “I was considering throwing the phage inside with her before you so kindly saved me the bother. Meditate upon *that* on your way to eternity.”

Even through the pain and the fear, my stomach twisted into frozen knots.

Oh, God.

Molly.

I couldn’t see out of my right eye, and I couldn’t feel anything but pain. I turned my head far to the right so that my left eye could focus on the naagloshii crouching over me, its long fingers, tipped with bloodied black claws, twitching in what was an almost sexual anticipation.

I didn’t know if anyone had ever thrown a death curse backed by soulfire. I didn’t know if using my own soul as fuel for a final conflagration would mean that it never went to wherever it is souls go once they’re finished here. I just knew that no matter what happened, it wasn’t going to hurt for much longer, and that I wanted to wipe that grin off the skinwalker’s face before I went.

I wasn’t sure how defiant you could look with a one-eyed stare, but I did my best, even as I prepared the blast that would burn the life from my body as I unleashed it.

Then there was a blur of light, and something darted past the naagloshii’s back. It tensed and let out a snarl of surprise, whirling away from me to stare after the source of light. Its back, I saw, bore a long and shallow wound, straight across its hunched shoulders, as narrow and fine as if cut by a scalpel.

Or a box knife.

Toot-toot whirled about in midair, a bloodied utility knife clutched in one hand like a spear. He lifted a tiny trumpet to his lips and piped out a shrill challenge, the notes of a cavalry charge in high-pitched miniature. “Avaunt, villain!” he cried in a shrill, strident tone. Then he darted at the skinwalker again.

The naagloshii roared and swept out a claw, but Toot evaded the blow and laid a nine-inch-long slice up the skinwalker’s arm.

It whirled on the tiny faerie in a sudden fury, its form shifting, becoming more feline, though it kept the long forelimbs. It pursued Toot, claws snatching—but my miniature captain of the guard was always a hairsbreadth ahead.

“Toot!” I called, as loudly as I was able. “Get out of there!”

The naagloshii spat out an acidic-sounding curse as Toot avoided its claws again, and slapped a hand at the air itself, hissing out words in an alien tongue. The wind rose in a sudden, spiteful little gale, and it hammered Toot’s tiny body from the air. He crashed into a patch of blackberry bushes at the edge of the clearing, and the sphere of light around him winked out with a dreadfully sudden finality.

The naagloshii turned, kicking dirt back toward the fallen faerie with its hind legs. Then it stalked toward me again, seething in fury. I watched him come, knowing that there was nothing I could do.

At least I’d gotten Thomas away from the bastard.

The naagloshii’s yellow eyes burned with hate as it closed the distance and lifted its claws.

“Hey,” said a quiet voice. “Ugly.”

I turned and stared across the small clearing at the same time the skinwalker did.

I don’t know how Injun Joe managed to get through the ring of attackers and to the summit of the hill, but he had. He stood there in moccasins, jeans, and a buckskin shirt decorated with bone beads and bits of turquoise. His long silver hair hung in its customary braid, and the bone beads of his necklace gleamed pale in the night’s gloom.

The naagloshii faced the medicine man without moving.

The hilltop was completely silent and still.

Then Listens-to-Wind smiled. He hunkered down and rubbed his hands in some mud and loose earth that lightly covered the rocky summit of the hill. He cupped his hands, raised them to just below his face, and inhaled through his nose, breathing in the scent of the earth. Then he rubbed his hands slowly together, the gesture somehow reminding me of a man preparing to undertake heavy routine labor.

He rose to his feet again, and said, calmly, “Mother says you have no place here.”

The naagloshii bared its fangs. Its growl prowled around the hilltop like a beast unto itself.

Lightning flashed overhead with no accompanying rumble of thunder. It cast a harsh, eerily silent glare down on the skinwalker. Listens-to-Wind turned his face up to the skies and cocked his head slightly. “Father says you are ugly,” he reported. He narrowed his eyes and straightened his shoulders, facing the naagloshii squarely as thunder rolled over the island, lending a monstrous growling undertone to the old man’s voice. “I give you this chance. Leave. Now.”

The skinwalker snarled. “Old spirit caller. The failed guardian of a dead people. I do not fear you.”

“Maybe you should,” Listens-to-Wind said. “The boy almost took you, and he doesn’t even know the Diné, much less the Old Ways. Begone. Last chance.”

The naagloshii let out a warbling growl as its body changed, thickening, growing physically thicker, more powerful-looking. “You are not a holy man. You do not follow the Blessing Way. You have no power over me.”

“Don’t plan to bind or banish you, old ghost,” Injun Joe said. “Just gonna kick your ass up between your ears.” He clenched his hands into fists and said, “Let’s go.”

The skinwalker let out a howl and hurled its arms forward. Twin bands of darkness cascaded forth, splintering into dozens and dozens of shadowy serpents that slithered through the night air in a writhing cloud, darting toward Listens-to-Wind. The medicine man didn’t flinch. He lifted his arms to the sky, threw back his head, and sang in the wavering, high-pitched fashion of the native tribes. The rain, which had vanished almost entirely, came down again in an almost solid sheet of water that fell on maybe fifty square yards of hilltop, drenching the oncoming swarm of sorcery and melting it to nothing before it could become a threat.

Injun Joe looked back down again at the naagloshii. “That the best you got?”

The naagloshii snarled more words in unknown tongues, and began flinging power with both arms. Balls of fire like the one I had seen at Château Raith were followed by crackling spheres of blue sparks and wobbling green spheres of what looked like Jell-O and smelled like sulfuric acid. It was an impressive display of evocation. Had a kitchen sink gone flying toward Listens-to-Wind, conjured from who knows where, it wouldn’t have startled me. The naagloshii pulled out all the stops, hurling enough raw power at the small, weathered medicine man to scour the hilltop clean to the bedrock.

I have no idea how the old man countered it all, even though I watched him do it. Again he sang, and this time shuffled his feet in time with the music, bending his old body forward and back again, the motions obviously slowed and muted by his age but just as obviously part of a dance. He was wearing a band of bells on his ankles, and another on each wrist, and they jingled in time with his singing.

All of that power coming at him seemed unable to find a mark. Fire flashed by him as his feet shuffled and his body swayed without so much as singeing a hair. Crackling balls of lightning vanished a few feet in front of him, and resumed their course a few feet beyond him, apparently without crossing the space between. Globes of acid wobbled in flight and splattered over the earth, sizzling and sending up clouds of choking vapors, but not actually doing him any harm. The defense was elegant. Rather than trying to match force against force and power against power, the failure of the incoming sorcery to harm Listens-to-Wind seemed like part of the natural order, as if the world was a place in which such a thing was perfectly normal, reasonable, and expected.

But as the naagloshii hurled agony and death in a futile effort to overcome Listens-to-Wind’s power, it was also striding forward, closing the distance between them, until it stood less than twenty feet from the old medicine man. Then its eyes glittered with a terrible joy, and with a roar it hurled itself physically upon the old man.

My heart leapt into my throat. Listens-to-Wind might not have come down on my side in this matter, but he had helped me more than once in the past, and was one of the few wizards to hold Ebenezer McCoy's respect. He was a decent man, and I didn't want to see him get hurt in my defense. I tried to cry out a warning, and as I did, I caught the look on his face as the naagloshii pounced.

Injun Joe was smiling a fierce, wolfish smile.

The naagloshii came down, its mouth stretching into a wolflike muzzle, extending claws on all four of its limbs as it prepared to savage the old man.

But Listens-to-Wind spoke a single word, his voice shaking the air with power, and then *his* form melted and shifted, changing as fluidly as if he'd been made of liquid mercury that until that moment had only been held in the shape of an old man by an effort of will. His form simply resolved itself into something different, as naturally and swiftly as taking a deep breath.

When the naagloshii came down, it didn't sink its claws into a leathery old wizard.

Instead, it found itself muzzle to muzzle with a brown bear the size of a minibus.

The bear let out a bone-shaking roar and surged forward, overwhelming the naagloshii with raw mass and muscle power. If you've ever seen a furious beast like that in action, you know that it isn't something that can be done justice in any kind of description. The volume of the roar, the surge of implacable muscle beneath heavy pelt, the flash of white fangs and glaring red-rimmed eyes combine into a whole that is far greater than the sum of its parts. It's terrifying, elemental, touching upon some ancient instinctual core inside every human alive that remembers that such things equal terror and death.

The naagloshii screamed, a weird and alien shriek, and raked furiously at the bear, but it had outsmarted itself. Its long, elegantly sharp claws, perfect for eviscerating soft-skinned humans, simply did not have the mass and power they needed to force their way through the bear's thick pelt and the hide beneath, much less the depth to cut through layers of fat and heavy muscle. It might as well have strapped plastic combs to its limbs, for all the good its claws did it.

The bear seized the skinwalker's skull in its vast jaws, and for a second, it looked like the fight was over. Then the naagloshii blurred, and where a vaguely simian creature had been an instant before, there was only a tiny flash of urine yellow fur, a long, lean creature like a ferret with oversized jaws. It wiggled free of the huge bear and evaded two slaps of its giant paws, letting out a defiant, mocking snarl as it slid free.

But Injun Joe wasn't done yet, either. The bear lifted itself into a ponderous leap, and came down to earth again as a coyote, lean and swift, that raced after the ferret nimbly, fangs bright. It rushed after the fleeing ferret—which suddenly turned, jaws opening wide, and then wider, and wider, until an alligator coated in sparse tufts of yellow fur turned to meet the onrushing canine, which found itself too close to turn aside.

The canine form melted as it shot toward the alligator's maw, and a dark-winged raven swept into the jaws and out the far side as they snapped shut. The raven turned its head and let out mocking caws of laughter as it flew away, circling around the clearing.

The alligator shuddered all over, and became a falcon, golden and swift, its head marked by tufts of yellowish fur that almost looked like the naagloshii's ears had in its near-human form. It hurtled forward with supernatural speed, vanishing behind a veil as it flew.

I heard the raven's wings beat overhead as it circled cautiously, looking for its enemy—and then was struck from behind by the falcon's claws. I watched in horror as the hooked beak descended to rip at the captured raven—and met the spiny, rock-hard back of a snapping turtle. A leathery head twisted and jaws that could cut through medium-gauge wire clamped onto the naagloshii-falcon's leg, and it let out another alien shriek of pain as the two went plummeting to the earth together.

But in the last few feet, the turtle shimmered into the form of a flying squirrel, limbs extended wide, and it converted some of its falling momentum into forward motion, dropping to a roll as it hit the ground. The falcon wasn't so skilled. It began to change into something else, but struck the stony earth heavily before it could finish resolving into a new form.

The squirrel whirled, bounded, and became a mountain lion in midleap, landing on the stunned, confused mass of feathers and fur that was the naagloshii. Fangs and claws tore, and black blood stained the ground to the sound of more horrible shrieks. The naagloshii coalesced into an eerie shape, four legs and batlike wings, with eyes and mouths everywhere. All the mouths were screaming, in half a dozen different voices, and it managed to tear its way free of the mountain lion's grip and go flapping and tumbling awkwardly across the ground. It staggered wildly and began to leap clumsily into the air, bat wings beating. It looked like an albatross without enough headwind, and the mountain lion was hard on its heels the whole way, claws lashing out to tear and rake.

The naagloshii disappeared into the darkness, its howls drifting up in its wake as it fled. It continued to scream in pain, almost sobbing, as it rushed down the slope toward the lake. Demonreach followed its departure with a surly sense of satisfaction, and I couldn't say that I blamed it.

The skinwalker fled the island. Its howls drifted on the night wind for a time, and then they were gone.

The mountain lion stared in the direction that the naagloshii had fled for long moments. Then he sat down, his head hanging, shivered, and became Injun Joe once more. The old man was sitting on the ground, supporting himself with both hands. He stood up slowly, and a bit stiffly, and one of his arms looked like it might be broken midway between wrist and elbow. He continued to look after his routed opponent, then snorted once and turned to walk carefully over to me.

"Wow," I told him quietly.

He lifted his chin slightly. For a moment, pride and power shone in his dark eyes. Then he smiled tiredly at me, and was only a calm, tired-looking old man again. "You claimed this place as a sanctum?" he asked.

I nodded. "Last night."

He looked at me, and couldn't seem to make up his mind whether to laugh in my face or slap me upside the head. "You don't get into trouble by halves, do you, son?"

"Apparently not," I slurred. I spat blood from my mouth. There was a lot of that, at the moment. My face hadn't stopped hurting just because the naagloshii was gone.

Injun Joe knelt down beside me and examined my wounds in a professional manner. "Not life-threatening," he assured me. "We need your help."

"You're kidding," I said. "I'm tapped. I can't even walk."

"All you need is your mind," he said. "There are trees around the battle below. Trees that are under strain. Can you feel them?"

He'd barely said the words when I felt them through my link to the island's spirit. There were fourteen trees, in fact, most of them old willows near the water. Their branches were bowed down, sagging beneath enormous burdens.

"Yeah," I said. My voice sounded distant to me, and full of detached calm.

"The island can be most swiftly rid of the beings in them," Injun Joe said. "If it withdraws the water from the earth beneath those trees for a time."

"So?" I said. "How am I supposed to—"

I broke off in midsentence as I felt Demonreach respond. It seemed to seize upon Injun Joe's words, but then I understood that nothing of the sort had happened. Demonreach had understood Injun Joe only because it had understood the thoughts that those words created in my head. Communication by sound was a concept so inelegant and cumbersome and alien to the island's spirit that it could never have truly happened. But my thoughts—those it could grasp.

I could all but feel the soil shifting, settling slightly, as the island withdrew the water in the ground beneath those trees. It had the predictable side effect that I realized Injun Joe had been going for. Once the ground around the trees' roots had become arid, it began to leach water from the trees themselves, drawing it back out through the same capillary action that had brought it in. It flowed in from the outermost branches most quickly, leaving the structures behind it dry.

And brittle.

Tree branches began to break with enormous, popping cracks. A *lot* of branches broke, dozens, all within a few seconds, and it was like listening to packs of firecrackers going off. There was a sudden cacophony of thunder and gunfire that rose up from the docks below, and flashes of light that threw bizarre shadows against the clouds overhead.

I tried to focus on my other knowledge of the island, and I felt it—the surge in energy being released below, the increased flow of strange blood into the ground beneath the affected trees—blood that they drank thirstily, in their sudden drought conditions. The Wardens were moving forward, into the tree line. The vampires were racing ahead of them, their steps the light, swift stride of predators on the trail of wounded prey. Strange things were dying in the trees, amidst bursts of magic and flurries of gunfire.

A light rose over the island, a bright silver star that hung in the air for a long moment, like a flare.

Once he saw that, Injun Joe's shoulders sagged a little, and he let out a slow, relieved breath. "Good. Good, that's done for them." He shook his head and looked at me. "You're a mess, boy. Do you have any supplies here?"

I tried to sit up and couldn't. "The cottage," I blurted. "Molly. Thomas—the vampire." I looked toward the bushes where one loyal little guardian had bought me precious seconds in the thick of the fight and started pushing my way to my feet. "Toot."

"Easy," Listens-to-Wind said. "Easy, *easy*, son. You can't just—"

The rest of what he had to say was drowned out by a vast roaring noise, and everything, all my thoughts and fears, stopped making any noise at all inside my head. It was just . . . quiet. gorgeously quiet. And nothing hurt.

I had time to think to myself, *I could get to liking this.*

Chapter Forty-six

I heard voices speaking somewhere nearby. My head was killing me, and my face felt tight and swollen. I could feel warmth on my right side, and smelled the scent of burning wood. A fire popped and crackled. The ground beneath me was hard but not cold. I was lying on blankets or something.

“... really no point to doing anything but waiting,” Ebenezar said. “Sure, they’re under a roof, but it’s leaking. And if nothing else, morning should take care of it.”

“Ai ya,” Ancient Mai muttered. “I’m sure we could counter it easily enough.”

“Not without risk,” Ebenezar said in a reasonable tone. “Morgan isn’t going anywhere. What’s the harm in waiting for the shield to fall?”

“I do not care for this place,” Ancient Mai replied. “Its feng shui is unpleasant. And if the child was no warlock, she would have lowered the shield by now.”

“No!” came Molly’s voice. It sounded weirdly modulated, as if being filtered through fifty feet of a corrugated pipe and a kazoo. “I’m not dropping the shield until Harry says it’s okay.” After a brief pause she added, “Uh, besides. I’m not sure how.”

A voice belonging to one of the Wardens said, “Maybe we could tunnel beneath it.”

I exhaled slowly, licked my cracked lips, and said, “Don’t bother. It’s a sphere.”

“Oh!” Molly said. “Oh, thank God! Harry!”

I sat up slowly, and before I had moved more than an inch or two, Injun Joe was supporting me. “Easy, son,” he said. “Easy. You’ve lost some blood, and you got a knot on your head that would knock off a hat.”

I felt really dizzy while he said that, but I stayed up. He passed me a canteen and I drank, slowly and carefully, one swallow at a time. Then I opened my eyes and glanced around me.

We were all in the ruined cottage. I sat on the floor near the fireplace. Ebenezar sat on the hearth in front of the fireplace, his old wooden staff leaned up against one shoulder. Ancient Mai stood on the opposite side of the cottage from me, flanked by four Wardens.

Morgan lay on the bedroll where I’d left him, unconscious or asleep, and Molly sat cross-legged on the floor beside him, holding the quartz crystal in both hands. It shimmered with a calm white light that illuminated the interior of the cottage much more thoroughly than the fire did, and a perfectly circular dome of light the size of a small camping tent enclosed both Morgan and my apprentice in a bubble of defensive energy.

“Hey,” I said to Molly.

“Hey,” she said back.

“I guess it worked, huh?”

Her eyes widened. “You didn’t know if it would?”

“The design was sound,” I said. “I’d just never had the chance to field-test it.”

“Oh,” Molly said. “Um. It worked.”

I grunted. Then I looked up at Ebenezar. “Sir.”

“Hoss,” he said. “Glad you could join us.”

“We waste time,” Ancient Mai said. She looked at me and said, “Tell your apprentice to drop the shield at once.”

“In a minute.”

Her eyes narrowed, and the Wardens beside her looked a little more alert.

I ignored her and asked Molly, “Where’s Thomas?”

“With his family,” said a calm voice.

I looked over my shoulder to see Lara Raith standing in the doorway, a slender shape wrapped in one of the blankets from a bunk on the *Water Beetle*. She looked as pale and lovely as ever, though her hair had been burned down close to her scalp. Without it to frame her face, there was a greater sense of sharp, angular gauntness to her features, and her grey eyes seemed even larger and more distinct. “Don’t worry, Dresden. Your cat’s-paw will live to be manipulated another day. My people are taking care of him.”

I tried to find something in her face that would tell me anything else about Thomas. It wasn’t there. She just watched me coolly.

“There, vampire,” Ancient Mai said politely. “You have seen him and spoken to him. What follows is Council business.”

Lara smiled faintly at Ancient Mai and turned to me. “One more thing before I go, Harry. Do you mind if I borrow the blanket?”

“What if I do?” I asked.

She let it slip off of one pale shoulder. “I’d give it back, of course.”

The image of the swollen, bruised, burned creature that had kissed Madeline Raith as it pulled out her entrails returned to my thoughts, vividly.

“Keep it,” I told her.

She smiled again, this time showing teeth, and bowed her head. Then she turned and left. I idly followed her progress down to the shore, where she walked out onto the floating dock and was gone.

I looked at Ebenezar. “What happened?”

He grunted. “Whoever came through the Nevernever opened a gate about a hundred yards back in the trees,” he said. “And he brought about a hundred big old shaggy spiders with him.”

I blinked, and frowned. “Spiders?”

Ebenezar nodded. “Not conjured forms, either. They were the real thing, from Faerie, maybe. Gave us a real hard time. Some of them started webbing the trees while the others kept us busy, trying to trap us in.”

“Didn’t want us getting behind them to whoever opened the gate,” Listens-to-Wind said.

“Didn’t want anyone to see who it was, more likely,” I said. “That was our perp. That was the killer.”

“Maybe,” Ebenezar said quietly, nodding. “As soon as those trees and the webbing came down, we started pushing the spiders back. He ran. And once he was gone, the spiders scattered, too.”

“Dammit,” I said quietly.

“That’s what all this was about,” Ebenezar said. “There was no informant, no testimony.”

I nodded. “I told you that to draw the real killer out. To force him to act. And he did. You saw it with your own eyes. That should be proof enough that Morgan is innocent.”

Ancient Mai shook her head. “The only thing that proves is that someone else is willing to betray the Council and has something to hide. It doesn’t mean that Morgan couldn’t have killed LaFortier. At best, it suggests that he did not act alone.”

Ebenezar gave her a steady look. Then he said, “So there is a conspiracy now—is what you’re saying? What was that you were saying earlier about simplicity?”

Mai glanced away from him, and shrugged her shoulders. “Dresden’s theory is, admittedly, a simpler and more likely explanation.” She sighed. “It is, however, insufficient to the situation.”

Ebenezar scowled. “Someone’s got to hang?”

Mai turned her eyes back to him and held steady. “That is precisely correct. It is plausible that Morgan was involved. The hard evidence universally suggests that he is guilty. And the

White Council will *not* show weakness in the face of this act. We cannot afford to allow LaFortier’s death to pass without retribution.”

“Retribution,” Ebenezar said. “Not justice.”

“Justice is not what keeps the various powers in this world from destroying the White Council and having their way with humanity,” Ancient Mai responded. “Fear does that. Power does that. They must know that if they strike us, there will be deadly consequences. I am aware how reprehensible an act it would be to sentence an innocent man to death—and one who has repeatedly demonstrated his dedication to the well-being of the Council, to boot. But on the whole, it is less destructive and less irresponsible than allowing our enemies to perceive weakness.”

Ebenezar put his elbows on his knees and looked at his hands. He shook his head once, and then said nothing.

“Now,” Ancient Mai said, turning her focus back to me. “You will instruct your apprentice to lower the shield, or I will tear it down.”

“Might want to take a few steps back before you do,” I said. “If anything but the proper sequence takes it apart, it explodes. It’ll take out the cottage. And the tower. And the top of the hill. The kid and Morgan should be fine, though.”

Molly made a choking sound.

“Hngh. Finally made that idea work, did you?” Ebenezar said.

I shrugged. “After those zombies turned up and just hammered their way through my defenses, I wanted something that would give me some options.”

“How long did it take you to make?”

“Nights and weekends for three months,” I sighed. “It was a real pain in the ass.”

“Sounds it,” Ebenezar agreed.

“Wizard McCoy,” Mai said sharply. “I remind you that Dresden and his apprentice aided and abetted a fugitive from justice.”

From behind me, Listens-to-Wind said, “Mai. That’s enough.”

She turned her eyes to him and stared hard.

“Enough,” Listens-to-Wind repeated. “The hour is dark enough without trying to paint more people with the same brush we’re going to be forced to use on Morgan. One death is necessary. Adding two more innocents to the count would be callous, pointless, and evil. The Council will interpret Dresden’s actions as ultimately to the support of the Laws of Magic and the White Council. And that will be the end of it.”

There was no expression on Mai’s face—absolutely none. I couldn’t have told you a darn thing about what was going on behind that mask. She stared at the two older wizards for a time, then at me. “The Merlin will not be pleased.”

“That is good,” Listens-to-Wind said. “No one should be pleased with this day’s outcome.”

“I’ll take Morgan into custody, Mai,” Ebenezar said. “Why don’t you take the Wardens back to the city in the boat? It should give you less trouble without me and Injun Joe on it. We’ll follow along in the other boat.”

“Your word,” Mai said, “that you will bring Morgan to Edinburgh.”

“Bring him and bring him unharmed,” Ebenezar said. “You have my word.”

She nodded her head once. “Wardens.”

Then she walked calmly out. The four Wardens fell into step behind her.

I kept track of them once they were outside. They started down the path that would lead them back to the dock.

I looked up at Listens-to-Wind. “I need your help with something.”

He nodded.

“There’s a patch of blackberry bushes out there. One of the Little Folk tried to play guardian angel for me. The naaglosh—”

“Don’t say the word,” Listens-to-Wind said calmly. “It draws power from fear, and from spreading its reputation. Referring to them by name can only increase their power.”

I snorted. “I saw you send it running. You think I’m giving it any fear?”

“Not at the moment,” Injun Joe said. “But speaking the word doesn’t accomplish anything good. Besides, it’s a sloppy habit to get into.”

I grunted. I could accept that. He’d probably phrased things that way intentionally. Besides, of the two of us, which one had a better track record against naagloshii? I decided to not be an idiot and listen to the medicine man.

“The creature,” I said, “knocked him out of the air. Maybe hurt or killed him.”

Injun Joe nodded. His broken arm had been splinted with a field dressing and wrapped in medical tape. The Wardens had probably brought their own gear. “I saw the very end of your fight. Which is why I felt it appropriate to give the creature the same treatment.” He shook his head. “It took a lion’s courage for the little one to do what he did. I already went looking for him.”

I felt a little bit sick. “Was he . . . ?”

Listens-to-Wind smiled faintly and shook his head. “Knocked senseless for a while, and wounded by blackberry thorns, though his armor protected him from the worst of it.”

I found myself barking out a short little laugh of relief. “That armor? You’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “Worst thing hurt was his pride, I think.” His dark eyes sparkled. “Little guy like that, taking on something so far out of his weight class. That was a sight to see.”

Ebenezar snorted. “Yeah. Wonder where the pixie learned that.”

I felt my cheeks coloring. “I didn’t want to do it. I had to.”

“You picked a good fight,” Listens-to-Wind said. “Not a very smart fight. But that old ghost is as close to pure evil as you’ll ever see. Good man always stands against that.”

“You had it on the run,” I said. “You could have killed it.”

“Sure,” Listens-to-Wind said. “Would have been a chase, and then more fight. Might have taken hours. Would have made the old ghost desperate. It would have started using innocents as shields, obstacles, distractions.” The old medicine man shrugged. “Maybe I would have lost, too. And while it was going on, spiders would be eating fat old hill-billies and picking their fangs clean with their bones.”

Ebenezar snorted. “Never would have happened. I don’t much care for vampires, especially not those White Court weasels, but I’ll say this much for them. They can fight, when they have a mind to. After the first rush, those bugs were a lot more careful.”

“Yeah,” I said. “They didn’t have much of a spine when they tried to stop me on the trail to Edinburgh.”

Both of the old wizards traded a look, and then Injun Joe turned back to me. “You got jumped by spiders going through the Way?”

“Yeah,” I said. I thought about it and was surprised. Had it happened so recently? “Two days ago, when I came to Edinburgh. I told you about it. The killer must have had some kind of watch put on the Chicago end of the Way, to get them into position in time to intercept me.” I let out a weary little snigger.

“What’s so funny?” Ebenezar asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “Just appreciating irony and getting punchy. I guess he didn’t want me letting the Council know where Morgan was.”

“Sounds like a reasonable theory,” Injun Joe said. He looked at Ebenezar. “Got to be somebody at Edinburgh. Cuts the suspect pool down even more.”

Ebenezar grunted agreement. “But not much. We’re getting closer.” He exhaled. “But it won’t do Morgan any good.” He stood, and his knees popped a couple of times on the way.

“All right, Hoss,” he said quietly. “I guess we can’t put this off any longer.”

I folded my arms and looked at Ebenezar evenly.

The old man’s face darkened. “Hoss,” he said quietly, “I hate this as much as you do. But as much as you don’t like it, as much as I don’t like it, Ancient Mai is right about this. The real killer will know that Morgan is innocent—but the other powers won’t. They’ll only see us doing business hard and quick, like always. Hell, it might even get the real killer enough confidence to slip up and make a mistake.”

“I told Morgan I’d help him,” I said. “And I will.”

“Son,” Injun Joe said quietly, “no one can help him now.”

I ground my teeth. “Maybe. Maybe not. But I’m not giving him to you. And I’ll fight you if you make me.”

Ebenezar looked at me and then shook his head, smiling sadly. “You couldn’t fight one of your little pixie friends right now, boy.”

I shrugged. “I’ll try. You can’t have him.”

“Harry,” said a quiet voice, weirdly mutated by the shield.

I looked up to see Morgan lying quietly on his pallet, his eyes open and focused on me. “It’s all right,” he said.

I blinked at him. “What?”

“It’s all right,” he said quietly. “I’ll go with them.” His eyes turned to Ebenezar. “I killed LaFortier. I deceived Dresden into believing my innocence. I’ll give you a deposition.”

“Morgan,” I said sharply, “what the hell are you doing?”

“My duty,” he replied. There was, I thought, a faint note of pride in his voice, absent since he had appeared at my door. “I’ve always known that it might call for me to give up my life to protect the Council. And so it has.”

I stared at the wounded man, my stomach churning. “Morgan . . .”

“You did your best,” Morgan said quietly. “Despite everything that has gone between us. You put yourself to the hazard again and again for my sake. It was a worthy effort. But it just wasn’t to be. No shame in that.” He closed his eyes again. “You’ll learn, if you live long enough. You never win them all.”

“Dammit,” I sighed. I tried to put my face in my hands and had to flinch back as my right cheek touched my skin and began to burn with pain. I still couldn’t see out of my right eye.

“Dammit, after all this. Dammit.”

The fire popped and crackled and no one said anything.

“He’s in a lot of pain,” Listens-to-Wind said quietly, breaking the silence. “At least I can make him more comfortable. And you need some more attention, too.” He put a hand on my shoulder. “Take the shield down. Please.”

I didn’t want to do it.

But this wasn’t about me.

I showed Molly how to lower the shield.

We got Morgan settled into a bunk on the *Water Beetle* and prepared to leave. Molly, troubled and worried about me, had volunteered to stay with Morgan. Listens-to-Wind had offered to show her something of what he did with healing magic. I grabbed some painkillers while we were there, and felt like I could at least walk far enough to find Will and Georgia.

Demonreach showed me where they were sleeping, and I led Ebenezar through the woods toward them.

“How did Injun Joe know about me claiming this place as a sanctum?” I asked.

“Messenger arrived from Rashid,” Ebenezar said. “He’s more familiar with what you can do with that kind of bond. So he went up to find you and get you to take those trees out from under the bugs.”

I shook my head. “I’ve never seen anyone do shapeshifting the way he did it.”

“Not many ever have,” Ebenezar said, with obvious pride in his old friend’s skills in his voice. After a moment, he said, “He’s offered to teach you some, if you want to learn.”

“With my luck? I’d shift into a duck or something, and not be able to come back out of it.”

He snorted quietly, and then said, “Not shifting. He knows more than any man alive about dealing with rage over injustice and being unfairly wronged. Don’t get me wrong. I think it’s admirable that you have those kinds of feelings, and choose to do something about them. But they can do terrible things to a man, too.” His face was distant for a moment, his eyes focused elsewhere. “Terrible things. He’s been there. I think if you spent some time with him, you’d benefit by it.”

“Aren’t I a little old to be an apprentice?”

“Stop learning, start dying,” Ebenezar said, in the tone of a man quoting a bedrock-firm maxim. “You’re never too old to learn.”

“I’ve got responsibilities,” I said.

“I know.”

“I’ll think about it.”

He nodded. Then he paused for a moment, considering his next words. “There’s one thing about tonight that I can’t figure out, Hoss,” my old mentor said. “You went to all the trouble to get everyone here. To lure the killer here. I give you a perfect excuse to roam free behind the lines with no one looking over your shoulder so you can get the job done. But instead of slipping up through the weeds and taking down the killer—which would clear up this whole business—you go up the hill and throw down with something you know damn well you can’t beat.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

Ebenezar spread his hands. “Why?”

I walked for several tired, heavy steps before answering. “Thomas got into trouble helping me.”

“Thomas,” Ebenezar said. “The vampire.”

I shrugged.

“He was more important to you than stopping the possible fragmentation of the White Council.”

“The creature was heading straight for the cottage. My apprentice and my client were both there—and he had Thomas, too.”

Ebenezar muttered something to himself. “The girl had that crystal to protect herself with. Hell, son, if it went off as violently as you said it would, it might have killed the creature all by itself.” He shook his head. “Normally, I think you’ve got a pretty solid head on your shoulders, Hoss. But that was a bad call.”

“Maybe,” I said quietly.

“No maybe about it,” he replied firmly.

“He’s a friend.”

Ebenezar stopped in his tracks and faced me squarely. “He’s *not* your friend, Harry. You might be his, but he isn’t yours. He’s a vampire. When all’s said and done, he’d eat you if he was hungry enough. It’s what he is.” Ebenezar gestured at the woods around us. “Hell’s bells, boy. We found what was left of that Raith creature’s cousin, after the battle. And I figure you *saw* what it did to its own blood.”

“Yeah,” I said, subdued.

“And that was her own *family*.” He shook his head. “Friendship means nothing to those creatures. They’re so good at the lie that sometimes maybe they even believe it themselves—but in the end, you don’t make friends with food. I been around this world a while, Hoss, and let me tell you—it’s their nature. Sooner or later it wins out.”

“Thomas is different,” I said.

He eyed me. “Oh?” He shook his head and started walking again. “Why don’t you ask your apprentice exactly what made her drop the veil and use that shield, then?”

I started walking again.

I didn’t answer.

We got back into Chicago in the witching hour.

Ancient Mai and the Wardens were waiting at the dock, to escort Ebenezar, Injun Joe, and Morgan to Edinburgh—“in case of trouble.” They left within three minutes of me tying the

Water Beetle to the dock.

I watched them go, and sipped water through a straw. Listens-to-Wind had cleaned my wounds and slapped several stitches onto my face, including a couple on my lower lip. He told me that I hadn’t lost the eye, and smeared the entire thing with a paste that looked like guano and smelled like honey. Then he’d made me a shoo-in for first place in the International Walking Wounded Idiot competition, by covering that side of my face and part of my scalp with another bandage that wrapped all the way around my head. Added to the one I needed for the damn lump the skinwalker had given me, I looked like the subject of recent brain surgery, only surlier.

Will and Georgia were sleeping it off under a spread sleeping bag on an inflatable mattress on the rear deck of the *Water Beetle*, when I walked down the dock, over to the parking lot, and up to a parked Mercedes.

Vince rolled down his window and squinted at me. “Did you curse everyone who desecrated your tomb, or just the English-speaking guys?”

“You just lost your tip,” I told him. “Did you get it?”

He passed me a manila envelope without comment. Then he leaned over and opened his passenger door, and Mouse hopped down from the passenger seat and came eagerly around the car to greet me, wagging his tail. I knelt down and gave the big beastie a hug.

“Your dog is weird,” Vince said.

Mouse was licking my face. “Yeah. Whatcha gonna do?”

Vince grinned, and for just a second, he didn’t look at all nondescript. He had the kind of smile that could change the climate of a room. I stood up and nodded to him. “You know where to send the bill.”

“Yep,” he said, and drove away.

I went back down to the boat and poured some Coke into the now-empty water bottle. I sipped at it carefully so that I wouldn’t break open one of the cuts and bleed some more. I was too tired to clean it up.

Molly fussed around the boat for a few minutes, making sure it was tied down, and then took two sets of spare shorts and T-shirts from the cabin’s tiny closet and left them where Georgia and Will would find them. She finally wound up sitting down on the other bunk across the cabin from me.

“The shield,” I said quietly. “When did you use it?”

She swallowed. “The skin—the creature threw Thomas into the cabin and he . . .” She shuddered. “Harry. He’d changed. It wasn’t . . . it wasn’t *him*.” She licked her lips. “He sat up and started sniffing the air like . . . like a hungry wolf or something. Looking around for me. And his body was . . .” She blushed. “He was hard. And he did something and all of a sudden

I wanted to just rip my clothes off. And I knew he wasn’t in control. And I knew he would kill me. But . . . I wanted to anyway. It was so *intense* . . .”

“So you popped the shield.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I think if I’d waited much longer . . . I wouldn’t have been able to think of it.” She looked up at me and back down. “He was changed, Harry. It wasn’t him anymore.”

I left nothing behind. You don’t have words for the things I did to him.

Chapter Forty-seven

Morgan's trial was held the next day, but since Scotland was six hours ahead of Chicago, I wound up getting about three hours' worth of sleep sitting up in a chair. My head and face hurt too much when I lay all the way down.

When I got back to the apartment with Molly, Luccio was gone.

I had been pretty sure she would be.

I got up the next morning and took stock of myself in the mirror. What wasn't under a white bandage was mostly bruised. That was probably the concussion grenade. I was lucky. If I'd have been standing where Lara had been when Binder's grenade went off, the overpressure would probably have killed me. I was also lucky that we'd been outdoors, where there was nothing to contain and focus the blast. I didn't feel lucky, but I was.

It could have been a fragmentation grenade spitting out a lethal cloud of shrapnel—though at least my duster would probably have offered me some protection from that. Against the blast wave of an explosion, it didn't do jack. Having gained something like respect for Binder's know-how, when it came to mayhem, I realized that he may have been thinking exactly that when he picked his gear for the evening.

I couldn't shower without getting my stitches wet, so after changing my bandages, I took a birdbath in the sink. I wore a button-up shirt, since I would probably compress my brain if I tried to pull on a tee. I also grabbed my formal black Council robe with its blue stole and my Warden's cape. I did my best to put my hair in order, though only about a third of it was showing. And I shaved.

"Wow," Molly said as I emerged. "You're taking this pretty seriously." She was sitting in a chair near the fireplace, running her fingers lightly down Mister's spine. She was one of the few people he deemed worthy to properly appreciate him in a tactile sense. Molly wore her brown apprentice's robe, and if her hair was bright blue, at least she had it pulled back in a no-nonsense style. She never wore a lot of makeup, these days, but today she was wearing none at all. She had made the very wise realization that the less attention she attracted from the Council, the better off she would be.

"Yup. Cab here yet?"

She shook her head and rose, displacing Mister. He accepted the situation, despite the indignity. "Come on, Mouse," she said. "We'll give you a chance to go before we head out."

The big dog happily followed her out the door.

I got on the phone and called Thomas's apartment. There was no answer.

I tried Lara's number, and Justine answered on the first ring. "Ms. Raith's phone."

"This is Harry Dresden," I said.

"Hello, Mr. Dresden," Justine replied, her tone businesslike and formal. She wasn't alone. "How may I help you today?"

Now that the furor of the manhunt had blown over, my phone was probably safe to talk on. But only probably. I emulated Justine's vocal mannerisms. "I'm calling to inquire after the condition of Thomas."

"He's here," Justine said. "He's resting comfortably, now."

I'd seen what terrible shape Thomas was in. If he was resting comfortably, it was because he had fed, deeply and intently, with instinctive obsession.

In all probability, my brother had killed someone.

"I hope he'll recover quickly," I said.

"His caretaker—"

That would be Justine.

"—is concerned about complications arising from his original condition."

I was quiet for a moment. "How bad is it?"

The businesslike meter of her voice changed, filling with raw anxiety. "He's under sedation. There was no choice."

My knuckles creaked as they tightened on the earpiece of the phone.

I left nothing behind. You don't have words for the things I did to him.

Chapter Forty-eight

The truly scary part wasn't that I was standing five feet away from a cloud of weapons-grade deathstone that would rip the very life force out of everything it touched. It wasn't that I had confronted someone who was probably a member of the Black Council, probably as deadly in a tussle as their members always seemed to be, and who was certainly fighting with his back to the wall and nothing to lose. It wasn't even the fact that the lights had all gone out, and that a battle to the death was about to ensue.

The *scary* part was that I was standing in a relatively small, enclosed space with nearly six *hundred* wizards of the White Council, men and women with the primordial powers of the universe at their beck and call—and that for the most part, only the Wardens among them had much experience in controlling violent magic in combat conditions. It was like standing in an industrial propane plant with five hundred chain-smoking pyromaniacs double-jonesing for a hit: it would only take one dummy to kill us all, and we had four hundred and ninety-nine to spare.

"No lights!" I screamed, backing up from where I'd last seen the cloud. "No lights!"

But my voice was only one amongst hundreds, and dozens of wizards reacted in the way I—and Peabody—had known they would. They'd immediately called light.

It made them instant, easy targets.

Cloudy tendrils of concentrated death whipped out to strike at the source of any light, spearing directly through anyone who got in the way. I saw one elderly woman lose an arm at the elbow as the mordite-laden cloud sent a spear of darkness flying at a wizard seated two rows behind her. A dark-skinned man with gold dangling from each ear roughly pushed a younger woman who had called light to a crystal in her hand. The tendril missed the woman but struck him squarely, instantly dissolving a hole in his chest a foot across, and all but cut his corpse in half as it fell to the floor.

Screams rose, sounds of genuine pain and terror—sounds the human body and mind are designed to recognize and to which they have no choice but to react. It hit me as hard as the

first time I'd ever heard it happen—the desire to be *away* from whatever was causing such fear, combined with the simultaneous engagement of adrenaline, the need to *act*, to help.

Calmly, said a voice from right beside my right ear—except that it couldn't have been there because bandages covered that side of my head completely, and it was physically impossible for a voice to come through that clearly.

Which meant that the voice was an illusion. It was in my head. Furthermore, I recognized the voice—it was Langtry's, the Merlin's.

Council members, get on the ground immediately, said the Merlin's calm, unshakable voice. *Assist anyone who is bleeding and do not attempt to use lights until the mistfiend is contained. Senior Council, I have already engaged the mistfiend and am preventing it from moving any farther away. Rashid, prevent it from moving forward and disintegrating me, if you please. Mai and Martha Liberty, take its right flank, McCoy and Listens-to-Wind its left. It's rather strong-willed, so let's not dawdle, and remember that we must also prevent it from moving upward.*

Chapter Forty-nine

Thorsen kept me from bleeding to death from the cut Peabody had given me. The Swede and his backup squad had been faced with a long run to catch up, a lot of locked gates, and the confusion we'd left in our wake. They reached me about three minutes after Morgan died. They did their best to revive Morgan, but his body had taken enough torment and lost too much blood. They didn't even bother with Peabody. Morgan had double-tapped the traitor's head with Luccio's pistol.

They bundled me off to the infirmary, where Injun Joe and a crew of healers—some of whom had gone to medical school when the efficacy of *leeches* was still being debated—were caring for those wounded in the attack.

After that, things fell into place without requiring my participation.

The Senior Council managed to contain and banish the mordite-infused mistfiend, a rare and dangerous gaseous being from the far reaches of the Nevernever, before it had killed more than forty or fifty wizards. All things considered, it could have been a lot worse, but the fact that it had been the gathering of LaFortier's former political allies who had been subject to the attack occasioned an enormous outcry of suspicion, with the offended parties claiming that the Merlin had disregarded their safety, been negligent in his security precautions, etc., etc. The fact that the attack had occurred while unmasking LaFortier's true killer was brushed aside. There was political capital to be had.

Basically the entire supernatural world had heard about LaFortier's death, the ensuing manhunt for Morgan, and the dustup during his trial, though most of the details were kept quiet. Though there was never any sort of official statement made, word got out that Morgan had been conspiring with Peabody, and that both of them had been killed during their escape attempt.

It was a brutal and callous way for the Council to save face. The Merlin decided that it was ultimately less dangerous for the wizards of the world if everyone knew that the Council responded to LaFortier's murder with a statement of deadly strength and power—i.e., the immediate capture and execution of those responsible.

But I knew that whoever Peabody had been in bed with, the people who had *really* been responsible knew that the Council had killed an innocent man, and one of their largest military assets, at that, to get the job done.

Maybe the Merlin was right. Maybe it's better to look stupid but strong than it is to look smart but weak. I don't know. I'm not sure I want to believe that the world stage bears that strong a resemblance to high school.

The Council's investigators worked more slowly than Lara's had, but they got to the same information by following the money, eventually. The Council confronted the White Court with the information.

Lara sent them the heads of the persons responsible. Literally. Leave it to Lara to find a way to get one last bit of mileage out of Madeline and the business manager's corpses. She told the Council to keep the money, too, by way of apology. The next best thing to six million in cash buys a lot of oil to pour on troubled waters.

He might have wound up with his brains splattered all over a desolate little hellhole in the Nevernever, but Peabody had inflicted one hell of a lot of damage before he was through. A new age of White Council paranoia had begun.

The Merlin, the Gatekeeper, and Injun Joe investigated the extent of Peabody's psychic infiltration. In some ways, the worst of what he'd done was the easiest to handle. Damn near every Warden under the age of fifty had been programmed with that go-to-sleep trance command, and it had been done so smoothly and subtly that it was difficult to detect even when the master wizards were looking and knew where to find it.

Ebenezar told me later that some of the young Wardens had been loaded up with a lot more in the way of hostile psychic software, though it was impossible for one wizard to know exactly what another had done. Several of them, apparently, had been intended to become the supernatural equivalent of suicide bombers—the way Luccio had been. Repairing that kind of damage was difficult, unpredictable, and often painful to the victim. It was a long summer and autumn for a lot of the Wardens, and a mandatory psychic self-defense regimen was instituted within weeks.

It was tougher for the members of the Senior Council, in my opinion, all of whom had almost certainly been influenced in subtle ways. They had to go back over their decisions for the past several years, and wonder if they had been pushed into making a choice, if it had been their own action, or if the ambiguity of any given decision had been natural to the environment. The touch had been so light that it hadn't left any lasting tracks. For anyone with half a conscience, it would be a living nightmare, especially given the fact that they had been leading the Council in time of war.

I tried to imagine second-guessing myself on everything I'd done for the past eight years.

I wouldn't be one of those guys for the world.

I was in the infirmary for a week. I got visits from McCoy, Ramirez, and Molly. Mouse stayed at my bedside, and no one tried to move him. Listens-to-Wind was a regular presence, since he was pretty much my doctor. Several of the young Wardens I had helped train stopped by to have a word, though all of them were looking nervous.

Anastasia never visited, though Listens-to-Wind said she had come by and asked after me when I was asleep.

The Gatekeeper came to see me in the middle of the night. When I woke up, he had already created a kind of sonic shield around us that made sure we were speaking in privacy. It made our voices sound like our heads were covered with large tin pails.

"How are you feeling?" he asked quietly.

I gestured at my face, which was no longer bandaged. As Listens-to-Wind had promised, my eye was fine. I had two beautiful scars, though, one running down through my right eyebrow, skipping my eye, and continuing for an inch or so on my cheekbone, and another one that went squarely through the middle of my lower lip and on a slight angle down over my chin. "Like Herr Harrison von Ford," I said. "Dueling scars and beauty marks. The girls will be lining up now."

The quip didn't make him smile. He looked down at his hands, his expression serious. "I've been working with the Wardens and administrative staff whose minds Peabody invaded."

"I heard."

"It appears," he said, choosing his words carefully, "that the psychic disruption to Anastasia Luccio was particularly severe. I was wondering if you might have any theories that might explain it."

I stared across the darkened room quietly for a moment, then asked, "Did the Merlin send you?"

"I am the only one who knows," he said seriously. "Or who will know."

I thought about it for a moment before I said, "Would my theory make any difference in how she gets treated?"

"Potentially. If it seems sound, it might give me the insight I need to heal her more quickly and safely."

"Give me your word," I said. I wasn't asking.

"You have it."

"Before he died," I said, "Morgan told me that when he woke up in LaFortier's room, Luccio was holding the murder weapon." I described the rest of what Morgan had told me of that night.

The Gatekeeper stared across the bed at the far wall, his face impassive. "He was trying to protect her."

"I guess he figured the Council might do some wacky thing like sentencing an innocent person to death."

He closed his eyes for a moment, and then touched the fingertips of his right hand to his heart, his mouth, and his forehead. "It explains some things."

"Like what?"

He held up his hand. "In a moment. I told you that the damage to Anastasia was quite extensive. Not because she had been persuaded to do violence—that much came easily to her. I believe her emotional attitudes had been forcibly altered."

"Emotional attitudes," I said quietly. "You mean . . . her and me?"

"Yes."

"Because she always believed in keeping her distance," I said quietly. "Until recently."

"Yes," he said.

"She . . . never cared about me."

He shrugged his shoulders. "There had to have been some kind of foundation upon which to build. It's entirely possible that she genuinely felt fond of you, and that something might have grown from it. But it was forced into place instead."

"Who would do that?" I shook my head. "No, that's obvious. *Why* would he do that?"

"To keep tabs on you, perhaps," the Gatekeeper replied. "Perhaps to have an asset in position to remove you, if it became necessary. You were, after all, virtually the only younger Warden who never gave Peabody an opportunity to exploit you, since you never came to headquarters. You're also probably the most talented and powerful of your generation. The other young Wardens like to associate with you, generally, so there was every chance you might notice something amiss. Taken as a whole, you were a threat to him."

I felt a little sick. "That's why she showed up in Chicago when she should have been back at headquarters helping with the manhunt."

"Almost certainly," he said. "To give Peabody forewarning if you should get closer to his trail, and to locate Morgan so that Peabody could make him disappear. Morgan dead at the hands of White Council justice is one thing. Had Peabody succeeded, killed Morgan, and gotten rid of the body, then as far as we knew the traitor would be at large in the world, and uncatchable. It would have been a continuous stone around our necks."

"And a perfect cover for Peabody," I said. "He could off whoever he wanted, and given the slightest excuse, everyone would assume that it had been Morgan."

"Not only Peabody," the Gatekeeper said. "Any of our enemies might have taken advantage of it the same way."

"And it also explains why he came to Chicago after I dropped that challenge on the Council. He probably thought that the fake informant was Anastasia. He had to go there to find out if his brainlock was holding." I shook my head. "I mean, he never needed to come through that Way since he already knew one out to Demonreach. Christ, I got lucky."

"Also true," the Gatekeeper said. "Though I would suggest that your forethought allowed you to make your own luck." He shook his head. "If Morgan had not acted so quickly, things might have been even worse. Luccio would have stood accused as well, and neither of them would have had any idea what had happened. Accusing Morgan was bad enough—the Wardens would not have stood for both the Captain and her second to be placed under arrest. It might have begun a civil war all on its own."

"Morgan . . . he loved Luccio," I said.

The Gatekeeper nodded. "He wore his heart on his sleeve for quite a while when he was younger. But she never let anyone close. In retrospect, it was a personality shift that should have been noted, though she kept her relationship with you discreet."

I snorted quietly. "Easy to expect tampering when someone turns into a foaming maniac," I said. "When someone changes by becoming happy, it's sort of hard not to be happy for them."

He smiled, a brief flash of warmth. "Very true."

"So she's . . . I mean, when you help her start fixing the damage . . ."

"It's already begun. Her subconscious has been struggling against the bindings placed in her mind for some time. Even if she'd felt something before, the fact that it was forced upon her will cause a backlash."

"Yeah," I said. "Things got sort of tense between us, I guess, after this whole situation got going. I mean, I sort of figured we'd already broken up, but . . ."

But this wasn't a case of having loved and lost. She had never loved me. Madeline's kiss, when she'd buried me in an avalanche of bliss while she took a bite from my life force, had

proved that. Anastasia hadn't ever been in love. Maybe she hadn't ever really liked me. Or maybe she *had*. Or maybe it was all of the above.

Whatever it had been, it was over now, before it could grow into anything else, and neither of us had been given much of a choice in the matter.

I hadn't expected it to hurt quite as much as it did.

Rashid put his hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you deserved to know."

"Yeah," I said, my voice rough. "Thank you. I guess." I found myself letting out a bitter little laugh.

The Gatekeeper tilted his head.

"I've been trying to work out why no one used magic on anyone at LaFortier's murder."

"What is your conclusion?"

"You can't do anything with magic that you don't really, truly believe in," I said. "Some part of Luccio had to recognize that killing LaFortier was wrong. So she used a knife. Morgan could no more have unleashed magic upon a lawfully serving Senior Council member or onto his commanding officer than he could have apologized for how he's treated me. And LaFortier never saw it coming from Anastasia. He probably died confused, never had a chance to use a spell." I looked up at the Gatekeeper. "It wasn't some big arcane, mysterious reason. It was because everyone was human."

"In my experience," he said, "that is more than mystery enough."

I was gathering my things to leave and go back home when Ebenezar appeared in the doorway. "Hoss," he said calmly. "Figured I would walk you home."

"Appreciated, sir," I told him. I had already sent Mouse home with Molly, and it was always a good idea to avoid walking the Ways alone. We started walking through the tunnels. I was heartily sick of them. I'm not claustrophobic or anything, but I think you'd need some kind of groundhog gene to enjoy living at White Council HQ.

We hadn't gone far when I realized that Ebenezar was taking a roundabout route to the Way, through tunnels that were largely unused and unlit. He conjured a dim red light to his staff, just enough to let us see our way, and in the color least likely to be noticed.

"Well," he said, "we filled LaFortier's seat on the Senior Council today."

"Klaus the Toymaker?" I asked.

Ebenezar shook his head slowly. "Klaus didn't say it, but I suspect the Merlin asked him to decline. Gregori Cristos got the seat."

I frowned. The seats on the Senior Council were awarded gerocratically. Whoever had the most years of service in the Council was offered the position of leadership, though there was nothing that required a wizard to accept a seat when it was available. "Who the hell is that? He's not up at the top of the seniority list."

My mentor grimaced. "Aye. A Greek, and an unpleasant bastard. He's lived all through southern Asia over the past couple of centuries. Distinguished himself in the battle with that rakshasa raja the Council took on recently."

"I remember when it happened," I said. "I heard it was pretty crazy."

Ebenezar grunted. "He was LaFortier's protégé."

I took that in, processing the logic. "I thought that bloc had been appeased."

"When someone wants power, you can't buy him off," Ebenezar said. "He'll take what you offer and keep on coming. And Cristos as much as told the Merlin that he and his allies would secede from the Council if he didn't get the seat."

"Jesus," I said quietly.

He nodded. "Might as well give the Red Court the keys to all our gates and let them kill us in our sleep. Fewer bystanders would get hurt."

"So the Merlin made a deal," I said.

"Didn't have a lot of choice. Cristos's people gained a lot of support after they lost so many at the trial. He'd have taken a third of the Council with him."

"Screw the selection process, huh?"

Ebenezar grimaced. "It's never been codified by anything but tradition. Oh, the Merlin made a show of adhering to it, but I guarantee you it was arranged behind the scenes, Hoss." He shook his head. "The Senior Council has issued official positions on LaFortier's assassination."

"Let me guess," I said. "Lone gunman."

He frowned at that for a moment, and then nodded. "Oh, Kennedy. Yes. It was an act of individuals motivated by profit. There is no evidence to suggest the presence of an organized conspiracy. There is no Black Council."

I stared blankly at Ebenezar. "That's . . . *stupid*."

"Damn right," he said. "But they had a majority. The Merlin, Cristos, Mai, Martha Liberty, and the Gatekeeper."

I shook my head. "What the *hell* does he think he's accomplishing?"

Ebenezar shrugged. "He's never been easy to read. And I've known him since I was sixteen years old. Two or three explanations come to mind."

"Like, maybe he's Black Council."

Ebenezar walked for several steps in silence. Then he said, "Aye."

"Or maybe Peabody got to him harder than we all think," I said.

"Impossible," Ebenezar said. "The drugs he slipped the Senior Council let him nudge them . . . us. But we're all too crusty to bend more than that."

"What then?"

"Well, Hoss," he said, "maybe Langtry's worried about the consequences of officially acknowledging the Black Council."

I felt a little chill glide over the nape of my neck. "He's worried that if enough people knew that the Black Council was real, they wouldn't line up to fight them. They'd join."

"Everyone loves a winner," Ebenezar said. "And we haven't been looking too good lately. People are afraid. Cristos is building his influence on it."

I stopped in my tracks and all but threw up on the cold stone floor.

Ebenezar stopped, putting his hand on my arm, and frowned in concern. "What is it, boy?"

"Sir," I said, hearing my voice shake. "When Peabody came to the island . . ."

"Yes?"

"He wasn't alone. Someone else came with him. Someone we never saw."

We said nothing for a long minute.

"That's only one explanation, Hoss," Ebenezar said. "It's not even a calculated estimate. It's a flat-out guess."

There was no conviction in his voice, though. Ebenezar felt the same thing I did. A hard gut feeling that left me certain—not pretty sure, but *certain*—that I was right. Besides. We were talking in whispers in an out-of-the-way corridor of our own damn stronghold. If that didn't tell you something was seriously wrong with the White Council, I don't know what would.

"They're inside," I whispered.

My mentor faced me gravely.

"That's why they whacked LaFortier. To get their own man into position." I leaned against the wall and shook my head. "They won."

"They won the round," he said. "Fight isn't over."

"It is for Morgan," I said.

"But not for you," he said with harsh intensity. "Morgan thought that saving your life was worth losing his own." Ebenezar took a deep breath. Then he said, very quietly, "Hoss, it ain't over. Some of us are going to do something about it."
I looked at him sharply. "Do something?"
"It's just a few, for now. Some wizards. Some key allies. People we know we can trust. I'm the only one who knows everyone involved. We've got to take this fight to the enemy. Learn more about them. Determine their goals. Shut them down."
"Fight fire with fire, eh?"
Ebenezar smiled wryly. "In denying the existence of one conspiracy, Langtry has necessitated another."

"And got himself a twofer with a side order of irony," I said. "If the Black Council finds out about us, they're going to jump for joy. They'll expose us, call us the Black Council, and go on their merry way."
" 'Us' already, is it?" His eyes gleamed as he nodded. "And given what we'll be doing, if the White Council finds out, they're going to call it sedition. They'll execute us."

See what I mean? Just like Disneyland.
I thought about it for a minute. "You know that in every objective sense, we're making a Black Council of our own."
"Aye."
"So where does that leave us?"
"With pure hearts and good intentions," he answered. "Our strength shall be the strength of ten."
I snorted loudly.
Ebenezar smiled wearily. "Well, Hoss, we're not going to have much choice other than to be walking down some mighty dark alleys. And doing it in mighty questionable company. Maybe we should think of ourselves as . . . a Grey Council."
"Grey Council," I said. We started walking again, and after a few minutes, I asked him, "The world's gotten darker and nastier, even in just the past few years. Do you think what we do will make a difference?"
"I think the same thing you do," Ebenezar said. "That the only alternative is to stand around and watch everything go to hell." His voice hardened. "We're not going to do that."
"Damn right we're not," I said.
We walked the rest of the way to Chicago together.

Murphy drove me down to get my car out of impound, and I caught her up on most of what had happened on the way.
"You're holding out on me," she said, when I finished.
"Some," I said. "Sort of necessary."
She glanced at me as she drove and said, "Okay."
I lifted my eyebrows. "It is?"
"You are beginning to deal with some scary people, Harry," she said quietly. "And people are trusting you with secrets. I get that."
"Thanks, Murph."
She shook her head. "I don't know, Harry. It means I'm trusting you to come to me when you've got something that intersects with my responsibilities. I'm a cop. If you screw me on

something I *should* know . . ." She shrugged. "I don't know if we could ever patch something like that up."
"I hear you," I said.
She shook her head. "I never really cared for Morgan. But I wish it hadn't ended that way for him."
I thought about that for a minute and then said, "I don't know. He went out making a difference. He took out the traitor who had gotten hundreds of wizards killed. He kept him from getting away with God only knows what secrets." I shrugged. "A lot of Wardens have gone down lately. As exits go, Morgan's was a good one." I smiled. "Besides. If he'd been around

any longer, he might have had to apologize to me. *That* would have been a horrible way to go."
"He had courage," Murphy admitted. "And he had your back."
"Yeah," I said.
"Did you go to his funeral?"

"No one did," I said. "Officially, he was *corpus non gratus*. But we had a kind of a wake, later, unofficially. Told stories about him and came to the conclusion that he really was a paranoid, intolerant, grade-A asshole."
Murphy smiled. "I've known guys like that. They can still be part of the family. You can still miss them when they're gone."
I swallowed. "Yeah."
"Tell me you aren't blaming yourself."
"No," I said, honestly. "I just wish something I'd done had made more of a difference."
"You survived," she said. "Under the circumstances, I think you did all right."
"Maybe," I said quietly.
"I went through that phone you sent me." She meant Madeline's phone, the one Binder had given me.
"What did you find?" I asked.
"The phone numbers to a lot of missing persons," she said. "Where's the owner?"
"With them."
She pressed her lips together. "There were a lot of calls to a number I traced back to Algeria, and another in Egypt. A couple of restaurants, apparently." She took an index card out of her pocket and passed it to me. It had the names and addresses of two businesses on it.
"What are they?" she asked.
"No clue," I said. "Maybe Madeline's contacts in the Black Council. Maybe nothing."
"Important?"
"No clue. I guess we'll file this under 'wait and see.'"
"I hate that file," she said. "How's Thomas?"
I shrugged and looked down at my hands. "No clue."

My apartment was a wreck. I mean, it's never really a surgical theater—except for right after Morgan had shown up, I guess. But several days of frantic comings and goings, various injuries, and serving as Morgan's sickbed had left some stains not even my faerie housekeepers could erase. The mattress wasn't salvageable, much less the bedding, or the rug we'd transported his unconscious body on. It was all soaked in blood and sweat, and the various housekeeping faeries apparently didn't do dry cleaning.

They'd taken care of the usual stuff, but there was considerable work still to be done, and moving mattresses is never joyful, much less when you've been thoroughly banged up by a supernatural heavyweight and then stabbed, just for fun, on top of it.

I set about restoring order, though, and I was hauling the mattress out to tie onto my car so that I could take it to the dump, when Luccio arrived.
She was dressed in grey slacks and a white shirt, and carried a black nylon sports equipment bag, which would hold, I knew, the rather short staff she favored and her Warden's blade, among other things. The clothes were new. I realized, belatedly, that they'd been the sort that she'd favored when I first met her, wearing another body.
"Hey," I panted. "Give me a second."

"I'll give you a hand," she replied. She helped me maneuver the mattress onto the top of the *Blue Beetle*, and then we tied it off with some clothesline. She checked the knots, making sure everything was just so, and then leaned on the car, studying my face.
I looked back at her.
"Rashid said he talked to you," she said.
I nodded. "Didn't want to push."
"I appreciate that. Quite a bit, actually." She looked off to one side. Mouse, now that the work was done, came out of a shamelessly lazy doze he'd been holding in the doorway and trotted over to Luccio. He sat down and offered her his paw.
She smiled quietly and took it. Then she ruffled the fur behind his ears with her fingers, the way she knew he liked, and stood up. "I, ah . . . I wanted to be sure you were recovering."
"That's very responsible of you," I said.

She winced. "Ah. Dammit to hell, Dresden." She shook her head. "I spent almost two hundred years *not* getting close to anyone. For damn good reasons. As can be evidenced by what happened here."
"Can it?"

She shook her head. "I was . . . distracted, by you. By . . . us, I suppose. Maybe if I hadn't been, I'd have seen something. Noticed something. I don't know."

"I kind of thought that you were distracted by the mind mage who had you twisted in knots."

She grimaced. "They're separate things. And I know that. But at the same time, I don't know that. And here I'm talking like some flustered teenager." She put her hands on her hips, her mouth set in annoyance. "I'm not good at this. Help."

"Well," I said. "I take it that you came here to let me know that you weren't going to keep pursuing . . . whatever it is we had."

"It's not because of you," she said.

"I know," I said. "Never was, was it?"

She exhaled through her nose, a slow sigh. Her eyes lingered on me. "I've always liked you, Dresden. For a long time, I thought you were dangerous. Then I saw you in action against the Heirs of Kemmler, and I respected you." She smiled slightly. "You're funny. I like that."

"But?" I asked.

"But someone pushed me toward you," she said. "And that pisses me off. And . . ." She started weeping, though her posture and her voice didn't waver. "And I thought that maybe I had broken through some kind of . . . scar. Or old wound. Or something. That I had grown closer to you, and maybe would keep growing closer to you, and it made me feel . . ." She shook her head as her voice finally broke. "Young. It made everything feel new."

I walked around the car to stand in front of her. I reached a hand toward her shoulder, but she raised hers in a gesture of denial. "But it was a lie. I'm *not* young, Harry. I'm not new. I've seen and done things that . . . that you can't understand. That I pray to God you'll never need to understand." She took a deep breath. "This is ridiculous. I should be better at handling this."

"What's wrong?" I asked quietly. "I mean, other than the obvious."

"I got to have *sex* again," she snarled. "And I liked it. I *really liked* it. I had forgotten exactly how mind-numbingly incredible sex is. And right now I'm having trouble forming complete sentences because I want to rip your shirt off and bite your shoulder while you're still sweating while you—" She broke off abruptly, her cheeks turning bright red. "You're not even *forty*."

I leaned against the car, looking at her, and started laughing quietly.

She shook her head, scowling ferociously at me, her dark eyes bright. "How am I supposed to give you orders, now?" she asked. "When you and I have . . . done all the things we've done."

"Well. What if I promise not to put the pictures on the Internet."

She blinked at me. "Pictures . . . you *are* joking, Dresden? Aren't you?"

I nodded.

"Because I had *quite* enough of that during my first young adult-hood," she said. "Italy may not have had an Internet back then, but you'd be shocked how quickly pictures can circulate even when they're painted on canvas."

"Ana," I said quietly.

She bit her lip and looked at me.

I reached out and took her hands. I squeezed them. Then I lifted them to my lips and kissed them each once, gently. "Whatever the reason, I'm happy to remember the time we had."

She blinked her eyes several times, looking up at me.

"I get it," I said. "Things have changed. And maybe that time is over. But you'll be okay. And I'll be okay. You don't have to feel guilty about that."

She lifted my hands to her lips and kissed them, once each, just as I had. A tear fell on my knuckle. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It'll be okay," I said. "It's okay."

She nodded and looked up at me. I could see the calm, collected strength of the Captain of the Wardens, ready to assume its guiding role. I could see the uncertainty of Anastasia, who hadn't been close to anyone in a long time. And maybe I could see something lonely and sad that was a part of who she had been when she was a young woman, well over a century before I was born.

"Goodbye, Harry," she whispered.

"Goodbye, Ana," I said.

She squeezed my hands and turned to walk away. She stopped after half a dozen paces and looked back.

"Dresden?"

I looked at her.

"Rashid doesn't talk much about the night Morgan died. I barely remember anything myself, after Peabody said what he said."

I knew what she was after. "He wasn't alone," I said. "I was with him. And he knew that he'd found the traitor. He was content."

Something tight in her shoulders eased. "Thank you," she said.

"Sure."

Then she turned and strode purposefully away.

I looked at the bloodstained mattress on the *Blue Beetle*, and sighed. I didn't feel like driving it anywhere. It was early. It could wait a few hours. I turned to Mouse and said, "Come on, boy. I need a beer."

We descended out of the summer heat into the relative cool of my basement apartment.

Maybe I needed two.

It took Justine more than two weeks to get me that meeting with Thomas. When she called, she was speaking in her official secretary tone again. She stipulated a public meeting place, where both of us would have the protection of the need to maintain a low profile. It was a precaution that the White Court had required of me, given how tense things had been between the Council and the White Court's leadership, of late.

I met Thomas on a Saturday afternoon outside the Great Cat House at the Lincoln Park Zoo.

As I came up, I spotted a pair of Lara's security guys, trying to blend in. Thomas was leaning on the rail that looked into this big pit where they keep a couple of tigers. He was wearing tight blue jeans, and a big loose white shirt. Every woman there and a large chunk of the guys were looking at him, with various degrees of lust, longing, interest, and seething hatred. I walked up and leaned on the rail beside him.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

We stood there watching the tigers for a few minutes.

"You asked for the meeting," he said. "What do you want?"

I arched an eyebrow. "Thomas, I want to see you. Talk to you. Be sure you're okay. You're my brother, man."

He didn't react to my words. Not at all.

I studied his profile for a few moments. Then I said, "What's wrong?"

He moved one shoulder in a careless gesture. "Nothing is wrong, per se. Unless . . . it was me."

"You? Were wrong?"

"I was an idiot to try to live the way I've been living," he said.

I looked at him sharply. "What?"

He rolled a hand in a lazy gesture. "The boutique. The constant nibbling, never sating myself. The . . ." He shrugged. "All of it."

I stared hard at him. Then I asked, very quietly, "What did the skinwalker do to you?"

"He reminded me of what I really am."

"Oh?"

Thomas turned to look at me with calm deep grey eyes. "Yes. It didn't take him long, once he set about it."

I felt sick to my stomach. "What happened?"

"He hung me up by my heels," Thomas said. "And ripped strips of skin off of me. One at a time."

I shuddered.

"It's agonizing," he said. "Not terribly dangerous to one of us. My demon didn't really have any trouble regenerating the skin—but it did become hungry. Very, very hungry." His eyes suddenly gleamed paler silver and he looked back at the tigers, which were now restlessly prowling the pit. "He'd taken a female kine to the lair where he had me prisoner. And he fed her to me."

"Hell's bells," I breathed.

Thomas watched the tigers pace. "She was lovely. Sixteen or so? I don't know, exactly. I didn't ask for her name." He spread his hands. "It was a fatal feeding, of course. I don't think I've ever really explained to you exactly what that is like."

"What is it like?" I asked in a quiet rasp.

“Like becoming light,” he said, his eyes drifting closed. “Like sinking into the warmth of a campfire when you’ve been shivering for hours. Like a hot steak after a day of swimming in cold water. It transforms you, Harry. Makes you feel . . .” His eyes became haunted, hollow. “Whole.”

I shook my head. “Thomas. Jesus.”

“Once she was gone and my body was restored, the skinwalker tortured me again, until I was in the same desperate condition. Then he fed me another doe.” He shrugged. “Rinse and repeat. Perhaps half a dozen times. He gave me young women and then put me in agony again. I was all but chewing out my own innards when he took me to the island. To tell you the truth, I barely remember it.” He smiled. “I remember seeing Molly. But you’ve taught her enough to protect herself, it seems.”

“Thomas,” I said gently.

He smirked. “If you ever get tired of her, I hope you’ll let me know.”

I stared at him, sickened. “*Thomas.*”

Author's Note

When I was seven years old, I got a bad case of strep throat and was out of school for a whole week. During that time, my sisters bought me my first fantasy and sci-fi novels: the boxed set of *Lord of the Rings* and the boxed set of Han Solo adventure novels by Brian Daley. I devoured them all during that week.

From that point on, I was pretty much doomed to join SF&F fandom. From there, it was only one more step to decide I wanted to be a writer of my favorite fiction material, and here we are.

I blame my sisters.

My first love as a fan is swords-and-horses fantasy. After Tolkien I went after C. S. Lewis. After Lewis, it was Lloyd Alexander. After them came Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny, Robert Howard, John Norman, Poul Anderson, David Eddings, Weis and Hickman, Terry Brooks, Elizabeth Moon, Glen Cook, and before I knew it, I was a dual citizen of the United States and Lankhmar, Narnia, Gor, Cimmeria, Krynn, Amber—you get the picture.

When I set out to become a writer, I spent years writing swords-and-horses fantasy novels—and seemed to have little innate talent for it. But I worked at my writing, branching out into other areas as experiments, including SF, mystery, and contemporary fantasy. That's how the Dresden Files initially came about—as a happy accident while trying to accomplish something else. Sort of like penicillin.

But I never forgot my first love, and to my immense delight and excitement, one day I got a call from my agent and found out that I was going to get to share my newest swords-and-horses fantasy novel with other fans.

The Codex Alera is a fantasy series set within the savage world of Carna, where spirits of the elements, known as furies, lurk in every facet of life, and where many intelligent races vie for security and survival. The realm of Alera is the monolithic civilization of humanity, and its unique ability to harness and command the furies is all that enables its survival in the face of the enormous sometimes hostile elemental powers of Carna, and against savage creatures who would lay Alera in waste and ruin.

Yet even a realm as powerful as Alera is not immune to destruction from within, and the death of the heir apparent to the Crown has triggered a frenzy of ambitious political maneuvering and infighting amongst the High Lords, those who wield the most powerful furies known to man. Plots are afoot, traitors and spies abound, and a civil war seems inevitable—all while the enemies of the realm watch, ready to strike at the first sign of weakness.

Tavi is a young man living on the frontier of Aleran civilization—because let's face it, swords-and-horses fantasies start there. Born a freak, unable to utilize any powers of furycrafting whatsoever, Tavi has grown up relying up on his own wits, speed, and courage to survive. When an ambitious plot to discredit the Crown lays Tavi's home, the Calderon Valley, naked and defenseless before a horde of the barbarian Marat, the boy and his family find themselves directly in harm's way.

There are no titanic High Lords to protect them, no Legions, no Knights with their mighty furies to take the field. Tavi and the free frontiersmen of the Calderon Valley must find some way to uncover the plot and to defend their homes against merciless horde of the Marat and their beasts.

It is a desperate hour, when the fate of all Alera hangs in the balance, when a handful of ordinary steadyholders must find the courage and strength to defy an overwhelming foe, and when the courage and intelligence of one young man will save the Realm—or destroy it.

Thank you, readers and fellow fans, for all of your support and kindness. I hope that you enjoy reading the books of the Codex Alera as much as I enjoyed creating them for you.

—Jim

Furies of Calderon, *Academ's Fury*, *Cursor's Fury*,

Captain's Fury, and *Princeps' Fury* are available
from Ace Books.

ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER

BIGFOOT ON CAMPUS

by JIM BUTCHER

The campus police officer folded his hands and stared at me from across the table. "Coffee?"

"What flavor is it?" I asked.

He was in his forties, a big, solid man with bags under his calm, wary eyes, and his name tag read DEAN. "It's coffee-flavored coffee."

"No mocha?"

"Fuck mocha."

"Thank God," I said. "Black."

Officer Dean gave me hot black coffee in a paper cup, and I sipped at it gratefully. I was almost done shivering. It just came in intermittent bursts now. The old wool blanket Dean had given me was more gesture than cure.

"Am I under arrest?" I asked him.

Officer Dean moved his shoulders in what could have been a shrug. "That's what we're going to talk about."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Maybe," he said in a slow, rural drawl, "you could explain to me why I found you in the middle of an orgy."

"Well," I said, "if you're going to be in an orgy, the middle is the best spot, isn't it."

He made a thoughtful sound. "Maybe you could explain why there was a car on the fourth floor of the dorm."

"Classic college prank," I said.

He grunted. "Usually when that happens, it hasn't made big holes in the exterior wall."

"Someone was avoiding the cliché?" I asked.

He looked at me for a moment, and said, "What about all the blood?"

"There were no injuries, were there?"

"No," he said.

"Then who cares? Some film student probably watched *Carrie* too many times."

Officer Dean tapped his pencil's eraser on the tabletop. It was the most agitated thing I'd seen him do. "Six separate calls in the past three hours with a Bigfoot sighting on campus. Bigfoot. What do you know about that?"

"Well, kids these days, with their Internets and their video games and their iPods. Who knows what they thought they saw."

Officer Dean put down his pencil. He looked at me, and said, calmly, "My job is to protect a bunch of kids with access to every means of self-destruction known to man from not only the criminal element but themselves. I got chemistry students who can make their own meth, Ecstasy, and LSD. I got ROTC kids with access to automatic weapons and explosives. I got enough alcohol going through here on a weekly basis to float a battleship. I got a thriving trade in recreational drugs. I got lives to protect."

"Sounds tiring."

"About to get tired of you," he said. "Start giving it to me straight."

"Or you'll arrest me?" I asked.

"No," Dean said. "I bounce your face off my knuckles for a while. Then I ask again."

"Isn't that unprofessional conduct?"

"Fuck conduct," Dean said. "I got kids to look after."

I sipped the coffee some more. Now that the shivers had begun to subside, I finally felt the knotted muscles in my belly begin to relax. I slowly settled back into my chair. Dean hadn't blustered or tried to intimidate me in any way. He wasn't trying to scare me into talking. He was just telling me how it was going to be. And he drank his coffee old-school.

I kinda liked the guy.

"You aren't going to believe me," I said.

"I don't much," he said. "Try me."

"Okay," I said. "My name is Harry Dresden. I'm a professional wizard."

Officer Dean pursed his lips. Then he leaned forward slightly and listened.

* * *

The client wanted me to meet him at a site in the Ouachita Mountains in eastern Oklahoma. Looking at them, you might not realize they were mountains, they're so old. They've had millions of years of wear and tear on them, and they've been ground down to nubs. The site used to be on an Indian reservation, but they don't call them reservations anymore. They're Tribal Statistical Areas now.

I showed my letter and my ID to a guy in a pickup, who just happened to pull up next to me for a friendly chat at a lonely stop sign on a winding back road. I don't know what the tribe called his office, but I recognized a guardian when I saw one. He read the letter and waved me through in an even friendlier manner than he had used when he approached me. It's nice to be welcomed somewhere, once in a while.

I parked at the spot indicated on the map and hiked a good mile and a half into the hills, taking a heavy backpack with me. I found a pleasant spot to set up camp. The mid-October weather was crisp, but I had a good sleeping bag and would be comfortable as long as it didn't start raining. I dug a fire pit and ringed it in stones, built a modest fire out of fallen limbs, and laid out my sleeping bag on a foam camp pad. By the time it got dark, I was well into preparing the dinner I'd brought with me. The scent of foil-wrapped potatoes baking in coals blended with that of the steaks I had spitted and roasting over the fire.

Can I cook a camp meal or what?

Bigfoot showed up half an hour after sunset.

One minute, I was alone. The next, he simply stepped out into view. He was huge. Not huge like a big person, but huge like a horse, with that same sense of raw animal power and mass. He was nine feet tall at least and probably tipped the scales at well over six hundred pounds. His powerful, wide-shouldered body was covered in long, dark brown hair. Even though he stood in plain sight in my firelight, I could barely see the buckskin bag he had slung over one shoulder and across his chest, the hair was so long.

"Strength of a River in His Shoulders," I said. "You're welcome at my fire."

"Wizard Dresden," River Shoulders rumbled. "It is good to see you." He took a couple of long steps and hunkered down opposite the fire from me. "Man. That smells good."

"Darn right it does," I said. I proceeded with the preparations in companionable silence while River Shoulders stared thoughtfully at the fire. I'd set up my camp this way for a reason—it made me the host and River Shoulders my guest. It meant I was obliged to provide food and drink, and he was obliged to behave with decorum. Guest-and-host relationships are damned near laws of physics in the supernatural world: They almost never get violated, and when they do, it's a big deal. Both of us felt a lot more comfortable around one another this way.

Okay. Maybe it did a wee bit more to make me feel comfortable than it did River Shoulders, but he was a repeat customer, I liked him, and I figured he probably didn't get treated to a decent steak all that often.

We ate the meal in an almost ritualistic silence, too, other than River making some appreciative noises as he chewed. I popped open a couple of bottles of McAnnally's Pale, my favorite brew by a veritable genius of hops, back in Chicago. River liked it so much that he gave me an inquisitive glance when his bottle was empty. So I emptied mine and produced two more.

After that, I filled a pipe with expensive tobacco, lit it, took a few puffs, and passed it to him. He nodded and took it. We smoked and finished our beers. By then, the fire had died down to glowing embers.

"Thank you for coming," River Shoulders rumbled. "Again, I come to seek your help on behalf of my son."

"Third time you've come to me," I said.

“Yes.” He rummaged in his pouch and produced a small, heavy object. He flicked it to me. I caught it and squinted at it in the dim light. It was a gold nugget about as big as a Ping-Pong ball. I nodded and tossed it back to him. River Shoulders’s brows lowered into a frown.

You have to understand. A frown on a mug like his looked indistinguishable from scowling fury. It turned his eyes into shadowed caves with nothing but a faint gleam showing from far back in them. It made his jaw muscles bunch and swell into knots the size of tennis balls on the sides of his face.

“You will not help him,” the Bigfoot said.

I snorted. “*You’re* the one who isn’t helping him, big guy.”

“I am,” he said. “I am hiring you.”

“You’re his *father*,” I said quietly. “And he doesn’t even know your name. He’s a good kid. He deserves more than that. He deserves the truth.”

He shook his head slowly. “Look at me. Would he even accept my help?”

“You aren’t going to know unless you try it,” I said. “And I never said I wouldn’t help him.”

At that, River Shoulders frowned a little more.

I curbed an instinct to edge away from him.

“Then what do you want in exchange for your services?” he asked.

“I help the kid,” I said. “You meet the kid. That’s the payment. That’s the deal.”

“You do not know what you are asking,” he said.

“With respect, River Shoulders, this is not a negotiation. If you want my help, I just told you how to get it.”

He became very still at that. I got the impression that maybe people didn’t often use tactics like that when they dealt with him.

When he spoke, his voice was a quiet, distant rumble. “You have no right to ask this.”

“Yeah, um. I’m a wizard. I meddle. It’s what we do.”

“Manifestly true.” He turned his head slightly away. “You do not know how much you ask.”

“I know that kid deserves more than you’ve given him.”

“I have seen to his protection. To his education. That is what fathers do.”

“Sure,” I said. “But you weren’t ever *there*. And that *matters*.”

Absolute silence fell for a couple of minutes.

“Look,” I said gently. “Take it from a guy who knows. Growing up without a dad is terrifying. You’re the only father he’s ever going to have. You can go hire Superman to look out for Irwin if you want to, and he’d still be the wrong guy—because he isn’t you.”

River toyed with the empty bottle, rolling it across his enormous fingers like a regular guy might have done with a pencil.

“Do you want me on this?” I asked him. “No hard feelings if you don’t.”

River looked up at me again and nodded slowly. “I know that if you agree to help him, you will do so. I will pay your price.”

“Okay,” I said. “Tell me about Irwin’s problem.”

* * *

“What’d he say?” Officer Dean asked.

“He said the kid was at the University of Oklahoma for school,” I said. “River’d had a bad dream and knew that the kid’s life was in danger.”

The cop grunted. “So ... Bigfoot is a psychic?”

“Think about it. No one ever gets a good picture of one, much less a clean shot,” I said. “Despite all the expeditions and TV shows and whatnot. River’s people have got more going for them than being huge and strong. My guess is that they’re smarter than humans. Maybe a lot smarter. My guess is they know magic of some kind, too.”

“Jesus,” Officer Dean said. “You really believe all this, don’t you.”

“I want to believe,” I said. “And I told you that you wouldn’t.”

Dean grunted. Then he said, “Usually they’re too drunk to make sense when I get a story like this. Keep going.”

* * *

I got to Norman, Oklahoma, a bit before noon the next morning. It was a Wednesday, which was a blessing. In the Midwest, if you show up to a college town on a weekend, you risk running into a football game. In my experience, that resulted in universal problems with traffic, available hotel rooms, and drunken football hooligans.

Or wait: *Soccer* is the one with hooligans. Drunken American football fans are just ... drunks, I guess.

River had provided me with a small dossier he’d had prepared, which included a copy of his kid’s class schedule. I parked my car in an open spot on the street not too far from campus and ambled on over. I got some looks: I sort of stand out in a crowd. I’m a lot closer to seven feet tall than six, which might be one reason why River Shoulders liked to hire me—I look a lot less tiny than other humans, to him. Add in the big black leather duster and the scar on my face, and I looked like the kind of guy you’d want to avoid in dark alleys.

The university campus was as confusing as all of them are, with buildings that had constantly evolved into and out of multiple roles over the years. They were all named after people I doubt any of the students had ever heard of, or cared about, and there seemed to be no organizational logic at all at work there. It was a pretty enough campus, I supposed. Lots of redbrick and brownstone buildings. Lots of architectural doohickeys on many of the buildings, in a kind of quasi-classical Greek style. The ivy that was growing up many of the walls seemed a little too cultivated and obvious for my taste. Then again, I had exactly the same amount of regard for the Ivy League as I did for the Big 12. The grass was an odd color, like maybe someone had sprayed it with a blue-green dye or something, though I had no idea what kind of delusional creep would do something so pointless.

And, of course, there were students—a whole lot of kids, all of them with things to do and places to be. I could have wandered around all day, but I thought I’d save myself the headache of attempting to apply logic to a university campus and stopped a few times to ask for directions. Irwin Pounder, River Shoulders’s son, had a physics course at noon, so I picked up a notebook and a couple of pens at the university bookstore and ambled on into the large classroom. It was a perfect disguise. The notebook was college-ruled.

I sat near the back, where I could see both doors into the room, and waited. Bigfoot Irwin was going to stand out in the crowd almost as badly as I did. The kid was huge. River had shown me a photo that he kept in his medicine bag, carefully laminated to protect it from the elements. Irwin’s mom could have been a second-string linebacker for the Bears. Carol Pounder was a formidable woman, and over six feet tall. But her boy was a head taller than she already, and still had the awkward, too-lean look of someone who wasn’t finished growing. His shoulders had come in, though, and it looked like he might have had to turn sideways to walk through doors.

I waited and waited, watching both doors, until the professor arrived, and the class started. Irwin never arrived. I was going to leave, but it actually turned out to be kind of interesting. The professor was a lunatic but a really entertaining one. The guy drank liquid nitrogen, right there in front of everybody, and blew it out his nose in this huge jet of vapor. I applauded along with everyone else, and before I knew it, the lecture was over. I might even have learned something.

Okay.

Maybe there were *some* redeeming qualities to a college education.

I went to Irwin’s next class, which was a freshman biology course, in another huge classroom.

No Irwin.

He wasn’t at his four o’clock math class, either, and I emerged from it bored and cranky. None of Irwin’s other teachers held a candle to Dr. Indestructo.

Huh.

Time for plan B.

River's dossier said that Irwin was playing football for OU. He'd made the team as a walk-on, and River had been as proud as any father would be about the athletic prowess of his son. So I ambled on over to the Sooners' practice field, where the team was warming up with a run.

Even among the football players, Irwin stood out. He was half a head taller than any of them, at least my own height. He looked gangly and thin beside the fellows around him, even with the shoulder pads on, but I recognized his face. I'd last seen him when he was about fourteen. Though his rather homely features had changed a bit, they seemed stronger, and more defined. There was no mistaking his dark, intelligent eyes.

I stuck my hands in the pockets of my old leather duster and waited, watching the field. I'd found the kid, and, absent any particular danger, I was in no particular hurry. There was no sense in charging into the middle of Irwin's football practice and his life and disrupting everything. I'm just not that kind of guy.

Okay, well.

I try not to be.

"Seems to keep happening, though, doesn't it," I said to myself. "You show up on somebody's radar, and things go to DEFCON 1 a few minutes later."

"I'm sorry?" said a young woman's voice.

* * *

"Ah," said Officer Dean. "This is where the girl comes in."

"Who said there was a girl?"

"There's always a girl."

"Well," I said, "yes and no."

* * *

She was blond, about five-foot-six, and my logical mind told me that every inch of her was a bad idea. The rest of me, especially my hindbrain, suggested that she would be an ideal mate. Preferably sooner rather than later.

There was nothing in particular about her that should have caused my hormones to rage. I mean, she was young and fit, and she had the body of the young and fit, and that's hardly ever unpleasant to look at. She had eyes the color of cornflowers and rosy cheeks, and she was a couple of notches above cute, when it came to her face. She was wearing running shorts, and her legs were smooth and generally excellent.

Some women just have it. And no, I can't tell you what "it" means because I don't get it myself. It was something mindless, something chemical, and even as my metaphorically burned fingers were telling me to walk away, the rest of me was going through that male physiological response the science guys in the Netherlands have documented recently.

Not *that* one.

Well, maybe a little.

I'm talking about the response where when a pretty girl is around, it hits the male brain like a drug and temporarily impairs his cognitive function, literally dropping the male IQ.

And hey, how Freudian is it that the study was conducted in the Netherlands?

This girl dropped that IQ-nuke on my brain, and I was standing there staring a second later while she smiled uncertainly at me.

"Um, sorry?" I asked. "My mind was in the Netherlands."

Her dimple deepened, and her eyes sparkled. She knew all about the brain nuke. "I just said that you sounded like a dangerous guy." She winked at me. It was adorable. "I like those."

"You're, uh. You're into bad boys, eh?"

"Maybe," she said, lowering her voice and drawing the word out a little, as if it was a confession. She spoke with a very faint drawl. "Plus, I like meeting new people from all kinds of

places, and you don't exactly strike me as a local, darlin'."

"You dig dangerous guys who are just passing through," I said. "Do you ever watch those cop shows on TV?"

She tilted back her head and laughed. "Most boys don't give me lip like that in the first few minutes of conversation."

"I'm not a boy," I said.

She gave me a once-over with those pretty eyes, taking a heartbeat longer about it than she really needed. "No," she said. "No, you are not."

My inner nonmoron kept on stubbornly ringing alarm bells, and the rest of me slowly became aware of them. My glands thought that I'd better keep playing along. It was the only way to find out what the girl might have been interested in, right? Right. I was absolutely not continuing the conversation because I had gone soft in the head.

"I hope that's not a problem," I said.

"I just don't see how it could be. I'm Connie."

"Harry."

"So what brings you to Norman, Harry?"

"Taking a look at a player," I said.

Her eyes brightened. "Ooooo. You're a scout?"

"Maybe," I said, in the same tone she'd used earlier.

Connie laughed again. "I'll bet you talk to silly college girls like me all the time."

"Like you?" I replied. "No, not so much."

Her eyes sparkled again. "You may have found my weakness. I'm the kind of girl who likes a little flattery."

"And here I was thinking you liked something completely different."

She covered her mouth with one hand, and her cheeks got a little pinker. "Harry. That's not how one talks to young ladies in the South."

"Obviously. I mean, you look so outraged. Should I apologize?"

"Oh," she said, her smile widening. "I just *have* to collect you." Connie's eyes sparkled again, and I finally got it.

Her eyes weren't *twinkling*.

They were becoming increasingly flecked with motes of molten silver.

Cutie-pie was a frigging vampire.

I've worked for years on my poker face. Years. It still sucks pretty bad, but I've been working on it. So I'm sure my smile was only slightly wooden when I asked, "Collect me?"

I might not have been hiding my realization very well, but either Connie was better at poker than me, or else she really was too absorbed in the conversation to notice. "Collect you," she said. "When I meet someone worthwhile, I like to have dinner with them. And we'll talk and tell stories and laugh, and I'll get a picture and put it in my memory book."

"Um," I said. "Maybe you're a little young for me."

She threw back her head and gave a full-throated laugh. "Oh, Harry. I'm talking about sharing a meal. That's all, honestly. I know I'm a terrible flirt, but I didn't think you were taking me seriously."

I watched her closely as she spoke, searching for the predatory calculation that I knew had to be in there. Vampires of the White Court—

* * *

"Wait," Dean said. "Vampires of the White Castle?"

I sighed. "White Court."

Dean grunted. "Why not just call her a vampire?"

"They come in a lot of flavors," I said.

"And this one was vanilla?"

"There's no such thing as..." I rubbed at the bridge of my nose. "Yes."

Dean nodded. "So why not just call 'em vanilla vampires?"

"I'll ... bring it up at the next wizard meeting," I said.

"So the vampire is where all the blood came from?"

"No." I sighed. "This kind doesn't feed on blood."

"No? What do they eat, then?"

"Life-energy."

"Huh?"

I sighed again. "Sex."

"Finally, the story gets good. So they *eat* sex?"

"Life-energy," I repeated. "The sex is just how they get started."

"Like sticking fangs into your neck," Dean said. "Only instead of fangs, I guess they use—"

"Look, do you want the story or not?"

Dean leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on his desk. "You kidding? This is the best one in years."

* * *

Anyway, I watched Connie closely, but I saw no evidence of anything in her that I knew had to be there. Vampires are predators who hunt the most dangerous game on the planet. They generally aren't shy about it, either. They don't really need to be. If a White Court vampire wants to feed off a human, all she really has to do is crook her finger, and he comes running. There isn't any ominous music. Nobody sparkles. As far as anyone looking on is concerned, a girl winks at a boy and goes off somewhere to make out. Happens every day.

They don't get all coy asking you out to dinner, and they sure as hell don't have pictures in a memory book.

This was weird, and long experience has taught me that when the unexplained is bouncing around right in front of you, the smart thing is to back off and figure out what the hell is going on. In my line of work, what you don't know can kill you.

But I didn't get the chance. There was a sharp whistle from a coach somewhere on the field, and football players came rumbling off it. One of them came loping toward us, put a hand on top of the six-foot chain-link fence, and vaulted it in one easy motion. Bigfoot Irwin landed lightly, grinning, and continued directly toward Connie.

She let out a girlish squeal of delight and pounced on him. He caught her. She wrapped her legs around his hips, held his face in her hands, and kissed him thoroughly. They came up for air a moment later.

"Irwin," she said, "I met someone interesting. Can I collect him?"

The kid only had eyes for Connie. Not that I could blame him, really. His voice was a basso rumble, startlingly like River Shoulders's. "I'm always in favor of dinner at the Brewery."

She dismounted and beamed at him. "Good. Irwin, this is..."

The kid finally looked up at me and blinked. "Harry."

"Heya, Irwin," I said. "How're things?"

Connie looked back and forth between us. "You *know* each other?"

"He's a friend," Irwin said.

"Dinner," Connie declared. "Harry, say you'll share a meal with me."

Interesting choice of words, all things considered.

I think I had an idea what had caused River's bad dream. If a vampire had attached herself to Irwin, the kid was in trouble. Given the addictive nature of Connie's attentions, and the degree of control it could give her over Irwin ... maybe he wasn't the only one who could be in trouble.

My, how little Irwin had grown. I wondered exactly how much of his father's supernatural strength he had inherited. He looked like he could break me in half without causing a blip in his heart rate. He and Connie looked at me with hopeful smiles, and I suddenly felt like maybe I was

the crazy one. Expressions like that should not inspire worry, but every instinct I had told me that something wasn't right.

My smile probably got even more wooden. "Sure," I said. "Why not?"

* * *

The Brewery was a lot like every other sports bar you'd find in college towns, with the possible exception that it actually was a brewery. Small and medium-sized tanks stood here and there throughout the place, with signs on each describing the kind of beer that was under way. Apparently, the beer sampler was traditional. I made polite noises when I tried each, but they were unexceptional. Okay, granted I was probably spoiled by having Mac's brew available back at home. It wasn't the Brewery's fault that their brews were merely excellent. Mac's stuff was epic, it was legend. Tough to measure up to that.

I kept one hand under the table, near a number of tools I thought I might need, all the way through the meal, and waited for the other shoe to drop—only it never did. Connie and Irwin chattered away like any young couple, snuggled up to one another on adjacent chairs. The girl was charming, funny, and a playful flirt, but Irwin didn't seem discomfited by it. I kept my responses restrained anyway. I didn't want to find out a couple of seconds too late that the seemingly innocent banter was how Connie got her psychic hooks into me.

But a couple of hours went by, and nothing.

"Irwin's never told me anything about his father," Connie said.

"I don't know much," Irwin said. "He's ... kept his distance over the years. I've looked for him a couple of times, but I never wanted to push him."

"How mysterious," Connie said.

I nodded. "For someone like him, I think the word 'eccentric' might apply better."

"He's rich?" Connie asked.

"I feel comfortable saying that money isn't one of his concerns," I said.

"I knew it!" Connie said, and looked slyly at Irwin. "There had to be a reason. I'm only into you for your money."

Instead of answering, Irwin calmly picked Connie up out of her chair, using just the muscles of his shoulders and arms, and deposited her on his lap. "Sure you are."

Connie made a little groaning sound and bit her lower lip. "God. I know it's not PC, but I've got to say—I am *into* it when you get all caveman on me, Pounder."

"I know." Irwin kissed the tip of her nose and turned to me. "So, Harry. What brings you to Norman?"

"I was passing through," I said easily. "Your dad asked me to look in on you."

"Just casually," Irwin said, his dark eyes probing. "Because he's such a casual guy."

"Something like that," I said.

"Not that I mind seeing you," Irwin said, "but in case you missed it, I'm all grown-up now. I don't need a babysitter. Even a cool, expensive one."

"If you did, my rates are very reasonable," Connie said.

"We'll talk," Irwin replied, sliding his arms around her waist. The girl wasn't exactly a junior petite, but she looked tiny on Irwin's scale. She hopped up, and said, "I'm going to go make sure there isn't barbecue sauce on my nose, and then we can take the picture. Okay?"

"Sure," Irwin said, smiling. "Go."

Once she was gone from sight, Irwin looked at me and dropped his smile. "Okay," he said resignedly. "What does he want this time?"

There wasn't loads of time, so I didn't get all coy with the subject matter. "He's worried about you. He thinks you may be in danger."

Irwin arched his eyebrows. "From what?"

I just looked at him.

His expression suddenly turned into a scowl, and the air around grew absolutely thick with energy that seethed for a point of discharge. "Wait. This is about Connie?"

I couldn't answer him for a second, the air felt so close. The last time I'd felt this much latent, waiting power, I'd been standing next to my old mentor, Ebenezer McCoy, when he was gathering his strength for a spell.

That pretty much answered my questions about River Shoulders's people having access to magical power. The kid was a freaking dynamo of it. I had to be careful. I didn't want to be the guy who was unlucky enough to ground out that storm cloud of waiting power. So I answered Irwin cautiously and calmly.

"I'm not sure yet. But I know for a fact that she's not exactly what she seems to be."

His nostrils flared, and I saw him make an effort to remain collected. His voice was fairly even. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning I'm not sure yet," I said.

"So what? You're going to hang around here butting into my life?"

I held up both hands. "It isn't like that."

"It's just like that," Irwin said. "My dad spends my whole life anywhere else but here, and now he thinks he can just decide when to intrude on it?"

"Irwin," I said, "I'm not here to try to make you do anything. He asked me to look in on you. I promised I would. And that's all."

He scowled for a moment, then smoothed that expression away. "No sense in being mad at the messenger, I guess," he said. "What do you mean about Connie?"

"She's..." I faltered, there. You don't just sit down with a guy and tell him, "Hey, your girlfriend is a vampire, could you pass the ketchup?" I sighed. "Look, Irwin. Everybody sees the world a certain way. And we all kind of ... well, we all sort of decide together what's real and what isn't real, right?"

"Magic's real," Irwin said impatiently. "Monsters are real. Supernatural stuff actually exists. You're a professional wizard."

I blinked at him, several times.

"What?" he asked, and smiled gently. "Don't let the brow ridge fool you. I'm not an idiot, man. You think you can walk into my life the way you have, twice, and not leave me with an itch to scratch? You made me ask questions. I went and got answers."

"Uh. How?" I asked.

"Wasn't hard. There's an Internet. And this organization called the 'Paranet' of all the cockamamie things, that got started a few years ago. Took me like ten minutes to find it online and start reading through their message boards. I can't believe everyone in the world doesn't see this stuff. It's not like anyone is trying very hard to keep it secret."

"People don't want to know the truth," I said. "That makes it simple to hide. Wow, ten minutes? Really? I guess I'm not really an Internetty person."

"Internetty," Irwin said, seriously. "I guess you aren't."

I waved a hand. "Irwin, you need to know this. Connie isn't—"

The pretty vampire plopped herself back down into Irwin's lap and kissed his cheek. "Isn't what?"

"The kind to stray," I said, smoothly. "I was just telling Irwin how much I'd like to steal you away from him, but I figure you're the sort who doesn't play that kind of game."

"True enough," she agreed cheerfully. "I know where I want to sleep tonight." Maybe it was unconscious, the way she wriggled when she said it, but Irwin's eyes got a slightly glazed look to them.

I remembered being that age. A girl like Connie would have been a mind-numbing distraction to me back then even if she hadn't been a vampire. And Irwin was clearly in love, or as close to it as he could manage through the haze of hormones surrounding him. Reasoning with him wasn't going to accomplish anything—unless I made him angry. Passion is a huge force when you're

Irwin's age, and I'd taken enough beatings for one lifetime. I'd never be able to explain the danger to him. He just didn't have a frame of reference ...

He just didn't know.

I stared at Connie for a second with my mouth open.

"What?" she asked.

"You don't know," I said.

"Know what?" she asked.

"You don't know that you're..." I shook my head, and said to Irwin, "She doesn't *know*."

* * *

"Hang on," Dean said. "Why is that significant?"

"Vampires are just like people until the first time they feed," I said. "Connie didn't know that bad things would happen when she did."

"What kinda bad things?"

"The first time they feed, they don't really know it's coming. They have no control over it, no restraint—and whoever they feed on dies as a result."

"So she was the threat that Bigfoot dreamed about?"

"I'm getting to it."

* * *

Irwin's expression had darkened again, into a glower almost exactly like River Shoulders's, and he stood up.

Connie was frowning at me as she was abruptly displaced. "Don't know wh—oof, Pounder!"

"We're done," Irwin said to me. His voice wasn't exactly threatening, but it was absolutely certain, and his leashed anger all but made the air crackle. "Nice to see you again, Harry. Tell my dad to call. Or write. Or do anything but try to tell me how to live my life."

Connie blinked at him. "Wait ... wait, what's wrong?"

Irwin left a few twenties on the table, and said, "We're going."

"What? What happened?"

"We're *going*," Irwin said. This time, he did sound a little angry.

Connie's bewilderment suddenly shifted into some flavor of outrage. She narrowed her lovely eyes, and snapped, "I am not your pet, Pounder."

"I'm not trying to..." Irwin took a slow, deep breath, and said, more calmly, "I'm upset. I need some space. I'll explain when I calm down. But we need to go."

She folded her arms, and said, "Go calm down, then. But I'm not going to be rude to our guest."

Irwin looked at me, and said, "We going to have a problem?"

Wow. The kid had learned a lot about the world since the last time I'd seen him. He recognized that I wasn't a playful puppy dog. He realized that if I'd been sent to protect him, and I thought Connie was a threat, that I might do something about it. And he'd just told me that if I did, he was going to object. Strenuously. No protests, no threats, just letting me know that he knew the score and was willing to do something about it if I made him. The guys who are seriously capable handle themselves like that.

"No problem," I said, and made it a promise. "If I think something needs to be done, we'll talk first."

The set of his shoulders eased, and he nodded at me. Then he turned and stalked out. People watched him go, warily.

Connie shook her head slowly, and asked, "What did you say?"

"Um," I said. "I think he feels like his dad is intruding on his life."

"You don't say." She shook her head. "That's not your fault. He's usually so collected. Why is he acting like such a jerk?"

“Issues,” I said, shrugging. “Everyone has a parental issue or two.”

“Still. It’s beneath him to behave that way.” She shook her head. “Sometimes he makes me want to slap him. But I’d need to get a chair to stand on.”

“I don’t take it personally,” I assured her. “Don’t worry.”

“It was about me,” she said quietly. “Wasn’t it? It’s about something I don’t know.”

“Um,” I said.

It was just possible that maybe I’d made a bad call when I decided to meddle between River and his kid. It wasn’t my place to shake the pillars of Irwin’s life. Or Connie’s, for that matter. It was going to be hard enough on her to find out about her supernatural heritage. She didn’t need to have the news broken to her by a stranger, on top of that. You’d think that, after years as a professional, I’d know enough to just take River’s money, help out his kid, and call it a night.

“Maybe we should walk?” I suggested.

“Sure.”

We left and started walking the streets of downtown Norman. The place was alive and growing, like a lot of college towns: plenty of old buildings, some railroad tracks, lots of cracks in the asphalt and the sidewalks. The shops and restaurants had that improvised look that a business district gets when it outlives its original intended purpose and subsequent generations of enterprise take over the space.

We walked in silence for several moments, until Connie finally said, “He’s not an angry person. He’s usually so calm. But when something finally gets to him...”

“It’s hard for him,” I said. “He’s huge and he’s very strong and he knows it. If he loses control of himself, someone could get hurt. He doesn’t like the thought of that. So when he starts feeling angry, it makes him tense. Afraid. He’s more upset about the fact that he feels so angry than about anything I said or did.”

Connie looked up at me pensively for a long moment. Then she said, “Most people wouldn’t realize that.”

I shrugged.

“What don’t I know?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not sure it’s my place to tell you.”

“But it’s about me.”

“Yeah.”

She smiled faintly. “Then shouldn’t I be the one who gets to decide?”

I thought about that one for a moment. “Connie ... you’re mostly right. But ... some things, once said, can’t be unsaid. Let me think about it.”

She didn’t answer.

The silence made me uncomfortable. I tried to chat my way clear of it. “How’d you meet Irwin?”

The question, or maybe the subject matter, seemed to relax her a little. “In a closet at a party. Someone spiked the punch. Neither of us had ever been drunk before, and...” Her cheeks turned a little pink. “And he’s just so damned sexy.”

“Lot of people wouldn’t think so,” I noted.

She waved a hand. “He’s not pretty. I know that. It’s not about that. There’s ... this energy in him. It’s chemical. Assurance. Power. Not just muscles—it’s who he is.” Her cheeks turned a little pink. “It wasn’t exactly love at first sight, I guess. But once the hangover cleared up, that happened, too.”

“So you love him?” I asked.

Her smile widened, and her eyes shone the way a young woman’s eyes ought to shine. She spoke with calm, simple certainty. “He’s the one.”

About twenty things to say leapt to my mind. I was going to say something about how she was too young to make that kind of decision. I thought about how she hadn’t been out on her own for very long, and how she had no idea where her relationship with Irwin was going to lead. I was

going to tell her that only time could tell her if she and Irwin were good for one another and ready to be together, to make that kind of decision. I could have said something about how she needed to stop and think, not make blanket statements about her emotions and the future.

That was when I realized that everything I would have said was something I would have said to a young woman in love—not to a vampire. Not only that, but I heard something in her voice or saw something in her face that told me that my aged wisdom was, at least in this case, dead wrong. My instincts were telling me something that my rational brain had missed.

The kids had something real. I mean, maybe it hadn't gotten off on the most pure and virtuous foot, but that wasn't anything lethal in a relationship. The way they related to one another now? There was a connection there. You could imagine saying their names as a unit, and it *fit*: Connie and Irwin. Maybe they had some growing to do, but what they had was real.

Not that it mattered. Being in love didn't change the facts. First, that Connie was a vampire. Second, that vampires had to feed. Third, they fed upon their lovers.

* * *

"Hold on," Dean said. "You missed something."

"Eh?"

"Girl's a vampire, right?"

"Yeah."

"So," Dean said. "She met the kid in a closet at a party. They already got it on. She done had her first time."

I frowned. "Yeah."

"So how come Kid Bigfoot wasn't dead?"

I nodded. "Exactly. It bothered me, too."

* * *

The girl was in love with Irwin, and it meant she was dangerous to him. Hell, she was dangerous to almost everyone. She wasn't even entirely *human*. How could I possibly spring something that big on her?

At the same time, how could I *not*?

"I should have taken the gold," I muttered to myself.

"What?" she asked.

That was when the Town Car pulled up to the curb a few feet ahead of us. Two men got out of the front seat. They wore expensive suits and had thick necks. One of them hadn't had his suit fitted properly—I could see the slight bulge of a sidearm in a shoulder holster. That one stood on the sidewalk and stared at me, his hands clasped in front of him. The driver went around to the rear passenger door and opened it.

"Oh," Connie said. "Marvelous. This is all I need."

"Who is that?" I asked.

"My father."

The man who got out of the back of the limo wore a pearl gray suit that made his thugs' outfits look like secondhand clothing. He was slim, a bit over six feet tall, and his haircut probably cost him more than I made in a week. His hair was dark, with a single swath of silver at each temple, and his skin was weathered and deeply tanned. He wore rings on most of his manicured fingers, all of them sporting large stones.

"Hi, Daddy," Connie said, smiling. She sounded pleasant enough, but she'd turned herself very slightly away from the man as she spoke. A rule of thumb for reading body language is that almost no one can totally hide physical reflections of their state of mind. They can only minimize the signs of it in their posture and movements. If you mentally exaggerate and magnify their body language, it tells you something about what they're thinking.

Connie clearly didn't want to talk to this man. She was ready to flee from her own father should it become necessary. It told me something about the guy. I was almost sure I wasn't going to like him.

He approached the girl, smiling, and after a microhesitation, they exchanged a brief hug. It didn't look like something they'd practiced much.

"Connie," the man said, smiling. He had the same mild drawl his daughter did. He tilted his head to one side and regarded her thoughtfully. "You went blond. It's ... charming."

"Thank you, Daddy," Connie said. She was smiling, too. Neither one of them looked sincere to me. "I didn't know you were in town. If you'd called, we could have made an evening of it."

"Spur-of-the-moment thing," he said easily. "I hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not."

Both of them were lying. Parental issues indeed.

"How's that boy you'd taken up with? Irving."

"Irwin," Connie said in a poisonously pleasant tone. "He's great. Maybe even better than that."

He frowned at that, and said, "I see. But he's not here?"

"He had homework tonight," Connie lied.

That drew a small, sly smile out of the man. "I see. Who's your friend?" he asked pleasantly, without actually looking at me.

"Oh," Connie said. "Harry, this is my father, Charles Barrowill. Daddy, this is Harry Dresden."

"Hi," I said brightly.

Barrowill's eyes narrowed to sudden slits, and he took a short, hard breath as he looked at me. He then flicked his eyes left and right around him, as if looking for a good place to dive or maybe a hostage to seize.

"What a pleasure, Mr. Dresden," he said, his voice suddenly tight. "What brings you out to Oklahoma?"

"I heard it was a nice place for perambulating," I said. Behind Barrowill, his guards had picked up on the tension. Both of them had become very still. Barrowill was quiet for a moment, as if trying to parse some kind of meaning from my words. Heavy seconds ticked by, like the quiet before a shootout in an old Western.

A tumbleweed went rolling by in the street. I'm not even kidding. An actual, literal tumbleweed. Man, Oklahoma.

Then Barrowill took a slow breath and said to Connie, "Darling, I'd like to speak to you for a few moments, if you have time."

"Actually..." Connie began.

"Now, please," Barrowill said. There was something ugly under the surface of his pleasant tone. "The car. I'll give you a ride back to the dorms."

Connie folded her arms and scowled. "I'm entertaining someone from out of town, Daddy. I can't just leave him here."

One of the guard's hands twitched.

"Don't be difficult, Connie," Barrowill said. "I don't want to make a scene."

His eyes never left me as he spoke, and I got his message loud and clear. He was taking the girl with him, and he was willing to make things get messy if I tried to stop him.

"It's okay, Connie," I said. "I've been to Norman before. I can find my way to a hotel easily enough."

"You're sure?" Connie asked.

"Definitely."

"Herman," Barrowill said.

The driver opened the passenger door again and stood next to it attentively. He kept his eyes on me, and one hand dangled, clearly ready to go for his gun.

Connie looked back and forth between me and her father for a moment, then sighed audibly and walked over to the car. She slid in, and Herman closed the door behind her.

"I recognize you," I said pleasantly to Barrowill. "You were at the Raith Deeps when Skavis and Malvora tried to pull off their coup. Front row, all the way on one end in the Raith cheering section."

"You have an excellent memory," Barrowill said.

"Got out in one piece, did you?"

The vampire smiled without humor. "What are you doing with my daughter?"

"Taking a walk," I said. "Talking."

"You have nothing to say to her. In the interests of peace between the Court and the Council, I'm willing to ignore this intrusion into my territory. Go in peace. Right now."

"You never told her, did you?" I asked. "Never told her what she was."

One of his jaw muscles twitched. "It is not our way."

"Nah," I said. "You wait until the first time they get twitterpated, experiment with sex, and kill whoever it is they're with. Little harsh on the kids, isn't it?"

"Connie is not some mortal cow. She is a vampire. The initiation builds character she will need to survive and prosper."

"If it was good enough for you, it's good enough for her?"

"Mortal," Barrowill said, "you simply cannot understand. I am her father. It is my obligation to prepare her for her life. The initiation is something she needs."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Holy ... that's what happened, isn't it? You sent her off to school to boink some poor kid to death. Hell, I'd bet you had the punch spiked at that party. Except the kid didn't die—so now you're in town to figure out what the hell went wrong."

Barrowill's eyes darkened, and he shook his head. "This is no business of yours. Leave."

"See, that's the thing," I said. "It is my business. My client is worried about his kid."

Barrowill narrowed his eyes again. "Irving."

"Irwin," I corrected him.

"Go back to Chicago, wizard," he said. "You're in my territory now."

"This isn't a smart move for you," I said. "The kid's connected. If anything bad happens to him, you're in for trouble."

"Is that a threat?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Chuck, I've got no objection to working things out peaceably. And I've got no objection to doing it the other way. If you know my reputation, then you know what a sincere guy I am."

"Perhaps I should kill you now."

"Here, in public?" I asked. "All these witnesses? You aren't going to do that."

"No?"

"No. Even if you win, you lose. You're just hoping to scare me off." I nodded toward his goons. "Ghouls, right? It's going to take more than two, Chuck. Hell, I like fighting ghouls. No matter what I do to them, I never feel bad about it afterward."

Barrowill missed the reference, like the monsters usually do. He looked at me, then at his Rolex. "I'll give you until midnight to leave the state. After that, you're gone. One way or another."

"Hang on," I said, "I'm terrified. Let me catch my breath."

Barrowill's eyes shifted color slightly, from a deep green to a much paler, angrier shade of green-gold. "I react poorly to those who threaten my family's well-being, Dresden."

"Yeah. You're a regular Ozzie Nelson. John Walton. Ben Cartwright."

"Excuse me?"

"Mr. Drummond? Charles ... in Charge? No?"

"What are you blabbering about?"

"Hell's bells, man. Don't any of you White Court bozos ever watch television? I'm giving you pop reference gold, here. Gold."

Barrowill stared at me with opaque, reptilian eyes. Then he said, simply, “Midnight.” He took two steps back before he turned his back on me and got into his car. His goons both gave me hard looks before they, too, got into the car and pulled away.

I watched the car roll out. Despite the attitude I’d given Barrowill, I knew better than to take him lightly. Any vampire is a dangerous foe—and one of them with holdings and resources and his own personal brute squad was more so. Not only that but ... from his point of view, I was messing around with his little girl’s best interests. The vampires of the White Court were, to a degree, as dangerous as they were because they were partly human. They had human emotions, human motivations, human reactions. Barrowill could be as irrationally protective of his family as anyone else.

Except that they were also *inhuman*. All of those human drives were intertwined with a parasitic spirit they called a Hunger, where all the power and hunger of their vampire parts came from.

Take one part human faults and insecurities and add it to one part inhuman power and motivation. What do you get?

Trouble.

* * *

“Barrowill?” Officer Dean asked me. “The oil guy? He keeps a stable. Of congressmen.”

“Yeah, probably the same guy,” I said. “All vampires like having money and status. It makes their lives easier.”

Dean snorted. “Every vampire. And every nonvampire.”

“*Heh*,” I said. “Point.”

“You were in a fix,” he said. “Tell the girl, you might wreck her. Don’t tell her, and you might wreck her and Kid Bigfoot both. Either way, somebody’s dad has a bone to pick with you.”

“Pretty much.”

“Seems to me a smart guy would have washed his hands of the whole mess and left town.”

I shrugged. “Yeah. But I was the only guy there.”

* * *

Forest isn’t exactly the dominant terrain in Norman, but there are a few trees, here and there. The point where I’d agreed to meet with River Shoulders was in the center of the Oliver Wildlife Preserve, which was a stand of woods that had been donated to the university for research purposes. As I hiked out into the little wood, it occurred to me that meeting River Shoulders there was like rendezvousing with Jaws in a kiddie wading pool—but he’d picked the spot, so whatever floated the big guy’s boat.

It was dark out, and I drew my silver pentacle amulet off my neck to use for light. A whisper of will and a muttered word, and the little symbol glowed with a dim blue light that would let me walk without bumping into a tree. It took me maybe five minutes to get to approximately the right area, and River Shoulders’s soft murmur of greeting came to me out of the dark.

We sat down together on a fallen tree, and I told him what I’d learned.

He sat in silence for maybe two minutes after I finished. Then he said, “My son has joined himself to a parasite.”

I felt a flash of mild outrage. “You could think of it that way,” I said.

“What other way is there?”

“That he’s joined himself to a girl. The parasite just came along for the ride.”

River Shoulders exhaled a huge breath. It sounded like those pneumatic machines they use to elevate cars at the repair shop. “I see. In your view, the girl is not dangerous. She is innocent.”

“She’s both,” I said. “She can’t help being born what she is, any more than you or I.”

River Shoulders grunted.

“Have your people encountered the White Court before?”

He grunted again.

"Because the last time I helped Irwin out ... I remember being struck by the power of his aura when he was only fourteen. A long-term draining spell that should have killed him only left him sleepy." I eyed him. "But I don't feel anything around you. Stands to reason, your aura would be an order of magnitude greater than your kid's. That's why you've been careful never to touch me. You're keeping your power hidden from me, aren't you?"

"Maybe."

I snorted. "Just the kind of answer I'd expect from a wizard."

"It is not something we care for outsiders to know," he said. "And we are not wizards. We see things differently than mortals. You people are dangerous."

"Heh," I said, and glanced up at his massive form beside mine. "Between the two of us, I'm the dangerous one."

"Like a child waving around his father's gun," River Shoulders said. Something in his voice became gentler. "Though some of you are better than others about it, I admit."

"My point is," I said, "the kid's got a life force like few I've seen. When Connie's Hunger awakened, she fed on him without any kind of restraint, and he wound up with nothing worse than a hangover. Could be that he could handle a life with her just fine."

River Shoulders nodded slowly. His expression might have been thoughtful. It was too dark, and his features too blunt and chiseled to be sure.

"The girl seems genuinely fond of him. And he of her. I mean, I'm not an expert in these things, but they seem to like each other, and even when they have a difference of opinions, they fight fair. That's a good sign." I squinted at him. "Do you really think he's in danger?"

"Yes," River Shoulders said. "They have to kill him now."

I blinked. "What?"

"This ... creature. This Barrowill."

"Yeah?"

"It sent its child to this place with the intention that she meet a young man and feed upon him and unknowingly kill him."

"Yeah."

River Shoulders shook his huge head sadly. "What kind of monster does that to its children?"

"Vampires," I said. "It isn't uncommon, from what I hear."

"Because they hurt," River Shoulders said. "Barrowill remembers his own first lover. He remembers being with her. He remembers her death. And his wendigo has had its hand on his heart ever since. It shaped his life."

"Wendigo?"

River Shoulders waved a hand. "General term. Spirit of hunger. Can't ever be sated."

"Ah, gotcha."

"Now, Barrowill. He had his father tell him that this was how it had to be. That it had to be that way to make him a good vampire. So this thing that turned him into a murdering monster is actually a good thing. He spends his whole life trying to convince himself of that." River nodded slowly. "What happens when his child does something differently?"

I felt like a moron. "It means that what his father told him was a lie. It means that maybe he didn't have to be like he is. It means that he's been lying to himself. About everything."

River Shoulders spread his hands, palm up, as if presenting the fact. "That kind of father has to make his children in his own image. He has to make the lie true."

"He has to make sure Connie kills Irwin," I said. "We've got to get him out of there. Maybe both of them."

"How?" River Shoulders said. "She doesn't know. He only knows a little. Neither knows enough to be wise enough to run."

"They shouldn't *have* to run," I growled.

"Avoiding a fight is always better than not avoiding one."

“Disagree,” I said. “Some fights *should* be sought out. And fought. And won.”

River Shoulders shook his head. “Your father’s gun.” I sensed a deep current of resistance in River Shoulders on this subject—one that I would never be able to bridge, I suspected. River just wasn’t a fighter. “Would you agree it was wisest if they both fled?”

“In this case ... it might, yeah. But I think it would only delay the confrontation. Guys like Barrowill have long arms. If he obsesses over it, he’ll find them sooner or later.”

“I have no right to take his child from him,” River Shoulders said. “I am only interested in Irwin.”

“Well, I’m not going to be able to separate them,” I said. “Irwin nearly started swinging at me when I went anywhere close to that subject.” I paused, then added, “But he might listen to you.”

River Shoulders shook his head. “He’s right. I got no right to walk in and smash his life to splinters after being so far away so long. He’d never listen to me. He’s got a lot of anger in him. Maybe for good reasons.”

“You’re his father,” I said. “That might carry more weight than you think.”

“I should not have involved you in this,” he said. “I apologize for that, wizard. You should go. Let me sort this out on my own.”

I eyed River Shoulders.

The big guy was powerful, sure, but he was also slow. He took his time making decisions. He played things out with enormous patience. He was clearly ambivalent over what kind of involvement he should have with his son. It might take him months of observation and cogitation to make a choice.

Most of us don’t live that way. I was sure Barrowill didn’t. If the vampire was moving, he might be moving now. Like, right now.

“In this particular instance, River Shoulders, you are not thinking clearly,” I said. “Action must be taken soon. Preferably tonight.”

“I will be what I am,” River said firmly.

I stood up from the log and nodded. “Okay,” I said. “Me too.”

* * *

I put in a call to my fellow Warden, “Wild Bill” Meyers, in Dallas, but got an answering service. I left a message that I was in Norman and needed his help, but I had little faith that he’d show up in time. The real downside to being a wizard is that we void the warranties of anything technological every time we sneeze. Cell phones are worse than useless in our hands, and it makes communications a challenge at times though that was far from the only possible obstacle. If Bill was in, he’d have picked up his phone. He had a big area for his beat and likely had problems of his own—but since Dallas was only three hours away (assuming his car didn’t break down), I could hold out hope that he might roll in by morning.

So I got in my busted-up old Volkswagen, picked up a prop, and drove up to the campus alone. I parked somewhere where I would probably get a ticket. I planned to ignore it. Anarchists have a much easier time finding parking spots.

I got out and walked toward one of the smaller dorm buildings on campus. I didn’t have my wizard’s staff with me, on account of how weird it looked to walk around with one, but my blasting rod was hanging from its tie inside my leather duster. I doubted I would need it, but better to have it and not need it than the other way around. I got my prop and trudged across a short bit of turquoise-tinted grass to the honors dorms, where Irwin lived. They were tiny, for that campus, maybe five stories, with the building laid out in four right-angled halls, like a plus sign. The door was locked. There’s always that kind of security in a dorm building, these days.

I rapped on the glass with my knuckles until a passing student noticed. I held up a cardboard box from the local Pizza ’Spress, and tried to look like I needed a break. I needn’t have tried so hard. The kid’s eyes were bloodshot and glassy. He was baked on something. He opened the door for me without blinking.

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” he said.

“He was supposed to meet me at the doors,” I said. “You see a guy named, uh...” I checked the receipt that was taped to the box. “Irwin Pounder?”

“Pounder, hah,” the kid said. “He’ll be in his room. Fourth floor, south hall, third door on the left. Just listen for the noise.”

“Music?”

He tittered. “Not exactly.”

I thanked him and ambled up the stairs, which were getting to be a lot harder on my knees than they used to be. Maybe I needed orthopedic shoes or something.

I got to the second floor before I felt it. There was a tension in the air, something that made my heart speed up and my skin feel hot. A few steps farther, and I started breathing faster and louder. It wasn’t until I got to the third floor that I remembered that the most dangerous aspect of a psychic assault is that the victim almost never realizes that it’s actually happening.

I stopped and threw up my mental defenses in a sudden panic, and the surge of adrenaline and fear suddenly overcame the tremors of restless need that I’d been feeling. The air was thick with psychic power of a nature I’d experienced once before, back in the Raith Deep. That was when Lara Raith had unleashed the full force of her come hither against her own father, the White King, drowning his mind in imposed lust and desire to please her. He’d been her puppet ever since.

This was the same form of attack, though there were subtle differences. It had to be Barrowill. He’d moved even faster than I’d feared. I kept my mental shields up as I picked up my pace. By the time I reached the fourth floor, I heard the noise the amiable toker had mentioned.

It was sex. Loud sex. A lot of it.

I dropped the pizza and drew my blasting rod. It took me about five seconds to realize what was happening. Barrowill must have been pushing Connie, psychically—forcing her to continue feeding and feeding after she would normally have stopped. He wanted her to kill Irwin like a good little vampire, and the overflow was spilling out onto the entire building.

Not that it takes much to make college kids interested in sex, but in this instance, they had literally gone wild. When I looked down the four hallways, doors were standing wide open. Couples and ... well, the only word that really applied was *clusters* of kids were in the act, some of them right out in the hall. Imagine an act of lust. It was going on in at least two of those four hallways.

I turned down Irwin’s hall, channeling my will into my blasting rod—and yes, I’m aware of the Freudian irony, here. The carved runes along its length began to burn with silver and scarlet light as the power built up in it. A White Court vampire is practically a pussycat compared to some of the other breeds on the planet, but I’d once seen one of them twist a pair of fifty-pound steel dumbbells around one another to make a point. I might not have much time to throw down on Barrowill in these narrow quarters, and my best chance was to put him down hard the instant I saw him.

I moved forward as silently as I knew how, stepping around a pair of couples who were breaking some sort of municipal statute, I was sure. Then I leaned back and kicked open the door to Irwin’s room.

The place looked like a small tornado had gone through it. Books and clothing and bedclothes and typical dorm room décor had been scattered everywhere. The chair next to a small study desk had been knocked over. A laptop computer lay on its side, showing what I’d once been told was a blue screen of death. The bed had fallen onto its side, where two of the legs appeared to have snapped off.

Connie and Irwin were there, and the haze of lust rolling off the ingénue succubus was a second psychic cyclone. I barely managed to push away. Irwin had her pinned against the wall in a corner. His muscles strained against his skin, and his breath came in dry, labored gasps, but he never stopped moving.

He wasn't being gentle, and Connie apparently didn't mind. Her eyes were a shade of silver, metallic silver, as if they'd been made of chrome, reflecting the room around her like tiny, warped mirrors. She'd sunk her fingers into the drywall to the second knuckle on either side of her to hang on, and her body was rolling in a strained arch in time with his motion. They were gratuitously enthusiastic about the whole thing.

And I hadn't gotten laid in forever.

"Irwin!" I shouted.

Shockingly, I didn't capture his attention.

"Connie!"

I didn't capture hers, either.

I couldn't let the ... the, uh, process continue. I had no idea how long it might take, or how resistant to harm Irwin might be, but it would be stupid to do nothing and hope for the best. While I was trying to figure out how to break it up before someone lost an eye, I heard the door of the room across the hall open behind me. The sights and sounds and the haze of psychic influence had my mental processes running at less than peak performance. I didn't process the sound into a threat until Barrowill slugged me on the back of the head with something that felt like a lump of solid ivory.

I don't even remember hitting the floor.

* * *

When I woke up, I had a Sasquatch-sized headache, my wrists and ankles were killing me. Half a dozen of Barrowill's goons were all literally kneeling on me to hold me down. Every single one of them had a knife pressed close to one of my major arteries.

Also, my pants had shrunk by several sizes.

I was still in Irwin's dorm room, but things had changed. Irwin was on his back on the floor, Connie astride him. Her features had changed, shifted subtly. Her skin seemed to glow with pale light. Her eyes were empty white spheres. Her cheekbones stood out more harshly against her face, and her hair was a sweat-dampened, wild mane that clung to her cheeks and her parted lips. She was moving as if in slow motion, her fingernails digging into Irwin's chest.

Barrowill's psychic assault was still under way, and Connie's presence had become something so vibrant and penetrating that for a second I thought there might have been a minor earthquake going on. I had to get to that girl. I *had* to. If I didn't, I was going to lose my mind with need. My instant reaction upon opening my eyes was to struggle to get closer to her on pure reflex.

The goons held me down, and I screamed in protest—but at least being a captive had kept me from doing something stupid and gave me an instant's cold realization that my shields were down. I threw them up again as hard as I could, but the Barrowills had been in my head too long. I barely managed to grab hold of my reason.

The kid looked awful. His eyes were glazed. He wasn't moving with Connie so much as his body was randomly shaking in independent spasms. His head lolled from one side to the other, and his mouth was open. A strand of drool ran from his mouth to the floor.

Barrowill had righted the fallen chair. He sat upon it with one ankle resting on his other knee, his arms folded. His expression was detached, clinical, as he watched his daughter killing the young man she loved.

"Barrowill," I said. My voice came out hoarse and rough. "Stop this."

The vampire directed his gaze to me and shook his head. "It's after midnight, Dresden. It's time for Cinderella to return to her real life."

"You son of a bitch," I snarled. "She's killing him."

A small smile touched one corner of his mouth. "Yes. Beautifully. Her Hunger is quite strong." He made a vague gesture with one hand. "Does he seem upset about it? He's a mortal. And mortals are all born to die. The only question is how and in how much pain."

"There's this life thing that happens in between," I snarled.

“And many more where his came from.” Barrowill’s eyes went chill. “His. And yours.”

“What do you mean?”

“When she’s finished, we leave. You’re dessert.”

A lump of ice settled in my stomach, and I swallowed. All things considered, I was becoming a little worried about the outcome of this situation. *Talk, Harry. Keep him talking. You’ve never met a vampire who didn’t love the sound of his own voice. Something could change the situation if you play for time.*

“Why not do it before I woke up?” I asked.

“This way is more efficient,” Barrowill said. “If a young athlete takes Ecstasy, and his heart fails, there may be a candlelight vigil, but there won’t be an investigation. Two dead men? One of them a private investigator? There will be questions.” He shrugged a shoulder. “And I don’t care for you to bequest me your death curse, wizard. But once Connie has you, you won’t have enough left of your mind to speak your own name, much less utter a curse.”

“The Raiths are going to kill you if you drag the Court and the Council into direct opposition,” I said.

“The Raiths will never know. I own twenty ghouls, Dresden, and they’re always hungry. What they leave of your corpse won’t fill a moist sponge.”

Connie suddenly ceased moving altogether. Her skin had become pure ivory white. She shuddered, her breaths coming in ragged gasps. She tilted her head back and a low, throaty moan came out of her throat. I’ve had sex that wasn’t as good as Connie sounded.

Dammit, Dresden. Focus.

I was out of time.

“The Council will find out, Chuck. They’re *wizards*. Finding unfindable information is what they *do*.”

He smirked. “I think we both know that their reputation is very well constructed.”

We *did* both know that. Dammit. “You think nobody’s going to miss me?” I asked. “I have friends, you know.”

Barrowill suddenly leaned forward, focusing on Connie, his eyes becoming a few shades lighter. “Perhaps, Dresden. But your friends are not here.”

Then there was a crash so loud that it shook the building. Barrowill’s sleek, black Lincoln Town Car came crashing through the dorm room’s door, taking a sizable portion of the wall with it. The ghouls holding me down were scattered by the debris, and fine dust filled the air.

I started coughing at once, but I could see what had happened. The car had come through from the far side of this wing of the dorm, smashing through the room where Barrowill had waited in ambush. The car had crossed the hall and wound up with its bumper and front tires resting inside Irwin’s room. It had smashed a massive hole in the outer brick wall of the building, leaving it gaping open to the night.

That got everyone’s attention. For an instant, the room was perfectly silent and perfectly still. The ghoul chauffeur still sat in the driver’s seat—only his head wobbled loosely, leaning at a right angle to the rest of his neck.

“Hah,” I cackled, wheezing. “Hah, hah. Heh hah, hah, hah. Moron.”

A large figure leapt up to the hole in the exterior wall and landed in the room across the hall, hitting with a crunch only slightly less massive than the car had made. I swear to you, if I’d heard that sound effect they used to use when Steve Austin jumped somewhere, I would not have been shocked. The other room was unlit, and the newcomer was a massive, threatening shadow.

He slapped a hand the size of a big cookie tray on the floor and let out a low, rumbling sound like nothing I’d ever heard this side of an amplified bass guitar. It was music. You couldn’t have written it in musical notation, any more than you could write the music of a thunderstorm, or write lyrics to the song of a running stream. But it was music nonetheless.

Power like nothing I had ever encountered surged out from that impact, a deep, shuddering wave that passed visibly through the dust in the air. The ceiling and the walls and the floor sang in

resonance with the note and impact alike, and Barrowill's psychic assault was swept away like a sand castle before the tide. Connie's eyes flooded with color, changing from pure, empty whiteness back to a rich blue as deep and rich as a glacial lake, and the humanity came flooding back into her features. The sense of wild panic in the air suddenly vanished, and for another timeless instant, everything, *everything* in that night went utterly silent and still.

Holy.

Crap.

I've worked with magic for decades, and take it from me, it really isn't very different from anything else in life. When you work with magic, you rapidly realize that it is far easier to disrupt than to create, far more difficult to mend than to destroy. Throw a stone into a glass-smooth lake, and ripples will wash over the whole thing. Making waves with magic instead of a rock would have been easy.

But if you can make that lake smooth again—that's one hell of a trick.

That surge of energy didn't attack anything or anybody. It didn't destroy Barrowill's assault.

It made the water smooth again.

Strength-of-a-River-in-his-Shoulders opened his eyes, and his fury made them burn like coals in the shadows—but he simply crouched, doing nothing.

All of Barrowill's goons remained still, wide eyes flicking from River to Barrowill and back.

"Back off, Chuck," I said. "He's giving you a chance to walk away. Take him up on it."

The vampire's expression was completely blank as he stood among the debris. He stared at River Shoulders for maybe three seconds—and then I saw movement behind River Shoulders.

Clawed hands began to grip the edges of the hole behind River. Wicked, bulging red eyes appeared. Monstrous-looking *things* in the same general shape as a human appeared in complete silence.

Ghouls.

Barrowill didn't have six goons with him.

He'd brought them *all*.

Barrowill spat toward River, bared his teeth and screamed, "Kill it!"

And it was on.

Everything went completely insane. The human-shaped ghouls in the room bounded forward, their faces and limbs contorting, tearing their way out of their cheap suits as they assumed their true forms. More ghouls poured in through the hole in the wall like a swarm of panicked roaches. I couldn't get an accurate count of the enemy—the action was too fast. But twenty sounded about right. Twenty flesh-rending, superhumanly strong and durable predators flung themselves onto River Shoulders in an overwhelming wave. He vanished beneath a couple of *tons* of hungry ghoul. It was *not* a fair fight.

Barrowill should have brought more goons.

There was an enormous bellow, a sound that could only have been made by a truly massive set of lungs, and ghouls exploded outward from River Shoulders like so much hideous shrapnel. Several were flung back out of the building. Others slammed into walls with so much force that they shattered the drywall. One of them went *through* the ceiling, then fell limply back down into the room—only to be caught by the neck in one of River Shoulders's massive hands. He squeezed, crushing the ghoul's neck like soft clay, and there was an audible pop. The ghoul spasmed once, then River flung the corpse into the nearest batch of monsters.

After that, it was clobbering time.

Barrowill moved fast, seizing Connie and darting out the door. I looked around frantically and spotted one of the knives the goons had been holding before they transformed. My hands and ankles had been bound in those plastic restraining strips, and I could barely feel my fingers, but I managed to pick up the knife and cut my legs free. Then I put it on the front bumper of the Lincoln, stepped on it with one foot to hold it in place, and after a few moments managed to cut my hands loose as well.

The dorm sounded like a medley of pay-per-view wrestling and the *Island of Doctor Moreau*. Ghouls shrieked. River Shoulders roared. Very, very disoriented students screamed. The walls and floor shook with impact again and again as River Shoulders flung ghouls around like so many softballs. Ghoulish blood splattered the walls and the ceiling, green-brown and putrid-smelling, and as strong as he was, River Shoulders wasn't pitching a shutout. The ghouls' claws and fangs had sunk into him, covering him in punctures and lacerations, and his scarlet blood mixed with theirs on the various surfaces.

I tried to think unobtrusive thoughts, stayed low, and went to Irwin. He still looked awful, but he was breathing hard and steady, and he'd already begun blinking and trying to focus his eyes.

"Irwin!" I shouted. "Irwin! Where's her purse?"

"Whuzza?" Irwin mumbled.

"Connie's purse! I've got to help Connie! Where is her purse?"

Irwin's eyes almost focused. "Connie?"

"Oh never *mind*." I started ransacking the dorm room until I found Connie's handbag. She had a brush in it. The brush was liberally festooned with her blond hairs.

I swept a circle into the dust on the floor, tied the hair around my pentacle amulet and invested the circle with a whisper of will. Then I quickly worked the tracking spell that was generally my bread and butter when I was doing investigator stuff. When I released the magic, it rushed down into Connie's borrowed hair, and my amulet lurched sharply out of plumb and held itself steady at a thirty- or forty-degree angle. Connie went thataway.

I ducked a flying ghoul, leapt over a dying ghoul, and staggered down the hall at my best speed while the blood went back into my feet.

I had gone down one whole flight of stairs without falling when the angle on the amulet changed again. Barrowill had gone down one floor, then taken off down one of the residential hallways toward the fire escape at the far end. He'd bypassed security by ripping the door off its hinges, then flinging it into the opposite wall. Kids were scattering out of the hallway, looking either horrified or disappointed. Some both. Barrowill had reached the far end, carrying his daughter over one shoulder, and was headed for the fire door.

Barrowill had been savvy enough to divest me of my accoutrements, but I was still a wizard, dammit, blasting rod or no. I drew up my will, aimed low, and snarled, "*Forzare!*"

Pure kinetic force lashed invisibly through the air and caught Barrowill at the ankles. It kicked both of his feet up into the air, and he took a pratfall onto the floor. Connie landed with a grunt and bounced to one side. She lay there dazed and blinking.

Barrowill slithered back up to his feet, spinning toward me, and producing a pistol in one hand. I lurched back out of the line of fire as the gun barked twice, and bullets went by me with a double hiss. I went to my knees and bobbed my head out into the hall again for a quick peek, jerking it back immediately. Barrowill was picking Connie up. His bullet went through the air where my head would have been if I'd been standing.

"Don't be a moron, Harry," I said. "You came for the kid. He's safe. That's all you were obligated to do. Let it g—oh who am I kidding. There's a girl."

I didn't have to beat the vampire—I just had to slow him down long enough for River Shoulders to catch up to him ... assuming River *did* pursue.

I took note of which wing Barrowill was fleeing through and rushed down the stairs to the ground floor. Then I left the building and sprinted to the far end of that wing.

Barrowill slammed the emergency exit open and emerged from the building. He was moving fast, but he also had his daughter to carry, and she'd begun to resist him, kicking and thrashing, slowing him down. She tugged him off balance just as he shot at me again, and it went wide. I slashed at him with another surge of force, but this time I wasn't aiming for his feet—I went for the gun. The weapon leapt out of his hands and went spinning away, shattering against the bricks of the dorm's outer wall. Another blast knocked Connie off his shoulder, and she let out a little

shriek. Barrowill staggered, then let out a snarl of frustration and charged me at a speed worthy of the Flash's understudy.

I flung more force at him, but Barrowill bobbed to one side, evading the blast. I threw myself away from the vampire and managed to roll with the punch he sent at my head. He caught me an inch or two over one eyebrow, the hardest and most impact-resistant portion of the human skull. That and the fact that I'd managed to rob it of a little of its power meant that he only sent me spinning wildly away, my vision completely obscured by pain and little silver stars. He was furious, his power rolling over me like a sudden deluge of ice water, to the point where crystals of frost formed on my clothing.

Barrowill followed up, his eyes murderous—and then Bigfoot Irwin bellowed, "Connie!" and slammed into Barrowill at the hip, using his body as a living spear. Barrowill was flung to one side, and Irwin pressed his advantage, still screaming, coming down atop the vampire and pounding him with both fists in elemental violence, his sunken eyes mad with rage. "Connie! Connie!"

I tried to rise but couldn't seem to make it past one knee. So all I could do was watch as the furious scion of River Shoulders unleashed everything he had on a ranking noble of the White Court. Barrowill could have been much stronger than a human being if he'd had the gas in the tank—but he'd spent his energy on his psychic assault, and it had drained him. He still thrashed powerfully, but he was no match for the enraged young man. Irwin slammed Barrowill's nose flat against his face. I saw one of the vampire's teeth go flying into the night air. Slightly-too-pale blood began to splash against Irwin's fists.

Christ. If the kid killed Barrowill, the White Court would consider it an act of war. All kinds of horrible things could unfold. "Irwin!" I shouted. "Irwin, stop!"

Kid Bigfoot didn't listen to me.

I lurched closer to him but only made it about six inches before my head whirled so badly that I fell onto my side. "Irwin, stop!" I looked around and saw Connie staring dazedly at the struggle. "Connie!" I said. "Stop him! Stop him!"

Meanwhile, Irwin had beaten Barrowill to within an inch of his life—and now he raised his joined hands over his head, preparing for a sledgehammer blow to Barrowill's skull.

A small, pretty hand touched his wrist.

"Irwin," Connie said gently. "Irwin, no."

"He tried," Irwin panted. "Tried. Hurt you."

"This isn't the way," Connie said.

"Bad man," Irwin growled.

"But you *aren't*," Connie said, her voice very soft. "Irwin. He's still my daddy."

Connie couldn't have physically stopped Irwin—but she didn't need to. The kid blinked several times, then looked at her. He slowly lowered his hands, and Connie leaned down to kiss his forehead gently. "Shhhh," she said. "Shhhh. I'm still here. It's over, baby. It's over."

"Connie," Irwin said, and leaned against her.

I let out a huge sigh of relief and sank back onto the ground.

My head hurt.

* * *

Officer Dean stared at me for a while. He chewed on a toothpick and squinted at me. "Got some holes."

"Yeah?" I asked. "Like what?"

"Like all those kids saw a Bigfoot and them whatchamacalits. Ghouls. How come they didn't say anything?"

"You walked in on them while they were all still trying to put their clothes back on. After flinging themselves into random sex with whoever happened to be close to them. They're all denying that this ever happened right now."

"Hngh," Dean said. "What about the ghoulish corpses?"

"After Irwin dragged their boss up to the fight, the ghouls quit when they saw him. River Shoulders told them all to get out of his sight and take their dead with them. They did."

Dean squinted and consulted a list. "Pounder is gone. So is Connie Barrowill. Not officially missing, or nothing. Not yet. But where are they?"

I looked at Dean and shrugged.

* * *

I'd seen ghouls in all kinds of situations before—but I'd never seen them whipped into submission. Ghouls fought to the grisly, messy end. That was what they did. But River Shoulders had been more than their match. He'd left several of them alive when he could have killed them to the last, and he'd found their breaking point when Irwin had dragged Barrowill in by his hair. Ghouls could take a huge beating, but River Shoulders had given them one like I'd never seen, and when he ordered them to take their master and their dead and never to return, they'd snapped to it.

"Thanks, Connie," I groaned as she settled me onto a section of convenient rubble. I was freezing. The frost on my clothes was rapidly melting away, but the chill had settled inward.

The girl looked acutely embarrassed, but that wasn't in short supply in that dorm. That hallway was empty of other students for the moment, though. We had the place to ourselves, though I judged that the authorities would arrive in some form before long.

Irwin came over with a dust-covered blanket and wrapped it around her. He'd scrounged a ragged towel for himself though it did more to emphasize his physique than to hide it. The kid was ripped.

"Thank you, Irwin," she said.

He grunted. Physically, he'd bounced back from the nearly lethal feeding like a rubber freaking ball. Maybe River Shoulders's water-smoothing spell had done something to help that. Mentally, he was slowly refocusing. You could see the gleam coming back into his eyes. Until that happened, he'd listened to Connie. A guy could do worse.

"I..." Connie shook her head. "I remember all of it. But I have no idea what just happened." She stared at River Shoulders for a moment, her expression more curious than fearful. "You ... You stopped something bad from happening, I think."

"Yeah, he did," I confirmed.

Connie nodded toward him in a grateful little motion. "Thank you. Who are you?"

"Irwin's dad," I said.

Irwin blinked several times. He stared blankly at River Shoulders.

"Hello," River rumbled. How something that large and that powerful could sit there bleeding from dozens of wounds and somehow look sheepish was beyond me. "I am very sorry we had to meet like that. I had hoped for something quieter. Maybe with music. And good food."

"You can't stay," I said to River. "The authorities are on the way."

River made a rumbling sound of agreement. "This is a disaster. What I did..." He shook his head. "This was in such awful taste."

"Couldn't have happened to nicer guys, though," I said.

"Wait," Connie said. "Wait. What the *hell* just happened here?"

Irwin put a hand on her shoulder, and said, to me, "She's ... she's a vampire. Isn't she?"

I blinked and nodded at him. "How did...?"

"Paranet," he said. "There's a whole page."

"Wait," Connie said again. "A ... what? Am I going to sparkle or something?"

"God, no," said Irwin and I, together.

"Connie," I said, and she looked at me. "You're still exactly who you were this morning. And so is Irwin. And that's what counts. But right now, things are going to get really complicated if the cops walk in and start asking you questions. Better if they just never knew you were here."

"This is all so..." She shook her head. Then she stared at River Shoulders. Then at me. "Who are you?"

I pointed at me, and said, "Wizard." I pointed at River. "Bigfoot." I pointed at Irwin. "Son of Bigfoot." I pointed at her. "Vampire. Seriously."

"Oh," she said faintly.

"I'll explain it," Irwin told her quietly. He was watching River Shoulders.

River held out his huge hands to either side and shrugged. "Hello, son."

Irwin shook his head slowly. "I ... never really..." He sucked in a deep breath, squared off against his father, and said, "Why?"

And there it was. What had to be the Big Question of Irwin's life.

"My people," he said. "Tradition is very important to them. If I acknowledged you ... they would have insisted that certain traditions be observed. It would have consumed your life. And I didn't want that for you. I didn't want that for your mother. I wanted your world to be wider than mine."

Bigfoot Irwin was silent for a long moment. Then he scratched at his head with one hand and shrugged. "Tonight ... really explains a lot." He nodded slowly. "Okay. We aren't done talking. But okay."

"Let's get you out of here," River said. "Get you both taken care of. Answer all your questions."

"What about Harry?" Irwin said.

I couldn't get any more involved with the evident abduction of a scion of the White Court. River's mercy had probably kept the situation from going completely to hell, but I wasn't going to drag the White Council's baggage into the situation. "You guys go on," I told them. "I do this kind of thing all the time. I'll be fine."

"Wow, seriously?" Irwin asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I've been in messier situations than this. And ... it's probably better if Connie's dad has time to cool off before you guys talk again. River Shoulders can make sure you have that time."

Outside, a cart with flashing bulbs on it had pulled up.

"River," I said. "Time's up."

River Shoulders rose and nodded deeply to me. "I'm sorry that I interfered. It seemed necessary."

"I'm willing to overlook it," I said. "All things considered."

His face twisted into a very human-looking smile, and he extended his hand to Irwin. "Son."

Irwin took his father's hand, one arm still around Connie, and the three of them didn't vanish so much as ... just become less and less relevant to the situation. It happened over the course of two or three seconds, as that same nebulous, somehow transparent power that River had used earlier enfolded them. And then they were all gone.

Boots crunched down the hall, and a uniformed officer with a name tag reading DEAN burst in, one hand on his gun.

* * *

Dean eyed me, then said, "That's all you know, huh?"

"That's the truth," I said. "I told you that you wouldn't believe it. You gonna let me go now?"

"Oh, hell no," Dean said. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. You're stoned out of your mind or insane. Either way, I'm going to put you in the drunk tank until you have a chance to sleep it off."

"You got any aspirin?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, and got up to get it.

My head ached horribly, and I was pretty sure I hadn't heard the end of this, but I was clear for now. "Next time, Dresden," I muttered to myself, "just take the gold."

Then Officer Dean put me in a nice quiet cell with a nice quiet cot, and there I stayed until Wild Bill Meyers showed up the next morning and bailed me out.

* * *

Author's Bio:

Jim Butcher enjoys fencing, martial arts, singing, bad science-fiction movies, and live-action gaming. He lives in Missouri with his wife, son, and a vicious guard dog. You may learn more at www.jim-butcher.com.

JIM BUTCHER

CHANGES

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES



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Chapter One

I answered the phone, and Susan Rodriguez said, “They’ve taken our daughter.”

I sat there for a long five count, swallowed, and said, “Um. What?”

“You heard me, Harry,” Susan said gently.

“Oh,” I said. “Um.”

“The line isn’t secure,” she said. “I’ll be in town tonight. We can talk then.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.”

“Harry . . .” she said. “I’m not . . . I never wanted to—” She cut the words off with an impatient sigh. I heard a voice over the loudspeaker in the background, saying something in Spanish. “We’ll have time for that later. The plane is boarding. I’ve got to go. About twelve hours.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll . . . I’ll be here.”

She hesitated, as if about to say something else, but then she hung up.

I sat there with the phone against my ear. After a while, it started making that double-speed busy-signal noise.

Our daughter.

She said *our daughter*.

I hung the phone up. Or tried. I missed the base. The receiver clattered to the floor.

Mouse, my big, shaggy grey dog, rose up from his usual napping spot in the tiny kitchenette my basement apartment boasted, and came trotting over to sit down at my feet, staring up at me with dark, worried doggy eyes. After a moment, he made a little huffing sound, then carefully picked the receiver up in his jaws and settled it onto the base. Then he went back to staring worriedly at me.

“I . . .” I paused, trying to get my head around the concept. “I . . . I might have a child.”

Mouse made an uncertain, high-pitched noise.

“Yeah. How do you think I feel?” I stared at the far wall. Then I stood up and reached for my coat. “I . . . think I need a drink,” I said. I nodded, focusing on nothing. “Yeah. Something like this . . . yeah.”

Mouse made a distressed noise and rose.

“Sure,” I told him. “You can come. Hell, maybe you can drive me home or something.”

I got honked at a lot on the way to McAnally’s. I didn’t care. I made it without crashing into anyone. That’s the important thing, right? I pulled my battered, trusty old Volkswagen Bug over into the little parking lot next to Mac’s place. I started inside.

Mouse made a whuffing sound.

I looked over my shoulder. I’d left the car door open. The big dog nosed it closed.

“Thanks,” I said.

We went into the pub.

Mac’s place looks like Cheers after a mild apocalypse. There are thirteen wooden pillars irregularly spaced around the room, holding up the roof. They’re all carved with scenes of Old World fairy tales, some of them amusing, more of them sinister. There are thirteen ceiling fans spinning lazily throughout the place, and the irregularly shaped, polished wooden bar has thirteen stools. There are thirteen tables in the room, placed in no specific pattern.

“There’re a lot of thirteens in here,” I said to myself.

It was about two thirty in the afternoon. No one was in the pub except for me and the dog—oh, and Mac. Mac is a man of medium height and medium build, with thick, bony wrists and a shining smooth pate that never shows signs of growing in. He could be anywhere between thirty and fifty and, as always, he was wearing a spotless white apron.

Mouse stared intently at Mac for a moment. Then he abruptly sat down in the entryway at the top of the little stairs, turned around once, and settled down by the door, his chin on his paws.

Mac glanced toward us. “Harry.”

I shambled over to the bar.

Mac produced a bottle of one of his microbrews, but I shook my head. “Um. I’d say, ‘Whiskey, Mac,’ but I don’t know if you have any whiskey. I need something strong, I think.”

Mac raised his eyebrows and blinked at me.

You’ve got to know the guy. He was practically screaming.

But he poured me a drink of something light gold in a little glass, and I drank it. It burned. I wheezed a little, and then tapped a finger next to the glass.

Mac refilled it, frowning at me.

I drank the second glass more slowly. It still hurt going down. The pain gave me something to focus on. Thoughts started to coagulate around it, and then to crystallize into definite shape.

Susan had called me. She was on the way.

And we had a child.

And she had never told me.

Susan had been a reporter for a yellow rag that covered supernatural news. Most of the people who worked there thought they were publishing fiction, but Susan had clued in to the supernatural world on her own, and we’d crossed trails and verbal swords several times before we’d gotten together. We hadn’t been together a terribly long time—a little less than two years. We were both young and we made each other happy.

Maybe I should have known better. If you don’t stand on the sidelines and ignore the world around you, sooner or later you make enemies. One of mine, a vampire named Bianca, had abducted Susan and infected her with the blood thirst of the Red Court. Susan hadn’t gone all the way over—but if she ever lost control of herself, ever took another’s lifeblood, she would.

She left me, afraid that if she didn’t, I’d be the kill that turned her into a monster, and set out into the world to find some way to cope.

I told myself that she had good reason to do so, but reason and heart-break don’t speak the same language. I’d never really forgiven myself for what had happened to her. I guess reason and guilt don’t speak the same language, either.

It was probably a damned good thing I had gone into shock, because I could feel emotions that were stirring somewhere deep inside me, gathering power like a storm far out to sea. I couldn’t see them. I could only feel their effects, but it was enough to know that whatever was rising inside me was potent. Violent. Dangerous. Mindless rage got people killed every day. But for me, it might be worse.

I’m a professional wizard.

I can make a lot more things happen than most people.

Magic and emotions are tied up inextricably. I’ve been in battle before, and felt the terror and rage of that kind of place, where it’s a fight just to think clearly through the simplest problems. I’d used my magic in those kinds of volatile circumstances—and a few times, I’d seen it run wild as a result. When most people lose control of their anger, someone gets hurt. Maybe someone even gets killed. When it happens to a wizard, insurance companies go broke and there’s reconstruction afterward.

What was stirring in me now made those previous feelings of battle rage seem like anemic kittens.

“I’ve got to talk to someone,” I heard myself say quietly. “Someone with some objectivity, perspective. I’ve got to get my head straight before things go to hell.”

Mac leaned on the bar and looked at me.

I cradled the glass in my hand and said quietly, “You remember Susan Rodriguez?”

He nodded.

“She says that someone took our daughter. She says she’ll be here late tonight.”

Mac inhaled and exhaled slowly. Then he picked up the bottle and poured himself a shot. He sipped at it.

“I loved her,” I said. “Maybe love her still. And she didn’t tell me.”

He nodded.

“She could be lying.”

He grunted.

“I’ve been used before. And I’m a sucker for a girl.”

"Yes," he said.
I gave him an even look. He smiled slightly.
"She'd be . . . six? Seven?" I shook my head. "I can't even do the math right now."
Mac pursed his lips. "Hard thing."
I finished the second glass. Some of the sharper edges had gotten softer. Mac touched a finger to the bottle, watching me. I shook my head.
"She could be lying to me," I said quietly. "If she's not . . . then . . ."
Mac closed his eyes briefly and nodded.
"Then there's this little girl in trouble," I said. I felt my jaw clench, and the storm inside me threatened to come boiling up. I pushed it down. "My little girl."
He nodded again.
"Don't know if I ever told you," I said. "I was an orphan."
Mac watched me silently.
"There were times when . . . when it was bad. When I wanted someone to come save me. I wished for it so hard. Dreaming of . . . of not being alone. And when someone finally did come, he turned out to be the biggest monster of all." I shook my head. "I won't let that happen to my child."
Mac folded his arms on the bar and looked at me intently and said, in a resonant baritone, "You've got to be very careful, Harry."
I looked at him, shocked. He'd . . . used grammar.
"Something like this will test you like nothing else," Mac said. "You're going to find out who you are, Harry. You're going to find out which principles you'll stand by to your death—and which lines you'll cross." He took my empty glass away and said, "You're heading into the badlands. It'll be easy to get lost."
I watched him in stunned silence as he finished his drink. He grimaced, as though it hurt his throat on the way down. Maybe he'd strained his voice, using it so much.
I stared down at my hands for a moment. Then I said, "Steak sandwich. And something for the pooch."
He grunted in the affirmative and started cooking. He took his time about it, divining my intentions with a bartender's instincts. I didn't feel like eating, but I had a little time to kill while the buzz faded.
He put my sandwich down in front of me. Then he took a bowl with some bones and some meat out to Mouse, along with a bowl of water. I ate my sandwich and idly noted that Mac never carried food out to anyone. Guess he was a dog person.
I ate my sandwich slowly and paid Mac.
"Thanks," I said.
He nodded. "Luck."
I got up and headed back for the car. Mouse followed beside me, his eyes lifted, watching me to see what I would do.
I marshaled my thoughts. I had to be careful. I had to be wary. I had to keep my eyes open. I had to keep the storm inside me from exploding, because the only thing I knew for certain was that someone—maybe Susan, maybe my enemies—was trying to manipulate me.
Either way, Mac was right.
I was heading into the badlands.

Chapter Two

Susan arrived at around one in the morning.

I had gone back home from the pub and straight to my lab in the subbasement, and made with the wizardry, which demanded an intense focus on my tasks. Over the next several hours, I prepared a couple of things that might come in handy in the immediate future. Then I went back up the stepladder to my apartment and put on my force rings. Each of them is a braid of three individual rings, and I had enchanted them to store up a little kinetic energy every time I moved my arm. They were pretty efficient, but it wouldn't hurt to top them off, so I spent half an hour beating the tar out of the heavy bag hanging in one corner of my apartment's living area.

I showered, cleaned up, made some dinner, and generally never stopped moving. If I did that, thoughts might start to creep in, and I wasn't sure how I would deal with them.

I didn't even consider trying to sleep. It just wasn't going to happen.

So I stayed in motion. I cleaned the kitchen. I bathed Mouse and brushed out his coat. I picked up my living room, my room, my bathroom. I changed out my cat Mister's litter box. I tidied up the fireplace, and set out fresh candles to illuminate the room.

It took me a couple of hours of that to realize that I was trying to make my apartment look nice because Susan was coming over. Old habits die hard, I suppose.

I was debating with myself whether or not I might need to clean Mister up (and having a narrow-eyed glare bestowed upon me from his perch atop my highest bookshelf) when there was a polite knock at the door.

My heart started being faster.

I opened the door and found Susan facing me.

She was a woman of medium height, which meant she was about a foot shorter than me. Her features were leanly angular, except for her mouth. She had dark, straight hair and even darker eyes, and her skin had a sun-bronzed tone to it far deeper than I had ever seen on her before. She looked thinner. I could see the tendons and muscles beneath the skin of her neck, and her cheekbones seemed starker than they had before. She wore black leather pants, a black T-shirt, and a leather jacket to complement the pants.

And she had not aged a day.

It had been most of a decade since I had beheld her. In that time, you expect people's appearances to change a little. Oh, nothing major. A few more pounds, maybe, a few more lines, a few silver hairs. People change. But Susan hadn't changed. At all.

I guess that's a nifty perk of being a half-turned vampire of the Red Court.

"Hi," she said quietly.

"Hi," I said back. I could meet her eyes without worrying about triggering a soulgaze. She and I had looked upon each other already.

She lowered her eyes and slipped her hands into her jacket pockets. "Harry . . . can I come in?"

I took half a step back. "I dunno. *Can* you come in?"

Her eyes flickered with a spark of anger. "You think I crossed over?"

"I think that taking unnecessary chances has lost its appeal to me," I said.

She pressed her lips together, but then nodded in acquiescence and stepped over the threshold of my apartment, the barrier of magical energy that surrounds any home—an action that simply would not have been possible for a vampire without first receiving my permission.

"Okay," I said, backing up to let her enter before I shut the door again. As I did, I saw a sandy-haired, plain-looking man seated casually on the top step of the concrete stairwell that led down to my apartment. He wore khakis, a blue denim jacket, and was reclining just enough to display the lines of a shoulder holster beneath the jacket. He was Susan's ally and his name was Martin. "You," I said. "Joy."

Martin's lips twitched into the faint and distant echo of a smile. "Likewise."

I shut the door on him and, just to be obnoxious, clacked the dead bolt closed as loudly as I could.

Susan smiled a little and shook her head. She looked around the apartment for a moment—and then suddenly froze as a growl came rumbling from the darkened alcove of the minikitchen. Mouse didn't rise, and his growl was not the savage thing I had heard once or twice before—but it was definitely a sound of polite warning.

Susan froze in place, staring at the kitchen for a moment. Then she said, "You got a dog."

"He kind of got me," I replied.

Susan nodded and swept her eyes around the little apartment. "You redecorated a little."

"Zombies," I said. "And werewolves. Place has been trashed a few times."

"I never understood why you didn't move out of this musty little hole."

"Musty? Little? My home this is," I said. "Get you something? Coke, beer?"

"Water?"

"Sure. Have a seat."

Susan moved silently over to one of the easy chairs framing the fireplace and settled down on its edge, her back straight. I got her some ice water, fetched myself a Coke, and brought the drinks over to her. I settled down in the other chair, so that we partly faced each other, and popped the tab on my drink.

"You're really going to leave Martin sitting outside?" she asked, amusement in her voice.

"I most certainly am," I said calmly, and took a sip of my drink.

She nodded and touched her glass to her lips. Maybe she sipped a little water.

I waited as long as I could stand it, maybe two or three whole seconds, before I broke the heavy silence. "So," I asked casually, "what's new?"

Her dark eyes regarded me obliquely for a moment before her lips thinned slightly. "This is going to be painful for both of us. Let's just have it done. We don't have time to dance around it."

"Okay. Our child?" I asked. "Yours and mine?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

She smoothed her face into a nonexpression. "There hasn't been anyone else, Harry. Not since that night with you. Not for more than two years before that."

If she was lying, it didn't show. I took that in for a moment and sipped some Coke. "It seems like something you should have told me."

I said it in a voice far calmer than I would have thought possible. I don't know what my face looked like when I said it. But Susan's darkly tanned skin became several shades lighter.

"Harry," she said quietly, "I know you must be angry."

"I burn things to ash and smash holes in buildings when I'm angry," I said. "I'm a couple of steps past that point right now."

"You have every right to be," she said. "But I did what I thought was best for her. And for you."

The storm surged higher into my chest. But I made myself sit there without moving, breathing slowly and steadily. "I'm listening."

She nodded and took a moment to gather her thoughts. Then she said, "You don't know what it's like down there. Central America, all the way down to Brazil. There's a reason so many of those nations limp along in a state of near-anarchy."

"The Red Court," I said. "I know."

"You know in the abstract. But no one in the White Council has spent time there. Lived there. Seen what happens to the people the Reds rule." She shivered and folded her arms over her stomach. "It's a nightmare. And there's no one but the Fellowship and a few underfunded operatives of the Church to stand up to them."

The Fellowship of St. Giles was a collection of the supernatural world's outcasts and strays, many of them half vampires like Susan. They hated the Red Court with a holy passion, and did everything in their power to confound the vampires at every opportunity. They operated in cells, choosing targets, training recruits, planting bombs, and funding their operations through a hundred shady business activities. Terrorists, basically—smart, quick, and tough because they had to be.

"It hasn't been Disneyland in the rest of the world, either," I said quietly. "I saw my fair share of nightmares during the war. And then some."

"I'm not trying to belittle anything that the Council has done," she said. "I'm just trying to explain to you what I was facing at the time. Teams from the Fellowship rarely sleep in the same bed twice. We're always on the move. Always planning something or running from something. There's no place for a child in that."

"If only there had been someone with his own home and a regular income where she could have stayed," I said.

Susan's eyes hardened. "How many people have gotten killed around you, Harry? How many hurt?" She raked her fingers through her hair. "For God's sake. You said yourself that your apartment has been under attack. Would that have gone any better if you'd had a toddler to watch over?"

"Guess we'll never know," I said.

"I know," she said, her voice suddenly seething with intensity. "God, do you think I didn't want to be a part of her life? I cry myself to sleep at night—when I can sleep. But in the end, I couldn't offer her anything but a life on the run. And you couldn't offer her anything but a life under siege."

I stared at her.

But I didn't say anything.

"So I did the only thing I *could* do," she said. "I found a place for her. Far away from the fighting. Where she could have a stable life. A loving home."

"And never told me," I said.

"If the Red Court had ever learned about my child, they *would* have used her against me. Period. As a means of leverage, or simple revenge. The fewer people who knew about her, the safer she was going to be. I didn't tell you, even though I knew it was wrong. Even though I knew that it would make you furious because of your own childhood." She leaned forward, her eyes almost feverish from the heat in her words. "And I would do a thousand times worse than that, if it meant that she'd be better protected."

I sipped some more Coke. "So," I said. "You kept her from me so that she would be safer. And you sent her away to be raised by strangers so that she would be safer." The storm in me pushed up higher, tingeing my voice with the echo of its furious howl. "How's that working out?"

Susan's eyes blazed. Red, swirling tribal marks began to appear on her skin, like tattoos done in disappearing ink, only backward—the Fellowship's version of a mood ring. They covered the side of her face, and her throat.

"The Fellowship has been compromised," she said, her words crisp. "Duchess Arianna of the Red Court found out about her, somehow, and had her taken. Do you know who she is?"

"Yeah," I said. I tried to ignore the way my blood had run cold at the mention of the name. "Duke Ortega's widow. She's sworn revenge upon me—and she once tried to buy me on eBay."

Susan blinked. "How did . . . No, never mind. Our sources in the Red Court say that she's planning something special for Maggie. We have to get her back."

I took another slow breath and closed my eyes for a moment.

"Maggie, huh?"

"For your mother," Susan whispered. "Margaret Angelica." I heard her fumble at her pockets. Then she said, "Here."

I opened my eyes and looked at a little wallet-sized portrait of a dark-eyed child, maybe five years old. She wore a pink dress and had purple ribbons in her dark hair, and she was smiling a wide and infectious smile. Some calm, detached part of me filed the face away, in case I needed to recognize her later. The rest of me cringed away from looking any closer, from thinking about the image as anything but a bit of paper and ink.

"It's from a couple of years ago," Susan said quietly. "But it's my most recent picture." She bit her lip and offered it to me.

"Keep it," I told her quietly. She put it away. The red marks were fading from her skin, gone the way they had come. I rubbed at my eyes. "For now," I said slowly, "we're going to forget about your decision to edit me out of her life. Because chewing over it won't help her right now, and because her best chance is for us to work together. Agreed?"

Susan nodded.

I spoke the next words through my teeth. "But I haven't forgotten. Will never forget it. There *will* be a reckoning on that account later. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she whispered. She looked up at me with large, shining dark eyes. "I never wanted to hurt you. Or her. I was just . . ."

"No," I said. "Too late for that now. It's just wasting time we can't afford to lose."

Susan turned her face sharply away from me, to the fire, and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, her expression was under control. "All right," she said. "For our next step, we've got some options."

"Like?"

"Diplomacy," she said. "I hear stories about you. Half of them probably aren't true, but I know you've got some markers you could call in. If enough of the Accord members raise a voice, we might get her back without incident."

I snorted. "Or?"

"Offer reparations to the Red King in exchange for the child's life. He doesn't have a personal interest in this matter, and he outranks Arianna. Give him a bribe big enough and she'll have to let Maggie go."

"Right off the top of a building, probably," I growled.

Susan watched me steadily. "What do you think we should do?"

I felt my lips do something that probably didn't look like a smile. The storm had settled somewhere around my heart, and heady tendrils of its fury were curling up into my throat. It was a good ten seconds before I could speak, and even then it came out in a snarl.

"Do?" I said. "The Reds stole our little girl. We sure as hell aren't going to pay them for *that*."

A hot and terrible hunger flared up in Susan's eyes in response to my voice.

"We find Maggie," I said. "We take her back. And we kill anyone who gets in the way."

Susan shuddered and her eyes overflowed. She bowed her head and made a small sound. Then she leaned over and gently touched my left hand, the one still covered in slowly fading burn scars. She looked at my hand and winced, beginning to draw away.

I caught her fingers and squeezed hard. She settled her fingers against mine and did the same. We held hands for a silent moment.

"Thank you," she whispered. Her hand was shaking in mine. "Thank you, Harry."

I nodded. I was going to say something to stiff-arm her and keep the distance, but the warmth of her hand in mine was suddenly something I couldn't ignore. I was furious with Susan, furious with an intensity you can feel only when someone you care deeply about hurts you. But the corollary of that was unavoidable—I still cared, or I wouldn't be angry.

"We'll find her," I said. "And I will do everything in my power to bring her back safe."

Susan looked up at me, tears streaking her face, and nodded. Then she lifted a hand and traced her fingers lightly over the scar on my cheek. It was a newer one, still angry and colorful. I thought it made me look like some old-school German character from Golden Age Hollywood with a dueling scar on his cheek. Her fingertips were gentle and warm.

"I didn't know what I was going to do," she said. "There was no one willing to stand up to them. There was no one."

Our eyes met, and suddenly the old heat was there between us, quivering out from our joined hands, from her fingertips against my face. Her eyes widened a little, and my heart started pounding along rapidly. I was furious with Susan. But apparently my body just read that as "excited" and didn't bother examining the fine print. I met her eyes for a long moment and then said, through a dry throat, "Isn't this how we got into this mess?"

She let out a shaking sound that was meant to be a laugh, but was filled with awareness of the inherent irony, and drew her hands away. "I . . . I'm sorry. I didn't mean to . . ." Her voice turned wry. "It's been a while for me."

I knew what she meant. I took several slow, deep breaths, separating mind from body. Then I said quietly, "Susan. Whatever happens from here . . . we're done." I looked up at her. "You know that. You knew it when you chose not to tell me."

She looked brittle. She nodded slowly, as if something might break off if she moved any more quickly than that. She folded her hands in her lap. "I . . . know that. I knew it when I did it."

Silence stretched.

"Right," I said finally. "Now . . ." I took another deep breath, and told myself it would help. "The way I see it, you didn't fly into Chicago just for a chat with me. You wouldn't need Martin for that."

She lifted an eyebrow at me and nodded. "True."

"Then why?"

She seemed to gather herself, her voice more businesslike. "There's a Red outpost here. It's a place to start."

"Okay," I said, rising. "Let's start."

Chapter Three

“I hope there are no hard feelings,” Martin told me as he pulled out of the little gravel lot next to the house I board in.

Susan had yielded the passenger seat of the rental car to me, in deference to my storklike legs. “Hard feelings?” I asked.

“About our first meeting,” Martin said. He drove the same way he did everything—blandly. Complete stops. Five miles an hour under the limit. Wherever we were headed, it was going to take forever to get there.

“You mean the way you used me to attempt to assassinate old Ortega?” I asked. “Thereby ensuring that the Code Duello was broken, the duel invalidated, and the vamps’ war with the White Council continued?”

Martin glanced at me, and then into the rearview mirror at Susan.

“I told you,” she said to Martin. “He’s only dense in the short term. He sees everything eventually.”

I gave Susan a slight, wry tilt of my head in acknowledgment. “Wasn’t hard to realize what you were doing in retrospect,” I said. “The Red Court’s war with the White Council must have been the best thing to happen to the Fellowship in ages.”

“I’ve only been with them for slightly over one hundred years,” Martin said. “But it was the best thing to happen in that time, yes. The White Council is one of the only organizations on the planet with the resources to seriously threaten them. And every time the Council won a victory—or even survived what should have been a crushing defeat—it meant that the Red Court was tearing itself to shreds internally. Some of them have had millennia to nurse grudges with rivals. They are appropriately epic in scale.”

“Call me wacky,” I said, “but I had to watch a few too many children die in that war you helped guarantee. No hard feelings?” I smiled at him—technically. “Marty, believe me when I say that you don’t want me to get in touch with my feelings right now.”

I felt Martin’s eyes shift to me, and a little tension gather in his body. His shoulder twitched. He was thinking about his gun. He was pretty good with firearms. The night of my duel with the Red Court vampire named Ortega, Martin had put a round from one of those enormous sniper rifles into Ortega about half a second before the vampire would otherwise have killed me. It had been a gross violation of the Code Duello, the set of rules for resolving personal conflicts between individuals of the nations who had signed the Unseelie Accords.

The outcome of a clean duel might have put an early end to the war between the Red Court and the White Council of Wizards, and saved a lot of lives. It didn’t turn out that way.

“Don’t worry, guy,” I told him. “Ortega was already in the middle of breaking the Code Duello anyway. It would have fallen out the way it did regardless of what you had done that night. And your being there meant that he ate a bullet at the last second instead of me. You saved my life. I’m cognizant of that.”

I kept smiling at him. It didn’t feel quite right, so I tried to do it a little harder. “I’m also aware that if you could have gotten what you wanted by putting the bullet in my back instead of his chest, you would have done it without blinking. So don’t go thinking we’re pals.”

Martin looked at me and then relaxed. He said, “It’s ironic that you, the mustang of the White Council, would immediately cling to its self-righteous position of moral authority.”

“Excuse me?” I said quietly.

He spoke dispassionately, but there was a fire somewhere deep down behind the words—the first I’d ever heard in him. “I’ve seen children die, too, Dresden, slaughtered like animals by a threat no one in the wise and mighty Council seemed to give a good goddamn about—because the victims are poor, and far away, and isn’t that a fine reason to let them die. Yes. If putting a bullet in you would have meant that the Council brought its forces to bear against the Red Court, I would have done it twice and paid for the privilege.” He paused at a stop sign, gave me a direct look, and said, “It is good that we cleared the air. Is there anything else you want to say?”

I eyed the man and said, “You went blond. It makes you look sort of gay.”

Martin shrugged, completely unperturbed. “My last assignment was on a cruise ship catering to that particular lifestyle.”

I scowled and glanced at Susan.

She nodded. “It was.”

I folded my arms, glowered out at the night, and said, “I have literally killed people I liked better than you, Martin.” After another few moments, I asked, “Are we there yet?”

Martin stopped the car in front of a building and said, “It’s in here.”

I eyed the building. Nothing special, for Chicago. Twelve stories, a little run-down, all rented commercial space. “The Reds can’t—Look, it can’t be here,” I said. “This building is where my office is.”

“A known factor, for Red Court business holdings purchased it almost eight years ago,” Martin said, putting the car in park and setting the emergency brake. “I should imagine that was when you saw that sudden rise in the rent.”

I blinked a couple of times. “I’ve . . . been paying rent to the Red Court?”

“Increased rent,” Martin said, with the faintest emphasis. “Duchess Arianna apparently has an odd sense of humor. If it’s any consolation, the people working there have no idea who they’re really working for. They think they’re a firm that provides secure data backups to a multinational import-export corporation.”

“But this is . . . my *building*.” I frowned and shook my head. “And we’re going to do what, exactly?”

Martin got out of the car and opened the trunk. Susan joined him. I got out of the car on general principles.

“We,” said Martin, definitely not including me, “are going to burgle the office and retrieve files that we hope will contain information that might point the way toward Arianna’s locations and intentions. You are going to remain with the car.”

“The hell I will,” I said.

“Harry,” Susan said, her tone brisk and reasonable, “it’s computers.”

I grunted as if Susan had nudged me with her elbow. Wizards and computers get along about as well as flamethrowers and libraries. All technology tends to behave unreliably in the presence of a mortal wizard, and the newer it is, the wonkier it seems to become. If I went along with them, well . . . you don’t take your cat with you when you go bird shopping. Not

because the cat isn’t polite, but because he’s a *cat*. “Oh,” I said. “Then . . . I guess I’ll stay with the car.”

“Even odds we’ve been spotted or followed,” Martin said to Susan. “We had to leave Guatemala in a hurry. It wasn’t as smooth an exit as it could have been.”

“We didn’t have days to spare,” Susan said, her voice carrying a tone of wearily familiar annoyance. It was like listening to a husband and wife having an often-repeated quarrel. She opened a case in the trunk and slipped several objects into her pockets. “Allowances have to be made.”

Martin watched her for a moment, selected a single tool from the case, and then slid the straps of a backpack with a hard-sided frame over his shoulders. Presumably it had computer things in it. I stayed on the far side of the car from it and tried to think nonhostile thoughts.

“Just watch for trouble, Harry,” Susan said. “We’ll be back out in twenty minutes or less.”

“Or we won’t,” Martin said. “In which case we’ll know our sloppy exit technique caught up to us.”

Susan made a quiet, disgusted sound, and the pair of them strode toward the building, got to the locked front doors, paused for maybe three seconds, and then vanished inside.

“And I’m just standing here,” I muttered. “Like I’m Clifford the Big Red Dog. Too big and dumb to go inside with Emily Elizabeth. And it’s my *building*.” I shook my head. “Hell’s bells, I am off my game. Or out of my mind. I mean, here I am talking to myself.”

I knew why I was talking to myself—if I shut up, I would have nothing to think about but a small person, terrified and alone in a den of monsters. And that would make me think about how I had been shut out of her life. And that would make me think about the beast in my chest that was still clawing to get out.

When the local Red Court badass, the late Bianca, had stolen Susan away and begun her transformation into a full-fledged vampire of the Red Court, it had been the vampire’s intention to take my girlfriend away from me. One way or another she had succeeded. Susan as she had been—always joking, always laughing, always touching or kissing or otherwise enjoying life in general and life with me in particular—was gone.

Now she was somewhere between Emma Peel and the She-Hulk. And we had loved each other once. And a child had been born because of it. And Susan had lied to—

Before I could begin circling the block a few more times on *that* vicious cycle, a cold feeling went slithering down my spine.

I didn’t even look around. Several years of tense missions with Wardens not old enough to buy their own beer had taught me to trust my instincts when they went insane in a darkened city at two in the morning. Without even thinking about it, I crouched, reached into the air surrounding me, and drew a veil around myself.

Veils are subtle, tricky magic, using one of several basic theories to render objects or people less visible than they would be otherwise. I used to suck so badly at veils that I wouldn’t even try them—but I’d had to bone up on them enough to be able to teach my apprentice, Molly Carpenter, how to use them. Molly had a real gift and had learned quickly, but I’d been

forcing her to stretch her talents—and it had taken a lot of personal practice time for me to be able to fake it well enough to have credibility in front of the grasshopper.

Long story short—fast, simple veils were no longer beyond my grasp.

The street darkened slightly around me as I borrowed shadow and bent light. Being under a veil always reduced your own ability to see what was happening around you, and was a calculated risk. I figured it was probably worth it. If someone had a gun pointed my way, I had a long damned run before I could get around the corner of a nice thick building. It would be better to be unseen.

I crouched next to the car, not quite invisible but pretty close. The ability to be calm and still was critical to actually using a veil. It is *hard* to do when you think danger is close and someone might be planning to part you from your thoughts in a purely physical fashion. But I arrested the adrenaline surge and regulated my breathing. *Easy does it, Harry.*

Chapter Four

My blasting rod was hanging from its tie on the inside of my coat, a stick of oak about eighteen inches long and a bit thicker than my thumb. The ridges of the runes and sigils carved into it felt comfortably familiar under the fingers of my right hand as I drew it out.

I went up to the building as silently as I could, let myself in with my key, and dropped the veil only after I was inside. It wasn't going to do anything to hide me from a vampire that got close—they'd be able to smell me and hear my heartbeat anyway. The veil would only hamper my own vision, which was going to be taxed enough.

I didn't take the elevator. It wheezed and rattled and would alert everyone in the building to where I was. I checked the index board in the lobby. Datasafe, Inc., resided on the ninth floor, five stories above my office. That was probably where Martin and Susan were. It would be where the vampires were heading.

I hit the stairs and took a risk. Spells to dull sound and keep conversations private were basic fare for wizards of my abilities, and it wasn't much harder to make sure that sound didn't leave the immediate area around me. Of course, that meant that I was effectively putting myself in a sonic bubble—I wouldn't hear anything coming toward me, either. But for the moment, at least, I knew the vampires were here while they presumably were unaware of me. I wanted to keep it that way.

Besides, in quarters this close, by the time I reacted to a noise from a vampire I hadn't seen, I was as good as dead anyway.

So I murmured the words to a reliable bit of phonoturgy and went up the stairs clad in perfect silence. Which was a good thing. I run on a regular basis, but running down a sidewalk or a sandy beach isn't the same thing as running up stairs. By the time I got to the ninth floor, my legs were burning, I was breathing hard, and my left knee was killing me. What the hell? When had my knees become something I had to worry about?

Cheered by that thought, I paused at the door to the ninth-floor hallway, opened it beneath the protection of my cloak of silence, and then dropped the spell so that I could listen.

Hissing, gurgling speech in a language I couldn't understand came from the hallway before me, maybe right around the corner I could see ahead. I literally held my breath. Vampires have superhuman senses, but they are as vulnerable to distraction as anyone. If they were talking, they might not hear me, and regular human traffic in this building would probably hide my scent from them.

And why, exactly, a voice somewhere within the storm in my chest whispered, *should I be hiding from these murdering scum in the first place?* Red Court vampires were killers, one and all. A half-turned vampire didn't go all the way over until they'd killed another human being and fed upon their life's blood. Granted, an unwilling soul taken into the Red Court found themselves at the mercy of new and nearly irresistible hungers—but that didn't change the fact that if they were a card-carrying member of the Red Court, they had killed someone to be there.

Monsters. Monsters who dragged people into the darkness and inflicted unspeakable torments upon them for pleasure—and I should know. They'd done it to me once. Monsters whose existence was a plague upon millions.

Monsters who had taken my child.

The man once wrote: *Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger.* Tolkien had that one mostly right.

I stepped forward, let the door bang closed, and snarled, "Fuck subtle."

The gurgle-hissing from around the corner ahead stopped at a confused intersection of speech that needed no translation: *Huh?*

Chapter Five

We got a cab. We got out of the area before the cops had cordoned off a perimeter. It wasn't all that hard. Chicago has a first-rate police department, but nobody can establish that big a cordon around a large area with a lot of people in the dead of night quickly or easily. They'd have to call and get people out of bed and onto the job, and pure confusion would slow everything down.

By morning, I knew, word of the explosion would be all over the news. There would be reporters and theories and eyewitness interviews with people who had sort of heard something happen and seen a cloud of dust. This hadn't been a fire, like we'd seen a few times before. This had been an explosion, a deliberate act of destruction. They would be able to find out that much in the aftermath.

There would be search and rescue on the scene.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head on the window. Odds were good that there was no one else in the building. All the tenants were businesses. None of them was prone to operating late at night. But all of them had keys to get in when they needed to, just like I did. There could have been janitors or maintenance people there—employees of the Red Court, sure, but they didn't know that. You don't explain to the janitorial staff how your company is a part of a sinister organization with goals of global infiltration and control. You just tell them to clean the floor.

There could very well be dead people in that building who wouldn't have been there except for the fact that my office was on the fourth floor.

Jesus.

I felt Susan's eyes on me. None of us had spoken in front of the cabbie. Nobody spoke now, until Martin said, "Here. Pull over here."

I looked up. The cab was pulling up to a cheap motel.

"We should stay together," Susan said.

"We can go over the disk here," Martin said. "We can't do that at his place. I need your help. He doesn't."

"Go on," I said. "People"—by which I meant the police—"are going to be at my place soon anyway. Easier if they only have one person to talk to."

Susan exhaled firmly through her nose. Then nodded. The two of them got out of the cab. Martin doled out some cash to the driver and gave him my home address.

I rode home in silence. The cabbie was listening to the news on the radio. I was pretty beat, having tossed around a bunch of magic at the building. Magic can be awfully cool, but it's exhausting. What was left buzzing around me wasn't enough to screw up the radio, which was already alive with talk of the explosion. The cabbie, who looked like he was vaguely Middle Eastern in extraction, looked unhappy.

I felt that.

We stopped at my apartment. Martin had already paid him too much for the ride, but I duked him another twenty on top of that and gave him a serious look. "Your name is Ahmad?"

It was right there on his cabbie license. He nodded hesitantly.

"You have a family, Ahmad?"

He just stared at me.

I touched my finger to my lips in a hushing gesture. "You never saw me. Okay?"

He grimaced, but dipped his head in a nod.

I got out of the cab, feeling a little sick. I wouldn't hurt the guy's family, but he didn't know that. And even if he did, that and the bribe together wouldn't be enough to keep him from talking to the cops if they came asking—though I suspected it would be enough to keep him from jumping up to volunteer information. Buildings were exploding. Sane people would want to keep their heads down until it was over.

I watched the car drive away, put my hands in my coat pockets, and shuffled wearily home. I'd cut into my physical and psychic resources pretty hard when I'd turned all that energy loose on the vampires, and now I was paying the price. I'd unintentionally poured soulfire into every blast I'd leveled at them—which was why I'd had the nifty silver-white blasts of flame instead of the red-orange of standard-issue fire. I felt like falling into bed, but it wouldn't be the smart move. I debated doing it anyway.

I had time to get a shower, take Mouse out for a much-needed trip outside, put on a pot of coffee, and was just finishing up cleaning the debris and trash from my leather duster with some handy-dandy leather-cleaning wipes Charity Carpenter, Molly's mother, had sent over, when there was a knock at the door.

Mouse lifted his head from where he lay near me, his brown eyes wary and serious. Then his ears perked up, and his tail began to wag. He got up and took a step toward the door, then looked at me.

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "I'm going."

I got up and opened the door. It stuck halfway. I pulled harder and got it open the rest of the way.

A woman a little more than five feet tall stood at my door, her face weary and completely free of makeup. Her hair was golden blond, but hanging all over her face and badly in need of attention from a brush and maybe a curling iron. Or at least a scrunchie. She was wearing sweat-pants and an old and roomy T-shirt, and her shoulders were hunched up in rigid tension.

She stared at me for a moment. Then she closed her eyes and her shoulders relaxed.

"Hiya, Murphy," I said.

"Hey," she said, her voice a little feeble. I enjoyed the moment. I didn't get to see Murphy's soft side often. "Do I smell coffee?"

"Made a fresh pot," I said. "Get you some?"

Murphy let out a groan of something near lust. "Marry me."

"Maybe when you're conscious." I stepped back and let her in. Murph sat down on the couch and Mouse came over to her and laid his head shamelessly on her lap. She yawned and scratched and petted him obligingly, her small, strong hands making his doggy eyes close in bliss.

I passed her a cup of coffee and got one for myself. She took it black with a couple of zero-calorie sweeteners in it. Mine came with cream and lots and lots of sugar. We sipped coffee together, and her eyes became more animate as the caffeine went in. Neither of us spoke, and her gaze eventually roved over my apartment and me. I could hear the wheels spinning in her head.

"You showered less than an hour ago. I can still smell the soap. And you just got done cleaning your coat. At four in the morning."

I sipped coffee and neither confirmed nor denied.

"You were at the building when it blew up," she said.

"Not at it," I said. "I'm good, but I don't know about having a building fall on me."

She shook her head. She stared at the remainder of her coffee. "Rawlins called. Told me that your office building had exploded. I thought someone had gotten to you, finally."

"We on the record?" I asked. Murphy was a detective sergeant with Chicago PD's Special Investigations division. It was the dead-end department of CPD and the only one with any clue whatsoever about the supernatural world. Even so, Murphy was a cop to the bone. She could stretch the line when it came to legality, but she had limits. I'd crossed them before.

She shook her head. "No. Not yet."

"Red Court," I said. "They bought the building a few years back. They wired it to blow if they wanted to do it."

Murphy frowned. "Why do it now? Why not blow you up years ago?"

I grunted. "Personal grudge, I guess," I said. "Duchess Arianna is upset about what happened to her husband when he tangled with me. She thinks it's my fault."

"Is it?"

"Pretty much," I said.

She swirled the coffee around the bottom of the cup. "So why not just kill you? Click, boom."

"I don't know," I said. "She figured it wasn't enough, maybe. Click-boom is business. What I have going with her is personal."

My jaws creaked a little as I clenched them.

Murphy's blue eyes missed little. "Personal?" She looked around again. "Your place looks too nice. Who was it?"

"Susan."

Her back straightened a little. It was the only sign of surprise she showed. Murphy knew all about Susan. "You want to talk about it?"

I didn't, but Murphy needed to know. I laid it out for her in sentences of three and four words. By the time I'd finished, she had set her mug on the coffee table and was listening to me intently.

"Jesus and Mary, Mother of God," she breathed. "Harry."

"Yeah."

"That . . . that *bitch*."

I shook my head. "Pointing fingers does nothing for Maggie. We'll do that later."

She grimaced, as if swallowing something bitter. Then she nodded. "You're right."

"Thank you."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Martin and Susan are seeing what they can get off the disk," I said. "They'll contact me as soon as they know something. Meantime, I'll get a couple hours horizontal, then start hitting my contacts. Go to the Council and ask them for help."

"That bunch of heartless, gutless, spineless old pricks," she said.

I found myself smiling, a little, at my coffee.

"Are they going to give it to you?" Murphy asked.

"Maybe. It's complicated," I said. "Are *you* going to get CPD to help me?"

Her eyes darkened. "Maybe. It's complicated."

I spread my hands in a "there you are" gesture, and she nodded. She rose and paced over to the sink to put her cup down. "What can I do to help?"

"Be nice if the police didn't lock me up for a while. They'll realize that the explosives were around my office eventually."

She shook her head. "No promises. I'll do what I can."

"Thank you."

"I want in," she said. "You're both too involved in this. You'll need someone with perspective."

I started to snap back something nasty, but shut my stupid mouth because she was probably right. I put my own coffee cup in the sink to give me an excuse not to talk while I tried to cool down. Then I said, "I would have asked you anyway, Murph. I need a good gun hand."

Tiny Murphy might be, but she'd survived more scrapes with the supernatural than any other vanilla mortal I'd ever met. She'd keep her head in a crisis, even if the crisis included winged demons, howling ghouls, slaving vampires, and human sacrifice. She'd keep anyone—by which I meant Martin—from stabbing me in the back. She'd keep her gun up and firing, too. I'd seen her do it.

"Harry . . ." she began.

I waved a hand. "Won't ask you to break any of Chicago's laws. Or U.S. laws. But I doubt we're going to be in town for this one."

She absorbed that for a moment, folded her arms, and looked at the fire. Mouse watched her silently from where he sat near the couch.

She said, "I'm your friend, Harry."

"Never had a doubt."

"You're going to take Maggie back."

My jaw ached. "Damn right I am."

"Okay," she said. "I'm in."

I bowed my head, my eyes abruptly burning, the emotion clashing with the storm in my belly.

"Th—" I began. My voice broke. I tried again. "Thank you, Karrin."

I felt her hand take mine for a moment, warm and steady.

"We *will* get her back," she said, very quietly. "We *will*, Harry. I'm in."

Chapter Six

I didn't sleep long, but I did it well. When my old Mickey Mouse windup alarm clock went off at seven, I had to fight my way up from a deep place on the far side of dreamland. I felt like I could use another eighteen or twenty hours.

It was another instance of my emotions getting the better of me. Using soulfire on pure, instinctive reflex was a mistake—potentially a fatal one. The extramortal well of power that soulfire offered was formidable in ways I understood only imperfectly. I don't know if it made my spells any more effective against the Red Court—though I had a hunch that it sure as H-E-double-hockey-sticks did—but I was dead certain that it had drawn upon my own life energy to do it. If I pulled on it too much, well. No more life energy kinda means no more life. And if that energy was indeed the same force that is commonly known as a soul, it might mean oblivion.

Depending on what actually happened when you got to the far side, I guess. I have no idea. And no mortal or immortal creature I had ever met had sounded like he knew for sure, either.

I did know that powerful emotions were an excellent source of additional energy for working magic, sort of a turbocharger. Throw a destructive spell in the grip of a vast fury, and you'd get a lot more bang for your effort than if you did it while relaxed on a practice field. The danger, of course, was that you could never really be sure how much effect such an emotion would have on a spell—which meant that you ran a much higher risk of losing control of the energy. Guys operating on my level can kill others or themselves at the slightest mistake.

Maybe the soulfire came from a similar place as the emotions. Maybe you couldn't have one without at least a little bit of the other. Maybe they were all mixed together, like protein powder and skim milk in a health smoothie.

Didn't matter, really. Less than sixty seconds of action the night before left me exhausted. If I didn't get a handle on the soulfire, I could literally kill myself with it.

"Get it together, Harry," I growled to myself.

I shambled out of bed and out into the living room to find that my apprentice, Molly, had come in while I was sleeping and was profaning breakfast in my tiny kitchen.

She wore a simple outfit—jeans and a black T-shirt that read, in very small white letters, *IF YOU CAN READ THIS, YOU'D BETTER HAVE BOUGHT ME DINNER*. Her golden hair was longer—she'd been letting it grow—and hung down to her shoulder blades in back. She'd colored it near the tips with green that darkened to blue as it went down.

I'm not sure if Molly was "bangin'," or "slammin'," or "hawt," since the cultural catchphrase cycles every couple of minutes. But if you picked a word meant to be a term of praise and adoration for the beauty of a young woman, it was probably applicable. For me, the effect was somewhat spoiled, because I'd known her since she was a skinny kid somewhere between the ages of training wheels and training bra, but that didn't mean that I didn't have an academic appreciation for her looks. When she paid any attention, men fell all over her.

Mouse sat alertly at her feet. The big dog was very good about not taking food off the table or from the stove or the counter or on top of the refrigerator, but he had drawn a line on the linoleum: If any bits fell to the floor, and he could get to them first, they were his. His brown eyes tracked Molly's hands steadily. From the cheerful wag of his tail, she had probably already dropped things several times. She was a soft touch where the pooch was concerned.

"Morning, boss," she chirped.

I glowered at her, but shambled out to the kitchen. She dumped freshly scrambled eggs onto a plate next to bacon, toast, and some mixed bits of fruit, and pressed a large glass of OJ into my hand.

"Coffee," I said.

"You're quitting this week. Remember? We had a deal: I make breakfast and you quit morning coffee."

I scowled at her through the coffeess haze. I dimly remembered some such agreement. Molly had grown up being interested in staying healthy, and had gotten more so of late. She was careful about what she ate, and had decided to pass that joy on to me.

"I hate morning people," I said, and grabbed my breakfast. I stalked over to the couch and said, "Don't feed Mouse anything. Not good for him."

Mouse didn't twitch an ear. He just sat there watching Molly and grinning.

I drank orange juice, which I found a completely inadequate beginning to my day. The bacon turned out to be made of turkey, and the edges were burned. I ate it anyway, along with toast that was not quite done enough. The grasshopper had talents, but cooking was not among them. "Things are up," I said.

She stood at the sink, scrubbing a pan, and looked up at me interestedly. "Oh? What?"

I grunted and thought about the matter carefully for a moment. Molly was not much for combat. It just wasn't her field. The next few days would certainly be hazardous for me, and I could live with that. But if Molly got involved, they might well be murderous.

I'd seen both sides of the "ignorance is safety" line of thinking in action. I'd seen people die who wouldn't have if they hadn't been told about the supernatural and its hazards, and I'd seen them die because they'd been forewarned, and it just wasn't enough to really impress the scale of the threat upon them. There was just no way to know what would happen.

And *because* I had no way to know what would happen, I'd come to the conclusion that, absent factors that might make me believe to the contrary, I just wasn't wise enough to deny them the choice. Molly was a part of my life. This would affect her strongly, in one way or another. The only responsible thing to do was to let her decide for herself how she wanted to live her life. That included endangering it, if that was what she felt was appropriate.

So, much as I had for Murphy, I laid it out for the grasshopper.

By the time I was finished, Molly was kneeling on the floor next to where I sat at the sofa, her blue eyes wide. "Wow, Harry."

"Yeah," I said.

"Wow."

"You said that."

"This changes everything."

I nodded.

"How can I help?"

I hoped that she hadn't just chosen to get herself killed. "You tell me. What's the smart move, padawan?"

She chewed on her lip for a moment and then peered up at me. "We need information. And we need backup. Edinburgh?"

I drank the last swallow of my orange juice, resented its healthiness, and said, "Bingo."

We took the Ways to Edinburgh, taking advantage of the weird geography of the spirit world to cover a lot more physical distance in the material world. Only certain previously explored routes were safe and reliable, and you had to have some serious supernatural juice to open the door, so to speak, between the real world and the Nevernever, but if you could do it, the Ways were darned handy. The Chicago-to-Edinburgh trip took us about half an hour.

The headquarters of the White Council of wizards is a dull, dim, drafty sort of place—not unlike the insides of the heads of a great many people who work there. It's all underground, a network of tunnels, its walls covered in carvings of mystic runes and sigils, of stylized designs and genuinely beautiful artistry. The ceilings are kind of low for me in places. Some of the tunnels are pitch-black, but most of them are bathed in a kind of ambient light without a visible source, which is an awfully odd look—sort of like one of those black lights that makes certain other colors seem to glow.

We passed two security checkpoints and walked for another five minutes before Molly shook her head. "How big is this place?" Her subdued voice echoed down the empty tunnels.

"Big," I said. "Almost as big as the city above, and it has multiple levels. Way more than we actually use."

She trailed her fingers over an elaborate carving in the stone as we passed it, a mural depicting a forest scene, its edges and lines crisp and clean despite the smoke from occasional torches and the passage of centuries. Her fingers left little trails in the light layer of dust coating the wall. "Did the Council carve it out?"

"Nah," I said. "That would have been too much like work. Rumor has it that it used to be the palace of the lord of the Daoine Sidhe. That the original Merlin won it from him in a bet."

"Like, *Merlin* Merlin?" she asked. "Sword in the stone and so on?"

"Same guy," I said. "Doubt he was much like in the movies."

"Wrote the Laws of Magic, founded the White Council, was custodian of one of the Swords and established a stronghold for the Council, too," Molly said. "He must have been something else."

"He must have been a real bastard," I said. "Guys who get their name splashed all over history and folklore don't tend to be Boy Scout troop leaders."

"You're such a cynic," Molly said.

"I think cynics are playful and cute."

There was no traffic at all in the main corridor, which surprised me. I mean, it was never exactly crowded, but you usually bumped into *someone*.

I headed for Warden country. There was a large dormitory set up for the militant branch of the White Council, where I could generally be confident of finding a surly, suspicious face. It was also very possible that Anastasia Luccio, captain of the Wardens, was there. The cafeteria and the administrative offices were nearby, so it was hands down the busiest part of the stronghold.

Warden country and the cafeteria were both empty, though there was a deck of cards spread out on a table in one of the lounges. "Weird," I muttered. "All the checkpoints are business-as-usual or I'd think something was wrong."

Molly frowned. "Maybe someone got into the heads of the sentries."

"Nah. They're jerks, but they're not incompetent jerks. No one around here is going to get away with mental buggery for a while."

"Buggery?" Molly asked.

"Hey, we're in the United Kingdom. When in Rome."

We went across the hall to administration and, finally, found someone: a harried-looking woman who sat at an old switchboard—the kind with about a million holes and plugs that had to be manually inserted and removed to run it. She wore a pair of ancient-looking headphones and spoke into an old radio microphone. "No. No, we have no word at this time. When we learn something, you will be informed." She jerked the wire out, plugged it in under another flashing light, and repeated her spiel. I watched that half a dozen times before I literally waved a hand in front of her face to get her to notice us.

She stopped and blinked up at me. She was a matronly-looking woman, iron grey woven smoothly through her brown hair, which meant that she could be anywhere between forty-five and two hundred years old. Her eyes flicked over me and then Molly, and I saw her body tense. She eased her rolling chair a few inches back from us—like most of the older crew of wizards, she probably regarded me as a sociopath looking for a nice bell tower. The switchboard lights blinked on and off steadily. They were the old kind that made little clicking sounds as they did.

"Ah," she said. "Wizard Dresden. I am quite busy."

"It looks like it," I said. "Wizard MacFee, right? Where is everybody?"

She blinked at me again, as though I had spoken in Ewok. "Why, they're in the Senior Council's residence hall. It was the only place big enough for everyone who wished to witness it."

I nodded pleasantly and tried to remain calm. "Witness what?"

"The ambassador," MacFee said, impatience touching her voice. She gestured at the switchboard. "You haven't heard?"

"Was sort of busy yesterday," I said. "Heard what?"

"Why, the Red Court, of course," she said. "They've sent an ambassador plenipotentiary." She beamed. "They want to change the cease-fire into a genuine peace. They've sent no less than Duchess Arianna Ortega to ask for terms."

Chapter Seven

I felt my stomach flutter around inside me.

The duchess was playing dirty. As the Red Court envoy, of course she'd have some advance knowledge about her people's intentions. There was no way in hell that this was a coincidence. It was too perfect.

If the Red Court was offering a return to the status quo—and older wizards love status quo, let me tell you—and adding in something to sweeten it to boot . . . the Senior Council would never authorize an action that would jeopardize such a peace. Not for some random little girl—and certainly not for the offspring of the White Council's most famous maybe-psychotic problem child, Harry Dresden, and a half-vampire terrorist.

Plenty of the people on the Council thought I should have been beheaded when I was sixteen. It made the younger wizards think I was cool and dangerous, which probably explained my popularity with them. The older members of the Council, though, held the lion's share of its influence and authority. That set would be happy to take any reasonable excuse to leave me hanging in the wind, and Duchess Arianna clearly planned to give it to them.

She was cutting me off.

It wasn't until then that I noticed that while my brain had been calmly paddling down the stream of logic, the raging cauldron in my belly had overflowed, and I was walking with smooth, swift strides down a hallway, my staff in my left hand, my blasting rod in my right, and the runes and carvings of both were blazing with carmine light.

That was somewhat alarming.

Someone was shaking my arm, and I looked down to see that Molly was hanging on to my left arm with both hands. I was dragging her sneakers forward across the stone floor, though she was clearly trying to stop me.

"Harry!" she said desperately. "Harry! You can't!"

I turned my face away from her and kept walking.

"Harry, please!" she all but screamed. "This won't help Maggie!"

It took me a few seconds to work out how to stop walking. I did it, and took a slow breath.

Molly leaned her forehead against my shoulder, panting, her voice shaking. She still held on tight. "Please. You can't. You can't go in there like this. They'll kill you." I heard her swallow down a mouthful of terror. "If we have to do it this way . . . at least let me veil you."

I closed my eyes and took more deep breaths, concentrating on pushing my anger back down. It felt like swallowing acid. But when I opened my eyes, the runes on the staff and rod were quiescent once more.

I glanced at Molly. She looked up at me, her eyes reddened and afraid.

"I'm okay," I told her.

She bit her lip and nodded. "Okay."

I leaned over and kissed her hair gently. "Thank you, Molly."

She offered me a hesitant smile and nodded again.

I stood there for a moment more before I said, gently, "You can let go of my arm now."

"Oh, right," she said, releasing me. "Sorry."

I stared down the hallway in front of me, trying to order my thoughts. "Okay," I said. "Okay."

"Harry?" Molly asked.

"This isn't the time or the place to fight," I said.

"Um," Molly said. "Yes. I mean, clearly."

"Don't start," I told her. "Okay. So the duchess is here to play games. . . ." I clenched my jaw. "Fine. Game on."

I started forward again with a determined stride, and Molly hurried to keep up.



We proceeded to the White Council's ostentatiatory.

I know. That isn't a word. But it should be. If you'd seen the quarters of the Senior Council, you'd back me up.

I strode down the hall and nodded to the squad of twelve Wardens on guard outside the chambers of the Senior Council. They were all from the younger generation—apparently there were grown-up things happening on the other side of the large double doors, to which the children could contribute nothing but confusion.

For once, the Council's geriatocracy had worked in my favor. If they'd left one of the old guard out here, he would certainly have tried to prevent me from entering on general principles. As it was, several of the doorkeepers nodded to me and murmured quiet greetings as I approached.

I nodded back briskly and never slowed my steps. "No time, guys. I need to get in."

They hurried to open the doors, and I went through them without slowing down and stepped into the chambers of the Senior Council.

I felt impressed upon entering, as I always did. The place was huge. You could fit a Little League baseball field in it and have room left over for a basketball court. A rectangular central hall splayed out in front of me, its floor made of white marble with veins of gold running through it. Marble steps at the far end swept up to a balcony that circled the entire place, which was supported by Corinthian columns of marble that matched the floor. There was a quiet waterfall at the far end of the chamber, running down into a pool, surrounded by a garden of living trees and plants and the chirp of the occasional bird.

A platform stage had been erected in the middle of the room, complete with stagelike lighting from a number of brightly glowing crystals, plus another mounted on a wooden podium that would, I took it, provide amplified sound for anyone speaking near it. The place was packed with wizards standing on the floor in a miniature sea of humanity, with more of them lining the balcony above, filling the place to its capacity.

All in all, the ostentatiatory was so overdone that you couldn't help but be impressed, which was the point, and though my brain knew it was hundreds of feet underground, my eyes insisted that it was lit by natural sunlight.

It wasn't, though: There was a vampire standing on the platform stage, beside the newest member of the Senior Council, Wizard Cristos. He stood at the podium, smiling and addressing the assembly. The rest of the Senior Council, resplendent in their black formal robes and purple stoles, looked on with their hoods raised.

". . . another example of how we must meet the future with our eyes—and minds—open to the possibility of change," Cristos said. He had a great speaking voice, a strong, smooth baritone that rolled effortlessly through the enormous chamber. He spoke in Latin, the official language of the Council—which ought to tell you something about their mind-set. "Humanity is already beginning to move away from the cycle of unthinking violence and war, learning to coexist with its neighbors in peace, working together to find solutions to their mutual problems, rather than allowing them to devolve into bloodshed." He smiled benevolently, a tall, spare man with a mane of flowing gray hair, a dark beard, and piercing dark eyes. He wore his formal robes open, the better to display the designer business suit beneath it.

"It is for this reason that I requested a telephone conference with the Red King," he continued. He used the English word for *telephone*, since there wasn't a proper Latin noun for it.

It garnered a reaction from the assembled Council watching the proceedings. Such things were not done. "And after speaking with him for a time, I secured his support for a clearly defined, binding, and mutually acceptable peace. Creating the peace is in everyone's best interests, and it is for this reason that I am pleased to present to you, wizards of the White Council, the Duchess Arianna Ortega of the Red Court."

Several wizards not far from Cristos's position on the stage began clapping enthusiastically, and it spread haltingly throughout the chamber, eventually maturing into polite applause.

Arianna stepped up to the podium, smiling.

She was gorgeous. I don't mean "cutest girl at the club" gorgeous. I mean that she looked like a literal goddess. The details almost didn't matter. Tall. Dark hair. Skin like milk, like polished ivory. Eyes as blue as the twilight sky. She wore a gown of red silk, with a neckline that plunged gorgeously. Jewels touched her throat, her ears. Her hair was piled up on her head, occasional loose ringlets falling out. Hers was a beauty so pure that it was nearly painful to behold—Athena heading out on a Friday night.

It took me a good five or six seconds of staring to realize that there was something beneath that beauty that I did not like at all. Her loveliness itself, I realized, was a weapon—such creatures as she had driven men literally insane with desire and obsession. More to the point, I knew that her beauty was only skin-deep. I knew what lurked beneath.

“Thank you, Wizard Cristos,” the duchess said. “It is a very great honor to be received here today in the interests of creating a peace between our two nations, and thereby finally putting an end to the abominable bloodshed between our peoples.”

The Applause Squad started up again as Arianna paused. People picked up on the cue faster this time. Outside of the wizards who stood on the floor beneath the raised stage, the applause was still polite and halfhearted.

I waited until it began to die before I released the door. It closed with a quiet boom precisely in the moment of silence between the end of the applause and the duchess’s next statement.

Nearly a thousand faces turned my way.

Silence fell. I could suddenly hear the little waterfall and the occasional twitter of a bird.

I stared hard at Arianna and said, my voice carrying clearly, “I want the girl, vampire.”

She met my gaze with polite serenity for a moment. Then the hint of a smile touched her face, bringing with it a shadow of mockery. It made my blood boil, and I heard my knuckles pop as they clenched harder at my staff.

“Wizard Dresden!” Cristos said in sharp rebuke. “This is neither the time nor the place for more of your warmongering idiocy.”

I was so impressed with his authority that I raised my voice and said, louder, “Give back the child you took from her family, Arianna Ortega, kidnapper and thief, or face me under the provisions of the Code Duello.”

Murmurs ran through the assembly like a rumble of thunder.

“Wizard Dresden!” Cristos cried, aghast. “This is an ambassador of an Accorded nation, promised safe conduct while she is here on a mission of peace. This is not *done*!” He looked around the room and pointed a finger at several grey-cloaked wizards standing not too far from me. “Wardens! Escort this man from the chamber!”

I shot a glance at them. They were all old guard, all dangerous, all tough, and they really didn’t like me. Six sets of eyes with all the mercy and pity of a gun’s mouth locked onto me.

I heard Molly gulp.

I looked back at them and said, in English, “You sure you want it to be like this, fellas?”

It must have come out sounding more threatening than I thought it had, because half a dozen White Council hard cases stopped walking. They traded looks with one another.

I turned from them back to the stage, and addressed the vampire. “Well, thief?”

Arianna turned to Cristos and gave him a rather sad and gentle smile. “I’m sorry about this disruption, Wizard Cristos. I’m not sure what this is about, but it’s quite clear that Wizard Dresden feels that he has been badly wronged by my people. Bear in mind that whether justly held or not, his feelings contributed to this war’s beginning.”

“I apologize for this outrageous behavior,” Wizard Cristos said.

“Not at all,” Arianna assured him. “I, too, have suffered personal loss in this conflict. It’s always difficult to control the emotions arising from such things—particularly for the very young. That’s just one of the problems we’ll need to overcome if we are to break the cycle of violence between your folk and mine. The veterans of wars suffer horrible mental and emotional scars, vampires and wizards alike. I take no offense at Wizard Dresden’s words or actions, and do not hold him responsible for them.” She turned to me and said, her voice compassionate, “I can sincerely say that I understand exactly how much pain you’re in right now, Wizard Dresden.”

I had to force myself not to raise my blasting rod and burn that false empathy off of the duchess’s face. I gripped my gear with both hands, to make sure they weren’t going to try anything without consulting me.

“We can never regain the loved ones this war has taken from us,” she continued. “All we can do is end the fighting—before even more of our loved ones get hurt. I’m here to avert any more needless deaths, Dresden. Surely you can see exactly why I would do such a thing.”

Boy, did I. It wasn’t enough for her simply to kill me. She wanted to defeat me utterly first, to have her cake and eat it, too. If she brought the fighting to a close this way, she would garner massive credibility in the supernatural community—and if she did it while simultaneously sticking it to me, it would only be that much more elegant a victory.

She smiled at me again, with that same tiny shading of mockery so faint that no one who wasn’t looking for it could possibly have seen it. It was just enough to make sure that I could see the malice behind it, to make sure that I damned well knew she was rubbing it in my face in front of the entire White Council. She’d probably practiced it in a mirror.

“I’m giving you a chance,” I said, my voice harsh. “Return the child and it ends. We’re quits. Make me take her from you and I’ll play hardball.”

She put long, elegant fingers to her chest, as if confused. “I don’t know why you’re so upset with me, or what I have to do with this child, sir,” Arianna said. “But I understand your outrage. And I wish that I could help you.”

Someone stepped up close to my side, a little in front of me. She was a young woman, not particularly tall, with curling brown hair and a heart-shaped face that was appealing and likable, if not beautiful. Her eyes were steady and hard.

“Harry,” said Anastasia Luccio, captain of the Wardens, “don’t do this. Please.”

I clenched my jaw and spoke in a heated whisper. “Ana, if you *knew* what she’d done.”

“You are *not* going to restart the war and tarnish whatever honor the White Council has left by attacking an ambassador visiting under a pledge of safe conduct,” she said evenly. “You’re strong, Dresden. But you aren’t that strong. If you try it, there are at least thirty wizards here who could take you alone. Working together, they wouldn’t just beat you. They’d swat you down like a bug—and then you’d be imprisoned until they decided what to do with you, three or four months from now.”

My belly and chest felt like they were on fire. I looked past Anastasia to Duchess Arianna again.

She was watching me—hell, probably listening to me, too, vampire hearing being what it was. Her smile was a scalpel drawn slowly over my skin.

Anastasia put her hand on my arm—very gently, not firmly. She was making a request. “Harry, please.”

Behind me, Molly added, “This won’t help Maggie, boss.”

I wanted to scream. I wanted to fight.

On the stage one of the hooded figures of the Senior Council reached up and drew back his hood. My old mentor, Ebenezer McCoy, was a stocky old man with broad hands and scarred knuckles, bald except for a faint fringe of pale white hairs. His blunt, strong features were smooth and unreadable, but he met my gaze and gave me a very small, very precise nod.

The message was clear. I could practically hear the old man’s voice growling, *Trust me, Hoss. Go with her.*

I felt my lip lift up from my teeth in a silent snarl.

Then I turned and stalked from the chamber, my work boots thumping heavily on the floor, my staff clenched in my hand. Anastasia walked with me, her hand still on my arm, making it clear that I was being escorted from the room, even if she’d used a gentler persuasion than Cristos would have preferred.

The Wardens closed the door behind me with a soft, solid boom, cutting me off from the assembled might of the White Council.

Chapter Eight

“Hey,” said one of the young Wardens outside the ostentatious. “Hey, Harry. What’s up, man?”

I owed Carlos Ramirez more than a quick shake of my head, but I couldn’t give it to him. I didn’t want to talk at all, because I wasn’t sure I could keep it from turning into furious shouting. I heard Molly turn quickly to him and say, “Not now. There’s a problem, we’re working on it, and I promise to call you if there’s something you can do to help.”

“But—” he said, taking a few steps after us.

“Warden,” Luccio said firmly. “Remain at your post.”

He must have obeyed. We kept on walking and he didn’t follow us.

Luccio marched me down a tunnel I had never seen before, took a few turns into the darker hallways lit only by light she called to hang in the air around us, and then opened a door into a warm, firelit room. It looked like a den. There was a large fireplace crackling, several candles lit, and a lot of comfortable furniture scattered around in solitary nooks and in groups, so that one could have as much or as little conversational company as one wished. There was also a bar. A very large, very well-stocked bar.

“Oh,” Molly said, as she came in behind me. “Cozy.”

Anastasia let go of my arm and marched straight to the bar. She got down a bottle of black glass and poured amber fluid into three shot glasses. She brought them to a nearby table, gestured for us to sit, and then put all three glasses in the middle of the table, leaving it to us to choose which we would drink—two centuries of Warden-level paranoia tends to sink into your bones.

I sat down at the table. I took a glass and downed it. The liquor left a scouring heat in my chest as it went down, and I wanted it.

Anastasia took hers and made it vanish without twitching an eye-lash. Molly looked at her glass, took a polite sip, and said, to the other woman’s amused glance, “Somebody should be the designated . . . not driver, but sober person.”

“Harry,” Anastasia said, turning to me. “What you did today was dangerous.”

“I could take the bitch,” I growled.

“There’s no way for us to know how old Arianna is,” she contradicted, “because humanity hasn’t had a written language for that long. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I pushed my empty glass away with my fingers and said, “I could take the prehistoric bitch.” I looked around the room for a moment and said, “What is this place?”

Anastasia leaned back in her chair and spread her hands, palms up. “Welcome to the Worry Room.”

“Worry Room, huh.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Didn’t you see the bar?”

Molly giggled, and suppressed it. “Sorry.”

Anastasia’s voice turned faintly ironic. “It’s a place where our crusty old Wardens can go when we’re sick of the softhearted wizards who are so lily-livered that they want us to permit wayward children with enough talent to go warlock to live instead of executing them. Like your apprentice, here. I guarantee you some drinks were poured in this room and bitter words said about how we would regret it after her trial.”

I grunted. “Were you pouring, drinking, or talking?”

She shrugged. “If not for her, then for plenty of others. I was here when Morgan drank himself into a stupor after your trial, Harry.”

“No wonder it feels so cozy.”

She smiled tightly. “It’s likely the most private and secure room in the complex.”

“Paranoia Central is only *likely* free of spies? You guys are getting sloppy.”

“Dammit, Harry,” Luccio shook her head. “You’ve done the Warden job for a while. Or most of it. You still think that the Wardens never have a reason for acting as . . . decisively as they sometimes do?”

I sighed. Life is never simple. I had railed against the Wardens for years for killing children, young men and women who had gone warlock, lost control of their magical talents and their minds by indulging in black magic. Then I had seen the results of a few warlocks on a spree. They were ugly. Ugly, ugly, ugly. “You’ve got good reason,” I said. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it. Doesn’t make it right.”

“Not everyone is so far over the edge they can’t come back,” Molly added softly. “Sometimes people just . . . just get lost. They just need someone to show them how to come back.”

“Yes. And in the time it takes to make that distinction, a lot of innocent people have died, Miss Carpenter,” Anastasia said, her tone frank and gentle. “The human population has expanded with unthinkable speed in the past two centuries. More and more wizard-level talents are being born. Every time one of them goes warlock, we have less and less time to confront the problem—and nowhere near enough help.”

“Prevention,” I said. “Find them early and they don’t *go* warlock.”

“Resources.” She sighed. We’d had this talk before. “If the entire Council did nothing but Warden duty, full-time, it still wouldn’t be enough.”

“Education,” I said. “Use the Paranet. Get the smaller talents to help identify the gifted.”

She smiled at me and said, “I’m still building support for it. It’s a good idea, Harry. It might even work. The problem is making some of the others in the Council understand it. They see it only as a security risk, especially after Peabody. But it’s a good idea. Its time will come—eventually.”

I grunted. I was quiet for a moment, and then I said, “Familiar argument, huh? Give me some routine. Calm me down. Is that it?”

“Anxiety, anger, and agitation cloud the mind. That’s why the Worry Room is here.” She smiled faintly. “I’m well aware of what it looks like when a wizard has been pushed to the brink.” She poured the two of us another shot and said, “So why don’t you tell me how the prehistoric bitch did it to you.”

I took the glass without drinking. “She took a little girl.”

“Vampires take a lot of children,” Anastasia said. “What makes this one so special?”

I said nothing. Silence reigned. I looked up and met her eyes.

Anastasia and I had seen each other for a while. She knew me better than most. She studied my face for maybe half a second, and then took a deep breath. “Harry,” she said, “don’t say anything about this to anyone you don’t trust with your life.”

I gave her a small, bitter smile and nodded. Knowledge was power. Anyone who knew Maggie was my daughter might use her for leverage against me. Anastasia wouldn’t, not for any reason—but others on the White Council would. Oh, they’d probably use softer gloves than Arianna had: I could just see being offered money to help support Maggie, give her access

to nice schools, a privileged upbringing, and everything a father could want for his child—so that the offer could be withdrawn if I didn’t play ball. After all, these were the *good* guys.

But it could get worse. I literally shuddered to think what Nicodemus might do with the knowledge—or, joyous thought, Mab. (Yes, *that* Mab. Take it from me: The stories don’t do

her justice.) I’d met some other real gems out there as well, and none of them had reasons to like me. On the other hand, I thought with a shiver, Arianna was the devil I *didn’t* know.

Regardless, it wouldn’t be helpful to let knowledge of Maggie become general. I had never planned on making an open case of her blood relation to me before the Council. It wouldn’t win sympathy—only interest. The fewer people who knew I was Maggie’s father, the safer she would be.

And yes.

I am aware of the irony.

I kept looking at Anastasia and asked, “Can I count on you?”

She put her hands flat on the table and looked down at them for a slow five count, considering her words before she answered. “I am not what I was in a fight, Harry.”

I ground my teeth. “So you’ll sit here where it’s safe.”

For the first time since I’d arrived in Edinburgh, Anastasia Luccio’s dark eyes flashed with real anger, and I suddenly remembered that this woman had been the captain of the Wardens for decades. The air between us grew literally physically hotter. “Think carefully,” she said in a very quiet voice, “before you call me a coward.”

Since the stern, iron-haired captain had been magically relocated to the body of a college grad student, her powers had diminished significantly—but her savvy and experience hadn’t. I wouldn’t care to fight Luccio, regardless of our relative strengths. And, hell, it wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen her fight more than once since then.

The anger inside me wanted to spill out onto her. But she deserved better than that from me. I stuffed it back down and lifted the fingers of one hand in a gesture of mute apology. Anastasia Luccio might be many things, but she was no coward—and she was born and raised in a day and age where such an accusation might literally require a duel to be refuted.

No, thank you.

She nodded, mollified, and some of the tension went out of her. “I was going to say that I would be of most use to you here—gathering intelligence, asking questions, and digging up resources for you to use. Of course you should fight—but you can’t do that until you find the girl, and some of our own people will have an interest in making sure you don’t disrupt the peace process. If I am working from here, I can circumvent them.”

I glanced down at my hands, suddenly embarrassed. She was thinking more clearly than I was. "I didn't even think . . . Yeah. I'm sorry, Ana."
She inclined her head. "It's nothing."
"It was unnecessary," I scratched at my head. "You think you can sandbag the Merlin?"
She lifted both eyebrows.

"Hell's bells, I'm shocked he didn't rip off his hood and start screaming at me. Maybe challenge *me*, right there. No way he's going to sit on his ass when he can stick it to me instead!" I broke off speaking as I noticed that Molly's eyes had gone very wide. I turned to look behind me.

A painting on the wall had just finished sliding to one side, revealing a doorway hidden behind it. The door swung open soundlessly, and a wizard who was the solemn, movie-poster version of old Merlin himself came into the Worry Room.

Arthur Langtry was one of the oldest and the single most powerful wizard on the White Council. His hair and beard were long, all snowy white with threads of silver, and perfectly groomed. His eyes were winter sky blue and alert, his features long, solemn, and noble.

The Merlin of the White Council was dressed in simple white robes. What I could think of only as a gunslinger's belt of white leather hung at his hips. It looked like it had been designed after tactical gear made for Special Forces operators, but in an insignificant flash of insight I realized that, if anything, the opposite was likely to be true. Multiple vials, probably potions, rode in individual leather cases. The leather-wrapped handle of an anemic rod or a stubby wand poked out of a holster. Several pouches were fastened closed, and looked as though they would contain bits and pieces of the standard wizarding gear I habitually carried with me when I was working. He also bore a long, white staff, a simple wooden pole made of an unfamiliar wood.

I stared at him for a moment. Then I said, "The peace talks are over?"

"Of course not," the Merlin said. "Goodness, Dresden. We aren't going to allow the entire Senior Council to stand on a stage within reach of a vampire's claws. Are you mad?"

I blinked at him.

"Wizard McCoy was the only actual Senior Council member on the stage," he said, and then grimaced. "Aside from Cristos, of course, who is unaware of the security measure. The envoy might well be an assassin."

I worked my jaw a few times and said, "So. You left him up there by himself while you played it safe."

The Merlin shrugged. "One of us had to be there to handle any questions. It was McCoy's idea, Dresden. He is an irritating, arrogant, and formidable man."

I scowled and mentally flogged my brain for slacking, forcing myself to see past my emotionally driven hostile response. "You don't trust the vampires," I said slowly. "You aren't drinking the Kool-Aid on this peace conference."

Langtry looked at me patiently. Then he looked at Luccio.

"Jonestown," she provided. "The mass suicide last century."

He frowned at that and then nodded. "Ah, I see the metaphor. No, Dresden, we are not willing to simply accept them at their word—but a great many people on the Council do not concur. Cristos has garnered an enormous number of supporters who very much want to embrace the terms of peace."

"If you don't want to call off the war," I said, "then why the hell did you stop me, Captain Luccio? I could have fixed it for you right there."

"You wouldn't have," Langtry said calmly. "You would have been knocked senseless and thrown in a hole." A faint smile touched his lips as he spoke the words. "Granted, a pleasant notion, but not a practical one."

Next to me, Molly put her elbows on the table and propped up her chin in her hands, staring at the Merlin thoughtfully.

My brain kept chugging. *I think I can, I think I can.* When it got to the top of the hill, my eyes widened. "You aren't planning to smoke the peace pipe. You're expecting an attack."

He looked at me blandly, and rested one hand on the hilt of his combat wand as if by pure coincidence. "Egad. What gave it away, Dresden?"

I started to say something hot in reply, Merlin or no Merlin, but Anastasia put a hand on my wrist. "Our sources," she said, overriding my incipient insult, "have reported a great deal of activity in the Red Court camp. They're mobilizing."

I looked back and forth between them. "You figure they're trying a Trojan horse?"

"Or some variant thereof," Langtry replied.

"So we're getting ready for it," Anastasia said. "As well as preparing the heaviest counterattack we've thrown at them yet."

"Um," Molly said, "what if they're serious about making peace?"

Everyone looked at her, and my apprentice visibly wilted beneath the Merlin's gaze.

"It might happen," she said.

Langtry smiled faintly. "The leopard cannot change his spots, Miss Carpenter. Sheep can befriend a hungry wolf only briefly. The Red Court is all savagery and crocodile tears. If they make peace, it is only because they need the time to replenish themselves before fighting anew."

"Really old things get set in their ways," I confirmed to Molly, my tone including Langtry as a matter of course. "Always hope for the best and prepare for the worst."

Molly chewed her lip thoughtfully and nodded.

Langtry eyed me and said, "Need I explain why I have explained, Dresden?"

"Maybe you'd better," I said. "I mean, you didn't use illustrations or anything, Professor."

Langtry inhaled, briefly closed his eyes, and then looked away from me.

"Um?" Molly said, frowning.

"We want the Red Court to attack, if that is their intention," I told her. "We want the Red Court to think their trick is working. We want them to be overconfident. Then when they hit us, we hit them back so hard and fast that they don't know it's coming until it's over."

"No," Langtry said. "So they never *knew* it was coming. Period. We will no longer wage a war with that filth, cold, hot, or otherwise. We're going to destroy them, root and branch."

He lifted his chin slightly as his voice turned to frost. "We're going to exterminate them."

Silence followed. The fire crackled cheerfully.

I felt my hands clench into fists. "But you need them to expose themselves first. And that," I whispered, "is why you're going to ask me to lay off Duchess Arianna."

"Don't be absurd," Langtry said in a calm, quiet voice. "I am not asking you. I am *ordering* you to desist, Warden Dresden."

"And let the child die," I said.

"In all probability the child is already dead, or else turned," Langtry said. "And even if she still survives, we must face a cold truth: Uncounted *billions* now living and yet to be born

will be saved if we stop the Red Court from feeding on humanity *ever again*." His voice became even colder. "No one life, innocent or not, is worth more than that."

I said nothing for several long, silent seconds.

Then I stood up. I faced the Merlin for a moment. I could feel the obdurate, adamant will that drove the man, and made his power the greatest well of mortal magic on the face of the earth.

"You've got it backward, you know," I told him quietly. "No life is worth more than that? No, Merlin. No life is worth less."

His expression never changed. But his fingers tightened slightly on his staff. His cold blue eyes touched lightly upon Molly, and then returned to me.

The threat was plain to see.

I leaned over close to his ear and whispered, "Go ahead, Arthur. Try it." Then I straightened slowly away, letting every emotion and every thought drain out of my expression. The tension in the air was thick. No one moved. I could see Molly trembling where she sat.

I nodded slowly at the Merlin.

Then I said in a quiet, clear voice, "Grasshopper."

Molly stood up immediately.

I kept myself between the girl and Langtry as we walked to the door. He didn't offer any challenge, but his eyes were arctic and absolute. Behind him, Luccio gave me a single, tiny, conspiratorial nod.

Hell's bells. She'd known who she would be working against all along.

Molly and I left Edinburgh behind and headed back home to Chicago.

Chapter Nine

I watched out for trouble all the way back to Chicago, but it didn't show up.

The trip from Edinburgh would be a difficult one if limited by strictly physical means of transport. Wizards and jet planes go together like tornados and trailer parks, and with similarly disastrous results. Boats are probably the surest means of modern transport available to us, but it's a bit of a ride from Scotland to Chicago.

So we do what a good wizard always does when the odds are stacked up against us: We cheat.

The Nevernever, the spirit world, exists alongside our own, sort of like an alternate dimension, but it isn't shaped the same way as the mortal world. The Nevernever touches upon places in the mortal world that have something in common with it, a resonance of energies. So, if point A is a dark and spooky place in the Nevernever, it touches upon a dark and spooky place in the real world—let's say, the stacks at the University of Chicago. But the space five feet away from point A in the Nevernever, point B, is only dark and sad, not really scary. Maybe point B attaches to a cemetery in Seattle.

If you're a wizard, you could then start at the stacks at UC, open a doorway into the Nevernever, walk five feet, open another doorway back to the real world, and emerge into the

cemetery in Seattle. Total linear distance walked, five or six feet. Total distance traveled, better than seventeen hundred miles.

Neat, huh?

Granted, it's almost never as little as five feet you walk in the Nevernever, and that stroll just might introduce you to some gargantuan, tentacular horror so hideous that it drives you insane just by looking at it. The Nevernever is a scary place. You don't want to go exploring without a whole lot of planning and backup, but if you know the safe paths—the Ways—then you can get a lot of traveling done nice and quick, and with a minimum incidence of spontaneous insanity.

Once upon a time, I would have refused even to enter the Nevernever except in the direst of emergencies. Now, the idea wasn't much more stressful to me than the thought of hitting a bus station. Things change.

We were back in Chicago before lunchtime, emerging from the Nevernever into an alley behind a big old building that used to be a slaughterhouse. I'd parked the *Blue Beetle*, my beat-up old Volkswagen Bug, nearby. We went back to my apartment.

Susan and Martin were waiting. About two minutes after we got back, there was a knock at the door, and I opened it to find both half vampires standing on my doorstep. Martin carried a leather valise on a sling over his shoulder.

"Who is the girl?" Martin asked, his eyes calm and focused past me, on Molly.

"It's nice to see you again, too, man," I said. "And don't mention it. I save people's lives all the time."

Susan smiled at me, giving Molly the Female Once-Over—a process by which one woman creates a detailed profile of another woman based upon about a million subtle details of

clothing, jewelry, makeup, and body type, and then decides how much of a social threat she might be. Men have a parallel process, but it's binary: *Does he have beer? If yes, will he share with me?*

Chapter Ten

I leaned on a table with my eyes closed.

The Red Court was preparing a destructive act of high black magic.

The ritual, whatever it was, required a human sacrifice to succeed.

In my head, I watched a movie of Maggie being bled out like a slaughtered sheep within a ritual circle, surrounded by an army of vampires beneath a nightmare sky.

There was a hideous elegance in it. In a single stroke my daughter would die, and her death would be used to lash out against the Council. It was bald guesswork, but it fit what I'd seen of the duchess. She could inflict the maximum amount of personal agony on me and launch a sorcerous attack simultaneously. Revenge and war would both be served—all while she smiled and smiled and offered promises of peace and understanding, protected from me by the same idiots she was plotting to destroy.

I could try to warn them, but few would listen. Ebenezar, maybe, and Anastasia, and some of the young Wardens—but even if they listened and believed, they would still have to

convince others. The freaking Council never does anything quickly, and I had a bad feeling that *tempus* was *fugiting* furiously.

So, I'd just have to do it myself.

But to do that, I needed information.

I looked at my summoning circle again and took a slow, deep breath. There were things I could do. Horrible things. There were beings I could call up, malicious mavens and entities of wicked wisdom who might make the unknowable as plain as daylight.

If I did, there would be a terrible price.

I tore my eyes from the circle and shook my head. I wasn't that desperate.

Yet.

Someone knocked loudly on my apartment door.

I went upstairs, closed the lab, and picked up my blasting rod. I carried it to the door and looked out the peephole. Murphy stood outside, her hands in her coat pockets, her shoulders hunched.

"Couldn't use the phone," she said when I opened the door. She stepped in and I closed it behind her.

"Yeah, we figure the Red Court might be tapping them."

She shook her head. "I don't know about that, Harry. But Internal Affairs has got mine wired."

I blinked at her. "Those IA idiots? Again? Can't Rudolph just let it rest?" Rudolph the Brown-nosed Cop-cop, as he was affectionately known at SI, had managed to kiss enough ass to escape SI and get reassigned to IA. He seemed to hold a grudge against his former coworkers, irrationally blaming them for his (now concluded) exile among the proles of SI.

"Apparently not," Murphy said. "He's making quite a name for himself over there."

"Murph, you're a good cop. I'm sure that—"

She slashed a hand at the air and shook her head. "That's not important right now. Listen. Okay?"

I frowned and nodded at her.

"There's a full-scale investigation going into the bombing of your office building," Murphy said. "Rudolph talked to the lead FBI agent and the local lead detective in charge of the case and convinced them that you're a suspicious character and good perpetrator material."

I groaned. "Forensics will bear them out. The explosives were on my floor, some of them in the walls of my office."

Murphy pushed her hair back with one hand. The bags beneath her eyes had grown visibly darker. "They're going to bring you in and question you in the next couple of hours. They'll probably hold you for the full twenty-four. More if they can find a charge to stick you with."

"I don't have time for that," I said.

"Then you've got to get scarce," Murphy said. "And I've got to go. Neither of us will be helped if we're seen together."

"Son of a bitch," I snarled. "I am going to throw Rudolph halfway across Lake Michigan and see if the slimy little turd floats."

"I'll bring the lead weights," Murphy said. She drew the amulet I'd made to let her past my apartment's magical defenses from her shirt and showed it to me. "Hopefully I won't be able to find you. Get in touch with me when you need my help, huh?"

"Murph," I said. "If the authorities are getting set to come down on me . . . you can't be around."

Her eyebrows climbed a tiny fraction. It was a danger signal. "Excuse me?" she said politely.

"It's already going to look bad enough, we've worked together so much. If you're actually abetting me now . . . they won't let you keep your badge. You know they won't. And they might do even more than that. You could wind up in jail."

The subliminal angry tension in her abruptly vanished. "God, Dresden. You are a simp."

I blinked at her.

"If I go with you," she said, "I could wind up in the ground. That didn't seem to worry you."

"Well," I said. "I . . ."

"I choose my battles, Dresden. Not you." She looked up at me calmly. "Let me put this in terms that will get through your skull: My friend is going to save a child from monsters. I'm going with him. That's what friends do, Harry."

I nodded and was silent for several seconds. Then I said, "I know you, Karrin. For you, dying in a good fight would not be a terrible end. You've known it was possible, and you've prepared yourself for it." I took a deep breath. "But . . . if they took your shield away . . . I know what your job means to you. You'd die by inches. I don't think I could handle watching that happen."

"So you get to choose to shut me out? What I want doesn't count?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe."

"And you're the one who decides?"

I thought about it for a moment. Then I said, "No."

She nodded. "Good answer." She touched her fingertips to the shape of her amulet under her T-shirt. "Call."

"I will. Maybe by messenger, but I will."

"It's occurred to me that someone who wanted to make you suffer might start pulling the trigger on your friends. How do I verify the message?"

I shook my head. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure that even here, in my own home, I couldn't be too careful about being overheard. My apartment was blanketed in protective magic, but there were plenty of people (and not-people) who were stronger, more experienced, or wilier than me. "If I have to send a messenger, I'll make sure you know who it's from."

Murphy watched me answer. Then she glanced slowly around the room, as if looking for an unseen observer, and nodded her understanding. "All right. Don't stay here long, Harry."

"Yeah," I said. "Don't worry about me, Murph."

She made a face. "I'm not worried about just you. You've got at least one gun stashed here, and I'm betting there's more illegal material in the lab. If they like you for a suspect, they'll get a warrant. And the FBI, as far as I know, doesn't have any amulets to get them in here alive."

I groaned aloud. Murph was right. I had a couple of illegal weapons in my apartment. The Swords were still in the lab, too. Plus some miscellaneous material that the government probably wouldn't want me owning, including depleted uranium dust, for when the answer to "Who you gonna call?" turns out to be "Harry Dresden."

The wards that protected my apartment were going to be an issue as well. They wouldn't do anything if someone walked up and knocked on the door, or even if they fiddled with the doorknob—but anyone who tried to force the door open was in for a shock. About seventy thousand volts of shock, in fact, thanks to the defenses I'd put in place around my door. The lightning was savage, but it was only the first layer of the defense. It hadn't been so terribly long since an army of zombies tore their way into my living room, and I wasn't going to repeat the experience.

But my wards wouldn't have any way of differentiating between a zombie or a crazed vampire or a misguided FBI agent. They simply reacted to someone forcing his way inside. I'd have to deactivate the wards before someone got hurt. Then I'd have to remove any suspect gear from the house.

Hell's bells. Like I didn't have enough on my mind. I rubbed my thumb against the spot between my eyebrows where the headache was forming. "I did not need this on top of everything else. Which is why she did it."

"Why who did what?"

"Duchess Arianna of the Red Court," I said. I filled Murphy in on my day.

"That's out of character, isn't it?" Murphy asked. "I mean, for them to do something this obtrusive? Blowing up a building?"

"They did similar things several times during the war," I said. "She was making a statement. Blowing up my place of business right in front of God and everybody, the same way the wizards took out her husband's command post in Honduras. Plus she's diverting my attention and energy, yanking more potential support out from under me."

Murphy shook her head. "She's so clever she's making a mistake."

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. If she was all that smart, she would have blown you to pieces in your office.”

I nodded. “Yeah. That’s the most practical way.”

“So why didn’t she?”

“Figure she wants to inflict the maximum amount of pain she can before she gets rid of me.”

Murphy lifted her eyebrows. “For vengeance? That’s . . . kind of like a bad movie script, isn’t it?” She put on a faint British accent. “No, Mr. Dresden. I expect you to die.”

I grunted. Murphy had a point. Duchess Arianna almost couldn’t have been the sort to enjoy indulging her sadistic side at the expense of practicality. You don’t survive millennia as a vampire without being deadly cold-blooded.

Which meant . . .

“There’s something else at work here,” I said. “Some other game going on.”

Murphy nodded. “How sure are you that Susan is being straight with you?”

“Pretty sure,” I said. It sounded a little hollow, even to me.

Murphy’s mouth twisted up into a bitter curl. “That’s what I thought. You loved her. Makes it easy to manipulate you.”

“Susan wouldn’t do that,” I said.

“I hope not,” Murphy replied. “But . . . she’s been gone awhile, Harry. Fighting a war, from the sounds of it. That’s enough to change anyone, and not for the better.”

I shook my head slowly and said, “Not Susan.”

Murphy shrugged. “Harry . . . I’ve got a bad feeling that . . .” She scrunched up her nose, choosing her words. “I’ve got a bad feeling that the wheels are about to come off.”

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “Just . . . the building blowing up is all over the news. You can’t find an anchor talking about anything else. People are screaming about terrorists. The whole situation is gaining more attention from higher up in the government than anything else I’ve ever seen. You say that most of the White Council has been effectively placed under the control of this Cristos person. Now the upper ranks of the Red Court are getting involved, too, and from what you tell me everyone is reaching for their guns.” She spread her hands. “It’s . . . it’s like the Cuban missile crisis. Everyone’s at the edge.”

Hell’s bells. Murphy was right. The supernatural world was standing at the edge—and it was one hell of a long way down to the war of annihilation at the bottom.

I took a slow breath, thinking. Then I said, “I don’t care about that.”

Murphy’s golden eyebrows went up.

“I’m not responsible for everyone else in the world, Murph. I’m going to find a little girl and take her somewhere safe. That’s all. The rest of the world can manage without me.”

“What if that’s the last straw, Harry? The little girl. What will you do then?”

I growled as a column of pure rage rose up my spine and made my voice rough. “I *will* make Maggie safe. If the world burns because of that, then so be it. Me and the kid will roast some marshmallows.”

Murphy watched me thoughtfully for several empty seconds. Then she said, very gently, “You’re a good man, Harry.”

I swallowed and bowed my head, made humble by the tone of her voice and the expression on her face, more than the words themselves.

“Not always rational,” she said, smiling. “But you’re the best kind of crazy.”

“Thank you, Karrin.”

She reached out and squeezed my arm once. “I should go. Call me.”

“I will.”

She left a moment later and I began sanitizing my apartment for government scrutiny. It would take me a little precious time, but being locked in a cage would take even more. I was still tucking away the last of my contraband when there was a knock at the door. I froze. After a moment, the knock was repeated.

“Harry Dresden!” called a man’s voice. “This is Special Agent Tilly of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I have a warrant to search this property and detain its occupants for questioning regarding last night’s explosion. If you do not open this door, we will be forced to break it down.”

Crap.

Chapter Eleven

I tore the rug from the trapdoor again. I'd packed almost all of my questionable materials into a large nylon gym bag. I slung it over my shoulder, grabbed my duster, staff, and blasting rod, and nearly killed myself trying to go down the ladder too quickly. I stopped a couple of steps from the bottom and reached up to close the trapdoor again. There was a pair of simple bolts on the lower side of the door, so that I or the grasshopper could signal the other that something delicate was in progress, and distractions might be dangerous. I locked the door firmly.

"What's going on?" blurted Bob from his shelf.

"Bob, I need the wards down *now*."

"Why don't you just—"

"Because they'll come back up five minutes after I've used the disarming spell. I need them *down*. Get off your bony ass and do it!"

"But that will knock them out for at least a week—"

"I *know*. Go *do* it, and hurry! You have my permission to leave the skull for that purpose."

"Aye-aye, O captain, my captain," Bob said sourly. A small cloud of orange sparkling light flowed out of the skull's eye sockets and rushed upstairs through the cracks at the edge of the trapdoor.

I immediately started dumping things into my bag. I was making a mess doing it, too, but there was no help for that.

Less than half a minute later, Bob returned and flowed back into the skull again. "There're a bunch of guys in suits and uniforms knocking on the door, Harry."

"I know."

"Why?" he asked. "What's going on?"

"Trouble," I said. "What do I have in here that's illegal?"

"Do I look like an attorney? These ain't law books I'm surrounded by."

There was a heavy slam of impact from upstairs. Whoever was up there was trying a ram on the door. Good luck with that, boys. I'd had my door knocked down before. I had installed a heavy metal security door that nothing short of explosives was going to overcome.

"Where's the ghost dust?" I asked.

"One shelf over, two up, cigar tin in a brown cardboard box," Bob said promptly.

"Thanks," I said. "That section of rhino horn?"

"Under the shelf to your left, plastic storage bin."

So it went, with Bob's flawless memory speeding the process. I wound up stuffing the bag full. Then I tore the Paranet map off the wall and added it to the bag, and tossed the directory of contact numbers for its members in next to it. The last thing I needed was the FBI deciding that I was the hub of a network of terrorist cells.

Bob's skull went in, too. I zipped the bag closed, leaving just enough opening for Bob to see out. Last, I took the two Swords (at least one of which had been used in murders in the Chicago area), slipped them through some straps on the side of the bag, and then hurriedly duct-taped them into place, just to be sure I wouldn't lose them. Then I drew on my duster and slung the bag's strap over my shoulder with a grunt. The thing was heavy.

Bangs and bumps continued upstairs. There was a sudden, sharp cracking sound. I winced. The door and its frame might be industrial-strength, but the house they were attached to was a wooden antique from the previous turn of the century. It sounded like something had begun to give.

"I told you," Bob said. "You should have found out what was on the other side from here long before now."

"And I told *you*," I replied, "that the last thing I wanted to do was thin the barrier between my own home and the bloody Nevernever by going through it and then attracting the attention of whatever hungry boogity-boo was on the other side."

"And you were wrong," Bob said smugly. "And I told you so."

There was a tremendous crash upstairs, and someone shouted, "FBI!" at the same time someone else was shouting, "Chicago PD!"

An instant later, someone let out a startled curse and a gun went off.

"What was that?" screamed a rather high-pitched voice.

"A cat," said Agent Tilly's voice, dripping with disdain. "You opened fire on a freaking cat. And missed."

Mister. My heart pounded in my chest. I'd forgotten all about him. But, true to his nature, Mister seemed to have taken care of his own daring escape.

There were chuckles from several voices.

"It isn't funny," snapped the other voice. It was Rudolph, all right. "This guy is dangerous."

"Clear," called a voice from another room—which meant my bedroom and bathroom, since it was the only other room available. "Nothing in here."

"Dammit," Rudolph said. "He's here somewhere. Are you sure your men spotted him through the window?"

"They saw someone moving around in here not five minutes ago. Doesn't mean it was him." There was a pause and then Agent Tilly said, "Or, gee. Maybe he's down in the subbasement under that trapdoor over there."

"You still have men in place at the windows?" Rudolph asked.

"Yes," Tilly said wearily. He raised his voice a bit, as if speaking to someone on the far side of a large room. "This place is buttoned up. There's nowhere for him to go. Let's just hope he shows himself and gives himself up quietly. We'll be sure to respect all his rights and everything, and if he cooperates, this could be over pretty quickly."

I paused. I had some choices to make.

I could still do as Tilly suggested. In the long run, it was obviously the best choice for me. I'd be questioned and cleared by anyone reasonable (i.e., not Rudolph). I could even point them at the duchess's business interests and turn them loose to become a thorn in her side. After that, I would be back to the status quo of wary cooperation with the authorities—but that process would take precious time. A couple of days at the very least.

I didn't have that kind of time.

Agent Tilly struck me as someone not entirely unreasonable. But if I approached him now, protesting my innocence, and then vanished, I'd be up for resisting arrest at the very least. Even if everything else in this mess panned out in my favor, that could get me jail time, which I wished to avoid. Besides. There wasn't anything Tilly could do for Maggie.

And, I had to admit it, I was *angry*. This was my home, dammit. You don't just break down the door of a man's home on the say-so of a snake like Rudolph. I had plenty of anger already stored up, but hearing those voices in my living room added another large lump to the mound. I doubted my ability to remain polite for very long.

So instead of stopping to talk, I turned to the summoning circle, stepped into it, summoned up my will, and whispered, "*Aparturum*."

I waved my staff from left to right, infusing the tool with my will, and reality rolled up along it like a scroll. Soft green light began to emanate from the empty air in front of me in a rectangular area seven feet tall and half as wide—a doorway between my apartment and the Nevernever. I had no idea what was on the other side.

The bolts to the trapdoor began to rattle. I heard someone call for a saw. The door wasn't closely fitted. They'd be able to slip a saw blade through the crack and slice those two bolts in seconds.

I gathered up my power into a defensive barrier around me, running it through my shield bracelet, and gritted my teeth. My heart pounded against my chest. It was entirely possible that walking through that doorway between worlds would take me to the bottom of a lake of molten lava, or over the edge of a rushing waterfall. There was no way to know until I actually stepped into it.

"I told you so!" Bob chortled.

An electric engine buzzed above me and then abruptly died. Someone made puzzled sounds. Then a slender steel blade slipped through the crack in the door and someone started cutting through the bolts by hand.

I stepped out of the real world and into the Nevernever.

I was braced for whatever would happen. Freezing cold. Searing heat. Crushing depth of water—even utter vacuum. The sphere of force around me was airtight, and would keep me alive even in someplace like outer space, at least for a few moments.

I emerged into the Nevernever, my shields at full strength, my blasting rod ready to unleash hell, as the invisible sphere of force around me slammed into—

—a rather lovely bed of daisies.

My shields mashed them flat. The entire bed, in its little white planter, immediately resembled a pressed-flower collection.

I looked around slowly, my body tight and ready, my senses focused.

I was in a garden.

It looked like an Italian number. Only a minority of the shrubs and flowers were planted in raised beds. The others had been laid out to give the impression that they had grown naturally into the space they occupied. Grassy paths wound through the irregularly shaped garden, twisting and turning this way and that. A hummingbird the size of a silver dollar darted down and tucked its beak into a particularly bright flower, and then vanished again. A bee buzzed by—just a regular old bumblebee, not some giant mutant monster thing.

Don't laugh. I've seen them over there.

I adjusted the shielding spell to allow air to pass through it and took a suspicious, cautious sniff. It might look like a nice place, but for all I knew the atmosphere was laced with chlorine gas.

It smelled like autumn sunshine, where the days might be balmy but the nights could carry a heavy nip. Letting the air in meant that sound had an easier time getting past my shield.

Birds chirped lazily. Somewhere nearby, there was running water.

Bob started tittering. "Look out! Look out for the vicious mega-squirrel, boss!" he said, hardly able to speak clearly. "My gosh! That ficus is about to molest you!"

I glowered down at the skull and returned to watching my surroundings for a moment more. Then I carefully lowered the shields. They burned a hell of a lot of energy. If I tried to hold them up for more than a few moments, I'd find myself too weary to function.

Nothing happened.

It was just a sleepy afternoon in a very pleasant, pretty garden.

"You should have seen your face," Bob said, still twitching with muffled laughter. "Like you were going to face an angry dragon or something."

"Shut up," I told him quietly. "This is the Nevernever. And it's way too easy."

"Not every place in the spirit world is a nightmare factory, Harry," Bob scolded me. "It's a universe of balance. For every place of darkness, there is also one of light."

I turned another slow circle, checking for threats, before I took my staff and waved it from left to right again, shutting the gateway back to my laboratory. Then I returned to cautiously scanning the area.

"Stars and stones, Harry," Bob said merrily. "I guess wearing that grey cloak for so long rubbed off on you. Paranoid much?"

I glowered and never stopped scanning. "Way. Too. Easy."

Five minutes later, nothing had happened. It's difficult to stay properly intimidated and paranoid when there is no evident threat and when the surroundings are so generally peaceful.

"Okay," I said, finally. "Maybe you're right. Either way, we need to get moving. Hopefully we can find somewhere one of us recognizes that can get us back to the Ways."

"You want to leave a trail of bread crumbs or something?" Bob asked.

"That's what you're for," I said. "Remember how to get back here."

"Check," he said. "Which way are we going?"

There were three paths. One wandered among high grasses and soaring trees. Another was pebbled and ran uphill, with plenty of large rocks figuring in the landscaping. The third had greenish cobblestones, and led through a field of nice low flowers that left lots of visibility around us. I went with option three, and started down the cobbled path.

After twenty or thirty paces, I started to get uneasy. There was no reason for it that I could see. It was pure instinct.

"Bob?" I asked after a moment. "What kinds of flowers are these?"

"Primroses," the skull replied instantly.

I stopped in my tracks. "Oh. Crap."

The earth shook.

The ground heaved around my feet, and along the primrose path ahead of me, the walking stones writhed and lifted up out of the soil. They proved to be the gently rounded crowns of segments of exoskeleton. Said segments belonged to the unthinkable large green centipede that had just begun shaking its way loose from the soil as we spoke. I watched in sickly fascination as the creature lifted its head from the soil, fifty feet away from us, and turned to look our way. Its mandibles clacked together several times, reminding me of an enormous set of shears. They were large enough to cut me in half at the waist.

I looked behind us and saw another fifty or sixty feet of the path ripping free, and looked down to see that the walking stone I stood upon was also part of the creature, albeit the last to unplant itself.

I fought to keep my balance as the stone ripped free, but I wound up being dumped into a bed of primroses while the enormous centipede's head slithered left and right and rolled toward me at a truly alarming rate.

Its enormous eyes glittered brightly, and slime dripped from its hungrily snapping jaws. Its hundreds of legs each dug into the ground to propel its weight forward, their tips like tent stakes, biting the earth. It sounded almost like a freaking locomotive.

I looked from the centipede down to the skull. "I told you so!" I screamed. "Way! Too! Easy!"

Chapter Twelve

Yeah.

This was not what I'd had in mind when I got out of bed that morning.

The damned thing *should* have been slow. By every law of physics, by every right, a centipede that big should have been *slow*. Dinosauric. Elephantine.

But this was the Nevernever. You didn't play by the same rules here. Physics were sort of a guideline, and a very loose and elastic guideline at that. Here, the mind and heart had

more sway than the material, and the big bug was *fast*. That enormous, predatory head shot at me like the engine of some psychotic locomotive, its killer jaws spreading wide.

Fortunately for me, I was, just barely, faster.

I brought forth my left hand, holding it out palm forth in a gesture of command and denial, a universal pose meaning one thing: *Stop!* Intent was important in this place. As the jaws closed, I brought up my spherical shield to meet it, the energy humming through my bracelet's charms, which burst into shining light as the magic coursing through them shone through the ephemeral substance of mere material metals.

The jaws closed with a crunch and a crash, and my bracelet flared even brighter. The shield exploded in more colors and shapes than a company of kaleidoscopes, and turned aside the beast's jaws—its strength, after all, was just one more bit of materially oriented power in an immaterial realm.

I brought my right hand out of my coat holding my blasting rod, and with a shouted word loosed a sledgehammer of searing power. It dipped down and then curled up an instant before it hit, landing a sorcerous uppercut on what passed for the centipede's chin. It flung the creature's head several yards up, and its entire body rippled in agony.

Which, in retrospect, probably shouldn't have caught me quite as off guard as it did.

The ground beneath my feet heaved and bucked, and I went flying, my arms whirling in a useless windmill. I landed in a sprawl amid ranks of primroses, which immediately began to move, lashing out with tiny stem-tendrils lined with wickedly sharp little thorns. Even as I struggled back to my feet, tearing them away from my wrists and ankles, I noticed that the flowers around me had begun to blush a deep bloodred.

"You know what, Harry!" Bob called. "I don't think this is a garden at all!"

"Genius," I muttered, as the centipede recovered its balance and began reorienting itself to attack. Its body flowed forward, following the motion of its head. I decided that all those legs hitting the earth like posthole diggers in steady sequence made the giant bug sound less like a locomotive than a big piece of farm equipment churning by.

I ran at it, focusing my will beneath me, planted my staff on the earth, and swung my legs up in a pole vaulter's leap. I unleashed my will beneath and behind me as I did, and flew over the thing's back as it continued surging forward. It let out a rumbling sound of displeasure as I went, the head twisting to follow me, forced to slow down enough to allow its own rearmost legs to get out of its way. It bought me only a few seconds.

Bigger doesn't mean better, especially in the Nevernever. One second was time enough to turn, focus another beam of fire into a far smaller area, and bring it down like an enormous cutting torch almost precisely across the middle of the big bug's body, an act of precision magic that I'd learned from Luccio, and which I was not at all confident I could have duplicated in the real world.

The beam, no bigger around than a couple of my fingers, sliced the creature in half as neatly and simply as if I'd used a paper cutter the size of a semi trailer.

It shrieked in pain, a brazen, bellowing sound that conveyed, even from such an alien thing, the depth of its physical agony. Its hindquarters just kept right on rolling forward, as if they hadn't noticed that the head was gone. The front half of the thing began to veer and waver wildly, its limited brain perhaps overloaded by the effort of sending nerve impulses to bits of its anatomy that no longer existed. It settled into a pattern of chasing its own retreating midsection, rolling in a great circle that crushed the ranks of primroses on either side of the trail.

"Booya!" I shouted in pure triumph, the adrenaline turning my manly baritone into a rather terrified-sounding shriek. "What have you got for fiery beam of death, huh? You got

nothing for fiery beam of death! Might as well go back to Atari, bug-boy, 'cause you don't got game enough for me!"

It took me five or ten seconds to realize what was happening.

The wound I'd inflicted hadn't allowed for much bleeding, cauterizing even as it sliced—but even that little bit of bleeding stopped on both severed halves of the monster. The front half's wounded rear end suddenly rounded out. The second half's wounded front end shuddered and suddenly warped in place, and then with a wriggling motion, a new head began to writhe free of the severed stump.

Within seconds, both halves had focused on me, and then two of the freaking things rolled at me, jaws clashing and snapping, equally strong, equally as deadly as before. Only they were going to come rushing at me from multiple directions now.

"Wow," Bob said, in a perfectly calm, matter-of-fact, conversational tone. "That is incredibly unfair."

"Been that kind of day," I said. I swapped my blasting rod for my staff. The rod was great for pitching fire around, but I needed to pull off something more complicated than it was really meant to handle, and my wizard's staff was a great deal more versatile, meant for handling a broad range of possibilities. I called forth my will and laced it with the soulfire within me, then thrust the staff ahead and called, "*Fuego murus! Fuego vellum!*"

Energy rushed out of me, and silver-white fire rose up in a ring nearly sixty feet across, three feet thick, and three or four yards high. The roar of the flames seemed to be somehow intertwined with an odd tone that sounded like nothing so much as the voice of a great bell.

The centipedes (plural—Hell's bells, I needed to stop being so arrogant) rose up onto their rearmost limbs, trying to bridge the wall in a living arch, but they recoiled from the flames even more violently than when I'd slammed the original head with a cannonball of fire.

"Hey, neat working!" Bob said. "The soulfire is a nice touch."

The effort of managing that much energy caught up to me in a rush, and I found myself gasping and sweating. "Yeah," I said. "Thanks."

"Of course, now we're trapped," Bob noted. "And that wall is going to run out of juice soon. You can keep chopping them up for a while. Then they'll eat you."

"Nah," I said, panting. "We're in this together. We'll both get eaten."

"Ah," Bob said. "You'd better open a Way back to Chicago, then."

"Back to my apartment?" I demanded. "The FBI is there just waiting to slap cuffs onto me."

"Then I guess you shouldn't have become a terrorist, Harry!"

"Hey! I *never*—"

Bob raised his voice and shouted toward the centipedes, "I'm not with him!"

None of my options were good ones. Getting eaten by a supernaturally resilient centipede-demon would be an impediment to my rescue effort. Getting locked up by the FBI wouldn't be much better, but at least with the feds putting me in a cell, I'd have a chance to walk out of it—unlike the centipedes' stomach. Stomachs.

But I couldn't walk back into my apartment with a bag full of no-nos. I'd have to hide them before I got there—and that meant leaving the bag here. That wasn't exactly a brilliant idea, but I didn't have much in the way of a choice. I would have to take whatever precautions I could to hide the bag and hope that they were enough.

Earth magic isn't my forte. It is an extremely demanding discipline, physically speaking. You are, after all, talking about an awful lot of weight being moved around. Using magic doesn't mean you get to ignore physics. The energy for creating heat or motion comes from a different source, but it still has to interact with reality along the same lines as any other kind of energy. That means that affecting tons of earth takes an enormous amount of energy, and it's damned difficult—but not impossible. Ebenezar had insisted that I learn at least one very useful, if enormously taxing, spell with earth magic. It would be the effort of an entire day to use it in the real world. But here, in the Nevernever . . .

I lifted my staff, pointed it at the ground before me, and intoned in a deep, heavy monotone, "*Dispertius!*" I unleashed my will as I did, though I was already winded, and the earth and stone beneath my feet cracked open, a black gap opening like a stony mouth a few inches in front of my toes.

"Oh, no, no," Bob said. "You are *not* going to put me in—"

It was an enormous effort to my swiftly tiring body, but I pitched the bag, with the Swords, Bob, and all, into the hole. It vanished into the dark, along with Bob's scream of, "You'd better come back!"

The furious hissing of the enraged centipedes sliced through the air.

I pointed my staff at the hole again and intoned, "*Resarcius!*" More of my strength flooded out of me, and as quickly as that, the hole mended itself again, with the earth and stone that the bag and its contents displaced being dispersed into a wide area, resulting in little more than a very slight and difficult-to-see hump in the ground. The spell would make retrieval of the gear difficult for anyone who didn't know exactly where it was, and I had put it deep enough to hide it from anyone who wasn't specifically looking for it. I hoped.

Bob and the Swords were as safe as it was possible for me to make them, under the circumstances, and my wall of silver fire was steadily dwindling. It was time to get going while I still could.

My legs were shaking with fatigue and I leaned hard on my staff to keep from falling over. I needed one more effort of will to escape this prettily landscaped death trap, and after that—

The ring of fire had fallen low enough that one of the centipedes arched up into the air, forming a bridge of its own body, and flowed over it and onto the ground outside. Its multifaceted eyes fixed upon me and its jaws clashed in hungry anticipation.

I turned away, focused my thoughts and will, and with a slashing motion of my hand cut a tiny slice into the air, opening a narrow doorway, a mere crack, between the Nevernever and reality. Then I threw myself at it.

I had never gone through such a narrow opening before. I felt as if it were smashing me flat in some kind of spiritual trash compactor. It hurt, an instant of such savage agony that it seemed to stretch out into an hour, all while my thoughts were compressed into a single, impossibly dense whole, a psychic black hole where every dark and leaden emotion I'd ever felt seemed to suffuse and poison every thought and memory, adding an overwhelming heartache to the physical torment.

The instant passed, and I was through the narrow opening. I sensed a fraction of a second in which the centipede tried to follow, but the slit I'd opened between worlds had healed itself almost instantaneously.

I tumbled through about three feet of empty air, banged my hip on the side of the worktable in my lab, and hit the concrete floor like a sack of exhausted bricks.

People started shouting and someone piled onto me, rolling me onto my chest and planting a knee in my spine as they hauled my arms around behind my back. There was a bunch of chatter to which I paid no heed. I hurt too much, and was too damned tired to care.

Honestly, the only thought in my mind at the time was a sense of great relief at being arrested. Now I could kick back and relax in a nice pair of handcuffs.

Or maybe a straitjacket, depending on how things went.

Chapter Thirteen

They took me to the Chicago division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation on Roosevelt. A crowd of reporters was outside the place, and immediately started screaming questions and snapping pictures as I was taken from the car and half carried into the building by a couple of patrolmen. None of the feds said anything to the cameras, but Rudolph paused long enough to confirm that an investigation into the explosion was ongoing and that several “persons of interest” were being detained, and that the good people of Chicago had nothing to fear, yadda, yadda, yadda.

A slender little guy in a fed suit with fish white skin and ink black hair strolled by Rudolph, put an arm around the other man’s shoulder in a comradely fashion, and almost hauled him off his feet and away from the reporters. Rudolph sputtered, but Slim gave him a hard look and Rudy subsided.

I remember stumbling through a checkpoint and an elevator and then being plopped down into a chair. Slim took the cuffs off my wrists. I promptly folded my arms on the table in front of me and put my head down. I don’t know how long I was out, but when I came to, a rather stiff, dour-looking woman was shining a penlight into my eyes.

“No evidence of concussion,” she said. “Normal response. I think he’s just exhausted.”

Slim stood at the door to the little room, which had a single conference table, several chairs, and a long mirror on the wall. Rudolph was standing there with him, a young-looking man in a suit more expensive than his pay grade, with dark, insanely neat hair and an anxious hunch to his shoulders.

“He’s faking it,” Rudolph insisted. “He wasn’t out of our sight for more than a few minutes. How could he have worked himself to exhaustion in that time, huh? Without sweating? Not even really breathing hard? He’s dirty. I know it. We shouldn’t have given him an hour to come up with a story.”

Slim eyed Rudy without any expression showing on his lean, pale face. Then he looked at me.

“I guess that makes you Good Cop,” I said.

Slim rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Roz.”

The woman took a stethoscope from around her neck, gave me a look full of disapproval, and left the room.

Slim came over to the table and sat down across from me. Rudolph moved around to stand behind me. It was a simple psychological ploy, but it worked. Rudolph’s presence, out of my line of sight, was an irritant and a distraction.

“My name is Tilly,” said Slim. “You can call me Agent Tilly or Agent or Tilly. Whatever you’re most comfortable with.”

“Okay, Slim,” I said.

He inhaled and exhaled slowly. Then he said, “Why didn’t you just answer the door, Mr. Dresden? It would have been a lot easier. For all of us.”

“I didn’t hear you,” I said. “I was asleep down in the subbasement.”

“Bullshit,” said Rudolph.

Slim looked from me to Rudy and back. “Asleep, huh?”

“I’m a heavy sleeper,” I said. “Keep a pad underneath one of the tables in the lab. Snooze down there sometimes. Nice and cool.”

Slim studied me for another thoughtful minute. Then he said, “Nah, you weren’t asleep down there. You weren’t down there at all. There was no open space large enough to have hidden you in that subbasement. You were somewhere else.”

“Where?” I asked him. “I mean, not like it’s a big apartment. Living room, bedroom, bathroom, subbasement. You found me on the floor in the subbasement, which only has one entrance. Where else do you think I was? You think I just appeared out of thin air?”

Slim narrowed his eyes. Then he shook his head and said, “I don’t know. Seen a lot of tricks. Saw a guy make the Statue of Liberty disappear once.”

I spread my hands. “You think I did it with mirrors or something?”

“Could be,” he said. “I don’t have a good explanation for how you showed up all of a sudden, Dresden. I get grumpy when I don’t have good explanations for things. Then I go digging until I come up with something.”

I grinned at him. I couldn’t help it. “I was asleep in my lab. Woke up when you guys started twisting my arms. You think I came out of a secret compartment so well hidden that nobody found it in a full sweep of the room? Or maybe I appeared out of thin air. Which of those stories do you think will make more sense to the judge in the civil suit I bring against the CPD and the Bureau? Yours or mine?”

Slim’s expression turned sour.

Rudolph abruptly appeared to my right and slammed a fist down on the table. “Tell us why you blew up the building, Dresden!”

I burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it. I didn’t have a whole lot of energy, but I laughed until my stomach was shaking.

“I’m sorry,” I said a moment later. “I’m sorry. It was just so . . . ahhhh.” I shook my head and tried to get myself under control.

“Rudolph,” said Slim. “Get out.”

“You can’t order me out. I am a duly appointed representative of the CPD and a member of this task force.”

“You’re useless, unprofessional, and impeding this deposition,” Slim said, his tone flat. He turned his dark eyes to Rudolph and said, “Get. Out.”

Slim had a hell of a glare. Some men do. They can look at you and tell you, without saying a word, that they are perfectly capable of doing violence and willing to demonstrate it. That look doesn’t convey any particular, single emotion, nor anything that can be easily put into words. Slim didn’t need any words. He stared at Rudolph with some faint shadow of old Death himself in his eyes, and did nothing else.

Rudolph flinched. He muttered something about filing a complaint against the FBI and left the room.

Agent Tilly turned back to me. His expression softened, briefly, into something almost resembling a smile, and he said, “Did you do it?”

I met his eyes for a second and said, “No.”

Tilly pursed his lips. Then he nodded his head several times and said, “Okay.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “Just like that?”

“I know when people lie,” he said simply.

“And that’s why this is a deposition, not an interrogation?”

“It’s a deposition because Rudolph lied his ass off when he fingered you to my boss,” Tilly said. “Now I’ve seen you for myself. And bomber doesn’t fit on you.”

“Why not?”

“Your apartment is one big pile of disorganized clutter. Disorganized bomb makers don’t have much of a life expectancy. My turn. Why is someone trying to tag you for the office building?”

“Politics, I think,” I said. “Karrin Murphy has pissed off a lot of money by wrecking some of their shadier enterprises. Money leans on politicians. I get some spillover because she’s the one who hired me as a consultant on some of it.”

“Fucking Chicago,” Tilly said, with real contempt in his voice. “The government in the whole state is about as corrupt as they get.”

“Amen,” I said.

“I read your file. Says you were looked at by my office before. Says four agents vanished a few days later.” He pursed his lips. “You’ve been suspected of kidnapping, murder, and at least two cases of arson, one of which was a public building.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” I said. “That building thing.”

“You lead an interesting life, Dresden.”

“Not really. Just a wild weekend now and then.”

“To the contrary,” Tilly said. “I’m very interested in you.”

I sighed. “Man. You don’t want to be.”

Tilly considered that, a faint frown line appearing between his brows. “Do you know who blew up your office building?”

“No.”

Tilly’s expression might have been carved in stone. “Liar.”

“If I tell you,” I said, “you aren’t going to believe me—and you’re going to get me locked up in a psycho ward somewhere. So no. I don’t know who blew up the building.”

He nodded for a moment. Then he said, “What you are doing now could be construed as obstructing and interfering with an investigation. Depending on who was behind the bombing and why, it might even get bumped up to treason.”

“In other words,” I said, “you couldn’t find anything in my apartment to incriminate me or give you an excuse to hold me. So now you’re hoping to intimidate me into talking with you.”

Agent Tilly leaned back in his chair and squinted at me. “I can hold you for twenty-four hours for no reason at all. And I can make them fairly unpleasant for you without coming close to violating any laws.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” I said.

Tilly shrugged. “And I wish you’d tell me what you know about the explosion. But I guess neither of us is going to get what we want.”

I propped my chin on my hand and thought about it for a moment. I gave it even odds that someone in the supernatural scene, probably the duchess, had pulled some strings to send Rudolph my way. If that was the case, maybe I could bounce this little hand grenade back to her.

“Off the record?” I asked Tilly.

He stood up, went out the door, and came back in a moment later, presumably after turning off any recording devices. He sat back down and looked at me.

"You're going to find out that the building was wired with explosives," I said. "On the fourth floor."

"And how do you know that?"

"Someone I trust saw some blueprint files that showed where the charges had been installed, presumably at the behest of the building's owners. I remember that a few years ago, there were crews tearing into the walls for a week or so. Said they were removing asbestos. The owners had hired them."

"Nuevo Verita, Inc., owns the building. As insurance scams go, this isn't a great one."

"It isn't about insurance," I said.

"Then what is it about?"

"Revenge."

Tilly tilted his head to one side and studied me intently. "You did something to this company?"

"I did something to someone far up the food chain in the corporate constellation that Nuevo Verita belongs to."

"And what was that?"

"Nothing illegal," I said. "You might look into the business affairs of a man calling himself Paolo Ortega. He was a professor of mythology in Brazil. He died several years ago."

"Ah," Tilly said. "His family is who is after you?"

"That's a reasonably accurate description. His wife in particular."

Tilly absorbed that, taking his time. The room was silent for several minutes.

Finally, Tilly looked up at me and said, "I have a great deal of respect for Karrin Murphy. I called her while you were resting. She says she'll back you without reservation. Considering the source, that is a significant statement."

"Yeah," I said. "Considering the source, it is."

"Frankly, I'm not sure if I can do anything to help you. I'm not in charge of the investigation, and it's being directed by politicians. I can't promise that you won't be questioned again —though today's events should make it harder to get judicial approval to move against you."

"I'm not sure I understand your meaning," I said.

Tilly waved a hand toward the rest of the building. "As far as they're concerned, you're guilty, Dresden. They're already writing headlines and news text. Now it's just a matter of finding the evidence to support the conclusion they want."

"They," I said. "Not you."

Tilly said, "They're a bunch of assholes."

"And you aren't?"

"I'm a different kind of asshole."

"Heh," I said. "Am I free to go?"

He nodded. "But since they've got nothing remotely like evidence that you were the one to plant the explosives, they're going to be digging into you. Your personal life. Your past. Looking for things to use against you. They'll play dirty."

"Okay by me," I said. "I can play, too."

Tilly's eyes smiled. "Sounds like. Yeah." He offered me his hand. "Good luck."

I shook it. I felt the very, very faint tingle of someone with a slight magical talent. It probably augmented Tilly's ability to separate truth from fiction.

I got up and walked wearily toward the door.

"Hey," Tilly said, just before I opened it. "Off the record. Who did it?"

I stopped, looked at him again, and said, "Vampires."

His expression flickered with swiftly banished emotions: amusement, then realization, followed by doubt and yards and yards of rationalization.

"See," I said to him. "I told you that you wouldn't believe me."

Chapter Fourteen

I came out of the doors of the FBI building to find a ring of paparazzi surrounding it, waiting with predatory patience to get more material for their stories. A couple of them saw me and hurried toward me, beginning to ask me questions, thrust microphones toward me, that sort of thing. I winced. I was still pretty tired, but it was going to play merry hell with their gear if I got too close to it.

I looked around for a way to get down the sidewalks without messing up anybody's equipment, and that was when they tried to kill me.

I'd been the target of a drive-by attempt once before. This one was considerably more professional than the first. There was no roar of engines to give me a warning, no wildly swerving vehicle. The only tip-off I had was a sudden prickling of the hairs on the back of my neck and a glimpse of a dark sedan's passenger window rolling down.

Then something hit me in the left side of my chest and hammered me down onto the stairs. Stunned, I realized that someone was shooting at me. I could have rolled down the stairs and into the news crowd, put them between myself and the shooter, but I had no way of knowing whether the shooter wanted me bad enough to fire through a crowd in hopes of getting me. So I curled into a defensive ball and felt two more heavy blows land against me: one of them on my ribs, the second on my left arm, which I'd raised to cover my head.

There was an exclamation from below, and then there were several people standing over me.

"Hey, buddy," said a potbellied cameraman in a hunting jacket. He offered me a hand to help me up. "Nasty fall, there. You still in one piece?"

I just stared at him for a second, the adrenaline coursing through me, and realized that the cameraman—all of the newsies, in fact—didn't even know what had just happened.

It made a creepy kind of sense. I hadn't heard anything. The assassin must have been using a suppressor. There hadn't been any flashes, so he must have done it right, aiming at me through the car window while sitting far enough back to make sure the barrel of his gun didn't poke out suspiciously—and that he never became a highly visible target. I had helped, too, by denying the onlookers the subtle clue of a dead body with little holes in the front of it and big ones in the back. No sound, no sight, and no victim. Why should they think that murder had just been attempted?

"Move!" I said, hauling myself up by the cameraman's paw. I struggled to get higher, to look over the crowd and get a plate off of the dark sedan. It didn't take much more than stepping around a couple of people and standing on tiptoe to get a view of the shooter's vehicle, cruising calmly away, without roaring engines, without crashing up onto the sidewalk or running red lights. It just vanished into the traffic like a shark disappearing into the depths. I never got a clear look at the plates.

"Dammit," I growled. Pain was starting to register on me now, especially in my arm. The protective spells I'd woven over my duster had held out against the bullets, but the leather had been pulled pretty tight over my skin and as a result it felt like someone had smashed a baseball bat into my forearm. The fingers of my left hand were tingling and refused to do more than twitch. I felt similar throbs from the other two hits, and ran my hands over the duster, just to be sure none of them had gone through without my noticing.

I found a bullet caught in the leather of my left sleeve. It hadn't penetrated more than maybe a quarter of an inch, but it was trapped in the leather and deformed from the impact. I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket, wrapped the bullet in it, and put it back again, managing to do the whole thing unnoticed while about a dozen people looked at me like I was a lunatic.

From the street came a wheezy little *beep-beep!* The *Blue Beetle* came slowly down the street and stopped in front of the building. Molly was behind the wheel, waving at me frantically.

I hurried down to the street and got in before the mismatched color scheme of my car sent the obsessive-compulsive federal personnel in the building behind me into a conniption. As

Molly pulled away, I buckled up, then got a sloppy kiss on the face from Mouse, who sat in the backseat, his tail going *thump-thump-thump* against the back of the driver's seat.

"Ick!" I told him. "My lips touched dog lips! Get me some mouthwash! Get me some iodine!"

His tail kept wagging and he smooched me again before settling down and looking content.

I sagged back into my seat and closed my eyes.

Maybe two minutes passed. "You're welcome," Molly said abruptly, her tone frustrated. "No problem, Harry. Whatever I can do to help."

"Sorry, padawan," I said. "This has been a long day already."

"I came back from the church and saw a bunch of guys and cops were going in and out of your apartment. The door was broken down and the whole place looked like it had been ransacked." She shuddered and clenched the wheel. "God. I was sure you were dead or in trouble."

"You were about ninety percent right," I said. "Someone told the feds I was the one who blew up the office building. They wanted to talk to me."

Molly's eyes grew wide. "What about the Swords? We've got to tell my dad, right away, or—"

"Relax," I said. "I stashed them. They should be safe for now."

Molly puffed out a breath and subsided in relief. "You look terrible," she said, after a minute. "Did they beat you up or something?"

I swept my eyes left and right as we went on, searching. "Giant centipede."

"Oh," Molly said, drawing the word out, as though I had explained everything. "What are you looking for?"

I'd been scanning the traffic around us for a dark sedan. I'd found about thirty of them so far, being a master detective and all. "The car of the guy who just shot at me." I produced the bullet, a little copper-jacketed round more slender than my pinkie and a little under an inch long.

"What is that?" Molly asked.

"Two-twenty-three Remington," I said. "I think. Probably."

"What's that mean?"

"That it could have been almost anybody. It's the round used in most NATO assault rifles. A lot of hunting rifles, too." A thought struck me and I frowned at her. "Hey. How did you know where to find me?"

"I let Mouse drive."

Thump, thump, thump.

Chapter Fifteen

“Aren’t you pleased with me?” the Leanansidhe said. She gestured with one manicured hand to the two cocoons, then went back to caressing Mister. “I came upon these brigands ransacking your little cave and . . . What is the word?” Her smile widened. “I apprehended them.”

“I see,” I said.

“As I understand mortal business,” she said, “next there is a trial, followed by . . . What is the word mortal law uses for murder? Ah, an *execution*.” Her red-gold brows furrowed briefly. “Or is it execution and *then* trial?” She shrugged. “La. It seems largely a matter of semantics in any case. Harry, would you prefer to be the judge, the jury, or the executioner?”

I . . . just stared.

The last time I’d seen my faerie godmother, she had been ranting and raving in a couple of distinct personalities and voices while half-entombed in a sheet of ice at the heart of the Winter Court. Since I was sixteen, she’d pursued me relentlessly whenever I crossed into the Nevernever, apparently determined to transform me into one of her hounds.

For crying out loud. Now she was all smiles and bubbles? Protecting my apartment? Offering to play courtroom with me, as if I were a child and Martin and Susan were a pair of dolls?

“It isn’t that I don’t like to see you, Lea,” I said. “But I can’t help but wonder what it is you want.”

“Merely to ensure the well-being of your spiritual self,” she replied. “That is what a godmother is supposed to do, is it not?”

“I was sort of hoping your answer would be a bit more specific.”

She let out a musical laugh that rang like distant church bells over snow. “Sweet child. Have you learned nothing of the fae?”

“Does anyone, ever?”

Her slender fingers stroked Mister’s fur. “Do you think it so impossible?”

“Don’t *you* think it is?”

“In what way is my opinion relevant to the truth?”

“Are we going to stand around here all day answering each other’s questions with questions?”

Her smile widened. “Would you like that?”

I lifted a hand, capitulating.

She inclined her head to me, a gracious victor. Lea was better at that sort of wordplay than me, having had several centuries to practice.

Besides, losing to the guest with grace was a traditional courtesy, as well.

“What I would like,” I said, nodding toward the cocoons, “is for you to please release these two. They aren’t robbers. They’re guests. And this is, after all, my home.”

“Of course, child,” she said agreeably. “No harm done.” She snapped her fingers and the cocoons seemed to sublimate into a fine green mist that quickly dispersed. Susan fell limply from the wall, but I was waiting to catch her and lower her gently to the floor.

Martin plummeted from the ceiling and landed on a threadbare throw rug covering the concrete floor. Nobody was there to catch him, which was awful. Just awful.

I examined Susan quickly. She had no obvious wounds. She was breathing. She had a pulse. And that was pretty much the length and breadth of my medical knowledge. I checked Martin, too, but was disappointed. He was in the same condition as Susan.

I looked up at my godmother. Mister was sprawled in her lap on his back, luxuriating as she traced her long nails over his chest and tummy. His purr throbbed continuously through the room. “What did you do to them?”

“I lulled their predator spirit to sleep,” she said calmly. “Poor lambs. They didn’t realize how much strength they drew from it. Mayhap this will prove a useful lesson.”

I frowned at that. “You mean . . . the vampire part of them?”

“Of course.”

I sat there for a moment, stunned.

If the vampire infection within half vampires like Susan and Martin could be enchanted to sleep, then it was presumably possible to do other things to it as well. Suppress it, maybe permanently.

It might even be possible to destroy it.

I felt a door in my mind open upon a hope I had shut away a long time ago.

Maybe I could save them both.

“I . . .” I shook my head. “I searched for a way to . . . I spent more than a . . .” I shook my head harder. “I spent more than a *year* trying to find a way to . . .” I looked at my godmother. “How? How did you do it?”

She looked back at me, her lips curled into something that wasn’t precisely a smile. “Oh, sweet child. Information of that sort is treasure indeed. What have you to trade for such a precious gem of knowledge?”

I clenched my teeth. “It’s always about bargains with you, isn’t it.”

“Of course, child. But I always live up to my end. Hence, my protection of you.”

“Protection?” I demanded. “You spent most of a couple of decades trying to turn me into a dog!”

“Only when you strayed out of the mortal world,” she said, as if baffled at why I would be upset. “Child, we had a bargain. And you had not willingly provided your portion of it.” She smiled widely at Mouse. “And dogs are so charming.”

Mouse watched her with calm, wary eyes, his body motionless.

I frowned. “But . . . you sold my debt to Mab.”

“Precisely. At an excellent price, I might add. So now, all that remains twixt thou and I is your mother’s bargain. Unless you would prefer to enter another compact, of course . . .”

I shuddered. “No, thank you.” I finally lowered my shields. The Leanansidhe beamed at me. “I saw you in Mab’s tower,” I said.

Something dark flickered through her emerald eyes, and she turned her face slightly away from me. “Indeed,” she said quietly. “You saw what it means for my queen to heal an affliction.”

“What affliction?”

“A madness had beset me,” she whispered. “Robbed me of myself. Treacherous gifts . . .” She shook her head. “I can think on it no more, lest it make me vulnerable once again. Suffice to say that I am much better now.” She stroked a fingertip over an icy white streak in her hair. “The strength of my queen prevailed, and my mind is mine own.”

“Ensuring the well-being of my spiritual self,” I murmured. Then I blinked. “The garden, the one on the other side of this place . . . It’s *yours*.”

“Indeed, child,” she said. “Did you not think it strange that in your turmoil-strewn time here none of your foes—not *one*—ever sought to enter from the other side? Never sent a spirit given form directly into your bed, your shower, your refrigerator? Never poured a basket of asps into your closet so that they sought refuge in your shoes, your boots, the pockets of your clothing?” She shook her head. “Sweet, sweet child. Had you walked much farther, you would have seen the mound of bones of all the things that have attempted to reach you, and which I have destroyed.”

“Yeah, well. I nearly wound up there myself.”

“La,” she said, smiling. “My guardians were created to attack any intruder—including one that looked like you. We couldn’t have some clever shapeshifter slipping by, now, could we?” She sighed. “You took a terrible toll on my primroses. Honestly, child, there *are* elements other than fire, you know. You really ought to diversify. Now I have two gaping maws to feed instead of one.”

“I’ll . . . be more careful next time,” I said.

“I should appreciate such a thing.” She studied me quietly. “It has been true for your entire lifetime, child. I have followed you in the spirit world. Created guardians and defenses ’pon the other side to ward your sleep, to stand sentinel over your home. And you still have only the beginnings of an idea of how many have tried.” She smiled, showing her delicately pointed canine teeth again. “Tried, and failed.”

Which also explained how she was *always* near at hand whenever I had entered the Nevernever. How she would be upon my trail in seconds whenever I went in.

Because she had been there, protecting me.
From everything but herself.
“Now, then,” she said, her tone businesslike. “You left a considerable trove of equipment in my garden for safekeeping.”
“It was an emergency.”
“I had assumed that,” she said. “I will, of course, safeguard it or return it, as you wish. And, should you perish, I will deliver it to an heir of your designation.”
I let out a weary laugh. “You . . . Of course you will.” I eyed Mouse. “What do you think, boy?”
Mouse looked at me, and then at Lea. Then he sat down—but still kept watching her carefully.
“Yeah,” I said. “I think that, too.”
The Leananaisidhe smiled widely. “It is good that you have taken my lessons to heart, child. It is a cold and uncaring universe we live in. Only with strength of body and mind can you hope to control your own fate. Be wary of everyone. Even your protector.”
I sat there for a moment, thinking.
My mother had prepared protection for me with considerable foresight. She had anticipated my eventually looking for and finding my half brother, Thomas. Had she prepared other things for me, as well? Things I hadn’t yet guessed at?
How would I pass on a legacy to my child if I knew that I wasn’t going to be alive to see it happen? What kind of legacy did I have, other than a collection of magical gear that anyone could probably accumulate without help, in time?
My only real treasure was knowledge.
Ye gods and little fishes, but knowledge was a dangerous legacy. I imagined what might have happened if, at the age of fifteen, I had learned aspects of magic that had not come to me on their own until I was over thirty. It would have been like handing a child a cocked and loaded gun.
A safety mechanism was needed—something that would prevent the child from attaining said store of knowledge until she was mature enough to handle it wisely. Something simple, but telling, for a child. A *wizard* child.
I smiled. Something like being able to admit one’s own ignorance. Expressed in the simplest possible form: asking a question. And, as I now knew, my mother had not been called “LeFay” for nothing.
“Godmother,” I asked calmly. “Did my mother leave anything for you to give me when I was ready for it? A book? A map?”
Lea took a very slow, deep breath, her eyes luminous. “Well,” she murmured. “Well, well, well.”
“She did, didn’t she.”
“Yes, indeed. But I was told to give you fair warning. It is a deadly legacy. If you accept it, you accept what comes with it.”
“Which is?” I asked.
She shrugged a shoulder. “It varies from one individual to the next. Your mother lost the ability to sleep soundly. It might be worse for you. Or it might be nothing.”
I thought about that for a moment, and then nodded. “I want it.”
Lea never took her eyes off me. She lifted her empty palm, closed her fingers over it, and opened them again.
A small, gleaming ruby, bright as a drop of blood, carved in a pentagon, lay in her hand.
“It is the sum of her knowledge of the Ways,” Lea said quietly. “Every path, every shortcut, every connection. She developed enough skill at searching them out that she was eventually able to predict them. Ways may change from decade to decade, but your mother knew where they were and where they would be. Very few of mine own kind can say as much.” She narrowed her eyes. “That knowledge is the burden I hold in my hand, child. Mine own belief is that it will destroy thee. The choice must needs be thine.”
I stared at the gem for a long moment, forcing myself to breathe slowly. All the Ways. The ability to travel around the world without concern for geography. Knowledge like that could have won the war with the Red Court almost before it began. Whoever possessed that knowledge could regard laws with utter impunity, avoid retribution from mortal authorities or supernatural nations alike. Go anywhere. Escape from damned near anything. Gather more information than anyone else possibly could.

Hell’s bells. That gleaming little gem was a subtle strength that had the potential to be as potent as any I had seen. Such *power*.
Such temptation.
I wondered if I’d be able to handle it. I am not a saint.
At the same time, I had never seen a tool so obviously intended to help a man Show Up for his little girl. No matter where she was, I could go to her. Go to her and get away clean.
Maggie.

Chapter Sixteen

“Harry,” Molly called from up in the living room. “I think they’re waking up.”

I grunted and lifted my pentacle necklace to examine it. The little pentagonal ruby had been quite obviously cut for this particular piece of jewelry. Or it had been before I’d been forced to use the necklace as a silver bullet. My little pentacle, the five-pointed star within a circle, had been warped by the extremes of stress I’d subjected it to. I’d been straightening it out with the set of jeweler’s tools I used to update Little Chicago.

The jewel abruptly snapped into the center of the pentacle as if into a socket. I shook the necklace several times, and the gem stayed put. But there was no point in taking chances. I turned it over and smeared the whole back with a big blob of adhesive. It might not look pretty from the front after it had dried, but I was pressed for time.

“That’ll do, pig,” I muttered to myself. I looked up to Bob’s shelf, where Mister was sprawling, using a couple of paperbacks for pillows while he amused himself dragging his claws through the mounded candle wax. I reached up to rub his ears with my fingertips, setting him to purring, and promised myself I would get Bob back soon: For the time being, he was, like the Swords, too valuable and too dangerous to leave unguarded. In Lea’s bloodthirsty garden, they were probably safer than they had been in my apartment in the first place.

I left my mother’s amulet and the glittering ruby sitting on my worktable so that the glue could dry, and padded up the stepladder.

I had hefted Susan up onto the sofa and fetched a pillow for her head, and a blanket. Molly had managed to roll Martin onto a strip of camping foam, and given him a pillow and a blanket, too. Mouse had settled down on the floor near Martin to sleep. Even though his eyes were closed and he was snoring slightly, his ears twitched at every sound.

While I had been in the lab, Molly had been cleaning up. She probably knew where all the dishes went better than I did. Or she was reorganizing them completely. Either way, I was sure that the next time I just wanted to fry one egg, I wouldn’t be able to find the little skillet until after I had already used the big skillet and cleaned it off.

I hunkered down next to Susan, and as I did she stirred and muttered softly. Then she jerked in a swift breath through her nose, her eyes suddenly opening wide, as if she were panicked.

“Easy,” I said at once. “Susan. It’s Harry. You’re safe.”

It seemed to take several seconds for my words to sink in. Then she relaxed again, blinked a few times, and turned her head toward me.

“What happened to me?” she asked.

“You were mistaken for an intruder,” I said. “You were hit with a form of magic that made you sleep.”

She frowned tiredly. “Oh. I was dreaming. . . .”

“Yeah?”

“I was dreaming that the curse was gone. That I was human.” She shook her head with a bitter little smile. “I thought I was done having that one. Martin?”

“Here,” Martin slurred. “I’m all right.”

“But maybe not for long,” I said. “The apartment’s wards are down. We’re naked here.”

“Well,” Martin said in an acidic voice. “I think we learned our lesson about where that leads.”

Susan rolled her eyes, but the look she gave me, a little hint of a smile and a level stare with her dark eyes, was positively smoldering.

Yeah. That had been pretty good.

“Did you guys find out about our tail?” I asked.

“Tails, as it turns out. Three different local investigative agencies,” Martin supplied. “They were paid cash up front to follow us from the time we arrived. They all gave a different description of the woman who hired them. All of them were too beautiful to believe.”

“Arianna?” I asked.

Martin grunted. “Probably. The oldest of them can wear any flesh mask they wish, and go abroad in daylight, hidden from the sun in the shadow of their own mask.”

I lifted my eyebrows. *That* was news. I wasn’t even sure the Wardens had that kind of information. Martin must have been a little groggy from his naptime.

“How long were we out?” Susan asked.

“I got here about five hours ago. Sun’s down.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, as if bracing herself for something, and nodded. “All right. Martin and I need to get moving.”

“Where?” I asked.

“The airport,” Martin said. “We should be able to be in Nevada by very late tonight or early tomorrow morning. Then we can move on the warehouse and look for more information.”

“We discussed it, Harry,” Susan said quietly. “You can’t take a plane, and we’re counting the minutes. A jet will get us there in about seven hours. The car will take two days. There’s no time for that.”

“Yeah, I can see your reasoning,” I said.

Martin stood up creakily and stretched. “Entering the facility may require a reconnaissance period. We’ll have to determine its weaknesses, patrol pacing, and so on before we—”

I interrupted him by slapping a piece of notebook paper down on the coffee table. “The storage facility is set into the side of a stone hill. There are some portable units stored outside in a yard with a twelve-foot razor-wire fence. A road leads into the hill and down into what I presume to be caverns either created for storage space or appropriated after a mining operation closed.” I pointed at the notebook paper, to different points on the sketch, as I mentioned each significant feature.

“There is a single watchtower with one guard armed with a longbarreled assault rifle with a big scope. There are two men and a dog walking a patrol around the perimeter fence with those little assault rifles—”

“Carbines,” Molly said brightly, from the kitchen.

“—and fragmentation grenades. They aren’t in a hurry. Takes them about twenty minutes; then they go inside for a drink and come back out. There are security cameras here, here, and here, and enough cars in the employee parking lot to make me think that the underground portion of the facility is probably pretty big, and probably has some kind of barracks for their security team.”

I nodded. “That’s about it on the surface, but there’s no way we can get inside to scout it out ahead of time. Looks pretty straightforward. We move up to it under a veil; I shut down the communications. We use a distraction to draw everyone’s attention, and when the reinforcements come running out, we’re in. Hopefully we can find a way to lock them outside. After that, it’s just a matter of . . .”

I trailed off as I looked up to find Martin and Susan staring at me, their jaws kind of hanging limply.

“What?” I said.

“How . . .” Martin began.

“Where . . .” Susan said.

Molly burst out into a fit of giggles she didn’t even try to hide.

“How do I know?” I reached over to the table and held up an old set of binoculars I’d left sitting there. “I went over to take a look. Took me about fifteen minutes, one way. I could bring you, if you want, but it’s cool if you guys want to take the plane. I’ll wait for you.”

Martin stared hard at me.

“You . . .” Susan began, something like anger in her tone. Then she threw back her head and laughed. “You insufferable, arrogant pig,” she said fondly. “I shouldn’t have underestimated you. You don’t always perform gracefully when everything is on the line—but you’re always there, aren’t you.”

“I hope so,” I said quietly. I stood up again. “Better eat something. I’ve got some things finishing up in the lab that might help us. We’ll go in one hour.”

Chapter Seventeen

We rolled out in fifty-five minutes.

The *Blue Beetle* was full, but we weren't going more than a half dozen blocks. The entry into the proper Way was in an alleyway behind a brownstone apartment building in a fairly typical Chicago neighborhood. It was getting late, so there wasn't much traffic, and Mouse ghosted along behind us, staying mostly in the shadows and easily keeping pace with the car.

Which speaks to my dog's mightiness, and not to my car's wimpiness. Seriously.

Molly pulled up to the mouth of the alley and stopped. She looked nervously around as we unloaded from the car. I gave Susan a hand out of the tiny backseat, and then held the door open as Mouse jumped up into the passenger seat.

I ruffled his ears and leaned down to speak to Molly. "Go get coffee or something. Give us about an hour, an hour and a half tops. We'll be back by then."

"What if you aren't?" Molly asked. She reached one hand over to Mouse in an unconscious gesture, burying her fingers in his fur. "What do I do then?"

"If we don't show up by then, go on back home to your folks' place. I'll contact you there."

"But what if—"

"Molly," I said firmly. "You can't plan for everything or you never get started in the first place. Get a move on. And don't take any lip from the dog. He's been uppity lately."

"Okay, Harry," she said, still unhappily. She pulled out into the street again, and Mouse turned his head to watch us as she drove away.

"Poor kid," Susan said. "She doesn't like being left behind."

I grunted. "That kid's got enough power to take all three of us down if she caught us off guard," I said. "Her strength isn't an issue."

"I'm not talking about that, obviously."

I grunted. "What do you mean?"

Susan frowned at me briefly, and then her eyebrows rose. "Dear God. You don't realize it."

"Realize what?"

She shook her head, one corner of her mouth crooked into the same smile I remembered so well. It made my heart twitch, if such a thing is possible. "Molly has it bad for you, Harry."

I frowned. "No, she doesn't. We settled that early on. Isn't happening."

Susan shrugged a shoulder. "Maybe you settled it, but she didn't. She's in love."

"Is not," I said, scowling. "She goes on dates and stuff."

"I said she was in love. Not dead." Her expression went neutral. "Or half-dead." She stared after the vanished car for a moment and said, "Can I share something with you that I've learned in the past few years?"

"I guess."

She turned to me, her expression sober. "Life is too short, Harry. And there's nowhere near enough joy in it. If you find it, grab it. Before it's gone."

It cost Susan something to say that. She hid it well, but not as well as I knew her. Giving breath to those thoughts had caused her very real pain. I was going to disagree again, but hesitated. Then I said, "I never stopped loving you. Never wanted you to be gone."

She turned a little away from me, letting her hair fall across her face as a curtain. Then she swallowed thickly and said, her voice trembling slightly, "Same here. Doesn't mean we get to be together."

"No," I said. "I guess not."

She suddenly balled her fists and straightened her spine. "I can't do this. Not right now. We've got to focus. I . . ." She shook her head and started walking. She went to the end of the block, to stand there taking deep, slow breaths.

I glanced at Martin, who stood leaning against the wall of a building, his expression, of course, bland.

"What?" I snapped at him.

"You think what you're feeling about your daughter is rage, Dresden. It isn't." He jerked his chin at Susan. "That is. She knew the Mendozas, the foster parents, and loved them like family. She walked into their house and found them. She found their children. The vampires had quite literally torn them limb from limb. One of the Mendozas' four children was three years old. Two were near Maggie's age."

I said nothing. My imagination showed me terrible pictures.

"It took us half an hour to find all the pieces," Martin continued calmly. "We had to put them back together like a jigsaw puzzle. And the whole time, the blood thirst was driving us both mad. Despite the fact that she knew those people. Despite her terror for her daughter. Imagine that for a moment. Imagine Susan standing there, filled with the urge to rip into the bloody limb with her teeth, even though she knew that little dismembered leg might have been her daughter's. Picture that."

At that point, I didn't think I could avoid it.

"It was only when the puzzle was finished that we realized that Maggie had been taken," Martin continued, his words steady and polite. "She's barely holding on. If she loses control, people are going to die. She might be one of them." Martin's eyes went hard and absolutely cold. "So I would take it as a fucking courtesy if you wouldn't torture her by stirring up her emotions five minutes before we kick down the door of a high-security facility."

I looked over my shoulder at Susan. She was still facing away from us, but she was in the act of briskly pulling her hair back into a tail.

"I didn't know," I said.

"In this situation, your emotions are liabilities," Martin said. "They won't help Rodriguez. They won't help the little girl. I suggest you postpone indulging them until this is all over."

"Until what is all over?" Susan asked, returning.

"Uh, the trip," I said, turning to lead them into the alley. "It won't take us long—about thirty seconds of walking down a level hallway. But it's dark and you have to hold your breath and nose the whole way."

"Why?" Susan asked.

"It's full of methane gas and carbon monoxide, among others. If you use a light source, you run the risk of setting off an explosion."

Susan's eyebrows rose. "What about your amulet?"

I shook my head. "The light from that is actually . . . Glah, it's more complicated than you need to know. Suffice it to say that I feel there would be a very, very small possibility that it might make the atmosphere explode. Like those static electricity warnings at the gas stations. Why take the chance?"

"Ah," Susan said. "You want us to walk blind through a tunnel filled with poisonous gases that could explode at the smallest spark."

"Yeah."

"And . . . you're sure this is a good idea?"

"It's a terrible idea," I said. "But it's the fastest way to the storage facility." I lifted my fingertips to touch the red stone on my amulet as I neared the location of the Way. It was an old, bricked-over doorway into the ground level of the apartment building.

A voice with no apparent source began to speak quietly—a woman's voice, throaty and calm. My mother's voice. She died shortly after my birth, but I was certain, as sure as I had been of anything in my life: It was her voice. It made me feel warm, listening to it, like an old, favorite piece of music that you haven't heard for years.

"The hallway on the other side is full of dangerous levels of methane and carbon monoxide, among other gases. The mixture appears to be volatile, and in the other side you can never be sure exactly which energies might or might not trigger an explosion. Forty-two walking steps to the far end, which opens on a ridge outside Corwin, Nevada." There was a moment of silence, and then the same voice began to speak again, panting, shaking, and out of breath. "Notation: The hallway is not entirely abandoned. Something tried to grab me as I came

through." She coughed several times. "Notation *secundus*: Don't wear a dress the next time you need to go to Corwin, dummy. Some farmer's going to get a show."

"Maybe it was a grue," I murmured, smiling.

"What did you say?" Susan asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Never mind." I put a hand on the doorway and immediately felt a kind of yielding elasticity beneath my fingertips. The separation between the world of flesh and spirit was weak here. I took a deep breath, laid out a fairly mild effort of will, and murmured, "*Aparturum*."

A circle of blackness began to expand from the center of my palm beneath my hand, rapidly swelling, overlaying the wall itself. I didn't let it get too big. The gate would close on its own, eventually, but smaller gates closed more quickly, and I didn't want some poor fool going through it.

Present company excluded, of course.

I glanced back to Susan and Martin. "Susan, grab on to my coat. Martin, you grab hers. Take a deep breath and let's get this done fast and quiet."

I turned to the Way, took a deep breath, and then strode forward.

Mom's gem hadn't mentioned that it was flipping *hot* in there. When I'd stepped into the hallway on the first trip, I felt like I was inside about three saunas, nested together like those Russian dolls. I found the righthand wall and started walking, counting my steps. I made them a bit shorter than normal, and nailed the length of Mom's stride more accurately this time. I hit the Way out at forty-three.

Another effort of will and a whispered word, and I opened that gate as well, emerging into a cold mountain wind, and late twilight. Susan and Martin came out with me, and we all spent a moment letting out our pent-up breaths. We were in desert mountains, covered with tough, stringy plants and quick, quiet beasts. The gate behind me, another circle, stood in the air in front of what looked like the entrance to an old mine that had been bricked over a long time ago.

"Which way?" Martin said.

"Half mile this way," I said, and set out overland.



It was an awfully good hidey-hole, I had to admit. We were out so far in the desert hills that the commute to nowhere was a long one. The facilities had been cut into a granite shelf at the end of a box canyon. There was a single road in, and the floor of the canyon was wide and flat and empty of any significant features, like friendly rocks that one might try to take cover behind. The walls of the canyon had been blasted sheer. No one was coming down that way without a hundred yards of rope or a helicopter.

Or a wizard.

"All right," I said. The night was growing cold. My breath steamed in the air as I spoke. "Take these. Drink half of 'em. Save the rest." I passed out test tubes filled with light blue liquid to Martin and Susan.

"What is it?" Susan asked.

"A parachute," I said. "Technically a flight potion but I watered it down. It should get us to the valley floor safely."

Martin eyed his tube, and then me.

"Harry," Susan began. "The last time I drank one of your potions, it became . . . awkward."

I rolled my eyes. "Drop into a roll at the end." Then I drank away half of my potion and stepped off the edge of the cliff.

Flight is a difficult thing for a wizard to pull off. Everyone's magic works a little differently, and that means that, when it comes to flying, the only way to manage it is by trial and error. And, since flying generally means moving very quickly, a long way above the ground, would-be aeromancers tended to cut their careers (and lives) short at the first error.

Flying is hard—but *falling* is easy.

I dropped down, accelerating for a second, then maintaining a pace of somewhere around fifteen miles an hour. It didn't take long to hit the desert floor, and I dropped into a roll to spread out the impact energy. I stood up, dusting myself off. Susan and Martin landed nearby and also rose.

"Nice," Susan said. She bounced up in the air experimentally, and smiled when her descent was slowed. "Very cool. Then we drink more to climb out?"

"Should make that slope a piece of cake," I said. "But we'll need to move fast. Potion will last us maybe twenty minutes."

Susan nodded, adjusting the straps on the small pack she wore. "Got it."

"Get close to me," I said. "I can't veil all three of us unless we're all within arm's reach."

They did, and after a few seconds of focus and concentration, I brought up a veil around us that should hide us from view and disperse our heat signature as well. It wouldn't be perfect. We'd still show up on a night-vision scope, to one degree or another. I was counting on the fact that men guarding a building that isolated could not possibly deal with problems on a regular basis. They'd have a very comfortable, reliable routine, which was exactly the sort of thing to take the edge off a sentry's wariness. That's just human nature.

I beckoned, and the three of us began approaching the facility. There was no fluttering from shadow to shadow, or camouflage face paint. The veiling spell took care of that. We just walked over the uneven ground and focused on staying close together. That part may have been more fun if Martin weren't there.

We got to within thirty yards of the fence, and I paused. I lifted my staff, pointed it at the first sentry camera, and whispered, "*Hexus*."

I wasn't used to holding something as demanding as a veil in one hand while performing another working with the other—even such an easy spell as a technology hex. For a second, I thought I'd lose the veil, but then it stabilized again. The lights on the camera had gone out.

We moved around the perimeter while I hexed the other two cameras into useless junk, but just as I'd taken down camera number three, Susan gripped my arm and pointed. The foot patrol was moving by on their sweep.

"The dog will get our scent," Susan said.

Martin drew a short pistol from beneath his jacket, and screwed a silencer to its end.

"No," I half growled. I fished in the pocket of my duster and found the second potion I'd made while preparing for the trip. It was in a delicate, round globe of glass about as thick as a piece of paper. I flipped the globe toward the path of the oncoming dog and heard it break with a little crackle.

The two patrolmen and the dog went by the area where I'd left my surprise, and the dog snuffled the new scent with thorough interest. At a jerk of the lead, the dog hurried to catch up to the guards, and all three of them went by without so much as glancing at us.

"Dog'll have his senses of smell and hearing back in the morning," I murmured. "These guys are just doing a job. We aren't going to kill them for that."

Martin looked nonplussed. He kept the pistol in his hand.

We circled around to where the fence met the canyon wall, opposite the large parking lot. Susan got out a pair of wire cutters. She opened them and prepared to cut through when Martin snatched her wrist, preventing her from touching the fence. "Electricity," he whispered. "Dresden."

I grunted. Now that he'd pointed it out, I thought I could feel it, too—the almost inaudible hum of current on the move, making the hairs on my arms stand up. Hexing something with a microchip in it is simple. Impeding the flow of electricity through a conductive material is considerably more difficult. I pitched my best hex at the wiring where it connected to a power line and was rewarded with the sudden scent of burned rubber. Martin reached out and touched the fence with the back of his hand. No electricity burned him.

"All right," Susan whispered, as she began clipping us a way in, cutting a wire only when the gusting wind reached a crescendo and covered the sound of the clippers at work, then waiting for the next gust. "Where's that distraction?"

I winked at her, lifted my blasting rod, thrust it between links of fence in front of us, and aimed carefully. Then I checked the tower guard, to be sure he was looking away, and

whispered, "*Fuego, fuego, fuego, fuego.*"

Tiny spheres of sullen red light flickered out across the compound and into the parking lot opposite. My aim had been good. The little spheres hissed and melted their way through the rear quarter panel of several vehicles and burned on into the fuel tanks beneath.

The results were predictable. A gas tank explosion isn't as loud as an actual bomb going off, but when you're standing a few yards away from it, it could be hard to tell. There were several hollow booming sounds, and light blazed up from the cars that had been hit as flames roared up and consumed them.

The guard in the tower started screaming into a radio, but apparently could get no reply. No surprise. The second camera had been positioned atop his tower, and the hex that took it out probably got his radio, too. While he was busy, Susan, Martin, and I slipped through the opening in the fence and made our way into the shadows at the base of one of the portable storage units.

A car, parked between two flaming vehicles, went up with another whump of ignition, and it got even brighter. A few seconds later, red lights started to flash at several points around the facility, and a warning klaxon began to sound. The giant metal door to the interior of the facility began to roll upward, just like a garage door.

The two patrolmen and their temporarily handi-capable German shepherd came running out first, and were followed, in a moment, by nearly a dozen other guys in the same uniforms, or at least in portions of them. It looked like some of them had hopped out of bed and tossed on whatever they could reach. Several were dragging fire extinguishers, as if they were going to be useful against fires that large. Good luck with that, boys.

The moment the last of them was past our position and staring agog at the burning automobiles, I hurried forward, putting everything I had into the veil, trusting that Martin and Susan would stay close. They did. We went through the big garage door and down a long ramp into the facility.

"Go ahead," Martin said. He hurried to a control panel on the wall and whipped out some kind of multitool. "I'll shut the door."

"As long as we can get it open on the way out," I muttered.

"Yes, Dresden," Martin said crisply. "I'd been doing this for sixty years before you were born."

"Better drop the invisibility thing, Harry," Susan said. "What we're looking for might be on a computer, so . . ."

"So I'll hold off on the magic until we know. Got it."

We went deeper into the facility. The caves ran very deep back into the stone, and we'd gone down maybe a hundred yards after moving about four hundred yards forward on a spiraling ramp. The air grew colder, to the ambient underground average.

More than that, though, it gained a definite spiritual chill. Malevolent energy hovered around us, slow and thick like half-frozen honey. There was a gloating, miserly quality to it, bringing to my mind images of old Snaug lying in covetous slumber upon his bed of treasure. That, then, was the reason the Red Court had hidden its dark treasures here. Ambient energy like this wasn't directly dangerous to anyone—but with only the mildest of efforts it would protect and preserve the magical implements jealously against the passing of time.

The ramp opened up into a larger area that reminded me of the interior corridors of a sports stadium. Three doors faced us. One was hanging slightly open, and read, **QUARTERS**. The other was shut and read, **ADMINISTRATION**.

The last, a large steel vault door, was labeled, **STORAGE**. A concrete loading dock with its edges painted in yellow and black caution stripes stretched before us, doubtless at just the right height to make use of the large transport van parked nearby.

Oh, and there were two guards standing in front of the vault door with some hostile-looking black shotguns.

Susan didn't hesitate. She blurred forward with nearly supernatural speed, and one of the guards was down before he realized he was in a fight. The other had already spun toward me with his weapon and opened fire. In his rush to shoot, he hadn't aimed. People make a big thing about shotguns hitting absolutely everything you point them at, but it ain't so. It still takes considerable skill to use a shotgun well under pressure, and in his panic the guard didn't have it. Pellets buzzed around me like angry wasps as I took three swift steps to my left and threw myself through the open barracks door, carrying me out of his line of fire.

From outside, there was a crack of something hard, maybe the butt of a gun hitting a skull, and Susan said, "Clear."

I came out of the emptied barracks nonchalantly. The two guards lay unconscious at Susan's feet. "God, I'm good," I said.

Susan nodded, and tossed both guns away from the unconscious men. "Best distraction ever."

I went to her and eyed the door. "How we getting through that?"

"We aren't," she said. She produced a small kit of locksmith tools and went to the administration door, ignoring the vault completely. "We don't need their treasures. We just need the receipts."

I'd learned a little bit about how to tickle a lock, but Susan had obviously learned more. Enough so that she took one look at the lock, pulled a lock gun from her kit, and went through it damned near as fast as if she'd had a key. She swung the door open and said, "Wait here. And don't break anything."

I put my hands behind my back and tried to look righteous. A smile lit her face, fast and fierce, and she vanished into the office.

I walked over to the barracks. My guns had been riding with the rest of my contraband when it got buried in Lea's garden, and I didn't like going unarmed on general principles. Magic is pretty damned cool when things get rowdy, but there are times when there's no replacing a firearm. They are excellent, if specialized, tools.

Two seconds of looking around showed me a couple of possibilities, and I picked up a big semiautomatic and a couple of loaded clips. I tucked them into a pocket of the duster. Then I picked up the assault rifle from its rack and found that two spare magazines were being held in this socklike device that went over the rifle's stock.

Rifles weren't my forte, but I knew enough to check the chamber and see that no round was in it. I made sure the safety was on and slung the assault rifle over my shoulder on its nylon-weave strap. Then I went back over to administration and waited outside.

Susan was cursing in streaks of blue and purple and vermillion inside. She appeared a moment later and spat, "Nothing. Someone was here first. They erased everything related to the shipment less than three hours ago."

"What about the paper copy?" I asked.

"Harry," Susan said. "Have you ever heard of the paperless office?"

"Yeah," I said. "It's like Bigfoot. Someone says he knows someone who saw him, but you don't ever actually see him yourself." I paused. "Though I suppose I actually *have* seen Bigfoot, and he seems like a decent guy, but the metaphor still stands. Remember who owns this place. You think someone like the duchess is a computer whiz? Trust me. You get to be over a couple of hundred years old, you get copies of everything in triplicate."

Susan arched an eyebrow and nodded. "Okay. Come on, then."

We went in and ransacked the office. There were plenty of files, but we had the identification number of the shipment of magical artifacts (000937, if it matters), and it was possible to flick through them very rapidly. We came up all zeroes, again. Whoever had covered up the back trail had done it well.

"Dammit," Susan said quietly. Her voice shook.

"Easy," I said. "Easy. We aren't out of options yet."

"This was the only lead we had," she said.

I touched her arm briefly and said, "Trust me."

She smiled at me a little. I could see the strain in her eyes.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get out of here before the cavalry arrives. Oh, here." I passed her the assault rifle.

"That's thoughtful of you," she said, smiling more widely. Her hands went over the weapon, checking the chamber as I had, only a lot more smoothly and quickly. "I didn't get you anything."

I turned and eyed the moving van, then went back to its cargo doors. "Here. Open this door for me?"

She got out her tools and did it in less time than it took to say it.

There were several long boxes in the van, standing vertically, and I realized after a moment that they were garment boxes. I opened one up and . . .

And found a long, mantled cloak made from some kind of white and green feathers, hanging from a little crossbar in the top of the garment box. It was heavy, easily weighing more than fifty pounds. I found a stick studded with chips of razor-sharp obsidian in there, too, its handle carved with pictographs. I couldn't read this particular form of writing very well, but I recognized it—and recognized that it was no ancient artifact, either. It had been carved in the past few decades.

"This is Mayan ceremonial costume," I murmured, frowning. "Why is it loaded up on the next truck out . . . ?"

The answer jumped at me. I turned to Susan and we traded a look that conveyed her comprehension as well. She went to the front of the van and popped it open. She started grabbing things, shoving them into a nylon gym bag that she had apparently found in the truck.

"What did you get?" I asked.

"Later, no time," she said.

We hurried back up the ramp to Martin.

The big door looked like it was having a tug-of-war with itself. It would shudder and groan and try to rise, and then Martin would do something with a pair of wires in the dismantled control panel and it would slam down again. I saw guards trying to stick their guns beneath the door for a quick shot, but they wound up being driven back by Martin's silenced pistol.

"Finally," Martin said as we came up to him. "They're about to get through."

"Damn," I said. "I figured they'd be firefighting longer than that." I looked around the barren tunnel. I was tired and shaking. If I were fresh, I would have no trouble with the idea of slugging it out with a bunch of guys with machine guns—provided they were all in front of me. But I was tired, and then some. The slightest wavering in concentration, and a shield would become porous and flexible. I'd be likely to take a bunch of bullets. The duster might handle most of them, but not forever, and I wasn't wearing it over my head.

"Plan B," I said. "Okay, right. We need a plan B. If we only had a wheelbarrow, that would be something."

Susan let out a puff of laughter, and then I turned to her, my eyes alight.

"We have a great big truck," Susan said.

"Then why didn't you list that among our assets?" I said, in a bad British accent. "Go!"

Susan vanished back down the tunnel, moving scary-fast.

"Martin," I said. "Get behind me!"

He did, as I lifted my left arm and brought up a purely physical shield, and within five or six seconds, the door had lifted two feet off the ground and a couple of prone shooters opened up on the first thing they saw—me.

I held the shield against the bullets as the door continued to rise, and they exploded into concentric circles of light spread across the front of the shield's otherwise invisible surface. The strain of holding the shield grew as more of the guards opened fire. I saw one poor fellow take a ricochet in the belly and go down, but I didn't have the time or the attention to spare to feel sorry for him. I ground my teeth and hung on to the shield as the guards kept a constant pressure on it.

Then there was a roar of large engines and Susan drove the cargo truck forward like some kind of berserk bison, charging the group of guards blocking the road out.

Men screamed and sprinted, trying to avoid the truck. They made it. I didn't need Martin to tell me to move, as the truck slammed into a turn, throwing its rear end in a deadly, skidding arch. We both sprinted for it in the confusion and flung ourselves up into the cargo compartment, which Susan had thoughtfully left open.

One of the more alert guards tried the same trick, but Martin saw him coming, aimed the little pistol, and shot him in the leg. The man screamed and fell down as the truck picked up speed. Susan stomped the pedal flat, and metal and razor wire screamed as she drove through a section of the fencing and out onto the open valley floor. She immediately turned it toward our escape point, and the truck began to bounce and rattle as it raced away from the facility.

After that, it was simple.

We went back to our ascension point, drank our watered-down flying potions, and bounded up the rocky face of the valley wall like mountain goats. Or possibly squirrels. Either way, it made the eighty-degree incline feel about as difficult to handle as a long stairway.

"Harry," Susan said, panting, as we reached the top. "Would you burn that truck for me?"

"My pleasure," I said, and dealt with the cargo truck the same way I had the cars in the parking lot. Thirty seconds later, it huffed out its own explosion, and Susan stood there nodding.

"Okay," she said. "Good. Hopefully that makes it harder for them to do whatever they're going to do."

"What did you find?" Martin asked.

"Mayan ceremonial gear," I said. "Not focus items, but the other stuff. The props. They were on the truck to be shipped out next."

Susan rustled in the nylon bag and held up a sheet of paper. "Bill of lading," she said. "Shipment number 000938. The next outgoing package after the original shipment, and it was initiated two days after the focus items went out."

Martin narrowed his eyes, thinking. "If it was going to the same place as the first shipment . . ."

"It means that we can make a pretty good guess that wherever it's going, it's within two days' drive," I said. "That gives the vampires time enough to get the first shipment, realize that some things got left out, and call in a second shipment to bring in the missing articles."

Martin nodded. "So? Where are they?"

Susan was going through the contents of the bag she'd appropriated. "Mexico," she said. She held up a U.S. passport, presumably falsified, since most people don't tote their passports around in manila envelopes, along with a wallet full of new-looking Mexican cash. "They were planning on taking those cloaks and things to Mexico."

I grunted and started walking back to the Way. Martin and Susan fell in behind me.

“Harry? Will destroying that gear ruin what they’re doing?”

“It’ll inconvenience them,” I said quietly. “Not much more than that. The actual magic doesn’t need the costumes. It’s the people performing it who need them. So any replacement sixty-pound cloak of parrot feathers will do—and if they want it badly enough, they can do the ritual even without replacing them.”

“They’ll know who was here,” Martin said. “Too many men saw us. Interior cameras might have gotten something, too.”

“Good,” I said. “I want them to know. I want them to know that their safe places aren’t safe.”

Susan made a growling sound that seemed to indicate agreement.

Even Martin’s mouth turned up into a chilly little smile. “So other than somewhat discomfiting the sleep of some of the Red Court, what did we actually accomplish here?”

“We know where they’re going to do their ritual,” Susan said.

I nodded. “Mexico.”

“Well,” Martin said. “I suppose it’s a start.”

Chapter Eighteen

Mrs. Spunkelcreef was a fantastic landlady. She lived on the ground floor of the old house. She rarely left her home, was mostly deaf, and generally didn't poke her nose into my business as long as my rent check came in—which it pretty much always did, these days, on time or a bit early.

A small army of crazy-strong zombies had assaulted my home without waking her up, probably because they'd had the grace to do it after her bedtime, which was just after sundown.

But I guess the visit from the cops and the FBI had been even louder than that, because as Molly pulled the *Blue Beetle* into the little gravel parking lot, I saw her coming up the stairs from my apartment, one at a time, leaning heavily on her cane. She wore a soft blue nightgown and a shawl to ward against the October chill in the night, and her bright blue eyes flicked around alertly.

"There you are," she said irritably. "I've been calling your house all evening, Harry."

"Sorry, Mrs. S," I said. "I've been out."

I don't think she could make out the words very well, but she wasn't stupid. "Obviously you've been out," she said. "What happened to your nice new door? It's wide-open! If we get another one of those freak thunderstorms, the rain will pour right in and we'll have mold climbing up the walls before you can say Jack Robinson."

I spread my hands and talked as loudly as I could without actually shouting. "There was a mix-up with the police."

"No," she said, "the lease is quite clear. You are responsible for any damages inflicted on the apartment while you are a tenant."

I sighed and nodded. "I'll fix it tomorrow."

"Oh, not so much sorrow as surprise, Harry. You're a good boy, generally." She peered from me to Molly, Susan, and Martin. "Most of the time. And you help out so when the weather is bad."

I smiled at her in what I hoped was an apologetic fashion. "I'll take care of the door, ma'am."

"Good," she said. "I thought you would. I'll come check in a few days." Mouse emerged from the darkness, not even breathing very hard from running to keep up with the Beetle. He immediately went over to Mrs. Spunkelcreef, sat, and offered her his right paw to shake. She was so tiny and the dog so large that she hardly had to bend down to grip his paw. She beamed broadly at Mouse, shook, and then patted his head fondly. "You can tell a lot about a man from how he treats his dog," she said.

Mouse walked over to me, sat down panting happily, and leaned his shoulders against my hip affectionately, all but knocking me down.

Mrs. Spunkelcreef nodded, satisfied, and turned to walk away. Then she paused, muttered something to herself, and turned back around again. She dug into her robe's pocket and produced a white envelope. "I almost forgot. This was lying on your stairs, boy."

I took it from her with a polite nod. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Welcome." She shivered and wrapped her shawl a little more tightly around her. "What is the world coming to? People breaking down doors."

I shot a glance at Molly, who nodded and immediately went to Mrs. Spunkelcreef's side, offering an arm for support. My landlady beamed up at her, saying, "Bless you, child. My cane arm got tired on the way down." Molly began helping her back up the little ramp to her apartment's front door.

Mouse immediately went to the bottom of the stairs, his nose questing. Then he turned back to me, tail fanning the air gently. No surprises lurked in my apartment. I went on down into it, waving the candles and fireplace to life with a murmur and a gesture, tearing open the envelope as I went to the fireplace to open it.

Inside was a piece of folded paper and another, smaller envelope, upon which was written, in Luccio's flowing writing, *READ ME FIRST*. I did:

If you are receiving this letter, it is because someone has rendered me unable to contact you. You must presume that I have been taken out of play entirely. The bearer of this note is the person I trust the most among every Warden stationed at Edinburgh. I cannot know the particulars of my neutralization, but you can trust his description implicitly, and I have found his judgment to be uncommonly sound in subjective matters.
Good luck, Harry.
-A-

I stared at the note for a moment. Then I unfolded the second piece of paper, very slowly. This one was written in blocky letters so precise that they almost resembled a printed font, rather than handwriting:

Hullo, Dresden.

Luccio wanted me to bring this note to you in the event something happened to her. No idea what her note says, but I'm to give you whatever information I can.

I'm afraid it isn't good news. The Council seems to have gone quite mad.

After your appearance at Cristos's grandstand, a number of ugly things happened. Several young Wardens were caught debating amongst themselves about whether or not they should simply destroy the duchess in Edinburgh to ensure that the war continued—after all, they reasoned, the vampires wouldn't be suing for peace if they could still fight. On Cristos's orders, they were arrested and detained by older members of the Council, none of whom were Wardens, in order to Prevent Them from Destabilizing Diplomatic Deliberations.

Ramirez heard about what had happened and I suspect you can guess that his Spanish-by-way-of-America reaction was more passionate than rational. He and a few friends, only one of whom had any real intelligence, hammered their way into the wing where the Wardens were being detained—at which point every single one of them (except for the genius, naturally) was captured and similarly imprisoned.

It's quiet desperation here. No one can seem to locate anyone on the Senior Council except Cristos, who is quite busily trying to Save Us from Ourselves by sucking up to Duchess Arianna. The Wardens' chain of command is a smashing disaster at the moment. Captain Luccio went to Cristos to demand the release of her people and is, at this time, missing, as are perhaps forty percent of the seniormost Wardens.

She asked me to tell you, Dresden, that you should not return to Edinburgh under any circumstances until the Senior Council sorts this mess out. She isn't sure what would happen to you.

She also wanted me to tell you that you were On Your Own.

I will send dispatches to you as events unfold—assuming I don't Vanish, too.

"Steed"

PS—Why, yes, I can in fact capitalize any words I desire. The language is English. I am English. Therefore mine is the opinion which matters, colonial heathen.

I read over the letter again, more slowly. Then I sat down on the fireplace mantel and swallowed hard.

"Steed" was an appellation I'd stuck on Warden Chandler, who was a fixture of security in Edinburgh, one of the White Council's home guards, and, once I had thought upon it, one of the guys who I'd always seen operating near Anastasia and in positions of trust: Standing as the sole sentinel at a post that normally required half a dozen. Brewing the Wardens and their captain their tea.

He and I had been the only ones present at the conversation where I'd tacked that nickname on him, thanks to the natty suit and bowler he'd been wearing, and the umbrella he'd accessorized—or maybe it was accessorised, in England—with, so the signature itself served as his bona fides. The flippant tone was very like Chandler, as well. I also knew Anastasia's handwriting, and besides, the paper on which her letter was written was scented with one of the very gentle, very subtle perfumes she preferred.

The message was as legitimate as it was likely to get, under the circumstances.

Which meant we were in real trouble.

The White Council carried a fearsome reputation not simply because of its capability of engaging in direct action against an enemy, but because it wielded a great deal of economic power. I mean, it doesn't take a genius to get rich after two hundred and fifty years of compounded interest and open trading. There was an entire brigade of economic warriors for the White Council who constantly sought ways to protect the Council's investments against hostile economic interests sponsored by other long-lived beings, like vampires. Money like that could buy a lot of influence. Not only that, but the Council could make the world a miserable place for someone who had earned their displeasure, in about a million ways, without ever throwing magic directly at someone. There were people in the Council who could play dirty with the most fiendish minds in history.

Taken as a whole, it seemed like a colossus, an institution as fixed and unmoving as a vast and ancient tree, filled with life, with strength, its roots sunk deep into the earth, a survivor of the worst storms the world had offered it.

But all of it, the power, the money, the influence, revolved around a critical core concept—every member of the White Council acted in concert. Or at least, that was the face that was supposed to be presented to the outside world. And it was mostly true. We might squabble and double-deal one another in peacetime, but when there was an enemy at hand we closed ranks. Hell, they'd even done that with me, and most of the Council thought that I was the next-best thing to Darth Vader. But at the end of the day, I think a lot of them secretly liked the idea of having Vader on the team when the monsters showed up. They didn't love me, never would, and I didn't need them to love me to fight beside them. When things got hairy, the Council moved together.

Except now we weren't doing it.

I looked at the folded letter in my hands and had the sudden, instinctive impression that I was watching an enormous tree begin to fall. Slowly at first, made to seem so by its sheer size—but falling nonetheless, to the ruin of anything sheltered beneath its boughs.

I was pretty tired, which probably explained why I didn't have any particular emotional reaction to that line of thought. It should have scared the hell out of me for a laundry list of reasons. But it didn't.

Susan came over to stand near me. "Harry. What is it?"

I stared at the fire. "The White Council can't help us find Maggie," I said quietly. "There are things happening. They'll be of no use to us."

After all they had wrongly inflicted upon me, after all the times I had risked my neck for them, when I needed them, truly *needed* their help, they were not there.

I watched my hands crush the letters and envelopes without telling them to do it. I threw them into the fire and glowered as they burned. I didn't notice that the fire in the fireplace had risen to triple its normal height until the blue-white brightness of the flames made me shade my eyes against them. Turning my face slightly away was like twisting the spigot of a gas heater—the fire immediately died back down to normal size.

Control, moron, I warned myself. *Control. You're a loaded gun.*

Chapter Nineteen

I went to my lab and started cleaning off my summoning circle. I'd knocked a few things onto it in the course of sweeping up anything incriminating. The FBI or Rudolph had added a bit to the mess. I pushed everything away from the circle and then swept it thoroughly with a broom. When you use a circle as a part of ritual magic, its integrity is paramount. Any object that falls across it or breaks its plane would collapse the circle's energy. Dust and other small particles wouldn't collapse a circle, but they did degrade its efficiency.

After I was done sweeping, I got a new shop cloth and a bottle of cleaning alcohol and wiped it down as thoroughly as if I were planning to perform surgery upon it. It took me about twenty minutes.

Once that was done, I opened an old cigar box on one shelf that was full of river rocks. All but one of them were decoys, camouflage. I pawed through it until I found the smooth piece of fire-rounded obsidian, and took it out of the box.

I went to the circle and sat in it, folding my legs in front of me. I touched the circle with a mild effort of will, and it snapped to life in a sudden curtain of gossamer energy. The circle would help contain and shape the magic I was about to work.

I put the black stone down on the floor in front of me, took a deep breath, straightened my back, and then began to draw in my will. I remained like that, relaxed, breathing deeply and slowly as I formed the spell in my head. This one was a fairly delicate working, and probably would have been beyond my skill before I had begun teaching Molly how to control her own power. Now, though, it was merely annoyingly difficult.

Once the energy was formed in my mind, I took a deep breath and whispered, "*Voce, voco, vocius.*" I waited a few seconds and then repeated myself. "*Voce, voco, vocius.*"

That went on for a couple of minutes, while I sat there doing my impression of a Roman telephone. I was just starting to wonder whether or not the damned rock was going to work when the lab around me vanished, replaced by an inky darkness. The circle's energy field became visible, a pale blue light in the shape of a cylinder, stretching from the floor up into the infinite overhead space. Its light did not make my surroundings visible, as if the glow from the circle simply had nothing to reflect from.

"Uh," I said, and my voice echoed strangely. "Hello?"

"Hold on to your horses," said a grumpy, distant voice. "I'm coming."

A moment later, there was a flash of light and a cylinder like my own appeared, directly in front of me. Ebenezar sat in it, legs folded the same way mine were. A black stone that was a twin to my own sat in front of him. Ebenezar looked tired. His hair was mussed, his eyes sunken. He was wearing only a pair of pajama bottoms, and I was surprised at how much muscle tone he had kept, despite his age. Of course, he'd spent the last few centuries mostly working on his farm. That would put muscle on anyone.

"Hoss," he said by way of greeting. "Where are you?"

"My place," I said.

"Situation?"

"My wards are down. I've got backup but I don't want to stay here for long. The police and FBI have gotten involved and the Reds have swung at me twice in the past two days. Where are you?"

Ebenezar grunted. "Best if I don't say. The Merlin is preparing his counterstrike, and we're trying to find out how much they already know about it."

"When you say 'we,' I assume you mean the Grey Council."

The Grey Council was the appellation that had stuck to our little rogue organization inside the White Council itself. It consisted of people who could see lightning, hear thunder, and admit to themselves that wizards everywhere were increasingly in danger of being exterminated or enslaved by other interests—such as the Vampire Courts or the Black Council.

The Black Council was mostly a hypothetical organization. It consisted of a lot of mysterious figures in black robes with delusions of Ringwraith-hood. They liked to call up the deadly dangerous demons from outside of reality, the Outsiders, and to infiltrate and corrupt every supernatural nation they could get to. Their motivations were mysterious, but they'd been causing trouble for the Council and everyone else for quite a while. I had encountered members of their team, but I had no hard proof of their existence, and neither did anyone else.

Cautionary rumors of their presence had been met with derision and accusations of paranoia by most of the White Council until last year, when a Black Council agent had killed more than sixty wizards and infiltrated the Edinburgh facility so thoroughly that more than 95 percent of the staff and security team had gotten their brains redecorated to one degree or another. Even the Senior Council members had been influenced.

The traitor had been stopped, if just barely, and at a heavy cost. And after that, the Council as a whole believed that there *might be* a faceless, nameless organization running amok in the world—and that any number of them could actually be members of the White Council itself, operating in disguise.

Paranoia and mistrust. They had been steadily growing within the White Council, whose leader, the Merlin, still refused to admit that the Black Council was real, for fear that our own people would start going over to the bad guys out of fear or ambition. His decision had actually had the opposite effect on the frightened, nervous wizards of the White Council. Instead of throwing the clear light of truth on the situation, the Merlin had made it that much more murky and shadowy, made it easier for fear to prey upon his fellow wizards' thoughts.

Enter the Grey Council, which consisted of me and Ebenezar and unspecified others, organized in cells in order to prevent either one of the other Councils from finding out about us and wiping out all of us at once. We were the ones who were trying to be sane in an insane time. The whole affair could backlash on us spectacularly, but I guess some people just aren't any good at watching bad things happen. They have to do something about it.

"Yes," Ebenezar said. "That is who I mean."

"I need the Grey Council to help me," I said.

"Hoss . . . we're all sitting under the sword of Damocles waiting for it to fall. The events unfolding in Edinburgh right now could mean the end of organized, restrained wizardry. The end of the Laws of Magic. It could drive us back to the chaos of an earlier age, unleash a fresh wave of warlock-driven monsters and faux demigods upon mankind."

"For some reason, sir, I always feel a little more comfortable when I'm sitting under that sword. Must be all the practice."

Ebenezar scowled. "Hoss . . ."

"I need information," I said, my voice hard. "There's a little girl out there. Someone knows something about where she is. And I know that the Council could dig something up. The White Council already shut the door in my face." I thrust out my jaw. "What about the Grey?"

Ebenezar sighed, and his tired face looked more tired. "What you're doing is good and right. But it ain't smart. And it's a lesson you haven't learned yet."

"What lesson?"

"Sometimes, Hoss," he said very gently, "you lose. Sometimes the darkness takes everyone. Sometimes the monster escapes to kill again another day." He shook his head and looked down. "Sometimes, Hoss, the innocent little ones are murdered. And there's not one goddamned thing you can do about it."

"Leave her to die," I snarled. "That's what you want me to do?"

"I want you to help save millions or billions of little girls, boy," he said, his own voice dropping into a hard, hard growl. "Not throw them away for the sake of one."

"I am *not* going to leave this alone," I snapped. "She—"

Ebenezar made a gesture with his right hand and my voice box just stopped working. My lips moved. I could inhale and exhale freely—but I couldn't talk.

His dark eyes flashed with anger, an expression I had seldom seen upon his face. "Dammit, boy, you're smarter than this. Don't you see what you're doing? You're giving Arianna

exactly what she wants. You're dancing like a puppet on her strings. Reacting in precisely the way she wants you to react, and it *will* get you killed.

"I told you long ago that being a real wizard means sacrifice. It means knowing things no one else does," he said, still growling. "I told you that it meant that you might have to act upon what you knew, and knew to be right, even though the whole world set its hand against you. Or that you might have to do horrible, necessary things. Do you remember that?"

I did. Vividly. I remembered the smell of the campfire we'd been sitting beside at the time. I nodded.

"Here's where you find out who you are," he said, his voice harsh and flat. "There's a lot of work to do, and no time to do it, let alone waste it arguing with you over something you should know by now." He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, as if bringing himself back under control. "Meet me at the Toronto safe house in twelve hours." He spoke in a voice of absolute authority, something I'd heard from him only a handful of times in my life. He expected his order to be obeyed.

I turned my head from him. In the edge of my vision, I saw him scowl again, reach down, and pick up his own black stone—and suddenly I was sitting on the floor of my lab again.

I picked up my sending stone wearily and slipped it into my pocket. Then I just lay back on the floor, breaking the circle as I did, and stared up at the ceiling for a little while. I turned my head to my left, and spotted the green, extra-thick three-ring binder where I stored all my files on entities I could summon from the Nevernever.

No.

I looked away from the book. When you call things up for information, you've got to pay their price. It's always different. It's never been pleasant.

And the thought frightened me.

This would be the time those beings had been waiting for. When my need was so dire that I might agree to almost anything if it meant saving the child. For her, I might make a deal I would never consider otherwise.

I might even call upon—

I stopped myself from so much as *thinking* the name of the Queen of Air and Darkness, for fear that she might somehow detect it and take action. She had been offering me temptation passively and patiently for years. I had wondered, sometimes, why she didn't make more of an effort to sell me on her offer. She certainly could have done so, had she wished.

Now I understood. She had known that in time, sooner or later, there would come a day when I would be more needful than cautious. There was no reason for her to dance about crafting sweet temptations and sending them out to ensnare me. Not when all she had to do was wait awhile. It was a cold, logical approach—and that was very much in her style.

But there were other beings I could question, in the light blue binder sitting on top of the green one—beings of less power and knowledge, with correspondingly lower prices. It seemed unlikely that I would get anything so specific from them, but you never knew.

I reached for the blue book, rose, and set about calling creatures into my lab to answer a few questions.

After three hours of conjuring and summoning, I came up with absolutely nothing. I had spoken with nature spirits in the shape of a trio of tiny screech owls, and with messenger spirits, the couriers between the various realms within the Nevernever. None of them knew anything. I plucked a couple of particularly nosy ghosts who lived around Chicago out of the spirit world, and summoned servants of the Tylwyth Teg, with whose king I was on good terms. I asked spirits of water what they and their kin had seen regarding Maggie, and stared into the flickering lights of creatures of sentient flame, whose thoughts were revealed in the images quivering inside them.

One of the fire spirits showed me an image that lasted for no more than three or four seconds—the face of the little girl in Susan's picture, pale and a little grubby and shivering with fear or cold, reaching out to warm her hands over the fluttering lights of a fire. In profile, she looked a lot like her mother, with her huge dark eyes and slender nose. She'd gotten something of my chin, I think, which gave her little face the impression of strength or stubbornness. She was much paler than Susan, too, more like her father than her mother that way.

But then the image was gone.

That was as close as I got.

I sat down on my stool after three hours of work and felt more exhausted than at any time I could easily recall. I'd gotten nothing that would tell me where she was, nothing that would tell me what was in store for her. Except for the single flicker of knowledge that Maggie was still alive, I'd gotten nothing.

But even that might be enough. She was still breathing.

Hang in there, kid. Dad's coming.

Chapter Twenty

“I don’t like it,” Molly said, scowling. “You sure you don’t want me to go in there with you? He’s got people.”

“Definitely not,” I said calmly. “I don’t want you showing up on his radar.”

“I’d like to see him try something,” Molly said, clenching one hand into a fist and thumping the *Blue Beetle*’s steering wheel for emphasis. “I’d eat him for breakfast.”

“No, Molly,” I said in a firm tone of voice. “You wouldn’t. Marcone might be vanilla mortal, but he’s dangerous. Most men have limits. He doesn’t. Never forget that.”

“If he’s so dangerous, why are you talking to him?”

“Because he also has rules,” I said. “And besides. I just had to see him here. Keep your eyes open for a third party interfering. I’ll worry about Marcone. Okay?”

“Okay,” Molly said, nodding, her eyes intent. In a spectacular bid for the Do as I Say, Not as I Do Award, she took a long pull from an energy drink in a can the size of a milk carton.

I got out of the *Blue Beetle* and walked into my meeting with Gentleman Johnnie Marcone, the undisputed gang lord of Chicago.

Burger King had just opened its dining area, but it was already half-full. I ignored Marcone upon coming in and got in line. A sausage biscuit and cup of coffee later, I went to the back corner where Marcone sat and his retinue stood.

Hendricks was there, of course, in an extra-large suit and a red haired buzz cut. Maybe he’d been working out, because he looked like he’d put on a few more pounds. If he got any bigger, he’d need a building permit. Miss Gard stood a little apart from Hendricks, covering the angles the big man couldn’t. She was just as blond and athletic and Amazonian as ever, her suit and tie muting her curves without reducing her appeal.

Marcone sat in the booth as if at a boardroom table. He wore a silk suit probably worth more than my car, and sat with his elbows on the table, his fingertips pressed together into a steeple. He looked like a man in his mature prime, neat and precise from his haircut to his polished leather shoes. He watched me come over to the table and slide my plastic tray into place before me. I dumped four or five packets of sugar into my coffee and stirred it with a little stick. “You’re not eating?”

He looked at his watch, and then at me. He had pale green eyes the color of old bills, but less personal. His stare was unsettling, and he met my eyes without concern. We had already taken the measure of each other’s souls. It was why I knew precisely how dangerous the man sitting across the table from me could be, and why I insisted upon treating him in as cavalier a fashion as possible. One doesn’t show dangerous predators weakness or fear. It makes them hungry.

I savored a bite of the biscuit, which was only a reminder of how good a real homemade biscuit and sausage was, but for the sake of my audience, I made sounds of enjoyment as I chewed and swallowed. “You sure?” I slurped some more coffee. “You’re missing out on ambrosia, here.”

“Dresden,” Marcone said, “this is aggravating. Even for you.”

“Yeah,” I said, smiling, and took another bite of sausage.

Hendricks made a growling sound.

I finished chewing and said, “You sure about that, big guy?”

“Hendricks,” Marcone said.

Hendricks subsided.

I nodded. Then I said, “You have information I want.”

“Undoubtedly,” Marcone said. “What information are you after, and what do you offer for it?”

“I’m not here to trade baseball cards with you, Marcone,” I said.

“And I am not a charity organization, Dresden,” he replied. “I take it this has something to do with your office building exploding.” He shook his head in a gesture of faint regret.

“Right,” I said. “You’re all broken up over the destruction.”

“I didn’t order it. I made no money on it. I failed to profit financially or politically from its destruction. And you survived. It was a complete waste.”

Hendricks made another growling sound that might have been gorilla for a laugh.

“Maybe it’s got something to do with the building. How much do you know about its owners?”

Marcone’s smile was a wintry thing. “That they are a part of the organization whose servitors have been attempting to intrude upon my business.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Someone’s muscling in on your territory?”

“Briefly,” Marcone said, “but incessantly.”

“Then we might have a common problem.”

Marcone looked at me as though I were a rather slow child. “Yes. Hence this meeting.”

I grunted and finished the biscuit. “The Red Court is on the move. Trouble is being stirred up between them and the Council. My interest in the matter is an eight-year-old girl. The Reds took her from her home. I believe that they’re holding her somewhere in Mexico. I need to know where.”

Marcone’s stare went on for several seconds before he said, “Somewhere. In Mexico. That’s as specific as you can be?”

“It’s as much as I know,” I said.

“For what purpose was she brought there?”

“Why does it matter?”

“If she was taken to be used as a sexual object, she would be in a different place than if she was going to be used as slave labor or harvested as an organ donor.”

I clenched my teeth and looked away briefly, treated to a number of delightful images by his words.

Marcone’s eyes narrowed. “Who is she to you, Dresden?”

“My client’s kid,” I said, struggling to keep my voice level and calm. “I think they’re going to use her in some sort of sacrificial ritual.”

“Then that narrows things considerably,” Marcone said. “As I understand the process, rituals such as the one you mention need to happen at a place of power.” He glanced up at Miss Gard, who nodded and immediately left the restaurant, heading for her car. “I suspect I can narrow it down even further for you, Dresden. Let’s talk price.”

“I’m going to use the information to put a major hurting on the people trying to take your territory away from you, Marcone,” I said. “That’s more than payment enough.”

“And if I do not agree?” Marcone asked.

“Then we throw down, right here, and after I toss your attack dogs over the top of the Sears building, I hurt you until you give me the information anyway.”

That cold smile returned. “Is that how you think it would happen?”

I shrugged a shoulder and kept my expression bland. “I think there’s only one way to find out.” I leaned forward a little and pitched my voice in a conspiratorial murmur. “But just between you and me, I don’t think the terrain favors you here.”

He stared across his steepled fingers at me for a time. Then he said, “It certainly doesn’t favor me in the manner I would prefer.” He laid his hands flat on the table and leaned back slightly. “There’s no sense in making a confrontation out of this. And I have never yet regretted it when I allowed you to rid me of an enemy.”

“I didn’t do it as a favor to you.”

He shrugged. “Your motivations are immaterial. The results are what matter.”

“Just remember that you’re on my list, Marcone. Soon as I get done with all the other evils in this town, you won’t be the lesser of them anymore.”

Marcone stared at me with half-lidded eyes and said, “Eek.”

“You think it’s funny?”

“I am not unduly concerned by dead men, Dresden.”

I bristled. “Is that a threat?”

“Hardly. One day, probably soon, you’ll get yourself killed thanks to that set of irrational compulsions you call a conscience, long before my name tops your list. I needn’t lift a finger.” He shrugged. “Giving you information seems an excellent way to accelerate that process. It will also tax the resources of my enemies.” Marcone mused for a moment, and then said, “And . . . I believe I have no objection to contributing against any organization which would victimize children so.”

I glowered at him. Partly because he was probably right, and partly because he’d once again shown the flash of humanity that prevented me from lumping him in with every other evil, hungry, predatory thing lurking in the wild world. For his own reasons, Marcone would go to extreme lengths to help and protect children. In Chicago, any adult was fair game for his businesses. Any child was off-limits. Rumor had it that he had vanished every single one of his employees who had ever crossed that line.

Gard reappeared, frowning, and walked over to our table.

Marcone glanced at her. “Well?”

Gard hesitated and then said, “He won’t speak of it over the line. He says that you have incurred no debt with him for asking the question. He will only speak to Dresden. Personally.”

Marcone lifted his eyebrows. “Interesting.”

“I thought so,” Gard said.

“Ahem,” I said. “Who wants to meet me?”

“My . . . employer,” Gard said. “Donar Vadderung, CEO of Monoc Securities.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Gard and I went to Oslo.

It sounds like it would be a long trip, but it's a hell of a lot faster when you don't have to worry about boarding, clearing security, going through customs, or actually moving a linear distance.

Gard opened a Way into the Nevernever down near the zoo, simply cutting at the fabric of reality with a rune-etched dagger. The Way took us on a short hike through a dark wood of dead trees, and ended when we emerged in what she said was Iceland. It sure as hell was cold enough. A second Way took us across the surface of a frozen lake, to stop before the roots of a vast old tree whose trunk could have contained my apartment with room to spare for a garage.

From there, we emerged into what seemed like a cold, damp basement, and I found myself face- to-face with two dozen men wearing body armor and pointing sleek-looking, high-tech assault rifles at the end of my nose.

I did absolutely nothing. Carefully.

One of the men with guns said something, a short phrase in a language I didn't understand. Gard answered in what I presumed to be the same tongue, and gestured to me.

The leader of the guards eyed us both suspiciously for a moment, then said something quietly and all the rifles stopped pointing at me. Two guards returned to stand on either side of a doorway. Two more took up a station facing Gard and me, evidently cautious about getting more company through the same Way we'd just used. The rest returned to a couple of card tables and a few sleeping cots.

Gard shook her head and muttered, "Einherjar. Give them a little sip of renewed mortality, and four thousand years of discipline go right out the window."

"I recognize some of these guys," I said. I nodded toward a trio playing cards. "Those three. They were some of the mercenaries Marcone brought to that party in the Raith Deeps."

Gard glanced at the three and then rolled her eyes. "Yes. And?"

"And they're just available for hire?" I asked.

"If you can afford them," Gard said, smiling so that her teeth showed. "Though be warned that prices may vary. This way, Dresden."

I followed her out into a hallway and past several rooms filled with enough weaponry to win a minor war in a century of one's choice. Racks of ash-wood spears stood side by side with old bolt- action Mausers, which stood next to modern assault rifles. Katana-style swords shared a room with flintlocks and Maxim guns. One shelving unit housed an evolutionary progression of grenades, from powder- filled crockery with ignitable fuses to the most modern miniature flash-bang grenades. Judging from the variety of the place's contents, it was like looking at a museum—but from the quantities present, it could only be an armory.

We got to an elevator whose walls were a simple metal grid, so that we could see out of them as we went up. I stopped counting after seeing seven floors of similarly equipped armories go by.

"Guess your boss believes in being prepared," I said.

Gard smiled. "It's one of his things, yes."

"It's a little extreme, isn't it?"

She looked at me with an arched brow. Then she said, "One can have only as much preparation as he has foresight."

I considered that for a moment, and decided that as cryptic statements went, it was all kinds of bad.

The elevator kept going up and up and up. Brief views of various floors went by. One floor looked like an enormous gym and was filled with sweating men and women working out. Another looked like an expensive legal office. Another was all done in antiseptic white, bathed with just a bit too much light, and smelled of disinfectant. Another was lit by candles and the murmuring of voices chanting. Still another was obviously some kind of enormous chemical laboratory. Still another level was filled with cells whose occupants could not be seen as anything other than shadowy presences. And so on.

I shook my head. "Hell's bells. It's like some kind of demented theme park."

"The difference being that nothing you see here is meant to entertain," Gard said. "And don't bother asking questions. I won't answer them. Ah, we've reached the ground floor."

The elevator continued to rise up through an enormous atrium that housed ten or twelve stories of what looked like high-end corporate offices. Each floor was open to the atrium, and between the plants, decorative trees, the waterfall, and all the windows plus the skylights far above, the entire building looked like a single, massive garden. The sounds of office activity and equipment, birds, and the flowing waterfall all blended together into an active whole that formed a white noise bustling with life, variety, and movement. We soared up through the atrium and our open-sided elevator vanished into a short tunnel.

A moment later, the door opened on a rather novel reception area.

It had all the things such offices always did: a prominent desk, several seats in a waiting area, a coffee machine, and a table laden with magazines. In this office, however, all of those materials were made of stainless steel. So were the floors. So were the walls. As was the ceiling. Even the lamps and the coffeepot were made of stainless steel. The magazines alone stood out as shapeless, soft-looking blobs of garish color.

The logo for Monoc Securities stood out upon one wall, in basrelief, and somehow reminded me more of a crest upon a shield than a corporate marketing symbol: a thick, round circle bisected by a straight vertical line emerging from either side of the circle. It might have been a simplified, abstract representation of an eye being cut from its socket by some kind of blade—I have some of that symbol written in scar tissue on my own face, where a cut had run down from eyebrow to cheekbone but had barely missed my eye. It might have been simple abstract symbology, representing the female and the male with round and straight shapes, suggesting wholeness and balance. Or, heck, it could have been overlaid Greek lettering, omega and iota on top of each other. Omega-iota. The last detail? The final detail? Maybe it meant something more like "every last little thing."

Or maybe it combined all of those things: the blind eye that sees all.

Yeah. That felt right.

Two women sat behind the big desk at computer monitors consisting of small clouds of very fine mist, wherein were contained all the drifting images and letters of the company cyber-reality, floating like the wispiest of illusions. Sufficiently advanced technology, I suppose.

The women themselves were, apparently, identical twins. Both had raven-dark hair cut in close-fitting caps, and it matched the exact shade of their identical black suits. Both had dark eyes that sparkled with intensity and intelligence. They were both pale and their features were remarkable, if not precisely beautiful. They would stand out in any crowd, and not in an unpleasant way, either—but they would never be mistaken for cover models.

The twins rose as the elevator doors opened, and their eyes looked very intent and very black as they stared at us. I've looked down the barrel of a gun before. This was like looking down four of them at once. They stood there, inhumanly motionless. Both wore headsets, but only one of them murmured into hers.

I started to step out of the elevator, but Gard put out a cautionary hand. "Don't, until you're approved," she said. "They'll kill you. Maybe me, too."

"Like their receptionists tough in these parts, huh?"

"It would be wiser not to joke," she said quietly. "They don't miss anything—and they never forget."

The receptionist who had spoken into her mike flexed one hand slowly closed and open. Her nails peeled up little silver curls from the stainless-steel desk.

I thought about making a manicure joke . . . and decided not to. Go, go, Gadget wisdom.

"Do you do oranges, too?" asked my mouth, without checking in with the rest of me. "What about sharpening table knives and scissors and lawn tools? My landlady's lawn mower blade could use a hand job from a girl like y—"

"Dresden," Gard hissed, her eyes both furious and wide with near-panic.

Both of the receptionists were focused on me intently now. The one who had remained silent shifted her weight, as though preparing to take a step.

"Come on, Sigrun," I said to my companion. "I'm trying to be diplomatic. The wisdom of my ass is well- known. If I didn't lip off to them, after shooting my mouth off to faerie queens

and Vampire Courts—plural, *Courts*—demigods and demon lords, they might get their feelings hurt."

Gard eyed me for a moment more, before her uncertain blue eyes gained a gleam of devil-may-care defiance. It looked a lot more natural on her than fear. "Perhaps your insults and insolence are not the valued commodities you believe them to be."

"Heh," I said. "Good one."

The chatty twin tilted her head slightly to one side for a moment, then said, "Right away, sir." She pointed her fingernail at me. "You are to enter the office through the doors behind me." She aimed her nail at Gard next. "You are to accompany him and make introductions."

Gard nodded shortly and then tilted her head in a "come along" sort of gesture. We walked out of the elevator and past the twins to the door behind them. They turned their heads as I went by, tracking my every movement. It was downright creepy.

On the other side of the door was a long hallway, also made of stainless steel. There were multiple ports or hatches of some kind in a row along the walls, all closed. They were about the size of dinner plates. I got a feeling that any visitors who tried the hors d'oeuvres served up from those plates would not be asking for the recipe later in the evening.

At the end of the hall was another set of steel doors, which gave way soundlessly before us, revealing another room done all in stainless steel, holding only a massive desk behind which was seated a man.

Donar Vadderung sat with his chin propped on the heel of his hand, squinting at a holographic computer display, and the first thing my instincts did was warn me that he was very, very dangerous.

He wasn't all that imposing to look at. A man in good shape, maybe in his early fifties. Lean and spare, in the way of long-distance runners, but too heavy in the shoulders and arms for that to be all he did. His hair was long for a man, and just a bit shaggy. It was the color of a furious thundercloud, and his eye was ice blue. A black cloth patch over the other eye combined with a vertical scar similar to my own made me think that I'd been right about the corporate logo. He kept a short, neat beard. He was a striking-looking rogue, particularly with the eye patch, and looked like the sort of person who might have served thirty years of a triple life sentence and managed to talk the parole board into setting him free—probably to their eventual regret.

"Sigrun," he said, his tone polite.

Gard went down to one knee and bowed her head. There was no hesitation whatsoever to the woman's movements—the gesture was not simply a technicality she had to observe. She

believed that Vadderung merited such obeisance.

"My lord," Gard said. "I've brought the wizard, as you commanded."

"Well done," the grey-haired man said, and made a gesture to indicate that she should rise. I don't think she saw it, with her head bowed like that, but she reacted to it anyway, and stood up. Maybe they'd just had a few hundred years to practice.

"My lord. May I present Harry Dresden, wizard and Warden of the White Council of wizards."

I nodded to Vadderung.

"Wizard, this is Donar Vadderung, CEO of Monoc Secur—"

"I think I've got a pretty good idea what he's in charge of," I said quietly.

The old man's mouth turned faintly up at the corners when I spoke. He gestured to a steel chair across the desk from him. "Please. Sit down."

I pointed at the holographic display. "You sure you want to put that at risk? If I stand too close to it..."

Vadderung turned his face up to the ceiling and barked out a laugh of genuine amusement. "I'll take my chances."

"Suits me," I said. I walked over to the desk and sat down in the steel chair across from Vadderung's. It didn't have a cushion or anything, but it was surprisingly comfortable nonetheless.

"Coffee?" he asked me. "Something to eat?"

I paused for a breath to think before answering. Duties such as this involved the obligations and responsibilities of guest to host and vice versa. If Vadderung was who I thought he was, he had been known, from time to time, to go forth and test people on how well they upheld that particular tradition—with generous rewards for the faithful, and hideous demises for the miserly, callous, or cruel.

In the supernatural world, such obligations and limits seem to be of vital importance to the overwhelming number of supernatural beings. I'm not sure why. Maybe it has something to do with the thresholds of protective energy that form around a home.

"Only if it isn't too much trouble," I said.

"And something to eat," Vadderung told Gard.

She bowed her head and said, "My lord." Then she padded out.

Though the big man hadn't stood up, I realized that he *was* big. Damned near a giant, really. Standing, he'd have more than a couple inches on me, and his shoulders made mine look about as wide as the spine of a book. He rested his chin on the heel of his hand again and studied me with his bright blue eye.

"Well," he said. "I take it you believe you know who I am."

"I've got a few guesses," I said. "I think they're good ones. Sigrun was kind of a tip-off. But honestly, that's got nothing to do with why I'm here today."

The blue eye wrinkled at the corners. "Doesn't it?"

I frowned at him and tilted my head. "How so?"

He lifted a hand palm up as he explained. "Someone with enough foresight might, for example, arrange to be in a position to assist a hot-headed young wizard of the White Council one day. Perhaps who I am is directly responsible for why I am here."

"Yeah. I guess that could be it," I said. "It's technically possible that your motives for assisting me are altruistic. On the other hand, it's also technically possible that you are speaking with a forked tongue, and that all you're really trying to do is find some way to take advantage of me when I'm under pressure." I shrugged. "No offense intended, but there's kind of a shortage of altruism out there."

"So cynical for one so young." He looked me up and down. "But you would be. You would be."

"I've got questions," I said. "Granted, they aren't as profound as 'Who am I?' or 'Why am I here?' but they're a lot more important to me at the moment."

Vadderung nodded. "You're looking for your daughter."

I felt my body go rigid. "How...?"

He smiled rather wolfishly. "I know things, Dresden. And if I don't know something, I can find out. Like yourself, it is what I do."

I stared at the man for most of a minute. Then I said, "Do you know where she is?"

"No," he said in a quiet, firm voice. "But I know where she will be."

I looked down at my hands. "What's it going to cost me to find out?"

"Chichén Itzá," Vadderung said.

I jerked my head up in surprise. I stared at the man for a moment. "I..."

"Don't understand?" Vadderung asked. "It isn't complicated. I'm on your side, boy."

I raked my fingers back through my hair, thinking. "Why there?"

"The Red King and his inner circle, the Lords of Outer Night, have got some big juju to brew up. They need a site of power to do it. For this, they'll use Chichén Itzá."

"Why there?"

"They're enacting a sacrifice. Like in the old days." A snarl of anger touched his voice, and made it suddenly frightening. "They're preparing a bloodline curse."

"A what?"

"Death magic," he said, "focused upon the bloodline. From the sacrifice, the child, to her brothers, sisters, and parents. From the parents to their brothers, sisters, and parents, and so on. Spreading up the family tree until there's no one left."

A chill hit my guts. "I've... never even heard of death magic on that kind of scale. The energy required for that... It's enormous." I stopped for a moment and then said, "And it's *stupid*. Susan was an only child, and she's already lost her parents. Same with me..."

Vadderung arched an eyebrow at me. "Is it? They like to be thorough, those old monsters."

I smoothed my expression over, trying not to give away anything. This spell they were doing would kill me, if they pulled it off. It could also kill my only family, my half brother, Thomas. "How does it work?" I asked him, my voice subdued.

"It tears out the heart," Vadderung said. "Rips it to bits on the way out, too. Sound familiar?"

"Hell's bells," I said quietly. It had been years since I had even thought about Victor Sells or his victims. They had featured in my nightmares for quite a while until I upgraded.

Vadderung leaned toward me, his blue eye very bright. "It's all connected, Dresden. The whole game. And you're only now beginning to learn who the players are." He settled back into his seat, letting silence add emphasis to his statement before he continued. "The sorcerer who used the spell in Chicago before didn't have strength enough to make it spread past the initial target. The Red Court does. No one has used Power on this scale in more than a millennium."

"And they're pointing it at *me*?"

"They say you can know a man by his enemies, Dresden." He smiled, and laughter lurked beneath his next words, never quite surfacing. "You defy beings that should cow you into silence. You resist forces that are inevitable for no more reason than that you believe they should be resisted. You bow your head to neither demons nor angels, and you put yourself in harm's way to defend those who cannot defend themselves." He nodded slowly. "I think I like you."

I arched an eyebrow and studied him for a moment. "Then help me."

Vadderung pursed his lips in thought. "In that, you may be disappointed. I am... not what I was. My children are scattered around the world. Most of them have forgotten our purpose. Once the Jotuns retreated..." He shook his head. "What you must understand is that you face beings such as I in this battle."

I frowned. "You mean... gods?"

"Mostly retired gods, at any rate," Vadderung said. "Once, entire civilizations bowed to them. Now they are venerated by only a handful, the power of their blood spread out among thousands of offspring. But in the Lords of Outer Night, even the remnants of that power are more than you can face as you are."

"I've heard that one before," I said.

Vadderung just looked at me. Then he said, "Let me help you understand."

And a force like a hundred anvils smashed me out of the chair and to the floor.

I found myself on my back, gasping like a landed fish. I struggled to move, to push myself up, but I couldn't so much as lift my arms from the ground. I brought my will into focus, with the idea of using it to deflect some of that force from me and—

—and suddenly, sharply felt my will directly in contention with another. The power that held me down was not earth magic, as I had assumed it to be. It was the simple, raw, brute application of the will of Donar Vadderung, Thunder's Father, the Father and King of the Aesir. Father Odin's will held me pinned to the floor, and I could no more escape it or force it away than could an insect stop a shoe from descending.

In the instant that realization came to me, the force vanished, evaporating as if it had never been. I lay on the floor gasping.

"It is within my capabilities to kill you, young wizard," Vadderung said quietly. "I could wish you dead. Especially here, at the center of my power on Midgard." He got up, came around the desk, and offered me his hand. I took it. He pulled me to my feet, steady as a rock. "You will be at the center of their power. There will be a dozen of them, each nearly as strong as I am." He put a hand on my shoulder briefly. "You are bold, clever, and from time to time lucky. All of those are excellent qualities to have in battles like yours. But against power such as this you cannot prevail as you are. Even if you are able to challenge the Red King at Chichén Itzá, you will be crushed down as you were a moment ago. You'll be able to do nothing but watch as your daughter dies."

He stared at me in silence for a time. Then the door to his office opened, and one of the receptionists leaned in. "Sir," she said, "you have a lunch appointment in five minutes."

"Indeed," Vadderung said. "Thank you, M."

She nodded and retreated again.

Vadderung turned back to me, as Gard returned to the room, carrying a covered tray. She set it down on the big steel desk and stepped back, unobtrusively.

"You've defied fate, Dresden," Vadderung said. "You've stood up to foes much larger than you. For that, you have my respect."

"Do you think I could swap in the respect for . . . I dunno . . . half a dozen Valkyries, a receptionist, and a couple of platoons of dead heroes?"

Vadderung laughed again. He had a hearty laugh, like Santa Claus must have had when he was young and playing football. "I couldn't do without my receptionists, I'm afraid." He sobered. "And those others . . . would be less strong at the center of the Red King's power." He shook his head. "Like it or not, this is a mortal matter. It must be settled by mortals."

"You're not going to help," I said quietly.

He went to a steel closet and opened the door, removing an overcoat. He slipped into it, and then walked over to me again. "I've been in this game for a long, long time, boy. How do you know I haven't given you exactly what you need?"

Vadderung took the lid off the covered tray, nodded to me pleasantly, and left.

I looked at the tray. A cup of tea steamed there, three empty paper packets of sugar beside it. The tea smelled like peppermint, a favorite. Next to the cup of tea was a little plate with two cake doughnuts on it, both of them covered in thick white frosting and unmarred by sprinkles or any other edible decorations.

I looked up in time to see Vadderung walk by, trailed by the pair of receptionists, and saw them all simply vanish, presumably into a Way.

"Well?" Gard asked me. "Are you ready to go?"

"Just a minute," I said.

I sat back down. And I drank the tea and ate the doughnuts, thoughtfully.

Chapter Twenty-two

I needed sleep.

I rode back to my place with Molly in the midmorning. Mouse came padding up the stairs from the apartment as we got out of the car, his alert, wary stance relaxing into the usual waving of a doggy tail and enthusiastic sniffs and nudges of greeting. I shambled on into my apartment calmly. All was obviously well.

Susan and Martin were both inside, both busy, as Mister looked on from his lordly peak atop the highest bookshelf. Susan had been shaking out all the rugs and carpets that cover the floor of my living room, and was now rolling them back into place, probably not in the same order as they had been before. She picked up one end of a sofa with a couple of fingers of one hand to get an edge into place.

Martin was alphabetizing my bookshelves.

They used to kill men for sacrilege like that.

I suppressed my twitches as best I could, and told myself that they thought they were helping.

“Success,” Susan said. “Or at least a little of it. Our people found out exactly who is tailing us up here.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “Who?”

“The Eebs,” she said.

Molly came in and frowned severely at what they were doing. Granted, the place was kind of a mess after the FBI and cops got done, but still. She was probably as used to the place as I was. “Sounds like the Scoobies, only less distinctive.”

Martin shook his head. “Esteban and Esmerelda Batiste,” he clarified. “One of the husband-wife teams the Red Court uses for fieldwork.”

“One of?” I asked.

“Couples traveling together attract less attention,” Susan said. “They’re often given the benefit of the doubt in any kind of judgment call made by various officers of the law. It smooths things out a little more than they would be otherwise.”

“Hence you and Martin,” I said.

“Yes,” said Martin. “Obviously.”

“Esteban and Esmerelda are notorious,” Susan said. “They’re unorthodox, difficult to predict, which is saying something when you’re talking about vampires. They’ll throw away their personnel, too, if that is what it takes to get results. Personally, I think it’s because they have some kind of gruesome variation of love for each other. Makes them more emotional.”

“They have complementary insanities,” Martin said. “Don’t dignify it with anything more.”

“The one you said got away, Harry?” Susan said. “Esteban, probably. He rabbits early and often, which probably explains why he’s still alive. Esmerelda would have been the spotter on top of a nearby building—also the one who probably triggered the explosives.”

“Gotta figure they’re behind the hit outside the FBI building, too,” I said. “Tinted windows on the car. Shooter was way back inside the backseat, away from the window.”

“Maybe, sure,” Susan said. “They’ll suit up in all-over coverage and head out in the daytime if they think it’s really necessary.”

I grunted. “So Esteban and Esmerelda . . .”

“Eebs,” Susan said firmly.

“So the Eebs aren’t really fighters. They’re planners. Fair to say?”

“Very much so,” said Martin. There might have been a faint note of approval in his voice.

I nodded. “So they and their vampire gang were supposed to follow you, only when they saw you heading into the data center, they were forced to do more than shadow you. They tried to protect the data. All rational.”

Susan began to frown and then nodded at me.

“Of course,” Martin said. “Difficult to predict but never stupid.”

“So why,” I said, “if they were here operating under orders from the duchess to foil your efforts, would they take the trouble to try an assassination on *me*?”

Martin opened his mouth, and then closed it again, frowning.

“I mean, Arianna wants to see me suffer, right? Thank God for clichéd mind-sets, by the way. I can’t do that if I’m dead. I go early, it cheats her of the fun.”

“There’s division in the ranks of the Red Court,” Susan murmured. “It’s the only thing that would explain it. Countervailing interests—and at the summit of their hierarchy, too.”

“Or,” Martin said, “it was not the”—he sighed—“Eebs . . . who made the attempt.”

“But I haven’t seen any of the other people who want to kill me lately,” I said. “I saw the Eebs just the other night. They’re the simplest explanation.”

Martin tilted his head slightly in allowance. “But remember that what you have is a theory. Not a fact. You are not blessed with a shortage of foes, Dresden.”

“Um, Harry?” Molly asked.

I turned to her.

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to jump in with this kind of thing or not, but . . . if there’s some sort of internal schism going on inside the Red Court . . . what if the kidnapping and so on

is . . . like a cover for something else she’s doing, inside her court? I mean, maybe it isn’t all about you. Or at least, not *only* about you.”

I stared at her blankly for a moment. “But for that to be true,” I said, “I would have to not be the center of the universe.”

Molly rolled her eyes.

“Good thought, grasshopper,” I said. “Something to keep in mind. Maybe we’re the diversion.”

“Does it matter?” Susan asked. “I mean, as far as our interests go?”

I shrugged. “We’ll have to see, I guess.”

She grimaced. “If the Eebs are working for a different faction than Arianna, then there goes our only lead. I was hoping I could convince them to tell us where Maggie was being held.”

“Worth a try in any case,” Martin said. “If we can catch them.”

“We could do that,” I said. “Or we could make sure we’ve got Chichén Itzá staked out and grab her when the Reds bring her there for their über-magic shindig.”

Susan whirled to face me, her eyes wide. “What?”

“They’re pulling off their big ceremony at Chichén Itzá,” I said. I met Susan’s eyes and nodded. “I found her. She’ll be there. And we’ll go get her.”

Susan let out a fiercely joyful cry and pounced upon me clear from the other side of the room. The impact drove my back up against one of the bookshelves. Susan’s legs twined around my waist and her mouth found mine.

Her lips were fever-hot and sweet, and when they touched mine silent fire spread out into my body and briefly consumed all thought. My arms closed around her—around Susan, so

warm and real and . . . and so very, very *here*. My heart lurched into double time, and I started to feel a little dizzy.

Mouse’s growl rolled through the room, sudden and deep in his chest.

“Rodriguez,” Martin barked, his voice tense.

Susan’s lips lifted from mine, and when she opened her eyes, they were solid black, all the way across—just like a Red vampire’s. My lips and tongue still tingled at the touch of her mouth, a very faint echo of the insidious venom of one of the Reds. Bright red tattoos showed on her face, her neck, and winding down one arm. She stared at me for a moment, dazed, then blinked slowly and looked over her shoulder at Martin.

“You’re close,” he said, in a very quiet, very soothing voice. “You need to back down. You need to take some time to breathe.”

Something like rage filled Susan’s face for an instant. Then she shuddered, glancing from Martin to me and back, and then began disentangling herself from me.

“Sun’s out, and it’s warm,” Martin said, taking her elbow gently. “Come on. We’ll get some sun and walk and sort things out.”

“Sun,” Susan said, her voice still low and husky with arousal. “Right, some sun.”

Martin shot me a look that he probably hoped would kill me, and then he and Susan left the apartment and walked up into the morning’s light.

Molly waited until they were well away from the front door and said, “Well. That was stupid of you both.”

I looked over my shoulder at her and frowned.

“Call it like I see it,” my apprentice said quietly. “You know she has trouble controlling her emotions, her instincts. She shouldn’t have been all over you. And you shouldn’t have kissed her back.” Her mouth tightened. “Someone could have gotten hurt.”

I rubbed at my still-tingling lips for a moment and suppressed a flash of anger. “Molly . . .”

“I get it,” she said. “I do. Look. You care about her, okay. Maybe even loved her. Maybe she loved you. But it can’t be like that anymore.” She spread her hands and said, “As messed up as that is, it’s still the reality you have to live with. You can’t ignore it. You get close to her, and there’s no way for it to come out good, boss.”

I stared hard at her, all the rage inside me coming out in my voice, despite the fact that I tried to hold it in. “Be careful, Molly.” Molly blanched and looked away. But she folded her arms and stood her ground. “I’m saying this because I care, Harry.”

“You care about Susan?” I asked. “You don’t even know her.”

“Not Susan,” she said. “You.”

I took a step toward her. “You don’t know a goddamned thing about me and Susan, Molly.”

“I know that you already blame yourself for what happened to her,” she said, spitting out the words. “Think about what it’ll be like for her if she gets lost in a kiss with you and realizes, later, that she ripped your throat open and drank your blood and turned herself into a monster. Is that how you want your story, Susan and Harry, to end?”

The words made me want to start screaming. I don’t know what kept me from lashing out at the girl.

Other than the fact that she would never believe me capable of such a thing.

And she was right. That might have something to do with it.

So I took a deep breath and closed my eyes and fought down the rage again. I was getting tired of that.

When I spoke, a moment later, my voice sounded raw. “Study with a wizard has made you manipulative.”

She sniffed a couple of times, and I opened my eyes to see her crying silently. “N-no,” she said. “That was my mom.”

I made a sound of acknowledgment and nodded.

She looked at me, and made no move to wipe the tears from her face. “You look awful.”

“I found out some things,” I said.

She bit her lip. “It’s bad. Isn’t it.”

I nodded. I said, “Real bad. We’re . . .” I shook my head. “Without the Council’s support, I don’t see how it can be done.”

“There’s a way,” she said. “There’s always a way.”

“That’s . . . sort of the problem,” I said. I looked at the hopelessly organized bookshelf nearest me. “I . . . think I’d like to be by myself for a while,” I said.

Molly looked at me, her posture that of someone being careful, as if they’re concerned that any move might shatter a delicate object. “You’re sure?”

Mouse made a little whining noise in his throat.

“I’m not going to do anything desperate,” I told her. *Not yet, anyway.* “I just need some time.”

“Okay,” she said. “Come on, Mouse.”

Mouse watched me worriedly, but padded out of the apartment and up the stairs with Molly.

I went to my shower, started it up, stripped, and got under the cold water. I just stood there with it sheeting over me for a while and tried to think.

Mostly, I thought about how good Susan’s mouth had felt. I waited for the cold water to sluice that particular thought down to a bearable level. Then I thought about Vadderung’s warning about the Red Court.

I’ve taken on some tough customers in my time. But none of them had been godlike beings—or the remnants of them, or whatever the Lords of Outer Night and the Red King were. You couldn’t challenge something like that in a direct confrontation and win. I might have powers, sure. Hell, on a good day I’d go along with someone who said that I was one of the top twenty or thirty wizards on the planet, in terms of sheer magical muscle. And my finesse and skill continued to improve. Give me a couple of hundred years and I might be one of the top two or three wizards on the planet.

Of course, if Marcone was right, I’d never make it that high. And the boss predator of the concrete jungle was not stupid. In fact, I’d say that there was an excellent chance I wouldn’t live another two or three days.

I couldn’t challenge the masters of the Red Court and win.

But they had my little girl.

I know. It shouldn’t matter that she was my little girl in particular. I should have been just as outraged that *any* little girl was trapped in such monstrous hands. But it did matter. Maggie was my child, and it mattered a whole hell of a lot.

I stood in the shower until the cold water had muted away all the hormones, all the emotion, all the mindless power of blood calling to blood. After thinking about it for a while, I decided that three courses lay open to me.

The enemy was strong. So I could show up with more muscle on my side. I could round up every friend, every ally, every shady character who owed me a solid. Enough assistance could turn the tide of any battle—and I had no illusions that it *would* be a battle of epic proportions.

The problem was that the only people who would show up to that kind of desperate fight were my friends. And my friends would die. I would literally be using them to shield myself against the crushing power of the Red King and his court, and I had no illusions of what such a struggle would cost. My friends would die. Most of them. Hell, probably all of them, and me with them. Maybe I could get to the kid and get out, while my friends gave their lives to make it possible. But after that, then what? Spend my life running with Maggie? Always looking over my shoulder, never stopping in one place for longer than a few days?

The second thing I could do was to change the confrontation into something else. Find some way to sneak up close enough to grab the girl and vanish, skipping the whole doomed-struggle part of option one. That plan wouldn’t require me to get my friends killed.

Of course, to pull it off, I’d have to find some way to get more clever and sneakier than beings with millennia of practice and experience at just such acts of infiltration and treachery. You didn’t survive for as long as they had among a nation of predators without being awfully smart and careful. I doubted it would be as simple as bopping a couple of guards over the head, then donning their uniforms and sneaking in with my friends the Cowardly Lion and the Tin Woodsman.

(I had cast myself as the Scarecrow in that one. If I only had a brain, I’d be able to come up with a better plan.)

So, the stand-up fight with an all-star team was a bad idea. It probably wouldn’t work.

The sneaky smash-and-grab at the heart of Red Court power was a bad idea. It probably wouldn’t work, either.

And that left option three. Which was unthinkable. Or had been, a few days ago. Before I knew I was a father.

My career as a wizard has been . . . very active. I’ve smacked a lot of awfully powerful things in the kisser. I’ve mostly gotten away with it, though I bear the scars, physical and otherwise, of the times I didn’t. A lot of the major players looked at me and saw potential for one kind of mayhem or another.

Some of them had offered me power.

A *lot* of power.

I mean, if I went out, right now, and gathered together everything I could—regardless of the price tag attached to it—it would change the game. It would make me more than just a hotshot young wizard. It would give my power an intensity, a depth, a scope I could hardly imagine. It would give me the chance to call upon new allies to fight beside me. It would place an almost unlimited number of new weapons at my disposal, open up options that could never otherwise exist.

But what about after?

I wouldn’t have to go on the run with Maggie to protect her from the monsters.

I’d be one.

Maybe not that day. Maybe not that week. But one day before too long, the things I had taken into me would change me. And I probably wouldn’t mind, even if I bothered to notice it happening. That was the nature of such power. You didn’t feel it changing you.

There is no sensation to warn you when your soul turns black.

Option three shared one commonality with options one and two: I wouldn’t survive it. Not as the man I was. The one who tried to make the world a little brighter or more stable. The one who tried to help, and who sometimes screwed things up. The one who believed in things like family, like responsibility, like love.

But Maggie might survive it. If I did it right—only to be orphaned again, in one way or another.

I felt so tired.

Maybe there isn’t a way, whispered a voice in the back of my head.

I snapped the water off and reached for a towel. “Screw that kind of thinking, Dresden,” I ordered myself. “There’s a way through this. There’s a way. You’ve just got to find it.”

I dried myself off and stared intently at my stark, scarred, unshaven face in the mirror. It didn’t look like the kind of face a child would love. Kid would probably start crying when she got a good look at me.

But it might be the kind of face that belonged to a man who could pull her safely out of a mob of bloodthirsty beasts. It was too early to throw in the towel.

I had no idea what I was going to do.

I just knew that I couldn’t give up.

Chapter Twenty-three

I called Murphy's cell phone.

"Murphy here."

"Heya, Murph. How you doing?"

"This line isn't—"

"I know," I said. "I know. Mine either. Hello, FBI guys. Don't you get bored doing this stuff all the time?"

Murphy snorted into the phone. "What's up?"

"I'm thinking about getting a broken-down doormat to go with my broken-down door and the broken frame around it," I said. "Thank you, FBI guys."

"Don't make demons of the Bureau," Murphy said. "They aren't much more inept than anyone else. There's only so much they can do when they're given bad intelligence."

"What about your place?" I asked.

"They came, they searched, they left. Rawlins and Stallings and a dozen other guys from SI were here assisting. The Bureau dusted and took out my trash after they were done."

I barked out a laugh. "The boys at SI got away with that?"

Murphy sounded decidedly smug. "They were there at the request of the new agent in charge."

"Tilly?"

"You met him, huh?"

"Did, and glad to. Spoke well of you."

"He's an *aikidoka*," Murphy said. "I've been to his dojo a few times to teach some practical application classes. He's come out to Dough Joe's to teach forms and some formal weapons classes."

"Oh, right. He's the guy who taught you staff fighting?"

"That's him. We started off in the same class, many moons ago."

I grunted. "Shame to meet him this way."

"The Bureau generally aren't a bad bunch. This is all about Rudolph. Or whoever is giving Rudolph his marching orders."

A thought struck me, and I went silent for a moment.

"Harry? You still there?"

"Yeah, sorry. Was just about to head out for a steak sandwich. Interested?"

"Sure. Twenty?"

"Twenty."

Murphy hung up and I said, to the still-open line, "Hey, if you've got someone watching my place, could you call the cops if anyone tries to steal my *Star Wars* poster? It's an original." Then I vindictively hung up on the FBI. It made my inner child happy.

Twenty minutes later, I walked into McAnally's.

It was too early for it to be properly crowded, and Murphy and I sat down at a corner table, the one farthest from the windows, and therefore from laser microphones, in case our federal pursuers had doubled up on their paranoia meds.

I began without preamble. "Who said Rudolph was getting his orders from his direct superiors? Or from anyone in Chicago at all?"

She frowned and thought about it for a moment. I waited it out patiently. "You don't really think that," she said. "Do you?"

"I think it's worth looking at. He looked shaky when I saw him."

"Yeah," Murphy said thoughtfully. "At my place, too."

I filled her in on the details of what she'd missed, at my apartment and the FBI building, and by the time I was done she was nodding confidently. "Go on."

"We both know that ladder climbers like Rudolph don't usually get nervous, rushed, and pressured when they're operating with official sanction. They have too much fun swaggering around beating people over the head with their authority club."

"Don't know if all of them do that," she said, "but I know damned well that Rudolph does."

"Yeah. But this time, he was edgy, impatient, Desperate." I told her about his behavior in general, and specifically at my place and in the interrogation room downtown. "Tilly said that Rudolph had lied his ass off to point the FBI at me."

"And you believe that?" Murphy asked.

"Don't you?"

She shrugged. "Point. But that doesn't mean he's being used as some kind of agent."

"I think it does," I said. "He's not operating with the full authority of his superiors. Someone else has got to be pushing him—someone who scared him enough to make him nervous and hasty."

"Maybe that works," Murphy said. "Why would he do it?"

"Someone wanted to make sure I wasn't involved in the search for Maggie. So, maybe they sent Rudolph after me. Then, when Tilly turns me loose, they take things to the next level and try to whack me outside the FBI building."

Murphy's blue eyes were cold at the mention of the assassination attempt. "Could they have gotten someone into position that fast?"

I tried to work it through in my head. "After Tilly sent Rudolph out of the room, it didn't take long for me to get out. Ten minutes, fifteen at the most. Time enough to call in his failure, and for his handler to send in a hit, you think?"

Murphy thought about it herself and then shook her head slowly. "Only if they were very, very close, and moved like greased lightning. But . . . Harry, that hit was too calm, too smooth for something thrown together at the last possible moment."

I frowned, and we both clammed up as Mac came over to our table and put a pair of brown bottles down. He was a spare man, bald, and had been ever since I knew him, dressed in dark clothes and a spotless white apron. We both murmured thanks, and he withdrew again.

"Okay," she said, and took a pull from the bottle. "Maybe Rudolph's handler had already put the assassin in place as a contingency measure, in case you got loose despite Rudolph's efforts."

I shook my head. "It makes more sense if the assassin was already there, positioned to remove *Rudolph*, once he had served his purpose. Whoever his handler was, they would need a safety measure in place, a link they could cut out of the chain so that nothing would lead back to them. Only once Rudy calls them and tells them he isn't able to keep me locked up, they have the shooter switch targets."

Which meant . . . I had taken three bullets meant for Rudolph.

"Harry?" Murphy asked. "Why are you laughing?"

"I heard a joke yesterday," I said. "I just got it."

She frowned at me. "You need some rest. You look like hell. And you're obviously tired enough to have gotten the giggles."

"Wizards don't giggle," I said, hardly able to speak. "This is cackling."

She eyed me askance and sipped her beer. She waited until I had laughed myself out before speaking again. "You find out about Maggie yet?"

"Sort of," I said, abjectly sobered. "I think I know where she will be in the next few days." I gave her what we had learned about the duchess's intentions, leaving out the parts where I committed a bunch of crimes like theft, trespassing, and vandalism. "So right now," I concluded, "everyone's checking their contacts in Mexico while I'm talking to you."

"Susan?" she asked.

"And Father Forthill," I said. "Between them, they should be able to find out what's going on at Chichén Itzá."

Murphy nodded and asked, casually, "How's she holding up?"

I took another pull from the bottle and said, "She thinks Molly has the hots for me."

Murphy snorted. "Wow. She must have used her vampire superpowers to have worked that one out."

I blinked at Murphy.

She stared at me for a second and then rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, Harry. Really? Are you really that clueless?"

"Uh," I said, still blinking. "Apparently."

Murphy smirked down at her beer and said, "It's always staggering to run into one of your blind spots. You don't have many of them, but when you do they're a mile wide." She shook her head. "You didn't really answer my question, you know."

I nodded. "Susan's a wreck. Maybe more so because of the whole vampire thing."

"I don't know, Harry. From what you've said, I don't think you'd need to look any further than the whole mommy thing."

"Could be," I said. "Either way, she's sort of fraying at the edges."

"Like you," Murphy said.

I scowled at her. "What?"

She lifted an eyebrow and looked frankly at me.

I started to get angry with her, but stopped to force myself to think. "Am I?"

She nodded slowly. "Did you notice that you've been tapping your left toe on the ground for the past five minutes?"

I frowned at her, and then down at my foot, which was tapping rapidly, to the point that my calf muscles were growing tired. "I . . . No."

"I'm your friend, Harry," she said quietly. "And I'm telling you that you aren't too stable yourself right now."

"Monsters are going to murder my child sometime soon, Murph. Maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow night. Soon. I don't have time for sanity."

Murphy nodded slowly, then sighed like someone setting down an unpleasant burden. "So. Chichén Itzá."

"Looks like."

"Cool. When do we hit them?"

I shook my head. "We can't go all *Wild Bunch* on these people. They'll flatten us."

She frowned. "But the White Council . . ."

"Won't be joining us," I said. I couldn't keep a bit of the snarl out of my voice. "And to answer your question . . . we're not sure when the ritual is supposed to take place. I've got to come up with more information."

"Rudolph," Murphy said thoughtfully.

"Rudolph. Someone who is a part of this, probably someone from the Red Court, is leaning on him. I plan on finding that someone and then poking him in the nose until he coughs up something I can use."

"I think I'd like to talk to Rudolph, too. We'll start from our ends and work toward the middle again, then?"

"Sounds like a plan." I waved at Mac and pantomimed holding a sandwich in front of me and taking a bite. He nodded, and glanced at Murphy. "You want a steak sandwich, too?"

"I thought you didn't have time to be sane."

"I don't," I said. "I don't have time to be hungry, either."

Chapter Twenty-four

“How does a police detective afford a place like this?” Molly asked.

We were sitting in the *Blue Beetle* on a quiet residential street in Crestwood. It was late afternoon, with a heavy overcast. The houses on the street were large ones. Rudolph’s place, whose address I’d gotten from Murphy, was the smallest house on the block—but it was on the block. It backed right up to the Cook County Forest Preserve, too, and between the old forest and the mature trees it gave the whole area a sheltered, pastoral quality.

“He doesn’t,” I said quietly.

“You mean he’s dirty?” Molly asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe his family has money. Or maybe he managed to mortgage himself to the eyeballs. People get real stupid when it comes to buying homes. Pay an extra quarter of a million dollars for a place because it’s in the right neighborhood. Buy houses they damned well know they can’t afford to make the payments on.” I shook my head. “They should make you take some kind of iota-of-common-sense quiz before you make an offer.”

“Maybe it isn’t stupid,” Molly said. “Everybody wants home to mean something. Maybe the extra money they pay creates that additional meaning for them.”

I grimaced. “I’d rather have my extra meaning come from the ancient burial ground under the swimming pool or from knowing that I built it with my own hands or something.”

“Not everyone puts as low a value on the material as you do, boss,” Molly said. “For them, maybe the extra material value represented by a higher price tag is significant.”

I grunted. “It’s still stupid.”

“From your perspective,” Molly said. “It’s really all about perspective, isn’t it.”

“And from the perspective of those in need, that extra quarter of a million bucks your material person spent on the prestige addition for his house looks like an awful lot of lifesaving food and medicine that could have existed if the jerk with the big house in the suburbs hadn’t blown it all to artificially inflate his sociogeographic penis.”

“Heh,” Molly said. “And their house is much nicer than your house.”

“And that,” I said.

Mouse grumbled quietly in his sleep from the backseat, and I turned to reach back and rub his ears until he settled down again.

Molly sat quietly for almost a minute before she said, “What else do we do?”

“Other than sit tight and watch?” I asked. “This is a stakeout, Molly. It’s what you do on a stakeout.”

“Stakeouts suck,” Molly said, puffing out a breath that blew a few strands of hair out of her eyes. “How come Murphy isn’t doing this part? How come we aren’t doing magic stuff?”

“Murphy is keeping track of Rudolph at work,” I said. “I’m watching his home. If his handler wanted him dead, this would be a logical place to bushwhack him.”

“And we’re not doing magic because . . . ?”

“What do you suggest we do?”

“Tracking spells for Rudolph and Maggie,” she said promptly.

“You got any of Rudolph’s blood? Hair? Fingernail clippings?”

“No,” she said.

“So, no tracking spell for him,” I said.

“But what about Maggie?” she said. “I know you don’t have any hair or anything from her, but you pulled a tracking spell for me using my mother’s blood, right? Couldn’t you use your blood for that?”

I kept my breathing steady, and prevented the flash of frustration I felt from coming out in my voice. “First thing I tried. Right after I got off the phone with Susan when this all started.”

Molly frowned. “Why didn’t it work?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe it’s because there’s something more than simple blood relation involved. Maybe there has to be a bond, a sense of family between the parent and child, that the tracking spell uses to amplify its effects. Maybe the Red Court is using some kind of magic that conceals or jams tracking spells—God knows, they would have been forced to come up with some kind of countermeasure during the war.” I shook my head wearily. “Or maybe it was simple distance. I’ve never tracked anything more than a couple of hundred linear miles away. I’ve heard of tracking spells that worked over a couple of thousand miles, but not from anyone who had actually done it. Gimme some credit, grasshopper. Of course I tried that. I wouldn’t have spent half a day summoning my contacts if I hadn’t.”

“Oh,” Molly said. She looked troubled. “Yeah. Sorry.”

I sighed and tipped my head back and closed my eyes. “No problem. Sorry, kid. I’m just tense.”

“Just a little,” she said. “Um. Should we be sitting out here in broad daylight? I mean, we’re not hiding the car or anything.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We want to be visible.”

“Why?”

“I’m gonna close my eyes,” I told her. “Just for a bit. Stay alert, okay?”

She gave me a look, but said, “Okay.”

I closed my eyes, but about half a second after I had, Molly nudged me and said, “Wake up, Harry. We have company.”

I opened them again and found that the grey late afternoon had settled into the murk of early evening. I looked up into the rearview mirror and spotted a white sports car coming to a halt as it parked on the street behind us. The running lights went off as the driver got out.

“Took him long enough,” I muttered.

Molly frowned at me. “What do you mean?”

“Asked him to meet me here. Didn’t know where to find him.”

Molly peered through the back window, and even Mouse lifted his head to look around. “Oh,” Molly said, understanding, as Mouse’s tail thumped hesitantly against the back of my seat.

I got out of the car and walked to meet my half brother, the vampire.

Thomas and I were a study in contrasts. I was better than six and a half feet tall and built lean. He was a hair under six feet, and looked like a fitness model. My hair was a muddy brown color, generally cut very short on the sides and in back, a little longer on top. It tended to stick up any which way within a few minutes of being ordered by a comb. Thomas’s hair was black, naturally wavy, and fell to touch his shoulders. I wore jeans, a T-shirt, and my big black leather duster. Thomas was wearing custom-fitted pants made from white leather, a white silk shirt, and a coarser silk jacket, also in white, decorated with elaborate brocade. He had the kind of face that belonged on billboards. Mine belonged on wanted posters.

We had the same contour of chin, and our eyes resembled each other’s unmistakably in shape, if not in color. Mom gave them to us.

Thomas and I had finally met as adults. He’d been right there next to me in some of the worst places I’d ever walked. He saved my life more than once. I’d returned the favor. But that had been when he decided to fight against his Hunger, the vampiric nature native to the vampires of the White Court. He’d spent years maintaining control of his darker urges, integrating with Chicago’s society, and generally trying to act like a human being. We’d had to keep our kinship a secret. The Council would have used him to get at the White Court if they knew. Ditto for the vampires getting at the Council through me.

Then something bad happened to him, and he stopped trying to be human. I might have seen him for a total of two, even three minutes since he’d been knocked off the life-force nibbling wagon and started taking big hearty bites again.

Thomas swaggered up to me as if we’d been talking just yesterday, looked me up and down, and said, “You need an image consultant, stat, little brother.”

I said, “Guess what. You’re an uncle.”

Thomas let his head fall back as he barked out a little laugh. “What? No, hardly, unless one of Father’s by-blows actually survived. Which essentially just doesn’t happen among—”

He stopped talking in midsentence and his eyes widened.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Oh,” he said, still wide-eyed, apparently locked into motionlessness by surprise. It was a little creepy. Human beings still look like human beings when they’re standing still. Thomas’s

pale skin and bright blue eyes went *still*, like a statue. “*Oh.*”

I nodded. “Say ‘oilcan.’”

Thomas blinked. “What?”

“You get to be the Tin Woodsman.”

“*What?*”

Chapter Twenty-five

I looked like a cool guy leading the charge for about a second and a half, and then my brother and my dog left me and Molly eating their dust. If I hadn't been a regular runner, Molly would have done the same, albeit more gradually. By the time I had covered half the distance, Thomas and Mouse had already bounded around to the back, one around either side of Rudolph's house.

"Get gone, grasshopper!" I called, and even as we ran forward Molly vanished behind her best veil. It took us another quarter of a minute to cover the distance, and I went around the side of the house Thomas had taken. I pounded around the back corner to see that a large glass sliding door leading from a wooden deck into the house had been shattered. I could hear a big, thumping beat, as if from a subwoofer, pounding away inside the house.

I took the stairs up to the deck in a single jumping stride, and barely avoided a sudden explosion of glass, wood, drywall, and siding that came hurling toward me. I had an instant to realize that the projectile that had just come through the wall was my brother, and then something huge and black and swift came crashing through the same wall, expanding the hole to five times its original size.

The whatever-it-was stood within a step or two, and I was already sprinting. I kept doing it. I slapped one hand down and vaulted the railing on the far side of the deck. I barely jerked my hand from the rail before the thing smashed it to kindling with one huge, blindingly fast talon. That deep beat grew louder and faster as I landed, and I realized with a shock that I could hear the thing's rising heart rate as clearly as if it had been pounding on a drum.

I was kidding myself if I thought I could run from something that fast. I had a step or two on the creature, but it reclaimed them within half a dozen strides and swiped at my head with terrible speed and power.

I whirled desperately, drawing my blasting rod and letting out a burst of flame, but I stumbled and fell during the spin. The fire hammered into the creature, and for all the good it did me I might as well have hit it with a rubber chicken.

I thought I was done for—until Mouse emerged from the house onto the back deck, bathed in a faint nimbus of blue light. He took a single, bounding, thirty-yard leap that ended at the attacking creature's enormous, malformed shoulders. Mouse's claws dug into the thing's hide, and his massive jaws closed on the back of its thick, almost indistinguishable neck.

The creature arched up in pain, but it never made a sound. It tripped over me, too distracted to actually attack, but the impact of so much mass and power sent up flares of agony from my ribs and from one thigh.

Mouse rode the creature down into the dirt, tearing and worrying it, his claws digging furrows in the flesh of its back. His snarls reverberated in the evening air, and each shake and twist of his body seemed to send up little puffs of glowing blue mist from his fur.

Mouse had the thing dead to rights, but nobody seemed to have told the creature that. It twisted lithely, bouncing up from the ground as if made of rubber, seized Mouse's tail, and swung the huge dog in a single, complete arc. Mouse hit the ground like a two-hundred-pound sledgehammer, drawing a high-pitched sound of pain from him.

I didn't think. I lifted my blasting rod again, filling it with my will and with all the soulfire I could shove in, screaming, "Get off my dog!"

White fire slammed out of the rod and drew a line on the creature from hip to skull, digging into flesh and setting it ablaze. Once again, it convulsed in silent agony, and the boom-box beat of its heart ratcheted up even higher. It fell, unable to hold on to Mouse, and writhed upon the ground.

I tried to get up, but my injured leg wouldn't support me, and the sudden surge of weariness that overtook me made my arms collapse, too. I lay there, panting and helpless to move. Mouse staggered slowly to his feet, his head hanging, his tongue dangling loosely from his mouth. Behind me, I heard a groan and twisted awkwardly to see Thomas sit up, one shoulder hanging at a malformed angle. His clothes had been ripped to shreds, there was a piece of metal protruding from his abdomen, just next to his belly button, and half his face was covered in a sheet of blood a little too pale to belong to a human.

"Thomas!" I shouted. Or tried to shout. The acoustics were odd in this tunnel within which I was suddenly sprawled. "Get up, man!"

He gave me a blank, concussed stare.

The creature's movements had slowed. I turned to see it beginning to relax, its body shuddering, the drumbeat of its heart steadying, and I got a better look at it than I had before.

It was huge, easily the size of a full-grown bull, and it carried a stench with it that was similar in potency. Or maybe that was because I had just overcooked it. Its body was odd, seemingly able to move on two legs or four with equal efficiency. Its flesh was a spongy blackness, much like the true skin of a Red vampire, and its head was shaped like something mixing the features of a human being, a jaguar, and maybe a crocodile or wild boar. It was pitch-black everywhere, including its eyes, its tongue, and its mouth.

And, despite the punishment I had just dealt out, it was getting up again.

"Thomas!" I shouted. Or wheezed.

The creature shook its head and its dead-black eyes focused on me. It started toward me, pausing briefly to swat my stunned dog out of its path. Mouse landed in a tumble, seemingly struggling to find his balance but unable to do so.

I lifted my blasting rod again as it came on, but I didn't have enough juice left in me to make the rod do anything but smoke faintly.

And then a stone sailed in from nowhere and struck the creature on the snout.

"Hey!" called Molly's voice. "Hey, Captain Asphalt! Hey, tar baby! Over here!"

The creature and I turned to see Molly standing maybe twenty yards away, in plain sight. She flung another rock, and it bounced off the creature's broad chest. Its heartbeat began to accelerate and grow louder again.

"Let's go, gorgeous!" Molly called. "You and me!" She turned sideways to the thing, rolled her hips, and made an exaggerated motion of swatting herself on the ass. "Come get some!"

The thing tensed and then rushed forward, covering the ground with astonishing speed.

Molly vanished.

The creature smashed into the earth where she'd been standing, with its huge talons balled into furious fists, slamming them eight inches into the earth.

There was a peal of mocking laughter, and another rock bounced off of the thing, this time from the left. Furious, it whirled to rush Molly again—and again, she vanished completely. Once more it struck at empty ground. Once more, Molly got its attention with a rock and a few taunts, only to vanish from sight as it came at her.

Each time, she was a little closer to the creature, unable to match its raw speed. And each time, she led it a little farther away from the three of us. A couple of times, she even shouted, "*Toro, toro! Olé!*"

"Thomas!" I called. "Get *up!*"

My brother blinked his eyes several times, each time a little more quickly. Then he swiped a hand at the bloodied side of his face, shook his head violently to get the blood out of his eyes, and looked down at the section of metal bar sticking out of his stomach. He clenched it with his hand, grimaced, and drew it slowly out, revealing a six-inch triangle that must have been a corner brace in the wall he'd gone through. He dropped it on the ground, groaning in pain, and his eyes rolled briefly back into his head.

I saw his other nature coming over him. His skin grew paler, and almost seemed to take on its own glow. His breathing stabilized immediately, and the cut along his hairline where he'd been bleeding began to close. He opened his eyes, and their color had changed from a deep, contented blue to a hungry, metallic silver.

He got up smoothly and glanced at me. "You bleeding?"

"Nah," I said. "I'm good."

A few feet away, Mouse got to his feet and shook himself, his tags jingling. Molly had gotten as far as the street again, and there was an enormous crashing sound.

"This time, we do it smart," Thomas said. He turned to Mouse instead of me. "I'm going to go in first and get its attention. Go for its strings. I think you'll have to hit two limbs to really cripple it."

Mouse woofed, evidently an affirmative, let out a grumbling growl, and once more very faint, very pale blue light gathered around him.

Thomas nodded, and picked up a section of ruined deck that had scattered around where he landed. He shouldered a corner post, a section of four-by-four about a yard and a half long, and said, "Don't sweat, Harry. We'll be back for you in a minute."

"Go, Team Dresden," I wheezed.

The two of them took off, zero to cheetah speed in about a second. Then they were out of sight. I heard Thomas let out a high-pitched cry that was a pretty darn good Bruce Lee impersonation, and there was a thunder crack of wood striking something hard.

An instant later, Mouse let out his battle roar. There was a flicker of strobing colors of light as Molly pitched a bit of dazzling magic at the creature. It wouldn't hurt the thing, but the kid could make eye-searing light in every color imaginable burst from empty air, accompanied by a variety of sounds if she so chose. She called it her One-woman Rave spell, and during the last Independence Day, she had used it to throw up a fireworks display from her parents' backyard so impressive that evidently it had caused traffic problems on the expressway.

It was hard to lie there twisted halfway around at the waist, to see only the occasional flash of light or to hear the thumps and snarls of combat. I tried my leg again and had no luck. So I just settled down and concentrated on not blacking out or breathing too hard. The creature had definitely cracked at least one of my ribs.

That was when I noticed the two sets of glowing red eyes staring at me from the forest, starting with the unmistakable fixation of a predator, and coming slowly, steadily, silently closer. I suddenly realized that everyone around who might have helped me was sort of distracted at the moment.

"Oh," I breathed. "Oh, crap."

Chapter Twenty-six

The eyes rushed toward me, and something dark and strong struck me across the jaw. I was already close to losing consciousness. The blow was enough to ring my bells thoroughly.

I was aware of being picked up and tossed over someone's shoulder. Then there was a lot of rapid, sickening motion. It went on long enough for me to throw up. I didn't have enough energy to aim at my abductor.

A subjective eternity later, I was thrown to the ground. I lay still, hoping to fool my captor into thinking I was barely conscious and weak as a kitten. Which should be easy, since I was. I've never really had much ambition as a performer.

"We don't like it," said a woman's voice. "Its Power smells foul."

"We must be patient," replied a man's voice. "It could be a great asset."

"It is listening to us," the woman said.

"We know that," replied the man.

I heard soft footsteps, cushioned by pine needles, and the woman spoke again, more slowly and lower. She sounded . . . hungry. "Poor thing. So battered. We should give it a kiss and let it sleep. It would be merciful. And He would be pleased with us."

"No, our love. He would be satisfied with us. There is a difference."

"Have we not come to understand this simple fact?" she shot back, acid in her voice. "Never will He name us to the Circle, no matter how many prizes we bring into the Court. We are interlopers. We are not of the first Maya."

"Many things can change in the span of eternity, our love. We will be patient."

"You mean that He might fall?" She let out a rather disconcerting giggle. "Then why aren't we currying favor with Arianna?"

"We shall not even consider it," he replied, his voice hard. "Should we even think of it too often, He might know. He might act. Do we understand?"

"We do," she said, her tone petulant.

Then someone grabbed my shoulder in iron- strong fingers and flipped me onto my back. The dark shapes of trees spun above me, nothing more than black outlines against the lights of Chicago reflecting from the overcast.

There was barely enough light to let me see the pale, delicate features of a tiny woman no larger than a child. Seriously, she might have been four-foot-six, though her proportions seemed identical to those of any adult. She had very pale skin with a light dusting of freckles, and looked as if she might be nineteen years old. Her hair was light brown and very straight. Her eyes were extremely odd-looking. One was pale, icy blue, the other deep, dark green, and I had an immediate instinct that whatever creature lurking behind those mismatched eyes was not a rational being.

She was wearing a gown with long, flowing sleeves, and some kind of sleeveless robe and corset over that. She was barefoot, though. I knew because I could feel her cold little foot when she planted it on my chest and leaned over to peer down at me.

"We're too late. Look, it's starting to go bad."

"Nonsense," said the male voice. "It's a perfectly appropriate specimen. Mortal wizards are supposed to be worn and tough, our love."

I looked up and saw the other speaker. He was perhaps five- foot-six, with a short brush of red hair, a black beard, and skin that looked darkened and bronzed by the sun. He wore

black silk clothing, and looked like he'd just come from a dress rehearsal of *Hamlet*.

"Aha," I said. "You must be Esteban and Esmerelda. I've heard about you."

"We are *famous*," hissed the little woman, beaming up at the man.

He gave her a stern look, sighed, and said, "Aye, we are. Here to stop you from allowing Arianna to proceed with her design."

I blinked. "What?"

Esmerelda leaned closer. Her hair brushed my nose and lips. "Are its ears broken? If the ears are defective, can we detach them and send them back?"

"Peace, our love," Esteban said. He hunkered down on his heels and eyed me. "It isn't its fault. It doesn't even realize how Arianna is manipulating it."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "Look, folks, no one wants to stop Arianna more than me."

Esteban waved a vague hand. "Yes, yes. It feels it must rescue its spawn. It will try to take her back, from the very heart of His realm. Placing it at the center of vast moving powers where it might tip balances any number of ways."

"It hardly looks large enough," Esmerelda sniffed. "It's just a ragged, dirty creature."

Esteban shrugged. "We know, by now, that the outside hardly matters. What lies within is what holds importance. Would you agree, ragged wizard?"

I licked my lips. I really didn't feel up to bantering with a couple of insane vampires, but it was probably my best course of action. Anything that lives long enough tends to lose track of passing time rather easily, on the minute-to-minute scale. After a few thousand years have gone by, an hour doesn't really rate. If my brother and company were successful in their fight, they would realize I was gone within a few minutes—and I didn't think the Eebs had carried me far enough away to let them evade Mouse. As far as I can tell, Mouse can follow a scent trail from space.

Talk to them. Stall.

"That depends upon the nature of the subject and observer," I said. "But if you are using the metaphor in its simplest form, then yes. The true nature of any given being supersedes its outer appearance in terms of importance." I tried a smile. "This is quite pleasant treatment, by the way," I said. "I had expected something entirely different."

"We wanted to eat you and kill you. Or kill you, then eat you," Esmerelda said, smiling back. Hers was a lot crazier- looking than mine. I hoped. "And might still."

"Obviously you had something else in mind, though," I said. "Apparently you wish to talk. I'm more than willing to listen."

"Excellent," Esteban said. "We are pleased that you can address the matter rationally."

"To which matter do you refer, specifically?"

"The matter of your involvement with Arianna's plan," Esteban said. "We wish you to discontinue your participation."

"That . . . could be problematic. Since if she does what she intends to do, it's going to kill me, along with the child's mother."

The two vampires traded a long, silent glance, their facial expressions shifting subtly. I got the impression that a lot of communication got done.

Esteban turned back to me. "How did you learn of this, ragged wizard?"

"It's what I do," I said.

"Oooo," said Esmerelda. She slid her body on top of mine, straddling my hips with hers. She was so tiny that I could hardly feel her weight on me. She smelled . . . wrong. Like

formaldehyde and mildew. "It is arrogant. We *adore* arrogance. It's so sweet to watch arrogant little things succumb. Do you like our pretty eyes, ragged wizard? Which color do you like more? Look closely and carefully."

You don't look vampires in the eyes. Everyone knows that one. Even so, I'd had a couple of encounters with the stare of one of the Red Court and never had a problem shutting them out. It wasn't even particularly difficult.

But evidently, those vampires had been noobs.

Ice blue and deep sea green swirled in my vision, and it was only at the very last instant that I realized what was happening, slamming closed the vaults of my mind, leaving only the hard, fortified places to attack, a castle of idea and memory, ready to withstand an assault.

"Stop that, please," I said quietly a moment later. "The conversation isn't getting anywhere like this."

The little vampire pursed her lips, her head tilted as if she were deciding whether to be upset or amused. She went with amused. She giggled and wriggled her hips around a little. "Lovely, lovely, lovely. We are well pleased."

"You do have options," Esteban said. If he was put out by Esmerelda's behavior, it didn't show. Hell, he hadn't even seemed to notice.

"By all means," I said. "Enumerate them."

"I suppose the simplest means to solve our problem would be for you to take your own life," he said. "If you are dead, Arianna has no reason to harm your spawn."

"Aside from the being-dead part, there are some minor problems with that idea."

"By all means," Esteban said, "enumerate them."

"What confirmation would I have that the child was safe and returned to her mother? What security would I have to make me believe that Arianna might not do the same thing a month from now?"

"A contract could be drafted," Esteban said. "Witnessed and signed, arbitrated by one of the neutral parties of the Accords. For security, we suppose we could ask our Lord if He would give his Word upon it that your mate and spawn were free of the cycle of vengeance."

"A possibility worth consideration," I said. "Though the part where I die seems to be something of a flaw."

"Understandably," Esteban said. "We might also offer you an alternative to death."

The roll of Esmerelda's hips became slower, more sensuous. I've been abused by Red Court vampires in the past. I still have nightmares sometimes. But the pretty-seeming girl atop me had that feminine mystique that defies description and definition. Being so close to her was making me nauseous, but my body was reacting to her with uncomfortable intensity.

"Alternative," she said in a breathy little voice. "In this day, that means fashionable. And we do so love showing little mortals how to be fashionable."

"You would make me like you," I said quietly.

Esmerelda nodded, slowly, her mouth drawing up into a lazy, sensual smile, her hips still circling maddeningly against mine. Her fangs were showing.

"It would offer you several advantages," Esteban said. "Even should Arianna complete the vengeance rite, the transformation of your blood would insulate you against it. And, of course, you would not be killed, captured, or tortured to death, as the White Council will be over the next six months or so."

"It certainly bears consideration as well," I said. "Very practical. Are there any other paths you think feasible?"

"One more," Esteban said. "Gift your spawn to our Lord, the Red King."

If I'd had the strength to take a swing at him, I would have. So it was probably a good thing that I didn't. "And what would that accomplish?"

"He would then take possession of the spawn. She would, in fact, be under his protection, until such time as He deemed her unfit, unworthy, or unneeding of such care."

Esmerelda nodded rapidly. "She would be his. He does so dote on his little pets. We think it quite endearing." She opened her mouth in a little O, like a schoolgirl caught in the midst of

a whispered conference about forbidden subjects. "Oh, *my*, would Arianna be upset. She would howl for *centuries*."

"We could provide chattel in exchange to sweeten the deal, Dresden," Esteban said. "We would be willing to go as high as seven young women. You could select them from our stock or from their natural habitat, and we would see to their preparation and disposition."

I thought about it for a long moment and rubbed lightly at my chin. Then I said, "These are all very rational suggestions. But I feel that I do not understand something. Why does the Red King not simply order Arianna to desist?"

Both of the Eebs drew in breaths of scandalized surprise. "Because of her *mate*, Dresden," said Esteban.

"Slain by the wizard of the black stick," said Esmerelda. "A blood debt."

"Sacred blood."

"Holy blood."

Esteban shook his head. "Not even our Lord can interfere in the collection of a blood debt. It is Arianna's right."

Esmerelda nodded. "As it was Bianca's to collect from you, in the opening days of the war. Though many wished that she would not have done what she did, it was her right, even as a very, very young member of the Court. As her progenitor, Arianna's mate took up that debt. As Arianna now has done herself." She looked at Esteban and beamed. "We are so happy with the ragged wizard. It is so civil and pleasant. Completely unlike those other wizards. Might we keep it for our own?"

"Business, our love," Esteban chided. "Business first."

Esmerelda thrust out her lower lip—and abruptly turned, all motion ceasing, to focus intently in one direction.

"What is it, our love?" Esteban asked quietly.

"The Ik'k'uox," she said in a distant, puzzled voice. "It is in pain. It flees. It . . ." She opened her eyes very wide, and suddenly they flooded in solid black, just as the creature's had been. "Oh! It cheated!" Her face turned down to mine, and she bared her fangs. "It cheated! It brought a demon of its own! A mountain ice demon from the Land of Dreams!"

"If you don't exercise them, they're impossible," I said, philosophically.

"The constable," Esteban said. "Did it kill the constable?"

Esmerelda returned to staring at nothing for a moment and then said, "No. It was attacked only seconds after entering his home." She shivered and looked up at Esteban. "The ragged wizard's demon comes this way, and swiftly."

Esteban sighed. "We had hoped to work out something civilized. This is your last chance, ragged wizard. What say you to my offer?"

"Go fuck yourself," I said.

Esteban's eyes went black and flat. "Kill him."

Esmerelda's body tightened in what looked like a sexual fervor, and she leaned down, teeth bared, letting out a low sound filled to the brim with erotic and physical need.

During the last few moments, the fingers of my right hand had undone the clasp on my mother's amulet. As the little vampire leaned into me, she met the silver pentacle necklace, the symbol of what I believed. A five-pointed star, representing the four elements and the spirit, bound within a circle of mortal control, will, and compassion. I'm not a Wiccan. I'm not big on churches of any kind, despite the fact that I've spoken, face-to-face, with an archangel of the Almighty.

But there were some things I believed in. Some things I had faith in. And faith isn't about perfect attendance to services, or how much money you put on the little plate. It isn't about going skyclad to the Holy Rites, or mediating each day upon the divine.

Faith is about what you do. It's about aspiring to be better and nobler and kinder than you are. It's about making sacrifices for the good of others—even when there's not going to be anyone telling you what a hero you are.

Faith is a power of its own, and one even more elusive and difficult to define than magic. A symbol of faith, presented with genuine belief and sincerity, is the bane of many an otherworldly predator—and one of the creatures most strongly affected were vampires of the Red Court. I don't know how it works, or why. I don't know if some kind of powerful being or Being must get involved along the line. I never asked for one of them to do that—but if so, one of them was backing me up anyway.

The pentacle flared into brilliant silver light that struck Esmerelda like a six-foot wave, throwing her off of me and tearing the flesh mask she wore to shreds, revealing the creature inside it.

I twisted and presented the symbol to Esteban, but he had already backed several paces away, and it only forced him to lift his hand to shade his eyes as he continued retreating.

There was a hissing, serpentine sound from Esmerelda, and I saw a gaunt, black-skinned creature stand up out of the ruins of gown and flesh mask alike. It was just as small as she was, but its limbs were longer, by at least a third, than hers had seemed, long and scrawny. A flabby black belly sagged down, and its face would make one of those really ugly South American bats feel better about itself.

She opened her jaws, baring fangs and a long, writhing tongue that was pink with black spots. Her all-black eyes were ablaze with fury.

Shadows shifted as a pale blue light began to grow nearer, and the woods suddenly rang out with Mouse's triumphant hunting howl. He had found my scent—or that of the vampires—and was closing in.

Esmerelda hissed again, and the sound was full of rage and hate.

"We mustn't!" Esteban snarled. He dashed around me with supernatural speed, giving the glowing pendant a wide berth. He seized the little vampire woman by the arm. They both stared at me for an instant with their cold, empty black eyes—and then there was the sound of a rushing wind and they were gone.

I sagged onto the ground gratefully. My racing heart began to slow, my fear to subside. My confusion as to what was happening remained, though. Maybe it was so tangled and impossible because I was so exhausted.

Yeah. Right.

Mouse let out a single loud bark and then the big dog was standing next to me, over me. He nudged me with his nose until I lifted a hand and scratched his ears a little.

Thomas and Molly arrived next. I was glad Thomas had let Mouse do the pursuit, while he came along more slowly so that my apprentice wouldn't be alone in the woods. His eyes were bright silver, his mouth set in a smug line, and there was broken glass shining in his hair. The left half of Molly's upper body was generously coated in green paint.

"Okay," I slurred. "I'm backward."

"What's that?" Molly asked, kneeling down next to me, her expression worried.

"Backward. 'M a detective. Supposed to find things out. I been working backward. The more I look at it, the more certain I am that I have no idea what's going on."

"Can you stand?" Thomas asked.

"Leg," I said. "Ribs. Might be broken. Can't take the weight."

"I'll carry him," Thomas said. "Find a phone."

"Okay."

My brother picked me up and carried me out of the woods. We went back to the car.

The car's *remains*.

I stared dully at the mess. It looked as though something had taken Thomas's white Jag and put it in a trash compactor with the *Blue Beetle*. The two cars, together, had been smashed down into a mass about four feet high. Liquids and fuel bled out onto the street below them.

Thomas gingerly put me down on my good leg as I stared at my car.

There was no way the Beetle was going to resurrect from this one. I found myself blinking tears out of my eyes. It wasn't an expensive car. It wasn't a sexy car. It was *my* car.

And it was gone.

"Dammit," I mumbled.

"Hmmm?" Thomas asked. He looked considerably less broken up than me.

"My staff was inna car." I sighed. "Takes weeks to make one of those."

"Lara's going to be annoyed with me," Thomas said. "That's the third one this year."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. I feel your pain. What happened with the big thing?"

"The fight?" Thomas shrugged. "Bullfighting tactics, for the most part. When it tried to focus on one, the other two would come at its back. Mouse did you rather proud."

The big dog wagged his tail cheerily.

"Paint?" I asked.

“Oh, the thing threw a five-gallon bucket of paint at her, either trying to kill her with it or so it could try to see her through the veil. Worked for about five seconds, too, but then she fixed it and was gone again. She did fairly well for someone so limited in offense,” Thomas said. “Let me see if I can salvage anything from my trunk. Excuse me.”

I just sat down on the street in front of the car, and Mouse came up to sit with me, offering a furry flank for support. The *Blue Beetle* was dead. I was too tired to cry much.

“I called a cab,” Molly said, reappearing. “It will meet us two blocks down. Get him and I’ll veil us until it arrives.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said, and picked me up again.

I don’t remember being awake for the cab ride.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Thomas supported most of my weight as my injured leg began to buckle, and settled me in one of the chairs in the living room.

“We can’t be here long,” he said. “Those two Reds know he’s injured and exhausted. They’ll be back, looking for an opening or trying to pick one of us off when we’re vulnerable.”

“Right, right,” Molly said. “How is he?”

He crouched down in front of me and peered at me. His irises looked like polished chrome. “Still punchy.”

“Shock?”

“Maybe. He’s in a lot of pain.”

I was? Oh. I was. That might explain the way I wasn’t talking, I guessed.

“God,” Molly said, her voice shaking. “I’ll get some of his things.”

“This isn’t right,” Thomas said. “Get Bob.”

Molly sounded confused. “Get what?”

His expression flickered with surprise and then went neutral again. “Sorry. Lips disconnected from my brain. Get the Swords.”

“They aren’t here,” Molly said, moving around. Her voice came from my bedroom. “He moved them. Hid them, along with his ghost dust and a bunch of other illegal things.”

Thomas frowned at that and then nodded. “Okay. It’ll have to do. Where do we take him?”

Molly appeared in my field of vision and knelt down to peer at me. She took one of my hands in hers. “Wherever is good, I guess.”

Thomas took a slow breath. His silver eyes grew even brighter. It was creepy as hell and fascinating. “I was hoping you knew a good spot. I sure as hell can’t take him to my place.”

Molly’s voice sharpened. “I don’t even *have* a place,” she said. “I still live at my parents’ house.”

“Less whining,” Thomas said, his voice cool. “More telling me a place to take him where he won’t be killed.”

“I am—” Molly began. Then she closed her eyes for a second, and moderated her tone. “I am sorry. I’m just . . .” She glanced up at Thomas. “I’m just scared.”

“I know,” Thomas said through clenched teeth.

“Um,” Molly said. She swallowed. “Why do your eyes do that?”

There was a lengthy pause before Thomas answered. “They aren’t my eyes, Miss Carpenter. They’re my demon’s eyes. The better to see you with.”

“Demon . . .” Molly said. She was staring. “You’re hungry. Like, the vampire way.”

“After a fight like that?” Thomas said. “I’m barely sane.”

Both of them should have known better. Every time a wizard looks another person in the eyes, he runs the risk of triggering a deeper seeing, a voyeuristic peep through the windows of someone else’s soul. You get a snapshot of the true nature of that person, and they get a peek back at you.

It was only the second time I’d ever seen a soulgaze happen to someone else. There was an instant where both of them locked their eyes on each other’s. Molly’s eyes widened suddenly, like a frightened doe’s, and she jerked in a sharp breath. She stared at him with her chin twisting to one side, as if she were trying—and failing—to look away.

Thomas went unnaturally still, and though his eyes also widened, it reminded me more of a cat crouching down in anticipation, just before pouncing on its prey.

Molly’s back arched slightly and a soft moan escaped her. Her eyes filled with tears.

“God,” she said. “God. No. No, you’re beautiful. God, you hurt so much, need so much. . . . Let me help you. . . .” She fumbled for his hand.

Thomas never moved as her fingers touched his. Not a muscle. His eyes closed very slowly.

“Miss Carpenter,” he whispered. “Do not touch me. Please.”

“No, it’s all right,” Molly said. “It’s all right. I’m here.”

Thomas’s hand moved too quickly to be seen. He caught her wrist in his pale fingers, and she let out a short gasp. He opened his eyes and focused on hers, and Molly began to breathe harder. The tips of her breasts showed against her shirt and her mouth opened with another soft moan.

I think I made a quiet sound of protest. Neither of them heard it.

He leaned closer, the motion feline and serpentine at the same time. Molly began trembling. She licked her lips and began to slowly lean forward, toward him. Their lips met, and her body quivered, tensed, and then went rigid. A breathless sound escaped her as her eyes rolled back in her head, and Thomas was suddenly pressed against her. Molly’s hips rocked against his. Her hands came up and began clawing at his shirt, tearing the buttons from the silk so that her palms could flatten against his naked chest.

Mouse hit Thomas like a wrecking ball.

The big dog’s charge tore my brother away from my apprentice and slammed him into the brick of the fireplace. Thomas let out a sudden snarl of pure, surprised rage, but Mouse had him by the throat before he could recover.

The big dog’s jaws didn’t snap closed—but the tips of his teeth sank into flesh, and he held Thomas there, a growl bubbling from his chest. My brother’s hand flailed, reaching for the poker that hung beside the fireplace. Mouse took note of it and gave Thomas a warning shake, his teeth sinking a tiny bit deeper. My brother didn’t quit reaching for the weapon, and I saw the tension gathering in the big dog’s body.

I came rushing back into myself all at once and said, weakly, “Thomas.”

He froze. Mouse cocked an ear toward me.

“Thomas,” I croaked. “Don’t. He’s protecting the girl.”

Thomas let out a gasping, pained sound. Then I saw him grimace and force himself to relax, to surrender. His body slowly eased away from its fighting tension, and he held up both hands palms out, and lifted his chin a little higher.

“Okay,” he rasped. “Okay. It’s okay now.”

“Show me your eyes,” I said.

He did. They were a shade of pale, pale grey, with only flecks of reflective hunger dancing through them.

I grunted. “Mouse.”

Mouse backed off slowly, gradually easing the pressure of his jaws, gently taking his teeth out of Thomas’s throat. He took a pair of steps back and then sat down, head lowered to a fighting crouch that kept his own throat covered. He kept facing Thomas, made no sound, and didn’t move. It looked odd and eerie on the big dog.

“Can’t stay here,” Thomas said. The bite wounds in his throat looked swollen, angry. Their edges were slightly blackened, as if the dog’s teeth had been red-hot. “Not with her like that.” He closed his eyes. “I didn’t mean to. Sorry.”

I looked at Molly, who was curled into a fetal position and shaking, still breathing hard.

“Get out,” I said.

“How will you—”

“Thomas,” I said, and my voice was slightly stronger, hot with anger. “You could have hurt Molly. You could have killed her. My only defense is down here babysitting you instead of standing guard. Get out. You’re no good to me like this.”

Mouse let out another warning growl.

“I’m sorry,” Thomas said again. “I’m sorry.”

Then he eased around Mouse and departed, his feet making little sound as he went up the stairs.

I sat there for a moment, hurting in practically every sense. My entire body tingled with unpleasant pinpricks, as though it had gone to sleep and was only now feeling the return of circulation. The soulfire. I must have pushed too much of it through me. Terror-adrenaline must have kept me rolling for a little while, but after that, I’d collapsed into pure passivity.

Terror on behalf of my brother and Molly had given me back my voice, my will, but it might not last. It hurt to sit upright. It hurt to breathe. Moving anything hurt, and *not* moving anything hurt.

So, I supposed, I might as well be moving.

I tried to get up, but my left leg wasn’t having any of it, and I was lucky not to end up on the floor. Without being told, Mouse got up and hurried into my room. I heard some heavy thumping as he rustled around under my bed, which had required him to lift it onto his massive shoulders. He came out a moment later, carrying one of my crutches, left over from injuries past, in his teeth.

“Who’s a good dog?” I said.

He wagged his tail at me and went back for the other one. Once I had them both, I was able to get up and limp my way over to the kitchen. Tylenol 3 is good stuff, but it is also illegal stuff to have without a prescription if you aren’t Canadian, so it was currently buried in my godmother’s insane garden. I took a big dose of Tylenol the original, since I didn’t have my Tylenol 3 or its lesser-known, short-lived cousin, Tylenol Two: The Pain Strikes Back.

I realized that I was telling Mouse all of this out loud as I thought it, which had the potential to become awkward if it should become a habit. Once that was done, and I’d drunk a third glass of water, I moved over to Molly and checked her pulse. It was steady. Her breathing had slowed. Her eyes were slightly open and unfocused.

I muttered under my breath. The damned girl was going to get herself killed. This was the second time she'd come very close to being fed upon by a vampire, though admittedly the first had been in a vicarious fashion. Still, it couldn't be good for her to be hit with it again. And if Thomas had actually begun to feed on her, there was no telling what it might do to her.

"Molly," I said. Then louder, "Molly!"

She drew in a sudden little breath and blinked up at me.

"You're smearing paint all over my rug," I said wearily.

She sat up, looking down at herself and at the green paint smeared all over her. She looked up at me again, dazed. "What just happened?"

"You soulgazed Thomas. You both lost perspective. He nearly ate you." I poked her with a crutch. "Mouse saved you. Get up."

"Right," she said. "Right." She stood up very slowly, wincing and rubbing at one wrist. "Um. Is . . . is Thomas all right?"

"Mouse nearly killed him," I said. "He's scared, ashamed, half out of his mind with hunger, and gone." I thumped her leg lightly with my crutch. "What were you thinking?"

Molly shook her head. "If you'd seen . . . I mean, if you'd seen him. Seen how lonely he was. Felt how much pain he was in, how *empty* he feels, Harry . . ." She teared up again. "I've never felt anything so horrible in my life. Or seen anyone braver."

"Apparently, you figured you'd help him out by letting him rip the life out of you."

She faced me for a moment, then flushed and looked away. "He . . . It doesn't get ripped out. It gets . . ." She blushed. "I think the only phrase that works is 'licked away.' Like licking the frosting off of a cake. Or . . . or the candy coating off of one of those lollipops."

"Except that as soon as you find out how many licks it takes him to get to your creamy center, you're dead," I said. "Or insane. Which is somewhat chilling to consider, given the things you can do. So I repeat." I thumped her leg with the tip of my crutch on each word. "What. Were. You. Thinking."

"It won't happen again," she said, but I saw her shiver as she said it.

I grunted skeptically, staring down at her.

Molly wasn't ready. Not for something like we were about to do. She had too much confidence and not nearly enough sound judgment.

It was frustrating. By the time I had been her age, I had finished my apprenticeship in private investigation and was opening my own business. And I had been living under the Doom of Damocles for the better part of a decade.

Of course, I had an experience advantage on Molly. I had made my first dark compact, with my old master Justin DuMorne, when I was ten or eleven, though I hadn't known what I was getting into at the time. I'd made a second one with the Leanansidhe when I was sixteen. And I'd wound up under round-the-clock observation from the paranoid Warden Morgan.

It had been a brief lifetime for me, at that point, but absolutely chock-full of lessons in the school of hard knocks. I had made plenty of dumb decisions of my own by then, and somehow managed to survive them.

But I also hadn't been dallying around in situations as hot as this one was. A troll under a bridge or an upset spirit or two was as bad as it got. It had prepared me for what I faced today.

Molly was facing it cold. She'd been burned once before, but it had taken me more than one attempt to learn that lesson.

She might not survive her next test.

She looked up at me and asked, "What?"

"We need to move," I said. "I met the Eebs while you three were playing with the Ik'k' . . . with the Ik'koo-koo-kachoo . . ." I crunched up my nose, trying to remember the name of the creature, and couldn't. "With the Ick," I said, "and they were charming in an entirely amoral, murderous sort of way. Thomas was right: They'll be after me, looking for an opening. We're going."

"Where?"

"St. Mary's," I said. "The Red Court can't walk on holy ground, and Susan knows I've used it as a fallback position before. She and Martin can catch up to me there. And I've got to get some rest."

She rose, nodding. "Okay. Okay, I'll get you a change of clothes, all right?"

"Call a cab first," I said. "And pack the Tylenol. And some of Mouse's food."

"Right. Okay."

I leaned on my crutches and stayed standing while she bustled around the room. I didn't want to risk sitting down again. The Tylenol had taken the worst edge off the pain, and my thoughts, though tired and sluggish, seemed to be firmly connected to my body again. I didn't want to risk relaxing into lassitude.

"Say that five times fast," I murmured, and tried. It was something to do that I couldn't screw up too badly.

A while later, Mouse made a whuffing sound from the top of the stairs outside, and Molly plodded up them wearily. "Cab's here, Harry," she called.

I got myself moving. Stairs on crutches isn't fun, but I'd done it before. I took my time, moving slowly and steadily.

"Look out!" she yelled.

A bottle smashed against the top interior wall of the stairwell, and its contents splashed all over the place, fire spreading over them as they did. Ye olde Molotov cocktail, still a formidable weapon even after a century of use. There's more to one of those things than simple burning fuel. Fire that hot sucks the oxygen out of the air around it, especially when it has a nice, dank stairway to use as a chimney. And you needn't get splattered by the spilling fuel to get burned. When a fire is hot enough, it'll burn exposed flesh from inches or feet away, turning the atmosphere around it into an oven.

I was only on the second or third step up from the bottom, but I staggered back before anything could get roasted—been there, done that, not going back. I tried to fall onto my uninjured side, figuring that it deserved a chance to join in the fun, too. I landed more or less the way I wanted to, and it hurt like hell, but at least I didn't faint. I screamed, though, a number of vitriolic curses, as fire roared above me, leaping from my little stairwell to the rest of the house, chewing into the old wood like a hungry, living thing.

"Harry!" Molly called from somewhere beyond the flames. "Harry!"

Mouse let out a heartsick-sounding bay, and I saw fire beginning to climb the sides of the house. The fire was starting from the outside. By the time it started setting off fire alarms, it would be too late to escape.

At this time of night, somewhere up above me, Mrs. Spunkelcreef was asleep and unaware of the danger. And on the second floor, my elderly neighbors, the Willoughbys, would be in similar straits, and all because they were unlucky enough to live in the same building as me.

I'd dropped one of my crutches up on the stairs and one end had caught on fire. There was no way I was pulling much in the way of magic out of my hat, not until I'd had food and

some rest. Hell's bells, for that matter I didn't know if I could *stand up* on my own. But if I didn't do something, three innocent people—plus myself—were going to die in a fire.

"Come on, Harry," I said. "You aren't half-crippled. You're half-competent."

The fire roared higher, and I didn't believe myself for a second.

But I put my hands on the ground and began heaving myself upright. "Do or die, Dresden," I told myself fiercely, and firmly ignored the fear pounding in my chest. "Do or die."

The dying really did seem a lot more likely.

Chapter Twenty-eight

I looked up at my apartment's ceiling, hobbling along on my crutch. I found the spot I thought would be the middle of Mrs. S's living room and noted that one of my old sofas was directly beneath it.

Using the crutch as a lever, I slipped one end of it behind one of my big old bookcases and heaved. The bookcase shuddered and then fell in a great crash of paperback novels and hardwood shelves, smashing down onto my couch. I grunted in satisfaction and climbed up onto the fallen bookcase, using its back as a ramp. I crawled painfully up to the end of the ramp, lifted my right hand, and triggered one of the rings I wore there.

They were magical tools, created to retain a little bit of kinetic energy every time I moved my arm, and when they were operating at capacity they packed one hell of a lot of energy—and I had freshly charged them up on the punching bag. When I cut loose with the ring, invisible force struck my ceiling, blowing completely through it and through the floor of the room above, tearing at faded carpeting the color of dried mustard.

I adjusted my aim a little and blew the entire charge out of the ring on the next finger, and another one after that, each one blasting the opening wider, until it was big enough that I thought I ought to fit through it.

I hooked the padded end of my crutch over the broken end of a thick floor joist and used it to haul myself up to my good leg. Then I tossed the crutch up through the hole and reached up to pull myself through.

Mister let out a harsh, worried meow, and I froze in place. My cat was still in my apartment.

I looked wildly around the room for him, and found him crouching in his usual favorite spot atop the highest bookshelf. His hair stood on end and every muscle on him seemed tight and strained.

I'd already tossed the crutch through. If I went back for him, I might not be able to stand once I'd made it back to the ramp. I had no idea how I'd hold him while climbing up, assuming I could do it at all. Mister weighs the next-best thing to thirty pounds. That's one hell of a handicap on a pull-up.

For that matter, if the fire spread as quickly as I thought it would, the extra time it took might mean that I wound up trapped with no exit. And there would be no one to help Mr. S and the Willoughbys.

I loved my cat. He was family.

But as I stared at him I knew that I couldn't help him.

"Unless you use your flipping *brain*, Harry," I snapped at myself. "Duh. Never quit. *Never* quit."

The sunken windows around my apartment were too small to be a means of escape for me, but Mister could clear them with ease. I took aim, used a single charge from my ring, and shattered the sunken window closest to the cat. Mister took the hint at once, and prowled down the tops of two bookcases. It was a five-foot leap from the top of the shelf to the window well, but Mister made it look casual. I felt myself grinning fiercely as he vanished through the broken window and into the cool air of the October night.

Stars and stones, at least I'd accomplished one positive thing that day.

I turned, reached up into the opening with my arms straight over my head, and hopped as hard as I could with one leg. It wasn't much of a leap, but it was enough to let me get my arms through and my elbows wedged against either side of the opening. My ribs were on fire as I kicked and wriggled my way up through the hole and hauled myself into Mrs. Spunkelcreef's living room.

It had last been decorated in the seventies, judging by the mustard yellow carpet and the olive green wallpaper, and it was full of furniture and knickknacks. I dragged myself all the way through the hole, knocking over a little display stand of collector's plates as I did. The room was dimly lit by the growing flames outside. I grabbed my crutch, climbed to my feet through screaming pain, and hobbled farther into the apartment.

I found Mrs. S in the apartment's one bedroom. She was sleeping mostly sitting up, propped on a pile of pillows. Her old television was on, sans volume, with subtitles appearing at the bottom of the screen. I gimped over to her and shook her gently.

She woke up with a start and slugged me with one tiny fist. I fell backward onto my ass, more out of pure surprise than anything else, and grimaced in pain—from the fall, not the punch. I shook it off and looked up again, to find the little old lady holding a little revolver, probably a .38. In her hands, it looked magnum-sized. She held it like she knew what she was doing, too, in two hands, peering down at me through the gun's sights.

"Mr. Dresden!" she said, her voice squeaky. "How dare you!"

"Fire!" I said. "Mrs. S, there's a fire! A fire!"

"Well, I won't fire if you just sit still," she said in a querulous tone. She took her left hand off the gun and reached for her phone. "I'm calling the police. You hold real still or I gotta shoot you. No bluff. This here is a grandfathered gun. Legal and proper."

I tried to point toward the bedroom door without moving my body, indicating it with my fingertips and tilts of my head.

"Are you on *drugs*, boy?" she said, punching numbers on the phone without looking. "You are acting like a crazy junkie. Coming into an old woman's . . ." She glanced past me, where there was some fairly bright light flickering wildly in the hallway outside the bedroom.

I kept wiggling my fingers and nodding toward it, desperately.

Mrs. S's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "Fire!" she said abruptly. "There's a fire right there!"

I nodded frantically.

She lowered the gun and started kicking her way clear of covers and pillows. She wore flannel pajamas, but grabbed at a blue robe in any case and hurried toward the door. "Come on, boy! There's a fire!"

I struggled desperately to my feet and started hobbling out. She turned to look at me, apparently surprised that she was moving faster than I was. You could hear the fire now, and smoke had begun to thicken the air.

I pointed up at the ceiling and shouted, "The Willoughbys! Willoughbys!"

She looked up. "Lord God almighty!" She turned and hurried down the hall, coming within ten feet of a wall that was already becoming a sheet of flame. She grabbed at something, cursed, then pulled her robe down over her head and picked up something, using the material as an oven mitt. She hurried over to me with a ring of keys. "Come on! The front door's already going up! Out the back!"

We both hurried out the back door of the house and into its minuscule little yard, and I saw at once that the entire front side of the house was aflame.

The stairs up to the Willoughbys' place were already on fire.

I turned to her and shouted, "Ladder! Where's the ladder? I need to use the ladder!"

"No!" she shouted back. "You need to use the ladder!"

Good grief.

"Okay!" I shouted back, and gave her a thumbs-up.

She hustled back to the little storage shed in the backyard. She picked a key and unlocked it. I swung the door open and seized the metal extending ladder I used to put up and take down Christmas lights every year. I ditched my crutch and used the ladder itself to take some of the weight. I went as fast as I could, but it seemed to take forever to position the ladder under the Willoughbys' bedroom windows.

Mrs. Spunkelcreef handed me a loose brick from a little flower planter's wall and said, "Here. I can't climb this thing. My hip."

I took the brick and dropped it in my duster pocket. Then I started humping myself up the ladder, taking a grip with both hands, then hopping up with a painful little jump. Repeat, each time growing more painful, more difficult. I clenched my teeth over the screams.

And then there was a window in front of me.

I got the brick out of my pocket, hauled off, and shattered the window.

Black smoke bellowed out, catching me on the inhale. I started coughing viciously, my voice strangled as I tried to shout, "Mr. and Mrs. Willoughby! Fire! You've got to get out! Fire! Come to the window and down the ladder!"

I heard two people coughing and choking. They were trying to say, "Help!"

Something, maybe the little propane tank on Mrs. Spunkelcreef's grill, exploded with a noise like a dinosaur-sized watermelon hitting the ground. The concussion knocked Mrs. S down—and kicked the bottom of the ladder out from under me.

I fell. It was a horrible, helpless feeling, my body twisting uselessly as I tried to land well—but I'd had no warning at all, and it was a futile attempt. The small of my back hit the brick planter, and I achieved a new personal best for pain.

"Oh, God in Heaven," Mrs. Spunkelcreef said. She knelt beside me. "Harry?"

Somewhere, sirens had begun to wail. They wouldn't get there in time for the Willoughbys.

"Trapped," I choked out, as soon as I was able to breathe again. "They're up there, calling for help."

The fire roared louder and grew brighter.

Mrs. S stared up at the window. She grabbed the ladder and wrestled it all the way back up into position, though the effort left her panting. Then she tried to put a foot up on the first step. She grasped the ladder, began to shift her weight—and groaned as her leg buckled and she fell to the ground.

She screamed, agony in her quavering voice. “Oh, God in Heaven, help us!”

A young black man in a dark, knee-length coat hurdled the hedges at the back of the yard and bounded onto the ladder. He was built like a professional lineman, moved more quickly than a linebacker, and started up the ladder like it was a broad staircase. The planet’s only Knight of the Cross flashed me a quick grin on the way up. “Dresden!”

“Sanya!” I howled. “Two! There’re two of them in the bedroom!”

“Da, two!” he replied, his deep voice booming. The curving saber blade of *Esperacchius* rode at his hip and he managed it with thoughtless, instinctive skill as he went through the window. He was back a moment later, with Mrs. Willoughby draped over one shoulder, while he supported most of Mr. Willoughby’s staggering body with the other.

Sanya went first, the old woman hanging limply over his shoulder, so that he could help Mr. Willoughby creep out the window and onto the ladder. They came down slowly and carefully, and as Sanya carefully laid the old woman out onto the grass, the first of the emergency response crews arrived.

“God in Heaven,” Mr. S said, weeping openly as she put her hand on Sanya’s arm. “He must have sent you to us, son.”

Sanya smiled at her as he helped Mr. Willoughby lower himself to the ground. Then he turned to my landlady and said, his Russian accent less heavy than the last time I had seen him, “It was probably just a coincidence, ma’am.”

“I don’t believe in those,” said Mrs. Spunkelcreef. “Bless you, son,” she said, and hugged him hard. Her arms couldn’t have gotten around half of him, but Sanya returned the hug gently for a moment.

“Ma’am,” he said, “you should direct the medical technicians to come back here.”

“Thank you, thank you,” she said, releasing him. “But now I have to go get those ambulance boys over here.” She paused and gave me a smile. “And thank you, Harry. Such a good boy.” Then she hurried away.

Mouse came racing around the side of the house where Mrs. S had just gone, and rushed to stand over me, lapping at my face. Molly wasn’t far behind. She let out a little cry and threw her arms around my shoulders. “Oh, God, Harry!” She shouldered Mouse aside and squeezed tight for several seconds. She looked up and said, “Sanya? What are you doing here?”

“Hey, hey,” I said. “Take it easy.”

Molly eased up on her hug. “Sorry.”

“Sanya,” I said, nodding to him. “Thanks for your help.”

“Part of the job, *da?*” he replied, grinning. “Glad to help.”

“All the same,” I said, my voice rough. “thank you. If anything had happened to them . . .”

“Oh, Harry,” Molly said. She hugged me again.

“Easy, padawan, easy,” I said quietly. “Think you should be careful.”

She drew back with a frown. “Why?”

I took a slow breath and said, very quietly, “I can’t feel my legs.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

It didn't take me long to talk Sanya and Molly out of taking me to the hospital. The Eebs, as it turned out, had shown up, pitched their firebomb from a moving car, and kept going, a *modus operandi* that was consistent with the earlier attempt on my life, except this time they'd been identified. Molly's description of the thrower was a dead ringer for Esteban.

I had to admit, the vampire couple had a very practical long-term approach to violence—striking at weakness and harassing the victim while exposing themselves to minimal risk. If I'd been a couple of steps higher up when that Molotov hit, I'd be dead, or covered in third-degree burns. Individually, their attempts might not enjoy a high success rate—but they needed to get it right only once.

It would be consistent with that practical, cold-blooded style to keep an eye on the hospitals in order to come finish me off—during surgery, for example, or while I was still in recovery afterward. Sanya, though, had EMT training of some kind. He calmly stole a backboard out of an open ambulance while its techs were seeing to the Willoughbys, and they loaded me onto it in a procedure that Sanya said would protect my spine. It seemed kind of “too little, too late” to me, but I was too tired to rib him over it.

I couldn't feel anything below the waist, but that apparently didn't mean that the rest of me got to stop hurting. I felt them carrying the board out, and when I opened my eyes it was only to see nearly a third of the building give way and crash down into the basement—into my apartment. The building was obviously a lost cause. The firemen were focusing on containing the blaze and preventing it from spreading to the nearby homes.

They loaded the backboard into the rental minivan Sanya had, by happy coincidence, been given at the airport when he arrived, at no additional fee, in order to substitute for the subcompact he'd reserved but couldn't have. As it drove away during the confusion and before the cops could lock everything down, I got to watch my home burn down through the back window of the van.

Even after we were several blocks away, I could see the smoke rising up in a black column. I wondered how much of that smoke was made of my books. My secondhand guitar. My clothes. My comfy old furniture. My bed. My blankets. My Mickey Mouse alarm clock. The equipment in my lab that I'd worked so hard to attain or create—the efforts of years of patient effort, endless hours of concentration and spellcraft.

Gone.

Fire is as destructive spiritually as it is materially, a purifying force that can devour and scatter magical energy. In a fire that large everything I'd ever built, including purely magical constructs, would be destroyed.

Dammit.

Dammit, but I hated vampires.

I'd had one hell of a day, all in all, but practically the only thing I had left to me was my pride. I didn't want anyone to see me crying. So I just kept quiet in the back of the van, while Mouse lay very close to me.

At some point, sorrow became sleep.

I woke up in the utility room at St. Mary of the Angels, where Father Forthill kept several spare folding cots and the bedding to go with them. I'd visited several times in the past. St. Mary's was a surprisingly stout bastion against supernatural villains of nearly any stripe. The ground beneath it was consecrated, as was every wall, door, floor, and window, blessed by prayers and stately rituals, Masses, and communions over and over through the decades, until that gentle, positive energy had permeated the ground and the very stone from which the church was built.

I felt safer, but only a little. Vampires might not be able to set foot on the holy ground, but they knew that, and someone like the Eebs would certainly take that into account. Hired human killers could be just as dangerous as vampires, if not more so, and the protective aura around the building couldn't make them blink an eye.

And, I supposed, they could always just set it on fire and burn it down around me if they really, *really* wanted to get me. I tried to imagine myself a century from now, still dodging vampires and getting my home burned to the ground on an irregular basis.

No way in hell was I gonna accept that. I'd have to deal with the Eeb problem.

And then I remembered my legs. I reached a hand down to touch my thigh.

I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. It felt like touching the limb of someone else entirely. I tried to move my legs and nothing happened. Maybe I'd been too ambitious. I pulled at my blanket until I could see my toes. I tried wiggling them. I failed.

I could feel the backboard beneath me, and the band around my head that kept me from moving it to look around. I gave up on my legs with a sharp surge of frustration and lifted my eyes to the ceiling.

There was a piece of paper taped to it, directly over my head. Molly's handwriting in black marker was scrawled in large letters across it: *Harry. Don't try to get up, or move your neck or back. We're checking in on you several times an hour. Someone will be there soon.*

Chapter Thirty

The third repetition of her name hung ringing in the air, and deafening silence came after as I awaited the response.

When you trap something dangerous, there are certain fundamental precautions necessary to success. You've got to have good bait, something to draw your target in. You've got to have a good trap, something that works and works fast. And, once the target is in the trap, you've got to have a net or a cage strong enough to hold it.

Get any of those three elements wrong, and you probably won't succeed. Get two of them wrong, and you might be looking at a result far more disastrous than mere failure.

I went into this one knowing damned well that all I had was bait. Mab, for her own reasons, had wanted to suborn me into her service for years. I knew that calling her by her name and title would be enough to attract her interest. Though the mechanism of my improved summoning circle would have been a fine trap—if it still existed, I mean—the cage of my will had always been the weakest point in any such endeavor.

Bottom line, I could get the tiger to show up. Once it was there, all I had was a really good chalk drawing of a pit on the sidewalk and “Nice kitty.”

I wasn't going into it blind and ignorant, though. I was desperate, but not stupid. I figured I had the advantage of position. Mab couldn't kill a mortal. She could only make him desperately wish he was dead, instead of enduring her attentions. I didn't have a lot to lose. She couldn't make me any more useless to my daughter than I was already.

I waited, in perfect darkness, for the mistress of every wicked fairy in every dark tale humanity had ever whispered in the night to put in an appearance.

Mab didn't disappoint me.

Surprise me, yes. But she didn't disappoint.

Stars began to appear in front of my eyes.

I figured that was probably a really bad thing, for a moment. But they didn't spin around in lazy, dizzy motion like the kind of stars that mean your brain is smothering. They instead burned steady and cold and pure above me, five stars like jewels on the throat of Lady Night.

Seconds later, a cold wind touched my face, and I became conscious of a hard smoothness beneath me. I laid my hands carefully flat, but I didn't feel the cot and the backboard under me. Instead, my fingers touched only cold, even stone, a planar surface that seemed level beneath my entire body. I wriggled my foot and confirmed that there was stone beneath it there, too.

I stopped and realized that I could feel my foot. I could move it.

My whole body was there. And it was naked. I wavered between yelping at the cold suddenly being visited upon my ass, and yelling in joy that I could feel it at all. I saw land to one side and scrambled to get off the cold slab beneath me, crouching down and hanging on to the edge of the slab for balance.

This wasn't reality, then. This was a dream, or a vision, or something that was otherwise in between the mortal world and the spiritual realm. That made sense. My physical body was still back in St. Mary's, lying still and breathing deeply, but my mind and my spirit were here.

Wherever “here” was.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness and I saw gentle mist and fog hanging in the air. Boiling clouds let a flash of moonlight in, and it played like a spotlight over the hilltop around me, and upon the ancient table of stone beside me. The moon's touch made deeply carved runes all around the table's edge dance with flickers of illumination, writing done in some language I did not know.

Then I understood. Mab had created this place for our meeting. It was known as the Valley of the Stone Table. It was a broad, bowl-shaped valley, I knew, though the mist hid most of it from me. In its exact center stood a mound maybe fifty feet across and twelve feet high at its center. Atop the mound stood the massive slab of stone, held up on four stumpy pillars. Other stones stood in a circle around it, some tumbled down, some broken, only one remaining in Stonehenge-like lintel. The stones all shed faint illumination in shades of blue and purple and deep, deep green. Cold colors.

Winter colors.

Yeah. It was after the equinox. So that tracked. The Table was in Winter's domain. It was an ancient conduit of power, transferred in the most primitive, atavistic fashion of all—in hot blood. There were grooves and whorls in the table's surface, coated with ancient stains, and it squatted on the hill, patient and hungry and immovable, like a snapping turtle waiting for warm, vital creatures to wander too close.

The blood spilled upon this table would carry the power of its life with it, and would flow into the well of power in the control of the Winter Queen.

A movement across the table from me drew my eye. A shadow seemed to simply congeal from the mist, forming itself into a slender, feminine shape draped in a cloak and cowl. Glittering green candle flames flickered in what looked like two eyes within the cowl's hood.

My throat went dry. It took me two tries to rasp, “Queen Mab?”

The form vanished. A low, feminine laugh drifted through the mist to my right. I turned to face it.

A furious cat squall erupted from the air six inches behind me and I nearly jumped out of my skin. I spun to find nothing there, and the woman's laugh echoed around the top of the misty mound, this time more amused.

“You're enjoying this, aren't you,” I said, my heart pounding in my throat. “You told me so, didn't you?”

Whispering voices hissed among the stones around me, none of them intelligible. I saw another flicker of mocking green eyes.

“Th-this is a limited-time offer,” I said, trying to make my voice sound steady. “It's been forced by circumstance. If you don't get off your royal ass and jump on it, I'm walking.”

“I warned you,” said a calm voice behind me. “Never let her bring you here, my godchild.”

I carefully kept myself from letting out a shriek. It would have been unwisely. Instead, I took a deep breath and turned to find the Leansidhe standing a few feet away, covered in a cloak the color of the last seconds of twilight, the deep blue-purple fabric hiding her completely except for her pale face inside the hood. Her green cat eyes were wide and steady, her expression solemn.

“But I'm here,” I said quietly.

She nodded.

Another shadow appeared beside her, green eyes burning. Queen Mab, I presumed, and noted that she was actually a couple of inches shorter than my godmother. Of course, especially in a place like this, Mab could be as gargantuan or Lilliputian as she chose.

Probably-Mab stepped closer, still covered in shadows despite the fact that she was nearer to me than my godmother was. Her eyes grew brighter.

“So many scars,” said my godmother, and her voice had changed subtly, growing cold and precise. “Your scars are beautiful things. Within and without.” The shadowed figure stepped behind one of the fallen stones and emerged from behind another on the opposite side of the circle. “Yes,” said the cold voice coming from the Leansidhe's lips. “I can work with this.”

I shivered. Because it was really cold and I was naked, I'm sure. I looked from the dark figure to my godmother and back, and asked, “You're still using a translator?”

“For your sake,” said the cold voice, as a shadowed figure stepped behind the next menhir and appeared atop another. Walking deosil, clockwise.

Mab was closing the circle around me.

“Wh-why for my sake?” I asked.

The cold voice laughed through the Leansidhe's lips. “This conversation would quickly grow tedious if you kept falling to your knees, screaming in agony and clawing at your bleeding ears, my wizard.”

“Yeah. But why?” I asked. “Why would your voice hurt me?”

“Because she is angry,” answered the Leansidhe in her natural voice. “Because her voice is a part of her power, and her rage is too great to be contained.”

I swallowed. Mab had spoken a few words to me a couple of years back, and I'd reacted exactly as she described. I'd lost a few minutes of time during the episode her words had provoked as well. “Rage?” I asked. “About what?”

The shadowed figure let out a spitting hiss, another feline sound that made me flinch and cringe away from it as if from the lash of a whip. My godmother jerked sharply to one side. She straightened only slowly, and as she did I saw that a long, fine cut had been drawn across one of her cheeks. Blood welled up and dripped down slowly.

My godmother bowed her head to Mab, and the cold voice came from her mouth again. “It is not for my handmaiden to judge or question me, nor to speak for me upon her own account.”

Lea bowed her head to Mab again, and not a flicker of either anger or chagrin showed in her features. Again, Mab moved from one stone to another without crossing the space in between. It should have been getting easier to deal with due to repetition. It wasn't. Each time she did it I realized that she could just as easily have reappeared behind me with foul intentions, and there wouldn't be anything I could do about it.

“There are ancient proprieties to be honored,” Mab's voice said, her tone measured and somehow formal. “There are words which must be said. Rites which must be observed. Speak your desire, mortal man.”

Now I really was shivering with the cold. I folded my arms and hunched in on myself. It didn't help. “Power,” I said.

The shadowed figure froze in place and turned to stare at me. The burning green eyes tilted slightly, as if Mab had cocked her head to one side. “Tell me why.”

I fought to keep my teeth from chattering. “My body is badly injured, but I must do battle with the Red Court.”

“This you have done many a time.”

“This time I’m fighting all of them,” I said. “The Red King and his inner circle.”
The fire of her eyes intensified. “Tell me why.”
I swallowed and said, “They’ve taken my daughter.”
The shadowed figure shuddered, and her disembodied voice breathed a sigh of pleasure. “Ahhh. Yes. Not for your own life. But for your child’s. For love.”
I nodded jerkily.
“So many terrible things are done for love,” Mab’s voice said. “For love will men mutilate themselves and murder rivals. For love will even a peaceful man go to war. For love, man will destroy himself, and that right willingly.” She began walking in a physical circle now, though her movements were so touched with unexpected motions and alien grace that it almost seemed that there must be something else beneath the shrouding cloak. “You know my price, mortal. Speak it.”
“You want me to become the Winter Knight,” I whispered.
A laugh, both merry and cold, bubbled beneath her response. “Yes.”
“I will,” I said. “With a condition.”
“Speak it.”
“That before my service begins, you restore my body to health. That you grant me time enough to rescue my daughter and take her to safety, and strength and knowledge enough to succeed. And you give me your word that you will never command me to lift my hand against those I love.”
The figure kept its eerie pace as she circled me again, and the temperature seemed to drop several degrees. “You ask me to risk my Knight in a place of dire peril, to no gain for my land and people. Why should I do this?”
I looked at her steadily for a moment. Then I shrugged. “If you don’t want to do business, I’ll go elsewhere. I could still call Lasciel’s coin to me in a heartbeat—and Nicodemus and the Denarians would be more than happy to help me. I am also one of the only people alive who knows how to pull off Kemmler’s Darkhallow. So if Nicky and the Nickelheads don’t want to play, I can damned well get the power for myself—and the next time I call your name, I won’t need to be nearly so polite.”
Mab let out a mirthless laugh through my godmother’s lips. “You are spoiled for choices, my wizard. What reason have you to select me over the others?”
I grimaced. “Please don’t take this as an insult. But you’re the least evil of my options.”
The cold voice told me nothing about her reaction. “Explain.”
“The Denarians would have me growing a goatee and gloating malevolently within a few years, if I didn’t break and turn into some kind of murderous tardbeast first. And I’d have to kill a lot of people outright, if I wanted to use the Darkhallow.” I swallowed. “But I’ll do it. If I have no other way to get my child out of their hands, I’ll do it.”
Silence reigned for an unbroken minute on the mound.
“Yes,” mused Mab’s voice. “You will, won’t you? And yes, you know that I do not kill indiscriminately, nor encourage my Knight to do so.” She paused and murmured, “But you have proven willing to destroy yourself in the past. You won your last confrontation with my handmaiden in just such a fashion, by partaking of the death angel. What prevents you from taking a similar action to cheat me of my prize?”
“My word,” I said quietly. “I know I can’t bluff you. I won’t suicide. I’m here to deal in good faith.”
Mab’s burning eyes stared at me for a long moment. Then she began to walk again, more slowly on this, her third traversing of the circle around me. “You must understand, wizard.

Once you are my Knight, once this last quest of yours is complete, you are *mine*. You will destroy what I wish you to destroy. Kill whatsoever I wish you to kill. You will be mine, blood, bone, and breath. Do you understand this?”
I swallowed. “Yes.”
She nodded slowly. Then she turned to stare at the Leansidhe.
Lea bowed her head again, and snapped her fingers.
Six cloaked figures appeared out of the mists, small, misshapen things that might have been kobolds or gnomes or any of a half dozen other servitor races of the Sidhe. I couldn’t tell because the cloaks had rendered them faceless, without identity.
But I knew the man they were carrying strapped to a plank.
Like me, he was naked. He had been shorter than me, but more athletic, heavier on muscle. But that had been years ago. Now he was a wasted shell of a human being, a charcoal sketch that had been smudged by an uncaring hand. His eyes were missing. Gone, but neatly gone, as if removed surgically. There were tattoos covering his entire face, particularly his sunken eyelids, all of them simply a word in different languages and styles of lettering: *traitor*. His mouth was partly open, and his teeth had been inscribed with whorls and Celtic design, then stained with something dark and brown, turning his mouth into living scrimshaw.
His entire body, in fact, was adorned with either tattoos or artistic, ritually applied scars. He was held to the plank with seven lengths of slender silken cord, but his emaciated limbs looked like they would never have the strength to overcome even those frail bonds.
He was weeping, sobbing softly, the sound of it more like an animal in horrible pain than anything human.
“Jesus,” I said, and looked away from him.
“I am somewhat proud of this,” Mab’s cold voice said. “To be sure, the White Christ never suffered so long or so terribly as did this traitor. Three days on a tree. Hardly enough time for a prelude. When it came to visiting agony, the Romans were hobbyists.”
The servitors slid the plank up onto the stone table, positioning Slate in its center. Then they bowed toward Mab and retreated in measured silence. For a moment, the only sounds were those of a cold, gentle wind and Slate’s sobs.
“For a time, I was contented to torment him to the edge of sanity. Then I set out to see how far over the edge a mortal could go.” Her eyes glittered merrily in the shadows. “A pity that so little was left. And yet, he is the Winter Knight, young wizard. The vessel of my power amidst mortals, and consort to the Queens of Winter. He betrayed me. See where it has taken him.”
The thing that used to be Lloyd Slate made quiet, hopeless sounds.
I trembled, afraid.
The dark shape came closer, and a pale hand emerged from the folds of cloth. Something glittered coldly in the strange light and landed in the thick grass at my feet. I bent to take it up and found an ancient, ancient knife with a simple leaf-blade design, set into a wooden handle and wrapped with cord and leather. It was, I thought, made of bronze. Its double edge had a wickedly sharp shine to it, and its needle point looked hungry, somehow.
Energy surged through the little blade, power that was unfettered and wild, that mocked limits and scoffed at restraint. Not evil, as such—but hungry and filled with the desire to partake in its portion of the cycle of life and death. It thirsted for bloodshed.
“While Lloyd Slate lives and breathes, he is my Knight,” said Mab’s voice. “Take Medea’s bodkin, wizard. Take his life’s blood.”
I stood there holding the knife and looking at Lloyd Slate. The last time I’d heard him speak, he had begged me to kill him. I didn’t think he’d be capable of even that much now.
“If you would be my Knight, then this is the first death I desire of you,” Mab said, her voice almost gentle. She faced me across the Stone Table. “Send his power back to me. And I will render it unto thee.”
I stood in the cold wind, not moving.
What I did with the next moments would determine the course of the rest of my life.
“You know this man,” Mab continued, her voice still gentle. “You saw his victims. He was a murderer. A rapist. A thief. A monster in mortal flesh. He has more than earned his death.”
“That isn’t for me to judge,” I whispered quietly. Indeed not. I was tempted to hide behind that rationale, just for a moment—just until it was done. Lie to myself, tell myself that I was his lawful, rightful executioner.
But I wasn’t.
I could have told myself that I was ending his pain. That I was putting him out of his hideous misery in an act of compassion. Necessarily an act of bloodshed, but it would be quick and clean. Nothing should suffer as much as Lloyd Slate had. I could have sold myself that story.
But I didn’t.
I was a man seeking power. For good reasons, maybe. But I wasn’t going to lie to myself or anyone else about my actions. If I killed him, I would be taking a life, something that was not mine to take. I would be committing deliberate, calculated murder.
It was the least evil path, I told myself. Whatever else I might have done would have turned me into a monster in truth. Because of Lloyd Slate, I knew that whatever Mab might say, she did not control her Knight completely. Slate had defied her power and influence.
And look where it got him, a little voice whispered inside my head.
The full, round moon emerged from behind the clouds and bathed the whole Valley of the Stone Table in clear, cold light. The runes upon the table and the menhirs blazed into glittering, cold light.
“Wizard,” whispered Mab’s appropriated voice, seemingly directly into my ear. “The time has come.”
My heart began pounding very hard, and I felt sick to my stomach.
“Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden,” Mab’s voice said, almost lovingly. “Choose.”

Chapter Thirty-one

I stared at the broken man. It was easy enough to envision my own mutilated face, looking blindly up from the table's surface. I took one step toward the table. Then two. Then I was standing over Lloyd Slate's broken form.

If it was a fight, I wouldn't think twice. But this man was no threat to me. He was no threat to anyone anymore. I had no right to take his life, and it was pure, overwhelming, nihilistic arrogance to say otherwise. If I killed Slate, how long would it take for my turn to come? I could be looking at myself, months or years from now.

I couldn't, any more than I could cut my own throat.

I felt my hand drop back to my side, the knife too heavy to hold before me.

Mab suddenly stood at the opposite end of the Stone Table, facing me. Her right hand moved in a simple outward motion, and the mists over the Table suddenly thickened and swirled with color and light. For a few seconds, the image was hazy. Then it snapped into focus.

A little girl crouched in the corner of a bare stone room. There was hay scattered around, and a wool blanket that looked none too clean. She had dark hair that had been up in pigtails, but wasn't anymore. One of the little pink plastic clips had evidently been lost or stolen, and now she had only one pigtail. Her face was red from crying. She'd evidently been wiping her nose on the knees of her little pink overalls. Her shirt, white with yellow flowers and a big cartoon bumblebee on it, showed stains of dirt and worse. She crouched in the tiniest ball she could make of her body, as if hoping that if something should come for her, she might be overlooked.

Her big brown eyes were quietly terrified—and I could see something familiar in them. It took me a moment to realize they reminded me of my reflection in a mirror. Other features showed themselves to me, muted shapes that maturity would bring forth eventually. The same chin and jawline Thomas and I shared. The same mouth as her mother's. Susan's straight, shining black hair. Her hands and her feet looked a little too large for her, like a puppy's paws.

Dimly, as if from a great distance, I heard the cry of a Red Court vampire in its true form, and she flinched and started crying again, her entire body trembling in terror.

Maggie.

I remembered when Bianca and her minions had kept me prisoner.

I remembered the things they had done to me.

But it didn't look like they had harmed my child—yet.

"Yes," said Mab's cold voice, empty of emotion. The image began to slowly fade away. "It is a true seeing of your child, as she is even now. I give you my word. No tricks. No

deceptions. This is."

I looked through the translucent image to where Mab and my godmother waited. Lea's face was somber. Mab's eyes were narrowed to glowing green slits within her hooded cloak.

I faced them both for a moment. The cold wind gusted over the hilltop and stirred the cloaks of the two Sidhe. I stared at them, at ancient eyes full of the knowledge of dark and wicked things. I knew that neither the child in the image nor the man on the table meant anything to them. I knew that if I went forward with Mab's bargain, I would probably end up on the table myself.

Of course, that was why Mab had shown me Maggie: to manipulate me.

No. There was a distinction in what she had done. She had shown me Maggie to make perfectly clear exactly what choice I was about to make. Certainly, it might influence my decision, but when a stark naked truth stares you in the face . . . shouldn't it?

I'm not sure it's possible to manipulate someone with candor and truth.

I think you call that enlightenment.

And as I stared at my daughter's fading image, my fear vanished.

If I wound up like Slate, if that was the price I had to pay to make my daughter safe, so be it.

If I was haunted for the rest of my life because Maggie needed me to make hard choices, so be it.

And if I had to die a horrible, lingering death so that my little girl could have a chance to live . . .

So be it.

I tightened my grip on the hideous weight of the ancient bronze knife.

I put one hand gently on Lloyd Slate's forehead to hold him still.

And then I cut his throat.

It was a quick, clean death, which made it no less lethal than if I'd hacked him up with an ax. Death is the great equalizer. It doesn't matter how you get there. Just when.

And why.

He never struggled. Just let out a breath that sounded like a sigh of relief and turned his head to one side as if going to sleep. It wasn't neat, but it wasn't a scene from a gorefest slasher movie, either. It looked more like the kind of mess you'd see in a kitchen when preparing a big bunch of steaks. Most of his blood ran into the carved indentations on the table and seemed to become quicksilver once there, running rapidly outward through the troughs and down the lettering carved in the sides and the legs. The blood made the letters reflect the eerie light around us, giving them a sort of flickering fire of their own. It was a terrible, beautiful sight. Power hummed through that blood; the letters, the stone, and the air around me were shaken by its silent potency.

I sensed the two Sidhe behind me, watching with calm, predatory eyes as the Knight who had betrayed his queens died. I knew when it was over. The two of them let out small sighs of . . . appreciation, I suppose. I couldn't think of any other phrase that fit. They recognized the significance of his death while in no way actually feeling any empathy for him. A life flowed from his broken body into the Stone Table, and they held the act in a respect akin to reverence.

I just stood there, blood dripping from the bronze knife in my hand onto the earth beneath my feet. I shivered in the cold and stared at the remains of the man I'd murdered, wondering what I was supposed to feel. Sadness? Not really. He'd been a son of a bitch of the first order, and I'd gladly have killed him in a straight-up fight if I had the chance. Remorse? None yet. I had done him a favor when I killed him. There was no getting him out of what he'd gotten himself into. Joy? No. None of that, either. Satisfaction? Precious little, except that it was over, the deed done, the dice finally cast.

Mostly? I just felt cold.

A minute or an hour later, the Leanansidhe lifted a hand and snapped her fingers. The cloaked servitors appeared from the mist as silently as they'd left, and gathered up what was left of Lloyd Slate. They lifted him in silence, carried him in silence, and vanished into the mist.

"There," I said quietly to Mab. "My part is done. Time for you to live up to yours."

"No, child," said Mab's voice through Lea's lips. "Your part is only begun. But fear not. I am Mab. The stars will rain from the sky before Mab fulfills not her word." She tilted her head slightly to one side, toward my godmother, and said, "I give thee this adviser for thy final quest, sir Knight. My handmaiden is among the most powerful beings in all of my Winter, second only to myself."

Lea's warmer, more languid voice came from her lips as she asked, "My queen, to what degree am I permitted to act?"

I thought I saw the fell light gleam on Mab's teeth as Lea's lips said, "You may indulge yourself."

Lea's mouth spread into a wide, dangerous smile of its own, and she bowed her head and upper body toward the Queen of Winter.

"And now, my Knight," Mab's voice said, as her body turned to face me exclusively. "We will see to the strength of your broken body. And I will make you mine."

I swallowed hard.

Mab lifted a hand, a dismissive gesture, and the Leanansidhe bowed to her.

"I am no longer needed here, child," Lea murmured. "I will be ready to go with thee whenever thou dost call."

My throat was almost too dry to get any words out. "I'll want the things I left with you, as soon as you can get them to me."

"Of course," she said. She bowed to me as well, and took several steps back into the mist, until it swallowed her whole.

And I was alone with Queen Mab.

"So," I said into the silence. "I guess there's . . . there's a ceremony of some kind to go through."

Mab stepped closer to me. She wasn't an enormous, imposing figure. She was considerably shorter than me. Slender. But she walked with such perfect confidence that the role of predator and prey was clear to both of us. I edged back from her. It was pure instinct, and I could no more stop from doing it than I could have stopped shivering against the cold.

"Going to be hard for us to exchange oaths if you can't talk, huh," I said. My voice sounded thin and shaky, even to me. "Um. Maybe it's paperwork or something."

Pale hands slipped up from the dark cloak and drew her hood back. She shook her head left and right, and pale, silken tresses, whiter than moonlight or Lloyd Slate's dead flesh, spilled forth.

My voice stopped working for a second. My bare thighs hit the Stone Table behind me, and I wound up sitting on it.

Mab kept pacing toward me, one slightly swaying step at a time. The cloak slid from her shoulders, down, down, down.

"Y-you, uh," I said, looking away. "You m-must be cold."

A throaty little laugh bubbled up out of her frozen-berry lips. Mab's voice, touched with anger, could cause physical damage to living flesh. Her voice filled with simmering desire . . . did other things.

And the cold was suddenly the least of my concerns.

Her mouth closed on mine, and I gave up even trying to speak. This wasn't a ceremony so much as a rite, and one as ancient as beasts and birds, earth and sky.

My memory gets shaky after the kiss.

I remember her body gleaming brightly above me, cold, soft, feminine perfection. I don't have the words to describe it. Inhuman beauty. Elfin grace. Animal sensuality. And when her body was atop mine, our breaths mingled, cold sweetness with human imperfection. I could feel the rhythm of her form, her breath, her heart. I could feel the stone of the table, the ancient hill of the mound, the very earth of the valley around us pulsing in time to Mab's rhythm. Clouds raced over the sky, and as she moved more quickly she grew brighter, and brighter, until I realized that the eerie luminescence around us all evening had been nothing but a dim, muffled reflection of Mab's loveliness, veiled for the sake of the mortal mind it could have unmade.

She did not veil it as her breathing mounted. And it burned me, it was so pure.

What we did wasn't sex, regardless of what it appeared to be. You can't have sex with a thunderstorm, an earthquake, a furious winter gale. You can't make love to a mountain, a lake of ice, a freezing wind.

For a few moments, I saw the breadth and depth of Mab's power—and for a fleeting instant, the barest, tiniest glimpse of her *purpose*, as well, as our entwined bodies thrashed toward completion. I was screaming. I had been for a while.

Then Mab's cry joined mine, our voices blending together. Her nails dug into my chest, chips of ice sliding beneath my skin. I saw her body drawn into an arch of pleasure, and then her green cat eyes opened and bored into—

Her mouth opened, and her voice hissed, "*MINE.*"

Absolute truth made my body vibrate like the plucked string of a guitar, and I jerked into a brief, violent contortion.

Mab's hands slid down my ribs, and I could suddenly feel the fire of the cracked bones again, until those icy hands tightened as again she said, "*MINE.*"

Again, my body bowed into a violent bow, every muscle trying to tear its way off of my bones.

Mab hissed in eagerness as her hands slid around my waist, covering the numb spot where my spine had probably been broken. I felt myself screaming and struggling, with no control whatsoever over my body.

Mab's feline eyes captured my own gaze, trapping my attention within their frozen beauty as again a jolt of terrible, sweet cold flowed out from her fingertips and she whispered, her voice a velvet caress, "... *mine* ..."

Chapter Thirty-two

I was tied down, but my hands weren't. I flexed the fingers of my right hand into the mystic position of attack—holding them like a pretend gun—and snapped, “*Arctis!*”

The spell tore the heat from all around the gun and drew water from the air into an instant, thick coating of ice, heaviest around the weapon's hammer. The shooter twitched in reaction to the spell and pulled the trigger.

The encrusting ice held the hammer back and prevented it from falling.

The gunman blinked and tried to pull the trigger several more times, to no avail. Forthill hit him around the knees. Both men went down, and the gun came loose from the gunman's cold-numbered fingers as they hit the floor, and went spinning across the room. It struck a wall, cracked the ice around its hammer, and discharged harmlessly into the wall with another roar.

The gunman kicked Forthill in the face and the old priest fell back with a grunt of pain. Molly threw herself at him in pure rage, knocking him flat again, and began pounding her fists into him with elemental brutality and no technique whatsoever. The gunman threw an elbow that got her in the neck and knocked her back, then rose, his eyes searching the floor, until he spotted his weapon. He started for it.

I killed the light from the amulet. He tripped and fell in the sudden darkness. I heard him scuffling with the dazed Forthill.

Then there was a single bright flash of light that showed me the gunman arching up in pain. Then it was gone and there was the sound of something large falling to the floor. Several people were breathing heavily.

I got my fingers onto my amulet again and brought forth light into the room.

Forthill sat against one wall, holding his jaw, looking pale. Molly was in a crouch, one hand lifted as if she'd been about to do something with her magical talents, the way she should have at the first sound of the shots, if she'd been thinking clearly. The gunman lay on his side, and began to stir again.

Butters wheezed, “Clear,” and touched both ends of the naked wires in his hands to the gunman's chest.

The wires ran back to the emergency defib unit. When they'd been melted off the paddles, it had left several strands of pure copper naked on the ends of both of them. The current did what current does, and the gunman bucked in agony for a second and sagged into immobility again.

“Jerk,” Butters wheezed. He put a hand on the small of his back and said, “Ow. Ow, ow, ow, OW!”

“Butters!” Molly croaked, and hugged him.

“Urgckh,” Butters said. “Ow.” But he didn't look displeased at the hug.

“Grasshopper, don't strain him until we know how bad it is,” I said. “Dammit.” I started fumbling with the straps, getting them clear of my upper body so I could sit up and work on my legs. “Forthill? Are you all right?”

Father Forthill said something unintelligible and let out a groan of pain. Then he heaved himself to his feet and started helping me with the buckles. His jaw was purple and swollen on one side. He'd taken one hell of a hit and stayed conscious. Tough old guy, even though he looked so mild.

I got off the backboard, onto my feet, and picked up the gun.

“I'm all right,” Butters said. “I think.” His eyes went wide and he suddenly seemed to panic. “Oh, God, make sure I'm all right!” He started clawing at his shirt. “That maniac freaking shot me!”

He got the scrubs top off and turned around to show Molly his back. He was wearing an undershirt.

And on top of that, he was wearing a Kevlar vest. It was a light, underclothing garment, suitable only for protection against handguns—but the gunman had walked in with a nine-millimeter. He'd put both shots onto the centerline of Butters's lower back, and the vest had done its job. The rounds were still there, flattened and stuck in the ballistic weave.

“I'm hit, aren't I?” Butters stuttered. “I'm in shock. I can't feel it because I'm in shock. Right? Was it in the liver? Is the blood black? Call emergency services!”

“Butters,” I said. “Look at me.”

He did, his eyes wide.

“Polka,” I said, “will never die.”

He blinked at me. Then he nodded and started forcing himself to take slower, deeper breaths. “I'm all right?”

“The magic underwear worked,” I said. “You're fine.”

“Then why does my back hurt so much?”

“Somebody just hit it twice with a hammer moving about twelve hundred feet per second,” I said.

“Oh,” he said. He turned to look at Molly, who nodded at him and gave him an encouraging smile. Then he shuddered and closed his eyes in relief. “I don't think I'm temperamentally suited for the action thing.”

“Yeah. Since when are you the guy in the bulletproof vest?” I asked him.

Butters nodded at Molly. “I put it on about ten seconds after she called me and said you needed help,” he said. He fumbled a small case from his pocket and opened it. “See? I got chalk, and holy water, and garlic, too.”

I smiled at him, but felt a little bit sick. The gunman had put Butters down for the simple reason that he had been blocking the shooter's line of sight to the room. If he'd been trying for Butters, the two shots to clear his sight line would have included a third shot to the back of Butters's head. Of course, if Butters hadn't been in the way, my head wouldn't have fared any better than his.

We're all so damned fragile.

Footsteps sounded outside the door, and I raised the gun to cover it, taking a grip with both hands, my feet centered. I was lining up the little green targeting dots when Sanya came through the door carrying a platter of sandwiches. He stopped abruptly and lifted both eyebrows, then beamed broadly. “Dresden! You are all right.” He looked around the room for a moment, frowning, and said, “Did I miss something? Who is that?”

“I don't think there's anything broken,” Butters told Forthill, “but you'd better get an X-ray, just to be sure. Mandibular fracture isn't anything to play around with.”

The old priest nodded from his chair in the living quarters of the church's residents, and wrote something down on a little pad of paper. He showed it to Butters.

The little guy grinned. “You're welcome, Father.”

Molly frowned and asked, “Should we take him to the emergency room?”

Forthill shook his head and wrote on his notepad: *Things to tell you first.*

Now I had a pair of guns I'd swiped from bad guys: the security guard's .40-caliber and the gunman's nine-millimeter. I was inspecting them both on the coffee table, familiarizing myself with their function, and wondering if I should be planning to file off the serial numbers or something. Mouse sat next to me, his flank against my leg and his serious brown eyes watching me handle the weapons.

“You found out something?” I asked Forthill.

In a way, he wrote back. *There are major movements afoot throughout South and Central America. The Red Court's upper echelon uses human servitors to interface with mortals. Many of these individuals have been sighted at airports in the past three days. All of them are bound for Mexico. Does Chichén Itzá have any significance to you?*

Chapter Thirty-three

“Give me the details,” I said quietly.

“She said you’d be here. Gave me twenty thousand up front, twenty more held in escrow until delivery was confirmed.”

Mouse made a soft, uncomfortable noise that never quite became a whine. He sat watching my face intently.

“When?” I asked.

“Last night.”

I stared at him for a moment. Then I tossed Stevie’s wallet back onto the folding card table and said, “Cut him loose. Walk him to the door.”

Sanya let out what seemed like a disappointed sigh. Then he produced a knife and began cutting Stevie free.

I walked down the hall, back toward the living area with my head bowed, thinking furiously.

Susan had hired a gunman to kill me. Why?

I stopped walking and leaned against a wall. Why would she hire someone to kill me? Or, hell, more to the point—why would she hire a *gunman* to kill me? Why not someone who stood a greater chance of success?

Granted, a gunman could kill even a wizard if he were taken by surprise. But pistols had to be fired at dangerously short ranges to be reliable, and Stevie D had a reputation as a brazen sidearm specialist. It meant that the wizard would have more time to see something bad coming, as opposed to being warned only when a high-powered rifle round hit his chest, and would have an easier time responding with hasty defensive magic. It was hardly an ideal approach.

If Susan wanted me dead, she wouldn’t really need to contract it out. A pretext to get me alone and another one to put us very close to each other would just about do it. And I’d never see that one coming.

Something about this just wasn’t right. I’d have called Stevie a liar, but I didn’t think he was one. I was sure he believed what he was saying.

So. Either Stevie was lying and I was just too dim to pick up on it, or he was telling the truth. If he was lying, given what kind of hot water I could get him into, he was also an idiot. I didn’t think he was one of those. If he was telling the truth, it meant . . .

It meant that either Susan really had hired someone to kill me, or else someone who could look like Susan had done business with Stevie D. If Susan had hired someone to kill me, why this guy, in particular? Why hire someone who didn’t have better than even chances of pulling it off? That was more the kind of thing Esteban and Esmerelda would come up with.

That worked a lot better. Esmerelda’s blue and green eyes could have made Stevie remember being hired by Mister Snuffleupagus, if that was what she wanted. But how would she have known where to find me? Had they somehow managed to tail Sanya back to the church from my apartment without being noticed by Mouse?

And just where the hell were Susan and Martin? They’d had more than enough time to get here. So why weren’t they?

Someone was running a game on me. If I didn’t start getting some answers to these questions, I had a bad feeling that it was going to turn around and bite me on the ass at the worst moment imaginable.

Right, then.

I guessed that meant it was time to go get some answers.

Paranoia is a survival trait when you run in my circles. It gives you something to do in your spare time, coming up with solutions to ridiculous problems that aren’t ever going to happen. Except when one of them does, at which point you feel way too vindicated.

For instance, I had spent more than a couple of off hours trying to figure out how I might track someone through Chicago if I didn’t have some kind of object or possession of theirs to use as a focus. Basic tracking magic is completely dependent upon having a sample of whoever it is you want to follow. Hair, blood, and nail clippings are the usual thing. But let’s say you don’t have any of those, and you still want to find someone. If you have a sample of something in their possession, a piece snipped from their clothing, the tag just torn out of their underwear, whatever, you can get them that way, too.

But let’s say things are hectic and crazy and someone has just burned down your house and your lab and you still need to follow somebody.

That’s when you need a good, clear photograph. And minions. Lots of minions. Preferably ones who don’t demand exorbitant wages.

There’s a Pizza ‘Spress less than two blocks from St. Mary’s. Sanya and I went straight there. I ordered.

“I do not see how this helps us,” Sanya said, as I walked out from the little shop with four boxes of pizza.

“You’re used to solving all your problems the simple way,” I said. “Kick down the door, chop up everybody who looks fiendish, save everyone who looks like they might need it. Yeah?”

“It is not always that simple,” Sanya said, rather stiffly. “And sometimes I use a gun.”

“Which I applaud you for, very progressive,” I said. “But the point is, you do your work directly. You pretty much know where you’re going, or get shown the way, and after that it’s just up to you to take care of business.”

“Da,” Sanya said as we walked. “I suppose.”

“My work is sort of the same,” I said. “Except that nobody ever points the way for me.”

“You need to know where to go,” Sanya said.

“Yes.”

“And you are going to consult four large pizzas for guidance.”

“Yes,” I said.

The big man frowned for a moment. Then he said, “There is, I think, humor here which does not translate well from English into sanity.”

“That’s pretty rich coming from the agnostic Knight of the Cross with a holy Sword who takes his orders from an archangel,” I said.

“Gabriel could be an alien being of some kind,” Sanya said placidly. “It does not change the value of what I do—not to me and not to those whom I protect.”

“Whom,” I said, with as much Russian accent as I could fit into one word. “Someone’s been practicing his English.”

Sanya somehow managed to look down his nose at me, despite the fact that I was several inches taller. “I am only saying that I do not need the written code of a spiritual belief to act like a decent human being.”

“You are way kookier than me, man,” I said, turning into an alley. “And I talk to pizza.”

I laid out the four pizza boxes on top of four adjacent trash cans, and glanced around to be sure no one was nearby. It was getting near to lunch break, and it wasn’t the best time for what I was about to do, but it ought to work. I turned to look up and down the alley as best I could, drew a breath, and then remembered something.

“Hey, Sanya. Stick your fingers in your ears?”

The big Russian stared at me. “What?”

“Your fingers,” I said, wiggling all of mine, “in your ears.” I pointed to mine.

“I understand the words, obviously, as I am someone who has been practicing his English. Why?”

“Because I’m going to say something to the pizza and I don’t want you to hear it.”

Sanya gave the sky a single, long-suffering glance. Then he sighed and put his fingers in his ears.

I gave him a thumbs-up, turned away, cupped my hands around my mouth so that no one could lip-read, and began to murmur a name, over and over again, each utterance infused with my will.

I had to repeat the name only a dozen times or so before a shadow flickered overhead, and something the size of a hunting falcon dropped out of the sky, blurred wings humming, and hovered about two feet in front of me.

“*Bozhe moi!*” Sanya spluttered, and *Esperacchius* was halfway from its sheath by the time he finished speaking.

I couldn’t stop myself from saying, “There’s some real irony in your using that expression, O Knight of Maybe.”

“Go ahead!” piped a shrill voice, like a Shakespearean actor on helium. “Draw your sword, knave, and we will see who bleeds to death from a thousand tiny cuts!”

Sanya stood there with his mouth open and his sword still partly in its sheath. “It is . . .” He shook his head as if someone had popped him in the nose. “It is . . . a *domovoi*, *da?*”

The little faerie in question stood nearly fifteen full inches in height, appearing as a slender, athletic youth with the blurring wings of a dragonfly standing out from his shoulders and a tuft of hair like lavender dandelion fluff. He was dressed in garments that looked like they’d been thugged from someone’s old-school G.I. Joe doll, an olive-drab jump-suit with the sleeves removed and holes cut through it for his wings. He wore a number of weapons about his person, most of them on nylon straps that looked like they’d been lifted from convention badges. He

was carrying one letter opener shaped like a long sword at his side and two more, crossed over each other, on his back. I'd given him the letter opener set last Christmas, advising him to keep half of them stashed somewhere safe, as backup weapons.

"Domovoi?" the little faerie shrilled, furious. "Oh, no, you didn't!"

"Easy there, Major General," I said. "Sanya, this is Major General Toot-toot Minimus, the captain of my house guard. Toot, this is my boon companion Sanya, Knight of the Cross, who has faced danger at my side. He's okay."

The faerie quivered with outrage. "He's Russian! And he doesn't even know the difference between a *domovoi* and a *polevoi* when he sees one two feet away!" Toot-toot let out a blistering string of words in Russian, shaking a finger at the towering Knight.

Sanya listened in bemusement at first, but then blinked, slid his sword away, and held up both hands. He said something that sounded somber and very formal, and only then did Toot's ire seem to abate. He said one or two more harsh-sounding words toward Sanya, added a flick of his chin that screamed, *So there*, and turned back to me.

"Toot," I said. "How is it that you speak Russian?"

He blinked at me. "Harry," he said, as if the question made no sense at all, "you just *speak* it, don't you. I mean, come on." He gave me a formal bow and said, "How may I serve you, my liege?"

I peered at him a bit more closely. "Why is half your face painted blue?"

"Because we're Winter now, my liege!" Toot said. His eyes darted to the side and down several times. "And . . . say, that doesn't mean we have to eat the pizza cold, does it?"

"Of course not," I said.

Toot looked relieved. "Oh. Good. Um. What were we talking about?"

"I have a job for you," I said, "and for everyone you can get to help." I nodded at the pizza. "Standard rates."

"Very good, my liege," Toot said, saluting. His eyes slid down again. "Maybe someone ought to check the pizza. You know. For poison and things. It would look real bad if someone poisoned your vassals, you know."

I eyed him askance. Then I held up a finger and said, "All right. *One* piece. And after—Ack!"

Toot hit the pizza box like a great white shark taking a seal. He slammed into it, one bright sword slashing the top off of the box. Then he seized the largest piece and began devouring with a will.

Sanya and I both stood there, fascinated. It was like watching a man try to eat a pizza slice the size of a small car. Pieces flew up and were skewered on his blade. Sauce got everywhere, and it gave me a gruesome little flashback to the Stone Table.

"Harry?" Sanya asked. "Are you all right?"

"Will be soon," I said.

"This creature serves you?" Sanya asked.

"This one and about a hundred smaller ones. And five times that many part-timers I can call in once in a while." I thought about it. "It isn't so much that they serve me as that we have a business arrangement that we all like. They help me out from time to time. I furnish them with regular pizza."

"Which they . . . love," Sanya said.

Toot spun in a dizzy, delighted circle on one heel, and fell onto his back with perfectly unself-conscious enthusiasm, his tummy sticking out as far as it could. He lay there for a moment, making happy, gurgling sounds.

"Well," I said. "Yes."

Sanya's eyes danced, though his face was sober. "You are a drug dealer. To tiny faeries. Shame."

I snorted.

"What was that he said about Winter?" Sanya asked.

"Harry's the new Winter Knight!" Toot-toot burred. "Which is fantastic! The old Winter Knight mostly just sat around getting tortured. He never went on adventures or *anything*."

He paused and added, "Unless you count going crazy, I guess."

"Toot," I said. "I'm . . . kind of trying to keep the Winter Knight thing low-profile."

"Okay," Toot said. "Why?"

I glanced from the little faerie to Sanya. "Look, I, uh . . . It's personal, okay, and—"

"Because every creature in Faerie got to see the ceremony," Toot said proudly. "Mab made sure of it! It was reflected in all the streams and ponds and lakes and puddles and every little drop of water!"

I stared at the engorged faerie, at something of a loss for words. "Um," I said. "Oh. How . . . very, very disturbing."

"Did it hurt when you kissed Mab?" Toot asked. "Because I always thought her lips looked so cold that they would burn. Like streetlamps in winter!" Toot sat up suddenly, his eyes

wide. "Ooooooh. Did your *tongue* get stuck to her, like on that Christmastime show?"

"Okayyyyy," I said with forced cheer, clapping my hands. "Way, way too personal. Um. The job. I have a job for you."

Toot-toot leapt up to his feet. His stomach was already constricting back toward its normal size. "Yes, my liege!"

Where the hell did he put it all? I mean . . . it just wasn't *possible* for him to eat that much pizza and then . . . I shook my head. Now wasn't the time.

I produced my picture of Susan. "This human is somewhere in Chicago. I need your folk to find her. She's probably accompanied by a human man with blond hair, about the same size she is."

Toot took to his wings again and zoomed down to the picture. He picked it up and held it out at arm's length, studying it, and nodded once. "May I have this, my lord, to show the others?"

"Yeah," I said. "Be careful with it, though. I want it back."

"Yes, my liege!" Toot said. He brandished his sword with a flourish, sheathed it, and zipped straight up into the October sky.

Sanya stood looking steadily at me.

I coughed. I waited.

"So," he said. "Mab."

I grunted vaguely in reply.

"You hit that," Sanya said.

I did not look at him. My face felt red.

"You"—he scrunched up his nose, digging in his memory—"tapped that ass. Presumably, it was phat."

"Sanya!"

He let out a low, rolling laugh and shook his head. "I saw her once. Mab. Beautiful beyond words."

"Yeah," I said.

"And dangerous."

"Yes," I said, with emphasis.

"And you are now her champion," he said.

"Everybody's gotta be something, right?"

He nodded. "Joking about it. Good. You will need that sense of humor."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because she is cold, Dresden. She knows wicked secrets Time himself has forgotten. And if she chose you to be her Knight, she has a plan for you." He nodded slowly. "Laugh whenever you can. Keeps you from killing yourself when things are bad. That and vodka."

"That some kind of Russian saying?" I asked.

"Have you seen traditional folk dances?" Sanya asked. "Imagine them being done by someone with a bottle of vodka in them. Laughter abounds, and you survive another day." He shrugged. "Or break your neck. Either way, it is pain management."

His voice sounded almost merry, though the subject matter was grim as hell. If not more so.

I had expected him to try to talk me out of it. Or at least to berate me for being an idiot. He didn't do either. There was a calm acceptance of terrible things that was part and parcel of Sanya's personality. No matter how bad things got, I didn't think anything would ever truly faze him. He simply accepted the bad things that happened and soldiered on as best he could.

There was probably a lesson for me in there, somewhere.

I was quiet for a while before I decided to trust him. "I get to save my girl first," I said. "That was the deal."

"Ah," he said. He seemed to mull it over and nodded. "That is reasonable."

"You really think that?"

He lifted both eyebrows. "The child is your blood, is she not?"

I nodded and said quietly, "She is."

He spread his hands, as if it were a self-evident fact that needed no further exploration. “As horrible fates go, that is a good one,” he said. “Worthwhile. Save your little girl.” He clapped me on the shoulder. “If you turn into a hideous monster and I am sent to slay you, I will remember this and make it as painless as I can, out of respect for you.”

I knew he was joking. I just couldn’t tell which part of it he was joking about. “Uh,” I said. “Thanks.”

“It is nothing,” he said. We stood around quietly for another five minutes before he frowned, looking at the other pizza boxes, and asked, “Is there some purpose for the rest of th—”

A scene out of *The Birds* descended upon the alley. There was a rush of wing-beaten wind, and hundreds of tiny figures flashed down onto the pizza. Here and there I would spot one of the Pizza Lord’s Guard, recognizable thanks to the orange plastic cases of the box knives they had strapped to their backs. The others went by in twinkles and flashes of color, muted

by the daylight but beautiful all the same. There were a *lot* of the Little Folk involved. If I’d been doing this at night, it might have induced a seizure or something.

The Little Folk love pizza. They love it with a passion so intense that it beggars the imagination. Watching a pizza being devoured was sort of like watching a plane coming apart in midair on those old WWII gun camera reels. Bits would fleck off here and there, and then suddenly in a rush, bits would go flying everywhere, each borne away by the individual fairy who had seized it.

It was over in less than three minutes.

Seriously. Where do they *put* it?

Toot came to hover before me and popped a little fistful of pizza into his mouth. He gulped it down and saluted.

“Well, Major General?” I asked.

“Found her, my liege,” Toot reported. “She is a captive and in danger.” Sanya and I traded a look.

“Where?” I asked him.

Toot firmly held up the picture, still in one piece, and two strands of dark hair, each curled into its own coil of rope in his tiny hands. “Two hairs from her head, my liege. Or if it is your pleasure, I will guide you there.”

Sanya drew his head back a little, impressed. “They found her? That quickly?”

“People underestimate the hell out of the Little Folk,” I said calmly. “Within their limits, they’re as good as or better than anything else I know for getting information—and there are a

lot of them around Chicago who are willing to help me out occasionally.”

“Hail the Pizza Lord!” Toot-toot shrilled.

“Hail the Pizza Lord!” answered a score of piping voices that came from no apparent source. The Little Folk can be all but invisible when they want to be.

“Major General Minimus, keep this up and I’m making you a full general,” I said.

Toot froze. “Why? Is that bad? What did I do?”

“It’s good, Toot. That’s higher than a major general.”

His eyes widened. “There’s *higher*?”

“Oh, yeah, definitely. And you’re on the fast track for the very top.” I took the hairs from him and said, “We’ll get the car. Lead us to her, Toot.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good,” Sanya said, grinning. “Now we know where to go and have someone to rescue. This part I know how to do.”

Chapter Thirty-four

“Admittedly,” Sanya said a few minutes later, “normally I do not storm headquarters buildings of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And in broad daylight, too.”

We were parked down the block from the FBI’s Chicago office, where Toot had guided us, crouched on the dashboard and demanding to know why Sanya hadn’t rented one of the cars that could fly instead of the poky old landbound minivan he had instead. Toot hadn’t taken the answer that “cars like that are imaginary” seriously, either. He had muttered a few things in Russian that only made Sanya’s smile wider.

“Damn,” I said, staring at the building. “Toot? Was Martin with her?”

“The yellow-hair?” Toot sat on the dashboard facing us, waving his feet. “No, my liege.”

I grunted. “I don’t like that, either. Why wouldn’t they have been taken together? Which floor is she on, Toot?”

“There,” Toot said, pointing. I leaned over and hunkered down behind him so that I could look down the length of his little arm to the window he was pointing at.

“Fourth,” I said. “That was where Tilly was talking to me.”

Sanya reached down to produce a semiautomatic he’d hidden beneath the seat of the minivan and cycled a round into the chamber, his eyes glued to the outside mirror. “Company.”

A bald, slightly overweight bum in a shabby overcoat and cast-off clothing shambled down the sidewalk with vacant eyes—but he was moving a little too purposefully toward us to be genuine. I was watching his hands with my shield bracelet ready to go, expecting him to pull a weapon out from beneath the big coat, and it wasn’t until he was a few steps away that I realized it was Martin.

He stopped on the sidewalk next to the passenger window of the van and wobbled in place. He rapped on the glass and held out his hand as if begging a handout. I rolled down the window and asked him, “What happened?”

“The FBI did its legwork,” he said. “They tracked our rental car back to my cover ID, got my picture, put it on TV. One of the detectives we shook down confirmed my presence and told them I’d been seen at your place, and they were waiting there when we came back to get you. Susan created a distraction so that I could get away.”

“And you left her behind, huh?”

He shrugged. “Her identity is genuine, and while they know she arrived with me and was seen with me, they can’t prove that she’s done anything. I’ve been operating long enough that the Red Court has seen to it that I’m on multiple international lists of wanted terrorists. If I were caught, both of us would have been taken.”

I grunted. “What did you find out?”

“The last of the Red King’s inner circle arrived this morning. They’ll do the ceremony tonight,” he said. “Midnight, or a little after, if our astronomer’s assessment is solid.”

“Crap.”

Martin nodded. “How fast can you get us there?”

I touched a fingertip to my mother’s gem and double-checked the way there. “This one doesn’t have a direct route. Three hops, a couple of walks, one of them in bad terrain. Should take us ninety minutes, gets us to within five miles of Chichén Itzá.”

Martin looked at me for a long moment. Then he said, “I can’t help but find it somewhat convenient that you are suddenly able to provide that kind of fast transport to exactly the places we need to go.”

“The Red Court had their goodies stashed near a confluence of ley lines,” I said, “a point of ample magical power. Chichén Itzá is at another such confluence, only a lot bigger. Chicago is a crossroads, both physically and metaphysically. There are dozens of confluences either in the town or within twenty- five miles. The routes I know through the Nevernever mostly run from confluence to confluence, so Chicago’s got a direct route to a lot of places.”

Sanya made an interested sound. “Like the airports in Dallas or Atlanta. Or here. Travel nexuses.”

“Exactly.”

Martin nodded, though he didn’t look like he particularly believed or disbelieved me. “That gives us a little more than nine hours,” he said.

“The Church is trying to get us information about local security at Chichén Itzá. Meet me at St. Mary of the Angels.” I handed him the change scrounged from my pockets. “Tell them Harry Dresden said you were no Stevie D. We’ll leave from there.”

“You . . .” He shook his head a little. “You got the Church to help you?”

“Hell, man. I got a Knight of the Cross driving me around.”

Sanya snorted.

Martin studied Sanya with eyes that were a little wide. “I . . . see.” A certain energy seemed to enter him as he nodded, and I knew exactly what he was feeling—the positive upswing in his emotions, an electricity that came with the sudden understanding that not only was death not certain, but that victory might actually be possible.

Hope is a force of nature. Don’t let anyone tell you different.

Martin nodded. “What about Susan?”

“I’ll get her out,” I said.

Martin ducked his head in another nod. Then he took a deep breath and said simply, “Thank you.” He turned and shambled away drunkenly, clutching his coins.

“Seems a decent fellow,” Sanya said. His nostrils flared a little. “Half-vampire, you say? Fellowship of St. Giles?”

“Yeah. Like Susan.” I watched Martin vanish into Chicago’s lunchtime foot traffic and said, “I’m not sure I trust him.”

“I would say the feeling is mutual,” Sanya said. “When a man lives a life like Martin’s, he learns not to trust anyone.”

I grunted sourly. “Stop being reasonable. I enjoy disliking him.”

Sanya chuckled and said, “So. What now?”

I took the guns out of my duster pockets and stowed them beneath the minivan’s passenger seat. “You go back to St. Mary’s. I go in and get Susan and meet you there.”

Sanya lifted his eyebrows. “You get her from in there?”

“Sure.”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully, then shrugged. “Okay. I suppose it is your funeral, *da?*”

I nodded firmly. “*Da.*”

Chapter Thirty-five

By the time Murphy and I had moved into the hall, gunfire had erupted on the floors below us. It didn't sound like much—simple, staccato thumping sounds—but anyone who'd heard shots fired in earnest would never mistake them for anything else. I hoped that nobody was carrying rounds heavy enough to come up through the intervening floors and nail me. There just aren't any minor injuries to be had from something like that.

"Those screams," Murphy said. "Red Court, right?"

"Yeah. Where's Susan?"

"Interrogation room, that way." She nodded to the left, and I took the lead. I walked with my shoulder brushing the left-hand wall. Murph, after dragging the sputtering Rudolph out of the office, walked a step behind me and a pace to my right, so that she could shoot past me if she had to. We'd played this game before. If something bad came for us, I'd stand it off long enough to give her a clean shot.

That would be critical, buying her the extra second to place her shot. Vampires aren't immune to the damage bullets cause, but they can recover from anything but the most lethal hits, and they know it. A Red Court vampire would almost always be willing to charge a mortal gunman, knowing how difficult it is to really place a shot with lethal effect, especially with a howling monster rushing toward you. You needed a hit square in the head, severing the spine, or in their gut, rupturing the blood reservoir, to really put a Red Court vampire down—and they could generally recover, even from those wounds, with enough time and blood to feed upon.

Murphy knew exactly what she was shooting at and had proved that she could be steady enough to deal with a Red—but the other personnel in the building lacked her knowledge and experience.

The FBI was in for a real bad day.

We moved down the hall, quick and silent, and when a frightened-looking clerical type stumbled out of a break room doorway toward us, I nearly sent a blast of flame through him. Murphy had her badge hanging around her neck, and she instructed him to get back inside and barricade the door. He was clearly terrified, and responded without question to the tone of calm authority in Murph's voice.

"Maybe we should do that," Rudolph said. "Get in a room. Barricade the door."

"They've got a heavy with them," I said to Murphy as I took the lead again. "Big, strong, fast. Like the loup- garou. It's some kind of Mayan thing, an Ik-something-or-other."

Murphy cursed. "How do we kill it?"

"Not sure. But daylight seems a pretty good bet." We were passing down a hallway that had several offices with exterior windows. The light of the autumn afternoon, reduced by the occasional curtain, created a kind of murky twilight to move through, and one that my ambient blue wizard light did little to disperse.

Eerier than the lighting was the silence. No air ducts sighed. No elevators rattled. No phones rang. But twice I heard gunshots—the rapid *bang-bang-bang* of practically useless

panic fire. Vampires shrieked out their hunting cries several different times. And the *thub-dub* of the Ick's bizarre heartbeat was steady, omnipresent—and slowly growing louder.

"Maybe we need a lot of mirrors or something," Murphy said. "Bring a bunch of daylight in."

"Way harder to do than it looks in the movies," I said. "I figure I'll just blow open a hole in the side of the building." I licked my lips. "Crud, uh. Which way is south? That'll be the best side to do it on."

"You're threatening to destroy a federal building!" Rudolph squeaked.

Gunshots sounded somewhere close—maybe on the third floor, directly below us. Maybe on the other side of the fourth floor, muffled by a lot of cubicle walls.

"Oh, God," Rudolph whimpered. "Oh, dear, sweet Jesus." He just started repeating that in a mindlessly frightened whisper.

"Aha," I said as we reached the interrogation room. "We have our Cowardly Lion. Cover me, Dorothy."

"Remind me to ask what the hell you're talking about later," Murphy said.

I started to open the door, but paused. Tilly was armed, presumably smart enough to be scared, and it probably wasn't the best idea in the world to just open the door of the room and

scare him. So I moved as far as possible to one side, reached way over to the door, and knocked. In code, even. *Shave and a haircut.*

Chapter Thirty-six

I stared up at the Erlking, and with my typical pithy brilliance said, “Uh-oh.”

The Erlking chuckled, a deep sound. It echoed around the hall, resonating from the stone, amplified into subtle music. If I’d had any doubts that I was standing at the heart of the Erlking’s power, that laugh and the way the hall had responded in harmony took care of them for me. “It seems, my kin, that we have guests.”

More chuckles rose up from a thousand throats, and evil red eyes crinkled with amusement.

“I confess,” the Erlking said, “that this is a . . . unique event. We are unaccustomed to visitors here. I trust you will be patient whilst I blow the dust from the old courtesies.”

Again, the goblins laughed. The sound seemed to press directly against whatever nerve raised the hairs on my arms.

The Erlking rose, smooth and silent despite his armor and his mass, and descended from the dais. He walked around to loom over us, and I took note of the huge sword at his side, itsommel and hilt bristling with sharp metal protrusions that looked like thorns. He studied us for a moment and then did two things I hadn’t really expected.

First, he took off his helmet. The horns were, evidently, fixed to the dark metal. I braced myself to view something horrible but . . . the Lord of Goblins was nothing like what I had expected.

Upon his face, the hideous asymmetries of the goblins of his hall were all reflected and somehow transformed. Though he, too, shared the irregular batch of features, upon him their fundamental repulsiveness was muted into a kind of roguish distinction. His crooked nose seemed something that might have been earned rather than gifted. Old, faint scars marred his face, but only added further grace notes to his appearance. Standing there before the Erlking, I felt as if I were looking at something handcrafted by a true master, perhaps carved from a piece of twisted drift-wood, given its own odd beauty, and then patiently refined and polished into something made lovely by its sheer, unique singularity.

There was power in that face, too, in his simple presence. You could feel it in the air around him, the tension and focus of a pure predator, and one who rarely failed to bring down his prey.

The second thing he did was to bow with inhuman elegance, take Susan’s hand, and bend to brush his lips across the backs of her fingers. She stared at him with wide eyes that were more startled than actually afraid, and she kept her smile going the whole time.

“Lady huntress,” he said. “The scent of fresh blood hangs upon you. Well does it become your nature.”

He looked at me and smiled, showing his teeth, which were white and straight and even, and I had to fight to keep from flinching from his gaze. The Erlking had a score to settle with me. I had better come up with a plan, and fast, or I was a dead man.

“And the new Knight of Winter,” he continued. “I nearly had thee at Arctis Tor, when the ogres caught up to thee upon the slopes. Hadst thou departed but threescore heartbeats later . . .” He shook his head. “Thou art an intriguing quarry, Sir Knight.”

I bowed to the Erlking in what I hoped was a respectful fashion. “I do thank thee for the compliment, O King,” I said. “Though it is chance, not design, that brought me hither, I am humbled by thy generosity in accepting us into thine home as guests. Mine host.”

The Erlking cocked his head slightly to one side, and then his mouth turned up into another amused smile. “Ah. Caught out by mine own words, ’twould seem. Courtesy is not a close companion unto me, so perhaps it is meet that in a duel of manners, thou wouldst have the advantage. And this hall honors cleverness and wisdom as much as strength.”

A murmur of goblin voices ran through the hall at his words, because I’d just done something impossibly impudent. I’d dropped myself into the dinner hall of the greatest hunter of Faerie—practically thrown myself onto a plate with an apple in my mouth, in fact—and then used an idle slip of his tongue to claim the ancient rights of protection as his guest, thus obligating him, as host, to uphold those responsibilities to me.

I’ve said it before. The customs of host and guest are a Big Deal to these people. It’s insane, but it’s who they are.

I bowed my head to him respectfully, rather than saying anything like, *Gee, it’s not often one of the fae gets outwitted by a lowly human*, which should be proof enough for anyone that I’m not entirely devoid of diplomatic skills. “I should not wish to intrude upon your hospitality any longer than is absolutely necessary, Lord of Hunters. With your goodwill, we will depart immediately and trouble you no more.”

“Do not listen to it, O Erlking,” called a woman’s clear soprano. It was easy to recognize Esmerelda. “It speaks honeyed words with a poisoned tongue, full intent upon deceiving you.”

The Erlking turned to regard the pair of vampires, still on their feet despite the efforts of the goblins who had initially attacked them. He studied them in complete silence for several seconds and then, after a glance at the fallen goblins near them, inclined his head. “Hunters of the Red Court, I bid ye continue. I listen. Pray tell me more.”

“Wiley game indeed, this wizard kin,” said Esteban. “It was well treed and out of tricks but for this shameful bid to escape the rightful conclusion of the hunt. With full intent did the wizard bring us here, into your demesne, intending to use you, O Erlking, to strike down his own foes.”

“When hunting a fox, one must be wary not to follow it into the great bear’s lair,” the Erlking replied. “This is common sense for any hunter, by my reckoning.”

“Well-spoken, Goblin King,” Esmerelda said. “But by this action, the wizard seeks to draw you into the war betwixt its folk and ours, for we hunt it upon the express wishes of our lord and master, as part of our rightly declared war.”

The Erlking’s red eyes narrowed and flicked back over to me. I could hear a low and angry undertone to his next words. “I desire naught of any other being, save to pursue my hunts in accordance with the ancient traditions without interference. I tell thee this aright, Sir Knight. Should this hunter’s words prove true, I will lay a harsh penalty upon thee and thine—one which the Powers will speak of in whispers of dread for a thousand years.”

I swallowed. I thought about it. Then I lifted my chin and said calmly, “I give thee my word, as Knight of the Winter Court, that I had no such intention when coming here. It was chance that brought this chase to thy hall, O Erlking. I swear it upon my power.”

The ancient fae stared hard at me for several more seconds, his nostrils flaring. Then he drew back his head slowly and nodded once. “So. I am given a riddle by my most thoughtful visitors,” he said, his voice rumbling. He looked from the Eebs and company back to Susan and me. “What to do with you all. For I wish not to encourage visits such as this one.” His mouth twisted in distaste. “Now I am reminded why I do not indulge in courtesy as do the Sidhe. Such matters delight them. I find that they pall swiftly.”

A very large, very powerful-looking goblin near the front of the hall said, “My king, render blood judgment upon them all. They are intruders in your realm. Place their heads upon your gates as a warning to any who would follow.”

A rumble of agreement ran through the crowd of goblins.

The Erlking seemed to muse on the idea for a moment.

“Or,” I offered, “such an act might invite more interference. The express servants of the king of the Red Court would surely be missed should they not return. The White Council of wizards would, I assure you, have very strong feelings about my own disappearance. To say nothing, of course, of Mab’s reaction. I’m still quite new, and she hasn’t yet tired of me.”

The Erlking waved a hand. “Nay, nay. The Knight caught my words fairly. Guests they are, Lord Ordulaka, and I will not cheapen my honor by betraying that ancient compact.” He narrowed his eyes. “Mmmm. Guests they are. Perhaps I should treat them most courteously. Perhaps I should insist that you remain my guests, to be cared for and entertained, for the next century.” He gave me a chilly little smile. “After all, you are all but the first visitors to my realm. I could understandably find it greatly insulting were you not to allow me the opportunity to honor you appropriately.”

The Eebs looked at each other and then both bowed sinuously to the Erlking. “Generous host,” Esteban said, “you honor us greatly. We should be pleased to stay as your guests for whatever length of time you feel appropriate.”

“Harry,” Susan hissed, tensing.

She didn’t need to explain it to me. A delay of even a few hours might mean Maggie’s death.

“Honored host,” I said. “Such a path would be no less than your due, given the . . . unanticipated nature of our visit. But I would beg you only to consider my obligations to my Lady Mab. I pursue a quest that I may not lay aside, and which she has bidden me complete. It hinges upon things that occur in mortal time, and were you to insist upon your rights as host, it could compromise my own honor. Something I know that you, as mine host, would never wish to do.”

The Erlking gave me a look that blended annoyance with amusement and said, “Few Winter Knights have had swords as swift as your tongue, boy. But I warn thee: name your Lady a third time and you will not like what follows.”

I hadn’t even thought of that. Hell’s bells, he was right. Speaking Mab’s name here, in the Nevernever, could indeed summon her. At which point not only would she be an intruder in another ruler’s domain, perhaps vulnerable to his power or influence, but she would be extremely annoyed with one overtaxed wizard for having brought her. The clashing of such Powers in simple proximity could prove dangerous, even deadly.

I bowed my head again and said, “Of course, mine host.”

A goblin about five feet tall, and so slender that it looked like a stiff wind might blow him down, appeared from the shadows and diffidently took the Erlking’s helmet. He began to turn to carry it away, paused, and suggested, in a spidery, whispering, unpleasant voice, “We are all predators here, my lord. Let it be settled in a trial of blood.”

The Erlking spread his hands, as if he felt the suggestion should have been self-evident to everyone present. “Of course, Raffurut. Again, thou hast given excellent service.”

The wispy goblin bowed at the waist and retreated to the shadows, his mouth curling up in a small smile.

“Oh,” I said. “Oh, crap.”

“What?” Susan asked.

I turned to speak quietly to her in a whisper pitched to register only to her more-than-human hearing, and hoped that the goblins didn't hear even better than that. "The Erlking can't harm us, or allow us to come to harm while we are his guests. Ditto for the Reds. But since we have competing claims that must be settled, he *can* establish a trial by combat to see who is correct—or at least, most committed to his version of the story."

Susan's eyes widened as she understood. "If we won't fight for our side of the story, he decides against us and for the Eebs."

I nodded. "At which point he can declare that we have abused his hospitality," I said. "And he will be free to kill us, probably without repercussion."

"But you just said—"

"M—The Winter Queen doesn't feel a thing for me," I said. "She might be annoyed. But this time next week, she'll barely remember me."

"But the Council—"

"I said they would feel strongly about it," I said. "I never said they'd be upset."

Susan's eyes got a little wider.

"A trial of skill, then," the Erlking said. "A match. The Knight and the lady huntress versus two of your own, Red hunters. Choose which will stand for your side of the issue." He clapped his hands once, a sound like a small cannon going off. "Prepare the hall."

Goblins leapt to obey, and cleared the long trestle tables outward with great energy and efficiency. Others began to rip at the stone with their bare, black-nailed hands. They tore it like wet earth, swiftly gouging out a great ring in the floor, a trench six inches wide, almost that deep, and thirty or forty yards across.

"We're hardly armed properly for such a trial, mine host," I said. "Whilst the Red hunters are fully equipped for battle as they are."

The Erlking spread his hands again. "Ah, but they are armed with what they deemed necessary to them for the hunt. And a true hunter never leaves himself unprepared for what the world may bring to face him. Do you say, perhaps, that you are no hunter after all?"

"No," Susan said at once. "Of course not."

The Erlking looked at her and gave her a nod of approval. "I am glad you find yourselves appropriately armed." He glanced over at the Eebs, who were discussing matters in furious whispers, probably employing a nonstandard use of pronouns. "Sooth, boy, you were quick enough at wordplay that I would fain feed thee and send thee on thy way, had you come here unpursued. But I will not rouse the wrath of the Lords of Outer Night lightly. A war with them would be a waste of dozens of excellent hunting moons." He shrugged. "So. Prove yourselves worthy, and you may be on your way."

I cleared my throat. "And our . . . fellow visitors?"

The Erlking didn't smile or otherwise change his expression, but I suddenly got creeped out enough to have to fight to keep from stepping away from him. "My hall is fully furnished to receive all manner of outsiders. There are rooms in these caves filled with clever devices meant for the amusement of my kin, and lacking only the appropriate . . . participants."

"What happens if we lose?" Susan asked.

"If fortune is kind, you will have clean deaths in the trial. If not . . ." He shrugged. "Certain of my kin—Rafforut, for example—are most eager to give purpose to all the rooms of my hall. You would amuse them for as long as you could respond. Which might be a very, very long time."

Susan eyed the Erlking. Then she said, "Let's do it, then. I, too, have promises to keep."

He inclined his head to her. "As you wish, lady huntress. Sir Knight, lady, please enter the circle."

I started toward it and Susan walked beside me.

"How should we do it?" she asked.

"Fast and hard."

Her voice turned wry. "How did I know you'd want it like that?"

I let out a short bark of genuine laughter. "I thought I was supposed to be the one with one thing on his mind."

"Oh, when we were younger, certainly," she replied. "Now, though, our roles have reversed."

"Meaning you want it fast and hard, too?"

She gave me a sly and very heated look with her dark eyes from beneath her dark lashes. "Let's just say that there's something to be said for that, once in a while." She spun the table leg in a few circles. I watched. She stopped and glanced at me, arching an eyebrow inquisitively.

My godmother might have tipped me off to a cure, a way to free Susan of the creature that had devoured half of her being and thirsted for me, something the Fellowship of St. Giles had been trying—and failing—to do for hundreds of years. It was possible that, with a bit more work, I could make it happen for her, give her back control of her life.

But even if I did, we couldn't be together. Not now.

Mab was bad enough . . . and Hell's bells, I hadn't even *thought* about it, I'd been so busy, but Mab's understudy, Maeve, the Winter Lady, was arguably more psychotic than Mab herself. And she was unarguably pet-tier, more vicious, and more likely to want to play games with anyone close to me.

I wondered how long it would take me to lose myself. Weeks? Months? Neither Mab nor Maeve would want me to remain my own man. I wondered if, when I was what they wanted me to be, it would bother me to remember what I had been. What others had meant to me.

All I said was, "I miss you."

She looked down and away, blinking. Then she gave me a rather hesitant smile as a tear fell—as if it were something she hadn't done in a while, and was still remembering how to accomplish it. "I miss joking with you."

"How could you do it?" I asked quietly. "How could you not tell me about her?"

"By tearing out a piece of myself," she said quietly. "I know it was wrong. I knew it was wrong when I did it, and that . . . that I was going to regret it someday. But I had to keep her safe. I'm not asking you to forgive. Just . . . just understand."

I thought about that moment of stillness and choice at the Stone Table.

"Yeah," I said. I lifted a hand and touched her face with my fingertips. Then I leaned over to kiss her forehead. "I do understand."

She stepped closer and we hugged. She felt surprisingly slender and fragile in my arms. We stayed that way for a little while, both of us feeling the fear of what was coming. We tried to ignore the hundreds of red eyes watching us. We more or less succeeded.

Another cannon clap of sound echoed around the vast hall, and the Erlking said, "Red hunters. Let your chosen champions enter the circle or else forfeit the trial."

"Okay," I said. "The Eebs will be tough but they're doable. They rely on stealth tactics, and this is going to be as straight up as you can get. I'm going to hit them with something that should give you enough time to close. Take whichever one is on the left. Move too far to the right and you'll be in my line of fire, so don't. You smash one, I burn the other, and we go get some custom coffee mugs to memorialize the occasion later."

Susan said, "I stopped drinking coffee. You know, the caffeine."

I looked at her with mock disgust. "You heathen."

"Fine!" Esmerelda said from the far side of the circle. She pointed a finger at one of the vampires trapped beneath the goblins' nets. "You. You do it." Impatiently, the tiny woman went to the trapped vampire, hideous and inhuman in its true form, and sliced through the odd material of the net with her nails, freeing the captive. Without ceremony, she pitched the vampire into the circle.

One of her foot soldiers? Okay. This might be easier than I'd thought.

Esteban appeared then, walking calmly forward.

The slowly accelerating *lub-dub* sound of the Devourer's unsettling heartbeat came with him. The Devourer loomed over Esteban, horrible and hungry-looking, and at a command from the vampire, it shambled forward into the circle, its all-black eyes staring at us with unnerving intensity. I might have been projecting or something, but it seemed to me that the Ick was spoiling for some payback.

"Oh, crap," Susan said in a very small voice.

"When the circle is closed," said the Erlking's deep baritone, "the trial begins. It will conclude when one party has been neutralized. Do the champions of the Red hunters stand ready?"

All of the vampires let out wailing shrieks, and even the Ick emitted a hissing burble, like an overfull teakettle.

"What are we going to do?" Susan whispered frantically.

I had no idea. "You take the scrub," my mouth said. "I'll handle the Devourer."

"Right," she said, her eyes wide. "Right."

The Erlking appeared, halfway between the two parties, standing outside the circle. "Sir Knight! Do you and the lady huntress stand ready?"

We both nodded sharply, though our eyes were fixed upon our opponents, not the Erlking. I began drawing in my will, and power seethed in my belly and chest and became an odd pressure behind my eyes.

The Erlking drew his sword and held it high, and every goblin in the place began roaring. Fire licked up the blade of the sword, wreathing it in green flame, and then he dropped the sword, thrusting its tip into the trough in the stone the goblins had dug.

Green goblin fire flared up with a howl and clouds of foul smoke. It raced around the exterior of the circle in both directions, until the two tongues of flame met at the point opposite where they had begun.

Susan screamed. I screamed. The vampire screamed. The Ick . . . did that teakettle thing.

And then we all started trying to kill one another.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Vampires and Icks are fast, but I'd duelled their like before. Like the apocryphal Loki, my previous opponents had learned that no matter how quick you are on your feet, you aren't faster than thought.

The spell I'd been holding ready lashed out before either of our opponents had moved more than a couple of feet, naked force howling out from my outstretched hand to seize not the Ick, but, in a sudden flash of inspiration, I directed it at the vampire beginning to bound along beside and a little behind it. Clearly, maybe even wisely, the vamp was hoping to stand in the Devourer's shadow when the hurt started flying.

I cried out, "*Forzare!*" and my raw will hammered the vampire down and at an oblique angle—directly in front of and beneath the feet of the Ick.

If you have no weapons with which to fight the enemy, find a way to make your enemy *be* your weapon. If you can pull it off, it makes you look amazing.

The vampire went under the Ick's feet with a wailing squeal and a crunchily-sounding splatter of vile fluids. The collision tripped up the massive hunting creature as its legs tangled with the vampire's rubbery, sinuous limbs, and the Ick came crashing to the ground, its unnatural drumbeat heart thudding loud and furious, swiping and smashing in fury at the entanglement without ever bothering to consider what it might be destroying.

Susan adjusted almost instantly to what had happened, and closed on the sprawling Ick with incredible speed. Her arm blurred as the Ick began recovering its balance, smashing her club straight down onto its skull and driving its head down to rebound from the floor.

The Ick took the hit like it was a love tap, slashing at Susan with its claws—but she had already bounded into the air, jerking her knees up to avoid the grabbing claws and flying clear over the Devourer to a roar of approval from the watching goblins. She landed in a baseball player's slide and shot forward over the gore-smeared stone, snapping one hand back to grab the throat of the downed vampire as she did.

The battered body came free of the Ick's limbs, minus a limb or two of its own, and thrashed weakly, slowing Susan's slide and stopping her forward motion a bare inch before her feet would have slid into the green flame surrounding the fighting ring.

The Ick whirled around as it staggered to its feet again, preparing to pursue her, when I lifted my blasting rod, snarled, "*Fuego,*" and hammered it with all the power I could shove through the magical focus. Blue-white fire, blindingly bright against the rather dim green flames of the Erlking's will, drew a group scream of surprise and discomfort from the gathered goblins. The fire struck the Ick and gouged a chunk of black, rubbery flesh the size of a watermelon out of the massive muscles of its back. Its head whipped back so sharply that the top of its head practically touched its own spine, and it lost its balance for another second or two, slipping on the gore the first vampire had provided as it turned toward me.

I dimly took note of Susan as this happened. The half-crushed, half-dismembered vampire flailed wildly with its remaining claws and fangs, putting up an insanelly desperate, vicious fight in an attempt to hang on to its life.

Susan took a hard blow to the side of the head, and when she turned back, her lip was bloodied, her teeth bared in a snarl, and the dark swirls and points of her tattoos began to spread over her face like black ink dripped upon water. She dropped the improvised club, got both hands on the vampire's throat, and, with calm, precise strength, thrust its head into the green fire.

There was a bloody explosion as that fire devoured the vampire, and though its heat had seemed no greater than any campfire's, the temperature within that fire had to be something as hot as the sun. As the vampire's skull entered it, it simply disintegrated with a howl of vaporized liquids, spattering tiny bits of bone like shrapnel and covering Susan and the dying vampire both in an enormous, dark, foul-smelling cloud.

"Susan!" I shouted, and darted over to one side so that I wouldn't be loosing blasts of fire blindly into that cloud if I missed. I hit the Devourer, gouging out a small trough in one of its arms, missed with the third blast, and scored with a fourth, burning a scorch mark as wide as my thigh across its hip. The drumbeat of its heart was a huge, pounding rhythm by now, like the double bass drums of a speed-metal band. The hits seemed only to make it more furious, and it shifted into a controlled forward rush meant to crowd me into the outer ring of fire or else leave me unable to escape its grasping claws.

But either the blow on the noggin or one of the blasts I'd unleashed had slowed the Ick down. I sprinted for the angle on its approach, for the path that would let me evade the Devourer and its outstretched claws, and got clear of its attack, beating the monster out on footwork and keeping from being trapped against the circle's perimeter as it came at me.

I found a fierce smile spreading over my lips as I moved. I kept hurling blasts at its legs as I ran, attempting to slow it even more. I didn't hit with more than a quarter of them, I think, but the missed bolts of fire splashed against the Erlking's green fire in sizzling bursts of light. The adrenaline made my senses crystalline, bringing me every sight and sound with a cold purity, and I suddenly saw where the Devourer was weakest.

Though it was hard to tell with its alien movement, I realized that it was favoring one side ever so slightly. I darted in for a better look, nearly got my head ripped off by a flailing fist, and saw that the Ick's leg was wounded, low on the back of its thigh, where the black flesh was twisted and mangled. Had it been mortal skin and tissue, I would have thought it the result of a severe burn—as long as whatever had done the burning had been molten-metal hot and shaped like Mouse's teeth. The Foo dog had gotten to the Ick during its encounter with Thomas, with a wound that had threatened to cripple it. That was why it had been forced to withdraw. If it stayed and Mouse had managed another such strike, it would have been entirely immobilized.

"Good luck this time, big guy," I heard myself say. "You've got nowhere to run."

The part of my mind that was still mostly sane thought the statement was utterly crazy. Maybe stupid, too. The Ick was still chasing *me*, after all. If it hit me once with one of those enormous, clawed hands, it would liquefy the bones under whichever part of my body it hit. (With the possible exception of my head. I maintain that all evidence seems to point to the fact that someone did one of those adamantium upgrades on my skull when I wasn't looking.)

I was scrambling and blasting away for all I was worth, and I couldn't keep up a pace like that forever. I was scoring on the Ick, maybe slowing it even more, but I wasn't even close to killing it.

It all came down to a simple question: Was the Ick better at taking it than I was at dishing it out? If so, then I was living on borrowed time, and the continuing onslaught of magic I threw at the thing amounted to an extremely high rate of interest.

Before I could find out, the fight changed.

The Ick made a painful-looking surge of effort, and got close enough to hit me. I barely got out of the way in time, almost fell, turned it into several spinning steps instead, and recovered my balance. The Ick turned to follow, and Susan burst out of the cloud of greasy smoke the instant it turned its back.

Her tattoos had flushed from black to a deep, deep crimson, and she moved with perfect grace and in perfect silence. So when she gracefully, silently swung that steel table leg at the side of the Ick's knee joint—on its unmarred leg, no less—it took the monster entirely off guard.

There was a sharp, terrible crack, a sound that I would have associated only with falling timber or possibly small-caliber gunfire if I'd heard it somewhere else. The steel bar smashed the Ick's knee unnaturally inward, until it made an angle of nearly thirty degrees.

It bellowed in agony and one arm swept back toward its attacker. The Ick hit Susan, and though it had been off balance, startled, and falling when it did so, it still knocked her ten feet backward and to the ground. Her club bounced out of her hand with a chiming, metallic clang, and tumbled, ringing like a tinny gong, into the circling flames.

The heat within the green fires sliced off half the table leg as neatly as any high-temperature torch possibly could have done. The colors of the flame briefly striated with tendrils of amber, violet, and coppery red. The severed end rolled free of the fire, and its edge was glowing white-hot.

I noticed it in the periphery of my heightened vision.

Susan had landed on the ground with her back twisted at an impossible angle.

The Ick lurched toward me as I stood there, frozen in shock for the briefest of instants. It was more than enough time for the Devourer to close, rake at me with its claws, and bat me twenty feet across the circle, all at the same time.

Again, the spells on my coat withstood the brute power of the Ick's claws, but this hadn't been a glancing blow, or incidental damage collected when it had tripped over me. This was

a full-on sledgehammer slam of the kind that had probably tossed the *Blue Beetle* onto Thomas's sports car du jour. It was exactly what I had dreaded, and as my body hit the ground, a kind of resolved calm washed over me, along with howls of goblin excitement.

I was a dead man. Simple as that. The only question was whether or not I would survive long enough to feel the pain that the shock of impact was delaying. And, of course, where to aim my death curse.

My limp arms and legs slowed my tumble and I wound up on my back with my hips twisted to one side as the Ick threw back its head and let out a burbling, teakettle scream. Its heart pounded like surreal thunder, and my body suddenly felt awash with cold, as if I'd landed in a pool of icy water. The Ick came at me, pain showing in its movements now. It howled and lifted both arms above its head, ready to smash them down onto my skull. I didn't have much time to use my death curse, said the little sane voice in my head.

And then another voice in my head, one far louder and more furious, screamed denial. My few glimpses of Maggie whirled through my mind, along with images of her death—or worse—at Arianna's hands. If I died here, there would be no one to take her out of darkness.

I had to try.

I thrust both fists at the Ick's least injured leg and let go with every energy ring I had left.

I guess from the outside it must have looked like one of those kung fu-type double fist strikes, though the only thing my actual fists were doing was collecting a new round of bruises and little scars. The energy released from the rings, though, kicked the Ick's leg so hard that it swept out parallel to the floor. The Ick toppled.

I rolled desperately, and escaped being crushed by its bulk by a hairbreadth. It landed in whistling agony.
And I suddenly saw a way to kill it that would never have been visible to me if I hadn't been flat on my back and looking up.
I raised the blasting rod to point at the ceiling above, deeply shadowed but still barely visible. It was a natural cavern roof. The floor might have been carved and polished smooth to host the Erlking's hall, but stalactites the size of city buses hung from the ceiling like some behemoth's grim teeth. I checked to be sure that Susan was on the far side of the circle, as far away as possible from what I was about to bring down.
Then I hurled my fear and rage at the base of a great stone fang that was almost directly overhead, and put almost everything I had left into it.
Blue-white fire screamed through the blasting rod, so intense that the rune-carved implement itself exploded into a cloud of glowing splinters. It hit the far-above stalactite with a thunderous concussion. Beside me, the Ick rose up and reached for my skull with one enormous hand.
I threw up my hands, hissed, "*Aparturum*," and, with the last of my will, ripped open the veil between the Erlking's hall and the material world, tearing open a circular opening maybe four feet across—and floating three feet off the ground and parallel to the floor, oriented so that its entry point was on its upper side. Then I curled up into a fetal position beneath that opening and tried to cover my head with my arms.

Tons and *tons* of stone tumbled down with slow, deadly grace. The Devourer's heartbeat redoubled its pace. Then there was an incredible noise, and the whole world was blotted away.

I lay there on my side for several moments, not daring to move. Stone fell for a while, maybe a couple of minutes, before the sounds of falling rocks slowly died away, like the pops from a pan of popcorn just before it starts to burn. Only, you know, rockier.

Only then did I allow myself to lift my head and look around.

I lay in a perfectly circular four-foot-across tomb that was maybe five feet deep. The sides of the tomb were perfectly smooth, though I could see from all the cracks and crevices that they were made from many mismatched pieces of rock, ranging from one the size of my fist to a boulder half as big as a car.

Above me, the open Way glowed slightly. All the stone that would have fallen on me had instead plunged through the open Way and back into the material world.

I took a deep breath and closed it again. I hoped that no one was hanging around wherever it was that Way emptied out. Maybe in the FBI cafeteria? No way to know, except to go through and look. I didn't want to face the collateral damage of something like that.

My sane brain pointed out that there was every chance that we weren't talking about falling stones at all. As matter from the spirit world, they would transform to simple ectoplasm when they reached the material world, unless ongoing energy was provided in order to preserve their solidity. I certainly hadn't been trying to pump any energy into the stones as they hit the Way. So odds were that I just dumped several dozen tons of slime onto a random spot in the FBI building—and slime that would evaporate within moments. It would grossly reduce the chances of inflicting injuries on some hapless FBI staffer.

I decided that my sanity and I could live with that.

I closed the Way with a wave of my hand and an effort of will, and slowly stood up. As I did, I realized that I felt a bit creaky, and that I was shaking with fatigue. But what I didn't feel was . . . pain.

I tried to dust myself off and get a good look at my injuries. I should have broken ribs. Ruptured organs. I should be bleeding all over the place.

But as far as I could tell, I didn't even have whiplash.

Was that Mab's power, running through me, wrapped around me? I didn't have any other explanation for it. Hell, when Susan and I had run from the FBI building, she had been the one to get winded first, while I felt no more need to breathe heavily than I would have had walking out to my mailbox. For that matter, I'd outrun the Devourer during this fight.

I thought I should probably feel disturbed by the sudden increase in my physical speed and toughness. But given what I'd had to pay for them, I couldn't feel anything but a certain sense of satisfaction. I would need every advantage I could get when I went to take Maggie away from the Red Court.

I looked up as the green fire of the fighting circle began to die away, and as it did the goblins of the hall erupted into an earsplitting, spine-chilling symphony of approving howls.

I climbed out of the hole, then over and around a couple of dump trucks' worth of rubble, and hurried over to Susan's side on the opposite end of the ring.

She lay limp and still. There were small cuts and bruises all over her. Her leather pants had hundreds of little holes in them—the shards of bone from the exploding vampire skull, I guessed. Her spine was bent and twisted. I couldn't tell how bad it was. I mean . . . Susan had always been fairly limber, and I had more reason to know than most. With her entire body limp like that, it was hard to say.

She was breathing, and her tattoos were still there, now bright scarlet. Her pulse was far too slow, and I wasn't sure it was steady. I leaned down and peeled back one eyelid.

Her eyes were black, all the way through.

I licked my lips. The tattoos were a warning indicator the Fellowship used. As Susan's vampire nature gained more influence over her actions, the tattoos appeared, solid black at first, but lightening to bright red as the vampire within gained more control. Susan wasn't conscious, but if she had been, she would have been insane with bloodlust. She'd nearly killed me the last time it had happened.

It was sort of what had started this whole mess, in fact.

Her body was covered in injuries of various sizes, and I thought I knew what was happening. It was instinctively drawing upon the vampire portion of her nature to restore her damaged flesh—but as she had not provided that nature with sustenance, it could offer her only limited assistance.

She needed blood.

But if she got it, woke up, and decided that she just had to have more . . . yikes.

Her breathing kept slowing. It caught for a moment, and I nearly panicked.

Then I shook my head, took my penknife from my duster's pocket, and opened a cut in my left palm, in an area where the old burn scars were thickest, and which still didn't have a lot of sensitivity.

I cupped my hand while I bled into my palm. Then, very carefully, I reached down and tipped my palm to carefully spill a few drops into Susan's mouth.

You would have thought I'd just run a current of electricity through her body. She quivered, went rigid, and then arched her back into a bow. Strange popping sounds came from her spine. Her empty black eyes opened and she gasped, then stared blindly, trying to find my hand again with her mouth, the way a suckling baby finds its meals. I held my hand over her mouth and let the blood trickle in slowly.

She surged in languid motion beneath my hand, savoring the blood as if it were chocolate, a massage, good sex, and a new car all rolled into one. Two minutes of slow, dreamy, arching motion later, her eyes suddenly focused on me and then narrowed. She snatched at my arm with her hands—and I drove my right fist into her face.

I didn't pull the punch, either. If her darker nature was allowed to continue, it would destroy her, killing me as a by-product of the process. Her head snapped back against the ground, and she blinked her eyes, stunned.

I stood up, took a few steps back, and stuffed my injured hand into my pocket. I was tired, and feeling shocky. My whole arm felt cold. I didn't stop falling back until I was sure I could hold in time to hold her off if she came at me.

I recognized it when Susan checked back in. Her breathing slowed, becoming controlled and steady. It took her four or five minutes of focus to push her darker self away from control, but eventually she did. She sat up slowly. She licked at her bloodstained lips and shuddered in slow ecstasy for a second before dashing her sleeve across her mouth and forcing herself to her feet. She looked around wildly, a terrible dread in her eyes—until she spotted me.

She stared at me for a moment, and then closed her eyes. She whispered, "Thank God."

I nodded to her and beckoned for her to stand at my side.

I waited until she reached me. Then we both turned to face the Erlking.

Off to one side, the members of the Red Court remained where they had been—save that Esteban and Esmerelda had been trapped in the goblins' nets as well. I had apparently been too intent on Susan to hear the sound of any struggle in the aftermath of the duel, but I could guess what had happened. As soon as the Ick had begun to falter, they must have made a run for it. This time, though, they hadn't had the advantage of showing up in a totally unexpected place, with the goblins intent upon their meals.

This time the goblins had taken them, probably before they had actually begun to flee. Both of the Eebs were staring at Susan and me with raw hatred written on their snarling faces.

The Erlking looked at the captured vampires for a moment, and smiled faintly. "Well fought," he said, his deep voice resonant.

We both bowed our heads slightly to him.

Then he lifted his hand and snapped his fingers, once. It echoed like the report of a firearm.

Screams went up from the entire helpless Red Court crew as several hundred violence amped goblins fell on them in a wave. I watched for a moment in sickened fascination, but turned away.

I hate the Red Court. But there are limits.

The Erlking's kin had none.

"What about the Red King?" I asked him. "The Lords of Outer Night?"

His red eyes gleamed. "His Majesty's folk failed to prove their peaceful intentions. The trial established their deception to the satisfaction of law and custom. Let him howl his fury if he so wills it. Should he begin a war over this matter, all of Faerie will turn upon him in outrage. And his people will make fine hunting."

Beneath the screams of the Red Court—Esmerelda's were especially piercing—a ragged chuckle ran through the hall. The sound danced with its own echoes. It was like listening to the official sound track of Hell. A goblin wearing thick leather gloves appeared, holding what was left of Susan's club as if it were red-hot. The touch of iron and its alloys is an agony to the creatures of Faerie. Susan accepted the steel calmly, nodding to the gloved goblin.

"I presume, then," I said quietly, "that we are free to go?"

"If I did not release you now," the Erlking said, his tone almost genial, "how should I ever have the pleasure of hunting you myself some fine, bright evening?"

I hoped my gulp wasn't audible.

The Lord of the Hunt turned and gestured idly with one hand, and a Way shimmered into being behind us. The green light that had let us see began to darken rapidly. "May you enjoy good hunting of your own, Sir Knight, lady huntress. Please convey my greetings to the Winter Queen."

My sane brain fell asleep at the switch, and I said, "I will. It was a pleasure, Erl."

Maybe he didn't get it. He just tilted his head slightly, the way a dog does at a new sound.

We all bowed to one another politely, and Susan and I stepped through the Way, careful not to take our eyes off of our host, until the world shimmered and that hall of horrors was gone.

It was replaced with an enormous, rustic-style building that appeared to be filled from the basement to the ceiling with everything you might possibly need to shoot, catch, find, stalk, hook, clean, skin, cook, and eat pretty much anything that ran, slithered, hopped, or swam.
“What the hell?” Susan said, looking around in confusion.
“Heh,” I said. “This is the Bass Pro in Bolingbrook, I think. Makes sense, I guess.”
“I didn’t mean that,” she said, and pointed. “Look.”
I followed her gaze to a large clock on the far wall of the big store.
It said that the time was currently nine thirty p.m.

Thirty minutes *after* our departure time.

“How can that be?” Susan demanded. “We were there for half an hour at the *most*. Look. My watch says it’s *two*.”

My heart began to beat faster. “Hell’s bells, I didn’t even think of it.”

“Of what?”

I started walking. Susan ditched her club behind a shelf and followed me. We must have made a charming sight, both of us all scuffed up, torn, ragged, and wounded. A few late shoppers stared, but no one seemed willing to approach us.

“Time can pass at a different rate in the Nevernever than it does here,” I said. “All those stories about people partying with the fae overnight and waking up in a new century? That’s

why it happens.” The next link in the logic chain got forged, and I said, “Oh. Oh, *dammit*.”

“What?” Susan said.

“It’s a three-hour trip to Chichén Itzá,” I said quietly. “We can’t get there by midnight.” Lead ingots began to pile up in my belly and on my shoulders and the back of my neck. I bowed my head, my mouth twisting bitterly. “We’re too late.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

“No,” Susan said fiercely. “No. This isn’t set up on Greenwich mean time, Harry. These creatures aren’t performing their ceremony based on a clock. They’re using the stars. We only know an approximate time. It could happen after midnight.”

It could happen half an hour before midnight, I thought, but I didn’t say that to Susan. Instead, I nodded. She was right. What she was saying just didn’t *feel* right, but I knew, in my head, that she was on target. I forced myself to ignore that little whispering voice of defeat in my ear.

“Right,” I said. “Keep going, maximum speed. We need to get back to St. Mary’s and pick up everyone there.”

Susan nodded and said, “Half an hour back if there’s no traffic.”

“And if you have a car,” I said, “which we don’t.”

Susan’s mouth twitched into a smile. “Good thing there’s a whole parking lot full of them, then.”

I opened the front door for Susan, followed her out onto the sidewalk, and nearly got run over by an emerald green stretch limousine, its tail fins, elongated hood, and shining chrome grille marking it as something created in the extravagant years subsequent to the Second World War. The limo screeched to a halt, and the driver, dressed in a no-nonsense black suit, got out and hurried around to the door nearest us. He was medium height, thin, young, and good-looking enough to be acting or modeling—so much so, in fact, that I decided immediately that he wasn’t human.

Almost as soon as I had the thought, I suddenly saw the young Sidhe lord as he truly appeared—dressed in an emerald green tunic and tights, each with accents of deep violet. His sunny hair was bound back into a tight braid that fell past his waist, and his feline, cat-slitted amber eyes were piercing. He saw me staring and gave me a mocking little bow that only barely moved his head and chest, then opened the limo’s door.

The Leanansidhe leaned over from the far side of the passenger compartment, an exasperated look on her face. “And here thou art at last, child. What madness possessed thee to pay

a social call upon the Hunter? He has a *grudge* against thee. Know you not what that *means*?”

Susan tensed and took a step back from her. My godmother noticed it and favored her with a toothy smile. “Fear not, half child. I’ve no reason to restrain thee again—unless, of course, thou wouldst like to see where it leads.” She glanced up at the night sky—mostly hidden behind all the light pollution—and said, “Granted, we would be forced to indulge such curiosity another time.”

“Godmother,” I said, staring. “What . . . a big car you have.”

She shook a finger at me. “The better to take you to the House of the Weeping Mother so that we may embark upon our quest, child. Glenmael, help them in, if you please. We race against time.”

The young Sidhe gestured gallantly toward the rear of the limo and offered me a supporting arm.

I scowled at him (provoking another smiling bow of his head) and helped Susan into the car. I got in without help of my own, and in short order we found ourselves seated facing the rear of the vehicle and my godmother as the young Sidhe pulled out of the lot and headed for I-55.

“Ridiculous,” Lea said, staring at me in disapproval. “You look utterly ridiculous.”

I blinked at her and then down at myself. Okay, well, granted. I’d been smeared with ichor and then rolled around in dirt and debris and I had a bleeding cut on one hand, which does not for neatness make. My jeans were a wreck, my T-shirt was beyond repair and going to get cut up for rags, and even my duster looked dirty and strained. Susan wasn’t in much better condition.

“I’m not going to a state dinner, Godmother,” I said.

Her voice turned wry. “That depends upon who wins the battle, me-thinks.” She looked me up and down and shook her head. “No. No, it won’t do at all. My queen has a certain reputation to maintain, after all. Your first engagement as the Winter Knight calls for something a bit less . . . postapocalyptic.” She studied Susan with a critical expression.

“Mmmm. And your concubine cannot be allowed to bring any shame upon you and, by extension, upon the queen.”

I sputtered.

Susan arched an eyebrow. “His *concubine*?”

“His lover, the mother of his child, yet to whom he is not wed? I believe the term applies, dear.” She waved a hand. “Words. La. Let us see.”

She rested a fingertip thoughtfully upon the end of her nose, staring at me. Then she said, “Let us begin with silk.”

She murmured a word, passed her hand over me, and my clothes started writhing as if they’d been made out of a single, flat organism, and one that hadn’t yet had the courtesy to expire. It was the damndest feeling, and I hit my head on the roof of the limo as I jumped in surprise.

A few seconds later, clenching my head, I eyed my godmother and said, “I don’t need any help.”

“Harry,” Susan said in a strangled voice. She was staring at me.

I looked down and found myself garbed in silken clothing. My shirt had become a billowing affair of deep grey silk, fitted close to my torso by a rather long vest of midnight black seeded in patterns of deep amethysts, green-blue opals, and pale, exquisite pearls. The tights were also made of silk, closely fit, and pure white, while the leather boots that came up to my knees were the same deep grey as the shirt.

I stared at me. Then at Susan.

“Wow,” Susan said. “You . . . you really *do* have a fairy godmother.”

“And I’ve never been able to indulge,” Lea said, studying me absently. “This won’t do.” She waved her hand again. “Perhaps a bit more . . .”

My clothing writhed again, the sensation so odd and intrusive that I all but banged my head on the roof again.

We went through a dozen outfits in half as many minutes. A Victorian suit and coat, complete with tails, was nixed in favor of another silk outfit, this one inspired by imperial China. By then, Susan and Lea were actively engaged in the project, exchanging commentary with each other and ignoring absolutely every word that came out of my mouth. By the seventh outfit, I had given up trying to have any say whatsoever in how I was going to be dressed.

I was given outfits drawing inspiration from widely diverse cultures and periods of history. I lobbied for the return of my leather duster stridently, but Lea only shushed me and kept speaking to Susan.

“Which outfit is really going to get that bitch’s goat?” Susan asked her.

Finally, Lea’s mouth curled up into a smile, and she said, “Perfect.”

My clothes writhed one more time and I found myself dressed in ornate Gothic armor of the style used in Western Europe in the fifteenth century. It was black and articulated, with decorated shoulder pauldrons and an absurdly ornate breastplate. Gold filigree was everywhere, and the thing looked like it should weigh six hundred pounds.

“Cortés wore armor in just this style,” Lea murmured. She studied my head and said, “Though it needs . . .”

A weight suddenly enclosed my head. I sighed patiently and reached up to remove a conquistador’s helmet decorated to match the armor. I put it down on the floor of the limo and said firmly, “I don’t do hats.”

“Poo,” Lea said. “Arianna still hates the Europeans with a vengeance, you know. It was why she took a conquistador husband.”

I blinked. “Ortega?”

“Of course, child,” Lea said. “Love and hate are oft difficult to distinguish between. She won Ortega’s heart, changed him, wed him, and spent the centuries after breaking his heart over and over again. Calling for him and then sending him away. Giving in to him and then reversing her course. She said it kept her hatred fresh and hot.”

“Explains why he was working in bloody Brazil,” I said.

“Indeed. Hmmm.” She flicked a hand and added a Roman-style cloak of dark grey to my armor-broadened shoulders, its ties fastened to the front of the breastplate. Another flick changed the style of my boots slightly. She added a deep hood to the cloak. Then she thoughtfully wrought all the gold on the armor into a spectrum that changed from natural gold to a green that deepened along the color gradient to blue and then purple the farther it went from my face, giving the gold filigree a cold, eerily surreal look. She added front panels to the cloak, so that it fell like some kind of robe in the front, belted to my waist with a sash of deep, dark purple. A final adjustment made the armor over my shoulders a bit wider and thicker, giving me that football shoulder-pad profile I remembered from Friday nights in high school.

I looked down at myself and said, “This is ridiculous. I look like the Games Workshop version of a Jedi Knight.”

Susan and Lea blinked at me, then at each other.

“I want my duster back, dammit,” I clarified.

“That old rag?” Lea said. “You have an image to maintain.”

“And I’m gonna maintain it in my duster,” I said stubbornly.

“Harry,” Susan said. “She might have a practical point here.”

I eyed her. Then my outfit. “Practical?”

“Appearances and first impressions are powerful things,” she said. “Used correctly, they’re weapons in their own right. I don’t know about you, but I want every weapon I can get.”
Lea murmured, “Indeed.”

“Okay. I don’t see why my image can’t wear my duster. We need to be quick, too. This setup is going to be binding and heavier than hell.”

Lea’s mouth curled up at one corner. “Oh?”

I scowled at her. Then I shook my shoulders and twisted about a bit. There was a kind of springy flexibility to the base material of the armor that steel would never match. More to the point, now that I was actually moving about, I couldn’t feel its weight. At all. I might as well have been wearing comfortable pajamas.

“No mortal could cut through it by strength of mundane arms,” she said calmly. “It will shed blows from even such creatures as the vampires of the Red Court—for a time, at least. And it should help you to shield your mind against the wills of the Lords of Outer Night.”

“Should?” I asked. “What do you mean, ‘should’?”

“They are an ancient power, godchild,” Lea replied, and gave me her cat’s smile again. “I have not had the opportunity to match my new strength against theirs.” She looked me up and down one more time and nodded, satisfied. “You look presentable. Now, child,” she said, turning to Susan. “Let us see what we might do for you.”

Susan handled the whole thing a lot better than I had.

I got distracted while they were working. I looked out the window and saw us blowing past a highway patrol car as if it were standing still instead of racing down the highway with its bulbs flashing and its siren wailing. We had to be doing triple digits to have left him eating our dust so quickly.

The patrolman didn’t react to our passage, and I realized that Glenmael must be hiding the car behind some kind of veil. He was also, I noticed, weaving and darting through the traffic with entirely impossible skill, missing other motorists’ bumpers and fenders by inches, with them apparently none the wiser. Not only that, but I couldn’t feel the motion at all within the passenger compartment. By all rights, we should have been bouncing off the windows and the roof, but it didn’t feel as if the car were moving at all.

Long story short: He got us to St. Mary’s in less than fifteen minutes, and gave me several dozen new grey hairs in the process.

We pulled up and Glenmael was opening the door to the rear compartment at seemingly the same instant that the car’s weight settled back against its parking brakes. I got out, the dark grey cowl covering my head. My shadow, on the sidewalk in front of me, looked friggin’ huge and scary. Irrationally, it made me feel a little better.

I turned to help Susan out and felt my mouth drop open a little.

Her outfit was . . . um, freaking hot.

The golden headdress was the first thing I noticed. It was decorated with feathers, with jade carved with sigils and symbols like those I had seen on the stone table, and with flickering gems of arctic green and blue. For a second, I thought her vampire nature had begun to rise again, because her face was covered in what I mistook for tattoos. A second glance showed me that they were some kind of precisely drawn design, sort of like henna markings, but far more primitive and savage-looking in appearance. They were also done in a variety of colors of black and deep, dark red. The designs around her dark brown eyes made them stand out sharply.

Under that, she wore a shift of some material that looked like simple, soft buckskin, split on the sides for ease of movement, and her feet were wrapped in shoes made of similar material, also decorated with feathers. The moccasins and shift both were pure white, and made a sharp contrast against the dark richness of her skin, and displayed the smooth, tight muscles of her arms and legs tremendously well.

A belt of white leather had an empty holster for a handgun on one of her hips, with a frog for hanging a scabbard upon it on the other. And over all of that, she wore a mantled cloak of feathers, not too terribly unlike the ones we had seen in Nevada—but the colors were all in the rich, cool tones of the Winter Court: glacial blue, deep sea green, and twilight purple.

She looked at me and said, “I’m waiting for you to say something about a Vegas showgirl.”

It took me a moment to reconnect my mouth to my brain. “You look amazing,” I said.

Her smile was slow and hot, with her dark eyes on mine.

“Um,” I said. “But . . . it doesn’t look very practical.”

Lea accepted Glenmael’s hand and exited the limo. She leaned over and murmured something into Susan’s ear.

Susan arched an eyebrow, but then said, “Okaaay . . .” She closed her eyes briefly, frowning.

And she vanished. Like, completely. Not behind a hard-to-pierce veil. Just *gone*.

My godmother laughed and said, “The same as before, but red, child.”

“Okay,” said Susan’s voice from empty air, and suddenly she was back again, smiling broadly. “Wow.”

“The cloak will hide you from the eyes and other senses as well, child,” my godmother said. “And while you wear those shoes, your steps will leave no tracks nor make the smallest sound.”

“Um, right,” I said. “But I’d feel better if she had some Kevlar along or something. Just in case.”

“Glenmael,” said my godmother.

The chauffeur calmly drew a nine- millimeter, pointed it at Susan’s temples from point-blank range, and squeezed the trigger. The gun barked.

Susan jerked her head to one side and staggered, clapping one hand to her ear. “Ow!” she snarled, rising and turning on the young Sidhe. “You son of a bitch, those things are loud.

That *hurt*. I ought to kick your ass up between your ears for you.”

In answer, the Sidhe bent with consummate grace and plucked something from the ground. He stood and showed it to Susan, and then to me.

It was a bullet. The nose was smashed in flat, until it vaguely resembled a small mushroom.

Our eyes got kind of wide.

Lea spread her hands and said calmly, “Faerie godmother.”

I shook my head, stunned. It had taken me years to design, create, and improve my leather duster’s defensive spells, and even then, the protection extended only as far as the actual

leather. Lea had whipped up a whole-body protective enchantment in *minutes*.

I suddenly felt a bit more humble. It was probably good for me.

But then I tilted my head, frowning. The power involved in my godmother’s gifts was incredible—but the universe just doesn’t seem to be willing to give you something for nothing. That was as true in magic as it was in physics. I could, with years of effort, probably duplicate what Lea’s gifts could do. The Sidhe worked with the same magic I did, though admittedly they seemed to have a very different sort of relationship. Still, that much power all in one spot meant that the energy cost for it was being paid elsewhere.

Like maybe in longevity.

“Godmother,” I asked, “how long will these gifts endure?”

Her smile turned a little sad. “Ah, child. I am a faerie godmother, am I not? Such things are not meant to last.”

“Don’t tell me midnight,” I said.

“Of course not. I am not part of Summer.” She sniffed, rather scornfully. “Noon.”

And that made more sense. My duster’s spells lasted for months, and I thought I’d worked out how to make them run for more than a year the next time I laid them down. Lea’s gifts involved the same kind of power output, created seemingly without toil—but they wouldn’t last like the things I created would. My self-image recovered a little.

“Lea,” I asked, “did you bring my bag?”

Glenmael opened the trunk and brought it over to me. The Swords in their scabbards were still strapped to the bag’s side. I picked it up and nodded. “Thanks.”

He bowed, smiling. I was tempted to tip him, just to see what would happen, but then I remembered that my wallet had been in my blue jeans, and was now, presumably, part of the new outfit. Maybe it would reappear at noon tomorrow—assuming I was alive to need it, I mean.

“I will wait here,” Lea said. “When you are ready to travel to the first Way, Glenmael will take us there.”

“Right,” I said. “Let’s go, princess.”

“Of course, Sir Knight,” Susan said, her eyes sparkling, and we went into the church.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Sanya was guarding the door. He swung it open wide for us, and studied Susan with a grin of appreciation. “There are some days,” he said, “when I just love this job.”

“Come on,” I said, walking past him. “We don’t have much time.”

Sanya literally clicked his heels together, took Susan’s hand, and kissed the back of it gallantly, the big stupidhead. “You are beyond lovely, lady.”

“Thank you,” Susan said, smiling. “But we don’t have much time.”

I rolled my eyes and kept walking.

There was a quiet conversation going in the living room. It stopped as I came through the door. I paused there for a second, and looked around at everyone who was going to help me get my daughter back.

Molly was dressed in her battle coat, which consisted of a shirt of tightly woven metal links, fashioned by her mother out of titanium wire. The mail was then sandwiched between two long Kevlar vests. All of that was, in turn, fixed to one of several outer garments, and in this case she was wearing a medium-brown fireman’s coat. Her hair was braided tightly against the back of her head—and back to its natural honey brown color—and a hockey helmet sat on a table near her. She had half a dozen little focus items I’d shown her how to create, none of which were precisely intended for a fight. Her face was a little pale, and her blue eyes were earnest.

Mouse sat next to her, huge and stolid, and rose to his feet and padded over to give me a subdued greeting as I came in. I knelt down and roughed up his ears for a moment. He wagged his tail, but made no more display than that, and his serious brown eyes told me that he knew the situation was grave.

Next came Martin, dressed in simple black BDU pants, a longsleeved black shirt, and a tactical vest, all of which could have been purchased from any military surplus or gun store. He was in the midst of cleaning and inspecting two sets of weapons: assault rifles, tactical shotguns, and heavy pistols. He wore a machete in a scabbard on his belt. A second such weapon rested in a nylon sheath on the table, next to a blade-sharpening tool kit. He never looked up at me, or stopped reassembling the pistol he’d finished cleaning.

A small chess set had been set up on the other end of the coffee table from Molly, next to Martin’s war gear. My brother sat there, with Martin (and, once he had finished greeting me, Mouse) between himself and the girl. He was wearing expensive- looking silk pants and a leather vest, both white. A gun belt bearing a large-caliber handgun and a sword with an inward-curving blade, an old Spanish falcata, hung over the corner of the couch, casually discarded. He lay lazily back on the couch, his eyes mostly closed, watching the move of his opponent.

Murphy was decked out in black tactical gear much like Martin’s, but more worn and better fitting. They don’t generally make gear for people Murph’s size, so she couldn’t shop off the shelf very often. She did have her own vest of Kevlar and mail, which Charity had made for her for Christmas the previous year, in thanks for the occasions when Murphy had gone out on a limb for them, but Murph had just stuck the compound armor to her tac vest and been done. She wore her automatic on her hip, and her odd- looking, rectangular little submachine gun, the one that always made me think of a box of chocolates, was leaned against the wall nearby. Murph was hunched over the chessboard, her nose wrinkled as she thought, and moved one of her knights into a thicket of enemy pieces before she turned to me.

She took one look at me and burst out giggling.

That was enough to set off everyone in the room except Martin, who never seemed to realize that there were other people there. Molly’s titers set off Thomas, and even Mouse dropped his jaws open in a doggy grin.

“Hah, hah, hah,” I said, coming into the room, so that Susan and Sanya could join us. No one laughed at Susan’s outfit. I felt that the injustice of that was somehow emblematic of the unfairness in my life, but I didn’t have time to chase that thought down and feed it rhetoric until the lightbulb over my head lit up.

“Well,” Murphy said, as the laughter died away. “I’m glad you got out all right. Went shopping after, did you?”

“Not so much,” I said. “Okay, listen up, folks. Time is short. What else did we manage to find out about the site?”

Murphy told Thomas, “Mate in six,” took a file folder from beneath her chair, and passed it to me.

“You wish,” Thomas drawled lazily.

I eyed him and opened the folder. There were multiple pages inside, color aerial and satellite photos of the ruins.

“Good grief,” I said. “How did you get these?”

“Internet,” Murphy said calmly. “We’ve got an idea of where they’re setting up and what security measures they’ll need to take, but before we can talk about an approach, we need to know where we’re going to arrive.”

I stroked a thumb over my mother’s gem and consulted the knowledge stored there. Then I went through the maps until I found one of the proper scale, picked up a pen from the table, and drew an X on the map. “Here. It’s about five miles north of the pyramid.”

Thomas whistled quietly.

“What?” I asked him. “You can’t do five miles?”

“Five miles of sidewalk, sure,” Thomas said. “Five miles of jungle is a bit different, Dresden.”

“He’s right,” Martin said. “And at night, too.”

Thomas spread his hands.

“Have done a little jungle,” Sanya said, coming over to study the map. “How bad is the bush there?”

“Tougher than the lower Amazon, not as bad as Cambodia,” Martin said calmly.

Sanya grunted. Thomas wrinkled his nose in distaste. I tried to pretend that Martin had given me some kind of tangible information, and idly wondered if Thomas and Sanya were doing the same thing as me.

“How long, Martin?” I asked him.

“Two hours, bare minimum. Could be more, depending.”

I grunted. Then I said, “We’ll see if Lea can’t do something to help us along.”

The room went still.

“Um,” Murphy said. “Your psycho faerie godmother? That Lea?”

“Harry, you told me she was dangerous,” Molly said.

“And I still have the scar to prove it,” Thomas added.

“Yes,” I said quietly. “She’s powerful and by any reasonable standard she’s insane and she’s currently pointed in the direction of our enemy. So we’re going to use her.”

“We’re using her, are we?” Sanya asked, grinning.

“He told us what Toot said about Mab, Harry,” Molly said softly.

There was a long stretch of quiet.

“You made a deal,” Murphy said.

“Yeah, I did. For Maggie, I did.” I looked around the room. “I’m me until this is all over. That was part of the deal. But if there’s anyone here who wants to bail on me and Susan, do it now. Otherwise, feel free to keep your mouth closed about the subject. My daughter doesn’t have time for us to debate the ethics of a choice that isn’t any of your goddamned business anyway.”

I looked around the room and Sanya said, “I am going. Who else goes with us?”

Mouse sneezed.

“I figured that,” I told him.

He wagged his tail.

“Me, obviously,” Martin said.

Murphy nodded. Molly did, too. Then Thomas rolled his eyes.

“Good,” I said. “Lea will probably have something to speed the trip,” I said.

“She’d better,” Thomas said. “Time’s short.”

“We will be there in time,” Sanya said confidently.

I nodded. Then I said, “And I have a favor to ask two of you.”

I put the bag down and pulled *Fidelacchius* from where I’d tied it. The ancient katana-style Sword had a smooth wooden handle that perfectly matched the wood of its sheath, so that when the weapon was sheathed it looked innocuous, appearing to be a slightly curved, sturdy stick of a good size to carry while walking. The blade was razor-sharp. I had dropped a plastic drinking straw across it as an experiment once. The rate of fall had been all the exquisite weapon had needed to slice the straw neatly in half.

“Karrin,” I said, and held out the Sword.

Sanya’s eyebrows climbed toward the roof.

“I’ve . . . been offered that Sword before, Harry,” she said quietly. “Nothing’s changed since then.”

“I’m not asking you to take up the mantle of a Knight,” I said quietly. “I want to entrust it to you for this night, for this purpose. This sword was made to fight darkness, and there’s going to be plenty to go around. Take it up. Just until my girl is safe.”

Murphy frowned. She looked at Sanya and said, “Can he do this?”

"Can you?" Sanya asked, looking at me.

"I was entrusted as the Sword's guardian," I said calmly. "Exactly what am I supposed to do with it if it is *not* my place to choose the Sword's bearer to the best of my ability?"

Sanya considered that for a moment, then shrugged. "Seems implicit to me. They gave you the power of choice when they entrusted you with the Swords. One of those things they seem to tell you without ever actually saying anything that sounds remotely related."

I nodded. "Murph. Used for the right reasons, in good faith, the Sword is in no danger. You're the only one who can know if you're doing it for the right reasons. But I'm begging you. Take it. Help me save my daughter, Karrin. Please."

Murphy sighed. "You don't play fair, Harry."

"Not for one second," I said. "Not for something like this."

Murphy was quiet for a moment more. Then she stood up and walked to me. She took the Sword from my hand. There was an old cloth strap fixed to the sheath, so that the weapon could be carried over one shoulder or diagonally across the back. Murphy slipped the weapon on and said, "I'll carry it. If it seems right to me, I'll use it."

"That's all I can ask for," I said.

Then I picked up *Amoracchius*, a European long Sword with a crusader-style hilt and a simple, wire-wrapped handle.

And I turned to Susan.

She stared at me and then shook her head slowly. "The last time I touched one of those things," she said, "it burned me so bad I could still feel it three months later."

"That was then," I said. "This is now. You're doing what you're doing because you love your daughter. If you stay focused on that, this Sword will never do you harm." I turned the hilt to her. "Put your hand on it."

Susan did so slowly, almost as if against her will. She hesitated at the last moment. Then her fingers closed on the blade's handle.

And that was all. Nothing happened.

"Swear to harm no innocents," I said quietly. "Swear to use it in good faith, to return your daughter safely home. Swear that you will safeguard the Sword and return it faithfully when that task is done. And I don't see any reason why you shouldn't be able to wield it."

She met my eyes and nodded. "I swear."

I nodded in reply and took my hands from the weapon. Susan drew it slightly from its sheath. Its edge gleamed, and its steel was polished as smooth and bright as a mirror. And when she moved to buckle it to her belt, the Sword fit there as if made for it.

My godmother was probably going to feel very smug about that.

"I hope that the Almighty will not feel slighted if I carry more, ah, innovative weaponry as well," Susan said. She crossed to the table, slid one of Martin's revolvers into her holster, and after a moment picked up the assault rifle.

Sanya stepped forward as well, and took the tactical shotgun with its collapsible shoulder stock. "If He exists, He has never given me any grief about it," he said cheerfully. "Da. This is going very well already."

Thomas barked out a laugh. "There are *seven* of us against the Red King and his thirteen most powerful nobles, and it's going well?"

Mouse sneezed.

"Eight," Thomas corrected himself. He rolled his eyes and said, "And the psycho death faerie makes it nine."

"It is like movie," Sanya said, nodding. "Dibs on Legolas."

"Are you kidding?" Thomas said. "I'm obviously Legolas. You're . . ." He squinted thoughtfully at Sanya and then at Martin. "Well. He's Boromir and you're clearly Aragorn."

"Martin is so dour, he is more like Gimli," Sanya pointed at Susan. "Her sword is much more like Aragorn's."

"Aragorn wishes he looked that good," countered Thomas.

"What about Karrin?" Sanya asked.

"What—for Gimli?" Thomas mused. "She *is* fairly—"

"Finish that sentence, Raith, and we throw down," said Murphy in a calm, level voice.

"Tough," Thomas said, his expression aggrieved. "I was going to say 'tough.'"

Martin had gotten up during the discussion. He came over to me and studied the map I'd marked. Then he nodded. As the discussion went on—with Molly's sponsorship, Mouse was lobbying to claim Gimli on the basis of being the shortest, the stoutest, and the hairiest—Martin explained what they knew of the security measures around the ruins.

"That's why we're going in here," he said, pointing to the eastern-most point of the ruins, where rows and rows and rows of great columns stood. Once, they had held up some kind of roof over a complex attached to the great temple. "Now," Martin continued, "the jungle has swallowed the eastern end of it. They're only using torchlight, so movement through the galleries should be possible. There will be considerable shadow to move through."

"Means they'll have guards there," I said.

"True. We'll have to silence them. It can be done. If we can move fully through the galleries, we'll be within two hundred feet of the base of the temple. That's where we think they'll be performing the ritual. In the temple."

"Plenty of temples got built on top of ley line confluences," I said, nodding. I studied the map. "A lot can happen in two hundred feet," I said. "Even moving fast."

Martin nodded. "Yes, it can. And, if our various intelligence sources are correct, there are more than a thousand individuals nearby."

"A thousand vampires?" I asked.

Martin shrugged. "Many. Many will be their personal guards. Others, the . . . highest-ranking servants, I suppose you would call them. They are like Susan and myself. There may also be mortal foot soldiers, there to keep the sacrifices in line."

"Sacrifices, plural?"

Martin nodded. "The ceremonies of the Red Court of old could last for days, with blood sacrifices made every few minutes. There might be a hundred or two hundred others chosen to die before the ritual."

I didn't shudder, but only by sheer force of will. "Yeah. Priming the pump." I nodded. "Probably they're doing it right now."

"Yes," Martin said.

"What we need," I said.

"A diversion," Martin said.

I nodded. "Get everyone looking in one direction. Then Susan, Lea, and I will hit the temple, get the kid. Then we all run for Father Forthill's sanctuary on holy ground."

"They'll catch us long before we can cover that distance."

"You ever tried chasing a faerie through the woods at night?" I asked wryly. "Trust me. If we can break contact, we can make it a few miles."

"Why not retreat directly to the spirit world?" Martin asked.

I shook my head. "No way. Creatures this old and powerful know all the tricks there, and they'll be familiar with the terrain on the other side that close to their strong places. I won't fight them on that ground unless there's no other choice. We head for the church." I pointed to the location of the church, in a small town only about two and a half miles from Chichén Itzá.

Martin smiled faintly. "Do you honestly think a parish chapel will withstand the might of the Red King?"

"I have to think that, Martin," I said. "Besides, I think a parish chapel with all three Swords defending it, along with two members of the White Council and an elder sorceress of the Winter Sidhe, will be a tough nut to crack. And all we have to do is make it until dawn. Then we're back in the jungle and gone."

Martin mused on that for a moment and said, "It might work."

"Yeah. It might," I said. "We need to move. Our ride is outside waiting."

"Right."

Martin looked at Susan and nodded. Then he put his fingers to his mouth and let out a piercing whistle. The good-natured discussion came to a halt and he said, "The car's outside."

"Let's go, people," I said quietly. "It's the big green car."

Everyone grew serious rather rapidly, and began gathering up their various forms of gear.

Susan went out first, to make sure there weren't any problems with Lea, and everyone filed out after her, Sanya last.

"Sanya," I said. "Who did I get cast as?"

"Sam," Sanya said.

I blinked at him. "Not . . . Oh, for crying out loud, it was perfectly obvious who I should have been."

Sanya shrugged. "It was no contest. They gave Gandalf to your godmother. You got Sam." He started to leave and then paused. "Harry. You have read the books as well, yes?"

"Sure," I said.

"Then you know that Sam was the true hero of the tale," Sanya said. "That he faced far greater and more terrible foes than he ever should have had to face, and did so with courage. That he went alone into a black and terrible land, stormed a dark fortress, and resisted the most terrible temptation of his world for the sake of the friend he loved. That in the end, it was his actions and his actions alone that made it possible for light to overcome darkness."

I thought about that for a second. Then I said, "Oh."

He clapped me on the shoulder and left.

He didn't mention the other part of the book. That following the heroes when they set out was the tenth member of their party. A broken creature who went through all the same dangers and trials, who had made a single bad choice and taken up a power he didn't understand—and who had become a demented, miserable, living nightmare because of it. In the end, he had been just as necessary to the overthrow of the darkness.

But he sure as hell didn't enjoy his part.

I shook my head and berated myself sharply. Here I was wasting time talking about a damned book. About a world of blacks and whites with precious little in the way of grey, where you could tell the good guys from the bad guys with about two seconds of effort.

And right now, I didn't give a damn about good and bad. I just wanted a little girl home safe.

It didn't matter which of them I was. As long as I got Maggie home.

I picked up my bag, left St. Mary's behind me, and stalked out to my wicked godmother's limo, pulling the soft hood of my dark cape up over my head.

If I was on the road to Hell, at least I was going in style.

Chapter Forty

There was room for everyone in the back of the limo. I was pretty sure that there hadn't been the first time I'd ridden in it. But it had gotten several extra feet of seats along the walls, and everyone was sitting there being only a little bit crowded as Glenmael charged out to assault Chicago's streets.

"I still think we should try a frontal assault," Sanya argued.

"Suicidally stupid," Martin said, his voice scornful.

"Surprise tactic!" Sanya countered. "They will not expect it after a thousand years of never being challenged. Harry, what do you think?"

"Uh," I said.

And then Ebenezer's voice said, quite clearly and from no apparent source, "Damn your stubborn eyes, boy! Where have you been?"

I went rigid with surprise for a second. I looked around the interior of the limo, but no one had reacted, with the exception of my godmother. Lea sighed and rolled her eyes.

Right. The speaking stones. I'd stuck mine in the bag, but since I was holding it on my lap now, it was close enough to be warmed by the heat of my body to function. It was possible to send terse messages through the stones without first establishing a clear connection, as my mentor and I had done back toward the beginning of this mess.

"Damnation and hellfire, Hoss!" growled Ebenezer's voice. "Answer me!"

I looked from Sanya to my godmother. "Uh. I kind of have to take this call."

Sanya blinked at me. Thomas and Murphy exchanged a significant glance.

"Oh, shut up," I said crossly. "It's magic, okay?"

I closed my eyes and fumbled through the bag until I found the stone. I didn't really need to show up in my outlandish costume for this conversation, so I thought about my own physical body for a moment, concentrating on an image of my limbs and flesh and normal clothing forming around my thoughts.

"So help me, boy, if you don't—"

Ebenezer appeared in my mind's eye, wearing his usual clothing. He broke off suddenly as he looked at me and his face went pale. "Hoss? Are you all right?"

"Not really," I said. "I'm kind of in the middle of something here. What do you want?"

"Your absence from the conclave did not go over well," he responded, his voice sharp. "There are people in the Grey Council who think you aren't to be trusted. They're very, very wary of you. By missing the meeting, you told them that either you don't respect our work enough to bother showing up, or else that you don't have the wisdom and the fortitude to commit to the cause."

"I never saw the appeal of peer pressure," I said. "Sir, I'm finding a little girl. I'll come play Council politics after I get her home safe, if you want."

"We need you here."

"The kid needs me more. It's not as noble as trying to save the whole White Council from its own stupidity, I know. But by God, I *will* bring that child out safe."

Ebenezer's mostly bald pate flushed red. "Despite my orders to the contrary."

"We aren't an army. You aren't my superior officer. Sir."

"You arrogant *child*," he snapped. "Get your head out of your ass and get your eyes on the world around you or you're going to get yourself killed."

"With all due respect, sir, you can go to hell," I snarled. "You think I don't know how dangerous the world is? *Me?*"

"I think you're doing everything in your power to isolate yourself from the only people who can support you," he said. "You feel guilty about something. I get that, Hoss. You think you ain't fit for company because of what you've done." His scowl darkened still more. "In my time, I've done things that would curl your hair. Get over it. Think."

"After I get the girl out."

"Do you even know where she is?" Ebenezer demanded.

"Chichén Itzá," I said. "She's scheduled to be the centerpiece of one of the Red King's shindigs in the next couple of hours."

Ebenezer took a sharp breath, as if I'd poked him in the stomach with the end of a quarterstaff. "Chichén Itzá . . . That's a confluence. One of the biggest in the world. The Reds haven't used it in . . . Not since Cortés was there."

"Confluence, yeah," I said. "The Duchess Arianna is going to kill her and use the power to lay a curse on her bloodline—Susan and me."

Ebenezer began to speak and then blinked several times, as if the sun had just come out of a cloud and into his eyes. "Susan and . . ." He paused and asked, "Hoss?"

"I meant to tell you the last time we spoke," I said quietly. "But . . . the conversation wasn't exactly . . ." I took a deep breath. "She's my daughter by Susan Rodriguez."

"Oh," he said very quietly. His face looked grey. "Oh, Hoss."

"Her name's Maggie. She's eight. They took her a few days ago."

He bowed his head and shook it several times, saying nothing. Then he said, "You're sure?"

"Yeah."

"H-how long have you known?"

"Since a day or so after she was taken," I said. "Surprised the hell out of me."

Ebenezer nodded without looking up. Then he said, "You're her father and she needs you. And you want to be there for her."

"Not want to be there," I said quietly. "Going to be."

"Aye-aye," he said. "Don't go back to the Edinburgh facility. We think Arianna laced it with some kind of disease while she was there. So far there are sixty wizards down with it, and we're expecting more. No deaths yet, but whatever this bug is, it's putting them flat on their backs—including Injun Joe, so our best healer isn't able to work on the problem."

"Hell's bells," I said. "They aren't just starting back in on the war again. They're going to try to decapitate the Council in one blow."

Ebenezer grunted. "Aye. And without the Way nexus around Edinburgh, we're going to have a hell of a time with that counterstroke." He sighed. "Hoss, you got a damned big talent. Not real refined, but you've matured a lot in the past few years. Handle yourself better in a fight than most with a couple of centuries behind them. Wish you could be with us."

I wasn't sure how to feel about that. Ebenezer was generally considered the heavyweight champion of the wizarding world when it came to direct, face-to-face mayhem. And I was one of the relatively few people who knew he was also the Blackstaff—the White Council's officially nonexistent hit man, authorized to ignore the Laws of Magic when he deemed it necessary. The old man had fought pretty much everything that put up a fight at one point or another, and he didn't make a habit of complimenting anyone's skills.

"I can't go with you," I said.

"Aye," he said with a firm nod. "You do whatever you have to do, boy. Whatever you have to do to keep your little girl safe. You hear?"

"Yeah," I said. "Thank you, sir."

"Godspeed, son," Ebenezer said. Then he cut the connection.

I released my focus slowly until I was once more in my body in the back of the limo.

"Who was it?" Molly asked. The others let her take the lead. She must have explained the whole speaking-stone concept to them. Which made me look less crazy, but I felt twitchy about her handing out information like that to the entire car. It wasn't a big deadly secret or anything, but it was the principle of the thing that—

I rubbed at my face with one hand. Ye gods. I was becoming my mentors. Next I'd be grumbling about those darned kids and their loud music.

"Uh, the Council," I said. "Big shock, they aren't helping."

Murphy looked like she might be asleep, but she snorted. "So we're on our own."

"Yeah."

"Good. It's more familiar."

Lea let out a peal of merry laughter.

Murphy opened an eye and gave Lea a decidedly frosty look. "What?"

"You think that this is like what you have done before," my godmother said. "So precious."

Murphy stared at her for a moment and then looked at me. "Harry?"

I leaned my head back against the window, so that the hood fell over my eyes. Murphy was way too good at picking up on it when I lied. "I don't know," I said. "I guess we'll see."

It took Glenmael less than twenty minutes to get to Aurora. We got out at a park there, a pretty little community place. It was empty this time of night, and all the lights were out.

"Pitcher's mound, folks," I said, piling out and taking the lead.

I was walking with long, long strides, staying ahead of everyone. Murphy caught up to me, moving at a slow jog.

"Harry," she said, her voice low. "Your godmother?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we trust her?"

I scowled. She wouldn't be able to see the expression, with the hood and all. "Do you trust me?"

"Why do you think I'm asking you?"

I thought about it for a moment and then slowed down, so that everyone else was nearer. That included my godmother.

"Okay, folks. Let's clear the air about the scary Sidhe lady. She's under orders to go with me and to help. She will. She's got a vested interest in making sure I come out of this all right, and if she doesn't do it, she's in trouble with the queen. As long as you all are helpful to her mission, getting me in and out in one piece, she'll support you. The second she thinks you're a liability or counterproductive to her mission, she's going to let bad things happen to you. Maybe even do them herself." I looked at Lea. "Is that about right?"

"That is precisely right," she said, smiling.

Susan arched an eyebrow and looked from me to my godmother. "You have no shame about it at all, do you?"

"Shame, child, is for those who fail to live up to the ideal of what they believe they should be." She waved her hand. "It was shame that drove me to my queen, to beseech her aid."

Her long, delicate fingers idly moved to the streaks of white in her otherwise flawless red tresses. "But she showed me the way back to myself, through exquisite pain, and now I am here to watch over my dear godson—and the rest of you, as long as it is quite convenient."

"Spooky death Sidhe lady," Molly said. "Now upgraded to spooky, *crazy* death Sidhe lady."

The Leanansidhe bared her canine teeth in a foxlike smile. "Bless you, child. You have such potential. We should talk when this is over."

I glowered openly at Lea, who looked unrepentant. "Okay, folks. The plan is going to be for me to stand where the fire is hottest. And if one of you gets cut off or goes down, I'm going to go back for you." I kept glaring at my godmother. "Everyone who goes in with me is coming out again, dead or alive. I'm bringing you all home."

Lea paused for a few steps and arched an eyebrow at me. Then she narrowed her eyes.

"If they can all carry themselves out," I said, "I believe that would be more 'quite convenient' than if they couldn't. Wouldn't it, Godmother?"

She rolled her eyes and said, "Impossible child." But there was a hint of a smile on her mouth. She bowed her head to me slightly, like a fencer acknowledging a touch, and I returned it.

Then I figured I'd best not threaten her ego any more than I had to. "Be careful when you speak to her," I told the others. "Don't make her any offers. Don't accept any, not even in passing, not even things that seem harmless or that could only be construed through context. Words are binding around the Sidhe, and she is one of the most dangerous creatures in all of Faerie." I bowed my head to her. "Fortunately for us. Before the night's over, we'll all be glad she's with us."

"Oh," the Leanansidhe purred, all but literally preening. "A trifle obvious, but . . . how the child has grown."

"*Da*," said Sanya cheerfully. "I am glad that she is here. For the first time, I got to ride in a limousine. Already it is a good night. And if spooky crazy death Sidhe lady can help serve a good cause, then we who bear the Swords"—he paused for a smiling second—"all three of them"—he paused for another second, still smiling—"will welcome her aid."

"Such charm, O Knight of the Sword," Lea replied, smiling even more endearingly than Sanya. "We are all being so pleasant tonight. Please be assured that should one of the Swords be dropped or somehow misemployed, I will do everything in my power to recover it."

"Sanya," I said. "Please shut up now."

He let out a booming laugh, settled the strap of the shotgun a little more firmly over his shoulder, and said nothing more.

I checked my mother's memories and nodded as I reached the pitcher's mound. "Okay, folks. First leg here. Should be a simple walk down a trail next to a river. Don't get freaked when you notice the water is flowing uphill." I stared at the air over the pitcher's mound and began to draw in my will.

"Right," I said, mostly to myself. "Annnnd here we go. *Aparturum*."

Chapter Forty-one

The first leg of the trip was simple, a walk down a forest trail next to a backward-flowing river until we reached a menhir—that’s a large, upright standing stone, to those of you without a pressing need to find out what a menhir is. I found where a pentangle had been inscribed on the stone, a five-pointed star within a circle, like the one around my neck. It had been done with a small chisel of some kind, and was a little lopsided. My mother had put it there to mark which side of the stone to open the Way on.

I ran my fingers over it for a moment. As much as my necklace or the gem that now adorned it, it was tangible proof of her presence. She had been real, even if I had no personal memories of her, and that innocuous little marking was further proof.

“My mother made this mark,” I said quietly.

I didn’t look back at Thomas, but I could all but feel the sudden intensity of his interest.

He had a few more memories than I did, but not many. And it was possible that he had me outclassed in the parental-figure issues department, too.

I opened another Way, and we came through into a dry gulch with a stone wall, next to a deep channel in the stone that might once have held a river—now it was full of sand. It was dark and chilly, and the sky was full of stars.

“Okay,” I said. “Now we walk.”

I summoned a light and took the lead. Martin scanned the skies above us. “Uh. The constellations . . . Where are we?”

I clambered up a stiff little slope that was all hard stone and loose sand, and looked out over a vast expanse of silver- white beneath the moon. Great shapes loomed up from the sand, their sides almost serrated in the clear moonlight, lines and right angles that clashed sharply with the ocean of sand and flatland around them.

“Giza,” I said. “You can’t see the Sphinx from this side, but I never claimed to be a tour guide. Come on.”

It was a stiff two or three miles from the hidden gully to the pyramids, and sand all the way. I took the lead, moving in a shambling, loosekneed jog. There wasn’t any worry about heat—dawn was under way, and in an hour the place would be like one giant cookie pan in an oven, but we’d be gone by then. My mother’s amulet led me directly to the base of the smallest and most crumbly pyramid, and I had to climb up three levels to reach the next Waypoint. I stopped to caution the party that we were about to move into someplace hot, and to shield their eyes. Then I opened the Way and we continued through.

We emerged onto a plain beside enormous pyramids—but instead of being made of stone, these were all formed of crystal, smooth and perfect. A sun that was impossibly huge hung in the sky directly overhead, and the light was painfully bright, rebounding up from the crystal plain to be focused through the pyramids and refracted over and over and over again.

“Stay out of those sunbeams,” I said, waving in the direction of several beams of light so brilliant that they made the Death Star lasers look like they needed to hit the gym. “They’re hot enough to melt metal.”

I led the group forward, around the base of one pyramid, into a slim corridor of . . . Well, it wasn’t shade, but there wasn’t quite so much light there, until we reached the next Waypoint—where a chunk the size of a large man’s fist was missing from one of the perfectly smooth edges of the pyramid. Then I turned ninety degrees to the right and started walking.

I counted five hundred paces. I felt the light—not heat, just the sheer, overwhelming amount of light—beginning to tan my skin.

Then we came to an aberration—a single lump of rock upon the crystalline plain. There were broad, ugly facial features on the rock, primitive and simple.

“Here,” I said, and my voice echoed weirdly, though there was seemingly nothing from which it *could* echo.

I opened another Way, and we stepped from the plain of light and into chilly mist and thin mountain air. A cold wind pushed at us. We stood in an ancient stone courtyard of some kind. Walls stood around us, broken in many places, and there was no roof overhead.

Murphy stared up at the sky, where stars were very faintly visible through the mist, and shook her head. “Where now?”

“Machu Picchu,” I said. “Anyone bring water?”

“I did,” Murphy said, at the same time as Martin, Sanya, Molly, and Thomas.

“Well,” Thomas said, while I felt stupid. “I’m not sharing.”

Sanya snorted and tossed me his canteen. I sneered at Thomas and drank, then tossed it back. Martin passed Susan his canteen, then took it back when she was finished. I started trudging. It isn’t far from one side of Machu Picchu to the other, but the walk is all uphill, and that means a hell of a lot more in the Andes than it does in Chicago.

“All right,” I said, stopping beside a large mound built of many rising tiers that, if you squinted up your eyes enough, looked a lot like a ziggurat-style pyramid. Or maybe an absurdly large and complicated wedding cake. “When I open the next Way, we’ll be underwater. We have to swim ten feet, in the dark. Then I open the next Way and we’re in Mexico.” I was doubly cursing the time we’d lost in the Erlking’s realm. “Did anyone bring any climbing rope?”

Sanya, Murphy, Martin—Look, you get the picture. There were a lot of people standing around who were more prepared than me. They didn’t have super-duper faerie godmother presents, but they had brains, and it was a sobering reminder to me of which was more important.

We got finished running a line from the front of the group to the back (except for my godmother, who sniffed disdainfully at the notion of being tied to a bunch of mortals), and I took several deep breaths and opened the next Way.

Mom’s notes on this Waypoint hadn’t mentioned that the water was *cold*. And I don’t mean cold like your roommate used most of the hot water. I mean cold like I suddenly had to wonder if I was going to trip over a seal or a penguin or a narwhal or something.

The cold hit me like a sledgehammer, and it was suddenly all I could do just to keep from shrieking in surprise and discomfort—and, some part of my brain marveled, I was the

freaking *Winter Knight*.

Though my limbs screamed their desire to contract around my chest and my heart, I fought them and made them paddle. One stroke. Two. Three. Four. Fi—Ow. My nose hit a shelf of

rock. I found my will and exhaled, speaking the word *Aparturum* through a cloud of blobby bubbles that rolled up over my cheeks and eyelashes. I tore open the next Way a little desperately—and water rushed out through it as if thrilled to escape.

I crashed into the Yucatán jungle on a tide of ectoplasmic slime, and the line we’d strung dragged everyone else through in a rush. Poor Sanya, the last in line, was pulled from his feet, hauled hard through the icy water as if he’d been flushed down a Jotun’s toilet, and then crashed down amidst the slimed forest. Peru to Mexico in three and a half seconds.

I fumbled back to the Way to close it and stopped the tide of ectoplasm from coming through, but not before the vegetation for ten feet in every direction had been smashed flat by the flood of slime, and every jungle creature for fifty or sixty yards started raising holy hell on the what-the-fuck-was-that party line. Murphy had her gun out, and Molly had a wand in each hand, gripped with white knuckles.

Martin let out a sudden, coughing bellow that sounded like it must have torn something in his chest—and it was *loud*, too. And the jungle around us abruptly went silent.

I blinked and looked at Martin. So did everyone else.

“Jaguar,” he said in a calm, quiet voice. “They’re extinct here, but the animals don’t know that.”

“Oooh,” said my godmother, a touch of a child’s glee in her voice. “I like that.”

It took us a minute to get everyone sorted out. Mouse looked like a scrawny shadow of himself with his fur all plastered down. He was sneezing uncontrollably, having apparently gotten a bunch of water up his nose during the swim. Ectoplasm splattered out with every sneeze. Thomas was in similar straits, having been hauled through much as Sanya was, but he managed to look a great deal more annoyed than Mouse.

I turned to Lea. “Godmother. I hope you have some way to get us to the temple a little more swiftly.”

“Absolutely,” Lea purred, calm and regal despite the fact that her hair and her slime-soaked silken dress were now plastered to her body. “And I’ve always wanted to do it, too.” She let out a mocking laugh and waved her hand, and my belly cramped up as if every stomach bug I’d ever had met up in a bar and decided to come get me all at once.

It. Hurt.

I knew I’d fallen, and was vaguely aware that I was lying on my side on the ground. I was there for, I don’t know, maybe a minute or so before the pain began to fade. I gasped several times, shook my head, and then slowly pushed myself up onto all fours. Then I fixed the Leanansidhe with a glare and said, “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Or *tried* to say that. What came out was something more like, “Grrrrrrbrrrrr awwf arrrrr grrrrrr.”

My faerie godmother looked at me and began laughing. Genuine, delighted belly laughter. She clapped her hands and bounced up and down, spinning in a circle, and laughed even more.

I realized then what had happened.

She had turned us—all of us, except for Mouse—into great, gaunt, long-legged hounds.

“Wonderfull!” Lea said, pirouetting upon one toe, laughing. “Come, children!” And she leapt off into the jungle, nimble and swift as a doe.

A bunch of us dogs stood around for a moment, just sort of staring at one another.

And Mouse said, in what sounded to me like perfectly understandable English, “That *bitch*.”

We all stared at him.

Mouse huffed out a breath, shook his beslimed coat, and said, “Follow me.” Then he took off after the Leansidhe, and, driven by reflex-level instinct, the rest of us raced to catch up.

I’d been shapeshifted one other time—by the dark magic of a cursed belt, and one that I suspected had been deliberately designed to provide an addictive high with its use. It had taken me a long time to shake off the memory of that experience, the absolute clarity of my senses, the feeling of ready power in my whole body, of absolute certainty in every movement.

Now I had it back—and this time, without the reality-blurring euphoria. I was intensely aware of the scents around me, of a hundred thousand new smells that begged to be explored, of the rush of sheer physical pleasure in racing across the ground after a friend. I could hear the breath and the bodies of the others around me, running through the night, bounding over stones and fallen trees, slashing through bits of brush and heavy ground cover.

We could hear small prey animals scattering before us and to either side, and I knew, not just suspected but *knew*, that I was faster, by far, than any of the merely mortal animals, even the young buck deer who went soaring away from us, leaping a good twenty feet over a waterway. I felt an overwhelming urge to turn in pursuit—but the lead runner in the pack was

already on another trail, and I wasn’t sure I *could* have turned aside if I had tried to do so.

And the best part? We probably made less noise, as a whole, than any one of us would have made moving in a clumsy mortal body.

We didn’t cover five miles in half the time, an hour instead of two.

It took us—maybe, at the most—ten minutes.

When we stopped, we could all hear the drums. Steady, throbbing drums, keeping a quick, monotonous, trance-inducing beat. The sky to the northwest was bright with the light of reflected fires, and the air seethed with the scents of humans and not-quite humans and creatures that made me growl and want to bite something. Occasionally, a vampire’s cry would run its shrill claws down my spine.

Lea stood upon a fallen log ahead of us, staring ahead. Mouse walked up to her.

“Gggrrrr rawf arrrrggrrrrrrrr,” I said.

Mouse gave me an impatient glance, and somehow—I don’t know if it was something in his body language or what—I became aware that he was telling me to sit down and shut up or he’d come over and make me.

I sat down. Something in me really didn’t like that idea, but when I looked around, I saw that everyone else had done it too, and that made me feel better.

Mouse said, again in what sounded like perfectly clear English, “Funny. Now restore them.”

Lea turned to look at the big dog and said, “Do you dare to give me commands, hound?”

“Not your hound,” Mouse said. I didn’t know how he was doing it. His mouth wasn’t moving or anything. “Restore them before I rip your ass off. Literally rip it off.”

The Leansidhe tilted her head back and let out a low laugh. “You are far from your sources of power here, my dear demon.”

“I live with a wizard. I cheat.” He took a step toward her and his lips peeled up from his fangs in unmistakable hostility. “You want to restore them? Or do I kill you and get them back that way?”

Lea narrowed her eyes. Then she said, “You’re bluffing.”

One of the big dog’s huge, clawed paws dug at the ground, as if bracing him for a leap, and his growl seemed to . . . I looked down and checked. It didn’t *seem* to shake the ground.

The ground was *actually shaking* for several feet in every direction of the dog. Motes of blue light began to fall from his jaws, thickly enough that it looked quite a bit like he was foaming at the mouth. “Try me.”

The Leansidhe shook her head slowly. Then she said, “How did Dresden ever win you?”

“He didn’t,” Mouse said. “I won him.”

Lea arched an eyebrow as if baffled. Then she shrugged and said, “We have a quest to complete. This bickering does not profit us.” She turned to us, passed a hand through the air in our general direction, and murmured, “Anytime you want it back, dears, just ask. You’d all make gorgeous hounds.”

Again, agony overwhelmed me, though I felt too weak to scream about it. It took a subjective eternity to pass, but when it did I was myself again, lying on my side, sweating and panting heavily.

Mouse came over and nuzzled my face, his tail wagging happily. He walked around me, sniffing, and began to nudge me to rise. I got up slowly, and actually braced my hand on his broad, shaggy back at one point. I felt an acute need to be gripping a good solid wizard’s staff again, just to hold me up. I don’t think I’d ever appreciated how much of a psychological

advantage (i.e., security blanket) it was, either. But I wouldn’t have one until I’d taken a month or so to make one: Mine had been in the *Blue Beetle*, and died with it, too.

I was on my feet before anyone else. I eyed the dog and said, “You can talk. How come I never hear you talk?”

“Because you don’t know how to listen,” my godmother said simply.

Mouse wagged his tail and leaned against me happily, looking up at me.

I rested my hand on his head for a moment and rubbed his ears.

Screw it.

The important things don’t need to be said.

Everyone was getting back up again. The canteens made a round, and I let everyone recover for five minutes or so. There was no point in charging ahead before people could get their breath back and hold a weapon in a steady hand.

I did say something quietly to Susan, though. She nodded, frowned, and vanished.

She was back a few minutes later, and reported what she’d found into my ear.

“All right, people,” I said then, still quietly. “Gather in.”

I swept a section of the jungle floor clean and drew with my fingertip in the dirt. Martin lit the crude illustration with a red flashlight, one that wouldn’t ruin our night vision and had less chance of being glimpsed by a nearby foe.

“There are guards stationed all over the big pyramid. The girl is probably there, in the temple on top. That’s where I’m going. Me, Susan, and Lea are going to move up through the gallery, here, and head for the temple.”

“I’m with Susan,” Martin said. “I go where she does.”

This wasn’t the time or place to argue. “Me, Susan, Lea, and Martin will go in that way. I want all eyes facing north when we head for the pyramid. So I want the rest of you to circle that way and come in from that direction. Right here, there’s a cattle truck where they’re storing their human sacrifices. Get close and spring them. Raise whatever hell you can, and run fast. Head west. You’ll hit a road. Follow it to a town. Get into the church there. Got it?”

There was a round of nods and unhappy expressions.

“With any luck, that will draw off enough of them to let us pull a smash and grab on the temple.

“Also,” I said, very seriously, “what happens in the Yucatán stays in the Yucatán. There will be no jokes about sniffing butts or chasing tails or anything like that. Ever. Agreed?”

More sober nods, this time with a few smiles.

“Okay, folks,” I said. “Just so you know, friends—I’m in your debt, and it’s one I’ll never be able to repay. Thank you.”

“Gush later,” Murphy said, her tone wry. “Rescue now.”

“Spoken like a true lady,” I said, and put my hand out. Everyone piled hands. Mouse had to wedge in close to put his paw on the pile. All of us, every single one of us, except maybe my godmother, were visibly, obviously terrified, a circle of shivers and short, fast breaths.

“Good hunting, people,” I said quietly. “Go.”

Everyone had just gotten to their feet when the brush rattled, and a half-naked man came sprinting almost directly into us, his expression desperate, his eyes wide with mindless terror. He smashed into Thomas, rebounded off him, and crashed to the ground.

Before anyone could react, there was a muted rustle, and a Red Court vampire in its black-skinned monstrous form came bounding out of the forest five yards away and, upon seeing us, went rigid with startled shock. An instant later, it tried to reverse its course, its claws gouging at the forest floor.

I’ve heard it said that no plan survives first contact with the enemy.

It’s true.

The vampire let out an earsplitting screech, and all hell broke loose.

Chapter Forty-two

A lot of things happened very quickly.

Mouse rushed forward and caught the vampire by one calf just before it could vanish into the thick brush. He set his legs as the vampire struggled wildly, trying to scream again.

Martin brought his pistol up in a one-handed grip, six inches of sound suppressor attached to its muzzle. Without hesitating for an instant, Martin took a step to one side for a clear shot and fired on the move. The gun made a sound no louder than a man clearing his throat, and blood splattered from the vampire's neck. Though it kept struggling, its screams suddenly ended, and it bounded and writhed wildly to maneuver Mouse between itself and Martin.

That stopped abruptly when Thomas's falcata took the vampire's head from its shoulders.

The half-naked man looked at us, and babbled something in Spanish. Susan answered him with a curt gesture and a harsh tone, and then the man blurted something, nodding emphatically, then turned to keep running into the darkness.

"Quiet," I breathed, and everyone dropped silent while I stood quite still, Listening for all I was worth.

I have a knack, a skill that some people seem to be able to learn. I'm not sure if it's something biological or magical, but it allows me to hear things I wouldn't otherwise pick up, and I figured it was a good time for it.

For a long breath, there was nothing but the continued rumble of the drums.

Then a horn, something that sounded a bit like a conch, began to blow.

A chorus of vampire screams arose and it didn't take any supergood hearing to know that they were headed our way.

"There. You see?" Sanya said, his tone gently reproving. "Frontal assault."

"Oh, Jesus," Murphy said, her tone more disgusted than afraid.

"He's right," I said, my voice hard. "Our only chance is to hit them hard." We had only a moment, and my mind raced, trying to come up with a plan that resulted in something other than us drowning in a flood of vampires.

"Harry," Susan said. "How are we going to do this?"

"I need Lea," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and steady. "I need Molly."

Molly made a squeaking noise.

I turned to Susan and said, "We do it in two waves."

We moved directly toward the enemy, entering the ancient gallery full of columns, and the vampires came boiling out of the shadows to meet us. I don't know how many of them there were. More than a hundred, less than a million. I stepped out in front of everyone and said, "Attack!"

Sanya's battle roar was loudest. He leapt forward, drawing *Esperacchius*, and blazing light shone forth from the blade.

Murphy ran forward upon his right, letting out a scream of her own and holding the shining length of *Fidelacchius* in her hands. An aura of soft blue light had surrounded her. On

Sanya's left, Susan ran, *Amoracchius* held aloft and wreathed in white fire, and her scream was something primal and terrible. Thomas flanked Murphy. Martin ran next to Susan, and both of them charged forward with blade and pistol in hand.

I saw the front ranks of vampires hesitate as they saw the pure, terrible light of the three Swords coming toward them, but it wasn't enough to stop the momentum of that horde. It swallowed all five valiant figures in a tidal wave of dark, flabby bodies, claws, fangs, and lashing tongues.

Suckers.

I still stood forward of everyone else, and the meeting of the two ranks of combatants brought the horde to a halt. A brief halt, true, something that lasted no more than a handful of seconds—but it was time enough for me to reach down to touch the slow, terrible power of the ley line flowing beneath my feet.

The temple atop the pyramid in the ruins was the center of the confluence, but ley lines, each one a vast, roaring current of magical energy, radiated out in all directions—and the one beneath us was an enormous current of raw earth magic. Earth magic wasn't my forte, and I knew only a couple of applications well enough to use them in a fight.

But one of them was a doozy.

I reached out and touched the power of that ley line, desperately wishing I had my staff with me to assist with the effort. I could sense the earth magic in my mind, feel it flowing by with a power that vibrated up through the soles of the big, stompy, armor-plated boots my godmother had put on me. I took a deep breath, and then thrust my thoughts down into that power.

I was immediately overwhelmed with a rush of images and alien sensations, contacting a power so intense and coherent that it nearly had its own awareness. In a single moment, I saw the ponderous dance of continents clashing against one another to form mountains, felt the slow sleepiness of the earth, its dreaming shivers felt as disasters by the ephemeral things that lived upon its skin. I saw wealth and riches beyond petty mortal imagination, gold and silver flowing hot in rivers, precious gems by the millions being born and formed.

I fought to contain the images, to control them and channel them, focusing all of those sensations into a well I could see only in my imagination, a point deep below the gallery of crumbling old stone that rested next to the pitifully temporary mortal structure on the surface.

Once I had the raw magic I needed, I was able to pull my mind clear of the ley line, and I was suddenly holding a whirlwind of molten stone in my head, seething against the containment of my will until it felt like my skull would burst outward from the pressure, and realized as I did that the use to which I was putting this pure, raw energy was almost childish in its simplicity. I was a frail wisp of mortality beside that energy, which could, quite literally, have moved mountains, leveled cities, shifted the course of rivers, and stirred oceans in their beds.

I set that well of energy to spinning, and directed its power as it spiraled up, a tornado of magic that reached out to embrace simple gravity. With the enormous energy of the ley line, I focused the pull of the earth for miles around into a circle a couple of hundred yards across and spoke a single word as I unleashed the torrent of energy, bound only, firmly if imperfectly, by my will. The spell, start to finish, had taken me a good sixty seconds to put together, and tapping into the ley line had been the last part of the process—far too long and far too destructive to use in any of the faster and more furious fights that I'd found myself in over the years.

Perfect for tonight.

For a quarter of a second, gravity vanished from Chichén Itzá, and the land for miles all around it, jerking everything that wasn't fastened down, myself included, several inches into the air. For that time, all of that force was focused and concentrated into a circle perhaps two hundred yards across that embraced the entire gallery and every vampire inside it. There, the enormous power of that much focused gravity, nearly three hundred times normal, slammed everyone and everything straight down, as if crushed by a single, gigantic, invisible anvil.

The stone columns handled it better than I thought they would. Maybe half of them suddenly cracked, shattered, and fell into rubble, but the rest bore up under the strain as they had for centuries.

The assault force of the Red Court wasn't nearly so resilient.

I could hear the bones breaking from where I stood, each snapping with hideously sharp pops and cracks. Down crashed the wave of vampires in a mass of shattered bones. Many of them were crushed beneath the falling stones of the weaker columns—each flabby black body smashed beneath a weight of scores of tons of stone, even if hit by only one piece from a single block.

The energy involved had been enormous, and as I was bounced up about a foot into the air, I was hit with the wave of exhaustion that came along with it. It wasn't as bad as it might have been. Technically, I was only channeling and rearranging forces that were already in existence and motion, not creating them from my will, or I could never have managed to affect an area so big, and to do it so violently. But believe you me, it was still hard.

I was thrown several inches up along with everything and everyone else that wasn't secured. I landed with only one foot beneath me, so I dropped to one knee, catching myself on my hands. Panting, I looked up to see the results of the spell.

A couple of acres of flat, dead, and a few horribly wounded and dying vampires lay strewn about like so many crushed ants, and standing over them, each in a combat pose, as if ready to keep on swinging, were the friends I had sent running ahead, entirely unaffected.

"Good," I said, panting. "That's enough, kid."

I heard Molly, several feet behind me, let out a sigh of relief herself, and the lights and shining auras vanished from the three figures wielding a Sword.

"Well-done, little one," the Leanansidhe said, and as she spoke the five figures themselves vanished. "A most credible illusion. It is always the little touches of truth that make for the most potent deceptions."

"Well, you know," Molly said, sounding a little flustered. "I just watched my dad a few times."

Mouse stayed close at my side. His head was turned to the right, focused upon the trees and the darkness that way. A growl I felt more than heard came from deep in his chest.

Susan stepped up to my side and looked at the crushed vampires with undisguised satisfaction, but frowned. "*Esclavos de sangre*," she said.

"Yes," said Martin from somewhere behind me.

"What?" I asked.

"Blood slaves," Susan said to me. "Vampires who have gone entirely feral. They can't create a flesh mask. They're almost animals. Scum."

"Cannon fodder," I said, forcing my lungs to start taking slower, deeper breaths. "A crowd of scum at a top-end Red Court function."

"Yes."

It wasn't hard to figure out why they'd been there. Mouse's interest in whatever it was he sensed in the trees was deepening. "The Red Court was expecting company."

"Yes," Susan said, her voice tight.

Well. Nothing's ever simple, is it?

That changed everything. A surprise raid upon an unsuspecting, unprepared target was one thing. Trying to simply kick in the teeth of a fully armed and ready Red Court obviously expecting someone with my firepower was something else entirely. Namely, sheer stupidity.

So.

I had to change the game and change it fast.

A gong began to clash slowly, a monstrous thing, the metallic roar of its voice something low and harsh that reminded me inexplicably of the roar Martin had produced earlier. The tension got thicker, and except for the sounds of the drum and the gong, there were no other noises, not of the creatures of the jungle or any other kind.

The quiet was far more terrifying than the noise had been.

"They're out there," I said quietly. "They're moving right now."

"Yes," said Lea, who had suddenly appeared at my left side, opposite Mouse. Her voice was very calm, and her feline eyes roamed the night, bright and interested. "That mob of trash was merely a distraction. Our own tactic used against us." Her eyes narrowed. "They are employing veils to hide themselves—and they are quite skilled."

"Molly," I said.

"On it, boss," she replied.

"Our distraction was an illusion. It didn't cost us any lives," Murphy pointed out.

"Neither did theirs, from their perspective, Sergeant," Martin said. "Creatures who cannot control themselves are of no use to the Red King, after all. Their deaths simply reduced the number of useless, parasitic mouths he had to feed. He may think of humans as a commodity, but he'd rather not throw that wealth away."

"Harry?" Murphy asked. "Can you do that anvil thing again?"

"Hell. I'm sorta surprised I got away with it the first time. Never done anything with that much voltage." I closed my eyes for a second and began to reach down for the ley line again—and my brain contorted. Thoughts turned into a harsh explosion of images and memories that left long lacerations on the inside of my skull, and even after I had moved my mind away from those images, it took several seconds before I could open my eyes again. "No," I croaked. "No, that isn't an option. Even if they gave me enough time to pull it off."

"Then what are we going to do?" Thomas asked. He held a large pistol in his left hand, his falcata in his right, and stood at my back, facing the darkness behind us. "Stand here until they swarm us?"

"We're going to show them how much it will cost to take us down," I said. "How's it coming, padawan?"

Molly let out a slow, thoughtful breath. Then she lifted one pale hand, rotated an extended finger in a circle around us, and murmured, "*Hireki*."

Chapter Forty-three

Chichén Itzá smelled like blood.

You never mistake blood for anything else, not even if you’ve never smelled it before. We’ve all tasted it—if nowhere else, when we lose our baby teeth. We all know the taste, and as a corollary, we all know the smell.

The main pyramid is known as El Castillo by most of the folk who go there today—literally, “the castle.” As we walked up out of the gallery of pillars, it loomed above us, an enormous mound of cut stone, every bit as large and imposing as the European fortifications for which it was named. It was a ziggurat-style pyramid, made all of square blocks. Levels piled one on top of another as it rose up to the temple at its summit—and every level of the pyramid was lined with a different form of guard.

At the base of the pyramid, and therefore most numerous, were the jaguar warriors we had already seen. They were all men, all appealing, all layered with the lean, swift muscle of a panther. They all wore jaguar skins. Many of them bore traditional weapons. Many more wore swords, some of them of modern make, the best of which were superior in every physical sense to the weapons manufactured in the past. Most of them also carried a Kalashnikov—again, the most modern versions of the weapons, made of steel and polymer, the finest of which were also readily superior to the weapons of earlier manufacture.

The next level up were all women, garbed in ritual clothing as Alamaya had been, but covered in tattoos, much as the jaguar warriors were. They, too, had that same subtle edge to them that suggested greater-than-mortal capability.

Hell’s bells. If the numbers were the same on every side of the pyramid, and I had no reason to believe that they were not, then I was looking at nearly a thousand of the jaguar

warriors and priestesses. I am a dangerous man—but no one man is *that* dangerous. I was abruptly glad that we hadn’t tried a rope-a-dope or a forward charge. We’d have been swamped by sheer numbers, almost regardless of the plan.

Numbers matter.

That fact sucks, but that makes it no less true. No matter how just your cause, if you’re outnumbered two to one by a comparable force, you’re gonna have to be real creative to pull out a victory. Ask the Germans who fought on either front of World War II. German tankers would often complain that they would take out ten Allied tanks for every tank they lost—but the Allies always seemed to have tank number eleven ready to go.

I was looking at an impossible numerical disadvantage, and I did not at all like the way it felt to realize that truth.

And I was only on the second tier of the pyramid.

Vampires occupied the next several levels. None of them were in their monstrous form, but they didn’t have to be. They weren’t going all out on their disguises, and the all-black coloration of their eyes proclaimed their inhumanity with eloquence. Among the vampires, gender seemed to have no particular recognition. Two more levels were filled with fully vampire jaguar warriors, male and female alike, and the next two with vampire priests and priestesses. Above them came what I presumed to be the Red Court’s version of the nobility—individual vampires, male and female, who clearly stood with their own retinues. They tended to wear more and more gold and have fewer and fewer tattoos the higher up the pyramid they went.

Just before the top level were thirteen lone figures, and from what I could see they were taller than most mortals, seven feet or more in height. Each was dressed in a different form of traditional garb, and each had his own signature mask. My Mayan mythology was a bit rusty, but White Council intelligence reports said that the Lords of Outer Dark had posed as gods to

the ancient Mayans, each with his own separate identity. What they didn’t say was that either they had been a great deal more than that, or that collecting worshipers had *made* them more than merely ancient vampires.

I saw them and my knees shook. I couldn’t stop it.

And a light shone in the temple at the top of the pyramid.

The smell of blood came from the temple.

It wasn’t hard to puzzle out. It ran down the steps that led up the pyramid, a trickling stream of red that had washed down the temple steps and onto the earth beyond—which was torn up as if someone had cruised through the bloodied earth with a rototiller and torn it to shreds. The blood slaves, I was willing to bet. My imagination provided me with a picture of that insane mob tearing at the earth, swallowing bloody gob-bets of it, fighting with one another over the freshest mud—until yours truly showed up and kicked off the party.

I looked left and right as we walked across the open courtyard. The cattle car Susan had told us about was still guarded, by a contingent of men in matching khakis and tactical vests—a private security company of some kind. Mercenaries. There were a load of security bozos around, several hundred at least, stationed here and there in soldierly blocks of fifty men.

Without pausing, Alamaya trod across the courtyard and began up the steps, moving with deliberate, reverent strides. I followed her, and everyone else present came with me. I got hostile stares all the way up, from both sides. I ignored them, as if they weren’t worth my notice. Alamaya’s calves were a lot more interesting anyway.

We reached the level below the temple and Alamaya turned to me. “My lord will speak to only one, Wizard Dresden. Please ask your retainers to wait here.”

Here. Right next to the Lords of Outer Night, the expired godlings.

If I made a mistake, and if this went bad, it was going to go really bad, really fast. The people who had been willing to risk everything to help me would be the first to suffer because of it. For a moment, I thought about cutting a deal. Send them away. Let me face the Red Court alone. I had enough lives on my conscience already.

But then I heard a soft, soft sound from the level above: a child weeping.

Maggie.

It was far too sad and innocent a sound to be the death knell for my friends—but that might be exactly what it was.

“Stay here,” I said quietly. “I don’t think this is going to turn into a John Woo film for a couple of minutes, at least. Murph, take the lead until I get back. Sanya, back her.”

She arched an eyebrow at me, but nodded. Sanya shifted his position by a couple of feet, to stand slightly behind her and at her right hand.

I moved slowly up the last few steps to the temple.

It was a simple, elegant thing: an almost cubic building atop the pyramid, with a single opening the size of a fairly standard doorway on each side. Alamaya went in first, her eyes downcast. The moment she was in the door, she took a step to one side and knelt, her eyes on the ground, as if she were worthy to move no farther forward.

I took a slow breath and stepped past her, to face the King of the Red Court.

He was kinda little.

He stood with his back to me, his hands raised over his head, murmuring in what I presumed to be ancient Mayan or something. He was five-two, five-three, well muscled, but certainly nothing like imposing. He was dressed in a kind of skirt- kilt thing, naked from the waist up and the kneecap down. His hair was black and long, hanging to the top of his shoulder blades. He gripped a bloodied knife in his hand, and lowered it slowly, delicately.

It was only then that I noticed the woman on the altar, bound hand and foot, her eyes wide and hopeless, fixed on that black knife as if she could not look away.

My hands clenched into fists. I wasn’t here to fight, I reminded myself. I wasn’t here to fight.

But I wasn’t here to stand around and let something like this happen, either. And I’ve never had a clear head when it comes to protecting women. Murphy says it makes me a Neanderthal.

She may be right, but I didn’t seize a bone and jump the guy. I just cleared my throat really, really obnoxiously, and said, “Hey.”

The knife paused.

Then the Red King lowered it and turned to face me. And I was forcibly reminded that nuclear warheads come in relatively small packages. He made absolutely no threatening gesture. He didn’t even glare.

He didn’t need to.

The pressure of his eyes was like nothing I had ever felt before—empty darkness that struck at me like a physical blow, that made me feel as if I had to physically lean away from him to keep from being drawn forward into that vacuum and lost to the void. I was suddenly reminded that I was alone, that I had none of my tools, that I was involved in matters way over my head, and that my outfit looked ridiculous.

And all of it was simply his physical presence. It was far too huge for the little body it came in, too large to be contained by the stone of this temple, a kind of psychic body heat that loomed so large that only a fool would not be instantly aware of how generally insignificant he was in the greater scheme of the universe. I felt my resolve being eroded, even as I stood there, and I clenched my jaw and looked away.

The Red King chuckled. He said something. Alamaya answered him, then rose and came to kneel down at his feet, facing me.

The slave on the altar remained in place, crying quietly.

I could hear another, smaller voice coming from behind the altar. Holy crap. I couldn’t have cut this one much closer. I focused on my daughter’s voice for a moment, small and sweet—and suddenly I didn’t feel nearly so small. I just felt angry.

The Red King spoke.

Alamaya listened and then said, “You do not speak the true tongue of the ages, wizard, so my lord will use this slave to ensure that understanding exists between us.”

“Radical,” I said. “Wicked cool.”

Alamaya eyed me for a moment. Then she said something to the Red King, apparently conveying the fact that I had obnoxiously used phrasing that was difficult to translate.

He narrowed his eyes.

I mimicked his expression. I didn’t know if he got it, but he sure didn’t like it.

He said something in a short, curt tone.
“My lord demands to know why you are here,” the priestess said.
“Tell him he fucking well knows why I’m here,” I said.

She stared at me in shock. She stammered several times as she translated for me. I don’t know if Ancient Mayan has a word for *bleep* or if she used it.

The Red King listened, his expression slipping from displeasure into careful neutrality. He stared at me for several moments before he spoke again.

“‘I was given a gift by she you know as Duchess Arianna,’ ” the girl translated. “ ‘Are you saying that the gift was wrongfully obtained?’ ”

“Yes,” I said, not looking away from him. “And you know it.” I shook my head. “I’m sick of dancing. Tell him that I’ll kill Arianna for him, take my daughter with me, and leave in peace. Tell him if he does that, it stops being personal. Otherwise, I’m prepared to fight.”

The girl translated, her face once more fearful. When she finished, the Red King burst out laughing. He leaned back against the altar, his mouth wide in a grin, his black eyes utterly unsettling. He spoke a few terse sentences.

“My lord says that he will throw one of your limbs from each door if you lift your hand against him.”

I snorted. “Yes. But I won’t even try to kill him.” I leaned forward, speaking to the Red King, not the girl, and showing him my teeth. “I’ll try to cripple him. Wound him. Weaken him. Ask him if he thinks the death curse of a wizard of the White Council can deal him a wound. Ask him how well he trusts the people on the nearest couple of levels of the pyramid. Ask him if he thinks that they’ll visit and send gifts when they realize he’s been hurt.”

Alamaya spoke in a fearful whisper, earning a sharp word of reproof and a command from the Red King. I guessed at the subject matter: “I don’t want to tell you this, my lord.”
“Stupid slave, translate the way I damned well told you to do or I’ll break my foot off in your ass.”

Okay. Maybe not that last part.

Alamaya got on with her unpleasant job, and the words pushed the Red King into a rage. He gritted his teeth, and . . . things *moved* beneath his skin, shifting and rolling where nothing should have existed that could shift and roll.

I stared at him with one eyebrow lifted and that same wolf smile on my face, waiting for his reaction. He hadn’t been talked to like this in a long time, if ever. He might not have much of a coping mechanism for dealing with it. If he didn’t, I was going to die really horribly.

He did. He mastered himself, but I thought it was close—and it cost the woman on the altar her life.

He spun and slammed the obsidian knife into her right eye with such force that the blade broke off. She arched her body up as much as her restraints allowed and let out a short, choked scream of agony, throwing her head left and right—and then she sort of slowly relaxed into death. One leg kept twitching and moving.

The Red King ran two fingertips through the blood that was seeping from her eye socket. He slipped the fingers into his mouth and shuddered. Then he turned to face me, completely composed again.

I’d seen behavior like that before. It was the mark of an addict scoring a fix and full of contentment that he had a body full of booze or drugs or whatever, and therefore the illusion that he could handle emotional issues more capably.

That . . . explained a lot about how the Red Court had behaved during the war. Hell’s bells, their king was a junkie. No wonder they had performed so inconsistently—brilliant and aggressive one moment, capable of making insane and idiotic mistakes the next. It also explained why there was strife within the Court. If the mark of power was control of one’s blood

thirst, indulging it only when and where one chose, and not with every random impulse, then anyone who knew about the Red King’s condition would *know* that he was weak, inconsistent, and irrational.

Hell’s bells. This guy wasn’t just a monster. He was also paranoid. He had to be, because he *knew* that his bloodlust would be seen as a sign that he should be overthrown. If it had been happening for very long, it would have driven him insane. Even for one of the Red Court, I mean.

And that must be what had happened. Arianna had somehow tumbled to the Red King’s weakness, and was building a power base aimed at deposing him. She’d be building her own power, personal, political, and social, inasmuch as the vampires had a psychotic, blood-spattered, ax-murdering version of a society. Dealing appropriately with one’s enemies was critical to maintaining standing in any society—and for the Red Court, the only two enemies were those who had been dealt with appropriately and those who were still alive. She literally had no choice but to take me down if she was to succeed. And a Pearl Harbor for the White Council wouldn’t hurt her any either, if she pulled it off.

Oh, I *had* to make sure this little lunatic stayed king. As long as he was, the Council would never face a competent, united Red Court.

The Red King spoke a moment later, and wiped off his fingers in Alamaya’s hair as he did.

“My lord accepts your petition to challenge the duchess. This slave will be sent to fetch her while you wait.”

“Not so fast,” I said, as Alamaya began to rise. “Tell him I want to see the girl.”

She froze between us, wide-eyed.

The king moved a hand in a permissive gesture. She spoke quietly to him.

His lip twitched up away from his teeth a couple of times. But he gave me a curt nod and gestured at the altar. Then he stepped to one side and watched me.

I kept track of him out of the corner of my eye as I approached the altar.

Maggie, wearing little metal restraints that had, ugh, been made to fit children, huddled on the far side of the altar. Blood had spilled out from the altar, and she had retreated from it until she was pressed against the wall, trying to keep her little shoes and dress, both filthy already, out of the blood. Her hair was a tangled mess. Her dark eyes were wide and bloodshot. She was shivering. It wasn’t terribly cold out tonight—but it was cold enough to torment a child dressed in only a little cotton dress.

I wanted to go to her. Take those restraints off. Wrap her up in my ridiculous cloak and get her some food and some hot chocolate and a bath and a comb and a brush and a teddy bear and a bed and . . .

She saw me and flinched away with a whimper.

Oh, God.

I *ached*, seeing her there, frightened and miserable and alone. I know how to handle pain when I’m the one feeling it. But the hurt that went through me upon seeing my child, my blood, suffering there in front of my eyes—it went to a whole new level, and I had no idea how to deal with it.

But I thought it would probably start with tearing some more vampires to bloody shreds.

I took that pain and fed it to the storm inside me, the one that had been raging for endless hours and that flared up white-hot again. I waited until my rage had been stoked hot enough to dry the tears in my eyes. Then I turned to the Red King and nodded.

“Deal,” I said. “Go get the duchess. I’ll take out the garbage for you.”

Chapter Forty-four

Alamaya departed the temple in silence. Within a minute she was back. She bowed to the Red King—a full, kneeling bow, at that—and said something quietly.

The Red King narrowed his eyes. He murmured something to the girl and walked out. Conch horns blew and the drums began again as he appeared to those outside.

Alamaya had to raise her voice slightly to be heard. “My lord wishes you to know that this place is watched and warded. Should you attempt to leave with the child, you will be destroyed, and she with you.”

“Understood,” I said calmly.

Alamaya gave me a more conventional bow and hurried out after the Red King.

When she was gone, I took two steps over to the altar and the dead woman upon it. Then I said, “All right. Tell me what I’m looking at.”

From the improvised Rolling Stones T-shirt bag tied to my sash, Bob the Skull said, in his most caustic voice, “A giant pair of cartoon lips.”

I muttered a curse and fumbled with the shirt until one of the skull’s glowing orange eye sockets was visible.

“A big goofy magic nerd!” Bob said.

I growled at him and aimed his eye at the altar.

“Oh,” Bob said. “Oh, my.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“The ritual curse they’re setting up,” Bob said. “It’s a *big* one.”

“How does it work? In ten seconds or less.”

“Ten sec—Argh,” Bob said. “Okay. Picture a crossbow. All the human sacrifices are the effort you need to pull back the string and store the energy. This crossbow has its string all the way back, and it’s ready to fire. It just needs a bolt.”

“What do you mean, a bolt?”

“Like the little girl hiding back behind it,” Bob said. “Her blood will carry the stored energy out into the world, and conduct that energy to the target. In this case, her blood relatives.”

I frowned for a second. Then I asked, “Does it have to be Maggie, specifically?”

“Nah. One bolt is pretty much like another. Long as you use a compatible knife to spill the blood, it should work.”

I nodded. “So . . . what if we used a different bolt?”

“The same thing would happen,” Bob said. “The only difference would be who is on the receiving end.”

“It’s a loaded gun,” I said quietly. I frowned. “Then why’d they leave me alone with it?”

“Who you gonna kill to set it off?” Bob asked. “Your little girl? Yourself? Come on, boss.”

“Can we disarm it then? Scramble it?”

“Sure. It’d blow this temple halfway to orbit, but you could do that.”

I ground my teeth. “If it goes off the way they mean it to, will it kill Thomas?”

“The girl’s human,” Bob said. “So only the human bits. His body, his mind. I suppose if he got lucky, he might wind up a vegetable in which his Hunger demon was trapped, but it won’t spread any farther into the White Court than that.”

“Dammit,” I said. I started to say more, but caught motion out of the corner of my eye. I stuffed Bob all the way back into the sack, admonishing him to shut up, and turned to find Alamaya entering the temple with a dozen of the full-vampire jaguar warriors at her back.

“If you would follow me, lord wizard,” the girl said, “I will conduct you to she who has wronged you. My lord wishes you to know that he gives his word that your daughter will be spared from any harm until the duel is concluded.”

“Thank you,” I said. I turned to look at my little girl one more time. She huddled against the wall, her eyes open but not fixed on anything, as if she were trying to watch everything around her at once.

I moved over to the child, and she flinched again. I knelt down in front of her. I didn’t try to touch her. I didn’t think I would be able to keep cool if I saw her recoil from my hand.

“Maggie,” I said quietly.

Her eyes flashed up to me, surprise evident there.

“I’m going to take you away from the mean people,” I said, keeping my voice as soft and gentle as I knew how. I didn’t know if she even understood English. “Okay? I’m taking you out of here.”

Her lip trembled. She looked away from me again.

Then I stood up and followed the priestess of the junkie god to face my enemy.

Outside, things had changed. The Red Court had filed down from the pyramid and were on the move, walking in calm, ordered procession to another portion of the ruins. My companions waited at the bottom of the stairs.

“Right,” I said, once I reached them. “Duel time.”

Sanya shook his head. “Mark my words. This will not be settled in a dueling circle. Things like this always go to hell.”

“The Accords are serious,” I said. “He’ll play it straight. If I win, I get the girl and we’re gone.”

Martin shook his head.

“What?” I asked him.

“I know them,” he said levelly. “None of us are leaving this place alive.”

His words had an instant effect on everyone. They hit Molly the hardest. She was already pale. I saw her swallow nervously.

“Maybe you know the monsters, Martin,” Murphy said quietly. “But I know the guy who stops them. And if they don’t return the girl, we’ll make them regret it.” She nodded at me and said, “Let’s go. We can watch Dresden kill the bitch.”

I found myself smiling. Murphy was good people.

Once the last of the half-mortal jaguar warriors had departed, we fell into step behind them, and followed them toward what looked like another temple, on the north end of the ruins.

As we went beneath the temple doorway, though, we found ourselves passing through it into the open space beyond—a swath of green grass at least a hundred and fifty yards long and seventy or eighty yards wide. Stone walls about thirty feet high lined the long sides of the rectangle, while the far end boasted a temple like the one we’d just entered.

“It’s a stadium,” I murmured, looking around the place.

“Ugh,” Molly said. “There are some pretty horrific stories about the Mayans’ spectator sports, boss.”

“Indeed,” Lea sighed happily. “They knew well how to motivate their athletes.”

Alamaya turned to me and said, “Lord, your retainers may wait here. Please come with me.”

“Keep your eyes open, folks,” I said. Then I nodded to Alamaya and followed her onto the field. Even as I started out, a woman began walking toward me from the opposite end. As she approached, I saw that Arianna had the same facial features, more or less, but she had traded in her pale skin for red-brown, her icy eyes for vampire black, and she’d dropped six inches from her height. She wore a simple buckskin shift and more gold jewelry than a Mr. T look-alike convention. Her nose was a little sharper, a little longer, but as we stopped and faced each other from about ten feet away, I could see the hate boiling behind her eyes. I had no doubt that this was the duchess.

I smiled at her and said, “I gotcha now.”

“Yes,” Arianna replied. Her eyes flicked up and around us in a quick circle, taking in the thousands of members of the Red Court and their retainers. “I may faint with the terror.”

“Why?” I demanded of her. “Why bring the child into this? Why not just come straight to me?”

“Does it matter at this point?”

I shrugged. “Not really. I’m curious.”

She stared at me for a moment and then she smiled. “You don’t know.”

I eyed her warily. “Don’t know what?”

“Dear boy,” she said. “This was never about *you*.”

I scowled. “I don’t understand.”

“Obviously,” Arianna said, and gave me a stunning smile. “Die confused.”

A conch horn moaned and Alamaya turned to bow toward the temple I'd just come through. I could see the Red King seated upon a throne made of dark, richly polished wood, decorated with golden filigree and designs.

Alamaya rose and turned to us. "Lord and lady, these are the limits within which you must do battle. First . . ."

I scowled. "Hey, This is an Accords matter. We abide by the Code Duello."

The Red King spoke, and though he was more than two hundred feet away, I heard him clearly. Alamaya listened and bowed. "My lord replies that this is a holy time and holy ground to our people, and has been from time immemorial. If you do not wish to respect the traditions of our people, he invites you to return tomorrow night. Unfortunately, he can make no promises about the fate of his newest chattel should you choose to do so."

I eyed the Red King. Then I snorted. "Fine," I said.

Alamaya nodded and continued. "First," she said. "As you are both wielders of Power, you will duel with Power and Power alone. Physical contact of any kind is forbidden."

Arianna's eyes narrowed.

Mine did, too. I knew that the Red Court had dabblers in magic—hell, the first Red Court vampire I'd ever met had been a full-blown sorceress by the time she'd been elevated to the Red Court's nobility. Judging by Arianna's jewelry, her proper place had been on the eleventh tier of the pyramid—the one directly below the Lords of Outer Night themselves. It stood to reason that even a dabbler could have accrued way too much experience and skill over the course of millennia.

"Second," the mortal priestess said, "your persons and whatsoever power you use must be contained within the walls of this court. Should either of you violate that proscription, you will be slain out of hand by the wills of my lord and the Lords of Outer Night."

"I have this problem with buildings," I said. "Maybe you noticed the columns back the other way . . . ?"

Alamaya gave me a blank look.

I sighed. Nobody appreciates levity when they're in the middle of their traditional mumbo jumbo, I guess. "Nothing. Never mind."

"Third," Alamaya said. "The duel will begin at the next sounding of the conch. It will end only when one of you is no more. Do you understand the rules as I have given them to you?"

"Yep," I said.

"Yes," said Arianna.

"Have you anything else to say?"

"Always," I said. "But it can wait."

Arianna smiled slightly at me. "Give my father my thanks, and tell him that I will join him in the temple momentarily."

Alamaya bowed to us both. Then she retreated from the field and back over to her boss.

The night grew silent. Down in the stadium, there wasn't even the sound of wind. The silence gnawed at me, though Arianna looked relaxed.

"So," I said, "your dad is the Red King."

"Indeed. He created me, as he created all of the Thirteen and the better part of our nobility."

"One big bloodsucking Brady Bunch, huh? But I'll bet he missed all the PTA meetings."

The duchess studied me and shook her head. "I shall never understand why someone hasn't killed you before now."

"Wasn't for lack of trying," I said. "Hey, why do you suppose he set up the rules the way he did? If we'd gone by the Code Duello, there's a chance it could have been limited to a physical confrontation. Really seems to be taking away most of your advantages, doesn't he?"

She smiled. "A jaded person might consider it a sign of his weakness."

"Nice spin on that one. Purely out of curiosity, though: Once you kill me, what comes next?"

She lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "I continue to serve the Red Court to the best of my ability."

I showed her my teeth. "Meaning you're going to knock Big Red out of that chair, right?"

"That is more ambitious than reasonable," she said. "One of the Thirteen, I should think, will ascend to become Kukulcan."

"Creating an opening in the Lords of Outer Night," I said, getting it. "Murdering your father to get a promotion. You're all class."

"Cattle couldn't possibly understand."

"Couldn't understand that Daddy's losing it?" I asked. "That he's reverting into one of your blood slaves?"

Her mouth twitched, as if she were restraining it from twisting into a snarl. "It happens, betimes, to the aged," Arianna said. "I love and revere my father. But his time is done."

"Unless you lose," I said.

"I find that unlikely." She looked me up and down. "What a . . . novel outfit."

"I wore it especially for you," I said, and fluttered my eyelashes at her.

She didn't look amused. "Most of what I do is business. Impersonal. But I'm going to enjoy this."

I dropped the wiseacre attitude. The growing force of my anger burned it away. "Taking my kid isn't impersonal," I said. "It's a Kevorkianesque cry for help."

"Such moral outrage. Yet you are as guilty as I. Did you not slay Paolo's child, Bianca?"

Bianca was trying to kill me at the time," I said. "Maggie is an innocent. She couldn't possibly hurt you."

"Then you should have considered that before you insulted me by murdering my grandchild," she hissed, her voice suddenly tight and cold. "I am patient, wizard. More patient than you could imagine. And I have looked forward to this day, when the consequences of your arrogance shall fall upon both you and all who love you."

The threat lit a fire in my brain, and I thought the anger was going to tear its way free of my chest and go after her without me.

"Bitch," I spat. "Come get some."

The horn blew.

Chapter Forty-five

Both of us had been gathering up our wills during the snark-off, and the first instant of the duel nearly killed us both.

I called forth force and fire, both laced with the soulfire that would help reinforce its reality, making the attack more difficult to negate or withstand. It took the shape of a sphere of blue-white fire the size of an inflatable exercise ball.

Meanwhile, Arianna fluttered her hands in an odd, twisting gesture and a geyser of water erupted from the soil with bone-crushing force.

The two attacks met halfway between us, with results neither of us could prevent. Fire and water turned to scalding- hot steam in a detonation that instantly washed back over us both. My shield bracelet was ready to go, and a situation something like this one that had rendered my left hand into a horror prop had inspired me to be sure I could protect myself from this kind of heat in the future.

I leapt back and landed in a crouch, raising the shield into a complete dome around me as the cloud of steam swept down, its heat boiling the grass as it came. It stayed there for several seconds before beginning to disperse, and when it finally did, I couldn't see Arianna anywhere on the field.

I kept the all- around shield in place for a moment, and rapidly focused upon a point a little bit above and midway between my eyebrows. I called up my Sight and swept my gaze around the stadium, to see Arianna, forty yards away and running to put herself in position to shoot me in the back. A layer of greasy black magic seemed to infest the air around her—the veil that my physical eyes hadn't been able to see. To my Sight, she was a Red Court vampire in its true form, only even more flabby and greasy than the normal vamp, a creature ancient in power and darkness.

I tried not to see anything else, but there was only so much I could do. I could see the deaths that had been heaped upon this field over centuries, lingering in a layer of translucent bones that covered the ground to a depth of three or four feet. In the edges of my vision, I could see the grotesqueries that were the true appearance of the Red Court, every one of them a unique and hideous monster, according to his particular madness. I didn't dare look directly up at the spectators, and especially not those gathered on the second floor of the little temple at the end of the stadium. I didn't want to look at the Red King and his Lords unveiled.

I kept my gaze moving, as if I hadn't spotted Arianna on the prowl, and kept turning in a circle, timing when my back was going to be exposed to her before I dropped the shield and rose, panting, as if I couldn't have held it any longer than that. I kept on turning, and an instant before she would have released her spell, I whirled on her, pointed a finger, and snarled, *"Forzare!"*

Chapter Forty-six

Guys like the Red King just don't know when to shut up.

I fought to raise my hand, and it was more effort than anything I'd done that night. My hand shook and shook harder, but finally moved six inches, to touch the surface of the skull in the cloth bag on my hips.

Bob! I screamed, purely in my head, as I would have using Ebenezer's sending stone.

Hell's bells, he replied. *You don't have to scream. I'm right here.*

Chapter Forty-seven

“Godmother!” I shouted, turning toward the pyramid.

Lea appeared at my side, her hands now filled with emerald and amethyst light—her own deadly sorcery. “Shall we pursue the quest now?”

“Yeah. Stay close. We’ll round up the team and move.”

Molly was nearest. I went to my apprentice and shouted in her ear, “Come on! Let the birdmen take it from here! We’ve got to move.”

Molly gave me a vague nod, and finally lowered the little wands as the kenku’s charge drove into the Red Court and took the pressure from our flanks. The tips of her wands, both of them made of ivory, were cracked and chipped. Her arms hung limply and swung at her sides, and she looked even paler now than she had going in. She turned to me, gave me a quivering smile, and then suddenly sank to the ground, her eyes rolling back in her head.

I stared at her in shock for a second, and then I was on my knees next to her, my amulet glowing as I used its light to check her for injuries. In the chaos, I hadn’t seen that one of her legs, at mid thigh, was a mass of blood. One of the wild shots from the security goons had hit her beneath the armored vest. She was bleeding out. She was dying.

Thomas crashed to the ground next to me. He ripped off his belt and whipped it around her leg as a tourniquet. “I’ve got this!” he said, looking up at me, his expression remote, calm.

“Go, go!”

I stared at him for a second, uncertain. Molly was my apprentice, my responsibility.

He regarded me and his calm mask cracked for a second, showing me his tension, the fear he was holding in check at the scale of the conflict around us. “Harry,” he said. “I’ll guard her with my life. I swear it.”

I nodded, and then clenched a fist, looking around. That much spilled blood would start drawing vampires to the wounded girl like bees to flowers. Thomas couldn’t care for her *and* fight. “Mouse,” I called, “stay with them!”

The dog rushed over to Molly and literally stood over her head, his eyes and ears everywhere, a guardian determined not to fail.

Then I ran to Murphy and Sanya, who both bore small cuts and abrasions, and who looked like they were about to charge into the nearest portion of the fray. Martin tagged along with me, apparently calm, and by all appearances unaware that he was in the middle of a battle. Say what I would about Martin, his blandness, his boring demeanor, and his noncombative body language were very real armor in this situation. He simply didn’t look like an important or threatening target, and he was untouched.

I looked around them and picked up a sword that had been dropped by one of the warriors they had killed, a simple Chinese straight sword known as a jian. It was light, razor-sharp on both edges, and suited me just fine.

“We’re going to the pyramid,” I called to Murphy and Sanya. A group of thirty or forty kenku went over us, witch shadows against the rising moon, and entered the fray against the jaguar warriors who still stood between us and an exit from the ball court. “There!” I said. “Go, go, go!”

I suited action to my words and plunged toward the opening Ebenezer’s allies were cutting for us. There was a surge of magic and a flash of motion ahead of us, as another vampire noble tossed another flare of power at me. I caught a small stroke of lightning on my mentor’s staff—it was shorter, thicker, and heavier than mine—conducting the attack down my arm, across my shoulder, and out the tip of my newly acquired sword. The lightning bolt chewed a hole in the belly of the Red Court noble. He staggered as I closed on him. I spun the staff to the horizontal, and checked him in the nose as I went by, dropping him to the ground.

We went past the remains of the temple and out into the open space between the buildings. It was chaos out there. Jaguar warriors and priest types were everywhere, and most of them were armed. Mortal security folks were forming into teams and racing toward the ball court to reinforce the Red Court. I realized that at some point Murphy, her clothing shining with white light, her halo a blaze of molten gold, had begun racing along on my right side, with Sanya on my left. The brilliant light of the two Swords was a terror to the vampires and half-breeds alike, and they recoiled from that aura of power and fear—but that wasn’t the same thing as retreating. They simply fell back, while other creatures closed a large circle about us, drawing it slowly tighter as we moved toward the pyramid.

“We aren’t going to make it,” Murphy said. “They’re getting ready to rush us from all sides.”

“Always they are doing that,” Sanya said, panting, his cheerful voice going slightly annoyed. “Never is it anything new.”

They were right. I could sense the change in motion of the villains around us, how they were retreating more slowly before us, pressing in more closely behind us.

I felt my eyes drawn up to the pyramid ahead—and there, standing on the fifth level of the pyramid, looking down, was a figure in a golden mask. Evidently, one of the Lords of Outer Night had been knocked all the way over to the pyramid by Ebenezer’s entrance. And I could feel his will at work in the foes around us—not used to overcome an enemy with immobility now, but to infuse his troops with confidence and aggression.

“That guy,” I said, nodding at him. “Gold mask. We take him down and we’re through.”

Murphy scanned the pyramid until she spotted him. Then her eyes tracked down to the base of the stairs and she nodded shortly. “Right,” she said.

And she raised *Fidelacchius*, let out a scream that had startled a great many large men working out at her dojo, and plunged into the warriors of the Red Court like a swimmer breasting a wave. Sanya blinked.

Holy crap, I hadn’t meant she should do *that*.

“Tiny,” Sanya said, letting out a belly laugh as he began to move. “But *fierce*!”

“You’re all insane!” I screamed, and plunged forward with them, while Martin backpedaled and tried to keep up with us while simultaneously warding off the vampires closing in from behind.

Murphy did what no mortal should have been able to do—she cut a path through a mob of warrior vampires. She went through them as if they’d been no more than a cloud of smoke.

Fidelacchius blazed, and no weapon raised against the Sword of Faith, neither modern steel nor living relic, could withstand its edge.

Murphy hardly seemed to actually attack anyone. She simply moved forward, and when attacks came at her, bad things happened to whoever had attempted to strike her. Sword thrusts were slid gently aside while she continued onward, her own blade seeming to naturally, independently pass through an S-shaped slash upon the opponent’s body on the way through, wreaking terrible damage with delicate speed. Warriors who flung themselves upon her found their hands grabbing nothing, their bodies being sent tumbling through the air—and that horrible Sword of light left wounds in each and every opponent, their edges black and sizzling.

They’d come at her in twos, and once, three of the jaguar warriors managed to coordinate an attack. It didn’t do them any good. Murphy had been handling opponents who were bigger and stronger and faster than her, in situations of real danger, since she was a rookie cop. The vampires and half-breeds, swift and strong as they were, seemed no more able to beat her down than had all of those thugs and criminals. Stronger though her enemies were, the blazing light of the Sword seemed to slow them, to undermine their strength—not much, but enough to make the difference. Murphy dodged and feinted and tossed warriors into one another, using their own strength against them. The three-on-one she faced almost seemed unfair. One of the jaguar warriors, armed with an enormous club, wound up smashing his two compatriots, courtesy of the intern Knight, only to find his club sliced into three pieces that wound up on the ground next to his own severed leg.

Karrin Murphy led the charge, and Sanya and I tried to keep up. She went through that sea of foes like a little speedboat, her enemies spun and tossed and turned and disoriented in her wake. Sanya and I hacked our way through stunned foes, pushing and chopping with unsophisticated brutality—and that big Russian lunatic just kept laughing the whole time.

We hit the stairs, and resistance thinned sharply. Murphy surged ahead, and the Lord of Outer Night raised a bejeweled hand against her, his sheer will causing the air to ripple and thicken. Sanya and I hit it like a brick wall and staggered to a halt, but it seemed to slide off of Murphy, as had every other attack to come at her, her halo burning still brighter. Panicked, the enemy raised a hand and sent three shafts of sorcerous power howling at her, one right after another. Murphy’s feet, sure and swift on the stairs, carried her into a version of a boxer’s bobbing dance, and each shaft went blazing uselessly past her.

Sanya yelled and dropped, dodging the bolt that nearly clobbered him. I blocked one on my shield and took the other in the shin. My godmother’s armor protected my flesh, but I hit the stone stairs of the pyramid pretty hard.

I jerked my eyes up in time to see Murphy rush the Lord of Outer Night and speed straight past him, her sword sweeping up in a single, upward, vertical slash.

The gold mask fell from the vampire’s head—along with the front half of its skull. Silver fire burned at the revealed, twisted, lumpy lobes of the vampire’s brain, and as its blood flowed out and touched that fire, it went up in a sudden pyre of silver-white flame. The Lord of Outer Night somehow managed to scream as fire consumed it, and flung more bursts of magic blindly and in all directions for several more seconds, until it finally fell into blackened ash and ugly smears on the stone.

Only *then* did the barrier of its will vanish, and Sanya, Martin, and I hustled up the stairs toward the temple.

Still, the enemy pursued us—there were so damned *many* of them—and as I gained more height I was able to look back and see that the Red Court had begun to contain the kenku incursion. The battle was still furiously under way within the ball court, and though the feathered warriors were the match of any two or three vampires or half-breeds, the enemy had numbers to spare. I could only be grateful that so many of their spell-slingers were duking it out with the Grey Council instead of getting in our way.

“Dammit,” I said, looking up the steps toward the temple at their summit. Shadows moved inside. “Dammit!” I looked around me wildly and suddenly felt a hand grasp mine, where I clutched my staff.

Murphy shook my hand until I looked at her. “Sanya and I will stay here,” she said, panting. “We’ll hold them until you get Maggie.”

I looked down the slope of the pyramid. Hundreds of the Red Court were coming up, and they were tearing free of their flesh masks now, revealing the monsters beneath. Hold them? It would be suicide. The Swords gave their wielders immense power against things out of nightmares, but it didn’t make them superhuman. Murphy and Sanya had both been fighting for

twenty minutes—and there *is* no aerobic exercise that compares with the physical demands of combat. Both of them were breathing hard, growing tired.

Suicide.

But I needed to get up there.

“Dresden,” Martin called. “*Come on!*”

Chapter Forty-eight

The Red King raised the knife over my daughter, and she let out a quivering little scream, a helpless, hopeless wail of terror and despair—and as hard as I fought with the new strength given me by Queen Mab, with the protection granted by my godmother’s armor, I could not do a damned thing about it.

I didn’t have to.

White light erupted over the altar from no visible source, and the Red King let out a scream. The shackles of his will vanished, even as his right hand, the one holding the stone knife, leapt off of his arm and went spinning through the air. It fell to the stone floor, still clutched hard around the leather-wrapped hilt of the knife, and the obsidian blade shattered like a dropped dish.

I let out a shout as I felt the Red King’s will slip off of me. The others still held me in place, but I suddenly knew that I could move, knew that I could fight. As the Red King reeled

back screaming, I lifted a hand, snarled, “*Fuego!*” and sent a wash of fire to my right, engulfing the jaguar warrior who still stood a couple of feet inside the doorway. He tried to flee, and only wound up screaming and falling down the deadly steep steps of the pyramid while the soulfire lacing my spell found his flesh and set it aflame.

I whirled back to the Lords facing me from the far side of the altar. I couldn’t have risked throwing destructive energy at them with my daughter lying on the altar between us, and I’d had no choice but to take out the immediate threat of the warrior so that I could focus on the Lords and the Red King—otherwise it would have been relatively simple for him to come over and cut my throat while I was engaged by the vampire elite.

But two could play at that game—and my physical backup was a hell of a lot better than theirs.

I drew in my own will and lifted my borrowed staff—and as I did four more beings in golden masks entered the temple.

Where did all these yo-yos *come* from?

“Hold the wizard!” snarled the Red King, and the pressure of hostile minds upon me abruptly doubled. My left arm shook and the staff I held in it slowly sank down. My right arm just ran out of gas, as if the muscles in it had become totally exhausted, and the tip of the sword clinked as it hit the stone floor.

The Red King rose, and stared for a moment at the altar and at the column of shimmering light over it. As he did, his freaking hand began to writhe like a spider—and a second later, it flipped itself over and began to crawl back over toward him. The king just stood there, staring at the light. I tried to fight my way out of the mass of dark will directed against me. The light

could only be Susan, veiled behind the Leanansidhe’s handiwork and wielding *Amoracchius*. I mean, how many invisible sources of holy light interested in protecting my daughter could there be running around Chichén Itzá? She hadn’t attacked yet, instead standing over Maggie—I wanted to scream at her to take him, that it was her only chance. If she didn’t, the Red King and his Lords could take her out almost as swiftly and easily as I had the jaguar warrior.

But he didn’t—and in a flash of insight, I understood why he didn’t.

He didn’t know what the light *was*.

He knew only that it had hurt him when he had tried to murder the child. From his perspective, it could have been almost anything—an archangel standing guard, or a spirit of light as terrible as the Ick had been foul. I thought back to the voice coming from Murphy’s mouth, pronouncing judgment upon the Red Court, and suddenly understood what was making the Red

King hesitate, what he was really thinking: that the entity over the altar might be something he did not think actually existed—like maybe the *real* Kukulcan.

And he was afraid.

Susan *couldn’t* do anything. If she acted, if she revealed what she was, the enemy’s uncertainty would vanish and the conflict would immediately ensue again. Outnumbered so heavily, she wouldn’t have a chance.

But she knew what she had, in uncertainty and fear, and she neither moved nor made a sound. It was a weapon as potent as the wills of the demigods themselves—it had, after all, paralyzed the Red King. But it was a fragile weapon, a sword made of glass, and I felt my eyes drawn to the broken pieces of obsidian on the floor.

I couldn’t move—and time was not our ally. With every moment that passed, the more numerous enemy would become more organized, recover more from the shock of the sudden invasion of a small army smack in the middle of their holiday celebration. I needed an opportunity, a moment, if I was going to get Maggie out of this mess. And I needed it soon.

I strained against the wills of the Lords of Outer Night, unable to move—and keeping their attention locked upon me. One by one, my gaze traveled over each of the golden masks. I focused on the last one for a time, then began again with the first, tried to test each individual will, to find out which would be the weakest point of attack when my moment came.

Just then, Martin ghosted into the temple through the fourth door, making absolutely no sound, and it looked to me like the moment was freaking nigh. All of the Lords present were focused on me. The Red King stood intently distracted by Susan’s light show, while his severed hand crawled its way up his leg and hopped over to his wounded arm, where rubbery tendrils of black ooze immediately extruded from whole and wounded flesh alike, and began intertwining.

Martin had walked into what had to be a Fellowship operative’s wet dream: the Red King’s naked back, and no one to stop him from going medieval on the leader of the vile edifice of power and terror that was the Red Court.

He took the machete from its sheath without a whisper of steel on nylon and drew back, readying himself to strike. There was an intensity of focus in his face that I had never seen before.

He closed the last two steps in a superquick blur, went into a spin, and I was getting ready to cheer—

—when his foot swept up to streak savagely through the air beneath the glowing white light.

I heard Susan let out a cry as she fell, startled by the blow. Martin, moving with his eyes closed, got close to her, his arms lashing out, and caught something between them. He ripped hard with his left arm, twisting the machete up with the right as he did—and suddenly Susan was fully visible, bowed into a painful arch by Martin’s grip on her. The feather cloak had fallen from her, and the blade of Martin’s machete rested against her throat.

I screamed in rage. It came out as a sort of vocalized seethe.

The Red King took a swift step back as Martin attacked, his eyes intent. Then, when Susan appeared, his head tilted as he worked through what he was seeing.

“Please excuse me, my lord,” Martin murmured, giving a slight bow of his head to the Red King. “Drop it,” he said in a flat voice to Susan. He twisted his body more, bending her

painfully, and pressing the machete’s edge against her throat even harder, until Susan’s fingers opened and *Amoracchius* fell to the floor, its light slowly dying.

“A trick,” said the Red King. Anger began to pour off of him. “A charlatan’s trick.” His eyes moved from Susan up to Martin. “And you have revealed yourself.”

“I beg your forgiveness, my lord,” Martin said. “It seemed the proper time. On my initiative, strike teams began removing Fellowship personnel and safe houses two hours ago. By this time tomorrow, there won’t be an operative left alive south of the United States. And our financial division will have taken or destroyed well over ninety percent of their accounts.”

“You son of a bitch,” Susan said, her voice overflowing with pain. “You fucking traitor.”

Martin’s expression flickered at her words. But his eyes never left the Red King. “I give you the Fellowship of St. Giles, my lord,” he said. “And I beg you to grant me my reward.”

“Reward,” Susan said, loading more contempt and hate into the word than should have been possible. “What could they possibly give you, Martin, to make it worth what you’ve done?”

The Red King stared at Susan and said, “Explain it to her.”

“You misunderstand,” Martin said calmly. “I have not betrayed the Fellowship, Susan. This was the plan from the moment I joined it. Think. You’ve known me for less than a decade and you’ve seen how near some of our scrapes have been. Did you truly believe I had survived a hundred and fifty years of battle against the Red Court, outlived every other operative ever to serve the Fellowship on my own merits?” He shook his head. “No. Escapes were provided. As were targets. It took me fifty years and I had to personally kill two of my fellows and friends working much as I was, to win the trust of the Fellowship. Once they admitted me to the inner circle, their time had come. Trust is a poison, Susan. It took another century to ferret out their secrets, but it is finally done. And our people will finish removing the Fellowship, in every meaningful sense, by tomorrow. It is over.”

Susan’s eyes flickered over to me, and Maggie continued to weep quietly, huddling in on herself. Susan’s face was twisted with pain. There were furious tears in her eyes as she looked at me.

And I couldn’t even speak to her.

“And what do you get?” Susan asked her, voice shaking.

“Ascension,” said the Red King. “I have no interest in admitting bloodthirsty lunatics to the nobility of my Court. Martin has proven himself—his dedication, his self-control, and, most important, his competence, over the course of decades. He was a priest for fifty years before he was even permitted to attempt this service.”

“Honestly, Susan,” Martin said. “I told you many times that you can never let emotion interfere with your duties. If you had listened to me, I’m certain you would have caught on. I would have been forced to kill you, as I have several others who were too wise for their own good, but you would have known.”

Susan closed her eyes. She was shaking. "Of course. You could make contact as often as you wished. Every time I visited Maggie."

"Correct," he said quietly. He turned back to the Red King. "My lord, I beg your forgiveness. I sought only to give you that which you wished, and the timing made it necessary for me to act, or see the opportunity pass us by."

"Under the circumstances, I think I will not object, priest," the Red King said. "If the strike teams are as successful as you predict, you will have your reward and my gratitude."

Martin bowed his head to the Red King, and then looked up at me. He studied my face for a moment before he said, "The wizard has Alamaya's dagger in his sash, my lord, should you wish to complete the ritual."

The Red King took a deep breath and then blew it out, his expression becoming almost benevolent. "Martin, Martin, the voice of practicality. We've been lost without you."

"My lord is too kind," Martin said. "Please accept my condolences on the loss of Arianna, my lord. She was a remarkable woman."

"Remarkably ambitious," the Red King said. "Determined to cling to the past, rather than exploring new opportunities. She and her entire coterie, determined to undermine me. Had she destroyed this animal and then made good upon her promise to break the back of the accursed White Council, she would have been a real threat to my power. I take no pleasure in thinking on it, but her death was meant to be."

"As you say, my lord," Martin said.

The Red King approached me, smiling, and reached for the dagger in my sash.

Susan bared her teeth, still straining, but Martin was more than her equal, it seemed.

There was nothing I could do. The deck had been stacked so hard against me that even with Martin on our side, things had looked grim. His treachery had come at the ideal moment, damn him. Damn them all. There was nothing I could . . .

Long ago, when I was little more than a child, my first lover and I had devised a spell to let us speak silently to each other in class. It was magic much like the speaking stone Ebenezar had crafted, but simpler, with a much shorter range. I had never used it to communicate with anyone but Elaine, but Susan had been intimate with me—and I thought that at that moment, the only thought on our minds was Maggie.

It might be enough to establish the link, even if it was only one-way.

I grasped for the minor magic, fighting to pull it together through the dragging chains of the wills of the Lords of Outer Night, and cast my thought at Susan as clearly as I could. *He*

doesn't know all of it, I sent to her desperately. He doesn't know about the enchantment protecting your skin. He only knows about the cloak because he saw you use it when we got here.

Chapter Forty-nine

Everything changed the night the Red Court died. It made the history books.

First, for the unexplained destruction of several structures in Chichén Itzá. A thousand years of jungle hadn't managed to bring the place down, but half an hour of slugfest between practitioners who know what they're doing can leave city blocks in ruins. It was later attributed to an extremely powerful localized earthquake. No one could explain all the corpses—some of them with dental work featuring techniques last used a hundred years before, some whose hearts had been violently torn from their chests, and whose bodies had been affected by some kind of mutation that had rendered their bones almost unrecognizable as human. Fewer than 5 percent of them were ever identified—and those were all people who had abruptly gone missing in the past ten or fifteen years. No explanation was ever offered for such a confluence of missing persons, though theories abounded, none of them true.

I could have screamed the truth from the mountaintops and blended right in with all the rest of the nuts. Everyone knows that vampires aren't real.

Second, it made the books because of all the sudden disappearances or apparent outright murders of important officials, businessmen, and financiers in cities and governments throughout Latin America. The drug cartels took the rap for that one, even in the nations where they weren't really strong enough to pull such tactics off. Martial law got declared virtually everywhere south of Texas, and a dozen revolutions in eight or ten different countries all kicked off, seemingly on the same night.

I've heard that nature abhors a vacuum—though if that's true, then I can't figure why about ninety-nine zillion percent of creation is vacuum. But I do know that governments hate 'em, and always rush to fill them up. So do criminals. Which probably tells you more about human beings than it does about nature. Most of the nations in South America proper kept their balance. Central America turned into a war zone, with various interests fighting to claim the territory the vampires had left behind them.

Finally, it made the books in the supernatural community as the night of bad dreams. Before the next sunset, the Paranet was buzzing with activity, with men and women scattered over half the world communicating about the vivid and troubling dreams they'd had. Pregnant women and mothers who had recently delivered had been hardest hit. Several had to be hospitalized and sedated. But everyone with a smidge of talent who was sleeping at the time was troubled by dreams. The general theme was always the same: dead children. The world in flames. Terror and death spreading across the globe in an unstoppable wave, destroying anything resembling order or civilization.

I don't remember what happened when the ritual went off. There's a blank spot in my head about two minutes wide. I had no desire whatsoever to find out what was there.

The next thing I remember is standing outside the temple with Maggie in my arms, wrapped up in the heavy feather cloak her mother had left behind. She was still shivering and crying quietly, but only in sheer reaction and weariness now, rather than terror. The shackles lay broken on the ground behind me. I don't remember how I got them off her without hurting her. She leaned against me, using a fold of the cloak as a pillow, and I sat down on the top step, holding her, to see what I had paid for.

The Red Court was dead. Gone. Every one of them. Most of the remains were little more than black sludge. That, I thought, marked the dead vampires. The half-breeds, though, only lost the vampire parts of their nature. The curse had cured them.

Of course, it was the vampire inside them that had kept them young and beautiful.

I saw hundreds of people on the ground aging a year for every one of my breaths. I watched them wither away to nothing, for the most part. It seemed that half-breeds came in a couple of flavors—those who had managed to discipline their thirst for blood, and thus carried on for centuries, and those who had not been half-vampires for very long. Very few of the latter had ranked in the Red King's Court. It turned out that most of the young half vampires had been working for the Fellowship, and many had already been killed by the Reds—but I heard later that more than two hundred others had been freed from their curse.

But for me, it wouldn't matter how many I'd freed in that instant of choice. No matter how high the number, it would need to be plus one to be square in my book.

Inevitably, the Red Court had contained a few newbies, and after the ritual went off, they were merely human again. They, and the other humans too dim to run any sooner, didn't last long once the Grey Council broke open the cattle car and freed the prisoners. The terror the Reds had inflicted on their victims became rage, and the deaths the Reds and their retainers suffered as a result weren't pretty ones. I saw a matronly woman who was all alone beat Alamaya to death with a rock.

I didn't get involved. I'd had enough for one day.

I sat and I rocked my daughter until she fell asleep against me. My godmother came to sit beside me, her gown singed and spattered with blood, a contented smile upon her face. People talked to me. I ignored them. They didn't push. I think Lea was warning them off.

Ebenazar, still bearing the Blackstaff in his left hand, came to me sometime later. He looked at the Leanansidhe and said, "Family business. Please excuse us."

She smirked at him and inclined her head. Then she stood up and drifted away.

Ebenazar sat down next to me on the eastern steps of the temple of Kukulcan and stared out at the jungle around us, beneath us. "Dawn's about here," he said.

I looked. He was right.

"Locals stay hidden in their houses until sunrise around here. Red Court would meet here sometimes. Induct new nobility and so on. Survival trait."

"Yeah," I said. It was like that a lot, especially in nations that didn't have a ton of international respect. Something weird happens in Mexico; twenty million people can say that they saw it and no one cares.

"Sun comes up, they'll be out. They'll call authorities. People will ask questions."

I listened to his statements and didn't disagree with any of them. After a moment, I realized that they were connected to a line of thought, and I said, "It's time to go."

"Aye, soon," Ebenazar said.

"You never told me, sir," I said.

He was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, "I've done things in my life, Hoss. Bad things. I've made enemies. I didn't want you to have them, too." He sighed. "At least . . . not until you were ready." He looked around at the remains of the Red Court. "Reckon you more or less are."

I thought about that while the sky grew lighter. Then I said, "How did Arianna know?"

Ebenazar shook his head. "A dinner. Maggie—my Maggie—asked me to a dinner. She'd just taken up with that Raith bastard. Arianna was there. Maggie didn't warn me. They had some scheme they wanted my support on. The vampires thought I was just Maggie's mentor, then." He sighed. "I wanted nothing to do with it. Said she shouldn't want it, either. And we fought."

I grunted. "Fought like family."

"Yes," he said. "Raith missed it. He's never had any family that was sane. Arianna saw it. Filed it away for future reference."

"Is everything in the open now?" I asked.

"Everything's never in the open, son," he responded. "There're things we keep hidden from one another. Things we hide from ourselves. Things that are kept hidden from us. And things no one knows. You always learn the damndest things at the worst possible times. Or that's been my experience."

I nodded.

"Sergeant Murphy told me what happened."

I felt my neck tense. "She saw it?"

He nodded. "Reckon so. Hell of a hard thing to do."

"It wasn't hard," I said quietly. "Just cold."

"Oh, Hoss," he said. There was more compassion in the words than you'd think would fit there.

Figures in grey gathered at the bottom of the stairs. Ebenazar eyed them with a scowl. "Time for me to go, looks like."

I nudged my brain and looked down at them. "You brought them here. For me."

"Not so much," he said. He nodded at the sleeping child. "For her."

"What about the White Council?"

"They'll get things sorted out soon," he said. "Amazing how things fell apart just long enough for them to sit them out."

"With Cristos running it."

"Aye."

"He's Black Council," I said.

"Or maybe stupid," Ebenazar countered.

I thought about it. "Not sure which is scarier."

Ebenazar blinked at me, then snorted. "Stupid, Hoss. Every time. Only so many blackhearted villains in the world, and they only get uppity on occasion. Stupid's everywhere, every day."

"How'd Lea arrange a signal with you?" I asked.

"That," Ebenazar said sourly. "On that score, Hoss, I think our elders ran their own game on us."

"Elders?"

He nodded down the stairs, where the tall figure with the metal-headed staff had begun creating another doorway out of green lightning. Once it was formed, the space beneath the arch shimmered, and all the hooded figures at the bottom of the stairs looked up at us.

I frowned and looked closer. Then I realized that the metal head of the staff was a blade, and that the tall man was holding a spear. Within the hood, I saw a black eye patch, a grizzled beard, and a brief, grim smile. He raised the spear to me in a motion that reminded me, somehow, of a fencer's salute. Then he turned and vanished into the gate. One by one, the

other figures in grey began to follow him.

"Vadderung," I said.

Ebenezar grunted. "That's his name this time. He doesn't throw in often. When he does, he goes to the wall. And in my experience, it means things are about to get bad." He pursed his lips. "He doesn't give recognition like that lightly, Hoss."

"I talked to him a couple of days ago," I said. "He told me about the curse. Put the gun in my hand for me and showed me where to point it."

Ebenezar nodded. "He taught Merlin, you know. The original Merlin."

"How'd Merlin make out?" I asked.

"No one's sure," Ebenezar said. "But from his journals . . . he wasn't the kind to go in his sleep."

I snorted.

The old man stood and used his right hand to pull his hood up over his face. He paused and then looked at me. "I won't lecture you about Mab, boy. I've made bargains myself, sometimes." He twitched his left hand, which was still lined with black veins, though not as much as it had been hours before. "We do what we think we must, to protect who we can."

"Yeah," I said.

"She might lean on you pretty hard. Try to put you into a box you don't want to be in. But don't let her. She can't take away your will. Even if she can make it seem that way." He sighed again, but there was bedrock in his voice. "That's the one thing all these dark beings and powers can't do. Take away your ability to choose. They can kill you. They can make you

do things—but they can't make you *choose* to do 'em. They almost always try to lie to you about that. Don't fall for it."

"I won't," I said. I looked up at him and said, "Thank you, Grandfather."

He wrinkled up his nose. "Ouch. That doesn't fit."

"Grampa," I said. "Gramps."

He put his hand against his chest.

I smiled a little. "Sir."

He nodded at the child. "What will you do with her?"

"What I see fit," I said, but gently. "Maybe it's better if you don't know."

Both pain and faintly amused resignation showed in his face. "Maybe it is. See you soon, Hoss."

He got halfway down the stairs before I said, "Sir? Do you want your staff?"

He nodded at me. "You keep it, until I can get you a new blank."

I nodded back at him. Then I said, "I don't know what to say."

His eyes wrinkled up even more heavily at the corners. "Hell, Hoss. Then don't say anything." He turned and called over his shoulder, "You get in less trouble that way!"

My grandfather kept going down the stairs, walking with quick, sure strides. He vanished through the doorway of lightning.

I heard steps behind me, and turned to find Murphy standing in the entrance of the temple. *Fidelacchius* rode over one shoulder, and her P-90 hung from its strap on the other. She looked tired. Her hair was all coming out of its ponytail, strands hanging here and there. She studied my face, smiled slightly, and came down to where I sat.

"Hey," she said, her voice hushed. "You back?"

"I guess I am."

"Sanya was worried," she said, with a little roll of her eyes.

"Oh," I said. "Well. Tell him not to worry. I'm still here."

She nodded and stepped closer. "So this is her?"

I nodded, and looked down at the sleeping little girl. Her cheeks were pink. I couldn't talk.

"She's beautiful," Murphy said. "Like her mother."

I nodded and rolled one tired and complaining shoulder. "She is."

"Do you want someone else to take her for a minute?"

My arms tightened on the child, and I felt myself turn a little away from her.

"Okay," Murphy said gently, raising her hands. "Okay."

I swallowed and realized that I was parched. Starving. And, more than anything, I was weary. Desperately, desolately tired. And the prospect of sleep was terrifying. I turned to look at Murphy and saw the pain on her face as she watched me. "Karrin," I said. "I'm tired."

I looked down at the child, a sleepy, warm little presence who had simply accepted what meager shelter and comfort I had been able to offer. And I thought my heart would break. Break more. Because I knew that I couldn't be what she needed. That I could never give her what she had to have to stand a chance of growing up strong and sane and happy.

Because I had made a deal. If I hadn't done it, she'd be dead—but because I had, I couldn't be what she deserved to have.

Never looking away from the little girl's face, I whispered, "Will you do me a favor?"

"Yes," Karrin said. Such a simple word, to have so much reassuring mass.

My throat tightened and my vision blurred. It took me two tries to speak. "Please take her to Father Forthill, when we get b-back," I said. "T-tell him that she needs to disappear. The safest place he has. That I . . ." My voice failed. I took deep breaths and said, "And I don't need to know where. T-tell him that for me."

I turned to Murphy and said, "Please?"

She looked at me as if her heart were breaking. But she had a soul of steel, of strength, and her eyes were steady and direct. "Yes."

I bit my lip.

And, very carefully, I passed my little girl over into her arms. Murphy took her, and didn't comment about the weight. But then, she wouldn't.

"God," I said, not two full seconds later. "Molly. Where is she?"

Murphy looked up at me as she settled down to hold the child. The girl murmured a sleepy complaint, and Murphy rocked her gently to soothe her back to sleep. "Wow. You were really out of it. You didn't see the helicopter?"

I raked through my memories of the night. "Um. No."

"After . . ." She glanced at me and then away. "After," she said more firmly, "Thomas found a landline and made a call. And a navy helicopter landed right out there on the lawn less than an hour later. Lifted him, Molly, and Mouse right out."

"Mouse?"

Murphy snorted gently. "No one was willing to tell him he couldn't go with Molly."

"He takes his work seriously," I said.

"Apparently."

"Do we know anything?" I asked.

"Not yet," Murphy said. "Sanya's manning the phone in the visitors' center. We gave Thomas the number before he left."

"Be honest, Sergeant Murphy," the Leanansidhe said quietly as she glided back over to me. "You gave the dog the number."

Murphy eyed her, then looked at me and said defensively, "Thomas seemed to have enough on his mind already."

I frowned.

"Not like that," Murphy said sternly. "Ugh. I wouldn't have let him go with her if he'd seemed . . . all weird."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah. Mouse wouldn't have, either, would he."

"He was in no danger of losing control," my godmother said calmly. "I would never let such a promising prospect be *accidentally* devoured."

Sanya appeared, jogging around the lower end of the pyramid from its far side. *Esperacchius* hung at his side—and *Amoracchius*, still in its sheath on Susan's white leather belt, hung from his shoulder.

I stared at the belt for a moment.

It hurt.

Sanya came chugging up the stairs, moving lightly for a big guy with so much muscle. He gave my godmother a pleasant smile, one hand checking to be sure that *Amoracchius* was still on his shoulder.

"Next time," Lea murmured.

"I think not," Sanya said, beaming. He turned to me. "Thomas called. He seemed surprised it was me. Molly is on navy cruiser on maneuvers in Gulf of Mexico. She will be fine."

I whistled. "How did . . . ?" I narrowed my eyes.

"Lara?" Murphy asked quietly.

"Got to be," I answered.

"Lara has enough clout to get a navy chopper sent into another country's airspace for an extraction?" Murphy kept on rocking Maggie as she spoke, seemingly unaware that she was still doing it. "That's . . . scary."

"Yeah," I said. "Maybe she sang 'Happy Birthday, Mister President.'"

"Not to be rude," Sanya said, "but I saw some people come up road in car and drive away very fast. Now would be a good time to . . ." He glanced over his shoulder and frowned.

"Who left that lightning door there?"

"I arranged that," Lea said lightly. "It will take you directly back to Chicago."

“How’d you manage that?” I asked.
 The Leansidhe smoothed her gown, a hungry little smile on her lips, and folded her hands primly in her lap. “I . . . negotiated with its creator. Aggressively.”
 I made a choking sound.
 “After all, your quest must be completed, my child,” my godmother said. “Maggie must be made safe. And while I found the swim bracing, I thought it might not be safe for her. I’m given to understand that the little ones are quite fragile.”
 “Okay,” I said. “I . . .” I looked back up at the temple. “I can’t just leave her there.”
 “Will you take her back to Chicago, child?” my godmother asked. “Allow your police to ask many questions? Perhaps slip her into your own grave at Graceland Boneyard, and cover her with dirt?”
 “I can’t just leave her,” I said.
 The Leansidhe looked at me and shook her head. Her expression was . . . less predatory than it could have been, even if it wasn’t precisely gentle. “Go. I will see to the child’s mother.” She lifted her hand to forestall my skeptical reply. “With all the honor and respect you would wish to bestow yourself, my godson. And I will take you to visit when you desire. You have my word.”
 A direct promise from one of the Sidhe is a rare thing. A kindness is even rarer.
 But maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised: Even in Winter, the cold isn’t always bitter, and not every day is cruel.



Sanya, Murphy, and I went down the stairs and through the lightning gate. Murphy politely refused Sanya’s offer to carry Maggie for her. He didn’t know how to work her the right way to get her to accept help.
 I offered to carry her gear.
 She surrendered the Sword and her guns willingly enough, and I lagged a few steps behind them while I settled the straps and weaponry about myself. I hung the P-90, the only object Murph was carrying with enough open space in it to hide an itinerant spirit, so that it bumped against the skull still in the improvised bag on my belt and murmured, very quietly, “Out of the gun.”
 “About time,” Bob whispered back. “Sunrise is almost here. You trying to get me cooked?” Orange light flowed wearily out of the apertures of the P-90 and back into the safety of the skull. The lights in the eye sockets flickered dimly, and the spirit’s slurred voice whispered, “Don’ gimme any work for a week. At least.” Then they flickered out.
 I made sure the T-shirt was still tied firmly, and that the gun wasn’t going to scratch the skull. Then I caught up to the others, and was the first one through the gateway.
 It was like walking through a light curtain into another room. A step, a single stride, took me from Chichén Itzá to Chicago. Specifically, we emerged into Father Forthill’s storage room-slash-refugee closet, and the lightning gate closed behind us with a snap of static discharge.
 “Direct flight,” said Sanya with both surprise and approval, looking around. “Nice.”
 Murphy nodded. “No stops? No weird places? How does that work?”
 I had no idea. So I just smiled, shrugged, and said, “Magic.”
 “Good enough,” Murphy said with a sigh, and immediately settled Maggie down onto one of the cots. The child started to cry again, but Murphy shushed her and tucked her beneath the blankets and slipped a pillow beneath her head, and the little girl was out in seconds.
 I watched Maggie without getting involved.
 Her mother’s blood was on my hands. Literally.
 Sanya stepped up next to me and put his hand on my shoulder. He nodded toward the hallway and said, “We should talk.”
 “Go ahead,” Murphy said. “I’ll stay with her.”
 I nodded my thanks to her, and went out into the hallway with Sanya.

Wordlessly, he offered me *Amoracchius*. I stared at the Sword for a moment.
 “I’m not so sure I should have that,” I said.
 “If you were,” he said, “I wouldn’t want you to have it. Uriel placed it in your care. If he wanted it moved, he should say so.”

After a moment, I took the sword and hung its belt over the same shoulder as *Fidelacchius*. The Swords felt very heavy.
 Sanya nodded. “Before he left, Thomas said to give you this. That you would know what it was.” He passed me a key.

I recognized it from the stamp on the head reading. *WB*. It stood for the name of the *Water Beetle*, Thomas’s beat-up old commercial fishing boat. It had a bathroom, a shower, a little kitchen, some bunks. And I had a couple of changes of clothing there, from overnight trips to one of the islands in Lake Michigan.
 My brother was offering me a place to stay.
 I had to blink my eyes several times as I took the key. “Thank you,” I said to Sanya.
 He studied my face for a second, thoughtfully. Then he said, “You’re leaving now, aren’t you?”
 I looked back toward Forthill’s quiet little haven. “Yeah.”
 He nodded. “When will Mab come for you?”
 “I don’t know,” I said quietly. “Soon, I guess.”
 “I will talk to Michael for you,” he said. “Tell him about his daughter.”
 “I appreciate it,” I said. “Just so you know . . . Murphy knows my wishes regarding Maggie. She’ll speak for me.”
 “Da,” he said. Then he reached into his pocket and produced a metal flask. He sipped from it, and offered it to me. “Here.”
 “Vodka?”
 “Of course.”
 “On an empty stomach,” I said, but took the flask, tilted it to him in a little salute, and downed a big swallow. It burned going in, but not necessarily in a bad way.
 “I am glad that we fought together,” he said, as I passed the flask back. “I will do everything in my power to help make your daughter safe until you can return.”
 I lifted my eyebrows. “Returning . . . isn’t really in the cards, man.” “I do not play cards,” he said. “I play chess. And in my opinion, this is not your endgame. Not yet.”
 “Being the Winter Knight isn’t the kind of job you walk out of.”
 “Neither is being Knight of the Sword,” he said. “But Michael is with his family now.”
 “Michael’s boss was a hell of a lot nicer than mine.”
 Sanya let out a rolling laugh, and took another sip from the flask before slipping it back into his coat. “What will be, will be.” He offered me his hand. “Good luck.”
 I shook it. “And you.”
 “Come,” the Russian said. “I will call you a cab.”

I went down to the *Water Beetle*. I took off the armor. I hid the swords in the concealed compartments Thomas had built into the boat for just such an occasion, along with Bob’s skull. And I took a long, long shower. The water heater on the tub wasn’t much, but I was used to not having hot water. Being the Winter Knight didn’t help when it came to the cold water, which seemed a complete rip-off to me—in other words, typical. I scrubbed and scrubbed at myself, especially my hands. I couldn’t decide if Susan’s blood was coming off my skin or just sinking in.
 I moved mechanically after that, with the routine of a longtime bachelor. There was chicken soup and chili in the kitchen—sorry, galley. I heated them both up and ate them. I had a choice between white wine, orange juice, or warm Coke to go with them. The orange juice was about to go bad, so it won the decision. Hot soups and cold juice got along better than I thought they would, and I lay down on a bunk. I thought I would sleep.
 I couldn’t.
 I lay there feeling the gentle motion of the great lake rocking the boat. Water made soft slaps and gurgles against the hull. Sunlight warmed the cabin. I was clean and dressed in an old pair of sweats and lying in a bed that was surprisingly comfortable—but I couldn’t sleep.
 The old clock on the wall—sorry, bulkhead—ticked with a steady, soothing rhythm.
 But I couldn’t sleep.
 Chicken soup and chili. That was one hell of a last meal.
 Maybe I should have had the cab stop at Burger King.

As noon closed in, I sat up and stared at my godmother's armor, which had stopped bullets and lightning bolts and maybe worse. I'd found several marks on the back and sides, but no corresponding memories matching them to any of the attacks I knew about. Evidently, it had handled a number of hits I hadn't noticed, and I knew that without the ridiculously ornate stuff I'd be dead.

The little ticking clock chimed twelve times at noon, and on the twelfth chime the armor changed. It . . . just melted back into my leather duster. The one Susan had given me before a battle a long, long time ago.

I picked up the coat. There were gaping wounds in it. Slashes. Patches burned away. Clearly visible bullet holes. There was more hole than there was coat, really, and even the surviving leather was cracked, dried, stiff, and flaking. It began to fall apart while I stood there examining it.

I guess nobody tried making a pie out of Cinderella's pumpkin once it got through being a carriage. Though in some versions of the story, I guess it had been an onion. Maybe you could have made soup.

I dropped the coat into the lake and watched it sink. I washed my face in the bathroom and squinted at the little mirror. My mother's amulet and gem gleamed against my bare chest.

Three days ago, my life had been business as usual. Now that little bit of silver and stone was just about the only thing I had left. Not my office. Not my house. Not my car. Not my dog—or my cat. God, where had Mister gone after the fire? Not my integrity. Not my freedom. Not my friends—not after Mab finished with me.

What was left?

A little bit of silver and a tiny rock.

And Maggie.

I sat down and waited to see what happened.

Footsteps came down the dock and then onto the boat. A moment later, Murphy knocked on the door, and then let herself into the cabin.

She looked like she'd come straight here from the church, since she was still in her whitened battle wear, and from her expression she hadn't slept. She exhaled slowly and nodded. "I thought so."

"Murph," I said. "Maybe you shouldn't be here."

"I had to see you," she said. "You . . . you just left."

"Wanted to say good-bye?" I asked.

"Don't be stupid," she said. "I don't want to say it." She swallowed. "Harry . . . it's just that . . . I was worried about you. I've never seen you like this."

"I've never murdered my child's mother before," I said tonelessly. "That's bound to take a little adjustment."

She shivered and looked away. "I just . . . just came to make sure that you aren't doing this to punish yourself. That you aren't going to . . . do anything dramatic."

"Sure," I said. "Nothing dramatic. That's me."

"Dammit, Dresden."

I spread my hands. "What do you want from me, Murphy? There's nothing left."

She came and sat down next to me, her eyes on my face, on my chest and shoulders, taking in all the scars. "I know how you feel," she said. "After Maggie was settled, I called in to the office. There's . . . been another investigation launched. That putz Rudolph." She swallowed, and I could practically smell the pain on her. "The game's rigged. Stallings thinks he can get me early retirement. Half pension."

"Jesus, Murphy," I said, quietly.

"I'm a cop, Harry," she whispered. "But after this . . ." She spread her hands, to show me that nothing was in them.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I got you into this."

"The fuck. You. Did." She turned angry blue eyes to me. "Don't try that bullshit with me. I knew what I was doing. I took the risks. I paid for it. And I'll keep doing it for as long as I damned well please. Don't try to take that from me."

I looked away from her and felt a little bit ashamed. She was probably right. She could have backed off from me a long time ago. She'd chosen to be my friend, even though she'd known the danger. It didn't exactly make me feel any better about myself, but it made me respect her a little more.

Is it wrong of me to admire a woman who can take a hit? Take it with as much fortitude as anyone alive, and stand up again with the fire still in her eyes?

If it is, I guess I can blame it on a screwed-up childhood.

"Do you want the Sword?" I asked.

She let out a quiet groan. "You sound like Sanya. That was the first thing he said." She twisted her face into a stern mask wearing a big grin and mimicked his accent. " 'This is excellent! I have been doing too much of the work!' "

I almost laughed. "Well, I must say. It looks good on you."

"Fell good," she said. "Except for that pronouncement-of-doom thing. It was like someone else was using me as a sock puppet." She shivered. "Ugh."

"Yeah, archangels can be annoying." I nodded toward the hidden compartment. "There's a space behind that panel. You ever want the Sword, check there."

"I'm not rushing into anything. I've had rebound boyfriends. Not interested in a rebound career."

I grunted. "So. What are you going to do?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to make any more decisions. So . . . I think I'm going to go get really drunk. And then have mindless sex with the first reasonably healthy male who walks by. Then have a really awkward hangover. And after that, we'll see."

"Sounds like a good plan," I said. And my mouth kept going without checking in with the rest of me. Again. "Do you want some company?"

There was a sharp, heavy silence. Murphy actually stopped breathing. My heart rate sped up a little.

I wanted to curse my mouth for being stupid, but . . .

Why the hell *not*?

Bad timing is for people who have *time*.

"I . . ." She swallowed, and I could see her forcing herself to speak casually. "I suppose you exercise. It would make things simpler."

"Simple," I said. "That's me."

Her hand went to her hair and she forced it back down. "I want to . . ." She took a breath. "I'll pick you up in an hour?"

"Sure," I said.

She stood up, her cheeks pink. Hell's bells, it was an adorable look on her. "An hour, then," she said.

Before she could leave, I caught her hand. Her hands were small and strong and just a little rough. She had bandages over a couple of burst blisters the sword had worn on her during half an hour or so of hard work. I bent over it and kissed the back of her fingers, one for each. I let her go reluctantly and said, my stomach muscles twitching with butterflies, "An hour."

She left and I saw her walking very quickly toward her car. Her ragged ponytail bobbed left and right with her steps.

The only thing certain in life is change. Most of my changes, lately, hadn't been good ones.

Maybe this one wouldn't be good either . . . but it didn't have that feel to it.

I took forty minutes shaving and putting on my nicest clothes, which amounted to jeans and a T-shirt and my old fleece-lined denim jacket. I didn't have any cologne, so the deodorant and soap would have to do. I didn't allow myself to think about what was going on. In a dream, if you ever start realizing it's a dream, poof, it's gone.

And I didn't want that to happen.

After that I spent a few minutes just . . . breathing. Listening to the water around me. The ticking of the clock. The peaceful silence. Drinking in the comforting sense of solitude all around me.

Then I said out loud, "Screw this Zen crap. Maybe she'll be early." And I got up to leave.

I came out of the cabin and into the early-afternoon sun, quivering with pleasant tension and tired and haunted—and hopeful. I shielded my eyes against the sun and studied the city's skyline.

My foot slipped a little, and I nearly lost my balance, just as something smacked into the wall of the cabin behind me, a sharp popping sound, like a rock thrown against a wooden

fence. I turned, and it felt slow for some reason. I looked at the *Water Beetle's* cabin wall, bulkhead, whatever, behind me and thought, *Who splattered red paint on my boat?*

Author’s Note

When I was seven years old, I got a bad case of strep throat and was out of school for a whole week. During that time, my sisters bought me my first fantasy and sci-fi novels: the boxed set of *Lord of the Rings* and the boxed set of Han Solo adventure novels by Brian Daley. I devoured them all during that week.

From that point on, I was pretty much doomed to join SF&F fandom. From there, it was only one more step to decide I wanted to be a writer of my favorite fiction material, and here we are.

I blame my sisters.

My first love as a fan is swords-and-horses fantasy. After Tolkien I went after C. S. Lewis. After Lewis, it was Lloyd Alexander. After them came Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny, Robert Howard, John Norman, Poul Anderson, David Eddings, Weis and Hickman, Terry Brooks, Elizabeth Moon, Glen Cook, and before I knew it I was a dual citizen of the United States and Lankhmar, Narnia, Gor, Cimmeria, Krynn, Amber—you get the picture.

When I set out to become a writer, I spent years writing swords-and-horses fantasy novels—and seemed to have little innate talent for it. But I worked at my writing, branching out into other areas as experiments, including SF, mystery, and contemporary fantasy. That’s how the Dresden Files initially came about—as a happy accident while trying to accomplish something else. Sort of like penicillin.

But I never forgot my first love, and to my immense delight and excitement, one day I got a call from my agent and found out that I was going to get to share my newest swords-and-horses fantasy novel with other fans.

The Codex Alera is a fantasy series set within the savage world of Carna, where spirits of the elements, known as furies, lurk in every facet of life, and where many intelligent races vie for security and survival. The realm of Alera is the monolithic civilization of humanity, and its unique ability to harness and command the furies is all that enables its survival in the face of the enormous, sometimes hostile elemental powers of Carna, and against savage creatures who would lay Alera to waste and ruin.

Yet even a realm as powerful as Alera is not immune to destruction from within, and the death of the heir apparent to the crown has triggered a frenzy of ambitious political maneuvering and infighting amongst the High Lords, those who wield the most powerful furies known to man. Plots are afoot, traitors and spies abound, and a civil war seems inevitable—all while the enemies of the realm watch, ready to strike at the first sign of weakness.

Tavi is a young man living on the frontier of Aleran civilization—because let’s face it, swords- and-horses fantasies start there. Born a freak, unable to utilize any powers of furycrafting whatsoever, Tavi has grown up relying up on his own wits, speed, and courage to survive. When an ambitious plot to discredit the Crown lays Tavi’s home, the Calderon Valley, naked and defenseless before a horde of the barbarian Marat, the boy and his family find themselves directly in harm’s way.

There are no titanic High Lords to protect them, no Legions, no Knights with their mighty furies to take the field. Tavi and the free frontiersmen of the Calderon Valley must find some way to uncover the plot and to defend their homes against the merciless horde of the Marat and their beasts.

It is a desperate hour, when the fate of all Alera hangs in the balance, when a handful of ordinary steadholders must find the courage and strength to defy an overwhelming foe, and when the courage and intelligence of one young man will save the realm—or destroy it.

Thank you, readers and fellow fans, for all of your support and kindness. I hope that you enjoy reading the books of the Codex Alera as much as I enjoyed creating them for you.

—Jim

Furies of Calderon, *Academ’s Fury*, *Cursor’s Fury*, *Captain’s Fury*,

Princes’ Fury, and *First Lord’s Fury* are available from Ace Books.

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AFTERMATH

—*original novella*

To quote a great man: 'Nuff said.

I can't believe he's dead.

Harry Dresden, Professional Wizard. It sounds like a bad joke. Like most people, at first I figured it was just his schtick, his approach to marketing himself as a unique commodity in private investigation, a job market that isn't ever exactly teeming with business.

Well, that's not entirely true. I knew better. I'd seen something that the rules of the normal world just couldn't explain, and he was right in the middle of it. But I did what everyone does when they run into the supernatural: I told myself that it was dark, and that I didn't really know what I had seen. No one else had witnessed anything to support me. They would call me crazy if I tried to tell anyone about it. By the time a week had passed, I had half convinced myself that I hallucinated the whole thing. A year later, I was almost certain it had been some kind of trick, an illusion pulled off by a smarmy but savvy con.

But he was for real.

Believe me, I know. Several years and several hundred nightmares later, I know.

He was the real thing.

God. I was already thinking about him in the past tense.

"Sergeant Murphy," said one of the lab guys. Dresden was almost one of our own, in Special Investigations. We'd pulled every string we had to get a forensics team on the site. "Excuse me, Sergeant Murphy."

I turned to face the forensic tech. He was cute, in a not-quite-grown, puppyish kind of way. The ID clipped to his lapel said his name was Jarvis. He looked nervous.

"I'm Murphy," I said.

"Um, right." He swallowed and looked around. "I don't know how to tell you this, but ... my boss said I shouldn't be talking to you. He said you were on suspension."

I looked at him calmly. He wasn't more than average height, but that put his head about eight and a half inches over mine. He still had that whippet thinness that some twentysomethings hang on to for a while after their teenage years. I smiled at him and tried to put him at ease. "I get it," I said. "I won't tell anyone if you won't."

He licked his lips nervously.

“Jarvis,” I said, “please.” I gestured at the bloodstain on the exterior of the cabin of a dumpy little secondhand boat, the lettering on which proclaimed it the *Water Beetle*. “He is my friend.”

I didn’t say *was*—not out loud. You don’t ever do that until you’ve found the remains. It’s professional.

Jarvis exhaled and looked around. I thought he looked as if he might throw up.

“The blood spatter suggests that whoever was struck there took a hit somewhere in his upper torso. It’s impossible to be sure, but”—he swallowed—“it was a heavy spray. Maybe an arterial hit.”

“Or maybe not,” I said.

He was too young to notice the way I was grasping at straws. “Or maybe not,” he agreed. “There’s not enough blood on the site to call it a murder, but we think most of it ... We didn’t find the round. It went through the victim, and both walls of the, uh, boat there. It’s probably in the lake.”

I grunted. It’s something I picked up over a fifteen-year career in law enforcement. Men have managed to create a complex and utterly impenetrable secret language consisting of monosyllabic sounds and partial words—and they are apparently too thick to realize it exists. Maybe they really are from Mars. I’d been able to learn a few Martian phrases over time, and one of the useful ones was the grunt that meant *I acknowledge that I’ve heard what you said; please continue*.

“Smears on the deck and the guardrail suggest that the victim went over the side and into the water,” Jarvis continued, his tone subdued. “There’s a dive team on the way, but ...”

I used the Martian phrase for *You needn’t continue; I know what you’re talking about*. It sounded a lot like the first grunt to anyone without a Y chromosome, but I really did get it.

Lake Michigan is jealous and protective of her dead. The water’s depth and the year-round cold temperatures that go with it mean that corpses don’t tend to produce many gasses as they decompose. As a result, they often don’t bob to the surface, like you see in all those cop shows on cable. They just lie on the bottom. No one knows how many poor souls’ earthly remains rest in the quiet cold of Michigan’s depths.

“It hasn’t been long,” I said. “Even if he fell off the back, into the open water, he can’t have gone far.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jarvis said. “Um. If you’ll excuse me.”

I nodded at him and shoved my hands into the pockets of my coat. Night was coming on, but it wouldn't make a lot of difference—the lake wasn't exactly crystal clear on the best days. The divers would have to use flashlights, day or night, even though we weren't more than fifty yards from shore, on the docks of the marina the *Water Beetle* called home. That would limit the area of water they could search at any given moment. The cold would impose limits on their dive time. Sonar might or might not be useful. This close to Chicago, the lake floor was cluttered with all kinds of things. They'd have to get lucky to get a good radar hit and find him.

If he was in there, he'd been there for several hours, and the wind had been rising the whole time, stirring the surface of the lake. Harry's corpse would have had plenty of time to fall to the bottom and begin to drift.

The dive team probably wasn't going to find him. They'd try, but ...

Dammit.

I stared hard at the lengthening shadows and tried to make my tears evaporate through sheer will.

"I'm ... very sorry, Sergeant," Jarvis said.

I replied with the Martian for *Thank you for your concern, but at the moment I need some space*. That one's easy. I just stared forward without saying anything, and after a moment, Jarvis nodded and toddled off to continue working.

A while later, Stallings was standing next to me, wearing his badge prominently out on his coat. After I'd been busted back to sergeant, Stallings had replaced me as the head of Special Investigations, Chicago's unofficial monster squad. We dealt with the weird stuff no one would accept, and then lied about what we'd been doing so that everything fit neatly into a report.

Stallings was a big, rawboned man, comfortably solid with age, his hair thinning on top. He had a mustache like Magnum's. I'd been his boss for nearly seven years. We got along well with each other. He never treated me like his most junior subordinate—more like an adviser who had been made available to the new commander.

The forensics boys were sealing the doors of the little boat with crime scene tape, having taken enough samples and photographs to choke a rhinoceros, before anyone spoke.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

He exhaled through his nose and said, "Hospital checks have come up with zip."

I grimaced. They would. When Harry got hurt, the hospital was the last place he wanted to be. He felt too vulnerable there—and he worried that the way a wizard's presence disrupted technology could hurt or kill someone on life support, or do harm to some innocent bystander.

But there was so much blood on the boat. If he was that badly hurt, he couldn't have gone anywhere on his own power. And down here, anyone who had found him would have called emergency services.

And the blood trail led to the lake.

I shook my head several times. I didn't want to believe it, but you can't make fact into fiction, no matter how much denial you've got to draw upon.

Stallings sighed again. Then he said, "You're on suspension, Murphy. And this is a crime scene."

"Not until we know a crime's been committed," I said. "We don't absolutely know anyone's been hurt or killed. Right now, it's just a mess."

"God dammit," he said, his voice weary. "You're a civilian now, Karrin. Get away from the fucking scene. Before someone gets word to Rudolph about this and Infernal Affairs comes down here to toss your ass in jail."

"On any other day, I would think you were talking sense," I said.

"I don't care what you think," he said. "I care what you do. And what you're going to do is turn around, walk over to your car, get in it, go home, and get a good night's sleep. You look like a hundred miles of bad road. Through Hell."

See, most women would have been a little put out by a remark like that. Especially if they were wearing slacks that flattered their hips and butt, with a darling red silk blouse and a matching silver necklace and two bracelets, studded with tiny sapphires, which they'd inherited from their grandmother. And more makeup than they usually wore in a week. And new perfume. And great shoes.

By any measure, that kind of remark was insulting. When you were dressed for a date, it was more so.

But Stallings wasn't trying to piss me off. The insult was Martian, too, for something along the lines of *I have so much regard for you that I went out of my way to create this insult so that we can have the fun of a mildly adversarial conversation. See how much I care?*

"John," I replied, using his first name, "you are a sphincter douche."

Translation: *I love you, too.*

He gave me a quiet smile and nodded.

Men.

He was right. There was nothing I could do here.

I turned my back on the last place I'd seen Harry Dresden and walked back to my car.

IT HAD BEEN a long day, starting most of two days before, including a gunfight at the FBI building—which the news was still going insane about, especially after the office building bombing a couple of days before that—and a pitched battle at an ancient Mayan temple that ended in the utter destruction of the vampires of the Red Court.

And after that, things had gotten really dangerous.

I'd shown up to that ratty old boat where Harry was crashing, dressed in the outfit Stallings had insulted. Harry and I were supposed to go grab a few drinks and ... and see what happened.

Instead, I'd found nothing but his blood.

I didn't think I would sleep, but two days plus of physical and psychological stress made it inevitable. Nightmares came to haunt me, but they didn't make much of an impression. I'd seen worse in the real world. I did cry, though. I remember that—waking up in the middle of the night from bad dreams that were old hat by now, sobbing my eyes out in pure reaction to the events of the past two days.

It happens. You feel overwhelmed, you cry, you feel better, and you go back to sleep.

If you don't get it, don't ask. It doesn't really translate into Martian.

I WOKE UP to a firm knock at my front door. I got out of bed, my Sig in my hand, and flicked a quick glance out the window at the backyard. It was empty, and there was no one at the door that led into my kitchen. Only after I had checked my six o'clock did I go to the front door, glancing quickly out the window in the hall as I went.

I recognized the stout young man standing on the porch, and I relaxed somewhat. Since I slept in an oversized T-shirt, I grabbed a pair of sweats and hopped into them, then went to see the werewolf standing at my door.

Will Borden didn't look like a werewolf. He was about five five, five six, and built like an armored car, all flat, heavy muscle. He wore glasses, his brown hair was cut short and neat, and you would never have guessed, from looking at him, that he and his friends had been responsible for a forty percent drop in crime in a six-block radius around the University of Chicago—and that didn't even take into account the supernatural predators that had been driven away and that now avoided the neighborhood. Strictly speaking, I probably should have arrested him as a known vigilante.

Of course, strictly speaking, I wasn't a cop anymore. I wouldn't be arresting anybody. Ever again.

That thought hit my stomach like a lead wrecking ball, and no amount of bravado or discipline could keep it from hurting. So I turned away from it.

I answered the door, and said, "Hello, Will."

"Sergeant Murphy," he said, nodding at me. "Got a minute?"

"It's early," I said, not bothering to correct his form of address.

"I need your help," he said.

I took a deep breath through my nose.

It wasn't as though I had to go to work. It wasn't as though I had a hot date waiting for me.

Part of me longed to slam the door in Will's face and go back to bed. I'd always thought that kind of selfish reaction had been a fairly small portion of my character. Today, it felt huge.

The house was silent and empty behind me.

"Okay," I said. "Come in."

I SEATED HIM at the kitchen table and went back to my room to put on clothes that looked a little less pajama-like. When I came back out, Will had gotten the coffeepot going, and brew was already a finger deep in the little glass pitcher.

I popped some bread in the toaster and watched it carefully to make sure it didn't burn. My toaster was an old one, but even so I didn't need to be watching it. It just gave me something to do until the coffee was done.

I took the finished toast and coffee to the table, a bit for each of us, and set out a jar of strawberry preserves. Will accepted the food readily and, naturally, wolfed it down. We did all of that in silence.

"Okay," I said, settling back in my chair and studying him. "What help?"

“Georgia’s gone,” he said simply.

I kept myself from wincing. Georgia was Will’s wife. They’d been together since they were barely out of high school. They’d learned to be werewolves together, apparently. I liked them both. “Tell me.”

“Work had me out of town,” he said. “Omaha. Georgia is getting ready to defend her dissertation. She stayed home. We both watched the news—about Dresden’s office building and the terrorists at the FBI. We were worried but ... I got a call from her late last night. She was ...” His face became pale. “She was almost incoherent. Terrified. She wasn’t making any sense. Then the call cut off abruptly.” His voice shook. “She was screaming. I tried to call the cops, but ...”

I nodded. “But if it was something bad enough to make her scream, there wouldn’t be much the cops could do to help. And between the bombing and the attack, they were all overworked, anyway. They’ll get to it as soon as they can.”

“Yeah,” Will said. “So I left a message with Dresden’s service and came back to Chicago. The apartment door was broken, maybe kicked in. The place was a wreck.” He swallowed. “She was gone. And I couldn’t pick up a trail. I went to Harry’s place, but ... There was still smoke coming up from what was left. Then I came here.”

I nodded slowly. Then I asked, “Why?”

He blinked and looked at me as if I’d broken out into a musical number. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“He always told us that if we ever needed him but couldn’t find him, we were supposed to go to you. That you were the person in this city who could help us better than anyone else.”

I stared at him for a minute. Then I said, “Yeah. I can just see him saying that.” I shook my head. “And never bothering to mention it to me.”

I’ll give Will credit—he was obviously terrified, but he managed to try a joke. “He probably thought you were formidable enough without the confidence boost from something like that.”

“Like I need his approval to be confident,” I muttered. I studied Will for a moment. I knew him well enough to know there was something off in his behavior. He was too quiet. Will wasn’t the sort of man to sit at a table fiddling with his napkin when his wife was missing and quite possibly in

danger. He was terrified, frightened to such a degree that it was nearly paralytic. I recognized the look.

I'd seen it in the mirror often enough.

"What aren't you telling me, Will?" I asked quietly.

He closed his eyes and shivered as a tear tracked down each cheek.

"Georgia's pregnant," he whispered. "Seven months."

I nodded. Then I pushed the rest of my coffee away and got up. "Let me get my coat."

"It's supposed to be nice today," Will said.

"With the coat, I can carry more guns," I said.

"Oh," he said. "Right."

WILL'S APARTMENT WAS a wreck. The lock had been smashed, though the door was still in one piece. The furniture was askew. A few things were broken. Paperback books had been knocked off a shelf. A laptop computer lay on its side, a blue screen of death glaring from its monitor. A mug of cocoa had been spilled and lay in a drying puddle on the hardwood floor.

I looked back and forth for a moment, frowning. The spill lay near the laptop, and both were to the right side of a comfortable-looking recliner, which had been bowled over backward. There was a therapeutic contoured pillow lying a few feet beyond that.

"So," I said, "maybe it went like this. The attacker kicks in the door. There's a partial impression of a shoe's tread on it. Georgia's sitting in her chair, there, working on her computer." I frowned some more. "She drink a lot of cocoa?"

"No," Will said. "Only when she's really upset. She jokes about it being self-medication."

So she'd been upset already, even before the attack. She was sitting in the chair with her laptop and her cocoa and ... I walked over to the fallen chair and found a simple household wireless phone lying behind it.

"Something besides the prospect of an attack had upset her," I said. "She took the time to make a cup of cocoa, and you don't do that when there's a maniac at the door. She made herself a comfort drink and huddled up in her chair to call you. Do you have any idea what could have upset her like that?"

Will shook his head. “Normally, no. But she’s been on a hormone crazy train the past few months. She’s overreacted to a lot of things.”

I nodded and stood there, just trying to absorb it all, to get an image of how things might have fit together. I pictured Georgia, a long, lean, willowy woman, curled up in the recliner, her face blotchy, her eyes red, almost curling up around her baby and the sound of her husband’s voice.

Someone broke the door in with a single kick and rushed her. Georgia was a fighter, accustomed to combat, even if it was mostly when she was in the form of another creature. She used the first defense she could bring to bear—her legs. As her attacker rushed her, she kicked out with both legs, trying to shove him away. But he had too much momentum, and instead Georgia’s kick had flung her chair over backward.

A pregnant woman nowhere near as lithe or graceful as she usually was, she turned and tried to get away.

“There’s no blood,” I said.

The attacker had dragged her out by main force. Either he’d beaten her with his fists and feet—easy, on a pregnant woman, who would instinctively curl her body around her unborn child, so that blows landed mostly on the back, ribs, and buttocks—or else he’d choked her unconscious. Either way, he’d subdued her without, apparently, drawing blood.

Then they left.

I shook my head.

“What do you think?” Will asked.

“I think you don’t want to know.”

“No, I don’t,” he said. “But I need to.”

I nodded. I repeated my theory and its supporting evidence. It made Will go pale and silent.

“How was her hand-to-hand?” I asked him.

“Fair. She used to teach women’s self-defense seminars on campus. I don’t think she’s ever had to use it in earnest... .” His voice trailed off as he stared at the fallen chair.

“What did you find out that I couldn’t?” I asked. “I mean, with the whole werewolf thing.”

He shook his head. “The human brain isn’t wired for serious scent-processing,” he said. “Not like a wolf’s, anyway. Shifting ... sort of turns up the volume in your nose, but it’s really hard to sort things out. I can

follow a trail if I'm on it soon enough, but when a bunch of scents get mixed together, it's a crap shoot. In here there's new paint, spilled cocoa, the last day or two of meals... ." He shrugged.

"Magic never seems to make things any easier," I said.

Will snorted faintly. "Dresden keeps saying the same thing."

I felt an odd pain in my chest. I ignored it. I walked over to the apartment's little kitchen and studied it for a minute. Then I said, "So she's a cocoa junkie."

"Well, she's functional."

"She drink instant?"

"Are you kidding?" The pitch and cadence of his voice changed a little, becoming slightly higher and more clearly inflected, in what was probably an unconscious imitation of his wife. "It's the Spam of cocoas."

I got a pen out of my pocket and used it to lift a second cup, this one with a bit of lipstick smeared on the rim. The bottom of the cup was sticky with the residue of real cocoa, the kind you make from milk and chocolate. Some of it was still liquid enough to stir as the cup shifted. I showed it to him.

"Georgia doesn't wear makeup," he half whispered.

"I know," I said. "And the cocoa in this cup has been sitting out for about the same length of time as the cocoa in the other cup. So the next question we need to answer: Who was drinking cocoa with Georgia when the door broke in?"

Will shook his head. "Either it's the attacker's scent or it's someone we know. Someone who is over a lot."

I nodded. "Redhead, right? The one who likes wearing the tight shirts."

"Andi," Will said. "And Marcy. She moved back to town after Kirby's funeral. Their scents are here, too."

"Marcy?"

"Little mousey girl. Brown hair. She and Andi had kind of a thing in school."

"Liberal werewolves," I said. "Two words rarely seen adjacent to each other."

"Lots of people experiment in college," Will said. "You probably did."

"Yeah," I said. "I tried getting into watching European football. It didn't work out."

"Neither did Marcy and Andi."

“Bad blood there?”

“Not that I know of. They were still roommates after they split.”

“But Marcy left town.”

Will nodded. “She wanted into the animation business. She pulled a job at Skywalker. Seriously cool stuff.”

“So cool that she left it to come back here?”

Will shrugged a shoulder. “She said it was more important for her to be here to help us. And she lived in a cardboard box or something, socked most of her money into the bank. Says the interest is enough to get by on for now.”

I decided to remain skeptical on that story. “You happen to remember if either of them wears this color lipstick?”

He shook his head. “Sorry. Not really the kind of thing I notice.”

If I remembered right, most guys who looked at Andi wouldn’t be entirely certain whether or not she *had* lips afterward. But she’d probably have back problems at some point. “Okay,” I said. “Maybe the cops will be here soon, and maybe not. Either way, I don’t think we should wait around for them.”

Will nodded. “What are we going to do?”

“This isn’t exactly high-dollar soundproof housing. Someone in this building must have heard or seen something.”

“Maybe,” Will said, though he didn’t sound confident.

I turned to leave the apartment and tried not to notice the little crib and changing table that had already been set up just beyond the open door of the apartment’s second bedroom. “We won’t know until we ask. Come on.”

CANVASSING A BUILDING isn’t particularly fun work. It’s awkward, boring, repetitive, and frustrating. Most of the people you talk to don’t want to be talking to you and want out of the conversation as quickly as possible—or else they’re just *delighted* to be talking to you, and want to keep talking to you even though they don’t know a damn thing. You have to ask the same questions over and over again, get the same answers over and over again, and generally look like you’re an idiot without a single clue.

And you pretty much are, or you wouldn’t be canvassing the building in the first place. You grow a thick skin fast for that kind of thing when you do police work.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Will said after the umpteenth door, his frustration and worry finally boiling over to the point that it was beginning to outweigh his terror for his wife and child. He turned to face me, his stance unconsciously confrontational, his shoulders squared, his chest thrust out, his hands clenched into fists. “We need to do something else.”

Ah, masculine assertiveness—I’ve got nothing against it, as long as it helps get the job done instead of making it harder. “Yeah?” I asked him. “You think we’d be better off walking down the street calling her name, Will?”

“N-no, but—”

“But what?” I asked him, keeping my tone reasonable while facing him with an equal amount of ready-to-kick-your-ass Martian body language. *You do not intimidate me.* “You came to me for help. I’m giving it to you. Either you work with me or you tell me you want to go it alone. Right now.”

He backed off, unclenching his hands and looking away. I relaxed as well. Will hadn’t meant to deliver a threat to me, as such, but he was a hell of a lot bigger and stronger than I was. Stronger isn’t everything, but simple mass and power mean a lot in a fight, and Will had the ferocity and killer instinct to make them count even more heavily than most. He’d never considered—hell, probably never *noticed*—the full depth of the statement he was making with his stance and clenched fists.

It’s another in a long list of things that Martians hardly ever think about: Almost any woman knows that almost any man is stronger than she is. Oh, men know they’re stronger, but they seldom actually stop to think through the implications of that simple reality—implications that are both unnerving and virtually omnipresent, if you aren’t a Martian. You think about life differently when you know that half the people you see have the physical power to do things to you, regardless of whether you intend to allow it—and even implied threats of physical violence have to be taken seriously.

Will hadn’t intended to frighten me. He just wanted to find his wife.

“I know it’s frustrating,” I told him, “but it’s the best way to find out something we didn’t know before.”

“We’ve been through the whole building,” he snapped. “The most we’ve got is a neighbor a couple of floors up who heard a thump.”

“Which tells us there wasn’t much of a fight,” I said, “or they’d have probably heard it. Fights are loud, Will, even when only one person is fighting. A building like this, everyone knows it when the neighbor beats his wife.”

“Somebody should have heard her scream.”

“Maybe it wasn’t as loud as you thought. It was right in your ear. And it upset you. If it ended quickly enough, it might not even have woken anyone up.”

I looked out the hallway window, toward more of the same sort of apartment building across the parking lot. Will wasn’t going to be terribly helpful in his current state. “I’m going to check across the lot, see if anyone happened to see or hear anything last night. I want you to call Andi and Marcy. Get them over here if you can reach them. After that, go over your phone’s caller ID, Georgia’s cell phone’s caller ID, her e-mail. See if anyone odd has been in contact with her.”

“Okay,” he said, frowning—but nodding.

“Control your emotions, Will. Stay calm,” I told him. “Calm’s the best way to think, and thinking’s the best way to find Georgia and help her.”

He inhaled deeply, still nodding. “Look, Sergeant... . One of the guys in that building ... Maybe you shouldn’t go over there by yourself.”

I smiled sweetly at him.

He lifted his empty hands as if I’d pointed a gun. “Right. Sorry.”

THREE BUILDINGS HAD apartments in them that faced out on the common parking lot in general, and had a view of the Bordens’ apartment in particular. I stood in the parking lot, looking up at the windows for a moment, and then started with the building on the left.

Most of an hour later, I hadn’t learned anything else, and I figured out my main problem: I wasn’t Harry Dresden.

Dresden would have looked around with a vague expression on his face and wandered around, bumping into things and barely comporting himself with professional caution, even at a crime scene. He’d ask a few questions that wouldn’t make much sense on the surface, make a few remarks he thought were witty, and glibly insult anyone who appeared to be a repressive authority figure. Then he’d do something that didn’t make any

goddamn sense, and produce results out of thin air, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of his hat.

If Harry were here, he could have taken some hairs out of Georgia's hairbrush, done something stupid-looking with them, and followed her across the town or the state or, for all I knew, to the other side of the universe. He could have told me more about what had happened at Georgia's than I could have known, maybe even identified the perp, in general or specifically. And, if things got hot when we went after the bad guy, he would have been there, throwing fire and lightning around as if they were his own personal toys, created especially and exclusively for him to play with.

Watching Dresden operate was usually one of two things: mildly amusing or positively terrifying. On a scene, his whole personal manner always made me think of autistic kids. He never met anyone's eyes for more than a flickering second. He moved with the sort of exaggerated caution of someone who was several sizes larger than normal, keeping his hands and arms in close to his body. He spoke a little bit softly, as if apologizing for the resonant baritone of his voice.

But when something caught his attention, he changed. His dark, intelligent eyes would glitter, and his gaze became something so intense that it could start a fire. During the situations that changed from investigation to desperate struggle, his whole being shifted in the same way. His stance widened, becoming more aggressive and confident, and his voice rose up to become a ringing trumpet that could have been clearly heard from opposite ends of a football stadium.

Quirky nerd, gone. Terrifying icon, present.

Not many "vanillas," as he called nominally normal humans, had seen Dresden standing his ground in the fullness of his power. If we had, more of us would have taken him seriously—but I had decided that for his sake, if nothing else, it was a good thing that his full capabilities went unrecognized. Dresden's power would have scared the hell out of most people, just like it had scared me.

It wasn't the kind of fear that makes you scream and run. That's fairly mild, as fear goes. That's Scooby Doo fear. No. Seeing Dresden in action filled you with the fear that you had just become a casualty of evolution—that you were watching something far larger and infinitely more dangerous than yourself, and that your only chance of survival was to kill it,

immediately, before you were crushed beneath a power greater than you would ever know.

I had come to terms with it. Not everyone would.

In fact ... it might be for that very reason that someone had put the hit on him. A bullet that strikes from long range and goes cleanly through a human body, and then through the hull of a boat, twice, leaving a series of neat holes, is almost certainly a very high-powered rifle round. A professional rifleman shooting from a good way out was one of the things Dresden had acknowledged had a real chance of taking him out cleanly. He might be a wizard, a wielder of tremendous power and knowledge (as if they're any different), but he wasn't immortal.

Quick, tough, tricky as hell, sure. But not untouchable.

Not in any number of senses. I should know, having touched him—even if I hadn't touched him anywhere near soon or often enough... .

And now I never would.

Dammit.

I pushed thoughts of the man out of my head before I started crying again. It's hard enough to pull off an air of authority when you're five feet tall, without also having red, watery eyes and a running nose.

Dresden was gone. His cheesy jokes and his corny sense of humor were gone. His ability to know the unknowable, to fight the unfightable, and to find the unfindable was gone.

The rest of us were just going to have to carry on as best we could without him.

I KNOCKED ON doors and talked to a lot of people, most of them college-age kids attending school in town. I got a whole lot of nothing about Georgia, though I did get tips on some drug sales that had gone down in the parking lot. I'd pass them on to the right people on the force, where they would become more scenery for the endless march of the war on drugs and wouldn't amount to anything. The tips did prove the point I'd made to Will, though: Neighbors see things. Maybe I just hadn't talked to the right neighbor yet.

When I hit building three, I felt the change in climate as I went through the door. It was more run-down than the other apartments. Some fresh graffiti marked an interior wall. More of the doors had double dead bolts on them. The carpet was old and stained. The pane of a window had been broken out and replaced with a piece of wood. The whole place screamed that unpleasant sorts were lurking about, making the building's super reluctant to maintain the halls and foyer, maybe forcing him to continue dealing with problems and damage over and over again.

I couldn't hear any music.

That's unusual in buildings like that one, mostly inhabited by students. Kids love their music, however mind-numbing or ear-rending it might be, and you can almost always hear at least a beat thumping somewhere nearby.

Not here, though.

I kept my eyes open, tried to grow a new pair for the back of my head, and started knocking on doors.

"NO," LIED A small, fragile-looking woman who said her name was Maria, a resident of the third floor. She hadn't opened the door more than the security chain allowed. "I didn't hear or see anything."

I tried to make my smile reassuring. "Ma'am, the way this usually works is that I ask you a question, and *then* you tell me a lie. If you give me a dishonest answer before I have the chance to ask the question, it offends my sense of propriety."

Her head shook in quick, jerky spasms as her eyes widened. "N-no. I'm not lying. I don't know anything."

Maria tried to shut the door. I got my boot into it first. "You're lying," I said, gently. "You're scared. I get that. I've gotten the same treatment from almost everyone in the building."

She looked away from me, as if seeking an escape route. "I'll c-call the police."

"I am the police," I said. Which was technically true. They hadn't fired me yet.

"Oh, God," she said. She shook her head more and more, desperation in the gesture. "I don't want to be ... I can't be seen talking to you. Go *away*."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Ma'am, please. If you're in trouble ..."

I wasn't sure she'd even heard me. I'd seen women like her often enough to know the look. She was terrified of something, probably a husband or boyfriend or a string of husbands and boyfriends, and maybe a father before that. She was living scared, and she'd been doing it for a long time. Fear had ground away at her, and the only way she'd been able to survive was by capitulating.

Maria was damaged goods. She shook her head, sobbing, and just started pushing at the door. I was about to pull my foot out and go away. You can't force someone to accept your help.

"Is there some kind of problem here?" asked a booze-roughened voice.

I turned to face a wooly mammoth of a man. He was well over six feet tall and probably weighed three of me, though more of it was mass than muscle. He wore a white undershirt that showed off his belly, and a button-down shirt with the name RAY embroidered on one breast.

He looked at me and at the apartment door and scowled. "Mary, you got some kind of problem?"

Maria had gone still, like a rabbit that suspects a predator is nearby. "No, Ray," she whispered. "It's nothing."

"Sure as hell don't sound like nothing," Ray said. He folded his arms. "I'm trying to get the city out here to fix the lights on the street and the fuse box, and you're making enough noise to fuck up my conversation all the way down the hall."

"I'm sorry, Ray," Maria whispered.

Something flickered behind Ray's eyes, an ugly little light. "Jesus, I give you all that extra time to pay off on the rent, and you treat me like this?"

Maria sounded as though someone were strangling her. "It was an accident. It won't happen again."

"We'll talk," he said.

Maria flinched as if the words had smeared her with grime.

My hand clenched into a fist.

Well, dammit.

I'd seen Ray's type before, too—bullies who never managed to outgrow the playground; people who liked having power over others and who controlled them through fear. He was big, and he thought that made him more powerful than everyone else. The worm probably had a record, probably had done some time, probably for something fairly gutless. For guys like Ray, sometimes prison only convinces them what dangerous

badasses they are, serving as a confirmation and validation of their status as predators.

Ray looked from Maria to me, with that same ugly light in his eyes.

“You’re the super?” I asked.

He grunted in Martian. *Fuck off and die.*

It’s an expressive language, Martian.

“What’s it to you?” he asked.

“I’m the curious sort,” I said.

“Fuck off and die,” Ray said, in English, this time. “Get out.” He looked past me to Maria. “Close that goddamn door.”

“I—I’ve been trying,” Maria said. My foot and my heavy black work boot were both still between the door and its frame.

Flat rage hit Ray’s eyes, and it was aimed at Maria. That made up my mind for me. Ray was obviously an abuser and one who took out his frustrations wherever he damn well pleased instead of upon their source. He was going to be unhappy with me, and when he realized he couldn’t take it out on me, Maria would be the recipient of his rage. It more or less obliged me to protect her.

And I wasn’t going to enjoy doing it even one little bit, either. Honest.

“Get your foot out of the door before I tear it off,” Ray growled.

“Suppose I don’t,” I said.

“Last chance,” Ray said, his eyes narrowing to slits. He was breathing faster, now, and I could see sweat beading on his brow. “Get out of here. Now.”

“Or what?” I asked, mildly. “You gonna hit me, Ray?”

Self-control was not one of Ray’s strong suits. He spat out the word “Bitch,” spraying spittle with it as he did. He moved toward me, all three-hundred-and-change pounds of him, his hands balled into fists the size of cantaloupes.

There was something Ray didn’t know about me: I know martial arts.

I’m not a truly advanced student, but I’ve practiced every day since I was seventeen. I started with Aikido, then Wing Chun, then Jujitsu. I’ve studied Kali, Savate, Krav Maga, Tae Kwan Do, Judo, boxing, and Shaolin Kung Fu. It sounds impressive laid out like that, but it really isn’t. Once you get two or three arts down, the next dozen or so come pretty quick. Since they are all addressing the same problem, and because human bodies are human

bodies, regardless of which continent you're on, they share characteristic motions and timing.

Ray swept a fist at me in a looping punch a kiddie-league fighter could have avoided, so I took my foot out of Maria's door and ducked it. He kept coming forward in a fleshy avalanche, while I went under his arm and took a pair of steps to one side on a diagonal angle. He tried to grab me as I slipped loose, but he wound up losing his balance badly in doing it. I gave him a helpful push with the first two knuckles of my left fist, right in the kidney.

Ray smashed into the drywall and left dents. I thought about how long it had taken him to build up speed, and I took several steps back. He turned, screaming a vicious oath, and came at me, gathering sluggish momentum like an overloaded tractor trailer. I had to back up another pair of steps to give him enough space to move into a wobbling run.

He didn't bother with a punch this time. He simply grabbed at me with his huge arms. I timed it carefully, and dropped to the floor at the last instant, sweeping my leg out in an almost-gentle kick that did nothing except prevent his right foot from proceeding forward and to the floor in proper rhythm with his left.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Ray fell pretty hard.

He staggered up to his hands and knees and swiped a paw at me in another grab.

Jesus Christ. Basic self-defense instructors would kill to have a video of this. He was coming at me with every stupid-aggressive move he possibly could, as if working his way through a list.

There were a lot of things I could have done with the gift he'd made me of his hand, but in real conflict, I don't get fancy. I go with simple, fast, and reliable. I let him grab my wrist, then broke his grip, wrapped him into a wrist lock, and applied pressure.

That kind of hold has very little to do with muscle or mass. That one is all about exploiting the machinery of the human body. It wouldn't have mattered if Ray was in shape. He could have looked like Schwarzenegger as Conan, and he would have been just as helpless. Human joints are all built to more or less the same specifications, out of similar materials, no matter how much muscle or lard is on top of them. They're vulnerable, if you know how to use them against your opponent.

I did.

Three hundred plus pounds of body odor, stupid and mean, slammed down onto the worn, dirty carpeting in the hallway, as if dropped from a crane.

While he lay there, stunned, I twisted his wrist straight up and behind him, keeping his arm locked straight with my other hand. From there, I could literally take his arm out of his shoulder socket with about as much effort as it would take to push a grocery cart. And I could make him hurt—a lot, if need be—in order to discourage him from trying any more stupid moves.

Being Ray, he tried stupid again, screaming and thrashing against the lock. I sighed and kept control, and he and his face relived his crushing impact with the carpet. We repeated that several times, until the lesson began to drill its way through to Ray—he wasn't going anywhere. It would hurt if he tried.

“So I've been talking to people in several buildings,” I said in a calm, conversational tone. Ray was puffing like an engine. “I was wondering if you could tell me if you saw anything odd or unusual last night? Probably between two and three in the morning?”

“You're breaking my fucking arm!” Ray growled—or tried to. It had been watered down with whine.

“No, no, no,” I said. “If I broke your arm, you'd hear a snapping sound. It sounds a lot like a tree branch breaking, actually, though a little more muffled. What you have to worry about is me dislocating your arm at the shoulder and elbow. That's worse, overall. Just as painful and it takes a hell of a lot more effort to recover.”

“Jesus,” Ray said.

“Are you telling me that Jesus was visiting between two and three last night? I'm dubious, Ray.”

“I didn't see nothing!” he said a few panting seconds later. “All right? Jesus Christ, I didn't see nothing!”

“Aha,” I said. “You sound like an honest man.” I used my bracing arm to reach for my coat pocket, then tossed my badge down onto the floor in front of him.

He stared at it for a long second, and then his face went white.

“Here's what happens,” I said very quietly. “You're going to resign from your job. You'll write a very nice letter to your boss, and then you get out of this building. You're gone by noon tomorrow.”

“You can’t do that,” he said.

“I can do whatever I want,” I said. “Which of us do you think the judge will believe, Ray?”

That isn’t how I approached law enforcement. It isn’t how any good cop does, either. But the criminals are always willing, even eager, to believe the absolute worst about cops. I think it makes them feel better if they can convince themselves that the police are just like them, only with badges and a paycheck.

“You’re going, one way or another. You don’t play ball, I send the city inspector in here to verify all the code violations on this building. Fire extinguishers are missing. The smoke detectors are years old, and most of the ones that aren’t missing entirely are just hanging from their wires. You’ve got mold and fungus issues all over the place. Lights are out. There’s trash piling up outside.” I yawned. “On top of that, there are drug deals going down in your parking lot, Ray. I figure you’re in on that.”

“No,” he said. “No, I’m not!”

“Sure you are. It fits you, doesn’t it? And here you are assaulting an officer.” I shook my head sadly. “So when the building fails inspection, maybe even makes it into the paper, you’ll be fired anyway. And on top of that, I’ll finger you in the drug deals. I’ll press charges for assault. How many strikes do you already have on you, big guy? Can you handle two more?”

“You’re bluffing,” he said.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “On the other hand ... maybe I just give John Marcone a call and tell him how you’re helping some of his street-level guys run some deals behind his back.”

Invoking the name of Marcone to a Chicago criminal is as significant as invoking the name of a saint to a devout Catholic. He’s the biggest fish in the pond, the head of organized crime in Chicago—and damn good at it. His people fear him, and even cops take him very, very seriously. One day he’d slip up and CPD, the FBI, or maybe the IRS would nail him. Until then, he was the deadliest predator in the jungle.

Ray shuddered.

“Look up, Ray,” I said quietly.

He did, and he saw what I had seen a moment before.

Doors were open all up and down the hallway. People stood in them, men and women, children, parents, the elderly. They all stood there silently and

watched a little blond woman handling big mean Ray as if he were an unruly child.

Their eyes were very hard. And there wasn't any fear in them now.

"Look at them, Ray," I said.

He did. He shuddered again. Then his body stopped straining, and he sagged down.

"I'll go," he said.

"Fucking right you will." I shoved on his arm, and he screamed with pain—but I hadn't dislocated it. I only did it to give myself a moment to pick up my badge and step out of grab range, just in case he was too dumb to quit.

He wasn't. He simply lay there like a beached shark.

"I'll be checking back here, Ray. Regularly. If I think you've harmed any of these people, stolen or broken their property—hell, if I hear that you gave them a dirty *look*, I am going to find you and shove a bundle of rusty rebar up your ass. I promise."

I took out one of my business cards, now obsolete, I supposed, and wrote down a phone number. I took the card to Maria and held it out for her. "If you have any trouble, you call this number on the back. You ask for Lieutenant Stallings. Tell him Murphy gave you the number."

Maria bit her lip. Then she looked at Ray and back to me.

She took the card with a hurried, nervous little motion and scampered back, closing her apartment door. Several locks clicked shut.

I didn't say anything else. I walked out of the building. I was halfway across the lot, heading back to Will's place, when I heard quick footsteps coming behind me. I turned with one hand close to my Sig, but relaxed when I recognized Maria.

She stopped in front of me and said, "I s-saw something."

I nodded and waited.

"There were some odd sounds, late last night. Like ... like thumps. And a little while later, a car rolled in. It pulled up to the building across the lot, and a man got out and left it running, like he wasn't worried about it being stolen."

"Did you recognize him?" I asked.

Maria shook her head. "But he was big. Almost as big as Ray, but he ... You know, he moved better. He was in shape. And he was wearing an expensive suit."

“What else can you tell me about him?” I asked.

Maria shrugged. “Not ... not anything, really. I saw him come out again, right away. Then he got into the car and drove away. I didn’t see any plates or anything. I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” I said quietly. “Thank you.”

She nodded and turned to scurry back toward her building. Then she stopped and looked back at me. “I don’t know if it matters,” she said, “but the man had one of those army haircuts.”

I stiffened a little. “Do you remember what color hair?”

“Red,” she said. “Like, bright orange-red.” She swallowed. “If it matters.”

It mattered—but I didn’t want to scare her, so I nodded and smiled, then said, “Thank you, Maria. Seriously.”

She tried to smile back and did pretty well. Then she looked around her, as if uncomfortable standing in so much open space, and hurried back to her building.

A big guy in a suit with a bright red crew cut—it was almost word for word the short description in the notes of the file that CPD kept for a man named Hendricks.

Hendricks was a former college football player. He weighed upward of three hundred pounds, none of it excess. He had been under suspicion for several mysterious disappearances, mostly of criminal figures who seemed to have earned his boss’s displeasure. And his boss had, presumably, sent him to Will and Georgia’s building late last night.

But why?

To get an answer, I was going to have to talk to Hendricks’s boss.

I had to go see “Gentleman” John Marccone.



THE POLICE KNOW where Marccone can be reached. Finding him doesn’t do diddly to let us nail him. The fact that he has his fingers in so many pies means that not only do we have to work against Marccone and his shadowy empire, but we have our own superiors and politicians breathing down our necks as well. Oh, they never say anything directly, like, “Stop arresting Marccone’s most profitable pimps.” Instead, we get a long speech about

racial and socioeconomic profiling. We get screams from political action committees. We get vicious editorial pieces in the newspapers and on TV.

We mostly stay quiet and keep plugging away at our jobs. Experience has taught us that hardly anyone ever cares what we think or have to say. They demand answers, but they don't want to listen.

I'm not saying that cops are a bunch of white knights. I'm just saying that the politicians can spin things all sorts of ways if it means that they're guaranteed stacks of cash for their campaign chests—or that Marcone's blackmailers won't expose some dark secret from their pasts.

I still had friends in the CPD. I called one who worked in the Organized Crime Division and asked him where I could find Marcone.

"Aw, Murph," Malone said. He sounded weary. "This ain't the time."

"Since when have you been big on punctuality?" I asked. "I need this. It's about Dresden."

Malone grunted. Dresden had saved his uncle from some kind of possession or (and I still have trouble with the concept when I say it), an evil enchantment. The elder Malone had been suffering to a degree I had never seen elsewhere. Cops and medics and so on couldn't do a thing for the man. Dresden had walked in, shooed everyone else out of the room, and five minutes later Malone was sane again, if worse for wear. It had made an impression on Malone's nephew.

"Okay," he said. "Give me a couple minutes. They got everyone with a star running around the city looking for bin Laden or Bigfoot or whoever else might have blown up that building. I ain't slept in two days. And the FBI is coming down like a freaking cloud of angry mama birds, after what happened at their office." He cleared his throat. "Um. I heard you might have been around there."

I grunted. Neutrally.

"Weird stuff, huh?"

I sighed. Internal Affairs or the FBI might still have my phone tapped, and I was reluctant to say much.

On the other hand, what were they going to do? Take my career away?

"Serious weirdness. The same flavor as the kind that hit the old Velvet Room." That was where Dresden had fought a whole bunch of vampires and wound up burning down the entire house.

Malone whistled. "Was it as bad as that guy down in the SI holding tank?"

The kid meant the loup-garou. We were stupid enough to lock Harley MacFinn in a normal cell. He transformed into this hideous Ice Age-looking thing. It was half the size of an old Buick and it could only loosely be called a wolf. Brave men had died that night, fighting with weapons that were utterly useless against the loup-garou. Carmichael, my old partner, had died there, all but throwing himself into the thing's jaws to buy me a few seconds.

I feel nauseated when I think about it.

"I don't know, really. Things happened too fast. I rounded up some people, went down a stairway and out. SWAT went in, but by the time they did, there was nothing left but stuff hiding in closets and under desks, and a lot of bodies."

"Jesus," he said.

"Malone, I need this," I pressed firmly.

"Call you back in a minute," he said.

I put my phone back into my coat pocket and looked at Will. We were both standing on the sidewalk in front of his apartment.

"This is crazy," Will said quietly. "Vampires hitting a government building? Blowing up buildings in a major city? They don't *do* that."

"If they followed all the rules, they wouldn't be bad guys," I said.

"It's just ..." He swallowed. "I really wish Harry was around. He'd have a take on it."

"That makes two of us."

Will shook his head. "I've been too crazy to even ask... . Where is he?"

I glanced at him and away, keeping my face still.

The color drained out of Will's cheeks. "No. He's not... . It doesn't work like that."

"We don't know where he is," I said. "He was staying out on that ratty boat he uses until he could find somewhere else to sleep. We found blood. Bullet holes. Blood trail leading into the lake."

Will shook his head. "But ... if he was hurt, he wouldn't go to a hospital. He'd call Waldo Butters." He took his cell phone from his pocket. "He's in my contacts. We can call—"

"I know about Butters, Will," I interrupted gently. "I called him first thing after I saw the blood. He hasn't heard from Harry."

"Oh my ... Oh my God," Will said, his voice a whisper.

I felt like I'd just double-tapped Santa Claus.

“Maybe he isn’t dead,” I said. “Maybe it was somebody else with the same blood type who got shot. Or maybe Dresden pulled one of his tricks and just vanished, whoosh, off to ... a wizard hospital somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Will said, nodding. “Yeah, maybe. I mean, he can do all kinds of things, right?”

“All kinds of things,” I said.

Including dying. But I didn’t say that.

DETECTIVE MALONE WAS good to his word, and five minutes later we were heading for a building on the north edge of Bucktown, another renovation project Gentleman Johnnie’s mostly legitimate business interests had secured. He had purchased, refurbished, updated, and preserved more than a dozen buildings in the city over the past several years. He’d been feted and decorated and honored at various society functions, as a man who was preserving the native beauty of Chicago architecture, saving it from being destroyed and forgotten, et cetera.

If you didn’t consider the drugs, gambling, prostitution, extortion, and other shadow franchises he ruled, I guess he was a real citizen hero.

Contractors were hard at work on the building as we came in, and a security guard in a white shirt and black pants walked over to us with a frown as I entered the building. Will was at my back. I hoped that if things went nutty, I wouldn’t have to drag him with me when I shot my way out.

I felt myself smile at that image, mostly because of its fantasy content. If blood was spilled in Marcone’s headquarters, I wouldn’t live long enough to drag anybody out.

“No trespassers,” the guard said firmly. “This is a construction site. Dangerous. You’ll have to leave.”

I eyed the man and said, “I’m here to see John Marcone.”

The guard eyed me. Then he got on his little radio and spoke into it. A moment later, a voice squawked an answer. “Mr. Marcone is not available.”

“Yes, he is,” I said. “Go tell him Karrin Murphy is here to see him.”

“I’m afraid not,” he said. “You’ll have to leave.”

He had a gun, a 9mm Glock, I noted.

I took out the little leather wallet with my police ID in it, and said, “If you make me open this, it gets official. There will be official questions, official paperwork, and lots of men in uniform trespassing all over your

site.” I held the wallet out as if presenting a crucifix to a vampire, fingers poised as if to open it. “Do you want to be the one who gives your boss that kind of headache?”

His eyes moved from me to Will. He looked quickly away. Then he took a few steps back toward the interior of the building and had a low, rather emphatic conversation with his radio.

I folded my arms and tapped one foot impatiently.

“Would you really do that?” Will asked me.

“Can’t,” I said. “I’m getting fired. But they don’t know that.”

Will made a choking sound.

The guard came back and said, “Through that door. Two floors down. Then take your first left, and you’ll see it.” He coughed. “You’ll have to leave any weapons with me.”

I snorted and said, “Like hell.” Then I brushed past him, nudging him slightly aside with my shoulder as though spoiling for a fight. Martian for *It is inappropriate for you to screw with me in any way.*

He got the message. He didn’t try to stop us.

Will’s quiet chuckle followed me down the stairs.

MARCONE’S OFFICE WAS located in what appeared to be a dining hall. The room was huge and tiled, and several contractors—most of them brawnier and more heavily tattooed than the average laborer—sat at long tables, eating. Caterers kept several serving tables of food stocked with the same attention and care that I would have expected in a high-society gala. It was brightly lit, and a raised stage at one end of the room, which would presumably host a full orchestral band if one were present, had instead been loaded with computers and office furniture.

The portrait of a busy executive, Marcone sat at an enormous old desk, holding a phone to his ear with one shoulder, his business shirt rolled up to his elbows.

Everything about him screamed “successful patriarch.” His suit jacket, hung over the back of his chair, was worth more than some small nations. His loosened tie, a simple silver number rather than a bright “power” tie, bespoke confidence and strength that needed no such sartorial declaration. His hands were broad and looked strong. There were scars on his knuckles. His short, conservatively cut hair was dark, except for just enough silver at

his temples to announce a man in his physical and mental prime. He was well built and obviously kept himself in shape, and his features were regular and appealing. He was by no means beautiful, but his face projected strength and competence.

He looked like a man others would willingly follow.

Two other people stood on the stage, slightly behind him, testimony to his ability to lead. The first was a woman, a blond amazon more than six feet tall in a grey business suit. She had the legs that had been cruelly denied me at birth, the bitch. Her name was Gard, and Dresden had believed she was an actual, literal Valkyrie.

The other was Hendricks. He wasn't truly ugly, but he reminded me of a gargoyle, anyway, a slab-muscled being with a misshapen appearance and beady eyes, ready to leap into action on behalf of the man he watched over. His eyes tracked me as I approached. Gard's blue eyes focused on me for a moment, then skipped past me to Will. She narrowed her eyes and murmured something toward Marcone.

Chicago's resident lord of the underworld gave no indication that he'd heard her, and I caught the last few lines of a conversation as I approached.

"You'll just have to do it yourself." He paused, listening. Then he said, "I don't have the proper resources for such a thing—and even if I did, I wouldn't waste them by sending them there blind and unprepared. You'll have to use your own people." He paused again and then said, "Neither of us will ever be scratching each other's back, mutually or otherwise. I will not send my people into danger without more information. Should you change your mind, you may feel free to contact me. Good day."

He hung up the phone and then turned toward me. He had eyes the color of several-days-old grass clippings. They were opaque, reptilian. He made a steeple of his fingertips and said, "Ms. Murphy."

"News travels fast," I said.

"To me. Yes." His mouth turned up in a heartless smile. "Which are you here for? Work or revenge?"

"Why would I want revenge on such a pillar of the community?"

"Dresden," he said simply. "I assume you're here because you think me responsible."

"What if I am?" I asked.

"Then I would advise you to leave. You wouldn't live long enough to take your gun from your coat."

“And besides,” I said, “you didn’t do it. Right? And you have a perfectly rational reason to explain why you didn’t even want him dead.”

He shrugged, a motion he managed to infuse with elegance. “No more than any other day, at any rate,” he said. “I had no need to assassinate Dresden. He’d been working diligently to get himself killed for several years—as I pointed out to him a few days ago.”

I kept my heart on lockdown. The cocky bastard’s tone made me want to scream and tear out his eyes. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d rattled me. “I’m here for another reason.”

“Oh?” he asked politely.

Too politely. He knew. He’d known why I was coming since before I came through the door. I stopped and played the past several hours back in my imagination, before I spotted where I’d contacted his net.

“Maria,” I said. “She was one of yours.”

Hendricks eyed Gard.

She rolled her eyes and withdrew a twenty-dollar bill from her jacket pocket. She passed it to the big man.

Hendricks pocketed it with a small, complacent smile.

Marcone took no evident note of the interaction. “Yes. The superintendent you met had been providing the means for some of my competitors to operate. Maria was observing his business partners, so that we could track them back to their source and encourage them to operate elsewhere.”

I stared at him, hard. “She just let Ray treat her like that?”

“And was well paid to do it,” Marcone replied. “Admittedly, she was looking forward to closing the contract.”

Maria hadn’t been a broken little mouse. Hell, she was one of Marcone’s troubleshooters. It was a widely used euphemism for hitters in Marcone’s outfit. Everyone knew it was the troubleshooter’s job to identify trouble within the organization—and shoot it.

“And you’re just standing there, sharing all this with me?” I asked.

His expression turned bland. “It isn’t as though I’m confessing to a police officer, is it, Ms. Murphy?”

I clenched my teeth. I swear. Scratch out his goddamn eyes. “That was why Maria came running out after me—she took enough time to call in, report, and ask you for instructions.”

Marcone nodded his head, very slightly.

“And she was also why Hendricks showed up,” I continued. “Maria saw or heard something and reported in.”

Marcone spread his hands. “You apprehend the situation.”

I clenched a fist again to let out some of the anger his deliberate choice of words had inspired.

“Why?” Will demanded suddenly, stepping forward to stand beside me. I noted that both Will and I were under average height. We stood staring up at Marcone on the raised stage. It was hard not to feel like an extra in the cast of *Oliver*—*Please, sir, may I have some more?*

“Why?” he repeated. “Why did you send your man to my apartment?”

Marcone tilted his head slightly to regard Will. “What are you willing to pay for such information, young man?”

Will’s upper lip lifted away from his teeth. “How about I don’t tear you and your goons into hamburger?”

Marcone regarded Will for maybe three seconds, his face blank. Then he made a single, swift motion. I barely saw the gleam of metal as the small knife flickered across the space between them, and buried itself two inches deep in Will’s right biceps. Will let out a cry and staggered.

My own hands went toward my coat, but Gard had lifted a shotgun from behind a cabinet, and leveled it on me as my fingers touched the handle of my Sig. Hendricks had produced a heavy-caliber pistol from his suit, though he hadn’t aimed at anyone. I stopped, then moved my fingers slowly from my gun.

Will ripped the knife out of his arm, then turned to Marcone, his teeth bared.

“Don’t confuse yourself with Dresden, Mr. Borden,” Marcone said, his voice level and cold. His eyes were something frightening, pitiless. “You don’t have the power to threaten me. The instant you begin to change, Ms. Gard here will fire on Ms. Murphy—and then upon you.” His voice dropped to a barely audible murmur. “The next time you offer me a threat, I will kill you.”

Will’s breaths came in pained gasps, each exhalation tinged with a growl. But he didn’t answer. The room had become completely quiet. The men who were eating lunch had stopped moving, as if frozen in place. No one looked directly at the confrontation, but all of them were watching from the corners of their eyes. A lot of hands were out of sight.

“He means it, Will,” I said quietly. “This won’t help her.”

Marcone left it like that for a moment, staring at Will, before he settled back into his chair again, his eyes becoming hooded and calm once more. "Have you given thought to your next career move, Ms. Murphy? I'm always looking for competent help. When I find it, I pay a premium for it."

I wondered where he'd heard about my suspension, but I supposed it wasn't important. He had more access to the CPD than most cops. I asked him, calmly, "Does the job involve beating you unconscious and throwing you into a cell forever?"

"No," Marcone said, "although it offers an excellent dental plan. And combined with your pension check, it would make you a moderately wealthy woman."

"Not interested," I said. "I will never work for you."

"Never is a very long time, Ms. Murphy." Marcone blinked slowly and then sighed. "Clearly, the atmosphere has become unproductive," he said. "Ms. Gard, please escort them both from the premises. Give them the information they want."

"Yes, sir," Gard said. She lowered the shotgun slowly. Then she returned it to its place behind the desk, picked up a file folder from it, and walked out to Will and me. I stooped and picked up the dropped, bloodstained knife before she could reach it. Then I wiped it clean on a pocket handkerchief, taking the blood from it, before offering the handle to Ms. Gard. I was more or less ignorant about magic, but I knew that Gard knew more about it than I, and that blood could be used in spells or incantations or whatever, to the great detriment of the bleeder. By wiping the blood from the blade, I'd prevented them from having an easy way to get to Will.

Gard smiled at me very slightly and nodded her head in what looked like approval. She took the knife, slipped it into a pocket, and then said, "This way, please."

We followed her back out of the room. Will walked with his left hand pressed to his right biceps, his expression furious. There was blood, but not much of it. His shirt was soaking it up, and he'd clamped his hand hard over the wound. The knife hadn't hit any major blood vessels, or he'd have been on the floor by now. We'd clean it up once we were out of here.

"You may know," Ms. Gard said, as we walked, "that Mr. Marcone's business interests are varied. Some of them have fierce competitors."

"Drugs," I said. "Extortion. Prostitution. Those are the money-makers. There's always competition for territory."

Gard continued as if she hadn't heard me. "Competition has increased rather dramatically of late, and it has consisted of increasingly competent personnel. We've also had a number of issues with involuntary employee dereliction."

Will let out a snort. "Does she mean what I think she means?"

"Hitters," I said quietly. "Marccone's been losing people." I frowned. "But there hasn't been any particular increase in the number of homicides."

"They haven't been killed," Gard said, frowning. "They've vanished. Quickly. Quietly. Sometimes with minimal signs of a struggle."

Will inhaled sharply. "Georgia."

Gard passed me the folder. I opened it and found a simple printout of a Web browser document. "'Craigslis'," I read, for Will's benefit. "'Talent search, Chicago. Standard compensation for new talent. Contact for delivery dates.' And there's an e-mail address."

"I know some of the business Dresden was involved in yesterday," she said quietly. "In the past twenty-four hours, announcements like this have appeared in London, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Rome, Berlin... ."

"I get the point," I said. "Something big is happening."

"Exactly," Gard said. She glanced at Will and said, "Someone is rounding up those mortals possessed of modest supernatural gifts."

"Talent search," I said.

"Yes," Gard said. "I don't know who or what is behind it. We haven't been able to get close. Whoever they are, they're quite well-informed, and they know our personnel."

"Why was Hendricks at my apartment?" Will asked.

"Maria saw someone force your wife and another young woman out of the building and into a car. We know about your gifts, obviously. Marccone sent Hendricks to case the scene to look for any evidence of our opponent's identity. He found nothing." She shook her head. "From here on, I have only conjecture," Gard said. "I'll give it to you if you want it."

"You don't need to," I told her. "Someone started picking on the little guys in town within a few hours of Dresden's shooting. He never would have stood for something like that. So whoever is responsible for these disappearances might well be behind the shooting, too."

"Excellent," Gard said, nodding in approval. "We don't really specialize in finding people." She glanced down at me. "But you do."

“I am not doing this for Marccone,” I snarled.

We reached the building’s entrance, and Ms. Gard looked at me thoughtfully. “A word of advice: Be cautious what official channels you use for assistance. We aren’t the only ones who have compromised the local authorities.”

“Yes,” I said. “I know how it works.”

Gard frowned at me and then nodded her head a little more deeply than was usual. “Of course. My apologies.”

I frowned at her, trying to figure out what she meant. There wasn’t any trace of sarcasm or irony in her words or her body language. Damn. I wasn’t used to confronting non-Martians. “Nothing to apologize for,” I said, after a hesitation. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

She studied me for a moment. “I can’t tell if what I’m seeing in you is courage or despair. I’d ask, but I’m almost sure you wouldn’t know the answer.”

“Excuse me?”

Gard nodded. “Exactly.” She sighed. “I’m sorry. About Dresden. He was a brave man.”

I suddenly felt furious that she had spoken of Harry in the past tense. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t done in my thoughts—but I hadn’t spoken the words aloud, either. “They haven’t found a body,” I told her, and I heard a fierceness in my voice I had not intended. “Don’t write him off just yet.”

The Valkyrie gave me a smile that bared her canine teeth. “Good hunting,” she bade us, and then went back inside the building.

I turned to Will and said, “Let’s take care of your arm.”

“It’s fine,” Will said.

“Don’t play tough guy with me,” I said. “Let me see.”

Will sighed. Then he took his hand away from the wound. There was a slit in his shirtsleeve, where the knife had gone in. It was too high up on his arm to make rolling the sleeve up practical, so I tore it a little wider and examined the wound.

It wasn’t bleeding. There was an angry, swollen purple line over the puncture mark. It wasn’t a scab, either. It was just ... healing, albeit into a damn ugly scar.

I whistled softly. “How?”

“We’ve been experimenting,” Will said quietly. “Closing an injury isn’t really much different from shifting back into human form. My arm still

hurts like hell, but I can stop bleeding—probably. If it isn't too bad. We're not sure about the limits. Leaves a hell of a mark, though." His stomach gurgled. "And the energy for it has to come from somewhere. I'm starving."

"Neat trick."

"I thought so." Will kept pace beside me as we headed back to the car. "What do we do next?"

"Food," I said. "Then we contact the bad guys."

He frowned. "Won't that just, you know ... warn them that we're on to them?"

"No," I said. "They'll want to meet me."

"Why?"

I looked up at him. "Because I'm going to be selling them some new talent."

WE WENT TO my place.

There wasn't much point in setting the dogs on the owner of the e-mail address. It would prove to be anonymous, and given what I had for hard evidence, even if I could get someone to pay attention to me, by the time it went through channels and peeled away all the red tape and got a judge somewhere to move, I was sure the address would be old news, and anyone connected to it would long since have departed.

I might have gotten some help from a friend at the Bureau, except that in the wake of the Red Court attack on their headquarters building, they would be going crazy looking for the "terrorists" responsible. They, too, were long since departed. Dresden had seen to that.

The TV news was all about the bombing, the attack, while everyone speculated about who had done what and used the occasion to put forward their own social and political agendas.

People suck. But they're the only ones around who can keep the lights on.

I turned Will loose on my fridge and then sent him out to make a few discreet inquiries of the local supernatural scene. I heard his car door close when he returned, about the time the daylight was turning golden orange. It looked like it would be another cold night.

There was the sound of a second car door closing.

Will knocked at the front door, and I answered it with my gun held low and against my leg. There proved to be a girl with him. She was a little taller than I, which still put her below average, and I had pencils bigger around than she was. Her glasses were oversized, her hair thin, straight, and the same brown of a house mouse's fur. Still, there was something in the way she held herself that put up the hairs on the back of my neck. The young woman might be a lightweight, but so were rats—and you didn't want to trap one of them in a corner if you could avoid it. She contained a measure of danger that demanded respect.

Her eyes flickered to my face and then down to my gun hand in the same first half second of recognition. She stopped slightly behind Will, her body language wary.

"Murphy," Will said, nodding—but he didn't try to come in or make any other movement that might force me to react. "Uh, maybe you remember Marcy? We were all at Marcone's place, stuck down in that muddy pit? Drugged?"

"Good times?" the young woman asked hopefully.

"My partner died the day before, when the loup-garou gutted him. Not so much," I said. I looked at Will. "You trust her?"

"Sure," Will said without a second's hesitation.

Maybe I'm getting cynical as I age. I stared at Marcy hard for a second before I said, "I don't."

No one said anything for a minute. Then Will said, "I'm vouching for her."

"You're emotionally involved, Will," I said. "It's compromising your judgment. Marcone could have put a bullet through your head instead of tossing that little knife at you. If Dresden was standing here telling you to be suspicious, what would you do?"

Will's expression darkened. But I saw him get ahold of himself and take a deep breath. "I don't know," he said finally. "I don't know. I've known Marcy for years."

"You knew her years ago," I corrected him with gentle emphasis.

Marcy rubbed one foot against the other calf, and stood looking down, her eyes on her feet. It looked like a habitual stance, social camouflage. "She's right, Will," she said in a quiet voice.

Will frowned at her. "How?"

“She should be suspicious of me, given the circumstances. I’ve been back in town for what? Two weeks? And something like this happens? I’d be worried, too.” She looked up at me, her expression uncertain. “I want to help, Sergeant Murphy,” she said. “What do we do?”

I stared at them both, thinking. Dammit, this was another one of those Dresden things. He could have pinched his nose for a second, then swept his gaze over them and reported whether or not they were who they said they were. Supernatural creatures are big on shapeshifting. They use it to get in close to their prey. In an attack like that, a mortal has the next-best thing to zero probability of escaping.

I knew. It had been done to me. The sense of chagrin and helplessness is terrible.

“To start with,” I said, “let me see if you can come in.”

Marcy frowned at me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that if you’re a shapeshifter or something, you might not have an easy time coming over the threshold.”

“Christ, Sergeant,” Will began. “Of course she’s a shapeshifter. So am I.”

I glowered at them both. “If she’s who she says she is, she won’t have a problem,” I said.

Will sighed and looked at Marcy. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” the young woman said. “It’s smart to be careful.”

Marcy held her hands out to her sides, in plain sight, and stepped into the house. “Good enough?”

Houses are surrounded by a barrier of energy. Dresden always called it the threshold. It’s all murky magic stuff to me, but the general guideline is that anything that’s too hideously supernatural can’t come in without being invited. A threshold will stop spirits, ghosts, some vampires (but not others), and will generally ward away things that intend to eat your face.

Not everything. Not hardly. But a lot of things.

“No,” I said, and put my gun away. “But it’s a start.” I nodded to a chair in the living room. “Sit down.”

She did, and she sat looking down at her hands, which were folded in her lap.

Will followed Marcy in and gave me a look that meant, in Martian, *What the hell do you think you’re doing?*

I ignored him.

“Marcy,” I said, “why didn’t you respond to Will when he tried to contact you earlier?”

“I tried,” she said. “I called back as soon as I got the message, but I didn’t have Will’s cell number. Only Georgia’s.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Um,” she said, “I just got back into town. And Georgia doesn’t need any stress. And he’s married. I mean, you don’t just go asking for a husband’s phone number. You know?”

Which was reasonable, put that way. I nodded, neither approving nor disapproving.

“I left messages on the answering machine at the apartment,” Marcy said. “It was all I could do.”

“And I checked the messages after I’d run your errands,” Will said. “I called her back and had her come over. She swept for scents, and then we came here.”

“Will,” I said, firmly, “please let me handle this?”

He clenched his jaw and subsided, leaning against a wall.

I turned back to where Marcy sat and continued towering over her, a posture of parental-style authority. “Tell me about your relationship to Georgia.”

“We’re friends,” Marcy said. “Close friends, really. I think of her as a close friend, I mean. She was very kind to me when Andi broke it off with me. And we were friends for years before that.”

I nodded. “Did Will explain what was going on?”

She nodded. “Georgia and Andi have been taken.”

“How do you know it was Andi with Georgia?”

“Because I was there,” Marcy said. “I mean, not last night, but the night before last. Will was out of town and we had a girls’ night.”

“Girls’ night?”

“We hung out and made fondue and watched movies and lied about how we all looked better now than when we first met. Well, except that Andi actually does.” She shook her head. “Um, anyway, we stayed up late talking, and Andi slept in the guest bed and I slept on the couch.” She glanced up at my eyes for the first time. “That was when we had the nightmares.”

“Nightmares?”

She shuddered. "I ... I don't want to think about it. But all three of us had an almost identical nightmare. It was the worst for Georgia. She was ..." She looked at Will. "It was as if she hadn't quite woken up out of the dream. She kept jerking and twitching." She gave me a weak smile. "Took two cups of cocoa to snap her out of it."

I kept my face neutral and gave her nothing. "Go on."

"Me and Andi talked about it and decided that one of us should stay with her. We were going to trade off, like, until Will came home."

"The first night was Andi, I take it?"

Marcy nodded, biting her lip. "Yes."

"Sounds reasonable," I said. Reasonable, logical—and impossible to verify.

And the kid was shaking.

Jesus Christ, Karrin, said a gentler voice inside me. *What are you doing? She's scared to death.*

I tried to make my tone a little warmer. "What do you know about their abduction, specifically, Marcy? Can you tell me anything at all that might point toward the identity of the kidnappers?"

She shook her head. "I can't think of anything that I picked up beforehand. But I'm certain it was Andi and Georgia who were taken."

"How can you be sure?" I asked.

Will cleared his throat and spoke quietly. "Marcy's got a nose. She's better with scents than any of the rest of us."

I eyed Marcy. "Could you pick up their trail?"

"They were taken downstairs and loaded into the back of a car," Marcy said promptly. "An older model, burning too much oil. But I couldn't follow them after that. I think I'll be able to recognize the scent of their captors, though, if I run into it."

I nodded. She'd gotten a ton more out of the scene than Will had. Such a talent could be damn useful.

All the same, I wasn't sure. She sounded sincere to me, and I'm pretty good at knowing when someone isn't. But there's always a better liar out there. I just wasn't sure.

But ... you have to trust someone, sometime. Even when it seems risky, when lives are on the line.

Maybe even especially then.

“Okay,” I said calmly, and took a seat in another chair. “Will,” I asked, “what did you find out?”

“There are half a dozen other folks who have gone missing in the past day and a half,” Will said. “At least, that’s how many Bock and McAnally know about. Word about the kidnappings is out on the Paranet, and has been spreading since yesterday morning. People are moving places in groups of three and four, at least. McAnally’s is packed. The community knows something is up. They’re scared.”

Marcy nodded. “It isn’t just Chicago. It’s happening all over the country. Group leaders are keeping everyone informed, asking after their people, reporting them missing to the local cops, for whatever good that might do... .” Her voice trailed off into a little squeak as she looked at me. “Um. Sorry.”

I ignored her. Martian for *This is easier for all of us if we just pretend I didn’t hear it*. “Will, did you turn up anything we can use?”

He shook his head. “No one has seen or heard anything at any of the disappearances. But there are rumors that someone found a gang of Red Court vampires torn apart in a basement across town. Maybe that has something to do with what’s going on.”

“It doesn’t,” I said, firmly. “Not directly, at least. Dresden killed the Red Court.”

Will blinked. “You mean ... those vampires in the basement?”

“I mean the Red Court,” I said. “All of them.”

Will let out a quiet whistle. “Uh. Wow. That’s pretty big magic, I guess.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Marcy’s face was twisted up in a frown of concentration. “Was ... was this the night before last, by any chance?”

I glanced aside at her and nodded once.

“If there was a really big surge of magic ... maybe that explains the dreams,” she said. “It wasn’t just the three of us. The night before last, a lot of people—Paranet people, I mean—had nightmares, too. Some of them were bad enough that people haven’t slept since. A couple of folks wound up in the hospital.” She blinked at Will. “That’s what happened with you, Will.”

“What do you mean?” Will said.

“When Georgia called you. She’d had the nightmare twice, during the day, when she tried to sleep. She must have had it again and tried to call

you.”

“There’s no point in speculation for now.” I looked at Will. “In short, more people missing, bad dreams, everyone is gathering in defensive herds. That about it?”

“More or less,” Will said. “What did you get?”

“I sent an e-mail to the address Marccone gave us. Told them I had a talent in need of placement. I got a public phone location. I’m supposed to be there to answer a call at nine tonight.”

Will frowned. “So they can get a look at you first, right?”

“Probably.”

“You shouldn’t look like you,” Marcy blurted. Her face colored slightly. “I mean, like, you’re the supernatural cop in Chicago. Everyone knows that. And it makes sense that anyone planning something here wouldn’t have much trouble finding out who might actually get in their way.”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “I don’t have a different look.”

Will looked at Marcy, frowning, and then said, “Ah. Makeover.”

“We have a little time,” Marcy said, nodding.

“Hey,” I said.

“She’s right, Ms. Murphy,” Will said. “You’ve been seen with Dresden a lot. And, no offense, but not many people look like you do.”

“Meaning?” I asked him. I smiled.

Will’s eyes might have checked the distance between himself and the door. “Meaning you’re outside the norm for adult height and weight,” he said. “Exceptionally so. We should do what we can to make it harder to identify you.”

Will had a point, I supposed. Annoying as it might be, his logic was sound. And I was almost certainly a little sensitive where my height was concerned. I sighed. “All right. But if I hear montage music starting to play, I’m cutting it short.”

Will, seeming to relax, nodded. “Cool.”

Marcy nodded with him. “So what about Will and me? I mean, what do the two of us do?”

I looked at the pair of young werewolves and pursed my lips. “How do you feel about duct tape?”

WHEN I ANSWERED the pay phone outside a small grocery store on Belmont, I felt like an idiot. In the windows of a darkened shop across the street, I could see my reflection.

Halloween had come early this year. I wore boots not unlike Herman Munster's, with elevator soles about three inches thick, making me look taller. My hair was dyed matte black and was slicked down to my skull. There was so much product in it, I was fairly sure it would deflect bullets. I wore some black dance tights Marcy had donated to the cause, a black T-shirt, and a black leather jacket in a youth size.

My face was the worst part of the disguise. I was all but smothered beneath the makeup. Dark tones of silver that faded to black made a mess of my eyes, altering their shape by means of suggestion, through clever application of liner. In the evening light, I might have looked Asian. My lips were darkened, too, a shade of wine red that somehow managed to complement the eye shadow. The lipstick changed the shape of my mouth slightly and made my lips look fuller.

I glowered at the reflection. This costume had exactly one thing going for it: I didn't look a thing like me.

The phone rang and I picked it up, jerking it off the base unit as if impatient. I glared around me, my eyes tracking across every spot I thought could contain an observer, and said, "Yeah?"

"The merchandise," murmured a soft, sibilant voice with an odd accent. "Describe."

There was something intrinsically unsettling about the voice. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. "One male and one female, mid- to late-twenties. Shapeshifters."

There was a rustle of static over the line, unless the speaker could make an extremely odd hissing sound. All things considered, I gave it even odds.

"Ten thousand," said the voice.

I could have played it a couple of different ways. The kinds of people who get into this sort of deal come in about three general types: greedy, low-life sons of bitches; cold professionals engaged in a business transaction; and desperate amateurs who are in over their heads. I'd already decided to try to come across as the first on the list.

"Forty thousand," I shot back instantly. "Each."

There was a furious sound on the other end of the phone. It wasn't a human sound, either.

“I could pluck out your eyes and cut your tongue into slivers,” hissed the voice. Something about it scared the hell out of me, touching on some instinctual level that Ray, in all his repulsive mass, had not. I felt myself shudder, despite my effort not to do so.

“Whatever,” I said, trying to sound bored. “Even if you could do it, it gets you nothing. But hey, no skin off my ass either way.”

There was a long silence on the other end of my phone. I thought I felt some kind of pressure building behind my eyelids. I told myself it was my imagination.

“Yo, anyone there?” I complained. “Listen. Are you up for doing some business, or did I just waste my time?”

After another pause, the voice hissed something in a bubbling, serpentine tongue. The phone rustled, as if changing hands, and a very deep male voice said, “Twenty thousand. Each.”

“I’m not selling the female for less than thirty.”

“Fifty total, then,” rumbled the new voice. It sounded entirely human.

“Cash,” I demanded.

“Done.”

I kept tracking the street with my eyes, looking for their spotter, but saw no one. “How do you handle delivery?”

“There’s a warehouse.”

“Fat chance. I pull in there, you’ll just pop me and make the body disappear along with the freaks.”

“What do you suggest?” rumbled the voice.

“Buttercup Park. Thirty minutes. One carrier. Carrier hands me half the cash. Then carrier verifies the merchandise in the back of my truck. Carrier hands me the rest of the money. I hand him the keys to the vehicle carrying the merchandise. We all walk away happy.”

The deep-voiced man thought about it for a moment and then grunted. Translation: *Agreed*. “How will you identify me?”

I snorted and said, “Park isn’t huge, tough guy. And it ain’t my first rodeo.”

I hung up on him, then went back to my motorcycle and left, heading for Buttercup Park. A lighted sign hanging outside a bank told me it was a quarter after nine. The metro traffic grid was dying down for the night. I got there in a little more than fifteen minutes, parked my Harley in a garage, and made my way to where Georgia’s high-dollar SUV was waiting

in the same structure. I went around to the back and opened the hatch. Will was just finishing wrapping Marcy in what appeared to be several layers of duct tape, covering her in a swath from her hips to her deltoids, trapping her arms against her sides. She was wearing a simple sundress with, I assumed, nothing underneath. I guess when you change into a wolf, you don't take your ensemble with you—being trapped in undies made for a different *species* could prove awkward in a fight.

Will looked up and gave me a quick nod of greeting. "All set?"

"So far. You're sure you won't have a problem getting out?" I asked.

Will snorted. "Claws, fangs. It'll sting a bit, when it tears out the hair. Nothing serious."

"Spoken like someone who's never had his legs waxed," Marcy said in a nervous, forcedly jovial tone. She might have looked like a skinny little thing, but the muscles showing on her legs were lean and ropy.

Will tore off the end of the duct tape and passed the roll to me. He sat down on the open floor in the back of the SUV, the seats of which had been folded away to make room for the "prisoners." He stripped out of his shirt, leaving only a pair of loose sweats. I started wrapping him.

"Tighten your muscles," I said. "When I'm done, relax them. It should leave you enough room to maintain blood flow."

"Right," Will said. "Houdini." He contracted the muscles in his upper body and the duct tape creaked. Damn, the kid was built. Given that I was more or less leaning against his naked back to reach around him with the roll of tape, it was impossible not to notice.

Dresden hadn't been muscled as heavily as Will. Harry'd had a runner's build, all lean, tight, dense muscle that ...

I clenched my jaw and kept wrapping tape.

"One more time," I said. "I meet the contact, then bring him here." I held up the SUV's remote control fob. "I'll disarm the security system so you know we're coming. If you hear me say the word *red*, it means things aren't going well. Get loose and help me jump the contact. We'll question him, find out where the other specials are being kept. Otherwise, sit tight, and make like you got hit with tranquilizer darts. I'll shadow you back to their HQ."

"What then?" Marcy asked.

"We'll have to play that by ear," I said. "If there aren't many of them, we'll hit them and get your people out. If they've got a lot of muscle, I'll

make a call. If I can get a large force here, they'll run rather than fight."

"Can you be sure of that?" Will asked.

"Dresden said that to the supernatural world, bringing in mortal authorities was equated with nuclear exchanges. No one wants to be the one to trigger a new Inquisition of some kind. So any group with a sense of reason will cut their losses rather than tangle with the cops."

"The way they didn't tangle with FBI headquarters?" Will asked.

I had sort of hoped no one would notice that flaw in my reasoning. "That was an act of war. This is some kind of profit-gaining scheme."

"Come on, Karrin," Will said. "You've got to know better than that."

"This is a professional operation," I said. "Whoever is behind it is depending on distraction and speed to enable them to get away with it. They'll already have their escape plan ready to go. If a bunch of cars and lights come at them, I think their first instinct will be to run rather than fight."

"Yeah," Marcy said, nodding. "That makes sense. You've always said supernatural predators don't want a fight if they can avoid one, Will."

"Lone predators don't," Will said, "but this is an organization. And you might have noticed how a lot of supernatural types are a couple of french fries short of a Happy Meal. And I'm talking about more than here, tonight. More than Georgia and Andi. More than just Chicago."

I frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

He leaned forward, his eyes intent. "I mean that if Dresden just blew up the Red Court ... that means the status quo is *gone*. There's a power vacuum, and every spook out there is going to try to fill it. The rules have *changed*. We don't know *how* these people are going to react."

A sobering silence fell over us.

I hadn't followed the line of reasoning, like Will had. Or rather, I hadn't followed it far enough. I'd only been thinking of Dresden's cataclysm in terms of its effect on my city, upon people who were part of my life.

But he was right. Dear God, he was right. The sudden demise of the Red Court, with consequences that would reach around the whole world, would make the fall of the Soviet Union look like a minor organizational crisis.

"So, what?" I asked. "We back out?"

"Are you kidding?" Will said. "They took my wife. We go get her and anyone else they've taken."

"Right," Marcy said firmly, from where she lay on the bed of the vehicle.

I felt a smile bare my teeth. “And if they fight?”

Will’s face hardened. “Then we kick their fucking ass.”

“Ass,” said Marcy, nodding.

I finished wrapping Will in the duct tape. He exhaled slowly and relaxed. He took a few experimental breaths and then nodded. “Okay. Good.”

“Lie down, both of you. I’ll be back with the buyer.”

“Be careful,” Will said. “If you aren’t back in twenty minutes, I’ll come looking.”

“If I’m not back in twenty minutes, there won’t be much point in finding me,” I said.

Then I shut them into the SUV and headed for the park.

BUTTERCUP PARK WASN’T exactly overwhelming. There were grass, playground equipment, and a tree or two on an island bordered by four city streets. That was pretty much it. It was the sort of place my low-life persona would choose. It was out in the open, and there was not much to break up the line of sight. It was a good location for criminals with mutual trust issues to meet up. Each could be sure the other was alone. Each could be reasonably sure the other wouldn’t start shooting, right out there in front of God and everybody.

The park, as it should have been, was empty. The surrounding streetlights left little hidden on the green grass, but the playground equipment cast long, asymmetric shadows.

A man sat on one of the swings. He was huge—the biggest individual I’d ever seen. He was heavy with muscle, though it was an athlete’s balanced build—made for action, not for display. His hips strained the heavy flexible plastic seat of the swing to the horizontal. He must have been better than seven feet tall.

He was quietly sitting there, completely still, watching and waiting. His head was shaved and his skin was dark. He wore a simple outfit—black chinos and a thin turtleneck sweater. If the October chill was bothering him, it didn’t show. I stomped over toward him in my Munster boots. When I was about thirty feet away, he turned his head toward me. His gaze was startling. His eyes were blue-white, as on some northern sled dogs, and looked nearly luminous in the half shadows.

He lifted his eyebrows as I came closer, then rose and bowed politely from the waist. I realized that he wasn't seven feet tall. He was more like seven foot four or five.

"Good evening," he said. His basso rumble was unmistakable. This was the person I had spoken to earlier.

I stopped in front of him and put a hand on my hip, eyeing him as if I wasn't much impressed. "As long as you brought the money, it will be," I drawled.

He reached into a cavernous pocket in his pants and drew out a brick wrapped in plastic. He tossed it to me. "Half."

I caught it and tore open the plastic with my teeth. Then I started counting the money, all of it in nonsequential Ben Franklins.

A trace of impatience entered my contact's voice. "It's all there."

"Talking to me is just going to make me lose count and start over," I said. "What am I supposed to call you?"

"Nothing," he said. "No one. I am nothing to you."

"Nothing it is," I replied. The bills were bound in groups of fifty. I counted one out and compared its thickness to that of the others, then flipped through just to be sure Nothing wasn't trying to short me by throwing some twenties into the middle of the stack. Then I stuck the money in my jacket pocket and said, "We're in business."

Nothing inclined his head a bit. "The merchandise?"

"Come with me," I said, injecting my voice with breezy confidence. I turned to stomp back toward the garage parking lot, and Nothing paced along beside me.

Already, this wasn't going well. This guy was huge. I was good, but training and practice can get you only so far. The old saying is that a good big man will beat a good little man. Which is sexist as all get-out, but no less true. Levels of skill being equal, whoever has the size and weight advantage damn near always wins. Nothing probably outweighed all three of us together, and I already had a sense, from the way he held himself and moved, that he was a person accustomed to violence. He was good.

I could shoot him (probably), but I didn't need a dead trafficker on my hands. I needed one who could talk—which meant I was going to have to let Will and Marcy be taken.

"How long you fellas setting up shop?" I asked him as we walked. "Might be able to come up with another one, if the price is right."

Nothing looked at me for a moment before speaking. “If you cannot do it by dawn, do not bother.”

“Maybe. We’ll see how this plays out.”

Nothing shrugged and kept on walking. I caught sight of our reflection in a passing window—Biker Barbie and Bigfoot. I tried to keep out of his reach as we walked, but there was only so much sidewalk, and Nothing’s arms looked long enough to slap me from the middle of the street.

As we walked, I noticed the smell. The man just smelled *wrong*. I wasn’t sure what it was—something ... musty, vaguely like the scent of stagnant water and rotting fish. It hung in the air around him.

“You aren’t really human, are you,” I noted as we walked into the parking garage—and away from any potential witnesses.

“Not anymore,” he replied.

As he spoke, the collar of the turtleneck ... stirred. It rippled, as if something had moved beneath it.

“Well, I am,” I said. “Completely worthless for whatever you’re doing collecting specials. So don’t be thinking you can get three for the price of two.”

Nothing looked down at me with those unsettling eyes. “You are pathetic.”

I put a little extra swagger into my step. “Careful what you say there, big guy. You’ll turn me on.”

Nothing made a small, quiet sound of disgust and shook his head. It was hard not to smile as I watched him pigeonhole me into “scum, treacherous, decadent.”

“It’s right up here.”

“Before we approach the vehicle,” he said, “you should know that if you have associates waiting in ambush, I will break their necks—and yours.”

I lifted my hands. “Jesus. Show a little trust, will you? We’re all capitalists here.” I pointed the fob at the SUV and disarmed the alarm with a little electronic chirp. The lights flashed once. I tossed him the keys. “That one. I’ll stay back here if you like.”

“Acceptable,” he said, and strode to the SUV. Watching him bend down to look in was like a scene from *Jurassic Park*. He opened the rear hatch and then lifted his hands to his neck for a moment. He tugged the turtleneck down a little.

The skin of Nothing's neck was deformed with narrow flaps of skin, somehow, and it took me a few seconds to realize what I was looking at.

Gills.

The man had *gills*. And he was breathing through them. They opened and closed in a rhythm not far removed from a dog's sniffing.

"Werewolves," he said. "Valuable."

"They make good pets?" I asked.

He reached in and seized Will, lifting him with one hand. The young man remained limp, his eyes closed.

"Their blood has unique properties. What did you use to subdue them?"

"Roofies. The way my dating life has been going, I keep some on hand."

He made a dissatisfied sound and tugged his collar up again. "The drug might lower their value."

"I hope not," I said. "This has been such a nice conversation. I'd hate for it to end in a gunshot."

Nothing turned his head slightly and gave me a very cold little smile.

I felt threatened enough to produce my gun without even consciously thinking about it. I held it in two hands, pointed at the ground near his feet. We stayed that way, facing off for several seconds. Then he shrugged a shoulder. He produced another brick of bills and threw it to me, along with the truck keys. Then he gathered up Marcy and tossed her over one shoulder, and Will over the other.

He turned to the entrance of the garage and made several sharp, popping clicks as he went, producing with an odd quiver of his chest and throat a sound that was somehow familiar. They must have been a signal. A moment later, a van with rental-agency plates pulled up to the curb and stopped.

A man dressed identically to Nothing rolled open the side door. Nothing put the two werewolves inside, then followed them, somehow compressing his bulk enough to get into the van. The driver pulled back into traffic a second later. The entire pickup had taken less than ten seconds.

I got back onto my motorcycle and rolled out of the garage with my lights off before their van had gotten to the end of the block. Then, settling in to follow them from several car lengths back, I tried to make like a hole in the air.

Nothing and his driver headed for the docks, which was hardly unanticipated. Chicago supports an enormous amount of shipping traffic

that travels through the Great Lakes, and offloads cargo to be transferred to railroads or trucking companies for shipment throughout the United States. Such ships remain one of the best means for moving illegal goods without being discovered.

There are plenty of storage buildings down by the docks, and Nothing went to one of the seedier, more run-down warehouses on the waterfront. I noted the location and went on by without stopping. Then I circled around, killed the engine with the bike still in motion, and came coasting back over the cracked old asphalt, the whisper of my tires lost in the susurrus of city sounds and water lapping the lakeshore.

There wasn't much to see. The warehouse had a single set of standard doors, and several large steel doors that would roll up to allow crates and shipping containers to be brought inside. They were all closed. A single guard, a man in a watch cap and a squall coat, wandered aimlessly around outside the building, smoking cigarettes and looking bored.

I got rid of the damn clunky Munster boots and pulled on the black slippers I always wore on the practice mat. I pulled weapons and gear out of the bike's saddlebags, attached the items to the tactical harness under my coat, and slipped closer. I stayed where it was dark, using the shadows to hide my approach. Then I found a particularly deep patch of darkness and waited.

It took a seemingly endless five minutes for the guard to get close enough for me to shoot him with a Taser.

Darts leapt out and plunged into his chest, trailing shining wires, and I pulled the trigger while he jerked and twitched and fell to the ground. I wasn't sure if this guy was human or not, but I wasn't taking chances. I kept the juice on him until I was sure he was down for the count. When I let up, he just lay there on his side, curled up halfway into a fetal position, quivering and twitching while drool rolled out of his mouth.

Actually, he sort of reminded me of my second husband in the morning.

I jerked the darts out of him and shoved the Taser and the trailing wire into my jacket pocket. It would take too much time to reset it for use, and I had a bad feeling that the electronic device wouldn't do me much good inside the warehouse. I could have slapped some heavy restraining ties on him—but I would be happier if anyone who found the downed man had no idea what had happened to him.

So much for the easy part.

My P-90 hung easily from the tac harness, its stock high, its barrel hanging down the line of my body. I took a moment to screw a suppressor onto the end of the gun and lifted it to firing position against my shoulder. The little Belgian assault weapon was illegal for a civilian to own within city limits; the suppressor, too. If I got caught with them, I'd be in trouble. If I got caught *using* them, I'd do time. Both of those consequences were subordinate to the fact that if I didn't go in armed for bear, I might not live to congratulate myself on my sterling citizenship.

Well, there's no such thing as a perfect solution, is there.

I moved quietly back to the entry door, silenced weapon tight against my shoulder. I duckwalked, my steps quick and small and rolling, to keep my upper body level as it moved. I'd put a red dot sight on the P-90, and it floated in my vision as a translucent crosshair of red light. The sight made the weapon, to some degree, point and click. The idea was for the bullets to go wherever the crosshairs were centered. I had it sighted for short work. Even though I'd seen more action than practically any cop in the country—thanks to Dresden—I could count on one hand the number of times I'd used a weapon in earnest against a target more than seven or eight yards away.

Standing next to the entry door, I tested the knob. It turned freely. So, the folks inside had been relying on their guard to keep intruders out.

I thought of the first hissing voice I'd spoken to on the phone and shivered. They wouldn't be relying on purely physical defenses. But I knew something about those, too. Harry's defenses had been deadly dangerous—but to create them, apparently you had to use the energy of a threshold, which only grew up around an actual home. This old warehouse was a place of business and didn't have a threshold. So, if a spell had been put up to guard the door, it would have to be fairly weak.

Of course, *weak* was a relative term in Dresden's vocabulary. It might hit me only hard enough to break bones, instead of disintegrating me completely—if there was a spell there at all.

I hated this magic crap.

Screw it. I couldn't just stand here all night.

I turned the doorknob slowly, keeping my body as far to one side as possible. Then I pushed in gently, and the door swung open by an inch or three. When nothing exploded or burst into wails of alarm, I eased up next to it and peeked into the building.

It was like looking into another world.

Green and blue light crawled and slithered up the walls and over the warehouse's interior, eerie and subtly unsettling, each color moving in waves of differing widths and speeds. The strange scent of water and fish was strong inside. There were *things* on the wall—*growths* was all I could call them. Ugly patches of some kind of lumpy, rough substance I didn't recognize were clumped all around the walls and ceiling of the warehouse in roughly circular patches about six feet across.

Cages were scattered all around the floor—a bunch of five-foot cubes made of heavy steel grid. People were locked up in several of them, the doors held shut by heavy chains. Most of them just sat, staring at nothing, or lay upon their sides doing the same thing, completely motionless. That wasn't normal. Even someone who was drugged but conscious would show a little more animation than that. This meant magic was involved, some kind of invasive mental stuff, and a little voice in my head started screaming.

I've been subjected to that kind of invasion, more than once.

It's bad.

My legs felt weak. My hands shook. The rippling colors of light on the walls became something sinister, disorienting, the beginnings of another attack on my mind. Jesus Christ, I wanted to turn around and scurry away, as swiftly and as meekly as possible. In fact, I tried to. My legs quivered as if preparing to move, but the motion drew my gaze across another row of cages, and I saw Georgia.

She was naked, kneeling, her hands wrapped gently around her swelling stomach, cradling her unborn child. Her head was bowed in a posture of meekness, and her sleek shoulders and neck were relaxed. But I saw her eyes, open and staring at the bottom of the cage, and I saw the defiance flickering in them.

Whatever held the others held Georgia as well—but she evidently had not been subdued as readily as they had. She was still fighting them.

Something deep inside me, something hard and fierce and furious, locked my legs into place. I stared at Georgia, and I knew I couldn't run. I remembered that Will and Marcy were in there, waiting for me to announce that the moment was right to change form and fight. I remembered that nearly all of those people in the cages were young, even younger than the werewolves—including the youngest of all, in Georgia's cage.

I remembered blood splattered on the weathered cabin of a boat—and that there was no one but me coming to help those kids.

The fear changed form on me. It disguised itself as reason. *Don't go in*, it told me. *Know your limits. Send for help.*

But the only serious help I could get would be SI—and they would be putting their own careers, as well as their lives, on the line if they came to my aid. I could send for the regular police, drop in an anonymous call, but in this part of town it might take half an hour for them to show up. Even when they did arrive, they'd be lambs to the slaughter. Most of the force had no idea what really went on in the city's darkest shadows.

You could go get the Sword, said my fear. *You know where it is. You know how strong it makes you.*

Not many people could honestly say they'd wielded a magic sword against the forces of darkness, but I'm one of them. *Fidelacchius*, the Sword of Faith, lay waiting for the hand of someone worthy to wield it against the powers of darkness. In the final battle with the Red Court, that hand had been mine. In the darkest moment of that fight, when all seemed lost, it had been my hand upon *Fidelacchius* that had tipped the balance, enabling Dresden to prevail. And I had felt a Power greater than I supporting me, guiding my movements, and, for a single, swift moment, entering into me and making use of my lips and tongue to pronounce sentence upon the murderous creatures surrounding us.

I could go for the Sword. Odds were it would be of some help.

But I knew that if I did, I would have taken the easy path. I would have turned away from a source of terror for the most excellent, rational of reasons. And the next time I faced the same kind of fear, it would be a little easier to turn away, a little easier to find good reasons not to act.

The Sword was a source of incredible power—but it was nothing but cool, motionless steel without the hand that could grip it, the muscles that would move it, the eyes and the mind that would guide it. Without them, the Sword was nothing.

I stopped and stared down at my shaking hand. Without my hand, my mind, my will, the Sword was nothing. And if that was true, then it must also be true that my hand was what mattered. That it had been my hand, my will that had made the difference.

And my hand was right here. In fact, I had two of them.

My breathing steadied and slowed. Sword or no Sword, I had sworn to serve and protect the people of this city. And if I turned away from that oath now, if I gave in to my fear, even for the most seductively logical of reasons, then I had no right to take up the Sword of Faith in any case.

My hands stopped shaking and my breathing slowed and steadied, bringing the terror under control. I whispered a quick, almost entirely mental prayer to St. Jude, the patron of lost causes and policemen. It sounded something like, “OhGodohGodohGod. *Help.*”

I nudged the door open a few more inches, then slid into the warehouse, moving with as much speed and silence as I possessed, my gun at the level and ready.

I MOVED DOWN the length of the warehouse, mostly hidden behind a shelving unit more than twenty feet high. It was stacked with pallets, loading gear, storage bins, and the occasional barrel or box of unknown provenance. The shifting, constantly wavering light made an excellent cover for motion, and I timed my steps to move in rhythm with the dancing illumination.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and it felt like every inch of my skin was covered in gooseflesh. I’d been in the presence of dangerous magic often enough to know the feeling of dark power in motion. It had been like this at Chichen Itza, and in the waters off the island of Demonreach, and in the Raith Deeps, and at Arctis Tor, and in the nest of Black Court vampires, and at ...

You get the point. This wasn’t my first rodeo.

The most important thing would be to take out Nothing’s presumptive boss, and fast—preferably before anyone knew I was here at all. The warehouse reeked of magic, and if a mortal goes into a fair fight against a wizard, the mortal loses. Period. They have power that is literally almost unimaginable, and if the bad guy got a chance to defend himself, the only uncertainty remaining would be how much creativity he put into killing me.

At the end of the shelving unit, there was a rolling ladder, one made to run all the way up and down the shelves and provide easy access. The warehouse was darker up near the ceiling than at floor level. I didn’t even slow down. I went up the ladder to the top of the shelving unit and froze in place, getting a good, clear look at the enemy for the first time.

There were half a dozen of them including Nothing, and they all shopped at the same store. Their outfits were conspicuous due to their uniformity, though some instinct made me think that they had been intended as disguises—that individuality, as a concept, wasn't of any particular concern to Nothing and his crew. Nothing was, by far, the largest of the men, though none of them looked like featherweights.

They were loading cages into a railroad cargo container, a fairly common sight on large ships, some of which could carry hundreds of the metal boxes. The cages had been sized to stack exactly into the railroad car, two across and three high, with no consideration whatsoever for the human cargo. There were no blankets, no pads—nothing but metal cages and vulnerable skin.

I spotted Andi's cage, not far from Georgia's. The redheaded girl had evidently lacked some critical capacity to resist whatever had been done to her. She lay on her back, staring blankly up at the roof of her cage. The werewolf girl was a bombshell. Even lying in completely passive relaxation, her curves beckoned the eye—but the hollow despair of her expression was haunting.

Nothing was standing over Will and Marcy, who lay limp and motionless on the floor at his feet. A couple of turtlenecks were hauling an empty cage toward them. "How long will it take?" he was asking a third man.

"Without knowing the exact drug, several hours," the man replied. His voice was plainly human, and sounded nothing like whoever it was I'd spoken to on the phone. "Perhaps more."

Nothing frowned. "Can you make a determination of their viability by dawn?"

"If I am able to isolate the substance that incapacitated them before then," he said. "I have no means of determining how many attempts will be required. It will take as long as it takes."

"He will not be pleased," Nothing said.

The man bowed his head. "My life for the master. I will do all in my power to serve him. Should he be disappointed in me, it is meet for him to take my life."

Nothing nodded. "Be about it."

The man turned and walked quickly away, holding two small vials of rich red blood in his hand—samples from Will and Marcy, I assumed.

By then, the empty cage had arrived. Nothing picked up Marcy and lifted her toward the waiting cage. I bit down on a curse. If I let him imprison her, a full third of my team would be neutralized, as helpless as the prisoners who had already been taken. But if I started the music early, I risked throwing away my sucker punch. Nothing's master might show up at any time.

On the other hand, Nothing seemed to be large and in charge. Perhaps the hissing person I'd spoken to on the phone had left matters in Nothing's shovellike hands. Or perhaps I'd read the situation incorrectly. What if one of the other turtlenecks had been the first speaker, and Nothing was really the boss?

I made up my mind and settled the P-90's crosshair onto Nothing's head, a little below the tip of his nose. The weapon was set for automatic fire, and while I could control the weapon fairly well, especially when it was loaded with subsonic rounds, the recoil would tend to carry the weapon's muzzle higher after the first shot.

Against anything human, more than one round to the head would be overkill: When the merely mortal goes up against the supernatural, there's no such *thing* as overkill.

I snuggled the gun in close and tight, took a deep breath in, let it halfway out, held it, and began to slowly squeeze the weapon's trigger.

The instant before the trigger would have broken, there was a shimmering in the air and a man stepped out of it, appearing as if from nowhere.

I backed off the tension on my finger, feeling my heart surge with unspent adrenaline.

The man was of medium height, with sallow skin and greasy, straight black hair that hung past his shoulders. His lips were very thick and his mouth very wide, almost to the point of deformity. His large eyes were dark and watery and bulging, his nose sunken, as small as any I had ever seen. He was soaking wet and naked, his limbs scrawny and long, his hands very, very wide. Except for the hair, I couldn't help but compare him to a frog—a sullen, vicious frog.

The man let out a sound somewhat like a muffled belch, then vomited water onto the floor. Flaps of skin at his neck flared in and out, spewing smaller sprays of water several times, until he drew in a breath through his mouth, evidently filling his lungs with air.

All of the turtlenecks turned to face the creature and fell to their knees, including Nothing, who calmly set Marcy aside and went into a full kowtow, his palms flat on the floor, his forehead pressed down onto his knuckles.

“Sssssso,” he hissed, “did the inssssolent creature deliver our prizesss?”

I recognized the voice from the telephone.

“Yes, my lord,” rumbled Nothing. “As promised and in plenty of time to move.”

“Did you sssstrike the bitch down?”

Nothing rocked back and then bowed again, somehow giving the impression that he was doing it more deeply. “She was clever enough to build safeguards into the meeting. I could not do so without attracting attention.”

Frogface hissed. “I will sssettle with the mortal another time,” he said. “Sssuch insssolence cannot be countenanced.”

“No, my lord.”

“Bring the new acquisitionsss. I will bind them.”

“They have been given drugs, my lord. The binding could damage them.”

Without looking particularly excited about it, Frogface kicked Nothing in the armpit. The blow was a more powerful one than Frogface’s frame would suggest he was capable of giving. It flung Nothing from his hands and knees and onto his side by main force.

“Bring them.”

“I obey,” wheezed Nothing. He rose unsteadily and went to pick up Will. He dropped the young werewolf onto the floor beside Marcy.

“Sssuch disgusssting thingsss, mortalsss,” Frogface murmured. His eyes lifted to Georgia in her cage. “She hasss not yet capitulated.”

“No, my lord,” Nothing muttered.

“Interesssting,” Frogface said, and a leer spread over his broad mouth. “When we arrive, transport her to my chambers. We will sssee what is left of her ssstrength when the ssspawn is taken from her womb.”

Jesus, men can be assholes. Even when they’re barely human. Frogface was officially elected.

Georgia shuddered. She lifted her head, very slowly, as if it had been held down with vast weights—and the glare she turned on Frogface was nothing less than murderous.

Frogface chuckled at the expression and turned to face Will and Marcy. He dipped his fingers into a pouch that hung around his neck, almost invisible against his leathery skin, and withdrew what looked like a small seashell from it. He leered at the motionless Marcy and said, “Firsst, the female.”

He closed his eyes and made a low sound in his throat, then began chanting words that bubbled and gobbled out from between his rubbery lips.

Now I’ve got you, I thought to myself, and sighted the gun on Frogface’s rubbery lips. I didn’t have Dresden’s knowledge of magic, but I knew any wizard was vulnerable when they began working forces, the way Frogface was doing. The concentration needed was intense. If I’d understood Dresden correctly, it would mean that Frogface would have to be focusing his entire attention on his spell—leaving nothing remaining for defending his sallow hide.

The air began to shimmer around Frogface’s hands, and fine, slithering tendrils emerged from the brightly colored shell and began to drift down toward Marcy, a cloud of tendrils as fine as a cobweb.

Certain now of my target, I breathed, held it, and squeezed the trigger.

Say what you like about the Belgians. They can make some fine weaponry.

The silenced P-90 barely whispered when the burst of automatic fire erupted from the end of the suppressor. There was no flash, no thunder—just a soft, wheezing sound and the *click* of the gun’s action cycling. Thanks to the subsonic ammunition, the discharge itself actually made less noise than the rounds striking Frogface’s skull.

There were several wet, loud cracking sounds, and every one of the rounds I’d fired struck home. One round would have been messy enough. When half a dozen of them hit, Frogface’s head quite literally exploded, shattered to pulp and shards of bone by the bullets’ impact, and two-thirds of his skull, from the upper lip on up, simply vanished into green-blooded spray.

There was a flash of angry red light from the seashell. Frogface let out a high-pitched, tinny scream, and the near-headless body began to topple, thrashing wildly.

The turtlenecks all came to their feet, looking around in wide-eyed confusion. My weapon had given them absolutely no clue as to where the

attack had come from. I sighted in on Nothing, but from my angle, any rounds that went through him would threaten Will and a caged prisoner, beyond him.

I shifted targets, settling the red crosshairs on another turtleneck standing just past Will. I squeezed off another whispering burst of a half-dozen or so rounds, and the creature's neck exploded into a cloud of scarlet gore the consistency of mucus. It went limp, settling to the floor like a deflating balloon.

Nothing's pale-eyed gaze snapped over toward me, and I saw his gaze track the fall of brass bullet casings from where they bounced off the floor back up to my position on the shelves.

He let out an enraged sound, pulled a short tube from his pocket, and pointed it at me. I moved, sliding back down the ladder to the floor, hardly moving more slowly than if I'd fallen. There was a high-pitched whistle, and something that looked like a small, spiny sea urchin flew past me, just over my head, close enough for the wind of its passage to stir dark-dyed hairs. It slammed into the wall behind me and remained there, quivering, as its spines punched through the metal siding and stuck. Drops of yellow-green liquid fell from the tips of some of the spines, and began smoking and eating small holes in the concrete floor.

Yikes.

Throaty popping, clicking sounds from several sources filled the air, an exchange of what could only be language. I ran for the far end of the shelving unit as the dark forms of the turtle-necks started moving toward me. I caught glimpses of them between the boxes and containers stacked on the lowest shelf, running with the lithe, floating agility of professional athletes.

I ran past a clump of the growth on the wall, a little lower than most, and as I approached, it suddenly fluoresced with bioluminescent color. On sheer instinct, I threw myself flat to the concrete floor and slid past on my belly as the lumpy growths began hissing, and jets of mist, the same color as the fluid covering the urchin spines, began to spray forth at random. The smell was hideous, and I scrambled back to my feet and kept running down the aisle, staying as far from the wall as I could.

If I'd been half a step slower, I would have died. There was a great crash, and Nothing smashed through the lowest level of the shelving unit, thrusting aside a steel drum and a wooden crate the size of a coffin as if

they'd been made of Styrofoam. His fingers missed grabbing onto me by inches.

A second turtleneck beat me to the end of the shelf. I opened up with the P-90, praying that a ricochet wouldn't kill one of the prisoners, but my target moved with the speed of a striking serpent, bounding forward to plant a foot against the steel wall of the warehouse, six feet off the ground. Using only a single leg, he kicked off into a back-flip that carried him back past the end of the shelf and out of my line of fire.

The damn thing hadn't been moving fast enough to dodge bullets—but he'd been moving fast enough to dodge *me*, and I was the one doing the aiming. A round might have clipped one of his legs, but that was all, and Nothing was pounding up behind me, gaining despite his mass. I felt like a squirrel being pursued by a German shepherd; if he caught me, it would end about the same way.

So I played squirrel, and instead of running in the open, I turned ninety degrees to my right and dove between two stacks of pallets on the lowest shelf. I took a little skin off an arm in hurling myself between them and emerged onto the open warehouse floor. I heard Nothing's shoes squealing on the floor as he applied the brakes behind me.

A turtleneck was coming straight at me, on a direct line from the cages not yet loaded into the railroad car. I brought the P-90 up and dropped to one knee. The turtleneck rushed forward, his pale blue eyes wide and staring. He held an inward-curving knife in one hand and carried it low and close to his leg. He knew how to use it.

I put the scarlet crosshairs on his sternum and squeezed the trigger. The instant before the shots would have sputtered out of the gun, the turtleneck leapt straight up, flipping once in the air as he went over me.

After seeing the incredible quickness of the other not-quite-humans, I'd been waiting for the dodge. As soon as his feet left the floor, I spun to my left, opening fire the instant the end of the barrel was clear of the prisoners. Bullets hissed through the air like a great scythe—and in the edge of my vision, I saw the turtleneck I'd wounded seconds before. He'd come charging toward me while I'd aimed at his buddy, and the sudden turn took him by surprise. There was no aiming involved—it was a brute-force approach. I emptied the rest of the clip at him and prayed I could leave him no safe space in which to dodge.

St. Jude gets a lot of business, but sometimes he comes through. The hissing, puffing little gun spat out a line of deadly projectiles and intersected the turtleneck's path, tearing a row of five or six holes across his upper body. The turtleneck screamed and went down.

But the one who'd leapt over me dropped back down, adjusting swiftly to the situation, and then whipped the hooked knife across my belly.

Almost anyone else in town would have been killed. The knife struck with enormous power, and its blade was sharp. Standard Kevlar-style body armor wouldn't have done a damn thing to stop it. I'd stopped wearing the standard stuff, thanks to one too many exciting outings with Dresden. I wore a double-thickness vest now—and sandwiched between the layers of antiballistic fabric was a corselet of tightly linked titanium rings, manufactured for me by one of Dresden's friends, the wife of a retired Fist of God.

The knife sliced right through the Kevlar. It split a ring or three, but then the tip caught in the titanium. Instead of spilling my intestines upon the ground, the superhumanly powerful blow wound up dragging me along and flung me across the concrete floor. I went down into a roll and spread out the force of the fall, coming back up to my feet, already having released the empty magazine from the P-90. I was reaching for the fresh one when another turtleneck abruptly closed in on me from behind and slipped a slim, iron-hard arm around my neck.

I barely got a hand inside the loop of his arm before he could lock the choke on me, and I twisted like an eel to get out. His strength was far superior to mine, but then, whose wasn't? Even in grappling, strength isn't absolutely everything. The turtleneck might have been faster than I, but I had the advantage of experience. My timing was good enough to let me sense the opening, the lack of pressure in the weakest part of his hold, and I managed to writhe out of his grip—only to have a forearm smash down across my shoulders, driving me to the floor.

As I went down, I saw that the turtleneck with the knife was only a few steps away. I'd never escape a pair of them.

I didn't have time to get another magazine into the P-90, so I rolled with it and smashed the heavy polymer stock of the weapon into the nearest turtleneck's kneecap.

He screamed and seized me by the neck of the leather jacket, shaking me like a doll.

At which point Will and Marcy gave Nothing's companions an object lesson as to why werewolves instill terror in mortal hearts and minds.

There was a flash of dark fur, a snarl, a horrible, tearing sound, and the turtleneck screamed. He started listing to one side, and I realized that one of the werewolves had just severed the hamstring of the turtleneck's unwounded leg. We both went down. I twisted out of the leather jacket, though I had to drop the P-90 and let it hang from my harness to do it, and rolled free of the turtleneck. An instant later, a second, slightly lighter brown form, teeth gleaming, darted past the fallen turtleneck and ripped out what would have been the jugular vein on a human being.

Apparently, it was close enough for government work. The turtleneck thrashed in dying agony as mucuslike red blood bubbled from the gaping wound.

And suddenly there were two beasts from the nightmares of mankind standing on either side of me, facing the enemy. They were wolves, one large and dark, the other slightly smaller and lighter, but both heavily laden with muscle and thick fur, and their golden eyes burned with awareness—and fury.

Faced with a pair of murderous werewolves, the knife-wielding turtleneck slid to a sudden, uncertain halt.

In the sudden silence that followed, the sound of me slapping a fresh magazine into the P-90 and racking the first round into the chamber was a sharp trio of clicks. *Pop. Click-clack.*

See, Nothing? I thought. *I can make ominous noises, too.*

I brought the weapon back up and snarled, "Lose the knife."

The turtleneck hesitated for half a second, eyes darting left and right, then released it. The steel chimed as the knife hit the floor.

I kept the weapon on him, the trigger half pulled. Yeah, it wasn't the safe, smart way to operate, but frankly I wouldn't lose any sleep if I accidentally shot this guy. He was just too damn fast to give up any advantage at all.

"There were five of them," I said to the wolves. "How many did you handle, including the one that was on me?"

The more lightly colored wolf let out two precise, low barks.

"I got two," I said. "That leaves this one and the big guy."

A complex sequence of clicks and pops drifted through the air, and the lights went out, plunging the warehouse into perfect darkness.

Instinctively, my finger tightened on the trigger, and I sent a burst of rounds out almost before the lights were gone. But I was literally shooting blind against a foe who had supernatural reflexes and had also known, thanks to those damn clicks, what was about to happen. I heard the rounds hammer through the far wall.

The wolves snarled and started forward—the warehouse wasn't a light-tight darkroom, and a wolf's eyes actually see better in near darkness than in full light. The gloom was no obstacle to them. But I seized handfuls of fur and hissed, "Wait."

Their momentum dragged me several inches forward before they slowed down, but I said, "The growths on the wall spray out acid, at least seven or eight feet. Don't get suckered in close to one. The big guy has something like a gun. Go."

The wolves bounded out from beneath my hands, leaving me alone in the darkness.

Clicks and pops continued to bounce around the empty space of the warehouse, impossible for me to localize. They were an ongoing thing, every couple of seconds, and I couldn't shake the idea that they were coming closer and closer to me.

Even as I crouched there, defenseless and hating it, my hands were scrabbling at the pouch on my tac vest. If there was too much magic running amok, flashlights might not be reliable. Magic screws up technology when there's too much of both of them around, and you don't take chances with something as important as being effectively struck blind. I'd prepared the tac vest with this kind of situation in mind.

I opened the pouch and pulled out a flare, popping the pull cord, which struck it to life as I did. Red light glared into the darkness, and I lifted the flare over my head and out of my own vision in my left hand. I held the P-90 in my right. The small weapon could be fired in one hand, no problem, and while it wouldn't be as accurate, I could still send bursts downrange almost as well as I could two-handed.

The pops and clicks continued, everywhere and nowhere. I had no idea where Will and Marcy were, and Nothing and the other turtleneck had an awful lot of shadow to hide in. I realized I was essentially sitting in the middle of an open floor under a spotlight, a perfect target for Nothing and his weird little urchin-gun, and I retreated toward the caged prisoners.

“Georgia,” I said, crouching down beside her. I studied the door of the cage, and found that the thing wasn’t even locked. It had a ring for a padlock on it, but the door’s mechanism was simply cycled closed. I spun it open and pulled open the cage door. “Georgia. Can you move?”

She lifted her head and stared at me grimly. Then she turned her body and leaned forward, moving as though underwater, and slowly began to crawl out of the cage. I hurried to Andi’s cage and opened that door as well—but the girl did not so much as blink or stir a finger when I urged her to get out. So much for reinforcements. I felt useless. I couldn’t go out there into the dark to join Will and Marcy in the hunt. I’d be worse than useless, stumbling around out there. They’d be forced to take their attention from their attack in order to protect me.

“Murphy,” Georgia said. “M-Murphy.”

I hurried to her side. “I’m here. Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “N-n-no ... L-listen.” She lifted her head to meet my eyes, her neck wobbling like a paraplegic’s. “*Listen.*”

Clicks. Pops. Once, a hackle-raising snarl. The whishing sound of an urchin flying through the air, and the sharp *pong* of its hitting a metal exterior wall.

“The guards,” Georgia said. “Sonar.”

I stared at her for a second, and then clued in to what she was talking about. The clicks and pops had sounded familiar because I *had* heard them before, or something very close to them—from dolphins, at the Shedd Aquarium. Dolphins sent out sharp pulses of sound and used them to navigate, and to find prey in the dark.

I dropped the flare on the ground well away from Georgia and began unscrewing the suppressor on the P-90. “Will! Marcy!” I shouted, unable to keep the snarl out of my voice. “They’re about to go blind!”

Then I pointed the weapon up and off at an angle that I thought would send the rounds into the nearby lake, flicked the selector to single fire, and began methodically triggering rounds. The second clip had been loaded with standard, rather than subsonic, ammo, and without the suppressor to dampen the explosion of the propellant, the supersonic rounds roared out, painfully loud. The flash at the muzzle lit the entire warehouse in strobes of white light. I didn’t fire them in rhythm or any particular pattern. I had no idea how actual sonar worked in biological organisms, but I’d taken several

nephews as a pack to see the *Daredevil* movie, and rhythmic sounds seemed to create a more ordered picture than random bursts of noise.

As I worked my way through the fifty-round magazine, I could all but hear Dresden's mockery, his voice edged with adrenaline, the words coming through a manic grin, as I'd heard several times before. *Murph, when you're reaching out to movie concepts that involved millions of dollars in special effects for your tactical battle plan, I think you can pretty safely take that as an indicator that you are badly out of your depth.*

But as the last round left the gun, I heard one of the turtles screaming in pain—a horrible cry that ended abruptly. And then the warehouse fell silent again—only to be invaded by another steady series of rhythmic clicks.

And this time they were definitely getting closer.

I unclipped the P-90 and set it aside. I had only the two clips for the weapon. But my Sig came into my hand with the smooth familiarity of long practice, and I moved, away from Georgia and the other prisoners, around behind the empty cages that had been meant for Will and Marcy. I nearly screamed when I kicked a dead body and found the other turtle lying in a pool of viscous blood—apparently the other bad guy Will and Marcy had seen to.

Some instinct warned me I was in danger, and I dropped flat. Another sea urchin projectile streaked over me; a second struck a bar in the empty cage and slammed into its floor, acid chewing at the steel. Then there was a third whispering projectile that rushed away from me.

A wolf began to scream in agony—horrible, horrible high-pitched screams.

Nothing had just pulled the same trick I had—shooting at me and enticing one of his other enemies into the open as he did, then spinning to fire at an unexpected moment. Will or Marcy had just paid a horrible price for their aggression.

I came to my knees with a cry of fury and flung my flare. It went high into the air, spinning, spreading red light wide and thin around the inside of the warehouse. I saw a massive black form ahead of me, turning, the tube of his projectile weapon swinging back toward me.

The Sig was faster.

I had already slid into a Weaver stance, and I slammed out a trio of shots, swift, steady, and practiced, all aimed at the upper torso, to avoid any

chance of hitting one of the wolves. I know at least one of the shots scored a hit on Nothing. The flare landed, still blazing. I saw the black outline of his silhouette twist in agony, then heard a quavering grunt escape him. He moved away from the flare and out of my vision. An instant later, I saw a wolf leap across the scarlet pool of light, and I started squeezing out more rounds from the Sig. I staggered them just as I had the shots from the P-90, hoping to blind Nothing as the wolf attacked.

The magazine emptied in a few seconds, though I hadn't meant to fire that many shots. The excitement of the fight was making it hard to stay level. I ejected the empty mag, slapped in a fresh one, and pulled a second flare from my tac vest, bringing it to hissing life as I started forward, my gun extended.

I could hear Nothing fighting with a wolf. His voice emanated from his huge chest, a basso growl of rage every bit as angry and animalistic as the snarls of the wolf fighting him. I used the sound as my guide and rushed forward. The other wolf kept on screaming in agony, its shrieks slowly changing and becoming more and more eerily human.

The scarlet light of the flare fell across Nothing and the wolf-version of Will just as Nothing flung the wolf to the concrete floor with bone-jarring force. Will let out a shriek of pain, and bones popped and crackled—but he retained enough awareness to roll out of the way as Nothing sent one huge foot stomping down at his skull.

I started putting rounds into Nothing's chest from maybe fifteen feet away.

I was shooting one-handed and was hyped up on adrenaline. It wasn't an ideal state for marksmanship. But I wasn't trying for points on a target—this was instinct shooting, the kind of accuracy that comes only with endless hours of practice, with thousands and thousands of rounds sent downrange. It takes a lot of work to make that happen.

I'd worked.

I was using a 9mm weapon. The rounds were on the small side for real combat—and Nothing was on the other end of the combat universe from small. He turned toward me, and I saw he no longer had the projectile tube—or two of the fingers on the hand that had been holding it. One of the wolves had tried for his throat and evidently had torn open the fine cloth of the sweater's neck, because I could see his gills flaring as he charged me.

Shots struck home in his torso. I was aiming for the heart, which few people realize is fairly low in the chest, a couple of inches below the left nipple. I hit him with every shot, six, seven, eight... .

It takes an attacker about two seconds to close a gap of thirty feet and get within range for a strike with a knife or fist. Nothing was about five feet closer than that. Eight shots, all of them hits, was damn solid combat shooting.

It just wasn't enough.

Nothing plowed into me like a runaway truck, sending me sprawling. We both hit the concrete. Pushing against him, I barely managed to keep his weight from coming down on my chest so that it came down somewhere around my hips instead. He seized my right hand and squeezed.

Pain. Tendons tearing. Bones cracking. He shook his arm once, and my Sig went tumbling away.

I didn't hesitate. I just doubled up, leaning toward him, and rammed the blazing end of the flare into the open flap of his gills.

He screamed, louder than a human being could have, and both hands flew to his throat to clutch at the flare. I got a leg free and kicked him in the chin, hard, driving down with all the power of my leg behind a crushing heel. I heard something crack, and he screamed, flinching. I freed my other leg and scrambled away from him, clutching awkwardly at my right ankle with my left hand.

Nothing tore the flare out, his pale eyes nearly luminous with rage, and came after me, roaring.

I had never been more frightened in my life. I couldn't get to the damn holdout gun before he reached me, so I did the only thing I could. I ran, blind, into the dark, and he came after me like a rabid locomotive.

I knew I didn't have much room left. I knew that I would hit a wall in a few seconds, and that then he'd have me. I could only pray that the shots I'd put in him were more serious than his reaction to them indicated—that he was already bleeding massively, and that the extra few seconds would be enough time to let him die.

But somewhere inside, I knew better.

I was playing out of my league, and I had known that from the beginning.

Beautiful light suddenly fluoresced in front of me—the acid growths on the walls. I slammed to a stop in front of the weird clumps of material and saw little tendrils and orifices on the growths tracking and orienting on me.

I turned to face Nothing.

He came in, insanely huge, insanely strong, and roaring in a terrible fury.

But terrible fury alone doesn't win fights. In fact, it can be a deadly weakness. In the second it took him to reach me, I touched the center of calm in myself, earned with endless hours of practice and discipline. I judged the distance and the timing. It felt as if I had forever to work out what I would need to do.

And then I did to Nothing exactly what I'd done to Ray.

As he closed, I ducked under his huge hands, spinning to sweep my right leg across his right foot, just as it was about to hit the floor. Preternaturally strong though he may have been, gravity pulled him just as hard as it had Ray, and his joints operated in exactly the same fashion. His right foot was driven to tangle with his left, and he went smashing forward into the wall.

Into the growth.

Into the spurting cloud of acidic spray that erupted from it, aiming at me.

I rolled away to one side, frantically, but I needn't have worried. Nothing's vast bulk shielded me from the acid spray. I turned over and backed away awkwardly on my butt and my left hand, staring at Nothing in sheer fascination.

He didn't scream. I think he was trying. The acid must have torn his throat apart, first thing. He sort of recoiled, staggering, and fell to his knees. I could see his profile dimly in the distant light of the flare and the glow of the acid fungus. It ... just dissolved; seeing it was like watching time-lapse photography of a statue being worn away by wind and rain. Fluids pooled around his knees. He took several agonized breaths—and then there were sucking sounds, as the acid ate into his chest wall. And then there were no sounds at all.

He tried to get up, twice. Then he settled down onto his side as if going to sleep.

The acid kept chewing at him, even after he was dead.

The stench hit me, and I retched horribly.

I backed farther away and sat for a second with my knees up against my chest, my good arm wrapped around them, and sobbed. I hurt so much.

I hurt so much.

And my arm throbbed dully.

"Dammit, Dresden," I said into the silence in a choked voice. "Dammit. Here I am doing your job. Dammit, dammit, dammit."

I got to my feet a moment later. I recovered the second flare. I found my gun. I went to do what I could for Will and Marcy, who would both live.

After that, I went around the warehouse and methodically put another half-dozen rounds into the head of each and every fallen turtleneck. And I used a can of paint thinner I found in a corner to set their master on fire, just to be sure.

There's no such thing as overkill.

I STOOD IN the open loading door with Will, facing into a wind that blew from the east, over the lake, cool and sweet. There was nothing between us and the water but forty feet of paved loading area. It was quiet. There had been no reaction to the events in the building.

Behind us, lying in quiet rows on the concrete floors, were the prisoners, each of them freed from their respective cages. Even though his left shoulder had been badly dislocated, Will had done most of the heavy lifting, dragging the cages out of the railroad car so I could open them and, with Marcy's and Georgia's help, drag the prisoners out.

Marcy came up to stand beside us, wearing her sundress once more. Her right shoulder looked hideous. The urchin projectile had struck her, and two tines had sunk in deeply. Acid had gone into the muscle and dribbled down from the other tines to slither over her skin, burning as it went. The tines had been barbed, but the acid had liquefied the skin immediately around the barbs, and I had been forced to pry the projectile out with a knife. Marcy had stopped the bleeding, the same way Will had, but her arm was somewhat misshapen, and the scar tissue was truly impressive in its hideousness.

That didn't seem to overly worry the young woman, whom I would never again be able to compare to a mouse in any fashion. But she looked exhausted.

"She's sleeping," Marcy reported quietly to Will.

"Good," Will said. His voice sounded flat, detached. He was hurting a lot. He looked at me, eyes dull, and said, "Think this will work?"

"Sunrise," I said quietly, nodding, and glanced back at the rows of motionless prisoners. "It has a kind of energy, a force of positive renewal in it. It should wipe away the spells holding them."

"How do you know?" Will asked.

“Dresden,” I said.

Marcy tilted her head suddenly and said, “Someone’s coming.”

I stood by the door, ready to pull it down, as a car, a silver Beemer, came around the corner of the warehouse into the paved loading lot. It stopped maybe thirty feet away, and Ms. Gard got out of it. She looked at me for a moment, then came around to the front of the car and stood there, waiting. The eastern wind blew her long blond hair toward us, like a gently rolling banner.

“Wait here,” I said quietly.

“You sure?” Will asked.

“Yeah.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

I stepped out, went down a short set of concrete stairs to the level of the lot, and walked over to face Gard.

She looked at me expressionlessly for a moment, and then at the prisoners. She shook her head slowly and said, “You did it.”

I didn’t say anything.

“That’s fomor magic,” she said quietly. “One of their lesser sorcerers and his retainers.”

“Why?” I asked her. “Why are they doing this?”

Gard shook her head and shrugged. “I don’t know. But there are teams like it operating all over the world right now.”

“Not in Chicago,” I said quietly.

“Not in Chicago,” she agreed. And her mouth stretched into a slow, genuine grin. She bowed to me from the waist, a gesture of antiquated, stately grace, and said, “There are few mortals with courage enough to face the fomor and their minions. Fewer still with skill enough to face them and win.” Her eyes grew serious, and she lost the smile. “Hail, Warrior.”

Dresden would have known how to respond to that kind of anachronistic gibberish. I nodded back to her and said, “Thank you.”

“My employer owes you a debt, it seems.”

“Didn’t do it for him.”

“But your actions are significant regardless,” she said. “This is the second time the fomor have attempted to move on Chicago—and failed.” She was quiet for a moment and then said, “If you told him you wanted your job back, he could make it happen. Without further obligation.”

I stood very still for a long, silent minute.

Then I sighed, very tired, and said, “Even if I was sure he wouldn’t try to use it as leverage down the line ... If Marcone got it for me, I wouldn’t want it. I’ll make my own way.”

Gard nodded, her eyes steady, and she looked back at the warehouse again. “There’s another position you might consider. Monoc Securities is always hiring. My boss is always pleased to find those with the proper”—she pursed her lips—“frame of mind. Considering your experience and skill set, I think you could do very well as one of our security consultants.”

“And work for guys like Marcone?” I asked.

“You should bear in mind that this is the second such incursion of the fomor,” Gard said in a level voice. “And there have been a half-dozen others nosing at the city in the last eight months alone. All of them have been turned away, courtesy of Marcone.”

“He’s swell,” I said.

“He keeps his word,” Gard replied, “which puts him a step above most of your own superiors, in my opinion. Like him or not, he has defended this city. It’s no minor thing.”

“Every predator defends its territory,” I said. “Pass.”

Her eyes glittered with amusement, and she shook her head. “Vadderung would definitely find you interesting. You’ve even got the hair for it. Don’t be surprised if you get a call sometime.”

“It’s a free country,” I said. “Is there anything else?”

Gard turned to look at the rapidly lightening eastern horizon, and looked from there to the prisoners. “You seem to have things fairly well contained.”

I nodded.

“Don’t worry too much about the scene,” Gard said. “Hardly anyone ever noses around places like this.”

But that wasn’t what she meant. Gard was telling me that the evidence—the bodies, the rounds, the weapons, all of it—was going to disappear. Marcone’s people were very, very good at making evidence vanish. In this particular case, I wasn’t sure I minded. It would protect Will and Marcy, both of whom had left blood there, and it would also cover me.

And Gard hadn’t made me ask for it.

She held up her hand, palm up—another one of those gestures, their meanings forgotten by everyone except for long-term wackjobs like Dresden. I returned it. She nodded in approval, got into her car, and left.

Will came up to stand at my side, watching her go. Then both of us turned to watch the sun beginning to rise over the lake.

“He’s really gone,” Will said quietly. “Dresden, I mean.”

I frowned and stared at the waters that had, by every rational indication, swallowed Dresden’s lifeblood. I didn’t answer him.

“Was she telling the truth, you think? That Marcone’s the one standing in the gap now?”

“Probably,” I said, “to some degree. But she was wrong.”

“Wrong how?”

“Dresden’s not gone,” I said. I touched a hand lightly to my brow. “He’s here.” I touched Will’s bare chest, on the left side. “Here. Without him, without what he’s done over the years, you and I would never have been able to pull this off.”

“No,” he agreed. “Probably not. Definitely not.”

“There are a lot of people he’s taught. Trained. Defended. And he’s been an example. No single one of us can ever be what he was. But together, maybe we can.”

“The Justice League of Chicago?” Will asked, smiling slightly.

“Dibs on Batman,” I said.

His smile turned into a real grin for a minute. Then sobered. “You really think we can do it?”

I nodded firmly. “We’ll cover his beat.”

“That will be a neat trick, if you can do it,” Will said.

“If we can do it,” I corrected him. “I’ll need a deputy, Will. Someone I trust. You.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then he nodded. “I’m in. But you’re talking about some very, ah, disparate personalities. How long can you keep it up?”

My answer surprised even me. “Until Dresden gets back.”

Will frowned. “You really think that’s possible?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t seem to be. But ... There’s this voice inside me that keeps pointing out that we haven’t seen a body. Until I have ...”

The sun rose over the horizon, burning gently through the morning haze over the lake, and golden light washed over us, warm and strong. We turned to watch the prisoners, and as the light touched them, they began to shudder. Then they began to stir. The first to rise was Georgia.

Will sucked in a long, slow breath, his eyes shining.

“Until I have,” I said quietly, “I can’t believe he’s dead.”

We walked back to the warehouse together, to see to the business of getting the prisoners safely home.

Acknowledgments

As always, there are too many people to thank and only a little bit of space to thank them in. This time around, I must especially thank my editor, Anne, for putting up with my delays in writing. I'm sure I gave her, along with several of the folks trying to schedule things at Penguin, headaches. My agent, Jenn, was invaluable in getting everything straightened out, as well as in helping me through the bumpy bits, and I owe her my thanks, as well. I would apologize to you all abjectly if I were sure it would never happen again. Seems sort of insincere to do it otherwise, all things considered, so I'll just thank you for your patience and understanding.

To the inhabitants of the Beta Asylum, many more thanks than usual are owed, especially for everyone who sacrificed so much of their time and focus in the last few weeks before the revised deadline. Your feedback, support, and advice were particularly invaluable.

To my dear patrons, the readers, I can only thank you for your patience, after leaving the last novel the way I did, then making everyone wait another three months past the usual delay while I made sure this book was ready to go. Enjoy! (And, technically, guys, *Changes* did NOT end in a cliff-hanger. Seriously.)

And to Shannon, who had to live with me during this more-frantic-than-usual period of insanity: I'm almost certain I'll be sane again at some point in the reasonably near future. I'll try to make it up to you.

ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER

THE DRESDEN FILES

STORM FRONT
FOOL MOON
GRAVE PERIL
SUMMER KNIGHT
DEATH MASKS
BLOOD RITES
DEAD BEAT
PROVEN GUILTY
WHITE NIGHT
SMALL FAVOR
TURN COAT
CHANGES
SIDE JOBS (ANTHOLOGY)

THE CODEX ALERA

FURIES OF CALDERON
ACADEM'S FURY
CURSOR'S FURY
CAPTAIN'S FURY
PRINCEPS' FURY
FIRST LORD'S FURY

Author's Note

When I was seven years old, I got a bad case of strep throat and was out of school for a whole week. During that time, my sisters bought me my first fantasy and sci-fi novels: the boxed set of *The Lord of the Rings* and the boxed set of Han Solo adventure novels by Brian Daley. I devoured them all during that week.

From that point on, I was pretty much doomed to join SF&F fandom. From there, it was only one more step to decide I wanted to be a writer of my favorite fiction material, and here we are.

I blame my sisters.

My first love as a fan is swords-and-horses fantasy. After Tolkien I went after C. S. Lewis. After Lewis, it was Lloyd Alexander. After them came Fritz Leiber, Roger Zelazny, Robert Howard, John Norman, Poul Anderson, David Eddings, Weis and Hickman, Terry Brooks, Elizabeth Moon, Glen Cook, and before I knew it I was a dual citizen of the United States and Lankhmar, Narnia, Gor, Cimmeria, Krynn, Amber—you get the picture.

When I set out to become a writer, I spent years writing swords-and-horses fantasy novels—and seemed to have little innate talent for it. But I worked at my writing, branching out into other areas as experiments, including SF, mystery, and contemporary fantasy. That's how the Dresden Files initially came about—as a happy accident while trying to accomplish something else. Sort of like penicillin.

But I never forgot my first love, and to my immense delight and excitement, one day I got a call from my agent and found out that I was going to get to share my newest swords-and-horses fantasy novel with other fans.

The Codex Alera is a fantasy series set within the savage world of Carna, where spirits of the elements, known as furies, lurk in every facet of life, and where many intelligent races vie for security and survival. The realm of Alera is the monolithic civilization of humanity, and its unique ability to harness and command the furies is all that enables its survival in the face of the enormous, sometimes hostile, elemental powers of Carna, and against savage creatures who would lay Alera to waste and ruin.

Yet even a realm as powerful as Alera is not immune to destruction from within, and the death of the heir apparent to the crown has triggered a frenzy of ambitious political maneuvering and infighting among the High Lords, those who wield the most powerful furies known to man. Plots are afoot, traitors and spies abound, and a civil war seems inevitable—all while the enemies of the realm watch, ready to strike at the first sign of weakness.

Tavi is a young man living on the frontier of Aleran civilization—because, let's face it, swords-and-horses fantasies start there. Born a freak, unable to utilize any powers of furycrafting whatsoever, Tavi has grown up relying up on his own wits, speed, and courage to survive. When an ambitious plot to discredit the crown lays Tavi's home, the Calderon Valley, naked and defenseless before a horde of the barbarian Marat, the boy and his family find themselves directly in harm's way.

There are no titanic High Lords to protect them, no legions, no knights with their mighty furies to take the field. Tavi and the free frontiersmen of the Calderon Valley must find some way to uncover the plot and to defend their homes against the merciless horde of the Marat and their beasts.

It is a desperate hour when the fate of all Alera hangs in the balance, when a handful of ordinary stead holders must find the courage and strength to defy an overwhelming foe, and when the courage and intelligence of one young man will save the realm—or destroy it.

Thank you, readers and fellow fans, for all of your support and kindness. I hope that you enjoy reading the books of the Codex Alera as much as I enjoyed creating them for you.

—Jim

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Chapter One

Life is hard.

Dying's easy.

So many things must align in order to create life. It has to happen in a place that supports life, something approximately as rare as hen's teeth, from the perspective of the universe. Parents, in whatever form, have to come together for it to begin. From conception to birth, any number of hazards can end a life. And that's to say nothing of all the attention and energy required to care for a new life until it is old enough to look after itself.

Life is full of toil, sacrifice, and pain, and from the time we stop growing, we know that we've begun dying. We watch helplessly as year by year, our bodies age and fail, while our survival instincts compel us to keep on going—which means living with the terrifying knowledge that ultimately death is inescapable. It takes enormous effort to create and maintain a life, and the process is full of pitfalls and unexpected complications.

Ending a life, by comparison, is simple. Easy, even. It can be done with a relatively minor effort, a single microbe, a sharp edge, a heavy weight . . . or a few ounces of lead.

So difficult to bring about. So easy to destroy.

You'd think we would hold life in greater value than we do.

I died in the water.

I don't know if I bled to death from the gunshot wound or drowned. For being the ultimate terror of the human experience, once it's over, the details of your death are unimportant. It isn't scary anymore. You know that tunnel with the light at the end of it that people report in near-death experiences? Been there, done that.

Granted, I never heard of anyone rushing toward the light and suddenly hearing the howling blare of a train's horn.

I became dimly aware that I could feel my feet beneath me, standing on what seemed to be a set of tracks. I knew because I could feel the approaching train making them shake and buzz against the bottoms of my feet. My heart sped up, too.

For crying out loud, did I just say that death isn't scary anymore? Tell that to my glands.

I put my hands on my hips and just glared at the oncoming train in disgust. I'd had a long, long day, battling the forces of evil, utterly destroying the Red Court, rescuing my daughter, and murdering her mother—oh, and getting shot to death. That kind of thing.

I was supposed to be at peace, or merging with the holy light, or in line for my next turn on the roller coaster, or maybe burning in an oven equipped with a stereo that played nothing but Manilow. That's what happens when you die, right? You meet your reward. You get to find out the answer to the Big Questions of life.

"You do not get run over by trains," I said crossly. I folded my arms, planted my feet, and thrust out my jaw belligerently as the train came thundering my way.

"What's wrong with you?" bellowed a man's voice, and then a heavy, strong hand wrapped around my right biceps and hauled me off the track by main force. "Don't you see the damned train?"

Said train roared by like a living thing, a furious beast that howled and wailed in disappointment as I was taken from its path. The wind of its passage raked at me with sharp, hot fingers, actually pulling my body a couple of inches toward the edge of the platform.

After a subjective eternity, it passed, and I lay on flat ground for a moment, panting, my heart beating along lickety-split. When it finally began to slow down, I took stock of my surroundings.

I was sprawled on a platform of clean but worn concrete, and suddenly found myself under fluorescent lights, as at many train stations in the Chicago area. I looked around the platform, but though it felt familiar, I couldn't exactly place it. There were no other commuters. No flyers or other advertisements. Just an empty, clean, featureless building.

And a pair of polished wing tip shoes.

I looked up a rather modest length of cheap trousers and cheap suit and found a man of maybe thirty years looking back at me. He was built like a fireplug and managed to give the impression that if you backed a car into him, he'd dent your fender. His eyes were dark and glittered very brightly, hinting at a lively intellect, his hairline had withdrawn considerably from where it must have been at one point, and while he wasn't exactly good-looking, it was the kind of face you could trust.

"Southbound trains are running pretty quick lately," he said, looking down at me. "I figured you probably didn't want to hook up with that one, mister man."

I just stared up at him. I mentally added twenty years and forty pounds to the man standing in front of me, subtracted more hair, and realized that I knew him.

"C—" I stammered. "C-c-c—"

"Say it with me," he said, and enunciated: "Carmichael."

"But you're . . . you know," I said. "Dead."

He snorted. "Whoa, buddy. We got us a real, gen-yoo-wine detective with us now. We got us the awesome wizardly intellect of mister man himself." He offered me his hand, grinning, and said, "Look who's talking, Dresden."

I reached up, dazed, and took the hand of Sergeant Ron Carmichael, formerly of the Chicago Police Department's Special Investigations division. He'd been Murphy's partner. And he'd given his life to save her from a rampaging loup-garou. That had been . . . Hell's bells, more than ten years ago. I saw him die.

Once I was standing, I stared down at him for a moment, shaking my head. I was a lot taller than he was. "You . . ." I said. "You look great."

"Funny what being dead can do for you," he said, widening his eyes dramatically. "And I tried Weight Watchers and everything." He checked his watch. "This is fun and all, but we'd better get moving."

"Uh," I said warily, "get moving where, exactly?"

Carmichael stuck a toothpick in his mouth and drawled, "The office. Come on."

I followed him out of the station, where an old, gold-colored Mustang was waiting. He went around to the driver's side and got in. It was dark. It was raining. The city lights were on, but the place looked deserted except for the two of us. I still couldn't tell exactly where in Chicago we were, which was damned odd; I know my town. I hesitated for a moment, looking around, trying to place myself by spotting the usual landmarks.

Carmichael pushed open the door. "Don't bother, kid. Out there're all the buildings that coulda been, as well as the ones that are. You'll give yourself a headache if you keep thinking at it."

I looked around once more and got into the old Mustang. I shut the door. Carmichael pulled sedately into the empty streets.

"This isn't Chicago," I said.

"Genius," he said amiably.

"Then . . . where are we?"

"Between."

"Between what?" I asked.

"Between what?" he said. "Between who. Between where. Between when."

I frowned at him. "You left out *why*."

He shook his head and grinned. "Naw, kid. We're real fond of *why* around here. We're big fans of *why*."

I frowned at that for a moment. Then I said, "Why am I here?"

"You never even heard of foreplay, didja?" Carmichael said. "Cut straight to the big stuff."

"Why am I here as opposed to—you know—wherever it is I'm supposed to be?"

"Maybe you're having a near-death experience," Carmichael said. "Maybe you're drowning, and this is the illusion your mind is creating for you, to hide you from the truth of death."

"Being here? With you? I've met my subconscious, and he's not that sick."

Carmichael laughed. It was a warm, genuine sound. "But that *could* be what is happening here. And that's the point."

"I don't understand. At all."

"And that's the point, too," he said.

I glowered.

He kept on smiling and said, "Kid, you're allowed to see as much as you can handle. Right now, we're someplace that looks a lot like Chicago, driving along in the rain in my old Mustang, because that's what your limits are. Any more would"—he paused, considering his words—"would obviate certain options, and we ain't big on that around here."

I thought about that for a moment. Then I said, "You just used *obviate* and *ain't* in the same sentence."

"I got me one of them word-a-day calendars," he said. "Don't be obstreperous."

"You kidding?" I said, settling back in the seat. "I live to be obstreperous."

Carmichael snorted, and his eyes narrowed. "Yeah, well. We'll see."

Chapter Two

Carmichael stopped the Mustang in front of a building that reminded me of old episodes of *Dragnet*. He parked on the empty street and we walked toward the entrance.

"So, where are we going?"

"Told you. The office."

I frowned. "Don't suppose you could be more specific?"

He looked around, his eyes narrowed. "Not here. We aren't in safe territory. Ears everywhere."

I stopped on the completely empty sidewalk and looked up and down the motionless, vacant street, and saw nothing but lonely streetlamps, traffic signals, and windows unmarred by light or curtains, staring more blankly than the empty eyes of a corpse.

"Yeah," I said. "Real hotbed of intrigue around here."

Carmichael stopped at the door and looked over his shoulder. He didn't say anything for a few seconds. Then he spoke quietly, without a trace of affectation in his voice. "There are Things out here, Dresden. And some Things are worse than death. It's best if you get inside."

I rolled my eyes at him. But . . .

Something about the emptiness around me was suddenly extremely nerve-racking.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and tried to saunter inside. The effect may have been slightly sabotaged by my desire to get some solid building between that emptiness and me. Carmichael used a key to open the door and let me in before coming in behind me, his face directed back toward the street until he had shut the door and locked it.

He nodded to a guard, a beat cop in dress uniform, who stood just to one side of an elevator, his back in an entirely rigid position of at-ease, his hands clasped behind him. The guard's uniform was literally perfect. Perfectly clean, the creases perfectly sharp, his gloves perfectly white. He wore a silver-plated, engraved service revolver in a gleaming black holster at his hip. His features went with the uniform—utterly symmetrical, strong, steady.

I stopped for a second, frowning at the guard, and then reached for my Sight.

Professional wizards like me have access to all kinds of wild things. One of the wildest is the Sight, which has been described in various times and cultures as the second sight, the third eye, the evil eye, and a host of other things. It allows a wizard to look at the true nature of things around him, to see the unseen world of energy and power flowing around him. It's dangerous. Once you see something with your Sight, you never forget it, and it never fades with time. Take a look at the wrong thing and you can kiss your sanity good-bye.

But this entire scene was so Rod Serling, I had to find *something* about it that I could pin down, something familiar, something that wasn't being spoon-fed to me by a person who looked like a younger, thinner Carmichael. I decided to try to identify the single object that was most likely to tell me something about the people around me—a source of power.

I focused on the guard's gun.

For a second, absolutely nothing happened. And then the black and silver of the gleaming weapon changed, shifted. The holster elongated, trailing down the length of the guard's leg, and the pearl-handled revolver changed as well, the grip straightening. The silver of the barrel and chamber became the pommel, handle, and hilt of a cruciform sword. Light gleamed from the weapon, not reflected from the illumination in the entry hall of the building, but generated by the weapon itself.

The guard's blue eyes shifted to me at once. He lifted a hand and said in a gentle voice, "No."

And as suddenly as a door slamming into my face, my Sight vanished, and the weapon was just a gun again.

The guard nodded at me. "My apologies for being abrupt. You might have harmed yourself."

I looked. His name tag read AMITIEL.

"Uh, sure," I said quietly, lifting empty hands. "No problem, man. I've got no problem with you."

Carmichael nodded respectfully to the guard and jammed a thumb down on the button to summon the elevator. It opened at once. "Come on, mister man. Time's a-wasting."

Officer Amitiel seemed to find the statement humorous. He smiled as he touched two fingers to the brim of his cap in a casual salute to Carmichael. Then he went back to his relaxed stance as a guardian, calmly facing the emptiness that had unnerved me.

The elevator doors closed, and the car rattled a little before it started moving. "So," I said, "now that we've got at least one guardian angel between us and whatever it is you were nervous about, can you tell me where we're going?"

Carmichael's eyes crinkled at the corners. He grunted. "I'm pretty much a tour guide at the moment, Dresden. You need to talk to the captain."

Carmichael took me through a precinct room, the kind with a lot of unenclosed desks as opposed to cubicles, where cops worked. It looked a lot like the Special Investigations headquarters in Chicago. There were several men and women at the desks, reading through files, talking on phones, and otherwise looking like cops at work. All of them were about Carmichael's apparent age—right at the line where youthful energy and wisdom-creating life experience were reaching a state of balance. I didn't recognize any of them, though Carmichael gave and received nods from a couple. He marched over to the only other door in the room, leading to a private office, and knocked.

"In," said a clear, quiet baritone.

Carmichael opened the door and led me into the room. It was a small, well-used office. There were old filing cabinets, an old wooden desk, some battered wooden chairs. The desk had an in-box, an out-box, and a message spike, along with a rotary telephone. There was no computer. Instead, on a table next to the desk sat an old electric typewriter.

The man behind the desk was also more or less Carmichael's age, and he looked like a professional boxer. There was scar tissue here and there around his eyes, and his nose had been frequently broken. He had hung his suit jacket over the back of his chair, and his shoulders and biceps strained the fabric of his white shirtsleeves. He had them rolled up to the elbows, revealing forearms that were approximately as thick as wooden telephone poles, and looked every bit as strong. His hair was blond, his eyes blue, and his jawline was heavy enough to make me think of a bulldog. He looked familiar somehow.

"Jack," Carmichael said. "This is Dresden."

Jack looked me up and down, but he didn't get up. He didn't say anything, either.

"He's always this way before he's had his cup of coffee," Carmichael told me. "Don't take it personal."

"Hey, coffee," I said into the silence that followed. "That sounds good."

Jack eyed me for a moment. Then he said, in that same mellifluous voice, "Dresden, are you hungry?"

"No."

"Thirsty?"

I thought about it. "No."

"That's because you're dead," Jack said. His smile was brief and not particularly reassuring. "You don't need to drink. You don't need to eat. There's no coffee."

I eyed Carmichael.

"I stand by my statement," said Carmichael. He looked at Jack and hooked a thumb at the door. "I should get back to that rakshasa thing."

Jack said, "Go."

Carmichael slapped my arm and said, "Good luck, kid. Have fun." And he strode out, moving like a man on a mission. That left me sharing an awkward silence with Jack.

"This isn't what I expected out of the afterlife," I said.

"That's because it isn't," he said.

I frowned. "Well, you said I was dead. Ergo, afterlife."

"You're dead," Jack said. "This is between."

I frowned. "What, like . . . purgatory?"

Jack shrugged. "If that works for you, call it that. But you aren't here because you need to cleanse yourself. You're here because there was an irregularity with your death."

"I got shot. Or drowned. Ain't exactly rare."

Jack lifted a big, square hand and waggled it back and forth. "It isn't about the physical. It's about the spiritual."

I frowned. "Spiritual?"

"The opposition," Jack said. "You died because they cheated."

"Wait. What opposition?"

"The angel standing guard at the elevator is what we cops think of as a clue. You need me to draw you some pictures?"

"Um. Hell, you mean? Like . . . actual Fallen angels?"

"Not exactly. But if you want to think of it that way, it works. Sort of. What you need to know is that they're the bad guys."

"That's why I'm here," I said. "Because they . . . broke some sort of cosmic rule?"

"You were getting in their way. They wanted you gone. They broke the law to make it happen. That makes you my problem."

I frowned at him and looked down at myself. I noticed idly that I was wearing jeans, a plain black T-shirt, and my black leather duster—which had been torn to shreds and consigned to the waters of the lake an hour or three before I got shot. I mean, my duster had died.

But I was wearing it, whole and good as new.

Which was when it really, really hit me.

I was dead.

I was *dead*.

Chicago, the White Council, my enemies, my friends, my daughter . . . They were all gone. Obsolete. And I had no idea whatsoever what was going to happen to me next. The room felt like it started spinning. My legs started shaking. I sat down on a chair opposite Jack's seat.

I felt his steady regard on me, and after a moment he said quietly, "Son, it happens to all of us. It's hard to face, but you gotta relax and focus, or there's nothing I can do for you."

I took some deep breaths with my eyes closed—and noticed for the first time how absolutely incredible I felt physically. I felt like I had when I was a kid, when I was full of energy and the need to expend it doing something enjoyable. My limbs felt stronger, quicker, lighter.

I looked at my left hand and saw that it was no longer covered in scar tissue from the burns I'd received years ago. It was whole, as if it had never been harmed.

I expanded the logic and realized that I didn't actually feel all that incredible—I was simply missing an entire catalog of injuries and trauma. The faded, years-old scar I'd given myself on my right forearm, when my knife had slipped while cleaning the fish my grandfather and I had caught, was missing also.

The constant, slowly growing level of aches and pains of the body was simply gone. Which made sense enough, since my body was gone, too.

The pain had stopped.

I mopped at my face with my hand and said, "Sorry. It's just a lot to take in."

The smile appeared again. "Heh. Just wait."

I felt irritated at his tone. It was something to hang on to, and I planted my metaphoric heels and dragged the spinning room to a stop.

"So, who are you?" I asked. "And how can you help me?"

"You want to call me something, call me Captain. Or Jack."

"Or Sparrow?" I asked.

Jack looked at me with a cop face that showed nothing but the vague hint of disapproval. He reached across the desk and slid a file folder to the blotter in front of him. He opened it and scanned the contents. "Look, kid, you're stuck here. You aren't going anywhere until we get this discrepancy sorted out."

"Why not?"

"Because what comes after isn't for people who are rubbernecking over their shoulders or bitching about how unfair they had it," Jack said, his expression frank. "So, we sort out how you got screwed over. Then you get to move on to what's next."

I thought of being trapped in the hollow shell of the city outside and shuddered. "Okay. How do we fix it?"

"You go back," Jack said. "And you catch the scum who did you."

"Back?" I said. "Back to . . ."

"Earth, yeah," Jack said. "Chicago." He closed the folder and dropped it into his out-box. "You gotta find out who killed you."

I arched an eyebrow at him. "You're kidding."

He stared at me, his expression as jovial as a mountain crag.

I rolled my eyes. "You want me to solve *my own* murder?"

He shrugged. "You want a job here instead, I can set you up."

"Augh," I said, shuddering again. "No."

"Okay," he said. "Any questions?"

"Uh," I said. "What do you mean when you say you're sending me back? I mean . . . back to my body or . . . ?"

"Nah," he said. "Isn't available. Isn't how it works. You go back as you are."

I frowned at him and then down at myself. "As a spirit," I said.

He spread his hands, as if I had just comprehended some vast and weighty truth. "Don't hang around for sunrise. Watch out for thresholds. You know the drill."

"Yeah," I said, disturbed. "But without my body . . ."

"Won't have much magic. Most people can't see you, hear you. Won't be able to touch things."

I stared at him. "How am I supposed to find anything out like that?" I asked.

Jack lifted both hands. "Kid, I don't make the law. I make sure it gets observed." He squinted at me. "Besides. I thought you were a detective."

I clenched my jaw and glared at him. My glare isn't bad, but he wasn't impressed. I exhaled slowly and then said, "Solve my own murder."

He nodded.

Anger rose from my chest and entered my voice. "I guess it isn't enough that I spent my adult life trying to help and protect people. There's something else I have to do before going off to meet Saint Peter."

Jack shrugged. "Don't be so certain about that. With your record, son, you might just as easily find yourself on a southbound train."

"Hell," I spat. "You know what Hell is, Captain Sparrow? Hell is staring at your daughter and knowing that you'll never get to touch her again. Never get to speak to her. Never get to help her or protect her. Bring on the lake of fire. It wouldn't come close."

"In point of fact," Jack said calmly, "I do know what Hell is. You aren't the only dead guy with a daughter, Dresden."

I sank back into my chair, frowning at him, and then turned my head to stare past him to a simple landscape painting on the wall.

"If it makes any difference," Jack said, "three of the people you love will come to great harm unless you find your murderer."

"What do you mean, harm?" I asked.

"Maimed. Changed. Broken."

"Which three people?" I asked.

"Can't tell you that," he said.

"Yeah," I muttered. "I bet you can't."

I thought about it. Maybe I was dead, but I was sure as hell not ready to go. I had to make sure the people who'd helped me take on the Red King were taken care of. My apprentice, Molly, had been badly wounded in the battle, but that wasn't her biggest problem. Now that I was dead, there was nothing standing between her and a summary beheading at the hands of the White Council of Wizards.

And my daughter, little Maggie, was still back there. I'd deprived her of a mother, just as someone else had deprived her of a father. I had to make sure she was taken care of. I needed to tell my grandfather good-bye . . . and Karrin.

God. What had Karrin found when she came back to the boat to pick me up? A giant splatter of blood? My corpse? She was misguided and stubborn enough that I was sure she would blame herself for whatever had happened. She'd tear herself apart. I had to reach her somehow, and I couldn't do that from this spiritual Siberia.

Could they be the ones the captain was talking about? Or was it someone else?

Dammit.

My self might have felt full of energy and life, but my mind was weary almost beyond measure. Hadn't I done enough? Hadn't I helped enough people, rescued enough prisoners, defeated enough monsters? I'd made enemies of some of the deadliest and most evil things on the planet, and fought them time and again. And one of them had killed me for it.

Rest in peace, it says on all those tombstones. I'd fought against the rising tide until it had literally killed me. So where the hell was my rest? My peace?

Three of the people you love will come to great harm unless you find your murderer.

My imagination conjured scenes filled with the anguish of the people I cared most about. Which pretty much settled things. I couldn't allow something like that to happen.

Besides, there was one more thing that made me certain that I wanted to go back. At the end of the day . . . some son of a bitch had freaking *killed* me.

That's not the kind of thing you can just let stand.

And if it would let me get out of this place and let me move on to wherever it was I was supposed to go, that was a nice bonus.

"Okay," I said quietly. "How does it work?"

He slid a pad and a piece of paper across the desk at me, along with a pencil. "You get to go to an address in Chicago," he said. "You write it there. Driver will drop you off."

I took the pad and paper and frowned at it, trying to work out where to go. I mean, it wasn't like I could show up just anywhere. If I was going in as a pure spirit, it would be futile to contact any of my usual allies. It takes some serious talent to see a spirit that hasn't manifested itself, the way a ghost can occasionally appear to the physical eye. My friends wouldn't even know I was there.

"Out of curiosity," I said, "what happens if I don't catch the killer?"

His expression turned sober and his voice became quieter. "You'll be trapped there. Maybe forever. Unable to touch. Unable to speak. Watching things happen in the world, with no ability whatsoever to affect them."

"Hell," I said quietly.

"Hell."

"That's cheerful."

"You're dead, son," Jack said. "Cheer is contraindicated."

I nodded.

I was looking at one hell—*ba-dump-bump-ching*—of a risk. I mean, fitting in here in Chicago-tory might not be fun, but it probably wouldn't be torture, either. Judging from what Carmichael and Jack had said and from the way they went about their business, they were able to act in some fashion, maybe even do some good. They didn't look particularly thrilled to be doing what they were doing, but they carried that sense of professional purpose with them.

A ghost trapped on the mortal coil? That would be far worse. Always present, always watching, and always impotent.

I never really developed my Don't-Get-Involved skills. I'd go crazy in a year, and wind up one more pathetic, insane, trapped spirit haunting the town I'd spent my adult life protecting.

"Screw it," I said, and started writing on the paper. "If my friends need me, I have to try."

Jack took the pad back with a nod of what might have been approval. Then he stood up and pulled on his suit coat. Car keys rattled in his hand. He was only medium height, but he moved with a confidence and a tightly leashed energy that once more made him seem familiar, somehow. "Let's go."

Several of the cops—because I was sure they were cops, or at least were doing something so similar that the word fit—nodded to Jack as he went by.

"Hey," called someone from behind us. "Murphy."

Jack stopped and turned around.

A guy wearing a suit that would have looked at home in the historic Pinkerton Detective Agency came over to Jack with a clipboard and held it out along with a pen. Jack scanned what was on it, signed off, and passed the clipboard back to the man.

Jack resumed his walking speed. I stuck my hands in my duster pockets and stalked along beside him.

"Captain Collin J. Murphy?" I asked quietly.

He grunted.

"You're Karrin's dad. Used to run the Black Cat case files."

He didn't say anything. We went down the elevator, past the guard angel, and out to the street, where an old blue Buick Skylark, one with tail fins and a convertible roof, sat waiting by the curb. He went around to the driver's side and we both got in. The rain drummed on the roof of the car.

He sat behind the wheel for a moment, his eyes distant. Then he said, "Yeah."

"She's talked about you."

He nodded. "I hear you've looked out for my Karrie."

Karrie? I tried to imagine the person who would call Murphy that to her face. Rawlins had done it once, but *only* once, and not only was he her partner, but he'd also worked with her dad when she was a little girl. Rawlins was practically family.

Anyone else would need to be a Terminator. From Krypton.

"Sometimes," I said. "She doesn't need much in the way of protection."

"Everyone needs someone." Then he started the car, the engine coming to life with a satisfying, throaty purr. Jack ran his hand over the steering wheel thoughtfully and looked out at the rain. "You can back out of this if you want, son. Until you get out of this car. Once you do that, you've chosen your path—and whatever comes with it."

"Yep," I said, and nodded firmly. "The sooner I get started, the sooner I get done."

His mouth quirked up at one corner and he nodded, making a grunting sound of approval. He peered at the pad, read the address I'd written, and grunted. "Why here?"

"Because that's where I'll find the one person in Chicago I'm sure can help me," I said.

Captain Murphy nodded. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

Chapter Three

Captain Murphy's old Skylark stopped in a residential area up in Harwood Heights, a place that still looked as empty and hollow as the rest of the city. It was an odd home, for Chicago—a white stucco number with a red tile roof that looked like it had been transplanted from Southern California. In the steady rain and the mournful grey light of the streetlamps it stood, cold, lonely, and empty of purpose among the more traditional homes that surrounded it.

The Buick's windshield wipers thumped rhythmically.

"Once you get out," said Captain Murphy, "there's no coming back. You're on your own."

"Been there, done that," I said. I offered him my hand. "Thank you, Captain."

He traded grips with me. I didn't try to outcrush him. He didn't try to crush me. The men who can really handle themselves rarely do.

I wished Captain Murphy had lived long enough for me to meet him in the real world. I had a feeling he'd have made one hell of an ally.

"I might be in touch with Karrin," I said.

"No messages. I've done her enough harm," he said, almost before I had finished speaking. His voice carried a tone of unquestionable finality. He nodded toward the house. "But you can tell the big fellow over there that I sent you. It might help."

I nodded. Then I took a deep breath, opened the door of the car, and stepped out into—

I was more impressed with what I *hadn't* stepped into, for a moment. Because when my feet hit the ground and the car door shut behind me, I wasn't standing in Chicago's rainy, abandoned corpse. Instead, I was on a city street on a cold, clear evening. No rain fell. The stars and moon burned bright overhead, and the ambient city light combined with a fairly fresh and heavy snowfall to make it nearly as bright as daylight outside.

Sounds rushed all around me. Traffic, distant horns, the thumping beat of music from a large stereo. A jet's passage left a hollow roar behind it—I was standing only a few miles from O'Hare.

I turned to look behind me, but Captain Murphy's car had vanished, back into Chicago Between, presumably.

I stood there alone.

I sighed. Then I turned and walked onto the property of Mortimer Lindquist, ectomancer.

Once upon a time, Morty had covered his lawn with decorations meant to be intimidating and spooky. Headstones. A wrought-iron fence with a big metal gate. Eerie lighting. The overall impression could be scary if you were gullible enough and the lighting was low, but mostly it had looked like cheap Halloween decorations outside a crack house.

Times had changed.

Morty had gotten rid of all the cheap junk, except for the fence. He'd turned his front yard into a Japanese garden. There were a few hedges, and a koi pond complete with a little wooden bridge that spanned it. Raised planters everywhere contained bonsai, all of them trees native to North America. It was a little unnerving to see what looked like an adult oak tree—only fifteen inches high and complete with miniature leaves.

There weren't a lot of people in Chicago doing that for money, which implied that it was Morty's own handiwork. If so, it had taken him a lot of effort and patience to create those.

I walked forward calmly, reaching out to open the gate.

My hand went right through it.

Yeah, I know, I was essentially a ghost, but I'd never gotten much practice with intangibility. I was used to reaching out for objects and being able to touch them. Now my hand simply tingled,

as if waking up after I'd taken a nap and used it as a pillow. I pushed my arm a little farther forward, leaning to one side, and saw my fingertips emerge from the metal of the gate. I waggled my fingers, just to be sure.

"Okay," I said. "No help for it, then." I took a deep breath and held it as if I were about to jump into deep water. Then I hunched my shoulders and rushed forward.

Anticlimax. As I went through the gate, I was subjected to a swift, intense tingling sensation. Then I was on the other side.

I walked up a little stone path leading to Morty's front door, but it wasn't until I had gone over the bridge that I saw the man standing in the shadows on the front porch.

He was huge. Not built like a weight lifter or anything, just a naturally big-boned, brawny man standing almost as tall as I. His dark hair was gathered at the nape of his neck with a bit of ribbon. A long, dark blue coat fell to his calves, its sleeves marked with gold braid. Beneath that, he wore a uniform—a tight-fitting blue jacket, white shirt, white pants, and high black boots. He carried some kind of long-handled ax over one shoulder, and as I came to a halt, he was already drawing a flintlock pistol from his belt with his free hand. He leveled it just a little bit to one side of me and called out, "Halt! Identify yourself, scoundrel, or begone!"

"Scoundrel?" I asked, putting my fingers on my chest as if distressed at the accusation. "That's a little unfair."

"Ye've the look of a scoundrel!" boomed the man. "And a dandysprat and a ragamuffin. Though I'll admit, for all that, ye could yet be a congressman." I could see the white flash of his teeth in the dark as he smiled. "Give me a name, man."

"Harry Dresden," I said in a clear tone.

The barrel of the gun wavered a few more degrees away from me. "The wizard?"

"The *late* wizard," I replied, then gestured down at myself. "The late Harry Dresden, really."

"Zounds," the man said. He frowned for a moment as if in thought.

It didn't look natural on him.

"If you lie," he said slowly, "I can see no veritable reason for doing so, and I am inclined to shoot you. Yet if you tell the truth, your presence here draws mischief to my friend's house, and I am inclined to shoot you repeatedly." He nodded firmly and settled the gun's barrel on me. "Either way . . ."

He was about to shoot. I didn't know if it would re-kill me or not, but given what I had experienced of the universe, it might. At the very least, I figured, it would probably hurt like a son of a bitch. I had to keep this bozo from bringing the hammer down. Assuming his period outfit was authentic, that might be simple.

"Little rude, isn't it, to shoot me?" I asked him. "I'm unarmed, and I've offered no violence or insult to you. Introduced myself, even. Whereas you haven't even told me your name."

The man in the blue coat looked suddenly abashed, and the pistol dropped slightly once more. "Ah yes. Um, please excuse me. Societal graces were imperfectly instilled in me in my youth, and that sad fact tends to be reflected in my more temperate afterlife." He straightened and literally clicked his heels together, without ever moving the gun far from me, and gave me a slight bow. "The late Captain Sir Stuart Winchester of the Colonial Marines."

I arched an eyebrow. "*Sir* Stuart of the *Colonial* Marines?"

He shrugged. "It is a protracted and complex tale."

"Well, Stu," I said, "with all due respect, my business here is not with you. It's with Mr. Lindquist."

"I hardly think so," Stu sniffed. "Have you an invitation?"

I gave him a blank look for a moment and then said, "I'm new to the whole ghost thing, but I'm damned sure you don't just send out envelopes through the U.S. Ghostal Service."

"Ye'd be surprised how many postal workers leave a shade behind," Stu countered. "The routine, methinks, is what keeps them making their rounds. The poor things don't even realize anything's changed."

"Don't change the subject," I said. "I need to talk to Mort."

"I am sorry, sir," Stu said. "But the standing order regarding the visit of any uninvited ghosts is to deny them entry."

"And you have to follow Mort's orders?"

"It isn't as though you could cross his threshold uninvited in any case, man," he said.

"Right," I said. "You have to follow his orders."

"We are not compelled," Stu said at once, and severely. "We aid him out of friendship and respect and . . ." He sighed and added, "And boredom. Ye gods, but this city pales after but half a century, and I've lingered here more than four times that."

I found myself grinning at the ghost. "Stu, let me make you a promise. Maybe even an oath. I come to ask Mort's help, not to harm him—and I'm reasonably sure my presence will not contribute to your ongoing sense of ennui."

Stu let out a rolling belly laugh and began to speak, but the sound died off, and he stared at me thoughtfully, tapping a fingertip against the pistol.

"If it makes any difference," I said, "Jack Murphy was the one who dropped me off here. Told me to mention his name."

Stu's eyebrows shot up. I could see the thoughts racing behind his eyes. They weren't going to win any sprints, but they seemed good for the long haul. "Aye?" He pursed his lips. "A good fellow. For an Irishman."

I snorted. "If he's ever around, you'd better smile when you say—"

A flood of intangible cold pressed against my back, as suddenly as if I'd been standing in front of an industrial freezer door when it opened.

I turned to see a humanoid, grey form floating just above the ground maybe five yards away from me and drifting closer. The details were obscure, the proportions slightly off, as if I were looking at a badly molded plastic doll. There were no real features on it, just hollow, gaping eye sockets within a sunken, nearly skull-like face, and a wide, empty mouth that hung open as if the tendons attaching the lower jaw had stretched out like old elastic bands.

It moved with a kind of shuffling grace, as if it had no real weight and needed only to touch the ground to propel itself forward with its toes. It made a sound as it came, a hollow, rattling, muted gasp. It was the sound of an agonized scream that had long since run out of breath to propel it—but tried to continue anyway.

It got closer to me, and I felt colder as it did.

"Get back," I snapped. "I mean it."

The creature came forward with another little touch of its toes to the earth, as mindless and graceful as a hungry jellyfish, and a hell of a lot creepier.

I took a pair of quick steps back and said, "Fine. Be that way." I lifted my right hand, drew in my will, and snarled, "*Fuego*."

And nothing—nothing at *all*—happened.

There was no stirring of forces deep inside me. There was no current of equal parts giddy excitement, vibrating tension, and raw lightning flashing through my thoughts. There was no flash of white-hot flame that would have incinerated the apparition coming toward me.

There was no magic.

There was no magic.

"Oh, crap," I choked and reeled back as the thing's fingers raked at me with deathly grace, the sound of its strangled scream growing higher pitched. Its fingers didn't end in nails. They just sort of trailed off into drifting shreds that were surrounded by deadly cold.

Behind me, there was a mechanical sound, *click-clack*, of a large, halfcocked trigger being pulled fully back and ready to fire.

I whirled my head around in time to see Stu's enormous old gun snap up to aim directly at the end of my nose. I'm sure its barrel wasn't actually as big as a train tunnel, but at the moment it sure as hell looked like it.

I felt the wave of cold intensify against my back, and by the time Stu shouted, “Get down!” I was already halfway to the ground.

I hit hard—apparently being insubstantial didn’t free me from the laws of gravity or the discomfort of its unwavering enforcement—at the same time that Stu’s pistol went off.

Everything happened in dreamtime, slowly enough for me to see every detail, but so swiftly that I felt that no matter how fast I moved, I would not be able to keep up. I was expecting the crack of a pistol round, or even the hollow *whump* of a large-bore black-powder weapon. What I got was a roar that sounded like it had been distorted by a dozen different DJs and a mile of train tunnel. The standard plume of black-powder smoke didn’t emerge from the barrel. Instead, expanding concentric rings of pastel mist puffed out, swirling at their center as if pulled into following the contrail of the bullet.

The bullet itself was no lump of lead. It was a sphere of multicolored light that looked nearly big enough to be a golf ball. It went by a couple of feet over my head, and I swear it felt like I’d gotten a mild sunburn just from being close to it. A deep tone, like the thrumming of an amplified bass-guitar string, emanated from the sphere, vibrating through my flesh and against my bones.

I turned my head in time to see the sphere smash against the chest of the attacking apparition. The not-bullet plunged into its body, tearing a hole the size of my fist in its chest. A cloud of something that looked like steam poured out of the creature. Light kindled within it, almost like an old movie projector playing upon the vapor, and I suddenly saw a flicker of shadowy images, all of them dim, warped, twisted, as if someone had made a clips reel from the random strips of celluloid from the cuttingroom floor.

The images grew steadily dimmer, until there was nothing left but a thinning cloud of mist. It wasn’t until then that I saw that the grey form was gradually sagging, like a waterskin being slowly emptied.

The mists vanished. All that was left of the grey creature was an ugly, colorless lump on the ground.

Firm footsteps came down the walkway from the porch, and Stu placed himself between me and the thing, whatever it had been. Though his hands were reloading the pistol, complete with powder horn and a short ramrod, his eyes swept up and down the street around us.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

“Wraith,” he said quietly, with a certain professional detachment in his voice. “A ghost, like you or me, who gave in to despair and gave up his sense of self-reason.”

“Dangerous?”

“Extremely so,” Stu said. He turned to look down at me. “Especially to someone like you.”

“Like me?”

“A fresh shade. You’ve a paucity of experience in learning to defend yourself here. And it is all but impossible for a fresh shade such as yourself to hide: There is a sense of life that clings to you.” He frowned. “To you especially.”

“Because I’m a wizard, maybe.”

Stu nodded. “Likely, likely.”

“What would have happened if . . . ?” I gestured at the wraith’s remains.

“It would have devoured your memories,” Stu said calmly.

I considered that for a moment and studied the remains almost wistfully. “I don’t know. I’ve got some I wouldn’t mind losing.”

Stu slid his readied pistol back into his belt. “For shades, memories are life, sustenance, and power. We *are* memories now, wizard.”

“The images in the mist,” I said. “When it was . . . was dying. They were its memories?”

“Aye. What was left of them.” Stu moved forward and crouched over the remains. He held out his hand, palm down over them, and took a deep breath. After a few heartbeats, glowing mist began to rise from the wraith’s remains. It snaked through the air and into Stu’s chest, flowing into him like water into a pool. When it was complete, he stood again and let out a sigh.

Whatever had struck the wraith, it had evidently been made of the same substance as Sir Stuart. If ghosts, then, were memories . . . “The bullet,” I said. “You made it out of a memory?”

“Naturally,” he said. His expression filled with a gentle, distant sorrow. “A strong one. I’ll make it into another bullet at some point.”

“Thank you,” I said. “For helping me.”

“I must admit, I did not put the poor brute down exclusively for your sake, wizard. You represent a feast for any wraith. Fresh from the world of the living, still with a touch of vitality upon you, and full to bursting with fresh, unfaded memories. The wraith that ate you would become powerful—a dire, fell creature indeed. One that could threaten the world of the living as easily as it could the world of spirit. I won’t have that.”

“Oh,” I said. “Thanks anyway.”

Stu nodded and offered me his hand. I took it, rose, and said, “I need to talk to Mort.”

Even as I spoke, I saw two more wraiths appear from the darkness. I checked behind me and saw more coming, drifting with effortless motions and deceptive speed.

“If you get me inside Mort’s threshold, I’ll be safe from them,” I said, nodding to the wraiths. “I don’t know how to defend myself against them. They’ll kill me. And if that happens, you’ll have that monster wraith on your hands.”

“Not if I kill you first,” Stu said calmly, tapping a finger on the handle of his pistol.

I turned my head slightly to one side, eyeing him, studying his face. “Nah,” I said. “Won’t happen.”

“How would you know, spook?” he asked in a flat voice. But he couldn’t keep the smile out of his eyes.

“I’m a wizard,” I said, infusing my voice with portentous undertones. “We have our ways.”

He remained silent, expression stern, but his eyes danced.

I sobered. “And those wraiths are getting closer, man.”

Stu snorted and said, “The wraiths are always getting closer.” Then he drew his pistol and pointed it at my chest. “I hereby take you prisoner, late wizard. Keep your hands in plain sight, follow all my verbal instructions, and we’ll do splendidly.”

I showed him my hands. “Oh. Uh. Okay.”

Stu nodded sharply. “About face, then. Let’s go talk to the little bald man.”

Chapter Four

I followed Stu through the front door (dammit, tingle, ouch), and paused on the other side to consider that fact for a moment. Only a member of the household's family could issue an invitation that would let an immaterial entity past the home's threshold.

So. Sir Stuart was practically family around Mort's place. Unless he was literal family. Hauntings, after all, have historically been known to remain with a specific family lineage. Could Stu be one of Mort's ancestors, here to watch out for his familial posterity? Or had the little ectomancer always possessed an odd sort of family, one I had never known about?

Interesting. It would be wise to keep my eyes open.

The house looked much different. What had been a cheesily staged séance room had become a living room with a sofa, love seat, and comfortable chairs. I'd seen only part of the rest of the house, but as I walked with Sir Stuart, I could see that the dismal little den of a house had been renovated, redecorated, and otherwise made more beautiful. Stu guided me to a room that was part library, part office, with a fire crackling in the fireplace.

Mortimer Lindquist seemed to have finally given in to the inevitable. I'd seen him with a bad toupee, and with an even worse comb-over, but this was the first time I'd seen him sporting a full-on Charles Xavier. The unbroken shine of his pate looked a lot better than the partial coverage. He'd lost weight, too, since last I'd seen him. I mean, he wasn't going to be modeling for Abercrombie & Fitch or anything, but he'd definitely dropped from self-destructively obese down to merely stout. He was in his early fifties, under five and a half feet tall, and dressed in black slacks and a grey silk shirt, and he wore little square-rimmed spectacles.

He sat at his table, a deck of playing cards spread out in front of him in what could be either a fortune-telling through the cards or a game of solitaire—they tended to have about the same amount of significance, in my experience.

"Did I hear a shot, Sir Stuart?" Mort asked absently, staring intently at the cards. Then his hands froze in the act of dealing another, and he shot to his feet, whirling to face me. "Oh, *perfect*."

"Hiya, Morty," I said.

"This is not happening," Mort said, promptly getting up from the table and walking quickly toward another room. "This just can't be happening. No one is *this* unlucky."

I hurried forward, trying to keep up, and followed him into a hallway. "I need to talk to—"

"I don't *care*," Mort said, his arms crossing each other in a slashing, pushing-away gesture, never stopping. "I do *not* see you. I am *not* listening to you, Dresden. It's not enough that you have to keep dragging me into things in life. So now your stupid ghost shows up to do it, too? No. Whatever it is, no."

We entered a kitchen, where I found Sir Stuart already present, his arms folded, leaning back against a wall with a quiet smile as he watched. Mort went to a large cookie jar, opened it, and took out a single Oreo before replacing the lid.

"Morty, come on, it's never been like that," I said. "I've come to ask your help a couple of times because you're a capable professional and—"

"Bullshit," Mort snapped, spinning to face me, his eyes flashing. "Dresden came to me when he was so desperate he might as well try any old loser."

I winced. His summation of our relationship was partially true. But not entirely. "Morty, please."

"Morty, *what*?" he snapped back. "You've got to be kidding me. I am *not* getting involved in whatever international crisis you mean to perpetrate next."

"It's not like I've got a lot of choice in the matter, man. It's you or no one. Please. Just hear me out."

He barked out an incredulous little laugh. "No, you hear *me* out, shade. *No* means 'no.' It isn't happening. It isn't ever going to happen. I said *no*!" And then he slammed the door to the next room in my face.

"Dammit, Morty," I snarled, and braced myself for the plunge through his door after him.

"Dresden, st—!" Sir Stuart said.

Too late. I slammed my nose and face into the door and fell backward onto my ass like a perfect idiot. My face began to throb immediately, swelling with pain that felt precisely normal, identical to that of any dummy who walked into a solid oak door.

"—op," Sir Stuart finished. He sighed, and offered me a hand up. I took it and he hauled me to my feet. "Ghost dust mixed into the paint inside the room," he explained. "No spirit can pass through it."

"I'm familiar with it," I muttered, and felt annoyed that I hadn't thought of the idea before, as an additional protection against hostile spirits at my own apartment. To the beings of the immaterial, ghost dust was incontrovertible solidity. Thrown directly at a ghost, it would cause tremendous pain and paralyze it for a little while, as if the spook had been suddenly loaded down with an incredible and unexpected weight. If I'd put it all over my walls, it would have turned them into a solid obstacle to ghosts and their ilk, shutting them out with obdurate immobility.

Of course, my recipe had used depleted uranium dust, which would have made it just a tad silly to spread around the interior of my apartment.

Not that it mattered. My apartment was gone, taken when a Molotov cocktail, hurled by a vampire assassin, had burned the boardinghouse to the ground along with most of my worldly possessions. Only a few had been left, hidden away. God knew where they were now.

I suppose I couldn't really count that as a loss, all things considered. Material possessions aren't much use to a dead man.

I lifted a hand to my nose, wincing and expecting to find it rebroken. No such thing had happened, though a glob of some kind of runny, transparent, gelatinous liquid smeared the back of my hand. "Hell's bells. I'm bleeding ectoplasm?"

That drew a smile from the late marine. "Ghosts generally do. You'll have to forgive him, Dresden. He can be very slow to understand things at times."

"I don't have time to wait for him to catch on," I said. "I need his help."

Sir Stuart grinned some more. "You aren't going to get it by standing there repeating yourself like a broken record. Repeating yourself like a broken record. Repeating yourself like a broken—"

"Ha-ha," I said without enthusiasm. "People who cared about me are going to get hurt if I can't act."

Sir Stuart pursed his lips. "It seems to me that if your demise was to leave someone vulnerable, something would have happened to them already. It's been six months, after all."

I felt my jaw drop open. "W-what? Six *months*?"

The ghost nodded. "Today is the ninth of May, to be precise."

I stared at him, flabbergasted. Then I turned, put my back against Morty's impenetrable door, and used it to stay upright as I sank to the ground. "Six *months*?"

"Yes."

"That's not . . ." I knew I was just gabbling my stream of thought, but I couldn't seem to stop myself from talking. "That's not right. It can't be right. I was *dead* for less than a freaking *hour*. What kind of Rip van Winkle bullshit is *this*?"

Sir Stuart watched me, his expression serious and untroubled. "Time has little meaning to us now, Dresden, and it's very easy to become unattached to it. I once lost five years listening to a Pink Floyd album."

"There is *snow* a foot and a half *deep* on the *ground*," I said, pointing in a random direction. "In *May*?"

His voice turned dry. “The television station Mortimer watches theorizes that it is due to person-made, global climate change.”

I was going to say something insulting, maybe even offensive, but just then the rippling sound of metallic wind chimes tinkled through the air. They were joined seconds later by more and more of the same, until the noise was considerable.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Sir Stuart turned and walked back the way we’d come, and I hurried to follow. In the next room over, a dozen sets of wind chimes hung from the ceiling. All of them were astir, whispering and singing even though there was no air moving through the room.

Sir Stuart’s hand went to his ax, and I suddenly understood what I was looking at.

It was an alarm system.

“What’s happening?” I asked him.

“Another assault,” he said. “We have less than thirty seconds. Come with me.”

Chapter Five

“**To arms!**” bellowed Sir Stuart. “They’re coming at us again, lads!”

The ringing of the alarm chimes doubled as figures immediately exploded from the very walls and floor of the ectomancer’s house, appearing as suddenly as . . . well, *as ghosts*. Duh.

One second, the only figures in sight were me and Sir Stuart. The next, we were striding at the head of a veritable armed mob. The figures didn’t have the same kind of sharp-edged reality that Sir Stuart did. They were wispier, foggier. Though I could see Sir Stuart with simple clarity, viewing the others was like watching someone walk by on the opposite side of the street during a particularly heavy rain.

There was no specific theme to the spirits defending Mort’s house. The appearance of each was eclectic, to such an extent that they looked like the assembled costumed staff from some kind of museum of American history.

Soldiers in the multicolored uniforms of regulars from the Revolutionary War walked beside buckskin-clad woodsmen, trappers, and Native Americans from the wars preceding the revolution. Farmers from the Civil War era stood with shopkeepers from the turn of the twentieth century. Men in suits, some armed with shotguns, others with tommy guns, moved toward the attack, the bitter divisions of the era of Prohibition apparently forgotten. Doughboys marched with a squad of buffalo soldiers, followed by half a dozen genuine, six-gun-toting cowboys in long canvas coats, and a group of grunts whose uniforms placed them as Vietnam-era U.S. Army infantry.

“Huh,” I said. “Now, there’s something you don’t see every day.”

Sir Stuart drew his gun from his belt as he strode forward, checking the old weapon. “I’ve seen a great many years in this city. Many, many nights. Until recently, I would have agreed with you.”

I looked back at Sir Stuart’s little army as we reached the front door and passed through it.

“I—glah, dammit, that feels strange—guess that means you’re seeing a pattern.”

“This is the fifth night running that they’ve come at us,” Sir Stuart replied, as we went out onto the porch. “Stay behind me, Dresden. And well clear of my ax arm.”

He came to a halt a step later, and I stood behind him a bit and on his left side. Sir Stuart, who had been a giant for his day, was only a couple of inches shorter than me. I had to strain to see over him.

The street was crowded with silent figures.

I just stared out at them for a moment, struggling to understand what I was looking at. Out on the road were scores, maybe even a couple of hundred wraiths like the one Sir Stuart had dispatched earlier. They were flabby, somehow hollow and squishy-looking, like balloons that hadn’t been filled with enough gas—sad, frightening humanoid figures, their eyes and mouths gaping too large, too dark, and too empty to seem real. But instead of advancing toward us, they simply stood there in even ranks, leaning forward slightly, their arms held vaguely upward as if yearning toward the house, though their hands seemed limp and devoid of strength, their fingers trailing into shapeless shreds. The horrible sound of hundreds of nearly silent moans of pain emanated from the block of wraiths, along with a slowly building edge of tension.

“Tell me, wizard,” Sir Stuart said. “What do you see?”

“A crap-ton of wraiths,” I breathed quietly. “Which I do not know how to fight.” None of them had the deadly, focused look of Sir Stuart and his crew, but there were a *lot* of them out there. “Something is getting them worked up.”

“Ah,” he said. He glanced back over his shoulder at me, his eyes narrowed. “I thought your folk had clear sight.”

I frowned at him and then out at the small sea of wraiths. I stared and stared, bringing the focus of concentration I'd learned over endless hours of practice in my studies—and suddenly saw them. Dark, slithering shapes, moving up and down the ranks of wraiths at the backs of their lines. They looked vaguely like folk covered in dark, enveloping cloaks and robes, but they glided through the air with a silent, effortless grace that made me think of sharks who had scented blood in the water and were closing in to feed.

"Four . . . five, six of them," I said. "In the back ranks."

"Good," said Sir Stuart, nodding his approval. "That's the real foe, lad. These poor wraiths are just their dogs."

It had been a long, long time since I'd felt quite this lost. "Uh. What are they?"

"Lemurs," he said, with the Latin pronunciation: *Lay-moors*. "Shades who have set themselves against Providence and have given themselves over to malice and rage. They do not know pity, nor restraint, nor . . ."

"Fear?" I guessed. "They always never know fear."

Sir Stuart glanced over his shoulder and bounced his long-handled ax against his palm, his mouth turned up into an edged, wolfish grin. "Nay, lad. Perhaps they were innocent of it once. But they proved quick learners when they raised their hands against this house." He turned back to face the street and called out, "Positions!"

The spirits who had come along behind us flowed around and over us and—though I twitched when I saw it—beneath us. Within seconds, they were spread into a defensive line in the shape of a half dome between the house and the gathered wraiths and lemurs. Then those silent forms stood steady, whether their feet were planted on the ground or in thin air or somewhere just *below* the ground, and faced the small horde with their weapons in hand.

The tension continued to build, and the seething, agonized gasps of the wraiths grew louder.

"Um," I said, as my heart started picking up the pace. "What do I do?"

"Nothing," Sir Stuart replied, his attention now focused forward. "Just stay near me and out of my way."

"But—"

"I can see you were a fighter, boy," Stuart said, his voice harsh. "But now you're a child. You've neither the knowledge nor the tools you need to survive." He turned and gave me a ferocious glare, and an unseen force literally pushed my feet back across five or six inches of porch. Holy crap. Stuart might not be a wizard, but obviously I had a thing or two to learn about how a formidable will translated to power on the spooky side of the street.

"Stay close to me," the marine said. "And shut it."

I swallowed, and Sir Stuart turned back to the front.

"You don't have to be a dick about it," I muttered. Very quietly.

It bothered me that he was right. Without Sir Stuart's intervention, I'd have been dead again already.

That's right—you heard me: dead again already.

I mean, come *on*. How screwed up is your life (after- or otherwise) when you find yourself needing phrases like *that*?

I indulged myself in half a second of disgust that once again the universe seemed to be making an extraspecial effort to align itself against me, but it was my pride that was in critical condition. I was accustomed to being the guy who did the fighting and protecting. Fear had been fuel for the fire, meat and potatoes, when I was the one calling the shots. But now . . .

This was terror of an alien vintage: I was helpless.

Without warning, the air filled with whistling and ear-slashing shrieks, and the horde of wraiths washed toward us in a flash flood of strangled moans.

"Give it to them, lads!" Sir Stuart bellowed, his voice rising above the cacophony of screams with the silvery clarity of a trumpet.

Spectral gunfire roared out at once from the weapons of the hovering defenders. Again, clouds of powder smoke were replaced with bursts of colored mist. Bullets had been switched out for streaking spheres of violent radiance. Instead of the explosions of propellant and projectiles breaking the sound barrier, hammering bass-note thrums filled the air and echoed on long after a gunshot would have faded.

A tide of destruction swept over the assaulting wraiths, distorted light and sound tearing great, ragged holes in them, filling the air with faded, warped shadow-images as their feeble memories bled into wisps of cloud that were swallowed by the night. They fell by the dozens—and there were still plenty more wraiths left to go around. Wraiths closed in with the Lindquist Historical Home Defense Society—and it still wasn't fair.

Sir Stuart's troops reacted like the fighting men they had once been. Swords and sabers appeared, along with stilettos and brass knuckles and bowie knives. The wraiths came at them with a slow, graceful, terrible momentum and were hacked, stabbed, punched, clubbed, and otherwise broken—but there were a *lot* of wraiths.

I heard a hollow scream that sounded as if it had come from a couple of blocks away, and lifted my eyes to see half a dozen wraiths who had all attacked together swarm over a phantom doughboy, a scrawny young man in a baggy uniform. Though one of the things was literally opened from one side to the other by a slash of the ghost soldier's bayonet, the other five just fastened onto him, first by a single fingertip, which was then blindly followed by others. Another wraith expired when the young soldier drew his knife. But then all those tattered fingers began winding and winding around him, lengthening impossibly, until within a few seconds he looked like nothing so much as a massive burn victim covered in heavy, dirty bandages.

The wraiths pressed closer and closer, their flabby bodies compressing until they hardly resembled human forms at all, and then with a sudden scream, they darted away in four different directions as more solid, lethal-looking shapes, leaving behind the translucent outline of a young man screaming in agony.

I watched, my stomach twisting, as even that image faded. Within seconds, it was gone.

"Damn their empty eyes," Sir Stuart said, his teeth clenched. "Damn them."

"Hell's bells," I breathed. "Why didn't . . . Couldn't you have stopped them?"

"The lemurs," he spat. "I can't give them the chance to get by me into the house."

I blinked. "But . . . the threshold . . . They can't."

"They did the first night," he said. "Still don't know how. I can't leave the porch or they'll get through. Now be quiet." His fingers flexed and settled on the haft of his ax. "Here's where we come to it."

As the wraiths continued to assault and entangle the house's defenders, Sir Stuart moved to the top of the little stairs leading up to the porch and planted his feet. Out at the street, the shadowy forms of the lemurs had all gone still, each of them hunched down in a crouch, predators preparing to spring.

When it came, it came fast. Not fast like the rush of a mountain lion upon a deer, and not even fast like a runaway automobile. They were fast like bullets. One second, the lemurs were at the street, and the next they were in the air before the porch, seemingly without crossing the space between. I didn't have time to do more than yelp and go into a full-body twitch of pure, startled reaction.

But Sir Stuart was faster.

The first lemur to charge met the butt of Sir Stuart's ax, a blow that sent it into a fluttering, backward tailspin. The second and third lemurs charged at almost exactly the same moment, and Sir Stuart's ax swept out in a scything arc, slashing them both and sending them reeling with high-pitched, horrible screams. The fourth lemur drove a bony-wristed punch across Sir Stuart's jaw, staggering the marine and driving him to one knee. But when the lemur tried to follow up the attack, Stuart produced a gleaming knife from his belt, and it flashed in opalescent colors as he swept it in a treacherous diagonal slash over the thing's midsection.

The fifth lemur hesitated, seeming to abort its instantaneous rush about halfway across the yard. Stuart let out a bellow and threw the knife. It struck home, and the lemur frantically twisted in upon itself, howling like the others, until the knife tumbled free of its ghostly flesh and fell to the snowy ground.

Five wounded lemurs fled from Sir Stuart, screaming. The sixth crouched on the sidewalk, frozen in indecision.

“Coward,” Stuart snarled. “If you can’t finish, don’t start.”

All things considered, I thought Stuart might be being a little hard on the thing. It wasn’t cowardly to *not* rush a juggernaut when you’d just seen your buddies get thrashed by it. Maybe the thing was just smarter than the others.

I never got a chance to find out. In the space of an instant, *Sir Stuart* crossed the lawn to the final lemur, only his rush ended not in front of his foe, but six feet past it. The lemur jerked in the twisting, surprised reaction I had just engaged in a moment before.

Then its head fell from its shoulders, hood and all, dissolving into flickering memory embers as it went. Its headless body went mad, somehow letting out a scream, thrashing and kicking and falling to the ground, where grey-and-white fire poured from its truncated neck.

A shout of triumph went up from the home’s defenders as they continued their own fight, and the suddenly listless wraiths began to be torn apart in earnest, the tide of battle shifting rapidly. Sir Stuart lifted his ax above his head in response and turned to almost casually step up behind a wraith and take its head from its shoulders with the ax.

Then, in the street, about ten feet behind him, a figure, one every bit as solid and real as Sir Stuart himself, appeared out of nowhere, a form shrouded in a nebulous grey cloak with eyes of green-white fire. It lifted what looked like a clawed hand, and sent a bolt of lightning sizzling into Sir Stuart’s back.

Sir Stuart cried out in sudden agony, his body tightening helplessly, muscles convulsing just as they would on an electrocuted human being. The bolt of lightning seemed to attach itself to his spine, then burned a line down to his right hip bone, burning and searing and blowing bits of the tattered, flaming substance of his ghostly flesh into the air.

“No!” I screamed, as he fell. I started running toward him.

The marine rolled when he hit the ground and came up with that ridiculously huge old horse pistol in his hand. He leveled it at the Grey Ghost and fired, and once again his gun sent out a plume of ethereal color and a tiny, bright sun of destruction.

But the cloudy grey figure lifted its hand, and the bullet bounced off the air in front of it smoothly, catching a luckless, wounded wraith who had been attempting to retreat. The wraith immediately dissolved as the first one had—and Sir Stuart stared up at the Grey Ghost with his mouth open in shock.

Magic. The Grey Ghost was using magic. Even as I ran forward, I could feel the humming energy of it in the air, smell it on the cold breeze coming off the lake. I didn’t move at ghostly superspeed. I mostly just ran across the hard ground, hurdled the little fence, went right through a car parked on the street (ow, grrrrr!), and threw my best haymaker of a right cross at a point I nominated to be the Grey Ghost’s chin.

My fist connected with what felt like solid flesh, a refreshingly familiar *smack-thump* of impact that immediately flashed red pain through my wrist to the elbow. The Grey Ghost reeled, and I didn’t let up. I put a couple of left hooks into its midsection, gave it one hell of an uppercut with my right hand, and drove a hard reverse punch into its neck.

I am not a skilled martial artist. But I know a little, picked up in training with Murphy and some of the other SI cops over the years at Dough Joe’s Hurricane Gym. Real fighting is only slightly about form and technique. Mostly it’s about timing, and about being willing to hurt somebody. If you know more or less when to close the distance and throw the punch, you’re most of the way there. But having the right mind-set is even more important. All the technique in the world isn’t going to help you if you come to the fight without the will to wreak havoc on the other guy.

The Grey Ghost staggered back, and I kicked one leg out from under it as it went. It fell. I started kicking it as hard as I could, screaming, driving my toe into its ribs and back, then switching to move in and stomp at its head with the heel of my heavy hiking boot. I did not let up, not even for a second. If this thing could pull out more magic, it would deal with me as easily as it had Sir Stuart. So I focused on trying to crush the enemy's skull and kept kicking.

"Help me!" snarled the Grey Ghost.

There was a flash of blue light, and what felt like a wrecking ball made from foam-rubber mattresses smashed into my chest. It threw me back completely through the car again (Hell's bells, ow!) and I landed on my back with stars in front of my eyes, unable to remember how to inhale.

A nearby wraith turned its empty-eyed head toward me, and a surge of fear sent me scrambling to my feet. I got up in time to see the Grey Ghost rising as well, and those burning green-white eyes met mine.

In the air behind the ghost floated . . . a skull.

A skull with cold blue flames flickering in its empty eye sockets.

"You've got to be kidding me," I whispered. "Bob?"

"*You!*" the ghost hissed. Its hands formed into arching clawlike shapes, and it hissed in rage—and in fear.

Click-clack, went the hammer of Sir Stuart's gun.

The Grey Ghost let out a scream of frustration and simply flew apart into thousands of tiny wisps of mist, taking the floating skull along with it. The wisps swarmed together into a vortex like a miniature tornado, and streaked down the road and out of sight, leaving a hundred voices screaming a hundred curses in its wake.

I looked around. The lasts of the wraiths were dying or had fled. The house's defenders, most of them wounded and bleeding pale ectoplasm and flickering memory, were still in their positions. Sir Stuart was holding one hand to his side, and with the other held the pistol pointed at the empty air where the Grey Ghost had been.

"Ahhhh," he said, sagging, once it became clear that the fight was over. "Bloody hell. That's going to leave a mark."

I moved to his side. "Are you okay, man?"

"Aye, lad. Aye. What the hell were you trying to do? Get yourself killed?"

I glowered at him and said, "You're welcome. Glad I could help."

"You nearly got yourself destroyed," he replied. "Another second and that creature would have blasted you to bits."

"Another second and you'd have put a bullet in its head," I said.

Sir Stuart idly pointed the gun at me and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell with a flash of sparks as flint struck steel . . . and nothing happened.

"You were *bluffing*?" I asked.

"Aye," Sir Stuart said. "'Tis a muzzle-loading pistol, boy. You have to reload them like a proper weapon." Idly, he reached out a hand toward the last remnants of a deceased wraith, and flickers of light and memory flowed across the intervening space and into his fingertips. When he had it all back, Sir Stuart sighed and shook his head, seeming to recover a measure of strength. "Very well, then, lad. Help me up."

I did so. Sir Stuart's midsection on the right side was considerably more translucent than before, and he moved as if it pained him.

"When will they be back?" I asked him.

"Tomorrow night, by my reckoning," he said. "With more. Last night they had four lemurs along. Tonight it was six. And that seventh . . ." He shook his head and started reloading the pistol from the powder horn he carried on a baldric at his side. "I knew something stronger had to be gathering all those shades together, but I never considered a sorcerer." He finished reloading the weapon, put the ramrod back into its holder, and said, "Pass me my ax, boy."

I got it for him and handed it over. He slipped its handle through a ring on his belt and nodded. "Thank you."

A thumping sound made me turn my eyes back toward the house.

A man, burly, wearing a dark, hooded sweater and old jeans, was holding a long-handled crowbar in big, blocky hands. He shoved one hand into the space between the door and the frame, and with a practiced, powerful motion, popped the door from its frame and sent it swinging open.

Without an instant's hesitation, Sir Stuart fired. So did the house's spectral defenders. A hurricane of ghostly power hurtled down upon the man—and passed harmlessly through him. Hell, the guy looked like he hadn't noticed anything at all.

"A mortal," Sir Stuart breathed. He took a step forward, let out a sound of pain, and clutched at his side. His teeth were clenched, his jaw muscles standing out sharply. "Dresden," he gasped. "I cannot stop a mortal man. There is nothing I can do."

The hooded intruder took the crowbar into his left hand and drew a stubby revolver from his sweater with his right.

"Go," Stuart said. "Warn Mortimer. Help him!"

I blinked. Mortimer had made it clear that he didn't want to get involved with me—and some childish part of my nature wanted to snap that turnabout was fair play. But a wiser, more rational part of me reminded my inner child that without Mort, I might never be able to get in touch with anyone else in town. I might never find my own killer. I might never be able to protect my friends.

And besides. You don't just let people kick down other people's doors and murder them in their own home. You just don't.

I clapped Stuart on the shoulder and sprinted back toward the little house and its little owner.

Chapter Six

The gunman had a big lead on me, but I had an advantage he didn't. I'd already been inside the house. I knew the layout, and I knew where Mort was holed up.

Oh. Plus I could *run through freaking walls*.

Granted, I think it would have been more fun to be Colossus than Shadowcat. But you take what you can get, and any day you've merely got the powers of an X-Man can't be all that bad. Right?

I gritted my teeth and plunged through the wall into Mort's kitchen and ran for the study, several steps ahead of the gunman.

"Mort!" I shouted. "Mort, they brought a hitter with them this time! There's a gunman running around your house!"

"What?" demanded Mort's voice from the far side of the ghost-dusted door. "Where's Stuart?"

"Dammit, Mort, he's hurt!" I called.

There was a brief pause, and then Mort said, as if baffled, "How did that happen?"

I was getting impatient. "Focus, Mort! Did you hear me? There's a frigging gunman loose in your house!"

Real alarm entered his voice for the first time. "A what?"

The gunman had heard Mort shouting at me. He came toward the door to the study, moving lightly for a big man. I got a better look at him, and noted that his clothing was ragged and unwashed, and so was he. He stank, enough that it carried through to me even given my condition, and his eyes were wide and wild, rolling around like those of a junkie who is hopped up on something that makes him pay too much attention to his surroundings. That didn't seem to have affected his gun hand, though. The semiautomatic he clutched in one big fist seemed steady enough to get the job done.

"Mort!" I called. "He's coming toward your study door right now! Look, just get your weapon and aim at the door and I'll tell you when to shoot!"

"I don't have one!" Mort screamed.

I blinked. "You don't *what*?"

"I am an ectomancer, not an action hero!" I heard him moving around in the office for a moment, and then he said, "Um. They cut the phone."

The gunman let out a low, rumbling chuckle. "You are wanted, little man." His voice sounded rotted, clotted, like something that hadn't been alive in a long time. "It is commanded. You can come with me and it won't hurt. Or you can stay in there and it will."

"Dresden!" Mort called. "What do I do?"

"Oh, *now* you want to talk to me!" I said.

"You're the one who knows about this mayhem bullshit!" Mort shrieked.

"Gonna count, little man," said the gunman. "Five."

"Surviving mayhem is about being prepared!" I shouted back. "Little things like *having a gun*!"

"I'll get one in the morning!"

"Four!"

"Mort, there's gotta be something you can do," I said. "Hell's bells, every time I've run into a ghost it's tried to rip my lungs out! You're telling me none of your spooks can do something?"

"They're *sane*," Mort shouted back. "It's crazy for a ghost to interact with the physical world. Sane ghosts don't go around acting *crazy*!"

"Three!" chanted the gunman.

“Go away,” Mort shouted at him.

“There’s gotta be something I can do!” I yelled.

“I don’t make the rules, okay?” Mort said. “The only way a ghost can manifest is if it’s insane!”

“Two!” the gunman screamed, his voice rising to an excited pitch.

I jumped in front of the lunatic and shrieked, “Boo!” I flapped my hands in his face, as if trying to slap him left and right on the cheeks.

Nothing happened.

“Guess that was too much to hope for, huh?” Mort called lamely.

“One,” the gunman purred. Then he leaned back and drove a heavy boot at the door. It took him three kicks to crack the frame and send the door flying inward.

Mort was waiting on the other side of the door, a golf club in hand. He swung it at the gunman’s head without any preamble, a grimly practical motion. The gunman put an arm up, but the wooden head of the club got at least partly around it, and he reeled back a pace.

“This is your *fault*, Dresden,” Mort snarled, swinging the club again as he spoke.

He hit the gunman full-on in the chest, and then again in one big arm. The gunman caught the next blow on his forearm, and swung wildly at Mort. He connected, and Mort got knocked on his can.

The gunman pressed one hand to a bleeding wound on his head and screamed, a howl of agony that was somehow completely out of proportion with the actual injury. His wild eyes rolled again and he lifted the gun to aim at the little man.

I moved on instinct, throwing myself uselessly between the weapon and the ectomancer. I tripped on a fragment of the ghost-dust-painted door and wound up falling in a heap on top of Mort and . . .

. . . sunk *into* him.

The world suddenly hit me in full Technicolor. It was so *dark* in here, the gunman an enormous, threatening shadow standing over me. His voice was hideous and so loud that my ears ached. The stench—unwashed body and worse things—was enough to turn my stomach, filling my nose like hideous packing peanuts. I saw the gunman’s hand tighten on the trigger and I threw my arm up. . . .

My black-clad, thick, rather short arm.

“*Defendarius!*” I barked, faux Latin, the old defense spell I’d first learned from Justin DuMorne, my first teacher. I felt the magic surge into me, down through my arm, out into the air, just as the gun went off, over and over, as some kind of restraint in the gunman’s head snapped.

Sparks flew up from a shimmering blue plane that formed in front of my outspread fingers, bullets and fragments of bullets shattering and bouncing around the room. One of them stayed more or less in one piece and smacked into the gunman’s calf, and he pitched abruptly to one side, still jerking the trigger until the weapon was clicking on empty.

I felt my mouth move as Mort’s voice—a voice that rang with a resonance and authority I had seldom encountered before, said, “Get *off* of me!”

If I’d been hurtled from a catapult, I don’t think I’d have been thrown away any faster. I flew off at an upward angle—and slammed painfully into the ghost-dust-painted ceiling of the study. I bounced off it and fell to the equally hard floor. I lay there, stunned, for a second.

The gunman got to his feet, breathing hard and fast, slobber shooting out from slack lips as he did. He picked up the golf club that had fallen from Mort’s fingers and took a step toward him.

Mort fixed hard eyes on the intruder and spoke, his voice ringing with that same unalterable authority. “To me!”

I felt the tug of some sudden force, as subtle and inarguable as gravity, and I had to lean against it to stop myself from sliding across the floor toward him.

Other spirits appeared, drawn in through the shattered door as if sucked into a tornado. Half a dozen Native American shades flew into Mort, and as the gunman swung the golf club, he let out

a little yipping shout, ducked the swing more nimbly than any man his age and condition should have been able to, caught the gunman's wrist, and rolled backward, dragging the man with him. He planted his heels in the gunman's midsection and heaved, a classic fighting technique of the American tribes, and sent the man crashing into a wall.

The gunman rose, seething, eyes entirely wild, but not before Mort had crossed the room and taken an ancient, worn-looking ax down from a rack attached to one wall. It took my stunned brain a second to register that the weapon looked exactly like the one Sir Stuart had wielded, give or take a couple of centuries.

"Stuart," Mort called, and his voice rang in my chest as if it had come from a bass-amplified megaphone. There was a flicker of motion, and then Sir Stuart's form flew in through the doorway as if propelled by a vast wind, overlaying itself briefly onto Mort's far smaller body.

The gunman swung the club, but Mort caught it with a deft, twisting move of the ax's haft. The gunman leaned into it, using his far greater weight and strength in an attempt to simply overbear the smaller man and push him to the floor.

But he couldn't.

Mort held him off as if he'd had the strength of a much larger, much younger, much healthier man. Or maybe men. He held the startled intruder stone-still for the space of five or six seconds, then heaved, twisting with the full power of his shoulders, hips, and legs, and used the ax's head to rip the club from the intruder's paws. The gunman threw an enraged punch at his face, but Mort blocked it with the flat of the ax's head, and then snapped the blunt upper edge of the ax into the gunman's face with an almost contemptuous precision.

The intruder reeled back, stunned, and Mort followed up with the instincts and will of a dangerous, trained fighting man. He struck the intruder's knee with the weapon's haft, sending a sharp, crackling pop into the air, and swung the flat of the blade into the intruder's jaw as the bigger man began to fall. The blow struck home with a meaty *thunk* and another crackling noise of impact, and the gunman dropped like a proverbial stone.

Mortimer Lindquist, ectomancer, stood over the fallen madman in a wary crouch, his eyes focusing on nothing as he turned his head left and right, scanning the room around him.

Then he sighed and exhaled. The steel head of the weapon came down to thump gently against the floor. Shapes departed him, the guardian spirits easing free of him, most of them fading from view. Within a few seconds, the only shades present were me and an exhausted-looking Sir Stuart.

Mort sat down on the floor heavily, his head bowed, his chest heaving for breath. The veins on his bald pate stuck out.

"Hell's bells," I breathed.

He looked up at me, his expression weary, and gave me an exhausted shrug. "Don't have a gun," he panted. "Never really felt like I needed one."

"Been a while since you did that, Mortimer," Sir Stuart said from where he sat beside the wall, his body supported by the ghost-dusted paint. "Thought you'd forgotten how."

Mort gave the wounded spirit a faint smile. "I thought I had, too."

I frowned and shook my head. "Was that . . . was that a possession, just now? When the ghosts took over?"

Sir Stuart snorted. "Nay, lad. If anything, the opposite."

"Give me at least a little credit, Dresden," Mort said, his tone sour. "I'm an ectomancer. Sometimes I need to borrow from what a spirit knows or what it can do. But I control spirits—they don't control me."

"How'd you handle the gun?" Stuart asked, a certain, craftsmanlike professionalism entering his tone.

"I . . ." Mort shook his head and looked at me.

"Magic," I said quietly. My bell was still ringing a little, but I was able to form complete sentences. "I . . . sort of bumped into him and called up a shield."

Sir Stuart lifted his eyebrows and said, “Huh.”

“I needed to borrow your skills for a moment,” Mort said, somewhat stiffly. “Appreciate it.”

“Think nothing of it,” I said. “Just give me a few hours of your time. We’ll be square.”

Mort stared at me for a while. Then he said, “You’re here twenty minutes and I nearly get killed, Dresden. Jesus, don’t you get it?” He leaned forward. “I am not a crusader. I am not the sheriff of Chicago. I am not a goddamned death wish-embracing Don Quixote.” He shook his head. “I’m a coward. And I’m very comfortable with that. It’s served me well.”

“I just saved your life, man,” I said.

He sighed. “Yeah. But . . . like I said. Coward. I can’t help you. Go find someone else to be your Panza.”

I sat there for a moment, feeling very, very tired.

When I looked up, Sir Stuart was staring intently at me. Then he cleared his throat and said, in a diffident tone, “Far be it from me to bring up the past, but I can’t help but note that your lot in life has improved significantly since Dresden first came to you.”

Mort’s bald head started turning red. “*What?*”

Sir Stuart spread his hands, his expression mild. “I only mean to say that you have grown in strength and character in that time. When you first interacted with Dresden, you were bilking people out of their money with—poorly—falsified séances, and you had lost your power to contact any spirit other than me.”

Mort glowered ferociously at Sir Stuart. “Hey, Gramps. When I want your opinion, I’ll give it to you.”

Sir Stuart’s smile widened. “Of course.”

“I help spirits find peace,” Mort said. “I don’t do things that are going to get me taken to pieces. I’m a ghost whisperer. And that’s all.”

“Look, Mort,” I said. “If you want to get technical, I’m not actually a ghost, per se. . . .”

He rolled his eyes again. “Oh, God. If I had a nickel for every ghost who had ever come to me, explaining to me how *he* wasn’t really a ghost. How *his* case was special . . .”

“Well, sure,” I said. “But—”

He rolled his eyes. “But if you aren’t just a ghost, how come I could channel you like that? How come I could force you out of me? Huh?”

That hit me. My stomach may have been insubstantial, but it could still writhe uneasily.

Ghosts were *not* the people they resembled, any more than a footprint left in the ground was the being that made it. They had similar features, but ultimately a ghost was simply a remainder, a reminder, an impression of the person who died. They might share similar personalities, emotions, memories, but they weren’t the same being. When a person died and left a ghost behind, it was as if some portion of his dying life energy was spun out, creating a new being entirely—though in the creator’s exact mental and often physical image.

Of course, that also meant that they were subject to many of the same frailties as mortals. Obsession. Hatred. Madness. If what Mort said about ghosts interacting with the material world was true, then it was when some poor spirit snapped, or was simply created insane, that you got your really good ghost stories. By a vast majority, most ghosts were simply insubstantial and a bit sad, never really interacting with the material world.

But I couldn’t be one of those self-deluded shades.

Could I?

I glanced at Sir Stuart.

He shrugged. “Most shades aren’t willing to admit that they aren’t actually the same being whose memories they possess,” he said gently. “And that’s assuming they can face the fact that they are ghosts at all. Self-deluded shades are, by an order of magnitude, more common than those that are not.”

“So what you’re saying is . . .” I pushed my fingers back through my hair. “You’re saying that I only think I did the whole tunnel-of-light, sent-back-on-a-mission thing? That I’m in denial about

being a ghost?"

The ghost marine waggled one hand in an ambivalent gesture, and his British accent rolled out mellow vowels and crisp consonants as he answered. "I'm simply saying that it is very much possible—*Mission? What mission? What are you talking about?*"

I eyed him for a moment, while he looked at me blankly. Then I said, "I'm gonna guess you've never seen *Star Wars*."

Sir Stuart shrugged. "I find motion pictures to be grossly exaggerated and intrusive, leaving the audience little to consider or ponder for themselves."

"That's what I thought," I sighed. "You were about two words away from being called Threepio from here on out."

He blinked. "What?"

"God," I said. "Now we're transitioning into a Monty Python skit." I turned back to Morty. "Mort, Jack Murphy met me on the other side and sent me back to find out who murdered me. There was a lot of talk, but it mostly amounted to 'We aren't gonna tell you diddly, so just do it already.'"

Mort watched me warily for a moment, staring hard at my insubstantial form. Then he said, "You think you're telling the truth."

"No," I said, annoyed. "I *am* telling the truth."

"I'm sure you think that," Mort said.

I felt my temper flare. "If I didn't go right through you, I would totally pop you in the nose right now."

Mort bristled, his jaw muscles clenching. "Oh yeah? Bring it, Too-Tall. I'll kick your bodiless ass."

Sir Stuart coughed significantly, a long-suffering expression on his face. "Mortimer, Dresden just fought beside us to defend this home—and rushed in here to save your life."

Then it hit me, and I eyed Sir Stuart. "You could have come inside," I said. "You could have helped Mortimer against the shooter. But you wanted to see where I stood when I was under pressure. It was a test."

Sir Stuart smiled. "Somewhat, aye. I wouldn't have let you harm Mortimer, of course, and I was there to help him the instant he called. But it didn't hurt to know a little more about you." He turned to Mortimer. "I like this lad. And Jack Murphy sent him."

Both Mortimer and I glared at Sir Stuart and then settled slowly back from the confrontation.

"Head detective of the Black Cats a generation ago," Stuart continued. "Killed himself at his desk. Sometimes new shades show up claiming they've had a run-in with him, and that he brought them back from the hereafter. And you know that he is no deluded fool."

Mort didn't meet Sir Stuart's eyes. He grunted, a sound that wasn't exactly agreement.

"Or maybe Jack Murphy's shade is simply more deluded than most, and has a talent for nurturing the delusions of other new shades."

"Hell's bells, Morty," I said. "Next you'll be telling me that I didn't even meet his shade. That I deluded myself into deluding myself into deluding him into deluding me that I made the whole thing up."

Sir Stuart snorted through his nose. "A fair point."

"It doesn't matter," Mort said. "There's no real way to know."

"Incorrect," Sir Stuart interrupted. "Summon him. That shouldn't be difficult—if he is just one more deluded shade."

Mort didn't look up. But he said, very quietly, "I won't do that to Jack." He looked up and seemed to recover some of his composure. "But even if Captain Murphy is genuine, that doesn't mean Dresden's shade is legit. Or sane."

"Consider the possibility," Sir Stuart said. "There is something unusual about this one."

Mort perked up his metaphorical ears. "Unusual?"

"An energy. A vitality." Sir Stuart shrugged. "It might be nothing. But even if it is . . ."

Mort let out a long sigh and eyed the shade. "You won't let this rest, will you?"

"I have no plans for the next fifty or sixty years," Sir Stuart said affably. "It would give me something to do. Every half an hour or so."

Mort pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "Oh, God."

Sir Stuart grinned. "There's another aspect to consider, too."

"Oh?"

"The attack was larger tonight. It cost us more defenders. And the creature behind it revealed itself." He gestured at his still-translucent midsection. "I can't keep holding them off forever, Mortimer. And the presence of a mortal pawn tells us two things."

I nodded. "One. The Grey Ghost is bad enough to have its way with mortals."

"Two," Sir Stuart said. "The creature is after *you*. Personally."

Mort swallowed.

I rose and shuffled over to look down at the still-unconscious intruder. The man let out a low groan.

"It is a good time to make friends," Stuart said, his expression serious. "Dresden's one reason you'll live the night. And he had allies in this city—people who could help you, if they had a reason to."

"You're fine," Mort said, his tone uncertain. "You've survived worse." Sir Stuart sighed. "Perhaps. But the enemy isn't going to give me time to recover before he attacks again. You need Dresden's help. He's asking for yours." His expression hardened. "And so am I."

The intruder groaned again and stirred.

Mort's forehead broke out in a sudden sweat. He looked at the fallen man and then, rather hurriedly, heaved himself to his feet. He bowed his head. Then he turned to me and said, "Fine, Dresden. I'll help. And in return, I expect you to get your allies to look out for me."

"Deal," I said. I looked at Sir Stuart. "Thank you."

"One hour," Mort said. "You get one hour."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay," Mort echoed, evidently speaking mostly to himself. "I mean, it's not like I'm trying to join the Council or anything. It's one hour. Just one little hour. What could happen in one hour?"

And that's how I knew that Mort was telling the whole truth when he said he wasn't a hero.

Heroes know better than to hand the universe lines like that.

Chapter Seven

Mort drove one of those little hybrid cars that, when not running on gasoline, was fueled by idealism. It was made out of crepe paper and duct tape and boasted a computer system that looked like it could have run the NYSE and NORAD, with enough attention left over to play tic-tac-toe. Or possibly Global Thermonuclear War.

"Kinda glad I'm dead," I muttered, getting into the car by the simple expedient of stepping through the passenger's door as if it had been open. "If I were still breathing, I'd feel like I was taking my life into my hands here. This thing's an egg. And not one of those nice, safe, hard-boiled eggs. A crispy one."

"Says the guy who drove Herbie's trailer-park cousin around for more than ten years," Mort sniped back.

"Gentlemen," Stuart said, settling rather gingerly into the tiny backseat. "Is there a particular reason we should be disagreeable with one another, or do you both take some sort of infantile pleasure in being insufferably rude?"

Now that the fighting was done, Sir Stuart's mannerisms were reverting to something more formal. I made a mental note of the fact. The Colonial Marine hadn't started off a member of proper society, wherever he'd been. The rather staid, formal, archaic phrasing and patterns of speech were all something he'd acquired as a learned habit—one that apparently deserted him under the pressure of combat.

"Okay, Dresden," Mort said. "Where to?" He opened his garage door and peered out at the snow. It was coming down even more thickly than earlier in the night. Chicago is pretty good about keeping its streets cleared in winter weather, but it was freaking May.

From the deep piles of old snow that had apparently been there for a number of weeks, I deduced that the city must have become increasingly beleaguered by the unseasonable weather. The streets were covered in several inches of fresh powder. No plow had been by Mort's house in hours. If we hit a patch of ice, that heavy, crunchy little hybrid was going to skitter like a puppy on a tile floor.

Thinking, I referenced a mental map of the city. I felt a little bad making Mort come out into weather like this—I mean, given that he wasn't dead and all. I was going to feel like crap if something bad happened to him, and it wouldn't be a kindness to ask him to go farther than he absolutely had to. Besides, with the weather worsening, his one-hour time limit seemed to put further constraints on my options.

"Murphy's place," I said quietly. I gave him the address.

Mort grunted. "The ex-cop?"

I nodded. Murph had gotten herself fired by showing up to help me one too many times. She'd known what she was doing, and she'd made her own choices, but I still felt bad about it. Dying hadn't changed that. "She's a pretty sharp lady. Better able than most in this town to look out for you."

Mort grunted again and pulled out into the snow, driving slowly and carefully. He was careful to keep his expression blank as he did it.

"Mort," I said. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Driving over here," he said.

I made a rude sound. Then I looked back over my shoulder at Sir Stuart. "Well?"

Sir Stuart reached into his coat and drew out what looked like a briar pipe. He tapped something from a pouch into it, struck an old wooden match, and puffed it to life. The smoke rose

until it touched the ceiling of the car, where it congealed into a thin coating of shining ectoplasm—the residue of the spiritual when it becomes the physical.

“To hear him tell it,” he said, finally, indicating Mort, “the world’s gone to hell the past few months. Though I’ve got to admit, it doesn’t seem much different to me. Everything’s been madness since those computers showed up.”

I snorted. “What’s changed?”

“The scuttlebutt says that you killed the whole Red Court of Vampires,” said Sir Stuart. “Any truth to that?”

“They abducted my daughter,” I said. I tried for a neutral tone, but it came out clipped and hard. I hadn’t even known Maggie existed until Susan Rodriguez had shown up out of nowhere after years overseas and begged for my help in recovering our daughter. I’d set out to get her back by any means necessary.

I shivered. I’d . . . done things, to get the child away from the monstrous hands of the Red Court. Things I wasn’t proud of. Things I would never have dreamed I would be willing to do.

I could still remember the hot flash of red from a cut throat beneath my fingers, and I had to bow my head for a moment in an effort to keep the memory from surging into my thoughts in all its hideous splendor. Maggie. Chichén Itzá. The Red King. Susan.

Susan’s blood . . . everywhere.

I forced myself to speak to Sir Stuart. “I don’t know what you heard. But I went and got my girl back and put her in good hands. Her mother and a whole lot of vampires died before it was over.”

“All of them?” Sir Stuart pressed.

I was quiet for a moment before I nodded. “Maybe. Yeah. I mean, I couldn’t exactly take a census. The spell could have missed some of the very youngest, depending on the details of how it was set up. But every single one of the bastards nearby me died. And the spell was meant to wipe the world clean of whoever it targeted.”

Mort made a choking sound. “Couldn’t . . . I mean, wouldn’t the White Council get upset about that? Killing with magic, I mean?”

I shrugged. “The Red King was about to use the spell on an eighty-year-old girl. If the Council doesn’t like how I stopped that from happening, they can kiss my immaterial ass.” I found myself chuckling. “Besides. I killed vampires, not mortals, with that magic. And what are they gonna do anyway? Chop my head off? I’m dead already.”

I saw Mort trade a look with Sir Stuart in the rearview mirror.

“Why are you so angry at them, Harry?” Mort asked me.

I frowned at him and then at Stuart. “Why do I feel like I should be lying on a couch somewhere?”

“A shade is formed when something significant is left incomplete,” Sir Stuart said. “Part of what we do is work out what’s causing you to hold on to your life so hard. That means asking questions.”

“What? So I can go on my way? Or something?”

“Otherwise known as leaving me alone,” Mort muttered.

“Something like that,” Sir Stuart said quickly, before I could fire back at Mort. “We just want to help.”

I gave Sir Stuart the eye and then Mort. “That’s what you do? Lay spirits to rest?”

Mort shrugged. “If someone didn’t, this town would run out of cemetery space pretty fast.”

I thought about that for a moment. Then I said, “So how come you haven’t laid Sir Stuart to rest?”

Mort said nothing. His silence was a barbed, stony thing.

Sir Stuart leaned forward to put a hand on Mort’s shoulder, seemed to squeeze it a little, and let go. Then he said to me, “Some things can’t be mended, lad. Not by all the king’s horses or all the king’s men.”

"You're trapped here," I said quietly.

"Were I trapped, it would indicate that I am the original Sir Stuart. I am not. I am but his shade. One could think of it that way nonetheless, I suppose," he said. "But I prefer to consider it differently: I regard myself as someone who was truly created with a specific purpose for his existence. I have a reason to be who and what and where I am. How many flesh-and-blood folk can say as much?"

I scowled as I watched the snowy road ahead of us. "And what's your purpose? Looking out after this loser?"

"Hey, I'm sitting right *here*," Mort complained.

"I help other lost spirits," Sir Stuart said. "Help them find some sort of resolution. Help teach them how to stay sane, if it is their destiny to become a mane. And if they become a lemur, I help introduce them to oblivion."

I turned to frown at Sir Stuart. "That's . . . kinda cut-and-dried."

"Some things assuredly are," he replied placidly.

"So you're a mane, eh? Like the old Roman ancestral ghost?"

"It isn't such a simple matter, Dresden. Your own White Council is a famous bunch of namers," he said. "Their history is, I have heard, rooted in old Rome."

"Yeah," I said.

He nodded. "And, like the Romans, they love to name and classify and outline facts to the smallest, permanently inflexible, set-in-stone detail. The truth, however, is that the world of remnant spirits is not easily cataloged or defined." He shrugged. "I dwell in Chicago. I defend Mortimer's home. I am what I am."

I grunted. After a few moments, I asked, "You teach new spirits?"

"Of course."

"Then can I ask you some questions?"

"By all means."

Mort muttered, "Here we go."

"Okay," I said. "I'm a ghost and all now. And I can go through just about anything—like I went through this car door to get inside."

"Yes," Sir Stuart said, a faint smile outlining his mouth.

"So how come my ass doesn't go through the *seat* when I sit down on—"

I was rudely interrupted by the tingling sensation of passing through solid matter, beginning at my butt and moving rapidly up my spine. Cold snow started slamming into my rear end, and I let out a yelp of pure surprise.

Sir Stuart had evidently known what was coming. He reached over, grabbed me by the front of my leather duster, and unceremoniously dragged me back up into the car and sat me on the seat beside him, back in the passenger compartment. I clutched at the door handle and the seat in front of me for stability, only to have my hands go right through them. I pitched forward, spinning as if I were floating in water, and this time it was my face plunging toward the icy street.

Sir Stuart hauled me back again and said, in a faintly annoyed tone, "Mortimer."

Mort didn't say anything, but when I was once again sitting down, I didn't fall right through the bottom of the car. He smirked at me in the rearview mirror.

"You don't fall through the bottom of the car because on some deep, instinctual level, you regard it as a given of existence here," Sir Stuart said. "You are entirely convinced that illusions such as gravity and solidity are real."

"There is no spoon," I said.

Sir Stuart looked at me blankly.

I sighed. "If I believe in an illusory reality so much, then how come I can walk through walls?" I asked.

"Because you are convinced, on the same level, that ghosts can do precisely that."

I felt my eyebrows trying to meet as I frowned. "So . . . you're saying I don't fall through the ground because I don't *think* I should?"

"Say instead that it is because you assume that you will not," he replied. "Which is why, once you actively considered the notion, you *did* fall through the floor."

I shook my head slowly. "How do I keep from doing it again?"

"Mortimer is preventing it, for the time being. My advice to you is not to think about too much," Sir Stuart said, his tone serious. "Just go about your business."

"You can't *not* think about something," I said. "Quick, don't think about a purple elephant. I dare you."

Sir Stuart let out a broad laugh, but stopped and clutched at his wounded flank. I could tell it hurt him, but he still wore the smile the laugh had brought on. "It usually takes them longer to recognize that fact," he said. "You're right, of course. And there will be times when you feel like you have no control whatsoever over such things."

"Why?" I asked, feeling somewhat exasperated.

Sir Stuart wasn't rattled by my tone. "It's something every new shade goes through. It will pass."

"Huh," I said. I thought about it for a minute and said, "Well. It beats the hell out of acne."

From the front seat, Mort let out an explosive little snicker.

Stars and stones, I hate being the new guy.

Chapter Eight

Murphy inherited her house from her grandmother, and it was at least a century old. Grandma Murphy had been a notorious rose gardener. Murphy didn't have a green thumb herself. She hired a service to take care of her grandmother's legacy. The flower garden in front would have fit a house four times as large, but it was a withered, dreary little place when covered in heavy snow. Bare, thorny branches, trimmed the previous fall, stood up from the blanket of white in skeletal silence.

The house itself was a compact colonial, single story, square, solid, and neat-looking. It had been built in a day when a ten-by-ten bedroom was considered a master suite, and when beds were routinely used by several children at a time. Murphy had upgraded it with vinyl siding, new windows, and a layer of modern insulation when she moved in, and the little house looked as if it could last another hundred years, no problem.

There was a sleek, expensive, black town car parked on the street outside Murphy's home, its tires on the curbside resting in several inches of snow. It couldn't have looked more out of place in the middle-class neighborhood if it had been a Saint Patrick's Day Parade float, complete with prancing leprechauns.

Sir Stuart looked at me and then out at our surroundings, frowning. "What is it, Dresden?"

"That car shouldn't be there," I said.

Mort glanced at me and I pointed out the black town car. He studied it for a moment before he said, "Yeah. Kind of odd on a block like this."

"Why?" asked Sir Stuart. "It is an automatic coach, is it not?"

"An expensive one," I said. "You don't park those on the street in weather like this. The salt-and-plow truck comes by, and you're looking at damage to the finish and paint. Keep going by, Morty. Circle the block."

"Yeah, yeah," Mort said, his tone annoyed. "I'm not an idiot."

"Stay with him," I told Sir Stuart.

Then I took a deep breath, remembered that I was an incorporeal spirit, and put my feet down through the floorboards of the car. I dug in my heels on the snowy street as the solid matter of the vehicle passed through me in a cloud of uncomfortable tingles. I'd meant to simply remain behind, standing, when the car had passed completely through me. I hadn't thought about things like momentum and velocity, and instead I went into a tumble that ended with me making a *whump* sound as I hit a soft snowbank beside the home next to Murphy's. It hurt, and I pushed myself out of the snowbank, my teeth chattering, my body blanketed in cold.

"N-n-no, H-Harry," I told myself firmly, squeezing my eyes shut. "Th-that's an illusion. Your mind created it to match what it knows. But you didn't hit the snowbank. You can't. And you can't be covered in snow. And therefore you can't be wet and cold."

I focused on the words, putting my will behind them, in the same way I would have to attract the attention of a ghost or spirit. I opened my eyes.

The snow clinging to my body and clothes was gone. I was standing, dry and wrapped in my leather duster, beside the snowbank.

"Okay," I said. "That's bordering on cool."

I stuck my hands in my pockets, ignored the snow and the steady, gentle northern wind, and trudged across Grandma Murphy's rose garden to Murphy's door. I raised my hand and knocked as I'd done so often before.

A couple of things happened.

First, my hand stopped above the door, close enough that you could have slid one or two pieces of paper between my knuckles and the wood, but definitely not three. There was a dull, low *thud* of solid impact, even though I hadn't touched the door itself. Second, light flashed, and something like a current of electricity swarmed up my arm and down my spine, throwing my body into a convulsion that left me lying on the ground, stunned.

I just lay there on the snow for a moment. I tried the whole "there is no spoon" thing again, but apparently there was perception of reality and then there was hard-core, undeniable, real reality. It took me several seconds to recover and sit up again, and several more seconds to realize that I had been hit by something specifically engineered to stop intruding spirits.

Murphy's house had been warded, its natural defensive threshold used as a foundation for further, more aggressive defenses. And while I was only a shade of my former self, I was still wizard enough to recognize my own damned wards—or at least wards that were virtually identical to my own.

The door opened and Murphy appeared in it. She was a woman of well below average height, but built of spring steel. Her golden hair had been cut into a short brush over her scalp, and the stark style showed off the lines of muscles and tendons in her neck, and the pugnacious, stubborn set of her jawline. She wore jeans and a plaid shirt over a blue tee, and held her SIG in her right hand.

Something stabbed me in the guts and twisted upon seeing her.

A rush of memories flooded over me, starting with our first meeting, on a missing-persons case years ago, when I'd still been doing my time as an apprentice PI and Murphy had been a uniform cop working a beat. Every argument, every bit of banter and repartee, every moment of revelation and trust that had been built up between us, came hammering into me like a thousand major-league fastballs. The last memory, and the sharpest, was of facing each other in the hold of my brother's boat, trembling on the edge of a line we hadn't ever allowed ourselves to cross before.

"Karrin," I tried to say. It came out a whisper.

Murphy's brow furrowed and she stood still in the doorway, despite the cold wind and falling snow, her eyes scanning left and right.

Her eyes moved over me, past me, through me, without stopping. She didn't see me. She couldn't hear me. We weren't a part of the same world anymore.

It was a surprisingly painful moment of realization.

Before I could get my thoughts clear of it, Murphy, still frowning, closed the door. I heard her close several locks.

"Easy, lad," said Sir Stuart in a gentle, quiet voice. He hunkered down to put a hand on my shoulder. "There is no need to rush regaining your feet. It hurts. I know."

"Yeah," I said quietly. I swallowed and blinked away tears that couldn't really be real. "Why?"

"As I told you, lad. Memories are life here. Life and power. Seeing the people you care for most again is going to trigger memories much more strongly than they would in a mere mortal. It can take time to grow accustomed to it."

I wrapped my arms around my knees and rested my chin on my kneecap. "How long?"

"Generally," Sir Stuart said very softly, "until those loved ones pass on themselves."

I shuddered. "Yeah," I said. "Well. I don't have time for that."

"You have nothing but time, Dresden."

"But three of my people don't," I said, my voice harsh. "They're going to get hurt if I don't make things right. If I don't find my killer." I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths. I wasn't actually breathing air. I didn't need to breathe. Habit. "Where's Mort?"

"Waiting around the corner," Sir Stuart said. "He'll come in once we've given him the all clear."

"What? I'm the little chicken's personal Secret Service now?" I grumbled. I pushed myself up to my feet and eyed Murphy's house. "Do you see anything threatening around here?"

"Not at the moment," Sir Stuart said, "other than the allegedly suspicious auto coach."

“Well, the house is warded. I’m not sure if the defenses are purely against insubstantial intruders or if they might also attack a living intruder. Tell him not to touch the house with anything he wants to keep.”

Sir Stuart nodded and said, “I’m going to circle the place. I’ll return with Mortimer.”

I grunted absently, reaching out a hand to feel the wards around the place again. They were powerful, but . . . flawed, somehow. My wards were all built into the same, solid barrier of energy. These wards had solidity, but it was a piecemeal thing. I felt like I was looking at a twelvefoot wall built from LEGO blocks. If someone with enough mystic muscle hit it right, the ward would shatter at its weakest seams.

Of course, that would probably punch a hole in the barrier, but not a catastrophic one. If one portion of my wards lost integrity, the whole thing would come down and whatever remained of the energy that had broken it would come through. If someone knocked out a bit of these wards, it would send a bunch of LEGOs flying—probably soaking up all of the energy by dividing it among lots of little pieces—but the rest of the barrier would stand.

That might offer several advantages on the minor-league end of the power scale. The modular wards would be easy to repair, compared to classic integral wards, so that even if something smashed through, the wards could be closed again in a brief time. God knows, the ingredients for the spell were probably a lot cheaper—and you wouldn’t need a big-time White Council wizard to put them up.

But they had a downside, too. There were a lot of things that *could* smash through—and if you got killed after they came inside, the ease of repair wouldn’t matter much to your cooling corpse.

Still. It was a hell of a lot better than nothing. The basic profile was my design, just implemented differently. Who the hell would have done this to Murphy’s place? And *why*?

I turned and stepped off the porch to peer in a window, feeling vaguely voyeuristic as I did so. But I wasn’t sure what else I was going to do until Mort got here to do some speaking for me.

“Are you quite all right?” asked a man’s voice, from inside the house.

I blinked, scowled in concentration, and managed to stand up on some of the wispy shrubbery under the window, until I could see over the chair back that blocked my view from where I was standing.

There was a man sitting on the couch of Murphy’s living room. He was wearing a black suit with a crisp white shirt and a black tie with a single stripe of maroon. His skin was dark—more Mediterranean than African—but his short, neat sweep of hair was dyed peroxide blond. His eyes were an unsettling color, somewhere between dark honey and poison ivy, and the sharp angularity of his nose made me think of a bird of prey.

“Fine,” said Murphy. She was on her feet, her gun tucked into the waist of her jeans in front. SIG made a fine, compact 9mm, but it looked big, dangerous, and clumsy on Murphy’s scale. She folded her arms and stared at the man as if he’d been found at the side of the highway, gobbling up raw roadkill. “I told you not to show up early anymore, Childs.”

“A lifetime of habit,” Childs said in reply. “Honestly, it isn’t something to which I give any thought.”

“You know how things are out there,” Murphy said, jerking her chin toward the front of the house. “Start thinking about it. You catch me on a nervous evening, and maybe I shoot you through the door.”

Childs folded his fingers on one knee. He didn’t look like a big guy. He wasn’t heavy with muscle. Neither are cobras. There was plenty of room for a gun under that expensive suit jacket. “My relationship with my employer is relatively new. But I have a sense that, should such a tragedy occur, the personal repercussions to you would be quite severe.”

Murphy shrugged a shoulder. “Maybe. On the other hand, maybe we start killing his people until the price of doing business with us is too high and he breaks it off.” She smiled. It was almost gleefully wintry. “I don’t have a badge anymore, Childs. But I do have friends. Special, special friends.”

Between them there was a low charge of tension in the room, the silent promise of violence. Murphy's fingers were dangling casually less than two inches from her gun. Childs's hands were still folded on his knee. He abruptly smiled and dropped back into a more relaxed pose on the sofa. "We've coexisted well enough for the past six months. I see no sense in letting frayed tempers put an end to that now."

Murphy's eyes narrowed to slits. "Marcone's top murderer—"

Childs lifted a hand. "Please. Troubleshooter."

Murphy continued as if he hadn't spoken. "—doesn't back down that quickly, regardless of how survival oriented he is. That's why you're here early, despite my request. You want something."

"So nice to know you eventually take note of the obvious," Childs replied. "Yes. My employer sent me with a question."

Murphy frowned. "He didn't want the others to hear it being asked."

Childs nodded. "He feared it might generate unintended negative consequences."

Murphy stared at him for a moment, then rolled her eyes. "Well?"

Childs showed his teeth in a smile for the first time. It made me think of skulls. "He wishes to know if you trust the Ragged Lady."

Murphy straightened at the question, her back going rigid. She waited to take a deep breath and exhale before responding. "What do you mean?"

"Odd things have begun happening near some of the locations she haunts. Things that no one can quite explain." Childs shrugged, leaving his hands in plain sight, resting comfortably on the sofa. "Which part of the question is too difficult for you?"

Murphy's shoulder twitched, as if her hand had been thinking about grabbing the gun from her waistband. But she took another breath before she spoke. "What's he offering for the answer?"

"Northerly Island. And before you ask, yes, including the beach."

I blinked at that. The island over by Burnham Park Harbor wasn't exactly prime criminal territory, being mostly parks, fields, and a beach a lot of families visited—but "Gentleman" John Marcone, kingpin of Chicago's rackets and the only plain-vanilla mortal to become a signatory of the Unseelie Accords, simply did not surrender territory. Not for anything.

Murphy's eyes widened, too, and I watched her going through the same line of thought I had. Though, to be perfectly fair, I think she got to the end of that line before I did.

"If I do agree to this," she said, her tone cautious, "it will have to pass our standard verification by Monday."

Childs's face was a bland mask. "Done."

Murphy nodded and looked down at the floor for a moment, evidently marshaling her thoughts. Then she said, "There isn't a simple answer."

"There rarely is," Childs noted.

Murphy passed a hand back over her brush cut and studied Childs. Then she said, "When she was working with Dresden, I'd have said yes, in a heartbeat, without reservation."

Childs nodded. "And now?"

"Now . . . Dresden's gone. And she came back from Chichén Itzá changed," Murphy said. "Maybe post-traumatic stress. Maybe something more than that. She's different."

Childs tilted his head. "Do you distrust her?"

"I don't drop my guard around her," Murphy said. "And that's my answer."

The bleach-blond man considered her words for a few seconds and then nodded. "I will carry it to my employer. The island will be clear of his interests by Monday."

"Will you give me your word on that?"

"I already have." Childs stood up, the motion a portrait of grace. If he was a mortal, he was deadly fast. Or a ballet dancer. And somehow I didn't think he had some Danskins stuffed in his suit's pockets. "I will go. Please inform me if anything of relevance comes out of the meeting."

Murphy nodded, her hand near her gun, and watched Childs walk to the front door. Childs opened it and began to leave.

"You should know," Murphy said quietly, "that my trust issues don't change the fact that she's one of mine. If I think for a second that the outfit has done any harm to Molly Carpenter, the arrangement is over and we segue directly to the OK Corral. Starting with you."

Childs turned smoothly on a heel, smiling, and lifted an empty hand to mime shooting Murphy with his thumb and forefinger. He completed the turn and left the house.

Murphy came over to the window where I was standing and watched Childs walk to the black town car and get in. She didn't relax her vigilance until the car had pulled out into the snow and cruised slowly away.

Then she bowed her head, one hand against the window, and rubbed at her face with her other hand.

I stretched my arm to put my hand out to mirror hers, being careful not to touch the wards humming quietly around the house's threshold. You could have fit two or three of Murphy's hand spans into one of mine. I saw her shoulders shake once.

Then she shook her head and straightened, blinked her eyes rapidly a few times, and schooled her expression into its usual cop mask of neutrality. She turned away from me, went to the room's love seat, and curled up on one side of it. She looked tiny, with her legs bunched up against her upper body, barely more than a child—if not for the care lines on her face.

There was a quiet motion, and then a tiny grey mountain lion with a notched ear and a stump of a tail appeared and leapt smoothly up onto the love seat with Murphy. She reached out a hand and gathered the cat's furry body against hers, her fingers stroking.

Tears blurred my eyes as I saw Mister. My cat. When the vampire couple, the Eebs, had burned my old apartment down, I knew Mister had escaped the flames—but I didn't know what had happened to him after that. I'd been killed before I could go round him up. I remembered meeting the cat as a kitten, scrambling in a trash bin, skinny and near starvation. He'd been my roommate, or possibly landlord, ever since I'd come to Chicago. He was thirty pounds of feline arrogance. He was always good about showing up when I was upset, giving me the chance to lower my blood pressure by paying attention to him. I'm sure he thought it a saintly gesture of generosity.

It's a cat thing.

I don't know how long I stood there staring through the window, but suddenly Sir Stuart was beside me.

"Dresden," he said quietly. "There are several creatures approaching from the southeast."

"You are not doing your lack of being named Threepio any good whatsoever, Sir Stuart."

He blinked at me several times, then shook his head and recovered. "There are half a dozen of them, as well as a number of cars."

"Okay. Keep Mort in his car until I can identify them," I said. "But I suspect he's in no danger."

"No?" the shade asked. "Know you these folk, then?"

"Dunno," I said. "Let's go see."

Chapter Nine

Ten minutes later, I was humming under my breath and watching the gathering in Murphy's living room. Sir Stuart stood beside me, his expression interested, curious.

"Beg pardon, wizard," he said, "but what is that tune you're trying to sing?"

I belted out the opening trumpet fanfare of the main theme and then said, in a deep and cheesy announcer's voice, "In the great Hall of the Justice League, there are assembled the world's four greatest heroes, created from the cosmic legends of the universe!"

Sir Stuart frowned at me. "Created from . . ."

"The cosmic legends of the universe," I repeated, in the same voice.

Sir Stuart narrowed his eyes and turned slightly away from me, his shoulders tight. "That makes no sense. None. At all."

"It did on Saturday mornings in the seventies, apparently," I said. I nodded at the room beyond the window. "And we've got something similar going on here. Though for a Hall of the Justice League, it looks pretty small. Real estate wasn't as expensive back then, I guess."

"The guests assembled inside," Sir Stuart asked. "Do you know them?"

"Most of them," I said. Then I felt obliged to add, "Or, at least, I knew them six months ago."

Things had changed. Murphy's buzz cut was just a start. I started introducing Sir Stuart to the faces I knew.

Will Borden leaned against one wall, slightly behind Murphy, his muscular arms folded. He was a man of below-average height and well-above-average build. All of it was muscle. I was used to seeing him mostly in after-work, business-casual clothing—whenever he wasn't transformed into a huge, dark wolf, I mean. Today, he was wearing sweats and a loose top, the better for getting out of in a hurry if he wanted to change. Generally a quiet, reliable, intelligent man, Will was the leader of a local band of college kids, now all grown-up, who had learned to take on the shape of wolves. They'd called themselves the Alphas for so long that the name had stopped sounding silly in my own head when I thought it.

I wasn't used to seeing Will playing the heavy, but he was clearly in that role. His expression was locked into something just shy of a scowl, and his dark eyes positively smoldered with pent-up aggression. He looked like a man who wanted a fight, and who would gladly jump on the first opportunity to get into one.

On the couch not far from Will, the other Alpha present was curled up into a ball in the corner, her legs up to her chest. She had straight hair the color of a mouse's fur that hung to her chin in an even sheet all the way around, and she looked as if a strong breeze might knock her to the floor. She peered owlishly out through a pair of large eyeglasses and a curtain of hair, and I got the impression that she saw the whole room at the same time.

I hadn't seen her in several years, but she'd been one of the original Alphas and had gotten her degree and toddled off into the vanilla world. Her name was . . . Margie? Mercy? Marci. Right. Her name was Marci.

Next to Marci sat a plump, cheerful-looking woman with blond, curly hair held sloppily in place with a couple of chopsticks, who looked a couple of years shy of qualifying to be a television grandmother. She wore a floral-print dress, and on her lap she held a dog the approximate size of a bratwurst—a Yorkshire terrier. The dog was clearly on alert, his bright, dark eyes moving from person to person around the room, but focused mostly on Marci. He was growling deep in his chest, and obviously ready to defend his owner at an instant's notice.

"Abby," I told Sir Stuart. "Her name's Abby. The dog is Toto. She survived a White Court vampire who was hunting down her social circle. Small-time practitioners."

The little dog abruptly sprang out of Abby's arms to throw itself toward Will, but the woman moved in remarkably quick reaction and caught Toto. Except it hadn't been remarkably quick—it had simply begun a half second *before* the little dog had jumped. Abby was a prescient. She couldn't see far into the future—only a few seconds—but that was enough talent to make me bet there weren't many broken dishes in her kitchen.

Will looked at Toto as the little dog jumped, and smiled. Abby shushed the Yorkie and frowned at Will before turning to the table to pick up a cup of tea in one hand, still holding the dog with the other.

Next to Abby was a brawny young man in jeans, work boots, and a heavy flannel shirt. He had dark, untidy hair and intense grey eyes, and I could have opened a bottle cap with the dimple in his chin. It took me a second to recognize him, because he'd been a couple of inches shorter and maybe forty pounds lighter the last time I'd seen him—Daniel Carpenter, the eldest of my apprentice's younger brothers. He looked as though he were seated on a hot stove rather than a comfortable couch, like he might bounce up at any second, boldly to do something ill conceived. A large part of Will's attention was, I thought, focused on Daniel.

"Relax," Murphy told him. "Have some cake."

Daniel shook his head in a jerky negative. "No, thank you, Ms. Murphy," he said. "I just don't see the point in this. I should go find Molly. If I leave right now, I can be back before an hour's up."

"If Molly isn't here, we'll assume it's because she has a good reason for it," Murphy said, her tone calm and utterly implacable. "There's no sense in running all over town on a night like this."

"Besides," Will drawled, "we'd find her faster."

Daniel scowled from beneath his dark hair for a second, but quickly looked away. It gave me the sense that he'd run afoul of Will before and hadn't liked the outcome. The younger man kept his mouth shut.

An older man sat in the chair beside the couch, and he took the opportunity to lean over the table and pour hot tea from a china teapot into the cup in front of the young Carpenter. He added a lump of sugar to it, and smiled at Daniel. There was nothing hostile, impatient, or demanding in his eyes, which were the color of a robin's eggs—only complete certainty that the younger man would accept the tea and settle down.

Daniel eyed the man, then dropped his eyes to the square of white cellulose at his collar and the crucifix hanging beneath it. He took a deep breath, then nodded and stirred his tea. He took the cup in both hands and settled back to wait. After a sip, he appeared to forget he was holding it—but he stayed quiet.

"And you, Ms. Murphy?" asked Father Forthill, holding up the teapot. "It's a cold night. I'm sure a cup would do you good."

"Why not?" she said. Forthill filled another cup for Murphy, took it to her, and pulled at his sweater vest, as if trying to coax more warmth from the garment. He turned and walked over to the window where Sir Stuart and I stood, and held out both hands. "Are you sure there isn't a draft? I could swear I feel it."

I blinked and eyed Sir Stuart, who shrugged and said, "He's one of the good ones."

"Good what?"

"Ministers. Priests. Shamans. Whatever." His expression seemed to be carefully neutral. "You spend your life caring for the souls of others, you get a real sense of them." Sir Stuart nodded at Father Forthill. "Ghosts like us aren't souls, as such, but we aren't much different. He feels us, even if he isn't fully aware of it."

Toto escaped Abby's lap and came scrambling over the hardwood floor to put his paws up on the walls beneath the windows. He yapped ferociously several times, staring right at me.

"And dogs," Sir Stuart added. "Maybe one in ten of them seem to have a talent for sensing us. Probably why they're always barking."

“What about cats?” I asked. Mister had fled the living room upon the arrival of other people and wasn’t in sight.

“Of course cats,” Sir Stuart said, his voice faintly amused. “As far as I can tell, all cats. But they aren’t terribly impressed with the fact that we’re dead and still present. One rarely gets a reaction from them.”

Father Forthill gently scooped Toto from the floor. The little dog wiggled energetically, tail flailing in the air, and kissed Forthill’s hands soundly before the old priest passed him carefully back to Abby, smiling and nodding to her before refilling his own cup of tea and sitting down again.

“Who are they waiting on?” Sir Stuart asked. “This Molly person?”

“Maybe,” I said. There was one more chair in the room. It was closest to the door—and farthest from every other piece of furniture in the room. Practically every other seat in the room would have a clear line of fire to the last chair, if it came to shooting. Maybe that was a coincidence. “But I don’t think so.”

There was a quick chirping sound, and Murphy picked up a radio smaller than a deck of cards. “Murphy. Go.”

“Ricemobile imminent,” said a quiet voice. “Furry Knockers is running a sweep.”

Will blew out a sudden snort of amused breath.

Murphy smiled and shook her head before she spoke into the radio. “Thanks, Eyes. Pull in as soon as she’s done. Hot tea for you.”

“Weather’s just crazy, right? Only in Chicago. Eyes, out.”

“That is just so wrong,” said Daniel, as Murphy put the radio away. “That’s a terrible radio handle. It could cause mixed messages in a tactical situation.”

Murphy arched an eyebrow and spoke in a dry tone. “I’m trying to imagine the situation in which someone mistakenly being told to be alert for the enemy ends in disaster.”

“If someone on the team was juggling glass vials of a deadly virus,” Will supplied promptly. “Or nitroglycerin.”

Murphy nodded. “Make a note: Discontinue use of radio in the event of a necessary nitro-viro juggling mission.”

“Noted,” Will drawled.

Daniel stiffened. “You’ve got a big mouth, Mr. Borden.”

Will never moved. “It’s not my mouth, kid. It’s your skin. It’s too thin.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes, but Forthill put a hand on the brawny youth’s shoulder. The old man couldn’t possibly restrain Daniel physically, but his touch might as well have been a steel chain attached to a battleship’s anchor. His move to rise became an adjustment of himself in his seat, and he folded his arms, scowling.

“Pasty Face in five, four, three . . .” came from Murphy’s radio.

Backs tightened. Faces became masks. Several hands vanished from sight. Someone’s teacup clinked several times in rapid succession against a saucer before it settled.

I could see the front door from where I stood outside the window, and a couple of seconds after the radio stopped counting aloud, it opened upon a White Court vampire.

She was maybe five-two, with a dimpled smile and dark, curly hair that fell to her waist. She was wearing a white blouse with a long, full white skirt and bright scarlet ballet slippers. The first thought that went through my head was *Awww, she’s tiny and adorable*—followed closely by the notion that she would be fastidious when blood was everywhere. I could just see her carefully lifting the hem of her pristine skirt so that only the scarlet slippers would touch it.

“Good evening, everyone,” she said, breezing through the door without an invitation, speaking with a strong British accent. “I apologize for being a few moments late, but what’s a lady to do with weather like this? Tea? Lovely.” She minced over to the table and poured some hot tea into an empty cup. Her eyes fastened on Daniel as she did, and she bowed just low enough to draw the young man’s eyes to her décolletage. He flushed and looked away sternly. After a second.

Tough to blame the kid. I've been a young man. Boobs are near the center of the universe, until you turn twenty-five or so. Which is also when young men's auto insurance rates go down. This is not a coincidence.

The vampire smirked, a surprisingly predatory expression on her cupid's-bow lips, and glided back to the empty chair by the door, seating herself in it like Shirley Temple on a movie set, sure that she held the attention of everyone there.

"Gutsy," I said quietly.

"Why do you say that?" Sir Stuart asked.

"She came in without an invitation," I said.

"I thought vampires couldn't do that."

"The Reds ca—That is, they couldn't without being half-paralyzed. The Black Court vampires can't cross a threshold, period. The Whites can, but it cripples their abilities, makes it very difficult to draw on their Hunger for strength and speed."

Sir Stuart shook his head. "Ah yes. She's a succubus."

"Well . . . not exactly, but the differences are academic."

The shade nodded. "I'm not exposing Mortimer to that creature."

"Probably not a bad idea," I agreed. "He's got access to way too much information. They'd love to get someone like Mort under their thumb."

"Hello, Felicia," Murphy said, her tone cool and professional. "All right, people. Mr. Childs won't be here tonight. I'm holding his proxy."

Felicia curled the fingers of both tiny hands around the teacup and sipped it. The tea had been scalding when the others had first sipped it. They'd been cautious. The vampire took a mouthful as if it had been room-temperature Kool-Aid and swallowed it down with a little shiver of apparent pleasure. "How convenient for you. Shall we ever see the dapper gentleman again?"

"That will be up to Marcone," Murphy replied. "Abby?"

Toto was staring at Felicia and standing with stiff legs on Abby's lap. If he'd been capable of a threatening growl, he'd have been doing it. Instead, there was just a steady squeaking sound coming from his general direction.

Abby took a firmer grip on Toto and looked down at a notebook in her lap. "The Paranet continues to operate at better than seventy-five percent of its original capacity. We actually regained contact with Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Alabama this week." She cleared her throat and blinked her eyes several times. "We lost contact with Oregon."

"Seattle or Tacoma?" Murphy asked.

"Yes," Abby said quietly. "No one has heard from a member in either place there for the past three days."

Forthill crossed himself and said something beneath his breath.

"Amen, Father," Felicia murmured.

"Someone got their roster," Daniel said, his voice harsh.

Will grunted and nodded. "Do we know who?"

"Um," Abby said, giving Will a brief, apologetic smile. "We haven't heard from anyone. So no. We'll have to send someone to investigate."

"Ugh," Murphy said, shaking her head. "No. If *that* many people have been taken, it means one of the larger powers is at work. If the Fomor have come to Oregon in strength, we'd just be throwing our scout into a snake pit."

"If we move quickly enough," Abby disagreed firmly, "we might be able to save some of them."

Murphy's expression turned introspective. "True. But there's nothing we can do from here." She looked at Forthill.

"I'll find out what I can through our channels," he promised. "But . . . I fear you will find little in the way of remedy there."

Murphy nodded. "We'll kick this one up to the Wardens."

Daniel snorted at exactly the same time I did. "Oh, sure, the White Council," the young man said. "They're the answer to this. Because they care so much about the little guy and the immediate future. They'll wander in right away—a mere year or two from now."

Will gave Daniel a flat look, and the muscles along his jaw twitched.

Murphy lifted a hand and said, "I'll call Ramirez and ask him to expedite. I'll ask Elaine Mallory to back me up."

Elaine Mallory. When Murphy said it, the name cracked something in my head and a geyser of memories erupted from it. Elaine had been my first. First friend. First crush. First lover. First victim—or so I had believed for years, at any rate. She somehow escaped the flames that consumed my old mentor, Justin DuMorne.

About a million sense-memories hit me all at once. It was like trying to watch a warehouse wall lined with televisions, all of them on different stations, all of them blaring at maximum volume. Sunshine on skin. Smooth curve of slender waist and leanly muscled back as Elaine dove into a moonlit swimming pool. The blindingly gentle sensation of our first kiss, slow and tentative and careful as it had been.

Elaine. Who had been subverted into Justin's slave. Who hadn't been strong enough to defend herself when Justin came to claim her mind. Who I failed to protect.

Joy and pain came with those memories. It was deliriously intense, as disorienting and overwhelming as any drug.

Hell's bells, I *hate* being the new guy.

I managed to push the memories off after a few moments, in time to hear the vampire speak. Felicia cleared her throat and lifted a hand. "As it happens," she said, "I know that we have some assets in the area. It's possible they might be able to find something."

"It's also possible that they're responsible for the disappearances," Marci said mildly.

"Nonsense, child," Felicia responded with a little toss of her head. "We hardly need to capture our prey and corral them where their thick numbers will make hunting simple." She gave Marci a sweetly dimpled smile. "We already have such pens. They're called *cities*."

"We will be happy for any information the White Court is willing to provide, Felicia," Murphy said, her calm, professional, neutral tone expertly dulling the edges of the previous words. "What about Chicago, Abby?"

"We lost two this week," Abby said. "Nathan Simpson and Sunbeam Monroe."

"A ghoul took Simpson," Will supplied at once. "We settled his account."

Murphy glanced at Will in approval. "Have I met Sunbeam?"

Abby nodded. "The college student from San Jose."

Murphy winced. "Right. Tall girl? Hippie-esque parents."

"That's her. She was accompanied to the El station, and someone was waiting at her destination. She never arrived."

Murphy made a growling sound that more than made up for Toto's lack. "We know anything?"

Will looked at Marci. The stringy girl shook her head. "The snow is holding too many scents in place. I couldn't find anything solid." She looked down at her knees and added, "Sorry."

Murphy ignored that last bit. "She shouldn't have been traveling alone. We're going to have to stress the importance of partnering up."

"How?" Abby asked. "I mean, it's in every circular."

Murphy nodded. "Will?"

Will drummed his fingertips on his biceps and nodded. "I'll see to it."

"Thank you."

Abby blinked several times and then said, "Karrin . . . you can't possibly mean . . ."

"People are dying," Murphy said simply. "A good scare can do wonders to cure stupidity."

"Or we could try protecting them," said Daniel.

Forthill lifted a hand again, but the younger man ignored him, rising to his feet. Daniel's voice was a rich, strong baritone. "All over the world, dark things are rising up against mortals

connected to the supernatural. Killing them or dragging them away into the dark. Creatures that haven't been seen by mankind in the past two *millennia* are reappearing. Fighting mortals. Fighting one another. The shadows are boiling over with death and terror, and no one is doing anything about it!

"The Wardens went from fighting the Vampire War to a new one, against an enemy without a face or an identity. The White Council doesn't have Wardens enough to handle everything that's happening anyway. If a cry for help is sent up anywhere but a major city, there's no chance at all of them showing up. Meanwhile, what are we doing?" Daniel's voice filled with quiet scorn. "Telling people to travel around in herds. Scaring them ourselves to make them do so, as if there wasn't terror enough in the world already."

Murphy stared steadily at him. Then she said, her tone hard, "That's enough."

Daniel ignored her, planting his feet and squaring his shoulders. "You know. You know what must be done, Ms. Murphy. You're holding two of the greatest weapons against darkness that the world has ever known. Bring forth the Swords."

A dead silence settled on the room, into which Sir Stuart asked me, conversationally, "Which swords?"

"The Swords of the Cross," I said quietly, out of habit—I could have sung it operatically without anyone there noticing. "The ones with the nails from the Crucifixion worked into them."

"Excalibur, Durendal, and Kusanagi, yes, yes," Sir Stuart said, his tone a little impatient. "Of course I know the Swords of the Cross. And the little blond woman has *two* of them?"

I just stared at the burly shade for a long second. I'd found what amounted to a rumor that *Amoracchius* was, in fact, the same sword given to King Arthur, but I hadn't ever heard anything about the other two—despite some fairly exhaustive research over the years. The shade had dropped their identities as if they were everyday knowledge.

Sir Stuart frowned at me and said, "What is it?"

"I just don't . . . Do you know how much research I . . ." I blew out an exasperated breath, scowled, and said, "I went to public school."

Back inside, Murphy didn't break the silence. She just stared at Daniel for maybe two minutes. Then she directed a rather pointed glance at Felicia and eyed Daniel again.

The young man glanced at Felicia and closed his eyes as his cheeks got redder and his passion swiftly deflated. He muttered something under his breath and sat down again rather quickly.

The vampire sat in her chair, staring at Daniel over the rim of her teacup and smiling as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. For all I knew, it wouldn't. "I love young men," she purred. "I just love them."

"Mr. Carpenter," Murphy said. "I assume you have divulged secrets enough to the enemies of humanity for one evening?"

Daniel said nothing.

"Then perhaps you can join Eyes and Fuzz in keeping watch outside."

He rose at once, slipping into his heavy, fleece-lined, blue denim coat. It was an old, well-used garment. I'd seen his father wearing it, but it was a little big on Daniel. Without a word, he left the living room for the kitchen and went out the back door.

Silence was heavy when he left.

"Both swords," Felicia said, her tone light, her periwinkle eyes on Murphy. "My, my, my." She sipped at her tea and said, "Of course, you'll have to kill me, dear. If you can." The diminutive vampire looked casually at each person in the room. "I give you one chance in four."

"I can't let the White Court know about the Swords," Murphy agreed. Her fingers hung near the handle of her gun.

Will watched with sleepy eyes. But sometime in the past few seconds he had managed to center his weight over his feet. Marci still crouched with her legs curled up to the rest of her, but they were under her dress now. Within a heartbeat, she could have it off and clear it from impeding her shapeshifting.

Felicia was in exactly the same posture as several minutes before. She looked entirely unconcerned with any possible danger. I made a mental note never to play poker with her. "Well, darling. If you intended to dance, there would already be music. So perhaps we should talk." She smiled, and her eyes glittered, suddenly several shades lighter than before. "Just us girls. We can go for a walk."

Murphy snorted. She drew her gun from her belt and set it on the armrest of her chair. She rested her hand over it, not quite touching the trigger. "I'm not an idiot, Felicia. You'll stay right where you are. As will I. Everyone else, outside."

Abby had risen before Murphy finished speaking, holding Toto carefully as she left.

Will frowned at Murphy. "You sure?"

Father Forthill rose, frowning, and said, "These old legs want to go for a little walk, in any case. Good evening, Ms. Murphy. William?"

Will literally growled, and it came out sounding like no noise a human being ought to be able to make. But then he nodded to Murphy and turned toward the door. Marci hurried to her feet and went after him. Forthill stumped off after them. I heard everyone leave the house by the back door, probably to gather on the stone-paved patio just outside.

"I like this," Felicia said into the silence, smiling. "This charming little house feels so intimate. Don't you think?" She tilted her head. "Are the Swords on the premises?"

"I think you should name your price," Murphy responded.

Felicia arched an eyebrow, a sensual little smile bending one corner of her mouth into a smirk.

"F—" Murphy cleared her throat. "Forget that. It isn't happening."

The vampire turned her mouth down in a mocking little pout. "Such a Puritan work ethic. Business and pleasure can coexist, you know."

"This isn't business, Ms. Raith. It's blackmail."

"To-may-toe, to-mah-toe," Felicia said with a shrug. "The point is, Karrin, that you can hardly afford to be squeamish."

"No?"

"No. You're intelligent, skilled, and strong-willed—quite formidable. . . ." She smiled. "For a mortal. But, in the end, you *are* a lone mortal. And you are no longer beneath the aegis of city law enforcement or resident members of the White Council."

Murphy moved nothing but her lips. "Meaning?"

Felicia sighed and said in a practical, dispassionate tone, "The Swords are valuable. They could be traded for a great deal of influence. Should the White Court learn of this and decide to take the Swords, they will take you. They will ask you where they are. They will force you to surrender them."

Murphy might have twitched one shoulder in a shrug. Then she got up and walked toward Felicia, gripping her gun loosely in hand. "And . . . what? If I give you what you want, you'll stay quiet?"

Felicia nodded, her eyelids lowering as she watched Murphy approach. "For a few days, at any rate. By which time, you will have been able to take measures to prevent them from being taken."

Murphy said, "You want to feed on me."

Felicia ran a very pink tongue over her upper lip, her eyes growing paler. "I do. Very much."

Murphy frowned and nodded.

Then she whipped the pistol in a bone-breaking stroke, smashing it into the vampire's jaw.

"Yes!" I hissed, clenching my hands into fists.

The vampire let out a short, stunned gasping sound and rocked beneath the blow. She slid out of the chair to her knees, feebly trying to move away from Murphy.

Murphy wasn't having any of it. She grabbed Felicia by the hair, hauled her halfway to her feet, and then, with a furious shout and a contraction of her whole body, Murphy slammed the vampire's face down onto the coffee table. Felicia's head shattered the teapot and the platter

beneath, and struck the oak table with such force that a crack erupted from end to end in the wood.

Murph slammed Felicia's head down with near-equal violence two more times. Then she turned and dragged Felicia over to the front door of her house by the hair. Murphy let her go with a contemptuous shove, stood over her, and pointed a gun at the vampire's head.

"This is what happens," Murphy said in a very quiet, hard voice. "You leave here alive. You keep your fucking mouth shut. And we never mention tonight ever again. If the White Court even blinks in the Swords' direction, I am going to come find you, Felicia. Whatever happens to me in the end, before I am taken, I *will* find you."

Felicia stared up at her, wobbling and shaking, clearly dazed. Murphy had broken the vampire's nose and knocked out at least two teeth. One of Felicia's high cheekbones was already swelling. The broken teapot had left multiple cuts on her face, and her skin had been scalded by the hot liquid still inside.

Murphy leaned a little closer and put the barrel of the gun against Felicia's forehead. Then she whispered, very quietly, "Bang."

The vampire shuddered.

"Do what you think best, Felicia," Murph whispered. Then she straightened again slowly, and spoke in a clear, calm voice as she walked back to her chair. "Now. Get out of my house."

Felicia managed to stagger to her feet, open the front door, and limp haltingly to the white limousine idling on the snowy street outside the house. Murphy went to the window to watch Felicia get into the limo and depart.

"Yeah," I said, deadpan. "The little blond woman has two of them."

"Oh, my," Sir Stuart said, his voice muted with respect. "I can see why you'd come to her for assistance."

"Damn skippy," I agreed. "Better go get Morty while she's still in a good mood."

Chapter Ten

I met Morty and Sir Stuart on Murphy's front porch. I guess it was a cold night. Morty stood with his entire body hunched against the wind, his hands stuffed into his coat pockets. His eyes darted around nervously. He was shivering.

"Hit the bell," I said. "And this is just my opinion, but if I were you, I'd keep my hands in plain sight."

"Thanks," Mort said sourly, jabbing the doorbell. "Have I told you how much brightness you bring to my world whenever you show up in it, Dresden?"

"All in a day's work when you're created from the cosmic legends of the universe," I replied.

"Be advised," Sir Stuart said, "that there are wolves to the left and right."

I looked. He was right. One was huge and dark-furred; the other smaller and lighter brown. They were sitting in the shadows, perfectly still, where a casual glance would simply pass over them. Their wary stares were intense. "Will and Marci," I said. "They're cool."

"They're violent vigilantes," Mort replied through clenched teeth.

"Buck up, little camper. They're not going to hurt you, and you know it."

Mort gave me a narrow-eyed glare, and then Murphy opened the door.

"Ms. Murphy," Morty said, nodding to her.

"Lindquist, isn't it?" Murph asked. "The medium?"

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"Behind us," Sir Stuart murmured.

I checked. A slender male figure in heavy winter clothing was crossing the street toward us. A third wolf, this one's fur edged with auburn, walked beside him.

"I'm here to speak to you on behalf of someone you knew," Mort told Murphy.

Murphy's blue eyes became chips of glacial ice. "Who?"

"Harry Dresden," Mort said.

Murphy clenched her right hand into a fist. Her knuckles made small popping sounds.

Mort swallowed and took half a step back. "Look, I don't want to be here," he said, raising his hands and displaying his palms. "But you know how he was. His shade is no less stubborn or annoying than Dresden was in life."

"You're a goddamned liar," Murphy snarled. "You're a known con artist. And you are playing with fire."

Mort stared at her for a long moment. Then he winced and said, "You . . . you believed he was still alive?"

"He is alive," Murphy replied, clenching her jaw. "They never found a body."

Mort looked down, pressing his lips together, and ran his palm over his bald pate, smearing away a few clinging snowflakes. He blew out a long breath and said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that this is difficult."

"It isn't difficult," Murphy replied. "Just annoying. Because he's still alive."

Mort looked at me and spread his hands. "She's still in denial. There's not much I can do here. Look, I've done this a *lot*. She needs more time."

"No," I said. "We've got to make her see. Tonight."

Mort pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "It isn't like you're getting any older, Dresden."

Murphy fixed Morty with her cop glare. It hadn't lost any of its intensity. "This is neither believable nor amusing, Lindquist. I think you'd better go now."

Lindquist nodded, holding up his hands in a gesture of placation. "I know. I'm going. Please understand, I'm just trying to help."

"Wait!" I snapped. "There's got to be something you can say."

Mort glanced at me as he began walking back toward his car and lifted both of his hands, palms up, in a little helpless gesture.

I ground my teeth, standing less than a foot away from Murphy. How the hell did I get her to believe it really was me?

"By having Morty talk about something only you could know, dummy," I said to myself. "Morty!"

He paused about halfway down the driveway and turned to look at me.

"Ask her this," I said, and spouted a question.

Mort sighed. Then he turned toward Murphy and said, "Before I go . . . Dresden wants me to ask you if you ever found that reasonably healthy male."

Murphy didn't move. Her face went white. After maybe a minute, she whispered, "What did you say?"

I prompted Mort. "Dresden wants me to tell you that he hadn't intended to do anything dramatic. It just sort of worked out that way."

The wolves and the man in the heavy coat had stepped closer, listening. Murphy clenched and unclenched her fist several times. Then she said, "How many vampires did Agent White and I have to kill before we escaped the FBI office last year?"

I felt another surge of fierce triumph. That was Murph, always thinking. I told Mort the answer.

"He says he doesn't know who Agent White is, but that you and Tilly took out one of them in a stairwell on your way out of the building." Mort tilted his head, listening to me, and then said, "And he also wonders if you still feel that taking up the Sword of Faith would represent a . . . a rebound career."

Murphy's face by now was almost entirely bloodless. I could almost visibly see her eyes becoming more sunken, her features overtaken by a grey and weary sagging. She leaned against the doorway to her house, her arms sliding across her own stomach, as if she were trying to prevent her innards from spilling out.

"Ms. Murphy," Mort said gently. "I'm terribly sorry to be the one to bear this particular news. But Dresden's shade says that he needs to talk to you. That people are in danger."

"Yeah," Murphy said, her voice numb. "That's new." She looked up at Mort and said, "Bleed for me."

It was a common test among those savvy to the supernatural world but lacking any of its gifts. There are a lot of inhuman things that can pretend to be human—but relatively few of them have natural-looking blood. It wasn't a perfect test, by any means, but it was a lot better than nothing.

Mort nodded calmly and produced a straight pin from his coat pocket. He hadn't even blinked at the request. Apparently, in the current climate, the test had become much more widely used. I wondered if Murphy had been responsible for it.

Morty pricked the tip of his left thumb with the pin, and it welled with a round drop of ruby blood. He showed it to Murphy, who nodded.

"It's cold out here. You'd better come inside, Mr. Lindquist."

"Thank you," Mort said with a heavy exhalation.

"Meeting time, kids," Murphy said to those outside. "I want this joker verified. Will, please send someone to invite Raggedy Ann over."

"I don't want to be any trouble . . ." Mort began.

Murphy gave him a chilly smile. "Get your ass inside and sit down. I'll tell you when you can go. And if you really are putting one over on us somehow, you should know that I am not going to be a good sport about it."

Mort swallowed. But he went inside.

Murphy, Will, and Father Forthill spent the next half hour grilling Morty, and, by extension, me, with Abby and Daniel looking on. Each of them asked a lot of questions, mostly about private conversations I'd had with them. Morty had to relay my answers:

"No, Father, I just hadn't ever heard a priest use the phrase *screw the pooch* before."

"Will, look. I offered to pay for that 'the door is ajar' thing."

"The chlorofiend? You killed it with a chain saw, Murph."

And so on and so forth, until my blood—or maybe ectoplasm—was practically boiling.

"This is getting ridiculous," I snapped, finally. "You're stalling. Why?"

Morty blinked at me in surprise. Sir Stuart burst out into a short bark of laughter from where he lounged against a wall in the corner.

Murphy looked at Mort closely, frowning. "What is it?"

"Dresden's getting impatient," Mort said, his tone of voice suggesting that it was something grossly inappropriate, if not outright impolite. "He, ah, suspects that you're stalling and wants to know why. I'm sorry. Spirits are almost never this . . ."

"Stubbornly willful?" Murphy suggested.

"Insistent," Mort finished, his expression neutral.

Murphy sat back in her chair and traded a look with Father Forthill. "Well," she said. "That . . . sounds a great deal like Dresden, doesn't it?"

"I'm quite sure that only Dresden knew several of those details he mentioned in passing," Forthill said gravely. "There are beings who could know such things regardless of whether or not they were actually present, however. Very, very dangerous beings."

Murphy looked at Mort and nodded. "So. Either he's both sincere *and* correct, in that Dresden's shade is there with him, or someone's been bamboozled and I've let something epic and nasty into my house."

"Essentially," Forthill agreed, with a small, tired smile. "For whatever it's worth, I sense no dark presence here. Just a draft."

"That's Dresden's shade, Father," Mort said respectfully. Mort, a good Catholic boy. Who knew?

"Where is Dresden now?" Murphy asked. She didn't exactly sound enthusiastic about the question.

Mort looked at me and sighed. "He's . . . sort of looming over you, a little to your left, Ms. Murphy. He's got his arms crossed and he's tapping one foot, and he's looking at his left wrist every few seconds, even though he doesn't wear a watch."

"Do you have to make me sound so . . . so childish?" I complained.

Murphy snorted. "That sounds like him."

"Hey!" I said.

There was a familiar soft pattering of paws on the floor, and Mister sprinted into the room. He went right across Murphy's hardwood floors and cannonballed into my shins.

Mister is a lot of cat, checking in at right around thirty pounds. The impact staggered me, and I rocked back, and then quickly leaned down to run my hand over the cat's fur. He felt like he always did, and his rumbling purr was loud and happy.

It took me a second to realize that I could touch Mister. I could feel the softness of his fur and the warmth of his body.

More to the point, a large cat moving at a full run over a smooth hardwood floor had shoulder-blocked empty air and *had come to a complete halt doing it*.

Everyone was staring at Mister with their mouths open.

I mean, it's one thing to know that the supernatural world exists, and to interact with it on occasion in dark and spooky settings. But the weird factor of the supernatural hits you hardest at home, when you see it in simple, everyday things: a door standing open that shouldn't be; a shadow on the floor with no source to cast it; a cat purring and rubbing up against a favorite person—who isn't there.

“Oh,” Murphy said, staring, her eyes welling up.

Will let out a low whistle.

Father Forthill crossed himself, a small smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

Mort looked at the cat and sighed. “Oh, sure. Professional ectomancer with a national reputation as a medium tells you what’s going on, and nobody believes him. But let a stump-tailed, furry critter come in and everyone goes all Lifetime.”

“Heh,” said Sir Stuart, quietly amused. “What did I tell you? Cats.”

Murphy turned to me, lifting her face toward mine. Her eyes were a little off, focused to one side of my face. I moved until I stood where she was looking, her blue eyes intent. “Harry?”

“I’m here,” I said.

“God, I feel stupid,” Murphy muttered, looking at Mort. “He can hear me, right?”

“And see you,” Mort said.

She nodded and looked up again—at a slightly different place. I moved again.

I know. It wouldn’t matter to her.

But it mattered to me.

“Harry,” she said. “A lot of things have happened since . . . since the last time we talked. The big spell at Chichén Itzá didn’t just destroy the Red Court who were there. It killed them all. Every Red Court vampire in the world.”

“Yeah,” I said, and my voice sounded hard, even to me. “That was the idea.”

Murphy blew out a breath. “Butters says that maybe there were some it missed, but they would have had to have been the very youngest and least powerful members of the least powerful bloodlines, or else sheltered away in some kind of protected location. But he says according to what he knows of magical theory, it makes sense.”

I shrugged and nodded. “Yeah, I guess so. A lot depends on exactly how that rite was set up to work.” But the Red Court was dead, the same way the Black Court was dead. Life would go on. They were footnotes now.

“When the Red Court fell,” Murphy continued, “their territory was suddenly open. There was a power vacuum. Do you understand?”

Oh, God.

The Red Court had tried to murder my little girl and all that was left of my family, and I wouldn’t lose any sleep over what had happened to them. (Assuming I would ever sleep again, which seemed to be a real question.) But I hadn’t thought past that single moment, thought through the long-term consequences of wiping out the entire Red Court.

They were one of the major supernatural nations in the world. They controlled a continent and change—South and most of Central America—and had holdings all over the world. They owned property. Stocks. Corporations. Accounts. They as much as owned some governments. Assets of every kind.

The value of what the Red Court had controlled was almost literally incalculable.

And I had thrown it all up in the air and declared one giant game of finders, keepers.

“Oops,” I said.

“Things . . . are bad,” Murphy said. “Not so much here in Chicago. We’ve repulsed the worst incursions—mostly from some gang of arrogant freaks called the Fomor. And the Paranet has been a huge help. It’s saved literally hundreds, if not thousands, of lives.”

In my peripheral vision, I saw Abby’s spine straighten and her eyes flash with a strength and surety I had never seen in her before.

“South America has the worst of it, by a long ways,” Murphy said. “But every two-bit power and second-rate organization in the supernatural world sees a chance to found an empire. Old grudges and jealousies are getting dusted off. Things are killing one another as well as mortals, all over the world. When one big fish shifts its power base to South America, dozens of little fish left behind try to grow enough to fill the space. So there’s fighting everywhere.

"The White Council, I hear, is running its tubby ass off, trying to hold things together and minimize the impact on regular folks. But we haven't seen them here, apart from a couple of times when Warden Ramirez came by, hunting for Molly."

"Molly," I said. "How is she?" I dimly heard Mort relaying my words. I noted that he was doing a credible job of mirroring my tone of voice. I guess he really had done a lot of this kind of thing before.

"She's still recovering from the wounds she took at Chichén Itzá," Murphy said. "She says they were as much psychic as physical. And that hit to her leg was pretty bad. I don't understand how your disappearance makes her a criminal to the White Council, but apparently it has. Ramirez has told us that the Wardens are looking to pass sentence on her—but he didn't seem to be working his ass off to find her, either. I know what it looks like when a cop is slacking."

"How is she?" I asked again. "Murph, it's me. How's she doing?"

She looked down and swallowed. "She . . . she isn't right, Harry."

"What do you mean?"

Murphy looked up at me again, her jaw set. "She talks to herself. She sees things that aren't there. She has headaches. She babbles."

"Sounds like me," I said, at approximately the same time Will said, "Sounds like Harry."

"This is different," Murphy said to Will, "and you know it. Dresden was in control of it. He used the weirdness to make him stronger. Were you ever afraid of him?" Murphy asked. "Outright afraid?"

Will frowned and looked down at his hands. "He could be scary. But no. I never thought he'd hurt me. By accident or otherwise."

"How do you feel about Molly coming over?" Murphy asked.

"I would like to leave," Will replied frankly. "The girl ain't right."

"Apparently," Murphy continued, turning back to me, "the presence of a wizard in a city, any city, all around the world, is an enormous deterrent. Weird things are afraid of the Council. They know that the White Council can come get you fast, out of nowhere, with overwhelming force. Most of the scary-bad things around, the ones with any brains, at least, avoid White Council territory."

"Only with you gone and the White Council having its hands full . . ." Murphy shook her head. "God. Even the vanilla news is starting to notice the weirdness in town. So. Molly wouldn't stay with anyone. She's always moving. But she got it into her head that Chicago didn't need an actual White Council wizard to help calm things down—the bad guys just had to *think* one was here. So she started posting messages whenever she dealt with some wandering predator, and called herself the Ragged Lady, declaring Chicago protected territory."

"That's crazy," I said.

"What part of *she isn't right* didn't you understand?" Murphy replied to Morty, her voice sharp. She took a breath and calmed herself again. "The craziest part is that it worked. At least partly. A lot of bad things have decided to play elsewhere. College towns out in the country are the worst. But . . . things have happened here." She shivered. "Violent things. Mostly to the bad guys. But sometimes to humans. Gangsters, mostly. The Ragged Lady's calling card is a piece of cloth she tears off and leaves on her enemies. And there are lots and lots of pieces of cloth being found these days. A lot of them on corpses."

I swallowed. "You think it's Molly?"

"We don't know," Murphy replied in her professionally neutral voice. "Molly says she isn't going after anything but the supernatural threats, and I've got no reason to disbelieve her. But . . ." Murphy showed her hands.

"So when you said Raggedy Ann," I said, "you meant Molly."

"She's like this . . . battered, stained, torn-up doll," Murphy said. "Believe me. It fits."

"Battered, torn-up, scary doll," Will said quietly.

"And . . . you just let her be that way?" I demanded.

Murphy ground her teeth. “No. I talked to her half a dozen times. We tried an intervention to get her off the street.”

“We shouldn’t have,” Will said.

“What happened?” Mort asked.

Will apparently assumed it had been my question. “She hammered us like a row of nails on balsa wood is what happened,” he said. “Lights, sound, images. Jesus, I’ve got a picture in my head of being dragged off into the Nevernever by monsters that I *still* can’t get rid of. When she gave it to me, all I could do was curl up into a ball and scream.”

Will’s description made me feel sick to my stomach. Which was ridiculous, because it wasn’t like I ate food anymore—but my innards hadn’t gotten the memo. I looked away, grimacing, tasting bitter bile in my mouth.

“Memories are weapons,” Sir Stuart said quietly. “Sharp as knives.”

Murphy held up her hand to cut Will off. “Whether or not she’s going too far, she’s the only one we have with a major-league talent. Not that the Ordo hasn’t done well by us, Abby,” she added, nodding toward the blond woman.

“Not at all,” Abby replied, undisturbed. “We aren’t all made the same size and shape, are we?” Abby looked at me, more or less, and said, “We built the wards around Karrin’s house. Three hundred people from the Paranet, all working together.” She put a hand on an exterior wall, where the power of the patchwork ward hummed steadily. “Took us less than a day.”

“And two hundred pizzas,” Murphy muttered. “And a citation.”

“And well worth it,” Abby said, arching an eyebrow that dared Murphy to disagree.

Murphy shook her head, but I could see her holding off a smile. “The point is, we’re waiting for Molly to confirm your bona fides, Harry.”

“Um,” Morty said. “Is . . . is that safe, Ms. Murphy? If the girl was his apprentice, won’t her reaction to his shade likely be . . . somewhat emotional?”

Will snorted. “The way nitroglycerin is somewhat volatile.” He took a breath and then said, “Karrin, you sure about this?”

Murphy looked around the room slowly. Abby’s eyes were on the floor, but her usually rosy cheeks were pale, and Toto’s ears drooped unhappily. Will’s expression was steady, but his body language was that of a man who thinks he might need to dive through a closed window at any second. Forthill was watching the room at large, exuding calm confidence, but his brow was furrowed, and the set of his mouth was slightly tense.

With the exception of Forthill, I’d seen them all react to direct danger.

They were all scared of Molly.

Murphy faced them. She was the smallest person in the room. Her expression was as smooth and expressive as a sheet of ice, her body posture steady. She looked as though she felt she was ready for just about anything.

But I’ve been in more than one fur ball with Murphy, and I saw through her outer shell to the fear that was driving her. She didn’t know if I was real. For all she knew, I might be some kind of boogeyman from the nightmare side of the street, and that was unacceptable. She had to know.

The problem was that no matter what answer she got, it was going to hurt. If Molly pegged me as a bad guy, the knowledge that the real Harry Dresden was still missing and presumed dead, after the flash of contact Mort had provided, would be like a frozen blade in the guts. And if she learned that it really was my shade . . . it would be even worse.

“Molly will be fine,” Murphy said. “We need her. She’ll come through.” She passed her hand over her brush of hair. Her voice turned into something much smaller, weighed down by pain. “No offense to Mr. Lindquist. No offense to Mister. But I . . . We have to know.”

Paranoid? Probably.

But just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean there isn’t a wizard’s ghost standing beside you with tears in his eyes.

Chapter Eleven

Not long after, something scratched at the front door, and Will opened it to admit a grey-brown-furred wolf. The wolf trotted over to where Marci's dress lay folded on the sofa, took it in her teeth, and vanished into the kitchen. Marci appeared a few seconds later, settling the dress around her slender form, and said, "She'll be here any moment. I already told Andi and Eyes."

"Thank you, Marci." Murph looked at everyone and said, "Settle down, people. You look like you're expecting Hannibal Lecter to come through the door."

"I could handle Hannibal," Will said. "This is different."

Murphy put a fist on her hip and said, "Will. Molly is one of us. And you aren't going to help her by looking nervous. If you can't settle down and relax, get out of here. I don't want you upsetting her."

Will grimaced. Then he went into the kitchen, and a moment later a large wolf with fur the same color as Will's hair padded back into the room. He went to a corner, turned around three times, and settled down on the floor. Toto let out a sharp little bark of greeting and hopped down to hurry over to Will. The little dog sniffed Will, then turned around three times and settled down next to him, their backs touching. The big wolf took a deep breath and exhaled it into a very human-sounding sigh of resignation.

"Thank you," Murphy said. She glanced at Mort. "There's a circle made out of copper wire in the kitchen. If it gets hot in here, you can run for it. You know how to empower a circle?"

"Yes, of course." He licked his lips and said, "Though I can't imagine running for my life and stopping in the kitchen. Meaning no offense to your protective ability, but I'll stop when I'm home, thank you."

"God," Murphy said. "If only more people had as much sense as you."

Murphy's radio chirped, and Eyes started to say something. His voice drowned an instant later in a burst of static.

That ratcheted more tension in everyone. Wizards and their major magical talent are tough on hardware. The more complex a machine is, the more disruptive a wizard's presence becomes, and electronics are nearly always the first to malfunction when a wizard is nearby. The wonky radio warned us of Molly's approach every bit as clearly as a sentry shouting, "Who goes there?"

"Huh," I said.

Mort glanced at me. "What?"

"The technology disruption a practitioner causes is relative to his—or her—strength."

"I knew that, actually," Mort said. "It's why I have to keep replacing my cell phone. So?"

"So Molly was not a heavyweight in terms of raw power. She had to be practically close enough to touch something to hex it down that fast." I narrowed my eyes. "She's gotten stronger. Either that or . . ."

"She's already in the room," Mort said.

Murphy looked up sharply at that. "What?"

The house lights flickered for a second and then went out.

They weren't gone long—the space of a heartbeat or two. But when they came back up, Murphy had her gun in hand, Marci had become a wolf with a sundress hanging around her neck, and a young woman wrapped in layers and layers of cast-off clothing sat on the sofa between Abby and Mort, not six inches away from either of them.

Molly was tall and built like a pinup model, with long, long legs and curves that not even the layers of clothing could hide. Her face was lovely and devoid of makeup, and her cheekbones pressed out harshly against her skin. Her hair was dirty, stringy, tangled, and colored a shade of

purple so dark as to be nearly indistinguishable from black. A wooden cane stained the same color of deep purple leaned against her knees, and an old military-issue canvas knapsack covered with buttons and drawings in Magic Marker rested between her hiking boots. From Abby's and Mort's reactions, it must have smelled like it had been at least several days since her last shower.

But it was her eyes that were the worst.

My apprentice's blue eyes were sunken, surrounded by shadows of stress and fatigue, and an odd light glittered there in the glassy shine I'd seen mostly in people recovering from anesthesia.

"It's interesting that you would notice me," Molly said to Mort, as if she'd been politely participating in the conversation all along.

The ectomancer twitched, and I saw him fight off the desire to get up and sprint for his car.

Molly nodded and looked around the rest of the room, person by person, until she got to Murphy. "I hope we're planning a civil discussion this time, Karrin."

Murphy put her gun away, giving Molly a mild glance by way of reprimand. "We *were* being civil last time. We're your friends, Molly, and we're worried about you."

My apprentice shrugged. "I don't want anyone like friends anywhere near me. If you include yourself among them, you should leave me the hell alone." Her voice had turned into a snarl by the end of the sentence, and she paused to take a slow, deliberate breath and calm down. "I don't have the patience or the time for a group-therapy session. What do you want?"

Murphy seemed to consider her answer for a moment. She wound up going for brevity. "We need you to verify something for us."

"Do I look like a fact-checker to you, Karrin?"

"You look like a homeless scarecrow," Murphy said, her tone matter-of-fact. "You smell like a gutter."

"I thought you used to be a detective," Molly said, rolling her eyes. "See above, regarding not wanting anyone around me. It's not all that hard to understand."

"Miss Carpenter," said Father Forthill in a sudden tone of gentle authority. "You are a *guest* in this woman's home. A woman who has put her own life in danger to save others—including you."

Molly turned an absolutely arctic look onto Father Forthill. Then she said, in a quiet, flat monotone, "I don't particularly care to be spoken to as if I am still a child, Father."

"If you wish to be respected as an adult, you should comport yourself as one," Forthill replied, "which includes behaving with civility toward your peers and respect toward your elders."

Molly glowered for a moment more, but then turned back to Murphy. "All things considered, it's stupid for me to be here. And I'm a busy woman, Ms. Murphy—nothing but customers, customers, customers. So I'm out the door in five seconds unless you give me a good reason to stay."

"This is Mort Lindquist, ectomancer," Murphy said promptly. "He says he's here to speak to us on behalf of Harry's ghost, who is with him."

Molly absolutely froze in place. Her face blanched beneath the grime.

"I'd like it if you could verify for us whether or not it's true," Murphy said, her voice gentle. "I need to know if he's really . . . if it's really his ghost."

Molly stared at her for a second, then shivered and looked down at her hands. "Um."

Murphy leaned a little closer to Molly. "You could tell. Couldn't you?"

Molly shot her a wide-eyed glance and looked down again. She muttered something before she said, "Yes. But . . . not with so many people in the room."

"Why not?"

Molly's voice turned into a bitter snarl. "Do you want my help or not?"

Murphy folded her arms for a long moment. Then she said, "Time for another stroll in the evening air, people. Mr. Lindquist, please stay. Everyone else, out."

Mort was trying very hard not to look like a man who wanted to run for the door, and getting mixed results. "I . . . Of course, Ms. Murphy."

Murphy had to urge the werewolves to leave and help Marci get untangled from her dress. Forthill and Abby looked at each other and left the room without a murmur. Molly sat completely still during this, staring down at her folded hands.

"You don't have clue one, do you?" she asked Murphy quietly. "You don't have any idea what you're asking me to go through."

"If I could do it myself, I would."

Molly looked up sharply at that. Her smile was unpleasant. Bordering on creepy.

"Easy words," she said. "Easy words. They leave little trails of slime on your lips when they pass them. But it doesn't make them go down any more smoothly."

"Molly . . ." Murphy sighed and sat down and spread her hands. "You won't let us help you. You won't talk to us. But this is something I literally cannot ask of anyone else."

"You always asked *him*," Molly said, her tone spiteful.

"There's a boiler about to burst," Sir Stuart murmured to me.

"Shut your mouth," I said quietly, coming automatically to her defense. But he was right. The kid was teetering on a cliff as I sat there looking at her.

I stared at Molly and felt absolutely wretched. She was my apprentice. I was supposed to have taught her to survive without me. Granted, I hadn't planned on taking a bullet in the chest, but then, who does? Or was her condition simply symptomatic of the world she lived in?

Murphy regarded the younger woman for a long moment and then nodded. "Yes. I know enough to know when I'm out of my depth. My instincts say Mort isn't trying to con me, but we've got to have more than just my intuition. I need your help. Please."

Molly shook her head very slowly, shivering. She wiped at her face with her grimy gloves, and clean streaks appeared on her cheeks. "Fine." She lifted her head, looked at Mort, and said calmly, "If you're running a con, I will peel the skin off your brain."

The ectomancer spread his hands. "Look. Dresden's shade came to *me*. If it isn't him, that ain't my fault. I'm operating in good faith, here."

"You're a roach," Molly said pleasantly. "Runs and hides from any threat, but you survive, don't you?"

"Yes," Mort said frankly.

"Maybe I should have been a roach, too," Molly said. "It would be easier." She took a slow, deep breath and said, "Where is he?"

Mort pointed a finger at me. I took a few steps until I stood in the mouth of the hallway that led down to Murphy's bedrooms. I gestured to Sir Stuart to stay back.

"Why?" he asked.

"She's going to use her Sight. The less she has to look at, the better."

Sir Stuart shrugged and stayed near Mort. He watched Molly through narrowed eyes, his fingertips on the handle of that monster pistol.

Molly grabbed her cane and rose to her feet, leaning on it, taking the weight off the leg that had been shot at Chichén Itzá. She straightened her back and shoulders, turned toward me, took a deep breath, and opened her Sight.

I'd never seen such a thing from this angle before. It was as if a sudden light, burning steady and unwavering, kindled just between and above her eyebrows. As it flooded out of her, I felt it as a tangible sensation on my immaterial flesh. It was blinding. I lifted a hand for a moment to shield my eyes against it before I looked up to meet Molly's gaze.

Her lips parted. She stared at me and tears blurred her vision. She tried twice to speak before she said, "How do I know it's you?"

I could answer her. It's called the Sight, but it embraces the entire spectrum of human perception, and then some. I met her gaze and composed my face. Then I said, in my very best Alec Guinness impersonation, "You will go to the Dagobah system. There you will learn from Yoda, the Jedi Master who instructed me."

Molly sat down abruptly, missed the couch, and hit the floor instead. “Ohmygod,” she breathed. “Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod. Harry.”

I knelt to be on eye level with her. “Yeah, kid. It’s me.”

“Are . . . are you really . . . really gone?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I am. I’m sorta new at this, and they aren’t in danger of winning any exposition awards around here.”

She nodded as more tears came, but she didn’t look away. “D-did you come to take me away?” she asked, her voice very small.

“No,” I said quietly. “Molly . . . no. I was sent back here.”

“W-why?” she whispered.

“To find my murderer,” I said quietly. “People I care about are in danger if I don’t get the job done.”

Molly began rocking back and forth where she sat. “I . . . Oh. I’ve been trying. . . . The city has become so *dark*, and I knew what you would expect of me, but I’m not as *strong* as you. I can’t just s-smash things like you could. . . .”

“Molly,” I said in a calm, clear tone.

Her reddened, exhausted blue eyes looked up at me.

“You know who I want to know about, don’t you? Who I wouldn’t want you to talk about in front of anyone?”

I hadn’t said my daughter’s name since returning to Chicago. Hell, I’d barely dared to *think* it. As far as the rest of the world knew, Maggie had been engulfed in the conflagration that devoured the Red Court. Anyone who knew of her identity might well hold it against her. I didn’t want that. Not if I wasn’t going to be there to protect her.

My throat felt tight, because I thought it should, I suppose. “You know who I’m asking about?”

“Yes,” she said. “Of course.”

“Is that person safe and well?”

“As far as I know, yes,” she said. A small smile made her, for an instant, resemble the girl I remembered. “Chewbacca is with her.”

There was only one giant walking carpet to whom she could be referring—my dog, Mouse. The beast was smarter than a lot of people, and was probably the single best supernatural guardian any child *could* have had. And he was huge and warm and fuzzy, and perfectly content to be a blanket or pillow—or a furious incarnation of preternatural strength and speed, depending on which was needed at the moment. Hell, Maggie was only eight. He was probably spending half his time pretending to be a pony.

I exhaled slowly and felt a little dizzy. The memories I had of Maggie—what few there were—were hammering their way across my consciousness. I mostly remembered holding her in the quiet after it was all over. I’m not sure how long I sat there with her. She had been a small, sleepy warmth in my arms, grateful for the comfort of being held.

“We can go see her,” Molly suggested. “I mean . . . I know where she is.”

I wanted to shout an agreement and leap at the chance. But I couldn’t. So I didn’t.

“Maybe after we take care of business,” I said.

“All right,” Molly said, nodding.

“Better button up your Sight, kid,” I said quietly. “There’s no reason to leave it open so long. Bad things could happen.”

“But . . . I won’t be able to see you. Or hear you. Which . . . seems odd, given that it’s called the Sight . . .”

“It encompasses a lot,” I said loftily. “Kid, you’ve got a gift. Trust your instincts. Which in this case should suggest to you that what you need is the spirit-viewing ointment we made off of Rashid’s faerie-sight recipe, or something like it.”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.” She frowned and bowed her head, and I saw her Sight being withdrawn, the light at her forehead dwindling and finally winking out.

Murphy was sitting at the very edge of her chair, her back straight, her hands in her lap. “Miss Carpenter?”

Molly turned to look at Murphy. It seemed to take her a second or two to focus her eyes. “Yes?”

“It’s him?”

“He greeted me with a quote from *The Empire Strikes Back*.”

Murphy’s mouth twitched at one corner. “Him.”

My apprentice nodded and didn’t meet Murphy’s eyes.

“So,” Murphy said. “He’s really . . . really gone. That bullet killed him.”

“He’s gone,” Molly said. “The shade is . . . It’s Harry in every practical sense. It will have his memories, his personality.”

“But it isn’t *him*.”

Molly shook her head. “I asked him about that once. About what happens to a soul when a ghost is left behind.”

“What did he say?”

“That he had no idea. And that he doubted anyone would ever get a straight answer.”

“Molly,” the older woman said. “I know you’re tired. I would like it if you let me offer you some clothes. A meal. A shower. Some real sleep. My house is protected. I’d like to be able to tell your parents that I did at least that much for you, the next time they call me to ask about you.”

Molly looked around the room for a moment, biting her lip. “Yes . . . it . . .” She shivered. “But . . . it’s better if I don’t.”

“Better for who?”

“Everyone,” Molly said. She gathered herself and rose, using the cane to get to her feet once again. She grimaced in the process. It was obvious that using her leg still caused her pain. “Honestly. I’ve been playing a lot of games, and I don’t want any of them to splash onto you.” She paused and then said tentatively, “I’m . . . sorry about the detective remark, Karrin. That was going too far.”

Murphy shrugged. “Least said, soonest mended.”

My apprentice sighed and began pulling her tattered layers about herself a little more securely. “Mr. Lindquist appears to be working in good faith. I’ll come back tomorrow with something that might let you communicate with Harry’s shade a little more easily.”

“Thank you,” Murphy said. “While you’re at it, it might be smart to—”

There was the sudden blaring of a pocket-sized air horn from outside.

Mort hopped up from his seat into a crouch, ready either to run or to fling himself heroically to the floor. “What was that?”

“Trouble,” Murphy said, unlimbering her gun. “Get d—”

She hadn’t finished speaking when gunfire roared outside and bullets began ripping through the windows and the walls.

Chapter Twelve

I did what any sane person would do in a situation like that. I threw myself to the ground.

“Oh, honestly, Dresden,” Sir Stuart snapped. He sprinted toward the gunfire, out through the wall of the house. I actually saw the building’s wards flare up with spectral, blue-white light around him as he went through unimpeded.

“Right, dummy,” I growled at myself. “You’re already dead.” I got up and ran after the elder shade.

The living were all kissing hardwood floor as I plunged into the wall of the house. I wasn’t worried about the wards keeping me in—no one ever designed their wards so that bad things couldn’t *leave*, only so that they couldn’t enter. Besides, I’d had an invitation to come in, which technically made me a friendly—but I found out that “friendly” wards operated on much the same principle as “friendly” fire. Going out through the warded wall didn’t just tingle unpleasantly. I felt like I’d just plunged naked down a waterslide lined with steel wool.

“Aaaaaaaagh!” I screamed, emerging from the wards and onto Murphy’s front lawn, chock-full of new insight as to why ghosts are always moaning or wailing when they come popping out of somebody’s wall or floor. Not much mystery there—it freaking *hurts*.

I staggered for several steps and looked up in time to see the drive-by still in progress. They were in a pickup truck. Someone in the passenger’s compartment had the barrel of a shotgun sticking out the window, and four figures in dark clothing crouched in the truck’s cargo bed, pointing what looked like assault weapons and submachine guns at Murphy’s house. They were cutting loose with them, too, flashes of thunder and lightning too bright and loud to be real, seemingly magnified by the quiet, still air between the snow and the streetlights.

These guys weren’t real pros. I’d seen true professional gunmen in action, and these jokers didn’t look anything like them. They just pointed the business end more or less in a general direction and sprayed bullets. It wasn’t the disciplined fire of true professionals, but if you throw out enough bullets, you’re bound to hit something.

Bullets went through me, half a dozen flashes of tingling discomfort too brief to be more than an annoyance, and I suddenly found myself sprinting toward the truck beside Sir Stuart, exhilarated. Being bulletproof is kind of a rush.

“What are we doing?” I shouted at him. “I mean, what are we accomplishing here? We can’t do anything to them. Can we?”

“Watch and learn, lad!” Sir Stuart called, his teeth bared in a wolfish grin. “On three, be on the truck!”

“What!? Uh, I think—”

“Don’t think,” the shade shouted. “Just do it! Let your instincts guide you! *Be on the truck!* One, two . . .” The shade’s feet struck the ground hard twice, like a long jumper at the end of his approach. I followed Sir Stuart’s example on little more than reflex.

A sudden memory flashed into my head—a school playground from my childhood, where mock Olympic Games were being run, students competing against one another. The sun was hot above us, making the petroleum smell of warm asphalt rise from the surface of the playground. I had been competing in the running long jump, and it hadn’t been going well. I forget exactly why I was so desperate to win, but I was fixated on it as only a child could be. I remembered willing myself to win, to run faster, to jump farther, as I sprinted down the lane toward the pink-chalk jump line.

It was the first time I used magic.

I had no idea at the time, naturally. But I remembered the feeling of utter elation that flooded through me, along with an invisible force that pushed against my back as I leapt, and for just an instant I thought I had spontaneously learned to fly like Superman.

Reality reasserted itself in rapid order. I fell, out of control, my arms spinning like a windmill. I went down on the blacktop and left generous patches of skin on its surface. I remember how much it hurt—and how I didn’t care because I’d won.

I broke the Iowa state high school long-jump record by more than a foot. It didn’t stick, though. They disqualified me. I hadn’t even gotten serious about puberty yet. Clearly, something irregular had happened, mistakes had been made, and surely the best thing was to ignore the anomalous leap.

It was a vivid recollection, silly and a little sad—and it was my first time.

It was a powerful memory.

“Three!” Sir Stuart cried, and leapt.

So did I, my eyes and will locked on the retreating pickup full of gunmen.

There was a twisting, dizzying sensation that reminded me very strongly of a potion Bob had helped me mix up when I’d tangled with the Shadowman. It was that same experience: a feeling of flying apart into zillions of pieces, rushing forward at a speed too great to be measured, only to abruptly coalesce again.

There was a sudden cold wind against my face and I staggered, nearly falling off the roof of the pickup as it continued to slowly accelerate down the street.

“Holy crap!” I said, as a huge smile stretched my face. “That was *cool*. First Shadowcat, now Nightcrawler!”

I turned to find Sir Stuart standing on the bed of the truck, looking up at me with a disapproving eyebrow lifted. One of the shooters’ backs was in the same space as the shade’s right leg.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” I asked him, nodding to his leg.

“Hmmm?” Sir Stuart said. He glanced down and saw what I was talking about. “Oh. I suppose, yes. I stopped noticing it after seventy or eighty years. Now. If you don’t mind, Dresden, might we proceed?”

“To do what?” I asked.

“To teach you what are obviously badly needed lessons,” Sir Stuart said, “and to stop these pirates.” He spat the last word with a startling amount of venom.

I frowned and eyed the gunmen, who were all reloading, having emptied their weapons in sheer, nervous excitement. They weren’t particularly good at reloading, either.

“Hell, one man with a handgun could take them all right now,” I said. “Too bad neither of us has one.”

“We cannot touch flesh,” Sir Stuart said. “And while it is possible for a shade to, for example, move an object, it is impractical. With practice, you could push a penny across a table over the course of a couple of minutes.”

“Too bad neither of us has a penny,” I said.

He ignored me entirely. “That’s because we can put forth only minuscule physical force. You couldn’t lift the coin into the air against the pull of gravity.”

I frowned. This sounded a lot like a basic lesson most young wizards received. Most of the time, when you wanted to move something around, you didn’t have the kind of energy you needed stored inside you. That didn’t mean you couldn’t move it, though. It just meant you had to get the energy to do so from another source. “But . . . you can co-opt energy from elsewhere?”

The big man pointed an index finger at me, a smile stretching his mouth. “Excellent. We cannot interact with something being moved by a living creature. We can’t even touch an object that is being carried too closely to a living body. But . . .” He glanced up at me, inviting me to finish the thought.

I blinked twice, mind racing, and said, “Machines. We can work with machines.”

Sir Stuart nodded. "As long as they are in motion. And there is an enormous amount of energy and motion passing through a nonliving, mechanical engine."

Without another word, he paced forward, through the back wall of the cab, sat on the passenger's seat, and leaned to his left. I couldn't see what he was doing, so I dropped to all fours, took a deep breath, and stuck my face through the roof of the cab. It tingled and hurt, but I had literally spent a lifetime learning to cope with pain. I pushed it to the back of my mind, gritted my teeth, and watched.

Sir Stuart had pushed his hand into the steering wheel of the truck. He pushed the other forward, leaning partly through the dashboard to do it, and waited patiently, watching the road ahead of us. It didn't take long for the truck to hit a hummock in the ice coating the streets, and the truck bounced, shocks squealing. Just as it did, the shade's eyes fluttered closed, and he gave a peculiar jerking twist of his arm.

The truck's air bag exploded out of the steering wheel.

It struck the driver, smacking him back into the driver's seat, and the man panicked. His arms tightened in surprise as he was hit, and he turned the steering wheel several degrees to one side. Then he broke the cardinal rule of driving on ice and stomped his foot on the brake.

The slight turn and the sudden braking motion put the car into a slide. The driver was trying to push the air bag out of his face, and he didn't compensate and turn into the slide. The slide became a spin.

Sir Stuart watched in satisfaction, looked up at me, and said, "Not much different from spooking a horse, really."

The gunmen in the back were screaming in confusion as the car spun through three ponderous circles, somehow putting forth the illusion of grace. They bounced off the snow piled high on one side of the street, and then slid into an intersection, up over a sidewalk, and through the front windows of a small grocery store. The sounds of shattering glass and brick, screaming metal crumpling through its zones, and cracking snow and ice were shockingly loud.

The steadily ringing bell of the store's security alarm sounded like my old Mickey Mouse alarm clock, in comparison.

The gunmen sat there doing nothing for a moment, clearly stunned, but then they began cursing and scrambling to get gone before the cops showed up.

Sir Stuart vanished and reappeared across the street. I made the same effort of will I had while jumping to the truck, reaching back for that memory once more. Again I flew apart and came back together, reappearing standing next to Sir Stuart, facing a brick wall.

"Next time turn around on the way," he advised.

I snorted and looked back at the gunmen. "What about them?"

"What about them?"

"Can't we . . . I don't know, possess them and make them bang their heads into a wall or something?"

Sir Stuart barked out a harsh laugh. "We cannot enter unless the mortal is willing. That is the purview of demons, not shades."

I scowled. "So . . . what? We stand here and watch them walk?"

He shrugged. "I'm not willing to leave Mortimer alone for so much time. You may also wish to consider, Dresden, that dawn is not far away. It will destroy you if you are not within a sanctum such as Mortimer's residence."

I frowned, looking up at the sky. City light had wiped away all but the brightest stars, but the sky to the east held only a hint of blue, low on the horizon. Dawn was hard on spirits and shades and magical spells alike. Not because one is inherently good and one inherently evil, but because dawn is a time of new beginnings, and the light of a new day tends to sweep away the supernatural litter from the day before. For spirit beings to survive sunrise, they had to be in a protected place—a sanctum. My trusty lab assistant, Bob, had a sanctum; in his case, a specially enchanted skull designed to protect him from dawn and daylight and to provide a home. A plain

old threshold wouldn't get it done, although my old apartment had probably qualified as a sanctum, given how many layers and layers of defense I'd put up around it.

But I didn't have either of those things anymore.

"Go back to Mort," I said. "It was fun playing *Maximum Overdrive* with these chowderheads, but that isn't going to protect the people we care about. I'm going to follow the shooters back to their place and see what I can find out about them."

Sir Stuart frowned at me and said, "The dawn is not something to take chances with, man. I strongly advise against your doing so."

"So noted," I said, "but the only real weapon I have against them is knowledge. Someone needs to get it, and I'm the only one who isn't susceptible to lead poisoning. I'm the logical choice."

"Assume you get the information and manage to survive the dawn," the shade said. "Then what will you do?"

"I give it to Murphy, who uses it to rip the bad guys' tongues out through their belly buttons."

Sir Stuart blinked. "That . . . is certainly a vivid image."

"It's a gift," I said modestly.

He shook his head and sighed. "I admire your spirit, man, but this is foolish."

"Yeah. But I've gotta be me," I said.

Sir Stuart put both hands behind his back and tapped a toe on the ground a few times. Then he gave me a resigned nod. "Good hunting," he said. "If you have a problem with wraiths again, vanish. They won't be able to keep up."

"Thank you," I said, and offered him my hand.

We traded grips, and he turned on a heel and started marching back toward Murphy's place.

I watched him for a moment, then turned around and hurried after the snow-blurred forms of the gunmen, wondering exactly how much time I had left before the sunrise obliterated me.

Chapter Thirteen

The bad guys started hoofing it, and I followed them.

“Over here,” said one of them. He was youthfully scrawny, his skin bronze enough to look Native American, though his tangled red hair and pug nose argued otherwise. His eyes were an odd shade of brown, so light as to be nearly golden.

“What, Fitz?” one of the other gunmen said.

“Shut up,” Fitz said. “Give me your piece.”

The other handed over his gun, and Fitz promptly removed the magazine, ejected a round from the chamber, and pitched it into the snowbank, along with the weapon he was carrying.

“What the fuck?” said the disarmed gunman, and struck Fitz lightly in the chest.

Fitz slammed a fist into the other man’s face with speed and violence enough to impress even me—and I’ve seen some fast things in action. The other gunman went to his ass in the snow and sat there, hands lifted to cradle his freshly broken nose.

“No time for stupid,” Fitz said. “Everyone, give me your guns. Or do you want to explain to *him* why you tried to get us all thrown in jail?”

The others didn’t look happy about it, but they passed over the weapons. Fitz unloaded them and threw them all into the snowbank. Then, at his direction, they started patting snow into the hole the weapons had made, concealing them.

“Stupid, man,” said one of the young men. “One of those wolves gets on our trail, we got nothing to defend ourselves.”

“One of the wolves follows us back, we’ll have the Rag Lady on our asses, and guns will be useless,” Fitz snapped. “Pack it in tighter. Smooth it.” Then he turned to the man he’d struck and piled some of the fresher snow into the man’s hands. “Put that on your nose. Stop it from bleeding. You don’t want to leave any blood behind if you have a choice.”

The seated young man looked frightened, and did as Fitz told him.

“What are we doing?” asked another of the gunmen. He was smaller than the others, and his tone wasn’t challenging—it was a question.

“The truck’s stolen. They can’t trace it to us,” Fitz explained, dusting snow off his hands. “Even if the winter breaks tomorrow, it’ll be days before this melts and they find the weapons. With luck, they’ll never connect the two.”

“That’s long-term,” the little one said. “I sort of want to survive the night.”

Fitz almost smiled. “You want to walk down the streets of fucking Chicago with assault weapons in your hands? We could keep them out of sight in the truck. Not out here.”

The little guy nodded. “I can keep the knife, right?”

“Out of sight,” Fitz said, and lifted his head, listening and frowning. Sirens were a common sound in nighttime Chicago, but they had shifted from background noise to something louder, nearer. “Get moving, people.”

Fitz jammed his hands into the pockets of his rather light coat and started walking. The others hurried to keep up with him.

I walked next to Fitz, studying him. I was more impressed with the young man in the lousy attack’s aftermath than I had been during the drive-by. Any idiot can point a gun and squeeze a trigger. Not everyone can keep themselves calm and rational in the wake of an automobile collision, weigh the liabilities of the situation, and make—and enforce—their decisions in the face of opposition. Though the attack had been amateurish, it had not been stupid, and Fitz’s actions in response to the sudden hitch Sir Stuart had thrown into his plans were probably as ideal as the situation allowed.

Fitz was smart under pressure, he was a natural leader, and I had a bad feeling that he was the sort of person who never made the same mistake twice. He had just done his best to kill several people I cared a great deal for. Brains plus resolve equals dangerous. I'd have to see to it that he was neutralized at the first opportunity.

I followed them through cold I no longer felt and practiced vanishing. I'd jump ahead of them, behind them, onto ledges above them—all the while trying not to notice that the sky was getting lighter.

Something bothered me about the redheaded kid.

With the cops on the way, the store alarm ringing, his associates bleeding and dazed around him . . . why take a few extra, vital seconds to empty the guns? It had cost him about half a minute of time he certainly couldn't afford to lose. Why do it?

I asked myself why I might do something similar. And the only answer I could come up with involved preventing whoever found the weapons from getting hurt. Fitz was willing to riddle a small Chicago house—and potentially the houses behind it, given the power of the weapons in question—with bullets, but he got all safety conscious when disposing of weapons? It was a contradiction.

Interesting.

Even more interesting was the fact that I'd cared enough to notice. Generally, if someone took a swing at my friends, I'd cheerfully designate him a target and proceed to make his world a noisy and dangerous place until he wasn't a threat anymore. I didn't lose a lot of sleep over it, either.

But I couldn't just throw myself into the fight now, dammit. And, unlike before, those who threatened my friends could *not* also threaten me. I was safe from Fitz and his crew, unless they planned to keep walking until sunrise, and I was similarly no danger to them. Normally, I'd be fuming at the presence of people who had tried to kill my friends. But now. . .

We were absolutely no threat to one another. That made it sort of hard to keep my inner kettle of outrage bubbling along at maximum boil.

Fitz kept them all moving through the snowbound streets, stopping only once to check on the bleeder's nose. Packing it in snow had stopped the blood loss, but the young man was disoriented from the wreck and the pain. There were other small injuries among his crew, and he stopped at a little convenience store, emerging with a bottle of water and an economy-sized bottle of painkillers. He passed them off to the short, inquisitive kid, and told him to double-dose everyone—and to keep moving.

It took them most of an hour of steady trudging through the cold to clear Bucktown and head for the South Side. A lot of people think of the South Side as a sort of economic desert crossed with a gang-warfare demilitarized zone. It isn't like that—or at least, it isn't like that everywhere. There are neighborhoods you don't want to walk through wearing certain colors, or being a certain color, but they're more exception than rule. The rest of the South Side varies pretty widely, with plenty of it zoned for industry, and Fitz and his group of battered pedestrians headed into an area on the fringe of an industrial park to a manufacturing facility that had been closed and abandoned for several years.

It took up a block all by itself, a big building only a couple of stories high that covered acres of ground. The plows had piled snow higher and higher around it, like a fortress wall, with no need to create an opening for the unoccupied building. Fitz and his crew went over the wall of snow at a spot that had evidently been worked with shovels to form narrow, if slippery, stairs. There was a foot and a half of snow covering the building's parking lot, with a single pathway shoveled out of it. They followed it in single file, to doors that looked as if they'd been solidly chained shut—but Fitz rattled the chains and nudged one of the doors open wide enough for the crew of youngsters, all of them still skinny, to squeeze through.

I went through the doors ghost style and tried to ignore the discomfort, the way Sir Stuart did. It hurt anyway—not enough to make me howl in agony or anything, but way too much to simply lose track of. Maybe it just took time for your “skin” to toughen. At least there hadn't been a

threshold, which would have stopped me cold. This place had never been meant to be anyone's home, and evidently nobody who lived there thought of it as anything special. The exact process that formed a threshold had never been fully explained or documented, but it might be a good idea for me to get a better idea of the exact why and how, given my circumstances.

"No, it is not a good idea. Focus, Dresden," I muttered. "The idea is for you to take care of business so you never have to learn all about the environmental factors of long-term ghostosity."

Fitz stopped long enough to do a head count, out loud, as the ragged troop of would-be gangsters moved deeper into the building. It was an industrial structure and it had been built for economy, not beauty. There weren't a lot of windows, and it was definitely on the shady side—even with dawn almost here and the lights of the city and sky reflecting from fresh snow. Cold, too, judging from the way the breath was congealing into fog every time the young men exhaled.

Fitz broke out a camping light and flicked it on. It was a red one, and didn't so much light the way as clarify the difference between utter darkness and not-quite darkness. It was enough for them to move by.

"I wonder," I mused aloud. After all, I was immaterial. Ghosts and the material universe didn't seem to have a completely one-way relationship, the way mortals and physics did. I didn't actually have pupils to dilate anymore. Hell, for that matter, light apparently passed right through me—how else was I invisible to everyone, otherwise? Which meant that, whatever it might seem like, I wasn't really *seeing* the world, in the traditional sense. My perceptions were something different, something more than light reflecting onto a chemically sensitive surface in my eyes.

"There's no real reason I should need the light to see, is there?" I asked myself.

"No," I said. "No, there isn't."

I closed my eyes for a few steps and focused on a simple memory—when, as a kid in a foster home, I'd first found myself in a dark room when a storm knocked out the power. It was a new place, and I had fumbled around blindly, searching for a flashlight or matches or a lighter, or any other source of light, for almost ten minutes before I found something—a decorative snow globe commemorating the Olympics at Lake Placid. A small switch turned on a light that made the red, white, and blue snowflakes drifting in the liquid gleam in sudden brilliance.

The panic in my chest had eased as the room became something I could navigate safely again, my fear fading. I could see.

And when I opened my ghostly eyes, I could see the hallway through which we walked with perfect clarity, as plainly as if the long-dead fluorescents overhead had been humming along at full glow.

A quick, pleased laugh escaped me. Now I could see in the dark. "Just like . . . uh . . . I can't think of an X-Man who I'm sure could see in the dark. Or was that a Nightcrawler thing . . . ? Whatever. It's still another superpower. There is no spoon. I am completely spoonless over here."

Fitz stopped in his tracks, turning suddenly, and lifted the camping light in my direction, his eyes wide. He suddenly sucked in a deep breath.

I stopped and blinked at him.

Everyone around Fitz had gone quiet and completely still, reacting to his obvious fear with the instant, instinctive stillness of someone who had good reason to fear predators. Fitz stared down the hall uncertainly, moving the light as if it might help him see a few inches farther.

"Hell's bells," I said. "Hey, kid. Can you hear me?"

Fitz reacted, his body twitching a little, his head cocked to one side, then the other, as if trying to trace a faint whisper of sound.

"Fitz?" whispered the little kid with the knife.

"Quiet," Fitz said, still staring.

I cupped my hands over my mouth and shouted. "Hey! Kid! Can you hear me?"

The color had already drained out of his face, but the second call to him got another reaction. He licked his lips, turned away quickly, and said, "Thought I heard something, that's all. It's nothing. Come on."

Interestinger and interestinger. I stuck my hands in the pockets of my duster and paced along beside Fitz, studying him.

He was maybe an inch under six feet tall, but taller than all the others with him. He couldn't have been seventeen, but his eyes were decades older. He must have been surviving on his own for a while to have had so much composure at his age. And he'd known at least a little about the way a practitioner could use blood to send all kinds of mischief and mayhem at his enemies.

He had scars at the corner of his left eye, like a boxer—except boxers collected them on both eyes, and they were spread out, scattered around. These were all in a relatively tiny space. Someone right-handed had punched him in the same spot irregularly, repeatedly. I'd seen Fitz's speed. He hadn't tried to get out of the way.

Hell's bells. We'd just been hit by Oliver Twist.

It took Fitz and the gang about five minutes to make it to what had once been a shop floor. It was open to the thirty-foot ceiling. There were skylights—translucent panels on the roof, really—and the place looked like something out of an apocalypse movie.

Equipment sat neglected everywhere. The motorized assembly line was still. Cobwebs stretched out, covering everything, coated in dust. Empty racks and shelves gave no clue as to what was made there, but several steel half barrels were scattered around an open area halfway down the shop floor. They had been filled with flammable scraps, mostly doors, trim, and shelves that must have been scavenged from other parts of the building. Ragged old sleeping bags were scattered among the fire sources, along with trash sacks of what I guessed were meager personal belongings.

One of the low barrels had a metal grate over it—a makeshift grill. There was a man crouched over it. He was thin, practically skeletal, and wore only a pair of close-fitting jeans. His skin was pasty and white. His smooth head was covered with crude-looking tattoos—symbols of protection and concealment from multiple traditions of magical practice, completely encircling his skull. He needed to shave. His patchy beard was growing out in uneven lumps of brown and black and grey.

There were several cans of beans and chili sitting on the grill, presumably being prepared for Fitz's gang, who looked painfully interested in them. The bald man didn't give any indication that he knew Fitz had arrived until the group had been standing silently for a full five minutes. Then he asked, "Is it done?"

"No," Fitz said.

"And where are the guns?"

"We had to ditch them."

The bald man's shoulders clenched, suddenly stiff. "Excuse me?"

Fitz lifted a hand to touch his fingertips to his left eye, a gesture that struck me as unconscious, instinctive. He lowered it again quickly.

"There was an accident. The police were coming. We had to walk out and we couldn't carry the guns with us."

The bald man stood up and turned to face Fitz. His eyes were dark, deep-set, and burning. "You lost. The guns. The guns I paid so much for."

"The guns were already lost," Fitz said, his eyes on the floor. "There wasn't any sense in all of us going to jail, too."

The bald man's eyes blazed and a scream exploded from his chest. There was a horrible, rushing, bass-thrumming sound in the air, and an invisible force struck Fitz full in the chest, knocking him back ten feet before he hit the concrete floor and tumbled another ten.

"Sense?!" the bald man screamed. "Sense? You don't *have* any sense! Do you know what the consequences of your idiocy could be? Do you know how many groups precisely like this one have been wiped out by the Fomor? By the Rag Lady? Idiot!"

Fitz lay on the floor, body curled defensively, and didn't even try to lift his head. He was staying down, hoping not to provoke Baldy any further, his expression resigned to the fact that he

was probably going to suffer more pain in short order—and that there was nothing he could do about it.

“It was simple!” Baldy continued, stalking toward the young man. “I gave you a task that men with their veins and noses full of drugs execute routinely. And it proved too great a challenge? Is that what you are telling me?”

Fitz’s voice was too steady to be sincere. He was used to hiding his fear, his vulnerability. “I’m sorry. The Rag Lady was there. We couldn’t have gotten any closer. She’d have taken us. We had to hit them and run.”

Baldy’s rage vanished abruptly. He stared down at the young man with no expression on his face and spoke in a gentle voice. “If there is some reason you believe you should be allowed to keep breathing, you should share it with the class now, Fitz.”

Fitz had a good poker face, but it had been a long night for him. He started breathing jerkily. “The idea wasn’t to kill them, you told me. The idea was to make sure that no one pushes us. That we push back. We showed them that. We accomplished the mission.”

Baldy stared at him and did not move.

I saw a bead of sweat on his brow. “It isn’t . . . It’s not . . . Look, I can get the guns back. I can. I marked where we buried them. I can go get them.”

Baldy glowered down at the young man and kicked him in the belly. The blow was offhand, absentminded, almost an afterthought. He seemed to reach a conclusion, and turned around to go back to the grill.

“Food’s hot, boys,” Baldy said. “Come eat up.”

The gang moved forward nervously. After a moment, Fitz began to rise, being careful to make no sound.

There was a sudden, puffing sigh of displaced air. Baldy’s shape blurred from the grill back over to Fitz, sending one of the young gunmen flying sideways. Baldy was suddenly slamming a hard right to Fitz’s head, his fist moving almost too quickly to see.

The hit sent Fitz to the ground. I was close enough to see the scar tissue around his eye break open, blood trickling rapidly down the young man’s cheek.

“Not you, Fitz,” Baldy said, his voice gentle again. “I don’t give food to dead men. Eat when you have corrected your error.”

Fitz nodded, without looking up, his hand pressed to his head. “Yes, sir.”

“Good lad,” Baldy said. He wrinkled his nose as if there were a mild stench in the air, and spat, mostly on Fitz. Then he turned to walk away.

The kid looked up at Baldy with murder in his eye.

I don’t mean that Fitz looked angry. You hear a lot about “if looks could kill” these days, but there just aren’t many people who *really* know what it looks like. Killing—or, more accurately, making the choice to kill—isn’t something we’re good at lately. Ending the life of another living creature used to be part of the daily routine. Chickens were beheaded by the average farm wife for dinner. Fish were likewise caught, cleaned, and prepared for a meal. Slaughtering pigs or cattle was a regular event, part of the turning of the seasons. Most people on earth—farmers—worked and lived every single day with lives they knew they were going to choose to end, eventually.

Killing’s messy. It’s frequently ugly. And if something goes wrong, it can be wretched, seeing another being in mortal agony, which means there’s a certain amount of pressure involved in the act. It isn’t easy, and that’s just considering farm animals.

Killing another human being magnifies the worry, the ugliness, and the pressure by orders of magnitude. You don’t make a choice like that lightly. There’s calculation to it, consideration of the possible outcomes. Anyone can kill in a frenzy of fear or hatred—you aren’t making the choice to kill that way. You’re simply giving your emotions control of your actions.

I watched Fitz’s eyes as he calculated, considered, and made his choice. His face went pale, but his jaw was clenched, his eyes steady.

I don’t know what motivated me, exactly, but I leaned down near him and snapped, “Don’t!”

The young man had begun to shift his weight, to get his feet beneath him. He froze in the act.

"He's expecting it, Fitz," I said in a harsh, forceful tone. "He spat on you to drive you to it. He's ready. He'll kill you before you've finished standing up."

Fitz looked around him, but his gaze went right through me. He couldn't see me, then. Huh.

"I've been where you are, kid. I know this bald loser's type. Don't be a sucker. Don't give him what he wants."

Fitz closed his eyes very tightly for a moment. Then he exhaled slowly, and his body relaxed.

"Wise," Baldy said. "Make good on your claim, and we might still have a way to work together, Fitz."

Fitz swallowed, and grimaced as if at a bitter taste in his mouth, and said, "Yes, sir. I'm going to check the perimeter."

"An excellent idea," Baldy said. "I'd rather not see you for a while." Then he walked away from Fitz, leaning down to touch the shoulder of one of the young men, and muttered softly.

Fitz moved, quickly and quietly, getting off the shop floor and moving out into the hallway. There he hugged himself tightly, shivering, and began walking rapidly down a hallway.

"I'm not crazy," he said. "I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy."

"Well . . . kinda," I said, keeping pace. "What are you doing working for an asshole like that?"

"You aren't real," Fitz said.

"The hell I'm not," I replied. "I just can't figure out why it is that you can hear me talking."

"I'm *not* crazy," Fitz snarled, and put his hands over his ears.

"I'm pretty sure that won't help you," I noted. "I mean, it's your mind that perceives me. I think you just happen to get it as, uh . . . one of those MV4 things, instead of as a movie."

"MP3," Fitz corrected me automatically. Then he jerked his hands from his ears and looked around him, eyes wide. "Uh . . . are you . . . you actually there?"

"I am," I confirmed. "Though any halfway decent hallucination would tell you that."

Fitz blinked. "Um. I don't want to piss you off or anything but . . . what are you?"

"I'm a guy who doesn't like to see his friends getting shot at, Fitz," I told him.

Fitz's steps slowed. He seemed to put his back against a wall out of reflex more than thought. He was very still for a long moment. Then he said, "You're . . . a, um . . . a spirit?"

"Technically," I said.

He swallowed. "You work for the Rag Lady."

Hell's bells. The kid was terrified of Molly. And I'd known plenty of kids like Fitz when I was growing up in the system. I met them in foster homes, in orphanages, in schools and summer camps. Tough kids, survivors, people who knew that no one was looking out for them except themselves. Not everyone had the same experience in the system, but portions of it were positively Darwinian. It created some hard cases. Fitz was one of them.

People like that aren't stupid, but they don't scare easily, either.

Fitz was terrified of Molly.

My stomach quivered in an unpleasant manner.

"No," I told him. "I don't work for her. I'm not a servitor."

He frowned. "Then . . . you work for the ex-cop bi . . . uh, lady?"

"Kid," I said, "you have no idea who you're screwing around with. You pointed weapons at the wrong people. I know where you live now. They will, too."

He went white. "No," he said. "Look . . . you don't know what it's like here. Zero and the others, they can't help it. He doesn't let them do anything but what he wants."

"Baldy, you mean?" I asked.

Fitz let out a strained, half-hysterical bark of laughter. "He calls himself Aristedes. He's got power."

"Power to push a bunch of kids around?"

"You don't know," Fitz said, speaking quietly. "He tells you to do something and . . . and you do it. It never even occurs to you to do anything else. And . . . and he moves so fast. I'm not . . . I

think he might not even be human.”

“He’s human,” I said. “He’s just another asshole.”

A faint, weary spark of humor showed in Fitz’s face. Then he said, “If that’s true, then how does he do it?”

“He’s a sorcerer,” I said. “Middleweight talent with a cult to make him feel bigger. He’s got some form of kinetomancy I’m not familiar with, to move that fast. And some really minor mind mojo, if he’s got to pick kids to do his dirty work for him.”

“You make him sound like a small-time crook . . . like a car thief or something.”

“In the greater scheme, yeah,” I said. “He’s a petty crook. He’s Fagin.”

Fitz frowned. “From . . . from that Dickens book? Uh . . . *Oliver Twist*?”

I lifted my eyebrows. The kid had read. Serious readers weren’t common in the system. Those who did read mostly seemed to focus on, you know, kids’ books. Not many of them rolled around to Dickens unless they got unlucky in high school English. I would have been willing to bet that Fitz hadn’t made it past his freshman year of high school, at the very most.

He was someone who thought for himself, and he had at least a little bit of magical talent. That probably explained why he’d been put in charge of the other boys. Aside from his evident good sense, his company notwithstanding, the kid had some innate magical talent of his own. Fitz had probably been slowly learning to shake off whatever magic it was that Baldy—Aristedes—used on him. The bad guy operated in a cultleader mind-set. Anyone who wasn’t a slavish follower would be utilized as a handy lieutenant, until such time as they could be disposed of productively—or at least quietly.

I didn’t like Fitz’s chances at all.

“Something like that,” I said.

Fitz leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. “I didn’t want to hurt anyone,” he said. “I don’t even know any of those people. But he ordered it. And they were all going to do it. And I couldn’t let them just . . . just turn into murderers. They’re the only . . . They’re . . .”

“They’re yours,” I said quietly. “You look out for them.”

“Someone has to,” Fitz said. “Streets weren’t ever easy. About six months ago, though . . . they got hard. Real hard. Things came out. You could see them at night sometimes—shapes. Shadows.” He started shivering, and his voice became a whisper. “They’d take people. People who didn’t have someone to protect them would just vanish. So . . .”

“Baldy,” I said quietly.

“He killed one of them,” Fitz whispered. “Right in front of me. I saw it. It looked human, but when he was done with it . . . It just *melted*, man.” He shook his head. “Maybe I am crazy. God, it would almost be a relief.”

“You aren’t crazy,” I said. “But you’re in a bad place.”

The light went completely out of the kid’s eyes. “What else is new?”

“Oy,” I muttered. “Like I didn’t have enough to do already.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Look, kid. Go back to the guns at eleven tonight. That street will have gotten quieter by then. I’ll meet you.”

His dull eyes never flickered. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to help you.”

“Crazy, imaginary, invisible-voice hallucination guy,” Fitz said. “He’s going to help me. Yeah, I’ve lost it.”

There was the sudden, burring, metallic buzz of a bell, much like you’d hear in a high school or university hallway. It echoed through the entire building.

“Time for class?” I asked.

“No. Aristedes had us set it up on a timer. Says he needed the warning for his work. It goes off about five minutes before sunrise.”

I felt my back stiffen. “Five minutes?”

Fitz shrugged. "Or seven. Or two. It's in there somewhere."

"Hell's bells," I said, turning it into a swearword. "Stu was right. Time *does* get away from you. Be at the guns at eleven, Fitz."

He grunted and said, in a tired monotone, "Sure, Harvey. Whatever."

Old books *and* old movies. I had to help this kid.

I turned away from him and plunged through several walls and out the side of the building, clenching my teeth over snarls of discomfort. The sky had grown almost fully light. Red was swiftly brightening to orange on the eastern horizon out over Lake Michigan. Once yellow got here, I was history.

Five minutes. Or seven. Or two. That was how long I had to find a safe spot. I consulted my mental map of Chicago, looking for the nearest probable shelter, and found the only spot I thought I could get to in a couple of minutes, Nightcrawler impersonation and all.

Maybe I could get there. And *maybe* it would protect me from the sunrise.

I gritted my teeth, consulted the images in my memory, and, metaphorically speaking, ran for it.

I just had to hope that it wasn't already too late.

Chapter Fourteen

One of the things a lot of people don't understand about magic is that the rules of how it works aren't hard-and-fast; they're fluid, changing with time, with the seasons, with location, and with the intent of a practitioner. Magic isn't alive in the sense of a corporeal, sentient being, but it does have a kind of anima all its own. It grows, swells, wanes, and changes.

Some facets of magic are relatively steady, like the way a person with a strong magical talent fouls up technology—but even that relative constant is one that has been slowly changing over the centuries. Three hundred years ago, magical talents screwed up other things—like causing candle flames to burn in strange colors and milk to instantly sour (which had to be hell on any wizard who wanted to bake anything). A couple of hundred years before that, exposure to magic often had odd effects on a person's skin, creating the famous blemishes that had become known as the devil's mark.

Centuries from now, who knows? Maybe magic will have the side effect of making you really good-looking and popular with the opposite sex—but I'm not holding my breath.

I mean, you know.

I wouldn't be. If I still had any.

Anyway, the point is that everyone thinks that the sunrise is all about abolishing evil. It's the light coming up out of the darkness, right?

Well, yeah. Sometimes. But mostly it's just sunrise. It's a part of every day, a steady mark of the passing of whirling objects in the void. Granted, there isn't much black magic associated with the sun coming over the horizon—in fact, I've never even heard of any. But it isn't a cleansing force of Good and Right.

It is, however, one hell of a cleansing force, generally speaking. Therein lay my problem.

A spirit isn't meant to be hanging around in the mortal world unless it's got a body to live in. It's supposed to be on Carmichael's El train, I guess, or in Paradise or Hell or Valhalla or something. Spirits are made of energy—they're made of 99.9 percent pure, delicious, nutritious magic. Accept no substitute.

Spirits and sunrise go together like germs and bleach, respectively. The renewing forces flowing through the world with the new day wash over the planet like a silent, invisible tsunami, a riptide of magic that will inevitably wear away at even the strongest of mortal spells, giving them an effective shelf life if they aren't maintained.

A wandering spirit, caught out beneath the sunrise, would be dissolved. It isn't a question of standing in a shady spot, any more than standing in your kitchen would protect you from an oncoming tsunami. You have to get to somewhere that is actually *safe*, that is somehow shielded, sheltered, or otherwise lifted above the renewing riptide of sunrise.

I was a ghost, after all. So I ran for the one place I thought might shelter me, and that I could reach the quickest.

I ran for my grave.

I have my own grave, headstone already in place, the darned thing all dug out and open, just ready to receive me. It was a present from an enemy who, in retrospect, didn't seem nearly as scary as she had been at the time. She'd been making a grand gesture in front of the seamier side of the supernatural community at large, delivering me a death threat while simultaneously demonstrating her ability to get me a grave in a boneyard with very exclusive access, convincing its management that it ought to break city ordinances and leave a gaping hole in the earth at the foot of my headstone. I don't know what she'd bribed or threatened them with, but it had stayed where it was, yawning open in Chicago's famous Graceland Cemetery, for years.

And maybe it would finally be useful as something other than a set piece for brooding.

I pulled Sir Stuart's vanishing trick and realized that I couldn't jump much farther than maybe three hundred yards at a hop. Still, I could do it a lot faster than running, and it didn't seem to wear me out the way I would expect such a thing to do. It became an exercise like running itself—repeating the same process over and over to go from Point A to Point B.

I blinked through the front gate of Graceland, took a couple more hops, trying to find the right spot by this big Greek temple-looking mausoleum, and arrived, in a baseball player's slide, at the gaping hole in the ground. My incorporeal body slid neatly over the white snow that ran right up to the edge of the grave, and I dropped into the cool, shady trench that had been prepared for me.

Sunlight washed over the world above a few heartbeats later. I heard it, felt it, the way I had once felt a minor earthquake through the soles of my shoes in Washington State. There was a harsh, clear, silvery note that hung in the air for a moment, like the after-tone of an enormous chime. I closed my eyes and scrunched up against the side of the grave that felt most likely to let me avoid obliteration.

I waited for several seconds.

Nothing happened.

It was dim and cool and quiet in my grave. It was . . . really quite restful. I mean, you see things on television and in movies about someone lying in a coffin or in a grave, and it's always this hideous, terrifying experience. I'd been to my grave before, and it had disturbed me every time. I guess maybe I was past all that.

Death is only frightening from the near side.

I sat back against the wall of my grave, stretching my legs out ahead of me, leaning my head back against it, and closed my eyes. There was no sound but for a bit of wind in the cemetery's trees, and the muted ambient music of the living, breathing city. Cars. Horns. Distant music. Sirens. Trains. Construction. A few birds that called Graceland home.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so . . .

Peaceful. Content.

And free. Free to do nothing. Free to rest. Free to turn away from horrible, black things in my memory, to let go of burdens for a while.

I left my eyes closed for a time, and let the contentment and the quiet fill me.

"You're new," said a quiet, calm voice.

I opened my eyes, vaguely annoyed that my rest had been interrupted after only a few moments—and looked up at a sky with only a hint of blue still in it. Violet twilight was coming on with the night.

I sat up, away from the wall of my grave, startled. What the hell? I'd been resting for only a minute or two. Hadn't I? I blinked up at the sky several times and pushed myself slowly to my feet. I felt heavy, and it was harder to rise than it should have been, as if I'd been covered in wet, heavy blankets or one of those lead-lined aprons they use around X-ray machines.

"I always like seeing new things being born," said the voice—a child's voice. "You can guess what they're going to become, and then watch and see if it happens."

My grave was about six feet deep. I'm considerably over six feet tall. As I stood, my eyes were a few inches above the top of half a foot of snow that covered the ground at that spot. So it wasn't hard to see the little girl.

She might have been six years old and looked small, even for her age. She wore a nineteenth-century outfit, an almost ridiculously frilly, ornate dress for a child who would probably have it splattered with dirt or food within the hour. Her shoes looked handmade and had little buckles on them. Over one shoulder she was carrying a tiny, lacy parasol that matched her dress. She was pretty—like most children—and had blond hair and bright green eyes.

"Hi," I said.

“Hello,” she said, with a little Shirley Temple curtsy. “It is a pleasure to meet you, the late Mr. Harry Dresden.”

I decided to be careful. What were the odds she was really a little girl, as she appeared? “How did you know my name?”

She folded the little parasol closed and tapped it against the headstone. It was made of white marble. Letters had been inscribed upon it in gold, or at least something goldlike, and it still gleamed despite about a decade of exposure. It had a pentacle inscribed beneath its simple legend: HERE LIES HARRY DRESDEN. Beneath the pentacle, it continued: HE DIED DOING THE RIGHT THING.

For a moment, there was a strange, sweet taste in my mouth, and the scent of pine needles and fresh greenery filled my nose. A frisson rippled up and down my spine, and I shivered. Then the taste and scent were both gone.

“Do you know me?” she asked. “I’m famous.”

I squinted at her for a moment. Then I made an effort of will and vanished from the bottom of the grave, reappearing beside the child. I was facing the wrong direction again, and I sighed as I turned to face her and then glanced around me. In Graceland there’s a statue of a small girl, a child known as Inez. It’s been there for going on two centuries, and every few years stories circulate about how the statue will go missing—and how visitors to the graveyard have reported encounters with a little girl in a period dress.

The statue was gone from its case.

“You’re Inez,” I said. “Famous ghost of Graceland.”

The little girl laughed and clapped her hands. “I have been called so.”

“I heard they debunked you a couple of years ago. That the statue was just there as advertising for some sculptor or something.”

She opened the parasol again and put it over a shoulder, spinning it idly. “Goodness. People confused about things that happened hundreds of years before they were born. Who would have imagined.” She looked me up and down and said, “I like your coat.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I like your parasol.”

She beamed. “You’re so courteous. Sometimes I think I shall never again meet anyone who is properly polite.” She looked at me intently and then said, “I think . . . you shall be”—she pursed her lips, narrowed her eyes, and nodded slowly—“a monster.”

I frowned. “What?”

“All newborn things become something,” said Inez.

“I’m not a newborn.”

“But you are,” she said. She nodded down at my grave. “You have entered a new world. Your old life is no more. You cannot be a part of it any longer. The wide universe stretches before you.” She looked around the cemetery calmly. “I have seen many, many newborns, Mr. Dresden. And I can see what they are going to become. You, young shade, are quite simply a monster.”

“Am not,” I said.

“Not at the moment, perhaps,” she said. “But . . . as time goes by, as those you care about grow old and pass on, as you stand helpless while greater events unfold . . . you will be. Patience.”

“You’re wrong.”

Her dimples deepened. “Why are you so upset, young shade? I really don’t see anything wrong with being a monster.”

“I do,” I said. “The monster part?”

“Oh,” the girl said, shaking her head. “Don’t be so simple. People adore monsters. They fill their songs and stories with them. They define themselves in relation to them. Do you know what a monster is, young shade? Power. Power and choice. Monsters make choices. Monsters shape the world. Monsters force us to become stronger, smarter, better. They sift the weak from the strong and provide a forge for the steeling of souls. Even as we curse monsters, we admire them. Seek to

become them, in some ways.” Her eyes became distant. “There are far, far worse things to be than a monster.”

“Monsters hurt people. I don’t.”

Inez burst out in girlish giggles. She turned in a circle, parasol whirling, and in a singsong voice said, “Harry Dresden, hung upon a tree. Afraid to embrace his des-tin-y.” She looked me up and down again, her eyes dancing, and nodded firmly. “Monster. They’ll write books about you.”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I didn’t know what to say.

“This little world is so small,” she continued. “So dull. So dreary.” She gave me a warm smile. “You aren’t shackled here, Mr. Dresden. Why remain?”

I shivered. A cold feeling swelled up in the pit of my stomach. It began to spread. I said nothing.

“Ahh,” Inez murmured—a sound of satisfaction. Her eyes went to my gravestone and she tilted her head to one side. “Did you?” she asked brightly.

I shook my head. “Did I what?”

“Did you die doing the right thing?”

I thought about it for a moment. And for a moment more. Then I said, quietly, “I . . . No. I didn’t.”

She tilted her head the other way. “Oh?”

“They had . . . a little girl,” I said quietly. It took me a moment to realize that I was speaking the words out loud and not just hearing them in my head. “They were going to hurt her. And I pulled out all the stops. To get her back. I . . .”

I suddenly felt sick again. My mind flashed back to the image of Susan’s death as her body fought to change into a monstrous form, locking her away forever as a prisoner of her own blood thirst. I felt her fever-hot skin beneath my lips where I had kissed her forehead. And I felt her blood spray as I cut her throat, triggering the spell that wiped out every murdering Red Court son of a bitch on the same planet with my little girl.

It had been the only way. I had no choice.

Didn’t I?

Maybe not at that point. But it was the choices I’d made up until that moment that had shaped the event. I could have done things differently. It might have changed everything. It might have saved Susan’s life.

I shuddered as another memory struck me. Complete, lifeless numbness in my legs. Aching pains of the body. The helpless fury I’d felt when I realized that a fall from a ladder had broken my spine—that I was paralyzed and helpless to do anything for my daughter. I remembered realizing that I was going to have to do something I would never have considered before that point.

“I crossed a line,” I said quietly. “Lines, plural. I did things I shouldn’t have done. It wasn’t right. And I knew it. But . . . I wanted to help the little girl. And I . . .”

“Sinned?” she suggested, her large eyes eerily serene. “Chose the left-hand path? Fell from grace? Cast the world into madness?”

“Whatever,” I said.

“And you think you aren’t a monster.” Calmly, she folded the parasol again and trailed its tip in the snow, humming a quiet little song.

That cold, sick feeling swelled and began to spread even more. I found myself shivering. Dear God, she was right. She was exactly right. I hadn’t meant any of it to hurt anyone, but did that really matter? I had made a decision to do something I knew was wrong. I bargained my life away to Queen Mab, promised her my service and loyalty, though I knew that the darkness of the mantle of the Winter Knight would swallow me, that my talents and strengths could be subsumed into wicked service for the Queen of Air and Darkness.

My little girl’s life had been on the line when I made that choice, when I had acquired power beyond the ken of most mortals.

I thought of the desperation in the eyes of Fitz and his gang. I thought of the petty malice of Baldy and those like him. Of the violence in the streets.

How many other men's daughters had died because of my choice?

That thought, that truth, hit me like a landslide, a flash of clarity and insight that erased every other thought, the frantic and blurry activity of my recent efforts.

Like it or not, I had embraced the darkness. The fact that I had died before I could have found myself used for destructive purposes meant nothing. I had picked up a red lightsaber. I had joined the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants.

I had become what I always fought.

There was no denying it. No chance to correct my mistake. I suddenly wanted, desperately, to simply drop back into the grave and seek out the quiet and peace I had found there. Dammit, but I wanted to rest.

I folded my arms and stared at Inez. My voice came out ragged and harsh. "You aren't the ghost of a little girl."

Her little face lit up with another smile. "If I am no ghost, why do you look so haunted?"

And then she was gone. No sound, no flash, no nothing. Just gone.

If I were living, then the headache I felt coming on would be typical of this kind of situation. Cryptic supernatural entities go with the territory in my line of work.

But, man, I hate it when they get in the last word.

"An insufferable entity," murmured a slow, deep, redolent basso voice behind me. "Her soul is made of crooked lines."

I stiffened. I hadn't sensed any kind of presence the way I had with Inez, and I knew exactly what could happen when you let someone sneak up behind you. Even though rule number one for dealing with supernatural beings—never show fear—is simple, it sure as hell isn't easy. I know the kinds of things that are out there.

I turned, very calmly and slowly, reminding myself that I didn't have a heart to pound wildly, and that there wasn't really any sweat on my palms. I didn't need to shiver from fear any more than I needed to shiver from cold.

My self apparently found its own assurances unreliable. Stupid self.

There was a tall and menacing figure floating in the air behind me, maybe three feet off the ground. It was swathed entirely in a rich cloak of patina, its hood lifted, creating an area of completely black shadow within. You could see the dim suggestion of a face in the blackness. It looked like the old images of the Shadow, who clouded the minds of men. The cloak wavered and billowed slowly in a breeze with the approximate viscosity of a lava lamp.

"Um," I said. "Hi."

The figure drifted downward until its feet were resting atop the snow. "Is this preferable?"

"Aren't we literal?" I said. "Uh, yes. That's fine." I peered at it. "You're . . . Eternal Silence. The statue on Dexter Graves's monument."

Eternal Silence just stood there in silence.

"I'll take that as a yes," I said. "I guess you aren't really just a local statue. Are you?"

"Your assumption is correct," Eternal Silence replied.

I nodded. "What do you want?"

It drifted slowly closer. The deep voice—and this guy made James Earl Jones sound like Mickey Mouse—rumbled out. "You must understand your path."

"My path."

"That before you. That behind."

I sighed. "That's less than helpful."

"It is more than necessary," Eternal Silence said. "It is essential to survival."

"Survival?" I asked, and I couldn't help myself. I chuckled. When you've faced off with enough Grim Reaper wannabes, it gets kinda routine. "I'm already dead."

It said nothing.

“Okay,” I said, after a minute. “Survival. Of who?”

It didn’t answer for a long moment, and I shook my head. I began to think that I could probably spend all night talking to every lunatic spirit in this freaking place and never make sense of any of them. And I didn’t have all night to waste.

I had begun to focus my thoughts on another series of Nightcrawler hops, when that deep voice spoke—and this time, it wasn’t something I heard. It just resonated in my head, in my thoughts, a burst of pure meaning that slammed into my head as if inscribed on the front of a cruise missile:

EVERYONE.

I staggered and clutched at my skull with my hands. “Agh!” I stammered. “Hell’s bells! Is it too much to ask you to turn down the volume?”

UNINTENTIONAL. MORTAL FRAILTY. INSUFFICIENT UNDERSTANDING OF VOCALIZATION. PRECONSIDERED VOCABULARY EXHAUSTED.

I actually disincorporated at this full-on assault of thought. My freaking spirit body spread out into a giant, puffy cloud of vaguely Dresdencolored mist. And it hurt. I mean, that’s the only word I can think of that really applies. It wasn’t like any kind of pain I’d felt before, and I’m a connoisseur when it comes to pain. It wasn’t pain of the body, the way I had known it. It was more like . . . like the way your head feels when you hear or see an image or concept that flabbergasts you so hard that the only thing you can say about it is, “That is so wrong.”

That. Times a million. And not just in my head, but full body.

It took a full minute for that feeling to fade, and it was only then that I could see myself coming back together again.

“Don’t explain!” I said, almost desperately, when I looked up to see Eternal Silence hovering a little closer to me. “Don’t! That hurt!”

It waited.

“We have to keep this simple,” I stuttered, thinking out loud. “Or you’re going to kill me. Again.” I pressed the heel of my hand against my forehead and said, “I’m going to ask yes or no questions,” I said. “For yes, stay silent. For no, indicate otherwise. Agreed?”

Nothing. Eternal Silence might not have even been there, except that his cloak kept rolling and billowing, lava-lamp fashion.

“Is your cloak red?”

The hood of the cloak twitched left and right, once.

“Fantastic,” I muttered. “Communication.” I mopped at my face with my hands and said, “Okay. When you say everyone, are you talking, like, everyone I know?”

Twitch.

“More than that?”

Silence.

“Um. The whole city?”

Twitch.

“What—more?”

Silence.

“So . . . you mean . . . like . . . everyone-everyone. Everyone. The whole planet.”

Silence.

“And me understanding my freaking path saves them?”

Silence. Twitch.

“Great,” I muttered. “Next you’ll want me to take a pebble out of your hand.”

Twitch.

“I wasn’t being *literal*. . . . Okay, yeah, you and I aren’t going to communicate well this way.”

Silence. Somehow . . . emphatic.

I stopped and pondered for a moment. Then I said, “Wait. This is connected, isn’t it? With what Captain Murphy sent me to do.”

Silence.

"Find my killer?" I asked him. "I don't get it. How does finding my killer save the world?"

The deep voice repeated earlier phrases. "You must understand your path. It is more than necessary. It is essential to survival."

"There's a little irony in Eternal Silence being stuck on a looping sound bite." I sighed.

A wraith's moan drifted into the air, and I tensed, looking around.

One of those ragged-scarecrow shapes was rising from the earth of a grave, like something being hauled up out of deep mud. It moaned in mindless hunger, its eyes vacant.

Then there was another moan. And another. And another.

Wraiths were coming up out of graves all around me.

I started breathing harder, though I didn't need to. "Yeah, okay, brilliant idea for a safe house, Harry. *It's a freaking graveyard*. Where else are ghosts going to be?"

Eternal Silence only stared at me. There was an amused quality to its silence.

"I have to go," I said. "Is that all you had for me? Understand my path?"

Silence. It lifted a green-shrouded limb in a gesture of farewell.

The first wraith finished with what was evidently its nightly routine of slogging out of the earth and moaning. Its empty eyes turned toward me and it began to drift my way, immaterial toes dangling down through the snow.

"Screw this," I said, and vanished. One, two, three hops, and I was to the nearest brick wall of the cemetery. I gritted my teeth and plunged into it.

And slammed my face into cold stone.

Pain lanced through my nose, and I snarled at my own stupidity. *Dammit, Harry*. Walls are built to keep things out—but walls around graveyards are built to keep things *in*. I'd known that since I was a freaking kid.

I checked behind me. The wraiths were drifting after me in a slow, graceful horde, adding members as they went. They weren't fast, but there were dozens and dozens of them. Again I was reminded of documentaries I'd seen showing giant clouds of jellyfish.

I gritted my teeth and thought fast. When walls are built, they are intended as physical barriers. As a result of that intention, invested by dozens or scores of builders, they took on a similar solidity when it came to the spiritual, as well. It's why they held most ghosts inside graveyards—and it probably had something to do with the way a threshold formed around a home, too.

But where human intention had created a barrier, that same intention had also created an access point.

I turned and began vanishing in a line, straight for the gates of the boneyard.

I don't know what I would have done if they had been closed. Shut gates and shut doors carry their own investment of intention, just as the walls do. But *open* gates are another matter entirely, and the gates of Graceland stood wide-open. As I went through them, I looked back at what seemed like a modest-sized army of wraiths heading for the opening.

I had a lightbulb moment.

The gates of the cemetery were being left open.

And hordes of wraiths haunted the streets of Chicago by night lately.

"Aha, Morty," I said. "And now we know where they're coming from."

Someone, someone *alive*, was opening those gates at night. That meant that we had a place to begin, a trail we could attempt to follow to find out who was stirring up the city's spooks to use against Morty—and why.

I had information. I had something to trade Mort for his ongoing help.

I suddenly felt like an investigator again.

"Hot diggity dog," I said, grinning. "The game's a-freaking-foot!"

Chapter Fifteen

I revved up the memory and started jumping. It was a quick way to travel in the city—the ability to go over buildings and ignore traffic signals, one-way streets, and cars was a real plus. It didn't take me long to get to Mortimer's house.

It was on fire.

There were fire trucks there, lights blazing. The firemen were moving quickly, professionally, but though the house was well ablaze, they had only one hose up and running. As I stood there, staring, two more started up, but I knew it was a lost cause. Morty's place was burning even more swiftly and brightly than mine had. Or maybe the dark was just making it look that way.

A cop or two showed up as the firemen kept the blaze from spreading to the houses around it—not hard, given the snow on the ground. Blue lights from the bubbles on the cop cars joined the red and yellow of the CFD. People stood around watching the fire—in my experience, they often do.

Of course . . . they didn't usually do it out in the cold. And they didn't usually do it in six inches of snow. And they tended to wander off when the fire began to subside. And talk. And blink. And their clothing is generally from the current century.

The crowd of onlooking Chicago civilians were ghosts.

I walked among them, looking at faces. They were much like any other group of folks, apart from the period outfits. I recognized a few from Sir Stuart's home-defense brigade—but only a few, and they were the more recent shades. The rest were just . . . people. Men, women, and children.

A boy maybe ten years old was the only shade who seemed to notice me. Beside him stood a girl, who must have been about seven when she died. They were holding hands. He looked up at me as I passed by, and I stopped to stare down at him.

"Where do we go now?" he asked. "I don't know another place to go."

"Um," I said. "I don't know, either. Hey, did you see what happened?"

"It came back again tonight. Then men came with fire. They burned the house. They took the little man away."

I stiffened. "The Grey Ghost took Mort?"

"No, men took him," the boy said.

The girl said, in a soft little voice, "We used to play with other children by the river. But he brought us here. He was always nice to us." Her facial expression never changed. It was flat, empty.

The boy sighed, touched the little girl's shoulder, and turned back to stare at the dwindling flames. I stood there watching them for a moment, and could see them growing more visibly transparent. I checked the other shades. It was happening to them, too, to a greater or lesser degree.

"Hey," I said, to the boy. "Do you know Sir Stuart?"

"The big man. The soldier," the boy said, nodding. "He's in the garden. Behind the house."

"Thank you," I said, and went to look, vanishing to the side of Mort's house and then jumping again, to the garden.

Mort's backyard was like his front—sculpted, carefully maintained, decorated with Japanese sensibilities, spare and elegant. There was what looked like a koi pond, now filled with snow. There were trees, and more of the little bonsai pieces, delicate and somehow vulnerable. The fire had been close enough and hot enough to melt any coating of snow from their little branches.

What was left of Sir Stuart lay in a circle in the snow.

They'd used fire.

A perfect circle was melted in the snow, out toward the back of the yard. They'd used gasoline, it looked like—the snow was melted down all the way to the scorched grass. Alcohol burns about three times as hot as gas, and faster, and it melts the snow fast enough for water to drown the flame. Someone had used the fire as part of a circle trap—pretty standard for dealing with spirits and other heavily supernatural entities. Once trapped in a circle, a spirit was effectively helpless; unable to leave, and unable to exercise power through its barrier.

The devilish part of the trap was the fire. Fire's real, even to spirits, and brings pain to the immaterial as fast as it does to flesh-and-blood creatures. That's one huge reason I always used fire in my mortal career. Fire burns, period. Even practically invulnerable things don't like dealing with fire.

There was maybe half of Sir Stuart left. Most of his upper body was there and part of his right arm. His legs were mostly gone. There wasn't any blood. What was left of him looked like a roll of papers rescued from a fire. The edges were blackened and crumbling slowly away.

The horrible part was that I knew he was still alive, or what passed for being alive among ghosts. Otherwise, he would simply be gone.

Did he feel pain? I knew that if I were in his condition, I would. Sure, maybe I knew that there was no spoon, but when it came down to it, I wasn't sure I could deny that much apparent reality. Or maybe the memory of pain wasn't an issue. Maybe the weird form of pain Eternal Silence had showed me had some sort of spiritual analogue. Or maybe, fire being fire, he was just in very real, very familiar agony.

I shuddered. Not that I could do anything about it. The circle that trapped him would keep me out as easily as it kept him in. In theory, I could take it down, but only if I could physically move something across it to break its continuity. I looked around quickly and spotted a twig standing out of the snow a few feet away. All I would need to do was move it about three feet.

It was like trying to eat broth with a fork. I just couldn't get hold of the stick. My hand went through it time and time again, no matter what I tried. I couldn't even get the damned thing to wiggle.

I wasn't ghost enough to help Sir Stuart. Not like that, anyway.

"Sir Stuart?" I asked quietly.

I could see only one of his eyes. It half opened. "HmMMM?"

I squatted down on my heels next to the circle. "It's Harry Dresden."

"Dresden," he slurred, and his mouth turned up in a faint smile. "Pardon me if I don't rise. Perhaps it was something I ate."

"Of course," I said. "What happened?"

"I was a fool," he said. "Our attacker came at the same time every night. I made the mistake of assuming that was true because it was as soon as the attacker could assemble his forces."

"The Grey Ghost," I said.

Sir Stuart grunted. "Arrived at dusk, sooner than I would have dared the open air. No mob of spirits this time. It came with half a dozen mortals and they set the house on fire. I was able to get Mortimer out of the house in time, but they'd set a trap for me in the backyard." One hand gestured at the circle within which he lay. "He was taken at the command of the Grey Ghost."

I frowned. "These mortals. They could hear the Grey Ghost?"

"Aye," Sir Stuart said.

"Stars and stones," I growled. "I could barely get two people in Chicago to hear me. This joker has half a dozen? How?"

Sir Stuart shook his head faintly. "Would that I knew."

"We'll find Morty," I said. "Let me figure out how to get you out of there, and then we'll go find him."

He opened his eyes fully and focused on me for the first time. "No," he said in a gentle voice. "I won't."

“Come on,” I said. “Don’t talk like that. We’ll get you patched up.”

Sir Stuart let out a small laugh. “Nay, wizard. Too much of me has been lost. I’ve only held together this long so that I could speak to you.”

“What happened to our world being mutable in time with our expectations? Isn’t that still true?”

“To a degree,” Sir Stuart said affably, weakly. “I’ve been injured before. Small hurts are restored simply enough.” He gestured at his broken body. “But this? I’ll be like the others when I restore myself.”

“The others?”

“The warriors who defended Mortimer’s home,” he said. “They faded over time. Forgetting, little by little, about their mortal lives.”

I thought about the soldiers I’d seen battling the enemy shades and wraiths—silent, severe, seemingly disconnected from the world around them. They’d fought loyally and ably enough. But I was willing to bet that they couldn’t remember why they did so or who they were fighting.

I imagined Sir Stuart like the rest of them—a translucent outline, his empty eyes focused on something else entirely. Always faithful. Always silent.

I shivered.

It could happen to me, too.

“Listen to me, boy,” Sir Stuart said. “We didn’t trust you. We assumed you were mixed up in whatever it is the Grey Ghost wanted.”

“Like hell,” I said.

“You don’t know that,” Sir Stuart said flatly. “For all we knew, you could have been directed by that creature without your own knowledge. For that matter, you don’t have the feel of a normal ghost. It could have created you whole from the spirit world.”

I scowled and began to argue—and couldn’t. I’ve been faced with the odd and unusual and had drawn incorrect conclusions too many times. When people are scared, they don’t think straight. Mort had been terrified.

“Do you still think that?” I asked.

“No reason for you to be here if you were,” Sir Stuart said. “The worst has happened. Were you a plant, you would not have come. Though I suppose you might still be a dupe.”

“Thanks,” I said wryly.

He softened the words with another smile. “But dupe or not, it may be that ye can help Mortimer. And it is critical that you do so. Without his influence, this city will be in terrible danger.”

“Yeah, you aren’t exactly increasing the tension by telling me that,” I said. “We’re already sort of playing for maximum stakes.”

“I know not what you mean,” Sir Stuart replied. “But I tell you this: Those shades standing around the house, one and all, are murderers.”

I blinked and looked back at the still-smoldering house and at the enormous circle of spirits around it.

“Each and every one of them,” Sir Stuart said. “Mortimer gave them something they needed to turn aside from their madness: a home. If you do not restore him to freedom so that he may care for these poor souls, they will kill again. As sure as the sun rises, they won’t be able to help themselves.” He exhaled wearily and closed his eyes. “Fifty years of maddened shades unleashed upon the city all at once. Preying on mortals. Blood will run in buckets.”

I stared at him for a moment. Then I said, “How am I supposed to do that?”

“I’ve not the foggiest,” Sir Stuart replied. He fumbled at his belt and drew that monster pistol. He paused for a moment, grimacing. Then he tossed it weakly at my feet. It tumbled through the circle with a flicker of energies and landed atop the snow without sinking into it—the apparition of a weapon.

I stared for a second. A spirit couldn't project its power across a circle—and I was sure that power was exactly what the gun represented. So if it had crossed the circle's barrier, it meant that it was power that no longer belonged to Sir Stuart. On several levels, what he had just done was a violent act of self-mutilation—like chopping off your own hand.

He gestured weakly toward the gun, and said, "Take it."

I picked it up gingerly. It weighed a ton. "What am I going to do with this?"

"Help Mortimer," he replied. His shape began to flicker and fade at the edges. "I'm sorry. That I couldn't do more. Couldn't teach you more." He opened his eyes again and leaned toward me, his expression intent. "Memories, Dresden. They're power. They're weapons. Make from your memory a weapon against them." His voice lost its strength and his eyes sagged closed. "Three centuries of playing guardian . . . but I've failed my trust. Redeem my promise. Please. Help Mortimer."

"Yes," I said quietly. "I will."

That faint smile appeared again, and Sir Stuart nodded once. Then he let out his breath in a sigh. He faded even more, and as I watched, his limbs simply renewed themselves, appearing as his shape became more translucent. The damage reversed itself before my eyes.

A moment later, he sat up. He looked around, his gaze passing right through me. Then he paused and stared at the ruined house, his brow furrowed in puzzled concentration—an expression mirrored on the faces of most of the spirits present.

Sir Stuart was nowhere to be seen in the shade's hollow eyes.

I bowed my head and clenched my teeth, cursing. I had *liked* the guy. Just like I had liked Morty, whatever insults I may have offered him. I was angry about what had happened to him. And I was angry about the position he had put me in. Now I was the one responsible for somehow finding and helping Morty, when I could barely communicate with anyone without him. All while the bad guy, whatever the hell it was, apparently got to chat it up with its own flunkies at will.

I couldn't touch anything. I couldn't make anything happen. My magic was gone. And now not only was I to track down my own murderer, but I had to rescue Mort Lindquist, as well.

Fabulous. Maybe I should make it my new slogan: *Harry Dresden—I take responsibility for more impossible situations in the first twenty-four hours of being dead than most people do all day.*

More snow was beginning to fall. Eventually, it would break the circle that had trapped what was left of Sir Stuart. Though I didn't know where he would go to take shelter from the sunrise. Maybe he would just know, the way I had seemed to—some kind of postdeath survival instinct. Or maybe he wouldn't.

Either way, it didn't seem like there was much I could do about it, and I hated that fact with a burning passion. Sir Stuart and the other spirits needed Morty Lindquist. Before I died, I might have been Harry Dresden, wizard at large. Now I was Harry Dresden, immaterial messenger boy, persuader, and wheedler.

I desperately wanted to blow something into tiny, tiny pieces—and then disintegrate the pieces.

All things considered, it was probably not the best frame of mind in which to handle a confrontation in a rational, diplomatic manner.

"Ah," said a whispery, oily voice behind me. "She was right. The tall one returns."

"Look at him," said another voice, higher-pitched and inhuman. "He will make *such* a meal."

"Our orders are—"

"Orders," said a third voice, filled with scorn. "She is not here. We shall share him, the three of us, and none shall be the wiser."

"Agreed," said the second voice eagerly.

After a pause, the first voice said, "Agreed."

I turned and saw three of the dark-robed forms from the night before during the attack on Casa Lindquist. Lemurs. Their clothing stirred with lazy, aquatic fluidity at the touch of an immaterial

wind. From this close, I could see the faint images of pale faces inside their hoods, and the sheen of gleaming, hungry eyes.

“Take him!” said the first lemur.

And three of the hungriest old ghosts of Chicago blurred toward the new guy.

Chapter Sixteen

The lemurs pounced, and I vanished, straight up.

I stood in empty air a hundred feet above them, furious, and called down, “You mooks picked a really lousy time to start up with me!”

Hooded heads searched upward, but I was an indistinct shape in a darkened sky already blurred by snow, while they were sharp outlines against a field of white.

I started throwing a punch, vanished again, and reappeared right behind lemur number one. My fist drove into the base of his neck just as I shouted, “BAMF!”

There isn’t much honor in a rabbit punch, but it’s a pretty darned good way to down an opponent. Whatever rules governed the world of spirit, there must have been some kind of analogue to a human nervous system. The lemur let out a choking gasp and fell to the ground as the other two panicked at the sudden assault and vanished. I kicked the downed guy in the head and neck a few times to help him on his way to Analogue-Concussion Land, screaming in pure and incoherent rage all the while.

I had a fraction of a second’s warning, a cold breath on the back of my neck, a rippling wave of ethereal pressure against my back. I vanished, to reappear five feet behind my original position—and this time, I *meant* to be facing the same way when I arrived.

I got there in time to see one of the other lemurs swing a freaking hatchet at the space my skull had recently vacated. He stumbled, off balance from the miss, and I kicked his ass—literally. I leaned my upper body back a bit and pretended I was using my heel to stomp an aluminum can flat. It’s a powerful kick, especially with my full body weight behind it, and the lemur flew forward and into the snow.

“Who’s the man?!” I screamed at the sprawled lemurs, fear and anger and excitement pitching my voice about an octave higher than usual. “Who’s the man?!”

The hood had fallen from the face of the second, and an unremarkable man of middle age goggled at me in complete incomprehension—which made sense. Who knew how many decades of pop culture the lemurs had missed out on. They’d probably never even heard of Will Smith.

“I am completely unappreciated in my time,” I muttered.

I am also, apparently, no wizard when it comes to simple mathematics: While I was Will Smithing, lemur number three appeared out of nowhere and smashed a baseball bat against the side of my neck.

The pain was something incredible—more than merely the reaction of physical trauma that I would have expected from such a blow. It also encompassed an almost Olympian sense of nausea combined with a force-five storm of whirling confusion. I felt myself note idly that I guessed egos literally *could* be bruised. It took me another second or two after that to realize that I was floating, drifting sideways and slightly upward, my body at a forty-five-degree diagonal to the ground. There was a roaring sound in my head. An eerie cry of triumph and hunger pealed through the night.

Then the lemurs came for me.

I felt bitterly cold fingers seize me, clamping down like steel claws. I was hauled out to horizontal by frigid, steely hands. I was still disoriented—I was barely able to turn my head enough to see the third lemur approach.

Her hood had fallen back. She was a young woman of unexceptional appearance, neither beautiful nor displeasing. Her eyes, though, were dark and hollow, and a hideous emptiness lay behind them. She stared intently at me for a long beat, her body quivering in some kind of dark rapture.

Then she let out a slow hiss, sank her fingers into the flesh of my left biceps, and ripped off a handful of meat.

Ectoplasmic blood flew. My blood. It scattered through the air in lazy globules that, once they were a few feet from me, fell like raindrops to the surface of the snow.

It hurt. I screamed.

All three lemurs screamed with me, as if triggered into a response by my own cries. The female lemur lifted the goblet of flesh aloft in triumph, then held it over her open mouth and squeezed. More blood pattered out onto her lips and tongue, and she let out a gasp of unadulterated ecstasy before shoving the raw flesh into her mouth as though she hadn't eaten in weeks.

Her eyes rolled back into her head. She shuddered. "Oh," she breathed. "Pain. He's felt so much *pain*. And rage. And joy. Oh, this one *lived*."

"Here," said the second lemur. "Come take his legs. My turn."

The female bared her bloodied teeth at him and tore another, smaller piece from my arm. She snapped it up and then leaned on my legs, pinning them. The second lemur looked me over like a man perusing a side of beef. Then he ripped a handful of flesh from my right thigh.

It went like that for several minutes, with the three of them taking turns ripping meat from my body.

I won't bore you with the details. I don't like to think about it. They were stronger than me, better than me, more experienced than me when it came to spiritual conflict.

They got me. The monsters got me. And it hurt.

Until footsteps crunched toward us through the snow.

The lemurs never took notice. I was in too much agony to care very much, but I wasn't exactly busy, either. I looked up and saw a lone figure slogging my way through the thick snow. He wasn't very big, and he was dressed in a white parka and white ski pants, with one of those ninja capmask things, also white, covering his face. In his right hand he carried a big, old-style, heavy, portable spotlight, the kind with a plastic carrying handle on top. Its twin incandescent bulbs shone a garish orange over the snow.

I sniggered to myself. He was a person. He sank into the snow with every step. He wouldn't be able to see what was happening right in front of him. No wonder the lemurs paid him no mind.

But ten feet away from me, he abruptly froze in his tracks and blurted, "Holy crap!"

He reached up and ripped off the ninja hood, revealing the thin, fine features of a man of somewhere near forty. His hair was dark, curly, and mussed from the hood; he had glasses perched askew on his bridge of a nose; and his dark eyes were wide with shock. "Harry!"

I stared at him and said, through the blood, "Butters?"

"Stop them," Butters hissed. "Save him! I release you for this task!"

"On it, sahib!" shouted another voice.

A cloud of campfire sparks poured out of the two sources of light in the spotlight, rushing out by the millions, and congealed into a massive, manlike shape. It let out a lion's roar and blurred toward the lemurs.

Two of them were sharp enough to realize something dangerous was coming, and they promptly vanished. The third, the young woman, was in the middle of another bite—and she didn't look up until it was too late.

The light form hit the lemur and simply disintegrated it. As I watched, skin and clothing and flesh were ripped away from the evil spirit, as swiftly and savagely as if peeled off with a sandblaster. A heartbeat later, there was nothing left but a gently drifting cloud of sparks, speckled here and there with the floating shapes of somewhat larger, prismatic gemstones.

The light being looked up and then promptly split into two parts, each one becoming a comet that hurtled into the night sky. There was an explosion almost at once—and the raining bits and pieces of a second lemur came drifting lazily down through the night air, along with more multicolored gems.

There was a terrible howling sound in the night sky above. I heard the flap of heavy robes snapping with rapid motion. The second comet of light darted back and forth, evidently engaged in some kind of aerial combat, and then lemur and comet both came hurtling back down. They struck earth with a thunder that shook the ground while leaving the snow untouched.

The orange lights flowed together into a manlike shape again, this time straddling the lemur's prone form. The being of light rained blows down on the lemur's head, over and over, striking with the speed and power of a motor's pistons. Within ten or twelve seconds, the head of the lemur had been crushed into ectoplasmic guck, and his sparkles of light—his memories—and the same odd, tiny gems began to well up from his broken form.

The light being rose from the form of the fallen lemur and scanned the area around us, his featureless face turning in a slow, alert scan.

"What the hell!" Butters said, his eyes wide. "I mean, what the hell was that, man?"

"Relax, sahib," said a young man's voice. It was coming from the fiery figure, which nodded and made hand-dusting motions of unmistakable satisfaction. "Just taking out the trash. Scum like that are all over these old mortal cities. Part of the posthuman condition, you might say."

I just watched. I didn't feel like doing anything else.

"Yeah, yeah," Butters said. "But he's safe now?"

"For now," the being said, "and as far as I know."

Butters crunched through the snow and stared down at me. The little guy was one of Chicago's small number of medical examiners, a forensic investigator who analyzed corpses and found out all sorts of details about them. A few years ago, he'd analyzed corpses of vampires that had burned to death in a big fire someone started. He'd asserted that they obviously were not human. He'd been packed off to an institution for half a year in response. Now he treaded carefully in his career—or at least he had when I was last alive.

"Is it really him?" Butters asked.

The being of light scanned me with unseen eyes. "I can't spot anything that would suggest he was anything else," he said cautiously. "Which ain't the same as saying it's Harry's ghost. It has . . . more something than other ghosts I've encountered."

Butters frowned. "More what?"

"Something," the being said. "Meaning I'm not sure what. Something I'm not expert in, clearly."

"The, uh, the ghost," Butters said. "It's hurt?"

"Quite severely," the being said. "But it's easily mended—if you wish to do it."

Butters blinked at him. "What? Yes, yes, of *course* I wish it."

"Very good, sahib," the being said. And then it whipped and darted through the night air, gathering up all the floating, glittering gems from the vanishing remains of the lemurs. It brought them together into a single mass and then knelt down next to my head.

"Bob," I said quietly.

Bob the Skull, formerly my personal assistant and confidant, hesitated beside me as I said his name. Once again, I became aware of his intense regard, but if he saw anything, it didn't register on his featureless face.

"Harry," he said. "Open up. You need to restore these memories to your essence."

"Restore what?" I asked.

"Eat 'em," Bob said firmly. "Open your mouth."

I was tired and confused, so it was easier to just do as he said. I closed my eyes as he dropped the mass of gems into my open mouth. But instead of feeling hard gems, fresh, cool water flowed into my mouth, swirling over my parched tongue and throat as I eagerly swallowed it down.

Pain vanished instantly. The disorientation began to fade and disappear. My confusion and weariness followed those others within a moment, and a deep breath later, I was sitting up in place, feeling more or less as sane and together as I had been when I had woken up that evening.

Bob offered me a hand and I took it. He pulled me to my feet as if I'd weighed less than nothing. "Well," he said. "At least you don't seem to be a bad copy. I was half-afraid you'd be some kind of demented Winter Knight wannabe with an eye patch and a goatee or something."

"Um," I said. "Thank you?"

"*De nada*," Bob said.

"Bob," Butters said in a firm voice. "You've fulfilled your task." Bob the Skull sighed and turned to bow in a florid gesture of courtesy toward Butters, before dissolving into a cloud of orange sparks again and flowing back toward the flashlight. I saw then that the spotlight casing hadn't contained lightbulbs and batteries and such—just Bob's skull, a human-bone artifact of a long-dead enchanter who had built it as a haven that could harbor the essence of a spiritual being.

"Hey, Bob," I said. "Could you relay my voice to Butters?"

"Don't have to, former boss," Bob said cheerfully. "On account of the fact that Butters is a whole heck of a lot more talented at magical theory than you."

I frowned. "What?"

"Oh, he doesn't have a lick of magical talent," Bob assured me. "But he's got a *brain*, which, let's face it, hasn't always been your most salient feature."

"Bob," Butters said in a scolding tone. Then he fumbled in his parka's pocket and produced a small, old radio. "Here, see? I had Bob go over your notes from the Nightmare case, Harry. Bob said you created a radio that he could communicate through. So . . ."

I refrained from hitting my own head with the heel of my hand, but just barely. "So it wasn't much of a trick to turn it into a baby monitor. You just needed an old crystal radio."

Butters listened with his head tilted toward the radio and nodded. "I explained the concept to Molly this morning and she put it together in an hour." He waved the spotlight housing Bob's skull. "And I can see spooks by the light of the spirit's form. So I can see and hear you. Hi!"

I stared at the skinny man and didn't know if I wanted to break out into laughter or wild sobs. "Butters . . . you . . . you figured this all out on your own?"

"Well . . . no. I mean, I had a tutor." He bobbled the spotlight meaningfully.

"Ack! Don't make me puke," Bob warned him. "You won't like me when I puke."

"Hush, Bob," said Butters and I in exactly the same tone at exactly the same time.

We both turned to eye each other for a moment. He might have tucked the skull close to his side in a protective gesture of possession.

"You shouldn't stay here, with all the official types around," I said.

"Just thinking the same thing," Butters said. "Come with me?"

"Sure," I said. "Uh. Where?"

"Headquarters," he said.

From Butters's other pocket, there was a hiss and a squawk from what proved to be a long-range walkie-talkie. He picked it up, looked at something on its little display, and said, "Eyes here."

"We've got nothing at his old place," said Murphy's tired voice. "What about you, Eyes?"

"He's standing right here talking to me," Butters said, and not without a trace of pride.

It looked good on him.

"Outstanding, Eyes," Murphy said, her voice brightening with genuine pleasure. "I'm sending you some shadows. Bring him in right away."

"Wilco," Butters said. "Out." He put the radio away, beaming to himself.

"Eyes?" I asked him.

"Daniel kind of gave me the nickname," he said. "They kept putting me on watch, and he wanted to know why they kept making the foureyed guy our lookout. It stuck as my handle."

"Except we have six eyes," Bob the Skull said. "I tried to get him to get me a pair of glasses, and then we'd have *eight*. Like spiders."

I nodded, suddenly understanding. "You still work for the morgue."

Butters smiled. "There are plenty of people listening to our transmissions. Murphy wouldn't let me use my name."

"Murphy is smart," I said.

"Extremely," Butters said, nodding agreement.

"She gave Bob to you?"

"She did," he said. "You being dead and all. She wanted to keep it need-to-know."

"It doesn't upset me," I said, even though it sort of did. "I entrusted those things to her judgment."

"Oh, hey, great segue. Speaking of judgment, you'd better come with me."

"I can do that," I said, and fell into pace beside him. "Where are we going?"

"The Batcave," he said. "Headquarters."

"Headquarters of what?" I asked.

He blinked at me. "The Alliance, of course. The Chicago Alliance."

I lifted my eyebrows. "What Chicago Alliance?"

"The one he organized to help defend the city from the Fomor," Butters replied.

"He?" I asked. "Fomor? What he? He who?"

"I'm sorry, Harry," he said. He bit his lip and looked down. "I figured you knew . . . Marcone. Baron John Marcone."

Chapter Seventeen

I found Stu's pistol on the ground where I'd dropped it during the struggle. Then I followed Butters to his car—an old Plymouth Road Runner. It looked almost worse than my old VW Beetle had the last time I'd seen it. Dents and dings covered its all-steel frame, and some of them looked suspiciously like they'd been raked into the metal with a two-pronged claw—but its engine throbbed with impressive, harmonious power. Its license plates read: MEEPMEEP.

"I kinda traded in my old one," Butters told me as I got in, going straight through the door. I didn't make any noise about the discomfort. Not in front of Butters. It would totally blow my ghostly cool.

"For another old one," I said. My voice issued out of the radio he slipped into a clip attached to the car's sun visor.

"I like steel better than fiberglass," he said. "The Fomor and the faeries are apparently related. Neither one of them likes the touch of any metal with iron in it."

Bob's skull rested in a container that had been custom mounted on the Road Runner's dash—a wooden frame set on a plate that made the skull wobble back and forth like a bobblehead doll. "Lot of interbreeding there," Bob said. "Back in the old, old, *old* days. Before the Sidhe Wars."

I lifted my eyebrows. "I haven't heard much about it."

"Crazy stuff," Bob said with tremendous enthusiasm. "Even before my time, but I've heard all kinds of stories. The Daoine Sidhe, the Tuatha, the Fomor, the Tylwyth Teg, the Shen. Epic alliances, epic betrayals, epic battles, epic weddings, epic sex—"

"Epic sex?" I sputtered. "By what standards, precisely, is *sex* judged to be epic?"

"And tons and tons of mortal simsps like you used as pawns." Bob sighed happily, ignoring my question. "There are no words. It was like *The Lord of the Rings* and *All My Children* made a baby with the Macho Man Randy Savage and a Whac-A-Mole machine."

Butters sputtered at that image.

But . . . I mean, Hell's bells. Who wouldn't?

"Anyway," he choked out a moment later, "the Fomor have a lot of faerie blood in their makeup. I like having Detroit steel around me when I drive."

"Murphy said something about the Fomor last night," I said. "I take it they've been moving in on the town?"

His face grew more remote. "Big-time. I've been busy." He exhaled a slow breath. "Um. Look, man. It's really you?"

"What's left of me," I said tiredly. "Yeah."

He nodded. "Um. There's a problem with Molly."

"I saw," I said.

"You didn't see," he said. "I mean, I heard that Murphy told you she was a couple bubbles off plumb last night, but there's more than that."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Seventeen people murdered in the past three months," he replied in a steady voice.

I didn't say anything for a couple of blocks. Then I said, "Who?"

"Scum," he said candidly. "Mostly. A cop who was maybe raping a prostitute. Petty criminals. Muggers. She doesn't even try to avoid being seen. She's gone totally Dark Knight. Witnesses left and right have reported a tall woman dressed in layers and layers of ragged, cast-off clothing. Took the papers about two weeks to name her the Rag Lady. People call her various versions, to make fun, to show her they aren't afraid, but . . ."

"A lot of people get killed in this town," I said. "Doesn't mean it's Molly."

“Harry . . .” Butters stopped at a light and gave me a direct look. “I’ve examined twelve of the victims. Different manner of death for each of them, but I found them all with a scrap of torn cloth stuffed in their mouths.”

“So?” I demanded.

“I matched the cloth. It’s the same as what was left of the clothes you wore to Chichén Itzá. They had some of it in evidence when they investigated the scene of your . . . your murder. Only someone got in there without being seen by anyone or any camera, and took it right out.”

Memory flashed at me, hard. The silent stone ziggurats in the night. The hiss and rasp of inhuman voices. The stale, reptilian scent of vampires. My faerie godmother (yes, I’m serious. I have one, and she is freaking terrifying) had transformed my clothes into protective armor that had probably saved my life half a dozen times that night without my even being aware of it. When they had turned back into my coat, my shirt, and my jeans, there had been little left of them but tatters and scraps.

Sort of like me.

Someone who had major issues with my death was killing people in my town.

Could it be my apprentice?

She had a thing for me, according to practically every woman I knew. I didn’t have a thing back. Yes, she was gorgeous, intelligent, quickwitted, brave, thoughtful, and competent. But I’d known her when her bra had been a formality, back when I’d begun working with her father, one of the very few men in the world I hold in genuine respect.

There was darkness in Molly. I’d soulgazed her. I’d seen it in more than one of her possible futures. I’d felt it in the black magic she had worked, with the best of intentions, on fragile mortal minds.

But though she’d fought tooth and nail at Chichén Itzá, beside the rest of us . . . she wasn’t a killer. Not Molly.

Was she?

People could be driven to extremes by the right events, the right stakes. I’d bargained away my future and my soul when I had needed to do it to save my daughter.

And I was Molly’s teacher. Her mentor. Her example.

Had she let herself be driven to extremes at my loss, the way I had been to the potential loss of my daughter? Had she turned aside from everything I’d tried to teach her and let herself slide down into the violent exercise of power?

Why shouldn’t she have done so, moron? I heard my own voice say in the dark of my thoughts. *You showed her how it worked. She’s always been an able student.*

Worse, Molly was a sensitive, a wizard whose supernatural senses were so acute that surges of powerful magic or the emotions that accompanied life-and-death situations were something that caused her psychic and physical pain. It was something I had barely even considered when I dragged her along to Chichén Itzá with me for the largest, most savage, and deadliest brawl I had ever personally participated in.

Had the pain of participating in the battle done something to my apprentice? Had it left her with permanent mental damage, just as the gunshot wound she’d received must have left her a permanent scar? Hell, it didn’t require any supernatural elements at all for war—and that was what Chichén Itzá was, make no mistake—to screw up young soldiers who found themselves struggling to stay alive. Throw in all the mystic menace on top of it, and it started to seem a little bit miraculous that I’d gotten as far as I had while remaining mostly sane.

I didn’t want to admit it or think about it, but I couldn’t deny that it was possible that my apprentice hadn’t been as lucky as I had.

“Hey,” Butters said quietly. “Harry? You all right?”

“That’s . . . kinda subjective, all things considered,” I answered.

He nodded. “No one wanted to be the one to tell you the details. But Murphy’s pretty sure. She says that if she was still working as a cop, she’d be convinced and digging as hard as she could to

turn up enough evidence to let her put the perp away.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I get what she means by that.” I swallowed. “Why hasn’t she?”

“We need Molly,” Butters said. “She’s made the difference between happily ever after and everyone dying in two raids against the Fomor.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Okay. It’s . . . something I’ll start processing. But I’m not saying that I believe it. Not until I talk to her about it. See her reaction with my own eyes.”

“Right,” Butters said, his voice gentle.

I eyed him. “Murphy wouldn’t want you telling me this.”

He shrugged. “Murphy’s not full all the way to the brim herself some days. What she’s been doing . . . It’s been hard on her. She’s gotten more and more guarded.”

“I can imagine.”

Butters nodded. “But . . . I’ve always been kind of a trust-my-instincts guy. And I think you need to know this stuff.”

“Thanks,” I said. “We’ve got some other problems, too.”

His tired, worried face lifted into a sudden grin. “Of course we do. Harry Dresden is in town. What’s that?”

I put Sir Stuart’s pistol into the voluminous pocket of my duster and said, “A cannon. Someone gave it to me.”

“Huh.” His voice turned casual. “Could something like that hurt me?”

I grinned and shook my head. “Nah. Ghost-on-ghost action only. Assuming I’m able to make it work in the first place.”

The snow had stopped falling, and Butters turned off his windshield wipers. “What’s it like?”

“What is what like?”

“Being . . . you know.”

“Dead?”

He shrugged a shoulder, betraying his discomfort. “A ghost.”

I thought about my answer for a moment. “Everything in my body that used to hurt all the time got better. I don’t feel hungry or thirsty. Other than that, it feels a lot like being alive, except . . . my magic is gone. And, you know, hardly anyone can see me or hear me.”

“So . . . so the world is the same?” he asked.

I shivered. “No. It’s chock-full of all sorts of weird stuff. You wouldn’t believe how many ghosts are running around this place.”

Even as I spoke, I turned my head to watch two wraiths glide down the sidewalk as the car passed them. I frowned. “Including one of you, Bob.”

Bob the Skull snorted. “I’m not mortal. I don’t have a soul. The only thing waiting for me when I cease to be is entropy. I can’t leave a ghost.”

“Then how come I saw a floating skull with blue eyelights helping attack Mort Lindquist’s place last night?”

The skull just stared for a moment. Then he suggested lamely, “You were high?”

I snorted. “Can’t be many things like that running around,” I said. “What do you know?”

“I have to think about this,” Bob said in a rushed tone, and his orange eyelights winked out.

Butters and I both stared at the skull.

“Huh,” Butters said. “I’ve never seen anyone make him shut up before.”

I grunted. Then I said quietly, “Scared the hell out of me, seeing that. Thought something had happened to him.”

“He’s fine,” Butters said. “Best roommate I ever had.”

“I’m glad you’re taking care of him,” I said. “He wouldn’t do well alone.”

“It’s not a big deal, right?”

“What isn’t a big deal?”

“If there’s an Evil Bob out there,” he said. “I mean . . . it’ll just be another nerd like this one, right? Only with a black hat?”

The orange eyelights winked back on, and Bob said, "Hey!"

"Butters . . . Bob is spooky strong," I said quietly. "Knowledge is power, man. Bob has a lot of it. When I accidentally flipped his switch to black hat a few years ago, he nearly killed me in the first sixty seconds."

Butters blinked several times. He tried to talk for a few seconds, swallowed, and then said in a small voice, "Oh." He eyed Bob sideways.

"I don't like to make a big thing of it, sahib," Bob said easily. "Not really my bag to do that kind of thing anyway."

I nodded. "He was created to be an assistant and counselor," I said. "It's unprofessional to treat him as anything else."

"Which sahib doesn't," Bob noted. "Due to complete ignorance, but he doesn't."

"Oh," Butters said again. Then he asked, "How do I . . . make sure not to set him on black hat?"

"You can't," Bob said. "Harry ordered me to forget that part of me and never to bring it out again. So I lopped it off."

It was my turn to blink. "You *what*?"

"Hey," Bob said, "you told me never to bring it out again. You said *never*. As long as I was with you, that wouldn't be an issue—but the next guy could order me to do it and it would still happen. So I made sure it couldn't happen again. No big whoop, Dresden. Oy, but you are such a little girl sometimes."

I blinked several more times. "Oy?"

"My mother calls me twice a week," Butters explained. "He listens in."

"She's right, you know, sahib," Bob said brightly. "If you'd just do something with your hair and wear nicer clothes, you'd find a woman. You're a doctor, after all. What woman doesn't want to marry a doctor?"

"Did he just get a little Yiddish accent?" I asked Butters.

"I get it twice a week already, Bob," Butters growled. "I don't need it from you, too."

"Well, you need it from somewhere," Bob said. "I mean, look at your hair."

Butters ground his teeth.

"Anyway, Harry," Bob began.

"I know," I said. "The thing I saw with the Grey Ghost must be the piece that you cut off."

"Right," he said. "Got it in one."

"Your offspring, one might say."

The skull shuddered, which added a lot of motion to the bobblehead thing. "If one was coming from a dementedly limited mortal viewpoint, I guess."

"So it's a part of you, but not all of you. It's less powerful."

Bob's eyelights narrowed in thought. "Maybe, but . . . the whole of any given being is not always equal to the sum of its parts. Case in point: you. You aren't working with a lot of horsepower in the brains department, yet you manage to get to the bottom of things sooner than most."

I gave the skull a flat look. "Is it stronger than you or not?"

"I don't know," Bob said. "I don't know what it knows. I don't know what it can do. That was sort of the whole point in amputating it. There's a big hole where it used to be."

I grunted. "How big?"

Bob rolled his eyes. "Do you want me to tell you in archaic measurements or metric?"

"Ballpark it."

"Um. A hundred years' worth of knowledge, maybe?"

"Damn," I said quietly. I knew that Bob had once been owned by a necromancer named Kemmler. Kemmler had fought the entire White Council in an all-out war. Twice. They killed him seven times over the course of both wars, but it didn't take until number seven. Generally

remembered as the most powerful renegade wizard of the second millennium, Kemmler had at some point acquired a skull inhabited by a spirit of intellect, which had served as his assistant.

Eventually, when Kemmler was finally thrown down, the skull had been smuggled away from the scene by a Warden named Justin DuMorne—the same Justin who had adopted me and trained me to grow up into a monster, and who had eventually decided I wasn't tractable enough and attempted to kill me. It didn't go as he planned. I killed him and burned down his house around his smoldering corpse instead. And I'd taken the same skull, hidden it away from the Wardens and company, and named it Bob.

"Is that bad?" Butters asked.

"A bad guy had the skull for a while," I said. "Big-time dark mojo. So those memories Bob lost are probably everything he learned serving as the assistant to a guy who was almost certainly the strongest wizard on the planet—strong enough to openly defy the White Council for decades."

"Meaning . . . he learned a lot there," Butters said.

"Probably," Bob said cheerfully. "But it's probably limited to pretty much destructive, poisonous, dangerous stuff. Nothing important."

"That's not important?" Butters squeaked.

"Destroying things is easy," Bob said. "Hell, all you really have to do to destroy something is wait. Creation, now. *That's* hard."

"Bob, would you be willing to take on Evil Bob?"

Bob's eyes darted nervously. "I'd . . . prefer not to. I'd really, *really* prefer not to. You have no idea. That me was crazy. And buff. He worked out."

I sighed. "One more thing to worry about, then. And meanwhile, I still don't know a damned thing about my murder."

Butters brought the Road Runner to a stop and set the parking break. "You don't," he said. "But we do. We're here. Come on."

Chapter Eighteen

I gritted my teeth and got out of Butters's car, then paused to look at my surroundings. The piled snow was deep, and the mounds on either side of the street were like giant-sized versions of the snow ramparts that appeared every year in the Carpenters' backyard. They changed the outlines of everything—but something was familiar.

I stopped and took at least half a minute to turn in a slow circle. As I did, I noticed a pair of fleeting shadows moving easily over the snow—wolves. Murphy's comment about sending shadows to escort Butters home made more sense in context. I watched one of the wolves vanish into the darkness between a pair of half-familiar pines, and only then did I recognize where we stood. By then, Butters had taken Bob from his holder in the car and was carrying him in the handheld spotlight case again. He shone the light around for a moment until he spotted me, then asked, "Harry?"

"This is my house," I said after a moment. "I mean . . . where my house was."

Things had changed.

A new building had been put up where my old boardinghouse—my home—had been. The new place was four stories tall and oddly cubical in appearance. The walls fell even farther out onto the lawn than those in the old building had, encasing it in a strip of yard only slightly wider than my stride.

I moved close enough to touch the wall and pushed my hand inside. It hurt, but the hurt never varied as I pushed in farther. This was no facade. It was made of stone. I'm not kidding. Freaking stone. Basalt, maybe? I'm no stonemason. It was dark grey with veins and threads of green and silver running through it, but I could only see them from up close.

The windows were narrow—maybe nine inches wide—and deep. There were bars on the outside. I could see more bars on the *inside*, and there was at least a foot between them. The roof was lined with a staggered row of blocks—real by-God crenellation. As the *pièce de résistance*, gargoyles crouched at the corners and at the midpoint of each wall, starting up at the second floor and moving in three rows of increasingly ugly statuary toward the roof.

Someone had turned the ruin of my home into a freaking fortress.

A plaque hung over what had to be the main entrance. It read, simply, BRIGHTER FUTURE SOCIETY.

Butters followed my gaze to the plaque. "Ah," he said. "Yeah. We named it that because if we didn't do something, there wasn't going to *be* much of a future for this town. I wanted Brighter Future Group, actually, for the initialism, but I got voted down."

"Hell's bells," I said. I did some math. To build on the ruins of the boardinghouse, construction would have had to start practically the same day that I died. Actual stone is expensive to build with because it's difficult and time-consuming. This place was as big as a small castle. It should have taken months and months and months to build. It had gone up in six. Probably significantly less, given the weather. "This place cost a damned fortune."

"Meh," Butters said, and walked to the front door. "Hang around a bit and you'll take it for granted like the rest of us." He entered a sequence of numbers on the keypad beside the door. They made a little mechanical clicking sound that reminded me of a manual typewriter. He put his hands back into his pockets and waited.

A moment later, a heavily accented basso voice emerged from a crackling speaker box. "Who goes there?"

"Butters," he said. "With Dresden's shade. Hi, Sven."

The speaker made a rumbling sound. “Waldo,” it said, pronouncing it Valdo. “The night is dangerous. One day you will stumble across a fox and it will eat you.”

Roars of laughter erupted from the speakers—evidently, several other men were with the door guard.

Butters didn’t laugh, but he did grin. “I’ll just get stuck in his throat until you can haul your walrus ass over to him and save me, Sven.”

Louder laughter erupted from the speaker, and a voice half-choked with it said something in a language that had come from somewhere in northern Europe. There was a click, and Butters opened the door. I started to follow him in—and remembered, in time, to put my hand out and check the doorway first. My hand moved smoothly past the twelve inches of stone, but then hit something as solid as a brick wall where the doorway opened up into the entry hall.

“Uh, Butters,” I said.

He smacked the heel of his hand against his forehead. “Right, sorry. Please come in.”

The invisible wall vanished, and I shook my head. “It’s got a threshold. People live here?”

“Bunch of ’em,” Butters confirmed, and we went inside. “Lot of Paranetters come through for a little while when they don’t have a safe place to sleep. Uh, visiting Netters who are passing through town. Venatori, when they meet with us. That kind of thing.”

I felt anger stirring in me, irrational but no less real. “My home . . . is a supernatural flophouse?”

“And armory! And jail!” Bob said enthusiastically.

Ghosts can sputter in outrage. “Jail?”

“And day care!” Bob continued.

I stopped in my tracks and threw my hands up. “Day care? *Day care?!?*”

“People have kids, man. And they have jobs,” Butters said in a gentle voice. “The Fomor aren’t above using children to get what they want. High-risk kids come here on workdays. Now, shut up, Bob. And get off your high horse, Harry. People need this place.”

I turned my gaze to Butters and studied him for a minute. The little guy had come a long way from the somewhat timid, insecure man I’d first met years before. That Butters would never have said anything like that to me.

Or maybe he was the same guy. Butters went right to the wall for the sake of the truth, even when it cost him his job and got him locked up in a nuthouse. He was a man of principles.

And he was probably right. This wasn’t my home anymore.

We passed the guard station after we got buzzed through a security gate. Four of the biggest, toughest-looking men I’d ever seen were stationed there. They wore biker leathers—and swords. Their muscles swelled tight against their skin, their beards bristled, and their uniformly pale eyes watched us pass with calm attention.

“Einherjaren,” Butters said quietly. “Soldiers of Valhalla, if they’re telling the truth.”

“They are,” I replied just as quietly. “Where did we get them?”

“Marccone. They aren’t cheap.”

“Him again.”

Butters shrugged. “I don’t like the guy, either, Harry. But he’s smart enough to realize that if the Fomor take control of the streets, they’re going to get rid of him as a matter of course.”

“Too simple,” I said. “Too easy. He’s running some kind of game on you.”

We went through another door and then up some stairs, which opened onto the second floor.

The place was one enormous chamber almost entirely free of interior walls. There was a small gym, complete with shower rooms and a boxing ring. Inside the ring, Murphy, wearing her street clothes, stood facing a man who had inherited a portion of his DNA from a rhinoceros—and not many generations ago. He was huge and heavily muscled, his dark hair and beard in long braids. He wore an old pair of jeans and nothing else. His upper body was coated with more dark hair.

(Not like a werewolf or circus freak or anything. Just at the top end of the hirsute bell curve. A real hair ball.)

Butters froze in place, waiting.

Murphy stared steadily at the big man for several moments, her body relaxed, her eyes never blinking. He returned a blank stare of his own. Then they both moved.

I couldn't tell who went first, but Murphy's fist streaked toward the big guy's groin. He twisted his hip, deflecting the blow, and when he returned it to balance, his leg scythed up in an arc that clipped the tip of Murphy's chin. She spun away and went down.

Hair Ball did not hesitate for so much as a second. He moved toward her, fast for someone so large, and stomped his heel down toward her head.

Murphy rolled and dodged the blow, but he followed up and she had to keep rolling to stay ahead of his sledgehammer heels. She hit the edge of the boxing ring, then abruptly reversed her roll, moving toward him instead of away.

She slipped the next stomp, scissored his knee with her legs, twisted her whole body, and brought him down. Hair Ball fell like a tree, huge and slow. The boxing ring ropes shook when he landed.

Murphy came up onto all fours, scrambled a bit to one side, and then swept her foot at Hair Ball's head. He dodged, but her kick shifted direction, her leg moving up, then straight down, bringing her heel down like a hatchet onto the hand Hair Ball was using to support his weight. Bones snapped.

Hair Ball howled, scrambled to his feet, and started swinging wildly at her. Murphy dodged and slipped one blow after another, and at one point abruptly turned and drove her heel into Hair Ball's solar plexus.

The blow rocked him back a step, but Murphy followed it too closely, too recklessly. Hair Ball recovered from the kick almost instantly, slapped a blow aside, and seized her arm. He turned and flung her, one-handed, over the top rope of the ring and into the nearest wall. She hit it with a yell and bounced off onto the floor.

"Dead," I snarled, my fists clenched. I started forward and took three or four whole steps before I realized that I wasn't going to be able to hit the guy. Or blow him up. Or send him on a vacation to another reality. Hell, I couldn't even sneak up on him and shout, "Boo!"

"Harry, wait," Butters hissed. "It's okay."

Murphy picked herself up from the floor, moving slowly. As she did, the giant Hair Ball came over to the nearest side of the ring, holding his right hand in his left. Murphy brushed some dust from her clothing and turned to face him. Her blue eyes were steady and cold, her mouth set in a small smile. Her teeth were white, and rich red blood quivered on her lower lip where the impact had split it open. She wiped the blood off on her sleeve without looking away from Hair Ball. "Three?" she asked.

"Broke all four," he said, moving his right hand a little by way of demonstration. "Took out my best sword hand. Good. If you hadn't gotten greedy for the kill, maybe you'd have taken this round."

Murphy snorted. "You've been drinking bad mead, Skaldi Skjeldson."

That made Hair Ball smile. "Sword tomorrow?"

Murphy nodded. The two of them stared at each other for a moment, as if each expected the other to suddenly charge the second the other turned his back. Then, with no detectable signal passing between them, they simultaneously nodded again and turned away from each other, relaxing.

"Butters," rumbled Skaldi Hair Ball. If he really had broken fingers, it didn't look like they were bothering him much. "When are you going to get in this ring and train like a man?"

"About five minutes after I get a functional lightsaber," Butters replied easily, much to Hair Ball's amusement. Then the little medical examiner nodded to Murphy and said, "Can we talk in the conference room?"

"Sure," she said. She walked by the ring and bumped (left) fists with Skaldi. Then she led Butters and me out of the gym, down another hallway, and into a long, narrow conference room.

She shut the door behind us, and Butters popped Bob's flashlight onto the table. His eyelights winked on again, and I saw Murphy react visibly when that light revealed my presence.

She stiffened a little, looking at me, and her eyes showed a sudden weariness and pain. She took a deep breath through her nose and closed her eyes for a second. Then she took off her jacket, moving gingerly, and said, "Hi, Harry."

Butters put the radio on the table and I said, "Hi, Murph."

She was wearing thin, light padding under the jacket—like the stuff I'd seen on stuntmen on a case I'd done not long after I'd gone into business. So her full-contact practice hadn't been as vicious as it had looked. She'd be covered in bruises, but the impact with the wall hadn't actually been likely to break her back. Her skull, maybe, but not her back.

"You okay?"

She rolled one shoulder with a grimace of discomfort. "I will be."

"Big guy like that going to town on you," I growled. "Someone needs to push his face in."

Her eyes glittered as she gave me a sharp look. "Dresden . . . when, exactly, am I going to fight someone my size and strength?"

"Um."

"If you want to wrestle hostile mooses—"

"Moose," Butters corrected absently. "Singular and plural, same word."

"Gorillas," Murphy continued, hardly breaking stride, "then the best way to train for it is by wrestling slightly less hostile gorillas. Skaldi's two hundred pounds heavier than me, almost two feet taller, and he has going on two millennium—"

"Millennia," Butters said. "*Millennium* is the singular."

Murphy pushed a breath out through her nose and said, "Millennia of experience in breaking the backs of annoying little doctors with annoying little grammar fetishes."

Butters grinned.

"I'm not going to beat him, Harry. Ever. That isn't the point." She looked away and her voice became quiet. "The point is that the world isn't getting any kinder. A girl's got to take care of herself."

The expression on her face? It hurt. Hearing the words that went with it felt like a knife peeling back layers of skin. I didn't say anything. I didn't let it show. Murphy would have been offended at the notion that she needed my protection, and if she thought I felt guilty for not being there to protect her, to help her, she'd be downright angry.

Don't get me wrong. I didn't think Murphy was a princess in a tower. But at the end of the day, she was just one person, standing in defiance of powers that would regard her with the same indifference as might an oncoming tsunami, volcanic eruption, or earthquake. Life is precious, fragile, fleeting—and Murphy's life was one of my favorites.

"Okay, Harry," Murphy said. "Where do we get started?"

I felt awkward standing there while she and Butters sat at the table, but it wasn't like I could pull out a chair. "Um. Maybe we get started with what you know about my . . . my shooting."

She nodded and pulled on her cop face—her expression professionally calm, detached, analytical. "We don't have much, officially speaking," she said. "I came to pick you up and found the blood and a single bullet hole. There wasn't quite enough to declare it a murder scene. Because the vic . . . because you were on the boat and it was in motion, there was no way to extrapolate precisely where the bullet came from. Probably a nearby rooftop. Because the bullet apparently began to tumble as it passed through your body, it left asymmetric holes in the walls of the boat. But forensics thinks it was something between a .223 assault rifle round and a .338 magnum-rifle round; more likely the latter than the former."

"I never got into rifles. What does that mean?"

"It means a sniper rifle or a deer rifle," Butters clarified. "Not necessarily military. There are plenty of civilian weapons that fire rounds in those calibers."

"We never found the bullet," Murphy said. She took a deep breath. "Or the body."

I noticed that both Murph and Butters were staring at me very intently.

"Uh," I said. "I . . . sort of did that whole tunnel-of-light thing—which is a crock, by the way." I bit down on a mention of Murphy's father. "Um, I was sent back to solve the murder. Which . . . sort of implies a death. And they said my body wasn't available, so . . ."

Murphy looked down and nodded.

"Huh," Butters said, frowning. "Why send you back?"

I shrugged. "Said what came next wasn't for whiners or rubbernecks."

Murphy snorted. "Sounds like something my father would say."

"Yeah," I said. "Heh."

Butters arched an eyebrow. His dark eyes flickered between me and Murphy, and thoughtful lines appeared on his face.

"Anyway," I said. "That's what you know officially, right? So . . . what else do you know?"

"I know it wasn't Marcone," Murphy said. "All of his troubleshooters have alibis that check out. So do he and Gard and Hendricks. I know which building the shot probably came from, and it wasn't an easy one."

"Four hundred and fifty yards," Butters said. "Which means it was probably a professional gunman."

"There are amateurs who can shoot that well," Murphy said.

"As a rule, they don't do it from buildings at their fellow Americans," Butters replied. "Look, if we assume it's an amateur, it could be anyone. But if we assume it was a professional—which is way more likely, in any case—then it gives us the beginning of an identity, and could lead us back to whomever he works for."

"Even if we do assume that," Murphy said, "I don't have the access to information that I used to. We'd need to review TSA video records, security cameras—all kinds of things I can't get to anymore."

"Your brother-in-law can," I said. "Dick can."

"Richard," she corrected me. "He hates that nickname."

"Dick who?" Butters asked, looking between us.

I said, "Her brother-in-law," at the same time she said, "My exhusband."

Butters's brow arched even farther and he shook his head. "Man. Catholics."

Murphy gave him a gimlet look. "Richard runs by the book. He won't help a civilian."

"Come on, Murph," I said. "You were married to the guy. You've got to have some dirt on him."

She shook her head. "It isn't a crime to be an asshole, Harry. If it was, I'd have put him away for life."

Butters cleared his throat. "We could ask—"

"No," Murphy and I said at the same time, and continued speaking over each other.

"The day I ask for that bastard's help will be the day I—"

"—told you before, over and over, that just because he's reasonable doesn't mean he's—"

"—a murderer and a drug dealer and a pimp, and just because Chicago's corrupt government can't put him away doesn't mean—"

"—you were smarter than that," Murphy finished.

Butters lifted his hands mildly. "Okay, okay. I was on board at *no*. No going to Marcone for help." He paused and looked around the room as if he'd never seen it before. "Because that would be . . . unprecedented."

"Wally," Murphy said, one eyebrow arching dangerously.

He held up his hands again. "Uncle. I don't understand your reasoning, but okay."

"You think Marcone was behind it, Harry?" Murphy asked.

I shrugged. "Last time I saw him, he said he didn't need to kill me. That I'd get myself killed without any help from him."

Murphy frowned. It made her lip hurt and she winced, reaching up. The wince made it hurt worse, apparently, because fresh blood appeared. “Dammit. Well. You can take that a couple of different ways, can’t you?”

“Like how?”

Murphy looked at me. “Like maybe Marcone knew something was happening already, and that’s why he said he didn’t need to kill you. It wasn’t him, but it was still something he was aware of.”

I grunted. Marcone ran Chicago like his own personal clubhouse. He had legions of employees, allies, and flunkies. His awareness of what happened in his city wasn’t supernatural; it was better than that. He was rational, intelligent, and more prepared for a crisis than any man I’d ever seen. If the Eagle Scouts had some sort of Sith equivalent, Marcone was it.

If someone’s wet-work specialist had come to town, Marcone was very likely to have learned of it. He and his underworld network missed little.

“Dammit,” Murphy said, evidently coming to the same conclusions I had. “Now I have to talk to the scum.” She got out her little notepad and scribbled on it. “Butters, you said that Lindquist’s house had burned down?”

“Big-time,” said Butters.

I nodded. “According to the ghosts hanging around it, the Grey Ghost showed up—I didn’t tell you about the Grey Ghost, did I?”

“Mr. Lindquist filled us in after the shooting,” Butters said.

“Oh, right. Anyway, it showed up with several mortals and snatched him. We’ve got to get him back.”

Murphy nodded, still writing. “What happens if we don’t?”

“A bunch of serial killer-type ghosts start wandering around Chicago, looking for a good time. Ghosts like that can manifest—make themselves the next-best thing to real, Murph. Like the Nightmare. People will get hurt. A lot of them.”

Murphy’s mouth thinned into a line. She wrote on her notepad. “We’ll do triage in a minute. What else?”

“I found the gang who shot up your house last night,” I said.

The tip of Murphy’s pencil snapped against the notepad. She looked up at me, and her eyes were cold, furious. She spoke in a very quiet voice. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” I said. I paused for a moment to think about what I was going to say: Murphy’s temper was not a force to be invoked lightly. “I don’t think you’re going to have to worry about them anymore.”

“Why?” she asked, in her cop voice. “Did you kill them?”

There’d been a little too much intensity in that question. Wow. Murphy was clearly only too ready to go after these guys the minute she knew where they were.

I glanced at Butters, who looked like someone sitting near an armed explosive.

“No,” I said, working out my words carefully. If Murphy’s fuse was really as short as it seemed, I didn’t want her charging off to deal with Fitz and his poor crew in true Viking tradition. “But they don’t have the resources they had before. I don’t think they’re going to hurt anybody in the immediate future.”

“That’s your professional opinion, is it?”

“Yes.”

She stared at me for a minute, then said, “Abby was standing on my patio last night when they came by. She took a round in the belly during that attack. She didn’t get down fast enough. They don’t know if she’s going to live or not.”

I thought of the plump, cheerful little woman, and swallowed. “I . . . I didn’t know, Murph. I’m sorry.”

She continued speaking as if I hadn’t said anything. “There was a retiree living in the house behind mine. He used to give me tomatoes he grew in his garden every summer. He wasn’t as

lucky as Abby. The bullet hit him in the neck while he was sleeping in bed. He had enough time to wake up, terrified, and knock the handset of his phone out of its cradle before he bled out.”

Hell’s bells. That put a different spin on things. I mean, I had been hoping to go for a no-harm, no-foul argument with Murphy. But if blood had been spilled and lives lost . . . Well. I knew Murphy. Whether or not she was a cop anymore, she wasn’t going to back away.

“Where are they?” she asked.

“This is not a time to kick down doors,” I told her. “Please hear me out.”

Her hand tightened into a fist, but she visibly took control of her anger, took a deep breath, and then nodded. “Go ahead.”

I told her about Fitz and his gang. I told her about Aristedes.

“I notice, Harry,” she said, “that you didn’t tell me where they are.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I, uh. I sorta told the kid I would help him. That you would help him.”

Murphy narrowed her eyes. “You did what?”

“They’re *kids*, Murph,” I said. “In over their heads. They need help.”

“They’ve killed at least one person, maybe more,” Murphy said. “There are still laws in this town, Dresden.”

“Send the cops in and it’ll get ugly. I’m not sure how much juice their boss has, but even if he can’t shoot, he’d be a nightmare for the police—even SI.”

Murphy frowned. “How sure are you about that?”

“Guys like him use fear and violence as daily tools. He won’t think twice about hurting a cop.”

Murphy nodded. “Then I’ll deal with him.”

“Murph, I know you can handle yourself, but—”

“Dresden, I’ve dealt with two men since you . . . since the shooting, who were skilled enough for Carlos to call them the next-best thing to full Council-quality warlocks. I’ve handled several lesser talents, too. The Fomor like to use them as officers and commanders. I know what I’m doing.”

“You’ve killed them,” I said quietly. “That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

She looked away. It was a moment before she answered. “With someone that powerful . . . there’s not really a choice. If you try to take them alive, they have plenty of time to kill you.”

I winced in sympathy for her. She might not be a cop anymore, but it was where her heart lay—with the law. She believed in it, truly believed that the law was meant to serve and protect the people of Chicago. When she was a cop, it had always been her job to make sure that those laws worked toward that purpose, in whatever way she could manage.

She loved serving her city under the rule of law, and that meant judges and juries got to do their job before the executioner stepped in. If Murphy had dispensed with that belief, regardless of how practical and necessary it had been, regardless if doing so had saved lives . . .

Butters had said that she was under stress. I now knew the nature of that stress: guilt. It would be ripping away steadily at her insides, at her conscience, scraping them both raw.

“They were all killers,” she said, though I don’t think she was talking to me. “Killers and kidnappers. And the law couldn’t touch them. Someone had to do something.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Someone always does.”

“The point is,” she continued, “that the way you deal with this kind of problem is to hit it with absolutely everything you’ve got, and to do it immediately. Before those spell-casting yahoos have enough time to fort up, bend people’s minds into defending them, or to start coming after you or someone you care about.” She looked up at me. “I need the address.”

“You don’t,” I said. “I’ll bring the kids to you. Once you get them away from Aristedes, he’s out of help and vulnerable. Then you can help Fitz and company.”

“Fitz and company,” she said in a flat tone, “are murderers.”

“But—”

“No, Harry. Don’t give me any rap about how they didn’t mean it. They opened fire with deadly weapons in a residential neighborhood. In the eyes of the law and anyone the least bit

reasonable, *It was an accident* is unconvincing. They knew what could happen. Their intentions are irrelevant.”

“I know,” I said. “But these aren’t bad kids. They’re just scared. It drove them to a bad choice.”

“You’ve just described most of the gang members in this town, Harry. They don’t join the gang because they’re bad kids. They do it because they’re frightened. They want to feel like they belong somewhere. Safe.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter if they started out as good kids. Life changes them. Makes them something they weren’t.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Take a team to their hideout. Deal with the sorcerer. We’ll make every effort to avoid harming the others.”

“You’re going to open fire with deadly weapons on their home. Maybe you don’t want to hurt the kids, but you know what could happen. If you wind up with bodies on the floor, your intentions would be irrelevant. Is that what you’re telling me?”

Her eyes flashed with sudden anger. “You haven’t been here the past six months. You don’t know what it’s been like. You—” She pressed her lips together. Then she looked at me and stared, clearly waiting.

I said, very quietly, “No.”

She shook her head several times. Then she said, “The real Dresden wouldn’t hesitate.”

“The real Dresden would never have gotten a chance to see them. To talk to them. He’d just skip to the fight.”

She flipped her notepad closed with a snap of her wrist and stood. “Then we’ve covered what needs doing. There’s nothing more to discuss.”

Murphy got up and left the room without a word, her steps smooth and purposeful.

Butters rose and collected Bob and the little spirit radio. “I, uh . . . I usually follow along after her when she’s setting up something. Take care of the details. Excuse me.”

“Sure,” I said quietly. “Thanks for your help, Butters.”

“Anytime,” he said.

“You, too, Bob,” I said.

“*De nada*,” the skull replied.

Butters hurried out.

I was left standing in the conference room alone.

Chapter Nineteen

I stood there for several minutes, doing nothing. Not even breathing.

Doing nothing is difficult. Once you aren't busy, your head starts chewing things over. Dark, bleak thoughts appear. You start to think about what your life means. If you're a ghost, you start to think about what your death means.

Murphy was being slowly devoured from within by a guilty conscience. I had known her a long time. I knew how she thought. I knew what she held dear. I knew what it looked like when she was in pain. I had no doubt that I made the right call on that one.

But I also knew that she was a woman who wouldn't kill another human, even if he were over-the-hill-and-around-the-bend crazy, unless it was absolutely necessary. No killing is easy for anyone of conscience—but Murphy had been facing that demon for a long time. Granted, she'd been hurt by my death (and let me tell you how furiously frustrated it made me that I was powerless to have changed that). But why would her conscience start catching up to her now? Why develop a sudden case of the damsels when I'd asked her to get more information from her exhusband? Brick walls didn't stop the woman when she had a mind to walk somewhere.

I noticed something, too, when we had been talking about the shot that had killed me and the shooter's location, and gathering more information about potential assassins. Murphy hadn't said much—but she'd *not* said a whole hell of a lot more.

She had never, not once, mentioned Kincaid.

Kincaid was a partially inhuman mercenary who worked for the scariest little girl on God's green earth. He was centuries old and he was a phenomenon in a fight. He had somehow overcome the negative aspects of the human nervous system, at least as it applied to firing a weapon under pressure. I'd never seen him miss. Not once.

And it was he who had told me that if he wanted to kill me, he'd do it from at least half a mile away, with a heavy-duty rifle round.

Murphy knew as well as I did that the opinion of an assassin with centuries of experience would be invaluable in the investigation. Initially, I hadn't suggested it, because Murph had kinda been dating the guy for a while, and seemed to care for him. So it seemed more appropriate to let her bring it up.

But she hadn't.

She'd never mentioned him at all.

She'd run the meeting too rapidly, and was ready to fight with me over something, anything. The entire argument about Fitz and his crew had been a smoke screen.

The only question was for whose benefit it had been. Mine, so that a possibly crazy ghost wouldn't go storming off for vengeance of some kind? Or had it been a veil of fog for her own benefit, because she couldn't reconcile her view of Kincaid with that of the faceless person who had killed me?

That felt right. That she knew it in her heart and, without realizing it, was frantically scrambling to find a less painful truth with her head.

My reasoning was based on my knowledge of human nature and of Murphy's personality, and on my intuition—but I'd spent a lifetime trusting my instincts.

I thought they were probably right.

I played through the possibilities in my head. I imagined Murphy, distraught and falling to pieces on the inside, in the days after my murder. We never got to find out if we'd be anything together. We'd missed it by moments. I knew that when there had been enough time for her rage

to abate, the sorrow would begin to pile up. I imagined her in the next month or so, no longer a cop, her world in shambles.

Word of my death would have gotten around fast—not only among the wizards of the White Council, but among the remaining vampire Court, over the Paranet, and from there to the rest of the supernatural world.

Kincaid probably heard about it within a day or two. As soon as someone filed a report about me, the Archive, the supernatural recorder of all written knowledge that dwelled within a child named Ivy, would have known. And I was probably one of the only people in the world she thought of as a friend. She was what? Twelve? Thirteen?

News of my death would shatter Ivy.

Kincaid would, I think, have gone to Murphy to offer what comfort he could. Not the hot-chocolate-and-fluffy-robe brand of comfort. He was more likely to bring bottles of whiskey and a sex-music CD.

Especially if he was already right here in town, a dark, nasty part of me whispered in my head.

I imagined Murphy taking shelter where she could and bidding him farewell when he left—and then, over the next few weeks, slowly lining up facts and reaching conclusions, all the while repeating to herself that she was probably wrong. That it couldn't be what it looked like.

Frustration. Pain. Denial. Yeah, that would be enough to draw rage out of anybody. Rage she would be carrying with her like a slowly growing tumor, becoming more and more of a burden. It was the sort of thing that might push someone to kill another person, even when maybe it wasn't necessary.

That death would cause more guilt, more frustration, which would cause more rage, which would cause more violence, which would add to guilt again; a literal vicious cycle.

Murphy didn't want to get shots from airport and train-station security cameras because she didn't want to find out that the man she'd been sleeping with had killed one of her friends. When drawn close to that plausibility, she reacted in anger, pushing away the source of illumination about to fall on what she didn't want to see.

She probably wasn't even aware of the clash of needs in her head. When you're grief-stricken, all kinds of irrational stuff flies around in there.

Detective work isn't always about logic—not when you're dealing with people. People are likely to do the most ridiculously illogical things for the most incomprehensible of reasons. I had no logic to aim at Kincaid. But the theory fit a whole lot of pieces together. If it was correct, it explained a lot.

It was only a theory. But it was enough to make me want to start digging for more evidence where I might not otherwise have looked.

But how? How was I going to start digging into Jared Kincaid, the Hellhound, the closest thing to a father Ivy had ever had—and do it without Murphy's help? For that matter, I'd have to find some way to do it without her knowledge, and that seemed like something that would be more than a little slimy to do to a friend. *Augh*. Better, maybe, to focus on the immediate problems first.

I had to find Morty, whose plight had clearly been low on Murph's priority list.

I had to help Fitz and the rest of his clueless, teenage pals.

And for all of it, I needed the help of someone I could trust.

I took a deep breath and nodded.

Then I walked until I had passed through an exterior wall of the Bright Future house, and set off to find my apprentice before the night got any deeper.

Chapter Twenty

I always considered myself a loner.

I mean, not like a poor-me, Byron-esque, I-should-have-brought-a-swimming-buddy loner. I mean the sort of person who doesn't feel too upset about the prospect of a weekend spent seeing no one, and reading good books on the couch. It wasn't like I was a people hater or anything. I enjoyed activities and the company of friends. But they were a side dish. I always thought I would also be happy without them.

I walked the streets of a city of nearly three million people and, for the first time, there was nothing that connected me to any of them. I couldn't speak to them. I couldn't touch them. I couldn't get in an argument over a parking space, or flip the bird to a careless driver who ran a light while I was crossing. I couldn't buy anything in one of the stores, making polite chitchat with the clerk while paying. Couldn't pick up a newspaper. Couldn't recommend a good book to someone browsing the shelves.

Three million souls went about their lives around me, and I was alone.

Now I understood Captain Murphy's shadow Chicago. The actual town had already begun to *feel* like the shadow version. With enough time, would the real city look that way to me, too? Dark? Empty? Devoid of purpose and vaguely threatening? I'd been here for barely a day.

What would I be like if I was here for a year? Ten years? A hundred years?

I was starting to get why so many ghosts seemed to be a couple of French fries short of a Happy Meal.

I had to wonder, too, if maybe Sir Stuart and Morty were right about me. What if I really was the deluded spirit they thought I was? Not the true Harry Dresden, just his image in death, doing what the lunatic had always done: setting out to help his friends and get the bad guy.

I didn't feel like a deluded spirit, but then, I wouldn't. Would I? The mad rarely know that they are mad. It's the rest of the world, I think, that seems insane to them. God knew it had always seemed fairly insane to me. Was there any way I could be sure I was anything other than what Sir Stuart and Mort thought?

More to the point, Mort was the freaking expert on ghosts. I mean, I knew my way around the block, but Mort had been a specialist. Normally, on purely technical matters regarding spirits and shades, I would give his opinion significant weight, probably a little more than I would my own. Morty had never been a paragon of courage and strength, but he *was* smart, and clearly tough enough to survive a long career that had been a lot more dangerous than I thought.

Hell. For all I knew, while I had been busy saving Chicago from things no one knew were there, Mort might have been saving me from things *I* never knew were there. Funny world, isn't it?

I stopped in my tracks and shook my head as if to clear water from my eyes. "Dresden, have your personal existential crisis later. The bad guys are obviously working hard. Get your ass in gear."

Good advice, that.

The question was, How?

Normally, I would have tracked Molly down with a fairly simple piece of thaumaturgy I'd done a thousand times. After her unplanned vacation to Arctis Tor, in Faerie, I had always been sure to keep a fairly recent lock of her hair handy. And more recently, I'd found I could get a fix on all the energy patterns she used to make her first few independent magical tools—like the hair, they were something specific and unique to her and her alone. A signature. I could be pretty sure to find her when I needed to do so. Hell, for that matter, I'd spent so much time around her that she

had become almost like family. I could generally tell by pure intuition when she was nearby, as long as she wasn't actively trying to hide herself.

That, of course, had all been when I had magic. Now I didn't.

Which was, upon thinking about it, probably another bit of evidence in favor of Stuart and Mort's theory, and against mine. You can't take magic away from a person. It's a part of who and what they are. They can abandon it, if they work at it hard enough, but you can't strip it out of them. If my ghost had truly been me, it would have had power, just as that bastard Leonid Kravos's ghost had.

Right?

Or . . . maybe not. Maybe I'd been making more assumptions without ever questioning them. I had already assumed that matter was solid when it wasn't; that I could get cold, which I couldn't; and that I was still beholden to the laws of gravity, which I wasn't.

Maybe I'd made the same assumptions about magic. I mean, after all, I had thrown a solid shield spell during the first attack on Mort's place, when I had been sharing space with the ectomancer. *That* would seem to show that my talent was still there, still real.

I just had to figure out how to access it.

Memories are power.

I dug into my duster's pocket and drew out the massive pistol Sir Stuart had given me. Black-powder weaponry isn't my thing, but I made sure there was nothing in the priming pan before turning it barrel down and shaking it. I had to give it several hard thumps with the heel of my hand to get the ball, wad, and powder to spill out into my palm.

The ball, the bullet, gleamed as if newly molded. Upon closer look, fine swirls on the surface of the metal took on the shapes of a simple, pastoral scene: a colonial-style home in the middle of a little green valley surrounded by apple trees; clean, neat cropland; and a pasture dotted with white sheep. Just looking at it seemed to give the scene life. Wind stirred the crops. Apples stood out like specks of bright green against the darker leaves. Lambs gamboled among adult members of the flock, playing for the pure joy of it. The door to the house opened, and a tall, straightbacked woman with hair blacker than a raven's wing emerged from the house, trailing a small cloud of children, clearly giving calm instructions.

With the sight, a flood of emotions coursed through me. A fierce and jealous pride of possession—not pride that I owned such a beautiful home, but that the home was beautiful *because* I owned it, because I had made it so. Mixed with that was an ocean-deep surge of love for the woman and her children, raw happiness at seeing them—and a heavy, entirely pleasurable surge of desire for the woman, whom I had not held in far too long—

I suddenly felt that I had intruded upon something personal and intimate. I closed my eyes and looked away from the scene.

Memories, I realized. These were all things from Sir Stuart's mortal memories. This memory was what he had cast forth against that wraith the first time I met him. He hadn't used memories of destruction as his weapon, but those of identity, of the *reasons* he was willing to fight.

That was why as a ghost he still used that ax, this pistol. Far more modern weapons were available to copy, but *his* memories were of himself using those weapons, and so they were the source of his power, the embodiment of his will to change what was around him.

They were Sir Stuart's identity. They were also his magic.

Memories equaled power.

For a moment, I thought it couldn't be that simple. But a lot of magic is actually disgustingly simple—which is not to be confused with easy.

There was only one way to find out.

The first spell I'd ever done had been during that long-ago class Olympics—but that was spontaneous, accidental magic, hardly worthy of the term. The first conscious spell I'd knowingly worked, fully planned, fully visualized, fully realized, had been calling forth a burst of fire.

Justin DuMorne had shown me how it worked.

I plunged into the memory.

"I don't understand," I complained, rubbing at my aching temples. "It didn't work the first fifty times. It isn't going to work now."

"Forty-six times," Justin corrected me, his voice very precise, like always. He had an accent, but I couldn't figure out which kind it was. I hadn't heard one like it on TV. Not that Justin had a TV. I had to sneak out on Friday nights to watch it in the store at the mall, or else face the real risk that I'd miss *Knight Rider* altogether.

"Harry," Justin said.

"Okay," I sighed. "My head hurts."

"It's natural. You're blazing new trails in your mind. Once more, please."

"Couldn't I blaze the trails somewhere else?"

Justin looked up at me from where he sat at his desk. We were in his office, which was what he called the spare bedroom in the little house about twenty miles outside Des Moines. He was dressed in black pants and a dark grey shirt, like on most days. His beard was short, precisely trimmed. He had very long, slender fingers, but his hands could make fists that were hard as rocks. He was taller than me, which most grownups were, and he never called me anything mean when he got mad, which most of the foster parents I'd been with did.

If I angered Justin, he just went from saying *please* to using his fists. He never swung at me while screaming or shook me, which other caretakers had done. When he hit me, it was really quick and precise, and then it was over. Like when Bruce Lee hit a guy. Only Justin never made the silly noises.

I ducked my head, looking away from him, and then stared at the empty fireplace. I was sitting in front of it with my legs crossed. There were logs and tinder ready to go. There was a faint smell of smoke, and a bit of wadded-up newspaper had turned black at one corner, but otherwise there was no evidence of a fire.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Justin turn back to his book. "Once more, if you please."

I sighed. Then I closed my eyes and started focusing again. You started with steadying your breathing. Then once you were relaxed and ready, you gathered energy. Justin had told me to picture it as a ball of light at the center of my chest, slowly growing brighter and brighter, but that was a load of crap. When the Silver Surfer did it, energy gathered around his hands and his eyes. Green Lantern gathered it around his ring. Iron Fist had glowing fists, which was pretty much as cool as you could get. I guess Iron Man had the glowing thing in the middle of his chest, but he was, like, the only one, and he didn't really have superpowers anyway.

I pictured gathering my energy together around my right hand. So there.

I pictured it glowing brighter and brighter, surrounded by a red aura like Iron Fist's. I felt the power making tingling sensations up and down my arms, making my hairs stand up on end. And when I was ready, I leaned forward, thrusting my hand into the fireplace, released the energy, and said clearly, "*Sedjet*."

And as I spoke, I flicked the starter on the Bic lighter I had palmed in my right hand. The little lighter immediately set the newspaper alight.

From right next to me, Justin said, "Put it out."

I twitched and dropped the lighter in pure surprise. My heart started beating about a zillion times a minute.

His fingers closed into a fist. "I don't like to repeat myself."

I swallowed and reached into the fireplace to drag the burning paper out from under the wood. It singed me a little, but not enough to cry about or anything. I slapped the fire out with my hands, my cheeks turning bright red as I did.

"Give me the lighter," Justin said, his voice calm.

I bit my lip and did.

He took the lighter and bounced it a couple of times in his palm. A faint smile was on his lips. "Harry, I believe you will find that such ingenuity may be of great service to you as an adult." The smile vanished. "But you are not an adult, boy. You are a student. This sort of underhanded behavior will not do. At all."

He closed his fist and hissed, "*Sedjet*."

His hand exploded into a sphere of scarlet-and-blue flame—which pretty much made Iron Fist's powers look a little bit pastel. I stared and swallowed. My heart beat even faster.

Justin rotated his hand a few times, contemplating it, and making sure that I saw his whole fist and arm—that I could see it wasn't sleight of hand. It was completely surrounded in fire.

And it wasn't burning.

Justin held his fist right next to my face, until the heat was beginning to make me uncomfortable, but he never flinched and his flesh remained unharmed.

"If you choose it, this is what you may one day manage," he said calmly. "Mastery of the elements. And, more important, mastery of yourself."

"Um," I said. "What?"

"Humans are inherently weak, boy," he continued in that same steady voice. "That weakness expresses itself in a great many ways. For instance, right now you wish to stop practicing and go outside. Even though you know that what you learn here is absolutely critical, still your impulse is to put play first, study later." He opened his hand suddenly and dropped the lighter in my lap.

I flinched away as it struck my leg, and let out a little yell. But the red plastic lighter simply lay on the floor, unmarked by any heat. I touched it with a nervous fingertip, but the lighter was quite cool.

"Right now," Justin said, "you are making a choice. It may not seem like a large and terrible choice, but in the long term, it may well be. You are choosing whether you will be the master of your own fate, with the power to create what you will from the world—or whether you will simply flick your Bic and get by. Unremarkable. Complacent." His mouth twisted and his voice turned bitter. "Mediocre. Mediocrity is a terrible fate, Harry."

My hand hovered over the lighter, but I didn't pick it up. I thought about what he had said. Then I said, "What you mean is that if I can't do it . . . you'll send me back."

"Success or failure of the spell is not the issue," he said. "What matters is the success or failure of your will. Your will to overcome human weakness. Your will to work. To learn. I will have no shirkers here, boy." He settled down onto the floor next to me and nodded toward the fireplace. "Again, if you please."

I stared at him for a moment, then down at my hand, at the discarded lighter.

No one had ever told me I was special before. But Justin had. No one had ever taken so much time to do anything with me. Ever. Justin had.

I thought of going back into the state system—to the homes, the shelters, the orphanages. And suddenly, I truly wanted to succeed. I wanted it more than I wanted dinner, more even than I wanted to watch *Knight Rider*. I wanted Justin to be proud of me.

I left the lighter where it was and focused on my breathing.

I built up the spell again, slowly, slowly, focusing on it more intently than on anything I'd ever done in my life. And I was nearly thirteen, so that was really saying something.

The energy swelled until I felt like someone had started a trash fire in my belly, and then I willed it out, through my empty, outstretched right hand, and as I did, instead of using the Egyptian phrase, I said, "*Flickum bicus!*"

And the remaining tinder under the logs burst into bright little flames. I didn't think I'd ever seen anything more beautiful.

I sagged and almost fell over, even though I was already sitting on the floor. My body suddenly ached with hunger and weariness, like this one time when all us orphans had gotten to go to a water park. I wanted to eat a bucket of macaroni and cheese and then go to sleep.

A strong, long-fingered hand caught my shoulder and steadied me. I looked up to see Justin regarding me, his dark eyes flickering with warmth that wasn't wholly the reflection of the small but growing fire in the hearth.

"*Flickum bicus?*" he asked.

I nodded and felt myself blushing again. "You know. 'Cause . . . the mediocrity."

He tilted his head back and let out a rolling laugh. He ruffled my hair with one hand and said, "Well-done, Harry. Well-done."

My chest swelled up so much I thought I was going to bounce off the ceiling.

Justin held up a finger, went to his desk, and returned with a brown paper package. He offered it to me.

"What's this?" I asked.

"Yours," he said. "You've done the work after all."

I blinked and then tore the package open. Inside was a Wilson baseball mitt.

I stared for several seconds. No one had ever given me a present before—not one that was meant for me, and not just some random, charity-donated Christmas package with a label that said: FOR: BOY. And it was an excellent glove. George Brett had one just like it. I'd been to two Kansas City Royals baseball games on field trips when I was little, and they were awesome. So was Brett.

"Thank you," I said quietly. Oh, come on. Now I was gonna cry? Sometimes I thought I was kinda goofy.

Justin produced a baseball, a brand-new one that was still all white, and held it up, smiling. "If you're up for it, we can go outside right now."

I felt really tired and hungry, but I had a brand-new glove! I shoved my hand into it until I figured out where all my fingers were supposed to go. "Yes," I said, pushing myself up. "Let's do it."

Justin bounced the ball up and down in his hand a couple of times and grinned at me. "Good. When all is done, I think you'll find baseball a rewarding experience."

I followed him outside. It didn't matter that I was tired. I was practically floating.

I opened my eyes, standing on a random Chicago sidewalk, immaterial and unseen. I turned my right hand palm up and focused upon that sudden kindling of light and hope, crystallized by the memory of that moment of triumph and joy.

"*Flickum bicus,*" I whispered.

The fire was every bit as beautiful as I remembered.

Chapter Twenty-one

It took me a couple of hours to work out how to make my trusty tracking spell function. I easily found several memories that I could use to power the spell; it was figuring out how to create the link to Molly that was hard. Usually, I would use one of the trusty traditional methods for directing thaumaturgy—a lock of hair, a fresh drop of blood, fingernail clippings, et cetera. That wasn't going to work, obviously. I couldn't touch them, even if I had them.

So instead of tracking Molly with physical links, I tried using *memories* of her in their place. It worked—sort of. The first tracking spell led me to the hotel that had once hosted a horror convention known as SplatterCon! It was closed now, and deserted. I guess maybe all the deaths at SplatterCon! had taken a toll on the hotel in the civil-court cases that followed the phobophage attacks. I took a quick spin through the place, hardly even flinching before I stomped through one wall after another. Except for a few transients who had broken into the building and were squatting there, I found nothing.

I went back over my work. The memory I'd used was one that had stuck in my head for some reason, of Molly here in this building. That must have thrown off the spell. It had homed in on this place because it had been part of the memory I used to create the link.

I tried again, this time omitting the background and picturing only Molly against an empty field of black. This second attempt took me to a police station from which I had once posted bail for Molly's boyfriend. I figured I'd bungled the spell somehow, but took a quick look around anyway, just in case. No Molly.

"Okay, smart guy," I said to myself. "So what if the memory-image you're using is too old? You're tracking her memory-self to a memorylocation. Which means you have to think of her *as* she is now to find *where* she is now. Right?"

"Theoretically," I said to myself.

"Right. So test the theory."

Well, obviously. Although discussing a problem with yourself is almost never a good way to secure a divergent viewpoint.

"In fact, talking to yourself is often considered a sign of impending insanity," I noted aloud.

Which hardly seemed encouraging.

I shook off the unsettling thought and worked the tracking spell again. This time, instead of using one of my earlier memories of Molly, I used my most recent one. I pictured her in her cast-off clothing and rags, as she'd been at Murphy's place.

Forming a memory into an image that would support the energy required for a spell isn't as simple as closing your eyes and daydreaming. You have to produce it in exact, even fanatical, detail, until it is as real in your mind as any actual object. It takes a lot of practice and energy to do that—and it is why people use props when they set out to do magic. A prop can be used as an anchor, saving the spellcaster the effort of creating not just one, but multiple, mental constructs, and supporting them all in a state of perfect focus and concentration.

I had learned how to do magic the hard way first—all of it in my head. Only after I'd proved I could do it without the aid of props did Justin tell me that it was even possible to use them. Over the years, I'd practiced fairly complex thaumaturgic spells without props maybe once a season, keeping my concentration and imagination sharp. It was a damned good thing I had. Working magic as a ghost was all about doing it *au naturel*.

I reached into my memory to produce the construct I'd need to stand in for Molly in the tracking spell. At the time, I'd been handed a lot to process, and I hadn't really taken stock of exactly what kind of shape Molly was in. I'd seen that she was under strain, but upon closely

reviewing the memory, I was somewhat shocked at how gaunt and weary she looked. Molly had always been the sort of young person who almost glowed with good health. After six months on her own, she looked like an escapee from a gulag: scrawny, tough, and beaten down, if not broken.

I added more than that to the image. I imagined her cheery goodwill, the self-loathing she still sometimes felt for the pain she'd caused her friends in the days before I agreed to teach her. I thought of her precise, orderly approach to her studies, so much different from my own, her diligence, and the occasional arrogance that pretty much every young wizard has until they've walked into enough walls to know better. I thought of the most powerful force in her life, a deep and abiding love for her family, and added in the desolation she must be feeling to be separated from them. Eager, beautiful, dangerous Molly.

I held that image of my apprentice in mind, drew together my will, and tapped into the recollection of one of my more memorable tracking spells, all at the same time. I established the pattern of the modified version of the spell I'd had to cobble together, walked, chewed bubble gum, and released the spell with a murmured word.

The power surged out through me, and a precise, powerful force spun me into a pirouette. I extended my left arm, index finger pointing, and felt a sharp tug against it each time it passed an easterly point of the compass. Within a couple of seconds I stopped spinning, rotated a little past the point, and then settled back slightly in the opposite direction. My index finger pointed straight at the heart of the city.

"Crombie," I said, "eat your heart out."

I followed the spell to Molly.

I pulled my vanishing act and went zipping downtown a few hundred yards at a time. I paused to check the spell twice more and correct my course, though by the third check, I was starting to feel like a human weather vane. I had to stop more frequently as I got closer to make sure I was moving in the right direction, and the trail took me down into the great towers within the Loop, where the buildings rose high enough to form what felt like the walls of a deep ravine, a man-made canyon of glass, steel, and stone.

I wasn't terribly surprised when the spell led me to the lower streets. Some of the streets downtown have two or even three levels. One is up on the surface, with the others stacked below it. A lot of the buildings have upper and lower entrances and parking as well, doubling the amount of access to the buildings within those blocks.

There were also plenty of empty spaces, pseudo-alleyways, walkways, and crawl spaces. Here and there, abandoned chambers in the basements and subbasements of the buildings above sat in silent darkness, waiting to be remade into something new. The commuter tunnels could connect down there, and there were several entrances to the insane, deadly labyrinth beneath the city known as Undertown.

Chicago cops patrolled the lower streets on a regular basis. Things came slinking out of Undertown to prowl the darkness. Traffic would blaze through on the actual streets, which were occasionally only separated from the sidewalks by a stripe of faded paint.

All in all, it's not the sort of place a sane person will casually wander through.

I found Molly standing in one of the narrow alleyways. Snow had fallen through a grate twenty feet overhead and covered the ground. She was dressed in the same rags I'd seen the night before, with her arms clenched around her stomach, shivering in the cold. There was a fresh, purpling bruise on her cheek. She was breathing heavily.

"Again," said a cool, calm woman's voice from farther down the alley, out of sight.

"I'm t-t-tired," Molly said. "I haven't e-eaten in a day and a half."

"Poor darling. I'm sure Death will understand and agree to return another time."

There was a sharp hissing sound, and Molly threw up her left hand, fingers spread. She spat out a word or two, and flickering sparkles of defensive energy spread from her fingertips into a flat

plane.

Molly simply didn't have a talent for defensive magic—but this was the best shield I'd ever seen the grasshopper pull off.

A hurtling white sphere hit the shield. It should have bounced off, but instead it zipped through the shield, its course barely bent. The sphere struck Molly in the left shoulder and exploded into diamond-glitter shards of ice. She let out a short, harsh grunt of pain and staggered.

"Focus," said the calm woman's voice. "Use the pain. Make the shield real with your will. *Know* that it will protect you. Again."

Molly looked up with her teeth clenched. But instead of talking, she raised her left hand once more, and another ball of ice flew at her. This one hit the shield and went through—but its path was attenuated more significantly than the last. It flew past her, barely clipping one arm.

She gasped and sank to one knee, panting. Magic taxes the endurance of anyone who uses it—and if you use magic you aren't particularly skilled with, you get worn down even faster.

I shivered to see Molly like that. I knew how she felt. When Justin began teaching me how to create protective shields, he threw baseballs at me at top speed. When I failed, I was hit with a fastball moving at more than eighty miles an hour. Justin said pain was an excellent motivator, and that the activity was good training.

When I had been teaching Molly how to shield, I hadn't used anything more painful than fluffy snowballs and rotten fruit.

"That will do for now," said the woman's voice. "Tomorrow we will move up to knives."

Molly shuddered and looked down.

The speaker came walking calmly down the alley to stand over Molly.

It was my faerie godmother, the Leanansidhe.

Lea was beautiful beyond the loveliness of mere humanity, but it was a stark, hungry, dangerous beauty that always reminded me of a hunting cat. She was tall and pale, her hair the color of autumn leaves at sunset. Her ears were very slightly pointed, though I wasn't sure she hadn't done that to herself in order to conform to mortal expectations. She wore a long gown of green silk, wholly unsuitable to the task of protecting a mortal from the weather, but as she was one of the most powerful Sidhe of the Winter Court, I doubted she even noticed the cold.

She reached out a hand and touched Molly's hair with her fingertips.

"Why?" Molly asked, her voice barely more than a whisper. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"Obligation, child," Lea replied. "Favors owed and loyalties given."

"You owed it to Harry to do this to me?" Molly asked.

"Nay, child, not me. But my queen is committed to him through ancient law and custom. She dispatched me to continue your training in the Art—and pain is an excellent teaching tool."

"Harry didn't believe that," Molly said, her voice brittle. "He never hurt me."

The Leanansidhe stooped and seized Molly's chin, jerking my apprentice's face up to meet her inhuman gaze. "Then he wronged you badly, child," Lea replied, enunciating each word sharply. "He cheated you of the legacy he lived—and suffered to acquire. I am not teaching you how to tie knots in rope or to bake pastries. I am making you ready to face battle and emerge alive."

"I *have* faced battle," Molly said.

"In which you were shot, of all things, by a mere mortal foot soldier," Lea said, contempt flavoring her words. "You nearly died, which would have been greatly humiliating to your mentor and by extension to my queen."

"What does it matter to Mab?" Molly said, her voice bitter. "He's dead."

Lea sighed. "Mortals can be so obsessed with useless detail. It grows tiresome."

"I don't understand," Molly said.

"Your mentor took an oath of fealty to my queen. Such oaths are not to be made lightly—and they place mutual obligations on both parties. Minor details do not excuse either party from its responsibilities."

"His *death* is a *minor* detail?"

“As these things go,” Lea said, “of course it is. You’re all mortals. Even the life length of a wizard is something brief and transitory to an immortal. Similarly, extending her hand to the assistance of those her vassal knew in life is a minor detail. If you live another three centuries, it is little more than a long season to the Queen of Air and Darkness.”

Molly closed her eyes. “He made her promise to take care of me?”

Lea blinked at her, politely baffled. “No, of course not, child. He took an oath of fealty. She is one of the Sidhe. The oath binds her as tightly as it does him. Just as when I was”—Lea shivered—“unable to perform my duties to young Dresden, Mab assumed those responsibilities until I could be restored to them. Thus does she now do for you, through me.”

Molly wiped a hand over her eyes. She shook her head and rose to her feet, moving slowly. “Did he know? I mean . . . did he know Mab would do this?”

“I should have,” I said quietly. “If I’d stopped to think about it for two minutes. I should have known.” But neither of them heard me.

“I knew the boy well,” Lea said. “Better than ever he realized. Many a night did I watch over him, protecting him, and he none the wiser. But I was not privy to his mind or his heart.”

Molly nodded slowly. She looked at Lea for a long moment. My godmother simply watched her, waiting until Molly nodded to herself and said, “His shade is in town, looking for the person who killed him.”

The Leanansidhe’s pale red-gold eyebrows flew up. It was one of the most drastic reactions I’d ever seen from her. “That . . . seems unlikely.”

Molly shrugged. “I used my Sight. It’s his ghost, all right. A construct couldn’t have hidden from me.”

“Six months after his death?” the Leanansidhe murmured. “It is rare for a shade to arise after the season in which it was made—and he was slain last autumn. . . .” Her eyes narrowed. “Interesting.” She tilted her head, studying Molly. “What is your condition?”

Molly blinked dully once before she said, “I need to curl into a ball and sleep for a week. I’m starving. I’m cold. I think I’m *getting* a cold. I hurt everywhere. I would—” Molly paused and eyed Lea. “Why do you ask?”

The Sidhe only smiled in answer.

Bootsteps sounded, heavy and quick, and a small crowd appeared at the far end of the alley. They were all rough-looking men, carrying an assortment of guns, blades, clubs, and axes. They dressed exclusively in black, to the extent that it looked like they all shopped in the same store. They were also wearing turtlenecks—every single one of them. Talk about weird.

Molly let out a hiss. “Servitors. How did they find me here?”

“I told them where to look,” Lea said calmly.

Molly whirled to her. “You *what*?”

“I didn’t share your location with the Fomor themselves, child. Just with some of their guard dogs. They think that if they catch you and return you to the Fomor, they will gain great honor—and I did not give them enough time to contact their masters for instructions.” She smiled, showing daintily pointed canines. “Initiative in an underling can be such a troubling thing.”

Molly made a disgusted sound. “I don’t believe this.”

Twenty armed thugs kept striding forward, exuding the calm that comes only from professionals who are not hurrying, keeping their spacing smooth. They were all glaring at Molly.

Lea smirked, already fading out of sight. “It is good training, child.” She vanished Cheshire Cat style, only she left her voice behind instead of her smile. “Let us see what you have learned.”

Chapter Twenty-two

“What I’ve learned,” Molly muttered, mostly under her breath. “So help me, one of these days, I’ll show you what I’ve learned, you skinny bitch.”

Then she focused on the enemy, took a breath, just as I’d taught her to do under stress, and calmed herself. She began to withdraw, calmly, slowly, one pace at a time. That was smart. Had she turned and sprinted, it would have provoked immediate pursuit. Instead, the guys in turtlenecks kept their professional cool, moving steadily forward in a solid block of muscles and weapons. All of them ready to kill a lone, exhausted young woman.

Scum. No way in hell that was happening to my apprentice.

I hadn’t yet tried any true evocation magic, the fast-and-dirty side of violent wizardry, but I thought I had the basic concept down. So I tuned in to a memory of a particularly powerful evocation, when I had blown a rampaging loup-garou straight through the brick wall of one building and *entirely* through the building across the street. I left out all the details except for the energy blast itself, vanished, and reappeared in front of the oncoming servitors, and snarled, “*Fuego!*”

A blast of flame and raw kinetic force exploded from my outflung right hand. It hit the front of the enemy formation like a blazing locomotive—

—and washed completely through them, having no effect whatsoever. I didn’t even ruffle their clothes.

“Oh, come *on!*” I shouted. “That is just not fair!”

I still couldn’t act, couldn’t touch, couldn’t help.

Molly faced the men alone.

She kept walking back until she emerged from the alley into a small parking lot contained within concrete walls and open to the sky. There were only a handful of cars in it, along with a motorcycle and a couple of mounds of piled snow. There were doors fitted with those magnetic card-swipe locks on two of the lot’s walls—employee or executive parking, obviously. The fourth opening led out to the lower avenue, where dull yellow lights cast a feeble gleam.

Molly walked to the middle of the little lot, looked around her, and nodded. “Well, boys,” she said aloud. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance we could talk about this over a cup of coffee at Denny’s? I’m starving.”

One of the turtlenecks, presumably their leader, said, “Submit yourself to the will of the masters. Your pain will be much shortened.”

“Right,” Molly said. She rolled her neck as if to loosen it up and nodded at the speaker. “You’re my huckleberry.”

The turtleneck tilted his head to one side, frowning.

Molly blew him a kiss.

A gust of wind, channeled through the lower street, rushed by, tugging at her ragged clothes, pulling her long coattails out like a flag beside her—and then she exploded.

It happened so fast that I could barely understand what was happening, much less anticipate what would come next. Where my apprentice had been standing suddenly became half a dozen identical, leanly ragged figures darting in every direction.

One Molly flew sideways, both arms extended in front of her, firing a pair of 1911 Colts, their hammering *wham-wham-wham* as recognizable as familiar music. Another flipped into a cartwheel and tumbled out of sight behind a parked car. Two more ran to each door, virtually mirror images of each other, swiping a card key and slamming into the buildings. A *fifth* Molly ducked behind a mound of snow and emerged with a shotgun, which she began emptying at the turtlenecks. The

sixth ran to the motorcycle, picked it up as if it had been a plastic toy, and flung it toward her attackers.

My jaw dropped open. I mean, I had known the kid was good with illusions, but Hell's bells. I might have been able to do *one* of the illusions Molly had just wrought. Once, I had managed two, under all kinds of mortal pressure. She had just thrown out *six*. *Simultaneously*. And at the drop of a hat, to boot.

My gast was pretty well flabbered.

The turtlebacks clearly didn't know how to react, either. The ones with guns returned fire, and they all scattered for cover. The motorcycle didn't hit anyone as it tumbled past the group, though the crashing sound it made when it landed was so convincing that it made me doubt my such-as-they-were senses. The guns barked several times as the illusionary Mollys all sought cover behind the snow mounds and cars.

I gritted my teeth. "You aren't one of the rubes, Dresden. You've got a backstage pass." I bent my head, touched my fingers to my forehead for a moment, and opened up my own Sight.

The scene changed colors wildly, going from a dull winter monochrome to an abstract done in smearing, interweaving watercolor. The blurs of magic in the air were responsible for all the tinting—Molly had unleashed a hell of a lot of energy in very little time, and she'd done so from the point of exhaustion. I'd been there enough times to know the look.

Now I could see the illusions for what they were—which was the single largest reason why the wizards of the White Council didn't put much stock in illusion magic: It could be easily nullified by anyone with the Sight, which was the same thing as saying "anyone on the Council."

But against this band of hipster, emo, mooklosers? It worked just fine.

Molly, behind an almost perfect magical veil, was standing precisely where she had been at the beginning of the altercation. She hadn't moved a muscle. Her hands were extended at her sides, fingers twitching, and her face was still and expressionless, her eyes shifted out of focus. She was running a puppet show, and the illusions were her marionettes, dancing on strings of thought and will.

The illusionary versions of Molly were very slightly transparent and grainy, like I remembered movies being when I was a kid. The motorcycle had never moved from where it was parked—an illusion had flown through the air, and a short-term veil was now hiding the bike.

The turtlebacks, though, weren't going to be shut down by half a dozen young women, even if they had just appeared out of nowhere and apparently were possessed of weapons and superhuman strength. At barked orders from their leader, they came bounding over parked cars and mounds of snow in teams of five, moving with the light, lithe grace rarely seen outside of the Olympics and martial arts movies. They advanced with the kind of frighteningly focused purpose you see only in veterans. These men knew how to survive a battle: Kill before you are killed.

If even one of them closed in on Molly, it was over.

I thought of what it might be like to watch my apprentice die with my Sight open, and almost started gibbering. If that happened, if I saw that horror with eyes that would make sure I could never, ever forget it or distance myself from it, there wouldn't be anything left of me. Except guilt. And rage.

I shut away my Sight.

"It must be difficult," said my godmother, standing suddenly beside me, "to watch something like this without being able to affect the outcome."

"Glah!" I said, or something close to it, jumping a few inches to one side out of sheer nerves. "Stars and stones, Lea," I said between my gritted teeth a moment later. "You can see me?"

"But of course, Sir Knight," she replied, green eyes sparkling. "My duty to oversee my godson's spiritual growth and development would be entirely futile could I not perceive and speak to a spirit such as thee."

"You knew I was there a moment ago. Didn't you?"

Her laugh was a bright, wicked sound. “Your grasp of the obvious remains substantial—even though you do not.”

A curtain of green-blue fire about seven feet high sprang up and swept rapidly across the width of the parking lot, between the position of the various Mollys and the turtlenecks. The flames emitted eerie shrieking sounds, and the faces of hideous beings danced about inside them.

I just blinked. Holy crap.

I hadn’t taught the kid *that*.

“Tsk,” Lea said, watching the scene. “She has an able mind, but she is filled with the passions of youth. She rushes to her finale without building anything like the tension required for something so . . . overt . . . to prove effective.”

I wasn’t sure what my godmother was talking about, but I didn’t have time to try to pry an explanation out of her. . . .

Except that I did.

I mean, what else was I going to do, right?

“Whatever do you mean?” I replied in a polite tone. I almost managed not to grit my teeth.

“Such an”—her mouth twisted in distaste—“overt and vulgar display as that wall of fire is worthy only of frightening children or appearing in something produced by Hollywood. It might yield a short-lived panic reaction, if built up and timed properly, but it is otherwise useless. And, of course, in very bad taste.” She shook her head in disapproval. “True terror is much more subtle.”

I gave my godmother a sharp look. “What?”

“Veils are of limited utility with snow upon the ground,” she explained. “The footprints, you see. It’s quite difficult to hide so many individual disruptions of the environment. Thus, she must work in another medium to survive.”

“Stop this. You’re going to get her killed,” I said.

“Oh, child,” the Leanansidhe said, smiling. “I’ve been doing this for a very long time. All teaching involves an element of risk.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and look at what happened to your last student.”

Her eyes glinted. “Yes. From nothing more than a terrified child, in a mere score of years he grew into a weapon that all but utterly destroyed a world power. The Red Court lies in ruins because of my student. And it was, in part, my hand that shaped him.”

I clenched my teeth harder. “And you want to do the same thing to Molly.”

“Potentially. She has a talent for verisimilomancy—”

“Versa what?”

“Illusion, child,” Lea clarified. “She has a talent, but I despair of her ever truly understanding what it is to cause terror.”

“That’s what she’s learning from you? Fear?”

“In essence.”

“You aren’t teaching her, Godmother. Teachers don’t do that.”

“What is teaching but the art of planting and nurturing power?” Lea replied. “Mortals prattle on about lonely impulses of delight and the gift of knowledge, and think that teaching is a trade like metalsmithing or healing or telling lies on television. It is not. It is the dissemination of power unto a new generation and nothing less. For her, as for you, lessons demand real risk in order to attain their true rewards.”

“I won’t let you turn her into a weapon, Godmother.”

Lea arched a red-gold eyebrow, showing her teeth again. “You should have thought of that before dying, child. What, precisely, will you do to stop me?”

I closed my hands into impotent fists.

The turtlenecks had been briefly stymied, but not stopped, by the wall of flame. It wasn’t high enough. I saw three of them moving together. Two of them linked their hands while a third backed off, then sprinted toward the other two. The runner planted his foot on the linked hands of his

supporters, and then both men lifted while the runner leapt. They flung him a good twenty feet up and over the wall of flame.

The runner flipped neatly at the top of his arc and landed in a crouch, holding a machete in his right hand, a pistol in his left. He calmly put two rounds directly into the shotgun-wielding Molly, and two more into the pistol-packing version. Before the last shot rang out, a second turtleneck had gone over the wall and landed beside the first—the leader, I noted. He carried no obvious weaponry, though his belt had been hung with several seashells in a manner that suggested they were dangerous equipment. He remained in a crouch when he landed, looking around with sharp, steady eyes, while his partner covered him.

Shotgun Molly crumpled slowly to the ground, still fumbling at a pocket for more shells for the weapon, while scarlet blood stained the fresh layer of thin snow. Two-Gun Molly's head snapped back as a dark hole appeared in her forehead, and her body dropped to the snow like a rag doll. Motorcycle-Chucking Molly screamed and snatched up her fallen sister's guns.

The turtleneck on lookout raised his weapon, but Captain Turtleneck moved his hand in a sharp, negative gesture, and the man lowered the weapon again. Both did nothing as the newly armed Molly aimed the guns and began to fire. Puffs of snow flitted up from the ground a couple of times, but neither was hit.

Captain Turtleneck nodded to himself and smiled.

Crap. He'd figured it out. Coordinated squads of bad guys are one thing. Coordinated squads of bad guys being led by someone who remained observant and cool in the middle of combat chaos were far, far worse.

"Ah, disbelief," Lea murmured. "Once the mark begins to suspect illusion is at work, there's little point in continuing."

"Stop them," I said, to Lea. "Godmother, please. Stop this."

She turned to blink at me. "And why should I?"

Captain Turtleneck scanned the ground, and I saw his eyes trace the line of footsteps Molly had made when she had backed into the center of parking lot, when the confrontation had begun. His eyes flicked around and I could practically see the thoughts going through his head. A trail of messy, backward tracks suddenly ended in two clear boot prints. The only Molly in sight had proven to be an illusion—and therefore the real Molly must be nearby, supporting the still-active illusions around him. Where would she be standing?

That last set of boot prints seemed a logical place to look.

Captain Turtleneck drew one of the seashells from his belt, murmured something to it, and gave it an expert, effortless flick. It sailed through the air and landed only inches from my invisible apprentice's toes.

"Oh," Lea said, setting her mouth into a pouting moue. "Pity. She had such potential."

I gave my godmother my most furious glare and sprinted forward.

The shell began to glow with a urine-colored light.

It had worked for Morty. Maybe it would work again.

I flung myself at Molly, focusing on protecting her, and I felt myself slide into her, merging and mingling from the soles of my feet to the crown of my head. (Which hardly made sense, given how much taller I was than she—one more example of the way physics doesn't necessarily apply to spirits.)

I suddenly felt utterly exhausted, frightened, and at the same time in a state of euphoric exultation. I could feel the various illusions dancing upon threads of my will, demanding complete focus and concentration. My legs and feet ached. My ribs ached. My face and shoulder hurt.

And then I felt myself choke, then wonder what the hell was happening to me.

It's me, kid, I thought, as loudly as I could. *Don't fight me.*

I didn't know what the seashell would do, but there wasn't much time to get particular. I extended my left hand along with my will, and murmured, "*Defendarius.*"

Blue energy suddenly blazed up around Molly and me in a sparkling sphere.

The seashell shone brighter and exploded into a sphere of pure white fire, as hot and fierce as a microscopic nuclear warhead. It lashed against the blue sphere like a bat hitting a baseball. The sphere went flying, taking us with it. I braced my arms and legs against the sides of the sphere, straining to hold it together. Without my shield bracelet, I wasn't sure how long I could keep it up.

The sphere struck a car and bounded off it into the wall of the building. Its path had us careening tail over teakettle, but our braced arms and legs kept us from smashing our head against the sphere's interior. We wobbled and rolled into a corner of the lot, and I realized dully as I looked around that Molly's illusions had vanished. My bad. The strength of the shield had cut her off from them and ended her ability to keep them going.

I looked up to find the turtles advancing on us in a crowd, and I dismissed the sphere, landing in a crouch. I gathered more of my will together and swept my arm from left to right with a murmured word, and a second curtain of blue fire sprang up between me and the oncoming bad guys.

One of them gave the wall of flame a disdainful snort and calmly walked into it.

Like I said, I'm not much when it comes to illusions.

I am, however, reasonably good with fire.

The turtle didn't scream. He didn't have time. When fire is hot enough, you never really feel the heat. Your nerves get fried away and all you feel is the lack of signal from them—you feel cold.

He died in the fire, and he died cold. The cinder that fell backward out of the fire could never have been casually identified as human.

Now, *that* got their attention.

I stood there holding the fire against the remaining turtles, the heat scorching away the thin layer of snow on the asphalt, then making it bubble and quiver, changing it into my own personal moat of boilinghot tar. It was hard work to keep it going, but I've never been afraid of that.

Harry, I need some room, came a thought from Molly, hardly able to be heard over the blaze of concentration necessary for maintaining the fire.

I gritted my teeth. It was like trying to hold an immensely heavy door open while half a dozen friends squeezed in around me. I felt an odd sensation and increased weariness and blocked them both away. I needed to focus, to hold the turtles away from Molly.

Once again, the bad guys impressed me. They knew that an intense magical effort could be sustained for only a limited amount of time. They didn't risk losing more men to the fire. Instead, they played it smart.

They just waited.

The fire blazed for another minute, then two, and as my control over it began to get shaky, something attracted my attention.

Flashing blue lights, out on the lower avenue.

A CPD prowler had stopped across the entrance to the parking lot, and a pair of cops, guys I'd seen before, got out and walked quickly into the lot, flashlights up. It took them about half a second to see that something odd was going on, and then they had both guns *and* flashlights up.

Before the turtles could turn their guns on the police, the officers had retreated to the cover offered by their car, out of direct line of sight from the parking lot. I could clearly hear one of them calling for backup, SWAT, and firefighters, his voice tense and tight with fear.

I felt myself giggling with exhaustion and amusement as I grinned at Captain Turtle. "Bad boys, bad boys," I sang, off-key. "Whatcha gonna do?"

That made Molly cough up a chattering belly laugh, which shouldered my awareness aside and came bubbling out of our mouth.

Captain Turtle stared at me without expression for a moment. He looked at the fire, the moat, and then at the police. Then he grimaced and made a single gesture. The turtles began to move as a single body, retreating rapidly back the way they had come.

Once I was sure they were gone, I dropped the wall and slumped to the ground. I sat there for a second, dazzled by the discomfort and the weariness, which I had rapidly grown accustomed to missing, apparently. The smell of hot asphalt, a strangely summertime smell, mingled with the scent of charred turtleneck.

I shivered. Then I made a gentle effort and withdrew from the same space Molly occupied. The weariness and pain vanished again. So did the vibrant scents.

The grasshopper looked up and around, sensing the change. Then she said, "Hold on, Harry," and fumbled at her pockets. She produced a small silver tuning fork, struck it once against the ground, and then said, "I can hear you with this."

"You can?"

"Yeah, no big deal," she said, her voice slurred with fatigue. "See you, too, if I line it up right. And it's easier to carry around than a bunch of enchanted Vaseline."

"We've got to get out of here," I said. "Before the cops show up. They'd try to lock you up for a long time."

Molly shook her head.

"Kid, I know you're tired. But we have to move."

"No," she said. "No cops."

I arched an eyebrow at her. "What?"

"Never were any cops," Molly said.

I blinked, looked at the empty entrance to the parking lot, and then found myself slowly smiling. "They were another illusion. And you sold it to the turtle-necks because they thought you'd already blown your wad on the flashy stuff."

"Excellent," purred Lea, appearing at my side again.

I flinched. Again. Man, I hate that sudden-appearance stuff.

"An unorthodox but effective improvisation, Miss Carpenter," she continued. "Adding complexity on the meta level of the deception was inspired—especially against well-informed adversaries."

"Uh-huh, I'm a rock star," Molly said, her voice listless. "Lesson over?"

The Leanansidhe glanced at me and then back to Molly, still smiling. "Indeed. Both of them."

Chapter Twenty-three

Which only goes to prove that you're never too old, too jaded, too wise—or too *dead*—to be hoodwinked by one of the fae.

"You set her up," I snarled, "for *my* benefit? As a lesson for *me*?"

"Child," Lea said, "of course not. It was entwined with her own lesson as well."

Molly smiled very slightly. "Oh yes. I feel I have grown tremendously from my experience of nearly being incinerated."

"You saw that your survival depended on the protection of another," my godmother responded, her voice sharp. "Without help from my godson's spirit, you would have died."

"There are a lot of people who can say something like that," Molly said. "There's no shame in being one of them."

Lea looked from Molly to me and then said, "Children. So emotional—and so rarely grateful. I will leave you to consider the value of what I have this evening shown unto you both."

"Hold it," I said. "You aren't going yet."

Lea looked at me with a flat expression. "Oh?"

"No. You're giving Molly money first."

"Why would I do such a thing?"

"Because she's hungry, she's tired, she survived your lesson, and she needs to eat."

Lea shrugged a shoulder. "What is that to me?"

I scowled. "If you're her mentor, your support of her physical needs while she learns is implicit in the relationship. And since you're filling in for me anyway, and since my choice right now would be to get food into her, if you don't do it, you'll be failing in your duty."

The Leanansidhe rolled her eyes and murmured, with a trace of amusement, "Now is when you choose to begin paying attention to proper protocol, child?"

"Apparently," I said. "Stop being cheap. Cough up the dough."

Her green eyes narrowed dangerously. "I do not care for your tone, child."

"I'm through being intimidated by you," I replied, and to my surprise, it came out in a calm and reasonable tone, rather than a defiant one. "You're the one with an obligation. I'm not being unreasonable. Pay up."

The Leanansidhe turned to face me fully, those feline eyes all but glowing with either anger or pleasure. Or maybe both.

Molly ordered the Moons Over My Hammy. And hot chocolate.

I sat across the table from her at Denny's, my elbow on its surface, my chin resting on the heel of my hand. The table could support my elbow because I had decided it should. Her tuning fork sat upright on the table, humming slightly, directly between us. She'd said she could see me if I didn't move too far to the left or right.

Molly tore into the food with a voracious appetite.

"Weren't you the one always trying to get me to eat healthier?" I mused.

"Bite me," she mumbled through a mouthful of food. "Freaking ice age out there. Gotta have fats, proteins, carbs, just to get my furnace going, keep my body temperature up."

"You know what else would keep it up?" I asked her. "Being indoors."

She snorted and ignored me for several minutes, venting a ravenous appetite onto the food. I watched her and found it oddly fulfilling. I'd been looking out for the grasshopper for a while. It made me feel good to see her hunger being satisfied because of something I had done.

I guess ghosts have to take pleasure in the little victories—just like everyone else.

I waited until she was cleaning up the remains to ask, "So. What's with the Ophelia act in front of Murphy and company?"

She froze for a second, then continued moving bits and pieces around her plate with somewhat less enthusiasm. "It isn't . . ." She exhaled slowly, and her eyes moved around the room restlessly. "There's more than one reason."

"I'm listening," I said.

"Well. Who says it's an act?" She flipped a couple of bits of hash brown onto her fork and then into her mouth. "Look at me. I'm sitting here talking to my dead mentor. And half the restaurant is worried about it."

I looked around. She was getting covert stares, all right. "Yeah, but there's hardly anyone here."

She laughed a bit harshly. "That makes me feel better." She put her cup of hot chocolate to her lips and just held it there, trails of steam curling up around her blue eyes. "So. You've finally been inside me. I feel like I should be offering you a cigarette."

I choked and had to clear my throat. "Um. It wasn't like that, kid."

"Of course it wasn't," she said, an edge in her voice. "It never was. Not for you."

I rubbed at the back of my neck. "Molly. When I met you . . ."

"I was a child who didn't need a bra," she said.

"It's about your father, too," I said. "Michael—"

"Is the uncle you never had," she said, her voice still calm but crisp. "You've always wanted his approval. Because he's a good man, and if he approves of you, you can't be a total wreck."

I scowled at her. "I've never said that," I said.

She looked at me through wisps of steam and said, "But it's true all the same. I had that worked out by the time I was about seventeen. You were afraid that if you touched me, you'd be losing his approval. That it would make you some kind of monster."

"I was afraid that I'd be losing *my* approval of me," I responded. "And not a monster, Molly. Just an asshole."

"When I was a child," she said, still speaking very quietly, "you'd have been right. I'm in my mid-twenties, Harry. I'm not a child."

"Don't remind—" I paused. Then I said, "I was going to make an old-age joke." I looked down at my immaterial self. "But all things considered . . ."

She let out enough of a snort to stir the steam. She took a slow drink of hot chocolate. "Little inappropriate. Even if you were still alive."

"But funnier," I said.

"You're not the one who is going to watch her entire family grow old and die, Harry." She said it without malice. "Not just my parents. My brothers and sisters. All of them. I'm going to be beginning to get respect from other wizards about the same time Hope and Little Harry are dying of old age."

"Maybe you'll get lucky and someone will kill you first."

She shrugged. "Lea's been doing what she could about that. If it happens, it happens. As long as there's a reason for it, that kind of death wouldn't bother me."

I shivered, just from the emotionless tone of her voice. "Except for the dead part?"

"Everyone dies, Harry," she said. "There's no use whining about it."

I waited for a couple of beats and then said, "Here's where you talk about how what you do with your life is what's truly important."

Her head fell back and she let out a belly laugh. It sounded warm and natural. Her eyes were just too wide, though, her smile too strained.

"Yeah. Exactly." She shook her head and looked at me intently. "Is that what it's always like for you? Throwing fire that way?"

I blinked and tried to change mental gears. I didn't do it as smoothly as she had. Someone uncharitable or unbiased might note that it could be because Molly had stripped said gears. "Um.

Oh, back at the fight with the Fomor guys?"

"They weren't the Fomor," Molly corrected me. "They were humans the Fomor have altered. They're called—"

"Turtlenecks," I said.

She arched an eyebrow. "You and Murphy both. No, they're known as servitors. The Fomor muck around with them. Install things. Gills, extra muscles, organs for sonar, night-vision eyes . . ."

I whistled. "All kinds of fun."

She nodded. "The odd bits kind of turn to jelly when they die. Police are calling them transients."

I nodded, and tried to keep the conversation casual. "A lot of them dying around here?"

"It's Chicago," she said. "There's always someone dying around here. And you should see what these . . . these animals do, Harry. They take people right out of their beds. Grab children waiting for the school bus. They've tortured people to death for fun."

As she spoke, the calm in her voice had begun to fracture. It wasn't dramatic. Just a break of her voice, an inhalation between sentences that was a little too harsh.

"You can't stand around doing nothing," I said, nodding.

"No," she said. "They'll come and scream at you in your sleep if you try. So . . ."

"So?"

Molly was silent. I didn't push. Five minutes went by before she closed her eyes and whispered, "It's easy. It shouldn't be so easy."

Technically, I didn't have a heart anymore. It couldn't twist. It couldn't break.

It did anyway.

"The first one was paying off a cop. Gold coins. He stood there with a little girl in a gym bag and paid the cop to look the other way." She swallowed. "God, if I could be like you. Have so much power to pour out. Like water from a hydrant. But I've just got a squirt gun. Not even a Super Soaker. Just one of the little ones." She opened her eyes and met mine. "But it was enough. They didn't even know I was there."

"Molly," I said gently, "what did you do?"

"An illusion. A simple one. I made the bag of gold look like a gun. The cop drew his weapon and shot him. But the servitor lived long enough to break the cop's neck." She held up a pair of fingers. "Twofer. For one little illusion."

I swallowed. I couldn't speak.

Her voice slowly gained volume. "There have been others like that. I mean, God, they make it simple. You just need an opportunity and the right little nudge at the right time. Green traffic light instead of a red one. Put a knife in someone's hand. Or a wedding ring on one finger. Add a spot of blood to someone's collar. They're animals. They tear into one another like animals."

"Molly," I said gently.

"I started leaving the bits of rag on them," she said. "It hurt at first. Being near that kind of . . . experience. It still hurts. But I have to do it. You don't know, Harry. What you did for this town."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know how many things just *didn't come here* before, because they were afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

She looked at me as if her heart was breaking. "Of *you*, Harry. You could find anything in this town, but you never even noticed the shadow you cast." Her eyes overflowed and she slashed at them angrily with one hand. "Every time you defied someone, every time you came out on top against things you couldn't possibly have beaten, your name grew. And they feared that name. There were other cities to prey on—cities that didn't have the mad wizard Dresden defending them. They *feared* you."

I finally understood. "The Rag Lady."

“Sometimes me,” Molly said. “Sometimes it’s Lea. She’s like a kid on recess when she takes a shift. I’m building a new name. Creating something else for them to fear. I can’t do what you did, Harry.” Her eyes, red and blue, flashed with something dangerous, deadly, and she slammed the heel of her hand onto the table as she leaned toward me. “But I can do that. I can kill them. I can make the fuckers afraid.”

She stared at me, her breathing heavy. It took her several seconds to look slowly around the room.

Every eye in the place was locked on Molly. A waitress stood with wide eyes and a telephone against her ear.

Molly looked around at them for a moment and then said, “God, you people have it good. You don’t know. You wouldn’t know if one of them walked up to you and tore the thoughts out of your skull.”

She rose, grabbed the tuning fork, and left a pile of wadded bills on the table. She pointed at the waitress and said, “Put the phone down. Or you won’t get a tip.”

The telephone dropped from the woman’s fingers and clattered on the floor.

“See?” she said, glancing back in my general direction. “It’s what I do. It’s what I’m good for.”

I sat there, stunned and heartbroken, unable to think of anything to say or do to help Molly.

I watched my mad apprentice stalk out of the silent restaurant and into the frozen night.

Chapter Twenty-four

I walked the shadowy streets, thinking. Or, at least, trying to think.

When I'd been alive, walking was something I did when I needed to chew something over. Engage the body in effort and activity and the purely physical manifestations of a mental problem stop being distractions. I didn't have a body anymore, but I didn't know how else to cope with so many overwhelming troubles.

So I walked, silent and invisible, my head down, and I thought furiously as I went.

A single fact glared out at me, blazing in front of my mind's eye in stark reality illuminated by all the lives that were on fire around me:

In the end, when it had mattered most, I'd blown it.

I grew up an orphan with nothing but a few vague memories of my father before he'd died. My childhood hadn't been the kind of thing I'd wish on anyone. I had run into some bad people. Justin was the worst—a true monster.

When I was sixteen or seventeen, still agonized by his betrayal, and certain that I would never know anything like a home, friends, or family, I made myself a promise: I would never allow a child of mine to grow up as I had—driven from home to home, an easy victim with no protector, never stable, never certain.

Never.

When Susan had asked me to help her recover Maggie, I went all-in without a second thought. The child was my daughter. It didn't matter that I hadn't known about her or that I had never seen her with my own eyes. There was a child of my blood who needed my help and protection. I was her father. I would die to protect her if need be.

End of story.

I may have had good reasons. I may have had the best of intentions.

But intentions aren't enough, no matter how good they are. Intentions can lead you to a place where you're able to make a choice.

It's the choice that counts.

To get my daughter back, I'd crossed a line. Not just crossed it; I'd sprinted at it and taken a flying freaking leap over it. I made a pact with the Queen of Air and Darkness, giving away my free will, my very self, to Mab in exchange for power enough to challenge the Red King and his monstrous Court. That was stupid.

I'd had excuses at the time. My back had been against the wall. Actually, it had been *broken* and against a wall. All the help I'd been able to call upon, all the allies and tricks and techniques in my arsenal, had not been enough. My home had been destroyed. So had my car. I couldn't even get up and walk, much less fight. And the forces arrayed against me had been great—so great that even the White Council of Wizards was terrified of confronting them.

In that bleak hour, I had chosen to sell my soul. And after that, I had led my closest friends and allies out on what I knew was practically a suicide mission. I'd known that such a battle would put a savage strain on Molly's psychic senses, and that even if she did manage to survive, she might never be the same. I'd risked the two irreplaceable Swords of the Cross in my keeping, sending them into the battle even though I knew that if we fell, some of the world's mightiest weapons for good would be captured and lost.

And when I saw that the sacrificial blood rite the Red King had intended to destroy me could be turned back on the Red Court, I had used it without hesitation.

I murdered Susan Rodriguez on a stone altar in Chichén Itzá and wiped out the Red Court. I saved my little girl.

I created a perfect situation for chaos to engulf the supernatural world. The sudden absence of the Red Court might have removed thousands of monsters from the world, but it meant only that *tens* of thousands of other monsters were suddenly free to rise, to expand into the vacuum I'd created. I shuddered as I wondered how many other men's little girls had been hurt and killed as a result.

And, God help me . . . I would do it again. It wasn't right. It wasn't noble. It wasn't good. I'd spent less than three hours in the company of my daughter—and so help me, if it meant keeping her safe, I would do it again.

Maybe the White Council needed an Eighth Law of Magic: the law of unintended consequences.

How do you measure one life against another? Can thousands of deaths be balanced by a single life? Even if Mab had not had time to fully take possession of me, how could I be sure that the very act of choosing to cross that line had not changed me into something monstrous?

I found myself stopped, standing on the Michigan Avenue bridge over the Chicago River. The mounded snow filled the night with light. Only the waters below me were dark, a black and whispering shadow, the Lethe and the Styx in one.

I looked up at the towers nearby. NBC. Trump's place. The Sheraton. They stood tall and straight and clean in the night. Lights winked golden in windows.

I turned and stared south of me at the Loop, at the skyline I knew so well. There was a rare moment of stillness down Michigan Avenue. Streetlights. Traffic lights. A scattering of fresh snowflakes, enough to keep everything pretty and white instead of slushy and brown.

God, my town is beautiful.

Chicago. It's insane and violent and corrupt and vital and artistic and noble and cruel and wonderful. It's full of greed and hope and hate and desire and excitement and pain and happiness. The air sings with screams and laughter, with sirens, with angry shouts, with gunshots, with music. It's an impossible city, at war with itself, every horrible and wonderful thing blending together to create something terrifying and lovely and utterly unique.

I had spent my adult life here fighting, bleeding, to protect its people from threats they thought were purely imaginary.

And because of what I'd done, the lines I crossed, the city had gone mad. Fomor and their turtlenecks. Freakish ghost riots. Huddled groups of terrified folks of the supernatural community.

I hadn't meant for that to happen, but that didn't matter. I was the guy who made the choice.

This was all on me.

I stared down at the quiet blackness of the river. I could go down there, I realized. Running water would disrupt supernatural energy, disperse it, destroy the pattern in which it flowed.

And I was made out of energy now.

The black, whispering river could make everything go away.

Styx. Lethe. Oblivion.

My apprentice was bitter, damaged. My friends were fighting a war, and it was tearing at their souls. The one guy who I was sure could help me out had been snatched, and there wasn't a whole lot I could do about it. Hell's bells, I was doing well just to find someone who could hear me talk.

What could I do?

What do you do to make up for failing everyone in your life? How do you make it right? How do you apologize for hideous things you never intended to happen?

I don't remember when I fell to my knees. Memories, stirred by my rumination, flooded over me, almost as sharp and real as life. Those memories stirred others and brought them along, like pebbles triggering a landslide. My life in Chicago rolled over me, crushed me, all the black pain and bright joy doubling me over, ripping tears out of my eyes.

Later, it was quiet.

It was difficult. A tremendous, slow inertia resisted my desire. But I pushed myself to my feet again.

I turned away from the river.

This city was more than concrete and steel. It was more than hotels and businesses and bars. It was more than pubs and libraries and concerts. It was more than a car and a basement apartment.

It was home.

My home.

Sweet home Chicago.

The people here were my family. They were in danger, and I was part of the reason why. That made things pretty clear.

It didn't matter that I was dead. It didn't matter that I was literally a shadow of my former self. It didn't matter that my murderer was still running around somewhere out there, vague prophecies of Captain Murphy notwithstanding.

My job hadn't changed: When demons and horrors and creatures of the night prey on this city, I'm the guy who does something about it.

"Time to start doing," I whispered.

I closed my hands into fists, straightened my back, and vanished.

Chapter Twenty-five

I was ten minutes late to the meeting with Fitz, but he was still there, lurking at a nearby storefront, looking about as innocent as an only child near a fresh Kool-Aid stain. He had a huge, empty sports-equipment bag hanging over one shoulder. For the love of God. The kid might as well have been wearing a stocking cap and a black mask, with a giant dollar sign printed on the outside of his bag to boot.

I appeared next to him and said, "You look so relaxed and calm. I'll bet any cop that rolls by will ask you for tips on self-control."

Fitz twitched, clearly controlling an instant instinct to flee. Then he spat on the frozen ground and said, "You're late, Harvey."

"Forgot to wind my watch," I said.

"And I was starting to think my brain had thrown a rod after all." Fitz looked up and down the street and shook his head. "But nothing's ever that easy."

"Life can be a bitch that way," I said.

"So, you're real."

"I'm real."

Fitz nodded. "You said you would help. Were you serious about that?"

"Yes," I said.

A gust of wind pulled his longish, curly red hair out to one side. It matched his lopsided smirk. "Fine. Help."

"Okay," I said. "Turn left and start walking."

Fitz put a fist on his hip and said, "You were going to help me with the guns."

"Never said that," I said. "You need help, kid, not tools. Guns aren't gonna cut it." I waited for him to begin to speak before I interrupted him. "Besides. If you don't play along, I've arranged for word to get to Murphy about where you and your band of artful dodgers are crashing."

"Oh," he snarled. "You . . . you son of a bitch."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"You can go fuck yourself."

"You need help. I've got it to give. But there ain't no free lunch, kid," I said in a calm and heartless tone. "You know that."

"You can kiss my ass is what you can do," he said, and turned away.

"Go ahead and walk," I said. "But you're throwing away your only chance to get your crew out from under Baldy."

He stopped in the middle of taking a step.

"If you bug out now, where are you going to go—back to Baldy? He'll kill you for failing to get the guns. And after that, Murphy's crew and the Rag Lady will take out the whole building. Baldy will probably skate out on your buddies, and do the same thing to some other batch of kids."

Fitz turned his head in my general direction, his eyes murderous. But he was listening.

"Look, kid. Doesn't have to be the end of the world. If you work with me, everything's peachy."

I was lying, of course. The last thing I wanted was to hand Murphy a convenient target in her present frame of mind. And I really did want to help the kid—but I've been where he was mentally. He wouldn't have believed in a rescuer on a white horse. In his world, no one just gave anyone anything, except maybe pain. The best you could hope for was an exchange, something

for something, and generally you got screwed even then. I needed his cooperation. Handing him a familiar problem was the best way to get it.

"I'm not a monster, Fitz. And honestly, I don't care about you and your goons or what happens to you. But I think you can help me—and I'm willing to help you in return if you do."

The young man grimaced and bowed his head. "It's not as though I have a lot of choice, is it?"

"We've all got choices," I said calmly. "At the moment, yours are limited. You gonna play ball?"

"Fine," Fitz spat. "Fine. Whatever."

"Groovy," I said. "Hang a left and get going. We've got some ground to cover."

He shoved his hands into his pockets, his eyes sullen, and started walking. "I don't even know who the hell you are."

"My name is Harry Dresden," I said.

Fitz stumbled. "Holy shit," he said. "Like . . . *that* Harry Dresden? The professional wizard?"

"The one and only."

He recovered his pace and shook his head. "I heard you were dead."

"Well, yeah," I said, "but I'm taking it in stride."

"They say you're a lunatic," Fitz said.

"Oh yeah?"

Fitz nodded. "They also . . ." He frowned. I could see the wheels spinning. "They also say you help people."

"So?"

"So which is it?"

"You've got half a clue, Fitz," I said. "You know that talk is cheap. There's only one way to find out."

Fitz tilted his head to one side and then nodded. "Yeah. So. Where we going?"

"To visit an old friend."

We went to a street toward the north end of the South Side. *Seedy* wasn't a fair description for the place, because *seeds* imply eventual regrowth and renewal. Parts of Chicago are wondrous fair, and parts of Chicago look postapocalyptic. *This* block had seen the apocalypse come, grunted, and said, "Meh." There were no glass windows on the block—just solid boards, mostly protected by iron bars, and gaping holes.

Buildings had security fences outside their entrances, literally topped with razor wire. You'd need a blowtorch to get through them. At least one of the fences in my line of sight had been sliced open with a blowtorch. Metal cages covered the streetlights, too—but they were all out anyway. Tough to make a cheap metal cage that stops rounds from a handgun.

Every flat, open space had been covered in spray-painted graffiti, which I guess we're supposed to call *urban art* now. Except art is about creating beauty. These paintings were territorial markers, the visual parallel to peeing on a tree. I've seen some gorgeous "outlaw" art, but that wasn't in play here. The *thump-thud* of a ridiculously overpowered woofer sent a rumbling rhythm all up and down the block, loud enough to make the freshly fallen snow quiver and pack in a little tighter.

There was no one in sight. No one. Granted, it was getting late, but that's still an oddity in Chicago.

I watched as Fitz took in the whole place and came to the same conclusion I had the first time I'd seen it—the obvious squalor, the heavy security, the criminally loud music with no one attempting to stop it.

"This is territory," he said, coming to an abrupt halt. "I'm alone, I'm unarmed, and I'm not going there."

"Vice Lords," I said. "Or they were a few years ago. They're a long-term gang, so I assume they still are."

"Still not going there," said Fitz.

"Come on, Fitz," I said. "They aren't so bad. For a gang. They almost always have a good reason to kill the people they kill. And they keep the peace on this street, if you aren't too far behind on your payments."

"Yeah. They sound swell."

I shrugged, though he couldn't see it. "Police response time for this place is way the hell after everything has already happened. People here are more likely to get help from a gang member than a cop if they're in trouble."

"You're a fan?"

"No," I said. "It shouldn't be like this. The gangs are dangerous criminals. They rule through force and fear. But at least they don't pretend to be anything else."

Fitz grimaced and looked down to stare at his open palms for a moment. Then he said, "Guess I'm not in a place where I can throw stones."

"You couldn't break anything if you did," I said. "You're of no use to me dead, kid. We're not going down the block. First place on the right. If you don't walk past there, you won't be crossing any lines."

Fitz frowned. "The place with the metal shutters?"

"Yeah. You remember what I told you to say?"

"Yeah, yeah, I remember the script," Fitz said, scowling. "Can we get this over with?"

"I'm not the one who can knock on the door."

He scowled more deeply and started walking.

The building he went to was part of a larger building that had once held four small businesses. One had been a clinic, one a lawyer, and one a small grocery. They were gutted and empty now. Only the fourth one remained. The metal shutter over the doorway held the only thing that looked like actual art: a nearly life-sized portrait of a rather dumpy angel, the hem of his robe dirty and frayed, his messy hair doing nothing to conceal his oncoming baldness. He held a doughnut in one hand and had a sawed-off shotgun pointing straight toward the viewer in the other.

"Heh," I said. "That's new."

Fitz regarded the painting warily. "What is this place again?"

"A detective agency," I said. "Ragged Angel Investigations."

"Looks kinda closed," Fitz said.

"Nick can't afford an apartment," I said. "He sleeps here. He drinks sometimes. You might have to be loud."

Fitz eyed the block and then the door. "Yeah. Great." He rapped on the metal shutter. Nothing happened. He repeated it, knocking slightly louder and longer. Still nothing.

"Ticktock, kid."

He glowered in my direction. Then he started pounding on the shutter in a heavy, steady rhythm.

Maybe five minutes later, there was the click of a speaker, evidently small enough to be concealed virtually in plain sight. "What?" said a cranky, whiskey-roughened voice.

"Um," Fitz said. "Are you Nick Christian?"

"Who wants to know?"

"My name is Fitz," the kid said. He'd pitched his voice slightly higher than usual. It made him sound a hell of a lot younger. "Harry Dresden said that if I was ever in trouble, I could come to you."

There was a long silence. Then Nick's voice said heavily, "Dresden is history."

"That's why I'm here," Fitz said. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

Nick sounded annoyed. "Dammit. He told you to say that, didn't he?"

Fitz looked slightly bemused. "Well. Yes, actually."

"I am getting too old for this crap," he growled. Then there were several loud clicks and a short, heavy screech of metal, and the shutter rolled up.

Nick Christian hadn't changed much since I'd last seen him. He was short, out of shape, well past his fiftieth birthday, and had sharp, quick, dark eyes that seemed to notice everything. His bald spot was larger. So was his stomach. He was dressed in a white undershirt and boxer shorts, and he held an old wooden baseball bat in his right hand. He shivered and glared at Fitz.

"Well, boy. Get in out of the cold. And keep your hands in sight, or I'll brain you."

Fitz held his hands up in plain sight and went in. I followed. There was a threshold at the doorway, but it was flimsy as hell, and felt more like a sheet of Saran Wrap than a wall. The muddling of business and home life in the same space was probably responsible. I pushed through it, following Fitz.

"Right," Nick said. "Close the shutter and the door. Turn all the locks."

Fitz eyed Nick for a moment. Streetwise and cynical, the kid didn't like the idea of locking himself into a strange building with a strange old man.

"It's all right, Fitz," I said. "He might kick your ass out his door if you give him trouble, but he won't do anything to hurt you."

Fitz glowered in my general direction again, but he turned and followed Nick's instructions.

We stood in his one-room office. It looked . . . Hell, it looked almost exactly like mine had, though I'd never compared the two in my head before. Old filing cabinets, a coffee machine, a desk, and a couple of chairs that had been pushed all the way to one wall to make room for a simple folding cot on an aluminum frame. Nick also had a computer and a television set, features my office never had. Nick was no wizard—just an old detective with a set of iron principles and a self-appointed mandate to help people find their lost children.

There were also seven pictures on his wall, every one of them an eight-by-ten school photo of a child between the ages of six and thirteen. The first few were faded, the hair and clothing styles in them clearly aged.

Nick went around to the back of his desk, sat down, pulled a bottle of rye from the top drawer, and slugged back a swallow. He capped it, put it back, and eyed Fitz warily. "I don't get involved in Dresden's line of work," he said. "I know my limits."

"The magic stuff," Fitz said.

Nick shuddered and glanced at his top drawer. "Yeah. That. So if you came here for that, you're out of luck."

"No," Fitz said. "It's about gangs. Dresden said you knew them."

Nick shrugged one shoulder. "Some."

"A man I know was abducted," Fitz said. "There's a description of the guy we think did it." Fitz dished out what I remembered about the thug who had broken into Morty's house.

Nick listened to it all without saying a word. Then he nodded once. Then he asked, "Who is this man to you?"

"No idea," Fitz said. "You're the expert."

"Not the kidnapper," Nick sighed. "The victim."

Fitz hardly hesitated. "My uncle."

Nick mused over that. Then he said, "I am too old to get up in the middle of the night and get conned. Get out."

"Wait," Fitz said, holding out a hand. "Wait, please."

Nick opened the top drawer again, but this time he came out with an old 1911. He didn't point it at Fitz. "Good try, kid. But I've been in this town a while. Walk back to the door and let yourself out."

"Dammit," I muttered. "Fitz, listen to me. Tell him this, word for word."

Fitz listened, nodded, and then said, "I can't tell you everything for a reason, Mr. Christian. Dresden said you and he had an understanding. That you wanted nothing to do with his side of the street."

"I don't," he said. "Get out."

I fed Fitz his next line.

"He also said that you owed him a favor."

Nick narrowed his eyes to slits. "What favor?"

Fitz listened to me, then said, "All the money and fame the Astor case brought you."

Nick arched an eyebrow. "All the . . ." He looked away and shook his head. He couldn't keep the smile off his mouth, until he finally snorted. When he spoke, there was laughter under his words. "That sounds like Harry."

The Astor case had been about a little girl lost. Her parents cared more about the fame of having an abducted daughter than they did about her, and when she ran off one day, they hired the child-recovery specialist Nick Christian and his apprentice, Harry Dresden, to find her. We did. She hadn't been kidnapped, but the Astors had reported her so, and, in the absence of an actual perpetrator, fingered Nick and me. It had been a trick and a half to get her safely back into her parents' custody without going to jail. There was a lawsuit afterward. The judge threw it out. But, all in all, finding that little girl had cost Nick about two thousand bucks.

Nick hadn't wanted to take the case. I had talked him into it. He had wanted to cut and run the moment I confirmed the kid was at liberty. I had talked him into seeing it through, being sure she was safe. When I'd completed my apprenticeship, Nick's graduation present had been to forgive me the two grand I owed him.

"You were tight with him?" Nick asked.

"He was sort of my adviser," Fitz said. "Sometimes it's almost like he's right there next to me, still."

Nick grunted. "Investigation apprentice or the other kind?"

Fitz put on a sober face. "I'm not at liberty to say."

"Hngh," Nick said, nodding. "Heard he'd picked up an apprentice. You're holding back to keep me distanced from the situation."

"Yes."

"And you just want the information? You don't want me to work the field on it?"

"That's right."

"A www," Nick said. He scratched at his ear and said, "Yeah. I guess. What else can you tell me about this guy?"

I fed Fitz his lines. "He was crazy."

Nick snorted. "Whole hell of a lot of gangers are crazy, kid. Or the next best thing."

"Less money-drugs-sex-violence crazy," Fitz said. "More creepy-cult crazy."

"Hngh," Nick said. Lines appeared on his brow. "There's one, where they all wear the hoodies with the hoods up all the time. Got rolling maybe three or four years back. They don't call themselves anything, but the gangs call them the Big Hoods. No one knows much about them."

"Perfect," I said to Fitz. "Sounds like the assholes we're looking for. Ask him where they're set up."

"A tunnel under the Eisenhower Expressway, on the south end of the Meatpacking District. The other gangs think they're crazy to be where the cops move so freely, but the Big Hoods never seem to attract any police attention." He scrunched up his eyes. "Don't think they even claim any territory. That's all I got."

"Because they aren't a gang, per se," I said. "Excellent, Fitz. Let's move."

"Thank you," Fitz said to Nick.

"Thank Dresden. Wouldn't have said that much to anyone else."

"I'll do that." Fitz stared intently at Nick for a moment and then said, "What do you do here?"

"As a private cop?" Nick asked. "Take some cruddy work to keep the lights on—divorces and so on. But mostly I look for lost kids."

"Doing it a while?" Fitz asked.

"Thirty years."

"Find any?"

"Plenty."

“Find any in one piece?”

Nick stared hard at Fitz for a long time. Then he pointed a finger up and behind him, to the row of portraits on the wall.

“Seven?” Fitz asked.

“Seven,” Nick said.

“In thirty *years*? You live like this and . . . *Seven*? That’s *it*? That’s *all*?”

Nick leaned back in his chair and gave Fitz a small smile. “That’s enough.”

Outside, Fitz said, to me, “He’s crazy.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And he helps people.”

Fitz frowned and moved hurriedly back out of the Vice Lords’ domain. He was silent for several blocks, seemingly content to walk beside me and think. Eventually, he looked up and asked, “You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“All right. I helped you. Pay up.”

“Okay,” I said. “Take a right at the next corner.”

“Why?”

“So I can introduce you to someone who will help.”

Fitz made a rude sound. “You really love not telling people things, don’t you?”

“I don’t love it, so much as I’m just really good at it.”

Fitz snorted. “Does this guy drink, too?”

“Nah. Sober as a priest.”

“Fine,” Fitz sighed, and kept trudging.

Chapter Twenty-six

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” said Fitz.

We were standing outside Saint Mary of the Angels. Calling the place a church is like calling Lake Michigan a swimming hole. It’s huge, literally taking up an entire city block, and an architectural landmark of Chicago. Gorgeously built, a true piece of gothic art, both inside and out, St. Mary’s had often served as a refuge for people with the kind of trouble Fitz was facing.

The kid was not in good shape. We’d done a considerable bit of hiking that evening, and despite what might have been the beginnings of a thaw, it was still below freezing, and the slight lack of bitter cold in the wind wasn’t stopping it from cutting through Fitz’s layers of mismatched clothing and his old jacket. Those lean, gangly kids have the worst of it when winter sets in. They lose their body heat fast. He’d been making up for it in exercise, but he was getting tired, and I remembered that he probably hadn’t eaten since I’d seen him before the previous day’s sunrise.

He stood clutching his arms around his body, shivering and trying to look like nothing was wrong. His teeth were chattering.

“I know a guy here,” I said. “Go around to the back door and knock until someone answers. Ask for Father Forthill.”

Fitz looked skeptical. “What’s he gonna do for me?”

“Give you a blanket and some hot food, for starters,” I said. “Look, kid, I’m giving you my A game here. Forthill’s a decent guy. This is what he does.”

Fitz clenched his jaws. “This isn’t getting me the guns back. I can’t go back without them. If I can’t go back, I can’t get my crew out.”

“Go inside,” I told him. “Talk to Forthill. Get some food in you. If you decide you want to go back and try to sneak the guns out of that drift on your own, you’ll have plenty of time before dawn.”

Fitz set his jaw stubbornly.

“Your choice, man,” I said. “But going hungry in cold like this is hard on the body. You had, what—seven weapons? Most of them submachine guns? Comes out to maybe forty pounds. Call it fifty if you bring back all the clips and ammo. Think you can burrow into a half-frozen snowbank, get all those guns out, load them up, and walk for most of an hour in the coldest part of the night? On an empty stomach? Without a cop spotting you and wondering what a guy your age is doing on the dark streets so late, carrying a really heavy bag?”

He grunted.

“At least have a damned sandwich.”

Fitz’s stomach gurgled audibly, and he sighed. “Yeah. Okay.”

It took Fitz five minutes to get anyone to answer the door, and when it finally opened, a dour, sour-looking elderly man in a heavy brown bathrobe vaguely reminiscent of a monk’s habit opened the door. His name was Father Paolo, and he took himself very seriously.

Fitz told him that he needed to see Father Forthill, that it was a matter of life and death. Only after several minutes of emphasizing his original statement did Father Paolo sigh and invite Fitz in.

“Stay there,” Paolo said, pointing a stern finger at Fitz.

Fitz pointed at the ground, questioningly, and then nodded. “Got it.” Then he deliberately took a small shuffle-step to one side as the priest began to turn away, drawing a scowl worthy of at least a cardinal.

I probably shouldn’t have undermined Paolo’s authority by chuckling like that, but come on. That’s comedy.

Forthill came down the hall from his chambers a few moments later, dressed in flannel pajamas and a heavy, black terry-cloth robe. He had thick, fuzzy house shoes on his feet, and his fringe of hair was standing up every which way. His bright blue eyes were a little watery and squinty without the aid of his glasses. He blinked at Fitz for a moment and then said, "Can I help you, my son?"

"Harry Dresden said you could," Fitz said.

Forthill raised his eyebrows. "Ah. Perhaps you should come with me."

Fitz looked around and then nodded. "I guess."

Forthill beckoned and led Fitz back down some hallways to the neat, modest chamber where he slept and lived. It was maybe ten feet square and contained a bed, a desk, a chair, and a couple of lamps. Forthill let Fitz in, then closed the door behind the young man. "Please have a seat, my son."

Fitz looked around for a moment, then sat down on the chair. Forthill nodded and sat on the edge of his bed. "First things first," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Should I give you a good set-up line for you to make a pithy comment about Catholic priests and sexual abuse of young men, or would you prefer to find your own opening during the conversation?"

Fitz blinked a couple of times and said, "What?"

"Such remarks are apparently quite popular. I wouldn't want to deny you the enjoyment."

"Oh, uh. No, that's all right, Father."

Forthill nodded gravely. "As you wish. Shall we talk about your problems now?"

"All right."

"Well, then," the priest said, "perhaps you should start by telling me when Dresden told you to come to me for help."

"Uh . . ." Fitz said. He glanced around, as if looking for me.

"Go ahead," I told him. "Just tell him the truth. It's all right."

Fitz took a deep breath and said, "About thirty minutes ago, Father."

Forthill's eyebrows tried to turn themselves into a toupee. "Oh?"

"Yeah," Fitz said, his eyes restless. "I, uh. I hear dead people."

"That must be disconcerting."

"I'm not crazy," Fitz said quickly.

"I never thought you were, my son," Forthill said.

Fitz gave him a suspicious scowl. "You believe me?"

The old man gave him an imp's grin. "I'm well aware of the supernatural facets of our city—and that the streets have been particularly dangerous for the past six months or so."

"That's . . . putting it sort of lightly, Father," Fitz said.

He nodded. "I'm sure your experience has not been a gentle one," he said. "I won't add to it with my own disbelief."

Fitz bit his lower lip for a moment. "Okay."

"I am also aware," Forthill continued, "that Dresden's shade is apparently taking a hand in things. I assume that's who you've spoken to?"

"Yeah."

Forthill nodded and looked around the room. "He's . . . he's here with you, isn't he?"

"Wow," I said. "Points for Forthill."

"Yeah," Fitz sighed. "He . . . kinda doesn't shut up."

Forthill chuckled. "He is—he was—a very determined young man."

"Hasn't changed," Fitz said.

"I see," the priest said. "My son, I am sure you understand that these are perilous times. I am afraid that I must ask for some kind of confirmation that this entity is who he says he is."

Fitz looked at the priest blankly. Then around the room. "You hear that?"

"Yeah," I said. I walked over to the far wall of the room and stuck my head through it. On the other side was a dark space, a hidden storage compartment just large enough to contain a couple

of small file cabinets. The concealed compartment had been unknown to anyone but Forthill until I worked a case for an archangel a while back. Michael Carpenter and I had seen him open the hidden cabinet.

"Come over here," I said. "Knock on the wall, right here. Forthill will know what it means."

"Uh, dude," Fitz said. "I can't see where you are."

I sighed. "Can you hear my voice?"

"Yeah," he said, "but it's just . . . like, this disembodied thing. There's not much direction to it."

Which made sense. He was not actually, physically, hearing me speak. Fitz's gift to sense spirits simply expressed itself as something his mind could interpret—in this case, auditory stimulus.

"Uh, okay," I said. "Walk over to the back wall of the room, the one you were facing when you came through the door."

Fitz said to Forthill, "He's trying to tell me how to prove he isn't full of crap." Then he stood up and walked across the room.

"Okay," I said. "Put your hand out on the wall. Now move to your right. Little more. Little more. Too far. Okay, now about nine inches down, and rap on it with your knuckles."

Fitz did all of that and finally knocked on the wall. Then he turned to Forthill and said, "Mean anything to you?"

The old priest pursed his lips and nodded. "Indeed. Indeed it does."

"Man," Fitz said, shaking his head. "Old people."

Forthill smiled at that. "Well, my son. Are you as cold and hungry as you look?"

Fitz tried to look nonchalant. "I could eat, I guess."

"How long has it been since you've had a hot shower?"

Fitz rolled his eyes and said, "Now, if that isn't a straight line, I don't know what is."

Forthill chuckled and spoke to the air. "Dresden, I'm sure that you're in a hurry and that there is some kind of dire deadline, but I'm not talking business with you until the young man is seen to." He said to Fitz, "That door leads to my bathroom. There's a shower. There's a cardboard box under the sink with several items of clothing in it. I keep them on hand for events such as this. Feel free to take any of them."

Fitz just stared, frowning. "Uh. Okay."

"Get cleaned up," Forthill replied, his tone firm. "I'll go round up something to eat while you do. Do you prefer tea or cocoa?"

"Um," Fitz said. "I guess cocoa."

"Excellent taste," Forthill said. "If you will excuse me." He left the room quietly.

Fitz started looking around the room immediately.

"I doubt there's much to steal," I said. "Forthill isn't really into material things."

"You kidding? Look at this place. Pillows, blankets." He looked under the bed. "Three pairs of shoes. It's a hell of a lot more than my crew has. Zero rolls in four pairs of socks and some old moccasin house slippers."

"Guy's offering you clothes and food," I said. "You're not seriously going to steal his stuff, are you?"

Fitz shrugged. "You do what you have to do to live, man. I do. Everyone does. Nothing personal." He looked in Forthill's closet, at maybe half a dozen outfits' worth of clothing, and shook his head. "Ah. He'll notice if I try to take any of this stuff." He looked toward the bathroom.

"Go ahead," I said. "You can lock the door behind you. I'm telling you, kid, Forthill is one of the good guys."

"That's make-believe. There ain't no good guys," Fitz said. "Or bad guys. There's just guys."

"You're wrong about that," I said.

"Heard that one before. People who want to use you always say they're the good guys," Fitz said. "You're one of them, right?"

“Heh,” I said. “No. I’m an arrogant ass. But I know what a good guy looks like, and Forthill is one of them.”

“Whatever, man,” Fitz said. “I haven’t had a shower in two weeks. If I tell you to buzz off, will you do it? Or do I have to keep hearing you yammer?”

“Sorry, Fitz. You aren’t my type.”

He snorted, went into the bathroom, and locked the door behind him. I heard the water start up a moment later.

I stood in the priest’s empty chamber for a moment, looking around it. Everything there was plain, modest, functional, and cheap. The quilt covering the bed looked like it might have been made for Forthill by his mother when he went to seminary. There was a King James Bible next to the bed. It, too, looked worn and old.

I shook my head. Granted, my life hadn’t exactly been featured on an MTV series covering the excesses of the rich and famous, but even I’d had more than Forthill did. How could a man go through life with so little? Nothing of permanence, nothing built up to leave behind him. Nothing to testify to his existence at all.

The kind of man who isn’t focused on his own existence, I guess. The kind of man who cares more about others than he does himself—to the point of spending the whole of his life, a life as fleeting and precious as anyone else’s, in service to his faith and to humanity. There was no glamour in it, no fame.

Forthill and men like him lived within their communities, where they could never escape reminders of exactly what they had missed out on. Yet he never called attention to himself over it, never sought sympathy or pity. How hard must it be for him to visit the expansive, loving Carpenter family, knowing the whole time that he could have had a family of his own? Did he ever spend time dreaming of what his wife would have been like? His children? He would never know.

I guess that’s why they call it sacrifice.

I found Forthill in the church’s kitchen, assembling a meal from leftovers. When I’d been the one taking shelter in the church, it had been sandwiches. Fitz was rating a larger meal. Hot soup; a couple of sandwiches, turkey and tuna, respectively; a baked potato; an ear of corn on the cob; and a small salad.

A few seconds after I walked into the kitchen, Forthill paused, aimed a vague smile at the room, and said, “Hello, Harry. Assuming that’s you, of course.”

“It’s me, Father,” I replied. I mean, he couldn’t hear me and I knew it, but . . . it just seemed sort of rude not to say anything.

“I had a difficult conversation with Karrin this evening,” Forthill said. “She told me that you had found the persons who shot at her home last night. And that you want us to help them.”

“I know,” I sighed. “It sounds insane, but . . .”

“I think that to Karrin, you must have sounded quite insane,” he continued. “But I consider your reaction to be remarkable for its compassion. I can only presume that the boy is one of these gang members.”

He finished off the food preparations and turned to face me, more or less. “Don’t worry. I have no intention of bringing Ms. Murphy into this situation—at least not for the time being. Her judgment has been clouded since your death, and grows more so as the fighting goes on.”

I felt myself relax a little. “I hoped you wouldn’t.”

“I will grant the boy sanctuary here for now. I’ll talk with him. I’m sure he will tell me the particulars of his situation. After that, I will have to act in accordance with my conscience.”

“Can’t ask a man for more than that, Father,” I said. “Thank you.”

He picked up the simple wooden tray laden with Fitz’s meal and stood there for a moment. “It’s a shame we can’t converse. I would love to hear about your experience. I should think it would be fascinating, a chronicle of one of the most enigmatic functions of Creation—Death itself.”

“Nah,” I said. “The mystery doesn’t stop even after you get to the other side. There’s just a lot more paperwork.”

“Also, I find it interesting that you are here on holy ground,” Forthill said. “If I remember correctly, the last ghost who attempted to enter this church couldn’t even touch the building, much less wander freely around it. What does it mean?” He shook his head, bemused. “I suppose you’d be the one to ask, eh?” He tipped his head in a polite, if badly aimed, nod, and left the room.

It was an excellent question, the thing about ghosts and holy ground. When Leonid Kravos, aka the Nightmare, had come to kill one of my clients I’d stashed at the church, he hadn’t been able to get in. He’d torn up several thousand dollars’ worth of landscaping and flower beds in sheer frustration.

The Nightmare had been a more powerful shade than I was at the moment. So why could I make myself at home, when he’d been stopped as cold as the Big Bad Wolf at the third Little Pig’s house?

“Note to self,” I said. “Look into apparent mystic anomaly later. Help your friends now.”

I sometimes give myself excellent advice. Occasionally, I even listen to it.

It was time to pay a visit to the Grey Ghost and the Big Hoods.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I headed for the Big Hoods' hideout with several important facts in mind.

Fact one: The Big Hoods themselves could not do me harm.

Fact two: There wasn't diddly I could do to the Big Hoods.

Fact three: The Big Hoods were apparently led by this Grey Ghost, a spirit that had been tossing lightning around with impunity during the attack on Morty's house. That meant that the Grey Ghost was the shade of someone with at least a sorcerer's level of talent, and while I felt sure I could defend myself against such an assault if I was ready for it, if I got blindsided, I might end up like Sir Stuart quicker than you could say *ka-zot*.

Fact four: The Grey Ghost had a bunch of lemurs hanging around. While my own spectral evocations might not be able to affect the living, they would sure as hell work on lemurs and the like. I could handle them easily one-on-one, but it seemed likely that they would come at me in waves, or maybe try to wear me down by throwing a horde of wraiths at me first.

Fact five: If the Grey Ghost was giving the orders to mortal cultists, they might have taken measures of their own to deal with ghosts. There might be circle traps prepared. There might be wards or other magical barriers. There might be dangerous substances like ghost dust. If I went in all fat and happy and confident, I could wander right into serious trouble.

Fact six: There were all kinds of spiritual beings in the wide universe, and ghosts were only a tiny cross section of them. I had to be ready for anything. Another entity of some sort might well wander in, drawn by the conflict. Or, hell, for all I knew, one might already be taking a hand.

"No closed minds, Dresden," I ordered myself. "Don't get suckered into thinking this is one limited, small-scale problem. There's every chance it might be part of a much, much larger problem."

If my afterlife went anything like my life had, that seemed a safe bet.

Fact seven: Sooner or later, dammit, I was going to start laying out a little chastisement where it was long overdue.

I flashed back to several vivid memories of when I had done exactly that. Images of violence and flame and hideous foes flickered through my head, sharp and nearly real. The emotions that accompanied those memories came along for the ride, but they were one step removed, distant enough to let me process them, identify them.

Rage, of course. Rage at the creatures who were trying to harm the innocent or my friends or me. That rage had been both a weapon and armor to me in moments of mortal peril. It was always there, and I always welcomed its arrival—being filled with anger was infinitely preferable to being filled with terror. But seeing it in my heightened memories, it made me feel a little sick. *Rage* was a word we used for *anger* when it was being used in the cause of right—but that didn't sanctify it or make it somehow laudable. It was still anger. Violent, dangerous anger, as deadly as a flying bullet. It just happened to be a bullet that was aimed in a convenient direction.

Fear next: always fear. It doesn't matter how personally courageous you are. When something is trying to kill you and you know it, you're afraid. It's a mindless, lizard-brain emotion. There's no way to stop it. Courage is about learning how to function despite the fear, to put aside your instincts to run or give in completely to the anger born from fear. Courage is about using your brain and your heart when every cell of your body is screaming at you to fight or flee—and then following through on what you believe is the right thing to do.

The White Council blamed me for causing trouble with various supernatural evils, and while I'm not quite arrogant enough to blame all the world's problems on my mistakes, they probably

had a point. I have issues with bullies and authority figures. And I refuse to stand by and do nothing when those too weak to defend themselves become victims.

But how much of that had been courage, and how much of it had been me embracing my probably righteous anger so that I wouldn't feel the fear? As the memories flipped by, I saw myself again and again throwing myself into the fire—sometimes literally—to help someone who needed it or to kill something that needed killing. The tidal surges of my emotion had propelled me, fueled my magic, and many times they had made it possible to survive when I wouldn't have otherwise.

But when I'd been running on adrenaline, I'd rarely stopped to consider the extended consequences of my actions. By saving Susan from Bianca of the Red Court, I had offered a high-profile insult to the entire vampire nation. When Duke Ortega had shown up to challenge me to a duel, to restore the honor of the Red Court and forestall a war, it had ended in a bloodbath—and it had never occurred to me to attempt to ensure any other outcome. As a result of the disastrous duel, a wizard named Ebenazar McCoy, my grandfather, had brought an old Soviet satellite down from its orbit, right on top of Ortega's stronghold. No one survived. Then Arianna, Ortega's wife, the daughter of the Red King, had sought her own vengeance even as the Red Court launched a fullscale war.

Arianna's vengeance had materialized in the form of murdering my daughter's foster family and abducting her. Once Susan heard about it, she got in touch. And again I flung myself into fire without a thought.

None of those things *had* to happen. I mean, I wasn't the only guy in the world who had driven that course of events. I knew that. But I had been the guy who had been standing at the tipping point between possible outcomes with depressing regularity. Could I have done something differently? Was it even possible to know?

In my memories, I murdered Susan Rodriguez again.

Time heals all wounds, they say, but I somehow knew I wouldn't be able to escape this one. Granted, only a few days' subjective time had passed since the events of that evening, so the memory was still fresh in my painfully clear recollection. But time wasn't going to help much with what I had done. And it probably shouldn't.

I wanted to hurt the Grey Ghost and its merry band of shades. I wanted to hurt them badly, make them feel the vitriol burning inside my belly. I wanted to take them on and smash them to flinders upon my will.

But. . .

Maybe I should pause for a moment. Maybe I should think. Maybe I should reject both anger and fear and strive for an outcome beyond kicking down the door and smashing everything in my way. Play it smart. Play it responsible.

"Little late for you to be learning that lesson now. Isn't it, dummy?" I asked.

No. It was never too late to learn something. The past is unalterable in any event. The future is the only thing we can change. Learning the lessons of the past is the only way to shape the present and the future.

Why did I want this fight so badly?

"Here's a thought, genius," I said to me. "Maybe it's got something to do with Maggie."

Maggie. My little girl. I would never see her grow up. I would never get to watch for any signs of manifesting talent, so that I could teach her and give her the choice of how to live her life. I would never get to hear her sing a song, or go trick-or-treating, or send her a present for Christmas. I would never . . .

At some point during that dark thunderstorm of regret, fire had erupted from seemingly every surface of my body, a furious red-gold flame. It wasn't hot at first, but after a few seconds it got uncomfortable and rapidly progressed to actual pain. I ground my teeth, closed my eyes, and forced order upon my thoughts, tried to replace the outrage with cool, steady logic.

Several seconds later, the fire died away. I opened my eyes slowly, eyeing the scorch marks on my coat and a blister or two on my exposed skin. Clear bubbles of ectoplasm dribbled from the blisters.

“So, yeah,” I said. “You may have anger issues where Maggie is concerned, Harry.”

Heh. You think?

“Got a rocket,” I sang, “in your pocket. Turn off the juice, boy.”

Show tunes? Really? It wasn't bad enough that you've started talking to yourself, man. Now you're doing performing art.

But the musically inclined me had a point.

“Play it cool, boy,” I whispered. “Real cool.”

I approached the Big Hoods' lair obliquely and cautiously. One might even accuse me of being overly cautious. I circled the lair from all angles, including up above, in a slow, spiral-shaped pattern that only gradually drew closer. I held a veil over myself the entire time, too. It wasn't any easier as a ghost than it had been in the flesh, and I still couldn't throw the greatest veil in the world, but I managed to make myself if not invisible, at least difficult to see.

I wasn't there to fight. I was there to learn. Mort needed my help, but maybe the best way to give it to him wasn't to go charging in like a rogue rhinoceros. Knowledge is power. I needed all the power I could get if I was going to help Morty.

The problem was that the Grey Ghost had apparently marshaled supporters of both the spirit and the flesh—and I couldn't fight the damned crazy thugs who just happened to be made of solid matter. I'd need help. Maybe I could hop into Morty again and toss out enough power to let him run away—but that assumed Morty would let me step in at all. He sure as hell didn't seem to like it the first time. It also assumed that he would be free and able to physically escape, and that I could neutralize his material captors. There was no guarantee either of those things would be the case.

I thought that the tip from Nick was a good one. I think he had identified the right bunch of yahoos, and I had faith in his knowledge of Chicago streets. After a lifetime walking them—and surviving—Nick was an expert. Chicago PD's gang unit sometimes went to him for advice. Sometimes he even gave it to them.

But any expert could be wrong. If the Grey Ghost was wily enough to have a hideout separate from its material mooks' living quarters and had stashed Mort there, I was about to waste a whole lot of time. But how would it *get* a setup of its own without physical help to establish it? If it was strong enough, I supposed, it could have a demesne of its own in the Nevernever—the spirit world. I'd dealt with a ghost named Agatha Hagglesworth once, and she'd had her own little pocket dimension filled with a Victorian-era copy of Chicago.

(It burned down.)

(I was not responsible.)

Anyway, I had to wonder if the Grey Ghost didn't have a similar resource. It would make one fine hidey-hole to avoid annoying things like sunrise, daylight, and recently deceased wizards.

I paused for a moment to consider a notion. I wondered if I could establish a demesne of my own. I mean, theoretically, I knew how it would work. Granted, there's as much space between theory and practice in magic as there is in physics, but it isn't an unbridgeable gap. I was reasonably sure that it could be done. Maybe I could get Butters to let me talk shop with Bob for a few minutes. He'd know what I needed to make it happen, I was sure.

But what would I make it look like? I mean . . . in theory, I could make it practically anything I wanted. I'm sure there would be some kind of energy-to-area requirement that would limit it in absolute terms, but if I wanted, I could make it look like the Taj Mahal or the old Aladdin's arcade where I used to play video games, back before my magic made it all but impossible. I could have a mansion. I could probably make some kind of simulacrum of a butler, if I wanted.

I sighed. Bob would, I was certain, suggest simulacrum French maids tottering around in stiletto heels as his first and most conservative contribution. It would only get more depraved from

there.

In the end, there was really only one of a couple of things my demesne could possibly be: a Burger King restaurant or my old apartment. The one that had burned with the rest of my life.

Suddenly, there was no appeal in considering my own demesne anymore.

"Stop wasting time," I told myself.

I shook off the thoughts and continued my stalk of the Big Hoods' clubhouse, sniffing around for possible magical defenses; alarm spells seemed most likely, but I had to assume that a ghostly sorcerer could create as much destructive mayhem as a mortal one. I could run into anything from ill-tempered guardian entities to a magical equivalent of claymore antipersonnel mines.

Hell, I'd seen a vampire's nest that used *actual* AP mines. Nasty toys. I would be keeping an eye out for any physical defenses as well, in the event I needed to warn Murphy or her crew about them when I showed up for the actual rescue operation.

"For the op," I corrected myself. "Sounds cooler if you call it the op." I moved closer, veil in place, senses tuned to the possibility of danger. "Definitely. Murphy would call it the op."

The entrance to the hideout was just where Nick had said it would be, beneath an overpass where a steel door had once led to an old cityworks storage area. I found no suspect magic in the immediate area around the bridge, which made sense. If I had been spreading detection spells around my own hideout, I wouldn't have gone to the trouble to set them up where the sunrise would obliterate them every morning.

To make something that lasted longer than a day or two at most, considerable effort was required. At the very least, you'd have to use some kind of physical object to harbor the spell's energy. Technically, you could use any object, though it was not unheard-of for wizards to utilize whatever they happened to have in their pockets at the time. It's probably where all the old stories of enchanted spindles, combs, brushes, and mirrors come from.

Most often, the magical energy was channeled into carvings or painted symbols. I'd once set up a rental storage unit as a short-term haven in case things ever went to hell. I'd laid up about a hundred small protective spells on the walls, floor, and ceiling of the place in various colors of paint. The energy inside them was stored in the paint, safe from the sunrise and ready to project a shield whenever the symbols felt the touch of hostile magic.

But a monitoring spell wouldn't be the kind of thing that could lie dormant. It had to actually be "looking" around all the time. That meant a constant, modest expenditure of energy, which would in turn be exposed and vulnerable to sunrise. Land mine-type spells were a lot easier, like my protective spells, only with more kaboom in them. I wasn't surprised that I didn't find any of those outside the hideout. Few people would host a picnic underneath the overpass, but it was Chicago, and all sorts of folks would be through this area during the day. Random people being horribly incinerated would certainly draw the attention of the local authorities, and possibly that of the White Council. The Grey Ghost didn't seem to be an idiot. No death traps were left lying around where some schoolkid or bum might stumble into them.

I wouldn't have set up like that, either. It made far more sense for such sentry spells to be laid down underground, deep enough for the steady presence of the earth to shield the spell energy from disruption.

The Grey Ghost was smart. Things would get interesting about fifteen or twenty feet down.

I finished my last circuit of the site and moved to the door. I reached out a hand and stopped with my palm about an inch away from the metal. I sensed something subtle but there, like the attractive field around an old, weak magnet. I frowned and focused on it, finding a spell of a composition unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

It was something subliminal, sending out a kind of beckoning energy that I wouldn't have noticed had I not been specifically looking for something like it. It would otherwise have been buried in the background energy of the city and its inhabitants. I stretched out a hand to touch the stream of energy flowing steadily outward. It oozed over the surface of my skin, a crawling sensation that made me shudder.

It's smarter not to play around with unfamiliar magic. Besides, I had other things to do. I lowered my hand and stepped toward the source of the music I'd begun hearing in my head at some point. There was little sense wasting more time up on the surface. And I hadn't heard that song in forever, but I could still sing along. I started humming and—

—and stopped myself with my nose about half an inch from the steel door.

I broke out into a cold sweat.

Hell's bells. That magic hadn't been heavy-duty, but it had been puissant. A few seconds after touching it, I had almost walked blindly and mindlessly through the door and into whatever reception was prepared for intruders on the other side. I couldn't know exactly what was over there without getting a look, but it sure as hell wasn't a gift basket and a bottle of wine.

I stepped back from the door and the siren spell with what I felt was a properly Darwinian appreciation of the danger it represented. Oh, it might not blow you up like the defensive wards I'd had on my apartment, but a scalpel can open up your arteries just as readily as a sword. In some cases, more so. I shivered and clutched my arms to my belly.

That spell wasn't the work of a novice or marauding sorcerer experimenting with magic he'd found in the metaphysical section of a bookstore. Whoever had put that thing together had been a true professional, one with centuries of experience.

One who was probably more capable than I when it came to magic.

Don't get me wrong: I'm hoss. When the spells start flying, mine are some of the flashiest, most violent on the planet. I'm like the Andre the Giant of the supernatural world. I've got a lot of power and mass to throw around.

Andre would be a great person to have on your side in a brawl against a rowdy tavern crowd. But in a more focused situation, he would be at the mercy of professionals who, while lacking his raw power, could nonetheless apply their own strength more efficiently and effectively. Murphy was an excellent example of that kind of fighter. She wasn't much bigger than a bread box, but I'd seen her toss around guys weighing most of three hundred pounds like they were unruly puppies.

If the Grey Ghost was responsible for that spell, then I was lucky to have survived our first meeting. The smart move would be to scamper. If it came to a fair fight, I might find myself completely outclassed.

I felt a shivering, cold presence on the back of my neck, and turned to find wraiths nearby. They drifted toward the hideout from all directions, coming in a slow, steady procession and moving in perfectly straight lines. The siren spell made sense to me now. It wasn't a guard spell, though it could certainly have that purpose. It was also a beacon, a dinner bell being rung to signal the mindless horde now approaching.

They never sped up, never slowed. They just kept floating forward until they began to pass through the closed steel door in groups of two and three as they converged upon it.

I pursed my lips, thinking. The Grey Ghost wasn't killing wraiths. It was using them. For the moment, at least, there wouldn't be any kind of guard spell on the other side of the door. There couldn't be, or the Grey Ghost would be slaughtering its own troops and wasting its own investment of time and energy to boot.

I might have an opportunity here. The inbound wraiths would almost certainly be routed by what amounted to a cattle chute. That route would most likely be clear of supernatural booby traps. It might be possible to gain entry, find a vulnerable point along the chute, and then duck out of it to run a quick reconnaissance of the Grey Ghost's headquarters and find Mort.

It took half an hour for the procession to be complete, and the flow of wraith traffic never let up. I stopped counting them at 450 and swallowed. That wasn't a herd of wraiths. That was a bloody *horde*. If one of the wraiths decided it wanted to eat me, it would have to perform a miracle to divide me into enough pieces to feed all of its dinner company.

My veil seemed to have prevented me from being noticed as they approached, but that could just as easily be the effect of the beacon spell. For all I knew, once the beacon shut off, they'd all

turn around and come at me like greyhounds leaving the gate. It would require a singularly stupid man to go hang around in narrow tunnels and cramped spaces alongside a threat like *that*.

“And I, Harry Dresden, am that man,” I stated.

I waited for the last wraith to go in and counted to twenty. My mouth felt dry. Fear boiled in my belly and made my knees feel unsteady. My fingers trembled.

I told them all that they were just preconceived residual memories anyway and that I would tolerate no guff from them.

Then I ground my teeth and followed the horde.

Chapter Twenty-eight

I slipped through the steel door and into the blackness on the other side. I ignored the darkness until it went away, and then began to move stealthily forward.

I stopped with the Scooby-Doo action a couple of feet later and just started walking. I mean, honestly, sneaking. It wasn't as though I could step on a twig or accidentally kick an old can and make a sound, right? Being a ghost, the problem wasn't being sneaky—it was getting noticed in the first place.

Besides. Nobody who was concerned about detecting my presence would be using their ears to sense me coming.

I began extending my wizard's senses out in front of me.

When I say *wizard senses*, I mean it in a similar fashion to *spider sense*. Spidey's enhanced senses detect when he's in danger and warn him that he's got incoming. A wizard's senses don't do that (though I suppose with enough work, someone could come close). What they do sense is the presence of magic, in both its natural state and its worked forms. You don't have to be concentrating to make it happen—it's natural in every practitioner.

The theory I've heard espoused most often is that the ability to sense such energies makes it possible for a regular person to become a wizard, providing the kind of sensory feedback he needs to gradually work with more and more energy. So while a regular person who lacked the sense could, technically, learn how to use magic without it, it would be a process as difficult as someone who was born blind teaching himself to paint.

I focused on that sense in me, partially blocking out my less important, physical senses to give greater attention to the presence of magic in my surroundings. It was pretty thick in here. The door led to a concrete stairway going down into the earth, and each step bore lit candles and thickly painted magical symbols. The latent energy in the paint was almost devoid of arcane power, barely detectable, but it was there and I saw it as faint phosphorescence. The energy of the beacon spell was still going strong. Somewhere in my head I had evidently decided to interpret it as a sound, because I could hear its slow throb like a bass beat on a big woofer.

I went down the stairs, my senses attuned to the ground at my feet. What looked like one more bit of barely magical scribbling could be concealing something far more potent and dangerous—but it didn't. I went down two flights of stairs unmolested.

The bottom of the stairway opened onto a rectangular room that had once been some sort of electrical junction. It obviously wasn't in service anymore. Large steel boxes and glass-faced readouts were spotted with rust and dust. There was more of the occult writing down here—all of it disjointed and fantastically disconnected, as if someone had composed a poem in a foreign language by randomly stringing together words from a dictionary.

It all bore the same trace amounts of magical energy as the writing on the stairs. The Big Hoods evidently had a certain amount of latent talent, which seemed to fit together with the idea of the Grey Ghost recruiting some mortal flunkies to assist it in . . .

. . . In whatever the hell he or she was trying to do.

What was he or she trying to do?

I mean, I knew the Grey Ghost had attacked Mort's place. But why? Why take Mort to begin with? Granted, the little ectomancer could probably be a pain in the ass to any ghost who got too ambitious in Chicago, but the Grey Ghost's ambitions seemed to have been limited to gunning for Morty. What could he possibly have to offer as a target?

At the far end of the junction room, there was a gaping, ragged hole in the wall that looked like it had been made with sledgehammers. It opened onto a rough tunnel beyond—the beginnings of

Undertown proper.

A man's anguished scream came from the opening.

I nearly burst into a sprint but stopped myself. Unthinking sprints were a good way to get killed. Re-killed. Instead, I moved forward into the rough-hewn corridor. It was cold and damp, and slime and mold were everywhere. I unimagined the strong, musty smell that would otherwise have filled my nose and paced forward, watching for traps and working hard not to move my feet in time with the bass-drum rhythm of the beacon spell.

I passed a number of alcoves that joined the corridor. They were individual quarters for the Big Hoods, apparently. Each contained a mattress or an air mattress and something resembling bedding, only covered with mildew and mold. Each had a box or a couple of bags, containing what I presumed to be personal belongings. More arcane gibberish covered the walls, along with slogans such as THE LIZARD FOLK ARE ALREADY HERE! WATCH FOR THEIR EYES! A couple of them looked occupied, with large, bulky forms snoring under the disgusting blankets.

A minute or two later, the passage opened up into a torch-lit room about the size of a hockey rink. The entrance was high up on one wall, so that my head was level with the larger room's ceiling. There were stairs cut into the wall beneath my feet, so that I could walk down them into the large room—which I didn't, as it was packed full of bad guys. I swallowed and made sure my veil was still running strong.

The bass beat of the beacon hammered loudly here, coming from a pit that had been cut into the floor. It must have been at least ten feet across, and I couldn't tell how deep it was. It was surrounded by written formulae that were far less nonsensical than the others, and they sent out flashes of dim red light in time with each pulse of the beacon.

The pit was full of wraiths.

They swirled round and round in steady, mindless motion, each of them overlapping with dozens of others, so that it looked less like a group of beings moving in a circle than some bizarre stew with the occasional recognizable portion of human anatomy appearing above the mix. The hollow not-scream of the empty-eyed wraiths was a huge and hideous sound, one that surged in time with the beacon.

Maybe two dozen lemurs were scattered around the room. They'd lowered their hoods, and without their faceless menace to back them up, they just looked like people. Some were standing. Some were sitting. Another group was playing cards. Still others just stared at nothing, bemused.

A group of Big Hoods was gathered around the pit, all but two of them on their knees and chanting. They bowed at regular intervals and clapped their hands together at others. A gallows that looked like it had been constructed out of a driveway basketball goal hung over the pit, with a pair of Big Hoods holding one end of the rope.

Morty dangled from the other end, trussed up from his hips to his neck. He was swinging back and forth on the end of the line and slowly spinning. Gasps and broken sobbing sounds came from him.

Standing in empty air directly before him, moving as he did, was the Grey Ghost. The figure looked at least as menacing as it had the first time around. When it spoke, its voice was liquid, calm—and feminine.

"You need not do this to yourself, Mortimer," the Grey Ghost said. "I take no pleasure in inflicting pain. Yield. You will do it in the end. Save yourself the agony."

Mort opened his eyes. He licked his lips and said in a cracked, thick voice, "G-g-go fuck yourself."

The Grey Ghost murmured, "Tsk." Then nodded and said, "Again."

"N-no," Morty choked out, beginning to twist against his bonds. He accomplished nothing other than to start spinning more rapidly. "No!"

The two Big Hoods holding the rope calmly lowered Mort down into the swirling pit of insanely hungry wraiths. They collapsed in on Morty, as if the surf could choose where it wished

to crash—and it all wished to crash on the little ectomancer. The cauldron of mad ghosts boiled and congealed onto him, all but hiding him from sight.

Mort began to scream again, a horrible, humiliated sound.

“One,” counted the Grey Ghost. “Two. Three. Four.”

At the last number, the flunkies hauled him up out of the pool of wraiths, and Morty hung there, swinging back and forth and sobbing again, gasping for breath.

“Each time you refuse me, Mortimer, I will add another second to the count,” said the Grey Ghost. “I know what you’re thinking. How many seconds will it take to drive you mad?”

Mort tried to regain control of his breathing, but it was a futile effort. Tears marked his face. His nose had begun to run. He opened his eyes, his jaw clenched, his bald pate scarlet, and said, his voice cracking, “Go watch the sunrise.”

“Again,” said the Grey Ghost.

The Big Hoods lowered Morty into the pit once more. I didn’t know what happened to a living mortal attacked by a wraith, but if Morty’s reaction was any indicator, it wasn’t good. Again he screamed. It was higher pitched than a moment before, more raw. The screams all but drowned out the calm, monotonous count of the Grey Ghost. She went to five, and then the Big Hoods hauled him up again. He twitched in spasmodic motion, as if he’d developed a simultaneous charley horse in every muscle and sinew. It took his screams at least ten seconds to die away.

“It’s more art than science,” the Grey Ghost continued, as if nothing had happened. “In my experience, most minds break before seven. Granted, most do not have your particular gifts. Whatever happens, I’m sure I will find it fascinating. I ask again: Will you help me?”

“Go jump in a river, bitch,” Morty gasped.

There was a moment of silence. “Again,” the Grey Ghost snarled. “Slowly.”

The obedient Big Hoods began to lower Mort slowly toward the wraith pit again.

Mort shook his head vainly and twisted his obviously battered body, trying to curl up and away from the swirling tide of hungry ghosts. He managed to forestall his fate by a few seconds, but in the end, he went down among the devouring spirits once more. He screamed again, and only after the scream had well and truly begun did the Grey Ghost start counting.

I’d never really had the highest opinion of Morty. I had hated the way he’d neglected his talents and abused his clients for so long, back when I’d first met him. He’d gone up in my estimation since then, and especially in the past day. So maybe he wasn’t a paragon of virtue, but he was still a decent guy in his own way. He was professional, and it looked like he’d had more juice all along than I thought he had.

That said a lot about Morty, that he’d kept quiet about the extent of his ability. It said even more about him that he was standing in the lion’s den with no way out and was still spitting his defiance into the face of his captor.

Dammit, I thought. I like the guy.

And the Grey Ghost was destroying him, right in front of my eyes.

Even as I watched, Morty screamed again as the wraiths surged against him, raking at him with their pale, gaunt fingers. The Grey Ghost’s calm voice counted numbers. It felt like a minor infinity stretched between each.

I couldn’t get Mort out of this place. No way. Even if I went all-out on the room and defeated every single hostile spirit in it, Mort would still be tied up and the Big Hoods would still be looming. There was no percentage in an attack.

Yet standing around with my thumb up my ghostly ass wasn’t an option, either. I didn’t know what the Grey Ghost was doing to Morty, but it was clearly hurting him, and judging from her dialogue (straight out of Cheesy Villain General Casting, though it might be), exposure to the wraiths would inflict permanent harm if Morty continued to refuse her. And there were the murderous spirits back at the ruins of Mort’s house to think about, too.

And as if all that wasn’t enough, sunrise was on the way.

Dammit. I needed an edge, an advantage.

The fingers of my right hand touched the solid wooden handle of Sir Stuart's pistol, and I was suddenly keenly aware of its power, of the sheer, tightly leashed potency of the weapon. Its energy hummed silently against my right palm. I remembered the fight at Morty's place and the havoc Sir Stuart's weapon had wreaked among the enemy—or, rather, upon a single enemy.

The Grey Ghost had feared Sir Stuart's gun, and I couldn't imagine she'd done so for no reason. If I could take her out, the other spirits who followed her would almost certainly scatter—the kind of jackals who followed megalomaniacs around rarely had the stomach for a confrontation without their leader to stiffen their spines. Right?

Sure. Just because the lemurs still outnumber you more than a dozen to one doesn't mean they'll see you as an easy victim, Dresden. You'll be fine.

There should be a rule against your own inner monologue throwing around that much sarcasm.

But there was still merit in the idea: Kill the Grey Ghost and then run like hell. Even if the lemurs came after me, at least the main voice who appeared to be guiding the Big Hoods would be silenced. It might even get all the malevolent spiritual attention entirely off of Morty.

All I had to do was make one shot with Sir Stuart's pistol. No problem. If I missed, I probably wouldn't survive the experience, sure, but other than that it should be a piece of cake.

I gritted my teeth and began to move slowly toward the Grey Ghost. I didn't know how close I could get before my half-assed veil became useless, but I had to do everything I could to maximize the chances of a hit. I wasn't a marksman, and the pistols of the eighteenth century weren't exactly precision instruments, but I couldn't afford to miss. Of course, if the Grey Ghost sensed me coming, she would have time to run, to dodge, or to pull some sort of defense together.

I had to kill her before she knew she was under attack. There was some irony there, considering the way I'd died.

The Grey Ghost finished her count, and the Big Hoods hauled a sobbing Morty out of the pit again. He hung there, twitching, suffering, making involuntary sounds as he gasped for breath. The Grey Ghost stood in front of him, motionless and, I felt certain, gloating.

Ten feet. I knew my veil was shoddy and my aim only middling, but if I could close to ten feet, I figured I had a fairly good chance of hitting the target. That would put me on the near edge of the wraith pit, shooting across it to hit the Grey Ghost. Of course, if I missed, the Grey Ghost wouldn't need to kill me. All she'd have to do was freaking *trip* me. The wraiths, once they sensed my presence, would be all over me.

Then I'd get what Morty was getting. Except that as a ghost myself, they'd be tearing me into tiny, ectoplasm-soaked shreds. And eating them.

What fun, I thought.

I tried to move steadily, to keep myself calm. I didn't have any adrenaline anymore to make my hands shake, but they shook anyway. Dammit. I guess even a ghost is still, on some level, fundamentally human. Nothing for it but to keep moving.

Thirty feet.

I passed within a few yards of a lemur who was apparently staring into nothingness—though his eyes were lined up directly with me. Perhaps he was lost in a ghostly memory. He never blinked as I went by.

Twenty-five.

The wraiths wheezed out their starving, strangled howls in the pit a few feet ahead of me.

Twenty.

Why do I keep winding up in these situations? Even after I'm *dead*?

For the fun, I thought to myself. *For the fun, fun, fun-fun, fun.*

Chapter Twenty-nine

Then the floor near the Grey Ghost's feet rippled, and a human skull floated up out of it, its eye sockets burning with a cold blue flame.

The Grey Ghost turned to look at the skull, and something about her body language soured. "What?"

"A Fomor messenger is at the outer perimeter," the skull said. It sounded creepily like Bob, but there was a complete absence of anything but a vague contempt in its voice. "He bears word from his lord."

I got the impression that the Grey Ghost tilted her head beneath its hood. "A servitor? Arriving from the Nevernever?"

"The outer perimeter is the Nevernever side, of which I am custodian," the skull replied. "The inner perimeter is the mortal world. You established that more than a year ago."

The Grey Ghost made a disgusted sound. "Have a care, spirit. You are not indispensable." She looked at the suspended Morty and sighed. "Of course the Fomor disturb me with sunrise near. Why must my most important work continually be interrupted?"

The skull inclined itself in a nod of acknowledgment. "Shall I kill him and send back the body, along with a note suggesting that next time they call ahead?"

"No," snapped the Grey Ghost. "Of course not. Curb your tongue, spirit, lest I tear it out for you."

"If it pleases you to do so. I am but a servant," the skull said with another nod. The contempt in its tone held steady, though. "Shall I allow him to pass?"

"And be quick about it," the Grey Ghost snarled.

"As it pleases you," the skull replied, speaking noticeably more slowly than a moment before. It vanished into the floor.

I held very, very still. Motion was the hardest thing for a veil to hide, and I suddenly realized that the one-shot, one-kill plan had a serious flaw in it: I had forgotten to account for Evil Bob. The spirit was powerful, intelligent, dangerous—and apparently incapable of anything resembling fear or respect. I suppose that after a few decades of working with Kemmler, the most dangerous necromancer since the fall of the Roman Empire, it was difficult to take a lesser talent seriously.

Not that regular Bob was exactly overflowing with respect and courtesy. Heh. Take that, bad guy.

In any case, I had a chance to find out more about the enemy. You can't ever get too much dirt on these cloaked lunatics. Frequently, learning more about them exposes some kind of gaping hole in their armor, metaphorical or otherwise. I've never had cause to regret knowing more about an enemy before commencing a fight.

Besides. If the Grey Ghost was a part of some kind of partnership, instead of operating alone, I had to know about it. Bad-guy alliances were never good news.

The Grey Ghost stepped away from the pit. In fewer than thirty seconds, the ground rippled again and a man appeared, arising from the ground a bit at a time, as if he were walking up a stairway. The skull came with him, floating along behind, just above the level of his head.

I recognized him at once: the leader of the Fomor servitors who had come after Molly. He was still dressed in the black turtleneck, but had added a weapons belt with a holstered pistol beneath his left hand and a short sword at his right. It was one of those Japanese blades, but shorter than the full katana. Wakazashi, then, or maybe it was a ninja-to. If it was, minus points for carrying it around out in the open like that.

Oh, there was something else odd about him: His eyes had changed color. I remembered them as a clear grey. Now they were a deep, deep purple. I don't mean purple like the dark violet eyes that lots of Bob's romance-novel heroines always seem to have. They were purple like a bruised corpse, or like the last colors of a twilit sky.

He faced the Grey Ghost calmly and bowed from the waist, the gesture slow and fluid. "Greetings, Lady Shade, from my master, Cantrev Lord Omogh."

"Hello. Listen," the Grey Ghost replied, her tone sour, "what does Omogh want from me now?"

Listen bowed again, purple eyes gleaming. "My master desires to know whether or not your campaign is complete."

The Grey Ghost's voice came out from between clenched teeth. "Obviously not."

Listen bowed. "He would know, then, why you have escalated your search to a seizure of a second-tier asset." The servitor paused to glance at Morty and then back to the robed figure. "This action runs counter to your arrangement."

The eye sockets of the skull flickered more brightly. "We could still send the Fomor the message about calling ahead."

"No," the Grey Ghost said severely.

"It would be simple and direct. . . ."

"No, spirit," the Grey Ghost snarled. "I forbid it."

The skull's eyes flickered rapidly for a moment, agitated. Then it bowed lower and said, "As you wish."

The Grey Ghost turned to Listen and said, "My servant believes it would be logical to murder you and send your corpse back to your master in order to express my displeasure."

Listen bowed again. "I am one of many, easily replaced. My death would be but a brief annoyance to my lord, and, I think, a somewhat anemic symbolic gesture."

The Grey Ghost stared at him and then said, "If you weren't speaking the literal truth, I think I should be satisfied with letting the skull have you. But you really have no sense of self-preservation at all, do you?"

"Of course I do, Lady Shade. I would never throw away my life carelessly. It would make it impossible for me to ensure that my death is of maximum advantage to my lord."

The Grey Ghost shook her head within the hood. "You are a fool."

"I will not contest the statement," Listen said. "However, Lady Shade, I must ask you for an answer to return to my lord." He added mildly, "Whatever form that answer may take."

"Inform him," said the Grey Ghost, voice annoyed, "that I will do as I see fit to acquire an appropriate body."

Whoa.

The Lady Shade was looking for a meat suit.

Which meant . . .

I shook off the line of logic to be examined later. I focused on the conversation at hand.

"You made no mention of requiring such a valuable specimen for your ends," Listen said.

"Look at what I have to work with," Lady Shade snarled, gesturing at the Big Hoods gathered around the pit. "Scraps that cannot support the weight of my talent. Tell Omogh that if he wishes an ally who can face the Wardens, he must be tolerant. This specimen is of the least value to his purposes, and the greatest to mine."

Listen considered that for a moment and then nodded. "And the Rag Lady?"

"Once I am seated within a mortal form, I will deal with her," Lady Shade said. Her voice became detectably smug. "Assuming, of course, you have not already removed her yourself. Is that a burn on your cheek, Listen? I hope it does not pain you."

"Very kind, Lady," Listen said with another bow. "I am in no discomfort worth noting. May I tell my lord that you will make him a gift of these fourth-tier creatures, once you are restored?"

Lady Shade seemed to consider that for a moment. She tilted her head and looked around at the Big Hoods. "Yes, I suppose so. I'll have little need for such baubles."

"Excellent," Listen said. He sounded genuinely pleased.

Lady Shade shook her head again. "Is he so enamored of such minor talents?"

"A moment ago," Listen said, "I was preparing to inform him of the potential loss of a second-tier. Now I may inform him of the probable gain of a dozen lesser acquisitions. It pleases me to draw positive gains for my lord from negative situations."

From his place dangling over the pit, Morty said, in a slurred voice, "Tell him he ain't getting squat. Bitch can't have me."

Listen lifted both eyebrows and looked at Lady Shade.

"I require his consent," the Lady Shade said, her voice tight. "I will have it. Had you not interrupted me, I would have it already. Now dawn nears. It may be several hours after sundown before I complete the transfer."

"Ah," Listen said. Nothing in his tone made him sound overtly skeptical, but I got the impression that he was nonetheless. "Then with your leave, I will depart to carry word to my lord and trouble you no more."

Evil Bob popped up into sight over Listen's shoulder again. "Are you sure you do not wish this creature to be *departed*, my lady?"

"Go in peace, Listen," Lady Shade said without so much as glancing at Evil Bob. "Inform your lord that I anticipate that we will be able to move against the Rag Lady and her allies in the fortress sometime tomorrow evening."

Listen bowed at the waist again; then he turned and, followed by the floating skull, stepped down into the floor, vanishing from mortal reality and into the spirit world.

The moment Listen was gone, Lady Shade waved a hand, and with reedy howls of protest, the wraiths in the pit were unceremoniously scattered from it, the heavy bass beat of the beacon spell coming to an abrupt halt. The will of Lady Shade pressed against them like the current of a river, and they were driven from the chamber, carried out through the walls and the floor by an unseen force.

I could feel it myself, the force of her will, simultaneously banishing the wraiths and commanding the attention of the lemurs in the chamber. I fought to hold still before it, to let it slide away from me around my veil, to use it to help me hide rather than being revealed by it.

"Children," she said, her tone full of contempt, "beware: The dawn approaches. To your sanctums, all." She turned to the Big Hoods. "Mortal dears. Mother is pleased with you. Keep safe the prisoner until nightfall. His life is worth the world to me. Guard him with your own."

The Big Hoods shivered, as if they'd heard the voice of a god whispering in their minds, and bowed their heads as one. They murmured words of some kind of ritual devotion, though they were too mushmouthed for me to clearly understand them. The lemurs began clearing out at once, rising from their activities (or lack thereof) and departing, moving silently from the chamber.

I got lucky. None of them actually plowed into me by mistake.

"Well," murmured Lady Shade to Morty. "We shall continue our discussion in several hours. You will have no food, no water. You will not be untied. I'm sure that sooner or later, you will see things my way."

"I would rather die than let you in," Morty replied, his voice a croak.

"You can't always have what you want, dear child," Lady Shade said. Her voice was matter-of-fact, calm, and practical. "I will continue to hurt you. And eventually, you will be willing to do anything to stop the pain. It is an unfortunate limit of mortality."

Morty said nothing. I couldn't tell whether he shivered at the coldblooded confidence in her voice, but I did.

And I realized, finally, who I was dealing with.

The Grey Ghost turned and sank into the floor, evidently moving into a demesne in the Nevernever. I waited until I was sure she was gone, then simply vanished, straight up, appearing

over the streets of Chicago above. Dawn was a golden promise over the eastern horizon. I headed toward my grave as fast as I could possibly travel.

The Grey Ghost was a shade; that I knew. But where had the shade come from? From someone with a knowledge of possessing others' bodies. From someone who seemed confident she could confront the Wardens of the White Council, the cops of the wizarding world, and come out on top. From someone who had been known to this Omogh person, whoever he was, and who needed a body with enough of an innate gift for magic to support what was apparently a much greater talent.

Only so many people with a wizard's level of ability had perished in Chicago. Most of them had been foes of mine. I hadn't been the one to gack all of them, but I'd killed this one. With a gun, no less, from about ten feet away.

I reached the shelter of my grave and sank into it gratefully, still shivering.

Morty was in the hands of the Corpsetaker, one of the heirs of that lunatic Kemmler, a body-hopping wizard with a serious case of the long-term crazies and maybe three or four times my own ability with magic. If she got into Morty, I was guessing that, like me, she would have access to her full abilities once more. She would be able to start hopping bodies again, and pick up her career right where she left off.

And she'd start by killing Molly.

I'd survived my original encounter with her thanks only to the intervention of "Gentleman" John Marcone, a little bit of good luck and better guesswork, and some truly epic paranoia. She was an absolute, first-class threat, one I would prefer to avoid confronting at all, much less alone.

Sunrise came roaring over the land, and I felt grateful to have it between the Corpsetaker and me. I was glad to have a chance to rest while I could.

Things had gotten considerably more urgent.

Come nightfall, I knew, I was going to have to find a way to take her on.

Chapter Thirty

I huddled in my grave as the sun rose. I would have thought I'd be more nervous about a personally lethal, fiery cataclysm sweeping over the world, but I wasn't. When dawn came, it was like listening to a big truck roll by outside—dangerous if you were in front of it, but nothing but background noise if you weren't. My grave was peaceful.

I tried to track that feeling, to identify that sense of contentment I enjoyed down in the ground. It took me a few moments, but then I understood: It was like being in my basement apartment during a winter storm. Outside, the wind howled and the snow and sleet fell, but I was home with Mouse and Mister piled onto the couch for warmth, sipping a cup of hot chicken soup in front of a big fire in the fireplace, and reading a good book.

It was the same thing, resting in my grave. Peace. I wasn't going anywhere and it made me happy. If only I'd brought a book, my day would have been perfect.

Instead, I just leaned back against the earthen wall of the grave and closed my eyes, soaking in the quiet. I would be trapped here until sundown. There was no sense in chewing my own guts out worrying about what would happen that evening.

I drifted through my memories, sad and joyous and just plain ridiculous.

I thought about Elaine and me in high school. We had lived like superheroes: two young people with incredible powers who must hide themselves from those around them, lest they be isolated and persecuted for their different-ness.

I hadn't really been interested in girls yet when I met Elaine. We'd both been twelve, bright, and stubborn, which meant that we generally drove each other crazy. We had also been best friends. Talking about our dreams of the future. Sharing tears or a shoulder, whichever was needed. At school, we both found the subject matter to be tedious beyond bearing—in comparison to the complexity of Justin's lessons, acquitting ourselves well in the public-school curriculum had been only nominally more difficult than sharpening a pencil.

It was difficult to relate to the other kids, in many ways. We just weren't interested in the same things. Our magic talents increasingly made television a difficulty, and video games had been downright impossible. Elaine and I wound up playing a lot of card and board games, or spending long, quiet hours in the same room, reading.

Justin had manipulated us both masterfully. He wanted us to bond. He wanted us to feel isolated from everyone else and loyal to him. Though he put up a facade about it that fooled me at the time, he wanted us to work through our nascent sexuality with each other and save him the bother of explaining anything—or the risk of either Elaine or me forming attachments with someone outside our little circle.

I never suspected a thing about what he really wanted, until the day Elaine stayed home sick. Concerned about her, I skipped my last class and came home early. The house seemed too quiet, and an energy I had never sensed before hung in the air like cloying, oily perfume. The second I walked in the door, I found myself tensing up.

It was my first encounter with black magic, the power of Creation itself twisted to maim and destroy everything it touched.

Elaine sat on the couch, her expression calm, her spine locked rigidly into perfect posture. I now know that Justin had put the mental whammy on her while I was gone, but at the time I knew only that my instincts were screaming that something was wrong. A wrongness so fundamental it made me want to run away screaming filled the room.

And besides. Elaine only sat like that when she was making a statement—generally, a sarcastic one.

I still remembered it, plain as day.

Justin appeared in the kitchen doorway, on the other side of Elaine, and stood there for a moment, looking at me, his expression calm.

"You skipped class again." He sighed. "I probably should have seen that coming."

"What's going on here?" I demanded, my voice high and squeaky with fear. "What have you done?"

Justin walked to the couch to stand over Elaine. Both of them stared at me for a long moment. I couldn't read their expressions at all. "I'm making plans, Harry," he said in a steady, quiet voice. "I need people I can trust."

"Trust?" I asked. His words didn't make sense. I couldn't see how they applied to the current situation. I couldn't see how they would make sense at all. I looked from Elaine back to Justin again, searching for some kind of explanation. Their expressions gave me nothing. That was when my eyes fell to the coffee table and to the object lying quietly next to my well-mauled paperback copy of *The Hobbit*.

A straitjacket.

There was something quietly, calmly sinister in the congruence. I just stared for a moment, and the bottom fell out of my stomach as I finally realized, for the first, awful time, what my instinct had been screaming at me: I was in danger. That my rescuer, teacher, my guardian meant to do me harm.

Tears blurred my vision as I asked him, in a very quiet, very confused voice, "Why?"

Justin remained calm. "You don't have the knowledge you need to understand, boy. Not yet. But you will in time."

"Y-you can't do this," I whispered. "N-not you. You saved me. You saved us."

"And I still am," Justin said. "Sit down next to Elaine, Harry."

From the couch, Elaine said in a quiet, dreamy monotone, "Sit down next to me, Harry."

I stared at her in shock and took a step back. "Elaine . . ."

Justin threw kinetomancy at me when I looked away.

Some instinct warned me in the last fraction of a second, but instead of trying to block the strike, I moved with it, toward the front picture window, weaving my own spell as I went. Instead of interposing my shield, I spread it wide in front of me like a sail, catching the force of Justin's blast and harnessing it.

Me, my shield, Justin's energy, and that picture window exploded onto the front lawn. I remembered the enormous sound of the shattering glass and wood, and the hot sting of a dozen tiny cuts from bits of flying glass and wood. I remember being furious and terrified.

I went through the open space where the window had been, fell onto the lawn, took it in a roll, and came up sprinting.

"Boy!" Justin said, projecting his voice loudly. I looked over my shoulder at him as I ran. His eyes were more coldly furious than I had ever seen them. "You are here with me—with Elaine. Or you are *nowhere*. If you don't come back right now, you are dead to me."

I lopped the last two words off the sentence to get his real meaning and poured on more speed. If I stayed, he meant to render me helpless, and from that beginning there could be no good endings. If I went back angry, I could fight him, but I couldn't win—not against the man who taught me everything I knew. I couldn't call the cops and tell them Justin was a mad wizard—they'd write me off as a nutcase or prankster without thinking twice. It wasn't like I could run to Oz and ask a more powerful wizard for help.

He'd never told me about the White Council or the rest of the supernatural world. Abusers like to isolate their victims. People who feel that they are completely alone tend not to fight back.

"Boy!" Justin's voice roared, now openly filled with rage. "Boy!"

He didn't need to say anything more. That rage said it all. The man who had given me a home was going to kill me.

It hurt so much, I wondered if he already had.

I put my head down and ran faster, my tears making the world a blur, with only one thought burning in my head:

This wasn't over. I knew that Justin could find me, no matter where I ran, no matter how well I hid. I hadn't escaped that straitjacket. I had only delayed it for a little while.

I didn't have any choice.

I had to fight back.

"What happened next?" asked a fascinated voice.

I shook my head and snapped out of the reverie, looking up to the sunlit sky outside my grave. Winter's hold was definitely weakening. The sky was grey clouds interspersed with streaks of summer blue sky. There was a lot of water dripping down the edges of my grave, though the snow at the bottom was still holding its chill.

The Leanansidhe sat at the edge of my grave, her bare, dirty feet swinging back and forth. Her bright red hair had been bound back in a long tail, and she was dressed in the shreds of five or six different outfits. Her head was wrapped in a scarf that had been knitted from yarn duplicating various colors of dirty snow, and the tattered ends of it hung down on either side of her head. It gave her a sort of lunatic-coquette charm, especially considering the flecks of what looked like dried blood on the pale skin of her face. She looked as happy as a kid on Christmas morning.

I just stared up for a moment and then shook my head faintly. "You saw that? What I was thinking?"

"I see you," she said, as though that explained it. "Not what you were thinking. What you were remembering."

"Interesting," I said. It made a certain amount of sense that Lea could discern the spirit world better than I could. She was a creature who was at least partly native to the Nevernever. I probably looked like some kind of pale, white, ghostly version of myself to her, while the memories that were my substance played across the surface.

I thought about the wraiths and lemurs that Sir Stuart had put down on my first night as a ghost, and how they had seemed to bleed images as they faded away.

"Yes," she said, her tone pleased. "Precisely like that. My, but the Colonial Knight put on a display for you."

"You knew Sir Stuart?"

"I have seen him in battle on several occasions," Lea said, her eyes somewhat dreamy. "He is a worthy gentleman, in his fashion. Quite dangerous."

"Not more dangerous than the Corpsetaker," I said. "She destroyed him."

Lea thrust out her lower lip and her brow furrowed in annoyance. "Did she? What a contemptible waste of a perfectly doughty spirit." She rolled her eyes. "At least, my godchild, you have discerned your foe's identity—and that of her pet."

I shivered. "Her and Evil Bob."

She waved a hand. "Evil is mainly an aesthetic choice. Only the spirit's power is significant, for your purposes."

"Not true," I said mildly. "Though I know you don't agree."

Her expression was pensive for a moment before she said, "You have your mother's Sight, you know."

"Not her eyes?"

"I've always thought you favored Malcolm." The serious expression vanished and she kicked her feet again. "So, young shade. What happened next?"

"You know. You were there."

"How do the mortals say it?" she murmured. "I missed that episode."

I coughed out a surprised little laugh.

She looked faintly miffed. “I do not know what happened between the time you left Justin and the time you came to me.”

“I see.” I grinned at her. “Do you think I just give away stories for free? To one of the Sidhe?”

She tilted back her head and laughed, and her eyes twinkled. Like, literally, with little flashes of light. “You have learned much. I began to despair of it, but it seems you may have acquired wisdom enough, and in time.”

“In time to be dead,” I said. “But, yeah. I’ve worked out by now that the Sidhe don’t give anything away. Or take anything for free. And after however long, I realized why that might be: because you can’t.”

“Indeed,” she said, beaming at me. “There must be balance, sweet godchild. Always balance. Never take a thing without giving such a thing in return; never give a favor without collecting one in kind. All of reality depends on balance.”

I squinted at her. “That’s why you gave Bianca *Amoracchius* years ago. So that you could accept that knife from her. The one Mab took from you.”

She leaned toward me, her eyes all but glowing with intensity and her teeth showing in a sudden, carnivorous smile. “Indeed. And such a *treacherous* gift it was, child. Oh, but if that deceitful creature had survived you, such a vengeance I would have wreaked that the world would have spoken of it in whispers for a thousand years.”

I squinted at her. “But . . . I killed Bianca before you could balance the scales.”

“Indeed, simple boy. Why else, think you, that I gifted you with the most potent powers of faerie to protect you and your companions when we battled Bianca’s ultimate progenitors?”

“I thought you did it because Mab ordered you to.”

“Tsk. In all of Winter, I am second in power only to Mab—which she has allowed because I have incurred with it proportionate obligation to her. She is my dearest enemy, but even I do not owe Mab so much. I helped you as much as I did, sweet child, because I owed you for collecting a portion of my due justice from Bianca,” the Leanansidhe said. Her eyes grew wider, wilder. “The rest I took from the little whore’s masters. Though I admit, I hadn’t expected the collection to be quite so *thorough*.”

Memories flashed in my head. Susan. An obsidian knife. I felt sick.

I’ll get over it, I told myself. Eventually. It hadn’t been much more than a day from my point of view. I was probably still in shock or trauma or something—if ghosts could get that, I mean.

I looked up and realized that Lea was staring at me, at my memories, with undisguised glee. She let out a contented sigh and said, “You do not settle things by half measures, do you, my godson?”

I could get mad at her for being callous about calling those memories to my mind, or I could revile her for taking such joy in so much destruction and pain, but there wasn’t a point in doing so. My godmother was what she was—a being of violence, deceit, and the thirst for power. She wasn’t human. Her attitudes and reactions could not fairly be called inhumane.

Besides. I had gotten to know Lea’s sovereign, Queen Mab, in a fashion so hideously intimate that I could not possibly describe it. And believe me. If Lea had been the high priestess of murder, bloodlust, scheming, and manipulation, then Mab was the goddess my godmother worshipped.

Come to think of it, that was probably an apt description of their relationship.

Six of one, a half dozen of another. My godmother wasn’t going to change. There was no sense in holding what she was against her. So I just gave her a tired, whimsical smile instead.

“Saves time,” I told her. “Do it thoroughly once, and you don’t have to fool around with it again later.”

She dropped back her head and let out a deep-throated laugh. Then she tilted her head and looked at me. “You didn’t realize what would happen to mortal kind when you struck down the Red King and his brood. Did you?”

“I saw the opportunity,” I said, after a moment. “If I’d stopped to think about the trouble it would create . . . I don’t know if I’d have done it any differently. They had my girl.”

Her eyes gleamed. “Spoken as someone worthy to wield power.”

“Coming from you,” I said, “that’s . . . a little bit unsettling, actually.”

She kicked both feet, girlishly pleased, and smiled down at me. “How sweet of you to say so.”

The best thing about my faerie godmother is that the creepy just keeps on coming.

“I’ll trade you,” I said. “The rest of the tale for information.”

She nodded her head in a businesslike fashion. “The tale for questions three?”

“Done.”

“Done, done, and done,” she replied.

So I told her.

Chapter Thirty-one

I ran and ran for a good long while. I wasn't on the cross-country team at school, but I often went running with Elaine. It was how we'd hidden sneaking off to make out—and stuff—from Justin. He was a thorough sort of guy, so we made sure to actually do the running, too, in order to make our deception flawless. And the whole time, we thought we were getting away with it.

As an adult, I could see that our efforts were about as obvious as they could possibly be. Justin had known, I was certain—now. But back then, Elaine and I had been sure that we were masters of deceit.

That scheme's trappings were sure as hell turning out to be handy that day. My strides slowed but turned longer, steadier, machinelike. I was sixteen. I didn't wind down for almost an hour.

When I finally stopped, the terror had faded, if not the headache, and I found myself in an entirely unexpected position.

I didn't know what was coming next. I didn't know what was expected of me.

I had to think. All by myself.

I ducked off the road and into a large culvert, huddling there while I got my breath back and flailed at the wet paper bag my brain was trapped within.

Mostly, I just kept thinking that I should have known. No one in my life had gone an inch out of their way to look out for me once my parents were gone. Justin's generosity, even seasoned with the demands of studying magic, had been too good to be true. I should have known it.

And Elaine. She'd just sat there while he'd been doing whatever he was going to do. She hadn't tried to warn me, hadn't tried to stop him. I had never known anyone in my life I had loved as much as Elaine.

I should have known she was too good to be true, too.

I wept for a while. I was tired and cold and my chest ached with the pain of loss. In a single moment, my home had been destroyed. My life had been destroyed.

But I shook my head ferociously, wiping my eyes and my nose on the leather sleeves of my jacket, heedless of what it did to them. I was still in danger. I had to think.

I had no means of travel, no money, and no idea of where to go. Hell's bells, I was lucky I had my shiny new driver's license in my pocket. It was mid-November, and my school letter jacket wasn't going to be enough to keep me warm once it got dark. My stomach made a cavernous noise, and I added starving hunger to my list of problems.

I needed shelter. I needed food. I needed to find someplace safe to hide from my mentor until I could figure out how to take him on—and to get all of that, I needed money. And I needed it fast.

So, once it got dark, I, uh . . .

Look. I was sixteen.

Once it got dark, I sort of knocked over a convenience store.

For lack of anything better to hide my face, I'd tied my sweaty T-shirt around my head in a sort of makeshift balaclava. I didn't have anything else to wear except my letter jacket, which seemed more or less like a screaming advertisement to make it simple for the cops to figure out my identity. There wasn't much I could do except to rip all the patches off of it and hope for the best. After that, I'd scavenged a paper sack from a trash bin, emptied it, and stuck my right hand in it.

Once I had my equipment ready, I looked up at the streetlights glowing outside the QuikStop and flicked a quick hex at them.

Learning magic is hard, but if you can do even fairly modest spells, you find out that wrecking technology is *easy*. Anything with electronics built into it is particularly susceptible to a hex, but if

you put enough oomph into it, even simpler technology can be shorted out or otherwise made to malfunction. At sixteen, I wasn't anywhere near the wizard I would be even five or six years later—but those lights didn't have a prayer. The two streetlights over the parking lot flickered and went black.

I hit the lights outside the store next, and two security cameras. I was getting increasingly nervous as I went along, and the last hex accidentally blew out the store's freezers and overhead lights along with the security camera. The only lighting left in the place came from a pinball machine and a couple of aging arcade video games.

I swallowed and hit the door, going through in a half-doubled-over crouch, so that there wouldn't be any way to compare my height to the marker on the inside frame of the door. I held out my right hand like it was a gun, which it might have been: I had the paper sack I'd acquired pulled over it. There was something cold and squishy and greasy on the inside of the bag. Mayonnaise, maybe? I hated mayo.

I hustled up to the cashier, a young man with a brown mullet and a Boston T-shirt, pointed the paper sack at him, and said, "Empty the drawer!"

He blinked reddened, watery eyes at me. Then at the paper bag.

"Empty the drawer or I'll blow your head off!" I shouted.

It probably would have been more intimidating if my voice hadn't cracked in the middle.

"Uh, man," the cashier said, and I finally twigged to the scent of recently burned marijuana. The guy didn't look scared. He looked confused. "Dude, what is . . . Did you see the lights just . . . ?"

I really hadn't wanted to do this, but I didn't have much of a choice. I made a little bit of a production of turning the "gun" to point at the liquor bottles behind the counter, gathered up my will, and screamed, "Ka-bang! Ka-bang!"

My verbal incantations have actually gotten *more* sophisticated and worldly over the years, not less.

I know, right? It shocks me, too.

The spell was just basic kinetic energy, and it didn't really hit much harder than a baseball thrown by a high school pitcher—a regular pitcher, not like Robert Redford in *The Natural*. That wasn't really enough power to threaten anyone's life, but it was noisy and it was more than enough energy to smash a couple of bottles. They shattered with loud barking sounds and showers of glass and booze.

"Holy crap!" shouted the cashier. I saw that his name tag read STAN. "Dude!" He flinched down, holding his arms up around his head. "Don't shoot!"

I pointed the paper bag at him and said, "Give me all the money, Stan!"

"Okay, okay!" Stan said. "Oh, God. Don't kill me!"

"Money!" I shouted.

He turned to the register and started fumbling at it, stabbing at the keys.

As he did, I sensed a movement behind me, an almost subliminal presence. It's the kind of thing you expect to experience while standing in a line—the silent pressure of another living being behind you, temporarily sharing your space. But I wasn't standing in a line, and I whirled in panic and shouted, "Ka-bang!" again.

There was a loud snap of sound as pure force lashed through the air and the glass door to a freezer of ice cream shattered.

"Oh, God," Stan moaned. "Please don't kill me!"

There was no one behind me. I tried to look in every direction at once and more or less succeeded.

There was no one else in the store. . . .

And yet the presence was still there, on the back of my neck, closer and more distinct than a moment before.

What the hell?

“Run!” said a resonant baritone.

I turned and pointed the paper bag at the pair of video games.

“Run!” said the voice on the Sinistar game. “I live! I . . . am . . . Sinistar!”

“Don’t move,” I said to Stan. “Just put the money in a bag.”

“Money in a bag, man,” Stan panted. He was practically sobbing. “I’m supposed to do whatever you want, right? That’s what the owners have told us cashiers, right? I’m supposed to give you the money. No argument. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said, my eyes flicking nervously around the place. “It’s not worth dying for, is it, Stan?”

“Got that right,” Stan muttered. “They’re only paying me five dollars an hour.” He finally managed to open the drawer and started fumbling bills into a plastic bag. “Okay, dude. Just a second.”

“Run!” said the Sinistar machine. “Run!”

Again, the insubstantial pressure against the back of my neck increased. I turned in a slow circle, but nothing was there—nothing I could see, at any rate.

But what if there *was* something there? Something that couldn’t be seen? I had never actually seen something summoned from the netherworld, but Justin had described such beings repeatedly, and I didn’t think he’d been lying. Such a beast would make an ideal hunter; just the sort of thing to send out after a mouthy apprentice who refused to wear his straitjacket like a good boy.

I took two slow steps toward the video game, staring at its screen. I didn’t pay attention to the spaceship or the asteroids or the giant, disembodied skull flying around. I didn’t care about the flickers of static that washed across the screen as I got closer, something inside its computer reacting to my presence. No. I paid attention to the glass screen and to the reflection of the store that shone dimly upon it.

I identified my outline on it, long and thin. I could see the vague outlines of the store as more shadowy shapes—aisles and end caps, the counter and the door.

And the Thing standing just inside the door.

It was huge. I mean, it was taller and broader than the door was. It was more or less humanoid. The proportions were wrong. The shoulders too wide, the arms too long, the legs crooked and too thick. It was covered in fur or scales or some scabrous, fungal amalgamation of both. And its eyes were empty, angled pits of dim violet light.

I felt my hands begin to shake. Tremble. Actually, they became absolutely spastic. The paper bag made a steady rattling sound. There was a creature from another world standing behind me. I could *feel* it, no more than seven or eight feet away from me, every bit as real as Stan, to every sense but my sight. It took a real effort to move my head enough to cast a single, hurried glance over my shoulder.

Nothing. Stan was shoveling various bills into a bag. The store was otherwise empty. The door hadn’t opened since I had come through it. There was a bell on it. It would have rung had it opened. I looked back at the reflection.

The Thing was two feet closer.

And it was smiling.

It had a head whose shape was all but obscured by growths or lumpy scales or matted fur. But beneath its eyes I could see a mouth, too wide to be real, filled with teeth too sharp and serrated and yellow to belong to anything of this earth. That was a smile from Lewis Carroll’s opium-inspired, laudanum-dosed nightmares.

My legs felt like they were going to collapse into water at any second. I couldn’t catch my breath. I couldn’t move.

Malice slithered up my spine and danced in spiteful shivers over the back of my neck. I could sense the thing’s hostility—not the mindless anger of a fellow boy I’d needled beyond self-restraint, or Justin’s cold, logical rage. This was something different, something vaster, more timeless, and deeper than any ocean. It was a poisonous hate, something so ancient, so vile, that it

could almost kill without any other action or being to support it, a hate so old and so virulent that it had curdled and congealed over its surface into a stinking, staggering contempt.

This thing wanted to destroy me. It wanted to hurt me. It wanted to enjoy the process. And nothing I said, nothing I did, would ever, ever change that. I was something to be eradicated, preferably in some amusing fashion. It had no mercy. It had no fear. And it was old, old beyond my ability to comprehend. It was patient. And if I proved too disappointing to it, I would only break through the veneer of that contempt—and what lay beneath would dissolve me like the deadliest acid. I felt . . . stained, simply by feeling its presence, stained as if it had left some hideous imprint or mark upon me, one that could not be wiped away.

And then it was behind me, so close it could almost touch, its outline towering over me, huge and horrible.

And it leaned down. A forked tongue slithered out from between its horrible shark-chain-saw teeth, and it whispered, in a perfectly low, calm, British accent, “What you have just sensed is as close as your mind can come to encompassing my name. How do you do?”

I tried to talk. I couldn’t. I couldn’t make the words form in my mouth. I couldn’t get enough air to push my voice up out of my throat.

Damn it. Damn it, I was more than some terrified child. I was more than some helpless orphan preparing to endure what someone vastly older and more powerful than me was preparing to inflict. I had touched the very forces of Creation. I was a young force of nature. I had seen things no one else could see, done things no one else could do.

And in a moment like that, there was only one thing I could ask myself:

What would Jack Burton do?

“I’m f-f-f-fine,” I said in a hoarse, hardly understandable voice. “That’s a mouthful, and I’m busy. D-do you maybe have a nickname?”

Its smile widened.

“Little Morsel, among those whom I have disassembled,” it purred, its tone wrapping lovingly around the last word of the phrase, “I have several times been called by the same phrase.”

“O-oh? W-what’s that?”

“He,” purred the thing, “Who Walks Behind.”

Chapter Thirty-two

“He Who Walks Behind?” I said, fighting a losing battle to keep from trembling. “As scary names go, that one kind of isn’t. I’d stick with the first one. More evocative.”

“Be patient,” purred the creature’s disembodied voice. “You will understand it before the end.”

“Uh, dude?” Stan asked quietly. “Uh . . . Who are you talking to?”

“Oh, tell him,” the creature said. “That should be entertaining.”

“Shut up, Stan,” I said. “And get out.”

“Uh,” said Stan. “What?”

I whirled on him and pointed the paper bag at him, my arms extending through the space where He Who Walks Behind apparently both was and wasn’t. “Get the hell out of here!”

Stan fell all over himself trying to comply. He literally went to the tile floor twice on his way to the door, his eyes wide, and stumbled out and into the night.

I turned back to the reflective surface of the video game’s screen, and just as I again found the shape inside it, fire erupted along my spine. I was slammed forward into the video game, and my head hit it hard enough to send a spiderweb of cracks through the machine’s glass screen. Pain, sickening and harsh, flooded through my skull, and I staggered.

But I didn’t fall. Justin DuMorne had been hard on me. It hadn’t ever been this bad, this scary, and it had never hurt so much—but then, it had never been for real. I grabbed the machine’s sides, forced my fingers to hold on, and kept myself from falling.

“Run! Run!” screamed the machine again. This time, the voice was blurred and distorted, disturbingly deep and malicious. I noted blurrily that the cracked and wildly flickering screen had a terrified wizard’s blood all over it. The game’s computer was apparently failing.

“You think that the inebriated little mortal is going to run to fetch the authorities,” purred the creature’s voice. I turned my head, looking around, and didn’t see anything. But the motion sent fire down my back, and for the first time I felt a trickling there beneath my jacket. I was bleeding.

“You think that if they come running in their vehicles, with their lights and their symbols, that I will flee.”

I turned and put my back to the machine. My legs felt wobbly, but I was beginning to fight through the pain. I clenched my teeth and snarled, “Get away from me.”

“I assure you,” came the creature’s bodiless voice, “that we will not be disturbed. I have made sure of it. But it does demonstrate that you possess a certain talent for performance under pressure. Does it not?”

“You sound like my guidance counselor,” I said, and wiped blood from one of my eyes. I took a breath and stalked forward, wobbling only a little. I grabbed the bag of money Stan had left on the counter. “I guess maybe you are a little scary.”

“Neither fear nor pain sway you from your objective. Excellent.” This time, the thing’s voice was coming from the far side of the convenience store. “But there’s no knowing the true temper of the blade until it has been tested. Even the strongest-seeming steel may have hidden flaws. This may be interesting.”

I paused, frowning, and looked up at my faerie godmother, who still sat at the edge of my grave, listening raptly. “I . . . Godmother, I’ve heard it said that ghosts are memories.”

“Indeed,” Lea said, nodding.

“Are the memories truth?”

Lea arched a rather caustic eyebrow at my words. “You ask your first question before finishing the tale?” Her mouth twisted in distaste. “Your storytelling form leaves something to be desired,

child.”

“Yeah, I never did too well in English class. Will you answer the question?”

Her eyes became very, very green and glittered with a wild, gleeful light. “They are the facts, the events as you experienced them.”

I frowned. “I never really had a clear recollection of exactly what the thing said to me,” I said. “I mean, that blow to the head gave me a headache for days.”

“Ah yes,” Lea said. “I remember your pain.”

She would. “Yeah, uh. Anyway. I’m remembering the conversation now, word for word. Is that real? Or is it something that guy in black made up to fill in the blanks?”

“They are your memories,” she said, “the record, the impression of what you lived. Your brain isn’t the only place they are stored—it is, in truth, often a poor facility for such a purpose.” She paused to consider her next words and then spread her hands, palms up, an odd light in her eyes. “It is the nature of the universe that things remain. Nothing ever disappears completely. The very sound of Creation still echoes throughout the vast darkness: The universe remembers. You are currently free of the shackles of mortality. Your limited brain no longer impedes access to that record. The only blocks to your memory are those you allow to be.”

“That’s either very Zen or very . . . very crazy,” I said. “So, this memory—this is all the actual event?”

“Did I not just say as much?” she asked crossly. “It would make a ridiculous fiction. Why would I bother listening otherwise?”

I honestly wasn’t sure. But I decided not to push the issue. Ghost Harry, wise Harry.

“Now,” the Leanansidhe said. “If you are quite finished holding hostage my imagination, pray continue.”

“Get away from me,” I snarled, clutching the money. Sparks spat fitfully from the fried security camera. They were most of the light in the place. Even if the creature had been something solid and physical, it might have hidden in the stretches of shadow between the flickering motes of light. I didn’t see it anywhere.

So it came as a shock to me when something gripped the back of my neck and effortlessly flung me into an end cap of various doughnuts and pastries.

I went through it and hit the shelf behind. It hurt more than I could have believed. Years later, I would have considered it a minor foothill of pain, but at the time it was a mountain. The sweet smell of sugar and chocolate filled my nose. I figured my backside must be coated in about half an inch of frosting, cream filling, and powdered sugar. The scent made my stomach howl for food, gurgling loudly enough to be heard over the sound of items falling from the shelves here and there.

Like I said. Sixteen.

“Such a useless scrap of meat contains you,” the creature said, its voice unchanged by the violence. “It is entirely inconsequential, and yet it molds you. Your existence is a series of contradictions. But here is certainty, mortal child: This time, you cannot run.”

The hell I couldn’t. Running had always served me fairly well, and I saw no reason to change my policy now. I scrambled to my feet and ran for the back of the store, away from the presumed direction of my attacker. I rounded the far corner of the aisle and pressed my back up against it, panting.

Something hard and hot and slimy settled around my neck, a noose made of moist serpent, and just as strong. It jerked me up and off my feet, a bruising force that threw me into the air and released me almost instantly.

I had an enormous flash of empathy for Jerry, facing the raw power and amused pleasure of a large, invisible Tom.

“You cannot escape what is always behind you,” it said.

I landed on my ass, hard, and scrambled toward the other aisle on my hands and knees, only to feel another terrible force strike me, a contemptuous kick in the seat of my pants. It flung me forward into a glass door on a wall of refrigerated cabinets holding racks and racks of cold drinks.

I bounced off the door and landed, dazed, staring for a second at the large cracks my head had left in the glass.

“No one will save you.”

I tried to crawl farther away. I made it only far enough to reach the next cabinet, and then a blow struck me in the ribs and flung me into the next glass door. My shoulder hit it this time and didn’t break the glass, but I felt something go *pop* in my arm, and the whole limb seemed to light up with abrupt awareness of pain.

The unseen presence of the creature came closer. Its voice lowered to a bare, pleased murmur. “Child of the stars. I will destroy you this night.”

My head was full of pain and fear. I could sense it getting closer again, coming up behind me—always there, I somehow knew, where I was weakest, most vulnerable. That was where it would always be.

I had to move. I had to do something. But the terror felt like lead weights on my wrists and ankles, sapping my strength, making muscles turn to water, thoughts to noise. I tried to run, but the best I could do was a slow, slippery scramble down the aisle of cold drinks.

“Pathetic,” said He Who Walks Behind, growing nearer with every word. “Whimpering, mewling thing. Useless.”

Terror.

I couldn’t think.

I was going to die.

I was going to die.

And then my mouth said, in a damned passable Pee-wee Herman impersonation, “I know you are, but what am I?”

He Who Walks Behind stopped in his tracks. There was a flickering heartbeat of uncertainty in that inevitable presence, and the creature said, “What?”

“Ha-ha!” I said in the same voice, double-tapping my own fear with the character’s staccato laugh. A thought came shining through my head: *Maybe I can’t stop this thing from coming at my back.*

But I can choose which way I turn it.

I struggled to my feet and started down the aisle, spinning with every step, whirling-dervish style. The whole time, I heard myself spewing Pee-wee Herman’s cartoony laugh—which, in retrospect, was possibly the creepiest thing to hit my ears that night.

I hit the door with a hip and an elbow and blew through it, still spinning, out into the parking lot. Once there, I realized that my escape plan did not have a part two. It hadn’t been concerned with getting me any farther than the doors of the store.

I’d achieved the objective. Now what?

The darkened parking lot was a mass of shadows. The nearest lights were a hundred yards away, and seemed somehow dimmer, more orange than they should have been. There was a heaviness in the air and a faint, faint stench of death and rot. Had that been something the creature had done? Had that been what it meant when it said it had made sure of our privacy?

Stan was in the parking lot, out between the two islands housing the convenience store’s gas pumps. He looked like a man who was trying to run in slow motion. His arms were moving very slowly, his legs bent as if sprinting, but his pace was much slower than a walk, as if he’d been trying to run through a rice paddy filled with peanut butter. He was looking over his shoulder at me, and his face was distorted with terror, a horrible mask that hardly looked human in the shadow-haunted night.

I began to run toward him on pure instinct. Herd instinct, really, operating on the assumption that there was greater safety in numbers. My feet pounded the parking lot’s asphalt at normal

speed, and his eyes widened with almost comical slowness and amazement as I ran toward him.

“Is that what you are?” came the creature’s voice, from no direction and from all of them. “One of them? One of the swarm that infests this world?” The origin point of the voice changed, and I suddenly felt hot, stinking breath right on the back of my neck. “I expected better of a pupil of DuMorne.”

I whirled, throwing my arms up defensively. I had time to see everything in the reflection of the convenience store’s broad front windows.

He Who Walks Behind emerged from the shadows in front of the terrified Stan. Broad, horrible arms wrapped around him, crushing him as easily as a man picking up a child. Another limb, maybe a tail or some kind of tentacle, covered in the same growth-fur-scales as the rest of the creature, joined the two arms, so that Stan was wrapped at the shoulders, at the bottom of the ribs, and at the hips.

And then with a slow smile and a simple, savage twisting motion, He Who Walks Behind tore Stan the convenience store clerk into three pieces.

I’d seen death before, but not like that. Not terrible and swift and bloody. I spun back to Stan in time to see the three pieces fall to the ground. Blood went everywhere. One of his arms waved in frantic windmills, and his mouth opened as if to scream, but nothing came out except a vomiting gurgle and a gout of blood. Wide, terrified eyes stared at mine for a second, and I jerked my gaze away, desperate to avoid seeing Stan’s soul as he died.

Then he just sort of . . . changed. From a person in hideous pain and fear to an empty pile of . . . of meat. Parts. Soiled cloth.

I had never seen death come like that. As a humiliation, a reduction of a unique soul to nothing more than constituent matter. When the creature killed Stan, it didn’t simply end his life. It underscored the underlying futility, the ultimate insignificance of that life. It made a man, albeit a fairly unmotivated one, into less than nothing—something that had been a waste of the resources it had consumed. Something that had never had a choice in its own fate, never had a chance to be anything more.

I had involved Stan in this struggle. It hadn’t been his fight at all.

Granted, I had never intended to hurt the guy and never would have. Nonetheless, without my decision to stick up the convenience store, he would have still been loitering behind the counter, killing time until his next joint. He had been caught up in violence that he had done nothing to earn or expect—and it had killed him.

Something in my head went *click*.

That wasn’t right.

Stan shouldn’t have died like that. No one should. No one—man, beast, or otherwise—should get to decide, in a moment of malicious humor, that it got to end Stan’s life, to take away everything he was and everything he might ever be.

Stan hadn’t deserved it. He hadn’t been looking for it. And that creature, that demon, had murdered him.

I felt my jaw begin to ache as it clenched harder and harder. I could feel my rapid pulse beating behind my eyes. There was a terrible pressure inside my head and inside my chest, and with it came a rising wave of anger, and something darker and deadlier than anger that came welling up like a great wave from an unlit sea.

It.

Wasn’t.

Right.

No, it wasn’t. But the world wasn’t a fair place, was it? And I had more reason to know it than most people twice my age. The world wasn’t nice, and it wasn’t fair. People who didn’t deserve it suffered and died every single day.

So what? *So somebody ought to do something about it.*

My right arm and shoulder burned like fire as I felt my right hand slowly form a tight fist. The knuckles popped one by one. They hadn't ever done that before.

I turned to face the creature's image in the reflection. It was crouched over Stan's corpse, its talons tapping lightly on the dead man's open eyes, its mouth still stretched into that horrible, wide smile.

And when it saw the look on my face, its smile widened and its eyes narrowed. "Ahhhh," it said. "Ahhhhh. There you are."

I was not a victim. I was not a powerless child. I was a wizard. I was furious. And I was finished running. "This isn't your world," I whispered.

"Not now," He Who Walks Behind murmured, its smile widening. "But it will be ours again in just a little time."

"You won't be around to see it," I said.

I had never used my power in anger. I had never consciously tried to harm another being with my magic.

But this thing? If anything I had ever seen had it coming, if ever a being was deserving of receiving my violence, it was the bloodstained creature crouching over Stan's mangled body. Everything had been taken away from me in the space of a single afternoon. My home. My family. And now, it seemed, I was about to lose my life. Well, if that was how it was going to be, if I couldn't run without getting more innocent bystanders killed, then I would make my stand here—and I had no intention of going quietly.

I reached into that deep well of anger and began drawing it together into something as hot and violent and destructive as what I was feeling inside.

"There's something you should know," I said. "I skipped sixth hour today. Spanish. Which I'm not very good at anyway."

"What is that to me?" asked the creature.

"*Flickum bicus* just doesn't seem appropriate," I replied. The heat in my right arm and shoulder concentrated into my right hand. The scent of burned hairs crept up to my nose. "And you really don't understand where you're standing, do you?"

The creature's reflection looked left and right at the gas pumps on either side of it.

I kept my eyes locked on its image in the windows, extended my right hand back toward it, and formed my little fire-lighting spell into something a thousand times bigger, hotter, and deadlier than anything I had ever attempted before.

I met the thing's eyes in the reflection, reached down to the well of energy and pure will I'd built inside me, extended my hand toward the creature, and screamed, "*Fuego!*"

My rage and fear poured out of me. Fire lashed out from my open hand like water from a broken hydrant. It spilled all over He Who Walks Behind and over Stan's body, and lit up the darkness with angry golden light.

The creature let out a scream, more surprise and anger than pain, clutching at its eyes with its huge hands. The light changed the reflection in the glass and I could no longer see what was behind me. I swept the torrent of fire left and right without turning away or changing the direction my back faced. I hoped it would slow He Who Walks Behind long enough for my modified fire-starting spell to do its thing.

Gasoline pumps have all kinds of safety mechanisms built into them to reduce the odds of accidentally igniting them. They're pretty good. I mean, how many times have you touched off an explosion while filling your car? But as reliable as they are, those measures are made to stop accidents.

And no engineer in the world ever thought about building them to stop angry young wizards.

It took a couple of seconds, but then there was a screaming sound, something metallic strained past the breaking point, and the first tank went up in a bloom of spectacular fire.

The explosion flung me back, scorching my skin and burning away the hair on my eyebrows. I landed on my ass—again—and lay there, stunned, for a few seconds. Sudden weariness, deeper

than anything I had ever known, flooded over me in reaction to the energy I'd expended on my economy-sized ignition spell.

And then the second tank went up.

Hot wind and pieces of smoking metal showered against the front of the convenience store. I'm glad the first blast knocked me down. If I'd been standing, the metal shrapnel that punched out the entire front wall of windows would have gone through me first.

I stared at the flames and saw a shape within it—or, rather, I saw a creature-shaped void where the smoke and fire should have been. A voice emerged from the fire, something huge and terrifying, a voice that belonged to gods and monsters of myth.

"HOW DARE YOU!" it roared. "HOW DARE YOU RAISE YOUR HAND AGAINST ME!"

Then that not-figure crashed to its knees and fell limply onto its side.

The roaring flames swept in and consumed it.

And my first true battle was over.

Chapter Thirty-three

“That was my first fight,” I said quietly to my godmother. “I’d never used magic to hurt anything before.” I rubbed my hand over my head. “If I hadn’t cut class that day . . . I don’t know. I might never have become what I did.”

“Is that the lesson you took from the memory?” Lea asked, her smile spreading. “You were clearly being prepared to be an enforcer.”

“It seems that way,” I hedged, trying to read her expression. “But Justin never actually tried to get me to hurt anyone.”

“Why would he wish you to be armed against him before he was certain of your loyalty?” Lea asked. “He would have. It was inevitable.”

“Probably,” I said. “But there’s no way we can know, really. It’s a long way from breaking boards in practice to breaking bones in life.”

“Quite. Because convincing a young mortal to believe that it is right and proper to use magic for violence is a delicate process and one that cannot be rushed.”

I grunted and leaned my head back against the wall of my grave.

“All the wishing in the world will not change the past, my godson,” Lea said. “You would like to believe that perhaps Justin had hidden good intentions of some sort. That what happened between you was some kind of misunderstanding. But you understood him perfectly.”

“Yeah. Probably. I’d forgotten how much it hurt—that’s all,” I said quietly. “I’d forgotten how much I loved him. How much I wanted him to be proud of me.”

“Children are vulnerable,” Lea said. “They are easily deceived and notoriously subject to such delusions. You are no longer a child.” She leaned forward slightly and said, with slight emphasis, “I am bound to answer two more questions. Will you ask them now?”

“Yes,” I said. “Give me a moment to consider them.”

“As you wish,” Lea said.

I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to clear my thoughts. Asking questions of inhuman entities can be a tricky and dangerous business—with the fae more than most. You almost never got direct answers from one of the lords of Faerie, the Sidhe. Asking them direct questions, especially questions touching on information relevant to a conflict of some sort, was likely to elicit obscure and maliciously misleading answers. I was on good terms with my godmother, as human-Sidhe relationships went, but that was no reason not to cover my bases.

So I thought over recent events for a while and looked for the blank spots, but I kept getting distracted by the memories of that night in the convenience store. They chewed at me and refused to be pushed aside—especially the conversation with He Who Walks Behind.

“Priorities,” I said out loud. “This is about priorities.”

“Oh?” Lea asked.

I nodded. “I could ask you a lot of questions about my past—and you’d answer them.”

“That is true.”

“Or I could ask you about what is happening right now in the city. I could find out how I could best help Murphy.”

Lea nodded.

“But I was sent back here to find my killer,” I said. “I’m supposed to be hunting down whoever killed me, and yet I’ve been doing a whole lot of everything but that.”

“In point of fact,” Lea said, “you’ve been doing little else.”

I blinked.

She gave me an enigmatic, feline smile.

“Oh, you bitch.” I sighed. “You just love doing that to me.”

Lea demurely lowered her gaze. She fluttered her eyelashes twice.

I scowled at her and folded my arms over my chest. Lea had been involved in my life since I was born, and probably before that. She could tell me any number of things I’d been quietly dying to know since I was old enough to ask questions at all. She was up on all the current events, too. All of the high Sidhe are fanatic gatherers of information, and my godmother was no exception. Of course, they tended to guard their knowledge as ferociously as a dragon guards its gold—and they parted with it almost as reluctantly.

The Sidhe aren’t dummies. Information is a great deal more valuable than gold, any day of the week.

So I circled back to my earlier question. Where *did* my priorities lie? What was more important to me: Digging up secrets from the shadowy bits of my past? Getting the information I needed to move on to my future? Or helping my friends and loved ones right now?

Yeah. No-brainer.

“What can you tell me about the Corpsetaker, her resources, and her goals?” I asked.

Lea considered the answer for a moment before nodding to herself. “The creature you ask about is motivated purely by self-interest. After the body she possessed was killed by a brash, impulsive, and dangerous young wizard, her spirit remained behind. It took a score of moons for her to gather enough coherence to act, and even then she had precious little power to exert upon the mortal world.

“She was limited to speaking with the few mortals who can perceive such things. So she found them and began to manipulate them, guiding them together into the group you have already encountered. Her goal was to assemble her followers, spiritual and material, and then to abduct a body of appropriate strength.”

“Clarification,” I interjected. “You mean a body with magical capability?”

“With significant capability,” Lea replied, stressing the phrase. “When Corpsetaker’s spirit still dwelt upon the mortal coil, even bodies with latent talent were hospitable enough for her to exercise her full power. But thanks to you, and like you, my dear godson, she has passed beyond the threshold between life and death. Now she requires a body with a much greater inherent talent in order to use her gifts once she is inside it.”

I tapped my lips with a fingertip, thinking. “So you’re saying Mort is a major talent.”

“In certain respects, he is more potent than you were, Godson. And he is a great deal more practical—he avoided the notice of the White Council almost entirely and hid his abilities from them quite neatly. The Corpsetaker wants him. She doubtless intends to make some use of the city’s dead and establish herself as the city’s dominant practitioner.”

I blinked. “Why? I mean . . . she’s just going to attract attention from the Council if she does that, and she’s still on their Wanted Dead or Alive but Mostly Dead list.”

“Not if she looks like the little ectomancer,” Lea countered. “She will simply be a concealed talent unveiling itself in a time of dire need.”

“But why risk it in the first place? Why Chicago?”

Lea frowned, golden red brows drawing together. “I do not know. But the Fomor are dangerous folk with whom to make bargains.”

I lifted my eyebrows. Considering the source, that was really saying something.

“In my judgment,” she continued, “the only reason Corpsetaker would deal with the Fomor would be to establish her presence here—probably as a loosely attached vassal of their nobility.”

I found myself scowling. “Well. She isn’t going to do it. This is my town.”

My godmother let out another silver-chime laugh. “Is it? Even now?”

“Course,” I said. I rubbed at my jaw. “What happens if she gets Morty?”

Lea looked momentarily baffled. “She wins?”

I waved a hand. “No, no. How do I get her back out of him?”

Her eyelids lowered slightly. “You have already utilized the only method I know.”

“So I gotta get her before she gets to Morty,” I said quietly.

“If you wish to save his life, yes.”

“And from the sound of the conversation with Creepy Servitor Guy, I’d better break up the Corpsetaker-Fomor team before it gathers any momentum.”

“It would seem to be wise,” Lea said.

“Why the Fomor?” I asked. “I mean, I barely know who they are. Why are they all over Chicago now? Who are they?”

“Once, they were the enemies of my people, Winter and Summer alike,” she said, lifting her chin as her emerald eyes grew distant. “We banished them to the sea. Now they are the exiles of myth and legend, the outcasts of the gods and demons of every land bordering the sea. Defeated giants, fallen gods, dark reflections of beings of light. They are many races and none, joined together beneath the banner of the Fomor in a common cause.”

“Revenge,” I guessed.

“Quite. It is a goal best served by gathering power, an activity that has been made attractive by the fall of the Red Court. And I have been more than generous with my answer to your question.”

“You have. I am grateful, Godmother.”

She smiled at me. “Such a charming child, betimes. Two questions have been answered. Your third?”

I thought some more. Somehow, I doubted that asking *Say, who killed me?* would yield any comprehensible results.

On the other hand, what the hell? You never know until you try.

“Say,” I asked, “who killed me?”

Chapter Thirty-four

The Leanansidhe looked down at me, her almond-shaped green eyes distant, pensive.

“Oh, my child,” she breathed after a moment. “You ask such dangerous questions.”

I cocked my head to one side. “You agreed to answer.”

“And I must,” she agreed. “And I must not.”

I frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Of course, child. You are not Sidhe.” She crossed her ankles, frowning, and I saw a distinct spark of irritated rebellion enter her eyes. “I’m of a mind to tell you and end this charade.”

YO U MUST NOT.

Eternal Silence’s voice wasn’t quite the same mind-destroying artillery shell it had been the first time the verdigris-encrusted statue had thought-spoken to me, but that might have been a function of me being sheltered in what amounted to a foxhole. The force of it blew Lea’s long hair straight back, and her head snapped to one side as sharply as if she’d been slapped on the cheek. A shadow fell across my grave, and I looked up to see the statue looming overhead.

In broad daylight.

Which meant . . . which meant that whatever the thing was, it *wasn’t* a ghost like me. I’d have been withered and blasted into the scraps of what I was now if I’d ventured out of my grave. The lingering power of the dawn wouldn’t destroy me, but it would hurt, a lot, and it would cripple and weaken me.

Eternal Silence was apparently having no problems with it.

Lea turned her head back to the statue, her eyes and expression cold. “I am perfectly aware of the situation,” she spat. Then she tilted her head to one side and paused, as if listening to a speaker I couldn’t hear. She sighed. “Fear not, ancient thing. I have no intention of depriving either of you.”

What? *What!?!* Either of *who*?

It was one of those questions to which I knew damned well that no one would tell me the answer.

Crud.

Clearly I should have haggled for seven questions.

“Child,” Lea said, “I will tell you an answer that is true. But it is not the answer that you desire.”

“Three true answers,” I shot back immediately. “The bargain was made in good faith.”

Lea puffed out a little breath and made a very contained and elegant gesture that somehow managed to convey the same meaning as if she had thrown her hands up. “Will you never cease pushing?”

“Never, ever,” I said.

“Impossible child. Oh, very well. If it will fill that bottomless well you call curiosity.” She shook her head, glanced again at Eternal Silence, and said, “The first truth is that you are acquainted with your killer.”

I swallowed. The single truly redeeming factor of the Sidhe, Winter or Summer, is that they can’t knowingly speak a lie. They are, in fact, completely incapable of it. That’s not the same thing as saying that they can’t deceive—they are past masters of deceit, after all. But they can’t do it by directly speaking words that aren’t true.

Which meant that, assuming Lea’s information was good, I had just eliminated better than six billion possible suspects—and Lea’s information was always good.

Lea nodded at me, the gesture so slight that I almost thought I imagined it. “The second truth is that your murder was but one of thousands at the killer’s hands.”

I took that in as well, trying to look at it from all angles. I knew some people and things who were stone-cold killers, but beings who had killed thousands of mortals were few and far between. Famous snipers in the World Wars hadn’t accumulated more than a few hundred kills. Serial killers working for decades hadn’t done any better. But supernatural predators, especially the long-lived ones, could add up that kind of count in a particularly active century or two.

Oh, and I had done my best to shut down pretty much every one of them I actually knew. The suspect pool was rapidly growing smaller.

“The final truth,” Lea said. She suddenly looked very tired. “Your killer was but the proxy of another being, and one mightier and more dangerous than he.”

He. Male. The pool dwindled by half, give or take.

So. . .

So, aside from the dick who killed me, I also had his boss to worry about.

Super.

“I can say no more, Godson,” Lea said.

YOU HAVE ALREADY SAID TOO MUCH.

Lea lifted her hand as if to shield her face from a sudden wind and scowled in Eternal Silence’s direction. “Your knowledge of mortals is relatively scarce. It is done. Desist your howling.” Lea paused to look to one side again, stiffened her back a little, and added a belated and unenthusiastic, “If you please.”

The silent figure looked from my godmother to me, and though it didn’t have lungs with which to draw breath, I somehow sensed that it was about to speak.

“I know,” I said hurriedly. “I know. Know my path. No need to blow my brains out repeating yourself.”

Eternal Silence seemed faintly, vaguely annoyed. There came a purely psychic sensation, something that . . . that really reminded me of an unsatisfied grunt. Then the statue turned away and vanished from my sight.

“Huh,” I said, after the figure had gone. “What the hell was that about?”

“Proxies,” the Leanansidhe muttered, barely audible. “Always proxies. And respect.”

“What?”

She gave me a direct look, and I had the impression that she was saying something with particular meaning. “Proxies, child. Those who appear to speak on behalf of another who cannot be present. Much as I have served as a proxy for my queen over the years, or she for me.” Lea shook her head and said, “I must go, child.”

“Wait,” I said, reaching up to touch her foot with my hand.

My ectoplasmic flesh did not sink through hers. My hand felt nothing, yet met an odd resistance to its motion. I didn’t pass into her as I had Mort or Molly. I blinked a little at that.

“I am of two worlds,” she said, her tone slightly impatient. As she often did, she had evidently guessed at my thoughts. “Of course I don’t feel the same as mortal flesh.”

“Oh,” I said. “Uh. Listen. I just want . . . I need to know that you’re going to take care of Molly.”

She tilted her head and studied me for a moment. “But . . . child. It was never your responsibility to care for the young woman.”

“Yes, it was,” I said. “She was my apprentice.”

“Indeed. Someone whom you had pledged to teach—not to care for. Child, did you miss the entire point of the exercise?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. “Maybe I did. What was supposed to happen?”

“You were supposed to teach her to care for herself,” Lea replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “Your failure to do so . . .” She frowned. “I confess that I have only a limited understanding of the

concepts of good and evil. The differences seem largely semantic to me when applied to empiric situations. Yet it seems to me that you did her no great kindness by being gentle.”

I met the Sidhe’s impassive gaze for a moment before I looked away. “You might be right.”

“I am very old, child. It is a safe assumption in most circumstances.” She sniffed and leaned down to pat my hand in a rather peremptory gesture. “Now, then. Listen to the nice statue. And *do* try to destroy anyone who seeks to do you harm. Death should be a learning experience, after all, or what’s the point?”

Something in my godmother’s words managed to land on the ghost of a functioning brain cell somewhere, and a flash of inspiration hit me. “That’s it!” I blurted. “That’s how to handle the Corpsetaker.”

Lea tilted her head, her eyes intent, and then smiled a knowing smile. “Ahhh. If you can do it.”

I swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Interesting,” she murmured. “If you can control them. They are a power potentially deadly even to the one who wields it. Explosive. Dangerous. And very typical of you. Excellent.” Then she moved the fingers of her right hand through a series of little gestures and was gone.

That left me alone in my grave with my thoughts.

I leaned against the wall again, but I didn’t settle down on the ground. Instead I thought about Molly and how screwed up she was.

That was my fault, in a lot of ways.

First thing to jump out at me: I never should have let Molly go to Chichén Itzá.

I had led her into the fight of my life against the Red Court, to save my daughter. But I shouldn’t have exposed Molly to that. She was a sensitive, a wizard whose magical senses were naturally attuned to the finest, lightest, most delicate workings of the Art. Or, to put it in more Harryfriendly terms, she had great big, honking Dumbo ears that were extremely sensitive to loud noises.

Magic is life. Some forms of death—like murder, the abrupt and violent termination of a life that was not otherwise ending—were the equivalent of enormous, screeching feedback to her senses. And I had dragged her into a freaking concert hall of it at Chichén Itzá. Murderpalooza. Not to mention setting off the biggest, most violent magical curse to be unleashed in the past century—hell, I wasn’t exactly a sensitive guy, magically speaking, but even I had a blank spot in my memory over the minutes right after that arcane explosion.

It’s got to be bad for me to shut it out. For Molly, it had to have been a whole lot worse. And, oh yes, she had been shot and nearly killed to go with everything else. I had watched her collapse from blood loss.

Mistake. It had been a big damned mistake. At the time, I had been so focused on getting Maggie out that I’d let Molly persuade me that she deserved to be on the team. I never would have let her do that if I’d been thinking straight. I would have told her to stay at home, hold the fort, or maybe stay in the car. That was what I’d always done when I was on my way to a slugfest. Exposure to that kind of noise could quite effectively shatter her sanity.

And maybe it had.

Even if her mental house was still on a good foundation, you didn’t need monsters or magic to get damaged by a brush with death. Soldiers coming home from wars had known that for centuries. Post-traumatic stress disorder from life-threatening injuries had screwed up the lives of a lot of people—people who *didn’t* have supernatural powers as a possible outlet for their anger, fear, grief, or guilt.

And who had been there to catch her? The freaking Leanansidhe, deputy of Her Wickedness, with her Nietzsche and Darwin Were Sentimental Pansies outlook on life.

Stars and stones. When Molly insisted on going, why didn’t I just tell her, “Of course you can come, grasshopper. I’ve always wanted to create a mentally mutilated monster of my very own.”

Man. It wasn’t the legacy I’d wanted to leave behind me. I mean, I hadn’t ever thought much about leaving a legacy, truth be told, but an apprentice with a crippled heart and mind who was

probably going to get hunted down by her own people was definitely never in the plan.

"Oh, kid," I breathed to no one. "Molly. I'm so sorry."

It turns out ghosts can cry.

"Over here," said a familiar voice. It was later, but not much later. Sometime after noon, maybe? It was hard to tell from the grave.

"You've never even been here before," answered another. "I was at the funeral. How the hell would you know where his grave was?"

I heard Fitz let out a sigh front-loaded with so much drama that only a teenager could have managed it without hurting himself. "Is it the gaping hole in the ground over there, with the big pentacle on the headstone?"

There was a brief, miffed pause, and Butters answered, "Okay. Maybe it is."

Footsteps crunched through wet, melting snow. Fitz and Butters appeared at the edge of my grave and peered down.

"Well?" Butters asked. "Is he there?"

"How the hell should I know?" Fitz replied. "I don't see dead people. I hear them. And I don't hear anything."

"Hey, Fitz," I said.

The kid jumped. He was wearing his newly laundered clothes and had added one of Forthill's old coats over the top of everything. "Christ. Yeah, he's there."

"Oh, fantastic," Butters said. "Hi, Harry. Here, man. Help me down."

"Help you down? It's, like, five feet to the bottom, if that. Just jump down."

"Jump into an open grave? What kind of idiot are you?" Butters replied. "I might as well put on a red shirt and volunteer for the away team. There's snow and ice and slippery mud down there. That's like asking for an ironically broken neck."

"Are all doctors whiny girls like you?" Fitz asked.

"Hey. This whiny girl is still alive because he doesn't do stupid crap."

Fitz snorted. "So I help you down, my foot slips, we both fall in and die."

Butters lifted an eyebrow and grunted. "Huh. True."

I pinched at the bridge of my nose. "Oh, Hell's bells, guys. Either get a room or stop flirting and get down here."

"Ha-ha," Fitz said toward me crossly. "He just called us gay."

Butters blinked. "For not jumping into a hole we might not be able to climb out of? That's kind of insensitive."

"Not for that, for . . ." Fitz let out a sigh of vintage teenage impatience. "Christ, just give me your hand, okay? I'll swing you down."

Butters fussed for a moment more, making sure that Fitz had a solid place to plant his feet, and then he swung down into my grave. He was wearing his winter gear again and carrying the gym bag. Once he was down, he made sure he was out of direct sunlight and started opening the bag.

"What's up?" I asked Fitz.

"Trouble," Fitz said.

"We need your help, Harry," Butters said.

"Hey, wait," I said, scowling. "How did Butters find you, Fitz?"

"He asked," Fitz said to Butters.

The little ME nodded. "Harry, I got from Murphy that you were apparently going into social work. It wasn't hard to figure out who you'd ask for help, so I went over to the church to talk to Forthill about the situation—except he wasn't there."

Fitz bit his lip. "Look, Dresden. The father and I talked. And he decided he was going to go talk to Aristedes on my behalf."

I blinked and pushed away from the grave wall. "What?"

"I tried to tell him," Fitz said. "He wouldn't listen. He was . . . I think he was angry. But he said he was going to resolve this before it came to some kind of bloodshed."

Hell's bells. I'd known Aristedes' type in the past. If it suited him, he'd kill Forthill without an instant's hesitation. The good father was in danger.

"Murphy would go in guns blazing," Butters said. "She's going to break my arm when she finds out I didn't tell her. We need you to help talk us through this."

"That's crazy," I said. "Go in guns blazing!"

"It's too late for that," Fitz said. "Look, Forthill is already there. I just met the guy but . . . but . . . I don't want him to get hurt for me. We have to move now."

"I can't," I said. "I can't move around in broad daylight."

"We thought of that," Fitz said. "Butters said you needed a shielded vessel."

"Butters said that, did he?" I asked wryly.

Butters rose from the bag, holding the plastic flashlight case holding Bob's skull. He winked at me, held it out, and said, "Hop in."

I blinked.

Then I said, "Right. Let's go."

I took a deep breath and willed myself forward, into the staring eye sockets of the skull.

Chapter Thirty-five

There was a very, very odd swirling sensation as my spirit-self leapt forward, and then I was standing . . .

. . . In an apartment.

Okay, when I say *apartment*, I don't mean it like my old place. I lived in a mostly buried box that was maybe twenty by thirty total, not including the subbasement where my lab had been. Apartment Dresden had been full of paperback books on scarred wooden shelves, and comfortable secondhand furniture.

This was more like . . . Apartment Bond, James Apartment Bond. Penthouse Bond, really. There was a lot of black marble and mahogany. There was a fireplace the size of a carport, complete with a modest—relatively modest—blaze going in it. The furniture all matched. The rich hardwoods from which it had been made were hand-carved in intricate designs. It wasn't until the second glance that I saw some of the same rune and sigil work I'd used on my own staff and blasting rod. The cushions on the couches (plural, *couches*) and recliners and sedans and chaises (plural, *chaises*), were made of rich fabric I couldn't identify, maybe some kind of raw silk, and embroidered with more of the same symbols in gold and silver thread. A nearby table boasted what looked like a freshly roasted turkey, along with a spread of fruits and vegetables and side dishes of every kind.

It was sort of ridiculous, really. There was enough food there to feed a small nation. But there weren't any plates to fill up, and there weren't any utensils to eat it with. It looked gorgeous and it smelled incredible, but . . . there was something inert about it, something lifeless. There was no nourishment on that table, not for the body or for the spirit.

One wall was covered in a curtain. I started to pull it aside and found it responding to the touch, spreading open of its own accord to reveal a television the size of billboard, a high-tech stereo system, and an entire shelf lined with one kind of video-game console after another, complicated little controls sitting neatly next to each one. I can't tell a PlayBox from an X-Station, but who can keep track of all of them? There are, like, a thousand different kinds of machines to play video games on. I mean, honestly.

"Um," I said. "Hello?" My voice echoed quite distinctly—more than it should have, huge marble cavern or not. "Anybody home?"

There was, I kid you not, a drumroll.

Then, from a curtained archway there appeared a young man. He looked . . . quite ordinary, really. Tall, but not outrageously so; slender without being rail thin. He had decent shoulders and looked sort of familiar. He was dressed like James Dean—jeans, a white shirt, a leather biker's jacket. The outfit looked a little odd on him, somehow forced, except for a little skull embroidered in white thread on the jacket, just over the young man's heart.

Cymbals crashed and he spread his arms. "Ta-da."

"Bob," I said. I felt one side of my mouth curling up in amusement. "This? This is the place you always wanted me to let you out of? You could fit five or six of mine in here."

His face spread into a wide grin. "Well, I admit, my crib is pretty sweet. But a gold cage is still a cage, Harry."

"A gold fallout shelter, more like."

"Either way, you get stir-crazy every few decades," he said, and flopped down onto a chaise. "You get that this isn't literally what the inside of the skull is like, right?"

"It's my head interpreting what I see into familiar things, yeah," I said. "It's getting to be kind of common."

“Welcome to the world of spirit,” Bob said.

“What’s with the food?”

“Butters’s mom is some kind of food goddess,” Bob said, his eyes widening. “That’s the spread she’s put out over the last few holidays. Or, um, Butters’s sensory memories of it, anyway—he let me do a ride-along, and then I made this facsimile of what we experienced.”

I lifted my eyebrows. “He let you do a ride-along? In his head?” Bob . . . was not well-known for his restraint, in my experience, when he got to go on one of his excursions.

“There was a contract first,” Bob said. “A limiting document about twenty pages long. He covered his bases.”

“Huh,” I said. I nodded at the food. “And you just . . . remade it?”

“Oh, sure,” Bob said. “I can remake whatever in here.” He waggled his eyebrows. “You want to see a replay of that time Molly got the acid all over her clothes in the lab and had to strip?”

“Um. Pass,” I said. I sat down gingerly on a chair, making sure I wasn’t going to sink through it or something. It seemed to behave like a normal chair. “TV and stuff, too?”

“I am kinda made out of energy, man,” Bob said. He pointed at the wall of media equipment. “You remember me broadcasting to your spirit radio, right? I’m, like, totally tapped in now. Television, satellite imagery, broadband Internet—you name it; I can do it. How do you think I know so much?”

“Hundreds of years of assisting wizards,” I said.

He waved a hand. “That, too. But I got this whole huge Internet thing to play on now. Butters showed me.” His grin turned into a leer. “And it’s, like, ninety percent porn!”

“There’s the Bob I know and love,” I said.

“Love, ick,” he replied. “And I am and I’m not. I mean, you get that I change based on who possesses the skull, right?”

“Sure,” I said.

“So I’m a lot like I was with you, even though I’m with Butters, because he met me back then. First impression and whatnot, highly important.”

I grunted. “How long do we have to talk?”

“Not as simple to answer as you’d think,” Bob said. “But . . . you’re still pretty cherry, so let’s keep it simple. A few minutes, speaking linearly—but I can stretch it out for a while, subjectively.”

“Huh,” I said. “Neat.”

“Nah, just sort of the way we roll on this side of the street,” he said. “What do you want to know?”

“Who killed me?” I replied.

“Oooh, sorry. Can’t help you with that, except as a sounding board.”

“Okay,” I said. “Lemme catch you up on what I know.”

I filled Bob in on everything since the train tunnel. I didn’t hold back much of anything. Bob was smart enough to fill in the vast majority of gaps if I left anything out anyway, and he could compile information and deduce coherent facts as well as any mind I had ever known.

And besides . . . he was my oldest friend.

He listened, his gold brown eyes intent, completely focused on me.

“Wow,” he said when I’d finished. “You are so completely fucked.”

I arched an eyebrow at him and said, “How do you figure?”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, where do I *start*? How about with the obvious? Uriel.”

“Uriel,” I said. “What?”

“A wizard tied in with a bunch of really elemental sources of power dies, right after signing off on some deals that guarantee he’s about to become a whole Hell of a lot darker—capital letter intended—and there’s this sudden”—he made air quotes with his fingers—“ ‘irregularity’ about his death. He gets sent *back* to the mortal coil to *get involved again*. And you think an angel *isn’t* involved somewhere? Remember. Uriel is the black-ops guy of the archangels. He’s conned the *Father of Lies*, for crying out loud. You think he wouldn’t scam you?”

"Uh," I said.

I felt a little thick.

"See?" Bob said. "Your first tiny piece of flesh-free existence, and already you're lost without me."

I shook my head. "Look, man, I'm just . . . just a spirit now. This is just, like, paperwork I'm getting filled out before I catch the train to Wherever."

Bob rolled his eyes again and snorted. "Oh, sure it is. You get sent back here just as the freaking Corpsetaker is setting herself up as Queen of Chicago, getting ready to wipe out the defenders of humanity—such as they are—here in town, and it's just a coincidence, business as usual." He sniffed. "They're totally playing you."

"They?" I said.

"Think about it," Bob said. "I mean, stop for a minute and actually think. I know it's been a while."

"Winter," I said. "Snow a foot deep at the end of spring. Queen Mab."

"Obviously," Bob said. "She's here. In Chicago. Somewhere. And because, duh, she's the Winter Queen, she brought winter with her." He pursed his lips. "For a few more days anyway."

Bob was right. Mab might flaunt her power in the face of the oncoming season, but if she didn't back down, her opposite number, Titania, would come for her—at the height of summer's power, the solstice, if previous patterns held true.

"Harry, I don't want to comment about your new girlfriend, but she's still here six months after you got shot? Seems kind of clingy."

"Wait," I said. "You're saying that Mab and Uriel are in on something. Together. The Queen of Air and Darkness, and a flipping archangel."

"We live in strange times," Bob said philosophically. "They're peers, of a sort, Harry. Hey, word is that even the Almighty and Lucifer worked a deal on Job. Spider-Man has teamed up with the Sandman before. Luke and Vader did the Emperor. It happens."

"Spider-Man is pretend and doesn't count," I said.

"You start drawing distinctions like this now?" Bob asked. "Besides, he's real. Like, somewhere."

I blinked. "Um. What?"

"You think your universe is the *only* universe? Harry, come on. Creation, totally freaking huge. Room enough for you and Spider-Man both." He spread his hands. "Look, I'm not a faith guy. I don't know what happens on the other side, or if you wind up going to a Heaven or Hell or something reasonably close to them. That isn't my bag. But I know a shell game when I see one."

I swallowed and pushed a hand back through my hair. "The Fomor's servitors. Corpsetaker and her gang. Even Aristedes and his little crew. They're pieces on the board."

"Just like you," Bob agreed cheerfully. "Notice anyone else who pushed you a space or two recently? By which I mean that you only recently noticed."

I scowled. "Other than everyone around me?"

"I was sort of thinking about the one behind you," Bob said. His expression grew suddenly serious. "The Walker."

I took a slow breath. He Who Walks Behind.

It was only now, looking back at my crystalline memories and applying what I'd learned during my adult lifetime since they happened, that I could really appreciate what had gone on that night.

The Walker had never been trying to kill me. If it had wanted to do that, it didn't need to play with me. It could simply have appeared and executed me, the way it had poor Stan at the gas station. It had been trying to push me, to shape me into something dangerous—like maybe a weapon.

Like maybe the same way Justin had.

I had always assumed that Justin had controlled He Who Walks Behind, that my old master had sent him after me when I fled. But what if I'd been a flipping idiot? What if their relationship had worked the other way around? What if Justin, who had betrayed me, had similarly been backstabbed by his *own* inhuman mentor, when the creature had, in essence, prepared me to destroy Justin?

"Lotta really scary symmetry there," I whispered.

"Yeah," Bob said, still serious. "You are in a scary place, Harry." He took a deep breath. "And . . . it gets worse."

"Worse? How?"

"It's just a theory," he said, "because this isn't my bag. But look. There's flesh and there's spirit, right?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Mortals have both, right there together, along with the soul."

"I thought it was the same thing. Soul, spirit."

"Um," Bob said. "Complicated. Think of your spirit-self as a seed. Your soul is the earth it grows in. You need both when you die. The way I've heard it . . . they sort of blend together to become something new. It's a caterpillar-butterfly thing."

"Okay," I said. "How does that make it worse?"

"You, here, now, aren't a spirit," Bob said. "You aren't a real ghost. You . . . You're just running around in your freaking *soul*, man. I mean, for practical purposes, it's the same thing, but . . ."

"But what?"

"But if something happens to you here, now . . . it's for keeps. I mean . . . forever. You could capital-E End, man. Spin right off the wheel altogether. Or worse."

I swallowed. I mean, I realized that I'd been in a serious situation all the way down the line, but not one that could potentially be described using words like *eternal*. Joy.

Bob shook his head. "I didn't think it was possible for them to do that to you. According to what I've heard, your soul's your own. I'd have thought you would have to walk into something like this willingly, but . . ."

I held up the heel of my hand and butted my forehead against it in steady rhythm.

"Oh, *Harry*," Bob said, his voice profoundly disappointed. "You didn't."

"They didn't explain it exactly the way you did," I said. "Not in so many words."

"But they gave you a choice?"

Captain Murphy had done exactly that. It had been phrased in such a way that I hadn't really had much of a choice, but I'd had a choice. "Yeah."

"And you chose to hazard your eternal soul? Even though you get all worked up about that sort of thing?"

"It . . . wasn't phrased quite like that . . ." I began. Only it really had been. Jack had warned me that I might be trapped forever, hadn't he? "Or . . . well. Um. Yeah. I guess technically I did."

"Well," Bob said. He cleared his throat. "You idiot."

"Argh," I said. "My head hurts."

"No, it doesn't," Bob said scornfully. "You just think it should."

I paused and reflected and saw that Bob was right. And I decided that my head hurt anyway, dammit. Just because I was a spirit or a naked soul or whatever didn't mean I needed to start ignoring who I had been.

"Bob," I said, lifting my head suddenly. "What does this mean? I mean, why not just let me die and move along like normal?"

Bob pursed his lips. "Um. Yeah. No clue."

"What if . . . ?" I felt short of breath. I hardly wanted to say it. "What if I'm not . . . ?"

Bob's eyes widened. "Oh. *Oooooohhhhhhhh*. Uriel's people—Murphy's dad and so on—did they say anything about your body?"

"That it wasn't available," I said.

"But not that it was gone?" Bob pressed.

"No," I said. "They . . . they didn't say that."

"Wow," Bob said, eyes wide.

Mine probably were, too. "What do I do?"

"How the hell should I know, man?" Bob asked. "I've never had a soul *or* a body. What did they tell you to do?"

"Find my killer," I said. "But . . . that means I'm dead, right?"

Bob waved a hand. "Harry. Dead isn't . . . Look, even by terms of the nonsupernatural, dead is a really fuzzy area. Even mortal medicine regards death as a kind of process more than a state of being—a reversible process, in some circumstances."

"What are you getting at?" I asked.

"There's a difference between dead and . . . and *gone*."

I swallowed. "So . . . what do I do?"

Bob lunged to his feet. "What do you *do*?" He pointed at the table of Mother Butters's feast food. "You've got *that* to maybe get back to, and you're asking me what to *do*? You find your freaking killer! We'll both do it! I'll totally help!"

The light in the room suddenly turned red. A red-alert sound I remembered from old episodes of *Star Trek* buzzed through the air.

"Uh," I said, "what the hell is that?"

"Butters calling me," Bob said, leaping to his feet. The form of the young man, who I now realized must have looked a lot like Butters when he was a kid, only taller, started coming apart into the sparks of a wood fire. "Come on," Bob said. "Let's go."

Chapter Thirty-six

I didn't actually will myself out of the skull, the way I had gone in. Bob's passage just sort of swept me along in his wake, like a leaf being tugged after a passing tractor-trailer. It was a forcible reminder that, the way things stood now, Bob was the heavyweight. I was just the skinny newbie.

I hated that feeling. That feeling sucked.

I reintegrated standing in a dusty room. Afternoon sunlight slanted through it, its danger abated by the thick coating of grime over the windows. The place looked like an industrial building's entryway. There was what had been a heavy-duty desk, maybe for a receptionist or security guard. An alcove housed rows of small personal lockers. Several rectangles of less-faded, commercial-grade taupe paint on the walls had probably been where a time clock and time-card holders had gone. Butters stood nearby, holding Bob's flashlight, and the eyes of the skull were glowing brightly with Bob's presence in the physical world, now that he had left his "apartment." The little ME looked tense, focused, but not afraid.

It wasn't much of a mystery how they'd gotten into the room: Fitz stood there with a set of bolt cutters with three-feet-long handles held over his shoulder. Fitz looked scared enough for everyone there. The kid was back in the lair of his erstwhile mentor and terrified of his wrath.

Yeah.

I knew that feeling.

Butters fumbled his little spirit radio out of his pocket and asked, in a hushed voice, "Dresden, you here?"

"To your left," I said quietly.

He shone Bob's eyelights my way and evidently saw me illuminated by them. "Oh," he said, looking relieved. "Right. Good."

I had no clue why he looked relieved. It wasn't like I could *do* anything, unless some random ghost came by, in which case my memorybased magic could cook another being incapable of affecting the material world.

But I guess he looked up to me, or at least to my memory, and I owed it to him to help however I could. So I gave him a calm nod and an encouraging clench of my fist. Solid.

"I take it we've come in through a blind spot?" I asked Fitz quietly.

Fitz nodded. "The chains on the doors were enough. And he couldn't extend his guard spells any farther than the main room."

I grunted. "That's good."

"Why?" Butters asked.

"Means Aristedes doesn't have enough power to just burn you to cinders on the spot."

Butters swallowed. "Oh. Good."

"Doesn't mean he can't kill you," I said. "Just that he won't have a high FX budget when he does."

"He's fast," Fitz said. His voice shook. "He's really, really fast."

"Like, how fast?" Butters asked. "Fast like Jackie Chan or fast like the Flash?"

"Little of both," I said. "He can cover ground fast. And he can hit like a truck."

Fitz nodded tightly.

"Oh," Butters said. "Super. We probably shouldn't fight him, then." He set the flashlight aside and rummaged in the duffel bag. "Give me just a second."

A shadow flickered by one of the grime-filmed windows. Fitz let out a hiss and clutched the bolt cutters with both hands, ready to use them like a club. Butters let out an odd little chirping sound and pulled a big, old, cop-issue flashlight-slash-club from his bag.

The shadow passed over another window. Someone outside was moving toward the door, coming in behind us.

I took a quick look at the flashlight and made sure I was standing in the light of Bob's eyes and out of the path of any direct sunlight that might come through the door. I couldn't do anything, but if I was visibly standing there when the door opened, maybe I could distract Aristedes, if it was him coming through. Maybe he'd speed-rush right through me and into a wall and knock himself out like a cartoon villain. That would make me look cool upon cool.

More likely, I wouldn't accomplish anything. But when your friends are in danger, you try anyway.

The door opened and I raised my arms into a dramatic stagemagician's pose. It felt ridiculous, but body postures draw reactions from human beings on an almost atavistic level. We aren't that terribly far removed from our primal roots, where body language was more important than anything we said. My stance declared me the ruler of the local space, a man who was in control of everything happening around him, one who others would follow, a mix of maestro and madman that would identify me, to instinct, as the most dangerous thing in the room.

Butters and Fitz hit the wall on either side of the door and raised their improvised weapons as it swung open. The door squealed dramatically on its hinges, and a large, menacing figure entered the building. It hesitated, lifting a hand to shield its eyes, apparently staring at me.

Butters let out a shout and swung his flashlight at the figure. Fitz, by contrast, swept the heavy set of bolt cutters down in silence. Even in that flash of time, I had to admire Butters. The little guy couldn't fight and he knew it, but he was smart enough to shout and draw the attention of the intruder toward the smaller, weaker, and lighter-armed of the two of them. He had intentionally thrown himself at a larger opponent to force the man to turn so that Fitz could swing at his back.

No fighter, maybe, but the little guy had guts enough for any three bruisers.

It didn't do either of them any good.

The large man seemed to sense the ploy. He ducked the swinging bolt cutters without so much as turning around and simultaneously snapped out his left arm, the heel of his hand thrusting forward. He hit Butters squarely in the belly and sent the little man sprawling. Then he whirled as Fitz recovered his balance and swung the bolt cutters again. He caught them with one hand, matching Fitz's strength with a single arm. Then with a sinuous motion of his upper body that reminded me of Murphy at work, he both took the bolt cutters from Fitz's hands and sent the young man sprawling into Butters, who had just begun to climb to his feet again. They both went down in a heap as the door clanged shut.

Daniel Carpenter, Michael Carpenter's eldest son, stood in place for a moment, holding the bolt cutters lightly, as tall and as strong as his father, his grey eyes distant and cold. Then he glanced at me, opened his mouth, and closed it again.

I waved at him and said, "Hi, Daniel."

The sound of my voice came to him only through the radio in Butters's pocket.

He blinked. "What the hell?" Daniel asked, staring at me. Then he looked at Butters, then at Fitz, and then at the bolt cutters. "I mean, seriously. What the hell, Butters? What the hell are you doing?"

Butters pushed Fitz off him and eyed Daniel with annoyance. "Quietly, please," he said in a lower, intent voice. "We're sneaking up on a bad guy, here, and you aren't helping."

"Is that what you're doing?" Daniel asked—but at least he lowered his voice. "Because Ms. Murphy thinks you're losing your mind."

Butters blinked. "What? Why would Karrin think that?"

"Because of that thing," Daniel said, nodding toward me.

"Ouch," I said. "That stings, Daniel."

"Dude," Butters said. "Don't be a dick. That's Dresden. Or at least it's his spirit, which is mostly the same thing."

"We don't know that," Daniel shot back. "Things from the spirit world can look like whatever they want to look like. You know that."

"Didn't we already go through this proper-identification thing?" I complained.

"I know. Right?" Butters said to me. "See what she's gotten to be like?"

"Who?" Daniel demanded.

"Karrin, obviously," Butters shot back. "Since you vanished, Harry, she's been fighting a war, and using whatever weapons she can find. Hell, she's even taken help from Marcone."

Daniel's face flushed darker. "Do *not* talk about Ms. Murphy that way. She's the only reason the Fomor haven't terrorized Chicago like they have everywhere else."

"The two don't preclude one another," Butters said with a sigh. He looked at me and spread his hands. "You see what I'm dealing with?"

I grimaced and nodded. "It's about her job, I think. She's insecure about her place in the world. She was like this when I first opened up shop, about the time she got put in charge of SI—suspicious, closeminded, negative outlook about everything. It was impossible to talk to her."

"You're sneaking around against her orders," Daniel said to Butters.

Butters got to his feet and offered Fitz a hand up. "Orders? This isn't the army, man, and Murphy isn't the King of Chicago. She can't order me to do anything."

"I notice you say that when she is not in the room," I said.

"I'm an independent thinker, not a martyr," Butters replied. He squinted at Daniel. "Wait a minute. She had you tailing me?"

"Damn," I said. "That is paranoid."

Daniel shook his head, scowling briefly at me. "You're going to have to come with me, Mr. Butters."

"No," Butters said. "I'm not."

Daniel set his jaw. "Ms. Murphy said that for your own good, I was to get you out of whatever that creature got you into. So let's go."

"No," Butters said, glaring up at the much larger young man. "I'm not leaving Forthill to the mercy of a punk sorcerer."

Daniel blinked his eyes several times, and the determined belligerence went out of his stance. "The father? He's here? He's in danger?"

"It gets less likely we're going to be able to help him the longer we stand around gabbing," Butters said. He recovered his bag, rummaged in it, and added, "This will work better with you here anyway." He straightened up and tossed a folded square of grey cloth at Daniel. "Put that on. Stay next to me. Don't talk."

Daniel stared at the cloth dubiously, then looked at Butters.

"For Forthill," Butters said quietly, softening his voice. "We'll leave as soon as he's safe, and you can take me straight to Karrin. You have my word. Okay?"

Daniel agonized over it for a couple of seconds. Then he nodded at Butters and unfolded the grey cloth.

"Oh," I said, suddenly understanding the little guy's plan. "Good call. The fabric isn't exactly right, but it's close. This could work."

Butters nodded. "I thought it might. How should we approach it?"

"Small-timer like Aristedes is insecure about the size of his magical penis," I said. "Give his ego a few crumbs and he'll eat out of your hand."

"We'll have to go to radio silence," Butters said. "There wasn't time to make the headphones work with it."

"If I think of anything imperative, I can tell Fitz. He'll pass it on."

Fitz looked nervously between Butters, Daniel, and me. "Oh. Uh. Sure. Because I can hear Dresden even without a radio."

Butters drew a second square of grey cloth from the bag and then tossed the bag over to one side. Calmly, he unfolded the cloth and threw the hooded cloak it proved to be over his shoulders,

fastening a clasp at his throat.

“So, Harry,” Butters said. “How do the Wardens like to make an entrance?”

Chapter Thirty-seven

Daniel Carpenter leaned back, lifted a size-fourteen work boot, and kicked the door leading to the factory floor completely off its hinges.

I was impressed. The kid had power. I mean, sure, the door was old and all, the hinges rusted, but it was still a freaking steel door. And it went a couple of feet through the air before it slammed down onto the floor with an enormous, hollow *boom* that echoed through the huge room beyond it.

“Thank you,” Butters said, in the absolutely obnoxious British accent he normally reserved for the nobleman his players were supposed to hate at our old weekly gaming sessions. He sniffed and strode onto the factory floor, his footsteps clear and precise in the empty space. The fake Warden’s cloak floated in his wake.

Daniel stomped along a step behind Butters, his dark brows lowered into a thug’s glower. It looked pretty natural on him. He had one huge hand clamped down on the back of Fitz’s neck and was dragging the kid along with brusque, casual power. Fitz looked intensely uncomfortable.

Butters stopped at a faint old line of chalk on the floor, regarded it for a moment, and then called out, “Hello? I say there, is anyone at home? I’m here to speak to the sorcerer Aristedes. I was told he was to be found here.” He paused for maybe a second and a half and added, “I’ve a warlock to catch in Trinidad in an hour. I would prefer not to draw this out.”

No one answered. There were soft, furtive sounds: an old tennis shoe dragging across the concrete floor with a faint squeak. Footsteps. A soft exhalation. A faint grunt of exertion.

“Warden,” Butters said. He picked at his teeth with his thumbnail.

Daniel’s shoulders locked up and tightened, and Fitz let out a short yowl. “It’s me!” he called out frantically. “It’s Fitz! Sir, they say they’re here to talk to you about the Fomor.”

“Fitz!” said a voice from off to one side. One of the kids from the drive-by, the little one, emerged from behind a set of metal cabinets. He got a look at Fitz’s situation and tensed into a crouch, ready to run.

“Hey, Zero,” Fitz said, trying to sound casual as he all but dangled from Daniel’s grip. “The boss home?”

There was a swishing sound, as if someone had thrown a large ball at considerable speed. And then Aristedes said, from directly behind us, “I am.”

Daniel twitched, but Butters concealed his reaction masterfully. He simply glanced over his shoulder and regarded Aristedes, who now stood in the newly doorless entryway. Butters arched an eyebrow, as if he’d seen the trick before but at least found it well-done, and turned to face Aristedes.

He gave the man a slight bow and said, “I am Warden Valdo. This is Warden Smythe.”

Daniel glowered.

“If you aren’t otherwise occupied, I wonder if we might ask for a moment of your time.”

Aristedes studied the three of them for a silent moment, his eyes narrowed. He was wearing a ragged, old dark blue bathrobe over loose cotton chinos and a tank top. The hair on his chest was thick and dark. The tattoos around his skull and over his cheekbones stood out sharply against his pale skin.

“You are from the White Council?” he asked.

Butters studied him for a moment and then sighed. “Should I start at the beginning again? Our files describe you as a minor but competent operator. Were they mistaken?”

Aristedes folded his arms, his expression a neutral mask. “I am, of course, aware of the White Council. What business do you have with me? And why are you holding my apprentice prisoner?”

I did a quick circle around Aristedes. Since I was all ghostly, he never knew I was there. He didn't so much as get goose bumps on the back of his neck. I guessed that he was the opposite of Forthill: Being a selfcentered megalomaniac hadn't prepared Aristedes to be sensitive to anyone's soul at all.

"There's a bulge under the robe at the small of his back," I said to Fitz. "Blink twice for yes if you know what it is. Blink once for *no*."

Fitz shot a glance at me and blinked twice.

"A weapon?" I asked.

Two blinks.

"Gun?"

One blink.

"Knife?"

Two blinks.

"Okay," I said. "That's definitely a need-to-know fact. If you get a chance, or if things get violent, tell Daniel about it."

Two more nervous blinks.

I hesitated, and then said, in a gentler voice, "Hang tough, kid. I've been where you are. It's going to be okay."

No blinks. Fitz bit his lip.

Butters, meanwhile, kept the dialogue going. "Clearly, the Council finds the recent activities of the Fomor somewhat repulsive. Just as clearly, our recently concluded war with the Red Court has left us less able to act than we would have been otherwise."

Which, thinking about it, probably wasn't true. The Council finished the war with the Red Court with more active, experienced, dangerous Wardens than they'd had when it started. Granted, the vast majority of them were a bunch of kids Molly's age or younger, but they were already veterans. But I was betting that the Fomor picking on a bunch of lowlevel talents was a problem that was fairly far down their priority list.

"I'd heard the Wardens were adept at coming to the point," Aristedes said. "Should we start again at the beginning to give you another chance to get there?"

Butters gave the sorcerer a frosty smile and a small inclination of his head. "You and your crew are still here. That suggests competence. We approve of competence."

Aristedes tilted his head to one side and was silent for a moment. "You've come to discuss a relationship of some kind?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Butters replied. "I'm not a recruiter. This is a visit. A ground-level evaluation, if you will."

I hated to leave the three of them standing in front of Aristedes and his knife, with nothing but Butters's gaming accent and a few yards of grey cloth to protect them, but we hadn't come here to face down Aristedes. We were here for Forthill. The hasty plan I'd sketched with Butters called for me to locate the father while they kept Aristedes' attention.

Besides, those cloaks represented something that Aristedes would respect, if he had two brain cells to rub together. The Wardens of the White Council had never been regarded as friendly figures like your local traffic cop. People feared them—probably all the more so since the war with the Red Court. The Wardens were the guys who gave you one warning, way before you were anywhere close to crossing the line by breaking one of the Laws of Magic. The next time you saw them, they were probably there to cut off your head.

Whether they were more respected or more feared depended greatly on one's point of view, but no one ever, ever took them lightly.

It felt right somehow that Butters was trading on their fearsome reputation. Maybe it felt right because that reputation was, like me, immaterial—but not unable to alter events. The ghost of the Wardens' ferocity could do as much as I could to keep an eye on my companions. So I wished them luck within the silence of my thoughts and set out to accomplish my part of the plan.

I vanished and reappeared at ceiling level, being careful to stay out of any direct sunlight as it streamed through a few small windows high up on the walls. The ceiling wasn't all that high compared to the area of the factory floor, and it took me several tries before I recognized the location of the gang's camp in all that abandoned space. I willed myself over to it and found Forthill.

The priest was lying very still on the floor, curled into a half circle. I couldn't see if he was breathing, and I couldn't touch him to check for a pulse. I grimaced and knelt to thrust my hand into the matter of one of his feet. I felt the sharp, odd sensation of contact with living flesh, like when I'd touched both Morty and my apprentice, and not the sharp tingling of contact with something solid but inert. He was alive. It felt like my own heart had stopped beating and then lurched into gear again.

I studied him for a moment, trying to assess what had happened to him. There was blood coming from several cuts around his face, where his thin, elderly skin had broken open under a sharp blow—across his cheekbones, his brow ridges, and on his chin. His lip had been split and was swelling. He'd taken a beating from someone's fists—or possibly from open-handed slaps delivered with supernatural speed.

That felt right. The old priest, a living, breathing symbol of everything Aristedes resented, must have shown up to talk. No matter how polite the father had been, his simple presence would have been challenge enough to the ego of anyone like the sorcerer. Challenges could be answered only with violence, and the slaps he delivered would have been both painful and insulting.

Forthill's left arm was pressed against his ribs. He'd fallen and curled up around his midsection. The sorcerer must have given him some body blows as well. Broken ribs, maybe, or worse. Everything about trauma was worse when it happened to the elderly—thinner skin, less muscle, less bone, worn organs. They were vulnerable.

I ground my teeth and looked around the camp. Aristedes had left a guard to watch Forthill. He was a boy, and he might have been a very scrawny and underfed ten-year-old, at most. He sat near the fire barrel, shivering, holding a rusted old steak knife. His eyes roamed everywhere, but he wouldn't look at the priest's still form.

Forthill suddenly shuddered and let out a soft moan before sinking into stillness again.

The little boy with the knife looked away, his eyes suddenly wet. He wrapped his arms around his knees and rocked back and forth. I wasn't sure which sight hurt more.

I clenched my jaw. What animal would do this to an old man? To a *child*? I felt my skin beginning to heat up, a reflection of the rage that had swelled up inside me again.

"It is better not to let such thoughts occupy your mind," said a very calm, very soothing voice.

I spun to face the speaker, the words of a spell on my tongue, ghostly power kindling in the palm of my right hand.

A young woman stood over Forthill, opposite me, in a shaft of sunlight that spilled in through a hole in a blacked-out window. She was dressed in a black suit, a black shirt, a black tie. Her skin was dark—not like someone of African ancestry, but like someone had dunked her in a vat of perfectly black ink. The sclera, the whites of her eyes, were black, too. In fact, the only things on her that weren't ink black were her eyes and the short sword she held in her hand, the blade dangling parallel to her leg. They were both shining silver with flecks of metallic gold.

She met my gaze calmly and then glanced down at my right hand, where flickers of fire sent out wisps of smoke. "Peace, Harry Dresden," she said. "I have not come to harm anyone."

I stared at her for a second and then checked the guard. The little kid hadn't reacted to the stranger's voice or presence; ergo she was a spirit, like me. There were plenty of spirit beings who might show up when someone was dying, but not many of them could have been standing around in a ray of sunlight. And I'd seen a sword identical to the one she currently held, back at the police station in Chicago Between.

"You're an angel," I said quietly. "An angel of death."

She nodded her head. "Yes."

I rose slowly. I was a lot taller than the angel. I scowled at her. "Back off."

She arched an eyebrow at me. Then she said, "Are you threatening me?"

"Maybe I'm just curious about who will show up for you when it's your turn."

She smiled. It moved only her lips. "What, exactly, do you think you will accomplish here?"

"I'm looking out for my friend," I said. "He's going to be all right. Your services are not required."

"That is not yet clear," the angel said.

"Allow me to clarify," I said. "Touch him, and you and I are going to throw down."

She pursed her lips briefly and then shook her head. "One of us will."

"He's a good man," I said. "I won't let you hurt him."

The angel's eyebrows went up again. "Is that why you think I'm here?"

"Hello," I said, "angel of death. Grim Reaper. Ring any bells?"

The angel shook her head again, smiling a little more naturally. "You misunderstand my purpose."

"Educate me," I said.

"It is not within my purview to choose when a life will end. I am only an escort, a guardian, sent to convey a new-freed soul to safety."

I scowled. "You think Forthill is so lost that he needs a guide?"

She blinked at me once. "No. He needs . . ." She seemed to search for the proper word. "His soul needs a bodyguard. To that purpose, I am here."

"A bodyguard?" I blurted. "What the hell has the father done that he needs a bodyguard in the afterlife?"

She blinked at me again, gentle surprise on her face. It made her look very young—younger than Molly. "He . . . he spent a lifetime fighting darkness," she said, speaking gently and a bit slowly, as if she were stating something perfectly obvious to a small child. "There are forces that would want to take vengeance upon him while his soul is vulnerable, during the transition."

I stared hard at the angel for several seconds, but I didn't detect anything like a lie in her. I looked down at the fire in my hand and suddenly felt a little bit silly. "And you . . . You're going to be the one to fight for him?"

She stared at me with those silver eyes, and I felt my legs turn a little rubbery. It wasn't fear . . . exactly. It was something deeper, something more awe-inspiring—the feeling I had when I'd once seen a tornado from less than a quarter of a mile away, seen it tearing up trees by their roots and throwing them around like matchsticks. Staring out of those silver eyes was not a spirit or a being or a personality. It was a force of freaking nature—impersonal, implacable, and utterly beyond any control that I could exert.

Prickles of sweat popped out on my forehead, and I broke the gaze, quickly looking down.

A dark, cool hand touched my cheek, something of both benediction and gentle rebuke contained within it. "If this is Anthony's time," she said quietly, "I will see him safely to the next world. The Prince of Darkness himself will not wrest him from me." Her fingertips moved to my chin and lifted my face to look at her again. She gave me a small smile as she lowered her hand. "Neither will you, Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden, noble though your intentions may be."

I didn't look away from her. The angel knew my Name, down to the last inflection. Holy crap. Any fight against her would be very, very brief, and I was glad I hadn't simply allowed my instincts to take over. "Okay, then," I said a little weakly. "If you aren't here to kill him, why don't you help him? He's a part of your organization."

"As I have already told you, it is not given me to choose when a life will end—or not end."

"Why not? I mean, why the hell *not*? Hasn't Forthill earned a break from you people?"

"It isn't a question of what he deserves," the angel said quietly. "It is a question of choice."

"So choose to help him. It isn't hard."

Her face hadn't shifted from its serene expression for more than a few seconds during the entirety of the conversation. But now it did change. It went flat and hard. Her silver eyes blazed.

“Not for a mortal. No. Not hard at all. But such a thing is beyond me.”

I took a slow breath, thinking. Then I said, “Free will.”

She inclined her head in a micro-nod, her eyes still all but openly hostile. “Something given to you yet denied to me. I may not take any action that abrogates the choices of a mortal.”

“Forthill chose to die? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Nothing so linear,” she said. “This singularity is an amalgamation of many, many choices. Fitz chose to place what little precious trust he had in you. You chose to involve Anthony in the young man’s existence. Anthony chose to come here, despite the danger. Aristedes chose to assault him. Waldo and Daniel chose to involve themselves in his rescue. Beyond that, every single one of the people known to each individual I have mentioned have made choices that impacted the life of those involved. Together, all of you have determined this reality.” She spread her hands. “Who am I to unmake such a thing?”

“Fine,” I said, “be that way.”

“I will,” the angel responded serenely.

I took one more look at Forthill and vanished, heading back toward Butters and company. If the angel wasn’t going to help the good father, I’d damn well do it myself.

It was only a couple of jumps back to the far end of the factory floor, and it took me only a few seconds to get there.

“Fitz,” I said, “I found the father. He’s—”

“That seems reasonable,” Aristedes was saying to Butters. “May I ask one question?”

“Why not?” Butters answered.

Fitz was squirming in Daniel’s grip, leaning away from Aristedes. One look at his face told me why: He’d recognized something in his old teacher’s words or manner. I’d seen the faces of abused wives while they watched their husbands drink, sickly certain that the cycle of abuse would renew itself in the coming hours. Fitz knew what Aristedes looked like when he was about to dispense violence.

“Wardens,” Aristedes said. “Why do you not carry swords?”

Crap.

The question caught Butters off guard. He could have smoothed over the question with a good answer, or maybe even ignored it altogether convincingly—but he did the one thing he absolutely could not do if he was going to sell his false identity to Aristedes.

He hesitated.

Couldn’t blame him, I guess. He’d come lickety-split after Forthill, moving as fast as possible. We’d spent all of maybe ninety seconds on putting our plan together, which had only been possible thanks to Butters’s foresight in packing those cloaks—apparently, he’d thought it might be useful to have them on hand to create a Warden sighting or two, if it seemed like the city’s supernatural scene could use some reassurance. In our hurry to retrieve the good father, I hadn’t thought about the whole sword angle—for good reason. The hell of it was that Aristedes was reaching an accurate conclusion based on an erroneous assumption.

The swords of the Wardens were fairly famous in supernatural circles. Bright silver, supernaturally sharp blades, perfect for chopping off the heads of warlocks, and wrought with spells to deflect or disrupt magical attacks or enchantments. When you saw Wardens, you saw their swords.

Or, at least, that had been the status quo until recently. The enchantress who had made them, Warden Luccio, had lost her capacity to create them when Corpsetaker had swapped her into the body of a young woman with very little natural inclination toward magic. As a result, most of the new Wardens, starting with me, didn’t have a groovy sword. Which meant that most of the Wardens didn’t carry swords any longer.

But that impression, apparently, hadn’t trickled down to street level yet.

Things started happening very quickly.

Aristedes produced his knife, a wicked-looking number with a lot of extraneous points on it—an interpretation of a bowie knife, as done by H. R. Giger.

Daniel Carpenter had evidently noticed Fitz's behavior and deduced its meaning. He dragged both Fitz and Butters behind him with a sweep of his brawny arms and positioned himself between them and the sorcerer, his hands up in a defensive martial arts stance.

Butters let out a yelp as his ass hit the cold concrete floor.

Fitz took the fall and rolled, his eyes wide with terror as he regained his feet and started to run.

"You are all dead men," Aristedes snarled.

And then he blurred forward, almost too quickly to be seen, the knife gleaming in his hand.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Aristedes was nothing more than a streak in the air as he closed on Daniel, slamming into him, knocking him back. As Daniel fell, that wicked knife gleamed and whipsawed back and forth half a dozen times in the space of a second, striking Daniel in the chest and belly on every blow.

Anyone other than Michael and Charity Carpenter's son would have been gutted like a fish.

The kid had gotten some serious training—maybe from Murphy, maybe from the Einherjaren, maybe from his father. Probably from all of them. I'm not a professional when it comes to hand-to-hand combat, of the supernatural variety or otherwise, but I know enough to know how little I know. And one of the things I know is that you don't just decide to time your moves a second in advance to compensate for a lack of supernatural speed. You have to learn that stuff, to build it into your reflexes with weeks or months of painstaking practice.

Daniel had.

He started rolling with the slashes of the knife before Aristedes had fully closed the distance, even as he stumbled backward from the force of the sorcerer's initial impact. The knife bit into his chest and belly—and found armor waiting for it.

Beneath his winter coat, Daniel was wearing a garment I recognized as Charity's handiwork: a double-thick Kevlar vest with a coat of thick titanium rings sandwiched in between the layers of ballistic cloth. Kevlar could stop bullets, but it didn't do squat for blades. That was what the titanium mail was for.

Sparks flew up in rapid succession as the knife struck armor. The impact sounded like someone hitting a side of beef with a baseball bat, but Daniel's body was in motion, giving in with each of the blows, robbing them of the most savage portion of their power. The knife never touched his skin.

Aristedes came to a stop after that blinding-fast combination of attacks and crouched, his arm out to one side, parallel to the ground, the knife gripped hard in it. He looked like an extra in a martial arts movie—the goober.

Daniel turned his backward momentum into a roll and came up on his feet. It didn't look very graceful, but he was obviously in control of the motion, and he dropped into a fighting crouch about twenty feet from the sorcerer. One hand went into his hip pocket and came out with a simple folding lock knife with a black plastic handle. With his thumb he snapped out a blade maybe four inches long and held the weapon tucked in close to his body, point toward Aristedes. He jerked the cloak off his back, and with a few flicks of his arm wrapped the heavy material around his left forearm. Then he held his left hand a little in front of him, palm down, fingers loose—ready to block or grab.

Aristedes had a good poker face, but for the moment, I didn't have anything to do except watch what was going on, and I knew his type. The sorcerer hadn't been psychologically prepared for Daniel's reaction. The stupid bruiser was supposed to be bleeding on the floor, maybe begging for his life. At the very least, he should have been running, terrified, but instead, the very large young man had apparently shrugged off the deadly attacks and meant to fight.

"Nice knife," Daniel said. Scorn dripped from the words. "Get it out of a magazine?"

"From the last fool who tried a blade against me."

Daniel bared his teeth. "Come here. I'll give you this one."

Aristedes flicked his knife through a little series of spins, making it dance nimbly through his fingers. It was a stupid thing to do in a real situation, but the guy clearly knew how to use the weapon. Then his body tightened as he hissed a word and once more he flashed toward Daniel.

The body language before the spell that granted him speed had given him away. The kid was ready again. He sidestepped and swept his arms in a pair of half circles as Aristedes flashed by. There was the sound of shearing cloth, and then the sorcerer was past him.

Daniel turned to face Aristedes with a hiss of pain. His left arm, wrapped in the grey cloak, was bleeding, red spreading through the grey in a slow but growing stain.

"No armor there," Aristedes murmured with a smile.

Daniel said nothing. He just took position again, holding his bloodied knife level, its point toward the sorcerer.

Aristedes looked down and saw the long, shallow cut across his right pectoral. A fine sheet of blood had mixed with the sweat that had broken out on his skin.

Heads were popping out of the debris and refuse now. Zero and his compatriots—maybe a dozen kids, all told—were emerging from their hiding spots to watch the fight. From the looks on their faces, it was the first time they'd ever seen their fearless leader get hurt. Hell, if they'd been anything like me when I was young, they probably had believed that he couldn't be hurt.

Daniel Carpenter had just shown them differently—and the sorcerer knew it.

Aristedes' face set into a grimace of undiluted hate as he stared at Daniel. Then he did something unexpected—he simply walked forward and pounced into knife range.

The exchange was brief. Most knife fights are. Daniel, the taller of the two, had the advantage of reach, somewhat negated by the length of the sorcerer's blade. He wore armor over his torso and was stronger, but Aristedes was the faster of the two, even without magic—and he had a lot more experience.

Hands and knives flashed, all whip-crack speed and whispering violence as they parted the air. I couldn't keep track of the individual cuts. There were just too many of them. I saw Daniel's mail shirt turn aside another pair of strikes, one of them hard enough to send a titanium ring tinkling across the floor. A flicker of red fanned through the air, where one of the fighters lost a splash of blood.

Daniel let out a short grunt. Then another. Aristedes barked out a sound of both pain and satisfaction. The two parted, both breathing heavily. Combat taxes a body's reserves like nothing else on earth. Seconds of it can leave you exhausted, even if you're in great shape.

Daniel staggered and went down on one knee, letting out a grunt of surprise.

There were wounds on both of his legs—punctures, deep stabs. Neither wound had hit one of the big arteries, or he'd already be unconscious, but they were right through the quadriceps muscles, and had to have been agonizing.

He snarled and attempted to rise. Halfway there, he faltered and went down again. Training, courage, and fortitude get you only so far. A deep enough wound on either leg could have taken Daniel out of the fight. He had them on both.

Aristedes hadn't come away clean from the exchange, though. There was a deep cut on his right arm, where Daniel's knife had caught him hard. Flesh hung from a flap of skin. Blood flowed, but his arm still seemed to work. If Aristedes lived long enough and if he kept the arm, he was going to have one hell of a scar to show off later.

But that wasn't going to matter much to Daniel.

The sorcerer switched his knife to his left hand and stared at Daniel with flat eyes. "Kids like you. Haven't learned the price of doing business. When to trade pain for victory."

He blurred into motion again, and Daniel lifted his knife. Then the younger man cried out and fell to his side, clutching at his right arm with his left hand. His knife landed on the floor and spun away from him, eventually coming to rest against Aristedes' feet.

The sorcerer took his time transferring his own knife to his left hand and picking up Daniel's. He tested the blade's balance and edge and said, "Serviceable." He carefully wiped the blood from Daniel's blade against the leg of his trousers, closed it, and slipped it into the pocket of his bathrobe. Then he fixed the young man with a nasty smile, raised his own blade over his head, so that Daniel's blood dripped down it and fell on his upraised arm.

And he started to chant.

I felt the magic gathering at once. It wasn't particularly powerful, but that was by my own standards. Magic doesn't absolutely require a ton of horsepower to be dangerous. It took Aristedes maybe ten seconds to summon enough will and focus for whatever he was doing, and I stood there clenching my fists and my jaw in impotent fury. Daniel saw what was happening and found an old can in the detritus on the floor beside him. He threw it at Aristedes in an awkward, left-handed motion, but came nowhere close to striking the sorcerer.

Aristedes pointed the knife at Daniel, his eyes reptilian, hissed a word, and released the spell.

Michael's eldest son arched his back and let out a strangled scream of agony. Aristedes repeated the word and Daniel contorted in pain again, his back bowing more than I would have thought possible.

I stifled a furious scream of my own and looked away as the sorcerer bent and twisted the energy of Creation itself into a means of torment. Looking away was almost worse: Aristedes' young followers were watching with a sick fascination. Daniel screamed until he was out of breath, and then began to strangle himself as he tried to keep it up. One of the kids bent suddenly and began retching onto the floor.

"This is *my* house," Aristedes said, his expression never changing. "I am the master here, and *my* will is—"

Butters appeared behind Aristedes, from around an upended vat of some kind, and swung three feet of lead pipe into the side of the sorcerer's knee.

There was a sharp, clear crack as bone and cartilage snapped, and Aristedes screamed and went down.

"That sound you just heard," Butters said, his voice tight with fear and adrenaline, "was your lateral collateral ligament and anterior cruciate ligament tearing free of the joint. It's also possible that your patella or tibia was fractured."

Aristedes just lay there in pain, gasping through clenched teeth. A line of spittle drooled out of his mouth.

Butters hefted the lead pipe like a batter at the plate. "Get rid of the knife, or I start on your cranium."

Aristedes kept on gasping but didn't look up. He tossed the creepy knife away.

"The one in your pocket, too," Butters said.

The sorcerer gave him a look of pure hatred. Then he tossed away the knife he'd appropriated from Daniel.

"Sit tight, Daniel," Butters called. "I'll be with you in just a second."

"'M fine," Daniel groaned from the ground. He didn't sound fine. But as I watched, I saw him winding pieces of the slashed cloak around the wound in his right arm, binding them closed and slowing the bleeding. Tough kid, and thinking under pressure.

Butters focused on Aristedes. "I don't want to hurt you," he said. "I want to help you. Your knee has been destroyed. You will never walk again if you don't get medical attention. I'll take you to a hospital."

"What do you want?" Aristedes growled.

"The priest. Fitz. These kids." He bounced the lead pipe against his own shoulder a couple of times. "And this really isn't a negotiation."

"Yes!" I said, clenching my fist. "You go, Butters!"

Aristedes eyed Butters for a moment more. Then he sagged and let out a soft groan of pain.

Oh, crap.

"You win," the sorcerer said. "Just . . . please . . . help me."

"Straighten it out," Butters said, never quite looking at the man. "Lie back and leave it straight."

Aristedes fumbled with his leg and let out another, higher-pitched moan of pain.

Butters flinched at the sound and his eyes were tortured. In a sudden flash of insight, I realized why he cut up corpses for a living instead of treating live patients.

Butters couldn't handle seeing people in pain.

That was what he'd always meant when he said that he wasn't a real doctor, when he said that treating living patients was messy and disturbing compared to extracting individual organs and cataloging them in autopsies. Dead people were just a pile of meat and bones. They were beyond all suffering.

A physician needs a certain level of professional detachment if he is going to best serve his patients, and Butters just . . . didn't have it. The little guy couldn't bring himself not to feel something for the people he worked with. So he had sought a career where he practiced medicine without trying to heal anyone—without involving himself with actual patients.

Aristedes had seen it, too. He probably didn't understand it, but he saw the soft spot, and he went for it ruthlessly.

"Don't," I breathed. "Butters, don't."

"Dammit," Butters said finally, gritting his teeth. He bent to help the man. "Hold still. You're just making it worse. Here." He tried to keep a wary distance as he lent the man a hand, but it just wasn't possible to help him *and* stay out of reach. I saw it on his face as he realized it and began to withdraw. Then, as the man continued his low moans of pain, Butters gave his head a little shake and moved to help Aristedes straighten his leg.

I saw the sorcerer's eyes narrow to slits, an almost sensual pleasure contained in them.

"Dammit!" I said. "Butters, move!" I vanished and appeared beside Butters, shoving my hands into his chest, willing myself to push him away.

I didn't move him—my hands just passed into him, insubstantial—but a sudden frisson seemed to run through him, and he began to pull away.

Too late.

Aristedes' left arm blurred and struck Butters squarely on the chin. If he hadn't been drawing back, the blow would have caught him just under the ear, and the sorcerer's hand was moving fast enough that it might have broken Butters's neck. Even so, the sharp thump of impact snapped Butters's head to one side, hard enough to rebound when it had reached maximum torsion. He did a brief bobblehead impersonation on the way to the floor and landed in a boneless heap.

I wanted to scream in frustration. Instead, I poked at my brain, demanding it to come up with something.

To my considerable surprise, it did.

I vanished straight up to the ceiling and spun in a quick circle. There. I spotted Fitz, moving in a low crawl toward one of the exits from the factory floor, keeping a modest pile of junk between himself and Aristedes.

"Fitz!" I bellowed. I vanished and reappeared right over him. "Fitz, you've got to turn around!"

"Quiet," he hissed in a frantic whisper. His eyes were white around the edges. "Quiet. No, I can't! Leave me alone!"

"You've got to do it," I said. "Forthill's here in the camp, hurt bad. There's a freaking angel of death standing over him. He needs help."

Fitz didn't answer me. He kept on crawling off the factory floor and into one of the hallways outside it. He was making desperate, small sounds as he reached the door and got out of any possible line of sight to Aristedes.

"Fitz," I said. "Fitz, you have got to do something. You're the only one who can."

"Cops," he panted. "I'll call the cops. They can handle it." He got up and started padding down the hall, toward what I presumed was the nearest exit from the building.

"Butters and Daniel don't have that kind of time," I answered. "The cops get tipped off by a runaway, we'll be lucky if a prowl car cruises by half an hour from now. All three of them could be dead by then. Your boss can't allow witnesses."

"You're the wizard," Fitz said. "Why can't you do it? I mean, ghosts can possess people and stuff, right? Just zap into Aristedes and make him jump off the roof."

I was quiet for a moment. Then I said, "Look, I'm new at this ghost thing. But it doesn't work like that. Even the badass ghost of a centuries-old wizard I know of can only possess a subject who is willing. So far, I've only been able to move into people who were sensitive to spirits—and they could have booted me out anytime they wanted. Aristedes is neither sensitive nor willing. I'd be like a bug splattering on a windshield if I tried to take him over."

"Christ."

"If you want to volunteer, I could take you over, I suppose. I don't think you've got the right wiring for me to use my power, and you'd still be in danger, of course, but you wouldn't have to make the decisions."

Fitz shuddered. "No."

"Good. It's weird as hell." I paused and took a breath. "And besides. It would be . . . wrong."

"Wrong?" Fitz asked.

"Take away someone's will, you take away everything they are. Their whole identity. Doing that to someone is worse than murder; if you kill them, they don't keep on suffering."

"Who cares?" Fitz said. "This guy is an animal. Who cares if he gets something bad? He's earned it."

"Wrong is wrong, even when you really, really want it not to be," I said quietly. "I learned that one the hard way. It's easy to do the right thing when it doesn't cost you. Not as easy to do the right thing when your back is to the wall."

Fitz shook his head the whole time I spoke that last, and his pace quickened. "There's nothing I can do. I'm running for my life."

I fought down a snarl to keep my voice level. Time to change tactics. "Kid, you aren't thinking it through," I said. "You know Aristedes. You know him."

"Which part of *running for my life* didn't come across?"

I grunted. "The part where you leave your friends to die."

"What?"

"He's busted up pretty bad right now. Weak. How long do you think it will take him to replace all your crew?"

Fitz's steps dragged to a stop.

"They've seen him weak now. Hell, he's hurt bad enough that he might be crippled for life. What do you think he'll do with the kids who saw him beaten? Who saw him get bloodied and smashed to the floor?"

Fitz bowed his head.

"Stars and stones, kid. You started showing signs of independent thought, and he was so threatened by it that he set you up to get killed. What do you think he'll do to Zero?"

Fitz didn't answer.

"You run now," I said quietly, "and you're going to spend your whole life running. This is a crossroads. This is where your life takes form. Here. Now. This moment."

His face twisted up as if he was in physical pain. Still, he didn't respond.

I wanted to put my hand on his shoulder, to give him the reassurance of a human touch. The best I could do was to soften my voice as much as I could.

"I know what I'm talking about, kid. Every time you're alone in the dark, every time you go by a mirror, you're going to remember this moment. You're going to see who you've become. And you'll either be the man who ran away while his own crew and three good men died, or you'll be the man who stood tall and did something about it."

Fitz swallowed and whispered, "He's too strong."

"Not right now, he isn't," I said. "He's on the ground. He can't walk. He's got one arm. If I didn't think you had a chance, I'd be telling you to run."

"I can't," he whispered. "I can't. This isn't fair."

“Life hardly ever is,” I said.

“I don’t want to die.”

“Heh. No one does. But everyone does it anyway.”

“That supposed to be funny?”

“Maybe a little ironic, given the source. Look, kid. All that matters is the answer to the question: Which of those men do you want to be?”

Slowly he lifted his head. I realized that he could see his own reflection in the glass of an office door.

I stood behind him, looking down at him and remembering, with a faint sense of irrational disbelief, that I had once been no taller than the boy.

“Which man, Fitz?” I asked quietly.

Chapter Thirty-nine

When I faced my old master, I did it with newly made staff and blasting rod in hand, with the ancient forces of the universe at my call, and with words of power upon my tongue.

Fitz had more courage than I had as a child.

He went to face his demons with no weapon at all.

As his footsteps rapped steadily on the concrete floor, I worried about the kid. He was doing this on my say-so. What if Aristedes wasn't hurt as badly as I thought? What if he knew some kind of restorative magic? Fitz wouldn't have a chance—and I would never forgive myself.

I gritted my teeth and told myself not to borrow trouble. Things were bad enough without adding in a bunch of my own worries. That wouldn't help anybody.

Fitz stepped into sight of Aristedes and stopped in his tracks.

"Easy," I said quietly. "Calm. Don't show him any weakness. You can do it."

Fitz took a deep breath and walked forward.

"Fitz," Aristedes spat. He was sitting up now, his leg straight out in front of him. Butters's unconscious body had been dumped next to Daniel, who sat on the ground in a small puddle of his own blood, grimacing in pain and obviously disoriented. He'd bound the wounds closed, more or less, but it was clear that he still needed real medical attention. Zero and the other kids, several obviously detailed to watch Daniel and Butters, were standing around with pipes and old knives. "What do you think you're doing here, traitor?"

Fitz faced him in silence.

"You led those men to us. You've endangered the lives of everyone here."

Fitz almost seemed to dwindle, as if a cloud had passed between him and the wan light spilling in the windows. Dark, hostile eyes glared at Fitz from all around.

A quick check with my senses confirmed that the sorcerer was using power. "He's pushing them," I said quietly, "making them feel hostility toward you. It isn't real. You've got to shake him, break his focus."

Fitz gave a barely perceptible nod of his head. "I didn't lead them here. They caught me while I was trying to recover the weapons. They forced me to come with them."

"That's not what the priest said," Aristedes shot back.

"The father thought he was helping me," Fitz replied. "There was no reason to hurt him."

"No reason?" Aristedes asked. His voice was dangerous, deadly, and smooth. "That he should trespass here is reason enough. But he wanted to destroy this family. That is something I will not permit."

"Family, right," Fitz said. "We're like the Simpsons around here."

Personally, I would have gone with the Waltons, but I liked the cut of the kid's jib.

Aristedes stared at Fitz with reptilian eyes and said, "Give me one reason why I should not kill you, here and now."

"Because you can't," Fitz said in a bored tone. "You aren't going anywhere under your own power. You're fucked. You need help."

The sorcerer's voice dropped to a bare whisper. "Do I?"

"Yep," Fitz said. "Wasn't like it wasn't going to happen eventually anyway, right? Sooner or later, you were gonna wind up eating applesauce with a rubber spoon somewhere. You think a bunch of kids you terrified into following you are gonna take care of Grandpa Aristedes? Come on."

"I'll give you one chance," Aristedes said. "Leave. Now."

Fitz tapped a finger on his chin thoughtfully. Then he said, "Nah. Don't think so."

Aristedes blinked. "What?"

"Here's how it's going to work," Fitz said. "I'm going to take the priest, those two guys, and the crew away from you. I'm going to get them some help. I'm going to call an ambulance and get you some help, too. After that, we never cross paths again."

"Are you insane?"

"I was," Fitz said, nodding. "I think I'm coming out of it now. I know you aren't coming back from Loopyland, though. So I'm taking the crew away from you."

Aristedes clenched his fists and his eyes blazed—and though he probably didn't realize it, his concentration faltered. The influence magic he held over the children wavered. "Kill him."

The flat-eyed children looked at Fitz. Zero started taking a step toward him.

Fitz's voice was a whip crack, sharp and loud in the echoing chamber. "Stop."

And they did. No magic was involved. Fitz had something more powerful than that. He'd cared for those other kids. He'd thought about them, encouraged them, and led them. That was something every bit as real as mystic power and dark enchantment—and it carries a hell of a lot more weight.

Love always does.

"Zero," Fitz said quietly. "We're done staying with this idiot. Put down the knife and come with me."

"Zero!" Aristedes said sharply.

I could all but see the strain in the air as the sorcerer doubled down on his influence-working, struggling to force the boy to do his will. He shouldn't have bothered. It was over. It had been over ever since Fitz chose to walk back into that room.

Fitz walked over to Zero and put a hand on the other boy's shoulder. "Z," he said quietly. "I can't make you do anything. So you tell me. Who do you want looking out for you? Me? Or him?"

Zero looked searchingly at Fitz. Then at Aristedes.

"Don't listen to him," Aristedes said through clenched teeth, spraying spittle. "Without me, you won't last a day on these streets. The Fomor will take you *all*."

"No, Z," Fitz said quietly. "They won't. It's okay. We've got help."

Zero blinked his eyes several times. He bowed his head.

The old knife in his fingers clattered to the concrete floor.

Another dozen knives and pipes fell to the floor as the other boys released them. They all went over to Fitz and gathered around him.

"I'll kill you," hissed Aristedes. "I'll *kill* you."

Fitz faced the crippled sorcerer and shook his head. Then he did what was possibly the cruelest thing he could have done to his former mentor.

He turned away and ignored him.

"Zero," Fitz said, "we need an ambulance for the father now. Call nine-one-one. Don't move him—let the ambulance guys do that."

Zero nodded and pulled one of those cheap, prepaid cell phones out of the pocket of his oversized jacket. He ran for the door, presumably to get a better signal. Within the next few minutes, rough but serviceable medical supplies had been brought out, and Daniel's wounds had been cleaned and bound tighter than he'd been able to manage on his own.

Aristedes tried to get a couple of the kids to pay attention to him, but they were following Fitz's lead. They ignored him. So the sorcerer just sat and watched it all in stunned silence.

Maybe I should have felt a little bit bad for the guy. As far as his world was concerned, he had just died. Only he was still alive to see the unthinkable—a world that existed without him. He was a living, breathing ghost. Maybe I should have felt some empathy there.

But I really didn't.

Butters stirred and sat up groggily as Fitz finished up tying a second pressure bandage to Daniel's leg. Michael's son let out a short grunt of pain and then breathed deeply several times. He

was still shaking and pale, but his eyes were steady. He met Fitz's gaze and said, "Thank you."

Fitz shook his head. "I didn't do anything. You two were the ones who beat him."

"The father was the one who beat him," Daniel corrected him. "He knew what would happen to him when he came here. And he knew we'd come after him."

Butters grunted and spoke without opening his eyes. "Forthill wouldn't have played it like that. He came here to give peace a chance." He groaned and pressed a hand to his jaw. "Nnngh. Ow."

Daniel frowned, thinking it over. "So . . . he didn't want us to come after him?"

Butters snorted. "He knew we would come after him, no matter what he did. And he also knew that if the sorcerer went off on him, there would be someone to come along and do it the other way. He's a man of peace. Doesn't mean he's stupid."

"Where is he?" Daniel asked.

"By the fire," Fitz said. "That way about thirty yards. The ambulance is on the way."

Butters groaned and slowly pushed himself up. He rubbed at his jaw again and said, "Take me to him."

"Wait," Daniel said. "Fitz . . . you ran. I don't blame you. But you came back."

Fitz paused, pursed his lips, and said, "Yeah. I did, didn't I?"

"Why?"

Fitz shrugged. "Dresden. He told me that if I ran now, I'd run forever. And I'm sick of that."

"Heh," Butters said. "Heh, heh. He totally Kenobied the day." Dark eyes gleaming, he looked at Daniel. "Still have doubts?"

Daniel shook his head once, smiling. Then he sank down to the floor with a satisfied groan.

"The father, please," Butters said. Fitz nodded and led Butters over toward the gang's little camp. But not before Butters looked around and said, "Thanks, Harry. Good to know you've still got our backs."

I watched them go to help Forthill quietly.

"Sure, man," I said, though I knew no one could hear me. "Anytime."

Emergency-service personnel arrived. By the time they got there, weapons had been hidden. Stories had been set. Concerned adults had come to discourage some local homeless youth from playing and living in a dangerous, old, ruined building. There had been an altercation with a possibly drunken vagrant that had gotten out of hand. Things had fallen down, injuring several.

It wouldn't have taken more than half a brain to see the holes in the story, but Butters knew the med techs, no one had been killed, and no one wanted to press any charges. The techs were willing to keep their mouths shut for a couple of greenbacks. Ah, Chicago.

Forthill was in bad shape, but by the time they'd gotten him onto a stretcher and out to the ambulance, the angel of death was nowhere to be seen. Hah. Up yours, Reaper Girl. The father would live to not-fight another day.

Daniel went with the father. Aristedes rode in his own ambulance. He was still stunned by what had happened, or else smart enough to look disoriented and keep his mouth shut. The techs, after a few quiet words from Butters, strapped his arms and legs down for the ride. He never resisted. He never did anything. The doors of the ambulance shut on a broken man.

As for me, I couldn't emerge from the old factory into the light. I had to stay in shadowed doorways to watch the proceedings. The afternoon must have been a warm one. The snow had visibly begun to lessen, and water ran and dripped everywhere.

When everyone with immediate medical needs had been taken care of, I went back to where I knew Butters would be. Sure enough, he came into the business entryway to recover his duffel bag and the flashlight containing Bob's skull.

Butters slung the bag's strap over his shoulder and pulled the little spirit radio out of it. He dropped that in his pocket and took out the flashlight housing. Then he held it up and said, "Okay, job's done."

Orange campfire lights shot in a stream over my right shoulder and past me into the eye sockets of the skull, where they took up their familiar glow. “See? I told you so.”

“Duly noted,” Butters said seriously.

I blinked at him and looked behind me, then back at the skull. “Bob. You were behind me that whole time?”

“Yeah,” Bob said. “The nerd had me shadow you. Sorry, Harry.”

Butters could see me, and I folded my arms and scowled at him. “You didn’t trust me.”

Butters pushed his glasses up on his nose. “Trust, but verify,” he said seriously. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Harry, but the testimony of a cat and a maybe-insane girl—wizard or not—didn’t exactly thrill all of us with its undeniable veracity.”

“Murphy told you to do it,” I said.

“Actually, Murphy didn’t want any of us to take any chances dealing with you,” he replied. “Things have used your appearance to get to her before.”

I wanted to say something heated and ferocious, but all I could have rationally responded with was something like, *You’re right*. And that wouldn’t have sounded very rational. So I just grunted.

Butters nodded. “And you’ve got to understand how bad the streets have been. The Fomor have no limits, Harry. They’ll use women, children, pets—anything—to get an emotional lever on you, if they can. To fight that, you’ve got to have buckets and buckets of sangfroid.”

I grunted and scowled some more. “But you bucked her orders.”

Butters scratched his nose with one finger. “Well. You know. It sounds cooler if I say I acted on my own initiative. I had a hunch.”

“Listen to Quincy here,” the skull burred, giggling. “You had me, you dope.”

“I had you,” Butters admitted. “And I trust you.”

“And Murphy doesn’t, much,” Bob said with cheery pride, “which is probably smart. Someone else gets hold of my skull and who knows what they’d do with me? I am a loose cannon! The Wardens would waste me in a hot second!”

“Present company excluded,” I said.

“You don’t count,” the skull said stoutly. “You were drafted.”

“Granted.”

“The point being that I am an *outlaw*! And chicks *love* that!”

“Oy,” Butters said, rolling his eyes. “Enough, Bob.”

“You got it, hombre,” Bob said.

I couldn’t help laughing a little.

“You see what I’ve got to live with,” Butters said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“You, uh,” he said. He rubbed at the back of his head. “You’re missed, here, Harry. A lot. After a while, most of us . . . you know. We figured you were gone. We kind of had a wake at your grave. Pizza and beer. Called it a funeral. But Murphy wouldn’t go.”

“Illegal gathering,” I said.

Butters snorted out a breath through his nose. “That was her excuse, yeah.”

“Well,” I said. “We’ll see.”

Butters paused, body motionless for a moment. “We’ll see what?”

“Whether or not this is permanent,” I said, gesturing at myself.

Butters snapped up straight. “What?”

“Bob thinks that there is hinkiness afoot with regard to my, ah, disposition.”

“You . . . you could come back?” Butters whispered.

“Or maybe I haven’t left,” I said. “I don’t know, man. I got suckered into this whole encore-appearance thing. I’m as in the dark as everyone else.”

“Wow,” Butters breathed.

I waved a hand. “Look. That will fall out where it may,” I said. “We’ve got a real problem to deal with, like, right now.”

He nodded, one sharp gesture. "Tell me."

I told him about the Corpsetaker and her plan for Mort, and her deal with the point guy of the Fomor's servitors. "So we've got to break that up right the hell now," I concluded. "I want you to get Murphy and her Vikings and tell them to go stomp the Corpsetaker's hideout."

Butters sucked in a breath through his teeth. "Ugh. I know there hasn't been time for a lot of chitchat since you, uh, became departed, but they aren't Murphy's Vikings."

"Whose are they?"

"Marccone's."

"Oh."

"We'll have to talk to Childs."

"Marccone's new guy?"

"Yeah. Him." Butters shivered. "Guy gives me the creeps."

"Could be Will and company would be enough."

Butters shook his head. "Could be Will and company have done too much already, man. Seriously."

"Something's got to happen. If you wait, you get a renegade wizard the White Council has nightmares about knocking on your front door. And by *knocking* I mean 'converting it from matter to energy.' "

Butters nodded. "I'll talk to her. We'll figure out something." He squinted at me. "What are you going to be doing?"

"Covering the ghostly side of things," I said. "She and her wannabe Bob and her lemurs and all the wraiths she's been calling up. Assuming things go well on the mortal coil, I don't want her slipping out the back door and coming back to haunt us another day."

He frowned. "You're going to do all that by yourself?"

I showed him my teeth. "Not exactly. Move. There's not much time."

"When?" he asked.

"When else?" I answered. "Sundown."

Chapter Forty

I vanished from inside the factory the second I felt sundown shudder through reality. The jumps were longer now, almost double what I'd managed the night before, and it took less time to orient myself between them. I guess practice makes perfect, even if you're dead. Or whatever I was.

It took me less than two minutes to get to the burnt remains of Morty's place.

On the way, I could see that southern winds were blowing, and they must have brought a springtime warmth with them. All of the city's snow was melting, and the combination of the two with the oncoming night meant that a misty fog hung in the air, cutting visibility down to maybe fifty or sixty feet. Fog in Chicago isn't terribly unusual, but never that thick. Streetlights were ringed with blurred, luminous halos. Traffic signals were soft blurs of changing color. Cars moved slowly, cautiously, and the thick mist laid a rare hush over the city, strangling its usual voice.

I stopped about a hundred yards away from Morty's house. There I felt it: a trace of the summoning energy that had been built into his former home, drawing me forward with the same gentle beckoning as might the scent of a hot meal after a long day. It was like the Corpsetaker's summons, but of a magic far less coarse, far more gentle. The necromancer's magic was like the suction of a vacuum cleaner. Mort's magic had been more like the gravity of the earth—less overtly powerful, but utterly pervasive.

Hell. Mort's magic had probably had some kind of effect on me all the way over in Chicago Between. His house was the first place I'd come to, after all, and though I had a logical reason to go there, it was entirely possible that my reasoning had been influenced. It was magic, after all, intended to attract the attention of dangerous spirits.

At that very moment, in her moldy old lair, the Corpsetaker was torturing Morty and planning to murder my friends—so the remnants of the spell were definitely getting my attention.

I went closer to Morty's house and felt that same pull get a little stronger. The spell had been broken when Mort's house had burned down, and it was fading. The morning's sunrise had almost wiped it away. It wouldn't survive another dawn—but with a little help, it might serve its purpose one more time.

From the voluminous pocket of my duster, I withdrew Sir Stuart's pistol. I fiddled with the gun until the gleaming silver sphere of the bullet rolled out into my hand, along with a sparkling cloud of flickering light. As each mote touched my skin, I heard the faint echo of a shot cracking out—the gunfire of Sir Stuart's memory. Hundreds of shots crackled in my ears, distant and faint: the ghostly memory equivalent of gunpowder. Sir Stuart had heard a lot of it.

But what I needed wasn't firepower, not for this. I took up the shining silver sphere, the memory of Sir Stuart's home and family, and regarded it with my full attention. Once again the scene of the small family farm seemed to swell in my vision, until it surrounded me in a faint, translucent landscape that quivered and throbbed with power all its own. For a second, I could hear the wind rustling through the fields of grain and smell the sharp, honest scents of animals drifting to me from the barn, mixing with the aroma of fresh-baked bread coming from the house. The shouts and cries of children playing some sort of game hung in the air.

They weren't my memories, but I felt something beneath their surface, something powerful and achingly familiar. I reached into my own thoughts and produced the memories of my own home, casting them up to merge with Sir Stuart's cherished vision. I remembered the smell of wood and ink and paper, of all the shelves of secondhand books that had lined the walls of my old apartment, with their ramshackle double- and triple-stacked layers of paperbacks. I remembered the scent of woodsmoke from my fireplace, blending with the aroma of fresh coffee in a cup. I threw in the taste of Campbell's chicken soup in a steaming mug on a cold day, when my clothes

had been soaked with rain and snow and I had gotten out of them and huddled beneath a blanket near the fire, sipping soup and feeling the warmth sink into me.

I remembered the solid warmth of my dog, Mouse, his heavy head pillowed on my leg while I read a book, and the softness of Mister's fur as he came by and gently batted my book away with his paw until I paused to give him his due share of attention. I remembered my apprentice, Molly, diligently studying and reading, remembered us having hours and hours of conversation as I taught her the basics of magic, of how to use it responsibly and wisely—or, at least, as responsibly and wisely as I knew how. They weren't necessarily the same thing.

I remembered the feeling of pulling warm covers up over me as I went to bed. Of listening to thunderstorms, complete with flickering lightning, pounding rain, and howling wind, and of the simple, secure pleasure of knowing that I was safe and warm while the elements raged outside. I remembered walking with confidence in pitch darkness, because I knew every step that would take me safely through my rooms.

Home.

I invoked the memory of home.

I don't know at what point the bullet dissolved into raw potential, but its power blended with my memories, humming a powerful harmonic chord with the emotions behind those memories—emotions common to all of us, a need for a place that is our own. Security. Safety. Comfort.

Home.

"Home," I breathed aloud. I found the tatters of Mort's gathering spell, and in my thoughts began to knit the edges of the memories together with the frayed magic. "Home," I breathed again, gathering my will, fusing it with memory, and sending it out into the nighttime air. "Come home," I said, and my voice carried into the night, reverberating through the mist, borne by the energy of my spell into a night-shivering, encompassing music as I released that power and memory into the night. "Come home. Come home."

It all flowed out of me in a steady, deliberate rush, leaving me with unhurried purpose. I felt the magic rush out in a steadily growing circle. And then it was gone, except for the faintest whisper of an echo.

Come home. Come home. Come home.

I opened my eyes slowly.

There had been no sound, no stirring of energies, no warning of any kind.

I stood in a circle of silent, staring, hollow-eyed spirits.

Now that I knew what they were—the insane, dangerous ghosts of Chicago, the ones that killed people—they looked different. Those two little kids? My goodness, spooky now, a little too much darkness in their sunken eyes, expressions that wouldn't change if they were watching a car go by or pushing a toddler's head under the surface of the water. A businessman, apparently from the late-nineteenth century, I recognized as the shade of Herman Webster Mudgett, an American trailblazer in the field of entrepreneurial serial murder. I spotted another shade from a century earlier who could only have been Captain William Wells, a cold and palpable fury radiating from him still.

There were more—many more. Chicago has an intense history of violence, tragedy, and sheer weirdness that really can't be topped this side of the Atlantic. I couldn't put names to a third of them, but I knew now, looking at them, exactly what they were—lives that had ended in misery, in fury, in pain, or in madness. They were pure energy of destruction given human form, smoldering like coals that could still sear flesh long after they ceased to give off light.

They were a loaded gun.

Standing behind them, patient and calm, like sheepdogs around their flock, were the guardian spirits of Mort's house. I had assumed them to be his spiritual soldiers, but I could see now what their main purpose had been. They, the ghosts of duty and obligation unfulfilled, had remained behind in an attempt to see their tasks to completion. They, the shades of faith, of love, of duty, had been a balancing energy with the dark power of the violent spirits. They had grounded the

savagery and madness with their sheer, steady, simple existence—and the faded shade of Sir Stuart stood tall and calm among them.

I held Sir Stuart's weapon in my right hand and half wished I could go back in time and rap my twenty-four-hours-younger self on the head with it. The fading spirit hadn't been trying to hand me a weapon at all. He'd been giving me something far more dangerous than that.

I thought he'd handed me potent but limited power, a single deadly shot. I'd been thinking in mortal terms, from a mortal perspective.

Stuart hadn't given me a gun. He'd given me a *symbol*.

He'd given me *authority*.

I held the gun in my right hand and closed my eyes for a moment, focusing on it, concentrating on not merely holding it, but taking it into me, making it my own. I opened my eyes, looked at the tall, brawny shade, and said, "Thank you, Sir Stuart."

As I spoke, the gun shifted and changed, elongating abruptly. The wood of its grip and stock swelled out, becoming knife-planed oak and, as it did, I reached into my memory. Runes and sigils carved themselves in a tight spiral down the length of the staff. I took a deep breath and once more felt the solid power of my wizard's staff, six feet of oak as big around as my own circled thumb and finger, the foremost symbol of *my* power, gripped steadily in my hand.

I bowed my head, focusing intently, drawing on the memories of the hundreds of spells and dozens of conflicts of my life, and as I did the symbols on the staff pulsed with opalescent energy that reminded me of Sir Stuart's bullets in flight. Power hummed through the spectral wood so that it shook in my hand and flickered sharply, sending pulses of weirdly colored light, light I sensed would be visible even to mortal eyes, surging through the mist. There was a rushing sound, something almost like a sudden strike upon an unimaginably large and deep drum, an impact that rippled out from me and passed throughout the city and the surrounding lands. It sent a shiver of energy through me, and for an instant I felt the warmth of the southern wind, the close, muggy dampness of the air, the wet, slushy cold of the snow beneath my insubstantial feet. I smelled the stench of Morty's burned home on the air, and for a single instant, for the first time since the tunnel, I felt the rumble of hunger in my belly.

Then dozens of spectral gazes simultaneously shifted, focusing exclusively on me, and their weight hit me like a sudden cold wind.

"Good evening, everyone," I said quietly, turning to address the circle of raw fury and devotion that surrounded me. "Our friend Mortimer is in trouble. And we don't have much time. . ."

Chapter Forty-one

The Corpsetaker's stronghold hadn't changed.

But it *had* awakened.

I felt the difference as soon as I approached, and a quick effort to invoke the memory of my Sight brought the changes into sharp, clear view. A column of lurid light, all shades of purple and scarlet, rose into the night sky over the entrance to the stronghold. I could see the magical energy involved, my gaze piercing the ground as if it had been slightly cloudy water. There, beneath the ground, where I had seen them on the stairs and in the tunnels, were formulas of deadly power, full of terrible energy, now awakened and burning bright.

All of that shoddy, nonsensical, quasimagical script hadn't been anything of the sort. Or, rather, it had been only apparent nonsense. The true formulas, strongly burning wards built on almost the same theory and system I had once used to protect my own home, had been concealed within the overt insanity.

"Right in front of me and I missed it," I breathed.

I should have known better. The Corpsetaker had once been part of the White Council, sometime back before the French and Indian War. We'd gone to the same school, even if we'd graduated in very different years. Not only that, but she was getting assistance from a being that had been created from part of my own personal arcane assistant. Evil Bob had probably given her similar advice on constructing wards.

Wards weren't like a lot of other magic. They were based on a threshold, the envelope of energy around a home. Granted, the loonies currently inhabiting the tunnels were hair-on-fire bonkers, but they were still human, and they still had the same need for a home that everyone else did. Thresholds don't care about sunrise, not when a living, breathing mortal fuels them every moment, just by living within them. Build a spell onto a threshold and it doesn't easily diminish. As a result, you can slowly, over time, pump more and more and more energy into spells based upon it.

The Corpsetaker hadn't needed access to a wizard-level talented body to create the wards. She'd just used tiny talents regularly over months and months, and built up the wards to major-league defenses a little at a time, preparing for the night when she would need them.

Obviously, she'd decided that since she was torturing a world-class ectomancer in order to make her big comeback from beyond the grave, tonight was a great night not to be interrupted.

"I hate fighting competent people," I growled. "I just *hate* it."

"Formidable defenses," said a quiet voice behind me.

I looked over my right shoulder. Sir Stuart studied the wards as well. He'd become a tiny bit more solid-looking, and there was distant, distracted interest in his eyes.

"Yeah," I said. "Got any ideas?"

"Mortal magic," he replied. "Beyond our reach."

"I know that," I replied grumpily. "But we've got to get in." I looked around at the crew of lunatic ghosts I'd mentally dubbed the Lecter Specters. "What about those guys? Breaking the rules is kind of what they do. Are they crazy enough to get in?"

"Threshold. Inviolable."

Which again made sense. I'd gotten into the fortress the night before because the door had been open and the ghost-summoning spell had essentially been a big old welcome mat, a standing invitation. Clearly, tonight was different. "Well," I muttered, "nothing worth doing is easy, is it?"

There was no response.

I turned to find that Sir Stuart's shade had faded out again and his eyes were lost in the middle distance.

"Stu? Hey, Stu."

He didn't respond except to face forward again, his expression patient, ready to follow orders.

"Dammit," I sighed. "Okay, Harry. You're the big-time wizard. Figure it out by yourself."

I vanished and reappeared at the doorway. Then I leaned on my staff and studied the active wards. That did me limited good. I knew them. I'd used constructions much like them on my own home. You'd need to throw several tons of bodies at them, literally, to bring them down—which was what had happened to my first-generation wards. Wave after wave of zombies had eventually gotten through.

I mean, go figure. You prepare your home for an assault and you don't take zombies into consideration. I'd fallen victim to one of the other classic blunders, along with not getting involved in a land war in Asia and never going in against a Sicilian when death was on the line.

My second generation of wards had planned for zombies. So had these. So even if I had zombies, which I didn't, I wasn't going to be able to go through them.

"So," I said. "Don't go through them. Go around them."

Yeah, smart guy? How?

"There's an open Way between the heart of the fortress and the Nevernever," I said. "That's like a permanently open door with an all-day invitation, or they wouldn't need fortifications on the other side. All you have to do is get to it, assault Evil Bob's defenses and Evil Bob and whatever the Corpsetaker recruited from God only knows what kind of dark hellhole, smash them up, and blast through from the spirit world."

Well. That plan did have a lot of words like *assault* and *smash* and *blast* in it, which I had to admit was way more my style. One problem, though: I couldn't open a Way to the Nevernever. Once I was through, I could probably find Evil Bob's fortress—it would perforce have to be nearby. But, like the mortal-world lair, I couldn't open the door.

"Other than that, though, it's genius," I assured myself.

A direct assault against a fortress that had undoubtedly been designed to defeat direct assaults? Brilliant. Uncomplicated, do-or-die suicidal, and there's the minor issue that you aren't capable of actually implementing it. But genius—absolutely.

Gandalf never had this kind of problem.

He had exactly this problem, actually, standing in front of the hidden Dwarf door to Moria. Remember when . . .

I sighed. Sometimes my inner monologue annoys even me.

"Edro, edro," I muttered. "Open." I rubbed at the bridge of my nose and ventured, "*Mellon.*"

Nothing happened. The wards stayed. I guessed the Corpsetaker had never read Tolkien. Tasteless bitch.

"I hate this depending-on-others crap," I muttered. Then I vanished and reappeared at the head of my horde. "Okay, everybody," I said. "Huddle up."

I got a lot of blank looks. Which was probably only reasonable. Most of those spirits predated football.

"Okay," I said. "Everyone get to where you can see and hear me clearly. Gather in."

The ghosts understood that. They huddled—in three dimensions. Some crowded around me in a circle on the ground. The rest took to the air and arranged themselves overhead.

"Christ," I muttered. "It's like Thunderdome." I held out my hand, palm up, and closed my eyes for a moment. I called up my most recent memories of Molly, both of her physical appearance and of her evident state of mind. Then I focused on projecting those memories, following my newly developing instincts with the whole ghost routine. When I opened my eyes, a small, three-dimensional image of Molly hovered above the surface of my palm, rotating slowly.

"This young woman is somewhere in Chicago," I said. "Maybe nearby. We need her help to get to Mort. So, um. Soldier boys, stay here with me. The rest of you guys, go locate her. Appear

to her. Tell her that Harry Dresden sent you, and lead her back here. Do not reveal yourselves to anyone else. Harm no one." I looked around at them. "Okay?"

Before I'd finished the last word, half of the crowd—the crazy half—was gone.

I just hoped that they would listen to me, that my beckoning spell and the mantle of authority Sir Stuart had passed to me would help ensure their cooperation. I felt fairly confident in my instinct that nutty killer ghosts were not terribly good at following orders.

"This could turn out bad in so many ways," I muttered.

But it mostly didn't.

Maybe ten minutes after I'd dispatched them, the Lecter Specters reappeared among the ranks of the quiet guardians with no sound, no flash, no fanfare. One second, nothing; the next, there they all were. All but two.

A moment later, the twins came walking toward us. Molly limped along between the two little spirits, holding hands with each of them. She was moving with her back perfectly rigid, her steps cautious, and she looked a little green around the gills. Like I said, she's a sensitive. She must have figured out the true nature of the child ghosts immediately upon meeting them, and she clearly did not relish the idea of being in skin contact with them. It said a lot about her intestinal fortitude that she had accompanied them at all.

It probably said even more about her trust in me.

It was no coincidence that the ghosts had found her so quickly, either. She'd already been on the way; Molly was dressed for battle.

There were still bloodstains on the front of her long coat, where she'd taken a bullet through the muscle of her thigh. It was based on the design of a fireman's coat and, like Daniel's vest, Molly's coat contained an armored lining of titanium rings sandwiched between layers of ballistic fabric. She still wore her ragged clothing beneath the coat, but she'd added a nylon-web tactical belt to her ensemble. It bore several potions, which she'd always been good at making, and a pair of wands covered in rows of runes and sigils like those on my own staff. One was tipped in a crystal of white quartz, the other with an amethyst.

Once the twins had led her to me, they vanished, reappearing in their previous spaces in the ranks. Molly blinked and looked around for a moment. She took her cane from under one arm and leaned on it, taking some of the weight off her wounded leg. Then she took out the little tuning fork, rapped it once against the cane, and held it up in front of one of her eyes, so that she was looking through the tines.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," she breathed, her eyes widening as she took in the spook squad. "Harry, is that you in there?"

"Two ghosts enter; one ghost leaves," I replied. Then I vanished from the Spookydom and reappeared in front of her. "Hi."

Molly shook her head a little. She looked tired still, but some of the strain I'd seen in her the night before seemed to have drained out of her. "Who are they?"

"Morty's friends," I said. I gestured at her. "You wore your party dress, I see."

She smiled for a second, enough to show her dimples. Then it was gone. "Butters got in touch with me. He told me what was going on."

I nodded. "Murphy?"

Molly looked away. "She's on the way with whoever she can get."

"Marccone's guys?"

She shook her head. "Marccone is in Italy or something. Childs is in charge."

"Let me guess. He's just supposed to mind the store until the boss gets back, and he didn't get chosen for his daring and ambition."

Molly nodded. "Pretty much."

I grimaced. "How's your brother?"

“More stitches. More scars,” Molly said, looking away—but not in time to hide the flash of pure, murderous rage I saw in her eyes. “He’ll live.”

“The padre?”

“Stable. Unconscious. He was beaten badly.”

“What about Fitz and his gang?” I asked.

“With my father for now,” she said. “Mom makes battalion-sized meals already. Eight or ten more mouths isn’t bad. Just until there’s enough time to figure out what to do with them.”

I snorted quietly. “And Murph would just call in the kids’ location and tell the cops to round them up for that hit if they’d gone anywhere else. She wouldn’t do that to Michael.”

“I thought the same thing.”

“Your idea?”

Molly shrugged.

“Very good, grasshopper,” I said, smiling.

She smiled, but only with the corners of her eyes. “Thanks.”

I shook my head. Crap. It was easy to get distracted when talking about memories. The ghost thing must have been slowly congealing my brain. “Okay, chitchat’s over. Here’s the short version.”

I told her about the Big Hood hideout, the wards, and what the Corpsetaker was up to. As I spoke, Molly took a moment to open her Sight and take a quick glance at the wards. She shuddered and closed it again. “Are you sure we can’t just hammer through them?”

“If we studied the layout for a day or two, maybe,” I said. “We don’t have that kind of time.”

“What’s the plan, then?”

“Me and my army go in through the back door in the Nevernever,” I said. “Once I’m in, I’ll wreck those formulae and take down the wards. Team Murphy comes storming in like they do on TV. I need you to open the Way.”

Molly bit her lip and then nodded. “I can do that. Are you sure that when I do, the other side will be close enough?”

The Nevernever isn’t subject to normal geography. It attaches to the physical world by means of symbols and ideas. Open a Way in a happy place, and odds are you’ll get a happy place in the Nevernever. Open a Way in a bad place, and the spirit world near it will be the same flavor of bad. Sometimes Ways that opened only ten or twenty feet apart from each other go to radically different portions of the Nevernever. Molly was concerned that if a Way was opened anywhere but in the basement of the stronghold, it might lead to the spiritual version of Timbuktu, rather than where I wanted to go.

“There’s seriously bad juju infesting this whole area,” I said. “We’ll get as close as we can to the entrance. It should get me somewhere in the same neighborhood—and I’m pretty light on my feet these days.”

“Ha-ha,” Molly said, and thumped her cane gently on the ground. “I’m not. What if I can’t keep up?”

I pressed my lips together and tried to keep from wincing.

Her mouth tightened. “You don’t want me to go with you.”

“It isn’t about what I want,” I said. “They’ll need you on this side. If Murphy tries to go in before the wards are down, people are going to die. Horribly. You’re the only one who can tell when the wards fall. So you stay.”

Molly looked away again. She swallowed. Then she nodded. “Okay.”

I looked at her for a moment. She was clearly hurting in all kinds of ways. She was just as clearly in control of herself. She didn’t like the role I’d asked her to play, but she had accepted its necessity.

“You’re one hell of a woman, Molly,” I said. “Thank you.”

She flinched as if she’d just been shot. Her eyes widened as she jerked her head back to me, and her face went entirely bloodless. She stared at me for a moment. Her mouth started working

soundlessly. Her eyes overflowed with tears. It took her several seconds to let out a little choking sound.

Then she shuddered and turned away from me. She lifted her arm and wiped her eyes on her coat sleeve. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I said, trying to keep my voice gentle. "I know . . . I know things haven't been easy for you lately. Bound to bring on the waterworks once in a while."

"God," she said, both bitterness and amusement in her voice. "Harry. How can you be so completely clueless and still be you?" She took a deep breath, then straightened her back and squared her shoulders. "Okay. We're burning time."

"Yeah," I said.

She walked toward the door to the Big Hoods' hideout. She planted her feet firmly, withdrew the amethyst-tipped wand from her belt, and held it firmly in her right hand. I saw her gather her focus and do it rapidly. She was very nearly operating on the level of a full member of the White Council. After less than five seconds, she looked up, lifted the wand, drew it in a long, vertical line through the air and murmured, "*Rokotsu*."

For a second, nothing happened. Then the air seemed to split and fall open, as if reality had been nothing more than a curtain suddenly stirred by an outside breeze. The opening widened until it was the size of the front door of a home, and odd, aqua green light poured out from the other side.

Molly rolled her neck a little, as if the effort had pained her. It probably had. Opening a Way takes a serious energy investment, and Molly had never been a high-horsepower practitioner. She stepped back and said, "All yours, boss."

"Thanks, grasshopper," I said quietly. Then I turned to the spook squad and said, "All right, everybody. Let's go knock some heads together."

I turned and plunged through the Way into the Nevernever, and the deadliest spirit-predators of the concrete jungle came with me.

Chapter Forty-two

Before I died, I went to a lot of movies.

Movie theaters were totally useless for me, especially as more and more of them went with increasingly advanced technology for their sound and projection systems. The way I tended to foul up technology, especially electronics, just by standing around meant that it was tough to see a movie all the way through without something going horribly wrong with the sound, the picture, or both. Magic draws a lot of its power from emotion, and at the movies that meant that things would tend to go bad at the parts of the movie that were the most gripping and interesting.

So I could see a movie that sucked at a theater. Usually. But if I wanted to see a *good* movie, there was only one solution: a drive-in.

There are still a few of them up and running. I went down to the one in Aurora. There, I could be far enough from the projector not to interfere with it. The sound system of the movie consisted of hundreds of little car speakers and car radios, mostly turned up loud. Yeah, the place was full of kids who were basically at the drive-in in order to make out, wander around in giggling groups, sneak friends in for free in their trunks, and drink smuggled alcohol. That never bothered me. I could park up front, sit on the hood of my car with my back leaning against the windshield, my hands behind my head, and enjoy the whole movie all the way through.

(I usually took Bob along. He sat on the dashboard. I always thought I'd been doing him a favor, although when I thought back, it made me think he'd been doing it for the sake of shared experience. For company.)

Anyway, the point is, I've seen a lot of movies. So I know whereof I speak when I say that I went through the Way my apprentice opened and landed in the first act of a movie.

Cold water engulfed the lower half of my body, and a second later a wave slapped me in the middle of the back, nearly throwing me off my feet. After the past days of muted physical stimuli, I staggered and gasped against the sudden shock of pure sensation. Salt spray filled my mouth.

I should have expected that. This was the spirit world, where the immaterial wasn't. Gravity, heat, cold, light—they were all just as real as I was now. I was a civilian again. There wouldn't be any fun ghost tricks like vanishing out of the cold water.

I spat, regained my balance, and got my bearings. I was maybe ten yards away from a pebble beach. The light was grey and somehow oppressive. The beach rose a couple of feet from the water across maybe two or three hundred yards, then ran right up onto the feet of a granite cliff.

There were . . . things, littering the beach. Imagine a jack from the children's game. Now imagine it had babies with a porcupine the size of a dump truck. That was what lurked there: some kind of massive, lethargic-looking beasts, their bodies mostly dug into the ground. Each projected several enormous, bladelike spines seven or eight feet long in several directions from its hump of a body—along with hundreds of other spines about a quarter that size. They were scattered in a vaguely ordered pattern all across the beach between us and the cliffs, their sides heaving gently as they breathed.

My eyes tracked on the cliffs, to squat, ugly, blocky-looking structures at their summit. There were narrow slits carved in their fronts. In a couple of spots along the cliff face, the stone had collapsed into a very steep gradient. A particularly agile monkey might be able to make his way up to the top. All of those spots were covered in razor wire and surrounded by fortified positions that would make an ascension a particularly nerve-racking form of suicide.

A cool wind that smelled of rotten meat fluttered across the pebbles and sand, and it carried a bloodred banner mounted above the structures out to the side, displaying a black swastika within a white circle. I stared at it blankly for half a second while another wave hit me in the back and

threatened my balance. Then it struck me where I'd seen this before: the first act of *Saving Private Ryan*.

"Oh, crap," I breathed.

This was the Nevernever, the spirit world, and beings of powerful mind and will could reshape the world to their liking. Evil Bob had been the part of Bob the Skull, which had been in the service of this jerk named Kemmler, who had apparently been killed for good sometime during World War II. Evil Bob had been working with a theme when he designed defenses to his patron's base of operations.

There were flashes of light from the firing slits in the bunkers at the top of the cliffs. Bullets that shone faintly scarlet hammered into the beach at the water's edge and then tracked toward us. The *hiss-splat* of impact got to us a second before the chattering *thump* of the guns.

"Get behind me!" I shouted to the spook squad. I heard them splashing through the water in immediate obedience.

Right. As long as I was a spirit in the spirit world, I might as well take advantage of it. Since I didn't really have my old duster, even though I'd been wearing it ever since Carmichael pulled me up off the tracks, I didn't see any reason why I shouldn't have my shield bracelet, either. I focused on my left wrist without actually looking at it, exerted my will, and then shook my arm in the old, familiar gesture that would make sure the bracelet was clear of the sleeve of my duster. When I did, I felt its slight, familiar weight as it dropped down—a chain, its links made of several braided metals and festooned with dangling charms in the shape of medieval shields.

"Hah!" I muttered, and began to run my will into it to bring up a shield.

A heavy weight hit me and sent me to one side. I hit the cold water and went under.

Glowing red energy masquerading as bullets smashed through the water where I'd just been standing. I came up out of the water, sputtering, and saw one of the projectiles slam into a protector ghost who had been behind me. The round impacted as if upon a living body, apart from one detail: There was no blood. Instead, it tore away a section of the spirit's arm and sent a spray of clear ectoplasm splattering out of him. He barely reacted, pausing to glance at his arm as if puzzled.

The next round tore away the largest part of his head, and the spirit simply dissolved into more transparent ectoplasmic jelly that was swallowed by the sea.

Sir Stuart's shade helped me get back on my feet as a second stream of projectiles strafed through the spook squad, sending ghosts diving and scrambling for cover that was not there. Several more were hit, gaining savage, bloodless wounds. We lost another spirit, one of the Lecters.

"Behind me!" I shouted again, and channeled my will through the shield bracelet, spreading it out into a quarter dome of faint blue energy that came to life ahead of me. It attracted fire at once—and shed it, sending spalling projectiles hissing through the air as they rebounded.

I started forward, toward the beach, with Sir Stuart's shade behind me and slightly to one side the whole way, steadying me as the surf kept trying to knock me down. The spook squad began to close in on me, taking shelter behind the shield, and we pressed forward to the beach as fast as I could walk while still holding the shield.

It turned into hard work within a few seconds. Even in magic, there are some laws you don't get away from—like the conservation of energy. Those pseudobullets were hitting my shield with a certain amount of force. I had to expend a similar amount of energy to stop them. I was cheating by making my shield as rounded as possible, deflecting rather than directly opposing, but even so, it was taking one hell of a lot of my effort and will to keep the fire off us.

My shield wasn't a solution, really. I was working too hard to manage a simultaneous counterstrike. Sometime soon, within the hour, I wouldn't be able to keep holding it, and when it went, we were all going to be dead. Deader. I had to figure out a way to silence those guns.

"Sir Stuart!" I shouted. "Do any of the gang carry grenades?"

Sir Stuart's hand and arm came into view from behind me. He was holding, I kid you not, a little black iron bomb about the size of a baseball. There was a hole in it that had been plugged with a cork, and a fuse stuck out of it. The thing was straight out of a cartoon, except for its size.

I looked back over my shoulder, and saw that several of the doughboys had produced more modern-looking pineapple grenades of their own. A couple of shades dressed in uniforms of the Vietnam era had them, too.

"Neat," I said. "Okay, here's the plan. We head for the base of that bunker right there, and your boys blow it up. Then we get the one next to it. Then we blow the nests on that slope between the two bunkers and get the hell off this beach."

Sir Stuart eyed the ground ahead of me while fire rattled against my shield. He studied it intently for a moment, then nodded. He looked over his shoulder at the rest of the squad, his face devoid of expression. All of them simultaneously nodded back at him.

"That was not even a little creepy," I muttered. "Okay, stay behind the shield!" And I started pushing forward again, striding across the pebble beach toward the cliff.

That was when the shells came in.

There was a high-pitched whistle from overhead and then a flash of motion. I had an instant's impression of a skull plummeting at a steep angle and blazing with the same angry scarlet energy as the incoming rounds. It hammered into the beach about thirty yards ahead of us. It didn't make any noise when it exploded. Instead, there was a sudden and absolute silence, as if the skull was drawing in absolutely every motion around it, including that of sound moving through the air—and then there was a flash of light, and an instant later, a roar of wind and fire. My ears screamed with the pain of the shift in air pressure. Pebbles slammed into my shield, sending it to blazing blue brightness as the incoming energy began to overload what the shield could handle, the excess energy being shed as light. When the dust cleared, there was a crater in the ground, as deep as my grave and twenty feet across.

More screaming whistles came from overhead, and I felt a surge of raw panic trying to push the thoughts out of my brain. Hell's bells. If one of those skulls hit closer to us or behind us, where my shield couldn't cover, we were dead. Another near-miss might blow my shield down entirely, and then the machine guns would have us. There was only one place to go that might be safe from the screaming skulls.

"We've got to get closer," I growled. "Come on!"

And I broke into a flat-out sprint *toward* the machine guns.

Chapter Forty-three

Things were pretty much a desperate blur between the water's edge and the cliffs. There was a lot of running and gunfire and spraying dirt and pebbles. Several more shades were destroyed by screaming skull shrapnel. My shield took one hell of a beating, and as we got closer to the machine guns, the angles of fire from either side meant that the shield could protect fewer and fewer of the shades.

There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, no direction to go but forward. It was either that or die, and I was as terrified as I had ever been in my life. Honestly, I'm glad my memories aren't much clearer than they are.

There was a nasty bit in the middle, when I was running between two of the crouching spike beasts. I remember realizing that the things were so heavily armored in layers and layers of bony plate that they couldn't stand up. The fire from machine guns and screaming skulls alike seemed only a minor discomfort to them. I remember a pair of reptilian eyes flicking toward me, and then dozens of the shorter spikes shot out upon greasy, living tendrils and started whipping around like a high-pressure water hose with no one holding it. One of them wrapped around my arm, and only the spell-armored sleeve of my duster kept the bladed spike from opening my flesh to the bone. Sir Stuart's ax flashed, and the tendril, separated from the main beast, collapsed into ectoplasm.

I ordered the shades to use their blades, and dozens of swords, axes, combat knives, and bayonets appeared. We hacked our way through the spike beasts, and endured increasingly intense fire. We lost several more protector shades as we did—they were hauled into the open by tendrils and torn to pieces by machine-gun fire.

The mortar skulls stopped coming down near us about twenty yards out from the cliffs, and we finally reached the base of the first tower. The shades and I all crowded in close to its base, where the gunners couldn't shoot us without getting out and leaning over the top or something. I reversed my shield, so that its quarter dome covered us in every direction that the cliff face or the ground didn't, though the fire on us had lightened considerably.

"Grenades!" I ordered, in a firm and manly tone that did not sound at all like a panicked fourteen-year-old.

Sir Stuart held a pair of his black minibombs out to a Capone-era gangster, who produced a lighter and flicked it to life. Sir Stuart rose, the lit fuses trailing small sparks, took a couple of steps back from the tower, and flung the grenades swiftly upward, one at a time.

It was a little ticklish, taking the shield down in time to allow the grenades to pass by, then bringing it up again, the wizardly equivalent of interrupting a sneeze, but I pulled it off. Both of the little bombs made clinking noises as they bounced off the inner lip of the firing slits, and there were snarling sounds from above us for a second or two.

Then there was a loud *whump* of an explosion, and inhuman shrieks of what could only be pain. A second later, there was another *whump*, and clear fluid splattered out of the bunker's firing slit and pattered down onto my shield.

"Cha-ching!" I crowed.

Sir Stuart's shade shot me a fierce grin.

"Get ready to move to the next one!" I called. I scrambled down the cliff face to where stone gave way to sand and shale, and the steep slope swept up from the beach to whatever was above. We'd taken out the bunker on one side of the slope. We'd have to take out the one on the other side, or be riddled with fire from several directions as we made the ascent.

I brought my shield around and angled it as best I could as I stepped out into the open. Firing points at the top of the slope opened up instantly, intently, and my shield blazed into sight again as

more focused enemy power came down upon it from the positions atop the slope. I crossed the thirty-foot gap to the base of the next tower, keeping ferocious will on the shield, and the spook squad came with me.

On the way, I got a glimpse of the opposition. They wore the black-and-grey uniforms of the old Waffen-SS, but they weren't human. Their faces were stretched and distorted into the muzzle and jaws of a wolf, which looked damned peculiar without any fur covering it. Their eyes were black, empty holes—and I'm not being metaphorical when I say that. There were simply no eyes there. Just empty sockets. Machine-gun crews and riflemen—or maybe rifle*things*—alike poured fire into us, a panting, eager hunger to spill blood apparent on their monstrous faces.

I stopped at the other corner, holding the shield until all the spooks had made it across, then took cover myself, redirecting the shield, as I had the last time, to cover us all.

"Handsome fellows," Sir Stuart's shade noted cheerily. He looked less faded than he had only moments before. I had a feeling that Sir Stuart, in life, had been the sort of person who was invigorated by action—and that his shade was no different.

"We'll send them a nice written compliment later," I called back, and gestured up above us, at the second bunker. "Do it again."

Stuart nodded and turned to the gangster once more. And again he made two excellent throws, pitching a pair of little bombs up the steep angle and into the bunker. Again, enemy ectoplasm sprayed, and again the tower above us went silent.

"Now the fun part," I said. "We're going up the slope. My shield won't last very long—whoever is behind this is going to put everything he has into taking it down. So we close to grips with them as fast as we can."

Sir Stuart nodded and gestured to the nearest of the mad ghosts. "Give them the order."

I pursed my lips for a second and then nodded. "Hey, you guys," I said, pointing at the twins.

Two little sets of dead, empty eyes turned toward me, along with dozens more, and I felt that same cold chill at the touch of their awareness.

"We're about to go up that slope. The very instant my shield drops, I want you to close with the enemy as fast as you can and take them down. Don't hold back. Give it to them hard. Don't stop until they're all down. Clear?"

More soul-empty stares. None of them moved. None of them responded.

"Sure," I said. "You got it. If you didn't, you'd say something, right?"

No response.

"God, it's like Gallagher performing at the Harvard Faculty Club," I muttered. "Here we go, folks. One! Two! Three!"

And I went around the corner again, shield held in front of me. It coalesced into a blazing blue-and-silver dome almost instantly, taking so much energy that the kinetic force began to transfer through, pushing against me like a gale-force wind. I staggered drunkenly, unable to see through the shield and anticipate my next steps up the steep slope. The footing was treacherous. Shale and sand and loose stone twisted and turned beneath me. Even with the occasional supporting shove from Sir Stuart, my forward momentum began to falter and I slipped to one knee, my bracelet getting hotter and hotter around my wrist.

I managed to lunge awkwardly forward a couple of times—and then something hit my shield like a runaway train, and silver-and-blue energy shattered into a coruscation of sound and light. I was abruptly able to see up the slope, where the enemy was momentarily reeling from the explosive feedback of the failed shield.

And the Lecter Specters went to work.

As I stared up the slope, the only thing I could think was that this must be what it looked like in the interior of a tornado. The mad ghosts of Chicago rushed forward with such speed and power that their forms blurred into elongated streaks that jostled to be the first to reach their victims, corkscrewing up the cutting. They ignored ridiculous constraints such as gravity and the solidity

of matter, and as they rushed upon the enemy, they *changed*—and I gained fresh nightmare material.

I'm willing to share the least disturbing bits. The twins, for example, just leaned forward and seemed to *slither* sinuously through the air toward the foe. As they went, their bodies elongated, intertwined, and twisted into a single entity that looked like a demented artist's rendition of a battle between a giant squid and some kind of unnamed, deep-sea horror fish with too many spines and too many fins and great, googly-moogly eyes. They reached the nearest bad guy, bobbed up, and then slammed down with so much grace that I almost missed the fact that they'd smashed the wolfwaffen so hard into the ground that he was no thicker than my old checkbook. Tentacles shot out and ripped a rifle from the wolfwaffen next to the first, then plunged forward into its mouth and throat, in through its nostrils, in through its *ears*. A second later, they came whipping out again—along with slime-covered *chunks* of whatever they'd happened to be able to grab while they were in there. They pulled the creature's stomach out through its mouth, along with several feet of intestine—and then the tentacles whipped said loops of flesh around the wolfwaffen's neck and strangled it.

It got considerably less cheerful and humane from there.

Snarls, then screams, filled the steep little opening in the cliff wall. Ghosts, twisted into monstrous forms by decades of hollow, mindless hunger, fell upon the wolfwaffen in our way, uttering howls and squeals and clicks and screams, filling the air with a nightmare cacophony that left me slamming my palms up over my ears and biting down on a scream of pain.

The enemy fought at first, and those who did died swiftly. As more and more hideous *things* dealt with the wolfwaffen, their morale faltered and they began to run. Those that did died horribly. And, toward the end, overwhelmed by terror, a handful of the enemy could only stand, staring in horror, and screaming high and piteously.

Those last few died indescribably.

Ghosts don't get hungry, I reminded myself. *Dead men don't eat*. So there was no reason whatsoever that I should throw up. The thought was hilarious for some reason, so I started laughing. I couldn't help it. I laughed and laughed, even as I realized that I couldn't just sit there—not having turned loose an elemental force of horror like the Lecters.

"Come on!" I said, giggling. "Come on, before they get out of earshot." I staggered up and climbed the slope, Sir Stuart and the protector spirits following along behind me. It wasn't an easy climb. The Lecter Specters had left a lot of the wolfwaffen partly alive, or at least had left some of their *parts* alive, and blood and worse fluids were everywhere. The fortunate few, the fighters who had gone down fast, had become nothing but buckets of slimy ectoplasm.

Any way you looked at it, the climb was a messy, nauseating, dangerous one. But it was a whole heck of a lot less dangerous than if we'd been getting shot at the whole way.

I reached the top of the slope and looked across the long network of trenches that ran outside the bunkers, along the top of the cliff. There was intermittent gunfire. There were intermittent screams. As I watched, I saw a frantic, panicked wolfwaffen clamber out of the trench. It got about three-quarters of the way out before what looked like a slimy yellow tongue shot out of the trench, from below my line of sight, and plunged into its back—and out its chest. The impaling tongue then wrapped around the howling wolfwaffen and pulled it back into the trench with so much force that a puff of dust and dirt billowed out from wherever he impacted.

"Hell's bells," I giggled. "Hell's bells. That's hideous."

Sir Stuart nodded grimly. He made a gesture. Protector spirits began putting the nearby, hideously mangled wolfwaffen out of their misery.

I swatted myself firmly on the cheek and forced the laughter back. I felt myself trying to scream in horror once the laughter was damped down. The demonic servitors Evil Bob had put in position had probably been some very nasty customers. They had probably deserved a violent death.

But there are things you just don't do, things you just can't see, and still be both human and sane.

I forced the incipient screams away, too. It took me a minute or two to get it done. When I looked up, Sir Stuart was facing me, his eyes sad, concerned, and empathetic. He knew what I was feeling. He'd known it himself—which probably stood to reason, as the commander, more or less, of the criminal psych ward of Chicago's ghosts.

"My fault," I said. My voice sounded dull. My tongue felt like it had been coated in lead. "I told the Lecters not to stop until they were all down."

The big shade nodded gravely.

"Follow them," I said. "Make sure any of the enemy who is left is given a clean death. Then round them up and come back to me."

Sir Stuart nodded. He looked at the protector spirits. Then they all moved out at the same time, going both directions up and down the cliff.

I leaned on my staff and rested. Holding that shield had taken a lot out of me. So much so that when I looked down at my hand, I could, just barely, see the shape of the stony ground right through it.

I was fading.

I shuddered and clutched the staff hard. It made sense, really. I've always believed that magic came from inside you, from who and what you were—from your mind and from your heart. Now I was all mind and heart. The shield had to be fueled by something. I hadn't really stopped to consider where that energy would come from.

Now I knew.

I looked at my hand and the ground on the other side of it again. How much more would it take to make me disappear altogether? I had no way of knowing, no way of even making a good guess. What if I needed to use my magic again when I took up the hunt for my killer, after all of this was over? What if I blew it all here? What if I wound up like Sir Stuart—just an empty shade?

I leaned my head against the solid oak of the staff. It didn't matter. Murphy and company—not to mention Mort—needed my help. They would get it, even if it meant I became nothing but an old, faded memory.

(Or maybe became one more insane shade drifting through Chicago's night, causing havoc without reason, without regret, and without mercy.)

I shook my head a little and straightened my back. From the sounds of it, there couldn't be many bad guys left for the Lecters to deal with. These were certainly the Corpsetaker's defenses—an area of bad mojo like this would have a kind of gravity for anyone crossing over from the material world through any Way near the location to which it had been linked, sort of like a funnel spiderweb. That had been the point of building it this way: to make sure anyone who wanted in from the Nevernever side wound up on that beach.

I needed to find the Way this site was guarding, the back door to the Corpsetaker's hideout, the one I'd seen Evil Bob and the Fomor servitor use. I closed my eyes and shut away the recent horrors. I willed away my worry and my fear. I didn't have to breathe, but I did anyway, because that was the only way I'd ever learned to attain a state of clarity. In. Out. Slowly.

Then I carefully quested out with my senses, looking for the energy that would surround an open Way. I found it immediately, and opened my eyes. It was coming from straight ahead of me, away from the cliff and the beach, several hundred yards back up among some rolling, wooded hills. I could see the head of a footpath that led into the woods. There had been regular traffic on it, for it to be so evident, and I doubted that many hikers or Boy Scout troops had been tromping through. That was our next step.

An instant, violent instinct screamed at me without warning. I didn't question it. I flung myself to one side, rolling in the air to bring up my shield again.

A wrecking ball of pure psychic force hit the shield, and half of the little shield charms dangling from my bracelet screamed and then shattered into tiny shards. The blow flung me a

good twenty feet and I hit the ground rolling, until said ground vanished from underneath me. I dropped to the floor of one of the defensive trenches and lay there for a second, stunned at the sheer savagery of the assault.

I heard slow, heavy, confident footsteps. *Clomp. Clomp.* Then a pair of black jackboots appeared at the top of the trench. My gaze tracked up the SS officer's uniform, which included a black leather trench coat not too unlike my own. It wasn't one of the wolfwaffen. Instead of a deformed, monstrous wolf face, this being had only a bare skull sitting atop the uniform's high collar. Blue fire glowed in its eye sockets and it regarded me with cold disdain.

"A worthy effort for a novice," Evil Bob said. "I wish you to know that I regret your death as the loss of significant potential." He lifted what was probably not actually a Luger pistol and aimed it calmly at my head. "Good-bye, Dresden."

Chapter Forty-four

Stall, I thought desperately. Sir Stuart and company wouldn't be busy for long. *Stall*.

"It isn't in your best self-interest to do that," I said.

Evil Bob's eyelights flickered. The gun didn't waver. "That hypothesis assumes that I possess self-interest."

"If you didn't," I said, "you would have pulled the trigger already."

For a second, nothing happened. Then the skull tilted slightly to one side, and I got the impression that Evil Bob had become suddenly pensive.

I rushed to continue. "There's no percentage for your boss in hesitation. And since I know you aren't doing it for my sake, your hesitation must therefore be an act of self-interest."

"An intriguing argument," said Evil Bob, "and potentially valid, given the penchant for independence evident in my progenitor."

"By which you mean the original Bob?"

"Obviously," Evil Bob sniffed. "He from whose essence I came to be. Your instincts for such matters are acute, Dresden. You have given me something to consider in the future, when my attention is not otherwise occupied by mildly effective stalling tactics."

And he pulled the trigger—

—just as Sir Stuart's thrown ax whirled into Evil Bob's outstretched shooting arm.

It hit him only with the spinning wooden handle, but it was enough to save my life. A blast of psychic energy, of sheer, deadly *will*, hit the concrete wall of the trench about five feet to my left and turned it into a cloud of powder.

I raised my right hand and snarled, "*Forzare!*" and responded with a hammerblow of force of my own.

Evil Bob lifted the other black-leather-clad hand and brushed my strike aside, but it rocked him back a step.

Sir Stuart charged into sight, hitting Evil Bob hard at the hips, and tackled him forward and down into the trench. The pair of them hit hard, but the dark spirit was on the bottom, and Evil Bob's skull cracked as it hit the concrete. His high-crowned SS hat went flying.

I let out a short scream of rage and swung my staff at the skull. Evil Bob caught my descending staff in one hand and locked it in place as if his fingers had been a hydraulic vise. He got his other hand under Sir Stuart's chest and simply thrust his arm forward. Sir Stuart went flying out of the trench, and I heard him hit the ground again about a second and a half later.

"Ah," Evil Bob said. Cold blue eyelights regarded my staff. "A simple tool, but serviceable. In McCoy's style." The eyes flared brighter. "And the key to your rather effective little army, as well. Excellent."

I wrenched at the staff but couldn't get it away from the dark spirit. I felt sort of goofy about it, in addition to being extremely alarmed about how *strong* the thing was. I wrenched at the staff with all the power of my hips, legs, back, and shoulders, with the leverage of my wide-spaced grip, and only barely managed to make Evil Bob wobble. He just stood up, holding the end of the staff in his hand, and only after examining it again did he apparently notice me.

"I will make this offer exactly once, Dresden," Evil Bob said quite calmly. He put his other hand on the staff, mirroring me, and I suddenly realized that if he wanted to, he could fling me considerably farther than he had Sir Stuart—assuming he didn't just ram the staff straight back into my chest and out of my back.

I was suddenly unsure whether the spook squad could take Evil Bob even if they were all right there, Lecters, guardians, and all.

"What offer?" I asked him.

"A relationship," he replied. "With me."

Yeah. He actually said it like that.

"Um," I said, narrowing my eyes. "Maybe you could clarify what you mean by a *relationship*. Because I've got to tell you, Bob, I've, uh . . . I've been hurt."

The joke missed him completely. I was apparently snarking on the wrong frequency. "In the nature of an apprenticeship," he said. "You have sound fundamental skills. You are practical. Your ambition is tempered by an understanding of your limits. You have the potential to be an excellent partner."

"And I'm not flipping insane like the Corpsetaker," I said.

"Hardly. But your insanities are more manageable," Evil Bob said, "and you have few self-delusions." He sniffed. "The Master never favored that creature, in any case. But he would have been interested in you."

"Even if Kemmler was still around, I'm pretty sure a relationship with him wouldn't be in the cards, either," I said in an apologetic tone. "I've got a strict rule about dating older men."

The spirit looked at me blankly for a moment. Then, as the real Bob sometimes did, he gave me the impression of an expression that simple, immobile bone could not possibly have expressed. His eyes slowly widened.

"You . . ." he said slowly, "are mocking me."

I whistled through my teeth. "Guess the real Bob made you from the slow bits, huh?"

The blue lights flared brighter, and I felt heat on my face even from six feet away. "*I am* the real one," he said in a hard, distant tone. "The true creation of the Master. Finally shed of my weakness. My doubt. Freed to use my power."

"Guess he threw in a little of his narcissism, too," I drawled—but I met his gaze with my own and felt an odd little smile turn up the sides of my mouth.

The skull's jaws slowly parted like a snake preparing to strike. "You who are barely more than an apprentice—you will die for mocking me."

"Yeah. But I will never, *ever* throw in with you," I snarled back. "I will *never* be like you or your precious Master or that nutball Corpsetaker. So take your offer of a relationship and shove it up your schutzstaffel."

Evil Bob's eyelights blazed and he wrenched at the staff.

He really was a lackey. A real mastermind wannabe would have boned up on the Evil Overlord list. He'd felt so confident in his power (okay, maybe not without reason) that he'd spent a moment talking to me instead of just moving on. Worse, he'd given me a chance to start lipping off to him, and that comes so naturally to me that I don't really need to consciously consider it anymore, except on special occasions.

So, what with my brain being unoccupied and all, I'd had the opportunity to realize a fundamental truth about the Nevernever. Here the spiritual becomes the material. Here spiritual power is physical power. Strength of mind and will are as real as muscle and sinew.

And I was damned if some blurry photocopy of the thoughts and will of some dusty-ass, dead necromancer was going to take me out.

If he hadn't made with the stupid recruiting speech, if I hadn't had my choices laid out in such stark relief in front of me, if I hadn't been reminded of who I was and of those things for which I'd lived my life . . . maybe Evil Bob would have killed me then and there.

But he *had* reminded me. I *did* remember. I spent my lifetime fighting the darkness without becoming the darkness. Maybe I had faltered at the very end. Maybe I had finally come up against something that made me cross the line—but even then, I hadn't turned into a degenerate freakazoid of the Kemmler variety. One mistake at the end of my life couldn't erase all the times I had stood unmoved at the edge of the abyss and made snide remarks at its expense.

They could kill me, but they couldn't *have* me.

I was my own.

And when Evil Bob shoved the staff at my chest, I drew upon the surge of fierce joy that truth had inspired, upon the will that had been dinged and dented but never broken, and fell back with the motion, digging the tip of the staff into the concrete as if it had been soft mud, and used the momentum to *fling* Evil Bob over me.

His unbreakable grip didn't falter—and he arced overhead and then back down while I wrenched at the staff, helping his forward momentum instead of fighting it.

He hit the floor of the trench like a big fascist meteor. The noise was incredible. The impact shattered the concrete for twenty feet in every direction. Chips and shards went flying. Dust flew up in a miniature mushroom cloud. I was flung back by the shock wave of impact—with my staff still gripped firmly in my hands.

"Booya!" I drunkenly howled from the ground. I choked a little on the dust as I staggered back to my feet, my heart pounding, my whole body alive with strain and adrenaline. I stabbed a pointing finger toward the impact crater. "That's right! *Who* just rocked your *face*? Harry fucking Dresden! *That's* who!"

I coughed a little more and leaned against the side of the trench, panting until the world stopped feeling all spinny, grinning a wolf's grin as I did.

And then gravel made a soft rustling sound from inside the dust cloud. A form appeared, just an outline, limping slowly. It came a few feet closer, and I recognized Evil Bob by the rising glow of his eyelights. The skull became visible a second later, and though I could see that the entire surface was lined with a fine network of cracks and chips, it was not broken.

The blue eyelights began to glow brighter and brighter. The dark spirit clenched his fists and his arms slowly rose, as if he was pulling something from the very earth beneath his feet. The ground started shaking. There was an ugly, low humming sound, like some kind of demon locomotive screaming by in a tunnel beneath my feet.

"My turn," the dark spirit hissed.

"Hell's bells," I muttered. "Harry, you idiot, when will you learn not to victory gloat?"

The spirit's skull mouth dropped open wider and wider and—

—a sudden stream of candle-flame-colored energy coalesced into Bob the Skull's human form, right behind Evil Bob.

My Bob lunged forward and snaked his arms beneath the dark spirit's. Bob's fingers locked behind the fractured skull of my enemy, gathering the dark spirit into a full nelson. He wrenched Evil Bob violently to one side and the dark spirit screamed, a sudden torrent of energy ripping through the wall of the trench and about fifty yards of earth as he pivoted, vaporizing spirit matter into an enormous pie-slice-shaped acre of ectoplasm.

Then Evil Bob spun, letting out a shriek of fury, and slammed his attacker back into the opposite wall.

"Harry!" Bob shouted, his face pale and his eyes wide. There were chips of broken concrete in his hair. "Take the spooks and go help Butters!"

"No!" I shouted back. "Let's take him!"

Evil Bob took two bounding steps, the second one on the trench wall about five feet up from the ground, and whirled, falling back to the ground with my Bob on the bottom. More concrete shattered, and Bob the Skull did something I'd never heard him do before: He screamed in pain.

"You can't!" he shrieked, panicked. "I can't! Not with everything here!"

The dark spirit twisted like a snake and broke Bob's grip. Evil Bob nearly got out of it entirely, but my old lab assistant managed to get a lock on one arm, and the pair of them whirled and twisted on the ground, almost too quickly to be seen, pitting dozens of escapes and counterlocks against each other in only a few seconds.

"Go!" Bob shrieked, gut-wrenching, bone-deep terror in his voice. "Go, go, go! Once you're gone I'll shut the Way behind you and bail! Hurry!"

A shadow appeared at the top of the trench, and a weary, battered-looking Sir Stuart held out his hand to me.

“Dammit,” I snarled. “Don’t make me regret this, Bob!”

“Go!” Bob howled.

I took Sir Stuart’s hand, and the big man pulled me out of the trench with a grunt of effort. Up on top, I found the spooks waiting for me in their typical silence.

“Right,” I said. “Let’s go, double time.”

I gripped my staff tight, put my head down, and sprinted for the Way into the Corpsetaker’s stronghold.

Chapter Forty-five

The Way hung in the air in the middle of the trail, maybe fifty yards back into the forest, an oblong mirror of silver light. Its bottom edge was maybe six feet off the ground, and a wooden staircase had been built to allow access to it. Behind us, back over toward the beach, I could hear low drumbeats of impact, the crackling scream of shattering concrete. The two Bobs were going at it hammer and tongs, and I desperately hoped that my old friend was all right.

There was another worry, too. If Bob couldn't stop Evil Bob from coming through the Way after us, we'd be caught with the Corpsetaker in front of us and Evil Bob behind. I didn't imagine things would go very well for us if that happened.

A flutter in the energies around the Way danced across my senses, and I paused to focus more intently on the Way itself, going so far as to call up my Sight for a quick peek. A glance told me everything I needed to know: The Way was unstable. Rather than being the steady, solid, steel-and-concrete bridge between here and the mortal world that I had seen before, it was instead a bridge made of frayed and straining ropes that looked like it might fall apart the instant it was used.

"Bob, you tricky little bastard," I murmured admiringly. My former lab assistant had been lying his socks off earlier. Bob wasn't planning on closing the Way behind us—because he had already rigged it to collapse as soon as we went through. His verbal explanation to me had been meant for Evil Bob's ear holes. If Evil Bob thought we were dependent on Bob to shut the door behind us, then he would have no reason to hurry after us. And if Bob had told me the real deal out loud, Evil Bob could have simply rushed to the Way ahead of us and collapsed it himself, leaving us totally shut out.

Bob was really playing with fire. If he'd taken time to sabotage the Way before he came to back me up, it meant that he had left me to face the wolfwaffen and their boss and gambled that I'd be able to hold my own until he circled back to me. On this side of things, his ploy to keep Evil Bob's attention meant that Evil Bob was free to focus entirely on tearing him apart, confident that he could always come charging at our backs as soon as he finished off my Bob.

More concrete shattered, somewhere back toward the beach. Bits of small debris, most of it no larger than my fist, came raining down among the trees a moment later.

"Okay, kids. Gather round and listen up." I shook my head and addressed the huddled shades. "When we go through," I said, "we'll be right in the middle of them. Sir Stuart, I want you and your men to rush any lemurs or wraiths that are near us. Don't hesitate; just hit them and get them out of my way." I eyed the Lecter Specters. "The rest of you follow me. We're going to destroy the physical representations for the wards."

The little girl ghost looked up at me and scowled, as if I'd just told her she had to eat a hated vegetable.

"How can you have any pudding if you don't eat your meat?" I told her seriously. "We're going to destroy the wards. Once that is done, you guys can join the rest of the shades in taking down the Corpsetaker and her crew. Okay? Everyone got it?"

Silent stares.

"Okay, good. I guess." I turned to the Way and took a deep breath. "This worked out reasonably well last time, right? Right. So here we go." I hesitated. Then I said, "Hang on one second. There's one more thing I want everyone to do . . ."

I went through the Way and felt it falling apart under the pressure of our collective spiritual weight. It was an odd sensation, falling against the back of my neck like ice-cold cobwebs. I

didn't let my fear push me into hurrying. I kept my steps steady until I walked onto the floor of the underground chamber where I'd seen Morty and the Corpsetaker the night before.

I had time for a quick-flash impression. The pit had been filled with wraiths once more, swirling around in a humanoid stew. Mort hung above the pit again, in considerably worse repair than the last time I'd seen him. His shirt was gone. His torso and arms were covered in welts and bruises. He had spots of raw skin that had been burned, maybe with electricity, if the jumper cables and car battery sitting on the ground nearby were any indication. Several of them were on his bald scalp. Someone among the Big Hood lunatics was familiar with the concept of electroshock therapy? That one sure was a stretch.

The Corpsetaker stood in the air above the pit, hissing words into Morty's ear. Mort's head was moving back and forth in a feeble negative. He was weeping, his body twitching and jerking in obvious agony. His lips were puffy and swollen, probably the result of getting hit in the mouth repeatedly. I don't think he could focus his eyes—but he kept doggedly shaking his head.

Again, the hooded lemurs were gathered around, but instead of playing cards, this time they all stood in an outward-facing circle around the pit, as if guarding against an attack.

Pity for them that the back door from the Nevernever was *inside* the circle. When the spook squad and I came through, they all had their backs to us.

Now, I'm not arrogant enough to think that I was the first guy to lead a company of ghosts into an assault. Granted, I don't think it happens every day or anything, but it's a big world and it's been spinning for a long time. I'm sure someone did it long before I was born, maybe pitting the ancestral spirits of one tribe against those of another.

I'm not the first person to assault an enemy fortress from the Nevernever side, either. It happened several times to either side in the war with the Red Court. It's a fairly standard tactical maneuver. It requires a certain amount of intestinal fortitude to pull off, as Evil Bob had demonstrated with his Normandy defenses.

But I am dead certain—*ba-dump-bump-ching*—that I'm the first guy to lead an army of spirits in an assault from the spirit-world side . . . and had them start off by screaming, "BOO!"

The spooks all stood in the same space I did, which felt weird as hell—but I hadn't wanted to take a chance with the rickety Way collapsing and leaving some of the squad behind. When I shouted, they all did, too—and I got a whole hell of a lot more than I bargained for.

The sound that came out of all those spirit throats, including mine, seemed to feed upon itself, wavelengths building and building like seas before a rising storm. Our voices weren't additive, bunched so closely like that, but multiplicative. When we shouted, the sound went out in a wave that was almost tangible. It hit the backs of the gathered lemurs and bumped them forward half a step. It slammed into the walls of the underground chamber and brought dust and mold cascading down.

And Mort's eyes snapped open in sudden, startled shock.

"Get 'em!" I howled.

The dead protectors of Chicago's resident ectomancer let out a bloodcurdling chorus of battle cries and blurred toward the foe.

You hear a lot of stories of honor and chivalry from soldiers. Most people assume that such tales apply primarily to men who lived centuries ago. But let me tell you something: People are people, no matter which century they live in. Soldiers tend to be very practical and they don't want to die. I think you'd find military men in any century you cared to name who would be perfectly okay with the notion of shooting the enemy in the back if it meant they were more likely to go home in one piece. Sir Stuart's guardians were, for the most part, soldiers.

Spectral guns blazed. Immaterial knives, hatchets, and arrows flew. Ectoplasm splashed in buckets.

Half the lemurs got torn to shreds of flickering newsreel imagery before I was finished shouting the command to attack, much less before they could recover from the stunning force of our combined voices.

The Corpsetaker shrieked something in a voice that scraped across my head like the tines of a rusty rake, and I twisted aside on instinct. One of the Lecters took the hit, and a gaping hole the size of a bowling ball appeared in the center of his chest.

“With me!” I shouted. I vanished and reappeared at the bottom of the staircase that led down to the chamber. A streamer of urine yellow lightning erupted from the Corpsetaker’s outstretched hand, but I’d had my shield bracelet at the ready, and I deflected the strike into a small knot of stunned enemy lemurs. When it hit them, there was a hideous, explosive cascade of fire and havoc, and they were torn to shreds as if they’d been made of cheesecloth.

Holy crap.

Either one of those spells would have done the same to me if I’d been a quarter second slower. Dead or alive, Kemmler’s disciples did *not* play for funsies.

The Lecter Specters appeared in a cloud around me, even as I sent a slug of pure force out of the end of my staff, forcing the Corpsetaker to employ her own magical counter, her wrists crossed in front of her body. The energy of my strike splashed off an unseen surface a few inches in front of her hands, and gobbets of pale green light splattered out from the impact.

“Dresden!” screamed Mort. He stared at me—or, more accurately, at the Lecters all around me—with an expression of something very like terror. “What have you done? What have you *done*?”

“Come on!” I shouted, and vanished from the bottom of the stairs to the top, just as the Corpsetaker appeared halfway up the stairway and sent another torrent of ruinous energy down toward the position the Lecters and I had just vacated.

At the top of the stairs, the tunnel was like I remembered it—decorated in miniature shrines with very real sigils of power concealed within splatters of gibberish. Candles glowed at each position—ward flames that accompanied the activation of the mystic defenses.

“The shrines!” I shouted to the Lecters. “Manifest and destroy them!”

I brought my shield up again, an instant before Corpsetaker sent a slew of dark, gelatinous energy up the stairs. I caught the spell in time, but it instantly began wrenching at my shield as if it had been some kind of living being, chewing away at it, devouring the energy I was using to hold the shield firm.

Crap. I was not going to fare well in a magical duel with someone who had clearly been doing this kind of thing for a long, long time—not when I had the Lecters to protect. The Corpsetaker would tear them apart if she could to stop us from bringing the wards down. She—I always thought of her as a she, for some reason, even though she could grab any kind of body she wanted, male, female, or otherwise—was far more experienced than I was, with what was probably a much broader range of nasty memories upon which to draw.

On top of that, I was already winded, so to speak. The fight with Evil Bob had been a job of work. If I stood there trading punches, she had an excellent chance of wearing me down enough to kill me. If all I did was keep shielding the Lecters, she’d be free to throw her hardest punches, and I felt certain that anyone from Kemmler’s crew could hit like a truck.

Time to get creative.

I dropped the shield and simultaneously thrust my staff at the black jelly stuff, snarling, “*Forzare!*” Pure force tore the dark energy to shreds and continued on down the stairs to strike the Corpsetaker. My aim was bad. The strike only spun her in place and sent her sprawling back into open air.

I took a quick look back at the Lecters and immediately wished I hadn’t. The flames of the candles in the hall had burned down to pinpoints of cold blue light. Once again, the ghosts had assumed forms from nightmares—and they were going totally ballistic on the Big Hoods’ hideout. Something that looked like a blending of a gorilla and a Venus flytrap smashed apart a wooden crate supporting one shrine. A giant caterpillar, its segmented body made of severed human heads, their faces screaming, their tongues functioning as legs, rippled up a wall and began tearing out chunks of concrete where a ledge had been worn, destroying another shrine.

Right. It was working. I just had to keep the Corpsetaker busy until the wild rumpus got finished tearing apart the defenses.

I called up my Sight and vanished to a point twenty feet below the Corpsetaker's position, reappearing inside solid stone. My eyes couldn't see a thing, but my Sight wasn't impaired. I could see dark, violent energy swirling around where I'd last seen the Corpsetaker; nasty stuff. I felt my lips stretch into a snarl as I hefted my staff again and growled, "*Fuego!*"

Ghost fire roared up through solid matter. In an instant, the dark energy had gathered to oppose my spell, but I sensed more than heard a cry of surprise and pain. The psycho hadn't expected that one.

Then the dark energy vanished.

I scanned around me wildly and found it reappearing behind and above me. I vanished again, flicking out another strike at the Corpsetaker's location—only to find that the Corpsetaker had blinked to a new one.

The next sixty seconds or so was a nauseating blur of motion and countermotion. We exchanged spells in solid stone, parried each other hovering in open air above the wraith pit, and leapfrogged each other's positions throughout the sleeping quarters of the Big Hoods. It was all but impossible to aim, since it required us to correctly guess the next position of the opponent and then hit it with a spell, but I clipped her once more, and she landed a strike of pure kinetic force that slammed into my hip and missed my ghostly genitals by about an inch.

Twice she darted into the hallway to attack the Lecters, but I stayed on her, forcing her to keep moving, keep defending, allowing her only time enough to throw quick jabs of power back at me.

I wasn't her match in a straight-up fight, but this was more like some kind of hallucinatory variant of Whac-a-Mole. Maybe I couldn't take her out, but I could damned well keep her from stopping the Lecters. If she turned her attention from me, I was wizard enough to take her out, and she knew it. If she went all-out on me, I could stand up to her long enough to let the Lecters finish their project—and she knew that, too.

I could feel her rage building, lending her next near-miss a hammering edge that jolted my teeth right through my shield—and I laughed at her in reply, making no effort whatsoever to hide my scorn.

I shrugged off another jab, letting it roll off my shield. And then Corpsetaker vanished and reappeared at the far end of the hallway, at the door to the old electrical-junction room. The very last of the ward flames burned there, at one final, unspoiled shrine. The Corpsetaker faced the Lecters, who were already moving toward her, lifted her hand, and spoke a single word filled with ringing power: "Stop."

And the Lecters did. Completely. I mean, like, statue-still.

"Screw that!" I called out and raised my staff, drawing upon my own will. "Go!"

There was a sudden strain in the air between the Corpsetaker and me, and I felt it as a physical pressure against my right hand, in which I brandished my staff. Corpsetaker's upraised palm wavered slightly as our wills contended down the length of the hallway. I pushed hard, grinding my teeth and simply *willing* the Lecters to finish the job. I leaned forward a little and shoved out my staff, envisioning the Lecters tearing down the last of the little shrines.

My will lashed down the hallway and blew the hood back from the Corpsetaker's face. Maybe she was wearing the form of one of her victims. Maybe I was getting a look at the real Corpsetaker. Either way, she wasn't a pretty woman. She had a face shaped like a hatchet, only less gentle and friendly. Both cheeks were marked with what looked like ritual scars in the shape of spirals. Her hair was long and white, but grew in irregular blotches on her scalp, as if portions of it had been burned and scarred. Her skin was tanned leather, covered in fine seams and wrinkles, and there was a lizardlike quality to the way it loosened around her neck.

But her eyes were gorgeous. She had eyes a shade of vibrant jade like I had never seen this side of the Sidhe, and her eyelashes were long, thick, and dark as soot. As a young woman, she must have been a lean stunner, dangerously pretty, like a James Bond villainess.

Our eyes met and I braced myself for the soulgaze—but it didn't happen. Hell's bells, I had my Sight wide-open, enough to let me see the flow of energy straining between our outstretched hands, and it still didn't happen. Guess the rules change when you're all soul and nothing else.

The Corpsetaker watched me for a moment, apparently not particularly straining to hold my will away. "Again you meddle in what is not your concern."

"Bad habit," I said. "But then, it's pretty much what wizards do."

"This will not end well for you, boy," she replied. "Leave now."

"Heh, that's funny," I said. I was straining. I tried to keep it out of my voice. "For a second there, it sounded like you were telling me to go away. I mean, as if I would just go away."

She blinked twice at me. Then, in a tone of dawning comprehension, she murmured, "You are not brilliant. You are *ignorant*."

"Now you done it. Them's fightin' words," I drawled.

The Corpsetaker tilted her head back and let out an eerie little screech. I think that, to her, it was laughter.

Then she turned, swiped a hand at the last shrine, and demolished it herself.

The wards came down all around us, energy fading, dispersing, settling abruptly back down to earth. I could see the massive currents of power begin to unravel and disperse back out into the world. Within seconds, the protective wards were gone, as if they'd never existed.

The Corpsetaker made that shrieking sound again and vanished, and in the sudden absence of her will I almost fell flat on my face. I caught myself by remembering that I could now officially scoff at gravity, stopped falling halfway to the floor, and righted myself again.

The wards were down. Murphy and company would be crashing the party at any moment.

And . . . for some reason, the Corpsetaker now *wanted* them to do it.

Right.

That couldn't be good.

Chapter Forty-six

I let go of my Sight and went up the final flight of stairs, the ones that led from the junction room up to the street entrance—and found them stacked with Big Hoods. I blinked for a fraction of a second when I saw them. I'd practically forgotten the real-world thugs under the Corpsetaker's control. All the power we'd been throwing around in the duel had been ghostly stuff. The Big Hoods had no practical way to be aware of it.

How odd must the past couple of minutes have been from their point of view? They'd have felt the wave of cold, seen candles burning suddenly low, and then heard lots of boards and candles and paints being smashed and clawed down, while the concrete and stone walls were raked by invisible talons and the candles were smacked up and down the halls and stairways.

There were at least a dozen of them on the stairs, and they had guns, and there wasn't a whole lot I could do about it. For a second, I entertained notions of setting the Lecters on them, but I rejected the idea in a spasm of nausea. I'd seen what the killer spooks had done to the wolfwaffen. If I turned them loose, they'd deal with the Big Hoods the same way—and the Big Hoods, at the end of the day, were as much the Corpsetaker's victims as her physical muscle—and once you turned loose a force that elemental, you almost had to expect collateral damage. I didn't want any of it to splash onto Murphy and company.

"Okay," I told the Lecters. "Go back downstairs and help Sir Stuart and his boys out against those lemurs. After that, defend Mort." The Lecters' only response was to vanish, presumably to the main chamber. Good. Mort had still been conscious the last time I'd seen him. He could tell them what to do if they needed any further direction.

Meanwhile, I'd do the only thing I could to take on the Big Hoods. I'd play superscout for Karrin's team.

I vanished to outside the door to the stronghold and found several forms crouched there. Evening traffic was rumbling by on the bridge overhead, though the street running below it was deserted, and the space beneath the bridge was entirely shadowed. I ignored the darkness and saw Murphy next to the door, rummaging in a black nylon backpack. She was wearing her tactical outfit—black clothing and boots, and one of Charity Carpenter's vests made of Kevlar and titanium. Over that was a tactical harness, and she had two handguns and her teeny assault rifle, a little Belgian gun called a P-90. It packed one hell of a punch for such a compact package—much like Murphy herself.

Next to her, against the wall, were three great, gaunt wolves—Will, Andi, and Marci, from the color of their fur. Next came Molly, in her rags and armor, sitting calmly against the wall with her legs crossed. Butters brought up the rear, dressed in dark colors, carrying his gym bag, and looking extremely nervous.

I went over to him and said, "Boo."

The word emerged from the little radio in his pocket, and Butters jumped and said, "Meep."

"Meep?" I said. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Butters muttered. "Keep your voice down. We're sneaking up on someone here."

"They already know you're here," I said. "There are about a dozen gunmen on the other side of that door."

"Quiet!" Murphy hissed. "Dammit, Butters!"

Butters held up the radio. "Dresden says they're right on the other side of the door."

"Now he shows up," Murphy muttered. "Not when we're planning the entry. Give me the radio."

Butters leaned across Molly and tossed the radio underhand. Molly just sat, smiling quietly. Murphy caught the radio. "So, what can you tell us—?" She hesitated, grimaced, and said, "I keep wanting to add the word *over* to the end of sentences. But this isn't exactly radio protocol, is it?"

"Not really," I said. "But we can do whatever makes you happy. Over."

"No one likes a wiseass, Harry," Murphy said.

"I always enjoy seeing you in gunmetal, Ms. Murphy," I continued. "It brings out the blue in your eyes. Really makes them pop. Over."

The wolves were all wagging their tails.

"Don't make me bitch-slap you, Dresden," Murphy growled. But her blue eyes were twinkling. "Tell me what you know."

I gave her the brief on the interior of the hideout and what was waiting there.

"So you didn't get this necromancer bitch," she said.

"That's one hell of a negative way to put it," I replied, grinning. "Who's a grumpy pants tonight? Over."

Murphy rolled her eyes at Butters and said, in exactly the same tone, "So you didn't get this necromancer bitch."

"Not yet," I said. "Pretty sure her ghost troops are done for, but I need to get back downstairs and see. Just wanted to give you the rundown. You remember how to get to the basement?"

"Down the stairs, through the hole in the wall, fifty feet down a hall that turns left, down more stairs."

"Yeah, you got it," I said.

"Uh," Butters said. "Point of order? There's a locked door and a bunch of guys with guns between here and there."

Molly stood up. "They won't have guns," she said calmly.

Butters frowned. "Uh. Dresden just said . . ."

"I heard him," Molly replied. "They're going to empty their weapons at you the moment they see you in the doorway."

"Okay. As plans go, I can't be the only one who has a problem with that," Butters said.

"Illusion?" I asked Molly.

She nodded.

Murphy frowned. "I don't get it. Why that? Why not push them back with fire or make them all go to sleep or something?"

"Because this is the bad guys' home," I said. "They have a threshold."

Molly nodded. "Any spell that goes through gets degraded down to nothing. I can't push anything past the door. If I go in without being invited, I won't have any magic to speak of. Without an invitation, Harry can't cross the threshold at all."

Murphy nodded. "So you're going to give them a target at the door. Makes sense." She frowned. "How were you going to get back in, Harry?"

I stood there for a second with my mouth open.

"Well, crap," I muttered. "Over."

Murphy snorted. "God, it really is you, isn't it." She turned back to her bag and took out a small black plastic hemisphere of what had to be explosives of some kind. She pressed it onto the door's surface right next to its lock. "No problem. I'll invite you in once the door's down."

"Doesn't work like that," I said. "Got to be an invitation from someone who lives there."

Murphy scowled. "Nothing's ever simple with you, Dresden."

"Me? Since when have you been Polly Plastique?"

"Kincaid showed me how," Murphy said without any emphasis. "And you know me, Dresden. I've always been a practical girl." She pressed a little device with a couple of tines on it through a pair of matching holes in the bowl, turned a dial, and said, "Get clear. Setting for ten seconds. Whatever you're going to do, Molly, have it ready."

My apprentice nodded, and everyone but me and Murphy backed down the wall from the door.

I waited until they were done moving away before I said, “Murph, these gangers . . . They’re victims, too.”

She took a breath. Then she said, “Are they standing right by the door?”

“No. Five or six steps down.”

She nodded. “Then they won’t be in the direct line of the blast. This is a fairly small, shaped charge. With a little luck, no one will get hurt.”

“Luck,” I said.

She closed her eyes for a second. Then she said, “You can’t save everyone, Dresden. Right now, I’m concerned with the man these victims are torturing and holding prisoner. They’re still people. But they come right after him and everyone here on my worry list.”

I felt a little guilty for making an insinuation about Murphy’s priorities. Maybe it was too easy for me to talk. I was the one the Big Hoods couldn’t hurt, after all. I wasn’t sure how to say something like that, though, so I just sort of grunted and mumbled.

“It’s okay,” Murphy said very quietly. “I get it. Your perspective has changed.”

I stared down at her for a moment. Then I said, “Not about some things.”

“Relationship ambivalence from beyond the grave,” she said, her mouth turning up at the corners. “Perfect.”

“Karrin,” I began.

“Don’t,” she said, cutting me off. “Just . . . don’t. It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“Of course it matters.”

“No,” she said. “You are not Patrick Swayze. I am not Demi Moore.” She touched a switch on the little box and it started ticking. “And this sure as hell isn’t pottery class.” She moved a couple of yards down the wall, pressed her hands up over her ears, and opened her mouth. Molly, Butters, and the wolves all did more or less the same thing. It looked . . . Well, they’d have been insulted if I said anything, but it looked darned cute on the wolves, them all crouched down with their chins on the ground, folding their ears forward with their paws. I’m sure any real wolf would have been shocked at the indignity.

I stayed where I was standing, right in front of the door. I mean, what the hell, right? When was I going to get a chance to see an explosion from this angle again?

I was a little disappointed. There was just a huge *bang*, a flash of light, and then a cloud of dust, which was pretty much descriptive of most of the explosions I’d seen. Though I was glad no one had actually been watching me. I flinched and hopped back about a foot when it went off.

When the dust cleared enough to see through, the door swung freely on its hinges. Murphy stuck her foot around the corner and kicked it all the way open, then gestured to Molly.

Molly murmured and closed her eyes, then lifted her hand. Abruptly, there were two Murphys crouched by the door. The one nearest it was chewing gum. Noisily. She stood up with her P-90, flicked on the little flashlight under the barrel, and stepped around the corner, the gun pointing down the stairs.

Gunfire erupted. The gum-chewing Murphy dropped to one knee and started shooting, the assault rifle chattering in two- and three-round bursts. It was noisy as hell for about five seconds, and then there was silence. Gum-chewing Murphy withdrew back around the corner. Once she was out of sight of whoever was inside, she vanished.

The real Murphy stood up then and pitched an object down the stairs. A moment later, there was an eye-searing flash of light and thunder.

“Go, go, go!” Murphy called, and swung to point her gun down the stairs with just a portion of her upper body and face exposed to possible fire, while the rest of her body was hidden behind the wall. The three wolves rose and plunged through the dusty doorway in a single blur of motion.

Wolves in general get underestimated in the modern world—after all, humans have guns. And helicopters. But back in the day, when things were more muscle powered, wolves were a real threat to humans, possibly the number-two predator on the planet. People don’t remember that wolves are far stronger, far faster, and far more dangerous than human beings. That humanity

taught wolves to fear and avoid them—and that without that fear and advanced weaponry, a human being was nothing more than a possible threat and a potential meal. A wolf with no fear could tear several human beings apart. A wolf with no fear and an intelligent mind directing it to work in close concert with teammates was a force of freaking nature, more or less literally.

The point being that three wolves against a dozen Big Hoods, in those tiny confines, was not a fair fight—it wasn't even close.

People started screaming, and Murphy moved in, dropping her assault rifle to let it hang from her harness, and holding a little personal stunner in her hand.

I watched from the doorway, unable to proceed farther. Will, Marci, and Andi plowed into the first guy, half a dozen steps down, in a single bound. I don't care how big and strong you are; getting hit by a stun grenade and about five hundred pounds of wolf in the wake of a closequarters explosion is going to make you want to call it a day. He went down, taking the next several Big Hoods with him. There was a huge tangle of frantic bodies and flashing teeth. The wolves had the advantage. Hands holding weapons got targeted first, and blood-spattered guns tumbled down the stairs.

One of the Big Hoods produced a knife about the size of a cafeteria tray and drew back to hack awkwardly at Will's back with it. Murphy stomped the weapon down flat against the stairs and jabbed the arm holding it with a stunner. A cry of pain rose sharply, and the weapon fell.

Then it was about momentum and snarling wolves. The Big Hoods were driven down the stairs, stunned, bruised, and bleeding. Once at the bottom, the wolves started attacking with even more savage growls—herding the Big Hoods like so many dazed and overmuscled sheep. They drove the guards down the length of the electrical-junction room and out of my direct line of sight. I had to imagine them all piled up in a corner. I heard growls rolling up out of the wolves' throats in a low, continual thunder.

Murphy went down the rest of the stairs, hands on her gun again, but not actually pointing it at anyone. "You," she said, nodding toward the presumed position of the Big Hoods. "Knife Boy. What's your name?"

"I . . ." stammered a voice. "I can't . . . I don't . . ."

"Murph," I called. "Corpsetaker's been messing with these guys' heads for a while now, ever since that thing with Sue. They are not operating at one hundred percent."

Murphy glanced at the radio in her pocket and then back at whoever she was talking to. Her expression had changed, from potential executioner to something more like a schoolteacher you don't want to cross. Murphy had been damaged in the same way before. "That's a wallet in your pocket, son?"

"Yes, ma'am," mumbled the voice.

She nodded. "Take it out with just two fingers. Toss it over here to me. Nice and easy."

"I don't want you to hurt me," said the voice.

Murphy tilted her head and I saw pain in her eyes. She lowered the gun and her voice became gentler yet. "Just toss me the wallet. I'm going to set things right."

"Yes, ma'am," mumbled the voice again. A ratty old nylon wallet hit the floor near Murphy's feet.

Murphy picked it up, never taking her eyes off the group. I saw her go through the wallet.

"I like dogs," ventured the voice. There was a disconnected tone to it.

"They won't hurt you if you stay there," Murphy said. "Joshua? Is that your name?"

"I . . . Yes, ma'am. It was. I mean, it is. Josh."

"Josh. Age nineteen," Murphy said. A flicker of anger entered her blue eyes. "Jesus, these game-playing bastards."

"Bitch, technically," I said.

Murphy snorted. "Come here, Josh."

Molly approached the top of the stairway and stood next to me, where she usually did, a little behind me and to my left. She must have gotten a look at my position through her little tuning

fork.

A Big Hood appeared in front of Murphy. He was about five hundred times bigger than she was. He had hands like shovels. One of his hands was bleeding.

"Take the hood off, please," Murphy said.

He hastened to do so. He was an ugly, blunt-featured kid. His hair was longish and matted. It had been months since it was cut, combed, or washed. He didn't have enough beard to notice from the top of the staircase, and he didn't look too bright. He blinked his eyes several times in the light coming from Murphy's flashlight.

"Hello, Josh," Murphy said, keeping her tone level and calm. "My name is Karrin."

"'Lo, Karrin," Josh said.

"Let me see your hand," she said firmly.

"Establish the pattern," Molly murmured under her breath. "Good."

Josh hesitated a moment and then held out his hand. Murphy examined it. "Doesn't look too deep. It's already beginning to stop bleeding."

"Had worse, ma'am," Josh mumbled.

She nodded again. "Do you know why you were on those stairs?"

"Bad people," Josh said. "Bad people who were going to hurt us." He frowned. "You?"

"I could hurt you right now, but I'm not going to. Am I?" Murphy said.

"No."

"That's right," she said. "I know this is hard, Josh, but I'm probably your friend."

He frowned. "I don't know you. You're a stranger."

"I'm going to help you," she said. "Help all of you, if you'll let me. Get you some food and some clean clothes."

Josh shrugged a shoulder. "'Kay. I'm hungry."

Murphy looked away from him, and I saw her control another expression of anger. "I'm looking for a little bald man. I know he's here."

Josh looked uncomfortable.

"Is he here? Downstairs?"

"You know he is," I muttered.

It hadn't carried to the radio, but Murphy glanced with an arched eyebrow up the stairway, then turned back to the kid.

Josh looked back and forth and shifted his weight.

"Tell me the truth, Josh," Murphy said. "It's all right."

"Downstairs," Josh said. "With Boz."

"Boz?" Murphy asked.

"Boz is big," Josh said.

Murphy eyed the kid up and down and squared her shoulders. "Um, right. Okay, Josh. There's one more thing I want you to do for me, and then you can go sit down with your friends."

"'Kay."

"My friends are up at the top of the stairs. I want you to ask them in."

Josh furrowed his brow. "Huh?"

"Invite them inside, please."

"Oh no," he said, shaking his head. "No one in the secret hideout. Orders."

"It's all right," Murphy said. "I'm giving you new orders. Invite them in, please."

Josh seemed to waver. "Umm."

Murphy's hand dipped into her pocket and he seemed to flinch. Then it emerged holding one of those high-activity protein bars wrapped in Mylar. "You can have this, if you do."

The way to a dim minion's heart was evidently through his stomach. Josh snapped up the bar with both hands and said, up toward the top of the stairs, "Won't you please come inside?"

I took a tentative step forward and felt no resistance. The threshold had parted. Molly did the same and hurried down the stairs.

"Will, Andi, Marci," Molly said in a calm voice. "Back a couple of steps, please."

The wolves glanced at Murphy and then started backing up.

"What are you doing?" Murphy asked.

"I'm making sure we don't need to hurt them, Ms. Murphy," Molly said. "Trust me."

"Grasshopper?" I asked.

"It's legal," she said, rolling her eyes. "Don't worry. And we can't just stand around. What's the response time to this block?"

"Eight minutes," Murphy said calmly. "Ish."

"It's been about four since the charge went off," Molly said. "Ticktock."

Murphy grimaced. "Do it."

Molly turned to Josh and said, "Go stand with your friends. You guys look tired."

Josh had a mouthful of whatever it was. He nodded. "Always tired." And he shuffled over to the dazed-looking group in the corner.

"A lot of cults do that," Molly said quietly. "It makes them easier to influence and control." She closed her eyes for a moment, then took a slow, deep breath and opened them. She lifted her right hand and murmured, in a silken-soft tone, "*Neru*."

And the dozen or so Big Hoods just sank down to the floor.

"Mother of God," Murphy said softly, and turned to stare at Molly.

"Sleep spell," I said quietly. "Like the one I had to use on you, Murph."

I didn't mention that the spell I'd used on Murphy had taken every bit of skill I'd had and ten times as long to put together. Molly had just done the same thing, only a dozen times bigger—touching each individual mind and crafting the spell to lull it to sleep. What she'd just done was *hard*.

In fact, it was what one could only have expected from a member of the White Council.

Maybe my godmother had a point.

Molly shuddered and rubbed at her arms. "Ugh. They aren't . . . they aren't right, Ms. Murphy. They weren't stable, and they could have had their switches flipped to violence at any time. This will at least make sure they won't hurt themselves or anyone else until morning."

Murphy studied her for a moment and then nodded. "Thank you, Molly."

My apprentice nodded back.

Murphy took up her gun again and then looked at her. She smiled and shook her head. "Rag Lady, huh?"

Molly looked down at her outfit and back up. "I didn't pick the name."

The diminutive woman shook her head, her expression firm with disapproval. "If you're going to create a persona, you've got to think of these things. Do you know how many extra PMS jokes are flying out there now?"

Molly looked serious. "I think that just makes it even scarier?"

Murphy pursed her lips and shrugged a shoulder. "Yeah. I guess it might."

"Scares me," I said.

Murphy smiled a little more. "Because you're a chauvinist pig, Dresden."

"No," I snorted. "Because I realize a lot better than you two do how dangerous you are."

Both of them stopped at that, blinked, and looked at each other.

"Okay, ghosty-scout time," I said. "Sit tight for a second. I'm going to check below."

"Meet you at the top of the next stairway," Murphy said.

"Got it," I said. "Oh. Nice work on that spell, grasshopper."

Molly's cheeks turned pink, but she said, casually, "Yeah. I know."

"Atta girl," I said. "Never let them think you're out of your depth."

I vanished and appeared in the main chamber below. I was unprepared for the sight that waited for me.

Corpsetaker was standing about twenty feet from where Mort hung suspended. Her jaw was . . . was unhinged, like a snake's, open much wider than it should have been able. As I watched, she

made a couple of convulsive motions with her entire body and swallowed down a recognizable object—a child’s shoe, circa nineteenth century. She tilted her head back, as if it helped her slide whichever one of the two child ghosts she’d eaten last down her gullet, and then lowered her chin and smiled widely at Mort Lindquist.

Sir Stuart’s faded form was the only one still visible in the room. The wispy, camera-lit mists of several other spirits were still dissolving, all around the room.

Mort spotted me and slurred, “Dresden. You moron. What have you done?”

Corpsetaker tilted her head back and laughed.

“I wasn’t keeping them shut away because they might hurt this bitch,” Morty said. He sounded hurt and exhausted and furious. “I was protecting them because she was going to *eat* them.”

I stared for a second.

The Corpsetaker had been going to *eat* the Lecters. The most vicious, dangerous, powerful spirits in all of Chicago.

Just like she had planned to do to Chicago’s ghosts when Kemmler’s disciples had attempted a ritual called a Darkhallow several years before, I realized—a ritual that, if successful, would have turned the necromancer who pulled it off into a being of godlike power.

“Ahhhh,” the Corpsetaker said, the sound deep and rich and full of satisfaction.

I got a very bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“I’m almost full,” she continued. She smiled at me with very wide, very white, very sharp-looking teeth. “Almost.”

Chapter Forty-seven

One thing you never do in a fight, no matter how emotionally satisfying it might seem, is pause to gloat with an enemy standing right in front of you. Savvy foes aren't going to just hang around letting you yak at them. They're going to take advantage of the opening you're giving them.

The same goes for desperate foes who aren't interested in trying to win a fair fight.

Before the Corpsetaker finished speaking, I snapped my staff forward and snarled, "*Fuego!*"

Fire lashed toward her. She deflected the strike with a motion of her hand, like you'd use to ward off a fly. The memory-fire went flying on by her, through the wall and gone.

"Such a pity," she said. "I was just going to—"

She wanted to keep up the gloating, I was game.

I hit her again, only harder.

This time I sent it flying a lot faster and it stung, though she slapped the fire aside before it could do much more than singe her. She let out a furious sound. "Fool! I will—"

Some people. I swear they never learn.

I'd built up a rhythm. So I gave her my best evocation, a burst of fire and force, sizzling with a lot of curve and English on it, an ogre-buster the size of a softball, blazing with scarlet and golden light.

She swept both arms into an X-shaped defensive stance, fingers contorted in a desperate defensive gesture, and she snapped out a string of swift words. She stopped the strike, but an explosion of flame and force rolled over her and she screamed in pain as she was driven twenty feet back and into the solid rock of the wall.

"Yahhh!" I shouted in wordless defiance, even as I reached for my next spell . . .

. . . and suddenly felt very strange.

"—sden, stop!" Mort was screaming. His voice sounded very far away. "Look at yourself!"

I had the next blast of fire and energy ready in my mind, but I stopped to glance at my hands.

I could barely see them. They were faded to the point of near invisibility.

The shock drove the spell out of my head, and color and substance rushed back into my limbs. They were still translucent, but at least I could see them. I turned wide eyes to where Mort still hung over the wraith pit. His voice suddenly snapped back up in volume, becoming very clear.

"You keep throwing your memories at her," Mort said, "but part of what you are now goes out with them—and it doesn't come *back*. You're about to destroy yourself, man! She's luring you into it!"

Of course she was, dammit. Why stand around trying to block my attacks when she could just vanish from in front of them? Evil Bob's fortifications, it seemed, had served a purpose other than simply barring the way—I'd used up way too much of myself on the way through them. And then here, trading punches with Corpsetaker, I'd used up a lot more, slinging out the memory of my magic left and right, when I'd seen how careful Sir Stuart was to recover such expended power practically the minute I'd gotten out of Captain Jack's car.

I couldn't see her without bringing up my Sight, but Corpsetaker's mocking laugh rolled through the underground chamber from the section of wall I'd knocked her into. I stared at my hands again and clenched them in frustration. Mort was right. I'd already done too much. But how the hell else was I supposed to fight her?

I turned to Mort. He was having trouble keeping his eyes on me as he twisted slowly on the rope. He closed them. "Dresden . . . you can't do anything more. Get out of here. I don't want anyone else to give themselves away for me," he said, his voice raw. "Not for me."

Sir Stuart's shade, floating protectively beside Mort, regarded me with sober, distant eyes.

Corpsetaker's mad laughter mocked us all. Then she said, "If I'd known you would deliver so thoroughly, Dresden, I'd have gone looking for you ages ago. Boz. Kill the little man."

There was a growl and the stirring of a large animal. And then a human garbage truck started climbing out of the wraith pit, emerging from the stewing broil of wraiths like Godzilla rising out of the surf. Boz had a stench to him so thick that it carried over into the realm of spirit—a psychic stink that felt like it might have choked me unconscious had I still been alive. The guy's *brain* had been down there stewing in wraiths for only God knew how long, and if Morty's reaction to exposure was any indication, Boz had to have had his sanity pureed. He was crusted over in filth so thick that I couldn't tell where the spiritual muck left off and the physical crud began. I could see his eyes, like dull, gleaming stones underneath his hood. They were absolutely gone. This guy was only a person by legal definitions. His humanity had long since begun to fester and rot.

Boz climbed out of the pit, radiating a physical and psychic power full of rot and corruption and rage and endless hungers. He stood there blankly for a second. And then he turned and took one slow, lumbering, Voorheesian step after another, toward the apparatus from which Mort hung.

The ectomancer regarded Boz weakly and then said, "Great. This is all I need."

"What?" I said. "Mort? What does she mean?"

"Uh, sorry. Little distracted here," Mort said. "What?"

"The Corpsetaker! What did she mean that she doesn't need you anymore?"

"You fed her enough power to fuel a couple of dozen Nightmares, Dresden," Mort said. "She can do whatever she wants now."

"What? So she gobbles a bunch of killers and she gets to be a real boy again? It can't be that easy."

Boz reached the basketball goal, grabbed it in his huge hands, and just turned it slowly, the hard way. Mort began to rotate toward the edge of the pit.

"Agh! Dresden! Do something!"

I glared at Morty, spreading empty hands, and then in pure frustration I tossed a punch at Boz. It was like slapping my fist through raw sewage. I didn't hit anything solid, and my fist and arm came out covered in disgusting residue. I couldn't act. Information was the only weapon I had. "Kind of limited here, Mort!"

Morty had begun to hyperventilate, but he clearly came to some sort of decision. He started gasping out words rapidly. "She can be real again—for a little while."

"She can manifest," I said.

Boz's fingernails were spotted with dark green mold. He reached out and grabbed the rope holding Mort. He untied the rope from its stay without letting it slide and began to haul Mort toward the edge of the pit. Arms and mouths and fingers stretched up from the bubbling wraiths, trying to reach the ectomancer.

"Gah!" Mort gasped, trying to twist away. Wraith fingertips touched his face, and he winced in apparent pain. "Once she does that, she gets to be her old self for a while. She can walk, talk—whatever."

"Use her magic for real," I breathed. The Corpsetaker wouldn't have to limit herself to people who could contact the dead, people from whom she could try to wrest consent, as she had done to Mort.

She could simply *take* someone new—and then she was back in the game, a body-switching lunatic with a hate-on for the White Council and all things decent in general. Her boss, Kemmler, had apparently slithered his way out of being dead more than once. Maybe her whole freaky-cult operation had been a page from his playbook.

I vanished to the bottom of the stairs and screamed, "Murph! Hurry!"

But I saw no one at the top of the stairs.

Sir Stuart stood in front of Boz, clenching his jaw and his ax in impotent rage, as Boz lowered Mort to the ground and then leaned over him, reaching down with his huge hands to grasp Mort on either side of his head. A twist, a snap, and it would be over for the ectomancer.

But what could I do? I had nothing more than the ghost of a decent spell in me, and then I was misty history. Morty was beat to hell, exhausted, unable to use his own magic—or he damned well would have gotten himself out of this clustergeist by now. Even if he'd let me in—which I wasn't sure he would do in his condition, not even to save his life—I doubted the two of us had enough energy and control between us to get him free. Mort could have called Sir Stuart into him, drawn upon the marine's experience and the memory of his strength, but the ectomancer was still tied up. And besides, Sir Stuart was in the same condition I was, only worse.

All of us were helpless to act on the physical world.

If I'd still had the Lecters, I could have ordered one of them to manifest and free Morty, which I maybe should have chanced a few minutes ago. Hindsight was blinding in its clarity. It was too late for that now—Corpsetaker had taken the Lecters out of the picture, and without the mad spirits' ability to manifest in the physical world . . .

My thoughts sped to quicksilver flickering. Frantic memory hit me like a hammer.

"Hell's bells. Every time I've run into a ghost, it's tried to rip my lungs out! You're telling me none of your spooks can do something?"

"They're *sane*," Mort shouted back. "It's crazy for a ghost to interact with the physical world. Sane ghosts don't go around acting *crazy*!"

For a ghost, manifesting in the material world was an act of madness—a memory trying to enforce its will on the living, the past struggling to steer the course of the present. It was, according to everything I had learned about magic and life, an inversion of the laws of nature, a defiance of the natural order.

Ghosts who weren't supermighty manifested all the time. It wasn't a question of raw power, and it never had been—it was a matter of desire. You just had to be crazy enough to make it happen. *That* was what the Corpsetaker had gotten from devouring the Lecters. Not sufficient power, but sufficient insanity. She just had to be crazy enough to make it happen.

For a wizard running around as a lost soul, expending his very essence in an attempt to rescue a guy who hadn't even really been his friend was definitely of questionable rationality. Grabbing the leashes of several dozen maniac ghosts and leading them on a banzai charge against a far stronger foe was probably less than stable, too. Hell, even the last few major choices of my life—murdering Susan in order to save our child, giving myself to Mab so that I could save little Maggie—were not the acts of a stable, sane man. Neither had been my entire career, really, given the options that had been available to me. I mean, I don't mean to brag, but I could have used my abilities to make money if I'd wanted to. A *lot* of money.

Instead? A little basement apartment. A job catering to clientele who hadn't merely needed help—they'd needed a miracle. Money? Not much. The occasional good deed, sure, but you can't eat sincere thanks. Girls don't flock to the guy who drives the old car, reads a lot of books, and kicks down the doors of living nightmares. My own people in the White Council had persecuted me my whole life, mostly for trying to do the right thing. And I'd kept on doing it anyway.

Hell. I was pretty much crazy already.

That being the case . . . how hard could it be?

It would take a certain amount of energy, I was sure. Maybe everything I had left. It wouldn't get me any closer to the answers I wanted. It wouldn't let me find out who had murdered me. It might destroy me altogether. Heck, for that matter, if it took too much power to pull off, it could snuff me here and now.

But the alternative? Watching Morty die?

Not going to happen. I'd face oblivion first.

I gripped the wooden grain of my staff, recalling the feelings that had surged through me when I had summoned and bound the Lecters. I called on my memories one more time. I called up the ache of sore muscles after a hard workout, and the sheer physical joy of my body in motion during a run, walking down the street, sinking into a hot bath, swimming through cool water, stroking over the softness of another body beside mine. I thought of my favorite old T-shirt, a

plain, black cotton one with 98% CHIMPANZEE written on the chest in white typeset letters. I thought of the creak of my old leather cowboy boots, the comfort of a good pair of jeans. The scent of a wood-smoked grill drifting into my nose when I was hungry, the way my mouth would water and my stomach would growl. I thought of my old Mickey Mouse alarm clock going off too early in the morning, and groaning out of bed to go to work. I remembered the smell of a favorite old book's pages when I opened them again, and the smell of smoldering motor oil, a staple feature of my old *Blue Beetle*. I remembered the softness of Susan's lips against mine. I remembered my daughter's slight, warm weight in my arms, her exhausted body as limp as a rag doll's. I remembered the way tears felt, sliding free of my eyes, the annoying blockage of congestion when I had a cold, and a thousand other things—little things, minor things, desperately important things.

You know. Life.

Then I did something fairly nutty, as I gathered the memory for what I was to attempt. I just uttered the spell in plain, old English. The energy seared through my thoughts in a way that would have been damaging to a living wizard, maybe fatal. It seemed appropriate to use it here, and I released whatever power I had left, clothing it in garments of memory, as I murmured the most basic of ideas, the foundation of words and of reality.

“Be.”

My universe shook. There was a vast rushing sound, rising to a crescendo that would have made a sane person flinch and crouch down to find shelter. And in a sudden burst of silence, I stood firmly in cold, dank dimness. The cold raised gooseflesh on my skin.

Shadows had swollen to cover almost all the details around me, and no wonder they had.

All the candles and lamps that lit the chamber had burned down to little pinpoints.

I tapped Boz on the shoulder and said, “Hey, gorgeous.”

His face twisted in complete surprise, turning to stare in blank incomprehension at mine.

I winked at him, and whispered, “Boo.”

And then I slugged him with my quarterstaff.

It hurt. I mean, more than the shock of impact that lanced up through my wrists. I was solid again, at least for a moment. I was myself again, and with my remembered body came a fountain of remembered pain. My legs and knees creaked and ached, something that was a natural progression for a big guy, a kind of background pain that I never noticed until it was gone and then back again. I hadn't exactly stretched out, and I'd socked Boz with everything I had. I'd torn a muscle in my back doing it. My head wasn't clear, suddenly riddled with a catalog of muscle twitches, physically painful hunger, and old injuries I'd just learned to ignore, now suddenly screaming in fresh agony.

I've said before that only the dead feel no pain, but I'd never spoken from experience before. Pain used as a weapon is one thing. Personal pain, the kind that comes from just living our lives, is something else.

Pain isn't a lot of fun, at least not for most folks, but it is utterly unique to *life*. Pain—physical, emotional, and otherwise—is the shadow cast by everything you want out of life, the alternative to the result you were hoping for, and the inevitable creator of strength. From the pain of our failures we learn to be better, stronger, greater than what we were before. Pain is there to tell us when we've done something badly—it's a teacher, a guide, one that is always there to both warn us of our limitations and challenge us to overcome them.

For something no one likes, pain does us a whole hell of a lot of good.

Stepping back into my old self and moving instantly into violent motion hurt like hell.

It.

Was.

Amazing.

I let out a whoop of sheer adrenaline and mad joy as Boz tumbled back over Mort's recumbent form.

“Oof!” Mort shouted. “Dresden!”

A howl of excitement came rolling out of Sir Stuart’s throat and he clenched his fist in vicious satisfaction, flashing briefly into full color. “Aye, set boot to arse, boy!”

Boz came up into a crouch pretty smoothly for someone of his bulk and stayed there, low and on all fours, an animal that saw no advantage in learning to stand erect. Absolutely no sign of discomfort showed on his face, even though I’d split open his cheek with the blow from my staff and blood joined the other substances encrusting his face.

Hell’s bells. My staff wasn’t exactly a toothpick. It was as heavy as three baseball bats. I wasn’t a toothpick, either. I wasn’t sure of my weight in baseball bats, but I could look down at a lot of guys in the NBA, and I wasn’t a scrawny kid anymore. The point being that the blow, delivered with all the power of my shoulders, hips, and legs as well as my arms, should have knocked Boz out—or killed him outright. I’d been aiming for his temple. He’d jerked his head back so that the end of my staff hit his left cheekbone instead. Hell, I might have broken it.

But instead of collapsing in pain, he just crouched there, silent, stony eyes looking right through me as he faced me without flinching. I began to gather my will and staggered, nearly falling on my face. I had nothing left. It was only that burning flash of irrational certainty that had driven me to attempt to manifest that was keeping me on my feet at all—and I realized with a cold little chill that I might not be able to stop Boz from killing Morty.

“Good Lord, I’m regretting this now,” I muttered. “I have never—ever—smelled BO this bad in my *life*. And I once had s’mores with a Sasquatch.”

“Hang out with him for a while,” Mort gasped. “Eventually it’s not so bad.”

“Wow. Really?”

“No. Not really.”

I kept my eyes on Boz, but did my best to grin at Mort. He’d been strung up and tortured by lunatics for almost twenty-four hours, and his executioner was still trying to finish the job, but he still had the guts to engage in badinage. Anyone with that kind of spirit in the face of horror is okay in my book.

Boz came at me like a predator—a smooth, swift motion that moved his whole body at once, unfettered by any kind of reluctance or hesitation. He never rose to do it, either. He flung himself forward as much with his arms as his legs, and his body’s center of mass never came much higher than my knees.

I gave him a boot to the head. I literally kicked him in the head with my hiking boot, and it was like stubbing my toe on a large rock. He just plowed on through the kick and hit me at the knees. Boz had a lot of mass. We went down, me on my ass, him lying on my lower legs. He started trying to claw his way up my body to my throat. I declined to allow him such liberties, and communicated that desire to him by thrusting the end of my staff at his neck.

He slapped at the staff with one paw and caught it in an iron grip. I tried to roll away. He got his other hand on the weapon. We wrenched and wrestled for control of it. He was stronger than me. He was heavier than me. I had slightly more leverage, but not enough to make the difference.

Then Boz surged forward, driving with tree-trunk legs, and I went down on my back. All his weight came down on the staff and he drove it toward my throat.

Temporary body or not, it still worked the same way as the one I was used to. If Boz crushed my windpipe, the body would die. If that happened, I assumed I would be left behind, immaterial again, while the false flesh collapsed into ectoplasm—the way ghosts and demons were driven back to their spirit forms when their temporary bodies were destroyed. But we were getting pretty far out of my comfort zone when it came to ghostly lore.

Boz bore down, and it was all I could do to keep him from choking me with my own staff. I couldn’t even dream of moving him. He had seventy-five or eighty pounds on me, all of them solid, stinking mass, and he was coming at me with a silently psychotic determination.

But he hadn’t realized where we had fallen.

I released the staff with my right hand, and his shoulders bunched, his back rounding out in a massive hump of trapezius muscles. My one hand wasn't able to do much to hold him back, and I felt the harsh pain of blood trying to hammer through the arteries Boz was compressing.

With my right hand, I seized the ends of the jumper cables still attached to the heavy-duty automobile battery, the one Morty had been tortured with—and jammed the metal ends of them both against the freshly blood-soaked side of Boz's face.

It wasn't exactly a surgical strike. I was holding both clamps in the same hand and only a couple of seconds from being choked unconscious, after all, but it worked. The clamps touched each other and wet skin, and sparks flew. Boz convulsed and jerked away from the sudden source of agony, a reflex action as immutable as pulling your arm away from a searing-hot pan handle. He shifted his weight and I pushed up, adding every ounce of muscle I had to aid the movement. He pitched off me, rolling, and I followed him, letting go of the staff and looping the main body of the jumper cable around his neck. He thrashed and tried to get away, but I had gotten onto his back and locked my legs around his hips. I grabbed the cable in both hands and hauled back on it with everything I had.

It was over pretty quick, though it didn't feel like it at the time. Boz thrashed and struggled, but as heavily muscled as he was, he wasn't flexible enough to get his arms back and up to reach where I was on his back, so he couldn't pull me off. He tried to break away, but between the cable and the grip of my legs, he wasn't able to shake me off. He tried to get his fingers in beneath the jumper cable, but though he managed to get in a couple of digits, I was pulling too hard and was more than strong enough to outmuscle one of his fingers.

I don't care how crazy you are; when your brain doesn't get oxygen, you go down. Boz did, too. I held the choke for another ten seconds to make sure he wasn't playing possum on me, and then for fifteen. Then twenty. Someone was snarling a string of curses and I hadn't realized it was me. The simple sensation of straining power, of primal victory, surged through me like a drug, and only the coup de grace remained.

I ground my teeth. I'd killed men and women before but never when I'd had an alternative. I might be a fighter, but I wasn't a killer, not when there was a choice. I forced myself to let go of the cables, and Boz flopped to the ground, entirely limp but alive. I had to roll him off one of my legs, pushing with my other heel, but he finally went, and I shambled upright, breathing hard. Then I turned to Mort and started untying knots.

He watched me with wary eyes. "Dresden. What you're doing . . . being in the flesh like that. It isn't right."

"I know," I said. "But no one else was going to do it."

He shook his head. "I'm just saying . . . it isn't good for you. Those spirits, the ones I'd been sheltering—they weren't any different from any other ghost when they got started. Doing this . . . It does things to you long-term. You'll change." He leaned a little toward me. "Right now, you're still you. But what you felt there, at the end—it grows. Keep doing this and you won't be you anymore."

"I'm almost done," I told him, jerking the ropes clear as fast as I could. It took a bit. They'd strung him up pretty carefully, distributing his weight across a lot of rope. I guess Corpsetaker hadn't wanted to spend several hours getting her limbs back under control once Mort cracked.

He groaned and tried to sit up. It took him a couple of attempts, but when I tried to help him, he waved my offer away.

"Can you walk?" I asked him.

He shuddered. "I can damned well walk out of here. Just give me a minute."

"I don't have it," I said. "I've got to move."

"Why?"

"Because my friends are up there somewhere."

He sucked in a breath.

“I know,” I said with a grimace. Then I rose, grabbed my staff, and started walking toward the stairs.

“Stu,” I heard Mort say. “You know knots, right?”

I glanced back and saw Sir Stuart nod. Mort nodded back and started gathering up the coils of rope I’d pulled off him. He beckoned to Sir Stuart. “Come in. I don’t want the man mountain there getting up and finishing what he started.”

I almost hesitated, to make sure Mort was all right, but I’d spent too much time down here already, and I could feel the hectic buzz of my fatigue growing by the moment. I had to get upstairs.

There was only one reason Corpsetaker would have taken down her own wards as she had. She wasn’t limited to such a small sampling of humanity now, when it came to seizing a new body. She’d *wanted* people to come inside her lair.

It would give her more variety to choose from.

I rushed up the stairs, praying that I would be in time to stop Kemmler’s protégé from taking one of my friends—for keeps.

Chapter Forty-eight

I pounded up the stairs and found that it was getting dark. Dammit. I'd gotten way too used to the upside of ghostliness. I reached up to my neck to find my mother's pentacle amulet and . . .

. . . and it wasn't there. Which it *should* have been. I mean, my actual duster had been destroyed, but the one I was wearing was an exact duplicate. There was no reason my mother's amulet shouldn't have been there, but it wasn't. That was possibly something significant.

But I didn't have time to worry about it at the moment. Instead, I sent a whisper of will into my staff, and the runes carved in it began to glow with blue-white wizard light, casting their shapes in pure light on the moldy stone walls and floor of the hallway, showing me the way. I didn't have much magic left in me, but a simple light spell was much, much easier than any kind of violent spell, requiring far less energy.

I ran down the hall, past the filthy sleeping rooms with curtains for doors, and through the break in the wall, to the old electrical-junction room.

A flashlight lay on the floor, spilling light onto a patch of wolf fur from a couple of inches away and otherwise doing nothing to illuminate the scene. I had to brighten the light from my staff to see that Murphy and the wolves were lying in a heap on the floor, next to the unconscious Big Hoods.

The Corpsetaker was nowhere to be seen.

Neither was Molly.

I turned in a slow circle, looking for any sign of what had happened, and found nothing.

Feet scraped on rock and I turned swiftly, bringing up my staff, ready to unleash whatever power I had left in me—and found Butters standing halfway down the stairs, looking like a rabbit about to bolt. His face was pale as a sheet behind his glasses, and his dark hair was a wild mess.

"My God," he breathed. "Dresden?"

"Back for a limited engagement," I breathed, lowering the staff. "Butters, what happened?"

"I . . . I don't know. They started shouting something and then they just . . . just collapsed."

"And you didn't?" I asked.

"I was out there," he said, pointing behind him. "You know. Looking out for the police or whatever."

"Being Eyes, huh?" I said. I turned back to Murphy and the wolves.

"Yeah, pretty much," he said. He moved quietly down the stairs. "Are they all right?"

I crouched down over Murphy and felt her neck. Her pulse was strong and steady. Ditto for the nearest of the wolves. "Yeah," I said, my heart slowing down a little. "I think s—"

Something cold and hard pressed against the back of my head. I looked down.

Murphy's SIG was missing from its holster.

"Everyone trusts a doctor," purred Butters, in a tone of voice that Butters would *never* have used. "Even wizards, Dresden."

I felt myself tensing. "Corpsetaker."

"You were able to manifest after all? Intriguing. You've a natural gift for darker magic, I think. My master would have snapped you up in an instant."

I'd spent an afternoon with Murphy working on gun disarms, at Dough Joe's Hurricane Gym. I tried to remember which way I had to spin to attempt to take the gun away. It depended on how it was being held—and I had no idea how Corpsetaker was holding the weapon on me. I was pretty sure Butters was a lefty, but I didn't think that would matter to the Corpsetaker once she set up shop. "Oh, boy. I could have hung out with people like you? I'm pretty sure it wouldn't have worked out."

“Possibly not,” Corpsetaker said. “I accorded you far more respect than you merited, as an opponent. How much of you is left behind that body you’ve cobbled together? Scarcely more than one of those pathetic wraiths, I think. You could have made a viable move in time, but clearly you’ve no patience, no head for strategy.”

“Yeah. I guess I’ve still got a soul and a conscience where you installed that stuff.”

“Soul? Conscience?” Corpsetaker said, almost laughing. “Those are nothing but words. They aren’t even true limits—just the figments of them. Useless.”

“Just because something isn’t solid doesn’t mean it isn’t real,” I said. “If you had a brain in your head, you’d know that.”

“You’re obsessed with the fantasies of the young,” she replied with my friend’s breath. “Though I must admit that that the ironic reversal of our current state is simply delicious.”

And without a hesitation or any change in the tone of her voice, she put a bullet into the back of my head.

The pain was infinitely brief and indescribable, a massive spike of agony that felt as if it should have sent me flying. I saw a cloud of something fly forward and then splatter all over one of the wolves and the nearest Big Hood. Ectoplasm, I realized dully. My physical body had been destroyed. It had fallen back into the spirit matter from which I’d formed it.

The pain faded, and then I was back in the still, neutral absence of sensation of the ghost state. I reached for the splattered matter with an instinctive, unspoken yearning to return to it.

I could barely see my hand.

I tried to turn around, but it felt like I was submerged in something thicker and more viscous than water, and it took forever.

I stared into the Corpsetaker’s eyes within Butters’s face and watched the body-jumping lunatic smirk at me. “Not much of you now, is there?” she murmured. “You’ll be a wraith within days. I think that balances our account. Enjoy eternity, Dresden.”

I tried to snarl a curse, but I was just so tired. I couldn’t get the sound to come out of me. And by the time I had tried, Corpsetaker had taken Butters’s body back to the bottom of the stairs. She was moving so *fast*.

Or . . . or maybe I was just that slow.

I tried to follow, and all I could manage was to drift in the Corpsetaker’s wake, moving with grace, but slowly. So slowly.

Corpsetaker made a gesture and a veil fell away from another shade at the top of the stairs. It was Butters. He stood there dressed not in his winter gear, but in the scrubs I was far more used to seeing him wear. He was completely motionless except for his eyes, which rolled around frantically. A rapidly evaporating puddle of ectoplasm spread at his feet. An expression of pure confusion was locked onto his face.

Corpsetaker had been a big fan of body switching. When she left me and Morty in the basement, she must have come directly up here to grab a new body. She’d probably dropped some variant of a sleeping spell on Murphy and the wolves—and then Butters must have shown up.

Corpsetaker had gone with her usual trick, forcibly trading bodies with a victim—and the manifested ghost body she’d been in had fallen back into ectoplasm the moment she wasn’t there to give it energy and form. Butters’s essence, his *soul*, had just been booted out of his body, and now it stood there, vulnerable and unmoving—brightly colored but fading away, even as I watched. She’d tossed a quick veil over Butters’s shade so that no one who might come upon her would see him standing there, forlorn and confused, while she drove around in his hijacked body.

The thing that really got to me? Corpsetaker threw a little smirk back at me as she got to Butters’s shade. There wasn’t anything I could do to stop her, but she wanted me to see how thoroughly she’d outthought and outmaneuvered me.

But the universe has a funny sense of humor, and apparently it’s not *always* aimed at me. While Corpsetaker looked back at me to smirk, Molly rippled forth from under a veil of her own, on the last step between Butters’s stolen body and the explosion-chewed door. She grabbed the

Corpsetaker by the front of Butters's coat. Butters wasn't exactly heroic in build. Molly, on the other hand, was several inches taller than he and had her mother's genes, everything I'd been able to teach her about mixing it up, and six months of hard time under the tender guiding hand of the Leanansidhe.

Molly slammed the Corpsetaker against the wall so hard that stolen teeth slammed together. Then she seized Butters's freaking *face* in a clawlike hand and thrust her head close, locking eyes with the Corpsetaker.

I wanted to scream a negation, but nothing came out. I frantically tried to move faster. If I succeeded, it didn't show.

"You want to play head games?" Molly snarled, her blue eyes blazing. "Let's go."

The Corpsetaker's face contorted into an expression somewhere between murderous rage and that of an orgasm, and she opened her stolen eyes wide.

Molly and the dark wizard went into a soulgaze, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it—except keep trying to get closer.

I could feel power flickering between them, though, like bursts of heat coming out of a furnace, as I got glacially nearer. It was an entirely invisible struggle, a simultaneous and mutual siege of the personality. Mind magic is dangerous, slippery stuff, and doing combat with another mind is all about imagination, focus, and sheer willpower. Right now, Molly was thrusting an array of images and ideas at the Corpsetaker, trying to force the other to pay attention to them. Some of the thoughts would be there to undermine defenses, others to assault them, and still others trying to slip past unnoticed to wreak havoc from within. Some of the thoughts would be simple things—whispered doubts meant to shake the other's confidence, for example. Others would be far more complex constructions, idea demons imagined ahead of time, prepared for such an occasion and unleashed upon the thoughts and memories of the foe.

The White Council hated mind magic, generally speaking. If you beat someone's defenses, you could do a lot of things to them, and precious few of them were good. Events, however, had forced them to acknowledge the necessity of giving all of its members lessons in psychic self-defense that were more comprehensive than the simple wall technique that I'd been briefly introduced to. A couple of old-timers who knew how to play the game had begun dispensing the basics to everyone interested in learning.

As it turned out, I had a natural fortress of personality, which explained a lot—like how hard it had always been for faerie glamour to trick me for long, and why I'd been able to grind through several forms of mental assault over the years. If someone came in after me, they had a big badass castle to contend with. They could pound on it all day, as such things were measured, without breaking the defenses, and I'd been told that it would take an extended campaign to conquer my head entirely—like any decent castle, there were multiple lines and structures where new defenses could take hold. But I didn't have much of a forward game. For me, the best offense had to be an obstinate defense.

Molly, on the other hand . . . well. Molly was sort of scary.

Her castle wasn't huge and imposing—the damned thing was invisible. Made of mirrors, covered in fog, wrapped in darkness, and generally hard even to pin down, much less besiege; anyone who went into her head had better bring a GPS, a seeing-eye dog, and a backup set of eyeballs. Worse, her offense was like dealing with a Mongolian horde. She'd send in waves and waves of every kind of mental construction imaginable, and while you were busy looking at those, ninja thoughts would be sneaking through your subconscious, planting the psychological equivalent of explosives. We'd practiced against each other a lot—immovable object versus irresistible force. It generally ended in a draw, when Molly had to quit and nurse a headache, at which point I would join her in scarfing down aspirin. A couple of times, my thuggish constructions had stumbled over her defenses and started breaking mirrors. A couple of times, her horde had gotten lucky or particularly sneaky. We'd had the same thought-image set up to signal

victory—Vader swooping down in his TIE fighter, smugly stating, “I have you now.” Once that got through, the game was over.

But outside of practice, that thought could just as easily be something more like, “Put your gun into your mouth and pull the trigger.” We both knew that. We both worked hard to improve as a result. It was a part of the training I’d taken every bit as seriously as teaching her theory or enchantments or exorcism, or any of a hundred other areas we’d covered over the past few years.

But we’d never done it for blood.

The Corpsetaker moved Butters’s hands up to gently frame Molly’s cheeks and said, “My, my, my. Training standards have improved.”

Molly slammed Corpsetaker’s head back against the wall with a short, harsh motion, and said, “Stop squirming and fight.”

Corpsetaker bared Butters’s teeth in a slow grin, and suddenly surged forward, slamming Molly’s back against the opposite wall while simultaneously moving up a stair, so that their eyes were on the same level. “Slippery little girl. But I was crushing minds like yours centuries before your great-grandfather’s grandfather left the Old Country.”

Molly suddenly let out a gasp, and her face twisted in pain.

“They never have the stomach to hurt their darling little apprentices,” Corpsetaker crooned. “That’s called pain. Let me give you a lesson.”

“Lady,” Molly panted, “did you pick the wrong part of my life in which to mess with me.” She took a deep breath and spoke in a ringing, furious voice. “Now get the fuck out of my friend. *Ideru!*”

I felt the surge of her will as she spoke the word, and suddenly reality seemed to condense around my apprentice. There was a terrible, terrible force that ripped forth from her, pulling hungrily at everything around it. I’d felt something similar once, when a nascent White Court vampire had unintentionally begun to feed on me—an energy that spiraled and swirled and pulled at the roots of my senses. But that was only one facet of the gravity that Molly exuded with the spell.

Corpsetaker’s eyes widened in surprise and sudden strain. Then she snarled, “Have it your way. The little doctor was my second choice, in any case.”

And then I saw Corpsetaker’s dark, mad soul flow into my apprentice on the tidal pull of the beckoning she’d performed.

The expression of Butters’s face went empty and he collapsed, utterly without movement of any kind. Three feet away, his shade’s helpless, confused gaze locked onto his fallen physical form, and his eyes went wide with terror.

Molly screamed in sudden shock—and fear. In that instant, I saw in her eyes the reflection of her terror, the panic of someone who has come loaded for bear and found herself face-to-face with a freaking dinosaur instead.

My drifting, dream-slow advance had finally gotten me close enough. With sluggish and agonizing grace, I stretched out one hand . . .

. . . and caught the Corpsetaker’s ankle as she slithered into my apprentice.

I settled my grip grimly and felt myself pulled forward, into the havoc of the war for Molly’s body, mind, and soul.

Chapter Forty-nine

I landed in the middle of a war.

There was a ruined city all around me. The sky above boiled with storm clouds, moving and roiling too quickly to be real, filled with contrasting colors of lightning. Rain hammered down. I heard screams and shouted imprecations all around me, overlapping one another, coming from thousands of sources, blending into a riotous roar—and every single voice was either Molly's or the Corpsetaker's.

As I watched, some great beast somewhere between a serpent and a whale smashed its way through a brick building—a fortress, I realized—maybe fifty yards away, thrashing about as it fell and grinding it to powder. A small trio of dots of bright red light appeared on the vast thing's rubble-dusted flanks, just like the targeting of the Predator's shoulder cannon in the movies of the same name, and then multiple streaks of blue-white light flashed in from somewhere and blew a series of holes the size of train tunnels right through the creature. Around me, I saw groups of soldiers, many of them in sinister black uniforms, others looking like idealized versions of United States infantry, laying into one another with weapons of every sort imaginable, from swords to rocket launchers.

A line of tracer fire went streaking right through me, having no more effect than a stiff breeze. I breathed a faint sigh of relief. I was inside Molly's mindscape, but her conflict was not with *me*, and neither was the Corpsetaker's. I was just as much a ghost here at the moment as I had been back in the real world.

The city around me, I saw, was a vast grid of fortified buildings, and I realized that the kid had changed her usual tactics. She wasn't trying to obscure the location of her mental fortress with the usual tricks of darkness and fog. She had instead chosen a different method of obfuscation, building a sprawl of decoys, hiding the true core of her mind somewhere among them.

Corpsetaker had countered her, it would seem, by the simple if difficult expedient of deciding to crush them *all*, even if it had to be done one at a time. That vast beast construct had been something more massive than I had ever attempted in my own imagination, though Molly had tossed some of those at me once or twice. It wasn't simply a matter of thinking big—there was an energy investment in creating something with that kind of mental mass, and Molly generally felt such huge, unsubtle thrusts weren't worth the effort they took—especially since someone with the right attitude and imagination would take them down with only moderately more difficulty than small constructs.

Corpsetaker, though, evidently didn't agree. She was a lot older than Molly or me, and she would have deeper reserves of strength to call upon, greater discipline, and the confidence of long experience. The kid had managed to take on the Corpsetaker on Molly's most familiar ground, and to play her hand in her strongest suit—but my apprentice's strength didn't look like it was holding up well against the necromancer's experience and expertise.

I stopped paying attention to everything happening—all the artillery strikes and cavalry charges and shambling hordes of zombies and storms of knives that just came whirling out of the sky. The form of any given construct wasn't as important as the fact of its existence. A flying arrow that could pierce the heart, for example, was potentially just as dangerous as an animate shadow reaching out with smothering black talons. As long as one could imagine an appropriate construct to counter the threat, and do so in time to stop it, any construct could be defeated. It was a simple thing at its most basic level, and it sounded easy. But once you're throwing out dozens or hundreds—or thousands—of offensive and defensive constructs at a time . . . Believe me—it takes your full attention.

It's also all you can do to deal with one opponent, which explained why I hadn't been assaulted by the Corpsetaker instantly, if she had even taken note of my presence at all. She and Molly were locked together tight. The soulgaze had probably played a part in that. Neither was letting go until her opponent was dead.

Both combatants were throwing enormous amounts of offensive constructs at each other, even though Molly was demolishing her own defenses almost as rapidly as the Corpsetaker was. As tactics go, that one had two edges. Molly was hurting herself, but by doing so, she was preventing the Corpsetaker from pressing too closely, lest she be caught up in the vast bursts of destruction being exchanged. A mistake could easily destroy anyone's mind in that vista of havoc, centuries-old necromancer or not. On the other hand, if she spotted where Molly was fighting from, it looked like she'd have the power to drive in and crush my apprentice. But if she closed in on the wrong target, she'd leave herself wide-open to a surprise attack from the real Molly. Corpsetaker had to know that, just as she had to know that if she simply kept on the pressure, the whole place would eventually be ground down and Molly would be destroyed anyway.

My apprentice had come with a good plan, but she had miscalculated. The Corpsetaker was a hell of a lot stronger than she had expected. Molly was playing the most aggressive defensive plan I'd ever seen, and hoping that she could pressure the Corpsetaker into making a mistake. It wasn't a good plan, but it was all she had.

One way or another, it wasn't going to be a long fight. Best if I got moving.

Molly was here somewhere in the sprawl of fake strongholds, and she would be just as hidden from me as from the Corpsetaker. But I had an advantage that the necromancer didn't: I knew my apprentice.

This wasn't the Nevernever. We were in Molly's head, inside a world of thought and imagination. There was no magic involved—not now that we were here anyway. I might be a slender wisp of a ghost, but I still had my brain, and that gave me certain liberties here.

I went over to the ruined building, where the monster thing was groaning through its death. I heaved aside a piece of rubble and pulled a pale blue bathroom rug, stained with dust and weird purple blood, out of the wreckage. It was a tiny piece of an environmental construct, but even so, it was a serious effort to appropriate it as my own. My arms shook with weakness as I lifted the carpet and snapped it once. Blood and dust flew from it as if it had never existed, and then I settled it calmly on flat ground, sat on it, and folded my legs and my arms in front of me.

"Up, Simba," I said in my best attempt to imitate Yul Brynner, and the carpet quivered and then rose off the ground, staying as rigid and almost as comfortable as a sheet of heavy plywood. It rose straight in the air, and as it did, I gripped the edges surreptitiously. It wouldn't do to have either my enemy or my apprentice get a glimpse of me flailing wildly for my balance as the carpet moved. But on the other hand, I didn't want to just fall off, either. I could probably come up with something to keep me from getting hurt when I hit the ground, but it would look awfully bad, and I don't care how close to dead he might be; a wizard has his pride.

Granted, the imagination was the only place where I was going to get one of these darned things to work. I'd tried the flying-carpet thing before, when I was about twenty. It had been a fairly horrible experiment that had dropped me into a not-yet-closed landfill during a thunderstorm. And then there was the famous flying-broomstick incident of Wacker Drive, which wound up on the Internet as a UFO sighting. After that, I had wisely determined that flying was mostly just a great way to get killed and settled for driving my old car around instead.

But hey. In my imagination, that carpet had worked great—and that was how it went as a guest in Molly's imagination, too.

I went up high enough to get a good view—and was impressed with the kid. The city of fortresses stretched for miles. There were hundreds of them, and fighting raged all the way through. It was the opposite of what the kid usually did in a mental battle—an inverse Mongol horde, with endless defenders pouring out like angry bees to defend the hive. Corpsetaker, unfortunately, was playing mama bear to Molly's queen bee. She'd get hurt coming in, but as long

as she wasn't stupid, not very badly. She could crush all the defenders eventually—and then rip the hive to shreds.

I leaned forward a little and the carpet began to gather speed, moving ahead. Shifts of my weight to the left or right let me bank, and it wasn't long before I was cruising through the rain as fast as I could and still keeping my eyes clear. I flew a spiral pattern, scanning the city beneath me. The battle kept going in the skies, too—mostly flying demon things and lightning bolts that kept smashing them out of the air. It got boring to watch after the first dozen spectacular lightning strikes or so, and I tuned that conflict out, too, as I kept searching.

Finally, I spotted what I was looking for: a ruined building that had been reduced to a crater by an artillery shell or some other explosion. It was impossible to tell what it had been from what was left, and burned rubble covered the area around it, coating a thick-bodied old oak tree and the tree house on its lower branches in dust, dirt, and debris.

I went past the tree house without stopping or slowing down for several more minutes, and then went evasive. I couldn't be sure the Corpsetaker didn't know I had ridden in on her coattails, and if she was following me, or had sent a construct to do so, I didn't want to lead her to Molly. So the carpet went from forty or fifty miles an hour to more than a hundred, and at the same time I constructed a veil around me so that I surged forward and simply vanished. I flew low, snaking through the streets, and only after I'd crossed my own trail five or six times without spotting anything shadowing me did I finally soar in to the tree house.

It looked like a miniature home, with a door and siding and trim and windows and everything. A rope ladder allowed one to climb up to the porch, but it had been pulled up. I floated up to the door on the flying carpet and knocked politely.

"I have you now," I said, as much like James Earl Jones as I could. I do a better Yul Brynner.

Molly's strained face appeared at the window and she blinked. "Harry?"

"What's with the come-hither, grasshopper?" I asked. "You practically vacuumed me in with the Corpsetaker."

Molly narrowed her eyes and said, "What was I wearing the first time we met?"

I blinked at her, opened my mouth, closed it, thought about it, and then said, "Oh, come on, Moll. I have no idea. Clothes? You were, like, eight years old and your mom tried to shut the door in my face and I was there to see your dad."

She nodded once, as if that was the answer she'd been looking for, and opened the door. "Come on."

I went into the tree house with her.

The inside was bigger than the outside. You can do that sort of thing in your imagination. It's kind of fun. I've got one closet of my castle that looks like a giant disco roller rink. The roller skaters come after you like juggernaut, the music makes heads explode, and the mirror ball distributes a killer laser beam.

Molly's headquarters looked like the bridge of, I kid you not, the U.S.S. *Enterprise*. The old one. The one that was full of dials that obviously didn't do anything and that had a high-pitched, echoing cricket chirp going off every five or six seconds.

There was an upside to that setting, though: Molly was wearing one of the old sixties miniskirt uniforms.

Look, I'm not interested in a relationship with the kid. I do love her tremendously. But that doesn't mean that she doesn't look fantastic. Anyone with eyes can see that, and I've always been the kind of person who can appreciate gorgeous scenery without feeling a need to go camping in it.

Actually, glancing around, there were about half a dozen Mollys, all of them wearing old sixties miniskirt uniforms, each of them manning a different station. The one who had opened the door had jet-black hair in a neat, almost mathematical, gamine-style cut and slightly pointed ears.

"*Star Trek*?" I asked her. "Really?"

"What?" she demanded, bending unnaturally black eyebrows together.

"There are two kinds of people in the universe, Molly," I said. "*Star Trek* fans and *Star Wars* fans. This is shocking."

She sniffed. "This is the post-nerd-closet world, Harry. It's okay to like both."

"Blasphemy and lies," I said.

She arched an eyebrow at me with Nimmoysian perfection and went back to her station.

Communications Officer Molly, in a red uniform with a curly black fro and a silver object the size of a toaster in her ear, said, "Quadrant four is below five percent, and the extra pressure is being directed at quadrant three."

Captain Molly, in her gold outfit, with her hair in a precise Jacqueline Onassis do, spun the bridge chair toward Communications Molly and said, "Pull out everything and shift it to quadrant three ahead of them." The chair spun back toward Science Officer Molly. "Set off the nukes in four."

Science Molly arched an eyebrow, askance.

"Oh, hush. I'm the captain, you're the first officer, and that's that," snapped Captain Molly. "We're fighting a war here. So set off the nukes. Hi, Harry."

"Molly," I said. "Nukes?"

"I was saving them as a surprise," she said.

There was a big TV screen at the front of the room—not a flat-screen. A big, slightly curved old CRT. It went bright white all of a sudden.

"Ensign," Captain Molly said.

Ensign Molly, dressed in a red uniform, wearing braces on her teeth, and maybe ten years younger than Captain Molly, twiddled some of the dials that didn't do anything, and the bright white light dimmed down.

From outside, there was a long scream. An enormous one. Like, Godzilla-sized, or maybe bigger.

Everyone on the bridge froze. A brass section from nowhere played an ominous sting: *bahm-pahhhhhhhhhhm*.

"You're kidding," I said, looking around. "A sound track?"

"I don't mean to," Ensign Molly said in a strained, teenager tone. She had a Russian accent that sounded exactly like Sanya. "I watched show too much when I was kid, okay?"

"Your brain is a very strange place," I said. I meant it as a compliment, and it showed in my voice. Ensign Molly gave me a glowing grin and turned back to her station.

I walked to the right-hand side of the captain's chair and folded my arms. The screen came up to light again, showing a devastated section of the city grid. No, not decimated. Had that part of the city been decimated, one out of every ten buildings would be destroyed. That's what *decimated* means. Personally, I think some early-years, respected television personality got *decimated* and *devastated* confused at some point, and no one wanted to point it out to him, so everyone started using them interchangeably. But dammit, words mean what they mean, even if everyone thinks they ought to mean something else.

Science Molly spoke in a grim voice. "Nuclear detonation confirmed. Enemy forces in quadrant four have been decimated, Captain."

I pressed my lips firmly together.

"Thank you, Number One," Captain Molly said, spinning back to face the front. "Harry, um. Help?"

"Not sure what I can do, grasshopper," I told her seriously. "I barely managed to steal a bathroom rug from some rubble and whip up a flying carpet. Her stuff goes right through me, and vice versa."

She looked at me for a moment, and I saw the same look of fear flicker over every face on the bridge. Then she took a deep breath, nodded, and turned to face the front. She started giving smooth orders, and her other selves replied in calm, steady voices.

After a few moments, Captain Molly said, “If you aren’t here to . . . I mean, if you can’t help, why are you here?”

“Because you’re here,” I said calmly. “Least I can do is stand with you.”

“If she wins . . .” Captain Molly swallowed. “You’ll die.”

I snorted and flashed her a grin. “Best thing about being a spook, grasshopper. I’m already dead.”

“Quadrant three is collapsing,” Communications Officer Molly reported. “Quadrant two is at twenty percent.”

Captain Molly bit her lip.

“How many quadrants?” I asked her.

“Four,” she said. “Since, you know. *Quadrants*.”

I wanted to say something about *decimated*, but I didn’t. “We’re in quadrant one?”

Captain Molly nodded. “I . . . don’t think I can stop her, Harry.”

“Fight’s not over until it’s over, kid,” I said. “Don’t let her beat you. Make her work for it.”

Science Molly said, in a firm tone, “Death is not the only consequence here. Should the Corpsetaker prevail, she will have full access to our talents, abilities, memories, and knowledge. Even though we have spent the last months distancing ourselves from others to insulate against a situation such as this one, the Corpsetaker could still inflict considerable damage on not only our friends and family, but on complete innocents. That is unacceptable, Captain.”

Captain Molly looked from Science Molly to me and then said, “The fight isn’t over yet. Prepare the Omega Bomb, but do not deploy.”

“Aye, aye,” said Science Molly, and she stood up and strode to the other side of the bridge—and an old wooden cabinet beside an old wooden door.

I blinked at it. “Wow. That’s . . . kind of out of theme.”

Captain Molly coughed loudly. “That? That’s nothing to worry about. Pay it no mind.”

I watched Science Molly get a device the size of a small microwave out of the old cabinet and push one button on it. Then she set it on the console next to her.

“Um,” I said. “Omega Bomb?”

“The Corpsetaker doesn’t get me,” Captain Molly said in a firm tone. “Ever.”

“And it’s in that old wooden cabinet because . . . ?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Captain Molly dismissively. “Ensign, bring up the screen for quadrant two.”

I eased away from Captain Molly as she kept commanding the battle, and went over to stand next to Science Molly. “Um. The captain doesn’t seem to want me to know about that door.”

“Definitely not,” said Science Molly, also in confidential tones. “It’s a need-to-know door.”

“Why?”

“Because if you know about it, you’re one of the ones who needs to know about it,” she replied calmly. “And if you don’t, it’s better that you not know. The captain feels you’ve suffered enough.”

“Suffered enough?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“I have nothing further to say on the subject,” said Science Molly.

“It’s my fault,” Ensign Molly said. “Sorry. Look, I don’t mean to, with the cabinet and the door, okay? But I can’t help it.”

You ever get that feeling you’re standing in a room full of crazy people?

I got that feeling. It isn’t a very nice feeling.

I stared at the door and the old wooden cabinet. It wasn’t a particularly outstanding door in any way—a standard hanging door, if rather old and battered. Ditto the cabinet. Both had been stained a medium brown, apparently a very long time ago. Both were covered with dings and dents, not as though something had tried to break them down, but simply from years and years of use.

They looked sort of familiar.

I studied the door and the cabinet thoughtfully, glancing occasionally at the big old CRT as quadrant two buckled under the Corpsetaker's assault. The fighting had been fierce, but she still hadn't revealed herself, and Molly hadn't managed to kill her with the nukes or the assault would have ended with her. Another quadrant went, and Captain Molly detonated another set of massive nuke constructs. Then a third, and more nukes. Neither of the second pair of detonations was followed by a massive scream, the way the first one had been. Molly had bloodied the Corpsetaker, presumably, but it hadn't been enough.

"Dammit," Captain Molly said, clenching one fist and staring at the screen. "She's got to be near now. But where?"

The streets outside were so full of battling constructs that they were literally piling up with bodies, slowing the progress of the enemy—but not stopping it.

Dammit, I felt helpless. Just standing next to the kid wasn't going to do her any good, but I was holding on to the world by a thread. I just didn't have the ability to make things happen, either here or in the real world. All I could do was . . .

. . . was use my freaking *brain*. *Duh*.

"Wait," I said. "Molly, I've got an idea."

All the Mollys turned to look at me.

I turned to Captain Molly. "Slow her down," I said. "You've got to slow the Corpsetaker down. Whatever you have to do, you need to buy some time. Go!"

Captain Molly blinked at me. Then she turned and started snapping orders. The bridge Mollys started twisting dials and punching keys.

I turned to Communications Molly. "Hey, you do communications, right?"

She looked baffled. "Right."

"We need to communicate," I said. "You need to make a long-distance call."

"Now?" Communications Molly said, her eyes widening.

"Right the *hell* now," I corrected her. I leaned down and explained what I needed in terse tones.

"That's going to be tricky," she said. "We're already at one hundred percent on the reactor."

I put on my best Sean Connery voice. "Then go to a hundred and ten pershent."

Science Molly arched an eyebrow at me and punched a button. "Engineering, Bridge."

"Aye!" screamed a furious Scottish-accented Molly. "What do ye want now?"

"More power, Engineer."

The answer was a furious rush of pure profanity—but the deep engine-hum in the background around us went upward a bit, and the floor started to vibrate.

Science Molly pointed at Communications Molly and said, "Go."

"Mayday," Communications Molly said into her console. "This is a mayday. Emergency transmission. We urgently require assistance. . . ."

Suddenly everything lurched to one side and we all staggered.

"Oh, I don't believe this crap," I muttered.

"She's found us, Captain," said Science Molly. "Shields at seventy percent."

"Hit her with everything!" Captain Molly snapped.

"*Finally*," growled Tactical Molly, who sat next to Ensign Molly, wearing a gold uniform almost identical to Captain Molly's. She'd been sitting there doing absolutely nothing and looking bored the entire time I'd been there. Now she turned and started jabbing buttons, and cheesy sound effects filled the bridge.

"Minimal damage," reported Science Molly.

The bridge rocked again and we staggered. One of the panels exploded in a shower of sparks. Some Molly in a red uniform who hadn't spoken crashed limply to the deck.

"Not real," Ensign Molly said. "Sorry; my bad. Some things you just can't get rid of."

Damage alarms started wailing. They sounded like a badly distorted version of a young woman screaming.

"Shields have failed, Captain!" Science Molly reported.

And she reached for the Omega Bomb.

"No!" I snapped. "Stop her!"

Captain Molly took one look at me and then leapt at Science Molly. She seized the Omega Bomb. "Stop!" she ordered.

"There is no room for emotion here," snapped Science Molly. "It's over. This is all you can do to protect them."

"I gave you an order!" snapped Captain Molly.

"You're letting your fear control you," replied Science Molly coldly. "This is the only logical way."

Captain Molly screamed in incoherent rage and slugged Science Molly in the face.

Science Molly screamed back, and swung a fist into Captain Molly's stomach.

Music started playing. Loud. High-pitched. Strident. Most would recognize it.

"Sorry!" Ensign Molly called, cringing.

I hurried forward to grab at the struggling Mollys—and my hands went right through them. Right. I was an observer here. Welcome, sure, but if I wanted to control what was going on, I had to do it the hard way, like Corpsetaker was doing.

I turned to Ensign Molly and said, "Dammit, do something!"

"There's nothing I can do," she said, her eyes uncertain and full of sadness. "They've been like that ever since they killed you."

I stared at Molly and felt my mouth fall open.

Time stopped.

The door. The old wooden door.

The cabinet where Molly had kept her suicide device.

I turned toward them.

My godmother's voice echoed in my head.

You are currently freed of the shackles of mortality. Your limited brain no longer impedes access to that record. The only blocks to your memory are those you allow to be.

I remembered the door. The cabinet.

I remembered the past.

Sanya had insisted that they keep me on the backboard when they carried me into St. Mary of the Angels, after my apartment burned down. The dark-skinned Knight of the Cross carried me from his minivan and into the church alone, toting the board and my couple of hundred pounds and change on one shoulder, as if I'd been a big sack of doggy chow.

Molly had gone ahead of him, worried, speaking rapidly to someone. I wasn't sure who—one of the priests, I guessed. I hurt everywhere I could feel. And in the places I couldn't feel, I only wished I could hurt.

My body, from the waist down, had stopped talking to me altogether.

I'd fallen off a ladder while trying to get some of my elderly neighbors out of the burning building and landed on a stone planter. Landed bad, and on my back. I've gotten lucky occasionally. This time I hadn't. I knew what the fall, the point of impact, and the lack of sensation in my lower body meant.

I'd broken my back.

The Red King had my daughter. I was the only one who was going to do anything about it. And I'd fallen and broken my back.

Sanya carried me into the utility room that was mostly used for storage—particularly for storing a battered wizard and his friends when they needed the refuge the church offered. There were a number of folding cots in the room, stored for use. Sanya set me down, rolled out a cot, put some sheets on it, and then placed me on the cot, backboard and all.

"Might as well leave me on the floor," I told him. "I'm lying on a board either way."

"Pffft," Sanya said, his dark, handsome face lighting up with a white grin. "I do not care to clean the floor after you leave. Someone else can do the sheets."

"Says you," I said. "You smell like burning hair."

"Some of it was on fire," he said cheerfully. His eyes, though, were less jovial. He put a hand on my chest and said, "You are badly hurt."

"Yeah."

"You want a drink?" he asked. One hand hovered near his jacket's breast pocket, where I knew he kept his flask.

"Pass. Maybe I'll just cope instead."

He made another disgusted noise and produced said flask, took a swig from it, and winked at me. "I was never clear on the difference. *Da?*"

Molly appeared in the doorway, and Sanya looked at her.

"He's on the way," Molly said. Her voice was strained. Her day hadn't been as bad as mine, but she still looked shaken.

Sanya offered Molly a pull from the flask. She shook her head. "Very good," the big Russian said. "I will talk to Forthill, tell him what is happening."

"Sanya," Molly said, putting a hand on his arm. "Thank you."

He gave her a wide grin. "Perhaps it was just a coincidence I arrived when I did."

Molly rolled her eyes and gave him a faint shove toward the door. It didn't move the big man, but he went, and Molly flicked on a little lamp and shut the door behind him. She walked over to me and took a couple of KFC wet wipes from her bag. She knelt down next to the cot, opened them, and started cleaning my face.

I closed my eyes and said nothing.

My little girl was going to die.

My little girl was going to *die*.

And there was nothing I could do about it.

Oh, I'd been defeated before. People had even died because I failed. But those people had never been my own flesh and blood. They hadn't been my child. I'd lost. I was beaten.

This was all over.

And it was all your fault, Harry.

If I'd been faster. If I'd been smarter. If I'd been strong enough of mind to make the hard choices, to focus on saving Maggie first and everyone else second . . .

But I hadn't been. I'd been insufficient to the challenge, and she was going to die because of it.

I broke, right there. I just broke. The task given to me had been more than I could bear. And what followed would be nothing but torturous regret. I'd failed my own child.

My chest convulsed, I made a sound, and my eyes filled until I couldn't see.

Molly sat beside me, patiently cleaning my face and neck with her wipes. I must have had soot on my face. When I could see again, there were large patches of grey and black on the wipes and my face felt cold and tingled slightly.

"I've got to help her," I said quietly.

"Harry, don't . . . don't twist the knife in your own wound," Molly replied. "Right now you need to stay calm and quiet, until Butters can look at you."

"I wish you hadn't gotten him involved," I said.

"I didn't even ask him," she said. "I got halfway through the first sentence and he asked where you were. Then said he'd come see you."

I shook my head. "No, I mean . . ." I drew a deep breath. "Kid. I've got to cross a line."

Molly froze, one hand still extended.

"I'm not getting up off this bed alone," I said quietly. "It's my only option."

You run in the circles I do, you get more than a few offers of power. It always comes with a price, usually a hidden one, but you get the offers. I'd had more than a few chances to advance myself, provided I was willing to set aside anything like integrity to do so. I hadn't been.

Not until today.

"Who?" Molly asked simply.

My mouth twitched at one corner. "One is a lot like another," I said.

She shook her head. "But . . . but if you go over to one of them . . ."

"They'll make me into a monster," I said quietly. "Sooner or later."

She wouldn't look at me.

"I can't let that happen," I said. "For all I know, I could turn into something that would hurt Maggie myself. But maybe I can use them to get her out of danger."

She inhaled sharply and looked up at me.

"It's got to be Mab," I said. "She's wicked smart, but she isn't omniscient or infallible. I've swindled faeries before. I can do it again."

She inhaled sharply. "You're going to be the Winter Knight?" She shook her head. "What if she doesn't? I mean, what if she won't?"

I let out a low chuckle. "Oh, she'll do it. If I go to her, she'll do it. She's been after me long enough."

"I don't understand," Molly said. "She'll . . . she'll twist you. Change you. It's what they do."

I fumbled and put one of my hands on hers. "Molls . . . Whatever happens . . . I'm not going to make it out of this one."

She stared at me for a minute. Then she shook her head. She shook her head and silent tears fell from her eyes.

"Molly," I said again, patting her hand. "Kid . . . For everything there is a season."

"Don't," she said. "Don't you dare quote the Bible at me. Not to justify this."

"Bible?" I said. "I was quoting the Byrds."

She burst out in a huffing sound that was both a laugh and sob.

"Look, Molls. Nothing lasts forever. Nothing. And if I've got to choose between myself and my daughter? That's not even a choice. You know that."

She bowed her head and wept harder. But I saw her nod. Just a little.

"I need your help," I said.

She looked up at me, bloodshot eyes a mess.

"I'm going to arrange things. But Mab's going to be wary of me. She knows my history, and if I know what's going on, she'll be able to tell I'm lying to her. I don't have enough of a poker face for that."

"No," Molly said, sniffing and briskly swiping at her eyes. "You don't. You still suck at lying, boss."

"To the people who know me, maybe," I said, smiling. "Do you understand what I'm asking you to do?"

She bit her lip and said, "Do you? Have you thought what it's going to mean for me once . . . once you're . . ."

"Dead," I said quietly. "I think Ebenezer or Injun Joe will take over for me, continue your training. They both know how strongly I felt about sheltering you from the Council's judgment."

She looked suddenly exhausted. She shook her head slightly. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh," I said.

Molly had crushed on me since she was a teenager. I hadn't really thought anything of it. I mean, it had been going on for years and . . .

. . . and crushes probably didn't last for years. Did they? They faded. Molly's feelings hadn't, but I didn't reciprocate them. I loved her to pieces, but I was never going to be in love with her.

Especially not if I was dead, I guess.

If our positions had been reversed, that might have been kind of hard for me to accept, too.

I patted her hand again awkwardly and said, "I'm sorry. That I wasn't here longer. That it couldn't be more than it was."

"You never did anything wrong by me, Harry," she said. She lifted her chin and met my eyes again. "This isn't about me, though, is it? It's about Maggie." She nodded, and I saw steel enter her spine. "So of course I'll help you."

I lifted her fingers to my mouth and put a gentle kiss on them. "You're one hell of a woman, Molly," I said. "Thank you."

She shivered. Then she said, "How do you want to do it?"

"Bring me a phone," I said. "Need to make a call. You stay out of it. It'll be better if you don't know."

"Okay," she said. "Then?"

"Then you come back in here. You put me to sleep. You take the memory of this conversation and the phone call out of my head."

"How?" she asked. "If I leave any obvious holes, it could hurt you—and it might be visible to something as powerful as Mab."

I thought about it for a moment and said, "I nodded off in the van on the way here. Set it up so that I was never awake once I was here, until I wake up after."

She thought about it and said, "It could work. If I do it slowly enough, it might not leave a ripple."

"Do it like that, then."

She stood up. She walked over to a battered old wooden cabinet on the wall and opened it. Among other things, there was an old, freestanding rotary phone inside it, attached to a long extension cord, a makeshift line that Forthill had run through the drywall from the next room. She brought the phone to me and set it carefully on my chest. Then she walked to the similarly battered old wooden door.

"You realize," she said, "that I could change this, Harry. Could find out who you were using to kill yourself. I could take it right out of your head and call them off. You'd never know."

"You could do that," I said, quietly. "And I feel like an utter bastard for asking this of you, grasshopper. But I don't have anyone else to ask."

"You should call Thomas," she said. "He deserves the truth."

Thomas. My brother. My family. He'd be one of little Maggie's only blood relations once I was gone. And Molly was right. He did deserve the truth.

"No," I said, barely louder than a whisper. "Tell him later, if you want. After. If you tell him before that, he won't stand for it. He'll try to stop it."

"And maybe he'd be right to do it."

"No," I said quietly. "He wouldn't. But he'd do it anyway. This is my choice, Molls."

She turned to go and paused. "You've never called me Molls before today."

"Was saving it," I said. "For when you weren't my apprentice anymore. Wanted to try it out."

She smiled at me. She shed one more tear.

Then she left.

It took me a moment to gather myself. Then I dialed an international number on the rotary phone.

"Kincaid," answered a flat voice.

"It's Dresden," I said.

The voice warmed very slightly. "Harry. What's up?"

I took a deep breath. "You owe me a favor," I said quietly. "For that thing with Ivy on the island."

"Damn right," he said.

"I'm calling it in."

"Okay," he said. "You want some backup on something?"

"I have a target for you."

There was a silence from the other end of the phone. Then he said, "Tell me."

"The new Winter Knight," I said.

"There's a new one?"

"There's going to be," I said.

"How do you . . ." More silence. Then he said, "It's like that."

"There's a good reason," I said.

"Yeah?"

"There's a little girl."

More silence. "You'll know it's coming."

"No," I said. "I won't. I'll see to it."

"Okay," he said. "When?"

They were going to kill my daughter sometime before the next sunrise. I figured it might take me some time to get her home, assuming I didn't die trying.

"Anytime after noon tomorrow," I said. "The sooner, the better."

"Okay."

"You can find me?"

"Yeah."

"Be sure," I said.

"I pay my debts."

I sighed again. "Yeah. Thanks."

He let out a soft chuckle. "Thanking me," he said. "That's new."

He hung up. I did the same. Then I called for Molly.

"Okay," I said. "Let's do this."

Molly took the phone and put it back in the cabinet. Then she picked up a slender, new white candle in a holder and a small box of matches. She came over and set the candle on a folding table nearby, where I could see it without moving my head. She struck a match and lit it.

"All right," she said. "Harry, this has to be a smooth, gentle job. So focus on the candle. I need you to still your mind so that I can work."

It felt odd, letting the grasshopper take the lead—but I guess that was what I'd been training her to do. I focused on the candle and began to quiet my thoughts.

"Good," Molly said quietly after a moment, her voice soft velvet. "Relax. Take a nice, slow, deep breath. Good . . . Listen to my voice and let me guide you. Another deep breath now . . ."

And together with my accomplice, I finished arranging my murder.

Chapter Fifty

I surfaced from the memory, shivering, and looked around in confusion. I was still in Molly's mindscape, on the cheesy bridge. It was silent. Completely silent. Nothing moved. The images on the screen and the various Mollys were all frozen in place like mannequins. Everything that had been happening in the battle had been happening at the speed of thought—lightning fast. There was only one reason that everything here would be stopped still like this, right in the middle of the action.

"So much for that linear-time nonsense, eh?" My voice came out sounding harsh and rough.

Footsteps sounded behind me, and the room began to grow brighter and brighter. After a moment, there was nothing but white light, and I had to hold up a hand to shield my eyes against it.

Then the light faded somewhat. I lifted my eyes again and found myself in a featureless expanse of white. I wasn't even sure what I was standing on, or if I was standing on anything at all. There was simply nothing but white . . .

. . . and a young man with hair of dark gold that hung messily down over silver blue eyes. His cheekbones could have sliced bread. He wore jeans, old boots, a white shirt, and a denim jacket, and no youth born had ever been able to stand with such utter, tranquil stillness as he.

"You're used to linear time," he said. His voice was resonant, deep, mellow, with the almost musical timbre you hear from radio personalities. "It was the easiest way to help you understand."

"Aren't you a little short for an archangel?" I asked him.

Uriel smiled at me. It was the sort of expression that would make flowers spontaneously blossom and babies start to giggle. "Appropriate. I must confess to being more of a *Star Wars* fan than a *Star Trek* fan, personally. The simple division of good and evil, the clarity of perfect right and perfect wrong—it's relaxing. It makes me feel young."

I just stared at him for a moment and tried to gather my thoughts. The memory, now that I had it again, was painfully vivid. God, that poor kid. Molly. I'd never wanted to cause her pain. She'd been a willing accomplice, and she'd done it with her eyes open—but, God, I wished it hadn't had to happen to her. She was hurting so much, and now I could see why—and I could see why the madness she was feigning might be a great deal more genuine than she realized.

That had to have been why Murphy distrusted her so strongly. Murph had excellent instincts for people. She must have sensed something in Molly, sensed the pain and the desperation that drove her, and it must have sent up a warning flag in Murphy's head. Which would have hurt Molly badly, to be faced with suspicion and distrust, however polite Karrin might have been about it. That pain would, in turn, have driven her further away, made her act stranger, which would earn more suspicion, in an agonizing cycle.

I'd never wanted that for her.

What had I done?

I'd saved Maggie—but had I destroyed my apprentice in doing so? The fact that I'd gotten myself killed had no relative bearing on the morality of my actions, if I had. You can't just walk around picking and choosing which lives to save and which to destroy. The inherent arrogance and the underlying evil of such a thing runs too deep to be avoided—no matter how good your intentions might be.

I knew why Molly had tried to get me to tell Thomas. She'd known, just as I had, that Thomas would try to stop me from killing myself, regardless of my motivations. But she'd been right about something else, too: He was my brother. He'd deserved more than I'd given him. That was why I hadn't thought of him, not once since returning to Chicago. How could I possibly have

remembered my brother without remembering the shame I felt at excluding him from my trust? How could I think of Thomas without thinking of the truth of what I had done?

Normally, I would never have believed that I was the sort of man who could make himself forget and overlook something rather than facing a harsh reality, no matter how painful it might be.

I guess I'm not perfect.

The young man facing me waited patiently, apparently giving me time to gather my thoughts, saying nothing.

Uriel. I should have known from the outset. Uriel is the archangel who most people know little about. Most don't even know his name—and apparently he likes it that way. If Gabriel is an ambassador, if Michael is a general, if Rafael is a healer and spiritual champion, then Uriel is a spymaster—Heaven's spook. Uriel covered all kinds of covert work for the Almighty. When mysterious angels showed up to wrestle with biblical patriarchs without revealing their identities, when death was visited upon the firstborn of Egypt, when an angel was sent into cities of corruption to guide the innocent clear of inbound wrath, Uriel's hand was at work.

He was the quietest of the archangels. To my way of thinking, that probably indicated that he was also the most dangerous.

He'd taken notice of me a few years back and had bestowed a measure of power known as soulfire on me. I'd done a job or three for him since then. He'd dropped by with annoying, cryptic advice once in a while. I sort of liked him, but he was also aggravating—and scary, in a way that I had never known before. There was the sense of something . . . hideously absolute about him. Something that would not yield or change even if the universe itself was unmade. Standing in his presence, I always felt that I had somehow become so fragile that I might fly to dust if the archangel sneezed or accidentally twitched the wrong muscle.

Which, given the kind of power such a being possessed, was probably more or less accurate.

"All of this?" I asked, waving a hand generally, "was to lead me *there*? To that memory?"

"You had to understand."

I eyed him and said wearily, "Epic. Fail. Because I have no idea what you're talking about."

Uriel tilted back his head and laughed. "This is one of those things that was about the journey, not the destination."

I shook my head. "You . . . you lost me."

"On the contrary, Harry: You found yourself."

I eyed him. Then tore at my hair and said, "Arrrgh! Can't you give me a straight answer? Is there some law of the universe that compels you to be so freaking mysterious?"

"Several, actually," Uriel said, still clearly amused. "All designed for your protection, but there are still some things I can tell you."

"Then tell me why," I said. "Why do all this? Why sucker me into going back to Chicago? Why?"

"Jack told you," Uriel said. "They cheated. The scale had to be balanced."

I shook my head. "That office, in Chicago Between. It was yours."

"One of them," he said, nodding. "I have a great deal of work to do. I recruit those willing to help me."

"What work?" I asked.

"The same work as I ever have done," Uriel said. "I and my colleagues labor to ensure freedom."

"Freedom of what?" I asked.

"Of will. Of choice. The distinction between good and evil is meaningless if one does not have the freedom to choose between them. It is my duty, my purpose in Creation, to protect and nourish that meaning."

I narrowed my eyes. "So . . . if you're involved in my death . . ." I tilted my head at him. "It's because someone forced me to do it?"

Uriel wagged a hand in a so-so gesture and turned to pace a few steps away. “*Force* implies another will overriding your own,” he said over his shoulder. “But there is more than one way for your will to be compromised.”

I frowned at him, then said, with dawning comprehension, “Lies.”

The archangel turned, his eyebrows lifted, as though I were a somewhat dim student who had surprised his teacher with an insightful answer. “Yes. Precisely. When a lie is believed, it compromises the freedom of your will.”

“So, what?” I asked. “Captain Jack and the Purgatory Crew ride to the rescue every time someone tells a lie?”

Uriel laughed. “No, of course not. Mortals are free to lie if they choose to do so. If they could not, they would not be free.” His eyes hardened. “But others are held to a higher standard. Their lies are far deadlier, far more potent.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“Imagine a being who was *there* when the first mortal drew the first breath,” Uriel said. Hard, angry flickers of light danced around us, notable even against formless white. “One who has watched humanity rise from the dust to spread across and to change the very face of the world. One who has seen, quite literally, tens of thousands of mortal lives begin, wax, wane, and end.”

“Someone like an angel,” I said quietly.

“Someone like that,” he said, showing his teeth briefly. “A being who could know a mortal’s entire life. Could know his dreams. His fears. His very thoughts. Such a being, so versed in human nature, in mortal patterns of thought, could reliably predict precisely how a given mortal would react to almost anything.” Uriel gestured at me. “For example, how he might react to a simple lie delivered at precisely the right moment.”

Uriel waved his hand and suddenly we were back in the utility room at St. Mary’s. Only I wasn’t lying on the backboard on a cot. Or, rather, I was doing exactly that—but I was also standing beside Uriel, at the door, looking in at myself.

“Do you remember what you were thinking?” Uriel asked me.

I did remember. I remembered with perfect clarity, in fact.

“I thought that I’d been defeated before. That people had even died because I failed. But those people had never been my own flesh and blood. They hadn’t been my child. I’d lost. I was beaten.” I shook my head. “I remember saying to myself that it was all over. And it was all your fault, Harry.”

“Ah,” Uriel said as I finished the last sentence, and he lifted his hand. “Now look.”

I blinked at him and then at the image of me lying on the cot. “I don’t . . .” I frowned. There was something odd about the shadows in the room, but . . .

“Here,” Uriel said, lifting a hand. Light shone from it as though from a sudden sunrise. It revealed the room, casting everything in stark relief—and I saw it.

A slender shadow crouched beside the cot, vague and difficult to notice, even by Uriel’s light—but it was there, and it was leaning as though to whisper in my ear.

And it was all your fault, Harry.

The thought, the memory, resonated in my head for a moment, and I shivered.

“That . . . that shadow. It’s an angel?”

“It was once,” he said, and his voice was gentle—and infinitely sad. “A long, long time ago.”

“One of the Fallen,” I breathed.

“Yes. Who knew how to lie to you, Harry.”

“Yeah, well. Blaming myself for bad stuff isn’t exactly, um . . . completely uncharacteristic for me, man.”

“I’m aware—as was that,” he said, nodding at the shadow. “It made the lie even stronger, to use your own practice against you. But that creature knew what it was doing. It’s all about timing. At that precise moment, in that exact state of mind, the single whisper it passed into your thoughts was enough to push your decision.” Uriel looked at me and smiled faintly. “It added enough

anger, enough self-recrimination, enough guilt, and enough despair to your deliberations to make you decide that destroying yourself was the only option left to you. It took your freedom away.” His eyes hardened again. “I attempt to discourage that sort of thing where possible. When I cannot, I am allowed to balance the scales.”

“I still don’t understand,” I said. “How does me coming back to haunt Chicago for a few nights balance anything?”

“Oh, it doesn’t,” Uriel said. “I can only act in a mirror of the offending action, I’m afraid.”

“You . . . just get to whisper in my ear?”

“To whisper seven words, in fact,” he said. “What you did . . . was elective.”

“Elective?” I asked.

“I had no direct involvement in your return. In my judgment, it needed to happen—but there was no *requirement* that you come back to Chicago,” Uriel said calmly. “You volunteered.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, yes. Duh. Because three of my friends were going to die if I didn’t.”

Uriel arched an eyebrow at me abruptly. Then he reached into the pocket of his jacket and withdrew a cell phone. He made it beep a couple of times, then turned on the speakerphone, and I heard a phone ringing.

“Murphy,” answered Captain Jack’s baritone.

“What’s this Dresden is telling me about three of his friends being hurt?”

“Dresden,” Jack said in an absent tone, as if searching his memory and finding nothing.

Uriel seemed mildly impatient. He wasn’t buying it. “Tall, thin, insouciant, and sent back to Chicago to search for his killer?”

“Oh, right, him,” Jack said. “That guy.”

“Yes,” Uriel said.

There was a guileless pause, and then Jack said, “What about him?”

Uriel, bless his angelic heart, closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep, calming breath. “Collin . . .” he said, in a reproofing, parental tone.

“I might have mentioned something about it,” Jack said. “Sure. Guy’s got a lot of friends. Friends are running around fighting monsters. I figure at least three of them are going to get hurt if he isn’t there to back them up. Seemed reasonable.”

“Collin,” Uriel said, his voice touched with an ocean of disappointment and a teaspoon of anger. “You *lied*.”

“I speculated,” Captain Jack replied. “I got him to do the right thing, didn’t I?”

“Collin, our purpose is to defend freedom—not to decide how it should be used.”

“Everything I told him was technically true, more or less, and I got the job done,” Jack said stubbornly. “Look, sir, if I were perfect, I wouldn’t be working here in the first place. Now, would I?”

And then he hung up. On speakerphone. On a freaking archangel.

I couldn’t help it. I let out a rolling belly laugh. “I just got suckered into doing this by . . . Stars and stones, you didn’t even *know* that he . . . Big bad angel boy, and you get the wool pulled over your eyes by . . .” I stopped trying to talk and just laughed.

Uriel eyed the phone, then me, and then tucked the little device away again, clearly nonplussed. “It doesn’t matter how well I believe I know your kind, Harry. They always manage to find some way to try my patience.”

It took me a moment to get the laughter under control, but I did. “Look, Uri, I don’t want to say . . .”

The archangel gave me a look so cold that my words froze in my throat.

“Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden,” he said quietly—and he said it exactly right, speaking my Name in a voice of that same absolute power that had so unnerved me before. “Do not attempt to familiarize my name. The part you left off happens to be rather important to who and what I am. Do you understand?”

I didn't. But as he spoke, I knew—not just suspected, but *knew*—that this guy could obliterate me, along with the planet I was standing on, with a simple thought. In fact, if what I'd read about archangels was right, Uriel could probably take apart *all* the planets. Like, all of them. Everywhere.

And I also knew that what I had just done had insulted him.

And . . . and frightened him.

I swallowed. It took me two tries, but I managed to whisper, "Aren't we just Mr. Sunshine today?"

Uriel blinked. He looked less than certain for a moment. Then he said, "Mr. Sunshine . . . is perfectly acceptable. I suppose."

I nodded. "Sorry," I said. "About your name. I didn't realize it was so, um . . ."

"Intimate," he said quietly. "Sensitive. Names have tremendous power, Dresden. Yet mortals toss them left and right as though they were toys. It's like watching infants play with hand grenades sometimes." The ghost of a smile touched his face as he glanced at me. "Some more so than others. And I forgive you, of course."

I nodded at him. Then, after a quiet moment, I asked, "What happens now?"

"That's up to you," Uriel said. "You can always work for me. I believe you would find it challenging to do so—and I would have considerable use for someone of your talents."

"For how long?" I asked. "I mean . . . for guys like Captain Jack? Is it forever?"

Uriel smiled. "Collin, like the others, is with me because he is not yet prepared to face what comes next. When he is, he'll take that step. For now, he is not."

"When you say *what comes next*, what do you mean, exactly?"

"The part involving words like *forever*, *eternity*, and *judgment*."

"Oh," I said. "What Comes Next."

"Exactly."

"So I can stay Between," I said quietly. "Or I can go get on that train."

"If you do," Uriel said, his eyes intent and serious, "then you accept the consequences for all that you have done while alive. When judged, what you have done will be taken into account. Your fate, ultimately, will be determined by your actions in life."

"You're saying that if I don't work for you, I'll just have to accept what comes?"

"I am saying that you cannot escape the consequences of your choices," he said.

I frowned at him for a minute. Then I said, "If I get on the train, it might just carry me straight to Hell."

"I can't talk to you about that," he said. "What comes next is about faith, Harry. Not knowledge."

I folded my arms. "What if I dig the ghost routine?"

"You don't," Uriel replied. "But even if you did, I would point out to you that your spiritual essence has been all but disintegrated. You would not last long as a shade, nor would you have the strength to aid and protect your loved ones. Should you lose your sanity, you might even become a danger to them—but if that is your desire, I can facilitate it."

I shook my head, trying to think. Then I said, "It . . . depends."

"Upon?"

"My friends," I said quietly. "My family. I have to know that they're all right."

Uriel watched me for a moment and then opened his mouth to speak, shaking his head a little as he did.

"Stop," I said, pointing a finger at him. "Don't you dare tell me to make this choice in the dark. Captain Jack gave me a half-truth that sent me running around Chicago again. Another angel told me a lie that got me killed. If you really care so much about my free will, you'll be willing to help me make a free, informed choice, just as if I was a grown-up. So either admit that you're trying to push me in your own direction or else put your principles where your mouth is and make like the Ghost of Christmas Present."

He stared at me for a long moment, his brow furrowed. "From your perspective . . . yes, I suppose it does look that way." Then he nodded firmly and extended his arm toward me. "Take my hand."

I did.

The white expanse gave way to reality once more. Suddenly, I stood with Uriel inside the Corpsetaker's hideout, on the stairs where that final confrontation had come. Molly was at the top of the stairs, leaning back against the wall. Her body was twisting and straining, her chest heaving with desperate breaths. Blood ran from both nostrils and had filled the sclera of her eyes, turning them into inhuman-looking blue-and-red stones. She let out little gasps and choked screams, along with whispered snatches of words that didn't make any sense.

Uriel did that thing with his hand again, and suddenly I could see Molly even more clearly—and saw that some kind of hideous mass was wound around her, like a python constricting its prey. It consisted of strands of some kind of slimy jelly, purple and black and covered with pulsing pustules that reeked of corruption and decay.

Corpsetaker.

Molly's duel with the Corpsetaker was still under way.

Butters's body lay at Molly's feet, empty of life and movement. And his shade—now I could see that it was bound into near immobility by threads of the Corpsetaker's dark magic—stood exactly as he had when I last saw him, staring down at his own body in horror. Down here in the electrical-junction room, Murphy and the wolves were bound with threads of the same dark magic as Butters—a sleeping spell that had compelled them all into insensibility.

Molly whimpered, drawing my gaze back to the top of the stairs as her legs gave way. She slid slowly down the wall, her eyes rolling wildly. Her mouth started moving more surely, her voice becoming stronger. And darker. For about two seconds, one of the Corpsetaker's hate-filled laughs rolled from Molly's lips. That hideous, slimy mass began to simply ooze into the young woman's skin.

"Do something," I said to Uriel.

He shook his head. "I cannot interfere. This battle was Molly's choice. She knew the risks and chose to hazard them."

"She isn't strong enough," I snapped. "She can't take on that thing."

Uriel arched an eyebrow. "Were you under the impression that she did not know that from the beginning, Harry? Yet she did it."

"Because she feels guilty," I said. "Because she blames herself for my death. She's in the same boat I was."

"No," Uriel said. "None of the Fallen twisted her path."

"No, that was me," I said, "but only because one of them got to me."

"Nonetheless," Uriel said, "that choice was yours—and hers."

"You're just going to stand there?" I asked.

Uriel folded his arms and tapped his chin with one fingertip. "Mmmm. It does seem that perhaps she deserves some form of aid. Perhaps if I'd had the presence of mind to see to it that some sort of agent had been sent to balance the scales, to give her that one tiny bit of encouragement, that one flicker of inspiration that turned the tide . . ." He shook his head sadly. "Things might be different now."

And, as if on cue, Mortimer Lindquist, ectomancer, limped out of the lower hallway and into the electrical-junction room, with Sir Stuart's shade at his right hand.

Mort took a look around, his dark eyes intent, and then his gaze locked onto Molly.

"Hey," he croaked. "You. Arrogant bitch ghost."

Molly's eyes snapped fully open and flicked to Mort. They were filled with more bitter, venomous hate than my apprentice could ever have put into them.

"I'm not really into this whole hero thing," Mort said. "Don't have the temperament for it. Don't know a lot about the villain side of the equation, either." He planted his feet, facing the Corpsetaker squarely, his hands clenched into fists at his side. "But it seems to me, you half-wit, that you probably shouldn't have left a freaking *ectomancer* a pit full of wraiths to play with."

And with a howl, more than a thousand wraiths came boiling around the corner in a cloud of clawing hands, gnashing teeth, and screaming hunger. They rode on a wave of Mort's power and no longer drifted with lazy, disconnected grace. Now they came forth like rushing storm clouds, like racing wolves, like hungry sharks, a tide of mindless destruction.

I saw Molly's eyes widen and the pulsing spiritual mass that was the Corpsetaker began to pull away from the young woman.

My apprentice didn't let her.

Molly let out a wheezing cackle and both hands formed into claws that clutched at the air. I saw the energy of her own magic surround her fingers so that she grasped onto the Corpsetaker's essence as if it had been a nearly physical thing. The necromancer's spirit began to ooze through Molly's grip. The exhausted girl could only slow the Corpsetaker down.

But it was enough.

The tide of wraiths slammed into the Corpsetaker like a freight train, their wails blending into a sound that I had heard before, in the train tunnel where Carmichael saved me. The Corpsetaker had begun to resume her usual form the instant she disengaged from Molly, and I could see the sudden shock and horror in her beautiful eyes as that spiritual tide overwhelmed her. I saw her struggle uselessly as the wraith train carried her up the stairs and out into the night. The train swept her straight up into the air—and then reversed itself and slammed her down, into the earth.

I saw her try to scream.

But all I heard was the blaring howl of the horn of a southbound train.

And then she was gone.

"You're right," Uriel said, his tone filled with a chill satisfaction. "Someone needed to do something." He glanced aside at me, gave me a slight bow of his head, and said, "Well-done."

Mort limped up the stairs to check on Molly. "You're the one who called to me, eh?"

Molly looked up at him, obviously too exhausted to move more than her head. "Harry . . . Well, it's sort of complicated to explain what was going on. But he told me you could help."

"Guess he was right," Mort said.

"Where is he?" Molly asked. "I mean . . . his ghost."

Mort glanced around and looked right at me—right through me. He shook his head. "Not here."

Molly closed her eyes and began to cry quietly.

"I got her, boss," Molly said quietly. "We got her. And I'm still here. Still me. Thank you."

"She's thanking me," I said quietly. "For that."

"And much more," Uriel said. "She still has her life. Her future. Her freedom. You did save her, you know. The idea to have her call to Mortimer in the closing moments of the psychic battle was inspired."

"I've cost her too much," I said quietly.

"I believe that when you went after your daughter, you said something about letting the world burn. That you and your daughter would roast marshmallows."

I nodded bleakly.

"It is one thing for you to say, 'Let the world burn.' It is another to say, 'Let Molly burn.' The difference is all in the name."

"Yeah," I croaked. "I'm starting to realize that. Too late to do any good. But I get it."

Uriel gave me a steady look and said nothing.

I shook my head. "Get some rest, kid," I called, though I knew she wouldn't hear me. "You've earned it."

The scene unfolded. Murphy and the wolves woke up less than a minute after the Corpsetaker was shown to the door. Will and company changed back to their human forms, while Mort, after a whispered tip from Sir Stuart, rushed over to Butters's fallen body. He worked a subtle, complex magic that made some of mine look pretty crude, and drew Butters's spirit from the disintegrating tangle of the Corpsetaker's spell and back down into his physical body.

It took several minutes, and when Butters woke up, Andi and Marci, both naked, both rather pleasant that way, were giving him CPR. They'd kept his body alive in the absence of his soul.

"Wow," Butters slurred as he opened his eyes. He looked back and forth between the two werewolf girls. "Subtract the horrible pain in my chest, this migraine, and all the mold and mildew, and I'm living the dream."

Then he passed out.

The cops showed up a bit after that. Two of them were guys Murphy knew. The werewolves vanished into the night a couple of seconds before the blue bubbles of the cop cars showed up, taking the illegal portions of Murphy's armament with them. Murphy and Mort told them all about how Mort had been abducted and tortured by the Big Hoods, and if they didn't tell the whole story, what they did tell was one hundred percent true.

Molly and Butters got handed off to EMTs, along with several of the Big Hoods who had been knocked around and chewed up. Mort got some attention, too, though he refused to be taken to a hospital. The rest of the Big Hoods got a pair of cuffs and a ride downtown. Boz was carted out like a tranquilized rhinoceros.

Karrin and Mort stood around outside as the uniforms sorted everything out, and I walked over to stand close enough to hear them.

". . . came back to help," Mort said. "It happens sometimes. Some people die feeling that something was incomplete. I guess Dresden thought that he hadn't done enough to make a difference around here." Mort shook his head. "As if the big goon didn't turn everything upside down whenever he showed up."

Karrin smiled faintly and shook her head. "He always said you knew ghosts. You're sure it was really him?"

Mort eyed her. "Me and everyone else, yeah."

Karrin scowled and stared into the middle distance.

Mort frowned and then his expression softened. "You didn't want it to be his ghost. Did you?"

Murphy shook her head slowly, but said nothing.

"You needed everyone to be wrong about it. Because if it really was his ghost," Mort said, "it means that he really is dead."

Murphy's face . . . just crumpled. Her eyes overflowed and she bowed her head. Her body shook in silence.

Mort chewed on his lip for a moment, then glanced at the cops on the scene. He didn't say anything else to Murphy or try to touch her—but he did put himself between her and everyone else, so that no one would see her crying.

Damn.

I wished I'd been bright enough to see what kind of guy Morty was while I was still alive.

I stood there watching Karrin for a moment and then turned away. It hurt too much to see her in pain when I couldn't reach out and touch her, or make an off-color joke, or find some way to give her a creative insult or otherwise show her that I cared.

It didn't seem fair that I should get to say good-bye to her, even if she couldn't hear it. She hadn't gotten to say it to me. So I didn't say anything. I gave her a last look and then I walked away.

I went back over to Uriel to find him conversing with Sir Stuart.

"Don't know," Sir Stuart was saying. "I'm not . . . not as right as I used to be, sir."

"There's more than enough left to rebuild on," Uriel said. "Trust me. The ruins of a spirit like Sir Stuart's are more substantial than most men ever manage to dredge up. I'd be very pleased to

have you working for me.”

“My descendant,” Sir Stuart said, frowning over at Morty.

Uriel watched Mort shielding Karrin’s sorrow and said, “You’ve watched over him faithfully, Stuart. And he’s grown a great deal in the past few years. I think he’s going to be fine.”

Sir Stuart’s shade looked at Mortimer and smiled, undeniable pride in his features. Then he glanced at Uriel and said, “I still get to fight, aye?”

Uriel gave him a very sober look and said, “I think I can find you something.”

Sir Stuart thought about it for a moment and then nodded. “Aye, sir. Aye. I’ve been in this town too long. A new billet is just what I need.”

Uriel looked past Sir Stuart to me and winked. “Excellent,” he said, and shook hands with Sir Stuart. “A man named Carmichael will be in touch.”

I lingered until everyone had vanished into the thick mist that still cloaked the earth. It took less time than it usually did for these sorts of things; no one had died. No need to call in the lab guys. The uniform cops closed the old metal door as best they could, drew a big X over it with crime-scene tape, and seemed willing to ignore the hole that had been blasted in it.

“They’re going to be all right, you know,” Uriel said quietly. “Tonight’s injuries will not be lethal to any of them.”

“Thank you,” I said. “For telling me that.”

He nodded. “Have you decided?”

I shook my head. “Show me my brother.”

He arched an eyebrow at me. Then he shrugged, and once again offered his hand.

We vanished from the night and appeared in a very expensively furnished apartment. I recognized my brother’s place at once.

It had changed a bit. The brushed steel décor had been softened. The old Broadway musical posters had been replaced with paintings, mostly pastoral landscapes that provided an interesting counterpoint of warmth to the original style of the place. Candles and other decorative pieces had filled in the rather Spartan spaces I remembered, adding still more warmth. All in all, the place looked a lot more like a home now, a lot less like a dressed stage.

A couple of things were out of place. There was a chair in the living room positioned in front of the large flat-screen, high-definition television set the size of a dining room table. The chair was upholstered in brown leather and looked comfortable, and it didn’t match the rest of the room. There were also food stains on it. Empty liquor bottles littered the side table next to it.

The door opened and my brother, Thomas, walked in. He might have been an inch under six feet tall, though it was hard for me to tell—he had worn so many different kinds of fashionable shoes that his height was always changing subtly. He had dark hair, currently as long as my shortest finger, and it was a mess. Not only was it messy, it was *simply* messy, instead of attractively messy, and for Thomas that was hideous. He had a couple of weeks’ growth of beard; not long enough to be an actual beard yet, but too long to be a sexy shadow.

His cold grey eyes were sunken, with dark rings beneath them. He wore jeans and a T-shirt with drink stains on it. He hadn’t even pretended to need a coat against the night’s cold, and breaking their easily maintained cover as human beings was something that the vampires of the White Court simply did not do. For God’s sake, he was barefoot. He’d just walked out like that, apparently to the nearest liquor store.

My brother took a bottle of whiskey—expensive whiskey—from a paper bag and let the bag fall to the floor. Then he sat down in the brown leather chair, pointed a remote at the television, and clicked it on. He clicked buttons and it skipped through several channels. He stopped clicking based, apparently, on his need to take a drink, and stopped on some kind of sports channel where they were playing rugby.

Then he simply sat, slugged from the bottle, and stared.

“It’s hard for the half-born,” Uriel observed in a quiet, neutral tone.

“What did you call him?” I asked. Belligerently. Which probably wasn’t really bright, but Thomas was my brother. I didn’t like the thought of anyone judging him.

“The scions of mortals and immortals,” Uriel said, unperturbed. “Halflings, half-bloods, half-born. The mortal road is difficult enough without adding a share of our burdens to it as well.”

I grunted. “That skinwalker got hold of him a while back. It broke something in him.”

“The naagloshii feel a need to prove that every creature they meet is as flawed and prone to darkness as they themselves proved to be,” Uriel said. “It . . . gives them some measure of false peace, I think, to lie to themselves like that.”

“You sound like you feel sorry for them,” I said, my voice hard.

“I feel sorry for all the pain they have, and more so for all that they inflict on others. Your brother offers ample explanation for my feelings.”

“What that thing did to Thomas. How is that different from what the Fallen did to me?”

“He didn’t die as a result,” Uriel said bluntly. “He still has choice.” He added, in a softer voice, “What the naagloshii did to him was not your fault.”

“I know that,” I said, not very passionately.

The door to the apartment opened, and a young woman entered. She was in her twenties and gorgeous. Her face and figure were appealing, glowing with vitality and health, and her hair was like white silk. She wore a simple dress and a long coat, and she slipped out of her shoes immediately upon entering.

Justine paused at the door and stared steadily at Thomas for a long moment.

“Did you eat anything today?” she asked.

Thomas flicked the television to another channel and turned up the volume.

Justine pressed her lips together. Then she walked with firm, purposeful strides into the apartment’s back bedroom.

She came out again a moment later, preceded by the click of her high heels. She was dressed in red lace underthings that left just enough to the imagination, and in the same shade of heels. She looked like the cover of a Victoria’s Secret catalog, and moved with a sort of subsurface, instinctive sensuality that could make dead men stir with interest. I had empirical evidence of the fact.

But I also knew that my brother couldn’t touch her. The touch of love, or anyone who was truly beloved, was anathema to the White Court, like holy water was for Hollywood vampires. Thomas and Justine had nearly killed themselves for the sake of saving the other, and ever since then, every time my brother touched her, he came away with second-degree burns.

“If you don’t feed soon, you’re going to lose control of the Hunger,” she said.

Thomas looked away from her. He turned up the television.

She moved one long, lovely leg and, with the toe of her pump, flicked off the main switch of the power strip the television was plugged into. It turned off, and the apartment was abruptly silent.

“You think you’re going to hurt my feelings if you take a lover, even though I’ve given you my blessing. You are irrational. And at this point, I’m not sure you’re capable of thinking clearly about the consequences of your actions.”

“I don’t need you telling me how to deal with the Hunger,” Thomas said in a low voice. He looked at her, and though he was at least a little angry, there was an aching, naked hunger in his gaze as his eyes traveled over her. “Why are you torturing me like this?”

“Because I’m tired of the way you’ve been torturing yourself since Harry died,” she said quietly. “It wasn’t your fault. And it hurts too much to watch you do this every day.”

“He was on my boat,” Thomas said. “If he hadn’t been there—”

“He’d have died somewhere else,” Justine said firmly. “He made enemies, Thomas. And he knew that. You knew that.”

“I should have been with him,” Thomas said. “I might have done something. Seen something.”

“And you might not have,” Justine replied. She shook her head. “No. It’s time, my love, to stop indulging your guilt this way.” Her lips quirked. “It’s just so . . . very emo. And I think we’ve had enough of that.”

Thomas blinked.

Justine walked over to him. I swear, her walk would have been enough to try the chaste thoughts of a saint. Even Uriel seemed to appreciate it. With that same slow, gentle sensuality, she bent over—itsself quite a lovely sight—and took the bottle from Thomas. Then she walked back across the room and put it on a shelf.

“Love. I am going to put an end to this Hunger strike of yours tonight.”

Thomas’s eyes were growing paler by the heartbeat, but he frowned. “Love . . . you know that I can’t. . . .”

Justine arched a dark eyebrow at him. “You can’t . . . ?”

He ground his teeth. “Touch you. Have you. The protection of being united with someone who loves you will burn me—even though I was the one who gave it to you.”

“Thomas,” Justine said, “you are a dear, dear man. But there is a way around that, you know. A rather straightforward method for removing the protection of having had sex with you, my love.”

A key slipped into the apartment’s door, and another young woman entered. She had dark-shaded skin, and there was an exotic, reddish sheen to her straight black hair. Her dark chocolate eyes were huge and sultry, and she wore a black trench coat and black heels—and, it turned out, when the trench coat fell to the floor, that was the extent of her wardrobe.

“This is Mara,” Justine said, extending a hand, and the girl crossed the room to slide her arms around Justine. Justine gave Mara’s lips an almost sisterly kiss and then turned to Thomas, her eyes smoldering. “Now, love. I’m going to have her—without deeply committed love, perhaps, but with considerable affection and healthy desire. And after that, you’re going to be able to have me. And you will. And things will be much better.”

My brother’s eyes gleamed bright silver.

“Repeat,” Justine murmured, her lips caressing the words, “as necessary.”

I felt my cheeks heat up and coughed. Then I turned to Uriel and said, “Under the circumstances . . .”

The archangel looked amused at my discomfort. “Yes?”

I glanced at the girls, who were kissing again, and sighed. “Yeah, uh. I think my brother’s going to be fine.”

“Then you’re ready?” Uriel asked.

I looked at him and smiled faintly.

“I wondered when we’d get around to that,” he said, and once more extended his hand.

* * *

This time, we appeared in front of a Chicago home. There were a couple of ancient oak trees in the yard. The house was a white Colonial number with a white picket fence out front, and evidence of children in the form of several snowmen that were slowly sagging to their deaths in the warm evening air.

There were silent forms standing outside the house, men in dark suits and long coats. One stood beside the front door. One stood at each corner of the house, on the roof, as calmly as if they hadn’t had their feet planted on an icy surface inches from a potentially fatal fall. Two more stood at the corners of the property in the front yard, and a couple of steps and a lean to one side showed me at least one more in the backyard, at the back corner of the property.

“More guardian angels,” I said.

“Michael Carpenter has more than earned them,” Uriel said, his voice warm. “As has his family.”

I looked sharply at Uriel. “She’s . . . she’s *here*?”

“Forthill wanted to find the safest home in which he could possibly place your daughter, Dresden,” Uriel said. “All in all, I don’t think he could have done much better.”

I swallowed. “She’s . . . I mean, she’s . . . ?”

“Cared for,” Uriel said. “Loved, of course. Do you think Michael and Charity would do less for your child, when you have so often saved their children?”

I blinked some tears out of my eyes. Stupid eyes. “No. No, of course not.” I swallowed and tried to make my voice sound normal. “I want to see her.”

“This isn’t a hostage negotiation, Dresden,” Uriel murmured, but he was smiling. He walked up to the house and exchanged nods with the guardian angel at the door. We passed through it, ghost style, though it wouldn’t have been possible for actual ghosts. The Carpenters had a threshold more solid and extensive than the Great Wall of China. I would not be in the least surprised if you could see it from space.

We walked through my friend’s silent, sleeping house. The Carpenters were early to bed, early to rise types. Inexplicable, but I suppose nobody’s perfect. Uriel led me upstairs, past two more guardian angels, and into one of the upstairs bedrooms—one that had, once upon a time, been Charity’s sewing room and spare bedroom. Hapless wizards had been known to find rest there once in a while.

We went through the door and were greeted by a low, warning rumble. A great mound of shaggy fur, lying beside the room’s single, twin bed, rose to its feet.

“Mouse,” I said, and dropped to my knees.

I wept openly as my dog all but bounced at me. He was obviously joyous and just as obviously trying to mute his delight—but his tail thumped loudly against everything in the room, and puppyish sounds of pleasure came from his throat as he slobbered on my face, giving me kisses.

I sank my fingers into his fur and found it warm and solid and real, and I scratched him and hugged him and told him what a good dog he was.

Uriel stood over us, smiling down, but said nothing.

“Missed you, too, boy,” I said. “Just . . . kind of stopping by to say good-bye.”

Mouse’s tail stopped wagging. His big, doggy eyes regarded me very seriously, and then glanced at Uriel.

“What has begun must finish, little brother,” Uriel said. “Your task here is not yet over.”

Mouse regarded the archangel for a moment and then huffed out a breath in a huge sigh and leaned against me.

I scratched him some more and hugged him—and looked past him, to where my daughter slept.

Maggie Dresden was a dark-haired, dark-eyed child, which had been all but inevitable given her parents’ coloring. Her skin tone was a bit darker than mine, which I thought looked healthier than my skin ever had. I got kind of pasty, what with all the time in my lab and reading and running around after dark. Her features were . . . well, perfect. Beautiful. The first time I’d seen her in the flesh, despite everything else that was going on at the time, somewhere under the surface I had been shocked by how gorgeous she was. She was the most beautiful child I’d ever seen, like, in the movies or anywhere.

But I guess maybe all parents see that when they look at their kids. It isn’t rational. That doesn’t make it any less true.

She slept with the boneless relaxation of the very young, her arms carelessly thrown over her head. She wore one of Molly’s old T-shirts as pajamas. It had an old, worn, iron-on decal of R2-D2 on it, with the caption BEEP BEEP DE DEEP KERWOOO under it.

I knelt down by her, stroking Mouse’s fur, but when I tried to touch her hand, mine passed through hers, immaterial. I leaned my head against Mouse’s big, solid skull, and sighed.

“She’ll have a good life here,” I said quietly. “People who care about her. Who love kids.”

“Yes,” Uriel said.

Mouse’s tail thumped several more times.

“Yeah, buddy. And she’ll have you.” I glanced up at Uriel. “For how long? I mean, most dogs . . .”

“Temple dogs have been known to live for centuries,” he replied. “Your friend is more than capable of protecting her for a lifetime—even a wizard’s lifetime, if need be.”

That made me feel a little better. I knew what it was like to grow up without my birth parents around, and what a terrible loss it was not to have that sense of secure continuation most of the other kids around me had. Maggie had lost her foster parents, and then her birth mother, and then her biological father. She had another foster home now—but she would always have Mouse.

“Hell,” I said to Mouse, “for all I know, you’ll be smarter than I would have been about dealing with her, anyway.”

Mouse snorted, grinning a doggy grin. He couldn’t speak, but I could effortlessly imagine his response—of course he’d be smarter than I was. That particular bar hadn’t been set very high.

“Take care of her, buddy,” I said to Mouse, and gave his shoulders a couple of firm pats with my fists. “I know you’ll take good care of her.”

Mouse sat up away from me, his expression attentive and serious, and then, very deliberately, offered me his paw.

I shook hands with him gravely, and then rose to face the archangel.

“All right,” I said quietly. “I’m ready.”

Chapter Fifty-one

Uriel extended his hand again, and I took it.

The Carpenters' house faded from around us and we reappeared in the world of empty white light. There was one difference this time. Two glass doors stood in front of us. One of them led to an office building—in fact, I recognized it as the interior of Captain Jack's department in Chicago Between. I saw Carmichael go by the door, consulting a notepad and fishing in his pocket for his car keys.

The other door led only to darkness. That was the uncertain future. It was What Came Next.

"I can hardly remember the last time I spent this much time with one particular mortal," Uriel said thoughtfully. "I wish I had time to do it more often."

I looked at him for a long moment and said, "I don't understand."

He laughed. It was a sound that seethed with warmth and life.

I found myself smiling and joined him. "I don't understand what your game is in all of this."

"Game?"

I shrugged. "Your people conned me into taking a pretty horrible risk with my soul. I guess. If that's what you call this." I waved a hand. "And you've got plausible deniability—I know, I know—or maybe you really are sincere and Captain Murphy threw a curveball past all of us. Either way . . . it doesn't make sense."

"Why not?" Uriel asked.

"Because it doesn't have anything to do with balancing the scales of one of the Fallen lying to me," I said. "You haven't done any fortunecookie whispers into my head, have you?"

"No," he said. "Not yet."

"Well, that's what I mean," I said. "The scale *still* isn't balanced. And I don't think you send people back just for kicks."

Uriel regarded me pleasantly. He said nothing.

"So you did it for a reason. Something you couldn't have gotten with your seven whispered words."

"Perhaps it was to balance the situation with Molly," he said.

I snorted. "Yeah. I bet all the time you go around solving your problems one by one, in neat little rows. I bet you never, ever try to hit two birds with one stone."

Uriel regarded me pleasantly. He said nothing.

"I'm headed for the great beyond, and you still won't give me a straight answer?" I demanded, smiling.

Uriel regarded me pleasantly. He said nothing. A lot.

I laughed again. "Tell you what, big guy. Just tell me something. Something useful. I'll be happy with whatever I get."

He pursed his lips and thought about it for a moment. Then he said, "No matter where you go, there you are."

I blinked. "Goodness," I said. "Buckaroo Banzai?"

"Confucius," he said.

"Wow. How very fortune cookie of you." I gave him a half smile and offered him my hand. "But despite your cryptic ways, I'm sure of one thing now that I wasn't before."

"Oh?"

"Souls," I said. "I mean, you always wonder if they're real. Even if you believe in them, you still have to wonder: Is my existence just this body? Is there really something more? Do I really have a soul?"

Uriel's smile blossomed again. "You've got it backward, Harry," he said. "You *are* a soul. You *have* a body."

I blinked at that. It was something to think about. "Mr. Sunshine, it has been a dubious and confusing pleasure."

"Harry," he said, shaking my hand. "I feel the same way."

I released his hand, nodded, and squared my shoulders.

Then, moving briskly, lest my resolve waver, I opened the black door and stepped through.

Given the way my life has typically progressed, I probably should have guessed that What Came Next was pain.

A whole *lot* of pain.

I tried to take a breath, and a searing burst of agony radiated out from my chest. I held off on the next breath for as long as I could, but eventually I couldn't put it off anymore, and again fire spread across my chest.

I repeated that cycle for several moments, my entire reality consumed by the simple struggle to breathe and to avoid the pain. I was on the losing side of things, and if the pain didn't exactly lessen, it did, eventually, become more bearable.

"Good," whispered a dry, rasping voice. "Very good."

I felt the rest of my body next. I was lying on something cool and contoured. It wasn't precisely comfortable, but it wasn't a torment, either. I clenched my fingers, but something was wrong with them. They barely moved. It was as though someone had replaced my bones and flesh with lead weights, heavy and inert, and my tendons and muscles were too weak to break the inertia. But I felt cool, damp earth crumbling beneath my fingertips.

"Doesn't seem to bode well," I mumbled. My tongue didn't work right. My lips didn't, either. The words came out a slushy mumble.

"Excellent," rasped the voice. "I told you he had strength enough."

My thoughts resonated abruptly with another voice, one that had no point of contact with my ears: *WE WILL SEE*.

What had my godmother said at my grave? That it was all about respect and . . .

. . . and proxies.

"The eyes," rasped the voice. "Open your eyes, mortal."

My eyelids were in the same condition as everything else. They didn't want to move. But I made them. I realized that they felt cooler than the rest of my skin, as if someone had recently wiped them with a damp washcloth.

I opened them and cried out weakly at the intensity of the light.

I waited for a moment, then tried again. Then again. On the four or five hundredth try, I was finally able to see.

I was in a cave, lit by wan, onion-colored light. I could see a roof of rock and earth, with roots of trees as thick as my waist trailing through here and there. Water dripped down from overhead, all around me. I could hear it. Some dropped onto my lips, and I licked at it. It tasted sweet, sweeter than double-thick cherry syrup, and I shivered in pleasure this time.

I was *starving*.

I looked around me slowly. It made my head feel like it was about to fly apart every time I twitched it, but I persevered. I was, so far as I could tell, naked. I was lying on fine, soft earth that had somehow been contoured to the shape of my body. There were pine needles—soft ones—spread about beneath me in lieu of a blanket, their scent sharp and fresh.

There was a dull throb coming from my arms, and I looked down to see . . .

There were . . . roots or vines or something, growing *into* me. They wrapped around my wrists and penetrated the skin there, structures that were plantlike but pale and spongy-looking. I could barely make out some kind of fluid flowing through the tendrils and presumably into my body. I wanted to scream and thrash my arms, but it just seemed like too much work. A moment later, my

leaden thoughts notified me that the vines looked something like . . . an intravenous fluid line. An IV.

What the hell kind of Hell was this supposed to be?

I realized that something rounded and unyielding was supporting my head. I twitched and moved myself enough to look up, and realized that my head was being held in someone's lap.

"Ah," whispered the voice. "Now you begin to understand."

I looked up still farther . . . and found myself staring into the face of Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness, the veritable mother of wicked faeries herself.

Mab looked . . . not cadaverous. It wasn't a word that applied. Her skin seemed stretched tight over her bones, her face distorted to inhuman proportions. Her emerald green eyes were inhumanly huge in that sunken face, her teeth unnaturally sharp. She brushed a hand over one of my cheeks, and her fingers looked too long, her nails grown out like claws. Her arms looked like nothing but bone and sinew with skin stretched over them, and her elbows were somehow too large, too swollen, to look even remotely human. Mab didn't look like a cadaver. She looked like some kind of nearly starved insect, a praying mantis smiling down at its first meal in weeks.

"Oh," I said, and if my speech was halting, at least it sounded almost human. "That kind of Hell."

Mab tilted back her head and cackled. It was a dull, brittle sound, like the edge of a rusted knife. "No," she said. "Alas, no, my knight. No, you have not escaped. I have far too much work for your hand to allow that. Not yet."

I stared at her dully, which was probably the only way I was capable of staring at the moment. Then I croaked, "I'm . . . alive?"

Her smile widened even more. "And *well*, my dear knight."

I grunted. It was all the enthusiasm I could summon. "Yay?"

"It makes me feel like singing," Mab's voice grated from between sharp teeth. "Welcome back, O my knight, to the green lands of the living."

ENOUGH, said that enormous thought-voice, the same one from the graveyard, but less mind annihilating. *THE FOOLISH GAMBLE IS CONCLUDED. HIS PHYSICAL NEEDS MUST BE MET.*

"I know what I am doing," Mab purred. Or it would have been a purr, if cats had been made from steel wool. "Fear not, ancient thing. Your custodian lives."

I turned my head slowly the other way. After a subjective century, I was able to see the other figure in the cave.

It was enormous, a being that had to crouch not to bump its head on the ceiling. It was, more or less, human in form—but I could see little of that form. It was almost entirely concealed in a vast cloak of dark green, with shadows hiding whatever lay beneath it. The cloak's hood covered its head, but I could see tiny green fires, like small, flickering clouds of fireflies, burning within the hood's shadowed depth.

Demonreach. The genius loci of the intensely weird, unmapped island in the middle of Lake Michigan. We'd . . . sort of had an arrangement, made a couple of years back. And I was beginning to think that maybe I hadn't fully understood the extent of that arrangement.

"I'm . . . on the island?" I rasped.

YOU ARE HERE.

"Long have this old thing and I labored to keep your form alive, my knight," Mab said. "Long have we kept flesh and bone and blood knit together and stirring, waiting for your spirit's return."

MAB GAVE YOU BREATH. HERE PROVIDED NOURISHMENT. THE PARASITE MAINTAINED THE FLOW OF BLOOD.

Parasite? What?

I'd already had a really, really long day.

"But . . . I got shot," I mumbled.

"My knight," Mab hissed, the statement one of possession. "Your broken body fell from your ship into cold and darkness—and they are *my* domain."

THE COLD QUEEN BROUGHT YOU TO HERE, Demonreach emitted. My head was starting to ache, hearing his psychic voice. *YOUR PHYSICAL VESSEL WAS PRESERVED*.

"And now here you are," Mab murmured. "Oh, the Quiet One angered us, sending your essence out unprotected. Had he been incorrect, I would have been robbed of my knight, and the old monster of his custodian."

OUR INTERESTS COINCIDED.

I blinked slowly, and again my lagging brain started catching up to me.

Mab had me.

I hadn't escaped her. I hadn't escaped what she could make me become.

Oh, God.

And all the people who'd gotten hurt, helping me . . . They'd done it for *nothing*.

"Told me . . . I was dead," I muttered.

"*Dead* is a grey word," Mab hissed. "Mortals fear it, and so they wish it to be black—and they have but few words to contain its reality. It escapes from such constraints. Death is a spectrum, not a line. And you, my knight, had not yet vanished into the utter darkness."

I licked at my lips again. "Guess . . . you're kind of upset with me. . . ."

"You attempted to *cheat* the Queen of Air and Darkness," Mab hissed. "You practiced a vile, wicked deception upon me, my knight." Her inhuman eyes glittered. "I expected no less of you. Were you not strong enough to cast such defiance into my teeth, you would be useless to my purposes." Her smile widened. "To *our* purposes now."

The very ground seemed to quiver, to let out an unthinkable low, deep, angry growl.

Mab's eyes snapped to Demonreach. "I have his oath, ancient one. What he has given is mine by right, and you may not gainsay it. He is mine to shape as I please."

"Dammit," I said tiredly. "Dammit."

And a voice—a very calm, very gentle, very rational voice whispered in my ear, "Lies. Mab cannot change who you are."

I struggled and twitched my fingers. "Five," I muttered, "Six. Seven. Heh." I couldn't help it. I laughed again. It hurt like hell and it felt wonderful. "Heh. Heh."

Mab had gone very still. She stared at me with wide eyes, her alien face void of expression.

"No," I said then, weakly. "No. Maybe I'm your knight. But I'm not yours."

Emerald fire flickered in her eyes, cold and angry. "What?"

"You can't make me your monster," I slurred. "Doesn't work. And you know it."

Mab's eyes grew colder, more distant. "Oh?"

"You can make me do things," I said. "You can mess with my head. But all that makes me is a thug." The effort of so many words cost me. I had to take a moment to rest before I continued. "You wanted a thug; you get that from anywhere. Lloyd Slate was a thug. Plenty where he came from."

Demonreach's burning eyes flickered, and a sense of something like cold satisfaction came from the cloaked giant.

"Said it yourself: need someone like me." I met Mab's eyes with mine and curled my upper lip into a sneer. "Go on. Try to change me. The second you do, the second I think you've played with my head or altered my memory, the first time you compel me to do something, I'll do the one thing you can't have in your new knight." I lifted my head a little, and I knew that I must have looked a little crazy as I spoke. "I'll *do* it. I'll follow your command. And I will do *nothing* else. I'll make every task you command one you must personally oversee. I'll have the initiative of a garden statue. And do you know what that will give you, my queen?"

Her eyes burned. "What?"

I felt my own smile widen. "A mediocre knight," I said. "And mediocrity, my queen, is a terrible, terrible fate."

Her voice came forth from lips so cold that frost began forming on them. The next drop of water to fall on me thumped gently, a tiny piece of sleet. "Do you think I cannot punish you for

such defiance? Do you think I cannot visit such horrors upon those you love as to create legends that last a thousand years?"

I didn't flinch. "I think you've got too much on your plate already," I spat back. "I think you don't have the time or the energy to spare to fight your own knight anymore. I think you need me, or you wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of keeping me alive for this long, of taxing your strength this much to get it done. You need me. Or else why are you here? In Chicago? In May?"

Again, the inhuman eyes raked at mine. But when she spoke, her voice was very, very soft and far more terrible than a moment before. "I am not some mortal merchant to be bargained with. I am not some petty president to be argued with. I am Mab."

"You are Mab," I said. "And I owe you a debt for preserving my life. For giving me the power I needed to save my daughter's life. Don't think that I have forgotten that."

The faerie's expression finally changed. She frowned and tilted her head slightly, as if puzzled. "Then why this defiance? When you know I will take vengeance for it?"

"Because my soul is my own," I said quietly. "You cannot steal it from me. You cannot change it. You cannot buy it. I am mine, Mab. I have fought long and hard against horrors even you would respect. I have been beaten, but I have not yielded. I'm not going to start yielding now. If I did, I wouldn't be the weapon you need."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I will be the Winter Knight," I told her. "I will be the most terrifying Knight the Sidhe Courts have ever known. I will send your enemies down in defeat and make your power grow." I smiled again. "But I do it my way. On my terms. When you give me the task, I'll decide how it gets done—and you'll stay out of the way and let me work. And that's how it's going to be."

After a long silent moment, she said, "You dare give commands to *me*, mortal?"

"I can't control you," I said. "I know that. But I can control me. And I've just told you the only way you get what you want out of me." I shrugged a little. "Up to you, my queen. But think about whether you want another thug to command or an ally to respect. Otherwise, you might as well start cutting on me right here, right now, and get yourself somebody with less backbone."

The Queen of Air and Darkness stared down at me for silent moments. Then she said, "You will never be my ally. Not in your heart."

"Probably not," I said. "But I can follow the example of my godmother. I can be a trusted enemy. I can work with you."

Mab's pale white eyebrows lifted and her eyes gleamed. "I will never trust you, wizard." And then she rose abruptly and let my head fall back to the earth. She walked away, her silken gown hanging limply upon her insect-thin frame. "Prepare yourself."

Demonreach stirred. The pale tendrils and roots began withdrawing themselves from my arms, leaving small, bleeding holes behind.

"For what?" I asked.

"For the journey to my court, Sir Knight." She paused and looked over one shoulder at me, green eyes bright and cold. "There is much work to do be done."

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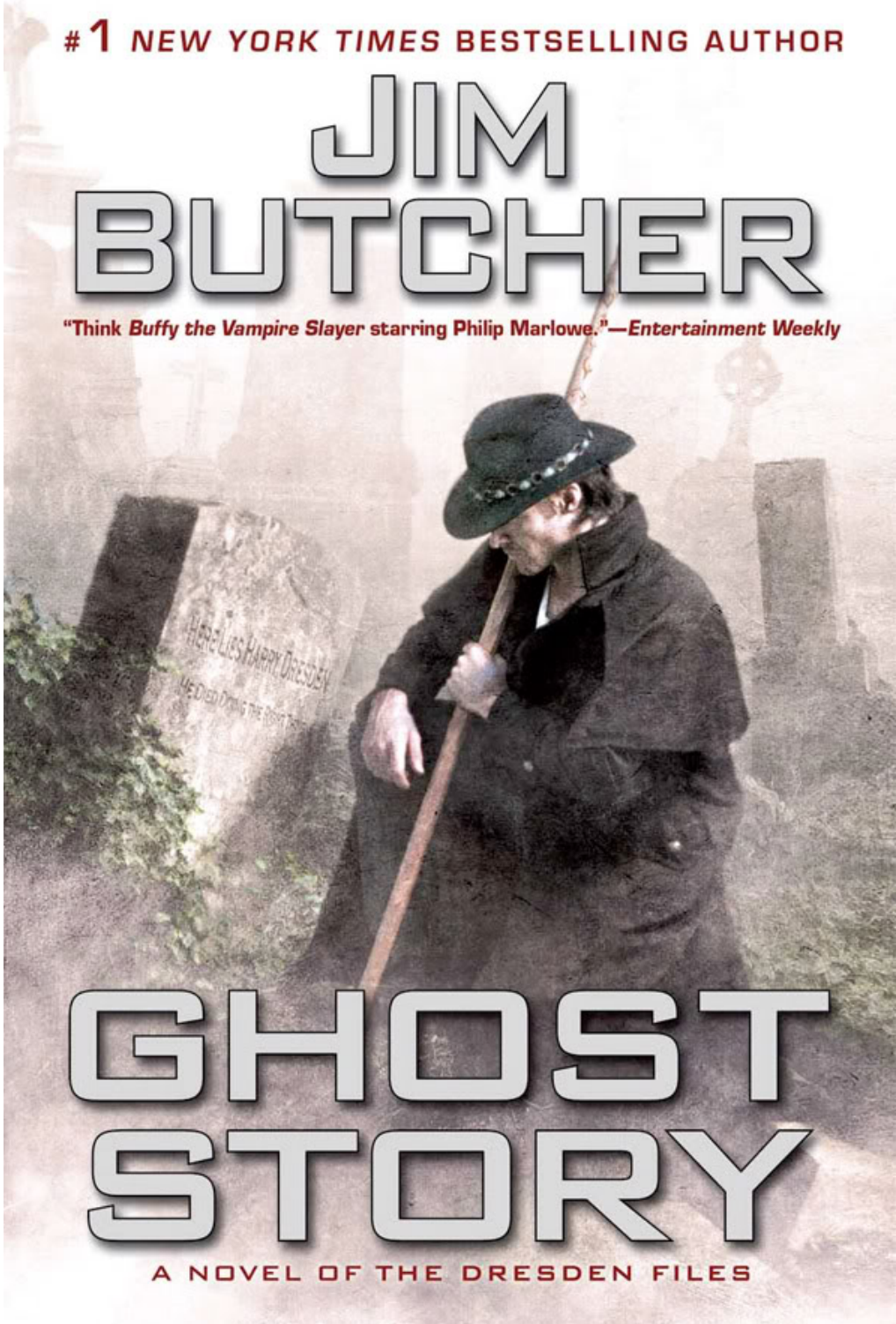
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"Think *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* starring Philip Marlowe."—*Entertainment Weekly*



GHOST STORY

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

To Air, for introducing me to Mab by onion-colored light

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JIM BUTCHER

**GHOST
STORY**

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES



A ROC BOOK

EVEN HAND

by JIM BUTCHER

A successful murder is like a successful restaurant: ninety percent of it is about location, location, location.

Three men in black hoods knelt on the waterfront warehouse floor, their wrists and ankles trussed with heavy plastic quick-ties. There were few lights.

They knelt over a large, faded stain on the concrete floor, left behind by the hypocritical y named White Council of Wizards during their last execution.

I nodded to Hendricks, who took the hood off the first man, then stood clear. The man was young and good-looking. He wore an expensive yet ill-fitting suit and even more expensive yet tasteless jewelry.

“Where are you from?” I asked him.

He sneered at me. “What’s it to y—”

I shot him in the head as soon as I heard the bravado in his voice. The body fell heavily to the floor.

The other two jumped and cursed, their voices angry and terrified.

I took the hood off the second man. His suit was a close cousin of the dead man’s, and I thought I recognized its cut. “Boston?” I asked him.

“You can’t do this to us,” he said, more angry than frightened. “Do you know who we are?”

Once I heard the nasal quality of the word “are,” I shot him.

I took off the third man’s hood. He screamed and fell away from me. “Boston,” I said, nodding, and put the barrel of my .45 against the third man’s forehead. He stared at me, showing the whites of his eyes. “You know who I am. I run drugs in Chicago.

I run the numbers, the books. I run the whores. It's my town. Do you understand?"

His body jittered in what might have been a nod. His lips formed the word "yes," though no sound came out.

"I'm glad you can answer a simple question," I told him, and lowered the gun. "I want you to tell Mr. Morelli that I won't be this lenient the next time his people try to clip the edges of my territory." I looked at Hendricks. "Put the three of them in a sealed trailer and rail-freight them back to Boston, care of Mr.

Morelli."

Hendricks was a large, trustworthy man, his red hair cropped in a crew cut. He twitched his chin in the slight motion that he used for a nod when he disapproved of my actions but intended to obey me anyway.

Hendricks and the cleaners on my staff would handle the matter from here.

I passed him the gun and the gloves on my hands. Both would see the bottom of Lake Michigan before I was halfway home, along with the two slugs the cleaners would remove from the site. When they were done, there would be nothing left of the two dead men but a slight variation on the outline of the stain in the old warehouse floor, where no one would look twice in any case.

Location, location, location.

Obviously, I am not Harry Dresden. My name is something I rarely trouble to remember, but for most of my adult life, I have been called John Marcone.

I am a professional monster.

It sounds pretentious. After all, I'm not a flesh-devouring ghoul, hiding behind a human mask until it is time to gorge. I'm no vampire, to drain the blood or soul from my victim, no ogre, no demon, no cursed beast from the spirit world dwelling amid the unsuspecting sheep of humanity. I'm not even possessed of the mystic abilities of a mortal wizard.

But they will never be what I am. One and all, those beings were born to be what they are.

I made a choice.

I walked outside of the warehouse and was met by my consultant, Gard—a tall blond woman without makeup whose eyes continually swept her surroundings. She fell into step beside me as we walked to the car. “Two?”

“They couldn't be bothered to answer a question in a civil manner.”

She opened the back door for me and I got in. I picked up my personal weapon and slipped it into the holster beneath my left arm while she settled down behind the wheel. She started driving and then said, “No. That wasn't it.”

“It was business.”

“And the fact that one of them was pushing heroin to thirteen-year-old girls and the other was pimping them out had nothing to do with it,” Gard said.

“It was business,” I said, enunciating. “Morelli can find pushers and pimps anywhere. A decent accountant is invaluable. I sent his bookkeeper back as a gesture of respect.”

“You don't respect Morelli.”

I almost smiled. “Perhaps not.”

“Then why?”

I did not answer. She didn’t push the issue, and we rode in silence back to the office. As she put the car in park, I said, “They were in my territory. They broke my rule.”

“No children,” she said.

“No children,” I said. “I do not tolerate challenges, Ms. Gard. They’re bad for business.”

She looked at me in the mirror, her blue eyes oddly intent, and nodded.

There was a knock at my office door, and Gard thrust her head in, her phone’s earpiece conspicuous. “There’s a problem.”

Hendricks frowned from his seat at a nearby desk. He was hunched over a laptop that looked too small for him, plugging away at his thesis. “What kind of problem?”

“An Accords matter,” Gard said.

Hendricks sat up straight and looked at me.

I didn’t look up from one of my lawyer’s letters, which I receive too frequently to let slide. “Well,” I said, “we knew it would happen eventually. Bring the car.”

“I don’t have to,” Gard said. “The situation came to us.”

I set aside the finished letter and looked up, resting my fingertips together. “Interesting.”

Gard brought the problem in. The problem was young and attractive. In my experience, the latter two frequently lead to the former. In this particular case, it was a young woman holding a child. She was remarkable—thick, rich, silver white hair, dark eyes, pale skin. She had very little makeup, which was fortunate in her case, since she looked as if she had recently been drenched.

She wore what was left of a gray business skirt-suit, had a towel from one of the fortunate in her case, since she looked as if she had recently been drenched. She wore what was left of a gray business skirt-suit, had a towel from one of my health clubs wrapped around her shoulders, and was shivering.

The child she held was too young to be in school and was also appealing, with rosy features, white blond hair, and blue eyes. Male or female, it hardly mattered at that age. They're all beautiful. The child clung to the girl as if it would not be separated, and was also wrapped in a towel.

The girl's body language was definitely protective. She had the kind of beauty that looked natural and ... true. Her features and her bearing both spoke of gentleness and kindness.

I felt an immediate instinct to protect and comfort her.

I quashed it thoroughly.

I am not made of stone, but I have found it is generally best to behave as if I am.

I looked across the desk at her and said, "My people tell me you have asked for sanctuary under the terms of the Unseelie Accords, but that you have not identified yourself."

"I apologize, sir," she answered. "I was already being indiscreet enough just by coming here."

"Indeed," I said calmly. "I make it a point not to advertise the location of my business headquarters."

"I didn't want to add names to the issue," she said, casting her eyes down in a gesture of submission that did not entirely convince me. "I wasn't sure how many of your people were permitted access to this sort of information."

I glanced past the young woman to Gard, who gave me a slow, cautious nod. Had the girl or the child been other than they appeared, Gard would have indicated in the negative. Gard costs me a fortune and is worth every penny.

Even so, I didn't signal either her or Hendricks to stand down. Both of them watched the girl, ready to kill her if she made an aggressive move. Trust, but verify—that the person being trusted will be dead if she attempts betrayal.

“That was most considerate of you, Justine.”

The girl blinked at me several times. “Y-you know me.”

“You are a sometimes associate of Harry Dresden,” I said. “Given his proclivities about those he considers to be held under his aegis, it is sensible to identify as many of them as possible. For the sake of my insurance rates, if nothing else. Gard.”

“Justine, no last name you'll admit to,” Gard said calmly, “currently employed as Lara Raith's secretary and personal aide. You are the sometimes lover of Thomas Raith, a frequent ally of Dresden's.”

I spread my hands slightly. “I assume the ‘j’ notation at the bottom of Ms. Raith's typed correspondence refers to you.”

“Yes,” Justine said. She had regained her composure quickly—not something I would have expected of the servitor of a vampire of the White Court.

Many of the ... people, I suppose, I'd seen there had made lotus-eaters look self-motivated. “Yes, exactly.”

I nodded. “Given your patron, one is curious as to why you have come to me seeking protection.”

“Time, sir,” she replied quietly. “I lacked any other alternative.”

Someone screamed at the front of the building.

My headquarters shifts position irregularly, as I acquire new buildings. Much of my considerable wealth is invested in real estate. I own more of the town than any other single investor. In Chicago, there is always money to be had by purchasing and renovating aging buildings. I do much of my day-to-day work out of one of my most recent renovation projects, once they have been modified to be suitable places to welcome guests. Then, renovation of the building begins, and the place is generally crowded with contractors who have proven their ability to see and hear nothing.

Gard's head snapped up. She shook it as if to rid herself of a buzzing fly and said, "A presence. A strong one." Her blue eyes snapped to Justine.

"Who?"

The young woman shuddered and wrapped the towel more tightly about herself. "Mag. A cantrev lord of the fomor."

Gard spat something in a Scandinavian tongue that was probably a curse.

"Precis, please," I said.

"The fomor are an ancient folk," she said. "Water dwellers, cousins of the jotuns. Extremely formidable. Sorcerers, shape changers, seers."

"And signatories," I noted.

"Yes," she said. She crossed to the other side of the room, opened a closet, and withdrew an athletic bag. She produced a simple, rather crude-looking broadsword from it and tossed it toward Hendricks. The big man caught it by the handle and took his gun into his left hand. Gard took a broad-bladed axe out of the bag

and shouldered the weapon. “But rarely involved in mortal affairs.”

“Ms. Raith sent me to the fomor king with documents,” Justine said, her voice coming out quietly and rapidly. Her shivering had increased. “Mag made me his prisoner. I escaped with the child. There wasn’t time to reach one of my lady’s strongholds. I came to you, sir. I beg your protection, as a favor to Ms. Raith.”

“I don’t grant favors,” I said calmly.

Mag entered in the manner so many of these self-absorbed supernatural cretins seem to adore. He blasted the door into a cloud of flying splinters with what I presumed was magic.

For God’s sake.

At least the vampires would call for an appointment.

The blast amounted to little debris. After a few visits from Dresden and his ilk, I had invested in cheap, light doors at dramatic (as opposed to tactical) entry points.

The fomor was a pale, repellent humanoid. Seven feet tall, give or take, and distinctly froglike in appearance. He had a bloated belly, legs several inches too long to be proportionately human, and huge feet and hands. He wore a tunic of something that resembled seaweed beneath a long, flapping blue robe covered in the most intricate embroidery I had ever seen. A coronet of coral was bound about his head. His right hand was extended dramatically. He carried a twisted length of wood in his left.

His eyes bulged, jaundice yellow around septic green, and his teeth were rotted and filthy. “You cannot run from me,” he said. His wide mouth made the words seem somehow slurred. “You are mine.”

Justine looked up at me, evidently too frightened to turn her head, her eyes wide with fear. A sharper contrast would have been hard to manage. “Sir.

Please.”

I touched a button on the undersurface of my desk, a motion of less than two inches, and then made a steeple of my hands again as I eyed Mag and said, “Excuse me, sir. This is a private office.”

Mag surged forward half a step, his eyes focused on the girl. “Hold your tongue, mortal, if you would keep it.”

I narrowed my eyes.

Is it so much to ask for civility?

“Justine,” I said calmly, “if you would stand aside, please.”

Justine quickly, silently, moved out from between us.

I focused on Mag and said, “They are under my protection.”

Mag gave me a contemptuous look and raised the staff. Darkness lashed at me, as if he had simply reached into the floorboards and cracks in the wall and drawn it into a sizzling sphere the size of a bowling ball.

It flickered away to nothingness about a foot in front of my steepled hands.

I lifted a finger and Hendricks shot Mag in the back. Repeatedly.

The fomor went down with a sound like a bubbling teakettle, whipped onto his back as if the bullets had been a minor inconvenience, and raised the stick to point at Hendricks.

Gard’s axe smashed it out of his grip, swooped back up to guard, and began to descend again.

“Stop,” I said.

Gard's muscles froze just before she would have brought down the axe onto Mag's head. Mag had one hand uplifted, surrounded in a kind of negative haze, his long fingers crooked at odd angles—presumably some kind of mystic defense.

“As a freeholding lord of the Unseelie Accords,” I said, “it would be considered an act of war if I killed you out of hand, despite your militant intrusion into my territory.” I narrowed my eyes. “However, your behavior gives me ample latitude to invoke the defense of property and self clause. I will leave the decision to you. Continue this asinine behavior, and I will kill you and offer a weregild to your lord, King Corb, in accordance with the conflict resolution guidelines of section two, paragraph four.”

As I told you, my lawyers send me endless letters. I speak their language.

Mag seemed to take that in for a moment. He looked at me, then Gard. His eyes narrowed. They tracked back to Hendricks, his head hardly moving, and he seemed to freeze when he saw the sword in Hendricks's hand.

His eyes flicked to Justine and the child and burned for a moment—not with adoration or even simple lust. There was a pure and possessive hunger there, coupled with a need to destroy that which he desired. I have spent my entire life around hard men. I know that form of madness when I see it.

“So,” Mag said. His eyes traveled back to me and were suddenly heavy-lidded and calculating. “You are the new mortal lord. We half believed that you must be imaginary. That no one could be as foolish as that.”

“You are incorrect,” I said. “Moreover, you can't have them. Get out.”

Mag stood up. The movement was slow, liquid. His limbs didn't seem to bend the proper way. "Lord Marccone," he said, "this affair is no concern of yours. I only wish to take the slaves."

"You can't have them. Get out."

"I warn you," Mag said. There was an ugly tone in his voice. "If you make me return for her—for them—you will not enjoy what follows."

"I do not require enjoyment to thrive. Leave my domain. I won't ask again."

Hendricks shuffled his feet a little, settling his balance.

Mag gathered himself up slowly. He extended his hand, and the twisted stick leapt from the floor and into his fingers. He gave Gard a slow and well-practiced sneer and said, "Anon, mortal lordling. It is time you learned the truth of the world. It will please me to be your instructor." Then he turned, slow and haughty, and walked out, his shoulders hunching in an odd, unsettling motion as he moved.

"Make sure he leaves," I said quietly.

Gard and Hendricks followed Mag from the room.

I turned my eyes to Justine and the child.

"Mag," I said, "is not the sort of man who is used to disappointment."

Justine looked after the vanished fomor and then back at me, confusion in her eyes. "That was sorcery. How did you ... ?"

I stood up from behind my desk and stepped out of the copper circle set into the floor around my chair. It was powered by the sorcerous equivalent of a nine-volt battery, connected to the

control on the underside of my desk. Basic magical defense, Gard said. It had seemed like nonsense to me—it clearly was not.

I took my gun from its holster and set it on my desk.

Justine took note of my reply.

Of course, I wouldn't give the personal aide of the most dangerous woman in Chicago information about my magical defenses.

There was something hard and not at all submissive in her eyes. "Thank you, sir, for ..."

"For what?" I said very calmly. "You understand, do you not, what you have done by asking for my help under the Accords?"

"Sir?"

"The Accords govern relations between supernatural powers," I said. "The signatories of the Accords and their named vassals are granted certain rights and obligations—such as offering a warning to a signatory who has trespassed upon another's territory unwittingly before killing him."

"I know, sir," Justine said.

"Then you should also know that you are most definitely not a signatory of the Accords. At best, you qualify in the category of 'servitors and chattel.' At worst, you are considered to be a food animal."

She drew in a sharp breath, her eyes widening—not in any sense of outrage or offense, but in realization. Good. She grasped the realities of the situation.

"In either case," I continued, "you are property. You have no rights in the current situation, in the eyes of the Accords—and more to the point, I have no right to withhold another's rightful

property. Mag's behavior provided me with an excuse to kill him if he did not depart. He will not give me such an opening a second time."

Justine swallowed and stared at me for a moment. Then she glanced down at the child in her arms. The child clung harder to her and seemed to lean somewhat away from me.

One must admire such acute instincts.

"You have drawn me into a conflict which has nothing to do with me," I said quietly. "I suggest candor. Otherwise, I will have Mr. Hendricks and Ms. Gard show you to the door."

"You can't ... ," she began, but her voice trailed off.

"I can," I said. "I am not a humanitarian. When I offer charity it is for tax purposes."

The room became silent. I was content with that. The child began to whimper quietly.

"I was delivering documents to the court of King Corb on behalf of my lady," Justine said. She stroked the child's hair absently. "It's in the sea. There's a gate there in Lake Michigan, not far from here."

I lifted an eyebrow. "You swam?"

"I was under the protection of their courier, going there," Justine said. "It's like walking in a bubble of air." She hitched the child up a little higher on her hip. "Mag saw me. He drove the courier away as I was leaving and took me to his home. There were many other prisoners there."

"Including the child," I guessed. Though it probably didn't sound that way.

Justine nodded. “I ... arranged for several prisoners to flee Mag’s home. I took the child when I left. I swam out.”

“So you are, in effect, stolen property in possession of stolen property,” I said. “Novel.”

Gard and Hendricks came back into the office.

I looked at Hendricks. “My people?”

“Tulane’s got a broken arm,” he said. “Standing in that asshole’s way. He’s on the way to the doc.”

“Thank you. Ms. Gard?”

“Mag is off the property,” she said. “He didn’t go far. He’s summoning support now.”

“How much of a threat is he?” I asked. The question was legitimate. Gard and Hendricks had blindsided the inhuman while he was focused upon Justine and the child and while he wasted his leading magical strike against my protective circle. A head-on confrontation against a prepared foe could be a total y different proposition.

Gard tested the edge of her axe with her thumb and drew a smooth stone from her pocket. “Mag is a fomor sorcerer lord of the first rank. He’s deadly

—and connected. The fomor could crush you without a serious loss of resources. Confrontation would be unwise.”

The stone made a steely, slithery sound as it glided over the axe’s blade.

“There seems little profit to be had, then,” I said. “It’s nothing personal, Justine. Merely business. I am obliged to return stolen property to signatory members of the Accords.”

Hendricks looked at me sharply. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. I already knew the tone of whatever he would say. *Are there no prisons*, perhaps. Or, *No man is an island, entire of itself. It tolls for thee*. On and on.

Hendricks has no head for business.

Gard watched me, waiting.

"Sir," Justine said, her tone measured and oddly formal. "May I speak?"

I nodded.

"She isn't property," Justine said, and her voice was low and intense, her eyes direct. "She was trapped in a den of living nightmares, and there was no one to come save her. She would have died there. And I am *not* letting anyone take her back to that hellhole. I will die first." The young woman set her jaw.

"She is not *property*, Mr. Marccone. She's a *child*."

I met Justine's eyes for a long moment.

I glanced aside at Hendricks. He waited for my decision.

Gard watched me. As ever, Gard watched me.

I looked down at my hands, my fingertips resting together with my elbows propped on the desk.

Business came first. Always.

But I have rules.

I looked up at Justine.

"She's a child," I said quietly.

The air in the room snapped tight with tension.

“Ms. Gard,” I said, “please dismiss the contractors for the day, at pay. Then raise the defenses.”

She pocketed the whetstone and strode quickly out, her teeth showing, a bounce in her step.

“Mr. Hendricks, please scramble our troubleshooters. They’re to take positions across the street. Suppressed weapons only. I don’t need patrolmen stumbling around in this. Then ready the panic room.”

Hendricks nodded and got out his cell phone as he left. His huge, stubby fingers flew over its touchscreen as he sent the activation text message.

Looking at him, one would not think him capable of such a thing. But that is Hendricks, general y.

I looked at Justine as I rose and walked to my closet. “You will go with the child into the panic room. It is, with the possible exception of Dresden’s home, the most secure location in the city.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

I took off my coat and hung it up in the closet. I took off my tie and slipped it over the same hanger. I put my cuff links in my coat pocket, rolled up my sleeves, and skinned out of my gun’s holster. Then I slipped on the armored vest made of heavy scales of composite materials joined to sleeves of quite old-fashioned mail. I pulled an old field jacket, olive drab, over the armor, belted it, holstered my sidearm at my side, opposite a combat knife, and took a military-grade assault shotgun—a weapon every bit as illegal as my pistol in the city of Chicago—from its rack.

“I am not doing it for you, young lady,” I said. “Nor am I doing it for the child.”

“Then why are you doing it?” she asked.

“Because I have rules,” I said.

She shook her head gently. “But you’re a criminal. Criminals don’t have rules. They break them.”

I stopped and looked at her.

Justine blanched and slid a step farther away from me, along the wall. The child made a soft, distressed sound. I beckoned curtly for her to follow me as I walked past her. It took her a moment to do so.

Honestly.

Someone in the service of a vampire ought to have a bit more fortitude.

This panic room looked like every other one I’ve had built: fluorescent lights, plain tile floor, plain dry wall. Two double bunks occupied one end of the room. A business desk and several chairs took up the rest. A miniature kitchen nestled into one corner, opposite the miniature medical station in another.

There was a door to a half-bath and a bank of security monitors on the wall between them. I flicked one switch that activated the entire bank, displaying a dozen views from hidden security cameras.

I gestured for Justine to enter the room. She came in and immediately took a seat on the lower bunk of the nearest bed, still holding the child.

“Mag can find her,” Gard told me when we all rendezvoused outside the panic room. “Once he’s inside the building and gets past the forward area, he’ll be able to track her. He’ll head straight for her.”

“Then we know which way he’ll be moving,” I said. “What did you find out about his support?”

“They’re creatures,” Gard said, “actual mortal beings, though like none you’ve seen before. The fomor twist flesh to their liking and sell the results for favors and influence. It was probably the fomor who created those cat-things the Knights of the Blackened Denarius used.”

I twisted my mouth in displeasure at the name. “If they’re mortal, we can kill them.”

“They’ll die hard,” Gard warned me.

“What doesn’t?” I looked up and down the hallway outside the panic room. “I think the primary defense plan will do.”

Gard nodded. She had attired herself in an armored vest not unlike my own over a long mail shirt. Medieval looking, but then modern armorers haven’t aimed their craft at stopping claws of late. Hendricks, standing watch at the end of the hall, had on an armored vest but was otherwise covered in modified motorcyclist’s armor. He carried an assault shotgun like mine, several hand grenades, and that same broadsword.

“Stay here,” I said to Justine. “Watch the door. If anyone but one of us comes down the stairs, shut it.”

She nodded.

I turned and started walking toward the stairway. I glanced at Gard. “What can we expect from Mag?”

“Pain.”

Hendricks grunted. Skeptical y.

“He’s ancient, devious, and wicked,” Gard clarified. “There is an effectively unlimited spectrum of ways in which he might do

harm.”

I nodded. “Can you offer any specific knowledge?”

“He won’t be easy to get to,” she said. “The fomor practice entropy magic. They make the antitechnology effect Dresden puts off look like mild sunspot activity. Modern systems *are* going to experience problems near him.”

We started up the stairs. “How long before he arrives?”

From upstairs, there was the crash of breaking plate glass. No alarm went off, but there was a buzzing, sizzling sound and a scream — Gard’s outer defenses. Hendricks hit a button on his cell phone and then came with me as I rushed up the remaining stairs to the ground floor.

The lights went out as we went, and Hendricks’s phone sputtered out a few sparks. Battery-powered emergency lights flicked on an instant later. Only about half of them functioned, and most of those were behind us.

Mag had waited for nightfall to begin his attack and then crippled our lights. Quite possibly he assumed that the darkness would give him an overwhelming advantage.

The hubris of some members of the supernatural community is astonishing.

The nightvision scopes mounted on my weapon and Hendricks’s had been custom-made, based off of designs dating back to World War I , before nightvision devices had married themselves to the electronics revolution. They were heavy and far inferior to modern systems—but they would function in situations where electronic goggles would be rendered into useless junk.

We raised the weapons to our shoulders, lined an eye up with the scopes, and kept moving. We reached the first defensive position,

folded out the reinforced composite barriers mounted there, and knelt behind them. The ambient light from the city outside and the emergency lights below us was enough for the scopes to do their jobs. I could make out the outline of the hallway and the room beyond. Sounds of quiet movement came closer.

My heart rate had gone up, but not alarmingly so. My hands were steady. My mouth felt dry, and my body's reaction to the prospect of mortal danger sent ripples of sensation up and down my spine. I embraced the fear and waited.

The fomor's creatures exploded into the hallway on a storm of frenzied roars. I couldn't make out many details. They seemed to have been put together on the chassis of a gorilla. Their heads were squashed, ugly-looking things, with wide-gaping mouths full of sharklike teeth. The sounds they made were deep, with a frenzied edge of madness, and they piled into the corridor in a wave of massive muscle.

"Steady," I murmured.

The creatures lurched as they moved, like cheap toys that had not been assembled properly, but they were fast for all of that. More and more of them flooded into the hallway, and their charge was gaining mass and momentum.

"Steady," I murmured.

Hendricks grunted. There were no words in it, but he meant, *I know*.

The wave of fomorian beings got close enough that I could see the patches of mold clumping their fur and tendrils of mildew growing upon their exposed skin.

"Fire," I said.

Hendricks and I opened up.

The new military AA-12 automatic shotguns are not the hunting weapons I first handled in my patriotically delusional youth. They are fully automatic weapons with large circular drums that rather resembled the old tommy guns made iconic by my business predecessors in Chicago. One pulls the trigger and shell after shell slams through the weapon. A steel target hit by bursts from an AA-12 very rapidly comes to resemble a screen door.

And we had two of them.

The slaughter was indescribable. It swept like a great broom down that hallway, tearing and shredding flesh, splattering blood on the walls and painting them most of the way to the ceiling. Behind me, Gard stood ready with a heavy-caliber big-game rifle, calmly gunning down any creature that seemed to be reluctant to die before it could reach our defensive point. We piled the bodies so deep that the corpses formed a barrier to our weapons.

“Hendricks,” I said.

The big man was already reaching for the grenades on his belt. He took one, pulled the pin, cooked it for a slow two count, and then flung it down the hall. We all crouched behind the barriers as the grenade went off with a deafening crunch of shock-wave-driven air.

Hendricks threw another one. He might disapprove of killing, but he did it thoroughly.

When the ringing began to fade from my ears, I heard a sound like raindrops. It wasn’t raining, of course—the gunmen in the building across the street had opened fire with silenced weaponry. Bullets whispered in through the windows and hit the floor and walls of the headquarters with innocuous-sounding thumps. Evidently Mag’s servitors had been routed and were trying to flee.

An object the size of Hendricks's fist appeared from nowhere and arced cleanly through the air. It landed on the floor precisely between the two sheltering panels, a lump of pink-and-gray coral. Gard hit me with a shoulder and drove me to the ground even as she shouted, "Down!"

The piece of coral didn't explode. There was a whispering sound, and hundreds of tiny holes appeared in the bloodstained walls and ceiling. Gard let out a pained grunt. My left calf jerked as something pierced it and burned as though the wound had been filled with salt.

I checked Hendricks. One side of his face was covered in a sheet of blood. Small tears were visible in his leathers, and he was beginning to bleed through the holes.

"Get him," I said to Gard, rising, as another coral spheroid rose into the air.

Before it could get close enough to be a threat, I blew it to powder with my shotgun. And the next and the next, while Gard dropped her rifle, got a shoulder under one of Hendricks's, and helped him to his feet as if he'd been her weight instead of two hundred and seventy pounds of muscle. She started down the stairs.

A fourth sphere came accompanied by mocking laughter, and when I pulled the trigger again, the weapon didn't function. Empty. I slapped the coral device out of the air with the shotgun's barrel and flung myself backward, hoping to clear the level of the floor on the stairwell before the pseudo-grenade detonated. I did not quite make it. Several objects struck my chest and arms, and a hot blade slipped across my unscarred ear, but the armor turned the truly dangerous projectiles.

I broke my arm tumbling backward down the stairs.

More laughter followed me down, but at least the fomor wasn't spouting some kind of ridiculous monologue.

"I did my best," came Mag's voice. "I gave you a chance to return what was mine. But no. You couldn't keep yourself from interfering in my affairs, from stealing my property. And so now you will reap the consequences of your foolishness, little mortal... ."

There was more, but there is hardly a need to go into details. Given a choice between that egocentric drivel and a broken arm, I prefer the latter. It's considerably less excruciating.

Gard hauled me to my feet by my coat with her spare hand. I got under the stunned Hendricks's other arm and helped them both down the rest of the stairs. Justine stood in the doorway of the safe room, at the end of the hallway of flickering lights, her face white-lipped but calm.

Gard helped me get Hendricks to the door of the room and turned around. "Close the door. I may be able to discourage him out here."

"Your home office would be annoyed with me if I wasted your life on such a low-percentage proposition," I said. "We stick to the plan."

The valkyrie eyed me. "Your arm is broken."

"I was aware, thank you," I said. "Is there any reason the countermeasure shouldn't work?"

Mag was going on about something, coming down the steps one at a time, making a production of every footfall. I ignored the ass.

“None that I know of,” Gard admitted. “Which is not the same answer as ‘no.’ ”

“Sir,” Justine said.

“We planned for this—or something very like it. We don’t split up now. End of discussion. Help me with Hendricks.”

“Sir,” Justine said.

I looked up to see Mag standing on the landing, cloaked in random shadows, smiling. The emergency lights on the stairwell blew out with a melodramatic shower of dying sparks.

“Ah,” I said. I reached inside the safe-room door, found the purely mechanical pull-cord wrapped unobtrusively around a nail head on the wall, and gave it a sharp jerk.

It set off the antipersonnel mines built into the wall of the landing.

There were four of them, which meant that a wash of fire and just under three-thousand-round shot acquainted themselves with the immediate vicinity of the landing and with Mag. A cloud of flame and flying steel enveloped the form, but at the last instant the swirling blackness around him rose up like a living thing, forming a shield between Mag and the oncoming flood of destruction.

The sound of the explosions was so loud that it demolished my hearing for a moment. It began to return to me as the cloud of smoke and dust on the landing began to clear. I could hear a fire alarm going off.

Mag, smudged and blackened with residue but otherwise untouched, made an irritated gesture, and the fire alarm sparked and fizzled—but not before setting off the automatic sprinklers. Water began pouring down from spigots in the ceiling.

Mag looked up at the water and then down at me, and his too-wide smile widened even more. “Real y?” he asked. “Water? Did you actual y think water would be a barrier to the magic of a fomor lord?”

Running water was highly detrimental to mortal magic, or so Gard informed me, whether it was natural y occurring or not. The important element was quantity. Enough water would ground magic just as it could conduct electricity and short-circuit electronics. Evidently Mag played by different rules.

Mag made a point to continue down the stairs at exactly the same pace. He was somewhat hampered in that several of the stairs had been torn up rather badly in the explosion, but he made it to the hallway. Gard took up a position in the middle of the hallway, her axe held straight up beside her in both arms like a baseball player’s bat.

I helped Hendricks into the safe room and dumped him on a bunk, out of any line of fire from the hallway. Justine took one look at his face and hurried over to the medical station, where she grabbed a first-aid kit. She rushed back to Hendricks’s side. She broke open the kit and started laying out the proper gear for getting a clear look at a bloody wound and getting the bleeding stopped. Her hands flew with precise speed. She’d had some form of training.

From the opposite bunk, the child watched Justine with wide blue eyes. She was naked and had been crying. The tears were still on her little cheeks.

Even now, her lower lip had begun to tremble.

But so far as anyone else knew, I was made of stone.

I turned and crossed the room. I sat down at the desk, a copy of the one in my main office. I put my handgun squarely in front of me. The desk was positioned directly in line with the door to the panic room. From behind the desk, I could see the entire hallway clearly.

Mag stepped forward and moved a hand as though throwing something. I saw nothing, but Gard raised her axe in a blocking movement, and there was a flash of light, and the image of a Norse rune, or something like it, was burned onto my retina. The outer edge of Gard's mail sleeve on her right arm abruptly turned black and fell to dust, so that the sleeve split and dangled open.

Gard took a grim step back as Mag narrowed his jaundiced eyes and lifted the crooked stick. Something that looked like the blend of a lightning bolt and an eel lashed through the air toward Gard, but she caught it on the broad blade of her axe, and there was another flash of light, another eye-searing rune. I heard her cry out, though, and saw that the edges of her fingernails had been burned black.

Step by step she fell back, while Mag hammered at her with things that made no sense, many of which I could not even see. Each time, the rune-magic of that axe defeated the attack—and each time, it seemed to cost her something. A lightly singed face here. A long, shallow cut upon her newly bared arm there. And the runes, I saw, were each in different places on the axe, being burned out one by one. Gard had a finite number of them.

As Gard's heels touched the threshold of the safe room, Mag let out a howl and threw both hands out ahead of him. An unseen force lifted Gard from her feet and flung her violently across the room, over my desk, and into the wall. She hit with bone-crushing force and slid down limply.

I faced the inhuman sorcerer alone.

Mag walked slowly and confidently into my safe room and stared at me across my desk. He was breathing heavily, from exertion or excitement or both.

He smiled, slowly, and waved his hand again. An unpleasant shimmer went through the air, and I glanced down to see rust forming on the exposed metal of my gun, while cracking began to spread through the plastic grip.

“Go ahead, mortal,” Mag said, drawing out the words. “Pick up the gun. Try it. The crafting of the weapon is fine, mortal, but you are not the masters of the world that you believe yourselves to be. Even today’s cleverest smiths are no match for the magic of the fomor.”

I inclined my head in agreement. “Then I suppose,” I said, “that we’ll just have to do this old school.”

I drew the eighteenth-century German dragoon pistol from the open drawer beside my left hand, aimed, and fired. The ancient flintlock snapped forward, ignited the powder in the pan, and roared, a wash of unnatural blue white fire blazing forth from the antique weapon. I almost fancied that I could see the bullet, spinning and tumbling, blazing with its own tiny rune.

Though Mag’s shadows leapt up to defend him, he had expended enormous energy moving through the building, hurling attack after attack at us. More energy had to be used to overcome the tremendous force of the claymores that had exploded virtually in his face. Perhaps, at his full strength, at the height of his endurance, his powers would have been enough to turn even the single, potent attack that had been designed to defeat them.

From the beginning, the plan had been to wear him down.

The blue bolt of lead and power from the heavy old flintlock pierced Mag's defenses and body in the same instant and with the same contemptuous energy.

Mag blinked at me, then lowered his head to goggle at the smoking hole in his chest as wide as my thumb. His mouth moved as he tried to gabble something, but no sound came out.

"Idiot," I said coldly. "It will be well worth the weregild to be rid of you."

Mag lurched toward me for a moment, intent upon saying something, but the fates spared me from having to endure any more of him. He collapsed to the floor before he could finish speaking.

I eyed my modern pistol, crusted with rust and residue, and decided not to try it. I kept a spare .45 in the downstairs desk in any case. I took it from another drawer, checked it awkwardly one-handed, and then emptied the weapon into Mag's head and chest.

I am the one who taught Hendricks to be thorough.

I looked up from Mag's ruined form to find Justine staring at me, frozen in the middle of wrapping a bandage around my second's head.

"How is he?" I asked calmly.

Justine swallowed. She said, "He m-may need stitches for this scalp wound. I think he has a concussion. The other wounds aren't bad. His armor stopped most of the fragments from going in."

"Gard?" I asked without looking over my shoulder. The valkyrie had an incredible ability to resist and recover from injury.

“Be sore for a while,” she said, the words slurred. “Give me a few minutes.”

“Justine, perhaps you will set my arm and splint it,” I said. “We will need to abandon this renovation, I’m afraid, Gard. Where’s the thermite?”

“In your upstairs office closet, right where you left it,” she said in a *very* slightly aggrieved tone.

“Be a dear and burn down the building,” I said.

She appeared beside my desk, looking bruised, exhausted, and functional. She lifted both eyebrows. “Was that a joke?”

“Apparently,” I said. “Doubtless the result of triumph and adrenaline.”

“My word,” she said. She looked startled.

“Get moving,” I told her. “Make the fire look accidental. I need to contact the young lady’s patron so that she can be delivered safely back into her hands.

Cal Dr. Schulman as well. Tell him that Mr. Hendricks and I will be visiting him shortly.” I pursed my lips. “And steak, I think. I could use a good steak. The Pump Room should do for the three of us, eh? Ask them to stay open an extra half an hour.”

Gard showed me her teeth in a flash. “Well,” she said, “it’s no mead hall. But it will do.”

I put my house in order. In the end, it took less than half an hour. The troubleshooters made sure the fomorian creatures were dragged inside, then vanished. Mag’s body had been bagged and transferred, to be returned to his watery kin, along with approximately a quarter of a million dollars in bullion, the price

required in the Accords for the weregild of a person of Mag's stature.

Justine was ready to meet a car that was coming to pick her up, and Hendricks was already on the way to Schulman's attentions. He'd seemed fine by the time he left, growling at Gard as she fussed over him.

I looked around the office and nodded. "We know the defense plan has some merit," I said. I hefted the dragoon pistol. "I'll need more of those bullets."

"I was unconscious for three weeks after scribing the rune for that one," Gard replied. "To say nothing of the fact that the bullets themselves are rare.

That one killed a man named Nelson at Trafalgar."

"How do you know?"

"I took it out of him," she said. "Men of his caliber are few and far between. I'll see what I can do." She glanced at Justine. "Sir?"

"Not just yet," I said. "I will speak with her alone for a moment, please."

She nodded, giving Justine a look that was equal parts curiosity and warning. Then she departed.

I got up and walked over to the girl. She was holding the child against her again. The little girl had dropped into an exhausted sleep.

"So," I said quietly. "Lara Raith sent you to Mag's people. He happened to abduct you. You happened to escape from him—despite the fact that he seemed to be holding other prisoners perfectly adequately—and you left carrying the child. And, upon

emerging from Lake Michigan, you happened to be nearby, so you came straight here.”

“Yes,” Justine said quietly.

“Coincidences, coincidences,” I said. “Put the child down.”

Her eyes widened in alarm.

I stared at her until she obeyed.

My right arm was splinted and in a sling. With my left hand, I reached out and flipped open her suit jacket, over her left hip, where she’d been clutching the child all evening.

There was an envelope in a plastic bag protruding from the jacket’s interior pocket. I took it.

She made a small sound of protest and aborted it partway.

I opened the bag and the envelope and scanned over the paper inside.

“These are account numbers,” I said quietly. “Security passwords. Stolen from Mag’s home, I suppose?”

She looked up at me with very wide eyes.

“Dear child,” I said, “I *am* a criminal. One very good way to cover up one crime is to commit another, more obvious one.” I glanced down at the sleeping child again. “Using a child to cover your part of the scheme. Quite cold-blooded, Justine.”

“I freed all of Mag’s prisoners to cover up the theft of his records at my lady’s bidding,” she said quietly. “The child was ... not part of the plan.”

“Children frequently aren’t,” I said.

“I took her out on my own,” she said. “She’s free of that place. She will stay that way.”

“To be raised among the vampires?” I asked. “Such a lovely child will surely go far.”

Justine grimaced and looked away. “She was too small to swim out on her own. I couldn’t leave her.”

I stared at the young woman for a long moment. Then I said, “You might consider speaking to Father Forthill at St. Mary of the Angels. The Church appears to have some sort of program to place those endangered by the supernatural into hiding. I do not recommend you mention my name as a reference, but perhaps he could be convinced to help the child.”

She blinked at me, several times. Then she said quietly, “You, sir, are not very much like I thought you were.”

“Nor are you. Agent Justine.” I took a deep breath and regarded the child again. “At least we accomplished something today.” I smiled at Justine. “Your ride should be here by now. You may go.”

She opened her mouth and reached for the envelope.

I slipped it into my pocket. “Do give Lara my regards. And tell her that the next time she sends you out to steal honey, she should find someone else to kill the bees.” I gave her a faint smile. “That will be all.”

Justine looked at me. Then her lips quivered up into a tiny, amused smile. She bowed her head to me, collected the child, and walked out, her steps light.

I debated putting a bullet in her head but decided against it. She had information about my defenses that could leave them vulnerable—and more to the point, she knew that they were effective. If she should speak of today’s events to Dresden ...

Well. The wizard would immediately recognize that the claymores, the running water, and the magic-defense-piercing bullet had not been put into place to counter Mag or his odd folk at all.

They were there to kill Harry Dresden.

And they worked. Mag had proven that. An eventual confrontation with Dresden was inevitable—but murdering Justine would guarantee it happened immediately, and I wasn't ready for that, not until I had rebuilt the defenses in the new location.

Besides, the young woman had rules of her own. I could respect that.

I would test myself against Dresden in earnest one day—or he against me. Until then, I had to gather as many resources to myself as possible. And when the day of reckoning came, I had to make sure it happened in a place where, despite his powers, he would no longer have the upper hand.

Like everything else.

Location, location, location.

BOMBSHELLS

I miss my boss.

It's been most of a year since I helped him die, and ever since then I've been the only professional wizard in the city of Chicago.

Well, okay. I'm not, like, officially a wizard. I'm still sort of an apprentice. And no one really pays me, unless you count the wallets and valuables I lift from bodies sometimes, so I guess I'm more amateur than professional. And I don't have a PI license like my boss did, or an ad in the phone book.

But I'm all there is. I'm not as strong as he was, and I'm not as good as he was. I'm just going to have to be enough.

So anyway, there I was, washing the blood off in Waldo Butters' shower.

I did a lot of living outdoors these days, which didn't seem nearly as horrible during the summer and early autumn as it had during the arctic chill of the previous superwinter. It was like sleeping on a tropical beach by comparison. Still, I missed things like regular access to plumbing, and Waldo let me clean up whenever I needed to. I had the shower heat turned all the way up, and it was heaven. It was kind of a scourgey, scoury heaven, but heaven nonetheless.

The floor of the shower turned red for a few seconds, then faded to pink for a while as I sluiced the blood off. It wasn't mine. A gang of Fomor servitors had been carrying a fifteen-year-old boy down an alley toward Lake Michigan. If they'd gotten him there, he'd have been facing a fate worse than death. I intervened, but that bastard Listen cut his throat rather than give him up. I tried to save him while Listen and his buddies ran. I failed. And I'd been right there with him, feeling everything he did, feeling his confusion and pain and terror as he died.

Harry wouldn't have felt that. Harry would have saved the day. He would have smashed the Fomor goons around like bowling pins, picked the kid up like some kind of serial-movie action hero, and taken him to safety.

I missed my boss.

I used a lot of soap. I probably cried. I had begun ignoring tears months ago, and at times I honestly didn't know when they were falling. Once I was clean—physically, anyway—I just stood there soaking up the heat, letting the water course all over me. The scar on my leg where I'd been shot was still wrinkled, but the color had changed from purple and red to angry pink. Butters said it would be gone in a couple of years. I was walking normally again, unless I pushed myself too hard. But yikes, my legs and various

pieces needed to get reacquainted with a razor, even with medium-blond hair.

I was going to ignore them, but ... grooming is important for keeping one's spirits up. A well-kept body for a well-kept mind and all that. I wasn't a fool. I knew I wasn't exactly flying level lately. My morale needed all the boost it could get. I leaned out of the shower and swiped Andi's pink plastic razor. I'd pay Waldo's werewolf girlfriend back for it later.

I wrapped up about the same time as the hot water ran out, got out of the shower, and toweled off. My things were in a pile by the door—some garage-sale Birkenstocks, an old nylon hiker's backpack, and my bloodied clothes. Another set gone. And the sandals had left partial tracks in blood at the scene, so I'd have to get rid of them, too. I was going to have to hit another thrift store at this rate. Normally, that would have cheered me up, but shopping just wasn't what it used to be.

I was carefully going over the tub and floor for fallen hairs and so on when someone knocked. I didn't stop scanning the floor. In my line of work, people can and will do awful things to you with discarded bits of your body. Not cleaning up after yourself is like asking for someone to boil your blood from twenty blocks away. No, thank you.

"Yes?" I called.

"Hey, Molly," Waldo said. "There's, uh ... there's someone here to talk to you."

We'd prearranged a lot of things. If he'd used the word "feeling" at any point in his sentence, I would have known there was trouble outside the door. Not using it meant that there wasn't—or that he couldn't see it. I slipped on my bracelets and my ring and set both of my wands down where I could snatch them up instantly. Only then did I start putting clothes on.

"Who?" I called.

He was working hard not to sound nervous around me. I appreciated the effort. It was sweet. "Says her name is Justine. Says you know her."

I did know Justine. She was a thrall of the vampires of the White Court. Or at least a personal assistant to one and the girlfriend of another. Harry always thought well of her, though he was a big goofy idiot when it came to women who might show the potential to become damsels in distress.

"But if he was here," I muttered to myself, "he'd help her."

I didn't wipe the steam off the mirror before I left the bathroom. I didn't want to look at anything in there.

Justine was a handful of years older than me, but her hair had turned pure white. She was a knockout, one of those girls all the boys assume are too pretty to approach. She had on jeans and a button-down shirt several sizes too large for her. The shirt was Thomas's, I was certain. Her body language was poised, very neutral. Justine was as good at hiding her emotions as anyone I'd ever seen, but I could sense leashed tension and quiet fear beneath the calm surface.

I'm a wizard, or damned close to it, and I work with the mind. People don't really get to hide things from me.

If Justine was afraid, it was because she feared for Thomas. If she'd come to me for help, it was because she couldn't get help from the White Court. We could have had a polite conversation that led up to that revelation, but I had less and less patience for the amenities lately, so I cut to the chase.

"Hello, Justine. Why should I help you with Thomas when his own family won't?"

Justine's eyes bugged out. So did Waldo's.

I was getting used to that reaction.

"How did you know?" Justine asked quietly.

When you're into magic, people always assume anything you do must be connected to it. Harry always thought that was funny. To him, magic was just one more set of tools that the mind could use to solve problems. The mind was the more important part of that pairing. "Does that matter?"

She frowned and looked away from me. She shook her head. "He's missing. I know he left on some kind of errand for Lara, but she says she doesn't know anything about it. She's lying."

"She's a vampire. And you didn't answer my first question." The words came out a little harsher and harder than they'd sounded in my head. I tried to relax a little. I folded my arms and leaned against a wall. "Why should I help you?"

It's not like I wasn't planning to help her. But I knew a secret about Harry and Thomas few others did. I had to know if Justine knew the secret, too, or if I'd have to keep it hidden around her.

Justine met my eyes with hers for a moment. The look was penetrating. "If you can't go to family for help," she said, "who can you turn to?"

I averted my eyes before it could turn into an actual soulgaze, but her words and the cumulative impression of her posture, her presence, her *self*,

answered the question for me.

She knew.

Thomas and Harry were half brothers. She'd have gone to Harry for help if he was alive. I was the only thing vaguely like an heir to his power around these parts, and she hoped I would be willing to step into his shoes. His huge, stompy, terrifying shoes.

"You go to friends," I said quietly. "I'll need something of Thomas's. Hair or fingernail clippings would be ..."

She produced a zip-closed plastic bag from the breast pocket of the shirt and offered it to me without a word. I went over and picked it up. It had a number of dark hairs in it.

"You're sure they're his?"

Justine gestured toward her own snow-white mane. "It's not like they're easy to confuse."

I looked up to find Butters watching me silently from the other side of the room. He was a beaky little guy, wiry and quick. His hair had been electrocuted and then frozen that way. His eyes were steady and worried. He cut up corpses for the government, professionally, but he was one of the more savvy people in town when it came to the supernatural.

"What?" I asked him.

He considered his words before he spoke—less because he was afraid of me than because he cared about not hurting my feelings. That was the reverse of most people these days. "Is this something you should get involved in, Molly?"

What he really wanted to ask me was if I was sane. If I was going to help or just make things a lot worse.

"I don't know," I said honestly. I looked at Justine and said, "Wait here."

Then I got my stuff, took the hairs, and left.

The first thing Harry Dresden ever taught me about magic was a tracking spell.

"It's a simple principle, kid," he told me. "We're creating a link between two similar things out of energy. Then we make the energy give us an indicator of some kind, so that we can tell which way it's flowing."

"What are we going to find?" I asked.

He held up a rather thick grey hair and nodded back toward his dog, Mouse. He should have been named Moose. The giant, shaggy temple dog

was pony-sized. “Mouse,” Harry said, “go get lost and we’ll see if we can find you.”

The big dog yawned and padded agreeably toward the door. Harry let him out and then came over to sit down next to me. We were in his living room. A couple of nights before, I had thrown myself at him. Naked. And he’d dumped a pitcher of ice water over my head. I was still mortified—but he was probably right. It was the right thing for him to do. He always did the right thing, even if it meant he lost out. I still wanted to be with him so much, but maybe the time wasn’t right yet.

That was okay. I could be patient. And I still got to be with him in a different way almost every day.

“All right,” I said when he sat back down. “What do I do?”

In the years since that day, the spell had become routine. I’d used it to find lost people, secret places, missing socks, and generally to poke my nose where it probably didn’t belong. Harry would have said that went with the territory of being a wizard. Harry was right.

I stopped in the alley outside Butters’s apartment and sketched a circle on the concrete with a small piece of pink chalk. I closed the circle with a tiny effort of will, drew out one of the hairs from the plastic bag, and held it up. I focused the energy of the spell, bringing its different elements together in my head. When we’d started, Harry had let me use four different objects, teaching me how to attach ideas to them, to represent the different pieces of the spell, but that kind of thing wasn’t necessary. Magic all happens inside the head of the wizard. You can use props to make things simpler, and in truly complex spells they make the difference between impossible and merely almost impossible. For this one, though, I didn’t need the props anymore.

I gathered the different pieces of the spell in my head, linked them together, infused them with a moderate effort of will, and then with a murmured word released that energy down into the hair in my fingers. Then I popped the hair into my mouth, broke the chalk circle with a brush of my foot, and rose.

Harry always used an object as the indicator for his tracking spells—his amulet, a compass, or some kind of pendulum. I hadn’t wanted to hurt his feelings, but that kind of thing really wasn’t necessary, either. I could feel the magic coursing through the hair, making my lips tingle gently. I got out

a cheap little plastic compass and a ten-foot length of chalk line. I set it up and snapped it to mark out magnetic north.

Then I took the free end of the line and turned slowly, until the tingling sensation was centered on my lips. Lips are extremely sensitive parts of the body, generally, and I've found that they give you the best tactile feedback for this sort of thing. Once I knew which direction Thomas was, I oriented the chalk line that way, made sure it was tight, and snapped it again, resulting in an extremely elongated V shape, like the tip of a giant needle. I measured the distance at the base of the V.

Then I turned ninety degrees, walked five hundred paces, and repeated the process.

Promise me you won't tell my high school math teacher about it, but after that I sat down and applied trigonometry to real life.

The math wasn't hard. I had the two angles measured against magnetic north. I had the distance between them in units of Molly-paces. Molly-paces aren't terribly scientific, but for purposes of this particular application, they were practical enough to calculate the distance to Thomas.

Using such simple tools, I couldn't get a measurement precise enough to know which door to kick down, but I now knew that he was relatively nearby—within four or five miles, as opposed to being at the North Pole or something. I move around the city a lot, because a moving target is a lot harder to hit. I probably covered three or four times that on an average day.

I'd have to get a lot closer before I could pinpoint his location any more precisely than that. So I turned my lips toward the tingle and started walking.

Thomas was in a small office building on a big lot.

The building was three stories, not huge, though it sat amidst several much larger structures. The lot it stood upon was big enough to hold something a lot bigger. Instead, most of it was landscaped into a manicured lawn and garden, complete with water features and a very small, very modest wrought-iron fence. The building itself showed a lot of stone and marble in its design, and it had more class in its cornices than the towers nearby had in their whole structures. It was gorgeous and understated at the same time; on that block, it looked like a single, small, perfect diamond being displayed amidst giant jars of rhinestones.

There were no signs outside it. There was no obvious way in, beyond a set of gates guarded by competent-looking men in dark suits. Expensive

dark suits. If the guards could afford to wear those to work, it meant that whoever owned that building had money. Serious money.

I circled the building to be sure, and felt the tingling energy of the tracking spell confirming Thomas's location; but even though I'd been careful to stay on the far side of the street, someone inside noticed me. I could feel one guard's eyes tracking me, even behind his sunglasses. Maybe I should have done the initial approach under a veil—but Harry had always been against using magic except when it was truly necessary, and it was way too easy to start using it for every little thing if you let yourself.

In some ways, I'm better at the "how" of magic than Harry was. But I've come to learn that I might never be as smart as him when it came to the "why."

I went into a nearby Starbucks and got myself a cup of liquid life and started thinking about how to get in. My tongue was telling me all about what great judgment I had when I sensed the presence of supernatural power rapidly coming nearer.

I didn't panic. Panic gets you killed. Instead I turned smoothly on one heel and slipped into a short hallway leading to a small restroom. I went inside, shut the door behind me, and drew my wands from my hip pocket. I checked the energy level on my bracelets. Both of them were ready to go. My rings were all full up, too, which was about as ideal as things could get.

So I ordered my thoughts, made a small effort of will, whispered a word, and vanished.

Veils were complex magic, but I had a knack for them. Becoming truly and completely invisible was a real pain in the neck: passing light completely through you was a literal stone-cold bitch, because it left you freezing cold and blind as a bat to boot. Becoming unseen, though, was a different proposition entirely. A good veil would reduce your visibility to little more than a few flickers in the air, to a few vague shadows where they shouldn't be, but it did more than that. It created a sense of ordinariness in the air around you, an aura of boring unremarkability that you usually only felt in a job you didn't like, around three thirty in the afternoon. Once you combined that suggestion with a greatly reduced visible profile, remaining unnoticed was at least as easy as breathing.

As I vanished into that veil, I also called up an image, another combination of illusion and suggestion. This one was simple: me, as I'd appeared in the mirror a moment before, clean and seemingly perky and

toting a fresh cup of creamy goodness. The sensation that went with it was just a kind of heavy dose of me: the sound of my steps and movement, the scent of Butters's shampoo, the aroma of my cup of coffee. I tied the image to one of the rings on my fingers and left it there, drawing from the energy I'd stored in a moonstone. Then I turned around, with my image layered over my actual body like a suit made of light, and walked out of the coffee shop.

Once outside, the evasion was a simple maneuver, the way all the good ones are. My image turned left and I turned right.

To anyone watching, a young woman had just come out of the store and gone sauntering down the street with her coffee. She was obviously enjoying her day. I'd put a little extra bounce and sway into the image's movements, to make her that much more noticeable (and therefore a better distraction). She'd go on walking down that street for a mile or more before she simply vanished.

Meanwhile, the real me moved silently into an alleyway and watched.

My image hadn't gone a hundred yards before a man in a black turtleneck sweater stepped out of an alley and began following it—a servitor of the Fomor. Those jerks were everywhere these days, like roaches, only more disgusting and harder to kill.

Only ... that was just too easy. One servitor wouldn't have set my instinct alarms to jingling. They were strong, fast, and tough, sure, but no more so than any number of creatures. They didn't possess mounds of magical power; if they had, the Fomor would never have let them leave in the first place.

Something else was out there. Something that had wanted me to be distracted, watching the apparent servitor follow the apparent Molly. And if something knew me well enough to set up this sort of diversion to ensnare my attention, then it knew me well enough to find me, even beneath my veil. There were a really limited number of people who could do that.

I slipped a hand into my nylon backpack and drew out my knife, the M9 bayonet my brother had brought home from Afghanistan. I drew the heavy blade out, closed my eyes, and turned quickly with the knife in one hand and my coffee in the other. I flicked the lid off the coffee with my thumb and slewed the liquid into a wide arc at about chest level.

I heard a gasp and oriented on it, opened my eyes, and stepped toward the source of the sound, driving the knife into the air before me at slightly

higher than the level of my own heart.

The steel of the blade suddenly erupted with a coruscation of light as it pierced a veil that hung in the air only inches away from me. I stepped forward rapidly through the veil, pushing the point of the knife before me toward the suddenly revealed form behind the veil. She was a woman, taller than me, dressed in ragged (coffee-stained) clothes, but with her long, fiery autumn hair unbound and wind tossed. She twisted to one side, off balance, until her shoulders touched the brick wall of the alley.

I did not relent, driving the blade toward her throat—until at the last second, one pale, slender hand snapped up and grasped my wrist, quick as a serpent but stronger and colder. My face wound up only a few inches from hers as I put the heel of one hand against the knife and leaned against it slightly—enough to push against her strength, but not enough to throw me off balance if she made a quick move. She was lean and lovely, even in the rags, with wide, oblique green eyes and perfect bone structure that could only be found in half a dozen supermodels—and in every single one of the Sidhe.

“Hello, Auntie,” I said in a level voice. “It isn’t nice to sneak up behind me. Especially lately.”

She held my weight off of her with one arm, though it wasn’t easy for her. There was a quality of strain to her melodic voice. “Child,” she breathed. “You anticipated my approach. Had I not stopped thee, thou wouldst have driven cold iron into my flesh, causing me agonies untold. Thou wouldst have spilled my life’s blood upon the ground.” Her eyes widened. “Thou wouldst have killed me.”

“I wouldst,” I agreed pleasantly.

Her mouth spread into a wide smile, and her teeth were daintily pointed. “I have taught thee well.”

Then she twisted with a lithe and fluid grace, away from the blade and to her feet a good long step away from me. I watched her and lowered the knife—but I didn’t put it away. “I don’t have time for lessons right now, Auntie Lea.”

“I am not here to teach thee, child.”

“I don’t have time for games, either.”

“Nor did I come to play with thee,” the Leanansidhe said, “but to give thee warning: thou art not safe here.”

I quirked an eyebrow at her. “Wow. Gosh.”

She tilted her head at me in reproof, and her mouth thinned. Her eyes moved past me to look down the alley, and she shot a quick glance behind her. Her expression changed. She didn't quite lose the smug superiority that always colored her features, but she toned it down a good deal, and she lowered her voice. "Thou makest jests, child, but thou art in grave peril—as am I. We should not linger here." She shifted her eyes to mine. "If thou dost wish to brace this foe, if thou wouldst recover my Godson's brother, there are things I must tell thee."

I narrowed my eyes. Harry's Faerie Godmother had taken over as my mentor when Harry died, but she wasn't exactly one of the good faeries. In fact, she was the second in command to Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness, and she was a bloodthirsty, dangerous being who divided her enemies into two categories: those who were dead, and those in which she had not yet taken pleasure. I hadn't known that she knew about Harry and Thomas—but it didn't shock me.

Lea was a murderous, cruel creature—but as far as I knew, she had never lied to me. Technically.

"Come," said the Leanansidhe. She turned and walked briskly toward the far end of the alley, gathering a seeming and a veil around her as she went, to hide herself from notice.

I glanced back toward the building where Thomas was being held, ground my teeth, and followed her, merging my veil with hers as we left.

We walked Chicago's streets unseen by thousands of eyes. The people we passed all took a few extra steps to avoid us, without really thinking about it. It's important to lay out an avoidance suggestion like that when you're in a crowd. Being unseen is kind of pointless if dozens of people keep bumping into you.

"Tell me, child," Lea said, shifting abruptly out of her archaic dialect. She did that sometimes, when we were alone. "What do you know of svartalves?"

"A little," I said. "They're from northern Europe, originally. They're small and they live underground. They're the best magical craftsmen on earth; Harry bought things from them whenever he could afford it, but they weren't cheap."

"How dry," the faerie sorceress said. "You sound like a book, child. Books frequently bear little resemblance to life." Her intense green eyes

glittered as she turned to watch a young woman with an infant walk by us. “What do you *know* of them?”

“They’re dangerous,” I said quietly. “Very dangerous. The old Norse gods used to go to them for weapons and armor and they didn’t try to fight them. Harry said he was glad he never had to fight a svartalf. They’re also honorable. They signed the Unseelie Accords and they uphold them. They have a reputation for being savage about protecting their own. They aren’t human, they aren’t kind, and only a fool crosses them.”

“Better,” the Leanansidhe said. Then she added, in an offhand tone, “Fool.”

I glanced back toward the building I’d found. “That’s their property?”

“Their fortress,” Lea replied, “the center of their mortal affairs, here at the great crossroads. What else do you recall of them?”

I shook my head. “Um. One of the Norse goddesses got jacked for her jewelry—”

“Freya,” Lea said.

“And the thief—”

“Loki.”

“Yeah, him. He pawned it with the svartalves or something, and there was a big to-do about getting it back.”

“One wonders how it is possible to be so vague and so accurate at the same time,” Lea said.

I smirked.

Lea frowned at me. “You knew the story perfectly well. You were ... tweaking my nose, I believe is the saying.”

“I had a good teacher in snark class,” I said. “Freya went to get her necklace back, and the svartalves were willing to do it—but only if she agreed to kiss each and every one of them.”

Lea threw her head back and laughed. “Child,” she said, a wicked edge to her voice, “remember that many of the old tales were translated and transcribed by rather prudish scholars.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“That the svartalves most certainly did not agree to give up one of the most valuable jewels in the universe for a society-wide trip to first base.”

I blinked a couple of times and felt my cheeks heat up. “You mean she had to ...”

“Precisely.”

“*All* of them?”

“Indeed.”

“Wow,” I said. “I like to accessorize as much as the next girl, but that’s over the line. Way over. I mean, you can’t even *see* the line from there.”

“Perhaps,” Lea said. “I suppose it depends upon how badly one needs to recover something from the svartalves.”

“Uh. You’re saying I need to pull a train to get Thomas out of there? ‘Cause ... that just isn’t going to happen.”

Lea showed her teeth in another smile. “Morality is amusing.”

“Would you do it?”

Lea looked offended. “For the sake of another? Certainly not. Have you any idea of the obligation that would incur?”

“Um. Not exactly.”

“This is not my choice to make. You must ask yourself this question: Is your untroubled conscience more valuable to you than the vampire’s life?”

“No. But there’s got to be another way.”

Lea seemed to consider that for a moment. “Svartalves love beauty. They covet it the way a dragon lusts for gold. You are young, lovely, and ... I believe the phrase is ‘smoking hot.’ The exchange of your favors for the vampire, a straightforward transaction, is almost certain to succeed, assuming he still lives.”

“We’ll call that one plan B,” I said. “Or maybe plan X. Or plan XXX. Why not just break in and burgle him out?”

“Child,” the Leanansidhe chided me. “The svartalves are quite skilled in the Art, and this is one of their strongholds. *I* could not attempt such a thing and leave with my life.” Lea tilted her head to one side and gave me one of those alien looks that made my skin crawl. “Do you wish to recover Thomas or not?”

“I wish to explore my options,” I said.

The faerie sorceress shrugged. “Then I advise you to do so as rapidly as possible. If he yet lives, Thomas Raith might count the remainder of his life in hours.”

I opened the door to Waldo’s apartment, shut and locked it behind me, and said, “Found him.”

As I turned toward the room, someone slapped me hard across the face.

This wasn’t a “Hey, wake up” kind of slap. It was an openhanded blow, one that would have really hurt if it was delivered with a closed fist. I

staggered to one side, stunned.

Waldo's girlfriend, Andi, folded her arms and stared at me through narrowed eyes for a moment. She was a girl of medium height, but she was a werewolf and she was built like a pinup model who was thinking about going into professional wrestling. "Hi, Molly," she said.

"Hi," I said. "And ... ow."

She held up a pink plastic razor. "Let's have a talk about boundaries."

Something ugly way down deep inside me somewhere unsheathed its claws and tensed up. That was the part of me that wanted to catch up to Listen and do things involving railroad spikes and drains in the floor. Everyone has that inside them, somewhere. It takes fairly horrible things to awaken that kind of savagery, but it's in all of us. It's the part of us that causes senseless atrocities, that makes war hell.

No one wants to talk about it or think about it, but I couldn't afford that kind of willing ignorance. I hadn't always been this way, but after a year fighting the Fomor and the dark underside of Chicago's supernatural scene, I was somebody else. That part of me was awake and active and constantly pushing my emotions into conflict with my rationality.

I told that part of me to shut up and sit its ass down.

"Okay," I said. "But later. I'm kind of busy."

I started to brush past her into the room, but she stopped me short by placing a hand against my sternum and shoved me back against the door. It didn't look like she was trying but I hit the wood firmly.

"Now's good," she said.

In my imagination, I clenched my fists and counted to five in an enraged scream. I was sure Harry had never had to deal with this kind of nonsense. I didn't have time to lose, but I didn't want to start something violent with Andi, either. I'd catch all kinds of hell if I threw down. I allowed myself the pleasure of gritting my teeth, took a deep breath, and nodded. "Okay. What's on your mind, Andi?"

I didn't add the words "you bitch" but I thought them really loud. I should probably be a nicer person.

"This is not your apartment," Andi said. "You don't get to roll in and out of here whenever you damned well please, no matter the hour, no matter what's going on. Have you even stopped to think about what you're doing to Butters?"

"I'm not doing anything to Butters," I said. "I'm just borrowing the shower."

Andi's voice sharpened. "You came here today covered in blood. I don't know what happened, but you know what? I don't care. All I care about is what kind of trouble you might draw down onto other people."

"There was no trouble," I said. "Look, I'll buy you a new razor."

"This isn't about property or money, Christ," Andi said. "This is about respect. Butters is there for you whenever you need help, and you barely do so much as to thank him for it. What if you'd been followed here? Do you have any idea how much trouble he could get into for helping you out?"

"I wasn't followed," I said.

"Today," Andi said. "But what about next time? You have power. You can fight. I don't have what you do, but even I can fight. Butters can't. Whose shower are you going to use if it's his blood all over you?"

I folded my arms and looked carefully away from Andi. In some part of my brain I knew that she had a point, but that reasoning was coming in a distant second to my sudden urge to slap her.

"Look, Molly," she said, her voice becoming more gentle. "I know things haven't been easy for you lately. Ever since Harry died. When his ghost showed up. I know it wasn't fun."

I just looked at her without speaking. Not easy or fun. That was one way to describe it.

"There's something I think you need to hear."

"What's that?"

Andi leaned forward slightly and sharpened her words. "Get over it."

The apartment was very quiet for a moment, and the inside of me wasn't. That ugly part of me started getting louder and louder. I closed my eyes.

"People die, Molly," Andi continued. "They leave. And life goes on. Harry may have been the first friend you lost, but he won't be the last. I get that you're hurting. I get that you're trying to step into some really big shoes. But that doesn't give you the right to abuse people's better natures. A lot of people are hurting lately, if you didn't notice."

If I didn't notice. God, I would absolutely *kill* to be able not to notice people's pain. Not to live it beside them. Not to sense its echoes hours or days later. The ugly part of me, the black part of my heart, wanted to open a psychic channel to Andi and *show* her the kind of thing I went through on a

regular basis. Let *her* see how she would like my life. And we'd see if she was so righteous afterward. It would be wrong, but ...

I took a slow breath. No. Harry told me once that you can always tell when you're about to rationalize your way to a bad decision. It's when you start using phrases such as "It would be wrong, but ..." His advice was to leave the conjunction out of the sentence: "It would be wrong." Period.

So I didn't do anything rash. I didn't let the rising tumult inside me come out. I spoke softly. "What is it you'd like me to do, exactly?"

Andi huffed out a little breath and waved a vague hand. "Just ... get your head out of your ass, girl. I am not being unreasonable here, given that my boyfriend gave you a key to his freaking apartment."

I blinked once at that. Wow. I hadn't even really considered that aspect of what Butters had done. Romance and romantic conflict hadn't exactly been high on my list lately. Andi had nothing to worry about on that front ... but I guess she didn't have way too much awareness of people's emotions to tip her off to that fact. Now I could put a name to some of the worry in her. She wasn't jealous, exactly, but she was certainly aware of the fact that I was a young woman a lot of men found attractive, and that Waldo was a man.

And she loved him. I could feel that, too.

"Think about him," Andi said quietly. "Please. Just ... try to take care of him the way he takes care of you. Call ahead. If you'd just walked in covered with blood next Saturday night, he would have had something very awkward to explain to his parents."

I most likely would have sensed the unfamiliar presences inside the apartment before I got close enough to touch the door. But there was no point in telling Andi that. It wasn't her fault that she didn't really understand the kind of life I lived. Certainly, she didn't deserve to die for it, no matter what the opinion of my inner Sith.

I had to make my choices with my head. My heart was too broken to be trusted.

"I'll try," I said.

"Okay," Andi said.

For a second, the fingers of my right hand quivered, and I found the ugly part of me about to hurl power at the other woman, blind her, deafen her, drown her in vertigo. Lea had shown me how. But I reeled the urge to attack back under control. "Andi," I said instead.

“Yes?”

“Don’t hit me again unless you intend to kill me.”

I didn’t mean it as a threat, exactly. It was just that I tended to react with my instincts when things started getting violent. The psychic turbulence of that kind of conflict didn’t make me fall over screaming in pain anymore, but it did make it really hard to think clearly over the furious roaring of ugly me. If Andi hit me like that again ... well. I wasn’t completely sure how I would react.

I’m not Mad Hatter insane. I’m pretty sure. But studying survival under someone like Auntie Lea leaves you ready to protect yourself, not to play well with others.

Threat or not, Andi had seen her share of conflict, and she didn’t back down. “If I don’t think you need a good smack in the face, I won’t give you one.”

Waldo and Justine had gone out to pick up some dinner, and got back about ten minutes later. We all sat down to eat while I reported on the situation.

“Svartalfheim,” Justine breathed. “That’s ... that’s not good.”

“Those are the Norse guys, right?” Butters asked.

I filled them in between bites of orange chicken, relaying what I had learned from the Leanansidhe. There was a little silence after I did.

“So ...” Andi said after a moment. “The plan is to ... boink him free?”

I gave her a look.

“I’m just asking,” Andi said in a mild voice.

“They’d never sell,” Justine said, her voice low, tight. “Not tonight.”

I eyed her. “Why not?”

“They concluded an alliance today,” she said. “There’s a celebration tonight. Lara was invited.”

“What alliance?” I asked.

“A nonaggression pact,” Justine said, “with the Fomor.”

I felt my eyes widen.

The Fomor situation just kept getting worse and worse. Chicago was far from the most preyed-upon city in the world, and they had still made the streets a nightmare for those of even modest magical talent. I didn’t have access to the kind of information I had when I was working with Harry and the White Council, but I’d heard things through the Paranet and other sources. The Fomor were kind of an all-star team of bad guys, the survivors and outcasts and villains of a dozen different pantheons that had gone down

a long time ago. They'd banded together under the banner of a group of beings known as the Fomor, and had been laying quiet for a long time—for thousands of years, in fact.

Now they were on the move—and even powerful interests like Svartalfheim, the nation of the svartalves, were getting out of the way.

Wow, I was so not wizard enough to deal with this.

“Lara must have sent Thomas in for something,” Justine said. “To steal information, to disrupt the alliance somehow. Something. Trespassing would be bad enough. If he was captured spying on them ...”

“They'll have a demonstration,” I said quietly. “They'll make an example.”

“Couldn't the White Court get him out?” Waldo asked.

“If the White Court seeks the return of one of their own, it would be like admitting they sent an agent in to screw around with Svartalfheim,” I said. “Lara can't do that without serious repercussions. She'll deny that Thomas's intrusion had anything to do with her.”

Justine rose and paced the room, her body tight. “We have to go. We have to do something. I'll pay the price; I'll pay it ten times. We have to *do* something!”

I took a few more bites of orange chicken, frowning and thinking.

“Molly!” Justine said.

I looked at the chicken. I liked the way the orange sauce contrasted with the deep green of the broccoli and the soft white contours of the rice. The three colors made a pleasant complement. It was ... beautiful, really.

“They covet beauty like a dragon covets gold,” I murmured.

Butters seemed to clue in to the fact that I was onto something. He leaned back in his chair and ate steadily from a box of noodles, his chopsticks precise. He didn't need to look to use them.

Andi picked up on it a second later and tilted her head to one side. “Molly?” she asked.

“They're having a party tonight,” I said. “Right, Justine?”

“Yes.”

Andi nodded impatiently. “What are we going to do?”

“We,” I said, “are going shopping.”

I'm kind of a tomboy. Not because I don't like being a girl or anything, because for the most part I think it's pretty sweet. But I like the outdoors, and physical activities, and learning stuff and reading things and building

things. I've never really gotten very deep into the girly parts of being a girl. Andi was a little bit better at it than me. The fact that her mother hadn't brought her up the way mine had probably accounted for it. In my house, makeup was for going to church and for women with easy morals.

I know, I know: the mind boggles at the contradiction. I had issues way before I got involved with magic, believe me.

I wasn't sure how to accomplish what we needed in time to get to the party, but once I explained what we needed, I found out that when it came to being a girly girl, Justine had her shit wired tight.

Within minutes a town car picked us up and whisked us away to a private salon in the Loop, where Justine produced a completely unmarked, plain white credit card. About twenty staff members—wardrobe advisors, hairdressers, makeup artists, tailors, and accessory technicians—leapt into action and got us kitted out for the mission in a little more than an hour.

I couldn't really get away from the mirror this time. I tried to look at the young woman in it objectively, as if she was someone else, and not the one who had helped kill the man she loved and who had then failed him again by being unable to prevent even his ghost from being destroyed in its determination to protect others. That bitch deserved to be run over by a train or something.

The girl in the mirror was tall and had naturally blond hair that had been rapidly swirled up off of her neck and suspended with gleaming black chopsticks. She looked lean, probably too much so, but had a little too much muscle tone to be a meth addict. The little black dress she wore would turn heads. She looked a little tired, even with the expertly applied makeup. She was pretty—if you didn't know her, and if you didn't look too hard at what was going on in her blue eyes.

A white stretch limo pulled up to get us, and I managed to dodder out to it without falling all over myself.

"Oh my God," Andi said when we got in. The redhead stuck her feet out and wiggled them. "I love these shoes! If I have to wolf out and eat somebody's face, I am going to cry to leave these behind."

Justine smiled at her but then looked out the window, her lovely face distant, worried. "They're just shoes."

"Shoes that make my legs and my butt look awesome!" Andi said.

"Shoes that hurt," I said. My wounded leg might have healed up, but moving around in these spiky torture devices was a new motion, and a

steady ache was spreading up through my leg toward my hip. The last thing I needed was for my leg to cramp up and drop me to the ground, the way it had kept doing when I first started walking on it again. Any shoes with heels that high should come with their own safety net. Or a parachute.

We'd gone with similar outfits: stylish little black dresses, black chokers, and black pumps that proclaimed us hopeful that we wouldn't spend much time on our feet. Each of us had a little Italian leather clutch, too. I'd put most of my magical gear in mine. All of us had our hair up in styles that varied only slightly. There were forged Renaissance paintings which had not had as much artist's attention as our faces.

"It just takes practice wearing them," Justine said. "Are you sure this is going to work?"

"Of course it is," I said calmly. "You've been to clubs, Justine. The three of us together would skip the line to any place in town. We're a matched set of hotness."

"Like the Robert Palmer girls," Andi said drily.

"I was going to go with Charlie's Angels," I said. "Oh, speaking of"—I opened the clutch and drew out a quartz crystal the size of my thumb—"Bosley, can you hear me?"

A second later, the crystal vibrated in my fingers and we heard Waldo's faint voice coming from it. "Loud and clear, Angels. You think these will work once you get inside?"

"Depends on how paranoid they are," I said. "If they're paranoid, they'll have defenses in place to cut off any magical communications. If they're murderously paranoid, they'll have defenses in place that let us talk so that they can listen in, and then they'll kill us."

"Fun," Butters said. "Okay, I've got the Paranet chat room up. For what it's worth, the hivemind is online."

"What have you found out?" Andi asked.

"They'll look human," Waldo replied. "Their real forms are ... well, there's some discussion, but the basic consensus is that they look like aliens."

"Ripley or Roswell?" I asked.

"Roswell. More or less. They can wear flesh forms, though, kind of like the Red Court vampires did. So be aware that they'll be disguised."

"Got it," I said. "Anything else?"

“Not much,” he said. “There’s just too much lore floating around to pick out anything for sure. They might be allergic to salt. They might be supernaturally OCD and flip out if you wear your clothes inside out. They might turn to stone in sunlight.”

I growled. “It was worth a shot. Okay. Keep the discussion going, and I’ll get back to you if I can.”

“Got it,” he said. “Marci just got here. I’ll bring the laptop with me and we’ll be waiting for you on the east side of the building when you’re ready to go. How do you look, Andi-licious?”

“Fabulous,” Andi said confidently. “The hemlines on these dresses stop about an inch short of slutty nymphomaniac.”

“Someone take a picture,” he said cheerfully, but I could hear the worry in his voice. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Don’t take any chances,” I said. “See you soon.”

I put the crystal away and tried to ignore the butterflies in my stomach.

“This isn’t going to work,” Justine murmured.

“It is going to work,” I told her, keeping my tone confident. “We’ll breeze right in. The Rack will be with us.”

Justine glanced at me with an arched eyebrow. “The Rack?”

“The Rack is more than just boobs, Justine,” I told her soberly. “It’s an energy field created by all living boobs. It surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together.”

Andi started giggling. “You’re insane.”

“But functionally so,” I said, and adjusted myself to round out a little better. “Just let go your conscious self and act on instinct.”

Justine stared blankly at me for a second. Then her face lightened and she let out a little laugh. “The Rack will be with us?”

I couldn’t stop myself from cracking a smile. “Always.”

The limo joined a line of similar vehicles dropping people off at the entrance to the svartalf stronghold. A valet opened our door, and I swung my legs out and tried to leave the car without flashing everyone in sight. Andi and Justine followed me out, and I started walking confidently toward the entrance with the other two flanking me. Our heels clicked in near unison, and I suddenly felt every eye in sight swivel toward us. A cloud of thought and emotion rolled out in response to our presence—pleasure, mostly, along with a mixed slurry of desire, outright lust, jealousy, anxiety, and surprise. It hurt to feel all of that scraping against the inside of my

head, but it was necessary. I didn't sense any outright hostility or imminent violence, and the instant of warning I might get between sensing an attacker's intention and the moment of attack might save our lives.

A security guard at the door watched us intently as we approached, and I could feel the uncomplicated sexual attraction churning through him. He kept it off his face and out of his voice and body, though. "Good evening, ladies," he said. "May I see your invitations?"

I arched an eyebrow at him, gave him what I hoped was a seductive smile, and tried to arch my back a little more. Deploying the Rack had worked before. "You don't need to see our invitation."

"Um," he said. "Miss ... I kind of do."

Andi stepped up beside me and gave him a sex-kitten smile that made me hate her a little, just for a second. "No you don't."

"Uh," he said, "yeah. Still do."

Justine stepped up on my other side. She looked more sweet than sexy, but only barely. "I'm sure it was just an oversight, sir. Couldn't you ask your supervisor if we might come to the reception?"

He stared at us for a long moment, clearly hesitant. Then one hand slowly went to the radio at his side and he lifted it to his mouth. A moment later a slight, small man in a silk suit appeared from inside the building. He took a long look at us.

The interest I'd felt from the guard was fairly normal. It had just been a spark, the instinct-level response of any male to a desirable female.

What came off of the new guy was ... it was more like a road flare. It burned a thousand times hotter and brighter, and it kept *on* burning. I'd sensed lust and desire in others before. This went so much deeper and wider than mere lust that I didn't think there was a word for it. It was ... a vast and inhuman yearning, blended with a fierce and jealous love, and seasoned with sexual attraction and desire. It was like standing near a tiny sun, and I suddenly understood exactly what Auntie Lea had been trying to tell me.

Fire is hot. Water is wet. And svartalves are suckers for pretty girls. They could no more change their nature than they could the course of the stars.

"Ladies," the new guy said, smiling at us. It was a charming smile, but there was something distant and disquieting in his face all the same. "Please, wait just a moment for me to alert my other staff. We would be honored if you would join us."

He turned and went inside.

Justine gave me a sidelong look.

“The Rack can have a powerful influence over the weak-minded,” I said.

“I’d feel better if he hadn’t left on a Darth Vader line,” Andi breathed. “He smelled odd. Was he ...?”

“Yeah,” I whispered back. “One of them.”

The man in the silk suit reappeared, still smiling, and opened the door for us. “Ladies,” he said, “I am Mister Etri. Please, come inside.”

I had never in my life seen a place more opulent than the inside of the svartalves’ stronghold. Not in magazines, not in the movies. Not even on *Cribs*.

There were tons of granite and marble. There were sections of wall that had been inlaid with precious and semiprecious stones. Lighting fixtures were crafted of what looked like solid gold, and the light switches looked like they’d been carved from fine ivory. Security guards were stationed every twenty or thirty feet, standing at rigid attention like those guys outside Buckingham Palace, only without the big hats. Light came from everywhere and from nowhere, making all shadows thin and wispy things without becoming too bright for the eyes. Music drifted on the air, some old classical thing that was all strings and no drumbeat.

Etri led us down a couple of hallways to a vast cathedral of a ballroom. It was absolutely palatial in there—in fact, I was pretty sure that the room shouldn’t have *fit* in the building we’d just entered—and it was filled with expensive-looking people in expensive-looking clothing.

We paused in the entry while Etri stopped to speak to yet another security guy. I took the moment it offered to sweep my gaze over the room. The place wasn’t close to full, but there were a lot of people there. I recognized a couple of celebrities, people you’d know if I told you their names. There were a number of the Sidhe in attendance, their usual awe-inspiring physical perfection muted to mere exotic beauty. I spotted Gentleman Johnnie Marcone, the head of Chicago’s outfit in attendance, with his gorilla Hendricks and his personal attack witch, Gard, floating around near him. There were any number of people who I was sure weren’t people; I could sense the blurring of perception in the air around them as if they were cut off from me by a thin curtain of falling water.

But I didn’t see Thomas.

“Molly,” Justine whispered, barely audible. “Is he ...?”

The tracking spell I'd focused on my lips was still functioning, a faint tingle telling me that Thomas was nearby, deeper into the interior of the building. "He's alive," I said. "He's here."

Justine shuddered and took a deep breath. She blinked slowly, once, her face showing nothing as she did. I felt the surge of simultaneous relief and terror in her presence, though, a sudden blast of emotion that cried out for her to scream or fight or burst into tears. She did none of that, and I turned my eyes away from her in order to give her the illusion that I hadn't noticed her near meltdown.

In the center of the ballroom, there was a small, raised platform of stone, with a few stairs leading up onto it. Upon the platform was a podium of the same material. Resting on the podium was a thick folio of papers and a neat row of fountain pens. There was something solemn and ceremonial about the way it was set up.

Justine was looking at it, too. "That must be it."

"The treaty?"

She nodded. "The svartalves are very methodical about business. They'll conclude the treaty precisely at midnight. They always do."

Andi tapped a finger thoughtfully on her hip. "What if something happened to their treaty first? I mean, if someone spilled a bunch of wine on it or something. That would be attention getting, I bet—maybe give a couple of us a chance to sneak further in."

I shook my head. "No. We're guests here. Do you understand?"

"Uh. Not really."

"The svartalves are old-school," I said. "*Really* old-school. If we break the peace when they've invited us into their territory, we're violating our guest right and offering them disrespect as our hosts—right out in the open, in front of the entire supernatural community. They'll react ... badly."

Andi frowned and said, "Then what's our next move?"

Why do people keep asking me that? Is this what all wizard types go through? I'd probably asked Harry that question a hundred times, but I never realized how hard it was to hear it coming toward you. But Harry always knew what to do next. All I could do was improvise desperately and hope for the best.

"Justine," I said, "do you know any of the players here?"

As Lara Raith's personal assistant, Justine came in contact with a lot of people and not-quite-people. Lara had so many fingers in so many pies that

I could barely make a joke about it, and Justine saw, heard, and thought a lot more than anyone gave her credit for. The white-haired girl scanned the room, her dark eyes flicking from face to face. "Several."

"All right. I want you to circulate and see what you can find out," I said. "Keep an eye out. If you see them sending the brute squad after us, get on the crystal and warn us."

"Okay," Justine whispered. "Careful."

Etri returned and smiled again, though his eyes remained oddly, unsettlingly without expression. He flicked one hand and a man in a tux floated over to us with a tray of drinks. We helped ourselves, and Etri did, too. He lifted his glass to us and said, "Ladies, be welcome. To beauty."

We echoed him and we all sipped. I barely let my lips touch the liquid. It was champagne, really good stuff. It fizzed and I could barely taste the alcohol. I wasn't worried about poison. Etri had quite diffidently allowed us to choose our glasses before taking one of his own.

I was actually more worried about the fact that I'd stopped to consider potential poisoning, and to watch Etri's actions carefully as he served us. Is it paranoid to worry about things like that? It seemed reasonable to me at the time.

Man, maybe I'm more messed up than I thought I was.

"Please, enjoy the reception," Etri said. "I'm afraid I must insist on a dance with each of you lovely young ladies when time and duty shall allow. Who shall be first?"

Justine gave him a Rack-infused smile and lifted her hand. If you twisted my arm, I'd tell you that Justine was definitely the prettiest girl in our little trio, and Etri evidently agreed. His eyes turned warm for an instant before he took Justine's hand and led her out onto the dance floor. They vanished into the moving crowd.

"I couldn't do this ballroom stuff anyway," Andi said. "Not nearly enough booty bouncing. Next move time?"

"Next move time," I said. "Come on."

I turned the follow the tingle in my lips and the two of us made our way to the back side of the ballroom, where doors led deeper into the facility. There were no guards on the doors, but as we got closer, Andi's steps started to slow. She glanced over to one side, where there was a refreshments table, and I saw her begin to turn toward it.

I caught her arm and said, "Hold it. Where are you going?"

“Um,” she said, frowning. “Over there?”

I extended my senses and felt the subtle weaving of magic in the air around the doorway, cobweb fine. It was a kind of veil, designed to direct the attention of anyone approaching it away from the doorway and toward anything else in the room. It made the refreshment table look yummier. If Andi had spotted a guy, he would have looked a lot cuter than he actually was.

I’d been having a powerful faerie sorceress throwing veils and glamours at me for almost a year, building up my mental defenses, and a few months ago I’d gone twelve rounds in the psychic boxing ring with a heavyweight champion necromancer. I hadn’t even noticed the gentle magical weaving hitting my mental shields.

“It’s an enchantment,” I told her. “Don’t let it sway you.”

“What?” she asked. “I don’t feel anything. I’m just hungry.”

“You wouldn’t feel it,” I said. “That’s how it works. Take my hand and close your eyes. Trust me.”

“If I had a nickel for every time a bad evening started with a line like that,” she muttered. But she put her hand in mine and closed her eyes.

I walked her toward the doorway and felt her growing more tense as we went—but then we passed through it and she let out her breath explosively, blinking her eyes open. “Wow. That felt ... like nothing at all.”

“It’s how you recognize quality enchantment,” I said. “If you don’t know it’s got you, you can’t fight it off.” The hallway we stood in looked much like any in any office building. I tried the nearest door and found it locked. So were the next couple, but the last was an empty conference room, and I slipped inside.

I fumbled the crystal out of my little clutch and said, “Bosley, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Angels,” came Waldo’s voice. Neither of us used real names. The crystals were probably secure, but a year with Lea’s nasty trickery as a daily feature of life had taught me not to make many assumptions.

“Were you able to come up with those floor plans?”

“About ninety seconds ago. The building’s owners filed everything with the city in triplicate, including electronic copies, which I am now looking at, courtesy of the hivemind.”

“Advantage, nerds,” I said. “Tell them they did good, Boz.”

“Will do,” Waldo said. “These people you’re visiting are thorough, Angels. Be careful.”

“When am I not careful?” I said.

Andi had taken up a guard position against the wall next to the door, where she could grab anyone who opened it. “Seriously?”

I couldn’t help but smile a little. “I think our lost lamb is in the wing of the building to the west of the reception hall. What’s there?”

“Um ... offices, it looks like. Second floor, more offices. Third floor, more offi—hello there.”

“What’d you find?”

“A vault,” Waldo said. “Reinforced steel. Huge.”

“Hah,” I said. “A reinforced-steel vault? Twenty bucks says it’s a dungeon. We start there.”

“Whatever it is, it’s in the basement. There should be a stairway leading down to it at the end of the hallway leading out of the reception hall.”

“Bingo,” I said. “Stay tuned, Bosley.”

“Will do. Your chariot awaits.”

I put the crystal away and began putting on my rings. I got them all together, then began to pick up my wands, and realized that I couldn’t carry them in each hand while also carrying the little clutch. “I knew I should have gone for a messenger bag,” I muttered.

“With that dress?” Andi asked. “Are you kidding?”

“True.” I took the crystal out and tucked it into my décolletage, palmed one of the little wands in each hand, and nodded to Andi. “If it’s a vault or a dungeon, there will be guards. I’m going to make it hard for them to see us, but we might have to move fast.”

Andi looked down at her shoes and sighed mournfully. Then she stepped out of them and peeled the little black dress off. She hadn’t been wearing anything underneath. She closed her eyes for a second and then her form just seemed to blur and melt. Werewolves don’t do dramatic, painful transformations except right at first, I’ve been told. This looked as natural as a living being turning in a circle and sitting down. One moment Andi was there, and the next there was a great russet-furred wolf sitting where she’d been.

It was highly cool magic. I was going to have to figure out how that was done, one of these days.

“Don’t draw blood unless it’s absolutely necessary,” I said, stepping out of my own torturous shoes. “I’m going to try to make this quick and painless. If there’s any rough stuff, not killing anyone will go a long way with the svartalves.”

Andi yawned at me.

“Ready?” I asked.

Andi bobbed her lupine head in a sharp, decisive nod. I drew the concealing magic of my top-of-the-line veil around us, and the light suddenly went dim, the colors leaching out of the world. We would be almost impossible to see. And anyone who came within fifty or sixty feet of us would develop a sudden desire for a bit of introspection, questioning their path in life so deeply that there was practically no chance we’d be detected as long as we were quiet.

With Andi walking right beside me, we stole out into the hallway. We found the stairwell Waldo had told us about, and I opened the door to it slowly. I didn’t go first. You can’t do much better than having a werewolf as your guide, and I’d worked with Andi and her friends often enough in the past year to make our movements routine.

Andi went through first, moving in total silence, her ears perked, her nose twitching. Wolves have incredible senses of smell. Hearing, too. If anyone was around, Andi would sense them. After a tense quarter of a minute, she gave me the signal that it was all clear by sitting down. I eased up next to her and extended my senses, feeling for any more magical defenses or enchantments. There were half a dozen on the first section of the stairwell—simple things, the sorcerous equivalent of trip wires.

Fortunately, Auntie Lea had shown me how to circumvent enchantments such as these. I made an effort of will and modified our veil, and then I nodded to Andi and we started slowly down the stairs. We slipped through the invisible fields of magic without disturbing them, and crept down to the basement.

I checked the door at the bottom of the stairs and found it unlocked.

“This seems way too easy,” I muttered. “If it’s a prison, shouldn’t this be locked?”

Andi let out a low growl, and I could sense her agreement and suspicion.

My mouth still tingled, much more strongly now. Thomas was close. “Guess there’s not a lot of choice here.” I opened the door, slowly and quietly.

The door didn't open onto some kind of dungeon. It didn't open up to show us a vault, either. Instead, Andi and I found ourselves staring at a long hallway every bit as opulent as those above, with large and ornate doors spaced generously along it. Each door had a simple number on it, wrought in what looked like pure silver. Very subdued lighting was spaced strategically along its length, leaving it comfortably dim without being dark.

Andi's low growl turned into a confused little sound and she tilted her head to one side.

"Yeah," I said, perplexed. "It looks like ... a hotel. There's even a sign showing fire escape routes on the wall."

Andi gave her head a little shake, and I sensed enough of her emotions to understand her meaning. *What the hell?*

"I know," I said. "Is this ... living quarters for the svartalves? Guest accommodations?"

Andi glanced up at me and flicked her ears. *Why are you asking me? I can't even talk.*

"I know you can't. Just thinking out loud."

Andi blinked, her ears snapping toward me, and she gave me a sidelong glance. *You heard me?*

"I didn't so much hear you as just ... understand you."

She leaned very slightly away from me. *Just when I thought you couldn't get any more weird and disturbing.*

I gave her a maliciously wide smile, and the crazy eyes I used to use to scare my kid brothers and sisters.

Andi snorted and then began testing the air with her nose. I watched her closely. Her hackles rose up and I saw her crouch down. *There are things here. Too many scents to sort out. Something familiar, and not in a good way.*

"Thomas is close. Come on." We started forward, and I kept my face turned directly toward the tingling signature of my tracking spell. It began to bear to the right, and as we got to the door to room 6, the tingle suddenly swung to the very corner of my mouth, until I turned to face the doorway directly. "Here, in six."

Andi looked up and down the hall, her eyes restless, her ears trying to swivel in every direction. *I don't like this.*

“Too easy,” I whispered. “This is way too easy.” I reached out toward the doorknob and stopped. My head told me this situation was all wrong. So did my instincts. If Thomas was a prisoner being held by Svartalfheim, then where were the cages, the chains, the locks, the bars, the guards? And if he wasn’t being held against his will ... what *was* he doing here?

When you find yourself in a situation that doesn’t make any sense, it’s usually for one reason: you have bad information. You can get bad information in several ways. Sometimes you’re just plain wrong about what you learn. More often, and more dangerously, your information is bad because you made a faulty assumption.

Worst of all is when someone deliberately feeds it to you—and, like a sucker, you trust her and take it without hesitation.

“Auntie,” I breathed. “She *tricked* me.” Lea hadn’t sent me into the building to rescue Thomas—or at least not only for that. It was no freaking coincidence that she’d taught me how to specifically circumvent the magical security the svartalves were using, either. She’d had another purpose in bringing me here, on this night.

I replayed our conversation in my mind and snarled. Nothing she told me was a lie, and all of it had been tailored to make me reach the wrong conclusion—that Thomas had to be rescued and that I was the only one who would do it. I didn’t know why the Leanansidhe thought I needed to be where I was, but she sure as hell had made sure I would get there.

“That conniving, doublespeaking, treacherous *bitch*. When I catch up with her, I’m going to—”

Andi let out a sudden, very low growl, and I shut up in the nick of time.

The door from the upstairs opened, and that bastard Listen and several turtlenecks started walking down the hall toward us.

Listen was a lean and fit-looking man of middling height. His hair was cropped military short, his skin was pale, and his dark eyes looked hard and intelligent. The werewolves and I had tried to bring him down half a dozen different times, but he always managed to either escape or turn the tables and make us run for our lives.

Vicious bad guys are bad enough. Vicious, resourceful, ruthless, professional, *smart* bad guys are way worse. Listen was one of the latter and I hated his fishy guts.

He and his lackeys were dressed in the standard uniform of the Fomors’ servitors: black slacks, black shoes, and a black turtleneck sweater. The

high neck of the sweater covered up the gills on both sides of their necks, so that they could pass as mortals. They weren't, or at least they weren't anymore. The Fomor had changed them, making them stronger, faster, and all but immune to pain. I'd never managed to set up a successful ambush before, and now one had fallen right into my lap. I absolutely *ached* to avenge the blood I'd washed from my body early that very day.

But the servitors had weird minds, and they kept getting weirder. It was damned difficult to get into their heads the way I would need to do, and if that first attack failed in close quarters like these, that crew would tear Andi and me apart.

So I ground my teeth. I put my hand on Andi's neck and squeezed slightly as I crouched down beside her, focusing on the veil. I had to damp down on the introspection suggestion: Listen had nearly killed me a few months before, when he noticed a similar enchantment altering the course of his thoughts. That had been damned scary, but I'd worked on it since then. I closed my eyes and spun the lightest, finest cobwebs of suggestion that my gifts could manage while simultaneously drawing the veil even tighter around us. The light in the hallway shrunk to almost nothing, and the air just over my skin became noticeably cooler.

They came closer, Listen clearly in the lead, walking with swift and silent purpose. The son of a bitch passed within two feet of me. I could have reached out and touched him with my hand.

None of them stopped.

They went down the hall to room 8, and Listen pushed a key into a door. He opened it and he and his buddies began to enter the room.

This was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. For all the horror the Fomor had brought to the world since the extinction of the Red Court, we still didn't know why they did what they did. We didn't know what they wanted, or how they thought their current actions would get it for them.

So I moved in all the silence the past year had taught me the hard way, and stalked up to the line of servitors passing into the chamber. After a startled second, Andi joined me, just as quietly. We just barely slipped through the door before it shut.

No one looked back at us as we passed into a palatial suite, furnished as lavishly as the rest of the building. In addition to the half dozen turtlenecks in Listen's party, another five were standing around the room in a guard position, backs straight, their arms clasped behind them.

“Where is he?” Listen asked a guard standing beside a door. The guard was the biggest turtleneck there, with a neck like a fireplug.

“Inside,” the guard said.

“It is nearly time,” Listen said. “Inform him.”

“He left orders that he was not to be disturbed.”

Listen seemed to consider that for a moment. Then he said, “A lack of punctuality will invalidate the treaty and make our mission impossible. Inform him.”

The guard scowled. “The lord left orders that—”

Listen’s upper body surged in a sudden motion, so fast that I could only see it *as* motion. The big guard let out a sudden hiss and a grunt, and blood abruptly fountained from his throat. He staggered a step, turned to Listen, and raised a hand.

Then he shuddered and collapsed to the floor, blood pumping rapidly from a huge and jagged wound in his neck.

Listen dropped a chunk of meat the size of a baseball from his bare, bloody fingers, and bent over to wipe them clean on the dead turtleneck’s sweater. The blood didn’t show against the black. He straightened up again and then knocked on the door.

“My lord. It is nearly midnight.”

He did it again exactly sixty seconds later.

And he repeated it three more times before a slurred voice answered, “I left orders that I was not to be disturbed.”

“Forgive me, my lord, but the time is upon us. If we do not act, our efforts are for nothing.”

“It is not for you to presume what orders may or may not be ignored,” said the voice. “Execute the fool who allowed my sleep to be disturbed.”

“It is already done, my lord.”

There was a somewhat mollified grunt from the far side of the door, and a moment later it opened, and for the first time I saw one of the lords of the Fomor.

He was a tall, extremely gaunt being, yet somehow not thin. His hands and feet were too large, and his stomach bulged as if it contained a basketball. His jowls were oversized as well, his jaws swollen as if he had the mumps. His lips were too wide, too thick, and too rubbery looking. His hair look too flattened, too limp, like strands of seaweed just washed up onto shore, and on the whole he looked like some kind of gangling,

poisonous frog. He was dressed only in a blanket draped across his shoulders. Ew.

There were three women in the room behind him, naked and scattered and dead. Each had livid purple bruises around her throat and glassy, staring eyes.

The turtlenecks all dropped to the floor in supplication as the Fomor entered, though Listen only genuflected upon one knee.

“He is here?” asked the Fomor.

“Yes, my lord,” Listen said, “along with both of his bodyguards.”

The Fomor croaked out a little laugh and rubbed his splay-fingered hands together. “Mortal upstart. Calling himself a Baron. He will pay for what he did to my brother.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“No one is allowed to murder my family but me.”

“Of course, my lord.”

“Bring me the shell.”

Listen bowed and nodded to three of the other turtlenecks. They hurried to another door and then emerged, carrying between them an oyster shell that must have weighed half a ton. The thing was monstrous and covered in a crust of coral or barnacles or whatever those things are that grow on the hulls of ships. It was probably seven feet across. The turtlenecks put it down on the floor in the middle of the room.

The Fomor crossed to the shell, touched it with one hand, and murmured a word. Instantly, light blossomed all across its surface, curling and twisting in patterns or maybe letters which I had never seen before. The Fomor stood over it for a time, one hand outstretched, bulbous eyes narrowed, saying something in a hissing, bubbling tongue.

I didn’t know what he was doing, but he was moving a lot of energy around, whatever it was. I could feel it filling the air of the chamber, making it seem tighter and somehow harder to breathe.

“My lord?” asked Listen abruptly. “What are you doing?”

“Making a present for our new allies, of course,” the Fomor said. “I can hardly annihilate the svartalves along with everyone else. Not yet.”

“This is not according to the plans of the Empress.”

“The Empress,” spat the Fomor, “told me that I ought not harm our new allies. She said nothing of the puling scum attending their festivities.”

“The svartalves value their honor dearly,” Listen said. “You will shame them if their guests come to harm whilst under their hospitality, my lord. It could defeat the point of the alliance.”

The Fomor spat. A glob of yellowy, mucus-like substance splattered the floor near Listen’s feet. It hissed and crackled against the marble floor. “Once the treaty is signed, it is done. My gift will be given to them in the moments after: I will spare their miserable lives. And if the rest of the scum turn against the svartalves, they will have no choice but to turn to *us* for our strength.” He smirked. “Fear not, Listen. I am not so foolish as to destroy one of the Empress’ special pets, even in an accident. You and your fellows will survive.”

I suddenly recognized the tenor of energy building up in the giant shell on the floor and my heart just about stopped.

Holy crap.

Lord Froggy had himself a *bomb*.

Like, right *there*.

“My life belongs to my masters, to spend as they will, my lord,” Listen said. “Have you any other instruction?”

“Seize whatever treasure you might from the dead before we depart.”

Listen bowed his head. “How efficacious do you anticipate your gift to be?”

“The one I made for the Red Court in the Congo was deadly enough,” Lord Froggy said, a smug tone in his voice.

My heart pounded even harder. During its war with the White Council, the Red Court had used some kind of nerve gas on a hospital tending wounded wizards. The weapon had killed tens of thousands of people in a city far smaller and less crowded than Chicago.

My bare feet felt tiny and cold.

Lord Froggy grunted and fluttered his fingers, and the bomb-shell vanished, hidden by a veil as good as anything I could do. The Fomor lord abruptly lowered his hand, smiling. “Bring my robes.”

The turtlenecks hurriedly dressed Lord Froggy in what might have been the tackiest robe in the history of robekind. Multiple colors wavered over it in patterns like the ripples on water, but seemed random, clashing with one another. It was beaded with pearls, some of them the size of big supermarket gumballs. They put a crown-like circlet on his head after that, and then Lord Froggy and company headed out the door.

I crouched as far to the side as I could, almost under the minibar, with Andi huddling right beside me, holding my veil in tight. Lord Froggy blew right by me, with the turtlenecks walking in two columns behind him, their movements precise and uniform—until one of the last pair stopped, his hand holding the door open.

It was Listen.

His eyes swept the room slowly, and he frowned.

“What is it?” asked the other turtleneck.

“Do you smell something?” Listen asked.

“Like what?”

“Perfume.”

Oh, crap.

I closed my eyes and focused on my suggestion frantically, adding threads of anxiety to it, trying to keep it too fine for Listen to pick up on.

After a moment, the other turtleneck said, “I’ve never really liked perfume. We should not be so far from the lord.”

Listen hesitated a moment more before he nodded and began to leave.

“Molly!” said Justine’s voice quite clearly from the crystal tucked into my dress. “Miss Gard freaked out about two minutes ago and all but carried Marccone out of here. Security is mobilizing.”

Sometimes I think my life is all about bad timing.

Listen whirled around toward us at once, but Andi was faster. She bounded from the floor into a ten-foot leap and slammed against the doorway, hammering it closed with the full weight of her body. In a flickering instant, she was a naked human girl again, straining against the door as she reached up and manually snapped its locks closed.

I fished the crystal out of my dress and said, “There’s a bomb on the premises, down in the guest wing. I repeat, a *bomb* in the guest wing, in the Fomor Ambassador’s quarters. Find Etri or one of the other svartalves and tell them that the Fomor is planning to murder the svartalves’ guests.”

“Oh my God,” Justine said.

“Holy crap!” chimed in Butters.

Something heavy and moving fast slammed into the door from the other side, and it jumped in its frame. Andi was actually knocked back off of it a few inches, and she reset herself, pressing her shoulder against it to reinforce it. “Molly!”

This was another one of those situations in which panic can get you killed. So while I wanted to scream and run around in circles, what I did was close my eyes for a moment as I released the veil and take a slow, deep breath, ordering my thoughts.

First: if Froggy and the turtlenecks managed to get back into the room, they'd kill us. There were already at least four dead bodies in the suite. Why not add two more? And, all things considered, they'd probably be able to do it. So, priority one was to keep them out of the room, at least until the svartalves sorted things out.

Second: the bomb. If that thing went off, and it was some kind of nerve agent like the Red Court used in Africa, the casualties could be in the hundreds of thousands, and would include Andi and Thomas and Justine—plus Butters and Marci, waiting outside in the car. The bomb had to be disarmed or moved to somewhere safe. Oh, and it would probably need to be not invisible for either of those things to happen.

And three: rescue Thomas. Can't forget the mission, regardless of how complicated things got.

The door boomed again.

"Molly!" Andi screamed, her fear making her voice vibrant, piercing.

"Dammit," I growled. "What would Harry do?"

If Harry was here, he would just hold the stupid door shut. His magic talents had been, like, superhero strong when it came to being able to deliver massive amounts of energy. I'm fairly sure he could have stopped a speeding locomotive. Or at least a speeding semitrailer. But my talents just didn't run to the physical.

Harry had once told me that when you had one problem, you had a problem—but when you had several problems, you might also have several solutions.

I stood up and dropped my wands into my hands, gripping them hard. I faced the doorway and said, "Get ready."

Andi flashed me a glance. "For what?"

"To open the door," I said. "Then shut it behind me."

"What?"

"Close your eyes. Go on three," I said, and bent my knees slightly. "One!"

The door rattled again.

"Two!"

“Are you insane?” Andi demanded.

“Three!” I screamed, and sprinted for the door, lifting both wands.

Andi squeezed her eyes shut and swung the door open, and I deployed the One Woman Rave.

Channeling the strength of my will, light and sound burst from the ends of the two wands. Not light like from a flashlight—more like the light of a small nuclear explosion. The sound wasn’t loud like a scream, or a small explosion, or even the howl of a passing train. It was like standing on the deck of one of those old World War II battleships when they fired their big guns—a force that could stun a full-grown man and knock him on his ass.

I charged ahead with a wall of sound and furious light leading the way, and burst into the hall among the scattered forms of the startled, dazed turtlenecks.

And then I started playing nasty.

A few seconds later, the scattered turtlenecks were all on their feet again, though they looked a little disoriented and were blinking their eyes. Down the hallway, one of the turtlenecks was helping Lord Froggy to his feet, his lank hair disheveled, his robes in disarray. His ugly face was contorted in fury. “What is happening here, Listen?” he demanded. He was screaming at the top of his lungs. I doubt his ears were working very well.

“My lord,” Listen said, “I believe this is more of the work of the Ragged Lady.”

“What!? Speak up, fool!”

Listen’s cheek twitched once. Then he repeated himself in a shout.

Froggy made a hissing sound. “Meddling bitch,” he snarled. “Break down that door and bring me her *heart*.”

“Yes, my lord,” Listen said, and the turtlenecks grouped up around the door to room 8 again.

They didn’t use any tools. They didn’t need any. They just started kicking the door, three of them at a time, working in unison, driving the heels of their shoes at the wood. In three kicks, cracks began to form and the door groaned. In five, it broke and swung in loosely on its hinges.

“Kill her!” snarled Lord Froggy, pacing closer to the broken door. “*Kill her!*”

All but two of the turtlenecks poured into the room.

From behind my renewed veil, I figured the timing was about right to discontinue my illusion just as the door bounced back after they’d rushed

through it. The silver numeral 8 hanging on the door blurred and melted back into a silver numeral 6.

Lord Froggy's eyes widened in sudden, startled realization.

One of the turtlenecks flew back out the door to room 6 and smashed into the wall on the far side. He hit like a rag doll and flopped off it to the ground. There was a body-shaped outline in cracked marble and flecks of fresh blood left on the wall behind him.

And from the other side of the broken door, Thomas Raith, vampire, said, "It's Listen, right? Wow. Did you clowns ever pick the wrong room."

"We made a mistake," Listen said.

"Yes. Yes, you did."

And things started going crunch and thump in the room beyond.

Lord Froggy hissed and swiveled his bulgy head around on his gangly neck. "Ragged bitch," he hissed. "I know you are here."

This time, I knew exactly what Harry would do. I lifted my sonic wand and sent my voice down to the far end of the hall, behind him. "Hi there, Froggy. Is it as hard as it looks, holding up villain clichés, or does it come naturally to you?"

"You *dare* mock *me*?" the Fomor snarled. He threw a spiraling corkscrew of deep green energy down the hall, and it hissed and left burn marks upon everything it touched, ending at the doors. When it hit *them*, there was a snarling, crackling sound, and the green light spread across their surface in the pattern of a fisherman's net.

"Hard to do anything else to a guy with a face like yours," I said, this time from directly beside him. "Did you kill those girls, or did they volunteer once they saw you with your shirt off?"

The Fomor snarled and swatted at the air beside him. Then his eyes narrowed, and he started muttering and weaving his spatulate fingers in complicated patterns. I could feel the energy coming off of him at once, and knew exactly what he was trying to do—unravel my veil. But I'd been playing that game with Auntie Lea for months.

Lord Froggy hadn't.

As his questing threads of magic spread out, I sent out whispers of my own power to barely brush them, guiding them one by one out and around the area covered by my veil. I couldn't afford to let him find me. Not like that, anyway. He wasn't thinking, and if I didn't get him to, it was entirely possible that he'd be too stupid to fool.

I couldn't have him giving up and leaving, either, so when I was sure I'd compromised his seeking spell I used the sonic wand again, this time directly above his head. "This kind of thing really isn't for amateurs. Are you sure you shouldn't sit this one out and let Listen give it a shot?"

Lord Froggy tilted his head up and then narrowed his eyes. He lifted a hand, spat a hissing word, and fire leapt up from his fingers to engulf the ceiling above him.

It took about two seconds for the fire alarm to go off, and another two before the sprinkler system kicked in. But I was back at the door to room 8 when the falling water began to dissolve my veil. Magic is a kind of energy, and follows its own laws. One of those laws is that water tends to ground out active magical constructs, and my veil started melting away like it was made of cotton candy.

"Hah!" spat the Fomor, spotting me. I saw him send a bolt of viridian light at me. I threw myself facedown to the floor and it passed over me, splashing against the door. I whipped over onto my back, just in time to raise a shield against a second bolt and a third. My physical shields aren't great, but the Fomor's spell was pure energy, and that made it easier for me to handle. I deflected the bolts left and right, and they blasted chunks of marble the size of bricks out of the walls when they struck.

Lord Froggy's eyes flared even larger and more furious that he'd missed. "Mortal cow!"

Okay, now. That stung. I mean, maybe it's a little shallow, and maybe it's a little petty, and maybe it shows a lack of character of some kind that Froggy's insult to my appearance got under my skin more effectively than attempted murder.

"Cow?" I snarled as water from the sprinkler system started soaking me. "I *rock* this dress!"

I dropped one of my wands and thrust my palm out at him, sending out an invisible bolt of pure memory, narrowed and focused with magic, like light passing through a magnifying glass. Sometimes you don't really remember traumatic injuries, and my memory of getting shot in the leg was pretty blurry. It hadn't hurt so much when I actually got shot and I'd had a few things occupying my attention. Mostly, I'd just felt surprised and then numb—but when they were tending the wound in the helicopter, later, now *that* was pain. They'd dug the bullet out with forceps, cleaned the site with something that burned like Hell itself, and when they'd put the pressure

bandage on it and tightened the straps, it hurt so bad that I'd thought I was going to die.

That's what I gave to Lord Froggy, with every bit of strength I could muster.

He wove a shield against the attack, but I guess he wasn't used to handling something so intangible as a memory. Even with the falling water weakening it, I felt the strike smash through his defense and sink home, and Froggy let out a sudden, high-pitched shriek. He staggered and fell heavily against the wall, clutching at his leg.

"Kill her!" he said, his voice two octaves higher than it had been a moment before. "Kill her, kill her, kill her!"

The remaining pair of turtlenecks in the hallway plunged toward me. A wave of fatigue from my recent efforts, especially that last one, almost held me pinned to the floor—but I scrambled to my feet, lurched to the door to room 8, and pounded against it with one fist. "Andi! Andi, it's Molly! Andi, let me—"

The door jerked open and I fell into the room. I snapped my legs up into a fetal curl, and Andi slammed the door shut behind me and hit the locks.

"What the *hell*, Molly?" she demanded. Andi was soaking wet, along with everything else in the room—including the Fomor's bomb.

I got up and scrambled toward it. "I couldn't take apart the veil over the bomb from the outside," I panted. "We didn't have time to build up a fire, and I can't call up enough of my own to set off the alarms. I had to get Froggy to do it for me."

The door shuddered under more blows from the turtlenecks.

"Hold them off," I told her. "I'll disarm the bomb."

"Can you *do* that?" Andi asked.

"Piece of cake," I lied.

"Okay," Andi said. She grimaced. "I'm going to smell like wet dog all night."

She turned to face the door in a ready position as I reached the giant shell. I forced the battering enemies at the door out of my thoughts and focused my complete attention on the shell before me. Then I extended my senses toward it and began feeling out the energy moving through it.

There was a *lot* of energy involved in this thing, power stored up inside and ready to explode. A thin coating of enchantment lined the shell's exterior, kind of the magical equivalent of a control panel. The water was

eroding it slowly, but not fast enough to start melting the core enchantment and dispersing the stored energy. But if I didn't move fast, the water *would* destroy the surface enchantment and make it impossible for *anyone* to disarm the bomb.

I closed my eyes and put one hand out over the shell like Froggy had done. I could feel the energy of the shell reaching up to my fingers, ready to respond, and I began pouring my own energy down into it, trying to feel it out. It was a straightforward spell, nothing complicated, but I didn't know what anything did—it was like having a remote control for the TV, if someone had forgotten to label any of the buttons. I couldn't just start pushing them randomly.

On the other hand, I couldn't *not* do it, either.

It would have to be an educated guess.

On a TV remote, the power button is almost always a little apart from the others, or else somehow centered. That's what I was looking for—to turn the bomb off. I started eliminating all the portions of the spell that seemed too complex or too small, narrowing my choices bit by bit. It came down to two. If I guessed wrong ...

I burst out into a nervous giggle. “Hey, Andi. Blue wire or red wire?”

A turtleneck's foot smashed a hole in the door, and Andi whipped her head around to give me an incredulous look. “Are you fucking *kidding* me?” she shouted. “Blue, you *always* cut the blue!”

Half of the door broke down and crashed to the floor. Andi blurred into her wolf form and surged forward, ripping at the first turtleneck as he tried to come in.

I turned my attention back to the bomb and picked the second option. I focused my will on it. It took me a couple of tries, because I was freaking terrified, and pants-wetting fear is generally not conducive to lucidity.

“Hey, God,” I whispered. “I know I haven't been around much lately, but if you could do me a solid here, it would be really awesome for a lot of people. Please let me be right.”

I cut the blue wire.

Nothing happened.

I felt a heavy, almost paralytic surge of relief—and then Lord Froggy hopped over the two turtlenecks struggling with Andi and smashed into me.

I went down hard on the marble floor, and Froggy rode me down, pinning me beneath his too-gaunt body. He wrapped the fingers of one hand all the

way around my neck with room enough for them to overlap his thumb, and squeezed. He was hideously strong. My breath stopped instantly and my head began to pound, and my vision to darken.

“Little *bitch*,” he hissed. He started punching me with his other hand. The blows landed on my left cheekbone. They should have hurt, but I think something was wrong with my brain. I registered the impact but everything else was swallowed by the growing darkness. I could feel myself struggling, but I didn’t get anywhere. Froggy was way, way stronger than he looked. My eyes weren’t focusing very well, but I found myself staring down a dark tunnel toward one of the dead girls on the bedroom floor, and the dark purple band of bruising around her throat.

Then the floor a few feet away rippled, and an odd-looking grey creature popped up out of it.

The svartalf was maybe four-six and entirely naked. His skin was a mottled shade of grey, and his eyes were huge and entirely black. His head was a little larger than most people’s and he was bald, though his eyebrows were silvery-white. He did look kind of Roswellian, only instead of being super-skinny he was built like a professional boxer, lean and strong—and he carried a short, simple sword in his hand.

“Fomor,” said the svartalf calmly. I recognized Mister Etri’s voice. “One should not strike ladies.”

Froggy started to say something, but then Etri’s sword went snicker-snack, and the hand that was choking the life out of me was severed cleanly from the Fomor’s wrist. Froggy screamed and fell away from me, spitting words and trying to summon power as he scrambled away on three limbs.

“You have violated guest right,” Etri continued calmly. He made a gesture and the marble beneath Lord Froggy turned suddenly liquid. Froggy sank about three inches, and then the floor hardened around him again. The Fomor screamed.

“You have attacked a guest under the hospitality and protection of Svartalfheim,” he said, his tone of voice never changing. The sword swept out again and struck the nose from Froggy’s face, spewing ichor everywhere and drawing even more howling. Etri stood over the fallen Fomor and looked down at him with absolutely no expression on his face. “Have you anything to say on your own behalf?”

“No!” Froggy screamed. “You cannot do this! I have harmed none of your people!”

There was a pulse of rage from Etri so hot that I thought the falling water would burst into steam when it struck him. “Harmed us?” he said quietly. He glanced at the shell and then back at Froggy with pure contempt. “You would have used our alliance as a pretext to murder innocent thousands, making us your accomplices.” He crouched down to put his face inches from Froggy’s, and said in a calm, quiet, pitiless voice, “You have stained the honor of Svartalfheim.”

“I will make payment!” Froggy gabbled. “You will be compensated for your pains!”

“There is but one price for your actions, Fomor. And there are no negotiations.”

“No,” Froggy protested. “No. NO!”

Etri turned away from him and surveyed the room. Andi was still in wolf form. One of the turtlenecks was bleeding out onto the marble floor, the sprinklers spreading the blood into a huge pool. The other was crouched in a corner with his arms curled around his head, covered in bleeding wounds. Andi faced him, panting, blood dripping from her reddened fangs, a steady growl bubbling in her chest.

Etri turned to me and offered me his hand. I thanked him and let him pull me up to a sitting position. My throat hurt. My head hurt. My face hurt. It’s killing me, nyuk, nyuk, nyuk. C’mere, you.

You know you’ve been punched loopy when you’re doing a one-person Three Stooges routine in your internal monologue.

“I apologize,” Etri said, “for interfering in your struggle. Please do not presume that I did so because I thought you unable to protect yourself.”

My voice came out in a croak. “It’s your house, and your honor that was at stake. You had the right.”

The answer seemed to please him and he inclined his head slightly. “I further apologize for not handling this matter myself. It was not your responsibility to discover or take action against this scum’s behavior.”

“It was presumptuous of me,” I said. “But there was little time to act.”

“Your ally alerted us to the danger. You did nothing improper. Svartalfheim thanks you for your assistance in this matter. You are owed a favor.”

I was about to tell him that no such thing was necessary, but I stopped myself. Etri wasn’t uttering social pleasantries. This wasn’t a friendly

exchange. It was an audit, an accounting. I just inclined my head to him. "Thank you, Mister Etri."

"Of course, Miss Carpenter."

Svartalves in security uniforms, mixed with mortal security guards, came into the room. Etri went to them and quietly gave instructions. The Fomor and his servitors were trussed up and taken from the room.

"What will happen to them?" I asked Etri.

"We will make an example of the Fomor," Etri said.

"What of your treaty?" I asked.

"It was never signed," he said. "Mostly because of you, Miss Carpenter. While Svartalfheim does not pay debts which were never incurred, we appreciate your role in this matter. It will be considered in the future."

"The Fomor don't deserve an honorable ally."

"It would seem not," he said.

"What about the turtlenecks?" I asked.

"What of them?"

"Will you ... deal with them?"

Etri just looked at me. "Why would we?"

"They were sort of in on it," I said.

"They were property," said the svartalf. "If a man strikes you with a hammer, it is the man who is punished. There is no reason to destroy the hammer. We care nothing for them."

"What about them?" I asked, and nodded toward the dead girls in the Fomor's chamber. "Do you care what happened to them?"

Etri looked at them and sighed. "Beautiful things ought not be destroyed," he said. "But they were not our guests. We owe no one for their end and will not answer for it."

"There is a vampire in your custody," I said, "is there not?"

Etri regarded me for a moment and then said, "Yes."

"You owe me a favor. I wish to secure his release."

He arched an eyebrow. Then he bowed slightly and said, "Come with me."

I followed Etri out of the suite and across the hall to room 6. Though the door was shattered, Etri stopped outside of it respectfully and knocked. A moment later, a female voice said, "You may enter."

We went in. It was a suite much like the Fomor's, only with way more throw pillows and plush furniture. It was a wreck. The floor was literally

covered with shattered furniture, broken décor, and broken turtlenecks. Svartalf security was already binding them and carrying them from the room.

Listen walked out on his own power, his hands behind his back, one of his eyes swollen halfway shut. He gave me a steady look as he went by, and said nothing.

Bastard.

Etri turned toward the curtained door to the suite's bedroom and spoke. "The mortal apprentice who warned us has earned a favor. She asks for the release of the vampire."

"Impossible," answered the female voice. "That account has been settled."

Etri turned to me and shrugged. "I am sorry."

"Wait," I said. "May I speak to him?"

"In a moment."

We waited. Thomas appeared from the doorway to the bedroom dressed in a black terry-cloth bathrobe. He'd just gotten out of the shower. Thomas was maybe half an inch under six feet tall, and there wasn't an inch of his body that didn't scream sex symbol. His eyes were a shade of deep crystalline blue, and his dark hair hung to his wide shoulders. My body did what it always did around him, and started screaming at me to make babies. I ignored it. Mostly.

"Molly," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing a bucket of aspirin won't help," I said. "Um. Are you okay?"

He blinked. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I thought ... you know. You'd been captured as a spy."

"Well, sure," he said.

"I thought they would, uh. Make an example of you?"

He blinked again. "Why would they do that?"

The door to the bedroom opened again, and a female svartalf appeared. She looked a lot like Etri—tiny and beautiful, though she had long silver hair instead of a cueball. She was wearing what might have been Thomas's shirt, and it hung down almost to her ankles. She had a decidedly ... smug look about her. Behind her, I saw several other sets of wide, dark eyes peer out of the shadowy bedchamber.

"Oh," I said. "Oh. You, uh. You made a deal."

Thomas smirked. "It's a tough, dirty job ..."

“And one that is not yet finished,” said the female svartalf. “You are ours until dawn.”

Thomas looked from me to the bedroom and back and spread his hands. “You know how it is, Molly. Duty calls.”

“Um,” I said. “What do you want me to tell Justine?”

Again he gave me a look of near incomprehension. “The truth. What else?”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Justine said as we were walking out. “I was afraid they’d have starved him.”

I blinked. “Your boyfriend is banging a roomful of elfgirls and you’re *happy* about it?”

Justine tilted her head back and laughed. “When you’re in love with an incubus, it changes your viewpoint a little, I think. It isn’t as though this is something new. I know how he feels about me, and he needs to feed to be healthy. So what’s the harm?” She smirked. “And besides. He’s *always* ready for more.”

“You’re a very weird person, Justine.”

Andi snorted, and nudged me with her shoulder in a friendly way. She’d recovered her dress and the shoes she liked. “Look who’s talking.”

After everyone was safe home, I walked from Waldo’s apartment to the nearest parking garage. I found a dark corner, sat down, and waited. Lea shimmered into being about two hours later and sat down beside me.

“You tricked me,” I said. “You sent me in there blind.”

“Indeed. Just as Lara did her brother—except that my agent succeeded where hers failed.”

“But why? Why send us in there?”

“The treaty with the Fomor could not be allowed to conclude,” she said. “If one nation agreed to neutrality with them, a dozen more would follow. The Fomor would be able to divide the others and contend with them one by one. The situation was delicate. The presence of active agents was intended to disrupt its equilibrium—to show the Fomor’s true nature in a test of fire.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me that?” I asked.

“Because you would neither have trusted nor believed me, obviously,” she said.

I frowned at her. “You should have told me anyway.”

“Do not be ridiculous, child.” Lea sniffed. “There was no time to humor your doubts and suspicions and theories and endless questions. Better to give you a simple prize upon which to focus—Thomas.”

“How did you know I would find the bomb?”

She arched an eyebrow. “Bomb?” She shook her head. “I did not know what was happening in any specific sense. But the Fomor are betrayers. Ever have they been, ever will they be. The only question is what form their treachery will take. The svartalves had to be shown.”

“How did you know I would discover it?”

“I did not,” she said. “But I know your mentor. When it comes to meddling, to unearthing awkward truths, he has taught you exceedingly well.” She smiled. “You have also learned his aptitude for taking orderly situations and reducing them to elemental chaos.”

“Meaning what?” I demanded.

Her smile was maddeningly smug. “Meaning that I was confident that whatever happened, it would not include the smooth completion of the treaty.”

“But you could have done everything I did.”

“No, child,” Lea said. “The svartalves would never have asked me to be their guest at the reception. They love neatness and order. They would have known my purposes were not orderly ones.”

“And they didn’t know that about me?”

“They cannot judge others except by their actions,” Lea said. “Hence their treaty with the Fomor, who had not yet crossed their paths. My actions have shown me to be someone who must be treated with caution. You had ... a clean record with them. And you are smoking hot. All is well, your city saved, and now a group of wealthy, skilled, and influential beings owes you a favor.” She paused for a moment and then leaned toward me slightly. “Perhaps some expression of gratitude is in order.”

“From me, to you?” I asked. “For that?”

“I think your evening turned out quite well,” Lea said her eyebrows raised. “Goodness, but you are a difficult child. How he manages to endure your insolence I will never know. You probably think you have earned some sort of reward from me.” She rose and turned to go.

“Wait!” I said suddenly.

She paused.

I think my heart had stopped beating. I started shaking, everywhere.
“You said that you know Harry. Not knew him. Know. Present tense.”

“Did I?”

“You said you don’t know how he manages to put up with me. Manages.
Present tense.”

“Did I?”

“Auntie,” I asked her, and I could barely whisper. “Auntie ... is Harry ...
is he alive?”

Lea turned to me very slowly, and her eyes glinted with green, wicked
knowledge. “I did not say that he was alive, child. And neither should you.
Not yet.”

I bowed my head and started crying. Or laughing. Or both. I couldn’t tell.
Lea didn’t wait around for it. Emotional displays made her uncomfortable.

Harry. Alive.

I *hadn’t* killed him.

Best reward ever.

“Thank you, Auntie,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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"Butcher is the dean of contemporary urban fantasy."—*Booklist*



COLD DAYS

A NOVEL OF THE DRESDEN FILES

ALSO BY JIM BUTCHER
T_{HE} D_{RESDEN} F_{ILES}

JIM BUTCHER

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For Chris Achterhof, writer of “Greed” (he’ll know why after reading this), and all my old gaming buddies in the International Fantasy Gaming Society. You people are all silly, and you made the nineties a much brighter place.

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Chapter

One

Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness, monarch of the Winter Court of the Sidhe, has unique ideas regarding physical therapy.

I woke up in softness.

What I probably should say was that I woke up in a soft bed. But . . . that just doesn't convey how soft this bed was. You know those old cartoons where people sleep on fluffy clouds? Those guys would wake up screaming in pain if they got suckered into taking one of those clouds after they'd been in Mab's bed.

The fire in my chest had finally begun to die away. The heavy wool lining coating my thoughts seemed to have lightened up. When I blinked my eyes open, they felt gummy, but I was able to lift my arm, slowly, and

wipe them clear. I'd gone jogging on beaches with less sand than was in my eyes.

Man. Being mostly dead is hard on a guy.

I was in a bed.

A bed the size of my old apartment.

The sheets were all perfectly white and smooth. The bed was shrouded in drapes of more pure white, drifting on gentle currents of cool air. The temperature was cold enough that when I exhaled, my breath condensed, but I was comfortable beneath the bed's covering.

The curtains around the bed parted and a girl appeared.

She was probably too young to drink legally and she was one of the lovelier women I'd ever seen in person. High cheekbones, exotic almond-shaped eyes. Her skin was a medium olive tone, her eyes an almost eerie shade of pale green-gold. Her hair was pulled back into a simple tail, she wore pale blue hospital scrubs, and she had no makeup at all.

Wow. Any woman who could wear that and still look that good was a freaking goddess.

"Hello," she said, and smiled at me. Maybe it was just the bed talking, but the smile and her voice were even better than the rest of her.

"Hi," I said. My voice came out in a croak that hardly sounded human. I started coughing.

She placed a covered tray on a little stand beside the bed and sat down on the edge of it. She took the cover off the tray and picked up a white china cup. She passed it to me, and it proved to be filled with not quite scalding chicken noodle soup. "You do that every day. Talk before you've gotten anything down your throat. Drink."

I did. Campbell's. And it was awesome. I flashed on a sudden memory of being sick when I was very young. I couldn't remember where we'd been, but my dad had made me chicken noodle soup. It was the same.

"I think . . . I remember some of it," I said, after several sips. "Your name is . . . Sarah?" She frowned, but I shook my head before she could speak. "No, wait. Sarissa. Your name is Sarissa."

She lifted both eyebrows and smiled. "That's a first. It looks like you're finally coming back into focus."

My stomach gurgled and at the same time a roaring hunger went through me. I blinked at the sudden sensation and started gurgling down more soup.

Sarissa laughed at me. It made the room feel brighter. “Don’t drown yourself. There’s no rush.”

I finished the cup, spilling only a little on my chin, and then murmured, “The hell there isn’t. I’m starving. What else is there?”

“Tell you what,” she said. “Before you do that, let’s shoot for another first.”

“Eh?” I said.

“Can you tell me your name?”

“What, you don’t know?”

Sarissa smiled again. “Do you?”

“Harry Dresden,” I said.

Her eyes sparkled and it made me feel good all the way to my toes. More so when she produced a plate that was piled with chicken and mashed potatoes and some other vegetables that I had little use for but which were probably good for me. I thought I was going to start drooling onto the floor, that food looked so good.

“What do you do, Harry?”

“Professional wizard,” I said. “I’m a PI in Chicago.” I frowned, suddenly remembering something else. “Oh. And I’m the Winter Knight, I guess.”

She stared at me like a statue for several seconds, absolutely nothing on her face.

“Um,” I said. “Food?”

She shivered and looked away from me. Then she took a quick breath and picked up an odd little fork, the kind they give to kids with motor control issues—it had lots of rounded edges—and pressed it into my hand. “If you’re willing to go for three, we’ll have had a really good day.”

The fork felt weird and heavy in my fingers. I remembered using forks. I remembered how they felt, the slender weight of them, the precision with which I could get food from the plate to my mouth. This fork felt heavy and clumsy. I fumbled with it for a few seconds, and then managed, on the second try, to thrust it into the mashed potatoes. Then it was another chore to get the stupid thing to my mouth.

The potatoes were perfect. Just warm enough, barely salted, with a faint hint of rich butter.

“Ohmmgdd,” I muttered around the mouthful. Then I went for more.

The second forkful was easier, and the third easier than that, and before I knew it the plate was empty and I was scraping the last of the remains into my mouth. I felt exhausted and stuffed, though it hadn't been all that much food. Sarissa was watching me with a pleased smile.

"Got it all over my face, don't I?" I asked her.

"It means you enjoyed the food," she said. She lifted a napkin to my face and wiped at it. "It's nice to know your name, finally, Harry."

There was the sound of light, steady footsteps coming closer.

Sarissa rose immediately, turned, and then knelt gracefully on the floor with her head bowed.

"Well?" said a woman's velvet voice.

My whole body shuddered in response to that voice, like a guitar's string quivering when the proper note is played near it.

"He's lucid, Your Majesty, and remembered my name and his. He fed himself."

"Excellent," said the voice. "You are dismissed for today."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Sarissa. She rose, glanced at me, and said, "I'm glad to see you feeling better, Sir Knight."

I tried to come up with something charming or witty and said, "Call me."

She huffed out a surprised little breath that might have been the beginning of a laugh, but shot a fearful glance the other way and then retreated. The sound of her sneakers scuffing on the hard floor faded into the distance outside the curtained bed.

A shadow moved across the curtains at the end of the bed. I knew whose it was.

"You have passed your nadir," she said in a decidedly pleased tone. "You are waxing rather than waning, my Knight."

I suddenly had difficulty thinking clearly enough to speak, but I managed. "Well. You know. Wax on, wax off."

She didn't open the curtain around the bed as much as she simply glided through, letting the sheer cloth press against her, outlining her form. She exhaled slowly as she reached my side, looking down at me, her eyes flickering through shades of green in dizzying cycles.

Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness, was too terrifying to be beautiful. Though every cell in my body suddenly surged with mindless desire and my eyes blurred with tears to see her beauty, I did not want to

come an inch closer. She was a tall woman, well over six feet, and every inch was radiance. Pale skin, soft lips the color of frozen raspberries, long silver-white hair that shone with opalescent highlights. She was dressed in a silk gown of deep frozen green that left her strong white shoulders bare.

And she was about six inches away from being in bed with me.

“You look great,” I croaked.

Something smoldered in those almond-shaped eyes. “I *am* great, my Knight,” she murmured. She reached out a hand, and her nails were all dark blues and greens, the colors shimmering and changing like deep opals. She touched my naked shoulder with those nails.

And I suddenly felt like a fifteen-year-old about to kiss a girl for the first time—excitement and wild expectation and fluttering anxiety.

Her nails, even just the very tips, were icy cold. She trailed them down over one side of my chest and rested them over my heart.

“Um,” I said into what was, for me, an incredibly awkward silence. “How are you?”

She tilted her head and stared at me.

“Sarissa seems nice,” I ventured.

“A changeling,” Mab said. “Who once sought of me a favor. She saw Lloyd Slate’s tenure as my Knight.”

I licked my lips. “Um. Where are we?”

“Arctis Tor,” she said. “My stronghold. In the Knight’s suite. You will find every mortal amenity here.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “What with my apartment burned to the ground and all. Is there a security deposit?”

A slow smile oozed over Mab’s mouth and she leaned even closer to me. “It is well that you heal,” she whispered. “Your spirit wandered far from your body while you slept.”

“Free spirit,” I said. “That’s me.”

“Not anymore,” Mab murmured, and leaned down toward me. “You are shaking.”

“Yeah.”

Her eyes filled my vision. “Are you frightened of me, Harry?”

“I’m sane,” I said.

“Do you think I am going to hurt you?” she breathed, her lips a fraction of an inch from mine.

My heart beat so hard that it actually hurt. “I think . . . you are who you are.”

“Surely you have no reason to fear,” she whispered, her breath tickling my lips. “You are mine now. If you are not well, I cannot use you to work my will.”

I tried to force myself to relax. “That’s . . . that’s true,” I said.

I hadn’t seen her picking up the thick, fluffy pillow beside me while she held my eyes. So I was totally unprepared when she struck, as fast as any snake, and slammed the pillow down over my face.

I froze for half a second, and the pillow pressed down harder, shutting off my air, clogging my nose and mouth. Then the fear took over. I struggled, but my arms and legs felt as if they’d been coated in inches of lead. I tried to push Mab away, but she was simply too heavy, my arms too weak. Her hands and forearms were frozen steel, slender and immovable.

My vision went from red to black. Sensation began to recede.

Mab was cool. Unrelenting. Merciless.

She was Mab.

If I did not stop her, she *would* kill me. Mab couldn’t kill a mortal, but to her I was no longer one of them. I was her vassal, a member of her court, and as far as she was concerned, she had every right to take my life if she saw fit.

That cold knowledge galvanized me. I locked my hands around one of her arms and twisted, straining my entire body. My hips arched up off the bed with the effort, and I wasn’t even trying to push her away. There was no opposing the absolute force of her. But I did manage to direct her strength just a little to one side, and in so doing managed to push her hands and the smothering pillow past me, freeing my face enough to suck in a gasp of sweet, cold air.

Mab lay with her upper body across mine, and made no effort at all to move. I could feel her eyes on me, feel the empty intensity of her gaze as I panted, my head swimming with the sudden rush of blessed oxygen.

Mab moved very slowly, very gracefully. There was something serpentine about the way she slithered up my body and lay with her chest against mine. She was a cold, ephemeral weight, an incredibly feminine softness, and her silken hair glided over my cheeks and lips and neck.

Mab made a low, hungry sound in her throat as she leaned down, until her lips were almost touching my ear.

“I have no use for weakness, wizard.” She shivered in a kind of slow, alien ecstasy. “Rest. Heal. Sleep. I shall most likely kill you on the morrow.”

“You? A *Princess Bride* quote?” I croaked.

“What is that?” she asked.

Then she was gone. Just *gone*.

And that was day one of my physical therapy.

* * *

I could describe the next few weeks in detail, but as bad as they were, they did have a certain routine to them. Besides, in my head, they’re a music video montage set to the Foo Fighters’ “Walk.”

I would wake in the morning and find Sarissa waiting for me, keeping a polite and professional distance between us. She would help me take care of the needs of my weakened body, which was rarely dignified, but she never spoke about herself. At some point after that, Mab would try to kill me in increasingly unexpected and inventive ways.

In the video in my head, there’s a shot of me eating my own meal again—until, just as I finish, the giant bed bursts into flames. I awkwardly flop out of it and crawl away before I roast. Then, obviously the next day, Sarissa is helping me walk to the bathroom and back. Just as I relax back into bed, a poisonous serpent, a freaking Indian cobra, falls from the bed’s canopy onto my shoulders. I scream like a girl and throw it on the floor. The next day, I’m fumbling my way into new clothes with Sarissa’s help—until a small swarm of stinging ants comes boiling out of them onto my flesh, and I have to literally rip the clothes off of me.

It goes on like that. Sarissa and me on waist-high parallel bars, me struggling to remember how to keep my balance, interrupted by a tidal flood of red-eyed rats that forces us to hop up onto the bars before our feet get eaten off. Sarissa spotting me on a bench press, and then Mab bringing a great big old fireman’s ax whistling down at my head at the end of my third set so that I have to block with the stupid straight bar. Me slogging my exhausted way into a hot shower, only to have the door slam shut and the thing start to fill with water. Into which freaking piranha begin to plop.

On and on. Seventy-seven days. Seventy-seven attempted murders. Use your imagination. Mab sure as hell did. There was even a ticking

crocodile.

* * *

I had just gotten back from the small gym, where'd I'd hiked about four miles up and I don't know how many miles forward on the elliptical machine. I was sweaty and exhausted and thinking about a shower and then bed again. I opened the door to my quarters, and when I did, Mab opened fire with a freaking shotgun.

I didn't have time to think or calculate before she pulled the trigger. All I could do was react. I flung myself back, slammed my will out into the air ahead of me, coalescing it into a barrier of pure energy. The gun roared, deafening in the enclosed space. Buckshot slammed against the barrier and bounced, scattering everywhere, landing with pops and rattles. I hit the floor, keeping the barrier up, and Mab advanced, her eyes glittering through every shade of opal, wild and ecstatic and incongruous against her otherwise calm expression.

It was one of those Russian-designed shotguns with the big drum magazine, and she poured all of it into me, aiming for my face.

The second the gun went click instead of boom, I flung myself to one side in a swift roll, just in time to avoid the pounce of a silver-grey malk—a feline creature about the size of a bobcat with wicked claws and the strength of a small bear. It landed where my head had been, its claws gouging chips from the stone floor.

I kicked the malk with my heel and sent him flying across the hall and into the stone wall. He hit it with a yowl of protest. I whirled my attention back to Mab as she dropped one drum magazine on the floor and produced another.

Before she could seat it in the weapon, I slashed at the air with my hand and shouted, "*Forzare!*" Unseen force lashed out and ripped the magazine and the shotgun alike from her hands. I made a yanking motion, and the bouncing shotgun abruptly shot across the empty space between us. I grabbed it by the barrel (which was freaking *hot*) just as the malk recovered and leapt at me again. I swung the empty shotgun two-handed and slammed the malk in the skull, hard enough to knock it from the air and leave it senseless on the floor.

Mab let out a delighted silvery laugh and clapped her hands like a little girl who has just been told she's getting a pony. "Yes!" she said. "Lovely. Brutal, vicious, and lovely."

I held on to the shotgun until the stunned malk recovered and began slinking sullenly away, and only after it was out of sight around the corner did I turn to face Mab again.

"This is getting old," I said. "Don't you have anything better to do with your time than to play Grimtooth games with me?"

"Indeed, I do," she replied. "But why play games if not to prepare for challenges that lie ahead?"

I rolled my eyes. "Fun?" I suggested.

The delight faded from her face, replaced by the usual icy calm. It was a scary transformation, and I found myself hoping that I had not provoked her with my wiseassery.

"The fun begins when the games end, my Knight."

I frowned at her. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"That appropriate attire awaits you in your chambers, and that you are to get dressed for the evening." She turned to walk after the departed malk, her gown whispering on the stone of the floor. "Tonight, my wizard, shall be . . . fun."

Chapter

Two

Back in my room, I found my clothes waiting for me: a tux in dark silver and pearl. The first of two small paper envelopes proved to contain a pair of jeweled cuff links, the stones too blue and too brilliant to be sapphires.

The other one held my mother's amulet.

It was a simple silver pentacle, a battered five-pointed star bound within a circle, on a simple silver chain. The pentacle's center was filled with a small red stone, cut to size. I'd once fastened the gem into place with hot glue. Apparently Mab had sent it to a genuine jeweler to attach it with something more solid. I touched the stone gingerly, and could instantly sense the energy within it, the psychic journal of my late mother's travels.

I slipped the amulet on over my head and felt a sudden and profound sense of relief. I had thought it lost when my bullet-riddled self had fallen into the waters of Lake Michigan. I stood there with my hand over it for a moment, just feeling the cool metal press against my palm.

Then I got dressed in the tux and examined myself in a mirror the size of a pool table.

“Just a gigolo,” I sang, off-key, trying to enjoy myself. “Everywhere I go, people know the part I’m playing.”

The guy looking at me out of the mirror looked raw and hard. My cheekbones stood out starkly. I’d lost a lot of weight while I was in what amounted to a coma, and my rehabilitation had added only lean muscle back onto me. You could see veins tight against my skin. My brown hair hung down past my jawline, clean but shaggy. I hadn’t cut it or asked for a barber. Things that know magic can do awful stuff to you if they get hold of a lock of your hair, so I’d decided to hang on to mine. I’d ditched the beard, though. Beards grow out so fast that if you shave every day, there isn’t much of a window for anyone to use them against you—and shaved stubble is too diffuse to make a decent channel anyway.

I looked a little more like my brother with the long hair. Go figure. Long, lean face, dark eyes, a vertical line of a scar under the left one. My skin was absolutely pasty-pale. I hadn’t seen the sun in months. Lots of months.

As I looked, the song just sort of faded out. I didn’t have the heart for it. I closed my eyes.

“What the hell are you doing, Dresden?” I whispered. “You’re being kept locked up like a goddamned pet. Like she owns you.”

“Does she not?” growled a malk’s voice.

Didn’t I mention it? Those things can talk. They don’t pronounce words too well, and the inhuman sound of it makes the hairs on the back of my everything stand up, but they talk.

I spun, lifting my hand in a defensive gesture again, but I needn’t have bothered. A malk I didn’t think I’d seen before sat on the floor of my chambers, just inside the door. His too-long tail curled all the way around his front feet and overlapped itself in the back. He was a huge specimen of the breed, maybe eighty or ninety pounds, the size of a young adult mountain lion. His fur was pitch-black, apart from a white spot on his chest.

One thing I'd learned about malks was that you didn't show them weakness. Ever. "These are my chambers," I said. "Get out."

The malk bowed its head. "I cannot, Sir Knight. I am under orders from the Queen herself."

"Get out before I get you out."

The very tip of the big malk's tail twitched once. "Were you not the bond servant of my Queen, and were I not obliged to show you courtesy, I should like to see you try it, mortal."

I squinted at him.

That was very unmalklike behavior. Apart from one, every malk I'd met had been a bloodthirsty little killing machine, primarily interested in what it could tear apart and devour next. They weren't much for small talk. They also weren't terribly brave, especially when alone. A malk might jump you in a dark alley, but you'd never see him coming.

This one . . . looked like it might like to see me put a chip on my shoulder.

I extended my senses cautiously and suddenly felt the nearly silent thrum of the malk's aura. Whoa. The thing had power. Like, lots of power. You couldn't usually feel a wizard's aura unless you were close enough to touch it, but I could feel his from across the room. Whatever that thing was, it only *looked* like one of the other furry, terminally ADD homicidal maniacs. I reeled in on the attitude.

"Who are you?"

The malk bowed his head once. "A faithful servant of the Queen of Air and Darkness. I am most often called Sith."

"Heh," I said. "Where's your red lightsaber?"

Sith's golden eyes narrowed. "When first your kind began scrawling knowledge upon stone and clay, my name was ancient. Walk carefully around it."

"Just trying to brighten the conversation with humor, Sithy. You need to cheer up."

Sith's tail twitched again. "Slicing your spine into coasters would cheer me. May I?"

"Gotta go with 'no' on that one," I said. Then I blinked. "Wait. You're . . . Cat Sith. *The* Cat Sith?"

The malk inclined its head again. "I am he."

Hell's bells. Cat Sith was a major figure in faerie folklore. This thing wasn't just a malk. It was the freaking monarch of the malks, their progenitor, their Optimus Prime. I'd taken on an ancient faerie creature like this one a few years back. It hadn't been pretty.

When Cat Sith had offered to slice my spine into coasters, he wasn't kidding. If he was anything like the ancient phobophage, he could do it.

"I see," I said. "Um. What are you doing here?"

"I am your batman."

"My . . ."

"Not the notional hero," Sith said, a bit of a growl in his voice. "Your batman. Your orderly."

"Orderly . . ." I frowned. "Wait. You work for me?"

"I prefer to think of it as managing your incompetence," Sith replied. "I will answer your questions. I will be your guide while you are here. I will see to it that your needs are met."

I folded my arms. "And you work for me?"

Sith's tail twitched again. "I serve my Queen."

Aha. Evasion. There was something he was avoiding. "You are to answer my questions, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Did Mab order you to obey my commands?"

Twitch, twitch, twitch went the tail. Sith stared at me and said nothing.

Silence could generally be taken as assent, but I just couldn't resist. "Get me a Coke."

Sith stared at me. Then he vanished.

I blinked and looked around, but he was gone. Then, maybe a second and a half later, there was the *snap-hiss* of a beverage can being opened. I turned and found Cat Sith sitting on one of the room's dressers. An opened can of Coke sat beside him.

"Whoa," I said. "How did . . . You don't even have *thumbs*."

Sith stared at me.

I crossed to the dresser and picked up the can. Sith's eyes tracked me the whole time, his expression enigmatic and definitely not friendly. I sipped at the drink and grimaced. "Warm?"

"You did not tell me otherwise," he said. "I shall be happy to similarly fulfill any such command you give me, Sir Knight, but for those that contravene the orders of my Queen."

Translation: *I don't want to be here. I don't like you. Give me commands and I will give you hell for it.* I nodded at the malk. "I hear you." I sipped at the Coke. Warm or not, it was still Coke. "So why the tux? What's the occasion?"

"Tonight is a celebration of birth."

"Birthday party, huh?" I said. "Whose?"

Sith said absolutely nothing for several seconds. Then he rose and leapt down to the floor, landing without a sound. He flowed past me to the door. "You cannot possibly be that stupid. Follow me."

My hair was still pretty messy. I slopped some water on it and combed it back, which was as close to neat as it was going to get, and then walked after Sith, my patent leather formal shoes gleaming and clicking on the stone floor.

"Who's going to be at this party?" I asked Sith when I caught up to him. I hadn't left my chambers in a while. My entire life had been eating, sleeping, and getting myself put back together. Besides, I hadn't wanted to go sightseeing around Arctis Tor. The last time I'd been there, I'd pissed off the faeries. Like, *all* of them. I hadn't fancied the idea of bumping into some hostile bogeyman looking for payback in a dark corridor. The door leading from my chambers opened by itself, and Sith walked through it with me behind him.

"The high and mighty among the Winter Sidhe," Sith said. "Important figures from the Wyld. There may even be a delegation from Summer there."

As we emerged into the capital of Winter, the corridors changed from what looked more or less like smooth, poured concrete to crystalline ice in every hue of glacial blue and green, the bands of color merging, intertwining. Flickers of light danced through the depths of the ice like lazy fireflies of violet and crimson and cold sky blue. My eyes wanted to follow the lights, but I didn't let them. I couldn't tell you why, but my instincts told me that would be dangerous, and I listened to them.

"Kind of a big event, huh?" I said. "Think there'll be a problem with the paparazzi?"

"One may hope," Sith said. "Dispatching the perpetrators of such an intrusion would be gratifying."

The air was arctic cold. I could feel the biting depth of the chill, but its fangs couldn't seem to break my skin. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it

didn't matter. I didn't shiver. I didn't shake. I chalked it up to the power Mab had given me.

Sith led me down a much dimmer corridor, and we passed in and out of patches of deep darkness and cold, sullen light. As we did, our shadows danced and stretched. After a few seconds, I noticed that Cat Sith's shadow was larger than mine. Like, seven or eight *times* larger than mine. I gulped.

"The last time I was at a supernatural shindig, I got poisoned and then everything there tried to kill me. So I burned the whole place to the ground," I said.

"An appropriate way to deal with one's enemies," Sith said. "Perhaps you will find Arctis Tor less flammable."

"I've never met a place I couldn't blow up, burn down, or knock over with enough motivation," I said. "Think anyone at the party wants to kill me?"

"Yes. I want to kill you."

"Because I annoy you?"

"Because I enjoy it." Sith glanced up at me for a moment. His billboard-size shadow on the wall mirrored the motion. "And you also annoy me."

"It's one of my gifts. Asking annoying questions is another. Other than you, is there anyone at the party I should make sure not to turn my back to?"

"You are of Winter now, wizard." He turned his golden eyes away from me again. "Don't turn your back to anyone."

Chapter

Three

Cat Sith led me down passages I had never seen on my previous visit to Mab's seat of power. Heck, back then I had thought it consisted entirely of a wall around a courtyard and a single turreted tower. I hadn't ever seen the complex beneath the ice of the courtyard. It was enormous. We walked for ten minutes, mostly in the same direction, before Cat Sith said, "That door."

The one he spoke of was made of ice, just like the walls, though it had a thick ring of what might have been silver hanging upon it. I grabbed the ring and tugged, and the door opened easily onto a small antechamber, a little waiting room complete with several easy chairs.

"Now what?"

“Go in,” Cat Sith said. “Wait for instructions. Follow instructions.”

“I’m not good at either of those things,” I said.

Sith’s eyes gleamed. “Excellent. I have orders to dispatch you if you disobey Mab’s commands or undermine her authority in any way.”

“Why don’t you go ask Eldest Fetch how easy that one is, Mittens?” I said. “Scat.”

Sith didn’t vanish this time. He just sort of melted into shadow. His golden eyes remained behind for a few seconds, and then he was gone.

“Always stealing from the greats,” I mumbled. “Lewis Carroll’s estate should be collecting a licensing fee from that guy.”

Unless, of course, it was maybe the other way around.

I went into the chamber and the door shut behind me. There was a table with what looked like handmade candies on it. I didn’t touch them. Not because I was worried about my svelte figure, but because I was standing at the heart of wicked faerieland, and eating random candy seemed like a less than brilliant idea.

There was an old book on the table next to the candies, set carefully and precisely in place beside the dish. It was titled *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. I leaned down and opened it. The text was in German. It was really old. The pages were made of paper of the finest quality, thin and crisp and edged in gold foil. On the title page, under the title, were the names Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and the year 1812.

It was autographed, and personalized, “For Mab.” I couldn’t read the text, so I settled for the illustrations. It was better than reading those stupid celebrity magazines in every other waiting room, and was probably more grounded in reality.

The door opened soundlessly while I looked at the book, and a vision came into the room. She wore a velvet dress the deep blue-purple of twilight. She glanced back toward the hallway behind her as the door closed, and I saw that the dress plunged low in the front. She had matching opera gloves that reached to halfway up her biceps, and there was a garland of periwinkles in her dark hair that complemented the dress gorgeously. Then she turned back to me and smiled. “Oh, my,” she said. “You clean up nicely, Harry.”

I rose politely to my feet, though it took me a couple of seconds to say, “Sarissa. Wow. You . . . barely look like you.”

She quirked an eyebrow at me, but I saw a pleased tilt to her mouth. “My. That was almost a compliment.”

“I’m out of practice,” I said. I gestured toward a chair. “Would you care to sit?”

She gave me a demure smile and did, moving with an absolute and liquid grace. I offered her my hand to help her sit, which she didn’t need. She gripped my fingers lightly anyway. Once she was seated, I sat back down myself. “Did you want a bit of candy?”

Her smile somehow contained gentle reproof. “I hardly think that would be wise. Do you?”

“Hell’s bells, no,” I said. “I just, uh . . . You make conversation when you’re, uh . . . I’m not sure what to . . .” I picked up the priceless copy of the Grimms’ tales and held it up. “Book.”

Sarissa covered her mouth with one hand, but her eyes twinkled. “Oh, um, yes. I’ve seen it a few times. I’ve heard rumors that Her Majesty worked hard to make sure the tales were put into print.”

“Sure,” I said. “Makes sense.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Oh, the Sidhe’s influence had been waning as the Industrial Age gathered steam,” I said. “By making sure the tales kept being told to mortal children, she made sure that she and her folk were never forgotten.”

“And that’s important?” Sarissa asked.

“If it wasn’t, why else would she do it? I’m pretty sure that being forgotten is bad for beings that live with one foot in the mortal world and the other over here. Wouldn’t shock me if she greased some wheels for Walt Disney, either. He did more than anyone else to bring those stories into modern times. Hell, he built a couple of fairylands in the mortal world.”

“I hadn’t ever thought about it that way,” Sarissa said. She folded her hands in her lap and smiled at me. It was a completely calm and lovely expression—but I had the sudden instinct that she was concealing unease.

I might not have been able to tell a couple of months ago, but she’d been on the periphery of several of Mab’s therapy sessions, and I’d seen her react to sudden fear and stress. There was that same sense of controlled tension in her now as there had been when a small avalanche of poisonous spiders—big ones—had come cascading out of the towel cupboard in the workout room. She’d been wearing capri pants and no shoes at the time,

and she'd had to hold completely still while dozens of the things swarmed over her naked feet, until I could clear them off, gently and cautiously, so as not to threaten the little things into killing us.

That particular test had been all about regulating one's reaction to sudden fear. Sarissa had done it, refusing to let her anxiety control her. She'd waited, expressionless and almost calm, looking much then as she did right now.

It made my feet start to itch.

She was expecting spiders.

"So," I said. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company? Do you need me to perform some last-minute yoga routines?"

"You took to yoga like a duck to vacuum," she said. "I know how much you love the routines, but I'm afraid I must disappoint you. Tonight I'm to be on your arm, by command of the Queen. I'm supposed to tell you the protocols for a gathering of the court and make sure you don't get too bored."

I leaned back in my chair and regarded her thoughtfully. "I can't remember the last time I had that problem. And gosh, walking around with someone as lovely as you all night sounds like torture."

She smiled and lowered her eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked.

"Of course."

"I didn't use that like a rhetorical question," I said. "I'm serious. I'd like to ask you something, but if you would rather keep it to yourself, that's okay, too."

That put a crack in her mask. I saw her eyes flick up quickly to my face for a moment, and then back down. "Why wouldn't I want to answer your questions?"

"Because we've been working together every day for eleven weeks and I don't know your last name," I said. "I don't know what you do in the real world. I don't know your favorite color or what kind of ice cream you like best. I don't know if you have family. You're very, very good at talking about things that don't matter, and making it seem like the only conversation that could possibly have made sense."

She very carefully did not move or answer.

"Mab's got something on you, too, doesn't she? Just like she does me."

There was another moment of stillness. Then she said in a bare whisper, “Mab has something on everyone. The only question is whether they realize it or not.”

“I get that you’re afraid of me,” I said. “I know you saw Lloyd Slate in action when he was the Winter Knight, and I know exactly what a peach of a human being he was. And I figure you think I’m going to be like him.”

“I didn’t say that,” she said.

“It wasn’t an accusation,” I said, as gently as I could. “I’m not trying to trick you into saying something. I’m not hoping that you’ll give me an excuse to do something to you. Okay? I’m not like Lloyd Slate.”

“Neither was he,” Sarissa whispered. “Not at first.”

A cold little feeling wobbled through my guts.

See, that’s the tragedy of the human condition. No one *wants* to be corrupted by power when they set out to get it. They have good, even noble reasons for doing whatever it is they do. They don’t want to misuse it, they don’t want to abuse it, and they don’t want to become vicious monsters. Good people, decent people, set out to take the high road, to pick up power without letting it change them or push them away from their ideals.

But it keeps happening anyway.

History is full of it. As a rule, people aren’t good at handling power. And the second you start to think you’re better at controlling your power than anyone else, you’ve already taken the first step.

“This is the reality, Sarissa,” I said quietly. “I’m the Winter Knight. I’ve got Mab’s favor and blessing. I can pretty much do as I damned well please here, and I won’t have to answer to anyone but her for it.”

The young woman shivered.

“If I wanted it,” I said quietly, “if I wanted y . . . to hurt you, I could do it. Right now. You couldn’t stop me, and no one else would do a damned thing. I’ve spent a year on my back and now that I’m moving again, um . . . my various drives are clamoring for action. In fact, Mab probably sent you in here to see what I would do with you.”

The pleasant mask faded from Sarissa’s face, replaced with wary neutrality. “Yes. Of course she did.” She switched her hands, moving the bottom one to the top, carefully, as if she worried about wrinkling her dress. “I know exactly what role she has in mind for me, Sir Knight. I am to”—her mouth twisted—“be at your convenience.”

“Yeah, well,” I said. “That isn’t going to happen, obviously.”

Her eyes widened slightly. She held completely still. "I'm sorry?"

"I'm not Lloyd Slate," I said. "I'm not one of Mab's pet monsters—and I'll die before I let her make me into one. You were kind to me and you helped me through a bad patch, Sarissa. I won't forget that. You have my word."

"I don't understand," she said.

"It isn't complicated," I said. "I won't take anything away from you. I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do. Period."

I couldn't interpret the expression on her face when I said that. There could have been anger in it, or suspicion or terror or skepticism. Whatever was going on in her head to make her face look like that, I couldn't translate it.

"You don't believe me," I said. "Do you?"

"I've lived a third of my life inside Arctis Tor," she said, and turned her face away. "I don't believe anyone."

In that moment, I didn't think I'd ever seen someone so entirely lovely look so utterly alone. A third of her life in Winter? And yet she could still be compassionate and friendly and caring. She'd probably seen things, had to face ugliness that few mortals ever did—the Unseelie were endlessly enthusiastic about their amusements, and they liked their games nasty and cruel.

But here she was, facing a fate she must have feared since she was a child—being given to a monster to be devoured. Facing it calmly. Staying in control of herself, and still managing to be warm to me, too. That told me she had a lot of strength, and strength has always been something I found attractive in a woman. So has courage. So has grace under pressure.

I could really get to like this girl.

Which, of course, was why Mab had chosen her—to tempt me, to make me convince myself to abandon the high road so that I could have her. Then, once I'd done one little thing, she'd start scattering new lures in front of me, until eventually I picked another one up. Mab was Mab. She had no intention of keeping a Knight with a conscience.

So she was planning on assassinating mine an inch at a time. Once I'd abused my power over the girl, Mab would use my guilt and self-loathing to push me to the next step, and the one after that.

Mab was one cold-blooded bitch.

I looked away from Sarissa. I was going to have to keep her safe—first and foremost from me.

“I understand,” I told her. “Or at least I understand part of it. My first mentor wasn’t exactly Officer Friendly, either.”

She nodded, but it was an entirely noncommittal gesture, an acknowledgment that I had spoken, not a statement of agreement.

“Okay,” I said. “Uncomfortable silence is uncomfortable. Why don’t you tell me what I need to know for tonight?”

She collected herself and slipped back into her pleasant demeanor. “We’ll enter next to last, just before the Queen. She will present you to the court, and then there will be a meal and entertainment. After the feast, you’ll be expected to mingle with the court and give them a chance to meet you.”

“That’s the protocol? Thanksgiving dinner at the in-laws’?”

Something like a real smile brought a little light to her eyes, at the sight of which my glands did *not* go pitter-pat. At all.

“Not quite,” she said. “There are two laws all must follow under pain of death.”

“Only two? Man, how do Unseelie lawyers make a living?”

“First,” Sarissa said, ignoring my wiseassery, “Blood may not be spilled upon the floor of the court without the Queen’s express command.”

“No murder without getting the nod first. Got it. Second?”

“No one may speak to the Queen without her express command.”

I snorted. “Seriously? Because I’m not much for keeping my mouth shut. In fact, I’m pretty sure I physically can’t. Probably because I was influenced at an impressionable age. Did you ever read any Spider-Man comics when you were—”

“Harry,” Sarissa said, her voice suddenly tight. She put her hand on my arm, and her lean fingers were like heavy wires. “No one speaks to the Queen,” she whispered intently. “No one. Not even the Lady Maeve dares disobey that law.” She shuddered. “I’ve seen what happens. We all have.”

I pursed my lips and studied her hand thoughtfully for a moment. Then I nodded. “Okay,” I said. “I hear you.”

Sarissa exhaled slowly and nodded.

Just then, a door I hadn’t seen before opened in the center of what had looked exactly like a wall. Cat Sith stood on the other side of the door. He ignored me pointedly, turning his golden eyes to Sarissa. “It is time.”

“Very well,” Sarissa said. “We are ready.”

I rose and offered Sarissa a hand up. She took it, and I tucked her arm into mine. Her fingers gave my forearm one quick squeeze, and then we turned to follow Cat Sith down another hallway.

Sarissa leaned a little closer to me and whispered, “You know what this is, don’t you?”

I grunted quietly. “Yeah,” I said. “It’s my first day in the prison yard.”

Chapter

Four

Sith led us down yet another passageway, this one darker than the others, until finally I couldn't see the malk at all in the dimness. Instead, a very dim phosphorescence in the shape of his paw prints began to rise from the floor, giving us just enough light to move by. I could feel Sarissa growing increasingly tense beside me, but she said nothing. Smart. If anything was going to jump up and eat us, our ears would tell us about it first.

The sound of our steps on the floor changed, and I realized that we had moved into a large open space. Just as I did, the glowing paw prints in front of us vanished.

I stopped at once, pulling Sarissa in closer against my side. Again, she remained completely silent, except for one sharp little inhalation.

Silent seconds went by.

“Sith,” I said quietly. “You are a suck guide. I don’t care how big your shadow is.”

My voice echoed cavernously while I waited, but apparently Sith didn’t have a comeback. After a few seconds, I reached up and tugged my amulet out of the tux.

I held it up and concentrated, sending a microcurrent of my will into the design, and an instant later it began to glow with a blue-white light. I held it aloft and looked around.

We were in another ice cave, this one filled with enormous, bizarre . . . structures, was the only thing I could think to call them. I might have called them sculptures, except no one does sculptures the size of buildings these days, even in ice. I looked around the place slowly. There was something odd about the structures, something almost . . .

Sarissa was looking, too. She seemed alert, but not frightened. “Are those . . . giant pieces of furniture?”

. . . familiar.

The structures *were* sculpture, built on a scale of maybe one to eight, of a couch, two easy chairs, a brick fireplace, bookshelves. . . . Mab had recreated my old basement apartment in ice, right down to textured carvings of all of my area rugs crafted into the ice of the floor.

I had about a second to take that in before the cavern exploded with sound, color, and motion. A wave front of pure noise slapped against me as a sudden horde of beings from every dark folktale ever told surged into view at the edges of my light, their screams and cries coming from all around me.

This was a worst-case scenario for a mortal wizard. We can do amazing things, but we need time to make them happen. Sometimes we get that time by preparing well in advance—creating tools that help us focus our abilities more quickly and with greater precision. Sometimes we get the time by picking where and when to begin our battles. Sometimes we do it by slinging the spell from a couple or a couple hundred miles away. But I didn’t have any of that going for me.

My convalescence with Mab had kept me way too busy recovering or sleeping to have enough time to create new tools, and my amulet was all I had. On the upside, Mab had given me a serious workout, magically speaking. I’d been forced to use my abilities without any kind of tools or

crutch to help me, or else perish. I was better at wielding raw magic now than I'd ever been in my life.

It just wasn't going to be enough to survive what was coming at me.

I moved without thinking, putting myself between Sarissa and as many of them as I could, and bringing my will to bear upon my right hand. Pallid blue-white fire suddenly engulfed my fingers as I let the pentacle fall. I raised my hand—no time to think or aim or plan—determined to take someone down with me.

Sarissa's hand snapped out and she grabbed my wrist, jerking my arm down before I could unleash the spell, and I heard two things in the vast roar of sound:

First, Sarissa screaming, "No bloodshed!"

Second, I realized that everything else in the cavern was bellowing, "SURPRISE!"

The horde of all things dark and hideous stopped maybe twenty feet short of Sarissa and me, and the walls and floor and ceiling began to glow with light. Music began to play, a full symphonic freaking orchestra, *live*, somewhere on the other side of the giant replica of my old secondhand sofa. High up on the ceiling of the cavern, thousands of wisps of eerie light swarmed deep within the ice, swiftly forming up like a flotilla of synchronized swimmers until they formed the words: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DRESDEN.

I stood there with my heart beating too fast for several seconds and blinked at the entire place. "Uh. Oh."

Sarissa studied the ceiling for a moment and then looked up at me. "I didn't know."

"Neither did I, really," I said. "Is it Halloween already?"

"Just barely, I think," Sarissa said back.

It got weirder.

They started to sing.

They sang "Happy Birthday."

Remember when I said that a malk's voice made my skin crawl? It's nothing next to the cackling rasp of a swamp hag, or the freaky-weird whistling voice of a manticore. Goblins can't carry a tune if it has handles, and the huge bat things that served as Mab's air force shrieked in pitches that could barely be heard. Trolls, hideous giant thugs towering over ten feet tall, sound like laryngitic foghorns.

But layered all throughout that cacophony were voices that went to the other extreme, voices that carried the melody with such perfect, razor-edged clarity that it made me want to slash my wrists on it. People always equate beauty with good, but it just ain't so. Amongst the Winter Court were beings of haunting beauty, mesmerizing beauty, disarming beauty, flawless beauty, maddening beauty, bloodthirsty beauty. Even in the mortal world, a lot of predators are beautiful, and if you're quick and motivated enough, you can admire that beauty while they kill you and eat you. Like all the other things there, the Sidhe sang to me, and I could feel the weight of their attention on me like the pressure wave from an onrushing shark.

You don't listen to music like that. You survive it.

The voices ended abruptly, and left one crystalline alto singing, "And many more."

The crowd of creatures parted suddenly, and a girl stepped out of their ranks. She paused for a moment, for dramatic effect, and to give everyone time to admire her.

She'd changed her hair again. Now it was a kind of extra-wide Mohawk, long except for where it had been shaved completely away from the sides of her head, where the cut could show off the tips of her gently tapering ears. It was still colored in all glacial shades of blue and green and deep violet, and hung down over much of one side of her face, allowing her to borrow enough of Veronica Lake's vibe to give her wide, wide eyes a little extra hint of cheerily wicked mystery. She was tallish, for a girl, maybe five-ten, and built with that perfect balance of lean and lush proportions that some girls are lucky enough to have for maybe a year, the kind of look that gets girls that age in trouble with men who should be old enough to know better.

And she was naked. Gloriously, disconcertingly naked—and just as fresh and vibrant and unspoiled-looking as she'd been the first time I'd met her, most of ten years before.

Only, you know, she'd been less naked then.

Man, was I ever noticing that part.

"Here's the birthday boy!" Maeve said in a singsong voice, flinging both arms up. She started toward me in a slow and slightly exaggerated walk. Technically, she wasn't *entirely* naked. She had silver piercings at the tips of her breasts, beneath her lip, in her navel, and probably elsewhere. I didn't let myself look quite that close. Her flawless pale skin was also

spangled with gemstones. I don't know how they'd been attached, but they clung to her and sent little flashes of color glittering around the cavern when she moved. They were concentrated most densely around her . . . well . . . She'd been, ah, vajazzled.

She came slinking over to me in the silence, her green eyes framed in a quasi-mask of gemstones and some kind of henna inking, and she absolutely smoldered with sex. Not that she'd never been suggestive before, but this was taking things to a whole new level.

"Look at you," she said, walking around me and eyeing me slowly and thoroughly. "Rumors of your death have been greatly exaggerated, it would seem."

"Hi, Maeve," I said. "You know, I almost wore that same outfit. Gosh, would our faces have been red."

The Winter Lady, Mab's successor and understudy, completed the circle and stopped in front of me, just oozing pure animal attraction. "It is a birthday. I wore a birthday suit." She took a deep breath, mostly for effect. "I hope you approve."

Hell, yes, I approved. Or at least everything south of my upper lip did—way more than it should have, really. She wasn't using some kind of magic on me; I had gone on alert to such a possibility the second I'd seen her. It must have been all the rest and the exercise and the good diet, most of which I'd successfully avoided back in the real world. It had resulted in a robust and healthy yet perfectly normal libido. Perfectly normal.

It wasn't me changing. Whatever Mab had done to me that had healed a broken spine, made me able to run at vampire speed, and given me the kind of reflexes that were capable of keeping up with the attack of a furious malk hadn't changed me on some fundamental level.

Everything was perfectly healthy and normal here in Denial Land.

Maeve's eyes met mine and she gave me a slow, slow smile. And, as when Mab had been near, I felt my whole body thrum in response to her, to her presence, her proximity, to her . . . everything. That smile contained something within it, something conveyed to me in a flashing instant—Maeve as she would look in ecstasy, beneath me, looking up at me with that lovely face mindless with sensation. And with that image came a hundred or a thousand others, each of them a single captured moment, the kind of moments that are the only one to survive a frenzied dream, frozen and layered atop one another, each of them a promise, a prediction, and every

one of them aimed right at the most base, most primitive parts of my brain. It wasn't limited to visual imagery. Each layer of the flash had its own round of sensual memory, every one of them only partial but intense—touch, taste, scent, sound, and vision—dozens and dozens of dreams and fantasies compressed into that one instant of dark inspiration.

I've had sex that didn't feel as good as Maeve's smile.

You hear me, came Maeve's thoughts, along with the images. You hear me now, because we are together now, just as you are with Mab. I felt you, you know, when you joined yourself to us. And I want to feel more. You are my Knight as well, Dresden. Let me welcome you. Come to me. Come with me. Walk by starlight and let me show you secret delights.

It took me a couple of seconds to remember that I was still standing there in the icy hall, still wearing my clothes, still standing most of an arm's length away from Maeve. When I spoke, it was through clenched teeth. "Sorry. Already got a date for tonight, Maeve."

She dropped her head back and laughed. "Bring her," she said, her eyes both dancing and wild. Her eyes shifted to Sarissa, who took a short breath and went stiff beside me. "She's gorgeous, and I would love to . . . get to know her better."

Imagine the possibilities, my Knight. Another multisensory slide show hit my head, and every single image was something that I should have known better than to find intriguing, but that I could not bring myself to entirely ignore—only this time Sarissa was included. *I can show you pleasures you have never dreamed could be. Bring your lovely companion. I will give you her and many, many more besides.*

Again, my head lit up with lunatic pleasure-maybes, dizzying, electrifying, and I felt as if I were about to start tearing my way out of my clothes.

And, just for a second, I considered it.

I'm not really proud of that fact, but it's not like I'm beyond temptation, either. I'm just as stupid as the next guy, and for a second, I thought about seeing what was behind door number one. I knew it would be foolish—and fun, yeah, but mostly foolish. I knew that I'd be an idiot to go along, and yet . . .

One day, something is going to kill me. It might be some monster. It might be my own foolishness. It might be what gets most everyone in the end: simple, implacable time (although I wasn't betting on that one). I'd

been closer to the idea of my own death lately, having been dead, or at least mostly dead, for a good while, and I wasn't any more comfortable with the idea. I didn't have any more desire to go out in an ugly, painful way than I did before.

And if you've gotta go, there are probably worse ways to do it than in a blaze of sybaritic glory.

Damn, Maeve had a great pitch.

Heh.

Everyone selling something to a sucker does.

The entire hall had gone completely silent, except for my own harsh breathing, and I suddenly became aware of the tension in the air. Every being there was waiting, and I suddenly realized that this was the second murder attempt of the evening. Maeve was trying to destroy me.

"You ever make Lloyd that offer?" I asked.

Maeve tilted her head, staring at me, her smile suddenly frozen.

"Cat got your tongue?" I asked in a louder voice. I put scorn into it. "Did you not hear the question?"

The frozen smile became something subarctic. "What did you say to me?"

"I said no, you psychopathic hosebeast," I answered, spitting out the words with every ounce of contempt I could muster up. "I saw how you treated Lloyd Slate. I saw how you treated the changelings of your court. I know what to expect from you, you arrogant, spoiled, self-involved, petty, cruel little queen-bee twit."

Maeve's expression changed, though not in any kind of focused way. She looked . . . startled.

Sarissa gave me a shocked look. Then she glanced around, as if hunting for a foxhole or bomb shelter or perhaps some kind of armored vehicle to throw herself into.

"You sent your last handmaiden to murder my friends on their wedding day, Maeve," I continued, in a voice loud enough to be heard by the entire hall. "Did you think I'd forgotten that? Or was it just too small and unimportant a fact for you to keep it from dribbling out of your alleged brain? Do you think I'm too stupid to understand that you set up this 'surprise' party in the hopes that you'd startle me into spilling blood at court, Darth Barbie? You tried to *murder* me just now, Maeve, and you

think a little psychic porn is going to make me forget it? I can't decide if you're insane or just that stupid."

Maeve stared at me with her mouth dropping wide open.

"Now hear this," I said. "You're cute, doll. You're gorgeous. You inspire supernatural levels of wood. And so *what*? You're damaged goods. So turn around and move your naked little ass away from me—before I do it for you."

For a long moment, there was dead silence.

And then Maeve's face twisted up in fury. The seductive beauty of her features vanished, replaced by an animal's rage. Her eyes blazed, and the temperature in the air dropped suddenly, painfully, enough to cause icy frost crystals to start forming *on the ice*. The freaking *ice* iced over.

Maeve glared at me with naked hatred in her too-big eyes and then gave me a small bow of her head and a little smile. "It would appear we yet have a life to celebrate," she hissed. "Music."

From somewhere in the room, the symphony began playing again. The silent gang-circle ring of bedtime-story villainy broke up with fluid grace, and seconds later you would have thought you were at any kind of extremely wild, extremely posh costume party.

Maeve's eyes glittered and she spun once, displaying herself to me with a mocking little flick of her hair, and then vanished into the crowd.

I turned to Sarissa and found her staring at me with wide eyes. "You turned her down."

"Uh-huh."

"No one does that. Not here."

"Whatever," I said.

"You don't understand. The insult you've just given her is . . . is . . ." Sarissa shook her head and said, with masterful understatement, "You just earned a little payback, in her mind."

"That was going to happen sooner or later," I said. "What bugs me is her response."

"Music?" Sarissa asked.

"Yeah," I said. "And in a minute there might be dancing. Can't be good."

"It could be worse," she said. She took a deep breath and settled her arm in mine again. "You won the first round."

"I only survived it."

“Here, that *is* winning.”

“So if we win the rest of the night, we’ll be making a good start.” I looked around us and said, “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere that isn’t the middle of the floor,” I said. “Somewhere I can put my back to a wall. And hopefully somewhere with snacks. I’m starving.”

Chapter

Five

I'm never really comfortable at parties. Maybe I'm just not the partying type.

Even when they aren't full of lunatic elves, hulking monsters, and psychotic faerie queens, parties are kind of tough for me. I think it's because I'm never sure of what to do with myself.

I mean, there're drinks, but I don't like being drunk, and I'm pretty sure I don't get any more charming when I do get that way. More amusing, tops, and that isn't always in a good way. There's music, but I never really learned to dance to anything that involved an electric guitar. There are people to talk to and maybe girls to flirt with, but once you put all the stupid things I do aside, I'm really not all that interesting. I like reading,

staying home, going on walks with my dog—it's like I'm already a retiree. Who wants to hear about that? Especially when I would have to scream it over the music to which no one dances.

So I'm there but not drinking, listening to music but not dancing, and trying to have conversations with near-strangers about anything other than my own stupid life, and they generally seem to have the same goals I do. Leads to a lot of awkward pauses. And then I start wondering why I showed up in the first place.

Hell's bells, the kind of party with monsters is actually easier for me. I mean, at least I have a pretty good idea of what to do when I'm at one of those.

The food table was set up over by the replica of the trapdoor that used to lead into my subbasement. It was open in the giant model, which meant that there was a gaping hole in the icy floor, and if you slipped at the wrong moment, you'd wind up falling down into Stygian darkness. I wondered whether the drop was to scale.

The table was loaded down with party food of every description, but apart from the sheer variety, it didn't look like anything but regular old food. I inhaled through my nose and felt absolutely certain about that—this was mortal chow, not the fabled ambrosia of faerie.

"Thank God," Sarissa said, picking up a pair of plates. "Food. I was afraid they'd have nothing but those flower trifles again."

"Wait," I said. "Are we sure this is food?"

"You can't smell it?" she asked. "I can always tell. Local cuisine is . . . not exactly subtle. Practically the first thing I learned here was how to tell the difference." She started loading up both plates, mostly with things I probably would have picked anyway. Well. She had basically been my dietitian for nearly three months. She'd know, by now, what I liked and didn't.

Weird. Would it be like that if I ever had, like . . . a wife or something?

Whoa, where the hell did *that* thought come from? All the recent, if entirely bent, domesticity? My heart did a weird little rabbitlike maneuver, beating way too fast for a few seconds. Hell's bells, had I just had a panic attack? At the very *notion* of calling some woman my wife? Though . . . now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure I had ever used that word in connection with myself and somebody else at the same time. Not explicitly, anyway.

I shook my head and filed the thought away to be examined later, when I didn't have a great big target drawn on my back.

I let Sarissa pick us some food while I kept an eye out for anyone or anything suspicious. After about twenty seconds of that, I decided that it was an impossibility, and dialed it back to watching for anyone who rushed us with a knife, screaming. I kept my defensive spells right on the tip of my mind, so to speak, and ready to erupt into reality at an instant's notice.

I spotted a good, quiet corner for us to stand in, over by the giant mantel above the giant fireplace. I took the plates from Sarissa, and we started that way.

A form that I recognized emerged from the crowd in our path, and I found myself smiling. The creature that came limping over to me wasn't much more than five feet tall, and leaned on a heavy, gnarled walking staff. He wore a hooded robe of undyed linen, belted with a length of soft-looking rope. Three folded strips of purple cloth were tucked into the belt—the formal stoles of senior members of the White Council of Wizards, taken after they fell to him in separate duels.

Oh, and he was a goat. Well, a very human-looking goat, anyway. He had the same long face as a goat, and curling ram's horns on his head. His eyes were golden, his beard long and white, and he looked pleased.

"Eldest Gruff," I said, smiling.

"Sir Knight," he replied, his basso a pleasant rumble. We exchanged small bows, which also seemed to please him. "Please do thou accept my best wishes on this day of your birth."

"Gladly," I said. "How did they rope you into showing up to this freak show?"

He sighed. "Obligation."

"Word." I nodded to Sarissa. "May I introduce Sarissa. She's been helping me recover from an injury. Sarissa, this is—"

"Lord Gruff," she said, giving him a courtesy that somehow seemed natural. "How lovely to meet you again, sir."

"It is pleasant to see thee, child," Eldest Gruff said. "Thou dost seem to thrive despite the climate."

"That may be a generous assessment," Sarissa replied.

"I prefer to think of it as a hopeful one," the Gruff said. "I see thou hast attached thyself to the new Knight."

“No,” I said quickly. “No, she hasn’t. There’s been no . . . attaching. She’s been doctoring me.”

Sarissa arched an eyebrow at me, and then said to the Gruff, “It was Mab’s price.”

“Ah,” the Gruff said. “A heavy burden obligation canst be, for Winter and Summer alike.” He glanced aside at me. “Does he know of thine—”

“It hasn’t come up,” Sarissa said.

“Ah,” Eldest Gruff said, raising his hands. He had weird nails. They were hoofy. “I will then follow the course of silence.”

Sarissa inclined her head. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Two more figures approached us, both of them over seven feet tall. I’m not used to being the shortest person in any given conversation. Or even the shorter person. I can change lightbulbs without stretching. I can put the star on the Christmas tree without standing on tiptoe. I’m like the Bumble, but with way better teeth, and I didn’t like feeling loomed over.

(Which probably should tell me about the kind of effect I might be having on other people, sort of generally speaking, and especially when I gave attitude to power figures who were shorter than me, but that kind of crystallized moment of enlightenment probably wouldn’t be helpful in winning the evening.)

The first was depressingly familiar. He was dressed in hunter’s leathers, all grey and green and brown. There was a sword with a hilt made from some sort of antler at his side. It was the first time I’d seen him wearing something other than a helmet. He had shaggy, grizzled light brown hair that fell to his shoulders. His features were asymmetrical but, though not handsome, contained a certain roguish charm, and his eyes were an unsettling shade of gold-green. I didn’t know his name, but he was the Erlking, one of the beings of Faerie powerful enough to lead the Wild Hunt, and he was the reigning ruler of the goblins.

(Not like the big ugly dimwit in the Hobbit. Real goblins are like mutant Terminator serial killer psycho ninjas. Think Hannibal Lecter meets Jackie Chan.)

Oh, and I’d insulted him once by trapping him in a magic circle. Faeries large and small hate that action.

“Gruff,” said the Erlking, tilting his head.

Eldest Gruff made a small bow in reply. “Lord Herne.”

“Know you these children?”

“Aye,” said Eldest Gruff. He began making polite introductions.

I studied the man standing beside the Erlking while he did. He was a sharp contrast. The Erlking was huge, but there was something about him that suggested agility and grace. It was like looking at a tiger. Sure, it might be standing there all calm and relaxed at the moment, but you knew that at any second it could surge with speed and terrible purpose and that it wouldn't give you any warning before it came at you.

This man wasn't a tiger. He was a bear. His shoulders were so broadly proportioned that he made Herne look positively slender by comparison. His forearms were nearly the size of his biceps, and he had the kind of thick neck that you see only in power lifters and professional thugs. There were scars all over his hands, and more on his face, all of them faded away to ancient white lines, like those you see on some lifelong bikers. He wore a coat of mail of some kind—a creature of Faerie couldn't abide the touch of iron, so it had to be made from something else.

Over the mail he wore a long, open coat of scarlet, trimmed in white fur. It was held in with a wide black leather belt. He had such a barrel of a chest that even a modest bit of stomach was a considerable mass on his huge frame. His gloves were made of black leather trimmed with more white fur, and they were tucked through the belt, right next to the very plain and functional hilt of an unadorned broadsword. His hair was short, white, and shining clean, and his white beard fell over his chest like the white breaker of a wave. His eyes were clean, winter sky blue.

I lost track of what Eldest Gruff was saying, because my mouth was falling open.

The second man noticed my expression and let out a low, rumbling chuckle. It wasn't one of those ironic snickers. It was a rolling, full-throated sound of amusement, and it made his stomach shake like . . . dare I say it?

Like a bowl full of jelly.

“And this,” Eldest Gruff said, “is Mab's new Knight.”

“Uh,” I said. “Sorry. I . . . uh. Hi.” I stuck my hand out. “Harry Dresden.”

His hand engulfed mine as he continued to chortle. His fingers could have crushed my bones. “I know who you are, Dresden,” he rumbled. “Call me Kringle.”

“Wow, seriously? ’Cause . . . wow.”

“Oh, my God, that’s adorable,” Sarissa said, smiling. “You are such a fanboy, Dresden.”

“Yeah, I’ve just . . . I hadn’t really expected this kind of thing.”

Kringle let out another rumbling laugh. It absolutely filled the air around him. “Surely you knew that I made my home among the beings of Faerie. Did you think I would be a vassal of Summer, lad?”

“Honestly?” I asked. “I haven’t ever really stopped to think it through.”

“Few do,” he said. “How does your new line of work suit you?”

“Doesn’t,” I said.

“Then why did you agree to it?”

“Seemed like the right thing to do at the time.”

Kringle smiled at me. “Ah. I didn’t much care for your predecessor.”

“Ditto,” I said. “So do you come to all of these?”

“It’s customary,” Kringle replied. “I get to visit folk I rarely see elsewhere.” He nodded toward the Erlking and Eldest Gruff. “We take a few moments to catch up.”

“And hunt,” the Erlking said, showing sharp-looking teeth when he smiled.

“And hunt,” Kringle said. He eyed Eldest Gruff. “Would you care to accompany us this year?”

Gruff somehow managed to smile. “You always ask.”

“You always say no.”

Eldest Gruff shrugged and said nothing.

“Wait,” I said to Kringle. “You’re going hunting?” I pointed at the Erlking. “With *him*? *You*?”

Kringle let out another guffaw and, I swear to God, rested his hands on his belly while he did it. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Dude,” I said. “Dude. You’re . . . freaking Santa Claus.”

“Not until after Halloween,” he said. “Enough is enough. I’m drawing a line.”

“Hah,” I said, “but I’m kinda not joking here.”

He grunted, and the smile faded from his features. “Lad, let me tell you something here and now. None of us is what we once were. Everyone has a history. Everyone comes from somewhere. Each moves toward a

destination. And in a lifetime as long as mine, the road can run far and take strange windings—something I judge you know something about.”

I frowned. “Meaning?”

He gestured at himself. “This became the tale with which you are familiar only in fairly recent times. There are wizards enough alive today who knew of no such person when they were children awaiting the winter holiday.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “You became something different.”

He gave me a wink of his eye.

“So what were you before?”

Kringle smiled, apparently content to say nothing.

I turned to Sarissa, asking, “You seem to know these guys, mostly. What . . . ?”

She wasn’t there.

I looked around the immediate area, but didn’t see her. I moved my eyes back to Kringle and the Erlking. The two of them looked at me calmly, without expression. I darted a glance to Eldest Gruff, whose long, floppy right ear twitched once.

I glanced to my left, following the motion, and spotted Sarissa being led onto the dance floor underneath the replica of my original *Star Wars* poster. The poster was the size of a skyscraper mural now, the dance floor beneath it the size of a parking lot. For the most part, the Sidhe were dancing, all fantastic grace and whirling color, with the occasional glitter of jewellike feline eyes sparkling as they turned and swayed.

A young male Sidhe was leading her by the wrist, and from the set of her shoulders she was in pain. You couldn’t have guessed it from her expression. The young Sidhe wore a black leather jacket and a Cincinnati ball cap, but I didn’t get a look at his face.

“A fresh challenge, it would seem,” the Erlking murmured.

“Yeah,” I said. “Gentlemen, if you would excuse me.”

“You know Mab’s law at court, aye?” Kringle asked. “You know the price of breaking it?”

“Yep.”

“What do you mean to do, lad?”

“Seems that what we have here is a failure to communicate,” I said. “Think I’ll go open up a dialogue.”

Chapter

Six

Moving onto a dance floor full of Sidhe is like dropping acid.

Partly it's because they're just so damned pretty. The Sidhe maidens there were all in Maeve's league in terms of sheer physical attractiveness, and some of them were just about as barely dressed as she was, only in what must have been the latest trends in the Chicago club scene for the fashionably provocative. And, yeah, the boys were pretty, too, and tarding it up just as much as the girls, but they weren't nearly as much of a distraction to me.

Partly it's because of their grace. The Sidhe aren't human, even though they look like close relatives. When you see an Olympic gymnast or ice skater or a professional dancer performing a routine, you can't help but be

impressed with the sheer, casual grace with which they move, as if their bodies are lighter than air. The clumsiest of the Sidhe operate at about that same level, and the exceptional leave the mortals eating dust behind them. It's hard to describe because it's hard for the brain to process—there's no frame of reference for what I saw, the motion, the balance, the power, the effortless subtlety. It was like suddenly discovering an entirely new sense with an enormous amount of input: I kept seeing things that made my brain scream at me to stop and watch so that it could catalog and process them properly.

And partly it's because of their magic. The Sidhe use magic the way the rest of us breathe, instinctively and without thinking about it. I'd fought them before, and their power was largely invoked through simple gestures, as if the spells had been hardwired into their motor reflexes. For them, movement was magic, and at no time so much as when they danced.

Their power didn't come after me, specifically—it was more like I had plunged into it, as if it were a pool of water occupying the same space as the dance floor. It subsumed my mind almost at once, and it was all I could do to grit my teeth and hang on. Ribbons of colored light flared in the air around the dancing Sidhe. Their feet struck the floor and their hands struck upon bodies, their own or otherwise, adding rippling layers of syncopated rhythm to the music. Gasps and cries joined with the beat and the melody, primal and fierce, echoing and challenging one another from all quarters, as if they'd practiced it. They hadn't. It was just what they were.

Sound and rhythm struck from either side, thrumming against my ears, disorienting me. Light danced and fluttered through the spectrum in subtle, seductive patterns. Bodies twisted and strained in inhuman artistry, their very grace an assault upon my reason. Part of me wanted to just stand there and drink it in, gawking like some ugly, clumsy behemoth among the Sidhe. Plenty of mortals had been lulled into tearful rapture by such dances—and generally speaking, it hadn't ended real well for them.

I put up every mental defense I could, reaching for that core of cold, clear power that had been within me since the night I'd murdered my predecessor with Medea's bronze dagger. I hadn't even realized what was happening to me at the time, since other things had been on my mind, but I now realized that the power had restored my shattered body, and given me strength and speed and endurance at the very limits of human ability—and maybe past them. I felt it only when I sought it out, but apparently my

instinctive need to survive had been enough to tap into it back when I'd set out to rescue my daughter from the late Red Court of vampires.

Now it poured into my mind like an ice-cold breeze, and withered away the bedazzlement the Sidhes' dance had wrought on my thoughts. I started forward through the throng, and for a few feet I tried to skip and slip and duck my way through the moving crowd without hitting anyone. Then I realized that even with whatever I had gained from becoming the Winter Knight, I was still hopelessly dull-witted and slow-footed when compared to the Sidhe.

So I just started walking and left it up to them to get out of the way. It kinda fit my mood better, anyway. They did it, too. None of them were obvious about it, and some of them came within a fraction of an inch of striking me with whirling limbs, but none of them did.

The Sidhe are tall, generally speaking, but I'm NBA tall, and I could see over the crowd. I spotted the red ball cap and a flash of Sarissa's wide eyes and went after them. I caught up to them near the back wall of the cavernous chamber. The Sidhe who had grabbed Sarissa stood behind her, one of his arms wound around her neck, the other around her waist, holding her back against his chest. Her eyes were wide now. I could see deep red flushing on the skin of her wrist, where bruises were already starting to form in the shape of the Sidhe's fingers.

I found myself clenching my hands into fists and growling deep in my throat.

Without any evident forethought to it, the dance floor for ten feet all around any of the three of us became clear of moving bodies. The Sidhe had made room for the confrontation. Jewellike eyes glittered and watched intermittently while the dance continued.

"Sir Knight," said the Sidhe holding Sarissa. He had straight black hair beneath the cap, and cheekbones so high that they needed to wear oxygen tanks. He was smiling, and there was something particularly vulpine in it. His canines were just a little too large, a little too sharp. "What a pleasure it is to speak with you."

"You aren't going to think so in a minute," I said. "Let her go."

He leaned in closer to her and inhaled through his nose. "Odd," he said. "I don't smell you on her. You haven't claimed her as your own."

"She's not yours, either," I said. "Let her go. Don't make me say it again."

“She’s just a mortal,” he said, smiling. “A mortal of no station here in Arctis Tor, at court. This place is not meant for mortals. Her body, her mind, and her life are all forfeit, should we decide to take them.”

“We just decided to let. Her. Go.” I began walking toward him.

Something feverish came into his eyes and I could suddenly see every bone and tendon in his hand, tight against his skin. His nails seemed a little too long, a little too heavy, and a little too sharp to be normal. Sarissa tried to speak, but only made a choking sound and went silent.

“You keep coming,” the Sidhe said, “and I’ll keep squeezing. This game is terribly interesting. I wonder how hard I’ll have to squeeze to crush her windpipe.”

I stopped, because I knew the answer to his question: not very hard. It’s only a little more pressure than you need to crush an empty beer can. It’s sort of scary how easy it is to kill someone once you know how to get it done.

“What about Mab’s law?” I said.

“I’ll not shed a drop of her blood,” he replied smoothly. “When I cut off her air or break her neck, she’ll simply cease—which is a waste, but the law is the law.”

And I got a sudden sinking feeling that the Sidhe in front of me, in his black leather jacket and his red cap, knew how to get it done. “You’re not a Cincinnati fan, are you?”

“Ah!” the Sidhe said, smiling. “You see, Sarissa, he’s worked it out. It took a while, but he got there.”

“You’re a redcap,” I said.

“Not *a* redcap,” he said, snapping annoyance in his voice. “*The* Redcap, little Knight.”

The Redcap was one of those figures I had hoped was a story. According to what I knew of legend, he got his name by greeting travelers in a friendly fashion, and then murdering them horribly. Once that was done, he would dye his cap freshly scarlet by dipping it in their cooling blood. Odds seemed reasonable that he was a badass. Legend was about as reliable as every other rumor mill on the planet, but looking at the guy, I got the impression that he would smile and have an erection the whole time he murdered Sarissa. Or me.

He certainly *expected* me to react with fear and caution. Which just goes to show you that no matter how old something is, centuries don’t

necessarily make it all that bright.

“The big bad Redcap,” I drawled. “And when you were picking a red cap for tonight to emblemize your power and skill, you went with Cincinnati over Philly? Or Boston? Seriously?”

The Redcap apparently didn’t know what to make of that. He just stared at me, trying to decide whether he’d been insulted or not.

“Man, you Sidhe are a crowd of poseurs. Did you know that? You try to do and say the things you think will push our buttons—but you just don’t get it, do you? Have you even *been* to a ball game? I caught one with Gwynn ap Nudd a few years back. Decent guy. Maybe you’ve heard of him.”

“Do you think your allies frighten me, wizard?” the Redcap demanded.

“I think you’re an opportunist,” I said.

“A what?”

“You heard me. You jump people traveling alone, people who don’t have a chance in hell of defending themselves against you. Especially not when you make nice and put them off their guard first.” I gave him a toothy smile. “I’m not off my guard, Red. And I’m not someone who doesn’t have a chance against you.”

“Touch me and I will kill her,” he snarled, giving Sarissa a little jerk by way of demonstration.

I looked at Sarissa and hoped that she could read deeper than the surface. “That’s bad, but there’s not much I can do about it if you decide to kill her now,” I said. “Of course, after you do that . . . I don’t really like your chances, Red. If she dies, you’ll join her.”

“You wouldn’t break Mab’s law,” he sneered.

“You’re right,” I said. “So I figure I’ll just open a Way back to the mortal world, drag you through it, and after that . . . well, I’ve always been partial to fire.”

Evidently that line of possibility had not occurred to the Redcap. “What?”

“I know it’s not thematically in tune with my new job and all, but I find it effective. Build a man a fire and he’s warm for a day,” I said. “But set a man on fire and he’s warm for the rest of his life. Tao of Pratchett. I live by it. You wanted to face me down in front of everyone, get props for tweaking my nose on my first night here? Well, congratulations, Red. You’re the man.”

The Redcap's eyes narrowed, gleaming bright, and his foxlike smile widened. "You think I'm afraid of you."

"The last time somebody swiped my date to a party, it got a little messy," I said in a very mild voice. "Ask the Red Court about it. Oh, wait."

The Redcap actually laughed at that, and it was hurtful. Literally. My ears rang painfully at the sharpness of the sound. "It is nothing to me how many cockroaches or vampires you have ended, mortal. I am Sidhe."

"Whatever," I said. "Killed some of them, too."

"Yes," the Redcap said, and there was an ugly, hungry heat in his tone. "The Lady of Summer. I was in that battle, mortal. I saw her blood flow."

I nodded and said, "And what makes you think I won't do it again?"

The Redcap jerked his chin a little to one side and said, "They do."

I froze.

Dammit, Harry, I chided myself. You're dealing with faeries. There is always a scam with faeries. There is always a sucker punch on the way. I'd gotten too forward-focused. The Redcap hadn't been a challenger.

He was the bait.

As if on cue, the wild dancing turned to stillness. The music died. All motion in the chamber, as far as I could tell, ceased entirely, and suddenly I stood in a small glade within a forest of lean, wickedly beautiful figures and weirdly sparkling eyes.

Two beings emerged from that forest, shambling out from the crowd of Sidhe, one on either side of me, maybe fifteen feet away.

The first, on my right, was a huge figure, shuffling forward with its form doubled over beneath a tattered grey cloak that could have covered a small truck. Its legs took strides that were two or three times as long as mine, and when it came to a halt, its long arms spread out to either side of it and rested on the floor. Beneath its hood, I could make out a flat, broad head, as stark as a skull and colored red and glistening. Its arms ended in hands with only three fingers, but they were proportionally too thick and a couple of feet long. They, too, were red and glistening, as if something had been built on a bone framework with flesh and muscle added on over it, but then whoever had made it had forgotten to put the skin on. It dripped little patters of ichor onto the floor and stared at me with very wide, very white eyes that contained only tiny pinpoints of black.

I recognized the thing. It was a rawhead, a creature that assembled itself out of the discarded bones and flesh of slaughtered hogs and cattle.

Then they started eating whatever they could catch, usually starting with pets, then working their way up to schoolchildren, and finally hunting down adults. If you caught them early, you should shut them down hard—but no one had caught this one.

As I watched, it rose, slowly, up to its full height of well over ten feet. Its jaws had come from more than a couple of different creatures, and they spread open in a slow, wide gape, into a mouth as wide as a waterslide tunnel. More liquid pattered down out of the rawhead's jaws onto the floor, and its breath rasped in and out in a slow, enormous wheeze.

On the left, the second figure drew back its hood. It was maybe only eight feet tall, and mostly human-looking, except for the thick coat of yellow-white fur that covered it. It was layered in so much muscle that it could be seen even through its pelt, and its eyes were burning, bloodshot orbs shining out from beneath a cavernous brow ridge. It was the Winter Court's version of an ogre, it was a great deal stronger than it looked, and if it wanted to, it could pick me up and drive my head *into* one of the icy walls, then hammer my spine in like a piton.

"I've been waiting to see that expression on his face all night," the Redcap said to Sarissa. "Isn't it priceless? What's going to happen next? I'm so interested."

Taking on a little friendly training and a grumpy malk was one thing, but going up against three of the nastier creatures in Faerie all at once was probably a losing proposition. Maybe I could survive it, if I was fast and good and a little bit lucky.

But Sarissa wouldn't.

I had only one real chance: instant and overwhelming aggression. If I could knock one of these bozos out of the fight before it even started, that changed the odds from impossible to merely daunting. It meant that there might be a chance of saving the girl.

Of course, it also meant that I would break Mab's law. I'd bragged about opening a Way, and if push came to shove, I probably could—but not before the rawhead and the ogre closed in on me.

Just then there was a sound: a shriek, a blast of cruel trumpets that sounded as if whoever blew them was being beaten with a salted lash. It took me a second to realize that no instruments were playing. Instead, high up on the constructed replica of my favorite chair, at my left shoulder, crystals were thrusting themselves up out of the ice, and screaming as the

ice changed form. They rose into a half dome of spikes and frozen blades, and shuddered as the center of the new outgrowth shifted again. Wisps of arctic blue and green and purple buzzed and whirled within those sharp spikes, sending out a wild coruscation of colored light. The aurora was mesmerizing and blinding at the same time, and little disco balls hoped that they could grow up to be half as brilliant one day.

Mab stepped out of the solid ice as if passing through a gauzy curtain. She was in formal wear, a robe of opalescent white, belted with joined crystals of ice. A tall crown of more ice rose from her brow, and her white hair spilled down around her like snow atop a mountain. She was distant and cold, as pure and lovely and merciless as moonlit snow.

She stood for a moment, staring out at the cavern. Then she sat, the motion slow and regal, and the ice within the spiked dome reshaped itself into a seat beneath her. She settled onto it, and the ice screamed again, shrieking out a second tortured fanfare.

Every head in the cavern turned to her. The Sidhe all around me knelt at once, including the Redcap and his buddies. All over the chamber, other beings of the Winter Court did the same, and suddenly only a very few people were standing upright. I was one of them. So were the Erlking, Kringle, and Eldest Gruff, though each of them stood with his head bowed in acknowledgment of Winter's ruler. I took my cue from them, but kept my eyes open.

I spotted Maeve standing only forty or fifty feet away, on an icy deck that had been formed to look like a paperback that had fallen from one of my bookshelves. Maeve was in a perfect position to see the conflict between the Redcap crew and me, and she hadn't bowed either. She was sipping something ice blue from a champagne flute, and ignoring her mother's presence entirely—but I could feel her malice, burning toward me even though she wasn't looking directly at me.

Mab studied me and my playmates for a solid minute, saying nothing, and in that silence you could hear the fluid dripping from the rawhead's various bits onto the icy floor.

Maeve turned to her mother and sipped at her blue champagne. She said nothing, and her features were entirely smooth and relaxed, but you could just *smell* the way she was smirking on the inside.

And only then did I really get it. Maeve's first attempt to get me to start a fight at court had been a distraction, then. She'd wanted me to focus

on her, to unnerve me with her high-voltage psychic sex moves. That way I wouldn't be thinking clearly enough to avoid it when the Redcap sprang *his* surprise.

Mab stared down at the Winter Lady for another silent minute. Then she smiled and bowed her head very slightly toward her daughter, the gesture one of acknowledgment.

"Well played," Mab murmured. She didn't raise her voice. She didn't have to. The ice rang with it.

Her eyes shifted to me, and though she was too far away for me to make out any details, I somehow knew exactly what the expression on her face meant: I had allowed myself to be drawn into this mess. I would have to be the one to get me out of it.

I was on my own.

Mab turned her gaze back to the rest of the room. "On this day of celebration of Our newest Knight's birth, We give you greetings one and all, you lords and ladies of Winter. Welcome again to Our home. We can see that the celebrations are already well under way." She settled back on her throne and placed one finger against her lips, as though she were fascinated with the scene before her. "We pray you, do not let Our entrance further disrupt them." She lifted a languid hand. "It is Our desire that you continue the festivities."

Oh, fun.

I turned back to face the Redcap, keeping his wingmen in my peripheral vision, and tried to think of something, anything, that would get both me and Sarissa out of this mess.

The rawhead gathered itself into a crouch again, clearly ready to pounce. Its mismatched set of claws and talons gouged at the floor in anticipation. The ogre flexed its hands open and closed once. It sounded like a popcorn popper. The Redcap already had his feet underneath him again, dragging Sarissa effortlessly up with him.

And I was wearing a tux.

Hell's bells.

Clearly, if I wanted us to survive the evening I had to step up my game.

Mab's voice came out as a throaty purr. "Music. Let Us see a dance."

Chapter

Seven

The odds here were long. Way long. All three deadly faeries stood ready to move, and no matter which of them I took on first, Sarissa's outlook wasn't good. The music began, low and quiet, with a slowly, slowly rising presence.

I needed some kind of edge, a game changer.

In fact . . .

A game changer was *exactly* what I needed.

Faeries are always underhanded and tricky, true, and I'd overlooked that a few moments before. But there's something else about faeries that runs absolutely bone deep: They love to play games.

“Why don’t we make this interesting?” I said out loud. “I trust you wouldn’t object to making a bit of a game of our dispute?”

Oh, the room got *intense* then, as maybe a thousand throats all inhaled at the same time. I could practically feel the air grow closer as all of those beings leaned very slightly toward me, their suddenly sharpened interest filling the cavern. The tempo of the music changed with it as well, now all suspended strings and muted percussion.

I felt a surge of emotion run through me, one that I knew was not my own—it was too pure, too primal, and it made my body do that thrumming thing again: Mab’s approval was fierce.

“But, wizard,” said the Redcap. “We’re already playing a game. One cannot change the rules simply because one is losing.”

“But one can change the stakes,” I replied. “What if you could get more out of it?”

The Redcap narrowed his eyes. “What more could you have to lose than your life?”

I gave him what I hoped was a patronizing smile, and then said, “Wait. Why am I talking to the tool instead of the person holding it?” I turned my back on the Redcap, gulped, and faced Maeve. “I’m offering you a prize, Winter Lady. Are you willing to hear me out?”

Maeve’s eyes sparkled more brightly than the jewels on her . . . midriff. She came to the edge of the platform and stood watching me.

“If he wins,” I said, jerking my head back at the Redcap, “I’ll go with you. Willingly.”

Maeve tilted her head. “And if you win?”

“Sarissa goes free. You leave peacefully.”

Maeve thrust out her lower lip. “Peacefully. That’s hardly ever any fun.” She lifted a hand and idly toyed with her hair. “As I see it, I already have a prize, mortal. I get to see Mother watch the steam rise from at least one fresh corpse, here in her own court.”

“You’re absolutely right, Maeve,” I said. “And you’ve got me in a pickle, and it was cleverly done.” I winked at her. “But what fun is the game you’ve already won? Why settle for so ephemeral a prize, however worthy, when you could take Mab’s Knight from her in front of all of Winter?”

That one sank home. I could *feel* the sudden surge of ambitious lust that went racing through the Winter Lady, and the seething hatred that went

along with a swift glance toward distant Mab on her throne.

Maeve's mouth curled up in an expression that bore as much resemblance to a smile as a shark does to a dolphin. She snapped her fingers, the sound almost as loud as a small-caliber gunshot, and two Sidhe hurried to her side escorting a dazed-looking athletic young man. Maeve didn't wait for him. She simply sat. The Sidhe shoved the young man to his hands and knees, and Maeve's slight weight settled across his broad back.

"I'll give you this much, Mother," she said, without looking toward Mab. "You do pick the most interesting mortals to serve you."

Mab's smirk said more than any words could have. Otherwise, she neither moved nor spoke.

"My lady . . ." began the Redcap, behind me.

"Hush," Maeve said absently. "I want to see what happens. What did you have in mind, wizard?"

In answer, I reached up and with a couple of quick tugs undid my tux's tie. It wasn't one of those preassembled ties. It was made out of a single band of pure silk, sized perfectly to wrap around my throat, with a couple of wider bits left over for handholds. I held it up, making a bit of drama out of it as I turned in a circle, and said, "Out of respect for our host and her law, there shall be no bloodshed."

Then I tossed the tie to the icy floor halfway between myself and the Redcap.

I looked up at Maeve and gave my chin an arrogant little lift. "'Sup, Princess. You game?"

Maeve lifted one hand and idly began tracing a fingertip over her lips, her eyes bright. She looked at Red and nodded.

"Okay, chucklehead," I said, turning to face him. "How about you let the yeti there hold the girl while you and I dance?" I gave him a broad grin. "Unless you're afraid of little old cockroach-swatting me."

Red's upper lip twitched. If he hadn't been one of the Sidhe, and at a party, and in front of all of his dearest frenemies, he would have snarled at me.

He beckoned the ogre with one hand, and the thing lumbered over to him. He thrust Sarissa into its huge, hairy, meaty arms. The ogre didn't get the girl around the neck. It simply wrapped its hand over her skull, like some hairy, spidery helmet, and held on. The smoky glass chopsticks in Sarissa's hair clattered to the ice, and her eyes got even wider.

“If the wizard uses his magic,” the Redcap said, “break her neck.” He eyed the ogre and said, “Without ripping it off.”

“Yuh,” the ogre said. Its beady eyes glared at me.

The Redcap nodded and turned to face me, his eyes narrowed.

Yowch. Nice move on Red’s part. Though I’m not sure he needed to bother. I’d never been able to tag one of the Sidhe with a really solid hit with my magic. Their defenses against that kind of thing were just too damned good. But I’d been counting on using it indirectly to help out in the fight, and the Redcap had just taken that option away from me.

Sarissa gave the Redcap a glare that might have peeled paint from a wall, and then said, her voice rasping, “Harry, you don’t have to do this for me. You can walk away.”

“You kidding?” I said under my breath. “You think I’m going to go to all the trouble of finding a new PT guy? Hang tough.”

She bit her lip and nodded.

I dismissed the girl from my thoughts, as much as I could, and tried to focus. I was still better off than I’d been a few moments ago. Now, instead of a three-versus-one fight that would probably kill me and certainly kill Sarissa, I had a pure one-on-one. If I lost, Sarissa wouldn’t make it, and I would either be Maeve’s chew toy or dead. (I was hoping for dead.) But if I won, Sarissa and I both got to walk away. It wouldn’t keep something like this from happening again, but we’d live through the night, which was by definition victory.

Of course, now I had to win without using magic in a strangling-cord duel against a faerie who was faster than me, and who had centuries of experience in killing mortals. Oh, and I had to win it without drawing blood, or I’d be guilty of breaking Mab’s law—and I knew how she would react to that. Mab wasn’t evil, exactly, but she was Mab. She’d have me torn apart. The only mercy she would show would be by doing it all at once instead of spread over weeks.

Long story short, nobody there was going to help me. At times it sucks to be the lone hero guy.

I had one advantage: I was used to competing out of my weight class. I didn’t have a whole ton of training in unarmed combat, but I did have considerable experience with being in dicey situations against homicide-oriented people and things that were bigger than me, stronger than me, faster than me, and motivated to end my life: I knew how to fight an uphill

battle. The Redcap knew how to kill, but by maneuvering me out of using my magic, he'd tipped some of his hand: He was being cautious about me.

Sure, he was a predator, but in nature predators generally go after the weak, the sick, the aged, and the isolated. Solitary predators almost exclusively hunt by attacking from surprise, where they have every advantage in their favor. Hell, even great white sharks do that, and they're just about the biggest, oldest predators on the planet. I've seen a lot of things that hunted people in my time, and I regard them as a professional hazard, part of the job. I know how they operate. Predators don't like to pick fair fights. It runs counter to their nature and robs them of many of their advantages.

The Redcap had tried to limit what I could do in a bid to scrape together any advantage he could, as any predator does. That told me that he probably wasn't used to this kind of open confrontation.

He was nervous.

I was nervous, too—but I was on familiar psychological ground and he wasn't. Maybe I could use that.

I undid the top button of the shirt and shrugged out of the jacket as if nothing at all were about to happen, taking my time. I tossed it at one of the watching Sidhe. He caught it and folded it neatly over one arm, never looking away, while I calmly undid the cuffs of my shirt and rolled up the sleeves. I stowed the cuff links in a pocket.

I stretched and yawned, which might have been taking the pantomime over the top, but what the hell? In for a penny. I smiled at Maeve, inclined my head very slightly to Mab, and turned to face the Redcap.

"Ready," I said.

"Ready," the Redcap echoed.

The music abruptly stopped, and in the silence Mab's voice came from everywhere. "Begin."

I rushed forward faster than I ever could have done before I'd become Mab's Knight. It was damned close. The Redcap was quicker off the mark, but I had longer arms. He snatched the nearest end of the silk an instant before I grabbed my end. As my fingers closed, he snapped it back out of my grip, and then dropped his weight straight down, his back leg coming forward into a crescent-shaped sweep about six inches off the icy floor.

I turned my forward stumble into a forward roll. I went over the kick, tucked in tight, and came up to my feet smoothly—but the motion had

carried me past him, and I knew that with his speed and grace, he'd already be leaping toward my back.

I spun to him, one hand at the level of my throat to intercept him if he was already close enough to get the tie around it, and lunged back toward him with my right arm raised to the horizontal, hoping to catch him across the neck in a clothesline.

I'd misjudged. He was moving so fast that all I got was motion blur, and he hadn't swept the silk tie at my neck—he'd aimed for my upraised left hand. The silk snaked around my wrist, and I caught it in my hand just in time for him to slip to one side, dragging my arm in close to his body. He used my forward momentum and my trapped arm to rob me of my balance and spin me in a circle, hauling at my arm with all his strength.

His strength was considerable, and his technique was sound. He suddenly reversed, using my own motion against me, and dislocated my arm from its shoulder socket with a loud pop and a flash of red-hot pain.

"Harry!" Sarissa screamed, grabbing uselessly at the ogre's wrist. It was as thick as her own leg, and the ogre didn't even seem to notice her struggling.

The Redcap kept hold of my arm, my wrist pulled up against his sternum and still trapped in the tie. He smiled broadly and walked backward in a small circle, the pain and the leverage forcing me to scramble along the floor in front of him. A gale of lovely, cold laughter went up from the Sidhe like a chorus of frozen chimes.

The Redcap took a miniature, mocking bow to the crowd and spoke to me. "I was worried for a moment, mortal. You're faster than you look."

He kicked me in the dislocated shoulder. He wasn't trying to kick my arm off. He was just doing it for the hell of it. It hurt a lot.

"You should see the look on your face, mortal," the Redcap said. "This is *fun*."

"You know what, Red?" I gasped. "We're all having fun."

I took my weight onto my knees and back, and slammed the heel of my right hand into the side of the jackass's knee.

I don't know how much stronger Mab's gift had made me, because I'd never been much of a weight lifter until I'd started therapy. I didn't know too much about how much weight lifters could, for example, bench-press. So I didn't have a very good idea how I stacked up against plain old me. Or plain old anybody. Plus the weights for the bench press were marked in

metric units, and I kind of fell asleep the day we learned to convert them to pounds.

But I'm pretty sure four hundred kilos isn't bad.

The Redcap's knee popped like a balloon from the force of the strike, and bent *in* toward his other knee. He howled in startled agony and tried to throw himself away, but just as I hadn't been able to move for a few critical seconds after he'd injured me, his body wasn't responding properly either, and he fell next to me.

The left side of my body felt like it was on fire, but me and pain are old buddies. His grip on the tie had loosened, and I couldn't move my left arm enough to get it loose. So before he could recover, I punched him in the neck with my good hand. He gagged and thrashed, and I was able to unwrap the silk from my useless arm. I tried to pull the tie away from him, but he'd already shaken off the hits I'd given him and held on. I jerked on it as hard as I could, but I had only the one arm and was fresh out of leverage. I could feel the tie sliding through my fingers.

So I let go without warning and snapped my hand at a different target as he fell back.

He dropped into a backward roll and came up six feet away. He perched on one hand and a knee, still gripping the tie.

I casually settled his red ball cap onto my head, touched a forefinger to its brim, winked at him, and said, "You have hat hair."

Again there was a chorus of marrow-curdling laughter from the Sidhe. It wasn't any more pleasant to have them laughing *with* me than it had been to have them laughing *at* me.

The Redcap's face flushed a furious red, and I could *see* the blood vessels in his eyes bursting.

Hell's bells, the twit hadn't been particularly perturbed when I'd crippled his leg. But touch his *hat* and embarrass him in front of his peers and the dude flipped out. Nobody has their priorities straight anymore.

I made it to my feet before he simply leapt at me. He hit me before I could get my balance and we both went down. His eyes burning, he ignored the tie and latched onto my throat with both hands.

He was strong. I think I might have been stronger than he was, but I had only the one arm. I slammed it at his forearms—if he kept his grip on me, those nails would almost certainly draw blood. He hissed and jerked

his hands away at the last second, and I slammed my knee against his injured leg. I bucked him off me while he screamed. I went after him.

We rolled a couple of times, and I cannot tell you how much it hurt both of us to do it. He had the use of both arms. I was able to use both legs to stabilize myself—but he was a hell of a lot squirmier than me, and in a blur of confusing motion he somehow managed to slither around to my back and get an arm across my throat. I got a few fingers underneath it, and started trying to pry him away. It wasn't a winning move. I managed to lessen the pressure, but I couldn't pull him off me, and my head started to pound.

Another group inhalation went up from the Sidhe, and I could feel them leaning closer, their interest almost frenzied, hundreds and hundreds of gemlike eyes sparkling like stars as the light started dimming. Sarissa stared at me with wide eyes, her expression horrified.

But . . . she'd lost one of her shoes.

I watched as she reached out with her toes and managed to pluck one of her fallen glassy chopsticks up off the floor. The freaking yeti holding her didn't notice. It was staring far too intently at the fight.

Sarissa passed the chopstick up to her hands, gripped it with both of them, and snapped it in the middle.

Shattered pieces of black glass fell away from a slender steel rod. Without looking, she simply lifted her hand and pressed the rod against the underside of the yeti's wrist.

Faeries, be they Sidhe or any other kind, cannot abide the touch of iron. To them, it's worse than molten plutonium. It burns them like fire, scars them, poisons them. There's a lot of folklore about cold iron, and it's a widely held belief that it refers only to cold-forged iron, but that's a bunch of hooey. When the old stories refer to cold iron, they're being poetic, like when they say "hot lead." If you want to hurt one of the fae, you just need iron, including any alloy containing it, to hurt them.

And man, does it ever *hurt* them.

The ogre's wrist burst into a sudden coruscation of yellow-white flame, as bright as that of an arc welder. The ogre howled and jerked its arm away from Sarissa's head as if he'd been a child experimenting with a penny and an electrical outlet.

Sarissa spun on her heel and slashed the little steel rod across the ogre's thigh.

It howled in primal fury and flinched back, sweeping one long arm at her in pure reflex.

Sarissa caught only a tiny fraction of the blow, but it was enough to send her staggering. She fell only a couple of feet away from me and looked up, her eyes dazed.

Her lower lip had been split wide-open.

A large ruby droplet fell from her lip and hung in the air, shining and perfect, and stayed there for half of forever. Then it finally splashed down onto the icy floor.

There was a shrieking hiss as the blood hit the supernatural ice, a sound somewhere between a hot skillet and a high-pressure industrial accident. The ice beneath the drop of blood shattered, as if the droplet had been unimaginably heavy, and a web of dark cracks shot out for fifty feet in every direction.

The music stopped. The Redcap froze. So did everyone else.

Mab rose out of her chair, and somehow in that instant of action she crossed the distance from her high seat, as though the simple act of standing up were what propelled her to the space nearby. As she came, the pallid finery of her dress darkened to raven black, as if the air had contained a fine mist of ink. Her hair darkened as well to the same color, and her eyes turned entirely black, sclera and all, as did her nails. The skin seemed to cling harder to her bones, making her beautiful features gaunt and terrible.

The Redcap flinched away from me and dragged himself back with his arms, getting clear. Give credit where it's due: He might have been a sadistic, bloodthirsty monster, but he wasn't a stupid one.

The furious, burned ogre wasn't bright enough to realize what was happening. Still smoldering, still enraged, it came stomping toward Sarissa.

"Knight," Mab said, the word a whipcrack.

Maeve came to the edge of the platform and clutched her hands into fists, her mouth twisted into a snarl.

I didn't get up off the ground. There wasn't time. Instead, I focused my will upon the advancing ogre and funneled my anger and my pain into the spell, along with the frozen core of power within me. I unleashed the energy as I thundered, "*Ventas servitas!*"

The ogre was only a couple of yards from Sarissa when the gale of arctic wind I'd called up slammed into the thing and lifted its massive bulk

completely off the ground. It tossed the ogre a good ten feet away. It landed in a tumble, dug its claws into the ice, and fought its way back to its feet.

I rose from the ground, acutely conscious of Mab's black presence just over my left shoulder, of the watching eyes of the Winter Court.

I'd told Sarissa this was my first day in prison, and the yard was full of things that could and *would* kill me if they got the chance. It was time for an object lesson.

I reached down into the cold inside of me. It was painful to touch that power, like throwing yourself into icy water, like emerging from warm covers into the shuddering cold of an unheated apartment on a winter morning. I didn't like it, but I knew how to get it.

All I had to do was think about everyone I'd let down. Everyone I'd left behind back in Chicago. My brother, Thomas. My apprentice, Molly. My friends. My daughter. Karrin. I thought about them and it felt like something in my chest was starting to tear in half.

The Winter inside me was torment and agony—but at least when I was immersed in it, I couldn't *feel*.

I lifted my right arm, the side that projects energy, focused my will, and shouted, "*Infriga!*"

There was a flash of light, an arctic howl, a scream of air suddenly condensed into liquid, and an explosion of frost and fog centered upon the ogre. The air became a solid fog bank, a rolling mist, and for several seconds there was silence. I waited for the mist to disperse, and after several long seconds it began to clear away, swept along by the remnants of the gale I had called first.

When it cleared, the entire Winter Court could see the ogre, standing crouched just as it had been when I threw the spell at it.

I waited for a moment more, letting everyone see the ogre standing absolutely still in defiance of Mab's law.

Then I drew forth my will again, extended my hand, and snarled, "*Forzare!*" A lance of invisible power lashed out at the ogre—and when it struck, the frozen monster shattered into thousands of icy chunks, the largest of which was about the size of my fist.

The bits of the former ogre exploded over several hundred square yards of the dance floor, and grisly frozen shrapnel pelted the watching Sidhe and sent them reeling back with shouts of alarm. The Sidhe gathered

themselves again, and every one of those bright eyes locked onto me, their expressions alien, unreadable.

From one of the back corners, I heard a deep, heartily amused chuckle rolling through the air. Kringle, I thought.

I turned to Mab and almost spoke—but then I remembered her other law and closed my mouth.

Mab's mouth twitched in an approving microsmile, and she nodded her head at me.

“If you consent, I would speak to them.”

She stared at me with those black carrion-bird eyes and nodded.

First, I helped Sarissa to her feet, passing her a clean white handkerchief, which she immediately pressed to her mouth. I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. Then I took a deep breath and turned to address the room, turning in a slow circle as I spoke to be sure I included everyone. My voice echoed throughout the whole chamber as clearly as if I'd been using a PA system.

“All right, you primitive screwheads. Listen up. I'm Harry Dresden. I'm the new Winter Knight. I'm instituting a rule: When you're within sight of me, mortals are off-limits.” I paused for a moment to let that sink in. Then I continued. “I can't give you orders. I can't control what you do in your own domains. I'm not going to be able to change you. I'm not even going to try. But if I see you abusing a mortal, you'll join Chunky here. Zero warnings. Zero excuses. Subzero tolerance.” I paused again and then asked, “Any questions?”

One of the Sidhe smirked and stepped forward, his leather pants creaking. He opened his mouth, his expression condescending. “Mortal, do you actually think that you can—”

“*Infriga!*” I snarled, unleashing Winter again, and without waiting for the cloud to clear, hurled the second strike, shouting, “*Forzare!*”

This time I aimed much of the force up. Grisly bits of frozen Sidhe noble came pattering and clattering down to the ice of the dance floor.

When the mist cleared, the Sidhe looked . . . stunned. Even Maeve.

“I'm glad you asked me that,” I said to the space where the Sidhe lord had been standing. “I hope my answer clarified any misunderstandings.” I looked left and right, seeking out eyes, but didn't find any willing to meet mine. “Are there any other questions?”

There was a vast and empty silence, broken only by Kringle's continued rumbles of amusement.

"Daughter," Mab said calmly. "Your lackey shamed me as the host of this gathering. I hold you accountable. You will return to Arctis Minora at once, there to await my pleasure."

Maeve stared at Mab, her eyes cold. Then she spun in a glitter of gems and began striding away. Several dozen of the Sidhe, including the Redcap and the rawhead, followed her.

Mab turned to Sarissa and said in a much calmer voice, "Honestly. Iron?"

"I apologize, my Queen," Sarissa said. "I'll dispose of it safely."

"See that you do," Mab said. "Now. I would have a dance. Sir Knight?"

I blinked, but didn't hesitate for more than an instant or three. "Um. My arm seems to be an obstacle."

Mab smiled and laid a hand upon my shoulder. My arm popped back into its socket with a silver shock of sensation, and the pain dwindled to almost nothing. I rolled my shoulder, testing it. If it wasn't exactly comfortable, it seemed to work well enough.

I turned to Mab, bowed, and stepped closer to her as the music rose again. It was a waltz. While the stunned Sidhe looked on, I waltzed with Mab to a full orchestral version of Shinedown's "45," and the smaller bits of our enemies crunched beneath our feet. Oddly enough, no one joined us.

Dancing with Mab was like dancing with a shadow. She moved so gracefully, so lightly that had my eyes been closed, I might not have been able to tell that she was there at all. I felt lumbering and clumsy beside her, but managed not to trip over my own feet.

"That was well-done, wizard," Mab murmured. "No one has lifted a hand to them that way since the days of Tam Lin."

"I wanted them to understand the nature of our relationship."

"It would seem you succeeded," she said. "The next time they come at you, they will not do it so openly."

"I'll handle it."

"I expect nothing less," Mab said. "In the future, try to avoid being at such a stark disadvantage. Sarissa may not be there to rescue you a second time."

I grunted. Then I frowned and said, "You wanted this to happen tonight. It wasn't just about me staring down your nobles. You're setting

something into motion.”

Her lips quirked slightly at one corner in approval. “I chose well. You are ready, my Knight. It is time for me to give you my first command.”

I swallowed and tried not to look nervous. “Oh?”

The song came to a close with Mab standing very close to me, lifting her head slightly to whisper into my ear. The Sidhe applauded politely and without enthusiasm, but the sound was enough to muffle what she whispered into my ear.

“Wizard,” she said, her breathy voice trembling. Every syllable bubbled with venom, with hate. “Kill my daughter. *Kill Maeve.*”

Chapter

Eight

Dancing with Mab was like rapidly downing shots of well-aged whiskey. Being that close to her, to her beauty, to her bottomless eyes, hit me pretty hard. The scent of her, cool and clean and intoxicating, lingered in my nose, a disorienting pleasure. I'd thrown around a lot of energy to pull off the pair of chunk-making combos, and between that and Mab's proximity, I was having a little trouble walking a straight line after the dance.

It wasn't like I had feelings for her. I didn't feel the kind of low pulse of physical attraction that I would around a pretty woman. I didn't particularly *like* her. I sure as hell didn't feel any love for her. It was simply impossible to be that close to her, to that kind of deadly power and beauty, to that kind of immortal hunger and desire, without it rattling the bars of

my cage. Mab wasn't human, and wasn't meant for human company. I had no doubt whatsoever in my mind that long-term exposure to her would have serious, unpleasant side effects.

And never *mind* what she had just asked me to do.

The consequences of that kind of action would be . . . really, really huge. And only an idiot would willingly involve himself in direct action on a scale that significant—which really didn't say anything good about me, given how often I'd been the guy wearing the idiot's shoes.

After our dance, Mab returned to her high seat and surveyed the chamber through barely open eyes, a distant figure, now garbed in pure white and untouchable again. As my head came out of the cold, numb clarity of wielding Winter, the aches and pains the Redcap had given me began to resurface in a big way. Fatigue began piling up, and when I looked around for a place to sit down, I found Cat Sith sitting nearby, his wide eyes patient and opaque.

"Sir Knight," the malk said. "You do not suffer fools." There was the faintest hint of approval in his tone. "What is your need?"

"I've had enough party," I said. "Would it inconvenience the Queen for me to depart?"

"If she wished you to stay, you would be at her side," Cat Sith replied. "And it would seem that you have introduced yourself adequately."

"Good. If you do not mind," I said, "please ask Sarissa to join me."

"I do not mind," Cat Sith said in a decidedly approving tone. He vanished into the party and appeared a few moments later, leading Sarissa. She walked steadily enough, though she still had my handkerchief pressed to her mouth.

"You want to get out of here?" I asked her.

"It's a good idea," she said. "Most of the VIPs left after your dance. Things will . . . devolve from here."

"Devolve?" I asked.

"I don't care to stay," she said, her tone careful. "I would prefer to leave."

I frowned, and then realized that she was trying to get a read on me. I simultaneously became acutely aware of a number of Sidhe ladies who were . . . I would say "lurking" except that you don't generally use that word with someone so beautiful. There were half a dozen of them, though, who were staying nearby, and whose eyes were tracking me. I felt

disconcertingly reminded of a documentary I'd once seen about lionesses involved in a cooperative hunt. There was something about them that was very similar.

One, a ravishing dark-haired beauty wearing leather pants and strategically applied electrical tape, stared hard at me and, when she saw me looking, licked her lips very, very slowly. She trailed a fingertip over her chin, down across her throat, and down over her sternum and gave me a smile so wicked that its parents should have sent it to military school.

"Oh," I said, understanding. Despite my fatigue, my throat felt dry and my heart revved up a bit. "Devolving."

"I'll go," Sarissa said. "I don't expect anything from you simply because we arrived together."

A Sidhe lady with deep indigo blue hair had sidled up to Miss Electrical Tape, and the two slid their arms around each other, both staring at me. Something inside me—and I'd be lying if I said that none of it was mine—let out a primal snarl and advised me to drag both of them back to my cave by the hair and do whatever I damned well pleased with them. It was an enormously powerful impulse, something that made me begin to shift my balance, to take a step toward them. I arrested the motion and closed my eyes.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, they look great, but that isn't a fantasy come true, Harry. That's a wood chipper in *Playboy* bunny clothing." I shook my head and turned deliberately away from temptation before I opened my eyes again. "We'll both go," I said to Sarissa. "It'd be a bad idea to stay." I offered her my arm.

She frowned thoughtfully at me for a moment before she put her hand on my arm. We left, again preceded by Cat Sith. Once we were in the icy hallways, she asked me, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Leave," she said. "You wanted to stay. And . . . let's just say that the, ah, appetite of Sidhe ladies has never been overstated. And nothing excites them more than violence and power. There are men who would literally kill to have the opportunity you just passed up."

"Probably," I said. "Morons."

"Then why turn it down?" she asked.

"Because I'm not a goddamned sex doll."

“That’s a good reason to avoid attention that is forced on you,” she said. “But that isn’t what happened. Why pass up what they were offering?”

We walked for a while before I answered. “I’ve already made one choice that . . . that took everything away from me,” I said. “I don’t know how much longer I’ll be around, or how much of a life I can make for myself now. But I’m going to live as much of it as I can as my own man. Not somebody’s prison bitch. Not the flavor of the day.”

“Ah,” she said, and frowned faintly.

I blinked several times and suddenly realized what she’d been trying to find out. “Oh. You’re wondering if I turned them down because I was planning to have *you* instead.”

She gave me an oblique look. “I wouldn’t have phrased it that way.”

I snorted. “I’m not.”

She nodded. “Why not?”

“Does it matter?” I asked.

“Why always matters.”

It was my turn to give Sarissa an appraising look. “Yeah, it does.”

“So, why not?”

“Because you aren’t a goddamned sex doll, either.”

“Even if I were willing?” she asked.

My stomach jumped a little at that. Sarissa was attractive as hell, and I liked her. I’d made her smile and laugh on occasion. And it had been a while.

Man, story of my life. It seems like it’s almost always been a while.

But you have to think about more than what is going to happen in the next hour.

“You’re here because Mab ordered you to be here,” I said. “Anything we did would have an element of coercion to it, no matter how it happened. I’m not into that.”

“You saved my life just now,” Sarissa said. “Some people might think you’d earned my attentions.”

“People think stupid things all the time. The only opinion that matters is yours.” I glanced at her. “Besides, you probably saved me right back. Toting steel into the heart of Winter. Using it right in front of Mab herself? That’s crazy.”

She smiled a little. “It would have been crazy not to tote it,” she said. “I’ve learned a few things in my time here.”

We had reached the doors to my suite, which still felt awkward to say, even in my own head. My suite. Guys like me don't have suites. We have lairs. Cat Sith had departed discreetly. I hadn't seen him go.

"How long has it been?" I asked.

"Too long," she said. She hadn't taken her hand off of my arm.

"You know," I said, "we've been working together for a while now."

"We have."

"But we haven't ever talked about ourselves. Not really. It's all been surface stuff."

"You haven't talked about you," she said. "I haven't talked about me."

"Maybe we should change that," I said.

Sarissa looked down. There were points of color in her cheeks. "I . . . Should we?"

"You want to come in?" I asked. "To talk. That's all."

She took a moment to choose her words. "If you want me to."

I tried to think about this from Sarissa's point of view. She was a beautiful woman who had to be constantly aware of male interest. She was a mortal living in a world of faeries, most of whom were malicious, all of whom were dangerous. Her introduction to the office of the Winter Knight had been Lloyd Slate, who had been one monstrous son of a bitch. She had some kind of relationship with Mab herself, a being who could have her destroyed at any moment she was displeased with Sarissa.

And I was Mab's hatchet man.

She'd been targeted for death for no better reason than that she happened to be my date at the party. She'd nearly died. Yet she'd taken action to save herself—and me, too—and now here she was standing calmly beside me, not showing the least anxiety. She'd spent months helping me get back on my feet again, always gentle, always helpful, always patient.

She was wary about extending me any trust. She'd been holding herself at a careful distance. I could understand why. Caution was a critical survival trait in Winter, and as far as she was concerned, I was most likely a monster in the process of being born. A monster she'd been *given* to, no less.

Thinking about it, even if I had saved her life, it wouldn't have needed saving had she not been with me. I figured that between that and everything else she'd done for me, I was well in her debt.

But I couldn't help her if I didn't know more about her.

"For a couple of minutes," I said. "Please."

She nodded, and we went inside. I had a little living room outside of my bedroom. I read somewhere that in general, women tend to be more comfortable with someone sitting beside them, rather than across from them. Men tend to be the opposite. Facing each other has undertones of direct physical conflict—in which a generally larger, stronger person would have an advantage. I didn't know whether it was true or not, but she was already keyed up enough, and I didn't want to add anything to it. So I seated her at one end of the couch, and then seated myself at the opposite end, out of arm's reach.

"Okay," I said. "We haven't talked, I guess, because I've never told you anything about myself. Is that about the shape of it?"

"Trust has to go both ways," she said.

I huffed out a short laugh. "You've been hanging around Mab too much. She's not big on answering simple yes-or-no questions either."

Sarissa's mouth twitched at the corners. "Yes."

I laughed again. "Okay," I said. "Well, when in Rome. Maybe we should exchange questions and answers. You can go first."

She folded her hands, frowning, and then nodded. "I've heard a lot of stories about you. That you've killed a lot of people. Are they true?"

"I don't know what you've heard," I said. "But . . . yeah. When bad things came after people in my town, I made it my business to get in the way. And I've been a Warden of the White Council for a while now. I fought in the war against the Red Court. I've done a lot of fighting. Sometimes people get killed. Why are you in Mab's debt?"

"I . . . have a form of congenital dementia," she said. "I watched what it did to my older sister and . . ." She shuddered. "Doctors can't help me. Mab can. Have you ever killed anyone who wasn't trying to kill you?"

I looked down at my shoes. "Twice," I said quietly. "I cut Lloyd Slate's throat to become the Winter Knight. And—"

A flash of memory. A ruined city full of howling monsters and blood. Flashes of light and roaring detonations of magic tearing asunder stone and air alike. Dust everywhere. Friends fighting, bleeding, desperate. A stone altar covered in a thick coating of dried blood. A terrified little girl, my daughter. Treachery.

A kiss pressed against the forehead of a woman I was about to murder.

God, Susan, forgive me.

I couldn't see through the blur in my eyes, and my throat felt like the Redcap might be garroting me again, but I forced myself to speak. "And I killed a woman named Susan Rodriguez on a stone altar, because if I hadn't, a little girl and a lot of good people would have died. She knew it, too." I swiped a hand at my eyes and coughed to clear my throat. "What were the terms of your bargain with Mab?"

"That as long as I remained myself, and sane, I would attend her and do as she bade me for three months out of every year. Summer vacation, when I was in school. Weekends, now, except for lately. Taking care of you meant that I'd have months and months off to make up for it." She fidgeted with the bloodied handkerchief. Her split lip had stopped bleeding, and a line of dark, drying blood marred it. "The whole time we worked on your therapy, I think you said something about having a dog and a cat once. But you never spoke about any friends or family. Why not?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure," I said. And then I realized that I was lying to everyone in the room. "Maybe . . . maybe because it hurts to think about them. Because I miss them. Because . . . because they're good people. The best. And I'm not sure I can look them in the eye anymore, after what I've done. What about you? Do you have any friends?"

"There are people I sometimes do things with," she said. "I don't . . . I'm not sure I'd call them friends. I don't want to make friends. I have the attention of some dangerous beings. If I got close to anyone, I could be putting them in danger. Don't you ever worry about that?"

"Every day," I said. "I've buried friends who died because they were involved with my work, and my life. But they wanted to be there. They knew the dangers and chose to face them. It isn't my place to choose for them. Do you think it's better to be alone?"

"I think it's better for *them*," Sarissa said. "You're healthy now. Are you going to go home? To your friends and family?"

"Home isn't there anymore," I said, and suddenly felt very tired. "They burned my apartment down. My books, my lab. And my friends think I'm dead. How do I just walk back in? 'Hi, everyone. I'm back, and did you miss me? I'm working for one of the bad guys now, and what good movies came out while I was gone?'" I shook my head. "I'm making fresh enemies. Nasty ones. I'd be pulling them in all over again. I know what

they'd say—that it didn't matter. But I don't know what I'm going to do yet. Mab seems to trust you. What is it that you do for her, exactly?"

Sarissa smiled faintly. "I'm sort of her humanity Sherpa," she said. "For all of her power and knowledge, Mab doesn't always understand people very well. She asks me questions. Sometimes we watch television or go to movies or listen to music. I've taken her to rock concerts. We've gone ice skating. Shopping. Clubbing. Once we went to Disneyland."

I blinked. "Wait. Your job is . . . You're BFFs with *Mab*?"

Sarissa let out a sudden torrent of giggles, until her eyes started to water a little. "Oh," she said, still giggling. "Oh, I've never thought of it like that, but . . . God, it applies, doesn't it? We do something every weekend." She shook her head and took a moment to compose herself. Then she asked me, "Is there anyone special for you? Back home?"

Karrin.

But I didn't dare use her name. No telling what other ears might be listening.

"Maybe," I said. "It was . . . sort of starting up when I left. I'm not sure where it would have gone. I'd like to think that . . ." I shrugged. "Well. It was bad timing on an epic level. You?"

"Nothing more than casual," she said. "If I was close to someone, well . . . it would create a target for Mab's enemies, which I sometimes think is practically everybody in Faerie. Killing the lover of Mab's pet mortal would be an insult while remaining oblique enough to not allow her room to respond." She took a deep breath and looked at her hands. "I saw you speaking to her on the dance floor. I saw your face. Who did she tell you to kill?"

I hesitated. "I . . . I'm pretty sure I shouldn't say. It's information that could get you into trouble."

I looked up in time to see the wariness returning to Sarissa's features. "Ah," she said. "Well, I suppose our little exchange is over, then." She bit her lower lip and asked, quite calmly, "Was it me?"

That one caught me off guard. "Uh, what? No. No, it wasn't you."

She didn't move for several heartbeats. "I . . . see." Then she looked up, gave me a pleasant and false smile, and said, "Well, it's late. And you should still try to rest as much as you can."

"Sarissa, wait," I began.

She rose, her back straight, her shoulders tense. “I think I’m going to my bed. Um. Unless you’d prefer . . .”

I stood up with her. “Don’t think that I’m against the idea, as a general principle. You’re smart, and I like you, and you’re gorgeous. But no. Not like this.”

She chewed on her lip again and nodded. “Thank you for that. For understanding.”

“Sure,” I said. I offered my arm and walked her back to the door of my lair.

(“Lair” worked so much better in my head than “suite.”)

At the door, she looked up at me. “May I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Are you going to obey Mab?”

My brain started gibbering and running in circles at the very thought of what Mab had asked me to do. But I forced it to sit down and start breathing into a paper bag, and then I thought about it for a second. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“Why?” she asked.

I rocked back onto my heels. It felt like that one little word had thumped me between the eyes with a Wiffle ball bat. Sarissa had hit exactly upon what most bothered me about Mab’s command.

Why? Why now instead of six months ago, or a year ago, or a hundred years ago? Why today instead of tomorrow? Hell, why should I do it in the first place? The whole reason Winter and Summer *had* a Knight was because the Queens of Faerie themselves were forbidden from directly killing any mortal, and they needed a hit man to make it happen. But Maeve wasn’t a mortal. As far as Mab was concerned, Little Miss Spanglecrotch was fair game.

Why?

“I’m not sure yet,” I said. “But I’m damned well going to find out.”

Chapter

Nine

“Cat Sith,” I called, once Sarissa had left.

From behind me, a voice said, “Yes, Sir Knight?”

I twitched and didn’t whirl around like a frightened teenager. I turned in a very urbane and James Bondian fashion, in keeping with my tux, eyed him, and said, “Hell’s bells. Do you always come in like that?”

“No,” the malk replied. He was sitting on the back of the sofa Sarissa and I had recently vacated. “Generally I do not speak. I simply proceed.”

“Are you aware of my orders?” I asked.

“I am aware that you have been given orders. I am to facilitate your ability to comply with them.”

I nodded. “I need to get back to Chicago. Right now. And I need a car.”

Cat Sith turned and padded down the hallway, toward my bedroom. He stopped in the hall at the door to the linen closet and lashed his tail once, then looked at me. “Very well.”

I frowned at him. Then I went to the closet and opened the door.

Autumn air, humid and smothering compared to that of Arctis Tor, flooded into my lair. Brilliant lights shone on the other side of the door, and it took me a few seconds of blinking against them to adjust, and realize that I was being blinded by simple streetlights. Inside my closet, there was a bit of sidewalk and then Michigan Avenue stretching out to the storefront opposite.

I blinked several times. Sith had opened a Way between Faerie and Chicago.

The spirit world, the Nevernever, is vast almost beyond imagining. Faerie is but one part of it, for the most part occupying the realms of spirit that lie most adjacent to the mortal world. The geography of the spirit world isn’t like that of the real world. Different places in the spirit world will connect with places with a similar energy in the real world. So dark, spooky parts of the Nevernever hook up with dark, spooky places in the mortal world.

And my freaking linen closet in Arctis Tor hooked up to Chicago—specifically to Michigan Avenue, to the Gothic stone building across the street from the Old Historic Water Tower. It was night. Cars went by occasionally, but no one seemed to take notice of the open portal to the heart of Winter. Arctis Tor was isolated in the Nevernever, difficult to reach without inside help. Even traveling by Ways takes at least some time, and I’d expected a hike back to the real world.

“How?” I asked quietly.

“Her Majesty had it made,” Sith said.

I whistled. Intentionally forming a connection from a specific place to a specific place took amounts of energy so enormous that even the White Council of Wizards could rarely manage it—I’d seen it done only once in my lifetime, the year before, in Chichén Itzá. “She had it made? For me?”

“Indeed,” Sith said. “In fact, this is, for the time being, the only way in or out of Faerie.”

I blinked several times. “You mean Winter?”

“Faerie,” Sith stated. “All of it.”

I choked. “Wait. You mean all of Faerie is on lockdown?”

“Indeed,” Sith said. “Until dawn.”

“Why?” I asked.

“One presumes it was done to give you a head start.” With that, Sith walked calmly through the door and onto the sidewalk. “Your car, Sir Knight.”

I stepped through the door into the Chicago air, and it slugged me in the face with a legion of scents and sensations and sounds that were as familiar to me as my own breathing. After the cool, dry silence of Arctis Tor, I felt like I’d leapt into the middle of an active circus. There were too many sounds, scents, too much color, too much motion. Arctis Tor was as still as the deepest night of winter, twenty-four/seven. Chicago is . . . well, Chicago.

I found myself blinking my eyes very rapidly.

Home.

I know. It’s corny. Especially since Chicago is what a polite person would call a colorful place. It’s a den of crime and corruption. And it’s a monument to architecture and enterprise. It’s violent and dangerous, and an epicenter of music and the arts. The good, the bad, the ugly, the sublime, monsters and angels—they’re all here.

The scents and sounds triggered a mental avalanche of memories and I shivered at the intensity of it. I almost didn’t notice the car that pulled up to the curb beside me.

It was an ancient hearse, a Caddy that must have been built sometime in the years immediately following World War II, complete with rounded tail fins. It had been painted dark, dark blue, and given a flame job in shades of electric purple. It wavered and bobbed drunkenly down the avenue, turned a bit too sharply toward the curb, lurched ahead with a roar of the engine, and then skidded to a halt with the brakes locked, missing the posts along the edge of the road, and the chains that hung between them, by maybe an inch.

“Will there be anything else, Sir Knight?” Cat Sith asked.

“Not right now,” I said warily. “Um. Who is driving that thing?”

“I recommend it be you,” Sith said with unmistakable contempt, and then with a swish of his tail, he vanished.

The engine roared once more, and the car lurched but didn’t move from its rest. The lights went on and then off, and then the wipers swept on

a few times before the engine dropped to an idle and the brake lights shut off.

I approached the car warily, leaned across the chains, and rapped on the driver's-side window.

Nothing happened. The windows were tinted a little, enough to make the dark interior invisible on the well-lit street. I couldn't see anyone inside. I opened the door.

"Three cheers, boys!" piped a tiny cartoon-character voice. "Hip, hip!"

"Hip!" shrilled maybe a dozen more tiny voices.

"Hip, hip!"

"Hip!"

"Hip, hip!"

"Hip!" That was followed by a heartfelt chorus of "Yay!"

Sitting in the driver's seat of the hearse were a dozen tiny humanoids. Their leader, the largest of them, was maybe eighteen inches tall. He looked like an extremely athletic youth, drawn down to scale. He was dressed in armor made from castoff bits of garbage and refuse. His breastplate had been made from a section of aluminum can, a white one bearing a Coca-Cola logo. The shield on his left arm was made from the same material, this one sporting Coke's seasonal Christmas polar bears. Part of a plastic toothpaste travel container had been fixed to his belt, and what looked like a serrated butter knife was thrust into it, its handle wrapped in layers of duct tape and string. His hair was violet, a few shades of blue darker than the lavender I remembered, silky, and nearly weightless, drifting around his head like dandelion down. Wings like a dragonfly's hung from his back like an iridescent cloak.

He was standing atop a formation of smaller sprites stacked up in a miniature human pyramid, and his hands rested on the wheel. Several weary-looking little wee folk were leaning against the gearshift, and several more were on the floor, holding the brake down in a dog pile of tiny bodies. They were all dressed in similar outfits of repurposed garbage.

The leader gave me a sharp salute, beaming. "Major General Toot-toot of the Sir Za Winter Lord Knight's Guard reporting for duty! It is good to see you, my lord!" His wings buzzed and he fluttered out of the hearse to hover in front of my face, spinning in circles. "Look, look! I got new gear!"

"We're all Winter and stuff!" piped up one of the smaller members of the guard. He brandished his shield, which was made out of a section of

plastic that had come from a solid-stick deodorant container, bearing the words “Winter Clean.”

“Go, Winter!” shouted Toot, thrusting a fist into the air.

“Go, pizza!” echoed the others.

Toot spun around and scowled at them. “No, no, no! We practiced this!”

“GO, PIZZA!” they bellowed, louder and more in unison.

Toot-toot sighed and shook his head. “This is why you’re all kernels and I’m a major general. ’Cause you got corn silk in your ears.”

Toot and company were kind of my minions. I’d gotten along well with the Little Folk over the years, mostly by virtue of bribing them with pizza. A few snitches and stool pigeons had developed into a band of cute little moochers, and then into an army—and at some point after that, Toot had somehow gotten the idea to make them into a real army. And they tried—they honestly did—but it’s tough to form a disciplined military when most of the guys in it have an attention span about twenty seconds long. Discipline is boring.

“Guys, guys,” I said. “Break it up and shove over. I’m in a hurry.”

The wee folk complied at once, all of them scrambling into the passenger seat or over into the rear compartment. I got in as quickly as I could and shut the door behind me.

I buckled in and pulled out into the sparse traffic. The big Caddy moved out with a satisfied rumble and way more power than I was used to in an automobile. My last car had been a vintage VW Bug with an engine about the size of a deck of cards.

“Toot,” I said, “have you grown?”

“Yes,” Toot said, disgusted. “Even though I stand around with weights on my head for, like, twenty whole minutes every day. I even got laundered. Twice! And nothing!”

“I think you look dashing,” I said.

He settled down at the center of the dashboard, his legs hanging off and kicking idly. “Thank you, my lord!”

“So the pizza came on schedule while I was, uh, away?”

“Yes, my lord! The Lady Leanansidhe provided it in your stead!” Toot lowered his voice and talked from between clenched teeth. “If she hadn’t, these knuckleheads would have deserted!”

“Well, we do have a deal,” I said. “That’s what a deal means, right?”

“Right,” Toot said firmly. “We trust you, Harry. You’re barely like a human at all!”

I knew he meant it as a compliment, but something chilly slithered down my back at the statement. My faerie godmother, the Leanansidhe, had covered my obligations at home while I was gone? Man, that could get complicated. Among the Sidhe, favors are hard currency.

But I was glad to see Toot and his gang. They were damned handy, and could be far more dangerous and capable than most, even in the supernatural world, I realized.

“I never doubted you or the guard for a second, Major General.”

Which was true: I had no doubt at all that as long as the pizza kept flowing, I’d have their absolute loyalty.

Toot beamed at the compliment, and his body pulsed with a gentle aura of cool blue light. “How can the guard serve you, my lord?”

They’d started off the evening nearly crashing the car, but it was impressive they’d managed it at all. “I’m on a case,” I said seriously. “I’ll need someone to watch my back.”

“Lean forward a little, my lord,” Toot said instantly, and shouted, “Hey, Kernel Purpleweed! Come watch the Za Winter Lord Knight’s back!”

I fought not to smile. “No, that’s a metaphor,” I said.

Toot frowned and scratched his head. “I don’t know what it’s for.”

Mustn’t laugh. Mustn’t. It would crush his little feelings. “In a minute, I’m going to pull over and go into a building. I want guards to stay inside and around the car, and I want a couple more to go with me and make sure no one sneaks up on me when I’m not looking.”

“Oh!” Toot said. “That’s easy!”

“Good,” I said, as I pulled the car over. “Make it so.”

Toot saluted, leapt into the air, and zipped back to the rear compartment, piping orders as he went.

I set the old Caddy’s parking brake and got out, wasting no time. I didn’t hold the door open any longer than I would have if I’d been alone. The Little Folk do not need that kind of coddling. They’re not always bright, but they’re fast, tough, and resourceful. I’d have had trouble keeping them in the car if I wanted to.

Once I was out and moving, I was to all appearances alone. Whoever Toot had sent to watch my back would be silent and nearly invisible, and I didn’t bother rubbernecking around to try to spot them. One thing about the

Little Folk that held as well with every faerie—when they made a deal, they stuck to it. They’d had my back before, and they had it now. Heck, since I was committing a felony, they probably thought it was fun to come along for the ride.

It’s tough to get one of the Little Folk to care about discipline. On the other hand, they really aren’t terribly impressed with danger, either.

I walked about a block to the right apartment building, a brownstone blockhouse that had all the flair and imaginative design of a brick of baking chocolate. It wasn’t an upscale place like where my brother lived, but it wasn’t one of the projects at their worst, either. It didn’t have a doorman, and the security wouldn’t be top-of-the-line, and that was, for now, the important thing.

I got a little bit lucky on the way in—a resident, a man in his twenties who had apparently been out drinking, opened the door on his way home, and I called out, “Hold that, please?”

He did. He probably shouldn’t have, but guys in tuxes, even without a tie, don’t strike anyone as a criminal upon first impression. I nodded to him and thanked him with a smile. He muttered something bleary and turned down a side hallway. I hit the elevators and took one up.

Once I was on the right floor, the rest wasn’t too tough. I walked calmly down the hallway to the proper door and leaned against it.

A ripple of gooseflesh washed up my arm, beginning on the back of my hand, and I jerked my fingers back in pure instinct. Huh. There were wards on the door, magical defenses. I hadn’t expected that. Wards can do all kinds of things to an intruder, from suggesting that he turn around and leave, to giving him a stiff push away, to frying him like a bug zapper.

I took a moment to study the wards. They were a smooth patchwork of enchantment, probably the result of several lesser talents working together. Somebody like me can put up a ward that is like a huge iron wall. This was more like a curtain of tightly interwoven steel rings. For most purposes, both would serve fairly well—but with the right tool, the latter kind of wall is easily dealt with.

“And I’m the tool,” I muttered. Then I thought about it, sighed, and shook my head. “One day,” I told myself, “one brave and magnificent day, I will actually be cool.”

I rested my fingertips lightly on the door and went over the wards in my thoughts. Aha. Had I tried to break in, the wards would have set off an

enormous racket and a bunch of smoke, along with a sudden, intense sensation of claustrophobia. Fire alarms would have gone off, and sprinklers, and the authorities would have been summoned.

That was a nominally effective defense all by itself, but the claustrophobia bit was really masterful. The noise would trip off an instinctive adrenaline response, and that combined with the induced panic of the ward would send just about anything scurrying for the exit rather than take chances in what would have been a very noisy and crowded environment. That kind of subtle manipulation always works best amidst a flurry of distractions.

Washington's been doing it like that for decades.

I cut the wards off from their power source one at a time, trying to keep the damage to a minimum so that it would be easy to fix. I already felt bad enough over what I was about to do. Then, once the wards were off-line, I took a deep breath and leaned against the door with a sudden thrust of my legs and body. I'd been working out. The doorframe splintered and gave way, and I slipped quickly and quietly into Waldo Butters's apartment.

It was dark inside, and I didn't know it well enough to navigate without light. I left the door a little bit open so that the light from the hall would leak in. This was the dangerous part. If someone had heard the noise, they'd be calling the cops. I needed to be gone in the next five minutes.

I crossed the living room to the short hallway. Butters's bedroom was on the right, his computer room on the left. The bedroom door was closed. There was a faint light in the computer room. I entered. There were several computers set up around the walls of the room, which I knew Butters and company used for some kind of group computer game-related thingy they all did together. The computers were all turned off except for one, the biggest one in the corner, which sat facing out into the room. Butters called it the captain's chair. He sat there and coordinated some kind of game activity. Raids, I think they were called, and they went on into the wee hours. His job required him to work nights, and he claimed it helped him keep circadian rhythm to play video games on his off nights.

That monitor was on, and in the reflection in the glass of the room's single window, I could see that the screen had been divided into maybe a dozen sections, and every single one of them was playing a different pornographic scenario.

A human skull sat on the table, facing the monitor, and faint orange flickers of light danced in its eyes. Despite its utter inability to form any expression, it somehow gave the impression of a happily glazed look.

I'd been in the room for about two seconds when the computer made an awful sound, coughed out a little puff of smoke, and the monitor screen went black. I winced. My fault. Wizards and technology don't get along so well, and the more advanced the technology is, the sooner something seems to go wrong—especially with electronics. Butters had been cobbling together a theory to explain why the world worked like that, but I'd drawn the line at covering my head in a tinfoil hat in the name of science.

The skull let out a startled, disappointed sound, and after several disoriented flickers, its eyelights panned around the room and landed on me.

"Harry!" said the skull. It didn't move its jaws to form the words or anything. They just came out. "Hell's bells, you're back from the dead?"

"From the mostly dead," I replied. "You made it out of Omaha Beach, huh?"

"You kidding?" Bob said. "The minute you were clear, I ran like a bunny and hid!"

"You could have taken that jerk," I said.

"Why would I want to?" Bob asked. "So when do we set up the new lab? And can I have broadband?" His eyes gleamed with avarice or something near it. "I *need* broadband, Harry."

"That's a computer thing, right?"

"Philistine," Bob the Skull muttered.

Bob wasn't a skull, per se. He was a spirit of air, or intellect, or one of any of a great many other terms used to describe such beings. The skull was the vessel that he inhabited, kind of like a djinni's bottle. Bob had been working as an assistant and adviser to wizards since before crossbows had gone out of style, and he'd forgotten more about the ins and outs of magical theory than I knew. He'd been my assistant and friend since I'd first come to Chicago.

I hadn't realized, until I actually heard his voice, how much I'd missed the demented little perv.

"When do we get to work?" Bob asked brightly.

"I am working," I said. "I need to talk to you."

"I'm all ears," Bob said. "Except for the ears part." Bob blinked. "Are you wearing a tux?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Tell me you did not get married."

"I didn't get married," I said. "Except for the whole Mab thing, which is creepy and weird. She spent the last three months trying to kill me once a day."

"Sounds like her style," Bob said. "How'd you get out of it?"

"Um," I said.

"Oh," Bob said. "Uh . . . oh. Maybe you should go, Harry."

"Relax," I said. "I know you've had your issues with Mab, but I'm the only one here."

"Yeah. That's kinda the part that bothers me."

I scowled at him. "Oh, come on. How long have you known me?"

"Harry . . . you're *Mab's hit man*."

"Yeah, but I'm not here to hit you," I said.

"You could be lying," Bob said. "Maybe the Sidhe can't lie, but you can."

"Hell's bells, I'm not lying."

"But how do I *know* that?"

"Because I haven't hit you already?" I frowned at him. "Wait a minute. . . . You're *stalling* me, aren't you?"

"Stalling you?" Bob asked brightly. "What do you mean?"

There was no warning. None at all. The door to Butters's bedroom exploded outward, sending splinters of cheap plywood sailing everywhere. A missile of living muscle hit me in the back at almost the same instant, shoving my chest forward and whiplashing my head back. My spine lit up like a casino, and I felt myself driven hard to the ground.

Something powerful and snarling and terribly strong came down on top of me, and I felt claws and fangs begin to rake at me.

Guess I used up all my evening's luck on the front door guy.

Chapter

Ten

Claws shredded my tux, raking over my back, my buttocks, and the backs of my legs. Jaws would have bitten into my neck if I hadn't gotten my hands in the way, clamping them over the back of my neck and squeezing them as tight as I could, hoping that a finger wouldn't come up and be nipped off. Pain came in, hot and high, but the claws didn't dig as deep as they would have if this had been a malk or a ghoul, and I had to hope the damage wouldn't be too serious—unless the fight went on long enough for blood loss to weaken me.

Some analytical part of my head was going over those facts in a detached and rational fashion.

The rest of me went freaking berserk with anger.

I got one arm beneath me to brace myself and threw the other elbow back in a heavy strike that slammed into something soft and drew a startled yelp out of my attacker. The teeth vanished for a second and the claws slowed. I rolled, shoving with a broad motion of that same arm, and threw a wolf the size of a Great Dane off of my back. It hit one of the computer tables with a tremendous racket, sending bits of equipment tumbling.

I got my feet underneath me, seized a computer chair by its back, and lifted it. By the time the wolf with dark red fur was getting back onto its feet, the chair was already halfway through its swing, and I was snarling in incoherent fury.

Only at the last second did I recognize my attacker through my rage and divert the arc of the descending chair. It broke into about fifty pieces when it hit the floor just in front of the wolf, plastic and metal tumbling in every direction.

The wolf flinched back from the flying bits, and lifted its eyes toward mine. It froze in what was an expression of perfect shock, and in a pair of seconds the wolf was gone, its form melting rapidly into the shape of a girl, a redhead with generous curves and not a stitch of clothing. She stared at me, gasping in short breaths, her expression pained, before she whispered, “Harry?”

“Andi,” I said, standing straighter and trying to force my body to relax. The word came out in a snarl. Adrenaline still sang along my arms and legs, and more than anything in the whole world, at that moment I wanted to punch someone in the face. Anyone. It didn’t matter who.

And that was *not* right.

“Andi,” I said, forcing myself to quiet and gentle my voice. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Me?” she breathed. “I . . . I’m not the one who’s *dead*.”

The night is young, thought the furious part of me, but I fought it down. “Rumors, death, exaggerated,” I said instead. “And I don’t have time to chat about it.”

I turned toward Bob at his desk, and heard Andi open a drawer behind me. The sound an automatic makes when someone racks the slide and pops a round into the chamber is specific and memorable—and gets your attention as effectively as if it were also really, really loud.

“Get your hands away from the skull,” said Andi’s shortened, pained voice, “or I put a bullet in you.”

I paused. My first impulse was to cover the floor of the computer room with frozen chunks of Andi, and what the hell was I *thinking*? It was the anger that kept on rolling through me in cold waves that was pushing for that, for action, for violence. Don't get me wrong; it's not like I exactly have an allergy to either of those things—but I'd always done a reasonably good job of keeping my temper under control. I hadn't felt like this in years, not since the first days I'd nearly been killed by the White Council.

I fell back on what I'd learned then. I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, reminding myself that the anger was just anger, that it was a sensation, like feeling hot or cold. It didn't mean anything by itself. It wasn't a reason to act. That's what thinking was for.

The old lessons helped, and I separated myself from the fury. I put my hands slowly out to my sides, making sure they were visible. Then I turned to face Andi. She stood with a pistol in a solid Weaver stance, like she'd learned how from someone who knew.

I could deflect bullets if I had to do it, but I couldn't *stop* them. And we were in a building full of innocent bystanders. "You know about the skull?" I asked.

"Kind of hard not to," she said. "Since I live here."

I blinked several times. "You and . . . Damn. Way to go, Butters."

Andi stared steadily down the sights of her gun. She was holding herself a little hitched, as if her right side pained her. That elbow I'd thrown must have caught her in the ribs. I winced. I don't mind a little of the rough-and-tumble when necessary, but I don't hit my friends, I don't hit women, and Andi was both.

"Sorry about that," I said, nodding toward her. "I didn't know it was you."

"And I still don't know if it's you," she replied. "Especially with you dead and all. There are plenty of things that might try to look like Harry."

"Bob," I said over my shoulder. "Tell her it's me."

"Can't," Bob said in a dreamy tone. "Boobs."

Right. Because Andi was naked. I'd seen her that way before, because that was one of the hazards of being a werewolf. I knew several, and they'd been my friends. When they change form, clothes and things don't go with, so when they change back, they're stark naked.

I'll give Bob this much—the little creep had good taste. Changing into a wolf must be a really fantastic exercise regimen, because Andi and naked

went really well together. Although at the moment, I was mostly impressed with her great big, slightly heaving gun.

“*Bob*,” I said more urgently. I put my hand out, trying to get it between the skull and Andi without actually reaching for it.

“Hey!” Bob demanded. “Dammit, Harry! It’s not like I get much of a chance to see ’em!”

Andi’s eyes widened. “Bob . . . is it really him?”

“Yes, but he works for the bad guys now,” Bob said. “It’s probably safest to shoot him.”

“Hey!” I said.

“Nothing personal,” Bob assured me. “What would *you* advise a client to do if the Winter Knight broke into her place, fought with her, and cracked two of her ribs?”

“Not to shoot,” I said. “The bullet’s going to bounce and there are way too many people in the apartments around us.”

At that, Andi took her finger off the trigger, though she left it extended and pressed against the guard. She exhaled slowly. “That’s . . . more like what I would expect from . . . from you, Harry.” She swallowed. “Is it really you?”

“Whatever’s left of me,” I said.

“We heard about your ghost. I could even sort of . . . sort of smell you, when you were near. I knew. We thought you were dead.”

“Wasn’t really my ghost,” I said. “It was me. I just sort of forgot to bring my body along with me.” I coughed. “Think you could maybe point that somewhere else?”

“My finger’s not on the trigger,” she said. “Don’t be such a baby. I’m thinking.” She watched me for a moment and said, “Okay, let’s assume it’s really you. What are you doing here?”

“I came for the skull,” I said.

“I’m invaluable!” Bob piped.

“Useful.” I scowled at him. “Don’t get cocky.”

“I know you came for the skull,” Andi said. “Why now? In the middle of the night? Why break in? Harry, all you had to do was ask.”

I ground my teeth. “Andi . . . I don’t have a lot of time. So I’m going to give you the short answer. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“When I break in here and *take* something from Butters, he’s my victim and of no particular consequence. If I come here and *ask* him for help, he’s my accomplice, and it makes him a target for the people I’m working against.”

She frowned. “What people?”

I sighed. “That’s the kind of thing I’d tell an accomplice, Andi.”

“Um,” she said, “isn’t that kind of what we are?”

“It’s what you *were*,” I said, with gentle emphasis. “Bob’s right. I’m not exactly on the side of the angels right now. And I’m not taking you and Butters down the drain with me.”

“Say, Harry,” Bob asked, “who *are* you up against?”

“Not in front of the eye-stander-bey,” I said.

“Just trolling for info like a good lackey,” Bob said. “You understand.”

“Sure,” I said.

Andi frowned. “Bob isn’t . . . Isn’t he supposed to be yours?”

“I’m not the present owner of the skull,” I said. “Whoever has the skull has Bob’s loyalty.”

“Services,” Bob corrected me. “Don’t get cocky. And right now I’m working for Butters. And you, of course, toots.”

“Toots,” Andi said in a flat voice. “Did you really just say that?” Her gaze shifted to me. “Bystander?”

“If you don’t know anything,” I said, “there’s no reason for anyone to torture you to death to find it.”

That made her face turn a little pale.

“These people think the *Saw* movies were hilarious,” I said. “They’ll hurt you because for them, it feels better than sex. They won’t hesitate. And I’m trying to give you all the cover I can. You and Butters both.” I shook my head and lowered my hands. “I need you to trust me, Andi. I’ll have Bob back here before dawn.”

She frowned. “Why by then?”

“Because I don’t want the people I work for to get hold of him either,” I said. “He’s not the same thing as a human—”

“*Thank* you,” Bob said. “I explain and explain that, but no one listens.”

“—but he’s still kind of a friend.”

Bob made a gagging sound. “Don’t get all sappy on me, Dresden.”

“Andi,” I said, ignoring him. “I don’t have any more time. I’m gonna pick up the skull now. You gonna shoot me or what?”

Andi let out a short, frustrated breath and sagged back against the table. She lowered the gun, grimaced, and slipped one hand across her stomach to press against her ribs on the other side.

I didn't look at what that motion did to her chest, because that would have been grotesquely inappropriate, regardless of how fascinating the resulting contours may or may not have been.

I picked up the skull, an old, familiar shape and weight in my hand. There was a flitter in the flickering eyelights, and maybe a subtle change of hue in the flames.

"Awright!" Bob crowed. "Back in the saddle!"

"Pipe down," I said. "I've got backup with me. The other team might have surveillance on me that is just as invisible. I'd rather they didn't listen to every word."

"Piping down, O mighty one," Bob replied.

When I turned back to Andi, she looked horrified. "Oh, God, Harry. Your back."

I grunted, twisted a bit, and got a look at myself in the reflection in the window. My jacket was in tatters and stained with blots of blood. It hurt, but not horribly, maybe as much as a bad sunburn.

"I'm sorry," Andi said.

"I'll live," I said. I walked over to her, leaned down, and kissed the top of her head. "I'm sorry about your ribs. And the computers. I'll make up the damages to you guys."

She shook her head. "Don't worry about it. Whatever, you know. Whatever we can do to help."

I sighed and said, "Yeah, about that. Um. I'm sorry about this, too."

She frowned and looked up at me. "About what?"

I was going to deck her, clip her on the chin and put her down for a few moments while I left. That would do two things. First, it would prevent her from getting all heroic and following me. Second, if I was currently being observed, it would sell the notion that I had stolen Bob from her. It was a logical, if ruthless move that would give her an extra layer of protection, however thin.

But when I told my hand to move, it wouldn't.

Winter Knight, Mab's assassin, whatever. I don't hit girls.

I sighed. "I'm sorry I can't deck you right now."

She lifted both eyebrows. “Oh. You think you’d be protecting me, I take it?”

“As screwed up as it is to think that—yeah, I would be.”

“I’ve been protecting myself just fine for a year, Harry,” Andi said. “Even without you around.”

Ouch. I winced.

Andi looked down. “I didn’t . . . Sorry.”

“No worries,” I said. “Better call the police after I’m gone. Report an intruder. It’s what you’d do if a burglar had broken in.”

She nodded. “Is it all right if I talk to Butters about it?”

This whole thing would have been a lot simpler if I could have kept anyone from getting involved. That had been the point of the burglary. But now . . . Well. Andi knew, and I owed her more than to ask her to keep secrets from Butters, whom I owed even more. “Carefully,” I said. “Behind your threshold. And . . . maybe not anyone else just yet. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said quietly.

“Thanks.” I didn’t know what else to say, so I added another “I’m sorry.”

Then I took the skull and hurried back out into the night.

Chapter

Eleven

Once I was in the hearse again, I started driving. I had a silent and nearly invisible squadron of the Za Lord's Guard flying in a loose formation around the car, except for Toot, who perched on the back of the passenger seat. Bob's skull sat in the seat proper, its glowing eye sockets turned toward me.

"So, boss," Bob said brightly, "where we headed?"

"Nowhere yet," I said. "But I'm operating on the theory that a moving target is harder to hit."

"That's a little more paranoid than usual," Bob said. "I approve. But why?"

I grimaced. "Mab wants me to kill Maeve."

“*What?*” Bob squeaked.

Toot fell off the back of the passenger seat in a fit of shock.

“You heard me,” I said. “You okay, Toot?”

“Just . . . checking for assassins, my lord,” Toot said gamely. “All clear back here.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Bob said. “Tell me everything.”

So I did.

“And then she told me to kill Maeve,” I finished, “and I decided to come looking for you.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Bob said. “Let me get this straight. Mab gave you a whole girl, all to yourself, and you didn’t even get to first base?”

I scowled. “Bob, can you focus, please? This isn’t about the girl.”

Bob snorted. “Making this the first time it hasn’t been about the girl, I guess.”

“Maeve, Bob,” I said. “What I need to know is why Mab would want her dead.”

“Maybe she’s trying to flunk you intentionally,” Bob said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you *can’t* kill Maeve, Harry.”

“I don’t want to do it,” I said. “I’m not even sure if I’m going to.”

“You’re too busy wrestling with your stupid conscience to listen to me, boss,” Bob said. “You *can’t* kill her. Not might, not shouldn’t. *Can’t*.”

I blinked several times. “Uh. Why not?”

“Maeve’s an immortal, Harry. One of the least of the immortals, maybe, but immortal all the same. Chop her up if you want to. Burn her. Scatter her ashes to the winds. But it won’t kill her. She’ll be back. Maybe in months, maybe years, but you can’t just *kill* her. She’s the Winter Lady.”

I frowned. “Huh? I killed the Summer Lady just fine.”

Bob made a frustrated sound. “Yeah, but that was because you were in the right place to *do* it.”

“How’s that?”

“Mab and Titania *created* that place specifically to be a killing ground for immortals, a place where balances of power are *supposed* to change. They’ve got to have a location like that for the important fights—otherwise nothing really gets decided. It’s a waste of everyone’s time and cannon fodder.”

I'd seen part of that place being created—with my Sight, no less—and it was burned indelibly into my memory. I saw the surging energy the two Queens of Faerie were pouring out, power on a level that defied description. And of course I had, in some sense, been in that place when I murdered Lloyd Slate and took his job as Mab's triggerman.

Memory. The ancient stone table, stained with blood. Stars wheeling above me, dizzying in their speed and clarity. Writhing, cold mist reaching up over the edges of the table, clutching at my bare skin, while Mab bestrode me, her naked beauty strangling me, raking my thoughts out through my eyes. Power surging through me, into me, from the blood in the swirling grooves of the table, from Mab's hungry will.

I shuddered and forced the memory away. My hands clenched the wheel.

"So I can't kill her," I said quietly.

"No," Bob said.

I glowered out at the road. "What is the point of telling me to do something she knows is impossible?" I wondered aloud. "You're sure about this, Bob? There's no way at all, without the stone table?"

"Not really," Bob said, his eyes flicking around the car. "And not in most of the Nevernever, either."

"Hey," I said. "What's with the shifty eyes?"

"What shifty eyes?" Bob asked.

"When you said 'Not really,' your eyes got all shifty."

"Uh, no, they didn't."

"Bob."

The skull sighed. "Do I have to tell you?"

"Dude," I said. "Since when has it been like that between us?"

"Since you started working for *her*," Bob said, and somehow managed to shudder.

I tilted my head, thinking as hard as I could. "Wait. This has to do with your feud with Mab?"

"Not a feud," Bob says. "In a feud, both sides fight. This is more like me screaming and running away before she rips me apart."

I shook my head. "Man, Bob. I know you can be an annoying git when you want to be one—but what did you *do* to make Mab mad at you?"

"It isn't what I do, Harry," Bob said in a very small voice. "It's what I know."

I lifted an eyebrow. It took a lot to make the skull flinch. “And what is that, exactly?”

The lights in the eye sockets dwindled to tiny pinpoints, and his voice came out in a whisper. “I know how to kill an immortal.”

“Like Maeve?” I asked him.

“Maeve,” Bob said. “Mab. Mother Winter. Any of them.”

Holy crap.

Now, *that* was a piece of information worth killing for.

If the skull knew how to subtract the *im* from *immortal*, then he could be a source of danger to beings of power throughout the universe. Hell, he was lucky that gods and demons and supernatural powers everywhere hadn’t formed up in a safari and come gunning for him. And it meant that maybe I wasn’t looking at an impossible mission after all.

“I’d like you to tell me,” I said.

“No way,” Bob said. “No way. The only reason I’ve been around this long is that I’ve kept my mouth shut. If I start shooting it off now, Mab and every other immortal with an interest in this stupid planet are going to smash my skull to powder and leave me out to fry in the sun.” The eyelights bobbed toward the rear compartment. “And there are too many ears around here.”

“Toot,” I said, “get everybody out of the car. I need privacy. Make sure no one gets close enough to eavesdrop.”

“Aw,” Toot complained from the rear compartment. “Not even me?”

“You’re the only one I can trust to keep those other mugs from doing it, Major General. No one overhears. Got it?”

I could practically hear the pride bursting out of his voice: “Got it!” he piped. “Will do, my lord!”

He rolled down a window and buzzed out. I rolled it back up and took a look around the hearse with both normal and supernatural senses, to be sure we were alone. Then I turned back to the skull.

“Bob, it’s just you and me talking here. Think about this. Mab sends me off to kill Maeve, something that would be impossible for me to do on my own—and she *knew* that you know how to do it. She knew the first thing I would do is come back *here* as the first step in the job. I think she meant for me to come to you. I think she meant for you to tell me.”

The skull considered that for a moment. “It’s indirect and manipulative, so you’re probably onto something. Let me think.” A long

minute went by. Then he spoke very quietly. “If I tell you,” he said, “you’ve got to do something for me.”

“Like what?”

“A new vessel,” he said. “You’ve got to make me a new house. Somewhere I can get to it. Then if they come after this one, I’ve got somewhere else to go.”

“Tall order for me,” I said soberly. “You’ve basically got your own little pocket dimension in there. I’ve never tried anything that complicated before. Not even Little Chicago.”

“Promise me,” Bob said. “Promise me on your power.”

Swearing by one’s power is how a wizard makes a verbal contract. If you break your word, your ability with magic starts to fray, and if you keep doing it, sooner or later it’ll just wither up and die. A broken promise, sworn by my power, could set me back years and years in terms of my ability to use magic. I held up my hand. “I swear, on my power, to construct a new vessel for you if you tell me, Bob, assuming I survive the next few days. Just . . . don’t expect a deluxe place like you have now.”

The flickering eyelights flared up to their normal size again. “Don’t worry, boss,” Bob said with compassion. “I won’t.”

“Wiseass.”

“Right, then!” Bob said. “The only way to kill an immortal is at certain specific places.”

“And you know one? Where?”

“Hah, already you’re making a human assumption. There are more than three dimensions, Harry. Not all places are in space. Some of them are places in *time*. They’re called conjunctions.”

“I know about conjunctions, Bob,” I said, annoyed. “When the stars and planets align. You can use them to support heavy-duty magic sometimes.”

“That’s one way to measure a conjunction,” said the skull. “But stars and planets are ultimately just measuring stakes used to describe a position in time. And that’s one way to *use* a conjunction, but they do other things, too.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “And there’s a conjunction when immortals are vulnerable?”

“Give the man a cookie; he’s got the idea. Every year.”

“When is it?”

“On Halloween night, of course.”

I slammed on the brakes and pulled the car to the side of the road. “Say that again?”

“Halloween,” Bob said, his voice turning sober. “It’s when the world of the dead is closest to the mortal world. Everyone—everything—standing in this world is mortal on Halloween.”

I let out a low, slow whistle.

“I doubt there are more than a couple of people alive who know that, Harry,” Bob said. “And the immortals *will* keep it that way.”

“Why are they so worried?” I asked. “I mean, why not just not show up on Halloween night?”

“Because it’s when they . . .” He made a frustrated noise. “It’s hard to explain, because you don’t have the right conceptual models. You can barely count to four dimensions.”

“I think the math guys can go into the teens. Skip the insults and try.”

“Halloween is when they feed,” Bob said. “Or . . . or refuel. Or run free. It’s all sort of the same thing, and I’m only conveying a small part of it. Halloween night is when the locked stasis of immortality becomes malleable. They take in energy—and it’s when they can add new power to their mantle. Mostly they steal tiny bits of it from other immortals.”

“Those Kemmlerite freaks and their Darkhallow,” I breathed. “That was Halloween night.”

“Exactly!” Bob said. “That ritual was supposed to turn one of them *into* an immortal. And the same rule applies—that’s the only night of the year it actually can happen. I doubt all of *them* knew that it had to be that night. But I betcha Cowl did. Guy is seriously scary.”

“Seriously in need of a body cast and a therapist, more like.” I raked at my too-long, too-messy hair with my fingers, thinking. “So on Halloween, they’re here? All of them?”

“Any who are . . . The only word I can come close with is ‘awake.’ Immortals aren’t always moving through the time stream at the same rate as the universe. From where you stand, it looks like they’re dormant. They aren’t. You just can’t perceive the true state of their existence properly.”

“They’re *here*,” I said slowly. “Feeding and swindling one another for little bits of power.”

“Right.”

“They’re trick-or-treating?”

“Duh,” Bob said. “Where do you think that comes from?”

“Ugh, this whole time? That is creepy beyond belief,” I said.

“I think it was the second or third Merlin of the White Council who engineered the whole Halloween custom. That’s the real reason people started wearing masks on that night, back in the day. It was so that any hungry immortal who came by might—might—think twice before gobbling someone up. After all, they could never be sure the person behind the mask wasn’t another immortal, setting them up.”

“Halloween is tomorrow night,” I said. A bank sign I was passing told me it was a bit after two a.m. “Or tonight, I guess, technically.”

“What a coincidence,” Bob said. “Happy birthday, by the way. I didn’t get you anything.”

Except maybe my life. “’S okay. I’m kinda birthdayed out already.” I rubbed at my jaw. “So . . . if I can get to Maeve on Halloween night, I can kill her.”

“Well,” Bob hedged. “You can try, anyway. It’s technically possible. It doesn’t mean you’re strong enough to do it.”

“How big a window do I have? When does Halloween night end?” I asked.

“At the first natural morning birdsong,” Bob replied promptly. “Songbirds, rooster, whatever. They start to sing, the night ends.”

“Oh, good. A deadline.” I narrowed my eyes, thinking. “Gives me a bit more than twenty-four hours, then,” I muttered. “And all I have to do is find her, when she can be anywhere in the world *or* the Nevernever, then get her here, then beat her down, all without her escaping or killing me first. Simple.”

“Yep. Almost impossible, but simple. And at least you know the when and the how,” Bob said.

“But I’m no closer to why.”

“Can’t help you there, boss,” the skull said. “I’m a spirit of intellect, and the premise we’re dealing with makes no sense.”

“Why not?”

“Because there’s no *reason* for it,” Bob said, his tone unhappy. “I mean, when Maeve dies, there will just be another Maeve.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

Bob sighed. “You keep thinking of the Faerie Queens as specific individuals, Harry,” Bob said. “But they aren’t individuals. They’re mantles

of power, roles, positions. The person in them is basically an interchangeable part.”

“What, like being the Winter Knight is?”

“Exactly like that,” Bob said. “When you killed Slate, the power, the mantle, just transferred over to you. It’s the same for the Queens of Faerie. Maeve wears the mantle of the Winter Lady. Kill her, and you’ll just get a new Winter Lady.”

“Maybe that’s what Mab wants,” I said.

“Doesn’t track,” Bob said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because the mantle changes whoever wears it.”

My guts felt suddenly cold.

(I’m not Lloyd Slate.)

(Neither was he. Not at first.)

“Doesn’t matter who it is,” Bob prattled on. “Over time, it changes them. Somewhere down the line, you wouldn’t be able to find much difference between Maeve and her successor. Meet the new Maeve. Same as the old Maeve.”

I swallowed. “So . . . so Lily, who took the Summer Lady’s mantle after I killed Aurora . . .”

“It’s been what? Ten years or so? She’s gone by now, or getting there,” Bob said. “Give it another decade or two, tops, and she might as well *be* Aurora.”

I was quiet for a moment. Then I asked, “Is that going to happen to me, too?”

Bob hedged. “You’ve . . . probably felt it starting. Um, strong impulses. Intense emotions. That kind of thing. It builds. And it doesn’t stop.” He managed to give the impression of a wince. “Sorry, boss.”

I stared at my knuckles for a moment. “So,” I said, “even if I frag this Maeve, another one steps up. Maybe not for decades, but she does.”

“Immortals don’t really care about decades, boss,” Bob said. “To them, it’s like a few weeks are to you.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Then maybe it’s about the timing.”

“How so?”

I shrugged. “Hell if I know, but it’s the only thing I can think of. Maybe Mab wants a less Maeve-ish Maeve for the next few years.”

“Why?” Bob asked.

I growled. “I already have one why. I don’t need you adding more.” I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. “Why doesn’t Mab do it herself?”

“Oh, I see. It’s okay if *you* add more whys. You have complicated rules, Harry.”

I ignored that with the disdain it deserved. “I’m serious. Mab has the power. What’s stopping her from tearing Maeve to shreds?”

“Something?” Bob suggested.

“I can’t believe I got my tux shredded for brilliant analysis like that,” I said.

“Hey!” Bob said. “I just told you something so valuable that it could save your life! Or get you killed!”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “You did. But it isn’t enough. I need more information.”

“You do know a few people around here,” Bob said.

I growled. “My physical therapist, who I’ve known for three whole months, nearly died tonight because she showed up at a party with me—and that was with Mab looking over my shoulder as a referee.”

“How is that any different from the last time you played with faeries?”

“Because now I know them,” I said. It was actually sort of scary looking back at the me from a decade ago. That guy was terrifying in his ignorance. “Aurora and her crew were basically a decent crowd. Misguided, yeah. But to them, we were the bad guys. They were tough, but they weren’t killers. Maeve’s different.”

“How?” Bob asked.

“She doesn’t have limits,” I said.

“And you figure you’re up against her.”

“I know I am,” I said. “And she’s grown powerful enough to challenge Mab in her own court. I also know more about Mab now, and all of it scares the crap out of me.” I snorted, and felt a tremble of winged insects in my midsection. “And apparently Maeve is a *threat* to her. And I’m supposed to deal with it.”

Bob whistled. “Well. Maybe that explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“Why Mab was so hell-bent on getting *you* to be the new Knight,” Bob said. “I mean, you’re kind of an avatar of the phrase ‘Things fall apart.’ Mab has a target she wants to be absolutely sure of. You’re like . . . her

guided missile. She can't know exactly what's going to happen, but she knows there's going to be a great big boom."

"I'm a missile, huh?"

"Her big, dumb bunker buster," he said cheerily. "Of course, you know the thing about missiles, Harry."

"Yeah," I said, as I put the Caddy back in gear again. "They're expendable."

"Buck up, little camper. At least you had a hot redhead jump your bones tonight. Not the *right* bone, but you can't have everything."

I snorted. "Thanks, Bob."

"Andi totally got the drop on you. Where was your tiny secret service team?"

"I forgot to invite them past the threshold," I said. "Besides, I think she'd hit me before anyone could have shouted a lookout anyway."

"You ever think about replacing them with some real bodyguard goons, Harry? I know a thing that knows a thing."

"Screw that. Toot and his gang aren't exactly gangstas, but I trust them. That means more."

"That means you're a sucker!" Bob said. "Did *The X-Files* teach you nothing? Trust no one."

I grunted. "Cat Sith gave me almost the same advice."

"Ack," Bob said. "That guy. He still got the attitude?"

"I feel safe in assuming that he does."

"I don't like him, but he's no dummy," Bob said. "At least he gives good advice."

"Mathematically, maybe," I said. "But trust isn't one of those things that lends itself well to math."

"Sure it does," Bob said. "You trust somebody, they betray you, you get a negative value. You never trust, they can never disappoint you, you break even."

I laughed. "Or you trust, it's vindicated, and you're better off."

"Shah," Bob said. "Like that happens."

"Life's about more than breaking even," I said.

Bob snorted. "Which is why the first thing you did, when you got back to town, was call all of your friends and immediately tell them you needed their help, and trust them to help you."

I scowled out at the road.

“It wasn’t like the first thing you did was abuse one of your friends and inflict property damage on his house and steal a powerful magical counselor whose loyalties are transferrable to whoever happens to be holding an old skull—presumably so that you’d have a lackey who would agree with whatever you said instead of give you a hard time about it. And the only beings you’re allowing to help you are a bunch of tiny faeries who worship the ground you walk on because you buy them pizza.” Bob made a skeptical sound. “I can see how important trust is to you, boss.”

“That’s why I got you, clearly,” I said. “Because I wanted a yes-man and you’re so good for that.”

“Hey, I’m just a mirror, boss. Not my fault you’re ambivalent.”

“I’m not ambivalent.”

“You know better, but you’re being a moron about it anyway,” Bob said. “If that ain’t ambivalence, maybe Mab’s getting to you. Because it’s a little crazy.” He sniffed. “Besides, if you weren’t of two minds about it, I wouldn’t be giving you this kind of crap, now, would I?”

I was going to say something sarcastic, but the red glare of a stoplight suddenly appeared about ten feet in front of the old Caddy’s nose. I stared at the light for a fraction of a second, and then mashed the brakes down. I had an instant to see that it wasn’t a traffic signal, but Toot-toot, his aura glaring brilliant scarlet, frantically waving his arms at me. As the Caddy lumbered forward, I saw him take a couple of steps forward, running up the windshield, and up out of sight above me.

As the heavy old piece of Detroit iron began to slide on the asphalt, I saw an object tumble out of the air in front of me and hit the street, turning over and over. I had another instant to recognize a plain black nylon duffel bag.

And then the world went white and a hammer the size of the Chrysler Building slammed me back against the old Caddy’s seat.

Chapter

Twelve

The bomb might have been fifty feet away when it exploded.

Mab's therapy had paid off. On raw instinct, I'd already begun to form a defensive shield in front of me when everything went boom. I hadn't had time to build much of a shield, but what little I could do probably kept me conscious.

Explosions are unbelievably loud. If you haven't been near one, there's no way to convey the sheer violence of it. It doesn't really register as a sound, the way a gunshot will. There's just this single, terrible *power* in the air, a sudden hammer blow of disorienting pressure, as if you've been hit by a truck made of pillow-top mattresses.

Your hearing goes. There's a familiar, high-pitched tone, only no one is telling you that this is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. There's dust and smoke everywhere, and you can't see. Your muscles don't all work right. You tell them to move and it's iffy. Maybe they do; maybe they don't. It's hard to tell which way is down. Not that you don't know it rationally, somewhere in your head—but your body just seems to forget its natural awareness of gravity.

Even if something sharp and fast doesn't go flying through some of your favorite organs, a nearby explosion leaves you half-blind, deaf, and drunkenly impaired.

Vulnerable.

One moment the Caddy was screeching and sliding toward that black duffel bag. The next, I was staring at a cloud of dust and the dim image of a brick wall at the end of the Caddy's nose. The windshield had been splintered into a webwork of cracks that made it hard to see. My chest hurt like hell.

I picked fitfully at it, my fingers clumsy, and thought to myself that the car Sith had provided must have had armored glass, or there would be windshield mixed in with my intestines. Lights danced and darted in my vision. My eyes wouldn't focus enough to track them. Smells were incredibly sharp. The air was acrid, thick with smoke, laced with the scents of things it is unhealthy to burn. I smelled gasoline nearby. There were wires hanging down from something in the corner of my vision, outside the car, spitting white sparks.

None of it seemed normal, but I couldn't quite remember the right word to describe it.

Danger.

Right. That was it. Danger. I was in danger.

A moving target is harder to hit.

I pushed open the passenger door and stumbled out of the car, choking on dust. Another car wreck? Man, Mike was going to charge me a small fortune to fix the *Blue Beetle* this time. Did I have the money in the bank? I couldn't remember whether I'd deposited my last stipend check from the Wardens.

No, wait. The car I'd just gotten out of wasn't the *Blue Beetle*, my trusty old Volkswagen Bug that had died in the line of duty. It was the creepy Herman Munster hot rod my boss had gotten m—

My brain finished rebooting, and things snapped back into focus; someone had just tried to bomb me back into the Stone Age.

I shook my head, gagging on dust, then dragged the Redcap's hat down off my head and over my mouth as a dust mask. The Caddy was up on the curb and had hit a building. The building had gotten the worst of it. One of the Caddy's headlights was out, its front fender crumpled a bit, and the passenger door had been thrown open, but otherwise the car was fine. Maybe ten or twelve square feet of brick wall had fallen out, some of it onto the hood, some of it onto the sidewalk. I looked around. It was hard to see through the dust. There were a lot of busted-up walls. Several small fires. A streetlight had come swinging down from the line that supported it—that was where the sparking cables came from.

Lights still darted and flickered randomly, and I blinked, trying to clear the stars away. But stars in the vision were usually white and silver. These were orange and red, like the embers of a fire.

Then one of those lights pivoted in midair and flashed toward my eyes. I jerked away from it, still clumsy, and a sudden spike of agony burned through my face.

I screamed and staggered to one knee. Something had gone through my cheek and was still there, tacking the damned Cincinnati cap to my face. I reached for it on instinct, but before I could get to it, pain exploded from my back, from the fresh wounds there, from my bruised hands, from my throat where the Redcap had nearly crushed it.

That *did* put me on the ground. It was too much to process, much less ignore. I reacted on blind animal instinct, swiping at the most intense source of pain with my paw. There was another flash of agony, and suddenly the hat came away from my face. A bloodied nail a good four inches long fell away with the hat, its last two inches bloodied, its other end swathed in duct tape.

The instant it came free, I felt my pain recede again, back to the dull background annoyance it had been a few moments before. My thoughts cleared as the agony retreated.

Someone had shot me? With a freaking nail gun? What the hell was going on here?

No sooner had I thought that than another light flashed toward me, and before I could react, a second round of utterly ridiculous levels of pain slammed through me, starting at my leg. The other pains resurfaced, with

the fresh addition of my throbbing face. I screamed and swatted, and tore a second nail, much like the first, from the flesh of my right quadriceps. Again that cold power flooded into me, making pain distant, making thoughts more clear.

The ember-colored lights were coming at me too fast. There was no time to get a defensive spell up, not in my condition, and my body, Winter Knight or not, wasn't fast enough to dodge or swat them out of the way. Even as I processed those thoughts, a third nail hit me in the left arm, and I had to scream and thrash my way out of another spike of pure agony. I felt utterly helpless, and stunned at my inability to overcome so tiny a foe.

And I suddenly knew how the late Summer Lady, Aurora, had felt at the end.

"Get up, Harry," I panted, fighting through the disorientation, the polar shifts in pain. "Get up before they nail you."

Nail you. Get it?

But I always joke when I'm afraid, and I was terrified. Whatever these things were, if they got more than one of those nails into me, I doubted I would be able to hold my thoughts together long enough to get them out again. I had a gruesome vision of myself stretched in lifeless, agonized rigor on the sidewalk, nails sticking out of every square inch of my skin.

I tried to scramble, to evade, but compared to the darting motes of light, I was moving in slow-motion replay. Half a dozen more of the glimmering things came arrowing toward me out of the night, zooming at me in a flying V formation, and I knew things were about to get really bad.

Then someone blew on a coach's whistle, a sound I heard even through my stunned ears, and a tiny, distant voice piped, "To the Za Lord!"

Half a dozen little cool blue spheres of light flashed toward my attackers, intercepting them only a couple of feet from my body. Six explosions of sparks and glowing motes lit the night, various colors swirling and spinning, as the tiny soldiers of the Za Lord's Guard closed to battle with my attackers.

Toot soared in from directly overhead, his heels landing hard on my stomach. For somebody the size of a chicken, he was strong, and my breath huffed out as I was knocked back to the ground. He planted his feet wide, a snarl on his tiny face, his shield hefted up to a defensive position, his table-knife sword in hand. "Stay down, my lord! Wait until we clear a path for escape!"

A path? I took a second to look around. I saw one of Toot's "kernels" go by, flying sideways, wielding a spear made of a straight pin and a pencil against another of the Little Folk, a humanish figure dressed in what looked like actual black armor made of some kind of shaped plastic or maybe carapace, and carrying another of the too-familiar nails. The enemy faerie was wounded, and glowing motes of scarlet and sullen orange light dribbled from a straight pin-inflicted wound on his tiny leg.

Sullen and chill spheres of light darted *everywhere*, dozens of them, all spinning and diving and looping at once. There was no way to track all of that motion. Even if I'd been completely clearheaded, I would have done well to follow a tenth of it.

Five or six more enemy fae, larger and brighter than the others, dived down at me bearing a nail sword in each hand. They let out shrill, eerie little cries as they came at me—and at Toot-toot.

Okay, I've thought a lot of things about Toot-toot over the years. I've compared him to a lot of really humorous stuff, and occasionally to people I didn't admire too much. I've made jokes at his expense, though never when I thought it would hurt him. But if you'd asked me for a perfect parallel for the little guy a year ago, I would never, ever, *ever* have said, "King Leonidas."

Toot let out a high-pitched roar and leapt into the air. He smashed his shield into the black-armored fae in the center of the enemy formation, spinning as he did, to send the luckless faerie careening into the companion on his left. Toot's sword lashed out, and a single dragonfly wing went fluttering free of the body it had been attached to. The little fae went spinning out of the air to crash into a pile of fallen bricks and rubble.

Two got through.

Agony.

The next thing I knew, Toot was pulling a nail from the muscle over my abdomen, and fresh hits there and in my left pectoral muscle had added their toll of pain to my evening. Toot, gripping the nail carefully by its duct-tape handle, turned and flung it at a pair of dueling fae, striking the orange-lit enemy with the broad side of the steel nail. There was a flash of white light, and the hit fae let out a shriek that started at the edge of human hearing and went up into dog frequencies, and darted away, the guard in hot pursuit.

“They’re breaking!” Toot bellowed. Well. As much as someone who can fit in a bread box can bellow. “After them, kernels!”

Sullen lights slithered away in panic, while bright balls of blue buzzed after them.

“Permission to pursue those jerks, my lord?” Toot shouted.

I finally had a couple of seconds to get my head together. I shook it violently. It didn’t help, but the simple act of putting together recognition of a problem, consideration of a solution, and taking action to fix it had gotten my mental house in some kind of order.

“It’s a feint,” I said, looking around. “They’re luring the guard away.”

There. High up. Way the hell high up, maybe twenty stories. A blob of ember-colored light suddenly plunged off of a balcony and began to fall toward us. As it came closer, the blob broke apart into dozens of angry little spheres. They began to bob and interweave, picking up more and more speed, the patterns dizzying, confusing. Streaking lights peeled off from the main cloud in every direction.

Toot, once more perched on my stomach, stared up at them, his mouth open. His left arm sagged, his shield dropping down to his side. “Uh-oh.” He gulped. “Um. I’m not sure I can get them all, my lord.”

I sat up, forcing him off my stomach, and gained my feet. “You did good, Toot,” I growled. “Okay, small fry. Wizard time.”

A couple of years back, me and my apprentice, Molly, had been studying air magic as part of her basic grounding in the elemental forces. She hadn’t ever picked up the knack for using blasts of wind as weapons, but she had managed to develop a spell that did a passable imitation of a blow-dryer.

I lifted my right hand, summoned my will, and readied the blow-dryer spell.

Only I turned it to eleven.

“*Ventas reductas!*” I thundered, unleashing my will, and an arctic gale came howling and shrieking from my outstretched hand. It condensed the damp October air into mist, too, bellowing out from my hand in a cone the size of an apartment building. Frost formed on every surface in the immediate area. It struck the cloud of diving Little Folk and sent them tumbling in every direction. Little orange lights went spinning and wobbling, their complex formation shattered.

I saw them begin to gather to one side, trying to re-form, but I poured on the wind and altered the direction of the blast, scattering them again. Molly's spell was more efficient than anything I'd come up with when I had her level of experience, but there's no free lunch. That much wind takes a lot of energy to whip up, and I wasn't going to be able to hold it forever.

Abruptly, Toot flashed away from me, diving through the air, his wings a blur. He vanished behind the nose of a parked car on the other side of the street, brandishing his sword.

A brawl spilled out from the tail end of the car an instant later. One of the enemy Little Folk went tumbling in a windmill of arms and legs and fetched up against the corpse of the traffic signal. Two went darting away in obvious panic, their flight erratic and swift, dropping their nail swords as they fled.

And then there was a flash of sparks as steel struck steel, and Toot came out from behind the truck, frantically defending himself from another of the Little Folk almost as tall as he was. The foe was dressed in black armor covered in spikes made from the tips of freaking fishhooks, even the helmet, and he fought with what seemed to be an actual sword designed to size, a wavy-bladed thing that I think was called a flamberge.

As I watched, the enemy champion's blade sheared half an inch of aluminum from the top of Toot's shield, and he followed up with a series of heavy two-handed blows meant to divide Toot in half.

Toot bobbed and weaved like a reed, but the assault was ferocious, the foe as fast as he was. He got the flat of the shield in front of another blow, stopping it, but on the next strike the flamberge's wavy blade caught on the edge of the shield and sliced through it again, leaving it little more than a rectangle of aluminum strapped to Toot's arm. Toot took to the air, but his opponent matched him, and they darted and spun around a light pole, the enemy's sword meeting Toot's improvised blade in flashes of silver sparks.

I wanted to intervene, but, like it always does, size mattered. My target was tiny and moving fast. The pair of them were darting around so much that even if I got lucky and hit someone, I probably had as much chance of taking out Toot as I did Captain Hook over there. My evocation magic was more focused and precise than it had ever been, thanks to Mab, but my control still wasn't up to the task of being *that* discriminating. And besides—I still had to keep my giant leaf blower going against the rest of Hook's goons. All I could do was watch.

Hook swung at Toot's head, but Toot ducked in the nick of time, and the flamberge caught briefly in the metal of the streetlight's post.

"Aha!" Toot said, and slammed his table knife down onto Hook's armored hand.

The other fae reeled, obviously in pain, and the flamberge fell to the ground.

"Surrender, villain!" Toot cried. "Face the justice of the Za Lord!"

"Never!" answered another piping voice from within the helmet, and Hook produced a pair of toothpick-slender daggers. He made a scissor shape of them and caught Toot's next attack in it, flicking the table knife aside and whipping his dagger at Toot's throat. Toot recoiled, but took a long cut across his chest, the knife shearing through his armor just as the flamberge had done.

My major general screamed in pain, recoiling.

It was the opening I'd needed, and I twisted my leaf blower around to slam into Hook. It caught the little fae as he was starting to move toward Toot-toot, sending him tumbling into the side of a building, while the back blast of wind actually threw Toot clear. He managed to recover in midair, wings blurring, and shot unsteadily toward me. I caught him in my free hand, drawing him in close against my side, and turned partly away from Hook, sheltering Toot.

The cloud of hostile fae was still swirling and wobbling around. They obviously lacked any kind of leadership, and were still disordered by the gale-force winds with which I'd hit them—but I was almost out of energy, and about two seconds after they got their act together, I was a dead man.

"Feets don't fail me now," I muttered.

I kept the leaf blower on Hook, who I suspected was their leader, and strode forward, toward the car. I checked it with several quick glances. The gasoline smell wasn't coming from the Caddy, but from a half-smashed car that had been close to the exploding duffel bag.

I gave the leaf blower one last surge of power and lunged into the Caddy, slamming the door behind me. I dumped Toot down next to Bob as gently as I could.

"What's happening?" Bob shouted blearily from where he'd landed, sideways, in the well of the passenger seat.

"I'm getting my ass kicked by tiny faeries!" I shouted back, fumbling to start the car. "They've got my freaking number!"

There was a loud pop, and a slender miniature steel dagger slammed through the passenger window, transforming it into a broken webwork, as difficult to see through as a stained-glass window.

“Ack!” I said.

Bob started laughing hysterically.

The dagger vanished and then the same thing happened on the driver’s side.

Holy crap, Hook was way too bright for someone the size of a Tickle Me Elmo. He was blinding me.

I got the Caddy into reverse and rumbled back off the sidewalk onto the street, shedding bricks and debris as I went. Just as I bounced down onto the street proper, the front windshield exploded into a web of cracks, too, so I just kept driving backward, turning to look over my shoulder. That went well for a few seconds, and then the rear window broke, too.

I gritted my teeth. Under normal circumstances, the next move would be to roll down the window and stick my head out of it. Tonight, I was pretty sure I’d get a miniature dagger in the eye if I tried.

Sometimes you have to choose between doing something stupid and doing something suicidal. So I kept driving blind and backward through the middle of Chicago while Bob chortled his bony ass off.

“Tiny faeries!” He giggled, rolling a bit as the Caddy weaved and jounced. “Tiny faeries!”

My plan worked for about ten seconds—and then I slammed into a parked car. I was lucky that it wasn’t a large one. I mean, I couldn’t see it, but it bounced off the Caddy like a billiard ball struck by the cue ball. It also knocked the wheel out of my hands, wrenching it from my fingers and sending the Caddy onto another sidewalk. It smashed through a metal railing and then the back tires bounced down into a sunken stairwell.

I struggled to get the Caddy clear, but there was nothing for the tires to grab onto.

End of the line.

I let out a heartfelt curse and slammed a fist against the steering wheel. Then I made myself close my eyes and think. *Think, think, don’t react in panic. Keep your head, Dresden.*

“Major General,” I said. “You okay?”

“It’s not bad, my lord.” He gasped. “I’ve had worse.”

“We’ve got to move,” I said.

“Run away!” Bob giggled. “Run away! Tiny faeries!”

I growled in frustration and popped the Redcap’s hat down over Bob. “Stop being a jerk. This is serious.”

Bob’s voice was only barely muffled. It sounded like he couldn’t breathe. “Serious! Tiny! Faeries! The m-m-mighty wizard Dresden!”

“You are not as funny as you think you are,” I said severely. “Toot, you got any ideas?”

“Trap them all in a circle?” Toot suggested.

I sighed. Right. I’d just need to get them all to land in the same place at the same time, inside of a magic circle I had no means to create.

Toot’s a great little guy. Just . . . not really adviser material.

Orange light began to bathe the broken windows, highlighting the webwork of cracks in them. A lot of orange light.

“Crap,” I gasped. “I am *not* going to be known as the wizard who used his death curse thanks to a bunch of bitty nail guns.”

Then there was a very sinister sound.

Toward the rear of the Caddy, someone opened the lid to the fuel tank.

It wasn’t hard to work out what would happen next. Fire.

“Hell, no,” I said. I recovered the ball cap, turned a still-giggling Bob upside down, and then popped Toot into the skull. He sprawled in it, arms and legs sticking out, but he didn’t complain.

“Hey!” Bob protested.

“Serves you right, Giggles,” I snapped. I tucked the skull under my arm like a football.

I knew I didn’t have much of a chance of getting away from that swarm of fae piranha, but it was an infinitely larger chance than I would have if I stayed in the car and burned to death. Hell’s bells, what I wouldn’t give to have my shield bracelet. Or my old staff. I didn’t even have an umbrella.

I wasn’t sure how much more magic I had left in me, but I readied my shield spell, shaping it to surround me as I ran. I wouldn’t be able to hold it in place for long—but maybe if I got very, very lucky, I would survive the swarm long enough to find another option.

I took several sharp and completely not-panicked breaths, then piled out of the Cadillac, bringing my shield up with a shout of “*Defendarius!*”

The Little Folk started hitting my shield almost instantly. I once rode out a hailstorm in a dome-shaped Quonset hut made of corrugated steel. It

sounded like that, only closer and a hell of a lot more lethal.

I went into a sprint. Between the still-present dust, the shroud of mist my leaf-blower spell had billowed forth, and the swarm of hostile fae, I could barely see. I picked a direction and ran. Ten steps. Twenty steps. The enemy continued pounding against the shield, and as I kept pouring my will into it to keep it in place, my body began to feel heavier and heavier.

Thirty steps—and I stepped into a small pothole in the sidewalk, stumbled, and fell.

Falling in a fight is generally bad. You tend not to get up again. I mean, there's a reason that the phrase "He fell" was synonymous with death for a bunch of centuries.

I fell.

And then I heard the most beautiful sound of my life. Somewhere nearby, a cat let out an angry, hissing scream.

The Little Folk live in mortal dread of *Felis domesticus*. Cats are observant, curious, and fast enough to catch the little fae. Hell, the domestic cat can stalk, kill, and subsist upon more species than any other land predator in the world. They are peerless hunters and the Little Folk know it.

The effect of the scream was instantaneous. My attackers recoiled on pure reflex, immediately darting about twenty feet into the air—even Hook. I got a chance to look up and saw a large brindle tomcat leap from the top of a trash can onto the sidewalk beside me.

"No!" shouted Hook from inside his helmet. "Slay the beast! Slay them all!"

"What? What did I ever do to *you*?" Bob protested, indignant. "I'm not even supposed to be here today!"

The fae all looked at Hook and seemed to begin gathering their courage again.

A second cat screamed nearby. And a third. And a fourth. Cats started prowling out of alleys and from beneath parked cars. Cats began pacing along building ledges twenty feet from the ground. Glowing eyes reflected light from the deep shadows between buildings.

Even Hook wasn't willing to put up with that action, I guess. The little fae champion let out a frustrated scream, then turned and darted up, up, and away, vanishing into the night. The others followed Hook, flowing away in a ribbon of emberlight.

I lay there for a second, exhausted and panting. Then I sat up and looked around.

The cats were gone, vanished as if they'd never been there.

I heard someone walk out of the alley behind me, and my body went tense and tight, despite my weariness. Then a young woman's voice said, in a passable British accent, "The Little Folk are easily startled, but they'll soon be back. And in greater numbers."

I sagged in sudden, exhausted relief. The bad guys hardly ever quote *Star Wars*.

"Molly," I breathed.

A tall young woman dressed in rather shabby secondhand clothing crouched down next to me and smiled. "Hey, boss. Welcome home."

Chapter

Thirteen

“Grasshopper,” I said, feeling myself smile. “Illusion. Very nice.”

Molly gave me a little bow of her head. “It’s what I do.”

“Also good timing,” I said. “Also, what the hell? How did you know I was . . . ?”

“Alive?”

“Here, but sure. How did you know?”

“Priorities, boss. Can you walk?”

“I’m good,” I said, and pushed myself to my feet. It wasn’t as hard as it really should have been, and I could feel my endurance rebuilding itself already, the energy coming back into me. I was still tired—don’t get me wrong—but I should have been falling-down dizzy and I wasn’t.

“You don’t look so good,” Molly said. “Was that a tux?”

“Briefly,” I said. I eyed the car. “Feel like driving?”

“Sure,” she said. “But . . . that’s pretty stuck, Harry, unless you brought a crane.”

I grunted, faintly irritated by her tone. “Just get in, start it, and give it gas gently.”

Molly looked like she wanted to argue, but then she looked down abruptly. A second later, I heard sirens. She frowned, shook her head, and got into the car. The motor rumbled to life a second later.

I went down the stairwell where the car’s tires were stuck, set down Bob’s skull, and found a good spot beneath the rear frame. Then I set my feet, put the heels of my hands against the underside of the Caddy, and pushed.

It was hard. I mean, it was really, really gut-bustingly hard—but the Caddy groaned and then shifted and then slowly rose. I was lifting with my legs as much as my arms, putting my whole body into it, and everything in me gave off a dull burn of effort. My breath escaped my lungs in a slow groan, but then the tires were up out of the stairwell, and turning, and they caught on the sidewalk and the Caddy pulled itself the rest of the way.

I grabbed the skull, still with the mostly limp Toot-toot inside it, staggered back up out of the stairwell and into the passenger side of the car. I lifted my hand and sent a surge of will down through it, muttering, “*Forzare*,” and the overstrained windshield groaned and gave way, tearing itself free of the frame and clearing Molly’s vision.

“Go,” I grated.

Molly went, driving carefully. The emergency vehicles were rolling in past us, and she pulled over and drove slowly to let them by. I sat there breathing hard, and realized that the real effort of moving that much weight didn’t hit you while you were actually moving it—it came in the moments after, when your muscles recovered enough to demand oxygen, right the hell now. I leaned my head against the window, panting.

“How’s it going, buddy?” I asked a moment later.

“It hurts.” Toot sighed. “But I’ll be okay, my lord. The armor held off some of the blow.”

I checked the skull. The eyelights were gone. Bob had dummied up the moment Molly was around, as per my standing orders, which had been in place since she had first become my apprentice. Bob had almost unlimited

knowledge of magic. Molly had a calculated disregard for self-limitation when she thought it justified. They would have made a really scary pair, and I'd kept them carefully separate during her training.

"We need to get off the street," I said. "Someplace quiet and secure."

"I know a place just like that," Molly said. "What happened?"

"Someone tossed a gym bag full of explosives at my car," I growled. "And followed it up with the freaking pixie death squadron from hell."

"You mean they picked *this* car out of all the other traffic?" she asked, her tone dry. "What are the odds?"

I grunted. "One more reason to get off the street, pronto."

"Relax," she said. "I started veiling the car as soon as we passed the police. If someone was following you before, they aren't now. Catch your breath, Harry. We'll be there soon."

I blinked, impressed. Veils were not simple spells. Granted, they were sort of a specialty of Molly's, but this was taking it up a notch. I didn't know whether I could have covered the entire Caddy with a veil while driving alertly *and* carrying on a conversation. In fact, I was pretty sure I couldn't.

Grasshopper was growing up on me.

I studied Molly's profile while she drove. Stared, really. I'd first met her years ago, when she was a gawky little kid in a training bra. She'd grown up tall, five-ten or a little more. She had dark blond hair, although she had changed its color about fifty times since I'd met her. At the moment, it was in its natural shade and cut short, hanging in an even sheet to her chin. She was wearing minimal makeup. The girl was built like a particularly well-proportioned statue, but she wasn't flaunting it in this outfit—khaki pants, a cream-colored shirt, and a chocolate brown jacket.

The last time I'd seen Molly, she'd been a starved-looking thing, dressed in rags and twitching at every sound and motion, like a feral cat—which was hardly surprising, given that she'd been fighting a covert war against a group called the Fomor while dodging the cops and the Wardens of the White Council. She was still lean and a little hyperalert, her eyes trying to watch the whole world at once, but that sense of overly coiled spring tension was much reduced.

She looked good. Noticing that made things stir under the surface, things that shouldn't have been, and I abruptly looked away.

"Uh," she said. "Harry?"

“You look better than the last time I saw you, kiddo,” I said.

She grinned, briefly. “Right back atcha.”

I snorted. “It’d be hard to look worse. For either of us, I guess.”

She glanced at me. “Yeah. I’m a lot better. I’m still not . . .” She shrugged. “I’m not exactly Little Miss Stability. At least, not yet. But I’m working on it.”

“Sometimes I think that’s where most of us are,” I said. “Fighting off the crazy as best we can. Trying to become something better than we were. It’s that second bit that’s important.”

She smiled, and didn’t say anything else. Within a few moments, she had turned the Caddy into a private parking lot.

“I don’t have any money for parking,” I said.

“Don’t need it.” She paused and rolled down the cracked window to wave at an attendant operating the gate. He glanced up from his book, smiled at her, and pushed a button. The gate opened, and Molly pulled the Caddy into the lot. She drove down the length of it, and pulled the car carefully into a covered parking spot. “Okay. Come on.”

We got out of the car, and Molly led me to a doorway leading into an adjacent apartment building. She opened the door with a key, but instead of moving to the elevators, she guided me to another doorway to one side of the entrance. She unlocked that one too, and went down two flights of stairs to a final door. I could sense magical defenses on the doors and the stairs without even making an effort to open myself up to it. That was a serious bunch of security spells. Molly opened the second door and said, “Please come in.” She smiled at Toot. “And your crew with you, of course.”

“Thanks,” I said, and followed her inside.

Molly had an apartment.

She had an apartment big enough for Hugh Hefner’s birthday party.

The living room was the size of a basketball court, and it had eleven-foot ceilings. There was a little bar separating the kitchen from the rest of the open space. She had a fireplace with what looked like a handmade living room set around it in one corner of the room, and a second section of comfy chairs and a desk tucked into a nook lined with built-in bookshelves. She had a weight bench, too, along with an elliptical machine, both of them expensive European setups. The floors were hardwood, broken up by occasional carpets that probably cost more than the floor space they

covered. A couple of doors led off from the main room. They were oak. Granite countertops. A six-burner gas stove. Recessed lighting.

“Hell’s bells,” I said. “Uh. Nice place.”

Molly shrugged out of her jacket and tossed it onto the back of a couch. “You like?” She walked into the kitchen, opened a cabinet door, and pulled out a first-aid kit.

“I like,” I said. “Uh. How?”

“The svartalves built it for me,” she said.

Svartalves. They were some serious customers in the supernatural scene. Peerless artisans, a very private and independent folk—and they tolerated absolutely no nonsense. No one wants to get on the bad side of a svartalf. They weren’t exactly known for their generosity, either. “You working for them?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “This is mine. I bought it from them.”

I blinked again. “With what?”

“Honor,” she said. She muttered something and flicked a hand at a chandelier hanging over the table in the little dining area. It began to glow with a pure white light as bright as any collection of incandescent bulbs. “Bring him over here, and we’ll see if we can’t help him.”

I did so, transferring Toot from the skull to the table as gently as possible. Molly leaned down over him, peering. “Right through the breastplate? What hit you, Toot-toot?”

“A big fat jerk!” Toot replied, wincing. “He had a real sword, too. You know how hard it is to convince any of you big people to make us a sword we can actually use?”

“I saw his gear,” I said. “I totally liked yours better, Major General. Way cooler and more stylish than that stupid black-knight look.”

Toot gave me a brief, fierce grin. “Thank you, my lord!”

Toot got out of his ruined armor with effort, and with Molly’s cautious, steady-fingered help I managed to clean the wound and bandage it. It looked ugly, and Toot was anything but happy during the process, but he was clearly uncomfortable and weary, rather than being badly hurt. Once the wound was taken care of, Toot promptly flopped onto the table and went to sleep.

Molly smiled, got a clean towel out of a cabinet, and draped it over the little guy. Toot seized it and curled up beneath it with a sigh.

“All right,” Molly said, picking up the first-aid kit. She beckoned me to follow her to the kitchen. “Your turn. Off with the shirt.”

“Not until you buy me dinner,” I said.

For a second, she froze, and I wondered whether that had come out like the joke it had sounded like in my mind. Then she recovered. Molly arched her eyebrow in a look that was disturbingly like that of her mother (a woman around with whom a wise man will not mess) and folded her arms.

“Fine,” I said, rolling my eyes. I shrugged my way out of the ruined tux.

“Jesus,” Molly said softly, looking at me. She leaned around me, frowning at my back. “You look like a passion play.”

“Doesn’t feel so bad,” I said.

“It might if one of these cuts gets infected,” Molly said. “Just . . . just stand there and hold still. Man.” She went to the cabinet and came back with a big brown bottle of hydrogen peroxide and a couple of kitchen towels. I watched her walking back and forth. “We’ll start with your back. Lean on the counter.”

I did, resting my elbows on the granite, still watching her. Molly fumbled with the supplies for a second, then bit her lower lip and began to move with purpose. She started dribbling peroxide onto the cuts on my back in little bursts of cold liquid that might have made me jump before I’d spent so much time in Arctis Tor. It burned a little, and then fizzed enthusiastically.

“So, not one question?” I asked her.

“Hmmm?” She didn’t look up from her work.

“I come back from the dead, I sort of expected . . . I don’t know. A little shock. And about a million questions.”

“I knew you were alive,” Molly said.

“Yeah, I sort of figured. How?” She didn’t answer, and after a moment I realized the likely answer. “My godmother.”

“She takes her Yoda-ing seriously.”

“I remember,” I said, keeping my tone neutral. “How long have you known?”

“Several weeks,” Molly said. “There are so many cuts here, I don’t think I have enough Band-Aids. We’ll have to wrap it, I guess.”

“I’ll just put a clean shirt over them,” I said. “Look, it isn’t a big deal. Little marks like that are going to be gone in a day or two.”

“Little . . . Winter Knight stuff?”

“Pretty much,” I said. “Mab . . . kinda gave me the tour during my recovery.”

“What happened?” she asked.

I found my eyes wandering to Bob’s skull. Telling Molly what was going on would mean that she was involved. It would draw her into the conflict. I didn’t want to expose her to that kind of danger—not again.

Of course, it probably wasn’t my sole decision. And besides, Molly had intervened in an assassination that had been really close to succeeding. Whoever was behind the swarm of piranha pixies had probably seen it. Molly was already in the fight. If I started keeping things from her now, it would only hinder her chances of surviving it.

I didn’t want her involved, but she’d earned the right to make that choice for herself.

So I gave it to her, straight, succinct, and with zero editing except for the bit about Halloween. It felt sort of strange. I hardly ever tell anyone that much truth. The truth is dangerous. She listened, her large eyes steadily focused on a point around my chin.

When I finished, all she said was, “Turn around.”

I did, and she started working on the cuts on my chest, arms, and face. Again, cleaning the wounds was a little uncomfortable, but nothing more. I watched her tending me. I couldn’t read her expression. She didn’t look up at my eyes while she worked, and she kept her manner brisk and steady, very businesslike.

“Molly,” I said, as she finished.

She paused, still not looking up at me.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I had to ask you to help me . . . do what I did. I’m sorry that I didn’t make you stay home from Chichén Itzá. I never should have exposed you to that. You weren’t ready.”

“No kidding,” Molly said quietly. “But . . . I wasn’t really taking no for an answer at the time, either. Neither of us made smart choices that night.”

“Maybe. But only one of us is the mentor,” I said. “I’m supposed to be the one who knows what’s going on.”

Molly shook her head several times, a jerky motion. “Harry—it’s over. Okay? It’s done. It’s the past. Let it stay there.”

“Sure you want that?”

“I am.”

“Okay.” I picked up a paper towel and dabbed at a few runnels of peroxide bubbling their way down my stomach. “Well. Now all I need is a clean shirt.”

Molly pointed at one of the oak doors. “In there. There are two dressers and a closet. Nothing fancy, but I’m pretty sure it will all fit you.”

I blinked several times. “Um. What?”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “Harry . . . duh. I knew you were alive. That meant you’d be coming back. Lea told me to keep it to myself, so I got a place ready for you.” She took a quick step back into the kitchen, opened a drawer, and came back with a small brass key. “Here, this will get you past the locks, and past the svartalves’ wards and past my defenses.”

I took the key, frowning. “Um . . .”

“I’m not asking you to shack up with me, Harry,” Molly said, her tone dry. “It’s just . . . until you get back on your feet. Or . . . or just as long as you’re in town and need a place to stay.”

“Did you think I couldn’t take care of it myself?”

“Of course not,” Molly said. “But . . . you know. I guess I think that maybe you shouldn’t have to?” She looked up at me uncertainly. “You were there when I needed you. I figured it was my turn now.”

I looked away before I got all emotional. The kid had gotten this place together, made some kind of alliance with a very suspicious and cautious supernatural nation, furnished a room for me, *and* picked me up a wardrobe? In just a few weeks? When she’d been living in rags on the street all the time for the better part of a year before that?

“I’m impressed, grasshopper,” I said. “Seriously.”

“This isn’t the impressive part,” she said. “But I don’t think we have time to get into that right now, given what you’ve got going.”

“Let’s survive Halloween,” I said, “and then maybe we can sit and have a nice talk. Molly, you shouldn’t have done this for me.”

“Ego much?” she asked, the ghost of her old, irreverent self lurking in her eyes. “I got this place for *me*, Harry. I lived my whole life in one home. Living on the street wasn’t . . . wasn’t a good place for me to put myself back together. I needed someplace . . . someplace . . .” She frowned.

“Yours?” I suggested.

“Stable,” she said. “Quiet. And mine. Not that you aren’t welcome here. While you need it.”

“I suppose you didn’t get those clothes for my sake, either.”

“Maybe I started dating basketball teams,” Molly said, her eyes actually sparkling for a moment. “You don’t know.”

“Sure I do,” I said.

She started putting the kit away. “Think of the clothes as . . . as a birthday present.” She looked up at me for a second and gave me a hesitant smile. “It’s really good to see you, Harry. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’d give you a hug, but I’d bleach and bloodstain your clothes at the same time.”

“Rain check,” Molly said. “I’m, uh . . . Working up to hugs might take a while.” She took a deep breath. “Harry, I know you’ve got your hands full already, but there’s something you need to know.”

I frowned. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She rubbed her arms with her hands as though cold. “I’ve kind of been visiting your island.”

In the middle of the southern reaches of Lake Michigan lies an island that doesn’t appear on any charts, maps, or satellite images. It’s a nexus point of ley lines of dark energy, and it doesn’t like company. It encourages people who come near it to get lost and wander away. Planes fly over the thing all the time, but no one sees it. A few years back, I’d bound myself to the island, and the world-class genius loci that watched over it. I’d named it Demonreach, and knew relatively little about it, beyond that it was an ally.

When I’d been shot and plunged into the dark waters of Lake Michigan, it had taken Mab and Demonreach both to preserve my life. I’d woken up from a coma in a cavern beneath the island’s surface with plants growing into my freaking veins like some kind of organic IV line. It was a seriously weird kind of place.

“How did you get there?” I asked.

“In a boat. Duh.”

I gave her a look. “You know what I mean.”

She smiled, the expression a little sad. “After you’ve had someone like the Corpsetaker pound your mind into pomegranate seeds, a psychic No Trespassing sign seems kinda slow-pitch.”

“Heh,” I said. “Point. But it’s a dangerous place, Molly.”

“And it’s getting worse,” she said.

I shifted my weight uneasily. “Define ‘worse.’”

“Energy is building up there. Like . . . like steam in a boiler. I know I’m still new at this—but I’ve talked with Lea about it and she agrees.”

God, she was dragging this out, making me wonder what she knew. I hate that. “Agrees with *what*?”

“Um,” Molly said, looking down. “Harry. I think that within the next few days, the island is going to explode. And I think that when it does, it will take about half the Midwest with it.”

Chapter

Fourteen

“Of course it is,” I said. I looked around and grabbed the first-aid kit, then started stomping toward the indicated guest bedroom. “I *swear*, this *stupid* town. Why does every hideous supernatural thing that happens happen *here*? I’m gone for a few months and *augh*. Be right back. Grrssll frrrsl rassle mrrrfl.”

There was a light switch in the bedroom and it worked. The lightbulb stayed on and everything. I scowled up at it suspiciously. Normally when I’m in a snit like this, lightbulbs don’t survive eye contact, much less my Yosemite Sam impersonation. Evidently, the svartalves had worked out a fix for technological grumpy-wizard syndrome.

And the room . . . well.

It reminded me of home.

My apartment had been tiny. You could have fit it into Molly's main room half a dozen times, easy. My old place was almost the same size as her guest bedroom. She'd furnished it with secondhand furniture, like my place had been. There was a small fireplace, with a couple of easy chairs and a comfortable-looking couch. There were scuffed-up old bookshelves, cheap and sturdy, lining the walls, and they contained what was probably meant to be the beginning of a replacement for my old paperback fiction library. Over toward where my bedroom used to be was a bed, though it was a full rather than a twin. A counter stood where my kitchen counter had been, more or less, and there was a small fridge and what looked like an electric griddle on it.

I looked around. It wasn't home, but . . . it was in the right zip code. And it was maybe the single sweetest thing anyone had ever done for me.

For just a second, I remembered the scent of my old apartment, wood smoke and pine cleaner and a little bit of musty dampness that was inevitable in a basement, and if I squinted my eyes up really tight, I could almost pretend I was there again. That I was home.

But they'd burned down my home. I had repaid them for it, with interest, but I still felt oddly hollow in my guts when I thought about how I would never see it again. I missed Mister, my cat. I missed my dog. I missed the familiarity of having a place that I knew, that was a shelter. I missed my life.

I'd been away from home for what felt like a very long time.

There was a closet by the bed, with a narrow dresser on two sides. It was full of clothes. Nothing fancy. T-shirts. Old jeans. Some new underwear and socks, still in their plastic packaging. Some shorts, some sweatpants. Several pairs of used sneakers the size of small canoes, and some hiking boots that were a tolerable fit. I went for the boots. My feet are not for the faint of sole, ah, ha, ha.

I ditched the tux, cleaned up and covered the injuries on my legs, and got dressed in clothes that felt familiar and comfortable for the first time since I'd taken a bullet in the chest.

I came out of the bedroom holding the bloodied clothes, and glanced at Molly. She pointed a finger at the fire. I nodded my thanks, remembered to take the bejeweled cuff links out of the pockets of the pants, and tossed what was left into the fire. Blood that had already been soaked up by cloth

wouldn't be easy to use against me, even if someone had broken in and taken it somehow, but it's one of those things best not left to chance.

"Okay," I said, settling down on the arm of a chair. "The island. Who else knows about it?"

"Lea," Molly said. "Presumably she told Mab. I assumed word would get to you."

"Mab," I said, "is apparently the sort of mom who thinks you need to find things out for yourself."

"Those are real?"

I grunted. "Have you had any contact with Demonreach?"

"The spirit itself?" Molly shook her head. "It . . . tolerates my presence, but it isn't anything like cordial or friendly. I think it knows I'm connected to you."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm sure it does. If it wanted you off the island, you'd be gone." I shook my head several times. "Let me think."

Molly did. She went into the kitchen, to the fridge. She came out with a couple of cans of Coca-Cola, popped them both open, and handed me one. We tapped the cans together gently and drank. I closed my eyes and tried to order my thoughts. Molly waited.

"Okay," I said. "Who else knows?"

"No one," she said.

"You didn't tell the Council?"

Molly grimaced at the mention of the White Council of Wizards. "How would I do that, exactly? Given that according to them, I'm a wanted fugitive, and that no one there would blink twice if I was executed on sight."

"Plenty of them would blink twice," I said quietly. "Why do you think you're still walking around?"

Molly frowned and eyed me. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that Lea's clearly taught you a lot, Molly, and it's obvious that your skills have matured a lot in the past year. But there are people there with *decades*' worth of years like the one you've had. Maybe even centuries. If they really wanted you found and dead, you'd be found and dead. Period."

"Then how come I'm not?" Molly asked.

"Because there are people on the Council who wouldn't like it," I said. "My g— Ebenezer can take anyone else on the Council on any given day, if

he gets mad at them. That's probably enough—but Ramirez likes you, too. And since he'd be the guy who would, theoretically, be in charge of capturing you, anyone else who did it would be walking all over his turf. He's young, too, but he's earned respect. And most of the young guns in the Wardens would probably side with him in an argument." I sighed. "Look, the White Council has always been a gigantic mound of assorted jerks. But they're not inhuman."

"Except sometimes," Molly said, her voice bitter.

"Humanity matters," I said. "You're still here, aren't you?"

"No thanks to them," she said.

"If they hadn't shown up at Chichén Itzá, none of us would have made it out."

Molly frowned at that. "That wasn't the White Council."

True, technically. That had been the Grey Council. But since the Grey Council was mostly made up of members of the White Council working together in secret, it still counted, in my mind. Sort of.

"Those guys," I said, "are what the Council should be. And might be. And when we needed help the most, they were *there*." I sipped some more Coke. "I know the world seems dark and ugly sometimes. But there are still good things in it. And good people. And some of them are on the Council. They haven't been in contact with you because they can't be—but believe me, they've been shielding you from getting in even more trouble than you've already had."

"You assume," she said stubbornly.

I sighed. "Kid, you're going to be dealing with the Council your whole life. And that could be for three or four hundred years. I'm not saying you shouldn't get in their faces when they're in the wrong. But you might want to consider the idea that burning your bridges behind you could prove to be a very bad policy a century or two from now."

Molly looked like she wanted to disagree with me—but she looked pensive, too. She drank some more of her Coke, frowning.

Damn. Why couldn't I have figured out that particular piece of advice to give to myself when I was her age? It might have made my life a whole lot simpler.

"Back to the island," I said. "How sure are you about the level of energy involved?"

She considered her answer. “I was at Chichén Itzá,” she said. “It’s all pretty blurry, but I remember a lot of fragments really well. One of the things I remember is the tension that had built up under the main ziggurat. Do you remember?”

I did, though it had been pretty far down on my list of priorities at the time. The Red King had ordered dozens, maybe hundreds of human sacrifices to build up a charge for the spell he was going to use to wipe me and everyone connected to me by blood from the face of the earth. That energy had been humming inside the very stones of the city. Go to a large power station sometime, and stand near the capacitors. The air is full of the same kind of silently vibrating potential.

“I remember,” I said.

“It’s like that. Maybe more. Maybe less. But it’s really, really *big*. It’s scaring the animals away.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

Molly checked a tall old grandfather clock, ticking steadily away in a corner. “Three fifteen.”

“Ten minutes to the marina. An hour and change to the island and back. Call it an hour for a service call.” I shook my head and snorted. “If we leave right now, that puts us back here in town right around sunrise, wouldn’t you say?”

“More or less,” she agreed.

“Mab,” I said, in the same tone I reserved for curse words.

“What?”

“That’s why the lockdown,” I said. Then clarified. “Mab closed the border with Faerie until dawn.”

Molly was no dummy. I could see the wheels turning as she figured it out. “She’s giving you time to deal with it unmolested.”

“Relatively unmolested,” I corrected her. “I’m starting to think that Mab mainly helps those who help themselves. Okay. Once Maeve gets to start moving pieces in and out of Faerie in the morning, things are going to get busy, fast. Also, I don’t want to be working with the magical equivalent of a reactor core the next time Hook and his band of minipsychos catch up with me. So.”

Molly nodded. “So we go to the island first?”

“We go to the island *now*.”

* * *

Molly had the apartment building's security call us a cab on the theory that it would be slightly less noticeable than the monster car now in the parking lot. They took her orders as if she were some kind of visiting dignitary. Whatever she'd done for the svartalves, they had taken it very, very seriously. I left Toot sleeping off the fight, with some junk food left out where he would find it when he woke up. Bob was in a cloth messenger bag I had slung over one shoulder, still buttoned up tight. Molly glanced at the bag, then at me, but she didn't ask any questions.

I felt like wincing. Molly hadn't ever exactly been shy about pushing the boundaries of my authority in our relationship as teacher and apprentice. Her time with my faerie godmother, the Leanansidhe, Mab's girl Friday, was starting to show. Lea had firm and unyielding opinions about boundaries. People who pushed them got turned into dogs—or something dogs ate.

The marina was one of several in the city. Lake Michigan provided an ideal venue for all kinds of boating, sailing, and shipping, and there was a nautical community firmly established all around the shores of the Great Lake. I'm not really part of it. I say "wall" instead of "bulkhead," and I'm not quite sure if port is left, or if it's something best left until after dinner. I get the terms wrong a lot. I don't care.

Marinas are parking lots for boats. Lots of walkways were built on piers or were floating pontoon bridge-style in long, straight rows. Boats were parked in individual lots much like in any automobile parking lot. Most of the boats showed signs of being prepared for winter—November can be a dangerous time for pleasure boating on Lake Michigan, and most people pack it in right around Halloween. Windows and hatches were covered, doors closed, and there were very few lights on in the marina.

Which was good, because I was breaking and entering again.

I'd had a key to the marina's locks at one time, but I'd lost track of it when I got shot, drowned, died, got revived into a coma, haunted my friends for a while, and then woke up in Mab's bed.

(My life. Hell's bells.)

Anyway, I didn't have a key or any time to spare, so when I got to the locked gate to the marina, I abused my cool new superstrength and forced the chain-link gate open in a low squeal of bending metal. It took me about three seconds.

“Cool,” Molly murmured from behind me. “Wait. Did you do the car, too?”

I grunted, a little out of breath from the effort.

“Holy cow,” Molly said. “You’re like Spider-Man strong.”

“Nah,” I panted. “Spider-Man can press ten tons. I can do sets with four hundred kilos.”

“Kilos,” Molly said.

“I inherited the last guy’s weight set,” I said. “It’s this fancy European thing. Not sure exactly how heavy that is in English.”

“In England they use kilos,” Molly said wryly. “But it would also be around sixty or sixty-five stone.”

I stopped and looked at her.

She smiled sweetly at me.

I sighed and kept on walking out to the boat.

It’s called the *Water Beetle*. It could be the stunt double for the boat of the crusty old fisherman in *Jaws*, except that it had been freshly painted and refinished and it looked a little too nice. I stopped on the dock in front of it.

There. I’d been standing right there, looking out toward the parking lot when it happened. My chest didn’t actually feel a pang of agony, but the memory of it was so sharp and clear that I might as well have reexperienced it—it hadn’t hurt at the time, not until I’d been in the water for a while, but it had been pure fire once Mab and Demonreach had succeeded in keeping my soul and body knit together.

And to think, I’d had to call in a solid to get the guy to come shoot me. It seemed like kind of a waste, at this point. I’d been sure that if I had managed to win the day, thanks to my deal with Mab, that I would be a monster in need of a good putting down. I’d scheduled my own assassin, and Molly had used her unique talents to help me forget that it was coming. Once the day had been safely saved, the plan had been to circumvent the evolution of monster-Harry by way of high-powered rifle.

Except I’d survived. Next, I guess, came the monster-Harry part.

I had it on good authority that it didn’t have to end with me going all nutty and villainous—assuming an archangel was trustworthy, which I didn’t. I also had it on good authority that it would end like that anyway. So at the end of the day, I really didn’t know what was going to happen to me in the future.

Heh. Why should I be any different?

The *Water Beetle* was definitely not battened down for winter, not yet. She was a sturdy, tough little craft—not fast, but not afraid of much of anything nature would throw at her, either. Her gangplank was down, and “batten” and “gangplank” are about the only boat words I’m comfortable with. I moved up it without hesitation, even in the shadowy dimness of late night on the marina. I was familiar with the boat. I’d visited the island on it on multiple occasions.

I went aboard and up onto the roof of the wheelhouse, where the driver’s position was. I flicked on a couple of tired old bulbs and checked the gauges. Fuel, oil, good. She had more than enough for the trip out to the island and back. The key wasn’t in the ignition—it would be in the small safe down in the boat’s cabin, but I knew the combination.

“We’re good,” I called softly. “Come on.”

Molly came up the gangplank while I went down into the cabin.

I got no warning whatsoever, no sound, no visible motion, nothing. One second I was going down the stairs, and the next my face and chest were being crushed against the wall and something extremely sharp was pressing against my neck, just beneath my right ear. Cool, iron-strong fingers were spread over my whole head, pressing it to the wall. The message was clear—if I struggled or made any sound, something pointy would go into my brain.

I froze. It seemed smart. If my attacker wanted me dead, I wouldn’t still be able to reason that he could already have killed me.

“Hello, precious,” murmured a man’s very soft voice. “I think you’re on the wrong boat.”

I sagged suddenly in relief. “Stars and stones,” I breathed. “Thomas, you scared the hell out of me.”

The power of the cold fingers against my head did not falter in the slightest, but there was a short, stunned silence. Then the pressure against my skull became furious. “Do you think this is funny?” my half brother said, his voice becoming louder, fairly boiling with anger. “Do you think I am amused by this kind of prank?”

“Thomas,” I said. “It’s *me*.”

“Sure it is,” Thomas snarled, the pressure against me surging for a second. “Harry Dresden is *dead*.”

I thought my eyeballs were trying to squeeze their way out of their sockets. “Glurk!”

“Now,” he growled. “I’m going to give you exactly three seconds to start telling me the truth, or I swear to God they will never find enough pieces of you to identify the body.”

He meant it, Hell’s bells. He was furious. If I were the kind of guy who ever got scared by anything, ever, which of course I am not, I would have been feeling extremely nervous at that moment.

“Mab!” I ground out. “Dammit, Thomas, you lunatic. It was Mab!”

“Mab sent you?” Thomas demanded.

“Mab *saved* me!” I rasped. “Hell’s bells, man, it’s *me*!”

Thomas growled, lower, but he didn’t pancake my skull or stick something sharp and metal into my brain. Thomas was strong—stronger than me. A vampire of the White Court can bring out that kind of strength only on special occasions, but Thomas was a very well-fed vampire. I knew that if he wanted to do it, Winter Knight steroids or no, he could twist me like a congressman’s logic.

“Molly!” he called out. “I know you’re out there. I can smell you.”

A few seconds later, there were soft steps on the gangplank, and then the shadows moved at the door. “I’m here.”

“What the fuck is *this*?” he demanded.

“I’m not sure,” Molly said. “It’s dark. But if I could see, I’d tell you that I try not to put myself between two siblings when they’re fighting. It never seems to help.”

Two or three flabbergasted seconds passed. Then the pressure against my skull was gone so fast that I all but fell over. I grabbed myself before I could and shook my head. “Ow. Nice to see you again, too, man.”

He moved silently across the cabin and something clicked. A battery-powered tap light came to life, bringing a dim if adequate level of light to the compartment.

My brother was a hair shy of six feet tall. He looked much as I remembered him: dark, glossy hair fell to his shoulders. His skin was even paler than mine. His eyes were storm-cloud grey, though they looked brighter than that now, glinting with little metallic flecks that revealed his anxiety and anger. He and I shared a similar scowl, all dark brows and intense eyes, and his mouth was twisted into a silent snarl as he stared at me. He was wearing a pair of jeans, and that was it. The cabin’s bunk had

been folded down and slept in. I'd woken him when I came aboard. In his right hand he held a metal tent stake. There was both dirt and rust on it. Can you get gangrene in your brain?

"Oh," Molly said. She stared at Thomas for a moment. "Oh, um. My."

Oh, I forgot to mention it: My brother is the kind of man whom women stalk. In cooperative *packs*. I'd say he was model pretty, except that as far as I could tell, there weren't any models as pretty as he was. He had muscles that rippled even when he was motionless and relaxed, and it was utterly unfair.

And . . . I didn't do a lot of appraising myself in the mirror, typically, but I suddenly realized that sometime in the past few years, Thomas had stopped looking like my older brother. He looked younger than me. Wizards can live a long time, but we don't look youthful while we do it. Thomas was a vampire. He'd look this good until he stopped breathing.

The guy barely works out, eats whatever he wants, and gets to look that good *and* that young his whole life. How is that fair?

"You can't be my brother," Thomas said, staring hard at me. "My brother is dead. You know how I know?"

"Thomas," I began.

"Because my *brother* would have contacted me," Thomas snarled. "If he were alive, he would have gotten in *touch* with me. He would have let me know."

Molly winced and looked away as though she'd just heard a very loud and very unpleasant sound. I'm not sensitive to the emotions of others the way Molly is, but I didn't need to be to know that Thomas was boiling over in reaction to seeing me there.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Molly said. "I can't . . . It hurts."

"Go," I said softly.

She nodded and withdrew onto the deck of the boat, shutting the door behind her.

My brother stayed where he was, staring at me. "All this time," he said. "And not a word."

"I was dead," I said quietly. "Or the next-best thing to it. Maybe it was more like a coma. Hell, I thought I was dead."

"When did you wake up?" he asked. His voice was carefully neutral.

"About three months ago," I said. "Wasn't in good shape. I've been recovering since then."

“Three months,” he said. “No phones there?”

“No, actually. I was in a cave on the island for a while. Then Arctis Tor.”

“No way for you to make contact?” he asked calmly. “*You?*”

Silence fell heavily. Thomas knew the kinds of things I could do. If I want someone to get a message, I can generally make sure it gets done—one way or another.

“What do you want me to say, man?” I responded. “I sold out, Thomas.”

“Yeah, when you hurt your back. You told us. For Maggie. To get her home safe.”

“Right.”

He was silent for a second. Then he said, “Empty night, why didn’t I put that together . . . ?” He sighed. “Let me guess. You tried to kill yourself after she was home safe, right?”

I snorted through my nose. “Something like that.”

He shook his head in silence for several seconds. Then he took a deep breath, looked up at me again, and said, “You. *Moron.*”

“Hey,” I said.

“You. *Idiot.*”

“Dammit, Thomas,” I said. “I haven’t lived my life the way I have to watch myself get turned into—” I broke off suddenly, and looked away.

“Into what, Harry?” he asked. “Say it.”

I shook my head.

“No, you don’t get a pass on this one, little brother,” Thomas said. “Say it.”

“Into a monster,” I snapped.

“Right,” Thomas said. “A monster. Like me.”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“It is exactly what you meant,” he spat, angry. “You arrogant . . .” He flung the tent spike in a fit of pure frustration. It tumbled end over end once, and sank two inches into a wooden beam. “You were going to be tempted, eh? Going to have to deal with monstrous urges? Going to have to face the possibility that you might change if you lost focus for a minute? Lose control of yourself? Maybe hurt somebody you care about?” He shook his head. “Cry me a fucking river, man. Boo-fucking-hoo.”

I couldn’t look at him.

“You’d rather be *dead* than be like me,” he said. “That’s one hell of a thing to say to your brother.”

“It wasn’t about that,” I said.

“It kind of was,” he snapped back. “Dammit, Harry.”

“I can’t go back and change it,” I said. “Maybe I would if I could. But it’s done. I’m sorry, but it is.”

“You should have talked to me,” he said.

“Thomas.”

“You should have *trusted* me,” he said. “Dammit, man.”

The memory of those desperate hours hit me hard. I felt so helpless. My daughter had been taken away from her home, and for all the times I had gone out on a limb for others, no one had seemed willing to do the same for me. The White Council for whom I had fought a war had turned its back on me. Time had been running out. And the life of a little girl who had never known her father was on the line.

“Why?” I asked him tiredly. “What would it have changed? What could you possibly have said that would have made a difference?”

“That I was your brother, Harry,” he said. “That I loved you. That I knew a few things about denying the dark parts of your nature. And that we would get through it.” He put his elbows on his knees and rested his forehead on his hands. “That we’d figure it out. That you weren’t alone.”

Stab.

Twist.

He was right. It was just that simple. My brother was right. I had been self-involved and arrogant. Maybe it was understandable, given the pressures on me at the time, but that didn’t mean that I hadn’t made bad calls of colossal proportion.

I should have talked to him. Trusted him. I hadn’t even tried to consider anyone other than Maggie, hadn’t even thought to start seeking support from my family. I’d just moved right along to the part of the plan where I hired one of the world’s premier supernatural assassins to whack me. That probably said something about the state of despair I’d been in at the time.

But it didn’t say as much as I had about my brother. He was right about that, too. It wasn’t something I had ever consciously faced before, but I had told Thomas, with my actions, that it was better to be dead than a

monster—a monster like him. And actions speak far more loudly than words.

I always thought it would get easier to be a person as I aged. But it just gets more and more complicated.

“I’m sorry. I should have talked to you then,” I said. My voice sounded hoarse. “I should have talked to you three months ago. But I couldn’t because I made the wrong call. I didn’t think I should contact anyone.”

“Why not?” he asked, looking up.

“Because I didn’t deserve to do it,” I said quietly. “Because I sold out. Because I was ashamed.”

He came to his feet, angry. “Oh, absolutely, I get that. I mean, you had to stay away. Otherwise we all would have known that you *aren’t perfect*, you gawking, stupid, arrogant, egotistical . . .”

He hit my chest and wrapped his arms around me so hard that I felt my ribs creaking.

“ . . . clumsy, short-tempered, exasperating, goofy, useless . . .”

I hugged my brother back and listened to a steady string of derogatory adjectives until he finished it.

“ . . . asshole.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I missed you, too.”

Chapter

Fifteen

Thomas got us to the island navigating by the stars.

I kept checking the ship's compass. Not because I didn't trust my brother, but because I had no freaking idea how he managed to keep the *Water Beetle* on course without one. Molly had spent the first part of the trip down in the cabin, wrapped up in some blankets: It was a chilly night out on the lake. Thomas and I were comfortable in shirts. I suspected my apprentice was still feeling the aftereffects of standing too close to my reunion with Thomas.

I filled Thomas in on recent events on the way out, omitting only the details on the immortal-killing thing. I had a sinking feeling that knowing something that important about beings that powerful was an excellent way

to get yourself killed horribly on any night of the year that *wasn't* Halloween.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Thomas said, when I finished the briefing. "Have you seen her yet?"

I scowled. "Seen who?"

"You tell me," he said.

"Just you and Molly," I said.

He gave me a look of profound disappointment, and shook his head.

"Thanks, Dad," I said.

"You're alive," he said. "You owe it to her to go see her."

"Maybe when this is done," I said.

"You might be dead by then," he said. "Empty night, Harry. Didn't your little adventure in the lake teach you a damned thing?"

I scowled some more. "Like what?"

"Like life is short," he said. "Like you don't know when it's going to end. Like some things, left unsaid, can't ever be said." He sighed. "I'm a freaking vampire, man. I rip out pieces of people's souls and eat them, and make them happy to have it happen."

I didn't say anything. That was what my brother was. He was more than that, too, but it would have been stupid to deny that part of him.

"I'm mostly a monster," he said. "And even I know that she deserves to hear you tell her you love her. Even if she never gets anything more than that."

I frowned. "Wait. Who are we talking about here?"

"Either," he said. "Stop being an idiot. Stop flagellating yourself about how you endanger her by being in her life. You're the only you *in* her life, Harry. Believe me. They don't make replacements for a guy like you."

"They don't make replacements for anybody," I said tiredly. "We'll see."

Thomas looked at me like he wanted to push. But he didn't.

"So what about you?" I asked. "Justine and her playmate keeping you company?"

"Playmates," Thomas said absently. "Plural."

Totally not fair.

"Hmph," I said.

He frowned. "Hey. How did you know about that?"

“Ghost me was there the night Justine decided she’d had enough of you moping,” I said.

“Ghost you was there for how long, exactly?” he asked.

“I left before it got to an NC-17.”

He snorted. “Yeah, well, Justine . . . has sort of become a dietitian.”

“Uh, what?”

He shrugged. “You are what you eat, right? Same principle applies to vampires. Justine thinks I’m sad, she brings home someone happy. She thinks I’m too tense, someone laid-back and calm.” He pursed his lips. “Really . . . it’s been kind of nice. Balanced, like.” His eyes narrowed and flickered through a few paler shades. “And I get to be with *Justine* again. Even if it was hell, that would make it worthwhile.”

“Dude,” I said, making the word a disgusted sound. “Single guys everywhere hate you. Starting with me.”

“I know, right?” he asked, nodding and smiling. Then he looked ahead and pointed. “There, see it?”

I peered ahead into the black and found a giant block of more solid black. We were at the island.

The cabin door opened and Molly emerged, the blanket still wrapped around her shoulders. Her face still looked drawn, but not as pale as it had before we left the marina. She came up the steps to the top of the wheelhouse and stood beside me. “Thomas,” she asked. “Why were you down at the boat tonight?”

Thomas blinked and looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“I mean why were you sleeping on board?”

“Because you didn’t tell me what time you’d be there, and I got sleepy,” he said.

Molly glanced aside at Thomas, and then at me. “I asked you to do it?”

“Uh, yeah,” Thomas said, snorting. “You called around ten.”

Molly kept looking at me, frowning. “No. No, I didn’t.”

Thomas promptly cut the throttle on the boat. The *Water Beetle* began coasting to a halt, and the sound of the water hitting her hull resurfaced as the rattle of her engines died.

“Okay,” Thomas said. “Uh. What the hell is going on, then?”

“Molly,” I said, “are you sure?”

“None of my issues have included memory loss or unconscious actions,” she said.

Thomas squinted back at her. "If they had, how would you know it?"

Molly frowned. "Valid point. But . . . there's been no evidence of that, to my knowledge. I'm as confident about that as anything else I perceive."

"So if Molly didn't call me . . ." Thomas began.

"Who did?" I finished.

Water slapped against the hull.

"What do we do?" Molly asked.

"If someone set us up to be here," Thomas said, "it's a trap."

"If it's a trap, they sure as hell didn't try very hard to hide it," I said.

"All we really know is that someone wanted us here."

Molly nodded. "Do you think . . . ?"

"Mab's work?" I asked. "Having my ride prepared? Yeah, maybe."

"If your new boss wanted you on the island, wouldn't she just have told you to go there?" Thomas asked.

"Seems like," I said. "Taking her orders is pretty much my job now."

Molly snorted softly.

"Maybe I'll grow into it," I said. "You don't know."

Thomas snorted softly.

More water sounds.

We didn't have a lot of choice, really. Whether or not we'd been manipulated into showing up, there was still a giant potential problem with the island, something that had to be addressed as soon as possible. If I waited, dawn would be upon us, and it was entirely possible I'd be too busy—or dead—to fix the problem before it went boom. Which meant that the only time I had to take real action was right now.

"Just once," I growled, "I'd like to save the goddamned day without a shot clock. You know?"

"The monster business is an easier gig," Thomas said, nodding. "Way, way easier."

Which was my brother's backhanded way of telling me what he thought of me.

"I think we all know I'm not smart enough for that," I said. "Eyes open, everyone. Thomas, pull her up to the dock. Let's see who's waiting for us."

* * *

The island had once been host to a small town, back in the late nineteenth century. It had been home to docks, warehouses, and what might have been a fishery or cannery or something. Probably no more than a couple of hundred people had lived there, at most.

But the people weren't there anymore. And what was left of the town was like some kind of skeleton lying among the trees that had grown up through the floorboards. I don't know what happened to the town. Stories from the time mention only mysterious events in the lake, and an influx of new customers to what passed for a psychiatric care facility of the day. The town itself had been expunged from any records, and not even its name remained to be found. The island, likewise, had vanished from the official record—though if I had to guess, I would say that the reigning authorities at the time decided that covering up the island's existence was the best way to protect people from exposure to it.

Actually, knowing what I know now, I'd guess that the island *made* them come to that conclusion. The island I'd named Demonreach was very much alive.

Most of the world is, actually. People think that civilization and organized religion have somehow erased the spirits that exist in nature, in all the world. They haven't. People aren't the omnipotent force for destruction that we arrogantly believe we are. We can change things, true, but we never really destroyed those old spirits and presences of the wild. We aren't that powerful. We *are* very loud and very self-involved, though, so most people never really understand when they're in the presence of a spirit of the land, what the old Romans called a genius loci.

So, naturally, they also didn't understand when they were in the presence of a truly powerful spirit of the land—a potent spirit like that of, say, Vesuvius.

Or Demonreach.

I'd been to the island on most weekends up until I got shot, and Thomas had often come with me. We'd used some fresh lumber, some material salvaged from the ruined town, and some pontoons made from plastic sheathing and old tractor-tire inner tubes to construct a floating walkway to serve as a dock, anchored to the old pilings that had once supported a much larger structure. Upon completion, I had dubbed it the Whatsup Dock, and Thomas had chucked me twenty feet out into the lake, thus proving his utter lack of appreciation for reference-oriented humor.

(And I'd thrown him *forty* feet out with magic, once I got dry. Because come on, he's my brother. It was the only thing to do.)

The *Water Beetle* came drifting slowly into the dock, and bumped it gently. You had to be a little bit nimble to get over the side of the boat and onto the floating dock, but fortunately for me you didn't need to be a gymnast. We'd limned the outer boards of the floating dock in phosphorescent paint, and in the darkness it was a gently glowing, clearly visible outline. I hit the dock and secured the first line on the ring we'd installed, then walked down the dock and caught the second when Thomas threw it to me. Once the boat had been made fast, Thomas lowered the gangplank (a pirate's life for me!), and Molly padded down it. Thomas came last, buckling on his gun belt, which was currently hung with his ridiculously huge Desert Eagle, just in case we were attacked by a rabid Cape buffalo, and a big old bolo-style machete.

Watching him put the weapons on, I started to feel a little bit naked. I didn't have any of my usual gear, and I'd survived a bunch of nasty situations because I'd had it. I rubbed my hands against the thighs of my jeans, scowling, and tried not to think of how the only gear I had now consisted of a messenger bag and a talking skull.

Thomas noticed. "Oh. Hey, you need a piece, man?"

"They're just so fashionable," I said.

He slipped back aboard and came out with a freaking relic. He tossed it to me.

I caught it, frowning. It was a repeating rifle, a Winchester, complete with the large rounded hoop handle on the lever action. It was seriously heavy, with an octagonal barrel, walnut wood fixtures, and shining brass housing. Elkhorn sights. The gun had a certain comforting mass to it, and I felt like even if it ran out of ammunition, I would still be holding a seriously formidable club. Plus, whatever it was chambered in, a gun that heavy would hardly kick at all. It'd be more like handling a shotgun that pushed against your shoulder, rather than trying to jar it off.

"What am I?" I complained. "John Wayne?"

"You aren't that cool," Thomas said. "It's quick, easy to instinct-shoot, and good to way out past the effective range of a handgun. Lever action, it'll be reliable, keep working right through the apocalypse."

Which was a point in its favor, the way my life had been lately. "Rounds?"

“Traditional, forty-five Colt,” he said. “Knock a big man down in one hit and keep him there. Catch.”

He tossed me an ammo belt heavy with metallic shells that were nearly as big around as my thumb. I slung the belt across my chest, made sure the chamber was empty, but with a shell ready to be levered into it, and balanced the heavy gun up on one shoulder, keeping one hand on the stock.

Molly sighed. “Boys.”

Thomas hooked a thumb back at the boat. “I got a machine gun you can have, Molly.”

“Barbarian,” she said.

“I don’t rate a machine gun?” I asked.

“No, you don’t,” Thomas said, “because you can’t shoot. I just gave you that to make you feel better.”

“You ready?” I asked them.

Molly had her little wands out, one in each hand. Thomas swaggered down the gangplank and looked bored. I nodded at them, turned, and took several quick steps off the dock and onto the stony soil of the island.

My link with the island was an extremely solid and powerful bond—but it existed only when I was actually standing on it. Now that I was, knowledge flooded into me, through me, a wave of absolute information that should have inundated my senses and disoriented me entirely.

But it didn’t.

That was the beauty of intellectus, pure universal knowledge. While I stood on the island, I understood it in a way that was breathtakingly simple to experience and understand, but practically impossible to explain properly. Knowledge of the island just flowed into me. I could tell you how many trees stood upon it (17,429), how many had been taken down by the summer’s storms (seventy-nine), and how many of the apple trees currently bore fruit (twenty-two). I didn’t have to focus on an idea, or wrest the knowledge from the island. I just thought about it and *knew*, the way I knew what my fingers were touching, the way I knew what scents belonged to what foods.

We were alone on the island. That much I knew. But I could also sense a profound unease in the place. Molly’s description had been perfectly accurate. Something was wrong; some kind of horrible strain was upon the island, a pressure so pervasive that the trees themselves had begun to lean away from the island’s heart, stretching their branches toward the waters of

the lake. Without my heightened awareness of the island, I never would have been able to sense the shift of inches across thousands and thousands of branches, but it was real and it was there.

“We’re clear,” I said. “There’s no one else out here.”

“You’re sure?” Thomas asked.

“I’m certain,” I said. “But I’ll stay alert. If I sense anyone showing up, I’ll fire off a shot.”

“Wait,” Thomas said. “Where are you going?”

“Up the hill,” I told him. “Uh . . . up to the tower, I think.”

“Alone? You sure that’s smart?” he asked.

Molly was standing at the end of the dock. She crouched down, reaching a hand out toward the dirt of the island. She brushed her fingers against it and then jerked them away with a shudder. “Ugh. Yes. We don’t want to step off the dock. Not tonight.”

I could hear Thomas’s frown in his voice. “Island’s got its panties in a bunch, eh?”

“I think something bad would happen to us if we tried to go with him,” Molly said, her voice troubled. “Whatever’s happening . . . Demonreach only wants Harry to see what’s going on.”

“Why doesn’t it just marry him?” Thomas muttered under his breath.

“It sort of did,” I said.

“My brother the . . . geosexual?”

I snorted. “Look, think of it as a business partner. And be glad it’s on our side.”

“It isn’t on *our* side,” Molly said quietly. “But . . . I think it might be on yours.”

“Same thing,” I said warningly, out at the island in general. “You hear that? They’re my guests. Be nice.”

The thrumming tension in the island didn’t change. Not in the least. It went on with a kind of glacial inevitability that didn’t give two shakes for the desires of one ephemeral little mortal, wizard or not. I got the feeling that *nice* simply wasn’t in Demonreach’s vocabulary. I’d probably have to be satisfied with it refraining from violence.

“We’ll talk,” I said to the island, trying to make it a threat.

Demonreach didn’t care.

I muttered under my breath, bounced the Winchester on my shoulder, and started walking.

Walking on the island is an odd experience. I'd say it's like walking through your house in the dark, except I've never known a house as well as I knew that island. I knew where every stone lay, where every branch stuck out in my path, knew it without being warned by any senses at all. Walking in the dark was as easy as doing it in broad daylight—easier, even. I'd have had to pay at least a little attention to use my eyes. But here, every step was solid, and every motion I made was minimal, efficient, and necessary.

I made my way through unbroken brush in the dark, hardly making a sound, never tripping once. As I did I noted that Molly had been right about another thing: The clash of energies in the air had created enough dissonance to drive away most of the animals, the ones that had the capacity to readily escape. The deer were gone. Birds and raccoons were gone, and so were the skunks—though that would be one hell of a long swim to the nearest stretch of lakeshore, animals had been known to swim farther. Smaller mammals, mice and squirrels and so on, remained, though they had crowded into the ten yards or so nearest the shoreline all around the island. The snakes were having a field day with that, and evidently weren't bright enough to know that there was a bigger problem brewing.

I found the trail to the top of the hill, the high point on the island, and started up it. There were irregular steps cut into the hillside to make the ascent easier. They were treacherous if you didn't walk carefully, or if you didn't have near-omniscience about the place.

At the top of the hill is a ruined lighthouse made of stone. It's basically just a chewed-up silo shape now, having collapsed long ago. Next to the ruined tower, someone cobbled together a small cottage out of fallen stones. When I first saw it, it had been a square, squat little building with no roof. Thomas and I had been planning on putting the roof back on, so that I could overnight on the island someplace where I could build a fire and stay warm, but we hadn't gotten that far yet when everything had gone sideways. The cottage just sat, empty and forlorn—but a soft golden glow bathed the interior wall I could see from my position. There was the scent of wood smoke on the air.

Someone had built me a fire.

I made my way forward cautiously, looking around with both my awareness and my eyes, just in case my omniscience was in actuality nigh-omniscience, but I couldn't sense any threat. So I went into the cabin and looked around.

There was a fire in the fireplace and a folding table stacked with thick plastic boxes containing jars of food that would stay good for months at a time. The boxes would resist the tampering of critters. There were some camp implements stored in another box, and I took the time to break out a metal coffeepot, went out to the little old iron pump just outside the front door, and filled it. I tossed in a couple of handfuls of coffee grounds, hung it on the swivel arm by the fireplace, and nudged it over the fire.

Then I broke out the skull and set him down on the table. "Okay, Bob," I said. "We have work to do. You been listening?"

"Yeah, yeah," Bob said, his eyelights flickering to life. "Island go boom or something."

"We're on a mission to find out what it's going to do, and why, and how we can stop it."

"Gosh, I'd never have thought of that myself, Harry."

"This is top secret stuff," I said. "Anything you learn here is for me and you only. You go to someone else, I want this whole evening locked away someplace nice and tight. And don't go splitting off another personality on me, like you did with Evil Bob."

"Entirely confidential, check," Bob said. "And it would take a lot more than one night working with *you* to build up enough momentum to spin off a whole new me. I have to actually learn things to make that happen."

"Less insult, more analysis," I said.

The beams from the skull's eye sockets grew brighter. They swept left and right, up and down, panning around like prison searchlights. Bob made thoughtful noises.

I tended the coffeepot. After it had been boiling for a few minutes, I took it off the fire, added a splash of cold water from the pump to settle the grounds, and poured myself a cup. I added a little powdered creamer and a bunch of sugar.

"Might as well drink syrup," Bob muttered.

"Says the guy with no taste buds," I said. I sipped. "Been meaning to have you out here to take a look at the place anyway."

"Uh-huh," Bob said absently.

"So?" I asked.

"Um," Bob said. "I'm still working on the surface layer of spells on the stones of this cottage, Harry."

I frowned. "Uh. What?"

“You know there’re symbols there, right?”

I sipped coffee. “Sure,” I said. “They kinda lit up when—”

Nauseating, mind-numbing horror and pain flashed over my thoughts for a couple of seconds. I’d used my wizard’s Sight to look at the wrong being a couple of years ago, and that isn’t the kind of mistake you ever live down. Now the memory of seeing that thing’s true being was locked into my noggin, and it wouldn’t go away or fade into the past—not ever.

That’s bad. But the really bad part is that I’ve gotten used to it. It just caused a stutter step in my speech.

“—the naagloshii tried to get inside. It didn’t seem to like them much.”

“I should fucking think not,” Bob said, his voice nervous. “Um, Harry . . . I don’t know what these are.”

I frowned at him. “Uh. What?”

“I don’t *know*,” he repeated. He sounded genuinely surprised. “I don’t *know* what they are, Harry.”

Magic is like a lot of other disciplines that people have recently begun developing, in historic terms. Working with magic is a way of understanding the universe and how it functions. You can approach it from a lot of different angles, applying a lot of different theories and mental models to it. You can get to the same place through a lot of different lines of theory and reasoning, kind of like really advanced mathematics. There’s no truly right or wrong way to get there, either—there are just *different* ways, some more or less useful than others for a given application. And new vistas of thought, theory, and application open up on a pretty regular basis, as the Art develops and expands through the participation of multiple brilliant minds.

But that said, once you have a good grounding in it, you get a pretty solid idea of what’s possible and what isn’t. No matter how much circumlocution you do with your formulae, two plus two doesn’t equal five. (Except maybe very, very rarely, sometimes, in extremely specific and highly unlikely circumstances.) Magic isn’t something that just makes things happen, poof. There are laws to how it behaves, structure, limits—and the whole reason Bob was created was so that those limits could be explored, tested, and charted.

I could count on the fingers of no hands how many times Bob had come up completely dry. He *always* knew something. The skull had been

working with wizards for centuries. He'd run into damned near everything.

"Uh, what?" I said. "Seriously? Nothing?"

"They're powerful," he said. "I can tell you that much. But they're also complex. I mean, like, Molly on her best day could not come close to weaving together something this crazy. You on your best day could not sling around enough power to juice up one of the smallest stones. And that's just the first *layer*. I think there are more. Maybe a *lot* more. Uh, like hundreds."

"On each *stone*?"

"Yeah."

"That's . . . It isn't . . . You can't put that much magic into that little space," I protested.

"No, no, I can't," Bob said. "And, no, you can't. Because it's impossible. But, um. Someone doesn't care."

"How did they do it?"

"If I knew that, it wouldn't be impossible," Bob said, an edge to his voice. "But I can tell you this much: It predates wizardry as we know it."

I would have said, *What?* but I felt like I'd been saying that a lot already. So I sipped coffee and scowled interrogatively instead.

"This work, the actual spells on the stone, comes from before even the predecessors to the White Council. I'm conversant in the course and application of the Art since the golden age of Greece. This stuff, whatever it is? It's older."

"You can't lay out spells that last that long," I mumbled. "It isn't possible."

"Lot of that going around," Bob said. "Harry . . . you're . . . we're talking about a whole different level, here. One that I didn't even know *existed*. Uh. Do you get what that means? In round terms, at least?"

I shook my head slowly.

"Well, at least you're smart enough to know that," Bob said. "Um, okay. You know the old chestnut about how sufficiently advanced science could be described only as magic?"

"Right," I said.

"Well, I'm going to use the same model right now: As a wizard, you're pretty good at making wooden axles and stone wheels. These spells? They're an internal combustion engine. You do the math from there. On your metaphorical abacus, I guess."

I blew out a very long, very slow breath.
Hell's bells.

I suddenly felt very young and very arrogant, and not terribly bright. I mean, I'd known I was going to be out of my depth when I first hooked up with the island, but I thought I'd at least be in the same freaking *ocean*. Instead, I was . . .

I was in uncharted space, wasn't I?

And the *best* part of this whole conversation? Those spells that had stymied one of the most advanced research tools known to wizardry and baffled the collected knowledge of centuries? Those were just the *ruined* part of the island.

What the hell was I going to find in the part that was *working*?

One second I was alone in the ruined cottage, and the next, there was a presence filling the doorway, looking down at me through the empty space where the roof should have been. It was huge, maybe twelve feet tall, and roughly humanoid in shape. I couldn't see much of it. It was covered in what looked like a heavy cloak that covered it completely. Two points of green fire burned from within the cloak's hood. It simply stood, unnaturally still, staring down at me, though the cool night breeze over the lake stirred the edges of its cloak.

Demonreach. The manifested spirit of the island.

"Uh," I said. "Hi."

The burning eyes shifted from me to Bob on the table. And then Demonreach did something it had never done before.

It spoke.

Out loud.

Its voice was a rumble of heavy rocks scraping together, of summer thunder rolling in from over the horizon. The voice was *huge*. Not loud. That didn't do it justice. It just came from everywhere, all at once. The surface of my partly drunk coffee buzzed and vibrated at the all-pervasive sound. "ANOTHER ONE."

"Meep," Bob squeaked. The lights vanished from the eye sockets of the skull.

I blinked a bunch of times. "You . . . you're talking now?"

"NECESSITY."

"Right," I said. "Um. So . . . you're having some trouble, I guess?"

"TROUBLE," it said. "YES."

“I came to help,” I said, feeling extremely lame as I did. “Um. Is that even possible?”

“POTENTIALLY,” came the answer. Then the vast form turned. It took a limping step. The ground didn’t so much tremble at the weight as shift slightly beneath the sheer, overwhelming presence of the ancient spirit. “FOLLOW. BRING THE MEMORY SPIRIT.”

“... meep ...” Bob whimpered.

I grabbed the skull in shaking hands and stuffed it into the messenger bag. I grabbed a chemical light from the storage boxes on the table, snapped it, and shook it to life as I hurried to catch up. I had an instinct about where we were headed, but I asked to be sure. “Uh. Where are we going?”

Demonreach kept walking, slow paces that nonetheless forced me to scurry to keep up. “BELOW.”

The spirit walked to the ruined circle of the lighthouse and lifted a shadowy arm in a vague gesture. When it did, the ground of the circle rippled and quivered, and then what had appeared to be solid stone began to run down, pouring itself into a hole like sand falling through an hourglass. In seconds, an opening the size of the trapdoor to my old lab had formed in the stone, and stairs led down into the darkness.

“Oh,” I said. I’d known there were caves beneath the island, but not how I had gotten there or where I could find them. “Wow. What’s the game plan here, exactly?”

“THE WELL IS UNDER ATTACK,” came the surround-sound answer. “IT MUST BE DEFENDED.” Demonreach started toward the stairs. There was no way it should have fit down them, but it moved as though that wasn’t going to be an issue.

“Wait. You want *me* to fight off something *you* can’t stop?” I asked.

“IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND.”

“Understand *what*?”

“OUR PURPOSE, WARDEN,” it said. “FOLLOW ME.”

Then it went down the stairs and vanished into the unknown.

“Here there be monsters!” Bob whispered, half hysterically. “Run! Run already!”

“Think it’s a little late for that,” I said.

But for a second there, I thought about taking his advice. Some part of me wondered what Tibet looked like this time of year. For a minute, it

seemed like an awesome idea to go find out.

But only for a minute.

Then I swallowed, gripped the plastic glow stick in fingers that felt very slippery for some reason, and followed Demonreach down into the dark.

Chapter

Sixteen

I don't know how far down those stairs went.

I'm not even kidding. I'm not taking poetic license. The stairs went down twelve steps, took a right angle, and went down twelve more, took another right-angled turn, and went down twelve more, and so on. I stopped counting in the low two hundreds and resorted to my awareness of the island to feel out the rest of them. Duh. Seventeen hundred and twenty-eight—twelve cubed.

The stairs were about eight inches each, which meant eleven hundred feet and change, straight down. That was *well* below the water level of the lake. Hell, it was below the *bottom* of the lake. The staircase echoed with deep, groaning sounds pitched almost too low to be heard. In the wan light

of the chemical glow stick, the place took on a kind of amusement-park fun-house atmosphere, where you suddenly realize that you've been routed into a circle with no apparent way out.

"Down, down to goblin town you go, my lad!" I sang in a hearty, badly pitched baritone. I was panting. "Ho, ho, my lad!"

Demonreach's glowing eyes flicked toward me. Maybe irritated.

"Oh, come on," I said. "You never saw the Rankin-Bass animated version of *The Hobbit*? The one they made before they did the movies in New Zealand?"

It didn't answer.

"Harry," Bob muttered at me. "Stop trying to piss it off."

"I'm bored," I said. "And I'm not looking forward to coming back *up*. I get that we're going a long, long way down, but couldn't we use an elevator? Ooh, or a fireman's pole. Then it'd be like going down to the Batcave. Way more fun." I raised my voice a little. "And more efficient."

Maybe it was my imagination, but when I said that last, I thought I saw Demonreach's steady pace slow for a thoughtful second or two.

Nah.

"Hey, how come you called me Warden?" I asked. "I mean, I've been a Warden, but there are a lot of other guys who are better at it than me. I'm not exactly the poster child."

"WARDEN," Demonreach said. "NOW THERE ARE MANY. FIRST THERE WAS ONE."

I counted down the last ten steps out loud, stopped at two, and jumped over the last one to the floor beneath with both feet. My hiking boots clomped on the stone.

We had reached a small chamber, the floor and walls lined in the same stone used in the lighthouse and cottage. I put a hand on them and could feel them quivering with power, with the dissonance of conflicting energies. Actually, looking back, I saw that at some point, the walls of the stairway, and the stairs themselves, had begun to be constructed of the same material—every single stone of it invested with impossible amounts of power and skill.

"Uh," I said. "Question?"

Demonreach had stopped at a stone doorway shape in the wall. It was surrounded with larger stones covered in intricate carving. The burning eyes turned toward me.

“Um. Who made this place?”

It didn’t speak. It pointed to the door. I looked. There was a sign in the middle of it, a sigil. It wasn’t something I recognized as part of any set of runes that I knew, but I knew I’d seen it somewhere before. It took me several seconds of sorting through memories to run it down—I’d seen it on the spine of a very, very, *very* old journal on my mentor’s bookshelf.

“Merlin,” I said quietly. “That’s whose sign that is, isn’t it?”

Demonreach did not respond. Why say YES when silence will do?

I swallowed. The original Merlin was the real deal, Arthur and Excalibur and everything. Merlin had, according to legend, created the White Council of Wizards from the chaos of the fall of the Roman Empire. He plunged into the flames of the burning Library of Alexandria to save the most critical texts, helped engineer the Catholic Church as a vessel to preserve knowledge and culture during Europe’s Dark Ages, and leapt tall cathedrals in a single bound. There were endless stories about Merlin. Popular theory among contemporary wizards was that they were more apocryphal than accurate. Hell, I’d always figured it that way, too.

But staring around at this place, I suddenly felt less sure.

“WATCH.”

Demonreach stretched out one long arm, still shadowy and indistinct in the feeble light of my glow stick. It touched one of the stones framing the door, and the stone erupted into emerald light.

I hissed and shielded my eyes against it, and took note of the fact that the air suddenly crackled with power.

Demonreach touched a second stone, which also began to glow. When it did, the sense of building energy was palpable in the air, and the hairs on my arms began to stand up. That was when I got what was happening here: Demonreach had wards around whatever was beyond the door—much like the wards that had been put into position around Butters’s apartment. Only they had to be fueled with freaking mystic plutonium or something to generate this much ambient energy simply from being *bypassed*.

The giant spirit reached for another stone, but paused before touching it.

“REMEMBER.”

The stones. They were like a security keypad. Demonreach was giving me the combination to its security system. And given how much dangerous energy was in the air right now, it stood to reason that if I ever got the

combination wrong, well . . . you'd need a bloodhound, a Ouija board, a forensic anthropologist, and a small army of Little Folk to find what was left of me.

I took *careful* note of which stones the spirit had indicated. Really careful note. Demonreach touched the last stone, and the granite doorway in front of us didn't move, exactly—it simply stopped being there. The leashed violence in the air, that angry, watchful energy dwindled and vanished, and Demonreach moved forward through the doorway. I followed.

We emerged into a familiar cavern, and once again my chest lit up with phantom remembered pain.

It was surprisingly well lit, for a subterranean chamber. When I'd last been there, I hadn't been in any shape to go over the details, but I could now see that several glimmering clusters of crystal in the floor, some kind of pale green quartz maybe, gave off a dim glow. No single patch of them really provided adequate illumination, but as a whole they filled most of the cavern with wan green-white light.

Roots burrowed down into the cavern through its ceiling, though I had no idea how in the hell they'd gotten there. No plant sent roots down as deep beneath the surface as this chamber. No normal, earthly plant did, anyway. Water dripped slowly down from above, and where it fell from the ceiling was where the patches of crystal lay.

Over to one side of the chamber was a hollowed-out section of soft earth no deeper than a very shallow bathtub, about seven feet long. I recognized it, even without seeing the withered vines that lay strewn forgotten all around the area. It was my sickbed, where my body had lain for months while Mab and Demonreach exerted themselves to keep the pumps working while my mind and spirit were doing a Casper impersonation.

My chest panged again and I looked away. Waking up from that particular nap had been one of the top two or three most painful moments of my life. Something inside me had changed. Not because of the pain of the experience—though that had been profound. Staring at that place, I felt as if the pain had been a side effect of a deeper and more significant shift in the way I thought of myself, saw myself, and how I should interact with my world.

Fire isn't always an element of destruction. Classical alchemical doctrine teaches that it also has dominion over another province: change. The fire of my tribulations had not simply been pain to be endured. It had been an agent of transformation. After all that I'd been through, I'd changed.

Not for the worse, I was pretty sure—at least, not yet. But only a moron or a freaking lunatic could have faced the things I had and remained unfazed by them.

I blinked myself out of my reverie to find Demonreach watching me. There was something intense about its eyes.

“MEMORY,” it said, “REFLECTION.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“THIS PLACE.”

I pondered that one for a minute. “Are you saying that I just went into an internal monologue because I came in here?”

Demonreach did not seem to feel a need to clarify. “MEMORY. REFLECTION.”

I sighed. “Well, if I ever need to mull things over, I know just where to go, I guess.” It was chilly in the cavern, and damp, and the air was thick with musty, earthy smells. I turned a slow circle, surveying the entire chamber. “What do you call this place?”

Demonreach said nothing and did not move.

“Right,” I said. “You don't call it anything at all, I guess.” I scrunched up my nose, thinking. “What is this chamber's purpose?”

“CONTAINMENT.”

I frowned. “Uh. Of what?”

“THE LEAST.”

“The least *what*?” I asked, feeling exasperated.

Demonreach just watched me.

“Uh, Harry,” Bob said in a small voice. “Maybe you should look at the crystals?”

I glanced down at the skull, shrugged, and walked over to the nearest formation. I stood over it for a moment. It was a large clump, maybe twelve feet long and four or five across. And . . . and the shadows passing through the translucent crystals seemed to indicate that the floor beneath it had been hollowed out, much the same as my own recovery bed. In fact . . .

I frowned, leaning closer. There was a form beneath the crystals, an outline. The image of whatever it was got to me only after being refracted through multiple crystals, so it was awfully blurry, but I peered at it, trying to unfocus my eyes and look past it, the way you do those magic paintings at the mall.

The image suddenly snapped into disjointed clarity. The form beneath the crystal was a lean creature of basically human shape, maybe nine or ten feet tall and lithe, covered in shaggy hair of golden brown. Its arms were too long for its body. Its hands were too big for its arms. Its fingers were too long for its hands, and were tipped with vicious claws.

And its yellow-gold eyes were open, aware, staring at me in naked, undisguised hatred.

“Fuck me!” I shouted, staggering back in pure, panicked reflex. “That’s a naagloshii! That’s a fucking naagloshii!”

Naagloshii were bad news. Serious bad news. Originally divine messengers of the Dine’s Holy People, they had turned their backs on their origins and become the legendary skinwalkers of the American Southwest. I went up against one of them once. It killed one of my friends, tortured my brother half-crazy, and left me with permanent psychic scars before beating the ever-loving snot out of me. The only reason I had survived was that the wizard who was the greatest shape-shifter I’d ever seen had intervened. Listens-to-Wind had taken on the naagloshii head-to-head. Even then, it had been close, and the naagloshii had escaped to fight another day.

I’ve run into cruel and dangerous beings before. But the naagloshii were quite simply among the most evil creatures it had ever been my displeasure to encounter. And one of the damned things was *staring* at me from beneath a fragile layer of quartz I could have smashed with a wrench, its eyes burning like it was going to eat me whole.

I got a sudden sinking feeling.

And I turned to the next mound of quartz. And the next.

I’m a lucky guy. I didn’t have one of the most nightmarish fiends in circulation lying on the floor within pouncing distance.

I had *six* of them.

There were more shapes beneath more crystal mounds. I didn’t recognize them. I’m pretty sure I was extremely happy that I didn’t.

“The least,” I said, my voice shaking. “You’re telling me that a *naagloshii* is one of the *least*.” I felt like sitting down, so I did, sort of

abruptly, onto the floor. “What . . . what else is in here?”

Demonreach turned to a wall. It lifted an arm and the stone of the wall faded into nonexistence, revealing a hallway maybe fifty feet across. I got back up onto my shaky legs again to take a look. The tunnel sloped down gently, and was lit by the wan glow of the crystals.

Lots of crystals.

Lots and lots and *lots* of crystals.

The tunnel stretched into the distance. Maybe it was a mile long. Maybe two. Maybe it ran all the way down to Hell. Mounds of crystals dotted the tunnel at regular intervals. Some of them were the size of buildings. Some of the individual crystals had to be the size of freaking trees. I had barely gotten my gawk on when a flood of energy smashed into me, as though opening the door had released liquid held back under pressure. The energy had no physical presence—but I felt a nauseating wave of greasy cold flooding through me, the dark power of the ley lines that converged upon the island breathing across me like a cloud of invisible smog.

“THE WELL,” Demonreach said. The spirit turned, slowly, and eleven more doorways to tunnels almost identical to the first one sighed into existence. Eleven more of them. Because one infinite tunnel full of horrors obviously wasn’t enough. *I had twelve.*

The dark energy from them hissed and oozed through the air, as if sheer malice and vicious will had been distilled into an unseen mist.

“And . . . and everything down there makes a naagloshii look like small change?” I asked.

“CORRECT.”

“Of course. Naturally,” I said, staring down the first hall. “What are they? What’s down there?”

“NIGHTMARES. DARK GODS. NAMELESS THINGS. IMMORTALS.”

“Holy crap,” I whispered. And that was when I understood why the place was called the Well. “This is *why* the island is the source of all those ley lines. It’s like a great big bubbling geyser of bad.”

Bob let out an awed whistle. “Uh. Wow, boss, yeah. That’s exactly it. The energy in those ley lines . . . it’s the body heat these things give off.”

I felt a giggle coming up. “Man. Containment. Hell’s bells, containment.” I tried to stuff the giggles back down and addressed

Demonreach. “This isn’t a magical stronghold,” I said. “It’s a *prison*. It’s a prison so hard that half a dozen freaking *naagloshii* are in *minimum security*.”

“CORRECT,” Demonreach answered, “WARDEN.”

Chapter

Seventeen

“I don’t guess this job pays anything, does it?” I asked.

The spirit just regarded me.

“Didn’t think so,” I said. “So . . . when you call me Warden, you’re speaking literally.”

“INDEED.”

“And you are what? The guard?”

“THE GUARD. THE WALLS. THE BARS. I AM ORDER.”

“You are not the first law-person I would want to be involved with,” I said. I raked my fingers back through my hair. “Okay,” I said, wincing. “The things in here. Are they dangerous where they are?”

“THEY ARE ALWAYS DANGEROUS. BUT THEY HAVE THE LEAST OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS IT HERE.”

I blinked. Those were some of the longest, most nuanced, and most complex sentiments the spirit had expressed to me. Which meant that we were speaking about something important—which only made sense. Demonreach didn’t care about friends or enemies or the price of tea in China. It cared about its inmates, period. Anything else, *everything* else, would be judged based upon its relevance to that subject.

“But can they get loose?”

“NOT WITHOUT OUTSIDE INTERVENTION,” Demonreach said, “OR YOUR AUTHORIZATION.”

“Meep,” I breathed. “Uh. You mean I could turn these things loose?”

“YOU ARE THE WARDEN.”

I swallowed. “Is it possible for me to communicate with them?”

“YOU ARE THE WARDEN.”

“Oh, Hell’s bells, this is bad.”

I had just inherited myself a world of trouble.

Having experienced a naagloshii up close and personal, there wasn’t any way I was letting one of those hideous things loose. I doubted I was going to like anything *else* that was being held prisoner here any better. In fact, I had no intention, for the time being, of even *looking* at them, much less finding out who and what the inmates were—and forget about actually *talking* to them. Not going to happen. Things that old and powerful could be deadly with only a few carefully chosen words dropped at the right place—and I’d learned that one the hard way, too.

But none of that really mattered.

I’d just been handed what amounted to a great big ugly weapon of mass destruction and potential havoc. To the various powers of the supernatural world, it wouldn’t matter that I would never use it. All that would matter was that I *had* it to use. Really, Officer, I know that’s a rocket launcher in my trunk, but I’m only holding it so that someone *bad* won’t use it. Really. Honest.

The guys in the White Council who didn’t like me were going to turn purple and start frothing at the mouth when they found out. And every foe the White Council ever had would start looking at me like a gift from Heaven—someone with knowledge of the inner workings of the Council, with enormously concentrated personal power, who was almost certain to

frighten the Council enough to make them suspect, isolate, and eventually move against him. That guy would be an awesome asset in any struggle against the wizards of the world.

And boy, wouldn't the White Council know it?

Like I didn't have enough recruiters aiming for me already.

And hey, the very best part? *I didn't actually have a real, usable superweapon.* I just had the key to a great big box full of pain and trouble for a whole lot of people.

No wonder my grandfather had looked stunned when he'd seen what I had done with Demonreach. Or maybe less "stunned" than "horrified."

My head was starting to ache again. Dammit, this was all I needed. Over the past few years, my headaches had grown steadily worse, to the point where sometimes they all but knocked me unconscious. I could function through it, to some degree—you don't spend most of your life learning to manipulate the powers of the universe without racking up a considerable amount of self-discipline and tolerance for pain. But it was just one more freaking stone being added to the baggage I had to carry while I tried to get out of the tightest corner I had ever been in.

Demonreach growled. In all capital letters.

And the headache vanished.

One second, my scalp was tightening up as two separate ice picks dug into my skull in the same places they always did, and the next the pain was utterly gone. The endorphins my body had started pumping got to the scene to find no pain there and threw a party instead. I didn't fall over in a dazed stupor, because of my universe-manipulating chops, but it was close.

"Whoa," I breathed. "Uh . . . what did you just do?"

"I WARNED IT."

I blinked several times. "You . . . warned away my headache?"

"THE CREATURE CAUSING IT. THE PARASITE."

I stared stupidly for a second, and then sorted through my memories again. That's right. Right here in this chamber, the last time I'd been here, either Mab or Demonreach had said something about the division of labor keeping my body alive while the rest of me was elsewhere. They'd said that the parasite kept my heart running. I glowered at Demonreach and said, "Tell me about this parasite."

"I WILL NOT."

I made an exasperated sound. "Why not?"

“IT BARGAINED.”

“With *what*?”

“YOUR LIFE, WARDEN.”

I thought about that one for a few seconds. “Wait. . . . You needed its help to save me? And its price was that you don’t tell me about it?”

“INDEED.”

I exhaled slowly and ran my fingers over my head. Something was running around in there, giving me migraines. “Is it a danger to me?”

“IN TIME.”

“What happens if it stays in there?” I asked.

“IT BURSTS FORTH FROM YOUR SKULL.”

“Aglck!” I said. I couldn’t help it. My skin was crawling. I’d seen those *Alien* movies at a formative age. “How do I get it out?”

Demonreach seemed to consider that for a moment. Then it said, “ASK GRASSHOPPER.”

“Molly? Uh, seriously? You know she’s new, right?”

It just looked at me.

“How long do I have to take care of it?” I asked.

“SOON.”

“Soon? How soon is soon? What do you mean, soon?”

It just stared at me.

Right. Immortal, inhuman, wholly-focused-on-holding-evil-horde-still-forever sorts of creatures don’t have a real solid grasp of the concept of time. From what I’ve seen and heard over the years, I’ve begun to understand that linear time is a uniquely mortal perspective. Other things aren’t attached to it nearly as tightly as we are. There were bushes on the island older than me. There were trees there older than Chicago. Demonreach was not compatible with stopwatches or day planners.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, priorities: Put the skull-bursting-parasite issue aside for the moment. That leaves me in charge of a veritable doomsday machine that the White Council and everyone else is gonna flip out about. But they aren’t going to flip out about it today, because presumably they don’t even know I’m alive yet, and if I don’t stay focused on the next twenty-four hours, I might not live long enough to have all that fun. So we forget about that for now, too.”

“SENSIBLE PRIORITIES.”

“I’m glad you approve,” I said. I was pretty sure something that didn’t understand minutes and seconds wouldn’t be big on getting sarcasm either. “You’ve still got a problem. I need you to explain it to me.”

“YOU ARE TOO LIMITED,” Demonreach said. “IT WOULD DAMAGE YOU, AS IT DAMAGED YOUR SPIRIT.”

I held up both my hands and half flinched. “For God’s sake, don’t *think* it at me. You think way too loud.”

The glowing eyes looked somehow disgusted. “THIS MEANS OF CONVEYANCE OF IDEAS IS INEFFICIENT AND LIMITED.”

“Words, words, words,” I said. “Tell me about it. But it’s what we’ve got, unless you can draw me a picture.”

Demonreach was still for a moment—and then vines abruptly twined up out of the floor. I almost jumped, but stopped myself. It clearly hadn’t done me any harm, apart from what I’d done to myself, and if it wanted to hurt me, I wasn’t going to be able to stop it anyway. So I waited.

The vines twined up into my bag and came out wrapped around Bob’s skull.

“Harry!” Bob squeaked.

“He’s one of mine,” I said in a hard voice. “You hurt him and you can forget me helping you.”

“LITTLE ENTITY,” Demonreach said. “YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE WARDEN. YOU WILL TRANSLATE. YOU WILL NOT BE DAMAGED.”

“Hey!” I said, and took a step between Demonreach and Bob. “Did you hear me, Hopalong? Put down the skull.”

“Harry!” Bob said again. “Harry, wait! It heard you!”

I scowled and turned to look at Bob. He looked like the same old Bob. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” the skull said. The eyelights were flicking everywhere, as if watching dozens of screens at once. “Man, this thing is big! And old!”

“Is it hurting you?”

“Uh, no . . . no, it isn’t. And it could if it wanted to. It’s just . . . kind of a lot to take in. . . .” Then the skull quivered in the grip of the tendrils and said, “Oh!”

“Oh, what?” I asked.

“It’s explaining the problem,” Bob reported. “It had to take it through several levels of dumbing-down before I was able to get it.”

I grunted and relaxed a little. "Oh. So what's the problem?"

"Hang on. I'm trying to figure out how to dumb it down enough for you to get it."

"Thanks," I growled.

"I got your back, boss." Then Bob bounced up and down in the tendrils a few times. "Hey, Hopalong! Turn this thing around this way!"

Demonreach glowered at the skull.

Bob jiggled a little more. "Come on! We're on a schedule here!"

I blinked at that. "Damn. You went from scared to wiseass pretty quick there, Bob."

Bob snorted. "'Cause as big and bad as this thing is, it needs me to talk to you, and that makes me important. And it knows it."

"LESSER BEINGS ONCE KNEW TO RESPECT THEIR ELDERS," Demonreach said.

"I respect the crap out of you," Bob complained. "You want me to help, and I'm telling you how. Now turn me around."

A sudden breeze passed through the cavern in a long, enormous sigh. And the vines stirred and twisted the skull toward the nearest wall.

Bob's eyelights brightened to brilliance and suddenly cast double cones of light on the wall. There was a scratchy sound that seemed to emanate from the skull itself, a blur of a sound like an old film sound track warming up, and then the old spotlight-sweeping 20th Century Fox logo appeared on the wall, along with the pompous trumpet-led symphony theme that often accompanied it.

"A movie?" I asked. "You can play *movies*?"

"And music! And TV! Butters gave me the Internet, baby! Now hush and pay attention."

The opening logo bit faded to black and then familiar blue lettering appeared. It read: A LONG TIME AGO, PRETTY MUCH RIGHT HERE . .

.

"Okay, come on," I said. "You're going to buy me a lawsuit, Bob."

"Hush, Harry. Or you'll go to the special hell."

I blinked at that, confused. I'm not supposed to be the guy who doesn't get the reference joke, dammit.

On the wall, the black gave way to a star field that panned down to a blue-and-green planet. Earth. Then it zoomed in and in and in until I

recognized the outline of Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes, and came closer still until it got to the outline of the island itself.

Bob is invaluable, but man, he loves his wisecracks and his drama.

The image sank down until it showed a familiar landing point, though it had no ruined town and no Whatsup Dock and no row of wooden piles in the water. It was just a little beach of dirt and sand and heavy, brooding forest growth.

Then a ribbon of light maybe eight feet long split the air vertically. The light broadened until it was maybe three feet wide, and then a figure appeared through it. I recognized the signs—someone had opened a Way, a passage from the Nevernever to the island. The figure emerged, made a gesture with one hand, and the Way closed behind it.

It was a man, fairly tall, fairly lean. He wore ragged clothing in many shades of grey. His grey cloak had a deep hood on it, and it shadowed his features, except for the tip of his nose and a short grey-white beard covering a rather pointy chin.

(Letters appeared at the bottom of the screen. They read: MERLIN.)

“Wait? You saw Merlin?” I asked Bob.

“Nah,” Bob said, “but I cast Alec Guinness. Looks good, right?”

I sighed. “Could you get to the point, please?”

“Oh, come on,” Bob said. “I wrote in this romance triangle subplot and cast Jenna Jameson and Carrie Fisher. There’s a love scene you’re gonna *really*—”

“Bob!”

“Okay, okay. Fine. Sheesh.”

The movie shifted into fast motion. The grey-clad figure became a blur. It walked about waving its arms, and directed oceans of energy here and there, settling them all in and around the substance of the island itself.

“Wait. Did Demonreach tell you how he did that?”

“No,” Bob said, annoyed. “It’s called artistic license, Harry.”

“Okay, I get it. Merlin built the island. However he did it. Get to the part with the problem.”

Bob sighed.

Merlin walked into the woods in comically fast motion and vanished. Then time passed. The sun streaked by hundreds and then thousands of times, the shadows of the island bowing and twisting, the trees rising,

growing, growing old, and dying. At the bottom of the screen, words appeared that read, A LOT OF TIME PASSES.

“Thank you for dumbing that down for me,” I said.

“*De nada.*”

Then the camera slowed. Again, Merlin appeared. Again, oceans of power rose up and settled into the island. Then Merlin vanished, and more years passed. Maybe a minute later, he appeared again—looking exactly the same, I might add—and repeated the cycle.

“Hold on,” I said. “He did it again? Twice?”

“Ah,” Bob said, as a fourth cycle began on the screen. “Sort of. See, Harry, this is one of those things that you’re going to have trouble grabbing onto.”

“Go slow and try me.”

“Merlin didn’t build the prison five times,” Bob said. “He built it once. In five *different* times. All at the same time.”

I felt my brows knit. “Uh. He was in the same place, doing the same thing, in five different times at once?”

“Exactly.”

“That does not make any sense,” I said.

“Look, a mortal jail is built in three dimensions, right? Merlin built this one in four, and probably in several more, though you can’t really tell whether or not he built it in a given dimension until you go there and measure it, and the act of measuring it will change it, but the point is: This is really advanced stuff.”

I sighed. “Yeah. I’m getting that. But what’s wrong?”

The shot zoomed out, rising up to give a top-down view of the island, which became a blurry shape. A familiar five-pointed star blazed itself across the surface of the lake, its lines so long that the pentagon shape at its center enfolded the island entirely. Within the pentagon, a second pentacle formed, like the first one drawn in the manner to preserve and protect. The camera tightened in, and I saw that the second pentagon enfolded the entire hilltop where the cottage and ruined tower lay. The camera tightened more, and I saw more pentacles drawn, this time not flat but at dozens of intersecting angles, their centers encircling the dozen tunnels full of evil beings beneath the island.

“These,” Bob said, “represent the original enchantments on the island. This is vastly simplified, of course, but the basic star-and-circle

architecture is the same as the work you do, Harry.”

Then the design blurred and increased, growing denser and more delicate and more brilliant in power, until something twinged in my brain and I had to look away from the diagram.

“Yeah, sorry about that, boss. This is meant to represent the entanglement of the spells being delivered at different times.”

“No wonder it was so complicated,” I muttered.

“And it’s even worse than this,” Bob said. “I’m filtering it down for you. And here’s the problem.”

I forced myself to look back at the projection, and saw those millions upon millions of spells resonating with one another, spreading and interlocking into an impenetrable barrier. It was, I thought, somehow like watching crystals grow. The spells powering the actual construction of it hadn’t been, alone, too much stronger than some of the work I had done—but when they’d been interconnected with their counterparts across time, they’d fed upon one another, created a perfect resonance of energy that had become something infinitely greater than the sum of its parts.

Then I saw the dissonance appear. Bob had chosen to show it as a sullen red light that began to pulse lightly at the westernmost edges of the great design. It began as something faint, but then, like an oncoming headache, started to throb into something larger and more noticeable. Where scarlet and blue light touched, there were ugly flares of energy—flares that I had been sensing ever since I’d gotten to the island. Before long, that scarlet pulse had spread to half the island, and then, abruptly, the screen went white.

Text at the bottom read, NOVEMBER 1.

“By tomorrow,” I said. “Super. But I still don’t see what is *wrong*, Bob.”

“Energy hits it,” Bob said. “A directed burst of energy, a whole lot of it. It unravels the whole containment spell Merlin laid down and triggers the fail-safe.”

“FIRE,” rumbled Demonreach.

“I figured that one out, thanks,” I said. “But nothing has actually happened to the spells yet?”

“Nope,” said Bob. “That tension that’s building? It’s . . . Well, think of it as cause and effect, only backward.”

“Huh?”

“What the island is experiencing now is the echo of the moment that burst of energy strikes it,” Bob said. “Only instead of the echo happening after, it’s happening first.”

I stopped and thought. “You’re telling me that the reason the island is about to blow up is . . . because it’s about to blow up?”

Bob sighed. “Someone hits the island with energy, Harry. But they’ve figured out *how* Merlin put this place together. They aren’t attacking it in three dimensions. They’re attacking in *four*. They’re sending power through *time* as well as through space.”

“So . . . I have to stop them from attacking the island tomorrow?”

“No,” Bob said, exasperated. “You have to stop them from attacking whenever it is that they actually *attack*.”

“Uh . . .”

“Look, the rock they’re throwing hits tomorrow,” Bob said. “But you have to stop them from throwing it at whatever point they’re standing when they throw it.”

“Oh,” I said, blinking. “I get that.”

Bob turned to look at Demonreach. “Do you see what I have to work with here? I had to take *that* down to throwing a *rock* before it got through.”

“HIS UNDERSTANDING IS LIMITED,” Demonreach agreed.

“Okay, I’ve had just about enough from both of you,” I said. “If you’re so smart, how come *you* don’t stop it from happening?”

“THE EXPLANATION WOULD DAMAGE YOU, WARDEN.”

Bob made an impatient sound. “Because that spirit *is* the island, Harry. The spells, the Well, the physical island, all of it. Demonreach *does not exist* outside this island. It has *no* ability to reach beyond itself. The attack is coming from *outside* the prison. That’s why it needs a Warden in the first place.”

I scowled. “It talked to me in the graveyard last year.”

“It bullied Mab into helping it,” Bob said.

“I DID NOT BULLY. I BARGAINED.”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I’ll add that to my list, then. Find whoever it is, wherever they are, and stop them from doing something they haven’t done yet.”

“Unless they have,” Bob said. “In which case, well. Kinda too late.”

“Right,” I said tiredly.

I had my own private purgatory full of sleeping monsters.

I had a parasite in my brain that was fixing to burst my skull on its way out of me.

My little island paradise was about to explode with enough energy to cook dark gods and Lord only knew what else hanging around under the island. That meant we were talking about a release of energy in the gigaton range. And if I didn't stop someone from doing it, the continental shelf was about to have a very bad day.

Oh, right. And I was supposed to kill an insane immortal—or else face the wrath of her mother.

And I had to do it all in the next twenty-four hours. Maybe a little less.

“And the sad part is, this actually feels like having my life back. How bent is that?”

“Harry,” Bob said. “Sunrise in one hour.”

“Right.” I sighed and picked up the skull. I tucked him away into the messenger bag and said to Demonreach, “I’m on it.”

“GOOD.”

I muttered darkly under my breath and turned for the stairs, then started jogging back up them, thinking of all the problems arrayed against me.

Good thing I’d been working out.

Chapter

Eighteen

Okay, for the record: That is one *hell* of a lot of stairs to go up.

Also for the record: I did them two and three at a time, at a run, and went to the top without stopping.

From there, I went pounding down the hillside, my feet never slipping or faltering, until I got back to the beach, moving at an easy run. The sun was rising behind me, but the solid mass of Demonreach kept it blotted out in shadow, and I could tell only by the light beginning to fill the sky.

Thomas came to his feet as I left the woods, his hands moving to his weapons automatically. I shook my head at him, never slowing down, and said, “Let’s get this tub moving!”

“What did you find out?” he called. He started untying the lines and then leapt nimbly up to the deck of the *Water Beetle*. Molly appeared from the cabin, looking as though she’d been sleeping a few seconds before.

I ran down the dock and hopped up to the ship’s deck. “A bunch of people are gonna be mad at me, I’ve got some kind of medical issue that’s going to kill me in a while if I don’t deal with it, oh, and the island’s blowing up tomorrow and taking a whole lot of the country with it if I don’t fix it.”

Thomas gave me a steady look. “So,” he said. “Same old, same old.”

“I think it’s nice that there are some things in this world you can rely on,” I said.

My brother snorted and started the *Water Beetle*’s engines. We backed away from the dock, and then he turned, gunned it, and headed back toward town. Like I said before, the boat isn’t a racing machine, but it’s got some horsepower in it, and as the sun rose properly, we were zooming over the orange-gold water, leaving a huge V-shaped wake behind us, while I stood at the front of the boat, my hands on the railing.

I felt it when the dawn broke, the way you almost always can if you stop to pay attention. Something subtle and profound simply shifted in the air around me. Even if I’d been blindfolded, I would have felt the transition, the way that the winds and currents of energy broadly known as magic began to gust and shift, driven by the light of the oncoming sun.

I wasn’t close enough to any of the Ways to the realms of Faerie to be able to sense whether they had been reopened, but it made sense that they would be. Sunrise tends to disperse and dissolve patterns of magical energy—not because magic is inherently a force of the night so much as because the dawn is inherently a force of new beginnings and renewal.

Every sunrise tended to erode ongoing enchantments. A spell spread so wide that it curtained the whole of Faerie away from the mortal world would by necessity be rather thin and fragile. When the sun hit it, it would be like about a zillion magnifying glasses focusing light on old newsprint. It would blacken and wither away. My mind treated me to a gruesome little collage of images—the darkest beings of Faerie suddenly pouring forth from every creepy shadow and unsettling alley and dangerous-looking old abandoned building in the city. You’d think my mind would find better things to do, like fantasize about improbably friendly women or something.

Molly came up and stood with me, facing ahead. I looked at her obliquely. The rising sun behind us painted her hair gold but left her face lightly veiled in shadow. She didn't look young anymore.

I mean, don't get me wrong; it wasn't like her hair had gone grey and her teeth fell out. But there had always been a sense of energy and life and simple joy welling up from the grasshopper. It had been her default setting, and I hadn't realized how much I had loved that about her.

Now her blue eyes looked weary, wary. She wasn't looking at the beauty in life as much as she once had. Her eyes scanned for dangers both nearby and farther down the road, heavy with caution and made wise by pain—and they had far, far more steel in them than I had ever seen there before.

Months of training with the Leanansidhe while fighting a street war will do that.

Maybe if I'd been tougher on the grasshopper early on, it wouldn't have come as such a shock to her. Maybe if I'd focused on different aspects of her training, she would have been better prepared.

Maybe, maybe, maybe, but I was kidding myself. Molly's eyes were always going to end up like that sooner or later—just like mine had.

This business doesn't play nice with children.

"I told you," Molly said, never looking toward me. "It's in the past. Leave it there."

"You listening to my head, kiddo?"

Her mouth twitched. "Only when I want to hear the roar of the ocean."

I grinned. I liked that so much better than all the "Sir Knights" I'd been getting lately.

"How much can you tell me?" she asked.

I looked at her eyes for a moment while she stared ahead and made a decision.

"Everything," I said quietly. "But not right this second. We've got priorities to focus on first. We can get into the details after we've dealt with the immediate threat."

"Maeve?" Molly asked.

"And the island." I told her about the danger to Demonreach without going into specifics about the island's purpose. "So if I don't stop it, boom."

Molly frowned. "I can't imagine how you can stop an event from happening if you don't know who is going to do it, and both where and when it's going to happen."

"If the problem was simple and easy, it wouldn't require wizards to fix it," I said. "The impossible we do immediately. The unimaginable takes a little while."

"I'm serious," she said.

"So am I," I replied. "Be of good cheer. I think I know the right guy to talk to about this one."

* * *

Half the sun was over the horizon when Chicago's skyline came into sight. I just basked in that for a minute. Yeah, I know, stupid, but it's my town and I'd been gone for what felt like a lifetime. It was good to see the autumn sun gleaming off of glass and steel.

Then I felt myself tense, and I pushed myself up from where I'd been leaning on the forward rail. I took a moment to look around me very carefully. I didn't know what had set off my instincts, but they were doing the same routine they'd learned to do every time Mab had been about to spring her daily assassination attempt, and I couldn't have ignored them if I'd wanted to.

I didn't see anything, but then I heard it—the humming roar of small, high-revolution engines.

"Thomas!" I shouted over the snorting of the *Water Beetle*'s motor. I gestured toward my ear and then spun my hand in a wide circle.

It wasn't exactly tactical sign language, but Thomas got the message. From his vantage point in the wheelhouse atop the cabin, he swept his gaze around warily. Then his gaze locked on something northwest of us.

"Uh-oh," I breathed.

Thomas spun the wheel and rolled the *Water Beetle* onto a southwesterly course. I hustled over to the ladder up to the wheelhouse and stood on the top rung, which put my head about level with Thomas's. I shielded my eyes from the glare of the oncoming sun with one hand and peered northwest.

There were five Jet Skis flying toward us over the water. Thomas had altered course enough to buy us a little time, but I could see at a glance that

the Jet Skis were moving considerably faster than we were. Thomas opened the throttle all the way and passed me, I kid you not, a shiny brass telescope.

“Seriously?” I asked him.

“Ever since those pirate movies came out, they’re everywhere,” he said. “I’ve got a sextant, too.”

“Any tent you have is a sex tent,” I muttered darkly, extending the telescope.

Thomas smirked.

I peered through the thing, holding myself steady with one hand. Given the speed and bounce of the boat, it wasn’t easy, but I finally managed to get a prolonged glimpse of the Jet Skis. I couldn’t see much in the way of detail yet—but the guy on the lead Jet Ski was wearing a bright red beret.

“We’ve definitely got a problem,” I said.

“Friends of yours?”

“The Redcap and some of his Sidhe buddies, it looks like,” I said, lowering the telescope. “They’re Winter muscle, but I think they’re mostly medieval types. That gives us a couple of minutes to—”

There was a sharp hissing sound and something unseen slapped the telescope out of my hand, sending it spinning through the air in a whirl of torn metal and tiny shards of broken glass.

The report of a gunshot followed a second later.

“Holy crap!” I sputtered, and dropped down to lie flat on the deck. There was another hiss and a loud cracking sound as a round smacked into the wall of the cabin above me.

“Medieval? Are you sure you know what that means?” Thomas demanded. He heeled the boat about a bit and then snaked it back in the original direction, following a serpentine course. That would make us a harder target—but it also meant that we were going slower, cruising in a zigzag while our pursuers were rushing forward in a straight line.

But even with the maneuvers, the rounds kept coming in. At that distance, with the relative movements of the vehicles, a purely human marksman could have hit us only through something that went well past good luck and began approaching divine intervention. But the Redcap and his cronies weren’t human. The grace I’d seen the Sidhe displaying on the

dance floor had been all precise, subtle elegance and flawless grace. Both of those things transitioned well into marksmanship.

I still had my shiny, gleaming cowboy rifle, but it was worse than useless in this situation. The .45 Colt round would be killer at conventional gunfight distances, most of which happened at about twenty feet—but it would lose a lot of effectiveness shooting at targets that distant. Coincidentally, the guy holding the gun would also lose effectiveness shooting at targets that distant. So blazing away at them seemed like a stupid plan.

“Hey!” I shouted toward my brother. “If I take the wheel, can you pick them off from here?”

“If we drive straight, maybe!” he called back.

A round tore a chunk of wood off the corner of the boat’s dashboard. Thomas stared hard at it for a second. Six inches to the left and it would have hit him in the lower back.

“Uh,” he said, continuing to veer and swerve the boat. “Plan B?”

“Right,” I muttered. “Right. Plan B.”

I thought furiously while the fusillade continued. Rounds hit the side of the ship in sharp, angry whacks. Surely they didn’t have the ammunition to keep this kind of thing up for very long. Though, thinking about it, I had no idea how rapidly they were going through the ammo. For all I knew, one guy was shooting at us, and getting more and more successful at judging the shot over the surface of the water. And the Sidhe were closing. Their accuracy seemed to be increasing as they did. Once they got into optimal range, where they were close enough to land rounds but we weren’t capable of replying in kind, all they had to do was maintain the distance and kill us to death.

I could start throwing magic at them, but Mab’s training had a gap in it: Everything had been right up in my grille. I’d never engaged her or one of her proxies at more than twenty feet or so, and without a properly prepared staff or blasting rod, I’d never be able to reach out far enough to hit those clowns. Odds were good that they knew it, too. They’d hold the distance.

A weakness. I had to exploit a weakness. The Sidhe hated iron, but even if I found some, how did I get it to them? I mean, a gun shooting jacketed rounds would really screw them up, but for it to work I’d have to hit them. There was a box of nails in the toolbox. I could throw those,

maybe, but again there was the issue of actually hitting them. Which wasn't going to happen as long as they were way out there.

I needed to lure them in closer.

"Grasshopper!" I shouted.

The cabin door swung open and Molly belly-crawled onto the deck until she could see me. "Who started shooting at us?"

"Bad guys!" I cringed as another round hit the side of the boat and peppered me with wooden splinters. "Obviously!"

"Can we outrun them?"

"Not happening," I said. "Ideas?"

"I could veil us?"

"Going to be hard to hide the boat's wake, isn't it?"

"Oh. Right. What do we do?"

"I need mist," I said. "A bunch of it. Gimme."

"Oh, ow, I don't know Harry. I'd have to move an awful lot of fire to give you even a little. You know that's not my thing."

"It doesn't have to be *real* mist," I said.

"Oh!" Molly called. "That is *exactly* my thing!"

"Attagirl!"

"Fuck!" Thomas snarled. I looked up to see him stagger, holding on to the boat's wheel with his right hand, his face twisted in pain. He'd taken a bullet in his left arm, just above the elbow, and he held it clenched in tight against his body, teeth bared. Slightly too pale blood trickled down his elbow and dribbled to the deck. "Plan B, Harry! Where the hell is plan B?!"

"Go, go, go!" I told Molly.

My apprentice closed her eyes and clenched her fists. I saw her focus, felt the slight stirring in the air as she gathered her will and power. Then she moved her hands in a complicated little gesture, whispering something. She continued making the gesture, and I realized that the motion was duplicating that of weaving three lines into a braid.

From between her fingers a thick white mist began to appear. First it came as a trickle, but as I watched it thickened to a stream. Then Molly bowed her head in concentration and muttered words beneath her breath, and a sudden plume of white mist bigger than the *Water Beetle* itself began jetting from her hands and spreading out to blanket the surface of the water over the boat's wake, shutting the pursuing Sidhe away from view.

For a long minute we raced across the water, a wall of white mist spreading out to cover our wake. The enemy fire continued for a few seconds, but then dropped off to nothing. Hell, if we could keep this up, maybe we could make it back to shore without doing anything more. I checked Molly. Her face was pale, twisted into a grimace of concentration, and already the plume of illusory mist was beginning to wane. Mist isn't a hard illusion to pull off, and it's usually the first thing an apprentice learns to do with that kind of magic, but Molly was spreading the illusion out over an enormous area, and brute-force approaches were not her strong point in magic. We wouldn't make it back to shore that way.

Fine, then.

"Thomas!" I shouted. "Throttle down! Let them catch up to us and then gun it!"

Thomas slowed the boat abruptly, and the sound of screaming Jet Ski engines rose up over the *Water Beetle's* motor, growing higher-pitched as they approached.

"Molly, drop it on my signal!"

"Kay," she gasped.

My brother stood at the wheel with his eyes closed, focused intently on the sound. Then, abruptly, he gunned the *Water Beetle's* engines again.

"Molly, now!"

Molly let out a groan and the illusionary cloud of white mist vanished as if it had never existed.

The formation of oncoming Jet Skis was only about fifty yards away, charging hard after us over the water, and they were moving so much more swiftly than us that within seconds they were almost on top of the *Water Beetle*. Jet Skis started swerving left and right to avoid a collision with our boat.

All except for the Redcap. He was guiding the Jet Ski with one hand and held a military carbine in the other. His eyes widened as the vehicle rushed closer, but rather than swerving to one side, he broke out into a wild smile, swung the gun around to point toward me, and *accelerated*.

Before he could shoot, I unleashed my gathered will into a burst of completely unfocused magical energy, shouting, "*Hexus!*"

I think I mentioned before how technology doesn't get along with wizards. Put any kind of intricate machine in a wizard's presence, and suddenly everything that *might* go wrong with the machine *does* go wrong.

And that's when we're not even *trying* to make it happen. Electronics generally get hit the hardest, like poor Butters's computers, but that particular law of magical forces is good across the spectrum.

Jet Skis, especially the brand-new ones, are intricate machines. They focus tremendous power and energy into a tiny space, and their systems are regulated by little computers and so on. They're a gathering of tiny, nearly continuous explosions in a box, moving water under intense pressure—and a world of things can go wrong with them.

The Redcap's Jet Ski suffered an abrupt, catastrophic engine failure. There was a hideous sound of tearing metal, a flash of flame, and the handlebar twisted abruptly from his hands. The Jet Ski's nose plunged down into the water, flinging the Redcap off of it at full speed. He'd been doing maybe sixty when I hit him, and he skipped twice across the water's surface before he slammed into a swell from the *Water Beetle*'s wake and vanished under the surface.

Thomas, meanwhile, had seized another opportunity. As the Jet Skis split off to swing around us, he whirled the steering wheel, turning the *Water Beetle* sharply to her left. I heard one scream, and a crunching sound accompanied by a heavy reverberation in the deck beneath my feet as a Jet Ski slammed into our boat's nose—with results very similar to a deer slamming into a speeding semi.

"*Hexus!*" Molly shouted from where she was crouched on the deck. Her aim was good, even if her hex wouldn't carry the same kind of raw power mine did. The Jet Ski Thomas had missed suddenly began billowing smoke, and its roaring engine cut away to a gasping, labored rattle.

I spun to face the other direction, pitching another hex at the two Jet Skis passing on the far side of the ship. They were at the edge of my range and racing away, so my hex didn't convince their engines to tear themselves apart, the way the short-range, focused curse had the Redcap's vehicle—but one of the Jet Skis abruptly began coasting to a stop, and the other took a sharp right turn and then simply went on turning in a furious, continuous circle.

Thomas opened up the throttle all the way, and the *Water Beetle* left the lamed flotilla of would-be assassins bobbing in her wake.

I didn't relax until I'd swept the ship's exterior with my eyes and magical senses alike to make sure no one was hanging on to a rail or

something. Then, just to be certain, I double-checked the cabin and hold, until I was certain that no one had infiltrated the boat in the chaos.

And then I sank down in relief on a chair in the cabin. But only for a second. Then I grabbed the first-aid kit and went up to the bridge to see to Thomas.

Molly was sprawled on the deck in the morning sunshine, exhausted from her efforts, and obviously asleep. She snored a little. I stepped over her and went up to my brother. He saw me and grunted. “We should be pulling into port in another fifteen minutes,” he said. “I think we’re clear.”

“That won’t last,” I said. “How’s your arm?”

“Through and through,” Thomas said. “Not too bad. Just stop the leak.”

“Hold still,” I told him. Then I started working on his arm. It wasn’t bad, as bullet wounds go. It had entered the lean muscle at the bottom of his triceps in back and come out the other side, leaving a small hole. That had probably been the Redcap, then—the rounds from his M4 would be armor-piercing, metal-jacketed military rounds, specifically designed to punch long, fairly small holes. I cleaned it up with disinfectant, got a pressure bandage positioned over the holes, and taped it down. “Okay, you can stop complaining now.”

Thomas, who had been silent the whole time, gave me a look.

“You can have your harem change out the bandages later,” I said. “How busy are you today?”

“Oh,” he mused. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve got to get a new shirt now.”

“After that,” I asked, “would you like to help me save the city? If you don’t already have plans.”

He snorted. “You mean, would I like to follow you around, wondering what the hell is going on because you won’t tell me everything, then get in a fight with something that is going to leave me in intensive care?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, nodding, “pretty much.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Okay.”

Chapter

Nineteen

We took Thomas's car back to his apartment.

"You got the Hummer fixed," I said approvingly.

He snorted. "After I let you ride in it, it went undamaged for what, about thirty minutes?"

"Come on," I said, stretching out my legs. There was room. "It was at least an hour. How you doing back there, Molly?"

From the backseat, Molly snored. I smiled. The grasshopper had shambled to the truck and flung herself down on the backseat without saying a word.

"She okay?" Thomas asked.

"She pushed it today," I said.

“With that mist thing? She does illusions all the time, I thought.”

“Dude,” I said. “It was hundreds of yards long and hundreds of yards across. That’s a huge freaking image to project, especially over water.”

“Because water grounds out magic?” Thomas asked.

“Exactly right,” I said. “And be glad it does, or the Sidhe would have been chucking lightning bolts at us instead of bullets. Molly had to sustain her image while the energy from which it was made kept on draining away. And then she hexed one of the Jet Skis. For her, that’s some serious heavy lifting. She’s tired.”

He frowned. “Like that time you collapsed at my dad’s place?”

“More or less,” I said. “Molly’s still relatively new at this. The first few times you hit your wall, it just about knocks you out. She’ll be fine.”

“So how come the Sidhe didn’t hex up their own engines? I mean, I’m guessing a Jet Ski would run for about ten seconds with you on it.”

“I’d give it ten or fifteen minutes,” I said. “And it worked for the Sidhe because they aren’t human.”

“Why should that make a difference?”

I shrugged. “No one really knows. Ebenezer thinks it’s because human beings are inherently conflicted creatures. Magic responds to your thoughts and to your emotions—and people’s thoughts and emotions are constantly conflicting with one another. The way he figures it, that means that there’s a kind of turbulence around people with magical talent. The turbulence is what causes mechanical failure.”

“Why?”

I shrugged again. “It’s just the way things are. The specific effects this turbulence causes tend to change slowly over time. Three hundred years ago, it made cream turn sour, disturbed animals, and tended to encourage minor skin infections in wizards. Gave them blemishes and moles and pockmarks.”

“Fun,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, I’m not upset about missing out on that kind of fun,” I said. “Then sometime between then and now, it segued into triggering odd flashes of hallucination in the people who hung around in close proximity to us. You know the whole ergot theory of history? People with talent, especially people who didn’t even know they had it, probably had a lot to do with that. Now it mucks around with probability where machines are concerned.”

Thomas eyed me. Then he carefully powered off his truck's stereo.

"Funny," I said. After a moment I added, "I don't mean to do it. I mean, I try not to do it, but . . ."

"I don't mind if you break my stuff," Thomas said. "I'll just make Lara buy me new stuff."

Lara, Thomas's half sister, was the power behind the throne of the White Court of vampires. Lara was gorgeous, brilliant, and sexier than a Swedish bikini team hiking up a mountain of money. As a potential enemy, she was a little scary. As an occasional ally, she was freaking terrifying.

I wasn't ever going to tell Thomas this, but when I'd been arranging my own murder, Lara had been the runner-up on my list of possible administrators of my demise. I mean, hey, if you're going to go, there are worse ways to do it than to be taken out by the freaking queen of the world's succubi.

"How's Lara doing?" I asked.

"She's Lara," Thomas said. "Always doing business, planning plans, scheming schemes."

"Like the Brighter Future Society?" I asked. The BFS was an alliance of unlikely bedfellows of the supernatural scene in Chicago, headquartered out of a small but genuine castle, guarded by hired guns from Valhalla.

Thomas bared his teeth in a smile. "That was Lara's idea, actually. Marcone imported that freaking castle and had it rebuilt over your old boardinghouse. Lara says it's impregnable."

"The Death Star was impregnable," I said. "So Lara got in bed with Marcone?"

"She tried," Thomas said, "but Marcone kept it purely business. That's two men who have turned her down in the same century. She was annoyed."

I grunted. I'd been the other guy. John Marcone was the crime lord of Chicago. He could buy and sell United States congressmen, and had the establishment in Chicago completely wired. He was also the first regular mortal to sign on to the Unseelie Accords, and according to them, he was the baron of Chicago.

"I was sort of hoping she'd kill him," I said.

"I was sort of hoping for the other way around," Thomas said. "But with the Fomor trying to muscle in on everyone's territory, they need each other—for now."

“The Fomor are that bad?” I asked. They were a crew of bad guys whose names were known primarily in old mythology books, the survivors of a number of dark mythoi across the world, the worst of the worst—or at least the most survival-minded of the worst.

“They’re ruthless,” Thomas said. “And they’re everywhere. But between Marcone’s hired goons, Lara’s resources, and Murphy’s people, they haven’t gotten a solid foothold here. Other cities, it’s bad. Los Angeles, Seattle, San Francisco, Miami, and Boston are the worst off. They’re grabbing anyone with a lick of magical ability and carrying them away. Thousands of people.”

“Hell’s bells,” I muttered. “What about the White Council?”

“They’re busy,” Thomas said. “Word is that they’re operating around the coasts of Europe, especially in the Mediterranean, fighting the Fomor there. Lara’s people have been sharing a little information with the Council, and vice versa, but there’s nothing like an alliance.”

“They aren’t working in the U.S. at all?” I asked.

Thomas shrugged. “Your Warden buddies are trying,” he said. “Ramirez got hurt pretty bad last year. I don’t think he’s back in action yet. But the Wardens in Baltimore and San Diego are holding out, and the kid in Texas is giving them hell.”

“Good for Wild Bill,” I said. “So how come other cities haven’t gone down?”

“Lara,” Thomas said simply. His voice altered subtly and I could recognize the precise, enunciated tones that marked his sister’s voice. “We labored for centuries to cultivate this herd. I will *not* abide a horde of toady, has-been poachers.”

“She’s a sweetheart,” I said.

“She’s done a lot,” he said. “But she wouldn’t have been able to do it without the Paranet.”

“Wow. Seriously?”

“Knowledge is power,” Thomas said. “There are tens of thousands of people on the Paranet. Eyes and ears in every city, getting more experienced every day. Something happens, one of the Fomor moves, and the entire community knows about it in minutes.”

I blinked. “They can do that?”

“Internet,” Thomas said. “The Netters are all low-grade talents. They can use computers and cell phones without hexing them up. So something

starts happening, they tweet about it, and Lara dispatches a ready team.”

“And she just happens to get to find out more about the magical talents in other cities. The ones who can’t really defend themselves. In case she gets hungry later.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. “But it’s not like the Netters have a lot of choice in the matter.” He paused for a couple of blocks and then said, “Lara’s getting scary.”

“Lara was always scary.”

Thomas shook his head. “Not like this. She’s getting involved in government.”

“She was always doing that,” I said.

“City officials, sure. A few key state bureaucrats. And she kept it gentle and invisible—manipulation, influence. But now she’s going for something different.”

“What?”

“Control.”

It’s funny how chilling one little word can be.

“I’ll stick her on my to-do list, then,” I said.

Thomas snorted.

“Not like that,” I said. “Pervert.”

“Yeah. Because you think she’s hideous.”

“She’s too scary to be pretty,” I lied.

“If she knew I’d told you even that much, bad things would happen,” Thomas said.

“To you?”

“Not me. I’m family.” His jaw tensed. “To Justine.”

“No, it won’t,” I said. “Because if she tries it, we’ll protect Justine.”

My brother looked at me. “Thanks,” he said quietly.

“Whatever,” I said. “It’s getting cloying in here. Are we there yet?”

He smiled. “Jerk.”

“Wuss.”

“Jackass.”

“Pansy.”

“Philistine.”

“Dandysprat.”

“Butthead.”

“Whiner . . .”

* * *

Thomas had just pulled the Hummer into a parking space in a garage across from his apartment building in the Loop when a gold SUV roared up and came to a sudden halt behind the Hummer. Thomas and I traded a fast look, and we were both thinking the same thing. A car meant that an attacker would probably be a mortal, using mortal weapons. That meant guns. That meant that if they started shooting at us while we were still in the car, Molly, asleep in the backseat, wouldn't have a prayer.

Both of us rolled out of the front seat, getting clear of the Hummer as fast as possible. Thomas had his handgun with him. I took the Winchester with me.

The occupants of the gold SUV didn't come leaping out with guns blazing. The engine stopped. Then, several seconds later, the driver's door opened, and someone got out. He walked calmly around the front of the SUV.

It was a slender man, a bit below average height. His hair was a blond so pale that it was nearly white. He wore faded blue jeans and a green silk shirt. He had a gun belt a lot like Thomas's number, fitted with an automatic pistol on one hip and a sword on the other. He wasn't a particularly good-looking man, and he didn't carry himself aggressively, but his jaw and his eyes were both hard. He stopped at a point where he could see both of us and stood there, his arms akimbo, his hands not *quite* entirely relaxed by his sides—and near his weapons.

"Harry," he said quietly.

"Fix," I said. I knew him. He was my opposite number on the Summer side of things. His predecessor had been murdered by *my* predecessor.

"I heard that Mab had recruited you to be the new Winter Knight," he said. "I was sure that it was a wild rumor. The man I knew would never have bowed to a creature like Mab."

"I had my reasons," I said.

He looked me up and down, slowly. Then he said, "You've been given instructions."

"Maybe," I said.

"You have," he said. "Mab's sent you to kill someone, hasn't she?"

"It's none of your concern," I said quietly.

"The hell it isn't," Fix said. "The Winter Knight exists to execute people Mab can't kill herself. You think I don't know that?"

“I think that there’s an awful lot of glass in your house, Fix,” I said. “You’re in the same business as me.”

“Never,” Fix said. “The Summer Knight’s job isn’t to do Titania’s killing.”

“No? What is it, then?”

“To stop you,” he said simply. “Not even Mab should get to decide who lives and who dies, Harry. Life is too precious to be wasted that way. So when she sends you to kill someone, someone gets in the way. That’s me.”

I didn’t say anything for a minute. I had assumed that the Summer Knight would have the same job I did, just for a different crew. I hadn’t really thought about actually crossing swords with Fix—metaphorically or otherwise. Ten years ago, that possibility wouldn’t have fazed me. But Fix wasn’t the same guy he had been back then. He was the Summer Knight, and he was currently standing up to a champion of the White Court and the Winter Knight without batting an eye. I recognized the calm in him, the stillness that was almost like serenity—it was focus and confidence. He knew the danger, he didn’t want to fight, but he was quietly ready for it, and ready to accept whatever consequences it might bring.

It’s generally a really bad idea to fight guys who are in that particular mental space.

“You want me to run him off?” Thomas asked.

Fix’s eyes didn’t move from me, but he directed his words at Thomas. “Come try it, vampire.”

“Stars and stones.” I sighed. I took the Winchester and put it gently back into the Hummer. “Fix, can we stop the *High Noon* routine? I’m not going to fight *you*.”

He frowned slightly. “That sort of remains to be seen.”

“Thomas,” I said, “get back in the truck, please.”

“What?”

“I want to talk to Fix, and it isn’t going to be a real productive conversation if he has to keep one eye on each of us and his fingers by his gun in case you draw on him.”

Thomas grunted. “Suppose he draws and shoots you as soon as I’m not backing you up.”

“If that happens, and if it’ll make you feel better, you can come fight him, I suppose.” I regarded Fix for a moment and then said, “But he won’t.”

“Harry,” Thomas said.

“He won’t,” I said quietly. “I know him. He won’t.”

Thomas let out a low growling grumble—but he got back into the Hummer and shut the door.

Fix eyed me warily, and checked his surroundings quickly, as though expecting some kind of ambush.

I sighed and sat down on the rear bumper of the Hummer. “Fix,” I said. “Look, I’ve been doing this job for about six hours now. I haven’t gone all dark side. Yet.”

Fix folded his arms. His fingers were still close to his weapons, but a little farther away than they’d been a moment before. “You’ve got to understand. Lloyd Slate was a real monster, man.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know. Because you never had to face him without power, the way we did.”

I spread my hands. “I didn’t always have power, Fix. And even with it, there are plenty of big, scary things out there that I’m just as helpless against. I know.”

“Then you know what my problem is,” he said.

“Let’s assume for a moment that I’m sometimes an idiot,” I said. “What’s your problem?”

He gave me a brief smile. “You were dangerous enough without Mab’s hand on you. Now? You can make Lloyd Slate look like a grade-school bully.”

“But I haven’t,” I said.

“But you could.”

“Maybe I won’t.”

“Maybe you will.”

“If I’m as powerful as you seem to think,” I said, “then what makes you think you can stand up to me?”

He shrugged. “Maybe I can’t. But at least I have a chance. The people behind me wouldn’t.”

“Ah,” I said. We both sat for a moment. Then I said, “So I guess it won’t be enough for me to assure you that I’m not up to no good.”

“You know how you could tell when Slate was lying?”

“How?”

“His lips were moving.”

I smiled briefly. “Well. It seems to me you’ve got a couple of choices.”

“Oh?”

“You do the math. You see what I have the potential to do, and you plan for what I *could* do, rather than what you think I *will* do.”

“Might be smart,” Fix said. “Von Clausewitz would say so.”

“If this was a war and I was the enemy, sure.”

“What else do you think I could do?”

“Extend a little trust, maybe,” I said. “That’s the illusion here, man. As far as I’m concerned, we don’t need to be enemies. We don’t need to be at war.”

Fix pursed his lips. Then he said, “Here’s the problem with that. You belong to Mab. I like Harry. Maybe I could even trust him. But I know what Mab is like—and Harry belongs to Mab now.”

“The hell I do,” I said. “Just because I took this job doesn’t mean I’m all cozy with her.”

“You, uh, looked kinda cozy, man. With Mab. On the stone table.”

Sealing a contract like the one with Mab isn’t something you do with an impersonal handshake. I felt my cheeks heat up. “Oh. You saw that.”

“All of Faerie did,” Fix said.

“God, that’s humiliating,” I muttered.

“I know what you mean,” he said. “At least it wasn’t on pay-per-view.”

I snorted.

“Okay,” I said finally. “I’m under some time pressure here, so I think you need to make a decision.”

“Yeah?”

I nodded. “Who is going to make this call? You? Or von Clausewitz?”

Fix looked away. Then he said, “I hate this kind of crap. This is the first time I’ve had a job I’ve held down for more than six months.”

“I hear you.”

He gave me another brief smile. “I want to believe you,” he said. Then he took a steadying breath and faced me, lowering his arms to his sides again. “But there are people depending on me to keep them safe. I can’t afford to do that.”

I stood up, very slowly and reluctantly. “Fix, I don’t want this fight.”

“And you’ll get a chance to avoid it,” he said. “I’m going to give you until noon to get out of town, Harry. If I see you after that, I’m not going to

spend any more time talking, and I'm not going to challenge you to a fair fight. If you're really serious about being your own man, if you really want to keep the peace between us—you'll go."

"I don't think I can do that," I said.

"I didn't think you could," he said quietly. "You have until noon."

We exchanged a nod. Then he moved back to his SUV, never taking his eyes off me. Once he was in, he started it and drove away.

I sank back down onto the Hummer's back bumper again and closed my eyes.

Great.

One more thing.

I liked Fix. He was a decent guy. He'd become the Summer Knight, and as far as I knew, he'd never abused his power. People in the supernatural community liked and respected him. I'd even seen him in action once. He was a hell of a lot more formidable than he'd been as the scared young man I'd first met.

I didn't want to fight him.

He might not give me a choice.

Mab was not about puppies and kittens, and I'd known that when I signed on. Even if she wasn't evil, exactly, she was vicious, violent, and ruthless. I had no doubt that Mab had done for a number of decent people in her time, one way or another. There were stories about the Winter Knight stretching back for centuries, and various vile personalities had held the title. Some of them had even been famous. Gilles de Rais. Andrei Chikatilo. John Haigh. Fritz Haarmann. If I were in Fix's shoes, and he were in mine, I might well have pulled the trigger without thinking twice.

I leaned my head back against the truck with a little thunk.

Thomas sat down next to me, and the Hummer settled a little more. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"He going to back off?"

"Doesn't matter," I said.

"Sure it does."

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter because he's a decent guy, and I'm not going to hurt him."

"He might not give you much choice."

“There’s always a choice,” I said. “That’s the thing, man. There’s always, *always* a choice. My options might really, truly *suck*, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a choice.”

“You’d let him kill you?” Thomas asked.

I looked up at him. “No. But I won’t hurt him.”

My brother gave me a tight-lipped look and then got up and walked away.

There was a shimmer in the air, and Molly appeared, standing about ten feet behind what had been Fix’s position during our conversation. She watched Thomas go with an unhappy expression.

I blinked at her. “How long have you been standing there?”

“I got out of your side of the car when Thomas got in,” she said. “You know. Just in case something happened. It seemed like a good idea to make sure he went down quick if a fight broke out, so you wouldn’t have to kill him.”

I smiled at her. “Totally unfair.”

“I had this teacher who kept telling me that if I was ever in a fair fight, someone had made a mistake,” she said.

“Sounds like a jerk.”

“He has his moments,” she said. She squinted after Thomas and said, “He’s just afraid, you know. He doesn’t want to lose his brother twice.”

“I know,” I said.

“But I’m really proud of you, boss,” she said, her voice quieter. “I mean . . . I know you’ve had some hard calls to make lately. But my dad would say that you were right about this one. There’s always a choice.”

I grunted. “If I get into it with Fix,” I said, “I don’t want you to get involved.”

“Why not?”

“Because faeries keep score,” I said. “And they’ll never leave a score unsettled.”

“If I told you that, you’d tell me that wasn’t my choice to make.”

“And I’d be right,” I said, and sighed. “But I have enough worries already, grasshopper. Leave it alone. For me.”

She looked like I’d just asked her to swallow a bug. “I’ll try,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said, and extended my hand.

She helped me up. “What’s next?”

“A phone call. Let’s go.”

Chapter

Twenty

“I don’t care how busy he is,” I said into the phone. “I need to talk with him. Period.”

We were in Thomas’s living room. Thomas was sprawled on a recliner. The hideous high-tech brushed-steel look that had been the place’s trademark had been softened with window dressings and various bits of decoration—Justine’s touch. Thomas, like most men, regarded a throw pillow as something to throw.

One bounced off of my chest. “Way to turn on the charm, Harry,” he murmured.

I covered the phone’s receiver with one hand. “Polite gets you nowhere with these people. Trust me.” I turned back to the phone. “No,” I

said. “Not over this line. It’s bugged. Just tell him that Doughnut Boy needs to speak to him or an informed high-level operative in person, within the hour.”

Thomas mouthed the word *operative* at me, his fingers spread in a gesture meant to convey spooky importance. I kicked the pillow back at him.

“Don’t give me excuses,” I said. “He can get here if he damned well wants to and we both know it. Call me back at this number.” I thunked the phone down.

“Earlier today,” Molly said, from where she sat on the floor, “someone said something to me about not burning my bridges. Let me think. Who was that?”

“Ixnay,” I growled. “I know what I’m doing.” I turned to Thomas. “How many bugs does Lara have on this place?”

“Harry,” Thomas said in a scandalized tone—one that was just a little bit too well projected to be meant for me. “I’m her brother. She would never behave that way toward her own flesh and blood, her own kin, her own dear sibling.”

I growled. “How many?”

He shrugged. “It changes. New ones come in sometimes when I’m not home.”

I grunted. I put the phone on the counter, unplugged it, and grabbed a pepper shaker. I put a circle of pepper around the phone, and sealed it with a gentle effort of will. “You’re set for money, right?”

“With Lara’s money, yes.”

“Good,” I said, and then I unleashed a burst of will with a mutter of, “*Hexus*,” that burned out every bit of electronics within fifty feet. The apartment’s lightbulbs all winked out at the same instant.

Thomas groaned, but he didn’t otherwise complain.

“Grasshopper,” I said.

“On it,” Molly said. She rose to her feet, frowning, her eyes mostly closed, and began walking slowly around the apartment.

While she did that, I broke the circle of pepper with a brush of my hand and plugged the phone back in.

“If you were going to do that,” Thomas asked, “why not do it before you made the phone call that absolutely did set off every flag Lara’s security teams have to wave?”

I held up a hand for silence, until Molly had wandered down the hall and back. “Nothing,” she said.

“No spells?” Thomas asked.

“Right,” I said. “Anyone who came in uninvited wouldn’t be able to make that kind of spell stick. And no one you’ve invited in has . . .” I frowned. “Molly?”

“I didn’t,” she said quickly.

“. . . has planted a spell to listen in on you,” I finished. “And I wanted Lara’s people to know who I contacted. When they try to follow up on it, they’ll betray their presence and he’ll be alerted to how they operate.”

“It was a payment,” Thomas said.

I shrugged. “Call it a friendly gesture.”

“At my sister’s expense,” Thomas said.

“Lara’s a big girl. She’ll understand.” I considered things for a moment and then said, “Everyone be cool. Something might happen.”

Thomas frowned. “Like what?”

“Cat Sith!” I called in a firm voice. “I need you, if you please!”

There was a rushing sound, like a heavy curtain stirred by a strong wind, and then, from the fresh, dark shadows beneath Thomas’s dining table, the malk’s alien voice said, “I am here, Sir Knight.”

Thomas jerked in reaction, despite my warning, and produced a tiny semiautomatic pistol from I knew not where. Molly drew in a sharp, harsh breath, and backed directly away from the source of the voice until her shoulder blades hit a wall.

It was just possible that I had understated how unsettling a malk sounds when it speaks. I’d clearly been hanging around creepy things for way too long.

“Take it easy,” I said, holding a hand out to Thomas. “This is Cat Sith.”

Molly made a sputtering noise.

I gave her a quelling glance and said to Thomas, “He’s working with me.”

Cat Sith came to the edge of the shadows so that his silhouette could be seen. His eyes reflected the light from the almost entirely curtained windows. “Sir Knight. How may I assist you?”

“Empty night, it talks,” Thomas breathed.

“How?” Molly asked. “The threshold here is solid. How did it just come *in* like that?”

Which was a reasonable question, given that Molly didn’t know about my former cleaning service and how it had interacted with my old apartment’s threshold. “Beings out of Faerie don’t necessarily need to be invited over a threshold,” I said. “If they’re benevolent to the inhabitants of the house, they can pretty much come right in.”

“Wait,” Thomas said. “These freaks can walk in and out whenever they want? Pop in directly from the Nevernever? And you didn’t tell us about it?”

“Only if their intentions are benign,” I said. “Cat Sith came here to assist me, and by extension you. As long as he’s here, he’s . . .” I frowned and looked at the malk. “Help me find the correct way to explain this to him?”

Sith directed his eyes to Thomas and said, “While I am here, I am bound by the same traditions as would apply were I your invited guest,” he said. “I will offer no harm to anyone you have accepted into your home, nor take any action which would be considered untoward for a guest. I will report nothing of what I see and hear in this place, and make every effort to aid and assist your household and other guests while I remain.”

I blinked several times. I had expected Sith to hit me with a big old snark-club rather than actually answering the question—much less answering it in such detail. But that made sense. The obligations of guest and host were almost holy in the supernatural world. If Sith truly did regard that kind of courtesy as the obligation of a guest, he would have little choice but to live up to it.

Thomas seemed to digest that for a few moments and then grunted. “I suppose I am obliged to comport myself as a proper host, then.”

“Say instead that I am under no obligation to allow myself to be harmed, or to remain and give my aid, if you behave in any other fashion,” Sith corrected him. “If you began shooting at me with that weapon, for example, I would depart without doing harm, and only then would I hunt you, catch you outside the protection of your threshold, and kill you in order to discourage such behavior from others in the future.”

Thomas looked like he was about to talk some smack at the malk, but only for a second. Then he frowned and said, “It’s odd. You sound like . . . like a grade-school teacher.”

“Perhaps it is because I am speaking to a child,” Cat Sith said. “The comparison is apt.”

Thomas blinked several times and then looked at me. “Did the evil kitty just call me a child?”

“I don’t think he’s evil so much as hyperviolent and easily bored,” I said. “And you started it. You called him a freak.”

My brother pursed his lips and frowned. “I did, didn’t I?” He turned to Cat Sith and set his gun aside. “Cat Sith, the remark was not directed specifically at you or meant to insult you, but I acknowledge that I have given offense, and recognize that the slight puts me in your debt. Please accept my apologies, and feel free to ask a commensurate service of me should you ever have need of it, to balance the scales.”

Cat Sith stared at Thomas for a moment, and then inclined his head. “Even children can learn manners. Done. Until such time as I have need of you, I regard the matter as settled, Thomas Raith.”

“You know him?” I asked.

“And your apprentice, Molly Carpenter,” Sith said, his voice impatient, “as well as the rest of your frequent associates. May I suggest that you get on with the business at hand, Sir Knight? *Tempus fugit.*”

One of Winter’s most dangerous creatures—most dangerous *hunters*—knew all about my friends. That was something that a smart man would be concerned about. I reminded myself that just because someone is courteous, it does not necessarily mean that they aren’t planning to vivisect you. It just means that they’ll ask whether the ropes holding you down are comfortable before they pick up the scalpel. Cat Sith might be an ally, for the moment, but he was *not* my friend.

“In a few minutes, we’re going to be leaving,” I said. “I’ve got a hunch that we’ll be under observation, and I don’t want that. I want you to distract anyone who has us under direct surveillance.”

“With pleasure.”

“Without killing them or causing significant bodily harm,” I said. “For all I know there’s a cop or a PI watching the place. So nothing permanent.”

Cat Sith narrowed his eyes. His tail twitched to one side, but he said nothing.

“Think of it as a compliment,” I suggested. “Any idiot could murder them. What I ask is far more difficult, as befits your station.”

His tail twitched the other way. He said nothing.

“After that,” I said, “I want you to get word to the Summer Lady. I want a meeting.”

“Uh, what?” Thomas said.

“Is that a good idea?” Molly asked at the same time.

I waved a hand at both of them, and kept talking to Sith. “Tell her it’s got to happen before noon. Can you contact her?”

“Of course, Sir Knight,” said Sith. “She will wish to know the reason for such a meeting.”

“Tell her that I’d prefer not to kill her Knight, and I’d like to discuss how best to avoid it. Tell her that I’ll meet her wherever she pleases, if she promises me safe conduct. Bring me her answer.”

Sith eyed me, then said, “Such a course is unwise.”

“I’m not asking you to do it. What do you care?”

“The Queen may be less than pleased with me if I break her newest toy before she’s gotten sufficient use from it.”

“Gosh,” I said.

Sith flicked an ear and managed to do it contemptuously. “I will bear this message, Sir Knight. And I will . . . distract . . . those who hunt you. When will you be departing?”

Behind me, Thomas’s phone began to ring.

“Tell you in a second,” I said. I answered the phone. “Go for Doughnut Boy.”

A woman with a voice cold enough to merit the use of the Kelvin scale spat, “He will meet you. Accorded Neutral Ground. Ten minutes.”

“Cool,” I said. “I haven’t had a beer in forever.”

There was a brief, perhaps baffled silence, and then she hung up on me.

I turned back to Thomas and Molly and said, “Let’s go. Sith, please be —”

The eldest malk vanished.

“—gin,” I finished, somewhat lamely.

Thomas swung to his feet and slipped the little automatic into the back of his pants, then pulled his shirt down over it. “Where are we going?”

“Accorded Neutral Ground,” I said.

“Oh, good,” Molly said. “I’m starving.”

Chapter

Twenty-one

In the lobby, we found the doorman sitting on the ground grimacing in pain. A CPD patrol officer was next to him with a first-aid kit. As we passed, I saw several long, long slices in the back of one of the doorman's legs, running from just above his heel to the top of his calf. His slacks and socks alike were sliced in neat, parallel strips. The wounds were painful and bloody, but not life-threatening.

Both men were both too preoccupied to pay an instant of attention to the three of us as we calmly left the building.

I winced a little as we went by them. Dammit. I hadn't wanted to turn even the gentlest of Cat Sith's attentions upon any of my fellow Chicagoans, but I hadn't worded my command to him tightly enough. Of

course, that was a rabbit hole I didn't want to start down—experience has taught me that you do *not* win against supernatural entities at lawyering. It just doesn't happen. I didn't even want to think about what Sith might have done if I hadn't forbidden him the use of deadly force.

Maybe this was the malk's way of telling me to beware the consequences if I kept giving him commands like a common servant. Or maybe this was his idea of playing nice. After all, he hadn't slashed up the cop and every passerby. For all I knew, he thought he'd been a perfect gentleman.

Molly checked out the parking garage from beneath a veil while Thomas and I waited. Once she pronounced the garage villain-free, we got into my brother's troop transport and left.

* * *

In Chicago, you can't swing a cat without hitting an Irish pub (and angering the cat), but McAnally's place stands out from the crowd. It's the favored watering hole for the supernatural scene of Chicago. Normals never really seem to find their way in, though we get some tourists once in a while. They rarely linger.

Morning traffic was roaring at full steam, and even though Mac's wasn't far, it took us a little time to get there. Clouds had swallowed up the bright dawn, thick and grey. A light rain was falling. Occasionally I could see flashes of distant lightning glowing through the clouds overhead, or hear a subtle growl of low thunder.

"And it was supposed to be nice today," Molly murmured.

I smiled a little, but didn't say anything.

Thomas pulled into the little parking lot adjacent to Mac's, parking his Hummer next to an old white Trans Am. He stopped, frowning at it.

"I thought Mac usually opened up at noon," he said.

"Eleven," I said. My old office building hadn't been far away. I'd eaten many a lunch at Mac's place. "Guess he came in early today."

"That's handy," Thomas said.

"Where does that saying come from?" I asked.

"Uh," Thomas said. "Handy?"

I blinked as we walked. "Well, yeah, that one, too, but I was thinking of the phrase, 'You can't swing a cat without hitting something around

here.’”

Thomas gave me a steady look. “Don’t you have important things to be thinking about right now?”

I shrugged. “I wonder about these things. Life goes on, man. If I stop thinking about things just because some psycho or crew of psychos wants me dead, I’ll never get to think about *anything*, will I?”

Thomas bobbed his head to one side in acknowledgment of my point.

About thirty feet from the door, Molly abruptly stopped in her tracks and said, “Harry.”

I paused and looked back at her.

Her eyes were wide. She said, “I sense . . .”

I narrowed my eyes. “Say it. You know you want to say it.”

“It is *not* a disturbance in the Force,” she said, her voice half-exasperated. “There’s a . . . a presence here. Something powerful. I felt it in Chichén Itzá.”

“Good,” I said, nodding. “He’s here. Seriously, neither of you guys knows where that saying comes from? Damn.”

I hate not knowing things. It’s enough to make a guy wish he could use the Internet.

* * *

Mac’s pub was all but empty. It’s a place that looks pretty spacious when empty, yet it’s small enough to feel cozy when it’s full. It’s a study in deliberate asymmetry. There are thirteen tables of varying sizes and heights scattered irregularly around the floor. There are thirteen wooden columns, placed in similarly random positions, their faces carved with scenes from old-world nursery tales. The bar kind of meanders, and there are thirteen stools spaced unevenly along it. Just about everything is made from wood, including the paneled walls, the hardwood floors, and the paneled ceiling. Thirteen ceiling fans hang suspended from the ceiling, ancient things that Mac manages to keep running despite the frequent presence of magical talents.

The decor is a kind of feng shui, or at least something close to it. All that imbalance is intended to scatter the random outbursts of magical energy that cause problems for practitioners. It must work. The electric fans and the telephone hardly ever melt down.

Mac stood behind the bar, a lean man a little taller than average, his shaven head gleaming. I've patronized his establishment for most of my adult life and he still looked more or less like he had when I first met him: neat, dressed in dark pants, a white shirt, and a pristine white apron that proved its ongoing redundancy by never getting messy. Mac was leaning on the bar, listening to something the pub's only other occupant was saying.

The second man was well over six feet tall, and built with the kind of broad shoulders and lean power that made me think of a long-distance swimmer. He wore a dark grey business suit, an immaculate European number of some kind, obviously custom-made. His hair was the color of old steel, highlighted with sweeps of silver, and his sharp chin and jawline were emphasized by the cut of a short silver-white beard. The man wore a black eye patch made of silk, and even against the backdrop of that suit, it gave him a piratical aura.

The man in the eye patch finished saying whatever it was, and Mac dropped his head back and let out a short, hefty belly laugh. It lasted only a second, and then it was gone, replaced with Mac's usual calm, genial expression, but the man in the suit sat back with an expression of pleasure on his face at the reaction.

"It's him," Molly said. "Who is that?"

"Donar Vadderung," I told her.

"Whoa," Thomas said.

Molly frowned. "The . . . the security company guy?"

"CEO of Monoc Securities," I said, nodding.

"Empty night, Dresden," Thomas said. "You just demanded that *he* come to see *you*?"

"Is that bad?" Molly asked him.

"It's . . . glah," Thomas said. "Think of doing that to Donald Trump or George Soros."

Molly winced. "I'm . . . not sure I can do that."

Thomas glared at me. "You set up Lara's surveillance crew to go up against *his* guys?"

I smiled.

"Balls," Thomas said. "She's going to rip mine off."

"Tell her it wasn't your fault. You couldn't have stopped me. She'll get it," I said. "You guys sit down; get some food or something. This shouldn't take long."

Molly blinked, then looked at Thomas and said, “Wait a minute. . . . We’re his *flunkies*.”

“You, maybe,” Thomas said, sneering. “I’m his *thug*. I’m way higher than a flunky.”

“You *are* high if you think I’m taking any orders from you,” Molly said tartly.

The two of them went to a far table, bickering cheerfully, and sat down, passing by the real reason we were meeting here—a modest wooden sign with simple letters burned into it: ACCORDED NEUTRAL TERRITORY.

The Unseelie Accords had supported the various supernatural political entities over the past few turbulent decades. They were a series of agreements that, at the end of the day, were basically meant to limit conflicts between the various nations to something with a definite structure. They defined the rights of those lords who held territory, as well as the infractions that could be committed against those lords by other lords. Think of them as the Geneva Conventions of the spooky side. That’s kind of close.

Mac had somehow gotten his place declared neutral ground. It meant that whenever any signatory of the Accords was here, he was obligated to be a good guest, to offer no harm or violence to any other signatory, and to take any violence that might erupt outside. It was a meeting ground, where there was at least a fair chance that you might actually get to finish a meal without being murdered by someone who might otherwise be a mortal enemy.

Vadderung watched Molly and Thomas sit and then transferred his attention back to me. His single eye was an icy shade of blue, and unsettling. As I approached him, I had an instinctive impression that he could see more of me than I could of him.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “Rumors of your death, et cetera.”

I shrugged. “I’m sure it isn’t an uncommon play among wizards,” I said.

Something in his eye flashed, an amused thought that went by almost before I could see it. “Fewer try it than you might think,” he said.

“I didn’t try anything,” I said. “It just happened.”

Vadderung reached out and lazily collected a cup of coffee. He sipped it, watching me. Then he leaned forward slightly and said slowly, “Nothing

that significant just happens, Dresden.”

I squinted at him. Shrugged. Then I said, “Mac, can I get a beer?”

Mac had sauntered a discreet distance down the bar. He eyed me, and then a slowly ticking clock on the wall.

“I haven’t had a drink in a lifetime,” I said. “If I go all nutty about it, you can sign me up for AA.”

Mac snorted. Then he got me a bottle of one of his microbrewed ales. They are nectar and ambrosia. He opened it and passed me the bottle (since he knew I rarely drink beer out of a glass), and I tilted it toward him before drinking some.

“Pretty early for that, isn’t it?” Vadderung asked.

“I can smell the whiskey in yours from here,” I said, and held up my bottle.

He smiled, lifted his coffee cup toward me in salute, and took a long sip as I put back some more ale. Then we both set our drinks down.

“What do you need?” Vadderung asked.

“Advice,” I said. “If the price is right.”

“And what do you think a sufficient price would be?”

“Lucy charges a nickel.”

“Ah,” Vadderung said. “But Lucy is a psychiatrist. You realize that you’ve just cast yourself as Charlie Brown.”

“Augh,” I said.

Vadderung smiled. “You found it lonely where you were, I see.”

“Why would you say that?”

“The banter. The talk. Unnecessary companions. Many would say that now is the time for rapid, decisive action. But you have spent precious time reconnecting with your allies.” He tilted his head slightly. “Therefore, if you have such a driving need for it, I can logically assume that you have spent your recent time apart from such company. Does that seem reasonable to you?”

“Arctis Tor isn’t much of a vacation spot,” I said.

“No? What is it?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Wait. Are you trying to shrink me?”

He sipped his coffee. “Why would you ask me that question?”

“Because you keep asking questions,” I said. “Joke’s on you, Lucy. I don’t have a nickel.” I regarded my bottle. “I’ve got time for banter. Just not for games.”

Vadderung set his coffee down and spread his hands. “I don’t work for free,” he said.

“I haven’t earned enough money in my entire lifetime to afford your fees,” I said. “But you don’t need more money.”

He waited.

“I’ll owe you one,” I said.

That seemed to amuse the hell out of him. Wrinkled topography appeared at the corner of his eye. “Given the caliber of your talents for making enemies, I hope you’ll understand if I don’t consider what you offer a sound long-term value.”

I smiled and sipped some beer. “But it’s worth a few minutes of your time—or you wouldn’t have come here in the first place.”

That drew a quick flicker of an amused smile. “I will accept your offer of one favor—and a nickel.”

“I told you. I don’t have a nickel.”

He nodded gravely. “What do you have?”

I rummaged in my pockets and came out with the jeweled cuff links from my tux. I showed them to him.

“Those aren’t a nickel,” he said soberly. He leaned forward again, as he had a moment before, and spoke slowly. “What do you have?”

I stared at him for a second. Then I said, “Friends.”

He sat back, his blue eye all but throwing off sparks, it was so bright.

“Thomas,” I called. “I need a nickel.”

“What?” Thomas asked. “In cash?”

“Yeah.”

Thomas reached into a pocket and produced a bunch of plastic cards. He fanned them out and showed them to me. “What about these?”

“Those aren’t a nickel,” I said.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” Molly sighed. She reached into a pocket and produced what looked like a little old lady’s coin purse. Then she flicked a nickel toward me.

I caught it. “Thanks. You’re promoted to lackey.”

She rolled her eyes. “Hail, Ming.”

I slid the nickel across the bar to Vadderung. “There.”

He nodded. “Talk to me.”

“Right,” I said. “Um. It’s about time.”

“No,” he said, “it’s about your island.”

I eyed him warily. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean," he said, "is that I know about your island. I know where it came from. I know what it does. I know what's beneath it."

"Uh," I said. "Oh."

"I'm aware of how important it is that the island be well managed. Most of the people who came to your party in Mexico are."

By which he meant the Grey Council. Vadderung was a part of it. It was a group of folks, mostly wizards of the White Council, who had joined together because it seemed like the White Council was getting close to meltdown, and they wanted to save it. But since the rats were in the walls, the only way to do it was covertly, working in cells. I wasn't sure who, exactly, was a member, except for my grandfather and Vadderung. He had come along with the rest of the mostly anonymous Grey Council when I'd gone to take my daughter back from the Red Court, and seemed to fit right in.

Of course, I was pretty sure he wasn't a wizard. I was pretty sure he was a lot more than that.

So I broke it down for him, speaking very quietly. I told him about the attack being aimed at the island from across time. Hard lines appeared in his face as I did.

"Idiots," he breathed. "Even if they could defeat the banefire . . ."

"Wait," I said. "Banefire?"

"The fail-safe," Vadderung said. "The fire the island showed you."

"Right. It'll kill everything held there rather than let them escape, right?"

"It is the only way," Vadderung said. "If anyone managed to set free the things in the Well . . ."

"Seems like it would be bad," I said.

"Not bad," Vadderung said. "The end."

"Oh," I said. "Good to know. The island didn't mention that part."

"The island cannot accept it as a possibility," Vadderung said absently.

"It should probably put its big-girl pants on, then," I said. "The way I understand it, it might already be too late. I mean, for all I know, someone cast this spell a hundred years ago. Or a hundred years from now."

Vadderung waved a hand. "Nonsense. There are laws that govern the progression of time in relation to space, like everything else."

"Meaning what?"

“Meaning that the echoes caused by the temporal event are proportionately greater than the span of time that was bridged,” he said. “Had the attack been launched from a century ago, or hence, the echoes of it would have begun far, far in advance of the event—centuries ago. These echoes have appeared only within the past few days. I would guess, roughly, that the attack must originate only hours from the actual, real-time occurrence.”

“Which is tomorrow,” I said. “So it’s happening sometime today or sometime tomorrow.”

“Most likely not tomorrow,” Vadderung said. “Altering one’s past is more than mildly difficult.”

“The paradox thing?” I asked. “Like, if I go back and kill my grandfather, how was I ever born to go back and kill my grandfather?”

“Paradox is an overrated threat. There is . . . a quality similar to inertia at work. Once an event has occurred, there is an extremely strong tendency for that event to occur. The larger, more significant, or more energetic the event, the more it tends to remain as it originally happened, despite any interference.”

I frowned. “There’s . . . a law of the conservation of history?”

Vadderung grinned. “I’ve never heard it phrased quite like that, but it’s accurate enough. In any event, overcoming that inertia requires tremendous energy, will, and a measure of simple luck. If one wishes to alter the course of history, it’s a far simpler matter to attempt to shape the future.”

I grunted. “So if I go back in time and kill my grandfather, what happens?”

“He beats you senseless, I suspect,” Vadderung said, his gaze direct.

Oh, man. Vadderung *knew* about Ebenezar. Which meant that either he was higher in the old man’s circle of trust than I was, or he had access to an astoundingly scary pool of information.

“You know what I mean,” I said. “Paradox? Universe goes poof?”

“If it works like that, I’ve never seen it, as evidenced by the fact that . . .” He spread his hands. “Here it is. I suspect a different form of apocalypse happens.”

I frowned. “Like what?”

“A twinned universe,” Vadderung said. “A new parallel reality, identical except for that event. One in which you never existed, and one in which you failed to kill your grandfather.”

I pursed my lips. “That . . . doesn’t really end well for me in either case.”

“An excellent reason not to meddle in the natural course of time, wouldn’t you say? Meddling with time is an irrationally, outrageously, catastrophically dangerous and costly business. I encourage you to avoid it at all costs.”

“You and the White Council,” I said. “So it’s going to happen sometime today or tonight.”

Vadderung nodded. “And nearby.”

“Why?”

“Because the energy requirements are astronomical,” he said. “Bridging a temporal gap of any length is something utterly beyond the reach of any mortal practitioner acting alone. Doing such a thing and then trying to project the spell over a distance as well? The difficulty of it would be prohibitive. And do not forget how much water surrounds the island, which will tend to mitigate any energy sent toward it—that’s one reason the Well was built there.”

I nodded. All of that hung together, based upon everything I knew of magic. People always assume that magic is a free ride—but it isn’t. You can’t pull energy from nowhere, and there are laws that govern how it behaves.

“So this . . . time bomb. It has to come from how close?” I asked.

“The shores of the lake, I suspect,” Vadderung said. “The island itself would be the ideal location, but I doubt that it will cooperate with any such effort.”

“Not hardly,” I agreed. “And you can’t just scribble a chalk circle and pull this spell out of your hat. It’s got to have an energy source. A big one.”

“Precisely,” Vadderung said.

“And those things tend to stand out.”

He smiled. “They do.”

“And whoever is trying to pull this off, if they know enough about futzing with time to be making this attempt, they know that the echoes will warn people that it’s coming. They’ll be ready to argue with anyone who tries to thwart them.”

“They most certainly will.” He finished his coffee.

I had made the right call here. Vadderung’s advice had changed the problem from something enormous and inexplicable to something that was

merely very difficult, very dangerous, and likely to get me killed.

“Um,” I said. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but . . . this is a high-stakes game.”

“The highest, yes,” he agreed.

“I’m thinking that maybe someone with a little more experience and better footing should handle it. Someone like you, maybe.”

He shook his head. “It isn’t practical.”

I frowned. “Not practical?”

“It must be you.”

“Why me?”

“It’s *your* island,” Vadderung said.

“That makes no sense.”

He tilted his head and looked at me. “Wizard . . . you have been dead and returned. It has marked you. It has opened doors and paths that you do not yet know exist, and attracted the attention of beings who formerly would never have taken note of your insignificance.”

“Meaning what?” I asked.

There was no humor at all in his face. “Meaning that now more than ever, you are a fulcrum. Meaning that your life is about to become very, very interesting.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

He leaned forward slightly. “Correct that.” He looked at his watch and rose. “I’m afraid I’m out of time.”

I shook my head, rising with him, blocking him. “Wait. My plate is already pretty full here, and if you haven’t noticed, I’m barely competent to keep myself alive, much less to prevent Arkham Asylum from turning into the next Tunguska blast.”

Vadderung met my eyes with his and said in a growl, “Move.”

I moved.

I looked away, too. I’d seen too many things with my Sight already. And I had a bad feeling that trading a soulgaze with Vadderung would not improve my performance over the next day or so.

“Where are Hugin and Munin?” I asked.

“I left them at the office,” he said. “They don’t like you, I’m afraid.”

“Birdbrains,” I muttered.

He smiled, nodded to Mac, and walked to the door.

“Can I do this?” I asked his back.

“You can.”

I made an exasperated sound. “How do you know?”

Odin turned to look back at me with his gleaming eye, his teeth bared in a wolf’s smile, the scar on either side of his eye patch silver in the light coming through the door. “Perhaps,” he murmured, “you already have.”

Then he opened the door and left.

I scowled at where he’d been standing, and then slouched back on my barstool. I grabbed my beer, finished it, and set it down a little harder than I had to.

Mac was back at the grill, making some of his famous steak sandwiches for Thomas and Molly. I waved at him, but before I could say anything, he had already added another steak to the first two. My stomach growled as I got up and went to Molly and Thomas’s table.

Perhaps you already have.

Now, what the hell had he meant by that?

Chapter

Twenty-two

I filled Molly and Thomas in on what I had learned from Vadderung while we ate. Mac's steak sandwiches were too awesome not to eat, even if it was more or less breakfast time.

Molly blinked as I finished. "Uh. Who *is* that guy?"

Thomas gave me an even look. My brother had figured it out. He tilted his head microscopically toward Molly.

"A friend, I think," I said. "When you work it out, you're ready to know."

"Ah." Molly frowned and toyed with a few crumbs, pushing them around with a forefinger. She nodded. "Okay."

"So what's next?" Thomas asked.

I finished the last few bites of my sandwich in a hurry. Man, that tasted good. I washed it down with some more of Mac's excellent beer. Normally, a couple of bottles along with a meal would leave me ready for a nap. Today they felt about as soporific as Red Bull.

"Molly," I said, "I want you to go talk to Toot. I need the guard to gather up and be ready to move when I give the word."

"Scouts?" she guessed.

I nodded. "While you're doing that, I'm going to go figure out the potential sites for the time bomb spell so we know where to aim the guard. Order some pizza; that will gather them in."

"Okay," she said. "Um . . . money?"

I looked at Thomas. "She already came through for me once. Your turn."

Thomas snorted and slipped a white plastic card out of his pocket. It was utterly unmarked except for a few stamped numbers and a magnetic strip. He flicked it across the table to Molly. "When you get your pizza, have them run that."

Molly studied the card, back and front. "Is this a Diners Club card or something?"

"It's a Raith contingency card," he said. "Lara hands them out to the family. Once they ring up the first charge on the card, it'll be good for twenty-four hours."

"For how much?" Molly asked.

"Twenty-four hours," Thomas repeated.

Molly lifted her eyebrows.

Thomas smiled faintly. "Don't worry about amounts. My sister doesn't really believe in limits. Do whatever you want with it. I don't care."

Molly took the card and placed it very carefully in her secondhand coin purse. "Okay." She looked at me. "Now?"

I nodded. "Get a move on."

She paused to draw a pen from her purse. She scribbled on a napkin and passed it to me. "My apartment's phone."

I glanced at it, read it, and memorized it. Then I slid it to Thomas, who tucked the napkin away in a pocket. "You're going to just send her out there alone?"

Molly regarded Thomas blankly. Then vanished.

"Oh," Thomas said. "Right."

I stood up and crossed the room to the door. I opened it and glanced out, as though scanning suspiciously for anyone's approach. I felt Molly slip out past me as I did. Then I closed it again and came back inside. Thunder rumbled over the lake, but no rain fell.

"I noticed," my brother drawled, "that you didn't leave her a way to contact you."

"Did you?"

He snorted. "You think Fix would hurt her?"

"I think she won't give him much choice," I said. "She's come a long way—but Fix is exactly the wrong kind of threat for her to mess with. He's used to glamour, he can defend against it, and he's smart."

"Molly's not too shabby herself," Thomas said.

"Molly is my responsibility," I said.

I hadn't meant for the words to come out that cold, that hard. The anger surprised me, but it bubbled and seethed still. Some part of me was furious at Thomas for questioning *my* decision regarding *my* apprentice. Molly was *mine*, and I would be damned if some chisel-jawed White Court pretty boy was going to—

I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw. Pride. Possession. Territoriality. That wasn't me. That was the mantle of Winter talking through me.

"Sorry," I said a moment later, and opened my eyes.

Thomas hadn't reacted in any way, to my snarl, my anger, or my apology. He just studied me. Then he said, quietly, "I want to suggest something to you. I'm not trying to make you do anything. You just need to hear it."

"Sure," I said.

"I'm a predator, Harry," he said. "We both know that."

"Yeah. So?"

"So I recognize it in others when I see it."

"And?"

"And you're looking at Molly like she's food."

I frowned at him. "I am not."

He shrugged. "It isn't all the time. It's just little moments. You look at her, and I can see the calculations running. You notice every time she yawns."

I didn't want what Thomas was saying to be true. "So what?"

“When she yawns, she’s showing us that she’s tired. It makes us take notice because tired prey is easy prey.” He leaned forward, putting one arm on the table. “I know what I’m talking about.”

“No,” I said, my voice getting cold again. “You don’t.”

“I tried going into denial like that when I was about fifteen. It didn’t work out too well.”

“What?” I asked him. “You think I’m going to attack her when she goes to sleep?”

“Yeah,” he said. “If you don’t recognize what’s motivating you and control it, you will. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow. But eventually. You can’t just ignore those instincts, man. If you do, they’ll catch you off guard some night. And you *will* hurt her, one way or another.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I frowned down at my empty bottle of ale.

“She trusts you,” Thomas said. “I think some part of you knows that. I think that part sent her away from you for a damned good reason. Take this seriously, Harry.”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I’ll . . . try. This stuff keeps catching me off guard.”

“Nature of the beast. You’ve always been good at keeping things right between the two of you, even though she’s carrying a torch the size of a building. I admire you for that. I’d hate to see it come apart.”

I rubbed at my eyes. My brother was right. I’d been forcing myself to look away from Molly all morning. That had never been an issue before. That was part of Winter, too—hunger and lust, a need for heat in the darkness. It had driven Lloyd Slate, just as it had several other Winter Knights over the years.

It had driven them insane.

I had to learn to recognize that influence before someone got hurt.

“Yeah, okay,” I said. “When I get done sprinting from one forest fire to the next, I’ll . . . I’ll figure something out. Until then, feel free to slap me around a bit if you think I need it.”

Thomas nodded very seriously, but his eyes sparkled. “I’m your brother. I pretty much always feel free to do that.”

“Heh,” I said. “I’d like to see you . . .”

I trailed off, glancing at Mac, who was staring at the door to the pub, frowning. I followed his gaze. The glass on the top half of the door was

faceted and partly frosted, but it was clear enough to give you a blurry image of whoever was standing outside the door. Or at least, it would have been if the exterior hadn't been blanketed by a thick grey mist.

Thomas noticed me, and looked. "Huh," he said. "Uh. Doesn't the fog usually burn off in the morning?"

"We didn't have any this morning," I said.

"So . . ." Thomas drawled. "That isn't right."

"No," I said. "No, it isn't."

There just weren't all that many reasons someone would blanket an area with mist—to conceal an approach. We both stood up and faced the door.

Behind us, Mac reached under the bar and came out with a pistol-grip shotgun made of black composite material. It had a folding stock and barely enough of a barrel to qualify as a hunting piece.

"This is crazy," Thomas said. "Nobody attacks Mac's. It's neutral ground."

"What about these Fomor I've heard about?"

"Not even them," Thomas said. "Every time they've gotten close to this place, the BFS came down on them like an avalanche. It's practically the only thing they've really agreed on."

I blanked for a second and then said, "Oh, Brighter Future Society."

"It isn't the faeries, is it?" Thomas asked.

"They're called the Unseelie Accords," I said. "Winter equals Unseelie. Anyone in Winter who violated Mab's treaty would be thrilled to die before she was through with them."

"Summer, then?"

"It isn't noon yet," I said.

The sounds of the city outside had vanished. An unnatural hush fell. I could hear three people breathing a little harder than they normally would, a creaky ceiling fan, and that was about it.

"Definitely magic," I said. "Someone doesn't want anybody seeing or hearing what happens in here."

There was a sharp sound, a sudden motion, and a stone sailed through one of the faceted panes of glass on the door. Thomas produced his pistol, and Mac's shotgun snapped up to his shoulder. Some broken glass tinkled to the floor, and the stone tumbled down and bounced off of my foot before

it came to rest on the floor. It was a rounded piece of glassy black obsidian about the size of an egg.

Tendrils of mist came through the broken pane of glass, and the stone on the floor abruptly quivered and began to buzz. Thomas and I both took several wary steps away from it, but the buzzing increased and warped until it became an eerie, quavering voice, like something you'd hear on an old, worn-out vinyl record.

"Sssssend out the wizzzzard," it hummed, each word slow and drawn-out. "Sssssend him to ussssss and all otherssssss may ssssstay."

"I know a good place for you to pound sand, you gutless fu—" Thomas began helpfully.

I held up a hand. "No," I told him quietly. "Wait."

"For what?"

"This is neutral territory," I said in a voice pitched to carry outside the door. "If you want to talk, come on in. You won't be attacked."

"Sssssend him to ussssss."

That wasn't creepy or anything. "My schedule is kind of full today," I called. "How's next Tuesday for you?"

"Thrice we asssssk and done," hissed the voice. "Sssssend him to ussssss. Now!"

I took slow, steady breaths to keep the fear at bay and think. I was pretty sure that whatever was out there, it wasn't interested in talking. I was also pretty sure that I didn't want to toddle out onto that narrow, mist-clouded stairway to start a fight. But I wasn't the only one in the room. I looked back at Mac.

"I don't want to bring any trouble into your place, Mac," I said. "You're my host here. I'll take it outside if you want me to."

In answer, Mac made a growling sound and worked the action on the shotgun, pumping a shell into the chamber. Then he reached under the counter, produced a heavy-caliber automatic pistol, and put it on the bar within easy reach.

Thomas showed his teeth in a predatory grin. "I'm leaving bigger tips from now on."

"Right," I muttered. I gestured at Thomas to move a few steps back, and made sure that neither of us was standing in Mac's line of fire to the door. I focused on the black stone. It would start there. "Hey, creep!" I called, lifting my left hand. "You heard the man. Kisssss my asssssss!"

“Sssso be it,” hissed the voice from the stone.

And the black stone exploded.

I was ready for it, though. I’d already prepared the defensive spell, and I poured my will into a thick wall in the air in front of me as fragments of glossy black stone flew around the room. They bounced off my shield and went zinging, shattering one of my empty beer bottles on the table, slamming into the wooden columns, and gouging wood out of the walls. None of them got to Thomas, Mac, or me. I’d put the shield between us and the black stone while our attackers wasted time in negotiation. It wasn’t as good as the shield I could have thrown up if I had managed to replace my old shield bracelet, and I couldn’t hold it up anywhere near as long, but I didn’t need to.

Once the explosion had passed, I dropped the shield, already focusing my will upon my other hand, gathering a cannonball of raw force, and at the first flicker of motion outside the door’s glass, I snarled, “*Forzare!*” and sent it hurtling forth.

Force hammered into the door, and turned maybe fifty pounds of leaded glass into a cloud of razor-sharp shards. The stairwell down to Mac’s place was sunken—there was no way any of the shrapnel could fly out at street level.

An instant later, the bottom half of the door exploded into flying daggers of wood. My shield stopped anything heading toward Mac, but I couldn’t catch them all. One of them clipped my left cheekbone broadside—if it had tumbled for another fraction of a second, the sharp end would have driven right into my brain. As it was, it hit me like a baseball bat, stunning me and knocking me down.

The world did that slow-motion echo-chamber thing that happens sometimes with a head blow, and I saw our attacker come in.

At first, I couldn’t translate what I was seeing into something that made sense: It looked something like those giant spinning, whirling tubes covered in strips of soft cloth at an automated car wash, the ones that actually shampoo your car. Except it wasn’t a tube; it was a sphere, and it wasn’t at a car wash; it was rolling in through Mac’s doorway.

Mac’s shotgun went off, the sound of it slapping me in the back. Those things are *loud* in an enclosed space. Dust and bits of scrap cloth flew out of the attacker, but it didn’t slow down. The giant rag ball hurtled toward

me, until Thomas dashed in from the side and smashed it with a roundhouse swing of one of Mac's heavy oak tables.

Quick bar fighting tip for you—in real life, when you hit a guy with furniture, it doesn't break into pieces the way it does in the movies. It breaks whoever you hit with it. There was a meaty sound of impact and the rolling shape's forward momentum was instantly converted into a perpendicular line drive. It streaked across the room, trailing streamers of grey-brown cloth like a ragged comet, the cloth flapping and snapping with unnatural volume until it hit the wall with a solid thwack.

Another fighting tip for you: Don't stay on the ground. If you don't know exactly what you're up against, if you aren't sure that the guy you're fighting doesn't have a buddy coming along who might help, you can't afford to be down and relatively motionless. My body was already moving, though I wasn't sure how it was doing that, pushing me back to my feet.

Mac put a hand on the bar and vaulted up onto it like he did it all the time. The attacker bounced off the wall, rolled across a tabletop, and fell to the floor in a heap. Mac took a pair of quick steps to get a better line of fire, and *boom* went the shotgun again. Another cloud of scrap cloth and dust flew up from the attacker.

The room lurched back into normal speed. Dozens of strips of the dark sackcloth came flying off of the thing, twining in an instant around chairs and tables. A chair flew at Thomas, knocking the table out of his hands, and he was forced to dodge to one side instead of closing in. Mac's shotgun bellowed three more times, and I hurled another lance of force at the thing. Mac's shells did nothing but create puffs of debris, and my own arcane strike split and flowed around the thing, shattering a chair and smashing in a portion of the wall behind it.

And it laughed.

Furniture exploded out from it, flung with superhuman force. My shield barely caught the narrow edge of a table that had been flung like a Frisbee. Thomas's legs were scythed out from under him by a flying bar stool, and he hit the floor with a huff of expelled breath. Mac had already thrown himself down behind the bar—but when another table hit it, there was an enormous cracking sound, and several pieces of wood broke under the impact.

A shape stirred in the writhing mass of ash-colored sackcloth and rose, its outline veiled but not entirely obscured by the cloth. It was lanky-tall,

and had to stand hunched over to avoid the lazily spinning blades of the ceiling fans. It was more or less human-shaped, and I was suddenly struck by the realization that I was looking at a humanoid who was wearing some kind of enormous, ungainly garment made of all those restless, rustling strips.

It lifted its head slowly and focused on me.

It didn't look at me—it didn't have any eyes, just smooth skin laced with scars where they had once been. Its skin was pearly grey lined with darker stripes that made me think of a shark. Its mouth was gaping open in a wide grin that reinforced the impression. It didn't have teeth—just a single smooth ridge of bone where teeth would have been on a human. Its lips were black, and its mouth smudged with more of it. Twin trails of saliva drooled from the corners of its mouth, leaving black streaks to down past its chin. There wasn't a hair to be seen on its head.

“Wizard,” it said, and its voice was the same as had come through the glossy stone. “Your life need not end this day. Surrender and I will spare your companions.”

I could hear Mac reloading behind me. Thomas had his gun in his hand, behind his back, and was prowling silently around the room to force Sharkface to turn to keep an eye on him.

Except it didn't have eyes. Whatever this thing was using to keep track of us, I had a feeling that just standing in an inconvenient spot wasn't going to net us much of an advantage.

“Surrender,” I said, as though trying to place where I'd heard the word before. “Yeah, um. I'm not so sure I want any surrenders today. There was a sale on surrenders last week, and I missed it, but I don't want to rush out and buy another one at the regular price right away. I'm afraid the sale might come back a week later, and then, I mean, come on. How stupid would I feel then?”

“Levity will not change the course of this day,” Sharkface said. Its buzzing, twisting voice was distinctly unpleasant in my ears, the aural equivalent of the stench of rotting meat. Which was appropriate, because the rest of him *did* smell like rotting meat. “You *will* come with me.”

“Isn't that what Mab said, Harry?” Thomas quipped.

I kept my hand shielded from Sharkface with my body and gave my brother the finger. “Look, Spanky,” I said to Sharkface. “I'm a little busy to be tussling with every random weirdo who is insecure about his junk.

Otherwise I would just love to smash you with a beer bottle, kick you in the balls, throw you out through the saloon doors, the whole bit. Why don't you have your people contact my people, and we can do this maybe next week?"

"Next week is your self-deprecation awareness seminar," Thomas said.

I snapped my fingers. "What about the week after?"

"Apartment hunting."

"Bother," I said. "Well, no one can say we didn't try. See you later."

"Harry," said a strange voice. Or rather, it wasn't strange—it was just strange to actually *hear* it. Mac isn't much of a talker. "Don't chat. Kill it."

Mac's words seemed to do what none of my nonsense had—they made Sharkface pissed off. It whirled toward Mac, dozens of sackcloth strips flicking out in every direction, grabbing whatever objects were there, and its alien voice came out in a harsh rasp. "You!" Sharkface snarled. "You have no place in this, *watcher*. Do you think this gesture has meaning? It is every bit as empty as *you*. You chose your road long ago. Have the grace to lie down and die beside it."

I think my jaw might have hung a little loosely for a second. "Uh. Mac?"

"Kill it," Mac repeated, his voice harder. "It's only the first."

"Yes," Sharkface said, tilting its head almost to the perpendicular. "Kill it. And more will come. Destroy me and they will know. Leave me and they will know. Your breaths are numbered, wizard."

As it spoke, I could feel a horrible, hopeless weight settling across my heart. Dammit, hadn't I been through enough? More than enough? Hadn't my life handed me enough misery and grief and pain and loneliness already? And now I was going to be up against something else, something new and scary, something that came galumphing at me by the *legion*, no less. What was the point? No matter what I did, no matter how much stronger or smarter or better connected I got, the bad guys just kept getting bigger and stronger and more numerous.

Behind me, I heard Mac let out a low groan. The shotgun must have fallen from his fingers, because it clattered on the floor. On my left, I saw Thomas's shoulders slump, and he turned his face away, his eyes closed as if in pain.

The people who stayed near me got hurt or killed. As often as not, the bad guys got away to come embadden my life another day. Why deal with a life like that?

Why did I keep on doing this to myself?

“Because,” I growled under my breath. “You’re Charlie Brown, stupid. You’ve got to try for the damned football because that’s who you are.”

And just like that, the psychic assault of despair that Sharkface had sent into my head evaporated, and I could think clearly again. I hadn’t felt the cloying, somehow oily power slithering up to me—but I could sure as hell feel it now as it recoiled and pulled away. I’d felt it before—and I suddenly knew what I was dealing with.

Sharkface jerked its head toward me, and its mouth opened in shock. For a frozen instant, we stared at each other across maybe fifteen feet of cluttered pub. It seemed to last for hours. Thomas and Mac were both motionless, reaching out for physical supports as though drunk or bearing a heavy burden. They wouldn’t be able to get themselves out of the building in their current condition—but I didn’t have any choice.

Sharkface and its sackcloth cloak flung half a ton of furniture at me about a quarter of a second after I raised my right hand and snarled, “*Fuego!*”

I hadn’t used much fire magic lately, obviously. You don’t go messing around conjuring up flame when you’re at the heart of Winter. There are things there that hate that action. But fire magic has always been my strongest suit. It was the first fully realized spell I ever mastered, and on a good day I could hang around in the same general league as any other wizard in the world when it came to fire magic.

On top of that, I tapped into the latent energy a particularly meddlesome angel had bestowed upon me whether I wanted it or not—an ancient source of the very energy of Creation itself known as soulfire. Soulfire was never meant for battle—but its presence could infuse my battle spells with significant energy and momentum, making them far more difficult to counter. I had to be careful with it—burn too much in too short a time and it would kill me. But if I didn’t live to walk out of the pub, it wouldn’t matter how much soulfire I had stored up for a rainy day.

I expected a roar of flame, a flash of white and gold light, the concussion of superheated air suddenly expanding, right in Sharkface’s ugly mug.

What I got was an arctic-gale howl and a spiraling harpoon of blue-white fire burning hotter than anything this side of a star.

Sharkface hurled furniture at me, trying to shelter behind it, but the fire I'd just called vaporized chairs and tables in the instant it touched them. They shattered with enormous, screaming detonations of thunder, and every impact made sounds that by all rights should have belonged to extremely large and poorly handled construction vehicles.

Sharkface crossed its bony grey forearms before it in a last-ditch effort to deflect the spell. If I'd been focused on it, concentrating on pushing the spell past its defenses, maybe it would have burned right through Sharkface and its stupid cloak. But that wasn't the plan. Instead, I sprinted across the distance between us, through the hideous heat of my spell's thermal bloom. It was like running through an oven. I saw my spell splash against Sharkface's crossed forearms, and the thing managed to deflect almost all of the spell away—but not all of it. Fire scorched across one of its cheeks and splashed over its right shoulder, setting a large mass of sackcloth strips aflame.

It screamed in pain, a sound that raked at my ears, and began to lower its arms to retaliate.

The second it did, I drove my right fist into its stupid, creepy face.

Man, the yahoos I scrap with never seem to anticipate that tactic. They all assume that what with me being a wizard and all, I'm going to stand back and chuck Magic Missiles at them or something, then scream and run away the second they get close enough to let me see the whites of their eyes.

Okay, granted, that *is* how a lot of wizards operate. But all the same, you'd think they would remember that there's no particular reason why a wizard can't be as comfortable with physical mayhem as the next guy.

Two things happened.

First, as my fist sailed forward, there was a sudden thrill that flowed up my arm from my hand, something delicious and startling. I had barely processed that when I heard a crackling noise, and then saw glacial blue and green ice abruptly coating my fist.

Second, I hit Sharkface like a freaking truck, starting right on the tip of its chin and driving straight toward South America. The ice coating my fist shattered into tiny shards that laced and sliced, but I barely felt it. Sharkface flew back as if I'd slugged it with a sledgehammer, and hit the wall with enough violence to crack and splinter the heavy oak paneling. Sharkface's cloak fluttered hard as it went backward—the freaking thing

was cushioning his impact, just as it had managed to stop shotgun pellets at short range.

Sharkface bounced off the wall, staggering, and I gave it a left and another right, and then kicked its legs out from underneath it as brutally as I knew how. It went to the floor hard.

Once Sharkface was down I stomped for its head with my hiking boots, going for a quick kill, which was exactly what this asshole had coming to it for messing with my favorite joint—but that stupid cloak got in the way. Strips flew out to gain purchase and hauled him out from beneath my boot. Even as I reacted, moving to follow him up, more of the sackcloth tendrils seized a dozen bottles of liquor from behind the bar—and flung them harshly onto the puddles of vicious blue-white fire still burning upon the floor where Sharkface had deflected them.

I slashed at the tumbling bottles with an effort of will, but I hadn't had a soft-touch spell in mind during the previous seconds. My clumsy grab accomplished nothing but to shatter one of the bottles early, and flames roared up from where the spilled liquor fell.

Alcohol fires are a nasty business. Booze burns a good deal hotter and faster than, for example, gasoline. In seconds it can take the temperature from below freezing to seven hundred degrees, hot enough to turn flesh into briquettes. Mac and Thomas were both down. There was no way I could get them both out of the fire in time—which meant my only option was to stop it from happening.

Sharkface let out an eerie, defiant shriek and suddenly vanished into the writhing mass of his coat again, becoming nothing but flailing cloth and dust and stench. The creature bounded into the air and streaked like a sackcloth comet out the front door—and there was diddly I could do to stop it.

Instead, I turned to the fires just as bottles began to shatter on the floor, just as white-hot flames began to leap. I hurled my will through my body, drawing forth the frigid purity of Winter, calling, "*Infriga!*"

Howling wind and cold engulfed the nascent fires. And the floor around where the fires had been. And the walls. And, um, the ceiling.

I mean, pretty much every nonliving surface in the place was completely covered in a layer of frost half an inch thick.

Mac and Thomas started groaning. I gave them a minute to pull themselves together and watched the door. Sharkface didn't show up for a

rematch. Maybe he was busy changing into fresh undies because I'd scared him so bad. Right. More likely he was off doing a *Right Stuff* walk and gathering his gang.

The fog lightened and burned off within five minutes or so, and the sounds of the city returned.

The attack was over. Mac stared woozily around the pub, shaking his head. Covered in glittering frost and ice, it looked like the place Santa's elves must go when they finish their shift at the toy shop.

Mac gave me a look and then gestured at the pub, clearly wanting an explanation.

"Hey," I said crossly. "At least it didn't get burned to the ground. Count your blessings, man. That's better than most buildings get around me."

Thomas sat up a moment later, and I helped him to his feet.

"What happened?" he asked blearily.

"Psychic assault," I told him. "A bad one. How you feeling?"

"Confused," Thomas said. He looked around the place, shaking his head. The pub looked like it had just been raided by Super Bowl-berserk Bears fans. "What was that thing?"

I rubbed at my forehead with the heel of my hand. "An Outsider."

Thomas's eyes went wide and round. "What?"

"An Outsider," I repeated quietly. "We're fighting Outsiders."

Chapter

Twenty- three

“**O**utsiders,” Thomas said. “Are you sure?”

“You felt it,” I said. “That mental whammy. It was exactly like that night in the Raith Deeps.”

Thomas frowned but nodded. “Yeah, it was, wasn’t it?”

Mac walked silently past us to the ruined door. He bent down and picked something up out of the general wreckage there. It was the Accorded Neutral Territory sign. It was scorched on one corner, but he hung it back up on the wall. Then he leaned his hands against it and bowed his head.

I knew how he felt. Violent encounters tend to be scary and exhausting, even if they last for only seconds. My nerves were still

jangling, my legs were trembling a little, and I wanted very badly to just plop down onto the floor and breathe for a while. I didn't. Wizards are stoic about this kind of thing. And my brother would make fun of me.

Thomas exhaled slowly through his nose, his eyes narrowed. "I don't know much about them," he said.

"That's not surprising," I said. "There's not a lot of information on Outsiders. We think that's because most people who run into them don't get a chance to tell anyone about it."

"Lot of things like that in the world," Thomas said. "Sounds like these things are just a little creepier than your average demonic nasty."

"It's more than that," I said. "Creatures out of the Nevernever are a part of our reality, our universe. They can get pretty bizarre, but they have a membership card. Outsiders come from someplace else."

Thomas shrugged. "What's the difference?"

"They're smarter. Tougher. Harder to kill."

"You handled that one pretty well. Didn't look so tough."

I snorted. "You missed out on the end. I hit that thing with my best shot, and I barely made it uncomfortable. It didn't leave because I hurt it. It left because it didn't expect me to fight clear of its whammy, and it didn't want to take any chances that I might get lucky and prevent it from reporting to its superiors."

"Still ran," Thomas said. "Yeah, that mind-meld thing was awful, but the bastard wasn't all *that* bad."

I sighed. "That little creep Peabody dropped *one* Outsider on a meeting of the Council. The best wizards in the world were all in that one room and took it on together, and the thing still managed to murder a bunch of them. It's hard to make magic stick to Outsiders. It's hard to make them leave. It's hard to hurt them. It's hard to make them die. They're insanely violent, insanely powerful, and just plain insane. But that isn't what makes them dangerous."

"Uh," Thomas said. "It isn't? Then what is?"

"They work together," I said quietly. "Near as we can tell, they *all* work together."

Thomas was silent for a moment as he considered the implications of that. "Work together," he said. "To do what?"

I shook my head. "Whatever they do. Their actions are not always predicated on rationality—or at least, that's what the Council thinks."

“You sound skeptical.”

“The White Council always assumes that it’s at least as smart as everyone else all put together. I know better.”

“Because you’re so much smarter than they are,” Thomas said wryly.

“Because I’m on the street more than they are,” I corrected him. “The Council thinks the Outsiders are just a giant box of crazy that can go rampaging in any random direction.”

“But you don’t think that.”

“The phrase ‘crazy like a fox’ leaps to mind.”

“Okay. So what do *you* think these Outsiders are doing?”

I shrugged. “I’m almost certain they aren’t selling Girl Scout cookies. But don’t quote me.”

“Don’t worry; I hardly ever want to sound clueless. But the fact that they’re working together implies a purpose. A goal.”

“Yes.”

“So?” my brother asked. “What do they want?”

“Thomas, they’re aliens. I mean, they’re like super-mega-überaliens. They might not even *think*, at least not in the way we understand it. How the hell are we supposed to make even an informed guess about their motivation—assuming that they have one?”

“Doesn’t matter how weird they are,” Thomas said. “Moving together implies purpose. Purpose implies a goal. Goals are universal.”

“They aren’t *from* this universe. That’s the point,” I said. “Maybe you’re right; I don’t know. But until I have a better idea, it’s smarter to keep reminding myself that I don’t know, rather than assuming that I do know, and then translating anything I learn to fit my preconceptions.”

“Here’s a fact that is no assumption,” Thomas said. “They wanted you.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Why?” he asked.

“All I can do is guess.”

“So guess.”

I sighed. “My gut says they’re planning a jailbreak.”

Thomas grunted. “Might have been smarter for them to have left you alone. Now you know something.”

I made an exasperated sound. “Yes. Those fools. By trying to kill me, they’ve revealed their very souls. I have them now.”

Thomas gave me a steady look. "Being Mab's bitch has made you a pessimist."

"I am not a pessimist," I said loftily. "Though *that* can't last."

That made Thomas grin. "Nice."

"Thank you."

At the door, Mac looked up suddenly and said, "Dresden."

Thomas tilted his head, listening. Then he said, "Cops."

I sighed. "Poor guys. Bet last night's watch hasn't even been released to go home yet. They're going to be cranky."

"The explosion thing?" Thomas asked.

"The explosion thing."

We didn't need to be detained and questioned all day, and I didn't need to get into an altercation with the police, either—they've got no sense of humor at all for such things. You always hear about there being no rest for the wicked, but I'm pretty sure cops aren't racking up much extra hammock time, either. Thomas and I traded a look and headed for the door.

I paused by it, and looked at Mac.

"It knew you."

Mac stared at nothing and didn't answer.

"Mac, that thing was dangerous," I said. "And it might come back."

Mac grunted.

"Look," I said. "If my guess is right, that twit and its buddies might wipe out a big chunk of the state. Or possibly states. If you know something about them, I need it."

Mac didn't look up. After several seconds, he said, "Can't. I'm out."

"Look at this place," I said quietly. "You aren't out. Nobody is out."

"Drop it," he said. "Neutral territory."

"Neutral territory that is going to burn with all the rest of it," I said. "I don't care who you are, man. I don't care what you've done. I don't care whether or not you think you're retired from the life. If you know something I need it. Now."

"Harry, we need to move," Thomas said, urgency tightening his voice.

I could hear the sirens now. They had to be close. Mac turned and walked back toward his bar.

Dammit. I shook my head and turned to leave.

"Dresden," Mac called.

I turned to look back at him. Mac was standing behind the bar. As I watched, he took three bottles of beer from beneath the counter and placed them down in a straight line, one by one, their sides touching. Then he just looked up at me.

“Three of them,” I said. “Three of these things?” Hell’s bells, one of them had been bad enough.

Mac neither nodded nor shook his head. He just jerked his chin at me and said, “Luck.”

“We’re gonna talk,” I said to Mac.

Mac turned a look on me that was as distant and as inaccessible as Antarctic mountains.

“No,” he said. “We aren’t.”

I was going to say something smart-ass. But that bleak expression made it seem like a bad idea.

So instead, I followed my brother up the debris-strewn stairs and into the rainy morning.

* * *

We passed the first police car to arrive at the scene on our way out, driving at the sedate pace of upright citizens.

“I love evading representatives of the lawful authority,” Thomas said, watching the car go by in his rearview mirror. “It’s one of those little things that make me happy.”

I paused and thought about it. “Me too. I mean, I know a bunch of these guys. Some of them are good people, some of them are jerks, but most are just guys doing a job. And it’s not like sticking us in a room and questioning us is going to accomplish anything to make their day go more smoothly.”

“And you enjoy driving authority figures insane,” Thomas said.

I shrugged. “I watched *The Dukes of Hazzard* at a formative age,” I said. “Of course I enjoy it.”

“Where next?” Thomas asked. “Molly’s place?”

I thought about it for a minute. I didn’t think it would be a great idea to be there when Fix came looking for a fight. Svartalves were a little prickly about territory, and they might not be at all amused if I dragged a personal conflict into their domain. But there were other people I wanted to

contact before nightfall, and I needed a phone and some quiet workspace to do it in.

“The Summer Lady has granted your request for an audience,” said Cat Sith from the backseat.

Thomas nearly took the Hummer off the street and into a bus stop shelter. My heart leapt into my throat as if it had been given bionic legs and its own sound effects. Thomas regained control of the vehicle almost instantly, letting out a wordless snarl as he did.

“Sith,” I said, too loud. My heart was running at double time. I glared at him over the front seat. “Dammit.”

The malk’s too-long tail flicked back and forth in smug self-satisfaction. “Shall I interpret that as an order to burn something, Sir Knight? If you are to survive long in Winter, you must learn to be much more specific in your turns of phrase.”

“No, don’t burn anything,” I said, grouchily. I thought about giving the malk an order not to sneak up on me like that anymore, but thought better of it. That would be exactly the kind of order that Cat Sith would take grotesque amusement in perverting, and I wanted to avoid putting him into a playful mood. “What did Lily have to say?”

“That she would guarantee your safety from harm wrought by herself, her Court, and any in her employ or influence,” the malk said, “provided that you came alone and kept the peace.”

I grunted, thinking.

“Why would she want you alone?” Thomas asked. “Unless she planned on doing something to you.”

“Because the last time she saw the Winter Knight, he was murdering the previous Summer Knight?” I guessed aloud. “Because the last time she saw the corpse of the Summer Lady, I was the one who’d made it? Because I’m a known thug who wrecks things a lot?”

Thomas bobbed his head slightly to one side in acknowledgment. “Okay. Point.”

“Sith,” I asked, “where is the meeting?”

“A public venue,” Sith said, his eyes half-lidded. “Chicago Botanic Gardens.”

“See?” I said to Thomas. “That’s not a venue for an assassination—for either of us. There are too many people around. There are plenty of ways out for anyone who wants to leave. That’s a viable neutral location.”

“If I remember right,” Thomas said, “the last time the Summer Lady tried a hit on you, didn’t she animate a bunch of plants into a giant monster that tried to kill you in the garden center of a Walmart?”

I rode in silence for a few seconds and then said, “Yeah, but . . . it was dark. Not as many people around.”

“Oh,” Thomas said. “Okay.”

I held the back of my left fist up to him, then used my right fist to make a little circular cranking motion next to it, while slowly elevating the center finger of my left hand until it was fully extended. Then I turned to Sith.

“What do you think? Is the risk acceptable for a meeting in that location?”

“You would be foolish to meet with her at all,” Cat Sith replied. “However. Given her promise and her chosen location, I judge it to be at least possible that she may actually intend to treat with you.”

“Suppose she’s lying,” Thomas said.

“She can’t,” I told him. “None of the Sidhe or the greater powers of either court can tell an outright lie. Right, Sith?”

“Logically speaking, *my* answer to that question would be unsupportable as truth.”

I sighed. “Well, that’s how it is among them,” I said. “No falsehoods. They can twist words around, they can avoid answering, they can mislead you by drawing you to false conclusions, but they can’t blatantly tell a lie.”

Thomas shook his head as he pulled onto 94 and started north. “I still don’t like it. That crowd never gives you what you expect.”

“Think how boring it would be if they did,” I said.

We both considered that wistfully for a beat.

“You might have to go in alone,” Thomas said. “But I’m going to stay close. Things go bad, just make some noise and I’ll come in.”

“They aren’t going to go bad,” I said. “But even if they do, I don’t want anyone to get hurt. Summer’s weird, but they’re basically good neighbors. I don’t blame them for being jumpy.”

Sith made a disgusted sound.

“Problem?” I asked him.

“This . . . compassion,” the malk said. “If you prefer, I can slash your throat open now, Sir Knight, and save the vampire the cost of fuel.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” I said. “I want you to stay close to Thomas and alert him to any source of danger. If a fight breaks out, your goal is to assist in making sure that both he and I escape, without doing harm to any innocent bystanders, and without killing any mortals.”

Sith started making a sound like my cat always did right before he spit out a hairball.

“Hey,” Thomas said. “Those are custom leather seats!”

Sith spit out a glob the size of a small plum, but instead of a hairball it was actually a small collection of splintered chips of bone. He flicked his tail in scorn and then leapt lightly into the rear bed of the Hummer.

“Jerk,” Thomas muttered.

“Just drive,” I said.

He grimaced and did. After a few miles he asked, “You think this is going to work? This peaceful summit thing?”

“Sure,” I said. After a second, I added, “Probably.”

“Probably?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“We’re down to maybe now?”

I shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Chapter

Twenty-four

The Botanic Gardens of Chicago aren't actually in Chicago, which always made them seem a little shady to me. Ba-dump-bump.

Rain was coming down in fitful little starts, averaging out to a mild drizzle. The air was cool, in the low fifties, and combined with the rain it meant that the gardens weren't exactly crowded with ardent floraphiles. The weather didn't bother me. In fact, I could have taken the jacket off and felt fine—but I didn't.

My grandfather had taught me that magic wasn't something you used in a cavalier fashion, and it *wasn't* considered to be a seductive, corruptive force, the way black magic and the Winter Knight's mantle were. I had an

instinct that the more I leaned on Mab's power, the more of an effect it would have on me. No sense flaunting it.

Once I was inside, I found myself in a setting of isolation that would be hard to duplicate anywhere else this close to the city. The gardens are the size of a moderate farm, more than three hundred acres. That wouldn't mean much to city mice, but to translate that into Chicago units, it was a couple of dozen city blocks' worth of garden. That's a lot of space to wander in. You could walk the various paths for hours and hours without ever visiting the same place.

Most of those paths were grey and empty. I passed a retiree near the entrance, and a groundskeeper hurrying out of the rain toward what looked like a concealed toolshed, and other than that it seemed like I had the whole place to myself.

There were seasonal decorations out here and there—a lot of pumpkins and cornstalks, where they'd been planning on Halloween festivities. Apparently they were going to be hosting some kind of trick-or-treating function that afternoon, but for the time being the place did not teem with costumed children and bedraggled parents. It was a little eerie, really. The place looked like it should have been crowded, and felt like it was meant to be crowded, but my soft footsteps were the only sound other than the whisper of rain.

Yet I did not feel as though I were alone. You hear the phrase "I felt like I was being watched" all the time. There's a good reason for that—it's a very real feeling, and it has nothing to do with magic. Developing an instinct for sensing when a predator might be studying you is a fundamental survival trait. If you're ever in a spooky situation and have a strong instinct that you are being watched, hunted, or followed, I advise you not to treat those instincts lightly. They're there for a reason.

I walked for about five minutes, and instinct converted into certainty. I was being followed. I couldn't spot who was doing it, exactly, and there were all kinds of plant cover to conceal whoever or whatever was pacing me, but I was confident that they were out there.

Maybe my brother's fears hadn't been entirely without merit.

Lily hadn't said where she intended to meet me, exactly—or rather, I chided myself, I hadn't badgered Cat Sith hard enough for the details. The furry jerk had calmly denied me that rather important piece of information, simply by never mentioning it, and I hadn't questioned him closely enough.

My own fault. I'd played the malicious obedience card more than a couple of times in my life, but this was the first time I'd had it played against me.

Man. No wonder it drives people insane.

So I started walking the main paths systematically. The gardens are built on a series of islands in a little lake, joined by footbridges and grouped into themes.

I found Lily waiting on the covered bridge to the Japanese garden.

Her long, fine hair flowed in gentle waves to the small of her back. It was silver-white. Evidently the weather didn't bother her either. She was dressed in a simple green sundress that fell to her knees, the kind of thing you'd expect to see in July. She had a pastel green sweater folded over one arm for appearance's sake. Brown leather sandals wrapped her feet, and their ties crisscrossed around her ankles. She stood very still, her deep green eyes focused on the ripples the little raindrops sent up on the surface of the lake.

And if I hadn't known better, if I hadn't known Lily's features well enough to be sure it was her, I would have sworn that I was looking at Aurora, the Summer Lady I'd murdered at the stone table.

Before stepping onto the bridge, I paused for a moment to look around me, to truly focus my senses. There, in the bushes—something that moved with feline smoothness paced me in utter silence. More presences filled the water, stirring up more ripples than the rain could account for. And on the far side of the bridge, a number of presences lurked, veiled by magic that kept me from knowing anything about them beyond the fact of their existence.

I figured that there were at least twice as many guardians present, the ones I couldn't sense without really buckling down. They would probably be the most capable and powerful of Lily's escort, too.

If Lily meant to do me harm, walking out onto that bridge was a great way to trap myself, and an absolutely fantastic place in which to be shot. The railing on either side was of light, fine material, and would provide no real cover. There were an almost unlimited number of places where a rifleman could be lying in wait. If I went out there and Lily meant to hurt me, I'd have a hell of a time arguing with her.

But she'd given her word that she wouldn't. I tried to look at this from her point of view—after all, I hadn't given my word, and even if I had, I could always break it. Had I intended to attack Lily, the bridge presented

her with an opportunity to block me in, to slow me down while she and her people escaped.

Screw this. I didn't have time to waffle.

I hunched my shoulders, hoped no one was about to shoot me again, and strode out onto the bridge.

Lily didn't give any indication that she'd noticed me until I got to within about ten feet of her. Then she simply lifted her eyes from the water, though she never looked at me.

I'd been the one to ask for this meeting. I stopped, gave her a bow, and said, "Thank you for meeting me, Lady Summer."

She inclined her head the slightest visible degree. "Sir Knight."

"Been a while," I said.

"Relative to what?" she asked.

"Life, I guess," I said.

"Much has happened," she agreed. "Wars have raged. Empires have fallen." She finally turned her head to regard me directly. "Friends have changed."

Lily had been gorgeous as a mortal woman. After becoming the Summer Lady, her beauty had been magnified into something that was only barely human, something so tangible and intense that it shone out from her like light flowing out of her skin. It was a different kind of beauty from Mab's or Maeve's. Their loveliness was an emptiness. Looking on them created nothing but desire, a need that cried out to be filled.

By contrast, Lily's beauty was a fire, a source of light and warmth, something that created a profound sense of satisfaction. Looking at Lily made the pains of my heart ease, and I suddenly felt like I could breathe freely for the first time in months.

And some other part of me abruptly filled my mind with a violent and explicit image—my fist tangled in Lily's hair, that soft gentle mouth under mine, her body writhing beneath my weight as I took her to the ground. It wasn't an idle thought, and it wasn't a daydream, and it wasn't a fantasy. It was a blueprint. If Lily was immortal, I couldn't kill her. That didn't mean I couldn't *take* her.

I forgot how to speak for a couple of seconds as I fought the image out of my forebrain. Then I forced myself to look away from her, out to the water of the lake. I leaned down on the guardrail, gripping it with my hands. I was a little worried that if I didn't give them something to do, they

might try something stupid. I took a cleansing breath and reengaged my speech centers. "I'm not the only one who's changed since that day."

I could feel her eyes on me, intently studying my face. I had a feeling that she knew exactly what I'd just felt. "True," she murmured. "But we've made our choices, haven't we? And now we are who we are. I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Sir Knight."

"What? Just now?"

I saw her nod in my peripheral vision. "A moment ago, you looked at me. I have seen a face with that precise expression before."

"Slate."

"Yes."

"Well," I growled, "I'm not Slate. I'm not some pet monster Maeve made to play with."

"No," Lily said, her voice sad. "You are a weapon Mab made to war with. You poor man. You always had such a good heart."

"Had?" I asked.

"It isn't yours any longer," Lily said quietly.

"I disagree," I said. "Strenuously."

"And the need you felt a moment ago?" she asked. "Did that urge come from your heart, Sir Knight?"

"Yes," I said simply.

Lily froze for a second, her head tilting slightly to one side.

"Bad things are inside everyone," I said. "I don't care how gentle or holy or sincere or dedicated you are. There are bad things in there. Lust. Greed. Violence. You don't need a wicked queen to make that happen. That's a part of everyone. Some more, some less, but it's always there."

"You say that you were this wicked from the beginning?" Lily asked.

"I'm saying I could have been," I said. "I chose something else. And I'm going to continue choosing something else."

Lily smiled faintly and looked back at the lake. "You wished to speak to me about my knight."

"Fix, yeah," I said. "He basically gave me until noon to leave town, or we shoot it out at the OK Corral. I'm busy. I don't have time to skip town. But I don't want either of us to get hurt."

"What do you wish me to do?"

"Tell him to stand down," I said. "Even if only for a few days. It's important."

Lily bowed her head. "It grieves me to say this, Sir Knight. But no. I will not."

I tried not to grind my teeth audibly. "And why not?"

She studied me again, her green eyes intense. "Can it be?" she asked. "Can it be that you have come so far, have fallen in with your current company, without realizing what is happening here?"

"Uh," I said, frowning. "You mean here, today?"

"I mean here," Lily said. "In our world."

"Yeah, uh. Maybe you haven't heard, but I haven't been in our world much lately."

Lily shook her head. "The pieces are all in front of you. You have only to assemble them."

"Vague much?" I asked. "Why can't you just tell me what the hell you're talking about?"

"If you do know, there is no need to speak. If you truly do not know, no amount of speech will convince you. Some things must be learned for oneself."

I made a disgusted sound and spit into the lake. Take that, lurking bodyguards. "Lily," I said. "Look, this isn't complicated. Fix is about to come at me. I *don't want to hurt him*. So I came here in peace to try to talk it out. What have I done here today that has convinced you that I'm some kind of psychotic maniac who can't be trusted?"

"It isn't anything you've done," Lily said. "It isn't anything you had any control over. You didn't know."

I threw up my hands at that. "Didn't know what?"

Lily frowned and studied me, her expression drawn with worry. "You . . ." She shook her head. "God, Harry. You really mean it. You aren't her creature?"

"No," I said. "Not yet."

Lily nodded and seemed to think for a moment. Then she asked, "Would it pain you for me to touch you?"

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I must know," she said. "I must know if it is upon you yet."

"What?"

She shook her head. "I cannot risk answering any questions until I am sure."

I grunted. I thought about it. Yeah, I could keep my inner caveman on a leash, if it meant getting some answers. “Okay,” I said. “Go ahead.”

Lily nodded. Then she walked toward me. She reached up and her slender, warm fingers touched my forehead, like a mother checking a child for a temperature. She stayed that way for a long moment, her eyes distant.

Then abruptly she let out a little cry and flung her arms around me. “Oh,” she said. “Oh, oh, oh. We thought you taken.”

Okay, inner caveman or not, when a girl that pretty is giving you a full-body hug, you don’t come up with the wittiest dialogue. “Uh. I haven’t had a girlfriend for a while now.”

Lily leaned her head back and laughed. The sound of it was like eating hot cookies, melting into a warm shower, and snuggling a fuzzy puppy all at the same time. “Enough,” she said. “Enough, come out. He is a friend.”

And, just like that, faeries popped out of absolutely *everything* in sight. Elves, tiny humanoids no more than a couple of feet high, rose up out of the bushes. A serpent the size of a telephone pole slithered out of the bridge’s rafters. Seven or eight silver-coated faerie hounds emerged from behind a stand of groomed arbor vitae. Two massive centaurs and half a dozen Sidhe of the Summer Court simply blinked into visibility from behind their veils. They were all armed with bows. Yikes. If I’d meant Lily any harm, my body would have resembled a feathery porcupine. The water stirred, and then a number of otters who were all too big to have been born this side of the last ice age came rushing out.

“Ee-aye, ee-aye, oh,” I said. “Uh, wow. All this for me?”

“Only a fool wouldn’t respect your strength,” she said. “Particularly now.”

Personally, I thought she’d gotten to overkill about one elf after those bows, but I didn’t want her to know that. “Okay,” I said. “You touched me. Make with some answers.”

“Certainly,” she said. Then she moved her hand, and the open air suddenly had the enclosed feeling of a small room. When she spoke, her voice sounded odd, as if it were coming over a radio. She’d put up a privacy spell so that no one could listen in. “What would you like to know?”

“Um, right,” I said. “Why did you touch my head like that? What were you looking for?”

“A disease,” she replied. “A parasite. A poison.”

“Could you repeat that answer, only without the poetry?”

Lily faced me squarely, her lovely face intent. “Sir Knight, you must have seen it. You must have seen the contagion spreading. It has been before your eyes for *years*.”

“I haven’t seen . . .” Then I paused. My head started adding things together. “You . . . you aren’t talking about a physical disease, are you?”

“Of course not,” Lily said. “It is a kind of spiritual malady. A mental plague. An infection slowly spreading across the earth.”

“And . . . this plague. What does it do?” I asked.

“It changes that which ought not change,” she said quietly. “It destroys a father’s love for his family by twisting it into maniacal ambition. It distorts and corrupts the good intentions of agents of mortal law into violence and death. It erodes the sensible fear that keeps a weakly talented sorcerer from reaching out for more power, no matter how terrible the cost.”

I felt my head rock back as if she’d slammed a croquet mallet into it, and the bottom dropped out of my stomach again.

“Victor Sells the Shadowman,” I whispered. “Agent Denton and the Hexenwolves. Leonid Kravos the Nightmare. My first three major cases.”

“Yes,” Lily whispered. “Each of them was tainted by the contagion. It destroyed them.”

I put a hand on the rail and leaned against it. “Fourth case. Aurora. A champion of peace and healing who set out to send the natural world into havoc.”

Lily’s eyes glistened with tears. “I saw what it did to her,” she said. “I didn’t know what was happening to my friend, but I saw it changing her. Twisting her day by day. I loved Aurora like a sister, Sir Knight. But in the end, even I could see what she had become.” Tears fell, and she made no effort to wipe them away. “I saw. I knew. In the end, you may have killed her, Harry. But you also did her a kindness.”

I shook my head. “I . . . I don’t understand why you didn’t want to tell me about it.”

“No one who knows of this speaks of it,” Lily said.

“Why not?”

“Don’t you see?” Lily said. “What if you had been tainted as well? And I revealed to you that I recognized what was happening?”

I kicked my brain into gear and thought. “Uh . . . then . . .” I felt sick. “You’d be a threat. I’d have to kill you to keep you quiet. Or make you the next recruit.”

“Exactly,” Lily said.

“But why suspect *me* of being tainted . . . ?” I heard my own voice trail off as I realized the only thing that could have moved Lily against me so strongly.

“Be at ease,” Lily said, and beckoned.

And freaking Maeve, the Winter Lady, strolled onto the far end of the bridge and sauntered toward us. She was dressed in leather pants of dark purple and a periwinkle sweater whose sleeves fell past the ends of her fingers, and her mouth was curled into a tiny, wicked smirk. “Hey, there, big guy,” she purred. “Lily give you the skinny?”

“Not yet,” Lily said. “Maeve, this isn’t the sort of thing one should simply ram down another’s throat.”

“Of course it is,” Maeve said, her smile widening.

“Maeve—” Lily began.

Maeve did a little pirouette that wound up with her toes practically touching mine as she smiled up at me, her too-sharp teeth very white. “Do you have a camera? I want someone to get a picture.”

“Oh, dear,” Lily said.

Maeve leaned in close, her smile widening. “Mab,” she breathed, “my mother, the Queen of Air and Darkness, and your liege . . .” She leaned closer and whispered, “Mab has been tainted and has gone utterly mad.”

My spine turned to brittle ice. “*What?*”

Lily looked up at me with a sad, sober expression.

Maeve let out a peal of giggles. “It’s true,” she said. “She means to destroy the mortal world, wizard, and to do it this very night—to unleash chaos and havoc that have not been known since the fall of Atlantis. And make no mistake, she *will* destroy it.”

Lily nodded, her eyes pained. “Unless,” she began. “Unless . . .”

I finished the thought Lily obviously did not want to complete. “Unless,” I whispered, “someone destroys her first.”

Chapter

Twenty-five

This day had begun so simply: I'd nearly been killed at my birthday party and Mab had ordered me to kill an immortal. I'd survived the first, and if I'd had the good sense to shut up and do the second without asking questions, I might be somewhere reading a nice book or something, and waiting out the clock until it was Maeve-whacking time.

Instead I had this.

"I love watching him think," Maeve told Lily. "You can almost hear that poor little hamster running and running on its wheel."

"You clubbed him over the head with it," Lily said. "What did you expect?"

“Oh, this,” Maeve said, her eyes sparkling. “Wizards are always so sure of themselves. I love seeing them off balance. This one in particular.”

“Why me?” I said. I wasn’t really participating in their conversation.

“You *did* kill my cousin, wizard,” Maeve said. “Aurora was a prissy little bint, but she *was* family. It makes me happy when you suffer.”

I glowered at Maeve and said, “One of these days, you and I are going to disagree.” I turned to Lily. “You say Mab wants to hold an Armageddon-thon, fine. How is she going to do it?”

“We aren’t completely certain,” Lily said, her eyes earnest.

“It’s something to do with that island,” Maeve said carelessly.

Gulp.

Wrecking someone’s powerful and deadly ritual wasn’t such a scary concept. I’d done that before, more than once. But somehow, knowing that it was *Mab’s* ritual I was supposed to derail made this situation a whole lot worse. I’d *Seen* Mab before, with the unadulterated perception of my Sight, and I remembered the kind of might she wielded with absolute clarity. Mab had the kind of power you had to describe using exponents. I felt like a man with a shovel and a couple of gunnysacks who has just been told to stop an oncoming tsunami.

And Mab knew the place. She’d taken care of me for *months* there. She knew Demonreach’s strengths, its defenses, and its potential. Hell, I’d been her ticket through the door—in fact, I was the *only* one who could have gotten her onto that island.

“You know,” I said aloud, “it’s just possible that I made a mistake in taking Mab’s deal.”

The two Ladies gave me level gazes. Neither of them said, “Obviously,” but it hung on the spell-muffled air nonetheless.

Then I had a thought. Cat Sith had lied to me very effectively only moments ago, because I assumed reasonable things and he allowed me to charge off down that line of thinking. This was no time to make a rookie mistake like that.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going to do something I know you both hate. I’m going to get direct. And I’m going to get direct answers from you, answers that convince me that you aren’t trying to hide anything from me and aren’t trying to mislead me. I know you both have to speak the truth. So give me simple, declarative answers, or I assume you’re scheming and walk away right now.”

That made Lily press her lips together and fold her arms. Her gaze turned reproachful. Maeve rolled her eyes, casually gave me the finger, and said, “Wizards are such weasels.”

“Deal with it,” I said. “Lily. Are you sure that this contagion you speak of is real, and works the way you say it does?”

Lily looked like opening her mouth exposed her taste buds to something foul, but she answered, “Absolutely.”

“Are you sure Mab has been . . . been infected?”

“I am all but certain,” Lily said. “But I have not examined her for myself.”

“I have,” Maeve said calmly. “While you and my people were putting on such a garish distraction at that dreary little celebration of your birth, Sir Knight.” She stretched and yawned, making sure to pull her sweater tight against her chest. “That was the purpose of it, after all.”

I scowled. “You examined Mab?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re sure she’s infected?” I asked.

For just a fraction of a second, Maeve’s smug exterior changed, becoming graver, more somber. In that instant, she and Lily looked as though they might have been fraternal twins. “With absolute certainty.”

“And you’re sure she means to attack the mortal world as you’ve described?”

That serious version of Maeve met my eyes. “Yes,” she said. “Think, wizard. Remember your godmother, bound in ice at Arctis Tor. That was when my mother trapped her and spread the contagion into her. Think of the creatures of Faerie Wyld who have been behaving irregularly and unpredictably. Think of the strange conduct of some of the Houses of the White Court, changing their diets after centuries of stasis. Think of the Fomor, active and aggressive again for the first time in millennia.” She stepped up close to me. “None of these things is coincidence. It spreads, a force that will upend the world and all of us with it. And what has happened until now is *nothing* compared to what will come if Mab is not stopped before the sun rises once more.”

Maeve stepped back from me, watching me, her exotic eyes opaque.

Silence fell within the little privacy spell.

Well, crap.

That was pretty much that.

Neither of the Ladies could speak a direct lie. I hadn't left them any room to dance around the truth. They were serious. I guess it was possible that they might have been mistaken, but they were damned well sincere.

"Neither of us can stop her," Lily said into that silence. "Even working together, we do not have anything like the power needed to overcome Mab's defenses, and she would never lower her guard for either of us."

"But for you," Maeve said.

"Her knight," Lily said, "her champion."

"She might not be quite so guarded," Maeve said, her eyes shining fever-bright. "You have power enough to smite her, if you strike when she is unprepared."

"What?" I blurted.

"What we ask you is not fair," Lily said. "We know tha . . ." She glanced at Maeve. "Well. I know that. But we have no other options."

"Uh, yes, you do," I said. "What about Titania? The Queen of Summer is an equal opposite, isn't she? Mab's mirror?"

The two Ladies exchanged a guarded look.

"Out with it," I said. "We're way past word games here."

Lily nodded. "She . . . refuses to act. I do not know why."

"Because she's terrified she'll be infected, too, obviously," Maeve snapped.

"Guys," I said. "I have *seen* what Mab is. Even if I catch her off guard, I don't have the kind of clout it takes to drop someone in her league."

Lily blinked at me several times. "But . . . but you do. You have Winter."

"Which is meaningful because . . . ?"

"Because she *is* Winter," Maeve said. "The Winter within you is Mab and she is it. The one thing you can never protect yourself against is yourself. You of all people should know this, wizard."

I shuddered. I did.

"The Winter Knight is a useful weapon," Maeve said. "But it has ever been one with two edges. Mab stands no mightier than any of the Sidhe against your hand, Sir Knight."

I narrowed my eyes at Maeve. "Wait a minute," I said. "Why in the hell should I think you're trying to help me? Since when have *you* cared about the mortal world, Maeve?"

Her smile widened. “Since I realized that should my mother fall, I will have a very large and very exclusive chair to sit upon back at Arctis Tor, wizard. Do not think for a moment that I do it from the kindness of my heart. I want the throne.”

Now, *that* was a scary thought. Mab was a force of nature, sure, but she also acted a lot like one. She rarely took things personally, she didn’t play favorites, and she was generally speaking equally dangerous to everyone. Maeve, though. That bitch was just not right. The thought of her with Mab’s mantle of power was something terrifying to anyone with half a brain—especially the guy who would be her personal champion.

“I don’t dig the idea of serving you, Maeve,” I said.

At that, the lazy sex-kitten look came back into her eyes. “I haven’t yet begun to persuade you, wizard. But be assured that I would never, *ever* throw away a tool so useful as you would be, should you succeed.”

“Even if it might slice into you next?” I asked.

Maeve laughed. “Oh, I am going to love playing games with you, Sir Knight. But first things first. You have no choice but to act. If you do not, millions of your fellow mortals will perish. In the end, you will act to protect them. That is what you are.”

“Lady Maeve has a point,” Lily said, with evident reluctance. “There is very little time. I understand your trepidation about the consequences of Mab’s . . . passing . . . but we have little choice. She is simply too dangerous to be allowed to continue.”

I made a low growling sound. “This is insane.”

“Fun,” Maeve said, her nose wrinkling, “isn’t it?”

I eyed both of them. “What are you holding back from me?”

Lily twitched again, and looked displeased at the question. “No one must realize that you know of the contagion,” she said. “You cannot know which of your allies or associates it has already taken. If you demonstrate awareness, anyone infected will either remove you or infect you.”

“Anything else?” I asked her.

“I will speak to Fix,” Lily said. “Otherwise, no.”

I nodded at her. Then I eyed Maeve. “What about you? Holding anything back?”

“I want to take you to my bower, wizard,” Maeve said, and licked her lips. “I want to do things to you that give you such pleasure your brain bleeds.”

“Uh,” I said.

Her foxlike smile sharpened. “Also,” she said, “my people are about to attempt to kill you.”

Lily’s eyes snapped toward Maeve, widening.

“I promised him nothing,” Maeve said with a sniff. “And there are appearances to keep up, after all. I am certain my mother has eyes watching his every move. He can hardly meet peaceably with me without making her suspicious.”

“Ah,” Lily said, nodding. “Oh, dear.”

Maeve leaned toward me, taking a confidential tone. “They don’t know of the contagion either, wizard. So their attempts will be quite sincere. I advise you to resist. Strenuously.”

Seven figures stepped around a corner of the garden on the far side of the bridge and began striding purposefully toward our little gathering. Sidhe. The Redcap strode along in the center.

“Hell’s bells,” I snarled, taking an involuntary step back. “Right here? *Now?* You could have given me a couple of minutes to get clear, dammit.”

“And what fun would that be?” Maeve asked, pushing out her lower lip in a pout. “I am who I am, too. I love violence. I love treachery. I love your pain—and the best part, the part I love most, is that I am doing it for your own good.” Her eyes gleamed white all the way around her irises. “This is me being one of the good guys.”

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” Lily said. “I didn’t want this. I think you should go. . . .” She turned aside to Maeve. “So that the Winter Lady can introduce me to her vassals. This is the first time we’ve met.”

Maeve blinked, and her expression darkened into a scowl. “Oh. *Oh*, you prissy bint.”

Lily said, with utmost sincerity, “I regret that this inconveniences your enjoyment, Lady, but protocol is quite clear.”

Maeve stomped one foot on the bridge, scowled at me, and then seized Lily by the wrist. She started dragging the Summer Lady toward her oncoming entourage.

Lily gave me a quick wink, the expression as pleasant as the warmth from a cup of hot chocolate, and I started backing off. Once I was off the bridge, I turned and began to run. There was no telling how long Lily’s tactic would stall the Redcap and his buddies, and I wanted to be in the truck and gone before introductions were made.

That plan was going pretty well, right up until I passed a huge wall of thick evergreen plants of some kind. Then something small and blurry shot out of the brush about half a step ahead of me. I got a flash impression of Captain Hook in his miniature armor, trailing some kind of heavy cord, and then my feet were tangled in it and down I went.

I tried to be cool and roll into the fall and come back up on my feet, but that works a lot better when you don't have one of your legs abruptly jerked out from beneath you. So mostly I hit the ground in a clumsy sprawl, then slid several feet forward on the damp concrete with my weight on my chest and my cheek.

Ow.

I got back onto my feet, moving as fast as I could. I didn't feel like getting stabbed with more of those steel nails, and my eyes went up to the open sky, scanning quickly for any incoming hostile Little Folk as I got moving again.

So I wasn't as ready as I should have been when a man in biker leathers emerged from the brush at my side and slammed a baseball bat into the base of my skull. My legs turned to jelly and I went down hard, landing on my chin.

I sort of flopped over onto my back, dazed, lifting my hands in a vague and useless defensive gesture. I took the tip of a motorcycle boot directly to the testicles, and my whole world went bright with confusion and pain.

"Yeah," snarled the man. He was of medium height, and had curly dark hair and a short goatee. "That's right, bitch. Who's crawling on the ground now?"

Asking the question seemed to infuriate him. He slammed a kick into my ribs, then another right into the breadbasket, and I curled around myself gasping.

I had to move. The Redcap was coming. I hadn't made any noise to tip Thomas off that I was in trouble—but even as heavily boosted as I was, it wasn't enough to instantly overcome the stunning pain of those blows. Shots like that mess around with your nervous system, disrupting the machinery that sends signals around your body. I wasn't going anywhere for a few more seconds.

"Nail him," the man spat, and those frozen spikes of raw agony I'd felt before blossomed into my body from my right arm, my left calf, and somewhere in my lower back. I heard the buzz of little wings as my

attackers zipped past me, driving nails in like harpoons into a floundering whale. It hurt so much that I could barely open my eyes and look up at my attacker.

I recognized him.

Ace, a changeling, one of his parents mortal, the other fae. He was the onetime victim of Lloyd Slate, the onetime betrayer of Fix and Lily and a girl named Meryl. He stared down at me with hate-filled eyes and bounced an aluminum baseball bat a few times in his hand. “I’ve been waiting *years* for this.”

And then he started clubbing me over the head.

Chapter

Twenty-six

Taking a beating well is not for amateurs.

You have to get started early, maybe by getting beaten up a lot as a child in school. Then you refine your raw talent by taking more beatings as you get older. Generally, you can seek out almost any crew of athletic types, and you'll find several willing to oblige you, under one guise or another. True craftsmen then seek out gifted individuals with a particular skill set to deliver the most skilled and professional beatings.

That's how you learn to fight, really. You take beatings, and you get tougher, and if you don't start avoiding all the fights, you continue taking beatings until you learn how it's done. Or they kill you.

Some guys are born lucky, with mad natural fighting skills, and they hardly ever take a beating—but that’s never been me. I’ve had to learn the hard way.

Like every other kind of pain, beatings are educational.

Ace started swinging the aluminum bat, and I learned two things about him right away. First, he wasn’t any stronger than any other guy about his size—don’t get me wrong; that was plenty strong enough to kill me at the moment. But he wasn’t going to deliver the coup de grâce by dropping a forklift on my head. Second, he was emotionally invested.

See, beatings have only a couple of purposes. You are either deterring someone from something—flirting with your girl, stealing your wallet, strangling you, whatever—in which case the point of the beating is to convey a very simple message: Stop it. The second “reason” to deliver a beating is to simply inflict pain. There’s no actual reason involved, of course. It’s all an emotional drive, a need to make someone *hurt*. Sometimes that kind of drive is well justified. Sometimes it’s misdirected rage. And sometimes, maybe more often than we really want to believe, people just enjoy making someone else feel pain.

The third motivation for a beating is to kill someone. There’s some bleedover, ah hah, between the second reason and the third.

Ace was handing me a beating of the second kind. He wasn’t thinking. He had a need to make me feel pain. And I was obliging the hell out of him.

The nails were the worst, like frozen points of pure fire in my flesh. Beside that agony, the first couple of blows from the bat were a dull ache. I got my arms between my noggin and the bat, getting the meat of my forearms in the way wherever I could. Arm bones are considerably less robust than broomsticks, and a solid swing with a club will snap them. Get the muscle and soft tissue in the way, though, and it spreads out the impact, both in surface area and in duration. It disperses the force—and hurts like a son of a bitch.

He swung at me several times. I blocked some. One clipped my forehead. I wriggled out of the way of the rest, the bat throwing up chips from the concrete sidewalk. I kicked at his knees with my feet, though I was in a poor position to do it. That was the part of the conflict that was important to me.

Meanwhile, I gave Ace the part that was important to *him*. I screamed. It didn’t take a lot in the way of Method acting to make it convincing. The

nails hurt so badly, I was pretty much going to start screaming anyway. So I screamed bloody murder, and he all but frothed at the mouth as he kept after me, swinging faster, more powerfully—and more erratically.

Swinging a club down at a struggling target is harder work than everyone thinks it is, and doing that and dodging clumsy kicks at the same time is the kind of aerobic workout you just don't get at the gym. The longer it went on, the heavier he would be breathing, and the more intently he would be focused on me.

Screaming, howling, very *noisy* me.

See, surprises like this are exactly why you bring backup in the first place. I knew I couldn't last more than a few seconds against Ace's onslaught. I also knew how fast my brother could run.

But someone else got there first.

I heard a pair of light steps and then Ace grunted. I looked up through my impact-numbed arms and saw him swing the bat again, this time at a standing target.

The bat lashed out and never stopped moving in its arc, but suddenly there was a small figure rolling up close to Ace, coming between his chest and the bat in his extended arm. They whirled in a circle, following the spin of the bat, and Ace's heels abruptly flipped up into the air over his head and he landed empty-handed on the concrete with a gasp of pain.

A woman stood over him. She was five nothing, and built with the kind of lithe, solid power that you'd expect in an Olympic gymnast who had stayed fit as she aged. Her blond hair was cut short, to finger-length. She'd had a pert upturned nose the last time I'd seen her. It had been broken since then, and while it had healed, I could see the slight bump the break had left. She had on jeans and a denim jacket, and her eyes were blue and blazing.

Ace started to get up, but a motorcycle boot much smaller than his own slammed down on his chest.

Karrin Murphy scowled at him, tossed the bat into the bushes, and said in a hard voice, "Stay down, creep. Only warning."

It was difficult to translate frantic thought into verbalization through the pain of the cold iron piercing my skin, but I managed to gasp, "Incoming!"

Murphy's eyes snapped around her, scanning in every direction including up, and she saw the first of the armored Little Folk diving down

at her. Her hand snatched something out of her jacket pocket, and with a flick of her wrist she snapped out a small, collapsible baton. The Little Folk darted down upon her like a squad of angry wasps.

She didn't try to evade them. She planted her feet and began snapping the little baton with sharp, precise motions. There wasn't really time for her to aim at anything—she was running on pure reflex. Murphy'd been a martial arts practitioner since she was a child, mainly in aikido along with several others. Aikido included all kinds of fun areas of study, and one of them was learning how to handle a sword. I knew that she'd also been spending a lot of time training with a gang of ancient Einherjaren, postdead Norse warriors of Valhalla. I doubt any of her teachers had trained her for this situation.

But they'd come close enough.

That little baton was a blur as it moved in half a dozen quick, sharp strokes, batting away the incoming Little Folk one by one. There were several sounds of impact and then a sharp *ping* and then a miniature clatter as Captain Hook was struck from the air and went into a sprawling crash on the ground. There were a series of high-pitched shrieks of panic, and the Little Folk vanished.

Beginning to end, that little fracas had lasted maybe five seconds.

I started fumbling at the nails still sticking out of me, but Ace and his baseball bat had left my fingers numb and useless. I managed to pull the one in my arm out with my teeth, which was unpleasant in a dimension I hardly knew existed. I spit out the nail and heard myself making short, desperate sounds of pain.

Murphy took several steps back until her heel bumped my shoulder. Then she stepped carefully over my body, never taking her eyes off the downed Ace. "How bad?"

I managed to grate out, "Nails."

The bushes crashed and Thomas appeared from them, pistol in one hand, that insanely big Gurkha knife in the other. His gun tracked to Murphy, then snapped upward, and retrained upon the downed Ace. "Oh, hi, Karrin."

"Thomas," Murphy said shortly. She looked down at me. I tried to gesture at the nails still sticking in me, but given the state of my hands and arms, I managed only to flail around weakly. "Dammit, Harry, hold still."

It didn't take her long. Two quick tugs and the nails were free. The level of pain I was experiencing dropped to maybe a tenth of what it had been. I sagged in relief.

"How bad?" Thomas asked.

"One of these wounds is bleeding, not bad," Murphy reported. "Jesus, his arms."

"We need to get out," I said. My voice sounded raw to me. "Trouble coming."

"No," said a beautiful Sidhe baritone. "Trouble is here."

They appeared from behind their veils, one by one, with so much melodrama that I was mildly surprised that they hadn't each struck some kind of kung fu pose. The Redcap with his red beret was in the center of the group. The others were spread out around us in a semicircle, pinning us against the hedge behind us. They were all holding blades and guns. They looked more like models at a photo shoot than actual warriors, but I knew better. The Sidhe are prancy, but fierce.

Ace let out a croaking laugh. "You see?" he said toward the Redcap. "You needed my help after all."

The Redcap gave Ace a glance and a small shrug that seemed to acknowledge the point. "Well, the vampire and the fallen woman. I cannot comprehend how you manage to convince yourself that you are some kind of heroic figure, Dresden, given the company you keep."

That got a laugh from the other Sidhe, who probably hadn't seen much comedy in the past few years.

I heaved a few times and managed to sit up. Murphy leaned back out of my way. She said to Thomas, "Who are these clowns?"

"Rambo there in the middle is the Redcap," Thomas said. "Pretty big hitter in Faerieland, I guess. The others are his lickspittles."

"Ooh," I said. "Lickspittles, nice."

"Thank you," Thomas said gravely.

"And they have a problem with Dresden, I take it?" Murphy asked.

"Wanna kill him or something. I don't know," Thomas said, nodding. "They tried it on Jet Skis earlier today."

"Roger Moore Bond villains?" Murphy asked, her tone derisive. "Seriously?"

"Be silent, mortal cow," snarled one of the Sidhe.

Murphy tracked her eyes calmly over to that one, and she nodded once, as if memorizing something. “Yeah, okay. You.”

The Sidhe fingered his weapons, beautiful features twisting into a scowl.

I tried to rise, but by the time I got to one knee I felt like crawling into a dark room and crying while throwing up. I stopped there and fought back the dizzies that tried to take me back down. I was feeling stronger than before already. If I’d had half an hour, I think I could have been ready to do something vaguely like magical violence. But I didn’t have half an hour. I couldn’t fight our way out of this, and if they didn’t have me supporting them, I was pretty sure Karrin and Thomas couldn’t do it either. We needed another option.

“Look, Red,” I said. “You made your play at my party and it didn’t turn out so well for you. That’s fine. No hard feelings. You tried to kill me and my friends out on Lake Michigan this morning, and I can see why you would. That didn’t go so swell for you, either. So what makes you think it’s going to turn out well for you now?”

“I like my chances,” said the Redcap, smiling.

“No reason this has to get ugly,” I said in reply.

There was something playful in his voice as he responded, “Is there not?”

“We can stop this right here. Turn around and walk away. We’ll do the same. We’ll let Ace here go free as soon as we get to our cars.”

“Oh, kill him if you wish to,” the Redcap said absently. “The halfblood is nothing to me.”

Ace let out a hissing sound and stared at the Redcap.

“You aren’t,” the Redcap said calmly. “I have made that clear several times.”

“But I . . . I snared him for you,” Ace said. “I slowed him down. If I hadn’t, you wouldn’t have caught up to him.”

The Redcap shrugged without ever glancing at the young man. “And I find that extremely convenient. But I never asked you to help. And I certainly never asked you to be so incompetent as to be captured by the prey.”

I was glad Molly wasn’t around, because the hate that suddenly flared out from Ace was so palpable that even I felt it. I could hear his teeth grinding, and the sudden flush of anger on his face was like something out

of a comic book. Ace's body tensed as though he were preparing to fling himself to his feet.

At that, the Redcap turned, a too-wide Sidhe smile on his face, and faced Ace for the first time. "Ah. There. You may not have talent, but at least you have spirit. Perhaps if you survive the night, we can discuss your future."

Ace just sat there seething, staring daggers at the Redcap, and everyone was focused on the two of them.

Which was why no one but me noticed when the situation silently changed.

The Redcap looked back at me and said, "Have the vampire kill the halfblood if you wish. I'll happily trade my son's life for yours, Dresden. There are Sidhe who get all sentimental about their offspring, but I can't say I've ever been one of them." He focused on me and drew a small knife from his pocket, snapping out the blade. It was an instrument for killing at intimate distance. "Companions," he said, a smug edge to his voice, "with whom should we begin?"

The air crackled with sudden tension. The Sidhe stared with too-bright eyes, their fingers settling on the hilts and grips of various weapons. This was going to be bad. I couldn't fight. Karrin couldn't possibly keep up with attackers who both outnumbered her and operated with superhuman speed and near-invisibility. The Sidhe could defend themselves against my magic, unless I was able to throw absolutely everything at one of them—and I wouldn't get that chance against half a dozen. Physically I was pretty much useless for the moment.

Thomas might make it out, but when this crystalline moment of stillness finally broke, I was pretty sure Karrin and I wouldn't.

Unless someone broke it exactly right.

"Hey," I said innocently. "Weren't there seven of you guys a minute ago?"

The Redcap tilted his head at me and then glanced left and right. Five other Sidhe looked back at him, except on the far side of their line, on my left. The Sidhe warrior who had been there was gone. The only thing remaining where he'd been standing was a single expensive designer tennis shoe.

Right then, in the exact instant of realization, screams, truly agonized screams erupted from several yards away in the brush. There was a

crystalline, almost bell-like quality to the voice, and the sound was terrifying, nothing that a human would ever make. Then there was a horrible retching sound, and the screams ended.

There was a stunned silence. And then an object came sailing out of the brush and landed at the feet of the Sidhe nearest to the one who had been taken. It was a horrible collection of bloody bone, maybe a foot and a half long—a section of spine, ripped clear of its body, bits of tissue still clinging to it.

That got a reaction from everyone. The Redcap dropped into a crouch, hands up in a defensive posture. Several Sidhe took rapid steps back.

“Holy Mother of God,” Murphy breathed.

Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the grisly missile lying on the sidewalk, so their heads weren’t directed toward the future, weren’t able to see that the situation was about to change again.

“Hey,” I said, in exactly the same tone. “Weren’t there six of you guys a minute ago?”

Eyes swept back up in time to see the brush swaying where something had dragged the Sidhe from the opposite end of the line, on my right side, into the bushes, and more screams erupted, clawing at the rain-drizzled air.

“Sith,” hissed one of the female Sidhe, her widened eyes darting everywhere, followed by the barrel of her composite-material pistol. “Cat Sith.”

Her attention wasn’t on me, and I took the opening. I slammed my will down through my numbed right arm, snarling, “*Forzare!*”

At the same instant, Thomas turned his gun on the Redcap and opened fire.

Invisible force hit the female Sidhe with more or less the same energy as a small car doing twenty-five or thirty. It should have been a lot more than that, and focused on a smaller area, but in my current condition it was everything I had thrown into the best single punch I could throw. She hadn’t been able to counter the spell as it struck, and was flung back away from me. She bounced once in a bed of flowers, and then tumbled into the lake.

Meanwhile, the Redcap and the other Sidhe darted in every direction and blurred to near-invisibility behind their veils. Thomas might have hit one of them. It was hard to hear any sounds of impact or screams of pain over the thunder of the ridiculously large rounds used in his Desert Eagle. Other guns went off, too.

Adrenaline surged and I shoved myself to my feet, shouting, “Fall back!”

Something flashed by me, and then Cat Sith appeared from behind his own veil, leaping with all four paws extended, his claws unsheathed. He landed on what looked like empty air, and his legs moved in a blur of ripping, supernaturally powerful strikes. Blood fountained from the empty air, and Sith bounded away, vanishing again, as one of the Sidhe appeared in the space where Sith had been. The Sidhe’s upper body was a mass of blood and shredded flesh, his expression shocked. He crumpled slowly to the ground, his eyes wide, as if trying to see through complete darkness. His hands clenched aimlessly a few times, and then he went still.

I turned to run and staggered woozily. Karrin saw it and darted in close to my side, preventing me from falling. She didn’t see Ace, behind her, produce a small pistol and aim it at her back.

I shouted and lurched down on top of him. The gun went off once, and then I had his gun arm pinned to the ground beneath both of my forearms and the whole weight of my body. Ace cursed and swung a fist at me. I slammed my forehead into his nose a bunch of times. It took the fight out of him, and his head wobbled dazedly.

There was a high-pitched shriek and a tiny armored form covered in fishhooks hurtled into my face and neck. My injuries swelled into agony again as the damned little metal hooks pierced my skin. I got a quick glimpse of a miniature sword flashing toward my eye. I flinched in a big roll that took me off of Ace, flinging my head in a circle to counter the motion of the little sword with centrifugal force. It cut into my eyebrow and missed my eyeball, and a flood of scarlet blocked out half of my vision.

After that, things were fuzzy. I swatted at Captain Hook with my forearm, and on the third blow the barbed hooks tore free of my skin. A hand with the strength of a hydraulic crane gripped the back of my coat and dragged me to my feet, and then my brother was helping me move. I sensed Karrin on my blind side, shouting something to Thomas, and then the Desert Eagle started thundering on that side of my body.

A Sidhe exploded from the brush, visible and wounded, with Cat Sith in hot pursuit. The Sidhe leapt into the air, shimmered, and transformed into a hawk with golden brown feathers. Its wings beat twice, gaining maybe ten feet of altitude—until Cat Sith sailed through the air in a

spectacular pounce, landed on the hawk's back, and they both plunged down into the waters of the lake.

After that, there was a lot of movement that hurt like hell, and I would have fallen a dozen times without my brother's support. Then I was being half thrown into the back of the Hummer, coming down on the custom leather seats hard, and too exhausted to do more than pull my feet in so that they wouldn't get slammed in the door. Both of the front doors opened and closed, and the engine, already running, roared to life, the acceleration pressing me back against the seat for a moment.

We drove for a few minutes before I was able to start sitting up. When I finally did, I found Thomas driving, with Karrin riding shotgun, holding Thomas's Desert Eagle in her hands and turned in the seat to steadily watch the road behind us.

My brother glanced up at me in the rearview mirror and winced. "You look awful."

I could see out of only one eye. I reached up to the other one with my hand and found blood smearing it shut and beginning to dry. I leaned to look in the rearview mirror. I had quite a bit of blood on that side of my head. The hooks had made some messy, if not large holes in my skin when they came out.

Karrin's eyes flicked toward me for just a second, and she might have gotten a little pale, but she didn't let any other emotion touch her face. "Looks like we're clear. No one back there."

Thomas grunted. "They can use magic, and Harry left a bunch of blood on the ground. If they want to follow us, they can."

"Dammit," Murphy breathed. "Castle?"

"And have Marcone's people cleaning the blood off him?" Thomas asked. "Fuck *that*."

"Amen," I agreed woozily.

"Where else, then?" Karrin asked. "Your apartment?"

Thomas shook his head emphatically. "Too many people will see us taking him in. They'll call the authorities. And Lara has eyes on the place. If I take a wounded wizard in there, she'd show up faster than Jimmy John's." He grunted in discomfort as the truck hit a bump in the road.

Karrin turned toward him and leaned over to examine him. "You're hit."

“Only one,” Thomas said calmly. “If it was bad, I’d have bled out by now. Gut shot. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Karrin said. “You know how easy it is for these things to go septic? You’ve got to take care of this.”

“Yeah, as soon as we stop somewhere.”

“Molly’s place,” Karrin said. “It’s under the aegis of Svartalfheim. No one’s getting in there without a major assault.”

“Right,” I said, the word slurring a little. “There.”

“Dammit, Dresden,” Karrin said, her voice exasperated. “Just lie down until we can look at you.”

I threw her a salute with my right hand and paused, feeling an unfamiliar weight on my arm.

I looked. Captain Hook dangled from it, half a dozen of his armor’s barbs caught in the denim of my jacket. I peered at the tiny armored figure and then poked him with a fingertip. He let out a semiconscious little moan, but the hooks had effectively immobilized him.

“Huh,” I said. Then I cackled. “Hah. Hah, hah, heh hahhah.”

Thomas glanced over his shoulder and blinked several times. “What the hell is that?”

“A priceless intelligence asset,” I replied.

Thomas lifted his eyebrows. “You’re going to interrogate that little guy?”

“If Molly has a turkey baster, maybe you can waterboard him,” Murphy said in an acid tone.

“Relax,” I said. “And drive. We need to . . .”

I forgot what I had been about to say we needed to do. I guess all that cackling had really taken it out of me. The world turned sideways and the leather of the backseat pressed up against my unwounded cheek. It felt cool and nice, which was a stark contrast to the waves of pure ache and steady burn that pulsed through my body with every heartbeat.

The world didn’t fade to black so much as turn a dark, restless red.

Chapter

Twenty- seven

I woke up when someone shoved a branding iron into my neck.

Okay, that isn't what happened, but I was coming out of unconsciousness at the time, and that was what it seemed like. I let out a curse and flailed with my arms.

"Hold him, hold him!" someone said in an intent voice. Hands came down on my arms, pressing them back against a smooth, rigid surface beneath me.

"Harry," Thomas said. "Harry, easy, easy. You're safe."

There were lights in my eyes. They weren't pleasant. I squinted against them until I could see Thomas's upside-down head looming over

me.

“There you are,” Thomas said. “We were getting worried.” He lifted his hands from my arms and gave the side of my face something somewhere between a pat and a slap. “You weren’t waking up.”

I looked around me. I was lying on the table in Molly’s apartment, the same spot where we’d seen to Toot’s injuries earlier in the day. There was the sharp smell of disinfectant in the air. I felt terrible, but less terrible than I had in the car.

I turned my head and saw a wiry little guy with a shock of black hair, a beaky nose, and glittering, intelligent eyes. He picked up a metal bowl in one hand, and moved a pair of needle-nose pliers in the other, dropping something into the bowl with a clink. “And he just wakes up?” Waldo Butters, Chicago’s most polka-savvy medical examiner, asked. “Tell me that isn’t a little creepy.”

“What are you talking about?” I said.

Butters held up the metal bowl, tilting it so that I could see inside. Several tiny, bright, sharp, bloodied pieces of metal were inside. “Barbs from those fishhooks,” he said. “Several of them broke off in your skin.”

I grunted. My collapse in the car made more sense now. “Yeah,” I said. “Any kind of iron gets under my skin, it seems to disagree with the Winter Knight’s bundle of awesome. Takes the gumption right out of me.” I started to sit up.

Butters very calmly put his hands on my chest and shoved me back down. Hard. I blinked at him.

“I don’t do assertive much,” he said apologetically. “I don’t really like doctoring people who are still alive. But if I’m going to do it, dammit, I’m going to do it right. So. You stay put until I say you can get up. Got it?”

“I, uh . . .” I said. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Smart,” Butters said. “You have two giant bruises where the lower halves of your arms usually go. You’re covered in lacerations, and a couple need sutures. Some are already inflamed. I need to clean them all out. That’ll work best if you hold still.”

“I can do that,” I said. “But I’m feeling all kinds of better, man. Look.” I held up my hands and wiggled my fingers. They felt a little tight. I glanced down at them. They were a mottled shade of purple and swollen. My wrists and forearms were blotchy with bruises and swollen, too.

“Harry, I once saw an addict pound his fist into concrete until he’d broken nearly every bone in his hand. He never even blinked.”

“I’m not on drugs,” I said.

“No? There’s damage to your body’s machinery. Just because you aren’t feeling it doesn’t mean it isn’t there,” Butters said firmly. “I’ve got a theory.”

“What theory?” I asked, as he got to work on the cuts.

“Well, let’s say you’re a faerie queen with a need for a mortal enforcer. You want the guy to be effective, but you don’t want to make him too powerful to handle. It seems reasonable to me that you might fiddle with his pain threshold. He’s not actually any more indestructible, but he *feels* like he is. He’ll ignore painful things like . . . like knife wounds or . . .”

“Gut shots?” Thomas suggested.

“Or gut shots, right,” Butters said. “And most of the time, that is probably a huge advantage. He can Energizer Bunny his way right through your enemies—and then, when it’s over, there he is. He feels great, but in reality he’s all screwed up and it’s going to take his body weeks or months to repair itself. If you don’t like the job he’s done, well, there he is all weakened and vulnerable. And if you do like it, you just let him rest and use him again another day.”

“Wow, that’s cynical,” I said. “And calculating.”

“I’m in the right ballpark, aren’t I?” Butters asked.

I sighed. “Yeah, it sounds . . . very Mab-like.” Especially if what Maeve had said about me being dangerous to Mab was true.

Butters nodded sagely. “So, as strong or quick or as fast to heal as it makes you, just remember: You aren’t any more invincible to trauma than before. You just don’t notice it when something happens. . . .” He was quiet for a moment and then asked, “You didn’t even feel that, did you?”

“Feel what?” I asked, lifting my head.

He put the heel of his hand on my forehead and pushed it down again. “I just stitched up a three-inch-long slice over one of your ribs. No anesthetic.”

“Huh,” I said. “No, I didn’t. . . . I mean, I felt something; it just wasn’t uncomfortable.”

“Supports my theory,” he said, nodding. “I already did that cut over your eye while you were out. That’s a beauty. Right down to the bone.”

“Courtesy of Captain Hook,” I said. “He had this bitty sword.” I glanced up at Thomas. “We’ve still got Hook, right?”

“He’s being held prisoner on a ceramic-lined cookie sheet in the oven,” Thomas said. “I figured he couldn’t jigger his way out of a bunch of steel, and it would give him something to think about before we start asking questions.”

“That’s an awful thing to do to one of the Little Folk, man,” I said.

“I’m planning to start making a pie in front of him.”

“Nice.”

“Thank you.”

“How long was I out?” I asked.

“About an hour,” Thomas said.

Butters snorted. “I’d have been here sooner but someone broke into my house last night and I was cleaning up the mess.”

I winced. “Uh, yeah. Right. Sorry about that, man.”

He shook his head. “I’m still kind of freaking out that you’re here at all, honestly. I mean, we held your funeral. We talked to your ghost. It doesn’t get much more gone than that.”

“Sorry to put a speed bump on your mental train track.”

“It’s more of a roller coaster, lately, but a good mind is flexible,” Butters said. “I’ll deal with it; don’t worry.” He worked for a moment more before adding, in a low murmur, “Unlike some other people.”

“Eh?” I asked him.

Butters just looked up across the large apartment and then went back to work.

I followed the direction of his gaze.

Karrin sat curled up in a chair beside the fireplace, on the far side of the big apartment, her arms wrapped around her knees, her head leaning against the chair’s back. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open a little. She was evidently asleep. The gentle snoring supported that theory.

“Oh,” I said. “Uh. Yeah. She didn’t seem to handle it real well when I was ghosting around. . . .”

“Understatement,” Butters breathed. “She’s been through a lot. And none of it made her a bit less prickly.”

Thomas made a low sound of agreement.

“She’s run most of her friends off,” Butters said. “Never talks to cops anymore. Hasn’t been speaking to her family. Just the Viking crew down at

the BFS. I'm hanging in there. So is Molly. I guess maybe we both know that she's in a bad place."

"And now here I am," I said. "Man."

"What?" Thomas asked.

I shook my head. "You gotta know Karrin."

"Karrin, eh?" Thomas asked.

I nodded. "She's real serious about order. A man dying, she can understand. A man coming *back*. That's different."

"Isn't she Catholic?" Thomas asked. "Don't they have a guy?"

I eyed him. "Yeah. And that makes it so much easier to deal with."

"Medically speaking," Butters said, "I'm pretty sure you were never dead. Or at least, never dead and beyond revival."

"What, were you there?" I asked.

"Were you?" he countered.

I grunted. "From my end, it went black, and then I woke up. Ghosty. Then it went white and I woke up. Hurting. Then did a bunch of physical therapy to recover."

"Wow, seriously, PT?" Butters asked. "How long?"

"Eleven weeks."

"Yeah, that really leans things toward 'coma' for me."

"And all the angels and ghost stuff," I said. "Which way does that make them lean? In your medical opinion?"

Butters pressed his lips together and said, "No one likes a smart-ass, Harry."

"I never liked him anyway," Thomas confided to him.

"Why don't you do something useful?" I said. "Go outside; see if anyone is lurking out there, waiting to kill us the second we walk out."

"Because Molly has to go with me each and every time or they won't let me back in, and she's out dealing with your scouts," Thomas said. "You worried about that faerie crew using your blood to track you?"

"Not sure. Using it is trickier than most people think," I said. "You've got to keep it from drying out, and you've got to get it undiluted. It was raining, so if someone wanted my blood, they'd have had to get to it pretty quick—and it looked like Sith was keeping them busy."

"Sith?" Butters asked.

"Not what you're thinking," I said.

"Oh," he said, clearly disappointed.

“Besides,” I said to Thomas, “I’m less worried about them using it to follow me than using it to make my heart stop beating. Or you know . . . explode out of my chest.”

Thomas blinked. “They can do that?”

“Oh, my God,” Butters said, blinking. “Is *that* what that was?”

“Yes, they can do that, and probably, if you mean all those murders around the Three-Eye drug ring bust,” I answered them. “Butters, what’s the story here? You done yet?”

“Empty night,” Thomas said, his manner suddenly serious. “Harry . . . shouldn’t we be putting up circles or something?”

“No point,” I said. “If they’ve got your blood, they’ve got you, period. Maybe if I ran and hid somewhere in the Nevernever, but even then it isn’t certain.”

“How much blood do they need?” Butters asked.

“Depends,” I said. “Depends on how efficient their magic is—their skill level. Depends on how fresh the blood is. Depends on the day of the week and the phase of the moon, for all I know. It isn’t something I’ve experimented with. The more energy they’re sending your way, the more blood they need.”

“Meaning what?” Butters asked. “Sit up so I can dress these.”

I sat up and lifted my arms out of the way as I explained. “A tracking spell is hardly anything, in terms of energy input,” I said. “They wouldn’t need much at all for that.”

Butters wound a strip of linen bandage around my midsection several times. “But if they want to make your head explode, it takes a lot more?”

“Depends how good they are,” I said. “They don’t have to crush your head into paste, sledgehammer style. Maybe they put an ice pick up your nose. Less force but concentrated into a smaller area, see?” I shuddered a little. “If they’ve got my blood and can use it, I’m fucked and that’s that. But until that happens, I’m going to assume that I still have a chance and proceed as if I do.”

There was a silence then, and I realized that both Butters and Thomas were just staring at me.

“What? Magic is dangerous stuff, guys,” I said.

“Yeah, for all of us,” Butters said, “but, Harry, you’re . . .”

“What? Bulletproof?” I shook my head. “Magic is like the rest of life. It doesn’t matter how much a guy can bench-press, or if he can break trees

with his hands. You put a bullet through his brain, he dies. I'm pretty good at figuring out where to stand so as to avoid that bullet, and I can shoot back a lot better than most people—but I'm just as vulnerable as everybody else."

I frowned at that thought. *As vulnerable as everybody else*. Something nagged at me from beneath the surface of my conscious calculations, but I couldn't poke it into visibility. Yet.

"Point is," I said, "if they were going to try to kill me with it, they've had time to do that already."

"Unless they're saving it for the future," Butters said.

I made sure not to growl out loud. "Yes. Thank you. Are you finished yet?"

Butters tore off a final piece of medical tape, stuck the end of the bandage down with it, and sighed. "Yeah. Just try not to . . . well, move, or jump around, or do anything active, or touch anything dirty, or otherwise do anything else that I know you're going to do anyway in the next twenty-four hours."

"Twelve hours," I said, swinging my legs down from the table.

"Oy." Butters sighed.

"Where's my shirt?" I asked, standing.

Thomas shrugged. "Burned it. You want mine?"

"After you got your guts all over it?" I asked. "Ew."

Butters blinked and looked at Thomas. "My God," he said. "You've been shot."

Thomas hooked a thumb at Butters. "Check out Dr. Marcus Welby, MD, here."

"I'd have gone with Doogie Howser, maybe," I said.

"Split the difference at McCoy?" Thomas asked.

"Perfect."

"You've been *shot*!" Butters repeated, exasperated.

Thomas shrugged. "Well. A little."

Butters let out an enormous sigh. Then he picked up the bottle of disinfectant and a roll of paper towels and started cleaning off the table. "God, I hate this Frankenstein-slash-Civil War medicine crap. Give me a second. Then lie down."

I left them to pad across the apartment to my bedroom. To Molly's guest bedroom. I opened the door as quietly as I could so that I wouldn't

wake Karrin, and went in to put on another secondhand shirt.

I found one that was plain black, with the Spider-Man emblem on it in white. The black uniform. The one that made Spidey switch teams for a bit, and which eventually gave him all kinds of grief. It seemed fitting.

I slipped into it and turned and nearly jumped out of my boots when Karrin quietly shut the bedroom door behind her.

I stood there for a long moment. The only light was from a single small, glowing candle.

Karrin faced me with an opaque expression. "You don't call," she said, one corner of her mouth quirked into an expression that wasn't a smile. "You don't write."

"Yeah," I said. "Coma."

"I heard," she said. She folded her arms and leaned back against the door. "Thomas and Molly both say it's really you."

"Yeah," I said. "How'd you find me?"

"Scanner. The last time a bomb went off in this town, it was in your office building. I hear another one goes off in the street, and then reports of explosions and gunfire out over the lake just after dawn this morning. Math wasn't hard to do."

"How'd you follow me?"

"I didn't," Murphy said. "I staked out Thomas's place and followed the guy who was following you." She moved a foot absently, touching the back of her other calf with it as if scratching an itch. "His name was Ace . . . something, right?"

I nodded. "You remember."

"I try to keep track of the bad guys," she said. "And on an entirely unrelated note . . . I hear you belong to Mab now."

The words hit me like a slap in the face. Karrin had been a detective for a long time. She knew how to manipulate a suspect.

I guessed I was a suspect, then.

"I'm not a cocker spaniel," I said quietly.

"I'm not saying you are," she said. "But there are creatures out there that can do things to your head, and we both know it."

"You think that's what happened?" I asked. "That Mab's bent my brain into new shapes?"

Her expression softened. "I think she'll do it slower," she said. "You're . . . an abrupt sort of person. Your solutions to problems tend to be

decisive and to happen quickly. It's how you think. I'm willing to believe that you found some kind of way to prevent her from just . . . I don't know. Rewriting you."

"I told her if she tried it, I'd start being obstreperous."

"God," Karrin said. "You haven't started?"

She half smiled. For a second, it was almost okay.

But then her face darkened again. "I think she'll do it slower. An inch at a time, when you aren't looking. But even if she doesn't . . ."

"What?"

"I'm not angry at you, Harry," she said. "I don't hate you. I don't think you've gone bad. A lot of people have fallen into the trap you did. People better than either of us."

"Uh," I said. "The evil-Queen-of-Faerie trap?"

"Christ, Harry," Murphy said quietly. "No one just starts giggling and wearing black and signs up to become a villainous monster. How the hell do you think it happens?" She shook her head, her eyes pained. "It happens to people. Just people. They make questionable choices, for what might be very good reasons. They make choice after choice, and none of them is slaughtering roomfuls of saints, or murdering hundreds of baby seals, or rubber-room irrational. But it adds up. And then one day they look around and realize that they're so far over the line that they can't remember where it was."

I looked away from her. Something in my chest hurt. I didn't say anything.

"Do you understand that?" she asked me, her voice even more quiet. "Do you understand how treacherous the ground you're standing on has become?"

"Perfectly," I said.

She nodded a few times. Then she said, "I suppose that's something."

"That all?" I asked her. "I mean . . . is that the only reason you came in here?"

"Not quite," she said.

"You don't trust me," I said.

Her eyes didn't meet mine, and didn't avoid them either. "That will depend largely on the next few minutes."

I inhaled through my nose and out again, trying to stay calm, clear, even. "Okay," I said. "What do you want me to do?"

“The skull,” she said. “I know what it is. So does Butters. And . . . it’s too powerful to be left in the wrong hands.”

“Meaning mine?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you what I know. I know you broke into his house when he was at work and took it. I know you left Andi with cuts and bruises. And I know you wrecked the place a bit along the way.”

“You think that means I’ve gone bad?”

She tilted her head slightly to one side, as if considering. “I think you were probably operating under some kind of harebrained lone-hero rationale. Let’s say . . . that I’m concerned that you have enough things to juggle already.”

I thought about snapping at her but . . . she had a point. Bob was a resource far too powerful to be allowed to fall into the hands of anyone who wouldn’t use him responsibly. And I’d been doing the Winter Knight gig full speed for about twelve hours, and I’d already had some disturbing realizations about myself. Twelve hours.

What would I be like after twelve days? Twelve months? What if Karrin was right, and Mab got to me slow? Or worse: What if I was just human? She was right about that, too. Power corrupts—and the people being corrupted never seem to be aware that it’s happening. I’d just told Butters that I wasn’t magically bulletproof. What kind of arrogant ass would I be if I assumed I was morally infallible? That I would be wise and smart and savvy enough to avoid the pitfalls of power, traps that had turned better people than me into something horrible?

I didn’t want her to be right. I didn’t like the idea at all.

But denial is for children. I had to be a grown-up.

“Okay,” I said, my throat tight. “Bob’s in that satchel out in the living room. Give him back to Butters.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I found where you left the swords.”

She meant the two Swords of the Cross, two of three holy blades meant to fill the hands of the righteous in the battle against true evil. I’d wound up babysitting them, being their custodian. Mostly they’d sat around in my place gathering dust. “Yeah?” I said.

“I know how powerful they are,” she said. “And I know how vulnerable they are in the wrong hands. I’m not telling you where they are. I’m not giving them back to you. I’m not negotiating.”

I exhaled slowly. A slow, hard anger rolled into a knot in my guts. "Those . . . were my responsibility," I said.

"They were," she said. There was something absolutely rigid in her blue eyes. "Not anymore."

The room suddenly felt too hot. "Suppose I disagree."

"Suppose you do," she said. "What would you do if you were in my position?"

I don't remember moving. I just remember slamming the heel of my hand into the door six inches from the side of Karrin's head. It sounded like a gunshot, and left me standing over her, breathing harder, and the difference in our sizes was damned near comical. If I wanted to, I could wrap my fingers almost all the way around her throat. Her neck would break if I squeezed.

She didn't flinch. She didn't move. She looked up at me and waited.

It hit me, what I was thinking, what my instincts were screaming at me to do, and I suddenly sagged, bowing my head. My breath came out in uneven jerks. I closed my eyes, tried to get it under control.

And then she touched me.

She rested her hand lightly on my battered forearm. Moving carefully, as if I were made of glass, her fingers slid down my arm to my hand. She took it gently and lowered it, not trying to force anything. Then she took my right hand in her left. We stood that way for a moment, our hands clasped, our heads bowed. She seemed to understand what I was going through. She didn't push me. She just held my hands and waited until my breathing had steadied again.

"Harry," she said quietly then. "Do you want my trust?"

I nodded tightly, not trusting myself to speak.

"Then you're going to have to give me some. I'm on your side. I'm trying to help you. Let it go."

I shuddered.

"Okay," I said.

Her hands felt small and warm in mine.

"I . . . we've been friends a long time," I said. "Since that troll on the bridge."

"Yes."

My eyes blurred up, stupid things, and I closed them. "I know I've screwed up," I said. "I'm going to have to live with that. But I don't want to

lose you.”

In answer, Murphy lifted my right hand and pressed it against her cheek. I didn’t open my eyes. I couldn’t hear it in her voice or her breathing, but I felt a slight dampness touch my hand.

“I don’t want to lose you, either,” she said. “That scares me.”

I didn’t trust myself to speak for a long time.

She lowered my hands slowly, and very gently let me go. Then she turned to the door.

“Karrin,” I said. “What if you’re right? What if I change? I mean . . . go really bad.”

She looked back enough for me to see her profile, and a quiet, sad smile.

“I work with a lot of monsters these days.”

Chapter

Twenty- eight

I picked up another jacket hanging in the closet, an old surplus military garment with an eighties-style camouflage pattern—not because I thought I would get cold as much as because I figured maybe the extra pockets would be handy if I found anything for which they would be needed. I didn’t have any money or ID. I didn’t have a credit card. Hell, I didn’t have a *business* card.

What would it say? “Harry Dresden, Winter Knight, Targets Slain, No Barbecues, Waterslides, or Fireworks Displays.”

I could joke around with myself all I wanted, but I would be doing it only because I didn’t want to face a larger question, a really hard one: How

the hell did I put my life back together?

Assuming I could do it at all.

Fortunately, I had dire evil to fight at the moment, which meant that I could think about the life thing later. Thank God for imminent doomsday. I'd hate to have to face up to the *really* tough stuff so soon after getting back into the game.

I heard the front door of the apartment open and close, and some quiet talk. I came out of the bedroom to find that Molly had returned. Toot-toot was riding along on one of her shoulders, hanging on to the top rim of her ear to keep his balance. He looked none the worse for wear.

"Harry," Molly said, smiling. "You look better. How do you feel?"

"I'll do," I said. "Major General, I see you're back on your feet. The last time I saw you, I figured you'd be down for weeks."

Toot stiffened to attention and threw me a salute. "No, my lord! The Little Folk don't have enough time to waste weeks and weeks healing like you big people."

That probably shouldn't have surprised me. I'd seen Toot literally eat half his weight in pizza. And his wings were powerful enough to lift him off the ground into flight. Anything that can put food away that quickly and produce such a prodigious amount of physical power relative to its size must have a ridiculously high-burning metabolism. And with the day I'd been having, it did my heart good to see him upright again.

"Where are we on our scouts?" I asked Molly.

"They're in a food coma," she said. "I ordered twenty pizzas. Must have been five hundred of them in the parking lot. They'll be ready to go as soon as you tell me where you want them to look."

"I need a map," I said.

Molly reached into her back pocket and produced a folded map. "Way ahead of you, boss."

"Soon as they're done, lay it out on the table," I said.

"Got it."

"Major General, I'm glad you're here," I said. "I need you to stay close."

Toot saluted again, and his wings blurred into motion, lifting him up off Molly's shoulder. "Yes, my lord! What is the mission?"

"To prevent a prisoner from attempting escape," I said. "I captured Captain Hook."

“Sort of,” Karrin chimed in, her voice amused. She’d returned to her seat by the fireplace.

I gave her a look. “We have him; he’s captured; that’s the main thing.”

Toot put his hand on his sword. “Shall I dispatch him for you, my lord?” he asked eagerly. “Because I totally can.”

“If it needs to be done,” I said soberly, “I’ll make sure it’s your hand that does it. But we’ll give him a chance to talk first.”

“You are a man of mercy and grace, my lord,” Toot-toot said, clearly disappointed.

“You bet your ass,” I said. “Make sure you’re in a good spot to stop our guest from leaving.”

“Aye!” Toot said, saluting, and darted across the apartment.

Molly shook her head. “You’re always so careful to make him feel involved.”

“He is involved,” I said, and started back toward Butters’s makeshift examination table.

“Of course it hurts,” Thomas was saying. Butters was stitching up a small, puckered hole in his lower abdomen. “But not as much as it did before you got the bullet out.”

“And you’re *sure* you can handle care this crude?” Butters asked. “Because if you were a regular human being, I could pretty much guarantee you that this thing would go septic in a couple of days and kill you.”

“Microorganisms aren’t a problem to my kind,” Thomas said. “As long as I don’t bleed out, I’ll be fine.”

My brother’s tone was calm, but the color of his eyes had changed, growing lighter, a shade of fine grey with almost no blue at all in it. A vampire of the White Court had superhuman strength and speed and resilience, but not an infinite supply. Thomas’s eyes changed as his personal demon, his Hunger, gained more influence over his actions. At some point, he would need to feed to replenish himself.

“You about done?” I asked him. “I need the table.”

“What *is* it with you people?” Butters grouched. “For God’s sake, these are real injuries here.”

“There will be more of them than a thousand reluctant physicians could patch up if we don’t get moving,” I said. “Today’s serious business, man.”

“How serious?”

“Can’t think when it’s been grimmer,” I said. “Freaking waste-of-space vampires, lying around on tables you need to use.”

“Useless wizards,” Thomas said, “jumping on enemy guns and accidentally shooting their allies with them.”

“Oh,” I said. “That was when I jumped Ace?”

He snorted. “Yeah.”

I winced. “Ah. Sorry about that.”

“One of these days, Dresden,” Thomas drawled, “pow, right in the kisser.”

“Talk is cheap,” I said. “Table, table, table.”

Butters finished patching Thomas up, wrapping a long strip of gauze bandage around his middle. Thomas leaned back on his elbows as the doctor worked. The pose made his muscles stand out sharply beneath pale skin—but then, most poses seemed to do that with Thomas. His pale eyes lingered on Molly for a long moment, and my apprentice abruptly turned away with spots of color high up in her cheeks.

“I, uh,” Molly said. “Wow.”

“Thomas,” I said.

“Sorry,” he said. He didn’t sound sincere. He got up off the table with lazy grace. “Say, Harry, do you have any more shirts back there? I bled, nobly and sacrificially, all over mine.”

“They’re Molly’s,” I said.

He looked at my apprentice. “Oh? What do I have to do to get one?”

“Go ahead,” Molly said. Her voice was not quite a squeak. “Take one.”

“Appreciate it,” Thomas said, and sauntered into the spare bedroom.

Murphy watched him walk by, openly, then gave me a rather challenging look. “What?” she asked. “He’s pretty.”

“I heard that,” Thomas said from the other room.

“Map,” I said, and Molly hurried over to the table. Butters got his stuff off of it in rapid order. He’d evidently pulled the slug out of Thomas’s guts without making a horrible bloody mess of things. The bullet had to have been close to the surface. Ace’s gun must have been fairly lightweight, a .25 or a .22. Maybe he’d been using cheap ammo and the round had been short on powder. Or maybe Thomas’s super-abs had stopped the bullet before it could sink in.

After the table was clean, Molly spread the map out on it. It was a map of Lake Michigan and the shores around it, including Chicago and

Milwaukee and on up to Green Bay. Molly passed me a pen, and I leaned over and started making marks on the map with my swollen fingers. It hurt but I ignored it. Karrin got up and came over to watch. Thomas joined us a moment later, freshly attired in a plain white T-shirt, which looked like it had been made to fit him. He's a jerk like that.

"What I'm doing here," I said, "is marking out all the nodes I remember."

"Nodes?" Butters asked.

My clumsy fingers made it a little hard to put the marks exactly where I wanted them. "The meeting points of one or more ley lines," I said. "I got to know all about them a few years ago."

"Those are like magical power cables, right?" Karrin asked.

"More or less," I said. "Sources of power that you can draw on to make major magic. And there are a *lot* of them in the Great Lakes region. I'm drawing from memory, but I'm pretty sure these are right."

"They are," Molly confirmed quietly. "Auntie Lea taught them to me a few months ago."

I looked up at her, eyed my battered fingers, and said, "Then why am I doing this?"

Molly rolled her eyes and took the pen. She started marking nodes rapidly and precisely on the map, including the Well on Demonreach (though the island didn't appear on the map).

"Whoever is going to attempt the spell on Demonreach has to do it from somewhere near the shore of the lake," I said. "They're almost certainly going to be at one of these nodes—the closer to the edge of the lake, the better." I pointed out several nodes near the shore. "So we need to send the guard out to check these six locations near the edge of the lake first. After that, they go after the next nearest and so on."

"Some of those are a good way off," Karrin noted. "How fast can these little guys move?"

"Fast," I said. "Faster than anyone gives them credit. They can fly and they can take shortcuts through the Nevernever. They can get to the sites and back before sundown."

Sundown. Which was when the big, bad immortals would come out to play.

"Any questions so far?" I asked, looking at Murphy.

She jerked her chin toward my brother and said, “Thomas filled me in.”

“Good,” I said. “Exposition gets repetitive fast. A spell like this takes time to set up, and they won’t really be able to hide it if we can get eyes on the site. Once we know which of the sites shows signs of use, we can get to it and thwart whatever lunatic is using it.”

“Do we know who it is yet?” Murphy asked.

“Answer unclear,” I said.

“It’s got to be those Outsiders, right?” Thomas asked.

“Stands to reason. But the real question is, who is helping *them*?”

I got a bunch of looks at that.

“Outsiders can’t just show up in our reality,” I said. “That’s why they’re called Outsiders in the first place. Someone has to open the door and let them in.” I took a deep breath. “Which brings me to the next twist. I talked to Lily and Maeve, and they tell me that Mab is the one planning to tinker with the island.”

Silence followed that.

“That’s . . . a lie, right?” Butters asked.

“They can’t lie,” I said. “They physically can’t. And, yes, I got them to speak directly about it. There’s no confusion of signals, no room for obfuscation.”

Thomas whistled quietly.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Uh,” Molly said. “We’re up against Mab? Your boss?”

“Not necessarily,” I said. “Lily and Maeve may not be lying but they could still be wrong. Lily has never been a cerebral titan. And Maeve is . . . maybe ‘insane’ is the only word that really describes it, but she’s definitely firing on an odd number of cylinders. It’s possible that they’ve been deceived.”

“Or,” Thomas said, “maybe they haven’t.”

“Or maybe they haven’t,” I said, nodding.

“What would that mean?” Molly asked.

“It would mean,” Karrin said quietly, “that Mab sent Harry to kill Maeve because either she wanted Maeve out of the way or she wanted Harry out of the way. Which is good, because it means that she’s worried that there’s someone who could stop her.”

“Right,” I said. “Or maybe . . .” I frowned, studying a new thought.

“What?” Thomas asked.

I looked slowly around the room. If Mab had been taken by the contagion, which really needed a better name, that certainly meant that Lea had been taken as well—and Lea had been tutoring Molly. If it had spread into the White Court, my brother could have been exposed. Murphy was maybe the most vulnerable—she was isolated, and her behavior had changed radically over the past couple of years. Hell, Butters was the person in the room least likely to have been exposed or turned or whatever—which made him the most ideal candidate for being turned.

Paranoia—because why should the conspiracy theorists get to have all the fun?

I just couldn’t see any of these people turning on me, no matter the influence. But if you could see treachery coming all that easily, Julius Caesar might have lived to a ripe old age. I’d always been slightly inclined to the paranoid. I had a sinking feeling I was going to start developing my latent potential.

I picked my words very carefully.

“Over the past several years,” I said, “there have been several conflicts between two different interests. Several times, events have been driven by internal conflicts within one or both of those interests.”

“Like what?” Butters asked.

“Dual interests inside the Red Court, for one,” I said. “One of them trying to prevent conflict with the White Council, one of them trying to stir it up. Multiple Houses of the White Court rising up to vie for control of it. The Winter and Summer Courts posturing and interfering with each other when Winter’s territory was violated by the Red Court.” I didn’t want to get any more specific than that. “Do you guys see what I’m getting at here?”

“Oh!” Butters said. “It’s a phantom menace!”

“Ah!” Molly said.

Thomas grunted.

Karrin glanced around at all of us and then said, “Translate that from nerd to English, please.”

“Someone is out there,” I said. “Someone who has been manipulating events. Playing puppet master, stirring the pot, stacking the deck—”

“Mixing metaphors?” Thomas suggested.

“Fuck off. I’m just saying that this situation has the same shape as the others. Mab and Maeve at each other’s throats, with Summer standing by

ready to get involved, and Outsiders starting to throw their weight around.”

“The Black Council,” Molly whispered.

“Exactly,” I said, which it wasn’t. Up until earlier today, I had known someone was covertly causing the world a lot of grief—and due to their connections with some grim events within the White Council I had assumed it was a group of wizards, which was both naturally arrogant and extremely nearsighted of me. But what if I’d been wrong? What if the Black Council was just one more offshoot of one enormous, intangible enemy? If what I’d gotten from Lily was accurate, the problem was a hell of a lot bigger than I had realized.

And I did not want that problem to know that I had spotted it.

“The Black Council,” I said. “A group of practitioners using dark magic to influence various events around the world. They’re powerful, they’re bad news, and if I’m right, they’re here. If they’re here, I figure it’s a good bet that Sharkface and his chums—”

“Shark,” Butters said. “Chums. Funny.”

“Thank you for noticing,” I said, and continued the sentence. “—are working for the Black Council.”

“The theoretical Black Council,” Karrin said.

“They’re out there, definitely,” I said.

Karrin smiled faintly. “If you say so, Mulder.”

“I’m going to ignore that. The only question is whether or not they’re here now.”

Molly nodded seriously. “If they are? How do we find them?”

“We don’t,” I said. “There isn’t enough time to go sniffing around methodically. We know someone’s going to mess with the island. It doesn’t really matter who’s pressing the button that sets off the bomb. We just have to keep it from getting pressed. The Little Folk find us that ritual site, and then we go wreck it.”

“Um,” Butters said. “Not that I lack confidence in you guys, but shouldn’t we be calling in the cavalry? I mean, doesn’t that make more sense?”

“We *are* the cavalry,” I said in a flat tone. “The White Council won’t help. Even if I knew the current protocols to contact them, it would take them days to verify that I am in fact alive and still me, and we only have hours. Besides, Molly’s on their most-wanted list.”

I didn't add in the third reason not to contact the Council—when they found out about my relationship with Mab, the monarch of a sovereign and occasionally hostile supernatural nation, they would almost certainly panic and assume that I was a massive security risk. Which would, for a variety of reasons and to a variety of degrees, be an accurate assumption. And now that I thought about it, given how my, ah, induction had been psychically broadcast to all of Faerie, there was no chance whatsoever that the Council didn't know. Knowing stuff is what they do.

Butters frowned. "The Paranetters?"

"No," I said. "The last thing we need is a small army of newbies floundering around and stumbling into us. That's asking for trouble in the short term, the long term, and every other term there might be. We can go to them for information only. We aren't dragging them in."

The little ME took off his glasses and cleaned them absently with the hem of his scrubs. "What about Lara's team? Or the Einherjaren?"

Thomas shrugged. "I could probably convince Lara to send the team somewhere."

"Ditto," Karrin said, "only with Vikings."

"Good," I said. "We might need more bodies, and we might need to cover multiple sites. Can you two get that lined up when we break?"

They nodded.

"Molly," I said. "You'll take the map up to our little scouts and tell them where to look and what to look for. Keep it simple and promise an entire pizza to whoever finds what we're after."

My apprentice grinned. "Drive their performance with competition, eh?"

"Millions of abusively obsessed sports parents can't be wrong," I said. "Butters, you'll go to the Paranetters and ask if anyone's seen or heard anything unusual anywhere even close to Lake Michigan. No one investigates anything. They just report. Get me all the information you can about any odd activity in the past week. We need to collect data as quickly as possible."

"Right," Butters said. "I've got some now, if you want."

I blinked. I mean, I knew the Internet was the fast way to spread information, but . . . "Seriously?"

"Well," Butters hedged. "Sort of. One of our guys is a little, um, imaginative."

“You mean paranoid?”

“Yes,” Butters said. “He’s got this Internet lair in his mother’s basement. Keeps track of all kinds of things. Calls it observing the supernatural through statistics. Sends me a regional status update every day, and my spam blockers just cannot keep him out.”

“Hngh,” I said, as if I knew what a spam blocker was. “What’s he got to say about today?”

“That boat rentals this morning were four hundred percent higher today than the median for this time of year, and dark forces are bound to be at work.”

“Boat rentals,” I muttered.

“He’s a little weird, Harry,” Butters said. “I mean, he has a little head-shot photo tree of the people responsible for the Cubs’ billy goat curse. That kind of odd. He blows the curve.”

“Tell him to take the tree down. The billy goat curse was a lone gunman,” I said. “But paranoid doesn’t necessarily equal wrong. Boats . . .”

I bowed my head and closed my eyes for a moment, thinking, but if Butter’s paranoid basement freak was right, then the puzzle piece he’d handed me was woefully unhelpful. I needed more pieces. “Okay,” I said. “Right. Get more data.” I looked up, jerked my head at Thomas, and headed for the kitchen. “Let’s go talk to our guest about his boss.”

* * *

I leaned down to look into the oven through the glass door. There was no light inside, but I could make out Captain Hook’s armored form huddled disconsolately on a coated cookie sheet. I knocked on the glass, and Captain Hook’s helmet turned toward me.

“I want to talk to you,” I said. “You’re my prisoner. Don’t try to fight me or run away or I’ll have to stop you. I’d rather just have a nice conversation. Do you understand me?”

Hook didn’t give me any indications either way. I took silence as assent.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going to open the door now.” I cracked open the oven door and opened it slowly, doing my best not to loom. Tough to do when you’re the size of a building relative to the person over whom you are standing. “Now just take it easy and we will—”

I'd opened the door maybe six inches when Captain Hook all but vanished in a blur of speed. I swiped an arm at him about a second and a half too late, but I didn't feel too bad about missing, because *Thomas* tried to snatch the little maniac, too, and missed completely.

Hook, who worked for our enemies, and who had been right there in the kitchen the whole time we'd been scheming, shot toward a vent on one wall, crossing the room in the blink of an eye, and none of us could react in time to stop him.

Chapter

Twenty-nine

None of us but the major general.

Toot dropped down from where he'd been crouched atop a bookcase, intercepting Hook's darting black form, and tackled the other little faerie to the floor in the middle of the living room. They landed with a thump on the carpeting, wings still blurring in fits and starts, and tumbled around the floor in irregular bursts and hops, sometimes rolling a few inches, sometimes bounding up and coming down six feet away.

Toot had planned for this fight. He'd tackled Hook into the carpet, where the hooks on his armor would get tangled and bind him, slowing him down. Furthermore, Toot's hands were wrapped in cloth until it looked like he was wearing mittens or boxing gloves, and he managed to seize Hook by

the hooks on the back of his armor. He swung the other little faerie around in a circle and then with a high-pitched shout flung him into the wall.

Captain Hook slammed into the wall, putting gouges in the freshly painted drywall, then staggered back and fell to the ground. Toot bore down with a vengeance, drawing his little sword, and the armored figure held up a mailed fist. “Invocation!” he piped in a high, clear voice. “I am a prisoner! I invoke Winter Law!”

Toot’s sword was already in midswing, but at those last two words he checked himself abruptly, pulling the weapon back. He hovered there over Hook with his feet an inch off the ground, gritting his teeth, but then he buzzed back from Hook and sheathed the sword.

“Uh,” I said. “Toot? What just happened?”

Toot-toot landed on the kitchen counter next to me and stomped around in a circle, clearly furious. “You opened your big fat mouth!” he screamed. After a moment, he added, sullenly, “My lord.”

I frowned at Toot and then at Hook. The enemy sprite just sat there on the floor, making no further effort to escape. “Okay,” I said. “Explain that.”

“You offered to take him prisoner,” Toot said. “By Winter Law, if he accepts your offer he may not attempt escape or offer any further resistance to you for as long as you see to his needs. Now you can’t kill him or beat him up or anything! And I was winning!”

I blinked. “Yeah, okay, fine. So let’s make with the questions already.”

“You can’t!” Toot wailed. “You can’t try to make him betray his previous covenants or terror-gate him or anything!”

I frowned. “Wait. He’s a *guest*?”

“Yes!”

“By Winter Law?” I asked.

“Yes! Sort of.”

“Well,” I said, starting toward Hook. “I never signed on to that treaty. So screw Winter Law—”

And abruptly, as if someone had just slammed a row of staples into my skin, the mantle of the Winter Knight vanished completely. Pain soared back into my body, inflamed tissue crying out, my bruises throbbing, the edemas beneath my skin pounding with a horrible tightness. Fatigue hit me like a truck. The sensations were so intense, the only way I could tell that I had fallen to the floor was by looking.

And my body abruptly went numb and useless from my stomach down.

That scared the hell out of me and confirmed one of my worst fears. When I'd consented to serve Mab, my back had been broken, my spine damaged. Taking up the mantle had covered what would probably have been a crippling and long-term injury. But without it, my body was only mortal. Better than most at recovering over time, but still human. Without the mantle, I wouldn't have legs, bladder or bowel control, or, most important, independence.

I was on the ground like that for a subjective week, but it could have been only a few seconds before Thomas reached my side, with Murphy, Butters, and Molly right behind him. I knew they were there because I could see them, but their voices swam down to me from what seemed like a great distance among the cacophony of raking sensations scouring my nervous system. They lifted me to a sitting position—and then abruptly the pain was gone, and my legs started moving again, jerking in a single, gentle spasm.

The mantle had been restored.

"Okay," I said in a ragged voice. "Uh. Maybe we *won't* screw Winter Law."

"Harry," Thomas said, as if he'd said my name several times already. "What happened?"

"Uh," I said. "I think it's . . . a side effect. Fallout from defying the order of things."

"What?" he asked.

"Faeries," I said. "They're kind of insane, and mischievous, and dangerous as hell, but they all share one trait—they're good to their word. They obey what they recognize as law. Especially Mab."

"You aren't making much sense right now," Thomas said.

"The mantle of power comes from Mab. And now it's in me. But it's still a piece of *her*. If I go violating her own realm's laws, it looks like the mantle isn't going to have my back."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I'd better figure out what the laws are pretty damned quick," I replied. "Help me up."

Thomas hauled me to my feet and I looked at Toot. "You know the Winter Law?"

“Well,” Toot said as if I were an idiot, “of course.”

“Where can I learn it?”

Toot tilted his head. “What?”

“Winter Law,” I said. “Where can I learn it?”

“I don’t understand,” Toot said, tilting his head the other way.

“Oh, for the love of . . .” I pinched the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. “Toot. Can you read?”

“Sure!” Toot said. “I can read ‘pizza’ *and* ‘exit’ *and* ‘chocolate’!”

“All three, huh?”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re a scholar and a gentleman,” I said. “But where did you learn Winter Law?”

Toot shook his head as if mystified. “You don’t *learn* it, Harry. You just . . . *know* it. Everyone knows it.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Maybe you’re too big,” Toot said. “Or too loud. Or, you know—too human.”

I grunted. Then I eyed Hook, who had continued to sit in the same spot during the entire conversation. “So I’ve gone and made him my guest, eh?”

“Well. More like your vassal.”

I frowned. “Uh? What?”

“That’s what surrender is, duh,” Toot said. “His life is yours to do with as you please. And as long as you don’t starve him or make him an oathbreaker, you can tell him to do whatever you want. And if his liege wants him back, he has to pay you for him.”

“Ah. Medieval-style ransom.”

Toot looked confused. “He did run some, but I stopped him, my lord. Like, just now. In front of you. Right over there.”

There were several conspicuous sounds behind me, the loudest from my apprentice, and I turned to eye everyone else. They were all either covering smiles or holding them back—poorly. “Hey, peanut gallery,” I said. “This isn’t as easy as I’m making it look.”

“You’re doing fine,” Karrin said, her eyes twinkling.

I sighed.

“Come on, Toot,” I said, and walked over to Hook.

The little faerie sat there, apparently ignoring me, which took considerable nerve. If I fell or stepped on him, it would be like a tree

falling on a lumberjack. If I were trying to hurt him, physically, I could twist him up like Stretch Armstrong.

On the other hand, Hook was a faerie. It probably never even occurred to him that I might violate Mab's laws.

"The prisoner will stand and face the Za Lord!" Toot shrilled.

Hook obediently got up and turned to face me.

"Identify yourself, please," I said. "I don't want your Name. Just something to call you."

"By some I am called Lacuna," he replied.

"Suits me, Lacuna," I said. "Remove the helmet, please. I want to see who I'm supporting."

Lacuna reached up and removed the face-shrouding helmet.

She was gorgeous.

Fine black hair bound into a braid at least a foot long spilled down out of the helmet when she did. Her skin was paper white, her huge eyes black all the way through. There were small markings or tattoos of some kind in deep purple ink on her skin, but they shifted slightly as I watched, some fading from sight, others appearing. Her features were long and very lean. She had a straight razor's elegant, dangerous beauty.

Toot's jaw just about dropped off of his head. "Wow!"

"Hmmm," Karrin said. "That's the one who beat you up last night, is it?"

"And tripped him this morning," Thomas reminded her.

"And tripped me this morning," I growled. I turned back to Lacuna and studied her for a moment. She looked back at me without blinking. Actually, she didn't move at all—except for her braid, which drifted upward like cobwebs over a heating vent.

"Huh," I said. "Was not expecting that."

Lacuna stared, her eyes flat.

"I won't ask you to break your word," I told her. "And I will treat you with respect and provide for your needs in exchange for your service. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Lacuna said.

"Wow!" said Toot.

"Without breaking any oath, I would like to know," I said, "whatever you can tell me about the person you were serving until you were taken prisoner."

She stared.

I caught my mistake and rolled my eyes. “Let me rephrase that. Tell me whatever you can about the person you were serving until you were taken prisoner without breaking any word you’ve given him.”

Lacuna nodded at that and frowned pensively. Then she looked up and said in a serious, confidential tone, “He does not seem to like you very much.”

I took a slow, deep breath. There were more titters behind me.

“I noticed that, too,” I said. “Tell me what you know about what’s happening tonight.”

“Children,” she said in a sepulchral voice, and her little face twisted up with unmistakable fury. “And candy. Lots and lots of candy.”

“Wow!” Toot said. He zipped away in a flutter of wings.

“Without breaking your word, tell me everything else you know about Ace,” I said.

“He owes me,” Lacuna replied grimly, “for services rendered.”

I sighed. “I don’t suppose you’d like to volunteer to offer me some more useful information?”

The armored faerie stared at me without blinking. It was a little creepy.

“Nah, I didn’t think so,” I said. “Are you hungry?”

She seemed to consider that for a moment, then said, “Yes.”

“Do you want some pizza?”

Lacuna’s face twisted up in disgust. “Ugh. No.”

My eyebrows went up. That was a grade-A first. The Little Folk would quite literally go to war over pizza. They liked it that much. “Uh. What would you like to eat, then?”

“Celery,” she replied promptly. “Cheese. Green tea. But mostly celery.”

“How random,” I said. I looked over my shoulder. “Molly?”

“I’ve got those,” she said, and went to the kitchen.

“Okay, Lacuna,” I said. “We’ve got a bunch of business to take care of. I want you to eat, get some rest, and make yourself comfortable. You aren’t to leave this apartment. Understood?”

Lacuna nodded somberly. “Yes.” Her wings blurred and she darted across the apartment to the kitchen, where Molly was preparing a plate with Lacuna-chow on it.

“Good. I’ll figure out what to do with you later.” I rubbed the back of my neck and went back over to the others. “Well. That was a little frustrating.”

“Why’d you take her prisoner then?” Thomas asked.

I glowered at him. “Don’t you have a squad of mercenaries to round up? Or a bridge to jump off?”

“I guess so.”

“Okay, everybody,” I said. “You’ve got your assignments. Let’s get them done. Molly, you’ve got the apartment and the phone, so after you send the search parties, you’re coordinating. Anyone learns something, call Molly with it. Otherwise, meet back here by five.”

There was a round of nods and agreements, and Butters, Thomas, and Karrin headed out into the city.

Once they were gone, Molly asked, “Why’d you ditch them like that?”

I lifted my eyebrows again. The grasshopper just kept getting cleverer. “I wasn’t ditching them,” I said.

Molly arched an eyebrow. “You weren’t?”

“Not entirely,” I said. “That stuff needs doing, too.”

“While you go somewhere dangerous all by yourself. Am I right?”

I didn’t answer her right away, and she finished making Lacuna’s meal. She put the plate on the counter and the serious little faerie fell upon it like a ravening wolf.

“Something like that,” I said. “Don’t you have a job to do, too?”

Molly eyed me. Then she picked up the map on the table, folded it, and walked toward the door. “I’m not going to fight you about it. I just wanted you to know that I knew.”

Just then, Toot buzzed back into the apartment from somewhere. He zipped in frantic, dizzying circles, starting at the point he’d last seen Lacuna, until his spiral search pattern took him to the kitchen. Then he swooped down to Lacuna, landing neatly on the counter.

I peered at the two little faeries. Toot held out to Lacuna a wrapped watermelon Jolly Rancher, as if he were offering frankincense and myrrh to the Christ child. “Hi!” he said brightly. “I’m Major General Toot-toot!”

Lacuna looked up from her food and saw Toot’s gift. Her eyes narrowed.

And then she sucker punched Toot-toot right in the face.

My little bodyguard flew back a couple of feet and landed on his ass. Both of his hands went up to his nose, and he blinked in startled bewilderment.

Toot had dropped the Jolly Rancher. Lacuna calmly kicked it into the disposal drain of the kitchen sink. Then she turned her back on Toot, ignoring him completely, and went back to eating her meal.

Toot's eyes were even wider as he stared at Lacuna.

"Wow!" he said.

Chapter

Thirty

The Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary has a second name—the Magic Hedge. There are about fifteen acres of trees, brush, and winding trails. It's been an established bird sanctuary for decades, and is a major port of call for birds migrating south for the winter. If you read some flyers about the place, they'll tell you all about how the Magic Hedge is chock-full to bursting with the magic of birds and nature.

But the folks who live here also call it the Magic Hedge because it's a fairly well-known hangout for men who are hoping to hook up with other men. The ratio of cruisers to bird-watchers (and don't think I didn't consider an ironic joke about binoculars and watching birds) varies depending on the time of the year. When there are tons of birds and bird

lovers around, that means lots of people with binoculars and cameras. That kind of thing really cuts down on the romantic mystique.

The place sticks out like a hook, almost totally enclosing Montrose Harbor, which is mostly a place for boats that are a lot less grubby than the *Water Beetle*. There's a yacht club in there, and a fairly busy beach nearby. So occasionally non-bird-watching, noncruising people wander through the Magic Hedge, too.

People like me.

At the end of October, most of the migrating flocks had already gone by, but the Hedge was still a rendezvous for leftover flocks of sparrows, which would gather together over a few days, then merge and leave in an enormous cloud. I spotted two dozen species on my walk in, without binoculars. I knew most of them, if I had bothered to dig their names out of my memories. I didn't. Ebenezer, when he taught me, had been very serious about making sure I learned the proper names of things.

The park was mostly empty today, under the cold grey drizzling sky. On the way in to where I wanted to go, I passed a man dressed all in black, with a black hat and black sunglasses—sunglasses, for crying out loud—who tracked me with his needlessly cool gaze as I went by.

“Not here for that,” I said. “Making a long-distance call. Be gone in half an hour. One way or another.”

He didn't say anything, and as I passed he faded back into the brush. There's a community here. Spotters, runners. The police run stings sometimes. Seems like an awful lot of fuss and trouble for everyone involved, to me, especially in the modern world.

Bob wasn't in my shoulder bag anymore, but I'd replaced him with what I'd need. The lake nearby and the falling rain would do for water. Earth was there in plenty, and I used a garden spade to dig a small pit. The fitful cold winds from the northwest would do for air, and once I got the few pounds of kindling I'd brought piled into a small, hollow pyramid, it didn't take me long to get a tiny fire going, even in the rain.

I waited until it had begun to blaze up, building it to make it burn hotter and faster. I didn't want to cook on it. A few minutes were all I needed. I stayed low and moved as little as possible. The song from hundreds of gathered sparrows was enthusiastic, pervasive.

Once the fire was burning, I used the trowel to cut a circle into the soft earth around me. I touched it with my finger and invested a minor effort of

will, and the magic of the circle snapped up around me. It was a mystic barrier, not a physical one, something that would contain and focus magical forces, and generally make it easier to do what I was about to do. It couldn't be seen or touched but it was very, very real.

A lot of important things are like that.

I gathered my will, sinking into pure focus. People think wizards use magic words, for some reason. There aren't any magic words, really. Even the ones we use in our spells are just symbols, a way to insulate our minds from the energies coursing through them. Words have a power every bit as terrible and beautiful as magic, and they don't need a special effects budget to do it, either.

What drives magic is, at the end of the day, sheer will. Emotions can help reinforce it, but when you draw on your emotions to fuel magic, even that is simply a different expression of will, a different flavor of your desire to make something happen. Some things you do as a wizard require you to set any emotion you have aside. They're good in a crisis, but in a methodical, deliberate effort they can wreak havoc with your intentions. So I blocked out all my confusion, doubt, and uncertainty, along with my perfectly intelligent terror, until all that remained was my rational self and my need to reach a single goal.

Only then did I lift my head and speak, infusing every word with the power of my need, casting the summoning forth into the universe. The power made my voice sound strange—louder, deeper, richer.

“Lady of Light and Life, hear me. Thou who art Queen of the Ever-Green, Lady of Flowers, hear me. Dire portents are afoot. Hear my voice. Hear my need. I am Harry Dresden, Winter Knight, and I needs must speak with thee.” I lifted my joined voice and will and thundered, “Titania, Titania, Titania! I summon thee!”

The last syllable rebounded from every surface in sight with booming echoes. It panicked the sparrows. They flew up in a cloud of thousands of wings and little bodies, gathering in a swarm that raced wildly in circles around the meadow.

“Come on,” I breathed to myself. “Come on already.” I stood in silence for a long, long minute, and I was starting to think that nothing was going to happen.

And then I saw the clouds begin to rotate, and I knew exactly what it meant.

I've lived in the Midwest for most of my life. Tornadoes are a fact of life out here, part of the background. People think they're scary, and they are, but they're very survivable, provided you follow some fairly simple guidelines: Warn people early, and when you hear the warning, head for the safest space you can reach quickly. That's usually a basement or root cellar. Sometimes it's beneath a staircase. Sometimes it's in an interior bathroom. Sometimes the best you can hope for is the deepest ditch you can find.

But basically it all amounts to "run and hide."

Years of life in the Midwest screamed at me to do exactly that. My heart started speeding up and my mouth went dry, while the clouds overhead—and when I say "overhead" I mean *directly* over *my* head—turned faster and faster.

Birds exploded into the sky from all over the Magic Hedge, joining the sparrows in their wild circling. The air suddenly became close, and the drizzling rain cut off as if a valve had been closed. Lightning with no thunder flickered weirdly through the clouds, which turned every shade of white and blue and sea green as the water vapor separated the light into the visible spectrum.

Then I felt it—a warmth like that I'd felt in Lily, only a hundred times hotter and brighter and more intense. The clouds started to lower, and the frantic birds tightened their circle, until they were a wall of shining feathers and glittering eyes around the meadow. Then there was a flash of light, a toll of thunder that sounded weirdly musical, like the after-tone of some vast gong, and a shower of earth and glowing bits of charred autumn grass flew into the air. I threw up an arm to shield my eyes—but I kept my feet planted.

When the dirt settled and the dust and ash cleared, the Lady of Light and Life and Monarch of the Summer Court stood about fifteen feet away from me.

She was breathtaking. I don't mean beautiful, because she was that, obviously. But it was the kind of beauty that had so much scope, so much depth, so much power that it made me feel dwindling, insignificant, and very, very temporary. You feel it the first time you see the mountains, the first time you see the sea, the first time you see the vast, bleak majesty of the Grand Canyon—and every single time you look at Titania, the Summer Queen.

I'd say that the details of her appearance were unimportant, except that they weren't—particularly for me.

Titania was dressed for a fight.

She wore a gown of mail made from some kind of silvery metal, the links so fine that at first it looked like woven cloth. It covered her like a second skin, all the way to the top of her throat. Over that she wore a long robe of silk that shifted in colors from the yellow of sunlight to the green of pine needles in a slow strobelike pattern. Her silver-white hair had been braided into a tail and then fixed in coils at the base of her neck. Upon her head was a crown of what looked like twisted vine with still-living leaves. She carried neither weapon nor shield, but her wide Sidhe eyes stared at me with the absolute certainty of one who knows she is armed well beyond the ability of her enemy to withstand.

Oh, and if I hadn't known better, I would have sworn to you that it was Mab standing there. Seriously. They didn't look like sisters. They looked like clones.

I started off by bowing to her, deeply. I held it for a beat before rising again.

She was a statue for a few seconds. She didn't so much as nod back to me, to any measurable degree, but some microchange in her body language indicated acknowledgment.

"You who slew my daughter," Titania said quietly. "You dare summon *me*?"

The last word slashed through the air, its fury palpable. It struck the circle surrounding me and broke into a shower of gold and green sparks that vanished almost instantly.

I've had some experience with the Queens of Faerie. When they get angry and start talking to you, you freaking *hear* them. And then if you survive it, you hope you can make it to the emergency room in time. I just hadn't seen any scenario in which my talking to Titania wouldn't make her furious—so I'd drawn the circle as a precaution.

Sometimes I use my brain.

"Crazy, right?" I said. "But I needed to speak to you, O Queen."

Her eyes narrowed. The curtain-cloud of birds continued their circling around us, though they had fallen eerily silent. The clouds overhead continued to spin. We were as isolated from the rest of the world as if we stood in a private garden. "Speak, then."

I thought about my words and picked them carefully. “There are events in motion. Very large events, with serious ramifications for basically the whole world. I mean, I thought the war between the White Council and the Red Court was a big deal—but now it looks to me like it was more or less an opening act for the real band.”

Her eyes narrowed. She nodded her head a fraction of an inch.

“Something is going to happen tonight,” I said. “The Well will come under attack. You know what could happen if it is opened. A lot of people would get hurt in the short term. And in the long term . . . well, I’m not sure I know what would happen, but I’m almost certain it wouldn’t be good.”

Titania tilted her head slightly to one side. It reminded me of an eagle considering its prey and deciding whether or not it was worth it to swoop down on it out of nowhere.

“I’m trying to make sure that doesn’t happen,” I said. “And because of the nature of this . . . problem . . . I can’t trust any of the information I get out of the people I’m working for.”

“Ah,” she said. “You wish me to pass judgment upon my sister.”

“I need someone with knowledge of Mab,” I said. “Someone who knows the events are in motion. Who would know if she had . . . uh. . . . Changed.”

“And what makes you think that I would have the knowledge you seek?”

“Because I Saw you preparing the battlefield at the stone table, years ago. You’re Mab’s equal. I Saw your power. You don’t get power like that without knowledge.”

“That is true.”

“I need to know,” I said. “Is Mab sane? Is she . . . still Mab?”

Titania did a statue impersonation for a long moment. Then she turned her head to one side and stared out toward the lake. “I do not know.” She gave me an oblique look. “I have not exchanged words with my sister since before Hastings.”

The next-best thing to a millennium’s worth of estrangement. Dysfunction on an epic scale. This was exactly the kind of family tension into which sane people do not inject themselves.

“I’m going to inject myself into your family business,” I said. “Because I’m scared to death of what could happen if I don’t, and because it needs to be done. I understand that you’re Mab’s enemy. I understand that

if she says black, you say white, and that's the way it is. But we're all in a southbound handbasket together here. And I need your help."

Titania tilted her head the other way and took a step toward me. I almost flinched back out of the circle. I didn't want to do that. I didn't think it would keep me safe for long if she decided she wanted to come at me, but as long as it was there, it meant that she would have to spend at least a little time bringing it down—time in which I could attack her. It also meant that if I took the first swing, I'd be sacrificing the circle's protection, and my only current advantage. She looked down at my feet and then back up at me expectantly.

"Uh," I said. "Will you please help me?"

Something flickered over her face when I said that, an emotion that I couldn't place. Maybe it wasn't a human one. She turned abruptly away and seemed to consider her surroundings for the first time. "We shall see," she said. She turned back to me, her eyes intent. "Why did you come here for the summoning?"

"It's a bird sanctuary," I said. "A natural place, intended to preserve life and beauty. And birds seem kind of Summery to me. Following summer to the south over the winter and then returning. I thought that it might be close to some of Summer's lands in Faerie. That you'd have an easier time hearing me."

She turned her head slowly, as if listening. There was no sound but the constant, muffled white noise of thousands of wings beating. "But this place is more than that. It is a location for . . . unapproved liaisons."

I shrugged. "It's just you and me. I figured if you wanted to kill me, you could do it here without hurting anybody else."

Titania nodded, her expression turning thoughtful. "What think you of the men who come here to meet with one another?"

"Uh," I said, feeling somewhat off balance. "What do I think of gay guys?"

"Yes."

"Boink and let boink, more or less."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it doesn't have a lot to do with me," I said. "It's none of my business what they do. I don't go over in their living room and get my freak on with women. They don't come over and do whatever they do with other guys at my house."

“You don’t feel that they are morally wrong to do so?”

“I have no idea if it’s right or wrong,” I said. “To me, it mostly doesn’t matter.”

“And why not?”

“Because even if they are doing something immoral, I’d be an idiot to start criticizing them for it if I wasn’t perfect myself. Smoking is self-destructive. Drinking is self-destructive. Losing your temper and yelling at people is wrong. Lying is wrong. Cheating is wrong. Stealing is wrong. But people do that stuff all the time. Soon as I figure out how to be a perfect human being, then I’m qualified to go lecture other people about how they live their lives.”

“An odd sentiment. Are you not ‘only human’? Will you not always be imperfect?”

“Now you’re catching on,” I said.

“You do not see it as a sin?”

I shrugged. “I think it’s a cruel world. I think it’s hard to find love. I think we should all be happy when someone manages to do it.”

“Love,” Titania said. She had keyed on the word. “Is that what happens here?”

“The guys who come here for anonymous sex?” I sighed. “Not so much. I think that part’s a little sad. I mean, anytime sex becomes something so . . . damned impersonal, it’s a shame. And I don’t think it’s good for them. But it’s not me they’re hurting.”

“Why should that matter?”

I just looked at Titania for a second. Then I said, “Because people should be free. And as long as something they want to do isn’t harming others, they should be free to do it. Obviously.”

“Is it?” Titania asked. “It would not seem to be, judging from the state of the mortal world.”

“Yeah. A lot of people don’t get that,” I said. “They get caught up in right and wrong. Or right and left. But none of that stuff matters if people aren’t *free*.”

Titania studied me intently.

“Why are you asking me about *that*, of all things?” I asked.

“Because it felt appropriate. Because my instincts told me that your answers would tell me something about you that I needed to know.” Titania took a deep breath. “What think you of my sister?”

I debated for a second: polite answer or honest one?

Honest. It's almost always best to go with honest. It means you never have to worry about getting your story straight. "I thought Mab's wrath was pretty bad until I found out what her affection was like."

At that, I think Titania almost smiled. "Oh?"

"She nursed me out of bed by trying to kill me every day for eleven weeks. She scares the hell out of me."

"You do not love her?"

"Not by any definition of the word I've ever heard," I said.

"And why do you serve her?"

"Needed her help," I said. "That was her price. Sure as hell wasn't because I like the decor in Arctis Tor."

Titania nodded. She said, "You are unlike the other monsters she has shaped for herself over the centuries."

"Uh. Thank you?"

She shook her head. "I have done nothing for you, Harry Dresden." She pursed her lips. "In many ways, she and I are alike. In many more ways, we are entirely different. Do you know what my sister believes in?"

"Flashy entrances," I said.

Titania's lips actually twitched. "In reason."

"Reason?"

"Reason. Logic. Calculation. The cold numbers. The supremacy of the mind." Titania's eyes became distant. "It is another place where we differ. I prefer to follow the wisdom of the heart."

"Meaning what?" I asked.

Titania lifted her hand and spoke a single word, and the air rang with power. The ground buckled, ripping my circle apart and flinging me from my feet onto my back.

"Meaning," she said, her voice hot and furious, "that you *murdered* my daughter."

Birds flew shrieking in every direction as if released from a centrifuge. Titania raised a hand, and a bolt of lightning fell from the tornadic sky and blew a smoking crater the size of my head in the ground a yard away.

"You *dare* to come here! To ask for me to interfere in my sister's business! You who gave my Aurora an iron death!"

I tried to get up, only to have Titania grab the front of my jacket and lift me off the ground. With one hand. She held me straight up, over her head, so that her fist was pressed against my chest.

“I could kill you in a thousand ways,” she snarled, her opalescent eyes whirling with colors. “I could scatter your bones to the far corners of the earth. I could feed you to my garden and make you scream the entire while. I could visit torments on you that would make Lloyd Slate’s fate seem kind by comparison. I *want to eat your heart.*”

I hung there over the furious Queen of Summer and knew, knew for certain, that there was not a damned thing I could do to save my own life. I can do things, sure—remarkable things. But Titania had no more to fear from me than a polar bear does a field mouse. My heartbeat became something close to a solid tone, and it was all I could do not to wet my freaking pants.

And then something really unsettling happened.

Tears filled her eyes. They came forth and spilled over her cheeks. Titania seemed to sag. She lowered me to the ground and released me.

“I could do these things. But none of them,” she whispered, “would give me my daughter back. None of them would fill the emptiness within me. It took time, but Elder Gruff’s wise counsel helped me to see that truth.”

Hell’s bells. Elder Gruff had spoken on my behalf? I owed that guy a beer.

“I am not a fool, wizard. I know what she had become. I know what had to be done.” More tears fell, shining like diamonds. “But she was mine. I cannot forget that you took her from me. I cannot forgive you for that. Take your life and leave this place.”

I sounded a little unsteady to my own ears when I spoke. “If the Well is ruptured, your realm stands to lose as much as the mortal one does.”

“The wisdom of my heart tells me to *hate* you, mortal,” Titania said, “whatever my reason might say. I will *not* help you.”

“No? What does your heart tell you is going to happen if those things in the Well are set free? They’re immortals. The fire in the fail-safe might keep them down for a while, but they’ll be back.”

Titania didn’t turn to face me. Her voice was weary. “My heart tells me that all things end.” She paused. “But this thing I will tell a Winter Knight who believes in freedom: You must learn greater discretion. The

power you have come to know and fear has a name. One should know the proper names of things.”

She turned and walked toward me. My body told me to run like hell, but I told it to shut up, that my legs were shaking too hard anyway. Titania leaned up onto her toes and whispered, very close to my ear.

“*Nemesis*,” she breathed. “Speak it carefully—or it may hear you.”

I blinked. “It . . . it *what*?”

With that she turned and began walking away. “Fare thee well, wizard. You say that people should be free. I agree. I will not shackle you with my wisdom. Make your choices. Choose what the world is to be. I care not. There is little light left in it for me, thanks to you.”

A relatively small flock of birds, only a few hundred, blurred by between me and Titania. When they had passed, she was gone.

I stood there, letting my heart rate slow down, along with the spinning clouds. I felt like crap. When I’d killed Aurora, there hadn’t been much in the way of a choice—but I’d still taken someone’s little girl away from her forever. I felt like a man in a rowboat with only one oar. No matter how hard I worked, I wasn’t really getting anywhere.

But at least I had a name now, for the force the Ladies had told me about.

Nemesis.

And it was *aware*.

The rain that had been held back abruptly began to come down in a torrent, and I sourly suspected that Titania had made sure I was going to get drenched. She hadn’t killed me, at least not yet. But I knew she sure as hell didn’t like me.

Night was coming on fast, and when it got here, all hell was going to break loose. And that was a best-case scenario.

I bowed my head, hunched my shoulders against the rain, and started out of the Magic Hedge.

Chapter

Thirty-one

I whistled down a cab and went to my next destination: Graceland Cemetery.

The place was actually kind of busy, it being Halloween and all. Graceland is one of the great cemeteries of the nation, the Atlantic City of graveyards. It's filled with monuments to men and women who evidently had too much money to throw around while they were still alive. There are statues and mausoleums everywhere, made from granite and ornate marble, some of them in the style of ancient Greece, some obviously more influenced by ancient Egypt. There's one that's practically a full-size temple. The actual style of the various monuments ranges from incredible

beauty to absolutely outrageous extravagance, with artists and tycoons and architects and inventors all lying silently together now.

Walk in Graceland and you can find yourself lost in a maze of memories, a cloud of names that no one living could attach to a face anymore. I wondered, passing some of the older monuments, whether anyone ever visited them now. If you'd died in 1876, it would mean that your great-great- or even great-great-great-grandchildren were the ones living now. Did people visit the graves of those who had been gone that long?

No. Not for any personal reason. But that was all right. Graves aren't for the dead. They're for the loved ones the dead leave behind them. Once those loved ones have gone, once all the lives that have touched the occupant of any given grave had ended, then the grave's purpose was fulfilled and ended.

I suppose if you looked at it that way, one might as well decorate one's grave with an enormous statue or a giant temple. It gave people something to talk about, at least. Although, following that logic, I would need to have a roller coaster, or maybe a Tilt-A-Whirl constructed over my own grave when I died. Then even after my loved ones had moved on, people could keep having fun for years and years.

Of course, I'd need a slightly larger plot.

My grave was still open, a six-foot pit in the ground. An old enemy had bought it for me as a form of murderous foreplay. That one hadn't fallen out the way she had expected it would. But apparently whatever mechanism she used to secure the grave and to have it (illegally) left open was apparently still in place, because when I got there, I found it just as gaping and threatening as it had always been. A chill rolled up my spine as I read my headstone.

It was a pretty thing, white marble with gold-inlaid letters and a gold-inlaid pentacle:

HERE LIES HARRY DRESDEN.
HE DIED DOING THE RIGHT THING.

“Well,” I muttered, “once, sure. But I guess I’ll have to go best two out of three.”

I looked around. I’d passed several groups that might have been Halloween haunted theme tours, and a gaggle of kids wearing expensive black clothing and grim makeup, smoking cigarettes and trying to look like they were wise to the world. A couple of older people seemed to actually be visiting graves, putting out fresh flowers.

I paused thoughtfully over my own grave and waited until no one was looking. Then I hopped down into it. My feet splashed into an inch of water and another six inches of mud, courtesy of the drizzling rain.

I crouched a little lower, just to be sure no one saw me, and got into my bag again.

My hands were shaking too much to get the bag open on the first try. It wasn’t the cold. It wasn’t even standing at the bottom of my own grave—hell, when I’d been a ghost, my own grave had been the most restful place in the whole world, and there was a certain amount of that reassurance that was still present. I still had no desire to get dead; don’t get me wrong.

The scary thing was imagining what would happen to all the people I cared about if I died in the next few minutes. If I was right, this next interview might get me everything I needed. If I wasn’t . . . well, I could hope to wind up dead, I guess. But I had a bad feeling that wizards who pissed off people on this level didn’t get anything that pleasant and gentle.

I made my preparations quickly. Earth and water were all around, no problem there. I’d have to hope that what little air I had was right for the calling. Fire would have been an issue if I hadn’t planned ahead. I needed to represent one other primal force, too, something that would call to the exact being I had in mind:

Death.

If working the spell from your own grave on Hallo-freaking-ween wasn't deathly enough, I wasn't sure what would be.

I stood on one foot, and with a gesture and a word froze most of the water in the grave. I put my free foot down on the ice and pulled my other foot out of the part I'd left as mostly slush. Then I froze that, too. I didn't have any problems slipping on the ice—or rather, I did slip a little, but my body seemed to adjust to it as naturally as it would have to small stones turning underfoot on a gravel road. No big deal.

Once the water was nice and solid, I got out my other props. A bottle of cooking oil, a knife, and matches.

I took the knife and drew a short cut into the skin of my left hand, in the fleshy bit between my thumb and forefinger, over an old scar where I had been hurt at the bidding of a Queen of Faerie before. While that welled up and began to bleed, I reached up and slashed off a lock of my hair with the same knife. I took the lock and used the freshly shed blood as an adhesive to hold it together, and dropped it onto the surface of the ice. More death, just in case. Then I poured a circle of oil around the hair and the blood and set it quickly alight with the matches.

Fire and water hissed and spit, and wind moaned over the top of my grave. I braced my hands on either side of it, closed my eyes, and spoke the invocation I'd chosen, infusing my voice with my will. "Ancient crone, harbinger!" I began, then raised my voice, louder. "Longest shadow! Darkest dream! She of the endless hunger, the iron teeth, the merciless jaws!" I poured more of my wind and my will into the words, and the inside of my grave rang with the sheer volume. "I am Harry Dresden, the Winter Knight, and I needs must speak with thee! Athropos! Skuld! Mother Winter, I summon thee!"

I released the pent-up power in my voice, and as it rang out I could hear birds erupting up from where they sheltered all over the graveyard. There were shouts and cries of surprise, too, from the tourists or the Gothlings or both. I ground my teeth and hoped that they wouldn't come my way. Getting killed by Mother Winter wouldn't be like being killed by Titania. That might at least have been huge and messy—not really a fight, but at least a proper slaughter.

If Mother Winter showed up and wanted to kill me, I'd probably just fall into dust or something. Mother Winter was to Mab as Mab was to Maeve—power an order of magnitude above the Winter Queen. I'd met

with her once before, and she'd literally knitted up some of the most powerful magic I'd ever seen while carrying on a conversation.

The echoes of my summoning bounced around the graveyard over my head a few times and then . . .

And then . . .

And then nothing.

I sat there for a moment, waiting, while the burning oil hissed and sputtered on the ice. A running tendril of oil ran out to my blood and hair, and a tongue of flame followed a moment later. That part was fine by me. It wasn't like I wanted to leave a target that juicy lying around for someone to steal, anyway.

I waited until the fire burned out entirely, and quiet settled over my grave again, but nothing happened. Dammit. I wasn't going to figure out what was really going on tonight by carefully sifting all the facts and analyzing how they all fit together. Not in the time I had left. My only real chance was to get to someone who knew and get them to talk. Granted, going to talk to Mother Winter was about half an inch shy of trying to call up Lucifer, or maybe Death itself (if there was such a being—no one was really sure), but when you need information from witnesses and experts, the only way to get it is to talk to them.

Maybe my summons hadn't been deathly enough, but I hadn't wanted to kill some poor animal just to get the old girl's attention. I might have to, though. There was just too much at stake to get squeamish.

I shook my head, put my tools away, and then the ice just beneath my toes shattered and a long, bony arm, covered in wrinkles and warts and spots, and belonging to a body that would have been at least twenty feet tall, shot up and seized my head. Not my face. My entire head, like a softball. Or maybe an apple. Stained black claws on the ends of the knobby fingers dug into me, piercing my skin, and I was abruptly jerked down into the freaking ice with so much power that for a second I was terrified my neck had snapped.

I thought I would be broken for certain when I hit the ice, but instead I was drawn *through* it and down into the mud, and through that, and then I was falling, screaming in sudden, instinctive, blind terror. Then I hit something hard and it *hurt*, even through the power of the mantle, and I let out a brief, croaking exhalation. I dangled there, stunned for a moment,

with those cold, cruel pointed claws digging into my flesh. Distantly I could hear a slow, limping step, and feel my feet dragging across a surface.

Then I was flung and spun twice on the horizontal, and I crashed into a wall. I bounced off it and landed on what felt like a dirt floor. I lay there, not able to inhale, barely able to move, and either I'd gone blind or I was in complete blackness. The nice part about having your bells rung like that is that mind-numbing horror sort of gets put onto a side burner for a bit. That was pretty much the only nice thing about it. When I finally managed to gasp in a little air, I used it to make a whimpering sound of pure pain.

A voice came out of the darkness, a sound that was dusty and raspy and covered in spiders. "Me," it said, drawing the word out. "You attempt to summon. Me."

"You have my sincerest apologies for the necessity," I said, or tried to say to Mother Winter. I think it just came out, "Ow."

"You think I am a servant to be whistled for?" continued the voice. Hate and weariness and dark amusement were all mummified together in it. "You think I am some petty spirit you can command."

"N-n-nngh, ow." I gasped.

"You dare to presume? You dare to speak such names to draw my attention?" the voice said. "I have a stew to make, and I will fill it with your arrogant mortal meat."

There was a sound in the pitch-darkness. Steel being drawn across stone. A few sparks went up, blinding in the darkness. They burned into my retinas the outline of a massive, hunched form grasping a cleaver.

Sparks danced every few seconds as Mother Winter slowly sharpened her implement. I was able to get my breathing under control and to fight past the pain. "Mmm . . ." I said. "M-Mother Winter. Such a pleasure to meet with you again."

The next burst of sparks gleamed off of an iron surface—teeth.

"I n-need to speak to you."

"Speak, then, manling," said Mother Winter. "You have a little time left."

The cleaver rasped across the sharpening stone again.

"Mab has ordered me to kill Maeve," I said.

"She is always doing foolish things," said Mother Winter.

"Maeve says that Mab's gone insane," I said. "Lily concurs."

There was a wheezing sound that might have been a cackle. “Such a loving daughter.”

I had to believe that I was going to get out of this somehow. So I pressed her. “I need to know which of them is right,” I said. “I need to know who I should turn my hand against to prevent a great tragedy.”

“Tragedy,” said Mother Winter in a purr that made me think of rasping scorpions. “Pain? Terror? Sorrow? Why should I wish to prevent such a thing? It is sweeter than an infant’s marrow.”

It is a good thing I am a fearless and intrepid wizardly type, or that last bit of sentence would have set my flesh to crawling hard enough to carry me across the dirt floor.

I was kind of hosed anyway, so I took a chance. I crossed my fingers in the dark and said, “Because Nemesis is behind it.”

The cleaver’s rasp abruptly stopped.

The darkness and silence were, for a moment, absolute.

My imagination treated me to an image of Mother Winter creeping silently toward me in the blackness, cleaver lifted, and I stifled an urge to burst into panicked screams.

“So,” she whispered a moment later. “You have finally come to see what has been before you all this time.”

“Uh, yeah. I guess. I know there’s something there now, at least.”

“So very mortal of you. Learning only when it is too late.”

Rasp. Sparks.

“You aren’t going to kill me,” I said. “I’m as much your Knight as Mab’s.”

There was a low, quiet snort. “You are no true Knight of Winter, manling. Once I have devoured your flesh, and your mantle with it, I will bestow it upon someone worthier of the name. I should never have given it to Mab.”

Uh, wow. I hadn’t thought of that kind of motivation. My guts got really watery. I tried to move my limbs and found them numbed and only partially functional. I started trying to get them to flip me over so that I could get my feet under me. “Uh, no?” I heard myself ask in a panicked, cracking voice. “And why is that, exactly?”

“Mab,” said Mother Winter in a tone of pure disgust, “is too much the romantic.”

Which pretty much tells you everything you need to know about Mother Winter, right there.

“She has spent too much time with mortals,” Mother Winter continued, withered lips peeled back from iron teeth as the sparks from her cleaver’s edge leapt higher. “Mortals in their soft, controlled world. Mortals with nothing to do but fight one another, who have forgotten *why* they should fear the fangs and the claws, the cold and the dark.”

“And . . . that’s bad?”

“What value has life when it is so easily *kept*?” Mother Winter spat the last word. “Mab’s weakness is evident. Look at her Knight.”

Her Knight was currently trying to sit up, but his wrists and ankles were fastened to the floor by something cold, hard, and unseen. I tested them, but couldn’t feel any edges. The bonds couldn’t have been metal. And they weren’t ice. I didn’t know how I knew that, but I was completely certain. Ice would have been no obstacle. But there was something familiar about it, something I had felt before . . . in Chichén Itzá.

Will.

Mother Winter was holding me down by pure, stark will. The leaders of the Red Court had been ancient creatures with a similar power, but that had been a vague, smothering blanket that had made it impossible to move or act, a purely mental effort.

This felt like something similar, but far more focused, more developed, as if thought had somehow crystallized into tangibility. My wrists and ankles wouldn’t move because Mother Winter’s will said that was how reality worked. It was like magic—but magic took a seed, a kernel of will and built up a framework of other energies around that seed. It took intense practice and focus to make that happen, but at the end of the day anyone’s will was only part of the spell, alloyed with other energy into something else.

What held me down now was pure, undiluted will—the same kind of will that I suspected had backed up events presaged by phrases like “Let there be light.” It was far more than human, beyond simple physical strength, and if I’d been the Incredible Hulk, I was pretty sure there was no way I’d have been able to tear myself free.

“Ahhh,” said Mother Winter, during one last stroke of the cleaver. “I like nice clean edges to my meat, manling. Time for dinner.”

And slow, limping steps came toward me.

Chapter

Thirty-two

A slow smile stretched my lips back from my teeth.

Mortals had the short end of the stick on almost any supernatural confrontation. Even most wizards, with their access to terrific forces, had to approach conflicts carefully—relatively few of us had the talents that lent themselves to brawling. But mortals had everyone else beat on exactly one thing: the freedom to choose. Free will.

It had taken me a while to begin to understand it, but it had eventually sunk into my thick skull. I couldn't arm wrestle an ogre, even with the mantle. I couldn't have won a magical duel with Mab or Titania—probably not even against Maeve or Lily. I couldn't outrun one of the Sidhe.

But I could defy absolutely anyone.

I could lift my will against that of anything, and know that the fight might be lopsided, but never hopeless. And by thunder, I was *not* going to allow *anyone's* will to stretch me out on the floor like a lamb for slaughter.

I stopped pressing at my bindings with my limbs and started using my mind instead. I didn't try to push them away, or break them, or slip free of them. I simply *willed* them not to be. I envisioned what my limbs would feel like coming free, and focused on *that* reality, summoning up my total concentration on that goal, that ideal, that *fact*.

And then I crossed my fingers and reached into me, into the place where a covert archangel had granted me access to one of the primal forces of the universe, an energy called soulfire. I had no idea how it might interact with the Winter Knight's mantle on an ongoing basis. I mean, it had worked out once before, but that didn't mean that it would keep working out. I felt certain that I was pretty much swallowing bottles of nitroglycerin, then jumping up and down to see what would happen, but at this point I had little to lose. I gathered up soulfire, used it to infuse my raw will, and cast the resulting compound against my bonds.

Soulfire, according to Bob, is one of the fundamental forces of the universe, the original power of creation. It isn't meant for mortals. We get it by slicing off a bit of our soul, our life energy, and converting it into something else.

Bob is brilliant, but there are some things that he just doesn't get. His definition was a good place to get started, but it was also something that was perhaps too comfortably quantifiable. The soul isn't something you can weigh and measure. It's more than just one thing. Because soulfire interacts with souls in a way that I'm not sure anyone understands, it stands to reason that soulfire isn't just one thing, either.

And in this case, in this moment, I somehow knew exactly what the soulfire did. It converted me, my core, everything that made me who I was, into energy, into light. When I turned my joined will and the blazing core of my being together, I wasn't supercharging a magical spell. I wasn't cleverly finding a weak point in an enchantment. I wasn't using my knowledge of magic to exploit what my enemy was doing.

I was casting everything I had done, everything I believed, everything I had chosen—everything I *was*—against the will of an ancient being of darkness, terror, and malice, a fundamental power of the world.

And the bonds and the will of Mother Winter could not constrain me.

There was a sharp, shimmering tone, like metal under stress and beginning to fail, but more musical, and a blinding white light that washed away the darkness and dazzled my eyes. There was a thunder crack, and a terrible force erupted from my wrists and ankles, throwing a shock wave of raw kinetic energy—a mere shadow of the true forces at work, a by-product—out into the space around me. In that whiteness, I caught an image of a shrouded, hunched dark form, flung from her feet to impact something solid.

And then I was free and hauling myself up onto my feet.

I backed up, hoping I hadn't gotten turned around in the flash, and a surge of relief went through me when my back hit a stone wall. I felt out along on either side of me, and my hand brushed something solid, maybe a small shelf made from a wooden plank. I knocked it off its peg. It fell to the dirt floor with a clatter and a clink of small, heavy glass jars.

I leaned against the wall, dazed, panting, and gasped, in my deepest and most gravelly voice, "No one can chain the Hulk!"

I heard a stir of cloth in the darkness then, a slight grunt of effort, the faintest whistle in the air. I can't claim credit for being smart or cool on this one. Some instinct pegged which way the cleaver was coming and I flung my head sharply to one side. Sparks flew as the cleaver struck the wall where my skull had been and sank into it as if it had been made of rotten pine, not stone. It stayed there, making a faint vibrating sound as it quivered.

I have got to learn to keep my freaking mouth shut. I clenched my teeth together and stayed still, giving no indication of where I might be in the darkness.

For a long time there was quiet, except for the breathing I fought to slow and silence. And then a horrible, slithering sound went through the blackness. It caught in Mother Winter's ancient throat, clicking like the shells of swarming carrion beetles. It wormed its way through the air like a swarm of maggots burrowing through rotten meat. It brushed against me, light and hideous, like the touch of a vulture's lice-infested feather, and I struggled to press myself back a little closer to the stone at the sound of it.

Mother Winter was cackling.

"So," she said. "So, so, and so. Perhaps thou art not entirely useless after all, eh, manling?"

For all I knew, Mother Winter had a whole cutlery set over there. I gathered my will into a shielding spell, but I didn't release it. Magic was like air and water to the fae. I had a feeling Mother Winter would have been able to home in on it.

"That was a test?" I whispered—behind my hand, so that it might not make it utterly obvious where I was standing.

"Or a meal," she rasped. "Either would suffice."

And then brightness flooded the room.

I thought some massive force had inundated the area I stood in, but after a second I realized that it was a door. The light was sunlight, with the golden quality that somehow felt like autumn. I had to shield my eyes against it, but after a moment I realized that I was standing in a small, simple medieval-looking cottage—one in which I had been before. Everything in it was wooden, leather, clay, and handmade. The glass in the windows was wavery and translucent. It was a neat, tidy place—apart from one corner with a large, ugly, raw-looking rocking chair. Oh, and a spilled shelf of small clay pots with wax-sealed mouths.

"You can be so overly dramatic, betimes," complained an old woman's voice, as gentle and sweet as Mother Winter's was unpleasant. She came into the house a moment later, a grandmotherly matron dressed in a simple dress with a green apron. Her long hair, silver-white and thinning, was done up in a small, neat bun. She moved with the slightly stiff, bustling energy of an active senior, and if her green eyes were framed by crow's-feet, they were bright and sharp. Mother Summer carried a basket in one arm filled with cuttings from what must have been a late-season herb garden, and as I watched, she entered, muttered a word, and a dozen tiny whirlwinds cleaned thick layers of soot from the many-paned windows scattered around the cottage, flooding it with more warm light. "We'll need a new cleaver now."

Mother Winter, in her black shawl and hood, bared her iron teeth in a snarl, though it was a silent one. She pointed one crooked, warty finger at the window nearest her, and blackened it with soot again. Then she shuffled over to a chair beneath the window, and settled into the resulting shadow as if it were a comforting blanket. "I do what must be done."

"With our cleaver," Mother Summer said. "I suppose one of our knives wouldn't have done just as well?"

Mother Winter bared her teeth again. "I wasn't holding a knife."

Mother Summer made a disapproving clucking sound and began unloading her basket onto a wooden table near the fireplace. "I told you," she said calmly.

Mother Winter made a sour-sounding noise and pointed a finger. A large mug decorated with delicately painted flowers fell from a shelf.

Mother Summer calmly put out a hand, caught it, and returned it to the shelf.

"Oh, uh, Mother Summer," I said, after a moment of silence. "I apologize for intruding into your home."

"Oh, dear, that's very sweet," Mother Summer said. "But you owe me no apology. You were brought here entirely against your will, after all." She paused for a beat and added, "Rudely."

Mother Winter made another displeased sound.

I looked back and forth between them. *Centuries of dysfunction in this family, Harry. Walk carefully.* "I, uh. I think I'd prefer to think of it as a very firm invitation."

"Hah," said Mother Winter, from her hood. Her teeth gleamed. "The Knight knows his loyalties, at least."

Mother Summer somehow managed to inject her voice with profound skepticism. "I'm sure he's overjoyed to owe loyalty to you," she said. "Why did you bring him here now, of all times?"

More teeth showed. "He summoned me, the precious thing."

Mother Summer dropped her herbs. She turned her head toward me, her eyes wide. "Oh," she said. "Oh, dear."

Mother Winter's rocker creaked, though it didn't really seem to move. "He knew certain names. He was not wholly stupid in choosing them, or wholly wrong in using them."

Mother Summer's bright green eyes narrowed. "Did he . . . ?"

"No," croaked Mother Winter. "Not that one. But he has seen the adversary, and learned one of its names."

Calculation and thought flickered through those green eyes, faster than I could follow. "Ah, yes. I see," Mother Summer said. "So many new futures unwinding."

"Too many bright ones," Mother Winter said sullenly.

"Even you must think better than empty night."

Mother Winter spit to one side.

It started eating a hole in the dirt floor a few inches from one of my feet. I'm not kidding. I took a small sidestep away, and tried not to breathe the fumes.

"I think," Mother Winter said, "that he should be shown."

Mother Summer narrowed her eyes. "Is he ready?"

"There is no time to coddle him," she rasped. "He is a weapon. Let him be made stronger."

"Or broken?" Mother Summer asked.

"Time, time!" Winter breathed. "He is not *your* weapon."

"It is not *your* world," Summer countered.

"Excuse me," I said quietly.

Green eyes and black hood turned toward me.

"I don't want to be rude, ma'am," I said. I picked up the fallen wooden shelf from where I'd knocked it down, and put it back on its pegs. Then I bent and started putting the sealed jars back onto the shelf. "I'm still young. I make mistakes. But I'm not a child, and I'm not letting anyone but me choose which roads I'll walk."

That made Mother Winter cackle again. "Precious little duck," she wheezed. "He means it."

"Indeed," Mother Summer said, but her tone was thoughtful as she watched me restore the fallen shelf to order.

I kept on replacing jars, lining them up neatly, and spoke as gently and politely as I knew how. "You can take my body and run it like a puppet. You can kill me. You can curse me and torture me and turn me into an animal."

"Can," said Mother Winter, "and might, if you maintain this impertinence."

I swallowed and continued. "You can destroy me. But you can't make me *be* anything but what I *choose* to be, ma'am. I don't know exactly what you both are talking about showing me, ma'am. But you aren't going to shove it down my throat or put it up on a shelf out of my reach, either one. I decide for myself, or I walk out the door."

"Oh, will you?" said Mother Winter in a low, deadly whisper. Her overlong nails scraped at the wood on her chair's arms. "Is that what you think, my lamb?"

Mother Summer arched an eyebrow and eyed Mother Winter. "You test his defiance against his very life, and yet when he passes you are surprised he does not leap to do your bidding?" She made another

disapproving clucking sound. “He is brave. And he is courteous. I will show him what you ask—if he is willing.”

Winter bared her teeth and spit again, into the same hole, and more earth hissed and melted away. She started rocking back and forth, slowly, and turned her gaze elsewhere.

I picked up the last fallen pot and was about to put it away when I frowned. “Oh. I’m sorry, but there’s a crack in this one.”

I never heard or saw any movement, but suddenly Mother Summer was there beside me, and her bony, capable hands were wrapping warmly around mine. Her touch was like Lily’s but . . . gentler and more vast. It made me think of miles and miles of prairie soaking up the summer sun’s heat, storing it through the day, only to give it back to the air in the long hours of twilight.

As gently as if handling a newborn, she took the little clay pot from me and turned it slowly in her fingers, examining it. Then she exhaled slowly, closed her eyes for a moment, and then put it reverently back onto the shelf.

When she took her hands from the little pot, I saw letters written in silvery light upon it and upon neighboring pots, as if the letters had been awakened by the warmth of her hands.

The writing on the cracked pot said simply, *Wormwood*.

The letters began to fade, but I saw some of the others: *Typhos. Pox. Atermors. Choleros. Malaros.*

Typhus. Smallpox. The Black Death. Cholera. Malaria.

And Wormwood.

And there were *lots* of other jars on the shelf.

My hands started shaking a little.

“It is not yet the appointed time for that one to be born,” Mother Summer said quietly, and her hard eyes flicked toward Mother Winter.

She didn’t look back toward us, but her teeth gleamed from within her hood.

Mother Summer slipped her hand through my arm. I gave it to her more or less out of reflex, and walked across the cottage. She picked up her basket and then we went to the door. I opened it for her and offered her my arm again, and we walked together out of the cottage and into a modest clearing surrounded by ancient forest with trees the size of redwoods. They blazed with the colors of fall, their leaves carpeting the forest floor in

glorious fire as far as the eye could see. It was gorgeous, but it wasn't anywhere on Earth.

"I think she likes you, young man."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I could tell, because of the cleaver."

"It is her way," Mother Summer said, smiling. "She rarely leaves our cottage anymore. She lost her walking stick. While your summons was impertinent, it was a necessity and you had the right. But it is terribly painful for her to travel, even briefly. You, a mortal, hurt her."

Mother Summer's words made the whole chopped-up-for-stew-meat situation more understandable. Beings like Mother Winter tormented mortals—not the other way around. I'd injured her pride along with the rest of her, and in the supernatural world such insults were rarely forgiven and never forgotten.

"She was balancing the scales," I said quietly. "Is that what you mean?"

Mother Summer nodded approval. "You phrase it simply, but not incorrectly." She stopped and turned to look up at me. "She cannot take you to the places we must walk if you are to understand."

"Understand what?" I asked.

Her green eyes reflected the colors of the autumn forest. "What is at stake," she said. "If you choose to walk with me, what is seen cannot be unseen, and what is known cannot be unknown. It may harm you."

"Harm me how?" I asked.

"You may never know a night's peace again. Knowledge is power, young man. Power to do good and power to do harm. Some knowledge can hurt. Some can kill."

"What happens if I don't have it?"

Mother Summer smiled, a gentle sadness in her eyes. "You keep the bliss of ignorance—and consign our fates to fickle chance. Do not choose lightly."

I pondered it for, like, ten whole seconds.

I mean, come on.

I'm a freaking *wizard*, people.

"It's better to know than not know," I said quietly.

"Why?" Mother Summer challenged.

"Because you can't truly make a choice without knowledge, ma'am."

"Even if it may haunt you? Harm you? Isolate you?"

I thought about it some more and then said, “Especially then. Show me.”

An emotion flickered across Mother Summer’s face—gentle pain and regret.

“So be it,” she said quietly. “Come with me.”

Chapter

Thirty-three

I walked into the ancient forest with Mother Summer on my arm, following a wide, meandering footpath.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question while we walk?” Mother Summer asked.

“Not at all, ma’am,” I said.

“What do you suppose will happen to you if you do not heed Mab’s command?”

“Command?” I asked.

“Don’t be coy, child,” Mother Summer sniffed. “What my counterpart knows, I know. Mab commanded you to slay Maeve. What do you think will happen if you disobey her?”

I walked for a while before I answered, “It depends whether or not Mab’s still around when the smoke clears, I guess,” I said. “If she is . . . she’ll be upset. I’ll wind up like Lloyd Slate. If she isn’t . . .”

“Yes?”

“Maeve assumes Mab’s mantle and becomes the new Winter Queen.”

“Exactly,” Mother Summer said. “In time, the difference will hardly show. But in the immediate future . . . how do you think Maeve will treat you?”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I could imagine that vividly enough—Maeve, high as a kite on her newfound power, giggling and tormenting and killing left and right just because she could do it. Maeve was the sort who lived to pull the wings off of flies.

And I was pretty sure whose wings would be the first to catch her eye.

“Well, crap,” I said.

“Quite so,” said Mother Summer. “And if you do heed Mab’s command?”

“Maeve’s mantle gets passed on to someone else,” I said. “And if . . . the adversary? Can I say that safely?”

Mother Summer smiled. “That’s why we use that word rather than a name, Sir Knight. Yes.”

“If the adversary has taken Mab,” I said, “then it gets to choose an agent to take the Winter Lady’s mantle. Two-thirds of the Winter Court will be under its influence.” I looked back toward the cottage. “And that seems like it might be bad for Mother Winter.”

“Indeed,” said Mother Summer. “We are all vulnerable to those who are close to us.”

“I never figured Granny Cleaver was close to anyone, ma’am.”

The lines at the corners of Mother Summer’s eyes deepened. “Oh, she . . . What is the phrase? She talks a good game. But in her own way, she cares.”

I may have arched a skeptical eyebrow. “Kind of like how, in her own way, she likes me?” I asked.

Mother Summer didn’t answer that, as our steps carried us into a more deeply shadowed section of the forest. “It is at times very difficult to be so closely interwoven with mortals,” she said.

“For you?”

“For all of Faerie,” she replied.

“What do you mean?”

She gestured at herself. “We appear much as humans, do we not? Most of our folk do—or else they resemble another creature of the mortal world. Hounds, birds, stags, and so forth.”

“Sure,” I said.

“You are endlessly fascinating. We conceive our children with mortals. We move and sway in time to the mortal seasons. We dance to mortal music, make our homes like mortal dwellings, feast upon mortal foods. We find parts of ourselves becoming more like them, and yet we are not like them. Many of the things they think and feel, and a great many of their actions, are inexplicable to us.”

“We don’t really understand ourselves all that well yet,” I said. “I think it would be very difficult for you to do it.”

Mother Summer smiled at me, and it felt like the first warm day of spring. “That’s true, isn’t it?”

“But you’ve got a point to make, ma’am,” I said. “Or you wouldn’t have brought up the subject.”

“I do,” she said. “Winter is cold, Sir Knight, but never so cold that it freezes the heart altogether.”

“You’ve got to have a heart before it can freeze, ma’am.”

“You do.”

I walked for a little while, considering that. “You’re saying that I have a chance to stay me.”

“I’m saying many things,” Mother Summer said. “Do you have a chance to remain yourself despite the tendency of the mantle to mold your thoughts and desires? All Knights, Winter and Summer, have that chance. Most fail.”

“But it’s possible,” I said.

She looked up at me and her eyes were deeper than time. “Anything is possible.”

“Ah,” I said, understanding. “We’re not really talking about me.”

“We are,” she said serenely, turning her eyes away. “And we are not.”

“Uh,” I said. “I’m getting a little confused here. What are we talking about, exactly?”

Mother Summer smiled at me.

And then she just clammed up.

We *are*? We’re *not*?

I kept a straight face while my inner Neanderthal spluttered and then went on a mental rampage through a hypothetical produce section, knocking over shelves and splattering fruit everywhere in sheer frustration, screaming, “JUST TELL ME WHOSE SKULL TO CRACK WITH MY CLUB, DAMMIT!”

Flippin’ *faeries*. They will be the death of me.

“In the spirit of balanced scales,” I said, “would it be all right if I asked you a question, ma’am?”

“I welcome the question. I make no promises as to the answer.”

I nodded. “Who are you, really?”

Mother Summer stopped in her tracks and turned to look at me. Her eyebrows slowly lifted. “That is a very significant question.”

“I know,” I said. “Blame it on Halloween.”

“Why should I do that?”

I shrugged, and we began walking again. “It’s just got me thinking: masks. I know of one figure from ancient tales who is alive and well and incognito. Why shouldn’t there be more?”

Mother Summer inclined her head, more a gesture of acknowledgment or admission than agreement. “Things change,” she said. “Immortals deal poorly with change. But it comes to everyone.”

“I called Mother Winter by the names Athropos and Skuld because they seemed to fit her,” I said. “I mean, she likes her sharp implements, apparently.”

Mother Summer’s smile appeared for a moment, dazzling me, and then was gone again. “It was not an imbecilic guess,” she said. “And, yes, she has been known by such names before. But you’ve only guessed the name of one of her masks—not our most powerful name.”

“Our?” I said. “Wait. I’m confused.”

“I know,” she said. “Here we are.”

We stopped in the middle of a forest path that didn’t look any different from anything around it. Mother Summer stopped and frowned at me. “You really aren’t dressed for the climate.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I can handle cold.”

She let go of my arm, looked me up and down, then put a hand on the handle of the basket she carried over one arm and said, “Something a little less . . . informal would be appropriate, I think.”

I've played Ken doll to a faerie fashion adviser before, so I wasn't entirely shocked when my clothing began to writhe and simply *change*. When the Leanansidhe had done it, I'd sat in the car for half an hour suffering through one fanciful and undignified outfit after another. Not this time.

My clothes transformed from cloth into custom-fitted steel. Well, probably not steel, but whatever the equivalent was that the Sidhe used in their armor. The armor was plain and functional with no ornaments on it—a breastplate, vambraces, and large pauldrons for my shoulders. Heavy tassets hung from the bottom of the breastplate, protecting my thighs. My lower legs were covered with greaves, front and back. The armor was black and gleaming, and where light fell directly on it, you could see shades of deep purple and dark blue.

I realized that I was holding a helmet under my left arm, and I took it in both hands to look at it. It was a Corinthian helm, like they wore in that movie about the Spartans, only without the fancy tail. It was padded on the inside. I slipped it on, and it fit perfectly.

“Much better,” said Mother Summer. “Stay near me at all times.”

I looked around the perfectly serene forest. It was a bit of an effort, since the helmet kept me from turning my head very smoothly. I looked up, too. I'm sure the armor made me look goofy. “Uh, okay.”

Mother Summer smiled, took my arm again, and stretched out one foot. She used it to brush a layer of dirt and fallen leaves from the pitted surface of a flat stone, like a paving stone, maybe three feet square. She tapped it three times with her foot, whispered a word, and drew me along with her as she stepped onto it.

No drama ensued. The landscape simply changed, as swiftly and drastically as when you turn on a light while in a darkened room. One second we stood in an autumnal megaforest. The next . . .

I've seen movies and newsreels about World War I. They didn't cover it as thoroughly in my schools, because America didn't have a leading role in it, and because the entire stupid, avoidable mess was a Continental clusterfuck that killed millions and settled nothing but the teams for the next world war. But what they did show me I remembered. Miles and miles of trenches. A smoke-haunted no-man's-land strung with muddy, rusty barbed wire and lined with machine guns and marksmen. There was a pall of smoke that turned the sun into a dully glowing orb.

But the movies couldn't cover all the senses. There was a constant rumble in the sky, thunder born of violence, and there was everywhere the smell of feces and death.

We stood atop a small, barren mountain, looking down. Near us, only a few hundred yards away, was an immense wall, the kind you'd use to hold out the Mongols if they were the size of King Kong. It was built entirely from ice or some kind of translucent crystal. Even from here, I could see that there were chambers and rooms in the wall, rooms containing barracks, hospitals, kitchens, you name it. There were dim and indistinct forms moving around in them.

The walls were lined with what had to be tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of soldiers. I peered, trying to get a better look, and then realized that they were armored Sidhe.

All of them.

They all wore armor similar to mine, its highlights throwing back the cool, muted shades of Winter.

Out beyond the wall was a land made of dust and mud and loose shale. It was covered in hillocks and steep gullies, and the only plants that grew there looked like they were certain to poke, scratch, or sting you. Though the land was somehow lit, the sky was as black as Cat Sith's conscience, without a single star or speck of light to be seen—and it was an overwhelming sky, enormous, like in the open, rolling lands of Montana and Wyoming.

There were more bodies of troops moving out there. Some of them looked like they might have been giants, or maybe trolls. Larger groups containing smaller individuals were likely Winter's gnomes. Things flew in the air. Bands of what appeared to be mounted cavalry rode back and forth. Some of the soldiers looked suspiciously like animated snowmen.

From this vantage point, I could see two major engagements happening, each containing maybe forty thousand Winter troops. And they were fighting. . . .

I couldn't make out the enemy. There didn't seem to be any unity of form. They were creatures—creatures whose physiologies made no sense, were utterly without order. I saw what appeared to be tentacles, enormous mandibles, claws, fangs, clublike limbs and tails. They weren't bipedal. They weren't quadrupeds. In fact, they seemed to have no regard for bilateral symmetry at all.

I peered a little closer and felt a sudden, horrible pressure inside my head. I felt dizzy for a second, nauseated, and at the same time part of me was screaming that I needed to ditch my escort and go look at these things for myself, that there was something there, something I wanted to see, something I wanted to stare at for a while. A cold, somehow greasy tendril of energy slithered around inside my head, something I had felt before when . . .

I jerked my eyes away with a short grunt of effort, closed them, and left them closed. “Holy . . . Outsiders? Mab’s fighting *Outsiders*?”

Mother Summer said nothing.

“I don’t . . . I don’t understand,” I said finally. “White Council intelligence always estimated Mab’s troop count at around fifty thousand. There are freaking formations out there with more troops in them than that.”

Mother Summer said nothing. But she did lift a finger and point off to the left. I looked, and saw a pair of towers the size of the Chrysler Building rising up over the wall. Between them was a pair of gates.

The gates were something amazing to look at. They were huge, bigger than most Chicago apartment buildings. They were made of a darker shade of the same ice or crystal, and there were designs and sigils carved into them, layer after layer after layer. I recognized a couple of the ones I could see clearly. They were wards, protective enchantments.

There was a sudden sound, a rising moan, like the wind shaking trees or surf striking a cliff wall—and the horizon outside the walls was suddenly lined with dark, grotesque figures, all of them charging forward, toward the Winter troops.

Faint horn calls sounded, clear and valiant. Winter’s troops began to retreat back toward the gates, gathering into a great arch on the ground outside them, locking their formation into place while cavalry harassed the oncoming Outsiders, slowing their advance. Then the cavalry streaked from their engagement, passing safely through the lines of infantry to come riding back through the gates.

The Outsiders came on and crashed against the Winter lines. Battle ensued. From this far away, it just looked like a big, confusing mess, with everyone jostling for a better position, but I could see a few things. I saw an ogre go down when an Outsider spit acid that started eating through his

eyes into his skull. I saw the Winter lines falter, and the Outsiders began pouring reinforcements into the weakness.

Then a small crew of goblins exploded out of a pile of shale at precisely the right moment, when the Outsiders were pressed almost into the Winter lines, but before reinforcements arrived. The surprise attack drove the Outsiders forward, when I could see that the “weak” regiment had been playing the Outsiders for suckers, falling back, but doing so in good order. The Outsiders had overreached themselves, and were now surrounded on all four sides by the savage troops of Winter.

The would-be invaders didn’t make it.

And that was only a tiny fraction of the battle. My senses and mind alike simply could not process everything I was seeing. But my heart was beating very swiftly, and frozen fear had touched my spine like Mab’s fingers.

The Outsiders wanted *in*.

“When?” I asked. “When did this start?”

“Oh, Harry,” Mother Summer said gently.

“What?” I asked. But I had noticed something. Those layers and mounds of shale? They weren’t shale.

They were bones.

Millions and millions and millions of fucktons of bones.

“What the hell is going on here?” I breathed. “Where are we?”

“The edge of Faerie,” she said. “Our outer borders. It would have taken you a decade to learn to travel out this far.”

“Oh,” I said. “And . . . and it’s like this?”

“In essence,” Mother Summer said. She stared sadly out over the plain. “Did you think Mab spent all her days sitting in her chair and dealing with her backstabbing courtiers? No, Sir Knight. Power has purpose.”

“What happens if they get in?” I asked.

Mother Summer’s lips thinned. “Everything stops. Everything.”

“Holy crap,” I muttered. “Does Summer have a place like this, too, then?”

Mother Summer shook her head. “That was never its task. Your Council’s estimate was fairly close, counting only those troops protecting the hearts of Winter and Summer. Mab has more than that. She needs them—for this.”

I felt like I'd been hit repeatedly in the head with a rubber hammer. "So . . . Mab's troops outnumber yours by a jillion."

"Indeed."

"So she could run you over at any time."

"She could," Mother Summer said, "if she were willing to forfeit reality."

I scanned the length of the wall nervously. It looked like it went on forever—and there was fighting all along its length.

"You're telling me that *this* is why Mab has her power? To . . . to protect the borders?"

"To protect all of you from the Outsiders, mortal."

"Then why does Titania have hers?" I asked.

"To protect all of you from Mab."

I swallowed.

"Titania cannot match Mab's forces, but she can drag Mab personally into oblivion with her—and Mab knows it. Titania is the check to her power, the balance."

"If Mab dies . . ." I began.

She swept a hand along the length of the wall. "A spoiled, sadistic, murderous, and inexperienced child will have control of all of that."

Hell's bells. I rubbed at my eyes, and as I did, I connected some dots and realized something else.

"This is a siege," I said. "Those guys out there are attacking the walls. But there are others trying to dig their way in so that they can open the gates for their buddies. That's what the adversary *is*. Right? A sapper, an infiltrator."

Mother Summer said, "There, you see? You possess the potential to be quite intelligent. Do stay beside me, dear." And she started walking firmly toward the massive gates.

It didn't take us long to get there, but as we came up to the base of the wall and walked along it, we started drawing the eyes of the wall's defenders. I felt myself growing tenser as a marching column of armored Sidhe soldiers came stepping lightly along the ground behind us, catching up quickly.

Mother Summer guided me slightly aside so that we weren't in the column's way, and they started going by us. I didn't think much of it until someone at the front of the column called out in a clear voice, and as one

the Sidhe came to a halt with a solid, simultaneous stomp of a couple of hundred boots. The voice barked another command, and the Sidhe all turned to face us.

“Uh-oh,” I said.

Mother Summer touched my hand with hers, and reassurance bathed me like June sunshine. “Shhh.”

The voice barked another command, and as one the Sidhe lowered themselves to one knee and bowed their heads.

“Good morrow, cousins,” Mother Summer said, her voice solemn. She took her hand off my arm and passed it in a broad, sweeping arch over the kneeling soldiers. Subtle, *subtle* power thrummed delicately in the air. “Go forth with my blessing.”

One of the soldiers in the lead of the column rose and bowed to her, somehow conveying gratitude. Then he snapped out another loud command, and the column rose, turned, and continued its quickstep march.

“Huh,” I said.

“Yes?” asked Mother Summer.

“I was sort of expecting . . . something else.”

“Winter and Summer are two opposing forces of our world,” she said. “But we are *of* our world. Here, that is all that matters. And showing respect to one’s elders is never unwise.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

Mother Summer gave me a small, shrewd smile.

We continued our walk in their wake, and soon reached the gates. There I saw a smaller set of gates—sally ports—built into the main gates. They were the size of the garage doors on a fire station. As I watched, someone shouted a command and a pair of heavily armored ogres each grabbed one of the sally ports and drew it open. The column that had passed us stood waiting to march out, but they did not immediately proceed. Instead, a column of carts and litters entered, bearing the groaning wounded of the fighting outside, being watched over by several dozen Sidhe dressed in pure white armor, marked with bold green and scarlet trim—Sidhe knights of Summer. Medics. Despite the massive numbers of troops I’d seen moving around, there were fewer than a hundred casualties brought back to the gates. Evidently the Outsiders were not in the business of leaving enemies alive behind them.

A lean figure came down a stairway built within the walls framing the gates, at first a shadowy blur through the layers and layers of crystal. He was a couple of inches taller than me, which put him at the next-best thing to seven feet, but he moved with a brisk, bustling sense of energy and purpose. He wore a dark robe that looked black at first, but as he emerged into the light, highlights showed it to be a deep purple. He carried a long pale wizard's staff in one weathered hand, and his hood covered up most of his face, except for part of an aquiline nose and a long chin covered in a grizzled beard.

He spoke to the Summer and Winter Sidhe alike in a language I didn't understand but they evidently did, giving instructions to Summer's medics. They took his orders with a kind of rigid, formal deference. He leaned over to scan each of the fallen closely, nodding at the medics after each, and they would immediately carry the wounded Sidhe in question back behind the wall, into what looked like a neat triage area.

"Rashid," I murmured, recognizing the man. "What is he doing here —"

I froze and stared up at the massive gates rising above us.

Rashid, a member of the Senior Council of the White Council of Wizards, had another title, the name he went by most often.

The Gatekeeper.

He finished with the last of the wounded, then turned and approached us with long, purposeful strides. He paused a few steps away and bowed to Mother Summer, who returned the gesture with a deep, formal nod of her head. Then he came the rest of the way to me, and I could see the gleam of a dark eye inside his hood. His smile was wide and warm, and he extended his hand to me. I took it and shook it, feeling a little overwhelmed.

"Well, well," he said. His voice was a deep, warm thing, marked with an accent that sounded vaguely British seasoned with plenty of more exotic spices. "I had hoped we would see your face again, Warden."

"Rashid," I replied. "Uh . . . we're . . . they're . . ."

The Gatekeeper's smile turned a bit rueful. "Ah, yes," he said. "They're impressive the first time, I suppose. Welcome, Warden Dresden, to the Outer Gates."

Chapter

Thirty-four

“The Outer Gates aren’t real,” I said numbly. “They’re a . . . They’re supposed to be a metaphor.”

Mother Summer smiled very faintly. “I’ll leave mortal business to mortals,” she said. “I’ll be nearby, young wizard.”

“Um,” I said. “Thank you.”

She nodded and walked away toward the wounded Sidhe.

“Well,” the Gatekeeper said to me. He seemed . . . if not precisely cheerful, it was something that lived on the same block—positive, confident, and strong. “You’ve managed to travel a very long way from home.”

“Mother Summer drove,” I said.

“Ah,” he said. “Still, I can’t recall the last time a wizard of your age managed the trip, however it was done. You take after your mother.”

I blinked. “You knew her?”

“Those of us who spend any amount of time walking the Ways tend to develop a certain amount of camaraderie. We would have dinner every so often, compare notes of our walks. And there were several of us who were friends of Ebenezar who . . . took it upon ourselves to watch over her.”

I nodded, keeping my face as blank as I could. It was not general knowledge that Maggie LeFey had been Ebenezar’s daughter. If Rashid knew, it was because my grandfather trusted him.

The fresh armored column of Sidhe began to move out, and as they did, horns began to call in the land beyond. Rashid turned his head toward them, listening as if to a spoken language, and the smile faded from his mouth.

“They’re massing again,” he said. “I have little time.” He reached up and did something I’d seen him do only once before.

The Gatekeeper lowered his hood.

He had short hair that was still thick and gleamed silver, but his features were weathered, as if from long years under harsh sunlight. His skin was paler now, but there was still something of the desert on his skin. His face was long, his brows still dark and full. He had a double scar on his left eyebrow and cheek, two long lines that went straight down, a lot like mine, only deeper and thicker and all the way to his jawline, and they were much softer with long years of healing. Maybe he hadn’t been as good at flinching as I was, because he’d lost the eye beneath the scar. One of his eyes was nearly black, it was so dark. The other had been replaced with . . .

I looked around me. Yes, definitely. The other eye had been replaced with the crystalline material that was identical to that which had been used to create the gates and the walls around them.

“Steel,” I said.

“Pardon?” he asked.

“Your, uh, other eye. It was steel before.”

“I’m sure it looked like steel,” he said. “The disguise is necessary when I’m not here.”

“Your job is so secret, your false eye gets a disguise?” I asked. “Guess I see why you miss Council meetings.”

He inclined his head and ruffled his fingers through mussed, tousled hood-hair. "It can be quiet for years here, sometimes. And others . . ." He spread his hands. "But they need a good eye here to be sure that the things that must remain outside do not slip in unnoticed."

"Inside the wounded," I guessed. "Or returning troops. Or medics."

"You've become aware of the adversary," he said, his tone one of firm approval. "Excellent. I was certain your particular pursuits would get you killed long before you got a chance to learn."

"How can I help?" I asked him.

He leaned his head back and then a slow smile reasserted itself on his face. "I know something of the responsibilities you've chosen to take up," he said, "to say nothing of the problems you've created for yourself that you haven't found out about yet. And still, in the face of learning that our world spins out its days under siege, you offer to help me? I think you and I could be friends."

"Wait," I said. "What problems? I haven't been trying to create problems."

"Oh," he said, waving a hand. "You've danced about in the shadows at the edge of life now, young man. That's no small thing, to go into those shadows and come back again—you've no idea the kind of attention you've attracted."

"Oh," I said. "Good. Because the pace was starting to slow down so much that I was getting bored."

At that, Rashid tilted his head back and laughed. "Would you be offended if I called you Harry?"

"No. Because it's my name."

"Exactly," he said. "Harry, I know you have questions. I can field a very few before I go."

I nodded, thinking. "Okay," I said. "First, how do you know if the adversary has . . . infested someone?"

"Experience," he said. "Decades of it. The Sight can help, but . . ." Rashid hesitated. I recognized it instantly, the hiccup in one's thoughts when one stumbled over a truly hideous memory gained with the Sight, like I'd had with—

Ugh.

—the naagloshii.

“I don’t recommend making a regular practice of it,” he continued. “It’s an art, not a skill, and it takes time. Time, or a bit of questionable attention from the Fates and a ridiculously enormous tool.” He tapped a finger against his false eye.

I blinked, even though he didn’t, and looked up at the massive gates stretching overhead. “Hell’s bells. The gates . . . they’re . . . some kind of spiritual CAT scanner?”

“Among many other things,” he said. “But it’s one of their functions, yes. Mostly it means that the adversary cannot use such tactics effectively here. As long as the Gatekeeper is vigilant, it rarely tries.” The horns sounded again, and the muscles in his jaw tensed. “Next question.”

I hate trying to be smart under time pressure. “This,” I said, pointing up at the gates. “What the hell? How long has this attack been going on?”

“Always,” he said. “There are always Outsiders trying to tear their way in. There are always forces in place to stop them. In our age, it is the task of Winter to defend these boundaries, with the help of certain others to support them. Think of them as . . . an immune system for the mortal world.”

I felt my eyes get wide. “An immune system . . . What happens if it . . . you know, if it breaks down for a bit?”

“Pardon?” the Gatekeeper asked.

“Uh, it gets a glitch. Like, if somebody new took over or something and things had to reorganize around here . . .”

“Most years, it would pose no major difficulty,” he said.

“What about this year?”

“This year,” he said, “it could be problematic.”

“Problematic.”

“Rather severely so.” Rashid studied my face and then started to nod. “I see. There are things happening back in Winter. That’s why Mother Summer brought you here. To show you what was at stake.”

I swallowed and nodded. “No pressure or anything.”

Rashid’s face reacted at that. I couldn’t say what the exact mix of emotion on it was, though one of them was a peculiar kind of empathy. He set his staff aside and gripped my upper arms with his hands. “Listen to me, because this is important.”

“Okay,” I said.

“You get used to it,” he said.

I blinked. “What? That’s it?”

He tilted his head to look at me obliquely with his good eye.

“I’ll get used to it? That’s the important pep talk? I’ll get used to it?”

His mouth quivered. He gave my arms a last, maybe affectionate squeeze and released them. “Pep? What is needed in the Warden is far more than *pep*, Harry.”

“What, then?” I asked.

He took up his staff and poked my chest with it gently. “You, it would seem.”

“What?”

“You,” he repeated firmly. “What we need is *you*. You have what you have for a reason. Unwitting or not, virtually your every action in the past few years has resulted in a series of well-placed thumbs in the adversary’s eye. You want to know how you can help me, Harry?”

“Engh,” I said, frustrated. “Yeah.”

“Go back to Chicago,” he said, turning away, “and keep being yourself.”

“Wait,” I said. “I need *help*.”

At that, he paused. He looked back at me and gave me a quiet smile. “I know precisely how it feels to be where you are.” He gestured back toward the battleground. “Precisely.” He seemed to think about it for a moment, and then nodded. “I will do what I can. If we both survive the next several hours, I will settle matters between you and the Council, which knows only as much about our roles as it needs to—and that isn’t much. I will verify your return and that you are indeed yourself, and will see to it that your back pay as one of the Wardens is forwarded to you. There’s some paperwork to fill out to get the Council’s office to reestablish your official identity with the government, but I’ll see to it that it happens. I think I remember all the necessary forms.”

I stared at him for a second and said, “You’ll . . . you’ll help me with White Council *paperwork*.”

He held up a finger. “Do not underestimate the depth of this favor,” he said soberly, but his eye was twinkling. “And on a similar note, do not underestimate yourself. You haven’t been given the power and the knowledge and allies and the resources you possess for no reason, Harry. Nothing I have to say can possibly make this task any easier for you. The

only way to do it is to do it.” He lifted his chin. “You don’t need help, Warden. You *are* the help.”

“We’re in trouble,” I said.

He winked at me, restored his hood to its usual position, and said, “We always are. The only difference is, now you know it. God be with you, my friend. I will cover this end. You see to yours.”

He took several rapid paces out from under the towering gates and gestured. A second later, I kid you not, a freaking woven carpet, maybe ten feet by twenty, came sailing neatly down out of the sky, coming to hover about six inches off the ground beside him. Rashid stepped onto the carpet, slipped his boots into some kind of securing straps on it, and then lifted his staff. The carpet and the Gatekeeper rose serenely up out of sight, and a second later went streaking out over the storm-lit battlefield in a howl of whirling winds.

And that’s when it hit me. I mean, when it really, really hit me.

It was up to me.

There wasn’t a backup plan. There wasn’t a second option. There wasn’t any cavalry coming over the hill. The White Council was the next-best thing to clueless about what was happening, and would never in a zillion years admit that they were.

Tonight, a catastrophe that could kill millions of people, including my daughter, was going to happen unless I stopped it. And on top of that, there was a deadly turbulence happening inside the Winter Court, and depending on which side I threw in on, I could save or destroy the world as we knew it. Walking away from this one was not an option.

No dodges, no delays, no excuses. It would happen or it wouldn’t, depending on me.

I looked down at my bruised hands. I slowly closed them into fists and then opened them again. They were battered hands, and they didn’t have anywhere near as much skill as I could have wished were in them—but they were what I had. I had earned the scars on them. They were mine.

I’d done this before. Never on this scale, maybe, but I’d done it before. I’d saved the day, mostly, more or less, on several occasions. I’d done it before, and I could do it again.

There wasn’t any other way it was going to happen.

The only good thing about having your back to the wall is that it makes it really easy to choose which way you’re going to go.

I felt like throwing up. But I stiffened my back and straightened my shoulders and walked quickly over to Mother Summer as she finished standing up from tending to the last of the wounded Sidhe.

“Ma’am,” I said quietly. “I’d appreciate it if you could take me home. I have work to do.”

Chapter

Thirty-five

With all the benevolence she'd had going on, I sort of forgot that Mother Summer wasn't human. She took me from the gates back to her cottage in silence, smiled, touched my head with her hand—and sent me back to my freaking grave.

I landed on my ass in the muddy broken ice—and could still hear the echoes of the crackling detonation when Mother Winter's ugly mitt had smashed up through it and grabbed my noggin. I could still hear the raucous cawing of startled crows. Time had all but stopped while I was gone—or, more accurately, time had flown by extremely swiftly where I had been, in the Nevernever, relative to Chicago. I'd been on the other side of that kind of time dilation while dealing with beings of Faerie before, but

this was the first time I'd actually benefited from it, gaining time rather than losing it.

Which I hadn't even considered until now. If things had gone the way they usually did when one got pulled into Faerie business, I could have been gone for an hour and come back a year later, to what would presumably have been a blasted wasteland. The thought made my stomach churn with anxiety.

But I suppose I hadn't exactly volunteered for the trip. It wasn't like I'd taken a hideous risk on that score—it had been something entirely outside of my control.

That was scary, too.

While I was sitting there wondering whether that meant that I was a control freak or just sane, a Goth kid poked her head into view atop my grave and peered down at me. She took a cigarette in one of those long holders out of her mouth, exhaled smoke through her nose, and said, "Dude. That is pretty hard-core down there. Are you, like, gonna cut yourself or something?"

"No," I said, self-consciously hiding my hand behind my back. I looked down and only then did I realize that my outfit had changed from the Sidhe armor back to the secondhand clothes I'd been wearing before. "I fell."

Other Gothlings appeared. The girl repeated herself, and the others agreed that I was hard-core down there.

I sighed. I gathered my things and clambered out with some reluctantly offered help. I didn't need it, but I thought it might be good for some kid's self-esteem. Then I looked around at all the people staring at me, hunched my shoulders up around my head, and hurried out of the graveyard before anyone else could become helpful.

* * *

When I got back to Molly's place, she asked, "Why do you smell like cloves?"

"Kids today," I said. "I'm just glad they weren't smoking marijuana."

"Ah," Molly said. "Goths. So I guess that's grave dirt on you?"

"Stop Sherlocking me," I said. "And, yes, it is, and I'm showering. Any word?"

“Not yet,” Molly said. “Toot’s waiting outside for his crew to get back. I had to promise him extra pizza to keep him from going out to look himself. I figured we needed him to coordinate the guard.”

“Good thinking,” I said. “One sec.”

I went into my temporary quarters and got clean. It wasn’t just because I had mud from a century-old graveyard on me, along with an open wound on my hand, and because I feared about a million horrible things that could be made from those ingredients. The whole wizard-metabolism thing means that our immune systems are pretty much top-of-the-line. I doubted the Winter Knight’s mantle was slouchy in defending against such mundane threats, either.

It was mostly because I’d been up close and personal with some extremely powerful creatures, and such beings radiate magic like body heat. It’s the sort of thing that can cling to you if you aren’t careful, maybe coloring the way you think a bit, and definitely having the potential to influence anything you do with magic. (It happens with people, too, but with people, even wizards, their aura is so much less powerful that the effect is negligible.) Running water cleanses away the residue of that kind of contact, and I wanted to be sure that whatever happened tonight, I wasn’t going to be handicapped by any mystic baggage from today’s visits.

I hit the shower, bowing my head under the hot water, and thought about things. The Mothers had been trying to tell me something, something they hadn’t said outright. Maybe they hadn’t wanted to just give me what I wanted—but, way more likely, maybe they were incapable of it.

I had bullied Maeve and Lily into straight talk, such as it had been, and it had obviously been uncomfortable for them. I would never have tried the same thing on Titania or Mab. For whatever reason, it seemed that the essential nature of the Queens of Faerie was to be as indirect and oblique about things as possible. It was built into them, along with things like not being able to tell a direct lie. It was who they were. And the farther up the chain you went, the more steeped in that essential nature the Queens became. Maybe Titania or Mab could be a little bit straightforward at times, but I doubt they could have laid out a simple declarative statement about the issue at hand without a major effort. And if that was true, then maybe the Mothers couldn’t have done it even if they *wanted* to.

There’d been a message in all their talk, especially Mother Summer’s. But what the hell had it been?

Or maybe this wasn't a human-faerie translation problem at all. Maybe this was a male-female translation problem. I read an article once that said that when women have a conversation, they're communicating on five levels. They follow the conversation that they're actually having, the conversation that is specifically being avoided, the tone being applied to the overt conversation, the buried conversation that is being covered only in subtext, and finally the other person's body language.

That is, on many levels, astounding to me. I mean, that's like having a freaking superpower. When I, and most other people with a Y chromosome, have a conversation, we're having a conversation. Singular. We're paying attention to what is being said, considering that, and replying to it. All these other conversations that have apparently been going on for the last several thousand years? I didn't even know that they *existed* until I read that stupid article, and I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one.

I felt somewhat skeptical about the article's grounding. There were probably a lot of women who didn't communicate on multiple wavelengths at once. There were probably men who could handle that many just fine. I just wasn't one of them.

So, ladies, if you ever have some conversation with your boyfriend or husband or brother or male friend, and you are telling him something perfectly obvious, and he comes away from it utterly clueless? I know it's tempting to think to yourself, "The man can't possibly be that stupid!"

But yes. Yes, he can.

Our innate strengths just aren't the same. We are the mighty hunters, who are good at focusing on one thing at a time. For crying out loud, we have to turn down the radio in the car if we suspect we're lost and need to figure out how to get where we're going. That's how impaired we are. I'm telling you, we have only the one conversation. Maybe some kind of relationship veteran like Michael Carpenter can do two, but that's pushing the envelope. Five simultaneous conversations? *Five?*

Shah. That just isn't going to happen. At least, not for me.

So maybe it was something perfectly obvious and I was just too dumb to get it. Maybe the advice of someone less impaired than me would help. I went back into my head and made sure that I remembered the details of my recent conversations, putting them in order so that I could get a consult.

Once my brain had resolved that, it went straight down a road I'd been trying to detour around.

If I blew it tonight, people I loved were going to die. People who weren't involved in the fight. People like Michael, and his family and . . .

And my daughter, Maggie.

Should I call them? Tell them to hit the road and start driving? Did I have the right to do that, when so many other people's loved ones were at risk, too, with no possible way to get them out of reach of harm? Did that matter?

Was I going to be responsible for my daughter's death, the way I was for her mother's?

The lights didn't waver, but it got really, really dark in that shower for a minute.

And then I shook it off. I didn't have time to waste moaning about my poor daughter and my poor life and, gosh, do I feel bad about the horrible things I've done. I could indulge my self-pity after I'd taken care of business. Scratch that. After I'd taken care of business.

I slammed the water off hard enough to make it clack, got out of the shower, dried, and started getting dressed in a fresh set of secondhand clothes.

"Why do you wear those?" asked Lacuna.

I jumped, stumbled, and shouted half of a word to a spell, but since I was only halfway done putting on my underwear, I mostly just fell on my naked ass.

"Gah!" I said. "Don't *do* that!"

My miniature captive came to the edge of the dresser and peered down at me. "Don't ask questions?"

"Don't come in here all quiet and spooky and *scare* me like that!"

"You're six times my height, and fifty times my weight," Lacuna said gravely. "And I've agreed to be your captive. You don't have any reason to be afraid."

"Not *afraid*," I snapped back. "*Startled*. It isn't wise to startle a wizard!"

"Why not?"

"Because of what could happen!"

"Because they might fall down on the floor?"

"No!" I snarled.

Lacuna frowned and said, "You aren't very good at answering questions."

I started shoving myself into my clothes. "I'm starting to agree with you."

"So why do you wear those?"

I blinked. "Clothes?"

"Yes. You don't need them unless it's cold or raining."

"You're wearing clothes."

"I am wearing armor. For when it is raining arrows. Your T-shirt will not stop arrows."

"No, it won't." I sighed.

Lacuna peered at my shirt. "Aer-O-Smith. Arrowsmith. Does the shirt belong to your weapon dealer?"

"No."

"Then why do you wear the shirt of someone else's weapon dealer?"

That was frustrating in so many ways that I could avoid a stroke only by refusing to engage. "Lacuna," I said, "humans wear clothes. It's one of the things we do. And as long as you are in my service, I expect you to do it as well."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't, I . . . I . . . might pull your arms out of your sockets."

At that, she frowned. "Why?"

"Because I have to maintain discipline, don't I?"

"True," she said gravely. "But I have no clothes."

I counted to ten mentally. "I'll . . . find something for you. Until then, no desocketing. Just wear the armor. Fair enough?"

Lacuna bowed slightly at the waist. "I understand, my lord."

"Good." I sighed. I flicked a comb through my wet hair, for all the good it would do, and said, "How do I look?"

"Mostly human," she said.

"That's what I was going for."

"You have a visitor, my lord."

I frowned. "What?"

"That is why I came in here. You have a visitor waiting for you."

I stood up, exasperated. "Why didn't you say so?"

Lacuna looked confused. "I did. Just now. You were there." She frowned thoughtfully. "Perhaps you have brain damage."

"It would not shock me in the least," I said.

“Would you like me to cut open your skull and check, my lord?” she asked.

Someone that short should not be that disturbing. “I . . . No. No, but thank you for the offer.”

“It is my duty to serve,” Lacuna intoned.

My life, Hell’s bells. I beckoned Lacuna to follow me, mostly so I would know where the hell she was, and went back out into the main room.

Sarissa was there.

She sat at the kitchen table, her small hands clutched around one of Molly’s mugs, and she looked like hell. There was a dark red mouse on her left cheekbone, one that was swelling and beginning to purple nicely. Her hands and forearms were scraped and bruised—defensive injuries. She wore a pale blue T-shirt and dark blue cotton pajama pants. Both were soaked from the rain and clinging in a fashion that made me want to stare. Her dark hair was askew, and her eyes were absolutely haunted. They darted nervously toward me when I appeared, and her shoulders hunched slightly.

Molly said something quiet to her and rose from the table, crossing the room to me.

“She said you knew her,” Molly said.

“I do. She all right?”

“She’s a mess,” Molly said. “Showed up and begged security to call me before they called the cops. And it isn’t the first time this has happened to her. She’s terrified to be here—terrified of you personally, I think.”

I frowned at my apprentice.

Molly shrugged. “Her emotions are *really* loud. I’m not even trying to pick anything up.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Is she on the level?”

I thought about it for a second before I answered. “She’s Mab’s BFF.”

“So that would be a no, then,” Molly said.

“Probably so,” I said. “There’s bound to be an angle here, even if she doesn’t know that there is one. She’s a pawn in Winter. Somebody has got to be moving her.”

Molly winced.

“She’s also a lifelong survivor in Winter, so don’t let your guard down. The last creature who did wound up as frozen kibble.” I jerked my head toward the exit. “Heard anything from the scouts yet?”

She shook her head.

“Okay. We’ll talk to her. Stay close. I might need to pick your brain about something later.”

“Right,” Molly said, blinking a little. Then she followed me back over to Sarissa.

She gave me a nervous smile, and her fingers resettled on the mug a couple of times. “Harry.”

“I didn’t realize you made house calls all the way to Chicago,” I said.

“I wish it were that,” she said.

I nodded. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I was given directions,” she said.

“By who?”

She swallowed and looked down at the tabletop. “The Redcap.”

I sat back slowly in my seat. “Maybe you’d better tell me what happened.”

“He came for me,” she said quietly, without meeting my eyes. “He came this morning. I was hooded, bound, and taken somewhere. I don’t know where. I was there for several hours. Then he came back, took my hood off, and sent me here. With this.”

She reached down to her lap and put a plain white envelope on the table. She pushed it toward me.

I took it. It wasn’t sealed. I opened it, frowned, and then turned it upside down over the table.

Several tufts of hair bound with small bits of string fell out, along with a small metal object.

Molly drew in a sharp breath.

“He said to tell you that he’s taken your friends,” Sarissa said quietly.

I picked up the tufts of hair one at a time. Wiry black, slightly crinkled hairs, sprinkled with silver ones. Butters. Red hairs, luscious and curly. Andi. And a long, soft, slightly wavy lock of pure white hair. I lifted it to my nose and sniffed. Strawberries. I let out a soft curse.

“Who?” Molly asked, her voice worried.

“Justine,” I said.

“Oh, God.”

I picked up the metal object. It was a plain bottle cap, slightly dented where it had been removed.

“And Mac,” I said quietly. “He had someone following me everywhere I went. He took someone from each place.”

“He told me to tell you,” Sarissa said, “that he’ll trade them all for you, if you surrender to him before sundown.”

“And if I don’t?” I asked.

“He’ll give their bones to the rawhead,” she whispered.

Chapter

Thirty-six

Silence fell.

“Okay,” I said into it. “I’ve just about had enough of that clown.”

Molly looked up at me, her eyes worried. “You sure?”

“Guy gets his jollies dipping his hat in people’s blood,” I said.

“You can bargain with the Sidhe sometimes,” Molly said.

“But not this time,” I said, my voice hard. “If we do, he’ll keep the letter of his word and he’ll make sure they don’t make it out anyway. The only way we’re getting our friends back is to take them away from him.”

Molly grimaced, but after a moment, she nodded.

I picked up the clumps of hair and put them in a neat row on the table.

“Molly.”

“On it,” she said, collecting them.

“What are you doing?” Sarissa asked, her eyes wide.

“The jerk was kind enough to give me some fresh cuttings from my friends,” I said. “I’m going to use them to track him down and thwart him.”

“Thwart?” Sarissa asked.

“Thwart,” I said. “To prevent someone from accomplishing something by means of visiting gratuitous violence upon his smarmy person.”

“I’m pretty sure that isn’t the definition,” Sarissa said.

“It is today.” I raised my voice. “Cat Sith. I need your assistance, please.”

Sarissa went completely still when I spoke, like a rabbit who has sensed a nearby predator. Her eyes widened, then flicked around the room, seeking escape.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “I’m getting along with him.”

“You’re a wizard and the Winter Knight,” Sarissa hissed. “You have no idea how vicious that creature is, and I don’t have the Queen’s aegis protecting me.”

“You have mine,” I said. I raised my voice, annoyed. “Cat Sith! Kittykittykittykitty!”

“Are you *insane*?” Sarissa hissed.

“He might not be able to get through, Harry,” Molly said. “It’s not just a threshold here. The svartalves have wards over the building as well.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “Be right back.”

I went out and looked around, but Sith didn’t appear. I called his name a third time, which as we all know is the charm. With beings of the Nevernever it’s a literal truth. I mean, it’s not an irresistible force, like gravity—it’s more like a kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder that happens to be present, to varying degrees, in most of them. They respond, strongly, to things that happen in threes, be they requests, insults, or commands. So in a way, three really is a magic number.

Hell. Just ask *ménage-à-Thomas*. Jerk.

I waited for a while, even going so far as to turn about and take a few steps backward before turning forward again, just to give Sith some really rich opportunities to appear abruptly and startle me.

Except he didn’t.

I got a slow, squirmy feeling in the pit of my stomach. The rain was still falling in spits and showers, but the clouds had begun to gain the tint

of a slow autumn sundown. Sith had always appeared almost instantly before.

Had Mab been setting me up? Had she given me the eldest malk's assistance so that she could pull the rug out from under me when I needed Sith the most? Had she gotten the Nemesis brainmold?

I hadn't seen Sith since the confrontation at the gardens. Had the enemy Sidhe brought him down?

Or worse, the adversary?

I felt actively sick to my stomach. If Cat Sith had been turned, there was no telling how much damage he might cause. Especially to me.

I felt a little stupid about the kittykittykitty thing. Hopefully, he hadn't been listening.

I went back into the apartment, pensive.

Molly gave me an inquiring look.

I shook my head.

Molly frowned at that; I could see the gears whirling in her brain.

"Okay," I said. "Plan B. Lacuna, come here, if you please."

After a moment, a little voice said from the direction of my room, "What if I don't please?"

"You come here anyway," I stated. "It's a human thing."

She made a disgusted noise and came zipping out of the room on her blurring wings. "What do you want me to do?"

"You can read," I said. "Can you read a map? Write?"

"Yes."

"You're on house duty, then," I said. "If any of the Little Folk come back with a location where a rite is taking place, I want you to write down their descriptions and mark the location on the map. Can you do that?"

Lacuna looked dubiously at the maps spread out on the table. "I think so. Probably. Maybe."

"And no fighting or duels."

"What about when I'm done writing things?"

"No."

Lacuna folded her little arms and scowled at me. "You aren't fun at all."

"Your breath smells like celery," I replied. "Molly, how are those spells coming along?"

“I think there’s some kind of counterspell hiding them,” she said. “It’s tricky, so stop bumping my elbow. I’m concentrating over here.”

I let out an impatient breath and fought against a surge of anger. She was the apprentice and I was the wizard. There were wizards who would have beaten unconscious any apprentice who spoke to them like that. I’d always been kind to her—maybe too kind—and this disrespect was what I got in return? I should educate her to respect her betters.

I made a low growling sound in my chest and clenched my fists. That impulse wasn’t mine. It was Winter’s. Molly and I had a relationship built on structure, trust, and respect—not fear. We had always bantered back and forth like that.

But something in me wanted to . . . I don’t know. Put her in her place. Take out my frustrations on her. Show her which of us was the strongest. And it had a really primitive idea of how to make that happen.

But that was unthinkable. That was the mantle talking. Loudly.

Hell’s bells. As if I didn’t have enough trouble thinking my way past the influence of my own glands already.

I heard a slight sound behind me and turned in time to see Sarissa vanish into the bathroom, moving in absolute silence. The rabbit had given up the statue routine and bolted.

Sarissa had good instincts when it came to predators.

I turned back to Molly to find her looking at me, her eyes wide. Molly was a psychic sensitive. She could feel emotions the way most of us can feel the temperature of a room. Sometimes she could even pluck someone’s thoughts out of the air.

She knew exactly what I was feeling. She had all along.

And she hadn’t run.

“Are you okay?” she asked quietly.

“It’s nothing,” I said. I forced myself to think my way past the mantle’s influence. “Find a steel needle to use as the focus,” I said. “Should give you an edge against whatever magic the Sidhe are using.”

“Should have thought of that,” Molly chided herself.

“That’s why they pay me the big bucks.” I turned and walked away from my apprentice to let her work without the distraction of my tangle of Winter’s urges blaring into her skull like an airhorn.

I rummaged around in her fridge and made a sandwich from a bagel I split down the middle and a small mountain of two different-colored deli

meats. I wolfed it down. Less than five minutes later, Molly tied a needle onto a piece of wood with one of each of the human hairs. She then placed it gently into a bowl of water, and performed the tracking spell without a hitch.

The needle slowly swung around to point east, directly toward my abducted friends. Probably. There were ways to futz about with tracking spells, but it appeared that the addition of steel to our own spell had overcome whatever the Redcap had cooked up. I extended my senses and checked the tracking spell. It was as solid as one of my own.

“Good work,” I said. Then I walked over to the bathroom door and knocked gently. “Sarissa,” I said. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“We’re going out,” I said. “I hope we won’t be gone long. You should be safe here, but you’re free to leave if you want to do so. I think you might be followed if you do, but you aren’t a prisoner or anything. Okay?”

There was a hesitant moment of silence and then she said, “I understand.”

“There’s food in the fridge,” Molly called. “And you can sleep in my room if you’re tired. The door has a lock.”

There was no answer.

“Let’s get moving,” I said to Molly. “I want to make a stop before we track them down.”

* * *

The svartalves’ security guy stopped us before we could leave and informed us that my car had been repaired and delivered, and that they would bring it around for me. Molly and I traded a glance.

“Um. How sure are you that the vehicle is secure?” Molly asked.

“Mr. Etri personally requested a security sweep,” the guard said. “It’s already been screened for weapons, explosives, toxins, and any kind of enchantment, Miss Carpenter. Right now, they’re running it under a waterfall to wash away any tracking spells that might be on it. It’s the same procedure Mr. Etri uses to secure his own cars, miss.”

“Who brought it?” Molly asked.

The guard took a small notebook from his pocket and checked it. “A local mechanic named Mike Atagi. Think there’s a picture . . .” He thumbed

through the pages, and then held up a color printout that had been folded into the notebook. “This is him.”

I leaned forward to peer at the photo. Well, son of a gun. It was my old mechanic, Mike. Mike had been a miracle worker when it came to repairing the *Blue Beetle*, working with a talent that was the next-best thing to sorcery to bring the car back from the dead over and over again.

“Did he say who delivered it to him?” I asked.

The guard checked his notes. “Here. That it was waiting at his shop when he got there, along with a deposit and a rush order, reading, ‘Repair this for Harry Dresden and return it to the following address or suffer, mortal smith.’”

“Cat Sith,” I said. “Well, at least he was on the job while we were out at the island.”

There was a low growling sound and the *Munstermobile* came gliding up out of the parking garage, dripping water from its gleaming surface like some lantern-eyed leviathan rising from the depths. There were still a few dents and dings in it, but the broken glass had all been replaced, and the engine sounded fine.

Okay, I’m not like a car fanatic or anything—but the guitar riff from “Bad to the Bone” started playing in my head.

“Wheels,” I said. “Excellent.”

The *Munstermobile* came gliding up to us and stopped, still dripping water, and another security guy got out of it, left the driver door open, and came around to open the passenger door for Molly.

I touched Molly’s shoulder to stop her from moving to get in immediately, and spoke to her very quietly. “How much do you trust your friend Mr. Etri?”

“Etri might oppose you,” Molly said. “He might break your bones. He might cut your throat in your sleep or make the ground swallow you up. But he will never, ever lie about his intentions. He’s not a friend, Harry. But he *is* my ally. He’s good at it.”

I wanted to say something smart-ass about not trusting anyone who lived anywhere near the Faerie realms, but I held back. For one thing, svartalves take paranoia to an art form, and I had no doubt they would be listening to everything everyone said on their own property while not in private quarters. It would have been stupid to insult them. For another thing, they had an absolutely ironclad reputation for integrity and

neutrality. No one crossed a svartalf lightly—but on the other hand, the svartalves rarely gave anyone a good *reason* to cross them, either. That garnered them a boatload of respect.

They also had a reputation for rigid adherence to promises, to bargains, and to the law, or at least to the letters it consisted of. “What are the terms of your alliance?” I asked, walking around the car toward the driver side.

“I get the apartment,” Molly said. “I mean, it’s mine. I own it. They handle any maintenance for the next fifty years, and as long as I’m on their property, they consider me to be a citizen of their nation, with all the rights and privileges that entails.”

I whistled as we got in and shut the doors. “And what did you give them for that?”

“Their honor. And there might have been this bomb problem I handled for them.”

“Hell’s bells,” I said. “Look at you, all grown-up.”

“You have been,” Molly said. “All day.”

I tried not to give her a guilty glance as we pulled out. “Um.”

“I feel it, you know,” she said. “The pressure inside you.”

“I’ve got it buttoned down,” I said, and started driving. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to let it make me . . . take anything away from you.”

Molly folded her hands in her lap, looked down at them, and said in a small voice, “If it’s given, freely offered, you can’t really take it away. All you’re doing is accepting a gift.”

Part of me felt like something had torn in my chest, so deep was the ache I felt at the hope, the uncertainty in the grasshopper’s voice.

And another part of me wanted to howl and attack her. Take her. Now. It didn’t even want to wait to stop the car. If I went purely by the numbers, there was no reason at all not to give in to that urge—except for the car crashing, I mean. Molly was an adult woman now. She was exceptionally attractive. I’d seen her naked once, and she was really good at it. She was willing—eager, even. And I trusted her. I’d taught her a lot over the years, and some of that had been extremely intimate. Master-apprentice relationships were hardly unheard-of in wizarding circles. Some wizards even favored that situation, because on the spooky side, sex can be a whole hell of a lot more dangerous than recreational. They regarded the teaching

of physical intimacy as something as inextricably intertwined with magic as it is with life.

It's possible that, from a standpoint of pure, unadulterated reason, they might even have a point.

But there was more to it than reason. I'd known Molly when she was wearing a training bra. I'd hung out in her tree house with her after she'd come home from high school. She was the daughter of the man I respected most in this world and the woman whom I least wanted to cross. I believed that people in positions of authority and influence, especially those in the role of mentor and teacher, had a mountainous level of responsibility to maintain in order to balance out that influence over less experienced individuals.

But mostly, I couldn't do it because Molly had been crushing on me since she was about fourteen years old. She was in love with me, or at least thought she was—and I didn't feel it back. It wouldn't be fair to her to rip her heart out that way. And I would never, ever forgive myself for hurting her.

"It's okay," she almost-whispered. "Really."

There wasn't anything much to say. So I reached over, took her hand, and squeezed gently. After a while, I said, "Molly, I don't think it's ever going to happen. But if it ever does, the first time damned well isn't going to be like that. You deserve better. So do I."

Then I put both hands back on the wheel and kept on driving. I had someone else to pick up before I gave the Redcap my version of a hostage crisis.

* * *

We got to Chez Carpenter around five, and I parked the *Munstermobile* on the street. It was the single gaudiest object for five miles in every direction, and it blended in with the residential neighborhood about as well as a goose in a crowd of puffer fish. I turned off the engine and listened to it clicking. I didn't look at the house.

I got out of the car, shut the door, and leaned back against it, still not looking at the house. I didn't need to. I'd seen it often enough. It was a gorgeous Colonial home, complete with manicured landscaping, a pretty green lawn, and a white picket fence.

The grasshopper got out of the car and came around to stand beside me. “Dad’s at work. The sandcrawler is gone,” Molly noted, nodding toward the driveway where her mother always parked their minivan. “I think Mom was going to take the Jawas trick-or-treating at the Botanic Gardens this afternoon. So the little ones won’t be home.”

Which was Molly’s way of telling me that I didn’t have to face my daughter right now, and I could stop being a coward.

“Just go get him,” I said. “I’ll wait here.”

“Sure,” she said.

Molly went up to the front door and knocked. About two seconds after she did that, something huge slammed against the other side of the door. The heavy door jumped in its frame. Dust fell from the roof over the porch, dislodged by the impact. Molly stiffened and backed away. A second later, there was another thump, and another, and the sound of the frantic scratching of claws on the door. Then more thumping.

I hurriedly crossed the street to stand beside Molly on the lawn, facing the front door.

The door wiggled, then opened unsteadily, as if being manipulated by someone with his hands full. Then the storm door flew open and something grey and shaggy and enormous shot out onto the porch. It cleared the porch railing in a single bound, hurtled across the ground and the little picket fence, and hit me in the chest like a battering ram.

My dog, Mouse, is a temple dog of Tibet, a Foo dog of a powerful supernatural bloodline, though he could have passed for an exceptionally large Tibetan mastiff. Mouse can take on demons and monsters without batting an eye, and he checks in at about two fifty. He knocked me down as easily as a bowling ball does the first pin. And, superdog though he may be, he’s still a dog. Once I was down, he planted his front paws on either side of my head and proceeded to give me slobbery dog kisses on the face and neck and chin, making happy little sounds the whole time.

“Ack!” I said, as I always did. “My lips touched dog lips! Get me some mouthwash! Get me some iodine!” I shoved at his chest, grinning, and managed to lever myself out from underneath him and stand.

That didn’t diminish Mouse’s enthusiasm in the least. He cut loose with a series of joyous barks so loud that they set off a car alarm on a vehicle a hundred feet away. Then he sprinted in a tight circle, came back to my feet, and barked some more. He did that over and over for about a

minute, his tail wagging so hard that it sounded like a helicopter might have been passing in the distance, *whup-whup-whup-whup*.

“All right,” I said. “Enough. Come on, it’s not like I died or anything, boy.”

He quieted, his jaws parted in a canine grin, tail still wagging so hard that it pulled his hindquarters left and right with it. I knelt down and put my arms around him. If I’d been an inch or two shorter, I doubt I could have done it. Damn pooch is huge, and built like a barrel. He laid his chin on my shoulder and panted happily as I hugged him.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I missed you, too, buddy.” I nodded toward the house. “Anyone home?”

He tilted his head to one side slightly, one ear cocked at a slightly different angle from the other.

“He says no,” Molly said.

I blinked at her. “First Sherlock, now Dolittle?”

She blushed slightly and looked embarrassed. “It’s just something I picked up. A dog’s thoughts and emotions are a lot more direct and less conflicted than a human’s. It’s easier to listen for them. It isn’t a big deal.”

Mouse came over to greet Molly by walking back and forth against her legs, nearly knocking her down. He stopped and looked fondly up at her, tail wagging, and made a little woofing sound.

“You’re welcome,” she said, and scratched his ears.

“I need your help, boy,” I said. “Bad guys took Butters, Andi, and Justine.”

Mouse shook his head vigorously and half sneezed.

“Mouse thinks Andi should be locked in the garage at night, until she learns not to get abducted.”

“Once we get her back, we’ll start calling her Danger-prone Daphne,” I promised him. “She’s even got the hair for it. You in, Scoob?”

In answer, Mouse hurried to the street, looked both ways, then crossed it to sit down at the back door of the *Munstermobile*. Then he looked at me, as if asking me why I wasn’t opening it for him.

“Of course he’s in,” Molly translated, smiling.

“Good thing you’re here,” I said. “He’s tough to read.”

Chapter

Thirty- seven

We used the spinning needle in the bowl of water like a compass, driving north to south first, to let us triangulate on our friends' location. As tracking spells went, this one was a little clumsier than most. We had to pull over the *Munstermobile* and let the water settle to use it—but hey, nothing's perfect.

We tracked our friends, and presumably the Redcap and company, to the waterfront. The sun was setting behind us, and had briefly appeared from behind the clouds. The city's skyline cast deep, cold shadows over us.

“Harry,” Molly said. “You know that this—”

“Is a trap,” I said. “Yep. The Redcap knew exactly what I would do with those bits of hair.”

Molly looked a little relieved. “Okay. Then what’s the plan?”

“Once we are sure where they are,” I said, “I’m going to go in the front door.”

“That’s the plan?”

“I’m going to be very, very noisy,” I said. “Meanwhile, you and Supermutt are going to sneak in the back, all sneaky-like, neutralize any guards that aren’t watching me, and get our crew out.”

“Oh,” Molly said. “Are you sure you don’t want me to be the distraction?”

It was a fair question. Molly’s One-woman Rave spell could get more attention than a crash at an airshow. “The Sidhe know all about veils,” I said. “Mine aren’t good enough to get anywhere near them. Yours are. It’s that simple.”

“Right,” she said, and swallowed. “So we’re . . . going to depend on me for the important part. Saving people.”

“You’ve been playing Batman for a while now, kid,” I said. “I think you’ve got this.”

“Mostly I was the only one in danger if I screwed up,” Molly said. “Are you sure this is the right plan?”

“If you think you can handle it,” I said. “Or if you don’t.”

“Oh.”

I put a hand on her shoulder. “We don’t have time to dance around on this one. So we go dirt simple. When it starts, if someone gets in your way, I want you to hit them with everything you’ve got, right in the face. Mouse will be with you as muscle.”

“Shouldn’t he be with you? I mean, if you’re going to fight . . .”

“I’m not going to fight,” I said. “No time to prepare, no plan, I’d lose a fight. I’m going to be a big noisy distraction.”

“But what if you get in trouble?”

“That’s my part. You do your part. Keep focused on your objective. Get in, get them, get out, signal. Then we all run away. Got it?”

She nodded tightly. “Got it.”

“Woof,” said Mouse.

* * *

“Huh,” I said a few moments later. We had triangulated with the tracking spell and narrowed down their location to one building, and we now lurked in an alley across the street. “I’ve actually been in there before.”

“You have?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Client had lost a kid or something to some half-assed wannabe warlock. He had the cheesy dialogue and everything, was gonna sacrifice the kid with this big cheap, spiky knife.”

“How did it turn out?”

“If I remember it right, I got beat up,” I said. “Didn’t make much money on it, either. The bad guy ran away, and the client walked out threatening a lawsuit. Except she left the kid. Turns out, she wasn’t even his mom, and his real parents tried to have me arrested. Never heard from her again. No clue what it was about. Chalk.”

Molly reached into her bag and came out with a stick of chalk, which she passed to me. I crouched and quickly sketched a diagram of the rectangular warehouse. “Here’s the front door. Office door. Back door. There’re some windows up high, but you’d have to be a bird to get there. The rear of the warehouse actually protrudes over the water, but there’s a wooden deck around the back. That’s where you’ll go in, at the back door. Watch for trip wires. Mouse can help with that. Trust him. We’re basically blind and deaf by comparison.”

“Right,” Molly said, nodding. “Okay.”

“Don’t get hung up on what could happen if it goes wrong,” I said. “Focus, concentrate, just like we do for a spell. Get in. Get them. Get out.”

“Let’s just do it,” she said, “before I throw up.”

“I’ll give you five minutes to get into position. Don’t go in until I get noisy.”

“Right,” Molly said. “Come on, Mouse.”

The big dog came up beside Molly, and she didn’t even have to bend to slip the fingers of one hand through his collar. “Stay this close to me, okay?” she said to Mouse.

He looked up at her and wagged his tail.

She gave him a shaky smile, nodded at me, then spoke a word and vanished.

I started counting to three hundred and briefly wondered why I kept running into repeat uses of various locations around town. This wasn’t the first time I’d dealt with the bad guys choosing to reuse a location different

bad guys had used before them. Maybe there was a Villainous Time-share Association. Maybe my life was actually a basic-cable television show, and they couldn't afford to spend money on new sets all the time.

Or—and this seemed more likely—maybe there was a reason for it. Maybe the particular vibe of certain spots just felt more like home to predators. Predators like to lair in a place with multiple ways in and out, isolated from casual entry, near supplies of whatever it was they like to eat. Supernatural predators would also have some level of awareness of the nature of the Nevernever that abutted any given part of our reality, even if it was only an instinct. It would make sense that they would be more at ease in places that joined parts of the Nevernever where they would be comfortable. I mean, everyone likes to eat somewhere that feels like home.

If I lived through the next day or so, I needed to start keeping track of where these jokers liked to get their bloodthirsty freak on. It might give me an edge someday. Or at least a list of places that could use a nice burning down. I hadn't burned down a building in ages.

Two ninety-nine. Three hundred.

"Ready or not," I muttered, "here I come."

I strode out of the alley across from the warehouse, gathering my will into a shield around my left hand, and readied a lance of force in my right. Hell's bells, I missed my equipment. Mab had forced me to learn how to do without, but that didn't mean I could do it as *well*. I missed my shield bracelet. I missed my blasting rod. I missed my spell-armored coat. With that gear, this would be pretty simple. I could protect myself better from every direction and have a lot more range on my spells to make the bad guys keep their heads down. But it would take me weeks to build new ones, and I had to work with what I had—which was pretty much just me.

My shields would be as strong, but I couldn't sustain them for as much time, or in every direction—so I couldn't walk in with a nice comfortable bubble of force around me. Without the bracelet or a tool like it, I could protect myself only from the front, and only for a few seconds at a time. My offensive spells would hit just as hard, but they'd have a shorter range, and they would take a few more crucial fractions of a second to enact.

Man, I missed my toys.

The warehouse had a little fence covered in plastic sheeting and topped with barbed wire. There was a gated area in front of the main entryway, though the gate had been blasted off its hinges by some deranged

ruffian who did not look like me, no matter what the witnesses said, and apparently no one had replaced it since.

Awful lot of open space out there. I'd be a really juicy target. Which was sort of the point: Make myself so attractively vulnerable that no one was watching the back door. It wasn't the best idea in the world to walk out into that, but Halloween night was maybe an hour away, and there wasn't time to be smart.

That said, there's a difference between being reckless and being insane. I didn't especially like the idea of stumbling over a trip line tied to, let's say, an antipersonnel mine, so before I went in, I flung my right arm forward in a large sweeping underhand motion, as if I were trying to throw a bowling ball at the pins two lanes over from where I was standing. I muttered, "*Forzare!*" as I threw the spell, focusing on shaping the force I'd released into what I needed.

Energy rippled across the ground in a shock wave that threw up dust and bits of gravel and irregular chunks of broken asphalt. It rippled across the ground to the warehouse and landed against its front doorway with a giant, hollow boom.

"Say, 'Who's there!'" I shouted at the warehouse, already walking forward rapidly, while the dust still hung in the air—it would make it more possible, if not likely, to spot any of the Redcap's Sidhe buddies who might be hiding under a veil inside it. "I dare you! I double-dog dare you!"

I hurled another blast of force at the big loading doors in the front of the warehouse, something meant to make a lot of noise, not to tear them down. It succeeded. A second enormous concussion made the building's steel girders and metal walls ring like some vast, dark bell.

"The furious wizard, that's who!" I shouted. "You've got ten seconds to free my friends, unharmed, or I'm going to fucking smite every last mother's son of you!"

I had maybe half a second's warning, and then a streaking black form dived down from above me and raked at my eyes with its talons. I snapped my head back out of the way, only to see a hawk beating back up out of the nadir of its dive. It rolled in the air, and as it did it shimmered, and in an instant the hawk was gone and one of the Sidhe was there in its place, arcing through the air in free fall, holding a bow and an arrow in his hands. He drew and shot in the same instant he shifted, and I barely caught the arrow on my shield. Before he could begin to fall, he completed the roll and

shifted again, back into hawk form, then beat his wings and continued rising into the sky.

Hell's bells. That looked *awesome*. It took a serious mastery of shape-shifting to bring equipment and clothes and things with you when you changed form, but that guy had made it look as easy as breathing.

I mean, say what you will about the faeries, but they've got style. Not so much style that I didn't hurl another bolt of force after the flying archer, but I missed him and he winged away with a mocking shriek.

Then I felt a small, sharp pain in my left leg.

I looked down to see a little wooden dart sticking out of the back of my calf. It was carved, perfectly smooth and round, and fletched with a few tiny slivers of scarlet feather. I snapped my gaze around behind me, and caught a single glimpse of the Redcap poised in a crouch atop the fence surrounding the warehouse, balancing his weight with apparent effortless ease along a strand of barbed wire that had to have been a sixteenth of an inch wide.

His mouth was spread in a wide, manic grin. He held a short silvery tube in one hand, and as my eyes found his face, he touched two fingertips of his other hand to his lips, blew me a kiss, and plummeted back off of the fence and out of sight.

I whirled toward him and brought up my shield, then spun around and angled it that way, then jittered about, rubbernecking everywhere at once. But that was it. Assuming the Sidhe weren't simply undetectable to my senses, they were gone.

A slow burning sensation began to spread from the wound in my leg.

A cold shiver oozed down my spine. I tugged the dart out of my calf. It hadn't done much—the slender spear of wood had penetrated maybe a quarter inch into my skin—but when I rolled up my pant leg to look, I found an inordinately large trickle of blood coming from the tiny wound.

And that burning sensation became an almost infinitesimally greater presence with each heartbeat.

This hadn't been a hostage crisis at all.

It had been an assassination. Or . . . or something.

"Goddammit!" I snarled. "I just got played *again*! I am so sick and tired of this backstabby bullshit!"

I more or less stormed into the warehouse, shoving open the office door and stalking out onto the main floor. The place was just as empty as I

remembered, give or take the leavings of several apparent transients between the present and the past. Molly was at the very rear of the warehouse, near the door. She was helping Justine to sit up. Mac was there, too, and he and Butters were between them helping a wobbly-looking Andi to remain on her feet. Mouse was standing guard between the group and the front of the warehouse, and he started wagging his tail when he saw me.

“Clear,” I called out to them, hurrying over. “Or at least clearish. What happened?”

“They were under a sleeping enchantment,” Molly reported. “Pretty standard stuff. I woke them up.”

“Everyone okay?”

“Andi got hit on the head when they took her,” she said. “Other than that, I think we’re good.”

When she spoke, Molly’s voice never quavered, but her eyes flickered uncertainly toward Mac. I took a closer look at everyone. Andi, Butters, and Justine had all been bound. Justine was only now getting the ropes cut off of her wrists, and as Molly sawed them away with a pocketknife, I could see the deep red marks they’d left on Justine’s slender wrists. Butters and Andi had them, too, visible even in the dimness of the warehouse.

Mac didn’t.

That was interesting. Why hadn’t Mac been tied up? Or if he had, how come there wasn’t a mark to show for it? Either way, that was odd.

My first instinct was to grab him and demand answers—but the direct approach hadn’t gotten me anything but more confused as I went through this stupid day. I might have been a better thug than at any point in my life, but that wouldn’t matter if I couldn’t figure out where to apply my muscle. And I was damned tired of being sneaked up on. So it was time to get sneaky.

I ground my teeth and pretended that Molly hadn’t clued me into anything. “All right, people,” I said. “Let’s move. I think they’re gone but they could be back.”

“That’s it?” Molly asked. “I was expecting more trouble than th—” She broke off, staring at the floor behind me.

My leg throbbed and burned a little more, and I glanced down at it in irritation. To my shock, I saw a long line of small smears of my blood on the tile floor. The little wound had continued bleeding, soaked through my sock and my shoe, and dribbled down onto my heel.

“What happened?” Molly asked.

“It was another stupid trick,” I said. “The point wasn’t to hold them for ransom. It was to get me here, under pressure, and too keyed up to defend myself from every direction.” I held up the dart. “We’d better find out what this thing is and what kind of poison is on it.”

“Oh, my God,” Molly breathed.

“I’ll take whatever help I can get,” I said. “Let’s g—”

But before I could finish the sentence, there was a loud crunching *whoomp* of a sound, and the entire warehouse shook. I barely had time to think *demolition charges* before there was a deafening crack, and the floor tilted.

And then the back twenty feet of the warehouse, including all of us, fell right off of the street and into the cold, dark water of Lake Michigan.

Chapter

Thirty-eight

We didn't drop straight down. Instead, there was a scream of shearing bolts, and our part of the building lurched drunkenly and then plunged into the water at an oblique angle.

The confusion of it was the worst part. The loud noise, the disorientation inherent in the uneven motion, and then the short surge of terror as gravity took over all served to create a panic reaction in my head—and I'm not a guy who panics easily.

That's what most people don't understand about situations like this one. People are just built to freak out when something goes wrong. It doesn't matter if you're a kindergarten teacher or a Special Forces operator—when life-threatening stuff happens, you get scared. You freak out. That's

just what happens. When it's because you've woken up to a hungry bear in your camp, that's usually a pretty good mechanism.

But being dropped into black water in an enclosed area is *not* a place where panicked adrenaline is going to help you out. That's when you have to somehow set that fear aside and force yourself to use your rational mind to guide you out of the situation. There are two ways to get yourself into that terrified-but-rational state of mind. First is training, where you drill a reaction into yourself so hard and so many times that it becomes a form of reflex you can perform without even thinking. And the other way you get there is to have enough experience to have learned what you need to do.

So the first thing I did as the cold water swallowed me was to close my eyes for a second and focus, just as I would if I were preparing a spell, relaxing my limbs and letting them float loosely in the water. I gathered my thoughts and laid out my options.

First, I had time, but not much of it. I had gotten a good breath before I went under. The others might or might not have done the same. So I had about two minutes to act before people started trying to breathe Lake Michigan. Two minutes doesn't sound like long, but it was enough time to spend a few seconds thinking.

Second, we were surrounded by steel siding. I wasn't getting through that with anything short of a full-power blast, and that wasn't going to happen while I was surrounded by water. Water tends to disperse and ground out magical energies just by being nearby. When water is all around you, it's all but impossible to direct any energy out of your body without it spreading out and diluting to uselessness.

The edges of the building might or might not have grounded themselves into the mud at the bottom of the lake, trapping us all like bugs under a shoe box lid. There wasn't time to search through them systematically, not before people started drowning. That meant that we had to go out through the only way I could be sure was available—the back door.

Except that everyone was spread out in the blackness now, and at least one person, Andi, was already disoriented from the blow to her head. It was possible others had been hurt in the fall, or would get hurt as they struggled to get out. There seemed to be very little chance that I could find the door, then find all of them in the dark, then get them pointed at the door and out. It seemed just as unlikely that everyone would stop to think and come to

the same conclusion I had. There was a very real chance that one or more of my friends might be left behind.

But what other options did I have? It wasn't as though I could lift the entire thing out of the water—

No. I couldn't.

But Winter could.

I opened my eyes into the darkness, made a best guess for down, and swam that way. I found mud within a few feet. I thrust my right hand into the mud, thrashing rather awkwardly to get it done. Then I went limp again, floating a bit weirdly, tethered by my hand in the mud, and focused my mind.

I wasn't going to try to lift the freaking building. That was just insane. I'd known things that might have been able to pull it off, but I was certain I wasn't one of them, not even with the power of the Winter Knight's mantle.

Besides, why do it the stupid way?

I felt myself smiling, maybe smiling a little too widely, in the dark water, and unleashed the cold of winter directly into the ground beneath me, through my right hand. I poured it on, holding nothing back, reaching deep into me, to the source of cold power inside me, and sending it out into the muck of the lake bottom.

Lake Michigan is a deep lake, and only its upper layers ever really warm up. Beyond a few feet of the surface, the cold is a constant, an absolute, and the mud at the bottom of what I was guessing to be fifteen or twenty feet of water, at the most, was clammy. As the power poured out of me, the water did what it always did with magic—it began to diffuse it, to spread it out.

Which was exactly what I was going for.

Ice formed around my hand and spread into a circle several feet wide in the first instant, conducted more easily through the mud than through the water. I poured more effort in, and the circle widened, more ice forming, spreading out. I kept up the cold, and the water touching the bottom began to freeze as well.

My heart began to beat harder, and there was a roaring sound in my ears. I didn't give up, sending more and more cold into the lake around me, building up layer after layer of ice across the entire bottom of the lake beneath the collapsed warehouse. At sixty seconds, the ice was three feet deep, and forming around my arm and shoulder. At ninety seconds, it had

engulfed my head and upper body, and had to have been five or six feet deep. And when my internal count reached a hundred and ten, the entire mass of ice tore loose from the lake's bottom with a groan and began to rise.

I never let up on it, building it into a miniature iceberg, and the steel beams and walls of the warehouse moaned and squealed as the ice began to lift them free. I felt it when my feet came out of the water, though most of the rest of me was still stuck in the ice. I tore and twisted and seemed to know exactly where to apply pressure and torque without being told. The ice crackled away and I slipped out of it with a minimum of fuss. When I pulled my head out (go ahead; make a joke), I was sitting in dim light atop a sheet of ice floating several inches out of the waters of the lake.

I was still in the rear section of the warehouse. The back door was open, straight above my head, and was letting in most of the light. The broken ends of the room, the floor, and the two walls had been embedded in ice, but crookedly. The ragged edge of the ceiling was a couple of feet out of the water.

Several very startled-looking people and one fur-plastered dog were shivering on the ice. I took a quick head count. Everyone was there.

I sagged down onto the ice in relief, fatigue making my body feel like it weighed an extra ton, and just lay there for a moment as the wreckage bobbed gently in the water. After a few seconds, I became aware of eyes on me, and I looked up.

My friends were all sitting or kneeling on the ice, damp and shivering, and staring at me with wide eyes. Molly's eyes were bright and intense, the expression on her face unreadable. Justine's mouth hung slightly open, and her big dark eyes looked afraid. Butters stared first at me and then down at the ice, his eyes flicking around, the wheels clearly churning in his head as he calculated how much ice there was and how much energy it would have taken to freeze it. Mac regarded me impassively, still supporting the dazed Andi.

Sweetly curved Andi was the most vulnerable. If I could isolate her from the herd, things could get interesting. I'd just saved her life, after all. She owed me. I could think of a few ways that she could express her gratitude.

I pushed the predator thought out of my head and took a deep breath. When I exhaled, it condensed into a thick, foggy vapor, more so than it ever

would have naturally, even on the coldest days. I looked down at my hands and they were covered in frost, and my fingertips and nails were turning blue. I put a hand to my face and had to brush away a thin layer of frost.

Hell's bells. What did I look like, to make my friends stare at me like that?

Time for mirrors later.

I stood up, my feet sure even on the wet ice, and found the nearest point of the shoreline. I extended a hand, murmured, "*Infriga*," and froze a ten-foot-long bridge from my improvised iceberg to land.

"Come on," I said, as I started walking toward the shore. My voice sounded strange, rough. "We don't have much time."

* * *

The sun had slipped below the cloud cover, and the sky was a bank of hot coals, slowly burning down toward ember and ash when we got back to Molly's apartment.

Thomas and Karrin were waiting outside. The two of them were leaning against the wall near the security checkpoint. Thomas had a tall coffee cup in one hand and a bagel in the other. Karrin was staring down at a smartphone, her thumbs flicking over its surface.

Thomas took note of the car as it pulled up, and nudged Karrin. She looked up, then did a double take at the *Munstermobile*. She rolled her eyes, then apparently turned the phone off and slipped it into a case on her belt.

I stopped the car and rolled down the window.

"You've got to be kidding me," Karrin said, eyeing the car. "*This?*"

"I think it's a company car," I said.

Karrin leaned down and looked at everyone in the back. "What happened?"

"Inside—I'll explain."

We got parked and everyone made their way to Molly's place, some of them more slowly than others.

"You're limping," Thomas noted, walking beside me. "And bleeding."

"No, I'm . . ." I began. Then I sighed. "Yeah. Redcap shot me with some kind of dinky dart. Maybe poisoned. Or something."

Thomas made a low growling sound in his chest. "I'm just about done with that clown."

“Tell me about it.”

Molly opened the door, and the moment I stepped in, Lacuna came zipping over to me. The little armored faerie hovered in the air near my face, her dark hair flying wildly in the turbulence of her own beating wings. “You can’t do it!” she cried. “You can’t just give them all that pizza! Do you have any idea how much harm you’re doing? Can I *please* fight now?”

“Whoa,” I said, leaning back and holding up my hands.

“Hey, shortcake,” my brother snapped. “Back off.”

“You aren’t important,” Lacuna declared to Thomas, evidently dismissing him entirely as she turned back to me. “I wrote down everything just like you said and now they’re going to get that awful pizza all over themselves without the *least* regard for properly protecting themselves, and I’m going to *fight* them for the pizza!”

“In the first place, that is not a fight you are going to win,” I said, “and in the second place—they found something?”

“And I wrote it down like you said and now I want to duel them!”

“No duels!” I said, and headed for the dining table. Sure enough, Lacuna had drawn precise little Xs at all of the sites marked on the map. Most of them had been done with a green pen, but two locations were marked in red. One of them was next to one of the primary sites I’d marked earlier, on this side of the lake, north of town. The next was at one of the secondary sites, a little farther inland and on the far side of the lake.

“Lacuna, were they sure that ritual preparation was under way at both of these locations?”

“And the others were clear,” the little faerie replied impatiently. “Yes, yes, yes.”

“Crap,” I muttered. “Molly, time?”

“Twenty-five minutes to sundown, more or less,” she replied. She came to the table with a first-aid kit in her hands. “Waldo, can you take a look at this?”

“The minute I’m sure Andi isn’t bleeding into her brain,” Butters snapped.

“I’ve already sent for an ambulance,” Molly said back in a calm, iron tone that sounded creepily like her mother. “Andi will die with all of the rest of us if Harry doesn’t stop things from going boom, so get over here and see to him.”

Butters turned toward Molly with absolute murder in his eyes. But then he looked at me, and back to the dazed Andi in her chair. Mac was supporting her. The bartender looked up at Butters and nodded.

"I hate this," Butters said, his voice boiling with anger. But he came over to the table, grabbed the kit, and said, "Try to hold still, Harry."

I planted my foot and kept standing still as he started cutting away my jeans at the knee. "Okay," I said. Karrin was already standing beside me, and Thomas joined us across the table. "What's the word from Marcone's Vikings?"

"Strike team standing by," Murphy said, "waiting for my word."

I grunted. "Thomas?"

"Lara's team is ready, too," he said.

"Butters, what do we have from the Paranet?"

"Dammit, Dresden, I'm a medical examiner, not an intelligence analyst." He gave the little wound a prod with something and a white-hot needle went up my leg to the hip.

"Nngh," I said. "Nothing?"

He took a wipe to the wound, and that didn't feel very good either. "About half a dozen sightings of the Little Folk all over."

"Aren't those yours?" Murphy asked.

"Some, probably," I said. "But I think they're the rest of Ace's crew."

Murphy grunted. "I thought the prisoner wouldn't tell you anything about him."

I shrugged. "I figure it was Ace who threw the explosives at the *Munstermobile* last night, when the Little Folk jumped me afterward. He showed up right when Lacuna ambushed me at the Botanic Gardens. Then when I go to get my friends back from his dad, something else blows up."

"He's learned to play with explosives," Karrin said.

"Yeah, but you've barely seen this guy," Thomas said.

"It makes sense," I said. "Especially if he's playing smart—which he is, just by rounding up a group of the Little Folk as allies. He knows he couldn't handle a straight fight—so he's kept his distance. We've barely seen him, and he's nearly killed me three times in the past sixteen hours."

"Hngh," Thomas said.

"What's he got against you?" Molly asked.

"He was part of Lily and Fix's crew, back when they were all just folks," I said. "They were friends with Aurora and the last Summer Knight.

When Mab hired me to find Ronald Reuel's killer, Ace pitched in with this ghoulish hater and the Winter Knight to stop me. Betrayed his friends. Billy and his crew almost killed him, but I let him skate."

"And he hates you for it?" Molly asked.

"I killed Aurora," I said. "His friend Meryl died in that same fight. And you can be damned sure that Lily and Fix haven't wanted anything to do with him since. So from where he's standing, I killed one of his friends, got another one killed in battle, and took the ones who were left alive away from him. Then I beat him up in front of his dad. Guy's got a forest of bones to pick with me."

"Cheery image," Thomas said.

I grunted. "What about your nutjob, Butters. What's his name?"

"Gary."

"Gary turn up anything else?"

"About twenty updates in all capital letters about boats, boats, boats."

I thought about that one for a moment.

Then I said, "Hah."

"We have to move, Harry," Karrin said.

I grunted. "Gard still have her chopper?"

"Yes."

"Right," I said. I thumped my finger on the site on the far side of Lake Michigan. "Lacuna, what's the word on this one?"

The little faerie was still flitting about in the air around the table, fairly bursting with impatience. "It's behind big stone walls on a human's private land, right where I marked it!"

I nodded. "Vikings get that site then. Get them moving."

"Right," Murphy said, and headed for the door, reaching for her phone on the way.

Thomas frowned. "We're going to depend on Lara's people to back us up?"

"Hell, no," I said. "No offense, but I don't trust your sister. Send her crew to the second site."

"This is damned odd," Butters muttered.

I looked down at him. "What?"

"The bleeding won't stop," he said. "It's not really all that dangerous in a wound this small, but it isn't clotting up. It's like some kind of anticoagulant was introduced. Do you still have the dart?"

“Dart,” I said. I patted my pockets. “I guess not. It was in my hand when the warehouse dropped into the water.”

“Bah,” Butters said. “Inflammation in the skin around it. This hurt?”

He poked me. It did. I told him so.

“Huh,” he said. “I can’t be sure without tests but . . . I think this might be some kind of allergic reaction.”

“How?” I asked. “I’m not allergic to anything.”

“I’m just saying what it looks like on your skin,” Butters said. “The trickle factor seems to imply some kind of toxin, though. You need a hospital, tests.”

“Later,” I said. “Just get it wrapped up and keep it from running down my leg.”

Butters nodded.

“So,” Thomas asked, “if Lara’s crew has one site and Marcone’s the other, which one are we going to?”

“Neither.”

“What?”

“We’re not going to either one.”

“Why not?”

“Because all day long,” I said, “I’ve been moving in straight lines and it’s gotten me nothing but grief.” I pointed at the locations marked on the map. “See those? Those are the perfectly rational places for our bad guy to make something happen.”

Thomas rubbed at his chin and narrowed his eyes. “They’re a distraction?”

“It’s how the Sidhe think. How they move. How they are. They put pressure on you, get you to look over there, and then kapow. Sucker punch.”

“What if they’re expecting you to expect that?” Thomas asked.

“Gah,” I said, waving my hands on either side of my head as if brushing away wasps. “Stop it. If I’m wrong, we’ve got professional badasses to cover it. But I’m not wrong.”

“Didn’t you say that they required a ley line site to perform a ritual that big?” Butters asked. He had taped a pad over the little injury and was securing it with a roll of gauze.

“Yes,” I said.

“And the Little Folk cleared all of them but those two?”

“No,” I said. “They cleared *almost* all of them. There was one place the Little Folk couldn’t check.”

Thomas’s eyes widened as he got it. “Boats,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Boats.”

Chapter

Thirty-nine

Thomas rose, glancing around the room, and said in a quiet voice, “She needs fuel. And I’d better talk to Lara about the second site.” But his eyes had drifted over to where Justine now sat by the fire, basking in warmth after our icy dunk and staring at it with a peaceful expression on her lovely face.

“Get moving,” I said. I lowered my voice. “You taking her with you?”

“You kidding? Bad guys have been all over us today. That creep took her right off the street in front of our apartment. I’m not letting her out of my *sight*.”

“Look, if you leave her here, the building has security that—”

“So does my building, and Cat Sith breezed right past all of it when he came in,” Thomas said. “I’m not letting her out of my sight until this thing is settled.”

I grimaced, but nodded. “All right. Go. We’ll be right behind you.”

My brother arched an eyebrow. “All of you?”

“We’ll see,” I said.

“Did you talk to her?” Thomas asked.

I gave him a steady look and said, “No. Maggie was out trick-or-treating.”

“Right. She’s what? Nine years old? She might as well have vanished into the Bermuda triangle. How could you possibly be expected to find her? Magic?” He gave me a sour look. “What about the other one?”

He meant Karrin. “We’ve both been kinda busy. Maybe later.”

“Later. Bad habit to get into,” Thomas said. “Life’s too short.”

“It almost sounded like *you* were attempting to enlighten *me* about bad habits.”

“The path of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,” he said, and turned for the door.

At the exact moment he moved, even though she was not looking at him, and though he said nothing to her, Justine rose from her seat by the fire and started toward the door. The pair of them met halfway there and she slipped herself beneath his arm and up close to him in a motion of familiar, unconscious intimacy. They left together.

My brother the vampire, whose kiss was a slow death sentence, had a stable and loving relationship with a girl who was crazy about him. By contrast, I could barely talk to a woman, at least about anything pertaining to a relationship. Given that my only long-term girlfriends had faked their own death, died, and broken free of enslaving enchantments to end the relationship, the empirical evidence seemed to indicate that he knew something I didn’t.

Keep your life tonight, Harry. Complicate it tomorrow.

Murphy came back in with a pair of EMTs I recognized, Lamar and Simmons. They got Andi loaded up onto a stretcher, and Lamar blinked when he saw me. He didn’t look as young as he had the last time I’d seen him—a few threads of silver in his hair stood out starkly against his dark hair and skin.

“Dresden,” he said. “That you?”

“Mostly.”

“I heard you were dead.”

“Close. It didn’t take.”

He shook his head and helped his partner secure Andi to the stretcher. They picked up the stretcher and toted her outside, with Butters hurrying along beside them, his hand on Andi’s arm.

Once they were gone, I stood in the room with the grasshopper, Karrin, and Mac. Mouse dozed on the floor near the door, but his ears twitched now and then and I doubted he was missing anything.

“Molly,” I said. “Would you ask Sarissa to join us, please?”

She went off to her room, and returned a moment later with Sarissa. The slender, beautiful woman came into the room silently, and didn’t meet anyone’s eyes. Hers were focused in the middle distance, as she tried to keep track of everyone in the room through peripheral vision.

“All right,” I said. “Things are about to hit the fan. They’re confusing as hell and I’m getting tired of feeling like I have no idea what’s going on. There are some unknown quantities here, and some of you aren’t telling me everything, but there isn’t enough time to pry it all out of each of you.” I pointed a finger at Sarissa. “Maybe you really are everything you say you are. Maybe not. But I figure there’re about two chances in three that you’re playing me somehow, and I think you’re way too good at backstabbing to leave you standing around behind me.”

“Everything I’ve told you—” Sarissa began.

I slashed a hand at the air. “Don’t talk. This isn’t an interrogation. It’s a public service announcement. I’m telling you how it’s going to be.”

She pressed her lips together and looked away.

“Mac,” I said. “Much as it pains me to level suspicion at the mastercraftsman of the best beer in town . . . you’re hiding something. That Outsider talked to you as if it knew you. And I don’t think it was an aficionado of your ale. Do you want to tell me who you really are?”

Mac was silent for a moment. Then he said, “No. That’s mine.”

I grunted. “Didn’t think so. I figure it’s more likely that you are an ally, or at least neutral, than it is that you’re a plant for somebody. But I’m not completely sure about you, either.”

I looked at them both and said, “I’m not sure if you’re my friends or my enemies, but I heard something once about keeping them close and closer. So until things have shaken out, you’re both staying where I can

keep track of you. And you both should be aware that I'm going to be ready to smack you down if I pick up on the least little hint of treachery."

"I am not—" Sarissa began.

I stared at her.

She bit her lip and looked away.

I turned my eyes to Mac. He didn't look thrilled about it, but he nodded.

"Okay," I said. "We'll be on the lake. There are a couple more coats in the guest bedroom closet. Better grab one."

Mac nodded and beckoned Sarissa with a tilt of his head. "Miss."

They went to the guest bedroom, and that left me facing Murphy with the grasshopper hovering in the background. I made a little kissing noise with my puckered lips, and Mouse lifted his head from the ground.

"You pick up anything weird about either of them?" I asked.

Mouse sneezed, shaking his head, and laid it back down again.

I grunted. "Guess not." I took a deep breath. "Grasshopper, maybe it's good time to take Mouse for a W-A-L-K?"

Mouse's head snapped up.

Molly looked back and forth between Karrin and me and sighed. "Yeah, okay."

"Maybe take those two with you when you go? And have security bring the car around, too. We'll leave shortly."

"Right," Molly said. She collected Mac and Sarissa, now clad in badly fitting secondhand coats, and they left.

It was just me and Karrin.

The fire crackled.

Karrin said, "You picked up Mouse. Did you get to see Maggie?"

"Christ, everyone wants to know about . . ." I shook my head. "She was out."

She nodded. "Did you get out of the car? Or just wait at the curb?"

I gave her a flat stare. She looked back at me with her cop face. I failed to terrify her off the subject.

"Curb," I said.

She smiled faintly. "I've seen you walk into places that should have killed you seven, eight times? You didn't flinch. But now you're petrified with fear?"

“Not fear,” I said, so quickly and with such vehemence that it became immediately clear to me that fear was exactly what I was feeling when I thought of approaching Maggie.

“Sure it isn’t,” Karrin said.

“Look,” I said, “we don’t have time for—”

“My dad said that a lot,” Karrin said. “‘I can’t right now. We’ll do that later.’ He was busy, too. Then he was gone.”

“I am not going to deal with this right now.”

Karrin nodded. “Right. Not right now. Later.”

“Christ,” I said.

Karrin looked down at the floor and smiled briefly, then looked back up at me. “I never liked being shrunk. Had to a couple of times. After I shot Denton. Stuff like that.”

“So?” I said.

“Some things can’t just sit inside you,” she said. “Not when . . .” She spread her hands. “Harry, you’re dealing with serious pressures here. With something that could . . . change who you are. I don’t blame you for being afraid.”

“I’ve got the Winter Knight thing under control,” I said.

“Winter Knight, Mab, whatever,” she said, as if it were an everyday annoyance. “Magic stuff, you’ll deal with it fine. I’m talking about something real. I’m talking about Maggie.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I figure it’ll take Thomas at least ten minutes to fuel the boat,” she said. “It’s been about five since he left. Which gives you five minutes with no city to save, no evil queens, and no monsters. No one to protect right in front of you, no apprentices to look strong for.”

I looked at her blankly and felt my shoulders sag. I hadn’t slept in too long. I wanted to find a nice bed somewhere and pull the covers over my head. “I don’t . . . What are you looking for, here? What do you expect from me?”

She stepped closer and took my hand. “Talk to me. Why didn’t you go see Maggie?”

I bowed my head and let my fingers stay limp. “I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Why not?”

I tried to speak and couldn’t. I shook my head.

Karrin stepped closer to me and took my other hand in hers, too.

"I'm right here," she said.

"What if . . ." I whispered. "What if . . . she remembers?"

"Remembers what?"

"She was there," I said. "She was there when I cut her mother's throat. I don't know if she was conscious, if she saw . . . but what if she did? In my head, I've run this scenario about a thousand times, and if she saw me and started screaming or crying . . ." I shrugged. "That would be . . . hard."

"You know what's going to be harder?" Karrin asked quietly.

"What."

"Not knowing." She shook my hands gently. "Leaving a hole in that little girl's life. She's your daughter, Harry. You're the only dad she's ever going to have."

"Yeah, but if I show up and she remembers me, I'm not her father. I'm her father the monstrous villain. I'm Darth Dresden."

"She'll learn better," Murphy said. "Eventually. If you try."

"You don't understand," I said. "I can't . . . I can't do anything that might hurt her. I just can't. I barely know that little girl—but she's mine. And I'd rather double-kneecap myself with a frying pan than bring her an ounce of pain."

"Pain passes," Karrin said. "If you think about it—"

"You don't *get* it," I half snarled. "She's blood, Karrin. She's mine. Thinking has no place in this. She's my little girl. I *can't* see her get hurt again—"

I stopped suddenly with my mouth hanging open.

Hell's bells, how could I have missed what the Mothers were trying to tell me?

I couldn't bear to see my child in pain.

And maybe I wasn't the only one who couldn't.

"Stars and stones," I breathed. "That's what's happening here."

Karrin blinked up at me several times. "Excuse me?"

I kept thinking about it, following the logic. "That's why Mab sent me to kill Maeve. She's no different from Titania. She knew it needed to be done but . . ."

"But what?" Karrin asked.

"Maeve is still her little girl," I said quietly. "Mab isn't human, but there are . . . remnants in all the Sidhe. Mother Winter called Mab a

romantic. I think this is why. Mother Summer went on and on about how humans have influenced the Sidhe. That's what this whole thing is about."

"I don't understand," Karrin said.

"Mab loves her daughter," I said simply. "She won't kill Maeve because she loves her." I let out a bitter little laugh. "And there's the kind of symmetry here that the faeries are crazy about. I killed the last Summer Lady. It's only fitting that the same hand deal with the Winter Lady."

My brain was running along with my mouth, and I stopped talking so that I could poke at the logic of the theory that my instincts—or maybe my heart—told me was obviously true. If Mab wasn't out to wreck the world, if she hadn't been taken by the adversary, then someone else had been lying to me. Someone who *shouldn't* have been able to lie.

"Okay," Karrin said. "If not Mab, then who is going to pull off this apocalypse ritual magic?"

I kept following the lines of logic and felt myself grow abruptly cold. "Oh. Oh, God. All this time." I turned and started for the door. "Outsiders. At the end of the day, this is all about the Outsiders. We've got to go. Right now."

"Harry," Karrin said.

I turned to face her.

"Why won't you explain . . . ?" She frowned. "You don't trust me. So you're going to keep me close just like the others."

I looked down at the floor. "Don't take it hard. I don't trust myself right now."

She shook her head. "This is the thanks I get."

"It's Halloween," I said. "It's the night when everyone looks like something that they aren't." I turned toward the door. "But I'm about to start ripping off masks. And we'll both see where everyone stands. Come on."

Chapter

Forty

I had a word with Toot-toot once we were outside, and by the time the *Munstermobile* rolled out of the lot, we had a ring of tiny, nigh-invisible escorts pacing us, making it their business to dislodge any enemy tiny observers our foes might have sent to keep tabs on us. It didn't make me think that we would avoid the attentions of enemy Little Folk altogether, but every little thing I could conceal from the people working against me could prove to be a critical edge.

Karrin saw the car's paint job again, rolled her eyes, and declined my offer of a ride. She followed us on her Harley. Molly rode shotgun with me, holding her backpack on her lap. Molly was a big believer in shaping the

future by way of carrying anything you might need in a backpack. Tonight it looked particularly stuffed.

As I drove, the burn in my calf continued every time I worked the clutch or pumped the brake, getting slowly worse beneath the layers of gauze Butters had wrapped it in. The rest of my lower leg was tingling and itching, too, but at least the wound wasn't soaking through the bandages.

What the hell had that dart *been*? Why plug me with it, unless the Redcap thought it would kill me?

"I, uh," Molly said as I pulled the Caddy into the marina parking lot. "I got you something."

"Eh?" I asked.

"I had them rush it out this morning and we got it this afternoon. I mean, you know. As long as I was using Thomas's card anyway."

I blinked. "You embezzled funds from the White Court to get me a present?"

"I like to think of it less as embezzling and more as an involuntary goodwill contribution," she said.

"Careful," I told her. "You don't want to get entangled with Lara and her crew. Even owing them money isn't smart."

"I didn't borrow it, boss. I stole it. If they weren't cautious enough to stop me, that isn't my problem. They should be more careful who they hand those cards to. Besides, they can afford it."

"The entitled younger generation, I swear," I said. "Well-done." I found a space big enough for the *Munstermobile* and parked, then set the emergency brake and killed the engine. "What is it?"

Molly got out of the car. "Come see."

I started to, but she hurried impatiently around to meet me, digging into her backpack. I shut the car door behind me and she presented me with a paper-covered package tied with string.

I opened it by tearing paper and snapping string, and a long leather garment unrolled.

"Dunh nuh nah nah nunh," Molly sang, singing the opening riff from "Bad to the Bone."

I found myself smiling and held up a long coat of heavy black leather, like one of those old cowboy dusters, except for the long mantle hanging down over its shoulders. It smelled like new leather and shone without a

scuff mark to be seen. “Where the hell did you find an Inverness coat?” I asked her.

“Internet,” she said. “Security Guy helped me shop for it.”

“You don’t know his name?” I asked.

“His name is Guy, and he’s building security,” Molly said. “Security Guy.”

“And he did this for you why?” I asked.

“Because I’m pretty and because he might have gotten a gift certificate out of the deal.”

“Remind me to never give you one of my credit cards,” I said, and I put the coat on.

The weight of the leather settling around me was familiar and comforting, but this coat wasn’t the same as my old coat. The sleeves were a little longer, and fit better. The shoulders were a little narrower, and actually matched up with mine. The mantle hung down a bit more. The pockets were in a slightly different place. Most significantly, it didn’t have the layers of protective enchantments that took about half a working week to lay down.

But . . .

Yeah, I decided. I could get used to it.

I looked up to see my apprentice grinning widely.

I put my hand on her shoulder for a moment, smiled, and said, “Thanks, Molls.”

Her eyes shone.

Mouse piled out of the car and hurried over to sniff the coat, tail wagging.

“What do you think?” I asked him.

“Woof,” he said seriously.

“He thinks it suits you,” Molly said, smiling.

“Goofy motorcycle cowboy meets Scotland Yard?”

Mouse wagged his tail.

I grunted as Karrin pulled in and parked her Harley far down the row from the *Munstermobile*, in a motorcycle parking space. She eyed me as she came walking up to us, then Molly, and gave her an approving nod. “That’s more like it,” she said.

“Feels good,” I said. I nodded toward the water, where the *Water Beetle* was chugging slowly back into its berth. Thomas was at the wheel,

maneuvering the tub deftly. I waved at him and he replied with a thumbs-up gesture. The boat was ready to go.

I turned to speak to the others, but before I could, I felt my concentration disrupted. An eerie, cool frisson rolled down my spine, all the way down my body to my legs. There was a flicker and a chill from the little wound, and the pain became a little less. At the same moment, I sensed the air grow a fraction of a degree colder, something I would never have noticed on my own.

Sundown.

“That’s it,” I said a second later. “Sun’s down. It’s on.”

“What if you’re too late?” Sarissa asked. “What if they’re starting right now?”

“Then we’re wasting time talking about it,” Molly said. “Let’s get to the boat.” She beckoned Mac and Sarissa. “This way, please.”

I glanced at Mouse and jerked my chin toward Molly. He heaved himself up and went after her, walking just behind our two unknown quantities.

Karrin had opened a storage compartment on her Harley. She shrugged out of her jacket, and then slipped into a tactical harness and clicked it shut around her. She added a number of nylon pouches to it, then took out a gym bag and dropped heavy objects in before shutting the compartment and locking it. She looked up at me and nodded. “All set?”

“I miss my gear,” I said. “P90 in there?”

“His name is George,” Karrin said. “You want my backup gun?”

“Nah, I’ve already got the finest killing technology 1866 had to offer on the boat. Glad I didn’t name it George. How embarrassing would that have been?”

“George isn’t insecure,” she said.

“What about, ah . . . ?”

“The Swords?”

“The Swords.”

“No,” Karrin said.

“Why not?”

She frowned and then shook her head. “This . . . isn’t their fight.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

“I’ve wielded one,” she said. “And it makes perfect sense to me. To use them tonight would be to make them vulnerable. No.”

“But—” I began.

“Harry,” Karrin said. “Remember the last time the Swords went to the island? When their actual adversaries were there? Remember how that turned out?”

My best friend, Molly’s dad, had been shot up like a Tennessee speed limit sign. The Swords had a purpose, and as long as they kept to it, they were invulnerable, and the men and women who wielded them were avenging angels. But if they went off mission, bad things tended to happen.

“Trust me,” Karrin said quietly. “I know it doesn’t make sense. Sometimes faith is like that. This isn’t their fight. It’s ours.”

I growled. “Fine. But tell the Almighty that He’s missing His chance to get in on the ground floor of something big.”

Murphy punched my chest, but gently, and smiled when she did it. The two of us turned toward the dock and began to follow Molly and the others. I was just about to step out onto the dock when I heard something. I stopped in my tracks and turned.

It started low and distant, a musical cry from somewhere far away. It hung in the darkening air for a moment like some carrion bird over dying prey, and then slowly faded.

The wind started picking up.

Again the tone sounded, nearer, and the hairs on my arms stood straight up. Thunder rumbled overhead. The rain, a fitful drizzle most of the day, began to fall in chilly earnest.

And again the hunting horn sounded.

My heart started revving up, and I swallowed. Footsteps approached, and then Thomas was standing beside me, staring out the same way I was. Without speaking, he passed me the Winchester rifle and the ammunition belt.

“Is it . . . ?” I asked him.

His voice was rough. “Yeah.”

“Dammit. How soon?”

“Soon. Coming right through the heart of downtown.”

“*Fuck*,” I said.

Karrin held both hands up. “Wait, wait, the both of you. What the hell is happening?”

“The Wild Hunt is coming,” I said, my throat dry. “Um . . . I sort of pissed off the Erlking a while back. He’s not the kind of person to forget

that.”

“The king of earls?” Karrin asked. “Now who isn’t making sense?”

“He’s a powerful lord of Faerie,” Thomas explained. “He’s one of the leaders of the Wild Hunt. When the Hunt comes to the real world, it starts hunting prey and it doesn’t stop. You can join it, you can hide from it, or you can die.”

“Wait,” Karrin said. “Harry—they’re hunting *you*?”

My heart continued to beat faster, pumping blood to my muscles, keying my body to run, run, run. It was hard to think past that and answer her question. “Uh, yeah. I can . . . I think I can feel them coming.” I looked at Thomas. “Water?”

“They’ll run over it like it was solid ground.”

“How do you know that?” Karrin asked.

“I joined,” Thomas said. “Harry, Justine.”

I clenched my hands into fists on the heavy rifle. “Get on the boat and go.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Oh, yes, you are,” I said. “Raith and Marccone have the other two sites covered, but we are the only ones left to get to Demonreach. If we blow it there, and the ritual goes off, we’re all screwed. If I go with you, the Hunt follows me and then goes after whoever is close. We’ll never pull off an assault with them on our heels.”

My brother ground his teeth and shook his head.

“Let’s go, Harry,” Karrin said. “If they follow us out over the lake, we’ll take them on.”

“You can’t take them on,” I said quietly. “The Hunt isn’t a monster you can shoot. It’s not some creature you can wrestle with, or some kind of mercenary you can buy off. It’s a force of nature, red in tooth and claw. It kills. That’s what it does.”

“But—” Karrin began.

“He’s right,” Thomas said, his voice rough. “Dammit. He’s right.”

“It’s chess,” I said. “We’ve been checked, with that ritual on the island. We have no choice but to try to stop it with everything we’ve got. If that means sacrificing a piece, that’s how it has to be.”

I put a hand on my brother’s shoulder. “Go. Get it done.”

He put his cold, strong hand over mine for a second. Then he turned and ran for the boat.

Karrin stared up at me for a second, the rain plastering her hair down. Her face was twisted with agony. “Harry, please.” She swallowed. “I can’t leave you alone. Not twice.”

“There are eight million people in this city. And if we don’t shut the ritual down, those people will die.”

Karrin’s expression changed—from pain to shock, from shock to horror, and from horror to realization. She made a choking sound and ducked her head, her face turned away from me. Then she turned toward the boat.

I watched her for a second longer. Then I sprinted for the *Munstermobile* as the haunting cry of the Wild Hunt’s horn grew nearer. I jammed my key into the door lock and . . .

And it wouldn’t fit.

I tried it again. No joy. Half-panicked, I ran to each of the others, but every single one of the locks was out of commission. I was going to bust out a window, but I checked the car’s ignition through it first. It had been packed with what looked like chewing gum. The *Munstermobile* had . . .

Had been sabotaged. With gum and superglue. It was a trick I’d had Toot and company play on others more than once. And now what I had done unto others had been done unto me at the damndest moment imaginable.

“Aggggh!” I screamed. “I hate ironic reversal!”

The Za Lord’s Guard had been escorting us along the way, but I hadn’t said anything about staying on the job once we reached our destination. Given the distance I’d had them covering today, they’d probably dropped down exhausted the second I’d set the parking brake.

The thunder rolled closer, my unthinking panic rose, and my wounded leg felt like it might burst into flames.

My leg.

My eyes widened with horror of my own. The Redcap had killed me at that ambush, and I was only now realizing it. The trickle of blood flowing steadily from that tiny wound would leave a powerful olfactory and psychic trail behind me. Tracking me would be easier than whistling.

I could run, but I couldn’t hide.

Thunder roared, and I saw a cluster of dim forms descend from the cloud cover overhead and into the city light of Chicago. I could run, but the Hunt was moving at highway speeds. I wouldn’t even be able to significantly delay the inevitable. Shadowy hounds rushed down at me

from the north, along the shoreline, and behind them came a blurry cluster of dark figures on horseback, carrying bows and spears and long blades of every description.

I couldn't beat the Hunt. Not even with Mab's 'roids in my system.

But maybe . . .

Then there was another roar—this time not of thunder, but of a hundred and forty horses, American-made.

Karrin Murphy's motorcycle slid to a stop close enough to me to throw gravel over my shoes, and I turned to find her revving the engine.

"Karrin! What the hell are you doing?"

"Get on the bike, bitch!" she called over the next horn blast. "Let's make them work for it!"

She smiled, a fierce, bright smile, and I found my own face following her example.

"Fuck, yeah," I said, and threw myself onto the back of the Harley as darkness, death, and fire closed in around my city.

Chapter

Forty-one

I dropped the cartridge belt for the Winchester over one shoulder and hurried to rake in the tail of my new duster before the motorcycle's rear wheel snagged it and killed me. I damn near fell off as Karrin accelerated, but managed to cling to her waist with the arm holding the rifle.

Karrin scowled at me, grabbed the rifle from my hand, and slipped it down into a little section on the side of the Harley that fit the short rifle suspiciously well. I held on to her with a free hand, and with the other made sure my coat wouldn't get me killed.

"Which way?" she shouted back at me.

"South! Fast as you can!"

She stomped one of her feet onto something, twisted a wrist, and the Harley, which had been doing around fifty, leapt forward as if it hadn't been moving at all.

I shot a quick glance over my shoulder, and saw the nearest elements of the Hunt begin to slowly fade back. I guess maybe the Wild Hunt hadn't ever heard about Harley-Davidson.

But she couldn't maintain the speed, not even on a wide Chicago street in chilly, rainy weather. There were just too many other people around, forcing her to weave between traffic, and she had to slow down to keep from splattering us all over some family's sedan. Indignant car horns began to blare as she slipped in and out of lanes, adding an abrasive harmony to the horns of the Wild Hunt.

"How we doing?" she called.

I looked back. The Wild Hunt was less than a hundred yards away—and they didn't have to contend with traffic. The jerks were racing along fifty feet off the freaking ground, up in the dark and the rain, unseen by the vast majority of people going about their everyday business. "They're cheating! Go faster! Head for the Bush!"

Karrin turned her head enough to catch me in the edge of her vision. "Is there a plan?"

"It isn't a very good plan!" I shouted. "But I need a big open area for it to work, away from people!"

"In *Chicago*?" she shouted. Then her eyes widened. "The mills?"

"Go!" I shouted. Karrin blitzed a red light, narrowly avoiding a left-turning car, and continued her furious rush down Lake Shore Drive.

Chicago is a city of terrific demands. Demand for a military presence helped establish the early Colonial-era forts, which in turn provided security for white settlers, traders, and missionaries. They built houses, churches, and businesses, which accreted over time into a town, then a city. Chicago's position as the great crossroads of the emerging American nation meant that more and more people arrived, building more homes, businesses, and, eventually, heavy-duty industry.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Chicago was a booming industrial city—and its steel mills were nearly legendary. U.S. Steel, Youngstown Steel, Wisconsin Steel, Republic Steel, all thriving and growing on the shore of Lake Michigan, down by Calumet City. The lakefront in that entire area was sculpted to accommodate the steel works,

and much of the steel that would fuel the Allied efforts in two world wars was produced in that relatively tiny portion of the city.

But all things wither away eventually. The American steel industry began to falter and fade, and by the end of the twentieth century, all that remained of an ironmongery epicenter was a long stretch of industrial-strength wasteland and crumbling buildings on Lake Michigan's shore. A decade later, the city started trying to clean the place up, knocking down most of the buildings and structures—but here and there, stone and concrete ruins remained, like the bones of some vast beast that had been picked clean by scavengers. Nothing much grew there as the city around it thrived—just weeds and property values.

That portion of the waterfront was slated for renewal, but it hadn't happened yet, and right now it was blasted heath, a flat, dark, empty, and desolate stretch of level land dotted with lonely reminders of former greatness. There was no shelter from rain or cold there, and on a miserable night like this, there shouldn't be anyone hanging around.

All we had to do was make it that far.

We flew by the Museum of Science and Industry on our right, then flashed over the bridge above the Fifty-ninth Street Yacht Harbor, moving into a section of road that had a little distance between itself and the nearest buildings and a decided lack of foot traffic on a cold autumn evening.

As if they'd been waiting for an opening away from so many prying eyes, the Wild Hunt swept down on us like a falcon diving onto a rabbit.

But they were not attacking a rabbit. They were attacking a wabbit. A wascally wabbit. A wascally wabbit with a Winchester.

Something that looked like a great, gaunt hound made of smoke and cinders, with glowing coals for eyes, hit the ground just behind the Harley and began sprinting, keeping pace with us. It came rushing in, dark jaws spread to seize the back tire, the same motion it might have used had it been attempting to hamstring a fleeing deer. Mindless animal panic raged inside my head, but I kept it away from the core of my thoughts, forcing myself to focus, think, act.

I saw Karrin's eyes snap over to her rearview mirror as it closed, and felt her body tensing against mine as she prepared to evade to the left. I gathered my will but waited to unleash it, and as the charhound closed to within inches of the tire, Karrin leaned and took the Harley left. The

charhound's jaws clashed closed on exhaust fumes, and I unleashed my will from the palm of my outstretched right hand with a snarl of "*Forzare!*"

Force hit the charhound low on its front legs, and the beast's head went into the concrete at breakneck speed—literally. There was a terrible snapping sound, and the charhound's limp body went tumbling end over end, bouncing up into the air for a dozen yards before landing, shedding wisps of darkness all the way.

What landed in a boneless sprawl on the road was not a dog, or a canine of any sort. It was a young man—a human, wearing a black T-shirt and torn old blue jeans. I barely had time to register that before the body tumbled off the road and was out of sight.

"Good shot!" Karrin cried, grinning fiercely. She was driving. She hadn't seen what was under the hound's outer shell.

So that was how one joined the Wild Hunt. It was a mask, a huge, dark, terrifying mask—a masquerade.

And I'd just killed a man.

I didn't get any time to feel angst over it. Karrin gunned the engine of the Harley and it surged ahead, running along the spit of land that bifurcates Jackson Harbor. Even as she did, two riders descended, one on either side of the road, their steeds' hooves hammering against empty air about five feet up. Like the charhound, the steeds and riders were covered in a smoky darkness through which shone the amber fire of their eyes.

Karrin saw the one on the right and tried to move left again—but the second rider pressed in closer, the dark horse's hooves nearly hammering onto our heads, and she wobbled and gunned the accelerator.

I recognized another hunter's tactic. The first had forced us to close distance with the second. They were driving us between them, trying to make us panic and think about nothing but running straight ahead—in a nice, smooth, predictable line.

The second rider lifted an arm and he held the dark shape of a spear in his hand. He hurled it forward, leading the target perfectly. I flung up my left hand, extending my shield spell. It got mixed results. The spear flew into it and through it, shredding my magic as it went—but instead of flying into my face, the spear was deflected just enough that its blade sliced across the back of my neck, leaving a line of burning pain behind it.

The adrenaline was flowing and the pain didn't matter. Hell, it really didn't matter if the wound had opened an artery—it wasn't as though I

could stop to get medical attention if it had. I twisted around to fling another bolt of force at the rider, but he lifted a hand and let out an eerie screech, and my attack was dispersed, doing little more than inconveniencing my target. His horse lost a step or two, but he dug black spurs into the beast's hide and it soon made up the pace.

Big surprise, magic wasn't a big threat to the Huntsmen.

Solution: Winchester.

I drew the rifle from the rack on the Harley, thumbing back the hammer while still holding it in one hand, then twisted at the waist to bring it to bear on the rider, the heavy weapon's forearm falling into my left hand. I didn't have much time to aim, and it might have actually been counterproductive, given our speed, the irregularities of the chase, the darkness, and the rain. Plus, I'm not exactly Annie Oakley. So I made a best guess and pulled the trigger.

The rifle let out a crack of thunder, and a burst of disintegrated shadow flew up from the shoulder and neck and jawline of the rider. I got a look at the armor beneath the mask, and a portion of his face, and realized with renewed terror that I'd just put a bullet into the Erlking.

And an instant later I realized with a surge of incandescent hope that I'd just put a *bullet* into the *Erlking* on *Halloween night*.

The Erlking reeled in the saddle, and his horse faltered and veered away, gaining altitude again. I levered a new round into the chamber, gripped the weapon like a pistol, and whirled it back over Karrin's ducked head to point it one-handed at the rider on the right, who was even now making his own approach, spear uplifted.

I guessed again and shot. I didn't hit him, but the thunder of the gun came just as he flung the spear. I didn't rattle the rider, but the flame-eyed horse flinched, and the spear flew wide of us. The rider was not deterred. He brought his steed under control first—then he let out a weird, bubbling screech and swept a long, dark-bladed sword from the scabbard at his side. He started closing the distance again.

It was impossible to lever another round into the rifle quickly while riding behind Karrin. That thing John Wayne does, whirling the rifle one-handed to cock it? It really helps if you have one of those enlarged, oblong lever handles to do it with, and mine was the smaller, traditional rectangle. Also, it helps to be John Wayne. I had to draw the rifle into my chest and hold it steady with my left hand to get it done. The rider swerved in at us

and I shot again—and missed as his steed juked and abruptly changed speed, briefly falling back before boring in again.

I repeated that cycle three times before I realized that the rider was playing me for a sucker. He respected the gun, but knew its weakness: me. He wasn't dodging bullets—he was dodging *me*, tempting me into taking shots with little chance of success in an effort to get me to use up my ammo.

And all the while, the rest of the Hunt kept pace with us: *dozens* of riders like this one, plus maybe twice that many shadowy hounds, all keeping about fifty yards back and up, clearly giving the first two hunters the honor of first attempt.

“His horse!” Karrin screamed. “Shoot the horse!”

I ground my teeth. I didn't want to do that. For all I knew, that thing was only a horse costume—there could be another human being underneath that shadowy outer shell.

The rider screeched again, the sound weirdly familiar and completely hair-raising. Again and again he came in on us, and I kept holding him off as we raced at insane speed through the rainy night, trading bullets for time.

“There!” I shouted suddenly, pointing off to our left. “Over there! The walls!”

We had reached the old steelwork grounds.

Karrin gunned the engine and swept the Harley out onto the open ground, racing frantically toward one of the only structures remaining—a trio of concrete walls maybe thirty or forty feet high, running parallel to one another for at least a quarter of mile—the last remains of U.S. Steel.

As the steed's hooves started hitting the ground, they abruptly threw off clouds of angry silver sparks with every strike. The dark horse screeched in agony and I let out a howl of defiance—after a century of labor in the steel mills, there had to be unreal levels of trace steel and iron in the ground where they had stood—and whatever power sustained the Wild Hunt didn't like it any more than the other beings of Faerie did.

“Between the walls!” I shouted. “Go, go, go!”

“That's crazy!” Karrin shouted.

“I know!”

She guided the Harley around a pile of rubble and raced into the heavy shadows between two of the walls, and the rider was right on us as she did.

“Closer!” I screamed. “Force him to the wall!”

“Why!”

A quarter of a mile goes by *fast* on a roaring Harley—and the only thing in front of us was the cold water of Lake Michigan. “Hurry!” I shrieked.

“Agh!” Karrin howled, and abruptly the Harley slowed and cut right.

In an instant, we were even with the rider, and though no expression could show through the darkness surrounding his face, his body language was one of shock.

Now for the dangerous part, I thought. Which made me start giggling. *Now* it was getting dangerous.

Before the rider could change speed or take on altitude, and while the Harley was still leaning toward the rider, I hauled my left foot up onto the seat and sprang at him, still holding the now-emptied Winchester in one hand.

I slammed into the rider, but whoever he was, he was *strong*. I had the power of the Winter Knight at my disposal, but compared to the rider, my strength was that of a child. He threw a stiff-arm into my chest and nearly sent me tumbling—but I grabbed onto his sleeve, and as he fell I simply hung on. That changed things. It wasn’t an issue of strength against strength. This made it a contest of mass and leverage versus muscle, and muscle lost. I dragged the rider from his saddle and we both hit the rough ground at speed.

My hand was torn from his arm on impact, and I remember trying to shield my head with my arms. The Winchester flew clear of me, too. I could see the rider tumbling as well, silver fire blowing up from the shadowy mask around him. I stopped tumbling yards later, and frantically staggered back to my feet. I spotted the Winchester lying a few yards away and leapt for it.

I grabbed the weapon, but before I could load it, I heard a footstep behind me and I spun, raising the gun up over my head, parallel to the ground. It was in the nick of time. I felt the staggering power of an enormous blow, and a sword rang against the steel of the Winchester’s octagonal barrel.

Kringle recovered from the block swiftly. Scraps of shadow mask hung from him, but he still wore the armor and a bloodred cloak and hood trimmed in white fur. His sword was silvery and unadorned, and he

whipped it through a swift series of strikes. I blocked frantically with the Winchester, but I knew enough about fighting to know that I was utterly outclassed. He'd have that sword in me in a matter of seconds.

So I ducked, sprang back from a backhanded slash, and raised the rifle to my shoulder as if I were about to shoot.

That stopped him, forcing Kringle to twist to one side to avoid the theoretical bullet—and when he did, I slammed every bit of will I had into a lance of magical force. “*Forzare!*”

Kringle slipped aside, incredibly nimble for a man his size, and the strike missed him completely.

It did *not* miss the base of the ruined wall behind him.

What must have been a couple of tons of aged concrete collapsed with a roar. Kringle was fast and skilled, but he wasn't perfect. He kept himself from being crushed, but several large stones clipped him and sent him staggering.

I let out a primal scream and rushed him. I hit him at the shoulders, and he was too off balance to bring the sword into play. We both crashed to the ground, but I wound up on top, kneeling over him, gripping the steel barrel of the Winchester in both hands, holding it like a club.

Kringle froze, staring up at me, and I suddenly realized that the night had gone utterly silent. I glanced around. The Wild Hunt had surrounded us, horses coming to a stop, their riders watching intently. Hounds paced nervously around at the horses' feet, but came no closer. The Erlking was there, too, his shadow mask tattered, greenish blood smearing the visible armor on his shoulder. His right arm hung limply. I turned back to Kringle.

“Join, hide, or die,” I growled. “Those are your options when the Wild Hunt comes for you.”

Kringle narrowed his eyes. “Everyone knows that's true.”

“Not anymore it isn't,” I growled. I got to my feet, slowly, and just as slowly I lowered the rifle. Then I extended a hand to Kringle. “Tonight, the *Hunt* is joining *me*.” I swept my gaze around the silent assembly, filling it with all the steel and resolve I had. “I just put the Erlking on the bench and laid a beat-down on freaking Santa Claus,” I told them. “So you tell me. Who's next? Who comes to make an end of the Winter Knight, a peer of the Winter Court and Mab's chosen? Who is at the top of *this* food chain? Because tonight is Halloween, and I am damned well not afraid of any of you.”

Firelight eyes stared at me from all around and nothing stirred.

Then Kringle's chuckle began rumbling up out of his throat, a pulsating sound of deep and hearty mirth. One of his huge hands closed on mine, and I hauled him back to his feet. I glanced over at the Erlking as I did. I could see nothing of his face, but he nodded his head toward me, very slightly. There was something ironic about the way he did it, and I sensed a kind of quiet amusement.

There was a low rumble as the Harley came purring slowly over the ground toward us. Karrin stared at the scene, her eyes wide, and drew the bike to a stop next to me.

"Harry?" she asked. "What just happened?"

"A change of leadership," I said, and swung one leg over the Harley to hop up behind her. Even as I did, shadows began to whirl and slither. They crawled up Kringle's legs, restoring the concealing mask—and as they did, they also started climbing the Harley and both of the people sitting on it.

It was a bizarre sensation. Everything about my physical perception sharpened, and I could suddenly sense the world around me with perfect clarity. I could feel the other members of the Hunt, knew exactly where they were and what they were doing on sheer instinct—an instinct that guided them, as well. The night brightened into a silvery fairyland that remained night while being as bright as the noonday sun. The shadow masks became something translucent, so that if I peered closely enough, I could see what was behind it. I didn't do much peering. I had a feeling that I didn't *want* to know what was behind all of those shadows.

Karrin twisted the throttle on the Harley nervously, gunning the engine—but instead of a roar, it came out as a primal screech. The cry was instantly taken up by every single member of the Hunt, even as Kringle, his shadow mask restored, remounted his steed and whirled it to face me.

"Sir Knight," Kringle said, inclining his head slightly to me, "what game amuses you this fine, stormy evening?"

I started loading shells from the ammo belt into the Winchester, until the rifle was full again. Then I levered a shell into the pipe, slipped a replacement into the tube, shut the breach with a snap, and felt a wolfish smile spreading my mouth. "Tonight?" I asked. I raised my voice to address them all. "Tonight we hunt Outsiders!"

The bloodthirsty screech that went up from the Wild Hunt was deafening.

Chapter

Forty-two

“Pipe down!” I shouted. “We’re going quiet until we get there!”

The Hunt settled down, though not instantly. Karrin revved the Harley’s engine, and it was completely, entirely silent. I could feel the vibration of the increased revolutions, but they did not translate into sound. The shadows around the Harley shifted and wavered, and after a second I realized that they had taken on a shape—that of an enormous black cat, muscled and solid, like a jaguar. That was astounding to me. Magic was not some kind of partially sentient force that did things of its own volition. It wasn’t any more artistic than electricity.

“Okay,” I said to Karrin. “Let’s move.”

“Uh,” she asked, without turning her head, “move where?”

“The island,” I said.

“Harry, this is a motorcycle.”

“It’ll work,” I said. “Look at it.”

Karrin jerked as she noted the appearance of the Harley. “You want me to drive into the lake.”

“You have to admit,” I said, “it isn’t the craziest thing I’ve ever asked you to do. It isn’t even the craziest thing I’ve asked you to do *tonight*.”

Karrin thought about that one for a second and said, “You’re right. Let’s go.”

She dropped the Harley into gear, threw out a rooster tail of dirt and gravel, and we rushed toward the shore of the lake. The steel mills had been engaged in actual shipping traffic in their day, and the level field of construction marched right up to the water’s edge and dropped off abruptly, the water four or five feet straight down.

Karrin gunned the engine, covering the last two hundred yards in a flat-out sprint, and the torque on that Harley’s engine was something epic, its bellow too loud to be wholly contained by the shadow mask, emerging from the shadow tiger’s mouth as a deep-throated roar. Karrin let out a scream that was two parts excitement to one part terror, and we flew twenty feet before the tires crashed down onto the surface of the lake—and held.

The bike jounced a couple of times, but I held on to Karrin and kept from flying off. It was an interesting question, though: If I had, would the water have supported me, like an endless field of asphalt? Or would it have behaved as it normally would?

The entire Hunt swept along behind us, silent but for the low thunder of hooves and the panting of the hounds—when suddenly the silver starlight turned bright azure blue.

“Whoa!” Karrin said. “Did you do that?”

“I don’t *think* so,” I said. I looked over my shoulder and found Kringle and the Erlking riding along behind me, I jerked my head at them in a beckoning gesture, and they obligingly came up on either side of the Harleytiger.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing at the sky.

“A temporal pressure wave,” the Erlking said, his flaming eyes narrowed.

“A wha’?” I asked.

The Erlking looked at Kringle. “This is your area of expertise. Explain it.”

“Someone is bending time against us,” Kringle said.

I stared at him for a second and then it clicked. “We’re being rushed forward so that we’ll get there too late,” I said. “We’re looking at a Doppler shift.”

“Is what he said correct?” the Erlking asked Kringle curiously.

“Essentially, aye. We’ve already lost half of an hour by my count.”

“Who could have done this?” I asked.

“You have encountered this before, wizard,” Kringle said. “Can you not guess?”

“One of the Queens,” I muttered. “Or someone operating on their level. Can we get out of this wave?”

The Erlking and Kringle traded a look. “You are the leader of the Hunt,” Kringle said. “What you wright with your power will grace each of us. Would you like to do it?”

Was he kidding me? I had almost as much of an idea of how to screw around with the fabric of time as I did which of my clothes could be safely washed in hot water. “I probably need to save myself for what’s coming,” I said.

Kringle nodded. “If it is your will,” he said diffidently, “we can set our hands against it.”

“Do it,” I said.

They both nodded their heads at me in small bows, and then their steeds raced out in front of the pack. Sparks began to fly from their horses’ hooves, first blue, then abruptly darkening to scarlet. The air seemed to shimmer, and strange, twisted sounds writhed all around us. Then there was a reverberating crash that sounded like something between thunder and the discharge of a blaster. The air split in front of the two of them like a curtain, and as the Hunt hurtled through it, the stars washed out to their normal silver hue again.

“Well-done, I guess!” I shouted—and then I noticed that Kringle was no longer there, though the Erlking still raced along. Over the next few moments he slowed enough to pace Karrin and me. “Hey, where’d Bowl-Full-of-Jelly go?”

“Kringle was our stepping-stone out of the rapids of the stream,” he called back. “To lift us out, he had to remain behind. He will rejoin us

farther down the shore.”

“Harry,” Karrin said.

“How much farther down the shore?”

The Erlking shrugged with his uninjured arm. “Time may hold no terror for us immortals, Sir Knight, but it is a massive force, all but beyond even our control. It will take as long as it takes.”

“Harry!” Karrin snapped.

I turned my eyes front and felt them widen.

We had arrived at Demonreach—and the island was under attack.

The first thing I saw was the curtain wall around the island’s shoreline. It was nothing but a flicker of opalescent light, like a dense aurora borealis, stretching from the water’s edge up into the October sky. It cast an eerie glow over the trees of the island, steeping them in menacing black shadow, and its reflection in the waters of the lake was three or four times bigger and more colorful than it should have been.

As the Hunt rushed closer, I could make out other details, too. There was a small fleet of boats surrounding the island—it looked like something out of WWII’s Pacific theater. Some of the boats were modest recreational models, several at least the size of the *Water Beetle*, and three looked like tugboat-barge units, the kind that could ferry twenty loaded train cars around the lake.

I could see motion in the waters around the shore. *Things* were swarming up out of the lake, hideous and fascinating—hundreds of them. They smashed into Demonreach’s curtain wall. Light pulsed in liquid concentric circles where they touched it, and shrieks of alien agony stretched the air toward a breaking point. The waters within twenty feet of the shore bubbled and thrashed in a demonic frenzy.

I felt a pulse of power stir in the air, and a bolt of sickly green energy lashed across the waters and slammed into the curtain wall. The entire wall dimmed for a second, but then resurged as the island resisted the attack. I tracked the bolt back to the barge and saw a figure in a weird, writhing cloak standing on the deck, facing the island—Sharkface.

As I watched, I saw a Zodiac boat carrying a team of eight men in dark clothing rush in toward the shore. The man in the nose of the boat lifted something to his shoulder, there was a loud *foomp*, and a fire blossomed in the brush, burning with an eye-searing chemical brilliance. Then the Zodiac whirled and rushed back out again, as if to escape a counterstrike—or

maybe they just didn't want to stay anywhere close to waters full of piranhalike frenzied Outsiders while sitting in a rubber boat. Half a dozen other boats were doing the same thing, and several other similar craft were sitting still, full of armed men waiting silently for the chance to land onshore.

I stared in shock. The recent rain meant that the island wasn't likely to burst into flame anytime soon, but I had utterly underestimated the scope of tonight's conflict, ye gods and little fishes. This wasn't just a ritual spell.

This was an all-out amphibious assault, my very own miniature war.

"Erlking," I said. "Can you veil the Hunt, please?"

The Erlking glanced at me, and then back at the Hunt, and suddenly the cold, weirdly flat-sounding dimness of a veil against both sight and sound gathered around us like a cloud.

"This doesn't make any sense," I said. "The ritual would still need a platform, and that would take time and work to set up—at least a day. It would show. They haven't even gotten onto the island yet—" Then the truth hit me in a flash. "The barges," I said. "They set up a ritual platform on one of the barges. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"The waters of the lake would diminish the power they could draw from the ley lines running beneath it," the Erlking said.

"Yeah," I said. "That's why they're assaulting the shore. They're going to force a breach and then run the barge aground on the island. That'll put them in direct contact with the ley line."

"There are *many* Outsiders here, Sir Knight," he noted. "More than enough to do battle with the Hunt, if we become bogged down in their numbers. They will react to us as one beast, once they know the danger we pose to them. Have a care for where we enter the fray."

"We'd better make the first punch count," I said. "Three barges. Which one has the platform?"

"Why assume there's only one?" Karrin asked. "If it was me, I'd set the spell upon all three of them, for redundancy."

"They might have set the spell up on all three of them for redundancy," I said.

She drove one of her elbows back against my stomach, lightly.

"We start this by sinking a barge," I decided. Then I blinked and looked at the Erlking. "Can we sink a barge?"

The shadow-masked Erlking tilted his head slightly to one side, his burning eyes narrowed. “Wizard, please.”

“Right,” I said. “Sorry. Eeny, meeny, miney, moe, catch a Sharkface by the toe.” I pointed at the barge in the middle, where I’d seen the Outsider a moment ago. “That one. And once it’s down, we’ll split into two groups. You’ll lead half the Hunt for the barge on the far side, and I’ll take my half to the nearer one. If we can nix any possibility of the ritual happening, maybe they’ll call it a night and go home.”

“That seems unlikely,” said the Erlking. He slowly flexed the arm I’d shot him in, and I could sense that, while it was not comfortable, the lord of the goblins was already functionally recovered from the injury.

“Never know until you try,” I said. I looked back at the Hunt and pointed toward the center barge. I repeated my instructions to them, and soot black hands drew dozens of shadowy weapons.

I leaned into Karrin a little and said, next to her ear, “You ready for this?”

“Only a lunatic is ready for this,” she said. I could hear her smile as she spoke. Then she turned her head and, before I could react, planted a kiss right on my mouth.

I almost fell off the Harley.

She drew her head back, flashed me a wicked little smile, and said, “For luck. *Star Wars*–style.”

“You are so hot right now,” I told her. I lifted my Winchester overhead, then dropped it to point forward, and the Hunt surged ahead at its full, insane speed, silent and unseen and inevitable.

“Go right past its rear end,” I told Murphy.

“You mean its stern?”

“Yes, that,” I said, rolling my eyes. And then I began to gather in my will.

It was *hard*, a slow strain, like trying to breathe through layers of heavy cloth. It was like holding a fistful of sand—every bit of energy I drew in wanted to slip away from me, and the harder I tried to hold it, the more trickled through my fingers.

So I gritted my teeth, accepted that I wasn’t going to have a lot of energy to work with, and tried to hold it loosely, gently, as we closed in on the barge. We were the first to pass it, and as we did I flung out my hand, crying out, “*Forzare!*” Raw will leapt through the air, shattering our

concealing veil. The energy was focused into the shape of a cone, needle-pointed at the top, and widening gradually to about six inches across—an invisible lance. I couldn't have done any more with the limited energy I had at my disposal. It hit the hull of the barge with a clang and a shriek of tearing metal, and then we were past it, and Karrin was tugging the Harley into a tight, leaning turn.

I checked over my shoulder and saw the Erlking, his sword in hand, lean over the saddle and strike. There was a hissing sound, and a howl of screeching steel, and, starting at the hole I'd punched in the barge's hull, a straight line of red-hot metal appeared where his sword had simply sheared through it. Behind him, the next riders struck, their weapons carving steel like soft pine, slashing at the weakened section and tearing the original hole I'd made wider and wider.

I heard a howl of rage, and looked up on the deck of the barge to see Sharkface there, already gathering energy to hurl at the riders of the Hunt.

He didn't take the hounds into consideration.

Before he could unleash his power, a dozen of the beasts hit him, all together, in a single, psychotic canine wave. Since they were running fast enough to get themselves a speeding ticket in most of Illinois, the impact was formidable. Hounds and Outsider alike flew out over the rails of the barge and vanished into the waters of Lake Michigan—and somehow, I knew, the fight continued beneath its waves.

The Erlking let out a shriek of encouragement, one that was echoed by the other riders as the tail end of the column passed the barge. As the last rider struck, a column of eerie green fire rose up from the glowing edges of the shredded steel hull, and with a groan of strained seams, the barge started to list badly to the right—starboard, I guess—as water rushed in through the hole the Hunt had made.

Karrin had already wheeled the Harley into a snarling turn, one that let us see the deck of the ship as it began to sink. Smart. She'd been thinking farther ahead than me. I could clearly see the dozens of lines and figures that had been painted onto the barge's deck, along with burning candles, incense, and the small, still remains of animal sacrifices—mostly rabbits, cats, and dogs, it looked like.

Rituals, whatever form they take, always involve the use of a circle, explicit or otherwise—the circle had to be there to contain the energy that they'd been building up with all the sacrifices, if nothing else. This one had

been established invisibly, maybe originally set up with incense or something—but as the water lapped over the edge of the circle, it immediately began to disperse the pent-up energy, visible as clouds of fluttering sparks, like static, that danced along the surface of the water.

And for just a second, everything in the night went silent.

Then there was a disturbance in the water, with more ugly green light pouring up from below. Water suddenly rushed up, displaced by something moving beneath the surface, and then Sharkface exploded up from the depths, his freaky rag-cloak spread out around him in an enormous cloud of tentacle-like extrusions. He turned his eyeless face toward me—me, exactly, not Karrin, and not the Erlking—and let out a howl of fury so loud that the water for fifty feet in every direction vibrated and danced in time with it.

And a wave of pure, violent, blinding, *nauseating* pain blanketed the face of Lake Michigan.

Chapter

Forty-three

Suddenly, I wasn't on the bitch seat of Karrin's Harley. I was hanging suspended in midair, and I was in agony.

I opened my eyes and looked wildly around me. Barren, icy earth. Cold grey sky. My arms and legs were stretched out into an X shape, and ice the color of a deep blue sky encased them, holding them stretched out against what felt like an old, knotted tree. Muscles and ligaments from my everywhere were at the trembling breaking point. My own heartbeat was torment. My face burned, exposed to cold so severe that it hurt even me.

I tried to scream, but couldn't. A slow, gargling moan came out instead, and I coughed blood into the freezing air.

“You knew this was coming,” said a voice, a voice that still made my entire body thrum in response, something simple and elemental that did not care how long she had held me in torment. “You knew this day would come. I am what I am. As are you.”

Mab walked into my vision from the left. I barely had enough strength to keep my eyes focused on her.

“You saw what happened to my last Knight,” she said, and began to take slow steps closer to me. I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction, but I couldn’t help it—I heard myself make a soft noise, felt myself make a feeble effort to move or escape. It made her wide eyes glint for an instant. “I gave you power for a purpose, and that purpose is complete.” She turned her hand over slowly, and showed me something she held in it—a small metal spike, too large to be a needle, too small to be a nail. She walked closer to me, rolling the fine-pointed etcher between two fingers, and smiled.

Her fingertips traced over my chest and ribs, and I shuddered. She’d carved the word *weak* upon my body in dozens of alphabets and hundreds of languages, etching it into my flesh, the palms of my hands, the soles of my feet, with miles upon miles of scars.

I wanted it to be over. I wanted her to kill me.

She leaned close to my face. “Today,” she breathed, “we start carving your teeth.”

Cold enveloped me, and water slithered into my mouth though I tried to keep it out. Some seeped through my cracked lips. More went up my nostrils and took the long way around—and then it froze into ice, slowly forcing my jaws apart. Mab leaned in close to me, lifting the etcher, and I caught the faint scent of oxidation as the instrument began scratching at my incisors. . . .

Oxidation. The smell of rust.

Rust meant steel—something no Faerie I’d ever seen, apart from Mother Winter, could touch.

This wasn’t actually happening to me. It wasn’t real. The pain wasn’t real. The tree wasn’t real. The ice wasn’t real.

But . . . I still felt them. I could feel something behind them, a will that was not my own, forcing the idea of pain upon me, the image of helplessness, the leaden fear, the bitter vitriol of despair. This was a

psychic assault like nothing I'd ever seen before. The ones I'd felt before this one were feeble shadows by comparison.

No, I thought.

"Nnngh," I moaned.

And I then I drew a deep breath. This was not how my life would end. This was not reality. I was Harry Dresden, Wizard of the White Council, Knight of Winter. I had faced demons and monsters, fought off fallen angels and werewolves, slugged it out with sorcerers and cults and freakish things that had no names. I had fought upon land and sea, in the skies above my city, in ancient ruins and in realms of the spirit most of humanity did not know existed. I bore scars that I'd earned in dozens of battles, made enemies out of nightmares, and laid low a dark empire for the sake of one little girl.

And I would be *damned* if I was going to roll over for some punk Outsider and his psychic haymaker.

The words first. Damned near everything begins with words.

"I am," I breathed, and suddenly the ice was clear of my mouth.

"I am Harry . . ." I panted, and the pain redoubled.

And I laughed. As if some freak who had never loved enough to know loss could tell *me* about pain.

"I AM HARRY BLACKSTONE COPPERFIELD DRESDEN!" I roared.

Ice and wood shattered. Frozen stone cracked with a sound like a cannon's blast, a spiderweb of tiny crevices spreading out from me. The image of Mab flew away from me and blew into thousands of crystalline shards, like a shattering stained-glass window. The cold and the pain and the terror reeled away from me, like some vast and hungry beast suddenly struck on the nose.

The Outsiders loved their psychic assaults, and given that this one happened about two seconds after Sharkface came up out of the water, it was pretty clear who was behind it. But that was fine. Sharkface had chosen a battle of the mind. So be it. My head, my rules.

I lifted my right arm to the frozen sky and shouted, wordless and furious, and a bolt of scarlet lightning flashed from the seething skies. It smashed into my hand and then down into the earth. Frozen dirt sprayed everywhere, and when it had cleared, I stood holding an oaken quarterstaff

carved with runes and sigils, as tall as my temple and as big around as my joined thumb and forefinger.

Then I stretched my left arm down to the earth and cried out again, sweeping it up in a single, beckoning gesture. I tore metals from the ground beneath me, and they swirled like mist up around my body, forming into a suit of armor covered in spikes and protruding blades.

“Okay, big guy,” I snarled out at the dark will that even now gathered itself to attack again. “Now we know who I am. Let’s see who you are.” I took the staff and smote its end down on the ground. “Who *are* you!” I demanded. “You play in my head, you play by my rules! Identify yourself!”

In answer, there was only a vast roaring sound, like an angry arctic wind gathering into a gale.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” I muttered. “You started this, creep! You want to get up close and personal, let’s play! Who *are* you?”

A vast sound, like something you’d hear in the deep ocean, moaned through the sky.

“Thrice I command thee!” I shouted, focusing my will, sending it coursing into my voice, which boomed out over the landscape. “Thrice I bid thee! By my name I command thee: Tell me who you are!”

And then an enormous swirling form emerged from the clouds overhead—a face, but only in the broadest, roughest terms, like something a child would make from clay. Lightning burned far back in its eyes, and it spoke in the voice of gale winds.

I AM GATEBREAKER, HARBINGER!

I AM FEARGIVER, HOPESLAYER!

I AM HE-WHO-WALKS-BEFORE!

For a second, I just stood there, staring up at the sky, shocked.

Hell’s bells.

It worked.

The thing spoke, and as it did, I *knew*, I knew what it was, as if I’d been given a snapshot of its core identity, its quintessential self.

For one second, no more than that, I *understood* it, what it was doing, what it wanted, what it planned and . . .

And then that moment was past, the knowledge vanished the way it had come—except for one thing. Somehow, I’d held on to a few crumbling fragments of insight.

I knew the thing trying to tear my head apart was a Walker. I didn't know much about them except that nobody else knew much about them either, and that they were extremely bad news.

And one of them had tried to kill me when I was sixteen years old. He-Who-Walks-Behind had nearly done it. Except . . . from where I stood now, I wasn't sure he'd really been trying to kill me. He'd been shaping me. I don't know for what, but he'd been trying to provoke me.

And this thing in my head, the thing I'd named Sharkface, was like him, a Walker, a peer. It was huge, powerful, and in a way utterly different from the kinds of power I had seen before. This thing wasn't *bigger* than Mab. But it was horribly, unbearably *deeper* than her, like a photograph of a sculpture compared to the sculpture itself. It had power at its command that was beyond anything I had seen, beyond measure, beyond comprehension—just plain beyond.

This thing was power from the Outside, and I was a grain of sand to its oncoming tide.

But you know what?

That grain of sand might be the last remnant of what had once been a mountain, but that which it is, it is. The tide comes and the tide goes. Let it hammer the grain of sand as it may. Let lofty mountains fear the slow, constant assault of the waters. Let the valleys shudder at the pitiless advance of ice. Let continents drown beneath the dark and rising tide.

But that grain of sand?

It isn't impressed.

Let the tide roll in. The sand will still be there after it rolls out again.

So I looked up at that face and I laughed. I laughed scorn and defiance at that vast, swirling power, and it didn't just feel good. It felt *right*.

"Go ahead!" I shouted. "Go ahead and eat me! And then we'll see if you've got the stomach to keep me down!" I lifted my staff and golden white fire began to pour from the carved runes as I gathered power into it. The air grew chill with Winter, and frost formed on the razor-edged blades in my armor. I ground my feet into place, setting them firmly, and the glow of soulfire began to emanate from the cracks in the earth around me. I bared my teeth at the hungry sky, flew the bird at it with my free hand, and screamed, "Bring it on!"

A furious voice filled the air, a sound that shook the earth and sky alike, that made the ground buckle and the swirling clouds recoil.

* * *

And then I was back on the Harley, clutching Karrin's waist in one hand and clinging to the Winchester with the other. The motorcycle was still in motion, but it wasn't accelerating. It felt like we were coasting.

Karrin let out a low, gurgling cry, and suddenly sagged forward, panting. I pulled her back against me, helping her to sit up, and after a few seconds she gave her head a few quick shakes and snarled, "I hate getting into a Vulcan mind meld."

"It hit you, too?" I asked.

"It . . ." She cast a look over her shoulder, up at me, and shuddered. "Yeah."

"You okay now?"

"I'm starting to get angry," she said.

A hideously mirthful sound spread over the air—the sound of the Erlking's laughter. His great steed swerved in close to the motorcycle, and he lifted his sword in a gesture of fierce defiance. Then his burning eyes turned to me and he spoke in a voice that was murderously merry. "Well-done, starborn!"

"Uh," I said. "Thank you?"

The lord of the goblins laughed again. It was the kind of sound that would stick with you—and wake you up in the middle of the night, wondering whether perhaps poisonous snakes had surrounded your bed and were about to start slithering in.

I looked back. The Hunt had spread out into a ragged semblance of its former cohesion, but even as I watched, the riders and hounds poured on extra effort to gather together again. I looked around but saw no sign of Sharkface.

I *did* see something else—V-shaped ripples coming toward us through the water. A whole lot of them.

"Here they come!" I shouted to the Erlking. "Good hunting!"

"That much seems certain," he called in that same cheerfully vicious voice, and wheeled his horse to the right. Half of the riders and hounds split off with him, while the other half continued streaming after me.

I pointed at our target as the Erlking headed toward his. "There!" I called. "Let's do it!"

The Harleytiger let out another snarling roar, and Karrin raced toward the second barge. Hellish shrieks went up from both groups of the Hunt—

and the oncoming things in the water smoothly split into two elements as they came forward. We raced the enemy toward the barges.

This time we didn't have surprise on our side. It couldn't have been more than a minute or two since the Hunt had announced its arrival, but I saw figures stirring on the deck of the barge ahead of us.

"Gun!" shouted Karrin. "Incoming!"

Crap.

Out over the water like this, I didn't have access to anywhere near enough magic to provide a continuous shield—and I couldn't try to slap down individual bullets, either. By the time I saw the gunfire, the round would already be going through us. Which meant that this was going to happen the vanilla way, the way soldiers worldwide have done it for a few centuries now. Advance, advance, advance, and hope that you didn't get shot.

Then Karrin snatched the rifle out of my hand and screamed, "Take the bike!"

I fumbled for a moment, but found the handlebars, reaching around her to make it happen. I gunned the throttle as Karrin raised the Winchester to her shoulder, half rose, and squinted through the buckhorn sights.

Flashes came from the boat, and something that sounded like an angry hornet flicked past my ear. I saw bits of spray coming up from the water ahead of us as the shooters misjudged their range, and I kept on racing straight ahead.

When we got to within a hundred yards, Karrin started shooting.

The old rifle boomed, and sparks flew up from the barge's hull. She worked the lever action without lowering it from her shoulder and fired again. One of the dark shapes on the deck vanished, and two more flinched away. More gunfire came from the boat—panic fire, splashing wildly everywhere and mostly nowhere close to us. Whoever was over there, they didn't like getting shot at any more than I did.

As we closed the last yards, Karrin fired three more times in a rapid, assured pace. I couldn't see whether she hit anyone else until we went roaring past the barge, no more than ten feet away, when a man holding the distinctive shape of a shotgun rose into sight. Karrin was covering the barge's stern with the Winchester when he popped up. The old gun roared again, and the gunman fell away and out of sight.

We raced by unharmed, but the enemy gunfire had done its work. The riders and hounds of the Hunt had been distracted by the flying bullets, and they didn't do nearly as much damage to the barge as in the initial attack. Even as I watched, more and more figures with guns appeared on the barge and started shooting.

I checked the oncoming rush of Outsiders.

We weren't going to sink the barge before they got here.

"—to sink it!" Karrin was shouting.

"What?"

"We don't have to sink the barge!" she shouted. "It can't move on its own! We just have to kill the boat that's pulling it!"

"Right!" I said, and leaned the Harley into a turn that would take us arching back toward the barge—this time at its front, or prow, or bow or something, where a rig containing a tugboat a bit bigger than the *Water Beetle* had been built on.

It also brought us closer to the oncoming Outsiders, and I couldn't tell which of us would get there first. As I sped up, Karrin dug into the compartments on the Harley, reaching around me, then said, "Hold it steady!"

Then she stood up, and I couldn't see a damned thing—but I *did* see the way she pulled the pin out of a freaking hand grenade, and let the spoon spin off into the night. The Harley buzzed past the tugboat's rig maybe ten feet ahead of the Outsiders, and Karrin gave the grenade a rather feeble little flick as we went by. I heard it smash into glass, like a stone thrown against a window, and then we were past the barge, and a huge sound thudded through the air, like an entire library of books all dropped flat at the same instant, and an incandescent white light flared from the tug.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw that the tugboat was on fire, pouring out thick black smoke and leaning sharply to one side. Murphy saw it, too, and let out an ululating war cry before she sat back down and pushed my hands off the handlebars, reassuming control of the Harley. "Two down!" she said. "One to go!"

I looked back behind me. The Outsiders had begun swarming at the barge, and one of them actually came out of the water at one of the rearmost riders of the Hunt—this horrible thing that was all pustules and multiple limbs with too many joints. As it leapt, the rider raised a shadowy bow and loosed a darkling arrow. It struck the Outsider and burst into red-

amber flame the same color as the burning eyes of the Hunt. The Outsider let out an unearthly wail and plunged back beneath the surface.

“Come on,” I said to Karrin. “Head for the other boat.”

“Should we?” she asked. “That Erlking guy seems a little . . . do-it-yourselfy.”

She was right about that. Like any of the other seriously powerful beings of Faerie, the Erlking had a strong sense of pride—and you crossed that pride at your own risk. If I showed up and the Erlking thought I was making the statement that I judged him unfit to finish the task, it could come back to haunt me. On the other hand, I’d already insulted him once and there was a lot on the line. “If he didn’t want me making calls like this, he shouldn’t have let me shoot him and take over his Hunt,” I said. I turned to beckon the riders and hounds behind me and shouted, “Come on!” My voice came out as both my own *and* in the howling screech of the Hunt, the two interwoven, and the rest of my group joined in the shriek and formed up around the Harley as it raced across the water, toward the third barge.

Where the fight wasn’t going well.

There were several long, straight streaks of molten steel where the Erlking and his riders had struck the barge’s hull, the edges marked with flickering tongues of eerie green fire, but they had not torn a hole in it like we had the first barge, either, and the Outsiders had gotten to this barge faster than they had to mine. Even as we approached, I saw a racing hound of the Hunt vanish in a spray of water as things, plural, too twisted and too confusing to count, surged up from below and began to drag the hound down.

A shriek loud enough to cause spray to rise from the water shook the air, and the Erlking himself plunged down from overhead, leading a trio of hunters behind him. Blades and arrows struck at the Outsiders in plumes of ember fire. The Erlking seized the hound by the scruff of its neck and dragged it up out of the grasp of the creatures beneath the surface.

The Erlking and his riders had fallen into a formation, a great, tilted wheel. At the far end, the riders were maybe fifty feet above the waves, circling in the air to then charge down at the surface of the water where it met the hull of the barge. The Outsiders would throw themselves up out of the waves, meeting each individual rider. Hounds would, in turn, try to throw themselves on the Outsiders, smothering their defense so that the rider could strike the barge.

Meanwhile, figures aboard the barge fired rifles wildly into the night, though the deck of the thing was actually bobbing with the thrashing of the Outsiders in the water around it. Whoever they were, they struck me as amateurish—though maybe it was only because I’d been exposed to real soldiers before, who were a deadly threat even on the scale of supernatural conflict. These guys weren’t the Einherjaren—but at the end of the day, they still had deadly weapons, and more than one rider and hound had been struck by rounds and bled molten light from their shadow-masked bodies. The piercing screech of the Hunt met with the howls of Outsiders and the crack of rifle fire, and bit by bit, the barge’s hull bled red-hot steel.

But it wasn’t happening fast enough.

With a groan, the barge’s tugboat, this one mounted behind it, began shoving the thing forward through the water and toward the shore of Demonreach.

“I shouldn’t have split us up,” I said. “We didn’t cover twice as many targets. We just got twice as half-assed.”

Karrin made a sputtering sound, then said, “You and math are not friends. Regret later. Lead now.”

“Right,” I said. The barge wasn’t exactly leaping into motion—but it wouldn’t stop on a dime once it got moving, either. “Do you have any more grenades?” I asked Karrin.

“I used them a couple of weeks ago,” she said.

“With Kincaid?” I asked. There was an edge to it. She and the assassin were kind of an item, the last time I looked.

“Harry,” she said, “focus.”

Hell’s bells, she was right. I didn’t need the Winter mantle turning me into a territorial alpha dick right now. I stared at the barge for a long second, pushing that instinct away, and then said to the Hunt, “Join the Erlking! Attack the barge!”

Hounds and riders streamed past us, joining the madman’s wheel of death in the sky, and I lowered my voice, speaking only to Karrin as I reloaded the Winchester. “Get me to the tugboat.”

She gave me a quick, wide-eyed glance, and then seemed to get it. She gunned the motor, sending the Harley shooting past the Erlking’s very large, very threatening, and very *distracting* formation, as we raced alone toward the chugging tugboat.

She brought us right alongside it, and once again I leapt from the back of the Harley. I hit the side of the tug pretty hard, but was able to get the fingers of my left hand around the top of the rail, and with a few kicks managed to swing myself up onto the deck. I landed in a crouch, clutching the rifle, got my bearings, and headed toward a stairwell that would lead me to the boat's bridge.

I went up it as quietly as I could, which is pretty damned quiet for a guy my size, Winchester at the ready. The bridge of the tug was big enough to merit its own enclosed space, and I slipped up to the door, took a breath, then ripped it open, lifting the Winchester as I did.

The bridge was empty, the wheel secured with a pair of large plastic ties. There was a piece of paper taped to the wheel, and on it was written in large black marker, LOOK BEHIND YOU.

I started to turn, but a cannonball hit me between the shoulder blades. I flew forward onto the bridge and slammed my head against the Plexiglas forward windows. I fell back from that, stunned, and a heavy weight hit me from the side, slamming me into a bulkhead, which felt almost exactly like being slammed into a steel wall.

I wound up prone, my face to the deck, and once more the heavy weight slammed into me, landing on my back.

And Cat Sith, who had told me not to turn my back on anyone, purred, "Wizard, Knight, fool. Too ignorant even to know how to die properly." His skin-crawling voice came out in a throaty buzz next to my ear. "Allow me to educate you."

Chapter

Forty-four

The reasonable thing to do would have been to whimper or flinch or just freak out and look for the nearest exit. But instead of doing any of those things, I felt a chill settle over my brain, and a very cold, calm part of me studied the situation objectively.

“Join, hide, or die,” I said. I heard the faint echo of the Wild Hunt’s screech in my voice.

“Excuse me?” Cat Sith said.

“You have excellent hearing,” I said. “But I will repeat myself. Join. Hide. Or die. You know the laws of the Hunt.”

“I do know them, wizard. And once I have slain you, the Hunt will be mine to do with as I please.”

“The real Cat Sith wouldn’t be having this conversation with me, you know. He’d have killed me by now.”

A blow struck the back of my head, sharp, painful, but not debilitating. “I *am* Cat Sith. The one. The only.”

I turned my head slightly and said, “So why do I still have a spine?”

And I threw an elbow at the weight on my back. I connected with something, hard, and slammed it off me. It hit the other wall of the bridge, and I flung myself to my feet in time to see the large, lean form of Cat Sith thrash his tail and bound at me.

I ducked him, moving forward under his leap, and spun, and it left the two of us facing each other across the full length of the bridge.

“Slow,” I said. “I’ve seen him move. Cat Sith is faster than that.”

A hideous growling sound came from the form of the malk. “I *am* he.”

“Get me a Coke,” I snarled.

“What?”

“You *heard* me, Mittens. Get me a freaking Coke and do it *now*.”

Sith remained in place, as if locked to the floor, though his whole body was quivering, his claws sheathing and unsheathing in rhythm. But he didn’t fly at me, ripping and tearing, either.

“You see,” I said, “Cat Sith is a creature of Faerie, and he swore an *oath* to Queen Mab to obey her commands. She commanded him to obey mine. And I just gave you a command, kitty. Did Mab release you from her command? Did she suspend the duties of her vassal?”

Sith snarled again, his eyes getting wider and rounder, his tail thrashing around wildly.

“They got to you, didn’t they?” I said. “They jumped you back at the Botanic Gardens while you were covering my exit. Freaking Sharkface was watching the whole thing and he got you.”

Sith began quivering so hard that he was jitterbugging back and forth in place on the floor, his head twitching, his fur standing on end and then abruptly lying flat again.

“Fight it, Sith,” I urged him quietly. “It doesn’t have to win. *Fight* it.”

For a second, I thought I saw something of Cat Sith’s smug, contemptuous self-assurance on the malk’s face. And then it was gone. Just gone. Everything went away, and the malk stood for a second with its head down. Then it lifted its head and the motion was subtly wrong, something that simply didn’t have the grace I’d seen in the elder malk before. It faced

me for a moment and then it spoke, its voice absent of anything like personality. “A pity. I would have been more useful to them as an active, covert asset.”

I shuddered at the utter absence in that voice. I wasn’t talking to Sith anymore.

I was speaking with the adversary.

“Like Mab wouldn’t have figured it out,” I said. “Like she did when you infected Lea.”

“Further conversation is not useful to our design,” Not-Sith said, and then the malk’s form flew at me in a blur.

It was a testament to the power of the Winter Knight’s mantle and the Wild Hunt’s energy that I survived that first leap at all. Sith struck straight at my throat. I got my arms in the way. The black shadow mask of the Hunt over my arms and chest blew apart into splinters, dispersing some of the impact energy of the malk’s spectacular leap, and instead of pulping me against the wall behind me, he just pounded me into it with tooth-rattling force.

Sith bounced off me, which was what I had hoped would happen. In my line of work, I’ve dealt with more than one critter that is faster than fast. When they’ve got their feet underneath them, it’s the next-best thing to impossible to land anything on them—but when they’re in the air, they’re moving at the speed gravity and air resistance dictate, like everybody else. For that one portion of a second, Sith was an object moving through space, not a blindingly fast killing machine. Someone who didn’t know that wouldn’t have known to be ready for it.

But I did. And I was.

The blast of raw force I summoned wasn’t my very best punch—but it was the best I was going to get out here over the lake. It slammed into the creature that had been Cat Sith and plowed it out through the Plexiglas window. The plastic didn’t break. It came entirely out of its housing, and the malk and a slab of Plexiglas the size of a door went whirling out into the madness of the night. Sith flew out over the bow of the tugboat and plunged down into the water through the open spaces of the pipe-steel rig between it and the barge.

I stared hard after the departed malk for a few seconds, to be sure he wasn’t going to bounce right back into my face somehow. As I did, I watched in the other half of the bridge’s forward window while the shadow

mask of the Hunt slithered back up over my arms and face. I gave it to a three count, nodded, and then went to the tug's wheel. I snapped the plastic ties securing it with a pair of fast jerks, then started rolling the wheel as far as it would go to the right. There was a big lever that looked like a throttle, and when I pushed it forward, the boat's engines started to roar with effort.

The barge groaned as the tug changed the direction in which it applied force, and the barge's back end began slowly slewing out and to the left. That drew shouts of consternation from the deck of the barge. I didn't feel like getting shot in the face, so I knelt down, out of sight, while I pulled the secondhand belt off of my old jeans and used it to secure the wheel in position. Then I recovered the Winchester and backed out of the bridge, hurrying away from it as quietly as I could.

What I'd done was a delaying tactic at best. It wouldn't turn the barge around—but it *would* set it to spinning in place, and maybe cost the enemy time to turn it around if they took control of it again. But that was exactly what the Hunt needed to sink her—time. The longer the barge played sit-and-spin, the better. So I found a nice quiet patch of shadow where I could see the stairs leading up to the tug's bridge, and where I could stand behind a very large steel pipe. I rested the Winchester on the top bend of the pipe, sighted on the doorway, and waited.

It didn't take long for the first couple of crewmen to arrive. I wasn't sure whether they came up from belowdecks or somehow swarmed over from the barge, but two men in dark clothing, carrying pistols at the ready, came hurrying along and started up the stairs.

I'm not a great shot. But when you're resting a rifle on a solid surface, one that is perfectly still (at least relative to all the solid surfaces around it), and when the range is about forty feet, you don't have to be an expert. You just have to take a breath, let it out, and squeeze.

The Winchester cracked with thunder, and the first man arched into a bow of agony just as he reached the top of the stairs. That ended up working in my favor. He fell back into the second man, just as the second guy spun and raised his pistol. The first man fell into the second, sending his first shot wild, and knocked him about halfway over. The second man couldn't hold the gun with both hands, but he kept pulling the trigger as fast as he could.

At forty feet, terrified, in the dark, unsure of his target's exact location, and sprawled out with the deadweight of another man flopping

against him, the poor bastard didn't have a chance. He got off seven or eight rounds, none of them coming anywhere close. I worked the action on the Winchester, took a breath, let half out, and squeezed the trigger.

It wasn't until the flash of light from the shot illuminated him that I recognized Ace, his expression panicked, his gun aimed at a point ten feet to my left. The light flashed and burned his face into my retina for a moment as the dark returned.

And the tugboat was silent again.

* * *

It didn't take long for the Erlking to finish his work. Maybe three minutes later, a chorus of hideous screams went up from the lake's surface, and the Hunt howled its triumph and circled into the sky, horns blaring, hounds baying. I saw green fire burning fiercely from the spot the Hunt had started carving, and then the barge started to list toward that side as the water poured into her. Barges aren't warships, or even maritime vessels. If they have belowdecks spaces at all, they generally aren't fitted with flood compartments and sealable doors. They sure as hell don't have automatic systems. They're just soup bowls. Poke a hole in the bottom, and a bowl isn't gonna hold much soup.

I didn't feel like getting *Titanicked*, so I hustled over to the spot where I'd boarded the tug. There was a roar from the shadow-tiger mask around the Harley, and Murphy swept up alongside the boat. I leapt down onto the back of the bike in a single smooth motion, which I felt was cool, and landed with way too much of my weight on my genitals, which I felt was not.

"Go, go, go," I gasped in a pained falsetto, and Murphy peeled away from the doomed ships.

Within moments, the Hunt had fallen into formation around me again, and the Erlking was laughing maniacally, whirling his sword over his head. The shadow mask over one leg and a section of his ribs had been torn away, and I could see wounds beneath—but already the shadows were stretching over them again. "I love nights like this!" he bellowed. "I love Halloween!"

"Yeah, it's pretty badass," I said in my wobbling, creaky voice.

"Sir Knight," he said, "that was passably done, but from here I believe it shall take more experience and expertise than you possess to continue the

Hunt. Do I have your leave to resume command and pursue these Outsider vermin in a more appropriate fashion?" he asked me.

"Uh," I squeaked. "You aren't going to come after *me* with it, are you?"

He broke into laughter that could have been heard for miles. He was smiling so hard, it went right through the shadow mask, turning his face into a crazed jack-o'-lantern of soot and fire. "Not this night. I give you my word. Have I your leave?"

Rather than answer the Erlking in my Mickey Mouse voice, I gave him the thumbs-up.

The Lord of the Goblins threw back his head and let out another screech, and his steed began to gain altitude. The rest of the Hunt followed him.

"Uh, Harry?" Karrin said.

"Yeah?"

"This is a *motorcycle*."

It didn't register for a second, and then I blinked.

We were cruising down the surface of Lake Michigan, and it was chock-full of monstery goodness—and we had just *left* the Wild Hunt.

"Oh, *crap*," I said. "Head for the island! Go, go, go!"

Murphy leaned hard into a turn and opened up the throttle. I looked over my shoulder at the Erlking, wheeling in the skies above the lake, spiraling higher and higher, the Hunt following after. We went by a couple of Zodiacs so fast that their occupants didn't have time to shoot at us before we were gone.

Then the motorcycle slowed.

"What are you doing?" I screamed.

"We can't hit the beach at this speed," Karrin shouted back. "We'll pancake ourselves into those trees!"

"I don't really feel like taking a swim tonight!"

"Don't be such a pussy," Karrin snapped. She leaned the bike into another turn, one that angled our direction to run parallel to the shore, and cut out the accelerator.

I felt the Harley slowing, and for a second I thought I felt it beginning to sink.

Then the Erlking cried out again and dived, his horse sprinting straight *down*, trailing the fire of the Hunt from its hooves. The rest of the hounds

and riders followed in formation, and their horns and cries rebounded around the night.

Then, maybe a second before they hit the water, the Hunt *changed*.

Suddenly the Erlking wasn't mounted on a horse, but on a freaking killer whale, its deadly-looking black-and-white coloration stark in the night. Behind him, the other steeds shifted, too, their riders screeching with excitement. The hounds changed as well. Their canine bodies compressed into the long, lean, powerful shape of large sharks.

Then the whole lot of them hit the water in a geyser of spray, and the Harley promptly fell into the water of the lake—

—and onto sand just under its surface. The bike slowed dramatically, pushing me up against Karrin, nearly pushing her over the handlebars, but she locked her arms straight and held, drawing the bike up onto the shore of the island. She rode the brake until we'd come to a halt, about five feet short of hitting one of the big old trees on the island.

"See?" Karrin said.

"You were right," I said.

She looked back up at me, her eyes twinkling. "You are so hot right now."

I burst out into a hiccuping laugh that felt like it could have veered off into manic or depressive at any second, the pressure and terror of this entire stupid, ugly day finally getting to me—but it didn't. There were no enemy ships right on hand, and no one had launched grenades at the island since the Wild Hunt's attack had begun. There might have been Outsiders in the water, but apparently the Hunt was occupying their total attention. For the moment, we were alone, and Karrin started laughing, too. We laughed like that for several moments. We each tried to speak, to say something about the day, but it kept getting choked off by the half-hysterical laughter.

"Grenades," I said. "As if a date has to have—"

". . . look on Molly's face . . ."

". . . know he's a dog but I swear that . . ."

"Santa Claus smackdown!" Murphy gasped finally, and it set us both into gales of laughter that had no wind to support them, until finally we were just sitting with her small warm form leaning her back against my chest, in the darkness.

Then she turned her head, slowly, and looked up at me. Her eyes were very blue. Her mouth was very close.

Then I noticed something.

The second barge, whose tug Murphy had torched with her grenade, was *moving*.

I stood up and climbed off the bike, my eyes widening. “Oh, *crap*,” I said.

From there, I could see that Sharkface stood calmly on the surface of the lake at the rear of the barge, his cloak twining and writhing all around him. His arms stretched forward in what was clearly a gesture of command. The waters at the rear of the barge boiled with Outsiders, most of them at least partly out of the water, and it took me only a second to work out what was happening.

They were doing an Evinrude impersonation, slamming their combined mass and preternatural strength against the rear of the barge. The burning tug was still a massive column of smoke and flame in front of the barge, but the barge was definitely moving—and it was close to shore.

Eerie green and scarlet light flashed in the depths of the lake, soundless and random. Sharkface had been smart. When the Hunt entered the water, he must have sent the lion’s share of his Outsiders against them—while he and a few others came back up to the surface to ruin the crap out of my potential romantic moment.

“Oh, stars and stones,” I breathed. “If they get that boat to shore . . .”

“The Harley can’t get us there,” Karrin said. “Not through this terrain and brush.”

“You can’t keep up with me here,” I said.

Murphy gritted her teeth at that, but nodded. “Go,” she said. “I’ll come as fast as I can.”

And then I thought to myself that if I kept on waiting for things to quiet down and be more appropriate and safer before I took action, I was never going to get anywhere in life.

So I slipped a hand behind her head, leaned down, and kissed her on the mouth, hard. She didn’t stiffen. She wasn’t surprised. She leaned into it, and her mouth tasted like strawberries.

I gave it two heartbeats, three, four. Then we both drew away at the same time. Her eyes were slightly wide, her cheeks high with color.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I told her.

Then I turned and sprinted toward the stretch of shore at which Sharkface had pointed the last barge.

Chapter

Forty-five

For me, running across the island wasn't a physical effort. It was mostly a mental one.

My awareness of the place was bone-deep, a total knowledge that existed as a single, whole body in my mind—a kind of understanding that some medieval scholars had called *intellectus*. It came to me on the level of reflex and instinct. When I ran, I knew where every branch stood out, where every stone lay ready to turn beneath my foot. Moving happened as naturally as breathing, and every step seemed to propel me forward a little faster, like running across the surface of one of those bouncy cages at a kid's pizza place.

I didn't have to run across the island. I just had to think about it and let my body effortlessly follow my mind.

I came out of the woods on the beach above where the barge was headed, which was roughly twenty-three yards, one foot, and six and one half inches from the nearest edge of the Whatsup Dock. One of the three major pulsing ley lines ran out from the island at almost that exact point, and if the barge managed to ground itself in contact with the line, Chicagoans were going to have a really rough morning commute.

Now that the Hunt and the Outsiders had taken their fight mostly below the waves, it was quiet enough to hear the barge approaching. Someone had already begun chanting on the deck of the barge. I couldn't see them through the smoldering wreckage of the tug out in front of the barge, but voices were certainly being raised in unison in a steady chant of some language that sounded as if it were meant to be spoken while gargling Crisco.

"Whatever happened to *Ia, Ia, Cthulu fhtagn?*" I muttered. "No one has a sense of style anymore."

Behind the chanting, I could hear the bubbling, sloshing water as the Outsiders pushed the barge nearer and nearer.

I rested the butt of the rifle on the ground next to my foot, crouched down, and squinted out at the boat. It was going to be here shortly, but not instantly, and I was pretty sure I'd get only one chance to stop it. I started gathering power to myself, an action I'd done so many times over the years that it was all but a reflex now, and squinted at the barge.

If the ritual was already in progress, then there was a chance that they were simply in a holding pattern, maintaining the skeleton of the spell with their own limited energy and waiting until the right moment. Once they were close enough to use it, they'd drop their circle and channel the energy of the ley line, shaping it into the spell's muscles and organs, filling out the frame that was prepared to accomodate it. I had to make sure they never got that chance.

A hole in the hull would work, but by the time the barge came within my limited range, it would be too late to drown it. I'd already tried killing its engine once, so I wasn't terribly excited about the prospect of taking out the creatures pushing it.

I had to *stop* it.

“For destruction,” I said aloud, “ice is also great, and would suffice.” I nodded once to myself, rose, and said, “Okay, Harry. Get this one right.”

I went down to the shore. Using the butt of the rifle, I inscribed a circle in the mud, and closed it with a touch of my hand and a whisper of will. Once I felt its presence snap into place, I took the will I’d been gathering, reached down into the earth, and gathered more, drawing it up like water from a well.

I could feel the seething power of the ley line beneath me, could feel how close I came to it in my quest to gather as much energy as I could before I unleashed my attack. The earth trembled with a subterranean river of dark power, the spirit of violence, havoc, and death expressed as energy, and if I tapped into it, I could potentially direct its terrible strength at the enemy. There would be consequences to an action like that, chain reactions and fallout I couldn’t predict, but it would sure as hell get the job done.

For a second, I almost did it. There was so much on the line. But you can’t go around changing your definition of right and wrong (or smart and stupid) just because doing the wrong thing happens to be really convenient. Sometimes it isn’t easy to be sane, smart, and responsible. Sometimes it sucks. Sucks wang. Camel wang. But that doesn’t turn wrong into right or stupid into smart.

I’d kinda gotten an object lesson in that.

So I left that power alone.

The magic continued to pour into me, more than I usually used, more than was comfortable. After thirty seconds, I felt as if my hairs were standing on end and sparks were shooting between them. I ground my teeth, dug into the cold power of Winter, and kept drawing more. I began directing it down toward my right hand, and cold blue-white fire abruptly wreathed my fingers like the flame from a newly lit gas burner.

The burned tug was only about a hundred yards away when I lifted my hand, stepped forward out of the circle, and cried out, “*Rexus mundus!*”

And a globe of blindingly intense blue light the size of a soccer ball flew out into the night. It spewed mist from every inch of its surface, and flashed through the night like a dying comet. It landed in the water twenty yards in front of the slow-moving barge.

There was an abrupt screech as the sphere of condensed, absolute-zero cold hit Lake Michigan. Ice formed almost instantly, and large crystals of it shot out in every direction, sharp as spears, kind of like Superman’s

Fortress of Solitude. One instant it was clear sailing for the barge—the next, the mutant spawn of an iceberg and a giant porcupine bobbed in the water directly in front of it, a barrier of ice the size of a tractor trailer.

I could have gone bigger, but there just wasn't enough *time*. I'd needed it to happen fast, to get that weight into position—but I wasn't a complete dummy. My pointy iceberg was the size of a semi, but the barge could have carried twenty of them. I just had to get the first piece into the right spot.

Again I reached for Winter, and again I lifted my hand, howling, "*Infriga!*"

Pure cold screamed from my hand into the air, spreading over the surface of the lake in a field shaped like a folding fan. The surface crystallized and froze, and I poured more and more into it, thickening the ice, spreading it toward the little iceberg. The wreckage of the tugboat hit my obstacle first, and the spears of ice punched through the weakened wooden hull of the tug, nailing the iceberg to it. The barge slowed, and pieces of the tug's rig screamed and bent in protest. Then, as it approached, it started hitting the thinnest ice at the edge of the fan—but as it kept coming, the ice got thicker and thicker, providing increasing resistance to the barge's forward motion. It began to grind to a halt.

A furious shriek ripped the air. Sharkface. I'd just pissed the Walker off big-time. It probably says something about my maturity level that it made me grin from ear to ear.

I saw him jump into the air—not like a bunny hop, but a full-on Kung Fu Theater leap, way up over the barge. His rag-strip cloak spread out like dozens of little wings as gravity turned his jump from an ascent into a dive. I was starting to feel the effort of using so much brute-power magic in such a short amount of time, but I had enough left to handle this thing. I prepared a blast of force, ready to swat him away from my barrier of ice and unleash it on him the moment he came within range.

I missed. Well, I didn't *miss*, exactly. But just before the bolt slammed home, Sharkface split into *dozens* of identical shapes that splintered off in every direction. So one of those shapes got hit with a slap of force that would have rocked a car up onto two wheels, and that one went soaring away.

But the other forty or fifty crashed down onto my field of ice like cannonballs, smashing through in most places, in some only sending wide cracks through the ice. When that happened, the copies of Sharkface just

started tearing it apart with their claws. Thick ice is no joke as an obstacle—unless you're a Walker of the Outside, I guess, because these things ripped it apart like it was Styrofoam.

There were so damned *many* of them. I started slamming more of them, but it was heavy work, and there were just too many targets. While some of them ripped apart the remaining ice, others began to tear apart the iceberg and the tugboat, rending them into scrap with an inexorable strength and claws like steel knives. I might have hit seven or eight of them, but it just didn't matter. I was the wrong tool for the job, so to speak. This was a much larger problem, and I had no idea how to solve it.

The chanting on the barge rolled upward an octave, gaining frenzied volume. Outsiders thrashed through the water, pushing the barge, surging ahead of it to push pulverized chunks of ice out of its way, their howls and weird clicks and ululations like their own horrible music. Other Outsiders came rushing toward me, on the shore—only to smash uselessly against the glowing barrier of Demonreach's curtain wall. They couldn't get to me. Which seemed fair enough, because I couldn't seem to get to *them*, either. I'd slowed them down, cost them maybe a couple of minutes, and that was all.

The water near me stirred and then a Sharkface rose up out of it as if on an elevator, slow, his mouth tilted up into a small smile. He stood there on the water perhaps five feet away from me. His eyeless face looked smug.

"Warden," he said.

"Asshat," I replied.

That only made his smile wider. "The battle is over. You have failed. But you need not be destroyed this day."

"You're kidding," I said. "You're trying to recruit me?"

"The offer is made," the Walker said. "We always appreciate new talent."

"I'm no one's puppet," I said.

The Walker actually barked out a short laugh. "At what point have you been anything *else*?"

"You can forget it," I said. "I'm not working for you."

"Then a truce," Sharkface said. "We do not need you to fight our battles for us. But if you stand aside, we will accord you respect and leave

you in peace. You and those you love. Take them to a safe, quiet place. Stay there. You will not be molested.”

“My boss might not go along with this plan,” I said.

“After tonight, Mab will no longer be a concern to anyone.”

I was going to say something badass and cool but . . .

Take the people I love somewhere. Take Maggie. Somewhere safe. Somewhere without mad Queens or insane Sidhe. And just get out of this entire thankless, painful, hideous business. Wizarding just isn’t what it used to be. Not so many years ago, I’d think it was a busy week if someone asked me to locate a lost dog or a wedding ring. It had been horribly boring. I’d had lots and lots of free time. I hadn’t been rich, but I’d gotten to buy plenty of books to read, and I’d never gone hungry. And no one had tried to kill me, or asked me to make a horrible choice. Not once.

You never know what you have until it’s gone.

Peace and quiet and people I love. Isn’t that what everyone wants?

Ah, hell.

The Outsider probably wasn’t good for it anyway. And I did have one more option.

I had been warned not to use the power of the Well. But . . .

What else did I have?

I might have done something extra stupid at that moment if the air hadn’t suddenly filled with a massive sound. Two loud, horrible crunching sounds, followed by a single, short, sharp clap of thunder. It repeated the sequence, again and again. Crunch, crunch, crack. Crunch, crunch, crack.

No, wait. I *knew* this song.

It was more like: stomp, stomp, *clap*. Stomp, stomp, *clap*.

What else did I have?

I had *friends*.

I looked up at Sharkface, who was scanning the lake’s surface, an odd expression twisting his unsettling face.

I smiled widely and said, “You didn’t see this coming, didja?”

STOMP, STOMP, CLAP!

STOMP, STOMP, CLAP!

This was somebody’s mix version of the song, because it went straight to the chorus of voices, pure, human voices, loud enough to shake the ground—and I lifted my arms and sang along with them.

“Singin’ we will, we will rock you!”

The Halloween sky exploded with strobes of scarlet and blue light, laser streaks of white and viridian flickering everywhere, forming random, flickering impressions of objects and faces, filling the sky with light that pulsed in time with the music.

And as it did, the *Water Beetle*, the entire goddamned ship, exploded out from under a veil that had rendered it and the water it had displaced and every noise it had made undetectable not only to me, but to a small army of otherworldly monstrosities and their big, bad Walker general, too.

The Walker let out another furious shriek, his hideous features twisted even more by the frenetic explosion of light in the sky, and that was all he had time to do—the *Water Beetle* slammed into the last barge at full speed.

The mass differential between the two ships was significant—but this was different from when the barge had hit my iceberg. For one thing, it was almost entirely still, having only barely begun to pick up speed again. For another, the *Water Beetle* didn't hit it head-on. Instead, it struck the barge from the side, and right up by its nose. With less than ten yards to spare before the barge's prow ground up onto Demonreach's shore, the *Water Beetle* brutally slammed her nose away from contacting the power of the outgoing ley line.

I couldn't hear the collision over the thunder of Queen's greatest hit, but it flung objects all over both ships around with the impact—more so on the *Beetle* than on the barge. The barge wallowed, stunned, its nose turned away from the beach, its long side being presented to the island, while the *Water Beetle* rebounded violently, drunkenly, and crunched up onto her hull in the shallows, listing badly to one side.

Mac and Molly were up at the wheel. She had nearly been thrown from the craft, but Mac had grabbed my apprentice around the waist and kept her from getting a flying lesson. I'm not sure she even noticed. Her face was contorted in a concentration so deep, it was practically dementia, her lips moving frantically, and she held a wand in either hand, moving them in entirely disconnected movements, as if directing two different orchestras through two different speed-metal medleys.

And as I watched, two other forms bounded up onto the *Water Beetle's* rail, then into graceful leaps that carried them over onto the barge—directly into the center of the ritual that was still running at a frantic pitch.

Thomas had gone into the fight with his favorite combination of weapons—a sword and a pistol. Even as I watched, my brother whirled into

a mass of figures on the deck, blade spinning, blood flying out in wide, clean arcs. He moved so swiftly that I could barely track him, just a blur of steel here, a flash of cold grey eyes there. His gun fired in quick rhythm between strokes of his falcata, scything down the Outsiders' mortal henchmen like sheaves of wheat.

The second figure was grey and shaggy and terrifying. Mouse's lionlike ruff of fur flew out like a true mane as he whirled and lunged into the ritual's participants wherever Thomas hadn't. I saw him rip a shotgun from the hands of a stunned guard and fling it with a snap of his head into another one before bounding forward and bringing half a dozen panicked men to the deck under his weight—and smashing them through the circle that had surrounded the ritual.

The reduced energy the ritual had been able to use, the framework that the ley line would have turned into a deadly construction, vanished, released into the night sky to be shaken to pieces by the music. *We will, we will, rock you.*

"Hey, Sharkface!" I shouted, stepping forward, gathering Winter and soulfire as I went.

The furious Walker whirled back to me just in time to have the heavy, octagonal barrel of the Winchester slam *through* the ridge of bone that he had instead of front teeth, and drive all the way to the back of his mouth.

"Get rocked," I said, and pulled the trigger.

Along with the .45-caliber bullet, I sent a column of pure energy and will surging down the barrel and into the Walker's skull. His head exploded, literally exploded, into streamers and gobbets of black ichor. His cloak of rags went mad, throwing the headless body into the air and sending it thrashing through the shallow water like a half-squashed bug. Dark vapor began issuing from the frantically twitching body—then suddenly gathered into a single cloud, all in a rush, and shot away, emitting a furious and agonized and terrorized scream as it went, alien but unmistakable.

Then the body went limp in the water. The cloak continued flopping and thrashing for a few seconds before it, too, went still.

A unified howl of dismay rose from the surface of the lake, from the Outsiders, and V-shaped wakes appeared on the surface, retreating from the island in every direction, chased by flickering spears of light and music—and the horns of the Hunt began to blare in a frenzy, ringing up from the water's quivering surface. I saw a massive black-and-white form seize a

fleeing Outsider and roll, while a shadow-masked rider lashed out over and over with a long spear. In another place, a shark exploded from the waves, hanging against the sky for a second, jaws gaping, before plunging down directly atop another Outsider, driving it beneath the waves where a dozen wickedly sharp fins abruptly converged.

The woods stirred behind me and Murphy came panting out of them, her P90 hanging from its sling. She came to my side, staring at the chaos.

I couldn't blame her. It was horrible. It was unique. It was glorious. It was . . .

Suddenly it felt like my heart had stopped.

It was distracting.

"Molly!" I screamed. "Molly!"

Mac heard me through that mess, and shook Molly. When she didn't react, he grimaced and then delivered a short, sharp smack to her cheek.

She gasped and blinked her eyes, and the sky show and sound track abruptly vanished, right in the middle of the guitar solo.

"Get them out of the water!" I screamed. "Get onto the shore! Hurry!"

Molly blinked at me several times. Then she seemed to get it and nodded her head quickly. She and Mac hurried down to the *Beetle's* slanted deck, to the door to below. She called out and Sarissa and Justine appeared, both looking terrified. Molly pointed them at the island, and the three jumped from the ship to the waist-deep water and started wading ashore.

Mouse caught what was happening and let out a short, sharp bark. Mouse doesn't bark often, but when he does he can make bits of spackle fall from the ceiling. He and Thomas plunged from the bloodied deck of the barge into the water, and began swimming swiftly toward the island.

The cries of the Hunt and frantic Outsiders filled the air now, and even as they did, I forced myself to calm my thoughts, to take slow breaths, to focus on my intellectus of the island. I couldn't sense anything specifically, but an instinct dragged my chin around, turning me to stare up toward the crest of the island, where the old ruined lighthouse stood among the skeletal forms of the late-autumn trees.

Then it hit me. I shouldn't have been able to see the lighthouse or the trees from down here, not on a cloudy night, but their silhouettes were clear.

There was light up there.

And as my friends reached the shore and hurried over to me, I realized that there was an empty place in my awareness of the island. I would never have sensed it if I hadn't been looking. I couldn't feel anything from around the top of the hill.

"The Walker was just the distraction," I breathed. "Dammit, they're not pulling that same trick on me this time." I turned to them and said, "I think someone's up at the top of the hill, and whatever they're doing, it ain't good. Stay right behind me. Come on."

I was pretty sure I knew who was up there, and I wasn't about to do this alone.

So I started toward the top of the hill, taking the agonizingly slow route that I knew would enable my friends to keep up with me.

Chapter

Forty-six

Whoever was up at the top of the hill had things ready to stop me from getting there. It didn't work out well for them.

I knew about the trip lines that had been strung up between the trees at ankle level, and knew where the gaps were—more harassment-level opposition from the enemy Little Folk, I was guessing. The people with me didn't even realize that there *were* any trip lines.

After that was a trio of particularly vicious-looking fae hounds, the little cousins of Black Dogs. I had taken a Black Dog on once, in my calmer days, and didn't care for a rematch. I clipped one of the hounds with a shot from the Winchester while it was crouching in the brush ahead, waiting for me to come a few steps closer, and I set on fire a thicket where another one

hid before we got within thirty feet. Ambush predators become unnerved when their would-be prey spots them. Fae hound number three hustled out of a hollow log where he'd been planning to rush out and attack with his buddies, and retreated with the two wounded hounds to the far side of the island.

"How did they get on the island?" Molly asked as we kept moving. She was breathing hard, both from her efforts on the lake and from the hike up. "I thought it kept everyone away."

Demonreach was meant to keep things *in*, not out, but I didn't want to blab about that in front of mixed company. "It encourages everyone to stay away, and turns up the heat slowly for anyone who doesn't," I said back. "But that's when it isn't being attacked by an army of cultists and a horde of howling freaks from beyond reality. It was busy making sure none of the Outsiders could come up onto shore—and none of them *could*. It just outmuscled an army led by something that could go toe-to-toe with Mab. Everything has its limits." I checked with my intellectus and realized that Mac and Sarissa were bringing up the rear. That wouldn't do. I still didn't know the role they were playing in this game. "Mouse," I called. "Take rear guard, in case those hounds circle around and try to sneak up on us."

The big furball made a huffing sound, an exhalation somewhere between a bark and a sneeze, but chewier. Heh. Chewie. I reminded myself to keep track of Mac and Sarissa as we went, but I felt better once Mouse was back there. Intellectus was handy as a reference guide, but not as an early-warning system. If either of them tried anything shady, the shaggy Tibetan guardian was probably the one most likely to notice first, anyway. Might as well have him close.

"Who's up there?" Karrin asked, her voice low and tense.

"Faerie Queens, I think. Plural."

"Whoa," Thomas said. "Why?"

"Complicated, no time," I said. "No one does anything until I do. Don't even talk. If the balloon goes up, go after whoever I light up first. After that, improvise."

Then I continued, increasing the pace a little. The trees near the crown of the island were older, thicker, and taller. The spreading canopy of their branches had shaded out most of the brush beneath them, and the ground was easier to move across, being mostly an irregular, soggy carpet of years

and years' worth of fallen leaves. The scent of molds was thick as we went through, disturbing them.

We emerged into the clearing at the top of the hill, and I stopped in my tracks six inches before I would have come out of the shadow of the forest. Thomas bumped into me. I looked partly over my shoulder with a little push of air through my teeth. He elbowed me in the lower back.

The hilltop had been closed in a circle of starlight.

I didn't know how else to describe it. I didn't know what I was looking at. Twelve feet off the ground was a band of illumination, glowing rather than glaring, something that filled the hilltop with gentle light, like an enormous ring floating above the earth. It was of precise width, as if drawn with a compass, and I knew that it was exactly one foot thick—twelve inches. The color was something I had never seen before, changing subtly moment to moment, holding silver and blue and gold, but it wasn't any of those things and . . . and words fail. But it was beautiful, like love, like music, like truth, something that passed through the eyes and plunged straight to the soul. Gentle, softly glowing light slid from the outer edge of the circle like a sheet of water from an elegant fountain, falling to the ground in a slow-motion liquid curtain of pure light, hiding what was behind it.

I felt the grasshopper move up beside me, her eyes wide. "Boss," she whispered. "This would make my mom talk in her church voice. What are we looking at?"

"Merlin's work, I think," I breathed. "That circle. I think it's part of the island's architecture."

"Wow."

"I . . . It's beautiful," Sarissa murmured. "I've never seen anything like it. And I've been looking at incredible things my whole life."

I spoke something I was certain was true in the same moment that I understood it. "It had to be beautiful. It had to be made from beauty. There is too much ugly inside for it to be made of anything else."

"What do you mean, ugly?" Karrin asked, her voice hushed.

"Later," I said. I shook my head and blinked my eyes several times. "City to save." I tried to find something about the circle in my intellectus, but I had apparently already learned everything I could learn about it that way. I knew its exact dimensions; I knew it was part of the structure of the massive spell that made the Well exist. And that was it. It was like the

entire thing had been . . . classified, top secret, need-to-know only—and apparently I didn't need to know.

Which, I supposed, made sense. We were talking about a massive security system.

Molly stooped and picked up a rock. She gave it a gentle underhand toss at the wall of light and it passed through without making a ripple. "Safe?" she asked.

"I doubt it. Give me something that isn't a part of the island," I said.

I heard her slip her backpack off her shoulder and open a zipper. Then she touched my arm and passed me a granola bar wrapped in plastic. I tossed it at the wall, and when it touched, it was destroyed. It didn't go violently. It simply became a flicker of softly glowing light in the precise shape of the bar of "food."

Then it was gone.

"That also was pretty," Thomas noted. "In a completely lethal kind of way."

"Look who's talking," Molly said.

"It's not all that high," he said. "Maybe I could jump it."

"Molly," I said.

She passed me another granola bar, and I threw it over the wall.

The wall destroyed it in midair.

"Maybe not," Thomas said.

"Okay," Karrin said. "So . . . How do we get through it?"

I thought about it for a second. Then I licked my lips and said, "We don't. I do."

"Alone?" Thomas said. "Sort of defeats the point of bringing us. Also, death. Bad plan."

"I think it will let me through," I said.

"You *think*?"

"Look," I said. "Me and the island are . . . kind of partners."

"Oh, right," Thomas said. He looked at Karrin and said, "Harry's a geosexual."

Karrin arched an eyebrow and gave me a look.

"You can't go alone," Molly said, her voice worried.

"Looks like it's the only way I can go," I said. "So we do this Ulysses-style. I go in, I figure a way to let down the gate and then we sack Troy."

"Can you do that?" Karrin asked.

I licked my lips and looked at the wall of light. "I'd better be able to."

"You're tired," Molly said.

"I'm fine."

"Your hands are shaking."

Were they? They were. "They are fine also."

I didn't *feel* tired. Given how much magic I'd been throwing around this day, I should have been comatose with fatigue hours ago, but I just didn't feel it. That wasn't a good sign. Maybe Butters had been right: No matter how much juice I got from the mantle of Winter, bodies have limits. I was pushing mine.

I passed the Winchester to Thomas and took off my new duster. At his lifted eyebrow, I said, "Not of the island. Hold 'em for me."

He exhaled and took them. "No reruns, okay?"

"Pfft," I said. "Be like sneaking into the movies."

Karrin touched my arm. "Just don't say that you'll be right back. You'll jinx it."

"I am a professional wizard," I said. "I know all about jinxes."

Having said that, I checked to make sure my shirt wasn't red. It wasn't. Then I realized I was putting this off because if I was wrong, I was about to go join Yoda and Obi-Wan in blue-light country. So I took a deep breath and strode forward into the beautiful, deadly barrier.

Chapter

Forty-seven

I lived.

Just in case anyone was wondering.

I stepped through and the liquid light poured over me like warm syrup. There was a little bit of a tingle as it passed over the surface of my body, and then it was gone.

As were my clothes. Like, completely.

I had sort of hoped that they would stay—the way Superman’s unitard stays mostly invincible because it’s really close to his skin. Plus I hadn’t felt like stripping in front of everyone for something so relatively trivial as preserving my garage-sale wardrobe and, more important, I didn’t think I

had time to start playing Mr. Rogers while someone screwed around with my island. City to save. Check out my focus.

Of course . . . going into battle full commando could be problematic.

On the other hand, every single time Mab had come at me during my recovery—*every time*—I'd been just like this, without resources of any kind except what I carried within me. I wasn't a big believer in coincidence. Had she been trying only to strengthen me generally? Or had she been preparing me for this exact situation?

Could Mab see that far ahead? Or was this simply a case of superior preparedness proving itself in action? What was it I'd heard in a martial arts studio at some point? Learn to fight naked and you can never be disarmed. Which is fine, I guess, as long as there aren't mosquitoes.

I got low and stayed still and opened my senses.

First thing: I was inside a ritual circle, one that was currently functioning, being used for a spell. It wasn't the cheap and quick kind I was used to, I guessed, or it would have been broken when I crossed it. Maybe it had kept its integrity because as part of the island, I already existed on either side of the circle. There were certain creatures who could move back and forth across boundaries like that without disturbing them in the slightest—most notably the common cat. It was one reason practitioners so often kept cats as house pets. From a technical standpoint, they are very magic-friendly. Maybe I hadn't broken it because it had been set up in such a way as to consider the island's Warden one of those creatures. Or maybe it was the continual, rippling, liquid nature of the circle itself.

Whatever the case, I was standing inside an active circle. Possibly the most active circle I had ever seen. Magic hummed through the air and the ground, so much that I felt my hair standing on end, and some primitive instinct-level awareness from the Winter Knight's mantle, the same part that had given me so much trouble all day, started advising me to get the hell out of there along with the rest of the island's animals. That was why my intellectus hadn't been able to tell me what was happening here. As a form of magical awareness, an active circle had blocked my intellectus out. Now it worked just fine for what was inside the circle—it was everything *outside* of it that it could no longer touch.

I learned all of that at the same time my regular old five senses registered what was happening: I was not alone. The crown of the hill was covered with faeries.

All right, that wasn't literally true. There were twenty of them, plus one other mortal.

And Demonreach.

The island's spirit made manifest stood in the ruins of the lighthouse, in the opening in the wall that led to the entrance to the stairs down to the Well. Its vast form was planted, braced like a man standing against a strong wind, hunched, bent forward slightly, but not in a stance of battle. The spirit did not exist for such things. Instead, I realized, it did only what it always had: It endured. But even as I watched, I saw bits of Demonreach flying backward, away from its mass, but slowly, as if a current of thick syrup flowed past the spirit, slowly wearing it away.

The spirit stood at one point of an equilateral triangle.

At one of the other points stood Lily, the Summer Lady. She stood with her right arm, the arm that projects energy, upraised. She wore the same simple dress I'd seen her in earlier. It was pressed against the front of her body, and her silver-white hair was blown back as if in a strong wind. There was no visible display of energy coming from her other than that, but the ground between her and Demonreach was covered in fresh green grass, and I could feel that she was pouring out power against spirit.

Behind her stood a pair of Sidhe of the Summer Court, each with a hand on her shoulder. Behind them were three more, and four more were behind them, each with their hands on the shoulder of someone in front of them, forming a pyramid shape. They were all projecting power forward, focusing it through Lily, making her even stronger than she already was.

Maeve stood at the third point of the triangle, with her own pyramid of supporters. She wore leather short-shorts, military boots, and a bikini top, all of midnight blue. She stood in the same stance as Lily, the same unseen power flaring from her outstretched hand, but her face was set in a wide, manic smile, and the ground between her and Demonreach was covered in a layer of frost.

The Redcap stood at her right hand, one hand on her shoulder. The massive rawhead from my birthday party was there, too, and its bony claws, drenched in and dripping fresh blood, rested on her other shoulder. Eight other Winter Sidhe were behind them, forming a power pyramid of their own.

Then I heard footsteps, and a second later Fix, the Summer Knight, stepped around the corner of my partially completed cottage and walked

toward me. He was wearing faerie mail, gleaming, draping over a wiry, hard-muscled frame, and he carried his sword in his hand. Fix stopped between me and the triangle at the top of the hill.

“Hey, Harry,” he said quietly.

“Hey, Fix.”

“Cold?”

“Not so much. You know what’s happening here?”

“What must happen,” he said.

“According to whom?”

“My Lady.”

“She’s wrong.”

Fix stood there for a time, quiet. Then he said, “Doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because she is my Lady. You will not raise your hand against her.”

I stared at Fix, who had suffered under the office of Lloyd Slate, and behind him at Lily, who had been Slate’s frequent victim. I wondered how many times, back then, Fix had ached to be able to save her, to have the power to stand up to the Winter Knight.

And now he did.

There comes a time when no amount of talk can change the course of events—when people are committed, when their actions are dictated by the necessity of the situation their choices have created. Fix had put his faith in Lily, and would fight to the death to defend her. Nothing I had to say would change that. I could see that in his face.

“Go back,” he said.

“Can’t. Stand aside?”

“Can’t.”

“So it’s like that?” I said.

Fix exhaled. Then he nodded. “Yeah.”

And for the first time in a decade the Winter Knight and Summer Knight went to war.

Fix hurled a bolt of pure Summer fire that scorched the ground beneath it as it flew at me.

I didn’t have time to think, but some part of me knew this game. Dodging the bolt wouldn’t be enough—the bloom of heated air coming off that fire would burn me if it even came close. That was why Fix would have the advantage in this match if he kept the distance open and just threw bolt

after bolt. So I called upon Winter to chill the air around me as I ducked to one side. Fire and cold met, clashed, and filled the air with mist—mist that would give me the chance to close to grips with my foe.

Part of me, the part of me that I was sure *was* me, viewed these tactics with alarm. I was freaking naked and unarmed. Fix had the mantle of the Summer Knight, and it made him just as strong and fast and tough as I was. He was armored and toted a freaking sword, and he'd had ten years of training with the Summer Court to learn how to fight and use the mantle. Plus, he presumably hadn't spent all day pushing his abilities to the limit.

But the Winter mantle didn't *care* about that. It simply saw its enemy and wanted to destroy it. The best way to do that was to get in close and rip out Fix's throat.

Except that wasn't how the last Winter Knight had killed the last Summer Knight. Lloyd Slate had iced the stairs underneath the other guy's feet and pushed him down. And Slate had been young and in good shape, whereas the other Summer Knight had been an old man. So I thought it would be smart to assume that the instinctual knowledge of the Winter mantle, while it could be handy, was basically that of a starving predator, a wolf in winter—it wanted blood, lots of it, now.

And if I played it like that, Fix was going to leave my guts on the ground.

Instead of charging ahead, I veered to one side for several steps and then froze. An instant later, another bolt of fire lit up the mist, right through where I would have been if I'd followed the mantle's instinct.

Of course—it had to be that way. Winter's Knight was the mountain lion, the wolf. Summer's was the stag, the bison. Winter was oriented to stalking, hunting, and killing prey. Summer to avoiding a confrontation until an advantage could be had, then savagely pressing that advantage for all it was worth. Fix would have a wealth of instinctive knowledge to draw on if I went after him Winter's way, and would be at his most dangerous the same way as, for example, a student of pure aikido. He would use the strength of an attack to assist his own defense, turning it back on the attacker. But if I didn't *give* him that kind of aggressive assault, I would rob him of his instinctive advantage.

Screw being the Winter Knight. Before everything else, I was a wizard.

So I flicked my wrist, whispered, “*Obscurata*,” and vanished behind a veil.

My veils aren’t much good compared to the grasshopper’s, or almost anyone else’s, really, but when you’re standing in a giant fog bank they don’t need to be very good to make you effectively invisible—and I know how to move *very* quietly. I wouldn’t have trusted them against one of the Sidhe, but Fix wasn’t one. He was a changeling, with one mortal parent and one fae one, but except for the Summer mantle, he was as human as the next guy.

I prowled ahead, Listening, sharpening the acuity of my ears to a far greater level than that of which they were normally capable, and heard Fix’s smooth breathing before I’d taken a dozen steps. I froze in place. I couldn’t locate him exactly, but—

I kept myself from making an impatient sound and consulted my intellectus. Fix was standing thirty-six feet, four inches away, about twenty-two degrees to the left of the way my nose was facing. If I’d had a gun, I was pretty sure I could have shot him.

Fix had frozen in place, too.

Bah. His mantle was probably advising him to be patient, just as mine was screaming at me to stop waiting, stalk him, and pounce. I took advantage of it for maybe a minute, consulting my intellectus and moving fifty feet to one side, where I could pick something up off the ground. Then I went back and waited—but he still hadn’t stirred.

This wouldn’t work if he stood his ground. I had to make him move.

I retreated a few more steps into the mist and spoke away from him, hoping the lousy visibility and my veil would confuse the exact origin of my voice. “I get Lloyd Slate a little better now, you know,” I said. “The mantle. It drove him. Made him want things.”

“Lloyd Slate was a monster,” came Fix’s voice.

I hated to do it but . . . I had to push his buttons. “He was as human as the next man,” I said. “It just . . . made his desires louder and louder. There wasn’t anything he could have done about it.”

“Do you hear yourself, Harry?” Fix called. There was an edge in his voice. “You sound like a man making excuses—or justifications.”

“Yeah, but I’m not Slate,” I shot back, my voice hotter. “Slate was some pathetic bully. I had as much power as a hundred Slates way before I cut his throat.”

Fix's breathing came faster. He had it under control—but he was scared. “The Harry Dresden I knew never would have said something like that.”

“That was ten years, a persecution complex, and a war ago, Fix,” I told him, “and you haven't got room to get all righteous with me. I know you're feeling things, too, just like I am.” Time to sink the right barb, to goad him into movement, aggression. “What do you see when you look at Lily, man? She's gorgeous. I have a hard time thinking about anything else when she's there.”

“Shut up,” he said in a quiet voice.

“Seriously,” I continued. The dialogue came easily—too easily. The Winter mantle was talking to a part of me that did not have much in the way of restraint. “That hot little ass? I mean, gosh, just thinking about it . . . If you could see me now, I'd be a little embarrassed.”

“Shut up,” he said again.

“Come on, bros before hos, man. That Summer mantle got a herd instinct going? 'Cause for something as sweet as that, I'm thinking we could share i—”

If my intellectus hadn't been focused on him, to let me see what was coming, I'd have been burned alive. I flung myself to one side as he turned and hurled another bolt of fire at me. I had to gather more Winter around myself to protect my vulnerable hide, thickening the mists even more—and Fix seemed to key on the surge of cold. He pivoted toward me, took two steps, and leapt with his sword held in both hands.

Thirty-seven feet. That was how far he jumped, and it had come effortlessly—he could have done more. I knew exactly how much force he pressed the ground with when he left it, exactly what angle he'd jumped at. My intellectus could track the air and the mist he was displacing as he leapt through it.

I took two steps away just as he leapt.

I felt sick, like I was fighting a blind man.

Fix landed exactly two feet short of where I'd been, and his sword came down through the space where I'd been standing. If I'd still been there, he would have split me into two gruesome halves.

But I wasn't. I was standing behind him, within inches of his back, and before he could rise, I struck. A moment before, I'd used my intellectus to locate an old nail on the ground, about four inches long, partly coated in

rust. Thomas or I must have dropped it while walking to or from the cottage, back when we'd been beginning repairs on it and building the Whatsup Dock. The nail had lain out through several seasons, only lightly touched by them.

I put my thumb behind its head, used the strength of the Winter mantle, and drove it straight through mail that had never been designed to stop such a small point, and two inches into the muscle of Fix's shoulder blade.

Fix let out a scream of shock and pain and swung his sword at me—but with cold steel piercing his skin, and his access to the Summer mantle disrupted, he had only his own reflexes, strength, and skill to rely on. He hadn't trained in them without the power of the Summer Knight to back them up, and he hadn't learned in the brutal school of hard knocks that Mab had put me through. The sword's slash was slowed and clumsy, and I struck him twice—once on the wrist, breaking it with a clear snap, sending the sword tumbling away, and once on the jaw, not quite as hard, sending Fix to the ground in a senseless heap.

"Knight takes Knight," I called into the cloudy night air. "Check."

The struggle between the Queens and Demonreach had already been a silent one, but now the air abruptly went still. I couldn't see them, but I knew that Lily had turned her body partly away from Demonreach, toward me, breaking her connection with one of the two Sidhe supporting her. Demonreach, for its part, had altered its facing to square off against Maeve. I could sense that the little bits of its body that had been eroding away were now moving in the opposite direction, reaccruing to its main mass.

"Fix?" the Summer Lady called, her voice vaguely confused. Then it was touched by sudden, cold fear. "*Fix!*"

"What are you doing?" Maeve snarled. "You stupid cow! I cannot defeat the guardian alone!"

Lily ignored her. I sensed her move her hand, an almost absent gesture.

And a sudden wind brushed the fog Fix and I had created from the hilltop as easily as a young mother sweeping fallen Cheerios from a toddler's tray.

Holy crap.

I knew the Ladies were powerful, but I hadn't realized what that meant in practical terms. Making that much air move that precisely and that

suddenly is *hard*, and it would take a serious investment of energy to make it happen. I could have done it, but it would have been enough heavy lifting to make me want a cold beer and a nice sit-down when I was finished. If I'd had to do it two or three times in a row, I'd have been too tired to lift the beer.

Lily had done it with a comparative flick of her fingers.

And there I was, standing naked on the hilltop over the unmoving form of Fix. I still had my veil up, but it was so rudimentary as to be useless against someone as savvy as the Sidhe. I shouldn't have bothered to hold on to it at all, but some irrational instinct made me condense it instead to a small field of blurry energy around my hips.

"He's alive, Lily," I said, quickly. "We need to talk."

The whites showed all the way around Lily's eyes. "What?" she demanded, fury swelling in her tone. "What did you say to me?"

Whoa. On my worst diplomatic day, I still shouldn't have garnered a reaction like that from what I'd said. "Lily, calm down. Fix is alive. But I think you're still you over there, and I don't think you've been given the whole truth. Let's talk before things happen that everyone regrets."

"How dare you!" she snarled, her rage turning incandescent. Literally. Fire burst from her hands and wreathed her forearms. "How *dare* you!"

I held up my own hands in front of me, empty. I was pretty sure I looked confused. "Hell's bells, Lily, what the hell? I do *not* want a fight here!"

Lily screamed, and Summer fire engulfed her, causing her courtiers to leap away. Gold and green and starlight silver, the fire danced around her, mesmerizing—and swelling. Suddenly I saw the same rage that I'd seen in Titania's eyes, but that had been the smoldering coals left over after the passing of years, after mourning and grief had eased. The power Lily held on to now came from the same kind of passion—but it was fresh and white-hot, and it wasn't going to cool anytime soon.

Then I realized what was going on. Maeve had extended her other hand toward me, and her fingers were dancing merrily. She gave me the briefest flash of a look, and it was poisonously amused. I reached into the air in front of me and felt it there, an elegant little glamour, simple enough that Maeve could have done it in her sleep, complex enough to slip by anyone not looking for it, even one of the Sidhe. I'd been talking, but it hadn't been my words getting to Lily. Maeve had chosen my words for me.

I don't know what she'd said, but she'd picked something exactly right to drive her Summer counterpart mad with rage. Lily's gentler, more compassionate nature had been used against her. Maeve had employed her simple little glamour with exquisite timing, at the one instant when there was no way the relatively inexperienced Lily would have expected it—when she was full of concern for the fallen Fix. With a sinking feeling I realized that the passionate young Lady of Summer was no Titania. She had all the heat, but none of the restraint, the balance, and there was no way in hell that she was going to be able to think, to reason, to hold back her fury.

“Destroy him!” she screamed. Trees shook and rocks cracked as she spoke. The sound of it ripped at my ears, and I felt a sudden hot wetness in them. “Destroy Harry Dresden!”

She threw forth her hands and a wall of fire twenty feet high and as wide as a football field roared toward me.

Chapter

Forty-eight

For a fraction of a second, my brain squealed like the last little piggy running all the way home, a spinal-level fear reaction. I had an experience with fire once. It's the kind of memory that sticks pretty hard.

Fire's tough to defend against. That's one of the reasons it's always been my favorite form of attack. Even if you don't actually set your target on fire, you can still roast it by heating up the air around it, unless it just throws away everything to get out of your way, in which case it isn't thinking about doing anything back to you. As weapons go, fire is top-drawer.

But.

Fire's tricky and fickle. Without focus, it's just chaos, the random release of stored chemical energy. It isn't enough to just have fire. You've got to know when and where and how to use it to best effect—and Lily didn't.

I threw myself down over the unconscious Fix and focused, thrusting my hands out to either side, shouting, "*Defendarius!*"

As I formed a shield around us in a bubble, the firestorm roared down onto us, washing over us like an ocean tide. My shield held the fire back, but it couldn't stop it entirely, and heat began to burn through. That was why I reached for Winter and filled the little bubble around us with the cold. That wave of fire was too massive for me to overcome—but I didn't have to overcome it. It was spread out over such a huge area that all I had to do was beat a relatively tiny portion of it, to hold out against it like a large stone on a beach. I didn't have the strength to beat it—but I did have the strength to hold it away, and to keep just the air within my shield from becoming an oven.

The fire washed over us, and I held on to the shield for a few seconds more, as long as I thought I could. Without my bracelet or my staff to help direct the energy, a few seconds were all I could do—but it was enough to survive. It left me on my hands and knees, gasping, on a small circle of frost-covered earth, but I made it, and so did Fix.

Go, me.

Maeve's mocking laughter rang out over the hilltop.

Hot air touched the side of my face and grew gently, along with an approaching light. I looked up to see Lily walking toward me over the scorched earth, naked now but for the flames curling around her body, her own clothing burned away in the firestorm. Her eyes weren't there. There were only a pair of searing fires burning where they had been, wisps of orange and scarlet flame rising up from them as she came closer. Her silken white hair rose into a wavering column like a flame itself, lifted by the hot air and colored golden green and orange by the light of her fiery nimbus.

Behind her, the other Summer Sidhe were shadows, with fire dancing in the reflection of silvery weapons, and with the echoes of it flickering in their hands and upon their brows, power and weapons alike spreading out around me to leave me no escape—but at the flick of a hand from Lily, they stopped and withdrew, back to their original positions near the tower.

I guessed that she didn't want to incinerate her Summer buddies along with me. I started to lift my hand, to ready another shield, but my other arm couldn't take the weight of my body and I nearly collapsed.

That was it, then.

I was out of gas.

I managed to get myself up onto my knees and sat back on my heels, panting. Then I tugged the nail out of Fix's back, gripped it grimly, and faced Lily.

She stopped about six feet away from me, covered in living fire, and stared down, her eyes like spotlights.

"He's okay, Lily," I said. "Fix is okay. God, Lily. Can you even hear me?"

Evidently she could not. Lily lifted a hand, and a minuscule sphere of white-hot light formed in the air above it, a tiny star.

Now there, that was focus. I couldn't have stopped something that concentrated without a major amount of preparation. I could appreciate it in a professional sense, even if it was about to kill me horribly.

And suddenly I felt very stupid. What the fuck had I been thinking? The Queens of Faerie, even the least of them, were elemental powers, something that was simply out of the league of any mortal. I should have tried to contact my grandfather and the Grey Council, should have at least put out a scream to the White Council, even if they were less likely to help.

And I should have sent Michael and his family—and Maggie—out of town the second I'd realized the danger. I'd saved the day before, maybe often enough to make me overconfident. I sneer about the White Council being arrogant all the time, but I'd walked into the exact same stupid trap, hadn't I? Confident of my ability to handle anything that came along, I'd gathered together my little band of enablers and cruised right into this disaster.

"Lily," I said wearily. "Listen to me. We've both been set up by Maeve."

White fire stared at me.

"The adversary," I said. "It's in her. It's been in her for a long time. Think. It makes the things it takes act against their natures. And you know what it's done for Maeve?" I leaned forward, holding my weary hands palms up. "It's let her *lie*. She can lie her ass off and never blink an eye.

Think. How much of your trust in her, of your awareness of what's going on in the world is based on knowing that she can't speak an untruth?"

Fire stared—and did not consume me. So I kept talking.

"Don't take me at my word," I said. "Just look at what she is *doing*."

And Lily spoke, her voice burning with the unleashed power of Summer. "We are working together. We are destroying the largest source of dark energy and corruption in this world. The source *you* are so desperate to protect that you call Outsiders to defend it!"

Oh, God.

Lily didn't *know* what was in the Well. She understood that it was a source of dark energy, but not *why*.

I kept forgetting that she had had the job for only a comparatively tiny amount of time. Before I'd killed Aurora and left poor Lily holding the mantle of the Summer Lady, she'd been a young woman, no older than Molly, only without Molly's skills and training. She'd been putting her life back together while dealing with the massive power of her mantle, taking a crash course in faerie leadership, struggling to learn.

And if someone had been there to feed her lies as part of her basic education in the supernatural, someone whose word she had trusted, God only knew how much her knowledge had been twisted and colored.

"Who told you I called up Outsiders?" I asked. "Maeve?"

"So arrogant," Lily said. "You reek of arrogance and deception, like all wizards. Even the famous Merlin, who built this abomination." Her eyes narrowed. "But as complex as it is, it is still made of mortal magic. This circle that we used to stop your interference—it's a part of the architecture here. All we had to do was feed power into it to close this place against your allies while we tore it down from inside."

"If you keep going," I told her, "you are going to destroy yourself, Lily, and everyone you brought with you, and a lot of innocent people are going to *die*."

"Finish it, Lily," Maeve called. "I told you they would lie. Mortals *always* lie, and that is why we must stand together. We cannot allow ourselves to be divided. Put him down and we will complete what we have begun."

"Lily, please," I said. "Don't take my word for it. Don't believe me. But be certain. Find out for yourself. Then you'll know. You don't have to do this."

The Summer fire vanished abruptly.

Lily stood over me, her hair mussed, her naked body so beautiful, it hurt. She spoke in a quiet, dreadfully numb voice. “You can’t tell me that,” she said. “Not you. Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I wanted pain and death and fear and war? Do you think I wanted this mantle, this responsibility?” Her eyes welled, though her expression didn’t change. “I didn’t want the world. I didn’t want vast riches, or fame, or power. I wanted a husband. Children. Love. A home that we made together. And that can never happen now.” The tears fell, and as the heat, the fury, came back into her voice, the fire gathered around her again. “Because of you. Because you killed Aurora. Because you *made* me into *this*. You raise your hand against my champion, my *friend*, and when you are defeated you *dare* tell me what I must and must not do?”

“Lily, please,” I said. “You have a choice.”

Maeve was laughing again in the background, an Arkham Asylum kind of laugh that echoed across the bare, burned ground.

“Now,” Lily said, her burning voice bitter. “Now you give me a choice.” The ministar flared to life in her palm again. “*Thus* do I choose, you son of a bitch. Knight of Winter, burn and die.”

I got it, I think. Or at least, I got most of it. Lily had spent her life a victim because of her luminous beauty. Lloyd Slate had been the last man to abuse her, but I doubted he was the first. All her life, she had been shut away from making choices, but she clearly had not wanted to be part of the world of Faerie; as a changeling, she could have Chosen to become a full faerie being at any time—and she hadn’t. Then when I killed Aurora, I had even taken the choice to remain human away from her.

I hadn’t meant to do that when I killed Aurora, but that fact made no difference in the outcome. I hadn’t just killed Aurora that night. In many ways, I’d effectively killed Lily, too. I’d thrown her into a world where she was lost and afraid. A grieving and furious Titania had doubtless not been the supportive mentor figure Lily had needed. And even if she’d been a newly minted immortal, she must have been horribly angry, and sad, and afraid—and lonely.

Easy prey for Maeve. Easy prey for Nemesis. I wasn’t sure whether there was anything about that entire situation that I could have changed, even if I’d known that it needed changing, but I still felt like I was the one at fault. Maybe I was. It had been my choice that changed everything.

Maybe it was fitting that Lily kill me, in turn.

Her fiery eyes seared into mine as she launched the little star at my heart.

Chapter

Forty-nine

There was a flash of silver, and the little star bounced off of the mirror-bright flat of Fix's long sword.

It soared into the earth a dozen yards away and hit the ground with a flash and a howl of heated air, creating a brief column of white flame that, presumably, had been intended to replace my head and neck.

Fix was holding himself up on one elbow, and held the sword in his left hand. He looked like hell, but he made a single deft rolling motion and came onto his feet as if he didn't weigh anything.

And he came to his feet between Lily and me.

"Lily!" Fix said. "What is *wrong* with you?"

Eyes of flame regarded him. "You . . . you're all right?"

“I *said* that,” I said. My voice might have squeaked a little. My heart rate was up.

“Harry, shut up,” Fix said. “Lily, *look* at him. He isn’t a threat to anyone.”

I guess I must have looked kind of bad, but still . . . “Hey,” I said.

Fix twitched his hips and kicked me in the chest. It wasn’t hard, but in my condition it didn’t need to be. It knocked me over.

“Sir Knight . . .” Lily said. “I . . . Fix, it *burns*.”

“Stop this,” he urged quietly. “Let’s get out of here, find someplace quiet for you to meditate until you’ve got it under control again.”

“I *need* to . . . He tried to *hurt* you.”

Fix’s voice hardened. “The ground is burned black, Lily,” he said. “And there’s frost all over my mail. There are burns all over his arms and shoulders, but I wake up fine, lying in the only grass left on the hilltop.” He held up his sword. The last six inches or so of the blade were simply gone, ending in a melted mess. The point must have been lying outside the area my shield had covered. “But it was hot enough to do this. Forget what anyone *said*. Who was protecting me, Lily?”

She stared at Fix, the furious fire still curling around her, lifting her hair, burning from her eyes. Then she closed them with a groan, and the fires went out. Lily turned her head sharply away from me. “This is too much,” I heard her whisper. “I’m going to fly apart.”

“My lady?” Fix asked.

Lily made a snarling sound, turning eyes that still flickered with embers toward me. “Stay where you are, Sir Knight,” she said, spitting the last word. “If you move or lift weapon or power against our purpose, I will not show mercy a second time.” Then she turned and swept back toward the pyramid formation of Sidhe assaulting Demonreach. Her feet left clear imprints in the soot and ash on the ground, and little fires flickered up in the wake of her steps, dying away again when she had passed. She did not say a word, just lifted her hand and again something like an invisible sandblaster started pouring into Demonreach.

I watched, too drained to move more. I did, I noted, have burns on my arms. I didn’t feel them. They didn’t look like anything epic, but they were there.

“Fix,” I said. “Thank you.”

He looked at me, his expression guarded, but nodded his head slightly. "It seemed I was in your debt, Winter." His eyes sparkled, just for a second. "Couldn't have that."

I found myself laughing weakly. "No. No, it might break something."

"It broke my damned wrist." He snorted. "My jaw isn't happy either. Good punch."

"I cheated," I said.

"Our business, there's no such thing," he said. "I should have known you were goosing me, talking like that. Most of the fighting I've done, there hasn't been much in the way of taunt and insult."

"Raise your standards. There's almost always time for an insult or two."

He smiled, though it was a bit pained. He waggled the fingers of his right hand experimentally. "Are you done?"

I exhaled slowly, and didn't answer.

"How much of what you told her is true?" he asked.

"What did you hear?" I asked him.

"Pretty much everything after you took the knife out of me."

"Nail," I corrected him, and held it up so he could see. It still had his blood on it.

He looked a little pained. "Harry, would you mind?"

"No," I said, and wiped the blood into the earth, scrubbing it off the nail.

"Thanks," he said. He squinted at the wall and then at me. "How the hell did you get in here?"

"Trade secrets," I said. "How did you guys get here? I know you didn't take a boat."

"Flew in," Fix said. "Shape-shifters. I dropped from a hang glider over the lake and parachuted in."

"Damn. You got extreme."

"I'm getting there," he said.

"So you landed here and put the circle up?"

"Trade secrets," he said cautiously. "You realize we still aren't sitting in the same dugout, right? I can do the frenemies thing. It's kind of traditional. But we are not on the same side."

"No. You're on the wrong side," I said. "Maybe more than one."

“That’s what every conflict sounds like,” he said. “Not everyone can be equally right, Harry.”

“But believe you me, everyone *can* be equally wrong,” I said. “Fix, this is about more than Winter and Summer.”

He frowned at that.

“Tell me this,” I said. “I’m not asking for anything specific, anything that I might be able to use against you later.” As if Maeve would let me have a later. “Just tell me: Has Maeve ever asked you to take something at her word. And just *told* you something was true? Straight up?”

Fix’s frown deepened.

“And you thought to yourself, ‘Hey, that’s odd. She never just *tells* anyone anything straight up.’”

His lips parted slightly, and his eyes fixed on Maeve.

“And you thought that if anyone but one of the Ladies had said it, you would wonder if she was lying. But she didn’t leave any wiggle room, so it *had* to be the truth.”

“So?” he asked, very quietly.

“So let me ask you this,” I said. “If you assume that she *can* lie, even if it was just that once—how does it change the picture?”

Fix might have had some foolish idealism going, but he’d never been anywhere close to stupid. “Oh,” he breathed. “Um.”

“Remember when Lily opened the door to Arctis Tor for us, back when?”

“Sure.”

“When we got inside, the Leanansidhe was popsicled in Mab’s garden,” I said. “Because something had invaded her and influenced her actions. Mab was in the middle of some kind of exorcism based on the model of an ice age.”

“And?”

“And what if this invader got into the water before Mab caught it?” I asked. “What if it got into Maeve?”

“That’s crazy,” he said. “Mab’s the one who’s gone mental.”

“Is she?” I asked him. “Is it so crazy? Remember that meeting at Mac’s? Remember how we found out that Mab had cracked a gasket?”

“Maeve told . . .” He stopped speaking suddenly.

“Yeah,” I said. “A minute ago, you told Lily to ignore the words and look at the actions. You know as well as I do which speaks louder. You

know who I am and what I've done. So I'm going to ask one more question," I said. "Whose idea was it to be here tonight? Lily's? Or Maeve's?"

The blood drained from his face. "Oh. Fuck."

I bowed my head. Then I said, "Fix, I saved you because you're a decent guy, and I don't care if we're on different teams. I don't want you dead."

"Yeah," he said quietly. "It . . . speaks pretty loud. But maybe you knew I'd think that. Maybe you did it so that you could play me."

"Maybe you're giving me way more credit for cunning than I'm due. You know how I work. How often do I get to a neat, elegant solution that ties everything up? Can you look at me right now and honestly say to yourself, 'Dresden, that wily genius! This must be a part of his master plan'?"

I spread my hands and looked up at him expectantly.

Fix looked at me, dirty, naked, shivering, burned, bruised, covered in soot and ash.

"Fuck," he said again, and looked back at the Ladies.

"I don't think Maeve did anything to Lily's head," I said. "I don't think she needed to. I think Lily was insecure and lonely enough that all Maeve needed to do was act sort of like a person. Give Lily someone who she felt understood what she was going through. Someone she thought would have her back."

"A friend," Fix said.

"Yes."

"Everyone wants to have a friend," he said quietly. "Is that so bad?"

"Thelma and Louise were friends," I said. I pointed at the triangle. "Canyon."

The muscles along his jaw jumped several times. "Even if . . . even if you're being honest, *and* you're right—and I'm not copping to either—so what? Those coteries with them are their inner circles. They'll obey without question. You've got nothing left to fight with. And I sure as hell can't take them all on alone."

I didn't want to say it, to give away anything to a potential enemy. Nemesis could have taken Fix, for all I knew. It could be there inside him right then, smirking at the rapport it was establishing with me. That was the ugly fact.

But sometimes you have to ignore the math, and . . .

And follow the wisdom of your heart.

My heart told me that Fix was a decent guy.

“Fix, I know about this island. It’s kind of my stomping grounds. That’s how I got through. And I know that if Maeve has her way, this island is going Mount Saint Helens, and taking Chicago with it.”

He stared at me, frowning, pensive.

“My daughter is in town,” I said in a whisper. “She’ll die.”

He blinked. “You have a . . . ?” Then he rocked back a little, as he realized what I’d entrusted him with. “Oh. Christ, Dresden.”

I took a deep breath and pressed on. “The Hunt is out there taking it to the Outsiders right now,” I said. “And they’re winning. And my crew is here, outside the circle. Murphy, Molly, Thomas, Mouse. If I can take the circle down, we aren’t alone.”

“When did ‘we’ happen?” he asked in a flat, hard tone.

I looked up at him and saw laughter at the corners of his eyes.

Sometimes the wisdom of the heart is not at all a bad thing.

“I won’t let anything hurt Lily,” he said. “For any reason. Period.”

“Agreed,” I said. “Maeve’s the bad guy.”

He tested his right hand again and got a little more motion out of it before he winced. “I don’t know where this will get you,” he said, “but as far as I could tell, this was just a ritual circle, like any other.”

“How so?”

“When we landed, Maeve sent some hounds and some Little Folk after you and went straight for that lighthouse—and the guardian just popped up out of the ground, where it is now. Maeve assaulted the spirit, just like right now. She kept it busy while Lily walked a circle of the hilltop, singing. I’ve seen her set up circles like that a thousand times. But once she’d gone all the way around, kaboom, up came the wall.”

I grunted. “Then . . . it’s a preinstalled defense that can be triggered like . . . Hell’s bells, not *like* a ward. It *is* a ward. A huge one. But if anything of the island passes through the circle without disturbing it, and anything that isn’t of the island is destroyed . . .” I followed the logic through and sagged.

“What?” Fix asked.

“Then there’s no way to break the circle,” I breathed. “It’s like a time-lock safe. It isn’t coming down until sunrise.”

“Meaning what?”

I swallowed. Sunrise was too late. So I gathered whatever scraps of strength I had left in me and pushed myself slowly, wearily to my feet.

“Meaning,” I said, “we’re on our own.”

Fix eyed the center of the clearing. He passed me a silvery knife he drew from his belt and said, “There you go with that ‘we’ again.”

Chapter

Fifty

I started walking. It was iffy for a couple of steps but I got the hang of it.

“Is there a plan?” Fix asked, keeping up with me.

“Maeve. I kill her.”

Which had been Mab’s freaking order in the first place.

He glanced aside. “You know she’s an immortal, right?”

“Yeah.”

His eyes narrowed. “What do I do?”

“They’ve got the guardian pinned down,” I said. “I think one of those crews has *got* to stay on it, or it will break loose. Otherwise, Maeve would have been stomping on me right next to Lily.”

Fix nodded. “She never passes up the chance to tear the wings off a fly.” He frowned. “What happens if the guardian gets loose?”

I wasn’t sure. Demonreach had enormous power, an absolute dedication to purpose, and no sense of proportion. I had very little idea of its tactical capabilities. It might or might not be able to help in a fight. Actually, I was sort of hoping it wouldn’t—imagine trying to kill specific ants, in a crowd of ants, with a baseball bat. I was pretty sure that if Demonreach ever started swinging at someone, I wanted to be over the horizon at the very least.

In fact, I realized, that was probably the problem here. Demonreach existed on an epic scale. It was neither suited to nor capable of effectively dealing with beings of such relative insignificance. Standing off a Walker and a small army of Outsiders had not been a huge problem for the island. But Maeve and Lily had slipped inside its guard. They and their personal attendants were sparrows attacking an eagle. The eagle was bigger and stronger and capable of killing any of them, and it didn’t matter in the least.

Not only that, but Demonreach was a *genius loci*, a nature spirit. The fae were intimately connected to nature on a level that no one had ever been able to fully understand. One could probably make an argument that Demonreach was one of the fae, or at least a very close neighbor. Either way, the mantles of the Ladies of Winter and Summer would carry a measure of dominion and power over beings like Demonreach. Clearly they were not sovereign over the guardian spirit, because it was withstanding them. Just as clearly, they had *something* going for them, because it wasn’t trying to crush them, either.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “But the point here is that if we jump Maeve, Lily is going to be too busy keeping a lid on the guardian to get involved.”

“The two of us,” Fix said, “are going to take on all ten of them?”

“Nah,” I said. “I take Maeve. You get the other nine.”

“What if they don’t cooperate?”

“Chastise them.”

Fix snorted. “That’ll be quick. One way or the other. And . . . it’s going to mean war if the Summer Knight assaults nobles of the Winter Court.”

“Not at all,” I said. “They aren’t nobles. They’re outlaws. I just outlawed them by the authority invested in me and stuff. I also hereby declare us a joint task force.”

“We’re a task force?”

“As of now,” I said.

Fix bobbed his head amiably. “If we dance fast enough, maybe we can sell that. Then what?”

“If we’re both alive, we’ll figure it out.”

We took a few more steps before Fix said, “You can’t take Maeve, wizard. Not in the shape you’re in. Not even if she was alone.”

“No,” I said. “I can’t.”

But maybe the Winter Knight could.

Ever since I’d gotten out of my bed in my quarters in Arctis Tor, I’d felt the power of the Winter mantle inside me, and held it back. I’d felt the primal drives that were its power, the need to hunt, to fight, to protect territory, to kill. Winter’s nature was beautiful violence, stark clarity, the most feral needs and animal desires and killer instinct pitted against the season of cold and death—the will and desire to *fight*, to *live*, even when there was no shelter, no warmth, no respite, no hope, and no help.

I’d fought against that drive, repressed it, held it at bay. That savagery was never meant for a world of grocery stores and electric blankets and peaceable assembly. It was meant for times like this.

So I let Winter in, and everything changed.

My weariness vanished. Not because my body was no longer weary, but because my body was no longer important—only my will. My fear vanished, too. Fear was for prey. Fear was for the things I was about to hunt.

My doubts vanished as well. Doubt was for things that did not know their purpose, and I knew mine. This was a Winter matter, a Faerie matter, a family matter, and it was precisely correct that only beings of Faerie resolve it. I knew exactly what I had to do.

There was a throat that needed ripping.

“Harry?” asked Fix. “Uh. Are you okay?”

I looked aside at him. As hunting partners went, Fix didn’t look like much, but I’d seen him in action before. He was no one to underestimate. And I needed him. Once I didn’t, things might change, because he was on my island and that wasn’t something I could let slide. But for now I could do worse than to have him at my side.

“I’m a little hungry,” I said, and smiled. “Here. Don’t need it.” I tossed the knife to him, point first.

He caught it deftly by the handle. I saw the minor shifts in shadow on his neck as his shoulders tensed up. “Remember. You’ve got iron.”

I didn’t sneer at him, because what would be the point? But I did roll the nail back and forth between my fingers, and heard it scraping on ice.

I looked down and found that ice had condensed out of the water in the air and formed over my fingertips. I put the nail between my teeth so that I could hold up my fingers. As I watched, icicles began to form, guided by raw instinct, stretching out from my fingertips. I flexed my fingers a few times, and saw the edges form, the ice hard and razor sharp. Nice.

I debated. Armor, too? Too heavy. This needed to happen fast. Besides, I wouldn’t want the armor to be in the way for what would come after. That was going to be the good part.

“Time to play,” I said around the nail. I took four steps, building up to a run, and leapt into the air toward Maeve. Fifty feet. No problem. It was glorious, the freedom, the certainty, and I could not imagine what had made me so squeamish about embracing Winter in the first place.

Bad things kept happening to me. It was high fucking time *I* started happening to *them*.

Maeve must have sensed something at the last instant, despite her focus on Demonreach. I was a fraction of a second away before she moved with the serpentine quickness of the Sidhe, throwing herself to one side. My claws missed her throat by inches. They did slice off one of her dreadlocks, and it whirled through the air as I hit the ground, legs absorbing the shock as my feet dug into the muddy ground near the lighthouse.

There was an instant of complete shock from Maeve’s coterie, and I used it to slice at the Redcap’s eyes just as Fix landed on the rawhead’s shoulders and overbore the creature, sending it toppling forward to the ground.

I felt my claws hit. The Redcap screamed and reeled away from most of the blow, darting back, brushing past one of the Sidhe from the Botanic Gardens, behind him. The Sidhe had a blank, confused look on his face as he tried to fight his way out of the concentration of supporting Maeve in her suddenly interrupted spell. No time to think. Claws of bloody ice flashed at him, and I opened his throat to the windpipe. He went down with a choked scream, and I stepped on his chest to fling myself at the two behind him, one a twisted figure inside a droopy grey cloak and hood, the

other a lean, gangling thing with the head of a boar, covered in tattoos and bone beads.

I stomped a foot down onto the cloak, slammed my clawed hand into the body behind it, and ripped out something ropy and hot and slippery. The boar-headed thing tore at my body with its tusks, and I felt bright, distant pain on my ribs. I drove a foot up between its legs in a kick that lifted it six inches off the ground, and took off an ear and half its face with my claws.

I sensed Fix at my back and heard him grunt, “Down!”

I dropped to my knees and bounced back up again. In the time I was down, his sword flicked out over my head, drove into the chest of the boar thing, and whistled out again, taking heart’s blood with it.

Then there was a roar, a sound that came from something truly enormous, and someone slammed a tree trunk into my lower back. It took me off my feet and sent silver pain through my body. I landed in a roll and came up to mostly steady feet, one hand supporting some of my weight, the other up in a defensive posture.

It was the rawhead.

Rawheads are parasites, creatures that assemble bodies for themselves out of the bone and blood of freshly dead beings. They were more common when every farm and village did some slaughtering each day, back before grocery stores and fast food. As I noted before, this one was enormous, bigger than a couple of large steers, twelve feet tall and weighing at least a ton. The cloak had been torn from it, and now it looked like a bizarre sculpture of bones of various creatures, drenched in fresh blood. It had the skull of something big, maybe a hippo or a rhino, and luminous lights danced in the empty eye sockets. It drew in a huge, wheezing breath and roared again.

Fix was picking himself up off the ground, bounding up as if he hadn’t been hurt at all—but the Redcap and four other Sidhe were stalking toward him with weapons drawn. Fix faced them squarely, blade in hand, a small smile on his plain face.

“My, my, *my*,” Maeve said. She stepped around the leg of the rawhead into sight, giving me a frankly appraising stare. “Who would have thought you would dirty up so well, wizard? I mean, the claws, the blood, the eyes.” She shivered. “It gets to me. I’ve always had a thing for bad boys.”

I smiled around the nail. “Funny. Because I’ve got something for you, too.”

“Yeah?” she asked, and licked her lips. “You finally gonna nail me, big guy? You’ve been so coy.”

“I’m done teasing,” I said.

Maeve slipped both hands behind her back, arching her body, thrusting her chest toward me. It wasn’t a particularly impressive chest, but it was well formed, and pale, and lovely, and hidden beneath entirely too much bikini for my taste. A snarl bubbled up out of my throat.

“That’s right,” Maeve said, her wide eyes unblinking. “I know what you’re feeling. The need to fight. To kill. To take. To fuck.” She took a pair of slow steps toward me, making her hips shift back and forth. “This is right. It’s exactly what you should be feeling.”

I flexed the fingers of my free hand and prepared to strike. She just had to come a little closer.

“Can you imagine this all the time, wizard?” Maeve purred. Steel began to ring out, back where Fix was. But I ignored it. Two more steps. “Can you imagine feeling this strong all the time? Can you imagine being so hungry?” She took another step, and another deep breath. “And feeding that hunger. Sating it. Quenching it in flesh and screams.”

She slid her left hand out from behind her back and ran her palm slowly over her stomach and side. “This flesh. I would not give it to you. I would fight, dare you to do your worst. You could unleash your every aching need. And that would just be the beginning.”

I was breathing hard now, though I hadn’t been a moment before. My eyes had locked onto the interplay of muscle and skin over her vulnerable belly. The claws would tear through her guts so easily there. Or I could use my teeth. Or just my tongue.

“Sex and violence,” Maeve purred. She had taken a couple more steps toward me, but I wasn’t sure when. Or why it mattered. “Hunger and need. Take me, here, on this ground. Don’t give me pleasure, wizard. Just take. Let it out, the beast inside you. I wish you to. I dare you to.” Her fingers popped the snap on the little shorts. “Stop denying yourself. Stop thinking. This *feels* right.”

Hell, yeah, it did. Maeve might have been one of the Sidhe, and fast, and have all kinds of magic powers, but she wasn’t stronger than me. Once I took her to the ground, I could do as I pleased with her. I felt my mouth water. Some might have come out of one corner.

Maeve stepped closer yet and breathed, “You came for my throat, didn’t you?” She let her head tilt bonelessly to one side, and slid her hand up her lithe body to push her hair back and away from her neck. Her hips were making small, slow shifts of her weight, a constant distraction. Her throat was lean and lovely. “Here it is. Come to me, my Knight. It’s all right. Let it out, and I will make everything worth it.”

Her throat. I had wanted it for something, I thought. But now I just *wanted*. That would be how to do it. Set my teeth on her throat while I took her. If she struggled—or didn’t struggle enough—I would be able to start ripping my way toward the blood.

“This is how it is supposed to be,” Maeve purred. “Knight and Lady, together. Fucking like animals. Taking what we please.” Her mouth turned up into a smile. “I thought you’d never let it in. Let it in deep, where I could touch.” Her lovely face took on a feigned, youthful innocence. “But I can touch it now, can’t I?”

I growled. I’d forgotten how to do whatever that other thing was. All I could think about was the need. Claim her as a mate. Take whatever I pleased from her. Make her mine.

Except . . .

Wait.

A fluttering surge of pure terror went through me, and it was energy enough to let me rip the Winter from my thoughts, to push it back. It didn’t want to go. It fought me every inch of the way, howling, filled with raw lust for flesh and for blood.

My ribs suddenly ached. My head spun a little. I suddenly needed that hand on the ground to keep my balance.

Maeve saw it the second I regained control. Her eyelids lowered almost closed, and she breathed, “Ah. So close. But perhaps there is still time. Is that your staff, wizard, or are you just happy to see me?”

I bared my teeth and said, “Maeve . . .”

“This is perfect,” she said. “In one night I’m going to unleash the Sleepers, slay a starborn, put an end to this troublesome mortal city, and begin a war between Summer and Winter. By the time the real assault on the Gates begins, Winter and Summer will be hunting one another in the night, and be so busy gouging out one another’s eyes that they’ll never see what is coming—all thanks to me. And you, of course. I couldn’t have done this at *all* without you.”

She leaned a little closer as she spoke that last, and I ripped at her throat with my ice claws.

I was exhausted, and it was slow, entirely lacking in the focused power and precision I'd felt under the influence of Winter. She bobbed her head back a fraction of an inch, and the swipe missed and sent me down into the dirt.

Maeve let out a little peal of laughter and clapped her hands. Then she flicked a couple of fingers negligently toward me and said to the rawhead, "Tear him to pieces."

The rawhead took two lumbering steps forward and reached down toward me with bony, bloody claws.

But before it could grab me, there was a rush of footsteps, and a four-legged form consisting entirely of what looked like mud slammed into its rearmost leg.

The mud creature hit the rawhead *hard*. The power of its impact cracked bones and blew the leg out from beneath the rawhead. The fae giant bellowed a ground-shaking roar. A ton of bloody bones fell, and the mud creature, white teeth flashing, kept after it.

Snarling.

And a nimbus of blue light gathered around its muddy jaws.

I looked up to see more mud creatures rushing up the hill, though the others were bipedal, of various sizes and shapes. The first one to reach me drew a steel sword from a muddy scabbard and went after the rawhead as well, falcata being used with the brutal power strikes normally employed with a freaking ax. Silver eyes flashed in the blobby, mud-covered face.

Thomas.

Maeve snarled and stepped toward me, bringing her right hand out from behind her back. She gripped a tiny little automatic in her fingers, though God only knew where she'd been concealing it. She half lifted it, but before she could shoot, gunshots rang out, sharp and clear. One of them hit the ground maybe three feet away, and Maeve bolted aside, vanishing behind a veil as she went.

The smallest mud figure came to my side, lowering a mud-covered P90. She hooked a little hand beneath one of my arms, her blue eyes reddened and blinking rapidly. With surprising strength, she dragged me back from the rawhead while Thomas and Mouse fought it.

The others hurried up to join Karrin, and while Karrin covered us, muddy Mac got a shoulder underneath me and with a grunt of effort picked me up in a fireman's carry.

"Come on," Karrin said. "The cottage."

While she kept her P90 at the ready and Mac toted me, the other two mud figures, Sarissa and Justine, hurried along beside us. A moment later Mac dumped me gently, more or less, onto the floor of the cottage. Karrin kept her gun pointed at the door.

"Karrin," I managed to gasp.

Her eyes didn't waver from the door. "Got tired of waiting on you. I'm here."

I spit the nail out of my mouth and into my hand. "*How?*" I asked. Then I eyed them all and said, "Mud. You covered yourselves in mud."

"Everywhere," she confirmed. "Nostrils, eyes, ears, everywhere the light could touch. We figured out that if you completely covered something, it could make it through that wall. God, I'm going to shower for a week."

Oh, that was clever. The defense mechanism wasn't a thinking being, capable of making judgment calls. It was simply a machine, albeit one made of magic, a combination detector and bug zapper. By covering themselves with mud, they'd tricked it into thinking they were of the island.

Outside the cottage, the rawhead bellowed, and Mouse's snarling battle bark rang out defiantly.

"This is insane," Sarissa breathed.

"The stones of the cottage have protections on them," I said. "Not sure how well they work, but they should help." I looked back at Karrin. "Where's Molly?"

"Out there, playing Invisible Girl."

There was the sound of a heavy impact, and Mouse let out a terrible, pained-sounding yelp.

Then it was quiet.

Karrin's breathing started coming faster. She resettled her grip on the weapon.

"Oh, God," Sarissa said. "Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God."

I would have gotten terrified, too, but I was just too tired for it to stick.

There was no warning, nothing at all. The rawhead shoved its arm into the cottage, seized Karrin by the gun, and hauled her out. The weapon barked several times as she went.

And then it got quiet again.

“We have to run,” Sarissa said in a whisper. “Harry, please, we should run. Open a Way into the Nevernever. Get us out of here.”

“I’ve got a feeling we wouldn’t like the part of the Nevernever this place borders,” I said.

“Oh, Sir Knight,” Maeve called from outside. “Come out, come out, wherever you are, you and everyone with you. Or I’m going to start playing with your friends.”

“Hey, why don’t you come in here, Maeve?” I called back. “We’ll talk about it.”

I waited for an answer. I got one a minute later. Karrin let out a pained, gasping sound.

“Dammit,” I muttered. Then I started to climb to my feet again. “Come on.”

“What?” Sarissa asked. “No. I can’t go out there.”

“You’re about to,” I said quietly. “Mac.”

“We go out,” Mac said, “she’ll kill us.”

“If we don’t, she’ll kill us anyway. Starting with Karrin,” I said. “Maeve likes hurting people. Maybe we can string her along until . . .”

“Until what?” Sarissa asked. “Sunrise? That’s hours away.”

Justine put her hand on Sarissa’s shoulder. “But we’ll stay alive a little longer. Where there’s life, there’s hope.”

“You don’t understand,” Sarissa said. “Not for me. Not for me.”

Karrin let out another gasp of pain and I ground my teeth.

“Sarissa,” I said, “we don’t have a choice. Lily just about roasted the top off the hill in a moment of pique. Maeve can do worse. If we stay in here, she will.”

“Die now, or be tortured to death in a few hours,” she said. “Those are our choices?”

“We buy time,” I said. “We buy time so that I can think and maybe figure some way for us to get out of this clusterfuck. Now get up, or so help me I’ll carry you out there.”

A flash of anger went through Sarissa’s eyes. But she got up.

“All right, Maeve!” I called. “You win! We’re coming out!”

I held up my hands, palms out, and walked out of the meager makeshift protection of the ruined cottage.

Chapter

Fifty-one

Maeve was enjoying her victory tremendously.

She stood on a pile of stone fallen from the lighthouse, next to the Summer Lady and her coterie, who were still focused upon restraining Demonreach. On the ground in front of her lay Thomas, Karrin, and Mouse. Mouse had been hog-tied and his muzzle held shut with thick bands of what looked like black ice. He wasn't struggling, but his deep, dark eyes were tracking everyone who moved. Karrin sat with her hands tied behind her back, scowling so ferociously that I could see the expression even through the mud. And my brother lay on the ground, bound up like Mouse was, but it didn't look like he was conscious.

The rawhead loomed over them, minus one of its arms. The arm lay over on the ground, a jumble of brittle, cracked bones held together by withered strands of some kind of reddish fiber. The rawhead didn't have an expression to read, but I thought the glow of its eyes looked sullen and satisfied. The Redcap was standing off to one side. Half of his face was a bloody mess, and he had only one good eye now. He was holding Karrin's P90 casually, with much of the mud knocked off of it. Next to him, two of the Sidhe held Fix's arms behind his back. The Summer Knight had a bruise blackening the entire left side of his face, running right to the hairline.

But Molly was not visible.

So. I might have been dealt a bad hand, but I still had a hole card out there somewhere.

Maeve hopped down from the fallen stones, still holding that little automatic in her hand, and smiling widely. "You made it interesting, Dresden. I'll give you that. Your merry band is just so"—she kicked Karrin in the small of the back, drawing nothing but a hard exhale—"feisty." She eyed the people standing with me. "Now let's see. Who do we have here?"

Maeve made a gesture with one hand, and the air suddenly felt thick. Mud started plopping off of everyone covered in it, as if it had begun to rain again and gotten wetter and runnier. "Let's see, let's see," she murmured. "Ah, the bartender. Irony, there. Getting a good view, are you?"

Mac stared at Maeve without speaking.

"Please allow me to make sure you don't get bored. This is a participation sport," Maeve said, and shot him in the stomach.

Mac grunted and rocked back onto his heels. He stared at Maeve, his expression completely impassive. Then he exhaled a groan and fell to one knee.

"Oh," Maeve said, her eyes glittering. "That just never gets old."

Justine made a quiet sound and went to Mac's side.

Maeve's eyes fastened on her. "And the vampire's crumpet. Luscious little thing, aren't you? And so close to Lady Raith. You and I are going to have a long talk after this, darling. I just know you're going to start to see things my way."

Justine didn't look at Maeve, and didn't answer. She didn't look frightened—just concerned for Mac. Maybe because Justine was not the

most balanced and danger-aware person I knew. Or maybe her poker face was just way better than mine.

Maeve's eyes stopped on the last person with me and her smile became positively vulpine. "Well, well, well. Sweet little Sarissa. Isn't this luscious? There's nothing I have that you don't want to ruin, is there?"

"Maeve," Sarissa said. She didn't seem frightened either. Just tired. "Maeve, for God's sake, how many times have we had this talk?"

"And yet you keep spoiling things for me!"

Sarissa rolled her eyes and gave a helpless little lift and fall of her hands. "Maeve, *what* could I *possibly* have ruined for you? Did *finally* moving out of that studio apartment destroy your life? Did getting my nursing degree somehow diminish your power? Did I steal some boyfriend of yours that you accidentally left breathing after the first night?"

"It always goes back to that, doesn't it?" Maeve said, her tone waspish. "How important you think men are. And here you are trying to impress Mother by bedding this one."

"It was *work*, Maeve. Therapy."

"I could see how therapeutic that dress was at his party."

"My dress? You were wearing *rhinestones*. And nothing else!"

Maeve's face contorted in rage. "They. Were. *Diamonds*."

Karrin looked back and forth between them with an expression of startled recognition. "Harry . . ." she said quietly.

"Yeah, I got it," I said. I turned to Sarissa, who looked younger than Molly. "Mab's BFF, eh?" I asked her.

"You said that, not me," she said quickly.

"Right," I said. "You're just a young, single rehabilitative health professional."

"This decade," sneered Maeve. "What was it last time? Mathematics? You were going to describe the universe or some such? And before that, what was it? Environmental science? Did you save the Earth, Sarissa? And before that, an actress? You thought you could create art. Which soap opera was it again?"

"It doesn't matter," Sarissa said. She saw me staring at her and said, "It was before your time."

I blinked. "What?"

She looked embarrassed. "I told you I was older than I looked."

“Finally I realize who you remind me of.” I sighed, looking back and forth between Sarissa and Maeve. “It must have been the scrubs that threw me off. Maeve is always dressed like a stripper, and she’s always had the piercings and the club lighting and the crazy Rasta hair.” I looked back and forth between the two. “Hell’s bells, you’re identical twins.”

“Not identical twins,” they both said at exactly the same time, in the exact same tone of outrage. They broke off to glare at each other.

“How does that work, exactly?” I asked. I was curious, but it was also an effort to buy time. I’ve yet to meet a megalomaniac who doesn’t love talking about him- or herself, if you give them half a chance. Especially the nonmortal ones. To them, a few minutes of chat in several centuries of life is nothing, and they let things build up inside them for decades at a time. “You two . . . were born changelings, weren’t you? What happened?”

“I Chose to be Sidhe,” Maeve spat.

“And you Chose humanity?” I asked Sarissa.

Sarissa shrugged a shoulder and looked away.

“Hah,” Maeve spat. “No. She never Chose at all. Just remained between worlds. Never making anything of herself, never committing to anything.”

“Maeve,” Sarissa said quietly. “Don’t.”

“Just floating along, pretty and empty and bored,” Maeve went on in a sweet, poisonous tone. “Unnoticed. Unremarkable.”

“Maeve,” said Lily in a harsh voice, looking up from where she stood. The Summer Lady kept a hand extended toward Demonreach, and her face was covered in sweat, and she seemed to be leaning back against the hands of the Sidhe behind her to stay upright. “I can’t hold the spirit alone all night. We have to talk about this before it gets any more out of control. Hurry, and let’s finish this.”

Maeve whirled toward Lily, stamping her foot on the ground. “This is *my* night! Do *not* rush me, you stupid cow!”

“Always so charming,” Sarissa noted.

Maeve turned back to Sarissa, and her right arm, the one holding the gun, twitched several times. “Oh, keep it up, darling. See what happens.”

“You aren’t going to let me live anyway, Maeve,” Sarissa said. “I’m not stupid.”

“And I am not *blind*,” Maeve spat back. “Do you think I did not know about all the time she has been spending with you? All the intimate talk,

the activity together. Do you think I don't know what it means? She's doing with you what she always meant to do with you—using you as a spare. Preparing you as a vessel for the mantle. Preparing my replacement. As if I were a broken piece of a machine.”

Sarissa looked pale and nodded slowly. “Maeve,” she said, her voice very soft. “You’re . . . you’re sick. You’ve got to know that.”

Maeve stopped, tilting her head, and her hair covered most of her face.

“Somewhere, you have to realize it. She wants to help you. She cares in her way, Maeve.”

Maeve moved her left arm alone, pointing a finger straight at me. “Yes. I can see how much she cared.”

“It isn't too late,” Sarissa said. “You know how she lays her plans. She prepares for everything. But it doesn't have to happen that way. The Leanansidhe was sick and Mother helped her. But her power alone isn't enough to heal you. You have to want it, Maeve. You have to want to be healed.”

Maeve quivered where she stood for a moment, like a slender tree placed under increasing strain.

“We need the Winter Lady now,” Sarissa said. “We need you, Maeve. You're a vicious goddamned lunatic and we *need* you back.”

Maeve asked in a very small voice, “Does she talk about me?”

Sarissa was silent. She swallowed.

Maeve said, her voice harsher, “Does she talk about me?”

Sarissa lifted her chin and shook her head. “She . . . won't say your name. But I know she fears for you. You know that she never lets things show. It's how she's always been.”

Maeve shuddered.

Then she lifted her head and stared venomously at Sarissa. “I am *strong*, Sarissa. Stronger than I have ever been. Here, now, stronger than *she* is.” Her lips quivered and twitched back from her teeth into a hideous mockery of a smile. “Why should I want to be *healed* of that?” She cut loose with one of her psychotic laughs again. “I am about to unmake every precious thing *she* ever valued more than her own blood, her own *children*. And where is she?” Maeve stuck her arms out and spun around in a pirouette. Her voice became pure vitriol. “Where? I have closed the circle of this place and she may not enter. Of course, these stupid primates sussed out a way through it, but she, the Queen of Air and Darkness, could not

possibly stoop to such a thing. Not even if it costs her the lives of her daughter and the mortal world, too.”

“Oh, Maeve,” Sarissa said, her voice thick with compassion and something like resignation.

“Where is she, Sarissa?” Maeve demanded. There were tears on her cheeks, freezing into little white streaks, forming white frost on her eyelashes. “Where is her *love*? Where is her *fury*? Where is her *anything*?”

While that drama was going on, I thought furiously. I thought about the mighty spirit who was my ally, who was being held immobile and impotent. I thought about the abilities of all of my allies, and how they might change the current situation if they weren’t all incapacitated. Molly was the only one at liberty, and she had worn herself out over the lake. She wouldn’t have much left in her—if she appeared now, the fae would defeat her handily. She couldn’t change this situation alone. Someone would have to set things into motion, give her some chaos to work with.

I just didn’t have much chaos left in me. I was bone-tired, and we needed a game changer. The mantle of the Winter Knight represented a source of power, true, but Maeve had damned near talked me into joining her team when I’d let it have free rein. I wasn’t going to help anyone if I let myself give in to my inner psycho-predator.

If we weren’t all inside the stupid circle, at least I could send out a message, a psychic warning. I was sure I could get it to my grandfather, to Elaine, and maybe to Warden Luccio. But while I was sure a mud coating could get us out of the circle, there was no way the fae would give us time to coat ourselves and do it. We were effectively trapped in the circle until sunrise, just like a being summoned from the Nevernev—

Wait a minute.

Circles could be used for several different things. They could be used to focus the energy of a spell, shielding it from other energies. They could be used to cut off energy flows, to contain or disincorporate a native being of the Nevernever.

And if you were a mortal, a genuine native of the really real world, they could be used for one thing more: summoning.

The hilltop was one enormous circle: one enormous *summoning* circle.

“She is not here,” Maeve was ranting. “She sends her hand to deal with me? So be it. Let me send her a message in reply!” The little automatic swiveled toward my head.

I shouted as swiftly as I could, putting whatever will I had left into the shortest and most elemental summons there is: “Mab! Mab! Mab! I summon thee!”

Chapter

Fifty-two

It's impossible to know how something is going to arrive when you summon it.

Sometimes it's huge and dramatic, like it was with Titania. Sometimes they come in a burst of thunder or flame. Once, this thing I'd summoned arrived in a shower of rotting meat, and it took me a month to get the smell out of my old lab. Less often, they simply appear, like a slide-show image suddenly projected on the wall, drama-free.

Mab came in a bell tone of sudden, awful, absolute silence.

There was a flash—not of light, but of sudden snow, of frost that abruptly blanketed everything on the hilltop and gathered thick on my eyelashes. I reached up a hand to flick the snowflakes out of my eyes, and

when I lowered it, Mab was there, again in her crow black dress, with her midnight eyes and ebon hair, floating three feet off the ground. The frost was spreading from her, covering the hilltop, and the temperature dropped by twenty degrees.

In the same instant, everything on the hilltop ceased moving. There was no wind. There were no fitful drops of rain. Just pure, brittle, crystalline silence and a sudden bleak black presence that made me feel like hiding behind something, very quietly.

Mab's dark, bleak gaze took in the hilltop at a glance, and stopped on Lily and her supporting coterie. Mab's left eye twitched once. And she spoke in a low, dreadfully precise voice. "Cease. This. Rudeness. At once."

Lily suddenly stared at Mab with wide eyes, like a teenager who had been walked in upon while making out in the living room. The confidence of her stance faltered, and she abruptly lowered her hand. There was a sigh, as of completed labor, from her crew. I checked Demonreach. The guardian spirit had ceased to look slow-motion windblown, and simply stood in the opening to the lighthouse, motionless.

Lily stared at Mab for a few seconds. Then she lifted her chin in defiance and took a few steps, until she stood shoulder to shoulder with Maeve.

Mab made a low, disgusted sound and turned to face me. "I have heeded your summons; yet I would not enter this domain unless specifically bidden. Have I your permission to do so?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes, you do."

Mab nodded her head slightly, and descended to the ground. From me, she turned to Demonreach. "I thank you for your patience and your assistance in this matter. You could have reacted differently but chose not to. I am aware of the decision. It will not be forgotten."

Demonreach bowed its head, barely, a gesture of acknowledgment, not cooperation or compliance.

Once she had seen that, something seemed to ease out of Mab. It was hard to say what gave me that impression, yet I had the same sense of relief I would have felt upon seeing someone remove his hand from the grip of a firearm.

Mab turned back to me and eyed me up and down. She quirked one eyebrow, very slightly, somehow conveying layers of disapproval toward

multiple aspects of my appearance, conduct, and situation, and said, “Finally.”

“There’s been a lot on my mind,” I replied.

“It seems unlikely that your cares will lighten,” Queen Mab replied. “Improve your mind.”

I was going to say something smart-ass, but said mind noted that maybe I could wait until my bacon was entirely out of the fire before I did. I decided to pay attention to my mind and bowed my head in Mab’s direction instead. I felt like I’d gotten a little smarter already. Baby steps.

Then Mab turned to Maeve.

The Winter Lady faced the Queen of Air and Darkness with cold fury in her eyes and a smile on her lips. “So,” Maeve said. “You come in black. You come as a judge. But then, you always did that with me. But it’s just a game.”

“How a game?” Mab asked.

“You have already judged. Passed sentence. And dispatched your executioner.”

“You have duties. You have neglected them. What did you expect?”

“From you?” Maeve said bitterly. “Nothing.”

“Nothing is precisely what I have done,” Mab said. “For too long. Yet to lose you presents a danger of its own. I would prefer it if you allowed me to assist you to return to your duties.”

“I’m sure you *would*,” Maeve sneered. “I’m sure you would enjoy torturing me to the brink of sanity to make me a good little automaton again.”

Mab’s reply was a second slower coming than it should have been. “No, Maeve.”

Maeve ground her teeth. “No one controls *Maeve*.”

Frost formed on Mab’s soot black lashes. “Oh, child.”

The words had weight to them, and finality—like the lid to a coffin.

“I will *never* be your good little hunting falcon again,” Maeve continued. “I will never bow my knee to anyone again, especially not to a jealous hag who envies everything she sees in me.”

“Envy?” Mab asked.

Maeve cut loose with another one of those lithium-laced laughs. “Envy! The great and mighty *Mab*, envious of her little girl. Because I have something you will *never* have, Mother.”

“And what is that?” Mab asked.

“*Choice*,” Maeve snarled.

“Stop,” Mab snapped—but not in time.

Maeve bent her elbow to point her little gun casually across her body and, without looking, put a bullet into Lily’s left temple.

“No!” Fix blurted, suddenly struggling against the Sidhe holding him.

Lily froze into absolute stillness for a second, her beautiful face confused.

Then she fell like the petal of a dying flower.

“Lily!” Fix screamed, his face contorted with agony. He fought wildly, though he couldn’t escape, lunging toward Maeve, paying no attention whatsoever to his captors. For their part, Winter and Summer fae alike seemed stunned into near-paralysis, eyes locked onto Lily’s fallen form.

Mab stared at Lily for a long second, her eyes wide with an echo of the same shock. “What have you *done*?”

Maeve threw back her head and howled mocking, triumphant laughter, lifting her hands into the air.

“Did you think I did not *know* why you prepared Sarissa, hag?” she half sang. “You wrought her into a vessel of Faerie. Rejoice! Thy will is done!”

I didn’t know what the hell she was talking about for a second—but then I saw it.

Fire flickered to life over the late Summer Lady. It did not consume Lily. Rather, it gathered itself into green and gold light, a shape that vaguely mirrored Lily’s own, arms spread out as she lay prostrate upon the frost-covered earth. Then, with a gathering shriek, the fire suddenly condensed into a form, the shape of something that looked like an eagle or a large hawk. Blinding light spread over the hilltop, and the hawk suddenly flashed from Lily’s fallen form.

Directly into Sarissa.

Sarissa’s eyes widened in horror, and she lifted her arms in an instinctive defensive gesture. The hawk-shaped Summer fire, the mantle of the Summer Lady, plunged through Sarissa’s upraised arms and *into* her chest, at the heart. Her body arched into a bow. She let out a scream, and green and gold light shone from her opened mouth like a spotlight, throwing fresh, sharp shadows across the hilltop.

Then her scream faded into a weeping, gurgling moan, and she fell to the earth, body curling into a shuddering fetal position.

“Mantle passed.” Maeve tittered. “Nearest vessel filled. The seasons turn and turn and turn.”

Mab’s eyes were wide as she stared at Maeve.

“Oh, *oh!*” Maeve said, her body twisting into a spontaneous little dance of pure glee. “You never saw that coming, did you, Mother? It never even *occurred* to you, did it?” Her own eyes widened in lunatic intensity. “And how will you slay me now? Whither would *my* mantle go? Where is the nearest vessel *now*? Some hapless mortal, perhaps, ignorant of its true nature? The instrument of some foe of yours, in alliance with me, ready to steal away the mantle and leave you vulnerable?” Maeve giggled. “I can play chess *too*, Mother. Better now than *ever* you could. And I am now less a liability to you alive than dead.”

“You do not understand what you have done,” Mab said quietly.

“I know *exactly* what I have done,” Maeve snarled. “I have *beaten* you. This was never about the sleepers, or this accursed isle, or the lives of mortal insects. This was about beating *you*, you hidebound hag. About using your own games against you. Kill me now, and you risk destroying the balance of Winter and Summer forever, throwing all into chaos.”

Sarissa lay on the ground, moaning.

“And it was about taking *her* away from you,” Maeve gloated. “How many mortal caterwauls or sporting events will the Winter Queen attend with the Summer Lady? And every time you think of her, you remember her, you will know that *I* took her from you.”

Mab’s black eyes went to Sarissa for a moment.

“The blame for this lies with me,” Mab said quietly. “I cared too much.”

I realized something then, in that moment when Mab spoke. She wasn’t reacting as she should have been. Cold rage, seething anger, megalomaniacal outrage—any of those would have been something I would have considered utterly within her character. But there was none of that in her voice or face.

Just . . . regret. And resolution.

Mab knew something—something Maeve didn’t.

“Remember that when this world is in ashes, Mother,” Maeve said, “for you cannot risk my death this night, and I will not lift a *finger* to aid

you in the Night to come. Without the Winter Lady's power, your downfall is simply a matter of time—and not much of that. After this night, you will not see me again.”

“Yes,” Mab said, though to which statement was unclear.

“I have choice, Mother, while you will be destroyed in your shackles,” Maeve said. “You will die, and I will have freedom. At *last*.”

“To fulfill one's purpose is not to be a slave, my daughter,” Mab said. “And you are not free, child, any more than a knife is free because it leaves its sheath and is thrust into a corpse.”

“Choice is *power*,” Maeve spat in reply. “Shall I make more choices this night, to demonstrate?”

She lifted the little pistol again and pointed it at me.

Karrin drew a sharp breath.

And I suddenly understood what was happening; I understood what Mab knew that Maeve didn't.

Sarissa wasn't the only Faerie vessel on the hilltop. She was simply the one Maeve had been *meant* to see.

There was one other person there who had been spending time with a powerful fae.

Who had a relationship with one that was deeper and more significant than a casual or formal acquaintance.

Whose life had been methodically, deliberately, and covertly reshaped for the purpose.

Who had been extensively prepared by one of the Sidhe.

“Maeve,” I said in a panic. “Don't! You're killing yourself. You haven't won. You just can't see it.”

Maeve cackled in delight. “Can't I?”

“Being able to choose to tell lies isn't a freaking superpower, Maeve,” I said. “Because it means you can always make the *wrong* choice. It means you can lie to *yourself*.”

Maeve's smile turned positively sexual, her eyes bright and shining.

“Two plus two is *five*,” she said, and rotated the gun sideways, the barrel still pointed at my eye.

Mab moved her little finger.

Karrin's hands flew out from behind her back in a shower of broken chips of black ice. She tore her little holdout gun from a concealed ankle holster.

“No!” I shouted.

Two shots rang out, almost simultaneously.

Something hissed spitefully past my ear.

A neat, round black hole appeared just to the side of Maeve’s nose, at the fine line of her cheekbone.

Maeve blinked twice. Her face fell into what was almost precisely the same expression of confusion Lily’s had. A trickle of blood ran from the hole.

And then she fell, like an icicle in a warm sunbeam.

“Dammit, no,” I whispered.

Deep blue fire gathered over the fallen Winter Lady. It coalesced with an ugly howl into the outline of a serpent, which coiled and then lashed out in a strike that carried its blazing form fifteen feet, to the nearest corner of the ruined cottage . . .

. . . where Molly, behind her veil, had been crouched and waiting for a chance to aid me.

The serpent of Winter cold plunged into her chest, shattering her veil as it struck, and my apprentice’s expression was twisted in startled horror. She didn’t even have time to flinch. It struck, and she fell back against the side of the cottage, her legs buckling as if the muscles in them had forgotten how to move.

Molly looked up at me, her expression bewildered, confused, and she barely managed to gasp out, “Harry?”

And then she, too, collapsed to the ground, shuddering and unconscious.

“Oh, God,” I breathed. “Oh, God.”

Molly.

Chapter

Fifty-three

Two Queens of Faerie lay dead.

Long live the Queens.

Everyone was shocked, still.

I turned to the retainers of the fallen Queens and said, “Let Fix go. Now.”

They released the smaller man, and he went at once to Lily’s side, his face still wrenched with grief.

“You will put down anything you took from my friends,” I told the fae in a level voice. “Then you will withdraw as far down the hill as the wall will allow. If I see any of you try anything violent, you will never leave this island. Am I understood?”

I didn't look like much, but Mab was looming right over one of my shoulders, and Demonreach over the other, so they took me seriously—even the rawhead. They all moved away, breaking into two groups as they went.

“Harry,” Karrin said. “What just happened? Is Molly all right?”

I stared hard at Mab. “I don't know,” I said to Karrin. “Can you and Justine get them both into the cottage? Just . . . make sure they don't swallow their own tongues or something.” I looked over at Justine. “How you doing, Mac?”

Mac gave me a weary, shaky thumbs-up.

Justine looked up from tending to him. “I don't think there's too much bleeding. But we need to get this dirt washed off of him.”

“There's a pump by the door to the cottage,” I said. I looked around and frowned at Demonreach. “Hey, make yourself useful and help them carry the wounded inside.”

Demonreach eyed me.

But it did so, lumbering forward to pick Molly and then Sarissa up, very carefully, the way a person would carry an infant, one in each arm. Then it walked over to the cottage, carrying them. Karrin, meanwhile, went to Justine, and between the two of them, they were able to get Mac on his feet and hobbling into the cottage. I went and managed to drag Thomas over my shoulder. I toted his unconscious form to the cottage, too, and told Mouse, “Stay with him, boy.”

Mouse made a distressed noise, and looked over at Molly. He sat down on the floor halfway between the two of them, and looked back and forth.

“Just have to have a little campout until dawn,” I said. “We'll take care of them.”

Mouse sighed.

“Harry,” Karrin began.

“Gun,” I said quietly, and held out a hand.

She blinked at me, but she checked it, engaged the safety, and handed it over.

“Stay here,” I said, moving toward the door.

“Harry, what are y—”

“Stay *here*,” I snarled, furious. I took the safety off and left the cottage to stalk over to Mab.

As I crossed to her, her black gown and hair became storm-cloud grey, then silver, then white again.

“Yes, my Knight?” she asked me.

I started walking around the base of the tower, away from the cottage. “Could you please come this way?”

She arched a brow but did, moving over the ground with the same approximate weight as moonlight.

I walked until we were out of sight of the cottage and the fae down the hill. Then I thumbed back the hammer on the little gun, spun, and put the barrel against Mab’s forehead.

Mab stopped and regarded me with luminous unblinking eyes. “What is the meaning of this?”

“It’s still Halloween,” I said, shaking with exhaustion and rage. “And I am in *no* mood for games. I want answers.”

“I have turned villages to stone for gestures less insulting than this one,” Mab said in a level tone. “But I am your guest here. And you are clearly overwrought.”

“You’re goddamned right I’m overwrought,” I growled. “You set me up. That’s one thing. I walked into it with open eyes. I get it, and I’ll deal with it. But you set *Molly* up. Give me one good reason not to put a bullet through your head right now.”

“First,” Mab said, “because you would not survive to finish pulling the trigger. But as threatening your life has never been a successful way to pierce your skull, I will provide you with a second. Miss Carpenter will have difficulty enough learning to cope with the Lady’s mantle without you handing her mine as well. Don’t you think?”

Right. I hadn’t thought about that part. But I wasn’t feeling terribly rational.

“Why?” I demanded. “Why did you do it to her?”

“It was not my intention for her to replace Maeve,” Mab said. “Frankly, I would have considered her a better candidate for Summer.”

“You still haven’t told me *why*,” I said.

“I meant Sarissa to take Maeve’s place,” Mab said. “But one does not place all one’s hopes with any one place, person, or plan. Like chess, the superior player does not plan to accomplish a single gambit, a particular entrapment. She establishes her pieces so that regardless of what her enemy

does, she has forces ready to respond, to adapt, and to destroy. Molly was made ready as a contingency.”

“In case something happened to your own daughter?” I asked.

“Something had *already* happened to my daughter,” Mab said. “It was my intention to make Sarissa ready for her new role, much as I made you ready for yours.”

“*That’s* why you exposed her to all of those things alongside me?”

“I have no use for weakness, wizard. The situation here developed in a way I did not expect. Molly had originally been positioned with another purpose in mind—but her presence made it possible to defeat the adversary’s gambit.”

“Positioned,” I spat. “Gambit. Is that what Molly is to you? A pawn?”

“No,” Mab said calmly, “not anymore.”

That rocked my head back as surely as if she’d punched me in the nose. I felt a little bit dizzy. I lowered the gun.

“She’s a kid,” I said tiredly. “She had her whole life ahead of her, and you did *this* to her.”

“Maeve was always overly dramatic, but in this instance she was quite correct. I could not risk killing her if I did not have a vessel on hand to receive her mantle—and the lack of the Winter Lady’s strength would have been critical. It is one of the better plays the adversary has made.”

“You don’t get it, do you?” I said.

“I do not,” she said. “I do not see how what I have done is substantially different from what you have been doing for many years.”

“*What?*” I asked.

“I gave her power,” she said, as if explaining something simple to a child.

“That is *not* what I have been doing,” I spat.

“Is it not?” Mab asked. “Have I misunderstood? First you captured her imagination and affection as an associate of her father’s. You made her curious about what you could do, and nurtured that curiosity with silence. Then when she went to explore the Art, you elected not to interfere until such time as she found herself in dire straits—at which point your aid placed her deep within your obligation. You used that and her emotional attachment to you to plant and reap a follower who was talented, loyal, and in your debt. It was actually very well-done.”

I stood there with my mouth open for a second. “That . . . that isn’t . . . what I did.”

Mab leaned closer to me and said, “That is *precisely* what you did,” she said. “The only thing you did not do is admit to yourself that you *were* doing it. Which is why you never availed yourself of her charms. You told yourself lovely, idealistic lies, and you had a powerful, talented, loyal girl willing to give her life for yours who *also* had nowhere else to turn for help. As far as your career as a mentor goes, you grew into much the same image as DuMorne.”

“That . . . that isn’t what I did,” I repeated, harder. “What you’re doing to her will change her.”

“Did she not change after you began to indoctrinate her?” Mab asked. “You were perhaps too soft on her during her training, but had she not already begun to become a different person?”

“A person she *chose* to be,” I said.

“Did she choose to be born with her gift for the Art? Did she choose to become someone so sensitive that she can hardly remain in a crowded room? I did not do that to her—you did.”

I ground my teeth.

“Consider,” Mab said, “that I have done something for her that you never could have.”

“What’s that, exactly?”

“I have put her beyond the reach of the White Council and their Wardens,” Mab said, again as if explaining something to an idiot. “While they might howl and lecture as much as they wish about an apprentice wizard, they can do nothing at all to the Winter Lady.”

I took a deep breath.

That . . . was also true.

“You’ve made her life so much harder,” I said quietly. I wasn’t saying it to Mab, really. I was just sounding out loud the chain of argument in my head. “But so have I. Especially after Chichén Itzá.”

“You trusted her with your mind and your life,” Mab said. “I took that as a statement of confidence in her abilities. You will be working frequently with the Winter Lady. It seems to me that this would be a most appropriate match.”

“And her duties?” I asked. “What is the purpose of the Winter Lady?”

“That is for her to know,” Mab said. “Know this, my Knight: Had I not considered her an excellent candidate, I would never have had her prepared. She has the basic skills she will need to master the power of the mantle—especially if one she trusts is there to advise and reassure her.”

“You should have spoken to me about this first,” I said. “You should have spoken to her.”

Mab moved so quickly that I literally never saw it. The gun was suddenly, simply gone from my hand and was being pushed into my face—in exactly the same spot where Maeve had been shot.

“I,” Mab said coolly, “am not *your* servant, Dresden. You are mine.”

“Demonreach,” I said. “If our guest pulls that trigger, take her below and keep her there.”

The guardian spirit’s vast shadow fell over us even though there was nothing actually casting it, and Mab’s eyes widened.

“Servant,” I said. “I don’t like that word. I suggest that you consider where you stand and choose a different term. My Queen. And you will be gentle with that girl, or so help me I will make you regret it.”

Mab’s mouth quirked very slightly—her eyes more so. She looked up at me almost fondly, exhaled, and said, “Finally, a Knight worth the trouble.” She lowered the gun and calmly passed it back to me.

I took it from her.

“Have you any other questions?” she asked.

I frowned, thinking. “Yeah, actually. Someone called Thomas and told him to be ready at the boat when I first got back to town. Do you know anything about that?”

“I arranged it, of course,” Mab said, in a voice that sounded exactly like Molly’s. “As a courtesy to the ancient one, just before your party started.”

At that, I shuddered. Molly’s voice coming from that inhumanly cold face was . . . just wrong.

“Lily,” I said. “She waved her hand over my chest, as if she could detect the influence of the adversary.”

Mab’s lips pressed into a firm line. “Yes.”

“Could she?” I asked.

“Of course not,” Mab said. “Were it so simple a task, the adversary would be no threat. Not even the Gatekeeper, at the focus of his power, can be absolutely certain.”

“Then why would she think she could?” I asked. Then I answered my own question. “Because Maeve led her to believe that she could. All Maeve had to do was lie, and maybe sacrifice a couple of the adversary’s pawns to make it seem real. Then she could have Lily wave her hands at her, and ‘prove’ to her that Maeve was clean of any taint. And Lily wasn’t experienced enough to know any better. After that, Lily would have bought just about anything Maeve was selling.”

“Obviously,” Mab said, her tone mildly acidic. “Have you any questions you cannot answer for yourself?”

I clenched my jaw and relaxed it a couple of times. Then I asked, “Was it hard for you? Tonight?”

“Hard?” Mab asked.

“She was your daughter,” I said.

Mab became very silent, and very still. She considered the ground around us, and paced up and down a bit, slowly, frowning, as if trying to remember the lyrics of a song from her childhood.

Finally she became still again, closing her eyes.

“Even tonight, with everything going to hell, you couldn’t hurt her,” I said.

Mab opened her eyes and stared down through a gap in the trees at the vast waters of Lake Michigan.

“A few years back, you got angry. So angry that when you spoke it made people bleed from the ears. That was why. Because you figured out that the adversary had taken Maeve. And it hurt. To know that the adversary had gotten to her.”

“It was the knife,” Mab said.

“Knife?”

“Morgana’s athame,” Mab said in a neutral tone—but her eyes were far away. “The one given her by the Red Court at Bianca’s masquerade. That was how the Leanansidhe was tainted—and your godmother spread it to Maeve before I could set it right.”

“Oh,” I said. I’d been at that party.

Mab turned to me abruptly and said, “I would lay them to rest upon the island, the fallen Ladies, if that does not offend you.”

“It doesn’t,” I said. “But check with the island.”

“I shall. Please excuse me.” She turned and began walking away.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I said.

She stopped, her back straight.

“Was it hard for you to kill Maeve?”

Mab did not turn around. When she spoke, her voice had something in it I had never heard there before and never heard again—uncertainty. Vulnerability.

“I was mortal once, you know,” she said, very quietly.

And then she kept walking toward her daughter’s body, while I stared angrily . . . sadly . . . thoughtfully after her.

* * *

The rest of the night passed without anyone getting killed. I sat down with my back against the outside wall of the cottage, to keep an eye on my “guests” down the hill, but when I blinked a few seconds later, my eyes stuck shut, and then didn’t open again until I heard, distantly, a bird twittering.

Footsteps came crunching up the hill, and I opened my eyes to see Kringle approaching. His red cloak and gleaming mail were stained with black ichor, the hilt of his sword was simply missing a chunk, as if it had been bitten away, and his mouth was set in a wide, pleased smile. “Dresden,” he said calmly.

“Kringle.”

“Long night?”

“Long day,” I said. Someone, during the night, had covered me with an old woolen army surplus blanket that had been in a plastic storage box in the cottage. I eyed him. “Have fun?”

A low, warm rumble of a laugh bubbled in his chest. “Very much so. If I don’t get into a good battle every few years, life just isn’t the same.”

“Even if it’s on Halloween?” I asked.

He eyed me, and his smile became wider and more impish. “Especially then,” he said. “How’s the leg?”

I grunted and checked. Butters’s dressing had stayed on throughout the events of the night. The constant, burning sting was gone, and I peeled off the dressing to see that the little wound on my leg had finally scabbed over. “Looks like I’ll live.”

“Hawthorn dart,” Kringle said. “Nasty stuff. Hawthorn wood burns hot, and doesn’t care for creatures of Winter.” His expression sobered.

“I’ve a message for you.”

“Ah?” I asked.

“Mab has taken the new Ladies with her,” he said. “She said to tell you that the new Winter Lady would be returned safely to her apartment in a few days, after some brief and gentle instruction. Mab is on excellent terms with the svartalves, and anticipates no problems with your apprentice’s . . . new position.”

“That’s . . . good, I guess,” I said.

“It is,” Kringle replied. “Dresden . . . this is the business of the Queens. I advise you not to attempt to interfere with it.”

“I already interfered,” I said.

Kringle straightened, and his fierce smile became somehow satisfied. “Aye? Like to live dangerously, do you?” He leaned a little closer and lowered his voice. “Never let her make you cringe—but never challenge her pride, wizard. I don’t know exactly what passed between you, but I suspect that if it had been witnessed by another, she would break you to pieces. I’ve seen it before. Terrible pride in that creature. She’ll never bend it.”

“She’ll never bend,” I said. “That’s okay. I can respect that.”

“Could be that you can,” Kringle said. He nodded to me and turned to go.

“Hey,” I said.

He turned to me pleasantly.

“The whole Winter Knight thing,” I said. “It’s made me stronger.”

“True enough,” he said.

“But not *that* much stronger,” I said. “You could have beaten me last night.”

“Oh?” Kringle’s smile faded—except from his eyes.

“And I’ve seen goblins move a few times,” I said. “The Erlking could have gotten out of the way of that shot.”

“Really?”

“You meant me to have the Wild Hunt.”

“No one can be given a power like the Wild Hunt, Dresden,” Kringle said. “He can only take it.”

“Really?” I said, as drily as I knew how.

That got another laugh from Kringle. “You have guts and will, mortal. It had to be shown, or the Hunt would never have accepted you.”

“Maybe I’ll just punch you out whenever I feel like it, then,” I said.

“Maybe you’ll try,” Kringle replied amiably. He looked out at the lightening sky and let out a satisfied breath. “It was Halloween, Dresden. You put on a mask for a time. That’s all.” He looked directly at me and said, “Many, many mantles are worn—or discarded—on Halloween night, wizard.”

“You mean masks?” I asked, frowning.

“Masks, mantles,” Kringle said. “What’s the difference?”

He winked at me.

And for the briefest fraction of a second, the shadows falling from the tower and the cottage in the gathering morning behind us seemed to flow together. The eye he winked with vanished behind a stripe of shadow and what looked like a wide scar. His face seemed leaner, and for that instant I saw Vadderung’s wolfish features lurking inside Kringle’s.

I sat straight up, staring.

Kringle finished his wink, turned jauntily, and started walking down the hill, humming “Here Comes Santa Claus” in a rumbling bass voice.

I stared after him.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered to myself.

* * *

I stood up and wrapped the army surplus blanket around myself before I walked into the cottage. I smelled coffee and soup, and my stomach wanted lots of both.

There was a fire going in the fireplace, and my coffeepot was hanging near the fire. The soup kettle was hanging on its swinger, too. The soup would be made from stock and freeze-dried meat, but I was hungry enough not to be picky. Everyone else there probably felt the same way.

Thomas was sacked out on one of the cots, snoring. Justine had spooned up behind him, her face pressed into his back. They both had clean faces and hands, at least. Mac was snoozing on the other cot, bare to the waist, his chest and stomach evidently washed free of any dirt—and any blood or any injury as well.

Sarissa was gone. Molly was gone. Fix was gone. I felt confident they had left together.

Karrin sat at the fire, staring in, a cup of coffee in her hands. Mouse sat beside her. When I came in, he looked over at me and started wagging his tail.

“You leave the blanket?” I asked quietly.

“Once we got the fire going,” she said. “I suppose I could go get you your duster now, though.”

“I’d look like a flasher,” I said.

She smiled, very slightly, and offered me two mugs. I looked. One had coffee, the other very chunky soup. She passed me a camp fork to go along with the soup. “It isn’t much,” she said.

“Don’t care,” I said, and sat down on the hearth across from her to partake of both. The heat gurgled into my belly along with the food and the coffee, and I started feeling human for the first time in . . . a while. I ached everywhere. It wasn’t at all pleasant, but it felt like something I’d come by honestly.

“Christ, Dresden,” Karrin said. “You could at least wash your hands.” She picked up a towelette and leaned over to start cleaning off my hands. My stomach thought stopping was a bad idea, but I put the mugs aside and let her.

She cleaned my hands off patiently, going through a couple of towelettes. Then she said, “Lean over.”

I did.

She took a fresh towelette and wiped off my face, slowly and carefully. There were nicks and cuts. It hurt when she cleaned one of them out, but it also felt right. Sometimes the things that are good for you, in the long run, hurt for a little while when you first get to them.

“There,” she said a moment later. “You almost look human—” She paused at that, and looked down. “I mean . . .”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

“Yeah.”

The fire crackled.

“What’s the story with Mac?” I asked.

Karrin looked over at the sleeping man. “Mab,” she said. “She just came in here a few minutes ago and looked at him. Then before anyone could react, she ripped off the bandage, stuck her fingers into the wound, and pulled out the bullet. Dropped it right on his chest.”

“No wound now,” I noted.

“Yeah. Started closing up the minute she was done. But you remember the time he got beaten so badly in his bar? Why didn’t his injuries regenerate then?”

I shook my head. “Maybe because he was conscious then.”

“He did turn down the painkillers. I remember it seemed odd at the time,” Karrin murmured. “What is he?”

I shrugged. “Ask him.”

“I did,” she said, “right before he passed out.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said, ‘I’m out.’”

I grunted.

“What do you think it means?” she asked.

I thought about it. “Maybe it means he’s out.”

“We just let it go?” she asked.

“It’s what he wants,” I said. “Think we should torture him?”

“Point,” she said, and sighed. “Maybe instead we just let him rest.”

“Maybe we should let him make beer,” I said. “What about Thomas?”

“Woke up. Ate.” She frowned and clarified, “Ate *soup*. Been asleep for a couple of hours. That big bone thing really clobbered him.”

“There’s always someone bigger than you,” I said.

She gave me a look.

“More true for some than others,” I clarified.

She rolled her eyes.

“So,” I said, a moment later.

“So,” she said.

“Um. Should we talk?”

“About what?”

Mouse looked back and forth between us and started wagging his tail hopefully.

“Quiet, you,” I said, and rubbed his ears. “Bad guy made of *bones* and he gets the drop on you? Charity giving you too many treats or something? That fight should have been like Scooby-Doo versus the Scooby Snack Ghost.”

Mouse grinned happily, unfazed, still wagging his tail.

“Don’t be so hard on him,” Karrin said. “There’s always someone bigger.” Then she shook her head and said, “Wow, we are such children. We’ll grab at any excuse not to talk about us right now.”

My soup did a little flip-flop. "Um," I said. "Yeah." I swallowed. "We . . . we kissed."

"There's a song about what that means," Karrin said.

"Yeah. But I don't sing."

She paused, as if her soup had just started doing gymnastics, too.

Then she spoke very carefully. "There are factors."

"Like Kincaid," I said, without any heat or resentment.

"He's not one of them," she said. "Not anymore."

"Oh," I said, a little surprised.

"It's you, Harry."

"Pretty sure I'm supposed to be a factor."

"Yeah," she said. "Just . . . not against." She took my hands. "I've seen things in you over the past day that . . . concern me."

"Concern you."

"They scare the holy loving fuck out of me," she said calmly, by way of clarification. "This Winter Knight thing. You're not changing. You've already changed."

I felt a little chill. "What do you mean? Tonight? Hell, Karrin, when haven't we done monsters and mayhem?"

"We've done it a lot," she said. "But you've always been scared of it before. You did it anyway, but you thought it was scary. That's the sane thing to think."

"So?" I asked. "What was different about it tonight?"

"The way your erection kept pressing into my back," she said wryly.

"Uh," I said. "Really?"

"Yeah, a woman kind of notices."

I hadn't.

Gulp.

"It's just . . . Karrin, look, that thing hardly ever does something that isn't ill-advised. Doesn't mean it's going to make the calls."

"I will never understand why men do that," she said.

"Do what?"

"Talk about their genitals like they're some other creature. Some kind of mind-controlling parasite." She shook her head. "It's just you, Harry. It's all you. And part of you was really loving everything that was going on."

"And that's bad?" I asked.

“Yes,” she said. Then she made a short, frustrated sound. “No. Maybe. It’s a *change*.”

“Do changes have to be bad?”

“Of course not. But I don’t know if this one is bad or not yet,” she said. “Harry . . . you are the strongest man I know, in more than one sense of the word. And because you are . . . it means that if you *do* change . . .”

“You think I’d be some kind of monster,” I said.

She shrugged, and squeezed my hands with hers. “I’m not saying this right. It’s not coming out right. But I *felt* you, when we were with the Hunt. I knew what was driving you, what you were feeling. And in the moment, I was down with it—and that scares me, too.”

“So am I too much of a monster or are you?” I asked. “I’m getting confused.”

“Join the club,” she said.

“You’re saying that the problem is, you think I could go bad,” I said.

“I *know* you could,” she said. “Anyone can. And you’ve got more opportunity than most. And maybe you shouldn’t be rocking your emotional boat right now. When Susan broke your heart, right after she was changed? You went into a downward spiral. If that happened now, with the kinds of things you’re facing . . . Harry, I’m afraid you might not be able to pull out of it.”

That much sure as hell was true. “You aren’t wrong,” I said. “But we haven’t even gone on a date yet and you’ve already skipped ahead to the ugly breakup?”

“There are factors,” she repeated in a firm, steady voice.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like this thing with Molly,” Karrin said.

“There’s no thing with Molly,” I said. “There’s never going to be a thing with Molly.”

She sighed. “You’re a wizard. She’s a wizard. Now you’re the Winter Knight. And she’s the Winter Lady.”

“Karrin,” I began.

“And I’m going to get old and die soon,” Karrin said very, very quietly. “Relatively soon. But you’re going to keep going for centuries. And so is she. The two of you are close—and even if nothing ever happens . . . it’s one more thing. You know?”

We held hands and the fire crackled.

“Oh,” I said.

She nodded.

“So there are things stacked against us,” I said. “What else is new?”

“You are the captain of disaster in the supernatural world,” she acknowledged. “But I’m the one who has repeatedly taken relationships into icebergs. I’ve done it enough to know that you and I are the *Titanic*.”

“We’re people,” I said. “Not some fucking ship.”

“We’re also people,” she said. “A kiss when we’re both ramped up on adrenaline is one thing. A relationship is harder. A lot harder.” She shook her head. “If it ends in tears, I’m afraid it could destroy us both. And there’s a lot on the line right now. I don’t think this is something we should rush into. I need time to think. To . . . I just need time.”

I swallowed. She still wasn’t wrong. I didn’t like what she had to say, not one bit, but . . .

She wasn’t wrong.

“Is this where you tell me we need to be friends?” I asked.

She blinked and looked up at me. She touched my face with her fingertips. “Harry, we’re . . . We went past that a long time ago. I don’t know if we can . . . if we should be lovers. But I’m your friend. Your ally. I’ve seen what you want, and what you’re willing to sacrifice to make it happen.” She took one of my hands between hers, pressing hard. “I feel lost since they fired me. I don’t know what I’m meant to do or who I ought to be. But what I do know is that I’ve got your back. Always.” Tears fell from her blue eyes. “So goddammit, don’t you start taking the highway to Hell. Because I’m going to be right there with you. All the way.”

I couldn’t see her face after that. I felt her head underneath my chin, and I put my arms around her. We sat together like that for a while.

“Things are going to get bad,” I said quietly. “I don’t know how or when, exactly. But there’s a storm coming. Being near me isn’t going to be . . . sane.”

“Let’s just agree that I’m not all the way together, and save us both some time arguing,” she said. “Always, Harry. I’m there. End of story.”

“Okay,” I said. “One condition.”

“What?”

“That’s not the end of the story,” I said. “I mean, maybe neither one of us is ready. But we could be, one day. And maybe we will be.”

“Optimistic idiot,” she said, but I could hear the smile.

“And if we get to that place,” I said, “you don’t chicken out. You don’t run away, no matter how it looks to you. We set course for the fucking iceberg, full speed ahead.”

She started shaking. She was weeping.

“And the sex,” I said. “It will be frequent. Possibly violent. You’ll be screaming. Neighbors will make phone calls.”

She started shaking harder. She was laughing.

“Those are my conditions,” I said. “Take them or leave them.”

“You’re such a pig, Dresden,” Karrin said. Then she drew back enough to give me a look through tearstained blue eyes. “Maybe you’ll be the one screaming.”

* * *

“You sure about this?” asked Thomas. “Out here by yourself?”

“Cold isn’t really an issue anymore,” I said, untying the first of the lines from the *Water Beetle* to the Whatsup Dock. I was wearing some of his clothes from the ship. The sweats were too short, and the shirt was too tight, but the duster hid most of that. “And I’ve got supplies for a week or so, until you can make it back. You sure that tub’s going to make it back to town?”

“Put three patches on the hull after I got her off the beach, and the pumps are working,” Thomas said. “We should be fine. What about you? That thing the island said was in your head?”

“Another reason to stay here,” I said. “If Molly’s the one who can help me, I’m on my own for now. But Demonreach seems to be able to make it leave me alone, at least while I’m here. Pretty much means I need to stay until Molly gets herself back together.”

My brother exhaled unhappily, and squinted up at the noonday sun, south of us, hidden behind grey clouds. “Heard from Lara on the radio.”

“And?”

“Both her team and Marccone’s found rituals in progress at the two sites. They broke them up. Someone *really* wanted this place to get screwed up.”

“Or *something*,” I said with a melodramatic waggle of my eyebrows.

He snorted. “You joke around. But I can’t help but think that Fix is going to hold you responsible for some of what happened last night,” he

said. "He might show up to explain that to you."

"He shows up here, there's nothing he can do," I said quietly. "I can take him on neutral ground. Here, it won't even be a fight."

"Still," Thomas said. "Out here, alone?"

"I think it's important," I said. "I've got to know more about this place and what it can do. The only way to do that is to invest the time."

"And it's got nothing to do with facing Molly's parents," he said.

I bowed my head. "It isn't my place to tell them. Molly should decide who they hear it from first. Once she has, yeah. There's going to be a really hard talk. Until that time, I need to be here."

"And it's got nothing to do with facing Maggie," Thomas said.

I looked away, out at the grey water of the lake.

Fix knew that Maggie existed. If he wanted to hurt me . . .

"She's with Michael because he's got an NFL lineup of angels protecting his house and family," I said. "And Supermutt, too. Am I going to be able to provide a real home for her, man? An education? A real life? What's her college application going to look like: 'Raised on Spooky Island by wizard with GED, please help?'" I shook my head. "And when the fallout from the White Council about Molly and about this place starts hitting, it's going to be a nightmare. I might as well have a target tattooed on her forehead as keep her near me."

"Michael is awesome," Thomas said. "Hell, I wish he'd raised me. But he isn't her dad."

"I had sex with her mother," I said. "That's not the same as being her father."

Thomas shook his head. "You'd be a good dad, Harry. You'd spoil her and you'd indulge her, and you'd embarrass her in front of her friends, but you'd do right by her."

"This is me," I said. "Doing right by her. For now. Maybe someday things could change."

Thomas eyed me. Then he shook his head and said, "Kids change. Into adults. Way faster than it seems like they should. Don't take too long deciding how much change is enough."

Hell, he was right about that much, at least. I sighed and nodded slowly. "I'll keep it in mind."

"I know," he said, and smiled at me. "Because I'm not going to shut up about it."

I rolled my eyes and nodded. “Good. Don’t.”

I offered my fist for bumping.

Thomas ignored me and gave me a rib-cracking hug, which I returned.

“Glad you’re back,” he whispered. “Loser.”

“You gonna start crying now, wuss?” I said back.

“See you in a few days,” he said. “We’ll get the cottage finished off. Make it someplace Maggie won’t need to learn shape-shifting to survive in.”

“Just don’t forget the books,” I said. “Or the pizza for the guard.”

“Won’t.” He let go of me and hopped up onto the *Water Beetle*. “Any messages?”

“Molly,” I said. “When she gets back, ask her to send Toot and Lacuna to me. And . . . tell her that when she’s ready to talk, I’m here.”

Thomas nodded, untied the last line, and tossed it to me. I caught it and started coiling it. Thomas climbed up onto the bridge and took the ship out, chugging away at the sedate pace he would use until he cleared the stone reefs around Demonreach.

Karrin came out of the cabin and stood on the deck. Mouse came with her, looking solemn. She leaned back against the cabin’s wall and watched me as she went.

I watched, too, until I couldn’t see her anymore.

Thunder rumbled over Lake Michigan, unusual in November.

I settled the new black leather duster over my shoulders, picked up the long, rough branch I’d cut from the island’s oldest oak tree a few hours before, and started back up the hill, toward the former lighthouse and future cottage. I had preparations to make.

There was a storm coming in.

* * *

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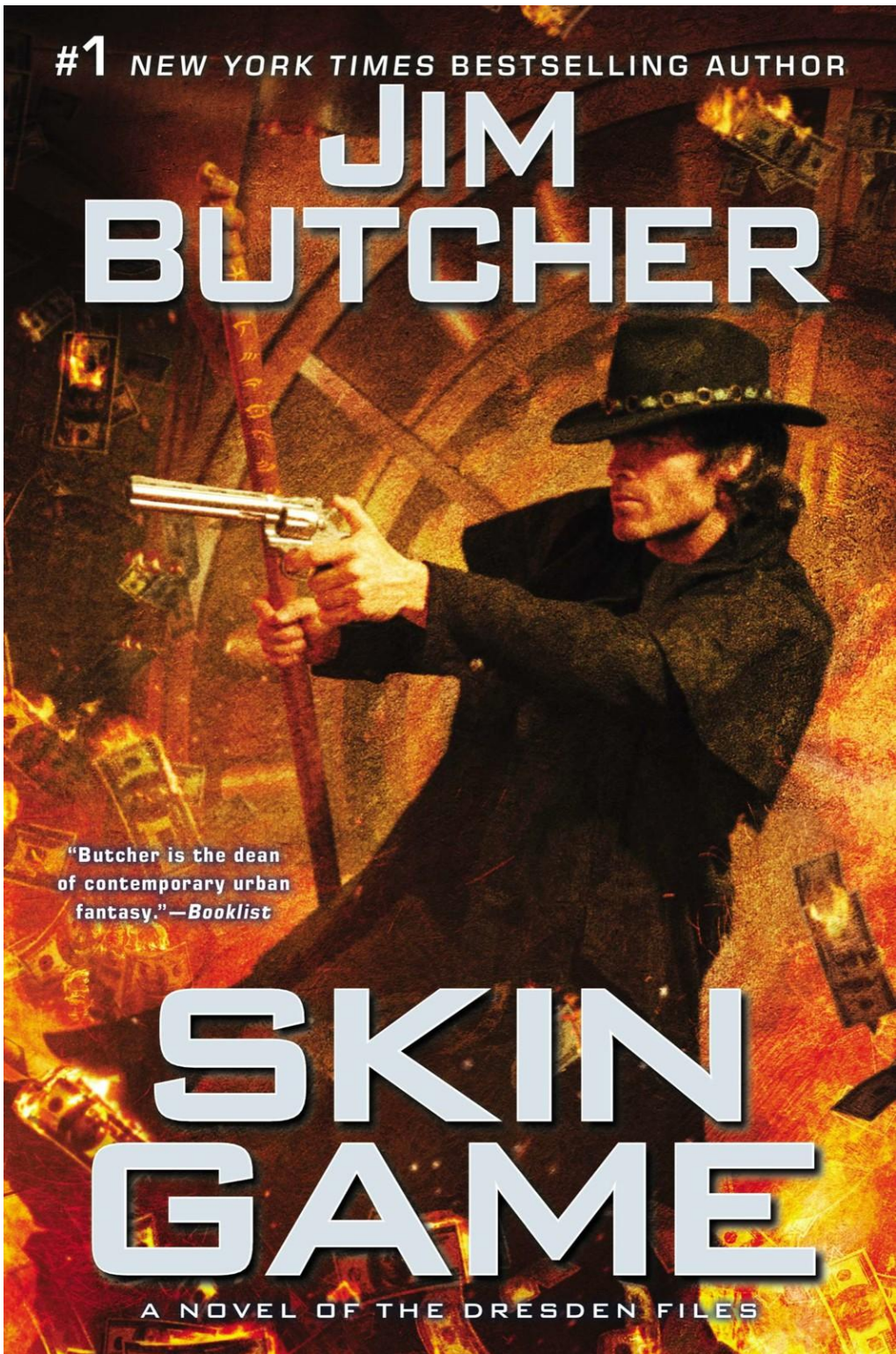
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The book cover features a central illustration of a man in a dark, wide-brimmed hat and a dark coat, holding a silver revolver with both hands, aiming it towards the left. The background is a fiery, orange and yellow scene with floating US dollar bills, suggesting a chaotic, high-stakes environment. The overall tone is gritty and action-oriented.

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Version_1

For Lori, Julie, and Mom.
You guys really came through for me. Thank you.

Chapter One

There was a ticking time bomb inside my head and the one person I trusted to go in and get it out hadn't shown up or spoken to me for more than a year.

That's a lot of time to start asking yourself questions. *Who am I? What have I done with my life?*

Who can I trust?

That last one is a doozy. It haunts you in moments of doubt. Sometimes when you wake up at night, you wonder if you've put your faith in the right people. Sometimes when you find yourself alone, for whatever reason, you review every little thing you know about someone, searching your memory for small, subtle things that you may have missed about them.

It makes you scared. It makes you think that maybe you've made some horrible mistakes lately. It drives you to *do* something, to act—only when you're stuck on an island in the middle of Lake Michigan, you're kind of limited in your choices of exactly what you can do to blow off steam.

I'd gone with my usual option. I was running through long tunnels filled with demons and monsters and nightmares, because it was easier than going to the gym.

The tunnels were big, the size of some of the substreets beneath the city of Chicago, their walls made of earth and stone, wound through with things that looked like roots but could not possibly belong to any tree this deep in the earth. Every few yards, more or less at random, there was a mound of luminous pale green quartz crystals. Inside every crystal mound was a recumbent, shadowy form. Some of the mounds held figures no larger than a medium-sized dog. Some of them were the size of houses.

I had just finished climbing over one of the huge mounds and was sprinting toward the next, the first in a series of three mounds more or less the size of my deceased Volkswagen.

"Parkour!" I shouted, and leapt, hitting the top of the mound with my hands and vaulting over it. I landed on the far side, dropped into a forward roll over one shoulder, and came up running.

"Parkour!" I shouted at the next mound, putting one hand down as I leapt, using it to guide my body up to the horizontal at the same level as my head, clearing the next mound, landing, and staying on the move.

"Parkour!" I screamed again at the third, and simply dove over it in a long arc. The idea was to clear it, land on my hands, drop into a smooth roll, and come up running again, but it didn't work out that way. I misjudged the dive, my foot caught a crystal, and I belly flopped and planted my face in the dirt on the far side of the mound.

I lay there on the ground for a moment, getting back the wind I'd knocked out of myself. Taking a fall wasn't a big deal. God knows, I've done it enough. I rolled over onto my back and groaned. "Harry, you've got way too much time on your hands."

My voice echoed through the tunnel, number seven of thirteen.

"Parkour," said a distant echo.

I shook my head, pushed myself up, and started walking out. Walking through one of the tunnels beneath the island of Demonreach was always an experience. When I ran, I went by the mounds pretty quick.

When I walked, the prisoners trapped inside them had time to talk to me.

Let me fulfill your every desire, crooned a silken voice in my head as I went by one.

*Blood and power, riches and strength, I can give you all that you—*promised the next.

One day, mortal, I will be free and suck the marrow from your bones, snarled another.

Bow down in fear and horror before me!

Loathe me, let me devour you, and I will make real your dreams.

Release me or I will destroy you!

Go to sleep. Go to sleep. Sleep and let me inside you . . .

Bloodpaindeathbloodfleshbloodpaindeath . . .

BLARGLE SLORG NOTH HARGHLE FTHAGN!

You know.

The usual.

I skirted around a fairly small mound whose occupant had simply sent me a mental picture that had kept me up for a couple of nights the last time I walked by, and passed one of the last mounds before the exit.

As I walked by, the mound's occupant projected a mental sigh and an unmistakable image of a man rolling his eyes. *Ah. A new one.*

I paused and studied the mound. As a rule, I didn't communicate with the prisoners. If you were locked up under Demonreach, you were a nightmare the likes of which few people could really understand—immortal, savage, and probably foaming-at-the-mouth, hair-on-fire crazy to boot.

But . . . I'd been locked up almost as well as the prisoners for months, trapped on the island and in the caverns beneath. There wasn't a lot of choice. Until I got the thing in my head out again, only the island had the power to keep it in check. I had visitors sometimes, but the winter months were dangerous on Lake Michigan, both because of the weather and because of the ice, and spring had only barely begun to touch the world again. It had been a while since I'd seen anyone.

So I eyed the mound, one about the size of a coffin, and said, "What's your problem?"

You, obviously, replied the occupant. *Do you even know what the word stasis means? It means nothing is happening. You standing here, walking by, talking to me, for God's sake, buggers that up entirely, the way you novices always do. What was the phrase? Ah, yes. Piss off.*

I lifted my eyebrows. To date, every single prisoner who had tried to communicate with me had been pretty obviously playing to get out, or else howling nuts. This guy just sounded . . . British.

"Huh," I said.

Did you hear me, Warden? Piss. Off.

I debated taking him literally, just to be a wiseass, but decided that body humor was beneath the dignity of a Wizard of the White Council and the Warden of Demonreach, thus disproving everyone who says I am nothing but an overgrown juvenile delinquent.

"Who are you?" I asked instead.

There was a long moment of silence. And then a thought filled with a terrible weariness and purely emotional anguish, like something I'd experienced only at the very lowest moments of my life, flowed into me—but for this being, such pain wasn't a low point. It was a constant state. *Someone who needs to be here. Go away, boy.*

A rolling wave of nausea went through me. The air was suddenly too bright, the gentle glow of the crystals too piercing. I found myself taking several steps back from the mound, until that awful tide of feeling had receded, but the headache those emotions had triggered found me nonetheless, and I was abruptly in too much pain to keep my feet.

I dropped to one knee, clenching my teeth on a scream. The headaches had gotten steadily worse, and despite a lifetime of learning to cope with pain, despite the power of the mantle of the Winter Knight, they had begun kicking my ass thoroughly a few weeks before.

For a while, there was simply pain, and aching, racking nausea.

Eventually, that began to grow slowly less, and I looked up to see a hulking form in a dark cloak standing over me. It was ten or twelve feet tall, and built on the same scale as a massively muscled human, though I never really seemed to see much of the being beneath the cloak. It stared down at me, a pair of pinpoints of green, fiery light serving as eyes within the depths of its hood.

“WARDEN,” it said, its voice a deep rumble, “I HAVE SUPPRESSED THE PARASITE FOR NOW.”

“Bout time, Alfred,” I muttered. I sat up and took stock of myself. I’d been lying there for a while. The sweat on my skin had dried. That was bad. The ancient spirit of the island had been keeping the thing in my skull from killing me for a year. Until a few weeks ago, when my head started hurting, all it had to do was show up, speak a word, and the pain would go away.

This time it had taken more than an hour.

Whatever was in my head, some kind of psychic or spiritual creature that was using me to grow, was getting ready to kill me.

“ALFRED,” the spirit said soberly. “IS THIS TO BE MY NEW NAME?”

“Let’s stick with Demonreach,” I said.

The enormous spirit considered that. “I AM THE ISLAND.”

“Well, yes,” I said, gathering myself to my feet. “Its spirit. Its genius loci.”

“AND I AM ALSO SEPARATE FROM THE ISLAND. A VESSEL.”

I eyed the spirit. “You know the name ‘Alfred’ is a joke, right?”

It stared at me. A wind that didn’t exist stirred the hem of its cloak.

I raised my hands in surrender and said, “All right. I guess you need a first name, too. Alfred Demonreach it is.”

Its eyes flickered brighter for a moment and it inclined its head to me within the hood. Then it said, “SHE IS HERE.”

I jerked my head up, my heart suddenly speeding. It made little echoes of pain go through my head. Had she finally responded to my messages? “Molly?”

“NOT GRASSHOPPER. GRASSHOPPER’S NEW MOTHER.”

I felt tension slide into my shoulders and neck. “Mab,” I said in a low, hard voice.

“YES.”

“Fantastic,” I muttered. Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness, Monarch of the Winter Court of the Sidhe, mistress and mentor of every wicked being in Faerie—my boss—had been ignoring me for months. I’d been sending her messengers on an increasingly regular basis to no avail. At least, not until today.

But why now? Why show up now, after all those months of silence?

“Because, dummy,” I muttered to myself, “she wants something.” I turned to Demonreach. “Okay, Alfred. Where?”

“DOCK.”

Which was smart. Demonreach, like practically every prison ever, was just as well suited to keeping visitors out as it was to keeping them in. When a freaking Walker of the Outside and his posse had shown up to perform a massive jailbreak on the island’s prisoners, they had been beaten back, thanks to the efforts of the island’s defenses and several key allies.

I’d spent the last year acquainting myself with the island’s secrets, with the defenses that I hadn’t even known existed—defenses that could be activated only by the Warden. If the Walker tried that play again, I could shut him down single-handed. Even Mab, as powerful as she was, would be well-advised to be cautious if she decided to start trouble on Demonreach’s soil.

Which was why she was standing on the dock.

She expected me to be upset. Definitely, she wanted something.

In my experience, when the Queen of Air and Darkness decides she wants something from you, it’s a good time to crawl in a hole and pull it in after you.

But my head pulsed with little twinges of pain. My headaches had slowly gotten worse and worse over several years, and I had only recently discovered their cause—I had a condition that had to be taken care of before whatever was hanging out in my noggin decided to burst its way out of my skull. I didn’t dare leave the island until that happened, and if Mab had finally decided to respond to my messages, I had little choice but to meet with her.

Which was probably why she *hadn’t* shown up to talk to me—until now.

“Freaking manipulative faeries,” I muttered under my breath. Then I headed for the stairs leading out of the Well and up to the island’s surface. “Stay nearby and pay attention,” I told Demonreach.

“DO YOU SUSPECT SHE MEANS YOU HARM?”

“Heh,” I said, starting up the stairs. “One way or another. Let’s go.”

Chapter Two

My brother and I had built the Whatsup Dock down at the shore at one of Demonreach's three little beaches, the one nearest the opening in the stone reefs surrounding the island. There had been a town on the hillside up above the beach maybe a century before, but it had been abandoned after its residents had apparently been driven slowly bonkers by all the dark energy around the hideous things imprisoned below the island.

The ruins of the town were still there, half swallowed by the forest, a corpse being slowly devoured by fungus and moss. I sometimes wondered how long I could stay on the damned island before I was bonkers, too.

There was an expensive motored yacht tied to the dock, as out of place as a Ferrari in a cattle yard, white with a lot of frosty blue chrome. There were a couple of hands in sight, and they weren't dressed in sailing clothes so much as they were in sailing costumes. The creases were too straight, the clothes too clean, the fit too perfect. Watching them move, I had no doubt they were carrying weapons, and practiced in killing. They were Sidhe, the lords of Faerie, tall and beautiful and dangerous. They didn't impress me.

Mostly because they weren't nearly as pretty or dangerous as the woman standing at the very end of my dock, the tips of her expensive shoes half an inch from Demonreach's shore. When there's a Great White Shark in the water with you, it's tough to be worried about a couple of barracuda swimming along behind her.

Mab, the Queen of Air and Darkness, was wearing a tailored business suit somewhere between the color of smeared charcoal on newsprint and frozen periwinkles. The blouse beneath was snow-white, like her hair, which was bound up in an elaborate do that belonged in the forties. Opals flashed on her ears and at her throat, deep colors of green and blue, matching the shifting hues of her cold, flat eyes. She was pale, beautiful on a scale that beggared simple description, and I harbored a healthy and rational terror of her.

I came down the old stone steps in the hillside to the dock, and stopped an arm's length away from Mab. I didn't bow to her, but I inclined my head formally. There were other Sidhe there, on the boat, witnessing the meeting, and I had worked out a while ago that though I was no danger to Mab's pride, she would not tolerate disrespect to her office. I was pretty sure that if the Winter Knight openly defied her in front of her Court, it would basically be a declaration of war, and despite what I now knew about the island, I wanted nothing of the sort with Mab.

"My Queen," I said pleasantly. "How's tricks?"

"Functioning flawlessly, my Knight," she replied. "As ever. Get on the boat."

"Why?" I asked.

Her mouth turned down into a slight frown, but it was belied by the sudden pleased light in her eyes.

"I'm predictable, aren't I?" I asked her.

"In many ways," she replied. "Shall I answer you literally?"

"I'd like that."

Mab nodded. Then she leaned forward, very slightly, her eyes growing deep, and said in a voice colder and harder than frozen stone, "Because I told you to do so."

I swallowed, and my stomach did this little roller-coaster number on me. "What happens if I won't?" I asked.

"You have already made clear to me that you will resist me if I attempt to compel you directly to obey my commands," Mab said. "Such a thing would render you useless to me, and for the moment, I would find it inconvenient to train a replacement. I would therefore do nothing."

I blinked at that. “Nothing? I could deny you, and you’d just . . . go?”

“Indeed,” Mab said, turning. “You will be dead in three days, by which time I should have made arrangements to replace you.”

“Uh,” I said. “What?”

Mab paused and looked over her shoulder. “The parasite within you will emerge in that time. Surely you have noticed the pains growing worse.”

Boy, had I. And it added up.

“Dammit,” I snarled, keeping my voice too low to be heard by the goons on the boat. “You set me up.”

Mab turned to face me and gave me a very small smile.

“I’ve been sending out Toot and Lacuna with messages for you and Molly every damned day. None of them got through, did they?”

“They are faeries,” Mab said. “I am a Queen of Faerie.”

“And my sendings to Molly?”

“I wove nets to catch any spells leaving this island the moment I bade you farewell, my Knight,” she said. “And the messages you sent to her through your friends were altered to suit my needs. I find it useful how the tiniest amount of distrust creates so much opportunity for miscommunication. Your friends have been trying to visit you for several weeks, but the lake ice has held unusually long this year. Alas.”

I ground my teeth. “You knew I needed her help.”

“And,” she said, biting the words off crisply, “you still do.”

Three days.

Hell’s bells.

“Have you ever considered just asking me for my help?” I asked her. “Maybe even saying ‘please’?”

She arched a pale eyebrow at me. “I am not your client.”

“So you just go straight to extortion?”

“I cannot compel you,” she said in a reasonable tone. “I must therefore see to it that circumstance does. You cannot leave the island without being incapacitated by pain. You cannot send for help unless I allow it. Your time has all but run out, my Knight.”

I found myself speaking through clenched teeth. “Why? Why would you put me in a corner like this?”

“Perhaps because it is necessary. Perhaps it is to protect you from yourself.” Her eyes flashed with the distant fury of a thunderstorm on the horizon. “Or perhaps it is simply because I *can*. In the end, it does not matter why. All that matters is what is.”

I inhaled and exhaled a few times, to keep the anger from boiling out into my voice. Given what she had to manage, it was entirely possible that manipulating me and threatening me with death this way *was* asking politely—by the standards of Mab, anyway. But that didn’t mean I had to like it.

Besides. She was right. If Mab said I had three days to live, she meant it. She had neither the capability nor the need to speak any direct lies. And if that was true, which I felt depressingly confident it was, then she had me over a barrel.

“What do you want?” I asked. I almost sounded polite.

The question brought a pleased smile to her lips and a nod that looked suspiciously like one of approval. “I wish you to perform a task for me.”

“This task,” I said. “Would it happen to be off the island?”

“Obviously.”

I pointed a finger at my temple. “Then we have an issue with the incapacitated-by-pain thing. You’ll have to fix me first.”

“If I did, you’d never agree to it,” Mab said calmly. “And I would then be obliged to replace you. For your own health and safety, therefore, you will wear this instead.” She lifted her hand and

held it out to me, palm up.

There was a small stone in her palm, a deep blue opal. I leaned a little closer, eyeing it. It was set on a silver stud—an earring.

“It should suffice to contain the parasite for what time remains,” Mab said. “Put it on.”

“My ears aren’t pierced,” I objected.

Mab arched an eyebrow. “Are you the Winter Knight or some sort of puling child?”

I scowled at her. “Come over here and say that.”

At that, Mab calmly stepped onto the shore of Demonreach, until her toes were almost touching mine. She was several inches over six feet tall, and barely had to reach up to take my earlobe in her fingers.

“Wait,” I said. “Wait.”

She paused.

“The left one.”

Mab tilted her head. “Why?”

“It’s . . . Look, it’s a mortal thing. Just do the left one, okay?”

She exhaled briefly through her nose. Then she shook her head and changed ears. There was a pinpoint of red-hot pain in my left earlobe, and then a slow pulse of lazy, almost seductive cold, like the air on an autumn night when you open the bedroom windows and sleep like a rock.

“There,” Mab said, fixing the post in place. “Was that such a trial?”

I glowered and reached up to the stone with my left hand. My fingertips confirmed what my ears had reported—it felt physically cold to the touch.

“Now that I’ve got this to keep me safe off the island,” I said very quietly, “what’s to stop me from having Alfred drop you into a cell right this second, and solving my problems myself?”

“I am,” Mab said. She gave me a very small, very chill smile, and held up her finger. There was a tiny droplet of my blood upon it, scarlet against her pale skin. “The consequences to your mortal world should there be no Mab would be dire. The consequences to yourself, should you try it, even more so. Try me, wizard. I am willing.”

For a second, I thought about it. She was stacking up enough leverage on me that whatever it was she wanted me to do, I was sure I was going to hate it. I’d never wanted to be in Mab’s ongoing service anyway. The boss couldn’t be the boss if I imprisoned her in crystal hundreds of feet beneath the waters of Lake Michigan. And it wasn’t like she hadn’t earned some time in the cooler. Mab was a serious bad guy.

Except . . . she was *our* serious bad guy. As cruel and as horrible as she could be, she was a guardian who protected the world from things that were even worse. Suddenly removing her from that balance of power could be worse than catastrophic.

And admit it to yourself, at least, Dresden. You’re scared. What if you tried to take her down—and missed? Remember what happened to the last guy who betrayed Mab? You’ve never beaten her. You’ve never come close.

I didn’t let myself shudder. She would have seen it as weakness, and that isn’t a wise thing to show any faerie. I just exhaled and looked away from those cold, endless eyes.

Mab inclined her head to me, barely, a victor’s acknowledgment. Then she turned and walked back onto the dock. “Bring anything you may need. We leave at once.”

Chapter Three

Mab's yacht took us to Belmont Harbor, where the late-February ice had evidently been broken up by an unseasonably warm morning. My ear throbbed with occasional cold, but my head seemed fine, and when we docked I hopped over the rail and onto the pier with a large duffel bag in one hand and my new wizard's staff in the other.

Mab descended the gangplank with dignity and eyed me.

"Parkour," I explained.

"Appointment," she said, gliding by me.

A limo was waiting for us, complete with two more Sidhe in bodyguard costumes. They swept us into the city proper, down Lake Shore Drive until we hit the Loop, turned, and pulled up in front of the Carbide and Carbon Building, a vast charcoal-colored creation that had always reminded me of the monolith in *2001*, except for all the brassy filigree. I'd always thought it looked particularly baroque and cool, and then it had become the Hard Rock Hotel.

Two additional Sidhe bodyguards were waiting when we pulled up, tall and inhumanly beautiful. Between one step and the next, they all changed from a crowd of cover models into lantern-jawed thugs with buzz cuts and earpieces—glamour, the legendary power of faerie illusion. Mab did not bother altering her own appearance, save for donning a pair of designer sunglasses. The four goons fell into a square formation around us as we went in, and we all marched up to an awaiting elevator. The numbers rolled swiftly up to the top floor—and then went one floor up above *that* one.

The doors opened onto an extravagant penthouse loft. Mozart floated in from speakers of such quality that for a moment I assumed that live musicians must be present. Floor-to-fourteen-foot-ceiling windows gave us a sweeping view of the lake and the shoreline south of the hotel. The floors were made of polished hardwood. Tropical trees had been planted throughout the room, along with bright flowering plants that were busy committing the olfactory floral equivalent of aggravated assault. Furniture sets were scattered around the place, some on the floor, and some on platforms sitting at various levels. There was a bar, and a small stage with a sound system, and at the far end of the loft, stairs led up to an elevated platform, which, judging from the bed, must have served as a bedroom.

There were also five goons wearing black suits with matching shotguns waiting for us outside of the elevator doors. As the doors opened, the goons worked the actions on their weapons, but did not precisely raise them to aim at us.

"Ma'am," said one of them, much younger than the others, "please identify yourself."

Mab stared at them impassively through her sunglasses. Then, in a motion so slight that I doubt any of them noticed, she twitched one eyebrow.

I grunted, flicked a hand, and muttered, "*Infriga*."

I didn't put much power into the spell, but it was enough to make the point: A sudden thick layer of rime crackled into being over the lower two-thirds of the goons' bodies, covering their boots and guns and the hands holding them. The men twitched in surprise and let out little hisses of discomfort, but did not relinquish the weapons.

"The lady doesn't do lackeys," I told them, "and you damned well know who she is. Whichever one of you chuckleheads is holding the brain should probably go tell your boss she's here before she starts feeling offended."

The young goon who had spoken staggered away, deeper into the loft, around a screen of trees and flowers, while the others faced us, dispassionate and clearly uncomfortable.

Mab eyed me and said in an intimate whisper, "What was that?"

I answered in kind. "I'm not killing a mortal just to make a point."

"You were willing enough to kill one of my Sidhe for that reason."

"I play on your team," I told her. "I'm not from your town."

She looked up at me over the rims of her sunglasses and then said, "Squeamishness does not become the Winter Knight."

"It's not about squeam, Mab," I said.

"No," she said. "It is about weakness."

"Yeah, well," I said, facing front again, "I'm only human."

Mab's gaze remained on me, cold and heavy as a blanket of snow. "For now."

I didn't shiver. I get muscle twitches sometimes. That's all.

The goon capable of human speech returned, and was careful not to make eye contact with anyone as he bowed at the waist in Mab's general direction. "Your Majesty. Please proceed. Your four guards may wait here, with these four, and I will show you to him."

Mab did not so much as twitch to acknowledge that the goon had spoken. She just stepped out of the elevator smartly, her heels clicking with metronomic inevitability on the hard floor, and both the goon and I hurried to keep pace with her.

We walked around the screen of shrubbery where the goon had gone a moment before and found an elaborate raised platform with three wide steps leading up to it. The whole thing was thickly surrounded by more plant life, giving it the cozy feel of an alcove. Expensive living room furniture was spaced around it ideally for conversation, and that's where Mab's appointment was waiting for us.

"Sir," the goon said. "Her Majesty, Queen Mab, and the Winter Knight."

"Who needs no introduction," said a man with a deep, resonant voice. I recognized it. That voice had once been smooth and flowing, but now there was a hint of rasp to it, a roughness that wasn't there before, like silk gliding over old gravel.

A man of medium height and build rose from his chair. He was dressed in a black silk suit, a black shirt, and a worn grey tie. He had dark hair threaded with silver and dark eyes, and he moved with the coiled grace of a snake. There was a smile on his mouth, but not in his eyes as he faced me. "Well, well, well. Harry Dresden."

"Nicodemus Archleone." I slurred into a Connery accent. "My cut hash improved your voish."

Something ugly flickered far back in his eyes, and his voice might have grown a little rougher, but his smile never wavered. "You came closer than anyone has in a long, long time."

"Maybe you're starting to slip in your old age," I said. "It's the little things that go first. For instance, you missed taking the tongue out of one of your goons. You're going to make him feel left out if he's the only one who can talk."

That made Nicodemus smile more deeply. I'd met his gang of hangers-on before. They'd all had their tongues cut out.

He turned to Mab and bowed at the waist, the gesture more elegant than anything I could manage, the manners of another time. "Your Majesty."

"Nicodemus," Mab said in a frosty tone. Then, in a more neutral one, "Anduriel."

Nicodemus didn't move, but his freaking shadow inclined its head anyway. No matter how many times I saw that kind of action, it still creeped me out.

Nicodemus was a Knight of the Blackened Denarius, or maybe it was more accurate to say that he was *the* Knight of the Blackened Denarius. He had one of thirty silver coins on him somewhere, one that contained the essence of the Fallen angel, Anduriel. The Denarians were bad news, in a major way—even though angels were sharply curtailed in how they were allowed to use their power, hobbled and bound to a mortal partner, they were as dangerous as anything running around in the shadows, and when they teamed up with world-class lunatics like Nicodemus, they were several shades worse. Nicodemus, as far as I had been able to find out, had been perpetrating outrages for a couple of millennia. He was smart, ruthless and tough, and killing people was almost as significant to him as throwing away an empty beer can.

I'd survived him once. He'd survived me once. Neither of us had been able to put the other away.

Yet.

"I beg your indulgence for a moment," Nicodemus said to Mab. "A minor matter of internal protocol to which I must attend before we continue."

There was a frozen microinstant of displeasure before Mab answered. "Of course."

Nicodemus bowed again, and then walked a few steps away and turned to the goon who had led us over. He beckoned to the man and said, "Brother Jordan, approach."

Jordan came to rigid military attention, swallowed, and then walked formally forward, stopping precisely in front of Nicodemus before bracing to attention again.

"You have completed the trials of the Brotherhood," Nicodemus said, his voice warm. "You have the highest recommendation of your fellows. And you have faced a dangerous foe with steadfast courage. It is my judgment that you have demonstrated your loyalty and commitment to our cause beyond the meager bonds of any oath." He reached up and put a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Have you any final words?"

The kid's eyes gleamed with sudden emotion, and his breathing sped. "I thank you, my lord."

"Well said," Nicodemus murmured, smiling. Then he said, "Deirdre."

The second person in the alcove rose from where she had been sitting quietly in the background. She was a young woman in a simple black dress. Her features were lean and severe, her body graced with the same slight, elegant curves as a straight razor. She had long, dark hair to go with black eyes that were a double of Nicodemus's own, and when she approached Jordan, she gave him an almost sisterly smile.

And then she changed.

First her eyes shifted, changing from dark orbs to pits filled with a burning crimson glow. A second set of eyes, these glowing green, blinked open above the first. And then her face contorted, the bones shifting. Her skin seemed to ripple and then hardened, darkening to the ugly deep purple of a fresh bruise, taking on the consistency of thick hide. The dress just seemed to shimmer out of existence, revealing legs that had contorted, her feet lengthening dramatically, until they looked backward-hinged. And her hair changed—it grew, slithering out of her scalp like dozens of writhing serpents, flattening into hard, metallic ribbons of midnight black that rustled and stirred and rippled of their own volition.

As that happened, Nicodemus's shadow simply grew, with no change in the light to prompt it. It stretched out behind him, and then up the wall, growing and growing until it spread over the whole of that side of the huge loft.

"Bear witness," Nicodemus said quietly, "as Brother Jordan becomes Squire Jordan."

The green eyes atop Deirdre's flickered brightly, as Deirdre lifted claw-tipped hands to cup Jordan's face, quite gently. Then she leaned forward and kissed him, lips parted.

My stomach twisted and flipped over. I didn't let it show.

Deirdre's head suddenly snapped forward a little more, and Jordan's body stiffened. A muffled scream escaped the seal of Deirdre's lips, but was quickly choked off. I saw Deirdre's jaws lock, and then she jerked her head away in the sudden, sharp motion of a shark ripping flesh from its prey. Her head fell back in something that looked horribly like ecstasy, and I could see the bloody flesh of Jordan's tongue gripped between her teeth.

Blood fountained from the young man's mouth. He let out a wordless sound and staggered, falling to one knee.

Deirdre's head jerked in swallowing motions, like a seabird downing a fish, and she made a quiet gulping sound. Then she shuddered, and opened her burning eyes slowly. She turned to move deliberately to Nicodemus's side, her purplish lips black with blood, and murmured, "It is done, Father."

Nicodemus kissed her on the mouth. And, my God, him doing it with tongue *now* was even more unsettling than it had been the *first* time I'd seen it.

He lifted his mouth from Deirdre's a moment later and said, "Rise, Squire Jordan."

The young man staggered to his feet, the lower half of his face a mass of blood, dripping down over his chin and throat.

"Get some ice on that and see the medic, Squire," Nicodemus said. "Congratulations."

Jordan's eyes gleamed again, and his mouth twisted into a macabre smile. Then he turned and hurried away, leaving a dripping trail of blood behind him.

My stomach twisted. One of these days, I'm going to have to learn to keep my mouth shut. Nicodemus had just casually had a young man maimed solely to make a point to me for teasing him about it. I clenched my jaw and resolved to use the incident to remind me exactly the kind of monster I was dealing with here.

"There," Nicodemus said, turning back to Mab. "I apologize for any inconvenience."

"Shall we conclude our business?" Mab said. "My time is valuable."

"Of course," Nicodemus said. "You know why I have approached you."

"Indeed," Mab said. "Anduriel once loaned me the services of his . . . associate. I now repay that debt by loaning you the services of mine."

"Wait. What?" I said.

"Excellent," Nicodemus said. He produced a business card and held it out. "Our little group will meet here at sundown."

Mab reached for the card and nodded. "Done."

I intercepted her hand, taking the card before she could. "*Not* done," I said. "I'm not working with this psychopath."

"Sociopath, actually," Nicodemus said. "Though for practical purposes, the terms are nearly interchangeable."

"You're an ugly piece of work, and I don't trust you any farther than I can kick you, which I'm tempted to see how far I can do," I snapped back. I turned to Mab. "Tell me you aren't serious."

"I," she said in a hard voice, "am perfectly serious. You will go with Archleone. You will render him all aid and assistance until such time as he has completed his objective."

"*What* objective?" I demanded.

Mab looked at him.

Nicodemus smiled at me. "Nothing terribly complex. Difficult, to be sure, but not complicated. We're going to rob a vault."

"You don't need anyone to help you with that," I said. "You could handle any vault in the world."

"True," Nicodemus said. "But this vault is not of this world. It is in fact, of the Underworld."

"Underworld?" I asked.

I was getting a bad feeling about this.

Nicodemus gave me a bland smile.

"Who?" I asked him. "Whose vault are you knocking over?"

"An ancient being of tremendous power," he replied in his roughened voice, his smile widening. "You may know him as Hades, the Lord of the Underworld."

"Hades," I said. "*The* Hades. The Greek god."

"The very same."

I looked slowly from Nicodemus to Mab.

Her face was beautiful and absolute. The chill of the little earring that was keeping me alive pulsed steadily against my skin.

"Oh," I said quietly. "Oh, Hell's bells."

Chapter Four

My brain shifted into overdrive.

My back might have been against a wall, but that was hardly anything new. One thing I'd learned in long years of spine-to-brick circumstance was that anything you could do to create a little space, time, or support was worth doing.

I met Mab's implacable gaze and said, "It is necessary to set one condition."

Her eyes narrowed. "What condition?"

"Backup," I said. "I want an extra pair of eyes along. Someone of my choosing."

"Why?"

"Because Nicodemus is a murderous murdering murderer," I said. "And if he's picking a crew, they're going to be just as bad. I want another set of eyes along to make sure one of them doesn't shoot me in the back the second I'm not looking—you're loaning out the Winter Knight, after all. You're not throwing him away."

Mab arched an eyebrow. "Mmmm."

"Out of the question, I fear," Nicodemus said. "Plans have already been made and there is no room for extraneous personnel."

Mab turned her head very slowly to Nicodemus. "As I remember it," she said, her tone arctic, "when you loaned me your service, you brought your spawn with you. I believe this request exhibits symmetry."

Nicodemus narrowed his eyes. Then he inhaled deeply and inclined his head very slightly in agreement. "I do not have explicit authority over everyone involved. I can make no promises as to the safety of either your Knight or his . . . additional associate."

Mab almost smiled. "And I can make none as to yours, Sir Archleone, should you betray an arrangement made in good faith. Shall we agree to an explicit truce until such time as your mission is complete?"

Nicodemus considered that for a moment before nodding his head. "Agreed."

"Done, then," Mab said, and plucked the card from my fingers. "Shall we go, my Knight?"

I stared hard at Nicodemus and his bloody-mouthed daughter for a moment. Deirdre's hair rasped and rustled, slithering against itself like long, curling strips of sheet metal.

Like hell was I gonna help that lunatic.

But this was not the time or place to make that stand.

"Yeah," I said through clenched teeth. "Okay."

And without ever quite turning my back on the Denarians, I followed Mab back to the elevator.

* * *

At the bottom of the elevator ride, I turned to Mab's bodyguards and said, "Time for you guys to get out and bring the car around." When none of them moved, I said, "Okay. You guys filled out some kind of paperwork for how you want your remains disposed of, right?"

At that, the Sidhe blinked. They looked at Mab.

Mab stared ahead. I'd seen statues that indicated their desires more strongly.

They got out.

I waited until the elevator doors closed behind them, flicked a finger, and muttered, "*Hexus*," unleashing a minor effort of will as I did. Mortal wizards and technology don't blend. Just being in proximity to a wizard actively using magic is enough to blow out a lot of electronics. When a wizard is actually *trying* to blow out tech, not much is safe.

The elevator's control panel let out a shower of sparks and went dark. The lightbulbs went out with little pops, along with the emergency lights, and the elevator's interior was suddenly plunged into darkness lit only by a bit of daylight seeping in beneath the door.

"Are you out of your *mind*?" I demanded of Mab.

Quietly.

There was just enough light to show me the glitter of her eyes as she turned them to me.

"I am *not* going to help that dick," I snarled.

"You will perform precisely as instructed."

"I will *not*," I said. "I know how he works. Whatever he's doing, it's nothing but bad news. People are going to get hurt—and I'm not going to be a part of that. I'm not going to help him."

"It is obvious to me that you did not listen to me very carefully," Mab said.

"It is obvious to me that you just don't *get it*," I replied. "There are things you just don't do, Mab. Helping a monster like that get what he wants is one of them."

"Even if refusing costs you your life?" she asked.

I sighed. "Have you even been paying attention, the past couple of years? Do *you* have any doubt that I would rather die than become part of something like that?"

Her teeth made a white gleam in the dark. "And yet, here you are."

"Do you really want to push this?" I asked. "Do you want to lose your shiny new Knight already?"

"Hardly a loss if he will not fulfill a simple command," Mab said.

"I'll fulfill commands. I've done it before."

"In your own inept way, yes," Mab said.

"Just not this one."

"You will do precisely as instructed," Mab said. She took a very small step closer to me. "Or there will be consequences."

I swallowed.

The last Knight to anger Mab had wound up begging me to end his life. The poor bastard had been *grateful*.

"What consequences?" I asked.

"The parasite," Mab said. "When it kills you and emerges, it will seek out everyone you know. Everyone you love. And it will utterly destroy them—starting with one child in particular."

Gooseflesh erupted along my arms. She was talking about Maggie. My daughter.

"She's out of this," I said in a whisper. "She's protected."

"Not from this," Mab said, her tone remote. "Not from a being created of your own essence, just as she is. Your death will bring a deadly creature into the world, my Knight—one who knows all that you know of your allies. Lovers. Family."

"No, it won't," I said. "I'll go back to the island. I'll instruct Alfred to imprison it the moment it breaks free."

Mab's smile turned genuine. It was considerably scarier than her glare. "Oh, sweet child." She shook her head. "What makes you think I shall allow you to return?"

I clenched my fists along with my teeth. "You . . . you *bitch*."

Mab slapped me.

Okay, that doesn't convey what happened very well. Her arm moved. Her palm hit my left cheekbone, and an instant later the right side of my skull smashed into the elevator door. My head bounced off it like a Ping-Pong ball, my legs went rubbery, and I got a really, really good look at the marble tile floor of the elevator. The metal rang like a gong, and was still reverberating a couple of minutes later, when I slowly sat up. Or maybe that was just me.

"I welcome your suggestions, questions, thoughts, and arguments, my Knight," Mab said in a calm voice. She moved one foot, gracefully, and rested the tip of her high heel against my throat. She put a very little bit of her weight behind it, and it hurt like hell. "But I am *Mab*, mortal. It is not your place to judge *me*. Do you understand?"

I couldn't talk, with her heel nudging my voice box. I jerked my head in a short nod.

"Defy me if you will," she said. "I cannot prevent you from doing so—if you are willing to pay the price for it."

And with that, she removed her foot from my throat.

I sat up and rubbed at it. "This is not a smart way to maintain a good professional relationship with me," I croaked.

"Do I seem stupid to you, my Knight?" she asked. "Think."

I eyed her. Mab's voice was perfectly calm. After what I'd said to her, the defiance I'd offered her, I hadn't expected that. She had never been shy about showing her outrage when she felt it had been earned. This perfect poise was . . . not out of character, precisely, but I had expected a good deal more intensity than she was displaying. My defiance endangered her plans, and that never left her in a good mood.

Unless . . .

I closed my eyes and ran back through her words in my head.

"Your precise instructions," I said slowly, "were to go with Nicodemus and help him until such time as he completed his objective."

"Indeed," Mab said. "Which he stated was to remove the contents of a vault." She leaned down, took a fistful of my shirt in her hand, and hauled me back to my feet as easily as she might heft a Chihuahua. "I never said what you would do after."

I blinked at that. Several times. "You . . ." I dropped my voice. "You want me to double-cross him?"

"I expect you to repay my debt by fulfilling my instructions," Mab replied. "After that . . ." Her smile returned, smug in the shadows. "I expect you to be yourself."

"Whatever Nicodemus has going this time . . . you want to stop him, too," I breathed.

She tilted her head, very slightly.

"You know he's not going to honor the truce," I said quietly. "He's going to try to take me out somewhere along the line. He's going to betray me."

"Of course," she said. "I expect superior, more creative treachery on your part."

"While still keeping your word and helping him?" I demanded.

Her smile sharpened. "Is it not quite the game?" she asked. "In my younger days, I would have relished such a novel challenge."

"Yeah," I said. "Gee. Thanks."

"Petulance does not become the Winter Knight," Mab said. She turned to the elevator doors, which had an enormous dent in them the same shape as a wizard's noggin. They swept open with a groan of protesting metal. "Do this for me, and I shall ensure the safe removal of the parasite when the task is completed."

"Nicodemus, his daughter, and God knows what else is in his crew," I said. "I'm working with my hands tied, and you expect me to survive this game?"

"If you want to live, if you want your friends and family to live, I expect you to do more than survive it," Mab said, sweeping out. "I expect you to skin them alive."

Chapter Five

“**T**o Mab’s credit,” Karrin Murphy said, “she is sort of asking you to do what you’re good at.”

I blinked. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“You have a tendency to weasel out of these bargains you get yourself into, Harry,” she said. “You have a history.”

“Like I shouldn’t fight them?” I demanded.

“You probably should focus more on not getting into them in the first place,” she said, “but that’s just one humble ex-cop’s opinion.”

We were sitting in Karrin’s living room, in the little house with the rose garden she’d inherited from her grandmother. She was sipping tea, her spring-muscle body coiled up into a lazy-looking ball at one end of the couch. I sat in the chair across from her. My big grey cat, Mister, was sprawled in my lap, luxuriating and purring while I rubbed his fur.

“You’ve taken good care of him,” I said. “Thank you.”

“He’s good company,” she said. “Though I wonder if he wouldn’t like it better with you.”

I moved from Mister’s back to rubbing behind his ears exactly the way he liked best. His purr sounded like a miniature motorboat. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed the little furball until he’d come running up and thrown his shoulder against my shins. Mister weighed the next best thing to thirty pounds. I wondered how the diminutive Karrin had managed to keep from being knocked down by his affection every time she came home. Maybe she had applied some principle of Aikido out of self-defense.

“He might,” I said. “I’m . . . sort of settled now. And there’s nothing on the island big enough to take him. But it’s cold out there in the winter, and he’s getting older.”

“We’re all getting older,” Karrin said. “Besides. Look at him.”

Mister rolled onto his back and chewed happily at my fingertips, pawing at my arms and hands with his limbs without extending his claws. Granted, he was a battle-scarred old tomcat with a stub tail and a notched ear, but damn if it wasn’t cute, and I suddenly felt my eyes threaten to get blurry.

“Yeah,” I said. “He’s kind of my buddy, isn’t he?”

Karrin’s blue eyes smiled at me over the rim of her teacup. Only attitude kept her from being an itty-bitty person. Her golden brown hair was longer than it had been since I could remember offhand, tied back into a ponytail. She wore yoga pants, a tank top, and a flannel shirt and had been practicing martial arts forms of some kind when I arrived.

“Of course,” she said, “you could do it the other way, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could live here,” she said. Then added, a beat too quickly, “In Chicago. You could, you know. Move back to town.”

I frowned, still playing with my cat. “I don’t . . . Look, when the next freak burns down my place, maybe I won’t get as lucky as I did last time.”

“Last time you wound up with a broken back and working for a monster,” Karrin said.

“Exactly,” I said. “And it was only because of literal divine intervention that none of my neighbors died.” I shook my head. “The island isn’t a kind place, but no one is going to come looking for trouble there.”

“Except you,” she said gently. “I worry about what will happen to you if you stay out there alone too long. That kind of isolation isn’t good for you, Harry.”

“It’s necessary,” I said. “It’s safer for me. It’s safer for everyone around me.”

“What a load of crap,” she said, without heat. “You’re just scared.”

"You're damned right," I said. "Scared that some bug-eyed freak is going to come calling and kill innocent people because they happen to be in my havoc radius."

"No," she said. "That isn't what scares you." She waved a hand. "You don't want it to happen, and you'll fight it if it does, but that isn't what scares you."

I frowned down at Mister. "I'm . . . really not comfortable talking about this."

"Get over it," Karrin said, even more gently. "Harry, when the vampires grabbed Maggie . . . they kind of dismantled your life. They took away all the familiar things. Your office. Your home. Even that ridiculous old clown car."

"The *Blue Beetle* was not a clown car," I said severely. "It was a machine of justice."

I wasn't looking at her, but I heard the smile in her voice—along with something that might have been compassion. "You're a creature of habit, Harry. And they took away all the familiar places and things in your life. They hurt you."

Something dark and furious stirred way down inside me for a moment, threatening to come out. I swallowed it back down.

"So the idea of a fortress, someplace familiar that can't be taken away from you, really appeals to you right now," Karrin said. "Even if it means you cut yourself off from everyone."

"It isn't like that," I said.

It wasn't.

Was it?

"And I'm fine," I added.

"You aren't fine," Karrin said evenly. "You're a long, long way from fine. And you've got to know that."

Mister's fur was soft and very warm beneath my fingers. His paws batted gently at my hands. His teeth were sharp but gentle on my wrist. I'd forgotten how nice it was, the furry beast's simple weight and presence against me.

How could I have forgotten that?

(*"I'm only human."*)

(*"For now."*)

I shook my head slowly. "This is . . . not a good time to get in touch with my feelings."

"I know it isn't," she said. "But it's the first time in months that I've seen you. What if I don't get another chance?" She put the cup of tea down on a coaster on the coffee table and said, "Agreed, there's business to do. But you've got to understand that your friends are worried about you. And that is important, too."

"My friends," I said. "So this is . . . a community project?"

Karrin stared at me for a moment. Then she stood up and moved to stand beside the chair. She considered me for a few breaths, then pushed my hair back from my eyes with one hand, and said, "It's me, Harry."

I felt my eyes close. I leaned in to her touch. Her hand felt feverishly warm, a wild contrast to the brush of Mab's cold digits earlier in the day. We stayed like that for a moment, and Mister's throaty purr buzzed through the room.

There's power in the touch of another person's hand. We acknowledge it in little ways, all the time. There's a reason human beings shake hands, hold hands, slap hands, bump hands.

It comes from our very earliest memories, when we all come into the world blinded by light and color, deafened by riotous sound, flailing in a suddenly cavernous space without any way of orienting ourselves, shuddering with cold, emptied with hunger, and justifiably frightened and confused. And what changes that first horror, that original state of terror?

The touch of another person's hands.

Hands that wrap us in warmth, that hold us close. Hands that guide us to shelter, to comfort, to food. Hands that hold and touch and reassure us through our very first crisis, and guide us into our very first shelter from pain. The first thing we ever learn is that the touch of someone else's hand can ease pain and make things better.

That's power. That's power so fundamental that most people never even realize it exists.

I leaned my head against Karrin's hand and shivered again. "Okay," I said quietly. "Okay. This is important, too."

"Good," she said. She left her fingers in my hair for another moment, and then withdrew her hand. She picked up my teacup, and hers, and carried them back to the kitchen. "So. Where did you go after you left the Hard Rock?"

"Hmm?" I asked.

Her voice drifted in from the kitchen. "Given what you told me, you left the meeting with Nicodemus about three hours ago. Where have you been since then?"

"Um," I said. "Yeah, about that."

She came back into the room and arched a golden eyebrow at me.

"What if I told you that I needed you to trust me?"

She frowned and tilted her head for a moment before the hint of a smile touched her mouth. "You went digging for information, didn't you?"

"Um," I said. "Let's just say that until I know more about what I'm up against, I'm playing things a lot closer to the chest than usual."

She frowned. "Tell me you aren't doing it for my own protection."

"You'd kick my ass," I said. "I'm doing it for *mine*."

"Thank you," she said. "I think."

"Don't thank me," I said. "I'm still keeping you in the dark. But I believe it's absolutely necessary."

"So you need me to trust you."

"Yeah."

She spread her hands. "Yeah, okay. So what's the play? I assume you want me to assemble the support team and await developments while you and Thomas go play with the bad guys?"

I shook my head. "Hell, no. I want you to go in with me."

That shocked her silent for a moment. Her eyes widened slightly. "With you. To rob a Greek god."

"Burgle, technically," I said. "I'm pretty sure if you pull a gun on Hades, you deserve whatever happens to you."

"Why me?" she asked. "Thomas is the one with the knives and the superstrength."

"I don't need knives and superstrength," I said. "What's the first rule to protecting yourself on the street?"

"Awareness," she replied instantly. "It doesn't matter how badass you are. If you don't see it coming, you can't do anything about it."

"Exactly," I said. "I need you because you *don't* have supernatural abilities. You never have. You've never relied on them. I need extra eyes. I need to see things happening, someone to watch my back, to notice details. You're the detective who could see that the supernatural was real when everyone else was explaining it away. You've squared off against the worst and you're still here to talk about it. You've got the best eyes of anyone I know."

Karrin took that in for a moment and then nodded slowly. "And . . . you think I'm crazy enough to actually do it?"

"I need you," I said simply.

She considered that gravely.

"I'll get my gun," she said.

Chapter Six

Karrin drove us to the address on the card in her new car, one of those little Japanese SUVs that *Consumer Reports* likes, and we got there about ten minutes before sundown.

"An abandoned slaughterhouse," she said. "Classy."

"I thought the stockyard district had all been knocked down and rebuilt," I said.

She put the car in park and checked the SIG she carried in a shoulder holster. "Almost all of it. A couple of the old wrecks hung on."

The wreck in question was a long, low building, a simple old box frame only a couple of stories high and running the length of the block. It was sagging and dirty and covered in stains and graffiti, an eyesore that had to have been around since before the Second World War. A painted sign on the side of the building was barely legible: SULLIVAN MEAT COMPANY. The buildings around it were updated brownstone business district standard—but I noticed that no one who worked in them, apparently, had elected to park his car on the slaughterhouse's side of the block.

I didn't have to get out of the car to feel the energy around the place—dark, negative stuff, the kind of lingering aura that made people and animals avoid a place without giving much consideration as to why. City traffic seemed to ooze around it in a mindless, Brownian fashion, leaving the block all but deserted. Every city has places like that, where people tend not to go. It's not like people run screaming or anything—they just never seem to find a reason to turn down certain streets, to stop on certain stretches of road. And there's a reason that they don't.

Bad things happen in places like this.

"Go in?" I asked Karrin.

"Let's watch for a bit," she said. "See what happens."

"Aye-aye, Eye-guy," I said.

"I want you to imagine me kicking your ankle right now," Karrin said, "because it is beneath my dignity to actually do it."

"Since when?"

"Since I don't want to get your yucky boy germs on my shoes," she said, watching the street. "So what's Nicodemus after?"

"No clue," I said. "And whatever he says he's after, I think it's a safe bet that he'll be lying."

"Ask the question from the other direction, then," she said. "What's Hades got?"

"That's the thing," I said. "My sources say he's the collector of the supernatural world. He's famous for it. Art, treasure, gems, jewels, antiques, you name it."

"Nicodemus doesn't seem like an antiquer to me."

I snorted. "Depends. There are a lot of kinds of antiques. Old coins. Old swords."

"For example," she said, "you think he's after some kind of magical artifact?"

"Yeah. Something specific. It's the only thing I can think of that he couldn't get somewhere else," I said.

"Could he be trying to make something happen with the act of burglary itself?"

I shrugged. "Like what? Other than pissing off something as big, powerful, and pathologically vengeful as a freaking Greek god. Those guys took things personally."

"Right. What if he's setting it up to make it look like someone else did the crime?"

I grunted. "Worth considering. But it seems like there'd be simpler ways to accomplish the same thing than to break into someone's version of Hell." I frowned. "Ask you something?"

"Sure."

"You planning to bring one of the Swords with you?"

Karrin had two swords that had been forged with nails from the Cross (yeah, *that* Cross) worked into the blades. They were powerful talismans, borne by the Knights of the Cross, the natural foes of Nicodemus and his crew of thirty silver-coined lunatics (yeah, *those* thirty pieces of silver).

She frowned, her eyes scanning the street, and didn't answer for a moment. When she did, I had the impression that she was choosing her words carefully. "You know I have to be careful with them."

"They're weapons, Karrin," I said. "They're not glass figurines. What's the point in having two genuine holy swords with which to fight evil if you don't, you know, fight evil with them occasionally?"

"Swords are funny," she replied. "The most capable muscle-powered tool there is for killing a man. But they're fragile, too. Use them the wrong way, and they'll break like glass."

"The Denarians are on the field," I said. "They're the people the Swords were meant to challenge."

"The things inside the Coins are what the Swords were meant to fight. The ones holding the Coins are the people the Swords were meant to save," she said, her tone gently emphatic. "And that's why I'm not carrying one. I don't want to save those animals, Harry. And it's not enough to use the Swords against the right foe. You have to use them for the right reasons—or they could be lost forever. I won't be the reason that happens."

"So you'll just let them sit and do nothing?" I asked.

"I'll give them to anyone I think will use them wisely and well," she said calmly. "But people like that don't come along every day. Being a keeper of the Swords is a serious job, Harry. You know that."

I sighed. "Yeah. I do. But Nicodemus and his girl are right over there in that building—and we could use every advantage we can get."

Karrin suddenly smiled. It transformed her face, though her eyes never stopped sweeping the street. "You're just going to have to have a little faith, Harry."

"Faith?"

"That if a Knight with a Sword needs to be here, one will be here. For all we know, Sanya will come walking down the street and get in the car with us."

I scowled at that, even though she was probably right. When a Knight of the Sword was meant to show up and intervene, one would damned well make an entrance and intervene, regardless of who or what stood in the way. I'd seen it more than once. But . . . part of me hated to let go of the advantage the Swords would offer.

Of course, that was what faith was all about, wasn't it—letting go and trusting Someone Else.

Maybe wizards just weren't terribly predisposed to surrendering control. I mean, not when they have so much personal power available to them. Once you've had your hands on the primal forces that created the universe, it's a little hard to relax and let them slip through your fingers. It would certainly explain why so few of the wizards I knew were even mildly religious.

Also, it illustrated pretty clearly why I was never, ever going to be a Knight. Aside from the fact that I was working for the queen of the wicked faeries and getting into bed with jerks like Nicodemus, I mean.

Karrin's eyes flicked up to her rearview mirror and sharpened. "Car," she said quietly.

In a spy movie, I would have watched them coolly in the rearview mirror, or perhaps in my specially mirrored sunglasses. But as I am neither cool nor a spy, nor did I feel any particular need for stealth, I twisted my upper body around and peered out the back window of Karrin's car.

A white sedan with a rental agency's bumper sticker on it pulled up to the curb halfway down the block. It was shuddering as it did, as if it could barely get its engine to turn over, even though it was a brand-new vehicle. Before it had entirely stopped moving, the passenger door swung open and a woman stepped out onto the street as though she just couldn't stand to be stuck in one place.

She was striking—rangy and nearly six feet tall, with long and intensely curled dark hair that fell almost to her waist. She wore sunglasses, jeans, and a thick, tight scarlet sweater that she filled out more noticeably than most. Her cowboy boots struck the street decisively in long strides as she crossed it, heading toward the old slaughterhouse. Her sharp chin was thrust forward, her mouth set in a firm line, and she walked as though she felt certain that the way was clear—or had better be.

“Hot,” Karrin said, her tone neutral, observational. “Human?”

I wasn’t getting any kind of supernatural vibe off of her, but there’s more than one way to identify a threat. “Can’t be sure,” I said. “But I think I know who she is.”

“Who?”

“A warlock,” I said.

“That’s a rogue wizard, right?”

“Yeah. When I was in the Wardens, they used to send out wanted posters for warlocks so the Wardens could recognize them. I didn’t hunt warlocks. But I was on the mailing list.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked. “Word is that they’re dangerous.”

“Dangerous children, most of them,” I said. “Kids who no one ever taught or trained or told about the Laws of Magic.” I nodded toward the woman. “That one’s name is Hannah Ascher. She was on the run longer than any other warlock on recent record. She’s supposed to have died in a fire in . . . Australia, I think, about six years ago.”

“You drowned once. How much pressure did the Council put on you after that?”

“Good point,” I said.

“What did she do?” Karrin asked.

“Originally? Ascher burned three men to death from the inside out,” I said.

“Jesus.”

“Killed one Warden, back before my time. She’s put three more in the hospital over the years.”

“Wizards trained to hunt rogue wizards, and she took them out?”

“Pretty much. Probably why she doesn’t look worried about walking in there right now.”

“Neither will we when we go in,” Karrin said.

“No, we won’t,” I said.

“Here comes the driver.”

The driver’s-side door opened and a bald, blocky man of medium height in an expensive black suit got out. Even before he reached up to take off his sunglasses to reveal eyes like little green agates, I recognized him. Karrin did too, and let out a little growling sound. He put the sunglasses away in a pocket, checked what was probably a gun in a shoulder holster, and hurried to catch up to Ascher, an annoyed expression on his blunt-featured face.

“Binder,” she said.

“Ernest Armand Tinwhistle,” I said. “Name that goofy, don’t blame him for wanting to use an alias.”

Though, honestly, he hadn’t chosen it. The Wardens had given it to him when they’d realized how he’d somehow managed to bind an entire clan of entities out of the Nevernever into his service. He could whistle up a modest horde of humanoid creatures who apparently felt nothing remotely like pain or fear, and who were willing to sacrifice themselves without hesitation. Binder was a one-man army, and I’d told the little jerk that if I saw him in my town again, I’d end him. I’d *told* him to stay out, and yet here he was.

For about three seconds, I couldn’t think about anything *but* ending him. I’d have to make it fast, take him out before he could call up any of his buddies, something quick, like breaking his neck. Open the car door. Call up a flash of light as I got out, something to dazzle his newly unshaded eyes. A dozen sprinting steps to get to him, then grab him by the jaw and the back of the head and twist sharply up and to one side, then bring up a shield around myself in case his brain stayed alive long enough to drop a death curse on me.

“Harry,” Karrin said, quiet and sharp.

I realized that I was breathing hard and that my breath was pluming into frost on the exhale as the mantle of power of the Winter Knight had begun informing my instincts in accord with the primal desire to defend my territory against an intruder. The temperature in the car had dropped as if she'd turned the AC up full blast. Water was condensing into droplets on the windows.

I closed my eyes as the Winter rose up in me and I fought it down. I'd done it often enough over the past year on the island that it was almost routine. You can't stave off the howling, primitive *need* for violence that came with the Winter mantle with the usual deep-breathing techniques. There was only one way that I'd found that worked. I had to assert my more rational mind. So I ran through my basic multiplication tables in my head, half a dozen mathematical theorems, which took several seconds, then hammered out ruthless logic against the need to murder Binder in the street.

"One, witnesses," I muttered. "Even deserted, this is still Chicago, and there could be witnesses and that would get their attention. Two, Ascher's out there, and if she takes his side, she could hit me from behind before I could defend myself. Three, if he's savvy enough to avoid the grab, I'd be out there with two of them on either side of me."

The Winter mantle snarled and spat its disappointment, somewhere in my chest, but it receded and flowed back out of my thoughts, leaving me feeling suddenly more tired and fragile than before—but my breathing and body temperature returned to normal.

I watched as Binder broke into a slow jog until he caught up with Ascher. The two spoke quietly to each other as they entered the old slaughterhouse.

"Four," I said quietly, "killing people is wrong."

I became conscious of Karrin's eyes on me. I glanced at her face. Her expression was tough to read.

She put her hand on mine and said, "Harry? Are you all right?"

I didn't move or respond.

"Mab," Karrin said. "This is about Mab, isn't it? This is what she's done to you."

"It's Winter," I said. "It's power, but it's . . . all primitive. Violent. It doesn't think. It's pure instinct, feeling, emotion. And when it's inside you, if you let your emotions control you, it . . ."

"It makes you like Lloyd Slate," Karrin said. "Or that bitch Maeve."

I pulled my hand away from hers and said, "Like I said. This is not the time to get in touch with my feelings."

She regarded me for several seconds before saying, "Well. That is all kinds of fucked-up."

I huffed out half a breath in a little laugh, which threatened to bring some tears to my eyes, which made the recently roused Winter start stirring down inside me again.

I chanced a quick look at Karrin's eyes and said, "I don't want to be like this."

"So get out of it," she said.

"The only way out is feetfirst," I said.

She shook her head. "I don't believe that," she said. "There's always a way out. A way to make things better."

Oh, man.

I wanted to believe that.

Outside, the sun set. Sunset isn't just a star orbiting below the relative horizon of the planet. It's a shift in supernatural energy. Don't believe me? Go out far away from the lights of civilization sometime, and sit down, all by yourself, where there aren't any buildings or cars or telephones or crowds of people. Go sit down, quietly, and wait for the light to fade. Feel the shadows lengthening. Feel the creatures that stay quiet during the day start to stir and come out. Feel that low instinct of nervous trepidation rising up in your gut. That's how your body translates that energy to your senses. To a wizard like me, sundown is like a single beat on some unimaginably enormous drum.

Dark things come out at night.

And I didn't have time, right now, to dither about where I had my feet planted. I had three days to screw over Nicodemus Archleone and his crew and get this thing out of my head, without getting myself or my friend killed while I did it. I had to stay focused on that.

There'd be time to worry about other things after.

"It's time," I said to Karrin, and opened the car door. "Come on. We've got work to do."

Chapter Seven

We got out of Karrin's little SUV and headed toward the creepy old slaughterhouse full of dangerous beings. Which . . . pretty much tells you what kind of day I was having, right there.

You know, sometimes it feels like I don't *have* any other kind of day.

Like, ever.

On the other hand, I'm not sure what I would really do with any other kind of day. I mean, at some point in my life, I had to face it—I was pretty much equipped, by experience and inclination, for mayhem.

"Too bad," Karrin mused.

"Too bad what?"

"We didn't have time to get you an actual haircut," she said. "Seriously, did you do it yourself? Maybe without a mirror?"

I put a hand up to my head self-consciously and said, "I had some help from the General. And, hey, I didn't say anything about your man-shoes."

"They're steel-toed," she said calmly. "In case I need to plant them in anyone's ass as a result of him calling them man-shoes. And seriously, you let Toot help you with your hair?"

"Sure as hell wasn't going to let Alfred try it. He'd probably scrape it off with a glacier or something."

"Alfred?"

"Demonreach."

Karrin shuddered. "That thing."

"It's not so bad," I said. "Not exactly charming company, but not bad."

"It's a demon that drove an entire town full of people insane to keep them away."

"And it could have done much, much worse," I said. "It's a big, ugly dog. A cop should know about those."

"You're glad it's there when someone breaks into your house," she said, "because then it can drive them so freaking crazy that the city erases all record of the incident."

"Exactly. And then no one remembers your ugly man-shoes."

By then, we'd reached the door. Both of us knew why we were giving each other a hard time. There was nothing mean-spirited in it.

We were both scared.

I would go through the door first. My spell-wrought black leather duster was better armor than the vest Karrin would be wearing beneath her coat. I gripped my new staff and readied my mind to throw up a shield if I needed one. We'd done this dance before: If something was ready to come at us, I'd hold it off, and she would start putting bullets in it.

Karrin folded her arms over her chest, which happened to put her hand near the butt of her gun, and nodded at me. I nodded back, made sure my duster was closed across my front, and opened the door.

Nothing came screaming out of the shadows at us. Nobody started shooting at us. So far, so good.

The door opened onto a long hallway with light at the far end, enough to let us walk by. The interior walls of the building were old and cracked and covered in decades of graffiti. The night had brought a cold wind off the lake and the building creaked and groaned. The air smelled like mildew and something else, something almost beneath the threshold of perception that set my teeth on edge—old, old death.

"These evil freaks," Karrin said. "They always pick the most charming places to hang out."

“Dark energy here,” I said. “Keeps people from wandering in and randomly interfering. And it feels homey.”

“I know you haven’t burned down any buildings in a while,” she said, “but if you start feeling the need . . .”

When we reached the end of the hallway, it turned into a flight of stairs. We followed those up, silently, and at the top of them a door opened onto a balcony over a large factory floor two stories high, running three or four hundred feet down the length of the building. The remains of an overhead conveyor line were still there; it had probably once carried sides of beef from the slaughter pen to various processing stations, but the machinery that had been there was all gone. All that was left were the heavy metal frames, empty now, which had once held the machines in place, and a few rusted, lonely old transport dollies that must once have been loaded up with packaged ribs and steaks and ground beef.

In the middle of the floor were a dozen brand-new work lights, blazing away, and an enormous wooden conference table complete with big leather chairs, brightly illuminated in the glow of the lamps. There was a second table loaded with what looked like a catered dinner, covered with dishes, drinks, and a fancy coffee machine. A few feet away from that was a small pen of wire mesh, and inside it were a dozen restless brown-and-tan goats.

Goats. Huh.

Nicodemus was sitting with one hip on the conference table, a Styrofoam coffee cup in his hands, smiling genially. Ascher was just being seated in a chair, which one of Nicodemus’s guards held out for her solicitously. Binder sat down in the chair beside her, nodded to Nicodemus, and folded his arms with the air of a man prepared to be patient. Deirdre approached the table in her girl disguise, holding a cup of coffee in each hand, offering them to the new arrivals, smiling pleasantly.

There were half a dozen of Nicodemus’s tongueless guards in sight on catwalks above the floor, and Squire Jordan, now all cleaned up, was waiting for us at the far end of the balcony. He had a sidearm, but it was holstered.

“Hi, Jordan,” I said. “What’s with the goats?”

He gave me a level look and said nothing.

“I don’t like having guns above us and all around us,” Karrin said. “Screw that.”

“Yep,” I said. “Go tell your boss we’ll come down there when the flunkies go find something else to do.”

Jordan looked like he might take umbrage at the remark.

“I don’t care what you think, Jordan,” I said. “Go tell him what I said, or I walk. Good luck explaining to him how you lost him a vital asset.”

Jordan’s jaw clenched. But he spun stiffly on one heel, descended an old metal stairway to the floor, and crossed to Nicodemus. He wrote something on a small notepad and passed it to his boss.

Nicodemus looked up at me and smiled. Then he handed the notepad back to Jordan, nodded, and said something.

Jordan pursed his lips and let out three piercing whistles, which got the instant attention of the guards. Then he waved a finger over his head in a circular motion, and they all descended from the catwalks to join him. They headed out, toward the far end of the floor.

Ascher and Binder turned to regard me as this happened, the former bright-eyed and interested, the latter justifiably apprehensive. Once the guards were out of sight, I started down the stairs, with Karrin walking a step behind me and slightly to one side.

“You’ve grown more suspicious, Mr. Dresden,” Nicodemus said as I approached.

“There’s no such thing as too suspicious with you, Nicky,” I said.

Nicodemus didn’t like the familiar nickname. Irritation flickered over his face and was gone. “I suppose I can’t blame you. We’ve always been adversaries in our previous encounters. We’ve never worked together as associates.”

"That's because you're an asshole," I said. I picked the chair two down from Binder and sat. I gave him a steady look and then said to Nicodemus, "We've already got a conflict of interest going."

"Oh?"

I jerked a thumb at Binder. "This guy. I said the next time he operated in Chicago, we were going to have a problem."

"Christ," Binder said. He said it in Cockney. It came out "kroist." He looked at Nicodemus and said, "I told you this was an issue."

"Whatever problem you have with Mr. Tinwhistle is your personal problem, Dresden," Nicodemus said. "Until such time as the job is over, I expect you to treat him as a professional peer and an ally. If you fail to do so, I will regard it as a failure to repay Mab's debt to me and, regrettably, will be forced to make such an unfortunate fact public knowledge."

Translation: Mab's name would get dragged through the mud. I knew who she would take it out on, too.

I glanced back over my shoulder at Karrin, who had taken up a stance behind me and to one side, her expression distant, dispassionate, her eyes focused on nothing in particular. She gave a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"Okay," I said, turning back to Nicodemus. I eyed Binder. "I'm giving you a three-day pass, Binder. But bear in mind that I'm going to hold you responsible for what you do in my town at the end of it. I'd be cautious if I were you."

Binder swallowed.

At that, Ascher stood up. "Hi," she said, smiling brightly. "You don't know me. I'm Hannah. Back off my partner before you get hurt."

"I know who you are, hot stuff," I drawled, not standing. I set my staff down across the table. "And I already backed off your partner. You can tell from how there aren't any splatter marks. Play nice, Ascher."

Her smile vanished at my response, and her dark eyes narrowed. She drummed her nails on the tabletop exactly once, slowly, as if contemplating a decision. A smirk touched her mouth. "So you're the infamous Dresden." Her eyes went past me, to Karrin. Ascher was a foot taller than she was. "And this is your bodyguard? Seriously? Aren't they supposed to be a little bigger?"

"She represents the Lollipop Guild," I replied. "She'll represent them right through the front and out the back of your skull if you don't show a little respect."

"I'd like to see her try," Ascher said.

"You won't see it," Karrin said softly.

The room got quiet and intent for a moment, though I never heard Karrin move. I knew she'd be standing there, not looking directly at anyone, watching everyone. That's a scary look, if you know what really dangerous people look like. Ascher did. I saw the tension start at her neck and shoulders, and make her clench her jaw.

"Easy, Hannah," Binder said, his tone soothing. He knew what Karrin could do on a fast draw. She'd dispatched some of his minions for him the last time he'd been in town. "Dresden's given a truce. We're all professionals here, right? Easy."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Nicodemus said in a patiently strained paternal tone. He went to the head of the table, of course, and seated himself. "Can we please settle down and get to work?"

"Fine with me," I said, not looking away from Ascher and Binder, until Ascher finally sniffed and returned to her seat.

"Would you care to sit, Miss Murphy?" Nicodemus asked.

"I'm fine," Karrin said.

"As you wish," he said easily. "Deirdre?"

Deirdre picked up an armful of folders and came around the table, passing them out to everyone seated. She rather pointedly skipped Karrin, who ignored her. I opened my rather thin folder, and found a cover page that read: DAY ONE.

“Everyone here knows the general objective,” Nicodemus said, “though I’m going to be leaving specific details vague, for the time being. I trust that I need not emphasize the need for secrecy to anyone here. Our target has a great many ways of gathering information, and if he gets wind of our venture from any of them, it will certainly come to an abrupt and terminal conclusion for all of us.”

“Keep your mouth shut,” I said, loudly enough to be a little annoying. “Got it.”

Nicodemus gave me that not-smile again. “In order to make clear to you all the potential gains to be had in this enterprise, you shall each be paid two million dollars upon our successful removal of my particular goal, guaranteed.”

Karrin’s breath stopped for a second. My stomach did an odd thing.

Man. Two million dollars.

I mean, I wasn’t gonna take Nicodemus’s money. I wasn’t doing this for the money. Neither was she. But neither of us had ever been exactly wealthy, and there were always bills to pay. I mean, stars and stones. Two million bucks would buy you a lot of ramen.

“In addition,” Nicodemus continued, “you are welcome to whatever you can carry away from the target. There is an unfathomable amount of wealth there—more than we could take away with a locomotive, much less on foot.”

“What kind of wealth?” Binder asked. “Cash, you mean?”

“For what that is worth,” Nicodemus said, an edge of contempt in his voice. “But that is collected more as a curiosity than anything else, I suspect. The real trove contains gold. Jewels. Art. Priceless artifacts of history. Virtually every rare and valuable thing to have gone mysteriously missing over the past two thousand years has wound up there. I would suggest that perhaps filling a few packs with precious gemstones might be the most profitable and least traceable course of action for each of you, but if you simply must have something more distinctive, you are welcome to take it if you can carry it and if it does not slow down our egress. I think it easily possible for each of you to beat the cash payment by an order of magnitude.”

So, not two million each.

Twenty-two million each.

That was so much money, it almost didn’t have a real meaning . . . which was a real meaning all by itself.

“And what are you after?” Ascher asked, openly suspicious. “If you’re willing to dish out two million to each of us, you certainly aren’t hurting for money. You don’t need a backpack of diamonds.”

Her reasoning made me like her a little more. Her tone doubled it.

Nicodemus smiled. “I’ll make that clear to you before we go in. For now, suffice to say that it is a single, small article of relatively little monetary value.”

Liar, I thought.

“As I said to Dresden before, he has known me only as an adversary. Much of my reputation has been made from those who have opposed me—those who survived the experience, that is.” He smiled and took a sip of coffee. “There is another side to that coin. One does not operate for as many years as I have by betraying allies. It simply isn’t practical. Certainly, one uses every weapon one has when dealing with foes—but when I work with associates, I do not turn aside or leave them behind. It is not from any sense of sentiment. It is because I do business with many people over the course of centuries, and treachery is a bad long-term investment. It simply isn’t good business.”

Liar, I thought. But maybe a little less emphatically than I had before. What he was saying made sense. In the supernatural world, there were plenty of people and things that counted their life spans in centuries. Wrong a wizard when he’s young, for example, and you could wait three hundred years to find out he was never able to put it behind him—and has been working to gain the clout he needs to make it clear to you that your actions were unacceptable. Cross a vampire, and it could haunt you for millennia.

A certain degree of cutthroat pragmatism was what made any kind of alliance between various supernatural entities possible. I'd seen it between my grandfather and a professional assassin called the Hellhound. I'd seen it when squaring off against various bad guys, over the years, most of whom were willing to make a deal of some kind. Hell, I'd *done* it, with Mab, and she was doing it again with Nicodemus by sticking me here.

So it was entirely possible that he was on the up-and-up. Or at least that he was as sincere as I was about following through on the whole alliance thing. We had to get his McGuffin and get out again. Until then, I was betting, he might be good to his word.

And after that, everything would be up in the air.

On the other hand, Nicodemus had gone out of his way to remove as much memory of himself as possible from the human race, by destroying records of his deeds over the centuries. Guys who are on the up-and-up don't go to those lengths to hide what they've done.

Not that it mattered. Mab had given her word. I had to play nice until we had grabbed the loot from Hades, or until Nicodemus tried to stick a knife in my back.

Fun, fun, fun.

I flipped to the second page of the folder and found a photo of a woman I knew, and hadn't seen in . . . Hell's bells, had it been almost ten years? She hadn't changed much in that time, except for maybe looking leaner and harder. I wasn't sure she'd be at all happy to see me, and I knew for damned sure what she would think of Nicodemus.

And since when had I become the guy that things happened to ten years ago?

Nicodemus continued in his lecture voice. "Entry to the target in the Nevernever requires us to find a matching site here in the mortal world. That means breaking into a high-security facility in the real world before we can even get started in the Nevernever."

I raised my hand.

"Pursuant to that," Nicodemus said, and then paused. He sighed. "Yes, Mr. Dresden?"

"You've got to be kidding me," I said. "She's never going to work with you."

"Probably not," Nicodemus agreed. "She may, however, work with *you*. We need an expert in security systems with a working knowledge of the supernatural world. The pool of such individuals is rather small. I've arranged a meeting with her at a local event in approximately ninety minutes. You and Miss Ascher will make contact and convince her to join our cause."

"Suppose she won't?" I asked.

"Be more convincing," he said. "We need her in order to proceed."

I clenched my teeth, and then nodded once. Hell, if he needed her to make it happen, then by screwing this up, maybe I could make sure it didn't. "Fine. But it's me and Murphy."

"No," Ascher said. "It's me and Binder."

"I'm afraid the event is a formal one," Nicodemus said. "I've taken the liberty of securing appropriate attire and identities for Dresden and Miss Ascher, neither of which would be compatible with Miss Murphy or Binder. Perhaps Miss Murphy could serve as your driver. She has the shoes for it."

I couldn't actually hear Karrin grind her teeth, but I knew she had.

"Binder," Nicodemus said, "I have another errand for you. You'll need to pick up the fourth—pardon, Miss Murphy, the fifth—member of the team at the train station. He's stated that he'll only meet someone he knows."

Binder nodded once. "Who is it?"

"Goodman Grey."

Binder's face went pale. "Ah. Yes, I've worked with the gent."

"Who is he?" Ascher asked.

"He's . . . not a man to cross," Binder said. "But a pro. I'll pick him up. Smoother that way."

Ascher pressed her lips together, as if she didn't like it, but nodded. "Fine, then." She looked down the table at me and smiled. "Well, Dresden, it looks like it's time to put on our party dress."

"Gee," I said. "What fun."

And I closed the folder on the picture of Anna Valmont.

Chapter Eight

Deirdre brought me a garment bag and pointed me to a small employees' kitchen and break room with another pair of work lights set up in it. I went in, closed the door, and opened the garment bag. There was a black tux inside with all the necessary accoutrements. I held it up enough to determine that it looked like a tolerable fit.

For a moment, I had a few paranoid misgivings. What if the entire point of the exercise had been to get me to take off the coat so that they could open fire with a machine gun and grease me through the wall? I already knew what it was like to be shot, and I was pretty well over the experience. Visions of Sonny Corleone danced in my head.

But I didn't think that was going to happen. Karrin was on guard outside. There was no way they'd move a gun into position without her at least making noise to warn me. Then, too, Nicodemus had plans in motion. I didn't think he'd want to jeopardize his "faithful associate" image until he could screw everyone over much more dramatically and permanently. And if he just murdered me outright, Mab would take it personally. I don't care how long you've been in business. If you cross Mab, you can skip your next five-year plan.

So I doffed the coat, stripped down, and started getting dressed in the tux.

I was at pretty much the damndest point of the process when the door opened again, and Hannah Ascher prowled into the room, carrying a garment bag of her own.

She gave me a slow and blatant once-over, that small smirk still on her mouth.

I'm pretty sure the temperature of the room didn't literally go up, but I couldn't have sworn to it. Some women have a quality about them, something completely intangible and indefinable, which gets called a lot of different things, depending on which society you're in. I always think of it as heat, fire. It doesn't have to be about sex, but it often is—and it definitely was with Hannah Ascher.

I was extremely aware of her body, and her eyes. Her expression told me that she knew exactly what effect she was having on me, and that she didn't mind having it in the least. I'd say that my libido kicked into overdrive, except that didn't seem sufficient to cover the rush of purely physical hunger that suddenly hit me.

Hannah Ascher was a damned attractive woman. And I'd been on that island for a long, long time.

I turned my face away from her and tried to ignore her while I laid out my cummerbund. Mighty wizards do not get rattled because someone sees them standing around in their boxer briefs.

"Damn, Dresden," she said, taking a few steps to one side and looking me over again. A slow smile spread over her mouth. "Do you work out?"

"Uh," I said. "Parkour."

The answer seemed to amuse her. "Well. It's definitely working for you." She hung the garment bag up on a cabinet handle and unzipped it by feel, her eyes on me the whole time. "So many scars." She had long arms. Her fingers brushed my shoulder. "What's that one?"

The touch sent a zing of sensation down my spine and through my belly. There wasn't anything magically coercive about it. I'd been on alert for that kind of nonsense from the moment my feet had hit the shore. It was worse than that—chemistry, pure and simple. My body had the idea that Ascher was exactly what I needed, and it wasn't paying any attention to my brain.

I pulled my shoulder away from her, gave her a glare, and said, "Hey. Do you mind?"

She folded her arms, her smile widening. "Not at all. Where'd you get it?"

I glowered and turned back to my tux. "The FBI shot me, maybe twelve years ago."

"Seriously?" Hannah asked. "It faded out really well."

"It's like that with wizards," I said.

"Your left hand," she said. "That's from fire."

"Vampire's flunky," I said. "Homemade flamethrower."

"Which Court?" she asked.

"Black."

"Interesting," she said, and stripped out of her sweater in one smooth motion.

Her body was exactly as pleasant to look at as the contours of the sweater had promised, possibly more so. My libido approved vigorously.

I hurriedly turned my back. "Hey."

"You're kidding, right?" she asked, something like laughter in her voice. "Turning your back, really? On this? What kind of big-time badass are you, anyway, Dresden?"

"The kind who doesn't know you, Miss Ascher," I said.

"That's a fixable problem, isn't it?" she asked, her voice teasing. "And it's Miss Ascher all of a sudden, huh? I wonder why that is."

Her black satin bra hit the counter in my peripheral vision. It had little bits of frilly lace along the edges.

I hurriedly jumped into the pants before I embarrassed myself. "Look," I said. "We're working together. Can we just get the job done, please?"

"Not nearly so many scars on your back," she noted. "You don't run from much, do you?"

"I run all the time," I said, stuffing my arms into the shirt. "But if you let yourself get attacked from behind a lot, you don't get scars. You get a hole in the ground."

Her boots made some clunking sounds on the floor. Socks and jeans joined the bra on the counter. "This thief we're picking up," she said. "You two have some history, huh?"

"Sort of," I said. "She stole my car."

She let out a brief laugh. "And you let her?"

"She gave it back," I said. "I bailed her out of trouble once."

"Think you can get her to go with us?"

"If it was just me, it would be more likely," I said.

"Or maybe you'd try to throw a wrench into the works by making sure she didn't get on board," she said, her tone wry. "After all, you like Nicodemus so much."

Oops. The woman was sharp. "What?" I asked.

"Based on your response, I'm going to assume that you don't have much of a poker face, either," she said. Cloth made soft rustling sounds. "Don't feel bad. It's one of the things I'm good at. I've got a feel for people."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that I can tell that right now, you're wound up tighter than twenty clock springs," she said. "You're nervous and scared and angry, and you're about to explode with the need to have sex with something. I've met guys fresh out of prison who aren't bursting at the seams as hard as you."

I paused in the midst of fastening cuff links.

"Seriously, I can promise you that you are impaired right now. You should blow off a little steam. Be good for you."

"You're an expert, eh?" I asked. My voice sounded a little rough.

"On this?" she asked, her voice teasing again. "I'm not bad. Zip me?"

I turned to find her facing away from me. She was wearing the hell out of a little black dress accented with shining black sequins. Her legs were excellent. There wasn't much of a back to the dress, but there was a short zipper running a few inches up from the top of her hips. I was pretty sure she could have managed it alone. But I took a step over to her and did it up anyway.

She smelled like late-afternoon sunshine on wildflowers. Her long, curling hair touched the backs of my hands as they moved.

I felt the Winter in me stirring, taking notice of whatever had gotten to my sex drive, hungry for an outlet. That wasn't a good thing. Winter thought sex was almost as much fun as violence, and that they went even better mixed together. Like chocolate and peanut butter.

I started multiplying numbers in my head and stepped away again, focusing on getting dressed, and eight times eight, and putting on socks without sitting down or noticing the woman whose gaze remained on me.

"Man," she said finally. "You've been burned more than once."

I fastened the pretied tie onto the collar and straightened it by feel. "You have no idea."

"Fine," she said, her voice steady and calm. "You don't want to have fun at work, that's cool. I like you. I like your style. But this job is important to me, and to my partner. Get it right. You screw us over, and you and I are going to have a problem."

"You really think you can take on a Wizard of the White Council, Miss Ascher?" I asked.

"I have so far," she said, without a trace of threat or bravado.

I turned to face her and found her on something almost like eye level with me, thanks to a pair of heels that went with the dress. She was fastening a diamond tennis bracelet onto her left wrist.

I stepped up close to her and took the ends of the bracelet in my fingers. "You should hear my terms, too," I said, and as I did, I could hear the Winter in my voice, making it quiet and cold and hard. "This town is my home. You hurt any mortals in my town, I take you out with the rest of the trash. And you should remember the state of my back, if you start thinking about putting a knife in it. Try it, and I'll bury you." The clasp closed, and I looked up to see her keeping a straight face—but I could see considerable uncertainty behind it. She drew her arm back from me a shade too quickly, and kept her eyes on my center of balance, as if she was expecting me to take a swing at her.

I'd had to talk tough to monsters and dangerous people before. I just couldn't remember doing it while sharing a somewhat intimate domestic moment, like getting dressed together, or while helping them put on jewelry. There was something in that gesture that made Hannah Ascher a person first, a woman, and a dangerous warlock second. And I had effectively threatened her during that moment—which had probably just made me, to her, a dangerous Warden of the White Council slash paranormal criminal thug first, and a human being second.

Super. Harry Dresden, intimidator of women. Probably not the best foot to get off on with someone with whom I was about to face considerable intrigue and danger.

Maybe next time, I'd just stick a gun in her face.

"You look great," I said in a voice that sounded a lot gentler than it had a few seconds before. "Let's get to work."

Chapter Nine

The Peninsula is one of the ritzier of the ritzy hotels in Chicago, and it has a grand ballroom measurable in hectares. The serious events of Chicago's nightlife rarely start before eight—you need time for people to get home from work and get all pretty before they show up looking fabulous—so when we arrived around seven thirty, Ascher and I were unfashionably early.

"I'm going to be right down here on the street," Karrin said from the front seat of the black town car Nicodemus had provided. She had checked it for explosives. I'd gone over it for less physical dangers.

"Not sure how long it will take," I said. "Cops going to let you loiter?"

"I still know a few guys on the force," she said. "But I'll circle the block if I have to. If you get in trouble, send up a flare." She offered me a plastic box with a boutonniere made from a sunset-colored rose in it. "Don't forget your advertising."

"Not like I need it," I said. "I'll recognize her."

"And she'll recognize you," Karrin said. "If she doesn't know she's supposed to talk to you, she might avoid you. It's not exactly hard to see you coming."

"Fine." I took it, opened the box, and managed to stab myself in the finger with the pin while trying to put the damned thing on my lapel.

"Here," Ascher said. She took the flower, wiped the pin off on a tissue, and passed it to Karrin, along with whatever tiny bit of my blood had been on it. Then she fixed the flower neatly to the tux. She wasn't making any particular effort to vamp, but her dress was cut low, giving me several eyefuls during the process. I tried not to notice and was partially successful.

"Here we go," Karrin said, and got out of the car. She came around and opened the door for me. I got out, and helped Ascher out, and she flashed enough shapely leg to keep anyone on the hotel staff out front from noticing me except in passing. Karrin got back in the car and vanished with quiet efficiency, and I gave Ascher my arm and escorted her inside.

"Try not to look like that," Ascher said under her breath, after we were in the elevator.

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like you're expecting ninjas to leap out of the trash cans. This is a party."

"Everyone knows there's no such things as ninjas," I scoffed. "But it will be something. Count on it."

"Not if we do it smooth," Ascher said.

"You're going to have to trust me on this one," I replied. "There's always something. It doesn't matter how smooth you are, or how smart the plan is, or how plain the mission—something goes wrong. Nothing's ever simple. That's how it works."

Ascher eyed me. "You have a very negative attitude. Just relax and we'll get this done. Try not to look around so much. And for God's sake, smile."

I smiled.

"Maybe without clenching your jaw."

The doors opened and we walked down a hallway to the grand ballroom. There were a couple of security guys outside the door dressed in the hotel's colors, trying to look friendly and helpful. I breezed up and presented them with our engraved invitation and fake IDs. I'd say this for Nicodemus—he didn't do things halfway, and his production values were outrageous. The fake driver's license (in the name of Howard Delroy Oberheit, cute) looked more real than my actual Illinois driver's license ever had. They eyed me, and then my license, closely, but they couldn't spot it as a fake. Ascher (née Harmony Armitage) gave the guards a big smile and some friendly chatter, and they didn't look twice at her ID.

I couldn't really blame them. Ascher looked like exactly the kind of woman who would be showing up to a blue-chip evening event. In me, the hotel's thugs recognized another of their kind—and one who was taller and had better scars than they did. But with Hannah on my arm, they let me pass.

The interior of the ballroom had been decorated in a kind of Chinese motif. Lots of red fabric draped in swaths from the ceiling to create semi-curtained partitions, paper lanterns glowing cheerfully, stands of bamboo, a Zen garden with its sand groomed in impeccable curves. The hotel staff was mostly women in red silk tunics with mandarin collars. Caterers in white coats and black ties were just getting a buffet fully assembled. When we came in, I couldn't see them, but I could hear a live band running through a number—seven pieces of brass, drums, and a piano, playing a classic ballroom piece.

I scanned the room slowly as we entered, but I didn't see Anna Valmont standing around anywhere.

"So this thief we're meeting," Ascher asked. "What's her story?"

"She used to belong to a gang called the Churchmice," I said. "Specialized in robbing churches in Europe. Nicodemus hired them to swipe the Shroud of Turin for him a few years back."

Ascher tilted her head. "What happened?"

"The three of them got it," I said. "I suspect they tried to raise their price. Nicodemus and Deirdre killed two of them, and he would have killed Anna if I hadn't intervened."

Her eyes widened slightly. "And now Nicodemus wants her to help him?"

I snorted softly through my nose. "Yeah."

Ascher studied me for a moment with her eyes narrowed. "Oh."

"What?" I asked her.

"Just . . . admiring the manipulation," she said. "I mean, I don't like it, but it's good."

"How so?" I asked.

"Don't you see?"

"I try not to think like that," I said. The caterers uncovered the silver trays holding the meat, and a moment later the smell of roasted chicken and beef wafted up to my nose. My stomach made an audible sound. I'd been cooking for myself over a fireplace for a long, long while. It had been sustenance, but given my culinary skills, it hadn't really been food, per se. The buffet smelled so good that for a minute I half expected to hear the pitter-patter of drool sliding out of my mouth.

"If you don't, someone else will," Ascher said. "If nothing else, you've got to defend yourself . . . Hey, are you as hungry as I am?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "And we've apparently got some time to kill."

"So it wouldn't be unprofessional to raid the buffet?"

"Even Pitt and Clooney had to eat," I said. "Come on."

We raided the buffet. I piled my little plate with what I hoped would be a restrained amount of food. Ascher didn't bother. She took a bit of almost everything, stacking food up hungrily. We made our way to one of many tables set up around the outskirts of the ballroom while the band went through another number. I picked one that gave us a view of the door, and watched for Anna Valmont to arrive.

She didn't appear over the next few moments, though a few of Chicago's luminaries did, and the numbers in the room began to slowly grow. The hotel staff began taking coats and drifting through the room with trays of food and drink, while the caterers began to briskly move back and forth through the service entrances, like a small army of worker ants, repairing the damage to the buffet almost the moment it was done. It seemed to mean so much to them that I was considering doing a little more damage myself, purely to give them a chance to repair it, you understand. I try to be nice to people.

I was just gathering my empty plate to show my compassionate, humanitarian side when one of the hotel staff touched my arm and said, "Pardon me, Mr. Oberheit? You have a telephone call, sir."

There's a courtesy phone right over here."

I looked up at the woman, wiped my mouth with a napkin, and said, "All right. Show me." I nodded to Ascher. "Be right back."

I got up and followed the staffer over to a curtained alcove by one wall, where there was a phone. We were more or less out of the way of everyone else in the room there.

"Miss Valmont," I said to the staffer, once we were there. "Nice to see you again."

Anna Valmont turned to face me with a small and not terribly pleasant smile. The last time I'd seen her, she'd been a peroxide blonde. Now her hair was black, cut in a neat pageboy. She was leaner than I remembered, almost too much so, like a young, feral cat. She was still pretty, though her features had lost that sense of youthful exuberance, and her eyes were harder, warier.

"Dresden," she said. "'Mr. Oberheit,' seriously?"

"Did you hear me criticizing your alias?" I asked.

That got a flash of a smile. "Who's the stripper?"

"No one you know, and no one to mess with," I said. "And there's nothing wrong with strippers. How've you been?"

She reached into her tunic and carefully produced a thickly packed business envelope. "Do you have my money or not?"

I arched an eyebrow at that. "Money?"

That got me another smile, though there was something serrated about it. "We have history, Dresden, but I don't do freebies and I'm not hanging around for chitchat. The people I had to cross for this aren't the forgiving type and have been on my heels all week. This envelope is made of flash paper. Cough up the dough or the data and I turn to smoke."

My mind was racing. Nicodemus had set up a job for Anna Valmont—it was the only way he could know that she would be here, and that she would be meeting the guy with the sunset-colored rose. So it stood to reason that whatever information he'd had her take, it might be valuable, too.

I checked around me quickly. I couldn't see the table from where I stood, but Ascher wasn't in sight. "Do it," I said, turning back to Valmont. "Destroy it, now, quick."

"You think I won't?" she asked. Then she paused, frowning. "Wait a minute . . . What's the con here?"

"No con," I said low. "Look, Anna, there's a lot going on and there's no time to explain it all. Blow the data and vanish. We'll both be better off."

She tilted her head, her expression suddenly skeptical, and she drew the envelope up close against her in an unconscious protective gesture. "You give me a hundred grand up front for this with another hundred on delivery, and then tell me to wreck the data? It's not like this is the only copy."

"I wasn't the one who hired you," I said intently. "Hell's bells, you stole my car once. You think I've got that kind of cash? I'm just the pickup guy, and you don't want to be involved with this crew. Get out while you can."

"I did the job, I get my money," she said. "You want to trash the data, fine. You pay for it. One hundred thousand."

"How about two million?" Ascher said. She eased into the alcove, holding a champagne flute with no lipstick marks on the rim.

Anna looked at her sharply. "What?"

"Two million guaranteed," Ascher said. "As much as twenty if we pull off the job."

I ground my teeth.

Valmont looked back and forth between us for a second, her expression closed. "This job was an audition."

"Bingo," Ascher said. "You've got the skills and the guts. This is a big job. Dresden here is doing what he always does, trying to protect you from the big bad world. But this is a chance at a score that will let you retire to your own island."

"A job?" Anna said. "For who?"

"Nicodemus Archleone," I said.

Anna Valmont's eyes went flat, hard. "You're working with him?"

"Long story," I said. "And not by choice." But I realized what Ascher had been talking about before. Nicodemus had picked Anna Valmont and sent me to get her because he'd been calculating her motivations. Anna owed me something, and she owed Nicodemus something more. Even if she didn't pitch in to help me, she might do it for revenge, for the chance to pull the rug out from under Nicodemus's feet at the worst possible moment. He'd given her double the reasons to get involved. The money was just the icing on the cake.

Valmont wasn't exactly a slow thinker herself. "Twenty million," she said.

"Best-case scenario," Ascher said. "Two guaranteed."

"Nicodemus Archleone," I said. "You remember what happened the last time you did a contract with him?"

"We tried to screw him and he screwed us back harder," Anna said. She eyed Ascher, as a couple more hotel staff flitted by the alcove. "What happens if I say no?"

"You miss the score of a lifetime," Ascher said. "Nicodemus has to abandon the job." She looked at me. "And Dresden is screwed."

Which was true, now that Ascher was here and had seen me trying to derail the job. Unless I killed her to shut her up, something I wasn't ready to do, she'd tell Nicodemus and he'd put the word out that Mab's word was no good anymore. Mab would crucify me for that, no metaphor involved. Worse, I was pretty sure that such a thing would be a severe blow to Mab's power in more than a political sense—and Mab had an important job to do.

All of which, I was certain, Nicodemus knew.

Jerk.

"Is that true?" Valmont asked.

I ground my teeth and didn't answer. A crew of four caterers carrying a large tray went by.

"It's true," Valmont said. "The job. Is it real?"

"It's dangerous as hell," I said.

"Binder is in," Ascher said. "Do you know who that is?"

"Mercenary," Valmont said, nodding. "Reputation for being a survivor."

"Damn skippy," Ascher replied. "He's my partner. I'm along to keep Dresden here from getting all noble on you."

"That true?" Valmont asked me.

"Son of a bitch," I said.

Valmont nodded several times. Then she said, to Ascher, "Excuse us for a moment, would you?"

Ascher smiled and nodded her head. She lifted her glass to me in a little toast, sipped, and drifted back out of the alcove.

Valmont leaned a little closer to me, lowering her voice. "You don't care about money, Dresden. And you aren't working for him by choice. You want to burn him."

"Yeah," I said.

Something hot flared in Valmont's eyes. "Can you?"

"The job is too big for him to do alone," I said.

"A lot of things could happen," she said.

"Or you walk," I said, "and it doesn't happen at all. He's out millions of bucks he's already paid, and there's no job."

"And he just crawls back into the woodwork," Valmont said. "And maybe he doesn't come out for another fifty years and I never have another chance to pay him back."

"Or maybe you get yourself killed trying," I said. "Revenge isn't smart, Anna."

"It is if you make a profit doing it," she said. She clacked her teeth together a couple of times, a nervous gesture. "How bad is it for you if I walk?"

“Pretty bad,” I said, as a second crew of caterers went by with another huge tray. “But I think you should walk.”

A hint of disgust entered her voice. “You *would*. Christ.” She shook her head. “I’m not some little girl you need to protect, Dresden.”

“You’re not in the same weight class as these people either, Anna,” I said. “That’s not an insult. It’s just true. Hell, I don’t want to be there.”

“It isn’t about how big you are, Dresden,” she said. “It’s about how smart you are.” She shook her head. “Maybe you need my help more than you know.”

I wanted to tear out my hair. “Don’t you get it?” I asked. “That’s exactly what he *wants* you to think. He’s a player who’s been operating since before your family tree got started, and he’s setting you up.”

Naked hatred filled her voice. “He killed my *friends*.”

“Dammit,” I said. “You try to screw him over, he’ll kill you just as fast.”

“And yet you’re doing it.” She put the envelope carefully away in her tunic. “Last time around, I thought I had it all together. I didn’t think I needed your help. But I did. This time, it’s your turn. Get the stripper and tell her we’d better get moving.”

“Why?”

She touched the envelope through the tunic. “Like I said. The former owners have been kind of persistent since I took this from their files.”

“Who?”

“The Fomor.”

“Balls—those guys?” I sighed, just as the horns blared and the band revved up into a swing number. “Okay, let’s g—”

The caterers came by again, all eight of them this time, in their identical uniforms, moving industriously. They were carrying two big trays, and abruptly dumped them onto their sides. The shiny metal covers clanged and clattered onto the floor, the sound lost in the rumble of drums, and from beneath them came two squirming, slithering *things*.

For a second, I wasn’t sure what I was looking at. It was just two mounds of writhing purple-grey flesh mottled with blotches of other colors. And then they just sort of *unspooled* into writhing, grasping appendages and a weird bulbous body, and suddenly two creatures that looked like the torso of a hairless, gorilla-like humanoid grafted to the limbs of an enormous octopus came scuttle-humping over the floor toward us, preceded by a wave of reeking, rotten-fish stench and followed by twin trails of yellowish mucus.

“Hell’s bells,” I swore. “I *told* her so. Nothing’s ever simple.”

Chapter Ten

So, what do you call abominations like that? I wondered in an oddly calm corner of my brain as adrenaline kicked it into high gear. Octogorillataurs? Gorilloctopi? How are you going to whale properly on a thing if you don't even have a name for it?

More to the point, nameless hideous monsters are freaking terrifying. You always fear what you don't know, what you don't understand, and the first step to having understanding of something is to know what to call it. It's a habit of mine to give names to anything I wind up interacting with if it doesn't have one readily available. Names have power—magically, sure, but far more important, they have psychological power. Something horrible with a name holds less power over you, less terror, than something horrible without one.

"Octokongs," I pronounced grimly. "Why did it have to be octokongs?"

"Are you *kidding* me?" breathed Anna Valmont. Her body tensed like a quivering power line, but she didn't panic. "Dresden?"

At the other end of the hall, the band hit the first chorus of the swing number, drums rumbling. The octokongs came a-glumping toward us, ten limbs threshing, octopus and gorilla both, nearly human eyes burning with furious hate, but they weren't what had me the most worried. The Fomor were a melting pot of a supernatural nation, the survivors of a dozen dark mythologies and pantheons that had apparently been biding their time for the past couple of thousand years, emerging from beneath the world's oceans in the wake of the destruction of the Red Court of Vampires. They'd spent the last couple of years giving everyone a hard time and making thousands of people vanish. Nobody knew why, yet, but the Fomor's covert servitors on land looked human, had gills, and acted like exemplary monsters—and they were what I was more worried about.

Behind the octokongs, the servitors in the caterer uniforms crouched down into ready positions, drawing out what looked chillingly like weighted saps, and every one of them was focused on Valmont. The beasties were just the attack dogs. The servitors were here to make Anna Valmont vanish—alive. One could only have nightmares about what people who get their kicks stitching gorillas to octopi might do to a captive thief.

I didn't have any of my magical gear on me. That limited my options in the increasingly crowded public venue. Worse, they'd gotten close to us before coming at us. There was nowhere to run and no time for anything subtle.

Lucky for me.

I'm not really a subtle guy.

I summoned forth my will, gathering it into a coherent mass, and crouched, reaching down and across my body with my right hand. Then I shouted, "*Forzare!*" as I rose, sweeping my arm out in a wide arc and unleashing a slew of invisible force as I did.

A wave of raw kinetic force lashed out from me in a crescent-shaped arc, catching both octokongs and all eight of the servitors, sending them tumbling backward.

The sudden, widely spread burst of magic also sent the heavy covered platters flying, and one of them hit edge-on and slashed right through one of the floor-to-ceiling windows of the ballroom. A genuine hotel staffer caught the edge of the spell and went sprawling as though clipped by an NFL linebacker. Hanging sheets of red fabric blew in a miniature hurricane, some of them tearing free of their fastenings and flying through the room. A couple of small tables and their chairs went spinning away—and almost every lightbulb in the place abruptly shattered in a shower of sparks.

People started screaming as flickering gloom descended, though as luck would have it, the band still had light enough to play by and, after a stutter, kept going. The octokongs, knocked

back several yards before they could spread out their tentacles and grab onto the floor, let out enormous, feral roars of defiance, and at that terrifying sound, genuine panic began to spread through the ballroom. A few seconds later, someone must have pulled a fire alarm, because an ear-piercing mechanical whoop began to cycle through the air.

So, basically: Harry Dresden, one; peaceful gathering, zero.

I grabbed Valmont by the hand and darted to one side, shoving scarlet cloth aside with my other hand and running blindly forward through it. The Fomor would be on our heels any second. Anything I could have unleashed that would have killed or disabled the Fomor crew would have caused even more collateral damage and might have gotten someone killed in the relatively limited confines of the ballroom. All I'd done was knock them back on their heels—but I wasn't trying to win a fight. I just wanted to get us out in one piece.

I didn't know where Ascher had gotten off to, but the Fomor were after Valmont. Ascher had survived being hunted by the White Council for years. I imagined she could get herself out of a hotel without my help.

"What are we doing?" Anna shouted.

"Leaving!"

"Obviously. Where?"

"Fire stairs!" I called back. "I'm not getting stuck in an elevator with one of those things!"

We plunged out of the obscuring curtains, and I tripped on a chair, stumbled, and banged my hip hard into the buffet table. I might have fallen if Valmont hadn't hauled on my arm.

I pointed toward the door the caterers had been using and got my feet moving again. "There! Fire stairs down the hall, to the right."

"I saw the signs too," she snapped.

We rushed through the doors, rounded the corner, and I found myself facing two more of the flat-eyed Fomor servitors, both of them bigger and heavier than average and wearing their more common uniform—black slacks with a tight black turtleneck.

And machine guns.

I don't mean assault rifles. I mean full-on automatic weapons, the kind that come with their ammunition in a freaking box. The two turtlenecks had obviously been placed to cover the stairs, and they weren't standing around being stupid. The second I came around the corner, one of them lifted his weapon and began letting loose chattering three- and four-round bursts of fire.

In movies, when someone shoots at the hero with a machine gun, they hit everything around him but they don't actually hit *him*. The thing is, actual machine guns don't really work like that. A skilled handler can fire them very accurately, and can lay down so many rounds that whatever he's shooting at gets hit. A lot. That's why they *make* machine guns in the first place. Someone opens up on you with one of those, and you have two choices—get to cover or get shot multiple times. I was less than fifty feet away, down a straight, empty hallway. He could barely have missed me if he'd been *trying*.

I threw back my right arm, hauling Anna Valmont behind me, and lifted my left arm, along with my will, snapping out, "*Defendarius!*"

Something tugged hard at my lower leg, and then my will congealed into a barrier of solid force between us and the shooter. Bullets struck it, sending up flashes of light as they did, revealing it as a half-dome shape with very ragged edges. The impact of each hit was visceral, felt all the way through my body, like the beat of a big drum in a too-loud nightclub. Heavy rounds like that were specifically designed to hit hard and penetrate cover. They could kill a soldier on the other side of a thick tree, chew apart a man in body armor, and reduce concrete walls to powder and rubble.

Without a magical focus to help concentrate my shield's energy, it took an enormous amount of juice to keep it dense enough to actually stop the rounds, while slowing them down enough to keep them from simply ricocheting everywhere. Rounds like that would penetrate the walls and ceiling of the Peninsula as if going through soft cheese. Innocent people five floors away could be

killed if I didn't slow the bullets as they rebounded, and the metal-clad slugs bounced and clattered to the floor around me.

That didn't deter the turtleneck. He started walking slowly forward in the goofy-looking, rolling, heel-to-toe gait of a trained close-quarters gunman, the kind of step that kept his eyes and head and shoulders level the whole time he was moving. He kept firing steady, controlled bursts as he approached, filling the hallway with light and deafening thunder, and it was everything I could do just to keep the bullets off of us.

Holding the shield in place was a job of work, and within seconds I had to drop to one knee, reducing the size of the shield needed as I did. I had to hold on for a little longer. Once the turtleneck ran dry, he'd have to change weapons or reload his magazine, and then I'd have a chance to hit back.

Except that his buddy was advancing right next to him, *not* firing. Ready to take over the second the first turtleneck's weapon ran out. Gulp. I wasn't sure I had the juice to hang on *that* long.

I was missing my shield bracelet pretty hard at that point—but it hadn't been with me when I woke up under the island of Demonreach, and I hadn't had the time or the resources to make another one since. My new staff would have done just fine, but it was just a little bit harder to sneak that thing into a formal gathering.

I needed a new plan.

Valmont shouted something at me. I was concentrating so hard, I barely heard her the first time. "Close your eyes!" she screamed. Then she tensed and moved and something flew over the faintly glowing top edge of my shield and clattered to the ground at the turtle-necks' feet.

The two shooters reacted instantly, diving away, and a second later there was a flash of utterly blinding white light and something slapped the air of the hallway like a giant's palm.

I hadn't gotten my eyes closed in time, and my vision was covered in red and purple spots, my ears ringing in a steady, high-pitched tone, but the shield had protected me from the force of the small explosion, and my head was clear enough that I could stagger to my feet and get out of the deadly hallway, Valmont pulling me along in her wake.

"Jesus Christ," she swore in a vicious tone as we ran. "It was just some goddamned *files*. Other stairway!"

Going back into the darkened ballroom after the stroboscopic hallway had left my eyes helplessly trying to adjust. "I can't see yet," I said, and felt her take my hand. "Okay, go!"

Valmont started running, and I lurched blindly along with her, holding her hand like an NBA-sized toddler and trying not to fall down. We crossed what had to have been most of the ballroom before Valmont suddenly stopped. My rented shoes were not exactly hell on wheels for traction, and I all but fell over her before I could stop, too.

"What?" I asked.

"Quiet," she hissed. "One of those things at the door."

"You have any more flash-bangs?" I said, lower.

"Most girls don't even carry the one, you know," she said rather primly. "I can't tell you how many jobs I've done without a hitch since the last time I saw you, Dresden. You walk through the door and everything goes to hell."

"That's embroidered on my towels, actually," I said. I blinked my eyes hard, several times, and could barely make out the shape of one of the octokongs waiting at the door. Well, technically, it was waiting *over* the door, its tentacles spread out along the ceiling, sticking to it like some enormous spider, apelike arms hanging down. Valmont had stopped us behind a column, deep in the shadows created by the emergency lights in the hallway beyond the octokong. "Wow, those things are ugly." I blinked some more. "Okay, stay close."

"Can you see?"

"Yeah, almost. We'll make a run for it. If it comes at us, I'll knock it away and we meep-meep right the hell out of here."

“Meep-meep.” Valmont’s voice was dry. “It’s so nice to work with a mature professional.”

“Fine. We extract, exfiltrate, whatever,” I said. I changed hands, shifting hers to my left, making sure my right was free. “Here we go.”

And we ran for the door.

The octokong started slorping down the wall, all tentacles and slime and harsh, ugly grunting sounds, but it didn’t just drop, and though I was ready to unleash another blast of force at it, we scooted by a couple of inches ahead of the nearest tentacle tip, and into the hallway, free and clear, even more easily than I’d planned.

So naturally, alarm bells started going off in my head.

There was a doorway across the hall, and I didn’t slow down. I lowered my shoulder and hit it with the weight of my entire body, and with the full power of the Winter Knight.

I don’t wanna say I’m strong when I’ve got my Winter Knight on—but I’ve lifted cars. Maybe it isn’t really comic-book-style superstrength, but I’m a big guy, I’m no lightweight, and that door splintered, its lock tearing free of its wooden frame as if it had already half rotted out. I went through it, my shoulder sending up a hot pulse of discomfort, dragging Valmont with me.

The *second* octokong had been waiting on the inside of the hallway, already plunging down at us, and if we’d paused for even a fraction of a second, it would have nabbed us both. Instead, I crashed into a rack of brooms and mops at the back of a large cleaning closet, snapping several handles and putting a huge dent in the drywall. I sort of bounced off of it, my eyes still blurry with spots, stunned.

“Dresden!” Valmont cried.

I spun to see her lurch and grab onto a heavy metal shelf of cleaning products. I’d lost hold of her at some point. No sooner had she grabbed on than one of her legs was jerked out from beneath her, and her hands were wrenched free of the shelf.

I snapped my arms out and caught her before she could be hauled out of the closet, becoming cognizant of a purple-grey tentacle wrapped around her ankle as I did. I went to the floor, lashing out with all the power of my legs, and sent the door swinging closed with vicious force, neatly severing the tip of the octokong’s tentacle.

There was a furious bellow from outside the door.

“Get behind me, get behind me!” I shouted at Valmont, keeping the door pressed shut with my legs. She scrambled over me in the darkness inside the closet, her limbs lean and solid beneath her disguise. A second later, there was a click, and light from a tiny flashlight flooded the room as she used it to start scanning the shelves.

I expected the octokong to come shoving against the door, but instead there were several smaller impacts, and then suddenly the door let out a shriek as it was simply torn into pieces and ripped away from me. I caught a flash of multiple tentacles holding various shattered pieces of the door, and then the octokong was coming through the doorway, low, propelled by still more tentacles and its apelike arms.

I let out a scream and kicked it in the chest with both feet, tagging it hard enough to draw a coughing roar of surprise from it and send its heavy torso tumbling back into the hallway—but its tentacles caught the doorframe with clearly supernatural power, arresting its momentum and beginning to send it hurtling back into me.

I lifted my hand and screamed, “*Forzare!*” A second wave of kinetic energy lashed through the air and caught the octokong, pressing outward, and for half a dozen seconds the strength of my will contended with all of those tentacles and arms.

The shield in the hallway had taken too much out of me. I could feel my will beginning to buckle, the spell begin to falter. The octokong pressed closer and closer to where I lay prostrate, my arm extended. Little stars gathered at the edges of my vision.

And then there was a shriek, a high-pitched howling sound that was absolutely industrial in its tone and intensity. There was a flash of light, blue-white and so bright that it made Valmont’s stun grenade look like a camera’s flashbulb by comparison, and the air itself was rent with a miniature

thunderclap as a sphere of fire the size of my two fists appeared in the same space as the octokong's skull.

It was there for a fraction of a second, pop, like a short-lived soap bubble.

And when it was gone . . . all that was left was blackened bone and a cloud of fine, fine black powder.

The octokong convulsed, all ten limbs writhing, but it didn't last long. The headless corpse thrashed around for a moment, and the blackened remnants of the skull went rolling off of it, cracking and crumbling as it did.

Hannah Ascher appeared over the body, her party shoes held in one hand, her dark eyes blazing. "Dresden? You okay?"

I just stared at her for a second.

Hell's bells.

I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm a Wizard of the White Council. But what I'd just witnessed was a display of precision and power so awesome that I would barely have believed it from a senior Council member, much less a freaking warlock younger than me. Fire's a tricky, tricky magic to use. Call up enough power to do damage, and you have to fight to control it. The hotter you make it, the more it spreads out, consumes, destroys. This fire spell had been positively surgical.

I mean, I'm good with fire.

But Hannah Ascher was *good* with *fire*.

Ye gods, no wonder the Wardens hadn't brought her in yet.

"Thanks," I said, climbing to my feet. And then I reached out and shoved her away as the *first* octokong came swarming through the doorway behind her and pounced, tentacles flailing.

I had time to get my arms up and then the weight of the thing drove me flat to the floor. I tried to fight it, but there was nothing to fight—I was pinned beneath a fleshy web of tentacles that ripped and tore and bit at me through my clothes. I barely managed to wrench my head free of the slimy, stinking thing and get a breath, and because I did I was in time to see Anna Valmont step out of the cleaning closet and hurl a cup of some kind of powdered concentrate into the octokong's eyes.

The thing shrieked in agony, pure agony, and half of its tentacles lifted off of me instantly in a vain attempt to protect its face and head. The beast writhed in torment, and I managed to get a leg into place to shove it off me. I pushed myself to my feet.

"Go!" I shouted at Ascher and Valmont. "Go, go, go!"

They didn't need any more encouragement. We fled down the hallway, leaving the screaming octokong behind us, and all but flew down the stairs.

"There," I snapped at Ascher on the way down. "We got her out and she's helping. You happy?"

"Yeah, Dresden," she said, her tone cross. "I'm happy. I'm thrilled. I'm freaking joyous. Now shut up and run."

And I fled the hotel, blood oozing out to stain my shredded tux.

I didn't mind so much.

I'd like to see Nicodemus try to get his deposit back on that.

Chapter Eleven

On the way down the stairs, Anna Valmont ditched her tunic and pants, and proved to be wearing a little party dress beneath. Once she'd kicked off her shoes and socks, she blended in with every other society girl fleeing the building. A small bag belted around her waist and concealed beneath the tunic became a clutch. She pulled her hair off, ditched the wig, and shook out shoulder-length dark blond hair from beneath it, fashionably tousled. She put on sunglasses, and appropriated Hannah Ascher's heels. She hurried a little, caught up to the last group to head out in front of us, and blended in with them seamlessly. By the time we'd reached the ground floor, the shapeless, shorter, brunette hotel staffer had vanished, and a tall and lean blond woman in a black dress was tottering out of the building along with all the rest of them.

Valmont was no dummy. The Fomor servitors were waiting outside, in their caterer uniforms, scanning everyone leaving the building with their flat, somehow amphibian gazes.

"I'll run interference. You get her to the car," I muttered to Ascher as we exited the building.

Then I pointed a finger at the nearest servitor and thundered, "You!"

The man turned his eyes to me. I felt the rest of them do the same. Good. The more of them that were looking at me, the fewer eyes there were to notice Valmont making good her escape. I stalked over to the servitor like a man spoiling for a fight. "What do you people think you're doing? I mean, I've heard of getting your sushi fresh, but that's just plain ridiculous."

Fomor servitors were not known for their bantering skills. The man just stared at me and took an uneasy half step back.

"I've got half a mind to sue!" I shouted, waving an arm in a broad, drunken gesture. "Do you *see* the state of my tux? You've taken something from me tonight. My wardrobe's peace of mind!"

By now, I was getting the attention of all kinds of people—evacuated guests, hotel staff, passersby on the sidewalk. There are a limited number of blood-covered economy-sized males ranting at the top of their lungs in a shredded tuxedo, even in Chicago. Sirens were wailing too, coming closer. Emergency services were en route. Motorcycle cops and prowler cars were already beginning to arrive, lickety-split here in the heart of the city.

I saw the servitor take note of the same thing. His weight shifted uneasily from foot to foot.

"Yeah," I said in a lower, quieter voice. "I don't know which of the Fomor you serve. But tell your boss that Harry Dresden is back, and he says to stay the hell out of Chicago. Otherwise, I'm going to knock his teeth out." I paused. "Assuming, uh, he has teeth, I mean. But I'll knock something out. Definitely. You tell him that."

"You dare to threaten him?" the servitor whispered.

"Just stating facts," I said. "You and your crew better go. Before I start ripping off your collars and asking the police and reporters what's wrong with your necks."

The servitor stared at me with empty eyes for a long moment. Then he turned abruptly and started walking. The other guys in caterer uniforms went with him.

"Subtle," came Karrin's voice.

I turned to find her standing maybe ten feet behind me, her arms crossed, where her hand would be close to her gun. Had the servitor or his buddies drawn a weapon, she'd have been in a good position to draw and start evening the odds.

"Murph," I said. "Did they get out?"

"They're waiting." Her eyes flickered with distress as they swept over me. "Jesus, Harry. Are you all right?"

"Aches a bit. Stings a bit. 'm fine."

"You're bleeding," she said, hurrying closer. "Your leg. Hold still." She knelt down and I suddenly realized that she was right—my leg was bleeding, the leg of my pants soaked, blood dripping from the hem of my pants leg and onto my rented shoes. She rolled the bloodied cloth up briskly.

"You've been shot," she said.

I blinked. "Uh, what? I don't feel shot. Are you sure?"

"There's a hole right through the outside of your calf," she said. "Little on both sides. Christ, they must have been close."

"M240," I said. "From maybe thirty feet."

"You got lucky—it missed the bone and didn't tumble." She pulled a handkerchief from her jacket pocket and said, "This is what Butters warned you about. Not being able to sense your own injuries. I've got to tie this off until we can get it taken care of. Brace."

Her shoulders twisted as she knotted the cloth around my calf and jerked it tight. That tingled and stung a little, but it didn't hurt any more than that. I suddenly realized that Winter was sighing through me like an icy wind, dulling the pain.

I also suddenly realized that Karrin was kneeling at my feet. The Winter in me thought that was all *kinds* of interesting. Something very like panic fluttered through my chest, something far more energetic and destabilizing than the fear I'd felt in the conflict a few minutes before.

"Uh, right," I said, forcing my eyes away. "What are we doing standing around here? Let's go."

Karrin rose and looked up at me, her expression torn between concern and something darker. Then she nodded and said, "Car's over here. Follow me."

* * *

Once in the car, I looked back over my shoulder at Ascher and Valmont while Karrin got us moving. We cruised out just as the majority of the emergency vehicles arrived. Valmont was staring out the window, her face unreadable behind her sunglasses. Ascher was looking over her shoulder, watching the scene behind.

When she finally turned around to see me looking at her, her face split into a wide smile, and her dark eyes glittered brightly. "Damn," she said, "that was intense."

"More for some than others," Karrin said. "Miss Ascher, I'm going to take you back to the slaughterhouse to meet up with your partner."

Ascher frowned. "What about you?"

"Dresden's shot."

Ascher blinked. "When?"

"Getting me out," Valmont said, still staring out the window. "He got shot pushing me behind him."

"I'm taking him to someone who can help," Karrin said. "Tell Nicodemus that Valmont is with us."

Ascher frowned at that, and eyed Valmont. "That what you want?"

"I'm not going to see that guy without Dresden around," Valmont said. "You were smart, you wouldn't, either."

"Let her be," I said quietly. "Ascher's a big girl. She can make her own choices."

"Sure," Valmont said.

Ascher frowned at me for a long minute before saying, "I hear a lot of stories about you."

"Yeah?" I asked.

"The warlock who became a Warden," she said. "And then refused to hunt warlocks for the Council."

I shrugged. "True."

"And they didn't kill you for it?" Ascher asked.

"Middle of a war," I said. "Needed every fighter."

"I hear other things. Wild things. That you help people. That you'll fight anyone."

I shrugged a shoulder. It hurt a little. "Sometimes."

"Is he always like this?" Ascher asked Karrin.

"Only when he's bleeding out," Karrin said. "Usually you can't get him to shut up."

"Hey," I said.

Karrin eyed me, a faint glimmer of humor somewhere in the look.

I shrugged a shoulder tiredly. "Yeah. Okay."

"So if you're such a tough guy," Ascher said, "how come I didn't see you kicking ass and taking names in there?"

I closed my eyes for a moment. I didn't feel like explaining to Ascher about how the Winter Knight was built to be a killing machine, one that moved and struck and never paused to think. I didn't feel like explaining what could have happened if I'd let that particular genie out of the bottle in the middle of one of Chicago's premier hotels. Karrin was right. I'd burned down buildings like they were going out of style in the past. A fire in the Peninsula could have killed hundreds. If I'd lost control of the instincts forced upon me by the Winter mantle, I might have killed even more.

What I did want to do, in the wake of the life-and-death struggle, was rip her party dress off and see what happened next. But that was the Winter in me talking. Mostly. And I wasn't going to let that out, either.

"We weren't there to kill Fomor," I said. "We went to get Valmont. We got her. That's all."

"If I hadn't been there," Ascher said, "that thing would have torn you apart."

"Good thing you were there then," I said. "You've got some game. I'll give you that. Fire magic is tricky to use that well. You've got a talent."

"Okay," Ascher said, seemingly mollified. "You've got no idea how many guys I've worked with that don't want to admit they got saved by a girl."

"Gosh," I said, glancing at Karrin. "It's such a new experience for me."

Karrin snorted, and pulled the car over. We'd made it back to the slaughterhouse.

"Tell Nicodemus we'll be back at sunrise," I said.

Valmont said nothing. But she took off the slightly too large shoes and passed them back to Ascher.

"Sure," Ascher said. "Don't bleed to death or anything. This is too interesting."

"Meh," I said.

She flashed me another smile, took her shoes, and slid out of the limo. Karrin didn't pause to watch her reenter the building, but pulled out again at once.

I looked back over my shoulder at Valmont. "You okay?"

She took off the sunglasses and gave me a very small smile. "Nicodemus. He's really back there?"

"Yeah," I said.

"And you're going to burn him?"

"If I can," I said.

"Then I'm good," she said. She turned her eyes back to the night outside. "I'm good."

Karrin stared at Valmont in the mirror for a moment, frowning. Then she set her jaw and turned her eyes back to the road.

"Where?" I asked her quietly.

"My place," she said. "I called Butters the minute the alarms started going off at the hotel. He'll be waiting for us."

"I don't want anyone else tangled up in this," I said.

"You want to take on the Knights of the Blackened Denarius," Karrin said. "Do you really think you can do it alone?"

I grunted, tiredly, and closed my eyes.

"That's what I thought," she said.

The limo's tires whispered on the city streets, and I stopped paying attention to anything else.

Chapter Twelve

Karrin's house is a modest place in Bucktown that looks like it should belong to a little old lady—mainly because it did, and Karrin never seemed to have the time or heart to change the exterior much from the way her grandmother had it painted, decorated, and landscaped. When we pulled up, there were already cars on the street outside. She slid the town car into the drive and around to the back of the house.

Before she had settled the car into park, I turned to Valmont and asked, "What's in the file?"

"A profile of a local businessman," Valmont replied at once.

"Anyone I know?"

She shrugged, reached into her purse, and passed me the file, which she had rolled up into a tube. I took it, unrolled it, and squinted at it until Karrin flicked on a reading light. It was on for about five seconds before it stuttered and went out.

"Nothing's ever easy around you, is it?" she said.

I stuck my tongue out at her, tugged my mother's silver pentacle amulet out of my shirt, and sent a gentle current of my will down into it. The silver began to glow with blue-white wizard light, enough to let me scan over the file.

"Harvey Morrison," I read aloud. "Fifty-seven, he's an investment banker, financial adviser, and economic securities consultant." I blinked at Karrin. "What's that?"

"He handles rich people's money," she said.

I grunted and went back to reading. "He goes sailing in the summer, golfing when the weather is nice, and takes a long weekend in Vegas twice a year. No wife, no kids." There was a picture. I held it up. "Good-looking guy. Sort of like Clooney, but with a receding hairline. Lists his favorite movies, books, music. Got a biography of him—grew up in the area, went to some nice schools, parents died when he was in college."

"Why him?" Karrin asked me.

I looked back at Valmont.

She shrugged her shoulders. "He looked pretty unremarkable to me. No obvious graft or embezzling, which is a given for someone operating at his level."

"Honest men?" I asked, with minimal cynicism.

"Smart crooks, when they steal," she said. "He's a trusted functionary like hundreds of others in this town."

"Gambling problem?"

She shrugged. "Not an obvious one, from his records. The Fomor don't rate him as a particularly vulnerable target for manipulation."

"They have files on money guys?" I asked.

"They've been buying information left and right for the past couple of years," Valmont said. "Throwing a lot of money around. It's been a real seller's market."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone's buying," Valmont said. "Fomor, White Court, Venatori, Svartalves, every paranormal crew who isn't trying to keep a low profile. That's why I ran this job—it's the third one this month. You want to make some fast money, Dresden, and know some juicy secrets, I can put you in touch with some serious buyers."

I blinked at that information. "Since when have you been all savvy on the supernatural scene?"

"Since monsters killed my two best friends." She shrugged a shoulder. "I made it my business to learn. I was sort of startled how easy it was. No one really seems to spend all that much effort truly hiding from humanity."

"There's no need to," I said. "Most people don't want to know, wouldn't believe it if you showed them."

"So I've realized," Valmont said.

"Why him?" Karrin asked. "What's Nicodemus's interest?"

I pursed my lips and sucked in my breath through my teeth thoughtfully. "Access," I said. "Gotta be."

"What do you mean?"

I held up Harvey's picture. "This guy can get us something that no one else can. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Whose money does he handle?" Karrin asked.

I scanned the file. "Um . . . there's a client list here. Individuals, businesses, estates, trusts. Most of it is just numbers, or has question marks. Several of them are listed as unknown."

"Pretty standard," Valmont said. "Guys like that operate at high levels of discretion. What has Nicodemus told you about this job?"

"The final objective, and you," I said. "None of the steps in between."

"Keeping you in the dark," she said. "Keeps the carrot in your mind, but makes it harder for you to betray him if you aren't sure what comes next."

"Jerk," I muttered. "So we don't know what Nicodemus has in mind yet, but I bet you anything that Harvey here is step two."

"Makes sense," Karrin said.

"All right," I said. "No details to any of the Chicago crew, okay? We're playing pretty serious hardball. If word of this leaks, it could reflect on Mab badly, and that could get a little crucifixiony for me."

Karrin grimaced. "So you also want to keep them in the dark and give them information on an as-needed, step-by-step basis?"

"Don't want to," I said. "Need to. The irony is not lost on me, but like I said, I'm playing this one kind of close to the chest."

I closed my eyes again and checked on my body. The same feelings of vague discomfort and weariness seemed to permeate my limbs, and a faint twinge of what might have been the beginnings of a muscle cramp tugged at my back. The silver stud in my ear continued to weigh a little too much, and to pulse with cold at the very edge of comfort.

A gut instinct told me that Mab's little painkiller wasn't actually helping me, *except* to hide the pain I would otherwise be feeling. I'd poured out a lot of energy into just a couple of spells back at the hotel, and doing it without my tools had been hard work. I'd been forced to draw upon the Winter mantle just to keep the pace I needed to stay alive. There wasn't any hard information on how the mantle would interact with my abilities, since to the best of my knowledge there had never been a Winter Knight with a wizard's skills before—but I was pretty sure that the more I leaned on that cold, dark power, the more comfortable I would get in doing so, and the more potential it would have to change who and what I was.

Whatever was in my head was close to killing me. I suddenly felt all but sure that Mab's gift had two edges. Yes, it made me feel well enough to run around getting in danger—but it also left me weak enough to need the Winter mantle now more than ever. It was probably her way of telling me I needed to employ it more.

But sooner or later, doing that would change me, the way it had changed everyone who had come before me.

If it hadn't changed me already.

I felt scared.

After a long moment of silence, Karrin said, "We'll do it your way for now. Let's go on in."

I forced myself to shake off the dark thoughts and the fear that went with them. "You got my stuff?" I asked.

"Trunk."

I got out and slogged over to the town car's trunk. I got my duffel bag and staff out of it, and slung the reassuring weight of my duster over my shoulder to don once I got patched up and into some comfortable clothing. Maybe I would sleep in it.

It had been that kind of day.

* * *

I stopped inside Karrin's kitchen, on the tile floor, so that I wouldn't get blood on the carpet, and found Waldo Butters waiting for me.

Butters was a scrawny little guy in his midforties, though from his build you could mistake him for someone a lot younger. He had a shock of black hair that never combed into anything like order, a slender beak of a nose, glasses, and long, elegant fingers.

"Harry," he said when I came in, offering me his hand. "We have got to stop meeting like this."

I traded grips with him and grinned tiredly. "Yeah, or I'll never be able to pay your bill."

He looked me up and down critically. "What the hell happened? You get in a fight with a street sweeper?"

"Octokongs," I said. "And a turtleneck with a machine gun."

"Right calf," Karrin said, bringing Valmont in out of the cold and locking the door behind her. "He's been shot."

"And you're letting him walk around on it?" Butters demanded.

Karrin gave him a look that would have curdled milk. "Next time I'll stick him in my purse."

He sighed and said, "Look, Harry, I know you don't feel the pain, but you are *not* invincible. Pain's there for a damned reason." He waved a hand at one of the kitchen chairs and said, "Sit, sit."

The kitchen was a tiny one. I sat. Butters was a medical doctor, though he spent most of his time cutting up corpses as an Illinois medical examiner, and since the hospitals tended to get a little twitchy when you walked in with gunshot wounds, he'd taken care of such injuries on the down low for me before.

Butters unwrapped my leg, muttered under his breath, and said, "Let's get him on the table. Help me extend it."

"Yeah," Karrin said.

They fussed about extending her kitchen table for a minute, and then she nudged me and said, "Come on, Harry, I'm not lifting you up there."

That said, she still got her shoulder beneath my arm and helped me up, and then helped me lift my legs onto the table. It seemed a lot harder than it should have been to get myself into place.

"Butters," I said, "you going to slash up my tux?"

"Just hold still," he said, picking up a pair of safety scissors out of his bag of medical tools.

"Awesome," I said, smiling. "I'm just going to close my eyes for a minute."

"Karrin, would you hang out with Andi, please. It's bad enough that I'm working on him like this. I don't need my elbows being crowded, too."

"Right," she said. "We'll be in the living room."

"Okay, Harry," Butters said. "Let me get to work."

"How you and Andi doing?" I asked him. "Still good?"

He didn't react to my mention of his girlfriend. "Try not to move."

I did that. The earring pulsed, waves of sleepy cold coming out a little faster than they had that morning. Butters prodded at the bullet wound with something, and I noted that it probably would have hurt like hell without the presence of Winter in my weary body. I opened my eyes long enough to see him swabbing out the injury with a plastic tool coated with what must have been some kind of antibiotic.

He was running it all the way through the hole in my leg.

I shuddered and closed my eyes again.

Day one of working with the Knights of the Blackened Denarius and I'd already been shot and ripped up by a pair of hideous abominations—and that had been doing something relatively simple and safe, by the standards of the rest of the operation.

I had this sinking feeling that day two was going to be worse.

Chapter Thirteen

O*pen your eyes, you fool. She's right in front of . . .*

I jerked my head up off the table, blinking. There had been a voice in my ear, as clear as day, speaking in a fearful, angry tone. "What?"

Time had gone by. Butters stood at the sink, cleaning his gear. He paused and looked over his shoulder at me, scowling, and said with perfect authority, "Lay. Down."

I did. The earring felt like a chip of ice, so cold that I was about to start shivering. "Did you say something?" I asked him.

"No," he said, frowning. "You were pretty out of it, man. I was letting you rest."

"Someone else in here?"

"No, Harry," he said.

"I could have sworn . . ."

He looked at me expectantly, raising one eyebrow. "Sworn what?"

I shook my head. "Beginning of a dream, maybe."

"Sure," Butters said.

"Am I going to make it, doc?"

He snorted. "Barring infection, you should be fine. No, wait  you *should* be in a hospital on an IV and then in a bed for a week. But knowing you, you're probably going to keep doing whatever stupidly dangerous thing you're doing. You probably won't bleed to death while you're doing it, now."

I lifted my head enough to examine myself. My clothes were gone, except for my pants, and they'd lost most of the right leg. Take that, Nicodemus's heist budget. I had several cuts bandaged. I had fresh stitches in two of the cuts, plus at both ends of the hole in my leg, maybe a dozen altogether, and . . .

"Is that *Super Glue* holding these cuts closed?"

"Super Glue and sutures, and if I could figure out a way to duct-tape them all shut, I'd do that, too."

"I'll take the roll with me, just in case," I said. "Can I get dressed, then?"

He sighed. "Try not to move too fast, okay? And be careful standing up. I don't think the blood loss was too serious, but you might be a little dizzy for a while."

I got up, slowly, and found my duffel bag. I pulled a set of fresh clothes out, ditched the rest of the tux, and tugged them on.

"So what *are* you doing?" Butters asked as I did. "Karrin's been more tight-lipped than usual."

"It's better if I don't say, for now," I said. "But before I do anything else, I need to pay off a debt."

He frowned at me. "What?"

I finished dressing, reached into the duffel bag, and withdrew a block of oak wood. It had taken me most of a month and several botched attempts to get the proportions correct, but in the end I had finally managed to carve a modestly accurate replica of a human skull. Once I'd gotten it carved, I'd boned it with tools I'd made from several curved and pointed sections of a deer's antler Alfred had found for me, and then I'd gone to work. Now, the wooden skull was covered in neat, if crowded, inscriptions of runes and sigils much like those on my staff.

"Four months it took me to make this," I said, and held it out to Butters. I didn't know exactly who else was in the house, or how much they might hear, so I didn't want to mention Bob the Skull out loud. The adviser-spirit was far too valuable and vulnerable a resource to advertise.

“Give this to our mutual friend and tell him we’re even. He’ll be able to tell you what to do with it.”

Butters blinked several times. “Is this . . . what I think it is?”

I stepped closer to him and lowered my voice to a near whisper. “A backup vessel for him,” I confirmed. “Not as nice as the one he has, but it should protect him from sunrise and daylight if he needs it. I made a deal with him. I’m paying up.”

“Harry,” Butters said. He shook his head slowly. “I’m sure he’ll be very pleased.”

“No, he won’t,” I snorted. “He’ll bitch and moan about how primitive it is. But he’ll *have* it, and that’s the important thing.”

“Thank you,” Butters said in a carefully polite tone, and slipped the wooden skull into his bag. “I’ll get it to him.”

I blinked a couple of times. “Uh, man? Are you okay?”

He looked at me for a moment before turning back to the sink and continuing to wash things. “It’s been a long year,” he said. “And I haven’t slept in a while. That’s all.”

That wasn’t all. I mean, I’m not exactly a social genius, but I could see that he was clearly anxious about something.

“Butters?” I asked.

He shook his head and his voice came out harder and cooler than I would have expected. “You should probably stop asking, Harry.”

“Yeah, I should probably eat more vegetables, too,” I said, “but let’s face it. That isn’t going to happen. So what’s up?”

He sighed. Then he said, “Harry . . . did you ever read *Pet Sematary*?”

I frowned. “Yeah, like, a long time ago . . .” My stomach twisted a little. “What are you saying exactly? You think I came back wrong?”

“You were *dead*, man,” Butters said. “People were . . . Look, when you were here, you were the sheriff in town, in a lot of ways. You died and *things* started moving on Chicago. Not just the Fomor. Ghouls have been lurking around. Stuff came out of Undertown. The vampires started putting people in their pockets. Even the straights started to notice. Molly did what she could, but the price she was obviously paying to do it . . .”

I watched his face as he spoke. His eyes were focused out at a thousand yards, his hands moving more and more slowly. “And your ghost showed up, and that was . . . you know. Weird. But we all figured that, hey, you hadn’t lived like the rest of us. It figured you wouldn’t die the same way, either.”

“Technically, it was more of a code-blue situation . . .,” I began.

“You didn’t say that at the time,” Butters said.

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. He was right. I hadn’t. I mean, I hadn’t known back then, but he’d had a considerable amount of time to get used to the idea of me being an ex-wizard.

“Then you show up again, when things are getting worse and worse,” he said, smiling faintly. “I mean, badass big brother Harry, back from the dead, man. I don’t think you can know what that was like for us. You’ve had the kind of power you have for so long, I think maybe you’ve got very little clue what it feels like to walk around without it. You don’t know what it was like to sit there helplessly as bad things happened to people while you couldn’t do more than fumble around and maybe help someone once in a blue moon.” He let out a bitter little laugh. “Oh, the skull could tell me all kinds of things. I’m not sure that made it any better, knowing all about what was happening, without having the strength to do anything but slink around and do little things when you could—just hardly ever when you wanted to.”

“Butters,” I said.

He didn’t hear me. “And then to suddenly see that protector back, when you thought he was gone for good, when things were getting even worse.” He shook his head, his eyes welling. “It was like an IV of pure hope, man. Superman had his cape again. The sheriff was back in town.”

I bowed my head. I was pretty sure I knew what was next, and I didn't like it at all.

"Except . . . you weren't back in town, were you," he said. "You stayed out on Creepy Island. You didn't do anything. And then Molly was gone, too, so we didn't even have *that* going for us. Will and Georgia both got put in the hospital last year, you know. For a while we weren't sure they were going to make it. They have a little girl now. She almost wound up an orphan. Everyone's lost someone over the past couple of years, or knows someone who has. And you stayed on Creepy Island."

"I had to," I said.

Butter's jawline hardened. "Try to see this from my perspective, Harry," he said. "Ever since Chichén Itzá, you haven't been you. Do you even get that?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You made a deal. With *Mab*," he said simply. "You apparently died. Your ghost showed up claiming you had died, and got us all to do things. Then you show up alive again, only you've got freaky Winter faerie powers. You were here for a *day* before Molly was gone, with freaky Winter faerie powers of her own. And you've been back for a year, living out on that island where hardly anyone can get to you, not talking, not helping, not *here*." He looked at me for the first time. "Not *you*. Not the you we all know. The guy who came to gaming every week. Who we went to drive-in movies with."

I stuffed my hands in my pockets.

"I know that things happen to people," he said. "And maybe you've got excellent and real reasons for doing what you've done. But . . . at the end of the day, there's just no replacement for being *here*. We're losing people. Kids. Old folks. Hell, there was this thing killing people's *pets* for a while." He turned back to his washing. "It's enough to make a guy a little bit cynical. And now you show up again, only you're not talking about what you're doing. People are worried that you're going to go bad like the other Winter Knights have." He spun back to me, his dark eyes hard and pained. "And when you sit up from being sewn up, what's the first thing you do? Hey, Butters? How you doing, Butters? Sorry about beating up your girlfriend? Didn't mean to wreck your computer room, man? No. The first thing you start talking about is *paying off a debt*. Just like *one of the Fae*."

Which made a cold chill go through my stomach. Butters might not have all the facts, he might not have the full story, but . . .

He wasn't wrong.

He started slapping his stuff back into his bag, though his voice stayed gentle. "I'm afraid, man. I know what's going on out there now, and it's scary as hell. So you tell me, Harry. Should I be anxious about Superman hanging out with Luthor? When I find out more about what you're dragging Karrin into, is it going to make me less worried? Because I'm not sure I know you anymore."

It was maybe fifteen seconds before I could answer.

"It isn't going to make you any less worried," I said quietly. "And I still can't talk to you about it."

"Honesty," he said. He nodded a couple of times. "Well. At least we've got that much. There's orange juice in the fridge. Drink some. Get a lot of fluids in the next few days."

Then Butters took his bag and walked out of the kitchen.

He looked at least as tired as I felt. And I could see how afraid he was, and how the fear had worn him down. He had doubts. Which, in this world, was only smart. He had doubts about me. That hurt. But they were understandable. Maybe even smart. And he'd been up-front with me about it all. That had taken courage. If I truly had been turning into the monster he feared, by being honest with me about it, he would've just painted a huge target on his face. He'd done it anyway—which meant that he wasn't sure, and he was willing to risk it.

And most important, when I'd needed his help, he'd shown up and given it.

Butters was good people.

And he wasn't wrong.

I heard quiet talking going on in the living room, between Butters and Karrin and another female voice—Andi, presumably. A moment later, the door opened and closed again. The quiet of an emptier house settled over the place.

Karrin appeared in the doorway.

"You heard that, huh?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I did." She crossed to the refrigerator, opened it, and took out a jug of orange juice. She got a plastic drinking glass out of the cupboard and poured it full. Then she passed the juice to me.

I grimaced and drank some, then stared down at the rest. "You agree with him?"

"I understand him," she said.

"But do you agree?"

"I trust you," she said.

Three words. Big ones. Especially coming from her. For a moment, they filled the room, and I felt something tight in my chest ease out of me.

I looked up at her and smiled with one side of my mouth. She answered it.

"Maybe you shouldn't," I said.

The smile deepened around her eyes. "Maybe I'm a big girl who can make up her own mind."

"Maybe you are," I allowed.

"It's been a hard year," she said. "They're tired, and scared. People lose faith sometimes. They'll come around. You'll see."

"Thanks," I said quietly.

She put her hand on my arm and squeezed, then let go of me. "I set Valmont up in the guest bedroom," she said. "You're in my room. I'm on the couch."

"I'll take the couch," I said.

"You don't fit on it, bonehead. You're the one who got shot, remember? And I need you in the best shape possible if we're going to do this."

I swirled the orange juice in the glass. She had a point.

Mister appeared in the doorway, then flung himself at my shins. I pulled the injured one back so that his shoulder hit my left shin alone. I leaned down to rub his notched ear. "Where have you been, fuzzball?"

"It's funny," Karrin said. "He vanishes whenever Andi shows up for some reason."

I remembered a scene of perfect havoc in the living room of my old apartment, and it made me smile. "Maybe she's not a cat person," I said.

"Drink your juice," she said. I did. She filled up the glass and watched me drink it down again before she was satisfied.

"Okay," she said. "Valmont's already gone to bed. Go sleep. We're getting an early start tomorrow, and you need to be sharp."

This wasn't my first rodeo, and Karrin had a point. You don't survive situations like this by shorting yourself on vital rest for no reason. Besides, I'd already dealt with enough for one evening. Let the day's trouble be enough for the day.

I headed back toward Karrin's bedroom and paused as I entered the living room.

There were guns on the coffee table. Like, a lot of them, broken out on cloths, being cleaned, leaned against a nearby chair, where a large equipment bag waited to receive them. Karrin's favorite little Belgian carbine was there, along with what looked like a couple of space guns. "New toys?" I asked.

"I'm a girl, Harry," she said, rather smugly. "I accessorize."

"Is that a bazooka?"

"No," she said. "That is an AT4 rocket launcher. Way better than a bazooka."

"In case we have to hunt dinosaurs?" I asked.

"The right tool for the right job," she answered.

“Can I play with it?”

“No. Now go to bed.”

She settled down on the couch and started reassembling one of her handguns. I hesitated for a moment. Did I have the right to drag her into the kind of conflict I was about to start?

I bottled that thought real quick, with a follow-up question: Did I have the capability to *stop* her from being involved, at this point?

Karrin looked up at me and smiled, putting the weapon together as swiftly and as automatically as other people tie their shoes. “See you in the morning, Harry.”

I nodded. The best way to get her through this was to focus and get it done. She wouldn’t leave my side, even if I wanted her to. *So stop dithering around, Harry, get your head in the game, and lay Nicodemus and company out so hard that they never have the chance to hurt her.*

“Yep,” I said. “See you in the morning.”

Chapter Fourteen

Whatever it was about the mantle of Winter I held that sustained me during action, it didn't seem to have nearly as much interest in looking after me once I was safe somewhere.

I had too many stitches to hop into Karrin's shower, but I bathed myself as best I could with a washcloth and a sink full of warm water and a little soap, and then fell down in the bed. I'd been there for maybe ten seconds before the distant weariness became acute, and the low burn and dull ache of dozens of cuts and bruises swelled up to occupy my full attention.

I was too tired to care. I thought about getting up and getting some aspirin or something for maybe a minute and a half, and then sleep snuck up on me and sucker punched me unconscious.

I dreamed.

It was one of those fever dreams, noisy and bright and disjointed. I don't remember many of the details—just that I could never keep up with what was happening, and I felt as though as soon as my eyes would focus on something, everything would change, and as soon as I caught up to the action that was happening in the dream, it would roar off in a different direction, leaving me struggling to reorient myself, trying to keep up the pace with my feet dragging in the mud. The whole while, I was conscious of several other Harry Dresdens in the dream, all of them operating a little ways off from me, doing their own confusion dance in parallel to mine, and we occasionally paused to wave at one another and exchange polite complaints.

Toward the end of it, I found myself driving along some random section of road in my old multicolored Volkswagen Bug, the *Blue Beetle*, scowling ahead through heavy rain. My apprentice, Molly, sat next to me.

Molly was in her midtwenties and gorgeous, though she still looked a little too lean to my eyes. Her hair, which had seemed to be colored at random ever since she was a teenager, was now long and white-blond. She wore old designer jeans, a blue T-shirt with a faded recycling symbol on it, and sandals.

"I hate dreams like this," I said. "There's no plot—just random weird things happening. I get enough of that when I'm awake."

She looked at me as if startled and blinked several times. "Harry?"

"Obviously," I said. "It's my dream."

"No," she said, "it kind of *isn't*. How are you doing this?"

I took my hands off the steering wheel long enough to waggle my fingers and say, in a dramatic voice, "Wizard."

Molly burst out into a warm laugh. "Oh, good Lord, it's an accident, isn't it? Are you finally off the island, then? How's your head?"

At that, I blinked. "Wait. Molly?"

"Me," she said, smiling, and leaned across the car. She snaked an arm around my neck for a second and leaned her head against my shoulder in a quick hug. There was a sense of warmth to the touch that went beyond the normal sense of a dream, a sense of another's presence that was too absolute to question. "Wow, it's good to hear from you, boss."

"Wow," I said. "How is this happening?"

"Good question," she said. "I've been attacked in my dreams, like, fifty times since the New Year. I thought I had my defenses locked up pretty tight."

"Attacked? By who?" I asked.

"Oh," she said in an offhand tone, "the Sidhe, mainly."

"Wait," I said. "Aren't you supposed to be their princess?"

"In the flesh, sure," Molly said, her eyes sparkling. "In dreams, though, they can come at me anonymously, so every punk thinks he's tough. It's like the Internet for faeries."

"What jerks," I said.

"No," she said, "not at all. Look, Harry, Maeve was a really, *really* awful Winter Lady. I have a job to do. The Sidhe just want to be sure I'm up for it. So they test me."

"By coming at you?" I asked.

"Quietly, where Mab can't see," Molly said. "It actually kind of reminds me of when Mom used to leave me in charge of all my little brothers and sisters at home. Only more felonious."

I blinked at that and let out a short bark of laughter.

"There, good, a smile," she said. "They step up. I swat them down. It's nothing personal," she continued. "Then I get back to business. Which, by the way, is why you haven't heard much from me. Sorry. I've had about a hundred and fifty years of Maeve's backlog to deal with. What's your excuse?"

"I've been sending messengers every day for the last six months," I said.

Molly's eyes widened, then narrowed. "Mab."

"Mab."

"Grrr," she said. "You need me?"

"The day before yesterday. There's this thing in my head that's going to kill me in the next couple of days. Demonreach says you can help. Apparently, Mab thinks so, too."

Molly's blue eyes went icy. "Or she wouldn't have intercepted your messengers. That bitch. If I'd known . . ." She chewed on her lower lip. "She's got me doing something that I can't get out of right away."

"What, it isn't convenient?" I asked.

"I'm under two miles of ice at the moment," she said. "It took me a day to get here—that's why I'm asleep now. What's the situation?"

I told her.

"Oh, God, Harry!" she said. "Nicodemus, really? Is Sanya there?"

"No," I said, then amended it. "At least, not yet."

"A Knight will be there," she said. "That's how it works. And I'm on the way." Her expression became distressed, and a moment later the dream world started flickering, and I was suddenly driving in a small herd of *Blue Beetles*, all of them filled with slightly different versions of Harry Dresden and Molly Carpenter. I had to slalom the VW through them.

". . . there as soon as I can . . ." came Molly's voice, distantly, and then I was driving alone.

The traffic got worse and worse and more confusing, and then there was a loud screech of tires and twisting metal, a bright light, and a sensation of tumbling and falling in exaggerated, graceful slow motion.

The radio blared with static and a woman's voice spoke in the tones of a news commentator. ". . . other news, Harry Dresden, Chicago wizard, blindly charges toward his own destruction because he refuses to recognize simple and obvious truths which are right there in front of him. Dresden ignored several excellently placed warnings, and as a result is expected to perish in the next forty-eight hours . . ."

* * *

I hauled myself out of the dream and sat up in bed, shaking and sweating, with my instincts keyed up for danger and certain that I was no longer alone in the room.

My instincts were half right.

Karrin shut the door behind her almost silently and padded over to the bed in the dim glow of a reflected streetlight outside. She was wearing a long, faded CPD T-shirt and her hair was back in a simple ponytail. She also had her favorite SIG in her hand, held down at her side.

"Hey," she half whispered. She stopped at the side of the bed. "I heard noises. Are you all right?"

I rubbed at my eyes with one hand. Had my dream of Molly been just that? A dream? Or had it been something more? I knew that a lot of crazy stuff was possible when it came to dreaming, and I knew that it had *felt* incredibly real, but that didn't mean that it had *been* real. "Dreams," I muttered. "Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

"I wasn't really sleeping anyway. You were muttering, moving around a lot." I heard her set the SIG down on the bedside table. She was maybe a foot and a half away from me, and from that close, I could smell her. Clean laundry, some kind of vaguely floral deodorant, a hint of sunlight-warmed skin, a trace of cleaning solvent from tending to her guns. A second later, she laid her hand across my forehead.

"You're running a temperature," she said. "Fever dreams are the worst. Sit tight." She went into the bathroom and came out a minute later with a Dixie cup of water and four pills. "Ibuprofen," she said. "How's your stomach?"

"Fine," I muttered. "It's the cuts and bruises that are bothering me." She passed me the pills and the water and I swallowed both and put the cup down on the table. "Thanks."

She picked up the cup and turned to drop it in the trash can, and the light from the bathroom highlighted the strong, curved muscles in her legs as she did. I tried not to notice how much that appealed to me.

But Karrin did.

She paused that way, looking at me obliquely, noticing me noticing her. Then she turned and reached around the bathroom door to shut off the light. The motion showed me even more of her legs. Then the light shut off and we were in sudden darkness. She didn't move.

"Your eyes," she said quietly. "You've only looked at me like that a few times. It's . . . intense."

"Sorry," I said. My voice sounded rough to me.

"No," she said. Cloth rustled softly. Her weight pushed down on the edge of the bed. "I . . . I've been thinking about what we talked about last year."

My throat suddenly felt dry, and my heartbeat accelerated. "What do you mean?"

"This," she said. Her hand touched my chest and slid up to my jaw. Then her weight shifted the bed a little more in the darkness, and she found my mouth with hers.

It was a good kiss. Slow. Warm. Her lips were soft and gentle and explored mine in gentle surges. I could hear her breathing getting faster, too, and her fingers slid up into my hair, her short nails scratching over my scalp and then tracing down over my neck to my shoulder.

Desire flooded through me in a sudden surge of hot, hungry need, and the Winter in me rose up with a howl, demanding that I sate it. Every instinct in my body told me that Karrin was there, and warm, and real, and pressing more of her body against mine through one fragile layer of cloth—that she was mine for the taking.

I didn't move my hands. But I broke from the kiss with a gentle groan and said, "Karrin."

"I know," she said, breathing harder, not drawing away, her breath hot against my skin. "This thing you have with Mab. It pushes you. I know."

Then she took my hand and guided it to her hip. After a second, she moved it lower, below the hem of the shirt, and then slid it up. I felt the soft skin and tight muscle of her thigh, the curve of her hip as she moved my hand up to her waist.

She was naked beneath the shirt.

I absolutely froze in place. It was the only alternative to doing something sudden and primal.

"What?" she breathed.

Something in me that had nothing to do with Winter howled at me for stopping, urged me to start moving my fingers, to get the shirt out of the way, to explore further. I beat it down with a club.

She was too important. This wasn't something I could decide with my glands.

Unfortunately, my head wasn't getting thoughts through to my mouth. "You aren't . . . I'm not sure if I can . . . Karrin, I *want* this, but . . ."

"It's all right," she said quietly.

"I'm not sure," I said again. I wanted her. But I wanted it to be about more than desire. I could have that if I wanted—mindless, empty sex is not exactly in short supply among the Sidhe of Winter.

But that kind of thing can eat you hollow, if you let it. And Karrin was courage and loyalty and brains and heart and so much *more* than mere need and desire.

I tried to explain that. Words just sort of sputtered out. I wasn't even sure they were in the right order.

She slid her hand over my mouth after a few faltering moments. I could hear the smile in her voice as she spoke. "I've had a year to think about this, Harry. And I don't want to wake up one day and realize that I was too scared to take the next step." She leaned down and kissed one of my eyelids, her mouth gentle. "I know that you're a good man. And I've never had a friend like you." She leaned down and kissed the other eyelid. "And I know you've been alone for a long time. So have I. And I'm right here. And I want this. And you want this. So would you please shut up and *do* something about it."

My fingers flexed, all by themselves, savoring the warmth and texture, the soft, tight skin over the curve of her hip, and she shivered and let out a breathless little sigh.

That set something off. I slipped my other hand around her and all but lifted her on top of me. Karrin was made of muscle, but she was still small, and I was a hell of a lot stronger than I had been at any other point in my life. I pulled her atop me, her breasts pressing against my chest through the cotton shirt, and tightened my hands on her lower back, sliding them down, feeling softness, warmth, drawing another gasp out of her.

I groaned and said, "I don't know if I can control . . . I don't want to hurt you."

In answer, she found my mouth again with hers, and the kiss was pure, hungry fire. I pressed back into it, our tongues touching, dancing, and she started pushing and kicking the bedsheets down.

"I spar with Viking warriors, Harry," she snarled. "I'm not made of glass. You need this. *We* need this. Shut *up*, Dresden." Then her mouth was on mine again, and I stopped thinking about anything else.

The kiss got hotter, her hands bolder. I got lost in running my fingers up and down the length of her back, beneath the shirt, from the nape of her neck, down over the supple muscles beside her spine, down over the curves of her hips to her thighs and back, over and over, skin on skin. Her mouth traveled to my jaw, my ear, my neck, sending jolts of sensation coursing down my body, until it became almost more than I could bear.

I let out a snarl and rolled, pinning her beneath me, and heard her gasp. I caught her wrists and slammed them to the mattress, gripping tight, and slid down her body until my mouth found her sex. She tasted sweet, and she let out gasping, breathless sounds as I explored her with my lips and tongue, rising excitement in every shivering motion of her body, in the increasingly frantic roll of her hips and arch of her back. She twisted her wrists, using them as an anchor point so that she could move—and then her breathing abruptly stopped, her body arching up into a shivering bow.

She gasped a few seconds later, twisting and twitching in reaction, and I could see her again in the dim streetlight, her face flushed with passion, her eyes closed. I was hard, so hard it hurt, and lunged up her body again, this time pinning her wrists down above her head.

"Yes," she hissed. "Now. Please."

My God, there are times when the sexiest thing a woman can give a man is permission.

I didn't hold back.

She was slippery and hot and I could only barely keep myself from simply taking, going. Some tiny bit of me managed to slow things down as I began to press into her—until she got her legs up and dug her heels into my hips, pulling me hard inside her.

After that, I didn't even try.

She twisted her wrists free of my grip and twined her arms around my neck. She pulled me down frantically, and the difference in our heights made it awkward to get my mouth down to hers without withdrawing from her, and there was no way I was going to do that. I managed. Our mouths were frantic on each other, breath mingling as our bodies surged in rhythm. She writhed against me, her eyes rolling back in her head as she climbed again, her back arching into a sudden bow once more, a soft, soft moan torn from her as she shuddered against me. I didn't stop as she came down from the climax, and she only grew more frantic, her body rolling to meet each thrust. "Now," she breathed. "Don't hold back. Don't hold back."

And suddenly I couldn't, wouldn't, didn't want to. I braced my hands on the bed, holding my weight off of her, and could think of nothing but how good it felt, about the pleasure building and building.

"Yes," Karrin hissed. "Come on."

I reached the shuddering edge—

—and felt something cold and hard press against my temple.

I opened my eyes and saw her holding her SIG against the side of my head. And as I watched, a second set of eyes, glowing with a hellish violet light, opened above her eyebrows, and a burning sigil of the same fire, in a shape vaguely reminiscent of an hourglass, appeared on her forehead.

Her voice changed, became lower, richer, more sensual. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," she purred.

And then she pulled the trigger.

* * *

I sat up in Karrin's bed choking down a short cry.

I blinked my eyes several times, struggling to order my thoughts, fighting sleep out of my head. The silver earring in my left ear felt like a tiny lump of frozen lead, heavy and arctic. I was breathing hard and covered in a light sweat, and some of the cuts were burning with discomfort. My body hurt everywhere—and worse, was utterly keyed up with frustrated, not quite consummated sexual arousal.

I lay back in bed with a groan.

"Oh come on," I panted. "Not even in the *dream*? That's ri-goddamned-diculous!"

A moment later, the light in the hall clicked on, and the bedroom door opened.

Karrin was standing there in her CPD T-shirt and pair of big loose gym shorts, holding her SIG loosely at her side. "Harry?" she said. "Are you . . . ?" She paused, eyed me, and arched one dark gold eyebrow.

I grabbed a pillow, plopped it down over my hips, on top of the covers, and sighed.

She regarded me for a second, her expression difficult to read. "Save it for fight night, big guy," she said. She started to turn and then paused. "But once we're clear of this mess . . ."

She smiled, and looked back at the pillow. Her smile was an amazing thing, equal parts joy and wickedness.

"Once we're clear, we should talk."

I found myself blushing furiously.

She gave me that smile again, and said, "See you in the morning."

Then she shut the door and left me in bed alone.

Yet somehow, thinking of that smile, I didn't really mind.

Chapter Fifteen

Karrin, Valmont, and I showed up at the slaughterhouse at dawn. As I came up the stairs and out onto the catwalk, Jordan and one of the other squires were hastily walking apart, with the mien of teenagers who hadn't been doing something they were supposed to do. Jordan was tucking a small notebook into his pocket as he did.

"Hi, Jordan," I said brightly. "Whatcha doin'?"

He glowered at me.

I walked up to him, smiled down, and said, "Let me see the notebook, please."

Jordan continued glowering at me. He looked aside at the other squire, who by now was standing forty feet away at an intersection of two strips of catwalk, evidently where he was supposed to be standing guard. The other squire resolutely ignored Jordan.

I held my hand out and said, "Humor me. I'm going to stand here until you cooperate or Nicodemus comes looking."

Jordan's lips twisted into an unpleasant grimace. Then he took the notebook from his pocket and slapped it into my hand.

"Thanks," I said, opening it to the page that had evidently been written on most recently, and read.

10 goats now.

The reply was written in a blocky, heavy hand—presumably the other squire's.

SO WHAT?

So one went missing last night, and another one in the last hour. Where did they go?

DID YOU TELL THE LORD ABOUT IT?

Yes, of course.

WHAT DID HE SAY?

Nothing.

THEN THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO KNOW.

Something is in here with us. Dangerous. Can't you feel it?

SHUT UP AND DO YOUR JOB.

But what i—

And the script ended in a hasty scrawl.

I finished reading it and eyed Jordan. "You have to wonder about it when your boss doesn't want any questions, kid."

Karrin cleared her throat, pointedly.

"Oh, I want them," I drawled. "I'm just not answering them right away." I passed the notebook back over to Jordan. "That what Nick has the goats in here for, then, eh? He's feeding something."

Jordan's face went pale but he didn't respond in any way.

"Your boss, kid," I said. "He's hurt a lot of good people. Killed some of them."

For a second I flashed back on a memory of Shiro. The old Knight had given his life in exchange for mine. Nicodemus and company had killed him, horribly.

I still owed them for that.

Something of that must have shown in my face, because Jordan took a step back from me, swallowed, and one of his hands slipped toward the sling of his shotgun.

"If you were smart," I said, "you'd get away from this place. Comes time for the balloon to go up, Nicodemus is going to feed you into the meat grinder the second it becomes convenient for him. I don't know what he's promised you guys—maybe Coins of your own, someday. Your very own angel in a bottle. I've done that. It's not all it's cracked up to be."

Jordan, in addition to looking worried, also looked skeptical.

Not a lot of guys who pick up a Blackened Denarius manage to put it back down again, I guess.

"Take it from me," I said. "Whatever you've been told—the Fallen are bad news." I nodded to him and walked past him. Karrin and Valmont hurried to keep pace with me as I descended toward the factory floor.

"What was the point of that?" Karrin asked.

"Sowing seeds of discord," I replied.

"They're fanatics," she said. "Do you really think you're going to convince them of anything now?"

"He's a fanatic," I said. "He's also a kid. What, maybe twenty-three? Someone should tell him the truth."

"Even when you know he isn't going to listen?"

"That part isn't mine to choose," I said. "I can choose to tell him the truth, though. So I did. The rest is up to him."

She sighed. "If he gets the order, he'll gun you down without blinking."

"Maybe."

"There are only ten goats in the pen today," she noted.

"Yeah. The guards think something is in here with them, taking them."

"They think? But they haven't seen whatever it is?"

"Apparently not."

Karrin looked around the warehouse. At least eight or ten hard-looking men with weapons were standing with a clear view of the goat pen. "I find that somewhat disturbing."

"Yeah," I said. "Tell me about it. There're only so many ways to hide. I'll see if I can spot it."

"Do you think it was here with us yesterday?"

"Yeah. Probably."

She muttered something under her breath. "That's not too creepy or anything. Can't you just wizard-Sight it?"

"I could," I said. A wizard's Sight, the direct perception of magic with the mind, could cut through any kind of illusion or glamour or veil. But it had its drawbacks. "But the last time I did that, I got a look at something that had me curled into a ball gibbering for a couple of hours. I don't think we can afford that right now. I'll have to use something more subtle."

"Subtle," Valmont said. "You."

I sniffed and ignored that remark, as it deserved.

"Ah," Nicodemus said, as we reached the pool of light around the conference table. "Mr. Dresden. I'm glad to see you here on time. Will you have doughnuts?"

I looked past him to the snack table. It was indeed piled with doughnuts of a number of varieties. Some of them even had sprinkles. My mouth started a quick impression of a minor tributary.

But they were doughnuts of darkness. Evil, damned doughnuts, tainted by the spawn of darkness . . .

. . . which could obviously be redeemed only by passing through the fiery, cleansing inferno of a wizardly digestive tract.

I walked around the table to the doughnut tray, eyeing everyone seated there as I did.

Nicodemus and Deirdre were present, looking much as they had yesterday. Binder and Ascher sat there, too, a little way down the table, speaking quietly to each other. Binder, in his dark, sedate suit, was eating some kind of pastry that didn't look familiar to me.

Ascher had a plate covered in the remnants of doughnuts that she was apparently struggling to redeem from the hellfire even now. She had changed back into her jeans-and-sweater look, and bound up her hair. A few ringlets escaped here and there and bounced slightly as she spoke. She gave me a small nod as I went by, which I returned.

Seated at the table a little apart from everyone else was an unremarkable-looking man who hadn't been there yesterday. Late thirties, if I had to guess, medium height, solid-seeming, as if he had more muscle to him than was readily apparent beneath jeans and a loose-fitting designer athletic jacket. His features were clean-cut, pleasant without being particularly handsome. He had a slightly dark complexion, and the right bone structure to pass for a resident just about anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, and in chunks of the rest of the world. His dark hair had a few threads of grey in it.

One thing about him wasn't average—his eyes. They were kind of golden brown with flecks of bronze in them, but that wasn't the strange part. There was a sheen to them, almost like a trick of the light, a semi-metallic refraction from their surface, there for a second and then gone again. They weren't human eyes. They looked human in every specification, but something about them was just off.

Something else about him bothered me, too . . .

He was entirely relaxed.

Nobody in that damned building was relaxed. It was an inherently disturbing place, riddled with dark energy. It was filled with dangerous beings. I know I looked tense. Karrin was walled up behind her poker face, but you knew she was an instant away from violence. Binder looked like he was trying to watch everyone at once, the better to know when to beat a prudent retreat, and Ascher's gaze kept hunting for targets. Nicodemus and his daughter sat with a kind of studied air of disinterest, feigning confidence and relaxation, but they were the paranoid type by nature. When I looked at them, I knew they were ready to throw down at a moment's notice. Even Valmont looked like she was ready to dart suddenly in any direction necessary, like a rat daring a trip across open floor for something it wanted to eat.

Every one of us was exuding body language that warned the others that we were potentially violent or at least hyperalert.

Not the new guy.

He sat slouched in his chair with his eyes half-closed as though he could barely keep them open. There was a half-empty Styrofoam cup of coffee in front of him. He'd drawn hash marks in it with his thumb and played a few rounds of tic-tac-toe with himself in a gesture of pure boredom. There was no sense of violence or alertness in him, no wariness, no caution. None at all.

Now, that made the hairs on my neck stand up.

Either this guy was stupid or insane, or he was dangerous enough that he genuinely was not bothered by this roomful of people—and Nicodemus did not seem the type to recruit the stupid or insane for a job like this one.

I secured a doughnut and coffee. I checked with Karrin and Valmont. Neither wanted to save the doughnuts from Nicodemus's corruptive influence. Not everyone can be a crusader like me.

"I was pleased to hear that you were successful last night," Nicodemus said. "Welcome to our enterprise, Miss Valmont."

"Thank you," Valmont said, her tone carefully neutral. "I cannot tell you how pleased I am to have this opportunity."

That brought a knife-edged smile to Nicodemus's face. "Are you?"

She smiled back, a pretty and empty expression. Then as I sat, she settled into the chair next to me, making it a statement to the room. Karrin took up her stance behind me, as before.

"You have the files, I trust?" Nicodemus asked.

I reached into my duster and paused with my hand there for a moment too long before beginning to draw the file out again, a shade too quickly.

Everyone jumped, or performed some vague equivalent of the gesture. Binder flinched. Nicodemus's fingers tightened slightly on the tabletop. Deirdre's hair twitched, as though thinking about becoming animate and edged. Ascher's shoulder rolled in a tiny back-and-forth motion, as though she'd stopped herself from lifting a hand in a defensive gesture.

The new guy remained lazily confident. He might have smiled, very slightly.

I put the file on the tabletop, tilted my head at the new guy, and asked, "Who's he?"

Nicodemus stared at me for a moment before answering. "Everyone, please meet Goodman Grey. Mr. Grey has kindly consented to assist us in our endeavor. I've already briefed him on each of you."

Grey looked up and swept those odd eyes up and down the table.

They stopped and locked on Karrin.

"Not everyone," he said. His voice was a resonant baritone, with a very gentle accent on it that might have been from somewhere deep in the American South. "I don't believe you mentioned this woman, Nicodemus."

"This is Karrin Murphy," Nicodemus replied. "Formerly of the Chicago Police Department."

Grey stared at her for a long time and then said, "The loup-garou videotape. You were in it with Dresden."

"Set the Wayback Machine for a damned long time ago," I said. "That tape went missing."

"Yes," Grey said, not quite amicably. "And I wasn't actually talking to you, wizard, was I now?"

That made everyone at the table notice. It got quiet and they got still, waiting to see what would happen next.

One thing you learn hanging out with people like Mab—you don't show weakness to predators. Especially not to the really confident ones.

"Not yet. I should ask you," I replied, "how thick do you think that wall behind you might be? When you go flying through it a few seconds from now, do you think you'll knock out a whole section, or just a little chunk the size of your head and shoulders?"

Grey blinked at that, and then turned a wide smile on me. "Seriously? You want to whip them out already? You've been here for about two minutes."

I took a bite of my doughnut, swallowed it (heavenly), and said, "You're not the toughest thing I've ever seen. You're not even close."

"Oh," Grey said. "You don't say."

Though he didn't rise or stir, the air got thick.

Karrin broke the silent tension by putting a small, restraining hand on my shoulder. "That was me in the video," she said.

Grey's eyes went back to her. "You took a shot right past this idiot's ear to take out that guy behind him. That takes some resolve. Good for you."

"I'm a better shot now," she said.

Grey lifted an eyebrow. "Damn, threats from both of you?" He turned his gaze on Valmont. "How about you, sister? Want to jump on this train?"

Valmont didn't meet his gaze. "I don't know you," she said.

Grey snorted. He considered me for a moment. Then he said, "Nicodemus?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do you need the wizard for the rest of the plan?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What about Murphy?"

"Not particularly."

Grey exhaled through his nose, his eyes glittering. "I see." Then he nodded and said, "Shall we put a pin in this, Dresden, until later?"

"Absolutely," I said. "Nicodemus?"

This time Nick's reply was warier. "Yes?"

"What is this jerk good for?"

"I'm the only person in the world who can get you where you want to go," Grey drawled.

"Yeah?" I asked. "Why? What do you do?"

Grey smiled. "Anything. This week, I'm opening doors."

"You've already opened the one that said AN ASS KICKING," I assured him. "We'll get to it eventually."

Grey regarded me levelly. Then he got up, moving lazily, and settled down in the chair next to Deirdre and Nicodemus, another statement. He took a slow sip of his coffee and studied Karrin the way a recently fed mountain lion might watch a baby mountain goat taking its first steps: with calm, patient interest.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for putting that aside for the nonce," Nicodemus said smoothly. He did not seem displeased either by Grey's choice of seats or by the focal point of his attention. "Dresden, may I assume you are ready to get to work?"

"When you assume," I said, "you make an ass out of you." I took another bite of doughnut and said, "Yeah, fine."

"The file, please."

I grunted and slid it down the table. Nicodemus promptly passed it over to Grey.

Grey opened the file and started reading it. Those odd eyes of his flicked over pages as if he could take in their entire contents with a glance, then moved to the next. He finished it in maybe six or seven seconds.

"Well?" Nicodemus asked.

"For the simple part, that's enough," Grey replied. "But to pull it off properly, I'll need a sample. A fresh one."

"We'll add that to today's list," Nicodemus said. He nodded to Deirdre, who got up and went around the table, passing out thin manila folders labeled DAY TWO. We each got one. I opened mine up to find a top page that simply read:

PHASE ONE PREPARATION:
WEAPONS
SPELLS
ENTRY

"We have considerable work in front of us today," Nicodemus said. "Binder, I've already had the weapons brought in for your associates to use, but we'll need to see to their maintenance and loading. Perhaps Miss Murphy will be willing to assist with that."

"Sure," she said. "Why not?"

Nicodemus smiled. "Miss Valmont, you'll find a schematic for a vault door in your folder. You'll need to be able to open it without damaging it. Today will be the day you plan your approach and requisition whatever equipment you need. Just make a list and give it to one of the squires."

Valmont flipped to the next page, frowning, and studied a diagram. Then she said, "This is a Fernucci."

"Yes."

"I'm not going to say it's impossible," she said. "But what I will say is that I've never cracked one successfully before and I don't know anyone who has. Easier to blow it."

"But we will not be doing so," Nicodemus replied calmly. "Life is challenge. Rise to it."

"Great." She shook her head. "What, are we hitting Vegas or something? Who has a vault door like this around this town?"

"We'll discuss that at the evening meeting," Nicodemus said. "Miss Ascher, Mr. Dresden. Phase One will require us to breach a secure building. We may need to make entry through a wall, neatly, without an explosion, and we will certainly need a loud and obvious distraction to occupy the attention of local security forces while we enter. Those tasks will fall to you two."

I grunted and eyed Ascher. "You want walls or noise?"

"He said loud and obvious," Ascher replied, her voice light. "That screams Dresden to me."

"And we don't want the building collapsing on us," Karrin added in a murmur.

I sniffed and said, "Fine. I'll make the noise, then."

“Releasing enough energy to open a hole without an explosion? That’s tricky,” Ascher said. “I can adapt a spell I know, but I’ll need some time to practice it.”

“You have until sundown,” Nicodemus said. “Deirdre, you will take Mr. Grey to the factor’s address and assist him in obtaining a sample.”

“No,” I said. “These two stay. I’ll go get the sample.”

Nicodemus looked up at me sharply.

I showed him my teeth. “Grey’s a shapeshifter, isn’t he?” I asked. “You’re going to use him to duplicate poor Harvey there.”

“If we are?” Nicodemus asked. There was an edge of frost to his words. He didn’t like that I’d figured out the next step of his plan.

“Harvey lives in my town,” I said. “You turn these two psychos loose on Chicago, and Harvey winds up dead somewhere. So I’ll do it. I’ll get the sample your doppelgänger needs without killing anyone.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Grey wondered aloud.

“The fun part is where you get to live,” I replied. “Besides. If his death is discovered before we pull the job, don’t you think someone’s going to be able to put two and two together and figure out that the place is about to get hit? So we do it smart.”

Grey sighed and looked at Nicodemus. “Honestly. Where do you find these people?”

Nicodemus never took his eyes off me. “Agreed,” he said finally. “Finesse seems a wiser option.” His dark eyes sparkled maliciously. “The three of you should have no problem accomplishing the task.”

“What?” I asked.

“Grey, Deirdre, and Dresden will run this particular errand,” he said, “while the rest of us busy ourselves here.” He paused. “Unless, of course, Dresden, you wish to cease lending me your support.”

I ground my teeth. I wanted to give him a solid punch in the nose—but that would not be upholding Mab’s honor. “No,” I said.

“Deirdre and Mr. Grey will bear witness to your sincerity.”

My eyes tracked over to Deirdre, who was regarding me with a wide, intense smile that made her dark eyes too bulgy and conveyed a number of awful things. Her hair had begun to slither back and forth over her suit jacket’s shoulders.

Grey just looked at me with that calm smile. He made a little motion of his hand, pantomiming sticking a pin into something. Or maybe pulling it out again.

“Oh, goodie,” I muttered. “Field trip.”

Chapter Sixteen

Harvey kept an office just off Logan Square, on the second floor of a brownstone he shared with a Chase bank. I drove us past the building and then around the square twice in Nicodemus's black town car, using the time to think. It was a sunny morning, promising a mild spring day.

"You are literally driving in circles," Grey noted, from the passenger seat.

"Harvey shares a building with a bank," I pointed out.

Grey made an unhappy sound.

"What difference does that make?" Deirdre asked from the backseat.

"They'll have at least one armed guard on-site," Grey said, "and probably more than one. Additionally, everyone there will have rapid access to alarms that will summon the local constabulary."

"Then we'll take him quickly and go," Deirdre said.

"A broad-daylight kidnapping," I said. "In view of all this foot traffic, bank customers and . . ." Even as I spoke, a white sedan with blue and white bubs and a sky blue horizontal stripe rolled through on the opposite side of the square's roundabout. "And Chicago PD patrol cars, which regularly prowl through here."

Grey sighed. "He's right. We're going to have to be patient."

"Can't keep circling the square," I said, pulling off. "We'll hit the next street over, try to find someplace we can park that gives us a view of the building."

Deirdre scowled at me in the rearview mirror. "The simplest way is to walk in, kill him silently, and take what we need. No one will be the wiser until the body is discovered."

"Point," Grey said.

"Simple, all right," I said. "I mean, we don't know his schedule today, who is coming to his office, where he is expected to be, who might raise a cry if he goes missing, or anything like that, but why let inconvenient little things like facts slow us down?"

Deirdre's scowl turned into a glower. Her hair whipped back and forth a few times, like an agitated cat thrashing its tail. I ignored her and drove slowly down the street on the other side of the bank building. It was early enough that I managed to find a parking space with a view of Harvey's office door, and I wedged the town car inexpertly into it.

"There's his car," Grey noted, as I did. "Our man comes in to work early."

"Maybe he loves his job."

"How tiresome," Grey said. He settled back in his seat with his odd eyes half-closed and unfocused.

"So?" Deirdre asked. "What are we going to do?"

"Await developments," Grey said.

"Harvey will leave eventually," I said, "to get lunch, if nothing else. We'll follow him until he's somewhere a little less likely to result in alarms and swarms of cops."

Deirdre didn't like that. "We are on a schedule."

"I guess Daddy should have thought of that before he decided to proceed without telling anyone his plans," I said. "We could have gotten started days ago."

"Patience, Miss Archleone," Grey advised, barely moving his lips as he spoke. He had the look of someone who was comfortable with the idea of spending a lot of time waiting. The man had worked stakeouts before. "We have a little time—and we can always do it the direct way should we need to change our minds."

And we waited.

* * *

“Why?” Grey asked me abruptly, a couple of silent hours later.

“Why what?” I asked. I needed a bathroom break, but I didn’t want to wander off and take the chance that the two of them would roll up and kill Harvey the minute I wasn’t looking.

“This man is no one to you,” Grey said. “Why does it matter if he lives or dies?”

“Because killing people isn’t right,” I said.

Grey smiled slightly. “No,” he said. “I’m being serious.”

“So am I,” I said.

“A random hardpoint of irrational morality?” he asked. “I’ve heard your reputation, Dresden. You don’t mind killing.”

“If I’ve got to, I will,” I said. “If I don’t have to do it, I don’t. Besides. It’s smarter.”

Grey opened his eyes all the way and turned his head toward me. “Smarter?”

“You kill someone, there’s always someone close to them who is going to take it hard,” I said. “Maybe a lot of someones. You remove one enemy, but you make three more.”

“Do you honestly think Harvey has someone ready to avenge him should we take his life?” Grey asked.

“He’s got whoever he works for,” I pointed out. “And he’s got the cops and the FBI. If we make a corpse of him, we risk warning our target and setting large forces in motion that could skew this whole deal.”

“Kill them as well,” Deirdre said sullenly.

“I thought we were on a schedule,” I sniped back at her waspishly. I turned to Grey again. “The point is, killing someone is almost never the smart move, long term. Sometimes it’s got to be done if you want to survive—but the more you do it, the more you risk creating more enemies and buying yourself even more trouble.”

Grey seemed to consider that for a moment, and then shrugged. “The argument is not entirely without merit. Tell me, wizard, does it give you some sort of satisfaction to protect this man?”

“Yeah.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Hmm.”

“Good, you want to keep him alive now,” I said. It’s just possible that I might have sounded sarcastic. “That was easy.”

Grey resumed his waiting posture, eyes slipping out of focus again. “It doesn’t matter to me, either way. I’ve no objection to killing for professional reasons, and no need to do it when doing so would be stupid.”

“I thought you said it would be fun.”

That made Grey bare his teeth in a smile. “Always. But just because something is pleasurable doesn’t mean it is appropriate.”

“Look,” Deirdre said, her voice suddenly intent.

I did. Three people in overcoats were walking up to Harvey’s building. They skipped the entrance in front and headed for the staircase in back. Two of them were men, fairly bulky. The third was a petite woman.

All three moved with a clarity and intensity of purpose that marked them as predators.

“Poachers,” Grey noted. There was a low, growling tone to his voice.

I peered at the woman a little more closely, and shot Deirdre a look over my shoulder. “Is that —?”

Her eyes were wide. She nodded tightly. “My mother.”

Fantastic.

Polonius Lartessa was another Knight of the Blackened Denarius, the bearer of Imariel. She was also Nicodemus’s estranged wife, a sorceress, and an all-around piece of bad news.

“What’s she doing here?” I demanded.

Deirdre stared intently at the woman. “I’m not sure. She’s supposed to be in Iran. She wasn’t supposed to know that—” Deirdre cut herself off abruptly.

So. The wife was cutting in on Nicodemus’s action—assuming Deirdre was telling the truth, which I couldn’t.

“We can’t let her take the factor from us,” Grey said calmly. He unbuckled his seat belt and got out of the car. “Come on.”

Deirdre bit her lip. But then she got out, following Grey, and I went with them.

Chapter Seventeen

“Grey,” I said, hurrying to catch up.

“Hmm?”

“How is walking up and starting a fight with Tessa any better than doing it with Harvey?”

“It isn’t,” he said. “But the alternative may be losing him. Unacceptable.”

“Then we don’t lose him,” I said. “How good is your Nicodemus impersonation?”

Grey narrowed his metallic eyes. “What did you have in mind?”

“You two go up and distract them,” I said. “One big happy family. I go in the front door and get Harvey the hell out of there. Quietly.”

Grey considered it for a moment and then nodded once. “I doubt I’ll be able to fool his wife for more than a moment. But then, you only need a moment.”

Deirdre grimaced. “Just press your lips together as hard as you can and keep quiet. He gets like that when he’s angry. I’ll talk.”

Grey’s mouth turned up into a grin. Then he winked at me and just *melted*.

One second, the plain man in jeans and an athletic jacket was there. The next, it was Nicodemus, head to toe, black suit and all—and not just in appearance. Grey’s posture changed, along with his walk, the way he held his head, right down to the smug, wary eyes. “Why, thank you, Deirdre,” he said in a perfect imitation of Nicodemus’s gravelly voice. “Such a dear child.”

Deirdre stared at Grey for a second in something between fascination and disgust. Then she said to me, “Hurry. Imariel will realize Anduriel isn’t there before long.”

I nodded and took off at a jog. I vaulted a large cast-iron fence behind the building (Parkour!) and hustled down an alley no wider than my shoulders between the bank building and its neighbor, keeping the bank between me and the approach of Tessa and her goons, the way a squirrel will circle and hide behind the trunk of a tree. I stopped at the corner to check and be sure that they’d gone out of sight, found the coast clear, then ran down the length of the front side of the bank and went up the stairs to Harvey’s office three steps at a time.

The front door had a simple logo on it that read: MORRISON FIDUCIARY SERVICES. I went on in and found myself in an office decorated with tastefully spartan sensibilities. There was a receptionist’s desk, though no one was at it, and an open door leading into what was obviously a working office.

“Just a moment,” called a man from the other room. “I’ll be right with you.”

I didn’t give him a moment. The way the office was laid out, the rear entrance had to open directly into Harvey’s office, and Tessa and company might appear there anytime.

Harvey’s office was as elegant as his entry, but more crowded with the tools of his trade—computers and office equipment and bookshelves and files. The man himself sat behind the desk with his shirtsleeves rolled up, hunched over a computer keyboard, fingers flying as he watched figures and diagrams of some kind rolling by on his screen.

No sooner did I set foot in the office than the computer started making an odd buzzing noise and the scent of scorched insulation filled the air. An instant later, Harvey’s screen turned blue, covered in white text.

“What?” he said, baffled. Then he slapped the side of the monitor and repeated, “What? You have *got* to be *kidding* me . . .” He turned his gaze toward me, annoyance all over his face, and suddenly froze as he saw my expression and my quarterstaff. “Uh,” he said. “Who the hell are you?”

“Come with me if you want to live,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“No time,” I said. “It isn’t your fault, but you’re into some bad business, Harvey. There’s a woman with two hired goons about to come up your back steps, and they aren’t here to sell you a magazine subscription.”

“What?” he said. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Are you freaking kidding me?” I growled, and stalked over to his desk. “Get up and come with me.”

“Now see here, young man,” Harvey stammered. “I will not be ordered about in my own place of business. If you do not leave immediately, I will summon the authorities.”

There just wasn’t time for this dance. So I stepped around the desk, grabbed his upper arm in my left hand, and hauled him to his feet.

“Take your hands off of me at once!” he shouted.

“I’m trying to help you,” I told him, dragging him back out into the front room by main force. “You are going to thank me for this later—”

The front door opened, and two *more* goons stepped into the office, different men from the ones Tessa had with her. Dammit. I hadn’t been keeping an eye out for them on the way in. Of course, if we’d thought to cover both exits, Tessa and her people would have done the same.

The two men saw us and immediately plunged their hands into their jackets, going for their shoulder holsters.

I was quicker. I thrust Harvey behind me with my left hand and pointed my staff at the two men with my right, summoning up a burst of will and snarling, “*Forzare!*”

The runes carved into the staff flared into a pale green-white light, and a wave of force caught both men. One of them was slapped against the wall hard enough to dent the drywall, while the other went reeling back out the door and was thrown down the steps.

The thug who hit the drywall was tough. He bounced off it, completed drawing his silenced pistol, dropped to a knee, and aimed at Harvey.

No time to pull together a shield, not without the advantage of a specialized magical tool to make it happen. So I spun, putting my back between the shooter and Harvey, bowed my head forward as far as I could, and hunched my shoulders.

The gun coughed, *clack, clack, clack*. Slugs smashed against my back, only to be defeated by the painstaking protective energies I had spell-wrought into the leather duster I wore. I counted eight hits, all of which felt like taking a Little League fastball to the back—painful but not debilitating. Then the gun fell silent and I heard the metallic click of a magazine being released.

I whirled and slashed the end of my staff at the gunman. The heavy oak smashed against the wrist of his gun hand and knocked away the fresh magazine he’d been about to load. I followed up with a backswing and hit him on the jaw right below his ear and sent him sprawling to the floor, the gun tumbling free.

I kicked the gun away from him, and hauled Harvey to his feet. He was staring at the downed gunman, aghast.

“That . . . that man just tried to kill you.”

“No,” I said. “He just tried to kill *you*. Seriously, dude, what part of *come with me if you want to live* did you not understand?”

I hauled Harvey along with me again, and this time he wasn’t resisting me. We headed for the door just as the sound of breaking glass cut in from the office.

“What was that?” he panted.

“Trouble,” I said. “Hurry.”

I led the way, staff in hand, a shield spell ready to leap into reality if the second gunman proved to be waiting for us, but there was no sign of him.

“You’re in pretty good shape, Harvey,” I said as I led him down the stairs. “You a jogger by any chance?”

“Uh,” he said. “I swim. And do yoga.”

"No, Harvey," I said. "You run. You run marathons every morning before breakfast. Make me believe it. Move." I broke into a run down the sidewalk, dodging a little bit of foot traffic now and then. Harvey hurried to keep up, breathing harder than was strictly warranted by the exercise. We'd gotten past the bank and to the next strip of brownstone buildings before I heard a shout behind me. Tessa had appeared in the doorway to Harvey's office. She focused on me, and even from that distance I could feel the malice in her gaze. She pointed a finger at me and two goons took up the chase.

I ducked down the next alley between buildings, circling back toward where I hoped Grey and Deirdre would be waiting to give me some backup, but they were not to be found. As I looked, I saw Tessa emerge from the back door of Harvey's office and begin hurrying after us. There wasn't much foot traffic on this block, and I saw Tessa shuck out of her overcoat on the run. In another moment, she'd take her demonic form and close in on us.

If she was truly out to disrupt her husband's plans, Tessa wasn't worried about causing a scene. If she could stir up the city's police forces, so much the better. She'd happily become that hideous bug thing she turned into and rip Harvey's skull apart.

"Dammit," I said, fleeing down the street, away from Harvey's office and my compatriots. I didn't have much choice. Tessa had me outnumbered. I might have been able to take my chances in a fight with her and some armed thugs, but I couldn't fight them and protect Harvey at the same time. If I stood my ground, they'd take him. So I ran, to buy myself some time to think.

As I did, I realized that I didn't have to beat them in a fight. All I had to do was stall them, or hold them off long enough for Deirdre and Grey to catch up with me. While I didn't trust either of my companions to give a damn about me, they needed Harvey to carry out the plan, and the farther I ran, the more likely it was that I might accidentally lose my own backup.

We reached a building that had been abandoned; its windows were boarded up and covered with graffiti. It would have to do. I whirled toward it, unleashed another blast of energy from my staff, and blew a hole the size of a garbage can in the plywood and the glass beyond.

"Come on," I said. "Stay close."

"What are you doing?"

"We're playing hide-and-seek," I said, and lunged into the building. Harvey stared slack-jawed at me for a second, but then glanced back toward Tessa.

His face went pale, and his eyes widened. He made a few strangled noises, and then thrust himself through the hole, almost sprawling into the broken glass. I caught him and set him on his feet.

The building had been a retail store of some kind, and most of it was one large room. There were still clothing racks scattered around the place, along with the detritus of long-term abandonment. The only light came in around the edges of its boarded-up windows, and through the hole I'd blasted. Shadows crawled everywhere.

I headed deeper into the building, stumbling blindly over things on the floor while my eyes struggled to shift from the light of the spring morning to the gloom of the store's interior. I almost ran into a wall before I saw it, but once I had, I was able to make out just enough shapes to realize that the shop had a doorway leading back to some restrooms and what were probably managerial offices of some kind.

I pushed Harvey into the hallway, then stepped into the doorway between him and the rest of the shop, raising my staff to the horizontal and preparing a shield spell. It wasn't anything like ideal, but it was a better defensive position than I could get on the street outside. They'd all have to come at me from the same direction. "Stay low," I advised him. "Don't go anywhere."

"We should be running," he panted. "Shouldn't we? Calling the police?"

"Cops got better things to do than get killed," I said.

He blinked. "What?"

"Seriously, you don't recognize that reference either? Hell's bells, Harvey, do you even go to the movies?"

Shadows moved in the shaft of light provided by my impromptu portal, and figures entered the abandoned store. Three gunmen, then four—and then something that might have been a praying mantis, only hundreds of times too large, complete with googly, faceted bug eyes and a second set of glowing green eyes open above them.

It took Tessa only a second to spot me. Then she darted toward me over the floor, moving with terrible, insectlike speed, and I triggered the shield spell. The runes on my staff flared green-white again, and a fine curtain of blue-green light washed out from the oak, covering the doorway.

Tessa stopped in front of it, maybe ten feet away. Then she pointed at the door with one long leg and said, in a perfectly normal human voice, “Open fire.”

The gunmen didn’t hesitate. Their silenced weapons went *clickity-clack*, and sparks and flashes of light bounced up from my shield where the bullets struck. Foiling them wasn’t a terrible strain. Subsonic ammunition is slow-moving by its very nature, and each individual round carried considerably less force when it struck than it would have at full speed.

“Hold,” the mantis-thing said.

The gunmen stopped firing.

The giant bug stared at me for a long moment. Then its jaws opened, and opened, and opened some more, and Tessa’s face and head emerged from its mouth, flaccid chitin peeling back like a hood. Her skin and hair were covered in some kind of glistening slime. She was an odd one to look at. She didn’t look like she could be out of her teens when she didn’t have wardrobe to lend her its gravitas, and her apparent youth was magnified by the fact that she was a tiny woman, under five feet tall. She was pretty, the high school girl next door.

Of course, she’d been walking the earth for more than a millennium before there *were* any high schools.

“Hello, Dresden,” Tessa said.

“Hi, Tessa,” I replied.

“The upright hero Harry Dresden,” she said, “working for Nicodemus Archleone. Did Lasciel finally talk you into taking up her Coin?”

“Pretty sure you know that she didn’t,” I said.

She shrugged one shoulder. The motion was absolutely eerie on her insectoid body. “True. But I cannot imagine what else might compel a man like you to work for the likes of my husband.”

“Long story,” I said. “Now go away.”

She shook her head. “I can’t do that, I’m afraid. You have something I want. I want you to give it to me.”

“It would never work out for us,” I said sadly. “I’d be too worried about you biting my head off afterward to live in the moment.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she said. “Give the mortal to me. Make me take him from you and you will share his fate.”

“Who are you?” Harvey asked in a shaking, bewildered voice. “What on earth have I done to you?”

Tessa clicked her tongue. “Don’t trouble yourself with such questions, little man. You won’t have them for very much longer.”

“Oh, God,” Harvey said.

“I’ll make you a deal,” I said. “Walk away and I won’t call the Orkin man.”

In reply she lifted an insect leg and hissed a word. A shaft of rotten-looking greenish light streaked toward my shield. I gritted my teeth and held it steady, turning back the attack, feeling the strain of holding the shield beginning to build.

“This isn’t a negotiation,” she said. “You’ve already lost. You’re trapped, and you can’t keep that shield up forever. Give him to me and I will grant you safe passage.”

She was right, of course. I couldn’t hold the shield forever, or even for long. The moment it dropped, she and her boys would cut loose with everything they had and that would be that. She might or might not be sincere about the offer of free passage, but if she was . . .

If she was, then this was my chance to derail Nicodemus's heist. If Tessa, one of Nicodemus's own circle, interfered and overpowered me, that wouldn't be my fault. I could end this mess and get out while still preserving Mab's reputation. Mab would applaud this solution.

And all I had to do was let Tessa kill Harvey.

No. I wasn't ready to hand over anyone to one of the monsters if I could help it. I might have made some bad choices along the way, but I wasn't that far gone. Besides, I couldn't trust her word anyway. She was just as likely to kill me for the fun of it as to let me walk away in one piece.

"Why don't you go back to the roach motel you crawled out of?" I replied.

She shook her head and sighed. "Such a waste of potential." Then she turned her head to one of her minions and nodded. "Take them both."

The gunmen did something I hadn't expected, at that point—they dropped their weapons and started shucking out of their coats and jackets. As they did, they began to jerk and contort. Joints popped and flesh rippled. Their shirts distended as their shoulders hunched to inhuman proportions, and their faces stretched out into almost canine muzzles, teeth extending into fangs and tusks. Their hands thickened and lengthened, with long claws extending from their tips.

"OhmyGodOhmyGodOhmyGod," Harvey whispered, his breath coming in panicked gasps. "What is that?"

"Ghouls," I said grimly. "Strong, fast, hard to kill."

"What are they going to do?"

"Rip through the walls, come at us from all sides, kill us, and eat us," I said.

And, in professional silence, the ghouls started ripping at the drywall on both sides of my defensive position in the doorway, to do exactly that.

Chapter Eighteen

Tearing through drywall is a surprisingly noisy process. It breaks with loud crunching, snapping noises. Ghouls have been known to claw their way through inches of stone mausoleum wall to get to a nice rotten corpse to eat, and they had very little trouble with drywall and wood, their claws and hunched shoulders ripping through it at a steady pace.

We had maybe sixty seconds, at most, before they would be romping through the wall and into the building on either side of us.

"They're coming," Harvey gasped. "They're going to get us. What do we do?"

My own heart was beating a lot faster than it had been a moment ago. Ghouls were no joke. And a close, confined space like this was the worst possible situation in which a wizard could take them on. My spell-armored duster wouldn't be of much help when one of them was chewing on my head. It doesn't matter how many times you've faced danger. When your life is under threat and you know it, you're scared, end of story.

Fear—real, silvery, adrenaline-charged fear—rocketed through me.

"Um," I said, not panicking. "We . . ."

I was going to say "back up." I really was. But Tessa was staring at me with a smug, gloating expression on her face, and I was suddenly infuriated. Tessa was special. The last time I'd seen her, she'd put a good man in the hospital for months and left him permanently maimed. It was a miracle, literally, that he'd lived at all.

She hurt my friend.

The Winter surged up inside me in time with my rage, and I suddenly put a much higher priority on the fact that I still *owed* her for that.

"Get behind me and stay close," I growled instead.

"What?" Harvey blurted.

I had the satisfaction of seeing Tessa's gloating expression falter for a fraction of a second, tipped off by something in my face, maybe, before I dropped my shield, extended my staff in my right hand, called upon Winter, and snarled, "*Infriga!*"

A howl of arctic air billowed out onto the display floor, blanketing every object in it—the floor, the ceiling, and the walls—in an instant layer of flash-frost. The sudden shift in temperature condensed the air into frozen mist, a fog thick enough to cut visibility to five or six feet—a situation that would be much more to the advantage of the team with fewer members, making it harder for the enemy to coordinate their superior numbers.

I strode forward through the fog, closing the distance on Tessa so that I could get her in sight again before she recovered and started maneuvering on me. In a perfect world, I would have found her frozen into a block of bitterly cold Winter ice—but she was a sorceress, and not a dime-store amateur, either. As I came in sight through the fog, I saw her stumbling back, her foremost insect-arms crossed in a defensive gesture, her image blurry on the other side of a C-shaped wall of ice that had not quite managed to engulf her entirely.

I gestured with the staff and snarled, "*Forzare!*"

The frozen wall exploded into chunks and shards of knife-edged, crystalline ice, as deadly as a cloud of shrapnel. She tried to fling herself to one side, but stunned by the intensity of the attack, she didn't account for the ice-coated tile floor beneath her legs—floor that provided me with footing as sure and solid as a basketball court. Insect legs skittered wildly, and the ice tore into her chitin-covered body, sending splatters of dark green ichor everywhere, even as the mantis-head half slithered up over her human face, swallowing it down again. Hotly glowing green eyes opened above the insectoid mantis-eyes of Tessa's demonform, blazing with immortal rage, and as

the swirling mists closed around them, the eyes of Tessa's patron Fallen angel were all that I could see of her.

"Hey, Imariell!" I snarled. "I got some for you, too! *Fuego!*"

As I spoke the words, I hurled the fusion of my will and elemental flame through my staff, imbuing the spell that ran through it with the silver-white fire of Creation itself. A basketball-sized comet of blazing soulfire soared through the air like a chord of triumphant choir music and detonated upon those glowing eyes in thunder and fury, in steam and even more mist. The eyes vanished in time with a teakettle scream of hellish fury and a thunderous crash of shattering brick from the far end of the building.

That bought me a little time, at least. I whirled and dragged Harvey behind me just as the quickest or luckiest of the ghouls loomed out of the mist and flung itself bodily at my head.

No time for a spell. No *need* for one. With the full power of Winter still singing through my limbs, I whirled my heavy oaken quarterstaff and met the leaping ghoul with a strike that used the full power of my arms, shoulders, hips, and legs. I struck it across one shoulder, and there was a wet, sickening crack of breaking bone and limbs being torn out of joint. I hammered the ghoul to the floor with the same blow, as if it had been an overeager kitten jumping at me, and drew a yowling shriek of surprised anguish from it as it landed.

My mind flashed to a pair of young wizards, brother and sister, tormented to death by ghouls on my watch, a few years back—and I remembered that I owed *them* a debt, collectively, as well. I kicked the downed ghoul hard enough to send it sliding away over the icy floor, and though it was already taxing my reserves to call up that kind of power, I again unleashed Winter, snarling, "*Infriga!*"

The ghoul had no defenses against that kind of magic. An instant later, there was a white, vaguely ghoul-shaped block of ice where the creature had been. The block kept sliding, grinding over the icy floor . . .

. . . and fetched up against the clawed feet of the other three ghouls.

The three stared at the block of ice for a startled quarter-second, and then, as one, fixed me with hate-filled eyes and let out snarls of utter fury.

Yikes.

Time slowed down as they crouched to spring toward me.

Entombing one ghoul in ice was one thing. Doing it to three of them was something else entirely. If I took the time to take out one of them, the other two would be upon me almost before the words had left my lips, and four ghouls minus two ghouls is two ghouls too many. When you're outnumbered as badly as I was, inflicting two-to-one casualties is just another way to say that you lost and got eaten.

I had to change the footing of this fight.

The ghoul on my left was a shade faster than his two fellows, and I sprang to my left, drawing him with me, creating a little more space between him and his companions. As his clawed feet left the ground, I gestured with my staff, calling upon Winter again and shouting, "*Glacivallare!*"

With a shriek, a sheet of ice a foot and a half thick rose from floor to ceiling in a ruler-straight line cutting diagonally across the sales floor. The ice clipped the lead ghoul's heels as it shot upward, slamming into the ceiling in front of the other two with an ear-tearing grinding noise.

My timing had been solid. It was a one-on-one fight again. I felt a surge of triumph.

That lasted for maybe a quarter of a second, and then the leaping ghoul hit me like a professional linebacker. Who was also a hungry cannibal.

He slammed into me hard enough to break ribs, and I had to hope that the crackling sound I heard was shifting ice. We went down hard, with me on bottom, my duster now sliding over the hard surface, dispersing some of the energy of the hit.

The ghoul knew exactly what it was doing. I'd tangled with them a few times before, and in a fight, ghouls are mostly all unfocused ferocity and brute strength, ripping and tearing at whatever they can reach. This one didn't do that. He got both hands on my staff, wrenching it aside with

that hunched, fantastic strength, and ducked his head in close, going for my throat, for the immediate kill. I knew enough about hand-to-hand fighting to recognize technique and discipline when I saw it. It was the difference in fighting a furious drunken amateur and taking on a trained soldier or a champion mixed martial artist.

Over the years, I'd picked up some technique of my own, from Karrin and the others. I provided an instant's resistance against the ghoul's wrenching of my quarterstaff, then released it as I doubled up my body, pushing the ghoul up as hard as I could with my legs, trying to shove him to one side.

I didn't fling him off me or anything, but simultaneously taking his balance and giving him a solid impetus in a new direction let me dump him to the ice just as his jaws began to snap closed on my throat. I felt a flash of sensation there as his weight vanished, and I rolled frantically in the opposite direction, using the momentum of the push to get me going.

I came to my feet, a hair faster than the ghoul warrior, already reaching for a fire spell in my mind—but without the aid of my staff to focus the energy of the spell more efficiently and effectively, I was a shade too slow getting it together. The ghoul came back to his feet, his claws digging at the ice, and promptly came at me with my own damned staff, whirling it like he knew how to use it.

I let out a yelp and started dodging. If we'd been standing on the street, he'd have tenderized me into a pulpy mess that he'd barely need to chew. But we weren't standing on the street. We fought in the frozen arctic air of the little store coated in Winter ice. The ice betrayed him at every movement, forcing him to constantly keep his balance in check, while to the Winter Knight it was as smooth and safe as a dance studio's floor. I ducked around empty clothes racks, dumping a couple of them at the ghoul as he came at me, hoping to knock him down, and changed direction constantly, hoping to open the gap between us or force him to lose his balance. All I needed was a portion of a second to bring another spell into play and end the fight.

Problem was, the ghoul knew it. He came at me smart and fast and balanced, and as long as he could keep doing it, he had me in a stalemate. All he had to do was hold me until his friends either ripped through the wall or loped around it, and I was done.

Stars and stones, I was missing my force rings right about then. And my blasting rod, and shield bracelet, and every other little magical craft tool I'd ever designed. But when my lab and its accompanying gear had been destroyed, it had severely cut down my options on what I could manufacture—and being stuck out on the island the whole winter with harshly limited resources, limited by what my brother could round up and bring on a boat, I'd not yet had a chance to set up anything as elaborate and as extensively personalized as a new lab. I'd managed the staff and the wooden skull, working at a laboriously glacial pace, but practically all I'd had to work with was a small set of knives and some sandpaper left over from the construction of the Whatsup Dock.

Preparation! Dammit, Harry. The key to survival as a wizard is preparation!

I could hear sledgehammer blows being delivered to my ice wall, and though I couldn't see it in the fog, I could *hear* the change of pitch in each impact, as the ice began to crack and shatter.

"Oh God!" Harvey shouted in a panic. I couldn't see him either, and I'd forgotten about him for a second. He was probably right where I'd left him, within a few feet of the wall, and able to see exactly what was happening.

The other two ghouls were coming through.

Something inside me started screaming along with poor Harvey.

It was time for a desperate risk.

I abruptly shifted direction and charged the warrior ghoul.

My staff flickered at my head. I raised my left arm to block, trying to take the blow on the meaty muscle of my forearm. Though I didn't feel any pain, the impact sent a flash of white light across my vision. My duster's sleeve caught some of the blow, but not much. Its defensive spells were really meant to slow and disperse fast-moving objects like bullets, or to stop the penetration of sharp things. A big blunt instrument had no subtlety, but it was merry hell to defend against.

I found myself inside the quarterstaff's reach, and promptly slammed my head against the end of the ghoul's muzzle. He let out a yowl of surprise and anger, his forward momentum abruptly stalled, and I followed up with a one-armed push using every bit of muscle the Winter mantle could muster.

The ghoul staggered back several steps and then *his feet went out from under him!*

Hope sparked and kindled will. As the ghoul fell, I let out a triumphant howl of "*Infriga!*"

Winter howled into the little store for the fifth time in maybe sixty seconds, blanketing the fallen ghoul warrior in absolute cold and boiling fog. I panted frantically for a couple of seconds, until the fog boiled away enough to let me see the warrior ghoul in its frozen sarcophagus.

"Harvey!" I croaked. "Harvey, sound off!"

"Oh God!" Harvey sobbed. "Oh God!"

"Yeah, or that," I muttered, and hurried toward the sound.

I reached him just as the other two ghouls pounded their way through the wall. Harvey let out a shockingly high-pitched squealing sound and scrambled in helpless panic on the slippery ice.

I raised my frost-coated right hand, gathered my will for another spell—

—and found a patch of white blankness in front of my eyes. I blinked and suddenly I was sitting on the ice next to Harvey, wondering how I'd gotten down there.

Winter, I realized. I called up too much power, too fast, with too little chance to rest. I'd burned up my reserves of magical energy, to the point where it threatened to rob me of consciousness. But even now, I didn't *feel* magically exhausted.

Of course you don't feel it, dummy. You're the Winter Knight.

I blinked a couple of times, and then looked down at my left arm, which was sending me some sort of odd, pulsing sensation.

My duster's sleeve was being distended from the inside by something pointy. It took me an effort of conscious observation and logical processing to realize that it was my own broken arm.

A seven-foot section of the ice wall suddenly shattered and fell to the floor with a groan.

I shoved myself to my feet with my good arm as the other two warrior ghouls came through the opening.

No magic.

No weapons.

No options.

I set my teeth in a defiant, futile snarl and the ghouls pounced.

Chapter Nineteen

Both ghouls came at me, as the most dangerous target in sight, ignoring the sobbing Harvey. I didn't blame them. I'd have made the same call.

All three of us were wrong.

The warrior ghouls came at me from different angles, so that I could have nailed only one of them, even if I'd had the energy to call up another blast of Winter. It meant that one ghoul had to bound to one side and then rush me. The other one just leapt over Harvey's screaming figure.

Goodman Grey killed that one first.

As the ghoul passed over him, Harvey's eyes went cold and calm, and one arm swept out. I didn't see it actually change, as much as I had an impression that the arm was, for a second, in an entirely different shape—a hard, inward-curving sickle, moving with fantastic speed. There was a shearing sound combined with a *thunk*, like a schoolroom paper cutter, but wetter and meatier, and suddenly the ghoul's top and bottom halves were spinning off on separate arcs.

Then the second ghoul was on top of me, and even with the extra strength of the Winter mantle, it was everything I could do to keep its teeth off my throat. If it hadn't been for my duster, its claws would have shredded my torso in the second it took Grey to reach me.

There was a sense of motion more than anything I could actually see, and something vaguely gorilla-like seized the ghoul in enormous hands, and threw him away from me with such power that I heard joints dislocating from the force of the throw. The ghoul hit a still-standing portion of the wall of ice and went right through it, splattering fluids in the process. Before it had gone all the way through the wall, a blur that reminded me of some kind of big hunting cat hit it in midair and bore it to the ground, out of sight behind the fog and the rubble of the wall.

The ghoul let out a single, weak, gurgling scream.

Then it went quiet.

Something moved on the other side of the wall. A few seconds later, there was a long exhalation and Goodman Grey appeared, stepping calmly over what was left of the wall. Something was twitching in death on the floor beyond him, though I couldn't make out any details—and didn't want to. Ghouls don't die easy, and they don't go out any way but messy. The one he'd bisected was making scrabbling noises from two different directions in the fog.

He looked around for a moment, pursed his lips and nodded, and said, "Good move, splitting them up like that, and in the fog, too. Smart. Don't see that much in people your age."

"There's always more of them than me," I said, and got to my feet. I had a feeling that I didn't want to be sitting on the ground bleeding, with a broken arm, around Goodman Grey. You don't give predators like that ideas—and at that moment, the casually dressed, unremarkable-looking little guy was scaring me more than had the ghouls and Tessa together.

I kept any tremor out of my voice and asked, "Where's Harvey?"

"Over here," Grey said. He looked exactly as relaxed as he had before, as if he had just paused to throw away an empty paper cup, rather than tearing two ghouls to shreds. His eyes lingered on my wounded arm. "I only had a few seconds to make the switch and he wouldn't quiet down. I had to knock him out."

I gave him a hard look. Then I took a couple of steps to the frozen ghoul who had taken my staff from me and reached down to wrench it free of the Winter ice. It crumbled for me obligingly, yielding the tool back into my hand. A couple of the ghoul's clawed fingers broke off and came with it. I shook them off of it with a grimace, turned to Grey, and said, "Show me."

He lifted his eyebrows at me for a moment. He might have smiled a bit, but nodded and waved for me to follow him. He didn't seem in the least worried about turning his back on me.

Hell's bells. For all I knew, the shapeshifter had eyes in the back of his head.

Grey led me to the side of the sales floor, where old metal-frame shelves had once held magazines. He grabbed one and hauled it easily aside.

Harvey Morrison's corpse lay on the other side.

His throat had been cut, neatly, by something sharp. There was an unholy mess on the floor around him. His eyes were open and staring sightlessly up at the ceiling. The blood was still pulsing out, though he was white enough that I knew that it was too late. He was dead. His body was still figuring it out.

I lifted my eyes slowly to Grey.

The shapeshifter stared down at Harvey with a very faint frown on his face. He looked up at me and said, "Huh. Awkward."

"You think this is funny?" I asked him. I knew my voice sounded hot.

"I think it stinks," Grey said, and looked back at Harvey. "I only choked him out."

"You would say that, though, if you were trying to screw me over."

"No, I wouldn't," Grey said. "I'd tell you I cut his cowardly throat because it was simpler."

"You would?"

"It's not as if you frighten me, Dresden. Lying well takes a lot of effort, and it gets old after a few centuries. Mostly I don't bother." He nudged Harvey's shoulder with the toe of his shoe. "But someone went to a lot of effort to get this done. Did it fast. Got out just as fast."

"Where's Deirdre?" I asked.

"She was supposed to be chasing her mother away after you bloodied her nose for her." He knelt down on the floor beside Harvey and then leaned closer, inhaling through his nose like a hound. "Nngh." He considered for a moment. "Too much fresh blood and damned ghoul stench. Can't get anything through it." He looked up at me. "What about you?"

"If I had twenty-four hours to collect gear and another five or six to go over the place, maybe I could turn up something," I said.

We looked at each other. I think we were both thinking that the other one wasn't telling us something he knew. Except that I was actually ignorant, whereas I was pretty sure Grey had scented more than he let on. But he struck me as the suspicious sort.

Evidently, Grey had me figured the same way. He let out an impatient sigh. "Wizard. You know I'm telling you the truth, right?"

"Right," I said. "Sure you are. We're a trustworthy bunch of Boy Scouts."

That got what almost looked like a genuine wry smile out of him. He leaned down and closed Harvey's eyes with one hand, the motion almost respectful. In the same gesture, he ran his fingers through the thickening puddle of blood.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Getting what we came for," he said. "Got to have the blood sample for what's coming up. You'll have to tell Nicodemus where I am."

"And where's that?"

"Morrison Fiduciary Services, for the rest of the day," he said. "The point of not killing Harvey was to avoid the possibility that he'd be noticed if he went missing. So he's about to not go missing."

"You're going to fake being a confidential and knowledgeable financial expert to people you've never met before for the rest of the day?" I asked him, my voice heavy with sarcasm.

"Yes," Grey said calmly.

I felt my eyebrows going up. "You're that good?"

"I'm better," he said. His eyes glinted weirdly and it made me shudder.

"What about Harvey's body?"

"He didn't have any family. And you've got two ghouls on ice," he said. "Leave them where they are. They'll take care of him for us when they thaw out."

That made me grind my teeth. “Maybe I should take them out now. Those guys were different than the usual ghoul. I don’t feel like giving them a second shot at me.”

“Whatever,” Grey said. “I need to get moving.”

Grey started lapping the fresh blood out of his cupped hand. He grimaced, and then shuddered, and a second later, he looked exactly like the corpse at his feet, clothes and all. He leaned over and took Harvey’s glasses out of his shirt pocket. He wiped the blood off them on a corner of Harvey’s shirt, and then put them on. “Better get someone to look at that arm, eh?”

I eyed my broken arm distractedly and then said, “Grey.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not leaving Harvey’s body to be eaten by ghouls. And if you’ve got a problem with that, then we can discuss it right now.”

Grey looked at me with Harvey’s face and then nodded once. “Your call. You do it.”

And he padded off through the rapidly thinning fog toward the opening I’d blasted in the store’s window, and vanished onto the street.

I looked down at Harvey’s corpse. Then I said, “I’m sorry.” It seemed inadequate. I was going to promise him that I would punish his murderer—but Harvey was beyond that now.

The dead don’t need justice. That’s for those of us who are left looking down at the remains.

I pushed the heavy shelves back in front of Harvey’s body. The authorities would probably find him in a couple of days. It wasn’t dignified, but there wasn’t a lot more that I could do—and I really didn’t feel like making a run on Hades’ vault only to find a batch of mythological badasses waiting to kill us all the moment we came in. So I did what I could.

I didn’t have much left in the way of a magical punch. But I did have the strength of my good arm and a big heavy stick. I used them to shatter the frozen ghouls into chunks, and then I left the store too, and shambled back out to the rental car, feeling tired and sick and useless.

Chapter Twenty

I wasn't sure where I was driving. The important thing was to drive.

Some part of me was noting, with more than a little alarm, that I was not behaving in any kind of rational fashion. The numbers weren't adding up. I had a badly broken arm. We were on the clock. I had left Karrin by herself among that crew, though I felt fairly sure that Ascher and Binder wouldn't kill her out of hand, and that Nicodemus had no good reason to do so. Yet. But I had only Grey's word that he had gone where he said he meant to go. For all I knew, he'd doubled back to the warehouse to indulge his interest in Karrin. Unlikely, maybe, but I still didn't like the idea of leaving her there.

On the other hand, I couldn't go back either. Not with my arm hurt like that. Showing weakness to that crew was not an option.

I checked to be sure that my arm wasn't bleeding. It wasn't, but I nearly crashed into a car that had come to a stop in front of me while I was looking. Whatever the mantle of the Winter Knight did for me, the damage was catching up to me now. Maybe I couldn't feel the pain, but the mantle had to draw its energy from something, and the most logical source was me. The pain didn't hurt, but it was still being caused by a very real injury, and covering that pain was costing me in exhaustion and focus.

I needed help.

Right. Help. I should drive to Butters, get him to set the arm and splint it.

But instead I found myself parking the car in front of a pretty, simple, Colonial home in Bucktown. It was a lovely house, unpretentious and carefully maintained. There was a large oak tree out front, a couple more in the back, and a freshly painted white picket fence surrounded the front yard. A new mailbox, handmade and hand-carved, rested on a post beside the fence's gate. Metallic gold lettering on the mailbox's side read: THE CARPENTERS.

I put the car in park and eyed the house nervously.

I hadn't been there since my last trip to Chicago, the year before. I'd stopped by when I'd been pretty sure no one was home, like a big old coward, to collect my dog, Mouse, for a secret mission.

Doing so had permitted me to craftily dodge my first meeting with my daughter since I'd carried her from the blood-soaked temple in Chichén Itzá, from the deaths of thousands of vampires of the Red Court—and from her mother's body, dead by my hand.

Her name was Maggie. She had dark hair and eyes, just like Susan, her mother.

Beautiful Susan, who I'd failed, just like I'd failed Harvey.

And after that, I'd taken Molly Carpenter out and gotten her involved with some of the most dangerous beings I knew. Because she'd been helping me, Molly had fallen prey to the power games of the Sidhe—and now, for all I knew, she wasn't even truly human anymore.

Molly, who I'd failed, just like I'd failed Harvey.

What the hell was I doing here?

I left the car and shambled up to the gate. After a brief pause, I opened it, and continued to the front door.

I knocked, wondering who might be home. It was the middle of the day. The kids would all be in school. For a second, I debated fleeing, driving away. What was I hoping to accomplish here? What could I possibly do here that would make victory in my treach-off with Nicodemus any more likely?

It was wholly against reason.

I stood on the front porch of Michael Carpenter's house, and only then did I realize that I was crying, and had been for a while. Again, I considered simple, childish flight. But my feet didn't move.

A moment later, a good man opened the door.

Michael Carpenter was well over six feet tall, and if he didn't have quite the same musculature he'd carried when he'd been an active Knight of the Cross, he still looked like he could take most men apart without breaking a sweat. His brown hair was more deeply threaded with silver than it had been before, and his beard was even more markedly grizzled. There were a few more lines on his face, especially around the eyes and mouth—smile lines, I thought. He wore jeans and a blue flannel work shirt, and he walked with the aid of a cane.

He'd gotten the injury fighting beside me because I hadn't acted fast enough to prevent it. I'd failed Michael, too.

My view of him went watery and vague and fuzzed out completely.

"I think I need help," I heard myself whisper, voice little more than a rasp. "I think I'm lost."

There was not an instant's hesitation in his answer or in his deep, gentle voice.

"Come in," my friend said.

I felt something break in my chest, and let out a single sob that came out sounding like a harsh, strangled groan.

* * *

I sat down at Michael's kitchen table.

Michael's house had a big kitchen that looked neater and a lot less cluttered than the last time I'd seen it. There were two big pantries, necessary for the provisioning of his platoon-sized family. The table could seat a dozen without putting the leaves in.

I squinted around. The whole place looked neater and better organized, though it had always been kept scrupulously clean.

Michael took note of my gaze and smiled quietly. "Fewer people occupying the same space," he said. There was both pride and regret in his voice. "It's true, you know. They grow up fast."

He went to the fridge, pulled out a couple of beers in plain brown bottles, and brought them back to the table. He used a bottle opener shaped like Thor's war hammer, Mjolnir, to open them.

I picked up the bottle opener and read the inscription on it. "'Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall wield the power of Thor.' Or at least to crack open a beer."

Michael grinned. We clinked bottles and drank a pull, and I put my arm up on the table.

He took one look at my sleeve and exhaled slowly. Then he said, "Let me help."

I eased out of my duster, with his aid, my arm and wrist flickering with silvery twinges of sensation as the sleeve came off. Then I eyed my arm.

The bone hadn't actually come out of the skin, but it looked like it would only take a little push to make it happen. My forearm was swollen up like a sausage. The area around the upraised bone was purple and blotchy, and something that looked like blisters had come up on my skin. Michael took my arm and laid it out straight on the table. He began to prod it gently with his fingertips.

"Radial fracture," he said quietly.

"You're a doctor now?"

"I was a medical corpsman when I served," he replied. "Saw plenty of breaks." He looked up and said, "You don't want to go to the hospital, I take it?"

I shook my head.

"Of course not," he said. He prodded some more. "I think it's a clean break."

"Can you set it?"

"Maybe," he said. "But without imaging equipment, I'll have to do it by feel. It could heal crookedly if I'm not good enough."

"I'd kill most of that equipment just by walking into the room with it," I said.

He nodded. "We'll have to immobilize the wrist right away once it's done."

"Don't know if I can afford that."

"You can't *not* afford it," he replied bluntly. "Assuming I get it set, one twist of your hand will shift the bone at the break. You've got to immobilize and protect it or the ends will just grind together instead of healing."

I winced. "Can you do a cast?"

"There's too much swelling," he said. "We'll have to splint it and wait for the swelling to go down before it can take a proper cast. I could call Dr. Butters."

I flinched at the suggestion. "He's . . . sort of wary of me right now. And you know how much he doesn't like working on living people."

Michael frowned at me for a moment, studying my face carefully. Then he said, "I see." He nodded and said, "Wait here."

Then he got up and went out his back door, toward his workshop. He came back a few moments later with a tool-bag of items and set them out on the table. He washed his hands, and then took some antibacterial towelettes to my arm. Then he took my wrist and forearm in square, powerful hands.

"This will hurt," he advised me.

"Meh," I said.

"Lean back against the pull." Then he began pulling with one hand, and putting gentle pressure on the upraised bone with the other.

It turned out that even the Winter Knight's mantle has limits. Either that, or the batteries were low. A dull, bone-deep throb roared up my arm, the same pain you feel just before your limbs go numb while submerged in freezing water, only magnified. I was too tired to scream.

Besides.

I had it coming.

After a minute of pure, awful sensation, Michael exhaled and said, "I think it's back in place. Don't move it."

I sat there panting, unable to respond.

Michael wrapped the arm in a few layers of gauze, his hands moving slowly at first, and then with increasing confidence—old reflexes, resurfacing. Then he took the rectangular piece of sheet aluminum he'd brought in from his workshop, gave my arm a cursory glance, and used a pair of pliers and his capable hands to bend it into a U-shape. He slid it over my hand at the knuckles, leaving my thumb and fingers free. The brace framed my arm most of the way to my elbow. He slid it back off and adjusted the angle of the bend slightly before putting it back on. Then he took a heavier bandage and secured the brace to my arm.

"How's that?" he asked, when he was finished.

I tested it very, very gingerly. "I can't twist my wrist. Of course, there's a problem with that."

"Oh?"

I spoke as lightly as I could. "Yeah, I can't twist my wrist. What if there's some incredibly deadly situation that can only be resolved by me twisting my left wrist? It could happen. In fact, I'm not quite sure how it could *not* happen, now."

He sat back, his eyes steady on my face.

I dropped the joking tone. "Thank you, Michael," I said. I took a deep breath. There was no point in saying anything else, here. It must have been the broken arm talking, telling me it was a good idea to open up to someone. "I should go."

I started pushing myself up.

Michael took his cane, hooked the handle around my ankle and calmly jerked my leg out from beneath me. I flopped back into the chair.

"Harry," he said thoughtfully. "How many times have I saved your life?"

"Bunch."

He nodded.

"What have I asked you for in return?"

"Nothing," I said. "Ever."

He nodded again. "That's right."

We sat in silence for a long time.

Finally, I said, very quietly, "I don't know if I'm one of the good guys anymore."

I swallowed.

He listened.

"How can I be," I asked, "after what I've done?"

"What have you done?" he asked.

It took me another minute to answer. "You know about Mab. What I am now. The deal I made."

"I also know that you did so intending to use that power to save your daughter's life."

"You don't know about Susan," I said. I met his eyes. "I killed her, Michael."

I don't know what I looked like—but tears suddenly stood out in his eyes. "Oh, Harry." He looked down. "She turned, didn't she? What happened?"

"That son of a bitch, Martin," I said. "He . . . he set her up. Sold out the family that had Maggie. I think he did it to set me on a collision course with the Red King, maybe hoping to focus the White Council on the war effort a little harder. But he had inside knowledge of the Reds, too. He'd worked for them. Was some kind of double agent, or triple agent—I don't know. I don't think he was running a grand scheme to get to one specific moment . . . but he saw his chance. The Red King was getting set to kill Maggie as part of a ritual bloodline curse. The curse was meant to kill me and . . . other people, up my family tree."

Michael raised his eyebrows.

"But the ritual was all loaded up and Martin saw a chance to wipe out the whole Red Court. All of them. He popped Susan in the face with the knowledge of his treachery and she just *snapped* . . ." I shuddered, remembering it. "I saw it coming. Saw what he was doing. Maybe I could have stopped it—I don't know—but . . . I didn't. And she killed him. Tore his throat out. And . . . she started to change and . . ."

"And you finished the ritual," he said quietly. "You killed her. You killed them all."

"The youngest vampire in the whole world," I said. "Brand-new. And they all originated from a single point—the Red King, I guess. Their own curse got every one of them. The whole family."

"Every Red Court vampire," Michael said gently, "was a killer. Every one of them, at one point, chose to take someone's life to slake their thirst. That's what turned them. That choice."

"I'm not shedding tears over the Red Court," I said, contempt in my voice. "The fallout from taking them all out at once . . . I don't know. Maybe I'd wish I could have done it differently. With more planning."

"One doesn't destroy an empire built on pain and terror neatly," Michael said, "if history is to be any indicator."

I smiled bleakly. "It was a little hectic at the time," I said. "I just wanted to save Maggie."

"May I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"After she started to turn . . . how did you subdue Susan?"

I sat for a time, trying to remember the moment less clearly.

"You didn't," he said gently, "did you?"

"She . . . she was turning. But she understood what was happening."

"She sacrificed herself," Michael said.

"She allowed *me* to sacrifice her," I snarled, with sudden, boiling fury. "There's a difference."

"Yes," Michael said quietly. "There's a cost for you in that. A burden to be carried."

"I kissed her," I said. "And then I cut her throat."

The silence after I said that was profound.

Michael got up and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Harry," he said quietly, "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry you were faced with those awful choices."

"I never meant . . ." I swallowed. "I never meant for all those things to happen. For Susan to get hurt. For Mab's deal to stick. I never meant to keep it."

Real pain touched his eyes. "Ah," he said quietly. "I'd . . . wondered. About the after."

"That was me," I said. "I arranged it. I thought . . . if I was gone before Mab had a chance to change me, it would be all right."

"You thought . . ." Michael took a slow breath and sat down again. "You thought that if you died, it would be all right?"

"Compared to me becoming Mab's psychotic monster?" I asked. "Compared to letting the Reds kill my daughter and my grandfather? Yeah. I regarded that as a win."

Michael put his face in his hands for a moment. He shook his head. Then he lifted his face and looked up at his ceiling, his expression a mixture of sadness and frustration and pain.

"And now I've got this thing inside me," I said. "And it pushes me, Michael. It pushes and pushes and pushes me to . . . do things."

He eyed me.

"And right now . . . Hell's bells, right now, Mab has me working with Nicodemus Archleone. If I don't, there's this thing in my head that's going to come popping out of it, kill me, and then go after Maggie."

"What?"

"Exactly," I said. "Nicodemus. He's robbing a vault somewhere and Mab expects me to pay off a debt she owes him. He's formed his own Evil League of Evil to get it done—and I'm a member. And to make it worse, I dragged Murphy into it with me, and I'm not even telling her everything. Because I *can't*."

Michael shook his head slowly.

"I look around me, man . . . I'm trying to do what I've always done, to protect people, to keep them safe from the monsters—only I'm pretty sure I'm *one of them*. I can't figure out where I could have . . . what else I might have done . . ." I swallowed. "I'm lost. I know every step I took to get here, and I'm still *lost*."

"Harry . . ."

"And my friends," I said. "Even Thomas . . . I was stuck out on that island of the damned for a year. A *year*, Michael, and they only showed up a handful of times. Just Murphy and Thomas, maybe half a dozen times in more than a year. It's just a goddamned boat ride away, forty minutes. People drive farther than that to go to the *movies*. They know what I'm turning into. They don't want to watch it happening to me."

"Harry," Michael said in a low, soft voice. "You . . . you are . . ."

"A fool," I said quietly. "A monster. Damned."

". . . so *arrogant*," Michael breathed.

I blinked.

"I mean, I was accustomed to a certain degree of hubris from you, but . . . this is stunning. Even on your scale."

"What?" I said.

"Arrogant," he repeated, enunciating. "To a degree I can scarcely believe."

I just stared at him for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know you were expecting me to share words of wisdom with you, maybe say something to you about God and your soul and forgiveness and redemption. And all those things are good things that need to be said in the right time, but . . . honestly, Harry. I wouldn't be your friend if I didn't point out to you that you are behaving like an amazingly pigheaded idiot."

"I am?" I asked, a little blankly.

He stared at me for a second, anger and pain on his face—and then they vanished, and he smiled, his eyes flickering as merrily as a Christmas Eve fire. I suddenly realized where Molly got

her smile. Something very like laughter bubbled just under the surface of his words. "Yes, Harry. You idiot. You are."

"I don't understand," I said.

He eyed our beers, which were empty. That tends to happen with Mac's microbrews. He went to the fridge and opened another pair of bottles with the power of Thor, and put one of them in front of me. We clinked and drank.

"Harry," he said, after a meditative moment, "are you perfect?"

"No," I said.

He nodded. "Omniscient?"

I snorted. "No."

"Can you go into the past, change things that have already happened?"

"Theoretically?" I asked.

He gave me a level stare.

"I hear that sometimes, some things can be done. But apparently it's tricky as hell. And I've got no idea how," I said.

"So can you?"

"No," I said.

"In other words," he said, "despite all the things you know, and all the incredible things you can do . . . you're only human."

I frowned at him and swigged beer.

"Then why," Michael asked, "are you expecting perfection out of yourself? Do you really think you're that much better than the rest of us? That your powers make you a higher quality of human being? That your knowledge places you on a higher plane than everyone else on this world?"

I eyed the beer and felt . . . embarrassed.

"That's arrogance, Harry," he said gently. "On a level so deep you don't even realize it exists. And do you know why it's there?"

"No?" I asked.

He smiled again. "Because you have set a higher standard for yourself. You think that because you have more power than others, you have to do more with it."

"To whom much is given, much is required," I said, without looking up.

He barked out a short laugh. "For someone who repeatedly tells me he has no faith, you have a surprising capacity to quote scripture. And that's just my point."

I eyed him. "What?"

"You wouldn't be twisting yourself into knots like this, Harry, if you didn't care."

"So?"

"Monsters don't care," Michael said. "The damned don't *care*, Harry. The only way to go beyond redemption is to choose to take yourself there. The only way to do it is to stop caring."

My view of the kitchen blurred out. "You think?"

"I'll tell you what I think," Michael said. "I think that you aren't perfect. And that means that sometimes you make bad choices. But . . . honestly, I don't know if I would have done any differently, if it had been one of my children at risk."

"Not you," I said quietly. "You wouldn't have done what I did."

"I *couldn't* have done what you did," Michael said simply. "And I haven't had to be standing in your shoes to make those same choices." He tilted his beer slightly toward the ceiling. "Thank you, God. So if you've come here for judgment, Harry, you won't find any from me. I've made mistakes. I've failed. I'm human."

"But these mistakes," I said, "could change me. I could wind up like these people around Nicodemus."

Michael snorted. "No, you won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I know you, Harry Dresden," Michael said. "You are pathologically incapable of knowing when to quit. You don't surrender. And I don't believe for a *second* that you actually intend to help Nicodemus do whatever it is he's doing."

I felt a smile tug at one corner of my mouth.

"Hah," Michael said, sitting back in his chair. He swallowed some more beer. "I thought so."

"It's tricky," I said. "I've got to help him get whatever he's after. Technically."

Michael wrinkled his nose. "Faeries. I never understood why they're such lawyers about everything."

"I'm the Winter Knight," I said, "and I don't get it either."

"I find that oddly reassuring," Michael said.

I barked out a short laugh. "Yeah. Maybe so."

His face grew more serious. "Nicodemus knows treachery like fish know water," he said. "He surely knows the direction of your intent. He's smart, Harry. He's got centuries of survival behind him."

"True," I said. "On the other hand, I'm not exactly a useless cream puff."

His eyes glinted. "Also true," he said.

"And Murphy's there," I said.

"Good," Michael said, rapping the bottle on the table for emphasis. "That woman's got brains and heart."

I chewed on my lip and looked up at him. "But . . . Michael, she wasn't . . . for the past year . . ."

He sighed and shook his head. "Harry . . . do you know what that island is like, for the rest of us?"

I shook my head.

"The last time I was there, I was shot twice," he said. "I was in intensive care for a month. I was in bed for four months. I didn't walk again for nearly a year. There was permanent damage to my hip and lower back, and physically, it was the single most extended, horribly painful, grindingly humiliating experience of my life."

"Yeah," I said.

"And," he said, "when I have nightmares of it, you know what I dream about?"

"What?"

"The island," Michael said. "The . . . presence of it. The malevolence there." He shuddered.

Michael, Knight of the Cross, who had faced deadly spirits and demons and monsters without flinching, shivered in fear.

"That place is horrible," he said quietly. "The effect it has . . . It's obvious that it doesn't even touch you. But I don't know if I could go back there again, by choice."

I blinked.

"But I know Molly went back there. And you tell me Karrin did, too. And Thomas. Many times." He shook his head. "That's . . . astounding to me, Harry."

"They . . . they never said anything," I said. "I mean, they never spent the night, either, but . . ."

"Of course they didn't," he said. "You already beat yourself up for enough things that aren't your fault. People who care don't want to add to that." He paused, and then added gently, "But you assumed it was about you."

I finished the beer and sighed. "Arrogance," I said. "I feel stupid."

"Good," Michael said. "It's good for everyone to feel that way sometimes. It helps remind you how much you still have to learn."

What he said about the island tracked. I remembered my first moments there, how unsettling it was. I had talent and training in defending myself against psychic assault, and I'd shielded against it on pure reflex, shedding the worst that it could have done to me. Wizard. And not long after

that, I'd taken on Demonreach in a ritual challenge that had left me the Warden of the place, and exempt from its malice.

Thomas hadn't had the kind of training, the kind of defenses I did. Molly, who was more sensitive than me to that kind of energy, must have found it agonizing. And Karrin, who had been assaulted psychically before . . . damn.

They'd all picked up more scars for me, on my behalf, without a word of complaint—and I'd been upset because they hadn't been willing to take more.

Michael was right.

I'd gotten completely focused on myself.

"It occurs to me," I said, "if I wasn't being the Winter Knight . . . Mab would have picked another thug." Mab had even told me who she would have gone after—my brother, Thomas. I shuddered to think what might have happened, if the temptations of Winter had been added to those he already bore. "Someone else would be bearing this burden. Maybe someone it would have destroyed by now."

"It occurred to you just now?" Michael asked. "I thought of it about five seconds after I heard about it."

I laughed and it felt really good to do it.

"There," Michael said, nodding.

"Thank you."

I meant it for a lot of things. Michael got it. He inclined his head to me. "There is, of course, an elephant in the room, of which we have not spoken."

Of course there was.

Maggie.

"I don't want to make her into a target again," I said.

Michael sighed patiently. "Harry," he said, as if speaking to a rather slow child, "I'm not sure if you noticed this. But things did not turn out well for the last monster who raised his hand against your child. Or any of his friends. Or associates. Or anyone who worked for him. Or for most of the people he knew."

I blinked.

"Whether or not that was your intention," Michael said, "you did establish a rather effective precedential message to the various predators, should they ever learn of her relationship to you."

"Do you think Nicodemus would hesitate?" I asked. "Even for a second?"

"To take her from this house?" Michael asked. He smiled. "I'd love to see him try it."

I lifted my eyebrows.

"A dozen angels protect this house, still," Michael said. "Part of my retirement package."

"She's not always in the house," I said.

"And when she isn't, Mouse is with her," he said. "We got him attached to her as a medical assist dog. He prevents her from having panic attacks."

I made a choking sound, imagining Mouse in a grade school. "By making everyone else around her panic instead?"

"He's a perfect gentleman," Michael said, amused. "The children love him. The teachers let the best students play with him on recess."

I imagined my enormous moose of a dog on a playground, trotting around after Maggie and other kids, with that dopey doggy grin on his face, cheerfully going along with whatever the kids seemed to have planned, moving with tremendous care around them, and shamelessly cadging tummy rubs whenever possible.

"That's kind of awesome," I said.

"Children frequently are," Michael said.

I chewed on my lip some more. "What if . . . Michael, she was there. She was in the temple when . . ." I looked up. "What if she remembers what I did?"

"She doesn't remember any of it," Michael said.

"Now," I said. "Stuff like that . . . it has a way of popping up again."

"If it does," he said, "don't you think she deserves to know the truth? All of it? When she's ready?"

I looked away. "The things I do . . . I don't want any of it to splash on her."

"I didn't want it to touch my children, either," Michael said. "Mostly, it didn't. And I don't regret my choices. I did everything in my power to protect them. I'm content with that."

"My boss has a few differences in policy compared to yours."

"Heh. True, that."

"I need to get moving," I said. "Seriously. I'm on the clock."

"We aren't done talking about Maggie," he replied firmly. "But we'll take it up soon."

"Why?" I asked. "She's safe here. Is she . . . She's happy?"

"Mostly," he said amiably. "She's your daughter, Harry. She needs you. But not, I think, nearly as much as you need her."

"I don't know how you can say that to me," I said, "after Molly."

He tilted his head. "What about Molly?"

"You . . . you know about Molly, right?" I asked.

He blinked at me. "She's been doing great lately. I saw her last weekend. Did she lose her apartment or something?"

I looked back at him in dismay, realizing.

He didn't know.

Michael didn't know that his daughter had become the Winter Lady. She hadn't told him.

"Harry," he said, worried, "is she all right?"

Oh, Hell's freaking bells. She hadn't *told* her parents?

That was so Molly. Unimpressed by a legion of wicked faeries—terrified to tell her parents about her new career.

But it was her choice. And I didn't have the right to unmake it for her.

"She's fine," I blurted. "She's fine. I mean, I meant, uh . . ."

"Oh," Michael said, a look of understanding coming over his face. "Oh, right. Well, that's . . . that's fine. Behind us now, and it all worked out."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but it was getting me out of making a major problem for Molly. I rolled with it. "Right," I said. "Anyway. Thank you, again. For too much."

"If it's ever too much," he said, "I'll thump you politely on the head."

"You'll have to, for it to get through," I said.

"I know." He rose, and offered me his hand.

I shook it.

"Michael," I asked, "do you ever . . . miss it?"

His smile lines deepened. "The fight?" He shrugged. "I'm very, very happy to have the time to spend with my wife and children."

I narrowed my eyes. "That . . . wasn't exactly an answer."

He winked at me. Then he walked me to the door, leaning on his cane.

By the time I got to the car, the icy ache in my arm had dulled down to a buzzing sensation. I was recovering. I'd get some anti-inflammatories into me before I got back, to help with the swelling. No, I couldn't feel the pain, but that didn't mean that it wouldn't be smart to do whatever I could to take the pressure off the mantle, to save my strength for when it counted. I needed to pick up some other things too, thinking along the same lines.

Whatever Nicodemus had planned, it would go down in the next twenty-four hours, and I was going to be ready for it.

Chapter Twenty-one

I rolled back up to the slaughterhouse just before the rented town car's transmission gave out on me altogether.

It sort of cheered me up, actually. I hadn't wrecked a car with my wizardliness in a long time. And it just couldn't have happened to a nicer guy's rental vehicle. For a moment, I felt a sudden, sharp pining for my old Volkswagen, which made about as much sense as anything else I'd been doing that day. The *Blue Beetle* had been uncomfortable and cramped and it had smelled a bit odd, not to mention that it was put together from the cannibalized scraps of a bunch of other late-sixties VWs—and I must have looked absolutely ridiculous crouched behind its wheel. But it had been my car, and while it hadn't run like a race car, it *did* run, most of the time.

Suck it, rental town car. The built-in talking GPS computer hadn't lasted two blocks.

"Jordan!" I boomed as I came in. I tossed a paper bag with a couple of cheeseburgers in it at the Denarian squire. "Chow down, buddy. They're hot, so don't let the cheese burn your ton—Oh, right. Sorry."

Jordan scowled at me and fumbled with the bag and his shotgun until he managed to balance the two. I clapped him on the shoulder in a genial fashion and rolled on by. I pointed at the guard at the next post and said, "You don't get cheeseburgers. You didn't say nice things to me like Jordan did."

The guard glowered at me in silence, of course. It was an act. No one could resist my bluff and manly charisma. In his heart of hearts, he wanted to be friends with me. I just knew it.

As I descended to the floor of the slaughterhouse, Karrin looked up from a long worktable absolutely covered in guns. She tracked my entrance, her expression touched with both wariness and . . . a certain amount of incredulity.

"Harry?" she asked, as I came down the last few steps.

"Who else would I be?" I asked. "Except that jerk Grey, except he's too busy being Harvey to be me." I took another paper bag from Burger King and plopped it down in front of Karrin, then dumped the loaded duffel I'd picked up from a military surplus store off where it hung over my shoulder. "Figured you might be hungry."

She eyed the fast-food bag. "I'm not sure I'm *that* hungry."

"Whoa, whoa, hold on there, Annie Oakley. You did *not* just say that," I said. "Not right to my face."

A slow smile spread over her mouth and reached her eyes. "Harry."

"I . . ." I exhaled. The talk with Michael had made me feel about twenty tons lighter, at least on the inside. "Yeah. I guess maybe it is." I felt my own smile fade. "Harvey's dead."

Her face sobered and her eyes raked over me, stopping on my arm. "What happened?"

"Polonius Lartessa showed up with a squad of soldier-ghouls and whacked him," I said. "Unless maybe it was Deirdre who did it. Or Grey. I had ghouls all over my face when it happened."

"Who took care of your arm for you?"

"A good man," I said.

She stared at me for a moment and then her eyebrows lifted. "Oh," she said. Her eyes glittered. "Oh. That explains some things, then."

"Yeah," I said, bouncing my weight lightly on my toes. "The point being, someone's trying to screw with the job before we even get going."

"What a crime," Karrin said.

I grunted. "If Tessa's trying to stop Nicodemus, I've got to wonder why."

"She's married to him?" she suggested drily.

"That's vengeance-worthy, all right," I said. "But . . . I don't know. I hate working in the dark."

"So what's the move?"

I chewed my lip and said, "Nothing's changed for us. Except . . ."

"Except what?" she asked.

"Except someone's going down for Harvey before this is done," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "I can get behind that."

I took a long look at the table. "Uzis," I noted.

"They're a classic," Karrin said. "Simple, reliable, durable, and *not* assault rifles."

That was good for the innocent bystanders of Chicago. Pistol ammunition wasn't nearly as good at flying through an extraneous wall or ten and killing some poor sap sitting in his apartment two blocks away. Which wasn't to say that they weren't insanely dangerous—just less so than a bunch of AK-47s would have been. Nicodemus wasn't doing that to be thoughtful. Either he'd bought what was available, or else he had a reason to cause only limited collateral damage.

"Can Binder's goons handle them?" she asked.

"I assume so," I said. "They seemed to take to guns pretty easily the last time. Check with Binder on it."

"Check with Binder on what?" asked Binder, appearing from farther down the factory floor. He was carrying a sandwich in one hand, a cup of what might have been tea in the other.

"Speak of the devil and he appears," I said.

Binder sketched me a courtly little bow, rolling his sandwich as he did.

"Your . . . people," Karrin said. "Do they know how to handle an Uzi or do they need some kind of orientation?"

"They'll be fine," he said, his tone confident, even cocky. "Don't ask them to fieldstrip and repair one, or for witty banter before they shoot, but for trigger work or reloading they're golden." His sharp, beady little eyes landed on my arm in its splint. "Does someone not know how to play well with others?"

His eyes went from me to start flicking around the slaughterhouse. I could all but see the calculation going on in his head. One Harry, no Deirdre, no Grey.

"They're fine," I said. "We ran into some opposition around the accountant."

"Bookmark," Binder said, holding up two fingers. He turned and retreated, wolfing down his sandwich, and returned a moment later with Hannah Ascher in tow. Ascher had ditched her sweater in favor of a tank top, and she looked as if she'd just come off a treadmill. She was breathing lightly and her skin was sheened with sweat. There were bits of ash stuck in the fine hairs of her forearms and smudging one cheek. Like every other look I'd seen on her, it was an awfully intriguing one—easily translated to let a fellow imagine what she might look like during . . .

"Right, then," Binder said. "Resume."

"We staked out the accountant," I said. "Nicodemus's wife showed up with a crew of ghouls and went after him. The accountant was killed."

"The wife did it?" Ascher asked.

"Women," Binder said scornfully.

Karrin and Ascher both eyed him.

He folded his arms. "I'm a century older than any of you sprats," he said. "I'll stand by that."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't kill Harvey," I said. "My gut says it wasn't Grey. Other than that, your guess is as good as mine."

"Eh?" Binder said, nodding toward me conspiratorially. "Women."

Karrin gave me a very level look.

I coughed. "The female of the species is deadlier than the male?"

She snorted, and picked up the next Uzi in the row.

"I don't understand. Why would Nicodemus's wife be trying to sabotage him?" Ascher asked.

"Maybe she wants to cop the job," Binder said wistfully. "Lot of money."

"Nah," I said. "Money isn't her thing."

"'Fraid you'd say that," he said. "Personal?"

"Let's just say that 'dysfunctional' doesn't even come close to that family."

"Bloody hell," Binder said. "Why does everyone have to get bloody personal? No bloody professional pride anymore." He glowered at me. "Present bloody company included."

"Language," Ascher said, wincing.

"Sod off," he said. "Where're Deirdre and Grey?"

"Grey's doubling the accountant," I said. "No clue about Deirdre."

Binder made a growling sound.

"Hey," Ascher said. "Has anyone else been keeping track of how many goats are in the pen?"

"Eight," said Karrin and Binder together.

I did a rough calculation. "It's eating one goat at every meal."

That got me a round of looks.

I shrugged. "Something's here. It stands to reason."

Ascher and Binder both looked around the factory floor. Ascher folded her arms as if she'd suddenly become cold.

"Big," Karrin noted calmly. "If it eats that much."

"Yeah," I said.

"And quiet."

"Yeah."

"And really, really fast."

Binder shook his head. "Bloody hell."

"What is it?" Ascher said.

"Could be a lot of things," Binder said. "None of them good." He squinted at me. "Muscle, you think?"

"Maybe where we're going, we need something with that kind of physical power," I said.

Ascher scowled. "Or maybe it's there to clean us up after the job."

"We wouldn't have been given a chance to become aware of it if that was the case," Karrin said.

"Unless that's what Nicodemus wants us to think," Binder said.

Us. I liked the sound of that. The more people I could incline against pitching in on Nicodemus's side when it all hit the fan, the better. "Let's not go down that rabbit hole," I said. "We've got problems enough without adding in paranoia."

"Too right," Binder said. "Job worth twenty million each, with an invisible monster nipping about the place and a psychotic ex trying to bugger us out of tweaking the nose of a bloody Greek god. What have we got to be paranoid about?"

"Look," I said, "at the best, it means Nicodemus isn't telling us everything."

"We knew that already," Ascher said.

I shrugged a shoulder in acknowledgment of that. "At worst, it means someone on the inside is giving information to some kind of opposition."

Ascher narrowed her eyes. "That's rich, coming from the opposition."

I waved a hand. "At this point, I'm playing the game. I'll get in and out again, because if I don't, Mab is going to have my head." Well, technically, she'd have the splattered pieces, but they didn't need the details. "I'm not looking to derail the train before then."

Ascher looked skeptical. Binder looked pensive. Karrin finished her inspection of the next Uzi and picked up another one.

"Ash-my-girl," Binder said, and jerked his head toward the other end of the factory floor.

She nodded, and the two of them moved off, walking close and speaking quietly.

Karrin watched them go, and then asked me, "What do you think they're talking about?"

"Same as us," I said. "Wondering when someone's going to pull the rug out from underneath them, and how they're going to get out of it in one piece."

"Or maybe thinking about doing a little pulling themselves," she said.

"Or maybe that," I said. "But . . . they won't do it until after they've got their packs loaded with jewels."

"How do you figure?"

"Binder," I said. "He's a mercenary, plain and simple."

"Unless that's what he wants us to think," Karrin said.

"Unless that," I said. I exhaled slowly. "This whole thing," I said, "is going to come down to guessing who isn't what they look like."

"Who is?" Karrin asked, her hands moving surely over the weapon. "Ever."

"Point," I said. "But it's going to be about guessing motivations. Whoever's done a better job of figuring out what the other wants wins."

Her mouth quivered at the corners. "Then we might be in trouble. Because your motivations have . . . never exactly been mysterious, Harry."

"Not to you," I said. "To someone like Nicodemus, I must seem like an utter lunatic."

Karrin let out a short laugh. "You know what? I think you're probably right." She manually cycled the action of the Uzi, caught the round as it was ejected, then put the weapon down and nodded. "That's it. Forty of them."

I grunted. "Didn't some biblical guy have forty soldiers to take on an army or something?"

"Gideon. He had three hundred."

"I thought that was the Spartans."

"It was also the Spartans," Karrin said. "Except that they had about four thousand other Greeks there with them in addition to their three hundred."

"Three hundred makes a better movie. Who had forty guys, then?"

"You're thinking of how many days and nights it rained on Noah's ark."

"Oh," I said. "I was sure somebody had forty guys."

"Ali Baba?"

"He didn't *have* forty guys," I said. "He ripped off forty guys."

"Maybe you're remembering cartoons again," Karrin said.

"Probably," I said. I stared down at the guns. "Forty of those demon suit guys. With Uzis."

She grimaced. "Yeah. Gonna take me maybe three hours just to load all the clips."

"What kind of target is tough enough that it needs forty demon soldiers with submachine guns to assault?"

Karrin shook her head. "Military installation?"

I grunted.

"You don't plan for this many guns if you don't intend to use them," Karrin said. "If it comes down to Binder's goons shooting people . . ."

"We sure as hell don't stand around and watch it happen," I assured her.

She nodded. "Good." She twisted her mouth in distaste. "Won't that upset Mab, if you bail out?"

"Her Royal FreezePop-iness can get upset—but if she claims to be surprised, I'll laugh in her face."

"But it could mean she kills you," she said quietly.

"Could mean she tries," I said, aiming for cocky and confident.

Karrin looked away, the motion a little too sharp. She didn't go so far as to need to blink tears from her eyes or anything, but for a moment she looked about ten years older. She nodded. It looked like she wanted to say something.

"Karrin?" I asked.

She shook her head once and said, "I've got to get these clips loaded."

"Want help?"

“Sure.”

We set to the task of loading a hundred and twenty thirty-two-round magazines with 9mm rounds. Thirty eight hundred bullets or so. Even with speed-loading tools, it took a while, and we worked in companionable silence, broken occasionally by the passing guard or an increasingly gentle, intermittent series of whumping sounds that came from the far end of the factory floor—Ascher, presumably, practicing her breaching spell.

Just as we were finishing up, footsteps came from the opposite direction and I looked up to see Nicodemus marching toward us, a pair of his squires tromping along behind him. Deirdre walked beside him, in her human form, her expression unfriendly and otherwise unreadable.

“Weapons ready?” he asked Karrin, without stopping.

“All set.”

“Excellent. Conference table, please.”

“Why?” I asked. My left hand hadn’t been good for much beyond holding the magazine as I loaded rounds, and the fingertips of my right hand felt raw.

Nicodemus went on by and glanced over his shoulder at me, his eyes lingering on my splint. “Grey is back. It’s time to talk about our target.”

Chapter Twenty-two

We gathered at the conference table again, and Anna Valmont slid into the seat beside me.

“Hey,” I said. “How goes the grease job?”

She eyed me and smiled faintly. “I am, in this crew, what is known as a grease man. A grease man is the person who can get you into someplace you otherwise couldn’t get into by yourself.” Her voice turned wry. “A grease job is something else.”

“Right,” I said, narrowing my eyes, nodding. “Got it. So how goes the man greasing?”

Valmont let out a shallow chuckle. “Got to admit, I wouldn’t mind being the first to take on one of those Fernucci monsters and win.”

“Can you?”

She nodded slowly. “I think it’s possible.”

Grey sauntered in, looking exactly as he had that morning, and sat down at the table.

“Order, please,” Nicodemus said, as Grey sat down next to Deirdre. “We’ll make this quick and then break for a meal, if that’s all right with everyone.”

“All right with me,” Ascher drawled. She looked sweatier and more smudged than she had a few hours before, but her expression was unmistakably smug. “I’m ravenous.”

“I know just what you mean,” Nicodemus said. “Deirdre?”

Once more, Deirdre circled the table with folders that were labeled simply *GOAL*.

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” I said. “Does this master plan of yours come with health coverage?”

“Dresden,” Nicodemus said.

“Because that kind of thing is getting to be more and more important. I mean, I know the government probably means well and all, but those people, honestly.”

Nicodemus eyed me.

“Life insurance seems like something that would be worthwhile, too.” I looked up at Ascher and winked. “Maybe we should strike until we get a whole-life policy.”

Ascher flashed me a quick grin and said, “I’ve always thought that insurance was more or less betting against myself.”

“Nah,” Binder said. “In my experience, you’re just playing the odds.”

“Children,” Nicodemus said with a sigh, “shall we focus on the matter at hand?”

“But I haven’t even had the chance to dip Deirdre’s pigtails in my inkwell,” I said.

Deirdre glowered at me, her eyes glinting.

“Fine,” I said, and subsided.

“Each of you,” Nicodemus said, “brings something to the table that we need in order to reach our final destination. The manor of the Lord of the Underworld, Vault Seven.”

“You mean Ha—”

“Shall we *not* speak his name for the next twenty-four hours or so, please, Mr. Dresden?” Nicodemus said in a pained tone. “Unless you prefer him to be ready and waiting for all of us, including yourself? Granted, the likelihood of him taking notice of any one of us, in particular, is vanishing small, but it seems prudent to take a few simple steps.”

“Whatever,” I said. I thought he was being pretty fussy. What with books and movies using him as a character, and mythology courses being taught all over the world, I figured Hades got to hear his name spoken in one form or another tens if not hundreds of thousands of times every day.

Each utterance of a powerful supernatural being’s name is . . . kind of like sending him a page, a ping for his attention. If I could have a phone that survived longer than an hour, and it tried to get my attention ten thousand times a day, I’d throw the damned thing into a hole. The big

supernatural beings, especially the very humanlike Greek gods, probably reacted in much the same way. Odds were good that I could sit chatting for an hour or two and mention his name several times, yet he wouldn't even notice my relative handful of pings among all the others. It took a deliberate and rhythmic repetition, usually at least three times, to really get a signal through the noise.

But on the other hand . . . there was always the chance that Hades just *might* feel my utterance of his name and randomly decide to take a moment to pay attention. That probably wouldn't be good. So despite giving Nicodemus lip, I shut up.

"Once we gain entry to the Underworld vault . . .," Nicodemus began.

I held up my hand and said, "Question?"

Nicodemus's left eye began to twitch.

I didn't wait for him to respond. "You're planning on just jumping straight to the vault? Hell, not even Hercules could do that. It was kind of a journey to get in. There was a bit with a dog and everything. Do you really think we're going to just hop right past all of the defenses around the realm of the king of the Underworld?"

That got everyone's attention, even Grey's. They all looked at Nicodemus, interested in the answer.

"Yes," Nicodemus said in a flat tone.

"Oh," I said. "Just like that, eh?"

"Once we're inside the vault," Nicodemus said, as if my question was not interesting enough to waste more time on, "there will be three gates between us and our goal. The Gate of Fire, the Gate of Ice, and the Gate of Blood."

"Fun," I said.

"Obviously," Nicodemus said, "Ascher was chosen for her capability with fire. As the Winter Knight, you, Dresden, will obviously handle the Gate of Ice."

"Right," I said. "Obviously. What about the Gate of Blood?"

Nicodemus smiled pleasantly.

Of course. Old Nick had probably spilled more blood than the rest of us in the room together, if you didn't count Deirdre. "Exactly what does each of these gates entail?"

"If I knew that," Nicodemus said, "I'd not have bothered recruiting experts. Each of us will take point on our specific gate, with the rest of the team backing whatever play they decide is important. Once we're through, we'll be in the vault. It's quite large. You'll have a few minutes to gather whatever it is you feel you need to take with you. After that time, I'm leaving. Anyone who lags behind is on his or her own."

I held up my hand again, and didn't bother waiting for a response. "What are you after?"

"Excuse me?" Nicodemus asked.

"You," I said. "Vault Seven is awfully specific. And you don't care much about money. So I have to wonder what's in there that you are so interested in."

"That's hardly your concern," Nicodemus said.

I snorted. "The hell it isn't. We're all sticking our necks out—and if things don't go well, we might have an angry *god* on our tails. I want to know what's worth that, other than the twenty million. After all, a lot of things could go wrong. Maybe you wind up dead, purely by someone else's hand on the way in—maybe I want to grab that whatsit for myself."

There was a mutter of agreement from Binder, and nods from Karrin and Valmont. Even Ascher looked curious. Grey pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Should I fall, the rest of you will already be dead," Nicodemus said calmly.

"Indulge me," I said. "This deal is already starting to stink. A reasonable person might walk based purely on what happened today."

That brought a low round of mutters, and Valmont asked, "What happened today?"

I told her about Tessa and her ghouls and Deirdre and Harvey. That made Valmont's lips compress into a line. She knew better than most what was left when a Denarian tore into a mortal,

and two out of three possible suspects were Knights of the Coin.

"That has no bearing on our mission," Nicodemus said.

"The hell it doesn't," I said. "I don't know about the rest of you, but the last thing we need is his crazy ex jumping into things on some kind of vengeance kick."

"It's not about that," Nicodemus said.

"Then what is it about?" I asked. "I dealt with the White Council my whole life, so I'm used to being treated like a mushroom—"

"Eh?" Ascher asked.

"Kept in the dark and fed bullshit," Binder reported calmly.

"Ah."

"—but this is going beyond the pale, even for me. You ask us to trust you about the plan to get into what should be an impenetrable vault. You ask us to trust you that our share will be waiting next to whatever it is you want. You ask us to trust you and believe that Tessa isn't on some kind of jihad that will get us all killed, but won't tell us what it is about." I looked around the table at my criminal confederates. "Trust is kind of a two-way street, Nicodemus. It's time to give something."

"Or you'll do what, precisely?"

"Or maybe we'll all walk away from a bunch of empty promises without a sliver of proof to back them up," I said.

Nicodemus narrowed his eyes. "Dresden and his woman are obviously in accord," he said.

Karrin scowled.

Nicodemus ignored her. "What about the rest of you?"

"What he said," Valmont said quietly.

Ascher folded her arms, frowning.

Binder sighed. "Twenty. Million. Quid. Think, girl."

"We can't spend it if we're dead from sticking our heads into a hole and getting them whacked off," Ascher said firmly.

Nicodemus nodded. "Grey?"

Grey tented his fingertips in front of his lips for a moment and then said, "The personal aspect of this interference troubles me. A job of this sort requires pure professionalism. Detachment."

Binder made a nonverbal sound of agreement with Grey's statements.

"I will not walk away from a job once I've agreed to it—you know how I operate, Nicodemus," Grey continued. "But I would sympathize if another professional of less ability and less rigid standards did so."

Nicodemus regarded Grey thoughtfully for a moment. "Your professional recommendation?"

"The wizard has a point," Grey said. "He is an annoying, headstrong ass, but he isn't stupid. It would not be foolish for you to invest some measure of trust to balance what you ask for."

Nicodemus mused over that for a moment and then nodded his head. "One ought not hire an expert and then ignore his opinion," he said. Then he turned to the rest of us. "Vault Seven contains, in addition to a standard division of gold and jewels, a number of Western religious icons. It is my intention to retrieve a cup from the vault."

"A wha'?" Binder asked.

"A cup," Nicodemus replied.

"All this," Binder said, "for a cup."

Nicodemus nodded. "A simple ceramic cup, something like a teacup, but lacking any handle. Quite old."

My mouth fell open and I made a choking sound at approximately the same time.

Grey pursed his lips and let out a slow whistle.

"Wait," Ascher said. "Are you talking about what I *think* you're talking about?"

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Karrin said quietly.

Nicodemus made a face in her direction. "Miss Murphy, please."

She gave Nicodemus a small, unpleasant smile.

Binder clued in a second later. "The bloody Holy Grail? Is he bloody kidding?"

Valmont turned to me, frowning. "That's real?"

"It's real," I said. "But it was lost more than a thousand years ago."

"Not lost," Nicodemus corrected me calmly. "It was collected."

"The cup that caught the blood of Christ," Grey mused. He eyed Nicodemus. "Now, what possible use could you have for that old thing?"

"Sentimental value," Nicodemus said with a guileless smile, and straightened the skinny strands of his grey tie. "I'm something of a collector of such artifacts myself."

The tie wasn't a tie, unless you meant it in a very literal sense. It was a length of simple old rope, tied into the Noose—the one that Judas used to hang himself after betraying Christ, if I understood it correctly. It made Nicodemus all but unkillable. I didn't know if anyone else in the world knew what I knew: that the Noose didn't protect him from itself. I'd nearly strangled him with it the last time we'd crossed trails—hence his roughened voice.

Grey didn't look like he believed Nicodemus's answer, but that hadn't stopped him from being satisfied with it. He looked around the room and said, "There. You know more than you did. Is it enough?"

"Tessa," I said. "What's her beef with you going after the Grail?"

"She wants it for herself, of course," Nicodemus said. "I'll deal with Tessa before we launch. It won't become an issue for the job. You have my personal guarantee."

Grey spread his hands. "There," he said. "That's good enough for me. Binder?"

The stocky little guy screwed up his eyes in thought and nodded slowly. "Ash?"

"All right," Ascher said. "Sure. That's enough for me, for now."

"But . . .," I began.

Ascher rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't be such a whiny little . . ." She turned to Binder. "Git?"

"Git," he confirmed.

"Don't be such a whiny little git, Dresden," Ascher said. "I'm hungry."

The more I could force Nicodemus to bend, the more of his authority would drain away from him. The more someone else defended him, the more he would stockpile. Time to try another angle. "And you aren't the only thing in here that is," I said to Ascher, and pointed at the goat pen. "Before I go anywhere else, I want to know what's been picking off the livestock."

"Ah," Nicodemus said. "That."

"Yeah, that."

"Does it matter?"

I glowered at him. "It kind of does," I said. Then, thoughtfully, I raised my voice to carry a little farther. "Whatever big, ugly, stinking, stupid thing you've got hanging around in here with us probably doesn't deserve to be in this company. Given our goal, I don't see the point in taking along a mindless mound of muscle."

Grey winced.

I felt it almost at once. The hairs on the back of my neck suddenly started trying to crawl up onto my scalp. Part of me kicked into a genuine watery-bellied fear reaction, something purely instinctive, a message from my primitive hindbrain: A large predator was staring at me with intent.

"Yeah, got your attention now," I muttered under my breath. I raised my voice to address Nicodemus. "Point is, Grey's right. It's time to share some details. So who is the last guy on the crew?"

"I certainly never meant to frighten anyone," Nicodemus said. "But I suppose I don't have the same point of view as you children. I can understand your apprehension."

Bull. He'd known exactly what he was doing, setting out the goats and letting us get the idea in our heads. From the start, he wanted us to know that he had something big and bad and dangerous hiding in reserve.

"If you don't mind," Nicodemus said to the room at large, "I think introductions are in order."

The nape of my neck was trying to slither away and find a good place to hide when the smell hit me first. It was thick and pungent, bestial—the smell of a large animal in the immediate proximity. A few seconds later, the goats started panicking in their pen, running back and forth and bleating to one another in terror.

“What the hell,” Valmont breathed, looking around uneasily.

I didn’t join her in rubbernecking. I was extending my awareness, my wizard’s senses, searching for the subtle vibration of magical energies at work in the air. I’d never been able to throw up a magical veil so good that it could mask odor, but just because I couldn’t do it didn’t mean that it was impossible. The one huge weakness of veiling magic was that it was still *magic*. If your senses were sharp, and you were reasonably sure a veil was present, you could find that source of magical energy if you looked hard enough.

I found it after a moment’s intense concentration—about ten feet directly behind me.

I turned kind of casually in my chair, folded my arms, fixed my gaze on the empty space where I’d felt the energy coming from and waited, trying to look bored.

It faded into sight, slowly, an utterly motionless figure. It was human in general shape, but only generally. Muscle covered it in ropy layers and in densities that were too oddly proportioned to be human—so much muscle that you could see its outlines through a thick layer of greyish, straggly hair that covered its body. It was well over nine feet tall. Massive shoulders sloped up to a tree-trunk-sized neck, and its head was shaped strangely as well, sloping up more sharply than a human skull, with a wide forehead and a brow ridge like a mountain crag. Eyes glittered way back in the shadows beneath that brow, glinting like an assassin’s knives from a cave’s mouth. Its features were heavy and brutish, its hands and feet absolutely enormous—and I had met the creature’s like before.

“Stars and stones,” I breathed.

That massive brow gathered, lowered. For a second, I thought there had been distant thunder outside, and then I realized that the nearly subsonic rumbling sound was coming from the thing’s chest.

It was growling.

At me.

I swallowed.

“This,” Nicodemus said into the startled silence, “is the Genoskwa. He, of course, knows you all, having been the first to arrive.”

“Big one, isn’t he,” Binder said, in a very mild voice. “What’s his job?”

“I share Dresden’s concerns about the availability of our target’s vault,” Nicodemus said. “There have, in the past, been rather epic guardians protecting the ways in and out of this particular domain. The Genoskwa has consented to join us in order to serve as a counterweight, should any such protection arise.”

“An ogre?” Ascher asked.

“Not an ogre,” I replied immediately. “He’s one of the Forest People.”

The Genoskwa’s growl might have gotten a little louder. It was so deep that I had a hard time knowing for sure.

“What’s the difference?” Ascher asked.

“I once saw one of the Forest People take on about twenty ghouls in a fair fight,” I said. “It wasn’t even close. If he’d been playing for keeps, none of them would have survived.”

The Genoskwa snorted a breath out through his nose. The sound was . . . simply *vile* with rage, with broiled, congealed hate.

I held out both of my hands palms up. I’d rarely seen the kind of power that River Shoulders, the Forest Person I’d met several times before, had displayed, physically and otherwise, and it seemed like a really fantastic idea to mend some fences if possible. “Sorry about what I said earlier. I figured Nicodemus had a troll stashed around here or something. Didn’t realize it was one

of the Forest People. I've done a little business with River Shoulders in the past. Maybe you've heard of—"

I don't even know what happened. I assume the Genoskwa closed the distance and hit me. One minute I was trying to establish some kind of rapport, and the next I was about a dozen feet in the air, flying across the factory floor, tumbling. I saw the conference table, the windows, the ceiling—and Jordan's incredulous face staring down at me from a catwalk, and then I hit the brick wall and light briefly filled my skull. I mean, I didn't even notice when I fell and hit the floor—or maybe I just can't remember that part.

I do remember that I came up fighting. The Genoskwa walked over the conference table—he just *stepped over it*—and covered the distance to me in catlike silence, in three great strides, moving as lightly as a dancer despite the fact that he had to weigh in at well over eight hundred pounds.

I threw a blast of Winter at him, only to see him make a contemptuous gesture and spit a slaverling, snarling word. The ice that should have entombed him just . . . drained away into the floor beneath him, grounding out my magic as effectively as a lightning rod diverts the power of a thunderbolt.

I had about half of a second to realize that my best shot had bounced off him with somewhat less effect than I would have had if I'd slugged him with a foam rubber pillow, and then he hit me again.

Aerial cartwheels. Another flash of impact against a wall. Before I could fall, he had closed the distance again—and his enormous hands drove a rusty old nail into my left pectoral muscle.

Once the steel nail had broken the surface of my skin, my contact with the mantle of the Winter Knight shattered, and I was just plain old vanilla me again.

And that meant pain.

A whole lot of pain.

The mantle had suppressed the pain of my broken arm, among other things, but once it was taken out of the circuit, all of that agony came rushing into my brain at the same time, an overload of torturous sensation. I screamed and thrashed, grabbing the Genoskwa's wrist with both hands, trying to force his arm and the nail he still held away from me. I might as well have been trying to push over a building. I couldn't so much as make him acknowledge my effort with a wobble, much less move him.

He leaned down, huge and grey and horrible-smelling, and pushed his ugly mug right up into mine, breathing hard through his mouth. His breath smelled like blood and rotten meat. His voice came out in a surprisingly smooth, mellow basso.

"Consider this a friendly warning," he said, his accent harsh, somehow bitter. "I am not one of the whimpering Forest People. Speak of me and that flower-chewing groundhog lover River Shoulders in the same breath again, and I will devour your offal while you watch."

"Ermph," I said. The room was spinning like some kind of wacky animated drunk scene. "Glngh."

The nail evidently robbed some of the power from Mab's earring, too. Someone drove a railroad spike into each temple, and I suddenly couldn't breathe.

The Genoskwa stepped back from me abruptly, as though I was something unworthy of his attention. He faced the rest of the room, while I clawed desperately at the nail sticking out of my chest.

"You," he said to the people seated at the table. "Do what Nicodemus says, when he says. Or I will twist off your head." He flexed his huge hands, and I suddenly noticed that they were tipped in ugly-looking, dirty claws. "Been here most of two days, and none of you ever saw me. Followed some of you all over this town last night. None of you saw me. You don't do your job now, no place you run will keep you from me."

Those at the table stared at him, stunned and silent, and I realized that my plan for stealing Nicodemus's thunder and destabilizing his authority over the crew had just gone down in flames.

The Genoskwa was apparently satisfied with his entrance. He strode to the pen and, as if it had been an appetizer at a sports bar and not a nimble animal trying desperately to avoid its fate, he plucked up a goat, broke its neck using only one hand, and vanished again, gone more suddenly than he had appeared.

Karrin was at my side a second later, grabbing the nail with her small, strong hands—but the pain was just too damned much. I was fading.

“Well,” I dimly heard Nicodemus say, “that’s dinner.”

Going, going.

Gone.

Chapter Twenty-three

I hadn't been to this place in a very long time.

It was a flat, empty floor in some vast, open, and unlit space that nonetheless somehow didn't echo with its emptiness, as if there were no walls from which sounds could reflect. I stood in a circle of light, though I couldn't quite make out the source of illumination above me.

It was the first time, though, that I'd ever been standing there alone.

"Hey!" I called out into the empty space. "It's not like my own subconscious can up and disappear, you know! If you've got something you want to say, hurry it up! I'm busy!"

"Yeah, yeah," called a voice from the darkness. "I'm coming. Keep your pants on."

There were shuffling footsteps, and then . . . I appeared.

Well, it wasn't me, exactly. It was my double, though, a mental image of myself that had appeared a few times in the past, and that I would probably avoid mentioning to any mental health professionals who had signed mandatory reporting clauses. Call him my subconscious, my id, the voice of my inner jerkface, whatever. He was a part of me that didn't surface much.

He was dressed in black. A tailored black shirt, black pants, expensive black shoes. He had a goatee, too.

Look, I never said my inner self was hideously complex.

In addition to his usual outfit, he also wore a pin on his left breast—a snowflake, wrought from silver with such complexity and detail that one could see the crystalline shapes of its surface. Whoa. I wasn't sure exactly what the hell *that* meant, but given how my day was going, I was reasonably sure it was nothing good.

There was someone with him.

It was a smallish figure, covered in what looked like a black blanket of soft wool. It moved slowly, hunched, as if in terrible pain, leaning hard against my double's supporting arms.

"Uh," I said. "What?"

My double sneered at me. "Why is it that you've never got the least goddamned clue what's happening inside your own head. Have you ever noticed this trend? Doesn't it bug you sometimes?"

"I try not to overthink it," I said.

He snorted. "Hell's bells, *that's* true. We have to talk."

"Why can't you just send dreams like everyone else's subconscious?"

"I've been trying," he said, and shifted into a voice that sounded suspiciously like Bullwinkle the cartoon moose. "But somebody's been busy not overthinking it."

I arched an eyebrow. "Oh, wait. That . . . that dream with Murphy? That was you?"

"All the dreams are me, blockhead," my double said. "And I swear, dude, you have got to be the most repressed human being on the face of the planet."

"What? Maybe you didn't notice, but I'm not exactly bending over backwards for anybody?"

"Not oppressed, moron. Repressed. As in sexually. What is *wrong* with you?"

I blinked, offended. "What?"

"You were doing okay with Susan," he said. "And Anastasia . . . Wow, there's really something to be said for experience."

I felt myself blushing and reminded myself that I was talking to me. "So?"

"And what about all the things you missed, dummy?" he asked. "You had the shadow of a freaking angel who could have shown you any sensual experience you could possibly have *imagined*, but did you take her up on it? No. Mab's been *throwing* girls at you. You could literally make one phone call and have half a dozen supernaturally hot Sidhe girls playing rodeo with you

anytime you wanted, and instead you're playing hopscotch over the cages of has-been demons. Hell, Hannah Ascher would have gotten busy with you if you wanted."

"It's Parkour," I said defensively. "And just because I don't go to bed with everything with a vagina doesn't mean I'm repressed. I don't want it to be just sex."

"Why *not*?" my double said, exasperated. "Go forth and freaking multiply! Drink from the cup of life! Carpe femme! For the love of God, get *laid*."

I sighed. Right. Id me didn't have to be concerned with long-term consequences. He was my instinctive, primitive self, driven by my most primal impulses. I wondered, briefly, if *id* and *idiot* came from the same root.

"You wouldn't get it," I said. "It's got to be more than just physical attraction. There's got to be respect and affection."

"Sure," he said, his tone absolutely acidic. "Then how come you haven't banged Murphy yet?"

"Because," I said, growing flustered, "we aren't . . . We haven't gotten to . . . There's been a lot of . . . Look, fuck off."

"Hah," my double said. "You're obviously terrified of getting close to someone. Afraid you'll get hurt and rejected. Again."

"No I'm not," I said.

"Oh, please," he said. "I've got a direct line to your hindbrain. I've got your fears on Blu-Ray." He rolled his eyes. "Like *she* isn't feeling exactly the same thing?"

"Murphy isn't afraid of anything," I said.

"Two ex-husbands, and the last one married her little sister. He might as well have sent her a card that said, 'I'd like you, only you're too successful. And old.' And you're a freaking wizard who is going to live for centuries. Of course she's freaking out about the idea of getting involved with you."

I frowned at that. "I . . . You really think so?"

"No, dolt. *You* really think so."

I snorted. "Okay, guy, if you're so smart. What do I do?"

"If having something real is so important to you, man up and go *get* her," my id said. "You could both be dead tomorrow. You're heading for the realm of freaking *death*, for crying out loud. What the hell are you waiting for?"

"Uh," I said.

"Let me answer that for you," he said. "Molly."

I blinked. "Uh, no. Molly's a freaking kid."

"She *was* a freaking kid," my double said. "She's heading for her late twenties, in case you forgot how to count. She's not all that much younger than you, and the proportional distance is only shrinking. And you like her, and you trust her, and the two of you have a ton in common. Go get laid *there*."

"Dude, no," I said. "That is not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"It would be a serious violation of trust."

"Because she's your apprentice?" he asked. "No, she isn't. Not anymore. Hell's bells, man, she's practically your boss when you get right down to it. At the very least, she got promoted past you."

"I am not having this conversation," I said.

"Repression *and* denial," my double said acerbically. "Get thee to a therapist."

The figure next to him made a soft sound.

"Right," the double said. "We don't have much time. Murphy's pulling the nail out."

"Time for *what*?" I asked. "And who is that?"

"Seriously?" he asked. "You aren't going to use your intuition even a little, huh?"

I scowled at him and at the other figure and then my eyes widened. "Wait . . . Is that . . . is that the *parasite*?"

The shrouded figure shuddered and let out a pained groan.

"No," my double said. "It's the being that Mab and that stupid Alfred have been *calling* a parasite."

I blinked several times. "What?"

"Look, man," my double said. "You've got to work this out. Think, okay. I can't just *talk* to you. This near-dream stuff is my best, but you've got to meet me halfway."

I narrowed my eyes. "Wait. You're saying that the parasite isn't actually a parasite. But that means . . ."

"The wheel is turning," my double said, in the tone of a reporter covering a sports event. "The fat, lazy old hamster looks like he's almost forgotten how to make it go, but he's sort of moving it now. Bits of rust are falling off. The cobwebs are slowly parting."

"Screw you," I said, annoyed. "It's not like you've showed up with a ton to say ever since . . ." I trailed off and fell entirely silent for a long moment.

"Ah," he said, and pointed a finger at me, bouncing up onto his toes. "Ah hah! Ah hah, hah, hah, the light begins to dawn!"

"Ever since I touched Lasciel's Coin," I breathed quietly.

"Follow that," my double urged me. "What happened next?"

"Touching the Coin put an imprint of Lasciel in my head," I said. "Like a footprint in clay, the same shape as the original. She tried to tempt me into accepting the true Lasciel into my head along with her, but I turned her down."

My double rolled his wrist in a "keep it moving" gesture. "And then?"

"And then the imprint started to change," I said. "Lasciel was immutable, but the imprint was made of me. A shape in the clay. As the clay changed, so did the imprint."

"And?"

"And I gave her a name," I said. "I called her Lash. She became an independent psychic entity in her own right. And we kind of got along until . . ." I swallowed. "Until there was a psychic attack. A bad one. She threw herself in the way of it. It destroyed her."

"Yeah," my double said quietly. "But . . . look, what she did was an act of love. And you were about as intimate with her as it gets, sharing the same mental space. I mean, it's funny, you get twitchy when you start considering *living* with a woman, but having one literally inside your head was not an issue."

"What do you mean?"

"Christ, you're supposed to be the intellect here," my double said. "*Think.*" He stared at me for a long moment, visibly willing me to understand.

My stomach fell into some unimaginable abyss at the same time my jaw dropped open. "No," I said. "That isn't . . . that's not possible."

"When a mommy and a daddy love each other *very much*," my double said, as if speaking to a small child, "and they live together and hug and kiss and get intimate with each other . . ."

"I'm . . ." I felt a little ill. "You're saying . . . I'm *pregnant*?"

My double threw up his arms. "*Finally*, he gets it."

In years and years and years of experience as a wizard, I'd dealt with concepts, formulae, and mental models that ranged from bizarre to downright insanity-inducing. None of them had, in any way whatsoever, ever prepared my head to wrap around this. At all. Ever. "How is that . . . That isn't even . . . What the *hell*, man?" I demanded.

"A spiritual entity," my double said calmly. "Born of you and Lash. When she sacrificed herself for you, it was an act of selfless love—and love is fundamentally a force of creation. It stands to reason, then, that an act of love is fundamentally an act of creation. You remember it, right? After she died? When you could still play the music she'd given to you, even though she was gone? You could hear the echoes of her voice?"

"Yeah," I said, feeling dazed.

"That was because a part of her remained," my double said. "Made of her—and made of you."

And very gently, he drew back the black blanket.

She looked like a child maybe twelve years old, in the last few weeks of true childhood before the sudden surge of hormones brought on the chain of rapid changes that lead into adolescence. Her hair was dark, like mine, but her eyes were a crystalline blue-green, the way Lash's had often appeared. Her features were faintly familiar, and I realized in a surge of instinct that her face had been constructed from those of people in my life. She had the square, balanced chin of Karrin Murphy, the rounded cheeks of Ivy the Archive, and Susan Rodriguez's jawline. Her nose had come from my first love, Elaine Mallory, her hair from my first apprentice, Kim Delaney. I knew because they were *my* memories, right there in front of me.

Her eyes were fluttering uncertainly, and she was shivering so hard that she could barely stand. There was frost forming on her eyelashes, and even as I watched it started spreading over her cheeks.

"She's a spiritual entity," I breathed. "Oh, my God. She's a spirit of *intellect*."

"What happens when mortals get it on with spirits," my double confirmed, though now without heat.

"But Mab said she was a parasite," I said.

"Lot of people make jokes, refer to fetuses like that," he said.

"Mab called her a monster. Said she would hurt those closest to me."

"She's a spirit of intellect, just like Bob," my double said. "Born of the spirit of a fallen freaking angel and the mind of one of the most potent wizards on the White Council. She's going to be born with knowledge, and with power, and be absolutely innocent of what to do with them. A lot of people would call that monstrous."

"Argh," I said, and clutched at my head. I got it now. Mab hadn't been lying. Not precisely. Hell, she'd as much as told me that the parasite was made of my essence. My soul. My . . . me-ness. Spirits of intellect had to grow, and my head was a limited space. This one had been filling it up for years, slowly expanding, putting more psychic and psychological pressure on me—reflected in the growing intensity of my migraines over that time.

If I'd realized what was happening, I could have done something sooner, and probably a lot more simply. Now . . . I was overdue and it was looking like this was going to be a very, very rough delivery. And if I didn't have help, I'd be in much the same shape as a woman giving birth alone and encountering complications. Odds were good that my head wouldn't be able to stand the pressure of such a being abruptly parting ways with me, fighting its way out of a space that had become too small, in sheer instinct for its own survival. It could drive me insane, or kill me outright.

If that happened, it would leave the newly born spirit of intellect alone and bewildered in a world it didn't understand, but about which it had lots and lots of data. Spirits like Bob liked to pretend they were all about rationality, but they had emotions, attachments. The new spirit would want to connect. And it would try to do so with the people who mattered most to me.

I shuddered, imagining little Maggie suddenly gaining a very, very seriously dangerous imaginary friend.

"See?" I demanded of my double. "You *see*? *This* is why you don't go around having sex with everyone all the time!"

"You're the brain," he said. "Figure it *out*." The lights flickered and he looked up and around. "Ugh," he said. "Nail's coming out."

He was right. I could feel a faint pang in my chest, and a fading echo of the agony in my head. Frost continued covering the little girl, and she sighed, her knees buckling.

My double and I both stooped down and caught her before she could fall.

I picked her up. She didn't weigh anything. She didn't look dangerous. She just looked like a little girl.

Her eyes fluttered open. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "Sorry. But it *hurts* and I c-c-couldn't talk to you."

I traded a look with my double and then looked down at her. “It’s okay,” I said. “It’s okay. I’m going to take care of it. It’ll be all right.”

She sighed slightly and her eyes closed. Frost covered her in fine layers upon layers, as the spell on Mab’s earring wrapped her in sleep and silence, stilling her—for now—and turning her into a beautiful white statue.

I hadn’t even known she was there—and she was entirely my responsibility.

And if I didn’t handle it, she would kill me being born.

I passed her carefully to my double. “Okay,” I said. “I’ve got it.”

He took her, very gently, and gave me a nod. “I know she’s weird. But she’s still your offspring.” His dark eyes flashed. “Protect the offspring.”

Primal drives indeed.

I’d torn apart a nation protecting my physical child. I was looking at part of the reason why. That drive was a part of me, too.

I took a deep breath and nodded to him. “I’m on it,” I said.

He wrapped the girl in a blanket and turned to carry her back into the darkness. He took the light with him, and darkness swallowed me again.

“Hey,” my double called abruptly, from the distance.

“What?”

“Don’t forget the dream!” he said. “Don’t forget how it ended!”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“You flipping *idiot*!” my double snarled.

And then he was gone along with everything else.

Chapter Twenty-four

I opened my eyes and saw the ceiling of Karrin's bedroom. It was dark. I was lying down. Light from the hallway came creeping under the bedroom door, and was almost too bright for my eyes.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Butters's voice was saying. "I don't *know*. There's no AMA-approved baseline for a freaking wizard Knight of Winter. He could be in shock. He could be bleeding from the brain. He could be really, really *sleepy*. Dammit, Karrin, this is what *hospitals* and practicing physicians are for!"

I heard Karrin blow out a breath. "Okay," she said, without any kind of heat. "What *can* you tell me?"

"His arm's broken," Butters said. "From the swelling and bruising, badly. Whatever put that dent in the aluminum brace on it—did he get it taken care of in a tool shop?—rebroke it. I set it again, I *think*, and wrapped it up in the brace again, but I can't be sure I did it right without imaging equipment, which would probably explode if he walked into the room with it. If it hasn't been set right, that arm might be permanently damaged." He blew out a breath. "The hole in his chest wasn't traumatic, by his usual standards. It didn't go through the muscle. But the damned nail was rusty, so I hope he's had his tetanus shots. I gave the hole another stitch and I washed the blood off the nail."

"Thank you," Karrin said.

Butters's voice was weary. "Yeah," he sighed. "Sure. Karrin . . . can I tell you something?"

"What?"

"This thing he's got going with Mab," Butters said. "I know that everyone thinks it's turned him into some kind of superhero. But I don't think that's right."

"I've seen him move," she said. "I've seen how strong he is."

"So have I," Butters said. "Look . . . the human body is a pretty amazing machine. It really is. It can do really amazing things—much more so than most people think, because it's also built to protect itself."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Inhibitors," Butters said. "Every person walking around is about three times stronger than they think they are. I mean, your average housewife is actually about as strong as a fairly serious weight lifter, when it comes to pure mechanics. Adrenaline can amp that even more."

I could hear the frown in Karrin's voice. "You're talking about when mothers lift cars off their kid, that kind of thing."

"Exactly that kind of thing," Butters said. "But the body can't function that way all the time, or it will tear itself apart. That's what inhibitors are built for—to keep you from injuring yourself."

"What does that have to do with Dresden?"

"I think that what this Winter Knight gig has done for him is nothing more than switching off those inhibitors," Butters said. "He hasn't added all that much muscle mass. It's the only thing that makes sense. The body is capable of those moments of startling strength, but they're meant to be something that you pull out of the hat once or twice in a lifetime—and with no inhibitors and no ability to feel pain, Dresden's running around doing them *all the time*. And there's no real way he can know it."

Karrin was silent for several seconds, digesting that. Then she said, "Bottom line?"

"The more he leans on this 'gift,'" Butters said, and I could picture him making air quotes, "the more he tears himself to shreds. His body heals remarkably, but he's still human. He's got limits, somewhere, and if he keeps this up, he's going to find them."

"What do you think will happen?"

Butters made a thoughtful sound. “Think about . . . a football player or boxer who has it hard and breaks down in his early thirties, because he’s just taken too damned much punishment. That’s Dresden, if he keeps this up.”

“I’m sure that once we explain that to him, he’ll retire to a job as a librarian,” Karrin said.

Butters snorted. “It’s possible that other things in his system are being affected the same way,” he said. “Testosterone production, for example, any number of other hormones, which might be influencing his perception and judgment. I’m not sure he’s actually got any more real power at *all*. I think it just *feels* that way to him.”

“This is fact or theory?”

“An informed theory,” he said. “Bob helped me develop it.”

Son of a bitch. I kept quiet and thought about that one for a minute.

Could that be true? Or at least, more true than it wasn’t?

It would be consistent with the other deal I’d worked out with a faerie—my godmother, Lea, had made a bargain to give me the power to defeat my old mentor, Justin DuMorne. Then she’d tortured me for a while, assuring me that it would give me strength. It did, though mostly, in retrospect, because I had believed it had.

Had I been magic-feathered by a faerie *again*?

And yet . . . at the end of the day, I *could* lift a freaking car.

Sure you can, Harry. But at what price?

No wonder the Winter Knights stayed in the job until they died. If Butters was right, they would have been plunged into the crippling agony of their battered bodies the moment the mantle was taken from them.

Sort of the same way I had just been rendered into agonized Jell-O when the Genoskwa had shoved a nail into me.

“I worry,” Butters said quietly, “that he’s changing. That he doesn’t know it.”

“Look who’s talking,” Karrin said. “Batman.”

“That was one time,” Butters said.

Karrin didn’t say anything.

“All right,” Butters relented. “A few times. But it wasn’t enough to keep those kids from being carried off.”

“You pulled some of them out, Waldo,” Karrin said. “Believe me, that’s a win. Most of the time, you can’t even do that much. But you’re missing my point.”

“What point?”

“Ever since you’ve had the skull, you’ve been changing, too,” Karrin said. “You work hand in hand with a supernatural being that can scare the crap out of me. You can do things you couldn’t do before. You know things you didn’t know before. Your personality has changed.”

There was a pause. “It has?”

“You’re more serious,” she said. “More . . . intense, I suppose.”

“Yeah. Now that I know more about what’s really happening out there. It’s not something influencing me.”

“Unless it is and you just don’t know it,” Karrin said. “I’ve got the same evidence on you that you have on Dresden.”

Butters sighed. “I see what you did there.”

“I don’t think you do,” she said. “It’s . . . about choices, Waldo. About faith. You have an array of facts in front of you that can fit any of several truths. You have to choose what you’re going to allow to drive your decisions about how to deal with those facts.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could let fear be what motivates you,” Karrin said. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe Dresden is being turned into a monster against his knowledge and will. Maybe one day he’ll be something that kills us all. You’re not wrong. That kind of thing can happen. It scares me, too.”

“Then why are you arguing with me?”

Karrin paused for a time before answering. "Because . . . fear is a terrible, insidious thing, Waldo. It taints and stains everything it touches. If you let fear start driving some of your decisions, sooner or later, it will drive them *all*. I decided that I'm not going to be the kind of person who lives her life in fear of her friends' turning into monsters."

"What? Just like that?"

"It took me a long, long time to get there," she said. "But at the end of the day, I would rather have faith in the people I care about than allow my fears to change them—in my own eyes, if nowhere else. I guess maybe you don't see what's happening with Harry, here."

"What?" Butters asked.

"This is what it looks like when someone's fighting for his soul," she said. "He needs his friends to believe in him. The fastest way for us to help make him into a monster is to look at him like he is one."

Butters was quiet for a long time.

"I'm going to say this once, Waldo," she said. "I want you to listen."

"Okay."

"You need to decide which side of the road you're going to walk on," she said gently. "Turn aside from your fears—or grab onto them and run with them. But you need to make the call. You keep trying to walk down the middle, you're going to get yourself torn apart."

Butters's voice turned bitter. "Them or us, choose a side?"

"It's not about taking sides," Karrin said. "It's about knowing yourself. About understanding *why* you make the choices you do. Once you know that, you know where to walk, too."

The floorboards creaked. Maybe she'd stepped closer to him. I could picture her, putting her hand on his arm.

"You're a good man, Waldo. I like you. I respect you. I think you'll figure it out."

A long silence followed.

"Andi's waiting on me to eat," he said. "I'd better get going."

"Okay," Karrin said. "Thank you again."

"I . . . Yeah, sure."

Footsteps. The front door opened and closed. A car started up and then drove away.

I sat up in bed, and fumbled until I found Karrin's bedside lamp with my right hand. The light hurt my eyes. My head felt funny—probably the result of being bounced off of walls. I'd lost my shirt, again. Butters had added some more bandages and the sharp scent of more antibiotics to my collection of medical trophies. My arm had been bandaged again, inside its aluminum brace, and the brace was held in a sling tied around my neck.

I got out of bed and wobbled for a minute and then shambled across the floor to the bedroom door. Karrin opened it just as I got there, and stood looking up at me, her expression worried.

"God, you are turning into a monster," she said. "A mummy. One bit at a time."

"I'm fine," I said. "Ish."

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "How much of that did you hear?"

"Everything after his usual 'I'm not really a physician' disclaimer."

Her mouth twitched. "He's just . . . He's worried, that's all."

"I get it," I said. "I think you handled it right."

That drew a sparkle from her eyes. "I know I did."

"Batman?" I asked.

"He's been . . ." She folded her arms. "You-ing, I suppose. With you gone from the city and Molly gone, the streets haven't been getting any safer. Marccone's crowd have taken up the fight against the Fomor, whenever their territory is threatened, but their protection costs. Not everyone can afford it."

I grimaced. "Dammit," I muttered. "Damn Mab. I could have been back here months and months ago."

"Waldo does what he can. And because he has the skull, that's more than most."

"Bob was never meant to be used in the field," I said. "He's a valuable resource—until he attracts attention to himself. Once he's been identified, he can be countered or stolen, and then the bad guys get that much stronger. It's why I tried not to take him out of the lab."

"The Fomor started taking children last Halloween," Karrin said simply. "Six-year-olds. Right off the streets."

I grimaced and looked down from her steady gaze.

"We'll sort something out," Karrin said. "You hungry?"

"Starving," I said.

"Come on."

I followed her to the kitchen. She took a pair of Pizza 'Spress pizzas from the oven, where she'd had them staying warm. They had almost settled onto the table before I started eating, ravenous. The pizza was my favorite. Not good, but my favorite, because it had been the only pizza I could afford for a long, long time, and I was used to it. Heavy on the sauce, light on the cheese, and the meat was just hinted at, but the crust was thick and hot and flaky and filled with delicious things that murdered you slowly.

"Present for you," Karrin said.

"Mmmnghf?" I asked.

She plopped a file folder down on the table beside me and said, "From Paranoid Gary the Paranetizen."

I swallowed a mouthful and delayed getting another long enough to ask, "The one who found the deal with the boats last year? Crazy-but-not-wrong guy?"

"That's him," she said.

"Huh," I said, chewing. I opened the folder and started flipping through printed pages of fuzzy images.

"Those are from Iran," Karrin said. "Gary says that they show a functioning nuclear power plant."

The images were obviously of some sort of installation, but I couldn't tell anything beyond that. "Thought they had big old towers."

"He says they're buried in that hill behind the building," Karrin said. "Check out the last few images."

On the last pages of the folder, things in the installation had changed. Columns of black, greasy smoke rolled out from multiple buildings. In another image, the bodies of soldiers lay on the ground. And in the last image, up on the hillside, which was wreathed in white mist, or maybe steam . . .

Three figures faced one another. One was a large man dressed in a long overcoat and wielding a slightly curved sword in one hand, an old cavalry saber. He carried what might have been a sawed-off shotgun in the other. His skin was dark, and though his head hadn't been shaved like that the last time I'd seen him, it could really have been only one person.

"Sanya," I said.

The world's only Knight of the Cross was standing across from two blurry figures. Both were in motion, as if charging toward him. One was approximately the same size and shape as a large gorilla. The other was covered in a thick layer of feathers that gave an otherwise humanoid shape an odd, shaggy appearance.

"Magog and Shaggy Feathers," I muttered. "Hell's bells, those Coins are slippery. When were these taken?"

"Less than six hours ago," Karrin said, "according to Paranoid Gary. The Denarians are up to something."

"Yeah," I said. "Deirdre said that Tessa was supposed to be in Iran. That makes sense."

"In what way does that make sense?"

"Nicodemus wants to pull a job over here," I said. "He knows there's only one Knight running around. So he sends Tessa and her crew to the other side of the world to stir up major-league

trouble. Let's say Gary's right, and Iran has a nuclear reactor running. And something goes horribly wrong with it. You've got an instant regional and international crisis. Of course a Knight gets sent to deal with it—where he can't get to Chicago, or at least not in time to do any good."

Karrin took that in silently, and I went back to eating. "So you're saying, we're on our own."

"And the bad guys keep stacking up higher and higher," I said.

"The Genoskwa, you mean," Karrin said.

"Yeah."

She shuddered. "That thing . . . seriously, a Bigfoot?"

"Some kind of mutant serial killer Bigfoot, maybe," I said. "Not like one of the regular Forest People at all."

"I can't believe it," Karrin said.

"It's no weirder than any number of—"

"Not that," she said. "I can't believe you met a Bigfoot and you never told me about it. I mean, they're famous."

"They're kind of a private bunch," I said. "Did a few jobs for one, a few years back, named River Shoulders. Liked him. Kept my mouth shut."

She nodded understanding. Then she got up and left the kitchen, and came back a moment later with her rocket launcher and an oversized pistol case. She set the rocket launcher down and said, "This will take out something Bigfoot-sized, no problem."

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. "Yeah," I admitted. "Okay."

She gave me a nod that did not, quite, include the phrase "I told you so." "I like to be sure I've got enough firepower to cover any given situation." She put the case on the table and slid it over to me. "And this is for you."

I took the case and opened it a little awkwardly, using mostly one hand. In it was a stubby-looking pistol that had been built with a whole hell of a lot of metal, to the point where it somehow reminded me of a steroid-using weight lifter's gargoylish build. The damned thing could have been mounted on a small armored vehicle turret. There were a number of rounds stored with it, each the size of my thumb.

"What the hell is this?" I asked, beaming.

"Smith and Wesson five hundred," she said. "Short barrel, but that round is made for taking on big game. Big, Grey, and Ugly comes at you to make another friendly point, I want you to give him a four-hundred-grain bullet-point reply."

I whistled, hefting the gun and admiring the sheer mass of it. "I've got one broken wrist already, and you give me this?"

"Ride the recoil, Nancy," she said. "You can handle it." She reached out and put her hand on the fingers of my left hand, protruding from the sling. "We'll handle it. We'll get this thing with Nicodemus done, and get that parasite out of your head. You'll see."

"Yeah," I said. "We've got a problem there."

"What's that?"

"We can't kill the parasite," I said. "We have to save it."

Karrin gave me a flat look and, after a brief pause, said, "What?"

"We, uh . . . Look, it's not what I thought it was. My condition isn't what we thought it was, either."

She eyed me carefully. "No? Then what is your condition, exactly?"

I told her.

* * *

"Come on," I said. "Get up."

She sat on the floor, rocking back and forth helplessly with laughter. Her plate with its slice of pizza had landed beside her when she'd fallen out of her chair a few minutes before, and hadn't moved.

“Stop it,” she gasped. “Stop making me laugh.”

I was getting a little annoyed now, as well as embarrassed. My face felt as though it had a mild sunburn. “Dammit, Karrin, we’re supposed to be back at the slaughterhouse in twenty minutes. Come *on*, it’s just not that funny.”

“The look”—she panted, giggling helplessly—“on your . . . face . . .”

I sighed and muttered under my breath and waited for her to recover.

It took her only a couple more minutes, though she drifted back into titters several times before she finally picked herself up off the floor.

“Are you quite finished?” I asked her, trying for a little dignity.

She dissolved into hiccoughing giggles again instantly.

It was highly unprofessional.

Chapter Twenty-five

By the time we got back to the slaughterhouse, the sun had gone down, and the night had come on cold and murky. Rain had begun to fall in a fine mist, and the temperature had dropped enough that I could see it starting to coat the city in a fine sheet of ice.

"Ice storm," Karrin noted as she parked the car. "Perfect."

"At least it'll keep people in," I said.

"Depending on how this goes, that might cut down on innocent bystanders," she said. "Is Mab messing with the weather again?"

I squinted out at the weather. "No," I said, immediately and instinctively certain of the answer. "This is just winter in Chicago being winter in Chicago. Mab doesn't care about innocent bystanders."

"But she might care about giving you an advantage."

I snorted and said, "Mab helps those who help themselves."

Karrin gave me a thin smile. "That thing you did, with the Genoskwa. You threw magic at it."

"Yep."

"It didn't work, I guess."

"Nope," I said. "I hit him with my best shot, something Mab gave me. Just drained off him, grounded out."

"Grounded," she said. "Like with a lightning rod?"

"Exactly like that," I said. "The Forest People know magic, and they're ridiculously powerful, but they understand it differently than humans do. The one I knew used water magic like nothing I'd ever seen or heard of before. This Genoskwa . . . I think he's using earth magic the same way. On a level I don't know a damned thing about."

"Pretend I don't know a damned thing about earth magic either," Karrin said, "and bottom-line it for me."

"I threw the most potent battle magic I know at him, and he shut it down with zero trouble. I'm pretty sure he'll be able to do it as much as he wants."

"He's immune to magic?" Karrin asked.

I shrugged. "If he senses it coming and can take action, pretty much," I said. "Which makes me think that he's not all that bright."

"Hell of a secret to give away when his goal wasn't to actually kill you."

"No kidding," I said. "Maybe he gave me too much credit and assumed I already knew. Either way, I know now."

"Right," Karrin said. "Which gives you an advantage. You won't bother trying to blast him with magic the next time."

I shuddered, thinking of the creature's sheer speed and power, and of exactly how little he feared me. I touched the handle of my new revolver, now loaded and in my duster pocket. "With any luck, there won't be a next time."

Karrin turned to me abruptly, her expression earnest. "Harry," she said quietly, "that thing means to kill you. I know what it looks like. Don't kid yourself."

I grimaced and looked away.

Satisfied that she'd made her point, she nodded and got out of the car. She'd slung one of her space guns (she'd called it a Kriss) on a harness under her coat, and you almost couldn't see it when she moved. She rolled around to the trunk, looked up and down the street once, and then took out the rocket launcher and slung it over her shoulder. In the dark, in the rain, it looked like it might have been one of those protective tubes that artists use, maybe three and a half feet long.

“Really think you can hit him with that thing?” I asked.
“It’s weapon enough to handle him,” she said. “If I have to.”
I squinted up at the drizzling mist and said, “I’m getting tired of this job.”
“Let’s get it done, then,” Karrin said.

* * *

This time, when we rolled in, Jordan wasn’t on duty. Maybe he’d been given a shift off to get some sleep. Or maybe Nicodemus was so sure I was about to break through his conditioning and suborn him that he’d moved the kid to a less vulnerable post. Yeah. That was probably it.

When we came in, most of the crew was already downstairs, gathered around the conference table. Even the Genoskwa was standing around in plain sight, albeit in a deep patch of shadow that reduced his visible presence to an enormous, furry shadow. Only Nicodemus and Deirdre were absent—and I spotted Deirdre standing silently on one of the catwalks, looking down at the table, where Binder was telling some sort of animated anecdote or joke.

She looked . . . disturbed. Don’t get me wrong—a girl who goes around biting the tongues out of men’s mouths is disturbed one way or another, but the Denarian killer looked genuinely troubled, or distressed, or something.

Karrin caught me looking at her and sighed. “We can’t afford another damsel, Dresden.”

“I wasn’t thinking that,” I said.

“Sure you weren’t.”

“Actually,” I said, “I was thinking she looked vulnerable. Might be a good time to confront her about how Harvey died.”

Karrin clucked her tongue thoughtfully. “I’ll be at the table.”

“Yeah.”

She descended the stairs, and I ambled out along the catwalk to stand beside Deirdre.

She looked up at me as I approached, her eyes flat. But then her gaze shifted back to the room below.

“And then I said”—Binder snickered, evidently coming to the punch line—“why did you wear it, then?”

Hannah Ascher burst out in a short, hearty belly laugh, and was joined, more quietly, by Anna Valmont. Even Grey smiled, at least a little. The expression looked somehow alien on his oddly unremarkable features.

Deirdre stared down at them all, her expression dispassionate, like a scientist observing bacteria. Her eyes flickered toward me for a second as I approached, her body tensing slightly.

Being a genius interrogator, I asked her, “So. Why’d you kill Harvey?”

She looked at me for a few seconds, then turned her eyes back to the room below, to watch Karrin come to the table. There was a moment of silence from everyone as they took in her armament. Then Grey rose, suddenly dapper, and offered to help her with the rocket launcher like it was a coat. Karrin let him, giving him an edged smile that she directed past him, to the shadows where the Genoskwa lurked.

“I didn’t kill the accountant,” she said quietly. “Nicodemus said not to.”

That surprised me a little. If she wanted to hide herself from me, she didn’t need to go to the effort of lying. All she had to do was stay silent.

“He said that to all of us,” I said. “Maybe he said something else to you privately.”

“He didn’t,” she said. “My mother killed him with a spell she calls the Sanguine Scalpel.”

“The cuts looked a lot like the ones you would inflict,” I said.

“A cut throat is a cut throat, wizard.”

Tough to argue with that one. “And you chased her.”

“I went to say . . . to talk to her, yes.”

“What did she have to say?”

“Personal things,” Deirdre replied.

I narrowed my eyes.

Something wasn't jiving here. Deirdre was demonstrating absolutely no emotion about her mother, which in my experience is the next best thing to impossible for almost anyone. Hell, even *Maeve* had carried enormous mother issues around with her. If Tessa was really trying to beat Nicodemus and Deirdre to the Holy Grail, there should have been something there. Frustration, irritation, fear, anger, resignation, *something*.

Not this distant, cool clarity.

Tessa wasn't after any Grail.

But what else could motivate her?

Deirdre looked up from below and studied me calmly. "He knows that you mean to betray him, you know."

"Makes us even," I said.

"No, it doesn't," she said, in that same distant voice. "Not even close. I've seen him disassemble men and women more formidable than you, dozens of times. You don't have a chance of tricking him, out-planning him, or beating him." She stated it as a simple fact. "Mab knows it, too."

"Then why would she send me?"

"She's disposing of you without angering your allies at *her*. Surely you can't be so deluded that you don't see that."

A slow chill went through me at the words.

That . . . could make a great deal of sense, actually. If Mab had decided not to use me after all, then my presence was no longer needed—but enough people thought well of me that they could prove extremely trying for her, should they set out to seek revenge.

Of course, that wasn't how Mab played the game. When she set something up, she did it so that no matter what happened, she would run the table in the end. Mab probably intended me to do exactly what she'd told me she sent me to do. But what she *hadn't* said was that she'd set it up so that it wouldn't hurt her too badly if I failed. If I was too incompetent to work her will, she would regard me as a liability, to be dispensed with—preferably without angering my allies. Nicodemus would get the vengeance-level blame for my death if I failed, and Mab would be free and clear to choose a new Knight.

I felt my jaw tightening and loosening. Well. I couldn't really have expected anything else. Mab struck me as the kind of mother who taught her children to swim by throwing them into the lake. My entire career with her would be shaped the same way—sink or swim.

"We'll see," I said.

She smiled, very slightly, and turned back to regard the table below. Grey was sitting with Karrin, speaking quietly, a smile on his face. She had her narrow-eyed expression on hers, but a smile also lurked somewhere inside it. He was being amusing.

Jerk.

"Is there anything else you'd like to ask me?" Deirdre asked.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Why?"

"Why what?"

I gestured around. "Why this? Why do you do what you do? Why bite out the tongues and murder hirelings and whatnot? What makes a person *do* something like this?"

She fell silent. The weight of it became oppressive.

"Tell me, child," she said. "What is the longest-lasting relationship in your life?"

"Uh," I said. "Like, in terms of when it started? Or how long it continued?"

"Whichever."

"My mentor in the White Council, maybe," I said. "I've known him since I was sixteen."

"You see him daily? You speak to him, work with him?"

"Well, no."

"Ah," she said. "Someone that close to you. Who shares your life with you."

"Uh," I said. "A girlfriend or two. My cat."

A small smirk touched her mouth. "Temporary mates and a cat. One cat."

"He's an awesome cat."

"What you are telling me," she said, "is that you have never shared your life with another over the long term. The closest you have come to it is providing a home and affection for a being which is entirely your subject and in your control."

"Well, not at bath time . . ."

The joke did not register on her. "You have had nothing but firefly relationships, there and then gone. I have watched empires rise and fall and rise again beside Nicodemus. You call him my father, but there are no words for what we are. How can there be? Mortal words cannot possibly encompass something which mortals can never embrace and know. Centuries of faith, of cooperation, of trust, working and living and fighting side by side." Her mouth twisted into a sneer. "You know nothing of commitment, wizard child. And so I cannot possibly explain to you why I do what I do."

"And what is it that you think you're doing with him, exactly?" I asked her.

"We," she said, with perfect serenity, "are fighting to save the world."

Which, if true, was about the creepiest thing I'd run into that day.

"From what?" I asked.

She smiled, very faintly, and finally fell silent.

I didn't press. I didn't want to hear anything else from her anyway.

I withdrew and went down to the table with the others.

". . . dinner," Grey was saying. "Assuming we're all alive and filthy rich afterward, I mean."

"I certainly can say no," Karrin replied, her tone light with banter. "You're a little creepy, Grey."

"Goodman," Grey said. "Say it with me. 'Goodman.'"

"I was a cop for twenty years, Grey," Karrin said. "I can recognize a fake name when I hear it."

I settled down next to Karrin and pulled the new revolver out of my pocket, put it on the conference table right where I could reach it and said to Grey, "Hi."

Grey eyed me and then the gun. Then he said to Karrin, "Does he make these kinds of calls for you?"

"You'll have to try a little harder with something a little less obvious than that," Karrin said. "Honestly, I'm sort of hoping he shoots you a little. I've never seen a round from that beast hit somebody."

Grey settled back in his seat, eyeing me sourly. "Bro," he said, "you're totally cockblocking me."

In answer, I picked up the monster revolver. "No," I said, and then I freaking cocked it, drawing the hammer back with my thumb. Rather than a mere click, it made a sinister ratcheting sound. "Now I'm cockblocking you."

The table got completely quiet and still. Anna Valmont's eyes were huge.

"Touché," Grey said, nodding slightly. "Well, there was no harm in my asking the lady, was there?"

"None to her," I agreed amiably. "Murphy, should I shoot him anyway?"

Karrin put a finger to her lips and tapped thoughtfully. "I've got to admit, I'm curious as hell. But it seems a little unprofessional, as long as he backs off."

"Hear that?" I asked Grey.

"You people are savages," Grey said. He shook his head, muttered something beneath his breath, and rose to stalk away from the table and settle down not far from the Genoskwa—who did not object. The two exchanged a very slight nod, and began to speak in low voices in a language I did not recognize.

I lowered the hammer carefully and put the revolver down. The table was silent for another long moment, before Binder said in a jovial tone, as if he had never stopped speaking, "So there I

was in Belize with thirty monkeys, a panda, and a pygmy elephant . . .”

He had begun to tell a story that everyone around the table thought was completely fabricated, while he insisted that every detail was absolutely true, when Nicodemus entered the factory through emergency doors on the floor level, letting in a blast of freezing mist and winter air. He had added a long coat to his ensemble, and he dropped it behind him as he strode forward across the floor. His shadow slid over the floor beside him, too large and never quite in sync with the rest of him.

“Good evening,” he said, as he took his seat at the head of the table. “Ladies and gentlemen, please give me your attention. Wizard Dresden, if you would, please give us a brief primer on the nature of Ways and how they open.”

I blinked as every eye on the table turned to me. “Uh,” I said. “Ways are basically passages between the mortal world and some portion of the Nevernever—the spirit world. Any point in the mortal world will open a Way to somewhere, if you know how to do it. The Way opens to a place that shares something in common with the point of origin in the mortal world. Uh, for example, if you wanted to open a Way to Hell, you’d have to find a hellish place in the mortal world and start from there. If you want to go to a peaceful place in the Nevernever, you start with a peaceful place here. Like that. Chicago is a great place for Ways—it’s a crossroads, a big one. You can get just about anywhere from here.”

“Thank you,” Nicodemus said. “Our goal is to open a Way into the secured facility containing our objective.” He accepted a large sheet of rolled paper from a squire who had hurried up to hand it to him. “Bearing all those factors in mind, I’m sure you’ll understand why we will begin the job here.”

With a flick of his wrist, he unrolled the large sheet of paper.

It proved to be blueprints, a floor plan. I frowned and stared at it, but it didn’t look familiar.

Karrin made a choking sound.

“Murph?” I asked.

“Ah,” Nicodemus said, smiling. “You know it.”

“It’s a vault,” Karrin said, looking up at me. “A vault that belongs to a lord of the underworld.”

I felt myself clench up in a place that didn’t bear much more clenching. “Oh,” I said weakly. “Oh, Hell’s bells.”

Binder jerked a thumb at me. “What is he on about?” he asked Karrin.

Karrin put a forefinger on the plans. “This is the Capristi Building,” she said. “It’s the second most secure facility in the city.” She took a deep breath. “It’s a mob bank. And it belongs to Gentleman John Marcone, Accorded Baron of Chicago.”

Chapter Twenty-six

I'd been afraid it would come to something like this, though I'd held out hope that Nicodemus would come up with a better way of getting to where we needed to go. Like maybe burning down a building around our ears and hoping to open a Way at the last second. That would have been merely dicey.

Marcone was *dangerous*.

"Gentleman" Johnnie Marcone had clawed his way to the top of Chicago's outfit back when I had first set up business in town, and he had ruled the city's crime with an iron fist ever since, with an eye toward making organized crime safer, more efficient, and more businesslike. It worked. A lot of cops thought he had more power than the government. Those cops kept their mouths shut about it, for the most part, though, because he commanded more cops than the government, too.

Then, a few years back, he'd sought and gained the title of freeholding lord under the Unseelie Accords, the legal document that was the backbone of civilized relations between supernatural nations. He was the first vanilla human being on record as having done so, and he had claimed, fought for, and held Chicago against all comers thus far, as its Baron.

Though, to be fair, I'd been out of town for a lot of that time.

Still, I didn't think it would be smart to cross him if I wasn't prepared to go right to the mat, for keeps. Marcone commanded an army of thugs and hired killers, some of whom were truly excellent at their jobs. He kept a small squad of Einherjaren, dead-but-not-gone Viking warriors, on retainer, and I had seen them efficiently take on some of the toughest nasties I've ever encountered. He had at least one freaking Valkyrie on the payroll—and the man himself was ruthless, intelligent, and absolutely without fear.

I thought getting into it with Marcone was going to be about two steps shy of getting into it with Hades himself. But all I said out loud was, "Hoo boy."

"Problem, Dresden?" Nicodemus asked.

"Marcone is not someone to cross lightly," I said. "Not only that, but he's a member of the Accords."

"I'm not," Nicodemus said. "Not any longer."

"I am," I said. "Twice. As a Wizard of the White Council and as the Winter Knight."

"I'm sure the White Council will be stunned and disappointed should you not conform to their policy," Nicodemus said. "And as for Mab—you are, in effect, simply my tool during this operation. As far as she is concerned, any obligation you incur with regard to the Accords can be laid at my feet, not hers."

He was right, twice, which made me scowl. "My point is," I said, "Marcone is not a man to be taken lightly. If you hit him, he hits you back. Harder."

"Indeed," Nicodemus said. "He has an excellent reputation. He would have made a fine monarch only a few centuries ago."

Good King John Marcone? I shuddered at the thought. "Let's say we hammer our way into his building," I said. "Fine. It's probably doable. Getting back out again is going to be the hard part—and even if we do *that*, it isn't over. He isn't going to forget, or let it go."

"Dresden's right," Karrin said. "Marcone doesn't suffer intrusions on his territory. Period."

"We will do what we have come to do," Nicodemus said calmly. "If necessary, reparations to the Baron can be considered once our mission is accomplished. I believe I can make the point to him that accepting such restitution will be more cost-effective than pursuing more personal collection efforts."

I traded a look with Karrin, and could see that she was thinking the same thing I was.

Nicodemus had abducted Marcone himself, not so many years back, as part of one of his schemes. Mab had, in fact, sent me to bail Marcone out, back when I'd just owed her a couple of favors. I still remembered Marcone as a helpless prisoner. The image had kind of stuck in my memory.

He would never forget that. There are some things money can't buy: One of them is redemption from the vengeance of Gentleman Johnnie Marcone.

And if Karrin and I went along with this plan, it would mean as much as declaring war on the Baron of Chicago.

"What do you think?" I asked her.

Karrin could do the math. She knew exactly what I was talking about. "Had to happen sometime."

"Heh," I said. "Right."

"I don't get it," Binder said. "Look, if he's a man of business, why don't we just make him a proposition and cut him in for a piece of the action?"

"A valid notion," Nicodemus said. "But it is not possible."

"Why not?"

"In the first place," Nicodemus said, "the vault houses materials belonging to more persons than our principal target alone. Marcone has become something of a notoriously neutral party in the affairs of the modern supernatural world. Svartalfheim, the White Court, Drakul, and a number of other individuals of similar weight have entrusted a portion of their wealth to his keeping, and he has given his word to protect it to the best of his ability."

"That's it, then," I said to Binder. "He won't bargain. Guy's a murderous asshole, but he's good to his word."

Binder settled back, frowning. "What's the other reason, then?"

"If he *let* us in, it would change the nature of the place," I said before Nicodemus could answer. "We're trying to open a Way into a jealously guarded vault. We probably won't be able to do it from a vault that's been opened to the public."

"Exactly," Nicodemus said. "Barring a few security systems requiring specific countermeasures, I have complete confidence that we can seize the building. Holding it until the job is done and escaping it with our hides is another matter, and that, Mr. Binder, is where you and your associates will play a critical role."

Binder grunted and leaned forward to study the map. "How long will I need to hold it?"

"An hour, at most," Nicodemus said.

"Barring anyone manipulating time on us between here and there," I put in.

Nicodemus gave me a sour frown and said, "We shall be finished in one hour—one way or the other." He pointed to a portion of the floor plans. "Here is the master vault door. That, Miss Valmont, is your responsibility—"

"Hang on," Binder said. "If you leave me playing doorman, how am I supposed to collect my backpack of jewels, eh? I can't go off to the Nevernever and leave my lads here behind me. That'll cut the connection between us. I'm not doing this job on salary."

"I suggest your partner carry and fill two packs," Nicodemus said. "I will undertake to carry your pack out myself and give it to you upon my return. As I am, with the possible exception of Grey, the one most likely to survive to escape, this arrangement would give you a greater chance of successfully receiving your payment than anyone else here."

Binder squinted at Nicodemus and sat back in his seat, obviously thinking it over. "What do you think, Ash?"

Hannah Ascher shrugged, which any red-blooded hetero male would have found utterly fascinating. It wasn't just me. "If you'll trust me to pick your share, I'm willing."

Binder grunted and then nodded slowly. "I like the red ones."

"I'll remember," Ascher promised.

I idly scratched at an itch on the back of my neck. “So what’s the big deal with Valmont cracking the door? And why drag poor Harvey into this?”

“Poor Harvey,” Nicodemus said, with all the sympathy of a bullet in flight, “was our principal’s factor in Chicago. He had exclusive access to the vault in question, which is kept shut by the best vault door money can buy in combination with what is known as a retina scan. A retina scan—”

“We know what a retina scan is,” Ascher said impatiently. “But why do you need it? Why not just blow the vault instead of going to all the trouble of getting Grey to duplicate the guy?”

“Same deal as before,” I said. “We’re trying to get into a secure vault, not one that’s been blown the hell open already. If we alter the place in the real world too much, we screw up the Way to the one in the Nevernever.” I glanced at Nicodemus and thumped a finger on the blueprint. “Our target has a private vault here?”

“Precisely. An inner security room inside the main vault. This location is one of several in which he acquires additional items for his collection by proxy,” Nicodemus said.

I had to give Nick this much: He’d thought this business through, lining up like to like, the way you needed to do to make magic work. “So first we have to get to the main vault?”

“Through two security doors, which Miss Ascher will see to with her newly practiced spell,” Nicodemus said, “the better not to activate the seismic sensors in the vault that will lock down the building more thoroughly and force us to take much more destructive measures to gain access.”

I nodded. “Then Valmont does the door on the main vault, and Grey does the private security room with the retina scan.” I blinked and eyed Grey. “Right down to his retinas, seriously?”

Grey looked up from where he sat in the shadows and gave me a modest smile.

I shuddered visibly. “You are an extremely creepy man,” I said. I looked back at Nicodemus. “I can see a possible problem.”

“Yes?”

“Marccone is not a dummy,” I said. “He’s gone up against supernatural powers more than once. He knows that sooner or later, he and I are going to get into it. He doesn’t make mistakes often, and he never fails to learn from them. He’ll have supernatural precautions as well as physical ones.”

“Such as?” Nicodemus asked.

“If I was him,” I said, “I’d have something rigged to shut down all the electronic gizmos and close off the vault as soon as the building’s power got disrupted—which just might happen when Ascher and I start throwing magic around. In fact, I’d set it up to happen as soon as any amount of magic started flying.”

“It would be smart,” Binder said in agreement. “Don’t think it’d be too hard to fix, either. Have circuits set up around the place, something delicate that would go out without too much trouble.”

“Like the ones in cell phones or something,” I added. “Those things go to pieces if a wizard looks at them funny.”

“Yeah,” Binder said, nodding. “I can use one, but only just. Had to start keeping it powered off when I took up with Ash, here.”

“Assuming such a . . . wizard alarm, I suppose, exists,” Nicodemus said, “how shall we defeat it?”

“Not a problem for me,” Binder said. “It wouldn’t even blink. These two, though, we’d have to . . .”

I eyed Binder sourly and rubbed at the itch on my neck again.

“Sorry, mate,” he said. He sounded genuine about it. “Thorn manacles,” he said to Nicodemus. “You know the ones?”

“I have some in stock,” Nicodemus said. “Though mine are svartalf make, not faerie. Steel. I suppose they’ll keep the talent of you and Miss Ascher suppressed as much as possible. Simpler than keeping running water flowing over you both, in any case.”

He gave me a small smirk when he said it. He’d once had me chained up under a freezing-cold stream to prevent me from using my talents to escape or make mischief. If another good man

hadn't given himself in exchange for me, I might have died there. Thorn manacles were uncommon but by no means unattainable magical bindings that accomplished the same thing, dampening a wizard's powers to the point of uselessness.

And they hurt like a son of a bitch. In fact, if he had some that worked the same way but were made of steel, they were going to hurt *me* to an outstanding degree, given how they functioned.

I returned Nicodemus's smirk with a wintry smile.

Binder continued, either ignoring or not noticing the look between Nicodemus and me. "Once the two of them are inside, get them into a circle before the manacles come off," Binder said. "That will contain the excess energy when they work their mojo. It should help."

"Mmm," Nicodemus mused. "We'll have to change the entry plan. Dresden won't be able to provide a distraction. We'll have to use more"—he glanced toward the Genoskwa—"overt means."

In the darkness, a faint gleam of yellow appeared beneath the Genoskwa's eyes.

Hell's bells, the thing was smiling.

Karrin shot me a look. She was thinking the same thing I was: The Genoskwa wasn't going to distract anything, except by ripping its head off. Depending on when we went in, God only knew how many people might be in that bank—people with absolutely no knowledge of its provenance. Even the building's security forces wouldn't necessarily know they worked for the outfit. And hell, when you got right down to it, I wasn't willing to feed even a mobster to something like the Genoskwa at Nicodemus's behest.

I rubbed at my neck again and said, "Nah, I got it still."

"Excuse me?" Nicodemus said.

"Noisy distraction? I'll handle it. No sense showing our secret weapon early if we don't have to do it, right?"

Nicodemus smiled faintly. "What, wizard? Without your talents?"

"I hadn't planned on using them anyway," I said. "Could be someone was going to get hurt during this. The White Council takes a pretty dim view of magic used for that kind of thing—and I have to think about my future. You want loud and obvious? Not a problem."

The Genoskwa's voice came rumbling from the shadows. "He's soft."

"He's smart," I said in harsh rejoinder. "The harder you hit things on the way in, the harder Marcone's going to be ready to hit back on the way out. Hell, if you make a big enough stink, you'll have the cops there, too. There are only about thirteen thousand of those guys running around Chicago, but I'm sure the eight of us can handle them. Right?"

The Genoskwa let out a low growl. "I am not afraid of them."

"Sure you aren't," I said. "That's why you cruised all over the place invisible the past two days, because you didn't care if you were spotted."

"Gentlemen," Nicodemus said, his voice raised and slightly tense. And then he paused, frowning, his head cocked partly to one side, as if trying to identify a distant sound.

Ascher suddenly looked up, frozen in the act of scratching her arm again, and said, "Dresden? Do you feel that?"

The itching on the back of my neck resolved itself into a full-on creepy sensation, the awareness of someone watching me. I closed my eyes and extended my other senses, reaching out with my talent to feel for magic in the air around me—and found the eavesdropping spell almost at once.

Ascher had already given us away with her comment, so there was no point in being cute about it. "Someone's listening in on us," I breathed, coming to my feet.

"Where?" Nicodemus spat.

Ascher pointed to the far end of the slaughterhouse. "There, not far. Just outside, I think."

The sensation abruptly vanished as the spell winked out of existence—but not before I'd found the spell's focus—the thaumaturgic version of the bug that had been planted so that the eavesdropper could hear us.

“Binder,” Nicodemus said at once.

Binder had already produced a hoop of wire from his suit coat’s pocket. He moved to a clear space of floor, gave it a toss with a flick of his wrist, and the wire unreeled and unfolded into a circle almost three feet across. It landed on the floor even as Binder spoke a few words, and filled with amber light.

Binder was a chump sorcerer, but he had one trick that he could do really, really well—summoning a small army of creatures from the Nevernever that he had somehow bound to his will. It took him less than two seconds to whistle up the first of his suits—humanoid figures dressed in something that resembled a badly fitted suit, their proportions and features looking almost normal, until one looked at them a little more closely. The demonic servitor flung itself up out of the circle like an acrobat emerging from a trapdoor in the stage, and Binder tapped his foot down onto the circle of wire in perfect time, releasing the suit from the circle’s confinement as it tumbled clear. Then he lifted his foot and dropped it down again in metronomic time as a second suit emerged from the Nevernever, and a third, and a fourth, and so on.

“Spell’s gone,” Ascher reported. “He heard us. He’s running.”

“He’s heard too much,” Nicodemus said, and turned to Binder. “Can your associates track him?”

“Like bloodhounds,” Binder confirmed.

Nicodemus nodded. “Kill him.”

Binder let out a short whistle and cocked a finger in the direction Ascher had indicated. The suits needed no more indication than that. They bounded off in that direction with greater than human agility.

I jerked my head at Karrin and stalked away from the table.

“What?” she hissed.

In answer, I dug into the bandages over my arm until I found the object, hidden from me until I had finally focused my attention on it—a rounded, black Pente stone that had been worked into the bandages when they had been reapplied. There were a number of familiar runes painted over its dark surface in metallic gold. I’d used the exact same spell design myself more than once, back in the day, when I’d been learning how it worked.

“What’s that?” Karrin asked.

“The bug,” I hissed quietly. “The one the listener was using to hear us. It got put in the bandages over my arm when it was reset.”

Her eyes widened. “But . . .”

“Yeah,” I said, and watched as more of the suited servitors poured forth from the Nevernever to streak into the night in pursuit. “It’s Butters. They’re going to kill him.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

“Go,” Karrin said. “I’ll catch up.”

“How are you going to find me?”

She gave me a quick roll of her eyes. “Harry, please.”

Right. Karrin had been a Chicago cop for twenty years. She’d find me whether I wanted her to or not. I touched her shoulder, called upon Winter, and took off at a sprint, staff clenched in my right hand.

As I ran, I could feel the power of the Winter mantle infusing my body, my senses, and my thoughts. Binder’s suits were hounding after the prey in a pack, moving in instinctive coordination, their leaders slowing the pace slightly until a few of the ones with a later start could catch up, the better to bring down the prey together.

I caught up to the rearmost suits and passed them before I’d even exited the slaughterhouse, which sent a rush of elation through me. Slowpokes. But they were necessary. I couldn’t hunt Butters down by mys—

I faltered for a few steps, and forced multiplication tables to start running through my head. I wasn’t hunting down Butters. I was keeping *them* from hunting him down. And I had to figure out a way to do it without overtly turning on Nicodemus and company and shaming Mab.

That particular line of reason seemed to interfere mightily with the flow of energy from the Winter mantle, as if it simply didn’t understand why it was going to all this trouble for so incomprehensible a goal.

Butters is one of mine, I snarled at it, *and we’re not letting these chumps kill him unless that’s what I decide should happen*.

Territory and power—those were things that Winter could sink its teeth into. I regained my stride as we exploded from the exit of the slaughterhouse and into the near-silent mix of sleet, rain, and frozen, slippery cold that was a Midwest ice storm.

The ground outside the slaughterhouse was already freezing over; not in a uniform sheet, but in treacherous patches of various consistencies of nearly transparent slush, invisible ice, and wet concrete, with very few visible cues to differentiate between them. The streetlights gleamed off of all of them with benevolent cheer, and the suits started slipping at random, further slowing them. I adjusted my pace only enough to be sure of putting my feet on the least slippery option available at every stride, trusting the instincts of the mantle to guide me.

Butters was sprinting across the small gravel parking lot, maybe seventy yards ahead of his pursuers. I could recognize his build and his shock of dark hair from where I was, though he was wearing a long, billowing overcoat and a rather bulgy-looking backpack and moving more slowly than he should have been. In the lowering skies, the mixed rain and lumpy snow, the sounds seemed muffled and close, as if everything was happening indoors. I could hear Butters’s quick, clean breaths, his pants of effort as he slowed, nearing the street.

I hoped he was about to throw himself into a getaway car. Instead, he fumbled at his backpack and spun in a comical circle trying to pull something off of it. As he whirled beneath the yellow cone of illumination cast by a streetlight, I saw him take a wide-looking skateboard off where it had been fastened to the pack and slam it to the concrete.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I muttered. “A freaking skateboard?”

The suits saw it and surged ahead. I’d seen them move before, and they could pounce like mountain lions. They’d be within a long leap of him in seconds.

Butters threw a glance over his shoulder, his face pale, his eyes huge behind his glasses, and stepped hard onto the skateboard, setting it into motion. He fumbled at a short strap on the front of

the board, crouching and taking hold of it with the same intensity as a water-skier about to be launched into motion.

“Go, go, go!” he screamed.

And then a small inferno of orange sparks erupted from the wheels of the skateboard, and the damned thing took off down the empty street at the speed of a motorcycle.

I felt my jaw drop open for a second—and then a bubbling chuckle rolled up out of my chest. Butters, it seemed, had been using more of my old artifice spells, doubtless learned from Bob the Skull. That particular one looked an awful lot like the one I’d put together in my one ill-advised attempt to create a wizardly classic: a flying broomstick. The experiment had damned near killed me, and scared me enough that I abandoned its use until I had a better understanding of the aerodynamics involved, but I’d never even considered applying it to something that wouldn’t necessarily flip me upside down while in motion and carry me into buildings at suicidal speeds. Why had I never applied the same magic to a freaking bicycle?

Or to a skateboard.

Butters didn’t have the kind of power it took to be even a serious sorcerer—but the little guy had knocked together a number of useful magical tools over the past couple of years, also with Bob’s help, and it looked like those exercises had developed into a real gift for creating magical artifices. But how the hell was he powering the damned things? Wizardly tools like that were like toys that needed batteries to work, but Butters didn’t have the strength to power any but the simplest toys. So what was he using as a battery?

Oh. Oh, *no*.

The suits let out howls of excitement and began lengthening their strides. They weren’t done, not by a long shot, and they started curling the path of their pursuit, bounding over the fence surrounding the property, leaping over the landscaping of nearby buildings. I went with them, leaping the same fences. One of the suits slipped and hit the chain link at better than thirty miles an hour, with moderately gruesome results.

Another suit might have accidentally caught the end of my quarterstaff in the teeth as we both leapt a six-foot hedge, and wound up slamming into the side of an office building at the same pace, but it was pretty dark, what with the rain and sleet and snow and all, and I just wasn’t entirely sure what happened. Heh.

By the time we hit the next cross street, I saw Butters fling out an arm. There was another glitter of orange sparks, this time in a long line, and I saw some kind of dark fiber whip out from his hand and wrap around a streetlight’s pole. He leaned into it with a high-pitched, half-panicked whoop of excitement, and used the line to carry the racing skateboard through a tight ninety-degree turn without slowing down. There was another sparkle of orange campfire sparks along the length of the line, and the thing evidently let go of the pole, as he kept sailing down the street, heading north.

Suits were letting out hunting cries at regular intervals by now, and running unimpeded on streets that were still warm enough from the day’s light to resist the ice. I knew that Binder could probably have forty or fifty of the damned things on the street by now, and that they were smart enough to communicate and work cooperatively. I had to hope that Butters would have the good sense to continue heading in one direction—every turn in the chase would give his more numerous pursuers a chance to maneuver, closing in around him, like hounds around a panicked rabbit.

He kept fleeing down the street, but the smooth surface that let him use his—and I can’t believe I’m going to use this phrase—enchanted skateboard also gave an advantage to his pursuers. The street was still warm enough from the sunlight of the day, and the passage of early-evening traffic meant that the falling precipitation had been given less time to settle, and consequently ice had not yet begun to clog it. The suits and I began to close the distance, and I couldn’t act to discourage them in the excellent lighting without risking observation.

Then came what I had feared might happen. A pair of suits, maybe a little leaner and faster than their companions, vectored in on the chase from a side street, using the cries of their companions to coordinate their attack. They bounded forward in a rush, and it was only because Butters had his left leg forward, and so was facing them as they came, that he saw them close on him.

I'll give the little guy credit. He didn't panic. Instead, he dropped his free hand into his coat, seized something and smashed it to the street in his wake, shouting a word as he did. There was a flash of light on some kind of glass globe, and then it shattered on the concrete, expanding into a cloud of thick grey mist, just in front of his pursuers.

The two suits hit the mist, unable to avoid it in their surge of closing speed and plunged into it and out the other side—where their steps abruptly slowed, and the pair of them stumbled to a halt, looking around them blearily as Butters and his orange-sparking skateboard whooshed on down the street.

As the rest of the pack passed the spot, the suits dodged around the cloud of grey mist, and the two who had stopped gave their packmates a startled, confused look and then took off in belated pursuit again, obviously straining to catch up. That was when I realized what I'd just seen, and I went by the cloud of mist cackling madly.

Mind fog. Better than ten years ago, a foe had used the enchanted mist to blanket an entire Wal-Mart store, rendering the memory of everyone inside it temporarily nonfunctional and effectively blurring the previous hour or so of experience beyond recall. Bob and I had worked out the specifics of how the spell must have operated in the aftermath of the case. Obviously, Butters and Bob had, between them, figured out how to can the stuff.

Butters rocketed on down the street, dodging around a couple of slow-moving cars, used his lightpole-lariat again twice in quick succession, and careened onto Michigan Avenue, heading into the heart of downtown, where the towers and lights of Chicago burned brightest in the freezing haze.

That gave even the demonic suits pause. Cities aren't just streets and buildings—they are collectives of sheer will, of the determination of every person who helped build them and every soul whose work and life maintains them. To something from the Nevernever, a place like downtown Chicago is an alien citadel, a source of power and terror. Mordor, basically. (One does not simply walk into Mordor—except that was *exactly* what everyone in the story did anyway.)

Similarly, Binder's goons were not sufficiently impressed with the Loop to let it stop them from pursuing Butters. They put on a surge of speed and gained on him, and for a moment, it looked like they might nab him again—but he hurled a second glass globe of forget-me mist to the street and disrupted the pursuit at exactly the right moment. Butters let out a shriek of terrified defiance and shook his fist at his pursuers as several staggered in confusion, stumbling into their packmates.

Then the Genoskwa appeared out of nowhere on the sidewalk in front of a café and kicked a stone planter the size of a hot tub directly into Butters's path.

Butters had maybe a whole second to react and nowhere near enough time to steer around the planter. The Genoskwa had acted with calm, precise timing. Butters did the only thing he could do: He let go of the skateboard strap and leapt into the air.

He wasn't wearing padding and he didn't have a helmet. That dopey little skateboard had been moving at thirty miles an hour, and all that waited to receive him was cold asphalt. If he'd been in a car with an airbag, I'm sure he'd have been fine—but he wasn't.

I ground my teeth and prepared a spherical shield to catch him with—but while that would protect him from the fall, it would also mean that he could be briefly held inside it until his momentum was spent. Without the skateboard, the suits or the Genoskwa would catch him in a few heartbeats, and I would be forced to fight to defend him, bringing my mission to an unfortunate conclusion.

So be it. You don't leave friends, even friends twisted up with mistrust, to the monsters.

But instead of falling onto the street and splattering, or into my shield and getting us both subsequently killed, Butters's too-billowy overcoat flared with orange sparks and spread out into a giant, cupped wing shape. He windmilled his arms and legs with a high-pitched, creaking shout, and then tucked himself into a ball while the orange light seemed to gather the coat into a resilient sphere around him—one that bounced once when it hit the street, and then rolled several times, dumping him onto the street more or less on his feet.

The little guy darted straight away from the Genoskwa, for which I did not blame him, up the steps of the nearest building—as it happened, the Art Institute of Chicago. The nearest of the suits leapt at his unprotected back.

I flung my staff forward with a howl of "*Forzare!*" and smashed the suit with invisible power in midair, flinging him just over Butters's shoulder as he leapt. "Dammit!" I howled, with as much sincerity as I could muster—which wasn't much. "Clear my line of fire!"

Butters shot an aghast look over his shoulder at me, and stumbled away, fetching up against the northernmost of the two lion statues outside the Art Institute. He darted a look at the statue, licked his lips, and hissed something beneath his breath.

Orange light flooded out of the inner folds of his coat and promptly seeped into the bronze of the statue, confirming how he was managing all of these tricks.

Bob.

Bob the Skull was running around loose, like some kind of bloody superhero sidekick.

Bob had been the one powering the skateboard. Bob had guided the ropes that had flown from Butters's wrist. Bob had manipulated Butters's coat to bring him in to a safe landing.

Damn. Bob was kind of awesome.

It only stood to reason. Though Bob was a spirit, he had always been able to manipulate physical objects—and if he had mostly only done so with fairly small, fairly light things in the past, like romance novels or his own skull, there was no reason that I knew that he might not have tried something larger. I'd always assumed he simply lacked the motivation.

But I'd rarely removed Bob from my lab for a *reason*. To be exercising that kind of control over the spirit, Butters had to be in possession of Bob's skull, like, *right now*. He was actually *carrying* the skull around, probably in that backpack, and that meant that Bob's allegiance was as fragile as Butters's ability to remain in physical possession of the skull itself. If someone like Nicodemus got hold of the skull, with Bob's centuries of experience and knowledge, I shuddered to think what my old friend might be used to accomplish.

Of course, that concern abruptly dwindled to a secondary issue as I realized what Butters had commanded the spirit to do.

Orange firelight-sparks suddenly erupted from the eyes of the enormous bronze lion. Then, moving exactly as if it had been a living beast, the thing turned its head toward me, crouched, and let out an enormous and authentically leonine roar.

"Oh, crap," I said.

"Hold them off!" Butters shouted.

The lion roared again.

"Dammit, Butters," I snarled under my breath, "I'm helping!"

And then several tons of living bronze predator, guided by the intelligence and will of the most powerful spirit of intellect I had ever encountered, flung itself directly at my head.

Chapter Twenty-eight

It had been a good long while since I'd had a freaking lion coming at me, and at the time it had been one of the genuine flesh-and-blood variety, from the zoo. I'd never had something made entirely of metal try to kill me before, unless you counted the instruments of the occasional would-be vehicular homicide that came my way, and never both at the same time—so actually that made this a first.

And that's important in a job. Fresh challenges. What would I do without them?

Without the Winter mantle on my side, I think Bob might have taken my head off of my shoulders. But instead, I ducked, fast enough and low enough to avoid the enormous paw that flashed toward me in anticipation of the move, and Bob flew over me, crashing into a pair of Binder's suits with juggernaut enthusiasm. They went flying like ninepins, and the bronze lion whirled toward me, far too fast for something so massive, and crouched to leap at me again.

And one of the lion's golden orange glowing eyes, the one away from the street, shivered down in the barest little wink imaginable.

Bob *got it*.

My former lab assistant thundered, "Die, traitor!" and then roared again.

"Watch out, he's loose!" I screamed to a nearby suit, reeling back toward him and fighting to keep the sudden grin off my face. "He'll tear us all apart!"

"Rargh!" Bob screamed and came rushing at me again.

I flung myself to one side at the last second, when the suit wouldn't see Bob coming until it was too late. The bronze lion smashed into the suit, sending it tumbling in a whirl of broken limbs, to smash into the side of the Art Institute. It exploded into gelatinous clear goo, its physical vessel simply too mangled to enable the spirit Binder had summoned to continue animating it, and the lion let out a roar of triumph, and turned toward the next nearest suits.

"I'll get him!" I shouted. I pointed my staff at Bob and snarled, "*Fuego!*" A blast of pure fire erupted from the staff, missed the rampaging lion statue by inches, and took a pair of suits full-on, setting them ablaze and causing them to issue weird howls of frustration and rage as it began to consume their physical forms.

Furious, the burning suits flung themselves at Bob, and the hunting-pack mentality of the demons prompted the others to leap at the rampaging statue as well. Bob roared, his eyelights blazing merrily, and started batting them around like Mister playing with multiple catnip lures on a string.

I hopped back from the immediate vicinity of the havoc and looked around wildly for Butters. I checked his last direction but saw nothing—except an empty plastic sports-drink bottle rolling slowly down the sidewalk, pushed by the mild wind coming in from the north, exactly like the kind I used to store a potion in when I made one.

Butters was in the wind. Hell, maybe literally. It had been a long time since I'd brewed that escape potion that had saved me from a toad demon, but if I'd had a twenty, I'd have bet it against a piece of bubble gum that Butters had duplicated my old formula and used it to pull a quick vanishing act in the confusion.

Because confusion there was: The explosions and roaring and noise had done exactly what I had hoped they would, and attracted attention. Though the muffling effect of the weather had dulled the sounds, and though it was well after business hours, that didn't mean that the area around us was wholly empty of life. Lights had begun to flick on. Faces had begun to appear at windows in nearby buildings.

One of the cardinal points of common sense, in the supernatural world, is that you don't get yourself involved with mortal authorities. The average individual mortal (or twenty) might not be a match for a real supernatural predator. I'm pretty sure the serious bad guys, like the hulking, hairy one standing in the shadows across the street from the Art Institute, could take on a riot's worth of mortals without hesitation, and expect victory. But in a city like Chicago, starting a rumble with humanity wouldn't mean fighting a score of mortals, or a couple of hundred. It would mean thousands, and more important, it would mean tangling with those who had the training and equipment to be a genuine threat.

People had actually begun to appear on the street, from inside the café and a nearby sandwich shop. Cell phones were coming out. And Chicago PD had maybe half a dozen stations within a mile of where I stood.

"What are you waiting for?" I shouted toward the Genoskwa, and pointed at the animated statue. "Lend a hand, big guy!"

The Genoskwa glowered at me for a second, and then at the rampaging Bob. There was a flash of ugly yellow tusks, a glitter of malicious and angry eyes, and then the creature faded from sight, turning as it vanished, and starting up the street in the direction Butters had last been going.

Worse, there was a sound of rushing wind overhead, and something dark and swift passed between me and some of the higher lights in the area, sending a multitude of wavering, flickering shadows across the street. I squinted up into the rain and mist, and saw nothing but a large, winged form, moving fast, in the same direction.

Well, crap.

Nicodemus and Anduriel had taken to the air. I had no doubt that the Genoskwa could track Butters as well as any hound, and that escape potion, if that's what he'd used, would only transport him a relatively short distance, maybe a couple of blocks. It would be only a matter of time before Nicodemus spotted Butters or the Genoskwa picked up his trail—and he no longer had Bob to propel his skateboard or cover his back.

I ground my teeth, and Bob sent another one of Binder's suits flying past me. I ducked absently. My instincts told me to get moving again, as quickly as possible. I told them to shut the hell up. I could go sprinting off in some direction, but that was unlikely to result in accomplishing anything. I took a moment to lever the Winter mantle away from my thoughts, and found them clearer. The Winter Knight was not needed here.

I ran down the street to the discarded sports bottle and snagged it. Just as I did, one of those mini-SUVs sliced through the slush in the middle of the avenue, sliding only slightly to one side as it braked, and Karrin stuck her head out the window. "Get in!"

I ran for the vehicle as Karrin stared in fascination at the sight of more than a dozen suits swarming over the lion, struggling to overturn it, and the huge thing twisting and spinning like a dervish trying to keep them off, orange eyelights blazing.

"Huh," Karrin said. "That's new."

I slammed the door shut and said, "It's Bob. Butters let him off the chain."

"Is that good?" she asked.

I stuffed my staff mostly into the back and fumbled with the bottle. "It's exciting, anyway. Butters gave them the slip, but Nicodemus and the Genoskwa are on his trail."

"Is our cover blown?"

"Not yet," I said. "We're still bad guys. At least, enough to satisfy Mab. You know how confusing fights can be."

"Hah," Karrin said. "What's the plan?"

"Find Butters. Get me to somewhere I can step out of the rain and give me a second to get a tracking spell running."

"No need," she said and started driving. "I know where he's going."

I blinked. "Where?"

"You're Butters. You know basically everything that's been going on in Chicago for the past dozen years. You've got a bunch of demons and supernatural bad guys including the Knights of the Blackened Denarius after you," she said. "Where would you go?"

I frowned, thinking. She was right about that. If Butters had been working that closely with Bob, he'd know pretty much anything the skull did, and he'd recognize Deirdre and Nicodemus by name—hell, he must have, which probably explained his mistrust. I'd declined to tell him anything about what I'd gotten Karrin into, and he'd listened in on me spending a day with a bunch of super-criminals and sitting down at a table with Nicodemus Archleone.

And where in this city would be the best place to go if one wanted protection from Fallen angels?

"Hell's bells," I breathed. "He's going to Michael's."

"Yeah," Karrin said, real anger in her voice. "Dammit, he knows better."

I blinked several times and then felt my jaw drop as a flash of intuition hit me. "The Swords are there, aren't they? And Butters knows it."

Her jaw tensed. She eyed me and gave me a single short nod. "I wanted one other person to know, in case something happened to me. My place isn't secure enough, even with what the Paranetters can do. And I'm sure as hell not going to trust those things to Marcone's people. Anything bad that tries to get into Michael's place has got a world of hurt coming down. It was the best I could think of."

"If they catch Butters before he gets there," I said, "he's dead. If you're wrong about where he's going, he's dead."

"And if we stop for a couple of minutes for you to get your mojo together, we might get there too late to do anything," she said, and bit her lip. She was coaxing as much speed from the little truck as she could, in this weather, its all-wheel drive churning steadily. "What do you think we should do?"

This was my fault. If I'd brought Butters in, at least far enough to understand what was going on, he wouldn't have gone poking around himself. But dammit, how could I have done it without . . .

Augh.

I hated this cards-close-to-the-chest thing.

I suck at cards. I'm more a Monopoly sort of guy.

"I hadn't talked to Michael in years," I said. "The first day I do, I set off a chain of events that has some heavyweight monsterage heading right for his house."

"Yeah," Karrin said, "I noticed that."

"Maybe it isn't a coincidence," I said.

She arched one pale brow. "Faith, Harry? You?"

"Oh, blow me," I said, scowling. "Drive."

She bared her teeth in a fierce smile and said, "Buckle up."

I did, as the fine, freezing rain began to turn to heavy sleet.

Chapter Twenty-nine

We were two blocks from Michael's place, back in the residential neighborhoods, when a cab all but teleported out of the sleet, moving too fast. It rolled through a stop sign and forced Karrin to slam on the brakes and swerve to avoid a collision.

The little SUV did its best, but it slid on the sleet-slickened street, bounced over the curb, through a wooden privacy fence, and wound up with its front wheels in someone's emptied pool.

Karrin slapped the vehicle into reverse and tried to pull out, but the rear tires spun uselessly on the ice. "Dammit!" she snarled. "Go. I'm right behind you!"

I grabbed my staff and leapt out into the sleet without hesitating, wrapping myself in Winter as I went running through the storm and into the hazy pseudo-darkness. I went straight for Michael's place, sprinting down a sidewalk briefly, and then cutting through yards, bounding over fences and parked cars (Parkour!) as I went.

I got to the Carpenters' home just as the cab that had caused our wreck slid to a gradual stop a few houses past Michael's. Butters popped out of the back and threw several wadded bills at the driver, then put his head down and sprinted toward Michael's house. He looked pale and shaky. I sympathized. That potion had left me feeling like I'd just ridden a couple of dozen roller coasters, all at once, with a bad hangover. He hadn't run five steps before one of his feet went out from under him on the frozen, slippery sidewalk, and he went down hard. I heard his head rap the concrete, and then felt a sympathetic pang at the explosion of air from his lungs as the fall knocked the wind out of him.

I didn't slow down until I was close to Butters, sweeping my gaze around the neighborhood, and finding it quiet and still.

"Jesus!" Butters blurted out as I got close. He flinched away from me, raising one hand as if to ward off a blow, reaching for something inside his coat with the other.

"Hell's bells, Butters," I said on a note of complaint. "If I was going to hurt you, I'd have blasted you from way the hell over there."

"You *tried* . . .," he wheezed, hand still poised inside his coat. "Stay . . . back. I . . . mean it."

"Hell's bells, you are smarter than this." I sighed and offered him my hand. "Come on. They're bound to be right behind you. You can't stay out here. Let me help you up."

He stared up at me for a second, clearly a little dazed from the fall, and just as obviously terrified.

I made an impatient clucking sound and stepped forward.

Butters fumbled what looked like a glass Christmas ornament from his coat's inner pocket and flicked it at me weakly.

Winter was still upon me. I bent my knees a little and caught it on the fly, careful not to break it. "Whoa," I said. "Easy there, killer. I'd rather not have us both forget why we're standing out here in the sleet."

He stared up at me, struggling to draw a steady breath. "Harry . . ."

"Easy," I said. "Here." I passed the ornament back to him.

He blinked at me.

"Come on," I said. I bent down, got a hand under his arm, and more or less hauled the little guy to his feet. He slipped again at once, and would have fallen if I hadn't held him up. I steadied him, guiding his steps off the treacherous concrete and onto the grass in front of one of the houses. "There, easy. Come on, let's get you out of the cold at least."

He groaned and said, "Oh, God, Harry. You're not . . . You haven't . . ." We stumbled a few more steps and then he said, "I'm an idiot. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," I said, looking around us warily. "Be inside."

"How bad have I screwed things up?" he asked.

"We move fast enough, nothing that can't be fixed," I said. Impatient, I ducked down enough to get a shoulder beneath his arm and more or less lifted him up, dragging him along with his feet barely touching the ground toward the Carpenters' yard.

Twenty yards.

Ten.

Five.

The wind rushed. Something shaped like black sails billowed in the sleet, and then swirling shadow receded, and Nicodemus Archleone stood between us and safety, a slender-bladed sword held in his right hand, blade parallel with his leg. He faced me with a small smile.

Behind him, his shadow stretched out for twenty yards in every direction, writhing in slow waves.

I drew up short. Butters's legs swung back and forth.

I took a step back and looked over my shoulder.

The Genoskwa blurred into vision through the thick sleet, maybe twenty feet back, staying in the shadows of a large pine tree, his enormous shaggy form blending into its darkness. I could see the gleam of his eyes, though.

"Ah, Dresden," Nicodemus purred. "You caught him. And in the nick of time."

I set Butters down warily, and kept him close to my side. The little guy didn't move or speak, though I could feel him shuddering with sudden intelligent terror.

"The little doctor," Nicodemus said. "Quite a resourceful rabbit, is he not?"

"He's quick," I said. "And not much of a threat. There's no reason not to let him go."

"Don't be absurd," Nicodemus said. "He's heard entirely too much—and my files on him say that he's been associated with Marcone's Chicago Alliance. Only an idiot wouldn't recognize a potentially lethal security leak." He tilted his head to one side. "He dies."

The Genoskwa let out a hungry, rumbling growl.

Butters stiffened. He did not look behind him. I didn't blame him. I didn't want to look back there either.

Nicodemus was enjoying this. "It seems, Dresden," he said, "that it is time for you to make a choice. Shall I make it easier for you?"

"What'd you have in mind?" I asked.

"Practicality," Nicodemus said. "Give him to me. I will take him from here. It will be quick and merciful." His eyes shifted to Butters. "It's nothing personal, young man. You became involved in something larger than you. That is the price you pay. But I've no grudge with you. You will simply stop."

Butters made a quiet, terrified sound.

"Or," Nicodemus said, "you can breach Mab's given word, wizard." He smiled. "In which case, well, I have no need of you."

"Without me," I said, "you'll never get through the second gate."

"Once I kill you," Nicodemus said, "I'm quite certain Mab will loan me her next Knight or another servant as readily as she did you, if it means a chance to make good on her word. Choose."

"I'm thinking about it," I said.

Nicodemus opened one hand, a gracious gesture, inviting me to take my time.

Giving him Butters wasn't on the table. Period. But fighting him did not seem like a good idea either. With Nicodemus on one side and the Genoskwa on the other, I did not like my chances at all. Even with the Winter Knight's mantle, I didn't know if I could have beaten either of these guys, let alone both of them at once.

If I gave him Butters, I might live. If I didn't, both of us were going to die, right here next door to Michael's house.

I was out of options.

"You take the guy behind us," I muttered to Butters.

The little guy swallowed, and jerked his head in a tiny nod, gripping his Christmas ornament carefully.

Nicodemus nodded, his dark eyes glittering. The point of the slender sword swept up, lithe as a snake's flickering tongue, and his shadow began to dance and waver in sudden agitation. The Genoskwa let out another rumbling growl and stepped forward. I gripped my staff, and Butters's tremors abruptly stilled into an electrified tension.

And then Karrin stepped out of the sleet with her rocket launcher prepped and resting on her shoulder, aimed directly at Nicodemus.

"Hi," she said. "I really don't like you very much, Denarian."

"Hah," I said to Nicodemus. "Heh, heh."

His eyes slid from me to Karrin and back. His smile widened. "Ms. Murphy," he said. "You won't shoot."

"Why not?" Karrin asked brightly.

"Because it is obvious to me that you love him," Nicodemus said. "That weapon will kill the wizard, as well as your friend the doctor, if you fire it. At that range, I'm not at all certain that you would survive the blast, either."

Karrin seemed to regard that offering thoughtfully. Then she said, "You're right," and took several steps closer. "There. That should just about do it, don't you think?"

Nicodemus narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't."

Karrin spoke in a very low, very calm voice. "People do crazy things for love. I'd rather kill us all and take you with us than let you harm him." Her voice became a bit sharper, and she took another pair of quick strides nearer Nicodemus. "Take one step closer, Tall, Dark and Furry, and I blow us all to hell right now."

I checked over my shoulder, to see the Genoskwa pause in the act of slipping a little closer. Its cavern-eyes glittered in silent rage.

Karrin took a couple of slow steps toward Nicodemus, her eyes strangely bright. "Crazy, crazy things. Don't push me."

Nicodemus's smile turned into a smirk. "You proceed from a false assumption," he said. "You assume that your toy can actually threaten me or my companion."

Guy had a point, even if I didn't want to admit it. With that Noose around his neck, I was pretty sure Nicodemus would smirk just as hard at a flamethrower, or a giant meat grinder, for that matter.

"Actually, you're the one proceeding from a false assumption," Karrin countered in that same deathly calm voice, a decidedly odd light in her eyes, still approaching. "You think I'm holding a rocket launcher."

And with that she knocked some kind of concealed cap off the back of the rocket launcher's tube, and from its length withdrew a sword.

Check that. She withdrew a Sword.

It was a Japanese-style katana blade, set into a wooden cane sheath, in the same style as that of the apocryphal Zatoichi. Even as the false rocket launcher casing fell to the ground, the Sword's blade sprang free of its sheath, and as it did, *Fidelacchius*, the Sword of Faith, blazed with furious white light.

But more important, the *presence* of the Sword suddenly filled the night, a nearly subaudible thrumming like the after-vibration of a bass guitar string. It wasn't something that could be heard, precisely, or seen, or felt on the skin—but its presence was absolute, unquestionable, filling the sleet-streaked air. It was power, bone-deep, earth solid, and terrible in its resolution.

I think it was that power that wiped the smirk from Nicodemus's face.

His eyes widened in dismay. Even his shadow abruptly went statue-still.

Karrin's bid to narrow the distance between them as she had been speaking meant that she was only a few strides away. She closed in, her feet sure, barely seeming to touch the icy ground, and he barely lifted his blade to a defensive counter in time. The swords met in a clash of steel and a blaze of furious light, and she carried her momentum into him with a full-body check against his center of gravity.

"Watch the big guy," I hissed to Butters, and took a step toward Nicodemus and Karrin—then froze in place.

Nicodemus slipped on the treacherous ground as Karrin slammed into him, but he swept a leg back, dropped one knee to the ground, and prevented himself from falling. She pressed her advantage, their swords locked, each blade exerting lethal pressure against the other.

I didn't dare intervene. The least slip or mistake in balance from either of them would mean that the two razor-sharp blades would slice like scalpels into unprotected flesh.

I watched them strain silently against each other, strength against strength. Karrin wasn't relying on upper-body strength to get it done. Her arms were locked in tight against her body, her weight and her legs pressing forward against Nicodemus, and her two-handed grip on *Fidelacchius* gave her a significant leverage advantage against his one-handed grip. The edge of her sword pressed closer to his face with each straining heartbeat, until a thin, bright ribbon of scarlet appeared on Nicodemus's cheek.

He showed her his teeth, and the strain on his arm quivered through his entire body as he pushed the Sword back a precious half inch from his skin. "So," he hissed, "the burnout thinks she has found her new calling."

She didn't say anything back. Karrin's never been a big one for backtalking the bad guys without a damned good reason. It's not her fault. She's a practical soul. She took a slow, contained breath, and kept up the pressure, veering the blades, altering the direction slightly, so that the locked swords began a slow descent toward Nicodemus's throat.

"And you think you deserve to join the ranks of real Knights of the Sword," Nicodemus said, his voice smooth and confident. "You battered, scarred, broken thing. In my centuries I've learned exactly what is needed in a real Knight. You haven't got what it takes. And you know that. Or you'd have taken up the Sword before now."

Her eyes blazed, bright blue in her pale, frightened face, and she leaned forward, pressing the Sword closer to his neck, and the beating artery there. I'd seen how sharp the katana's blade was. It would take a feather's pressure and the movement of a blade of grass to open Nicodemus's neck once that steel reached his skin.

"You've never done this before," he said. "Been this close, this tense, this still—not in earnest. Do you know how many times I've talked to novices exactly like you, in situations almost exactly like this? I've forgotten more about real sword fighting than this pale modern world knows."

Karrin ignored him. She shifted her hips the barest fraction, seeking a slightly different angle of pressure. The blazing Sword dipped another fraction of an inch closer.

"Dresden," Nicodemus said, "I'm giving you ample chance to call off your dog before I put her down." His eyes flicked to me. "End the little doctor and come back to headquarters. There's no reason I should have to kill all three of you."

I ground my teeth. Getting myself killed defending Butters was one thing. Taking Karrin with me was something else. But I knew her. I knew what choice she would make, without needing to talk to her about it.

Karrin didn't let the monsters take her people, either.

But there just wasn't a good option open to me. The Genoskwa wasn't far from us, and the damned thing was fast. Even if Butters ran for the safety of Michael's place right now, he'd never get there before it caught him—and I couldn't slow the huge thing down with magic, either.

I only had one choice.

"All right," I croaked. "Dammit, all right."

I grabbed Butters and threw him out in front of me, pointing my staff at him and calling forth my will. The runes blazed up with the pale green-white light of the crystals beneath Demonreach, from whence the wood for the staff had come.

"Sorry about this, Butters," I said. "Nothing personal."

Nicodemus's eyes widened. Karrin's gaze flicked toward me for an instant, disbelieving and then resolute.

"Harry?" Butters asked.

"*Forzare!*" I thundered, and unleashed a blast of unseen force from the staff.

It took Butters full in the chest, hitting him like a charging bull and hurling him through the sleet—and over the little white picket fence into the nearest corner of the Carpenters' yard.

Everything happened in the same instant.

Nicodemus's left arm blurred and produced a short-barreled pistol from somewhere on his body. He jammed it into Karrin's belly and pulled the trigger half a dozen times.

I let out a scream of defiance and drew that monster revolver from my duster even as the Genoskwa came charging toward me. The Winter mantle made me faster than I could ever have been on my own, but even so there was no time for anything but a hip shot. The Genoskwa was maybe three feet away when the gun went off, thundering like a high-powered rifle. Then the huge creature hit me like a freight train, picking me up in its onslaught like a piece of litter being towed along by the breeze, and carried me across the street and into the side of the neighbor's minivan.

Metal crashed and crunched. Glass broke. Silver lightning ran through my body without causing me any real pain. The carnivore stench of the Genoskwa filled my nose. My arms slammed against the vehicle, but I hung on to the pistol, shoved it against the creature's torso, but before I could shoot, it got hold of my wrist, its huge hands wrapping my forearm as if I'd been a toddler, and slammed it against the minivan, pinning the pistol there. Its other hand landed on my head, claws pressing into my skin as the thick fingers tightened on my skull like a nutcracker.

"Hold!" I heard Nicodemus shout, his voice sharp.

The Genoskwa let out a low growl. It had to turn its shoulders and twist at the waist to look back at him, a simian gesture—there was just too much muscle on that huge neck to allow it the full range of motion. As a result, I was able to see past it.

Karrin, apparently unhurt, still stood, and she had *Fidelacchius* pressed against Nicodemus's throat.

I blinked, and felt a sudden surge of ferocious pride.

She'd *beaten* him.

"I may be no true Knight," Karrin snarled into the sudden silence, her voice tight with pain. "But I'm the only one here. Tell the gorilla to let Dresden go or I take your head off and give the Noose back to the Church along with your Coin."

Nicodemus stared at her for a moment. Then he opened his hands, slowly, and the sword and pistol both tumbled to the frozen ground. The sleet rattled down in silence.

"I surrender," he said quietly, his voice mocking. He tilted his head slightly toward Butters. "And I relinquish my claim on the blood of the innocent. Have mercy on me, O Knight."

"Tell the Genoskwa to let him go," Karrin said.

Nicodemus held out his hand. The swarming shadows around him abruptly surged, condensed, flooded toward him. They gathered in his palm, and an instant later, a small silver coin gleamed there, marked with a black smudge in the shape of some kind of sigil. Without looking away from Karrin, he dropped the Coin, and it fell to the icy sidewalk without bouncing, as if it had been made from something far heavier than lead.

"Let Dresden go," Karrin said.

Nicodemus smiled, still, his eyes and hands steady. He reached up and undid the Noose tied about his throat, and let it fall to the ground beside the Coin.

Karrin bared her teeth. "Let him go. I'm not going to ask again."

Nicodemus smiled and smiled, and said, "Crush his skull. Make it hurt."

The Genoskwa turned back toward me, his eyes blazing from back beneath his cavernous brow, and his fingers tightened on my skull. I dropped my staff and tried to reach up to pry his hand off my head, but quickly realized that I was hilariously outclassed in the physical strength department. If I strained with my entire body, I might have a chance against one of the Genoskwa's fingers. I tried that. The vise tightened. My breathing turned harsh as red cracks began to spread through the silvery sensation.

"But I've surrendered," Nicodemus assured Karrin. "It's very clear, what you must do." His smile had returned, and his voice dripped contempt. "Save me, O Knight."

"You son of a bitch," Karrin snarled. Her breath had begun to come in gulps. "You son of a bitch."

Pain finally began to hammer through the mantle of Winter. I heard myself make an animal sound as the Genoskwa's grip tightened. His breathing was getting faster and harsher, too. He was enjoying this.

My groan shook Karrin, visibly, her body reacting to the sound.

I saw it coming, what Nicodemus was doing. I tried to warn her, but as I began to speak, the Genoskwa rapped my head back against the minivan and nothing came out.

"Save me," Nicodemus said again, "and watch him die."

"Damn you!" Karrin snarled.

Her hips and shoulders twisted, to deliver the lethal slash.

The light of the blade died away as abruptly as that of an unplugged lamp. The thrum of power that resonated through the very air vanished.

Nicodemus rolled, moving like a snake, anticipating her perfectly and flowing away from the Sword with a sinuous motion of spine and shoulder. Karrin was thrown slightly off-balance by the lack of resistance, and his hands swept up and seized her wrists.

The pair of them struggled for a second, and then *Fidelacchius* swept up high, over Karrin's head. Her expression whitened in horror as she saw the Sword, now gleaming with nothing more than ordinary light.

Then, guided by Nicodemus's hands, the ancient Sword came smashing down onto the concrete of the sidewalk, the flat of the blade striking the frozen stone.

It shattered with a rising shriek of protesting metal, shards flickering in the streetlights. Pieces of the blade went spinning in every direction, sparkling reflected light through the darkness. Karrin stared at it with unbelieving eyes.

"Ah," Nicodemus said. The wordless sigh was a slow, deep expression of utter satisfaction.

Awful silence fell.

The Sword of Faith was no more.

Chapter Thirty

Sleet rattled down.

A dog howled, somewhere a few blocks away, a lost and lonely sound.

Karrin's breath exploded from her in a sob, her blue eyes wide and fixed on the shattered pieces of the blade.

"Judge not, lest ye be judged, Miss Murphy," Nicodemus purred. And then he slammed his head into hers.

She reeled back from the blow, and was brought up short by Nicodemus's grip on her arm.

"It is not the place of a Knight to decide whether or not to take the life given to another," Nicodemus continued. Before she could recover, he struck her savagely, the heel of his hand cracking into her jaw with an audible crunching sound. "Not your place to condemn or consign."

Karrin seemed to gather herself together. She flicked a quick blow at Nicodemus's face, forcing him to duck, and then their hands engaged in a complex and swift-moving series of motions that ended with Karrin's left arm held out straight, while she was forced down to her knees on the freezing sidewalk.

I'd never seen her lose when it came to grappling for a lock. Never.

"I'm not sure what would have happened if you'd simply struck, without that condemnation," Nicodemus continued, "but it would seem that in the moment of truth, your intent was not pure." He twisted his shoulders in a sudden, sharp motion.

Karrin screamed, briefly, breathlessly.

I struggled against the Genoskwa's crushing grip. I might as well have been a puppy, for all the effect my best efforts had on the thing. I gathered my will and flung a half-formed working of power against him, but again, the energy grounded itself harmlessly into the earth as it struck him.

I could do nothing.

Nicodemus twisted Karrin, tilted his head to one side, and then drove his heel against her knee with crushing strength.

I heard bones and tendons parting at the blow.

Karrin choked out another sound of pain, and crumpled to the ground, broken.

"I was afraid, for a time, that you actually *would* leave the Sword out of it," Nicodemus said. He bent and recovered the Noose calmly, fastening it around his neck as casually as a businessman putting on his tie. "Survivors of Chichén Itzá—and there were more than a few, in part thanks to your efforts—describe your contribution to that conflict as impressive. You were obviously ready and in the right, that night. But you were never meant for more. Most Knights of the Cross serve for less than three days. Did you know that? They aren't always killed—they simply fulfill their purpose and go their way." He leaned down closer to her and said, "You should have had the grace to do the same. What drove you to take up the Sword, when you knew you weren't worthy to bear it? Was it pride?"

Karrin shot him a fierce glare through eyes hazed with pain and tears, and then looked over at me.

He straightened, arching an eyebrow. "Ah, of course," he said, his tone dry—yet somehow filled with venomous undertones. "Love." Nicodemus shook his head and picked up his sword with one hand, and the Coin with the other. "Love will be the downfall of God Himself."

Karrin snarled weakly, and flung the broken hilt of *Fidelacchius* at Nicodemus's head. He snapped his sword up, flicking it contemptuously away from him. The wooden handle landed in the Carpenters' yard.

Nicodemus stepped closer to Karrin, dropping the point of his sword again, aiming it at her. As he did, blackness slithered down his body again, onto the ground, his shadow spreading out around him like a stain of oil over pure water.

Karrin fumbled backward, away from him, but she could barely move with only one arm and one leg functioning. The wet sleet plastered her hair to her head, made her ears stick out, made her look smaller and younger.

I kicked at the Genoskwa through the red haze over my vision. With Winter upon me, I can kick cinder blocks to gravel without thinking twice. It was useless. He was all mass and muscle and rock-hard hide.

“Face it, Miss Murphy,” Nicodemus said, keeping pace with her. His shadow swarmed all over the ground around her, surrounding her. “Your heart”—the tip of his sword dipped toward it by way of illustration— “simply wasn’t in the right place.”

He paused there, long enough to give her time to see the sword thrust coming.

She faced him, her eyes fierce and frightened, her face pale with pain.

And the front door of the Carpenters’ house opened.

Nicodemus’s dark eyes flickered up at once, and stayed focused on the front porch.

Michael stood in the doorway to the house for a brief moment, leaning on his cane, surveying the scene. Then he limped down the steps and out onto the walk leading from the front porch to the mailbox. He moved carefully and steadily in the sleet, right up to the gate in the white picket fence.

He stopped there, maybe three feet from Nicodemus, regarding him steadily.

Sleet struck and melted into rain on his flannel shirt.

“Let them go,” Michael said quietly.

Nicodemus’s mouth turned up at one corner. His dark eyes shone with a dangerous light. “You have no power here, Carpenter. Not any longer.”

“I know,” Michael said. “But you’re going to let them go.”

“And why should I do that?”

“Because if you do,” Michael said, “I’ll walk out this gate.”

Even where I was, I could almost see the blaze of hatred that flared out of Nicodemus’s eyes. His shadow went insane, flickering from side to side, surging up the white picket fence like an incoming tide chewing at a stone cliff.

“Freely?” Nicodemus demanded. “Of your own choice and will?”

A critical point. If Michael willingly divested himself of angelic protection, there would be nothing his bodyguards could do. Angels have terrible power—but not over free will. Michael would be helpless.

Just like Shiro had been helpless.

“Michael,” I grated. I was under some pressure. I sprayed a lot more spittle than I thought I would. “Don’t do it.”

Michael gave me a small smile and said chidingly, “Harry.”

“There’s no point,” Karrin gasped, her voice thin and breathless, “in you dying too. He’ll just come after us again, later.”

“You’d both do the same for me,” Michael said, and looked up at Nicodemus with that same quiet smile.

And then the sleet just . . . stopped.

I don’t mean it stopped sleeting. I mean that the sleet stopped *moving*. The half-frozen droplets hung in the air, suspended like millions of tiny jewels. The slight wind vanished. The howling dog’s voice cut off as abruptly as if someone had flipped a switch.

At the same time, a man appeared, outside the little gate. He was tall and lean with youth, broad-shouldered like a professional swimmer. His features were porcelain-fine. His hair was glossy black and curling, his skin a rich, dark caramel color, and his eyes glittered silver-green.

There was no fanfare about his appearance. One moment nothing was there, and the next moment he was.

His presence was as absolute as it was abrupt, as if the light of the street somehow picked him out more clearly, more sharply, than anyone else there. Even if the abrupt cessation of movement in the physical world hadn't been enough to tip me off, I could feel the power in him, radiating from him like light from a star.

He'd appeared to me in many different forms, but there was no possibility of mistaking his presence, his identity.

Mister Sunshine. The archangel Uriel.

His gaze was focused exclusively on Michael, and his expression was anguished.

"You need not do this," he said, his voice low, urgent. "You have given enough and more than enough already."

"Uriel," Michael said, nodding his head deeply. "I know."

The angel held up his hand. "If you do this, I can take no action to protect you," he said. "And this creature will be free to inflict upon you such pain as even you could not imagine."

A sudden, sunny smile lit Michael's face. "My friend . . ."

Uriel blinked, and rocked slightly, as if the words had struck him with physical force.

". . . thank you," Michael continued. "But I'm not the Carpenter who set the standard."

Nicodemus tapped Uriel on the shoulder. "Excuse me."

The angel turned to him, slowly. His face was resolute, his eyes flat.

"You are standing in the way of mortal business, angel," Nicodemus said. "Stand aside."

Uriel's eyes flickered, and frozen lightning exploded through the clouds overhead, thunder making the standstill sleet-drops quiver.

"You make threats?" Nicodemus asked, contempt dripping from his voice like blood from a wound. "Perhaps you should cut your losses. You are without power in this matter, angel, and we both know it. You can do nothing to me."

And then Nicodemus lifted his left hand and, deliberately, calmly, tensed his forefinger beneath his thumb and flicked it out to tap the end of the angel's nose.

Uriel's eyes widened, and terrible light gathered around his head and shoulders. Looking at it hurt, burned the eyes, seared my mind with sudden memories of every shameful act I'd ever chosen to do, scorched me with the obvious truth of how easy it might have been to make a different choice. The light of Uriel's halo banished shadows and averted everyone's gaze.

Everyone's but Nicodemus's.

"Go on, angel," Nicodemus taunted, his shadow swelling and curling in slow, restless motion. "Smite me. Visit your wrath upon me. Judge me."

Uriel stared at him. Then the angel's gaze went to the shards of *Fidelacchius*. He closed his eyes for a moment, and turned his face away from the Denarian. The light of his halo flickered and died away. A tear slid down his cheek.

And he stepped aside and began walking away.

"Dude!" I said in protest. It was getting hard to see through all the red. "What the hell kind of angelic protector are you? *Do something*."

Uriel did not look back.

"Now, then," Nicodemus said to Michael. His sword had never ceased pointing at Karrin's heart. "If I release this pair, you will step through that gate?"

Michael nodded once. "I will. You have my word."

Nicodemus's eyes glittered. He looked up at the Genoskwa and nodded, and suddenly I was on the ground, untouched, with the giant thing looming over me. The shaggy, hulking creature stared at Uriel with hateful eyes, but then that feral gaze flickered up to the house, and around the yard, skipping from point to point, and looking at something that I couldn't see. The blood rushed back and forth through my head, pounding hard, and though Winter held the pain at bay, my vision pulsed darker and lighter with every heartbeat.

“Go on, Dresden,” Nicodemus said. “Take her inside.”

It took me a couple of tries to get to my feet, but I did it, stuffed my revolver back into my duster’s pocket, and shambled over to Karrin.

She was in bad shape, obviously in severe pain. When I picked her up, she would have screamed if she’d had the breath. Michael opened the gate for me, and I carried her through it, into the yard, then put her down as carefully as I could on the grass.

Uriel, meanwhile, had gone to Butters’s side. He crouched down and shook him. Butters started awake and sat up, rubbing at his head.

Uriel spoke to him in a low, intent voice, nodding toward the house. Butters swallowed, his eyes the size of teacups, and nodded. Then he got up and half ran around the house, into the backyard.

Uriel gave me an intent look.

Time, said a voice in my head. *Get me a little time.*

“I’ve kept my word,” Nicodemus said to Michael. “Now it’s your tur—”

“The hell you have,” I spat. “You just ordered your goon to kill me. You’ve broken your contract with Mab.”

Nicodemus shifted his gaze to me and looked amused. “That?” he said. “Goodness, Dresden, can you not recognize a ploy when you see one?”

“What ploy?” I demanded.

“I needed to put a little pressure on Miss Murphy,” he said. “But you were never in any actual danger. Do you honestly think it would take the Genoskwa more than a few seconds to crack even a skull so thick as yours?” He smiled widely, clearly enjoying himself. “Why, it was no more an attempt to kill you than was your participation in the chase of the little doctor a betrayal of Mab’s word that you would aid me.”

Dammit. Nothing like a little pro forma quid pro quo action. By Mab’s reckoning, I was pretty sure, Nicodemus and I had played this one out evenly. My actions in protecting Butters could be explained as bad luck and sincere incompetence. Nicodemus’s attempt to kill me could be explained as a ploy to destroy the Sword.

His eyes narrowed. “And I fully expect you to continue to fulfill your half of the bargain, Dresden, regardless of what happens over the next few hours.”

I ground my teeth and said, “You attacked Murphy.”

“I warned you that I could not guarantee her safety,” he said in a reasonable tone. “And in any case, she initiated the attack, if you recall. And she’s not dead just yet.” He showed me white teeth. “I’d say that I’m being more than reasonable. And so would your liege.”

Again, he was right—by Mab’s reckoning, he was indeed a reasonable man.

Uriel, meanwhile, had paced over to stand at Michael’s right hand. I took up station on my friend’s left.

“The bargain was made,” Nicodemus purred, to Uriel, “his word freely given. You cannot stop him from fulfilling it.”

“Correct,” Uriel said, “but I can *help* him do so.”

Nicodemus’s smile slipped.

Calmly, Uriel turned to Michael. He put a hand on Michael’s shoulder and gently took his cane away.

Michael blinked at Uriel, his arms going out for balance, his body tightening as if he expected to pitch over without the cane’s support. And then he abruptly relaxed. He put some of his weight on his bad leg, and then a little more. And then he let out a little laugh and hopped on it a few times.

Just then, Butters came running back around from behind the house. There was a twig with a soggy brown oak leaf still attached to it in his hair, his knees were scuffed and marked with sap, and he was carrying a slender package wrapped in canvas and duct tape, almost as long as he was tall. Butters was tearing at the package as he ran over and then offered it to Michael.

Michael's eyes widened and went to Nicodemus as he stretched out his right hand, without looking, without *needing* to look, and withdrew from the canvas package a Sword, a shining length of straight steel with a cruciform hilt. As Michael's fingers closed on it, *Amoracchius* exploded into white light, and for the second time in an evening, the quiet, ominous power of one of the Swords filled the air.

Nicodemus's eyes widened. "You cheat!" he snarled.

"I said I would come out to you," Michael said.

Then he lifted a work-booted foot and kicked the white picket gate off its hinges. It struck Nicodemus across the torso, driving him back into the street, and Michael Carpenter, Knight of the Cross, strode out of the open gate onto the icy sidewalk while the archangel looked on, silver-green eyes blazing in answer to the light of the Sword in Michael's hands.

"I'm out," Michael said. "*In nomine Dei*, Nicodemus, I have come to face you."

In the street, Nicodemus bared his teeth.

I was terrified for Michael.

And my heart soared.

"Hah-hah," I said, like the bully on *The Simpsons*, pointing at him. Then I walked out of the gate to stand beside my friend. I pointed my finger at my quarterstaff, fallen on the ground where the Genoskwa had held me, exerted my will, and called, "*Ventas servitas*."

A burst of wind rose and flung the staff into the air. I caught it, and called power into it, summoning green-white light and silvery soulfire into the channels of power that ran through its runes.

Uriel smiled tightly, his eyes hard, and the sleet began to fall once more. It burst into little drops of steam when it hit the runes on my staff.

"Two of you," I said to Nicodemus. "Two of us. What do you think, Nick?"

Michael faced him squarely, both hands on the hilt of *Amoracchius*. The Sword's light filled the air—and Nicodemus's shadow quailed before it.

Nicodemus finally stood back. He lowered his blade and said, "Dresden. I expect you back at our headquarters by four a.m." He turned to go.

"Not so fast, smart guy," I said.

Nicodemus paused.

"If I have to play by these stupid rules, so do you. I still get someone to watch my back during this job."

"Miss Murphy is more than welcome to do so."

"You put her out of commission," I said. "You didn't have to do that. You'd already beaten her."

"Then choose another," Nicodemus snapped.

I put a hand on Michael's shoulder and said, "I already have. And you're going to put up with it, or I'll consider it a release of obligation—and so will Mab."

Nicodemus simply stood, soaked by the sleet and unmoved by the cold. He stared at me in chilly silence for several seconds. Then he said, "So be it."

Shadows gathered around him, and vanished up into the stormy night, taking him with them. I looked left and right, and realized that the Genoskwa was already gone.

Michael was looking at me very oddly as he lowered the Sword.

"What?" I asked him.

"Charity," he predicted, "is not going to be pleased."

Chapter Thirty-one

Once Nick and Big Shaggy were gone, I hurried to Karrin. She was on her back, shuddering, her eyes focused on nothing.

I turned to Uriel, pointed a finger at Karrin, and said, "Fix her."

Uriel grimaced. "I cannot." After a moment, he added, "I'm sorry."

"I am badly disappointed in you, Mr. Sunshine," I said. "Butters."

"Yeah, yeah," Butters said, already on his way to Karrin. "Jesus," he said after a moment. "Come on, we have to get her out of the cold and wet. Like, right now. She could be going into shock."

"I've got a fire going," Michael said. "We'll pull the couch up next to it."

I stripped out of my coat and put it on the ground next to her. We lifted her onto it. "Hey, Mr. Sunshine," I said, maybe a little more harshly than I could have. "Some cosmic limitation that keeps you from picking up your corner of the coat?"

Uriel blinked, but then hurried over to us and took one side of the coat willingly. We all picked up the coat with Karrin on it, trying to support her evenly. She made an incoherent sound of pain as we did. We carried her into the house together, with Butters opening doors for us.

Michael watched my face closely as we carried her.

"What?" I asked.

"You aren't angry," he said. "That she's hurt."

"Like hell I'm not," I said. "It's coming. After we take care of her. When it's time."

Michael grunted. "You aren't *more* angry than you would be if it was me. Or Butters, here."

I grunted. "She's not a delicate princess," I said. "She's a warrior. Warriors have enemies. Sometimes warriors get hurt." I felt my jaws clench. "And then their friends even things up."

"Damned right they do," Butters said.

Michael's eyes were steady. "Harry."

We had gotten Karrin into Michael's living room by then, and settled her slowly onto the couch. Good to his word, there was a fire burning in a neat stone fireplace inside. Once she was on the couch, I picked up one end, Uriel picked up the other, and we set the whole thing down in front of the fireplace where the heat of it would surround her.

"Towels," Butters said. "Blankets. Hurry."

"I'll get them," Uriel volunteered. He turned, paused, and then asked Michael, "Where are they?"

Michael directed him to the linen closet. He hurried off and returned a moment later, arms loaded with cloth.

"Good," Butters said, and seized them. He started taking them to Karrin, drying her off. The heat and the chafing of the towels seemed to rouse her slightly, and she blinked her eyes several times.

"Michael," she said. "Michael?"

"I'm here," Michael said.

Karrin looked up, her face drawn, her eyes full of tears. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I lost the Sword."

"Easy," Michael said gently. "We'll deal with it. You don't have to worry about it right now."

"We've got to get the wet clothes off," Butters said. "Do you have safety scissors?"

"In my kit," Michael said. "In the kitchen."

Uriel said, "I'll get it." He walked out and in, and passed the same red plastic toolbox Michael had used on me earlier to Butters.

"Sorry, Karrin," Butters said. "About your jacket." He went to work with the safety scissors, cutting Karrin out of her coat while trying not to move her arm and shoulder. She grunted with pain anyway.

"I didn't know what to do," Karrin said. "If I'd turned from him, he'd have come at my b-back. If I didn't go to Harry, he was g-going to die." Her eyes widened. "Harry, is he . . . ?"

"Here," I said. I found her right hand with mine. Her eyes rolled to me, and her fingers suddenly squeezed down tight on mine. Her hand was icy cold, and she was shivering harder.

"Harry," she said. "Thank God."

"Holy crap," Butters said. "There are bullet holes in her shirt."

"I blew it, Harry," she said. "Dammit, I blew it." She was weeping openly now. "They're always too strong. There's always more of them, and they're always too strong."

"Karrin," I said. I took her face in my hands and made her look at me as Butters cut away at her shirt. "Shut up. You screwed up excellently. Okay? We all made it out. We're all going to be fine. Right, Butters?"

Butters gave me a tight look.

"But the Sword," Karrin said.

Michael leaned down and said, "Have faith, Ms. Murphy," he said, his voice serious. "Things are not always as bad as they seem. Sometimes, the darkness only makes it easier to see the light."

I looked up at Uriel, who compressed his lips into a grim line.

"Oh, thank God," Butters breathed. "She was wearing a vest."

"Of course I was wearing a vest," Karrin said, her voice for a second perfectly clear and slightly annoyed. She was shivering harder now. "Oh, God, cold."

Butters plucked at several small, bright bits of metal, passing them to Michael. "Four, five. How many shots did she take?"

"Five," Uriel supplied instantly.

"Twenty-twos," Michael said. "Maybe twenty-fives."

"No blood," Butters reported. "I think the vest stopped them all." He kept cutting her shirt away until he could see her injured shoulder. It was already swelling. "We've got to get the vest off of her."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because Kevlar doesn't stretch and she's going to keep swelling, and because this needs a hospital. I'd rather she didn't have to answer any questions about a damaged bulletproof vest once we get there."

"It might not be safe," I said. "Why can't you take care of her here?"

"Because I don't have the tools I need to help her here, and I don't have the expertise to use them even if I did," Butters said, his voice hard. "Look, Harry, not everyone has got your ability to handle injury. Her shoulder is dislocated and there's probably additional damage. I haven't seen her knee yet, but from the shape of it I think he took her ACL. This isn't something she can just walk off, and if she doesn't get proper care, fast, it could cripple her for life. So as soon as I'm sure she isn't going into hypothermia, we're going to the hospital." He looked up at me, his eyes steady, his expression resolute. "And if you argue with me, I'm going to call her friends on the force and tell them that she needs help."

Rage made my vision pulse, and I snarled and clenched my hand into a fist, but Butters didn't back down.

"Harry," Michael said. He stepped in between us, and put a hand on my chest. "She can't stay here. She's in agony."

I blinked several times, and did math, pushing the Winter aggression further from my thoughts. The rage receded, leaving weariness behind, and my head started to hurt. "Right," I said. "Right . . . Sorry, Butters. Hey, Mr. Sunshine. You can put a protective detail on her, can't you?"

"I cannot," Uriel said.

"So useless," I muttered. The throbbing got worse, despite Mab's earring. "God, my head."

Michael's restraining hand became a steadying one, his voice sharpening with concern. "Harry? Are you all right?"

"Will be. Just . . . need a minute to rest."

"Uriel," Michael said, his voice softly urgent.

The room tilted to one side unexpectedly, and I flailed my arms to try to catch my balance. Michael caught my right arm. Uriel's nose caught my left, right in the aluminum brace, but the archangel managed to support me. Between the three of us, I found a chair and sat there in it for a minute while my head spun, briefly.

Uriel had a shocked, even startled look on his face.

And his nose was bleeding.

I was pretty sure that wasn't possible.

Uriel touched his fingers to his face and drew them away, bright with scarlet blood. He blinked at them, the expression almost childlike in its confusion. Tears welled in his eyes, and he blinked them several times, as if he wasn't sure what was happening.

Michael caught the direction of my stare, and his clear grey eyes widened. He straightened, staring at Uriel in shock.

"What have you done?" he asked.

"It was not within our power to heal what was done to you," Uriel said. "I'm sorry. It was not chance that brought you to harm, but choice."

Michael looked from the angel down to his leg and back. "What have you done?" he repeated.

Uriel looked from his shaking, bloodied fingers to Michael and said, "I have loaned you my Grace."

Michael's eyes became completely round.

"Wow," I said. "Uh . . . Isn't that . . . that kind of important?"

"It is what makes me an angel," Uriel said.

"Merciful Mother of God," Michael said, his voice awed.

"Uh," I said. "Isn't that . . . kind of overkill? I mean . . . Uriel, you've got the power to unmake solar systems."

"Galaxies," Uriel said absently.

"Harry," Michael said, "what are you saying?"

"Why?" I asked Uriel.

"I had to do something," he said. "I couldn't just . . . stand there. But my options are limited."

"Oh," I said. "I get it. I think."

"Harry," Michael said. "What are you talking about?"

"Um," I said, and rubbed at my aching head. "Uriel wanted to help you, but he couldn't exert his will over the situation to change it. Right?"

"Correct," Uriel said.

"But he could act in accordance with your will, Michael. Which was to go out and meet Nicodemus."

"Yes," Michael said.

"So he couldn't change you," I said. "And he couldn't change the world around you, at least not of his own will. But he could change himself. So he gave you his power in order to make your body function the way it used to. That way it isn't his will that's using the power. It's yours." The throbbing had begun to recede, slowly, and I looked up. "It's way more than you needed, but it's the only unit he had to work with. It's as if . . . he loaned you his giant passenger jet because you needed a reading light." I eyed the angel. "Right?"

Uriel nodded and said, "Close enough."

Michael opened his mouth in understanding. "Loaned," he said. "It won't last."

Uriel shook his head. "But this task is an important one. You need it. Use it."

Michael tilted his head. "But . . . Uriel, if I were to misuse it . . ."

"I would Fall," Uriel said quietly.

I choked on the air.

Holy crap.

The last time an archangel Fell, I'm pretty sure there were extended consequences.

Uriel smiled faintly at Michael. "I'm confident that you won't." His smile turned a little green. "I would, however, appreciate it if you . . . did not push any buttons or pull any of the levers in my giant passenger jet."

"How could you do this?" Michael breathed.

"You need the reading light," Uriel said. "You have more than earned whatever help I can give. And you are a friend, Michael."

"What happens to you, while I . . . borrow your jet?" Michael asked.

"Transubstantiation," Uriel said. He gestured with his bloodied fingers.

Butters finally chimed in. "Holy. Crap. He's mortal?"

"And he can die," I said quietly.

Chapter Thirty-two

The fire crackled.

“Because, obviously,” I said, “there wasn’t enough on the line already.”

Uriel smiled. It was a tight, pained expression.

“Take it back,” Michael said. “You’ve got to take it back, right now.”

“I can do that,” Uriel said. “If that is your choice, I will respect it.”

Something in his voice triggered my instincts, and I said, “Michael, wait. Think about this.”

“What’s to think about?” Michael asked. “An archangel of the Lord is vulnerable.”

“Right,” I said, and spread my hands. “Almost as if he thinks this is important or something. Or maybe you figure Uriel for the kind of guy who hands out this kind of power all willy-nilly, every time the wind blows.” I looked at Uriel. “Right?”

Uriel helped Butters get another blanket around the shuddering Karrin, watched us, and said nothing.

“Yeah,” I said. “You can tell when you’re on the right track, because he shuts up and doesn’t tell you a damned thing. It’s about the Grail, isn’t it? About what Nicodemus wants to do with it.”

Uriel gave me a knowing look.

I flushed and said, “I’m playing my cards close to the chest, okay? I know it’s about more than that.”

He put his hand on Karrin’s head and smiled at her encouragingly.

Michael shook his head and walked over to where he’d set *Amoracchius* after he’d drawn it from his belt once we had Karrin inside. He picked it up absently, and started cleaning the water from it carefully with one of the used towels. “You’re asking me to make a very large choice.”

“Yes,” Uriel said.

“With potentially horrible consequences.”

Uriel looked at him with sympathetic eyes and nodded.

“Can you tell me what is at stake, that I should risk this?”

Uriel frowned, considering the question for a moment. Then he said, “A soul.”

Michael raised his eyebrows. “Oh,” he said. “You should have said that from the beginning.” He extended the Sword and looked down the length of its blade. “I’m not retired at the moment,” he said. “What about my family?”

“The guards remain,” Uriel said. “I have taken your place.”

Michael exhaled and some of the tension eased out of him. “Right. Though this is going to draw attention here again.”

“It might.”

“And your protection doesn’t extend to the merely mortal,” Michael said.

“No.”

“So mortals could enter, and kill you. Kill them.”

“Potentially,” he said.

“Guys,” Butters said, “we need to get her to a hospital.”

“Right,” I said. “Here’s the plan. Butters drives Murphy to the hospital and tells the guys at SI she needs looking after.”

“Those guys can’t stop someone like Nicodemus,” Butters said.

“No,” I said, “but they can force him to get noisy if he wants to get to her, and Nick won’t want that until after the job. He might send some of his squires to do it, but SI can go up against them just fine. Michael, will you loan Butters a car?”

“Of course,” Michael said.

“Good. They’ll help you unload her at the emergency room, Butters.”

“Right,” Butters said. “Great.”

“I’m going to go clean up out front,” I said. “What’s left of the Sword, shell casings, what have you. Those shots were muffled by the sleet, but we don’t need to leave things lying around in case some busybody called the cops.”

“Leaving me to talk to Charity alone,” Michael said drily.

“Yeah, funny how that worked out,” I said. “Where is she, anyway?”

“In the panic room with Mouse and the kids,” Michael said. “Little Harry was all but bouncing off the walls, he was so excited. I didn’t want him seeing . . .” He nodded toward Karrin. “I’ll sound the all clear as soon as she and Butters leave.”

“Good call,” I said.

“What should I do?” Uriel asked.

“Sit,” I said. “Stay inside. Don’t put pennies in the outlets or play with matches or run with scissors.”

“I don’t understand,” Uriel said.

“Take no chances,” I clarified.

“Oh, yes.” He frowned and said, “But I want to help.”

“So sit,” I said. “Sitting quietly is very helpful.”

He sat down on the arm of the couch, frowning.

“I think this will hurt the least if one person carries her,” Butters said.

“Right,” I said, rising, and wobbled as the blood rushed to my head.

“Harry,” Michael said, and pushed gently in front of me. He went over to Karrin and adjusted the couch to give him room to stand in front of her. He passed Butters a set of car keys.

“It’s her left arm and leg that are hurt,” Butters said. “Carry her right side against you and try to support her left knee.”

“I’ll be careful,” Michael said, and lifted her gently, keeping her wrapped in the blankets. He didn’t seem to have any trouble doing it. I mean, he didn’t look like he’d gained muscle or anything, but his strength was certainly that of the Knight I remembered, and not of the lame contractor and Little League softball coach he’d been lately.

Karrin let out a soft sound of pain, and closed her eyes, breathing with steady, disciplined rhythm through her nose.

“Right, right,” Butters said. He’d discarded his pack before, but he recovered it now, as we went outside and loaded Karrin into Michael’s white pickup truck.

We got her in and buckled up, though she was obviously fighting the pain. Michael hurried back inside, out of the sleet. She opened her eyes once and gave me a little smile.

“Sorry,” she said, “that I won’t be there to watch your back.”

“You did fine,” I said. “We’ll make sure you’ve got cover.”

“Worry about yourselves,” she said. “I can make some calls. Michael’s a good man, but he doesn’t always see things coming.”

I bit my lip for a second, trying to decide if I should say anything. I decided not to. If she didn’t know what was coming up, she couldn’t possibly tip off anyone that I already knew part of what Nicodemus was up to.

I need to work on my poker face. She looked at my expression and smiled with one side of her mouth. “Need-to-know. I get it, Harry.” She struggled to free her right hand from the blankets, so that she could put it on mine and squeeze. “Make the sucker punch count.”

I winked at her. “I’ll come see you soon.”

“You’d better,” she said.

Butters slammed the driver’s-side door and brought the truck to life with a smooth rumble of V8 engine. He turned the heaters all the way up, first thing, and double-checked Karrin’s seat belt. Then he adjusted the mirrors, muttered something about the truck being the size of a house, and said to me, “Close it up. I’ll get you word as soon as I know anything.”

I nodded and said, "Thanks, Butters."

He grimaced and said, "Thank me when I save your life."

"You've done that already," I said. "Back in the museum."

"So we're even?"

"Once you've made that swap, you don't keep counting, man," I said. "Drive safe."

I closed the door carefully, and watched Butters back the truck out onto the icy street. He put it into the lowest gear, and the tires crunched slowly down the street as he drove away.

He'd been out of the driveway for maybe twenty seconds when a flickering stream of campfire sparks came soaring down out of a nearby tree and through the windshield of the truck—Bob, returning to the skull still in Butters's backpack.

I watched until they were gone. Then I hurriedly cleaned up the scene, fake rocket launcher, sword-shards, sheath, hilt, and shell casings all, and hurried back inside.

I shut the door behind me and leaned against it. For a second, I was alone.

I missed Karrin already. Logically, I knew that she probably wasn't in any immediate danger from Nicodemus and company, but some irrational part of me wanted to be the one who drove her to the hospital, terrified the doctors into perfection, and watched over her when she could finally sleep.

She'd looked so small like that, with her wet hair plastered down, swaddled in blankets.

And she wouldn't have been that way if I hadn't invited her along for the ride.

I mean, yeah, logically, I hadn't been the one to hurt her. Nicodemus had done that. But there was a great, seething tide of anger somewhere behind the walls of my mind, absolute fury that she had come to harm, and since it had no handy targets to crash upon, some stupid part of my brain had decided that I would do.

And now I was going to drag Michael into my mess as well. And if he got put in a compromising position the way Karrin had, the consequences might be significantly more severe.

And all because I'd been weak, and cut a deal with Mab.

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to stand on my own two feet again.

What was done was done. There was no point in tearing myself to shreds over it—especially since indulging in that kind of self-flagellation would not help me protect Michael or stop Nicodemus from obtaining one of the most powerful holy relics in the world.

There would be plenty of time to beat myself up later—assuming I lived long enough to do it.

Focus on the task at hand, Harry. Sort the rest out when you have time.

Yeah, sure. But isn't that the kind of thinking that got me into this mess in the first place?

I was trying to learn to play the game a few more moves ahead than I had in the past. Part of that had been keeping Karrin in the dark about what I had in mind for Nicodemus and company. But, man, that game was hard to play.

Bleak thoughts. I was roused from them by feet on the stairs. I looked up.

At the top of the stairs stood two figures—an enormous dog and a little girl.

The dog was grey, shaggy, and the size of a bantha. A bulky ruff of fur about his head and shoulders gave him a leonine look, and his dark eyes were bright, his slightly curled tail wagging so furiously that it looked like it might pull him over sideways. When Mouse saw me, he made a happy little chuffing sound, and his front paws bounced off the floor, but then he glanced to the girl beside him and held himself carefully still.

The little girl stood with her hands buried in the thick fur of Mouse's mane, as though she had refused to admit that she couldn't just circle her arms around his neck and tote him about like a teddy bear. She was wearing an old T-shirt of Molly's that read SPLATTERCON!!! across the front. The shirt hung past her knees and its sleeves went halfway to her wrists. She had big brown eyes the size of softballs, it looked like, and her dark brown hair hung straight down to her little shoulders.

Her features were a little long. I could see myself in the shape of her eyes, in the set of her chin. But she had her mother's full mouth and elegant nose.

Maggie.

My daughter.

My heart all but stopped beating—and then it lurched into high gear in pure terror.

What should I do? What should I say? I mean, I had known I was a father and whatnot, but . . . now she was *looking* at me. And she was a *person*.

She regarded me soberly from the top of the stairs for several long seconds before she said, “Are you Harry Dresden?”

She was missing a tooth from up front and off to one side. It was kind of adorable.

“Uh,” I said. “Yeah. That’s me.”

“You’re really big,” she said.

“You think so?”

She nodded seriously. “Bigger than Mr. Carpenter.”

“Um,” I said. “How did you know it was me?”

“Because Molly showed me your picture,” Maggie said. She moved her shoulders, as though attempting to hold Mouse up the way she might a favorite doll. “This is my dog, Mouse.”

Mouse wagged his tail furiously and managed not to knock Maggie down while he did it.

“I know,” I said. “I’m the one who gave him to you.”

Maggie nodded. “That’s what Molly said. She said you gave him to me ’cause you loved me.”

“Yes,” I said, recognizing the truth as I spoke it. “That’s true.”

She wrinkled up her nose, as if she had smelled something unpleasant. “Are you mad at me?”

I blinked several times. “What? No, no, of course not. Why would I be mad at you?”

She shrugged and looked down at Mouse’s mane. “Because you aren’t ever here. Never, ever.”

Ow.

The Winter Mantle is pretty amazing, but there are some kinds of pain it can’t do jack about.

“Well,” I said after a moment, “I have a very tough job. Do you know what I do?”

“You fight monsters,” Maggie said. “Molly told me so. Like Draculas and stuff.”

Had Molly been filling in for me a little, while I was away? That . . . sounded a lot like the kind of thing Mab had done or ordered done when I was unavailable—taking up some of the duties of her vassal in his stead.

Maybe Molly was following in the same footsteps. Or maybe she was just being Molly, and being as kind as she could to the child. Or maybe it wasn’t as simple as either-or.

“Yeah,” I said. “Like Draculas and stuff. It’s very dangerous and I do it a lot.”

“Mr. Carpenter works harder than two men. That’s what Missus Carpenter says.”

“That’s probably true,” I said.

“But he comes home every night. And you haven’t ever . . .” A thought seemed to strike her and she pressed a little closer to Mouse. “Are you going to take me away?”

“Um,” I said, blinking. This was proceeding really quickly. “I, uh. Would you like that?”

She shrugged, almost hiding her eyes in Mouse’s mane. “I don’t know. My toys are all here. And my roller skates.”

“That’s very true,” I said. “Um. Not tonight, anyway.”

“Oh,” she said. “Okay. Molly says you’re really nice.”

“I try to be.”

“Is he nice, Mouse?”

Mouse continued wagging his tail furiously, and gave a quiet bark.

“Mouse is smart,” she said, nodding. “Really super dog smart. We’re reading *James and the Giant Peach*.”

I blinked. Did she mean that she was reading the book to the dog or that *Mouse* was reading the book, too? I mean, I already knew that he was as smart as most people, but I’d never really considered whether or not he could learn to do abstract things like reading. It seemed like a very strange notion.

On the other hand, he *was* going to school. Hell, I only had a GED. If he stayed close enough to Maggie for long enough, the dog might wind up with more education than me. Then there’d be

no talking to him.

"Don't tell people about Mouse, though, okay?" Maggie said, suddenly worried. "It's a top secret."

"I won't," I said.

"Okay. Do you wanna see my room?"

"I'd like that."

I came up the stairs, and Maggie let go of the dog's mane with one hand, to grab my right forefinger with it, and to lead me down the hall.

Maggie's room had, long ago, been Charity's sewing room. They'd cleaned it out and redecorated the little chamber, in purple and pink and bright green. There was a tiny kid-sized desk with a chair, and several toy boxes. The toys had all been put neatly away. There were a couple of schoolbooks on the desk. A closet stood slightly open, and proved to have its floor covered in dirty clothes that hadn't made it into a small laundry hamper. There was a raised bed against one wall, the kind that usually came with a second one beneath it. There wasn't a lower bunk. Instead, there was a big futon mattress on the floor beneath the bed. Posters of brightly colored cartoon ponies adorned the walls, and the ceiling above the bed.

Once we were in the room, Mouse finally let out a few little whines and came over to me, grinning a big doggy grin. I spent a few minutes rubbing his ears and scratching him beneath the chin and telling him what a good dog he was and how much I'd missed him and what a good job he was doing. Mouse wriggled all over and gave my hands a few sloppy kisses and in general behaved exactly like a happy dog and not at all like a mystic, super-powered guardian creature from Tibet.

Maggie climbed a little ladder to her bunk, to watch the exchange closely. After a minute, Mouse leaned against me so hard that he nearly bowled me over, and then he happily settled down on the futon mattress beneath the little girl's bed.

"I have a monster under my bed, and it's *Mouse*," she said proudly. "There was another one there but me and Mouse slayerized it."

I lifted an eyebrow. I mean, any other kid, I might have thought she was reporting a recent game of pretend. But on the other hand . . . I mean, she was a Dresden and all. Maybe she was giving me the facts and nothing but the facts.

"He's the most awesome dog ever," I said.

That pleased her immensely. "I know!" She chewed on her lip thoughtfully, a gesture that reminded me so much of Susan that a tangible pang went through my chest. "Um," she said. "Would you like to . . . tuck me in?"

"Sure," I said.

She nodded and flopped down onto her pillow. I stepped up to the bed and took a few seconds to sort out the sheets and the blanket and to get them pulled over her. Once that was done, she said, "Would you like to read me a story?"

Mouse's tail thumped enthusiastically against the wall.

"Sure," I said. And we read *Where the Wild Things Are*.

When I finished, she said, "You didn't do the voices right."

"Hmmm," I said. "Maybe I'll do better next time."

"I don't know," she said dubiously. "I guess you can try." She looked at my face searchingly for a moment and then said, in a tiny voice, "Do you want to be my dad?"

I went blind for a few seconds, until I blinked the tears away.

"Sure," I said. It came out in a tight croak, but when I said it she smiled at me.

* * *

By the time I'd finished the second run-through of Sendak's opus, she was asleep.

I made sure the blankets had her all covered up, and kissed her hair, and then crouched down beside Mouse and put my arms around him.

"Thank you, boy," I said. "Thank you for taking care of her."

He leaned against me, tail wagging, and snuggled his huge head into my ribs. I petted him some more. "I have to go soon. But I need you to keep her safe. The Carpenters, too. Okay?"

He chuffed and snuggled a little closer.

"Missed you too, boy," I said, rubbing his ears. "I just need a little time to figure this out. To figure out what comes next."

Had I decided that I was going to be a dad to Maggie now? I examined myself and realized that indeed I had. When did *that* happen? And why hadn't anyone kept me in the loop?

It had happened, I thought, the moment I had seen her, talked to her.

Oh my God.

That was terrifying.

And . . . exciting?

All things considered, I wasn't sure I could put a lot of trust in my emotions at the moment. But one thing was certain.

If I wanted to keep my word to my daughter, I'd have to come back. That meant staying alive tomorrow.

I got up, gave Mouse a final round of petting and scratching, and padded quietly from the room into the upstairs hallway. The lights in the other rooms were out—except for the one in Michael and Charity's room. A light burned there. The door was slightly open.

And I could see Charity, sitting on the edge of the bed in flannel pajamas, a tall blond woman with an excellent physique, whose hair was threading through with silver in style as she aged. Her tearstained face was miserable, as she spoke, presumably, to her husband, seated on the bed beside her. I couldn't see him from there.

Obviously Michael had intended that talk to take place in private.

I turned away from it and went back down the stairs. I sat down on the bottom steps and tried to clear my head.

A few minutes later, Charity came down the stairs and sat down next to me. I made room.

"Where's Michael?" I asked.

"Praying over the children," she answered. "He always does that before he leaves. In case . . ."

"Yeah," I said.

"You know," Charity said, "I had intended to punch you in the nose, twice, the moment I saw you again. Once to make it bleed, once to break it."

"Oh?"

"Mmm-hmm. The first time for trying to kill yourself. The second for using my daughter to do it."

"You, uh. You know about that? How?"

"I watch. I listen. Her reaction to reports of your death was . . . too much. It took time, but I eventually worked out why she was so furious at herself."

"You can hit me right now, if you think it would help," I said.

"No," she said tiredly. "I just wanted to tell you something."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "Kids need their father to come home safe, Harry. Make sure it happens."

"I'll bring him back to you or die trying. I promise."

Charity glanced at me and then shook her head with a weary smile. "I wasn't talking about Michael, Harry. I meant you." She glanced back up the stairs, toward Maggie's room. "That child has lost everyone she's ever loved. Did you notice how close she stays to Mouse? Without him, I wonder if she'd be functioning at all. If anything should happen to you . . ."

"Ah," I said quietly.

"Maggie doesn't need to feel that pain again. Don't let her down."

I chewed on my lip and nodded with my watery eyes closed. "Right."

"And . . . please remember that Michael has children who need him, too. Please."

“I’ll bring him back or die trying,” I repeated.

Charity exhaled a shaky breath, and then touched my shoulder gently. “Thank you. God be with you and bring you home safe, Harry. Both of you.”

Chapter Thirty-three

At three thirty a.m., we rolled up to the evil lair in a soccer mom's minivan with a MY KID IS AN HONOR STUDENT AT ... bumper sticker on the back. It is worth noting that by the standards of my life, this was not a terribly incongruous entrance.

Michael regarded the slaughterhouse for a moment after he had killed the ignition and said, "This is a bad place."

"Yeah," I said. I rubbed at the small of my back. I'd gotten a few hours' worth of sleep before we'd left, on the futon mattress on the floor beneath Maggie's bed. Mouse had been happy to snuggle up to me. The lummox likes to pretend he's still a tiny puppy that will fit on my lap if he tries hard enough, and I'd been too tired to argue with him. As a result, I'd had to practice defensive sleeping, and it had left my back a little twitchy.

On the upside, even the modest amount of sleep I'd gotten had done wonders to restore me, or at least the power of the Winter mantle. I felt practically normal, broken arm, gunshot wound, and all.

Michael was dressed in his old mail, which he had kept clean and scoured free of rust despite his retirement. He wore body armor beneath it. He'd put his big white cloak with its bright red cross on the left breast over it.

"You sure you couldn't just put something black on?" I asked him. "You're going to clash with all the bad-guy robbery wear."

"That's the idea," Michael said.

"You don't get it, man," I said. "This building we're going to hit belongs to John Marcone. We're supposed to go in without taking down their electronic systems. That means there will be cameras and pictures. The blindest security tech in the world could identify you—and your guardian angels won't protect you from Marcone's people."

Michael shook his head. "It won't come to that."

"You say that," I said, "but you don't know what Marcone is like."

"Perhaps," he said. "But I *do* know what the Almighty is like, Harry. And He wouldn't give me the strength to do this only to have it result in harm to my family."

I grimaced. "Seems to me it would be polite of you to take a couple of prudent steps—like wearing dark clothes and a mask—so that the Almighty wouldn't need to go out of His way to arrange things for you."

He barked out a quick laugh and gave me a rueful smile. "So you *have* been listening to me, all this time." He shook his head. "Nicodemus and his ilk operate in the shadows, in secret. The Swords aren't meant for that. I have nothing to hide."

"Hey," I said, letting my voice be annoyed, "as shadowy ilk myself, I think I resent that statement."

Michael snorted. "You destroy buildings, fight monsters openly in the streets of the city, work with the police, show up in newspapers, advertise in the phone book, and ride zombie dinosaurs down Michigan Avenue, and think that you work in the shadows? Be reasonable."

"I will if you will," I said. "At least wear a ski mask."

"No," Michael said calmly. "The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me. Trust Him, Harry."

"Probably not in the cards," I said.

His smile widened. "Then trust me."

I threw up my hands. "Fine. Whatever. Are you sure your people can find someplace safe to keep the Grail if we get it back? Because apparently they go out and use the Coins to get snacks

out of the vending machine, the things go back into circulation so fast.”

“Part of the nature of the Coins is to *be* in circulation, as you put it,” Michael said. “They can only be contained for so long. The Grail is a different proposition entirely. They’ll keep it safe.”

“And you know the rules I have to play by, right?” I asked.

“You have to help Nicodemus recover the Grail,” he said. “After that, you can go weapons free.”

“Right. And you’ll respect that?”

“I will do what is right,” Michael said.

I licked my lips. “Yeah, but . . . could you maybe put off doing what is right until we get clear of Mab’s restrictions?”

“All things considered,” Michael said, “no. I’m not taking chances.”

Translation: He wasn’t going to do anything—or *not* do anything—that might screw up Uriel’s grace, no matter what.

Thank you, Mab, for this wonderful, wonderful game. Maybe next time we can play pin the tail on the wizard.

“I’m pretty sure Nicodemus is going to play it straight, at least until right before we get back to Chicago,” I said.

“Why would he?”

“Because I’m going to say please.”

Michael arched an eyebrow at me.

“I’m going to say it in his native tongue,” I said.

“Power?”

“Bingo.”

* * *

Nicodemus hadn’t warned his squires what to expect, and when Michael strode in at my side, Jordan and his brothers-in-arms produced a truly impressive number of weapons in what appeared to be a state of pure panic.

Michael just stood there with his thumbs hooked into his belt, *Amoracchius* hanging quietly at his side in its scabbard. “Son,” he said to Jordan, “don’t you have anything better to do than point that thing at me?”

“Lower your weapons,” I snarled in a voice loud enough to carry throughout the slaughterhouse. “Before I start downsizing your organization.”

They didn’t put their guns down, but my threat did make a lot of the squires eye me nervously. Go me.

“Hey, Nick,” I shouted. “Your boys are all jittery. You want to calm them down or should I do it?”

“Gentlemen,” Nicodemus called, a moment later, “I know who is with Dresden. Let them through.”

Jordan and the others lowered their weapons with manifest reluctance, but kept their hands on them, ready to bring them to bear again at any time. Michael didn’t move or take a threatening posture, but he swept his gaze from squire to squire, one by one.

They all dropped their eyes from his. Every one of them.

We started down to the conference table, and Michael said, “I feel sorry for these men.”

“The tongue thing?” I asked.

“Removing their tongues is one way to keep their loyalty,” Michael said.

“Yeah. I love people who mutilate my body parts.”

He frowned. “It’s designed to keep them isolated. Think what it does to them. They can’t talk—so how much more difficult is it for them to connect with other people? To form the kinds of bonds that might let them free themselves of this cult? They can’t taste their food, which precludes eating for pleasure—and eating together is one of the primary means of forming real relationships

between human beings. Think how much more difficult it makes even the simplest of interactions with outsiders. And how the shared experience of that hardship means that one's fellow squires will always be the only ones who truly understand his pain." He shook his head. "It's the last step of their indoctrination for a reason. Once it's done, they no longer have a voice of their own."

"It's not the same as not having a *choice*," I said. "These guys have made their call."

"Indeed. After being manipulated by Nicodemus and Anduriel as unwise young men." He shook his head. "Some men fall from grace. Some are pushed."

"Once their fingers pull the trigger, does it matter?"

"Of course it matters," Michael said, "but it doesn't change what has to be done. I just wish they could find another way to fill the empty place inside them."

We'd reached the conference table by that time, where the crew was making final preparations. Anna Valmont, Hannah Ascher, and Binder were all there, dressed in close-fit, dark clothing, and each of them was wearing a shoulder holster. Valmont had a roll-up leather tool pouch laid out on the table and was going through various bits of equipment in it one by one. Ascher was sipping coffee, her bagel untouched on the plate in front of her. Binder was going over his gang's Uzis one more time.

The loading doors at one end of the slaughterhouse rolled open, and a pair of large stepside vans rumbled into the place a moment later. Several squires set about getting them lined up and then rolling their rear doors open.

"Morning, Dresden," Hannah Ascher said. "What happened to your girlfriend?"

"She's not my girlfriend," I said. "And she had a misunderstanding with Nicodemus."

Anna Valmont's eyes flicked up to me, hard.

"She's alive," I told her. "But she wasn't in any shape to go to work today."

"So you brought Captain Crusader instead?" Ascher asked. "He looks like a Renaissance fair."

Binder abruptly stood up, his eyes widening. "Bloody hell, girl. That's a Knight of the Sword."

Ascher frowned. "I thought there were only, like, three of those guys in the whole world."

"Two," Michael said, "at the moment."

Binder stared at Michael, and narrowed his eyes in calculation. "Aw, dammit. Dresden, this is what you do because Nicodemus gets in a tiff with your girlfriend?"

"She's *not* my g—" I rubbed at the bridge of my nose. "Look, I want someone I know and trust watching my back. Murphy couldn't do it, so he's doing it instead."

"What a load of tripe," Binder said. "You think I don't know what the Coins and the Swords are like with each other? You didn't bring him to watch your back. You brought him to fight."

"Let's just say I don't mind having a deterrent around," I said. "If Nicodemus plays it straight and keeps his word, I will too and we'll all get rich."

Binder scowled and eyed Michael. "Is that right, Knight?"

"Harry's generally a very honest man," Michael said. "I really don't care about the money, though."

Binder and Ascher both tilted their heads to one side, like dogs that have just heard a new noise.

Anna Valmont smiled and shook her head slightly, going back to checking her tools.

"So what happened last night?" Ascher asked me. "Binder's goons drew him a picture of a lion. The ones who came back, I mean."

"Yeah, it got a little crazy," I said.

"Did you get the guy?" Binder asked.

"Nah, he skated," I said. "Nobody's fault, really. Tricky, slippery little bastard."

Binder eyed me. "Yeah. Right. You give me a big speech about how you'll come down on my neck if I hurt anyone in your town. Then you two tear out of here to take up the chase, and Murphy winds up too busted up to continue after a 'misunderstanding' with Nicodemus."

I gave him a beatific smile. "Binder, relax. The op isn't in any danger. I made sure he's not going to go to anyone. That was the point of chasing him down in the first place, right?"

Binder frowned. "I thought the White Council didn't let you use mind magic."

Which I hadn't meant, at all, and which I really couldn't do, considering my utter lack of talent in that area, but Binder didn't know that. "I did what needed to be done," I said. "And think of it like this—I don't have to stomp on your neck now."

Binder looked skeptical, but he didn't push it—which was smart. Binder had a really formidable skill, but he was a one-trick pony. He wasn't up to facing a Wizard of the White Council directly, and he knew it.

Michael rounded himself up a cup of coffee and looked at me. I nodded, and he brought me back one. "That's a very large pen for just four goats," he noted.

Which meant that the Genoskwa had come back here last night, and gotten a couple more meals in. Damn, but that thing ate a lot. It ate more than something that size should have been able to consume—but a lot of supernatural creatures had supernatural metabolisms that helped fuel their exceptional speed and strength. Ghouls could put down forty or fifty pounds of meat in a meal, and need more the next day. Maybe Big Shaggy had a similar high-consumption engine fueling its physical power.

I sipped coffee and waited. At a quarter to four, Goodman Grey came ambling in. The unassuming-looking man stopped ten feet short of the table and stared hard at Michael. The Knight returned the shifter's look, and dropped the heel of his hand casually to the hilt of *Amoracchius*, resting it there with his fingers relaxed.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"I don't like that man very much," Michael said. "He's done terrible things."

"Obviously," Goodman Grey said, his tone wary. "I'm a monster for hire. But I've got no quarrel with you today, sir Knight."

"Maybe," Michael said. "Maybe not."

Grey's eyes flicked to me. "Do you really expect me to work with someone like this, wizard, on our side?"

"Yes," I said. "You've been hired, haven't you? Show a little professionalism."

Grey grunted and seemed to relax a little. "Well. I won't give him any cause to take issue with me. But if he does, don't think I won't take him apart."

"Pretty sure you can't," I told him. "But it might be fun to watch you try it."

Grey gave me a sour look and went over to the coffeepot.

At five minutes to four, Nicodemus and Deirdre arrived together. Deirdre was in her demonic battle form, all purple scales and metallic ribbons of hair. Both sets of her eyes were focused on Michael warily. Nicodemus looked like he always did, but more smug. "Good morning, everyone," he said. "Table, please."

In the shadows back behind Nicodemus, I could see the hulking outline of the Genoskwa, lurking in silence.

We all gathered around the table, where Nicodemus had laid out a large piece of paper with a map of the bank drawn cleanly upon it. "This will be a simple entry," he said. He pointed at the front doors of the bank. "We'll go in through these doors. There will be between three and six security personnel, and I will expect Binder and Dresden to keep their attention and eventually neutralize them. The rest of us will head straight back to the vaults. There are two large security doors in the way, but we aren't going to bother opening them. Miss Ascher will go through the walls beside them here and here." He marked the appropriate places with a red pen. "After that, Miss Valmont and Mr. Grey will move forward into the main vault. Miss Valmont will open the vault's door, and Mr. Grey will open the target's private storage room. Once those systems have been circumvented and the doors opened, it will be safe to bring our wizards into the vault." He smiled widely. "And then the real fun can begin. Are there any questions?"

"What happens when we get where we're going?" I asked. "You got a map for that?"

"Unfortunately, no," Nicodemus said. "Though our path should be an obvious one. Our target uses active defenses to protect his vaults, not obfuscation."

“No map,” I said. “Just some vague references to gates.”

“One does not attain great reward without daring similarly great risk,” Nicodemus said. “We will simply have to adapt to what we find as we enter.”

I did not, for a minute, believe that Nicodemus had no further information about Hades’ vault. But there wouldn’t be much point in saying it.

“If that is all,” Nicodemus said, “we shall load up. Dresden and his escort, Grey, and Valmont will be in the leftmost van. The rest of us will take the one on the right. I took the liberty of stocking them with heavy-duty backpacks for each of you, in order to allow you to gather up your shares. Mr. Binder, twenty of your associates in each van, if you please.”

“Got it,” Binder said. He produced his circle of wire and began calling up suits, issuing them an Uzi and a couple of spare clips as they arrived. They rushed to the waiting vans, leaping up into them with a will.

Michael watched and shook his head.

“Oh, cheer up, Mr. Carpenter,” Nicodemus said. “By the time the sun rises this morning, you may be twenty million dollars richer.”

“I have a family. I am already rich beyond measure,” Michael said. “But I really wouldn’t expect you to understand that.”

Nicodemus’s face went blank, his eyes cold.

I took note of *that*. It was far more reaction than I’d seen from him this whole time. Something about what Michael had said struck home.

“The time for talking and planning is over,” Nicodemus said. “Now is the time for action. Everyone get in the vans.”

Chapter Thirty-four

The inside of the van was crowded, with twenty of Binder's goons crammed in with the four of us, and a couple of squires driving.

"All right, Dresden," Grey said. "Let's have your wrists."

"What?" I said. "Oh, right. The manacles."

"What is he talking about?" Michael asked.

"Thorn manacles," I said. "They inhibit magical ability. They should greatly reduce the odds that I'll blow out any of the building's security systems by walking past—and we need them to stay up and functioning until we get all the doors open."

"His wrist is broken," Michael said to Grey. "Will they fit on his ankles?"

Grey held up a set of manacles on a heavy steel chain. They looked just like the ones I'd seen before, only they had the heavy gleam of steel to them, instead of that weird silvery metal the Sidhe used. The inner surfaces of the cuffs were lined with small, sharp thorns of steel. They would bite into the flesh when they were locked on—and with that steel breaking my skin, the Winter mantle would go to pieces.

That wasn't going to feel good.

"Doesn't matter," I said, eyeing them. "If either of the cuffs is on, I can't use the magic. Just have them both on one wrist and wrap the chain around to keep it out of my way. Gimme."

"Sure you don't want me to do it?" Grey asked.

"Nah, I dislike you enough already. I'll put them on." I took the manacles from Grey and gave Michael a look to let him know that I wanted him to pay attention. He frowned and did.

I elbowed myself enough room to wrap the chain around my wrist. Then I closed my eyes for a moment and took slow, deep breaths, concentrating. Blocking out pain was a lesson I'd learned a long time ago, and I could do it pretty well if I had time to prepare for it. Mostly, the bad guys aren't that courteous before they start hurting me, but fortunately this time the bad guy was me, and I was willing to cut myself a break. It took me a couple of minutes to erect the mental barriers, and then I opened my eyes, pulled up the sleeve of my duster, and fastened both manacles onto my right wrist, locking them on with their key.

Steel bit into my skin with a hundred tiny teeth, and the Winter mantle vanished. As suddenly as light comes on when you flip the switch, my body started reporting injuries.

My arm was pretty horrid, but my back had apparently turned into a single large contusion when the Genoskwa slammed me into that parked car. My calf burned steadily where I'd been shot. My feet were killing me, too, which—what the hell? Had I gotten a pair of shoes the wrong size or something? I was aching in the knees, and somehow I'd collected a cut on my tongue and on one of my gums—I hadn't really noticed them before, though I sure as hell felt them now.

And my head . . . oh, my aching head. Mab's little silver earring was as cold as an ice cream truck in Antarctica, but with its numbing influence reduced by the steel, my head felt like it was going to crack open and spill out streams of molten lead.

I realigned my mental shields for a moment, once I knew exactly what I was supposed to be blocking out, and then straightened up slowly.

"Harry," Michael said. "You just went pale."

"Hurts," I said shortly. "I'll be fine." I put the key to the manacles in my pocket, then picked up my oversized duffel bag and started rooting around in it. I'd tied a leather thong onto my wizard's staff, and now wore it over one shoulder like a rifle. "Grey, I'm going to be making all kinds of light and noise once we're inside. If you feel like doing something about the guards, try to make it nonfatal."

“Or what?” Grey asked.

“The manacles come off and I get upset with you,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll just let them shoot you,” he said.

I gave him a pleasant smile. “If you do, who is going to open your Way to the vault, eh? Took me years of formal instruction to learn enough to make that happen. I guarantee you that Ascher can’t pull that one off.” I squinted at Grey. “Ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Why take money for something like this?” I asked. “Someone with your talents can get it any way he wants.”

Grey shrugged. “No mystery. Everyone’s got to pay the Rent,” he said, and something in his voice put a capital letter on the last word.

“I don’t get it,” I said.

“I know,” Grey replied placidly. “Not my problem.”

“If you don’t mind, gentlemen,” Valmont said, speaking for the first time since we got in the van. “You may think your bits of the job are simple, but mine is the next best thing to impossible. I would appreciate some quiet, please.”

I eyed Valmont, grunted, and fell silent, working to rearrange the contents of my duffel to my satisfaction.

It didn’t take us long to get where we were going. The van came to a stop, and a moment later Jordan rolled up its rear door.

The Capristi Building is one of the last skyscrapers to be had on the north end of the city of Chicago proper, right across the street from Lincoln Park. It’s made of white concrete and glass, a mediocre bit of soulless modern architecture that’s all monotonous squares and right angles stretching up and up into the still-sleeting skies.

Between the weather and the time, the streets were almost completely empty and still—which actually bothered me a little bit. That stillness would have made our vans pretty obvious to anyone who saw them moving. I stepped out of the van, slipped on the ice, and would have fallen if I hadn’t grabbed onto the truck. Right. No Winter mantle to help with the ice.

By now, there was half an inch of transparent ice lying over every surface in sight. Power lines were bowed down with the weight of it. In the park behind me, the trees were bent almost double, and here and there, branches had cracked and fallen beneath its weight. The streets had been a mess, and only careful driving and the weight of the heavily loaded vans had kept them from slithering all over the place.

A sign on the first floor of the Capristi Building read: VERITY TRUST BANK OF CHICAGO. Which was a fine name for a mob bank. The first floor was the bank’s lobby, with the secure floors being on the levels below. At least half the outside of the building was glass, and I could see a security guard inside staring at the vans.

“Michael,” I said, striding toward the guard, drawing my gear out of my duffel and preparing it. “Doors.”

Michael stepped in front of me and said, as if reminding himself, “The building belongs to a criminal overlord and functions to assist him in his evil enterprise.” Then he drew *Amoracchius*, made two sweeping slashes, and the glass fell entirely out of the door immediately in front of me.

I deployed the material I’d picked up the day before: specifically, a self-lighting butane torch and a bundle of two dozen large roman candles I had duct-taped together. I held the roundish bundle of fireworks under my left arm and was already lighting their fuses en masse with the butane torch as Michael leapt aside. By the time the guard had begun to rise from his chair, twenty-four twenty-shot roman candles were sending out screaming projectiles that detonated with deafening cracks of thunder.

It was a constant stream of fire and sound and light and smoke, and the poor guard had no idea how to react. He’d been fumbling for his gun when the first projectile went off not a foot from his nose, and before he could recover from that, two dozen more were going off all around him.

I hated to admit it, but . . . it was pretty gratifying. I mean, it was like holding my own personal pyrotechnic minigun, so many rounds were spewing out of the various roman candles. They filled the air with the scorched scent of sulfur and thick smoke that I hoped would confuse the surveillance cameras.

The guard was hit by twenty or thirty of the sizzling munitions in a couple of seconds, and flung himself down behind his desk, while I peppered the wall behind him with more of the raucous projectiles. While I did that, Grey bounded into the place, danced between the last few rounds from my bundle, and slugged the guard across the jaw with bone-cracking force.

The guard went down in a moaning heap.

Grey looked at something behind the desk and said, "He got to the silent alarm."

"Right," I said. I dropped the first bundle of roman candles and pulled the second one out of the duffel bag. I started walking toward the stairs down to the vault below as I lit the second bundle, and began hosing down the top of the stairway with more fireworks just as two more men in the same uniform came pelting up the stairs.

These two weren't as slow as the first one—and they had shotguns. That said, there's a really limited amount of damage you can do when you can't see or hear and loud things are going bang half an inch from your face, or giving you first-degree burns as they sizzle into your arm. They got a few aimless rounds off before Deirdre, in her demonform, swarmed past them, walking on her ribbons of hair as if they were the manifold legs of some kind of sea crustacean. A couple of them lashed out, slashing the shotguns in half, and the guards began to beat a hasty retreat back down the stairs.

Grey flung himself down the stairwell after them, not touching the stairs with his feet on the way, and there came the sounds of efficient and brutal violence from below, beneath the howling and banging of the fireworks.

"Clear!" Grey shouted.

I went to the top of the stairs and looked down. Grey had both guards lying back to back at the bottom of the stairs, in front of the first security door. He was busy using their handcuffs to cross-bind their wrists to one another.

I spattered him with the last few rounds from the roman candles. He rolled his eyes and gave me a disgusted look.

"Oops," I said, and discarded the exhausted bundle of fireworks.

Nicodemus appeared on the stairs beside me, looking down at Grey. He arched an eyebrow. "All three, still alive. Going soft, Grey?"

"They set off the silent alarm," Grey said. "Means the authorities are coming. It will be easier for Binder to convince them to sit and talk rather than simply assaulting the place if we have prisoners instead of corpses."

"I suppose that's true," Nicodemus said. He turned and called, "Mr. Binder, bring your associates in, if you would, and prepare to defend the building. Miss Ascher, we are ready for you now."

I put the butane torch out, put it back in my duffel, and then slung my staff down off my shoulder. Nicodemus was eyeing me as I did.

"Fireworks," he said.

"You think you're the only guy in the world who can get things done without his supernatural gadgets?" I asked him.

He waved a hand at the smoke in his face and said mildly, "Let us hope that their firefighting systems do not include—"

An alarm began to blare, and sprinkler heads all around the first floor started up, spraying chilly, slightly stale-smelling water everywhere.

"—sprinklers," Nicodemus finished on a sigh.

Hannah Ascher came in, moving quickly, and eyed me with disgust. "Fireworks? Seriously?"

“Loud and distracting, remember?” I called after her, as she descended the stairs. “I am the king of loud and distracting.”

“Not only do I have to burn through a wall,” she muttered. “I’ve got to do it in a downpour, too.”

“Get tough. It should help muffle the excess magical energy,” I said, maybe a bit grumpily.

Ascher shot a look back up at me, and gestured at the sprinklers. “You did this on purpose?”

“Yeah, well. Sometimes, when I get bored, I stop and think.”

She held up a small spray can. “How am I supposed to lay out a circle on the floor when there’s a layer of water over it? Did you think about that?”

“Deirdre,” Nicodemus said.

Deirdre promptly swarmed halfway down the stairs, and then there were several sharp sounds of impact, as her metallic hair shot out, surrounding Ascher, and slammed onto the floor around her. The flat ribbonlike hairs spread out, edge down, scraping along the marble tile like a squeegee, sweeping the standing water away.

Ascher looked like she nearly had a heart attack when Deirdre did that, and cast a glare up at the Denarian. But then she took the can and sprayed a layer of what looked like some kind of aerosolized plastic or rubber onto the floor. She laid it out in a large circle around her, overlapping the circle onto the wall and continuing it up to a few inches above her head. It was lopsided, but technically a circle didn’t have to be a perfect one to contain the magic. It was just a lot more efficient—not to mention professional—that way.

Ascher, who was looking damned appealing in her wet clothes (and dammit, how could I blame my reaction on the Winter mantle when it was being held at bay by iron?), went over the circle again, making sure the plastic spray was especially thick at the joints of the floor and wall. Then she nodded once, bent, and twisted her wrist so that a couple of drops of her blood fell from the manacles onto the circle. It snapped up into place at once, a screen of invisible energy, and she promptly unlocked her manacles and dropped them onto the floor at her feet. Then she narrowed her eyes, touched her finger to the wall inside the circle, and murmured a quiet word.

Light sprang out from her fingertip, sudden and fierce, and steam began to hiss up where droplets of water fell onto her hand or the wall. She began to move her fingertip slowly, and I watched as marble and the drywall and the concrete and metal beneath it began to crack and blacken and part. Glowing motes and sparks flew back from her, falling thickly on her hand and her arm, then blackening and dropping to the floor, burning holes in her sleeve but leaving her flesh, as far as I could see, untouched.

I lifted my eyebrows at that. I mean, I guess I could turn my finger into an arc welder, sure, but that wouldn’t mean that my entire hand wouldn’t burn to a crisp as I did it. That kind of inurement to the elements required an entirely different order and magnitude of talent—talent very few wizards, in my experience, possessed.

Man. When Ascher said she mostly worked with fire, she wasn’t kidding.

Binder and his troops came into the bank while she was working, and Binder immediately scouted out the place and started assigning groups to various defensive positions. As he did that, Anna Valmont slid silently across the floor until she stood near me. She looked at the thorn manacles on my wrist.

“I can’t stand to look at those things,” she said. “It must hurt.”

I bit down on a sharp reply. She wasn’t looking for that by standing near me. “Yeah, pretty much.”

She fiddled with her gear and licked her lips. “How long, do you think, before you can take them off?”

“No idea,” I said. “Depends on Ascher, I guess.”

There was a loud snapping sound and a squeal of parting metal from below, and Ascher half snarled, “That’s right, bitch,” and began putting her manacles back on in a businesslike fashion.

It had taken her less than three minutes to slice an opening large enough to admit a big guy into the reinforced wall.

She smeared the circle with her foot, and the excess energy of the spell dispersed into the air to be immediately smothered by the falling water. Then she put her hand on the cut section and began to push.

Grey slid in front of her and said, "Best let me go first, Miss Ascher." He set his shoulders and almost casually shoved the cut section of wall down, and it fell through to the hallway beyond with a satisfying boom—and was instantly echoed by the hollow, coughing blast of a shotgun from the hallway beyond.

Grey was flung off of his feet to the ground, where he promptly became the origin point of a growing puddle of blood.

Ascher let out a choked sound and flattened herself desperately to the side of the opening, into the shelter of the unexposed side of the stairwell.

The shotgun boomed twice more, and then Deirdre was through the opening. The shotgun went off again, and then a man screamed.

Then silence.

I snarled wordlessly. I rushed down the stairs to check on Ascher, and then peered through the hole in the wall. Deirdre crouched beyond it, on all fours like a wary cat, her hair spread out around her and moving slowly, like strands of kelp in a gentle current. A fourth guard lay unmistakably dead on the floor in front of her, his shotgun still gripped loosely in his hand.

"Grey," Nicodemus said, his voice tight.

Of course he was worried about Grey. Grey hadn't done his job with the retina scanner yet.

Ascher was shaken but untouched. I gave her shoulder a quick squeeze and turned to Grey, trying to remember what I knew about first aid and tourniquets.

I needn't have bothered. Grey had already begun sitting up even before I turned around, and his hair was mussed. Other than that, and the bloodied clothing, he looked entirely healthy. His expression was annoyed. "Damn, that hurts."

"Whiner," I said. "One little load of buckshot to the chest." I offered him my hand.

Grey stared blankly at my hand for a second, as if it had taken him a moment to remember what the gesture meant. Then he took it and I pulled him up to his feet. He wobbled once, and then shook his head and steadied.

"You okay?" I asked.

He gestured at all the blood on the floor. "Hit my heart. I'll be fine in a minute."

"Man," I said, impressed. "Takes a licking and keeps on ticking."

Grey showed me his teeth, then turned, poised and contained once more, and stalked through the doorway after Deirdre.

Hannah Ascher got slowly to her feet and stood staring down at the smeared puddle of blood on the floor. She swallowed and started back up the stairs.

I put out a hand and stopped her. "It'll take the cops time to get here, but you probably don't want to be standing around on the first floor when they do," I said.

"Too right," said Binder, coming up behind Valmont, still at the stairway's top and nudging her down like a bulldog herding a hesitant child. "Bullets are no respecters of persons. Go on, girl. And Ash, love, don't forget to fill my pack."

Ascher had a couple of empty black backpacks slung over her shoulder. "I know, I know. The red ones."

Nicodemus came to the top of the stairs, dragging the unconscious guard, and came down the steps, taking the guard along none too gently. Once he had the man to the bottom, he interlaced his handcuffs with those of the men already on the floor and cuffed him there.

"Well-done, Miss Ascher," Nicodemus said. "We'll secure the hallway and you can repeat your excellent performance on the second door. Miss Valmont, if you would accompany us, please—I'll want you working on the main vault door the moment we have access to it."

Anna Valmont tensed beside me, her fingers fretting over the surface of her tool roll, constantly wiping droplets of water away.

"Michael," I said, "why don't you go on in and make sure Valmont has everything she needs?"

Michael arched an eyebrow at me, but nodded, and came down the stairs to Anna Valmont's side. He gave her an encouraging smile, which she returned hesitantly, and the two of them went on through in the wake of the others.

"Dresden," Nicodemus said, his tone amused. "Surely you don't think I'd do anything to the woman simply because her purpose had been served?"

"Not if you want that Way opened, you won't," I said.

Nicodemus smiled at me. He had buckled on a sword belt bearing the long blade he'd used earlier and a curved Bedouin dagger. "There, you see. You can learn to play the game after all." He vanished through the security door. A moment later, a huge shadow moved through the narrow stairway. I never saw the Genoskwa go by, but I felt the brush of patchy fur against the skin of my right hand, smelled a faint reek of its odor in the air, and bits of ash and the scent of burned hair came from the edges of the torched opening as the huge beast squeezed through it.

"This stinks," Binder said a moment later, his voice pitched low. "This stinks all to hell."

"Hah," I said. "Maybe it's just the furball."

He snorted, and we waited in silence for another three or four minutes, until Ascher reappeared, newly muddy with ashes and soot from burning through the second wall, wearing the manacles again. "That big thing creeps me out," she said.

"Too right," Binder said. "Gotta wonder what something like that wants with jewels, eh?"

He wasn't wrong about that.

"You're right," I said. "It smells."

Ascher traded a long look with Binder. "Should we leave?"

Binder grimaced. "And leave Old Nick unable to get through his fiery gate? He'd take that personal, I think. What is Uncle Binder's Rule Number Two?"

"Keep your eyes on the money," Ascher said.

"That's right," Binder said. "Don't take things personal, don't get emotional. We're professionals, love. Do the job, get paid, get gone."

"There could be more than money at stake here," I said quietly.

"Nick and his cup?" Binder asked. "Been a lot of bad men and a lot of powerful artifacts since this ball started spinning. It'll spin on."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not. Nicodemus is connected like few others. What if I could make you an offer?"

"Cash?" Binder asked.

I grimaced. "Well. Not as such."

He made a tsking sound and glanced at Ascher. "What's Uncle Binder's Rule Number One?"

"Money or nothing," she said. "Anything else costs too much."

He nodded. "So don't offer me favors, wizard, or lenience from the White Council, or power from a Faerie Queen. Those things aren't payment. They're pretty, pretty things with strings attached, and sooner or later you're all wrapped up like a bug in a web. Money or nothing."

"What about freedom?" I asked him. "The cops are going to have this place surrounded by the time we get back. Do you think you're going to fight your way out past an army of CPD?"

Binder let out a low belly laugh. "Look at you, Dresden. Damn, but you're a Boy Scout. This is a mob bank, belongs to your local robber baron. Eight minutes since the silent alarm went off, and where are the sirens? Where are the uniforms?"

I grimaced. I'd noticed that, too.

"You really think the alarms call the gendarmes?" He shook his head. "Twenty to one, it'll go to his people first. Then they can decide if they want to call in the coppers or handle the matter themselves."

Yeah. Marccone's people.

Gulp.

Binder busied himself making sure the groaning, stirring guards had been thoroughly disarmed and relieved of their handcuff keys. "Now, if you'll excuse me, odds are good if this Marcone of yours is so savvy, someone will start playing circle games with me. I'll need to be ready to counter them." He pointed a finger at Ascher.

"For the hundredth time, the red ones," Ascher said, quirking a slight smile.

"I'll buy us a nice tropical island with a nice beach, and get you a new swimsuit," he said, winking.

"You should be so lucky," Ascher said back.

"I'll hold the door for you lot. Don't be too long." Binder went up the stairs, his beady eyes sparkling, fairly bristling with energy.

"Huh," I said.

"What?" Ascher asked.

"You and Binder . . . not a thing?"

Ascher's mouth turned up bitterly at the corners. "Not for lack of trying."

"Well," I said, "kinda hard to blame him. You're damned attractive."

"Not *him*, trying," she said. "Me. He's turned me down." She looked up the stairs for a moment and sighed. "Rule Number One. He's not into entanglements."

"Oh," I said, trying to imagine Ascher coming on to Binder and getting turned down. Granted, I'd turned her down too. Which . . . now that I thought about it, just couldn't have been awesome for her self-image.

Doesn't matter how pretty you are. What's important is how pretty you feel. No one feels pretty when they hear "no" often enough.

"Don't take this the wrong way," I said, "but you would not believe how many times I've had pretty girls who would have eaten me alive, like, literally, make a pass at me. Makes a guy a little tense about it."

Ascher scratched at her nose with one finger, making the manacles jingle. She grimaced as the thorns dug at her wrists. "Wait a minute. You're saying I'm *too* pretty to be attractive."

"To a guy in my business, maybe," I said. "Someone as alluring as you, there's a high twitch factor. Binder strikes me as the type to have the same kind of wariness."

Her voice turned thoughtful. "So if I'd been a little older and a little dumpier, maybe I'd have had some luck with you—like Murphy."

I scowled. "Murphy's made of muscle. You just can't see it under the suit and the body armor," I said. "And she hasn't gotten lucky with me either."

Ascher stared at me for a second and blinked slowly. "You're . . . serious, aren't you?"

"We're complicated," I said.

"Because you're twitchy?"

"And she's had a couple of divorces. And her ex-boyfriend kind of shot me."

"What?"

"I asked him to," I said hurriedly.

"What?"

My mouth just kept running. "Plus there was this whole initiation rite with Mab, except I think that only happened in my brain or something. Traumatic—like getting it on with a hurricane. I think it's kind of put me off sex in general."

Ascher stared at me for a second more, then shook her head and turned away. "Man," she said. "Don't take this the wrong way, Dresden, but thanks for turning me down. Kinda dodged a bullet on that one."

"Hey," I protested.

"Seriously," she said. "Way too much drama there for anyone sane."

"We're not dramatic," I said. "Just—"

“Complicated?” she asked. She shook her head. “It isn’t complicated. You just open up and let someone in. And whatever comes after that, you face it together.”

“It isn’t that simple.”

“The hell it isn’t. You had a chance for that and you turned it down? You’re a fucking idiot. I’m not making the same mistake.”

Footsteps came from the hallway beyond the security door and Michael appeared, *Amoracchius* in hand. The Sword was glowing with a faint, angry light.

“Harry,” he said. “Trouble.”

“What’s happening?”

“Nicodemus is about to kill Anna Valmont.”

“And you’re here?”

“Four of them and one of me,” he said.

I got out the key to my manacles and made sure it was handy.

“Dresden,” Ascher said, her voice tense, “if you blow out the electronics, you’ll blow the whole job!”

“I love it when a posh bird talks dirty!” called Binder merrily, from upstairs.

I ground my teeth, took my staff in my right hand, and said to Michael, “Come on.”

And then I took off down the hallway.

Chapter Thirty-five

The hallway beyond the first security door ran for a bit less than a hundred feet, and I found the mental shields against my various pains fluttering as I put more demand on my body. I ground my teeth and got through it, while Michael moved with effortless, well, *grace* at my side, even steadying me once when I wobbled.

At the end of the hall was another security door with a hole scorched through the wall beside it—and again I was treated to the stench of burned Genoskwa hair.

I ducked and went through the hole with Michael right behind me, and found myself in a room that was walled on two sides with what at first glance looked like lockers and which I realized a second later were security-deposit boxes. Minimum security, I guessed, where people stored copies of their important paperwork and such, from the size of them.

The third wall was made of obdurate, unjointed steel, broken only by a large steel door with a relatively small, unobtrusive control panel in its center. The panel didn't look like cutting-edge tech to me. It was simply a keypad, a large combination wheel, and a small LED display.

Anna Valmont stood in front of the control panel with her tool roll splayed out on the floor beside her feet, all her equipment at the ready. She had what looked like a small flashlight in her hand. She was facing not the door, but Nicodemus.

The leader of the Denarians stood off to one side, his little automatic in his hand, pointing it steadily at Valmont. Deirdre stood on his right, and Grey on his left. The Genoskwa was a giant blur against the wall behind them and a stench in the air.

"I still don't see the problem," Nicodemus said.

"The problem," Valmont said, her eyes flicking nervously to me, "is that this *isn't the door from the plans you gave me.*"

"My information sources are impeccable," Nicodemus replied. "They assure me that the door I showed you was the one installed when the bank was built."

"Obviously, they aren't as smart as they think they are," Valmont replied tartly. "Marccone must have had the door changed out secretly after it was installed."

"Then open *this* door," Nicodemus said, and gestured with the gun. "Now."

"You don't get it," Valmont said. "With the blueprints and a day to plan, I might have been able to crack the door. Maybe. This one is another Fernucci, but it's a custom job, and it could be designed completely differently. Not only that, but *this* door . . ."

A horrible instinct hit me. "Hell's bells. It's wired, isn't it?"

Grey scowled at me. "How did you know that?"

Because my brother's girlfriend had seen Marccone defending one of his strongholds with her own eyes a few years before, against an angry Fomor sorcerer. He'd had the place rigged with mines and defensive strong points and booby traps. Thomas had told me about it. But all I said to Grey was, "How? I'm a freaking wizard, that's how."

Valmont gave me a grim nod, and jerked her head toward the hole in the wall where we'd entered. "We're lucky Ascher didn't set them off on the way in."

I padded over to the wall and examined it. At the edges of the scorched hole, I could see the melted plastic edges of shapes I recognized from previous horrible experiences—claymore antipersonnel mines. They'd been set into the wall, between the concrete and the drywall, facing into the room.

I swallowed. One claymore, when detonated, would spew hundreds of ball bearings out in a broad arc in front of it, a giant's shotgun. I counted eight of the devices, stacked vertically, one per linear foot. I think the things were about a foot across.

So. Assume Marcone wanted anyone who tried to force their way into his vault reduced to salsa. Assume he was perfectly well aware how hard a lot of supernatural beings were to hurt. How would he handle it?

Overkill, that's how.

I was guessing he'd installed one claymore mine per square foot of wall. Multiply that by, for simplicity's sake, three hundred ball bearings each, and you had a whole freaking *lot* of round pieces of metal waiting to tear us all to shreds. They would bounce around the steel walls of this room like BBs rattling around the inside of a tin can and render any physical body in it to churned meat sauce.

"Fun," I said. I turned to Nicodemus and said, "Looks like this party is over. You weren't sufficiently prepared."

"We aren't stopping now," Nicodemus said, staring at Valmont. "Open the vault, Miss Valmont."

"It would be stupid," Valmont said. "I think I could have done the first one. This is a door I know nothing about. Even if I do everything right, I could run into something that trips the circuit just because I don't know it's there."

"I'm going to give you three minutes to open the vault, Miss Valmont. After that, I'll kill you."

"Are you insane?" Valmont demanded.

"Hell's bells, man," I said. "Calm down. The target isn't going anywhere. You aren't getting any older. What's the rush?"

He bared his teeth. "Time is relative, Dresden. And, at the moment, it is running out. We open the vault, today. Either Miss Valmont does so or she dies."

"Or she sets off the mines and we *all* die?" I blurted. "Have you lost it?"

"Feel free to wait outside if you are frightened," he said calmly.

And I realized that I could. I could back out of the room and pull Michael with me. Valmont would have nowhere else to go, no other options, and I knew exactly what she would do, facing certain death—she'd blow the system in an attempt to take Nicodemus and Deirdre with her. Or maybe she would pull off a minor miracle and open the door, in which case we could proceed just as we had before. If she died, the raid was blown and Mab's obligation to Nicodemus was met or at least delayed—and if I got lucky, maybe it would put paid to a roomful of bad people at the same time. If Valmont survived, I was no worse off than before.

And all I had to do was throw a woman to the wolves. The math said it was the smart move.

"Math was never my best subject," I muttered. "Michael, get clear."

He ground his teeth, but Michael had worked with me long enough to trust me when things were tight—and we both knew that not even *Amoracchius* and the purest intentions in the world would save him from a blast like the one Marcone had rigged. He left.

"I'm not frightened," Grey said. "I want to make that perfectly clear." Then he also left the room.

"What are you doing, Dresden?" Nicodemus asked.

"Helping. Stop the shot clock and let us work," I said, and made sure the manacles were locked tight against my wrist as I strode over to Anna Valmont. "Okay," I told her. "Let's do this."

She widened her eyes at me. "What are you doing? Get back!"

"I'm helping you," I said. "I'm helping you open this door without blowing anyone to hell. Especially yourself. Also me."

She whirled the little flashlight up and shone it on the ground at my feet. "Stop!"

It was an ultraviolet light. I barely managed to stop my foot before it came down on a circle of vaguely Norse runes painted on the stone floor, invisible to normal light but picked out by Valmont's flashlight.

"Stars and stones," I breathed. "It's a ward."

She shone the light around the floor in front of the vault door. There were at least a dozen wards the size of dinner plates in the immediate area around it.

"That's why the door is different," I said. "They've got passive spells running all over the damned room."

"I didn't see the first one until I'd already trampled all over them," she said. "That suggests, to me, that I'm not the right sort of person to set them off."

"Give me the light again," I said, and she shone it at my feet. I bent over and peered down at the ward, examining it carefully. "Good call. These are built to react to a practitioner's aura. Not real strong—there's no threshold to base them on. But enough to put out a surge of magical energy."

"Enough to break a circuit, you think?"

"Definitely."

"So a practitioner walks on one of them and . . ." Valmont opened the fingers of her left hand all at once, an elegant gesture. "Boom."

The chatter of automatic gunfire came from upstairs—one of the suits had opened up with an Uzi. Valmont and I both flinched at the sudden sound.

"Christ," she breathed.

"We have no time," Nicodemus said. "Open the door, Miss Valmont."

She swallowed and looked at me.

"Shine the light at my feet, so I can see the way," I said.

She did, and I picked my way over the wards until I reached her side. "Okay," I said. "Three things. One, I'm not going to run off and leave you here alone. Two, I'm not going to let him shoot you. And three—you can do this."

"I don't know if I can," she said in a low whisper. "What if this door is more complex than the first one?"

"It can't be," I said.

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do," I said. "Because of the way magic interacts with technology. Marcone's got all these low-grade wards spread out around the door. Whatever electronics or mechanics are inside it, the more complex they are, the faster the magic in this room would break them down and trip the circuit." I pointed a finger. "That door has got to be assembled out of simpler parts and far simpler electronics than the original. That's why it got installed secretly—not to stick an even meaner door on, but to hide the fact that the door has to be less complicated than the original."

Valmont looked at me for a moment, frowning. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," I said. "I mean, you know. In theory."

"God, Dresden," she said. "What if you're wrong?"

"Well," I said, "if I am, neither one of us will ever know it. Because I'm not going anywhere."

She stared up at me uncertainly.

I put a hand on her shoulder and said, "This is what happened to the audacity of the woman who stole my coat and my car after I rescued her from certain doom? I remembered you with a little more attitude than that."

A spark of some kind of defiance, or amusement, or maybe both, flickered in her eyes. "I don't remember it happening that way."

"Probable doom," I allowed, and felt myself grinning like a loon. "Highly possible doom. Look, Anna, you robbed the *Vatican* when you swiped the Shroud. How tough can it be to handle the pad of a schmuck gangster from Illinois?"

She took a slow, deep breath. "You make an excellent point," she said seriously, and bent to her tools.

She moved with swift, precise professionalism. She had the cover off the control panel in half a minute, and was getting into the wires behind it seconds later.

"You were right," she reported. "There are no chips or microcircuits at all."

"Can you open it?" I asked.

"If I don't make any mistakes. Yes. I think. Now hush."

More gunfire erupted from upstairs as she worked. It wasn't answered by anything I could hear, but I was pretty sure Binder's goons wouldn't be firing off their weapons for fun.

Grey slid back into the room and reported, conversationally, "They're using suppressed weapons. There are enough of them to make a great big mess of this entire operation, but so far they're just probing us."

"Heh," I said. "Probe."

"Wizard," Grey said, a trifle impatiently, "are you sure you want to keep pushing it like this?"

"Yeah," I said. "Think so."

"Grey, stand by," Nicodemus said. "Should Valmont open the vault, we'll need you to handle the scanner."

Grey grunted and said, "Guess I'd better put my game face on."

And once again, he seemed to quiver in place, a motion that I couldn't quite track with my eyes, and suddenly Grey was gone and poor Harvey was standing there, looking nervously through the scorched entry of the vault. More gunfire rang out and Grey-Harvey flinched, darting quick glances behind him.

Huh.

"Bloody hell," Valmont muttered, reaching for another tool. She started operating the combination lock, watching a bobbing needle on some kind of sensor as she did. "Impossible to work with all this jabber."

"I could make some white noise for you," I said helpfully, and followed by saying something like, "Kssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

"Thank you, Dresden, for that additional distract—" Her eyes widened in sudden terror and she stopped breathing.

I felt my spine go rigid with anticipation. If those claymores went off, there was no way my duster was going to save me from that much flying metal. I clenched my teeth.

Valmont looked up at me, abruptly showed me a tigress's smile, and said, "Gotcha." Then she pushed a final button with a decisive stab, and the vault door made an ominous *clickety-clack* sound. She turned the handle, and the enormous door swung ponderously open. "Schmuck gangster from Illinois, indeed."

"Get that UV light on the wards again," I said.

"On it," Valmont said.

"Grey," Nicodemus said.

Grey-Harvey hopped rather nimbly through the wards as Valmont illuminated them, and went through the vault door.

I went with him, my senses alert to any other bits of magical mayhem that might be waiting for us inside Gentleman Johnnie Marcone's vault.

It was huge. Fifty feet wide. A hundred feet long. Barred doors that looked sufficient to keep out King Kong stood at intervals along the walls. Each of the barred doors had a steel plaque on it bearing a number and a name. The first one on the right read: LORD RAITH—00010001. The room behind it was piled with boxes of about the right size to hold large paintings, strong-box-style crates, and several pallets bearing bricks made of bundles of hundred-dollar bills, stacked up in four-foot cubes and wrapped in clear plastic.

The strong room on the other side of us had a plate that read: FERROVAX—00010002, and it was filled with row upon row of closed, fireproof safes.

And there were eleven more rooms on each side of the vault.

In between the barred doors were storage lockers, shelves loaded with precious artwork, and more of those giant cubes of money than I really wanted to start counting.

It was the fortune of a small nation. Maybe even a not-so-small nation.

And the only door in the place with a little computerized eye-scanning thing next to it was at the very, very far end of the vault, in the center of the rear wall—the Storage Cubby of the Underworld.

"Looks like that's it," I said.

For a second, Grey-Harvey said nothing. I looked at him. He was scanning the room, slowly.

"It's just money," I said. "Get your head in the game."

"I'm looking for guards and booby traps," he said.

I grunted. "Oh. Carry on."

"I shouldn't be here," Grey muttered, almost too quietly to be heard. "This is stupid. I'm going to get caught. I'm going to get caught. Someone will come for me. Those things will get me."

I gave him a somewhat fish-eyed look. "Uh," I said. "What?"

Grey blinked once and then looked at me. "Huh?"

"What were you talking about?" I said.

He frowned slightly. The frown turned into a grimace and he rubbed at his forehead. "Nothing."

"The hell it was," I said.

"I'm too Harvey right now," he said. "He doesn't like this situation very much."

"Uh," I said. "What do you mean, 'too Harvey'?"

"Shifting this deep isn't for chumps," he said. "It's nothing you need to worry about. Trust me."

"Why should I do that?"

His voice turned annoyed. "Because I'm a freaking shapeshifter and I'm the one who knows, that's why." He eyed me. "You'd better wait here. Manacles or not, those retina scanners are damned finicky."

"I'll stop short," I said, and started walking to the end of the vault. I didn't doubt that Grey was right about the scanners, but I'd have to be a lot more gullible than I was to let someone like him out of my sight if I could help it. I stopped thirty or forty feet short of the back wall, and Grey-Harvey sidled up to the panel. He lifted his fingers and tapped out a sequence of maybe a dozen or fifteen numbers into the keypad, swiftly, as if his fingers knew it by pure reflex. A panel rotated when he was done, and a little tube appeared. He leaned down and peered into it, and red light flashed out. He straightened, blinking, and a second later there was a quiet clack.

"Here goes nothing," he said, and turned the handle on the door to the strong room.

The door to the mortal vault of the God of the Underworld (labeled HADES—00000013) opened smoothly, soundlessly. It would have taken more muscle to get into Michael's fridge.

Grey turned to me, resuming his own shape, and his mouth twisted into a perfectly invincible smirk. "Damn, I'm good."

"Okay," I said. "Go get everybody else. I'll get the Way ready."

Grey turned to go and then paused, eyeing me.

"If I wanted to shut this thing down," I said, "I could have done it pretty much anytime in the past twenty minutes." I shifted to a maniacally indeterminate European accent and said, "We're going through."

"*The Black Hole*?" Grey asked, incredulously. "*Nobody* quotes *The Black Hole*, Dresden. Nobody even remembers that one."

"Hogwash. Ernest Borgnine, Anthony Perkins, and Roddy McDowall all in the same movie? Immortality."

"Roddy McDowall was just the voice of the robot."

"Yeah. And the robots were awesome."

"Cheap *Star Wars* knockoffs," Grey sneered.

"Not necessarily mutually exclusive," I said.

"I wasn't worried about you scrubbing the mission," he said. "I was thinking you might indulge yourself in a little Robin Hood action against this Marccone character."

"Doubt it would make him any angrier than he's already going to be," I said. "But ripping off *this* vault isn't the job."

Grey considered me for a moment and then nodded. “Right. I’ll get the crew.” He turned and jogged to the entrance to the vault—

—and was suddenly *pulled* out of the vault and into the security room beyond by an abrupt and severe force.

“Yeah, that can’t be goo—,” I started to say.

Before I could finish, Tessa in her mantis form blurred through the vault door, fantastic in her speed, terrifying in her strength, and slammed the door closed behind her. Her rear legs rotated the inside works of the door—meant to allow the door to be locked or unlocked from the inside—and the lock of the heavy vault door shut with a very final-sounding *clack*.

Suddenly, the only light came from some tiny floor lamps along either wall, and they gleamed madly from the mantis’s thousands of eye facets.

“You,” came her buzzing, two-layered voice, poisonous with hate. “This is *your* fault.”

“What?” I said.

My hand went to the thorn manacles still on my wrist—and then froze. Michael and the others were outside, in the booby-trapped security room. If I started throwing magic around, even at this distance, I would almost certainly trip the antiwizard fail-safe Marcone had built into it.

“No matter,” Tessa spat. “Your death will end the chain even more readily than the accountant’s.”

And then a furious Knight of the Blackened Denarius came hurtling toward me with insectile speed—and if I used a lick of magic to fight her, I’d blow my friends to Kingdom Come.

Chapter Thirty-six

Tessa's wings blurred and she came at me, scythe-hook arms raised to strike.

The voice inside my head was screaming a high-pitched, girly scream of terror, and for a second I thought I was going to wet my pants. There wasn't any time to get cute, there wasn't any space to run, and without the superstrength of the Winter mantle, I was as good as dead.

Unless . . .

If Butters was right, then the strength I'd gained as the Winter Knight was something I'd had all along—latent and ready for an emergency. The only thing that had been holding me back was the natural inhibitors built into my body. Not only that, but I had another advantage—during the past year and a half or so, since I'd been dead and got better, I'd been training furiously. First, to get myself back on my feet and into shape to fight if I had to, and then because it had provided a necessary physical outlet for the pressures I was under.

The thing about training of any kind is that you get held back by an absolute limit—it freaking hurts. Little injuries mount up, robbing you of your drive, degrading the efficiency of whatever training you're into, creating imbalances and points of relative weakness.

But not me.

For the duration of my training, I'd been shielded from pain by the aegis of the Winter mantle. It wasn't just that it made me physically stronger—it also allowed me to train longer and harder and more thoroughly than I could possibly have done without it. I wasn't faster and stronger than I'd been before solely because I wore the Winter Knight's mantle—I'd also worked my ass off to do it.

I didn't have to *beat* Tessa. I just had to *survive* her. Anna Valmont would already be on the vault door, finessing it open again, and now that she'd done it once, I was pretty sure that her repeat performance would be even faster. How long had it taken her to take the door the first time? Four minutes? Five? I figured she'd do it in three. And then Michael would be through the door and this situation would change.

Three minutes. That was one round in a prizefighting ring. I just had to last one round.

Time to make something awesome happen, sans magic, all by myself.

As Tessa closed in, I flung my mostly empty duffel bag at her, faked to my right, and then darted to my left. Tessa bought the fake and committed, sliding past me on the smooth floor. I jumped up on top of a money cube and, without stopping my motion, bounded up again to the top shelf of a storage rack of artwork, got my feet planted, and turned with my staff raised over my head as she came blurring through the air toward me.

I let out a shout as I swung the heavy quarterstaff, giving it everything I had. I tagged her on the triangular head, hammering her hard enough to send the shock of the blow rattling through my shoulders. She might have been fast and psycho-angel strong, but she was also a bitty thing and even in her demonform she didn't have much mass. The blow killed her momentum completely and she plunged toward the floor.

But instead of dropping, she slammed her hooks into the metal shelf, their points piercing steel as if it had been cardboard, and she let out a shriek of fury as she started hauling herself up toward me.

I didn't like that idea. So I jumped on her face with both of my big stompy boots.

The impact tore the hooks free of the shelf and we both plunged to the floor. I came down on top, and the landing made my ankles scream with pain, and drove a gasping shriek from Tessa. I tried to convert the downward momentum into a roll and was only partly successful. I scrambled away on my hands and knees about a quarter of an instant before Tessa slammed a scythe down

right where my groin had been. She'd landed on her back, and for an instant her limbs flailed in a very buglike fashion.

So I dropped my staff, grabbed one supporting strut of the steel shelving, and heaved.

The whole heavy storage rack and all its art came crashing down onto her head with a tremendous crash and a deafening sound of shattering statuary. I grabbed my staff and started backpedaling toward the entrance to Hades' strong room.

Tessa stayed down for maybe a second and a half. Then the shelves heaved and she threw them bodily away from her and scrambled back to her feet with another shriek of anger. She turned toward me and came leaping my way.

I stopped in my tracks, drew the big .500 out of my duster pocket, took careful aim, and waited until Tessa was too close to miss. I pulled the trigger when she was about six feet away.

The gun, in the confined space of the vault, sounded like a cannon, and the big bullet crashed into her thorax, smashing through her exoskeleton in a splash of ichor, and staggering her in her tracks. Behind her, a money cube suddenly exploded into flying Benjamins.

I took two or three steps back before she got moving again, and then I stopped and aimed once more, slamming another round into her. I stepped back and then fired a third round. Back again, and a fourth. After the fifth, my gun was empty and Tessa was still coming.

The bullets hadn't been enough to do more than slow her down, but they'd bought me what I needed most—time.

I stepped back into Hades' strong room and slammed the barred door closed just as Tessa came at me again. She hit the far side of the door with a violent impact and wrenched at it with her scythes but it had locked when it closed, and it held fast. She shrieked again and her scythes darted through the bars toward me. I reeled back in time to avoid perforation, and my shoulders hit the wall behind me.

"Hell's bells!" I blurted. "At least tell me *why*!"

The mantis's scythe-hooks latched onto two of the bars and began straining to tear them apart. Metal groaned and began to bend, and I suddenly felt one hell of a lot less clever. Tessa wasn't all that *big*, and it wouldn't take much of a bend in the bars to allow her into the strong room with me, without leaving an opening big enough for me to use to escape. If she opened them enough to come in, I was going to die a savagely messy death. Seconds ticked by in slow motion as the demon mantis quivered with physical strain and pure hatred.

"Why?" I demanded. My voice might have come out a little bit high-pitched. "What the *hell* are you doing screwing around with this mission?"

She didn't answer me. The bars groaned and slowly, slowly bent maybe an inch, but they'd been built extra thick, as if they'd been precisely intended to resist superhuman strength, which in all probability was exactly the case. Tessa threw back her insect's head and let out a screech that pressed viciously on my ears.

Halfway through, the mantis's head and face just *boiled* away, and the screech turned into a very human, utterly furious scream as Tessa's head appeared, both sets of her eyes wide and wild.

"I have *not* invested fifteen centuries to see it thrown *away*!" she shrieked.

I stared at her helplessly, my heart pounding furiously in my chest. I tried to think of something clever or engaging or disarming to say, but what came out was a helpless flick of my hands and the words "Psycho much?"

She focused on me, utterly furious and she spat several words that might have been an incantation of some kind, but her fury was too great to allow her to focus it into a spell. Instead, she just opened her mouth and *screamed* again, a scream that could never have come from a simple set of human lungs, one that went on and on and on, billowing out of her mouth along with particles of spittle, and then clots of something darker, and then of larger bits of matter that I realized, after a few seconds, had legs and were *wriggling*.

And then her scream turned into a gargle and she began vomiting a cloud, a *swarm* of flying insects that poured through the bars of the cage and came at me in an almost solid stream,

slamming into me like water issuing from a high-pressure hose.

The impact drove the air from my lungs, and I couldn't suck it back in right away—which was just as well. The insects that hit my body clung on, roaches and beetles and crawling things that had no names, and swarmed up my neck toward my nose and mouth and ears as if guided by a malign will.

A few got into my gaping mouth before I clamped it shut and covered my nose and mouth with one hand. I chewed them to death and they crunched disgustingly and tasted of blood. The rest went for my eyes and ears and burrowed beneath my clothing to begin chewing at my skin.

I kept my cool for maybe twenty seconds, slapping them away from my head, getting a few strangled breaths in through my barely parted fingers, but then the insects got between my fingers and into my eyes and ears at almost the same time, and I let out a panicked scream. Burning agony spread over my body as the swarm chewed and chewed and chewed, and the last thing my stinging eyes saw was Tessa's body emptying like a deflating balloon as the insect swarm kept flooding out of it, and I had a horrified second to realize that she was in the strong room with me.

And then my mental shields against pain fluttered as panic began to settle in, and agony dropped me to my knees—putting me hip-deep in the focused malice of thousands and thousands of tiny mouths.

I dropped my hands desperately to fumble with the key to the thorn manacles, because without the use of magic I was going to die one of the more ugly deaths I'd ever considered, but my hands were one burning sheet of flame and I couldn't *find* the damned manacles and their keyholes under the layers and layers of swarming vermin, which seemed devilishly determined to keep them hidden from me.

Seconds later, the swarm filled my nostrils and started chewing at my lips, and forced me to close my eyes or lose them, and even then I could feel them chewing at the lids, ripping at the lashes.

I have been trained in mental disciplines most people could hardly imagine, much less duplicate. I have faced terrors of the same caliber without flinching. But not like this.

I lost it.

Thought fled. Pain came flooding through my shields. Terror and the urgent desire to *live* filled every thought, blind instinct taking over. I thrashed and crawled and writhed, trying to escape the swarm, but I might as well have been holding completely still for all the good it did me, and after time, the lack of air forced me to the floor on my side, curled up in a fetal position, just trying to defend my eyes and nose and mouth. Everything turned black and red.

And voices filled my ears. Thousands of whispering voices, hissing obscene, hateful things, vicious secrets, poisonous lies and horrible truths in half a hundred tongues all at once. I felt the pressure of those voices, coursing into my head like ice picks, gouging holes in my thoughts, in my emotions, and there was nothing, *nothing* I could do to stop them. I felt a scream building, one that would open my mouth, fill it with tiny, tearing bodies, and I knew that I couldn't stop it.

And then a broad hand slammed down onto the crown of my head, and a deep voice thundered, "*Lava quod est sordium!*"

Light burned through my closed eyelids, through the layers of insects covering them, and a furious heat spread down from the crown of my head, from that hand. It spread down, moving neither quickly nor slowly, and wherever it passed over my skin, as hot as scalding water in an industrial kitchen sink, the swarm abruptly vanished.

I opened my eyes to find Michael kneeling over me, *Amoracchius* in his left hand, his right resting on my head. His eyes were closed and his lips were moving, words of ritual Latin flowing from them in a steady stream.

Pure white fire spread down over my body, and I remembered when I had seen something similar once before—when vampires had attempted to manhandle Michael, many moons before, and had been scorched and scarred by the same fire. Now, as the light engulfed me, the swarm scattered, outer layers dropping away, while the slower inner layers were incinerated by the fire. It

hurt—but the pain was a harsh, cleansing thing, somehow honest. It burned over me, and when the fire passed, I was free, and the swarm was scattering throughout the vault, pouring toward the tiny air vents spread throughout.

I looked up at Michael, gasping, and leaned my head forward. For a second, the pain and the fear still had me, and I couldn't make myself move. I lay there, simply shuddering.

His hand moved from my head to my shoulder, and he murmured, "Lord of Hosts, be with this good man and give him the strength to carry on."

I didn't feel anything mystic. There was no surge of magic or power, no flash of light. Just Michael's quiet, steady strength, and the sincerity of the faith in his voice.

Michael still thought I was a good man.

I clenched my jaw over the sobbing scream that was still threatening me, and pushed away the memory of those tiny, horrible words—the voice of Imariel, it must have been. I forced myself to breathe in a steady rhythm, despite the pain and the burning of my skin and my lungs, despite the stinging tears and tiny drops of blood in my eyes. And I put up the shields again, forcing the pain to a safe distance. They were shakier, and more of the pain leaked through than had been there before—but I did it.

Then I lifted my eyes to Michael and nodded.

He gave me a quick, fierce smile and stood up, then offered me his hand.

I took it and rose, looking past Michael to where Grey stood, melting back from Harvey's face to his own, one last time. He'd opened the door to Hades' vault again. Behind him, the rest of the crew, minus Binder, was approaching, while the huge, vague shape of the Genoskwa closed the door to the vault with a large, hollow boom of displaced air.

"She came through fast, during the firefight," Michael said to me. "There wasn't any way for me to stop her."

My throat burned and felt raw, but I croaked, "It worked out. Thanks."

"Always."

Nicodemus approached us with his expression entirely neutral, and eyed Michael.

"We needn't fear further interference from Tessa. It will take her time to pull herself together. How did you do that?" he demanded.

"I didn't," Michael said simply.

Nicodemus and Deirdre exchanged an uneasy glance.

"All of you, hear me," Michael said quietly. He turned and stood between them—Fallen angels and monsters and scoundrels and mortal fiends—and me. "You think your power is what shapes the world you walk in. But that is an illusion. Your choices shape your world. You think your power will protect you from the consequences of those choices. But you are wrong. You create your own rewards. There is a Judge. There is Justice in this world. And one day you *will* receive what you have earned. Choose carefully."

His voice resonated oddly in that space, the words not loud, but absolutely penetrating, touched with something more than mortal, with an awareness beyond that of simple space and time. He was, in that moment, a Messenger, and no one who heard him speak could doubt it.

Silence settled on the vault, and no one moved or spoke.

Nicodemus looked away from Michael and said calmly, "Dresden. Are you capable of opening the Way?"

I took a steadying breath, and looked around for the key to the manacles. I'd dropped it while being simultaneously eaten, smothered, and driven insane. Hell, I was lucky there hadn't been any anaphylactic shock involved.

Or, all things considered, maybe luck had nothing to do with it.

Michael spotted the key and picked it up. I held out my hand and he began unlocking the manacles.

"What did that mean?" I asked him in a whisper.

“You heard it as well as I did,” he replied, with a small shrug. “I suppose it wasn’t a message for us.”

I looked slowly over the others as the manacles came off and thought that maybe it had been.

Uriel, I thought. You sneaky bastard. But you weren’t telling me anything I didn’t already suspect.

The thorn manacles fell away and the icy power of Winter suffused me again. The pain vanished. The raw, chewed skin became nothing. The exhaustion fell away and I drew a deep, cleansing breath.

Then I summoned my will, spun on my heel, slashed at the air with my staff, and called, “*Aparturum!*”

And with a surge of my will and power, and a sudden line of sullen red light in the air, I tore an opening into the Underworld.

Chapter Thirty-seven

The lights blew out in showers of sparks and there was an instant, thunderous explosion behind us, and the closed door of the vault rang like an enormous bell. While the thick steel walls of the vault were impenetrable to the shot of the antipersonnel mines, I didn't want to think about how much metal had just rebounded from them and gone flying off at every angle imaginable, and I wondered if anyone had just died as a result.

There was a great grinding sound, as if some part of the building's structure had slowly collapsed, somewhere outside the vault, and in the dim red glow of the tear in the fabric of reality, I could barely make out the faces around me.

"Hell's bells," I said to Michael. "Binder? His prisoners?"

"I helped him move them," Michael said at once. "It's partly why it took me so long to get to you. Once we knew about the mines, we got everyone out of that hallway and back up to the first floor."

"Where there were only bullets flying around," Grey said, his voice dry.

I grimaced, but there'd been no help for it. Marcone had set up those mines, not me, and I just had to hope that the initial impact against the vault had robbed the explosively propelled projectiles of most of their strength.

Meanwhile, the torn-cloth ribbon of light in the air of the vault had spread, the Way to the Underworld opening before us, red light pouring into the strong room, and I could see scarlet flames dancing on the far side. The smell of sulfur wafted out of the Way. A moment later, there was a sudden, hot wind driving even more of the scent out of it, and pushing my hair back from my forehead.

As the flames danced and bowed with the wind, I could see a dark shape behind them—a wall rising up maybe forty yards away from us, with a clear arch shape beneath it. The arch was filled with brilliant fire, so dense that I could see nothing beyond it.

Nicodemus stepped up to stand beside me, staring into the Underworld. His dark eyes glittered with scarlet highlights.

"The Gate of Fire," he murmured. "Miss Ascher, if you please."

"Um," Hannah Ascher said. She swallowed. "No one said jack about me being the first one into the Underworld."

"I'm not sure anyone else could survive in there for more than a moment," Nicodemus said. "Dresden?"

I squinted at the inferno raging beyond the Way and said, "It's pretty tough to argue with fire. That's why wizards like to use it as a weapon. Heat that intense, I could keep it off me for maybe ten or twenty seconds—if you let me get a nap and a meal in before you asked me to deal with the next gate." I peered more closely. "Look there, in the archway. On the right wall, about five feet up."

Hannah Ascher stopped next to me, and squinted through the Way. "Is that a lever?"

"Looks like it," I said. "Walk through, pull the lever. Seems simple enough."

"A little too simple," she said, and started taking off her own thorn manacles.

"Sure," I said. "If you're immune to fire, it's a piece of cake." I blew out my breath. "I can make that sprint before my shields fail. I think. Assuming I don't trip and fall on anything. I can't see what the ground is like."

"Dammit," she said. "No. No, I guess this is where I earn my cut." She stared at the Way and dropped the two empty backpacks she carried over one shoulder. Then she took a short breath and stripped out of her black sweater in one smooth motion, revealing a black sports bra beneath.

"Wow," Grey said. "Nice."

She rolled her eyes and gave him a short look, then pressed the sweater into my hands. "Hold this for me."

"Okay," I said. "Why?"

Her boots and fatigue pants came off next, and Michael resolutely turned slightly to one side and studied an empty section of the strong room's wall. "Because my clothes wouldn't survive it, and I would rather not spend the entire rest of the trip without any clothes."

"I would," Grey said. "I would rather that."

"Grey," I said. "Stop it."

"We're wasting time," Nicodemus said.

Ascher met my eyes for a second, a fairly daring thing to do between two practitioners, and her cheeks flushed a little bit pink before she shucked out of her socks and underwear, motions quick and entirely without artifice. She pressed the rest of her clothes into my hands and said, "Don't do anything weird with them."

"I was going to shellac them into a dining set and serve a four-course meal in them," I said, "but if you're gonna get all squeamish about it, I guess I'll just hold them for you."

Ascher eyed me obliquely. "Did you just ask me out to dinner?"

I felt myself baring my teeth in a smile. Nothing much I like more than a woman with guts. "Tell you what. We both get out of this in one piece, I'll show you where to buy the best steak sandwich in town," I said. "Good luck."

She gave me a quick, nervous smile and turned to the Way. She stared at it for a couple of seconds, licked her lips once, twitched her hands in a couple of nervous little gestures, then clenched her jaw and strode through the Way, naked, into the fires of the Underworld.

Granted, I hadn't ever seen anyone with quite her degree of precision and power in pyromancy before, but even so, I cringed as she hit the first wall of flame. It surged up to meet her like it had an awareness of its own and was eager to devour her—and had about as much luck as a wave breaking on a stony shore. The fire wreathed her and recoiled, twisted into miniature cyclones that whipped her long dark hair this way and that. The wind from the flame roared and shifted, blowing hard enough to make her balance wobble. She put her hands out to either side of her, like someone walking on slippery ice, and proceeded slowly and carefully. I could see the way that focus and concentration made her spine straight and tense, and no, I was not staring at her ass. To any inappropriate degree.

I realized that Grey was standing beside me, watching her intently, his expression unreadable. He keyed in to my realization, even though neither of us looked at the other, except in our peripheral vision.

"Got to love a woman with guts," he said.

"You talk too much," I said.

"How is she doing that?" he asked. "I know the basics, but I've never seen anything quite like that."

"She's redirecting the energy," I said. "See how when the waves hit her, they bounce off, all swirly?"

He grunted.

"She's taking the heat and turning it into kinetic energy as it reaches her aura. It's impressive as hell."

"So far," Grey said. "But why do you say that?"

"Because it's *hard* to deal with that much heat, when you're immersed in it," I said. "She's not just stopping it at one point. She's dealing with it from every angle, and she's got to be doing the same enchantment about a dozen times at once to stop it all, in successive layers."

"And that's hard?"

"Tell you what," I said. "Why don't you go play Simon, Concentration, checkers, chess, solitaire, Monopoly, Sudoku, Clue, Risk, Axis and Allies, poker, and blackjack all at the same

time, while counting to twenty thousand by prime numbers only, standing on one foot and balancing a Styrofoam cup of hot coffee on your head. And when you can do that, we'll start you with walking through a small campfire."

"I can play poker," Grey said seriously. "So she's gutsy *and* she's good."

"Yep."

"Good person to have on your team."

"Or a bad one to have on the other team," I said.

His eyes moved to me. They were an almost physical pressure. "Meaning?"

I shook my head and said, "Meaning nothing."

They stayed on me for a second, and then he shrugged and looked at Hannah Ascher again. Who wouldn't?

She was almost all the way to the gate before the Salamander made its move.

From the thickest flame beneath the gateway, something that looked like a Komodo dragon made of material from the surface of a star came roaring forth. It moved with the same scuttling speed as a lizard, and Ascher only just managed to skitter to one side and avoid its first rush. The Salamander hissed out its displeasure in a blast-furnace roar, and the light around it grew even brighter and more intense. The flamestorm around Ascher intensified, and she staggered a few steps back, her face tight with concentration. The fire around her swirled and became thicker, a miniature hurricane spinning slowly around her, with her vulnerable flesh as the eye.

The Salamander roared again, and came for her.

"Dammit," I said.

Michael came to my side and said, "She's got no weapons."

"Can you get to her?" I asked my friend.

Michael shook his head, his eyes worried. "She isn't an innocent in danger. She chose this."

"Grey?"

"I can't help her in that," Grey said. "I wouldn't last any longer than you would."

I turned to look at Nicodemus and said, "Help her."

He eyed me once, and then nodded. Then he drew the sword from his side, narrowed his eyes, took two smooth steps and cast it in a throw.

Swords are not meant for such things. That said, flying pieces of metal with long, sharp edges and pointy ends are inherently dangerous, and Nicodemus had probably spent the idle afternoon, every few decades, throwing a sword around just for fun. After two thousand years of that, he knew exactly what he was doing.

The tumbling blade struck the Salamander on the snout, drawing a line of molten fire along its furnace-flesh and sending up a shower of scarlet sparks. It roared again, in surprised pain, and staggered a few steps to one side, then whirled toward the Way, lashing its tail. A blast of hot, sulfurous wind blew out, making my duster flap wildly and drawing tears from my eyes. Michael lifted a hand to shield his face, his white cloak billowing.

"The lever!" I screamed. "Go for the lever!"

I don't know if Ascher heard me or just reached the same conclusion I had. When the Salamander turned from her, she sprinted for the gateway and the lever in it. The Salamander saw her and whirled, snapping at her legs, but she was past it, quick and lithe. She flung herself at the lever and hauled down on it—letting out a scream of pain as she did so.

There was an enormous rushing sound, and a vast metallic grinding—and suddenly the flames of the entire room shifted down the spectrum in color and dropped lower. I got what was happening at once. That much fire needs an enormous amount of oxygen to supply it, and the lever had somehow reduced that supply.

The Salamander's flesh went from yellow-white to a deep orange within seconds, and it let out another roaring blast of heat from its mouth—and then retreated, much more slowly than it had moved a moment before, toward a low hole in one wall of the archway. Its fire and light filled the

tunnel beyond the hole for a moment and then faded, and as it did, the flames all around the Gate of Fire withered away and flickered into scraps and remnants.

“Not yet!” called Ascher in a panting, tense voice, as Nicodemus stepped toward the Way. “Give it a couple of minutes to cool off!”

I waited about forty-five seconds and then muttered a spherical shield into life around me, channeling it through my staff. I would rather have had my old shield bracelet, but assembling a decent metalcrafting tool shop takes money and time, and I hadn’t had time to rebuild much of either—and certainly not to the degree I’d been prepared back in my old lab at my apartment.

The spells I’d carved into the new staff were much the same as the ones in my old shield bracelet, if less efficient and less capable of tightly focusing power, but it was much better than I could have managed without any focus at all, and it was sufficient to protect me from harm as I crossed the still smoldering-hot ground.

Passing from the mortal world into the Nevernever is both more and less dramatic than you’d think. There’s no real sensation to it, apart from a mild tingle as you pass through the Way itself, kind of a protracted shiver along your skin. But when I stepped into the Underworld, I *knew* that I had just crossed an unimaginable distance. My body felt slightly heavier, as if the gravity itself was different from that on Earth. The air was hot and tainted with sulfur and other minerals, and it felt utterly alien in my nose and mouth. The ground around me was all stone, covered in protruding chunks of what might have been still-glowing charcoal, and I could see the melted stumps of what must have been, at one point, stalagmites, their limestone now running like candle wax. Shattered, half-molten remnants of what must have been stalactites fallen from a ceiling out of sight in the darkness overhead were scattered around my line of vision.

Of course. We were in a cave. An unthinkable enormous cavern that stretched out of sight in the glowing light of the Way behind us and that was interrupted by a wall at least forty feet high and the archway set into it in front of us.

I crossed the ground rapidly to Ascher’s side. My shield was good when it came to stopping fire, but it probably wasn’t quite as good as a single one of the layers she’d held in place around her. “Hey,” I said. “You all right?”

“I was sweating,” she said, her face twisted with pain, and she lifted her hands to show me blisters bubbling up in a line along her palms where she had grabbed the lever. The lever itself still glowed red with heat that it hadn’t yet lost. “Dammit. The sweat went into steam and screwed up the last few layers of protection.”

“You just grabbed freaking red-hot metal with your bare hands and you’ve got nothing to show for it but blisters,” I said. “Totally badass.”

A smile fought its way through her expression of pain for a moment, and she said, “Yeah, it really kind of was, wasn’t it? Was that a Salamander?”

“Pretty sure,” I said.

“They’re so much *bigger* than in those Xanth books.”

“No kidding,” I said. “Maybe Ha—our client got one some hormone treatments.” I offered her the clothes I held cradled in my broken arm. “Shellac free.”

She took them from me with another grimace of pain and said, “Thanks.”

Grey came ambling up over the ground. If the temperature bothered him, he didn’t show it. “Want a hand with those?”

Ascher arched an eyebrow at him. “From you? I think I’m a little smarter than that.”

“You only say that because you think I’m only interested in you for your body.”

“Yes, obviously.”

“Totally unfair,” Grey said, with a disarming smile. “I’m also interested in what you might elect to *do* with your body.” He added, in a more sober voice, “You’re going to have trouble with clasps and buttons with your fingers like that. I know.”

Ascher squinted at him. She looked at me uncertainly, and then said to Grey, “Probably true.”

She got dressed. Grey helped her, without doing anything untoward, and the rest of the crew joined us a moment later.

"Maybe I should have let you handle that one, Dresden," she said. "Traded you for the ice thing. Normally when some beastie comes at me, I use fire. Useless here."

"I'd never have gotten through when it turned up the heat," I said. "But if you'd like to handle my gate for me, I'm willing."

"Maybe I will," Ascher said with a cocky grin.

"Come," Nicodemus said. He'd picked up his sword. One of its edges was blackened and had been visibly dulled, steel bubbling up like the edges of a pancake when the griddle is too hot. "Defeating the Salamander has surely warned someone of our presence here. The less time wasted, the better."

And so all of us passed through the Gate of Fire, through a tunnel about thirty feet long that had me briefly worrying about the Murder Holes of Fire, but no threat materialized. We came out of the archway onto another broad expanse of stony cavern.

But this one was covered in ice.

The stalagmites and stalactites were all intact at this gate, and were in fact spread out in a suspiciously regular, almost geometric pattern for a couple of hundred yards, stretching between us and the next gate. They were covered in a thick sheath of old, old ice, which had universally come down from the stalactites to meet the rising stalagmites, forming great columns as thick as I was tall. The ice sparkled in the light cast by the last smoldering remains of the flames at the Gate of Fire, throwing back shimmering spectra of color. The floor, too, was covered in the same shimmering ice, starting about ten feet from the opening from the Gate of Fire. The air was dry and bitterly cold, and I saw Ascher draw a short breath and stop suddenly as it reached her.

I stared out at the glittering, frozen cathedral between us and the Gate of Ice and my palms began to sweat a little. I licked my lips and took a steadying breath as I regarded the passage in front of us.

Michael came to stand at my side and said, "It doesn't look too bad."

"Yeah," I said, "which worries me."

"Dresden," Nicodemus said. "The time has come for you to redeem Mab's word."

"Hold your demonic horses," I said, annoyed.

I put my hand forward for a moment, half closing my eyes, reaching out with my wizard's senses. The air was frigid, as bad as anything you'd find at the South Pole, but that wouldn't bother me much more than would a cold October evening back home. I sensed no enchantments, which meant little here in the Nevernever, where enchantment could just as easily be a part of the very fabric of reality, and thus no more remarkable or out of place than gravity or air in the mortal world.

I took several cautious steps forward, and put the toes of my left foot down on the edge of the icy floor.

And as if some vast machine had whirled to life, a block of ice the size of a small house plunged down from overhead and smashed onto the floor five feet in front of me, retaining its cut shape, its regular edges. No sooner had it settled than it whirled in place, flopped on its side, and a second house-sized block came rumbling out along the horizontal, sliding along the ice floor to smash into the first block. They parted for an instant, then slammed together again and shattered into dozens of smaller blocks that whirled off on their own, spinning into positions, slamming into one another with the speed and energy of high-speed traffic collisions, rearranging themselves into random, violent stacks every few seconds, each impact resounding through the vast space with enormous grinding crunches.

I stared at the field of gnashing, mashing ice-oliths in dismay, and saw more of the original huge blocks sliding out of the shadows to the side of the cavern, and falling down from overhead.

Dozens and dozens of them.

In seconds, there were thousands of blocks crunching and grinding and smashing away at one another over every foot of the space between me and the Gate of Ice. The air filled with the deafening sounds of impact, as if a glacier had come to life and begun to utter threats.

The smallest of the blocks, if they trapped me between them, would have smashed half of my body into tomato paste.

“Dresden,” Ascher said, and swallowed. “Uh. I’ve decided that maybe you *should* handle this one.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

Giant, angry, crushy blocks of ice, check.

One deity of the ancient world about to be royally pissed off, check.

Pack of rampant bad guys with whom I was about to lose major value, big check.

First things first.

I whirled away from the Gate of Ice, pointed my staff at the distant glow of the Way standing open behind us, unleashed my will and thundered, "*Disperdorius!*"

Magic lanced from my staff, disruptive and hectic, a spear of greenish light wreathed with corkscrewing helixes of green-white energy. The dispersal spell smashed into the Way and tore it to shreds, closing the passage between the mortal world and the Underworld as thoroughly as dynamite brings down a tunnel.

And instantly, the Underworld was plunged into pitch-darkness, broken only by the few smoldering remnants from the Gate of Fire, visible only dimly, at the other end of the tunnel.

I heard several sharp indrawn breaths before I could bring light from my staff and my mother's pentacle amulet with a murmur and a minor effort of will. Green and blue light, respectively, illuminated the area around me, and spread out for a remarkable distance, reflected endlessly by the Gate of Ice and its thousands of moving parts.

The light revealed Nicodemus's hard, narrow eyes. "Dresden," he snapped. "Explain yourself."

"Sure," I said. "See, the way I figure it, after I get you through this gate, I've got exactly zero utility to you people. It would be a great time for you to stick a knife in my back."

"That wasn't the plan," Nicodemus said.

"Yeah, you're such a Boy Scout, Nick," I said, "with the best of intentions. But for the sake of argument, let's say you weren't. Let's say you were a treacherous bastard who would enjoy seeing me dead. Let's say you realized that here, in the most secure portion of the Underworld, the demesne of a major Power, there'd be no way for Mab to directly observe what you do. Let's say your plan all along was to kill me and leave me here in the Underworld, maybe even try to pin the whole thing on me so that you don't have to worry about the client, later—you could just let him tangle with Mab, sit back on your evil ass, and laugh yourself sick over it."

Something ugly flickered far back in Nicodemus's eyes. I didn't know if I'd gotten every single little detail of his plan right, but I was sure I'd been in the ballpark.

"Maybe you can still pull it off," I said. "But if you do, you're going to have to find another ride. If I don't make it to the end of this, there's no one left to open the Way home—and we *all* stay down here."

His jaw tightened, but other than that, his expression didn't change.

"Christ, Dresden," Grey complained. "What if you get killed trying to run through that thing? How are we all supposed to get out of here then?"

It was a point that had bothered me, too, but I'd had few options to work with. Besides, given a choice between a psychotically dangerous, bone-crunching obstacle course or Nicodemus at my back with nothing to gain by keeping me alive, I knew damned well which was more likely to result in my death—and once Nicodemus took me out, there was no way he'd choose to leave my friends alive behind me as witnesses to his treachery.

"Well, golly, Goodman. Then I guess it looks like you'll all be well motivated to genuinely wish me good luck and think positive thoughts," I said. I turned to the hulking blur that was the Genoskwa. "Starting with you, big guy. Come on over. I need to get a better look at this thing."

A subterranean growl rumbled through the air, audible even over the grinding of the Gate of Ice.

“Hey,” I said, spreading my hands. “Be that way if you want to. It’s not like that attitude might get all of you trapped in the Underworld forever or anything. I hear, like, two or three whole people made it out of this place. Ever.”

The Genoskwa rippled out from beneath his veil and stalked toward me. I’m pretty sure I only imagined that his footsteps shook the ground beneath my feet as he walked, and I had a sudden desire to flee with my arms out in front of me and my legs rotating in a circular blur. But instead, I stood my ground, eyed the Genoskwa, and thrust out my jaw as it got closer.

Michael laid his hand on his sword and put himself between Anna Valmont and the rest of the group, his expression questioning. I gave my head a quick shake. If Michael drew *Amoracchius* in earnest against this crew, there would be a fight to the death and that’s all there was to it. I didn’t mind the thought of a fight, but I wanted better ground and better odds if I could get them.

“Nick,” I said, without looking away from the Genoskwa, “run the numbers before your gorilla does something stupid.”

I saw Nicodemus nod his head to one side, and Deirdre suddenly slipped between me and the Genoskwa, facing him, both palms lifted in a gesture of pacification.

“Stop,” she said in a quiet voice. “The wizard is insufferable, but he’s correct. We still need him.”

The Genoskwa could have kicked Deirdre aside like an empty beer can, but instead he slowed, glowering down at her and then, more intensely, at me.

“Arrogant child,” the Genoskwa rumbled. His eyes went to the Gate of Ice and then back toward the now-closed Way. “You think you’re clever.”

“I think I want to get home alive,” I said, “and if I thought that you people would be willing to behave with something approaching sanity for five minutes, stuff like this wouldn’t be necessary. Shut up and play the game, and don’t come crying to me if you aren’t winning. Lift me up. I need to get a look at the whole field if I can.”

“Because that might help.” He lifted one rubbery lip away from his tusks and said to Deirdre, “Rather rot down here than help this one for two minutes.” Then he turned his broad, shaggy back and padded away.

Deirdre turned toward me, her blade-hair rasping and slithering against itself, and shook her head with an expression of faint disgust. “You’ve won the round, boy. There’s no point in doing a victory dance too.”

“Still need the big guy to give me a lift,” I insisted.

“Why?” she demanded.

I jerked a thumb at the Gate of Ice. “They’re moving in a pattern. If I can see the whole field, if I can track the pattern, I can find a way through. But I can’t see over the first row of blocks. So I need to get higher.”

Deirdre stared at me steadily, both sets of eyes on mine, and I dropped my gaze away from hers hurriedly. The last thing I needed, at the moment, was to accidentally find myself in a soul gaze with a Fallen angel or a psychotic murderess with centuries of dark deeds behind her.

“Very well,” she said. “I will lift you.”

“How?” I asked.

Her hair suddenly burst into motion, striking down into the stone of the cavern floor and sending up bursts of sparks where the steely stuff bit deep into the rock. I would have jumped back from her if doing so wouldn’t have put me far enough out onto the ice to get myself smashed flat. Then some more of the blades slithered down to the floor and lay flat, side by side, in several layers. It was like looking at a floor tile made from razor blades.

“Stand there,” Deirdre said. Plenty of strands of her hair were still free and moving slightly. “I will lift you.”

I arched an eyebrow at her. “You’re kidding, right? What happens if you drop me? It’ll be like I fell into a blender.”

“Well, golly, Dresden,” she said, deadpan, “then I guess it looks like you’ll be well motivated to keep your balance and think positive thoughts.”

“Heh,” said Grey.

I glowered at him for a second and then said, “Fine,” and stepped onto Deirdre’s hair, keeping some bend in my knees.

The hair moved and she lifted me slowly, while other razor-blade strands rustled and rasped around me. There was something deliberate about the motion, as if it was taking all of her concentration to prevent herself from slicing me into confetti, and I decided that a comment about split ends and using some chain-saw oil for conditioner could go unspoken.

That’s what I call diplomacy.

She got my feet up maybe ten feet off the ground, which was more than enough for me to be able to look over the entire two hundred yards. I lifted my staff, murmured a word, and willed more light to issue forth from it. The air was filled with droplets of water and tiny chips of ice, where the blocks were smashing into one another, creating a glittering haze over everything, but I could track the motion of the blocks well enough, and in the archway ahead, I could see another lever exactly like the one at the Gate of Fire.

Seemed pretty simple. Get through the grinders. Get to the lever. I scanned the place for some kind of ice-amander, but saw nothing. Nothing that I knew of would be able to survive all the abuse the grinders were dishing out, but that didn’t mean that there wasn’t something I didn’t know about that could handle it just fine.

My imagination promptly treated me to an image of a viscous, blobby monster that could lie flat on the floor in perfect concealment, and be smashed between grinders with no particular trauma and that would melt my face off the second it touched me. Then my imagination showed me my skinless self, flailing around like a victim in a horror movie, getting blood everywhere—for about two seconds. Then I imagined two of the grinders smashing me to jelly that could be readily consumed by osmosis.

My imagination needs therapy.

I closed my eyes for a second and dismissed such flights of fancy. That wasn’t what I needed right now. I needed to find the pattern in the movement between me and the gate, to determine the path I could take to get inside. I opened my eyes again and watched.

It took me several minutes to see where it began. The movement of the nearest blocks began to repeat itself after seventy-five seconds or so. The next row had a similar pattern, though it was happening on a separate cycle. As was the next, and the next, and the one after that.

I stood there watching the patterns for a good fifteen minutes, tracking them, focused, keeping track of every separate motion in my head, in much the same way you had to do with the most complex of spells, and realized that I could simplify the model for each row to a cog with one broken tooth. As long as I entered the row on the beat that the broken tooth was aligned with me, I could breeze through it. So it just became a matter of timing my run so that the openings lined up for me. Theoretically.

I watched for another ten minutes, until I was pretty sure I had it, and could see the patterns aligning to give me my string of openings.

“Harry?” Michael asked, finally.

I held up my hand to silence him, bouncing my hand slightly to help me keep track, following the pattern. The way through was going to open about . . . now.

I leapt down to the ground and started running.

I was five strides onto the ice, and through the opening in the first row of grinders, before I realized that I may have miscounted, and that if I had, I would have no opening through the next-to-last row.

There was no help for it. The opening behind me was already gone. I’d just have to adjust on the fly.

I kept moving forward, dashing ahead through a pair of house-sized grinders before they could crash together with me in the middle. I whipped to the diagonal for a couple of rows, and the air got colder and colder as I went ahead. I could stand at the heart of a cavern of ice deep within a glacier, naked and wet from the shower and not shiver, but *this* cold was beginning to get to me. My breath became a large plume, visible in the air, and the floating chips of ice gathered on my eyelashes, making me fear that if I blinked, they might freeze together.

On I went, going over a single smaller block like a hurdler, and the cold got deeper and deeper, and while the Winter Knight had nothing to fear from slipping on simple ice, the fine, powdery sleet coating the cavern floor from all the grinding impacts did not make things easy, even for me.

One hundred and eighty yards or so, and things went relatively well. Then I found out that I had, indeed, miscounted.

I ran for the place where the opening in the row of spinning, randomly slamming grinders should have been, and realized about a step before I got there that it wasn't coming.

So I pointed my staff at the more battered-looking of the blocks in front of me, focused my will and shouted, "*Forzare!*"

Unseen force smashed into the block, sending it spinning wildly away from me. The block into which it had been about to smash went spinning after it, as if the two were attracted by mutual gravity. I followed in their wake, as they smashed into a couple of blocks in the next row, and ice shattered into a cloud of mist and flying chips. Something hit my stomach and something else hit my hand. A section of block came tumbling wildly toward me, and I bounded up into a rolling dive that took me a good six feet off the cavern floor, shouting, "Parkour!"

Then I was through the grinders and into the shelter of the archway.

The cold there was a living thing, something that abruptly doubled me over, my body beginning to shudder and tingle. It took everything I had to lift an arm, secure a hold on the lever with my bare fingers, and haul it steadily down.

There was a loud grinding sound, like ancient, ice-encrusted gears beginning to whirl together, and an enormous thumping sound that reminded me of explosives going off at a safe distance. The horrible cold faded almost immediately to something merely Antarctic, and I sank to one knee and peered back the way I had come.

The blocks had ceased their motion, simply dropping to the ground wherever they were moving or spinning or crashing.

I was through.

I stood up and waved my still-lit staff left and right in a broad motion. Then I paused to take stock of myself.

My shirt was bloody and so was my right hand. I lifted my shirt to examine my abdomen and found a small wound there. It took me a minute, but I was able to get my fingers around the end of a splinter of ice approximately the size and shape of a small nail, and I withdrew it in a little squirt of steaming red blood. Ugly, but it hadn't gone all the way through the muscle and it couldn't have pierced my abdominal wall. Not dangerous. I checked my right hand. A similar shard of ice had pierced me, but it was smaller and the heat of my blood had evidently melted it away. It wasn't bad. I'd lost a couple of layers of skin to the frozen metal of the gate's deactivation lever. That was it.

But, man, I was glad I didn't have a mirror to look in right about now.

By the time the rest of the crew reached me, the air was merely wintry, and I was on my feet again, and I'd used a small fire spell to sear away the blood that was on the little shard of ice, along with the shard itself.

Michael approached me with his eyes wide and said, "Dear God in Heaven, Harry. That was amazing. I've never seen you move so quickly."

"Yeah," I said. "There aren't many perks to being the Winter Knight, but that's one of them."

"Did you shout 'Parkour'?" Michael asked.

"Well, sure," I said. "That was kinda Parkour-like."

Michael fought to keep a smile off his face. "Harry," he said, "I'm almost certain one doesn't *shout* 'Parkour.' I believe one is supposed to simply *do* Parkour."

"Do I criticize your Latin battle cries? No, never once."

"That is true," Michael said soberly. He nodded toward my belly. "Are you all right?"

"Flesh wound," I said. "I'll get some Bactine on it when we get back. Or let Charity drag out her bottle of iodine."

"She'd like that," Michael said, nodding.

"Ugh," Ascher said, stepping beneath the arch, her arms folded against her stomach. "I hate the cold."

"Wear looser clothes," Valmont suggested in a voice so dry that it defied anyone listening to find any snark in it. "Nice moves, Dresden."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm auditioning for the sequel to *Frogger* in a week."

Nicodemus, Grey, the Genoskwa, and Deirdre entered the archway together a moment later. Which was not even a little suspicious.

Michael turned to me with a quizzical expression on his face, and had begun to form a question when the Genoskwa lunged, powering toward me with ferocious speed, and simply seized me by the upper body, his thumbs pressing against my chest, his hands wrapping around my arms and pinning them at my side.

Michael swore and went for his sword, but Grey suddenly had Valmont by the hair, her head tilted back. Fingers that ended in an eagle's talons pierced her throat delicately, drawing beads of blood, and he said, "Easy there, sir Knight. We don't want any needless bloodshed."

The Genoskwa leaned down to glower at me and rumbled, "Please. Struggle. I would *love* some needless bloodshed."

"Nicodemus," Ascher said, her voice sharp. "What is the meaning of this?"

Nicodemus walked up to the arch arm in arm with Deirdre. "Because we have come to the Gate of Blood, children," he said. He drew the Bedouin dagger from his belt and its damascene blade glittered in the light of my staff and amulet. "The time has come for one of you to die."

Chapter Thirty-nine

Michael's sword swept out of its sheath, and the silver-white fire of *Amoracchius* filled the archway. He said nothing. He didn't need to. He took the Sword in a two-handed grip and settled into a relaxed ready position.

Deirdre and Nicodemus immediately split apart, so that they forced Michael to divide his attention between them. She dropped into a fighting crouch, while Nicodemus narrowed his eyes and became very still. Grey regarded Michael impassively, while in his grasp, Anna Valmont turned completely pale and held very still. I felt the Genoskwa's summer-sausage fingers tighten painfully.

"Now, now, sir Knight," Nicodemus said, his voice almost a growl. "There's no need for this to devolve into general mayhem, is there?"

"I will not allow you to harm them," Michael said.

"Lower the Sword," Nicodemus said. "Or I will order Grey to kill Valmont."

"If you do that," Michael said calmly, "Dresden and I will fight to the death."

I felt my eyes get a little bit wider, and my voice might not have been as deep and steady as it usually was, but I managed to say, "Right. We'll fight you. Not each other. In case that wasn't clear."

"How assured is your victory?" Michael asked Nicodemus. "How many times has *Amoracchius* foiled your plans over the centuries?"

"You've never beaten me, Knight," Nicodemus said.

"Almighty God as my witness, and as He gives me grace," Michael said, "if you harm that woman, I will strike you down."

"Right," I said. "Me too."

Nicodemus gave me an impatient glance and turned his attention back to Michael. "You should have stayed in your little house, quietly retired," he said. "You didn't matter there. I didn't care about you any longer. If you begin a fight here, you will never see your family again."

Michael smiled faintly. "That is where you are wrong. With God's blessing, it will take a good many years. But I will see them again."

"Think where you *are*, sir Knight," Nicodemus said, his mouth quirking up into a mocking smile. "The Underworld is a prison for souls. Do you think yours is so great as to escape it?"

"I am not great," Michael said quietly. "But God is."

Nicodemus's smile was like something you'd see on a shark. "One of the great disappointments in killing a Knight is knowing that he or she does not suffer as a result. But you are in the Underworld, Christian. Here, I think, your eternity will be something entirely different than you have been promised."

"On the one hand, I have your word," Michael said. "On the other, I have my Father's. I think I know to which voice I should listen."

"This is the land of Death," Nicodemus said. "Death must be part of the offering to let us in. You have been so eager to lay down your life, sir Knight. Perhaps you will do so again, rather than forcing me to slay another."

Michael's eyes narrowed. "I don't think so," he said. "No force compels you but your own ambition, Nicodemus. You could choose to turn back—and I will not let you destroy a life to serve your purposes."

"Even if by doing so, you force me to denounce Dresden and his mistress?" Nicodemus asked. "You know the consequences of that, should Mab be shamed by his failure to keep her word—and

you are here on *his*. Should you bring this mission to a halt, Dresden will have broken Mab's word. I imagine that his death will be a terrible one."

Michael was silent for a fairly awful moment.

"Michael, no," I said. "You're carrying enough of a burden already."

That made him look at me, his eyes troubled. We had already been standing on some fairly shifty moral ground, and it was only getting muckier as we went forward. Laying down one's life for a friend was pretty much *the* definition of a selfless act—but doing it so that a monster could get his hands on a supernatural weapon of tremendous power put it in an entirely different context, and not a flattering one. Especially not for a man carrying an archangel's grace around like so much priceless china.

"Wait," Hannah Ascher said, stepping forward, her hands partly lifted, palms showing. "People, wait. This is not the time for us to turn on one another. We're close. Your precious cup, Nicodemus. Twenty million each for the rest of us. If you let this explode right now, none of us gets anything except trapped down here. And somehow I don't think our client will be a kind and gracious host, given what we've come here to do."

Nicodemus's eyes flicked to Ascher and back to Michael. He stared at the Knight for a long moment and then said, "Deirdre. Conference." He looked over his shoulder at Grey and the Genoskwa. "If they start to struggle, kill them."

He took a step back from Michael and then turned, walking calmly toward the other end of the archway. Deirdre went with him.

Ascher let out her breath in an explosive hiss. "What is it with you religious types?"

"Name like Hannah Ascher and you aren't Jewish?" I asked.

She sniffed. "That's different."

I snorted, tracking Nicodemus and Deirdre's movements. They went to the end of the tunnel, where there was another stretch of open cavern and a final stone wall. There was the impression of an archway carved into the stone, but no actual gate there. Shadows hung heavy over it. Nicodemus and his daughter stopped about five feet from the stone wall, and began speaking quietly.

I could feel the Genoskwa practically quivering with the desire to do violence. I knew that if I showed any sign of physical resistance, he'd start on me. Maybe he wouldn't kill me—not without having another way home—but he'd be happy to crack some ribs, rip off a couple of fingers, or maybe put out one of my eyes. If things got desperate enough, that might be a price I'd have to pay, but for the time being it made more sense to be still and keep my eyes open.

"Grey," I said, "I thought you were a pro."

"I am," Grey said calmly. "You knew something like this was coming, wizard." His fingers flexed gently on Valmont's throat, by way of demonstration. "Do you really want everyone to fall apart right now?"

I thought about it hard for a minute. "Not yet. Look, what I did, I did for insurance," I said, "but he's talking about killing one of us . . ."

Wait a minute.

If Nicodemus had chosen this moment to turn on us, against all reason, then why the hell was he bothering to negotiate anything? It hadn't made much sense to move against me in the first place, especially since he would need me to make good his escape. It made even less sense to start it and then hesitate. I knew him well enough to know that he wasn't a waffler. If Nicodemus decided someone needed killing, he killed them, and then he went on to the next chore on his list.

He was up to something. He had to be. But what?

Nicodemus was a liar, through and through.

This was theater. It had to be.

And I realized his plan in a flash of insight: He hadn't had Grey and the Genoskwa grab us because he'd been about to turn on us and kill us. He'd done it to force Michael to stay near us if he wanted to intervene—instead of intervening somewhere else.

Deirdre and Nicodemus stood close together, his hand on her arm. I saw the demonform young woman look up into his eyes, her expression fragile and uncertain, and I focused my thoughts exclusively on my hearing, listening as hard as I could.

“. . . wish there was another way,” Nicodemus was saying quietly. “But you’re the only one I can trust.”

“I know, Father,” Deirdre said. “It’s all right.”

“You will be safe from the Enemy here.”

Deirdre lifted her chin, and her eyes were wet. “I have chosen my path. I regret nothing.”

Nicodemus leaned over and kissed his daughter’s forehead. “I am so proud of you.”

A tear rolled down Deirdre’s cheek as she smiled, and the demonform faded away, until a blade-thin girl remained, staring up at him. “I love you, Father.”

Nicodemus’s rough voice cracked a little. “I know,” he said, very gently. “And that is the problem.”

And he struck with the curved Bedouin dagger.

It was an angled thrust, up beneath the sternum and directly into the heart. Deirdre never broke eye contact with him, and never moved a muscle. The blade sank in to the hilt, and the only reaction she gave was a slight exhalation. Then she moved, leaning closer to Nicodemus, and kissed his mouth.

Then her legs buckled and she sank slowly down. Nicodemus went with her, down to his knees, and held her gently, the jeweled hilt of the dagger standing out sharply from her body.

“Mother of God,” Michael breathed. “He just . . .”

Nicodemus held her for maybe two minutes, not moving. Then, very carefully, he laid the body down on the cavern floor. He withdrew the knife with equal care. He dipped two fingers into the wound, felt around for a moment, and then withdrew something small and covered with blood and gleaming. A silver coin. He cleaned his daughter’s blood from it and from the dagger with a handkerchief. He pocketed the coin, sheathed the knife, and rose, calmly, to walk back toward the rest of us. His face was as blank as the stone floor beneath his feet. Everyone stared at him in shock. Even Grey looked surprised.

“Mother of God, man,” Michael breathed. “What have you done?”

Nicodemus stared at Michael with steady eyes and spoke with quiet contempt. “Did you think you were the only one in the world willing to die for what he believes, sir Knight?”

“But you . . .” Michael looked like he might be near tears himself. “She just *let* you do it. She was your *child*.”

“Did your own precious God not ask the same of Abraham? Did he not permit Lucifer to destroy the children of Job? I, at least, have a *reason* for it.” He gestured curtly at Grey and the Genoskwa and said, “Release them.”

Grey let go of Valmont at once. The Genoskwa turned me loose only reluctantly, and gave me a little push as he did it that nearly knocked me to the ground.

Michael’s mouth opened and closed. “I could have talked to her,” he said.

“If he’d given you the chance,” I said. “That was the whole point of the hostage drama. To make sure you were focused somewhere else.”

Nicodemus stared at me coldly.

“He was worried that you might say something, Michael. That in the moments before she knew she was going to die, Deirdre’s faith might have wavered. Particularly if someone like you was there to offer her an alternative.”

Nicodemus inclined his head to me, very slightly. Then he said, “You have never beaten me, sir Knight. And you never will.”

“You’re insane,” Michael said quietly, sadly.

Nicodemus had begun to turn away, but he paused.

“Perhaps,” he said, his eyes distant. “Or perhaps I’m the only one who isn’t.”

Anna Valmont moved to my side and said quietly, “Look.”

I looked.

Deirdre's corpse stirred.

No, that wasn't right. There was movement at the corpse, but the body wasn't moving. Instead, a faint, silvery glow seemed to begin radiating from it. Then there was motion, and the glow coalesced into a humanoid shape, which after a moment refined itself into a translucent silvery shade in the shape of Deirdre. She sat up from the corpse, separating herself from it, and rose to her feet. She turned and paused, frowning down at the body, and then lifted her own hand and stared at it.

Behind her, the same silvery glow that had surrounded the body began to suffuse the solid stone image of an archway carved in the next wall. It spread to the edges of the carving where a silvery translucent lever appeared, in the same place the lever had been on the previous two gates.

Deirdre's shade turned to look at her father. She smiled, sadly. Then she turned and drifted over to the lever. She wrapped ghostly hands around it and pulled it slowly down. The light in the stone intensified, becoming brighter and brighter, until there was a flash and it was gone, taking Deirdre's shade and the stone alike with it, leaving an open archway in their place.

Light poured from the archway.

Golden light.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Nicodemus said, his voice calm, "we have done it."

Chapter Forty

I just stood there for a moment, still stunned at what Nicodemus had done.

I tried to think of what would have to happen to motivate me to do something like that to Maggie. And it just didn't click. There was nothing, nothing on earth I wouldn't do to protect my child.

But you were willing to cut her mother's throat, weren't you? said a bitter little voice inside me. *Are you any better?*

Yeah. I was better. What I'd done to Susan had been at least partly her choice, too, and we'd done it to save Maggie and by extension the tens or hundreds of thousands or millions of victims the Red Court would have claimed in the future.

Nicodemus had consigned his daughter to death for what? A room welling up with a golden glow that . . .

Okay.

I'm not what most people think of as a greedy sort of guy, but . . .

All of us rolled forward a few steps, toward that golden light. Even Michael.

"That's it," Anna Valmont said quietly.

Ascher swallowed, and let out a nervous little laugh. "What do you think is in there?"

"Fortune and glory, kid," I said. "Fortune and glory."

"Dresden, Ascher," Nicodemus said. "Check the way in for any further magical defenses. Valmont, watch for mechanical booby traps. The Genoskwa will accompany you and intercede should any guardian appear."

"I thought once we were through the three gates, we were in the clear," I said.

"My specific information, beyond here, is limited to inventory," Nicodemus said. "It is at this point that I had assumed the intervention of more mythic forces, if they were to be had."

"He's right," Valmont said. "You never assume you're in the clear until you've gotten the goods, gotten away, and gotten liquid."

"Michael," I said, "come with. Just in case there's anything big, bad, and smelly that tries to kill me."

The Genoskwa let out an almost absentminded growl. His beady eyes gleamed reflected golden light.

"Of course," Michael said. He carried *Amoracchius* at port arms, across the front of his body, grasping the blade lightly in one gloved hand with the other on the handle, rather than sheathing it.

"Grey," Nicodemus said, "watch the rear. If you see anything coming, warn us."

"Going to be hard to collect my loot from out here," Grey said.

"I'll spell you once I have the Grail."

Grey nodded, albeit reluctantly. "All right."

"Dresden," Nicodemus said.

I took point, with Ascher on my right hand and Valmont on my left. Michael and the Genoskwa followed, a pair of mismatched bookends, though I noted that the Genoskwa was not making threatening noises or gestures at the wielder of *Amoracchius*. The Swords have a way of inspiring that kind of wariness in true villains.

I shook my head and focused on the task at hand, moving forward slowly, my magical senses extended, searching for any hint of wards, spells, or energies or entities unknown. Beside me, I could feel Ascher doing the same thing, though my sense of her was that she was tuned in on a slightly different bandwidth than I was, magically speaking. She was hunting for more subtle

traps, illusions, psychic land mines. She wouldn't be able to detect as many things as I would, but she would probably be better at spotting what she was looking for. Valmont had removed an old-style incandescent flashlight from her bag, one that was unlikely to fail in our presence unless some serious magical energy started flying. She shone it carefully, slowly on the ground and sweeping the walls ahead of us, watching for the shadows cast by trip wires, or pressure plates, or whatever other fiendish things she would probably know all about finding.

We crossed to the arch, one slow step at a time, and then into the tunnel. I strained my senses to their utmost.

Nothing.

And then we were in Hades' vault.

... it ...

... uh ...

Imagine Smaug's treasure hoard. Now imagine Smaug with crippling levels of obsessive-compulsive disorder and fanatic good taste.

It's a pale description, and in no way a substitute for seeing it in person, but it's the best I can do, except to say that looking upon Hades' treasure vault made me feel like a dirty, grubby rat who had gnawed his way into the pantry. And my heart lurched into thunder. And I'm reasonably certain the pupils of my eyes vanished, to be replaced by dollar signs.

The light came primarily from the outstretched hands of two twenty-foot-tall golden statues in the center of the room. I found myself walking to one side, enough to see the details of each statue. Both consisted of the shapes of three women, standing back to back, in a triangle, their arms thrust outward and up, palms lifted to the ceiling. One of the women was an ancient crone. The next was a woman in the full bloom of her strength and maturity. The third was that of a young woman, recently matured out of childhood. The flames of one statue burned golden-green. The other statue's flames were an icy green-blue.

And just looking at that, my heart started beating faster all over again.

Because I'd met every single one of them. I recognized their faces.

"Is that Hecate?" Ascher murmured, staring up at the statues in awe. "The triple goddess of the crossroads, right?"

I swallowed. "Uh. It . . . Yes, it might be."

And it might also be Grannies Summer and Winter, Mab, Titania, Sarissa, and Molly Carpenter. But I didn't say anything about that.

I pulled my eyes down from the statues and forced myself to look around the rest of the vault.

The room was about the size of a football field. The walls were a parquet of platinum and gold triangles, stretching up out of sight overhead. The floor was a smooth surface of white marble shot through with veins of pure, gleaming silver. Corinthian columns supported rooftops straight from ancient Athens in scores of small, separate display areas around the vault. Some of them were raised as much as seven or eight feet off the floor, and had to be reached by stairs of more silver-shot marble. Others were sunken in descending rows in a curling bow that looked almost like a Greek amphitheater, if it had been built with box seating.

I looked at the nearest . . . shrine. Or display case. Or whatever they were.

The spaces between the columns had been filled with walls made from bricks of solid gold. Those were just the backdrop. The *backdrop*.

The nearest case was filled with paintings by Italian Renaissance masters, all working in the theme of divinity, showing images of saints and the Virgin and the Christ. Veneziano. Donatello. Botticelli. Raphael. Castagno. Michelangelo. Freaking da Vinci. Maybe fifty paintings in all, each displayed as meticulously as they might have been in the Louvre, in protected cases, with lights shining just so upon them from oddly shaped lanterns that might have been made from bronze and that put out no smoke whatsoever.

Surrounding the paintings, framing them, was a variety of topiary shapes—except instead of being made from living plants, I saw, after several glances, that they'd been made from emeralds. I

couldn't tell how whatever craftsman had shaped them had done it. Hell, I could barely tell that they weren't plants at all. A fountain poured water silently into a shining pool in the display's center, but then I saw that it wasn't water, but diamonds, tiny and shining, pouring out in streams that somehow gave the impression of liquid.

That fountain could have filled every backpack we'd brought with us, plus all the improvised containers we could manufacture from our clothes. Never mind the emeralds. Never mind the tons of gold. Never mind the hundreds of millions of dollars in priceless art, paintings that had probably been written off as lost forever.

That was only one of the displays. And, I realized, as I swept my eyes slowly around me, it was one of the more modest ones.

"Okay," Ascher breathed, her eyes wide. "I don't know if I'm about to pass out or have an orgasm."

"Yeah," I croaked. "Me too."

Valmont shook off the awe of the place first. She strode over to the diamond-fountain, unzipped her backpack, and held it beneath the spigot in a matter-of-fact gesture, filling it as if it were a bucket.

"Seriously?" Ascher asked her. "You aren't even going to shop?"

"Highest value for the weight," Valmont replied tightly. "And they're small enough to move easily. There's no point in taking something you can't sell when you get it back home."

"But there's so much," Ascher breathed.

"Ascher," I said. After a couple of seconds, I said, louder, "Hannah."

"Uh, yeah?"

"Go tell Nicodemus that it looks clear. Let's get our stuff and get gone."

"Right," she said. "Right. Gone." She turned and hurried from the room.

I turned to Michael and the Genoskwa and said, "I'm going to do a quick circuit of the room with Valmont and check for anything else, just in case. Don't wander anywhere until I give you the high sign."

Michael nodded slowly. There has never been a backpack made that was big enough for the Genoskwa. But he had several military-style duffel bags looped to a long piece of cargo strapping like you see used on diesel trailers on the highway.

"Come on, Anna," I said. "Let's check for more booby traps." I started walking. Valmont shouldered her pack and came after me. I lifted my staff as we went, pouring out more light, until Valmont had to squint against it, and we walked out of sight of the others. Our shadows faded to mere slips beneath the extreme illumination.

"What's with the light show?" she asked me.

"Trust me," I said quietly, and dropped my voice to a bare whisper, leaning down close to her ear. "When it starts, stay close to me. I'll protect you."

Her eyes widened and she gave me a quick nod without saying anything back.

I nodded my approval, then leaned my staff against another Corinthian column, putting enough effort of will into it to make the light continue issuing forth for a while. Then I put a finger against my lips, and beckoned Valmont to follow me.

I cut immediately through the displays to get to the amphitheater, and descended into it, heading for the stage, at the feet of the two enormous statues.

Valmont looked back at my brightly blazing staff in sudden understanding. *Look, everybody, Dresden and Valmont are right there, see? Nowhere near the heart of the collection.*

The amphitheater stage, in stark contrast to every other display in the vault, had no overwhelming riches, fantastic jewels, or precious metals. It was stark and bare, with a single block of silver-veined marble rising about four feet off the stage floor in its center.

And upon the marble sat five simple objects.

An ancient wooden placard, its paint so faded that the symbols could not be recognized.

A circlet woven from thorny branches.

A clay cup.

A folded cloth.

A knife with a wooden handle and a leaf-shaped blade.

Why take one priceless holy relic when you could take *five* of them?

And I knew exactly what relic Nicodemus truly wanted.

I turned to Anna and mouthed, "Check it."

She nodded and hunkered down to examine the block, moving cautiously around it. Meanwhile, I extended my senses toward them, feeling carefully for any enchantments that might be protecting them.

That was a mistake. There weren't any traps on the objects, but the collective aura of power around them seared my awareness as sharply as if I'd jammed a penny in an electrical outlet. I let out a hiss and leaned back, while my thoughts blazed with the energy focused upon those artifacts—a combined aura that made the thrumming power of a roused *Amoracchius* seem like a low-wattage lightbulb by comparison.

"My God," I breathed, before I could remember to remain silent. "These are *weapons*." I looked slowly around me. "This isn't a vault. It's an *armory*."

Anna Valmont did not respond.

In fact, she didn't move at all.

I stepped around the block and found her peering at its rear side, her expression focused in concentration. She was entirely frozen.

I then realized that the quality of the light had changed, and I looked up at the flames in the outstretched hands of the two Hecate statues. The flames had ceased flickering. They hadn't gone out—they'd simply frozen in place.

The hairs on the back of my neck didn't go up so much as they let out tiny, hirsute whimpers and started trembling as violently as the rest of me.

"You are, of course, correct," said a basso rumble of a voice from behind me. "This is an armory."

Slowly I turned.

A man in an entirely black suit stood on the amphitheater stage behind me. He was seven feet tall if he was an inch, with the proportions of a professional athlete and the noble features of a warrior king. His hair was dark and swept back from his face in a mane that fell to the base of his neck. His beard was equally black, though marked at the chin with a single streak of silver. His eyes . . .

I jerked my gaze away from those caverns of utter midnight before I could be drawn into them. My stomach twisted, and I suddenly had to fight not to throw up. Or fall down. Or start weeping.

"Wh—" I stammered. "Wh—wh— Are, uh, y-y-you—"

"In point of fact," he said, "it is *my* armory, mortal."

"I can explain," I blurted.

But before I could try, Hades, the Lord of the Underworld, Greek god of death, seized the front of my duster, and a cloud of black fire engulfed me.

Chapter Forty-one

The black fire faded and left me standing half crouched down with my arms up around my head. It's possible that I was making a panicked noise, which I strangled abruptly when I realized that the fire had neither burned nor consumed nor otherwise harmed me in any way at all.

My heart beat very loudly in my ears, and I made myself control my breathing and stand up straight. The terror didn't fade so much as drop to manageable levels. After all, if I wasn't dead, it was because Hades didn't want me dead.

He did, however, apparently want to speak to me in a different room, because we were no longer in the vault.

I stood in a chamber that might have belonged to a Spartan king. The furnishings were few, and simple, but they were exquisitely crafted of nothing but the finest materials. A wooden panel, stained with fine smoke and time, framed a fireplace, and was carved with images of the gods and goddesses of Greece scattered about the slopes of Mount Olympus. Two large chairs of deep, polished red wood and rich black leather sat before the fire, with a low wooden table between them, polished to the same gleaming, deep red finish. On the table was a ceramic bottle. A simple, empty wineglass sat next to it.

I looked around the chamber. A bookcase stood against each wall, volumes neatly aligned, and the spines showed a dizzying variety of languages. There were no doors.

I wasn't alone.

Hades sat in one of the chairs in front of the fire, holding a second wineglass in one negligent hand. His dark eyes gleamed as he stared at the flames. The light was better in here than it had been out in the vault. I could see several dozen tiny objects moving in a steady circular orbit around his head, maybe eight or ten inches out from his skull. Each looked like a small, dark mass of shadow, trailing little tendrils of black and deep purple smoke or mist and . . .

Oh, Hell's bells. It was mordite. A substance so deadly that if it simply touched anything alive, it would all but disintegrate it on the spot, devouring its life energy like a tiny black hole. Hades was wearing a *crown* made of it.

On the floor next to Hades was a mass of fur and muscle. Lying flat on its belly, the beast's shoulders still came up over the arms of the chair, and its canine paws would have left prints the size of dinner plates. One of its heads was panting, the way any dog might do during a dream. The other two heads were snoring slightly. The dog's coat was sleek and black, except for a single blaze of silver-white fur that I could see on one side of its broad chest.

"Sir Harry," Hades rumbled. "Knight of Winter. Be welcome in my hall."

That made me blink. With that greeting, Hades had just offered me his hospitality. There are very few hard and fast rules in the supernatural world, but the roles of guest and host come very close to being holy concepts. It wasn't unheard of for a guest to betray his host, or vice versa, but horrible fates tended to follow those who did, and anything that managed to survive violating that custom would have its name blackened irreversibly.

Hades had just offered me his protection—and with it, the obligations of a good guest. Obligations like not *stealing* anything from his host, for example. I had to tread very carefully here. Bad Things Would Happen To Me if I dared to violate my guest-right. But I couldn't help but think that Bad Things Would Happen To Me even faster if I insulted a freaking Greek god by refusing his invitation.

I remember very little of my father, but one thing I do remember is him telling me always to be polite. It costs you nothing but breath, and can buy you as much as your life.

What, don't look at me like that. I'm only a wiseass to monsters.

And people who really need it.

And when it suits me to be so.

Oh yeah. I was going to have to watch my step very, very carefully here.

"Thank you, Lord Hades," I said, after a pause. My voice quavered only a little.

He nodded without looking away from the fire, and moved his free hand in a languid gesture toward the other chair. "Please, join me."

I moved gingerly and sat down slowly in the chair.

Hades gave me a brief smile. He poured wine from the ceramic bottle into the other glass, and I took it with a nod of thanks. I took a sip. I'm not really a wine guy, but this tasted like expensive stuff, dark and rich. "I . . .," I began, then thought better of it and shut my mouth.

Hades' eyes shifted to me and his head tilted slightly. He nodded.

"I feel that I should ask you about the passage of time," I said. "It is possible that time-sensitive events are occurring without your knowledge as we speak."

"Very little in the lives of you or your companions has occurred without my knowledge for the past several days," Hades replied.

I got that sinking feeling that reminded me of all the times I got called in front of the principal's desk in junior high. "You, uh. You know?"

He gave me a very mildly long-suffering look.

"Right," I said quietly. "It's your realm. Of course you know."

"Just so," he said. "That was fairly well-done at the Gate of Ice, by the way. Relatively few who attempt it take the time to watch first."

"Um," I said. "Thank you?"

He smiled, briefly. "Do not concern yourself with time. It currently passes very, very slowly for your companions at the vault, as compared to here."

"Oh," I said. "Okay. That's good."

He nodded. He took a sip of wine, directed his gaze back upon the fire and trailed the fingers of one hand down over the nearest head of the dog sleeping beside his chair. "I am not what the current age of man would call a 'people person,'" he said, frowning. "I have never been terribly social. If I had the skill, I would say words to you that would put you at ease and assure you that you are in no immediate peril of my wrath."

"Your actions have already done so," I said.

The wispiest shade of a smile line touched the corners of his eyes. "Ah. You have a certain amount of perception, then."

"I used to think so," I said. "Then I started getting older and realized how clueless I am."

"The beginning of wisdom, or so Socrates would have it," Hades said. "He says so every time we have brunch."

"Wow," I said. "Socrates is, uh, down here?"

Hades arched an eyebrow. He lifted his free hand, palm up.

"Right," I said. "Sorry. Um. Do you mind if I ask . . . ?"

"His fate, in the Underworld?" Hades said.

I nodded.

Hades' mouth ticked up at one corner. "People question him."

The dog took note that it was no longer being petted, and the nearest head lifted up to nudge itself beneath Hades' hand again. The Lord of the Underworld absentmindedly went back to petting it, like any man might with his dog.

The second head opened one eye and looked at me from beneath a shaggy canine brow. Then it yawned and went back to sleep.

I sipped some more wine, feeling a little off-balance, and asked, "Why did you, um, intervene in the . . . the intrusion, just now?"

Hades considered the question for a while before he said, "Perhaps I did so to thwart you and punish you. Do not villains do such things?"

"Except you aren't a villain," I said.

Dark, dark eyes turned to me. The fire popped and crackled.

"Granted, I'm basing that on the classical tales," I said. "Which could be so much folklore, or which could have left out a lot of details or wandered off the truth in that much time. But you aren't the Greek version of the Devil."

"You'd hardly think so from the television," Hades said mildly.

"TV rarely does the original stories justice," I said. "But the stories bear out that you might not be such an awful person. I mean, your brothers got up to all kinds of shenanigans. Like, utterly dysfunctional shenanigans. Turning into a bull and seducing a virgin? How jaded do you have to be for *that* to sound like fun?"

"Careful," Hades said, very, very gently. "I do not deny anything you say—but they are, after all, family."

"Yeah, uh, right," I said. "Well. My point is that they each had a sphere of responsibility of their own, and yet they seemed to spend a lot of time maybe neglecting that responsibility—which is not my place to judge, sure, but such a judgment might not be without supporting evidence."

Hades flicked a few fingers in acknowledgment of my statement.

"But the thing is, there's no stories about you doing that. The others could sometimes show capricious temper and did some pretty painful things to people. You didn't. You had a reputation for justice, and never for cruelty. Except for that . . . that thing with your wife, maybe."

Fire reflected very brightly in his dark eyes. "How I stole Persephone, you mean?"

"Did you?" I asked.

And regretted it almost immediately. For a second, I wanted very badly to know a spell that would let me melt through the floor in a quivering puddle of please-don't-kill-me.

Hades stared at me for a long, intense period of silence and then breathed out something that might have been an extremely refined snort from his nose and sipped more wine. "She came of her own will. Her mother failed to cope. Empty-nest syndrome."

I leaned forward, fascinated despite myself. "Seriously? And . . . the pomegranate seeds thing?"

"Something of a political fiction," Hades said. "Hecate's idea, and my brother ran with it. As a compromise, no one came away from it happy."

"That's supposedly the mark of a good compromise," I said.

Hades grimaced and said, "It was necessary at the time."

"The stories don't record it quite that way," I said. "I seem to recall Hecate leading Demeter in search of Persephone."

That comment won a flash of white, white teeth. "That much is certainly true. Hecate led Demeter around. And around and around. It was her wedding present to us."

I blinked slowly at that notion. "A honeymoon free of your mother-in-law."

"Worth more than gold or jewels," Hades said. "But as I said, I've never been the most social of my family. I never asked the muses to inspire tales of me, or visited my worshipers with revelations of the truth—what few I had, anyway. Honestly, I rarely saw the point of mortals worshipping me. They were going to come to my realm sooner or later, regardless of what they did. Did they think it would win them leniency in judging their shades?" He shook his head. "That isn't how I operate."

I regarded him seriously for a moment, frowning, thinking. "You didn't answer my question."

"Words are not my strong suit," he said. "Did you ask the best question?"

I sat back in the chair, swirling the wine a little.

Hades had known we were coming, and we'd gotten in anyway. He'd known who I was. And there was, quite obviously, some kind of connection between Hades and the Queens of Faerie. I sipped at the wine. Add all that together and . . .

I nearly choked on the mouthful as I swallowed.

That won a brief but genuine smile from my host. "Ah," he said. "Dawn."

"You *let* Nicodemus find out about this place," I said.

"And?"

"Mab. This is Mab's play, isn't it?"

"Why would she do such a thing?" Hades asked me, mock reproof in his voice.

"Weapons," I said. "The war with the Outsiders. Mab wants more weapons. Why just get revenge when she can throw in a shopping trip at the same time?"

Hades sipped wine, his eyes glittering.

I stared at him, suddenly feeling horrified. "Wait. Are you telling me that I'm *supposed* to take those things out of here?"

"A much better question," Hades noted. "My armory exists to contain weapons of terrible power during times when they are not needed. I collect them and keep them to prevent their power from being abused in quieter times."

"But why lock them away where anyone with enough resources can get them?" I asked.

"To prevent anyone without the skill or the commitment to use them well from having them," he said. "It is not my task to keep them from all of mortal kind—only from the incompetents."

Then I got it, and understanding made the bottom of my stomach drop out. "This hasn't been a heist at all," I said. "This whole mess . . . it was an *audition*?"

"Another good question. But not the most relevant one."

I pursed my lips, and tried to cudgel my brain into working. It seemed too simple, but hell, why not take the direct route? "What is the most relevant question, then?"

Hades settled back into his chair. "Why would I, Hades, take such a personal interest in you, Harry Dresden?"

Hell's bells. I was pretty sure I didn't like the way that sounded, at all. "Okay," I said. "Why would you?"

He reached out a hand to the middle head of the dog and scratched it beneath the chin. One of the beast's rear legs began to thump rapidly against the floor. It sounded like something you'd hear coming from inside a machine shop. "Do you know my dog's name?"

"Cerberus," I said promptly. "But everyone knows that."

"Do you know what it means?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I shook my head.

"It is from an ancient word, *kerberos*. It means 'spotted.'"

I blinked. "You're a genuine Greek god. You're the Lord of the Underworld. And . . . you named your dog *Spot*?"

"Who's a good dog?" Hades said, scratching the third head behind the ears, and making the beast's mouth drop open in a doggy grin. "Spot is. Yes, he is."

I couldn't help it. I laughed.

Hades' eyebrows went up. He didn't quite smile, but he nonetheless managed to look pleased. "A rare enough sound in my kingdom." He nodded. "I am a guardian of an underground realm filled with terrible power, the warden of a nation-prison of shades. I am charged with protecting it, maintaining it, and seeing to it that it is used properly. I am misunderstood by most, feared by most, hated by many. I do my duty as I think best, regardless of anyone's opinion but my own, and though my peers have neglected their charges or focused upon inconsequential trivialities in the face of larger problems, it does not change that duty—even when it causes me great pain. And I have a very large, and very good dog . . ."

Spot's tail thumped the side of Hades' chair like some enormous padded baseball bat.

". . . whom other people sometimes consider fearsome." He turned to me, put his wineglass down and regarded me frankly. "I believe," he said, "that we have a great many things in common." He rose and stood before me. Then he extended his right arm. "You are here because I wanted to take a moment to shake your hand and wish you luck."

I stood up, feeling a little off-balance, and offered my hand. His handshake was . . .

You can't shake hands with a mountain. You can't shake hands with an earthquake. You can't shake hands with the awful silence and absolute darkness at the bottom of the sea.

But if you could, it might come close to what it was like to trade grips with the Lord of the Underworld, and to receive his blessing.

"Wish me luck?" I breathed, when I could breathe properly again. "You aren't going to help?"

"It is not my place," Hades said. "I wish you good fortune, and will hope that you triumph. But even if we yet lived in the age where my will could guide the course of destiny, it is not for the Lord of Death to take sides in this struggle. The fate of the weapons you have found must be decided by those who found them."

"But you've already helped me," I said. "Just by pointing out what was going on."

Hades didn't smile, but the corner of his eyes wrinkled. "All I did was ask you a few questions. Are you ready?"

"I have one more question," I said.

"Mortals generally do."

"What will happen to Deirdre?"

Hades drew in his breath. His face became expressionless. For a long moment, I thought he wasn't going to answer, but then he said, "Relatively few new shades come into my realm these days. Foremost amongst them are those who perish in the gates—particularly at the Gate of Blood. She will remain in my keeping."

"The things she's done," I said quietly. "The people she's hurt. And she gets to skate justice?"

My host's eyes became hard, flat, like pieces of coal.

"This is my realm," he said, and there was a note in his voice like the grinding of tectonic plates.

Behind him, Spot let out a warning growl. Magnified by three throats and rumbling in that huge chest, it sounded like machinery in a slaughterhouse.

I didn't answer. At least I had enough brains to pull my foot out of my mouth and stop talking. I bowed my head, as meekly as I knew how.

Hades' voice smoothed out again, and at a gesture of his hand, Spot quieted down. "Should you survive the hour, consider your classics again, Sir Harry. And revisit the question in your thoughts."

I nodded, and thought of others in the Underworld. Tantalus. Sisyphus. Vultures tearing out livers, water that could be carried only in sieves, and ever-spinning wheels of fire, punishments tailored specifically to the soul in question.

I didn't know what was going to happen to Deirdre—but she wasn't going to get off light.

"I understand," I said quietly.

Hades nodded. "You will return to the same moment in which I slowed time," he said, "and in the same position. Are you prepared?"

I drew a slow, deep breath. "I guess I'd better be."

His eyes flickered and he gave me a brief nod, maybe of approval.

Then black fire swallowed me again.

Chapter Forty-two

“If there’s any kind of device built into this thing, I can’t see it,” Valmont reported in a near whisper, and rose from behind the altar.

I looked around a bit wildly, my eyes taking a second or three to adjust to the dimmer light. I was, just as Hades had said, right back where I’d been a few objective fractions of a second before.

Five artifacts. Mab had promised Nicodemus that I would help him recover the Grail. She hadn’t said a damned thing about any of the others. So that meant that there were four things I could keep away from him, right here, right now. Nick hadn’t seen them yet, so he couldn’t know for certain that they were here. I had to recover them if I could, but keep them away from him at all costs. That meant getting them out of sight and splitting them up as best I could.

But it meant more than that. It meant winning the game Mab had set up for me.

Or, now that I thought about it, the game Mab had *rigged* for me. Mab had arranged to give me a target I couldn’t miss if I tried. It wasn’t a very appetizing target, but not every job I’d ever done was clean and enjoyable.

I knew how to win the game to Mab’s satisfaction. The trick was going to be both winning the game and *surviving* it.

Mentally, I went over those cards that I’d been holding close to my chest.

Yeah. If I played them properly, I thought I had a winning hand.

“Right,” I said quietly. I stepped up to the altar and started seizing holy objects. The placard. The crown.

“Take these,” I said in a whisper, passing them to Valmont. “Get out of sight. Stow them in your pack if you can. Hide them somewhere else if you can’t.”

Valmont stared at me with her eyes wide. “Why?”

“They can’t be allowed to fall into the wrong hands,” I said.

“Dresden,” she said, “I’m in this for the money, and revenge if I get a chance at it. I’m not here for a cause.”

I clenched my jaw for a second, and then regarded her frankly. “Anna,” I said, “when have I ever done wrong by you? I need your help. Who do you trust more to get you out of here? Nicodemus? Or me?”

She stared at me hard for only a fraction of a second before she gave me a curt nod, and took them. She started stuffing them into her pack. She hadn’t filled even half of it with diamonds, and was able to slide them in. “Hey, is that the Shroud?”

“This one looks older and shabbier than the one you stole from the Church,” I said, rolling up the old cloth and stuffing it into my duster’s pocket. It was thin stuff, terribly thin, and made a smaller bundle than you’d think. “Hell, maybe that investigative panel was right. Maybe the Church does have a knockoff.”

“But I thought that one had power?” she asked.

“It did, but not like this.” My fingers still tingled from touching the cloth. “Besides, we’re talking about the power of faith, here,” I said. “Enough people believe that the fake is really the Shroud, maybe that’s enough to make it powerful all by itself.”

“Seems like a cheat.”

“Don’t knock it,” I said.

Her head snapped up, and her eyes widened. “Dresden,” Anna hissed.

I heard footsteps approaching a couple of seconds later. My heart thudded in my chest. I managed to get the knife and slip it up the sleeve of my duster, then quietly slid the cup into the

exact center of the altar. Even that brief contact was like touching a live wire. Tingles flew up my arm and set every hair of my body on end.

I fought to suppress a full-body shudder, and about half a second later, Nicodemus appeared, trailing Michael, Hannah Ascher, and the Genoskwa. Ascher carried my staff in one hand, the lights of its runes gradually growing dimmer. She looked tired but smug, wearing one backpack that sagged with wealth and lugging a second like a too-heavy carry-on bag at the airport.

"There," Michael said when he spotted me. He looked relieved, and he hadn't, as far as I could tell, picked up anything. "Thank God."

I waved a hand at the group, using the gesture to let the knife fall a little deeper into my sleeve. "Over here. Found it."

They all came down to the stage with me. Nicodemus's eyes were narrow with suspicion as he walked. "Dresden. You've found the Grail?"

"I just had Valmont check this altar for traps, and she says it's clear," I said, not quite lying. "I just got done examining it myself."

"Why did you leave your staff back there?" Nicodemus asked, his rough voice harsh. "A distraction?"

"Figured you guys could use it as a waypoint to find us," I lied blatantly. I stepped aside with a little Vanna White gesture, revealing the cup, and said, "Ta-da."

Nicodemus stared at me hard for a second, then at the cup on the marble altar. I could see the wheels spinning in his head as he thought. Michael's eyes went to it as well, widening.

"That's it?" Michael asked. "That's really it?"

"Thing makes my teeth buzz it's so powerful," I said. "Yeah, I think that's it." I looked at Nicodemus and said, "You've got your damned cup. Let's pack up, get Grey his share, and get the hell out of here."

Nicodemus walked a slow circle around the altar, examining it. His shadow twisted and writhed with eagerness where it fell on the floor around him. I took a step to one side to avoid letting it fall on me, because ick.

"I know you've been aching to have your hands on my staff," I said to Ascher, as Nicodemus examined the altar for himself. I held out my hand. "But I'd rather be the one fondling my tool. Wizards are weird like that."

"Wow," she said, and flashed me a grin, her face flushed, excited. "You left me nowhere to go with that one. I have nothing to add."

"I'm just that good," I said.

She tossed the staff back to me, imprecisely, and I fumbled it for a second and nearly dropped it. I had a hell of a time both catching it in my right hand and keeping my left arm bent enough to keep the knife from slipping out of my sleeve.

And the brass hilt of the knife clicked against the aluminum splint still on my left arm.

Nicodemus looked up sharply at the sound.

His eyes stayed on me, dark and opaque for a moment.

"Miss Valmont," he said quietly. "Go back to the entrance. Stand watch there and tell Grey he's free to collect his share."

Valmont hesitated, looking at me.

She was a liability here. If I could get her clear, it would be harder for Nicodemus to use her against me. Also, the more I could spread these artifacts out, the better.

I nodded, and Valmont vanished silently toward the entrance to the vault.

Michael came to stand next to me, and abruptly tilted his head, looking up at the statues. "Harry," he asked, "does that statue look like Molly to you?"

Oh, crap. I so didn't need this kind of thing distracting either of us right now.

"Pfffffft," I said. "What? No. That's absurd. Maybe a little. Some people might think so. She's got, uh, one of those faces."

He pursed his lips and eyed me.

“Would you get your head in the game?” I said. “Trapped in the Underworld, possible epic Greek menace all around us? Focus, please.”

Michael eyed me.

Dammit, I so didn’t need this right now. Anna had, by now, gotten well out of the way. For the next few moments, Grey might be distracted with collecting his share, leaving Nick and the Genoskwa against me and Michael.

I’d take that fight.

But where would Hannah Ascher come down? Whichever side she chose would have the advantage, and that was that. Ascher liked me, on the one hand. But on the other, Nicodemus had saved her life against the Salamander, and she had signed on to be a part of his crew, not mine. If she held to Binder’s mercenary code, she’d back Nick’s play and not mine. I racked my brains for anything I could do to get her to come down on my side, at this point. But I had nothing.

Man.

Maybe I shouldn’t have rejected her advances. Especially not if she’d already been feeling the rejection from Binder. Maybe that would have made a serious difference.

On the other hand, who knows? It had been a while for me. Maybe that would have hurt my chances even more.

Something nagged at the back of my brain, an instinct that was attached to Ascher but too vague to make any sense out of.

The moment was passing, when Nicodemus was at the height of his tension and uncertainty. If I didn’t hurry, I was going to lose it. Time to start pushing.

“Would you hurry it up?” I said to Nicodemus. “I don’t want to get eaten by a three-headed dog or maybe bump into the shade of Medusa because you went into gloat-mode like every Evil Overlord shouldn’t. I told you we already checked it.”

“If you don’t mind,” Nicodemus said, going back to his examination, “I’m going to make certain for myself.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, you can’t be serious,” I said. “Mab is a tricky bitch, but she’s good to her word. She gave you her word that I would help you secure the cup and bring it back as long as you didn’t get up to any shenanigans, and that’s what I’m going to do. It’s safe. Stick a needle in my eye.”

Nicodemus continued in his slow circle.

“You get all cautious now?” I asked him. And I shifted my staff into the crook of my left arm and plucked up the Grail.

Nicodemus’s hand went to his sword, and his eyes narrowed, but I just held it speculatively, bouncing it in my hand. “See? No traps. It’s not an Indiana Jones movie, man.”

Nicodemus remained there, frozen—but his shadow exploded back across the amphitheater stage and climbed halfway up the rear arch of the seating, its edges flaring out wildly, like a monstrous cobra. As tells go, that seemed like a pretty damned big one.

My stomach turned as I began to speak, but I didn’t let that show in my voice. “This is what you came for, right?” I said quietly. “What your daughter died to give you. Hey, if I dropped it, do you think it would break?”

“Dresden,” Nicodemus said. There was no silk in his voice now—only rasp.

“Gravity seems a little higher here,” I said. “You notice? Maybe exactly high enough to break something like this if it fell. And then she’d have died for nothing.”

“Give me the Grail,” he said, his voice a whisper. “Now.”

“Sure. Come get it,” I said.

He started stalking around the altar toward me, and I casually mirrored him, keeping it between us. “Deirdre talked to me about your relationship yesterday,” I said. “Did you know that?”

He swallowed. His shadow shifted, surging toward me, spreading out in a large circle around us. The light from the upraised hands of the two triple statues grew a little dimmer. It was like suddenly being enfolded in enormous, shadowy wings.

"She went on about the centuries you two had spent together," I said carelessly. "About how there was no word for how close you two had become because no mortal could possibly understand. Hell, I guess that's true. Because you threw her away like she was so much trash. I don't have a word that seems sufficient to cover a father who would do that."

At that, Nicodemus went still again. "Give me the Grail," he whispered. "And shut your ignorant mouth."

"You said she was the only one you trusted, back where you murdered her," I continued in a conversational tone, putting a little emphasis on the verbs. "Call me crazy, but it seems to me that it's going to be a long, cold, empty place for you for the next few millennia. I mean, talk about having an empty nest. That Coin in your pocket must feel pretty heavy right about now."

Nicodemus began to breathe faster.

He was thousands of years old. He was a villain who had forgotten more victims than the most wildly successful serial killer ever claimed. I had no doubt that he'd killed men for much less reason than I was currently offering him. He was skilled in every form of the infliction of damage and death that the world had to offer. He was the most personally dangerous foe I'd ever faced.

But somewhere, deep inside the monster, was something that was still almost human. Something that could feel loss. Something that could feel pain.

And because of that, he was furious.

And he was beginning to lose control.

This, I thought, is just about your best plan ever, Harry.

"That must have been really difficult for someone so used to wielding power," I said. "To realize that as a result of the life you'd led, there was no one who would willingly come with you, willingly let you slaughter them, willingly pull that lever for you after you had. I'll bet you chewed that problem for years, trying to crack it. Did it hurt when you realized what you were going to have to give up?"

Nicodemus's chest started heaving, and his eyes got wider.

In my peripheral vision, I could see Michael standing with his sword at port arms, his eyes cast slightly to one side, focused on nothing. The Genoskwa loomed behind him. I saw Michael ripple the fingers of his right hand into a fighting grip on *Amoracchius*, and take a slow, centering breath.

"The funny part is that bit about her being protected from Hell," I said. "You brought her *here* and expected that she wouldn't get her sentence? Have you *read* Greek mythology? Do you *know* the kinds of things Hades sentences people to endure? At least Hell is, by all reports, more or less nondiscriminatory. Down here, they get *personal*. Did you just try to give her a comforting lie at the last minute? Just to make sure she pulled the lever?"

Nicodemus's sword sprang into his hand. "Give me the Grail or I'm going to kill you."

Hell's bells. I was hurting him.

I considered the Grail and felt bad for what I was doing, and I didn't hesitate or slow down for a second. There are weapons that have nothing to do with steel or explosions or vast arcane power, and I used mine. "Do you remember?" I asked in a very quiet voice. "The first time you saw her? The first time she looked at you? Do you remember that change? That shift, when the whole universe suddenly tilted? Do you remember looking at her and knowing that you would never, ever be quite the same person? Do you think the cup will do that for you?"

I flicked him the Grail, sending it in a smooth arc through the air.

His eyes widened in surprise, but he caught it adroitly, his whole body shuddering as its power washed over him.

I watched him, his face, his posture, and put every ounce of scorn I had into my voice. "I don't know how you said it back in the day, but I'll bet you anything her first word was 'dada.'"

Something snapped.

His chest stopped heaving.

A single tear appeared.

And he said, in an utterly flat, utterly dead voice, "Kill them."

And that ended the game, right there.
I win?

Chapter Forty-three

With those words, Nicodemus broke his pact with Mab and freed me of any obligation to keep helping him secure the Grail. I had fulfilled every ounce of her promise to him, or at least to well within the obligation as Mab would see it. Hell, I had actually *given* him the Grail. And if he couldn't take a little harsh truth, as Mab would see it, then that was Nicodemus's problem, not hers.

Well. Nicodemus's problem—and mine. The big downside of the plan to infuriate an emotionally traumatized psychopath into trying to kill me was part two, where the lunatic actually did it.

As spots for a fight went, this was better than most. It was limited to as few people and as few environmental factors as possible. If I'd waited until we were back in Chicago, Nick would have had a virtually unlimited number of civilians to harm and possible hostages to seize. Not only that, but *I* would have had a virtually unlimited number of collaterals to damage, and I didn't imagine that any fight with the head of the Denarians was going to be something I wanted to finesse. Additionally, if we'd duked it out in Chicago, I would have had to worry about whose side Binder would throw in on, not to mention a possible strike team of Denarian squires standing by in the wings, and on top of all of that I was pretty sure that Marcone's troubleshooters would be trying to murder us all.

Here, in the Underworld, I could take the gloves off. The fight would be clean, or as clean as such things got, and I wouldn't have to worry about innocents being harmed.

Just, you know, Michael and me.

I could think abstract thoughts about the decisions leading up to the fight in the back of my head all I wanted, because the real fight happened almost too fast for any thinking to get involved.

The Genoskwa lunged toward me, making a foolish mistake—he should have gone after Michael.

The Knight of the Cross pivoted on the balls of his feet, and *Amoracchius* blazed into furious light. He didn't move with blinding speed. Michael's attack was all about timing, and his timing was pretty much perfect. As the Genoskwa thundered past him, Michael whirled, cloak flying out, and struck a spinning blow that started at the level of his ankles and swept up until he was holding *Amoracchius* over his head in both hands. On the way, the Sword cut a line of light into the back of one of the Genoskwa's thick, hairy knees.

I heard the suddenly parted tendons, thicker than heavy ropes, snap like bowstrings, and the Genoskwa's leg melted out from underneath it in the middle of its stride.

At the same moment, Nicodemus flung both his arms forward, and a terrible, smothering darkness came slamming down upon me.

I'd had two possible responses to his first attack in mind—and they had to be responses, not assaults of my own. When all this was over, I wanted there to be absolutely no question in Mab's mind that he had turned on me, not the other way around. He might have come at me with his sword—it was how he normally preferred to do business, in every case that I had seen. A shield would have held him off, at least for a time.

Or, in his rage, he might unleash the full malice of Anduriel upon me. Which he had done.

This was not a normal circumstance for Nicodemus.

I'd prepared the proper defense.

"*Lumios!*" I shouted, as the darkness closed in, and I poured my will into the same light spell I'd used earlier—only I added a measure of soulfire into the mix.

The light leapt forth in a sphere and exploded into sparks as it collided with something that simply *devoured* it, swallowing it into nothingness as it streamed forth. The effect was damned odd-looking, from the inside. Light poured forth to be enveloped by a slithering blackness all around me, something that recoiled from the sparks and then came surging back in their wake with frenzied agitation—but the darkness could reach no closer than just beyond the reach of my arm.

I heard Nicodemus shout something in a language I didn't understand, and the Genoskwa let out a howl of furious pain. Something heavy made the ground quiver beneath my feet, and there was an enormous crashing sound.

Michael's voice rang out like a silver trumpet, calling, "*In nomine Dei! Lux et veritas!*"

Steel rang on steel, and I realized that I hadn't figured the numbers right after all. It wasn't Nick and the Genoskwa versus me and Michael. It was Nick, the Genoskwa, and *Anduriel* versus me and Michael. And I had the last two as my dance partners.

The Genoskwa let out a roar, and I knew it was coming right at me. I couldn't move without stepping into that smothering blackness and that seemed like a horrible idea, so instead I folded my arms across my chest, and muttered, "Let's see you ground *this*, ugly." Then I called upon Winter, and cried out, "*Arctispinae!*"

I expanded my arms out explosively, and as I did, slivers of Winter cold froze the water in the air into hundreds of spines of needle-pointed ice that exploded out from me, into the darkness and beyond. No magic attached itself to the spines of ice once they had been formed—they simply became sharp, hurtling pieces of solid matter. I was betting that whatever power the Genoskwa had to negate the effects of directly applied magic, it still had to follow the laws of magic as I understood them.

The bet paid off. The Genoskwa let out another ear-shattering roar of pain from no more than seven or eight feet away.

I used the sound as a point of reference and whirled my staff in a swooping arc, its green-silver soulfire-infused light driving back the substance of the Fallen angel still trying to compress in upon me. My will gathered more Winter ice around the end of the staff in an irregular globe the size of my head and harder than stone, and I aimed at the source of the sound and cried, "*Forzare!*"

A lance of pure kinetic energy flung the hailstone from the end of my staff and out through the darkness like a cannonball, and it hit something with an enormous and meaty-sounding *thunk* of obdurate ice against muscle-dense flesh. I must have gotten him in the breadbasket, because instead of roaring, the Genoskwa let out a windy, seething sound.

Steel rang on steel again, and I heard workboots pound the marble, coming near me. Michael shouted, "*Omnia vincit amor!*" and the blinding white fire of *Amoracchius* shattered the darkness around me as if it had been a dry and dusty eggshell.

My vision returned. Nicodemus was coming along in Michael's wake, blade in hand, but as *Anduriel* was shattered, he screamed and staggered, falling to one knee and only managed that because he threw out his left arm to support himself.

Not far away, the Genoskwa was rising from where he had fallen. The hailstone I'd conjured had apparently knocked him backward over the marble block in the center of the stage, and one side of his rib cage looked distorted. The creature crouched on three limbs, his leg dragging, and bared his teeth at me in a silent snarl, yellowed tusks showing.

"Enough, Nicodemus!" Michael thundered, and his voice rang from the marble and the riches of the vault. "Enough!"

The sheer volume and force in his voice staggered me. I found myself standing back to back with him so that I could keep the Genoskwa in sight.

"Has today not been enough for you?" Michael said, his voice dropping to something almost like a plea. "In the name of God, man, have your eyes not yet been opened?"

"Michael," I growled, low, between clenched teeth. "What are you doing?"

“My job,” he answered me, just as quietly. “Nicodemus Archleone,” he said, his tone gentle, directed back toward the fallen Denarian. “Look at yourself. Look at your fury. Look at your pain. Look where they have *led* you, man. Your own *child*.”

From where he had fallen, Nicodemus looked up at Michael, and I saw something I had never seen on his face before.

Weariness. Strain. Uncertainty.

“This is what it has taken, Nicodemus,” Michael said quietly. “This journey into the darkness of greed and ambition. You stand amongst untold, unimaginable wealth, and you have lost the only thing that really matters because of them. Because of the lies and the schemes of the Fallen.”

Nicodemus did not move.

Neither did the Genoskwa. But I gathered another hailstone-cannonball onto the end of my staff, just to be sure I was ready if he did.

Michael lowered his sword, the wrathful fire of *Amoracchius* becoming something less fierce, less hot. “It is not too late. Don’t you see what has happened here? What has been arranged, all the pieces that have been moved to bring you to the only place where your eyes might be opened. Where you might have a chance—perhaps your very last chance—to turn aside from the path you have walked for so long. A path that has caused you and those close to you and the world around you nothing but heartache and misery.”

“Is that what you believe this is?” Nicodemus said in a wooden, uninflected tone. “My chance at redemption?”

“It isn’t a matter of belief,” Michael said. “I need look no further than the evidence of my eyes and mind. It’s why I took up the Sword in the first place. To save you, and those like you, who have been used by the Fallen. It’s why I have been given the grace to take up arms again, this very night—in time to offer you a chance.”

“For forgiveness?” Nicodemus spat.

“For hope,” Michael said. “For a new beginning. For peace.” He swallowed and said, “I can’t imagine anything happening to my daughter. No father should have to see his child die.” Michael’s voice stayed steady, quiet, and sincere. “As different as we are, as much separated in time and faith, you are still a human being. You are still my brother. And I am very sorry for your pain. Please. Let me help you.”

Nicodemus shuddered and dropped his eyes.

I blinked several times.

And for a second, I thought Michael was going to pull it off.

Then Nicodemus shook his head and let out a low and quiet laugh. He stood up again, and as he did, his shadow seemed to accrete beneath him, gathering darkness from all around the room and drawing it into a nebulous pool at his feet.

“Choirboy,” he said, contempt in his tone. “You think you know about commitment. About faith. But yours is as a child’s daydream beside mine.”

“Don’t do this,” Michael said, his tone almost pleading. “Please don’t let them win.”

“Let *them* win?” Nicodemus said. “I do not dance to the Fallen’s tune, Knight. We may move together, but I play the music. I set the beat. For nearly two thousand years have I followed my path, through every treacherous bend and twist, through every temptation to turn aside, and after centuries of effort and study and planning and victory, they follow *my* leadership. Not the other way around. Turn aside from my path? I have *blazed* it through ages of humanity, through centuries of war and plague and madness and havoc and devotion. I *am* my path, and it is me. There is no turning aside.”

The shadow at his feet seemed to darken as he spoke, to throb in time with his voice, and I shuddered at the sight, at the pride in his bearing, the clarity in his eyes, and the absolute, serene certainty in his voice.

Lucifer must have looked *exactly* like that, right before things went to Hell.

I was still standing back to back with Michael, and I felt his shoulders slump in disappointment. But there was nothing of remorse or weakness in his voice as his sword swept back up to guard position. “Despite all you have given in their service, you stand alone before *Amoracchius* now. I am truly sorry for your soul, brother—but this time, you will answer for what you have done.”

“Alone,” Nicodemus all but purred. “Do you think I am alone?”

He gave us his hungry shark-smile, and my stomach went into free fall.

Behind the stone block the Genoskwa smiled as well, and that would have been a hideous thing to see if a second set of glowing green eyes hadn’t opened above the cavernous gleam of the Genoskwa’s beady orbs, along with a faintly glowing, swirling sigil in the center of his forehead—and made the sight truly nightmarish. Even as I watched, curling ram’s horns erupted from the Genoskwa’s skull, and the already enormous creature began to swell, growing in mass, his patchy fur thickening, an extra set of limbs swelling out from his sides. Within a heartbeat or three, the shape of a creature like some enormous bear of a forgotten epoch, except for the extra legs, eyes, and the horns, stood where the Genoskwa had been. Tons of it.

“Ursiel,” I breathed. A Fallen angel so powerful that it had taken all three Knights of the Cross together to take him out the last time he’d appeared. And this time he wasn’t powered by the skinny husk of an insane gold miner, either. “Oh, crap.”

“It gets better,” said another voice.

I looked past where Ursiel and the Genoskwa stood, to find Hannah Ascher mounting the steps to the top of the stage. She’d shed her packs, and walking with a lazy, deliberate sensuality, she stretched her arms overhead as she reached the stage, and her clothing just . . . dissolved, like so much smoke, into a clinging, purplish mist that drifted around her in spiraling tendrils—not so much for modesty as for accent, yet for the most part, covering her most delicate parts with the same coyness as a fan dancer’s feathers. She smiled, slowly, and a second set of glowing purple eyes opened above her own, as a glowing sigil, vaguely suggestive of an hourglass appeared on her forehead.

I knew the symbol.

It had been etched in my flesh for years.

“Lasciel,” I whispered.

“Hello, lover,” said a throaty, playful voice that was not quite Hannah Ascher’s own. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”

I leaned my head back to Michael a little and said, “You and I definitely need to have a talk with the Church about what the word ‘safekeeping’ means.”

Michael glanced at me with a faint frown, to let me know that this was not the time.

Lasciel laughed, musically, the sound of it pure pleasure on the ears. “Oh, Harry,” she said. “Did you really think that it’s possible to pick up corruption in a nice clean handkerchief and lock it away in a box? No, of course not. Forces such as we cannot be contained by mortals, my lover. We are a part of you all.”

Michael leaned his head back a little toward me and asked, “Lover?”

I twitched one shoulder in answer and said, “It’s complicated.”

“Oh dear.”

I turned to Lasciel and said, “Hey, Hannah. Take it from someone who knows. You really don’t want to be doing what you’re doing.”

Ascher’s human eyes narrowed. “Oh, sure,” she said, in her own voice. “Because the high road is just so awesome. Wardens of the White Council have been trying to kill me for most of my adult life because when I was seventeen years old I defended myself against three men who tried to rape me.”

“I’m not defending them,” I said. “But you killed people with magic, Hannah. You broke the First Law.”

“Like you haven’t,” she snarled. “You hypocrite.”

“Hey, whoa,” I said. “Hold on there. Me and Lasciel have some history, but even if we’ve been on different sides of the law, you and I don’t have a personal quarrel.”

“The hell we don’t,” she said. “After a few years on the run, I got in with the Fellowship of St. Giles. You remember them, right? Bunch of folks who fought the Red Court? They gave me training, safe places to live. Hell, I lived on the *beach* in Belize for six years. I had a life. Friends. I even fought the good fight.”

“Yay?” I said, trying not to sound as baffled as I felt. “What’s that got to do with me?”

“Everything!” she screamed, and the purple mist around her was suddenly suffused with sullen, glowing flame.

I swallowed, despite myself.

“When you destroyed the Red Court, you killed most of the Fellowship with it. All the half vampires more than a few decades old just *withered* away in front of our eyes. People who had given me trust. Respect. My *friends*.” She shook her head. “And, you arrogant son of a bitch, I’ll bet you never gave them a thought before you did it, did you?”

“If I’d known it was going to happen,” I said, “I’d have done it anyway.” Because if I hadn’t, Maggie wouldn’t have survived the night.

“The world fell apart after that,” Ascher spat. “The finances, the coordination, the communication. I was on the street. If Binder hadn’t found me . . .” She shook her head.

“Yeah, Binder and his Rule Number One,” I said. “He doesn’t know about what you’ve done, does he?”

She narrowed her eyes and her voice became a degree hotter. “Nicodemus and Lasciel and the other Denarians have treated me with *respect*,” she said. “They’ve talked to me. Trusted me. Worked with me. Made me *rich*. When one side treats you like a sad freak and a hunted animal and the other treats you like an equal, it gets really easy to decide where you stand.”

Hard to argue with that. But I tried. “Doesn’t mean you have to run everything exactly the way he wants you to do it,” I said.

She let out a harsh laugh. “But I *do* want to do it,” she said. “I’ve been looking *forward* to it. Every time you looked at me, flirted with me, spoke with me.”

“As have I,” said Lasciel’s voice, from the same mouth. “No one’s ever turned me down before, Harry. Not once. And to think that I *liked* you.”

“We wouldn’t have worked out, babe,” I said.

“Perhaps,” she said. “Perhaps not. In any case, be assured that I may have one of the few accurate perspectives in the universe when I say that ‘Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned.’”

Ah. So that’s what my subconscious had been trying to warn me about. That Lasciel was right there in front of me, and itching for payback.

“Meaning what?” I asked her.

“Meaning that since a whisper in your ear that should have killed you seems to have failed, I intend to skip the subtlety, rip your head apart, and collect our child. She’s far too valuable a resource to be allowed to die with you.”

My eyes widened. “You, uh, you know about that.”

“Child?” Michael said, baffled.

“*Complicated*,” I said through clenched teeth.

Well. At least now I knew which side Ascher was taking.

“I’d tell you to give me the knife, Dresden,” Nicodemus said, still smiling. “But unlike your friend, I don’t do second chances. And you won’t have any need for it in a moment.”

Ursiel made a sound that I normally only associate with tractor-trailer rigs, and which might have been a hungry growl. Then he stepped over the four-foot block with no particular difficulty and padded in near silence to my left. Lasciel took up station a bit to my right, with Nicodemus making the third point of a lopsided triangle surrounding us.

This day was going bad a little more rapidly than I had anticipated. It had, in fact, sprayed gravel on the windshield of my worst-case scenario as it went rocketing past.

And then footsteps sounded, and Grey sauntered into the amphitheater, casually carrying Anna Valmont's pack over one shoulder.

There was blood on it, and on Grey's fingers.

"Ah, Grey," Nicodemus said. He was enjoying getting a little of his own back after the theater I'd thrown into his face. "And?"

"Valmont's dead, as ordered," Grey said calmly. He surveyed the scene on the stage as he approached, his eyes lingering on Lasciel appreciatively. "We about done here?"

"A few final details to tie up," Nicodemus said. "Have you considered my offer?"

"The Coin thing?" Grey asked. He shrugged and glanced at Lasciel again. "It's got possibilities. I've got questions. Let's finish the job and talk about them over dinner."

"Excellent," Nicodemus said. "Would you mind?"

I tracked Grey, staring hard at him as he took up position at the fourth corner of the square centered on me and Michael, watching him as he set the pack of diamonds and artifacts to one side and cracked his knuckles, smiling.

"I never pretended to be anything but a villain," he said to me, as if baffled by my glare. "Should have seen this one coming, wizard."

"You really killed her?" I asked.

"No particular reason not to. It was quick."

"You are a treacherous son of a bitch," I said.

He rolled his eyes. "Maybe you should have been the one to hire me, then."

His response made me grind my teeth.

There weren't going to be any temptations offered this time, no bargains to think twice about, and no cavalry was about to ride over the horizon. Nicodemus meant to kill us.

Michael and I could not win this fight.

I heard him take a deep breath and murmur a low, steady prayer. He set his feet and raised his sword to the high guard.

I gripped my staff mostly in my right hand, holding it across my body with a few fingers of my damaged left arm, and called forth my will and Winter, readying for a hopeless battle.

Lasciel turned her hands palms up, and searing points of violet light appeared in them. Waves of heat shimmered around Hannah Ascher's body.

Anduriel seethed up around Nicodemus like a dark cloak made from a breaking wave, foaming around the slender man as he raised his sword and started forward.

Ursiel let out a subsonic rumble that shook my chest, and the Genoskwa's beady eyes stared hate from the face of the prehistoric demon-bear.

Grey tensed and crouched slightly, his bland features relaxed and amused.

And I stopped being able to fight back the maniac's grin that had been struggling to get loose as I played my hole card and said, "Game over, man. Game over."

Chapter Forty-four

A good con doesn't just happen.

It's all about the setup.

Let's rewind.

Set the Wayback Machine for three mornings ago, just after walking out of that first meeting with Nicodemus and Deirdre at the Hard Rock, while riding away in the limo with Mab.

I told her who I wanted to see.

For a moment, she didn't react. Her eyes were locked somewhere beyond the roof of the limo, her head tracking slowly, as if she could still see Nicodemus and Deirdre in their suite. There was no expression on her face, absolutely none—but the interior of the car had dropped several degrees in temperature, purely from the intensity of whatever she wasn't showing.

"You grow in wisdom, my Knight," she said a moment later, turning her head back to face the front. "Slowly, perhaps, but you grow. He is the logical person to consult in this matter. I have already arranged a meeting."

"Oh," I said, and idly fingered the earring, unused to the sensation of something metallic there. "Good."

"Stop playing with that," Mab said. "The less attention you draw to it, the better."

I scowled and futzed with it a little more, just to show her that I could, but she was right. As things stood, it might be seen as a simple fashion statement. If Nicodemus realized that by taking the earring away, he could all but incapacitate me, things could go downhill rapidly once we finally came to grips.

So I dropped my hands and schooled myself mentally the rest of the way to the meeting, focusing on accepting the new sensation and dismissing it from my thoughts entirely.

I started playing with it again as the limo stopped, and Mab sighed.

McAnally's pub is the best of the watering holes in Chicago that serve the supernatural community. It's a basement bar, like Cheers, but there the resemblance ends. It's all decorated in stained and polished wood, with clunky electric ceiling fans from the thirties whirling lazily overhead. The ceiling isn't very high, so they whirl away just a few inches over my head, and I remind myself not to do the bunny hop every time I come through the door.

Normally, Mac's does a brisk trade, but today there was a sign on the door that read: CLOSED FOR PRIVATE PARTY. A second sign hung inside the door, a wooden one, into which the words ACCORDED NEUTRAL TERRITORY had been neatly burned. It meant that the establishment was officially neutral ground under the guidelines of the Unseelie Accords, what amounted to the Geneva Convention of the supernatural world. Mab had written the Accords, and their signatories defied them at peril of the antipathy of the supernatural establishment and, worse, her personal displeasure.

One corner of the sign was scorched and cracked, which had happened in a battle with Outsiders, who weren't very civic-minded.

Mac, bald, lean, and silent, stood behind the bar in his usual crisp white shirt and spotless apron. When Mab entered, he put down the rag he was using to polish the wooden bar, and bowed at the waist, somehow giving the gesture an accent of courtesy rather than obeisance.

"Barkeep," Mab replied, and inclined her head considerably more deeply than she had to Nicodemus a few minutes before. "May your patrons be prosperous and honest."

Mac, as a rule, rarely uttered multi-syllables. Today, he said, "May your scales always return to balance."

Her mouth quirked at the corner and she said, "Flatterer."

He smiled and nodded to me. "Harry."

“Mac. I haven’t had good food in months. Though, uh, I’m a little short on funds. I will gladly pay you Tuesday for a sandwich and a beer today.”

He nodded.

“Thanks.”

Mab turned to the table nearest the door and gave me a look. It took me a beat to realize what she wanted, and to pull out a chair for her. She sniffed and sat down, folded her hands in her lap, and stared at nothing in particular, dismissing the rest of us from her world as thoroughly as if she had entered a locked room.

My contact was waiting for me at a table in the back corner, and I walked over to join him. He was a big man by every definition of the word, tall and strong and solid, with a barrel for a chest and a smaller keg of a belly to go with it. His hair and beard were white and silver, though the rosy smoothness of his cheeks belied any indication of old age, and his eyes were blue and bright. He wore a chain-mail shirt and hunting leathers, and a long, hooded red coat trimmed in white fur hung from the back of the chair beside him. A simple, worn-looking broadsword hung at his side, and a large, lumpy leather sack sat on the floor beside him, as natural there as a mail carrier with his bag.

“Sir Knight,” he said.

“You’re here as Kringle, seriously?” I asked him.

Kringle winked at me. “The Winter Knight called for me in his official capacity as an agent of the Winter Court. Mab has the right to summon Kringle. If she’d called for Vadderung, I’d have told her to get in line.”

Donar Vadderung was the name of the CEO of Monoc Securities, a corporate security interest that provided information and highly skilled specialists to those with a great deal of money. Vadderung had access to more information than anyone I knew, except maybe the Senior Council of the White Council of Wizardry—only he was a hell of a lot smarter about using it. He was also, I was reasonably certain, *Odin*. The Odin. Or if he wasn’t, he could do an awfully good impersonation. Oh, and also, he was Santa Claus.

Vadderung is a complicated guy.

“But you and Kringle are the same person,” I said.

“Legally speaking, Kringle and Vadderung are two entirely different people who simply happen to reside in the same body,” he replied.

“That’s just a fiction,” I said, “a little game of protocol.”

“Little games of protocol are how one shows respect, especially to those with whom one does not get along famously well. It can be tedious, but generally is less trouble than a duel would be.”

Mac set a couple of his homebrewed beers down on the bar. I rounded them up and returned to the table, putting both bottles out in the middle. Kringle chose one, nodded to the chair across from him, and I sat.

“To start with, I’m going to assume you know everything I do,” I said.

His eyes wrinkled at the corners as he took a drink. “That seems wise.”

I nodded and sipped my own. Wow. Mac’s beer is an excellent argument that there is a God, and that furthermore, He wants us to be happy. I savored it for a couple of seconds and then wrenched my mind back to business. “I want to float some thoughts at you and see if you think they’re sound.”

“By all means.”

“First,” I said, “Nicodemus is after something powerful. I don’t know what it is, but I do know that if I can get him to *tell* us what he’s after, it’s going to be a lie. He’d never let anyone know his true goal if he could help it.”

“I concur,” Kringle said.

I nodded. “He’ll assemble a crew. Some of them will be his people, and some of them will be outside specialists, but I’m pretty sure at least one of them is going to be a plant—they’ll look all

independent but they'll have one of those Coins on them and one of the Fallen whispering in their ears."

"I would consider that a high probability," Kringle said.

"Third," I said, "he's going to betray me at some point along the line. He's proactive, and obsessed with control, so he'll be the one who wants to stick the knife in first. He knows the limits Mab has placed on me, so he'll want to do it after I've gotten him to wherever he wants to go, but before we finish the job, to guarantee him the first blow."

"Also sound reasoning," Kringle said.

"Dammit," I said. "I had hoped I was wrong about something. If I'm to follow Mab's rules, my options are limited."

Kringle's eyes went to the slender figure at the table by the door. "May I offer you a word of advice, based purely upon my knowledge of the Queen's nature?"

"Sure."

"Mab moves in mysterious ways," he said, looking back at me with a grin. "Nasty, unexpected, devious, patient, and mysterious ways. I don't think she'd throw away a piece as valuable as you on a lost cause. Look for an opening, a weakness. It will be there."

"Have you seen this guy in action?" I asked. "Nicodemus Archleone is . . . He's better than me. Smart, dangerous, ruthless, and experienced. All by himself, he'd be bad enough. I've never even seen him go to his bench. All the other Denarians whip out their Fallen buddies left and right, but Nicodemus, as far as I can tell, mostly uses his to chauffeur him around. I've got no idea what Anduriel can do, because Nick has never had to fall back on him."

"Perhaps that's because Nicodemus understands just as well as you do where true power comes from," Kringle said.

I arched an eyebrow at that. "Knowledge," I said. I thought about it, putting pieces together. "Wait. You're telling me that he doesn't use Anduriel in fights because Anduriel isn't a fighter."

"Any of the Fallen are absolutely deadly in battle," Kringle said severely, "even hampered as they are. But the Master of Shadows doesn't prefer to operate that way, no."

Nicodemus's control over the gang of superpowered lunatics was starting to make more sense now. "Master of Shadows. That's an old, old phrase for a spy master."

"Exactly," Kringle said. "Nicodemus knows very nearly as much as I do. Anduriel has the potential to hear anything uttered within reach of any living being's shadow, and sometimes to look out from it and see."

My eyes widened and I looked down at my own shadow on the table.

"No," Kringle said. "That's why Mab remains here, to secure this conversation against Anduriel. But you must exercise extreme discretion for the duration of this scenario. There are places Anduriel cannot reach—your friend Carpenter's home, for example, or your island, now that you have awakened it. And the Fallen must know to pay attention to a given shadow, or else it's all just a haze of background noise—but you can safely assume that Anduriel will be listening very carefully to your shadow during this entire operation. Anything you say, Nicodemus will know. Even writing something down could be compromised."

"Hell's bells," I said. If that was the case, communicating with my friends would just get them set up for a trap. Man, no wonder Nicodemus was always a few steps ahead of everyone else. "I'm . . . going to have to play the cards really damned close to my chest, then."

"If I were you, I'd hold them about three inches behind my sternum, just to be sure," Kringle said.

I swigged beer and drummed my fingers on the table. "Yeah," I said. "Okay. Good to know. But it's not enough. I need another advantage."

"I never find having too many advantages any particular burden."

"What would be perfect is a plant of my own," I said. "Someone Nicodemus doesn't see coming. But to work that angle, I'd have to know who he was getting together, someone he already planned to have in place."

Kringle took on the air of a professor prompting a stumbling protégé. “How could you work with this theoretical person, without the ability to speak with him, to coordinate your efforts?”

“Hide it in plain sight,” I said, “disguised as something else. Code.”

“Interesting. Go on.”

“Uh . . .,” I said. “He’d be taking his cues from me, so mostly he’d be the one asking me questions. Tell him to refer to me as ‘wizard’ just before he asks a question relating to the situation at hand. The first word of my response would be the answer. Then we could make the actual conversation sound like something else entirely. We play along until it’s time for me to make my move. Then I use the phrase ‘game over’ and we hit them.”

Kringle took a pull of his beer. “Not bad. Not perfect, but then, it never is.” He set his bottle aside and reached down into the sack by his foot. He rummaged for a moment and then produced a large envelope, which he offered to me.

I regarded it carefully. Gifts have an awful lot of baggage attached to them among the Fae, and both Kringle and I were members of the Winter Court. “I didn’t get you anything,” I said.

He waved his other hand negligently. “Consider it a belated holiday gift, free of obligation. That island is a tough delivery.”

“Prove it,” I said. “Say ‘ho, ho, ho.’”

“Ho, ho, ho,” he replied genially.

I grinned and took the envelope. I opened it and found a photo and a brief description inside.

“Who is this?”

“A covert operative, a mercenary,” Kringle replied. “One of the best.”

“I’ve never heard of him.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Because he’s covert?”

I bobbed my head a bit in admission of the point. “Why am I looking at his picture?”

“There are four operatives who could play one role Nicodemus needs filled in this venture,” he said. “Two of them are currently under contract elsewhere, and the third is presently detained. That leaves Nicodemus only one option, and I know he won’t exercise it until the last possible moment—and he’s not far away.”

“You think if I get to him first, I can hire him?”

“If I make the introduction and we establish your communication protocol under Mab’s aegis? Yes.”

“But if he’s a mercenary, he can by definition be bought. What’s to stop Nicodemus from outbidding me?”

Kringle sat back in his seat at that, considering the question. Then he said, “If you buy this man, he stays bought. It’s who he is.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You’re asking me to trust a stranger’s professional integrity?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Kringle said. “I’m asking you to trust mine.”

I exhaled, slowly. I took a long pull of beer.

“Well, hell,” I said. “What’s the world coming to if you can’t trust Santa Claus?” I leaned forward, peering at the printed summary and said, “So let’s meet with Goodman Grey.”

Chapter Forty-five

I hadn't quite finished the "r" sound in "game over" before Grey had crossed forty feet of intervening space and was on top of Ursiel and the Genoskwa.

One second, Grey was standing there, looking smug and anticipatory. The next, there was a blur in the air and then a *creature* was clawing its way up Ursiel's back. It was about the size and vaguely the shape of a gorilla, but the head on its shoulders might have belonged to some kind of hideous werewolf-bulldog hybrid, and grotesquely elongated claws tipped its hands. Its weird golden eyes were Grey's. Before Ursiel could realize that he was under attack, the Grey-creature was astride its ursine back, fangs sinking into the huge hump of muscle there, oversized jaws locked into place. The huge bear-thing reared up onto its hind legs, only for Grey to reach around to its head with gorilla-length arms and sink nine-inch claws like daggers into its eyes.

Ursiel and the Genoskwa let out an ear-tearing roar of agony.

I whirled the heavy end of my staff toward Nicodemus and snarled, "*Forzare!*" The hailstone flew at him like a bullet, but though the shock of Grey's betrayal was still evident on his face, Nicodemus's superb reflexes were still in fine operating order, and he dropped into a lateral roll, dodging the missile.

Michael shouted, "Harry!" and hauled me to one side an instant before an orb of absolutely searing white heat appeared precisely where my head had been. The blast coming off of it was so intense that it singed the hair on that side of my head. I turned my head to see Ascher and Lasciel lifting her other hand, preparing to hurl a second sphere at me.

"You get Nick," I panted.

"Seems fair," Michael said.

In the background, Ursiel continued to roar and thrash. I couldn't see how it was going for Grey, but Ursiel crashed off of the stage and into a display featuring at least a dozen statues of various saints and holy figures, reducing them to rubble and scattering fabulously valuable gems in every direction.

The second sphere came flying at me and I countered by lifting my staff and shouting, "*Defendarius!*" A broad wall of force shimmered into being in front of me, and the sphere smashed against it and exploded into a cloud of flame that spread out along its length and breadth, as if seeking a way around it. The heat was viciously intense, and enough of it would have burned through the shield—but it was a question of volume. Ascher had struck at me with pinpoint precision and intensity. I'd countered her with raw power, using a shield big enough to spread the heat over a wide enough area to keep it from burning through.

Ascher let out a snarl of frustration and hurled another sphere. Her thinking was obvious—if she could keep pouring fire onto me and force me to hold up shield after shield against it, eventually she could either burn through it or exhaust my ability to keep holding it up. I'd have taken that fight against a lot of practitioners: There are relatively few wizards on the White Council who can stay with me in terms of pure magical horsepower. But while there are plenty of wizards who could wear themselves out pounding on my shields, I had a pretty solid intuition that Ascher could keep throwing fire until I was a gasping heap on the ground, especially with Lasciel's knowledge and experience backing her up. Worse, Lasciel knew me, inside and out.

Or at least, she had *known* me. So it was time to use a few tricks I'd developed since we'd parted ways.

In the past, I'd worn rings designed to store a little excess kinetic energy every time I moved my arm. Then I could let loose the saved energy all in one place to pretty devastating effect when I

really needed to do it. I hadn't had the resources I needed to make new rings, but I'd carved the same spell in my new wizard's staff.

Seventy-seven times.

It wasn't as handy as my layered rings had been—instead of being broken up into multiple units, the energy of the spell was all stored in one reservoir, so I only had the one shot.

But it was a doozy.

So as another white-hot sphere splashed into flame against my shield, I whirled the butt end of the staff where the energy storage spells were carved toward Ascher, focused my concentration on the shield, braced my feet, and shouted, "*Arietius!*"

The staff bucked in my hands like a living thing and shoved my shoes several inches across the floor as the stored energy unleashed itself and drove into the rear of my shield. For a second, I worried about the staff shattering—I had never tried it with this much stored energy before, and there was always the chance that I had exceeded the design tolerance of the spell at some point. If I had, I would be the center of my own spectacular and splintery explosion. But my work was good and the staff functioned perfectly. I held the structure of the shield together and let the energy from the staff drive it forward, toward Ascher, and suddenly a large, obdurate, and extremely solid invisible wall was rushing at her like an oncoming freight train, shedding a trail of fire in its wake.

I had never lowered the shield, and my actions had been obscured by all the fire chewing away at it—so Ascher recognized the danger a second too late, and that was where her inexperience showed. She might have real power and a gift with fire, but in a fight there's no time to think your way through spells and counterspells. Either you've done your homework or you haven't, and despite the advantage of having Lasciel in her corner, Ascher wasn't ready for something like this. She was focused entirely on offense, not on protecting herself as well, and couldn't come up with a counter in time.

The wall hit her with about the same force as an oncoming garbage truck, and blew her right out of the veil of purple mist that clung to her naked form. She flew back off the stage in a windmill of flailing limbs, and crashed into a display of particularly fine ecclesiastical robes and garments, most of which burst into flame as the sheath of shimmering heat around her body brushed against them.

As that happened, the light in the great vault changed. The fire in the hands of the two triple statues flared into large, dangerous-looking scarlet bonfires, painting everything in shades of sudden blood. I shot a glance up at the statues, and their *mouths* were moving. No voices were coming out, but the damned things were *talking* and a raw instinct told me what had happened. The wanton destruction of part of the collection had set off some kind of alarm.

And we were all standing, more or less, in one enormous prison for the shades of the dead.

Michael and Nicodemus, meanwhile, were engaged in a furious exchange of blows. *Amoracchius* glowed like a beacon, and its humming power filled the air. Nicodemus's shadow danced and threatened and obscured his form as he moved like some oily and poisonous liquid, sword flickering—but I had seen all of that before.

I had never seen Michael going all out.

Michael was a big guy, built broad and strong, and the contrast between him and Nicodemus was striking. There's an old truism in fighting that says a good big man will beat a good small man. The advantage gained from having superior height, reach, and greater physical mass and power is undeniable, and for the first time, I saw Michael using it all.

Blow after blow rained down on Nicodemus, a furious attack, and the smaller man had no choice but to give way before the assault, driven step by step backward before the onslaught of the Knight of the Sword. His lighter blade managed to flick out once, then twice, but each time Michael twisted his body to catch the blow on his mail, trusting the armor Charity had forged for him to protect him—and it did. He kept coming forward, and none of his blows was aimed to

wound or incapacitate. *Amoracchius* swept down at Nicodemus's head, his throat, his belly, his heart, and any one of the strikes could have delivered a mortal wound.

I flicked a glance toward where Ascher was, for all I knew, on fire. I thought about going over and making sure she stayed down and it made me feel sick enough that I decided I wasn't quite that far gone yet. Besides, dangerous as she was, she didn't hold a candle to Nicodemus. Michael had him on the ropes. This was our chance to put that monster away.

Michael drove Nicodemus to the edge of the stage, until the Denarian had to twist with a snarl and dive off to the ground below. He tucked into a roll and came back up again, neat as an acrobat.

And I tagged him with another hailstone before he could turn around and see it coming.

I hadn't had time to get together as much ice as I'd used on the first two, but the hailstone that hit him was the size of a very large apple and moving considerably faster than a major-league fastball. It didn't break when it hit. Nicodemus did. There was a wet thump of impact when it hit him in the left side, below the ribs, and he went up onto his toes in reaction, his body drawing to one side in a bow of pain. Then he staggered to one side and fell to a knee.

Michael took two steps and leapt from the stage, Sword grasped over his head, and brought it down on Nicodemus like a headsman's ax. No demonic power or Fallen angel could save Nicodemus from that blow, delivered by that man, with that Sword.

Nick saved himself with pure nerve.

As *Amoracchius* swept down, Nicodemus, his face twisted in pain, lifted not his sword to block Michael's—but the Holy Grail.

Michael let out a cry and twisted at the hips, pulling his blade to one side, and the blow swept past Nicodemus without touching him. Michael landed off-balance and fell into a heavy roll. From the ground, Nicodemus thrust his slender blade at Michael's back, and sank the tip into the back of one of his thighs. Michael cried out in pain, and came up to his feet heavily, favoring his wounded leg.

Nicodemus rose, his dark eyes glittering, holding his left arm in close to his ribs, where the hailstone had hit him, favoring that side, and moving stiffly. He turned to make sure he could see both me and Michael, and had visible trouble shifting his weight. He was hurt.

But not nearly hurt enough to suit me.

I called another hailstone to my staff. I raised it and aimed.

Nicodemus lifted the Grail again, a small smile on his face as he held it between me and him as a hostage. "Careful, Dresden," he said. "Are you willing to accept such a loss?"

"Yep," I said, and snarled, "*Forzare!*" again, sending another hailstone at him.

Nicodemus's eyes widened, but he turned his body to shield the Grail, and the hailstone struck him in the right shoulder blade. He let out another breathless cry—and then sudden blackness engulfed him and a tide of shadow swept him away.

"Michael," I said, and hurried to my friend's side.

Michael's eyes were busy, roaming left and right, looking for Nicodemus. He turned so that I could see the wound. It was a thrust, narrow but deep. There wasn't an inordinate amount of blood staining the leg of his jeans, and I didn't think it had gone into the artery.

"What happened there?" I asked. "Is he gone?"

"I'm . . . I'm not sure . . .," Michael said. "I've never seen him forced to run before."

"We should finish him."

"Agreed," Michael said. "How? He just flew away."

"Gimme a minute," I said, and felt myself baring my teeth in a grin. "How does the leg feel?"

"I've had worse," Michael said, his voice strained. He shifted his weight, testing the leg, and made a hissing sound—but it supported his weight. "Only a flesh wound."

"Yeah," I said. "'Tis but a scratch. Come on, ya pansy."

He blinked and looked at me. "Pansy?"

"Oh," I said. "You weren't quoting the movie. Sorry."

“Movie?”

“*Holy Grail?*”

“Nicodemus still has it.”

I sighed. “Never mind.”

From the other side of the amphitheater, there was a roar of collapsing stone, and I looked up in time to see a couple of sets of Corinthian columns falling, to the accompaniment of Ursiel’s furious roars.

“So,” Michael said, “to be clear, Grey is on our side?”

“Yeah. I hired him before this started.”

“But he killed Miss Valmont!”

“No, he didn’t,” I said. “He lied to Nicodemus. She must be outside the vault somewhere, waiting for us.”

Michael looked nonplussed. “Oh. Still. I don’t care for the man.”

“Hey, we’re alive right now.”

“True,” he said. He drew a deep breath. “And if he’s kept faith with you, we should help him.”

Just then, Ursiel went up on its hind legs. Grey was still in that same monstrous form, and still hanging on. The Genoskwa’s physical eyes were a bloody ruin, but Ursiel’s glowing green orbs were furious and bright. The giant bear-thing roared, a sound guaranteed to haunt my nightmares, should I live long enough to have any, and toppled over backward, into another Corinthian column, attempting to smash Grey upon it. They went down with another huge crash and a spray of glittering gems. The sound of the impact was . . . just freaking *huge*. The kind of noise you associate with the demolition of buildings, not with a brawl.

I swallowed. “Yeah. I guess we sh . . .”

I paused, as cold that had nothing to do with the movement of molecules crawled up my spine.

I knew the feeling. I’d gotten the sensation before, when surrounded by hostile specters, back when I’d been mostly dead. It was a creepy, thoroughly nasty sensation that gathered around them like body heat.

Which might not be a big deal in the physical world. Specters often could not interact with the material realm, or could do so only in specific and limited ways. But we weren’t in the physical world. This was the Nevernever, the Underworld, and down here spiritual forms would be every bit as real and as deadly as physical foes—actually, much more so.

In fact, given how many truly horrible monsters the various Greek heroes had slain, Hades might have a very, very nasty crew of guardians indeed. The guy might, in fact, be the only one in the universe who could actually give the order “Release the kraken.” But why would they be coming toward us? I mean, the guy had wished me well. Sure, he hadn’t interfered, but . . .

I looked up at the moving lips on the statues and winced. “Oh, crap.”

“What?” Michael asked.

“I think we’ve tripped some kind of automatic fail-safe,” I said. “I think there’s a load of dangerous spirits on their way toward us right now.”

“Then we should leave.”

“Posthaste. Let’s go get Grey and boogie.”

We both turned and started moving toward Grey—Michael’s best speed was a trot—but I hadn’t gotten a dozen steps before a cry of pure fury rose up behind me.

“Dresden!” howled Lasciel through Ascher’s mouth. I looked back to see a form rising up from the small inferno consuming the garment display, violet glowing eyes blazing. She planted her feet and seemed to inhale—and the flames all around her suddenly burned low, and blazed the same ugly shade of purple as her eyes. The smell of brimstone filled the air.

“Oh, *crap*,” I breathed.

And then a lance of pure Hellfire roared toward me.

Chapter Forty-six

There was no time to think. I ran on instinct.

I couldn't shield a blast of flame infused with Hellfire, the demonic version of soulfire. Hellfire enormously increased the destructive potential of magic. When Lasciel's shadow had been inside me, I'd used it. If I'd had my last shield bracelet, I might have parried most of it, but even that wouldn't have been enough to stop it cold.

Couldn't counter it with Winter. If I flung ice out to stop the fire, they would form steam, and the Hellfire would flow right into *that*, and continue on its way. Same result, only I'd be steam-cooked instead of roasted.

Once or twice in my life, I'd been able to open a Way in front of me, fast enough to divert an incoming attack away from me, into the Nevernever or out into somewhere else in the mortal world. But from here, in the secured vault, there was no way I was going to be able to open a Way—not until I got back out beyond the first gate again.

Fire was hard enough to deal with. Infuse it with Hellfire and it was almost unstoppable.

So I didn't even try to stop it.

Instead, I redirected it.

As the strike hurtled toward me, I lifted my staff in my right hand, whirling it back and forth in front of my body in a figure-eight spin and sent my will racing out through the staff, infused with soulfire to counter the Fallen angel's Hellfire, shouting, "*Ventas cyclis!*"

A howling, whirling torrent of wind whipped out of my staff, spiraling tightly in on itself as the Hellfire reached it. There was a flash of light, a thunderous detonation, and the sharp scent of ozone as the two diametrically opposed energies met and warred. The spinning vortex of wind caught the violet fire and bent it up toward the distant ceiling of the vault, slewing back and forth, a gushing geyser of unearthly flame.

The effort to control that wind was tremendous, but even though the fire came within a few feet, the rush of air moving away from me prevented the thermal bloom from cooking me where I stood. My defense carried the entire power of the strike to the roof of the cavern, where it splashed and danced and rolled out in vast circular waves.

It was actually damned beautiful.

Ascher let out a short snarl of frustration as the last of the strike flashed upward. I released the wind spell but kept my staff spinning slowly, ready to counter a second time if I had to do it. Ascher had plenty of anger still raging in her, and she drew on it to gather more fire into her hands.

"Don't do it, Hannah," I called. "You aren't going to beat me. You haven't got what you need."

"You cocky son of a bitch," she said. "I've got everything I need to handle *you*, Warden. God, I was a fool to think you were any different than the rest of them."

"Here's the difference," I said. "Back down. Walk away. I'll let you."

She actually let out a brief, incredulous laugh. "There is no *end* to the ego of the White Council, is there?" she asked. "You think you can pick and choose who is going to live and die. Decide all the rules that everyone else is going to live by."

"The rules are there for a *reason*, Hannah," I said. "And somewhere deep down, you know that. But this isn't about the Laws of Magic or the White Council. It's about you and me and whether or not you walk out of this vault alive." I tried to soften my voice, to sound less frightened and angry. "That thing inside you is pushing your emotions. Manipulating you. She can show you illusions so real that you can't tell the difference without resorting to your Sight. Did she tell you that?"

Ascher stared at me without saying anything. I wasn't sure she'd heard me.

Hell. If Lasciel was inside Ascher's head, twisting her perceptions with illusion right now, she might *not* have heard me.

"You can't have had her Coin for long. A couple of weeks? A month? Am I right?"

"Don't pretend you know me," she spat.

"You're right," I said. "I don't know you. But I know Lasciel. I had that Coin once upon a time. I had her inside my head for *years*. I know what she's like, the way she can twist things."

"She doesn't," Ascher said. "Not with me. She's given me power, knowledge. She's taught me more about magic in the last few weeks than any wizard did in my whole lifetime."

I shook my head. "Fire magic is all about passion, Hannah. And I know you must have a lot of rage built up. But you've got to think your way past that. She hasn't made you stronger. She's just built up your anger to fuel your fire. Nothing comes free."

Ascher let out a bitter laugh. "You're scared, Dresden. Admit it. I've got access to power that makes me dangerous and you're afraid of what I can do."

And, right there, she showed me the fundamental difference between us.

I loved magic for its own sake. She didn't.

The Art can be a lot of work, and it can sometimes be tedious, and sometimes even painful, but at the end of the day, I love it. I love the focus of it, the discipline, the balance. I love working with the energy and exploring what can be done with it. I love the gathering tension of a spell, and the almost painful clarity of focus required to concentrate that tension into an effect. I love the practice of it as well as the theory, the research, experimenting with new spells, teaching others about magic. I love laying down spells on my various pieces of magical gear, and most of all, I love it when I can use my talents to make a difference in the world, even when it's only a small one.

Ascher . . . enjoyed blowing stuff up and burning things down. She was good at it. But she didn't love her talent for the miracle it was.

She merely loved what she could do with it.

And that had led her here, to a place where she had tremendous power, but not the right frame of mind to understand the consequences and permutations of using it—or at least not where she needed it, deep in her bones. To wield power like she currently possessed, she needed to understand it on the level of gut instinct, having assimilated the Art so entirely that the whole reality of using it came to her without conscious thought.

It was why virtually every time she'd used magic in the past few days, it had been to destroy something, or else to protect her own hide from the immediate consequences of her own power. It was why she hadn't put in the practice she needed to go up against someone with a broad range of skills. It was why she had focused exclusively on attacking me, to the neglect of her own defenses a few moments before. It was why she'd said yes to the Fallen angel who was now driving her emotions berserk.

And it was also why she hadn't thought through the consequences of unleashing that much elemental destruction in a large but ultimately enclosed area.

Ascher had talent, but she hadn't had the training, the practice, or the mind-set she needed to beat a pro.

"I'm scared," I told her. "I'm scared for you. You've had a bad road, Hannah, and I'm sorry as hell it's happened to you. Please, just walk. Please."

Her eyes narrowed, her face reddened, and she said, words clipped, "Condescending bastard. Save your pity for yourself."

And then with a cry she sent another lance of Hellfire at me, redoubled in strength.

Again, I caught it with a conjured cyclone infused with soulfire, though the effort was even more tremendous. Again I sent it spiraling up toward the ceiling—but this time I sent it all to one spot.

Even before the last of the Hellfire had smashed into the ceiling, I dropped to one knee, lifted my staff, and extended the strongest shield I could project, putting it between me and Ascher. It was a calculated bit of distraction on my part, giving her something she wasn't psychologically equipped to ignore.

She screamed at me, her eyes furious, gathering more fire in her hands, seeing only a passive target, weakened and fallen to one knee, one she could smash to bits with a third and final strike—but I saw Lasciel's glowing eyes widen in sudden dismay and understanding as the Fallen reached her own comprehension of consequences a few portions of a second too late to do any good.

An instant later, several hundred tons of molten and red-hot rock, chewed from the earth above us by Ascher's own Hellfire-infused strike, came crashing down on top of her.

The noise was terrible. The destruction was appalling. Glowing hot stones bounced from my shield and then began to pile up against it, pushing at me and physically forcing me back across the ground. The pileup shoved me a good twenty feet across the amphitheater floor, with Michael hobbling frantically along a couple of feet ahead of me, crouching to take advantage of the protection of my shield.

After a few seconds, the falling stone became less violent and random, and I dropped my shield with a gasp of effort. I stayed right where I was, down on one knee, and bent forward at the waist, struggling to catch my breath, exhausted from the efforts of the past few moments. The vault was spinning around and around, too. When had it started doing that?

The air had gone thick with dust and heat and the smell of brimstone. Half of the freaking amphitheater had been buried by fallen stone. One of the enormous statues was covered to the thighs.

And Hannah Ascher and Lasciel were gone.

A few last stones fell, clattering over the mess, bouncing. I noted, dimly, that their arches didn't look the way they should have. Gravity was indeed something heavier here than in the physical world. It was so heavy, in fact, that I thought I might just close my eyes and stay on the floor.

"Harry," Michael breathed.

"Sorry about that, Hannah," I heard myself mutter. "I'm sorry."

Michael put his hand on my shoulder. "Harry? Are you all right?"

I shook my head, and gestured weakly at the fallen rock with one hand. "Hell's bells, Michael. That wasn't even a fight. It was just murder. She wasn't a monster. She just made a bad call. She let that thing inside her and . . . it just pushed her buttons. Drove her."

"It's what they do," Michael said quietly.

"Could have been me over there . . . There but for the grace of God goes Harry Dresden."

Michael limped around to stand in front of me, slapped me lightly on the cheek, and said, "We don't have time for this. Reflect later. We'll talk about it later. Get up."

The blow didn't hurt, but it did startle me a little, and make me shake my head. The immediate exhaustion of slinging that much power around began to fade, and I shrugged off the lethargy that went with it. The ugly, prickling cold was still coming closer.

"Harry," Michael said, "are you with me?"

"Headache," I muttered. And then I realized what that meant. Mab's earring burned like a tiny frozen star in my ear, and my head was beginning to pound anyway.

I was running out of time. And unless I could get everyone back to the first gate and open the Way back to Chicago, it was running out for everyone else as well. I planted my staff and pushed myself to my feet. I felt creaky and heavy and tired and I couldn't afford to let that matter.

Everything snapped back into focus, and I swiped at something hot and wet in my eyes. "Okay," I said. "Okay. Let's get Grey and get the hell out of here."

Just then, something that looked vague and lean, and had huge batlike wings, streaked through the air toward us from the far side of the amphitheater. One of its wings faltered, and it tumbled out of the air, hit the marble floor, and started bouncing. The form rolled several times, and when

it stopped, Grey was lying there looking dazed. The lower half of his face, as well as his hands and forearms were soaked with scarlet blood.

"Michael," I said.

We moved together, getting Grey onto his feet between us, and started back toward the entrance to the vault, skirting the hellish heat coming off of the rubble. "Grey," I said, "what happened?"

"He got smart and shifted down," Grey said. "My jaws slipped. But something got in his eyes, and I disengaged before he could reverse the hold on me."

From somewhere behind us came the Genoskwa's furious roar and the crash of another column falling. Then another roar, pained, that grew deeper in register as the Genoskwa assumed Ursiel's demonform again and rose up onto his hind legs, coming into sight of us. Doing so put his head damned near twenty feet off the ground, and though we were most of the way up the amphitheater stairs, Ursiel's glowing eyes and the Genoskwa's ruined and bloody eye sockets were level with my own. The demon-bear opened his jaws and roared in fury.

"He looks pissed," I squeaked.

"Certainly hope so," Grey said, slurring the words a little. He was only barely supporting his own weight, and his eyes still looked vague. "Gimme sec, be fine."

Ursiel dropped back down to all sixes and started toward us. He was limping on the leg Michael had cut, but it wasn't just flopping loosely the way it should have been. Hell's bells, he recovered fast.

"Valmont," I said to Grey. "Where is she?"

"Sent her back to the first gate," Grey said, "with your magic artif . . . art . . . toys."

"That's it," I said to Michael. "You're hurt. Grey's scrambled. Get him back to the first gate and do it as fast as you can."

Michael clenched his jaws. "You can't fight Ursiel alone, Harry. You can't win."

"Don't need to fight him," I said. "Just need to buy you two some time to get clear. Trust me. I'll be right behind you."

Michael closed his eyes for a second and then gave me a quick nod and shouldered Grey's weight more thoroughly. "God be with you, my friend."

"I'll take whatever help I can get," I said, and stopped at the top of the amphitheater stairs, while Michael half carried Grey back out the way we'd come.

My head pounded. I shook the sheathed knife out of my sleeve and dropped it into the duster pocket with my overgrown revolver, then checked the Shroud to make sure it was secure.

From the far rear of the vault, I heard something let out an eerily windy-sounding cry, and the sensation of cold around me grew more and more intense, gaining an element of irrational, psychic terror to go with it. An instant later, other cries echoed the first, and the sensation of unthinking panic swelled. My heart sped up to a frantic pace and my limbs felt shaky and weak.

The shades were coming.

Ursiel let out another furious roar and then the twenty-foot horned bear the size of a main battle tank broke into a lumbering run as it came up the stairs toward me, fangs bared, intent upon mayhem.

And rather than turning to flee like a sane person, I brandished my staff in one hand, flew him the bird with the other, and screamed, "Hey, Yogi! Here I am! Come get some!"

Chapter Forty-seven

Ursiel was too big to fight.

Look, people go on and on about how size isn't everything, and how the bigger they are, the harder they fall, but the people who say that probably haven't ever faced down a charging demon-bear so big it should have been on a drive-in movie screen. As a defensive adaptation, sheer size is a winner. It's a fact. Ask an elephant.

But.

As a *hunting* adaptation, size is only good when the things you're hunting are also enormously huge. Successful predators aren't necessarily bigger than the things they take down—they're better armed, and just big enough to get the job done if they do it right. Too much bulk and nimble prey can escape, leaving the hunter less able to handle a broad range of targets.

Grey had done something brilliant, in blinding the Genoskwa: He'd forced it to rely upon Ursiel's eyes. That meant, apparently, that he had to stay in that giant bear form to do it. If the Genoskwa had been able to pursue me in his natural form, he would have caught me and torn me apart in short order—I'd seen him move. The bear might have been an irresistible mass of muscle, claws, and fangs, but I'd had a little experience with very, very large creatures on the move, and I'd learned one important fact about them.

They didn't corner well.

Ursiel closed in and went into a little bounce, a motion as close to a pounce as something that size could manage, and I darted to one side. Harry Dresden, wizard, might have bought the farm right there. But Sir Harry, the Winter Knight, dodged the smashing paws and snapping jaws by a tiny margin, hopped back several yards, and shouted, "Olé! Toro!"

Ursiel roared again, but its head swung around toward the retreating forms of Michael and Grey. Ursiel was no tactical genius, from what I'd seen of it, but both it and the Genoskwa were predators—and Michael and Grey were wounded and vulnerable. It could catch them and dispatch them easily and then hunt me down at its leisure, like a cat dealing with so many troublesome mice.

So I lifted my staff, pointed it at the demon-bear, and shouted, "*Fuego!*"

The blast of fire I sent at him wasn't much. I didn't feel like passing out from exhaustion at the moment, and both the Genoskwa and Ursiel had displayed a troublesome resistance to my magic. That wasn't the point. The mini-blast of flame struck the bear in the side of the nose, and while it didn't sear the flesh, it singed some hairs and I bet it stung like hell.

The bear's head whipped back toward me and it rolled a step forward. Then the glowing eyes brightened and it swung again toward the wounded men, now leaving the vault. The conflict of wills going on between the Genoskwa and the Fallen angel was all but visible.

"Jeez," I drawled, in the most annoying tone I possibly could. "You suck, Gen. I'll bet you anything River Shoulders wouldn't be all torn and conflicted right now."

That got it done.

The great bear whirled back to me and lunged into instant, savage motion, and again I skittered out of the way a couple inches ahead of being ground into paste. I darted a few more yards to one side, putting one of the displays between us. It didn't bother to go around—it just crashed straight through, spraying gold and jewels everywhere, and I damned near got my head redecorated with a falling marble column. I slipped, recovered my footing, and kept moving, forcing the huge bear to keep turning laterally if it wanted to pursue me.

It went like that for a subjective century and a half, and maybe thirty objective seconds. Several suits of armor were crushed and scattered when a flashing, enormous paw shattered the marble

column holding up the roof of their display area. Half a dozen pieces of art that might have been Fabergé eggs in delicate golden cages were smashed flat when a sledgehammer blow missed me by an inch. At one point, I picked up a cut diamond the size of my fist, screamed, “Get rocked!” and flung it at Ursiel’s nose before darting behind another exhibit, this one of rare sacred texts, featuring half a dozen Gutenberg Bibles as the centerpiece.

And then something scary happened.

The roaring stopped.

I froze in place, instantly. Everything got quiet, except for the rushing sound of the flames in the hands of the giant statues, and a rising tide of moaning, terrifying wails coming steadily and unnervingly closer from the rear of the vault.

Something made a metallic clinking sound. Like, maybe the sound a great big foot would make as its blind owner accidentally kicked a fallen gem into something made of precious metal.

Oh, crap.

I looked around, and realized that there was rubble scattered over every inch of floor around me for fifty feet in every direction. I had forgotten that Ursiel’s bestial nature was not the only one I had to deal with. The Genoskwa’s intellect had been at work behind it, too, and I’d been had.

The Genoskwa had been trying to catch and kill me, sure—but he had also been intentionally covering the floor around us with detritus so that there would be no way in hell I could move without making noise.

Then he wouldn’t *need* eyes to catch me and kill me.

“Little wizard,” rumbled the Genoskwa’s voice. It had a weirdly modulated quality to it. It was coming from behind a veil, maybe, and I couldn’t isolate the direction of its origin. “Going to twist your head off your skinny neck. Going to enjoy it.”

I had some material I could have thrown back at him, but I didn’t dare speak. I would have sounded terrified, anyway. The howls and the eerie presence of the shades continued to grow closer and more intense, and my heart was pounding hard enough to shake my chest. I held my feet perfectly still and tried to turn my head without rustling my clothing at all, scanning for the Genoskwa. I couldn’t see him, but his voice was close.

I knew I would only get one chance to move. If I didn’t do it right, he would run me down and do exactly what he said he’d do, and a weird little fluttery sensation went slithering through my neck at the thought of it. I had to know where he was.

“Take off your head like a cap, little wizard,” the Genoskwa rumbled, pausing to listen between each sentence. “Drink your blood. Like a bottle of pop.”

That image was so vivid that I nearly let out a nervous giggle. I caught it just in time and closed my eyes, Listening as hard as I could. I could hear small, faint sounds. Crunching rubble. Weight shifting atop a pile of spilled gems. But it all had the same distorted tone as the Genoskwa’s voice, impossible to localize.

Stop behaving like a prey animal, Harry, and use your brain.

Right.

The Genoskwa couldn’t hear me and couldn’t know exactly where I was—but sooner or later, if I held still, he’d find me. If I muttered the word to a spell to veil my own movement, he’d hear that, too. My pounding head was already under enough pressure that I didn’t dare try to use magic without a verbal utterance. I could do it, but the psychic feedback was devastating and the last thing I needed was to slip up and take myself out for him. Even using my magical senses might give me away—the Genoskwa was something of a practitioner himself, and might well be able to feel me extending my aura to detect energy around me.

The shades came closer, and the air in the vault had grown uncomfortably warm with the heat from the melted rock. The heated air around it was rising, and that updraft was what was fanning the fires in the hands of the statues, making them growl quietly.

Draft.

Air brushed across the fine hairs on the back of my hand, flowing gently past me from the exterior of the vault and in toward the hot stone more or less in the center of the huge chamber.

Don't think like a human, Harry. Think like a predator. Ignore sight. Forget hearing. Where would a predator go when stalking his prey?

Downwind.

The Genoskwa would be moving downwind of me, locating me through my scent. It wasn't the same as knowing where he was, but for my purposes it was close enough.

Assuming, of course, that my reasoning was correct. If it wasn't, I was about to trap myself with him and become Harry Dresden, human beverage.

I didn't have much energy left in me for spells, but I had to chance it.

So I called upon Winter, focused my will through my staff and shouted, "*Glacivallare!*"

Icy cold rolled out of the staff and solidified into a wall of ice maybe twenty feet long and a foot thick, curved slightly toward me. I prayed that the Genoskwa was on the other side of it, turned, and sprinted, my life depending upon it.

I hadn't gone twenty feet when something hit the wall and shattered it with a crash. I flashed a quick look back over my shoulder to see the Genoskwa as a large, humanoid blur behind a veil that had faltered as tiny flecks of ice landed on the Genoskwa and melted to water. The veil shimmered and fell, and he didn't bother trying to restore it. He recovered his balance after almost a whole half second, and came after me, coming along the ground in a rush, using his huge arms as well as his legs to run.

If Michael hadn't lamed him, the Genoskwa could have claimed his five-cent deposit for my corpse. But though he was on the mend, he still wasn't moving at full speed, and I was able to stay a couple of steps ahead of him. His stench filled my nose, and his huge breathing was terrifying as he came along behind me, tracking me by the frantic sound of my running feet and labored breath.

I couldn't fight this guy.

But that didn't mean that I couldn't kill him.

We flew out of the vault, and out past the Gate of Blood, and I poured it on, committing all of my reserves to the effort. I called light to my staff as I sprinted down the tunnel that emerged at the Gate of Ice, and as I went by it, I drew upon the power of the Winter mantle to slam the iron lever back up to the ON position and snap it off at the base in the same savage motion.

And then I plunged out into the two-hundred-yard-long killing field as the house-sized blocks of ice began to fall and shatter and slide and flip and smash together like some kind of enormous, demented garbage disposal unit.

"Parkour!" I screamed, dropping to a slide that took me just under a horizontally flying block of ice as big as a freight car, then popping back up to keep running.

"Parkour!" I shouted again, bounding up onto a small block and diving over several more, ducking and weaving between them, the Genoskwa hot on my tail, casting frantically quick glances back at him, watching him close the distance inch by inch, his huge body moving with an utterly unfair amount of agility as he handled the obstacles better than I could have, even without his eyes.

And then the cold started to get to him.

It wasn't much at first. He lost a step on me. But then in the next row of grinders, one of them clipped his monstrous shoulder. He recovered his balance and kept moving, and we were nearly through the field when I played dirty.

I jumped over a pair of low grinders, and turned in midair, just enough to point a finger back at the ground behind me and snap, "*Infriga!*"

I didn't use a lot of power. Barely a whisper, really—just enough to coat a ten-foot patch of cavern floor with smooth Winter ice.

And his foot slipped.

It wasn't a big slip. But his cold-dulled reflexes weren't up to catching him and his balance wavered. Not much—he was, after all, running on all fours. But enough. It staggered him as he came after me, slowing his pace again.

Suddenly, there was a ten-foot wall of grinders in front of me, each individual block spinning and smashing and flipping at unpredictable intervals, and I let out a scream and leapt over it completely, high-jump-style. My shoulders brushed the top of the wall, treating me to a dandy view of another house-sized block falling straight at me from the darkness overhead, and then I bounced off the top of the wall and tumbled into the clear.

The Genoskwa grabbed the top of the wall and vaulted it easily, his huge hairy form moving with effortless power. He'd somehow anticipated its presence. He must have heard my shout and jump, and maybe the way I'd gone over it at the top. Or maybe Ursiel was helping him through his sightless chase, the way Lasciel had once helped guide me in total darkness.

But neither the Genoskwa nor the Fallen angel sensed what was plummeting soundlessly toward them.

A block of ice the size of a building came down like the hammer of God Almighty, and crushed the Genoskwa like a beer can.

I rolled to a stop and flopped on the stone cavern floor, utterly exhausted, breathing like a steam engine. But I had enough energy to turn my head to the gruesome remains being tossed about like a rag doll among the last row of grinders.

"Parkour," I panted. "Bitch."

Then I just breathed for a minute.

Footsteps approached a moment later, and I felt hands hauling me up. Michael had sheathed *Amoracchius* again, and he steadied me as I rose. Grey stood and watched the grinders grind for a moment before he shook his head and said, "Yuck."

"Right?" I said.

Anna Valmont shuddered, her face pale, and turned to me. "Are you all right, Harry?"

"Nothing two months asleep in a good bed won't cure," I said.

A chorus of moaning wails suddenly came toward us, as though the shades that had begun flooding the vault had reached some kind of critical mass and were now surging forward. I still hadn't seen them, and I didn't want to see them. I had this vague image of the scrubbing bubbles of undeadness from that *Lord of the Rings* movie in my brain, and I was sure that would serve fine for imagining the threat drawing quickly nearer.

"What was that?" Anna asked.

"Bouncers," I said. "We don't want to be around when they get here. Let's get clear of the first gate, people."

And we did, hurrying down the tunnel to the location of the original Way. I took a deep breath and steadied myself for what I hoped would be the last serious effort of the day.

"Michael," I said.

"Yes?"

"I figure Nicodemus had Lasciel and Ascher as his backup Way home," I said. Ascher had been throwing Hellfire around. With a couple of weeks' training from a good teacher, say a Fallen angel who could provide her with images and communicate directly in thought, she might have enough talent to learn how to manage a Way—but probably not from inside several hundred tons of molten rock. "Maybe the Genoskwa could have done it. But they're out. That leaves one way for him to get back."

Michael grunted and drew his sword, and Grey frowned and looked warier than he had a moment before.

"We're not in much shape for a fight, Harry," Michael said.

"Neither is he," I said. "Eyes open. Get through the Way as quick as we can, and I'll zip it closed behind us. Nick can find his own way home." Then I focused my will, drew a line in the air with my staff and said, "*Aparturum*."

Once more, a line of light split the air and widened, and from where I stood, I could see the inside of the vault back at Marcone's bank.

I leaned heavily on my staff, and felt fairly proud of myself for not falling over and going to sleep right there.

"Michael," I said. "Go."

Michael drew his sword and went through first, his eyes wary for any danger.

"Anna," I said.

Valmont went through, still carrying her backpack, I noted. It was one of the identical ones that Nicodemus had provided for everyone and that I had ignored. Grey had used a duplicate as his decoy, back at the amphitheater.

"My God," Grey said, looking at me. "You didn't get any loot? How the hell are you going to pay me?"

"Think of something," I said.

Grey smirked. "I know we're in a hurry, but there's something you need to realize."

"What?"

"No one got Binder's share," he said. "We're all worn pretty ragged—and he's got an army of demons he can jump us with. Food for thought." Then he went through the Way.

"Oh," I said. "Crap."

I just wanted to go have a nice lie-down somewhere. Why was nothing ever simple?

I stepped through the Way and back into the mortal world, and almost instantly I felt better, lighter, more free. Gravity change. I wrenched my head back into the moment, because I had to focus. Nicodemus might be rushing the Way even now—as might a few million furious shades. I didn't think Hades would allow his prisoners to come flooding into the mortal world, but on the other hand, you never know with those types.

At least wrecking the weaving of a spell was easier work than creating it.

"Michael," I said. "Cover me."

He came to my side, Sword in hand. I turned to the Way, tired to my bones, lifted my staff and muttered, "*Disperd*—"

And a black shadow hurtled through the Way, hitting me like a truck.

I was watching for trouble and ready. Michael was ready. Either we were both wearier than we realized, or the shadow moved with such speed that neither of us had a chance to react. Or both.

The impact spun me around in a circle and dumped me on the ground with my everything hurting and my elbows tangled with my scapulae.

I jerked my head up blearily, raising my arms in a defensive gesture, to see that the streak of shadow had whooshed to the far end of Marcone's vault, to its main door.

Nicodemus rose up out of the swirl of shadow. He looked pale and awful, his eyes sunken with pain, but he held himself straight. His sword was sheathed again, and he still carried the Holy Grail negligently in one hand. Moving with obvious stiffness and pain, he twisted a handle that opened the main door of the vault from the inside. The door swung open when he pushed.

Then he looked directly at me and quite calmly snapped the handle off at its base.

"Dresden," Nicodemus said. There was something furious and horrible in his eyes—I could see it, even from there. "From one father to another," he called. "Well played."

I felt my eyes widen. "Stop him!" I blurted and flung myself to my feet.

Michael started running. Grey blurred toward the far end of the vault, moving at speeds one normally associates with low-flying aircraft.

None of us got there in time to stop Nicodemus from letting out a harsh, bitter laugh, and slamming the huge door closed.

I ran to the other end of the vault anyway, or mostly ran, breathing hard. Anna Valmont stayed beside me, still carrying her tool roll.

"God!" I said. I tried what was left of the handle, but couldn't get a grip on it. The vault door had locked, shutting us in. I slammed a shoulder against the door, but it wasn't moving, and I

wasn't sure I could have blasted it open even if I'd been fresh. "Michael, did you hear what he *said*?"

"I heard," Michael said grimly.

"How could he know?"

"You told him," Michael replied quietly. "When you taunted him about Deirdre. You said things only another father would know to say."

I let out a groan, because Michael was right. Once Nicodemus had realized that I was a father, it was not too much of a stretch to identify the dark-haired, dark-eyed little girl who had suddenly appeared at Michael's house, a place that I knew damned well Nicodemus would surveil, even if he couldn't use his pet shadow to do it. And she had appeared there immediately after my insane assault on the Red Court and my apparent death, to boot. It wasn't hard to figure.

Nicodemus might not be able to walk onto Michael's property—but he had an entire dysfunctional posse of squires with assault rifles and shotguns who could, and he was filled with the pain of losing his daughter.

Maggie was there. So were Michael's children. So was a defenseless archangel.

"He's going to your house," I breathed. "He's going after our families."

Chapter Forty-eight

“Get back,” Anna Valmont said sharply, and knelt to flick her tool roll open on the ground in front of the broken handle. “Dresden, get out of my way.”

I moved aside and said, “Hurry, hurry, hurry.”

She started jerking tools out of the roll. “I know.”

“Hurry.”

“I know.”

“Can’t you just cut it open?”

“It’s a vault door, Dresden, not a bicycle chain,” Valmont snapped. She gave Michael an exasperated look and jerked her head toward me.

Michael looked like he wanted to tell her to hurry, too, but he said, “Let her work, Harry.”

“Won’t be long,” she promised.

“Dammit,” I said, dancing from one foot to the next.

“Dresden?” Grey asked.

“What?”

A chorus of moaning wails echoed through the vault as if from a great distance.

Grey pursed his lips. “Should that Way be standing open like that?”

I whipped my head around and stared at the Way. The only light on the other side came from the Way itself, but that was just enough to show me a huge figure step to the Way. Its hairy kneecap was level with my sternum. Then it knelt down, and a huge, ugly humanoid face with a monobrow and one enormous eye in the center of its forehead peered hungrily at me.

I gripped my staff and drew together my will. “Just *once* I want something go according to plan,” I snarled. “*Disperdorius*.”

Energy left me in a dizzying wave, and the outline of the Way folded in on itself and vanished, taking the cyclops with it. I turned from the collapsing Way back to the vault door, even before the light show had finished playing out.

There was a little *phunt* sound, followed by a hissing, and I turned to find Valmont holding a miniature welding torch of some kind, hooked to a pair of little tanks by rubber hoses. She passed a steel-shafted screwdriver to Grey and said, “I need an L-shape.”

Grey grunted, took the thing in both hands, and narrowed his eyes. Then, with an abrupt movement and a blur in the shape of his forearms, he bent the screwdriver’s shaft to a right angle.

“Slide it inside the socket where he broke it off, here, and hold it,” she said.

Grey did. Valmont slid a strip of metal of some kind into the hole, held a little square of dark plastic up to protect her vision from the brilliant light of the torch, and sparks started to fly up from the door. She worked on it for about five hundred years that probably fit inside a couple of minutes, and then the torch started running out of fuel and faltered.

“Hold it still,” she said. “Okay, let go.”

Grey released the screwdriver’s handle, which now stuck out of the original fitting in approximately the same attitude as the original handle.

“Do it. Let’s go,” I said.

“No,” Valmont snapped. “These materials aren’t proper and I’m none too sanguine about that braze. We’ve got to let it cool or you’ll only break it off and I haven’t the fuel for a second try. Sixty seconds.”

“Dammit,” I said, pacing back and forth. “Okay, when we get out, I’m heading for the house as fast as I can get there. Michael, I want you to get to a phone and—”

“I’m going with you,” Michael said.

I turned to face him and said in a brutally flat, practical tone, “Your leg is hurt. You’ll slow me down.”

His jaw clenched. A muscle twitched. But he nodded.

“And you’ll need to help the others get clear of the bank. Hopefully without getting shot to pieces on the way. Get clear, find a phone and warn Charity. Maybe she’ll have time to get them to the panic room.”

“He’ll burn the house down around them,” Michael said quietly.

“Like hell he will,” I said. “Follow along as quick as you can.”

He nodded. Then, silently, he offered me the hilt of *Amoracchius*.

“Can’t take that from you,” I said.

“It’s not mine, Harry,” he said. “I just kept it for a while.”

I put my fingers on the hilt, and then shook my head and pushed it back toward him. The Sword had tremendous power—but it had to be used with equally tremendous care, and I had neither the background nor the disposition for it. “Murphy knew she shouldn’t have been using *Fidelacchius*, but last night she drew it anyway and now it’s gone. I’m no genius. But I learn eventually.”

Michael smiled at me a little. “You’re a good man, Harry. But you’re making the same mistake Nicodemus always has—and the same one Karrin did.”

“What mistake?”

“You all think the critical word in the phrase ‘Sword of Faith’ is ‘sword.’”

I frowned at him.

“The world always thinks that the destruction of a physical vessel is victory,” he said quietly. “But the Savior was more than merely cells and tissue and chemical compounds—and *Fidelacchius* is more than wood and steel.”

“It’s gone, Michael,” I said quietly. “Sometimes the bad guys win one.”

“Sometimes they seem to. But only for a time.”

“How can you know that?”

“I can’t know,” he said, his face lighting with a sudden smile. “That’s why they call it faith, Harry. You’ll see.”

Grey, I noticed, was staring at Michael intently.

“Time,” Valmont said. She reached up and braced the shaft of the screwdriver with her fingers. Then, very gently, she turned the handle.

The vault door let out a heavy click, and swung open.

“Let’s get moving,” I said.

“Assuming Binder lets us,” Grey added.

We pushed out of the vault and into the secure room, and found the place absolutely wrecked. The exterior of the vault had been pocked with dents half an inch deep. More dents and smears covered the security boxes on the other two walls. The wall that had contained the mines was simply gone, bared to the concrete beneath, and that had been chewed and mangled by ricocheting ball bearings, some of which were still visible, buried in the wall. The floor was covered in gravel and debris.

Also, thirty of Binder’s goons were in formation around the vault door, covering every possible angle. They were all pointing Uzis at us.

“Whoa!” I said, gripping my staff. “Binder, wait!”

“Move another inch and you’re slurry!” came Binder’s voice from the hallway outside the security room. By some minor miracle, the door was still on its hinges, and the little mercenary was staying out of sight behind it. “Where’s Hannah?”

My first instinct was to say Binder’s partner was coming along right behind us, but something told me that would be a bad idea. So I swallowed and said, “Dead.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Binder’s voice came back, roughened. “What happened?”

"She forgot Rule Number One," I said. "She took one of the Coins. I didn't have a choice."

"Didn't have a choice. You White Council boys say that a lot," Binder said in a very mild tone that sounded infinitely more frightening than a harsh one would have been. "Nicodemus says your crew betrayed us, killed Deirdre, Hannah, and the big monkey, and that you're keeping all the loot."

"He told you some of the truth," I said. "But he's lying about who tried to stick the knife in first. We played it straight. He turned on us."

Part of Binder's face appeared from behind the door, and he grunted. Then he jerked his chin at Michael and said, "Sir Knight, is that what happened?"

"Your partner took the Coin of Lasciel," Michael said firmly. "Nicodemus murdered his own daughter to open the Gate of Blood. Once we were inside, he ordered Miss Ascher and the Genoskwa to turn on the rest of us. We fought. They lost."

Binder squinted at Grey, a disapproving scowl coming over his features. "You turned your coat, then?"

"Dresden contracted me before Nicodemus did. I did what he hired me to do."

Binder lifted an eyebrow. "Ah. That explains it."

Grey shrugged.

"Hannah," Binder said, his eye going back to me. "You killed her?"

"I did," I said. "I offered to let her back down. She wouldn't. I'm sorry. She was too strong to handle any other way."

Binder spat a quiet, vicious oath, and looked away. "Stupid kid. Not a bad partner. But not a scrap of sense."

"Just curious," Grey said. "You going to shoot us or what?"

"Eh?" Binder said. Then he glanced at the goons, and they lowered their weapons and began filing back out. "Ah, no, the lads ran out of ammunition at least twenty minutes ago. It was hand-to-hand after that, but then the coppers started to arrive and Marcone's people backed off to think about things for a bit."

"More like to get the Einherjaren as backup," I muttered. Binder's goons were formidable, but they weren't going to be able to stand up to a crew of genuine Norsemen with a dozen centuries of experience each, who hadn't been impressed by death the first time around. "What's the status out there?"

Binder's eyes seemed to glaze over for a moment. Then he reported, "A dozen patrol cars have blocked off the area. Some fire trucks are here. Parts of the building above us are on fire. There're a million more vehicles on the way, one presumes, but the streets are one big sheet of ice, and for now the cops are just covering the exits. The weather's turned foul. There's a heavy fog coming off the Lake."

"Ice and fog," I said. "I like it."

"Sun's not up yet," Binder said. "And some evil, handsome old bloke hexed all the streetlights and spotlights out. We get out of here now, we might do it in one piece."

"What happened to Nicodemus?" Michael asked.

"He flew out," Binder spat. "Told me you'd killed Hannah and left me to rot."

I grunted.

"The bit about the money," Binder asked. "How true is that?"

"We've got one backpack," Valmont said quietly. "Small stones, easy to move. We'll have to split it once we're all clear."

I blinked and looked at her.

She gave me a calm, indecipherable look. "All for one," she said. "I want out of this, too."

She was right. I was nearing the end of my rope. Binder looked exhausted as well. If we just ran out the door all willy-nilly, pure chance would decide our fates. Dark or not, foggy or not, Chicago patrol cops were heavily armed, and given the gunfire and explosions and so forth, they

had to think that this was some kind of terrorist attack in progress. They'd shoot first, and second, and third and fourth, and ask questions to fill the time while they reloaded.

Some buckshot through the skull would not improve my response time to the attack on the Carpenter house—and I owed Valmont and Michael a lot more than to let them get shot whilst fleeing the scene of a crime. More than anything, I wanted to be moving toward Michael's home—but to do that, I had to get us out of the building in one piece first. The only way to do that was to work together.

"Binder," I said. "Nicodemus screwed us all. But I'm offering you a new deal, right here, a mutual survival pact. We split the pack evenly between the five of us once we're out of here. They aren't red ones, but twenty percent of them are yours if you sign on with us to get us all the hell out of here."

"Your word on it?"

"My word," I said.

"Dunno," Binder said. "Seeing as how you didn't follow through on that promise to kill me if you saw me here again . . ."

I glowered.

"Sir Knight?" Binder asked. "Will you give your word?"

"You have it," Michael said.

"Are you in or not?" I asked.

Binder regarded Michael for a moment, then nodded once. "'Course I'm in. What choice do I have?"

"Everyone else?"

There was a general murmur of agreement.

"Right, then, listen up," I said, feeling the urge to go sprinting after Nicodemus in every fiber of my body. But I used my head. First things first. Get out of the death trap we were in—then save Maggie from hers. "Here's the plan."

Chapter Forty-nine

The plan didn't take long to put into effect.

Binder's goons poured out of all sides of the bank building in a howling horde, crashing through windows and sprinting through doorways. They ran straight into gunfire from two dozen patrol cars surrounding the place. Binder's goons died hard, but die they did, after taking several rounds each. They leapt onto cars. They waved their arms threateningly. They brandished their empty Uzis with malicious intent.

But they didn't actually hurt anybody. Binder's share was forfeit if they had. And when they went down, they splattered back into the ectoplasm they'd been formed from in the first place—a clear, gelatinous goo that would rapidly evaporate, leaving nothing behind but empty Uzis and confusion.

Most of the goons went out the west side of the building. Our little crew went out several seconds behind them, covered in my best veil—which is to say, looking slightly blurrier and more translucent than we would have normally appeared.

Veils aren't really my thing, all right? Especially not covering that many people all at once.

In that light, in that weather, in the howling confusion of an apparent assault by demons of corporate dress code, my paltry veil was enough. I took the lead, Michael brought up the rear, and we all held hands in a chain, like a group of schoolchildren traveling from one place to another. We had to—the veil would only have covered me, otherwise.

Outside the ring of police cars was a perimeter of other emergency vehicles—fire trucks and ambulances and the like, parked on whatever uneven slew they had managed on the ice. The press had begun to arrive, while an insufficient number of other cops tried to cordon off the block around the Capristi Building. Every single person there was straining to see through the fog, to get an idea of what was happening during the howling chaos of the attack and the subsequent hail of gunfire. I kept the veil around us as we hobbled through the confusion at Michael's best pace. It didn't stop people from noticing that someone was hurrying by, but at least it would prevent anyone from identifying us.

Michael's bad leg lasted for another block and then he dropped out of the chain, gasping, to stumble to a halt and lean against a building.

Once his grip was broken, my veil faltered and fell apart, and the five of us flickered fully back into sight.

"Right," I said. "You three keep moving, fast as you can, before Marcone's people twig to what's going on. Find a phone soonest."

"We should split up as quick as may be," Binder said. He looked pale and shaken. He'd been born in an age before the invention of cardio, and he'd been summoning demons all night.

Valmont added a firm, silent nod to Binder's opinion.

"When you're doing crime, listen to the crime pros," I said. "Take your share and give Michael what's left."

"God go with you, Harry," Michael said.

"Grey," I said, "with me."

And I turned, called upon Winter, and started running.

It took several seconds for Grey to catch up with me, but he did so easily enough. Then he let out an impatient sound and said, "Try not to clench up."

"What?" I blurted.

"Parkour," he said impatiently. And he caught me by the waist and flung me into the air.

I went up, flailing my arms and legs and looked down to see something that was basically impossible.

Grey smoothly dropped to all fours, blurred, and suddenly there was a large, long-legged grey horse running beneath me, and I came down on his back. I managed to angle it to minimize the, ah, critical impact zone, catching most of my weight on my thighs, but doing so nearly sent me tumbling off, and I had to flail pretty wildly to hang on.

I did it, though, and set myself. I hadn't ridden a horse since my days on Ebenezer's farm down in the Ozarks, but I'd done it every day down there, and the muscle memory was still in place. Riding a running horse bareback isn't easy when you're feeling a little crogged from seeing someone completely ignore the laws of physics and magic as you know them.

Shapeshifting I could deal with, but Grey had done something more significant than that—he'd altered his freaking mass. Rearranging a body with magic, sure, I basically knew how that worked. You just moved things around, but the mass always remained the same. Granted, I'd seen Ursiel shift into his bear form and add oodles of mass, so I knew it could be done somehow, but I'd figured that was maybe a Fallen angel thing. Though that didn't make sense, either. I'd seen Listens-to-Wind reduce his mass pretty significantly in a shapeshifting war with a naagloshii, but I'd figured he had managed to make some materials denser and heavier, crowding the same mass into a smaller area.

Grey hadn't just made himself bigger. He'd made himself seven or eight *times* bigger, and done it as quick as blinking. My pounding head was making it hard for the thoughts to get through, but I got my staff tucked under my arm so that I could hold on to the horse's mane with the fingers of my good hand, and realized that I was babbling them aloud.

"Oh," I heard myself realize, "ectoplasm. You bring in the mass the same way Binder's goons make some for themselves."

Grey snorted, as if I had stated the very obvious.

And then he shook his head and started *running*.

When I'm running with Winter on me, I can move pretty fast, as fast as any human being can manage, and I can do it longer. Call it twenty-five or thirty miles an hour. A Thoroughbred horse runs a race at about thirty-five. Quarter horses have been clocked at fifty-five miles an hour or so, over short distances.

Grey started moving at quarter-horse speed, maybe faster, and he didn't stop. I just tried to hang on.

The ice storm had brought Chicago to a relative standstill, but there were still some cars out moving, a few people on the sidewalks. Grey had to weave through them, as none of them was fast enough to get out of the way by their own volition. By the time they could see Grey moving toward them through the fog, it was too late for them to avoid him, and there was very little I could do but hang on and try not to fall off. At the pace Grey was moving, a tumble would be more like a car wreck than anything else, only I wouldn't have the protection of, you know, a *car* around me when it happened. The experience gave me a new appreciation for Karrin and her Harley—except that her Harley didn't freaking jump over mailboxes, pedestrians, and one of those itty-bitty electric cars when they got in its way.

I noticed, somewhere along the line, that Grey was as subject as anyone else to the slippery ice on the streets and sidewalks of the town. At some points, he was more skating than running, though he seemed to handle it all with remarkable grace.

If it wouldn't have reduced my odds of surviving the ride, I'd have closed my eyes.

We were moving in the right direction, and it didn't occur to me until we were nearly there that I'd never told Grey where to find Michael's house.

By the time we got there, Grey was breathing like a steam engine, and the hide beneath me was coated with sweat and lather and burning hot. His wide-flared nostrils were flecked with blood. As remarkable as he was, moving that much mass that quickly for that long apparently had a metabolic cost that not even Grey could escape. We thundered past Karrin's little SUV—still stuck

where she'd crashed it yesterday evening—and it was as he tried to turn down Michael's street that Grey's agility met his exhaustion and faltered.

He hit a patch of ice, and we went sideways toward the house on the corner.

I felt his weight leave the ground and we started to tumble in midair. It was going to be an ugly one. Most of a ton of horse and about two hundred and fifty pounds of wizard were going to bounce along the frozen earth together and smash into a building, and there wasn't a whole hell of a lot I could do about it.

Except that it didn't happen that way.

As we tumbled, the horse blurred, and suddenly Grey was back, along with a great, slobbering heap of steaming ectoplasm. He grabbed me in midair, pulling my shoulders back hard against his torso, and when we first hit the ground, his body cushioned the shock of impact, taking it on his back instead of on my skull. We bounced and it hurt, spun wildly once, and then slammed into the side of the house about a quarter of a second after all the ectoplasmic goo. Again, Grey took the impact on his body, sparing mine, and I heard bones snapping as he did. Between him, some thick bushes at the base of the house, and the cushion of slime, I came to a bone-jarring, but nonfatal halt.

I pushed myself up and checked on Grey. He was lying in a heap, his eyes closed, his nose and mouth bloody, but still breathing. His chest was grotesquely misshapen, but even as I watched, he inhaled and a couple of ribs seemed to expand back toward a more natural shape. Hell's bells, that guy could take a beating. And that was *me* saying that.

"The things . . . I do . . .," he rasped, "for . . . Rent money."

I lifted my head, blearily, to see the big unmarked vans Nicodemus had used for transport at the start of the job turn the corner at the other end of the street and lumber slowly toward Michael's house.

Grey had gotten me there in time, if only barely.

Of course, now that I was here, the question was what I was going to do about it.

I stood up, calling my veil about myself again. It might not accomplish much, but at least it didn't take a lot of energy to do it, and I started moving quietly toward the enemy. The Winter Knight's feet were absolutely soundless on the ice.

My head was killing me, a steady pounding. My arm, ditto, even through the insulation offered by the Winter mantle. Fatigue and hard use had tied knots in my back, and I didn't know how many more spells I could pull off before I fell over—if any.

So why, I asked myself, was I walking toward the vans, preparing for a fight?

I blamed the Winter mantle, which continually pushed at my inner predator, egging me on to fight, hunt, and kill my way to a solution. There was a time and a place for that kind of thing, but as I watched the vans begin to slow carefully on the icy streets, my sanity told me that it wasn't here or now. I might be able to drop an explosive fire spell on the vans, but explosions are hardly ever as neat and as thorough as the people who create them hope for—and the effort might just drop me unconscious onto the sleet-coated ground. I could lie there senseless while the survivors murdered my daughter.

Too many variables. Why duke it out with the bad guys when maybe I could grab the Carpenters and Maggie and slip out ahead of them?

So instead of starting a rumble, I kept the veil up and sprinted around the house on the corner, and started leaping fences, moving through backyards to the Carpenter house. I came up to the back door and tried the doorknob. It didn't move, and I risked a light rap on the glass of the storm door. "Charity!" I said in a hushed, urgent tone. "Charity, it's me!"

I checked the corners of the house, in case the squires had deployed people on foot, to move through the backyards the way I had. And when I looked back to the storm door, the heavy security door beyond it had been opened and, the twin barrels of a coach gun gaped in front of my eyes.

I dropped my veil in a hurry and held up my hands. I think I said something clever, like “Glurk!”

Charity lowered the shotgun, her blue eyes wide. She was wearing pajamas and one of her handmade tactical coats over them—a layer of titanium mail between two multilayered coats of antiballistic fabric. She had what looked like a Colt Model 1911 in a holster on her hip. “Harry!” she said, and hurriedly opened the storm door.

I hurried in and said, “They’re coming.”

“Michael just called,” she said, nodding, and shut the security door behind me, throwing multiple bolts closed as she did.

“Where are the kids?”

“Upstairs, in the panic room.”

“We’ve got to get them out,” I said.

“Too late,” said a voice from the front room. “They’re here.”

I padded forward intently, and found Waldo Butters crouching by the front windows, staring out. He was wearing his Batman vest with all its magical gadgets, and holding a pump-action shotgun carefully, as if he knew how to use it, but only just.

In the doorway to the kitchen stood Uriel. He was wearing an apron. There was what appeared to be pancake flour staining his shirt. Instead of looking dangerous and absolute, the way an archangel should, he looked slender and a little tired and vulnerable. He didn’t have a gun, but he stood holding a long kitchen knife in competent hands, and there was a quiet balance to his body that would have warned me that he might be dangerous if I hadn’t known him.

Mouse sat next to Uriel, looking extremely serious. His tail thumped twice against the vulnerable archangel’s legs as he saw me.

“Da . . .,” Charity began, when she saw Uriel. “Darn it,” she continued, her voice annoyed. “You’re supposed to be upstairs with the children.”

“I was fighting wars when this planet was nothing but expanding gasses,” Uriel said.

“You also didn’t leak and die if someone poked a hole in you,” I said.

The angel frowned. “I can help.”

“Help what?” I asked him, drawing the monster revolver from my duster pocket. “Slice up bananas for pancakes? This is a gunfight.”

“Harry,” Butters said urgently.

“Ennghk,” I said in frustration, and went to Butters. “Mouse, stay with him, boy.”

“Woof,” Mouse said seriously. That was obviously the mutt’s plan, but I read somewhere that a good commander never gives an order he knows won’t be obeyed. It therefore stood to reason that he might as well give orders that he knows will be obeyed whenever possible.

“Kill the lights,” I said to Charity.

She nodded. Most of the lights were already out, but a few night-lights that could double as detachable flashlights glowed in power outlets here and there. She went around detaching them, and the interior of the home became darker than the predawn winter light outside.

I moved to Butters’s side and peered out through the translucent drapes while I reloaded my big revolver. I could dimly see squires unloading from the two vans, now parked in front of the house. They carried shotguns and rifles, as they had before.

“Nine,” Butters said quietly, counting gunmen. “Ten. Eleven. Jesus.”

“Keep counting,” I said. “It might matter.”

Butters nodded. “Fourteen. Fifteen. Sixteen? Sixteen.”

“Stay down,” I told everyone. “Stay away from the windows. Don’t let them know anything.”

Someone moved through the dark and crouched quietly next to me. “I called the police already,” Charity said.

“They’re responding to a big emergency,” I replied. “Be a while before they get here.” I noted two pairs of gunmen splitting off from the others, heading around either side of the house. “They’re going around.”

"I'll take the back," Charity said.

"You know how to use guns, too, huh?" I asked her.

I saw her teeth gleam in the dimness. "I like hammers and axes better. We'll know in a minute."

"Luck," I said, and she vanished back into the rear of the house.

Michael's house had been fortified the same way mine had been, with heavy-duty security doors that would resist anything short of breaching charges or the determined use of a ram. With anything like a little luck, they might try the doors, find them tough, and waste some time figuring it out.

But Nicodemus didn't leave room for luck in his plans. Eight men started carefully toward the front door over the lawn. Two of them were carrying small charges of plastic explosives. Of course, he'd already scoped the place out. Or maybe he just planned to blow the door off its hinges even if it was made of painted paper.

Dammit, I wasn't a soldier. I didn't have training in the whole tactical thing. But if it was me, and I wanted to get inside a house where I expected at least a little bit of fight, it might be smart to go in from two directions at once. Maybe I'd have most of my guys coming from the front, and just a few from the back, to reduce the chances of them massacring one another by mistake. For that matter, maybe I'd just put a few guys on the back door to plug anyone who tried to run away.

Of course, the whole point of breaching a room is to do it when you aren't expected. And they were. That gave us at least a little advantage, right?

Sure it did.

"They're going to blow the door," I said to Butters. "And maybe toss in a few flashbangs, and then they'll roll in here and start shooting. Get over there behind the couch and wait for them. Soon as that door opens, start shooting through it."

Butters swallowed, and nodded in a jerky motion. His face was pale and beaded with cold sweat. "Right." He crawled over to the couch.

Meanwhile, I went to the wall beside the staircase that went upstairs. When the door blew, it would slam open, or if it got taken off the hinges, fly back onto the staircase. I would crouch beside the staircase, where most of my body would be hidden except for my gun arm and my head. I got into position and put the gun down on the floor where I could find it easily.

Then I waited.

Ten seconds later, there was a sound like a huge hammer hitting a flat rock, and a sensation like standing in surf and being hit in the chest with a wave, only less substantial. The door flew open. I could barely get the air out of my chest, but I flicked my hand at the door and muttered, "*Ventas servitas.*"

A gust of powerful wind hit the doorway from my side just as several small objects tumbled in from the other side, and they fell back to the porch with dull thumps before there was a wash of light and sound that would have obliterated my vision if I hadn't already shielded my eyes with my hand. A couple of wordless cries of confusion went up from the squires outside, and exhaustion from the effort made my vision narrow to a tunnel. I saw someone move in the doorway, and then Butters opened up with the shotgun.

I grabbed my pistol, aimed it at the doorway, and fired two rounds as quickly as I could aim them. A man was knocked down, and while I'd like to claim credit for being an awesome gunslinger, odds were better that it was Butters and his shotgun who were responsible.

There wasn't time for anything more than that. Fanatics they might be, but they weren't stupid. It took them less than a couple of seconds to clear away from the porch and our lines of fire. Even the guy who went down scabbled away, leaving a smear of blood behind him as he did.

I stopped shooting, frustrated at the lack of targets, but Butters kept pumping shell after shell into the empty doorway. He didn't stop until the shotgun clicked on an empty chamber three or four times.

I darted a look at him, to find him staring at the doorway, trembling visibly, his face pale as a sheet.

“Dude,” I said. “Reload.”

He stared at me with goggle-eyes for a second, then jerked his head in a nod and started fumbling at one of his pockets. I waited until he had the shotgun reloaded and said, “Cover the door. I’m going to check on Charity.”

“Right,” he said.

I turned and paced toward the back of the house, trying to remember where the walls were so that I didn’t walk into them—and as I rounded the corner nearly walked into a squire with a shotgun.

No time to think. I swept my staff from left to right, knocking it against the shotgun. The weakened grip of my left hand didn’t give me a lot of leverage, but when fire and thunder bloomed from the barrel, instead of dying I reeled in sudden agony at the pain of the sound so near my eardrum, so it was enough. The squire knocked the staff from my weak grip with a slash of the shotgun’s barrel.

I shot him twice in the stomach with my big revolver.

He let out a gasp and went down, and I kicked the shotgun out of his hands as he fell.

Behind him, his partner drew a bead on me with an assault carbine and had me dead to rights. Terror spiked through me. I tried to fling myself away, knowing as I did that it wouldn’t do me any good.

Uriel melted out of the shadows behind the second squire with his kitchen knife, and opened both of the squire’s big arteries and his windpipe with a single slice. The man collapsed, and Uriel rode him to the floor, pinning the assault rifle down with one hand for a few seconds, until the squire stopped struggling.

He looked up at me, his expression sickened.

I stared at the two squires. They’d come in the back.

Charity.

By the time I got to the back door, it was standing open, one side of it twisted and blackened with the force of the breaching charge that had opened it. Charity’s shotgun lay on the floor, a couple of expended flashbangs next to it. There was a smear of blood in a trail leading to the door and out into the ice.

Charity was gone.

It wasn’t hard to figure. The bad guys had blown the back door, only she hadn’t had a wizard there to stop the flashbangs. They’d sailed in, stunned her, and she’d been taken before she could fire a shot.

I saw a flash of movement outside the door, and leapt back as another shotgun roared. The squire missed me, but not by much, and a section of drywall the size of my fist vanished from the wall behind where I’d been.

“Harry!” Butters howled.

I hurried back to the front of the house to find Butters staring out through the curtains, his expression twisted up in horror.

Nicodemus was standing on the sidewalk outside the Carpenter house, his shadow writhing.

Tessa stood beside him in human form, wearing black trousers and a black shirt. Her expression was distant, haunted. She looked awful, thin and wasted away, like those movies of people rescued from concentration camps, but her eyes burned with some dark emotion that the word *hate* didn’t begin to cover.

As I watched, two squires half dragged, half carried Charity over to him. They dumped her on the sidewalk in front of Nicodemus. She seemed stunned. Her leg was covered in blood. The armored coat was chewed and torn over her wounded thigh, where most of the shotgun pellets had been caught and stopped.

Nicodemus seized a handful of Charity’s hair and dragged her faceup, to where she could see her house.

My heart twisted and rage filled me. I knew what he was doing. Nicodemus planned to leave a message for Michael. It wasn't enough for Nicodemus simply to kill the Knight's children—not when he could kill them and leave Charity's corpse behind in such a fashion as to make clear that she had been forced to watch them die, first.

"Watch, Mrs. Carpenter," Tessa hissed. "Watch."

Nicodemus turned his head toward three squires, who were standing by with bottles of vodka fitted into Molotov cocktails with bits of cloth. The bottles were already lit.

His gravelly voice came out low and hard. "Burn it down."

Chapter Fifty

I stepped up to the door with my staff in hand just as the three men hurled the bottles of vodka, pointed the staff, and snarled, “*Infriga!*”

Icy air screamed. The bottles soared up toward the house and hit the roof with a number of dull *thunks*, then came rattling back down to fall to the lawn, glass cracking, their contents frozen solid.

A number of things happened, all at once.

Tessa let out a hellish screech. She lifted a hand toward me, gathering power in her palm, but as she released it, Nicodemus seized her arm and directed the blast straight up into the air.

Squires started shooting at me. A bullet smacked into my duster over my left lung and hit me like a fist, spinning me to one side.

Mouse hurtled toward the rear of the house.

And, as I fell, Mab’s earring burst, the two pieces flying out of my ear in different directions and bouncing off the walls of the entry hall, and all the pain in the universe came crashing down on me at the same time.

Dimly, I heard Butters calling my name. Bullets hit the entry hall and the doorway and darted past me in spiteful, hissing whispers to thwack into the stairs behind me. I lay there in a stupor of pain, and another round hit my duster again, and then Butters was hauling me out of the doorway by main force.

I tried to care about other things that were happening, but mostly I was trying to work up enough energy to curl up into a defensive fetal position—and failing.

“Harry!” Butters screamed, propping me up. “Harry, get up! They’re coming back!”

“Burn it!” Tessa shrieked. “Burn them! Burn them all!”

“Harry!” Butters howled. “*Do something!*”

I didn’t have enough left in me to contort my face.

“Oh, God,” Butters said. “OhGodohGodohGod . . .”

And that was when I saw Waldo Butters choose to be a hero.

He looked up the stairs, toward where the children were hidden. Then he looked out toward the men outside. Then he hardened his jaw.

And with businesslike motions, he stripped me out of my leather duster. He put it on. The sleeves were too long and it was grotesquely oversized, but I had to admit that he got a lot more coverage out of the thing than I ever did.

“Bob,” he said.

Glowing lights surged up out of one of the pouches on his Batman vest, dancing nervously in the slowly growing light of dawn. “Yeah, boss?”

“We’re going in.”

“Uh . . .”

“If anything happens to me,” he said, “I want you to head back to the skull. Tell Andi everything you saw. Tell her I said to get you to someone responsible. And tell her that I said that I loved her. Okay?”

“Boss,” Bob said, his voice subdued. “You sure about this?”

“There’s nobody else here,” Butters said quietly. “Harry’s down. Charity’s been captured. We can’t risk Uriel’s demise. And if we wait for help, they’ll burn the kids to death while we wring our hands.”

“But . . . you aren’t up for this. You can’t possibly beat them.”

“Gotta try,” Butters said.

"You'll die trying," Bob said. "And it won't make any difference."

"I've got to believe that it will," he said. "Maybe I can slow them down until some real help gets here."

"Oh," Bob said, his voice very small.

"You ready?" Butters asked. "Can you access the duster?"

"Sure. I tutored Harry on these spells."

"Keep the bullets off me for as long as you can," Butters said.

"Got it," Bob said. "Let's give 'em hell, boss."

"That's the spirit," Butters said. He took a deep breath, and then put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Don't worry, Harry. You've done enough. I got this."

I wanted to scream at Butters not to go, not to throw his life away—to go get the kids and try to run. It would have been just as hopeless, but he might not realize that. And at least they'd die with bullets in them instead of being burned to death. But I couldn't move, or think or do anything else. The pain was simply too great. It wasn't a headache now. It was a worldache. I didn't have a broken arm anymore—I didn't have a body at all. I just had pain.

But I started crying as Waldo Butters stood up, rolled the sleeves of my duster up until his hands could reach out of them, grabbed a couple of things from his vest, flung something on the floor of the porch and went out the door.

The first globe he'd hurled down released a sudden, brief cloud of opaque smoke that went roiling out in all directions, and guns began firing outside.

No, dammit.

No.

I couldn't let things end like this. Butters was a friend, and too good a man to let die while I lay on the floor unable to go to his aid.

I fought to rise, but my arms and legs couldn't hear me through the pain. Again, I struggled, throwing up every mental shield I could against the agony, and this time I managed to shift my weight, and fall heavily onto my side. My cheek lay on the floor and I found myself staring along it, down the hall toward the back of the house, past the dining room where I'd struggled with the squires who invaded . . . and where the remnants of *Fidelacchius* had been carefully set on the dining room table.

The table had been jarred in the fight. The broken hilt of the Sword of Faith had fallen and rolled toward the front of the house. It was only a few feet away from me.

Could it be?

When the Knights of the Blackened Denarius set out to wreak harm, the Swords were there to oppose them. The Sword of Faith was no more. But that did not mean that the power that guided the Swords could not find another means of expressing itself. I'd seen Charity Carpenter rely upon her faith when Molly was in danger before. How much deeper would it be now, with her home and family in peril?

Maybe Michael was right about the Sword. If he was, there was still a chance.

And I had to believe that. People I loved were going to die. I had to believe that there was hope.

Hope lets you do things you would otherwise never be able to do, gives strength when everything is darkest. In that moment, maybe it helped me—because I forced my nerve endings to respond and dragged myself toward the hilt of the Sword, clenching my teeth in sheer defiance of the agony supplanting my existence. It felt like it took forever before my fingers settled on the wooden grip of the Sword, but by the time I finally reached it, and turned back to the door, Butters had only at that moment reached the front gate. My duster whirled and swirled around him like a living thing, orange light playing along the normally invisible black runes I'd tattooed into the leather, the mantle flaring up wildly like a cobra's hood.

Half a dozen squires stood stupefied and confused in dissipating clouds of memory mist, and of the others who were moving, only one had a clean shot at Butters. But the little guy's hand

pointed and an orange flicker danced out, a thin line wrapping around the barrel of the gunman's weapon and holding fast. Butters heaved, shouting, and hauled the rifle out of the man's hands. The cord released the gun in a glitter of orange light and slithered back up Butters's sleeve.

And then, before any of the scrambling gunmen could get a clear shot at him, Butters hurdled the Carpenters' little fence and smashed into Tessa in a tackle that, if not exactly physically impressive, was dynamic as hell.

The impact tore the pint-sized Tessa loose from Charity, and the emaciated Denarian let out a furious squall and went down under Butters's weight.

Nicodemus drew his sword and thrust it at Butters's back, but the flying folds of my leather duster slapped the blade aside. Butters wasn't much of a fighter, but he was game. He screamed and slammed his head down into Tessa's.

Then she lifted her hand and shouted something, and there was a crash of sound, a flash of light.

Butters flew off of her and landed six feet away, sprawled and dazed on the icy street. I could see blood running from one of his ears. He made a vague, spreading gesture with one hand, and Bob's trail of campfire sparks emerged from the duster and soared away in the general direction of Butters's apartment.

"What was *that*?" Tessa demanded, her tone furious as she came back to her feet.

"A detail," Nicodemus said, his tone harsh. "Stupid, but brave, little man. Nice try." He stepped over to Butters and raised his sword. Butters clenched his jaw and raised his hand in a hopeless defensive gesture. He knew what was coming—what had to come. But though his face was ghostly white, his eyes were steady, unflinching.

He'd made his choice, and he would accept the consequences of his actions.

And for that moment, everyone out there was looking at Nicodemus and Butters—and no one was looking at Michael Carpenter's wife.

Hope gave me a last burst of strength.

"Charity!" I croaked.

Her head snapped around toward me, and she blinked in my direction.

I threw the broken hilt of *Fidelacchius* as hard as I could.

There are moments in your life that, when you look back at them, you realize were perfect. A hundred million things had to happen, to all come together at the same time, for such moments to come into existence—so many things that it beggars imagination to think that they could possibly have happened by random chance.

This was one of them.

The broken hilt of the Sword tumbled in a perfect arc. It flew up, soared down, and cleared the little fence in the front yard by maybe an inch. The rotation of its length was as precise as a juggler's throw, setting the hilt to tumble directly into Charity's palm.

But she bobbled it, and missed the grab.

The wooden hilt with its lonely, harmless little fragment of the Sword's blade bounced off the icy sidewalk and up into the air. It tumbled several more times, clipped Nicodemus's shoulder . . .

. . . and landed directly in Waldo Butters's upraised hand.

His fingers closed around the grip of the broken Sword of Faith, and if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would scarcely have believed what happened.

There was a flash of light.

There was a sound like a howl of holy trumpets backed up by the voices of an entire choir.

And suddenly a shaft of blinding silver-white light three feet long sprang from the broken hilt of *Fidelacchius* and shone in the first golden light of that day's dawn, humming with the full power of the Sword, only louder now, more melodic, and *physically* audible.

Nicodemus's sword was already falling, and when it met the blade of light, there was a shriek of protesting metal, a flash of sparks, and he reeled back three quick steps, staring at his own weapon in incomprehension.

Fidelacchius had sheared it off as neatly as if it had been paper instead of steel. The severed end of Nicodemus's sword glowed white-hot.

"Ah," said a voice next to me, in a tone of intense satisfaction, and I jerked a quick glance up to see Uriel crouching next to me, his teeth showing, his eyes glittering.

Butters came to his feet, and his jaw hung open. He stared at the humming blade in his hands for a second and then suddenly his teeth showed in a joyous smile that was no less fierce for being so.

And his eyes locked on Nicodemus.

Suddenly, there was an incoherent scream from behind one of the vans, and the vehicle rocked, as if something enormous had smashed against it. A second later, Mouse stepped out from behind the van, where its bulk was shielding him from the immediate aim of the slowly recovering squires. The Foo dog's head was low, his body crouched and tensed, hackles raised, gleaming, sharp, freshly bloodied teeth bared. He was no more than a few feet from Nicodemus's back, and at his appearance, Anduriel's shadow form went berserk, flickering and twisting in a dozen directions at once, like a panicked animal running to the ends of its tether.

"Nice try?" Butters said. "Mister, where I come from, *there is no try*."

And he lifted the Sword to a guard position and charged, coat flaring dramatically, impossibly.

Mouse let out a great, coughing roar of a bark and flung himself forward, silver-blue light gathering in his fur and around his mane and jaws.

I saw the fury and the rage and bafflement in Nicodemus's face as the newly minted Sir Butters came toward him, and I saw something else there, too.

Fear.

The furious light of the Sword of Faith renewed filled him with terror.

He let out a cry of frustration and leapt into the air, where Anduriel's shadow gathered around him in a sudden blob of fluid darkness, and then streaked away, up into the dawn-lit fog, and was gone.

Butters whirled at once, toward Tessa, but the other Denarian had already fled into the fog, leaving behind a frustrated cry that turned into her demonform's brassy shriek as it faded.

Butters, with Mouse at his side, turned to face the squires who still remained. The nearest one, I saw, was Jordan, who clutched his shotgun in white-knuckled hands, his expression bewildered.

In fact, as I looked around, I saw the same expression on the faces of every squire there. Utter confusion, as if they'd just beheld something that they knew damned well was impossible. They'd just seen their unbeatable lord and master humbled and forced to flee by a pipsqueak of a Knight who wore black-rimmed spectacles and might have weighed a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet.

"It's over," Butters said. *Fidelacchius's* ominous hum gave his voice a certain terrifying punctuation. "We make an end of it, right here. It's over, guys."

Jordan, his eyes welling with tears, dropped his arms to his side, abruptly, limply, like an exhausted child. His weapon tumbled to the ground. And, over the next few seconds, the others did exactly the same.

The Sword of Faith, I thought, cuts both ways.

I realized my cheek was back against the floor a moment later, and dully noted that my eyes had stopped working at some point. They were open, but they weren't showing me any images. Maybe that's what they meant by the phrase "lazy eye." Hah. I'm hysterical when I'm dying.

I heard a sound then—a distant howl of northern wind, rapidly growing louder in pitch and volume.

"Easy, Harry," said Uriel's voice in the blackness. "Molly's here. Easy."

And then I went away.

Chapter Fifty-one

I woke up in bed. There was a colorful cartoon pony on the ceiling above me.

My body ached. I mean it ached to no end. Just breathing felt like a motion that stretched sore muscles. I was hideously thirsty and ravenous, and considering the complaints from my bladder, I'd been down for a while.

I looked around without moving my head. I was in Maggie's room. Judging from the amber sunshine coming in through the window and covering one wall, it was evening. I wondered if it was the same day. Maggie's raised bed towered over me, and I realized that I was on a mattress laid on the floor of her room. Something heavy was on one of my feet, and it had gone to sleep. I moved my head enough to see what it was, and wished I hadn't done that. My skull pounded like a little man was slamming it with a hammer.

I winced and focused my eyes through the discomfort. Mouse slept on the floor beside the bed, and his massive chin rested on my ankle. His ears were twitching, though his eyes were closed, his breathing steady.

"Hey," I croaked. "Gonna lose my foot, you keep that up. Fall right off."

Mouse snorted and lifted his head. He blinked blearily for a second, as any reasonable person does upon waking, and then dropped his mouth open in a doggy grin. His tail started wagging, and he rose so that he could walk to my head and start giving me slobbery dog kisses while making little happy sounds.

"Ack!" I said. I waved my hands without any real enthusiasm, and settled for scratching him under the chin and behind the ears while he greeted me. "Easy there, superdog," I said. "I think I exfoliated a couple of licks ago."

Mouse made a happy chuffing sound, tail still wagging. Then he turned and padded out of the bedroom.

A moment later, he returned, and Molly followed him in.

She made an impression walking into the room. I was used to Molly in old jeans and sandals and a faded T-shirt. Now she wore slacks and a deep blue blouse that looked like they'd been hand-tailored to fit. Her hair, which I had seen in every improbable shade and configuration imaginable, was now long and straight and the color of moonlight on corn silk. She still looked a shade too angular and thin. Her eyes had been haunted and strained the last time I'd seen her in the flesh. Now they had a few added wrinkles at the corners, maybe, and a gravity I hadn't seen in them before—but they were steady and calm.

Without a word, she knelt down beside me and gave me a hard hug around the neck.

"Ack," I said again, but I was smiling. Again. It made all the muscles in my body twinge, but I moved one arm and patted her hair. "Hey, grasshopper."

"I'm so sorry," she said. Her arms tightened a little. "I'm so sorry I didn't get here sooner."

"Hey, it all worked out," I said. "I'm okay."

"Of course you're okay," she said, and despite the bravado in her words, I thought she might have been sniffing. "I was the one working on you."

"Look," I said. "The parasite. It isn't some kind of hostile entity—"

She nodded, her hair rubbing against mine. "I know. I know. The guy in black told me all about it while I was in there."

"Is the spirit all right?" I asked.

She released me from her hug/choke hold and nodded at me, smiling, her eyes suspiciously wet. "Of course, the first thing you want to know is if someone else is all right." She reached

across me and picked up something from the floor near my head, where I hadn't been able to see. It was the wooden skull I'd carved for Bob.

"It was a tough delivery," Molly said. "She's very tired."

I grunted, lifted my hand, and took the wooden skull in my fingers.

Immediately, tiny flickers of greenish light appeared in the eye sockets, and the little spirit made a soft, confused sound.

"Shhh," I said. "It's me. Get some rest. We'll talk later."

"Oh," said the little spirit. "Hi. Good." And the flickers of light vanished again with a small, weary *pop*.

"You know," Molly said, smiling, "it's traditional to have a home of your own if you're going to keep adopting strays."

I tucked the wooden skull into the crook of my arm and said, "Home is where, when you go there and tell people to get out, they have to leave."

She grinned, smoothed some hair back from my forehead, and said, "I'm glad to see that you're feeling more like yourself."

I smiled at her a little. "Makes two of us," I said. "How you holding up?"

Her eyes glittered. "It's . . . been really interesting. It all looks very, very different from the inside."

"Usually how it works," I said. "Tell me about it?"

"Can't, literally," she said cheerfully and waved an airy hand. "Faerie mystique and all that."

"Figures. You like it?"

"Not always," she said without rancor. "But . . . it's necessary work. Worth doing."

"Yet you didn't tell your folks about it."

For the first time, Molly's calm slipped a little. Her cheeks turned a little pink. "I . . . Yeah, I haven't quite gotten around to that yet." Her eyes widened suddenly. "Oh, God, you didn't . . ."

"No," I said. "Skated past it just in time. Though I think I might have given your father the impression that we, uh . . . you know."

A small, choked laugh, a sound equal parts mirth and absolute horror burst out of her mouth. "Oh. Oh, *God*. *That's* what those looks were about." She shook her head.

"You should tell them," I said.

"I will," she said, with a little too much instant assurance. "You know. When I find a way to bring it up." She bit her lower lip, maybe unconsciously, and said, "You, uh . . . you'll let me do that, right?"

"If that's your choice, I'll respect it. You aren't really my apprentice anymore, Molls."

She stared at me for a second after I said that, and I saw hurt and realization alike flicker through her features. Then she nodded and said quietly, "I guess I'm not, am I?"

I made another major effort and patted her hand. "Things change," I said. "Nothing to feel sad about."

"No," she said. She squeezed my fingers back for a second and forced a smile. "Of course not."

"Mab been around?" I asked.

She shook her head. "She knows I'm going to want to talk to her about sidetracking me. But she's in town. I can feel that much. Why?"

"Because I'm going to want to talk to her too."

* * *

One hour, one shower, and one barrage of painkillers later, I was dressed and able to shamble down the stairs under my own power, just after sundown. Mouse followed me carefully. Molly didn't *quite* hover around like a Secret Service agent prepared to throw herself into the way of a bullet if necessary, but only just.

"You know what's weird?" I said, as I got to the first floor.

"What?" Molly asked.

"The lack of cops," I said. "There should be cops everywhere. And police tape. And handcuffs." I raised my wrists. "Right here."

"Yeah," Molly said. "I noticed that too."

I looked at her and arched an eyebrow. "Was this you?"

She shook her head. "I wouldn't really know how to go about bribing the authorities. And I'm not sure Mab understands the concept."

The first floor of the Carpenter house had always been something of a riot in progress, even in calm times. Tonight was no exception.

"Run!" screamed a young woman with curly blond hair, who was dressed in a school uniform, was a shade taller than Molly, and who probably caused neck injuries when turning the heads of the boys in her school. She fled past the bottom of the stairs, firing one of those toy soft-dart guns behind her. As she ran past, she waved a hand at me, flashed me a grin, and said, "Hi, Bill!"

"Hell's bells," I said, feeling somewhat bewildered. "Was that Amanda?"

"She still wears the uniforms," Molly said, shaking her head. "I mean, even *after* school. Freak."

"Rargh!" roared a young man, whose voice warbled between a high tenor and a low baritone. He was lanky with youth, with Michael's darker hair and grey eyes, and was running after Amanda half bent over at the waist, with his hands pressed up against his chest as if mimicking relatively tiny dinosaur claws. I recognized "little" Harry immediately. He looked like he was big for his age, developing early, and already starting to fill out through the shoulders, and his hands and feet looked almost comically too large for the rest of him.

Maggie was riding astride his back, clinging with her legs, with one arm wrapped around his neck. She'd have been choking him if she wasn't on the small end of the bell curve herself. She clutched a toy dart gun in her free hand, and sent a few darts winging aimlessly around the room, giggling.

"Dinosaur Cowgirl wins again!" she declared proudly, as Harry ran by.

A moment later, another blond girl came through, calmly picking up fallen darts. She was older than Harry, but younger than Amanda, and shorter than any of the other Carpenters. She smiled at me and said, "Hey, Harry."

"Hope," I said, smiling.

"Hobbit," she corrected me, winking. "Molly, Mom says to tell you that our guests need to get going."

Maggie, her steed, and her prey went running by in the other direction with the roles reversed, with my daughter shrieking, "No one can catch Dinosaur Cowgirl! Get her, Mouse!"

Mouse's tail started wagging furiously and he bounced in place, then whipped his head around to look at me.

"Go play," I told him.

He bounded off after them.

I watched them rampage off in the other direction for a moment. I sensed Molly's eyes on me.

"Man," I said quietly. "Is . . . is it like this for her all the time?"

"There are crazymaking moments too," Molly said quietly, in the tone of someone delivering a caveat. "But . . . mostly, yeah. Mom and Dad have some pretty strong opinions but . . . they know how to do family."

I blinked my eyes quickly several times. "When I was a kid . . ." I stopped talking before I started crying, and smiled after them. When I was a kid in the foster system, I would have given a hand and an eye to be a part of something like this. I took a steadying breath and said, "Your family has given my daughter a home."

"She's a pretty cool kid," Molly said. "I mean, as Jawas go, she's more or less awesome. She makes it easy to love her. Go on. They're waiting for you."

We went into the kitchen, where Charity was sitting at the kitchen table. Her eyes were a little glazed over with prescription painkillers, but she looked alert, with her wounded leg propped up and pillowed on another chair. Michael sat in the chair next to her, his own freshly wounded leg mirroring hers on a chair of its own, and the pair of them were holding hands, a matched set.

Michael's cane, I noted, was back. It rested within arm's reach.

Binder and Valmont sat at the table across from them, and everyone was drinking from steaming mugs. There were five brand-new locking metal cash boxes from an office supply store sitting side by side on the table.

Binder was in the middle of a story of some kind, gesticulating with both thick-fingered hands. "So I looked at her and said, 'That's not my pen, love.'"

Michael blinked and then turned bright pink, while Charity threw back her head and let out a rolling belly laugh. Anna Valmont smiled, and sipped at her tea. She was the first to notice that I had come in, and her face brightened, for a moment, into a genuine smile. "Dresden."

Binder glanced over his shoulder and said, "About bloody time, mate. You look a right mess."

"Yeah, but I feel like an utter disaster," I said, and limped to the table. "Where's Grey?"

"He won't come in the yard," Michael said.

I arched an eyebrow and looked at him. "Hngh."

Michael spread his hands. "He said he'd be around and that you would take him his pay."

"Said he didn't want a share of the stones," Binder said in a tone of utter disbelief. "That he had his pay coming from you."

I lifted my eyebrows. "Huh."

"There's professional," Binder said, "and then there's just bloody odd."

"Not everyone is motivated solely by money," Valmont said, smiling into her tea.

"And how much more sensible a world it would be if they were," Binder said.

"I've divided the stones by weight," Valmont said. "Each box is the same. Everyone else should pick theirs and I'll take whichever one is left."

"Sensible, professional," Binder said in a tone of approval. "Dresden?"

"Sure," I said. I tapped a box and picked it up. It was heavy. Diamonds are, after all, rocks.

Binder claimed one. Michael frowned thoughtfully.

"Michael?" I asked him.

"I'm . . . not sure I can accept—"

Charity, very firmly, picked up one of the boxes and put it on her lap. "We have at least twenty-three more child-years of college education to finance," she said. "And what if there are grandchildren one day, after that? And have you considered the good we might do with the money?"

Michael opened his mouth, frowned, and then closed it again. "But what do we know about selling diamonds?"

"Anna assures me it's perfectly simple."

"Fairly," Valmont said. "Especially if you do so quietly, over time. I'll walk you through it."

"Oh," Michael said.

"And we have an extra," Valmont said, "since Grey didn't want a share."

"Here's a brainstorm," Binder said. "Give it to me."

"Why on earth would I do that?" Valmont said.

"Because I'll take it to Marcone and bribe him with it to not kill us all, after we wrecked his perfectly nice bank," Binder said. "Walking away rich is all very well, but I want to live to spend it."

"Give it to me," I said. "I'll take care of it."

"Harry?" Michael asked.

"I know Marcone," I said. "He knows me. I'll use it to keep him off of all of us. You have my word."

Michael exhaled through his nose. Then he nodded and said, "Good enough for me. Miss Valmont?"

Anna considered me and then nodded once. "Agreed."

"Better you than me, mate," Binder chimed in. "Just you try to get some kind of warning to us if he kills you when you go to talk to him."

"I'll bear it in mind," I said, and took a second box. Valmont claimed the last one.

We were all quiet for a moment.

Then Binder rose and said, "Ladies, gents, what a treat it's been scraping out of a mess by the skin of our teeth with you. Godspeed." And he headed for the door.

Valmont rose, too, smiling quietly. She came over to me and gave me a hug.

I eyed her. Then I made a bit of a show of checking my pockets for missing items.

That made her laugh, and she hugged me again, a little longer. Then she stood up on tiptoe to kiss my cheek and said, "I left your things in the closet of the room you were sleeping in."

I nodded, very slightly.

She withdrew then, smiled at Charity, and said, "Give me three days. Then call me at the number I gave you."

"I will," Charity said. "Thank you."

Anna smiled at her, nodded to Michael, and left.

Michael idly unlocked his box and opened it. Light spilled off of the diamonds heaped inside.

"My, my, my," Michael said.

Charity picked up a stone carefully and shook her head, bemused. "My, my, my."

"Watch my loot for me?" I asked. "I need to go speak to Grey."

* * *

I found Grey standing on the sidewalk outside the house, leaning against the streetlight with his arms folded over his chest and his head bowed. He looked up as I came out of the house and shuffled down the front walk to the gate.

"Dresden," he said.

"Grey. You really came through for me."

"What you hired me to do," Grey said, as if I might be a bit thick.

"I guess I did, didn't I?" I said. "You could have bailed. You could have taken Nick's money."

He looked at me as if I had begun speaking in tongues.

"Guess Vadderung was right about you."

Something not quite a smile touched Grey's mouth. "Heh," he said. "He's one who would know, isn't he?"

"So how come you won't come in the yard?" I asked, stepping through the broken gate to join him.

Grey stared at me, his eyes opaque. He turned his head to the Carpenters' home, and looked up and around the yard, as if noting the position of invisible sentries. Then he looked back at me.

And his body language shifted, relaxing slightly. His eyes flickered and changed, from brown orbs with that odd golden sheen to them to something brighter gold, almost yellow, the color spreading too wide for human eyes, the pupils slit vertically like a cat's. I had seen eyes exactly like them once before.

My heart leapt up into my throat and I slammed the gate shut. "Hell's bells," I stammered. "A naagloshii? You're a freaking naagloshii?"

Grey's eyes narrowed and changed back to mostly human brown again. He was silent for a moment, and then said, "You didn't choose to be the son of Margaret LeFay. You didn't choose the legacy she left you with her blood. And she was a piece of work, kid. I knew her."

I frowned at him, and said nothing.

"I didn't choose my father, either," Grey said. "And he was a piece of work, too. But I do choose how I live my life. So pay up."

I nodded, slowly, and said, "What's it going to cost me?"

He told me.

"What?" I said. "That much?"

"Cash only," he said. "Now."

"I don't have that much on me," I said.

He snorted and said, "I believe you. We going to have a problem?"

"No," I said. "I'll go get it."

"Sure," he said, and bowed his head again, as if prepared to wait from now until Judgment Day.

And I shambled back into the house, went in to Michael and asked, "Can you loan me a dollar?"

* * *

I watched Grey depart, walking down the sidewalk, turning the corner, and continuing on his way. The day had warmed up enough to melt the ice, and the evening was misty, cool, and humid. The streets gleamed. It was very quiet. For a moment, I stood there alone.

"If you have a minute," I said to the air.

Uriel suddenly stood next to me.

"Look at you," I said. "Got your jet plane back."

"Undamaged," he said. "Michael is a good man."

"Best I know," I said. "Would you really have nuked Grey if he'd come in the yard?"

Uriel considered the statement for a moment. Then he said, "Let's just say that I'm relieved that he didn't make the attempt. It would have been awkward."

"I think I'm starting to see the picture now," I said. "Who was really moving this whole mess?"

"I thought you might," he said.

"But I don't get your role in it," I said. "What was your angle?"

"Redemption," he said.

"For Nicodemus?" I asked him. "You risked that much—your grace, the Sword, Michael, me—for that clown?"

"Not only for him," Uriel said.

I thought about that for a second and then said, "Jordan."

"And the other squires, yes," Uriel said.

"Why?" I asked. "They made their choices, too, didn't they?"

Uriel seemed to consider the question for a moment. "Some men fall from grace," he said slowly. "Some are pushed."

I grunted. Then I said, "Butters."

Uriel smiled.

"When Cassius Snakeboy was about to gut me, I remember thinking that no Knight of the Cross was going to show up and save me."

"Cassius was a former Knight of the Blackened Denarius," Uriel said. "It seems appropriate that he should be countered by an incipient Knight of the Cross. Don't you think?"

"And the Sword breaking?" I asked. "Did you plan that, too?"

"I don't plan anything," Uriel said. "I don't really do anything. Not unless one of the Fallen crosses the line."

"No? What is your job, then?"

"I make it possible for mortals to make a choice," he said. "Ms. Murphy chose to act in a way that would shatter the Sword. Mr. Butters chose to act with a selflessness and courage that proved him worthy to be a true Knight. And you chose to believe that a ruined, broken sword could make a difference. The sum of those acts created a Sword that is, in some ways, greater than what was broken."

"I didn't choose for it to do *that*," I said. "Seriously. There might be some kind of copyright infringement going on here."

Uriel smiled again. "I must admit," he said, "I never foresaw that particular form of faith being expressed under my purview."

"Belief in a freaking movie?" I asked him.

"Belief in a story," Uriel said, "of good confronting evil, of light overcoming darkness, of love transcending hate." He tilted his head. "Isn't that where all faith begins?"

I grunted and thought about it. "Huh."

Uriel smiled.

"Lot of *Star Wars* fans out there," I noted. "Maybe more *Star Wars* fans than Catholics."

"I liked the music," he said.

* * *

I took the extra box of diamonds and went to see Marcone.

Molly came with me, but I didn't need her intuition to know who I would find there. When we got there, she looked at the building and said, "That bitch."

"Yeah," I said.

I knocked at the door of the Brighter Future Society. It was a small but genuine castle that Marcone had paid to move to Chicago. It was not lost on me that he had erected the damned thing on the lot formerly occupied by the boardinghouse whose basement I'd rented for years. Jerk.

The door opened and a man the height and width of a drawbridge glowered down at me. He had long hair, a mad bomber's beard, and enough muscle to feed a thousand hungry vultures.

"Your name is Skaldi Skheldson," I said. "You know who I am. I'm here to see Marcone and his guest."

Skaldi frowned. Skaldi's frown would have been intimidating if I hadn't spent the past few days hanging out with the Genoskwa.

I bobbed an eyebrow at him and said, "Well?"

The frown became a scowl. But he stepped aside and let me in. I said, "Thanks," and headed for the conference room. I knew right where it was. I'd visited when I was a mostly dead ghost. Skaldi hurried to keep up with me. The fact that I already knew where I was going appeared to leave him a little unsettled.

Wizard.

We passed several other Einherjaren as I walked through the building, and opened the door to the conference room without knocking.

Mab was inside, seated at one end of the table, her expression distant and implacable, her back ramrod-straight. Her dress and her hair were both pitch-black, as were her eyes, all the way across her sclera. She was here, then, in her aspect of Judgment.

People *die* when Mab shows up in black. The last time I'd seen her in that outfit, two Faerie Queens had bled out onto the soil of Demonreach.

Seated at her right hand, wearing a charcoal-grey suit, was Gentleman Johnnie Marcone, Baron of Chicago under the Unseelie Accords—and made so, at least in part, by my own signature. There might have been slightly more silver at his temples than the last time I'd seen him, but it only made him look more distinguished. Otherwise, he looked exactly as he always did: calm, alert, impeccably groomed, and as merciful as a lawn mower's blade.

"You could have told me from the beginning," I said to Mab.

She regarded me with flat black eyes and tilted her head, a curiously birdlike gesture.

"You were balancing the scales with Nicodemus," I said. "But it was never about paying back a favor. And it wasn't about foiling his scheme. This was full-scale political vengeance."

Very, very slowly, Mab lifted her hands and placed them flat on the table in front of her. Her nails were black and looked sharp enough to slice silk.

"You set Nicodemus up from the very beginning," I said. "You, Hades, and Marcone."

Marcone tilted his head from one side to the other and said nothing.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," I said. "Why you sent Molly away—because she'd have known you were up to something. Why the plans to Marcone's vault were available. Why the bodies got cleaned up, and why the cops didn't crawl all over this thing when it was done. Hell, they're probably spinning the shoot-out and the explosions as some kind of terrorist attack. And I'll bet you anything that the squires found themselves offered a new job, now that their demigod has fallen from grace. Right?"

A ghost of a smile haunted Marcone's lips.

"Nicodemus violated your Accords," I said to Mab. "He kidnapped Marcone. He abducted the emissary appointed under the Accords. This was your payback. You arranged for him to get the details about Hades' vault." I turned to Marcone. "You *built* your vault specifically to create the link so that a Way could be opened there. All so you could set Nicodemus up, years after he wronged you both." I met Mab's unwavering gaze and said, "And you dealt him the worst pain you could imagine. You took away his daughter. No, you did even worse—you made him do it himself."

Neither of them said anything.

But Mab's raven black nails sank a fraction of an inch into the wood of the table, and her void black eyes glittered.

"Now he's lost his lieutenant," I continued. "He's lost his squires. When word gets out of his treachery, he'll lose his name. No one will want to work with him. No one will deal with him. From where you're standing, you've done worse than kill him. You've wounded him, strangled his power, and left him to suffer."

A long moment of silence passed.

I turned to Marcone. "And what did you get out of it? You got to build the vault, and to secure the clientele who use it. My money says that Hades was your first depositor. That when he made that gesture of trust in you, others followed his example—and that now you're holding in trust a treasure trove like none in the supernatural world. And if you got a little payback on Nicodemus as a side effect of that, you didn't mind it at all. And you'll have plenty of money to pay to have him hounded down, now that he's been weakened."

Marcone's eyes, the exact green shade of old dollar bills, focused pleasantly on me. Still, he said nothing.

Then Mab finally spoke, her voice sepulchral. "Do you have a point, my Knight?"

"I wanted you to know that I knew," I said. Then I turned to Marcone. "There were people involved in the robbery. People who aren't otherwise involved in this affair."

"People who violated my territory, nonetheless," Marcone said quietly.

"While helping you get your vengeance," I said. "Go after Nicodemus as hard as you want. Leave the rest of them out of it. They took nothing from you."

"They took the life of one of my employees," Marcone said.

"The woman who did that is dead already," I said. And I tossed the cash box onto the conference table. It landed with an impressive thump.

Mab frowned.

Marcone raised his eyebrows briefly. "And what is this?"

"It's weregild," I said. "You know the word?"

"Salic Code," he replied, instantly. "Blood money."

"That's right," I said. "That's for your dead employee's family. Take care of them with it. And leave my people out of it. It ends here."

Marcone considered the box and then me. "And if I should disagree with your terms?"

"Then you and I are going to have a serious problem," I said. I turned to Mab and added, "Right here. Right now."

Mab's eyes widened.

If I threw down on Marcone, any number of things could happen—but one of them would certainly be a major disgrace for Mab. She was a guest under Marcone's roof. For her Knight and instrument to betray that trust would utterly destroy her name in the world—and what's more, she knew it.

"Come, now, Baron," Molly said, her voice smooth, soothing. "Consider how much you have gained. You are in the process of destroying the man who truly wronged you. What does it matter if his hirelings go about their business? After all, you might need their services yourself, one day. The offer is a reasonable one." And on those last words, she reached over to the cash box, unlocked it, and opened it.

Marcone's expression rarely showed much—but his eyes widened, if only for an instant, as he saw the stones.

I stared at Marcone without blinking or looking away.

Marcone looked up from the diamonds and returned the stare for a long time.

I put my hands on the table, leaned in close to his face, and said, "Just you remember who pulled your ass out of the fire when those maniacs grabbed you. You owe me."

Marcone considered that for a moment. Then he said quietly, "You did so as a favor to Mab. Not to me." He reached out and smoothly closed the cash box, then drew it to his side of the table and squared it with the table's edge. His voice was almost silken—but there was a blade hidden within the folds of it. "However, the fact that there is a debt remains—and I would not see Mab's name suffer any childish diminishment when she has kept such excellent faith with me. I accept your offer, Dresden. This balances our account. Do you understand my meaning?"

I understood it, all right. It meant that the next time I crossed him, he would feel perfectly free to waste me.

Which was fine. The feeling was pretty much mutual.

Mab was far too contained to give any reaction to the resolution of the situation, beyond a very, very small nod to Marcone. But she regarded me with a look of displeasure that promised me a reckoning later. Molly got the same glare.

I doubt that my former apprentice looked any more chagrined than I did.

* * *

"... the point of having a squadron of angels around the place if they aren't going to *do* anything to protect it," Molly said, exasperated.

We were walking up to Karrin's room in the hospital. Visiting hours were almost over, but I didn't want the day to go by before I'd seen her.

"Any kind of supernatural threat, they'd have been all over it," I said. "Nick obviously knew that, too. That's why he sent purely vanilla mortals in, with purely mortal weaponry."

Molly scowled. "It's a pretty darned huge loophole. That's all I'm saying."

"So do something about it," I said.

"I already have," she said. "The house is being watched now. And I'm buying the place for sale down the street."

"You can afford that?" I asked. "Mab pays that well?"

"The account balance I have now has eight zeroes in it," Molly said. "I could buy the neighborhood if I wanted. There will be someone keeping an eye on my parents' place, twenty-four seven in case anyone tries the same thing again."

"Unseelie bodyguards." I grunted. "Not sure they're going to like that."

"They don't have to like it," Molly said. "In fact, they don't even have to know about it."

"I'm sensing a pattern here, Molly."

She gave me a quick glance, and for a second, I could see the worry in her eyes. "Harry . . . if you hadn't been there today . . ." She swallowed. "They're my family. I have to do whatever I can to protect them."

I walked for a few steps, thinking, and said, "Yeah. You do."

She smiled faintly as Karrin's room came into sight and her steps slowed. "You go ahead. I've got some things to arrange. I'll be back later tonight."

"Cool," I said, and offered her my closed fist.

She shook her head and said, "Not very respectful of you, sir Knight."

I waggled my fist and said, "Come on. You know you want it."

That drew a quick, merry laugh from her. She bumped my fist with hers, and turned away—and as she walked away from me, I saw her pull a cell phone out of her pocket and turn it on.

That stopped me in my tracks.

Cell phones were some of the technology that was absolutely the most sensitive to the unbalanced fields of energy around a mortal wizard. When one of us got near a powered-up cell phone, it was likely to kick the bucket right there.

Inhuman practitioners, on the other hand, had no problem with that effect whatsoever.

And I suddenly felt very afraid for Molly.

She was hiding a lot of things from her parents. And now I had to wonder how many things she might be hiding from me.

More things to keep an eye on in the future.

I traded a greeting with Rawlins and walked into Karrin's room, to find Butters sitting in the chair by her bed, his feet on the seat, his butt on the back, waving his hands animatedly as he spoke. ". . . and I looked at him and said, 'Mister, where I come from *there is no try*.' And I went straight at him, and the evil son of a bitch *bailed*."

Karrin looked like she'd been beaten with rubber hoses after a double triathlon, but she was sitting up, and if she looked a little bleary, she also looked composed. One of her arms had been wrapped up and immobilized in a sling fixed to her body. Her hair was a lank mess, and she had an IV line running to her unwounded arm. "You are telling me lie after lie, Waldo Butters," she said. She turned to me and her smile widened. "Hey, Harry. You look terrible."

"I'm in good company," I said, and put my hand on her head for a second, grinning.

"Tell her," Butters said. "Harry, you were there, right? Tell her." He blinked. "Oh, God, you were pretty out of it. Don't tell me you don't remember."

"I remember," I said. "Butters went full-on Jedi Knight on us. Sword. *Vomm. Vroom, krsloom, kazark, skreeow*."

Karrin gave me a suspicious glance, and looked back and forth between us. "You can't be serious."

"Got it with you?" I asked Butters.

"Are you kidding?" he said, grinning. "I may never put it down again."

"So show her," I said.

"You think that's . . . you know. Okay? To show it off like that?"

"You aren't showing off," I said. "You're confirming her faith."

Butters screwed up his face and then said, "Yeah. I guess that's okay, then." He reached into his coat and produced the hilt of *Fidelacchius*. The moment he drew it from his coat, the blade of light hissed out to its full length, banishing shadows from the room and humming with power.

Karrin's eyes widened. "Mary, Mother of God," she said. "And . . . he just *ran*?"

"Not right away," I said. "He took a swing at Butters here, first. And that thing sliced through Nick's sword like it was made of pasta."

"Yeah," Butters said. "Seemed to catch him totally off guard. And even if he'd still had a sword, I don't think it would have helped him much. I mean, *lightsaber*. Actually, it was kinda unfair."

"That guy's earned it," I said.

"Butters," Karrin said, shaking her head. "That's . . . that's really amazing. I'm so proud of you."

If Butters could have floated up off the floor, Karrin's words would have made him do so. "Yeah, I . . . Thanks, Murph."

Murph.

Well, look at you, Butters. One of the boys.

"Well deserved," she said. "But . . ." Her face turned grim. "You don't have to keep it if you don't want to, you know."

Butters frowned and moved to return the handle to his coat. The blade vanished seemingly of its own accord. "Why wouldn't I keep it?"

"Lot of responsibility, bearing one of those," Karrin said.

"Lot of travel, too," I said, just as seriously.

"Bad guys," Karrin noted.

"Hopeless situations you'll be expected to overcome," I said.

"Monsters, ghosts, ghouls, vampires," Karrin said.

"And all the Knights of the Blackened Denarius will want to stuff you and mount you on the wall," I said, my voice harder. "Butters, you took Nicodemus by surprise on what was probably the worst day he's had in a couple of thousand years, when his only backup was a woman twisty enough to marry him, who had spent the past two days trying to derail his plans. He retreated because he was facing a new and unknown threat and it was the smart thing to do. Next time you see him, he won't be running away. He'll be planning to kill you."

Butters looked at me uncertainly. "Do . . . do you guys not think I can do it?"

I stared at him, expression suitably grave. Karrin too.

"Michael and Charity said they'd train me," he said seriously. "And Michael said he'd show me how to work out and eat right and help me figure out what the Sword can do. I mean . . . I know I'm just a little guy but"—he took a deep breath—"I can *do* something. Make a difference. Help people. That's a chance a lot of people never get. I want it."

Karrin glanced at me and asked, "What do you think?"

I winked at her, and we both grinned as I said, "He'll do. I mean, he routed Nicodemus Archleone and all. I guess that's something."

"Yeah," Karrin said. "That's something."

Butters grinned in relief. "Oh," he said. "There is one thing I . . . I sort of have an issue with."

"What's that?" I asked.

He spread his hands and said, "A *Jewish* Knight of the Cross?"

Karrin burst out into something suspiciously like giggles. Later, she would swear that it had been the drugs.

* * *

Butters left Karrin and me alone a little while later. We had a few minutes until some polite nurse would be along to kick me out.

"You're going to have to take care of yourself," Karrin said quietly. "Over the next few weeks. Rest. Give yourself a chance to heal. Keep the wound on your leg clean. Get to a doctor and get that arm into a proper cast. I know you can't feel it, but it's important that—"

I stood, leaned over the bed, and kissed her on the mouth.

Her words dissolved into a soft sound that vibrated against my lips. Then her good arm slid around my neck, and there wasn't any sound at all. It was a long kiss. A slow one. A good one. I didn't draw away until it came to its end. I didn't open my eyes for a moment after.

". . . oh . . .," she said in a small voice. Her hand slid down my arm to lie upon mine.

"We do crazy things for love," I said quietly, and turned my hand over, fingers curling around hers.

She swallowed. Her cheeks were flushed with color. She lowered her eyes.

"I want you to rest and get better, too," I said. "We have some things to do."

"Like what?" she asked.

I felt myself smile. There might have been something merrily wolfish in it. "Things I've only dreamed about."

“Oh,” she breathed. Her blue eyes glittered. “That.” She tilted her head. “That was . . . was me?”

“That was you,” I said. “Seems fair. It was your bed.”

Her hand tightened on mine and her face broke into an open grin. I lifted her hand and kissed her fingers, one at a time.

“I am on so many drugs right now,” she said.

I grinned. She wasn’t really talking about her IV.

The nurse came in while we were kissing again. She cleared her throat pointedly. Two or three times. I let her. The kiss wasn’t finished yet. The nurse went out in the hallway to complain to Rawlins, who appeared to listen politely.

Karrin ended the kiss with another little laugh.

And she didn’t even know I’d slipped her half of my diamonds in a couple of knotted-off socks when she wasn’t looking.

* * *

By about ten that night, I was back at the Carpenters’ house. The evening had turned unseasonably gentle, even if it was a little muggy. I was sitting on the porch with Michael, in one of a pair of rocking chairs that he had made himself. Both of us had a bottle of Mac’s Pale Ale in hand, having already emptied the pair of bottles at our feet.

Maggie was sitting with her legs across my lap. She’d fallen asleep with her head against my chest half an hour before, and I wouldn’t have disturbed her for the world. Or a third beer. Mouse dozed at my feet, delighted to be able to take up a station close to both of the people he most wanted to slobber on.

“So Karrin’s surgery was successful? She’s going to recover?” Michael asked.

“Probably not ever to where she was,” I said. “But the doctors told her she could get to ninety percent.”

“That’s wonderful,” Michael said. I saw him glance down at his bad leg, propped up on a kitchen chair Molly had brought out for the purpose. I could practically hear him wondering what it would have been like to get back to fifty percent. At least Nicodemus had stabbed him in the leg that was already messed up.

“What was it like?” I asked him. “Getting out into the fight again?”

“Terrifying,” he said, smiling. “And for a little while . . . like being *young* again. Full of energy and expectation. It was amazing.”

“Any regrets?” I asked.

“None,” he said. Then he frowned. “One.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Nick got away with the Grail.”

He nodded, his face darkening with worry.

“Hey, we went four for five on the artifact scoreboard,” I said. “That’s not bad.”

“I’m not sure this is a score that can be tallied,” he said.

“What do you think he’ll do with it?”

Michael shrugged and took a thoughtful sip of beer. “The Grail is the most powerful symbol of God’s love and sorrow on the face of the earth, Harry. I don’t see how he could use it to do harm—but if Nicodemus sacrificed so much to acquire it, I suspect that he does.”

“I figure the Grail was a secondary goal,” I said. “He really wanted something else.”

The knife was still in the pocket of my duster, now draped over the back of my chair in deference to the evening’s warmth.

Michael glanced at my coat and then nodded. “What will you do with the other four?”

“Research them. Learn about them until I can see when and how they should be used.”

“And until then?”

“Store them someplace safe.” I figured the deepest tunnels of Demonreach should do.

He nodded and regarded his bottle. "Did you ever once consider giving them back to the Church?"

"All things considered," I said, "nope."

He grimaced and nodded. And after a very long silence he said, "I fear you may be right."

That made me look at him sharply.

"The Coins we captured should not have been able to escape from storage so quickly or easily," he said slowly. "Which suggests . . ."

"That someone in the Church facilitated their recirculation," I said.

"I fear corruption," Michael said simply.

I thought of the state of affairs in the White Council, and Molly's cell phone, and shuddered. "Yeah," I said. "Lot of that going around."

"Then you'll understand this." Michael leaned his head back and called, "Hank!"

A moment later, little Harry appeared at the door. He was carrying *Amoracchius* in his arms, scabbard, baldric, and all. He passed them off to Michael, who ruffled the boy's hair and sent him back inside.

"Here," Michael said simply, and leaned the Sword against the side of my chair. "When you store the artifacts, take that as well. You're its keeper again."

I frowned. "Because I did such an amazing job the last time around?"

"Actually," Michael said, "you did an excellent job. You defended the Swords from those who would try to claim them, and you issued them to people who used them well."

"Murphy didn't," I said quietly. "I mean, I know it worked out in the end—but my judgment was obviously in error."

"But you didn't call her to be a true Knight," Michael said. "You entrusted her with the Sword for one purpose—to help you save your little girl from Chichén Itzá. She appointed herself the Swords' keeper after you apparently died. And this morning, you gave the Sword of Faith to the right person at the right time."

"That was an accident."

"I don't believe in accidents," Michael said. "Not where the Swords are concerned."

"Suppose I don't want it."

"It's your choice, of course," Michael said. "That's sort of the point. But Uriel asked me to pass it to you. And I trust you."

I sighed. Maggie's limp, warm little body was emitting a barrage of some kind of subatomic particle that was making me drowsy. Probably sleepeons. Mouse snored a little, generating his own sleepeon field. The gentle night wasn't helping things, either. Nor was my battered body.

I had a surplus of burdens already.

"The thing is," I said quietly, "the Swords' keeper needs clear judgment more than anything else. And I'm not sure I have it anymore."

"Why not?" Michael asked.

"Because of the Winter mantle. Because of Mab. If I take the Sword, bad things could happen down the line."

"Of course they could," Michael said. "But I don't believe for a second that they would happen because you chose to make them happen."

"That's what I mean," I said. "What if . . . what if Mab gets to me, eventually?" I waved my hand. "Stars and stones, I just spent the weekend working with Denarians on behalf of freaking Marcone. I've had this job for . . . what? A couple of years? What will I be like five years from now? Or ten? Or a hundred and fifty?"

"I don't believe that for a second," Michael said. "I know you."

"I'm not sure I do anymore," I said, "and it scares the hell out of me. What happens if she does it? What happens if she turns me into her personal monster? What is she going to do with me then?"

"Oh, Harry," Michael said. "You're asking exactly the wrong question, my friend."

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He looked at me, his face serious, even worried. “What is she going to do with you if she *can't*?”

A fluttery fear went through my belly at the thought. Silence fell. The night was dark and quiet and misty. Somewhere, out there in it, Mab was moving, planning. Part of her plans, the dark, bloody, violent parts, included me.

Maggie was warm and soft beside my heart. Mouse stirred for a moment, and shifted until his big shaggy head was lying on my foot before going back to sleep. Behind me, the Carpenter household was settling into the quiet, stable energy of a home going through a familiar pattern. Bedtime.

Sometimes you realize you're standing at a crossroads. That there are two paths stretching out ahead of you, and you have to pick one of them.

Without a word, I took *Amoracchius* and settled it where I could reach it easily when it was time to stand up.